Faded Away (Persona 3 Sibling AU)

by GraePearl

Summary

The Arisato siblings wouldn't count themselves as lucky. However, after transferring to the prestigious Gekkoukan Senior High School, life becomes far more complicated. Clubs that fight monsters at night, summoning demons using a gun, a mysterious boy who knows too much, and a band of equally interesting classmates send Minako and Minato on a journey they never wanted to embark on.

Now, caught in the middle of the action and nowhere left to run, they decide to face whatever the future has in store: for better or worse.

Notes

After a few months of debating with myself, I decided to post this new fic. My previous one was a big flop and I never finished. I hope this one turns out much better. Enjoy and have a blessed day!

- Inspired by memories of you by florarune
“Attention passengers: we will be running behind schedule as the track switch system has been tampered with. Plan to arrive an hour behind the posted time. We apologize for the inconvenience.”

The train’s audio system went silent and a loud groan swept throughout the car. Mothers shushed fussing children while workers called their families to alert them of the situation. The elderly grumbled about how transportation was worse than ‘back in the day’ and for the youth to quit complaining.

Minato Arisato simply scratched the back of his neck and checked the time on his old MP3 player. It was almost eight in the evening.

“Great,” he thought to himself, “looks like we’ll get there tomorrow at this rate.”

He swore on the grave of his ancestors that he was the most unlucky boy in the world.

Movement from the corner of his eye forced him to look down. A girl with red headphones around her neck and a messy ponytail stretched an arm annoyingly into his space. It was an obviously fake gesture to mess with Minato.

Out of irritation, he slapped her arm away, catching her by surprise and causing her to yip like a scared puppy.

“Hey! It’s too cramped and I’m TIRED!” she whined, slapping him back. “We’ve been at this all day and I just want a shower already.”

Minato rolled his eyes and readjusted his backpack. “At least you don’t have to stand for six hours on a crowded train that is now running an hour behind-” He paused then frowned as he noticed something sticking out of her purse: a chocolate bar and a package of gum.

“When did you have time to get candy?” he asked, now thoroughly irked.

The girl shrugged and dug into the bag on her lap. It indeed was a bar of chocolate, already opened and halfway finished. She broke off a square and offered it to him. “Brother dearest, where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Minato quirked an eyebrow but accepted the square. “Did you steal it?” He popped it into his mouth, savoring the sweetness on his tongue. “Not that I’m complaining, but should I be worried about getting arrested on our first night back?”

She shook her head, producing a Cheshire grin. “Remember when I had to use the bathroom at our last stop?” The russet-haired girl opened her purse further to reveal an assortment of gum, taffy, and other goodies. “A nice woman was selling them with her daughter so I bought a few things. They were surprisingly cheap. It must’ve been for a fundraiser or something.”

That sounded like something Minako Arisato would say. Doing one thing only to be distracted by the nearest person that could quench her sweet tooth.

This was all at the expense of their shared funds.

Minato held out his hand expectantly. “You do know that money is for emergencies only, right? What would God think if he knew you used that money to buy unnecessary things?”
Minako scoffed but handed over the rest of the chocolate bar to him. She replaced it with a stick of mint gum. “First off, you don’t believe in the same God as I do. Secondly, my God is cool with me enjoying all the candy I want as long as I say my prayers at night.” With all the smugness in the world, she flipped the treat into her mouth. “This is why you should become a Christian. Life is so much cooler on the path of the righteous.”

Minato groaned. “You sound like a ‘born again’ crackpot.” He leaned against the door of the train as it finally began to move. “Older but none the wiser.”

“What can I say?” Minako said between chews. “You’re just mad that I found food while you were waiting around for nothin’ to happen.” Her face suddenly dropped as a man nearby started talking loudly with someone else.

Minato listened in to their conversation as well.

“I just got a text from Ojima. Apparently, a boy just suddenly jumped in front of the train and he saw it all happen while he was heading home. They’re almost done clearing his body out so we should get moving any minute now. He said the kid didn’t even hesitate, barely showed a lick of emotion.”

The man’s companion gasped. “How terrible! Teenagers these days are acting up. It must be the winter blues.”

Minako frowned and turned on her iPod. “Bless the poor soul. I pray he found a sliver of peace.” She glanced over at Minato. “If you need me, tap on my shoulder. There’s a song from Yumi calling my name.”

Without ceremony, she put on her headphones and ignored Minato for the rest of their ride.

Her brother felt a pang of frustration at her words. As the more serious of the two siblings, Minato found it quite tiresome dealing with the most childish seventeen-year-old in the world. Of all the people that ever lived, out of the century’s of human history, he had to be born two years behind the most annoying and outgoing girl to curse the face of the planet.

The only perk of sticking with her was the constant sense of adventure and undying optimism that she seemed to have endless reserves of. Not to mention her superpower of finding the best candy at the lowest price. Legend has it, she was able to clean out a convenience store with a single five Yen coin.

So maybe it wasn’t all bad.

Minato let it slide, for now, nibbling piece by piece off the chocolate bar as he turned his music up. He opted to watch as the train picked up speed to hopefully make up for the lost time.

*Time never waits. It delivers all equally to the same end.*

Just then, a blue butterfly caught his eye.

The tiny insect flew close the train right next to Minato’s window. It had an almost unearthly glow in the dying light of the day. If he looked hard enough, it was almost as if the tiny thing was leaving behind a trail of stardust.

As the train picked up speed, the butterfly somehow kept pace. Minato watched in wonder as it beat its delicate wings and easily stayed dutifully by the window.
How could something so tiny be so quick?

You two, who wish to safeguard the future, however limited it may be. . .

Just as mysteriously as the butterfly came, it soon couldn’t stay its course. It fluttered away, leaving behind its trail of blue sparks. Then there was nothing, almost as if it vanished into thin air.

Minato was awestruck for a moment before concluding that the whole experience was his mind playing tricks on him. After all, he felt exhausted from the trip and just heard bad news.

He needed some sleep to forget this dreadful day.

You both will be given one year; go forth without falter, with your hearts as your guide. . .

Minato stretched as Minako and he exited the terminal. After seven hours of waiting patiently, their tedious ride had come to an end.

They were finally back in Iwatodai.

Despite the fact it was almost midnight, Minako bounced ahead of him to get past the gates. “We finally made, albeit two hours behind schedule. Next time, let’s just get a taxi.”

Minato sighed and shook his head. “It’s less expensive to take the train. We could’ve taken a cab if you didn’t drain our money for sweets. You’ll just have to stick it out next time we have to move.”

He felt a stab of pain at his own words.

There always seemed to be another destination for the two of them.

“Until then, let’s just focus on getting through this next school year.” He wondered if Minako noticed his change in attitude. Even if she did, she continued forward and left it alone.

Barely a soul was commuting this late at night. The only people that were around happened to be staff: janitorial teams, maintenance crew, and conductors. The two siblings were the odd ones out since it was a school night. Minato wouldn’t be shocked if the two were caught by a patrol car and questioned later on about breaking curfew.

On second thought, it would be a free ride to the dorm if the cops were nice.

He contemplated for a moment if setting a controlled fire would get the attention of the authorities without landing the siblings in jail.

Minato shook his head. Now he was starting to sound like Minako.

Speaking of the girl, she had pulled out a pamphlet with directions written in the blanks spaces. “If my math is correct, which it probably is,” she thought aloud, “we only have to walk a few blocks to get there. Interesting fact: they strategically built the dorms near the train station so students have an easier time commuting back and forth.”

“Let’s get going then.” Minato took the pamphlet from her to read her messy directions. “Did you have to write everything in another language? Now you’re just showing off.”

Of course, she would write everything in English just to watch him suffer and stumble through his lousy translation.
He thought he heard her gearing up to scold him for taking the pamphlet away, but the winded lecture never came.

That was strange. Minako never backed down when someone took something from her or questioned her methods of doing things.

The younger Arisato turned around. “Cat got your t-?”

Minako was paused mid-stride and looking up at the station clock. For a moment, she seemed dazed.

Minato glanced at the time and knew right away what was going on.

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All of a sudden, the lights in the station went out. The soft rumbling of trains had come to a standstill and left the siblings in an eerie silence. Even the screens of their MP3s had turned off as if they had lost power in one fell swoop. Puddles of water had become a rich red color, resembling blood. Whether or not it was the real thing, Minato never wanted to know.

The creepiest addition had to be the coffins. They stood vigilantly and at attention in place of people. Each one was as terrifying as the very thing they were supposed to contain.

It never failed to send a shiver down Minato’s spine.

He just wanted to get to the dorms and sleep the lifelike nightmare away.

Minako shook herself out of her funk and threw on her usual grin. “This is nothing, we’ve been through this before. Let’s just crack on.” She looked over at her brother. “Ya’ got a candle we can use?”

Minato nodded and quickly retrieved the requested item from his backpack. There was no point dwelling on what he already knew. They had places to be.

His sister had dug under her candy stash and procured a lighter. He went into his own backpack and searched for an unused candle. The two had been through this before: every night for the past ten years. This Transformation that left the air still and dead that only the siblings seemed to experience had been a consistent occurrence. Why it happened to them, how it happened in the first place, those questions were never able to be answered. It simply was what it was.

At first, they had thought it was some horrible dream, but they soon realized just how real their situation was.

From then on, the two always came prepared. Electronics, even battery powered ones, seemed useless during this time. Primitive means of light were the only source of comforts, such as candles and torches. Unfortunately, it would be awkward to carry the latter around, so they stuck with the lighter of the two.

Once their candle was lit, the two made their way to the dorm. Minako had regained control of the map, being the only one who was gifted in the ways of foreign language. She carefully directed them through the winding streets, being careful to hop over the strange puddles and maneuver around closed coffins.
The moon hung menacingly overhead amongst the curtain of green sky.

Minato had hypothesized at one point or another that the world was sick during this time. Although it was simply a childish thought, it gave him something to turn around in his head while he walked. It was better than counting the number of coffins they walked past like a crazy person. Thankfully, it was nearing the end of winter. Not many coffins were out this late at night with a chill still folding the city into a freezing embrace.

Heck, if Minato had a choice, he would be playing video games on his laptop or downloading illegal music to study to.

“Looks like we’re almost there,” Minako said. She pointed to a building that was two blocks down the sidewalk. “It should be that one, with the lights in the window.” The shades were drawn, but a faint light peeked out from behind the heavy fabric.

That was strange; electricity was always out during the dark hour.

Minato and Minako walked in silence the rest of the way. Minato could tell that his sister was wary of the light in the window as well. She had put away the directions and began to fiddle with the strap of her purse.

When they finally climbed the short flight of stairs to a pair of heavy looking doors, they paused to regard one another. Minato saw the familiar twinkle in his sister’s eyes as she reached for the handle first. “There’s no point in standing out in the open like a bunch of featherless chickens.” she pushed open the door and light poured out, inviting them in. “Besides, maybe we’re worrying over nothing.”

The offer was more than enticing.

Even still, Minato felt more than a little suspicious about the whole situation.

"Are you sure this isn't sket-"

A loud screech filled the air.

Both the siblings jumped at the noise before making their final decision.

“Into the spooky building, it is!” Minako yelped.

Minato lightly shoved his sister and practically leaped inside with his suitcase in tow. He tripped over his own feet and went tumbling onto a plush entry carpet. Minako didn’t even protest at his rudeness.

Minato heard her slam the door shut behind them. He groaned before sitting up from his fall. “Note to self: don’t go outside ever again.”

“Ditto-” Minako chimed in breathlessly, leaning against the door like a human barricade. “I don’t remember hounds of hell last time we were outside during one of these nights. Do you?”

Her brother shook his head. “Whatever that was, I hope we never see it for as long as we live.” He stood off and brushed off his pants. “Although, I’ll valiantly sacrifice you to preserve my life. You shall have a hero’s death.”

Minako huffed at his proclamation. “Whatever nerd. At least I didn’t trip over my own ego while coming in the door.”
“Shut up-”

“-You’re both late. I’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

The siblings ceased their bickering at the interruption of gentle voice.

Both looked over at a wooden reception desk to see a boy in prison styled pajamas. His head was propped up in his hands as he leaned over. He had an amused expression on his face, obviously enjoying the banter between the teens.

Minato shoved his hands in his pockets. The child could also be smiling at the fact he had tripped in his hurry to get inside.

The boy motioned for them to come closer, snapping his fingers. A red book that they hadn’t noticed before opened. A black pen rested beside it. “Now, if you wish to proceed, please sign your names there.”

There was a beat of silence before Minako stepped up first. It wasn’t as if he was going to take initiative, that wasn’t his style. Minato had to be the youngest at some point and let his thick-headed sister bite-the-bullet for once.

Minako finished reading, but she didn’t pick up the pen right away. “This doesn’t make any sense, why would we need to sign this if we aren’t staying at the dorm for long?”

Once again, the boy was cryptic with his words. He waved her off. “Don’t worry, all it says is that you’ll accept full responsibility for your actions.” The boy shrugged. “You know, the usual stuff.”

Minako hesitated but soon had the pen in her hand. “That doesn’t answer my question, but . . . it must be a mandatory thing for all students, I guess.” She quickly signed before tossing the utensil over to Minato. “You’re up, nerd.”

Minato easily caught the pen and took his turn. He barely skimmed over the contract and went straight to the signature space at the bottom. There was no point in rereading something that had already been laid out very clearly. Right under Minako’s overzealous cursive, he printed his own name. It was plain, but it got the job down.

Once he was finished, he closed the book. When he looked up to hand it back to the boy, he had disappeared.

“What the-”

Minako tapped him on the shoulder. She pointed to their right where the boy was waiting with his hand outstretched, the same unsettling smile plastered on his face. His pajamas looked much more worn out, with the ends of the pant legs frayed with feet and fingers caked in dirt.

Minato considered throwing the contract away but something compelled him to finish the exchange.

The boy took the book and held on to it as if it were his favorite teddy bear. “No one can escape time. It delivers all to the same end.” He looked Minako in the eye and then Minato. His stare was just as unsettling as his grin. The boy raised the book to obscure his face. “You can’t plug your ears or cover your eyes.”

“How ironic.” Minato thought to himself. If he wasn’t so disturbed, he might’ve whispered the joke to his traveling companion. If he was brave enough, he could’ve said it straight to this boy’s...
The boy removed the book and clutched it to his chest.

“And so it begins.”

He backed away into the shadows. They swallowed him whole.

“This shall be interesting...”

As if he never existed, he disappeared.

Minako hummed to herself. “Well... that happened.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot, a habit when she was deep in thought. “I wonder if he’s a student playing a prank on us. Kids *are* pretty weird nowadays.”

Minato said nothing. If the boy was a student who lived in the dorm, why would he look like he hadn’t been taken care of in months? Sure, it could just be a dedicated prankster looking to haze the new kids.

Still, the entire situation seemed a little too strange to just be an elaborate joke.

“Who’s there!”

A new voice called to them, this time commanding and loud, causing Minato to have an out-of-body experience for the second time that night. Minako had gasped and knocked over her suitcase. Standing as if she were about to attack the two was a girl in a school uniform. She looked to be about his age, maybe even Minako’s if he was being honest with his gut feeling. A pink sweater was thrown over to account for the winter weather that still clung to the city. Strapped to her thigh was a weapon of some kind, but Minato couldn’t tell what from the distance and low lighting.

Before they could explain themselves, she reached for the weapon.

Minako panicked and stepped up with her hands in the air. “H-hey! Let’s just take it easy! There’s no need for violence!”

The girl didn’t listen and soon had her hand on the holster. Minato felt his heart take a swan dive into his stomach, shriveling up into nothing. Tonight just really wasn’t his night. He braced himself for whatever pain he may feel before his death.

At least he lived an adequate life.

“Takeba! Stand down!”

Minako’s ramblings about angels and demons came true in that one second in time. Another girl came down the same stairs, sporting a scowl and a hand on her hip. She was definitely older than Minato with a mature face and eyes that could cut diamonds. If the first girl had commanded his attention, this one made you a slave to her will.

Whether that was a good or bad thing, it was still up in the air.

Minako was the first to break her stiff position with a deep breath. “Oh thank God.”

For the second time that night, Minato considered converting from Shinto. The lights came back on and the soft whirl of an A/C system provided some decent white noise. At last, they had pulled
through another hardship and were home free.

The older girl stepped forward, scarlet hair swishing as she made her approach. “I didn't think you two would arrive so late.” She extended a hand to Minako first when she reached them. “My name is Mitsuru Kirijo. I'm one of the students who live in this dorm.”

Minako, ever the spokesman for the siblings, gladly accepted the gesture. “It’s a pleasure to meet you! My name is Minako Arisato, the older sibling.” She motioned to Minato who still remained quite to anyone other than her. “The nerd to my right is Minato. He’s about a year younger than me and the silent type. Don’t get mad if he ignores you while listening to songs he downloaded illegally.”

Minato sent her a harsh glare before extending his hand. There was no satisfaction in fighting with the girl who still read tween manga and fangirled about it. “What she said, nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” When Mitsuru took his hand, Minato knew that he was in the clear. One bullet dodged, one to go.

The first girl lowered her guard, but only enough to appear friendly. “Um, who are they?”

Mitsuru once again frowned before crossing her arms, obviously annoyed. “They are transfer students. It was a last minute decision to assign them here.” She flipped her hair out of her face. “They'll eventually be moved to a room in the boys' and girls’ dorms.”

Living with a girl all his life, Minato knew what the hair-flip and arms cross combination meant: the two were at odds with each other. Their brief stay was bound to be unpleasant with a pair of angry teens acting all haughty like girls tend to do.

Despite picking up on the body language, the brunette pursed her lips and bore through it. This time, she looked more concerned, lowering her voice as if the new students weren’t in the room at all. “Is it okay for them to stay here? You know...” she trailed off, leaving the siblings confused beyond their years.

Were all the students at this school this weird?

Mitsuru looked them both up and down. Finally, she gave them both a smile before turning back to her partner. “I guess we’ll see.”

Minako took matters into her own hands to help dispel some of the lingering awkwardness. “Well, we know Mitsuru’s name, but what about you?”

The once tense girl straightened up but gave an award-winning smile. “My name is Yukari Takeba, but there’s no need to be formal with me. Yukari will do just fine.” She turned to Minato. “You’re a junior too, right?”

Minato was stunned for a moment but nodded slowly in response. No need to talk when you could just use your head, literally.

“Well, I guess you and I will be seeing each other often.”

Mitsuru then stepped in to address them both. “Before Yukari takes you up to your rooms, do either of you have any lingering questions? I have business to attend to tomorrow morning and afternoon. You won’t be seeing me for a while.”

Minato pondered asking about the gun but thought against it. For all he knew, they were for self-
defense and that was that. Asking would only stir up trouble.

Minako immediately piped up. “Is this a girls dorm? From what I can tell, that seems to be the case.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “Unlike the other buildings, this one's co-ed. It's not your typical dorm, though. I'll explain it to you later when I get a chance.” She turned away from the rest of the group and ascended the stairs. “Takeba, please show them to their rooms. Anything that was sent ahead will be there.”

Without another word, she left. The heels on her boots clicked with every step she took.

Yukari cleared her throat and motioned to the stairs. “You both must be exhausted. Follow me and please don’t fall behind. I got lost my first time here and I don’t want a repeat.”

Minako giggled at the comment, picking up her meager belongings and making the climb. Minato followed close behind, sparing the lounge area a quick glance before continuing on his way.

Once he reached the second floor, Yukari stationed Minako to wait at the next flight of stairs. It must lead to the girls’ section of the dorm. She noticed her brother and mouthed a “good night”. He nodded and went to the end of the rows of doors. By the time he was beside Yukari, the door was open.

“This is it. Pretty easy to remember, huh?” she asked, shifting her weight uneasily on the balls of her feet. The gun-toting girl couldn’t even look him in the eye when she continued to speak. “You know... since it's right at the end of the hall.”

Gone was the earlier bravado, now replaced with silence. Not surprising, considering Minako was always the one to talk people’s ears off. Talking to him after she was done was like getting a slap in the face.

“Oh yeah,” Yukari perked up and handed him his room key, “make sure you don't lose your key, or you'll never hear the end of it...” She clasped her hands behind her back. “So, any questions?”

Minato thought for a moment before the boy in the strange pajamas popped back into his head. “That contract we signed, what was it for?”

Yukari was taken aback at his question. “Huh, what contract?”

She didn’t know about the boy or the contract.

What sort of God sent him this crazy day?

“Nevermind, forget it.” he quickly reflected further questions. “Don’t let me hold you up.”

The sooner his head was on a pillow, the better the mood he would be in. No amount of chocolate could replace the energy a good night's sleep gave. He would never understand those who drank coffee to get a boost for the day.

Yukari nodded, but she still remained. “Before I forget, you didn’t see anything... strange walking here from the station? Anything that seemed out of place?”

Minato paused, not even through the threshold of the door. What did it take for a person to get some shut eye around here?
One part of him screamed to just slam the door in her face, but another part of him screamed louder to humor the poor girl.

“Yeah...” he answered simply.

No point in beating around the bush.

Yukari was wide-eyed before finally starting to back away. “I see, I'm sure you still have other questions, but let's save them for later?” She quickly excused herself to escort Minako to the next floor. “Good night, Minato.”

Minato didn’t stay to watch her leave. He walked straight into his room, not even bothering to take in the scenery. His suitcase was stockpiled by the door and was officially made a problem for tomorrow. He shrugged his pea coat off and flung it on the floor. Deciding that changing into sleep attire was a waste of time, so he shucked off his jeans and was left in his boxers and t-shirt.

Just as he predicted, when his head hit the pillow, he felt sleep pull him into a haze. It had been a day to forget. After all, he would just repeat the same routine after the year was over.

Minato never planted his roots for very long.

April 6th, 2009

The first night is always the most difficult when we move. I’ve learned how to coop with the drastic change of scene, but Minato always seems to fall into bitter sleep.

Who could blame him? We are constantly on the move. I bet I’ve seen half the country by the time I turned eleven. Travelling is awesome and all, but it gets tedious having to adjust to a different place every school year.

We met a few new people today. A senior named Mitsuru Kirijo and a junior named Yukari Takeba. Both seem like they have a bit of beef with one another, but I’m sure I could easily get along with them individually.

After all, we’re only there until the school moves us into proper dormitories.

Ah... better get some sleep instead of writing. I wonder what tomorrow will bring.

As always,

Minako Arisato (17)
Keep My Feet on the Ground

Minako was up bright and early for school, as per her usual style.

Her hair had been properly set into its usual ponytail. The school issued uniform was crisp and with no thread out of place, straight off the hanger. She would have to thank whoever cleaned it later. To finish off the look, she had her signature headphones hanging around her neck with her trademark pins arranged in an “XXII” pattern.

She gave herself a twirl in a vanity mirror that she had discovered the night before, a red scarf draped over to the side so she could see her reflection.

It was going to be a sad day when she has to leave it behind.

Minko smiled at the image. Although her confidence came out as just below average when it came in the looks department, at least she was pleased with her appearance. In her opinion, how one dressed could affect their mood in a positive way.

One could even chase away the worst case of butterflies in their stomach.

The newly minted senior took a deep breath. “Today’s gonna be a good day,” she said to herself. “Just make sure to be nice and don’t screw up. Simple. Easy.”

A soft knock came at the door. Minako was broken from her concentration but was far from discouraged.

“Door’s open!” she called, putting the final touches of her outfit together by tying a bright, red ribbon around her neck. She was careful not to tangle it up with her MP3 and headphones that always remained in the same spot.

In the mirror’s reflection, she saw Yukari let herself in. “I didn’t know you were an early bird, too!”

Minako shrugged, turning around. “Don’t wanna be late for my first day. Gotta keep up my near-perfect attendance record.”

“I guess I shouldn’t worry about you then.” Yukari chuckled and pointed to the door. “I’ll make sure Minato is up. You’re welcome to anything in the kitchen if you want something to eat.” She waved as she left. “Just don’t drink any of the muscle milk. Trust me, it doesn’t taste good.”

“Noted, see ya’ downstairs.” Minako’s door closed, leaving her alone once again. She looked back in her mirror one last time.

It all dawned on her at that moment: it was her last year of high school.

Next year, she’d be off at college and living a life of her own. Minato would have to learn to navigate the ins and outs of student life without her pushing him around. The poor boy couldn’t even hold a conversation with a girl without having prolonged bouts of awkwardness, depreciation, or just plain insulting them.

The two had their rough patches, they bickered and argued, but what siblings didn’t? Considering the life the two had shared together, they were thick as thieves when it came to most others.

Especially after all that happened, how could she part with him so soon?
After all, they’ve gone through so much.

The girl shook herself out of her thoughts. Her mind always did tend to wonder beyond what she should be focused on. Minako knew that the two would part ways eventually. She’ll just have to trust he’ll find his own path. He wasn’t seven anymore, he was sixteen and ready to gain some independence.

Minako gave herself a sad smile. “I guess I just have to let him go, but I have nothing to worry about.” She grabbed her school bag. “Besides, he’s cool as a cucumber. He’ll be just fine.”

It was time to spring into action. Minako practically skipped over to the door as soon as she double and triple checked she had everything. Just as she turned the knob on the door, all doubts were wiped away.

“I won’t mess up this time around.”

The train was on time this morning, much to Minato’s quiet delight. He may hide it from others, but Minako saw the tiny smirk when the audio system announced that they were running ahead of schedule.

Her nerdy brother hated being in tight spaces with strangers. He always said it was because he could taste the idiocy in the air.

Yukari pointed out prominent buildings as they came upon their route. Minako made a note to visit them after school sometime once she was settled. You never know what kind of trouble you’ll find unless you go looking for it. Maybe she’ll persuade a new friend to join her.

“And there’s the famous Pullawina Mall.” the pink-clad junior commentated, pointing to a glass-domed building in the middle of the city. “I recommend checking out Chagall, a coffee shop known for its flavored coffee and pastries. There’s also a karaoke bar and arcade if your into that stuff. I’ve only been to karaoke myself, but I’m sure the other one’s fun too.”

Minato was barely paying attention to the tour up until now, pretending to listen to his music. As soon as she mentioned an arcade, he was all ears. “Did someone just say there’s an arcade?”

Yukari nodded. “At the mall, but I’ve never been to it. It’s not really something I like.”

Minato glanced over and gave her his “I think I might tolerate this place” face.

Minako smiled once she knew he was invested.

One hobby they both shared was beating carnival style games wherever they went. Arcades were no different, just fancier machines with a less than cheerful staff. Together, they could clean out all of the top tier prizes and sell them online: a perfect and legal way to make some extra cash.

All they needed was some seed money and they were set for life.

Yukari let out a tiny gasp and pointed to the horizon. “Looks like we’re almost there. Check it out.”

Both the siblings broke out of their scheming to look out the window.

Of all the high schools they had been to, of all the places they had traveled, Minako could count on one hand how many of those schools could compete for “best looking”.

This one took the cake, no questions asked. The entire campus looked more like a classy art building than a school. Glass rooftops to let in natural light, glittering white stone that hurt the eyes, and what looked to be a row of trees leading to the entrance. There was even an outdoor swimming pool and what looked to be a planetarium. To top it all off, it resided on an island that had an excellent view of the sea. You just can’t beat a school with an ocean view.

“Can this train go any faster?” Minako asked, bouncing on her toes. “I’ve got some major exploring to do!”

Minato just whistled and checked the time on his phone. “Nice school.”

“Well, this is it.” Yukari walked the two down the rows of trees towards the shoe lockers. She motioned to the entire area. “Welcome to Gekkoukan High. Hope you like it!”

Minako couldn’t help but try to take it all in with one look. “Oh, heck yeah I’m gonna like it here!” she exclaimed, almost bumping into a group of other students.

Minato grabbed her by the collar of her uniform blazer and towed Minako along. “Watch where you’re going, idiot. Do you wanna die on the first day?” he warned, letting her go once she was facing straight ahead. "Don't make me do all the thinking, for once."

Minako felt her ears burn at her mess up.

Yukari giggled at the interaction between them. “You two really are something else. I thought Minako would be the serious one, but I guess I was wrong.” she inquired. “How do you two stand each other?”

Minako picked herself back up and recomposed her dignity. “Minato isn’t much of a people’s person, so I do enough talking for the both of us.” She felt herself regain that faux confidence from before. “We both have our strengths and they just so happen to go well together. I handle foreign language and composition while he takes math and science. If either of us needs help, we can depend on each other for it.”

Yukari led them through the shoe lockers. “I wish I had an older sister like you. I’m an only child.”

“Take her, she’s free of charge.” Minato grumbled.

His sister gasped in mock horror. “You would so easily sell your sister’s love to some stranger? I feel betrayed brother dearest!” She quickly cleared the distance between them and ruffled his hair. “Traitors deserve to be punished via The Hair Destroyer!”

Minato smacked her hand away and put Yukari between them. The girl sighed at their antics before giving them their final instructions. “You guys are okay from here, right? You should go see your homeroom teachers first.” She pointed to a hallway branching off the main area. “The Faculty Office is right there to the left.”

Minako gave her a thumbs up. “We’ve got the whole spiel down to an art form at this point. You just go and get yourself settled.” She put her hands on her hips while Minato nodded in agreement. “Don’t worry about us.”

Yukari smiled and gave them a quick wave. “Well, thanks. I’ll see you guys around.” Just as she was about to leave, she paused and leaned in. “Hey... about last night... don't tell anyone what you saw, okay?”
Both of the siblings nodded.

Yukari smiled at them. “Alright, see ya around.”

The siblings immediately set on their journey to the faculty office. Minato was still trying to fix his hair from his sister’s assault. She simply hummed to herself, proud of her handiwork.

“Did you have to do that in front of her on my first day?” he complained, finally satisfied with himself. “You’re really trying to make yourself look like a psych patient now.”

Minako rolled her eyes, seeing the sign hanging over the faculty office growing closer. “Is someone a little embarrassed in front of his crush? I never thought you’d go for a girl like her, all mature and composed.”

“Shut up.” he snapped under his breath. “I barely even know her.”

When they reached the office, Minako let herself in with Minato following behind. A female teacher saw them from her desk and waved them inside.

Minako noticed her peach and white outfit right out of the gate, giving her a warm presence. Her brown hair was fluffed and winged out at the sides. She reminded the eldest Arisato of Yukari when she looked hard enough.

“Are you two the new students?”

Minako returned the smile and approached her. “Indeed ma’am! We’re looking for our homeroom teacher.” She arrived at her desk and made the usual introductions. It was one of her rules: give a nice hello with a little spirit behind it. This woman probably doesn’t get many nice students during her office hours.

“My name is Minako Arisato!” she chirped. Minako then motioned to her brother who was still lingering behind her. “The shy one is Minato. He’s junior this year and I’m a senior.”

Minato gave a little wave. “Good morning ma’am, pleased to meet you.”

“Such enthusiasm and manners from both of you. You really are siblings.” she complimented. “My name Miss Toriumi and I teach composition here. Give me a moment to pull out your files and we can get you both squirt away.”

Next, shuffle to the side while she’s pulling up the files so she knows Minato exists. He always had a habit of hiding behind her when it came to talking to teachers. Although she never minded being a meat shield, Minato had to learn to get out of his shell for once.

Miss Toriumi pulled two thick files out of an organizer from her desk. She was obviously a neat person; someone that Minako could respect.

The women flipped open the top file. “Minako Arisato; Twelfth grade and class 3-D.”

Minako nodded. “I think that’s my name.” she added sarcastically.

An additional step, answer all questions with confidence and humor. There was no need to be coy with someone you’ll only know for a short time. You might as well try to bring a smile to their face.

The teacher looked impressed at her file. “My, my, you’ve both traveled quite a bit. Your grades
are nothing to shake a stick at as either.”

Minato chuckled under his breath. “Wait till you see my grades.”

Minako elbowed him in the stomach. “Can it, nerd.”

Suddenly, the teacher’s face dropped. “1999... Ten years ago your parents—oh no...”

The two cut their banter at the mention of that year.

Miss Toriumi was giving them a sympathetic guise, ever sad for their situation like most were. “I’m sorry...” she set the file aside and gave them a small bow. “I’ve been so busy that I haven’t been able to read over your files. I shouldn’t have read that aloud.”

Minato shrank back, shoving his hands in his pockets and slouching. It was his default position when things got awkward.

Minako took a deep breath, throwing on her best poker face. “Don’t worry ma’am,” she said promptly. “We’re used to it at this point. Besides, everyone makes mistakes, so don’t worry yourself to death.”

The final step, don’t let them know you’re uncomfortable. There was no need to worry anyone over the past.

Miss Toriumi, cleared her throat and picked up Minato’s file. “Well, let’s continue. Minato Arisato; eleventh-grade and—oh!” She grinned at the boy who was still trying to look as small as possible. “It looks like you’re in 2-F, my homeroom.”

Minato snapped out of his funk and returned to the cool-headed person he was. He gave her a polite bow. “I look forward to your class, Miss Toriumi.”

His teacher stood up, dusting imaginary muck off her smart pencil skirt. “I apologize our first meeting was a bit off-kilter, but I’m glad you both seem fine.” She picked a neat pile of supplies for the day. “If there anything you need, please don’t hesitate to ask me. My door is always open.”

Minako felt a little less wound up. She let herself relax and nodded. “Thank you, I’ll be sure to take you up on the offer if I need it.” She gave her a bow. “But you might wanna be careful with Minato, he’s a classic skirt chaser.”

Minato shot her a harsh glare. “You are just bound and determined to ruin my day.”

Miss Toriumi laughed at the two. “I will certainly keep an eye on him for you, but I don’t think I have anything to worry about. You both are so well mannered.” She motioned for Minato and Minako to follow. “Now we have to go to the welcome ceremony. I’ll walk both of you to the auditorium.”

Minako followed the two out of the office, trailing behind as they went over Minato’s schedule for the day. She simply watched on with a neutral expression on her face.

“As you begin the new school year, I’d like each of you to remember the proverb, "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well." When applied to student life, this means...”

Minako sat quietly, doing her best to stay still during the principal’s winded welcome speech. She was unable to find a chair with the rest of her class, so she opted for an empty aisle spot towards
the back of the auditorium.

Just as she suspected, the speech was horrible. The usual “another great year” and “strive for success” were all in the speech as expected, adding to the layers of intolerance she was building up.

She wondered if Minato was just as bored with this ceremony as she was. After all, they had both sat through the same speeches before. The girl couldn’t help but yawn. She did her best to stretch without disturbing her neighbor who seemed quite enraptured with the speech. To each his own, even if that meant his tastes were trash.

She could make a game out of counting repeated tropes. The only thing that really interested her was when someone in Minato’s class started talking and got caught by a teacher nearby. Everyone started whispering back and forth before being called back to attention. After that debacle, the principal slogged on.

Minako inwardly groaned and let her mind wander back to the events that transpired yesterday.

In all her years dealing with this strange experience, there was never any sound. Heck, she never thought it was even real up until yesterday. All of a sudden, there were others that could experience the same thing.

Minako closed her eyes, trying to process all the information bit by bit. Unlike her brother, she couldn’t keep her mind in one place at any given time.

Why could Minato and she see this phenomenon? What about the others they lived with? Mitsuru mentioned that the dorm was special. Could it be connected to what was going on?

Something about the dorm got under her skin. Yukari’s warning from before also seemed out of place.

“Hey... about last night... don't tell anyone what you saw, okay?”

Even Mitsuru, who promised to explain everything failed to so much as reach out since last night. Minako knew that she must be busy, but she could have given a message through Yukari.

What could possibly be so bad about what they saw?

Minako inwardly groaned. She decided that she would sleep on the issue or ask Mitsuru when she got back to the dorms.

“My name is Minako Arisato. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.” She bowed to the class as they all started to whisper to one another. Minako ignored them and waited for the teacher to quiet everyone down.

“Alright, alright. Arisato, you can take the empty desk by the window.”

Minako did as she was told and went immediately to her seat, keeping her smile on. The teacher gave the other students a dirty glare. “As for the rest of the class, be nice to the new student. You all were new at some point to this school. The only difference is that you all have been here longer. Make sure to reach out and lend a hand if she needs something.”

The class gave a well-rehearsed “yes, sir” and it was off to the races.

Rules were reviewed, expectations set, then came time to dig in their heels and start course
Minako paid close attention to each the lectures, taking her notes and nodding along to show she was paying attention. Occasionally, others would stare at her to see if she would do something odd, but she couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t as if she was going to break into another language while answering a question.

It would be funny though.

The end of the day came along faster than she expected. Soon, most of the students had sprinted out the door to meet up with friends or head straight home. A few stragglers remained behind to catch up and chat with their fellow classmates. No one paid her any mind.

Minako packed away her materials. It was nice to be the loner for a change. Being popular and swarmed by the whole class was always the downside of moving every twelve seconds.

Maybe tomorrow she would try to look for some clubs to entertain herself with. She could use a friend or two during her stay at the school.

Once she had everything, Minako turned to leave the room.

There was an arcade that was waiting to be legally robbed of its prizes!

Before she could even make it halfway to the stairs, she was pounced on by a group of girls who weren’t in her class. Each one was grinning wildly while squealing their words out.

“Are you the new girl who lives in the same dorm as Akihiko Sanada?!”

Minako gulped. “Um-?”

“She has to be, she came to school with Yukari Takeba! I heard about it this morning!”

“Excuse me-”

“No fair, she has him all to herself!”

“We’re not-”

“Has he ever tried to make a move on you?”

“What the-?”

“Can you invite us over to your dorm? Pretty please?”

One after another, they threw questions at her as if it were some sort of game-show. They didn’t even pause for a response. She had never met anyone named Akihiko at the dorm and she didn’t want to ask. If comic books had taught her anything, it’s that you never ask crazy fangirls what they are fangirling about. All it does is make them want to kill you and your entire family.

Never in her seventeen years had Minako been so scared for her life. She started to back away into the classroom. “I’m sorry, I have to get home early today! Can I take a rain check on this conversation?”

One of the girls stepped forward, presumably the leader of the group. “You’re not going anywhere until you answer our questions! Yukari Takeba never answers us, but we saw you walking into school with her. That could only mean that the two of you live in the same dorm. Now we have
you as an info broker.” She narrowed gaze, a hawk about to attack. “We won’t ask again: do you live in the same dorm as Akihiko Sanada?”

Minako gulped and felt herself shrink. Not even the manliest of men could tame the indomitable force that is a group of fangirls. There’s just no coming between them and what they worshiped so dearly.

All one could do was pray for a savior.

Minako knew it was time to pull out the big guns. She broke into her go-to excuse that worked like a charm every time. For added effect, the senior threw on somber puppy eyes. “I have to get home or my mother will worry! She’s very sick and needs my help to unpack everything from our move. Please, I can’t be late!” She clasped her hands together and willed herself to look distraught. “Takeba and I just happened to be on the same route to school so she offered to walk with me, that’s it!”

The lie didn’t sway the leader in the slightest. She simply glared at Minako with the fury of one thousand suns.

“Stop lying to us and answer the damn-!”

Minako felt someone bump into her from behind. The group of girls had cornered her so far, she was blocking up the door to her classroom. She stepped forward and turned around to apologize. “I’m sorry for blocking up the door-”

The person who ran into her quickly swapped places, standing before the mob. Minako faced the person’s back only to be met by someone tall, wearing a red vest with the standard uniform shirt. A black jacket was carried over his shoulder with a school bag underneath (and admittedly it looked pretty cool). Even his short, grey hair seemed to command attention, looking sharp and tough.

Minako couldn’t help but smile that someone would take on the fangirls for her.

“You guys aren’t picking on the new transfer are you?”

From behind the boy, she could hear the girls melt at the very voice of her rescuer. Minako remained behind him in order to preserve her safety.

“Of course not!”

“It’s Sanada-senpai!”

“Oh. My. Gawd! He’s sooo cute today!”

“Please elope with me!”

Despite how annoying the group was, he remained relaxed. His shoulders sloped and his posture was proud. Minako wouldn’t be surprised if he was in some type of sport to maintain such an imposing frame.

The boy gave a hefty sigh and jabbed a thumb to the stairs down the hall. “Don’t you guys meet up in one of the study rooms after school? You’re gonna lose it if you don’t get moving.”

The girls gave one last group squeal before saying their goodbyes. Minako dared to peek out and watch as the crazy students skipped together down the stairs. She shuddered to think that they might still try to find her.
When the two couldn’t hear the group anymore, Minako stepped out from behind the mystery man and crossed in front of him. She giggled to herself at the thought of living another day. “Thanks for the assist!” she bowed to him, not even seeing his face. “You have no idea how scared I was. They looked like they would kill me if I didn’t answer their questions.”

The boy gave a low chuckle. “Don’t worry about it. This happens all the time.”

Minako stood straight again and examined at his face. He was all angles with hazel eyes that could captivate anyone in a second. There was a bandaid just above his right eye that definitely had a good story behind it. To make matters better, there was a subtle grin which seemed to be a cross between a smirk and a satisfied smile. It was charming even if it was directed at her apology.

All in all: he was a stud.

“Whatever the case, thanks anyway.” She rubbed the back of her neck, feeling a little sheepish now that she was faced with him. “So, I’m just gonna go ahead and guess that you’re the mythical Akihiko Sanada they were raving about, huh?”

He gave a nod. “I don’t know about mythical, but you’ve got the right guy.” The now-named Akihiko extended his free hand to her. “You’re the mysterious Minako Arisato. Mitsuru said you got to the dorm late last night, so we didn’t get a chance to meet. Seems like ya’ get into trouble easily.”

“What can I say?” she joked, accepting the handshake. “I just attract attention no matter where I go. Call me lucky, I guess.”

“I can see that. Hope it doesn’t rub off on me.” When they both exchanged gestures, Akihiko looked at his watch and before cursing under his breath. “Wish I could stay and chat, but I gotta get to practice. Can’t let my team give me crap again about being late.”

Minako stepped aside and motioned to the stairs. “Don’t let me stop you. I have somewhere to be too, so go have some fun!”

“I will,” he threw her a wave "See you later, troublemaker.”

With that, Minako watched as her new dorm mate jogged away towards what she assumed was the gym. She smiled and went back towards the main entrance. Though the end of her day was a bit chaotic, her plans to raid the arcade remained unchanged.

She quickly flipped open her phone and texted Minato.

\[Me: \text{Wanna go 2 the arcade? I got $$$} \]

\[EmoBro: \text{Meet me @ the gates.} \]

Mitsuru had a book balanced on her lap. Candles lit the lobby as she enjoyed the momentary peace that was bound to be broken. Between getting the new transfers situated, attending to the student council, and preparing for the school chairman to visit tomorrow, it was high time for relaxation.

Just as she thought, someone came lumbering down the stairs. At least she had finished a page without being disturbed.

Low and behold, her new guest was Akihiko. He had his brass knuckles on and a jacket slung over
his shoulder. Although she could only see a belt, there was no doubt he was going to Tartarus for a short hunt.

“I’m going out for a bit,” he said as if he needed her permission.

Mitsuru refused to set her book aside. “Hm?”

A newspaper he must have stuffed in his back pockets was thrown onto the table in front of her. She peeked over her book but didn’t need to read the title on the front page to know what he was implying. Still, he huffed and stood in his usual cocky way as if she was oblivious. “Didn’t you see the newspaper? There’s lots going on.”

He was frustrated. It was written all over his face.

“I know.” Mitsuru finally set her book aside. “...I know. People who had no problems before are suddenly developing acute cases of Apathy Syndrome. I’ve seen it in the news quite often lately.” She crossed her arms over her chest and looked to the door.

For a moment, Mitsuru wondered if they would be smart enough to locate and attack their dorm.

“They say it’s due to stress, but-.”

Akihiko quickly cut her off. “Yeah right, it has to be them. Otherwise, it’s not worth my time.” He walked right past her and to the door.

“Will you be okay on your own? The chairman will be here for the next few days, but after that, I can...”

He paused before leaving Mitsuru to herself. Akihiko refused to turn around when he answered the question.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a little bit of practice.”

Without another word, the door shut softly behind him. Mitsuru sighed and picked up her book again. Although she tried to focus on the words in front of her, there were far more daunting things on her mind. She finally gave up and left the lobby for the fourth floor.

“This isn’t a game. . .”

April 7th, 2009

I met the last member of the dorm: Akihiko Sanada.

He was not what I expected considering his name means “bright boy.” If anything, he was imposing and tough looking. Even when he was saving me from a group of fangirls, he was mellow to the point of boredom.

Something about him seems a little off. I wonder what his story is. . .

Ah well, what can I do? I’ll just have to get along with him for now.

Hmm. . .

I was going to say something else, but I started nodding off and left a giant ink stain on the page!
I should catch some z’s before I fall asleep on my desk.

Until next time,

Minako Arisato
Welcome to the Velvet Room!

Chapter Notes

So I found out that Minako's name can mean holy child, apple tree, beautiful truth, or beautiful lady/girl. Girl's with the name are often seen as the mature siblings that care deeply for their brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, they tend to hold their own emotions back for the sake of others.

Minato's can mean port, harbor, bridge, or stoic boy. Boys with this name are usually reclusive in nature, but often find themselves enriched in culture and deep thought. Just like girls named Minako, they can hold back their emotions because they have difficulties expressing themselves.

I think I'm gonna use these ideas later! :D

“I met someone new yesterday,” Minato mentioned, casually flipping through his music for something good. “Yukari didn’t like him very much and warned him to stop bugging me.”

“That’s a poor explanation, what was he like?” Minako asked, leaning over as they walked, invading her brother’s personal space. “Did he seem like a nice guy? Bad guy? Bland guy? Don’t leave me in suspense here!”

The dark-haired junior pushed her away. “He was-well. . . Let me start from the beginning.”

[Yesterday: After School]

Baneofmyexistance: Wanna go to the arcade? I got $$$

Me: Meet me @ the gates.

Minato knew that his sister would want to check the arcade out right away. It was all over her face once Yukari brought it up on the train ride.

In turn, it would be lying to say that Minato wasn’t a little more than excited. Without wasting any time, he began to gather his belongings in preparation for their newest raid. He tossed his phone into the main pocket of his school bag and corralled his pencils into one large cluster.

Not knowing what to do with the cluster, he simply chucked them into a random pocket to be sorted through later.

Before Minato could so much as take a step away from his desk, he found his path blocked by a much taller student. He wore a baseball cap and a smirk that spoke of fake confidence.

Minako seemed to have a male twin roaming about the school.

“S’up dude! How’s it going?”
Minato took a step back and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Who are you?”

The other boy flourished a hand. “The name’s Junpei Iori. Nice to meet ya’!” He extended a hand in greeting. “I transferred here in the eighth grade. I know how tough it is to bein’ the new kid, so I wanted to say hey!”

Minato took his hand. “Minato Arisato. . . thanks.”

Maybe he misjudged this Junpei too soon. Despite carrying himself like he was arrogant and reminded him of his annoying sister, he seemed nice. How many people go out of their way to welcome the new kid out of the goodness of their heart?

“See what a nice guy I am!”

No, his earlier assumption had been correct. Minato could smell the ego on this guy from ten miles away.

“Yukari came along and then we all went our separate ways.” Minato took out his headphones and draped them around his neck. They were getting closer to the school. “He said something about this year was bound to be interesting, but I pretty much zoned out after a bit. I don’t plan on talking to him ever again, so that’s that.”

Minako scoffed and thumped him on the head. “Just because someone is a little cocky, it doesn’t mean you should dismiss them right away. He’s probably just looking for someone to hang out with.” She sighed as they neared the school. “At least you didn’t have to deal with a pack of wild fangirls. I thought I was gonna die and rot in hell!”

They both continued to argue over which had the worst first day until they got the school gates. Some students meandered nearby, sharing the daily gossip or waiting for their other friends. Minato couldn’t help but listen in on some of the conversations, some people not even trying to be discreet about the content of their chatter. Two girls merged in front of the siblings, making a point to shout every syllable that came out of their mouths.

“Did you hear the rumor?”

A rumor? This could be interesting.

“Oh, um...something about the bathroom?”

The first girl grew embarrassed and flailed her arms comically. Minako snickered under breath, no doubt proud she wasn’t a spastic teenager.

“N-No! Not that one! I mean the one about the first-year student! Not only did she stop coming to school, she does nothing but sits and stare at the walls all day. If her mother tries to talk to her, she only mutters to herself, ‘It’s coming, It’s coming!’”

Minato reached over and tugged at the strap of Minako’s bag. She caught the signal and slowed down so that the two were a good distance behind the girls.

“Doesn’t that seem a bit odd?” she inquired. “First the boy who flung himself in front of the train, and now a girl who thinks something is coming to get her.”
Minato studied his shoes as they made their way into the school. “Not to mention it’s only our second day and we’ve already started noticing some strange activity.” he said. “We should keep an ear open for more of these rumors.”

The two then went their separate ways, promising to meet back at the gates after school.

Despite being a logically inclined person, most people would find it surprising that Minato enjoyed reading and writing. Although he wasn’t as fanatical as his older sister, he still got a kick out of analyzing books and explaining the use of figurative language. It was something the two of them could bond over other then arcades and video games and debating religion.

Maybe that’s the way he found his homeroom teacher quite fascinating to pay attention to while other students nodded off at their desks.

“Hakushu Kitahara is great, but I think I prefer Fuyuhiko Yoshimura. His works aren’t as famous, but that's what I like about him. My personal favorite is ‘Mangekyo.’” Miss Toriumi smiled as she talked about the author. "The school doesn't have enough copies in the library, though. We'd need to share with each other if I planned a lesson for later on."

Minato may have found his newest recommendation to give a whirl. If his teacher was this enchanted, it might be worth picking up a copy at the library. He jotted down the name of the book while the teacher continued.

“I'll bring it next time so you can write an essay on it.” she decided, finishing off her miniature rant.

The class groaned at the mention of a paper to write.

Everyone except one person, sound asleep at his desk and definitely not paying attention. His cap obscured his face, but even Minato could hear the snores from where he sat.

Miss Toriumi must have noticed the student too and immediately called him out.

“Hey, Junpei!”

The boy from yesterday, Junpei jerked awake at the teacher’s stern voice. “Huh, I’m awake! I swear! I was listening!”

The crack in his voice betrayed he was certainly not.

“Were you listening? Who did I say was my favorite author?” She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a stern look. “I can wait here until the bell rings, Iori.”

The class began to whisper as Junpei sat moon faced in his chair. Many point and giggled under their breaths, waiting for him to admit that he had been sleeping instead of listening to the lecture. Yukari simply put her head in her hands, as if she could feel the second-hand embarrassment.

Minato simply watched Junpei. The boy looked scared out of his mind: knee bouncing under his desk, biting his lower lip, rubbing the back of his neck. He was obviously distressed and trying to come up with a suitable answer in his head, the teacher’s eyes burning a hole straight through the poor guy.

Although Minato told himself to just ignore him, something inside of him felt sympathy for the poor soul. With the entire class waiting for him to fail and a teacher expecting the wrong answer,
school life must be tough for Junpei.

Such an expectation was never healthy for someone to bare. To be a bad student in high school meant trouble for the future. No one wanted to hire an idiot who couldn’t pay attention to anything.

At one point, Minato and this Junpei fellow were one and the same.

Minako’s words from their walk to school seemed to echo in his head.

“Just because someone is a little cocky, it doesn’t mean you should dismiss them right away. He’s probably just looking for someone to hang out with.”

Minato knew what he had to do. If he got in trouble, it wouldn’t be the first time.

He stealthy flicked his pencil off his desk so it landed right near Junpei’s feet. Minato got out of his chair and kneeled down to pick it up, catching the target’s attention. Amidst the rampant gossip and chatter of his classmates, he ducked his head and spoke under the noise, just above a polite volume.

“It’s Fuyuhiko Yoshimura.”

Junpei’s expression changed. His face softened and he gave Minato a thumbs up under the desk.

The ploy had been a success.

Minato returned to his seat and watched as everything played out.

“I remember now!” Junpei lied, a casual smirk on his face. “It’s Fuyuhiko Yoshimura, right? Took me a second, but better late than never.”

The class was dead silent. Miss Toriumi looked to be a cross of shocked and ecstatic at his answer.

“That’s absolutely correct! I guess I was wrong, you were paying attention.”

Junpei simply shrugged, bashful at her praise. “Eheh, you know how I like to pay attention!”

Yukari glanced over at him, a little bit skeptical, but still just as surprised as everyone else. The class muttered amongst themselves as Miss Toriumi began to write something on the blackboard for the next lesson.

Junpei leaned over the divide between his and Minato’s desks. “Thanks, dude! You really saved my bacon there.”

Minato felt a semblance of pride at helping this boy, so he extended his hand between them. “Your welcome. . . dude,” he replied, unable to act natural.

Junpei chuckled and accepted his hand. “I have a feelin’ we’re gonna get along. Just give me a holler if someone comes pickin’ a fight, I’ll back you up!”

Maybe his sister was right for once, he really could be a nice guy.

“Say Junpei, do you like arcades?”

Me: Hey, Im bring a new person w/ us today

Baneofmyexistence: RLLY? WAT DAT NAM BOI?
“So, what’s your sister like?” Junpei asked as they neared the school gates. “Is she cute? Funny? Single? Come on, don’t leave a bro in the dark!”

Minato was starting to rethink inviting his new companion on an arcade raid. As much as he thought Junpei was interesting and kind, there was no denying he was a hot-blooded doofus looking for a girlfriend.

“No, no, and questionable.” He sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “She could have an elephant in her room and I wouldn’t find out until next year.”

Junpei seemed to like the answer, clapping his hands together. “Oh, the mysterious type! I like where this is going.”

Minato scoffed at his assumption. “She’s about as mysterious as a bag of potato chips. Seriously, she’s not into dating anyone so I would just give up now.”

When they were almost to the gates, Minako was standing vigilant with perfect posture and head held high. Her brightly colored headphones were over her ears so she didn’t hear that the pair of boys talking about her.

By the time they were within arm’s length, she noticed them and removed her headphones in a hurry. “So your my brother’s new friend! It’s about time he finally tried making one!” she exclaimed. “I’m the wonderfully talented Minako Arisato!” She threw him a quick wave. “Minato told me how you two met yesterday. Thanks for reaching out to him since he’s new and all.”

Junpei smiled and shook his head. “The pleasure’s all mine! He seemed a little quiet during class so I decided to reach out to him.”

“I’m always quiet,” Minato interjected, starting to walk away. “Let’s just hurry up and get to the arcade.”

The other two flanked him on either side. “Ignore him when he gets moody. Minato is actually a big nerd on the inside. He has an entire box at our dorm filled to the roof with vintage video games.” She bumped her brother’s shoulder. “When you move to the boy’s dorm, you should invite him over.”

Junpei gasped, breaking from his cool guy act. “Dude! I love vintage games! Man, I have so many at my house too! What do’ya got?”

Suffice to say, the trio spent the good part of their trip to the arcade raving over games. Minato felt like it was a good choice to invite Junpei along.

He hadn’t smiled so much in a long time.

The Arisato siblings made it back to the dorm late. They decided to walk Junpei home after messing around at the arcade for a few hours. Some of the streetlights were beginning to flicker on as the sun sank lower in the sky.
“I like Junpei,” Minako announced as they were just about to walk inside. “He seems like a good fit for you, all outgoing and friendly. We should ask him if he wants to study sometimes.” She held the door open for her brother. “What do you think?”

Minato shrugged and let himself go ahead. “Let’s not go that far, I barely know him. Today was just a test ride.”

“Whatever, nerd. You were a Chatty Cathy the whole time he was with us!”

When they were inside, they weren’t the only ones in the lobby. Yukari was taking with an older gentleman, thin glasses resting on the perch of his nose. He also seemed to like the color brown as his entire suit was composed of it, just with different shades.

The man and the student had perked up and quit talking once the siblings were inside. “Welcome back you two. I’m guessing you went to the arcade again?” Yukari asked.

Minako nodded and pointed to Minato. “This guy brought a friend from class, Junpei Iori if my memory's still working. You know him, right?”

Yukari visibly shrunk at the mention of the boy. “Unfortunately, yeah.”

The man in brown chuckled at her reaction. “I see you do not approve of your new classmate’s choice in comrades.” He then motioned for the pair to come closer. “Please sit, I would like to speak to both of you before you retire for the night.”

Both siblings took up the offer, setting their book bags next to their feet. Minako wasted no time and began to talk. “If you don’t mind me asking, who are you, sir? I don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“I like your politeness,” he commented. “My name is Shuji Ikutsuki. I’m the Chairman of the Board for your school.”

“Ikut-Ikutsu-. . .” Minako tried to pronounce his name but failed horribly. She rubbed the back of her neck with an embarrassed chuckle. “Sorry, it doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue like Arisato or Yuki.”

Minato reminded himself to grill her later.

Ikutsuki waved her off. “Hard to say, isn’t it? That's why I don't like introducing myself. Even I get tongue-tied sometimes.” He weaved his hands together, laying them neatly on his lap. “I apologize for the confusion regarding your accommodations. However, it may take a while longer before you receive a proper room assignment.”

Minako snapped her fingers in mock anger. “Rats! We have to stay in a quiet dorm where we don’t have to share a room with strangers or weirdos.” She then got serious and gave him a small bow. “In all seriousness, we don’t care where we go at this point. Please take all the time you need to sort things out.”

“I surely will.” Ikutsuki then turned to Minato. “You’ve been awfully quiet over there, do you have any questions to ask?”

Nothing came to mind other than what happened on their first night.

“When we first got here, we saw something strange.”
The Chairman looked concerned. “Strange? I can’t imagine anything strange in this neighborhood. Perhaps it was a simple fabrication of the mind.”

Yukari was silent, but she glared at Minato to stop. He simply ignored her and looked Ikutsuki in the eyes.

Minako was quick to step in and disperse the growing tension. “We were both really tired that night! Like ya’ said, I’m pretty sure it was just our minds playing tricks on us!”

Ikutsuki nodded at her. “I wouldn’t worry about anything unless someone was injured. In that case, I would gladly answer to anything of that sort. Are there any other questions?”

Minato knew that something wasn’t right, but he dropped the conversation and left his sister to clean up the mess.

“Nope! We’re both caught up on everything.” Minako pulled Minato to his feet and pointed to the clock on the wall. “It’s getting’ late so we’re gonna turn in early. We wouldn’t want to hold ya’ up!”

The man stood from his chair. “Of course, you must be tired from all the earlier excitement and I must speak to Mitsuru. Please get some sleep. As they say, the early bird catches the ‘bookworm’!”

Yukari sighed and leaned back into the couch cushions. “You’ll get used to his puns.”

Minato seriously doubted that he would.

Mitsuru and Yukari sat at a large consul. A screen displayed both Minato and Minako sleeping in their rooms, both unaware that they were experiencing the Change. Neither of them showed any signs of waking up soon.

Ikutsuki stood behind the girls and thought aloud to himself. “Hmm, they are still sleeping.” He began to pace the room as the white noise of the computer filled the silence of the room. “The Dark Hour occurs every day at 12 midnight; you could say it’s the ‘hidden’ hour. During this time, an ordinary person Transmogrifies into a coffin, and is oblivious to all that occurs.”

Yukari turned around in her spot. “So that must mean...”

“As you can see, they have retained their human forms. They are asleep but definitely experiencing the Dark Hour. The only question that remains is whether or not they have the potential. Although, they must...”

He paused and looked out a window at the far side of the room. The green sky cast an eerie glow on the dark brown carpet. “If they didn't, they would’ve preyed on them by now.”

“Scary...” Yukari whispered.

Ikutsuki came away from the window. “In any case, we should continue to monitor them for a few more days. We’ll go from there.”

Mitsuru typed a few commands into the consul. “Yes, sir.”

Yukari turned back around and spared a glimpse at the two resting figures. Though they both acted like polar opposites during the day, she could see the family resemblance at the base level. Thin
mouths that parted ever so slightly, curled up as if like cats, and eyes that occasionally twitched as if disturbed by a dream. They constantly tossed and turned under the covers; it was a wonder that they didn’t fall out of bed. Occasionally, one or the other would mumble some incoherent garble before returning to silence.

They looked almost like children as they slept.

It was creepy just to think about.

“I feel kinda bad, though, spying on them like this. . .”

Mitsuru ignored the statement and focused on monitoring their vitals.

Minato opened his eyes into a hazy dream. His mind was clouded and lights seemed to rush past him in a flurry. It almost hurt to sit up, but somehow, the junior was able to raise his head out of the stupor.

“About time you got here.”

Minato grumbled at the familiar bluster.

He scratched his previous statement. If Minako was here, it was a night terror.

The two sat side-by-side on a plush blue couch that looked more expensive than all of their belongings combined. Both of them were in the same clothes they wore coming from the train station on their first night.

Minako looked away from him and set to inspecting their surroundings. “What kind of place is this? Some kind of fancy hotel?”

He took a gander and saw he was in a large room colored in different shades of blue. The wall in front of the couch was covered in chain-link, lights flying past as if the room was moving up. A large clock with spinning hands also took up the wall and seemed to be made entirely of gold.

Minato drew his attention down from the clock and saw that he and his sister weren’t the only ones in the blue room.

Across from them was a man with a large nose, sitting in a chair much more expensive looking than the couch. Two well-dress individuals, one man and woman stood on either side. They carried large books and watched the siblings closely. The two parties of people were separated by an elaborately decorated table.

After a long stretch of silence, the man in the middle spoke.

“Welcome to the Velvet Room, my dear gentleman, and lady.”

Minako, as per her real self, sat up straighter. She had to clear her throat of any obstructions before speaking. “Um, t-thank you for having us?”

There was another stiff beat of reticence. The large-nosed man seemed to be content with the peace, leaning forward as if he were waiting for something more. Minako tugged at her collar. “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your name?”

The man’s persistent smile grew wider. “My name is Igor. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.” Igor then motioned to the other two. “This is Elizabeth and Theodore. They are
residents of this room, such as myself.”

Both of them bowed to Minato and Minako. “It is a pleasure,” Elizabeth said, voice cool and relaxed.

Theodore simply let her make the greeting, nodding to make himself known.

“Ever a man of words. I trust you, he is simply a little shy at first meetings.” Igor beguiled then focused back to the teens. “This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter. It has been years since we have had a guest, let alone two at the same time.”

Minato yawned, finally choosing to speak up. It was a dream, after all. “I take it you guys are particular about who comes in.”

“Astute observation, young man.” Igor waved his hand and something appeared on the table in front of them. It was the red book that the boy asked them to sign. “Only those who have signed the contract can enter this place. Henceforth, you shall both be welcome here in the Velvet Room, so long as you uphold your obligations.”

Minako nodded along as he spoke. “Okay, but why are we here? There has to be a reason.”

Igor chuckled, placing the contract on the table in front of him. “You two are destined to hone your unique abilities, and you will require my help to do so. I only ask one thing in return. . . that you abide by the contract and assume responsibility for the choices that you make.”

Minato narrowed his gaze.

Something wasn’t sitting right with him.

“Is this a dream?”

“Precisely!” Igor answered, making the contract disappear as if he were a magician. “You are fast asleep in the real world as we speak. This visit of ours is merely a dream. However, you two will come here of your own accord, sooner or later.” He snapped his boney fingers. “Hold on to these. All guests must have one.”

In place of the contract, two bronze keys sat waiting in its place. Each one was identical with a mask on the head: cut in half with the two sides inverted of one another.

The only difference was that one smiled while the other frowned.

Minako took her key first, the smiling face matching her own. Minato tentatively grabbed the other, the frown seeming to mirror his own.

It was much lighter than he thought it would be.

Igor gave them a low bow.

“Until we meet again. . .”

The room vanished into a black void, leaving Minato to the darkness of sleep once more.

He still felt the cool metal of the key in his hands.

04/08/09
I don’t usually write in this notebook Minako gave me, but I thought I’d give it a chance. She paid for it anyway.

Today was okay. Turns out Junpei isn’t a terrible guy. Maybe a little abrasive, daft, and thick-skulled, but at least he’s honest. My face hurts from answering his questions.

The only downside is that the idiot and he are thick as thieves.

Turns out my homeroom teacher is really nice. She likes books. I think I’ll enjoy her class the most. I also have to find a book named “Mangekyo” by Fuyuhiko Yoshimura. Miss Toriumi talked a lot about him during the lesson today.

We met the Chairman of the School Board after our trip to the arcade. Something about him doesn’t seem right, but maybe that’s because he like puns.

I’ll keep an eye out.

That’s it,

Minato Arisato
Happy Early Easter! Here’s a second chapter for today as my Easter egg! Enjoy spring break and stay safe everyone!

Minato yawned, slouching as he hobbled along the school road. “Why am I so tired? I thought going to sleep earlier meant you got more rest.”

Minako nodded along, her feet drag across the concrete. “I feel ya’. I had this weird dream last night that’s still kinda bothering me.” She yawned as well and strained to keep her eyes on the gate ahead. “I just hope we get some sleep tonight. Word of the street is, one of my teachers has a pop quiz tomorrow and I have no idea how to speak French.”

Minato frowned and reached into his pocket. Sure enough, the key he found when he woke up was still there.

It took a few minutes to gather himself before he decided to keep it on him at all times. With crazy rumors going around on top of seeing weird things after midnight, a blue room that appeared in his dreams didn’t seem so far-fetched.

The biggest problem was figuring out if Minako had her key. Although she seemed less peppy than usual, she got up at her usual time and said nothing about the Velvet Room on their train ride. Perhaps she was waiting until the end of the day to say something.

“What’, up dudes!?”

Minato came out of his thoughts when he saw Junpei waiting outside the gates. He seemed to be in much higher spirits than usual.

Apparently, his mood was contagious, enough to pull Minako out of her stooper and crack a pleasant smile. “If it isn’t my new favorite person!” she called, going in for a high-five.

Junpei easily caught the gesture and the two created a huge slap. “And if it isn’t the two Arisato troublemakers! I’ve been waiting here a bit for you guys to show up.”

Minato simply hummed at the excited teen. “Morning Junpei, you seem happy.”

“Man, today is the perfect day!” Junpei opened his arms as if to catch all that was good in the world. With limbs so freakishly long, maybe he had a chance to do just that. “The sky is blue, we’re young, and spring is just around the corner. What more could we ask for!?”

Minako sighed and cocked her head to the side. Any old fool could spot the dark circles forming under her eyes. “I really wish I could be as naturally cheerful as you today. I guess I’ll just have to fake it ‘til I make it for now.” She continued walking forward as if she was a zombie. “Some people just seem like rays of sunshine in the morning.”

Junpei scoffed and led the trio towards the shoe lockers. “You two should cheer up, too. After all,
you've got ME as a friend.”

Minato couldn’t help but grin. The weird stuff going on behind the scenes had time to work themselves out. As long as he had two of the most energetic people in the world close by, there was no point in being worried.

Even if one of them was the spawn of Satan, despite being a devout Christian.

Minato was barely hanging on to his consciousness by the time the second half of the day rolled around. There was no doubt that his notes were going to be impossible to read if anyone borrowed them. He already had a few close calls after almost nodding off during lunch. Junpei, despite his earlier bravado, was fast asleep at his desk.

How could he blame the capped boy when their Classic Literature teacher tried too hard to be in tune with the younger generation?

“I'm Mr. Ekoda. I'll be teaching you Classic Literature. I'll be teaching you about good old Japan all year. Some people say Classic Lit isn't relevant to everyday life, but oh, how they're wrong! Hey... Are you all listening to me?”

No one answered him. They all had either zoned out, refused to talk, or fallen asleep like Junpei. At least everyone agreed that this teacher was going to be a headache all year.

Minato wished that he could jump out a window. Maybe death would provide enough sleep to get through the lecture.

As if to answer the thought, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked to make sure the teacher wasn’t looking before reading the message.

[One New Message]

Baneofmyexistence: I can’t stay awak much longer, u?

Me: Me neither, i’m goin 2 nap aftershool

Baneofmyexistence: lol, me 2 bro

Baneofmyexistence: btw, before u go 2 sleep, i need to tell u something after skool

Me: Is it about that dream u had last nit?

Baneofmyexistence: Yup, it’s important

[All Texts Read]

Minato was about to ask her about the dream before he received a new message.

[Two New Messages]

Baneofmyexistence: Teacher is calling ppl, txt u later

Baneofmyexistence: <3
Without making a sound, Minato flipped his phone closed and stuffed it back in his pocket. For the rest of class, he tried to focus on the content of the lecture. His notes looked sloppier than usual, but at least there was something to look forward to afterward.

In the margins, he had scribbled a small poem.

“Then I heard him say ‘Until we meet again’ and then I just woke up.” Minako finished, leaning back on her palms. “I didn’t want to say anything this morning because I wasn’t sure if you’d believe me.”

Minato hunched forward, occupying the desk chair while his sister took her bed. “Do you have the key? I woke up with mine in my hand.”

Minako pointed to her desk. “Mom’s jewelry box, hidden pocket on the bottom.” The barren space only contained a lamp for studying and an old case with chipping silver edging. Rustic designs of angels and doves creating a mural spanning around the surface remained undamaged.

Minato sighed. “What’s going on here? I thought it was supposed to be a normal school year, not trying to figure out if our dorm mates are going to kill us in our sleep.”

"You said it, not me.” Minako sat up and stared at the floor. “I was gonna graduate with honors, go to a cushy university somewhere far away, then you’d come live with me once you got out of high school. After college, you’d go off and convince some schmuck to marry you. I’d help you pick out a wedding ring and stare down the in-laws” She smiled at her description of her future. “We’d both get a fresh start. No more moving around, no more secrets, just the two of us. . . and maybe a dog.”

Minato shook his head. “Something is very wrong here. I don’t know what it is, but those girls and the Chairman are avoiding our questions at every turn.”

Minako yawned and fell onto her back. “Not to mention that we heard something screech during the Change. That’s never happened before we came here. It was always quiet and no one else knew about it.”

The two shared a beat of silence before Minato finally decided to stand up.

“Let’s confront them tomorrow. It’ll be Sunday, so we can catch them in the morning before they go anywhere. . .” he concluded.

“Sounds like a plan to me. Afterward, we can catch some breakfast and pick up Junpei for a day on the town.” his sister added. “You can get out now. I’m gonna take an early shower and goof around online for a bit.”

Minato didn’t need to be told twice. He closed the door behind him just as Minako rose from her bed. As he walked down the hall to get downstairs, he heard the lock on her door click into place.

No one seemed to be around but them. All was quiet except for the hum of an A/C unit.

“What the hell is this dorm anyway?”

Once again, Yukari and Mitsuru were at the large consul observing the two siblings as they slept.
Both seemed more restless that night with Minako having kicked her blankets off the bed and Minato tossing and turning every few minutes. Ikutsuki read the paper and occasionally looked up to see what was going on.

“It seems like they’re worried about something,” Mitsuru commented. “Other than that, everything is the same as last.”

Ikutsuki turned to the next article as he spoke. “Very interesting. Even those who have the potential tend to be unstable at first. Memory loss, disorientation, but these subjects are rather unique. They haven’t exhibited any of the common symptoms.”

“But,” Yukari finally spoke up, “we're treating them like guinea pigs.”

“I understand your concern, but it's imperative that we recruit new members.” Ikutsuki folded up his newspaper and set it aside. “I heard he's your classmate. Wouldn't you be more comfortable working with someone from the same grade?

Yukari bit her lip, glancing over at the monitor above her. “Yeah, I guess, but still-!”

A red light flashed on the corner of the screen and a beeping noise resounded from the consul. Mitsuru quickly set herself to work by putting on a nearby headset and turning a few dials.

“Command room, is that you Akihiko?”

There was a crackle of static before a voice finally came through.

“You're not gonna believe this! This thing is huge! Unfortunately, I don't have time to talk. It's chasing me. I wanted to let you guys know, I'm almost there!”

The voice cut out, leaving the room in silence once again. Mitsuru jumped up from her set, along with the Chairman and Yukari.

“Does that mean he’s bringing that thing here-!?"

Mitsuru took charge, cutting off Yukari mid-speech. “Mr. Chairman! Let's suspend our observation for now. We'll prepare for battle!”

Ikutsuki was stunned for a moment but soon found his composure.

“R-right! Be careful everyone!”

Minato woke with a start and flung himself out of bed. The ground was shaking, there was a commotion going on downstairs, and a loud screech split the air. He had to throw his hands over his ears to block out the horrible roar.

Something was very wrong. He had to get to Minako and get out of the building.

Without even thinking, he stripped down and threw on his clothes from school. He didn’t bother with the jacket or socks but simply focused on a shirt, pants, and shoes. It didn’t matter if it was chilly or uncomfortable when your life could be in danger.

Just before he was about to leave his room, Minato remembered the Velvet Room key on his desk. He snatched it up and shoved it in his back pocket.

There was a frantic knocking at his door before he could even reach for the handle.
“Wake up! We have to go!”

Minato quickly unlocked the door and flung it open.

Yukari stood in the hallway with a key ready out, ready to barge in. “Good, you’re awake!” She stuffed the key away and grabbed his arm. “Let’s go get Minako and get out of here!”

“I’m here!” Minako came stumbling down the stairs, still tying her hair up. She somehow found the time to throw on her favorite orange sweater and a pair of jeans. “What the hell is going on, Yukari!? It sounds like the Huns invading China all over again!”

“There’s no time to explain, just follow me!” She pulled out her gun from the night they arrived and started down the stairs to the lobby. “We need to go out the back way!”

The siblings didn’t question her and obeyed the command to follow. They all shared the same goal of surviving the night; there was no time to integrate the person saving them. All three flew down the stairs and went through the kitchen to the backdoor Yukari talked about. Said student stopped in front of it and took a second to catch her breath.

Minako and Minato took a moment to let their brains catch up to their bodies. They both looked at each other as Yukari made some final arrangements.

“Whatever happens, don’t you dare leave my sight,” Minako warned, her mother bear instincts showing through her usually aloofness. “I’m not losing you in a place like this, not tonight. You hear me?”

Minato nodded, more afraid of her than whatever was going on. “I won’t.”

“Good, stay close to me.”

Yukari suddenly jumped up, scaring the siblings. “Y-yes! I hear you!” She waited for a moment as if she was listening to someone else speak. Minato guessed she had a communication device on and was receiving information from someone else.

Suddenly, her face drained of color.

“What-!?”

The back door rattled violently as if something was trying to break in. Another loud screech was let loose, this time closer than ever before. Minako grabbed her brother (then Yukari) and shoved them behind her. “Stay away from there!”

Yukari wasted no time in pushing them both away. “L-let’s pull back! Upstairs before the door caves in!”

The three flung themselves through the kitchen and to the stairs in a heartbeat. Yukari took to the lead while Minako brought up at the rear. Minato had grabbed his sister’s arm to pull her along, but he could barely even see straight. There was a throbbing in his head that refused to go away no matter how hard he tried to ignore it.

As they reached the second floor, a loud bang caused everyone to flinch. Yukari started leading them up to the girl’s section of the dorm muttering to herself “What are we going to do? They’re downstairs! Do we have any choice but to go further up?”

Minako must have known he was feeling woozy. She stepped to his side and draped an arm across
his shoulders as they ran. “Keep going! Just a little further and everything will be okay!”

Minato had to wonder if she was saying that to him or to herself.

Once they reached the third floor, another tremor threw the three off balance. A window at the end of the hall broke at the force of the quake.

“We have to get to the roof!” Yukari screamed before leading them up to the final floor. Minato had to grit his teeth to walk in a straight line, even with the added support of his sister.

They finally reached another door which Yukari quickly unlocked. Once there was a metallic click, she flung it open and waved them through.

“Everyone out!”

Minako put Minato ahead of her with Yukari following behind. He stumbled and fell to his knees, feeling his headache reaching a fever pitch. Minako was at his side in a heartbeat, rubbing his back and asking him what was wrong.

He couldn’t find the stomach to answer any of her concerned questions.

The door was slammed shut behind them and locked back up.

Yukari let out a loud sigh of relief. “Alright, we should be safe for now-.”

The ground shook once more. Minato felt a white-hot pain course through him as his vision began to spin. A wave of nausea almost brought him to his knees, but the support of his sister clutching his shoulder kept him from blacking out.

What Minato did manage to catch a glimpse chilled him to the bone.

A black hand reached over to climb onto the roof. Many others followed until a monster with limbs for a body stood facing the teens. Swords and daggers of all shapes and sizes were clenched in multiple fists, poised to attack and rip anyone or anything to shreds. A single mask was held out in front, attention fixed on the siblings.

The mask’s dead stare seemed to pierce right to Minato’s soul.

Another stab of agony caused him to cry out and clutch his head.

Yukari stepped in front of Minato’s hunched form, drawing her gun from its thigh holster. Minako did her best to act as a shield, as if she was able to withstand being chopped up by such a creature.

“Those monsters-” Yukari growled and brought her gun up to her head. “-We call them Shadows! Let me handle this!”

Minako hauled her brother to his feet. “Be careful, Yukari!”

Minato barely responded, only finding enough strength to get up and get back to the door.

The Shadow charged them, but Yukari stood tall against it. She took a raspy breath before pulling the trigger. Minato watched as bursts of energy shot out from the gun.

Without so much as giving an ounce of effort, the Shadow flicked the gun out of her hands and threw her aside. The gun landed at the stunned sibling’s knees. Yukari went sliding across the roof until coming to a stop at a far end. She lay motionless, knocked unconscious from the powerful
attack.

Minato watched in horror as it completely ignored them and went after Yukari. Blades scrapped against the concrete and were raised to strike.

It was after a killing blow.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

She was going to die if he didn’t do anything.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

Without thinking, he scooped up the gun at his feet and pushed Minako behind him. She fell down and protested for him to stay back, but he didn’t listen to a single word.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

He raised the gun to his head. The barrel rested against the side of his temple.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

A voice, small and delicate, whispered in his head.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

“\emph{Go on. . .}”

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

Minato felt something swell within him.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

He could save everyone.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

He just had to be brave.

\[ \text{Ba-dum. . .} \]

“\emph{Per-...so-...na!”}

He pulled the trigger and suddenly found his head had cleared. The wind around him kicked up into a frenzy, but he managed to remain grounded as chaos ensued around him. Lights flashed and blurred the darkness, but there was no more pain, just a calming voice.

\[ \text{“Thou art I, and I am thou.”} \]

A figure came from the light to float just above the rooftop. It looked almost like a machine with a
speaker protruding from its stomach. A silver lyre was strapped to it’s back, glittering as if it contained the stars in one stroke of the strings.

“From the sea of thy soul, I cometh.”

Minato smiled at the figure. It was strange yet felt so right.

“I am Orpheus, master of strings.”

Orpheus, he could get used to a name like that.

Suddenly, the pain from before returned. Minato gripped his head and cried out to the sickened moon.

Something was gravely wrong.

Orpheus convulsed and was soon ripped apart from the inside out. He was replaced with a much more sinister figure, swathed in black with coffins for wings. A skull replaced its face as it screamed loud enough to drown out the night. Talons meant for tearing and shredding curled in anticipation for action.

This new being dove for the attacking Shadow without hesitation.

Minato watched through squinted eyes as the beast was ripped into nothing but dust. A brilliant fire was thrown about the area, just missing Yukari who was now watching the scene in shock. The mask was cut in two and limbs were torn painfully from the main body. It rained black hands and silver swords on the roof while the dark figure continued to revel in the carnage it created.

More Shadows attempted to get onto the roof but were torched in an explosion of flames. They plummeted to the sidewalk below. As if the small monsters could stand a chance against the demon Minato had summoned.

When there was nothing left to kill, the creature stopped fighting and screamed at the starless sky.

In the blink of an eye, Orpheus had returned before vanishing into thin air.

Minato dropped the gun and fell to his knees.

His eyes felt heavy.

The last thing he heard before blacking out and toppling over was someone calling out his name.

Warm hands caught him, holding the boy close.

Everything went dark.

04/09/09

I decided to write a poem in class. My day was really boring.

Here it goes:

Duality

My heart is heavy
Yet completely empty inside
My head is light
Yet it is unsteady
My life is meaningless
Yet I am content
My hand writes words
Yet it creates nothing
I do not know anything
Yet I know too much
All that I realize
All I do not

That’s it,

Minato Arisato
Chapter Notes

I'm back from my Spring Break with a new chapter and some good news! I will be reposting previous chapters in the coming weekend and fixing all of the mistakes for new readers. Feel free to go back and see if you can catch any major changes. Enjoy the new chapter!

In movies and TV shows, they love to sugar coat the Intensive Care Unit.

The heart monitor hooked up to the patient is constantly beeping. Loved ones weep over the bodies of the main character, their faces uncovered so everyone gets to say their final goodbyes. Doctors shake their heads, unable to save the poor should. All is quiet without a single peep to disturb the fragile silence.

However, as Minako learned in the hall of Tatsumi Memorial Hospital, she realized the movies lied.

At first, all seemed at rest. It was the middle of the night, so things were supposed to be slow going. Minako sat with one of her arms bandaged, stitches on her shoulder hidden by a clean sweatshirt that had been grabbed by Mitsuru on the way to the hospital.

The change between the stillness and chaos was like flipping a switch.

Nurses with crash carts rushed around the hallways to save patients, shouting orders to move aside. Doctors hopped between rooms and only stopped to change out their bloody gloves for fresh ones. The air grew unbearable to breathe after a time as the tension continued to build.

Minako simply placed her hands over her ears to block out the noise. She prayed that her brother’s room was left alone, feeling her eyes sting from unshed tears.

“Oh God, he’s just a kid.”

Just as quickly as it came, the noise came down to the familiar hum.

Patients stopped trying to die and went back to sleep.

Minako removed her hands from her ears. She took a shaky breath and told herself everything was going to be okay.

Her brother was young and tough.

He would get through this bump in the road.

He had to.

The door beside Minako opened and a nurse came out, a mask covering her mouth and nose. She barely spared the girl a glance before going about her business. There were other people that needed help.
A doctor followed behind, stopping at the doorway. He looked to Minako and put a hand on her shoulder. “You’re the boy’s older sister, correct?” he asked.

Minako glanced up at the man.

"Is everything okay?"

The doctor nodded and kneeled down beside her chair. Taking both her hands in his own, he smiled. "I apologize for how long it took but I can assure you, everything went as planned. He’ll make a full recovery."

Feeling the hours of waiting come crashing down on top of her, Minako took a deep breath. Each moment had been worth the anxiety.

“Can I see him?” she said.

The doctor nodded and helped her stand. He guided her inside the dimly lit room. “I would ask that you be quiet and not to touch anything. We have him stable, but he is still very weak from his procedure.”

Minako gulped but put herself on autopilot to answer.

“I understand.”

The room smelled like hand sanitizer. Another door was open to show a private bathroom for the patient and visitors. Machines hummed in all corners of the open space with a curtain drawn back to show the bed.

Minato laid in bed, motionless and connected to all sorts of contraptions that Minako could only gawk at. Perhaps, if he were awake, he might show off by rattling off the names one at a time. A tube reached into his mouth to help clear out any smoke from the fire on the rooftop. She knew he would be receiving a feeding tube later if he didn’t improve. IV’s ran up into his arms and supplied him with medications to sedate the pain.

The doctor began to lead Minako back out into the hall. She could barely muster the strength to fight back, though she wanted to. All she seemed able to do was drag her feet along the slick tile to slow the doctor down.

“I can’t allow you to stay with him. You will have to come back during visiting hours in the morning.” He walked with the distraught sister to the lobby, holding her steady. “He’s young and strong, there’s no doubt he’ll pull through just fine. Go home and rest for a few hours. Come back when you’ve caught some shut-eye.”

Minako hummed in agreement, her heart sinking with her decision to comply.

“I’ll go.”

The doctor sighed. “I understand this is difficult, but listen to me: we will take good care of him. If anything happens, we’ll contact the dorm to bring you here. Luckily, I don't think that will be the case.”

“. . .Thank you.” she trailed off, seeing the lobby draw closer.

“Good girl, everything will be fine.” Minako felt a gentle pat on her back. "Your brother will be in good hands.”
They both entered the lobby space. Ikutsuki, Yukari, and Mitsuru all stood up and flocked to the newcomers. The doctor explained everything while Minako stood nodding along. All she seemed to hear was static as the Chairman gave final instructions. Somehow, Minako was huddled away with Yukari holding on to her. A jacket was thrown over her shoulders, as if that could block out the cold she felt in her heart.

Outside, a car was waiting to take them all back to the dorm. Minako was set between Yukari and Mitsuru.

The whole ride was spent watching the streetlights fly by in a flurry of yellow light. Although it was still too early for anyone to be up, occasionally she spotted a pedestrian roaming the sidewalks. Minako made a game out of counting the number of people she saw.

It was a lame way to take her mind off of things.

By the time they were back at the dorm, everyone was half-dead and practically sleeping on their feet. Ikutsuki told them all to take the day off tomorrow while he handled anything that needed to be sorted out. The group trudged inside and began to settle in for Sunday.

Yukari had asked Minako something, but she couldn’t remember how she responded. She simply gave a default answer and climbed the stairs to the girl’s wing of the dorm. Her eyes could barely keep themselves open for much longer. The doctor was right, she needed to rest and get better before anything else happened.

Minako dragged herself to her room and refused to speak with anyone for the rest of the night.

By the time she got into bed and closed her eyes, she felt herself drift away into a dreamless sleep.

“Let us sit down and debrief last night’s events.”

The director gave Minako a hot chocolate and sat down next to her. She had been forced to stay home instead of visiting Minato that afternoon. Much to her chagrin, she could hardly get out of bed, even finding herself unable to walk down the stairs without wheezing.

She had been promptly stopped by Yukari who promised to go in her upperclassman's place.

Instead, Minako was treated to an explanation of everything that the dorm was via Ikutsuki and Mitsuru.

At least Minako got a sugary drink to calm her down.

Mitsuru sat across from the two. On the table in front of her sat a metal briefcase. “We should start by explaining what exactly you saw on your first night. Takeba had reported your brother mentioning seeing strange things on the way to the dorm, and if I'm correct, you experienced the same thing.” She crossed her legs. “Please recount from the beginning what you know.”

Minako felt like her throat was going to shrivel up, but she needed answers now more than ever. If it wasn’t for herself, it was for Minato.

“We’ve...that night wasn’t our first rodeo, to put it bluntly.” She took a pause to sip her cocoa. “It's always the same thing, every night without fail, the sky turns green and the water turns red. People are replaced with coffins. The moon gets bigger, a lot bigger. Electricity stop working. We have to use candles to get around. . .”
“Were there ever any Shadows?” Ikutsuki asked. “That is what we call those monsters that attacked us.”

“No, that was the first time we saw Shadows.” Minako’s mind wandered to the night the siblings arrived. “But the more I think about it, we could tell something was off. We heard a screech the day we got here, but we didn’t know how to bring it up.”

Mitsuru nodded and leaned closer. “Is there anything else you can tell us before we explain? Do you know when these events began to occur?”

Minako had to think carefully but soon came up with a rough estimate. “About ten years ago, around the time...” she trailed off and looked into her mug. “...after our parents’ died.”

A pregnant pause filled the space between the three. Mitsuru pursed her lips and glanced away from Minako. The latter felt herself back away into a mental corner, shutting off the memories of that night entirely before they consumed her.

“I’m over it by now. It’s all in the past anyway.” Minako said quickly.

Ikutsuki gave her a reassuring smile. “You’re not obligated to speak about you and your brother’s past experiences. It can hurt to bring up such things, especially around strangers.” He drew his hand away, checking his watch. “I’m guessing you would believe me if I told you that there are more than twenty-four hours in a day.”

Minako sniggered under her breath. “If you said that there’s a unicorn on the roof right now, I wouldn’t be surprised at this point.” She leaned back with a yawn. “Go on.”

“Very well then.” The chairman tapped his watch, discontinuing the snarky comment. “The event you have experienced over the years is what we refer to as the Dark Hour. Every night at midnight, this phenomenon takes place and changes our world. As you can probably tell, people are unaware of such changes, staying safely tucked away in a transmogrified state. The coffins are simply a shell used to protect the soul of the human it replaces.”

Minako felt a shiver run down her spine. “So there’s no people inside?”

Mitsuru spoke up. “It’s more precise to say that the coffins are the people in question.” She laced her fingers together on her lap. “Moving forward, there are individuals that can function in the Dark Hour and do not transform. Shadows prey on those outside their coffins and feed on their minds. It reduces them to a walking corpse.”

Minako thought back to the train ride and the rumors she heard at school. She set aside her mug on the table in front of her. “Are they responsible for all those people on the news and in the rumor mill?”

“Correct, but that is also where we come in,” Ikutsuki said. “There are a rare few that can harness a special power known as Persona. Those that can summon a Persona are able to stand up and fight back against the Shadows.” The chairman swept his hand to the lobby. “This dorm serves another purpose rather than overflow, it is the base of operations for the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad. You can call it SEES for short.” He turned back to Minako. “I know this can be quite a bit to take in, but I need you to sleep on something before Minato rejoins us.”

Mitsuru stood up and opened the briefcase on the table. Inside was a pair of twin guns that resembled Yukari’s. “We would like you to consider fighting beside us as members of SEES.”

Minako gawked at the weapons before her before Mitsuru picked one up and plopped it into her
hands. “These were made not long after you came to the dorm. If you choose to join us, you will remain here and learn to harness the power of Persona.”

Ikutsuki stood and flattened the creases in his suit. “Of course you could always refuse the offer and leave this all behind. Whatever you chose, please bare in mind that Minato and you are under no obligation to join.”

Minako held the gun a little too tightly.

It was heavier than she thought.

Walking to school was an awkward experience.

Minako had busied herself with music to pass the time, but at moments she caught herself asking the empty space beside her a question. Strangers would give her confused looks before going back to their own business.

After years of companionship, the space beside her seemed barren.

It didn’t help that she now had the knowledge of the Dark Hour and Personas on her plate. She had a choice now to fight or stand aside without being able to interfere.

Risk her life and future or dive straight into the fray, neither option sat right with her.

All Minako wanted was her brother to wake up. She already missed his dry humor and poorly concealed disgust. It wasn’t fun going to school without him.

Junpei was waiting at the gates with his thumbs looped in his belt. When he spotted Minako walking along, he grew puzzled. “Yo, where’s Minato?” he looked past her as if he’d come walking up the path. “Did he miss the train or something?”

Minako threw on a fake smile. She had to go about her business as usual.

“He’s not feeling well, so you’re stuck with me today!”

“That sucks, I hope he gets better.” Junpei fell into step beside the senior. “You’ll never believe what happened yesterday! I finally beat that level in Castlevania that I was complaining about. You HAVE to hear what I did.”

Minako gasped, feeling herself smile for real. Things were going to be rough for the next few days, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t try to cheer up.

“Tell me everything! I want a full report on our way to class.”

The two continued to chat until the first bell rung. Minako parted ways with Junpei a little less gloomy.

The day practically flew by. Soon, Minako and Junpei were already making their way out of the school. The two had exchanged phones and were preoccupied with entering their information. Once they both finished, they switched back and snapped them closed.

“Just text me if ya’ need anything. I’m never busy,” Junpei said. “Make sure to tell Minato that he needs to get his butt back in school.”
Minako stuffed her phone away. “Thanks, and sorry we can’t hang out today. I’ve gotta get back and take care of the nerd.” She glanced away, feeling sheepish inside. “God knows what kind of trouble he could’ve gotten into while I wasn’t looking.”

“Don’t sweat it, I’ve got places to be too.” Junpei checked the time on his watch before groaning. “Shit, I’ve gotta get home. See ya tomorrow!”

And with that, Minako watched as Junpei sprinted towards the station to catch the next train. She took a second to breathe and relax.

Once she collected herself, she decided to take her time walking to the hospital. There was no way Minato had woken up today. She could stand waiting a bit longer.

Besides, going to school improved her mood significantly. She couldn’t stay moping around her room all day when there were things to do. Then again, when had she ever been one to dwell on her feelings for long periods of time?

“Hey, Minako-senpai!”

At the mention of her name, Minako turned around to see Yukari running towards her with a folder in her hands. “I’m glad I caught you before you left. Mitsuru wants you to do something for her.” She stopped in front of Minako and offered her the folder. “Akihiko-senpai is in the hospital too. He hurt his arm during the attack and had to stay for a few days. Could you get these notes to him?”

The mysterious Akihiko Sanada, the boy who had gotten rid of the fan-girls. It would be her chance to get to know her new classmate without the intervention of hungry vultures breathing down her neck.

Minako took the folder with a nod. “It’s on my way, sure. Tell Mitsuru I’m on the case!”

Yukari smiled and turned to run back towards the school. “Thanks, I gotta get going. I have archery club until five today. See you later.” She then quickly scampered away to the gym and outdoor range.

Minako kept walking towards the station with the folder under her arm.

Reading a smudged room number on her hand, Minako made her way through the hospital corridors to drop off the folder.

A nurse had quickly rattled off Akihiko’s room number before running off to attend to another patient. Knowing that her scattered brain wouldn’t remember the number, she wrote it down with one of the hospital’s many spare pens.

The extended stay section of the hospital was much more relaxed. Fewer people needed emergency attention, consisting of post-surgery and overnight patients. Minato was going to be moved there tomorrow if his condition improved tonight. Minako saw Akihiko’s room number and stopped in front of the door.

She knocked softly, just in case he was sleeping.

“Who’s there?”

Minako threw on a smile and leaned closer to the door. "It’s just Minako Arisato. Mitsuru sent you
the notes from class today and some homework. Can I come in?"

There was a grunt of approval so the russet-haired girl let herself inside. However, a tall individual in a red coat bumped into her, leaving the room as she came in. He looked down at the newcomer with squinted eyes.

“Excuse me. . .” he said before stepping out the room, closing the door behind him. Minako took a moment to recollect herself from the experience before turning her attention to Akihiko.

Like Minato, he was laying in a bed. The sheets had been pulled back to reveal his left arm that had been bandaged heavily and put in a sling. He wore the standard hospital gown, but somehow still seemed just as imposing as when the first met.

Minako didn’t let it hinder her from being herself.

“I’m guessing you know that guy?” she asked, approaching the bed slowly.

Akihiko gave her a curt nod. “We’re friends, he just came in for a quick visit. He may seem rough around the edges, but don’t pay attention to it. Shinji wouldn’t hurt a fly without a good reason. Just don’t provoke him.”

“I’ve got no reason to, so that shouldn’t be hard.” Minako opened her bag and took out the folder. She had gotten tired of carrying it and trying to switch between songs, so she tucked it away on the train ride over. “Good thing Mitsuru put these notes together instead of me,” she giggled and handed over the hefty folder, “I like to practice my English. Sometimes, I forget I’m even writing in it before I need to turn the page.”

Akihiko accepted the notes. “Yeah, my English is still a bit rusty. It’s my worst subject right now.” He set the notes on his bedside table. “So how’s your little brother doing? Mitsuru never tells me anything.”

Minako closed her bag back up. “He’s recovering, but he hasn’t woken up yet. The nurses are gonna move him to this section if his condition improves tonight.” She crossed her fingers. “Although that prayer is a bit of a downer, it kinda fits ya’ know.” She paused, thinking to herself. “Maybe I should be saying the prayer for sleep? It might be better considering the circumstances. No, the prayer is supposed to be personal and for going to bed. Why didn’t the Vatican make a prayer for sick people?”

Akihiko gave her an owlish look. “Um...you okay?”

Minako stopped talking and came to attention. “Sorry about that. I tend to get on rants all the time. Thinking in my head really isn’t my style!” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Minato can usually get me to shut up, but he’s out of commission so. . .”

“Don’t worry about it. We all have our quirks.” Akihiko picked up his folder. “Thanks for the notes. It gets boring just sitting around doing nothing.”

Minako waved him off and stepped back into the hall. “Glad I could help. See ya later!”

She left the room in high spirits. The rest of her time spent in the hospital seemed far less depressing.

Akihiko came back to school the next day, but the two never spoke unless in passing. He was busy
with his club and Minako was scrambling to find something to do after school.

For the next week, she had settled into a nice routine. She would meet Junpei at the school gates and chat with him before the bell rang. During class, she would be a good student and take her notes in English. Occasionally her fellow classmates would journey over to her desk and introduce themselves. Minako could proudly say she made a few friends from her interactions.

After school was spent catching up with Junpei and getting something to eat. The two would sometimes pop by the arcade and see who could get the highest score on the DDR machine. To no one’s surprise, both sucked at it and got chewed out by the better players.

At least Minako smiled knowing she had someone to be bad at it with.

Once the two went their separate ways for the evening, she dropped by the hospital to check on Minato. His condition grew steadily better, but for some reason, he still remained unconscious.

Despite the bad things, Minako continued to pray he would wake up soon.

By the time Sunday rolled around again, she was already feeling much like her old self. Junpei and her met up for another arcade run then grabbing lunch at Wild Duck Burger. Minako barely ate on account of spending most of the money she brought on games. She simply piggy-backed off of Junpei who ordered extra fries.

The younger student had to go home after eating, but both parted ways in good spirits. Minako automatically took the train back to the hospital. She felt a pang of hunger but ignored it.

Minako checked in with the nurse on duty before heading to Minato’s room. The women greeted her with a tired smile and warm hello before returning to her paperwork. It was around this time that she would be getting off of her twelve-hour shift.

Just as he always had been, Minato was sleeping peacefully in his bed. Minako made herself at home next to him and pulled out a manuscript to a story she had been writing for some time now. She passed the time by reading it over and revising dialogue that sounded clunky or awkward.

“It is with great sorrow, I hang my head and say unto you, death is waiting. There is but a short time left until we must part. . . My life may have been all but perfect, yet I know it was a life well done. Even as the angels send themselves upon me to cast my creator’s judgment, I fear not of Heaven or Hell. This life was spent in servitude to the endless pursuit of knowledge. Even in death, I still seek such sacred notions as I always have.”

Yes, I find that I have an answer to that greatest query of man! Life is not meant for such dwellings as what could have been or what has transpired. Life is-”

There was a resounding knock on the door to the room.

Minako stopped short in her reading and collected herself. “Come in!” she called, setting her manuscript aside. She started packing her things as the door opened up. “Sorry if I lost track of time. I was just-”

Much to her surprise, instead of a nurse or doctor, Akihiko stepped inside. He wore a red sweater with tan pants, a matching jacket slung over his shoulder.

“You were what?” he asked.

Minako snapped her mouth shut and shook her head. “My bad, Minato doesn’t get a lot of visitors.

“Do you have…” he asked before realizing he was speaking to Minako. He cleared his throat, “Do you have…”

Minako’s face went blank. “Oh, yes. He is still unconscious.”

Akihiko nodded in response. “I see.”

Minako turned back to her manuscript. There was a lot to write about. She had to make sure she got everything right. If only Minato could be here to read it over…
I thought it was the nurse kickin’ me out for the day.” She set her things back down and took a seat again. “So, what’re you doin’ here? Shouldn't you be resting?”

Akihiko shut the door behind him. “I came in for a check-up, so I thought I’d drop in.” He hung awkwardly at the door, shifting his weight from side to side. “I mean, tt’s partially my fault that he got here in the first place. The least I can do is pay my respects.”

Minako shrugged and motioned for him to come closer. “I’m pretty sure he’ll forgive you. You’d be surprised how little this nerd cares about anything other than music or studying.” She leaned back in her chair. “Besides, it’s not like you had any other choice. No one was killed so don’t stress about it.”

“R-right, thanks.” he came closer and studied Minato. “You two look completely different.”

“That’s one way to switch the conversation!” she observed. “I take more after my mom and Minato actually took after our great grandfather. Funny how that worked out, huh?”

“That far back, huh? Must’ve been a shock to your parents.” Akihiko nodded along. “Do you two have anything in common?”

“Yup, we both have the same mouth: small and thin.” She pointed to her lips. “Ya’ might not be able to see it in your lifetime, but when he smiles, it’s identical to mine. Mine might be a touch bigger since I smile more.”

Akihiko chuckled at the joke. “Can’t argue with that-”

Minako’s growling stomach interrupted the boxer before he could finish. She rolled her eyes and gave a nervous laugh.

“Ah, the hunger pains have returned with a vengeance! Another thing Minato and I have in common is a high metabolism.” She snapped her fingers and gathered up her belongings. “I think I’m gonna head back to the dorm now and find something to snack on. All I’ve had to eat today were a few fries.” Once she had everything, she began to leave. “Stay as long as ya’ like!”

“Wait a second,” he objected, “I really only planned on popping in for a second and going back to the dorm.” Akihiko threw on his jacket. “You wanna grab something on the way back?”

Minako threw her hands in front of her. “Slow down there, Tex! I spent all my extra money on arcade games so I’ll just be sitting there frothing at the mouth like some idiot.”

Akihiko shrugged and straightened his collar. “Whatever, I can pay. It’s the least I can do since you got me my notes the other day.” He opened up the door for Minako. “That and you look like you could use some cheering up.”

The girl smiled and decided to just go with the invitation. “If you really don’t mind, I can’t turn down free food.” Minako threw on her coat. “Do you have a place in mind?”

“How come I never found this place?” Minako took a deep breath of the homely beef bowl restaurant. “I smells sooo good!”

Akihiko grinned at her satisfied reaction and led the way to the counter. “I come here all the time. You can’t get stronger without hard work and a diet full of protein.” He pulled out a chair for himself then his companion. “Make yourself at home.”
Minako thanked him and sat down.

A server came to them, a jovial man with a comforting demeanor. He recognized Akihiko right away. “Welcome back, how’s the arm treatin’ ya’?”

“Better but I’m still out for the month,” Akihiko responded. “Really should’ve been on guard during that sparring match.”

The man chuckled. “You’ll be back before you know it.” He then turned to Minako who had been listening respectfully. “Well, who’s this pretty little thing you got here? I’ve never seen you before, young lady.”

Minako gave him a tiny bow. “Minako Arisato, I’m new to the school so Sanada-san offered to show me the best place to eat in the city.” She gave him her award winning smile. “If the food tastes half as good as it smells, I think I’ll have my new favorite restaurant!”

“Well, you came to the right place!” He turned back to Akihiko. “The usual?”

“Yeah,” the boy motioned to his partner, “and make that a double.”

“Coming right up!” The server left to go prepare the food.

Minako leaned onto the counter. “So what exactly did ya’ get?”

“You’ll see.” Akihiko said.

The two fell into polite conversation as they waited. Akihiko took the lead and seemed more than happy to discuss how to craft a balanced workout. Minako simply listened on, throwing her two cents in when she felt like he was slowing down. Mostly, she took to scooping out what kind of person he was.

If there was anything she knew about the mysterious bot, it was the fact that he was awkward. He would almost never look her dead on for more than half a second. There always seemed to be something that caught his attention, either that or he was too nervous to hold eye contact for long periods of time.

Akihiko also had trouble keeping still. His knee was constantly bouncing or his fingers were drumming on the wooden counter. A few times, Minako expected him to get up and go for a jog to the dorm in back. She suspected he was anxious to get back into hardcore training, but maybe it was something much deeper.

On the other hand, Akihiko was passionate. The way he talked about lifting techniques or running trails in the area made him light up like a firework. His eyes seemed to shimmer at anything pertaining to getting stronger. Nothing else caught his fancy more than being the best. At times, it seemed like all he thought was strength and training.

Even still, Minako could tell he loved to work hard and reach a little higher than the day before. It was something she could respect.

Minako broke out of her thoughts as the server came back with two large bowls stacked high with beef and noodles. The whole dish looked like it was made for a giant. He placed both bowls in front of the two with a nod.

A weight dropped in the girl’s stomach as she stared down the behemoth in front of her. She
wondered to herself if she could even get halfway through the thing.

Their server placed down two pairs of chopsticks and some napkins. “Enjoy kiddos! I’ll be around if ya’ need anything.”

With that, he left to assist other customers.

Akihiko wasted no time, picking up his utensils. “Better dig in before it gets cold.” He then shut right up, barely taking the time to breathe as he practically inhaled the dish.

Minako steeled herself and faced down the beef bowl. If there was one thing that Minato and she also had in common, it was a competitive streak. She made a quick sign of the cross, brandished her weapons, and prayed she wouldn’t throw up.

The two ate in silence, demolishing their meal at an ungodly pace. Minako found it easier to digest since the food was fantastic. She didn’t know if she could survive if it tasted sub-par or worse. It was even better since she had barely a scrap of nutrition all day, leaving room in her rapidly filling gut. Maybe it was a good thing that she blew all her money on a claw machine.

It took a good twenty minutes to finally reach the end of her culinary journey. The last bite was the most triumphant moment of the day and signified herself as a true champion over the beef bowl monster. It didn’t even matter that Akihiko was already done a few minutes ahead.

Minako let out a long sigh and pushed her empty bowl away. Her stomach felt like it was going to burst, but good free food was a blessing from God. “That was the best meal I’ve had in forever! I can die happy.”

“Glad you liked it.” Akihiko peered over at her bowl. “I’m impressed, you really polished that.”

“What can I say?” Minako said with a smirked. “Arisato’s don’t leave food untouched.”

Akihiko seemed pleased. “That’s what I like to hear. Are you ready for round two then?”

Minako wavered but wanted to be polite. She did her best to hold back her disdain to eat anything else. “Ready and waiting! I could go for something else.”

She must have been lousy at concealing her pain. Akihiko raise an eyebrow at her strained answer. “You don’t have to push yourself to make me happy,” he assured. “Eating right is a big part of building up muscle, you know. Forcing yourself won’t do any good.”

Minako gave him a tiny grin. “Sorry, ya’ can’t really turn down food someone else paid for. Thanks for understanding.”

“Just don’t go overboard. That kind of thinking will make you sick.”

The server came back around and scooped up their bowls. “My stars, I’ve never seen a lady finish off the extra large bowl! What a fine girl you are!” He leaned over to Akihiko. “This one’s a keeper. Better steal her before some other chap scoops her up.”

The boxer ducked his head. “S-shut up, you’re gonna make her uncomfortable. We barely know each other yet.”

Minako poked his shoulder. “Aw, come on buddy! I think I’m quite the catch. Are you just too shy to admit your undying love for me?”
“And she’s got herself a sense of humor!” The owner of the shop gave them both a curt nod. “Treat her right, my boy. Bring her back anytime!”

Akihiko watched the man leave before leaving their dues, plus a little extra for a tip. He shook himself out of his earlier humiliation and turned to his companion. “Let’s jog back to the dorm. It’ll help the food digest faster.”

He really was a fitness nut, but at least he was an earnest young man.

“Why not?”

Minako found herself enjoying the run, even if she was wearing a skirt.

Once again, Minako found herself in the Velvet Room that night.

Igor sat in his chair with Theodore and Elizabeth dutifully at his sides. He gave her the same wide smile he always seemed to wear. “Welcome back, young lady. The young man has already awakened to his power: Orpheus. It is quite interesting he would receive the Master of Strings.”

“I really don’t know what that means.” Minako shifted on the couch. “Um, can I ask you a question about this Persona business? I got a brief explanation, but I still don’t get it.”

“It is my job and distinct pleasure to assist in any questions you may have.” Igor shrugged. “Well, maybe not every question.”

Minako took a deep breath. “What in the world are we dealing with? Why do we have these powers? What even is a Persona?” She hung her head. “It just all seems so surreal. Nothing makes any sense ever since we got here.”

Igor made no attempt to change his expression. “Humans are limited in their knowledge of Personas. They are blameless in not understanding the complexities of power that they hold within themselves.” He motioned to the table between them. “Allow me to shed some light on the subject.”

A set of five cards appeared in front on Minako. Each one had the same face that was emblazoned on the Velvet room keys. “A Persona is a facet of one’s personality that surfaces as you react to external stimuli. You can think of it as a mask that protects you as you brave many hardships.”

Theodore stepped forward and opened his book. “As a guest of the Velvet Room, your Persona is only a fraction of your full potential. There is still a great power that dwells beneath the surface: a gift only you can control. The same goes for the young man.” He snapped the book closed “That being said, you and your brother’s powers are still weak.”

Minako leaned forward. “What do ya’ mean? Minato was able to completely demolish that Shadow the other night like it was nothing!”

The card closest to Igor flipped over to show a man carrying a bag with a dog at his heels. “When you use your Persona ability, you must channel your inner strength. The ability evolves as you develop your Social Links: your emotional ties with others. The stronger your Social Links, the more powerful your Persona ability.”

Minako felt her head begin to hurt just thinking about it all. “There’s so much I don’t know.”

“It will all be learned with time and patience, young lady.” Igor waved his hand over the cards and
they vanished once again. “As you humans say: Rome wasn’t built in a single day. Fortunately, a Persona is much less complicated than building an empire.”

The girl sighed. “Why do I get the strange feeling you’re lying about that last part?”

Elizabeth chuckled into a white-gloved hand. “Humans, so skeptical of everything that is presented to them. What an interesting species.”

Theodore shot a harsh glare at the amused attendant. “Do carry yourself with a semblance of decorum, dear sister. We couldn’t let our guests think of us as an unprofessional bunch. What would Margret say if she were here to see your indecent behavior?”

“Be still, my dear Theodore. It was all in jest.” Elizabeth waved him off. “What is life in this room without a hint of fun now and then? Do relax and enjoy yourself while you can.”

Minako marveled at the two before the clock on the wall began to chime.

Igor perked up ever so slightly. “It looks as if our time has come to an end, my dear.” Igor held out his hand. “I must speak with the young man before he wakes in your world. The next we meet, it will be of your own accord.”

“Minato is gonna be here?” Minako whipped her head around. “Can I talk to him? I need to know if he’s okay.” She quickly got on her feet. “He’s had me worried sick all week! That nerd is in so much trouble when I see him!”

Igor didn’t answer but instead waved her off. Minako’s vision began to blur as if looking into a mirage. Much to her disappointment, she felt herself falling back into her reality.

All she could hear was Igor’s faint laughter echoing in her dreams.

“Until we meet again, I shall pass along your message.”

March 5th, 2010

I think back to my first night at the dorm.

I wonder, if I could go back and tell them about what I knew, would they listen?

I suppose it's too late to say.

For the last time,

Minako Arisato
“The young lady has been worried over you.”

Minato opened his eyes to find himself off the rooftop and in the Velvet Room. Igor sat in the same spot, the same smile plastered on his face, with Elizabeth and Theodore flanking him.

“What-?” he grumbled, feeling like he’d been hit by a truck. “Why am I here?”

Igor chuckled and his smile widened. “Have you already forgotten what you’d accomplished? You’ve awakened to the power of Persona and find yourself in a dream once more.” He motioned to a door on his right. “As I said, the young lady has been worried.”

Minato felt his mind go fuzzy. “T-the young lady-?” Suddenly, it clicked in his brain what the strange man had meant. “You mean Minako was here? She didn’t pass out on the roof though, I heard her shouting at me.”

Elizabeth chuckled from beside Igor’s chair. “You have been sleeping for some time now. In the real world, I suspect a week or more has passed.”

The boy’s eyes bugged out. “A-a week-?” He felt a sharp pain in his head, clutching it to dull the unpleasant sensation.

“You mustn’t trouble yourself, lest you go mad from thinking. You are still healing from your first battle.” Igor nodded to himself. “What a marvelous bout it was. Even Theodore had been impressed with who answered your call.”

Minato felt the pain recede as he found his bearings. “Answered my call? What the hell is going on?”

Igor clicked his tongue, wagging his finger like a disappointed parent. “There is no need for language in this hallowed room. I understand you humans find the need for such profanity, but it will not be tolerated here.” He motioned a hand to the table in front of him.

“Let us move on to more important matters. You are probably confused about your current situation.” Five cards appeared before Minato, face down with inverted faces on the back. “What you had summoned is what we call a Persona.” Igor snapped his fingers and a card flipped over. It revealed the image of a man and a dog. “A Persona is a facet of one’s personality that surfaces as you react to external stimuli. You can think of it as a mask that protects you as you brave many hardships.”

Elizabeth strode over to Minato’s side, the thick book she always carried on her hip. “Even though your peers also possess this power of Persona, you have an extra ability that’s all your own. The young lady shares this gift with you.” She stopped short in front of him. “Unfortunately, both of you are terribly feeble.”

Minato narrowed his gaze at Elizabeth. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Igor waved his hand and the cards disappeared. “When you use your Persona ability, you must channel your inner strength. The ability evolves as you develop your Social Links: your emotional ties with others. The stronger your Social Links, the more powerful your Persona ability.”

“We got a problem there.” Minato huffed, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m not exactly the...
social type. Minako’s the one who can make friends easily, not me.” He frowned at the carpet. “Besides, what’s the point of having emotional ties when everyone leaves in the end.”

Theodore sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It seems we have our work cut out for us when it comes to this one.”

Igor chuckled and shook his head. “Dear Theo, remember that our beloved guests have never been given a mission quite as grand. Instead of looking at it in a negative light, let us help them flourish not only as Wild Cards but also as humans. That is our noble duty after all is said and done.”

Elizabeth gave Minato a pat on the shoulder. “It will be a difficult journey, we are not denying that in the slightest. It is why we, as inhabitants of the Velvet Room, are here. With a little time and patience, you may come to find this to be a positive experience.”

Minato was silent, but he didn’t shrink away from Elizabeth. The woman, despite her informality, held a curious aura that softened the stifling air of the room.

The clock on the grated wall chimed aloud.

Theodore clicked his tongue and pulled out a silver pocket watch on a thin chain. “It appears that our guest will wake soon. Let us wrap up the visit, shall we?”

“Quite Theo, we shall.” Igor turned his full attention on Minato. “Time marches on in your world. I shouldn't keep you here any longer. Next time we meet, you will come here of your own accord.”

Elizabeth helped the boy to his feet. “Your sister will be overjoyed to know you are safe. Please, give her our best before you return.”

“I’ll do that.” Minato gave her a curt nod. “Thanks. . . see ya soon I guess.”

Igor chuckled and waved.

“Until then, farewell.”

Just like his first encounter with the Velvet Room, everything faded into black as if he were being pulled back by some invisible force. Minato’s body felt heavy but his spirit still hummed from his brief visit.

Minato's eyes were heavy, but somehow he managed to wake up from his deep sleep. A soft light filtered in from a nearby window. The smell of clean linens and flowers lingered in the room, a welcome change from the smoke and ash he had inhaled previously.

He wondered for a moment how long he had been like this.

“You’re awake.” a smooth voice said beside him.

Minato turned to see Yukari sitting in a chair close to the bed. She had a book on her lap with the pages open. It looked like she was almost down with the whole thing.

Yukari shut her book. “Um...how are you feeling?”

Minato opened his mouth to speak, but his throat felt like sandpaper. He had to swallow thickly before making another attempt to answer her.

“Where am I?”
Without warning, the girl rounded on him. “Thank goodness. You finally came to! How much sleep do you need!? It's been a whole week!” she disparaged before her expression dropped. “... I was so worried about you... Minako-senpai was so lonely.”

Minato looked down at his sheets, trying to take in the new information.

Igor had been right, but all Minato could think about was how much he had missed.

After a tension-filled lull in the conversation, Yukari let out a long sigh.

“... This is Tatsumi Memorial Hospital. It's just a short walk from the station. Minako and I came around every day to check up on you. She couldn’t come today because of homework, so I stayed a little longer in her place.”

Minako was still going to school. It was a comforting thought that she hadn’t gotten too upset and was able to carry on.

“Other than some smoke in your lungs and a few nasty bruises, the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with you.” Yukari continued on with her explanation. “He said you were just exhausted, but you kept sleeping and sleeping.” She gripped the book on her lap. “Do you even know how worried I was?”

Again, Minato couldn’t respond to her tender emotions. More than ever, he just wished that Minako could be there to straighten the situation out.

Thankfully, Yukari recoiled when she realized what she had said.

“Um... I'm sorry I couldn't do anything. Even though I was supposed to protect you, I-but, your power...” she trailed off before whispering in awe. “It was amazing.”

Once again, Igor’s words echoed in his head about Persona and his weak power. Minato felt a slight shock of pain trying to remember the specifics, so he simply huffed and tried to relax.

Yukari set her book aside on a small table. “We'll explain everything later like we did with Minako. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I-uh...” she stared off into space before going on. “I wanted to tell you that... I'm sorta like you.”

Minato sat up a little taller at her words. “What do you mean?” he asked, waiting patiently for an answer.

Yukari shifted in her chair, looking away from the injured boy.

“My dad died in an accident when I was little, and my mom and I aren't exactly on good terms. You and Minako are all alone too, right?” She frowned and met him eye to eye. “To be honest, I already knew about your past, but it didn't seem fair so I wanted you to know about mine. It was back in '99. There was a big explosion in the area. Supposedly, my dad died in the blast, but nobody really knows what happened. He was working in a lab run by the Kirijo Group.”

Ten years ago...

She was right, they did share something in common.

Suddenly, Yukari regained her confident visage. “So, I'm hoping that if I stick around long enough, I'll find out something. That's why I'm going to Gekkoukan High, and why I was there when this happened to you. Of course, I panicked and wasn't much help. It was my first time fighting them,
Yukari bowed to Minato. “I’m sorry. You wouldn’t have to go through all this if I wasn’t such a coward.”

Something inside Minato felt sorry for the girl before him. Even when the voice of reason told him she was simply looking for pity to justify herself, a pang of empathy resounded in himself. Yukari had done the best she could and that was enough.

There was no need to be cynical about everything.

For once, he told the voice of reason to take a hike.

“It’s not your fault,” he stated simply. “To be honest, I was scared too. There’s no point in beating yourself up so don’t worry about it.”

Yukari sat up, her face contorted into a surprised grin. She breathed a sigh of relief. “And here I am telling you all this the minute you wake up. While I was waiting, I thought to myself, ‘I’ve been hiding so many things from him. As soon as he wakes up, I’ll tell him the truth.’ So, thanks for listening. I’ve been wanting to share that story with someone for a long time.”

“Don’t mention it.” He sunk back into the mattress. “A week of shut-eye and I’m still tired?”

Yukari chuckled before getting out of her seat. “Alright, I’m gonna get going. I’ll let the others know you woke up.” She grabbed her book and made her way to the door. “Take it easy, okay? Be a good patient! And don’t hesitate to call the nurse. I’m sure she’ll take good care of you.”

Minato gave her a thumbs up. “I’ll do that. . . thanks for the company.”

Yukari smiled and let herself out.

“Bye Minato. Sweet dreams.”

When the door closed behind Yukari, Minato sighed and let his mind wander until sleep pulled him back under.

The blinds near Minato’s bed were forcibly flung open, assaulting his eyes and forcing him to sit up. Before he had a chance to adjust to the sudden wake-up call, a bundle of clothes were flung into his face. They bounced off and landed right in his lap. “Get dressed and get ready. You’re discharged as of negative six seconds ago!” the rude intruder announced. “You have a clean bill of health so you’re goin’ to school today.”

Minato rubbed the sleep out of his eyes to confront the familiar assailant. To his un-surprise, Minako stood next to his bed. She wore her constant smile and had two croissants held carefully in opposite hands.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked, setting one of the pastries on his bedside table. “I woke up at the crack of dawn to get here and all I get is a blank stare?” Minako used her now free hand to ruffle her fatigued brother’s hair. “We’ve got ten minutes before they kick you out and sixty more to get to school. I’m not gonna be late because you decided to get some beauty sleep.”

“I’m getting up, troglodyte.” Minato groaned, flinging his covers aside and grabbing his clothes.
“Like you said, we got an hour and the school is just a twenty-minute train ride.”

Minako huffed and took a seat next to his bed. “Some of us actually like to be early. Just get dressed already so we can catch the train and get moving. You can eat breakfast on the fly.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” Minato mumbled, walking to the bathroom. “Did you bring my shoes?”

The senior hummed and bent down to present a pair of polished oxfords. Sitting next to them was his school bag. “I also packed your MP3 and headphones. You can have them back when you get your butt in gear.”

“Can do, your highness.” he jeered while slipping into the bathroom.

“And use the sink to fix that stupid mop you call hair!” Minako called before he closed the door. “You look homeless!”

Once inside the privacy of the bathroom, Minato let himself grin.

He hadn’t polished his school shoes before the night the dorm was attacked.

They had been dirty from his daily commutes.

Much to Minako’s delight, they had fifteen extra minutes to spare. The entire journey for Minato was spent eating his croissant, listening to Minako rant about books, and trying not to focus on his wobbly legs. Walking uphill from the train station was more like a death march. It wouldn’t have surprised him if his legs fell off halfway through.

Minako noticed and sarcastically offered to carry him, which he vehemently declined.

Yukari was waiting for the two outside the school gate when they arrived.

The pink-clad student waved the pair over. “Morning guys!” she called as Minako pulled her brother along. Yukari immediately turned to Minato with a relieved smile. “You seem to be doing pretty well. How do you feel being up and around?”

Minato shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. “It feels weird.” He flexed a leg that felt sore since he first started walking. “A week did nothing on the muscles.”

Yukari gave him a sympathetic look. “I can only imagine. If you need help walking around, I wouldn’t mind giving you a hand. We’re in the same class, so it makes sense.”

Minako giggled under her breath and gave the two of them a mischievous smirk. “I bet Minato would appreciate that very much.” She elbowed him and wiggled her eyebrows. “What do ya’ say to that, lil’ bro?”

“I say shut up.” he snapped, pushing her away with what little strength he had.

Yukari caught the underlying context of her senior’s words and ducked her head. A deep blush dusted her cheeks. “Um, never mind. I’ll just show you where the elevators are so you don’t have to use the stairs.”

“Thank you,” Minato said.

Yukari suddenly perked up and drew closer to the siblings. “Hey, sorry to add this to your worries, but Ikutsuki-san wants to talk to you both today.” She turned to Minako. “You already got most of
the information. All he needs is an answer so you should still be there.”

Minako’s smile twitched for a moment. It went noticed by the untrained eye, but Minato caught the momentary action as clear as day.

“I have my answer, don’t worry about that,” she affirmed. “We’ll be there after school.”

Yukari nodded at them. “Come to the fourth floor of the dorm after school, okay? Don't forget.”

The three walked into the building, making idle small talk on their way. Minato’s head filled with an assortment of questions that he would no doubt have an answer to soon.

“Look who’s back from the dead.”

Of course, Junpei would be the first one to acknowledge his absence.

Minato waved when he and Yukari made their way inside the classroom. “Hey Junpei,” he said, taking his seat and unpacking his materials for class. “You’re still the same.”

“That’s what ya’ say after freaking dropping off the face of the planet? Talk about the cold shoulder routine,” the caped student groaned. Junpei leaned towards his friends. “So, what were ya’ sick with? Flu? Ebola?”

Minato shrugged. “Don’t know and doesn’t matter. How’s school goin’ for you? Keeping up during lectures?”

“That was the definition of a rhetorical question.” Yukari, who sat down in the seat right in front of him, turned to enter the conversation. “He couldn’t even string a sentence together without you around, let alone get the right answer.”

“Come on, Yuka-tan! You’re so harsh!” Junpei complained. “It was ONE time. Cut me some slack, will ya’?”

The trio talked amongst themselves before Miss Toriumi waltzed in and called the students to attention. She ran through general announcements, the lunch menu, and finished by welcoming Minato back to school. He made sure to thank her for the sentiment before she went to her next class.

Today, their lessons started out with Japanese history, taught by a man name Mr. Ono. The man wore a replica samurai helmet and funky button downs. Anyone would think he was one of those teachers that enjoyed his work.

Unfortunately, he was about as invested in his job as Junpei was in his daily studies.

“So, the Stone Age can be summarized as mankind's struggle against the mammoths. Aaaaand that's enough about the Stone Age,” Mr. Ono slammed his binder of notes on the lesson shut. “I'm sick of it. I'd rather talk about the Sengoku era! Japanese history's not that exciting until then. Though I'm paid to do this, so I've gotta. . . It's tough being an adult.” The eccentric man scratched at his stubble “Okay, can anyone answer a question about the Stone Age?” He barely swept his eyes across the room before picking out an unlucky volunteer.

“Junpei, how about you? The Stone Age is divided into the Paleolithic and the Neolithic eras. What's the difference between them?”
Junpei, who had actually been paying attention, snapped up from his notes. “Uhh... How am I supposed to know about something way back then? You didn’t say anything about Palelick and Neolick!”

For once: he had been right. All Mr. Ono had done during the lecture was go on a rant about how boring it was rather than actually teach. How could Junpei know something he was never taught?

The rest of the class gave each other uncertain glances, fearing they would be called on if Junpei answered incorrectly. Even the usually intelligent Yukari was shrinking down to hide from persecution. It didn’t help that she sat in the front row.

Minato, on the other hand, knew the right answer. History had always been one of Minako’s best subjects, so she would often tutor him when he needed help. She had mentioned that the naming process for most eras before emperors was the change in how tools were made or the material used. This was especially true for the Stone Age.

There was no way he could sneak the answer to Junpei without getting caught. Mr. Ono was bearing down on the poor boy like a hawk about to kill its prey.

He would just have to give the answer himself.

“Excuse me?” Minato raised his hand tentatively. “I have the answer, sir.”

Mr. Ono reared his glare to Minato. “Alright, what’s the answer, my boy? What's the difference between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic eras?”

Minato cleared his throat and folded his hands on his lap. “How the tools were made, sir.”

“Correct Arisato. Paleolithic tools were chipped stone, while Neolithic tools were ground stone. Though either way, they used stone tools.” Despite the right answer, he leaned on his podium with a wistful gleam in his eyes. “Ugh, I wanna get to the age of katanas. Everything else is so dull.”

Soft whispers broke out amongst his peers. Many were praising the gods they didn’t have to suffer any humiliation. Even more were commenting on how smart Minato was.

Junpei leaned over so only Minato could hear him.

“Saved again, thanks man.” He reached out his fist. “Are we a team or what?”

Minato snorted but accepted the fist bump. “Whatever.”

After the morning lessons, the boys and Yukari spent lunch together. Classes flew by for the rest of the school day.

Minako and Minato walked to the dorm with Yukari. The lounge was empty when they got back so they all went to the fourth floor. The last time the siblings had been up there was the night they had to flee for their lives.

Strange enough, there was only one room on the floor. It was separated from the hallway by a set of heavy wooden doors. A security camera hung in plain view to monitor anyone who came and went.

Yukari led them to the doors and shouldered her way inside. “Everyone should be in there by now. Come on in.”
Minato hesitated, but in true Minako fashion, she grabbed him by the strap of his school bag and dragged him inside. He couldn’t fight back when his legs already felt like jelly on a hot day.

Inside the room was what looked to be a command center straight out of a movie. A large computer with a consul took up an entire wall while a display of weapons and maps made up the other. There was only one window that had a dark and heavy curtain blocking out any form of light.

At the center of the room was a similar set-up of couches like downstairs. The coffee table in the middle had a metal briefcase standing out against the dark wood color. Mitsuru and the Chairman were already seated comfortably with a third unknown student polishing a pair of boxing gloves. He looked far more intimidating than the Shadows they faced just a week ago without a doubt. If the boxing gloves didn’t scream trouble, it was the well-built frame and intense look in his eyes. Even the bandage above one eye seemed to warn anyone that he’d been in the dirt a few times.

Despite that, Minako plopped down right next to him like they were already friends. The new face had looked up from his work at her presence and struck up a conversation.

His sister really was a gutsy human being.

Ikutsuki waved Minato over to the group. “There you are. I'm glad that you're okay. Please, have a seat so we may discuss some important things.”

Yukari motioned for Minato to follow her and he obeyed. The two sat on the same couch as Mitsuru.

“It looks like you are all accounted for.” Ikutsuki turned to the mysterious boy Minako had been chatting with. “Before that, I believe I mentioned him earlier, but this is Akihiko Sanada. Minako and he happen to be in the same class.”

Akihiko threw a small grin, dissipating the placid semblance he gave off earlier. “How ya doin’?”

Minato gave him a small nod, still wary of this new face. “Fine, thanks.”

Ikutsuki brought the group to attention with the flick of his wrist. “Okay, let me start off by asking you this.” He leaned forward, the light glinting off his spectacles. “Would you believe me if I said that a day consists of more than 24 hours?”

“. . . Excuse me?” Minato asked, glancing over at Minako.

She caught his gaze and gave him a reassuring smile. “I know it sounds like he’s blowing smoke, but hear them out.”

Minato nodded, still unsure about what was going on. He turned back to the Chairman. “Keep going.”

“I'm not surprised by your reaction. However, you've already experienced this truth firsthand.” Ikutsuki settled back in his chair. “Do you remember the night you came here? You had to have noticed the signs. The street lights went out, nothing was working, there were coffins everywhere. Didn't it feel like you were in a different time?”

Minato studied his shoes. “When you put it that way...”

“That's the Dark Hour: a time period hidden between one day and the next.” Mitsuru went on to explain. “Normal humans are unaware of this phenomenon, but as you have seen, it is very real.”
“None of this makes any sense,” The younger Arisato felt a headache creeping up on him. “But keep going.”

Ikutsuki chuckled but remained calm. “I know how you feel. Who would believe such a story? On the other hand, the Dark Hour occurs each night, right at midnight. It'll happen tonight, and every night to come.”

From across the coffee table, Akihiko spoke up. “Normal people don't realize it since they're all sleeping inside their coffins. Unfortunately, that's not what makes the Dark Hour so interesting.”

Minato perked up. “What do you mean by interesting?”

“You saw those creatures.” Akihiko continued. “We call them Shadows. They only appear during the Dark Hour and attack anyone not in a coffin. It's our job to defeat them. Sounds exciting, huh?”

“Akihiko!” Mitsuru snapped at her fellow senior. “Why are you always like that? You just got hurt the other day!”

The two stared each other down, bringing new meaning to the phrase ‘if looks could kill’. Yukari looked scared half to death while Ikutsuki could only watch with mild disinterest. It looked to be a regular occurrence between the two.

Minako was the saving grace who swooped in to break the tension. “Anyway, what Sanada said is true,” she interjected. “That thing you killed was called a Shadow, and a nasty one at that. Turns out there are more of them roaming around during the Dark Hour.”

Ikutsuki nodded. “To put it simply, we're the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad: SEES for short. On paper, we're classified as a school club, but in reality, this group is dedicated to defeating the Shadows. Mitsuru is the leader. I'm the club advisor.”

“Okay, that makes sense. No wonder this dorm is so empty,” Minato said. “How do you guys fight the Shadows then?”

“Although rare, there are those who can function during the Dark Hour. Some may even awaken to a power that enables them to fight the Shadows. That's ‘Persona’, the power you used the other night. The Shadows can only be defeated by Persona-users.” Ikutsuki finished by nodding to Mitsuru. “To put it bluntly, it's all up to you guys.”

Mitsuru stood up and opened the briefcase. Two guns that were identical to the one he had used a week ago sat inside. “What he's trying to say is we want you and your sister to join us. We've prepared an Evoker for the both of you.” She gave him a somber frown “We'd like you to lend us your combined strength.”

Ikutsuki first turned to Minako. “We had asked your sister while you were incapacitated if she would join us, but she wished to wait until you came through for an answer.” He motioned to the briefcase. “Do you wish to fight as a member of SEES?”

Minako averted her eyes to the floor.

She took a deep breath before letting herself speak. “The Arisatos are a package deal.” She stared directly at Ikutsuki. “I’d be more than happy to lend a hand, but if Minato goes, so do I. He’s my responsibility.”

Mitsuru looked like she wanted to protest, but held back. "I see. . . we can respect that decision." Instead, she turned to Minato in an almost pleading way.
“I guess the choice lays with you.” She stepped aside for him to get a better view of the Evokers.

“Will you both join SEES?”

"Time never waits. It delivers all equally to the same end."

Minato felt a chill run up his spine. He looked over at Minako who was frozen on the spot. Her lips were pursed and body tense.

So she could hear the voice too.

"You two, who wish to safeguard the future, however limited it may be. . ."

Minato stood up and walked to the open briefcase. He picked up one of the Evokers, testing the weight while getting a feel for the cold metal. Although it seemed natural the way he moved, something told him that this wasn’t of his own free will.

"You both will be given one year; go forth without falter, with your hearts as your guide. . ."

The voice disappeared from his head. It left Minato buzzing and clutching the Evoker in his hands. 

Whatever had happened was no coincidence.

A new found determination set in.

“Alright,” he replied simply. "I'll join."

Yukari let out a heavy sigh before standing beside Minato. “I was afraid you’d say no, but I feel much better now. We had nothing to worry about.” She stuck out her hand. “Welcome aboard!”

Minato accepted the handshake after setting aside the Evoker. “Thanks. . .”

Minako got out of her dazed funk, ending the heartfelt moment by leaning over and raising her hand. “Does this mean we get to stay here?”

Ikutsuki gave her a quizzical look before his mind caught up. “Oh, I almost forgot about your room assignments. Of course, you can keep your current rooms. I don't know what the holdup is, but I guess it worked out in the end.”

Minako broke into a cheesy grin. “What a shame it took so long.”

“Dork.” Minato snorted.

The rest of the night was spent welcoming the Arisatos into the gang with a nice dinner.

Even when everyone else celebrated, Minato was still concerned over the voice he heard during the meeting.

“What do you think that voice was?” Minako finally asked when they were in the safety of her room. “It didn’t sound like anyone from the Velvet Room, so obviously they weren’t calling us back.”

“I don’t know.” Minato had opted to lay on the floor to observe the ceiling. “I just hope we made the right choice getting involved with these people. If that voice was a warning about what we’re doing, then we should be on guard at all times.”
"As much as I’d like to trust these people, you’re right. Let’s keep a close eye out for anything sketchy...” The older girl trailed off, drawing her knees to her chest. She glanced over at her alarm clock. “Looks like it’s almost midnight. Maybe we should think about turning in.”

Her brother huffed and rolled on his back. “Whatever, it’s not like I’d be able to sleep with crazy voices in my head-.”

The lights in the room turned off abruptly and the alarm clock had gone dark. Outside the window, the sky had turned a sickly green.

The Dark Hour had begun.

Minako cursed and reached over to the table her clock stood on. “I think I put some candles somewhere. Give me a second-.”

“How are you both?”

Both the siblings yelped at the sound of a new voice. Minako ripped open her table drawer, retrieving a candle and lighter. She quickly lit a fire and swung her candle around.

Standing at the door was the boy from their first night. He still wore his ratty pajamas and ever knowing smile. When he noticed that the two were startled, he chuckled into his oversized sleeve.

Minako looked past him at the door then to the window. “Um... how did you get in here? There’s no way you’re that quiet.”

The boy shrugged and carefully approached the siblings. “I’m always with the two of you. My presence was just never acknowledged until your arrival.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “However, I did not come to reminisce tonight. I bring you a warning.”

Minato sat up and crossed his legs. “Were you the one who talked to us before? During the meeting on the fourth floor?”

In the blink of an eye, the boy had disappeared. The siblings looked around wearily before he reappeared at the foot Minako’s bed. “That is a question for another day, but I will confirm that I had no hand in such events.” he answered. The boy leaned back on his hands and stared out the window.

“Soon, the end will come. I remembered, so I thought I should tell you.”

A dreadful chill fell over the room at his words. Minato could hear his sister gulp before she decided to speak. “The end of what?”

The boy turned to her. “The end of everything, but to be honest, I don’t really know what it is. That is for the two of you to figure out amongst yourselves.”

Minako frowned at him. “Who are you?”

“Someone you know,” he said cryptically. “By the way, looks like you’ve awakened to your powers since we last spoke.” The boy pointed to Minato. “A power that takes many forms yet is bound by the heart.” He then pointed to Minako. “A power that sees beyond, yet bound by time.”

He smiled at the pair. “They may prove to be your salvation, depending on where you end up. Hopefully, they shall serve you both well enough in the future.” Once again, he disappeared and was back at the door. In the boy’s hands was the red-bound contract. “Do you remember when we
first met? I expect you to honor your commitment. I'll be watching you, even if you forget about me.”

Minato watched as he seemed to melt into the wood of the door. The boy caught his stare and waved at the teenager on the floor.

“Okay then, see you later.”

The siblings were left in utter silence, their guest’s words ringing in their ears.

Minato had a bad feeling that something was going to go down.

4/18/2009

I had a good day. Junpei noticed I was gone. It's been a long time since someone noticed anything about me. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a pleasant surprise.

That's all I want to write for now.

-Minato Arisato

P.S. I need to research the name Orpheus.
Take What Is Yours, Dear Guests

Chapter Notes

I went a little overboard with this chapter since I had a lot to cover. In Microsoft Word, the final draft came out at 25 pages long. Writing Minako is just too much fun, but fear not Minato fans, he will be getting his moment in the sun in a few short chapters.

Ye' who yields time recives thine reward.

Now the updates are going to get more sparse. Hopefully I can get a chapter out every two weeks or even three.

“So if X equals negative B plus or minus the square root of B squared minus four AC all over two A . . .” Minako tapped her pencil on her desk as she stared down her Algebra homework. A bowl of half-eaten gummy candy sat atop her mountain of textbooks, providing minimal relief to her frustration.

Much to her chagrin, there would never be enough candy in the world to sedate her hatred for math.

“But that doesn’t make sense...” she muttered, erasing her work for the hundredth time that evening. “How could that be when the product comes out to be a decimal-?”

Without paying attention, Minako added to much pressure on her eraser, ripping her notebook paper that she had been using to record her answers. All of her previous work had officially gone to waste.

She couldn’t turn in a haphazardly done page. The only way she could remedy the situation was to transfer her answers to a clean sheet and start her current problem over.

“. . . Gosh, darn it.”

Finally, she gave up with an annoyed grumble. There was no point in continuing when she was about ready to send her homework to the deepest depths of pain and suffering. Instead, Minako resolved to seek out Minato's help after a good meal of instant noodles and chips, if she felt hungry enough.

An empty stomach made an angry person after all.

She turned off her lamp light and left her room. The hallway was brightly lit that evening, but there was nobody around.

When she skipped down the stairs and into the lobby, Yukari was sitting on one of the couches with her homework spread across the coffee table. She seemed to be just as stuck as Minako had been moments ago.

“Evening Yuka-tan!” she greeted as she made her way down the stairs. “Looks like you’re workin’ hard.”

Yukari perked up from her concentration with a glare. “I’ve really gotta’ smack Junpei for that
stupid nickname. It doesn’t even make sense.”

Minako shrugged and walked into the kitchen area. “I think it’s kinda cute. Rolls right off the
tongue, too,” she remarked as she grabbed a ramen cup from one of the cupboards. “Do you want
anything while I’m in here? Tea? Crackers?”

“Curry, please and thank you.” Yukari said, putting down her pencil to stretch. “At least you’re
nicer than Junpei. How did you two become friends in the first place when he’s such a jerk?”

Minako retrieved another cup for instant curry. “He likes video games, I like video games. It’s not
rocket science.” She smiled as she filled a teapot with water to boil. “Honestly, he’s not all that
bad. The guy is funny, nice, and just a really upstanding dude. Once you sit down and talk to him,
you may find him interesting.”

Yukari snorted at the last part. “Maybe if he’d stop flirting with every girl he meets, I’ll give him
the time of day.”

“I guess he’s out of luck then!” Minako giggled. “God in heaven, bless his poor soul.”

“Oh yeah!” Yukari stood up and walked over to the kitchen. “You’re brother mentioned something
about you being Catholic. Is that true?”

The senior hummed in response. “Been a devout follower since I could hold the Holy Bible,” she
confirmed. “Our mom was raised in the United States for most of her life. Her parents were deeply
religious, so their faith rubbed off on her.”

Yukari took a seat at the counter-top. “I’m guessing she’s the one that got you into it, huh?”

“You bet she did.” The water on the stove was done boiling. Minako turned off the heat and
opened up their meal cups. “She taught my brother and me all about God and Jesus Christ, but
Minato never believed in that kinda thing. He follows Shinto like our Dad used to.”

Yukari nodded along while Minako poured the water. “So, is it difficult having different beliefs?
I’d imagine you two would fight a lot over that kind of thing.”

“Having different religions? No, we’re civil ‘bout it.” Once the cups were filled, the senior brought
Yukari her meal with a fork. “On the contrary, we both benefit from our opposing faiths. Gives us
something to talk about whenever we ride the train.”

Yukari stirred her curry carefully, smiling at Minako’s words. “I wish I had an older sibling
sometimes. Even if we disagree on everything, having someone to share things with and trust
wholeheartedly sounds amazing.” She grinned at her older peer. “Minato’s really lucky he has
you.”

Minako felt a blush creep up on her. She fiddled with the strings on her hoodie while she answered.
“Well, I’ve always wanted a lil’ sister. I don’t mind adopting you like family if you’re that
desperate.” she offered with a grin. “I-if you wanna, that is. I’m fine either way.”

Yukari chuckled at her senior’s suggestion but had to duck her head away to hide her relief.

“I’d like that, thank you.”

The two girls continued to talk and eat their dinner until the front door opened. Both stopped mid
chatter when Akihiko let himself inside. When he spotted the Minako and Yukari, he threw a quick
wave.
“Takeba, go get the other Arisato.” he ordered. “I’d like you all to meet the new recruit.”

“Got it senpai.” Yukari hopped down from her counter seat and took her time climbing the stairs.

Minako leaped down from her stool. Her sock-clad feet landed soundlessly on the hardwood floor. “Looks like things are about to get a little more lively around here. Who’s the new recruit?”

“He’s a classmate of Yukari’s,” Akihiko replied. He peeked out the open door. “Hey, hurry up.”

“Hold your horses!” an annoyed voice snapped back, followed by a small bump and a groan. “This is freakin’ heavy.”

In stepped Junpei Iori, lugging two suitcases that were nearly bursting from how full they were. Despite his earlier tone, he had an ever-present smirk on his face when he saw Minako. “Wazzup Ariso-senpai?” He tipped his baseball cap. “Surprised to see me?”

Minako grinned at her lower classman. “Kinda, but at least it’s someone I know.” She extended out her hand. “Welcome to the dorm.”

“Glad to be here!” he answered, giving her a crisp low-five. “Now I can get my hands on that game collection you’re hidin’.”

Akihiko regarded the interaction with slight interest.

“You guys know each other? Aren’t you in different grades-?”

“J-Junpei!? Why is HE here!? Wait, don’t tell me-”

Minako glanced at the stairs to see a disgruntled Yukari storming towards the door. Minato followed behind with his hands shoved in his sweatpants pockets.

“I don’t know how you got in here-” she growled, poking Junpei in the chest once she stood between himself and the lounge, “-but I highly recommend you leave before you get an arrow shoved up your butt.”

Junpei grabbed her hand and tried to lightly push the girl away. “Come on, Yuka-tan. No need to be such a harpie. It’s been a long night already!”

Akihiko recoiled at the pair’s shrillness but straightened himself just as quickly. The senior pulled the two away before a fight could begin. “As I was ABOUT to say, this is Junpei Iori from Class 2-F. He’ll be staying here as of today.”

Yukari gasped loud enough to wake the neighborhood. “He’s staying HERE!? You’ve gotta be kidding me!” She whipped her head at Akihiko. “This has to be some kind of sick joke. Haha! Very funny, now get rid of him before I call the police!”

Akihiko had to take a deep breath before answering his junior. “I bumped into him the other night. He has the potential, but he just awakened to it recently. I told him about us, and he agreed to help.” The boxer crossed his arms over his chest. “Mitsuru and I both agreed to bring him in after Minato recovered from his coma.”

Yukari opened her mouth to protest but swallowed heavily at the mention of the Kirijo heiress. She shrunk back and clicked her tongue in disgust. “Whatever, it’s not like he’s gonna stick around with that flaming ego of his.”
Minato dared to make his presence known by stepping forward to stand by his sister. She noticed a twinkle in his eyes when he got closer. “So how did Sanada-senpai find you?”

Junpei took off his hat with a nervous chuckle. “He found me cryin' like a baby at the convenience store, surrounded by a bunch of coffins.” He looked away from the siblings, a tint of red growing on the tips of his ears. “I don't remember much, but man, that's embarrassing! He said that's, ya know, completely normal in the beginning. Like, bein' confused and not remembering anything.”

Minako shrugged her shoulders, feeling a pang of sympathy for her junior. She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t feel too embarrassed: you’re one of us now,” she assured, giving him a good-natured punch in the arm. “Yukari’s just upset that game night is officially moved to every night! We’ll be tearin’ it up like it’s the end of the freaking world!”

Junpei perked up and broke out of his funk. He reciprocated the punch by ruffling her hair. “Thanks, senpai!” He put his cap back on before letting out a long sigh. “I'm glad I'm not the only one. It could get kinda lonely, ya know.” Junpei turned to Minato and offered another high-five. “I bet you're stoked too, right!? Havin' me join an all.”

Minato shrugged but took the gesture with a small grin. “S’long as you don’t hog the TV down here, sure.”

Yukari rolled her eyes at the chummy interaction. “Hurray, we’ve lost the two nicest people here to an idiot with a baseball obsession. Can this night get any worse?”

Minako couldn’t help but giggle at the girl’s disdain for her classmate. Yukari kept a cool air about herself in front of her fellow archers, teachers, and peers, but she still acted irrationally when it came to Junpei Iori.

Things at the dorm were about to get entertaining.

Akihiko, who had been silent during Junpei’s recount, cleared his throat to catch everyone’s attention. “Well, enough with the introductions. I think we're about ready.” He smirked as his gaze swept over the group in front of him. “With this many people, we can start exploring that place.”

Yukari broke out of her mopping at the mention of 'that place'.

“You mean. . . Tartarus?”

Minako felt a shiver down her spine at the word.


Minato groaned and face-palmed. “You play video games and you don’t know what Tartarus means?”

Akihiko shook his head. “It's just a nickname we gave the site. It’s not the actual Tartarus that you guys hear about from books or stories. We believe we can find the reason for the Dark Hour there. The Chairman will give us the details tomorrow night-.”

Minako droned out her classmate as her mind began to wander into deep thought.

Tartarus. . .

The Underworld. . .
Land of the Dead...  
End of River Styx...  
Hell...  

It didn’t matter what you called it. Each was the same, simply belonging to different religions and ideologies. It was the place where evil was born and breed to corrupt the world. Somewhere that no good person dared to set foot for fear of losing themselves to demons or monsters. It was fitting that Shadows would emerge from a destination with a nefarious reputation surrounding its very name.

To hear that they would be exploring inside sent a wave of dread through Minako.

Did such a place exist in their world?

How did it come to be?

Why did it scare her so much to even think about it?

Minako spent the rest of the night helping Junpei unpack, finishing her math homework, and worrying about tomorrow.

Another day of school came and went.

Akihiko had approached Minako after class and suggested that they return to the dorm early so they weren’t late to the meeting with Director Ikutsuki. Because Minato left ahead of her with Junpei and Yukari, Minako didn’t mind walking in borderline uncomfortable silence.

Well, silence and some classic rock music blaring in her ears.

It was a familiar feeling to keep her mouth shut and look ahead with a brother as quiet as her’s. If anything, it was pleasant to just put on her headphones and drink in the aura of someone standing close by.

Akihiko seemed just as content to simply keep to himself on their walk to the station and ride on the train. Occasionally, he would spare a glance if another passenger bumped into Minako, shoving her into his personal space. If the passenger was particularly vexed, the boxer would come to her aid with an equally dirty glower.

Minako had made a note to herself: always bring Akihiko along during rush hour if you want to scare off strangers.

It wasn’t until they exited the train and were near the dorm that her MP3 player decided to die. The deep bass solo cut out at the apex of the song.

Minako removed her headphones with a sad groan. “Why did ya’ have to die at the good part?” she asked her device. “Darn you, modern technology.”

Akihiko perked up when his peace was broken. “Something wrong?”

Minako hung her headphones around her neck. “My music player ran out of juice. Just your typical first-world problem.” She looked at the now blank screen of her gadget dejectedly. “I guess I forgot to charge this blasted thing again.”
“That’s a shame,” he remarked, examining the small device from a distance. “Isn’t that an older model? Why don’t you get a new one with a longer battery life?”

Minako shook her head. “I’m fine with this one. It gets the job done and it’s easy to carry around. Not to mention it’s hard to steal since I’m always wearing it.” She twiddled the cylinder music player in her slim fingers.

Her heartstrings seemed to quiver as bittersweet memories came unwillingly back.

“Besides, this one’s got sentimental value. It would break my heart if I stopped using it.” she insisted meekly. “A new one is just a waste of money.”

Akihiko must have noticed her sudden change in tone. He stood a little straighter when he spoke. “What makes it so special?” he asked. “It doesn’t look like much.”

Minako clutched the object in her hand, willing herself not to give away too much. She would only give the barest of details.

“My dad worked for a popular electronics company. They made this MP3 model which barely sold anywhere, so eventually, they started giving them away to company employees,” she recalled wistfully. “He gave me this one for my sixth birthday and my brother got his a few months later.”

Akihiko chuckled to himself. “Kinda cheap, huh?” He stretched his arms to the sky. “Guess I can’t complain though. Do whatever your heart desires, s’long as you don’t go and do something stupid.”

Minako giggled along, but her heart still ached when she looked down at the device in her hand. “Maybe one day. . .”

A simple MP3 was the last gift she had ever received from her father.

Even putting it away with her mother’s jewelry box seemed wrong, as if she was trying to bury an important piece of herself.

Some things just weren’t supposed to be given up like frivolous toys, at least not before they’ve served their purpose.

“Um, maybe what?” Akihiko asked.

Minako abandoned her lingering thoughts and threw on her default smile. She let her MP3 hang from its cord once more. It bounced off of her uniform jack and hung back into its place of honor. It would be staying there for a little bit longer.

“It’s nothing,” she assured him while forging ahead. She could see the dorm within her sights once they rounded the final corner. “Let’s hurry up or we’re gonna be late.”

The two entered the dorm and went to the fourth floor in silence. Not another word was uttered on the matter of an outdated music player.

Minako and Akihiko had apparently arrived right behind Mitsuru and Ikutsuki. The rest of the gang had made a few detours on account of Junpei and Yukari’s arguing the quickest route back to the dorm. Minato was too quiet and couldn’t have cared less what route they took, causing him to
remain as a neutral party.

Long story short, they had tacked on an extra twenty minutes after missing their train several times.

Somehow the three managed to stumble in and take their seats. Yukari had placed herself as far from Junpei as possible with Minato taking up his sister’s left side. Junpei decided to stay close to the siblings, trying to avoid looking at Yukari.

When everyone had found a seat, the Chairman spoke up.

“Okay, everybody's here. I'd like your undivided attention.”

Minako evened out her posture. Minato seemed to do the opposite, sinking into the cushions instead of seeming interested. She pinched his arm, jerking him into a more acceptable position. It earned her a nasty glare, but at least he wasn’t being disrespectful.

“For a long time, Mitsuru and Akihiko were the only Persona-users we had. But, that number recently jumped to five.” Ikutsuki looked to all the new recruits. “Therefore, starting tonight at 12:00 AM, I'd like to commence the exploration of Tartarus-.”

Junpei cleared his throat sheepishly before the older gentleman could continue. “Sorry Mr.Chairman, I asked this yesterday, but what's this Tartarus thing again?”

Yukari groaned and narrowed her gaze at him. “You haven’t seen it, Stupei? Honestly, just be quiet when other people are talking.”

“Miss Takebae, please restrain yourself.” Ikutsuki raised his hand for peace. “Iori’s questions come as no surprise since it only appears during the Dark Hour. “

Junpei scratched the back of his neck and whispered under his breath “The Dark Hour?”

“Just like the Shadows,” Akihiko interjected, leaning over his knees with an excited gleam in his eyes. “Interesting, huh? And it's the perfect place for us to train. You can think of it as a Shadow nest.”

“I hate to pry.” Minako leaned back in her seat as she spoke, “But what about your injury, Sanada?”

Akihiko opened his mouth to speak but was swiftly cut off my Mitsuru’s stern tone. “Since Akihiko hasn't fully recovered yet, he'll only come as far as the entrance.” the young lady affirmed, throwing said student a ornery look. “He knows full well that I won’t allow him to fight until the doctor advises otherwise.”

Akihiko flinched at her words and met her glare with one of his own. “Yeah, I know.”

Minako felt the alarm bells go off in her head at the senior’s staring contest. The rest of the juniors were equally worried, sinking under the building pressure of the room. It was beginning to turn into another shouting contest. Not even the usually pacifist sister could prevent the two from going for each other’s throats and canceling the mission altogether.

Minako looked to the Chairman for guidance. While they were stubborn leaders, Mitsuru and Akihiko wouldn’t argue when an adult ordered them to heel.

To her shock, Ikutsuki smirked at the drama unfolding before him.
His smile was unsettling.

He was clearly enjoying their theatrical fury.

After another prolonged silence that could be cut with a butter knife, the Chairman finally clapped his hands to break the silence. “Well, I’m sure he won’t complain, as long as you don’t go too far in.” He folded his hands on his lap. “Since we’re dealing with Shadows, Tartarus isn’t something we can avoid.”

Minako did her best to ride out the newly shattered tension. She stood up, dusting nonexistent dirt from her skirt. “We better get ready then. No point in sitting around when we could be workin’!”

Yukari frowned and clenched her fists. “I-I don’t know. . . are we really prepared for this?”

Mitsuru ignored the comment and turned the Ikutsuki. “What about you Chairman? Will you join us on the expedition?”

“I’ll stay here,” he replied, waving the group off.

Minako couldn’t help but catch the way his eyes narrowed at their leader.

Something about the way his fingers curled against the arm of his chair sent a shiver down her spine.

“As you know, I can't summon a Persona. . .”

“This is IT?”

The group had gathered outside their school, confusion on everyone’s faces except Mitsuru and Akihiko. Each person carried a weapon with an Evoker strapped on their waists. Yukari had opted for her thigh holster with a quiver of arrows replacing a belt holster. Minako and Minato had gone with twin short blades, lightweight and easy to run with. Junpei went with a much larger broadsword that he held more like a baseball bat.

Thankfully, no one was around to see a group of armed students.

Junpei had been the most vocal about their shared bewilderment, asking an assortment of questions since they arrived.

“I get that school is hell an’ all, but THIS is Tartarus!?” he exclaimed. “This has to be a joke!”

Akihiko shot the capped teen an annoyed look. “Give it a minute.” He glanced down at his watch, tapping his foot. “You’ll see what happens next.”

Minako tuned out the annoyed groans of Junpei and gave her weapon a few practice swings. She had mostly chosen the sword for simplicity’s sake. Most everyone knew how to beat things with a stick, so she figured a sword wouldn’t be much different. Unfortunately, something about the way she held it with one hand made it feel unbalanced. Even when she made room and used two, it was clunky and awkward.

The senior pouted and sheathed the weapon. She resolved to test out more options when she had the time.

“Something wrong?” Minato asked, sheathing his own sword. “You’re not gonna chicken out before the Dark Hour even starts, right?”
Minako snorted and gave him a friendly jab. “As if I’d back down at the last second, nerd. I just
don’t think swords are for me.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “It feels weird, but not in the
‘I’ll get used to it eventually’ sort of way. I think I’m gonna try something different next time.”

“Whatever floats your boat.” her brother commented. “We could use some weapon diversity
anyway. If everyone has swords, we’re bound to fail.”

“Aww!” Minako chuckled and reached up to ruffle his hair. “Look at my lil’ brother! Being all smart
and stuff!”

“Buzz off, idiot.” he protested, whacking her hand away. “You’re so embarrassing-”

“It’s midnight.”

The siblings broke off their banter at Yukari’s voice. They looked to the school and steeled
themselves for what was about to occur.

Just as it had been all their lives, everything around them became much darker. The sky faded from
its normal deep blue to sickly green. Puddles rippled into a bloody red while the light flickered out
into pitch black.

To the Minako’ surprise, it was the school’s change that sent her reeling.

The once posh, white building that was just over four floors rose high above the clouds and became
distorted. Its sleek outer shell became grimy bricks that belonged in a horror movie, an assortment
of random balconies and stairs protruding out of the newly forming structure. Even the crude
entryway had ripped up the once beautiful foliage to become a sinister walkway to the hellish
structure that was their school.

As quickly as the building formed, it stopped moving suddenly. All that was left were the iron
gates with the school’s seal displayed proudly for visitors to admire.

It was as if someone was showing the group a damaged picture of a haunted castle.

Minako felt sick to her stomach. She instinctively grabbed the cross around her neck with a heavy
gulp. Her other hand reached for her Evoker. “Sweet, merciful God, what is this place?”

Minato seemed to step closer to her. He had a hand on the grip of his Evoker, ready for anything
that may pop out of the building. “What the hell just happened?”

Mitsuru strode to the gates with a hand on her hip. “This is Tartarus: the labyrinth that reveals itself
during the Dark Hour. This is where all Shadows seem to originate from and what we can only
consider as their nest.”

Junpei rounded on Mitsuru once his shock had transformed into panic. “What are you talking
about!? What happened to our school!??” he cried, turning to an amused Akihiko. “This is the ‘nest’
you were talking about!? But, why!? Why’d our school turn into a giant tower!?”

Mitsuru remained silent, setting herself to unlocking the gate.

Junpei’s fractiousness melted into complete puzzlement. “You don’t know either?”

Yukari stepped forward and smacked Junpei on the back of the head. “I’m sure it's complicated.
Who cares anyway? It's not like it would change our minds about fighting.”
Minako glanced over at her brother who watched the girl carefully. His eyes were trained on the way she clutched her bow in a death grip. Bone could be seen below the surface of her pale skin.

She wasn’t the only one keeping tabs on the other’s emotional states.

Once Mitsuru had unlocked the gate, Akihiko helped her to push it open. “Well, maybe now we’ll find out. Mitsuru and I have only gone in to take a peek; this will be our first time exploring it.” He cracked his knuckles while leading the party towards Tartarus. “Exciting, isn’t it? There has to be some sort of clue in here about the Dark Hour.”

Mitsuru picked up a radio set-up she had brought from the dorm and fell into pace with Akihiko.”I respect your enthusiasm, but you won’t be accompanying us today.”

Minako could see the slump in her classmate’s shoulders at Mitsuru’s words.

“I know, you don’t have to remind me.”

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When everyone entered Tartarus, they were left awestruck at the interior.

Rather than a jumbled nightmare, the inside was almost as if they had walked into a church. A marble staircase led to a blue portal lined in gold. Pillars rose to a pearly white ceiling, a glass dome casting a colorful light into the room. Even the air seemed cleaner than outside. While there was still a lack of weather, there was a certain coolness that gave Minako goosebumps when she walked. She had to hug her arms in order to keep herself from visibly shaking.

Junpei turned in circles beside her, trying to look at the ceiling art. “Whoa, it’s just as cool on the inside!” He clapped a hand on Minato’s shoulder. “Pinch me, I’m dreaming.”

Minato reached over and pinched the other boy on the arm. Yukari had to scuttle in order to avoid a flailing Junpei from knocking her over.

“It sure is creepy,” she mumbled under her breath, looking around like a deer in the headlights. “Are there any other exits?”

“This is only the entrance,” Mitsuru responded while she set up her radio. “The labyrinth lies beyond the doorway at the top of the stairs. You can pass through easily.”

Akihiko stood over the technical set-up, picking up a headset for himself. “First, we'll have you four get a feel for this place.” He faced the rest of the group with the headset around his neck. “Why don't you go have a look around?”

Junpei and Yukari let out a synchronized yelp. Minato had stopped observing his surroundings and started shuffling behind his sister. The trio of juniors looked to the oldest Arisato for a spokesperson.

Minako gladly stepped forward with a hand in her Evoker. She willed her hands not to shake. “Seems a lil’ dangerous sending newbies into the lion’s den.” She popped out her hip, fear for what lay beyond the doorway kept her feet still. “If something happens, what’ll we do?”

Mitsuru stood up with her own headset on. “We're not asking you to go very far, and I'll be feeding you information from here. If there is any pressing danger, I will personally enter to desist the enemy.” She smiled and held up her chin. “Besides, you’re not children, save Iori.”

Minako nodded while Junpei balked behind her. “Well, can’t argue with that. We’re counting on
Akihiko crossed his arms with a satisfied grin. “We're also going to appoint a leader to make any necessary decisions. If everything goes horribly wrong with them tonight, we’ll get someone else next time.”

Minako could sense her brother stepping up to her side. “What if everything goes well?”

The boxer shrugged. “We’ll see what happens. They might just be our field leader until I get back-”

Junpei interrupted with his hand raised frantically. “For real? One of us? Oh! Oh! Me, me, me! Pick me!”

Minako and Minato both glanced at each other, the former trying to contain her amusement. The latter smirked while fiddling with the pommel of his blade. A typical habit of her brother: never able to stop fidgeting.

Yukari grabbed Junpei by the collar and yanked him back. “Shut up, Stupe! There’s no way he’s gonna chose you to lead. You couldn’t lead a starving rat to a slice of cheese!”

Minako giggled into her fist but remained civil when she turned to address her female junior. “Give him some credit, Yuka-tan. He’s got the guts and enthusiasm of a good leader. It’s hard to find a guy like that anymore.”

Junpei gave her a grateful smile before sticking his tongue out at Yukari. “Ah ha! At least someone recognizes my talents!”

“Or lack thereof.” Minato shoved his hands in his pockets and walked next to the taller boy.

“Ya’ wanna go, Arisato?” Junpei mock challenged and grabbed the shorter teen by the collar of his uniform jacket. “This’ll show you how talented I am!” He ruffled Minato’s hair viciously while cackling up a storm. The victim of the assault tried to wiggle out of his classmate’s grasp but failed to overcome his superior strength.

“Get off me!”

Minako sighed but felt her heart lighten. Minato never let anyone overpower him, not even his own sister. He remained on the fringe of the situation, unseen like a fly on the wall.

When was the last time he let someone get close to him?

Minako broke out of her thoughts when Yukari looked about ready to tear out Junpei’s throat. Her fingers brushed over an arrow in her quiver.

Minako clapped her hands to get the group’s attention before anyone started getting their Personas involved. “Come on, guys. Let’s listen up!” she called. “We’re wasting time attacking each other. Save that energy for the Shadows, eh?”

Junpei and Minato parted, her brother combing through his messy hair. Yukari fell in beside him, still annoyed but complacent with the senior’s orders.

“Good.” Minako turned to face the pair who watched the scene with curious eyes. She made sure to step aside so they could get a good look at their pick from the three juniors. “Well, who’s it gonna be?
Mitsuru hummed and nodded to Akihiko. “I think it’s clear who they will follow without complaint.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” he replied, pointed to Minako. “You’re in charge.”

The teen reeled on him, glancing over a shoulder as if he had pointed at someone else. She had to take a moment to breathe before she could find her voice. “Me? Are you sure?” she asked. “Minato’s got the fighting experience and Yukari’s been here longer, so why me?”

Akihiko gestured to the juniors. “Do you really think they’d take orders from a fellow classmate without feeling jealous? It’ll throw off team dynamics going off of experience alone.”

“Besides,” Mitsuru added, “they all seem to trust you. I have no doubt you will do just fine.”

Minako had to pause in order to take in her new title. Her legs seemed to be full of lead.

Junpei and Yukari had given her pats on the back as they began heading towards the doorway.

“I can’t complain too much. Least you ain’t Miss Pink Sweater or Skin-n-Bones.” Junpei sighed, pushing the brim of his cap out of his field of vision. He flashed her a wink as he went on his way. “I’m countin’ on you, leader!”

“What’s wrong with a pink sweater?” Yukari had rolled her eyes but still gave an encouraging smile. “As long as it isn’t Junpei, I don’t care. You’re the best choice, so do your best.”

Minako thanked them both before looked back at her brother. He picked up his pace so the two were walking to the portal in tandem. “He could’ve picked worse.” He offered her a fist bump as they neared the staircase. “Here’s to hoping you don’t get us all killed.”

Minako scoffed but received his offer. “Just make sure ya’ actually listen, nerd.”

When their fists connected, Minako felt something within her shutter. It was as if an earthquake was resonating within her very soul. Minato’s face contorted and he pulled away with a hand on his sword. She had guessed he experienced the same sensation.

“What the hell-?”

Minako threw a hand over his mouth while reaching for her Evoker. “Hush and use your inside language.”

Everyone seemed to be frozen mid tasks. Junpei and Yukari were halfway on the stairs. Mitsuru and Akihiko seemed to be making final adjustments on their radio.

“What’s going on?” Minato asked once he freed his mouth from his sister’s intervention. “Why isn’t anyone moving?”

Minako noticed that the air seem to have a bluish tint to it. The chill that clung to her skin had vanished, leaving a pleasant warmth behind.

“It’s so calm. . .” she whispered.

A loud gong that belonged to a grand clock chimed through the room. The pair of siblings jumped at the sudden noise, stepping closer until they were back to back.

“That’s new.” Minako could hear her brother say. She could feel the muscles in his back tense as if he had spotted something dangerous.
“Do you see anything?”

There was a beat of silence until she felt a tug on her jacket.

“I think you’d wanna see this.”

Minako turned to see him pointing at a space to the right of the staircase. In a small crook, tucked away in the light from the moon, was a blue door. It seemed to give off an energy of its own despite the lack of movement. Painted on the sanded wood was a mask with inverted sides. One side smiled while the other frowned.

Minako was the first to move towards it, Evoker now fully drawn at her side. Minato let her take the lead, his sword drawn in case they were walking into a trap. When they reached the pair door, Minako noticed a keyhole above the knob. It seemed to glow under the pale light of the strange abnormality they were trapped in.

A vision of a blue room had popped into her mind.

The words of Igor echoed.

Minako turned to her brother. “Do you have your key? I forgot mine at the dorm.”

Minato narrowed his gaze at her before realizing what she meant. He nodded and dug deep into his pocket. In no time at all, he produced his copy of the Velvet Room key.

“Let’s hope this works,” he commented while handing over the brass object.

“I hope so too.” Minako slid the key into place and turned the lock. With a click, a soft glow came from the keyhole and painted the knob in an ethereal light. The older sibling smiled and opened the door.

A wave of pure serenity seemed to envelop the two like a hug from an old friend.

Minako entered the Velvet Room first with a big grin on her face. Minato crept behind her but wasn’t deterred from making his way inside. Igor, Elizabeth, and Theodore stood in their usual positions at the head of the room.

Igor watched the two approach the elaborate table with his constant smile. “Welcome, dearest guests.” he said. “I trust you found the door easily?”

“Yup,” Minako helped herself to the plush couch and sunk right in with a content sigh. “I wish I could steal this couch. Who’s your supplier? I want names.”

Elizabeth chuckled as Minato took a seat beside his sister. “I don’t believe it wise to announce your heist before it is accomplished, especially in front of the ones you plan to steal from. We need that sofa for other guests.”

As always, Theodore remained quiet. It was apparent who the more mature one of the group was.

Igor waited for both siblings to settle in before he spoke. “I’ve been waiting for you. The time has come for you to wield your power.” The man raised his eyebrows as his smile grew. “The tower that you are about to venture into. How did it come to be? For what purpose does it exist? Regrettably, you are not yet capable of answering these questions, but all in due time.”

Minako couldn’t help but wonder if Igor enjoyed giving out cryptic messages to teenagers or if he
was genuinely curious.

Whatever the reason, she knew that at least he was someone she could put a semblance of faith in. Any help on the journey that lay ahead was a blessing.

Igor waved his hand and the card from their last visit appeared on the table before the two siblings. The man and his dog still walked towards the cliff’s edge. “That is why you must be made aware of the nature of your power.”

Minato leaned forward to get a better look at the card. “What do you mean?”

“Your power is unique. It's like the number zero...” Igor explained. “It's empty, but at the same time holds infinite possibilities. You, my dear guests, are able to possess multiple Personas, and summon them as needed.”

Minako regarded the man with a newfound curiosity. As far as she could tell, the others only had one Persona to call their own.

Having multiple ones seemed to be a foreign concept.

Igor continued, despite the shift in his guest's body language. “When you have defeated your enemies, you will see the faces of possibility before you both. There may be times when they are difficult to grasp, but do not fear. Seize what you have earned.”

Minato remained quiet, but Minako would only breath in awe.

“What we have earned?”

Elizabeth beamed at the two, her golden eyes sparkling under in the bluish hue of the room. “It will be a long journey, but fear not. As you learn and press on, your powers will grow accordingly. Be sure to keep that in mind.”

Igor nodded in agreement before turning back to the teens. “My spare time will soon be scarce, but please come again of your own accord. I'll tell you then about my true role, the manner in which I can best assist you.”

Minato stood up and gave the three attendants of the Velvet Room a polite bow. Minako followed suit, keeping herself composed when she spoke next.

“Thank you, we’ll be sure to drop in soon.”

“Until then, farewell.”

In the blink of an eye, Minako and Minato were standing in front of the Velvet Room door. The warmth from before had vanished. Everything felt the same as when they first walked into Tartarus.

Minako heard footsteps behind the two and turned to see Yukari and Junpei approaching them with concern etched in their features. They made no comments about the glowing door in front of them.

“Hey, are you alright?” Yukari asked first. “You guys zoned out for a minute.”

Junpei ambled up to the senior’s brother and nudged his shoulder. “Yeah, what's up? You looked like a zombie.”
It took a moment for Minako to process the situation. When her mind finally caught up with her mouth, she shook her head and smiled. “I thought I saw something so I wanted to investigate.” She looked around the small space, doing her best to ignore the door. “Yup, nothin’ to see here!”

The two juniors also checked their surroundings before determining the area was clear.

“Looks fine to me.” Yukari observed. “Maybe you’re just paranoid since it’s our first time exploring this place. Even I’m a little shaken up about it all.”

Junpei nodded along and motioned for them to get moving. “Can’t turn back now though! Mitsuru-senpai will kick our butts if we back out.” He raised his broadsword and sauntered ahead. “Let’s show those ugly sons of guns who’s boss!”

“Yeah…” Minako glanced at the door one more time before taking the lead of the group. Everyone followed her as they finally stood before the portal.

“Let’s do this.”

“HYA!” Minako cried as she sliced through a small Shadow. It shrieked when she cut it down until it disappeared into ash.

There was a rattling noise behind her which caught her attention. Minako spun around with her short sword clutched tightly. A pair of much larger Shadows charged at her from down the hall. No amount of slicing and dicing was going to help fend off the terrors. She acted quickly and drew her Evoker. There was barely time to grip it properly, so she had to press the barrel against her forehead upside down.

“Let’s get em’ Nona!” Minako pulled the trigger, feeling her body spasm momentarily before her Persona stood to fight.

It was a spirit to behold: a tall woman clothed in a vibrant gold and red toga. She wore a winged helmet and held a short spear aloft, a golden thread attached at the end that floated around like a protective cloud.

Nona raised her spear and a bright ball formed. With one swipe, the light engulfed the attacking Shadows. They squirmed in a futile attempt to escape but soon met the same fate as all the rest. Within moments, they were gone.

Minako smiled to herself as Nona faded away. “Looks like I killed two birds with one stone.” She turned back to see how everyone else was doing.

Junpei and Minato led the charge down the corridor with Yukari supporting from behind. Her ability to attack from a distance with her bow played the team’s advantage. Unfortunately, the trio struggled with a Shadow that seemed to be resisting their magic and physical attacks.

Minako rushed to Yukari’s side. The younger girl had a leg injury and was struggling to keep herself upright. “Our backside is clear!” Minako shouted over the noise, calling Nona to cast a healing spell. “If we complete this last floor, we should be done for the night. Everyone looks like crap right now!”

“You think?!” Junpei called back, raising his sword to guard himself against a wind attack. “Shit! This thing just doesn’t give up!”

Minato copied his actions but instead shoved his sword into the floor to keep from being blown
away. “We can’t fall back now! We need to knock that thing back, do an All-Out attack and we’re out of here!”

Minako smirked and stepped up beside the vanguard. She raised her Evoker to her head, feeling the rush of wind trying to keep her down. “Let’s put this thing down! Follow my lead!”

When Nona appeared, she charged the Shadow with the blade end of her weapon raised for a crushing blow. The Shadow tried to hold her back but was overpowered in an instant. Without an ounce of resistance, the spear pierced the thick armor of the enemy. The Shadow screamed out at the attack and finally fell to the ground.

“NOW! All out attack!” Minako cried.

Junpei pumped his fist in the air. “Alright! Let’s go for a home run then!” He raised his Evoker and pulled the trigger. “Give em’ hell, Hermes!”

The Persona rushed forward in a blaze of black and orange. It leapt on top of the downed Shadow and sliced away at the exposed crack in the armor. The two grappled with one another, but Junpei managed to keep his concentration up.

Minako whipped her head to her brother. “Give him some back-up!”

“Orpheus!” Minato commanded, sending the lyre clad spirit out to tag team with Hermes. The two Personas were relentless in their barrage of physical and fire attacks.

Finally, Yukari stood on shaky legs with her Evoker poised to summon.

“Help me, Io!”

Minato and Junpei’s Personas fell back as a massive whirlwind engulfed the Shadow. The floating maiden, Io, had her arms outstretched to control the storm of her own creation. With one final cry, the Shadow was thrown against the wall by the force of the gale.

Just like all the others, it vanished into dust. The group was left with nothing but silence.

They had cleared the floor with minimal injuries.

Minako sighed, feeling a crashing wave of fatigue that somehow seemed to only make an appearance after the battle.

“Looks like we made it everyone. . .” She fell to the floor and accidentally let go of her weapon. It clattered to the floor as she tried to catch her breath. “Goodbye, my friends. It was an honor to serve as your leader. . .”

“Minako-senpai!” Junpei shouted, sheathing his broadsword and dropping to her side. “Don’t die on us! You still owe me money, damnit!”

Minato groaned and dropped to the floor as well. “She’s just exhausted. The idiot took on the rear guard by herself like she had unlimited energy.” He tried his best to push his messy hair out of his face. “At least we’re all in one piece.”

Mitsuru’s voice came through to everyone’s heads.

“Is everyone alright? Junpei’s caterwauling was a bit concerning.”

Minako chuckled and let Junpei help her to her feet. “We’re alive and well captain. Just a few
scrapes and bruises. Nothing a little sleep can’t fix.”

“Good, reach the access point and get back downstairs. You’ve all done a good job tonight.”

Yukari gathered up any arrows she had let fly. She shouldered her bow, getting Minato to stand up. “Let’s hope we don’t find anymore Shadows on our way. I don’t think we’d be able to face them at this point.”

The group reorganized and moved to the end of the hall. Junpei had to help Minako along, but he didn’t mind. All four teens talked excitedly about their successful mission all the way to the terminal. Yukari was the first to reach their exit. She jogged to the access point and stepped onto the green plate, igniting a bright light beneath her feet. “Alright everyone, let’s get going!”

Minato stepped forward and shared the terminal with Yukari. In the blink of an eye, they were engulfed in the bright green glow and disappeared.

Junpei and Minako followed close behind. They were blinded by the flash emitted by the panel and whisked them away.

When Junpei and Minako arrived back at the entrance within seconds. The other four members of SEES were waiting for them, packing up their supplies for the night.

Minako stepped away from her supporter and attempted to walk on her own. Unfortunately, her knees buckled and she began to crumple to the tiled ground. Junpei caught her before she hit the ground.

“Woah senpai! I gotcha, nice and easy.” He lowered his senior down to the floor. “Looks like you’re gonna earn your sleep tonight.”

Mitsuru jogged up to the pair after seeing the commotion.

“I knew something was wrong. The first summon is always the most taxing on the body.” She kneeled down to eye level. “Your brother told me you held off the rear on your own. That was incredibly reckless of you when you’re still learning the ropes.”

Minako shrugged. “Sorry, I got a little carried away.” She gave the redheaded leader a thumbs up through her exhaustion.

“At least I’m still alive.”

April 20th, 2009

Our first night in Tartarus went smoothly. Everyone had done an excellent job and held their own on the field of battle.

I did my best too. . .

It feels strange being the leader of something. I’ve always been more of a “stand back and let others take charge” kind of person. Sure, I’m experienced in taking care of Minato, but it’s been a long time since I was in charge of a group.

I wonder how things will work out.
Good night,

Minako Arisato
The Student Council President

Chapter Notes

This is gonna be a slow chapter, but I hope you enjoy!

_Baneofmyexistence: I’m goin on a run, u want anything from da store?_

_Me: about time u started again, ur getting fflat_

_Baneofmyexistence: Haha, ur getting’ nothin’_

_Me: fflat an cranky_

Minato’s stomach churned as Minako munched happily on her fresh bagel. The two approached the school gates at a leisurely pace considering their activities the night before. Mitsuru was right when she said that the Dark Hour sapped the life out of them.

How his sister could get up early and go for a run was beyond him.

As if to add to his dilemma, Minato’s stomach growled loud enough for Minako to hear. She smirked and used her free hand to pat him on the head. “This is what happens to brothers who call their sisters fat and cranky.” Minako practically sang, adding to Minato’s annoyance. “The bakery smelled really good this mornin’ too! The nice couple that own the place even gave me a coupon for next time.”

The sour junior huffed and looked the other way. “Whatever, I’ll get something from the school store.” He dug into his messenger bag to scrounge up any spare change. “And stop spending all our money on pastries and candy. You’ll need to run twice a day if you keep it up.”

Minato heard his sister let out a frustrated yelp. He quickly ducked as her hand palm sailed over his head. The failed attack caused Minako to stumble into him.

“Watch it!” Minato protested, pushing her away.

“You shouldn't have ducked, nerd!” she complained, motioning with her now crushed bagel. “An eye for an eye, so stop your bellyaching!”

Minato groaned but continued forward. Other students who went on their merry way barely spared the bickering siblings a second glance. They simply carried on as if nothing had happened.

The two reached the gates in one piece. Minako had finished off her breakfast when a boy spotted them and stood in their way.

“What, you’re Minato, right?”

Both siblings stopped in their tracks. The newcomer beamed at them, waiting for an answer to his question.
“Um. . .” Minako trailed off, pulling away from her brother. “I’ve got something to do early today. See ya’ after school, nerd.”

Without so much as a wave, she hurried towards the shoe lockers. Her still damp hair from her post-run shower bounced as she withdrew from the situation.

His own sister had left him to the wolves.

Minato turned back to the task at hand. The student remained patient, shoving his hands in his pockets and standing more arrogant now that their senior had left him behind.


The student was somehow able to grin wider than before. He was giving Minako a run for her money with how excited he looked. "Man, I knew it. I heard from Junpei that you're pretty close with Yukari-san-."

“Have a good day.” Minato walked past the student, knowing where the conversation was going. It had only been a few weeks since he and Minako arrived, but suddenly everyone and their mother wanted him to hook them up with Mitsuru or Yukari.

The student immediately got in front of him, reaching out his arm to block Minato. “What's up with that?” He drew his arm in and rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I guess it doesn't matter. I'm looking for someone with a little more experience anyway. By the way, I'm Kenji Tomochika. Nice to meet you.”

Minato quirked an eyebrow and inwardly sighed. The last thing he wanted to happen that morning was to meet new people and strike up a conversation.

Unfortunately, the Minako-esque voice in his head screamed at him to be civil, even if he was dealing with an obvious idiot. Minato forced himself to be polite and nodded to Kenji.

It made every inch of his skin crawl.

“Pleasure’s mine.”

The first bell rang, signaling for students to get their butt’s in gear. Minato had never been so relieved to be saved by school start times.

Kenji jabbed a thumb at the school. “There's a morning assembly, so we better hurry.” He dashed ahead, leaving Minato to walk alone. The now thoroughly peeved teen ambled at the pace of a drunk honey badger towards his doom.

It was going to be a long day.

“That concludes the main portion of today's assembly.”

An audible sigh swept throughout the crowded auditorium. Even Minato couldn’t help but let his shoulders slump now that the monotone student delivering the morning speech finally released the school from his torment. Teachers lining the walls had to shake out their heads in order to wake up and pay attention to the rest of the assembly.

Junpei yawned and stretched his legs out with what little room there was. “I thought that would never end.” He leaned back, his hands behind his head. “When are we getting out again?”
Minato made sure to shift so they wouldn’t bump into one another. “Beats me, but I think we have a little more to go.”

“That’s just fantastic.” Yukari nearly hissed, crossing her arms over her chest. “This is torture! Who let this guy on the mic anyway?”

Said boy cleared his throat to silence the side chatter. The microphone hummed for a moment before he leaned in to speak. “Next, we’ll hear a word from the Student Council. Please welcome the new president, Mitsuru Kirijo, from Class 3-A.”

Minato had never been more relieved for someone to stop talking in his life if he discounted Kenji from earlier. He would have rather listened to nails on a chalkboard with Minako singing Bohemian Rhapsody backward while tap dancing on bubble wrap.

Everyone clapped respectfully as Mitsuru stepped up from behind the previous speaker. Her calm expression took in the applause without coming across as arrogant. She even threw a humble wave to her fellow seniors as they chanted her name.

It was a performance befitting a young woman of her station.

Yukari refused to uncross her arms and join in with the rest of her classmates. “So, she did get elected.” She stared daggers at her upperclassman as if she could make her disappear with a simple thought. “Well, I guess she is the most popular girl in school.”

“You can say that again!” Junpei chimed in, diminishing his cheers for the new president “There's, like, some kinda aura around her. Besides, this school's owned by the Kirijo Group, right?”

Minato could practically hear Yukari’s jaw grind over the ecstatic crowd. He glanced over to see the fiery brunette glaring at the floor.

“Yeah, I try not to think about that.” she seethed.

Teachers called for the students to quiet down. A hush fell over the auditorium as the attention was all on Mitsuru. She adjusted the microphone before taking a deep breath.

“As I begin my term as Student Council President, I'd like to share with you my vision for this coming year. It is my firm belief that each of us must accept the responsibility of bettering our school.” Mitsuru looked out over the different grades with a serious expression. “However, change cannot occur without sustained effort and an unprecedented level of commitment. That is why we must restructure our daily lives to accommodate this lofty goal.” She smiled and placed a hand over her heart. “I'd like each of you to dig deep into your well of motivation, and re-evaluate your convictions. To imagine a bold new future without losing sight of the realities around you. That is the key.”

Junpei was on the edge of his seat, jaw gaping for all to see. Many of the other members of Class 2-F mimicked his expression.

Minato remained stone-faced along with Yukari.

Her voice soared over the stunned students. They ate up each word as the speech hit its peak of passion. “I am certain that many of you have your own visions of the future. For us to reap the full benefits of our education, your participation, ideas, and enthusiasm are essential. Thank you.”

Another fit of applause rumbled the foundations of the building as Mitsuru stepped away from the podium. Teachers frantically tried to keep their students in line, but even they were in complete
shock over the power her words held.

Minato clapped numbly along. He heard more than enough grandiose speeches from Minako that all others seemed to be a repeat.

Junpei bumped shoulders with Minato, still marveling at the stage. “Dang, that was freaking amazing!” he breathed, chuckling to himself. “So, do you have any idea what she just said?”

Minato shrugged and stuck a headphone in his ear, lazily shuffling through his songs. “I was barely listening.”

“Dude, you’re such a rebel!”

Much to his delight, Miss Toriumi was the teacher that day. Minato already had space in the margin of his notebook to write down new book suggestions.

“All right, today we'll be going over Meiji-era literature. Open your textbooks to page twelve. . .” she paused before flipping her teacher’s copy of the textbook closed. “Hmm, I don't really like this author. Okay, never mind. I've got a great poem we can cover instead. Close your textbooks, everyone, and listen.” The sharp woman waited until everyone had followed directions before opening her pink binder. She cleared her throat and began to speak in a soft and cool tone.

"Beyond the seas, high above in the skies. . ."

Miss Toriumi’s usually no-nonsense demeanor transformed as words of heavenly landscapes came to life in Minato’s ears. The inflection of each stanza, coupled with a dramatic flare left him drifting off from the peacefulness that was laced in every breath. Her delight, as well as her sage-like love for literature, was showing through carefully crafted rhythms and rhyme.

In Minato’s opinion, it was far better than the speeches given at any assembly.

Unfortunately, his fatigue from last night came creeping in. Hazel eyes began to droop, the promise of sleep was almost too tempting.

Maybe if he only put his head down for a moment. . .

Minato pinched his arm as hard as he could. The sudden jolt of pain was almost too much to bear, but in a moment he was wide awake.

His perfect school record wouldn’t be tarnished by some tower. Minato would sooner eat his own shoe then see that day.

He would stay awake even if it killed him.

Miss Toriumi suddenly banged her fist on the podium.

“All right, Kenji, you'd better not be sleeping back there! You should be ashamed of yourself, taking a nap while I pour my heart into reading this poem! For that, you get another essay along with your regular assignment tonight! I'll expect a slice of cake when you turn it in, too!”

The boy from the gates shouted, jumped out of his desk, and did his best to apologize. Unfortunately, his punishment was bumped up to a full cake.

Minato’s resolve to keep his eyes open was strengthened. Essays were not his strong suit.
Sports were something that Minato often found to be counter-productive to his education.

While physical activity was seen as a good way to blow off steam, moving from place to place most of his life put a damper of “teamwork”. Even being in SEES was still a hard pill to swallow considering his lone-wolf mentality. Having Minako by his side throughout the whole ordeal did nothing to relieve the sudden social whiplash.

That’s why it was surprising when Minato found himself wandering around the sports center during his lunch break, admiring the numerous trophies and awards the teams had won over the years.

Gekkoukan High were no pushovers when it came to its athletic department. Despite many of the students signed-up for filling a time slot in their day, they ended up staying for the top-notch coaching and social atmosphere.

It was almost as if the glittering cases screamed for students to join in on the success.

Minato continued down the hall, eyes scanning the different competitions the teams had dominated. In no time at all, he reached the end of the cases. Multiple doors led to different sections of the campus: the track, archery range, tennis courts, an indoor gym with a conjoining pool, and boxing room.

From the wire protected windows or open doorways, the curious junior could see various students getting in a quick workout before heading back to class. Loud electronic music blared from loudspeakers to help pump up the athletes. A distinct stench of chlorine hung over a majority of the area. Sign-up sheets were posted next to every door. In big, vibrant letters, they advertised open slots on their teams. Many of the lines meant for names were filling up quickly.

Many of the sheets barely caught his attention. They all were the same. Benefits, cheesy quotes, and all sorts of empty promises seemed to pass by in a blur. Nothing stuck out or deviated from anything that came before it.

Finally, something did catch his attention.

Minato stopped in front of a plain sheet of long paper. Names stretched nearly half-way down under a small block of text with a picture of a cartoon sword fighter.

Join the Kendo Team/Recreational Club!

No experience necessary, just a good attitude and a willingness to get better are required here. Learn basic self-defense as well as character building skills in the discipline of a classic sport deeply rooted in our culture.

Those who are looking for an individualized experience rather than a serious, competition based environment, don’t worry! Everyone is welcome to try out our Recreational Club. Get a good workout with a flavor of excitement. For veterans of the sport (or the courageous rookies), join our competition team. It speaks for itself.

There is always room on both routes. Practice begins on April 28th so come check us out!

For more information or to connect with the team, contact the club supervisor in homeroom 1E.

-Yuko Nishiwaki (Team Manager and Competition Team Student Coordinator)

Minato read over the short summary of the club once or twice.
Joining Kendo would help boost some of his skills with a sword. Although it was one hour, exploring Tartarus was taxing and he was still new to proper combat etiquette. Yukari was already honing her skills in the archery club, Junpei loved playing baseball, and Minako was an avid distance runner. Just about everyone who was able to explore Tartarus had some kind of daily exercise except Minato.

If they wanted to stay alive, it would be in everyone’s best interest to take up a sport. It would mean sacrificing a bit of comfort, but at least it was something.

Minato’s eyes darted to the cartoon fighter decked in full gear.

Without another word, he signed his name on an empty slot. He wrote the date the first team practice began on his wrist so he wouldn’t forget.

Me: Junpei an me r goin 2 the mall, u game?
Baneofmyexistence: sure, we should check out da karaoke box
Me: I’ll brin’ meh headphones
Baneofmyexistence: Har Har, u suk
Me: @ least I can sing

Classes seemed to fly by for the rest of the school day.

Soon, Minato and Junpei walked out of the building together, chatting over the day’s events.

“Can’t believe Kenji got the shaft. He never gets caught, the lucky bastard!” Junpei chuckled to himself. “It’s about time he got his just desserts.”

Minato sighed at the pun, checking his phone for the time. “If I hear one more pun, I think I’m gonna hurl.”

“Come on, that was a good one!” Junpei protested, throwing an arm over the shorter boy’s shoulders. “At least it wasn’t creepy like the Chairman. Seriously, what’s that guy’s deal?”

The two stopped at the gate and continued to mull over their day while waiting for Minako. They discussed Miss Toriumi’s assignment, an upcoming video game release, and even what they planned to do over the weekend.

Last night’s mission was never mentioned. Mitsuru had pounded into the new recruits that any and all discussions of the Dark Hour were prohibited. They didn’t want anyone outside of SEES to become a liability in their missions. Anyone who leaked confidential information was threatened with ejection from SEES, even the school depending on the severity of the information leak.

Minato couldn’t afford a suspension in high school.

After ten minutes, Minako finally exited the building. Their male upperclassman, Akihiko Sanada, was listening to her discussing something with a neutral expression.

Always the same nonchalant expression, never subject to change.
That's when it crossed Minato's mind that his sister had been chummy with the popular captain ever since they first met him, it was almost concerning. Sanada’s laissez-faire attitude towards everything but boxing made conversation an absolute nightmare. Girls seemed to follow him at all times of the day, giving anyone within ten feet a headache. Not to mention the fact he cut an imposing figure that gave even the bravest of students nightmares for weeks.

Guys like him didn’t talk to girls like Minako.

Minato would have to pay extra attention to this new development.

When the two seniors were close to reaching the gates, a mass of girls seemed to flock from nowhere. They advanced on the pair in unison while squealing to the end of days.

“Look it’s Akihiko senpai!”

“Oh my god! He’s so cute today!”

“Get him!”

Minako had foreseen the attack and dodged the fangirls with ease. Minato could see her petite frame maneuvering the minefield that swallowed her companion whole. Unfortunately, one of the harpies had grabbed her arm and shoved Minako away with an angry glare.

“Move hussie!”

Minato and Junpei came to Minako’s aide as she began to topple to the pavement. They grabbed her arms and pulled her away from the ensuing chaos.

“Easy now, sis.” Minato said while gripped his sister’s arm. “You’ll win his affections someday.”

Minako waved him off, straightening her jacket. “Haha, nerd. At least I’ll get a boyfriend before you do.”

Minato looked away from her, shoving his hands into his pockets. “I’m not gay.”

“Sure you’re not.” Minako shrugged and gave him a sly wink. “So that crush on Haru Tachibana was just a phase, huh?”

Minato felt himself grow hot at the mention of his former middle school classmate. It had been an offhanded admiration for his intelligence, wit, and skill with a basketball. Sure, the boy was somewhat handsome, even charming to most others—

Now he was playing into Minako’s evil hands.

Minato rounded on his sibling, but he tried his best to keep his emotions to a minimum. His voice barely quivered, but he felt the fury in each syllable that left his mouth. “Just a PHASE, so shut up already.”

Junpei chuckled at the exchange before turning to the Akihiko being assaulted from all sides. “Have you noticed how popular Akihiko-san is with the ladies?” he sighed, but a fire was lit behind the feigned distaste “Man, take a look at that. I didn't use to talk to him much, but now I've got a good excuse. I know he's the captain of the boxing team, but who woulda thought he'd be such a chick magnet!? I mean, come on! You don't even see girls flock like that on TV!”

Another reason to be careful about rubbing elbows with Sanada: the fact he attracted trouble like a
If Minako was starting to hang around the guy, Minato would be the one to be caught up in the action.

Akihiko somehow pushed through the mighty throng and stood before the trio. The fangirls formed a uniform semi-circle around the object of their affection, continuing to call out for him in their annoyingly high pitched squeaks.

“How irritating. The screeching never ends,” he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. The boxer glanced over at Minako. “You okay Arisato?”

Minako gave a miniature salute coupled with a cheerful smile. “Tip-top shape, so don’t worry ‘bout me.” She turned to Minato and Junpei, her bag clasped behind her back. “Why don’t you tell them what you told me? Can’t leave them out of the loop when there’s stuff to get done.”

Akihiko nodded and turned to the pair of juniors. “You guys free this afternoon?”

Junpei broke into a cheesy grin and cracked his knuckles in a comical fashion. “Hell yeah! Whatcha got in mind?”

“I want the three of you to meet me at Paulownia Mall. You know where it is, right?” Akihiko asked, rocking anxiously on the back of his heels. “I’ll be at the police station. There’s someone I want you all to meet.”

Junpei gawked, fidgeting with the brim of his hat. “Th-The police station? You mean, we’re not hangin’ out with your friends?”

Akihiko denounced his connection with the fan-club behind him, but Minato was too lost in thought to pay attention. The only thing he registered were his uneasy feelings towards the entire situation. First, a mysterious death tower that was the real-life equivalent of Hell, now they were consorting cops of all things. For all he knew, Mitsuru was paying off the police to keep them out of her family business.

What was SEES: a vigilante mafia group?

He glanced over at Minako who seemed more than happy to go along with anything her classmate said. Her face was bright as always, Minato could tell that she was listening with a certain intensity that contradicted her rosy disposition.

Behind the facade, her chin remained at a respectable angle, a show of dignity and poise that many students failed to recognize.

Minako may have the emotional guise of a six-year-old, but Minato knew she could step into the ring with monsters the size of buildings. Nothing shady slipped under her radar once she decided to investigate.

It was a motto the two followed: never approach a situation without careful consideration.

Minato let himself relax and focused back into the conversation at hand. If his sister was on boards, there was no reason to be so uptight.

As a younger brother, he decided to follow her lead.

Akihiko had finished denying his involvement with his fangirls. Without paying said group any
mind, he turned heel and threw a small wave to the group.

“Anyway, I'm gonna head out. Don't keep me waiting.”

When the senior left, the fangirls all let our a well-rehearsed cry of distress.

“Awww, why can't he be more friendly?”

“But that’s what makes him so cool!”

“After him ladies!”

Minato, Minako, and Junpei watched in amusement as Akihiko was chased down the school hill by a pack of hormonal females. Many of the other students parted the walkway for the pursuit to continue uninterrupted.

Minato was more than happy to admit that the scene was gratifying.

Paulownia mall was bustling as usual. Teenagers shuffled between the arcade, karaoke boxes, and Chagall cafe while chatting with friends. Adults coming off of work checked their watches while carrying bags of gifts or commodities for their families. Couples clung to one another as they enjoyed one another’s company while making fellow shoppers uncomfortable.

Minato simply enjoyed the white noise that was Junpei and Minako arguing over which iteration of Featherman Rangers was the best.

In the end, while riding the escalator to the main floor, they agreed the original first season was a happy compromise.

“So, anyone know where the Police Station is?” Minako asked. “We’ve only been to Game Panic, but I never explored the other shops.”

Junpei pointed to a neon-lit sign once they stepped off the escalator, entering the main area of the mall. “It’s right next to Be Blue V. Cute little place, they sell antiques and used stuff.” He chuckled to himself as he led the way. “I get all my old consoles and games there for peanuts. We should check it out sometime.”

Just as he said, Minato saw the police station to the right of Be Blue V. Wanted posters were pinned outside on a glass-protected cork board. Glass doors and pristinely cleaned windows gave everyone that walked past a clear view of a white tiled lobby. He could see Akihiko talking to a stern-faced officer when they were close enough to make out finer details.

It was all the more unsettling that the officer had a constant frown.

Minako opened the door and ushered both juniors inside. Minato had to stick out his tongue at her when she said in a fake accent “After you, madame”.

She responded in kind.

The air inside the station was just as chilling on the inside. An air conditioner hummed above the reception desk, but the atmosphere remained stiff. Akihiko turned around when the three approached the desk cautiously.

“Oh, these are the guys I was talking about earlier.” He stepped aside so the officer could get a good look at the newcomers. “I was waiting for you guys. This is Officer Kurosawa; he helps keep
our squad well-equipped.”

Officer Kurosawa observed the students with a sharp glare. Minato briefly made eye-contact, but soon regretted it. All he could see were pools of grey steel with a heightened sense of forewarning. It was fitting for someone who lived under the law.

It told him that this man was the one in charge.

Minako stepped up first to take a bullet and break the ice. “It’s a pleasure to meet ya’, Officer. My name is Minako Arisato and I’m currently the SEES field leader.” She bowed respectfully with a smile. “Thank you for helping us get set up.”

The officer wasn’t swayed by her decorum and remained stoic. Minako stood straight but shifted from foot to foot when no response came.

At last, someone Minato could relate to.

Akihiko coughed to break the awkwardness. He opened his school bag and took out bills of yen, passing one out to each person. “This is from Ikutsuki-san. Use it wisely ‘cause you only get this once a month.”

“Really? Sweet!” Junpei exclaimed when he got his allowance. “Come to papa!”

When Minato received his own bills, he examined the money. It was newly minted with a five thousand stamped on the top two corners. He folded it neatly before stashing the money in his jacket pocket.

“You can't fight something empty-handed, so find something you like. Officer Kurosawa has connections.” Akihiko explained, closing up his bag. “But, these things still cost money.”

Finally, Officer Kurosawa spoke. His voice was akin to a razor blade cutting that added to his dangerous appearance.

“Of course they do. Nothing in life is free.”

Akihiko nodded in response, unfazed by the almost threatening tone the man used. “I realize that.” He threw a wave the frozen trio. “Well, I'll see you later.”

Without another word, he left the station. The door shut quietly behind him.

All Minato could think was how the fangirls were right, he really was cold as ice.

“I've been informed about you three.”

Minato was brought to attention when Kurosawa broke the fragile silence. He crossed his arms over his chest and trained his sights on the group.

“My job is to maintain peace in this city, regardless of the circumstances. I'm just an ordinary police officer, but it doesn't take a genius to know something strange is going on here. I'm only doing what I think is right.”

Minako once again took up the role as the groups' spokesperson. She stepped closer to the officer and flipped from perky to business mode. A coy grin kept her from crossing the thin line between being afraid and being enthusiastic.

“Nice to know we’re all on the same page.” She laid her money on the desk. “We actually could
use some help, if ya’ don’t mind.”

For the first time since they entered the station, the Kurosawa nodded and pulled out a large catalog from under his desk. He slid the book across the desk to the girl. “Not at all. Take a look for something you like.”

Minako thanked him and set to flipping through the book. Junpei made himself at home, flanking to the leader’s side and pursuing the options for himself.

Minato huffed before he locked eyes with the Officer.

The older man observed him from his feet to blue hair. He seemed to be looking for a reason to chew Minato out but remained steady and fair in his assessment. The brim of Kurosawa’s hat shadowed a majority of his upper facial features, but there was a certain crinkle of his nose that gave away the fact he was deep in his own head.

An introverted thinker knows his own kind after all.

Once the gentleman was satisfied, he nodded to the boy.

“Impeccable choice of shoes. Oxfords will take you places, boy.”

Minato felt a tug at his lips and his feet moved to join his friend and sister.

“. . . Thank you.”

Minako stared at her ceiling, her hands resting neatly on her stomach as she took in the peacefulness of her room. Her window was cracked open to let the spring breeze filter out the stifling air. Cream colored drapes swished in time with each gust of wind that carried a hint of freshly cut grass.

The dorm was mostly silent, save for Junpei and Yukari’s occasional bickering from downstairs.

She had just finished her homework and taken a nice shower. It was a blessing that it was a private bathroom: no one could walk in on her by accident. There was also space for her to store her toiletry items without having to commute them back and forth between her room and bathroom.

With Minako’s wet hair strewn across her pillow, it was the perfect moment to let her mind quietly recount the events of her day.

School was just as boring and trivial as ever. She spent most of her time listening to lectures, scouting for a club to join, or writing new story ideas. Her focus was mostly on enjoying what little time she had after class and planning out a new route for her morning jog.

It had been so long since she and Minato lived in Tatsumi Port Island. Nothing felt the same since they arrived, even streets that she had walked down before being forced to move away.

Junpei, Minato, and her visit to the police station went well. Officer Kurosawa had made sure to stock them with new equipment including a new sword for each of the boys, work gloves for protection, and extra attachments for their belt holsters.

As for Minako’s small dilemma, Kurosawa had promised to find her a two-handed weapon that was well balanced on all ends. His supplier was a friend in the military who knew how to match a person’s fighting style to the tools they carried.
Everything was promised to be delivered tomorrow.

Minako sighed and closed her eyes.

Her thoughts seemed to run wild with images of the night before. Monsters with knives for teeth danced across her memories. The distinct sound of metal colliding with leathery flesh echoed as if they had happened moments ago. Even the stench of the blood-stained marble plagued her senses and made it difficult to concentrate.

One night had turned her mind into a trap for nightmares whenever Minako found a moment of rest. The whole situation was difficult to take in: a hidden world that appeared after midnight was something straight out a horror movie.

Not only that, but innocent people were in danger. They could be dragged into the Dark Hour against their will, becoming lost and living the rest of their days as a walking corpse.

Now the fate of strangers weighed down on her shoulders.

It was an overwhelming feeling, one that felt too heavy to carry.

Her fingers brushed over the cross she wore, her mind flipping to Igor and the Velvet Room. His words of destiny and expectation seemed to soothe her troubled soul. He had assured both Arisato siblings to be a guide and teacher in this new world they navigated. Such a role made the journey ahead less daunting and more exciting.

Minako believed in a purpose for everyone who lived. It was no coincidence to her that such an opportunity laid before both Minato and herself.

There was a soft knock on Minako’s door, breaking her thoughts.

The teen rolled herself off the bed and stretched with a yawn. “It's open!” she called.

The door swung aside and Mitsuru stepped in.

“Good evening, Arisato-san. I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

Minako stopped yawning and threw on a smile. “Kirijo-san, this’s a surprise! You're not interrupting a thing; I was just thinkin’ about some stuff.” She straightened out her lopsided sweater. “What brings ya’ to this neck of the woods?”

Mitsuru stepped further into the room, pulling out a chair from Minako’s desk. “Do you mind if I sit? I'd like to speak to you for a moment.”

“Go ahead, I’m all ears.” Minako responded, sinking back down on her bed. “What’s on your mind? Am I in trouble?”

Mitsuru shook her head. “No, this is regarding our exploration of Tartarus. There are some details I would like you to be made aware of. Please interject if you have any questions.”

Minako perked up at the mention of Tartarus, folding her hands on her lap. “I’m listening.”

The student council president took a small breath before diving in. “As you know, Akihiko is still on the mend, so for now, I'd like you to lead the team.” she explained with the precision and tact of CEO. “You never know when a powerful enemy might appear, like the one you faced the other day. It's best to be prepared, or else you may find yourself in a difficult situation.”
Minako felt her heart sink knowing the responsibility that now officially rested with her, but she had to remain composed. It was inevitable that the oldest member who everyone respected would be chosen.

It was an honor to be the field leader.

She should be happy that Mitsuru bestowed such a title on someone as inexperienced as Minako.

So why did she just want to clam up and hand off the position to someone else?

Where was her backbone when she needed it most?

“I understand, I’ll do my best.”

“Good, I trust you will do fine.” Mitsuru crossed her legs and continues. “So, whenever you'd like to explore Tartarus, just let me know, and I'll gather everyone there.”

Minako nodded and thought for a moment.

“We should probably go back tomorrow.” She bowed her head and started thinking over her decision. “It would be smart to get used to the Dark Hour as soon as possible. I’d also like to get a gauge for everyone’s abilities so we can start to organize plans of attack.”

Mitsuru smiled. “You’re already settling in. I was worried for nothing.” She stood up and pushed the desk chair back into place. “Also, since I'm sure there are other things you will need to take care of, you may go out at night if you need to.”

Minako nodded and played with the hem of her pajama shorts. “Is there anythin’ else I should know?”

“That's it. I will notify the others in the lobby about tomorrow.” the older senior affirmed. She excused herself to the door, stepping halfway out before giving her a friendly wave. “Keep up the good work.”

When the door closed behind the leader of SEES, Minako finally let herself relax. She flopped herself face first on her pillow, hugging it tightly.

“Maybe if I sleep it off. . .” she mumbled before drifting off into a deep sleep. “. . . I’ll feel better in the morning.”

Her usual studying was pushed aside for the night.

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4/21/2009

Have you ever wondered what it’s like to hate someone for no good reason? I used to wonder what it felt like. I’ve never actually hated anyone in my life, even if they're annoying or stupid. Pure and unadulterated loathing has never crossed my mind.

I stopped wondering after today.

There’s a student in my class who I just met and I already can’t stand him. He’s like an off-brand Junpei, but without a shred of kindness or humility. He screams arrogance just by opening his mouth.

Just thinking about him makes my skin crawl, ugh. I’d rather admit Minako is better than me, which she’s NOT.

I pray to whatever god is out there that I never talk to that idiot again.

Um. . .

I also signed up for the kendo team. It looked like something that could help me. Practice begins April 28th.

That’s it.

-Minato Arisato
Persona Summoners

Chapter Notes

Sorry this update came late, I've been busy lately finishing up school. This chapter, we get a visit from everyone's "favorite" shitlord. I hope you guys enjoyed Mother's Day, because the Arisatos sure didn't.

Minako was a morning person through and through.

One had to enjoy being up before the sun in order to go for a quick jog before school.

After donning a red tank top, a light pullover, and black basketball shorts, she bounced down the stairs while tying up her hair. Her sneakers were soft on the carpeting despite their state of disrepair after years of use. A chill hung over the entire dorm from the night before. Windows were frosted over from the not-so-smooth transition from winter to spring.

Minako had to pause on the boy's floor in order to admire how the ice swirled to create intricate designs on the glass. Past the frost, she could still see stars glittering faintly in the sky. A combination of the street lamp light gave the scene a certain ethereal charm.

Such a sight was just what she needed to start the day.

“Woah. . .” she sighed, her breath coming out swirling, white wisps. She put the window behind and made her way to the lobby. Once again, she stepped carefully so no one would wake up and start yelling in an exhaustion-fueled rage.

When Minako reached the lobby, she realized she wasn’t alone.

Sitting on the coach, tying his shoes in athletic attire was Akihiko. He didn’t notice the girl at the bottom of the stairs yet, too focused on his own tasks.

Minako smiled and stepped further into the lobby. “Guess I’m not the only early bird ‘round here.”

Akihiko looked up at her. “Oh, good morning.” He finished off his last knot and stood up. “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“Nope, I got up for a nice run. You were quiet as a mouse,” she replied, walking towards the door with a spring in every step. She threw him a mischievous grin along the way. “I thought Kirijo-san said no training until your arm feels better? You wouldn’t want her catching you, eh?”

Akihiko shook his head. “What she doesn’t know won’t kill her.” He rolled his shoulders as he made his way to the door as well. “Besides, my legs are fine and I can’t just sit around doing nothing for a month.”

Minako shrugged and opened the door for him. “Whatever floats your boat, just don’t get caught.”

The two slipped outside into the frigid April air. Minako immediately began to shiver but her smile remained when she took a deep breath.
“Lovely day for a jog.” She skipped the steps leading up to the door and faced her route. She turned back to Akihiko with a wave. “Guess I’ll see ya’ later-”

“Hang on,” he said. “Are you going up to the station?”

Minako gave him an owlish look. “Yeah, I went that way yesterday. I know it’s not the most scenic route, but I don’t wanna get lost.”

Akihiko sighed. “You’re really missing out.” He motioned with his head to follow in the opposite direction. “Come on, I’ll show ya’ my route. It’s a bit longer and has a nice view of the bay.”

The confused teen was hesitant for a moment but soon gave in. Minako had already been bored to death by the view from yesterday, so there was no harm in trying something new.

“Alrighty then-”

Without warning, she dashed past Akihiko. “Just make sure you can keep up!”

The boxer was stunned for a moment, but soon he was sprinting after his running partner.

“Hey, slow down! You’ll get lost!”

Me: I’m gonna b @ dorm 2 get supplies ready 4 2nite, u?

EmoBro: don’t know

Me: u could help me! :D

EmoBro: no

Minato flipped his phone closed with a snap, leaned back in his seat, and stared at the ceiling.

The junior barely paid attention in class today. All he could remember was Junpei ranting about something and Yukari trying to shut him up. Both left the classroom bickering when the final bell sounded, leaving Minato to go back to the dorm on his own. He was fine with it, there were better things to do than listen to them argue on the train again.

A shadow fell over his desk. Minato titled his head back down to see Kenji standing expectantly in front of him.

The prickles of annoyance he had felt yesterday came back with a vengeance.

Kenji smirked when he saw he had Minato’s attention. “Hey, man, I’m gonna get some ramen after school. You wanna come?”

Minato inwardly groaned. He could hear his voice of reason being slammed into submission by his impulse to get up and leave the cocky teen hanging. It took all of his willpower to swallow the impulse and speak.

“Why are you asking me?”

Kenji shrugged. “No reason, really. I just don't have anything to do later, and I thought we could finish our conversation from yesterday.” He gestured to the door, a genuinely kind smile on his face. “So whaddya say, man? Let's get some ramen and talk, I'll buy.”
As much as Minato wanted to say no, something compelled him to think the offer through.

Maybe he was feeling guilty for being harsh the day before.

Maybe it was the promise of free food.

Maybe because he was in a good mood.

Minato decided he would give Kenji a second chance.

“. . . You got a place in mind?”

The two teens found themselves at a little shop named “Hagakure” in almost no time at all.

It was a homey restaurant with a jovial staff to boot. Even though Minato had ordered a very basic set of noodles, it was almost as if it had been prepared by a grandmother to her children’s children. There was a sense of love in each dish that just begged for proper respect and a side of care for each customer.

He made a mental note to eat at the establishment more often rather than unload his money at Wild Duck Burger.

Kenji was just finishing off his second bowl when they finally began to talk.

He had to throw back his head in order to drink up the now noodle-less soup. Once he had slurped down every last drop, he looked over to Minato who was still on his first bowl. “Whew! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Kenji patted his stomach. “Well, was I right, or was I right? This ramen tastes great, doesn’t it?”

Minato absentmindedly stirred up his ramen to keep it from settling. “You were right. This place is pretty good.” he said while preparing another bite. “I wonder what makes it taste so good.”

Kenji set down his bowl. “I bet they put a special ingredient in it, something no other ramen shop uses. It’s probably some sort of secret spice-” he suddenly paused before rubbing the back of his neck. “Oh, sorry. My bad. I get all geeked up when I eat here.”

Minato was surprised at the impromptu rant, feeling rather sentimental towards Kenji. Although he came off as just another hound dog, he had his own interests. It would be lying to say the blue-haired junior didn’t get more than a little excited whenever he met someone with his taste in music. Who was he to judge him so quickly? He was just a normal teenager with his own quirks.

Maybe Kenji wasn’t so bad after all.

“Don’t worry about it,” Minato said after swallowing another bunch of noodles. “We all have a thing; ramen’s just your thing.”

Kenji was stunned for a moment before melting into a cheesy grin. “Thanks!” he gave Minato a pat on the back, “You’re a pretty cool dude! No wonder you’re friends with Junpei.”

The two continued talking about their classes that day. Kenji complained about his grades in Composition while Minato occasionally jumped in with words of sympathy. They exchanged songs they liked, upcoming concert dates, and even a few stories.

By the time they left the restaurant, they exchanged phone numbers.
“Hey, let's hang out after school again sometime. We'll get some food and I'll tell you about my secret plan.” Kenji rubbed his hands together. “Wait ’til you hear it, dude. You're gonna flip!”

Minato couldn’t help but snort. Even if Kenji was quickly growing on him, there was still some cockiness that lay beneath his dorky obsession with ramen.

Still, he felt as if he had another person to count on.

“Can’t wait to hear it.”

The Dark Hour came almost too quickly. The group arrived at Tartarus, less surprised but still unnerved that their school could become such a horror show.

Once inside, Mitsuru had set to preparing for the mission. She focused on checking her radio and putting the juniors to work. “Make sure to check your Evokers. We can’t send you in with broken equipment.”

Yukari, Junpei, and Minato all nodded and set to checking their gear for the night.

Minako stood a little ways off from the rest of the group, holding her replacement for the sword she used on the first mission. Officer Kurosawa had pulled through in his promise for a better weapon. He had delivered a pole-arms that stood a good foot above Minako. A curved blade glittered in the light of the dying sun, new and ready for use. Her new weapon was called a naginata and fit her specifications: well balanced while still being light enough to carry for long stretches of time.

Minako flipped the staff and gripped it with both hands. “Here goes nothing.”

It remained balanced as she took a few practice swings. At first, she was awkward and unable to get the hang of the grip. Her footwork seemed all over the place and she stumbled when she tried to so much as a shift.

After a few minor adjustments, she was able to go from a resting position to a simple slash without any troubles.

It wasn’t much, but at least she would survive the night.

“I see you've decided to change your weapon.”

Minako stopped her practice when Mitsuru approached her. The former smiled and leaned her naginata on her shoulder. “It’ll take some gettin’ used to, but I can practice in my room.”

Mitsuru nodded. “As you should. A good leader must always strive for greatness.”

Minako grew sheepish at the title but did her best to hide the butterflies that fluttered in her stomach. She shrugged and drummed her fingers on the pole of her weapon. “I don’t know ‘bout greatness, but I’ll do my best.”

“You'll do just fine,” Mitsuru assured. “By the way, I found out something about Tartarus.”

Minako perked up. “Nothing bad, I hope?”

“No, just inconvenient.” Mitsuru placed a hand on her hip. “A few floors up, there's a barricade preventing you from going any higher. The tower seems to have a number of these interspersed amongst its floors.”
Minako hummed along. “What about the layout? Didn’t you say it’s randomized every night?”

“I know I told you that the layout changes each day, but these barriers seem to be in fixed
locations. Therefore, I’d like you to try and reach the first barricade.” The redhead extended her
hand. “I’m counting on you.”

Minako nodded and accepted her hand. “We’ll do our best.”

For a moment, Minako felt as if she would pull away and beg Mitsuru to pick someone else.

How she was able to smile through it all was a miracle.

Four floors later and the group was still going strong. No one was seriously injured, so most of
their wounds were easily patched up with a healing spell from Yukari or Minako. They split up the
duty in order to conserve energy.

Mitsuru would chime in during battles in order to offer advice or analyze the enemy. As they went
further and further in, she would provide moral support since they could handle the battles off-the-
cuff. The Shadows became easier and easier to defeat as they learned their weaknesses from their
last visit. Minako was able to keep track of who was most needed in an encounter and who could be
deviated into support roles. She would also jump to the rescue of her juniors if they weren’t
paying attention to the enemy’s movements.

In turn, they came to her rescue if she had been knocked down.

It was when they reached the fifth floor that Mitsuru reached them with an urgent tone.

“I sense a strong Shadow on this floor, one you’ve never encountered. Please proceed with the
utmost caution.”

“Understood Kirijo-san, we’ll be careful.” Minako said, turning to the trio behind her. “Keep your
distance until we figure out its weakness. After this, we’ll call it a night.”

Junpei whooped and threw his free arm around Minato. “Let’s do this! I’m gettin’ pumped now!”

“How many times do I need to tell you-” Minato elbowed his taller companion, “-stop doing that.
I’m not a fricken armrest.”

“Alright, alright!” Minako started leading them into the long halls. “Enough chatter, let’s get
rolling. We’re losing moonlight here.”

The group gave a resounding “yes ma’am” and they went on their way. They occasionally bumped
into groups of low-level Shadows that could be dispatched with a quick melee attack from the
quickest member. It almost became a game for them to try and reach the Shadows and destroy the
most.

Minako grew increasingly more worried as they defeated wave after wave of lower Shadows. They
had yet to come across any abnormal activity even after covering most of the floor.

It was becoming increasingly unsettling.

They eventually had explored the whole floor and found a large room. Not a single Shadow could
be seen, but the group remained on guard. The area was wide open with a set of stairs blocked by a
glass-like barrier. It shimmered despite the darkened light of the Tartarus.
Minako was the first to lower her weapon from a defensive position. She swung her head around to get a good look at the strange room. Nothing seemed to pop out from behind the darkened corners.

After a moment of quiet, Junpei finally sighed. “Looks like we’re stuck. Just great!”

Yukari put away an arrow she had knocked. “How are we supposed to go on? Should we come back tomorrow or something?”

Minato remained silent, but when Minako glanced over at him, she could tell he was thinking. She turned her attention back to the reflective barrier. “This doesn’t sit right with me—”

“Look up.” Minato interrupted, his sword poised for battle. “We’ve got company.”

Everyone’s attention was drawn to the high ceiling. They all instinctively shuffled closer to Minako, their weapons raised in case of an ambush.

At first, all they could see was a ceiling swathed in patches of darkness. Blood continued to stain the pillars that kept the room from crumbling to pieces. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, let alone gave away any signs of an attack.

After a drawn out silence, they heard a loud screech. A sinister form plunged at an alarming speed from behind one of the support pillars.

“SCATTER!”

The four teens jumped in different directions to avoid the assault. Their attacker hit the marble floors with a squak and spray of black feathers. Minako was the first to spring to her feet, now able to get a good look at the Shadow. It was much larger than any enemy they had previously encountered. Inky wings rose its sleek body off the ground and allowed for it to hover above the team. The power of each flap kicked up a gust of wind without much trouble. An intricate mask covered a sharp beak and yellow ords for eyes.

“Everyone keep a wide perimeter!” Minako shouted out. “Test the waters and find out what its weakness is! Don’t engage directly!”

“Ya’ got it, Minatan!” Junpei bellowed before summoning his Persona. “Light ‘em up, Hermes!”

Hermes jumped at the flying Shadow with a barrage of physical attacks. Its breakneck speed was able to keep it from retaliating right away. Minato and Yukari joined their teammate with their Evokers brandished. In no time, the distinct smell of raging fires and gnashing armor filled the room.

Minako had her Evoker drawn, but she remained off the front lines. She let Junpei and Minato take up the frontal assault while she and Yukari took up supporting roles. Her naginata was used to help keep her from losing her footing as she cast spell after spell.

Unfortunately, it seemed as if their attacks did nothing to deter the Shadow. Its large wings seemed the force them back at every attempt to get closer towards their target. Fire spells only worked when Junpei was able to slip past with his Persona’s overwhelming speed. Yukari couldn’t make any of her arrows hit their mark. Even Minako could feel its wind spells that were directed at the boys throwing her off balance.

“Darnit all,” Minako cursed, “this overgrown chicken just won’t go down.” The field leader sent out Nona once more before digging in her heels and holding a hand to her head. “Kirijo-san, do you copy? We could use some help up here!”
There was a brief crackle of static before the young Kirijo was able to patch herself through. “I can hear you, Arisato.” Mitsuru answered curtly. “What can I do to assist you?”

Minako witnessed the bird Shadow claw Nona the shreds, forcing her to re-summon the red clad warrior. “Could you run a scan and see what this thing’s weak to? None of our attacks seem to work.”

“Very well,” the senior answered, “I will analyze the enemy and then get back to you.”

“Please hurry!”

Just as Mitsuru’s voice cut out, a vigorous wind caught Minako by surprise. She was thrown off her feet and her naginata went scattering out of reach.

“Minako!” Yukari flocked her senior’s side. “Are you okay? She reached out her hand and helped the russet-haired girl to her feet. “That looked really painful.”

Minako shook her head. “Don’t worry about me-” Something out of the corner of her eye caused her to cut her sentence short. When Yukari had come to her aide, the watchful glare of the Shadow noticed the moment of weakness. Without paying any mind the main attackers, it changed its course to nose-dive straight for the girls.

“Get down!” Minako flung herself on top of Yukari as the bird-like Shadow moved on the offensive, acting as a shield to protect the young archer. There was a sharp pain as its sharp talon sliced across her back.

“GAH!”

“AGI!”

Minako heard Junpei yell as she grit her teeth in preparation for the spell. A scorching heat caused the Shadow to retreat from its prey. Flames licked at its wings and made it screech out in pain.

Minako took the opportunity for a counter strike. She deftly rolled away from Yukari, ignoring her injury, and grabbed her Evoker. She pressed the barrel against her temple, taking a deep breath before joining the fray.

“Hama!”

Nona appeared in an instant and waved her staff. A blinding light engulfed the enemy, giving the summoner enough time to heave herself to her feet. When the light vanished, the Shadow remained flying above the group with any trouble. If anything, it seemed more agitated.

“Light attacks won’t work!” Minako looked to Junpei and Minato. “Keep using fire until Mitsuru gets back to me! We can hold out ’til then!”

The boys nodded and raised their Evokers. Orpheus and Hermes charged the Shadow in a flurry of explosions and fire. The Shadow responded by flapping its massive wings, kicking up another gust of harsh wind. Junpei and Minato had to dig in and drop the floor in order to avoid being blown away. Their fire spells were rendered almost useless.

“Its using wind and slash attacks! Keep your distance and watch your back!”

“Got it, Minatan!” Junpei yelled back and brought back Hermes. “Get over here ya’ son of a gun!” He sent his quick-footed Persona to help Orpheus deal out heavy physical attacks.
Minako bit her lip as the wound from the Shadow’s attack flared up. “Sweet Jesus, that hurts.”

A soothing light fell over Minako. Yukari appeared at her side in an instant, Io floating behind her with arms outstretched.

“I’m sorry, Minako. Are you alright?” she asked as her healing spell took away the worst of the pain. “I should’ve paid more attention to my surroundings.”

Minako shook her head. “Don’t worry, I’m fine. Thanks for the healing spell.”

“Don’t mention it.” Yukari knocked a new arrow, keeping herself low to the floor to avoid the barrage of wind attacks. “This really bites! None of our spells are working!”

“I’ve got it!”

Mitsuru’s voice broke into Minako head. The latter placed a hand over her ear in order to focus in on the conversation. “What’s the jist? How do we down this turkey?”

“It seems this enemy is weak to piercing attacks. Yukari’s bow and arrows should do the trick.”

Yukari gripped her bow with concern written on her expression. “I can’t get close enough with all these wind attacks. We have to distract this thing so I can line up a shot.”

Minato and Junpei were forced back by another powerful blow. They retreated back to the girls, casting a few spells to throw off the Shadow. The capped teen turned to Minako with a confident glint in his eye. “If it’s a distraction ya’ need, Hermes and I can getcha’ one!”

Minato nodded along. “We’ll bring down its defense and get it tired.”

Minako smiled, feeling her nerves melt into energy. She stood straighter, her naginata back in her hands. “Alrighty, you two get to work on that. I’ll protect Yukari until we ground that thing. Once it’s down, give ‘em the ol’ razzle dazzle! Don’t stop fighting until its dead!”

The boys spared no time for theatrics. They ran into the wind with spells ablaze without fear in their movements. Minako turned to Yukari who still looked terrified.

“I-I don’t think I can do this.” she shook her head vehemently. “You’re already injured. What if I miss and we get knocked down again? What if it gets angry and lashes out?”

Minako had to swallow her words before she said something that would scare the archer. Of course, there were risks, but she knew that they had no other options. If Yukari didn’t have a level head, how could she focus on so much as shooting straight? Someone needed to get her head in the game.

It was finally time to be a leader, even if said leader was scared herself.

Minako threw on a smile and shook her head. “I know this is gonna be tough, but we need you right now.” She pulled out her Evoker. “Don’t worry about us getting hurt, that’s just how it goes in here. Focus on shooting a bulls-eye and you’ll do just fine.”

Yukari gulped but nodded. “Okay, I will.” She looked to the battle that still raged on. “How am I supposed to line up my shot? The wind currents on the ground are too strong for a clean shot.”

Minako thought for a moment before an idea came to mind.

“Is it possible to ride on your Persona?”
“W-what?” Yukari exclaimed. “That’s crazy! What are you planning?”

Minako pointed above them. “You said it yourself: the wind currents on the ground are too strong. If you climb on your Persona to get a better vantage point, you could avoid the wind altogether. You’ll not only get rid of resistance, but you’ll also have an advantage over the Shadow. I know it’s a tad bizarre, but if it works…”

Yukari was quiet for a moment, still looking uneasy about the task on her shoulders. Much to her leader’s relief, she nodded and loosened the death grip on her bow. “I’m still uncertain about all this, but I’ll give it my best shot Minako-senpai!”

Minako could feel her heart grow lighter. “I know you won’t let us down. Summon Io and let’s get rollin’!”

Yukari did as she was told and aimed her Evoker between her eyes. “Come to me, Io!” The floating Persona appeared above them, her tranquil face ever so steady. It seemed to know their plans and hovered slightly lower than usual. With the help of Minako, Yukari clambered onto Io and gave her leader a reassuring nod.

“Let’s wrap this up.” she said with a new determination filling her words. Io then lifted herself higher into the darkened areas of the pillars. All Minako could see was a faint glow illuminating the stone around the Persona and its passenger.

She could almost feel the change in attitude by simply a glance.

“Take us home, Yukatan.” Minako turned on her heel and joined her male teammates who struggled to stand their ground. The Shadow had become increasingly enraged at their attempts to knock it down, resorting to flailing and diving at the two.

Minato was thrown back by a particularly harrowing barrage that sent him skidding across the floor. Just as the Shadow moved to ambush him, Minako raised her Evoker.

“Nona!”

Her Persona collided and tackled the Shadow aside. The Shadow’s wings beat furiously in order to drive the new arrival, preventing itself from being dragged to the ground. Both entered an aerial stalemate that Nona was quickly losing.

Minako could feel a tug of pain as her body struggled to keep her Persona materialized. She took a deep breath and forced herself to stand without shaking.

“I need back-up, you guys!”

Minato jumped to his feet with the help of Junpei. The pair of boys rushed to regroup with their leader before grabbing their Evokers.

“Orpheus!”

“Hermes!”

All three Personas now bombarded the Shadow. It began to grow frantic as it struggled to keep itself from harm. After Orpheus used its lyre to land a lucky hit, the Shadow’s red eyes swiveled within the space of the mask. It couldn’t fly straight and had to make an effort to stay in the air.

Minako couldn’t help but grin. She raised her arm with a triumphant cry.
“Get ‘em Yukari!”

From her hiding spot, Yukari’s arrow was let loose and sailed at the disoriented the Shadow. The arrow buried itself in the chest of the monster who let a howl of pain. The Shadow remained in the air a moment longer before it finally fell the ground.

The three watched as their enemy slowly faded into the usual smoke. All that hit the floor was a cloud of ashes which too disappeared after a few seconds. The glittering wall that blocked their path to the next floor melted into what resembled snowflakes, also leaving no trace as they sank to the ground.

At first, no one spoke. Yukari had found her way back to the group by letting Io float her to the ground. Everyone seemed to stare at the stairs that would be the gateway to challenges unknown.

Minako was the first to break out of her funk as pride blossomed in her heart.

They had conquered their first huge enemy.

No one was seriously injured.

Minako took a deep breath.

“We did it.”

4/23/09

Apparently, our Personas are tangible. Yukari was able to ride on Io to get a to a high vantage point and win the day.

I’ll keep that in mind.

-Minato Arisato
Chapter Notes

Sorry this is coming out late. I had some stuff that needed my complete attention (nothing bad, actually it's all great stuff!). Enjoy this fluffy chapter of team bonding and junk!

“Good morning, dear guests. I trust you slept well?”

Minato let himself stretch out before answering Igor. “No comment.” He scratched at his unruly hair and closed his eyes. “Five more minutes please.”

Minako yawned beside him, the sleeves of her sweatshirt hiding her hands. “Does this place have a coffee maker? And sugar? And cream?”

Elizabeth chuckled to herself as she kneeled in front of the siblings. “Surprisingly, we had considered such a contraption for the comfort of our guests.” She busied herself by trying to rouse the Minato, using his own hand to lightly slap him awake. “Unfortunately, coffee was banned after the incident with our sister, Margaret. The poor woman nearly took off her own head after summoning a Persona named Loki.”

Minato swatted away Elizabeth, sitting up straight to please her. “Like the Norse god Loki?” he asked.

“Personas can be manifested in many forms: from mythological beasts to iconic figures in Earth’s history.” Theodore chimed in, a tray of mugs balanced delicately on his fingertips as he approached the siblings and Elizabeth. “Each one was created by the volition of one’s imagination or presence in the Collective Unconscious.” He stopped in front of the couch and handed off the mugs to the guests. “In essence, there are limitless possibilities to what can and cannot become a Persona. There may even be Personas we have yet to register within our records.”

Minato felt himself perk up once the hot ceramic was cradled in his hands. A tea bag was partially submerged in the darkened water with the scent of herbs wafting from the surface.

Theodore offered a mug to Minako which she took gladly, throwing an appreciative smile back at the attendants. “My apologies if the taste is not to your liking; it was either this or wine. It has been some time since we’ve had younger adults in our midst.”

Minako waved off the attendant. “Don’t worry, I’m just happy for something warm right now.”

Igor chuckled to himself. A half-lit cigar hung from the side of his mouth while a glass of (what Minato thought was) scotch sat on a coaster next to his drumming fingers. Sure, it was five o’clock somewhere, but it just looked ridiculous. “We will be sure to prepare for extended visits in the future. It would be a shame if you both should be of ill temperament during your stays,” he said.

Minato leaned forward and took a tiny sip of his drink. It tasted faintly of mint. “By the way, why are we here? You just poofed us in without warning.”

Igor stopped drumming his fingers and snapped them. “I suppose I should explain. It is my reason
for being here as well as the true function of this room.” A pair of cards appeared on the table, laying side-by-side. “Just as Elizabeth had mentioned, we have the power to summon Personas, but not in the manner in which you think.” he explained. The cards flipped over to reveal images of what seemed to be a tiny fairy and red teardrop, a scowl etched onto its features.

Minato watched in awe as a line was drawn between the cards. They hovered above the table, beginning to glow.

In the blink of an eye, the cards were engulfed in a blinding light. Minato almost dropped his mug at the sudden burst of white. He could hear his sister yelp and felt as she flinched away from the spectacle.

Just as it had appeared, the light was gone.

In the place of the cards was a manta ray-like monster, easily navigating the air like it was home in the ocean. It bore menacing fangs and piercing yellow eyes, yet as it regarded the two teens, there was a certain calm that was laying behind the rugged appearance.

“I am Forenus, the Great Marquis of Hell. Allow me to assist in your conquest, and you shall be handsomely rewarded with knowledge beyond your Earthly comprehension.”

Forenus gave one last flick of his spindling tail before vanishing in a shimmer of blue sparks. A card floated down to the table in his place. His image was imprinted face-up.

“By means of fusing two different Personas together, a new one shall emerge in their place.” Igor took the card and offered it to the siblings. “This new creature will be yours to take into battle. Consider it your first in the long line of Personas you will create.”

Minato caught his sister giving him an expecting look. Her eyes darted over to the offered card then back to him. “Go ahead, I’ll get the next one.” she said.

Minato gave her a small nod and turned back to Igor. He reached out to grab the card, but as soon as his fingers brushed the thick paper, it shattered like glass. His heart seemed to skip a beat as if shocked by lightning. A strange tingle ran up his spine and a voice echoed in his head.

“This will be an interesting one indeed.”

Minato took a deep breath, feeling his head spin for a moment. A sensation as if something had crawled under his skin sent a shiver down his spine. For a moment, it was almost as if a second person had decided to take control, only to relinquish control back to the host. “Woah.” He touched his racing heart. “That felt weird.”

Elizabeth laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “The process will become easier. Your first contractee will always feel a little intrusive. Soon, it will all be second nature accepting them into your heart.”

Minato let his hand brushed over his chest. There was something there that hadn’t seemed to register before.

As if someone else was inside his head, ready to stand in defense of their carrier.

“My heart, huh?”

Minato spent the rest of his visit learning the ins and outs of Persona Fusion with his sister. The whole time, he could already feel himself getting used to Forenus’ presence.
“Hey, I hear you're friends with Kenji now. He said you're a pretty cool guy.”

Minato glanced up at Junpei from his lunch. The latter sat on top of his desk while Minato relaxed in the one behind his companion. He was in the middle of a bite when his dorm mate brought up the topic of “Ramen Boy” (as he had put into his phone a few days ago).

“He’s okay.” Minato replied, finishing off the food in his mouth quickly. “Maybe a little too obsessed with noodles, a bit self-centered, and cocky, but an okay guy. At least he isn’t a huge jerk like I thought he was.”

Junpei chuckled at Minato’s assessment. “Dude, you really don’t beat around the bush. Seems like ya’ got a chip on your shoulder there. Trust me, you two will get along just fine.” He flicked the brim of his cap. “I am an excellent judge of character, ya’ know.”

“On what planet, Stupei?” Yukari slid into the desk right next to Junpei. She had her own lunch complete with all the cute things girls liked to pack in order to impress boys.

Well, it’s not like it was a bad thing to Minato. It suited the ‘popular girl’ vibe she exuded to keep the wrong people from getting too close.

“That’s cold, Yukatan. No wonder you’re still single.” Junpei snuck his hand into a bag of chips Minato had propped against his lunch box. “Ya’ know what they say about women who are mean to guys?” He crossed his arm over his chest, a smirk on his lips. “They end up lonely cat ladies who write blogs about their ninety-nine precious children.”

Yukari huffed and shoved a helping of carefully cut fruit in her mouth. “Whatever, at least I’m not an egomaniac whose biggest claim to fame is wearing a baseball hat indoors every day,” she scoffed, "By the way, how was the principal's office this week? I heard he got a new painting of himself."

"Hey! I didn't get called down this week!"

And so the two started going back and forth trying to out-insult the other. Minato let their voices go in one ear and out the other as he enjoyed the now comfortable bickering.

Since when had arguing become so mundane and reassuring?

He flipped open his phone.

“Wonder what Minako’s up to?”

---

**Me:** yo

**Baneofmyexistence:** Hello brother dearest!! :D

**Baneofmyexistence:** Are u eatin all ur veggies like a gud boi?

**Me:** begone thot

**Baneofmyexistence:** awwww, I'm hurt. all my hard work 4 that?

**Me:** wat work? U tossed carrots in a bag
Being the older sibling, it often fell on her shoulders to be the homemaker of both her and Minato’s lives. Minako had done everything from cooking, cleaning, laundry, and even some basic repairs to whatever house the two were passed off to. She also handled any paperwork that required their attention.

Out of all those things, cooking was her favorite.

Of course, Minako’s passion for the culinary arts was born out of necessity, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t grow to love it. The pride in making something with her hands gave a warm feeling that required no gratification. Learning something new that she could enjoy knowing it was a creation all her own brought a smile to her face.

Maybe that’s why earlier that morning, after her run with her new partner, she tried to find a snack to eat on the fly before school. Tea from the Velvet Room did nothing to stop her stomach from rumbling.

She found what she was looking for, but also an unsavory reality check.

The only food they had at the dorm fell into two categories: calorie ridden junk or instant meals.

While Minako was no patron saint in the sweets department, she couldn’t stand eating them all day and every day. Even she had a limit to how much sugar she could guzzle down. There had to be a line drawn in the sand and a cabinet of store-bought garbage was crossing that line.

In light of the situation, an idea came waltzing in.

What about taking matters into her own hands?

That’s why Minako took it upon herself to get home before the rest of the gang, toting two heavy bags of groceries.

So now, for the past hour, Minako had dug in her heels to make dinner for the rest of the gang. A singular earphone played classic rock as she worked.

It took longer than usual to set-up due to the poor quality of the stove and other appliances. The equipment hadn’t been used for an unknown amount of time and collected enough grim to be considered a fire hazard. Many of the burners had to be scrubbed clean before Minako could light the gas.

The only evidence of use were scattered recipes printed off the internet, laying in odd locations as if meant to be hidden from view. Scratchy handwriting decorated every sheet with suggestions, corrections, and all sorts of additives for different tastes.

Was there someone who also enjoyed cooking in SEES midst who had yet to come forward?

Minako simply shook her head and gathered the recipes ahead of the rush to be used some other
time. She made a note to ask about them when she was less exhausted.

For now, it was her moment to shine.

Hash Browns were ready in a skillet, set aside on low heat. Slices of fresh bread were waiting to be soaked in french toast batter and fried up. An egg mixture that had been prepared beforehand sat in the fridge, waiting to be used for the main dish of omelets. Various ingredients ranging from mushrooms to sour cream were waiting to be used as well.

It was a traditional breakfast dinner, straight from her mother’s kitchen handbook. There was even a pie baking in the oven for after the meal. Apple cinnamon with an oat crumble topping: a fine dessert after a long day at school.

All that was left to do was make a fruit tray and their breakfast dinner would be ready. Only the best would do: plump strawberries, grapes fresh off the vine, and pears sliced thick were a few of those. By the time Minako had finished cutting up a large pineapple, her hands were sticky with sweet juice.

“Well ain’t that neat.” she mumbled, scuttling over to the sink. “I thought I was more careful than this.”

As she rinsed her hands of the pineapple juice, she heard the door open. The animated voice of Junpei drifted into the kitchen. A dry response affirmed that Minato was with him. The two must have ended up following their noses and found the eldest Arisato fishing for a clean rag to wipe her hands off.

“Um, what’s all this senpai?”

Minako dried off her hands. “I made a proper meal for everyone. All we have is junk food and instant noodles. We’re fighting demon monsters from the pit of H-E double hockey sticks itself, so we need the right nutrients to keep ourselves sharp.”

Minato, who was standing next to Junpei, scoffed as he started flipping through his music for a new song. “Gee, thanks mom.”

“Can it, nerd. I jumped on the first train home to get this ready. Show some respect for my hard work once in a blue moon.” Minako pulled her egg mix from the fridge as well as her numerous fillings. “I was thinking about a good old-fashioned breakfast dinner. Omelets, french toast, and some nice hash browns. Sounds good?”

Junpei rubbed his hands together with a childish grin on his face. “When do we get eatin’? I’m already starving!”

Minako smiled and set to making the first omelet. “Soon as you wash your hands, I’ll start serving up. If you guys set the table, I’ll let you have the first crack at the pie I’m baking.”

“Did someone say pie?”

Yukari, who had stealthily entered the dorm, began to slink past her classmates in order to creep into the kitchen area. “Is it done now? Can I have a little taste, please-?”

Minako was quick to step in the glutinous archer’s path. “This is for after dinner, missy moo.” She turned Yukari around and escorted her out of her workspace. “The last time I let someone help me in the kitchen, they stole the pie and ran off to their room with it. I won’t name names, but it rhymes with ‘Dumbo’.”
Minato rolled his eyes, but shouldered off his school blazer and got to work. “It’s your fault you left it out. Leave a note or something before you start pointing fingers.”

Minako sighed before setting herself back into preparing the food. She poured a generous helping of mix into two waiting skillets, a pleasant sizzle ringing in her ears. “Who wants dibs on the first omelets? I’ve got two pans going.”

“MEEEE!” Junpei shouted from the dining room as he laid out a set of silverware for everyone. “Just cheese and a dollop of green onions! I’ll add hot sauce later!”

“I want the next one!” Yukari chirped, carrying the fruit tray to the center of the table before coming back for butter and a bowl of powdered sugar. “Run it through the garden but skip the bell peppers please.”

Minato filled up glasses of water after washing his hands. “The usual, please and thanks.”

As the juniors got to work on setting up, Minako kept herself busy with cooking. She had started frying up the french toast while checking the omelets intervals. Her hands moved on auto-pilot from years of practice and mistakes. The scalding steam from the pans used to burn her skin but now it only tickled on the surface.

The first batch of food was done in a moments notice. Each plate was given their main dish with a decent helping of hashbrowns and a slice of french toast. Junpei and Yukari snatched up their food and retreated to the table. Minato waited patiently for his with a bowl of fruit. Her brother’s was finished in a matter of minutes. He collected his dues and hobbled back to the table.

Junpei was already on his feet, back in the kitchen with his plate polished off. “Is there enough for seconds?” he asked.

Minako grinned and heaped on more french toast to keep him busy. “There’s enough for thirds. Sit tight for now.”

Mitsuru and Akihiko came around the corner from the front door just as Junpei was settling back in. Minako was just about to get to work on the next omelet when she saw them walk in.

“Afternoon!” she said while waving with her spatula. A splatter of omelet mix flew and stuck to the microwave nearby. Minako noticed her accident, gave a sheepish grin, and made a move for a paper towel. “Sorry about that, got a little too excited.”

Mitsuru hung her bag off the back of one of the counter stools. “What’s all this? Are we celebrating something?”

Minako finished cleaning off the microwave. “Oh, this is nothing! Just a nice dinner a’la my famous home cooking.”

“My like infamous!” Minato commented between hungry chomps. “Remember the time you gave Aunt Mirai food poisoning?”

Minako shot her brother a nasty glare before turning back to her fellow seniors. “So, what can I getcha’? Omelet? French Toast-?” She suddenly stopped herself and kicked into mission mode. “You know what? I’ll just get one of everything! What would you like on your omelets? I make only the best, so don’t be shy.”

Mitsuru’s previous confusion melted into a soft grin. “Surprise me.” She grabbed a plate and helped herself to toast and hash browns.
Akihiko followed close behind. “Same here.”

Minako grinned and brandishing her cooking utensil like a weapon of mass destruction. “You won’t be disappointed.”

As the two newcomers joined in at the table, Minako expertly poured out two new omelets and settled into her new challenge.

She started with the toughest of the orders without a second to spare, Mitsuru. She seemed like someone who enjoyed a fresh yet interesting flavors a meal could offer after a long day. Some raw onions with juicy peppers could be combined with the savoriness of pepper ham. All that she needed to top it off was some feta cheese and the rest would help itself.

Akihiko, on the other hand, was much simpler. Athletes needed one thing and one thing only: protein, protein, PROTEIN. From their short excursion to Hagakure, he had chosen the heaviest item on the menu in terms of serving as well as focused nutrition. All Minako had to do was throw all the meat products she prepared, add some cleansing sour cream so she wouldn’t have to perform the hind-lick maneuver, and she was golden.

“Two chief surprise omelets comin’ right up!” she announced while scooping said delicacies onto a large plate. Minako sauntered into the dining room and helped herself to serve the seniors in attendance, careful not to tear the delicate casing and spilling the contents of her labor.

“I hope yer’ insurance is good, cause your minds are about to be blown,” Junpei commented in between bites of potatoes.

Minako took a few polite steps away from the table. “I don’t know about that, but I hope you both enjoy.”

The two seniors nodded and took a tentative bite out of their omelets. There was a pause, a shared look between them, and a pair of smiles that followed their first taste.

“Exquisite.” Mitsuru hummed, now starting to dig in with a newfound urgency. “Goût parfait, mes compliments au chef.”

Akihiko snickered at the use of french. “Oui, pareil ici. Mieux que je pourrais faire.”

Minako could only understand bits and pieces from her limited experience with the language but could feel the sentiment in their mannerisms. She gave a small curtsy, lifting her apron as if it were the skirt of a ballgown.

“Je vous remercie.” she responded, her tongue unfamiliar with the finer points of pronunciation. It came out in more of a slur than with careful precision. The hairs on the back of her neck raised at the clumsiness of her speech. “Um, that’s to say I have no idea how to speak French. English and sheet music is more my forte.”

Mitsuru smiled at the young cook. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Why don’t you join us senpai?” Yukari pipped in as she was about to shove a generous pile of hash browns in her mouth. “Shouldn’t the chief get a chance to relax too?”

Junpei looked up mid-chew. “Yaw, jwon ush.” He hastily swallowed when everyone gave him a disapproving frown at his poor manners. “Grab a plate an’ chow down!”
Minato was quiet but gave Minako a glance that spoke louder than a siren.

“Stop standing around and grab a chair.”

Minako couldn’t help the warm buzz that seemed to hum through her blood.

Just a couple of students spending an evening in each other’s company, and yet there was an unspoken connection that kept the atmosphere light.

When was the last time she could experience something like this?

“Don’t mind if I do.”

5/26/2009

Minako is finally cooking again. I almost forgot what real food tasted like.

-Minato Arisato
Minako never saw herself as a hardcore athlete.

Elementary school was meant to establish a healthy lifestyle. They would play all the classics: dodge-ball, tee ball, jump rope, hopscotch, four corners, and even a bit of tag (if the teachers allowed it during recess).

Times were simpler. All she had to do was giggle with her classmates and try to forge a friendship or two.

After 1999, everything changed.

Middle school came around, providing no safe haven for a girl who was juggled more than a ball at the circus. Her peers all took up sports during this time. Minako would attempt them all the first few days then drop out because she had to move on to the next relative or her teammates thought she was going to die.

Softball ended with cut knees and dusty hair. Basketball meant an insurmountable array of bruises on her scalp. Swimming was a chore since she was self-conscious of her less-than-desirable figure. Tennis held the award of ‘follow a tiny green ball that bounces higher than your teacher’s expectations’. Even volleyball was out of the question considering her below average height and poor jumping skills.

It was a shame since it was one of her favorites to watch on TV.

By the time she was in high school, everyone had their own sport to call home. It left Minako out of the social loop, but then again, she was destined as much.

The only activity that interested her was running long distance.

Her small body cutting through the air like a knife, hair snapping behind at the incredible speed, and satisfaction of beating a personal record made Minako smile. There was nothing she would rather do than just keep going until there was no more road. Even then, she’d hit the dirt and get her shoes dirty.

Although the track teams she joined were remarkably tight-knit, she didn’t mind running alone.

Rain, shine, sleet, or storm, she could always be found racing the clock. No matter where she ended up, no matter what city or town, she would grab a map and figure out a route.

Doing all of this alone was the story of her life.

Maybe that’s why she cherished her new running partner so much.

As the sun was still making its accession to the sky, Minako would meet Akihiko every morning in front of the dorm. They would greet one another quickly before setting out on their path; there was no need for winded conversation when you could be running. He would lead the way while she kept an eye on the time.

This morning was no different, at least at first.

Minako had woken at the crack of dawn. Akihiko was waiting for her, throwing her a smirk and a
“you’re late.” She had scoffed at the claim and said: “Well good morning to you, too.” Other than that, their routine stuck. As soon as Minako made it to Akihiko’s side, they were off at a steady pace.

Akihiko had chosen a new route that day, a tour through a quaint shopping district just waking up. A few of the storefronts were already opened and welcoming early risers. Employees and owners would say hello as the pair jogged by. The tantalizing smell of bread made Minako’s mouth water, but she swallowed back the feeling and continued on.

They looped back towards the dorm after leaving the district. Minako easily kept up with the Akihiko’s long strides by simply picking up her own pace. It was a good challenge that pushed her to the limits of what she could do, making sure that the two were never ahead or behind each other.

The local shrine was coming into view when Minako noticed that she was pulling ahead. For a moment, she felt a bit of pride blossom in her heart, she was beating the champion of boxing himself at something sporty! She was already coming up with witty jokes to hang over his head for the rest of the day.

She glanced over at Akihiko and noticed that he was wincing and discreetly reaching for his still injured arm. His breathing came in uneven rasps, different from all other days they ran together.

His injury must be flaring up.

Why hadn't she noticed sooner?

Minako felt a twinge of worry take root. Had he been like this since the start? How long had he been running with the pain? Why didn’t he take the morning off? Was his pride really so important that he would let himself tear a muscles and cause permanent damage?

There was no way they could continue at their current pace if he was in pain.

Though it was disappointing to end a run when they were almost done, Minako began to slow to a trot.

Akihiko didn’t notice the change until Minako was a good distance behind him. He slowed to a stop and gripped the back of his head in order to breath easier. His bad arm hung uselessly at his side as he turned around to see what was going on.

“Quitting. . .a-already?” he asked between breaths. “Where’s all t-that. . .sass from earlier?”

Minako felt her legs become lead weights on her body. She shook her head and forced herself to take deep breaths.

“My stubborn partner.-” she coughed as the morning air tickled her throat, “-can’t keep runnin’ with a gimp arm. It’s painful to watch.”

Akihiko frowned for a moment; he knew he had been caught. “Just a small ache.” He rolled his shoulders back, his hands resting on his hips. “Can’t let a little pain get in the way of my training.”

And there it was, it all came back to training.

Minako let out a hefty sigh, defeated with only one sentence. “One day, you’re gonna end up in an early grave and I’m gonna carve ‘I told you so’ on your headstone.” She shook her head and stepped towards him. “Have you been hurting this whole time?”
Akihiko was tense for a moment before letting his arms come across his chest: a defensive position. “I slept on it wrong last night.” He glanced away so he didn’t have to look her in the eye. “I swear, I’ve been fine until today.”

Not willing to make eye contact, closing himself off, all classic signs that someone was hiding something.

Minako knew he was lying, but she was too tired to start an argument so early in the morning. Besides, arguing with Akihiko Sanada about his well being was about as productive as talking to a brick wall.

Some things just weren’t worth the fuss.

Instead, she walked forward until she stood in front of the boxer. “Fine, I’ll let it slide, but no more running for today. We have enough time to walk back to the dorm.” Her frown melted into a familiar smirk. “If it’s better tomorrow, I’ll shut my mouth an’ let it go completely. Deal?”

There was a small quirk on his lips. Akihiko glanced down at her, pausing for a moment before uncrossing his arms. He matched her smirk and nodded. “Alright, deal.” He turned on his heel and motioned for Minako to follow. “We’ve got some time, wanna see something cool?”

Minako let herself smile, following Akihiko into the shrine. “Sure, but I hope ya’ know I don’t plan on converting anytime soon. I like my religion, please and thank you.”

He chuckled and continued into the interior. “Maybe another day, but that’s not it.”

They turned off the path leading to the main building, Minako finding that there was a playground to the right of the entrance. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, reflecting off the candy-colored metal that looked to be well worn from constant play.

It must be a popular hangout for the kids that lived in the neighborhood.

Akihiko approached a piece of equipment: a horizontal bar meant for children to dangle from or perform little stunts that mostly ended in broken bones.

He stopped in front and wiped the sweat from his palms on his shorts. “Do you know how to do a back hip circle?” he asked, curling and uncurling his fingers.

Minako pursed her lips. “Ya’ better not be thinking what I’m thinking or so help me God, I will tell Mitsuru.”

There was a rare, mischievous glint in the boy’s eye. “I’ll take that as a no.”

As if to agitate his companion more, he reached above his head, latched onto the bar, and pulled himself up. “Just watch this.”

Minako felt her face drain of color. Just running had caused him enough pain to warrant stopping for the day. Now he was holding up his entire body, risking an even more serious injury, just to show-off a stupid trick.

Fear bubbled up inside, causing Minako to stomp her foot on the wood chips beneath her shoes. “Akihiko Sanada, if you don’t get off that bar-!”

Her threat fell on deaf ears.
Minako gaped in abject horror as Akihiko leaned back, his body beginning to make a full rotation around the bar.

She could already hear the sound of ambulance sirens speeding towards the playground to pick up a corpse. An involuntary gasp escaped her as Minako surged forward to act as a cushion for the inevitable fall.

“Sweet Jesus, stop right now!”

Just as quickly as he had begun the move, Akihiko was back in an upright position. He was laughing while pulling himself up to sit on the bar.

“Cool, huh? I’m pretty good at it.”

Minako was stunned, still trying to calm a frightened heart. Her racing pulse thundered in her head in a mix of worry, relief, and unadulterated fury.

She screwed up her face and pointed at the thoroughly amused teen above her. “For the love of all that is good, don’t scare me like that!”

Akihiko simmered his laughter to a low chuckle. “Your brother’s right, you really do act like a mom.” He extended his bad arm out for her to see below. “It only hurts when I bend it or run. I’m feeling fine right now.”

Minako wasn’t convinced. Instead, she huffed and stormed towards him. “I. Don’t. Act. Like. A. Mom.” she enunciated, pointing to the ground. “Now get your crazy, suicidal butt down here or I’ll-”

“-Drag me back to the dorm? You know I’m stronger and weigh more than you, right?” Akihiko cut in. “Don’t worry about me so much. Sorry I scared you, but I’m seventeen years old. I think I can look after myself.”

Minako’s frown deepened, but at least her heart coming down from its shocking experience. Instead, the fear was replaced with annoyance. She crossed her arms and pouted at the ground.

“It’s my job to worry. I’m the field leader.” she mumbled to herself. “All I do is worry about everyone else.”

“That’s something a mom would say.” he teased. Akihiko looked out at the dawning sky with tranquil expression. “The sun’s not even up yet and talking like this is hurting my neck.” He motioned for her to join him. “Climb up.”

Minako bit down on her lip, refusing to move from her spot. “I’m too short,” she lied, “I can’t even reach the bar when I jump.”

Akihiko let out a sigh but didn’t seem to give up. Instead, he reached out his good arm.

“Then I’ll pull you up.”

Minako glanced at the hand offered to her.

If she knew anything about her running partner, he wasn’t going to quit until she was sitting with him on that bar. Could she really refuse or could she just start walking back to the dorm? Would he give in and follow her or keep pestering until they both had to go back?
After weighing her options, she let out a defeated sigh. A smile quirked at her lips, betraying her amusement. “Only for a little bit. I still need a shower before school.”

Akihiko seemed pleased that she caved. “We’ll be back in time. Grab on.”

Minako grabbed his hand, finding her own being dwarfed in comparison. “Hang on tight,” he warned before yanking her upward. I seemed like he was lifting a piece of paper rather than a person. “Can you reach now?”

“Yeah.” She grabbed onto the bar with both hands and attempted to pull herself on top. Alas, she realized too late that she was a runner with noodles for arms. All she could do was kick helplessly at the air as if it would give her a boost up.

“You’ve gotta be joking!” she protested, only managing to get one leg up. Minako knew she looked like an idiot, but at least she only had one witness.

Fewer bodies to hide if need be.

“You really are a piece of work. Hold still.” Akihiko helped her the rest of the way by latching on to the back of her sweatshirt, easily setting her into place. Minako struggled for a moment to find her balance but soon was perched like a bird on a wire.

The view was more than worth her ungraceful struggle.

“Holy moly.” she breathed.

“Scared of heights?” Akihiko asked.

Minako shook her head. “I like it up here.” She looked up to see the sun rising higher in the sky, casting a soft glow on the trees surrounding the shrine. “Makes the world seem so much smaller. Reminds me of when I’d hide in trees while playing tag with Minato. The look on his face when I ambushed him was priceless!”

Akihiko hummed in agreement, but his expression from before remained. “So you were born a trouble maker? That makes a lot more sense now.” He yawned, turning his attention to the brightening sky. “Guess Mitsuru has a soft spot for putting restless kids who run fast in charge.”

“What does that mean?” Minako asked.

“She didn’t tell you?” Akihiko barely seemed surprised at his own question. “Mitsuru’s the one who picked you as a leader, and you were the only person on her list since I got hurt.”

“Really?” Minako chuckled to herself. “I don’t know why Kirijo-san would do that. I’m just a newbie who just happens to be the oldest right now. If you didn’t get hurt, you’d be leading, not me. You actually know what you’re doing.”

Akihiko snickered under his breath. “You really think I’d be any better? Those juniors look up to you.” He bumped his shoulder with her’s, a friendly attempt to get her to look at him. “I thought you’d be best in that position as soon as I saw you reign them all in like it was nothing. They looked like a bunch of amateurs before you took charge.”

Minako felt herself shrink even further, more out of bashfulness than disbelief. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better. I don’t even know what I’m doing half the time.”

“Well, it can’t be as bad as watching you try to sit on the bar.” He snickered under his breath. “If it
was, then we’d be screwed. Mitsuru would have to rename us the Suicide Operation Squad.”

“Now that’s just mean!” Minako retorted, giving him a playful smack.

Akihiko easily swatted her hand away, letting his legs swing as if he were a child. “Ah man, this takes me back.” He swept his gaze across the empty playground. “It reminds me of when I was just a snot-nosed kid.”

“Yeah, I bet you were one of those punks who shoved kids down and wrestled them for candy or something.”

“Look who’s being mean now.” He grumbled, rubbing his hands together for warmth. “But then again, you’re not far off. Believe it or not, I didn’t have any fans back in elementary school. I did have a surplus of rivals.”

Minako felt herself shiver as a dawn chill suddenly became apparent. “Sounds rough...” she took a second to choose her next words, “... Were you ever bullied, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Akihiko nodded, a far off look in his eyes. “I’ve always had a punchable face, but I learned to punch back eventually. Soon as I was in middle school, I picked up boxing and started training. The rest is history.”

“Sounds like you alright.” Minako sighed. “Why boxing though? Did ya’ always love it or was it something else?”

This time, her partner shook his head. “It was the closest thing to fighting there is. I didn’t even know how to throw a punch before my first day,” he motioned to himself, “and now I’m captain. That’s all there is to it.”

Minako was taken aback.

The jewel of Gekkoukan’s sports department didn’t even have a passion for the thing that made him famous.

“That’s... strange, but different strokes I guess.” Minako flexed her aching feet, beginning to cramp from a lack of a cool-down. “Look at you now at least. You’re top of your sport, girls wanna be with you, guys just wanna be you. What more could ya’ want?”

Akihiko paused for a moment, a determined look settling on his features.

The rising sun was reflected in his steeled gaze.

“I just have to get stronger.” he finally said in almost a mummer. “If I don’t get stronger... how can I protect anything? How...”

Minako couldn’t catch the rest of his words. He had trailed off into nonsensical rambling that kept him preoccupied with his one track mind.

Such a predictable answer, but one she could respect.

A goal so similar to her own that it could almost be identical, Working to possess the power necessary to safeguard what was important, it was almost poetic that they even met.

Two like-minded birds sharing a single bar.

A pair of seniors doing what was needed.
Minako couldn’t help but listen to him drone on until they had to go back to the dorm. They exchanged light small talk but could stand a bit of silence in between topics.

Now, the leader of SEES could understand her odd teammate a little better.

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Me: dindin 2nite is pork lo mein, sale r justice ;D

Emobro: no wonder ur knot a writer, ur grmmar sucks

Me: congrats, u can get ur own dindin after kendo 2nite

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Another day, another long assembly called by the principal.

The only thing that made it worth paying attention to was that no one knew what it was for.

Minato, Yukari, and Junpei all sat together, falling into their usual group dynamic. Yukari and Junpei would start bickering over some trivial topic (today it was the best ice cream flavor) while Minato would pop in a headphone and enjoy the show.

It was almost comical listening to his two friends fight while AC/DC provided a lovely backdrop. Heavy metal guitars helped counterbalance Yukari’s shrieking while the barrage of drums tuned out Junpei’s indignant replies.

Oh, how Minato worshiped technology!

“I think the assembly is starting!”

A hush fell over the crowd as a teacher waltz onto the stage. Yukari and Junpei promised to revisit their fight (which was a bald-faced lie), sat down on either side of Minato, and promptly ignored each other.

“We'll now begin this morning's assembly. First, our principal has some words he'd like to share with you. Please give him a warm welcome.”

Half-hearted applause filled the auditorium. Minato couldn’t muster the will to care, and neither could his two companions.

Instead, Yukari leaned over to talk over the noise.

“What's the deal with the assembly?” She paused for a moment as the applause died down. Her voice was lowered to avoid being spotted by teachers. “You think it's about the recent incidents?”

“Who cares?” Junpei answered, leaning back in her seat. “The principal doesn't know anything about the Shadows, anyway. I just hope this doesn't take too long.”

In a rare moment of solidarity, Yukari hummed in agreement.

“I know, his speeches always drag.”

Minato chuckled to himself, turning up his music. At least everyone was on the same page when it came to the man on stage. “I guess miracles do exist, after all.” he muttered, earning a sneer from Junpei.

The principal loosened his tie and cleared his throat before leaning into the microphone. A sheen of
sweat made his forehead reflect the harsh lights in the auditorium. He shuffled a stack of wrinkled note cards in his claw-like hands.

“Today, I’d like to tell you about my, um, vision for this school year.” One of his many notecards fell off the podium, but he continued forward. “As you are aware, strange incidents have been reported on the news lately. It is my firm belief that none of you are involved.”

“Uh oh,” Junpei pulled the brim of his cap over his eyes, “This’ll be good.”

“However, if we want to better our school, then we all need to accept responsibility for change. Dig deep down inside, and tap into your imaginations-!” More notecards were lost in the battle to hold the student’s attention. “But don’t lose touch with reality! As they say, ‘There’s no use crying over spilled milk.’ This is the key to reaping all the rewards that school has to offer.”

“I give up.” Junpei stole Minato’s free headphone. “Ah, that’s some good music.”

“No fair!” Yukari searched frantically for a third headphone while avoiding being caught by a teacher, but came up empty. “I call sexism.”

“Bros before-GAH!”

Junpei never got the chance to finish his sentence. Yukari had removed one of her shoes and had aimed for her rival’s head.

Don’t mess with a top tier archer is what everyone learned at the assembly that morning.

Minato learned that he may want to invest in some new friends who wouldn’t try to kill each other.

“So they’re called ACDC. What does that mean?”

Minako had lent out an earphone to a bored Akihiko halfway through the principal’s speech. She finally had the chance to introduce someone other than Minato to some real music.

“I don’t know, but they make good stuff.” She felt herself grow giddy at his interest. It took all her willpower to not raise her voice above a soft whisper. “You should look up one of their concerts on Youtube. Man, what would I give to go see one live when they came to Japan! I’d chop off my big toe for just a nosebleed seat-”

There was a loud screech from someone in class 2-E. Heads from all around the auditorium shot up to see Junpei doubled over, clutching his face in pain. Yukari stood over him, fuming with unrivaled scorn.

“I think my nose is broken! NURSE!”

“Live with it, Stupe!”

“People are staring-”

“SHUT UP, MINATO!”

Minako sighed, turning the music up louder in hopes to drown out her own disappointment. Akihiko let out a nonchalant whistle as if that could prove he wasn’t affiliated with the enraged archer.

“Someone’s losing their pie privileges for assaulting Junpei,” Minako growled.
“Yup.”

“Everyone, this is Minato Arisato. He’ll be joining the team from today onward.”

A chorus of greetings rung in Minato’s ear after his introduction by the coach. He gave the other members of the team a half wave, the sleeve of his gear sliding down his arm.

The coach, a tall man who wore a red baseball cap and sporting attire, motioned to a tan girl with a clipboard who stood beside him. She was writing something down. “This here is Yoko, our manager. She may look sweet, but she has my permission to whip you into shape.”

Yoko’s pencil was moving at a steady pace, but she paused to give Minato a kind smile. Dimples formed on her glowing cheeks. “I’m Yuko Nishiwaki, nice to meet you.” She tucked a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “Since we’re in the same year, just call be Yoko. It keeps things casual.”

Minato responded with a simple nod. “Pleased to meet you, Yoko.”

The coach cleared his throat to reign in everyone’s attention. “Alright, you ladies know the drill by now in the season. Pair up and start running through block-attack drills. I’ll be around to make sure you’re not screwing with each other.”

“Yessir!” the team yelled out, taking their practice swords and helmets out to the already laid mats. Everyone quickly paired up and jumped into the warm-up drill.

The coach scanned the team until he seemed to spot what he was looking for.

“Kazushi! Front and center! Let’s see some hustle, kid!”

“Yessir!”

From the sea of matching gear, a boy with short mousy hair and a hooked nose came sprinting towards Minato and the coach. He stopped gruffly, his headgear tucked under his arm. “What do ya’ need sir?”

The coach chuckled and threw an arm over his shoulders. “This is the future captain of this team. He's a great fighter and scores well in competitions.” He motioned to Minato who was listening quietly. “You two are in the same class, right?”

Kazushi gave a sharp nod with his head held high. The boy was practically glowing as if it was an honor. “Yessir! Class 2-E!”

“Kazushi, keep an eye on the new guy here, okay? Help him settle in.”

“You got it!”

Without another word, the coach stalked off to go yell at a group of freshmen whacking each other over the head instead of sparring. “You two! Knock it off or you’ll be running the sixteen hundred after practice!”

There was a loud yelp of panic before the boys went back to the assigned drill.

Minato snorted at them. Typical freshmen, all shiny faced and no idea how the high school pecking order functioned. People like that at least served as good entertainment for a cynic like himself.
“You’re the guy who went out with Yukari Takeba on the first day of school, right?”

All at once, Minato adorned a scowl. He swore, the next time someone brought up the not-so-big-a-deal incident, he will start flipping tables.

Minato turned his now thoroughly peeved attention at his teammate. “We’re not dating, for the love of God.”

Kazushi wasn’t phased by the younger Arisato’s menacing tone. In fact, he chuckled and clapped Minato on the back.

“You’ve got fire, I like that! You’ll fit in here just fine.” The brunette retracted his arm, motioning for his new teammate to follow. “I'm Kazushi Miyamoto. You've seen me around, right?”

Minato looked Kazushi up and down as they walked, trying to pinpoint him in his memory. Was there ever a student with a lack of social awareness and smiled like he was going to the Olympics the next day.

Alas, Minato drew a blank. “No.”

“Dude, you're hurtin' my pride. Everyone knows who I am.” Kazushi stopped at an empty mat. “You sure you’ve never heard about me?”

Minato suppressed an annoyed groan. “I transferred here less than three weeks ago.”

Kazushi was quiet for a moment before he let out a hearty chuckle. “My bad! Guess that makes sense.” He turned around and gave Minato another smirk. “Well, ya’ know me now, and that’s all that matters. Don’t forget!”

Without another word, Kazushi prepared for their drill.

Minato rolled his eyes but held back any retorts he thought of at the moment to put on his headgear. There was no point in starting a fight with a popular student who had the attitude of a brick. All that would come of it is an angry mob and a suspension from school.

Plus, Minako would scream at him like a harpy for DAYS.

It was a fate worse than death.

Minato would just have to suck it up for now. He joined the club to hone his sword skills and contribute to SEES. Everyone was working hard to make sure they functioned as a unit, so he had to play his part.

Junpei had baseball, Yukari had archery, and Minako had running. Now it was time for him to step up and get his practice in.

Besides, if he could get along with Kenji, he could withstand even the most troublesome of classmates.

When Minato was ready, he squared up to Kazushi who was waiting on the mat. His kendo sword was poised for a well-placed stab. His stance was impeccable, so Minato mirrored him to the best of his ability.

“Just cause you’re new, doesn’t mean I’ll go easy on ya’.” Kazushi warned, bouncing lightly on his toes. “I’ll guard first, show me whatcha got!”
Minato took a deep breath. The grip on his sword tightened as his body prepared to land the first strike. It wasn’t any different than facing a Shadow.

“Understood.”

“Let’s go then!”

With the speed of a viper, Minato surged forward. Wood collided with wood as Kazushi easily blocked the shorter fighter’s attack.

He was barely moved.

Minato could almost see the satisfied smirk on his opponent’s face.

“Oh, crud.”

Without warning, Minato was roughly shoved backward. The force of the push made him stumble a good distance away. He barely had time to recuperate before Kazushi moved in with a powerful side slash.

One thing was going through Minato’s as he was slaughtered in his first bout: the pain.

Getting hit by Shadows was a rarity in Tartarus. Sure, he’d been tossed around by wind spells, but at least he had enough air to perform a roll. Rolling used the attack to propel rather than cause any real damage. He could always get back up and keep fighting without trouble.

This was so much worse.

It felt as if someone had thrown a cinder block into his ribs with intent to kill. Minato made an undignified choking sound as his head smashed against the mat. His sword flew from his hands and skittered from his reach.

The world spun as he tried to haul himself back to his feet. A figure appeared at the edge of his swimming vision. Minato looked up to see Kazushi bringing his weapon back. He offered it to the defeated boy as if he hadn’t just creamed him.

“I told ya’ so.” he stated plainly. Without another word, Kazushi returned to his side of the mat, purpose in every long stride. He turned to face Minato with his blade ready. Gone was his joking tone, replaced with the voice of a fighter who was ready to go again. “On your feet. Your turn to guard.”

Minato did as he was told, moving on autopilot while his conscious mind was still reeling from what just happened.

So Kazushi wasn’t kidding about not going easy. That was mistake number one.

Minato gulped, now gripping his sword in dread for what was going to happen.

“L-let’s go.”

He sounded just as pathetic as a pigeon-toed girl confessing her love to her senpai.

Kazushi didn’t attack right away. He took his time, shuffling as if he were searching for the right opening. Minato couldn’t help but feel unnerved by the predatory way he was being circled.

What was he waiting for, an invitation?
Was he just messing with the new kid on the block?

A grey and blue blur replaced Kazushi.

Minato must have been too deep in his own thoughts again.

One moment, he was able to block a hefty blow that sent him stumbling once again. The next, he was laying on the floor, clutching his aching stomach.

“What. The. Fuck.”

Minato sat up, clutching himself in a sad attempt to lessen the pain. Somehow, the second time he got hit, it felt ten times worse than the previous round.

Kazushi simply ignored him and squared up for a third beating. He hadn’t even been touched once, not even his uniform was crumpled.

“Get up, your turn to attack.”

Frustration was beginning to take hold like an icy hand choking Minato’s throat.

Red filled his vision.

He was going to topple the bastard Kazushi if it was the last thing he ever did.

Minato scooped up his blade, his focus on the enemy in front of him.

Kazushi gave a nod, tensing his arms for impact. “Go ahead.”

This time, Minato borrowed his opponent’s tactic from the last round. He carefully circled Kazushi in hopes to find an opening. The latter responded in kind, always showing Minato his front at all times.

Finding a way to slip a hit in was going to be difficult.

He was fast, despite his bulky frame. He could overpower Minato or throw him off his feet without so much as batting an eye. Not to mention his experience with competitions gave him insight on how someone may attack. There was no wonder that the coach placed so much faith in his ability, he covered the most important bases when it came to a fight.

Minato gulped, knowing that his efforts were futile, and the round had barely started.

Agile, powerful, and smart: why was a newbie even trying to win?

There was only one way the fight could go.

Minato rushed in for a body hit, which Kazushi blocked with ease. Without giving a second to breathe, he threw Minato on the mat for the third time with a well-timed shove.

As he fell like a defective baby bird, Minato knew he had purposely thrown the match.

All the anger he had felt morphed into shame as he stared up at the ceiling. The sounds of other fights thundered in his ears, almost mocking him as the shouts of victory soared above it all.

This wasn’t how he wanted his first day to go.
Minato felt humiliated, truly ashamed for the first time in years. There was no denying it. He knew he should have remained like he always did: a fly on the wall who no one paid mind to.

Maybe it wasn’t too late to quit. He could practice with his real sword back at the dorm.

“You’re not giving up on the third round, are ya’?”

Minato heard someone plop down beside him. There was no doubt it was Kazushi.

Still, the former remained silent, too busy nursing his ruined pride.

“How typical,” Kazushi sighed when he didn’t get a response, “And I thought you’d actually show some backbone. Guess you’re just like everyone else who’s new, a quitter.”

Minato felt too defeated to defend himself. Instead, he removed his headgear to catch some cool air. Sweat was forming on his brow despite his but getting handed to him on a silver platter.

“Just leave me alone.”

Kazushi hummed as if to consider the demand, but instead responded with a shake of the head. “Can’t do that. You’re still on this team, even if it’s for an afternoon. You don’t leave a brother behind on the battlefield: physical or mental.”

Minato grumbled, sitting up in a haze. “Aren’t you just the cheerleader.” He heaved himself to his feet, headgear clutched in his hands. “Take a hint and let me fail in peace. I’ve been embarrassed enough for one day.”

“Nope, we’re gonna keep going.” Kazushi retrieved both of their swords. He paused for a moment when the coach yelled out an announcement for everyone. “At least stick it out ‘till the end of practice. Who knows? Maybe you’ll change your mind.”

Minato rolled his eyes for the second time that day. “You just don’t give up, do you?” Despite the resignation, he put his headgear back on. “End of practice, then I’m out.”

“We’ll see ‘bout that.” Kazushi tossed a sword over. This time, he didn’t settle into a battle pose. He stood more relaxed, no doubt smiling behind the screen protecting his face.

“Since ya’ have no idea what you’re doing, we’ll start with some basic striking drills. Everyone else is doing the same thing, so don’t worry ‘bout looking bad.” Kazushi raised his blade. “Why don’tcha follow my lead? Let’s start with a simple defense swipe.”

Minato sighed but mustered what remaining dignity he had left to copy Kazushi.

“That’s the spirit!” Kazushi practically sang. Maybe he was a theater nerd in a past life. “Because you’re scrappy, ya’ can’t exactly bulldoze your enemy with a shove like I can. A defense swipe is a block with some power behind it, perfect for someone like you. If you hit with the middle of the blade, their attack will just bounce right off.” He swung his blade, stopping short as if an invisible opponent had connected with him. “See, simple like that.”

“I’m not scrappy,” Minato stated snidely, channeling his inner older sister. “I prefer the term lithe.”

“Whatever, keep lying to yourself.” Kazushi gave no more warnings as he dove for a stab. “Let’s spare!”
Minato barely had time to react. He dodged to the side, simultaneously blocking Kazushi’s attack with a well-placed swipe. The opposing blade bounced off the middle of his own.

For the first time that day, Minato had defended himself.

“Don’t space out on me!”

Kazushi sent a barrage of attacks, sword moving with expert precision. Minato weaved and swiped, occasionally receiving a sharp hit when he failed to block. Despite that, his attacker wouldn’t let up his advance.

“What are ya’ doing? Predict my movements and act!”

“I’m trying!” Minato yelled back, zeroing in to observe patterns in the oncoming strikes.

Kazushi was a lefty, so he had the advantage of inverted techniques. He could easily guard any natural strike a righty threw without having to switch out of his dominant side.

While it was a point in his favor, it also meant that both his and Minato’s weak points were on mirrored sides. Kazushi was aware of this and often mitigated his attacks to the righty’s exposed left side. He relied on his quick feet and strength to throw the enemy back in order to make his killer move.

It was a clever strategy, but once revealed, there was no chance for Kazushi to rely on that one trick to carry the victory.

Soon, Minato was blocking more and more attacks. He learned to keep himself sideways, dominant hand always facing Kazushi. There was less body to hit and provided higher mobility on the mat.

A few minutes after applying these adaptations, Kazushi backed off.

“Good!” He stopped with a flourish of his blade. He pulled back, removing his helmet to reveal a wide smile. “The best offense is a solid defense, and you just nailed it! And you wanted to give up like a little bitch!”

Minato also removed his helmet, his breath coming in rasps. His arms stung from where Kazushi connected, but the pain was worth the satisfaction of finally putting up a fight.

“S-shut . . . up.” Minato somehow managed to get out. “I know your secret now. Don’t think I won’t use it against you.”

Kazushi wasn’t offended by the threat, it only made him smile wider. He chuckled to himself, pleased to have riled Minato up. “I’ll hold ya’ to that. On guard, now we’ll work on perimeter mobility. This is where things get fun!”

For the rest of practice, Minato learned the basics of Kendo from his new rival.

He refused to quit the team like he had resolved to do.

After all, he had a resolve to beat Kazushi at his own game.

“And so you threw your shoe at him for a little joke?” Minako loosened her scarf as she led the trio of juniors into Iwatodai University Hospital. “You honestly thought petty words justified violence? What am I going to do with you?”
“You got it all wrong!” Yukari furiously shook her head. “I swear, I was only aiming for his shoulder! I didn’t mean to almost break his nose!”

Junpei snickered under his breath. He leaned over and whispered to Minato. “Take that, witch.”

Yukari rounded on Junpei when she heard the comment. She made a move to grab another blunt object, her metal studded purse, and whack the amused boy.

“That’s it! ROUND TWO HERE WE-!”

“That’s enough, Yukari!” Minako grabbed said girl by the shoulder and hauled her back. “No more fighting! I’m sick and tired of you two always getting on each other’s nerves! You both are on clean-up and chore detail for a week!”

Junpei scoffed when he was handed down a joint punishment. “That’s not fair! She’s the one who started it!”

“What do you mean it’s unfair? You started it-!”

Minato watched as Minako grabbed both teens by the back of their collars, and in all of her five-foot-three glory, yanked them close so they could hear her very clearly.

“I’ll tell ya’ what’s not fair, kiddos. Spending Showa Day having to supervise a pair of immature teenagers when I could be at the arcade relaxing for a change.” She let the thoroughly rattled pair go. “I cook your meals, vacuum the dorm, take out the trash and recycling, AND make sure you don’t get sick. Video games and running are the only reason you two aren’t sleeping in the alleyway with hungry Shadows.”

Junpei and Yukari visibly shrunk as Minako recomposed herself. She fluffed her ponytail, flattened her plaid skirt, and gave them a haunting smile. “Now please behave when we visit Sanada-san or you will see just how unfair I can be.”

With a flourish of her hand, she turned on her heel and stalked towards Akihiko’s room.

Minato couldn’t help but trot to her side while the two troublemakers followed behind. He leaned in close so only she could hear.

“Encore, I almost thought that was real.”

Minako gave him a sidelong glance, a subtle wink going unnoticed by the juniors behind the siblings.

“Anger is such an ugly emotion.” She fished into her purse and pulled out a tube of pale pink lipstick. With practiced grace, she added some color that could allure anyone into thinking she was older than seventeen. “I’ve been recently informed that you three respect me, so I thought I’d try throwing my weight around. Seems like I have a new ace-in-the-hole.”

Minato did his best to control a humored snort. “Who said I respect you? The Pope? Your guardian angel?”

Minako rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t hide the obvious sincerity behind them. She affectionately ruffled his hair. “A friend.”

The siblings arrived at the room in no time at all. Junpei and Yukari were still hesitant to approach Minako, still believing she was truly livid by their presence alone. The door was shut; there was
someone else visiting.

“Well,” Minato checked the time on his MP3, “We’re a few minutes early. I wonder if Sanada-senpai is dealing with one of his many admirers.”

Minako tapped her foot on the tile, ever impatient when it came to her days off. “I highly doubt it. No one at school should be aware of the extent of his injuries. As far as anyone knows, it’s just a small sprain from a home training accident.”

Junpei took a seat next to the door. His back was straight and head lowered. “Whoever’s in there should hurry up. The sooner I get started on chores, the sooner I can call up Kenji for a game marathon.”

Yukari was equally as glum, but she played nice and took a seat beside her enemy. “I just wanted to go sing karaoke with some friends today.”

“. . . I’ll take care of the boy’s floor if you take the girl’s. . .” Junpei offered.

Yukari glanced over with a sad smile. “I guess. . . and I can wash the dishes if you dry. . .”

Junpei reached over for a handshake. “Sounds like a deal.”

Minato saw his sister soften at the pair’s reconciliation.

Anger really was an ugly emotion, even if you faked it.

Minako let herself smile openly. “I suppose if you two have prior engagements this afternoon, you can start your punishment tomorrow. You’ll both have an extended sentence, but the workload won’t eat up your free time today.”

The two perked up.

“Are you serious!?” they said in unison.

Minako chuckled. “Just make sure you’re both home by nine. I’m making something special before we go to Tartarus tonight.”

There was a chorus of cheers that filled the quiet hallway. Minato was disheartened that the charade ended sooner than he thought, but at least he didn’t have to keep up the lie for weeks on end.

Yeah, it was better this way.

Minako let the celebration go on for a minute longer before clapping her hands together to gain everyone’s attention.

“Fall in troops, I’m sick of waiting around much longer.” She approached the door and gave it a soft couple of taps. “Let’s see if we can get in already.”

Minato listened for someone to welcome them in, but there was no answer from the other side.

Was the room empty?

“Maybe he busted out to go train?” Minato commented before turning on his heel to walk out of the hospital. “Ah well, we tried. Let’s hit the arcade-”
Minako grabbed him by the collar and yanked him back to her side. “Oh no ya’ don’t.”

Yukari stepped up and reached for the door handle. “Let’s wait inside until he gets back.” She welcomed herself inside. “He did mention he had tests today-”

Minato didn’t hear the end of Yukari’s sentence.

He was frozen where he stood as Minako’s meat shield, trapped in the glare of a less-than-cheerful stranger sitting inside the room.

Red coat.

Charcoal hat.

Sharp frown.

Blue irises clashed with angry brown, and that’s how the youngest Arisato met Shinjiro Aragaki.

May 1st, 2009

Things have been crazy since I last wrote in this old journal.

Minato finally joined a club! His first day was on the twenty-seventh of April. He made a new friend with the soon-to-be captain. The nerd came back on his first day all red-faced and fired up for the rest of the season. I’m so proud of him!

It’s Showa Day today! I decided to spend it at the arcade, then I’ll go and visit Kurosawa to get a new naginata, then finish with a visit to Tartarus. If there’s time, maybe I’ll get around to doing homework.

Just kidding, finished last night so I could free up my schedule!

I think I’m done for the time being. There’s so much on my mind that I can’t fit it onto the page.

Here’s to hoping it’ll be a good day.

Until next time,

Minako Arisato
Priestess Prelude I

Chapter Notes

SHE LIVED BITCHES!!!!!!!

OUR GURL IS BACK TO CHEW GUM AND KICK ASS, AND SHE’S ALL OUT OF GUM!!!!!!!

You have no idea how excited I am for PQ2! I actually enjoyed the first one a lot, but it was so underrated by the community. Now that FeMC is in the line-up, we can count on her becoming a part of the canon. She'll be "wiping all out" with Door-kun and co without a doubt!

Anyway, this took me a long time to write because I had written two chapters together. Today, you guys will get part one then I'll post part two early tomorrow morning.

Please enjoy the chapter folks!

Minato held the glare of this red-clad stranger. If he hadn’t been wearing such a distinct coat and grey beanie, he may have mistaken the newcomer as a bear.

A very, very pissed off bear... with thumbs.

For a moment, nobody seemed to want to back down. Junpei and Yukari were slowly backing away and whispering about the ratty attire the young man sported. Minato wished he could have melted into the shadows like he usually did when confronted with a problem.

As usual, Minako was the first to speak up. Being the closest one to the door before it swung open, she never had the choice to back down. “Good morning, we’re here to make a delivery.” She extended a hand out between them. “We’ve met before, but my name is Minako Arisato. You’re Shinjiro Aragaki right?”

Minato watched as the supposed Shinjiro’s eyes flickered between his sister’s face and then her hand. Junpei and Yukari stopped whispering, waiting with bated breath for him to bite their leader’s head off and stick it on a pike.

In the end, he swore under his breath and nodded.

“Yeah, I know who you are,” he said in an almost threatening voice. Shinjiro squared up from his slouch and stood at full height, even if he was already much taller than everyone else to begin with. “You’re here to see Aki, right?”

Minako nodded and motioned to Junpei who was carrying the folder that had been requested the day before. “Just needed to drop somethin’ off. Is he in or should we come back-?”

Shinjiro didn’t give her a chance to finish, turning his back to them and reentering the room.

Minako was momentarily dazed but shrugged it off. She looked back at the three, mouthed “yikes” animatedly, and promptly entered with her cheerful expression still intact.
Junpei sighed and rubbed the back of his neck, following his senior while mumbling under his breath. “Jeez, what crawled up his butt and died?”

“Never use that sentence ever again.” Yukari made a point to shove him along, all previous diplomacy was forgotten in the wake of what had transpired. “Let’s just do what we came here to do and go home. I have places to be today.”

Minato fell in behind the group. He could hear Minako throw out the first greeting while Junpei and Yukari chimed in right after. All he could focus on were the features of the hospital room.

All hospitals seemed to smell distinct, like walking into a cloud of vaporized soap, the kind that claimed it was unscented but really wasn’t. Every surface seemed to be dulled by the heavy use of plastic and off-white colors, except the floor that shined as if it were a new coin. A bathroom door was shut, but the unmistakable plate that announced the room beyond told Minato all that he needed to know.

Even the low whirl of machines and heaters were a nice bit of white noise to help fill the silence that was all too common in a hospital room. Goodness knows Minato would have gone crazy without tapping his finger in time with a clock on the wall or hum in sync with whatever device was on.

Minato noticed this room had a scant collection of artwork in earthy tones meant to soothe patients. One portrait of a lighthouse overlooking an empty beach caught his attention with eye-catching pinks and yellows meant to capture the beauty of a sunrise.

When was the last time he had been to the beach? It had to have been years ago, but there was never enough freedom in his schedule or simply not worth jumping on the train for hours at a time.

Minato’s finger’s lingered over a flock of seagulls over the water. He followed the carefully placed brush strokes from wingtip to wingtip.

Maybe there was a beach outside the city? The whole place was right on the waterfront after all.

“Is that it, Aki?”

Minato was broken out of his musings by Shinjiro’s gruff voice. He looked back at the main action to see his sister, Junpei, and Yukari waiting respectfully away from Sanada and his current visitor.

“Yeah, thanks again for the help.” Sanada had a notebook open with chicken scratch notes filling up the page. “Let me know if you hear anything else.”

Shinjiro nodded before he noticed he was being watched. He snapped his sharp gaze at Minato who could feel the tension in his muscles, screaming to run away from this dangerous person.

But he couldn’t let himself appear meek, not in the face of such a rude individual. Minato took his hands from his pockets and straightened his spine to bring forth his full height, mouth quirked into a frown that rivaled the person he gave it to.

“Need something,” he asked coolly, “or don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

Shinjiro seemed to bristle at the remark. He began to take a step in Minato’s direction with the eyes of a predator on the offensive.

“I don’t have time for your shit, pipsqueak-”
Minako had pulled herself out of the soft conversation with the juniors. She easily inserted herself between the two of them, halting Shinjiro’s advance. “I’m sorry, he’s just tired from waking up early.” Her head inclined in a polite bow. “He means nothing by it, Aragaki-san.”

Shinjiro regarded the apologetic girl for a moment before rolling his eyes and turning to leave. The room had gone dead silent with only his heavy footfalls to fill the place of chatter. Minato swore he heard him mumble about never helping anyone ever again before vanishing into the hall.

Just like that, he was gone.

Junpei stepped up with the folder they brought clutched in his shaking hands. “W-who was that? Some kind of punk? Yakuza?”

Sanada shook his head, closing the notebook and setting it aside. “A friend from school, sort of.” He swung his legs off the side of his bed and stretched out. “You know how the number of Apathy Syndrome cases have been increasing? He knows a few people who are suffering from it, so I was asking him about it.”

“Young informant, huh?” Yukari thought aloud. Her knuckles were white from the death grip she had on his purse. “He seems really angry for some reason.”

Sanada shrugged, but a ghost of an appreciative grin crossed his features. “That’s Shinji for you, but he’s harmless. Just don’t piss him off and you’ll be fine.”

Minato swore that his upperclassmen threw him a warning disguised as reassurance to the group. It was impressive that the athlete hadn’t paired his words with a stern glare.

“Cheeky bastard.” The teen thought while walking over to stand in beside a frazzled Junpei. “Clever, but still a little too condescending to be considered helpful.”

With Shinjiro gone, the atmosphere of the room became a little lighter. Akihiko turned his full attention to his new visitors. “Did you guys bring what I asked?”

Junpei shook out of his funk and was all but too eager to step up as the carrier of what he was referring to. “Of course, senpai!” He brandished the item in an overly dramatic fashion, handing it over with a bow. “One class roster for class 2-E in a waterproof, binder-friendly folder. Perfect for travel and the like!”

Minato felt a chuckle bubble in the back of his throat. This was something he should have expected, but he had imagined fewer descriptions and more ego signaling. He heard Yukari groan, no doubt looking away to avoid having to watch. “Just give him the folder like a normal person.” she snipped.

Minako, not a stranger to going an extra step beyond the normal, regarded the interaction as if it was normal. Although, Minato swore he could see her trying to suppress giggles by pinching her arm.

Akihiko seemed to not care, stretching out his bad arm and taking the folder.

Yukari raised a finger as if to ask for permission to speak. “Uh, you shouldn’t move your arm. Isn’t it still really busted up?”

Sanada scoffed under his breath. “It's nothing. I've wasted enough time already.” He flipped the
folder and skimmed over the papers inside. “I need to get back to my training or else I’ll go insane.”

“But-!” Yukari paused before having her eureka moment. “-but Mitsuru said you should rest! You don’t want to make her mad, right?”

Poor and naive Yukari: she thought she could pull the Mitsuru Kirijo trap card on him.

“He’s not gonna listen.” Minato stuck on a headphone and picked a random song to help get his snark down to apathetic observation. “He and Minako run together every morning without Kirijosenpai’s permission anyway. Not like you can stop him from grabbing a piece of plastic.”

Yukari was shocked, rounding on her leader with a mortified pout. “You let him run? Even when Mitsuru said absolutely no training of any kind!? ”

Minako gave a lopsided grin. “I’m a five-two, noodle armed girl and he’s a six something tank meant to break people’s jaws. You can do the math.” She threw up her hands in defeat. “Sorry Yukatan, I couldn’t stop him even if I tried with all my might.”

“Hell yeah!” Junpei was more than happy to agree with Minako, daring to give Sanada a playing nudge on the shoulder. “Gekkoukan's golden boy! He was born to be in the ring!”

“Language, Junpei.”

The capped student gave Minako a sheepish smile. “My bad, won’t happen again.”

Another annoyed groan sounded from Yukari. “Jeez, you just can’t keep your mouth shut for two seconds. Now he thinks we’re a bunch of groupies.”

“I’m just being friendly!” Junpei turned his attention to his favorite person to bicker with. “Maybe you should try it sometime, Yukatan.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Don’t be a jerk then!”

And just like that, the two were slipping into their hourly squabble.

Minato really didn’t expect his sister’s threat of extra chores to deter them from arguing, but for a moment, he had hope. He should have known that miracles only happened once per one hundred years.

A shame it was wasted at the school assembly and the hallway.

Two chances that failed to mend an already rocky relationship.

Minako barely paid them any mind, but the disappointment on her face gave away her true feelings. Akihiko, on the other hand, seemed confused by the enthusiasm, looking up from his reading and giving his running partner a quirked eyebrow. “Are they always like this or is it just when I’m in the room?”

Minako sighed. “You get used to it after a few missions. I don’t even hear it much during battle anymore.” She rocked on her heels, obvious that she was tired of standing in the same place for minutes on end. “It’s just like Godzilla an’ Mothra, let them at each other. It’ll be over soon enough.”
Minato couldn’t help but catch how Sanada’s usually aloof visage morphed into something akin to amusement.

Akihiko Sanada, amused at such a weak attempt at humor?

Maybe he really did have other interests outside training and training?

Maybe Minato still had some miracles left in him.

“Can you believe we got our punishment extended TWO weeks!?”

Minato was finishing off a weaker Shadow when Junpei began to complain about Minako laying down the law after leaving the hospital. It was only a matter of time until Yukari would pipe in and start blaming everything on her fellow teammate.

“You should know my sister doesn’t mess around.” He flicked his blade to rid it of remaining Shadow debris, watching it dissolve as it hit the marble floor. “She took my laptop away when I was failing in math. She didn’t give it back until I was at least passing or better.”

“How long was that?” Junpei asked, sheathing his sword and walking over to Minato.

The latter shrugged, copying the other’s actions. “Give or take five months plus two weeks and then some. Now I’ve got almost all perfect marks.”

Junpei sucked in a heavy breath. “Yeesh, Minatan has no chill—”

“What was that?” Minako chimed from further ahead, her naginata acting as support from the previous battle. Her joking smile was a perfect mix of pure sarcasm and the physical embodiment of foreboding. “Did I hear someone who wants triple their sentence?”

Junpei nearly jumped out of his skin, turning to his leader on the drop of a hat. “Nahnah! I meant it in a good way! You’ve got fire! Please don’t do this I wanna live!”

“Just a joke,” she answered back. “I may be tough but I’m not malicious.” She easily twirled her polearm with practiced grace and placed a hand over her ear. “Kirijo-san, did Yukari find the stairs yet?”

Their guide’s voice sounded in their minds, but Minato and Junpei went back to a casual conversation without skipping a beat.

“Say, you’re getting good with that thing.” Junpei jabbed a thumb at the shorter boy’s short sword. “Kendo’s really doing a number on your skill and you can summon other Personas like your sis. Keep it up and you’ll hit like a truck in no time.”

Minato didn’t smile at the compliment but hummed a high tone in response. “Kazushi puts me through the wringer, but I’m glad for it. He never gives up when it comes to beating me senselessly.” He glanced over at Junpei, his eyes falling to his broadsword. “For such a heavy hitter, you’re quick on your feet.”

Junpei chuckled and rubbed the back on his neck. “Baseball dude, ya’ gotta be fast if ya’ wanna score anything worth cheering for.” He pounded his chest and pumped a fist in the air. “Just watch me! I’ll be hittin’ home runs by day and slicin’ Shadows by night. Girls won’t keep their hands off me in halls!”
Minato snorted, but this time let himself grin. “That’s something I’ve meaning to ask, how’d you get into Gekkoukan? No offense, but there’s no chance you got in for academics.”

“Well, you’re not wrong!” Junpei took the comment without a fight before breaking into a proud smile. “Ya’ know how I transferred here last year? I used to live a few prefectures away, can’t remember how many since I haven’t been home in years.”

Minato felt a twinge of sympathy, but from the way he spoke, Junpei seemed more than happy to uproot his entire life.

Was his old home really that terrible?

“How’d you get spotted? Did they send out scouts or was it just luck?”

“A coach saw me playing for my ol’ high school, I was on the other team and it was a slaughter.” Junpei flicked the brim of his cap, bearing the insignia of a school Minato didn’t know. “All his players killed in the outfield, but only had a handful of batters who could barely hit a single. He needed a guy who could hit hard and run fast, but that guy didn’t exist. All it took was a beat down every time I was up. He asked for my transcripts and contact info after scoring a game crushing home run!”

Junpei finished with a deep breath. He was so invested in his story, his face was tinged with red. “I was on the train three days later. I’ve never been better since.”

Minato couldn’t help but note the pride that blossomed with his story. No goofy smiles or cocky grandstanding, just a humble glint in his eyes.

He was almost jealous, having found his passion that could lead to something better in the future. However, he could not find the will to let the feeling stay when his new friend was beaming the world.

“. . . I envy you.”

Even so, it slipped out before he could stop himself.

Junpei was surprised for a moment before bursting into a laughing fit. His hand reached out and ruffled Minato’s hair. “Says the dude who’s got more Personas than me!”

Minako walked over to the pair of boys, Junpei still chuckling to himself. “Alright, Yukari found the stairs, but there are a few friends waiting nearby. I told her to wait for backup so we better get movin’ before she starts going Robin Hood on us.”

“Can do, sis.” Minato responded, calmly redoing his side part which had been tousled thoroughly.

Junpei-on the other hand- was less than happy. “Great, now I’ve gotta listen to Yukatan call me Stupei every five seconds.” He trudged on through without fail. “Dude, I swear I pissed off the wrong god.”

“There’s only one god Junpei,” Minako pointed to him with an accusatory finger, “but he’s more concerned with those who swear. You’re cutting onions with me tomorrow.”

Junpei nearly choked. “H-hey! That’s not cool, dude! My eyes are sensitive!”

Minato followed the two towards the stairs, not able to contain a content grin.
As much as he tried to come off as a ladies man, Junpei really was a good guy with a good heart.

“Finally back!” Minako flopped face first on her bed. The comforter was chilled from a cracked open window, making the perfect nest to cuddle up in after a long night of Shadow killing. She rolled over to let her back soak in the refreshing cold. “Those last few Shadows really did a number on us, huh?”

“For once, you’re right about something.”

She heard Minato plop down on the floor so she sat up. A glass of water in one hand while the other was playing with the lanyard that had his MP3. The screen was still off since the Dark Hour was still in effect.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She shrugged off her school jacket and hung it off the end of her headboard. There was a tear in the sleeve that would need mending. “I’m pretty smart. We’ve got pretty similar grades, even if yours are a bit more well-rounded.”

“As my new rival says,” Minato dropped his voice as low as it could, “‘Keep lying to yourself’ and then he tried to take my head off.”

Minako rolled her eyes. She wondered what Minato had said to warrant such a harsh response. What was something he was insecure about that was also painfully obvious?

She snapped her fingers in realization. “He called ya’ short, didn’t he?”

“Shut up.” he retorted, taking a long and slow sip of his water. His thick swallow gave away his frustration, and dare Minako say it, his embarrassment at the memory. “Besides, that guy will get what he deserves soon enough. I’ll beat him at his own game and then we’ll see who gets the last laugh.”

Minako had to suppress a giggle. “Such a lofty goal for such a tiny nerd. Would you like a stool so you can reach him-?”

“Knock it off, idiot.”

A rouge sweater that had been discarded carelessly the day before was flung at Minako. She ducked and rolled to the side just in time, watching as an orange blur missed her by a mile.

“Hah! Nice try-”

“-Such a fluffy sweater.”

Both the siblings jumped at the sound of a child’s voice. Minako swerved her body the source directly behind her. “Who’s the-!” she exclaimed before biting down on her tongue. “-Oh, it’s you again.”

Sitting cross-legged on her bed was the strange boy who always seemed to phase appear from thin air. Minako’s sweater was being inspected with his azure stare; his oddly clean hands ghosted over the material as if it were a sunset themed sheep rather than a piece of clothing.

“How did you get in again?” Minato was on his feet in a heartbeat, taking a seat on the bed. “I thought the doors locked when they closed.”

The boy kept his eyes glued to the sweater, but his lip puckered out at the blunt question. “Such a
cruel welcome. I have feelings too.” he muttered before setting the clothing aside. “Besides, I am always with you two. I simply decided to show myself at this particular moment. I also happen to have a mind of my own.”

Minako frowned, but the questions that festered in the back of her mind seemed to take their sweet time to form into proper sentences.

She finally cleared her throat and tried to shake out her jitters. “That’s the thing that’s been bothering me, what does that mean? How’re you always with us, but only show yourself when it suits you?”

The boy glanced back at the sweat. Minako almost expected him to pick it back up. “. . . I don’t know. This journey you both have started is also mine.” He shrugged and offered a defeated grin. “I know what I know, I know what you know, but nothing more. I truly am sorry.”

Both of the siblings relaxed, Minako feeling sorry for the boy. She retrieved her sweater, placing it on his lap. “It’s something a knitted awhile ago.” Her fingers played with the collar. “The yarn’s soft, isn’t it? I don’t mind if you play with it. It’s actually flattering.”

The smile that nearly split the boy’s face was infectious. “It really is a lovely thing.” His hands carefully tracing the tight pattern that weaved in and out to create a beautiful yet functional item. “Humans are just too crafty. I wish I had one.”

Minako scooted backward until her back was flat against the wall. “Maybe if you tell us why you’re visiting, I could get started on one.”

“Is that all?” the boy asked.

Minato followed her and flanked the boy on the other side. “I’ll throw in some chocolate. Minako eats too much anyway.”

The boy giggled even when frustration flared up in Minako’s gut. She gave her brother a dirty look but avoided any verbal confrontation. They still had no idea about this boy and what would scare him off.

“I suppose since I would tell you regardless.” He clutched the sweater close to his chest as if it were a teddy bear rather than clothing. “One week from now, there will be a full moon. A new ordeal awaits you. . . a challenge not unlike the tower you climb, albeit somewhat troublesome.”

Minako heard her brother shift towards their visitor. “What kind of ordeal?”

“You will encounter one of them.” he stated, accentuating the subject. “I simply came to wish you luck and remind you to prepare as best you can. Time is of the essence.”

Minako furrowed her brow, but could only turn the new information over in her head like a rock. “How much trouble are we in? Do ya’ think we’ll be okay?”

The boy shrugged, handing the sweater back to its owner. “Hard to say, I only know when it’s coming. Best to be prepared for the worst.”

Minato let out a heavy sigh while Minako felt an oncoming headache. “This was a bit sudden.” Despite that, she accepted the sweater and reached to rub the boy’s back. “Thanks for the warning though. Don’t ya’ worry ‘bout us.”

The boy chuckled, not shying away from her touch. “I never need to.” He stood up and hobbled
over the comforter, trying his best not to fall over with his skinny legs. “I’ll see you both after it’s over. There’s no doubt you will prevail as long as you have each other.”

In the blink of an eye, Minako was staring at blank air.

“I will be with you always, to the very end.”

The world seemed to spring to life with the sounds of the night returning, the Dark Hour now gone. A dog howled somewhere far away, a police siren sprung to life, and streetlights hummed with electricity. It was as if nothing had happened.

It suddenly dawned on the elder sister that they had a week before they’d be confronted with this ordeal.

Seven days was not enough time considering their lax Tartarus schedule of two to three visits a week.

Minako quickly sat up from her bed and nearly leaped at her desk. Minato was startled, letting out a high pitched yelp.

“What the heck are you doing!?”

She grabbed a notebook from her desk and began to write down a supply list for Officer Kurosawa.

“Kiss sleep goodbye, we’ve got work to do!”

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May 3rd, 2009: Dorm Lounge (Morning)

“We’re goin’ to Tartarus every night for six days. Any questions folks?”

Junpei almost choked on his breakfast bar at Minako’s sudden declaration. “What do ya’ mean EVERY NIGHT!?”

“I meant every night for the next six days. Our goal is to reach the next block in that time period.” Minako sat straight on the couch, going over the supply list she made the night before for the hundredth time. “Are there any other questions?”

Yukari stood up violently from her seat on the couch. “This is crazy, Minako-senpai! We’re already exhausted from last night, but now we’re going back?” She stomped her foot. “Sure, we can push ourselves during Golden Week, but what happens when school starts again? We’ll be walking zombies!”

“That’s a small price to pay for the safety of the city, Takeba.” Mitsuru came to Minako’s rescue, a book propped up in her hand to enjoy the day in peace. “Arisato is your field leader and therefore has complete control of when we go and how long we stay.”

Yukari was silent for a moment, but soon her fury overcame her. She let out an indignant screech and stormed out of the lounge to the upstairs area. “You’re all insane!”

As she ascended the stairs, she accidentally bumped into Akihiko who was making his way down.

“Good morning.”
“Leave me alone!” Yukari screeched.

Without another word, the archer was gone. A minute after her departure there was a loud crash of a slamming door them an awkward silence.

Akihiko was stunned for a second before he cleared his throat. “What’s wrong with her?”

Minako couldn’t help but feel her stomach drop. The urge to hide her face in her hands out of preemptive fatigue was overwhelming.

This was going to be a long week.

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**May 3rd, 2009: Tartarus Block One (Dark Hour)**

“Watch out!”

Minato barely had time to react when two pairs of Trance Twins ambushed him. Electricity crackled in the air, warning of a brutal assault. The teen was able to duck and roll away in time thanks to Junpei’s shout. The Shadows crashed together in an explosion of thunder that sent them sprawling to the floor.

“Up and at ‘em!” Junpei encouraged over the noise of other fights going on just a few paces away. He hauled Minato back to his feet with broadsword swung over his shoulder.

“Thanks.” Minato gathered himself together. “I owe you one.”

“No problem, dude!”

The two boys locked eyes and gave each other a nod. Without having to think much about what they needed to do, their Evokers were already unholstered and aimed for their heads.

“Hermes!”

“Jack Frost!”

The speedy Hermes wasted no time once summoned, flinging itself at the pile of dazed enemies while raining fire from the wings on his boots. The Trance Twins writhed and screamed as they were consumed by the flames.

Minato had decided to summon a recent favorite of his, a bumbling snowman that was named Jack Frost. The presence it held in his heart brought him a sense of joy that came with snow once summoned.

Once he materialized, he bounced along to tag in with Hermes. Jack opened his comically large mouth to bring forth a freezing wind that put out the flames and encased the Shadows in a thick layer of ice.

Junpei extended his arm with a wild grin. “Sick ‘em, Hermes! Show me a home run!”

Hermes darted upwards and landed on the ceiling. With blinding speed, he shot down from his perch and collided with the ice. Shards and ash flew in every direction, but the members of SEES were protected by Jack Frost’s large body.
The Shadows had been defeated, and tough ones at that. The Personas that had finished them off returned to their masters, faded into blue sparks, and returned to their hearts.

Junpei smirked and whistled at their good work. “Not too shabby, a little fire an’ ice. Looks like we’re the perfect team!”

For the first time in his life, Minato offered a fist bump. “Yeah, I think so too.”

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May 4th: Mall Police Station (After School)

“I got everything you asked for.”

Minako smiled gratefully as Officer Kurosawa handed over a clipboard with a shortly worded contract attached. “Thanks so much for doing this on short notice. I’ll be paying ya’ back with interest.”

The older gentleman shook his head. “Kirijo has taken care of the down payment. All that’s left is the upfront fees and delivery costs.”

“Of course she did.” Minako signed off after reading through the terms of payment, attached an envelope with a combination of the current field operatives allowance. “This should be everything, for now at least.”

Kurosawa took the clipboard and removed the envelope to count the money. “One moment, I just want to make sure you didn’t overpay.”

Minako shrugged. “I checked a few times, but go ahead.”

A sick feeling swirled in her stomach for what she’d done to get what they needed.

No one needed to know that she lied that everything wasn’t as expensive as it was, or that she used up all of her monthly allowances to pay.

To make up the difference, she dipped into the yen she set aside for recreation, music, and sweets.

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May 5th, 2009: Dorm Kitchen (Night)

“What did you wanna talk about? Am I in trouble?”

Minako had pulled Yukari away from the group before their mission briefing, using the kitchen for some privacy. The latter seemed on edge when asked for a one-on-one ever since her outburst a few days before.

If Minako was being honest, she wasn’t exactly composed either.

The field leader took a deep breath once she knew they wouldn’t be heard. “I know this six-day conquest’s been a lot on everyone, but I felt extra terrible after ya’ stormed out the other day.” She put a finger to her lips and motioned the junior towards the fridge. “I hope this’ll cheer you up a little.”

When she opened the door, Minako couldn’t help but chuckle when Yukari’s eyes went wide like an owl.
It’s not much, but I hope it tastes alright.”

Sitting on the top shelf was a pie tin covered in aluminum foil, a post-it note labeled with Yukari’s favorite flavor: apple with cinnamon crumble.

The archer couldn’t help but turn to her senior with a face-splitting smile. “It’s all mine? Like, mine mine?”

Minako nodded. “Junpei and Minato have been warned. Besides, they got their own presents for Children’s Day.”

Yukari closed the fridge door, took a deep breath, then lunged at Minako for a bone-crushing hug. “I’m sorry I yelled at you. It wasn’t fair.” She pulled away with a shy grin. “Whatever you’re doing, I trust you. You’re our leader for a reason so I’ll do my best to support your decision.”

The senior was stunned for a moment before giving her teammate a couple of pats on the back.

“I promise this will all be worth it. Just wait a few more days.”

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May 6th, 2009: Miss Ounishi’s Class (Morning)

Minato was barely staying awake while listening to his chemistry teacher rant about not wanting to be at work.

Maybe he should introduce her to Mister Ono before going to lunch? They could complain about how everything but science and katanas sucked.

“I don’t feel like teaching today... I was watching TV last night, and there was a special on weight loss. ‘The more you drink, the thinner you get!’” She slammed her fist on the podium, no doubt still drunk from a few shots the night before. “Yeah, right! What about the osmotic pressure, huh? It’s misinformation, but people believe what they see on TV!”

If the class was lucky, maybe they’d get fired and never teach poor teenagers like him something that everyone knew: work sucks but so does being poor.

Minato felt his eyes droop as she continued to talk about soap for some reason. Her shrill voice stabbed into his head like a million needles, threatening to cause permanent brain damage. The worst part was that she didn’t seem to pause for a breath.

What was up with women and constantly shrieking their emotions for everyone else to suffer with her?

He glanced over to see that Junpei had long since dozed off, notebook empty and pencil barely held between his fingers. At least Yukari had made an excuse that she felt sick and went to nap in the nurse’s office.

Minato tentatively laid his head into his arms.

Perhaps he could get away with a few minutes of shut-eye?

“ARISATO!”

Minato had never stood up so quickly in his life. “Yes, ma’am!” If he wasn’t awake before, he was
bright-eyed and bushy tail now.

Miss Ounishi didn’t seem to notice that he was about to fall asleep, instead of pointing him with the butt of her pen. “Is soap acidic, basic, or neutral? Answer in 5,4,3,2-”

Minato had no time to think about his answer. In a panic, he went with his best guess for being half-dead and ready to murder a teacher in broad daylight.

“Basic...”

His teacher gave him an accusatory glare.

Maybe she had caught him about to fall asleep and was just waiting to pounce.

Minato winced, prepared for the worst to happen.

“You got it. I guess you're smarter than you look-”

“I'M AWAKE!” Junpei shot up from his desk, knocking Minato over. “SHIT!”

The last thing that went through his mind before hitting the floor was that he now had an excuse to sleep in class.

He’d thank Junpei later.

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May 7th, 2009: Dorm Kitchen and Dining Area (Late Evening)

Minato nearly passed out when he came home to find Minako running around the kitchen with copious amounts of noodles being dumped into a large pot to be boiled. Meat that resembled pork was already simmering loudly in three separate saucepans. All of this culminated in a powerful scent that invaded his senses.

He ventured with caution, not knowing if his sister had finally lost her mind or just decided to invite the entire school over for dinner.

“Um...” he trailed off while attempting to remove his jacket without upsetting his injury from the day before. “Where’s the party?”

Minako grumbled something before clapping some stray flour off on her apron. “If we’re gonna fight hard, we need to eat right.” She motioned to her mess of pots going all at once. “Noodles for carbo-loading, meat for a protein fix, and steamed vegetables because you should always eat your vegetables. Leftovers will be packed up for lunches tomorrow.”

Minato opened his mouth to speak, but his words came out as more of a disgruntled hum.

On one hand, she went overboard and made enough food for an entire classroom of teenagers. There was no way they could finish everything within the span of a night and afternoon. He would be right in calling her a psycho or food.

On the other hand... she wasn’t exactly wrong about bumping up their nutrition.

Minako tapped a metal tongs on the rim of a boiling pot. “If you don’t close your mouth, you’ll attract flies. Speak now or forever hold your peace.”
Minato did as he was told. His jaw clamped back into place and he took a deep breath, moving to get a tablecloth from a cabinet above the stove.

“I'll set the table.”

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*May 7th, 2009: Train Station (Dark Hour)*

A sparse collection of coffins were scattered along a dark platform. The people who they contained were waiting for a late-night train, only to be transformed and wait for the terror of the Dark Hour to pass. One of the many monorail trains had just arrived before the change and lay dormant. It had lost its power along with the lights of the station.

It was a common occurrence that transpired each and every night.

Shadows darted in between them as if they were hockey players weaving in and out of cones. Lights helped conceal their movements to anyone who was outside during the accursed hour.

All of a sudden, frost coated the station.

Shadows screeched with a twisted sort of delight.

They jumped aboard the train and began to swarm the area.

A woman’s chuckle echoed in the distance.

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*05/07/2009*

Tomorrow is the day. Even though we all took the night off, I doubt I'll be able to sleep through the night. Something has been eating away at me since that boy appeared and the feeling just won't go away.

Where did he come from?

What does he want?

Can we trust anything he says?

Is all of this a ploy for a much bigger problem?

My head hurts from all this thinking. Maybe if I lay down and close my eyes, I'll feel better. Heck, I might get some sleep while I'm at it.

-Minato Arisato
Priestess Prelude II

Chapter Notes

. . .

So I know I said I would get the chapter out sooner, but my computer said nope and went kaput. Now here I am using a loaner laptop.

Sorry and sorry again for not posting but here's the part two! It's quite a bit longer than previous chapters so please enjoy!

Tap, tap, tap . . .

Minako stared at a blank sheet of scratch paper, math textbook opened to the assigned homework for the evening. Her calculator was blank of digital numbers and gathering dust next to her writing hand. Scratch paper that had been dug up hours ago still remained spotless of scrawl.

A small calendar hanging over the desk read May the eighth.

The day SEES would face a monstrous ordeal finally arrived, right on schedule. All their non-stop training, tower climbing, and Shadow fighting was about to be put to the test. Having reached the end of Tartarus’s first block a few nights before, they had time to sweep the lower blocks one last time before returning back to the dorm. The Shadows they encountered seemed like mere cannon fodder.

The night before, they took the last day off.

Minako had barely focused during class all day in favor of double and triple checking the team supply list. Everything seemed to be accounted for, from their weapons to first-aid items. Extra food from last night’s dinner was tonight’s meal with everyone eating at their own pace and time.

Junpei, Yukari, and Minato put their absolute trust in her extreme plan. With only one knowing the true reasoning behind the decision, it came as a shock that everyone went along with minor complaints.

They had come such a long way in only a matter of a week.

Now their final test was just hours away.

Minako sighed and closed her textbook, unable to keep her mind steady on the task at hand. The numbers on the page were starting to look more akin to fangs, claws, and reaching hands that were poised to kill. Without the distraction of work, Minako leaned back in her chair to stare at the ceiling. Her fingers laced together on her lap and eyes wandered over to her desk clock.

It wasn’t even past six in the afternoon. Sunlight still peeked through the curtains as if to mock the poor leader further.

“Come on,” she said into the silence of her room, “how long is this gonna take?”
Her words lingered in the air, never to be answered. What did answer her was a soft buzz coming from her school bag.

Minako reached down to retrieve said device, rummaging through the side pocket where the buzz was the loudest. Unsurprisingly, she scooped up her phone.

Her collar ID read off an unknown number.

Flipping open her phone, she fiddled with the shell of her ear. They began to burn as she didn’t her best to appear mature through her tone of voice. “Minako Arisato, how can I help ya’?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

Minako perked up, feeling the heat starting to melt away. She knew that voice from countless mornings spent beating the sun and running for miles.

“Sanada-san!” She leaned her elbows on her desk. “This is a shock. How’d you get my number?”

“I had to ask Yukari-san while I was leaving school.” There was mumble from Akihiko’s side of the line before his voice came along clearly. “Listen, can we talk somewhere? I need to get my mind off training for two seconds.”

Minako glanced over her desk.

As much as she wanted to keep staring at the ceiling and waiting for her homework to remain unfinished, it wasn’t a healthy way to deal with her stress.

Plus, Akihiko was an interesting guy. It never hurts to talk with interesting people.

Minako was already throwing on a sweatshirt and grabbing her purse.

“Did you have somewhere in mind?”

Minako should have known Akihiko would choose the Beef Bowl Shop.

There was nothing wrong with the place, in fact, it was beyond fantastic. The perfect balance of noodles to soup ratio coupled with a taste that rivaled higher-end establishments was a big draw for her. Not to mention the staff who kept spirits high even when morale was low in the city.

However, Minako was more keen on exploring the sights with someone who knew the modern Iwatodai. Eating at the same place for every lunch together was getting dull quickly. Variety was the spice of life and that seemed to be missing lately.

At least Akihiko offered to pay for their meal, so she didn’t complain too much when they met outside the strip mall area.

That didn’t stop him from going on an impassioned rant about why that restaurant was far superior to all others.

“Honestly, the beef bowl shop is great!” He grinned like a madman as they ascended the stairs to the second tier of the mall. “The servings are big, the sauce they use on the meat is second to none, and-”

“-Jesus would eat there if he decided to stop by, yadda yadda yadda!” Minako threw up her hands in defeat. “Ya’ already made your peace over the phone. I said I didn’t care where we went so
please don’t go on another tirade. I’m gonna lose my mind.”

Akihiko snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “But do you really? If your gonna get stronger, you need protein, and this place has it in spades.”

Minako smirked, shaking her head at the silliness of their argument. “I never thought I’d be having this talk with anyone.” She stuffed her hands in her hoodie pouch. “But this entire year has been crazy so far, I don’t know what to expect anymore.”

“Just expect the worst and you’ll be fine.” her running partner quipped. “By the way, did you get anything Mr. Ono was saying tod-”

“Akihiko-senpai! Oh my god!”

“EEEEEKKK!!”

Akihiko flinched at an eardrum-bursting sequel that nearly scared Minako out of her own skin.

“Move hussie!”

Before she could react, Minako was shoved aside by a pair of perfume drenched blurs. Thanks to the many nights spent fighting monsters that were trying to kill her, recovery wasn’t a mind-boggling task. It came almost naturally in regaining her lost balance by taking a few steps and bending at the knees.

It wasn’t difficult either to get a grasp on the situation at hand once safely grounded. Two teenage girls sporting makeup-caked faces had flanked Akihiko on both sides. Although they didn’t sport the Gekkoukan uniform, it was painfully obvious their allegiance was in-line with the boxing captain’s fan club.

“Akihiko-senpai, what are you doing here?” asked one of the girls, buns adorning her jet black hair. “We never see you at boxing practice anymore!”

Couple that with their feigned ditziness and high voices, their endgame was obvious from the moment they opened their mouths.

They wanted to cause some trouble for the poor boy.

Akihiko, who was thoroughly uncomfortable at this point, tried to break away from the closeness of his fans. “Please give me some space.”

The first girl’s accomplice joined in on his torment, rouge painted lips getting a little close to Akihiko’s face. “Oh, I know! You're here for the beef bowls, right? It's, like, so funny that you're always eating here!”

“What’s so funny about that?” Akihiko threw the field leader a concerned glance. "Is it?” Minako could only offer a shake of her head. Any words that she could’ve said would have been drowned out by the two girl’s shrillness.

The red-lipsticked girl latched onto his arm. “It means you’re totally cool, senpai! Everyone at school knows it.”

“Look,” Akihiko asserted himself, “can you get out of the way? My friend and I want to eat already.”
“Hey, hey, you don't have a girlfriend, right?” The bun-haired girl sent a hostile grin at Minako. “We're, like, totally looking for guys to be with right now.”

“Yeah! Hang out with us.” Another glare was sent in her direction by the lipstick-crazed friend. “We’ll have a TON of fun together! Just come on already!”

Minako had dealt with catty girls before, but having a friend in the school’s most eligible heartthrob was a new level of strange. If the stares when the two occasionally ended up sharing lunch together weren’t enough, then having an entire club want to kill you was certainly concerning.

Akihiko wasn’t too happy with the situation either. “Just let us through, please.” He peeled off one girl while using his bad elbow to deter the other. “If you want to talk to me, let's find some other time to do it.”

That was Minako’s chance to move on the offensive. Once he freed himself from the clutches of the fangirl’s, she sashayed to his side and grabbed his arm to pull him towards the beef bowl shop. “Would ya’ look at the time?” she asked the other girls. “This hussie’s been starving all day and needs something good to eat.”

Akihiko took the opportunity to link their arms together and pull them away from the girls. “Let’s go, Arisato.”

Minako didn’t dare look back, knowing that a pair of fangirls would greet her and tear her apart. Being inside the restaurant was a blessing. The feeling of being stared at to death had faded away and instead was replaced with the warmth of the shop’s atmosphere. The two took a seat at the counter in silence, quickly unlinking their arms to defer any suspicious eyes.

That wasn’t to say the silence was unwelcome. A moment of peace after experiencing something odd was at least a simple kindness. It was a time to process the events, finding a hint of normalcy again.

Minako was more than happy to take out a pen from her purse and start jotting down last-minute ramblings. It was a small list of thoughts that she had on her journey to the shop, mostly pertaining to her writings at the dorm.

A scene from one story, a concept for a new location, they all danced across the notepad she always carried around. Pages upon pages had already been used up over many years.

Currently, she was still hung up on an action section that required major re-working. Such things were not her strength, even if her fighting experiences had given her a broader perspective on movement and battle flow.

Perhaps if she took a small break and moved ahead with the plot, there would be enough distance from the problem to form a solution?

Maybe it was time to bring in a second opinion?

Or maybe it was simply a choreographing issue-

“.I think I get it now.”

Minako perked up as Akihiko finally started talking again. She flipped her notepad closed and decided to return to the action scene later. “Ya' get what?”
He tapped the wooden counter with a proud smirk. “Do you think those girls wanted to have beef bowls too? Maybe that’s why they wanted us to come along since we’re regulars. We know the best options for flavor and nutritional balance.”

“Oh boy.” Minako tried to choke back her giggles. “Hate to break it to ya’, but they didn’t want it that way. Not in the way you think.”

Akihiko gave a blank stare. “Huh. . . I wonder what they wanted?”

Minako couldn’t help but jump in with her older sister-level teasing skills maxed out.

“Allow me to enlighten you.” She retrieved a salt and pepper shaker combo. “Imagine the salt is a girl and the pepper is some guy.” Minako set the two side by side, giving them plenty of room. “When a girl loves a boy, the girl decides that she wants to date the boy.” She slid the two together so they were close, but not overly close. “So the girl places herself in a position to get the boy’s attention. Make sense so far?”

Akihiko watched the display with an almost unwilling curiosity. “Yeah, but there were two girls.”

“Just pretend that there’s two salt shakers.” She then pushed the shakers together until there was only a hair’s width of space between them. “The girls decided to double down and take you for themselves.” She knocked over the pepper with a loud clunk. “Two loud teenagers are a mightier force than one. Ya’ catch that?”

All at once, it was slowly dawning on Akihiko what had happened. He ended up shaking his head in disbelief that he had been hit on by two girls at the same time.

“So that’s why they asked if I had a girlfriend,” he muttered darkly. “They always travel in packs.”

Minako let a few chuckles unwillingly escape. “Sounds like someone doesn’t want a girlfriend. Don’tcha want one someday?”

“Now you’re going to start asking me about that, too? Why are all girls so obsessed with this kind of stuff?” The boxing captain sighed, more confused than outright rejecting the idea. “I really don’t want to deal with this kind of thing. It’s just too much.”

Minako backed down on the aloof young man. She softened up on her joking demeanor and instead pivoted onto an easier topic.

“Sorry, sorry! How about something less specific? Is there a type of girl ya’ like, even as a friend?”

Akihiko was quiet for a moment. His eyes were trained straight ahead to avoid having to look Minako straight on.

“The type I like is . . . I’d been told that whenever a girl asks that, the right answer is always ‘Girls like you’. . .” There was another pause before Akihiko turned bright red and flustered. He slammed his fist on the counter. “Argh, but I can't bring myself to say it! Damn that Junpei! Damn him to hell!”

Minako couldn’t even stop to reprimand his swearing. She doubled over the counter in a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Akihiko Sanada didn’t understand girls, but that was okay.

Who needed a smooth-talking husk when you could have an awkward running buddy?
The Dark Hour came that night without ceremony.

Mitsuru had buckled down in the SEES control room and set herself to checking radio frequencies with rapt attention. Her Evoker was dutifully holstered at her hip.

Static crackled at every turn of the dial, unable to focus in on any oddities. Her mind strained to reach Tartarus to check if there were Shadows roaming outside their nest. Unfortunately, all she seemed to see was the surrounding island. Her Persona only seemed to have a range of a few miles.

She sighed and continued to try.

The door to the room opened and Akihiko stepped in. “Evening Mitsuru.” he greeted before parking himself on the couch across from the young heiress, relaxing into the seat. “You’re still at it?”

Mitsuru hummed. “Yeah. You never know when Shadows will appear. There’s nothing irregular so far but I’ll keep looking.”

Akihiko leaned over the coffee table to inspect her amplifying radio. “I thought you couldn’t scan outside of Tartarus,” he commented.

“To be honest, I do lack the power.” She flipped to another channel. “Maybe this is the best Penthesilea can do in terms of data gathering. Although, the power of Persona seems to be much broader than I thought. We’ve even got two people who can switch Personas in the middle of battle. There’s something special about their ability. It hasn’t been that long since their awakenings, either.”

Akihiko nodded along. “I have to admit, I was surprised too. In the end, it’s up to them whether or not they can reach their full potential.”

“Astute, Akih-”

Mitsuru suddenly paused as the static in her headphones morphed into random screeches echoing off of a metal structure. An overwhelming force caused her stomach to sink.

“It’s a Shadow!” She focused in on the presence but found it was too large to process from such a distance. “I can’t believe this.”

In an instant, Akihiko was on his feet. “What!? You mean you actually found one?”

“It has to be.” Mitsuru breathed. She pointed to the larger control consul behind her. “Get the others up. We have to deal with this before damage occurs to the city.”

Akihiko was more than happy to comply. “Let’s wake them up then.” He strode over to the panel, flipping open a glass case with a red button labeled ‘Emergency’. “This is gonna be fun.”

Without wasting any more time, he sounded the alarm.

Minato had gotten tired waiting for the Dark Hour to arrive, so he dozed off on his desk.

When the alarm slapped him awake, he flew off his chair and went for his equipment on his dresser. He made sure his Evoker was in working order before grabbing his sword. His door was
slammed shut behind him as he sprinted up the stairs to the control room.

Everyone had forgone their school uniforms and opted for the easiest clothes to put on in a hurry. He and Junpei sported pop t-shirts with loose jeans. Yukari went with a pink off-the-shoulder sweater and a white skirt with leggings to keep her modesty. Minako seemed more prepared with a sports hoodie and joggers.

Mitsuru didn’t have time to greet them when they rushed into the control room. Yukari took the lead with her bow in hand. “We’re here!”

Junpei had his sword propped on his shoulder, protected by an old denim jacket. “Where is it? I’ll rip it apart!”

Taking that as a cue to begin the briefing, Mitsuru jumped right in. “We've detected a Shadow outside of Tartarus. We don't know for sure, but we think it's another big one. We have to defeat any of them we find, as quickly as possible. Most people don't know the Dark Hour exists. But, if half the city is destroyed, there will be panic. That must be avoided at all costs.”

Minato followed her words closely, but on the inside, he was shaking like a leaf.

This had to be the ordeal the boy had warned them about.

All of their training from the past week was about to be put to the test.

If they failed, who knows what could have happened.

At least he could focus on Junpei’s infectious pep. The latter was practically running circles around the room in anticipation. “In other words, we need to kick some ass, right? Well, count me in!”

Yukari was less than appreciative, pinch the bridge of her nose. “Dangit Stupei, this is serious.”

Minato glanced over to his sister. Up until now, she had been silently testing her naginata, as if to contain her nervous energy. Once Yukari had stopped complaining about her teammate, he noticed her usual confidence returned to assume control of the group.

“Alright Kirijo-san, we’ll get this under control and fast. You can count on us.”

The redheaded senior gave his sister a nod. “I know you will lead the team well.” She turned to Akihiko at her side. “Akihiko, I want you to stay here and wait for the Chairman. He should be here in ten minutes.”

“What?” The captain rounded on his companion. “Are you kidding!? I’m going!”

Mitsuru was quick to shut him down with a flick of the wrist. “You still need to recover. You’ll just be a hindrance. This is the last time I will say it.”

Akihiko crossed his arms over his chest. “Tch, whatever.”

“They’ll fare better than you, in your current state. Have faith in them, Akihiko.” Mitsuru visibly softened at her old friend. “They're ready. You'll get your chance. But for now, wait for the Chairman.”

Akihiko tried to remain angry but instead melted into slight annoyance. “Fine, I’ll wait here. Keep me updated on the ground.”

“Of course.” Mitsuru turned to Minako. “Take these three to the train station and wait for me. I
need time to prepare and move my radio. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Understood.” his sister answered, turning to the team. “You heard her, let’s get on the road soldiers!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Yukari and Junpei had already quickly left the room. In a surprising turn of events, all bickering from the meeting was postponed.

Minato followed them close behind but paused when he noticed that Minako wasn’t by his side. He turned around and saw that she had been stopped by Akihiko. They were talking in hushed voices, so it was impossible to tell what they were saying.

“What in the world?” he thought to himself before running to join his fellow juniors.

Whatever those two were talking about, it was strange that Minako was being singled out.

“Where is she?” Yukari asked, looking around for any sign of Mitsuru. “We don’t have all night with a giant Shadow on the loose.”

“She’ll be here soon,” Minako assured, handing her a water bottle from her small bag of supplies. “Have some water, Yukatan. It’s crucial we fight at our full potential and thirst ain’t gonna help us win.”

The junior took the bottle with a quiet ‘thank you’ and seated herself beside Minato on the curb. From their spot on the street, he could see the train station covered in an almost purple fog. It complimented the creepy atmosphere that the Dark Hour had in spades.

Junpei was pacing back and forth on the street. He kept throwing glances at the mostly empty station (save the occasional coffin). From time to time, his hand would fall on the hilt of his broadsword or Evoker.

“You’ll wear down the concrete at this rate,” Minako said, fishing another bottle out of her bag and gearing up to throw. “Heads up, Junpei!”

The capped teen had heard her warning, not even looking when he easily caught the bottle. “Thanks, Minatan.” He unscrewed the cap and a few huge gulps. “That’s refreshing! It’s nature’s gift to mankind, I tell ya’.”

Minato couldn’t help but feel parched watching the two juniors drink. He lifted his own bottle up and indulged himself in some freshwater.

Well, as fresh as bottled water could be.

“Anybody else hear a motor running?”

The quartet paused at Yukari’s observation. Minato strained his ear and low and behold, there was a low rumbling that was slowly gaining speed in their direction.

As the sound got louder and louder, Yukari and Minato had gotten to their feet with hands at their Evokers. Minako and Junpei had taken up defensive positions as well, scooting closer to their teammates.

The rumble became a low roar, getting louder and louder with every second.

“It’s getting closer.”
“No dip, Stupei!”

Finally, a white motorcycle carrying a metal box on the back came rushing around a blind corner and towards the group. It stopped beside them with almost expert timing. There wasn’t even a harsh skidding sound.

The passenger was none other than Mitsuru. She dismounted the vehicle and removed her helmet, running a hand through her thick hair.

Minato couldn’t help but whistle at the beauty that was the motorcycle. An Uncle of his had a vast knowledge of the machines and had taught him the crap from the creme de’ la. Mitsuru’s was no hunk of metal. “Nice ride.”

“Thank you, Arisato.” Mitsuru unhooked her payload and set it gently on the ground. “Sorry to keep you waiting. This radio isn’t exactly travel-friendly.”

Minako waved her off. “You’re the one giving us backup and tactical support, so it evens out. Besides, it was only ten minutes.”

“You’re too kind.” Mitsuru placed a hand on her hip. “Tonight, I’ll be providing support from here. Everything else is the same. The Shadow is currently located inside a monorail, not far from the station. To get there, you’ll have to walk on the tracks.”

“Huh!” Junpei gawked openly. “Are you serious? That’s dangerous, man! What if the trains start moving, we’ll get pancaked!”

Minato gave the other teen a funny look. “‘Pancaked’ isn’t a word.”

“It is now!”

“Children please!” Minako cut in before turning back to the other senior. “Go on.”

“Of course, Arisato.” Mitsuru turned to Junpei directly. “Don’t worry, no electronic equipment is operable during the Dark Hour, including the monorails. Just complete the mission in a timely manner and everything should be fine.”

Minato glanced over at the young woman’s bike that had been working in the Dark Hour just moments ago. “What about your bike?”

Mitsuru patted the seat. “It’s special.” She then kneeled down to unpack her support equipment. “Now, if circumstances change, I’ll notify you immediately. I won’t let anything happen to you four.”

Minato couldn’t help but still feel butterflies in his stomach once they finally deployed onto the tracks. The fact that he had been forced to take up the lead with Junpei barely made things better.

They only made things more nerve-wracking.

Was it too late to pretend to be sick?

“Is this it?”

“I don’t know Yukari.” Minako inspected the rear car of a stopped monorail that the team happened upon. She raised a hand to her ear to focus in on Mitsuru’s watchful presence over everyone’s mind. “Kirijo-san, is this the right one?”
There was a momentary crackle before a voice came to life. “The readings are definitely coming from that monorail. Proceed with caution, and stay together. There seem to be many lower-level Shadows on the prowl.”

“Loud an’ clear, thanks. Keep us posted.” Minako dropped her hand back to her side and turned to the rest of the group. “Did everyone get that?”

“You bet.” Junpei grinned and stalked to the side of the car where a door was wide open. He took a knee and cupped his hands together. “Who wants first dibs?”

Minato didn’t waste time, being easily boosted up and into the car. He reached out his hand to pull Junpei inside.

“I guess I’ll go next,” Minako said, turning to Yukari. “Ya’ ready to go?”

Yukari held onto her bow with white knuckles, neither nodding or shaking her head. “I don’t know, Minako-senpai. What if we’re not ready? What if everything goes horribly wrong like what happened that night at the dorm?”

Minako knew that they couldn’t waste time on the what-if’s, but she’d be lying if such questions never crossed her mind.

The advice Akihiko had given her before leaving the dorm echoed in her memory.

“Remember that Mitsuru and I choose you. I know you’ll do fine.”

The leader simply took Yukari’s arm and pulled her along to the side of the car.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. If we just play it safe and keep a cool head, everything will work out,” she said, looking up to the boys. “Besides, we’ve got these two as shields.”

“I guess,” Yukari answered softly, but her grip on the bow loosened and a chuckle escaped her. “I’ll make sure to give it my all.”

Junpei and Minato both reached down. The latter took Minako’s naginata and Yukari’s bow while his companion grabbed the field leader’s waiting hand.

“Hang on, Minatan.” He lifted her up as if she weighed as much as a feather. “All aboard the spooky express.”

Minako was able to grab onto the door rail and pulled herself inside. She thanked Junpei before reclaiming her weapon from her brother. He stood stiffer than usual, eyes roaming back and forth around the main car. His hand never left his weapons as if a Shadow would attack at any moment.

He never acted so alert on Tartarus missions.

“Something wrong?” Minako asked.

Minato hesitated for a moment, but soon found his voice. “This doesn’t sit right with me.” He motioned his head to the doors. “We’re not anywhere near the station but the doors are wide open.”

“I noticed that too.” Yukari piped in as she grabbed her bow. “Did someone pull the emergency brake before the Dark Hour began?”

Junpei swung his head around the compartment. “Maybe it’s nothin–”
A loud slam from the rear door, the team’s entrance.

Yukari jumped back, hand already reaching for an arrow. “What the heck-”

Another door closed suddenly, then another, and another until they were trapped. Loud clunks from the cars ahead suggested that the same event was occurring in the other cars.

The Shadows knew they were there.

Yukari was sent into a panic. “It’s a trap!”

“Crap, this is bad!” Junpei shouted alongside her, running up to one of the doors and trying to pry it open. “They won’t budge! How’re we gonna get out!?”

Minato had his sword fully drawn. “I knew something was off.”

“Stay calm everyone! This is no time for panic.” Minako twirled her naginata so it was ready at a moment’s notice to fight. “Mitsuru, do you copy!”

To her relief, the familiar static came through loud and clear. "I do, it must be the Shadow. It knows you're there." There was a beat of disconnect before her voice returned one last time. “-Be ready for anything! Proceed with extreme caution!”

Suddenly, the four were left with silence.

Minako took a deep breath and turned to her team. “Let’s keep moving forward. The mission isn’t over yet.” She passed ahead to take the lead. “Being scared is what the Shadows want. We’re tougher than that.”

Her brother was the first to shake out of his fearful trance. His sword was up in a guard position. “Don’t have to tell me twice.”

Junpei took a heavy breath before deciding to start moving his feet. “Can’t let this guy show me up.” He turned back to Yukari. “No man left behind unless you’re chicken.”

“As if, Stupei! I’m not afraid of some monster.” The dumb challenge was enough to put a bit of courage back in her step. “We’ll see who’s chicken after tonight.” In no time, the archer had jogged to rejoin the rest of the group.

“Good,” Minako thought to herself, “who knew the power of gloating would work on someone like Yukari?”

The first few cars had proven to be uneventful. They had come into contact with a sparse number of coffins leaning up against the seats and walls. Maybe a dark corner seemed to be hiding enemies, but nothing had shown itself yet.

It seemed no longer that nothing moved to attack, the more high strung the teenagers became.

Each creek of metal was a warning bell.

Tartarus on the other side of the port foretold doom and gloom.

The full moon cast a baleful light on every surface.

“Where are all the Shadows?” Junpei had asked at one point while sweeping the cars. Minato had responded along the lines with “None of this makes any sense.”
Despite all the tension, Minako had somehow kept herself from showing her fear. Fingers didn’t so much as twitch in anticipation. Eyes stayed vigilant but held no wavering fire that would betray her weakness.

Struggle, but remain calm in the face of danger; it was the Arisato way.

When they reached the third car, the air seemed to drop a few degrees in temperature. Yukari had begun to shiver and rub her arms for warmth.

“W-what’s going on? It got chilly all of a s-sudden.”

Junpei shrugged, also beginning to shake. “It’s never this cold during the Dark Hour.”

Minato said nothing, his chattering teeth a dead give away. Swirling billows of frost escaped his lips as he tried to hug himself into his jacket.

“Keep on your guard.” Minako warned, moving further into the car. “I think we’re getting closer to the Shadow. Looks like our enemy is an ice user-”

Suddenly, something small and blurry dropped from the ceiling.

Everyone jumped as a tiny Shadow that barely came up to their knees blocked the door to the next car. It regarded them with an almost deadpan stare, its jellyfish-like body pulsing to keep itself in the air.

“There it is!”

Minako didn’t have time to bark orders before Junpei rushed past her with broadsword raised to attack.

“Junpei, wai-!”

“Finally!” He came down hard on the creature, but even his speed wasn’t fast enough. The Shadow darted backward to an open train door. In an instant, the Shadow retreated into the next cabin, leaving Junpei fumbling to regain his composure.

“Hey!” he called, moving to pursue the Shadow deeper into the train. “Ya’ coward, get back here so I can kill ya’ already!”

“Wait!” Mitsuru’s voice boomed in Minako’s head. “Something is very wrong; the enemy is acting strangely. This is no time for playing hero!”

“Junpei!” Minako dove forward and was able to catch him by his coat. “Kirijo-san’s right, we can’t just rush into things when the Shadow’s are acting this way.”

Junpei tried to pry the tiny girl off him. “But, if we don't go after it, we're gonna lose it!”

Minako didn’t let go but instead held on tighter. “I’m the field leader, what I say goes. We’ve got no clue what’s waiting for us behind that door. For all I know, we’d be walking into another trap!”

That’s when Junpei finally snapped. He violently yanked himself out of the leader’s grip, her fingers too weak to hold on. “Who needs your advice!? We can beat that thing, no problem!” In his anger, Junpei charged ahead. “Hell, I’ll do it myself!”

Yukari gasped audibly. “Junpei, wait!”
Minato watched on in horror as his teammate went off on his own. “Get back here!”

Their words were meaningless. Junpei had already crossed over into the other cars to tail the rogue Shadow, leaving the others behind.

Minako felt her heart take a swan dive. “This can’t be happening, not now!” She dug her heels in and prepared to sprint after him. “We can’t let him go in alone-!”

“Behind you!”

Mitsuru’s shout came in the nick of time as a group of Shadows dropped from the roof of the car. Some looked exactly like the one Junpei was chasing while others were much larger. Minako counted five enemies that needed to be dealt with.

“This is just what they wanted.” She immediately drew her Evoker and pulled the trigger. “Pyro-Jack, light em’ up!”

Once summoned, the pumpkin-headed spirit wasted no time fulfilling her order. He cackled and waved his lantern at the group of Shadows. They were swallowed up in billowing flames and crying out from relief.

“Everyone watch out!” Yukari followed suit in a matter of seconds, the barrel of her gun pressed against her forehead. “Io, help me!”

Io appeared dutifully behind her master. She stretched out her arms to the burning Shadows and surrounded them with a tornado of wind. Most of them were thrown around and crashed into the walls. One still remained upright, but still found itself engulfed by flames. The Guru spell only made the fire worse.

Minato wasted no time in moving in to finish the rest by his own hand. “Let’s end this quickly.” With a cover from Yukari, he hacked and slashed his way through the Shadows as if they were butter. Anything that tried to get a jump on him was swiftly handled by Minako’s difficult movements or an arrow through the skull.

After the last of the Shadows had been dealt with, Minako barely spared a second to breathe. She cast a small healing spell on the group and rallied the troops. “We have to keep going and catch up to Junpei.” The remaining two followed her as they started moving towards the next car with haste. “Mitsuru, can ya’ tell where he is? Is he okay?”

“From what I can tell, he’s only a few cars ahead. I’ll continue to track his whereabouts, but I won’t be able to monitor his health.”

“Got it.” Minako waved her hand for Yukari and Minato to keep up with her quickened pace. “Let’s hurry.”

The three remaining members traversed further into enemy territory, encountering more Shadows as they went deeper. They only seemed to grow more and more difficult with each car they passed through.

As they went on, the temperature seemed to keep dropping. Yukari’s accuracy had gotten spotty at best to the point where Minato gave up his jacket for her to keep warm. He claimed that he didn’t mind, but the goosebumps on his exposed arms said otherwise.

The cold was an afterthought to Minako when a teammate was missing. It kept her from letting her natural reactions take the wheel and hinder their search.
Thankfully, there were no fresh blood splatters that raised any concern. Not even a shred of cloth from his outfit could be seen in Shadow’s claws, which meant he either avoided trouble or was able to out-maneuver each obstruction.

Unfortunately, that meant there was no sign of him anywhere. There would have to be at least marks from a fight or injured Shadows, yet there were none. The only confirmation that Junpei was on the train was through Mitsuru but there was no way to know if he was even alive.

Minako willed herself to stay calm though. Thinking about everything that could go wrong would only lead to losing sight of their mission.

Junpei was a capable fighter and was hard to kill. As long as Minako couldn’t see a body, it was best to assume that anything was possible. She simply had to keep her head in the game and press on.

Four more cars in and they still couldn’t find a trace of the capped teen, but the Shadows were starting to grow increasingly more agitated.

Another battle ended with a good outcome: all Shadows eliminated with no major injuries thus far. A couple of scratches and bruises were their biggest concern.

Yukari leaned against a support railing. “Junpei’s not in this car, either.” She let out an exasperated groan “He should know it’s too dangerous to go alone, but then he does something like this? It’s just too strange.”

“I thought so too.” Minato took a seat on one of the benches, glancing over at his sister. “Did you say something to rile him up? I couldn’t hear what you said to each other until the very end.”

“Not really,” she admitted. “All I said was that it was not a good idea to go in guns blazing. When he wouldn’t listen, I had to pull rank on him but he got upset and ran off.”

Yukari’s eyes went wide. “That doesn’t make sense. Out of everyone here, you’re the one he probably trusts the most. Heck, he didn’t even bellyache after you were chosen to lead. Junpei never does that for anyone else except on his baseball team.”

Minako felt her heart sink lower than ever before.

Junpei seemed like he was trusting of her. There was no doubt he had ambitions to become a leader and taking orders was difficult for someone like him.

This whole time, he could’ve just faked his loyalty.

Minako dismissed her thoughts as quickly as they came. Doubts were the seeds of all other negative emotions that Shadows thrived on. She was the leader and therefore had to set the precedent for team dynamics.

That meant that her personal feelings could take a beating for a little while if it meant preserving the loyalty of the others. She would save it for another day. Right now, her main objective was reuniting the team.

“Let’s keep moving on.” she resolved, squaring her shoulders back. “We can sit and debate all night, but that won’t do a darn thing. Is everyone ready to mo-”
A crash sounded from the next car, followed by a warcry that was all too familiar.

Minato drew his sword and was already making a break for the next cabin. “It’s Junpei. We gotta hurry.”

Yukari and Minako followed behind, Evokers poised to attack. “Stay close everyone, we don’t know what we’ll find.” the latter commanded. “Protect Junpei above everything else!”

The three exploded into the cabin.

A group of Shadows had formed a wall to keep anyone from advancing further. Standing to face them was Junpei, haggard from what seemed to be multiple fights. “Is that all ya’ got?” He leaned heavily on his broadsword with his Evoker practically glued to his head. “Come at me!”

The Shadows screamed back and broke ranks to attack him at the same time. Junpei had no time or energy to summon his Persona, standing helplessly in the face of danger.

“Stop it!” Minako moved as fast as her legs would allow, Minato matching stride for stride. “Get down!” The two grabbed Junpei by his coat to drag him backward. The three tumbled and hit the floor. The Shadows had nothing to land on, ending up in a cluster of limbs and screeching. They flailed around in a fruitless attempt to regain composure.

“Yukari!” Minako yelled.

“Io!”

A powerful wind consumed the Shadows, throwing them in a tizzy and toppling each one. They disappeared one by one in a cloud of smoke.

The wind must have been their weakness.

Minako wasn’t concerned a moment longer once the threat had been neutralized. Her attention swung to Junpei who was sitting up with a groan. “Oh man, that was rough.” He looked behind to see the group with all eyes on him. “I had it under control!”

“I think not. You look terrible.” Minako had her Evoker out. “Pixie.”

A tiny fairy was summoned, flying in loops before landing on Junpei’s head. She snapped her fingers and covered him in a pale green light. A cut on his face closed up, the exhaustion in his eyes was clearing out, and his breathing was evener.

Pixie disappeared once Junpei was healed. The teen rolled his shoulders with a contented sigh.

“Thanks, Minatan.”

Minato, who was on his feet first, offered a hand. “Can you stand?”

“Sure.” But Junpei still accepted the help. He hauled himself to his feet and stretched out his back. “I thought I had it handled back there. I’ll get ‘em next time.”

“Like hell you did!” Yukari stormed over to him until she had a finger pointed directly at his face. “Do you ever think about anyone but yourself? We thought you were gonna die! This is what happens when you don’t listen!”

Minako rushed to plant herself between them. “He knows what he did, stand down Yukari.” She then turned to Junpei with a solemn expression. “All that matters is we’re together again. Let’s
keep it that way from now on. No one’s dying while I’m still alive, got it?”

Junpei looked away from her, all bravado from his previous behavior gone. “Sorry, I’ll be careful next time.”

“Good.” Minako then turned her serious frown into a smile. “I’m not angry, I’m just a worrywart. If anything happened to anyone, I’d never forgive myself.”

“All of us would,” Minato added in beside her, clapping Junpei on the shoulder. Minako couldn’t help but give her brother a grateful look before turning back to the others. “Should we keep moving? There’s still one more Shadow left and we need all hands on deck.”

Mitsuru’s voice came to life in response to the leader’s words.

“Be careful, you three. I don’t detect any movement but stay alert. I still can’t tell what the enemy is capable of from this distance.”

As if the situation couldn’t get any worse, the sound of steam boiling and spitting drowned out whatever Mitsuru was going to say next. The train suddenly rumbled to life. A powerful lurch nearly took the ground from under Minako’s feet, but her heart kicked itself into high gear.

Outside, the sky was rolling by quicker and quicker.

The air had gone completely frozen.

Minako regained her bearings and had a hand to her ear. “Kirijo-san, we’re moving! What’s goin’ on!”

“This is bad. It seems the monorail is under the enemy’s control!”

Yukari had grabbed Minato for support but now clung to him as if she saw a ghost. “Whaddya mean, ‘it seems’!? What if we crash into another train? We’re dead meat!”

“Stay calm!” Minako knew that time was no longer on their side. She gathered herself and pried open the next car door with her weapon for leverage. It popped without any trouble and allowed entrance. “If the Shadow’s doing this, we have no choice. Let’s kill this thing before it kills us and everyone on this train!”

“I sense a strong presence in the front car. That must be the one we’re after. You have approximately fifteen minutes before the collision. After that, there’s no telling what sort of tragedy will occur!”

Junpei was the first of the juniors to kick into high gear. Any remaining fatigue was replaced with a smirk to hide the truth of the situation.

“Let’s run then!”

The others followed the call to action and SEES was sprinting through the remaining cars. As they speed increased, each corner they rounded nearly threw them to the ground. Junpei and Minato were able to withstand to force of the speed and both took hold of the girls to pull them along.

Together they reached the head car which was dusted in frost. Junpei used his sword to jimmy it open, but once opened, a harsh wind with crystals of ice greeted them. A fog blocked any view inside.
“Jeez, that’s cold.” Junpei stepped away, the fog pooling at everyone’s feet. “No turning back now.”

Minako checked in with Mitsuru one last time before they entered. “We’re at the second to last car. Any last advice before we go in?”

“Proceed with caution, but don’t drag your feet. There’s only twelve minutes left before the train collides into the next station.”

Yukari chuckled dryly after Mitsuru cut out. “No pressure, I guess.” She knocked an arrow from her quiver while Junpei unsheathed his sword. He gave the leader an optimistic thumbs up. “Let’s stop this crazy train and go home. We still got school tomorrow.”

Minato stepped up beside his sister, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. “We better get going, sis. There’s not much time left.”

“I know.” She reached to cover it with her own. The calluses of her worn fingers seemed almost at home reaching out to her little brother, but they were alone again when she went to put all her attention on the fight ahead. “Watch my back, nerd.

Minato clicked his tongue but didn’t comment on the soft insult.

Minako stepped over the threshold and entered the front car. The others followed close behind.

At first, her vision was blocked by the wall of fog that engulfed the door.

“Stay close, guys. No one attacks until we can see what we’re fighting.”

No one answered, but the presence of her team closed in on her. Each of their distinct movements was a comfort despite the lack of visibility.

Minako could feel a wild pulse hammering through her body. It was as if someone had taken all the oxygen in the room and replaced it with a thick, unspeakable evil. Such a thing made it difficult to breathe properly.

What kind of Shadow could sour even the air itself?

In only a matter of seconds, the fog was wiped away by a biting wave that rattled the window panes and metal shell of the train. Minako let the tension in her release go to guard against the surprise attack.

“Here it comes! Get ready!”

As the fog cleared out, SEES came face-to-face with the monster they had been hunting all night. It wasn’t a disappointment either.

The Shadow took the form of a large and scandalously clad woman. A tarp wrapped around her waist concealed very little to the imagination but did even worse with her legs spread to the group. She leaned back as if reclining to watch a show. Her worst feature came in the form of a twisted, red smirk and mask that was all too calm when faced with a high profile threat.

“What the-?” Minako heard Junpei shuffling closer to her. “That’s the friggin’ boss!?”

“Do you see anything else, Stupei!” Yukari snapped back.

Minato drew his Evoker and stepped beside Minako. “The form means nothing: a Shadow’s a
Shadow. Let’s just get to it already.”

“You're right.” The field leader had her naginata poised to attack. “Minato and Junpei, focus on Ice Queen with all ya’ got. Yukari and I will watch your backs.” She bent her knees in preparation to move. “Don’t hold back, okay!?”

In response, the boys aimed and shoot off their Evokers.

The battle had begun.

“Burn her alive, Hermes!”

Hermes had moved in to take the first barrage of attacks, raining fire on the enemy. Sparks caught on her minimal clothing and burned the edges. The Shadow seemed to barely react the attack but still squirmed with each consecutive hit. Her fingers curled around a nearby pole.

“That’s the way!” Junpei pumped a fist in the air. “Keep it up!”

In retaliation, the boss reached out and grabbed Hermes by the neck. The quick Persona was slammed to the ground and held in place. Ice began to increase its helmet with the intent to incapacitate for the duration of the battle.

Junpei clutched his chest with a gasp. “Damnit, that’s gonna leave a mark!” He reached out to Hermes with a frantic cry. “I can’t call him back! She’s got him pinned!”

Minato was by his partner’s side, Evoker ready to go. “Let’s go, Berith!” he yelled before the familiar shock of the Evoker froze him in place.

Minato felt the noble presence of the chosen Persona seeth beneath his skin. A night atop a black mount galloped from the sea of his soul. The sharp armor exuded the powers of hell and would seer anything that touched the hot metal.

Berith let out a garbled warcry and leaped at the hand that trapped Hermes. With a swift cut of his flaming blade, it severed and was soon ash.

For the first time during the battle, the boss screamed out and yanked her stumped arm to her chest.

Hermes and Berith disappeared soon after and Junpei was able to breathe clearly again. He sprung back to his feet without a moment to lose. “Thanks, man. That hurt like hell.”

Minato grunted in turn. “No problem.”

The boss let out a low growl and snapped her head to the side.

An entire pack of smaller Shadows dropped from the ceiling. They congregated in front of their summoner as if to shield her from the two teens.

Without warning, they charged forward to prevent any more fire attacks.

“On your left!”

Minato barely noticed as Minako rushed at the newcomers from behind. She wasted no time in jumping them, naginata easily slicing into them repeatedly. Her skill had greatly improved and it showed with how she expertly twirled and spun to both defend and damage.
“Keep working on the boss!” She yelled, raising the staff over her head and coming down hard enough to crack the crown-shaped head of one of the Shadows. “We’ll handle these suckers ourselves. Don’t stop now!”

Arrows whizzed past to bury into a Shadow that went for Minako’s back. As more small Shadows dropped and crawled out of hiding, more arrows flew for a killing strike.

“Do as she says and go!” Minato heard Yukari’s Evoker sound off. “Dia!”

Minato and Junpei were briefly caught in the archer’s healing spell, their wounds immediately attended to. It was as if someone had injected caffeine into their veins.

“Thanks, Yukatan!” Junpei raised his Evoker once more. “Hermes!”

Minato followed suit, this time calling out to a different Persona.

“Orpheus!”

Together, Hermes and Orpheus tag teamed rather than attack one at a time. The main Shadow couldn’t keep up with two opponents attacking from difficult angles.

Flames and smoke obscured the boss in smoke and intense heat. Screams echoed off the steel walls of the monorail. Some of the smaller Shadows had gotten caught in the crossfire and shriveled away with their master.

Each time Orpheus returned to Minato, his blood thundered from the thrill of the battle. He could hear his Persona’s call to be returned to battle and to obliterate the frustrating enemy. Each time, the wish was granted, chaos erupting in the car.

It was a good thing that no human’s manned the night trains these days or else there would be coffin debris everywhere.

Unfortunately, the strain from constant Persona use was getting to Minato.

Fatigue weighed heavy on his bones and muscles. “Is this even working?” His once even breathing was growing more and more shallow. “Why can’t we beat her?”

Junpei fared no better, leaning heavily on his drawn broadsword. “This thing just won’t go down already.” His smirk had become a stoic line that was more concerned with survival than obliterating the enemy.

At the pace they were going, they would eventually collapse or worse. Yukari and Minako would be left without their first line of defense.

The two ended up lightening their assault, taking a moment to catch their bearings.

“What’re you doing!? Get down-”

Minako’s alert came too late.

In a last-ditch attempt to shake off her assailants, the boss raised her good hand and blew a kiss the team’s way, blasting them with an ice attack.

Minato felt the tip of his nose and ears freeze almost instantly. His shoes did nothing to keep his feet from becoming nothing but a pair of frozen blocks. Even his hands stayed curled around his Evoker with no intention of moving to summon a Persona. “What is this?”
“I can’t move!” Junpei wriggled in place, but true to his claim, his legs refused to comply. His arm seemed stuck like a doll on display. “This bites!”

He didn’t seem to be the only one. From the corner of his eye, Minato could see his sister struggling to shake off a decent layer of frost. Her naginata had slipped from her grasp and laid at her feet in a drift of snow.

“We’re frozen solid!” Minako tried to turn her head in an attempt to take a headcount. “I can’t see Yukari! Yukari!? Where are ya?”

Minato heard someone shuffle behind him. A warm hand was placed on his back as a placid voice accompanied the click of a gun.

“Io, get us free.”

In the next instance, a pleasant tingle spread through Minato’s body. The deep chill in his bones melted away and left him with feeling in his limbs again. He took a few testing steps forward to find control over himself was back completely.

Soon enough, Junpei and Minako were stumbling this way and that. “Is everyone alright?” The latter quickly scooped up her naginata and turned to the rest of the party. “Good job, Yukatan! I thought we were toast for a second!”

Minato nodded. “Yeah, thanks. We owe you one.”

Yukari stepped back in line with the others. Minato could see a dusting of pink on her cheeks when their eyes accidentally met. “It was nothing. You guys would do it for me.”

They all faced the boss once again. She wore the same crooked grin despite losing an arm and her prey from escaping her icy trap. Her good hand was raised, sparking with jagged snow dust and a strange power that seemed all too ominous.

As if sensing the situation, Mitsuru’s voice reentered their heads.

“You have to hurry! There’s only three minutes until collision!”

Minako drew her Evoker and aimed for her forehead. “Looks like our time’s up. We have to go all out!”

Minato shimmed his way next to her, bumping shoulders to let her know he was there. “If we die here, I want a Viking funeral.”

She bumped him back, a smile curled on her lips. “Good luck with that.”

“Well, I guess that’s that then,” Junpei said, gun poised to make the first move. “If we die, we die like heroes! Let’s end this, Hermes!”

As the Persona flung itself forward for their final stand, Minako recoiled as her Evoker went off. “I’m counting on ya’, Pyro Jack!”

Now with to fire-wielding Personas out, Minato remained on standby while they dropped bombshell after bombshell of flaming death. Pyro Jack flung his lantern in circles as Hermes went in for quick slashes and burns as a follow-up. Yukari used Io’s wind spells to keep the fire from panning backward into the cars behind them with great success.
Suddenly, Pyro Jack’s lantern had run out of firepower and needed to retreat for a break. Minato took his turn for an attack. He raised his Evoker without hesitation.

“Orpheus.”

The harp-clad warrior leaped into the fray, his instrument now a weapon of mass destruction. Using the blunt end, Orpheus slammed itself repeatedly at the boss who couldn’t focus on him or Hermes at the same time.

In order to shake them off, she placed her fingers to her lips for another freezing spell.

“Crap! Not again!”

“I got this, Stupei! We won’t fall for the same trick twice!” Yukari pointed to the boss with her bow. “Stop her Io!”

Just as the spell was cast, Io increased her wind power to blow the ice back at the boss. The force of the counter strike was enough to not only deflect her attack but threw her head back against the wall of the train. By some miracle, she stopped moving, head lolling as if dizzy.

“She’s down!” Minako yelled out, shooting off her Evoker. “It’s now or never! Nona!”

“Io!”

“Orpheus!”

“Hermes!”

The four Personas all rushed at the boss with incredible vigor. Io got to it first and, although not a physical attacker in the slightest, took no time in body-slamming her floating bull’s head full force at the enemy. A sickening snap resounded through the car before Io faded and was replaced by the nest combatant.

Nona poised her spear above her head and ran it straight through the boss’s chest. It screeched and tried to pry the weapon out, but could only dangle helplessly. Minako’s Persona twisted the end of the spear for good measure before leaving the battle.

It was finally Hermes and Orpheus turn to dish out some pain. The latter took advantage of the boss’s situation, using his harp as a butcher’s knife to chop off the remaining arm.

“It’s all you, Junpei!” Minato called as Orpheus vanished. “End it!”

“Gladly!” Junpei raised his hand to the sky, shouting out to Hermes one final time. “Off with her head!”

Hermes did as he was told. He took a running start, cocked his arm back, and surged for the neck.

One moment, Hermes landed behind the petrified boss. The Persona vanished as per usual, but not the enemy.

Minato thought for sure that nothing happened and raised his Evoker for another attack.

Just as the metal brushed his ear, the Shadow slumped forward.

Her head detached from her body. It rolled a few measly feet then both body and head crumbled into black ash. Just like all other Shadows, the ash became smoke and the smoke vanished just as
Minato watched everything, stunned but his mind seemed to scream.

Minako was the first to lay a hand on Junpei’s shoulder with a dumbstruck grin.

“We beat it.” She shook the junior lightly, convulsing into giggles. “Ya’ just sliced her head off Queen of Hearts style! We actually won!”

Junpei removed his cap, waving it in the air with ecstatic whoops.

“WOOHOO! WE WON!” He ran up to Minato and nearly suffocated him in a hug. “Ah man, dude I thought we were gonna die! That was sick!”

Minato struggled to break away, but couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride at their first huge victory in weeks. He reached to pat Junpei on the back.

“Yeah, we did it.”

“Oh no!”

Their celebration was short-lived at Yukari’s grim outburst.

Minato looked outside to see the world still rushing past. The floor under their feet swayed over the imperfections of the monorail track. A train that wasn’t too far off was on the same track as theirs, and it was getting closer and closer.

“It’s not over yet.”

The train was still moving.

Minako’s joy turned to terror.

“We’re still moving.” Her own voice seemed foreign as she stumbled into the nearest pole. “This can’t be happening, not now.”

“We’re still moving!?” Junpei rushed to the nearest window, wiping his eyes as if stuck in a dream. “That’s impossible, we beat the Shadow! We shouldn’t be moving!”

The train took a sharp turn, but at the speed it was going, the teens were thrown and tossed around the carriage like ragdolls. Yukari had grabbed Junpei before he took a hard fall to the floor. “We’re going too fast! We have to put on the brakes or else we’ll die!”

Mitsuru came through in a hurry.

“What are you waiting for!? There’s a train up ahead! Get to the control panel and pull the emergency break!”

Minako didn’t need to think before snapping into action. “I’ve got it!” She used the railings and anything stable to help her towards the control car. The others watched as she struggled to so much as stand up and walk against the force that forced them back.

Junpei was holding on to both of the other juniors, keeping them from tumbling over. “Keep going Minatan!”
“Hurry!” Yukari shrieked at the top of her lungs.

Minato said nothing, but his terrified stare was more than enough motivation.

Minako reached the control room without a second to waste, raking over each button and lever. Alas, there were no labels to guide her. No post-it notes on the walls or cheat sheets could be seen.

As far as she was concerned, she was flying blind.

“Where’s the break-” Another sharp turn sent Minako ramming into the wall. A sharp pain ran up and down her arm that braced for impact. She could hear her teammates screaming from the other car.

“We’re gonna die!”

“Minako-senpai!”

“Sis!”

Minako barely had a second to recover. Her eyes wandered above the dashboard to see the monorail they were about to collide with. Time seemed to slow as the bumper loomed closer and closer.

“This can’t be happening.”

A flash of red caught her attention.

Looking down at the control panel again, a bright scarlet lever was practically begging to be pulled. “Emergency” was printed in neon yellow on a black and white background.

Minako gulped and didn’t spare another thought. She grabbed the lever with both hands and closed her eyes.

“God, please save us.”

The lever was pulled back with little resistance.

A horrible screeching blared in her eardrums while the floor beneath Minako’s feet seemed to rumble like an earthquake. At the same time, she was thrown against the wall once more on her already injured arm.

“Please stop!” she repeated over and over. “Stop, stop, stop!”

The force of being yanked back was slowly receding. The screeching metal was starting to dull to a low roar, but Minako still kept her eyes shut and prayed.

“Please, for them just stop. . .”

Suddenly, there was silence.

The train gave one last jerk before going deadly still.

Minako dared to open her eyes and look outside.

Their train had stopped with less than a foot of space between the bumper and window.
Nothing happened to anyone, no casualties or damage to be seen.

Minako let out a sigh and slumped against the wall, seating herself on the floor. She held her sore arm, staring blankly at a trashcan stowed under the control panel.

“We’re still alive. Thank God, we’re alive.”

Three sets of shoes came running into the control room and stood in front of the leader. All three kneeled down in front of her with concerned glances. “You saved us!” Yukari’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, arms cradling her shaking form. “I thought we were dead for sure, but you stopped us in time. Thank you so much!”

Junpei took off his cap with a relieved chuckle. “Dude, I’m like drenched in sweat. That was too close.”

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” Mitsuru sighed as she entered in on the muted celebration. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more on my end, but I don’t detect any more Shadows. You guys did a great job, so come on home.”

Minako smiled. “We’ll get off at the closest station. Thanks for the back-up.”

“Of course, I will be there shortly to help treat any wounds.” The president cut out once more, leaving the three in comfortable silence.

Minato stood up and offered his arm out to her. “Let’s get moving, the Dark Hour will be over soon. Can you stand up?”

Minako accepted the help, finding that her legs still shook from the excitement. “Yeah, but my arm’s killing me. I got jostled around before pulling the break.” A headache was beginning to pound into her skull. “Is it just me, or was the world always this fuzzy?”

“Senpai,” Yukari shuffled to Minako’s side, “how did you know which one was which?” She pointed to the dashboard. “None of these are labeled. Do you know a lot about trains.”

Minako couldn’t help but let out a nervous chuckle.

“Guess ya’ could say it was a . . . ‘lucky break’?”

Minato slapped his forehead while Junpei’s jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

“Kill me, please.”

“Are you shittin’ me!?”

“\textit{This is Mitsuru. We've successfully completed the operation. The monorail didn't sustain any noticeable damage and the team seems to be in one piece.}”

Ikutsuki hummed at the report, leaning back in his chair while inspecting the map above the control panel. “Thank you, Mitsuru. When I'd heard they hijacked a monorail, I feared the worst.” He yawned. “Well done, now I don't have to worry about tomorrow's headlines.”

“They did a great job as well. For a moment, I thought it would all fall apart. I'm glad I was proved wrong when it came down to the wire.”

Akihiko, who stood behind him, couldn’t seem to loosen his rigid stance. “But, what are the
Shadows up to? Taking over a monorail and trying to ram it into another. . .” He shook his head. “This is getting out of hand. Anything could happen now.”

Ikutsuki remained stone-faced. “I’ll be looking into the matter, don’t worry.”

“Does this mean. . .” Mitsuru’s voice lowered as if her next words were only meant for certain ears. “. . . Does that mean it’s begun?”

“Hmmm. . .” Ikutsuki rubbed his chin. “Let's not jump to any conclusions. For now, we should study their behavior for patterns or clues. We cannot afford to always wait for them to make the first move.”

Mitsuru mumbled over the transceiver, her voice coming out as static amidst the poor connection. Not a single word seemed to make any sense.


“I’m fine,” she answered promptly. The engine of a motorcycle sparked to life through the communication unit. “I need to meet the team. We’ll be back soon.”

The line went dead with a crackle of electricity.

Ikutsuki let out a sigh of relief, leaning back further in his chair. “Excuse me, but do you have anything to drink, Akihiko? I’m a little parched at the moment.”

“Huh?” Akihiko came around the Chairman to get a better look at him. “Why do you look so tired, Ikutsuki-san? Wait. . .” He walked over to the window overlooking the front of the building before whipping his head back. “Don’t tell me that bicycle outside is yours!”

Ikutsuki groaned and sunk deeper into the chair.

“Boy, am I gonna be sore tomorrow!”

May 9th, 2009

I will keep this as short as possible. My hands are aching so bad, I can barely write straight.

We faced our biggest threat to date with only a few hiccups along the way. For a moment, things were going south and I thought we were done for. Thankfully, we got out with only some cuts and bruises.

. . .

If I’m being honest, this entire thing scared me to death.

At any second, I felt like someone was going to die. I was barely able to protect my team at the beginning and it could have cost us dearly. Junpei acted completely out-of-character to the point that I’m deeply concerned. Yukari shook the whole time, I could have sworn she was going to pass out.

And Minato. . . my brother was almost killed because of a stupid miscalculation. If I had pulled the wrong lever, he wouldn’t be sleeping soundly tonight.
I know I was chosen as the leader, but can I step down as soon as Sanada-san comes back?

He says the team trusts me, but trust cannot save people’s lives.

Maybe even Mitsuru could take over. She handles everything like it means nothing.

I need some sleep. Tomorrow is Sunday, so at least I can rest up. God knows I have a lot to think about the next few days.

Until next time,

Minako Arisato
Minato had never been more grateful for a day off in his entire life.

The events from the night before had left him exhausted beyond comprehension. The muscles in his arms, legs, and torso had all but failed him at when he tried to get up at his usual time. Raindrops on his window lulled him back to sleep until he finally got up around ten in the morning.

Now, still in his sleeping attire, Minato lounged on his bed while watching old reruns of Featherman Rangers. The bright colors of the heroes were almost blinding, but the nostalgia of cheesy one-liners and low budget fight scenes kept him from getting bored.

“Let’s fly on by side-by-side. Just spread your wings and go, go, go~” Minato sung along to the familiar opening song. No one was around to make fun of him for singing about a children's TV show so he might as well enjoy a moment of brevity.

Just a moment, of course.

“We are the Rangers, Featherman Rangers-”

“BABY BABY BABY BABY BABY BABY!!!”

Minato flinched as his phone buzzed and played his trademark ringtone.

“Fear's awake, anger beats loud, face reality. Never face charity~”

“Dammit.” he groaned before rolling out of bed. It took a moment for him to adjust from the loud colored screen to a familiar greyscale room. “Someone better be dead or dying.”

“The enemy you're fighting cover all society (damn right). Mommy's not here, gotta fight (all night)~”

His phone was sitting on his desk, a small thing, simple and cheaper than one with a full-sized keyboard. Leave it to Minako to penny-pinch with everything that wasn’t candy.

When Minato finally stumbled his way across the room, the chorus of the song was blaring as loud as the volume would permit. He didn’t bother glancing at the collar I.D before picking up the phone and flipping it open. “Minato Arisato, what’s up?”
“Hello, this is Elizabeth.”

Minato perked up, straightening his posture without knowing he was. “Hey, good morning.” He made a move toward his door. “Is something wrong? Should I get Minako?”

“That won’t be necessary. Theo has already spoken to the young lady earlier this morning.” Elizabeth seemed to smile with her voice. “I trust you slept well after last night’s events? We in the Velvet Room are very proud of both you and your sister’s efforts to live up to your full potential.”

Minato shrugged, walking back to his bed and flopping on top of the covers. “It’s whatever, I just did what I could.”

“And what you did was nothing short of impressive, for a human that is.”

There was an edge of humor in her crass observation. It was too forced, the delivery may have come off as condescending to others, but to a cynic like himself, Minato couldn’t help the small quirk of his mouth. Igor and the attendants have probably seen billions of situations like this or even faced their own enemies much more fearsome.

Even still, there was something charming about her compliment disguised behind an attempt as a joke.

Elizabeth was really starting to grow on the boy.

“Is there anything else I should know? I doubt you called to just congratulate me.”

“Yes, down to business I suppose.” Elizabeth changed her tone back to neutral. “I’m calling to inform you of a change in Tartarus. I believe a path that was blocked is now open. Does that mean anything to you both?”

Minato nodded, knowing full well she couldn’t see him. “I know what you’re talking about. We’ll take it from here.”

“I thought so. I admire your attention to detail. Enjoy your rest, young man. We will speak again soon enough.”

“Take care, Elizabeth.”

“I certainly will. Igor sends his regards.”

Without further ceremony, the call ended.

Minato snapped his phone shut, tossing it aside.

All at once there was peace once more in his humble abode.

The rain grew worse outside and nearly drowned out the animate yells of the Featherman Rangers on the TV. Despite that, it was almost soothing the way it fell against the building.

Minato’s eyes began to droop.

Eight hours was never enough sleep for someone like himself.

“Well, if you can’t beat it…” He shimmed himself back under the covers, leaving the TV on for more white noise. The blankets were cool and the sheets were starting to smell less like hand sanitizer with each use. There were no lights to turn off so he simply turned towards to wall and
closed his eyes. “Just . . . five more minutes.”

The last thing he heard before drifting off into a dreamless sleep was the ending theme of a children’s superhero team show.

For a moment, he had to wonder if that was what SEES would become.

Me: hey junpinator, ya up?

$upDude: yah dude wat’s up?

Me: wanna get some lunch? I just finished shopping 4 da team an need something gud 2 eat, but I don’t wanna eat alone. U game?

$upDude: sure! Where 2?

Me: Hagakure Ramen . . . meh fellow senior has me addicted :P

Despite being dead on her feet, surviving on a cheap cup of coffee, and ready for a three-day nap, Minako decided to drag her feet to the Iwatodai strip mall and meet Junpei for lunch. True to his word, he arrived at the beef bowl shop two steps ahead of the ragged senior. He had even taken the liberty of staking out a place at the counter and ordering her drink ahead of time.

Sitting down never felt so relieving after walking around Port Island all day. And as if the universe was finally throwing her a bone, Minako sat down and had her order taken without having to wait.

In no time, it was just her and the capped teen.

“So ya’ know ‘bout this place too? Not many newbies come here.” Junpei asked, shrugging off his coat and hanging it on the back of his chair. “Who showed ya’?”

Minako sighed and took a swig of her water. “Sanada has an infatuation with the food; it’s almost scary, but he pays, so no biggie.” She shivered at the memory of the first visit. “That boy is something else. He got me the special on my first visit here.”

“That doesn’t sound bad-”

“-the EXTRA large special. . .” Minako sank, "... I ate every last bite out of guilt.”

Junpei sucked in a harsh breath.

“Yikes . . he knows yer’ a girl, right?”

“In his words,” she lowered her voice and forced a frown, “Eating right is a big part of building up muscle, you know. Blah, blah, protein is life get good mortals.” She couldn’t help but chuckle at her horrible impression. “Scratch that last part, that’s what I was thinking.”

“I wouldn’t’ve noticed the difference.” Junpei lounged back. “Jeez, Mitsuru-senpai and Akihiko-senpai are sooo hardcore. Makes ya’ wonder what SEES was like before we got thrown into the fire. Those two must’ve argued a lot, dude!”

Minako shrugged. “Maybe, but I don’t know. I think they’re just a pair of young adults trying to do the best they can, but they have disagreements on what that means for the situation.” She
absentmindedly twirled a stray lock of her hair. “I could learn a lot from their differing leadership styles, especially Kirijo-san. She’s practically a genius when it comes to micro-management and organization. My dumb luck can only get me so far when it’s our lives on the line.”

Junpei gave her a glassy-eyed stare. “Yeah, I’ll let ya’ do all that thinking. It’s not for me.”

“Order up!”

Two piping hot bowls of the beef bowl special slid in front of the high schools, breaking them from their conversation. Chopsticks were hastily handed over before the server left to attend to another table.

“Thanks, man!” Junpei called after, getting a thumbs up in return. “Well then, I’m digging in!” He didn’t hesitate in breaking his utensils and moving in to inhale the first bite. “Chow time!”

The two ate in relative silence with only the sounds of the restaurant to fill the dead space between them. Sizzling meat from the kitchen wafted into the main dining area and gave off a cozy atmosphere of a home. The laughter of work buddies on break and catty gossip between women all culminated together in a symphony of normalcy.

However, Minako couldn’t fully enjoy it with so much weighing on her mind.

Akihiko would be returning to the team towards the end of Midterms, that left her scrambling to dissect how his integration into the new SEES would affect established group dynamics. Someone just coming out of the blue would certainly cause a few waves that could be positive or negative. It was better to predict the outcome and adjust for the future ahead of time.

Then there was the current issue of their difficult mission. Almost dying and having to go back to school, not even two days after, wasn’t healthy on the mind. A debriefing of the events was already scheduled to take place that evening, but will such a formality solve the emotional side of the problem?

And then there was Junpei’s out-of-character, insubordinate actions during the mission. . .

No one mentioned it, spoke of it, or acknowledged that it had happened. No one stopped to ask him what was wrong (albeit there was no time during their situation). No one had pulled him aside after the mission and give him a chance to say his peace. Even still, what happened was a shock to everyone.

How could the usually carefree, loyal, and team-oriented fighter become a hostile deserter at the drop of a hat?

All of her thoughts seemed to swirl like a hurricane inside her mind. A sudden lightheaded sensation crept up from the parade of confusion.

Maybe going out was not the brightest idea in the book.

“Hey, you okay senpai?”

A steady hand was placed on her shoulder, she hadn’t noticed she’d been tipping out of her seat.

“Just a little dizzy.” Minako re-centered herself, but Junpei still kept a hold on her. “After everything that happened, I should be at the dorm resting. Guess I overestimated how much I could do today.”
Junpei hummed in agreement. “Yeah, you’re always so busy but ya’ gotta know your limits Minatan. Let’s head back.” He raised his hand to flag down one of the servers. “Check please!”

After paying for their meal, the two left to go back to the dorm. Minako had trouble keeping up with her taller companion’s pace and being exhausted didn’t help at all. Thankfully, Junpei noticed her struggle and slowed down until they fell into a comfortable gait.

“Sorry, we had to leave early. You didn’t even finish your lunch.”

Junpei waved her off. “Psh, they’ll be open forever.” He tucked his hands behind his head. “Maybe we can go when you’re not trying to faint on me? We can study for midterms an’ all that normal stuff for once.”

Minako couldn’t help but snort. “Junpei-kun, since when did you decide ya’ wanna study of your own free will? I don’t remember tacking on extra chores lately.” She snapped her fingers. “It was Yukari, wasn’t it? What’d she say?”

“I’m serious, Minatan!” he exclaimed. “Can’t a guy just decide he wants to work hard an’ get a good score?”

Minako gave him an incredulous glare but ended up relenting to focus on the sidewalk under her feet. “Alright, I’ll believe you for now. This school does have some gnarly tests, practically light years away from my old school’s curriculum.”

“Yeah, tell me ‘bout it. I had some problems myself when I transferred here, too.” Junpei shrugged despite himself. “In your case, you’ve got all the fighting stuff and being a leader . . . and you’re all on your own. I don’t know how ya’ stay sane with all that on your plate.”

Minako felt her feet begin to drag on the concrete.

“I manage, nothing I can’t handle.” She shoved her hands in the pockets of her orange plaid skirt. “I’ve been juggling keeping good grades and taking care of Minato for years. He’s practically a young man, so he helps out where he can. It takes some weight off my back.”

Junpei matched her slowing pace. He let out a long breath, fidgeting with the zipper of his jacket. “Still, I can’t imagine filling in for your parents when your just a kid. It’s just so- . . .” he trailed off into the spring breeze. “. . . That ain’t fair for anyone. Now I’m just worried you’ll run yourself into an early grave.”

Minako felt her heart warm inside her chest. It was the same kind of feeling she got whenever Minato did something worthy of a celebratory cake. The same feeling when he burst into a rare laughing fit and would roll around on the ground like an eight-year-old.

Maybe this newly dubbed “best friend,” a title that was never given out liberally, was starting to become something closer to a brother?

“Junpei-kun,” she breathed, “how come you’re such a dork and have a heart of gold at the same time?”

Said teen scoffed and bumped her with his elbow. “Hey, I’m just wondering how you’re doing! That’s what pals do, they watch each other’s back and all that!” He jammed a thumb in his direction. “Someone’s gotta make sure our leader isn’t dead. Might as well be me!”

Minako somehow found extra pep in her step at his heartfelt declaration. She started to pick up her knees and began to move ahead. “Careful, Minato might get jealous that I’m stealing his partner!”
“Pft, he’ll be fine! He’s a lone wolf through an’ through that guy!”

As they threw quips back and forth, Minako felt her doubts about his true feelings melt into the background of her singing heartbeat. She might be able to forget her troubles with everyone else, but with Junpei, she had a second little brother.

And as for what he said the night before, it wasn’t a big deal at that moment.

He was human, and humans sometimes say things they don’t mean.

It was a talk for another lunch.

The dorm was coming into view as they turned into the neighborhood. Both wore glowing smiles despite the lead in their feet.

“Girls and guys livin’ in the same dorm, huh? That can't be good.”

Minako glanced over to see Junpei giving the building a mischievous smirk. “Down boy, Yukari and Kirijo would wipe the floor with ya’ if they heard that.”

“Aww, I can't help it!” he whined, but his smirk remained just as strong. “Oh, but I don't drag love into my work.”

“Tha’t’s very mature-”

“-Then again, I can't guarantee that I won't fall for somebody, mwahahaha!”

Yes, he definitely became the second brother in that moment as he avoided Minako trying to steal his hat for his crude joke.

Minato had made the correct choice to be a couch potato on Sunday. It was as if someone had given his brain a bubble bath complete with some Mozart playing in the background and a book being read for him by some tall glass of water.

Also, candles, fifty of them scattered at random intervals.

Junpei and Yukari had somewhat recovered; they walked to school with him and had only complained three times about not getting enough rest. The other ten were about how one or the other was Lucifer reincarnate.

Mr. Ekoda was kicking off the week with his Classic Literature class. At least it wasn’t Mr. Ono and his dumb hat.

“I’m sure you all remember that midterm exams start next Monday. If you paid attention during class and studied diligently at home, you should have no problems.” The elderly man walked up and down the rows, stopping only to slap Junpei on the back. “Of course, the best way to prepare for a difficult exam is to sleep through class, like Junpei here!”

The whole class giggled and chuckled amongst themselves as Junpei balked at the sudden humiliation. “Hey, I’m wide awake gramps, that was ONE time and I said I was sorry! What more do ya’ want from me?”

The teacher let out a hearty laugh. “It seems you need to prioritize math in the coming days since I distinctly remember it being no less than NINE times.” He wriggled a pencil in the student’s direction. “Do get yourself a tutor young man.”
Junpei crossed his arms over his chest and muttered under his breath “Why don’t you get a tutor cause ya’ already got dementia.”

Minato couldn’t help but smirk at the poor attempt at a burn.

Mr. Ekoda returned to the front of the room. “That goes for all of you. If you choose to neglect your duty as a student and waste your life in idleness, then be my guest!”

Minato set aside his pencil and notebook, leaning back so he was comfortably seated.

There was no need to hunch over his desk in preparation for actual knowledge. They were starting out with a famous back-in-my-day rant on Monday morning, a trademark of the straight-laced Mr. Ekoda.

“In my day, society was nowhere near as rich and abundant as it is today! That's why we worked so long and hard; to better our lives. Can you young people say the same?” He sent a harsh glare to every student. “Hmm?”

When no one answered, he carried on.

“Our society's material wealth has come at the cost of its spiritual wealth. Spiritual wealth, I say a second time!”

They eventually got to the lesson on *Ise Monogatari.* . . . almost an hour later.

“The recent string of cases involving the medical phenomenon, Apathy Syndrome, has dropped into the single digits as of this afternoon.”

“Could someone turn that up? I can’t hear it from the kitchen!”

“Got it, Minatan!” Junpei answered back.

“Thanks!”

Minato had scooped up the remote first and raised the volume to an acceptable number. Minako could continue cooking while the juniors watched from the couches. Textbooks and lined paper lay strewn about of cushions, side tables, and even the floor.

“-Doctors reported their patients to be responsive and many returning to their previous behaviors as early as twelve in the morning on Sunday. Three individuals are still in the care of a team of professionals researching the cause of this peculiar event, but are slowly making progress towards discharge.”

Yukari clasped her hands together, a sigh of relief escaping her lips. “Thank goodness. Looks like we actually made some waves.”

Junpei pointed at the screen. “Hold up, there’s more.”

“-Although it seems that Apathy Syndrome affects individuals regardless of medical history, gender, and/or age, a link has been found between the most recent victims. All had reported to be riding the subway during the night and suddenly felt nothing. This contradicts previous reports that linked these outbreaks near a small neighborhood in Iwatodai. Could this sickness be location-based? Will it return or is this simply the beginning? We’ll be back tomorrow with updates on the remaining three victims.”
Minato flicked the TV off, sinking into the chair he had claimed for the group’s study session.
“Guess Yukari’s right, we’re doing well out there.”

“That was crazy though, the day before yesterday. We won the battle and saved the freaking city.” Junpei mused aloud. “I’ve never had that kinda thrill in all my life. Don’t you think it’s been getting more exciting lately?”

“I’m just happy we survived that whole debacle.” Minako entered the living room with a tray of delicately sliced fruit, her apron stained with various shades of red, orange, and blue. As soon as the tray was set on the coffee table, the teen helped themselves. “But I have to agree, things might start to pick up again. Who knows what else is out there? What kind of Shadows haven’t we fought yet?”

Yukari finished chewing a clementine slice before speaking. “I say we go to Tartarus on the thirteenth. We’d have one more day to rest up and then we can explore to our heart’s content.” She put her hand up. “Let’s take a vote, who’s in?”

Junpei raised his hand that held a generous serving of blackberries. “For once, I agree with Yukatan. Studying is already getting old. I need something fun!”

“I have no objections.” Minato threw out, turning his body to face his sister. “It’s your call; we good to go or are we staying here?”

Minako pretended to consider the proposal, rocking back and forth on her heels. After a suspenseful minute, she nodded and gave them a thumbs up. “Finish your chores and get at least a few minutes of flashcards in, we shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Alright!” Junpei and Yukari yelled at the same time. Minato offered an apathetic cheer under the caterwauling of his fellow classmates.

Minako shook her head, returning to the kitchen to clean up her mess. She fiddled with her cross around her neck as she listened to her teammate’s chatter excitedly about the upcoming adventure.

“God bless these five-year-old teenagers.”

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May 11th, 2009

Sometimes, I wonder if life happens on a script.

Like, it was all planned and we’re all just actors.

Damn... I’m starting to sound like Satan herself.

-Minato Arisato
Rondo Capriccioso

Chapter Notes

I had planned to release this yesterday, but I didn't like the ending so I abstained. After realizing that I didn't want to spend another week trying to find a perfectly phrased ending, I decided to just post this. Sorry if the ending isn't up to par with what I usually would like!

“So then Sanada challenged me to a sit-up competition and I was pumped! But that lunatic cheated! He didn’t use his core at all, he used his hips!” Minako rounded on her brother, walking backward up the school slope. “His H-I-Ps, nerd! I’m already at a disadvantage being a runner and then he goes and commits the mortal sin of being a Hip Hopper-!”

Minato had finally reached his limit of Minako’s Crazy-Sister-Syndrome, clamping a hand of her mouth. “Oh no, someone call an old priest and a young priest to expel the demon!” he mocked, removing his hand. “I don’t give a flying frog what your boyfriend does when you guys go for a stroll through town. Unlike the rest of us normal people, we don’t get up at three am for couple's Jazzercise.”

Minako huffed, turning back around so she was walking forward. “He’s not my boyfriend, he’s a training partner and kinda friend.” She sighed and reached up to readjust her ponytail. “Besides, if we started dating, the fangirls would find a way to summon Satan so he could drag my soul straight to hell.” She visibly shivered at her own description. “Nope, being single is alright by me.”

“Five bucks says he thinks you two are dating.”

“Do you really think he’s that dumb?”

“A little, the guy drinks too much muscle milk and thinks it’s healthy.”

The two passed by the gate in relative peace (albeit Minako had switched to the topic of what was for dinner). A pair of girls had reached the gate at the same time and started walking very close to the siblings, too engrossed in their conversation to notice they were invading someone’s personal space.

“Did you hear the latest?” the first girl asked. “Someone on the staff was hospitalized with some bad injuries. I heard the road suddenly collapsed, and the guy's car fell thirty feet straight down!”

Her friend gasped in absolute shock. “Wow, I've never heard of anything like that before. . . Is this school haunted?”

Minato heard his sister hold in a snort.

“I know, right!? I think I just felt a chill go down my spine. I should go to the nurse's office.”

The friend, once again cried out as if the gossiper had caught the Plague. “Th-The nurse's office!? The same place that staffer is resting? Are you kidding me?” There was a rattling sound that followed as if she grabbed the other girl by the shoulders and put some faux sense into her. “He'll give you that weird medicine. You might end up feeling even worse!”
The girls walked around the siblings who had intentionally slowed down to discuss the new information.

Once they created a safe buffer between them and the girls to talk in private, the two set themselves to work.

“That doesn’t sound normal at all.” Minako weighed in first. “Maybe the Shadows know we’ve been taking it easy and decided to roam outside of Tartarus. It sounds like something they could be capable of. What do ya’ think?”

Minato hummed. “A thirty-foot hole doesn’t just appear out of nowhere. I’ll see if I can get pictures of the accident and cross-reference times with police reports. If it happened at midnight, we got a case.” He nodded to himself. “Ghosts don’t just dig tunnels unless they’re trying to get revenge on someone, so it has to be something else.”

Minako reeled back, raising an eyebrow. “You sound like a conspiracy theorist.”

“Says the Catholic who believes the world was created in seven days.”

“I’ve told ya’, I’m not a Creationist!”

And the arguing between the Arisato siblings continued until the bell rang for class.

True to his word, Minato skipped lunch and went straight to the library to begin his research on the rumor he heard that morning. After telling Yukari and Junpei, they decided to jump on the bandwagon and help out.

However, one of them wasn’t too keen on being patient.

“These load times suuuuck.” Junpei slumped as he waited for another news page to finish configuring. “How long does it take for this dinosaur to work already?”

“You’ve been sitting there for two minutes.” Minato casually observed, closing a click-bait ad that was blocking the story he was in the middle of reading. “Jeez, I hate modern news sites. What happened to just reading the paper?”

Yukari was the only one of the three who seemed remotely on top of things. “I still can’t believe the media is all over this so early. I found ten more stories and a video.” She motioned for the boys to come look at her monitor. “Apparently, there’s a twenty-four-hour convenience store on the same street the accident happened. One of their cameras caught the entire thing.”

Minato had to get up and stand behind her chair just to see the screen. Junpei stood behind him, using the short boy’s head as an armrest.

“Comfortable?” Minato asked.

Junpei gave him a knowing smirk. “Yeah, why?”

“Ssh! I’m restarting the feed.” The mouse hovered over an embedded clip, and in a click, a loading icon spun over a frozen image of the aftermath. Another few seconds and the video box went black.

An empty street popped into the frame. There was a static gradient and the picture was in exclusively black and white. Light from the store it was watching poured over the sidewalk and
into the closest driving lane. Someone with their face blurred out walked away from the storefront with a plastic bag filled with indistinguishable items.

Moments later, another light was slowly creeping out from outside the narrow frame.

“There’s the car. Watch what happens when it comes on screen.”

The light drew closer and closer until a car finally rolled into view. It crossed the frame only to stop a hair’s breadth away from a white traffic line.

While they waited for it to move, Yukari pointed to the line. “The guy leaving the store crossed the street right in front of the car. He was the first person on the scene when the car went down.”

Another few seconds went by until a static crackle went across the screen. One moment, the camera seemed to freeze up and gave off a small whine. The next moment, the ground under the car gave way and crumbled. Both the car and debris caved under the weight and were swallowed up in an instant.

The clip ended with the pedestrian from before jogged next to the hole and leaned down to check on the driver. He waved his arm in front of himself as stray debris drifted up to form a cloud of grey. An attendant from the store ran out to see what the commotion was, only to sprint back inside to presumably call the police.

Minato pushed Junpei’s arm off of his head and shoved his hands in his pockets. “That happened too fast to be a sinkhole. It takes time for the street to give, but it’s like something just ripped a chunk out.”

“It gets worse.” Yukari scrolled back to the article and highlighted over a block of text. “The driver was taken to Tatsumi Memorial Hospital where he was soon diagnosed with Apathy Syndrome. The doctors knew he could hear them, but all he could say was ‘I thought they were people’ and then he’d just stare at the wall.”

“Does that mean . . . ?” Junpei paused to look around for bystanders. After confirming no one could hear them, he leaned close to the other two. “Did the Shadows get ‘im?”

Minato nodded. “Let’s talk to the seniors when we get back to the dorm. Kirijo and Sanada might know by now, but just so Minako’s up to speed—”

“—know what?”

The three juniors looked towards the intruding voice to see Mitsuru walking towards their group.

“Afternoon, Kirijo-senpai.” Minato greeted, stepping aside and welcoming her into the fold. “Take a look at this. We found something you might wanna see.”

The young woman approached swift as a hawk, the heels of her boots clicking with every step she took. Minato stepped aside so she could peer over Yukari’s shoulder and see what they were looking at. Her gaze fell directly onto the highlighted section about the man’s mental diagnosis.

“Another victim so close to the school,” she commented, skimming the rest of the article. “A hole appearing out of nowhere, witnesses report seeing nothing, barely outside campus grounds . . . how concerning.”

“Is something wrong, senpai?” Junpei asked.
Mitsuru stepped away from Yukari’s chair. “The Chairman and I have noticed a pattern with the Lost. At first, they’ve been concentrated around the area that Akihiko was ambushed the night our dorm was attacked.” She placed a hand on her hip. “After that particular Shadow was dealt with, they stopped appearing in that location, but they soon focused themselves on transit stations that the affected monorail ran through. It wouldn’t be a stretch to assume they had all rode the same train as well.”

Minato felt the loose puzzle pieces come together in his head. “You think the Lost appear where those large Shadows strike next?”

“It’s only a theory,” she affirmed with a shake of her head. “We can’t jump to conclusions just yet, not with such powerful enemies supposedly hiding in plain sight. I’d tell you all if such a pattern existed in the first place. For now, we must assume that they can appear anywhere at any time.”

“Still, isn’t that creepy?” Yukari asked with a shiver. She crossed her arms over her chest. “What if it’s true? Will the students and teachers be in danger?”

Mitsuru remained stone-faced. “Like I said, until we have definitive proof, we cannot let the fear of the unknown dissuade us from our mission. It is an issue I and Ikutsuki will continue to keep an eye on, I promise you that.”

Junpei leaned towards Minato.

“What’s dissuade mean?”

Minato gave him a sidelong glance. “Dissuade, it means to distract.”

“Oh . . . thanks dude.”

Mitsuru turned back to the boys, eyes immediately falling on Minato. “On another note, do you have your sister’s cell phone number? I need to reach her, but she’s not in her classroom.”

Minato gave her a curt nod and dug into his pant’s pocket. “Gimme one sec.” He pulled out his phone, flipped it open, and opened his contacts. Right at the top of the list, he selected the nickname he gave Minako and handed his phone over. “Here ya’ go.”

Mitsuru quietly thanked him as she copied the number into her own phone: one of the newer smartphones with a touchscreen.

“Is she in trouble?” Junpei asked.

“Quite the opposite, but I can’t say what that is right now.” The senior pocketed her phone (skirt pockets, go figure) and handed Minato’s back. As he reached to grab it though, he noticed her eyes remained on his phone with her mouth curved into a frown.

“Is something wrong?”

Mitsuru looked up, opened her mouth to speak, but seemed unable to form the words. She paused as if to choose the next sentence and seemed to be successful when she spoke next.

“Why is your sister’s name ‘the bane of my existence’?”

Unknown: Minako-san, meet me in the Student Council Office after school. There is something I wish to discuss and it is of the utmost importance.
Me: Um, hiya who dis’?

Unknown: My apologies, it’s Mitsuru Kirijo. I couldn’t find you lunch, but I found your brother in the library by a stroke of good luck. I asked him for your phone number and now we’re here.

Me: sry bout that, went 4 a walk =^.^=

Unknown: That’s fine, can you meet my request?

Me: no prob bob!

Unknown: Excellent, just come right in. I’ll be there for an hour or so after the bell.

Me: coolio, btw mind if i add u 2 my contacts?

Unknown: I see no reason not to. It would be efficient for SEES meetings and staying on top of announcements.

Me: nifty, i know wat nickname I wanna use!

IceQueen: What is with you and your brother about nicknames?

As soon as the final bell had rung, Minako kicked herself into gear and fast-walked down to the Student Council room.

The school was becoming more and more familiar by the day. She could easily make her way through the many labyrinth-esque hallways and stairwells without having to ask a single person for help. Even when she had trouble finding the council room, all it took was one glance at a floor map hanging outside the school store to get back on track.

The only real obstacles were people and cult members of the Akihiko fan club (who officially branded her as a heretic that must be purged at all costs).

After making her way back to the entrance, she only had a few steps to go. One hop, skip, and dramatic sprint from a faction of previously mentioned club members, Minako reached the safety of the club activities hallway.

A long straight away of doors greeted her, all with a different sign hanging from the ceiling to distinguish them. The nurse’s office lay at the very end, but the complaints of visiting patrons could be heard from where Minako stood. Students milled about near the library entrance while others went straight for specific rooms without having to pause and think. Teachers who were ready to end their day practically skipped into the faculty office while advisors for sports trudged at a snail’s pace.

And right across from the faculty office was the Student Council room.

Minako hustled over as a rowdy clan of boys passed her by, each one wearing different sports jerseys. A laminated sheet of paper was posted on the door that stopped her from reaching for the doorknob.

Meeting in progress

Do not enter
Minako tried to peer through the window but instantly found that it was a privacy window, fogged-up with wires to protect against blunt weapons. The only thing that registered was sunlight and a blurry figure of a person.

The room wasn’t empty, just as the sign had said. Just walking in would come off as disrespectful to the council members as well as brand Minako as the person who knowingly interrupted without regard for tact.

There were two choices that were opened up in that moment.

Option one: wait patiently for someone to come out and tell them that she had to see Mitsuru. It wasn’t the best plan considering that she could be standing there for a while and be late, but it was the less intrusive route.

Option two: knock and risk the wrath of an unknown person given the power to get another student in trouble. However, it was quick and, so long as she was nice, Minako could be punctual.

Polite?

Or Punctual?

Unpredictable?

Or . . . unpredictable.

Minako sent up a small prayer and made her choice.

She raised her fist to the wood and made three soft knocks.

No sound came from the other side. It was impossible to tell if anyone was coming to greet her or if they heard her at all. After a minute of waiting, her assumptions must have been correct.

Should she knock again?

Should she knock louder?

Just as she was about to repeat herself, a shadow appeared in the window. Minako stepped back right as the mystery person turned to the knob and pulled the door open.

A petite girl with long looked up at Minako over a pair of rectangular glasses. Everything about this new face screamed adorable from her round cheeks to a pleasant grin. When their eyes met, the brunette seemed to stiffen up and promptly tried to glance anywhere else but at Minako.

“Um, are you the one Miss Kirijo called in? She mentioned a girl with red headphones and ponytail would be stopping by.”

Minako tried her best to give a reassuring smile, she was an expert with shy individuals at this point in life after all. “Yup,” she extended a hand and offered a tiny bow, “my name’s Minako Arisato. I’m a senior this year.”
The girl looked at the hand, but instead of backing away, she loosened up and accepted the gesture. “I’m I’m Chihiro Fushimi, the Treasurer.” She shuffled her feet. “I’m a sophomore, and um . . . I’m still learning the ropes.”

Minako shrugged. “Same here, I just transferred from Aomori prefecture. It’s been a bit of a whirlwind!”

Chihiro giggled and welcomed her inside. “That’s so far north! Did your family decide to move closer to the city or are they still up there?”

Minako rubbed the back of her neck, fishing through her list of pre-written excuses find for a proper response. “It’s . . . a long story.”

Chihiro didn’t question the misdirection in her words as she closed the door behind them. Her sheepishness seemed to melt away as Minako became more and more familiar. “Well, if you need help finding things around the city, I’m a local. I’d be happy to help if you ask.”

“Thank you, Chihiro-san.”

Minako glanced around the room and was surprised to find it was mostly empty. There were a few students milling around desks with various colored armbands, but not enough to call the gathering a meeting. Most of them were simply going through stacks of paperwork or getting acquainted with one another.

At the head of the room was a large desk meant for teachers. Mitsuru leaned against it while listening to a boy with slicked-back hair and yellow armband talk.

Chihiro led Minako to them, fiddling with the cuffs of her sleeves as she went. Once they were within talking distance, Mitsuru noticed them and stopped chatting with the other student. “You came, and so quickly too.” She pushed off the desk and gave a nod to Chihiro. “Thank you for letting her in, I’ll take it from here. Yuno needed your approval on those budget forms from the swim team.”

“I’ll get to it.” Chihiro turned back to Minako with a smile before practically bounding away from the trio.

A cute way to exit for a cute girl.

“That takes care of that,” Mitsuru muttered before turning her full attention at the person in front of her. “I’m sorry this all seems on such short notice, but I couldn’t ask anyone else.”

Minako cocked her head. “What do ya’ mean? Is something wrong?”

“Hmm.” The boy at Mitsuru’s stepped forward and looked her up and down. His sharp eyes seemed to pierce right to the bone. “For someone handpicked by the president, you certainly have a problem with waiting until people ask you a question before speaking.” He turned back to the president. “Are you sure you’ve made the right choice?”

Minako frowned but didn’t shrivel up from his challenging remarks and snide looks. She pulled her shoulders back and focused solely on Mitsuru. “I’m listening, sorry if I interrupted.”

The redhead waved her off. “A simple miscommunication, I will keep it brief.” She reached behind her and plucked a form off the desk. “Yesterday, I received some bad news. Our Secretary suddenly had to transfer schools due to some personal reasons. He is no longer with us.”
“Yeesh, that’s terrible.” Minako crossed her arms. “Does that mean ya’ need some help? If that’s what you’re getting at, I don’t mind stepping in until ya’ find someone else.”

Mitsuru’s neutral expression then blossomed into a grin.

“Actually, would you consider a more . . . long term commitment?”

A sudden switch had flipped off in some distant universe.

“Long term . . . long term?” she repeated. Minako pointed to herself, feeling as if the world had suddenly begun to spin faster on its axis.

Was Mitsuru really asking what she thought she was asking?

Was she just offered a position on the Student Council?

“What an intelligent way to respond.

Minako cleared her throat to try and reset her brain. “Sorry,” she said, “you want me to join the Student Council?”

“Yes,” Mitsuru stated plainly. “I trust your leadership skills and work ethic. It shines through both in school and outside. I’ve also heard from teachers that you’re quite the avid writer and a Secretary requires a certain degree of linguistic expertise. As it stands, you’re a strong candidate for such a position.”

The boy at her side grumbled at the string of compliments. “That still doesn’t excuse her lack of experience in school government. All of her transcripts are filled with music-related clubs and track team affiliations. Can we trust her with an elected position without at least giving her a test first?”

“That won’t be necessary since this is a bit of an emergency.” the Kirijo heiress dismissed his claims before returning to Minako. “If at any point you decide to leave, I can find a new replacement. All I ask is that you come to the next couple of meetings and see if you’re capable of rising to the occasion.”

Once again, the boy came back to complain, but it faded into background noise.

Minako bit down on her tongue that threatened to take the position quickly just to satisfy her extra-curricular requirements for the first semester. Not to mention that being on the Student Council could provide useful skills for the future and open up previously closed doors. It was practically a golden opportunity being dished out on a silver platter.

Yet, something all too familiar was holding her back. Why couldn’t the cause be named?

Fear? Anxiety? What was it that kept her from taking the plunge?

It was supposed to be a quiet year: keeping her head down and graduating without leaving any trace that she existed. She would straight to the workforce and save as much as she could.

One day, she would retire and live the rest of her days in peace.

A simple life, all laid out in a pretty little package.

But now, stuck in that moment of hesitation, it seemed like that life was too far away. It was
someone else’s rather than a plan she had created. After everything that had already happened, could she really turn this down because of cold feet? Was she really going to close another door?

Or maybe this was just a window letting some sunshine in?

Minako felt a smile tug at her lips.

“Mitsuru-san?”

Said girl stopped debating and turned back to Minako. “Have you made your decision?” she asked. “Will you lend me your assistance?”

It took all of Minako’s willpower not to laugh at her formal way of speaking, putting that energy into her answer.

“Let’s see what I can do.”

In the one month Minato had joined the Kendo team, he would be the last person to admit that it was one of the best choices in his lifetime.

A sport that required a high level of concentration, rigor, and mental fortitude taught only the best of life lessons. Lessons that not just meatheads and jerks could use, but those who hadn’t realized their own potential for growth could glean from as well.

“On your left!”

Minato felt a sharp jab at his stomach despite the amount of gear that protected him. The force of the blow nearly forced him to gag out loud. For a moment, he stumbled backward but he quickly found his footing again as Kazushi went in for a follow-up attack on his right side.

“Nice try.” he snapped back as he easily swiped his opponent’s blade away. It bounced away like a ball off of concrete. “I’m not stupid.”

“Don’t get cocky, Arisato!” Kazushi warned as he regained his composure once more. His sword was positioned back to a guard stance. Minato could practically hear him smiling behind his mesh armor helmet. “That’s just your dummy test for today. I won’t be so easy on ya’ next time.”

Minato felt a little gutsy and decided to move on the offensive. He sashayed to the side, trying to get behind Kazushi and go for an assault. Their blades were pointed towards one another, clicking together as they each waited for the other to make an advance.

“Is that the best you can do?” His enemy kept up with his sly trick, not even remotely willing to concede an inch of ground. “You look like a little fairy dancing around the ring.”

Minato took Kazushi’s moment of trash talk to make his move.

He advanced forward with his sword poised for an attack to the head. Kazushi noticed the gape in Minato’s defense where he could strike his wrist guards and score points. The taller competitor shuffled forward with a resounding warcry.

However, before he could, Minato quickly swiped his sword under Kazushi’s without skipping a single beat. He ducked to the side in order to avoid any contact and lunged forward to spear the other boy’s throat guard. For good measure, he used the lower part of his blade to create a wider opening to access the target.
The attack connected with a loud smack.

Kazushi reeled back at the force and stumbled off the mat.

“Shit!” Once he found his feet again, he removed his helmet and let it clatter to the gymnasium floor. Kazushi rubbed his neck which was starting to show signs of reddening. “Ya’ really got me that time, Arisato. I’m gonna feel that tomorrow.”

Minato removed his own helmet with a tiny smirk. “That’s payback for what happened last week.”

“Bahaha! Really!? You’re still bitter about that?” Kazushi burst into laughter, walking over to clap his teammate on the shoulder. “Has anyone told you you’ve got tin skin? It was competition prep for the Bay Area regionals, course I’m gonna bump things up a notch. Heck, it’s already coming up this Sunday.”

Minato ducked rolled his eyes but felt a hum of excitement at the reminder. When was the last time he ever competed in a true blue sports tournament that wasn’t mandated by the school? It would be a day filled with thrilling matches, learning from other teams, and forging new goals for the season.

“Yeah, it is coming up.” he echoed, leaving the mat to fetch his water bottle nearby. “Sure you won’t be too tired from practicing too hard?” He scooped up both his and Kazushi’s water, tossing the latter’s over for a drink break.

“Nah.” Kazushi easily caught the flying bottle. “How ’bout you? You okay?” He took a long and slow chug before continuing. “You’ve been pushing the pace today. You don’t even look tired. What kind of training have you been doing?”

"Fighting Shadow monsters at midnight in our school that turns into a giant death tower. I also do it with my bossy sister, a crazy new friend, and homicidal ginger. We’ve got matching armbands and everything, wanna join us one of these nights? We can’t guarantee you’ll make it out alive, but boy is it a hoot and a half!"

“Ya’ know, the usual.”

"Oh, and did I mention the Personas? We have Personas."

Kazushi wasn’t convinced but didn’t press the issue. Instead, he placed his sword down and took a seat on the mat. They had been working hard all practice, so no one would grill him for taking an extended breather.

“You act like your progress is no big deal. I’d call you crazy, but then again, so am I for teaching the enemy my secret methods.”

Minato was the enemy?

How fitting: the tiny emo boy had a villainous reputation.

Kazushi groaned and pulled his legs in to sit criss-cross. “With how you’re progressing, I’d say you’ll eventually catch up. I might be taken out of the running for team captain next year. That just sucks.”

The enemy and now potential dictator of the Kendo team. It was quite a resume Minato was building in such a short period of time. “It’s not like I wanna be captain in the first place,” he pointed out and took a seat beside Kazushi. “I think your throne is safe from my clutches, you
drama queen.”

Kazushi still appeared to be unconvinced and uninvested, staring off at the rest of the team.

The boys were packing up the gym for the day. Practice mats and swords were hauled over their shoulders as they chatted animatedly to one another. It was an almost cliche scene of whoops for joy at practice being over and promises of beatdowns at the next meet up. A few laughs were shared, some threats exchanged, but it was obvious that this team was more than just for the individual.

Minato had observed people all his life, from their mannerisms all the way to the speech. He didn’t claim to be an expert on the topic by any means, but he would never concede he was blind to other’s emotions.

The way Kazushi watched his team was with a certain pride that few could notice. Not sappy pride, something Minako seemed to keep in spades, but more of an introspective kind.

The type of pride in knowing you were a cut above the rest.

The pride in knowing you had something special to offer up.

“Kazushi?”

Kazushi shook his head.

“I hear you.”

He stood up, sword swung over his shoulder and arm outstretched to Minato. “Let’s pack it in, little guy. I like my rivals fresh-faced when I give them hell.”

Rival?

Minato was considered to be a threat.

He was considered good enough for someone to watch out for.

What a strange feeling it was to be competing with the prospective captain.

“I could say the same for you.”

Section two of Tartarus was strikingly different from the first; it was obvious as soon as they ascended the stairs and came face to face with their next challenge.

The blood splatters and green lighting had all but vanished, the only resemblance being castle-like walls colored in dark shades. The floor had been formed in purple tiles that rippled and bent to create an almost disorienting effect on the eyes. At least it brightened the halls and allowed for the group to easily watch out for Shadows, a lot easier than the previous block.

However, faces would randomly pop up and give everyone a scare.

“Is it too late to go back?” Yukari had asked at one point, on the verge of tears after a particularly shocking face had appeared while she was resting against a wall.

Despite those few hiccups, the enemies thus far had been predominantly immune to wind and lightning attacks. All it took was some readjusting on Minako and Minato’s part in which Personas
to summon and there was nothing but relatively smooth sailing.

Minako was especially glad to be taking more of a support role this time around. Using her newly gained summons, Principality and Naga, she set the team up for success by throwing curveballs at enemies, healing all injuries, and providing concise instructions without distractions of the battlefield.

Occasionally, she would step in if they were ambushed by a splinter group of new Shadows, but it rarely happened. Everyone could focus on putting energy into fighting while she watched their backs.

After nearly a month and a half of fighting together, it was only in critical situations Minako needed to truly start barking orders.

Everyone had a job to do.

There was push and pull, give and take, balance in their movements.

They were finally hitting their stride as a unit rather than a group of specialists.

They had just finished off a group of Frivolous Maya when fatigue was becoming an issue. The boys were haggard from the barrage of physical attacks they had been dishing out all night. Yukari had taken more than a few hits during the bout and was now relying on her new bow to bear her weight.

Minako herself was starting to feel the physical toll her spells had taken on her. It was as if her very soul was being sucked out like a milkshake through a straw.

It was time to pack things in after only six floors of progress. This new block really was proving to be much more of a formidable foe.

She let out a heavy sigh and shouldered her naginata. “Alright guys, let’s call it. I saw an’ access point not far from here.”

Junpei and Minato were the first to move. The latter yawned with his arms stretched the sky. “About time, I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving.” Minako quipped while assisting Yukari who had slumped to her knees. The archer quietly thanked her and then looked around with wide eyes. “Do you think we’ll see any more Shadows? What if we get attacked like the last floor?”

Minako didn’t know what to tell her, simply raising a hand to cover her ear. “Hey Mitsu- san, what’s the way to the access point look like?”

The guide’s voice came through much more garbled than the previous block from the distance. “It looks as if the way is clear. Your time spent on this floor paid off, the Shadows must have retreated now that they’re aware of your strength. Good work!”

Junpei let out a small cheer. “Ya’ know it, dude! We’re just that awesome!”

“You’re too excited.”

“You’re not excited enough!”

Minako chuckled as the boys started going back and forth, but never once turned malicious
towards one another. “Those two.” She turned to Yukari. “What do ya’ say to leaving them behind to let off that bad energy? Maybe they’ll stop complaining about studying and actually hunker down for once?”

Yukari leaned heavily of Minako for support, one arm over her senior’s shoulder while another loosely held her bow. “I don’t know, Stupei always finds something to complain about. Forget having the Potential, his real power is coming up with excuses.”

The two girls shared a good laugh, however weak it sounded.

“Hey, I heard that!” Junpei shouted.

“Good, ‘cause it’s true!” Yukari responded.

“No, it’s not!”

“Is too!”

The group continued moving forward, occasionally exchanging small talk every now and again about what everyone was doing when they got back to the dorm. Minato had started casting small healing spells as to conserve power to keep walking on his own accord. Junpei had taken to the role of stabilizing Yukari after Minako started to slow down at the weight of the other girl. Both were too tired to so much as bicker, remaining more civil than previous nights.

All the usual sounds that accompanied Tartarus had ceased the closer they got to their exit. Just as Mitsuru reported, it seemed that the Shadows had retreated to other levels since they had stayed on the floor longer than most nights.

In fact, it seemed almost too quiet.

“-Arisato!”

Minako flinched as Mitsuru’s voice drilled into her skull. The other’s held similar expressions of pain.

“What’s wrong, Kirijo-san!?” Minako responded once she found her bearings.

“I sense a deadly presence on your current floor- . . . -It just appeared from nowhere-! Hu- to the access point before- finds you-!”

Mitsuru’s voice was choppy at best, leaving only harsh static in her wake. If the connection wasn’t bad before, this was downright terrible.

“-closer-run now- . . ! Dangerous readings-can only be- . . . -Reaper! Do not engage, I repeat-!”

Minako began to panic as her voice completely disappeared. “Hey, what the-!”

She immediately shut up as a distant rattle of chains reached the group. Junpei and Minato had frozen in place and didn’t dare look behind them since they made up the tail end of the group. Yukari had gone all but limp in the former’s hold and ceased to breathe in fear of making a single peep.

There was a moment that all four stood there, totally still and waiting for what was about to happen next.

At first, there was only silence . . .
An oppressive force lingered over them . . .

Another beat of prolonged anticipation . . .

Then nothing . . .

Minako felt her heart hammer in her chest. She began to move with precise actions, every footfall having the potential to break the fragile atmosphere. The others caught her and mirrored in kind.

Easy steps towards the exit.

Not a single word.

Nice and-

“m E w AN t SC e A M S!!!”

The rattling came back more violent and closer than before and the dark aura returned with a vengeance. A quick succession of hefty thumps reverberated throughout the floor, drawing towards the group.

Yukari screamed at the top of her lungs.

“WHAT WAS THAT!??”

Minako could no longer feel the soreness of her muscles. She pointed to Junpei before she and Minato broke into a sprint. “Grab Yukari and don’t look back!”

“Gottcha!” Junpei scooped up Yukari and fell into step with the siblings. “Let’s get the hell outta Dodge!”

“Language!”

“That’s what you’re worried about right now!?”

“JUST SHUT UP AND RUN! I’m too young to die!”

Minako lead the group away from whatever was chasing them as quickly as she could. Her eyes remained glued in front of her for fear of what she might see. The mystery Shadow let out more incoherent screams as they ran.

“F i gH tF I GhTF i gH tF I GhT SC e A M S!!!”

“I thought Shadows couldn’t speak!” Minato yelled, pulling further ahead as a faint green glow of an access point grew closer and closer. “This place just gets crazier and crazier every night!”

No one responded to the comment as they finally reached the access point after many twists and turns in their way.

“Finally!” Minako wasted no time in activating the device, standing off to the side so the others could enter first. “I’ll go last, everyone else get in!”

Junpei and Yukari went first without complaint. They both were swallowed up by the light in almost an instant, as if it realized the urgency of the situation.

Minako and Minato went next. In their hurry to fit two people on the pad at the same time, they
had started shoving each other back and forth. The access point couldn’t lock onto their presence to bring them back to the entrance.

“Hold still, nerd!”

“Practice what you preach!”

Another loud screech caught them off guard.

The two looked up slowly down the hall.

A large figure was obscured in the darkness of the floor, but the glimmer of chains was easily discernable from where the teens stood. It noticed that Minako and Minato were staring at it. A menacing row of teeth gnashed out as the figure made a move to cover the short distance of the corridor.

“SC e A M S!!!”

“GAH!!!”

“JESUS CHRIST!!!”

The outline of a gun raised to shoot was the last thing Minako saw before the familiar green light of the transporter sucked her and Minato up.

Minato had to take fifteen deep breaths after stepping out of the receiving transporter. He doubled over with his hands on his knees. Minako followed close behind him, but he found it difficult to focus on her concerned voice with his racing thoughts overcoming his mind.

What had they just run from?

How was the Shadow able to speak?

Had it been following them all this time?

“Thank goodness, you’re safe!”

Minato looked up just in time to see Mitsuru flitting between the members of SEES to check for major injuries. When she got to him, she forced his upper body to attention with his head in her hands. “Are you hurt in any way?” she asked while examining him. “I have only encountered Reapers once before, but never this strong. If you had been a second slower- . . . I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

Minato squirmed under her cold fingers, partly because of the uncomfortable physical contact, partly because of the adrenaline that refused to die down. He tried to step away, but she simply stepped with him.

“I’m fine, please let go of my face.” he finally said.

Mitsuru removed her hands and strode over to Minako. The field leader was watching the pair’s exchange before being stopped scooped up for an examination. “Good thing we were already on our way out. Thanks for warning us. We’d be dead meat without you.”

“I did what I could, but thank you as well for your encouragement.”
Junpei groaned and slumped the floor. “Dude, doesn’t it feel like the Shadows beefed up? They were using spells I never knew existed! I thought we were goners a few times.”

“Stupei’s right.” Yukari summoned Io to help ease the pain in her legs. “Before, it felt like they were manageable, but now I’m struggling to keep up. There’s just so much we don’t know about this block.”

Minato could only silently agree with them, turning to his sister and Mitsuru. “What do you guys think?”

“... You three aren’t wrong. This isn’t gonna get easier anytime soon.” Minako paused for a moment before she gave them a weak grin. “We’ve got some work to do, but for now, let’s get back to the dorm.”

5/13/2009

*Studying for midterms, stronger Shadows, and now I’m someone’s rival.*

*This year is getting interesting.*

- Minato Arisato
Here we are again, folks! I hope you enjoy some sibling bonding, new faces, "old" faces, and a little more angst!

BTW, I recently took my first Chemistry test with a lab. I aced the lab, but the written exam left me a little bummed out. Ah well, at least I have the fic to pour my feelings into.

Another school day over, another afternoon spent in the company of extroverts.

At least that’s how Minato interpreted being invited to Hagakure by Kenji so he could reveal his “secret plan” from their last visit. He had done so by practically tackling him in the hallway while the younger Arisato was on his way to lunch. If Junpei hadn’t been there to catch him from kissing the floor, they’d be at the hospital rather than enjoying ramen.

A day in the life of an unlucky boy.

The first few minutes were spent in silence as the pair dug into their meals, Kenji slurping down a house special while Minato experimented with something spicier.

“Ah!” Kenji slapped down his chopsticks and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Broth residue stained the black material. “Doesn’t get much better than that. Ya’ ever wonder if they’re using magic to make this taste so good?”

Minato thought he had left the conspiracy theorist back at school, plowing through Student Council paperwork as she stewed over the existence an imaginary sky God. Maybe it was time to diversify his people portfolio?

He could only shrug at the question while finishing off the last of his own meal. “Can’t say, I don’t work here.”

Kenji gave him a blank look before breaking into a grin. “Guess you’re right. Let’s talk about something else.”

Disaster averted.

“So, can you, like, go into Yukari-san's room and stuff?”

Minato stopped mid-bite to give his companion a serious glare.

“Come again?”

“Your dorm’s co-ed, right?” Kenji swiveled so he was facing Minato head-on. “So you can go in Yukari-san’s room whenever ya’ want, right!?”

Yeah, it was definitely time to invest in new acquaintances. At least Junpei had the common decency to address such topics after he had established himself as the residential class clown. Kenji
was just a shameless pervert.

Minato took a deep breath to keep himself from appearing completely disgusted with the question. “No,” he answered, “I’d get shot.”

Kenji started laughing. “Ah man, that’s funny! I’d get shot’, you’re sooo dramatic.” He clapped Minato on the back. “I don’t ya’ have anything to worry about. Only the police have guns. Since when do high school girls have them just laying around.”

“You’d be surprised.” Minato thought to himself. “In fact, I dare you to break in late at night. Climb through the window and see how fast you can run. It’ll be a blast.”

Kenji calmed himself down and turned to face forward again. “Well, I’m not interested in girls her age, anyway. When it comes to women, I like them to be older than me.” He drummed his fingers on the counter. “What about you? How do ya’ like them? Old? Young? Same?”

Minato could slowly feel himself reaching for anything to use as a blunt instrument on the other boy’s head. It was disappointing when he realized no such object was easily within reach.

“. . . I don’t like anyone,” he responded. “Dating is such a pain, so I avoid it. Plain and simple.”

“Ouch, that's cold. You don’t know what you’re missing!” Kenji extended his arms out as if to represent the world before them. “Older women are smart, sexy, and sophisticated. What more could ya’ want?”

Peace, quiet, and money: just to name a few things better than wasting all his time obsessing over someone who could leave the very next breath. Besides, why readily give your heart away to some chick who had better things to do, such as finding a husband who would shower her with presents and attention?

No thanks.

Kenji leaned back in his seat with a heavy sigh. “Well, to tell you the truth, I—” He paused to look around before turning back to his audience of one. There was a hint of excitement in his face as he leaned in close. “-This is just between us, okay? I have my eye on someone.”

Minato tried to suppress his blatant disinterest, keeping a neutral expression and tone. He might find Kenji annoying, but manners were also important in situations of intrigue. “Really?”

“Yeah man, this is the ‘secret plan’ I was talking about. I’m going to ask her out. Soon.” The smug brunette flashed a contented smirk. It was a lame attempt to remain humble. “Not that that's a big deal or anything.”

What a shock.

“Well, I guess it IS a big deal since she's a teacher at our school . . .”

All at once, the mood of the conversation shifted to awkward.

Minato slowly cocked his head towards Kenji.

“. . . You’re asking a teacher to be your girlfriend? Are you high?”

Kenji didn’t seem to hear the other teen, opting to stare dreamily into space. “Anyways, I want you to be there when I ask her out.” He continued to stare ahead, but his voice lowered significantly.
“But you gotta promise you won’t tell anyone, okay? If people find out they’ll be all like, ‘That’s inappropriate’ or whatever. . . . who cares what they think anyway?”

And thus, Kenji rambled on and on about the “ingeniousness” of his master plan.

Minato was still sitting stunned up until the left.

Had he just lost his scholarship because some idiot decided to go after some poor lady?

Only time would tell when this crazy train was going to crash and burn.

“The Student Council members all collectively stood from their seats after Mitsuru finished speaking. Some left the room with boxes of books and paperwork while other mingled about with clipboards of duties to attend to.

Minako yawned as she checked over her report of the meeting. Budgets for sports teams had been finalized, clubs handed in their rosters for the upcoming spring, and complaints from the student body had all been addressed that day. A few new rules had been proposed, others petitioned to be broken, but those issues were being saved for the next meeting.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard of her borrowed laptop; it was a remnant of the previous Secretary after he had resigned. Being able to record the meeting and questions raised during the discussion period was a cinch with such technology. Not to mention taking attendance of members and tracking the different school committees progress were practically child’s play.

Of course, she had to return the laptop to the storage closet once her report was finished, since it was for council duties only, but that wasn’t an issue. Writing things down by hand never seemed to get old.

Minako noticed someone approaching her seat, leaning against the table to observe her working. The faint scent of expensive, yet pleasant perfume filled her nose as the person leaned over her shoulder.

“Excellent work, Arisato. I told you you’d be a good fit and look at all you’ve done.”

“Thanks, Kirijo-san. One second please.” Minako typed one last sentence, closed the laptop and faced the president. “I still got a lot to learn, but I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it. The last Secretary left some checklists to help keep me on track.”

“I’m not surprised Watanabe would do something like this.” Mitsuru nodded her approval. “He always was a Type A personality.”

“I’ve gotta thank him one of these days. Maybe I’ll send him some homemade chocolate?” Minako slid out of her chair, tucking her laptop under her arm. “Is there anything else ya’ need done? Dinner’s pretty easy tonight, so I got time.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “Not that I can think of. Just put away that laptop and sign out for now—”

“Miss President!”

Both of the seniors looked up at a flustered Chihiro, glasses askew on her nose as she hustled
herself to them. “Hidetoshi-san went off the handle again!” The sophomore stopped in front of them while nervously wringing her hands. “He’s cornered some girls who were violating school dress policy and started lecturing them. He won’t leave until they promise to change their attire!”

Mitsuru clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Not again.” She started to walk past Chihiro while rolling up her sleeves. “I’ll handle this-”

“Miss President!”

Another student, this time a boy with a blue armband came bounding up to Mitsuru. “Ma’am, there’s a fight going on between the swim team and track team! I’ve already enlisted the help of the boxing club, but they’re still trying to kill each other!”

Mitsuru looked between Chihiro and the boy, obviously torn at trying to decide which situation to attend to first. Minako could only watch on as the two underclassmen waited with bated breath to see what she would choose.

“Please, Hidetoshi is probably going to start another scene!”

“We could have a brawl on our hands!”

It was too painful to sit back.

Minako stepped forward and immediately turned to Chihiro. “I’ll help with Hidetoshi-san. I’ve got more than a few tricks up my sleeve.” She turned back to the red-headed president. “You can count of me, Kirijo-san. Go take care of the fight.”

Mitsuru broke into a rare and genuine grin. “I knew I could count on you. Please exercise caution Arisato.” She prompted the blue armband student to lead the way. “Let’s hurry before things escalate any further. Tell me the details on the way.”

The two groups exited the Student Council room and started running off in opposite directions. Minako barely spared a glance at the location of the brawl, instead, concentrating on following Chihiro through the winding halls of the school. For such a timid girl, she was fairly quick and light on her feet.

“Hidetoshi-san is always like this,” she mentioned offhandedly as they jogged down the stairs to the first year’s wing. “He means well, but it often ruffles a few feathers with his sense of justice. Please don’t take it personally if he lashes out at you. He truly means well.”

This Hidetoshi fellow was starting to sound a lot like Officer Kurosawa: strict in code but not exactly warm and fuzzy.

Minako stifled a chuckle. “I’m sure I can manage.”

The two arrived at a row of doors that lead to the outside. Chihiro pushed one open and pointed to the path in front of them. “I have to go back to the council room, but halfway down the path is a tall persimmon tree surrounded by stone benches. Before I ran to get help, Hidetoshi was talking to them while they were sitting there.”

“Thanks, Chihiro-san.” Minako shuffled past her and gave the girl a tiny smile. “Don’t worry ‘bout the rest. I’ll handle things from here.”

Chihiro returned the smile before ducking back inside, leaving the leader of SEES to finish the job herself.
“Just leave us alone already!”

“Yeah, who cares about the dress code anyway!?”

A pair of shrill voices pierced through the air, both female and livid. A third voice simply laughed at their indignant screams, deep and no doubt a male. However, Minako couldn’t make out what was said afterward, the subject of the girl’s rage kept himself composed and soft-spoken.

She bounded across the cobblestone walkway, easily finding the persimmon tree Chihiro had mentioned. A tall garden wall surrounded the tree and made it impossible to see the girls or the rouge Hidetoshi.

As she got closer, she could hear the third voice more clearly.

“-to think that ladies with such fancy titles as yourselves would blatantly disregard the simplest of rules is laughable. What would your father’s think if they knew you changed out of the standard uniform once you arrive on campus ground just for a few revealing inches of skirt length? All it takes is one phone call.”

“Fuck you, I can sue for sexual harassment!”

“Yeah, we’ll see who gets the last laugh, you bastard!”

Minako rounded the wall, to see the full situation.

Just as she thought, a pair of girls sat cross-legged on one of the stone benches, clothes breaking more than a few items on the dress code. Skirts that rode up to their thighs, shirts clinging tight to their midsections, and jackets carelessly tossed in the dirt. It was too distracting.

Standing in front of them, arms crossed over his chest was a familiar face; it was the boy who had opposed Minako’s nomination as Secretary of the Student Council. His ashen hair was slicked back, accentuated by his uniform and bright yellow armband. “Disciplinary Committee” was written across the face of the band.

This was the infamous Hidetoshi.

This was the person who wanted nothing to do with Minako.

What was to gain from helping such a pompous individual?

Despite the voice in her head that said to leave the situation alone and never return, it wouldn’t be fair to anyone.

Besides, it would be hypocritical to not give him a second chance.

Minako swallowed her pride and strode into the groove.

“Allright everyone, calm down!”

All three looked up to see her enter the area.

Hidetoshi was stunned for a moment, but to Minako’s surprise, showed off a proud smirk. “I see the president’s choice has arrived.” He waved her off. “I have things under control at the moment. The Secretary doesn’t concern themselves with such unsavory business. There is nothing to worry about.”
Minako puckered her lips, feeling a prick of frustration at his condescending tone. She walked past him to stand in front of the girls. “I understand you’re angry, but let’s be civil, eh? And keep the curse words to a minimum, that’s another rule broken.” She rested a hand on her hip. “Hidetoshi-san’s right, you’re both dressed like a bunch of club girls. School policy gives us the authority to exercise and uphold the rules and guidelines, so just do as he says and there shouldn’t be an issue.”

One girl with lips painted in red stood and shoved Minako back. “And what if we don’t? You’ll tell on us to our daddies who own a share of the school?” She got up in the Secretary’s face, her pearl white teeth lashing out. “You don’t have a shred of power. We’ll wear whatever we want and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Minako didn’t shrink under her scrutinous gaze. She remained cool-headed, straightened her posture, and cleared her throat.

God forgive her for what she was going to say next.

“With that attitude, you’ll never get a boyfriend.”

The first girl’s face morphed into pure outrage, grabbing Minako by the shoulders and shaking her silly.

“Fuck you too!”

The second girl snarled and practically charged with the passion of a billion suns. She yanked at the senior’s hair until the ribbon holding it in place fluttered to the ground. The harshness of the tug caused Minako to see stars.

Maybe provoking them was a bad idea.

“What do you know, bitch-”

“And cut.”

The girls looked past Minako and let her go suddenly.

The attacked girl turned around slowly to see Hidetoshi holding up his phone, the red recording button on.

“My, my, I’ve never seen such a heinous reaction to the truth.” Hidetoshi admonished them. “I wonder what will happen when I show this to our president? What will she think of the daughters of two prolific donors attacking the Student Council Secretary while making inflammatory statements?”

Both girls stared at him for a moment longer, frozen in place at being blackmailed. All at once, they let Minako go and rushed to grab their school bags leaning against their bench. As they began to beat a hasty retreat, they practically spat venom at Hidetoshi.

“You’re a dick, Odagiri! Everyone hates you!”

“You’ll be hearing from my dad’s lawyer!”

The two girls ran off with tails between their legs.

Minako shook out her head, still feeling a sharp pain in her scalp. “Thanks for that.” She looked around for her ribbon that had fallen out. “Now where’s that darn hair tie? Should’ve brought an
“My apologies for their behavior.” Hidetoshi pocketed his phone and began searching the ground with her. He got on his hands and knees to shift through the tall grass that provided a natural carpet for lunch picnickers. Leaves from the tree had fallen all around. “What does it look like?”

Minako was taken aback by his actions but shook it off to kneel beside him. “It’s a red ribbon. Thin but still easy to pick out.”

Hidetoshi swung his head around until he stopped at the base of the tree. He pointed to a lush hasta plant with purple flowers in bloom. “I think I found it.”

Sure enough, a red ribbon was caught on one of the giant leaves. It lay still since the wind had barely picked up that day.

Hidetoshi got up, gently scooped up the accessory, then walked back to Minako. He extended a hand out to help her up. “I believe we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot a few days ago. My name is Hidetoshi Odagiri. Your name was Minako Arisato, correct?”

Minako nodded and accepted the gesture. “Don’t worry, hard to hold a grudge when someone helps you out.” She heaved herself up with the added strength of Hidetoshi and reached back to retie her hair up. “I’m guessin’ that happens a lot?”

He sighed but gave her a shrug. “People who can’t follow rules are naturally inclined to be hostile when the error of their ways are challenged. Does it really come as much of a surprise when they lash out in such a crude manner?”

Minako finished off her ponytail. “Well, guess ya’ got a point.” She ran a hand through her bangs so they would fall neatly over her forehead. “Then again, what do I know? I’m new to all this.”

“You’ll learn.” Hidetoshi started walking away from the grove, motioning for her to follow. “While we return to the council room, may I ask you a question? I’d like your opinion on something and you seem level headed enough to hold a conversation.”

“Ask away.” Minako trotted to his side. “I’m all ears.”

“Alright.” He wrung his hands. “It’s nothing serious, but some students feel the school uniform should be abolished. Those girls are simply two of a growing number of supporters on this campus that agree with that sentiment.”

Minako didn’t need to take much time to think of an answer. She folded her hands over her skirt. “Doesn’t that seem a lil’ pointless?” she asked. “What’s so terrible about wearing a uniform? It’s no different than if you’ve got a job or going out to a fancy restaurant, you’ve gotta dress for the situation.”

Hidetoshi seemed satisfied with her answer, his chin rising higher. “You’re right about that. Elegantly put as well.” He looked ahead of them at the main school building. “They think life without rules is freedom. It’s ridiculous, plain and simple. Without rules, the whole system will collapse. They’re mistaking selfishness for freedom.”

For a moment, Minako was stuck hearing him talk. Maybe it was because she was an older sister, but his words struck a chord with her.

Living in a generation where people took order and rules for granate, it was difficult being a little more straight-laced then what was deemed appropriate. Did her peers honestly expect that the
Perhaps she really had misjudged Hidetoshi. In fact, they had more in common than she first thought.

He must have taken her silence as a bad sign. The council member gulped and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, I must have overreacted.”

Minako dismissed his apology and gave him a reassuring smile. “I was just deep in thought. You and I actually agree on a lot of things.” She bumped him with her elbow. “Keep talking, I’m enjoying this.”

Hidetoshi relaxed at her words. They had arrived at the doors back inside, so he politely held one open. “I hate people with no common sense. Sometimes, I can’t believe the things that come out of their mouths. When I own my own business, such actions will not be tolerated on the companies time.”

Minako listened to him prattle on all the way back to the Student Council room. Occasionally, she would throw in her own thoughts when asked.

Little did she know, a leaf from the persimmon tree had accidentally gotten tangled up in her ribbon.

Books had always been a staple within the Arisato family, even before Minato was born.

Coming from a poor background, their father learned how to become an independent mind at a young age. It was partly the reason he was able to not only skip grades but get into the best schools using his brain and excellent communication skills. His wife and Minato’s mother was raised in a middle-class family who stressed hard work and grit. Often times, she found herself skipping out on friend dates to brush up on all things old, new, and academic at the local library.

It was one of the reasons they got along so well with such understanding between them.

Their habits never changed when they had Minako and then Minato. His parents had instilled in both their children to be well-read from a young age. It all started with silly picture books, but soon they graduated to short chapter books before most of their peers. Both adults had openly bragged about that fact to coworkers and fellow parents at every opportunity.

Even after their untimely deaths, his sister continued to drill the need for enlightenment, relief, and comfort that reading brought. From international classics to political commentary to science fiction, it didn’t matter so long as each day ended with a few minutes devoted to enjoying a good piece of literature.

And the results showed in Minato’s above-average I.Q.

Besides, he had grown to appreciate a well-crafted story.

So when Minako suggested they check out a local bookstore after school, Minato went along without complaint. Afterward, they would meet up with Junpei and Yukari for a night of cramming for exams.

“I heard that the couple who run the place are just the sweetest.” she fondly mentioned as they
approached the Iwatodai Strip Mall. One of her headphones dangled around her neck while the other was in use, her free ear adjacent to her little brother. “Isn’t that nifty? Maybe if we’re nice enough, we’ll get a discount!”

Minato snorted, easily changing the song on his MP3 without having to look. “Like that’ll happen.” A chill beat was laid out to overlap the bustling crowd of the mall. “You just want to raid the sweets shop because you ran out of lemon drops. As if your tongue isn’t yellow enough.”

Minako rolled her eyes. “Haha, haven’t heard that one for the billionth time.” She looked away from him and pointed ahead. “Looks like we’re here. It’s a cute lil’ place.”

Minato followed her finger and couldn’t help but agree with her description.

The shop was constructed with aesthetically appealing bricks with green bushes giving the place an inviting presentation. A rustic sign hung over a maroon awning with “The Bookworm” painted in swooping, dark brown characters. Even a pair of lamps on either of the double doors had vine shaped iron designs over the misty glass. It deserved a low whistle as they approached the shop.

“Gotta’ say, I dig the storefront,” Minato commented. He took off his headphones and let them drape around his neck. It would be rude to walk into an establishment and not give the owners his undivided attention.

He got to the door a few steps ahead of Minako so he could open it for her. Minato nodded inside with a sly grin. “Women and idiots first.”

The insult was met with his hair getting tousled as she accepted the half-kind, half-mean gesture. “You’re already holding the door, ya’ nerd.” She tossed her ponytail as she entered. “Step lively.” Minato followed behind while trying to return his hair to its purposefully messy self.

And his sister called herself a good Christian.

The store was just as charming inside as it was outside. The lighting was kept low to preserve, but the merchandise could be easily seen.

Books- both old and new- had been carefully organized on the shelves according to the genre then grouped by the author’s last name. If they didn’t fit on the chock-full shelves, they took up residence on various tables. A vast array of languages, familiar or unrecognizable, had a place amongst the collection of familiar Japanese and created a mosaic of culture.

Minako drew in a sharp breath before breaking into an excited grin. She immediately hopped over to the nearest table which had been a small sign labeled “Staff Favorites”. No time was wasted when she picked up a thick text from atop the shortest pile.

“The Last of the Mohicans by James F. Cooper.” she read aloud before cracking it open. “I heard about this one, but I never got around to reading it.”

Minato waltzed over to her side and studied the page she had turned to. It had been translated, but after skimming a paragraph, the nuances of its original language were lost to him. Footnote after footnote detracted from his enjoyment of the first chapter.

He cocked his head to his sister who seemed to understand the finer points without any trouble. “What language was this translated from?”

“English.” Minako closed the book and started a thorough search through the piles on the table. “I
think I’ll just get the native copy. It’ll be good practice and not as many footnotes.” She proudly
displayed the copy she still had. “I wanna get the full experience of the story! After all, it’ll be a
great challenge.”

“And it really is a wonderful story.”

Minato nearly leaped out of his skin at a gravelly yet warm voice that had addressed his sister’s rant.

They both turned to find an elderly gentleman chuckling to himself at the boy’s undignified reaction to being spooked. His grey hair was well maintained and clothing of khakis with sweater/collared shirt combo was without so much as a wrinkle.

“And I thought children nowadays were apathetic to the world. Apparently, that doesn’t seem to be
the case.” He folded his hands behind his back. “My apologies if I gave you two a fright. I couldn’t
help but overhear your interest in one of my favorite books.”

Minato quickly recomposed himself with posture straight and tall. “No trouble, mister . . . um?”

The old man gave him an understanding smile. “Bunkichi, I am the owner of this fine store.” He
glanced around with a certain pride in his twinkling eyes. “Well, both Mitsuko and I have the honor
of sharing this business. Partners in life and work.”

“Aw!” Minako sighed. “That’s so sweet!”

“Thank you, dear!” A new voice had joined in.

This time, an elderly woman with a hunch in her back. With one arm, she carried a tray of cookies and with the other, a wooden cane. Her smile was just as warm as Bunkichi. “I recognize your uniforms. You two are students at Gekkoukan High School, correct?” She offered the tray to them. “Please take one. My husband and I know the high standards it places on youngsters.”

Minako was more than happy to bump Minato aside to get first dibs on the best of the bunch. “Thanks so much!” She picked one that had a surplus of chocolate morsels and took a generous bite.

Minato was more patient in his decision process, fingers hovering over the try but careful not to
touch. He finally picked one with an even mix of chips and cookie, thanked the woman under his
breath, and took a nibble out of his chosen treat.

A flavor explosion melted on his tongue. It was a perfect mix of sweet dough and bitter chocolate. If he dared to say, it was the best cookies he had ever indulged in. He couldn’t help but hum his approval.

“Delicious, no?” Bunkichi asked while stealing a cookie for himself. “There is no baker quite like
my lovely wife. Goodness knows I ask for nothing else but her skill with an oven and own two hands.”

Mitsuko lightly slapped the man’s arm. “Oh, you’re just trying to butter me up! You’ll make our
guests uncomfortable.” Despite her protests, a faint blush told a different story.

Minato felt a twinge of warmth at their interactions.

“And by and by,” the old man said, “I don’t believe I caught your names. To whom do we owe the
pleasure?”
Minako quickly finished off the last bite of her cookie to speak. “I’m Minako Arisato.” She motioned to Minato with a pout. “He’s my little brother, Minato. Fair warning, he’s a bit of a nerdy brat.”

Minato openly glared at her. “Really?” He pitched his voice into a mocking version of Minako’s. “Have you no heart!?”

“I don’t sound like that-!”

“-a persimmon leaf!”

The two siblings ceased their quarreling as Mitsuko grabbed on to Minako’s arm with a finger pointed to her ponytail. “That leaf in your hair, may I see it Minako-chan?”

“A leaf in my hair?” The older sister made a double-take at the woman before turning back to Minato. “Can ya’ get it out for me?”

The younger teen hesitated for a moment before stepping up to her. Mitsuko led him by the arm to stand where she was and brushed away Minako’s wild curls. “See? It’s right there.”

Just as the old woman said, he found a distinctly yellow and green leaf caught in her hair ribbon. It was skewed in such a way that it would be difficult to see from certain angles, but from a lower vantage point, the oddity was painfully obvious.

“I got it.” Minato plucked the leaf as carefully as he could from the tightly secured ribbon. He delicately placed it in Mitsuko’s wrinkled palms. “What did you mean by a persimmon tree?”

Bunkichi limped to get a better look at the leaf. After studying it for a moment, he sighed and reached to give it a gentle poke. “It’s nothing to worry over.” He looked to the siblings. “Would you mind if we kept this leaf? I have a for plant pressing and persimmon leaves are just so lovely this time of year. It would be a waste not to.”

Minato caught a sense of longing as the two huddled around the leaf like a mother bear wrapped around her cubs. It was as if having it taken away would be a harsh blow to their emotions.

Where had the leaf come from to be considered so precious?

Minako must have caught the same vibe and probably knew more about the secret of the leaf’s origin. She was more than happy to nod enthusiastically, waving them on. “We don’t mind at all. Can we see it when you’re done?”

Bunkichi visibly relaxed, cupping a hand over the leaf to keep it from drifting away. He then turned to his wife. “I’ve been meaning to go see that tree for a while now.” A sigh escaped the man as he patted a leg. “But I’m not sure if these stumpy old legs will make it that far . . .”


The couple regarded the two for a moment before letting out a round of docile laughter.

“That wasn’t meant to be a pun, but I’m glad you’re amused!” Bunkichi looped his arm with Mitsuko’s. “Let’s see if we can get you both a copy of that book, eh? I can’t let such darling children such as yourselves leaf without them!”

Mitsuko shook her head at her husband, but let him lead her towards the back of the store. “Let us call them Minako-chan and Minato-chan.” She smiled at the pair of teens. “Come along, this one is
on us today! Consider it payment for the leaf and your wonderful company, Minako-chan, and Minato-chan.”

Once the couple had their back turned, Minato turned to his sister who had on an ear-splitting grin.

“Told. You. So.”

They both left with two free books that day and an invitation to come back for tea.

“And then you translate this line like this.” Minako slid her notebook over to a disgruntled Junpei. “Do ya’ get it yet?”

The capped teen let out an obnoxious groan. “Can’t we just go to Tartarus?” He slammed a fist on his coffee table. “You can study anytime, but we need to get stronger ASAP. Me an’ Hermes will take down the next big Shadow ourselves!”

Yukari, who had situated herself on the couch, was more than happy to kick Junpei in the back of the head. “Shut up already. You couldn’t take down a flea let alone one of those monster Shadows. Besides, you need all the studying you can get. Be thankful Minako actually took time out of her schedule to help a lost cause.”

“Did ya’ have to kick me!?”

“Your skull’s so thick, I bet I barely made your brain jiggle!”

“Your skull’s thick!”

“No, your’s!”

Minato sat opposite of the three stooges, his own textbooks open on either side of his arms. A page filled to the brim of practice math and science equations sat at the center of his attention. He was far from worried about failing his semester midterms, but it never hurt to stretch his skills once and awhile.

Besides, it was his daily entertainment to watch Yukari and Junpei go at each other like wild dogs fighting over a slab of meat.

Minako caught her brother’s amused looks and was less than happy about it. She tried to shut him down with an admonishing frown meant to be worn by cram school teachers. It only added to his growing enjoyment of the chaos.

Something must be wrong with him after all these years.

Eventually, everyone had calmed down and settled back into their tasks. Minako had given up on Junpei and ordered him to work on something else before she served dinner. She hummed along to her iPod as she put the finishing touches on their meal. Yukari threw the boy dirty looks in between translating paragraph after paragraph for English. Minato had kept to himself, music turned down just in case another interesting event took place.

He heard the front door swing open and saw the figure of a person leaning on the back of one of the couches.

“Seems like everyone is working hard.” Mitsuru’s cool personality shown through her praise. She came around the back to sit in the head chair. “How are your grades, if I may ask?”
Junpei was the first to speak, more or less annoyed by the query. “Whaddya think? How’re your grades?”

Instead of taking his sassy tone, Mitsuru played along with a joking gleam in her eye. “If you must know, I'm currently studying college-level material. All my courses include extensive material in business, foreign relations, language, and public speaking. Are there any other questions you would like to ask, Iori?”

Junpei slumped over his homework, arms covering his face. Minato could see his nose scrunch up as if he were about to cry. “Man, now I don’t feel like doing anything.” the distraught boy mumbled into the table. “Why’s life gotta suck so hard?”

Minato noticed Akihiko leaning over the couch, thoroughly amused by the entire situation. Something about his grin made him suspect he had killed a man on the way home from school.

At least he hoped that was the case. He could get the smug bastard arrested.

A loud round of taps coming from the kitchen caught everyone’s attention. Minako popped up from under the counter with a sizzling pan of meat, shrimp, and vegetable in her right hand. “Soup’s on guys!” The left held a large, metal serving spoon that easily scooped out various helpings of food based on everyone’s personal tastes. “Come an’ get it!”

Junpei’s mood changed on a dime. “Wooo!” He sprung up from the floor and vaulted over the couch Yukari sat on to save time. “It’s chow time!”

The rest of the group followed more slowly behind but had nearly equal expressions at the prospect of the night’s menu. Even Yukari had held back on yelling at Junpei for leaping over her like a hyperactive deer. They each grabbed the plate they deemed the proper proportion size for them found seats at the dining room table.

Minato took his sweet time to close his notes and textbooks before heaving himself to his feet. He had been sitting for so long, one of his legs had fallen asleep. In an ungraceful fashion, he did his best to appear fine and dodder over to pick up his meal.

Minako noticed his struggle and flashed a sly grin.

“Sir, I don’t serve drunks.” She pushed his plate across the counter and proceeded to prepare her own. “I’m gonna have to kick you out.”

“Idiot.” As he grabbed his plate, Minato stuck out his tongue. “Go pop some more Ritalin; you’re too peppy.”

Minako finished her own plate and sauntered to approach the table together, giving him an all too innocent grin. “One can never be too peppy,” she placed a hand over her heart, “you’re just too emo to appreciate my God-given talents.”

“What talents?”

“Natural happiness!”

“Liar.”

“Nerd.”

The two took their seats with everyone else, said their individual prayers and thank you’s to the
chief, and dug into the food. For the first few minutes, there was a peaceful silence as they concentrated on eating.

After five minutes, Mitsuru was the first to speak.

“Since all of you have been studying so hard for midterms, would you mind if I proposed a small game of sorts?” She set aside her utensils. “Nothing too difficult, but if your grades are good . . .”

Heads around the table perked up. She seemed gratified that she had all eyes on her. “If they're good, I'll give you something. Consider it a reward. The higher the grade, the more brilliant the gift. I may even ask if there is anything, in particular, you would like.”

Minato leaned back in his seat. It seemed odd that Mitsuru of all people would offer a reward of all things. Why now? Why on the midterms?

Yukari finished off a bite she had taken. “What brought this on?” She looked Mitsuru up and down. “Who are you and what have you done with Mitsuru-san?”

Said Mitsuru chuckled at the perplexed reaction. “To be honest, I'm not as well prepared as I should be. I'm still preoccupied with monitoring Shadows to pay attention to much else.” She shrugged. “Besides, we need to build trust as a unit. What better way than a traditional and friendly competition of the mind?”

Junpei cracked his knuckles. “Man, you got my attention.” He puffed out his chest. “I'm gonna study my butt off an' beat all of you! Just wait an' see!”

There was a collective groan that spread throughout the dining room.

From across the table, Akihiko cleared his throat. “In other news, I’ve got something to say.” He broke into a cheesy grin. “If the doctor gives me the okay, I'll be able to fight with you guys again after midterms. Just have to wait on a few tests, but they're positive I’m good to go.”

“That’s great news!” Minako was practically beaming a supernova, it almost hurt to look at straight on. “I’ve already come up with some strategies after we talked about your Persona last week. We could really use a strong thunder attacker at the moment, but with you taking over ground operations, there’s no way we can lose.”

Minato noticed a shift in Akihiko’s demeanor at the mention of being field leader again.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask.” He twirled his fork absentmindedly. “You've been doing a great job leading the team in Tartarus, better than I ever could. Would you mind continuing after I come back? That way, I can concentrate on building my strength and being an asset to the team.”

Junpei, once again, got over-excited. “No way, Minatan!” Since he was sitting close by, he was able to give her a clap on the shoulder. “Ya’ really are something else!”

“You’ve saved our lives more times than I can count.” Yukari put her hands together in soft applause. “Let's keep it that way.”

Mitsuru picked up her glass of water. “I say we celebrate. Tomorrow midterms begin, but after, we’ll work harder than ever before.” She motioned to Minako. “I expect great things from you, Arisato.”

“Here, here!” Junpei said.
Minato gauged his sister’s expression as she thanked the group for their support. After all, he had front row seats to the play that was her daily life.

Unfortunately, the main character was white-knuckled from clutching the seat of her chair.

“Oh, no! The test is today! I didn't study at all yesterday, cause... -I fell asleep!”

“Come on, you don't need to lie about it every time. By the way, did you hear? Our PE teacher was hospitalized. I heard a signboard fell on top of him.”

"Whoa... Wait, who cares about our PE teacher!? C'mon, we've got 5 minutes! We can memorize 10 vocab words!”

Minato (along with Yukari, Junpei, and Minako) watched as two gossiping students hustled into school with notebooks brandished for some last-minute studying.

Junpei chuckled as they struggled to balance their notes. “Man, glad I actually studied ahead of time.” He stretched his arms over his head. “This’ll be cake! Afterward, we’ll be back to slaying Shadows and kickass-”

“-Language.”

“Sorry, Minatan.”

Yukari rolled her eyes and glanced at Minato. “Say, are you ready for the tests? You’ve got the highest scores of quizzes, but those are easy enough.”

Minato fiddled with the wires of his headphones.

“Piece of cake.”

May 18th, 2009

I couldn’t write an entry last night, so I guess I’ll get all my feelings out before midterms today.

I still can’t believe it. Leader, I’m still the field leader.

Why-no-how did this happen? I’m the least qualified senior for the job, I can barely control my own emotions without this journal as a venting device.

I’d be happy to take on a supporting role, join the boys on the front lines, anything but being responsible for everyone’s lives! The pressure is too much to bear most nights. There’s nowhere to turn to no, no one I can trust with these feelings I have.

Is it selfish to want to hide from it all?

As much as I complain, I know that they’re counting on me to make the right choice. I’ve gotten this far pretending to have all the answers. I can’t back out when I’m this far ahead.

I pray every night that my choices are the correct ones.

Until next time,
Minako Arisato
Chapter Notes

So I may or may not have blown off my research paper in Chemistry to finish writing this chapter. It's okay though, I'm almost done. Please read Minato's journal entry at the end for some #juicy stuff for ya'll shippers. Enjoy!

Friendly competitions were something that Minako took a little too seriously.

Sure, just going with the flow and enjoying a moment between buddies was fine. Who could deny the sense of belonging when hanging out with someone else? It gave purpose to the meaning of being human.

On the other hand, Arisato’s were proud like lions.

Declining a challenge would be a sign of weakness.

So that’s how she found herself in a heated push-up contest with Akihiko in the Naganaki Shrine park. Even though it was Sunday, they never missed getting up at dawn for some exercise. One thing led to another and they ended up having a battle of who could go the longest without getting tired.

However, when you challenge someone whose strengths are in core and upper body training, push-ups were not exactly the fairest for someone who was proficient in cardio. Her arms were already starting to feel like limp noodles. The muscles in her shoulders screamed for relief but were ignored for the sake of proving a point.

“Having trouble keeping up?” Akihiko asked, putting one arm behind his back just to show off. “You can stop whenever you want.”

“In your dreams, golden boy!” she said in between exhausted breaths. Her stomach burned as she spoke, but the irritation kept her from faltering. “Don’t underestimate a runner. My sport is your sport’s punishment.”

Akihiko chuckled, hoping to the other arm. “I think I’m estimating just right.”

After two more minutes of them trying to outdo the other, Minako was struggling to keep up her breakneck pace. Her lungs now seemed to shrivel up as her breathing became more labored.

Still, she told herself she could win. Her partner would get tired eventually; using only one arm would certainly tire him out quicker. She just had to bide her time.

Breathe in, up.

Breathe out, down.

Ignore the pain, and repeat.

Breathe in, up.
Breathe out, down.
Breathe in, up.
Breathe out, down.
Breathe in, up-
All at once, disaster struck in the most horrible way imaginable.

Her arms were stuck halfway up.

That’s when Minako began to panic. She willed her limbs to move, but the slowness of the action drained her remaining strength.

“Come on-” Before she could even think of taking another deep breath, she toppled over into the dirt. As she did, she hit her shoulder on the concrete. “Nooo-!” she cried out, but her voice came out as a distressed wheeze. It had sent her into a coughing fit.

"Ha, told you so!” Akihiko said.

Minako rolled on her back and closed her eyes in an attempt to breathe easier. “Y-you win. Just l-leave me here to wallow in my shame.”

Why did losing have to feel so painful?

She opened her eyes to take in the early morning sky. They had started later than usual, so the sun was starting to make its climb. Streaks of red and purple mixed together as day and night blurred like an oil painting being washed away.

“Looks like the sun’s coming out.” Minako noticed out of the corner that Akihiko had plopped himself next to her. He leaned back so he could look up at the beautiful sight before them.

She frowned and turned her attention back to the heavens. “Aren’t you gonna gloat about winning?” The girl waved him on. “I promise I won’t complain. You deserve it.”

Akihiko hummed but surprised her. “Not feeling it today. Besides, you did okay. You’ve got grit that most of the sophomore boxers I know . . . for a girl that is.”

Minako smiled and forced herself to sit up. She knew that there was no way she could beat a young man reaching the peak of his physical fitness. Science just wasn’t on her side, but knowing she had his respect was enough.

“That actually means a lot. Thank you.” Minako did her best to heave herself to her feet. “We better get back. I’ve got some errands to run with Junpei later on. We’re out of everything so I need some extra hands.”

Akihiko’s face went blank of all previous mirth, instead replaced with a default frown.

“Are you okay?” Minako asked, reaching out a hand. She gave him a Cheshire grin to lighten the mood. “Don’t tell me you’re tired. What happened to all that bravado?”

He shook his head and through on what seemed to be a reassuring expression. Without complaint, he accepted her help. “Forget about it, it’s nothing.” Once on his feet, he took the lead towards the dorm. “Let’s take it easy and walk. We went far today.”
Minako jogged to his side, shoving her hands in her sweatshirt pouch. Her fingers were cold from exposure to the cool spring air. Winter seemed to still linger just a few weeks over its expiration date.

For most of the walk back, they fell into a comfortable silence. The only noise between them was their soft footfalls on the sidewalk. Minako took the time to appreciate the silence that came with the morning. Street lights flickering out one by one, houses bathed in the pastel colors of dawn, and tune of crickets all filled her senses with a feeling of tranquility. Even the distant howls of dogs seemed to sing the praises of a new day about to begin.

It was moments like this that she had a hard time describing. How could one overthink such simple things like a lone bird’s melody or stars being swept away with the navy blue blanket of the sky?

All in all, it was one of the few things that never failed to give her shivers.

They had almost reached the dorm when Minako grew more and more concerned about Akihiko’s silence. He stared ahead as if in a deep haze, fists shoved in his pockets with arms tensed to strike out at a second’s notice.

Just a few minutes ago, they were laughing and having fun, now he was guarded.

What had changed in such a short amount of time?


“No-!” Akihiko was quick to deny her, but soon calmed himself when he saw her flinch at his knee-jerk reaction. “-sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. . . just thinking too hard.”

Minako went a few paces ahead of him so she could turn around and walk backward. She tried to give him her most gentle smile, hoping to ease his stiffness. “They say if ya’ talk things out, thinking’s a lot easier. I’m a really good listener, so fire away!”

He tried to look away from her, but she knew it was impossible. It was her secret weapon: kill them with kindness and face aversion head-on. Just to add some comfort, exude an inviting presence that no one could simply ignore. Such a tactic worked every time, even with the most stubborn of people.

Finally, he sighed while rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s . . . I don’t wanna come off as nosey, but I got a question.”

Minako urged him on with a quirk of an eyebrow. “That question being?”

“It’s a bit personal-” He seemed to be stuttering over his words as they came to mind, “-And if you don’t want to tell me, then you don’t have to.”

“Yes?”

“It’s just. . . Is it true you're going out with Junpei?”

Minako felt her heart skip a beat.

Where had this come from all of a sudden?

At first, she started giggling to herself a the notion. The more she thought about it, the more
hilarious it became. Her giggles turned into laughter, her worries melting away at such a silly idea.

“What the heck? No, nonono. He’s like a lil’ brother to me. I wouldn’t date him in a million years.” Minako said.

“What. . .?” Akihiko seemed to mull over the revelation before his mind finally caught up to his ears. His shoulders sagged. “I see, it was just a rumor I heard. Guess I just jumped to conclusions too fast. Sorry.”

A rumor? This late in the year? Usually, such things spread early and died off like mayflies once her character had been fully evaluated. It was no surprise that someone as popular Akihiko would hear the latest news on the strange transfer students.

Minako sighed but was far from angry at him. “Don’t get the wrong idea, I’m fine. You were curious, so ya’ asked.” She started walking again, this time facing forward again. “Tramp, returning drop-out, foreigner: I’ve had enough rumors spread about me to last a lifetime. At least you asked me about it.”

“Still, It's bad enough that I listened to a rumor, but then I confronted you about it. It was incredibly rude of me.” He shook his head, a frown taking the place of shame. “If I hear anyone say that again, I'll tell them it's not true. I hate rumors.”

“Amen to that.” Minako yawned, savoring the cool air in her lungs. “I’m just glad someone’s looking out for lil’ old me.”

Akihiko went wide-eyed for a moment before ducking his head.

“W-we should get something on our way home.” He looked up to see they had already arrived at the steps of the dorm. “Oh, we're back. That’s a bummer, guess we’ll have to make something here. Any ideas?”

Minako perked up, her runner’s mindset flung into the corner of her brain. "How 'bout something sweet?" she bemused. The creative side kicked in as recipe after recipe danced around, waiting to be pulled out and put to good use.

They went back inside to begin their day, chatting back and forth about the rest of the day.

Me: yo, wat's ur midterm score?

Baneofmyexistence: i got in the top 3 in class! top 10 in the grade!

Baneofmyexistence: kirijo-san’s impressed, take dat!

Me: *slow clap*

Me: cute

Me: reel cute

Baneofmyexistence: don’t u dare

Me: wanna hear wat i got?

Baneofmyexistence: i swear if u even
Me: I got #1 in class, top 3 in grade

Baneofmyexistence: . . .

Baneofmyexistence: nerd

Me: git

Me: gud

Baneofmyexistence: :P jerk

“I can’t believe the new guy scored the highest in the class! He’s so quiet.”

“No wonder he’s friends with Yukari-san. Does anyone have his phone number?”

“Then why’s he hanging out with an idiot like Iori?”

Minato was never one to brag about test scores unless it was with his sister. Bragging, in his father’s words, meant less time hitting the books and becoming even smarter than the minute before. Of all the things the man had said, that advice stuck with him long after he had died.

Besides, actions speak far louder than words. Actions are seen, then the common folk speak of it for days on end, you can make yourself known without coming off as arrogant.

But even Minato had his times of selfishness.

“Wow, Minato-kun.” Yukari perched herself on his desk as their classmates continued to fawn over the ego-boosted teen. “I knew you were smart, but you got the top spot and placed in the top three in our grade. Mitsuru’s gotta give you something pretty nice. How’d you do it so easily?”

Minato had to sit sideways to give the two of them a respectful distance. “I work hard, simple as that.”

A disheartened groan brought the pair’s attention to Junpei. He slumped over his desk with his cap clutched in his hands. If one had been a casual onlooker, they might have thought his world had ended.

“Man, I’m a laughing stock. . .” His voice cracked with the raw emotion of defeat. “After the results were posted, I heard these two cute girls talking. They were sayin’ I have a one-track mind. . . If I beg for a higher score, will I get one? How much money does it take to bribe a teacher?”

Minato felt a twinge of sympathy. After all, Junpei was street smart, not exactly the studious type. He worked well with his hands rather than learning from a chalkboard. Being denigrated by his female counterparts was just another nail in an open casket being hurtled into oncoming traffic.

“Look on the bright side!” Yukari seemed to be genuinely concerned at the boy’s plight for a sliver of a second. “You got perfect marks in physical education. Girls like guys who work out, right? Who needs brains when you’ve got brawn?”

Junpei still remained downtrodden, sinking lower into his desk. “I’m gonna die alone.”

Poor, stupid Junpei. When will his suffering end?
“Heard ya’ got the best score in your class. Congratulations, twig.”

Minato truly enjoyed Kendo practice with Kazushi around, but the constant teasing of his less than muscular frame was getting on his nerves. He ended up chucking his water bottle at the smug athlete’s head in an attempt to shut him up for a change. “Yeah, how’d you do, big nose?”

Kazushi caught the bottle with expert precision and an eye-roll. “Leave the insults to the rest of us. You’re terrible at it.” He set the bottle aside and picked up his bamboo blade that leaned against his side. “Alright, one more round then we’ll call it. Ya’ ready, or should I wait so you can look up a better comeback?”

The question about his test scores had been easily dodged. Typical Kazushi, ever the thorn in Minato’s side yet a welcome one. He cracked his knuckles and picked up his own blade.

“ Doesn’t take a genius to make fun of you.” Minato said.

“ ’Cause the genius can’t come up with anything good!” Kazushi crowed and squared up for a face-off. “Enough talk. Show me what you’re made of.”

They went through all the proper rites of a challenge before taking a defensive stance to one another. At first, they circled each other in waiting for someone to strike. Minato could feel the sweat from the day’s workout rolling down his neck.

He was convinced the enemy could sense his exhaustion.

Finally, he decided to break the stalemate with a rush towards Kazushi’s gauntlets, a few cheap points, but points all the same. The latter swiped his blade aside and shuffled in to get the former on the head. Thankfully, Minato jumped back in time to avoid the hit.

Kazushi had overestimated the strength needed for his strike. His blade made contact with the practice mat and created a resounding “bang.” Minato prepared for him to make a swift recovery or charging forward for a fake-out.

However, Kazushi didn’t raise himself back up.

He was frozen in place.

For a few moments, Minato stood at the ready for an attack that would never come. Once he realized that Kazushi wasn’t moving, he lowered his blade. He started towards him with an outstretched hand for the shoulder.

“Hey, you okay-”

Before Minato could finish, Kazushi toppled to the floor. His body landed with an almost sickening thunk.

“Kaz!” someone shouted from across the gym.

”Asthma?”

“C’mon, we’re counting on you to be captain next year! You’ve gotta take care of yourself.”

“The big meet will be here before we know it, but that doesn’t excuse pushing it past your limits with gimp lungs.”
Minato listened to various teammates dot over Kazushi in the nurse’s office. He stood by the door and watched on as everyone flocked like a pack of squawking seagulls. The future captain kept his mouth shut, but his creased brow and narrowed gaze spoke a million words.

Annoyance seemed to be a theme of the day.

“Alright, boys!” The coach, who had been speaking with the attending nurse, waved the boys out of the room. “Shower off and go home. You’re gonna stink up the entire room if ya’ keep this up!”

“Yessir.”

Everyone filed out one-by-one, all chattering about Kazushi. Minato stepped aside and ignored their mindless speech, not wanting to get involved with such frivolous talk. There was only so much gossip one could tolerate in one day, good or bad.

“Arisato! Stay here a second.” Minato turned to see his coach standing by Kazushi. “Take this guy home.” He gave the student a well-natured pat on the back. “Don’t wanna wake up tomorrow and find him on the morning news. Can I trust ya’ with his crazy butt?”

Kazushi seemed to shrink at the comment, but again, remained silent. Had his asthma messed him up more than what was led on?

Minato looked between him and the coach.

He was going to be late for dinner.

“Sure,” he answered, “I’ve got time.”

The coach beamed. “Alright,” he left the nurse’s office with a tip of the hat, “I’m counting on ya’. Have a good night you two.”

Kazushi followed the coach but stopped once he got to Minato. “Jeez, glad that’s over.” He glanced over with a grin. “Better get going before rush hour. I live downtown; it’s a nightmare around this time. Good thing we changed out of our uniforms before everyone else, eh?”

Minato gave him a nod. “Yeah, can’t complain about that.”

The two started on their journey home, silence the only thing between them. It was nothing that Minato found to be strange. Kazushi never seemed like the walk-and-talk guy, keeping his interactions constrained to cheesy one-liners and gruff encouragement. In fact, he hummed a tune with a contented smile.

Still, his face while the team was around was a puzzle all its own.

When they reached the outside entrance to the school, Minato had popped in an earphone and started up his more energetic playlist. His fingers drummed on the strap of his school bag. The sunset hit the teammates full-on in a bright display of red and orange. Boats on the water were mere shadows gliding on a film of dark blue.

Kazushi suddenly dropped back after only a few steps. He had stopped a good three strides away from his escort. Had he gotten winded from walking halfway across the school? Was everything really fine?

Minato adapted the new development and put the brakes on himself. “Hey, what’s up?”
Kazushi’s face screwed up as if he were about to scream. He had to take a few breaths before he even faced up to the question.

“I-. . .” he began. “. . . I’ve got something to say, but the other guys can’t find out.” He glanced up from the ground with a deadly serious frown. “If I tell you, ya’ won’t say anything, will ya’? There are a lot of nosy guys on the team. If they find out, they’ll keep bugging me about it. I don’t need that right now.”

Minato shoved his hands in his pocket. “You’re asking the quietest person on Earth to keep a secret. I think you’re golden.”

Kazushi loosened up at the quip but remained rigid in his posture. “Truth is . . . my knee hasn’t felt right,” he admitted. “I’ve had trouble in the past, but since that day you first came to practice, it’s gotten worse. Seems like I’m fighting you and my leg at the same time, I just can’t keep up some days.”

A knee injury, the bane of all professional athletes. Minato had a few run-ins, but never to the point of having to keep quiet on the matter. That would imply that the damage would be permanent. All this time, he never saw past the joking smile.

“Will it heal?”

Kazushi sighed, staring past Minato at the city skyline. “Next year, there’s a national competition. There will be participants from all over Japan. The regional meet pales in comparison.” he mused aloud. “I have to win at that meet if I wanna go places on the pro circuit. I can’t afford to put my training on hold. Not now, not unless I say so!”

Minato knew that the passion Kazushi held was pure, but he couldn’t help but chuckle at his dramatic monologue. He blamed his sister for ruining them for the rest of his life for everyone else.

“I get it, I get it. Not a peep.” he said with a thumbs up. “Just stop talking like you’ve got a camera rolling twenty-four seven. We’re not in a soap opera.”

Kazushi shrugged but softened at the reassurance. “Thanks, man. I knew I could trust ya’.”

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**Baneofmyexistence:** yooooooo soap’s on!!!!!!!

**Baneofmyexistence:** dinner’s over, where r u?

**Baneofmyexistence:** we’re goin hunting 2nite

**Baneofmyexistence:** hello?

**Baneofmyexistence:** are you okay?

**Me:** srry, I’ll be back soon

**Me:** Pls tell me it’s just the main sqwad 2nite

**Baneofmyexistence:** actually

**Me:** No
Baneofmyexistence: guess whos back in action :D

Me: . . . y does god h8 me?

Me: if I get electrocuted, someone gonna gets stabbed

“Hermes!”

A bright flash later, the swift Persona bowled straight into a large group of Heat Balances, tossing them into the air. All six of them landed in a scattered mess across the purple tiled floor of Arqa block, allowing Hermes to beat a hasty retreat to its summoner. Their singular eyes were spinning as they tried to hop back up for a second attack.

“Strike, yer’ out!”

Minako grinned at an ecstatic Junpei and pointed to the recovering enemy. “Yukari, Sanada, finish ‘em off!”

“Got it, Minako-senpai!” Yukari aimed her Evoker with sights set on the target. “Io!”

“Polydeuces!” Akihiko commanding voice carried without having to yell out like most of the others.

Io appeared next to the newest addition to the SEES’s Persona lineup. A robust humanoid with blonde hair that flowed with each precise movement, right arm replaced with a syringe-like javelin, it seemed to exert its own supernatural pressure over the room. With a stoic face to boot, the Shadows quivered at their inevitable fate.

A column of wind followed up with raging lightning drew out anguished cries from the Balancing Scales. Some tried to escape, but Io’s spell had them pulled into the thick of the brutal assault.

Just as quickly as it had begun, the Garu and Zio spell stopped. Screams ceased alongside and left a gaping hole of silence. The blue and red crosses were lifeless on the ground until fading into black dust, then disappearing in mid-air. Left behind were glowing blue cards strewn in all manner of directions.

Minako smiled at the path ahead. A flight of stair was now accessible with all Shadows in the immediate area taken care of, a metal case also visible from where she stood.

“Excellent work, everyone.” Mitsuru commented, voice cool as per usual. “I sense a great presence on the next floor, but I have no doubts you will prevail. Proceed at your own discretion and there shouldn’t be any trouble.”

“Thanks, Kirijo-san. Keep in touch.” Minako stepped forward to examine the cards more closely. She kneeled down and picked up one with an unfamiliar Persona: a Unicorn that was white as the driven snow.

Although it hadn’t been an issue before, Minato and herself gained new summons from defeated Shadows. At first, they would naturally gravitate towards them like a moth to a flame, but now that the challenges were mounting, cards were dropped instead. Both of the siblings, including other members of SEES, could only choose one from the group while the rest vanished. Of course, there were other images on the cards, such as power-ups for previously gained summons and money, but the Personas were something Minako had taken upon herself to gain.
It was all based on curiosity. She wanted to see how many there were to gather.

“Those cards again?” Junpei came bounding over and picked up one with a money symbol. It dissolved in his palms, leaving behind yen coins and a wicked smile. “Ah man, I love this place! Why can’t money just appear like this in real life?”

“I suspect the cards formed as a result of external factors. Items can often get lost in the Dark Hour and take on different forms depending on the object.” Mitsuru explained. “Ikutsuki and the other researchers that work with us have yet to confirm such things as the cards are only temporarily manifested. However, the evidence points to that theory being true.”

“I don’t care where they came from.” Junpei shoved the money in his back pocket. “Papa needs a new video game!”

Yukari had picked up one such card with rounded leaves: a growth card. “I’ll take this one.” she said, crushing the card in her hand, engulfing it in a green glow.

Akihiko tentatively grabbed a similar card, only to watch it become part of him. “A little extra experience never hurt anyone.”

Minako turned back to her card and held it out in front of her. She closed her eyes and focused on calling out to the horned animal. “Thou art I, therefore I am thou.” Her fingers closed around the image as a warm sensation filled her chest, signifying her call had been heard. “What shall I name you?”

The reply came in the voice of a beautiful woman. “Unicorn, legendary beast of purity.” The warmth dwindled, but a new presence took residence within Minako’s heart. “I shall protect you and those you deem worthy, young warrior. All you need is ask.” Unicorn settled well with the other Personas, not causing much of a stir.

“Thank you.”

Minako retracted her arm just as Minato had approached her side. He held of growth card that began to dissolve. “What’s with you and Personas?” he asked, green light-absorbing into his pale skin. “Doesn’t it get cramped? I can barely hold three and you’ve got, what, ten?”

Minako shrugged. “Dunno, it’s not that hard once ya’ get used to it.” She knocked on her skull. “Besides, it’s hard to forget something that’s a part of you.”

“Ugh, too sappy. I think I’m gonna choke.” Minato staggered away from her. “If you had time to come up with that, you had time to get a better score on midterms.”

“Says the dork who got first.”

“Exactly. Step up your game.”

“I hate to interrupt, but we should get moving.” Yukari piped in, the other two boys following close behind. “The Dark Hour will be over before we know it so we shouldn’t waste any more time just standing around.”

“Astute.” Minako rightened herself and sunk back into leadership mode. “Now then, for those who haven’t fought floor bosses with us before, let’s go over a few quick things.” She pointed to the floor above. “We don’t have a clue what’s waiting upstairs so play it safe. I want the boys focused on physical attacks unless we’ve got a flyer, then protect Yukari and use long-range spells. I’ll deal with healing and support for most of the battle, but if things get rough, regroup on me and try
again. Any questions?"

There was a mix of shaking heads and no’s.

“Good, I’d say we’re ready.” Minako twirled her naginata so it would rest against her shoulder. “After this, let’s go back. We’ve already made some great progress tonight.”

The team’s spirits picked up at the praise and everyone started towards the stairs. Their leader dropped back to give herself some time to think through her strategy.

So far, there were no glaring concerns in anyone’s health. She could start putting buffs on the team right away and maybe get some fighting experience on her part. If she needed to conserve energy for summoning and casting spells, Mitsuru was gracious enough to pack freshly stocked medkits before they headed out for the night. Yukari could also take over if she wasn’t needed for the front lines, but those bases were more than covered.

Two proficient heavy attackers, one exemplary healer, and two adaptable Wild Cards made for a fine set-up. If they kept rotating around each other, fatigue wouldn’t be an issue.

The five teens climbed the patchy staircase up to the next floor. For the most part, the large open area was devoid of enemies but only one hallway led out into the darkness.

Cries of unfamiliar Shadows carried from beyond a blind corner.

“I sense three powerful Shadows, but I have no worries you’ll be just fine. Still, do not underestimate the enemy.”

Minako nodded, more to convince herself rather than the rest of her comrades as they walked towards the noise. “Copy that, Kirijo-san.” She brought her naginata to a defensive position as they rounded the corner. “Let’s make this quick.” came as more of a mummer above her thrumming heartbeat.

Down the hallway, just as predicted, three Shadows lay in waiting. They took after tables with checkerboard cloths and blue masks etched deep with sulking mouths. Each had black arms with various flaming kitchen tools: skillets, knives, and forks to name the ones Minako could see.

When she locked eyes with the frontrunner of the trio, loud war cries followed by the Shadows charging straight at them.

Minako reacted on instinct and grabbed her Evoker. “Naga! Rakukaja!” The snake-like Persona appeared at her call. It raised its spear over the other four members of SEES and developed them in blue light. “Everybody move!”

Junpei and Minato reacted in tandem, flanking either side of the hall and pulling their own Evokers.

“Agi!”

“Arcangel, pierce!”

Hermes and the holy fighter, Arcangel appeared and charged the tables. Fire and metal clashed in a mix of heat and screeching weapons bounced off the walls. Both Personas were thrown back at Minato and Junpei, easily bested as the assault of the enemy continued.

“Fire ain’t working, Minatan!” Junepi yelled as he engaged a table head-on. He held it back with shaking arms for only a second before being thrown backward. “SHIT!”
Minato had encountered the same fate, his slash attacks with his sword doing nothing to deter his own opponent. Thankfully, he landed on his feet and played the evasion game to keep himself safe. “They’re resisting pierce attacks.” He avoided a frying pan being thrown at his head. “We’ve gotta try something else!”

Akihiko rushed to help Junpei as soon as he went down. As he did, his Evoker was raised. “Zio!”

Polydeuces created a barrier between the sub-boss and the downed junior. As it used its body as a shield, it let off a strong pulse of electricity, pushing the Shadow back to give Junpei enough time to escape. The spell actually had a decent effect.

“I’ll take care of this guy!” he yelled, pointing to a struggling Minato. “Help him!”

“Got it, senpai!” Junpei clambered to his feet and did as he asked. Hermes was summoned promptly, using bowling into the table as it was about to start throwing more objects. The Persona took a beating but remained as a trusty roadblock.

“Io!” Yukari’s Persona jumped into the fray with wind running wild on the third table that had barely taken damage up until now. Her spells also had a more desirable effect than Junpei or Minato, unfortunately, they weren’t miraculous by any stretch of the imagination.

Yukari shrieked as the flaming table grew extremely hostile and started throwing its contents at her. “Someone help!”

Minako had been healing the boys up when she heard the distressed archer’s call. She changed gears and rushed to the younger girl’s side, ignoring a growing pit of debility in her body. “Naga!” she called again, the creature launching a bolt of lightning at the table and staving off the projectiles that threatened to harm Yukari. A sense of relief washed over the leader as she redirected herself to fighting beside Takeba for the time being, as she was starting to grow oddly pale from the excessive use of Garu spells.

“Minako-san, we can’t keep this up!” Yukari yelled as the leader joined her with electric spell support. “I’m feeling tired. Akihiko-senpai and I have been carrying things all night. At this rate, we’ll have to retreat.”

It didn’t take Minako long to take in those words and begin to access the current situation of the battle.

Akihiko and Minato had doubled up on Zio attacks, but Minato’s summon was severely under par compared with the much more seasoned Polydeuces. Junpei assisted his constant partner while the senior took on one Shadow by himself. With Yukari and Minako tied up on one themselves, things on the battlefield were uneven.

They had been so focused on working on diversifying their spell types that both Wild Cards neglected the idea that they would need to jump on at a moment’s notice.

Minako grit her teeth but forced herself to remain rational. Negative thoughts only led to ruin and thus she had to restructure her plan.

Yukari and Akihiko were more than capable with wind and electricity, but they had been the on the offensive all night. They could give out at any second if they didn’t start spreading their forces. Minato and Junpei were both fire users, but a fire was out questioned. The former was also keen on buffing spells, wind, and darkness while Minako knew primarily light and buffing spells.

The only other remarkable thing she knew were ice attacks...
Ice.

That was it!

“I have an idea!” Minako drew her Evoker and envisioned her main ice attacker. “Jack Frost!”

The snowman Persona bumbled to life with scarf fluttering lively in the air. It giggled into its hands, opened them to the enemy, and sent a thick white cloud. Towards the table in front of the two girls.

As soon as the cloud touched it, the table screamed out and dropped its juggled items. The black arms protruding from under the checkered cloth writhed to reach out in vain. Flames that once seemed to keep it safe from melee attacks vanished in wisps of smoke and steam.

“Now’s our chance!” Minako rushed forward with Yukari following close behind. “Hurry before the frost clears out!” The senior leaped into the cloud, goosebumps from the cold didn’t stop her from landing on top of the table while swinging her naginata down like a bludgeoning club. The blue mask cracked like brittle clay, scattering across the floor, the frown twisted and broken.

“My turn!” Yukari didn’t bother with knocking an arrow, deciding to whack the Shadow in the same fashion as her leader. “Take that!”

The Shadow was overwhelmed instantly. It only took a few more strikes before the white frost was swept away, the table along with it.

Both girls stopped attacking to catch their breath.

“W-we.. . did it.” Yukari breathed, a smile forming on her face. “We found its weakness.”

“GAH!” A pained scream pulled them out of the moment. Minako looked up to see Minato and Junpei struggling to suppress their own enemy. The flames on their table had grown only stronger as if to intimidate them into submission.

Minako wasted no time pulling her Evoker. “One more time!” Jack Frost bounced happily over to the boys, sending another cloud their way. Just like the first Shadow, it went down with flames all burned out. “Thanks, Minatan!” Junpei called before jumping on the Shadow. “Get back here ya’ son of a-!” Minato followed close behind before the two had been hidden from sight by the frosty cover.

“Little help over here!” Akihiko called from his side of the hall. He seemed to have exhausted all his energy to summon Polydeuces, instead of ducking and weaving in a futile effort to get away from his enemy. His clothes appeared to be charred around his boxing gloves. from failed attempts to do as much.

“Stay here Yukari!” Minako commanded and willed her feet to move as fast as they would go. She had to sidestep a fork that had been aimed directly at her foot. “Watch it buster, Jack Frost!”

For an encore performance, Jack Frost took a more direct approach to beat the Shadow once and for all. It belly-flopped onto the table with a gleeful “He HO!” and caused the legs underneath to give way. A piece of blue mask went sailing against the wall with a gratifying smash.

“Good snowman!” Minako could not help but laugh at the comical scene. “Come on back, boy!” Jack Frost hopped back to her side before vanishing. It had left behind one final frost cloud and a broken enemy that made no attempts to get back up.
Minako twirled her polearm with overzealous flare as she approached the fallen Shadow. She caught the base of the weapon and cocked it back like a baseball bat. “Say la vie!”

With all her might, she sliced upward and the Shadow howled as its underbelly was exposed. Her naginata had also made a clean cut right down the middle, adding insult to injury. The wood splintered as it was barely holding together.

“My turn!” A red and white blur, no doubt a recovered Akihiko, had slipped behind her and took advantage of the situation. The Shadow was thrown back by a vigorous punch meant to shatter bones, break concrete, and destroy monsters of the night. Before it could even hit the ground, the Shadow was torn in half from the previous cut and faded into blackened smoke, no longer the threat it once was.

Minako used her naginata as support, arms were thoroughly worn out from the tough fight. Her final attack had taken most of her energy and had been meant as such. She was simply glad she could see straight.

“I’m not getting up tomorrow.” she thought to herself bitterly.

“Yahoo!” she heard Junpei holler from across the hall. His sword was raised in triumph over a fading Shadow carcass. “That’s whatcha get, ya’ oversized tea sets!”

Minato and Yukari shook their heads at the terrible comparison. “Stupei, this is why you’re still single.”

“Hey! I thought you and I were getting along! What gives?”

“You opened your mouth!”

“Could you two stop yelling? I’ve got a headache.”

“Shut up, Minato!”

“Hey! Stop yelling at him, ya’ harpy!”

Minako sighed as the three juniors went off on one another. “Here we go again.” She guessed there would never be peace between them, but at least they appeared to be fine if they had the energy to bicker. That was all that mattered in the long run.

“Looks like everyone’s alright.” she heard Akihiko chuckle at their antics. He soon was at her side, arms crossed and taking in the scene before them. “How do you put up with these three?”

“I don’t know, Sanada.” Minako found some strength to right her posture. “Maybe I’m just that patient.”

The two shared a good laugh, not knowing that Minato was glaring daggers at Akihiko. His short sword was clutched tightly as if ready for another battle.

5/27/2009

Junpei and Yukari fought all the way back to the dorm tonight (or this morning, I really don’t care anymore). Mitsuru tried to get them to stop yelling but gave up after they ignored her the fifth time. I swear to whatever god who reads this, I’d give you my right foot if I could just get some peace and quiet.
Then there’s the asshole known simply as Akihiko Sanada. Guess what he said when I got back to the dorm: “Where’ve you been?” First of all, fuck you, you’re not my real dad. Just because you’re kinda friends with my sister, doesn’t suddenly make you MY brother.

That’s another thing, he’s awfully keen on spending time with Minako. I turn my back for two minutes and I see those two laughing at something really stupid. I don’t know what he wants, but he can fuck right off if he thinks he can just waltz in and try to get to know her like he’s actually invested in her wellbeing.

No, more like build up favors.

Minako’s already got her own shit to deal with. She’s too kind for her own good. I might not be the best brother ever, but hell if I don’t at least try to look out for my own.

I need to get those two away from each other, stat. He’s got bad news written all over his “perfect” ass.

Ugh, just thinking about him makes my headache worse. I hope he gets beaten into a coma so I never see him again.

-Minato Arisato
Junpei's Believe It or Don't!!

Chapter Notes

Yooo, we're just gonna hop skip and dive right into a scene that I'd been planning since the beginning of this fanfic. It might not be as cool as it looked in my head, but hey who knows?

Also, this chapter is very much a Minato heavy chapter. This boi needs some love!

“Did you hear? About that girl in class 2-E?”

“Oh, yeah! The one who was lying on the ground this morning, right? I hope she just ran away from home, but I feel like this is the start of something big.”

“Yeah, they haven't got a clue.”

“Isn't that bizarre!?”

Minato took a chomp out of his melon bread he had gotten from the bookstore couple not even a day ago. They insisted on him taking some after he came in alone and, being the glutton he was, accepted with open arms as lunch. With gossip running rampant around the classroom, it was the perfect “meal and a show” combo that often went overlooked in recent years.

“Seems like the rumor mill is running strong.” his older sister remarked while taking modest nibbles out of her own bread. She was more preoccupied with the “show” aspect rather than the package deal. “At least it’s something useful, for once.”

Junpei groaned, rocking back in his desk chair. “Man, can you believe these people? What’s so great about this whole thing? What even happened?”

Minato was hardly shocked at Junpei’s lack of information. All five members of SEES had been working double-time to pay careful attention to what their classmates were ranting about every day.

“A girl from 2-E went missing last night. This morning, they found her lying on the ground in front of the school gate. Nobody knows what happened, and supposedly, she's still unconscious.”

Minako filled in. “At least that’s what I heard from Hidetoshi-san in the Student Council. He’s a reliable source though, so it’s probably true.”

Just as the field leader had ended her report, Yukari stalked over to the group, leaving a cluster of her friends and a flustered Miss Toriumi behind.

“You guys are talking about that girl they found?” She seemed to have overheard Minako’s brief synopsis of the situation. “I saw her yesterday on my way back from practice. She seemed okay then.”

Junpei tapped his chin. “This is a tough case, even for Junpei Iori: Ace Detective. How will we crack this one?”

Yukari let out an indignant snort. "Ace Detective? Are you stupid or something?" She placed her
hands on her hips and was more than willing to glare down her nose at him. “More more like
Stupei, Ace Defective.”

“As if!” Junpei gasped. “I’ll have you know, I’m more than capable of solving a mystery. Maybe
they should call you Stukari, Ace Smarta-”

“Hey, play nice!” Minako butt in before any swear words were spoken. “Let’s agree this is strange
and out of the ordinary. We’ve gotta work together and see what we can find out. Okay, children?”

“Sorry, Minako-senpai.”

“Yeah, sorry Minatan.”

Minato rolled his eyes. “Says the biggest child of us all.”

Minako tossed her brother a more than forced grin. “Looks like we’ve got a volunteer to go an’ talk
to Ikutsuki-san once we get back to the dorm.”

And just like that, Minato’s day had been ruined.

No amount of freshly baked melon bread could save his soul from the self-proclaimed “Pun King”
himself.

Dinner that night had proven to be a worthy challenge: a beef bowl that could bring grown men to
their knees and tears to women’s eyes. The recipe was a synch to make but difficult to master.
From the proper use of spices and quality of the meat, all factors played a role in the creation of
such a hearty meal. That lesson had been learned the hard way after an accidental food poisoning.

However, Minako knew there were worse challenges in her lifetime. As long as she had the basics
on her side, the flavor was merely an afterthought that could be easily played with.

“Way of life, way of life~” she sang to herself as she seared the meat that had been marinating since
yesterday, “blah blah something, something ‘bout life. Way of life, way of my life~!”

“Stop already.” Minato groaned as he trudged into the lounge. “If you don’t know the lyrics, don’t
sing. It’s annoying as hell for the rest of us.”

“Language.” Minako reprimanded sharply, transferring the meat to six waiting bowls of rice. “I’ll
sing if I feel like it. This is kinda a free country, minus the gun laws and speech . . . and literally
everything about education.”

“I smell beef!” Junpei followed close behind Minato but stopped once he got a good look at what
was being served. “Ah man, I’m starving! Can we eat now?”

Minako nodded, adding her own version of seasoning sauce on top. “Get the rest of the gang
together.” She gave him a knowing grin. “I’ll give ya’ first dibs if you can do it in under a minute.”

“Got it, senpai!” Junpei charged back up the stairs, his shouts carrying throughout the dorm.
“Come on! It’s chow time!” The sound of him pounding up and into the girl’s wing thundered to
the ground floor. Although his voice was muffled from so high up, Yukari’s screech indicated she
got the message loud and clear.

“Sweet Jesus,” Minato remarked, “I swear I’m gonna lose my eardrums one day and it’ll be his
fault.”
Despite his jab, an earnest smile wormed its way onto his lips.

Minako knew that her brother was more than happy to let such a thing happen.

Junpei rocketed back downstairs and helped himself to his own serving of beef bowl. He managed a quick “thank you” before taking a seat next to Minato, already digging in without so much as a care in the world. Together, they tore into their food at breakneck speed. The other three dorm members came swiftly after, took their meals and seats at the table.

Once everyone had been served, Minako untied her apron, grabbed the last bowl, and took a corner seat next to Junpei. She folded her hands together and bowed her head once she deemed herself comfortable. Despite the noise going on around her, she willed herself to quiet her heart in prayer just as she always did.

“All praise to the Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive,” she repeated from years of constant use, “From thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord.” With a sign of the cross, she finished the prayer. “Amen.”

All rites had been completed. It was time to enjoy her creation.

Just as Minako was taking the first bite of her food, Junpei had wiped his mouth to speak. “Hey Minatan, why’re you a- what’s it called? Christian?”

Yukari reached over to smack Junpei. "You can't just ask people that! You're gonna make her uncomfortable!"

The question gave Minako pause, but the answer came naturally as she finished swallowing. “My mom was born in America. Her father moved there after World War II and he converted right before she was born.” She thought fondly of family vacations to her grandparents’ farm. “Guess you could say it rubbed off on me.”

“More like indoctrinated into the Creationist cult.” Minato jeered in between bites. “Ya’ don’t have to sound so melodramatic about it.”

“Says the nerd who believes in sky goblins.”

“Oni, they’re called oni and they’re NOT sky goblins.” he snapped back, pointing his chopsticks at her. “At least I don’t have to get up at freaking four in the freaking morning just to watch an old priest tell me I’m a sinful piece of crap.”

Minako sighed, knowing that the argument was going to be an unproductive one. “I’ll keep watching televised mass at SIX in the morning ‘cause I feel like getting up early, and it’s not like I’m forcing you to watch with me or say prayers all day.”

“Oh, like middle school? So glad you remembered.”

“Ya’ said you wanted to!”

Minako heard Yukari start to giggle, her voice little more than a whisper from a sore throat. “You two are just something else.” She leaned an elbow on the table. “I think praying before a meal is nice. It’s . . . comforting, like being a part of a family.”

There was a twinge of longing in the archer’s voice, as if, at one point, she hadn’t participated in such things for a while. More than that, it sounded like she missed it.
Junpei didn’t seem to pick up on the subtle gloom in Yukari’s words, continuing on voicing his thoughts aloud. “Hey Yuka-tan, have you seen the posts on the student message board? You know how that girl was found by the front gate?” He grinned mischievously. “Well, there's this rumor that it was an angry spirit from this one ghost story.”

Yukari got out of her funk but was instead jumpy out of her skin. “H-Hey! C'mon, nobody believes that stuff!?!” She glanced around the table in search of support. “R-Right guys? Back me up here!”

“Intriguing.” Mitsuru was more curious than sympathetic, leaning towards Junpei for more information. “So, what is this ghost story about?”

“Wha-!? It-It's probably made-up so why bother!?!”

Akihiko also ignored the pink-clad junior in favor of a potentially scary development. “I’m interested.” He waved Junpei on. “Go ahead and tell us.”

It was as if he had planned for this very event to happen. Junpei leaped from his seat like a little kid and rushed to the light switch panel near the kitchen. One by one, he flipped them off until the lounge was covered in darkness. There was a shuffling noise, a dark chuckle, and a scraping chair before Junpei’s face was alight by a flashlight. It cast menacing shadows on his already pronounced features.

“Good evening and welcome to Junpei’s Believe It, or Don’t! There are many strange things in this world. According to one story, if you get caught at school late at night, you'll be devoured by a maniacal ghost that roams the halls!” He certainly had a flair for dramatics as he swung his flashlight in time with speech inflections.“The other day, this friend of mine--let's call him Shu. He said to me, ‘Junpei, I saw something strange.’”

Junpei delayed to make sure his audience was captivated. Once he confirmed that they were indeed listening, he continued.

“He sounded serious, so I asked him what he'd seen. He said it was about the girl in 2-E. He claims he saw her go into the school on the night of the incident. I couldn't believe it.” he gasped animatedly. “She's not the kind of girl to be out at night!”

Minako could almost see Yukari shivering across the table. A chill ran up her own spine, nearly giving herself a fright.

“But Shu was as white as a sheet. He insisted it was true. . . Then, it hit me. That ghost must've tried to make her its dinner! And that's why they found her lying on the ground by the gate! I felt a chill run down my spine, and I broke into a cold sweat. Yes, there are strange things in this world. . .”

Junpei disappeared with a flick of his flashlight. “Believe it . . . or don’t.”

There was a break for eerie silence as he turned the light in the lounge back on. His flashlight was placed on the counter for safekeeping. “Man, that was cool. We should make it a thing!”

“How about no?” Yukari said curtly, her arms hugging herself tightly. “Besides, that was lame.”

“Ah, that's just cold Yuka-tan.” Junpei turned to the veteran seniors. “What do you guys think? Pretty sweet, huh?”

Akihiko seemed more than pleased. “I think it’s something worth investigating.”
Junpei took the answer in stride, turning back to Yukari. “Wow, I didn’t know you were afraid of ghosts, Yuka-tan.” He hid his mouth with his hand to poorly muffle a laugh. “That’s kinda funny!”

The girl huffed, turning her head away from the smug baseball player. “F-Fine, then let’s investigate. We’ll each ask around for the rest of the week.” She jabbed a finger in his direction. “I’ll prove to you that this ghost story is just an urban legend! Just wait and see, Stupei!”

“I appreciate that. I’ll leave it in your capable hands.” Mitsuru went back to enjoying her meal, but not before letting a frown slip. “The story is a bit unnerving if I’m being honest. It’s best we nip these rumors in the bud.”

“Then, I’ll let you guys handle it.” Akihiko also returned to his beef bowl, nearly finishing the entire dish. “Just make sure you sleep with one eye open.”

Minako felt a hum of excitement.

She had always wanted to play detective.

It had been almost a week since they had started their investigation into the ghost story.

In that time, barely any new information had surfaced expect for gossip and refutable lies. The few observable facts came in the form of riled up teens and jittery teachers as another two girls had been found unconscious like the first. The tension between fellow students was mounting each passing day as they waited for the next victim to turn up in front of the school.

The only thing that seemed to get done was exploring further into Tartarus and even then they had reached the fortieth floor in no time at all. All they could do was go down to the lower floors and train until the cows come home.

Everyone was getting understandably antsy.

It was then on Friday night, after a long day of school and homework, Minato and Minako had decided to finish their evening playing cards in the former’s room.

For whatever reason, he had been itching to play Blackjack for days but never found the time or motivation to seek out an opponent. With trouble brewing and a new mystery around the corner, it seemed fitting that he unwind with someone who understood his need for silly games to cope with the madness.

For a good hour, they played in silence, taking turns dealing based on the winner of the previous round. They needn’t speak, even when announcing their hands or asking for more cards. They instead communicated through knocks, triumphant grins, and even the occasional eye roll.

Midnight was only a minute away when that fragile peace was broken.

“It’s almost a full moon, a week out.” Minako offhandedly mentioned as she took her turn dealing out the cards. “Will we see that boy again?” Her slim fingers easily made the action seem more graceful than it actually was. “Do ya’ think something’s gonna happen?”

“Dunno,” Minato grunted, taking a peek at his hand: a face-up ace and a face-down seven. “S’been long enough. I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up tonight.” He took a chance and knocked on the carpet. A new card was passed his way: a face-down queen of spades. “Whatever, let’s just play.”
They fell back into an easy silence. Minato had busted while his sister had won with a perfect score of twenty-one (her hand consisted of an ace and a Jack). She gathered up the cards and began to reshuffle them for another game.

“Still, when will we see the lil’ guy?” She made a bridge and collapsed it with expert timing. “I kinda miss him.”

Minato didn’t answer. He looked at his alarm clock on his bedside table, just above Minako’s bowed head. The blue digits were brightly lit to show the time. “Looks like we lost track of time.”

Eleven fifty-nine became twelve within a matter of seconds.

The lamp the two used to see their cards went out. A green light from outside tinted the floor and eggshell-colored walls like a second paint job. A familiar feeling of depression hung over Minato as the Dark Hour settled on his room.

“Hello again.”

Speak of the devil and he shall come. This time, neither sibling jumped as the boy in prison pajamas appeared on the floor beside them. He sat cross-legged and regarded them fondly with azure eyes filled with a certain joy that was difficult to place.

However, unlike previous visits, Minato leaned back on his palms to open himself up. “Hey, long time no see, kiddo.”

The boy glanced over, almost bashful at the casual greeting. “It has been some time since we last spoke, but I came to see you again, as I promised. I’m actually glad you remembered at all.” He toyed with the sleeves of his ratty clothing. “How are you both? Are your studies coming along nicely?”

“We’re alright. Minato got top of the class and I got third.” Minako tapped the deck of cards on the ground. “Wanna play a game of Blackjack while we talk?” She smiled at him warmly. “We’d love to have ya’.”

The boy nodded, returning her kind expression. “I’d love to. Thankfully, I know how to play.”

Minako dealt out the cards for three people. Never mind how the boy knew a gambling card game, they had another player in the mix. Her mood was visibly brighter compared to her earlier somberness. “Remember, aces can be high or low. Just make sure ya’ don’t go over twenty-one. Get all that?”

“Understood.” The boy studied his cards for a second before putting them back with a shrug. “I wish to do nothing.”

As soon as Minato got his cards, he checked them quickly. To his delight, he had been given two Kings, one in the suite of hearts while the other was of clubs. They might not be from powerful suites, but as a hand, they were perfect if someone wished to play safe. He nodded to Minako to let her know he was ready for the reveal.

“Alrighty,” she turned to their guest, “go ahead.”

The boy flipped his cards over.

A black Jack and ace of spades greeted them.
Minato sighed and showed his hand, not seeing the point in trying. “Now that’s just mean.”

“Oh my,” the boy chuckled, “I sense some animosity. Have I done something wrong?”

“No, he’s just a sore loser.” Minako snatched up the cards. She didn’t bother showing her own hand but if he had to guess, Minato knew it was worse than the two boys combined. “Wanna play another game? We’ve got some time.”

The boy shook his head. “I think one will do. There are things I must do after this.” He rocked back and forth, “Now then, for what I actually came for. In another week, the moon will be full again. And the next ordeal will be upon you.” There was a hint of concern as he looked to the siblings. “So, be careful. I enjoy talking with you two, however brief it may be.”

Minato quirked an eyebrow. “Anything else? Anything we should know?”

“Nope, that’s all I know at this time.”

The boy had vanished, reappearing on Minato’s bed. “I must say, I find human sleeping arrangements quite nice.” He started lightly bouncing atop the comforter. “What a wonderful invention. Can we sit together up here next we meet?”

For a being who had been mysterious and creepy, Minato had a difficult time finding a reason to say no.

“Sure, next time.”

The boy had let a beaming grin.

“I await our next meeting.”

Without another word, he disappeared for the night.

Minako had decided she had enough of Black Jack and retreated to her own room for the night. Minato was left only to his own thoughts.

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**Unknown:** MINATOKUN ROOF 2DAY B THR AFTERSKOL

**Unknown:** BRING MINAKOSENPAI

**Me:** the fuk, who’s this? It’s 6am

**Unknown:** YUKARI I HAD PRACTICE

**Me:** how’d u get my #?

**Unknown:** JUS B THR

**Me:** i need 2 get a new fuking phone

---

School let out for the day, but there was still work to do.

Minato climbed the steep stairwell that led to the rooftop, as per Yukari’s blunt instructions that morning. His sister had to forgo the meeting on account of a Student Council meeting between the president, vice president, treasurer, and herself. From her frantic explanation on the way to said
meeting, it was going to be a long one. He promised to text her the details later on.

One step later and he was face to face with a heavy, metal door that led to the outside. Wires in the glass window made sure that, if broken, no shards would go flying through the air.

“Here goes,” he mumbled, shouldering his way through.

Junpei and Yukari were sitting on two of the four benches that provided a front-row seat to the vast harbor not even a mile away. The white stone that dominated the roof’s primary colors was almost blinding to the untrained eye.

“You’re late, man!” Junpei called. "Where's Minako-senpai?"

Minato blinked to get used to the shift in lighting and made his way to the others. “Minako stopped me on the way here. She can’t make it cause of a Student Council meeting, it seemed like an emergency so we won’t be seeing her anytime soon.” Once he reached them, he made himself comfortable next to Junpei. “I’ll let her in the loop after we’re done.”

“That’s a bummer, I really wanted her input on a plan I came up with this morning. I guess it can’t be helped.” Yukari shook her head in defeat. “You’re probably wondering why I asked for everyone to meet here today so we better get started right away.”

Junpei leaned towards Minato. “She knows Minatan’s still the leader right?”

Yukari threw him a nasty glare. “I know, but I got some interesting information this morning on the ghost story that everyone has to know.” She reached into her school bag and pulled out a pink day planner. It seemed that pink just so happened to be her favorite color, from sweaters to paper products. “I got lots of good info. It turns out no angry ghost was involved.”

“Oh,” Junpei rolled his eyes, “so that’s what’s important, huh?”

“Can it, Stupei.” Yukari flipped open her planner and cleared her throat. “First off, let's talk about how this rumor got started... Since the girl was found on school grounds, there's at least one similarity to the ghost story. But, why did the rumor spread so fast, if this was the first time anything happened?”

Minato thought to himself about the question. “I remember that teacher who got into an accident, but that was an isolated thing. He wasn’t well known by most students.” He bounced his knee. “This time it was three students, all with higher popularity status. News had to travel fast.”

“Correct, but here’s where things get interesting! My coach told me something very crucial this morning when she found out I was asking around for information.” She scanned over her notes one last time before setting the planner aside. “The victims are in different classes, and they don’t seem to be connected. However, they did have one thing in common. What was it?”

Junpei facepalmed at her theatrics. Ironic considering her performance earlier that week. “What is this, a quiz show?” He turned back to Minato. “You’re smart, can I phone a friend?”

“They hung out together?” Minato asked. “I mean, that’s the most logical conclusion.”

Yukari nodded, growing more excited. “Not just once or twice, either. They got in with a bad crowd and were always out late. It can’t be just a coincidence.” She gave them a satisfied look. “So, to find out what happened, we're gonna do some field research tonight.”

Junpei gave her an incredulous frown. “Field research, are ya’ kidding me?”
“Yeah, there's this one place where the three victims were regulars. It was an easy place for them to get drugs and other stuff, plus they could stay under the radar while blending with the crowd.”

“Hold up, I’m putting the breaks on this crazy train!” Junpei waved his hands frantically for Yukari to stop. “You’re not talkin’ about that place behind Port Island Station, are ya’?”

The only girl in their trio nodded almost too enthusiastically. “Oh, so you’re familiar with it? That makes this a whole lot easier.”

“Easier!?” Junpei stood up too quickly, he nearly fell forward off the bench. “You can’t go there! I used to live near that area and I can tell ya’ right now that it’s not safe. We’ll make the morning news by just showing up!”

Minato pursed his lips at the sudden outburst. What was so frightening that made the normally jolly Iori get on his feet and yell in their faces? Why was he living near that area in the first place if it was truly as horrible as he said?

Something ugly twisted in the passive boy’s stomach, a certain foreboding that told him to take action.

“We should listen to him. For all I know, we could be walking straight into danger.” Minato voiced as he caught Junpei’s eye, relieved that he had someone else on his side. “Let’s at least tell the seniors what’s going on. Maybe they can come with us for added support or call Officer Kurosawa to do an investigation.”

“Yeah, listen to reason! I know ya’ don’t like me, but at least here Minato out. He’s smarter than the two of us combined.” Junpei was pleading now. “Besides, don’t you think we’re getting in over our heads? What if something happens and no one’s there to help us?”

Yukari ignored the two altogether with a dismissive hand. “If you wanna stay back at the dorm, be my guest. I’m not afraid to go alone and I’m not afraid of the what if’s.” She got to her feet with fists balled up and determination in her stance. “Up until now, all we’ve done is take orders. We have Minako-senpai on our side but all she can do is make an appeal that gets processed faster. They treat her exactly like they treat us, like little kids who need ordering around.” She nearly growled at her own statements. “Does that feel right to you two, being treated like little kids?”

Both of her classmates bit their tongues.

Minato wanted Yukari to be wrong.

He really did wish he could be his logical self.

As soon as his sister was brought up, the way the seniors shoved all of the responsibilities they didn’t want on her already full plate, it was too aggravating to let be. They didn’t care what she wanted or lend a shred of respect when she was obviously uncomfortable with the workload. How much more did she have to do to prove that she was a great leader? Does she have to summon a Persona without an Evoker? Go to Hell and back just to say “hi” to Satan?

Not to mention how they looked down on the rest of the juniors with smug attitudes and silver spoons in their mouths. They handed them an investigation that could be easily conducted with Mitsuru’s position in Student Council. All it took was one order and the school would bend to her will.

If they could prove themselves, maybe the tides would change? Maybe they’ll be treated differently.
Minato knew it was stupid, but he also had his pride.

“I’m in.”

Yukari relaxed as if she never intended on making good by her threat. “Glad to have you.” She turned to Junpei. “Well, you in or out? We don’t have all day.”

“I know what you mean, but . . .” The capped teen looked between her and Minato before finally letting out a long sigh. “Man, did you have to say it like that? I guess I don't have a choice, do I? I’ll go, even if it kills me.’’

“Don’t worry, we’ll be in an out.” Yukari checked her watch. “Well, we’ve got a few hours to kill before the sun goes down. What should we do until then?”

Minato felt his stomach lurch again, this time accompanied by a low rumble. He had to skip lunch to help Miss Toriumi carry books for her next class.

“I can think of something.”

---

Me: we got a lead
Me: hellowooooo0000? we’re @ wild duck
Me: these fries fukin suk
Baneofmyexistence: language
Baneofmyexistence: Wat ya’ got?
Me: that girl had friends who all collapsed like her
Me: they had a favorite hangout spot, someplace they could vent
Me: we’re heading over 2 do some field research
Baneofmyexistence: where is it? I’ll meet’cha there in a few
Me: alleyway behind port island station, see ya later
Baneofmyexistence: wait a sec. that’s a dangerous area!! don’t go or you’ll get hurt!!
Baneofmyexistence: pls wait til’ I get back 2 the dorm, this is rlly dumb w/o backup
Baneofmyexistence: hello? Minato!? it’s been 10 minutes wat r u doing!!!
Baneofmyexistence: Minato!!!
Baneofmyexistence: i’m coming, just hang tight!

Minato glanced down at his phone that was now out of power. The screen flickered for a moment longer before going black, it had just received her answer to their location and now he would never know. His eyes hurt momentarily as they adjusted from the artificial glow to the dark street leading towards the place the girls had hung out.
“Minako’s gonna kill me when I don’t answer,” he muttered before pocketing the device with a lethargic sigh. “That’s life I guess.” The other two watched him expectantly as they kept walking towards the Iwatodai train station. “She’s got our location, so we’ll be seeing her later on. Don’t know when but should be in the next few minutes.”

“Alright,” Yukari picked up her pace, “let’s get going. We can start by asking around without her.”

“Wait a sec!” Junpei was less than enthusiastic, trying to slow her down by trying blocking her path. “W-what's your hurry? I still think this is a bad idea. How could you be afraid of ghosts, but not be scared of this?”

Minato could only agree with his words. Sure, they were no strangers to dealing with tough situations, but that was all during the Dark Hour. Outside that time, they were just a bunch of kids who didn’t have Personas or intimidating weapons to fight back with. They were sheep heading into the lion’s den.

“I agree.” he piped up, standing beside Junpei to hinder her movement. “We didn’t bring anything to defend ourselves. Maybe we should wait for Minako to get here; she knows how to sweet talk herself out of sticky situations.”

The logic was lost on the gung-ho Yukari. “Big deal!” she exclaimed and pushed past them. “So it’s a little dangerous? Come on, it’ll be like an adventure.”

The boys looked at each other, no doubt with the same thought. They might not feel confident about the situation but Yukari was far from being able to reason with. All they could do was play along and do their job as men, albeit scrawny and built for speed, to protect the headstrong archer from harm.

“This is suicide,” Junpei grumbled as the entrance to the alleyway grew closer. “What if Mitsuru and Akihiko-senpai find out? They’ll skin us alive!”

“Then I’ll use you as a shield.”

“That’s just mean.”

“Shut up, Minato.”

Yukari really was something else when she set her mind on something.

The three reached the entrance to the alleyway. Their self-appointed leader led the way through a torn chain link fence that was bent back for access beyond. The boys followed close behind with Minato keeping a close eye on their surroundings. So far, no one had stopped them, so the situation was still in their control.

It was when they stepped into the dark that things had begun to truly settle in.

Minato thought himself to be a good person at that moment: doing his homework, not breaking major rules, and dressing modestly each day. Teachers loved him and classmates wanted to be him, though they wished for it to come naturally. He was a product of conservative parents and a straight-laced busybody, instilling a deep protestant mentality of “he who does not work does not eat”. They taught him how to be not only a fine man but also a decent human being.

Yes, he was no doubt just in his ways.

Entering the alley had rendered those qualities unreliable when facing the people that occupied the
Young men in ratty jackets and shredded jeans hunched against graffiti-covered walls, some with an equally scruffy girl under their arm. Young women flashing fishnet stockings and dark make-up milled around while making flirtatious comments to those who would listen. Smoke made the area hazy, clouding one’s judgment despite their moral character.

What seemed to stick out the most to Minato was the laughter. It was a strange thing seeing a person take a long drag of a cigarette or snuggling up to their intimate partner only to giggle or burst out into a glorious fit.

What was so funny?

Were they laughing at the newcomers?

Laughing at themselves?

Junpei corralled Yukari and Minato into a huddle as they proceeded further into the abyss. “Oh man, this is worse than I thought.” He kept his voice soft, but the frequenters of the alley sensed his unrest. “We should get outta here, now.”

Yukari, despite inching closer to her male companions, remained stone-faced and forged ahead. “We came here for answers, and that’s what we’re gonna get.” She glanced to them both. “Keep your eyes peeled for anyone who looks like a student. Some of those girls might be here right now.”

By now, everyone around them took notice of them. Whispers were being thrown back and forth on account of their abnormal appearance for the location.

“The hell?”

“Check out those rags.”

“They're from Gekko High.”

A few rough looking individuals had begun to close in on the group. Minato was the first to spot them, but as soon as they got on Junpei’s radar, he grabbed the other two and started pulling them back. “Sharks at twelve through eleven o’clock. It was fun while it lasted but abort the mission dudes.”

Minato could barely focus on the exit as their predators closed in. “Yeah, let’s get moving before it’s too late.” He started backing up, tugging at Yukari’s sleeve. “We’ll find another way to get information, but we’ve gotta get out and meet up with Minako.”

Yukari yanked her arm away. “No, we’re too close.”

She refused to listen to reason, but both of the boys had enough of her endangerment of their lives. In silent agreement, each one grabbed an arm and began to haul her back. She was stunned at the sudden action but was soon trying to get away. “What gives!? Let me go!”

Minato and Junpei easily pulled her back despite her squirming. The former was able to get a hand over her mouth so she would not draw attention to themselves. “We’re trying to help you not get assaulted tonight. My sis will kill me and I happen to think you’re an okay person.”

“Sorry Yuka-tan, you’ll thank us later~”
"-Hey, I think you're in the wrong place!"

The three bumped into a group of thugs that blocked their escape route. Minato barely had a second to think before he and his companions were shoved forward. He stumbled a few steps before looking up to see who had called them out.

A second group had formed in front of the juniors, led by a man with oversized boots and a holey black vest. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets as he nonchalantly smoked an oddly shaped cigarette. By far the most significant feature on him as a nose piercing connected to a thin, silver chain that was then attached to another piercing in his ear.

“Ya’ just gonna stand there? Answer the fucking question!”

“Uh . . . well, w-we’re just passing through and thought we’d check this place out!” Junpei looked around. “Yup, lovely place ya’ got here! What a pleasant, pleasant . . . trash pile you’ve got. That’s some really interesting trash!”

Minato could hear his inner-self retch.

“You don't belong here. Get it?” The leader stepped closer, reaching to push back his greasy brown hair. “So take your two bitches and beat it, Goatee. We don’t want your kind mucking up the place.”

Yukari had not taken being called a bitch lightly, stepping up to defend honor. “We don't need your permission to be here!” She closed the short distance between herself and the punk, driving an accusatory finger in his face. “And that’s some talk from a guy who probably hasn’t had a bath since last year. How long’s it been since you’ve even seen the inside of a bathroom?”

“H-hey!” Junpei hushed Yukari from continuing her long list of grievances. “Are you nuts!? Take a look around you!” He turned back to give Minato a panicked chuckle. “You’re hearing this too, right?”

“Junpei’s right.” Minato took note that the circle around them was beginning to thicken. “Thing just got worse.” They had attracted an even larger crowd, and they didn’t seem the be the passive observing types.

There was no getting out unless they had help from the outside, but Minako was still nowhere to be found. Even if she did come to their rescue, what could she do? Run them to death? Quote Bible scripture to make them feel bad? She was just one person against an army of dangerous strangers.

“I'm not blind, ya know.” Yukari broke Minato from his thoughts, now directing her rage on Junpei while pushing him ahead of her. “Come on, don't be intimidated by these scum! Be a man!”

She had just called the people about to jump them scum. How dense could one person be while facing imminent danger? Whispers broke out among the ranks of her comment.

“What was that?”

“She just called us ‘scum’.”

“Let's get 'em. Who cares where they're from!?”

The lead punk smiled at the rising call to violence. “You oughta learn to shut that trap of yours.” He slowly approached Junpei who had now been thrust into the line of fire. The baseball player
didn’t move an inch as to protect his teammates, but it was obvious he was afraid. “Man, I feel sorry for you, Goatee.” The punk glanced at Yukari. “This bitch is a pain in the ass.”

Without warning and too quick for any normal person to react, the leader removed his fists from his pocket and punched Junpei right in the stomach.

“Shit!” The capped teen staggered back while clutching the spot he was attacked. He swayed hazardless before crumpling to the ground “Fucking hell, that’s gonna leave a mark!”

Minato was at his side, too stunned to bite back at the thug yet calm enough to hold up his injured partner. “Just stay still so you don’t pass out,” he warned. “I can’t carry ya’ all the way back to the dorm by myself.”

“Junpei!” Yukari dropped to her knees beside them. She covered her mouth, it finally dawned on her that she had backed them all into a corner. “Oh god, what have I done?”

Snickers and laughter sounded around the three while the circle got a little more compact. Minato did his best to block out the snide comments and instead focus on his teammates, but they still came through loud and clear.

“What’ll we do to the other two?”

“I don’t know ‘bout the faggot, but I can think of a few things for the bitch!”

“We'll post some pictures that will make her daddy cry! She'll wish she was never born!”

Minato turned to a pale Yukari, clutching her arms as she took in their words.

“This was all my fault.” she breathed. “What’ll we do?”

He could feel something bubble inside him that threatened to snap back at their remarks, but he knew that they would do no good. Their only objective now was to get Junpei back on his feet and break out of the mob that had surrounded them on all sides.

It was time to be brave.

“That’s enough fun for one night.” The youngest Arisato hauled himself to his feet, hoping Yukari was able to at least take on half of Junpei’s weight. He offered a hand to the thoroughly shaken archer. “Grab an arm, we’re leav-”

Minato froze up as someone grabbed him around the neck and began to squeeze. He heard Yukari scream, but his brain could barely comprehend the pain of nails digging into his exposed skin. Calloused fingers cut off most of his ability to breath but left some wiggle room for a semblance of mercy. Never before had he been faced with such a perilous situation, one that couldn’t be talked out of.

“Hey, pretty boy.” Minato got a good whiff of smoke and something else that dulled his senses as the leader spoke close to his ear. “I don’t like your face either. It’s like you’re looking down on us for being here.” The fingers around his throat grew tighter. “Got anything to say before I crush your windpipe and stomp on the corpse?”

Minato knew that he couldn’t save himself, despite all the fighting the past few months, he was still no heavyweight. He could try and pry the attacker’s fingers away one-by-one but what about his friends? They would swoop in faster than a hawk to hold Minato’s arms while his life was snuffed out.
It really was a terrible situation.

For the first time since facing the powerful Shadow on the runaway train, the idea that he might die dwarfed Minato’s every thought.

The difference was that at least he could fight back during the Dark Hour.

In the real world, he was just a powerless fool too wrapped up in his own mind to care.

No one would come to save him.

He really hoped his parents would forgive him for giving up.

“What dumbass chains their nose to their face?”

Such eloquent last words.

“You little fuck!” The fingers around his neck now clamped down on what little air he could get at the comment. An ugly gargle was the only noise that escaped Minato. He could practically see the furiousness in the punk’s face as the world began to blur.

“NO!”

“Let him go!”

“Choke! Choke! Choke!”

Minato heard the pleas for his life from Yukari and Junpei, but they fell on deaf ears. The other alleyway inhabitants cheered on the mob leader as he only squeezed harder and harder. Tears of pain pricked on the edges of the dying boy’s vision but he willed them to stay put.

He would die with his pride still intact.

“Sorry guys, this was on me.”

“This is what ya’ get for trespassing on our territory.”

“HOLY SHIT!”

“She’s got a gun!”

There was a commotion from the back of the crowd that caused Minato to be let go. He fell to the ground with Yukari and Junpei already springing forward to his rescue. All he could do was cough and try to regain his bearings while chaos erupted around him. Many of the alleyways visitors scattered to the wind around them as if escaping from something.

“What’s going on?” he heard Yukari whine, trying to keep from getting stepped on. “Who has a gun?”

“Dudes, look.”

Minato gave one last sputter as both he and Yukari raised their heads to see what Junpei was talking about.

His vision was still blurry from unshed tears, but he could make out the shape of someone small in the place that had been blocked off. Some stragglers stood behind the figure but didn’t dare
approach for some reason.

Minato wiped his eyes and brought clarity back to the situation.

There stood Minako with her Evoker aimed at the punk who had grabbed him. She had ditched her uniform for regular attire as if she knew it was open season on students; a good decision considering the circumstances. An unsightly bruise was blooming over her right eye, a cut bleeding steadily underneath and she was panting from sprinting, but she looked ready to kill anyone who took another step.

Her red eyes blazed with a fury that was unmatched as she started walking forward.

“Lay one more hand on them and I’ll shoot.”

Minako had never sprinted faster in her entire life. Anyone still out so late at night gave her funny looks as she raced past but respectfully moved out of the way.

They had to have sensed her worry.

She had gotten Minato’s texts when she got back to the dorm from the Student Council. Her plan was to meet the juniors there, but when she found the place empty, she decided to change clothes and go look for them.

Just as she was about to leave, she had gotten the news of where they were heading.

When her brother hadn’t answered his phone, she had gone full big sister mode.

Everything in between then and her running to the rescue was a complete blur. She remembered grabbed her Evoker from her mother’s jewelry box just in case she would need bluff. The weapon was stowed in her oversized boot. It was uncomfortable while she ran but it was better than bringing nothing at all.

Port Island Station loomed only two blocks away, but it felt like Minako had to cover far more ground than that. Everything felt numb yet her body willed itself to go faster.

“Just a little more. They could be dead already.”

That one thought propelled her past the station entrance and into a back alley that she had passed many times before but had always been told to never go down.

Her way was blocked by a chain-link fence reinforced with rotting palette wood. There was a large tear in the middle that desperately needed mending. There was shouting that seemed to be coming from the other side. A stench of decaying trash and smoke permeated Minako’s senses. It was almost too much to handle as bile rose to the back of her throat.

“They could be dead already.”

Again, that thought spurred her onward. Minako grimaced and nearly dove for the hole in the fence. She pried open the broken chainlink to create a space big enough for herself to crawl through and hustled into the alley. The shouting from before was becoming distinguishable.

“NO!”

“Let him go!”
“They could be dead already.”

A sharpened end of the fence had caught her cheek and left a burning line across her face, bring Minako back to the current moment. She simply swiped at the cut and kept moving ahead.

“Choke! Choke! Choke!”

When she entered, she noticed that a crowd gathered towards the middle of the alley. Some simply looked on with mild disinterest but looking over their heads, Minako could see fists waved high in the air. It seemed that they were watching something.

Cheers and whistles echoed off the brick walls, all chanting a single, bone-chilling message.

“Choke! Choke! Choke!”

Minato, Junpei, and Yukari were in the center of the mob.

“Choke! Choke! Choke!”

One of them was in trouble.

“They could be dead already.”

“Guys!” Minako hurled herself at the edge of the crowd. “Don’t worry, I’m coming!” She collided with a well-built man wearing a shiny white shirt. Personal space went out the window as she struggled to wedge herself past, finding a small yet promising opening. If she was only a foot taller and had the muscles of a god.

“Please let me through! I think those are my-”

“-Get off, whore.” Minako was shoved back by the man. “It’ll be over in a minute anyway, then you can see them.” He turned back to watching the show with crossed arms. "Doubt they’ll be in one piece, but you’ll see them.”

Minako felt her left hand twitch and her knees bending as she started reaching for her Evoker. She had to force her arm back down to her side and her knees to lock, not wanting to use up her ace-in-the-hole right away.

“You’re right. . .”

Instead, in a moment of brilliance, she took a few steps back and ran full speed into the man. He stumbled forward into the thick of the group and fell on top of other audience members. Three others toppled and left a better view of the action.

Junpei and Yukari were on the ground, the former clutching his stomach while the other was being tugged at by scantily dressed women. Junpei tried to swat hands away but ended up collapsing again and again.

But what Minako saw next sent took the air from her lungs.

Minato had been plucked up by one of the thugs, a large male with a chain on his nose and slicked-back hair. A sickening smile let loose a laughing fit that was almost inhuman. The thug’s hands were around her brother's throat.

His face was deathly pale.
He was going limp.

“Get that bitch!”

The man from before and the others he had taken down with him had sprung to their feet. “Don’t throw her in with the other three!” He pointed at Minako who was now fuming from what she had seen. “She’s mine!”

Minako brought her foot up to grab her Evoker.

One of the fallen punks was faster. His fist was cocked back and swinging just as her fingers brushed the trigger.

Before she knew what was happening, a flash of white-hot pain flared up in her eye. Minako felt her feet shuffle in random directions in a futile attempt to regain her balance. Everything went dark for a second as her brain tried to comprehend what had just taken place.

Punched, that’s what happened.

She got punched in the face.

Someone grabbed the collar of her jacket and yanked her back into the present. Her vision swam with varying shades of grey and yellow before the face of the thug that had decked her came into perspective.

Her hands moved on their own.

“That’s what ya’ get, ya’ filthy-”

Minako pressed her Evoker into the thug’s stomach.

Suddenly, everything froze in place.

“. . . Wanna finish that sentence?”

At first, the thug merely stared at her like a deer in the headlights. “. . . Holy shit.” he gulped and his grip started to loosen. “Please don’t kill me, I-I’m not gonna kill ya’.”

Minako took it as a sign to pressed harder into his gut. “Get off me,” she growled, “Now.”

He let go of her jacket and stepped back with his hands up. “Holy shit,” he said a little louder while his back-up got a good look at what caused him to stop ganging up on the leader of SEES. To make a point, she raised the fake firearm as if to aim at her assailant. All she could hear was the hum of her soaring heartbeat.

It was the final straw.

Chaos erupted when the thug started screaming.

“SHE’S GOT A GUN!”

The crowd had all turned around only to be met with the barrel of her Evoker. Gasps and shouts to run away rippled like a wave on the beach. They ran in every direction or simply pressed themselves against the walls to avoid any potential bullets.

“Is that chick crazy!?”
“Where’d she get that!?”

“We’re gonna die!”

Once everyone had cleared the way, Minako saw that the punk who was choking Minato let him go. Junpei and Yukari had him on either side as he fell, watching her and waiting for some kind of sign that they were safe.

As soon as her brother had locked eyes with her did she finally find her voice again.

She stared ahead at the now terrified punk who had laid a hand on her only family.

Everything felt like it was on fire.

“Lay one more hand of them and I’ll shoot.”

Minato could hear the lead punk start to scramble backward as Minako approached them. He could also hear the sound of snapping fabric as if he flung his hands up in a sign of surrender.

“Hey, I’m sorry! Just put the gun down-”

“Just shut up and stay there!” Minako reached the trio, and with her Evoker pointed to the ground, she nodded with her head to stand. Her gaze flickered to Minato in particular with a worried frown etched into her features. “We’ve gotta go but are you guys okay? Do we need to go somewhere-?”

“HA!”

Minato caught a flash of movement. The punk charged at them with a knife and didn’t seem in the mood for games. Minako raised her Evoker but what good would it do? The punk only continued to close the distance with ignited vigor.

“NO!”

Did he know the gun was fake?

“You’re dead!”

Were they really going to die after all?

“That’s enough!”

Minako was pulled out of the punk’s range by a red-coated giant. The hulking figure stepped in front of the group, lazily swatted the knife away and head-buttled the attacker.

Minato recognized that deep red, almost scarlet coat.

That day at the hospital, the young man from Akihiko’s room.

“Fucking fuck!” The punk fell to the ground, clutching his face with blood oozing between his fingers. He snapped up only to start caterwauling some more. “Who do you think you are, dumbass? You want some too!?”

Shinjiro Aragaki had acted as a shield in front of Minako, holding her Evoker away from the punk as if it were actually dangerous. “Do ya’ really wanna pick a fight with someone who just broke your nose and an angry chick with a loaded gun?” He raised his chain as if to intimidate and it
worked like a charm. “So who do ya’ think you are? Dead meat? A walking target?”

One of the other punks rushed out from the shadows to pick up the downed leader. “Damn you, Aragaki.” He glared daggers at Shinjiro. “That’s right, you're from Gekko High too, aren't ya!? I thought you were one of us!”

“What gave you that idea? I don’t remember swearing a blood oath.” The red-coated savior spit on the concrete next to the two thugs. “Now scram, before the police show up and arrest your sorry asses.”

With one final snarl from the helper punk, he picked up the leader and disappeared with the rest of the crowd.

“You better grow eyes in the back of your head!”

And then they were gone, leaving a hollow silence in their wake.

A faint buzz of adrenaline was all Minato could feel. He rubbed his sore neck. “We’re never doing this ever again.”

“Oh man, thanks for saving our bacon!” Junpei said to Aragaki, getting under Minato’s arm and easily hoisting him up. He then turned to Minako. “Pardon my French but that was badass, Minatan! I thought we were goners before ya’ showed up. That was like something out of a movie!”

For once, the senior didn’t make any reprimands. She instead stashed her Evoker in her boot and reached to pull Yukari to her feet. “I wanna be mad at you three but it’s really hard when you’re all beat up.”

Shinjiro groaned and rounded on the four students with a furious attitude. “You idiots! What made ya’ think coming here was a good idea, huh?” He thrust a finger towards the broken chainlink fence. “Get outta here before they come back.”

He started to walk away but Yukari was quick to recover from her stupor. “Wait! We came here for a reason! We need help and you’re the only one we can go to!”

Shinjiro stopped and turned back around. At first, he regarded them with an annoyed scowl but soon let up after a deep breath. “You guys. . . I show ya’ at the hospital.” He started walking back towards them.

Minato must have shifted because soon he was on the receiving end of a pair of piercing ink eyes.

“Did Aki tell you to come here?”

The question was directed right at him. Better yet, it had to deal with the bastard himself, Akihiko Sanada. Everything always came back to that silver-haired baffoon who’s IQ was built on the back of sport’s science and nutrition labels. Even if he had given them the task of tracking down the source of the ghost stories, he would have jumped on the chance to show off in front of the juniors.

At least that’s what Minato thought. He was more than happy to shake his head. “No, he didn’t.” He felt his lip quirk into a grin. “Do ya’ really think he’d send us on a suicide mission when he could go himself?”

“Hmph.” For the first time since they met, Shinjiro showed emotion that didn’t constitute being perpetually frustrated with everyone around him. It was a cross between smug and amused and it
was fantastic to know someone agreed with Minato. “Still a lil’ prick, but you’re sharper than you look.”

So, he remembered how the teen sassed him in the hospital. He wasn’t even mad, just impressed.

In a twisted sort of way.

It looked like the start of a beautiful stranger-ship.

“I try,” Minato responded.

Shinjiro focused back on the group. “What do you wanna know? I’ll see what I can think up.” He rocked back on his heels. “Is it that ghost story everyone’s jabbering about?”

Yukari nudged Junpei with her elbow. “I know we’d get something tonight.” Her attention went back to Aragaki. “That’s exactly what we’re looking for! What do you know? Anything will help.”

“You’re too excited, sheesh.” Shinjiro readjusted his beanie that had been thrown askew during his counter-attack. “It's a rumor. Those girls who wound up in the hospital were here talkin' shit every night about all the things they'd done to some girl named Fuuка.”

“Fuuка?” Minako asked, stepping forward. “I’ve heard that name before, but where?”

“Ya’ don’t know Minatan?” Junpei spoke up. “She’s in class 2-E with Mr. Ekoda. People are saying she’s been sick for a while and hasn’t been to school since Monday.”

“She’s not sick,” Shinjiro interjected harshly. “You guys don't know? This Fuuка girl might be dead. She hasn’t been home in over a week and you think she’s just got the fucking flu?” His voice grew louder as his frustration skyrocketed. “Don't you guys go to school!? How do you not know this?”

“Well excuse me, I have a life ya know!” Junpei defended.

Shinjiro rose to full height. “You wanna go, Goatee?”

“Knock it off!” Minato flinched at his sister’s biting tone. She placed herself in the middle of the boys. “I’ve had enough yelling and brawling and to heck whatever else!” She turned to Shinjiro with a polite bow. “Thank you for your time but we’ve gotta get going. You gave us more than what we came for so please take good care of yourself. It would be a shame to lose a valuable informant like you.”

“Tch, just don’t come here again.” Shinjiro did not return the gesture, clicking his tongue and turning away from Minako. “Glad you’re satisfied. I like my peace and quiet.”

Junpei and Yukari bowed to Shinjiro in kind.

“Sorry for yelling, thanks a bunch.”

“You totally helped us out, you’re very kind.”

Aragaki rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah yeah, now get your butt’s in gear.” He pointed in the opposite direction that they came from. “Those guys might be hanging around, so take the long way back. Don’t wanna see you four on the news when I wake up.”

“Thanks, we will.” Minako started leading the way out of the alley. “Let’s get back to the dorm everyone. We’ve got a lot of work tomorrow.”
Minato followed behind the group. As he drowned out the chatter of his teammates formulating a plan to seek out the mystery behind Fuuka’s disappearance, he thought he heard Shinjiro talking to himself.

“I get it, Aki. You’re still holding on to the past. It’s you who can’t let go.”

6/6/2009

Yukari texted me this morning in all caps.

It was so strange, I had to write it down.

-Minato Arisato
Soooo sorry I haven't posted in a few weeks. Pre-med isn't easy and I actually got to go home and see my family for the first time in what feels like forever (but it was at most two months). I thought a short break was in order so I took my time to write this one. It might not be the best chapter, but I'm really proud even if you guys don't. The original document was thirty-three pages long so enjoy!

P.S. There will be more social link conversations coming up. Feel free to suggest any that might be really cool to see, but keep in mind that I am cutting a few because I can.

Mitsuru had been angry when the four had come back to the dorm with more than a few scrapes but had been surprisingly understanding once she had taken two seconds to breathe. It was even more unexpected when she actually listened to their whole anthology of the night without chewing out the ragtag team. All it took was sitting her down (with Akihiko as her impulse control) in the lounge and it was relatively smooth sailing.

"So Aragaki-san told us to take the long way back to the dorm and now we're here." Minako finished her account of the night's events, her throbbing eye beginning to be a bother. "That's all I've got to say. Everything else's... painfully obvious."

The heiress sighed, leaning back into her seat on one of the two couches.

"Well, I can't say I'm ecstatic at how you obtained such valuable information, it is information we can use all the same. Our next step is to call the Chairman and set up a meeting with her homeroom teacher. We'll get to the bottom of her disappearance and fan-out from there."

The three juniors stood behind Minako’s seat, leaning on the back of the couch with heads bowed. She could hear them shift every so often in reaction to the story but they had remained mostly quiet overall. The boys occasionally made an aggravated grunt from their injuries with varying degrees of discomfort.

What they had all gone through that night had left them roughed up, there was no doubt about it.

“It’s just so weird.” Yukari eventually grumbled. “Why didn’t anyone notice that Fuuka was gone rather than sick? News travels fast but I barely heard a thing about it until tonight.”

Mitsuru considered the younger student’s statement. “I don’t know but something isn’t sitting right in all this.” She pinched the bridge of her nose in thought. “Whatever that teacher says on Monday, I have a feeling there will be blood.”

Junpei sucked in a deep breath. “Yikes, ya’ make it sound like Mr. Ekoda killed her. They don’t call ya’ President for nothing, Mitsutan.”

“Mitsutan?” Mitsuru crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t recall us being so familiar Iori. Mayhaps those ruffians kicked you hard enough to warrant memory lose or are you just that bold to assume you and I are friends?”
Minako heard her brother snort “Ice cold.” There was a muffled sound that resembled someone being clapped on the back. “Better luck next time at getting a woman to like you.”

Junpei slumped over the couch like a sock monkey being thrown aside by a child. His voice had all but shriveled up and lost all earlier bravado. “Why does life hate me?”

“Because you’re terrible at flirting?” Yukari answered.

“Thanks, Yukatan. I feel SO much better.”

Mitsuru cleared her throat to reign in everyone’s attention. Once all eyes had returned to her, she looked to the four who had gone out with a sympathetic smile.

“I think tonight has been eventful for all of you; it’s best you get to bed early and get a jump start on the weekend. We have a lot of work ahead of us so I don’t need sleepwalkers. You’re dismissed for tonight, good work.”

A chorus of appreciative mummers broke out behind Minako. Footsteps were practically racing toward the staircase as the three juniors had been given to go to leave. She turned to watch them skip steps for fear that Mitsuru would change her mind and start yelling.

“Dudes, I’m not getting up tomorrow.” Junpei said.

Yukari sighed. “I agree with Stupei. Homework can wait for all I care.”

“No wonder you guys scored lower than me on midterms.”

“Ah shut it, Minato.” the other two juniors said in unison.

How typical of her brother: always finding ways to sneak in a gloating jab.

“Arisato.”

Minako snapped back to her fellow seniors. Both looked at her with a sort of expectant expressions as if waiting for her to speak. Had they been trying to get her attention this whole time while she was watching the juniors walk away?

“Sorry, did you say something?” she asked.

A furrow in Mitsuru’s brow deepened at the question. “You said you were punched by one of the men surrounding those three. Did you happen to fall and hit your head on the concrete?”

It was a logical assumption to make considering the facts. One man against a high school girl is an uneven match-up if it weren’t for her clever bluff with the Evoker. She knew that punch would be enough to cause some damage but everything had gone by so quickly. Who’s to say if she had hit something or not?

“I don’t remember, maybe?” she answered truthfully while covering her injured eye. It felt embarrassing that her two peers now watched her like hawks for any sign of weakness. “Honestly, I feel fine except for this dumb headache. It’s been bothering since we got back inside. . . with all the lights.”

Why had it not clicked in her brain?

Dizziness, irritation to light, and lack of focus.
Did she have a concussion?

“Um,” Minako gulped and a nervous chuckle rose up to the surface. “This isn’t good.”

From the pregnant pause that preceded her reflux statement, the other seniors had a similar idea.

“Oh no.” Mitsuru sprung into action and reached into her pocket to retrieve her cell phone. “I’ll call the Chairman immediately and notify him of what happened. We may have to take you to a clinic tonight just to be safe.” She glanced over to Akihiko who looked equally tense. “You know where the first-aid kit is. This shouldn’t be difficult for you to manage.”

Minako opened her mouth to protest. “Wait a sec, I can help my-”

The two split off in two different directions, Mitsuru leaving the dorm entirely for some privacy while Akihiko nearly bolted towards the kitchen, leaving Minako to stew by herself on the couch. Her plea for them to let things be was scattered to the wind.

“-self . . .” she finished before resting her head back.

What was the point in fighting if she was to just be ignored altogether?

Her eyes clamped shut to block out the fluorescent bulbs that caused a majority of the problem. It eased some of the pain but a dull throbbing still insisted on causing her grief. Her teeth clamped down on her tongue as if it could help distract her for the time being. The new sensation allowed her a moment to fixate on something other than the events of the night replaying themselves in her mind.

The harder she bit down, the easier it was to muffle the chants of the punks who had remained with her all the way back.

She could wash away the vile stench of garbage from her nose with a little more pressure.

Her brother’s desperate struggle to free himself would cease to haunt the corners of her hazy vision.

That horrible choking gurgle would follow her no more if she just bit a little harder.

“Hey, open your eyes.”

Minako raised her head and did as she was told. “Oka-”

A new flash of light assaulted her retinas with a burning passion. Tears unwillingly broiled at the edges of her lids at the intensity of the violent attack. The thumping in her head grew to a fever pitch.

Her hands flew up to her face once the shock had worn off. “Ack!” she cried while wiping away a few stray tears. Once her sight was cleared, she looked up to see Akihiko with a medical flashlight gripped like a pencil. “Give me a heart attack, why don’t ya’!”

The boxer pointed the flashlight away from her face, almost sheepish at her outburst. “Sorry about that. You’re okay, right?”

Minako took a deep breath to reign in her headache. “Yeah, sorry I jumped.” She blinked to freshen her eyeballs and tilted her chin up so Akihiko could get a better look at her face. “I’m ready now, sorry if I’m being a bad patient.”

“Pft, you haven’t met the younger guys on my team. You’re doing fine.” He poised the flashlight to
just beam over her forehead, trying to find the right angle to examine her. His free hand ghosted near her temple. “I’m gonna need to check if anything around your eye is broken. Mind if I move you around a little?”

“Go ahead,” she said. “I don’t bite.”

Her quip earned a low chuckle. Akihiko pointed to the tip of his nose before he reached out to get started. “Just relax your neck and look here the best you can. I’ll try to be quick.”

Minako shivered when his fingers met the side of her face. She had expected the feeling of someone else to be strange but this was not what she had expected. Cold, hardened skin pressured to keep her from pulling away from the light that had returned to her eyes. Maybe it was because of her dead sprint that the difference in temperature was more apparent, or maybe it was because she had always been a more warm-blooded individual. It was still an interesting thing that nearly distracted her from the pain.

Despite the cold fingers, Akihiko was surprisingly benign in his work. There was never an urgency to get away from her rather than putting in the effort to cover all their bases. Every repositioned tilt was done slowly as to not be upsetting to the person who was in his care, treating Minako more akin to a delicate piece of china or an expensive antique doll.

In all the times they had hung out, whether it be eating at the Beef Bowl shop or running until their lungs burned, there was a certain vigor about Akihiko that was almost contagious to the easily inspired. Even those who had a hard time rallying to anything not worth their time could get behind his oddly charming mannerisms. He certainly had most of Gekkoukan High around his finger by simply walking into a room.

However, with no one around to impress but her, the Golden Boy was truly someone else.

The same boy who stumbled over a pick-up line had the attentiveness of a surgeon.

The same boy that watched the sunrise on a gymnastics bar remained gentle.

Akihiko clicked a tiny button on the flashlight signaling he had finished. “There’s no blood in your eyes, the pupils contracted normally, and I can’t see any odd patches that might be broken bones. A few days on ice should do the trick,” he said to himself, grazing his thumb under her cut. “What’d you do?”

Minako squirmed. the cut began to sting just from light contact. “Broken fence. I was in a bit of a hurry to get through and got scratched pretty good.” She twiddled her thumbs on her lap; “It might be infected already but I’m not a doctor; that’s Minato’s job.”

“He wants to be a doctor?” Akihiko stepped away to get bandage and alcohol scrub. Once he had both, it was time to disinfect the wound and close it up. “Makes sense with his grades but I never got that vibe. I can see him as an engineer or accountant, but not something with that much human interaction.”

Minako tried to keep still as the pure alcohol stung her open cut. “Don’t be fooled by his emo haircut, Minato enjoys helping others when they’re in trouble. He might change his mind when they start looking the gift horse in the mouth, but at the end of the day, he’s a big ol’ softy on the inside.” She smiled just thinking about her own words. “That’s just how we Arisato’s do things; we help people.”

Akihiko hummed in agreement. “Guess you’re more upfront about it.” He neatly placed a bandage
over her cut to finish the job and removed his hand from her face. “You’re all set. I can’t guarantee there won’t be a scar but at least you’ll have a story to tell for later.”

Minako touched the bandaged area and found it to be numbed by the rubbing alcohol. Her eye still felt sore but at least talking to her teammate helped get her mind off of her many ailments obtained that night.

She tried to stop her smile from getting any bigger as to not upset any of the injuries. “I think I owe someone breakfast after our run tomorrow.”

“After everything you’ve been through tonight and you feel up to the usual route?” Akihiko excused himself from her personal bubble to clean up the first-aid mess on the coffee table. “I’m not saying we can’t go, but maybe you should sleep in instead. It’d be a shame if our leader got hurt. Stuff like that really puts a strain on morale ya’ know.”

Minako waved him off. “I’ve been through worse. Have ya’ ever run up a steep hill while it was raining sideways; it’s brutal!” she said to counter. “Besides, I’ve been at this whole adulting thing for a while. I get that I’m a girl and I’m not as physically imposing, but taking care of myself and my brother is a full-time gig. I know my limits.”

Akihiko was not one to be convinced as he just picked up the last scrap of used materials with a fixed gaze to the floor. “Still, doesn’t that seem like a lot for one person to handle?”

“No really. . .” Minako trailed off. What was he trying to get from her? “I’ve just gotten used to it. I can’t remember a time I wasn’t taking care of someone.”

It was always her being the mother hen, maintaining the dorm on days off and cooking most nights for a decent crowd.

When Yukari caught a bought of the fly during the week, it was Minako who forced her to stay home and rest.

If Junpei and Minato started going off the rails with fire spells, Minako yanked them by the collars until they stopped setting Tartarus ablaze.

SEES relied on her for guidance in the field.

Everyone needed a rock and she was excellent at letting people lean on her.

Those were the things she wanted to say.

Unfortunately, those things were kept bottled tight within her mind.

“I can get by.” was all she managed to get out. A grin was automatically plastered on her features, despite her earlier restraint not to. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve got enough gas in the tank to last.”

All her pretty declarations were met with deafening silence. Only Mitsuru’s staccato voice from outside and the mundane hum of the dorm filled the dead space. Minako felt awkward that she had gone on such a winded rant both verbally and mentally. The fact that Akihiko had yet to respond to anything she said was also giving her a bad feeling.

Had she gone on too long without saying anything? Was he annoyed by her altruistic tendencies? He gave no sign as to answer either of those questions, packing up the first-aid kit without so much as a peep.
It was her queue to fly the coop.

Minako pursed her lips and got to her feet. “Sorry if I kept ya’ up late. I think I’ll just hit the hay for now and we’ll see about tomorrow.” She started to leave the lounge, back facing the stairs as she bowed graciously. “Thanks again for everything—”

“-Catch.”

Minako barely caught a squishy, plastic bag filled with a liquid that sloshed around when she grabbed on.

A single-use ice pack.

Akihiko had stopped rummaging around the kit to give her a reassuring grin. “Keep that on whenever you can. It’ll help the swelling go down so you don’t go temporarily blind.” He leaned back on the coffee table. “Don’t be a hero either, if the swelling gets worse, I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. We need our leader in one piece.”

Was that his way of saying he was looking out for her?

Was he just concerned this whole time?

Somewhere in Minako’s heart, something skipped. She returned the expression, not caring anymore if her cheeks hurt.

“I guess I can count on you.”

And so the two went their separate ways for the night, a budding trust between them at the verge of bloom.

Mr. Ekoda was infamous at Gekkoukan High for all the wrong reasons.

It was no secret that the man was a crafty fox capable of making the best students his personal whipping posts. Whether you were an honorable bookworm or aloof jock, it didn’t matter so long as you had ears and eyes to bear witness to his exhausting rants on the human condition. Rumors from the upperclassman about his behavior had practically become legends in their own right, adding to the hysteria.

Paying off young girls. Beating the bricks off of boys. Getting other teachers fired. Not every rumor was true, but no one tried to confirm or deny these claims.

And so, during lunchtime, Minato found himself, his sister, and Mitsuru in Chairman Ikutsuki’s office. The aforementioned man was fetching Mr. Ekoda from the faculty office for a four-on-one meeting about what happened to Fuuka Yamagishi and perhaps gain some insight into her whereabouts.

No more pussyfooting around under the guise of ignorance.

Minato slouched in his chair, positioned against one of the office’s mint green walls. His eyes tracked a clock on the wall, waiting for anything to happen. “Lunch is almost over,” he said aloud. “Is the Pun King directionally challenged too? What’s taking him so long?”

Mitsuru, leaning against Ikutsuki’s desk, snorted at the snide comment. “You certainly have high opinions about the Chairman, but no, he’s simply running late for whatever reason.” She glanced
at the clock herself. “But I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t concerning. He’s usually quite punctual.”

Minako was browsing through the Chairman’s bookshelf when she caught wind of Mitsuru’s unintentional joke. “Don’t you mean PUN-ctual?”

A sigh swept across the room.

“Boo,” Minato said, twirling the lanyard of his iPod. “I need some brain bleach.”

“Too late, nerd.” Minako helped herself to a seat on the room’s lone couch. “Think of it as a charitable donation from the ‘Lighten Up’ society. You could really use it.”

Mitsuru looked between the two of them with an almost horrified expression. “Do all siblings act this way or are you the exception?”

Minato felt nothing for Mitsuru as an onlooker to the daily show of him versus the she-devil. He still had to deal with her for the rest of his long life, forever haunted by the knowledge that they shared blood and genes.

“Hell if I know,” he answered. “At least we’re not twins.”

The door to the office creaked open and Ikutsuki popped his head in.

Speak of the devil and he shall come.

Speak of the Pun King and he shall intrude on all conversations.

“Forgive me for being late,” he said, opening the door wide behind him as he waltzed into the office. “It seems that we have more than one interviewee today: a fellow student from Miss Yamagishi’s class. She may have some valuable insight into our investigation.”

Behind Ikutsuki was Mr. Ekoda in one of his trademark charcoal suits with a matching purple striped tie. His age was worn terribly on his face with a wrinkled forehead and chin that made dried prunes seem more hydrated. Sharp eyes darted around the room, taking in the three students with malice dripping from the curl of his chapped lips.

Another person trailed the teacher, a girl with tanned skin and a grey vest variation of the school uniform. A nest of light brown hair was tied into a messy top bun that would block anyone’s view if they sat behind her in class. Her wrists were decorated with a multitude of flashy bracelets that nearly blinded Minato when she walked into a patch of sunlight streaming from the office’s lone window.

Despite the loudness of her presence, her plump lips were pressed in a jittery frown while she wrung her hands.

Mr. Ekoda paid no mind to the student’s plight. Instead, he took one look at the room and was obviously unhappy that the meeting would have an audience.

“I thought this would be a private affair between us and Miss Moriyama.” His disgust was aimed directly at Minato, sending a tremor down the boy’s spine. “Especially one of her more... interesting peers.”

Minato stood up, hands shoved deep into his pockets. “Am I really the biggest problem in the room right now?”
“Minato, hush!” Minako reprimanded before bowing to Mr. Ekoda. “Forgive him, sir. we’re all a little on edge today. Kirijo-san arranged this and we’re her team to help with keeping all the facts straight. I hope ya’ don’t mind if we stay.”

Minato resisted the urge to hiss at Minako for quieting him but he played along with her charade by biting his tongue and staying in his corner chair.

Mitsuru lit up at the opportune lie, stepping away from Ikutsuki’s desk with a hand poised on her hip. “In any case, we best get started. Those two will be silent unless I need them for a consult.” She motioned to the empty seats in the room. “Please, we shouldn’t waste any more time with a missing girl afoot.”

Mr. Ekoda crossed his arms but did as he was told. He took the biggest chair in the room, one reserved for when Ikutsuki preferred to use the coffee table rather than his desk to work. The student remained on her feet, something keeping her from settling down.

“Now then,” Mitsuru began. “As you well know, I’m here to ask you about a student named Fuuka Yamagishi. She's been missing for a considerable amount of time and yet you reported her as being ill. Why?”

The man gave no sign that he was concerned, for himself or his student. He laced his fingers together and spoke to defend his actions.

“I was thinking of the students, of course. You children may not understand, but we have to consider the future of everyone affected. I wouldn't want her records to be stained by something as trivial as this.” He turned away from Mitsuru to address Ikutsuki at his desk. “It was in her best interest until she is safely delivered home. Her parents agreed; you know this Chairman.”

Ikutsuki still had on his lazy grin as he leaned over his desk. “It seems there’s a bit of a miscommunication, Mr. Ekoda. I never heard such authorization from her family until this very second.” He cocked his head. “Please, don’t make up such fanciful tales. Her parents have called each day for news on their only daughter and yet all you’ve done is incorrectly marked her attendance for all staff members to see. Imagine what they would think if they heard of such inconsiderate actions in a time of panic.”

Mitsuru shook her head in utter disappointment. “You chose not to report this to the police for the ‘good of the class.’” Her next words could have been spat out like venom and it would still have the same sting. “To protect your career, you ignored your responsibility as a teacher. How despicable.”

Minato held back a snicker as Mr. Ekoda’s face was turning beet red, despite sitting absolutely still to control his anger.

Not even five minutes in and they already shut up the epitome of the classical dumbass.

“Now listen here Miss Kirijo-”

“I-I never thought it'd turn out like this. . .”

Finally, the female student had said something. All attention turned on her as she stepped closer to the center of the room.

“I-I have something to say.” She looked to Mitsuru with an almost frantic look in her eyes, the desperation only accentuated by her shaking frame and inching closer to the Student Council President. “If it’ll help find Fuuka, I’ll tell you everything!”
Minako was at the girl’s side as she started to lose all composure. “Easy there, easy. Your name was Moriyama, right?” She gently guided the brunette to sit next to the seniors on the couch. “Take a deep breath. You’re not in trouble, we just need the truth.”

Mr. Ekoda scoffed at the scene before him. “This isn't an interrogation, young lady.” He leaned forward towards Moriyama who held tightly to Minako’s hands. “Natsuki, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. You wouldn't want to give them the wrong idea.”

“Be quiet, Mr. Ekoda. Let her speak.” Ikutsuki folded his hands on his desk. “I apologize for that interruption. Please continue, Miss Moriyama.”

Natsuki fiddled with one of her ten thousand bracelets. For a girl that looked the part of a spoiled brat, she certainly came off like a mouse in a trap.

“Fuuka... She always looked so frazzled whenever I gave her a hard time. Then, I realized: She's an honor student, but deep inside, she's the same as us. I knew exactly which buttons to push.” She paused to swallow thickly as if she could burst into tears at any second. “We were just messin’ with her that day, too! May twenty-ninth... We took Fuuka to the gym... and locked the door from the outside.”

Minato was on his feet before his brain could tell his body to stay put.

“You locked her in a closet for ten days straight?” He could at least keep his voice from rising above a normal volume. “What were you thinking?”

“Minato!” his sister snapped, still hold Natsuki’s hands. “This is no time for your sass! Sit down and be quiet.”

Minato followed the command, seething on the inside.

How could he be the only one angry that this girl had done such a cruel thing, yet was still being treated like the victim? Did they even care that someone’s life was at stake the longer they coddled the person who had the answers to all their questions?

Natsuki watched him sink lower into his chair before turning back to the larger group. “That night, Maki returned to school alone. She was afraid we’d get in trouble if Fuuka committed suicide. But, she never came back and the next morning...”

“She was found lying by the school gate.” Mitsuru finished. “Did you eventually go yourself to check if Yamagishi was still there?”

Natsuki nodded curtly. “I went to the gym to let Fuuka out, but the door was still locked. So, I opened it and went inside, but she wasn't there... We all freaked out.” She let go of Minako’s hands, her shoulders sagging. “Starting that night, we all went looking for her. But every night, another one of us went missing... and they each ended up like Maki.”

Minako rubbed her back to coax her onward. “Were they acting weird before they ended up like that? Anything at all?”

Minato gauged Natsuki’s expression as it morphed into one of confusion.

“... They all heard a voice, a creepy voice. Right before each of them went missing, they said it was calling their name.” She looked between the seniors for an explanation. “Is it because of that ghost story? Is it real!”
“I have had it! You’ve wasted enough of my time with this game of detective.” Mr. Ekoda jumped from his seat and moved to pull Natsuki to her feet. “I have a class to teach; come along Moriyama-“

“Wait just a moment!”

Mr. Ekoda stopped and looked to Ikutsuki who rose from his desk.

“You may return to your class, but I believe that Miss Moriyama needs a moment to process what she told us.” He clasped his hands behind his back and approached the teacher slowly, the sunlight leaving a glare on his glasses. “After all, it appears classical literature is all you are competent at. On the other hand, your ability as an actual teacher is severely lacking but that’s another meeting for another day.”

Minato watched as Mr. Ekoda’s jaw dropped to the floor. He turned sharply towards the door and stormed out, Ikutsuki following to make sure he would actually leave.

“Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

“Bite me, Chairman.”

For the second time, Minato held back chuckles as the door slammed behind the peeved teacher. Karma had won the day and score one for the Pun King.

Mitsuru dismissed the disruption, rising from her seat. “Arisatos, a moment please.”

The three members of SEES congregated around the Chairman’s desk while Ikutsuki stayed with Natsuki to comfort her. Mitsuru gave the two one quick glance to make sure the girl was distracted before talking.

“It’s them, no doubt about it. Until now, there was no way of knowing how or why some people are conscious during the Dark Hour but it’s the voice; it draws them in. It’s not a random phenomenon.” She looked away from the siblings to Natsuki, a coldness in her stare. “This whole thing has made me realize, they’re clearly targeting humans. Shadows are the enemy of mankind.”

Minako shifted at the growing tension. Even Minato felt a certain drop in temperature as their leader spoke.

“What’s the next move then?” he dared to ask.

Mitsuru looked to Minato. “Tell Iori and Takeba to meet in the Student Council room after school. There are no meetings today so you three can walk right in. We’ll discuss it then.” She then turned to Minako. “Make sure Akihiko gets the same message.”

Both siblings nodded in unison, despite not getting a direct answer to the question. They would just have to wait like everyone else.

“Good,” Mitsuru broke away from the huddle and walked back to the Chairman and Natsuki. The girl looked up when the senior stopped in front of her with a neutral expression.

“Stay at our dorm tonight; it’s the safest place for you. If you hear the voice, tell us immediately. And don’t leave the building, no matter what.” She finished by extending a hand for Natsuki to stand. “If you can do that much, you should be okay. Will you accept our help, Moriyama?”

Natsuki made no objections, nodding her head and accepting the senior’s hand. “Is Fuuka gonna be
okay? Do you know what happened to her?"

Mitsuru lifted the girl to her feet.

“If my guess is right, she's still inside the school.”

Minako was glad that everyone had arrived at the Student Council room at almost the exact same time, so no one was leaving the others waiting for very long. After they filed inside and gotten comfortable, Yukari scampered over to the door and locked them up.

“Okay,” she said before returning to the others. “We’re all set to go.”

“Perfect, thank you. I guess I’ll cut straight to the point.” Mitsuru turned to the larger group with arms crossed. “Tonight, we will infiltrate the campus. Our objective is to rescue Fuuka Yamagishi and bring her home.”

Junpei raised his hand, perched atop one of the various long tables in the room. “Um, I don't get it. Is Fuuka inside the school somewhere?”

Yukari, standing next to Minato, joined in the conversation. “And why at night? At midnight, this place turns into-” She paused as it suddenly dawned on her what that meant. “No, she’s not-?”

“Exactly,” Mitsuru said. “She was locked inside a storage closet in the gym on May the twenty-ninth by the girls who had ended up with Apathy Syndrome this past week. At midnight, the school turned and she wandered into Tartarus.” She tapped her arm. “There’s no other explanation of how Yamagishi could suddenly vanish into thin air.”

“Then, ever since Fuuka got locked in the gym, she's been stuck there?”

Mitsuru nodded solemnly at Yukari’s words. “She has been there for the past ten days.”

“What the-” Junpei leaped from his table, causing Minako to flinch as the legs scraped against the floor at the violent action. “-but that means she’s been there for ten days without food and water! And with the Shadows, she’s...”

The room was sent into a depressive state.

The field leader clasped her hands together as everyone around her started to murmur about the nature of the mission. Minako knew immediately upon hearing Natsuki’s story that they could very well be looking for a body rather than a girl, but hearing someone voice her thoughts aloud stung even worse.

“Not necessarily.” Mitsuru broke through the side conversations. “We can't jump to conclusions. Tartarus only appears during the Dark Hour. So, what about the rest of the day?”

Minako felt her heart flutter once more, smiling as it was beginning to sink in. “You don’t mean- does this mean what I think it means?”

“I get it.” Akihiko jumped in. “This is only a theory, but time functions differently with respect to Tartarus. So, even though it's been ten days for us, perhaps only ten hours have passed for her. It's possible she's still alive.”

“You guys are forgetting the elephant in the room.” Minato had stepped forward, turning to Mitsuru. “Yeah, I won’t discount the idea she’s only been there for half a day but the Dark Hour is
pretty brutal. We can barely handle an hour; how’s she gonna last ten? She doesn’t even have an Evoker.” He sharpened his gaze as it swept to Minako. “I like being optimistic as much as the next guy but we can’t just go around making up false hope. We can’t put ourselves in mortal danger for no good reason.”

Minako had no idea where this was coming from. “Minato?”

First, he yelled at Natsuki for something she had no control over, now Minato suggested they abandon the mission altogether.

Since when had her brother become so cold?

“Yeah, but…” Yukari was less than enthusiastic about the idea as well and seemed to shrink in on herself the more she spoke up. “Minato-kun’s right, and even if she’s still alive, we might not be able to get to her.”

“Are you just gonna let her die, then!?” Akihiko snipped back. “If you guys don’t want to go, then I’ll go by myself!”

“Don’t yell at her!” Junpei stepped in front of his fellow juniors. “That’s not what we’re saying at all! We’ve got families and lives to get back to, man!”

Minato had joined his partner’s side with equal passion. “Not all of us can be gung-ho about risking our lives.”

Mitsuru stepping between the warring parties once things started to get heated. “Honestly, I have reservations. If something goes wrong, you could all end up lost in Tartarus too.” She gave the juniors a harsh look. “But we’re here to save lives, not just leave them behind!”

The debate continued to get worse as both sides tangled with the thought of what could be and what they needed to do.

Stay alive for certain but leave someone else to die or go and risk getting killed themselves, it was a difficult choice.

However, what good was SEES if they could not even save one girl?

Minako had enough of the back and forth. They were on a time crunch with a person’s life on the line, yet they could barely agree on a single thing. She dug in her heels and whipped her head around the room.

“Everyone shut UP!”

The shouting was cut off by her plea for silence.

All eyes fell to her as the yelling ceased.

Her shoulders seemed heavy for some reason as they waited for her to speak. It took a deep breath and a little self-encouragement for her to find her voice again.

“Can we agree that we’re all on edge? We’ve got no idea what we’re dealing with and we’re all scared of what we’ll find.” She turned to the juniors, certain that she looked as desperate as she sounded. “I get it, we’re taking a huge leap into the unknown, but haven’t we faced worse on the monorail? We could’ve died, yet we pulled through in the end. Doesn’t that prove we’re capable of so much more?”
Junpei and Yukari looked to one another as the incident was recalled. Minato had hung back from the other two, shoving his hands in his pockets with an annoyed huff.

“That being said, I know we can’t dive in headfirst without a plan.” Minako addressed her fellow seniors. “It’s obvious you two care a lot about helping others, but we’re not disposable tools. I’m sure we can come to an understanding if we tried.”

Akihiko and Mitsuru both took a moment to consider her words before backing off.

Everyone returned to a state of uneasy peace.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now let’s try and solve this like adults. Our first step should be to make a plan. Does anyone have an idea how we can find Fuuka? Anywhere we can start?”

At first, no one spoke, still sore from the fight that had taken place not even a moment ago.

Finally, Akihiko of all people cleared his throat.

“I have an idea. Let’s try to enter Tartarus exactly how Fuuka did. We’ll go to the gym, and wait for midnight. That should take us right to her without us stumbling around like a bunch of idiots.”

Junpei sighed, but his usual self had come back in spades. “Makes sense to me. What about the rest you ya’? Should we do it?”

“I agree with Akihiko-senpai. This could actually work out okay.” Yukari confirmed, turning to Mitsuru with bright eyes. “And we won’t know until we try.”

Mitsuru nodded. “Alright. We’re aware of the risks, but we can’t just leave her there.” She turned to the rest of SEES. “We’ll infiltrate the school tonight with the help of the Chairman, get a key to the storage room, and wait for the Dark Hour. I and someone else will enter the usual way to make sure Yamagishi doesn’t wander out on her own while another team takes the alternate path. Are we in agreement?”

Minako heard a chorus of “yes” ring out through the room.

“Then I guess it’s settled.”

Junpei rubbed his hands together and gave Minako a mischievous grin. “Cool, we get to sneak into the school! Hehe!” He wiggled his cap and started to leave the room. “In that case, I know just what to do.”

Minako smiled at his antics, letting him make his own preparations. “He can’t cause that much damage.” She looked to her brother to see if he wanted to head back to the dorm with. “Hey, ya’ wanna-”

Instead, she bit her tongue when she saw him directing an icy glare at her.

When Minato noticed she caught him, he rolled his eyes and stalked out of the Student Council room.

He slammed the door in his wake.

“Minato?”

“If you need anything at all, I left my cell number on the desk.” Minako started to back out of
Natsuki’s temporary room. The girl had found herself a comfortable spot on the bed, an extra blanket clutched around her shoulders. “You won’t be able to reach me after midnight, but you should be asleep by then. It shouldn’t be an issue.”

Natsuki nodded, hugging her blanket closer.

“Do you promise Fuuka will be okay?” She seemed almost pale despite her darker shade of skin. “I feel terrible for what I did.”

Minako knew there were no guarantees considering the situation but the girl looked so upset. It was strange to see a bully in this day and age that truly held regrets for what they had done. It was especially odd considering that the bully was a girl with a much higher social status, no reasons to be humbled or need forgiveness.

Despite all she had done, the remorse remained.

It was difficult to be angry.

“We’ll do our best to bring her back,” Minako said. “You’re job is to stay put and just stay safe. It might get boring but there’s books downstairs and a TV. Just hang tight for now.”

Natsuki gave her a sad frown but slowly nodded. “Mhm. . .” She tried her best to smile. “If you see her before I do, can you. . . tell her I’m sorry?”

Minako felt her heart melt. She started to close the door on the room but mustered a smile in return. “You can say that yourself soon enough.” The door was only a sliver open. “Goodnight, Natsuki-san. Sweet dreams.”

“Thanks, Minako-senpai.”

Without another word, she closed the door on the girl. Minako finally let herself relax with a heavy sigh.

“That’s that then.” She let go of the doorknob and made her way to the boy’s wing of the dorm. “That leaves one last thing to do.”

It was oddly quiet when she made it down the stairs. Usually, Minato was blasting music from the stereos he bought years ago or someone was banging on Akihiko’s door to stop Mitsuru from tearing their head off. Some pink wearing individuals might even be trying to kill a certain Casanova with a frying pan that Minako was trying to cook with.

However, it was silent tonight. Everyone had made their way downstairs to prepare for whatever the mission had to offer. Mitsuru had already called the Chairman, but alas, he had been away from his phone. It was understandable that the others were nervous about breaking into the school without a faculty member to back up their actions.

As for the boy’s wing, someone was still around and away from the team. There was only a single light under a door at the end of the hall. It was Minato’s room and yet, not even a note of heavy metal drifted from beyond the wooden threshold.

Therein laid the final task.

Minako knew that she had to address his behavior from earlier that day. Something had to be wrong that he wasn’t telling her.
Lashing out when he would have been silent.

Accusing students of committing the equivalent of manslaughter when it had all been an accident.

He had never acted this way before, not her quiet, introspective brother.

The team would suffer if the problem was left to fester during this crucial mission, so it was up to his older sister to fix the molehill before it became a mountain. Minako approached the door with caution as if he could pop his head out and start yelling again. She reached out her hand to knock and gave three quick taps.

“Minato? It’s me.”

She waited for a response.

After a minute, none came.

Minako reached for the doorknob. He never locked his door, not even when he hit puberty and went through a terrible awkward phase. There was no need when the only person who would visit him understood him the best.

“I’m coming in,” she announced and slid inside. “I hope you’re decent.”

Minato’s room reflected the boy perfectly. Posters that could be easily toted around hung from the far wall, the off-white color barely visible beneath band logos and vintage movie artwork. His desk was covered in his cryptic notes that few were able to read and various books ranging from the school variety to free-time enjoyment. Even his clothes had been thrown into their proper areas: dirty in a basket for laundry day and clean hung up in the closet or in the dresser.

One part chaos, one part mad scientist, but one hundred percent under his control. There was no doubt that there was some form of organization, it was just difficult to see under all the clutter of a teenage male.

Minato layed in bed with his eyes to the ceiling, completely chill and in his own little world. One earphone was resting beside his head while the other seemed to be in use. His hair was wet, he must have taken a shower before she came to see him.

Why would he take a shower when they were about to go on a mission? He would just get filthy all over again.

“I thought you couldn’t hear me, nerd.” Minako strode to the bed and helped herself to a seat next to him. “Can we talk for a minute? It’s about earlier today-”

“-There’s nothing to talk about.” he interrupted and turned his head away from her. “You’re just gonna lecture me about stuff I already know and then give a whole sermon about being nice. Leave me alone.”

Minako was taken aback by his bitter attitude but she knew it could not deter her from her goal.

“You took a shower.” she began. It was best to act casual to help smooth over the tension. “We’re gonna be fighting Shadows tonight. Don’t ya’ think you should’ve waited until we got back?”

“I’m not going,” he said. “I talked to Mitsuru and she agreed someone should stay with Natsuki in case she starts hearing voices. We’ve already got enough people on the mission anyway.”
“Oh,” Minako held back her shock. “And when were ya’ gonna tell me?”

“I wasn’t.”

Another deep breath before she could continue.

“Minato, we need all hands on deck for this mission. I get that something’s bothering you today but running off to hide in your room isn’t gonna solve the problem.”

Minato checked his MP3 as if he were going to change songs. “Mitsuru already cleared it so there’s no point in fighting for me to go. I’m staying here. Drop it already.”

Things were far from going well.

Minako had dealt with this kind of disrespect before but it never came from Minato. Not her little brother who was always polite when it counted most.

What was going on?

“That’s exactly why we need to talk. You only act up like this when something’s wrong.” She had to plant her feet and hold her ground if the talk was to go anywhere productive. “Look, I don’t wanna lecture you either, but sometimes you’ve gotta open up a little. That’s what family does, we keep an eye on each other when things get rocky and you’re all I’ve got left. Just talk to me and I’ll listen.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I can’t figure out what you’re trying to say if you speak in melodrama. Just say what you think, really mean it, and let it be. No more beating around the bush!”

“You wanna know what I think!?” Minato suddenly sat up to face her head-on. “I think you’re the worst liar on the face of the planet! All you do is go around trying to please people but ya’ never actually mean it and for what!? Sometimes, I think you’re just a huge dumbass playing hero, but all you are is a glorified parent!”

All too quickly, their talk had devolved into a shouting match.

“Minato, you know how I feel about swearing!”

“I don’t care, you’re a dumbass!” He had gotten off the bed to stand over her. “Natsuki could’ve killed someone and all you care about are her pitiful feelings! What about Fuuka? Do you think she’d care about Natsuki’s feelings if she’s dead? Do you even care that she might be dead!?”
“Of course I care but anger solves nothing!” Minako was on her feet now to match intensity. “Is this what you’re upset about, that I’m not up there straggling the poor girl? She’s been through enough for one night!”

“And the girl in Tartarus isn’t!?”

“What’s gotten into you? This is crazy!”

“It doesn’t fucking matter what you think!”

“Minato-”

“Fucking shut UP!”

Minato had ended their fight as quickly as it began with that one three word phrase.

Minako could feel her heart pound in her chest before it sank. It had been ages since they had truly gotten this upset at one another, longer still since they yelled with true malice.

Had that really just happen or was it all a nightmare?

For a minute or two, they stood next to Minato’s bed while staring each other down. Neither seemed willing to move. The dorm seemed to hum with life as if nothing happened, as if no one had gotten hurt, passing them by in quiet.

Finally, Minato looked away from his sister.

“Just get out. Go run your suicide mission, leader.”

Minako thought she could hear something break but chalked it up to just that, hearing things. She slowly lowered her gaze to the floor and nodded somberly.

“Right,” she whispered, turning towards the door. “Make sure to keep an eye on Natsuki.”

Minato climbed back onto his bed.

“Whatever.”

Another break.

It was simply her imagination.

Minako held in a sign and let herself out, never once looking back at him. It would have hurt more to lay one more eye on him than to just leave it to memory. Once she was at the door, Minato had turned the music up so loud that she could hear the singer from across the room.

“. . . Stay safe, Minato.”

She left by closing the door softly behind her.

It took what little willpower she had to walk away.

The full moon beamed in the night sky when they began the operation the save Fuuka. To make sure they seemed less conspicuous, they all dressed as if they were a group of teens enjoying a walk rather than students about to break into a highly guarded school. It was certainly warmer than
wearing their uniforms.

As for weapons and equipment, Mitsuru had taken care of it during the day so that they were all set to go when the Dark Hour arrived. It was a weight off their shoulders and one less explanation to the cops if they were stopped.

All that remained was breaking in.

Lucky for them, SEES was able to get into the school easily with the help of the resident troublemaker in their midst.

“See? We got in no problem. Man, I'm a genius!” Junpei cheered as they made their way through the second year’s hallway. “All it took was leaving a few doors unlocked and bingo, we’re ready to roll!”

Yukari groaned and shushed the overexcited boy. “Is that really something to brag about? A monkey could do your job.”

Mitsuru was the first to reach their destination, classroom 2-F. She opened the door for everyone to funnel inside. “I thought that was quite clever considering that the Chairman never answered us back. That was very forward-thinking of you, Iori. _Tres bien._”

“Oui, but no time for compliments.” Akihiko was the first inside. “We’ve still gotta figure out where the keys to the storage area are.”

Junpei turned to Yukari as they followed him into the room. “Tray Ben? What is that, French?” He shook his head when he was unable to figure out what they were saying. “Lousy seniors and their lousy French, can’t even enjoy my moment. They’re just showing off now.”

Minako brought up at the rear of the group. She tried her best to remain unseen up until the very last second, but things were about to pick up as the operation to retrieve Fuuka Yamagishi went underway. Once again, she would have to don the role of leader. She would have to let go of her worries to lead everyone to success.

Even if the fight between her and Minato was still fresh in her brain.

Even if what he said was starting to get to her.

“Arisato?”

“Wha-”

Minako stopped in the middle of the hallway when Mitsuru had called out to her. If the latter had let her be, she would have walked right past the room and towards the next hallway.

“Oh, my bad!” She tried to play it off with a nervous chuckle. “Guess my head’s in the clouds tonight. Sorry ‘bout that, Kirjo-san!”

Mitsuru must have seen through her poorly concealed disguise. “Is something bothering you? Are your injuries from Saturday acting up?”

Minako hid a gulp as the lies came naturally to her tongue, waving the Mitsuru off. “It’s fine, just a little nervous with all this sneaking around.” She shuffled inside the classroom as to not create any more of a scene. “I’ll get over it once we get moving, honest. Let’s just get to work and save Fuuka.”
Mitsuru gave her a funny look but offered a small smile. “If there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Minako nodded and went through the door. It was best to just go with the flow but not follow the request if it came up.

“I will.”

Another lie, another promise broken.

Her brother had been right, she really was what he said.

Once everyone was inside, Yukari had begun to pace through the darkness. They had all left their weapons outside so she had nothing to hold onto and fidget with.

“C-can we turn on the lights? It’s kinda creepy in here after hours.”

“Aww, are ya’ scared?” Junpei pretended to be a ghost, raising his arms above his head and advancing on the archer with a low, moaning voice. “The school’s not that haunted. Mwahaha!”

“Get away from me, Stupei!” Yukari took a swing at the boy only to have Mitsuru rush forward and cover her mouth.

“Quiet, Takeba. Even if we wanted to turn on the lights, the power is cut after the gates lock. We’ll just have to make do with the darkness.” the senior chastised before turning to Junpei. “As for you, please stop trying to scare her or else we may end up expelled. Conduct yourself properly from now on or you’ll cost us our education.”

“Sorry, senpai.”

“Accepted,” Mitsuru motioned for everyone to gather closer. “Now then, unfortunately, the Chairman was unable to get us a key to gym storage so we’ll have to find it ourselves. We don’t have much time left before the Dark Hour and there’s a lot of ground to cover. Two teams will go to search the faculty office and the janitor’s closet for the key and we’ll all meet in the gym. Are there any questions before we begin?”

Junpei’s hand shot up. “I wanna search the faculty office. Maybe we’ll find some test questions or something juicy!”

Minako felt her mood improve at the boy’s usual silliness, trying to suppress giggles through a cheesy grin. If she could focus on at least the little things during the mission, maybe it would help her get back in the rhythm without skipping a beat.

Mitsuru, on the other hand, was far from impressed by the statement. “Are you planning something unscrupulous under my supervision? If so, then expect to be severely punished.”

“It-It was a joke!” Junpei took a few steps away from her. “I’d never do something like that!”

Minako finally saw the opportunity to intervene and help save her younger friend. Maybe it could prove to be another great distraction?

She shuffled in front of the flustered Junpei. “Let’s just keep it light, guys. I’m sure it was a harmless joke, so let’s pick the teams and get going.”

Mitsuru was still tense and ready to pounce for a moment longer, but after hearing the field
leader’s words, she fell back into a neutral stance. “You’re right, Arisato. I’ll let that slide for now.” She pointed to Junpei and Akihiko. “I want you two with me. The janitor’s closet is going to be a tough one, so we’ll need a larger group.”

“Wait a sec,” Yukari tugged at the sleeves of her casual sweater. “C-can I go with you instead? It’s too dark downstairs and I’m terrible at walking around in the dark. I might slow Minako-senpai down if I do. Please?”

“I’m afraid of how dark it is.”

It was a phrase Minako knew all too well from raising a little boy, especially one who had been through so much.

Mitsuru barely needed to think and nodded right away. There was no time to debate, even if there were a reason to object to the small request. “I’ll still need to keep an eye on Junpei, but you can switch places with Akihiko. We may need eyes lower to the ground anyway.”

“Thanks!” Yukari practically skipped to Junpei and Mitsuru’s side. She looked back at Minako with a sympathetic smile. “Sorry, no hard feelings?”

“None at all,” Minako responded as Akihiko changed his position to be next to her. She looked to everyone in the other group and gave them a thumbs up. “Just stay safe until we meet up, you three. Don’t get caught by security or poke your eyes out on something.”

Everyone said their good wishes and left the classroom, Mitsuru leading the juniors to the closet while Minako and Akihiko hurried downstairs.

The two kept silent as they crept onward and into the near pitch-black, sticking close to the wall as they entered the stairway. Minako had to count on her feet to know where each step was lest she missed and take a nasty spill. Thankfully, her trust was not misplaced and she made it to the first landing without trouble.

From the lack of a struggle behind her, it seemed that her companion was equally successful.

However, the eerie part was just how desolate the school appeared to be.

With the power cut all over the building, not even the hum of the A/C units or wind against the outer walls could provide a blanket of white noise. Long shadows were cast from the high windows and bathed the pristinely clean tile in a pale light.

Despite that light, the way the pillars blocked them out still made walking around a difficult task.

It was as if they had already crossed over into the Dark Hour rather than exploring during their normal world.

The seniors cleared the last flight of stairs without much trouble and entered the main commons. It was better lit than the hallways, allowing them to cross over to the other side of the building with help from the moonlight.

Minako could practically see the faculty office. Her gait lengthened at the thought of retrieving the proper key.

Suddenly, she felt her wrist being roughly grabbed.
Minako jerked at the contact but willed herself not to overreact. The only other person with her was Akihiko, so there was nothing to fear. She started to turn around to see what was so important that he had to get her attention.

“Sana-?”

“-Shit.”

Another hand was thrown over her mouth and soon she was being half pushed, half dragged behind a pillar. Any sound of protest or attempt to put more space between them was stilted as she was forced to be held in place by the far stronger young man. He let go of her wrist, instead, throwing his remaining arm right around her to draw her out of the light. It was akin to being squeezed by a snake and just as uncomfortable.

“Someone’s coming.” Akihiko barely said above a breath, going still and holding her closer. “Don’t move.”

Minako’s stomach plummeted at those words.

Then she heard the sound of footsteps not too far off.

And they were getting closer.

The glare of a flashlight could be seen from the corner of her eye.

This time, she felt panic swell within her.

Without thinking, she instinctively brought her arms up to cover her chest. When her way was blocked by Akihiko’s own arm, she simply held onto his sleeve for a semblance of stability. Fingers curled into the material and stayed there in a death grip. She did her best not to breathe as there was already an obstruction over her mouth.

Minako prayed to God that he did not hear her heartbeat while it raced faster than after any run she had ever done. The only comfort was the warmth on her back as the footsteps were now closer than ever.

_Thump... thump... thump..._

The flashlight was now clearly visible as it swung across the commons in search of roaming students.

_Thump... thump... thump..._

A beam passed by the pillar the two hid behind and nearly caused Minako to go limp under pressure.

_Thump... thump... thump..._

_Thump... thump... thump..._

Part of her wanted to shrivel up like a raisin to take up less space, but the more she thought about it, the harder it was to control her breathing.

_Thump... thump... thump..._

The light disappeared.
Thump. . . thump . . .

An older gentleman’s sigh echoed off the walls.

Thump. . . thump. . . thump . . .

Thump. . . thump. . .

Thump. . .

Finally, the footsteps began to fade.

It was after a minute of listening to distant thuds grow harder and harder to make out that Akihiko dropped his hand from Minako’s mouth. Cool air returned to her lungs.

However, his grip on her front remained as the footsteps could still be heard.

“One more minute. . .”

Thump. . .

. . . Creak.

A door opened somewhere far off.

The hinges squealed as it closed on itself.

Cu-chunk. . .

The door was sealed shut.

“. . . He’s gone.”

Akihiko let Minako free once it was certain the security guard was gone. She unlatched her fingers and tried to breathe normally again.

“That was close. I didn’t even hear him coming.” She looked over to Akihiko. “You’ve got a dog’s ears, that’s for sure.”

For a moment, his eyes darted in the direction that the door seemed to be. “Comes with being in SEES. You get used to things sneaking up on ya’.” He looked back at Minako. “Sorry if I scared you back there. I’m not. . . used to yanking girls around like that.”

Minako shook her head. “No, I should’ve been paying more attention.” She rubbed at the place where he grabbed her wrist. “I think I owe ya’ extra now. First for my eye, now this, I’ll need to start writing stuff down pretty soon if I keep getting into trouble.”

“Don’t bother, it’s nothing.” Akihiko huffed and started hustling them towards the faculty office once more. “Come on, we better find that key before the others get to the meeting spot. There’s not much time left before the Dark Hour settles in.”

Minako scuttled to keep up but felt lighter on her toes. “Right, onward we go.”

They jogged the rest of the way to the office and slipped inside. Minako had barely paid any mind to the school and focused solely on finding the key.
Just like the commons, the lighting was much better than the upper floors and stairwell. Teacher’s desks were in various degrees of organization (or lack thereof) and chairs tucked against them. Corkboards had paper notices pinned at dangerous angles that would make anyone with OCD cry out in physical pain. Some papers even had random tears at the edges, as if they had been accidentally snagged and no one had the heart to replace them.

Minako was the last in so she shut the door gingerly, just in case the security guard had decided to come back for another sweep. Akihiko had already got to work by raiding a drawer and searching through documents for anything of use.

“Trying to steal some test answers, Sanada-san?” She could not resist the jab as she started rummaging through her own drawer filled with miscellaneous desk toys. “If Kirijo-san could see you now, she’d be pretty livid.”

Akihiko took the bait, shutting the drawer a little too bluntly. “It’s not like that!” He moved on once more, this time search the filing cabinets for a clue. “I’m not Junpei, sheesh.”

“And I’m not being serious.” Minako moved on to the next drawer after coming up empty-handed. “You’re almost too easy, I swear to goodness. Either that or I’m getting better at messing with people.”

“Neither. I’m just distracted. . . Hey, I think this is it.” Akihiko stopped searching his next place-of-interest: a basket filled with an assortment of keys. He raised one up with a pleased look, twirling it by a tiny loop to put on a lanyard. “Now that was too easy.”

Minako quit on the drawer she was working on to examine the key he had picked up. “Gym” was printed on a piece of white tape with a black marker. However, it did not specify whether or not it was for the gym itself or the storage closet.

The wrong key.

“Ya’ might wanna check that again.” She pointed to the tape. “It should say ‘storage’ somewhere but this one just says ‘gym.’”

“Really?” Akihiko read it again before giving up and putting the key back with the numerous others in front of them. He sighed as he scanned over the vast selection that threatened to overwhelm them. “Must be in the janitor’s room, where Mitsuru and the others went because I’m not seeing anything.”

Minako stepped up to give the box another sweep. “Maybe, but I’ve got a feeling. . .”

Though she was a firm believer that superpowers did not exist (being a Persona user did not count), Minako liked to think she had a sixth sense for finding lost objects. It was a skill she developed over years of being independent. Call it woman’s intuition, a mother’s radar, whatever anyone wanted, if something was deemed unfindable, Minako could tell if that was true or not.

All it took was listening to what her mind wanted to say, No matter how brief the sensation: a tingle down her spine or a sneeze while healthy.

Still, it was enough to suggest that it was worth giving another go.

This time, it was a magnetic pull towards that box of keys, Minako’s gaze drawn to a pile next to where Akihiko had been searching not even seconds ago.

It looked to be hiding something that could yield desirable outcomes.
“Maybe. . .”

Without wasting a second, she jammed her fingers into the pile.

It was no coincidence that the pile was there.

There had to be a reason.

Everything had a reason.

Her fingers had brushed over a familiar set of metal teeth.

Where had she felt it before?

“That’s it.” Minako drew her hand out of the pile, a key pinched delicately between her thumb and pointer finger. “Gym storage” was written in black marker.

Akihiko stared at the object in awe. “Wha-?” He reached out to take it, turning the key over as if it had magically appeared from thin air. “How in the- Where on earth did that come from? I thought I checked the entire box.”

Minako knew she was smug over the whole situation, standing with a hip out and arms crossed. She just didn't care.

“Now that was too easy.”

Minako and Akihiko sprinted across the school after getting the correct key. Their morning runs had prepared them for worse situations, so they arrived at the gym without getting extremely fatigued. They made a bit of a racket stamping across the basketball court in order to get to storage but it was the least of their worries.

Mitsuru, Junpei, and Yukari were all waiting patiently. Their weapons had all been retrieved from where the president had hidden them earlier that day.

“There they are!” Yukari was the first to voice their speedy arrival. “Did you guys find it? We didn’t see anything.”

“Piece of cake.” Akihiko, the only one of the two with pockets, produced the key. He slowed to a stop in front of Mitsuru and handed it off, Minako trailing just behind him. “Looks like we’re just in time, hm?”

“A few minutes to spare actually but we should still hurry.” Mitsuru looked back at the rest of SEES. “Alright, we don’t have much time left so listen closely. We’ll divide into teams again. Three of you will enter Tartarus, and one of you will remain outside with me to provide extra support. Once the Dark Hour has begun, I’ll determine Yamagishi’s position to the best of my ability.”

Minako noticed Mitsuru give her a nod, it was time to put together the team. She cleared her throat to begin. “I’ll take the lead on the ground operation. To make things fair, it’ll be completely volunteer-based. Who’s coming with me?”

“I’ll go,” Akihiko said immediately. He had just grabbed his armored gloves and had his belt holster on. “That makes two, so one more spot left.”
“Um,” Yukari tentatively shuffled closer to Minako. “I guess I’ll be third then-”

“Hold up a second!”

Minako was shocked when Junpei, one of the people most opposed to the method they were about to use, stepped forward with his sword at the ready.

“Listen…” He took off his cap and looked Minako dead on. “Remember how I accidentally screwed up on the monorail? When I ran off like a dummy and you guys had to save me?”

Minako paused but soon nodded for him to continue. “… I remember.”

“You guys were worried about me, but I just blew up like the idiot I am.” Junpei put his cap back on. “What I’m saying is I wanna make up for it. Can ya’ gimme a chance tonight? I promise I’ll get it right this time.”

“Seriously!?” Yukari groaned at his short speech. “Oh, come on! It's not always about YOU! Besides, you didn't ‘accidentally’ screw up. You ran away!”

The two were well on their way to another fight. Mitsuru was already breaking them up with help from Akihiko but Junpei was not one to give up.

In fact, he refused to deny the claims made against him.

He accepted them.

He wanted to do right by them.

The choice was obvious.

“That’s enough!” Minako rushed forward to put a hand on Yukari’s shoulder. It was hard to do, yet somehow, the words came without much force. “I think he deserves this one, Yukatan. You’re our best support so Mitsuru could really use your help to locate Fuuka. It’s just for tonight but you’ll get your chance next time.”

“Sweet!” Junpei cheered and joined the ground team. “Thanks, Minatan!”

Yukari watched the boy dejectedly but made no move to start fighting again. “Fine, but…” She glanced over at Mitsuru. “I-I…”

It was not with disgust.

It was something else.

Something far more complicated.

Minako let go of the archer. “Is everything okay?”

Yukari lingered a moment longer only to shake out of her funk. “No, just distracted.” She looked back at Minako. “Just come back safe, for all of us.”

For Fuuka Yamagishi.

For Junpei.

For Mitsuru and Akihiko.
For the one they left behind.

“I will.”

The two teams went their separate ways after unlocking the storage closet.

The Dark Hour was about to begin.

What right does she have to treat me like this!?

I did nothing wrong and she still acts like I'm an angsty ten-year-old!

Sometimes, I hate my sister. Call me an ungrateful bastard but I don't care!

I hate her! I hate her! I hate her! I hate her!

GAAAAH!!

I HOPE she gets lost tonight. Maybe she won't come back to nag me.
Two Hearts II

Chapter Notes

Here's part two of the last chapter! Because this one got so long, I decided to turn this into a three-part battle instead of two. Seriously, the original chapter was bordering on forty-five pages in Microsoft Word so I just said: "Well I'll just give them part one of part two and give part two of part two LATER as part three" (yes, that's what I said to my roommate who also reads this). God bless that lady for suggesting to do that instead of posting a long chapter no one could get through without falling asleep.

Anyway, please enjoy part one of part two!

You know what, let's just call it part two and the other one part three. It's getting really confusing.

The last thing Minako expected upon entering Tartarus was waking up on the floor with a fuzzy brain and no clue how she got there.

However, when her eyes opened, she staring at a hazy ceiling, the stone arches blurring in and out of focus. The floor beneath seemed to shift, even when laying on her back. She failed to remember how she got there or why she got knocked out but those thoughts were tabled in favor of regaining a semblance of composure.

Minako sat up slowly and breathed a sigh of relief. At least something good came out of being randomly dropped within the tower, no Shadows in sight.

“Thank the lord, we're safe.” Minako sat up and turned to her side. The boys had been awfully quiet, considering their circumstances. Were they knocked out just like she just was? “Is everyone-”

Another thing she did not expect tonight, her teammates were nowhere to be seen.

Minako sprung to her feet, taking a moment to find her balance. When she managed to, she still didn't spot Junpei or Akihiko. All that greeted her was an empty floor and a new revelation, her naginata was missing, too.

“Junpei? Sanada-san?”

Perhaps they walked off to scout the area, leaving their leader to rest? She cupped her hands around her mouth and raised her voice, praying that would be the case. “Is anyone there? Hello!?”

No answer, just a frightened girl’s words echoing off the walls.

Where were they?

Minako placed a hand over her ear. “Kirijo-san? Are ya’ there?”

Again, no answer. Not even a crackle of static or a strained whisper.
She let her arm drop back to her side. “Does that mean-?” Minako reached for her Evoker and was relieved to find that she at least had something to defend herself with.

However, even if she was able to summon her Persona, how long could she last on her own? Would she have enough energy to fight off hordes of roaming Shadows or would something go wrong? The endless list of scenarios festered like a beehive in her mind.

Minako willed herself to stay calm, talking herself into rationality. The moment she let fear get the better of her, especially in a place fraught with danger, it would be the last mistake she will ever make.

“They’ve gotta be somewhere close by. But I should start looking for Yamagishi first.” She paced as she talked. "She's the only one in this place who can't protect herself. Once

“That’s quite a positive attitude, all things considered.”

The lone leader perked up at the sound of a familiar voice. Minako swiveled in the direction it had come from, behind a corner that led into a darkened hallway. No one was there but maybe the voice was feeling shy.

“Is that you, kiddo?” she asked into the void.

As if he were a rabbit, the mysterious boy popped out from behind the corner, a coy grin lighting up the room. He held onto the wall as he stepped further out to reveal himself.

“This is the first time we've spoken outside of your rooms.” He looked around, his smiling disappearing. “And the last we do. This place is. . . creepy.”

Minako nodded and walked towards the boy, her only source of comfort in such a dire straight. “By the way, did you see anyone else around? I’m lost and I can’t find my team.”

The boy shook his head. “I’m sorry but it’s just me. After all, I’m always with you and your brother.” He met her halfway with hands respectfully behind his back. “But if it's any consolation, I can sense them further down the tower and they’re not too far away. You’ll see them again shortly.”

The others were close by. It was another weight lifted off her shoulders.

“Thanks, I feel a little better now.” Minako said, kneeling down to see the boy eye-to-eye. “On another note, did you need to tell me something? Seems like we only see ya’ when bad things are about to happen.”

The boy paused for a moment to consider the statement.

“I wish that weren’t true, but yes, there’s a danger in the air.” He scooted closer so he could keep his voice down. “We don’t have much time to talk so please listen carefully. Tonight, there is more than one ordeal you all must face. They are both very dangerous, I fear you can not win the upcoming battle alone.”

It was just as he said a week ago but now the stakes had been raised with two ordeals. Why did it have to come on the night they were rescuing someone?

Minako let out a heavy sigh. “It just had to be tonight.”

The boy remained unperturbed by the bad news. “On the contrary, you’re lucky it happened
tonight. The timing was perfect.” He turned away from her and pointed down the darkened hallway he appeared from. “You should hurry. She’s waiting for you.”

_She_ had to mean Fuuka. Who else were SEES here to save?

On that note, Minako knew it was time to get moving. Her first mission was to find Fuuka, the next, to meet with the others.

“Got it, kiddo.” She straightened back up, brandishing her Evoker as her new main defense against the Shadows. If possible, she would keep an eye out for a new melee weapon. “We’ll get _her_ out first, then we’ll deal with whatever decides to show up. No more surprises from now on.”

The boy chuckled before going back behind his corner.

“Okay, then the rest is up to you guys.”

A tiny hand poked out once more to give a quick wave.

“Please, be careful.” he said.

The hand vanished in an instant.

“I won’t let ya’ down,” she whispered.

And without hesitation, picking a hall at random, she steeled her nerves and ran off blindly.

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Yukari paced the floor of Tartarus’ expansive lobby, clutching her bow tightly to her body. A quiver of newly made anti-Shadow arrows had been haphazardly tossed on the floor and remained unused. “It’s been a while,” she remarked. “What’s taking them so long to check-in?”

Nearby, Mitsuru experimented with her radio in search of any signals from the ground team. Occasionally there would be a crackle of noise, maybe even voices that seemed distant and unclear, but no one had breached the communication barrier to let the girls know about their status.

“I don’t know, Takeba. The transceiver’s sensitivity is set to high, too.” Mitsuru tinkered with the dials. Another gurgled round of static, some incoherent words, and still nothing of substance. “Is anyone there? Akihiko? Iori? Arisato?”

Mitsuru sighed, removing her headset and taking a deep breath. “Still nothing, it’s as if they’re too far out of range. Is this the best I can do?”

Yukari stopped pacing once she noticed the senior had stopped running transmissions. It was unsettling to see someone so composed look so defeated.

If she was being honest, Yukari always had a sore spot for the Kirijo heiress. Growing up in the lap of luxury, never knowing what normal was like, it was easy for anyone to be jealous. Throw some good genetics and a decent academic career, she was the full package and ready to jump right into the forefront of the family business.

Now, watching her struggle to find the rest of the team, she was less an icon and more human.

The more Yukari thought about it, the more that she felt guilty for feeling so bitter. Being rich had its own struggles after all: having to live up to monumental expectations, an image crafted from birth, a heavy burden to carry for just one person.
Had Yukari been selfish all this time? If she gave the other girl a chance, could they at least build a better relationship to stand on?

“I know this is gonna be tough, but we need you right now.”

It was time to take the first step.

The archer picked up her quiver to go and sit beside Mitsuru. Once she was close enough, she hunkered down so that they had a reasonable distance between them.

“All of us knew the risks coming in, so it’s not your fault.”

Mitsuru looked up from sulking. Her usually sharpened gaze softened, just enough to appear almost like a normal teenager. Was she really surprised at someone being supportive of her abilities?

In return, Yukari offered a warm smile.

“I remember something that Minako-senpai told me when we were facing our first big Shadow in the first block. We were all fighting for our lives and I was terrified of screwing up. What if I missed? What if I got everyone killed?”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them close. The memory of that day haunted her still, even if they had won the battle with her killing shot. It took whatever courage she could muster to relive such an ordeal.

“But she wasn’t afraid. If she was, I didn’t know. What I do know is she just smiled and said ‘Don’t worry about us getting hurt. Focus on shooting a bulls-eye. It’ll be okay, if you do your part to win.’”

Mitsuru chuckled. “I can imagine she’d give that advice. She always struck me as the naive believer.”

“But it worked,” Yukari felt the same pride that had overcome her in that moment return, “And after that, I shot that buzzard down. We didn’t need an all-out attack. And... I guess what I’m trying to say is that you’ve just gotta do your part and everything will be okay.” Yukari nodded. “If someone like me can do it, you’ll do it better.”

Mitsuru took a moment to consider her advice before letting a tender smile peer through her iron-clad frown. Her light red lip gloss shimmered in time with the subtle movement.

“Thank you, Takeba.”

It was a small pep talk, and yet it made all the difference.

Yukari felt like she could relate better to Mitsuru, even if they might not line up on everything.

Suddenly, the radio sparked to life.

“Mitsuru, can you hear me?”

Yukari leapt to her feet at the familiar and low voice. “Akihiko-senpai? Is that you?”

At least he was okay.

“Damn-. . . -are we?”
And Stupei, fantastic.

Mitsuru threw her headset back on and adjusted the signal to capture their voices. “I hear you, just one second while I pinpoint your location.” A few more turns of the dial and her eyes lit up in realization. “I’ve confirmed your position. You’re higher up than I expected. You’re barely in communication range.”

“Yeah, but I think we’re still in Arqa block. It looks almost the same.”

Yukari kneeled down by the radio and picked up a spare headset to better listen in on the conversation and speak to the others. “Is everyone okay? We thought you guys were in trouble.”

“No, we lo-”

Just as quickly as the signal had come along it was beginning to go back to static. They were losing them.

“Akihiko? Akihiko!” Mitsuru flipped into high gear and started turning any dial she could get her hands on. “Akihiko, come in!”

“. . .-don’t know!” Junpei’s voice came over so loud, the sound became twisted and distorted. “-got separ-!”

Without warning, the radio was silenced.

Mitsuru removed her headset, letting it slip from her fingers and hitting the marble floor.

“What have we done?”

Two floors later and drained from battling Shadows on her own, Minako was beginning to wonder if she would ever make it back to the others.

Fighting with a group had made her oblivious to how difficult it really was to take on enemies one on one. Energy to defeat Shadows could be more easily conserved so that advancing to higher floors was less of a chore and more of an adventure. Plus, there was no hurry to switch between Personas if someone was already covering certain spells.

On lower floors, SEES would split up for a short time to work on individual training if they felt capable enough to take on a solo adventure. Very rarely did the others require additional help but that all depended on the type of Shadow or number of enemies.

However, going on alone was far more taxing and made one appreciate having teammates to watch each other’s backs.

Minako was pushed to the limit of what she thought she was capable of. Switching between Personas had to happen at the drop of a hat but the enemy did not wait or give her that breathing room. More often than not, she’d find herself retreating when confronted with a larger group or jumping behind pillars in a hopeless attempt to evade pursuing Shadows.

Not to mention that Tartarus was much more terrifying when alone.

With an ordeal hanging over the field leader’s head, the stress was mounting every time she had to use a summon. Without a weapon, she had no other way to defend herself.

All it took was one slip up and it would all be over.
Minako had to find the others before she ran out of stamina to fight.

“Junpei! Sanada! Anyone!” She yelled as she practically sailed down another flight of stairs. Her distressed cries were met with silence.

Once she reached the bottom landing, she forced herself to take a moment to catch her breath.

“Please. . .” Minako shuffled towards all wall for support. It was oddly cold but it gave her a chance to sink down and take a few deep breaths. Unfortunately, her lungs barely seemed to do their job. “Please. . .”

The back of her throat stung from over-use.

“I talked to Mitsuru and she agreed someone should stay with Natsuki in case she starts hearing voices.”

Did everyone end up like her?

Were they all scattered like army men on the floor?

What if they never found each other again?

“Apparently I don’t know you either.”

Without anyone around, Minako was afraid. “This can’t be happening.” She closed her eyes to focus on breathing. If anything, that was the one thing she could control.

“It doesn’t fucking matter what you think!”

“God, please. . . I have to get out of here.” she prayed.

Prayers.

“I have to make things right.”

All she could do was pray.

“I have to make things right.”

But would she get an answer?

“Who’s there?”

Minako nearly banged her head against the wall at the crystal clear voice in her head. She had been so used to the radio static of Mitsuru and echoing whispers of her Personas that this new sensation had come as a shock.

This time, it seemed to be a young girl.

“Are you human?”

The voice came again, this time a little more confident. It was as if it were seeking someone out for help.

Was someone nearby?

“Hello? Hello!?” She stood up and looked around for the source of the voice. “I’m human, who
are you? What’s your name?”

“What am I? Why am I here?”

The girl sounded frightened.

Maybe the person communicating was scared and needed more reassurance?

“If you can hear me, my name is Minako Arisato.” She started walking again. “You’re in a place called Tartarus and you’re here because you accidentally wandered inside. Can ya’ tell me your name?”

“You can hear me? Thank goodness. I thought I was all alone and starting to imagine things.” The girl’s voice let out a shaky sigh. “My name is Fuuka Yamagishi. Are you stuck here too?”

Fuuka.

It was her, Fuuka! Alive and well. Not only that, but she appeared to be in better condition than everyone thought, and her ability to communicate was beyond explanation.

But that could only mean she had the potential, and a different version than everyone else.

On the other hand, Minako found it difficult to answer Fuuka’s last question.

“Well, not really. I came here with two other people but we got separated.” She paused at a corner and surveyed for any stray Shadows. “You wouldn't have happened to two boys just walking around? They’re both tall, but one’s wearing a baseball cap and the other guy has white hair. Does that ring any bells?”

“No, but I have noticed some irregular movements near my hiding spot. None of the monsters act like that so it could be them.”

Irregular movements, could this girl be like Mitsuru?

“Fuuka-chan, can you see those monsters in your head?”

“Somewhat, but it’s more like I know where they are rather than seeing them. I can also track certain patterns they use while patrolling the area. It’s how I’ve been able to avoid them this whole time.”

So she really was able to see the Shadows and her abilities to track and map out enemy movements were beyond anything SEES had ever seen so far. This girl was shaping up to be a wildcard in her own right.

“Just hang on a little longer, help is on the way.” Once Minako assessed that her path was clear, she hurried down the empty hallway. “I just gotta find those two first. I’m not used to fighting solo-”

“STOP!”

Minako had to slam down on her heels at the command. “What the-”

“I sense a group of monsters near your location. If you continue down the hall, you’ll be ambushed!”

Ambushed? But the hallway was clear when she checked.
There was a dead-end with two branching paths about three hundred feet down. Closer to her, Minako had a few other hallways to choose from, but there was no way to tell which one was hiding enemies. Going any further would risk injury in the Shadows intended to jump on top of her.

However, if Fuuka managed to stay safe for ten hours using her abilities, how could her judgment be wrong? If she knew which hallway was the safest route, it would make it easier to get to the lower floors.

Minako chose to put her trust in this newcomer if it meant getting back to the dorm in one piece.

“Alright, so where should I go?” she asked.

“Let’s see…” Fuuka hummed to herself before responding. “There’s a path on your left side. Go there and keep walking straight ahead. I’ll scout the area beyond and give you further instructions as needed.”

Minako looked to her left and saw what Fuuka was talking about: a branching hallway that looked to be safe enough. She immediately picked up her feet but maintained a more reasonable pace to save energy.

“Thanks, keep me posted. If I’m close to you, just jump out.”

“Understood, I’ll do my best.”

Looking after someone you would rather see take a running leap into a dumpster was tough work.

Three hours elapsed since the team left Minato and Natsuki to their own devices, yet it had been the longest three hours of the former’s life.

Things were already terrible to begin with: he was pissed off from his fight with Minako, someone had decided to crank up the heating for no good reason, and the soda machine on the second floor dispensed luke-warm drinks. Being angry was one thing, but being hot and miserable on top of it was a death sentence. Not even the icebox in the freezer had anything to solve the last two issues.

Who had the bright idea to disconnect one of the water pipes? Why didn't anyone take notice and put in a request to get it fixed? Did they all get Apathy Syndrome and just forget they had no ice?

So many dumbasses in such a small living space.

Minato eventually had to move out of his room and down to the dining room where it was the coolest. His soda tasted bitter as he tried to distract himself with studying for a test that would never be given. It was difficult to focus when someone’s car alarm decided to go off, dogs howled at the moon, and the neighbors started up a yelling match in the street.

Not even heavy metal music turning his brain into mush at the sheer volume could drown out the inner voice of annoyance.

It was starting to get old.

If only there was someone to talk to.

Someone to vent his frustrations without prejudice.

Someone who knew him best. . .
After trying and failing to complete a page of stoichiometry, Minato finally stopped scribbling away.

He stared at the paper before him, filled with chemical formulas and conversion models, not a shred pride in his hard work. Numbers that always made total sense now floated on a sea of pale blue lines and a white background. Some of them were written incorrectly in his haste to do something with his hands.

It was sloppy work at best and a decent fire starter at worst.

Had he even paid attention to what he had put down or was he simply too wrapped up in his own thoughts to care?

Minato closed his notebook after coming up empty with his question.

That’s when the fight with Minako started to sink in.

Sixteen years together and they never went at each other like that. They fought, as do most other siblings, but it was their situation that forced them to be closer than close. Everything between them was built on trust, a trust that nothing would separate them or drive a stake through their relationship.

The love each had for the other was the solution to the gaping hole left by their parents. It kept them from becoming too obsessed with their deaths or listening to the voices of disapproving relatives.

It was open. It was simple.

Despite Minako holding back what she felt most of the time, she was only trying to help him and yet he pushed her away. Sure, everything he said was straight from the heart, but no one deserved to be belittled or called a dumbass. His actions had been the literal equivalent of looking a gift horse in the mouth. Minato had been too occupied by his own opinions, he forgot that his sister was still a human being doing her best to make the most of her life.

Had he been too harsh?

Did Minako feel just as terrible as him?

Could she ever forgive him?

. . . Of course, she would forgive him. That was just the type of person she was.

Why did that hurt more than if she stayed angry?

“Dammit.” he finally cursed, resting his head on the kitchen table.

Minato came up empty to questions he asked.

The normal lights in the dorm suddenly went out, leaving the Dark Hour alternatives in their place. All white noise and music from Minato’s iPod had cut out to leave only a crippling silence. He had been sitting downstairs for so long that the change had passed him by. The operation to save Fuuka was no doubt beginning.

There was a sound of a door opening and closing from up above. Footsteps hurried closer and closer as if being chased. Natsuki must have been still awake when the Dark Hour came around,
and it seemed like she was taking it poorly.

And now Minato had to deal with it.

“What the hell!?” Natsuki stormed into the lobby and went straight towards him. “Hey, you! What happened to the lights!?”

No one had explained the Dark Hour to her, fantastic.

“Just calm down.” Minato shoved himself away from the table to stand up. “This happens every night at midnight. We call it the Dark Hour and it’s how we’re gonna find that girl you locked in the closet.”

Natsuki grimaced at the mention of Fuuka.

“You know, for someone who’s supposed to keep me safe, you’re a huge dick.” She hugged herself and looked away from him with a furrowed brow. “I hate this. I hate everything about this place. I just wanna find Fuuka and tell her I’m sorry.”

Minato matched her disdain. Two could play the bratty teenager game.

“No can do, princess. You’ll get eaten alive the second you step out the door.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. “You’re staying here until they find Yamagishi and bring her back. Better get comfortable cause it’s gonna be a while.”

Natsuki threw down her arms and stormed away. Her direction led to the exit. “Then I’ll just go to them.”

Her strides were long and rushed, but Minato was prepared for her to fly the coop.

It only took a few running bounds and he caught her wrist.

“Are you fucking deaf? I said you have to wait to make your fake apology.”

“The hell-” Natsuki was stunned by the action but was soon trying to fight out of his vice-like grip on her. “Let go of me! I have to see her! I need to say I’m sorry!”

Without anyone around to scold him, Minato scoffed. It was the perfect moment to turn this girl into his emotional punching bag.

Admittedly, it was petty, but who was going to stop him? She’d forget everything as soon as the Dark Hour was done.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from the person who put her in this situation. I’d call you a piece-of-shit, but that’s just being nice.” He looked her dead in the eye. “Do you always throw a pity party after one of your victims gets hurt or is this one a special occasion?”

Natsuki gasped and recovered fast enough to respond.

“Fuck you! I know what I did was shitty but you’ve got no idea how I feel!” She advanced on him with fists balled. “I know who you are; you’re the new transfer student that got the highest score in 2-F. Everyone was so impressed with the secret genius, he was just faking it because he’s a ‘little shy’.” Once she was close enough, Minato could see tears trailing down her cheeks. “But you’re just an asshole with a mouth! Why are you so cruel!?”

Her crying had no effect on him, neither did her yelling. For all he cared, she deserved to feel guilty
after what she did.

And to insinuate that he had no clue what she was feeling was just the icing on the cake.

“You just answered your own question.” Minato forced her to take a step back by pushing her away. “I am an asshole. People annoy me, so I make fun of them. If they’re mean, I’m mean right back. If I had the choice, I’d rather be alone so I don’t have to listen to half the people in my class spout meaningless bullshit.”

Natsuki shrank away from him. “So what? That doesn’t-” Her discomfort was growing more and more obvious as she looked for the words to say. More tears spilled, most likely out of frustration. “-Do you even know how badly I want to apologize? It’s tearing me apart!”

“All you do is go around trying to please people but ya’ never actually mean it and for what!?”

Minato rolled his eyes, turning toward the front door. “Well, aren’t you just saintly?” He tried to focus on a green sliver of light beamed inside.

“Of course I care but anger solves nothing!”

“All she did was be nice to me, and I made her life hell on earth. Now she’s gone . . . she could be dead.” Natsuki was getting softer the more she spoke. “Why did it take that much for me to realize what I’d done?”

Minato gulped and tried to block out her desperate ramblings that echoed his own thoughts.

"Shut up already."

“Sometimes, I think you’re just a huge dumbass playing hero, but all you are is a glorified parent!”

“It should’ve been me . . .” Natsuki had sunk to the group, her head in her hands. “. . . I deserve it.”

“Just get out. Go run your suicide mission, leader.”

Although he had the biggest reaction to Fuuka’s disappearance, Minato declined to do anything and hid in his room like a petulant child. Minako and the others had decided to roll the dice on a theory that could very well be wrong.

“Fuuka, I wish I could’ve taken it all back . . .”

And he went and called her dumb for trying to fix what was totally shattered.

What kind of hypocrite was he?

Natsuki had completely broken down into quiet sobs on the floor. Her words had finally talked her into hysteria, and Minato had only made things worse. In the end, the bigger monster was him for pushing her over the edge.

“She’s been through enough for one night!”

Looking at her suffering tugged at a place that had never been touched on.

He was never one to be sympathetic towards others, he found it wasted his time and energy. Everyone had their hardships and some of those hardships could have been avoided if the person had done things differently. Some tried to bolster their problems and wear them like medals as if
having more suddenly made them better than others.

Now, when all of the girl’s sadness was for the sake of another, it was humbling. All this time, it was all because she wished to make amends. The remorse was laid bare for even someone like him to see.

“Just talk to me and I’ll listen. . .”

He had to make things right.

Minato kneeled down in front of her. She did not seem to notice the change in position or that he had even decided to give her attention.

He took a long and slow deep breath.

“. . . I might not get half the things girls think is normal, and I don’t know what it’s like to be a bully, but I know what it’s like to hurt people.”

Natsuki stopped crying and looked up. Mascara had begun to stain under her eyes and some concealer had rubbed off on her hands. Her bangs that had been neatly combed were now thrown into a state of chaos from running her hands through her hair.

Still, she seemed to be listening, so Minato continued.

“I’m not the best person in the world and neither are you, but at least you’ve got the courage to tell a stranger like me that you were wrong.” He sat down in front of her with crossed legs. “You even wanna break the Student Council President’s rules, risk going outside during a dangerous time, and cuss me out just to apologize. If that ain’t selfless, I don’t know what is.”

Natsuki averted her gaze. Once again, she hugged herself as if she had just been exposed.

“Maybe I was wrong, I might be the only asshole here. When I hurt someone. . . all I did was tell them to take a hike. I stayed bitter and I wasn’t sorry. You’re better than I ever could be.”

Her bottom lip began to quiver. “Y-you. . . why are you doing this?”

“That’s what family does, we keep an eye on each other when things get rocky.”

Minato shrugged, looking towards the front desk.

Hanging next to the window was a pair of keys to Mitsuru’s motorcycle.

There was no one around to tell him no from borrowing them.

“Because I wanna make things right, too.”

What he was about to do was stupid, but he was not the only one making dumb decisions tonight.

Twists and turns took Minako through two more floors, but this time her encounters with Shadows were few and far between. In fact, the journey turned out swift and more streamlined than just running around looking for the next staircase.

Occasionally, fighting was inevitable. There were simply too many enemies roaming the tower that battles were inevitable. But, Minako had time to recuperate and get a jump on her targets, even before they knew she was nearby. She made quick work of the Shadows then continued following
She had Fuuka Yamagishi to thank.

“There are no Shadows in the surrounding area. That monster you faced was the last of them.”
The junior hummed at her own the good news. “I also sense your teammates on this floor. If you stay put, you’ll run right into them.”

“Finally, I thought it’d never end.” Minako holstered her Evoker as she walked through the now deserted halls. She pulled off to the side to stand by a window overlooking the city below Tartarus, bathing all surroundings in a greenish glow. “Am I close to you yet? It feels like I’ve been walking around for hours.”

“Yes, I can sense you close by. I can come to you. Please wait where you are and I’ll be there soon.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Yes, there’s no danger now that you’re here. Thank you for getting rid of those things.”

Minako smiled. “You’re too sweet.” She leaned against the window and took a well deserved deep breath. “Let me know if anything comes up on the way here. This place can sometimes mess with your sense of direction.”

“I’ll be careful. See you soon, Minako-san.”

Fuuka’s voice cut out.

It still amazed Minako to think that someone had such a strong communication ability without knowing about their power. There was no question that her skills were far more polished compared to Mitsuru, even if the latter had been at this longer than everyone else. The clarity in her voice, Shadow tracking, and range were above and beyond comprehension.

Such thoughts raised some interesting ideas: would Fuuka consider joining SEES as a full-time member?

Their ranks bolstered plenty of combat units, yet lacking in proper support players. Mitsuru’s skills, while useful on the lower levels, were limited by distance. Before long, they would need to set up checkpoints to help bridge the gaps, but those checkpoints were subject to attacks. It was safer to keep a guide in the lobby where the Shadows refused to go.

Fuuka already excelled at giving instructions without taking time to formulate a layout of the area. Her cooperation was also desirable for team cohesion, not too bossy but assertive when an action guaranteed a tragic result.

The only problem was whether or not she wished for this type of life. She was an honor student with a bright future, so certain things would come before being a hero. Her family, who still waited for her safe return, what would they say if she moved into a co-ed dorm without explanation? Did Fuuka even want to leave her family behind?

Too many variables to consider. All anyone could do was to let things be until the mission was over.

Besides, Fuuka had enough to worry about for one night.
And so did everyone else...

Minako started to twirl her Evoker in order to ease her train of thought. It was clumsy and she would lose her concentration from time to time, but the feeling of something spinning off her finger was a wanted distraction from the events of that evening. The more she zeroed in on the menial task, the more her brain began to gather itself back together as if someone had taken apart a puzzle and put it away for next time.

Soon enough, Minako whirled the mock-firearm around with ease.

“Hehe, this is kinda fun.” She tried a directional change that broke her flow.

Her skills could use some work before she earned the title of a professional gunslinger.

“MINATAN!”

Minako stopped playing with her Evoker and looked up towards the person shouting out her nickname.

Just as she expected, Junpei and Akihiko came running down the hall, the former holding her naginata like a baseball bat.

Why that observation? She was no longer stumbling around on her own!

“Wow, you’re alive!” As they approached, Junpei got a step ahead and offered Minako her naginata with a huge grin. “Never fear, Junpei’s here!”

“You thought I was dead?” she asked when she accepted her weapon.

Junpei shrugged. “Maybe just a little.”

As always, the loveable teen still made no sense.

“What a mess.” Akihiko caught the two’s attention with his somber attitude. “I don't think we should enter Tartarus this way again. Huh?”

Minako and Junpei nodded in unison.

“Agreed.”

“Totally senpai.” The capped teen looked between the two upperclassmen. “Oh yeah! Did you hear a voice while you were in here? Uh, kinda like-uh...”

“Hello?”

Junpei and Akihiko both jumped at the sound. “Th-that’s the voice!”

“Where’s it coming from?” the latter asked. “It’s too echo-y in here.”

Minako was less than jumpy, in fact, she looked to where the boys had appeared from down the hall and saw a head of teal hair peeping out from behind a corner. Bright brown eyes watched the group carefully while still holding a curious spark, despite not knowing what she was supposed to be doing. Even though afraid, this girl still held the senior’s gaze.

“Yamagishi?” Minako leaned her naginata against the wall and left the trio to approach the girl hiding behind the corner. “It’s me, Minako-san. We came here to rescue you, remember?”
“Minako-san?” she asked, edging out into the open hall. Her winter uniform was clean and complimented by a blue floral turtleneck, giving away that she had been in there past the change in seasons. “It’s really you. You came to save me.”

Her voice was just as soothing as it sounded before.

Minako nodded and beckoned her over. “Sorry if we’re a little late but there’s no time like the present, eh?”

“Thank goodness, I thought it was all a dream.” Fuuka took the gesture and scuttled over to the group.

Junpei came to Minako’s side, pointing to her than the shorter girl. “Um, am I missing something or what?” He scratched his head. “Do you two know each other? What’s going on?”

Fuuka stopped in front of the three and shook her head. “No, this is the first time I’ve ever officially met her.”

“Wait a second,” Akihiko joined his teammates. “What do you mean ‘officially’?”

Minako forced the boys to take a few steps back from Fuuka. “First, give the girl some space. You’re both gonna scare her off.” Once that was done, she crossed over to the junior’s side so that she had someone to stand by. “Second, she’s not a normal student. She’s just like us.”

Junpei’s eyes widened. “Ya’ don’t mean?”

Minako laid a comforting hand and Fuuka’s shoulder. “When I got lost, I thought I was just running around in circles. I started talking to myself to help keep calm. Then I heard a voice asking if I was human or not. Turns out, it was Fuuka-chan, she could talk to me and even tell where Shadows were on different floors. She helped me avoid any unnecessary battles and led me back to you two without a fuss.”

Fuuka shifted back and forth. “Before Minako-san answered my call for help, I was able to use the same method to keep away from the monsters. If they ever got too close, I would find somewhere to hide and waited until they were gone.”

“Woah, that’s wicked man! You must be a psychic or something.” Junpei gave her a thumbs up. “Akihiko-senpai and I thought we were just hearing things, but it was just you! Now I just feel really dumb.”

Akihiko breathed in awe. “She has the same power as Mitsuru, maybe even stronger since Mitsuru's Persona is more battle-oriented.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too.” Minako said. “Her abilities are incredible and her voice is from so far away. It was like she was right behind me the whole time and always had a lay of the land.”

“I see...” Akihiko reached into an inside pocket of his tan blazer and produced a shiny, new Evoker. It was much smaller than his own but just right for someone with more delicate hands, someone like Fuuka. He held it out to the girl so the grip was facing her. “Here, take this. You might need it.”

Fuuka hesitated, eyes darting between the gun and Minako. “B-but that's-!”

“-Think of it as a lucky charm,” he reassured her. “It’s not really a gun, but I can explain later. Getting you out is priority number one.”
The girl accepted the Evoker but had no interest in brandishing the weapon, instead, she held it close to her chest. Her knuckles turned a ghastly white from clutching it too hard. Fuuka reached out for Minako’s arm and held on as tight as she could.

The poor girl was shaking.

“I-I really don’t wanna be here anymore. Could we leave before those monsters sense where we are?” she asked.

“Just hang tight,” Minako let Fuuka cling to her for comfort and looked to the boys. “Is there an access point somewhere close by?”

“Nada,” Junpei replied but remained cheerful. “We’ve still got some time left. It’s barely been twenty minutes into the Dark Hour. We’ll find one eventually.”

And so, the party of four set out in search of the exit.

Riding a motorcycle looked easier in movies and video games.

It was even more nerve-wracking knowing the bike was not yours and the owner would have no qualms in strangling someone who trashed said bike.

And that someone may or may not have their own private detective who knew more than a few ways to hide a body.

No pressure, just be careful and try not to crash.

After some awkward starts and failed attempts to get it right, eventually, Minato and Natsuki were speeding along the empty streets of Port Island. Without any cops able to stop and check them for a license, the city had become one long stretch of road. No pedestrians or stop lights meant no chance for unwanted accidents. They were safe from Mitsuru having to pay ridiculous amounts of money on insurance claims.

As for whether or not she would let Minato off the hook for stealing her motorcycle, that was still up in the air.

“You’re not a bad driver,” Natsuki said as they were crossing the bridge to the next island. They had been using communication units in the helmets they stole from the control room to talk to one another throughout the ride. Mitsuru spared no expense when outfitting her ride. “Are you sure you don’t have a license?”

Minato had to almost agree with her. It was almost scary how quickly he was able to get the hang of driving the thing. His only experience with motorized vehicles came from his visits to his grandparents’ pig farm in Texas, with his grandpa’s supervision.

But despite those visits and even living with them after the accident being some of the best memories of their young lives, they were ripped away by their father’s side of the family. As soon as citizenship was brought up with one of their ethnically purest aunts, they were shipped back "home" before they knew it. Funny enough, that same aunt who tried to keep the siblings as Japanese as possible cast them out the quickest after Minato beat her son in an entrance exam.

The bitch had it coming.

All resentfulness aside, how did steering a four-wheeler translate to a motorcycle with far more
kick in its engine? Even if it made a spectacular difference, it was so long ago.

The feeling he got was too familiar. Like a bad case of Deja Vu.

When had he ever done something like this?

Why had he been getting this feeling ever since he came back to Iwatodai?

This year was a crazy one.

Minato still had yet to answer Natsuki’s question. He simply shrugged and kept his eyes glued to the road ahead.

“If I had one, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be getting into Tokyo U with a big middle finger shoved in the administrations face.” He could almost imagine such an absurd picture in all it’s smug glory. “High school’s just not my speed. And there's a fuck ton of idiots.”

For the first time since the two met, Natsuki laughed at his crudeness.

“You really are an egotistical asshole. . . but an honest one. I like that.” She held onto him tighter as they made a sharp veer away from a car stopped in the center of the road. “So if this is the Dark Hour, why’s there no electricity and stuff?”

“Don’t know, don’t care, don't ask me.” he said. "I’m more concerned with the Shadows that come out and eat people's souls until the entire island becomes one giant zombie pit.” Minato slowed them down in order to more gracefully maneuver the bridge’s many obstacles. “All that logistical jargon is more Kirijo’s area of expertise. My sister, Yukari, Junpei, Sanada and I are just foot soldiers, she’s the one holding the leash.”

“Oh. . .” Natsuki trailed off. “. . . Sounds like she forced you to do all this, fighting the Shadows and stuff.”

Her words had an air of truth to them.

There were few people who knew about the Dark Hour, even fewer who could stand up and use the power of Persona. Mitsuru was the type to use what little resources at her disposal, paying any price to gain what was needed to complete agenda. The Kirijo Cooperation was still a business and a business needed a labor force.

It was just business and, in the end, not personal.

However, Minato was no slouch when it came to the art of the trade.

In order for both parties to co-exist, there needed to be an equal exchange of goods. Money, material items, and a fulfilled life were the driving factors that made the world what it is today. No one does anything simply because they had nothing better to do.

The excitement of entering a difficult battle. Curiosity while exploring unknown territory. Pride in knowing your actions make a difference. Everyone in SEES had a reason for why they were there, even if the fate that brought them together was uncertain. Not a soul knew they would end up doing this sort of work, and yet here they were.

Taking a leap outside his sheltered world.

Learning to let others watch his back.
Following a sister into the fire.

That’s why he joined.

That’s why he was going to stay...

... To fight beside the one he called family.

“That was beautiful.”

Minato mentally slapped himself. Being so wrapped up in his thoughts, he forgot his helmet’s microphone was still on. Now some girl with enough makeup to be a model knew all his personal feelings.

Minato exited off the bridge, catching a glimpse of Tartarus before it disappeared behind a taller building. For some reason, it seemed to loom more ominously than previous nights. He was starting to get a bad feeling that something was terribly wrong.

“If you tell anyone what I said, I have no problem using you as bait for the Shadows.” he said.

“No, you won’t.”

“Try me, Britney.”

Minato revved up the gas and speed down an open street.

They were almost there.

Tartarus never had such open areas to the outside, but occasionally there would be a nice view from time to time. With how high they were, the city looked like something straight from a cheesy monster movie set.

“Whoa, check out the moon! I’ve never seen it so bright.” The group stopped as Junpei admired the city from a large window. “That’s so cool!”

Minako led Fuuka to the boy’s side. “I’ve gotta admit, it does look pretty.” She turned to the younger girl who had her arm more comfortably looped in her’s. “What do ya’ think, Fuuka-chan? Isn’t it lovely?”

For the first time that night, Fuuka was too entranced to be scared. “It’s beautiful...” She let go of Minako’s arm and pressed her palms flat against the glass. “I never get to see things this high up where I live and I never have the time to go to an observatory.”

“Dude, me too!” Junpei was more conscious of the fact he was taller when speaking to Fuuka this time. Instead, he slouched to appear less threatening and more friendly. “I used to live on the west side of town with my folks. You could barely see anything with all the skyscrapers getting in the way.”

“My goodness, tell me more!”

Minako let herself relax as both juniors chatted back and forth about how terrible their home views were compared to the tower.

However, it struck her that Junpei lived in such a dangerous area. It was past the Port Island station and a place that was far worse than just some gangs or punks.
Even when she was still living in Iwatodai as a child, she remembered her parents always talking
about volunteering at the homeless shelters that dotted the west side. It was mostly because her
mother was involved with a shelter with funding from a local church, but her father always
dedicated extra time not spent with the family helping her serve meals. They always went together,
just in case something bad happened.

Minako always wanted to help them. Volunteering was a good way to humble oneself and get to
know another side of the population head-on. She would try to sneak out and follow them at a
distance, but never even got past the front door.

It was too risky for bringing a young and defenseless girl.

Why did Junpei live in a place like that?

What was his life like before SEES?

Minako felt a knock on the shoulder.

“You okay?” Akihiko had gotten her attention and was looking at her with a mix of worry and
intrigue. “You got quiet all of a sudden.”

Had she been standing there the whole time lost in thought?

Minako promptly gathered herself. “Yeah, just a bit jaded after everything that happened.” She
yawned to help gain some feeling back in her senses and turned back to the moon. “Say, does the
moon have any effect on the Shadows in here? I swear they were more antsy than usual.”

Akihiko nodded and looked out the window too. “Some research indicates that the Shadows are
affected by the phases of the moon. As for why I can’t say.” He crossed his arms. “Of course, the
same can be said for humans. Just look at those two, they look like a bunch of little kids.”

Junpei caught wind that he was being talked about. He and Fuuka stopped chatting while the boy
had a sly grin on his face.

“That would explain Yukatan's mood swings.” He began to chuckle. “That and a few other things
that go on.”

Minako tried to suppress her laughter at the suggestive jab. “I wish that was the only thing,
knowing her.” she said back.

It took Fuuka a moment to understand what they were talking about before her face went beet red
in realization. “M-Minako-san! Why are you laughing at that!?” She turned to the only other senior
among them. “I-Is this normal?”

Unfortunately, Akihiko let out a chuckle of his own. “Sorry, those two can be a bit childish. It’s
just how it goes in here.”

What good was fighting beside others if you had no fun in the process?

Once Junpei had calmed down, he sighed and looked back out the window. “Hey, wasn't it a full
moon the night we went to the monorail?”

Akihiko stopped smiling at the offhand comment.

“Was it?” he asked.
The tone in conversation shifted.

“I don’t know,” Junpei answered. “What do ya’ think, Minatan? Was there?”

Minako paused.

“I think so. . .” She tapped her chin and strained her memory to recall that details of that night. Although she drew a blank on remembering if there was a full moon, some other technicalities slipped through the cracks. “It felt a lot like tonight, that’s for sure. More oppressive and the air was tainted with something bitter.” A slow but steady picture was being put together. “The Shadows were so hostile and acted differently than we were used to.”

Akihiko mulled over her description.

“The Shadows acted differently, more hostile. . .” he mused, seemingly unaware he was being watched by the others. “An oppressive air, bitterness. . . but that could mean anything.”

Minako was now starting to become unsettled.

“Sanada-san?”

At the mention of his name, Akihiko perked up and looked to her. “Hey, did you see the moon on the night the dorm was attacked, back in April?”

Another long stretch of time since that crucial day, and this time there were other things Minako had been focused on. Still, she closed her eyes and did her best to recreate that moment when the siblings and Yukari burst onto the rooftop.

“I remember I had a terrible headache when I woke up. Everything felt numb but I ignored it because the others were alarmed by the whole situation. It wasn’t much, but I tried my best to be calm.”

She could feel that headache burning her skull, even as she stood there months later. The pain was forever ingrained.

“That giant Shadow climbed onto the roof. It looked right at us and charged.”

Those knives and swords scraped along the concrete.

“Yukari got hurt and dropped her Evoker.”

A boy with harrowing eyes stared down at the glistening weapon. Minako’s headache got worse as he reached for it carefully. Was he really going to put his life on the line for his older sister?

“Minato picked it up and pushed me aside.”

He aimed the Evoker at his head. He said something under his breath, but it was too soft to hear above noise going on around them.

“He summoned Orpheus.”

The gunshot brought her relief and the mighty Persona appeared in front of them. He floated just above the rooftop, capturing the attacking Shadow’s attention.

“Then Orpheus was ripped apart. . .”
Behind that thing which tore Orpheus to shreds from the inside out was a silver outline. Coffin wings accentuated by a greenish glow. Black cloth in stark contrast to the pale light, fluttering as it attacked the Shadow and sliced it to ribbons.

As if hitting the pause button on a remote, the answer was right there

*All the while, a full moon illuminated the scene.*

Minako opened her eyes and was back in the present. However, the urgency from that night remained with the shocking realization.

“It was full.”

That was why Akihiko asked.

The missing piece of the puzzle.

Every time a big Shadow appeared, there was always a full moon.

“This is bad.” Akihiko placed a hand over his ear. “Mitsuru? Mitsuru, are you there!?”

Suddenly, Minako heard Fuuka gasp.

She whipped around to see Junpei holding his fellow junior steady while she clutched her head.

“What is this thing? It's much bigger than the others,” Fuuka's eyes glazed over as if she were about to cry. “And it's attacking someone downstairs- no two people! They’re in danger!”

“Damnit! Mitsuru!?” Akihiko shouted before he took off running. “Damnit, damnit, damnit!”

His oldest friend was probably being beaten to a bloody pulp in the lobby, their leader could be dead for they knew. Yukari, a sweetheart with a rough exterior, could the Shadows have broken her too? Would they be able to save her before then?

Minako wasted no time to think.

“We've gotta help them!” She started after the boxer. “Grab Fuuka and run like ya' stole something!”

“Aiy!” Junpei swept up the girl bridal style and did his best to catch up. “Hang on tight, it's gonna be a bumpy ride.”

Fuuka swung her arms around his neck. “Right!”

For someone who trained with him morning after morning, it was an easy task to catch up to Akihiko. Even with naginata in hand, she found a way to keep from being slowed down. With determination driving her every step, it only gave her the power to go faster, for her legs to push her over the edge.

An access point was within sight.

“We'll make it in time!” Minako yelled out as they sprinted. “Let’s give ‘em a beat down they won’t forget.”

Akihiko cracked his knuckles.
“They’re gonna be dead before they remember anything.”

The four practically leaped from the main access point as soon as they touched down. Junpei had let Fuuka’s legs go so he could make preparations to fight.

Minako was the first to find her footing and run out to get an idea for what was going on.

“Kirijo-san! Yukari-”

She choked on her own tongue at what she saw.

The entire lobby, once pristine marble and a welcome change from the upper floor of the tower, had been turned into a battleground. Small fires caught on and were beginning to fade from lack of proper fuel. Pillars that once supported the glass ceiling above were crumbling or lay in chunks, strewn about like barricades and projectiles used by giants.

Yukari held onto one for dear life, a massive cut running up her right leg. Her bow lay among the ruins with arrows scattered in all different directions.

“What’s going on!?” She cried out, wincing in pain. “Nothing’s working!”

In the middle of it all were two massive Shadows. Unlike the scantily clad demon or the monorail, these were adorned like a King and Queen pairing. The King gripped a mighty sword that was dragged across the ground, resembling an ogre and a bludgeoning club. The Queen was more courtly, holding a scepter high and proud as if it were actual royalty.

What caused Minako to feel unbridled rage was in the Queen’s free hand.

Mitsuru being held like a doll, limp and blood staining half her face.

The two Shadows just stood there, staring at the motionless young woman while a peal of sickening laughter echoed through the air.

Why were they laughing?

Could Shadows even feel a sense of pride?

Did they feel anything except the need to destroy humans and take their souls?

Two Shadows, two ordeals.

Two targets.

“Junpei, make sure Yukari’s safe! Join the fight once you KNOW she’ll be okay!” Minako shouted.

“On it!” Junpei hoped over the broken marble to get to Yukari, his Evoker ready in case there was trouble.

Fuuka, without orders, followed close behind. “I can help too!” she yelled before jumping on top of the debris to leap across the mess. Her own Evoker clutched close to her chest, but her knuckles were no longer a pale white. “I can’t stand by and do nothing!”

For such a small girl, she was able to navigate the minefield of wreckage with ease.
Minako left the safety of the access point once Junpei reached Yukari, Fuuka not far behind. Akihiko was already out in the fight, Polydeuces summoned and brawling with the King while the Queen was left alone. They could not risk Mitsuru’s life in order to kill the Shadows.

The King swung his sword around in a poor attempt to knock the Persona away, but Polydeuces grabbed the blade and let loose a shock that brought the enemy to its knees. The crackle of electricity gave Minako goosebumps, even though she and Akihiko kept their distance to feel out the enemy.

A Persona’s power was based on one’s inner psyche. Even if they were all different in skill and ability, the base on which they all functioned on was always the same. It was dictated by the strength and conviction of one’s very soul. No amount of physical training could prepare someone for such a feat as using their soul.

Such raw power came from a place of strong emotion.

“I’ll handle the Queen!” Minako shouted to Akihiko as he continued to put pressure on the other Shadow. “I’ve got an idea to get Mitsuru, but you’ll have to keep that one busy!”

“Got it!” Akihiko threw her a wave. “Just make sure she’s safe!”

With that, he started a violent assault on the King. The air grew increasingly electrified as he worked to keep the monster at bay.

There was no way he could lose with that hardened resolve to save Mitsuru.

Now it was time for her to apply her own for a daring rescue.

Minako dared to get closer to the Queen, now that it and the King were separated. She advanced forward using the broken pillars to hide from any possible eyes the Queen had on her. She tried to keep in its blind spots while still maintaining a visual on Mitsuru’s prominent red hair.

Once close enough, she cupped her hands over her mouth to amplify her voice. “Kirijo-san, are you okay!? Give me a sign!”

The Queen noticed the field leader’s shouting. It turned while swinging its golden scepter in the same fashion as the King’s sword.

The Queen noticed the field leader’s shouting. It turned while swinging its golden scepter in the same fashion as the King’s sword.

However, Minako was faster on the draw. She forced against her head in time with the attack.

“Flauros!”

Before she became a human golf ball, a humanoid creature with tiger-like legs and upper body appeared to stop the scepter. Its upper half was protected by oddly shaped armor and made it easy for holding back heavy attacks. A pair of swords hung from a metal belt, perfect for a fight if Minako could get Mitsuru out safely.

“Perfect!” She ducked under the scepter to get in front of the Queen. As she passed by its stubby legs, she sliced the ankles so that the creature became unstable and wavering on the edge of tipping over. “Just hold on a bit longer! I’ve got a plan but I need to check something first!”

“As you wish, young warrior!” Flames erupted from his claws as it dug in for the long haul. The heat was already starting to spread throughout the area. “I will not let this sow defeat the Great Flauros!”
Minako nodded and focused back at Mitsuru. The Queen was preoccupied with regaining control over her weapon to pay any mind to the problem in front of her. Her captive remained still.

From where she stood, Minako took in the full extent to Mitsuru's injuries. Blood splattered half of her face, still bleeding from a gash above her left eye. It probably was not even the size of a pea, but head wounds looked worse than they actually are.

"Hurry, young warrior!" Minako heard Flauros warn in her mind. "I will not be able to sustain this from much longer!"

Minako uttered a quick prayer before getting putting distance between her and the Queen.

"Flauros, knock that thing over and grab the girl she’s holding!" She raised her Evoker so she could resummon the Persona to Mitsuru. "If she gets hurt, I’ll get Igor to erase you! I can’t let her die!"

"Such fire! Your wish is my command!" Flauros chuckled and engulfed the Queen’s scepter in a blazing fire. Her Persona let go of the weapon and the enemy stumbled backward at the change in power. "The girl shall not die under my watchful eye!"

The large Shadow wobbled on unsteady legs.

*Deep breath in...*

The Queen went down with arms stretched to the sky.

*Deep breath out...*

Its grip on both scepter and Mitsuru was loosened.

*Deep breath in...*

The leader of SEES began to fall towards the ground.

*Hold!*

"NOW!" Minako shot the Evoker and felt a spasm of energy overcome her spirit. "GO FLAUROS!"

Flauros reappeared in a flash of blue to catch Mitsuru. Once she was secured in its arms, the Persona used the Queen’s downed body as a springboard and leapt high into the air towards Minako. It raised a hand at the enemy with a mighty roar.

"Begone harlot!"

The Queen was fully consumed in a brilliant blaze of glory. A heatwave hit Minako full force, strong enough that she dropped her naginata to shield her eyes from the intense flare. Ash and smoke burned her lungs despite the precautions.

"A little too much!"

"But now she is surely dead!" Flauros landed in front of her and gave Mitsuru over to her. When the pass was completed, it used its far stronger body to protect them from the worst of the carnage. "Do not fear! I can handle the power of my own flames."
“My turn!” she heard from nearby. As the flames of Minako’s Persona began to die, Junpei was running in to join the fight with Evoker raised. “Finish this up, Hermes!”

“Good luck, young warrior!” Flauros took his leave in a cloud of blue while Hermes burst forward at breakneck speed and hurled itself on top the smoldering Queen. While using its fin-like arms to slice the enemy’s face, explosions covering all other areas. The heat had someone gotten worse, even after what Flauros had done.

As quickly as it began, Hermes smashed the Queen’s skull one last time, its crown blasted to pieces and dispersed.

The beast stopped writhing.

The Queen was dead.

Junpei pumped a fist in the air. “Woah ho! Take that, your majesty!”

Minako let out a sigh of relief. “That was quick.” She turned back to Mitsuru who was still held close in her arms to protect from the fire.

Not a single burn nor scratch that was not that before.

She looked to where Akihiko had just finished his own fight. The King lay motionless and charred on the ground, Polydeuces and the summoner standing victorious. From the burn marks on the Shadow’s body, it seemed like she was not the only one who Junpei assisted tonight.

The battle was won.

“Thank you, Flauros,” Minako said aloud, repositioning Mitsuru in a more comfortable position on her lap. A hand brushed over her heart where she could feel the steady thrum of the demon’s own beat. It was something she was terrified of at first but soon found it to be a reminder of what she had accomplished. “I’ll put it a good word with Igor next time I visit.”

“It was an honor. Continue to grow, the young warrior of the Fool.”

The voice disappeared, as did the heartbeat. It left her drained from the fight, however short it was.

Warrior of the Fool. . . was that a reference to Nona’s arcana? Perhaps to Minako's ability to call multiple Personas?

In any case, it was nice to have a title, and given to her by a being from another world no less.

“Ugh. . .” Mitsuru shifted and opened her eyes. She tried to sit up, but struggle to do even that simple task. “W-what happened?”

Minako was broken from her thoughts as the redhead stirred. “Easy there, Kirijo-san. You’re hurt pretty bad.” She smiled and helped Mitsuru sit upright. “Sorry if you feel a little sore. My plan might’ve been a little bit bumpy, but at least you’re safe now. We finished the Shadows off.”

“Plan-?” Mitsuru flinched and went to touch the cut on her forehead. “-impossible, they were so strong. . .”

“Mitsuru!” Akihiko ran and slid right next to the other seniors in the blink of an eye. Upon seeing his friend was conscious and breathing, he visibly slumped as if a weight had been taken off his shoulders. “We made it in time.”
“Akihiko . . .” She paused to take a staggered breath but then offered up a smile. “It took you three long enough to get back.”

“She’s fine alright.” Minako shimmed away from Mitsuru to give her some space to move. “Can ya’ get up on your own? You’re probably still shaken up after all that.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “Admittedly, I could use some assistance.”

“I got her. Help me get her real quick.” Akihiko kneeled down and threw her arm his head. He grabbed her waist for extra stability. Minako got on her other side and offered herself as a crutch to lean on. “Up on three?”

He nodded and waited until Mitsuru was ready to go.

“One, two, hup!”

With a combined effort, they had Mitsuru on her feet and being supported by Akihiko. She groaned and swayed from her wounds but soon found her balance without Minako’s intervention.

“How embarrassing,” the heiress muttered yet held no venom in her words. “I suppose my fighting skills could use a tune-up, after all the support work I’ve done these past few months. It’s been a while since I’ve been in the field.”

Minako stepped away from the two with a shrug. “I guess we’ve got some good news for you then!” She started to regroup with the others to check on their status. “I’ll give a full report later, but first, I’ve gotta make sure Yukari’s alright. She looked pretty beat up too.”

“Go ahead, we’ll catch up.”

With an okay from Mitsuru, Minako jogged away from the seniors to the group of juniors sitting on the staircase.

The communication equipment lay strewn about, smashed to the point of no return. When intermingled with sharp stones, it would be easy for anyone to step on one and ruin their shoes. It was difficult to avoid tiny shards of metals, splayed wiring, and damaged headsets but Minako reached the three without getting a single cut.

Yukari was sitting and talking with Fuuka while Junpei resigned himself to dressing the archer’s wound. The first aid kit that kept hidden behind the stairs was laid open, a bottle of rubbing alcohol was half empty from cleaning off her cut while two packs of gauze were already used up. A spool of white bandages had been nearly depleted from covering the surface area of the gash running the length of her calf. The sock that had covered it was torn up and bloody on the tile.

There was no doubt that it hurt. Not even a more powerful healing spell could take away the deep, internal scarring left behind.

For the rest of her life, she would carry that scar and be reminded of what she went through.

If only they had been a second sooner. . . if only Minako were faster, this could have been avoided.

“It’s not as bad as it looks, Minako-senpai.”

Minako looked up from the gash to see a grinning Yukari. She gave the field leader a thumbs up as if she could tell that she was thinking about what happened. “We’re all gonna get scars out of this. Mine’s just cooler than everyone else's!”
Junpei scoffed, closing up the first aid kit. “What kind of line is that? Sounds like an after-school special about life and junk.”

Yukari rolled her eyes. “She looked sad so I tried to make her feel better, Stupei!” She stuck out her tongue. “What were you doing? Pretending to patch me up? I know you’re just trying to look up my skirt or something creepy like that!”

“Hey! I don’t think about that stuff all the time!” he defended. “Besides, I’d be clever and just wait until we got into a fight!”

“I knew it! That’s why I wear compression shorts when we go on missions anyway!”

“It. Was. A. JOKE!”

“You’re gonna make Minako feel weirded out with your JOKES!”

What a charming, considerate girl. If she could extend the same kindness to Junpei, the world would be in sweet harmony.

But she was right, everyone has scars.

“You two are just too funny.” Minako sat down in front of them on her knees. The exhaustion from using her Personas in the tower and again in the lobby was taking a toll on her body. Summoning Flauros was no small endeavor, taking into account its status and her limit on how much she could take in one night. “S’long as we get back to the dorm before the Dark Hour ends, I’ll be more than happy. I’ve barely got anything left in me after my master plan.”

Fuuka smiled at the mention of leaving. “Are we really going back? It’s finally over?”

Minako nodded and stood up.

“Yup, good work tonight everyone. Let’s get ready to move out-”

Without warning, a harsh wind bombarded the group from the direction of the entrance.

“What’s going on!?"

“Someone protect Yamagishi!”

“Get down, they aren’t dead!”

Minako tried to fight against the wind to look where it was coming from. Her legs shook but the will to remain standing kept her from falling down. The Shadows were defeated, so what was causing such a storm? There had to be another enemy!

She found her cause as the wind receded.

“No. . .”

The Shadows stood back up, seemingly unharmed.

“They aren’t dead yet.”

6/8/2009
This is my last will and testament before I get murdered by Mitsuru Kirijo.

Let the record show that I'm not sorry for stealing her motorcycle. It was for a good cause.

As for my stuff, I don't know. Just fight to the death over it and whatever.

-Minato Arisato
Hello! Who's ready for approximately forty-two pages worth of thrills, chills, and Kill Bills!? Maybe not that last one, but hey it works with the rhyming scheme. In other words, here is the end of the first quarter of this story! I'd like to thank a couple of people personally for making me keep this going even though it's been a rough couple of months. Without them and their messages of kindness, I don't think we'd make it this far.

First, because there are so many to name that I couldn't fit them all (which is beyond cool), I'd like to extend a humble thank you to everyone who gave a Kudos on this story. If I did not mention your name, I mean this in the most serious way possible: my bad and thank you so much.

Rosalix_Archangel, ph0sph0r, Ryuu_No_Kami, AcceleratedStall (more than once!), swirlywirly, FowlJ, Therandompers, valeria1314151611, Ani1998, ShadowHawk01, Lephise, and guest (you know who you are and you're awesome) all commented at least once. Thanks so much for your support over this past year or so!

Special thank you(s) go out to Kunimeme. I always look forward to seeing your frequent comments on what you think about the story! Also to CoinSprite, I died laughing when I first read your comment about these "5-year-old teens". Carminagadelica was one of my inspirations to start this whole project with her (or his IDK it's the internet) fanfic "Persona 3 Portable: Her Story" (love it to bits go check it out!).

Finally, the first penguin is the brave one that starts it all while the first commenter gets the ball rolling for others. JusKldding was the first person to comment on this fanfic. If I hadn't said it before, thank you for being the first penguin. It means a heck of a lot.

At long last, here is part two of part two but also part three of part one that is also an ending to part one of four sections: “Two Hearts, One Blood III”.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Orange and red flames licked at twisted metal. Two young children, one a boy and the other a girl, crawled out from the hull of a crashed car. The latter struggled to lead the boy to safety through the maze of twisted steel and smoke.

Glass shards tore at their clothing, yet so long as they escaped, it mattered not if their uniforms were ruined.

The boy wailed as the girl dragged him across the bridge for help.

"I want momma! Papa!"

However, the girl carried on. Though she was barely a year older than the boy, she wore a frown
befitting a hardened adult.

She was on a mission.

"Help, help us." she said pitifully, knowing her pleas were in vain.

Help, what good was that to them now?

Helpless children, their voices soaked up only by a starless sky, and yet, somehow found the strength to stumble forward.

Minako never felt more helpless as she watched those two Shadows stand back up. The Queen picked her scepter from the rubble, a new crown reforming in a golden glow atop its head. Charred spots from Hermes and Flauros’ fire barrage were replaced with shiny new clothing that strained to cover her obese form.

“The hell!?” Junpei exclaimed and stood beside Minako. “I thought we killed those things!”

The King wavered a brief moment until he found his balance once again. Once steadied, it bent down to snatch its sword that, dropped during the previous battle but now poised to strike. Any electrical burn marks had been quickly healed with a lazy wave of the hand. Without hesitation, the King raised his sword with a frosty fog beginning to form.

It was about to cast a Bufu spell.

“Mitsuru-senpai! Akihiko-senpai!”

Minako shook out of her daze as Yukari screamed out her senior’s names. Why was she so frantic as she spoke? What was going on?

She whipped her head back to ground level to see both Mitsuru and Akihiko thrown to the ground and separated by the previous attack. Both struggled to recover from the shock, barely moving or alert their surroundings.

Akihiko was weak to ice and Mitsuru had taken enough damage for one night.

In their condition, the damage would be fatal.

Minako sprinted towards the Shadows with Evoker poised, returning to the battlefield and prepared for round two. As she ran, she pictured her oldest Persona squirming just as badly as her to act quickly.

“Leave them alone!”

Nona burst from her summoning in a storm of blue and dove straight for the King’s weapon in a desperate attempt to prevent the attack. She latched onto the enemy’s arm and caused the violent attack to miss, shoot sideways, and cover an already crumbling pillar in a thick layer of ice and snow.

Unfortunately, Nona’s body was partially caught in the path of the blast. Her whole left side struggled to move but still remained clinging to the King’s arm. Dust from the crushed stone kicked up as the two grappled for control over the other. It wasn’t ideal but bought Minako time.

“Kirijo-san! Are you okay!?” Minako reached Mitsuru, the most vulnerable of the two who went down and hauled the latter to her feet. “Come on, we’ve gotta get you to safety!”
“I knew it!” Mitsuru struggled to stand upright, but at least her fighting spirit remained intact. “They pulled the same trick before you got here. They switched their immunities and attacked with our own weaknesses!”

“You son of a-” Junpei was at Mitsuru’s side and while offering support, raised his Evoker. “I’ve gotcha covered, Minatan!”

Hermes reappeared in a flash and charged the Queen once more. When the two collided, the Persona lit itself ablaze, trying to make a repeat of what Flauros had done only with its whole body. From the way the Shadow staggered and failed to detach its attacker, it seemed to be working.

Junpei was overjoyed, waving a fist in the air as if to cheer his Persona on.

“That’s the way-!”

Suddenly, the Queen raised her scepter and summoned a whirlwind around the two.

The flames were easily snuffed out by the power, and with both of them being at the center of the attack, Hermes took the full force of the attack. Minako watched in horror as Hermes, limp and defeated from the wind, was tossed off like a bug on one’s hand. Its body dissolved into blue light when it hit the ground before fading to nothing.

Junpei lowered his Evoker, staring blankly at where his Persona had just vanished. “No way, I thought it was weak to fire.”

“We’ve just gotta keep trying!” Minako handed Mitsuru off to the now stunned teen. “Take her and get Yukari on healing duty. When you get back, focus on physical attacks.”

Junpei practically dragged his charge towards the stairs where the other girls had cowered for any form of shelter. “Hang on tight, Kirijo-senpai!”

Minako watched them retreat for a moment longer before returning her attention to the fight.

The Queen seemed to take a breather from the attack, despite the fire not leaving a scratch. On the other hand, the King finally grabbed Nona and slammed the Persona against the ground. Her graceful form was bent in odd directions and looked to have been thoroughly defeated, like a doll being discarded for breaking too easily. Just like Hermes, Nona vanished. The King stood watching on as if perplexed by the idea of something simply going away in a flutter of blue.

Frost began to form around its hand as it looked back up at its targets, no longer interested by his latest kill.

However, a new idea popped into Minako’s head.

Ice, could that be the key to this monster's defeat? Would it be that cut and dry?

“It’s gonna have to do,” she told herself, warmth gathering in the sea of her mind until it exploded with the crack of her Evoker. “Pyro Jack!”

A tiny, pumpkin-headed Jack Brother bounced to life with a lantern in hand and cape fluttering with its wild movements. With limited energy to spare, Minako ran the risk of making larger summons without knowing the trajectory of the battle, wasting precious energy in the process. Relying on small yet effective Personas would be the smarter option in weeding out changing weaknesses.

“Okay Jack, go for the King and hit ‘em hard!” Minako pointed straight ahead so the Persona
locked onto the Shadow. “Do your best! Agi!”

Pyro Jack let out a wild cackle before flying top speed ahead. As it sped off, it grabbed his pointy hat to keep it from falling off.

It seemed like all Jack Brothers had an affinity for getting too excited to fight.

Once it hovered above the King’s head, it danced around while dropping car-sized balls of fire. The King flinched away where they made contact with its body. Burn marks began to appear and it swayed dangerously when they landed near its feet. The unsteady movement worsened as it tried to hit Pyro Jack out of the sky. In its haste to dispatch the Persona, the frost extinguished and the King dropped it sword.

The plan worked.

Minako held her Evoker close to her chest as the smoke an flames filled the lobby. Spiritual strain settled in her bones, making it difficult to keep up a consistent attack or breathe properly. Her legs began to tremble the longer she kept up her assault.

However, there was no way she could let the Shadow win.

Not again.

Pyro Jack squealed and started increasing the severity of the attack. More and more flaming balls caught onto the King’s armor, its cape, and its head. Soon enough, it was difficult to see the two through a thick cloud of black and flailing arms.

“Minako-san, look out!”

Fuuka’s voice entering her mind caught the field leader off guard.

“What the-!?“ She covered an ear to help block out the shrieks of the King. “What was that-!?“

Another harsh wind caught Minako by surprise, only this time, no amount of will could stop her from getting knocked over. She hit her shoulder hard enough to lose focus on keeping Pyro Jack manifested and felt the Persona return to her.

The Queen, she forgot to pay attention to the Queen!

“Fuuka-ch-ack!” Debris got inside her mouth when she tried to speak. Minako threw a hand over her mouth and tried to sit up, a difficult task when her other hand still clung to her Evoker, fearing it may be blown away by the wind.

Suddenly, something braced Minako from behind, keeping her low to the ground. A pair of scrawny arms wrapped around Minako’s waist to keep both her and the mystery person from pulling apart.

“Just hang on tight! It’ll be over soon!”

That voice!

Minako flipped herself around to come face to face with Yukari, her bow and quiver discarded, a concerned frown etched deep into her features. The wind made her strawberry blonde hair look more like a bird’s nest than an actual style.

How did she manage to navigate the perils of the battlefield with a bad leg? Why was she back in
the battle in the first place?

“What’re you thinking! Your leg-!”

"Forget about the leg!” Yukari grabbed Minako’s shoulders. “Sorry, but we can talk later!” She forced both of them to duck, throwing her lithe body over the oldest Arisato’s own. “Get ready! Here it comes!”

What was coming?

Minako’s question was answered when the crack of an Evoker went off. A bitter chill had made the air almost too hard to breathe, mixing with the dust and soot to create an almost choking environment.

Was the King making another attack or was this something else?

No, it had to be something else. This cold was far more concentrated, deliberate even. No Shadow had the ability to make such an attack, especially one that passed the girls by with only minimal exposure.

“So cold!” Yukari shivered but remained in place. “Please hurry!”

Moments later the wind died down and with it, the spread the chill that threatened to cause the girls harm.

Yukari lifted her head as soon the coast seemed to be clear. “It worked!” she exclaimed and clambered to her feet. “Mitsuru-senpai’s no pushover, that’s for sure.”

“Kirijo-san?” Minako asked and turned to the Shadows.

The Queen was now encased in a block of ice. Its arms, raised in triumph, let go and dropped the golden scepter which now laid at its feet. The work was far beyond anything that Minako or Minato had accomplished with their own ice savvy Personas, but was that really surprising when they both specialized in other areas?

“She’s not going anywhere soon.” Mitsuru appeared in front of the other girls with Evoker drawn and rapier at her hip. Her black jacket had been tied around her waist, one of the sleeves shredded to ribbons. “Be ready, I doubt my attacks will be of use a second time.”

Minako flanked Mitsuru, worried that she may fall again. “You shouldn’t be out here. What about your head? And your arm?”

“I got it handled,” Yukari said. “Don’t forget, I’m a great healer. My wind attacks are useless against these Shadows but I can still support everyone until we can find a weakness.” She gave the seniors a curt nod. “So, anyone got an idea on how to beat these things?”

Minako turned to where she left the King. Junpei and Akihiko started switching between fire and physical attacks, gaining some ground little by little. It was difficult to gauge how much energy the boys had left in their systems but if there had to be a guess, their limits were being pushed to the edge. They weren’t as stamina rich in summoning their Personas in such quick succession so there was no telling when they would finally crash and burn.

The ice surrounding the Queen began to crack. A luminescent wheel that the group had never noticed before circled the Shadow, rotating faster by the second. Steam rose into the air and water was running down to the floor.
Fuuka remained hunkered out near the stairs with no desire to use her Evoker. Even if she did, it would be insane to ask a newbie, with no awareness of their powers, to cast themselves into battle.

If only they had Minato with them, it would make spreading their forces so much easier. . .

But help wasn't coming, that much Minako understood.

No, they had to keep up their attacks and pray something stuck.

There was no more time to think.

“Let’s keep switching back and forth with our attacks,” Minako announced and stepped away from the other girls, getting ready to assist Junpei. “I’ll get Akihiko-san to help with this one! Try using physical attacks until I get him!”

Mitsuru and Yukari squared up with Evokers at the ready. Io was the first to be summoned, engulfing them in yellow light to boost their weakened bodies.

Minako nodded and zeroed in at the task in front of her. The sounds of a new fight raging on only spurred her feet to move faster, even if her lungs had taken enough abuse for one night. She bounded across the room to the boys.

Junpei looked worse for wear when she approached, hat askew on his head and jeans ripped from a few nasty falls. Akihiko tossed his blazer aside and fought in only a red, long-sleeved shirt. Both of their Personas were summoned and pounding into the King without restraint. Hermes seemed to be the only one of the two that made even a semblance of progress while Polydeuces only smashed into the Shadow like a wrecking ball.

Minako drew her Evoker to help alleviate some of that burden. “Let’s go, Nona!”

With her spear raised, Nona jumped above the King’s head and came down hard enough to knock its sword away. The Shadow buckled under the attack but somehow remained standing, Nona clinging around its thick neck for dear life.

Minako came to a stop between the two boys. “We’ve gotta keep hitting them with everything we’ve got. There’s nothing else we can do.” she said, turning to them both. “I need Junpei to stay here and help me with fire attacks. Better to exploit this weakness before it becomes immune.”

Junpei tipped his hat, broadsword long discarded as it had no use in the fight. “We’ll have ‘em dead in no time!”

“I hope so,” she then turned to Akihiko, “I need you helping Kirijo-san and Yukari. The Queen hasn’t seen lighting attacks yet, so don’t hold back.” She could feel her heart drop. “And whatever you do, protect them. They’re in no shape to fight or protect themselves.”

Akihiko nodded. “Don’t worry ‘bout it.” He threw Minako one last glance before carrying out his orders. “Don't die.”

Minako heard him start to run towards the next fight. Broken stone crunched like leaves in fall as
he made his way to whatever lay in store.

“... You too.”

Her mind blanked out as she and Junpei charged headfirst into the fray.

The way behind them was covered in smoke.

The point of no return.

The two children, still walking, still stumbling along the road, an hour gone by and nothing changed.

Flames.

Metal.

Blood.

Silence.

Repeat.

The boy continued to wail, holding onto the girl as if she might disappear. A nasty gash disfigured his shoulder and would certainly leave a scar, but his tears were shed from a different kind of pain.

"Momma! Pappa!"

Flames.

Metal.

Blood-

The girl nearly tripped. Over what, she could not bring herself to look. Her gaze focused on the way ahead, trying to plan where to go next.

Flames.

Metal.

Blood.

Silence.

Repeat.

The boy let out a gut-wrenching scream.

The girl tried to walk faster, drag the boy harder, hoping he might raise his head from staring at the ground.

"Don't look, Minnow. Not again..." she said.

The boy continued to scream.
And forward they went.

Flames.

Metal.

Blood.

Silence.

Repeat.

“We’re losing ground!”

“Help me, Io!”

“Ice won’t work anymore!”

Minako swore that, in her adrenaline-fueled blackout, that the others were yelling from the other side of the smoke wall.

"Don't look. Don’t look." she said.

And kept fighting.

The girl stared out at a sea of red, running dirt-caked fingers through the boy’s hair. Silent tears mixed with blood, dripping down his chin and staining his new school clothes in the same, ugly shade.

Would help arrive by boat?

By ambulance?

Police car?

On foot?

At all?

“Kirijo-san and Takeba-san are down!”

“This isn’t good!”

“We have to retreat, Minatan!”

There was no retreat when the King still blocked the way out.

“Unicorn!” Minako kept summoning whatever Persona she hadn’t tried yet.

It may be a foolish endeavor, but what else could she do?

Exhaustion finally claimed the girl's tiny body, gravity doing the rest as she collapsed.
The boy followed suit, clinging to the girl and falling into her waiting arms. He continued to cry.

And cry.

And cry... Then nothing.

The boy passed out. He sobbed himself into it.

The girl saw no reason to resist anymore.

Her eyes drooped.

And then they closed.

Just barely, both of their tiny hearts continued to beat.

One minute, they had been bombarding the King with fire. The next minute, the Shadow surrounded itself in that god-forsaken circle and went on the offensive.

“Hermes!”

Junpei’s Persona went for another assault on the King on behest of its summoner. It was easily stopped and swatted away like a fly. Hermes went sprawling across the lobby before landing with a heavy thunk, too far away for its form to be maintained. As it collided with the ground, it exploded into blue sparks and vanished once again.

“Damnit...” Junpei finally toppled to the ground, clutching his chest and wheezing from the smoke that had been trapped inside the lobby. His Evoker went skittering out of reach and impossible to grab at a moment’s notice. “We’re gonna die here.”

However, if one person was still standing, nothing was truly lost for good.

“We can’t give up! Not yet!” Minako came to Junpei’s side and ducked under his arm. While trying to stand him back up, she used a free hand to aim her Evoker for another desperate counter-attack. “Jack Frost!”

The Snowman waddled and bounced the short distance between itself and the enemy with fog forming with each shaky step. “BWAA!” Jack Frost cried and body slammed itself against the much larger King. Ice crystals spread out across the metal shell of the monster, threatening to encase it completely if it wasn’t dealt with.

“Please work, please work,” Minako repeated.

The Shadow raised his sword once more.

It plunged the blade through Jack Frost, stabbing itself in the process.

In a cry of anguish, the Persona, and the ice that it created disappeared.

The King stayed standing, sword protruding from its stomach, still alive despite the seemingly fatal wound.

Minako’s arm dropped to her side.
They failed.

Junpei’s body finally gave out. He slipped from Minako’s grasp and started to fall face first into the tile. The girl panicked and tried to grab him before he caused himself further harm, barely making it in time by catching an arm.

“Junpei-!”

A flash of gold from the corner of her eye.

The Queen was about to make another attack.

“. . . Do ya' think I’ll get a scar?”

“. . . I dunno.”

“Oh, okay . . .”

“. . .”

“Where’s mom and dad?”

“. . . Does your cut hurt?”

“. . . The nurse said momma's here. An' papa, too. I wanna see 'em.”

“. . .”

“The nurse said they're here so that means the doctor can fix 'em.”

“. . .”

“The doctor can fix anything. He fixed my shoulder. He can fix momma an' papa.”

“. . .”

The last thing she remembered was a powerful wind ripping her away from Junpei. Her body hit something hard and sharp as she went flying, her shoulder stung as if someone (or something) sliced it open.

The world spun when she finally came to a stop, and when she opened her eyes, colors swirling together like a Picasso painting doused with a bucket of water. Everything and anything moved across her vision, even if she knew that it was just an illusion created from being dizzy. Her legs refused to do so much as curl up into a ball; arms too fatigued to lift a feather.

Minako tried to lift herself off the floor but flopped back down when a high pitched ringing left her clutching her head.

Something slick made a muffled smack when her head was resting back down. A sharp, metallic flavor threatened to make her empty the contents of her stomach.

The only thing that came through loud and clear was the voices of SEES echoing in her eardrums.
“Come on and get up!”

“Can you hear us, senpai?!”

“Oh god, they’re going after her!”

“Damnit, move or you’re dead!”

“Someone save her!”

There was an ominous thumping before a looming presence blocked out the brightness of the lobby.

Minako dared to shift her head to see the two Shadows standing over her.

Their weapons poised for a killing blow.

Death had always seemed like a funny thing. Equal parts depressing as it was interesting to think of. It raised the big questions that would scare most yet fascinated Minako to no end.

How could a human soul be inside a body one second and disappear in the very same instant? What even was a soul: a ghost that inhabits a shell or something far more complex? Is there an afterlife or is the soul destined to drift in an endless void?

Death was a normal part of life. It was nothing to be afraid of as it came to all and was one of the few things all people could connect over. The passing of life was simply that, a fleeting moment in Earth’s history. It was normal.

However, as she lay there, unable to move and helpless to defend herself, all she could think about was how scared she was.

She wasn’t even eighteen.

She never learned how to apply for college.

She would never see her brother’s graduation.

She won’t be at his wedding.

She would never have one of her own.

Time moved forward and the glint of metal was coming straight for her. She shut her eyes tight.

A bright, white light filled her vision.

Warm hands grabbed her own.

Her final thought was of Minato’s angry scream.

“. . . Minnow.”

“. . . Minny?”
“...Mom and dad aren’t here.”

“...B-but the nurse said-”

“-I know... she wasn’t lying.”

“...”

“...”

“...Who’s gonna take us home?”

“...I dunno.”

“...”

“...”

“...I wanna go home.”

“...We can’t go home.”

At long last, Minato and Natsuki arrived at the gates.

The former knew better than to take Mitsuru’s bike into Tartarus and chose to leave it parked against one of the concrete walls. It would give him a chance to explain before Mitsuru murdered him with her nine-inch heeled boots and danced on the brain matter. Whatever good that would do, it was at least a better plan than appearing out of nowhere with engine a’blazing.

And from what Minato heard from his upperclassman, she was also a fan of knife throwing. He didn’t stand a chance if he attempted to make a getaway via motorized vehicle.

So, despite feeling tired, the pair climbed the familiar hill towards the entrance.

“It looks so much creepier up close, and a lot bigger too,” Natsuki remarked, letting her driver take the lead. Her teeth chattered, definitely not used to the odd dips in temperature that annoyed just about anyone who experienced the Dark Hour on a regular basis. “You guys really fight those Shadow thingies in here? How do you NOT get lost all the time?”

Minato shrugged, hands in his pocket and earphones safely hung around his neck. “We’ve got a navigator that makes sure we’re on the right track. She’s got a limit on her range but there’s also these...” He paused before giving up.

No matter how he worded it, it would sound stupid as soon as it left the mouth.

“Portals, there are portals on every floor. If we get too lost, we can hop right in and start over from a lower floor.”

Predictably, Natsuki snorted at the explanation. “Seriously? That’s some grade-A bullshit. I’m not as smart as you, but I’m not dumb enough to believe you guys teleport around like something out of a fantasy novel!”

Minato just wished FOR ONCE he could meet someone mellow, kinda rough around the edges, and not a complete loser. Boy, girl, dog, hamster: it didn’t matter. He would make them stay in his life even if he had to marry or adopt them.
Although, it would be easier just to go and get a turtle from the pet store. Now that’s an animal that knew what life was all about. Quiet. Slow. It was a match made in heaven.

For now, he was stuck listening to a walking perfume department jabber on and on about meaningless crap.

Minato let out a long sigh. “Forget I said anything, let’s just walk in silence.”

“That’s no fun.” Natsuki crossed in front of him, walking backward so they could speak face to face. “I think you’re kinda funny, acting all cool when you’re actually plotting everyone’s death. Maybe we should go out sometime-”

“I don’t date girls with dye jobs that are worth more than my violin.”

The girl scoffed yet didn’t seem to be offended, falling back into step beside him. “Second thought, I’ll take a hard pass. I don’t date guys who have better taste in hairstyles than me. That just screams gay.”

First his sister, now Natsuki. Why did the whole world seem to think Minato liked the same sex?

“I’m not gay.”

“Sure you’re not. Did you polish those Oxfords yourself or do they magically clean themselves?”

Minato glanced down at his shoes, shiny and free of buffs that would wear out the leather exterior. They had been a gift from himself and cost a pretty penny and he wanted to keep them looking nice.

“By that logic, everyone in the military’s a sprite. I want these to last, so I take care of them. Anything else ya’ wanna say about my appearance?”

“Well, since you asked-”

Natsuki suddenly stopped walking. Her words cut off just as promptly.

Minato took a step or two ahead, waiting for her to continue berating him. When she refused to move from her stalemate, he finally started to slow down, turning back to see what the hold-up was. “Hey, keep moving. With an attitude like your’s, the Shadows will be on us at any second.”

Natsuki was pale as a sheet and staring straight ahead. Her mouth was agape as if she had seen a ghost.

“Moriyama?” Minato took his hands from his pockets and started towards her slowly. “What’s the big deal, huh?”

She raised a shaking finger past him.

“I-is that-”

Minato stopped, feeling his heart take a dip into his stomach. He turned to where she was pointing.

They had been so engrossed in their spat that he had forgotten to look where they were going. The slope of the hill evened out and they could now see the archway that led inside the transformed the school. Trees had been stripped of their leaves and beckoned them towards whatever the mysterious tower had in store.
Everything seemed to be as it always was. It should have been just like any other night, quiet but with an air of caution.

It all seemed to fall apart when Minato saw the smoke coming from the entrance of Tartarus.

Fragments of memories long packed away came back to the surface of his mind. Fire reaching for anything to burn, a starless sky filled with nothing but black, and a moon so old and grey made prominent appearances. It had taken years for him to control when those images could come and when they could go, years to forget how vivid they had been even months after the accident took place.

“No,” his companion gasped. “Isn’t everyone still in there!?”

But now, what struck him most was that the wrong girl stood outside the blaze with him.

“Shit!” Minato drew his Evoker without thinking, motioning for Natsuki to take his other hand. “Listen to everything I say or else we’re both dead meat, got it?”

Natsuki was stunned for a moment before gathering her earlier bravado. She grabbed his hand and gave him a sharp nod. Her grip was tight, palms sweaty from the stress, but still determined in her posture to continue forward. “If I can help save Fuuka, I’ll do anything!”

Minato refused to waste his breath giving a pep talk, pivoting on his heel with sights trained on the blurry smoke. He could have cared less when the others- when his sister- was possibly in danger.

“Then hang on tight!” He charged ahead while dragging Natsuki behind him. She did her best to hang on, practically skipping and stumbling along rather than running. However, it seemed like no matter how fast she shuffled along, no matter how strong Minato was, they were just too slow. “Can’t you speed up a little!? It’s like dragging a lead block with Prada!”

“Excuse me!” Natsuki said in between labored breaths. Her stamina was not at all up to par with his. “We don’t ya’ stop complaining and keep your eyes on the road!? Fuuka needs our help!”

At least she had enough spite to count as courage. It would serve her well if they were about to face an enemy much more fearsome than an angry Mitsuru. He tugged harder on her arm.

“Then move it!”

“Do you think they’ll let me keep Kuro-chan?”

“They have to, it’s your violin. I’ll bite their fingers off if they try!”

“. . . But they took mom’s piano. She said it was our piano, now it’s gone.”

“. . . I don’t need it.”

“But that was ours-”

“-I don’t need it anymore, Minato.”

“. . . Okay.”

“. . .”

“. . . Are you sad?”
“. . . No.”

“Why?”

“. . . I still got you.”

The smoke from before had begun to clear from the entrance as they got closer and closer. Pillars of smog mixed in with the inky sky, and yet still seemed to obscure whatever was going on inside.

Voices, on the other hand, carried through the air and were much easier to pinpoint. Each one built on one another and were hard to discern over a series of loud thumps, but some choice shouts were able to reach Minato.

“Come on and get up!”

That was Junpei. Why did he sound so frantic?

“Can you hear us, senpai!?”

Yukari was calling for one of the seniors.

Was someone knocked out?

“Oh god, they’re going after her!”

Mitsuru was still awake.

She couldn’t mean . . . could she?

“Damnit, move or you’re dead!”

Akihiko never sounded more alarmed.

“Someone save her!”

An unfamiliar voice came through his head.

“That’s Fuuka! She’s still in there!” Natsuki suddenly picked up her pace. “I heard her voice! It was so clear, but where is it coming from?”

Fuuka was a telepath. She had the potential to summon a Persona. Why hadn’t anyone figured it out, especially if they could predict that two transfer students had that power?

That was a question to save for later. Minato’s main priority was to keep moving forward as quickly as possible. If his hunch was correct, which was more than certain at this point, there was still one person unaccounted for in this line-up.

And if his gut was telling him anything, this person was in peril.

“Careful of the stairs!” Minato warned as they skipped steps up to the entrance. The stench of ash and dust nearly choked him but covering his mouth and squinting his eyes allowed for at least some protection from the elements. Natsuki did the same. He felt her twist for a moment before finding her direction once again.

They reached the top of the steps in no time. The air thinned of debris, giving them both a chance
to cough up any stray particles and take a few deep breaths. Even then Minato pressed for them to run through the archway entrance.

“Please be okay. Please be okay,” he repeated and let go of Natsuki’s arm once they crossed the threshold.

However, what he saw warranted a pause to take it all in.

Standing in the middle of the carnage was a pair of Shadows, larger and meaner looking than anything SEES had faced before tonight. The size had even surpassed the one on the monorail just a month ago, dressed in King and Queen attire to add to the list of differences. They even held props just to add insult to injury: a sword and scepter respectively.

Minato felt sick just thinking about the damage they caused.

“Jesus Christ.”

How was he supposed to help when the others had tried and failed?

The others seemed to notice that Minato had arrived with a guest. Mitsuru was the first to spot them, and when their eyes met, it was the first time he had seen the leader frightened.

“What are you doing, Arisato! You were supposed to keep that girl safe!”

“What the hell!?” Akihiko chimed in next. “What were you thinking!?”

“Natsuki!? Natsuki! Get out of here now!”

“Fuuka?” Natsuki whipped her head around, paused then violently shook Minato’s arm. She pointed toward the tower entrance near the back of the lobby, a smile threatening to break her face. “I see her! She’s alive!”

Sure enough, on the steps was a girl with teal locks and a winter uniform. They were too far away to see or hear her clearly, though it didn’t matter, her face was that of shock and horror.

“Please go! You can’t die here!”

“Fuuka!” Natsuki seemed to forget that there were monsters that could kill her or worse just feet away. She started to move away from Minato, almost in a trance-like state. “Fuuka I-!”

Minato caught her before she took off through the lobby. He dragged her close and pointed at the King and Queen who stood absolutely still. It was a wonder why they weren’t attacking, but he doubted it would last for very long. “What happened to ’doing what I say?’”

Suddenly, the Shadows began to move. Minato dared to see where they were heading.

Bile rose in the back of his throat.

They slowly approached a battered and beaten Minako, laying on her side without any signs of being able to get up.

Her Evoker was nowhere to be found but what good would it be if she couldn’t even sit up and face the enemy?

One of the sleeves of her orange sweater torn open to reveal a gash running over her shoulder.
Minato shoved Natsuki to get her feet moving. “Run, they're not looking!”

“W-wait, you’ll be killed! Minato-san!”

Minato didn’t even spare her a glance as he took off running across the rubble. That stretch of distance between himself and Minako seemed like an eternity. Every step counted for something, however small it was, while each fumble meant losing precious time that could never be returned. Each miscalculated footfall would set him back and the Shadows seemed to close in even faster than before.

If he had just gone on the mission, rather than throwing a temper tantrum, he could have been there.

A family was supposed to keep each other safe and he failed.

Was his pride worth seeing his sister in such a sorry state?

Was this how she felt when he almost died in the alleyway?

The Shadows now stood over her. Their weapons raised slowly as if to taunt them all; as if to say they had won the battle. All that was left to do was to kill the head of the snake and parade it around like a trophy.

Minato sprinted faster, thoughts racing through his head.

This year had thrown them for a loop, there was so much more to do and a lot at stake. Still, nothing changed in how Minako handled life’s curveballs.

She took on the role as a field leader. She smiled even when put through Hell and back. The glass was never half empty nor full. The siblings were glad to have water in the first place, and that water just so happened to be clear and fresh.

But what had Minato done?

He slapped the glass away.

Yes, his sister was infuriating. Yes, she could be more of a pest than help. Yes, she never told him what she was feeling to spare him from taking on her burdens.

All of it was true but fighting was not the answer.

After everything they had been through, this could not be the end.

The glint of metal went hurtling towards Minako.

She still remained unmoving.

It was now or never.

Minato dove in front of the sword and rod just as they were about to make contact. His Evoker was already trained on his temple, every fiber of his being, every Persona inside him screaming out one thing. It swelled within him until he took in one last shuddering breath. He forgot to blink but it was worth seeing what he was about to bear witness to.

Don’t run away.
“Let’s go, Orpheus.”

Orpheus appeared at the last second, stopping both weapons from crushing the siblings. There was a loud clang of metal meeting the Persona’s sturdy lyre and a grunt of effort at the power of the mighty swing. Somehow Orpheus was able to act as a shield between the Shadows and the two fools who called themselves family.

With a loud cry, Orpheus pushed back on the pair, causing them to fall over. They were pinned beneath the far superior strength of the Master of Strings and weren’t going anywhere soon.

With the royal pains taken care off by his trusty partner, Minato turned back to his sister.

Upon closer examination, the gash on her shoulder was not as drastic as he thought. Looking under the heavy material of the sweater the cut was a shallow one. It was nothing a healing spell and time couldn’t fix. Her black eye was starting to fade as well. He hadn’t noticed it since the meeting with Mr. Ekoda but it was already starting to look half-decent. Give it a few more days and it would be like nothing had ever happened.

Bottom line: she was breathing.

Minato sighed, slipping his hands into Minako’s. He shook from the adrenaline rush, felt like he was going to throw up, but only wanted one thing in the whole world.

“Get up.”

The noises of battle vanished.

“I need my sister.”

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“. . . Will we ever see them again?”

“One day. . . just not now. They’d be angry if we went to Heaven too early.”

“. . . But I miss them.”

“. . .”

“. . . Will you go to Heaven before me?”

“. . . I hope I don’t.”

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Minako’s hands tensed up in his.

At first, she could only groan with a pained expression twisting her face.

“Sis?” he asked, lightly shaking her. “Hey, up and at’em. I’m not dragging you back to the dorm like a princess.”

There was a slight shift.

Another noise of discomfort.

Finally, a pair of crimson eyes opened and immediately looked up at him.
“W-what’d you say-?” She went moon-faced as soon as she realized who he was. “Minato- but how-?”

Before she could finish, Minato was already hugging her as tightly as he could, something he hadn’t done in a long time.

The same eyes that always watched his back would not be closed forever.

He still had his sister.

They were together again.

“Hey now, easy on the shoulder.” Minako protested but didn’t pull away. Instead, she rubbed his back like she had done when they were still children. It was gentle, warm, and accepted, even if it seemed childish. “If I didn’t know any better, you were actually worried about me, for once.”

Minato smirked, reveling that her sense of humor remained, even after getting beaten to a pulp. “Maybe next time you’ll listen to the guy who got the highest score in his class.”

He could practically hear her smile dropping into a frown. “Ya’ got third in your grade, nerd. Come back when you make Valedictorian.”

“So next year?”

Another sigh escaped her as she pulled out of the hug. As predicted, not a smile to be seen, not even an annoyed one. “Next time, just leave me to get squashed-”

Their moment was broken when Orpheus let out a cry of pain.

They both looked towards the noise only to find the two Shadows standing over a glittering cloud of blue being swept away into nothing. A luminescent circle with strange, multi-colored symbols spun around each one, gaining speed until breaking apart. Both of them seemed to be unharmed despite a brutal beatdown by Minato’s most reliable Persona.

And they seemed to be angry about not killing anything.

“Dangit-” Minako attempted to get on her feet, swaying slightly before Minato offered an arm. “Those Shadows are immune to our attacks after we use them. It’s some kind of passive defense, like a chameleon changing its skin.”

A foe that could change to repel anything that came its way. No wonder they were able to wipe out SEES so quickly, all they had to do was adapt then heal before a new weakness was found.

Minato turned to Minako, offering his Evoker. If this was a war of attrition, then they would need to conserve their energy as much as possible.

“Maybe we should stop talking and start fighting.” he said. "We've got a long way to go."

She didn’t need a second reminder. Minako took the Evoker and aimed for her head, understanding that their reunion could wait.

If they won, there would be plenty of time to get their feelings out.

Fuuka watched in horror as Natsuki ran across the room towards the stairs. The Shadows were preoccupied with one of the monsters that a newcomer had summoned. It was a stroke of luck he
arrived just before anything terrible could happen, saving Minako-senpai’s life without blinking an eye.

However, he brought Natsuki to this terrifying place the others called Tartarus.

Even after everything that happened.
Even after all the bullying.

Natsuki deserved to live.

“Please Moriyama-san, I’m begging you!” There was no question she was reaching her above all the noise. Somehow, she knew that her strange ability was still active, despite not knowing how to turn it off. “It’s not safe here! You’ll die!”

“I don’t care! I just don’t wanna hear it anymore!” Natsuki’s voice was vehement, the girl still running to the stairs where Fuuka coward in fear. The blonde stumbled over a broken tile but stayed on her feet by some small miracle. “I’m not leaving without you! Not until you hear what I have to say!”

What was so important that someone like her would risk life and limb just to say to someone like Fuuka?

“ Heads up everyone! They threw something!”

Fuuka heard Minako’s warning and felt the movement of the Shadows, looking away from Natsuki to a car-sized stone that was hurled by the King across the large room. It resembled a comet with a tail of gravel instead of fire and precious metals. There was no doubt the target was her foolish classmate, the only person besides Fuuka who had no means of protection.

With her back turned, Natsuki couldn't see it coming.

“Natsuki!” Fuuka screamed at the top of lungs, a futile attempt to warn her.

In the nick of time, the slim monster that belonged to Junpei Iori appeared. With amazing velocity, it caught the rock midair and drove it into the ground, creating a cloud of dust and flying pebbles.

“Gotcha, you son-of-a-gun!”

One gunshot went off. Fire exploded soon after.

“Nice catch!”

Another shot followed close behind. A lightning bolt flared up.

“Keep your head in the game, boys!”

A third sounded from across the room and it suddenly got chillier.

“We can’t lose here!”

A fourth shot brought about a chorus of cheers. Light covered each of the students who fought.

Soon, everyone jumped back in.

Fuuka sunk to her knees, tears to clouding her vision of the chaos.
Even if the others fought hard, the Shadows would continue to change, continue to evolve and evade their attacks. It didn’t matter if they had one more person, each shift was like clearing a slate. Every time, they needed to explore what worked and waste energy bringing their own monsters to life. Fuuka could feel how drained they were; she could see a light within them flicker with each shot.

If they continued to pressure that light, continue to test how much they could handle, they would run out of fuel and it would all go dark.

They would be just as powerless as the girl they came to save.

“It’s all my fault. . .”

They would die for a stranger.

“If only I could do something. . .”

Finally, she crumpled into a ball, weeping.

“There’s no way they can win. . .”

It was best to just accept her death and die quietly.

“I can’t take it anymore. . .”

“Fuuka!”

Fuuka stopped crying when someone flung their arms around the distraught girl, someone warm and gentle in touch.

“. . . N-Natsuki?”

Was all this happening or was it a dream?

“I-I wanted to tell you I’m sorry. . . I’m so, so sorry.” Natsuki’s voice came in soft hiccups.

“Everything I did to you, all of those terrible things, I-I wanna apologize for them all. I hurt you so much and I-I hate myself for doing them!”

Moriyama. . . sorry?

“I was always so jealous of you!” her classmate admitted through her sobs. “Teachers always tell me ‘Why don’t you hang out with her? She needs a friend to stick up for her’. They think you’re a wonderful person, that you can make me better just by knowing you. They know you’re a wonderful person.”

The teachers asked Natsuki to be her friend?

“But I wanted them to stop comparing a future high school ‘Has-Been’ to a genius. They thought less of me for being dumb, for being too petty to admit there’s more to life than just looking cool and being popular. Even my own parents said I should stop being such a bad person actually do something meaningful.”

How could someone like Natsuki feel less than anything? Was her self-esteem really that low all this time?

“So I bullied you. . . I bullied you because I was angry. Angry at everyone for thinking I was
nothing more than a failure. Angry that you had everything I ever wanted. Angry, vengeful, offended. . . and sad that I never had anyone meaningful. . . someone special I could call a friend.”

Her words trailed off.

Still, they resonated with Fuuka.

No one, not her teachers or her parents, ever said she was smart. They expected her to do well without questions. If she fell behind, they asked her why she was letting her future slip away. Never once did they stopped to tell her that she was doing a good job. They would never say what she was doing right, only pointing out what she wasn’t.

And she heard it all from the bully who was reminded every day that she was less than human.

It was Natsuki, the tormenter with guys wrapped around her finger who said such unprecedented things.

She envied a meaningless spec more than the people who should have cared.

“Y-you. . . think I’m special?”

Natsuki pulled away, not even caring to dry her flowing tears. Mascara painted her blush-caked cheeks and yet she smiled like a glowing sun.

“I know it’s late, but yeah. . . I do.”

Fuuka’s heart fluttered.

Her tears dried up.

For the first time in forever, she chose to believe in what she was told.

“I’m. . . special.”

Something within her called out like a fanfare.

*I have been awaiting your call, young one.*

Fuuka loosened the grip on her gun, no, her Evoker and nodded.

“Thank you, Natsuki. . .” She stood up in front of the other girl. “I know what I have to do now.”

*Though you are small and not meant for fighting, you must know one thing.*

The barrel of the gun felt cool as it pressed against her forehead.

*You are a mighty force to be reckoned with.*

“Fuuka, no!”

It was already too late; the trigger had been pulled. Fuuka didn’t dare close her eyes as the name of her Persona flashed through her mind.

*You may call me. . .*

“Lucia.”
A bright, blue light swirled around both her and Natsuki.

The noise of battle faded to a dull roar as they were encased in a glass-like dome, reinforced by a frame of elegantly shaped metal. Shades of pink fabric hung around the dome and acted as a dress of sorts for the body. To top it all off, though she could not see, Fuuka imagined a woman’s face covered in bandages, not needing to see with eyes alone. Blonde hair that was only slightly lighter than Natsuki’s own swished with the grace and majesty.

Two arms were outstretched to the battlefield, covered in satin gloves to match the rest of the ensemble that was Lucia.

All at once, Fuuka could see what was once hidden to them, the enemy naked with Lucia’s powerful vision at work.

“F-Fuuka? What’s going on?” Natsuki asked, standing beside her companion, grabbing her hand for comfort. “What are you doing?”

Everything was going to be okay.

“I know how to beat these things.”

Minako sensed the determination of SEES after the heroic rescue from her brother, but determination alone was no substitute for a solid strategy.

“These things just won’t die!” Junpei yelled as Hermes switched targets from the Queen to the King. The former became immune to his attacks so he came to help the siblings instead, letting Mitsuru take his place. “Do ya’ think we can just make a run for it and come back some other day!”

“I doubt it would be that easy!” Mitsuru answered him. “If we leave them to regroup for even one night, there’s no telling how much damage they could cause on the city! We have to finish this battle here and now!”

She was right. It was one thing when lower-level Shadows got loose, those things could only harm individual people outside of their coffins. These beasts could do all of that and more without having to put in much effort. All it would take was one poor citizen roaming around in the Dark Hour and the next minute, a building would catch fire.

Yukari backed everyone up with a strengthening spell to boost their attacks for a while. “We’ll never beat them if we’re dead tired. What we need is to find their weaknesses before they change again!”

“But how are we supposed to know that? We aren’t psychic!” Akihiko electrocuted the Queen and the glowing circle appeared, starting to spin and change.

“Don’t let that get us down, we’ve gone through worse!” Minako handed her brother’s Evoker back to him. “Let’s mix things up. Try hitting the Queen while she’s changing her immunity.”

Minato sighed. “Guess it’s worth a shot.” He pressed the barrel against his head. “Omoikane!”

A half-brain, half-octopus was brought to form, wriggling its tentacles sporadically at its chosen target. With an incoherent screech and blink of its many eyes, Omoikane sent a powerful shock at the Queen who seemed to be harmed despite trying to build an immunity.
“I don’t think it’ll work a second time, but now we have another trick up our sleeve.” Minato whistled to call Omoikane back to his mind. “Also, that guy creeps me out-”

“I can see the enemy’s weakness!”

Minako was cut off by Fuuka’s excited voice ringing in her head. Everyone else seemed to hear the declaration loud and clear, reaching for their ears as if swatting away a fly. Even better, there was a reason for her exuberance.

“Fuuka-san? But how?”

“Lucia, she gives me the power to scan an enemy with little to no delay. If I can read their weaknesses faster than they can recover, you’ll have no trouble defeating those Shadows while conserving approximately seventy-six percent more spiritual energy. I predict the battle will end within three minutes using this plan! Two and a half with Takeba’s support spells!”

Lucia? Since when was someone named Lucia brought into the tower?

“Woah, dudes! She summoned a Persona!”

Minako looked back at where Fuuka had been hiding. Just as Junpei had said, a feminine Persona clad in pink and white was standing at the ready. A clear dome acting as the main body was shielding Fuuka and Natsuki from being attacked in any way.

“Well, isn’t that something?” Mitsuru said in awe, still keeping up on attacking the enemy. “It seems like I won’t need to hold back as the navigator from now on!”

Minako couldn’t help but beam; this was exactly what they needed to go back!

“Just tell us what we should be using an’ we’ll do the rest!”

“Let’s see... they’re both weak to fire! Defense is down, so please be careful!”

“Gotcha covered!” Yukari gave them another boost to help be more resilient to any incoming spells. “Alright, you’re all set!”

“Let’s do it!” Junpei said as he and Minato raised their Evokers.

“Light ’em up.”

Together, the junior boys sent out their Personas, each taking on one Shadow each. The enemy didn’t seem to understand they had been caught and tried to show them away with their weapons.

“Oh no, ya don’t!” Junpei exclaimed. “This is payback for that wind spell!” Hermes was the first to make a move, taking on the Queen with speed and deliberate strikes of flaming wings. There was a harsh cry from the Shadow which only prompted Hermes to move faster, hit harder, and bring on the pain. It barely stood a chance against the Persona’s constant barrage.

Orpheus used its lyre as a shield to move in and grab the King by the neck. In no time, explosions covered the metal body until there was nothing but smoke.

When the Personas had their fill of the fight, the circles that signaled a shift appeared again.

“Lightning for the King and ice for the Queen. Attack power has been reverted, Takeba-san!”

“Now’s the time to strike back.” Mitsuru bemused with her Evoker poised to shoot. “Akihiko, are
you ready?"

“Is that even a question?” The senior stood back-to-back with the redhead, mirroring her position in his own way. “I’ve been waiting for this!”

Together, Polydeuces and Penthislea charged both of their targets at the same time. Ice shards and thunderbolts rained from above while trapping the Shadows in the middle of it all. It was barely five seconds before they were rolling on the ground in agony. The unison of moves showed years of practice in the field: polished and clean despite causing so much damage. It wasn’t hard to tell that both students worked well as a pair.

“Excellent!” Minako cheered them on just before another shift was in the process of beginning. There was still more fighting to go around. “What’re you seeing, Fuuka-san? What do we use next?”

“It looks like they’re both weak to light. Just a little more to go and you’ll have them on the ropes!”

It was Minako’s time to shine.

“That’s my cue.” She grabbed her brother’s Evoker already being offered and pictured Nona, waiting patiently to let loose one final time. “Mahama! Give it all ya’ got and don’t hold back!”

Her Persona sang when summoned, a ball of light forming at the tip of its golden spear. Once it had gained enough energy, Nona raised the polearm to the ceiling and in a quick flick of the wrist, sent the ball crashing into the downed Shadows. They were engulfed in the intense light for a good chunk of time, and when the light faded, they looked worse for wear.

The end of the battle was right there.

“Now’s your chance! They’re weak to all physical attacks!”

Minako held out her arm to the Shadows. Her brother quickly grabbed his Evoker back to summon for the last time that night.

“Everyone, ALL OUT ATTACK! Leave nothing behind!”

“Orpheus!”

“Nona!”

“Hermes!”

“Io!”

“Polydeuces!”

“Penthislea!”

Together, all of their Personas unleashed a powerful tidal wave of pure carnage. Sparks went flying, metal clashed with metal, dust was thrown into the air like a mushroom cloud. It was difficult to see anything that was going on most of the way through.

However, once their Personas were finished, they faded to blue, the dust settling in their wake. They had done a fantastic job well.
The King and Queen’s bodies remained for a second longer.

Soon enough, they too vanished in a smog of black and purple fog.

It was finally over.

“Woohoo, we actually won.” Junpei laid down on the floor, staring straight up at the ceiling. “Wake me up in, like, a few days.”

“Same here. . .” Yukari was sprawled out not far away from where her classmate was resting. “Is it too late to call in sick for a week or do you need special permission?”

“I don’t care. Just say I’m dead and when I come back to school, it’ll be pretty funny.”

“Hehe, that is kinda funny. . . but you’re still an idiot, Stupei.”

“Yeah. . . hey!”

Mitsuru found herself thoroughly amused at the junior’s exhausted banter. Despite having a mutual disdain for one another, Takeba and Iori always seemed to be on the same wavelength when it came to their emotions. It reminded her a lot of her and Akihiko’s relationship when SEES was only three members strong. To an extent, their relationship was still off-beat.

But where was the fun in being completely civil with your best friend?

“Looks like everyone’s still alive.” Speaking of the aforementioned best friend, Akihiko was at her side with Evoker still drawn. “Gotta admit, those two remind me of someone very familiar. Catch my drift?”

Mitsuru chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing.” She shifted her weight off her injured leg once the pain from before started to return. A throbbing sensation caused her to bite her cheek just to keep from wincing too much for others to notice. “We may need to make a visit to the hospital. All of us came really close to dying tonight.”

“Speak for yourself. You can barely even stand straight.” Akihiko easily noticed her pain and offered to bear most of her weight with an arm casually hooking around her own. “Just watching you makes my ribs hurt all over again. Ever heard of practice what you preach?”

“Hmph,” Mitsuru leaned into him and found the pain to be less of a bother with his help. “Touche, mon cher ami.” Good point, my dear friend.

Akihiko smirked and immediately fell into their usual French small talk.

“Ja sais, mon stupide ami.” I know, my stupid friend.

“Ce n’était pas très agréable. Que dirait Shinji?” That was not very nice. What would Shinji say?

“La même chose, et Vous le savez.” The same thing, and you know it.

“Il dirait probablement ‘abrutis’.” He would probably say ‘you dumbasses’.

At that final line, they shared a small bout of laughter.

Despite all their differences, there were still those moments you couldn’t help but care. If that meant cracking a rare joke after a hard-fought trial, it was worth the trouble.
“Speaking of abruti,” Mitsuru looked over to the stairs where Fuuka and Natsuki had come out of Lucia. “What do you think we should do with Moriyama? She obviously doesn’t have the potential but she’s seen too much. I can’t decide between contracts or expulsion.”

“Don’t worry, she’s not like us, so she won’t remember any of it. The good news is, she didn’t fall victim to the Shadows. I don’t even think she heard their call because of Yamagishi’s ability to shield others’ minds from danger.” He glanced over at her with a quirked eyebrow. “And do ya’ have to be so extreme? Even if she did remember everything, she seems like she can keep a secret or two.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “The former is the more ideal option, but. . . she’ll forget the Fuuka saved her life. She would forget that she was forgiven for all past transgressions.”

“I don’t know. . .” Akihiko trailed off. “Just look at them over there.”

At a second glance, the girls were giggling back and forth and leaning on each other for support, smiling like the world was in front of them. Tears of relief and joy stained their cheeks.

“I think she learned her lesson.”

Friendship was truly a complex mystery.

Almost as mysterious as to how Natsuki was able to get into Tartarus on her own.

No, she had assistance.

“Wait just a minute. . . I put the younger Arisato in charge of watching Moriyama.” Mitsuru remembered just the right persona to ask. Frustration manifested in an ugly snarl and she started to tug her human crutch along to find her next victim. “Odd how it took them less time than us to reach the tower.”

Akihiko used his free hand for a facepalm. “Abruti.”

Somehow, his sister had scooped him into another hug as soon as his back was turned. Minato wanted to pull away out of embarrassment at first but soon melted into the embrace. He hadn’t needed so much love since he was a little boy.

It was strange to think about yet nostalgic all at the same time.

Minako pulled away from him after she had her fill. “I don’t know what you’re doing here, but thank God you did. I thought I was a goner before ya’ swooped in like a Featherman Ranger.” Her gaze flickered to his chest. Some of the blood on from her injury stained his t-shirt. “Sorry ‘bout that. Looks like we’ll both need some new clothes after tonight. I still haven’t learned mom’s secret to getting blood out of cotton.”

Minato shrugged. “It’s just a shirt. I’ve got more than enough back at the dorm.”

There was a bittersweet grin on her face. An awkward silence passed between them.

The conversation they were both dreading was about to start.

Oddly enough, it was Minako who broke the tension with a sigh.

“. . . I’m sorry for yelling at you earlier. I don’t know why I got defensive, but I should’ve been honest about my feelings instead of hiding them from my own family.” She seemed to shrink in on
herself. “If I had just been a better sister, maybe you could’ve been here to fight beside us. Maybe we wouldn’t have been in this mess.”

Just as he thought, she felt just as guilty as him.

Still, he had to move forward to fix what they started.

“No, I shouldn’t’ve yelled at you.” Minato rubbed the back of his neck. It was one thing to think about an apology; it was a whole other ball game to articulate those feelings into words. “You only tried to explain yourself while I was the jerk. If I had been more patient, if I had just asked what was wrong, maybe we didn’t have to go at each other like we did.”

“Minato. . .” She patted his hand. “Can we just agree we both said something wrong? Playing the blame game will only make things worse.”

“I don’t regret anything I said, I meant every word. You’re too nice and let others treat ya’ like some kind of pariah. They don’t stop to think ‘what if she’s got problems too?’ All they care about is what’s on the outside and it pisses me off.”

Minako puckered her bottom lip.

“-I-” She drew another long sigh. “. . . You’re right, sometimes I hide things from others because I don’t wanna be a burden. I know it hurts me sometimes, I know I shouldn’t, but the way we were brought up . . . the way we were treated after the accident changed us.”

And the truth came out. It all somehow linked back to the day.

They could always trace their problems back to the night their parents died.

It had to stop.

Minato took both of her hands in his own. He wasn’t going to let that night dictate his life anymore.

It was time to move on.

“Promise?”

“Hm?” Minako cocked her head in confusion. “Promise what? To be more honest with one another?”

He bobbed his head from side to side. “That and . . .” The boy studied his now debris-covered shoes. It would take weeks just to get them back in tip-top shape. “. . . And to stop dwelling on the past.”

“Minato. . .”

Those words she had spoken, the pact they made as children came flooding back in picture-perfect memory.

“. . . Jus’ hang on. I’m here.” The girl wrapped her arms around him.

“Let’s do this whole ‘starting over’ thing for real. No more pretending, no more doubts about the future. We’re a team, even if it’s just you and me.”

“My lord. . .” Minako relaxed at the statement, beaming back at him. “. . . Don’t change too much. I’ll miss you acting emo.”
Minato rolled his eyes but felt relieved.

“Some things gotta stay the same.”

“Mmhm. . .”

_The boy shut his eyes and buried his face in her shoulder. “Don’t leave too.”_

Minato did the same thing he had done years ago, his face nuzzled into her uninjured shoulder. Up close, she smelled like charred paper with undertones of her lavender shampoo. It was a small gesture of weakness on his part but it was the only to get his point across.

“Hey, it’s okay. I got ya’ . . .” Minako automatically had her arms around him as if he were a turtle and she was the protective shell. Her nose poked at his head despite the thickness of his untrimmed hair. “What happened to the young man who hates hugs? Twice in one night? You’re kinda freaking me out.”

He closed his eyes to drink in the feeling of being six years old and sensitive to everything. If this year really was a brand new start, then it was time to stop acting like nothing mattered.

In the end, they both could use a fresh beginning.

“You're ruining the moment.”

“. . . You, nerd.”

_She gave him a tiny kiss on his temple. “I won’t.”_

Minato lost track of how long they stood there holding one another.

It didn’t matter, because he actually found peace in that pocket of time, even if it was for a little while.

“What do ya’ wanna eat tomorrow?” he finally heard his sister ask. It was muffled but the mention of food was enough to pique his interest. “I don’t feel like cooking so whatever restaurant you want, I’ll buy.”

The question caused him to finally stir and look Minako in the eyes. “Always ten steps ahead-”

“ARISATO!”

Both siblings went rigid when Mitsuru’s enraged yell nearly shook the foundations of Tartarus. It was unclear at first who the shout was directed at until the redhead came storming for them with poor Akihiko being dragged along for the ride. The others watched on as the seniors descended on the family of two like a hawk on mice.

“What did you do?”

“I stole her motorcycle.”

“So much for starting over.”

__________________________

_June 9th, 2009_

_What a night! Fights with family and a fight with Shadows, what next? Fights with Akihiko_
bare-fisted? I would be the first person to volunteer not to go first. My arms are too skinny to go one-on-one with him. Maybe Junpei would step up? Yukari? She seems like the type to enjoy a good competition.

On a serious note, Minato and I promised something important tonight.

We both have been struggling with the complete pace change of this year. One minute, we were just some orphans living life with only one vector going down. Now, I’m suddenly a leader and he’s a fighter on a mission. To say we’ve both been going about this the wrong way, especially when dealing with one another is an understatement.

Starting now, we both promised to treat this as a real beginning.

No more apathy and no more lies between us.

Who knows? Maybe I’ll get the hang of this leader thing. I’m actually starting to get a kick out of it! Give it a few months and maybe I’ll be cruising along.

That’s it for now,

Minako Arisato

P.S. Minato kinda died so now I get all his money now. Something about stolen property and a high heel boot. Sweets Shop, here I come!

P.S.S. This is Minato. I take everything back. My will was never even notarized. Quit telling God I’m dead.

P.S.S.S. This is Minako again. If I’m quiet enough, I can still hear his voice.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again, everyone. I really do enjoy doing this, even if I don't benefit, I love this fandom so much. Here's to about seventy more chapters!

I'll see you soon when I post part one epilogue.
The Room Where It Happens (1st Quarter Epilogue)

Chapter Notes

This is a really short chapter compared to everything else that’s coming up next time. Consider it a teaser for the 2nd quarter and a hint at the next chapter. We're gonna have some sibling fun when twenty-three rolls around!

Also, the toaster has popped.

Officer Kurosawa was called to the school as soon as the Dark Hour ended to fetch Fuuka and Natsuki to bring them to the hospital. The cover story was that he found them wandering outside the school in a daze. Natsuki just so happened to have been in the area and stumbled upon Miss Yamagishi by chance, calling Kurosawa who just so happened to be on duty that night.

As for the members of SEES, the returned to the dorm, treated their wounds and turned in for another day of school. There was complaining from the juniors (Yukari and Junpei mostly) about such a cruel schedule but their education could not be postponed.

Thankfully, Minako promised a victory dinner if they all gave tomorrow a try and the motivation to get a good night’s rest had been sparked. Even Junpei had bounded upstairs as quickly as possible to catch some shuteye. The things people did for a homecooked meal was baffling.

The only two people still up and working were Mitsuru and Akihiko. They called the Chairman once they were sure the others went to bed and by a stroke of good luck, he was able to come in for a debriefing session. Twenty minutes after the call, the three huddled themselves into the Operations Room and while everyone slept, they locked the door and got to work.

“I heard from Akihiko that you attacked Mister Arisato earlier tonight but I just couldn’t believe it. Did you really have to throw a punch at the poor boy?” Ikutsuki asked Mitsuru. “There was barely even a shift in the gas meter. Why such a violent reaction?”

The girl shrugged. “I don’t trust anyone with my things, especially people I only met a few months ago. Even those who have proven to be calmer than others.”

“I guess but please don’t kill your teammates. Persona users are a rare commodity in the market so we can’t risk scaring them off.” Ikutsuki chuckled to himself. “Well, at least Miss Yamagishi turned out to a great asset to your team tonight. I wondered why her potential was so unique compared to the other’s but this was a complete shock. I’m almost ashamed that we were about to discontinue the idea of her becoming a member of SEES.”

Mitsuru nodded along. “Yes, I do admit I had my doubts about recruiting her before this incident. It’s relieving to know that she could still be of use to our operations and free me up to join the field team.”

Akihiko listened quietly since they had begun the impromptu meeting. Now that he stepped down from his leadership position, all major decision making was left up Mitsuru and Minako, freeing him up to train and fight on the frontlines. He would still attend these sessions between the veterans and Ikutsuki but never found the heart to get involved when they started talking logistics.
However, something was just not sitting right when they brought up the issue of recruiting Fuuka Yamagishi.

Sure, they had discussed the topic since her name cropped up in some hospital files. Ikutsuki entertained the idea of her joining once it was confirmed she had the potential, but the way they spoke about it, as if they forgot she was a human being. If calling her gift a ‘commodity’ wasn’t enough, then doubting her usefulness was the icing on the cake. If she hadn’t been under their careful watch the past month, her getting sucked into Tartarus could have gone unnoticed much longer than it had. There was no telling what would have happened if they had decided to pass her off as just another student.

They also chose to omit the existence of Fuuka’s power from the others. It was a decision that was, in Akihiko’s opinion, rude at best and downright insulting at worst.

At least Minako could have been informed; she was their field leader and the oldest of the rookies. Her input could have been valuable in what to do. Her track record had been impressive when it came to working with the others and would no doubt have served them well if given the chance.

Minato, Junpei, and Yukari also risked their lives to save this girl. They had gone along with his risky plan all for a person who they had never met or heard of until a few days ago. Heck, they went out of their comfort zone, under Mitsuru’s watch, and behind the Chairman’s back just to gather intel on her disappearance.

If that was not proof enough of their willingness to be a productive member of SEES, what was? Did they not deserve to know that she was on their radar for some time? Did they not deserve to know everything else that Mitsuru, the Chairman, the Kirijo Corporation were hiding?

“Ahem,” Akihiko finally cleared his throat to catch the others’ attention. “Can I say something? You’re not gonna like it, but it needs to be said.”

Mitsuru was talking mid-sentence but stopped immediately at the request. “What’s the matter? Is it about Yamagishi?”

He nodded, curt.

“We should’ve told the others about Yamagishi. It feels shady going behind their backs and getting new recruits without at least letting them know.” His gaze narrowed at the Chairman specifically. “The three of us know so much more about all this than they do. When are we gonna tell them the truth about the school? About what happened ten years ago? Why they were brought here in the first place?”

Both fell silent.

Ikutsuki let out a chuckle. “Well now, you’ve done some thinking these past few days. I’m impressed they you’ve come to trust your fellow students in this endeavor.” He shrugged, leaning back against the dashboard of the security consul. “However, we still need to play some cards close to our chest, Mister Sanada. It is still too soon to tell how they will receive such sensitive information.”

Akihiko felt a prick of frustration. “Is that just a fancy way of saying you don’t trust all of them yet? What about Minako-san? She’s got this team running better than I ever did. She’d be a starting point.”

“Akihiko,” Mitsuru stood up from her chair. “Where is this coming from all of a sudden? We
agreed before bringing in Takeba that some things were meant to be kept secret for the time being. They had all suffered so much, is it really our place to make things worse?”

They were using the same excuses again.

“That’s not the- it’s not about that.” Akihiko shook his head. “Why are we waiting? For them to put the pieces together? They have everything to do it and Takeba’s already suspicious. All it’ll take is one little push and we lose their trust for good.”

“Yes, but when that time comes, we’ll deal with it then,” Ikutsuki reassured. “For now, those four need to focus on school. I already plan to explain everything during the summer break. There will be enough time to process the information and answer any lingering questions on the matter. Right now isn’t, well, right.”

“But-”

“I understand your concerns Akihiko!” Mitsuru interrupted, arms crossed and prepared to strike. “I understand how you feel and I agree wholeheartedly, but this isn’t the time for fighting. Please, we’ll talk about this tomorrow when we’re rested and ready to make a choice.”

Akihiko opened his mouth to protest, however, he found him biting down on his tongue.

As much as he wanted to press the issue, the two seniors were in no condition for one of their infamous spats. They had enough fighting for one night.

Besides, this was a touchy subject for all of them.

He decided to give in to her demands, letting a sigh escape to help calm his nerves. Once a little more stable, he looked up to give Mitsuru a nod.

“Fine. . . but you know as well as I do what needs to be done. Secrets will divide us.”

Mitsuru returned the gesture.

“Mark my words, they will know the truth.”

“So she came barreling in like- WHOOSH!” Minako swept her arm through the air in a mock punch. “Then next thing I knew, Minato was on the ground clutching his face! I swear if Mitsuru wasn’t on our side, I’d surrender without battin’ an eye!”

Minato grumbled once she had finished her recount of how the redhead decked him in front of the entire team. He felt his cheek throb just remembering when her fist connected with skin. A small cut was covered with a small band-aid near his mouth; Mitsuru had been wearing a ring when she hit him. “I didn’t crash it. She acted like it was the end of the bloody world.”

Igor chuckled at his response, folding his hands together. “My goodness, the ways of women seem to allude you, young man.” The strange man glanced at Elizabeth who had been trying and failing to stifle her laughter. “You may want to consider forming a bond with an older lady. It would serve you well in learning how to handle more. . . female interactions with teammates. Might I suggest talking with your attendant from time to time?”

Elizabeth had stopped laughing at the mention of spending time with Minato. “Yes, I and Theodore have many ways the four of us can bond. Although we will be unable to help strengthen your abilities to fuse higher level Personas, we can offer rewards in exchange.”
Minato’s interest had been captured at the mention of an *exchange*.

“This is new,” he said before settling deeper into the cushions of the couch, “I’m all ears.”


“In a sense, yes.” Theodore chimed in, carrying a tray of hot drinks. “The two of us have always wished to see the world beyond the Velvet Room. There is so much that can be gleaned from studying the ways of human’s and learning your customs.” He stopped by the siblings and gave them each a steaming mug. “With such learnings, we can better serve and help grow your knowledge in the ways of our world. Think of it as pooling our experiences to create a better understanding between one another.”

Minako blew on her drink before turning back to the attendants. “But you guys look exactly like us, so what's holding you back?”

The two fell silent at the question, giving her a blank stare.

Minato always wondered about the nature of the Velvet Room inhabitants. Although they could communicate with fluently and they understood some basic concepts of humanity, there was a disconnection when it came to the finer points of culture. It made him question if they had even met other humans besides Minako and himself.

Not only that but the inhabitants were kept to the confined space of the room. If they were such powerful beings with skills ranging from creating God-monsters and predicting the future (to an extent), why had they never left to explore?

“So what you’re saying is that you guys wanna see our world but you need us around just in case?” he asked instead. He stirred his drink, a strong black coffee with a wooden stick Theo had provided. “That makes sense, I guess.”

They both nodded, but Elizabeth spoke for them.

“Indeed, we need you two as teachers to guide and show us what our books don’t say.” She bounced on her heels like a child waiting for ice cream. “Think of how exciting your world is with such interesting people, all different, all new and surprising! The possibilities of cultural enrichment are endless!”

Theodore seemed to be able to control himself better but still had a coy grin plastered on his lips. “If it’s not a bother, we only ask for short visits. They would take no more than a few minutes at a time.”

Igor cackled from behind his desk. “You both are just as entertaining as our guests.”

Minato looked over at his sister. She seemed to sense he was turning to her and was already face-to-face when their eyes met.

“It’d be a lot of fun. We can take ‘em to the mall, the ramen shop, and even the bookstore! I bet they’d love that one.”

“You’re the boss,” Minato answered and they turned back to the Velvet Room attendants. “Does tomorrow after school work for everyone? I don’t have practice and we need a day off from Tartarus.”

Elizabeth hummed a high tune.
“Then it’s what the human’s call ‘a date!’”

For the rest of their visit, the four-plus Igor discussed their plans for the next day, enjoying each other’s company after a hard-fought battle.
[Arcana Program: Functional]

[Paladin System: Standby]

[Conclusion: Code “Soul Phrase” still active, the mind is unharmed]

[Replaying last accessible battle log]

[“Help! Someone help us!”]

[Speaker: female, pre-adolescent, possibly in danger]

[“Momma! Papa!”]

[Speaker: male, also pre-adolescent, distraught]

[Conclusion: Save the speaker(s)]

[Warning: Payload Signal fading]

[Error: Speaker(s) Signal fading]

[Conclusion: Save the payload]

[Override: Transfer payload]

[Override: Save the speaker(s)]
[Override: Save the children]

[Report: Children saved]

[Report: Payload lost]

[Override: Forced shut down]
"Oiseaux de la plume"

Chapter Notes

Sorry for posting this after I promised some people it would be out last week! I caught a bad case of the stomach flu and had to miss class a few days. My fellow slaves— I mean friends in those classes taped the lectures for me so I could catch up on the work (give 'em a nice prayer!). That meant that the beginning of Part II had to wait a little bit so I could rest and recover from scrambling to get things done.

But how about some good news? I aced my finals and I'm checking out graduate schools! Pretty cool, huh? I can taste that doctorate already (*insert Patrick meme here where he licks something*). Anyway, with the winter break coming up, I'll be able to hopefully relax and post a few new chapters before the end of the year!

Hope ya'll are ready because here we go!!! We've got some social links, "steamy" full-moon missions, and a toaster coming right up!

Another day of school arrived on schedule, even if the members of SEES had all but turned into zombies as the sun came up.

Minako got up for her usual jog only to lay in bed for an hour, staring at the wall as her legs protested the very thought of being used. Akihiko had the same idea when they eventually ran into each other later that morning. He grumbled something under his breath about a "late night" and "no sleep," so they both let this one time slide. The dark circles under his eyes were comical sight, at least.

When she finally decided to get ready for the day with a hot shower and a quick breakfast, another event gave her a semblance of amusement. The juniors (somehow) woke up at the same time and created the first three-person bowling ball after Junpei tripped going down the stairs, taking out the others in kind. It nearly gave Minako a heart attack when Yukari blamed both of the boys for causing the accident before sauntering out the door.

Little did the archer know, she left her pink sweater behind at the base of the stairs.

They may have changed over to the spring and summer uniforms but that sweater was the girl’s staple fashion feature. Minato was nice enough to bring it to school with him. Junpei promised to buy Yukari a chocolate bar during lunch as an apology for his fumble.

Such wonderful kids Minako called her team.

Not everything was bad, though. The first class of the day was canceled for the seniors of 3-B, leaving them with an extra study hall to catch up on work. It was as if God had listened to Minako's prayers before they were even brought into existence!

However. . .

“Where’s Mr. Ekoda? Isn’t he supposed to be teaching today?”

“You didn’t hear? Ekoda’s in hot water!”
“Really!? What did he do?”

“I don’t know, but it must be serious.”

Minako removed her headphones for only half a second to catch a loud conversation from a few desks away. The ones talking were a group of girls, huddled close, as if that could keep themselves from causing a miniature scene.

“Sexual harassment maybe?”

“At least we get a study hall. I’m really behind on getting ready for finals!”

“Yeah, it is great! Excellent deduction, Sherlock!” A boy from the back of the room had looked up from his own group of friends to shout at the girls. “Now shut up! Some of us are actually TRYING to get some work done!”

Whatever happened next, Minako ignored. All she could hear as she turned back to her own work was a couple of random yells and obscenities being thrown back and forth. All she was worried about was right in front of her: translating a page of French passably.

It was true that learning new languages was somewhat of a specialty of her’s; she and Minato lived in America for a time when they were younger. Most everyone spoke English, despite the country not having an official language, so the adaptation was necessary to survive. Her brother had trouble on account of his age and spending most days at home. Their grandparents ended up translating for him whenever the four went out.

For Minako, it was like riding a bike. She never really forget once she had a firm grasp on the rules.

Now that she was older, picking up new languages became harder and harder. Not surprising but still a harsh reality, since this school required that the students take more than two language courses.

By a stroke of bad luck, every member of the senior class was forced to take French during their high school career and Minako was forced to start from the very beginning. Whenever asked to get up in front of the class, it took all her willpower not to run out of the room in embarrassment after a botched reading. She had never taken so many trips to the library for a single page of homework. Cheating on tests started to look more and more enticing as the bar went higher and out-of-reach.

If only she knew that was the case, she would have started way before transferring to Gekkoukan. It might not have done much, but at least she would look like less of an idiot.

Instead, Minako was left staring at half-baked notes and the instructions to the assignment, lost beyond words.

Translate the following excerpt from Osamu Dazai’s “No Longer Human.” Make sure to include proper accents and translation notes if a word has multiple meanings.

“I am convinced that human life is filled with many pure, happy, serene examples of insincerity, truly splendid of their kind-of people deceiving one another without (strangely enough) any wounds being inflicted, of people who seem unaware even that they are deceiving one another.”

How hard could it be to just look up the words in a dictionary and throw them together for pity
points? She had enough practical knowledge of the language to come up with at least a poor but readable translation.

But how was she to know if the words would work together in the first place? Meanings could change depending on sentence structure or even other words. Pronouns were also used so there would need to be a consideration in changing the masculine and feminine articles. Not all rules worked for all words.

Minako set her pencil aside to keep from throwing it at the nearest student and possibly taking their eye out.

Of all languages the school chose to teach, it had to be one that was spoken exclusively in two countries. What about something with a wide range of use? Like Mandarin Chinese? Spanish? Even Latin had more practical applications, a dead language at that!

All Minako could do was put her head in her hands. “Is this how it ends?” Shame welled up from deep within her heart. “God, where are you now? I need your help.”

What kind of help could she get? If only the juniors were taking French as well, that could have been a viable option, but that wasn’t the case. The juniors took English and only that language. Option two, going to her teacher for help might work but he had been expressly clear about students using other resources besides himself. It was supposed to “prepare them for the real world.” Did the guy not even know about how mentorship worked?

The only other idea she could come up with was a private tutor. Private, as in paying for one. Tutors didn’t exactly charge low rates either.

There was barely enough money in what little she and Minato received from their parent’s estate as it stood now. All other savings were shored up in three different accounts, managed by older relatives for ‘security purposes,’ but that was a fancy way of saying that they were not handing the assets over any time soon.

The accounts will be legally transferred to the siblings once Minako turned eighteen in November, and the rest of the cash put in their possession.

By then, it would already be too late.

“Konichiwa!”

What was she going to do?

“Kon-Ichi-Wa!”

This had to be some kind of bad omen.

“Camarade étudiant!”

Minako felt a light tap on her arm.

“Tu as lâché ça.”

Who was trying to get her attention?

A better question, what was this person saying?

The girl looked up from her moping to see her assignment being dangled in front of her face.
Minako followed where the paper was extended from to see a foreign-looking boy with the palest skin she had ever seen. His unnaturally blonde hair was cut slightly long but not enough to be considered too girly.

Had he been standing there the whole time?

What was he doing there in the first place?

When Minako didn’t respond, the boy continued.

“Est-ce que ça va? Tu as l'air bouleversée, étrange fille,” he said with a heavy accent, setting the paper down on her desk lightly. “Est-ce que Je peux Faire quelque chose pour aider?”

It was French, he spoke in French and that was just her luck. There was no mistaking the swooping vowels and use of rolling consonants.

“Um,” Her eyes darted around the room to see if anyone was looking at them. Perhaps it was just a group of people trying to play some kind of cruel and topical prank on her. When her search came up empty, she turned back to the waiting student and tried to be as polite as possible. “Have we met before? I don’t think-who are you?”

The student brightened at the question. “An’ she speaks!” He took both her hands in his own and pulled them close to his chest. “Ma dame, j'avais peur que vous soyez malade! Dites-moi, êtes-vous l'étudiant de transfert dont tout le monde parle? J'ai entendu dire que vous êtes tout à fait le personnage intéressant!”

Minako squealed at the sudden attack on her personal space. It was one thing to give no notice when going in for a high-five or handshake, but to grab them without asking, especially if they were strangers was too far. Even for someone like herself, personal boundaries existed for a reason.

If only she could keep up with what he was saying, maybe she could understand why he seemed so persistent in trying to talk to her.

“H-hey! What gives?” Minako tried to politely wriggle herself free from his grasp. When he refused to let her go, she looked him dead in the eye and mustered up whatever shred of intimidating looks she had in her arsenal.

“Hey buddy, I’ve got a younger brother with anger issues and nothing to lose. I’m not afraid to call him up here!”

“Gomen, transver student!” He seemed to get the message and released her. “Je suis désolé, je t'ai offensé? Je ne pouvais pas le dire parce que tu parlais si vite.”

Again with the French and sparing use of Japanese, maybe this was just some joke after all?

Was this all to humiliate her terrible use of the language?

Shadows in a giant death tower? She could handle it.

Keeping Junpei and Yukari from murdering each other in their sleep? Easy.

This moment of getting lost in translation? A death sentence.

Minako took a deep breath and shifted in her seat, facing the student. “Listen, I have no clue what you’re saying so for the love of God, do ya’ understand me?” She swallowed thickly. “I. Can’t.
Speak. French.”

The boy cocked his head to the side. “J’ai dit quelque chose?”

Finally, Minako could only shake her head. She was too tired from the battle the night before, too sore to move, and too out of it to care.

“Bebe, qu'est-ce qui se passe?”

As if brought in the wings of angels, a familiar voice came swooping into the situation.

Minako looked up from her despair to see Akihiko coming towards her desk, post-fight exhaustion etched deep into his face. Still, he was able to speak in his and Mitsuru’s fluent use of French.

“Akihiko-san! Bonjour, brave homme!” The French boy opened his arms to Akihiko and engulfed him in a surprise embrace, rocking them both back and forth. “Comment vas-tu? Je te jure, toute cette classe semble morte au monde aujourd’hui.”

It was even more surprising when Akihiko didn’t stiffen at the action.

“Il n'y a que moi. J'ai passé une Longue Nuit, des devoirs et des trucs.” Instead, he gave the mystery student a pat on the back before pulling away. “Ne vous inquiétez pas trop, tout le monde est toujours en vie.”

Whatever Akihiko had said, the boy laughed with a wink. “Peut-être que tu devrais abandonner les gants de boxe et devenir comédien, non? J'imagine que ma tante aimerait t'écouter parler!”

They both continued to chat while Minako looked frantically between them, trying to use the power of cognates to decipher at least a fraction of what they were saying. So far, all she could pick up on were a few nouns, an interjection, and maybe some sparse prepositions.

Once they finished their conversation, Akihiko seemed to remember Minako was still there and turned to her. “That’s right, no one told you about the exchange student yet.” He motioned to the blonde beside him. “Minako-san, this is Andre Laurent Jean Geraux from France, but everyone just calls him Bebe for short. He’s been in Japan since the end of the last school year as part of the language and culture immersion program.”

Bebe bowed to her. “My sincerest apologies, mon cher Minako-sama! I ‘ave a struggle grasping ze language of ze country, so forgive my rudeness. I should ‘ave known you were uncomfortable.” He straightened up and gave her a beaming smile. “I also forget zat I can be a bit- how you say-personal with my space. Please, do not be afraid to say someting about my behavior if you find it odd.”

Minako was shocked by his grasp of Japanese when all she heard before was French. It was endearing now that she knew he wasn’t trying to be condescending.

She couldn’t help but wave him off. “No, it’s my bad. You’re probably used to everyone being able to speak in the language.” Her gaze flitted over at the paper he picked up for her. All this time, he was just trying to do a kind act. “And you were being so nice, picking that up for me even though I got defensive. I’m the one who should be sorry.”

Bebe laughed and patted her on the shoulder. “Wakarimashta, you are zat transfer student, no?” His expression turned sympathetic at the mention of her status. “You and I are ze same. New place ze explore, new people ze meet. So much ze learn and so little time. It is not easy to be new.”
Minako nodded. “Exactly, so much to learn. Still, I’m sorry if I couldn’t get what you were saying. I just started speaking French this year.”

“Zis year!?” Bebe rounded on Akihiko. “But zis class is so advanced, most everyone can hear me! How is zis possible?”

All Akihiko could do was give him a shrug. “That’s just how it is, Bebe. Gekkoukan set a precedent that any transfer students who come along have to catch up on their own.” He shrugged. “The foreign language department is pretty strict. There’s really nothing the school can do but offer a list of tutors.”

Minako shrunk at the reminder that got her into such a bad mood in the first place. “That’s right, but tutoring is so expensive.” She picked up her assignment and gave it another once-over, only to cringe when the words came to her mind in a mix of English and Japanese, not even a lick of French translated properly.

“Minako-sama, you look so sad!” Bebe remarked, leaning in to read the paper. “‘No Longer Human’, zis is so long for a beginner.”

Minako felt herself sink lower in her seat. “Don’t remind me.”

There was a soft hum before Bebe plucked the paper from her hand. She let him take it, not caring if he used it as an airplane or tinder.

The latter being her preferred option.

“Let us see. . .” he cleared his throat. “Je suis convaincu que la vie humaine est remplie de beaucoup de purs, heureux, des exemples sereins de l’insincérité, vraiment splendide de leur genre-de personnes se trompant les uns les autres sans (curieusement) toutes les blessures infligées, des personnes qui semblent ignorant même qu’ils sont tromper les uns les autres.”

Minako only felt more discouraged at how easy he made it look. Maybe it was time to consider finding a student tutor who accepted homemade sweets as payment. “If only I spoke French as good as I speak English, maybe I’d be okay.”

“Et tu pourrais! Zat is zu say you can! All zis takes is some time.” Bebe slapped the paper on the desk, facing Minako. “You simply need someone ze ‘elp!” He used the empty desk in front of her to sit down and point at the first couple of words. It certainly got Minako’s attention as he pulled a pen from seemingly thin air.

Even Akihiko was interested in the development, using the back of Minako’s chair to lean on. “This outta be good.”

“Start at ze beginning. What does zis two say?” Bebe's fingersghosted over the phrase ‘I am.’

“Je Suis,” Minako looked up from the paper. “But that’s just two words. There’s so much I don’t understand.”

Bebe shook his head.

A knowing grin stretched across his face.

“You find zat lots of hings begin with, Je Suis.”

For the rest of the study hall, the three spent their time going through the entire paragraph. By the
time lunch had rolled around, Minako was able to recite the quote just as well as Bebe and Akihiko.

The French student gave her his phone number and an invitation to talk anytime and taught Minako a second quote: "Oiseaux de la plume, troupeau ensemble."

Birds of the feather, flock together.

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**Me:** don't forget, we’re meeting eliz and theo after skol
**EmoBro:** I know
**Me:** be honest
**Me:** wat r the chances we’ll get arrested? 1-10
**EmoBro:** honestly, 9-1 in favor of jail cell
**Me:** wat’ll we do?
**EmoBro:** just say they’re from Barcelona
**EmoBro:** or deny deny deny
**Me:** Igor's gonna kill us

---

“Welcome to Paulownia Mall!” Minako led the ragtag group of Velvet Room attendants, with Minato in tow, out of the alleyway and into the main courtyard. “Try not to wander off, it’s easy to get swept up by the teenage mob.”

The youngest Arisato snickered as the two tried to contain their amazement and horribly failed when cheesy grins broke out on their faces. Despite the worry of getting into trouble and the crippling exhaustion from the night before, Minato had actually been looking forward to this small adventure. It wasn’t every day that you could take beings from another world to the mall and show them how humans acted in their natural habitat. He guessed those were the types of things that interested those who lived in a pocket dimension so blue, it would give a certain group of drummers a run for their money.

Elizabeth was the first of the four to break formation, turning around in tight circles to get a good view of everything. How she managed to not crash into anyone in the afternoon crowd was a wonder. As the self-appointed tour guide and the one responsible for watching Elizabeth, Minato kept up with her just in case he would need to apologize.

Whatever happened while visiting the mall today, it was a chance to see the world through someone else’s eyes, eyes that have probably seen things in a much different light. It could be a fun experience that they could all laugh at together one day.

And the promise of a handsome reward was also a bonus.

“So, what do ya’ think?” Minato asked his attendant. “Not exactly as pretty as the VR, but . . . is this what you were expecting?”

Elizabeth nodded enthusiastically. “I love it! What a fantastic structure this place is!” she cheered,
still trying to take it all in before stopping suddenly in front of the central fountain, swaying a little from all her spinning. Her hands clapped together and she faced the group again. “I had imagined it would be smaller but this is simply delightful. There is more to explore, more to learn, more to experience!”

Minako chuckled as she approached Elizabeth, Theo, not far behind. “This isn’t even the biggest mall in the world. You should’ve seen the ones in America, now those ones were like a maze. I can still hear our grandparents yelling over the PA system when we decided to take a little detour to the food court and got lost. So embarrassing!”

Ah yes, the cringe-worthy Black Friday incident. Minato almost forgot about it but now it was back to replay over and over in the theater of his brain. “I thought we were never gonna speak about that ever again.”

Both Elizabeth and Theodore listened to the story with rapt attention, however, they wore looks of confusion.

“A PA system?”

“Food court?”

Minato took the chance to step in. “PA stands for ‘public address.’ People use it to make announcements and stuff to everyone in the building. A food court is where shoppers go to eat stuff when they need a break. It’s nothing fancy, though.”

“I see,” Theodore said aloud. “Who knew the humans would be so clever? A communication device that can be used on a larger populous and a place to rest in between merchant interactions, I have to give them credit.” He turned to Elizabeth. “Sister, we must study this further and make plans to attend one of these ‘food courts’ on a later date. My interest in the culinary options is peaked.”

However, Elizabeth seemed deep in her own thoughts, head lowered, eyes narrowed at the shiny floor. “I simply wish to know how humans have accomplished the feat of widespread communication within a confined space. Is it a form of telepathy? Do they probe one’s mind in order to send the message?”

Did these two always assume that everything either had to be magic or primitive?

Minato caught an exasperated sigh from his sister, but it was soon dismissed as she squared up to get the conversation back on track. “That’s a story for another. How about we start showing ya’ around? There’s a lot to see!”

Elizabeth looked up with a contented smile. “Yes, that would be the optimal decision. Let us continue with this adventure before you must go home for the evening.” She turned on her heel so that she was facing the fountain, realization dawning on her face. “Actually, I would like to start with this! An intimate encounter with one of your world’s rarities!”

“A . . .” Minato could only scratch his head. “. . . a fountain?” These things were all over the place. Just where had these two learned about Earth culture before meeting the Arisatos? Wikipedia? A prehistoric encyclopedia?

Theodore mirrored his fellow attendant's excitement, tipping his hat as if out of respect for the decorative piece. “It makes sport of water, well known by all to be the foundation of all life.” He shook his head as if disapproved. “I must say, it’s a waste of such a precious material. Do humans
not care about the fact they are throwing this away for an interesting fixture?”

“It’s fine, Theo!” Minako said. “Fountains don’t actually waste the water. It just pumps it to make a cool effect then it gets cycled back to be cleaned at a treatment plant. In fact, the water we see right now might’ve been used somewhere else before getting used here.” She pointed out the visible pipes running along the base of the tank. “See? When it collects in the basin, it gets shipped back through the system and cleaned. Isn’t that cool?”

Theodore inspected the pipes and looked the fountain up and some more, relaxing once it finally sank in.

“I see. . . my apologies for not understanding what you meant. That makes you humans seem even more innovative.” He looked back at the teenager with a coy grin. “You are able to take valuable resources, play with them, and then call upon them when their important purpose must be fulfilled. A classic representation of work and pleasure.”

Minato found his way to Elizabeth, still enjoying the fountain in blissful ignorance of everything else happening around her. She had been oddly quiet since Theo and Minako started discussing the technology behind the display.

“So, what else do ya’ know about these things? Anything interesting?” Minato asked.

Elizabeth hummed to herself. “It’s rumored that its enchanting nature grants wish to those who sacrifice a few coins. Do you think that’s true?”

So they did know about tossing coins into a fountain for good luck but somehow assumed that a PA system was powered by magic. How. . . funny.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I did it all the time as a kid and nothing really happened when I did. It’s just something I never paid attention to.”

“I see. . . then I must try it for myself.” As if from nowhere, Elizabeth pulled out a bulging, blue purse. “Fortunately, I anticipated this an brought a good supply of coins. Two thousand of your five hundred yen coins to be exact.”

It certainly caught Minato’s eye when she popped the golden clasp to reveal it was full of yen coins.

Two thousand times five hundred equaled a million.

One million yen. She was carrying around one million yen like it was nothing. That was enough money to keep a family alive for a month or more!

Where did she get all this money? Did the Velvet Room really pay this well? Since when was working in the Velvet Room a job with an actual salary?

“Wait for just a second-” Minato started to say but Elizabeth had already stepped giddily up to the side of the fountain. She extended the purse over the water, closed her eyes, and smiled.

This action caused Theodore and Minako to stop talking and look at the disaster about to take place.

“Sister, what are you doing?” the latter asked. “I didn’t recall that we were supposed to bring our emergency money along.”
Elizabeth opened her eyes and tipped her bag on its side. “I shall make an opening bid to the fountain spirit of one million yen.”

Without a care in the world, she poured out the contents of the purse into the fountain. The golden pieces of metal tumbled like a waterfall of broken dreams, capturing the attention of the shoppers around them. Minato could only watch on in horror as they settled to the bottom in a growing pile towering to the surface of the water.

One million yen, all wasted for a superstition.

There were so many things they could've done with that money.

Minato put his head in his hands.

“Ah!” As quickly as she had begun, Elizabeth stopped pouring and reclasped her purse. “I was so caught up in the excitement of tossing in coins that I hadn’t given my wish any thought.” She retracted her arm and stashed the purse away. “This won’t do. I shall give it more careful consideration before I return here in the near future. Maybe then I shall have an even bigger offering for the fountain spirit.”

Minato could only shudder at that final sentence. How much more was she willing to spend on a stupid bid for luck? It just spelled “Look at me, officers! I’m a public disturbance! Arrest me, please!”

Theodore came to his sister’s side. “Elizabeth, I believe the young lady has mentioned something that is quite uncanny. Something pertaining to our own function as attendants.” He pointed over the Police Station. “We must go and inspect that building at once.”

Elizabeth nodded before looping her arm with Theo’s. “Tell me what this resemblance is. Maybe we could glean some insight on the parallels between humans and ourselves!” Together, they broke away from their guides and were heading towards the Police Station.

“Hey, you two! What did I say about wandering off!!?” Minako tried to shout after them but they kept walking at a brisk pace to the station. They were already too far away and too engrossed in their mission to care. All they wanted was to explore and it was giving the siblings a headache.

“For crying out loud-” Minato grabbed her arm and pulled her along in pursuit of the rouge attendants, “I thought it would be an hour before they started causing trouble.”

Minako jogged to keep up but whisper shouted once the two matched their strides. “I told ya’ Igor’s gonna kill us!”

When the two approached the station, Elizabeth and Theodore peered through the large windows, trying to get a good look at the inside. Minato heard them going back and forth about whatever the heck they were seeing.

“Miss Arisato had said this is a Police Station. The gentlemen inside are the peacekeepers of the human's and this is considered their base of operations.” Theodore said.

“Peacekeepers, that sounds like Philemon. I wonder if they control multiple bases such as this one, only they are scattered around this world. Do you think they can enter other stations via this one?” Elizabeth asked.

“I haven’t the slightest clue, but look at those photographs displayed. I wonder what they mean by ‘Most wanted’ and that you may receive a reward. Does that mean these people in the photos are
like Shadows? Can they be captured and returned here as a form of vigilante justice?"

“I think they are a version of our subjugation requests. If that is the case, do they require a piece of
the body as proof?”

“It seems those gentlemen are looking this way. They seem a little... angry?”

Minato’s heart nearly stopped when Theodore mentioned that they had been spotted. Not even ten
minutes and the police already caught on that a pair weirdos from another dimension were loose on
the public.

Not only that, but they had been talking about their requests to kill Shadows in the same line as
catching criminals.

“That’s enough.” Minato broke away from Minako and swiftly latched on to Elizabeth, dragging
her away from the Police Station while his sister did the same thing with Theodore.

“I thought I told you two to stay with us at all times, not talking about killing people in front of the
cops!” Minako scolded, leading the group to the storefront of Chagall Cafe.

The four paused to gather their bearings, the senior among them taking the chance to breathe. “You
two might not understand but normal people in our world don’t go around hurting other people for
money. We can get is into a lot of trouble so don’t talk about subjugation requests, okay?”

To Minato’s dismay, when he glanced over to see if the attendants heard Minako’s question, the
two didn’t seem to be listening. Instead, Elizabeth was already bouncing on her heels and pointing
at another destination.

“Theodore, look!” She tugged on Theodore’s sleeve. “It is the club Margret spoke of! It exists!”

“Where? We must investigate!” the man affirmed before sauntering ahead towards the hot pink
mess that was ‘Club Escapade.’

These two beings had about the same amount of patience as a toddler with ADHD.

Unlike last time, Minato and Minako were able to stay hot on their heels. If they could just pay
attention to where the attendants were interested in, they could keep an eye on them.

Theodore and Elizabeth openly gaped at the building, although they tried to remain cool. The
attempt failed miserably.

“It IS the fabled edifice spoken of so much by Marget!” Elizabeth nodded her approval. “I thought
these only existed on the fringes of society and yet here is one at the central hub of activity!”

“Dancers, dictated by the sway of one’s inner passions. A hallmark of humanity’s need to express
their individuality. A subterranean garden of uninhibited spectacle.” Theodore smirked. “Of
course, I still believe that Nameless and Belladonna are just as splendid, if not more so, as they live
much longer than any human. Such as the proverb goes: with age comes wisdom.”

Margret? Nameless? Belladonna? How many people lived in the Velvet Room and where were
they hiding? Up Igor’s nose?

“No!” Elizabeth tried to open the doors but found that they were locked tight. The club was only
open after nine o’clock so there was no way they would be able to get in. “It’s not closed for
business now, is it?”
Minako was able to take the opportunity to lead the woman away from the club. “Sorry, but that’s just how things go. We can come back another day.”

That was a bold-faced lie and Minato knew it. No self-respecting member of the Arisato household would ever be caught dead dancing at a club notorious for some of the most insane drunks in all of Port Island and a thriving prostitution problem. The family name would not be tarnished just to show off niche earth customs.

“A shame…” Elizabeth sighed but allowed herself to be taken elsewhere. “I had hoped to join in on the wild ritual.”

Theodore and Minato followed them, the former still taken by the hustle and bustle going on all around him. “I must admit I am overwhelmed by all of this,” he said. “Everything is new and inviting. Despite my best efforts, something always catches the eye-”

Once again, Elizabeth veered away from her escort and towards another fountain not too far from the entrance of the club. Her purse was already brandished and ready to be dumped out. “Another fountain! I must pay tribute to the spirit!”

“Elizabeth, no! How many times do I have to say stop running off!” Minako went after the woman like a mother chasing down her rambunctious child. When she reached Elizabeth, Minako grabbed the arm holding her purse and turned to the other two with a pleading look in her eyes. “Theo, talk some sense into her! You guys can’t go around throwing that much yen into a pool!”

Theodore remained at Minato’s side. “I apologize, but I cannot. My sister has a free-spirited mind and thus, cannot be tamed with a simple beck and call.”

Elizabeth withdrew her arm and pointed across the mall to yet another fountain. “This place is host to a trinity of fountain spirits!” She unhanded herself from Minako and jogged over to it without delay. “I must make my offering! I wish for a fountain spirit of my own so I may have infinite wishes!”

“Oh no, ya’ don’t!” Minako ran after Elizabeth. “So help me God, I WILL take your purse!”

“Oh dear…” Theodore tugged at Minato’s sleeve, ushering him towards the others. “Perhaps it’s best to keep with the group. I don’t wish to cause more trouble for the both of you.”

Minato felt a chuckle rise within him as he and Theodore shuffled to catch up with them. His sister was a hardworking person, but that didn’t mean he didn’t take joy in watching her scramble. It was even funnier that it looked like she was chasing a grown woman with no social tact whatsoever.

Today really did turn out to be an interesting day.

“Now that’s enough!” Minako gained control over Elizabeth’s purse by the time Minato and Theodore reached them. She held it out to Theo who took it dutifully. “No more throwing coins into fountains. From now on, you can only toss one per visit, got it?”

Elizabeth pouted at having her belongings taken away. She puffed out her cheeks and glared down at the tile floor. "Fine…"

“Hey, Minato!”

At the call of his name, Minato’s attention pulled away from the group and towards a familiar voice. Kenji from his class walked towards them with a friendly wave, still wearing his school uniform and a cheesy grin that threatened to break his jaw.
“Sup?” Minato said back once the other boy was within talking distance. “Didn’t expect to see you
around here.”

“Yeah, I didn’t plan on visiting this place today, but I heard from Junpei you were hanging around
with your sister today. I wanted to talk to ya’ about something important, so here I am.” Kenji
rubbed the back of his neck and his gaze darted over to the strange-looking attendants. Both gave
him equally blank stares. “Um, at least he said it was just Minako-senpai. Are these guys your
parents or something?”

Theodore straightened up with a bow. “We are not their parents. In fact, we are humble att-”

“-Family!” Minako threw a hand over the man’s mouth. “They’re our aunt and uncle from
America! We’re just showing them around!” She threw a pleading look at Theo and Elizabeth.
“Right you two?”

Both nodded slowly.

“Yes,” Elizabeth bowed as well, “I am an American! What is up, my dude?”

Minato internally groaned.

Kenji raised an eyebrow at the odd greeting. “Um. . . okay?” Thankfully, he turned back to Minato
and ignored the other three. “So, can we talk real quick at Chagall? I’ve got some good news and
I’m just dying to tell someone!”

“Uh. . .” Minato looked to Minako. He could only imagine the carnage that might occur if he
wasn’t there to help keep watch over Theo and Elizabeth. The conversation may have to wait until
a later date. Besides, he didn’t have the patience to deal with Kenji at the moment. “They're still
settling in and need supervision, so-”

“-Nonsense! Go on ahead and get some coffee, ya’ crazy kiddos!” Minako looped her arms with
the attendants. “I can take care of these two by myself. I was just about to walk 'em home.”

Kenji threw Minako and appreciative smile. “You’re the best Minako-senpai!” He grabbed his
classmate and started dragging him towards Chagall. There was barely a second to protest. “Oh
boy, you’re gonna love what I’ve gotta say!”

As Minato was pulled further and further away, Elizabeth mouthed a silent “have fun” before the
trio started heading back to the alley. Theo tipped his hat as if he could sense the boy’s frustration
at being dragged away against his will.

Minako, the devil herself, threw a mischievous smirk.

He could practically hear her calling him a nerd.

Chagall was just as busy as the rest of the mall.

Students crowded themselves in corners with headphones on to block out mindless chatter. Women
sipped at dainty-looking cups that probably cost more than one of those new smartphones. Most of
all, teenage girls laughing and twirling their ridiculously complicated hair had swarmed the center
tables.

Kenji, with whatever sense he had in him, chose a booth near the back of the cafe. A waiter took
their orders, returning with a tray of black coffee and muffins to sweeten things up.
“Isn’t this place just the best?” Kenji asked after a generous bite of his pastry. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d eat ramen every day of the week but man, there’s an air in here that’s so charming. What do you think, Minato-kun?”

Said boy dived right into his muffin and was unprepared to answer the question. He quickly swallowed in order to give his input. “I like it. A change of pace is always welcome in my book.”

“I know right?” Kenji leaned back into the booth. “So, what’s new with you? We haven’t talked in a while.”

And so they started giving an update on their lives outside of going to school. Minato omitted the part about saving Fuuka Yamagishi with the rest of SEES, getting into a heated fight with his older sister and almost watching that same sister get clubbed to death, but he was able to talk about his progress with the Kendo team. Kazushi was still having trouble with his leg and yet he gave practice one hundred and ten percent. There was also studying for finals and a not-so-humble brag about looking at colleges in his spare time.

Kenji was slightly less busy but still had a tale or two to tell. His midterm scores were average, at best, scoring unusually low in literature and composition. That didn’t seem to keep him from being excited about a few new video games slated to release in a just two short weeks. Other than that, life was slow going and college seemed a million miles down the road.

As much as Minato dreaded hanging out with people at times, he couldn’t help but let a grin slip once or twice. He might even thank Minako for feeding him to the wolves.

Keyword: might.

After a few minutes of mindless small talk and other trivialities, the reason for their visit was finally addressed.

“Alright, enough with all this catch-up.” Kenji set aside an empty coffee mug and leaned on the table. “So, remember that plan I told ya’ about? The one with you-know-who?”

Minato remembered the plan well.

He remembered how stupid it sounded.

“Yeah, why?”

“Glad ya’ remembered! Here’s what’s good.” Kenji crossed his arms over his chest with a proud smile. “Her name is Miss Kanou. She teaches twelfth-grade ethics, I’m totally acing her class.” He shrugged. “She’s not the most beautiful woman, but she’s really cute. She has pretty eyes, a nice little body, and a good head on her shoulders. Wicked right?”

Minato nodded along but, on the inside, was rolling his eyes to the moon. “Sure, wicked.”

Kenji continued with his story. “So, during lunch today, I decided I’d catch her after class and finally ask her out!”

Oh no.

He actually went through with it.

“What happened?” Minato urged. He really hoped the teacher politely declined and Kenji was finally brought to his senses.
However, with a smile like his, there could only be one possibility.

“Dude,” Kenji whispered, “I actually got a yes! Can you believe it!? She said YES!”

Oh, Minato could NOT believe that this was happening. First, it was Mr. Ekoda and now female teachers were going out with their students. What had the world come to? Were people really that insane to go along with such a risky endeavor.

“Oh, Minato could NOT believe that this was happening. First, it was Mr. Ekoda and now female teachers were going out with their students. What had the world come to? Were people really that insane to go along with such a risky endeavor.

“Just as I was about to ask her out, she asked me if I wanted a private lesson! A private lesson, dude! She invited me over to her house, dude! Oh man, I'm not ready for this!” Kenji was drifting off into his own little dream world again. “I probably shouldn't try to go too far with her today, right? But, then again, she is an adult, so. . .”

Then, Kenji was muttering to himself all over again.

Minato continued chugging down their pot of coffee for the remainder of the time together. If he drank enough, maybe it would be the same as getting black-out drunk? Maybe this was all some bad dream that he would eventually wake up from? It had to be a nightmare, right?

If these two got caught, Minato would be labeled an accomplice.

He took back everything about before. Every conversation with this person only took him one step closer to a courthouse.

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**Minatan:** hey can u do me a solid and come to the grocery store?

**Me:** sure, why?

**Minatan:** I was getting stuff 4 the victory dinner and there was a sale. I couldn’t resist (>.<) so I got some. . . stuff.

**Me:** wat kind of “stuff”?

**Minatan:** illegal stuff ;D

**Me:** rlly!?

**Minatan:** kidding, I got steak and potatoes but I can’t carry them all back with the other groceries

---

Junpei would be the first to admit that he was no first-rate chief. His cooking skills were contained to making toast and putting ramen in the microwave.

The last time he tried to actually make something with a recipe, the food caught on fire. To save the day, he threw everything out of a window so the apartment his family lived in wouldn’t burn down. It landed on the sidewalk and then it broke: bent like a hard shell taco.

The good news was that the fire had gone out and no one got hurt. His mom was furious but at least the two of them were able to buy a new pan before Junpei’s father found out what happened. They couldn’t turn you in and convict you of arson if there was no fire in the first place, right?

The bottom line, it was a shock when Minako asked him to help make dinner.

And being a nice guy, Junpei had no choice but to accept to request.
So, while Minako did all the big picture preparations, he was set to juicing lemons and chopping up tomatoes for a red sauce. The latter of the tasks had been finished long ago which only left taking care of the lemons. The head cook brought down a portable radio so they could listen to music while they worked.

Occasionally, there was a conversation.

“So, why the heck do ya’ need lemons? I never heard of something like that in a sauce. Is it an American thing or what?” Junpei asked.

Minako busied herself with throwing skinned potatoes together in a pot. “It’s something my grandma discovered one day by accident. The sourness balances the sweetness of tomatoes. It works wonders when ya’ pair it with steak fillet!” She put a finger to her lips. “But that’s a trade secret, so don’t go spreading it around, ’kay? Wouldn’t want some big chain restaurant using it for their own gain.”

Junpei couldn’t help but chuckle. “Alright, your secret’s safe with me.” He finished up his current lemon and carried the juice over to her. “Here’s that last of it. No seeds. No pulp.”

“Thanks a bunch!”

Minako took the bowl of juice and immediately poured it in with the rest of the sauce. Earlier, she threw together some canned paste and scratch to make up the majority of the pot. Inside the body of red were burnt pepperonis, minced garlic, olive oil, and (of course) the tomatoes. Why she burned all of them was a mystery, but maybe it was to give it a charred flavor. Still, it was something he had never seen before.

“Now we’ll just stir it up and get started on cutting up the meat.” After a minute, she stopped stirring and set her wooden spoon aside. She took a new spoon, scooped up a tiny portion of the sauce, then offered it to Junpei. “Go ahead, try it and see what ya’ think.”

Junpei was hesitant at first but did not want to be rude, especially when Minako had yet to make something that was inedible.

He thanked her for the spoon and took it from her, blowing on the steaming sauce before putting the whole thing in his mouth.

An explosion of flavor burst and bloomed on his tongue. The burnt items that caused concern added a certain bitterness. A hint of lemon caught him off guard, but true to her word, Minako stopped everything from becoming too sweet. It was a better alternative than using the more widely accepted vinegar and made Junpei grin.

She was right, there really was a significant difference.

“Ah, man!” he mumbled, taking the spoon out of his mouth. “Now that’s good cooking!”

“I’m glad ya’ like it!” Minako too his spoon and tossed it into the nearby sink. Once that was done, she put a cover on the pot and turned down the heat on the sauce. “Now we can finish the meat. We’re gonna use a griddle so I hope ya’ know how to make steak.”

Things really started to get complicated when Minako showed him how to set up an indoor version of a grill. It turned out that a griddle was a pan with ridges meant to emulate a metal grate pattern, only without space for flames to poke through.

While they waited for the griddle to heat up, they took out the steaks slabs and started to slice off
sections of unnecessary fat. Junpei struggled to make precise cuts and would often get too deep into the main meat but gradually got better. It helped that he could watch how Minako did everything so well, giving a visual to mirror.

And for some odd reason, Junpei thought about how talented the girl really was.

She knew how to cook full meals from scratch. Cleaning was no bore if she was manning the chore list. Her words were chosen carefully and overflowed with a certain rhythm and rhyme, a style that put others at ease. Even the way she moved around the halls of the school, through Paulownia Mall, and around the perils of Tartarus spoke of grace and poise. Summoning her Persona looked more like a show than fighting, and Minato could brag all he wanted, but it was obvious who had more control over their power.

Sure, she was older than him, with plenty more life experiences under her belt, but it went beyond age.

Even a jealous blockhead could barely maintain a frown.

Even when he knew that he didn't stand a chance of being picked over her.

It was a terrible thing that he was still butthurt over the whole situation. Minako did nothing to deserve such scrutiny, in fact, the position fit her like a glove, all thing's considered. All her good qualities made her the prime candidate and if she were a junior like the rest, she’d still be picked.

It still stung like a hornet to know he would never be a leader.

Who would trust someone like him with anything?

Who thought he was a valuable asset to the team other than himself?

"Junpei!"

"Wah-crap!" The teen suddenly came back to his senses just as his carving knife almost took a finger off. The blade was only about a millimeter away from getting sawed. If Minako had been a second later, there would be a hospital visit in his near future.

Another thing she was good at, looking out for everyone else.

"That was close. . ." Junpei took the knife out of the cut he was making and set it aside. He could feel a certain panic rising within him despite nothing actually going wrong. “Jeez, guess I really can’t multitask, eh? Maybe I’m just not made for this.”

Minako shook her head. “No, you’re pretty good with your technique; the only problem is the direction. Your blade should always face away from the body.” She set aside her own knife, grabbed two kitchen towels, and handed one to Junpei. “Is something bothering you? I get you were trying to focus on doing well but. . . you seem off today. Anything I can help with?”

Junpei wiped his hands clean of cow blood, shaking his head. “Not really, I was just thinking about some stuff.”


"I kinda hate that you’re the leader and I’m not."

"I wish it were me and not you."
"I want everyone to respect me as they respect you."

All those things were too mean to say. It wasn’t fair to the person that worked the hardest out of all
the members of SEES, calling them out and criticizing them for the fault of being an exemplary
pillar of society.

What to say now that he dug himself into this hole?

What was the first thing that came to mind?

“Don’tcha think this is something a married couple would do?” Junpei bemused. “I-I mean it’s
kinda like we’re the parents and the rest of the gang are the kids, ya’ know?”

Minako gave him an owlish stare.

“. . .I don’t follow.”

This grave was only getting deeper and deeper the more he opened his mouth. Now, she probably
thought he had feelings for her.

“N-not to say I like ya’ or anything! You’re like my big sister so that’d be REALLY weird if I did!”
He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a burning itch coming on. “I'm screwin' this up. It’s just-. . .
isn't strange that we’re always hanging out together? I mean, you’re a girl and I’m a guy. People
might start talking bad about you.”

Minako’s confusion turned to disappointment. “Does that mean you don’t wanna hang out
anymore?”

“That’s not it either!” Did someone forget to turn up the AC? He was getting hot all over. “The
guys at school might say some stuff if they see us together. I mean, it looks like a lot of them are
interested in you.” He chuckled to himself. “Plus, the famous Yukatan and Mitsuru-senpai live in
the same dorm, too. There's a lot of dudes at school who are pretty jealous of me.”

When the misunderstanding was cleared up, Minako started to chuckle. “I’m sorry?” She tossed
her rag aside and got back to work on the meat. “Is it really my fault that I’m likable and everyone
wants to be you?”

“Yeah, it’s your fault!” Junpei went back to his cutting tasks now that they fell back into a more
casual atmosphere. “Everyone keeps asking if you're single. It’s getting old.”

Minako hummed. “I never noticed anything up until now. Should I be worried about any potential
suitors?”

“Eh, not really. Most of ‘em are a bunch of wimps who think they’ll get beat up by Mitsuru-senpai
if they went after you.” Junpei continued to grow more and more comfortable with cutting away
from himself rather than putting his fingers in harm’s way. “Actually, you don't seem to be all that
interested in guys. I mean, you're not all excited and asking me who's saying all this stuff. Well, of
course, you aren't. No girl would be that desperate.”

“Have ya’ met Akihiko-san’s fan club?”

“. . . I thought we were talking about girls, not monkeys.”

The two laughed at his crude joke. Minako calmed down quickly but still had a contented smile.
“Goodness gracious, you’re terrible!”
Junpei felt a blossom of pride. “I try!”

She let out another giggle. “In any case, I just don’t have the time to worry about that kind of thing. Between SEES, Student Council, homework, and college hunting, adding a boyfriend to the mix would just drain me.” Her amused expression became more serious, nearly slipping under Junpei’s radar. “Besides, I never saw myself finding anyone. I’m just too . . . plain.”

Although it was said as a joke, her words seemed more like a painful truth.

“Sure, I can cook pretty good and I’ve always wanted a family of my own but . . .” Minako shook her head. “Look at me, ranting about dating when dinner still has to get done. Just forget I said anything.”

It caught Junpei off guard.

Minako was always so cheerful, so positive and full of boundless potential. It seemed almost foreign for her to say such negative things or putting herself down.

And how could someone up and leave her on the first date? Her kindness overflowed with a motherly love that Junpei had missed for so many years. It was genuine, no strings attached and had room for second chances. He could see it when she talked with underclassmen from the Student Council, with Mitsuru the Ice Queen, and especially the other members of SEES. All were welcome to try their best, to be part of her world.

However, did she really not believe that others accepted her in turn?

Now he felt even worse for his constant envy.

Junpei cleared his throat. “You know, if you’re that busy, I’ve got my own stuff to do but it seems like you need a right-hand man.”

Minako paused and looked up.

“A right-hand man?”

He nodded. “Yup, just someone to watch you’re back and take care of things behind the scenes. Like picking up supplies, cleaning weapons, small things to take some pressure. Nothing too crazy but still . . .”

"I want to help."

"I want everyone to take me more seriously."

"I want to be a leader like you."

“. . . I wanna be someone you can depend on.”

At first, Minako could only look at him, puzzled by his declaration.

Then, a coy grin made a rare appearance.

“I’ll admit, I have been stressed out, especially after the last mission. It’ll be nice to have someone I can call on if I need extra hands.” She let out a long sigh. “I want you to understand this won’t be easy. Being my partner takes grit and determination, but it also takes patience and humility. You have to promise me you’ll do what’s needed to the best of your ability. I’m not taking half-hearted work.”
It was no fancy title and the others might not take him as seriously, but for now, he got what he wanted.

Minako trusted him.

She actually gave him a chance to prove himself.

A part of him will still feel the tug of frustration and yet it mattered not.

Junpei gave her a mock salute, knife still in hand. Some of the blood from the meat got flicked in the senior’s face. “I’m at your service, Miss Captain, my captain.”

He got a light nudge in return. “Watch where you’re swinging that! I didn’t like getting a black eye and I don’t wanna lose one!”

And so, the tension of their agreement faded and they continued to finish dinner. The chatter became lighter in tone, shifting to school and video games that were coming out. They both seemed to be really excited for the announcement of a new game in a franchise called “Devil Trigger.” Apparently, there would be three playable characters instead of just one like the previous installments.

“I still can’t believe how kick-butt the trailer was! The battle theme, the animation, and they made that one guy less whiny and more fun. I wonder what they’ll do to explain his missing demon arm?”

“I don’t know, Minatan. Maybe his dad isn’t dead and he stole it because he’s evil now?”

“Doesn’t that seem a little farfetched?”

“Meh, they’ve got swords that turn into motorcycles. I think we can assume anything is possible.”

“Fair enough.”

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**June 9th, 2009**

Junpei helped me make dinner after I walked Theodore and Elizabeth back to the Velvet Room. Both occasions were... interesting to say the very least. Still, I had a good time hanging out with all three of them! Even Minato cracked a smile when we were at the mall.

Until I made him get dragged away by a "friend" of his. I could see the annoyance from a mile away!

What really struck me though was something Junpei asked when we were talking about dating. It seemed out-of-the-blue, but I was also glad he brought it up. He asked if he could play a bigger role as a member of SEES.

It won’t be too much more work than what he does now. He’ll be assisting me from time to time while buying new weapons for everyone, updating protective equipment, and even doing the menial cleaning chores. Like I said it’s nothing crazy.

However, I'm glad he offered.

Before I forget, I met a French exchange student today! He's a swell guy and he promised to
help me out with catching up on the language. What a nice dude!

That's it from me! Until next time!

Minako Arisato
You May Call Me "Pharos"

Chapter Notes

Merri Chrysler, meh dudes. I decided to wait until the 26th the post this because I wanted to spend some time with family before I go back to prison- I mean OT school. I meant OT school.

I'm serious. . . about it being a prison for my soul. Thank God I have a passion for this kind of stuff.

Anyway, I really had fun with some parts of this chapter with foreshadowing the McTwist to explain why Minako and Minato exist at the same time. Brownie points will be given out depending on how close people get to the answer. I bet that a lot of you will guess it since this is a piece of self-indulgent trash. Please enjoy and have a Happy New Year folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So we covered Heian and briefly touched on the Taika Reforms of 645. They’re not really important so just memorize when they happened for finals.” Mr. Ono scoured his binder of notes before letting out a dejected sigh. In the end, he flipped the binder closed and slammed his fist on the podium. “Argh, I don’t care about any of this! I wanna get to the Sengoku era! It's calling out to me!”

Minato tapped his pen on his desk, having given up on taking notes since the teacher had done nothing but complain the entire class period. The man didn’t even know one of his students slipped on his headphones to drown out the boredom.

Spoiler: the student was Minato.

That wasn’t to say that he would shrug and abandon his studies completely, that would be academic suicide when finals were just around the corner. Libraries existed for a reason and would provide everything he needed to pass the history portion with ease. Looking up the proper material on the Taika Reforms would be a piece of cake.

For now, he simply pretended to listen to slog through the lesson.

At least it gave Minato time to reflect on how things calmed down since the battle with the King and Queen Shadows.

Everyone at the dorm recovered from the battle while Fuuka, Natsuki, and the other girls were resting in the hospital. Mitsuru assured the team that all of them would be back at school sometime next week, give or take a few days. Others diagnosed with Apathy Syndrome, including the teacher who got into the mysterious car accident, would also return once their conditions improved.

Unfortunately, but to no one's surprise, Natsuki forgot the time she spent with SEES and her conversations with Minato. Their heart to heart on forgiveness, the motorcycle ride, even their pissing matches, all of it erased from memory. The only thing she seemed to grasp was when she was with Fuuka and snippets of the battle, but other than that, nothing remained.
It was probably for the best, all things considered, and yet Minato still felt a twinge of regret.

If it hadn’t been for Natsuki, he would have stayed at the dorm and remain angry for the rest of the night. He would have missed out on a chance to reconcile with Minako, to be a better brother in her time of need. There were a myriad of reasons that he was thankful and now the girl would never know how much of an impact she had.

Still, knowing that she found peace with herself, peace with Fuuka, and peace with what she had done, it was more than a fine reward.

Natsuki Moriyama would carry the aftermath of that night, even if she forgot what happened.

They may never be friends or talk to each other, but Minato made a note to be kinder when he saw her in the hallways. Who knows? Maybe they could reconnect if she wished to rant about how stupid the world was sometimes.

But he was getting ahead of himself and starting to sound like a total sap.

“And that concludes my lecture for today. You’re all dismissed for lunch!”

The students nearly rocketed out of their desks as Mr. Ono finally set them free from the shackles of his talking. Chatter about what was on the cafeteria menu, gossip hot off the press, and a few grumbles about the lesson buzzed like flies across the room. Just about everyone had something to say as they aimed to get out of class as quickly as possible. Even Mr. Ono scurried to the Faculty Office faster than usual, clinging to his trademark helmet as he went.

Only a few remained once the rush had subsided. They pushed desks together so friend groups could eat as a unit rather than being alone. In no time at all, tiny islands with inhabitants of three to five students had emerged to provide a safe haven for them all to belong.

Minato paid no mind, grabbing his own lunch from his bag and getting himself set for a meal of cold rice with some kind of mystery meat. There was no time to chose a specific one on the way out the door this morning, so he simply grabbed whatever was closest to him in the fridge.

He really hoped it wasn’t liver, again.

“Jeez, kill me before I have to listen to another one of Mr. Ono’s lessons.” Junpei scooched his chair across the aisle and plopped his own lunch on Minato’s desk: sea salt with vinegar potato skins and a Diet Cola. “Here’s to hoping Toriumi doesn’t start a rant on the reason for life. Maybe she’ll go easy on us and assign some reading during class.”

Minato huffed at his companion’s theatrics. “I heard we’ve got an essay coming up on last week’s reading. Word is, she’s out for five pages minimum.”

Junpei groaned and hunched forward on the desk. “Noooo! I still need to finish the last one!”

“You didn’t finish the last essay? How dumb are you, Stupeii?” Yukari joined the two boys promptly. “Even Kenji got it done and he’s worse than you! Set up your game or else you’ll end up working at Wild Duck Burger for the rest of your life. Do you WANT to smell worse than you actually do forever?”

Minato quirked an eyebrow. He couldn’t tell if that was an insult or concerned motivation. With a relationship like theirs, it was difficult to know when they were being serious and when they wanted to kill each other.
“Whatever, I’ll get it done. Stop nagging me like yer’ my mom.” Junpei opened his soda with a satisfying pop. “Say, doncha’ have lunch with your archery friends right now? You only eat with us on mission days and Fridays, so what gives?”

Yukari huffed at the “nagging mom” comment but set herself down on her desk in front of Minato. “If you really wanna know, they won’t stop talking about this guy who asked me out the other day in front of them. I said no, but they wanted me to say yes.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna be hanging around here until they leave me alone. That okay or am I interrupting your boy time?”

Minato shook his head. “It’s whatever.” He offered her one of the more healthier things in his lunch, a Tupperware box of salad with a metal fork. It was the gentlemanly thing to do if he really wanted to invite her into the fold. “Looks like you didn’t pack anything. Help yourself.”

Yukari thanked him for the salad and dug in gratefully. “Don’t mind if I do!”

The three ate their food at a leisurely pace with small talk mixed in between, mostly about local news and how their sports teams were coming along. Junpei had a game just a week away while Yukari was gearing up for a regional tournament at the end of June. Both promised to play their best while making the other look like an idiot.

Minato talked about how he and Kazushi were ready for their first meet of the season which was coming up in three days. They were in different competition brackets, but if all went well, they may face off at the next meet. It was a small inter-school competition and not too important when it came to reaching the district championship. The match-up was mostly to help get people excited for when the real fighting began.

After the chaos from Tartarus and Shadows and unrest, it was good to just unwind with the normal school activities.

It was toward the end of lunch that Yukari gave back the salad container and let out a heavy sigh. “So Fuuka is one of us, huh?” she asked. “She’s got the Potential and... well, you know what I mean.”

Minato perked up at her soured mood. This shift seemed to come entirely out of left field.

“Guess so, isn’t it sweet?” Junpei responded. “Can’t help but feel like this is destiny. Mitsuru-senpai said something about needing new members the other day. Maybe Yamagishi’s the one we need?”

Yukari nodded slowly but didn’t seem to be convinced. “Still, doesn’t anyone else get the feeling that the seniors and Ikutsuki knew this would happen? They seemed hell-bent on saving Fuuka before considering our own safety. Minako-senpai must’ve felt obligated to lead a rescue mission but at least she took our concerns into account. Why?”

The elephant in the room, it was true that the veterans seemed to be vehement on getting Fuuka out as quickly as possible, which peeked Minato’s suspicions right away. Up until then, they had been passive to the well-being of those afflicted by the Dark Hour, leaving those victims in the hands of medical professionals and the police.

However, what if that person could be an asset to the team?

What if they knew this whole time but never said anything?

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Minato spoke up, “Did Mitsuru-senpai want to save Fuuka
because it was the right thing to do? Or was it just because she's a Persona-user and we need her?’”

Yukari frowned. “I mean, I wanna think it’s because she actually wants to help people but. . .”

“. . . She’s still a Kirijo.” Junpei finished somberly and leaned back in his chair. “That lady’s all business. She doesn’t make decisions because they’ll benefit one person. She’ll make decisions because it’s best for the majority.”

Minato hummed in agreement.

Something wasn’t right. The pieces of this puzzle just wouldn’t add up.

However, there was someone who could put them together.

“I think we need to bring this up with the others, and soon.”

Maybe it was time to confront the heiress on what was really going on.

As the next class period started, an unexpected rainstorm had moved in.

The beats and jive of the Student Council were starting to become more familiar to Minako with every meeting she attended.

Although most of her duties consisted for filing paperwork, recording key points during open-air discussions, and communicating the group’s progress, she found that she was jumping in with the different committees whenever they needed an extra hand. The tasks she performed for them were small, but it gave her a chance to get to know fellow seniors and underclassmen on a personal level.

Today, however, she was swamped with filing away last-minute club roosters. Attendance for sports teams had been down this year so the club advisors held out longer than usual to turn the list of their club members. It was a pain considering that the Secretary had so many projects on the backburner that itched to be completed.

It was even more frustrating considering that the advisor chose to turn-in their forms on the same day.

There were more than a few choice words that Minako wanted to use to describe the terrible coincidence.

“Why does everyone’s name gotta be unique?” Minako grumbled as she entered each individual student into the database. “Who even names their kid Renren Amamiya? Is this some kind of joke?”

Parents these days and their creative name choices, it made life harder for the rest of society.

“His real name is Ren, but everyone just calls him Renren,” Chihiro said as she approached Minako with another stack of papers, “I think it was a nickname from a friend and everyone just really liked it. The teachers were convinced that was his real name so that’s what they write on the attendance sheets.”

“Can’t really argue with that if teachers call him Renren too.” Minako finished the track team and pushed the hardcopy of the rooster into her done pile. “I’m still gonna complain about it, though.”

She picked up the next form for the swim team but immediately noticed that (somehow) all the names had been smudged to the point of being unreadable.
Now she needed to send the form back by hand for a redo since everyone else was tied up with their own duties to fulfill.

The swim team’s pool was all the way across campus, an indecent ten-minute walk and it was raining. She left her umbrella at home since the weather had been so nice earlier.

God was testing her patience.

Chihiro noticed her plight and looked at the form. “Oh no, they must have delivered it when it started to rain.” She extended her hand out to collect it. “You have to finish the rest of these so don’t worry about it. I have an umbrella so I can deliver a new form.”

Minako thought she would leap up from her seat and tackle the sophomore in a bone-crushing hug. However, she restrained herself and instead beamed at the poor girl. “You’re an angel!” she said and let the paper trade hands. “I owe ya’ one for this!”

Chihiro’s face went beet red, but she didn’t duck under the overflowing gratitude.

“I-it’s nothing! You’re working so hard and I have nothing left to do for today.”

“Arisato-kun!” Minako looked away from council Treasurer to see Hidetoshi striding to the girls with a teacher in tow. The latter was unfamiliar to her, but she had seen him cruising the hallway like a shark on the hunt for prey.

“Hidetoshi, what can I do for ya’?” Minako asked.

The boy motioned to the teacher. “We need to fill out an incident report and get it signed for confirmation purposes.” He spared a glance at her mountain of unprocessed forms. “Unless you’re busy. I can come back later if you have other things to do.”

Minako spared one glance at her growing pile but felt inclined to ignore it. What was work without a little curveball once in a while?

“No prob, I could use a break anyway.” She pushed it aside and went straight into the Incident Report folder on her computer desktop. A new electronic form opened up. “You’ve probably got this spiel down better than I do, but please describe the event to the best of your ability.”

The teacher tugged at his tie. “Just an hour ago, I was checking up on a few students who were on cleaning duty. They needed to confirm with me that they had completed their tasks before they could go home.” He cleared his throat. “I had gone into the boy’s bathroom, as it was on the list to be done today, but I had found something that was . . . deeply concerning.”

Minako stopped typing at the sudden shift in the teacher’s confidence. “Please continue, we need all relevant information in order to make a formal appeal for an investigation into the issue.”

Hidetoshi wasted no time in taking up the request. “He had found a cigarette butt in one of the stalls.” He crossed his arms with an oddly excited smirk. “It was still smoldering when it was discovered, how deplorable. Some foolish student had been smoking long after school had left out.”

Minako recorded the revelation with her own shock now setting in. She had been to schools where students would smoke, sometimes on the roof or just outside the grounds. It was bound to be the same story here eventually, but what person would risk getting caught within the building itself, especially since the bathrooms didn’t have a door to trap the smell. Anyone could simply walk in and notice that there was a rancid stench.
“Does anyone else know about this?” she pressed on.

“No,” the teacher answered, “But I will also be bringing this to Chairman Ikutsuki’s attention at tomorrow’s district meeting. We may have a larger problem on our hands than just one rogue student breaking the rules, so it’s best we prepare for more serious action.”

Minako filled out all that she could at that moment. If an updated report needed to be done, she would at least have a good base to stand on. All that was left was to send it to the printer and get an ink signature.

“Allrighty, looks like we’re all set!” She hit the print button and got up from her seat to retrieve the document across the room. “Just give me a sec and I’ll be right back with the final copy for you to sign.”

The teacher gave her a small bow. “Thank you, young lady.”

Minako muttered a quick “thank you as well” and scuttled away to the printer. She was certain the Hidetoshi could keep the man occupied long enough to her to get what was needed to complete this minor detour in her busy schedule.

Not that she minded. It felt good to get up and walk for a bit.

When Minako returned to Hidetoshi and the teacher, she dug a useable pen out of her pocket and marked an “x” on the signature line and held out the pen. “Sign here and we’ll take care of the rest. Kirijo-san won’t take a claim like this lightly.”

“Quite...” he trailed off, focused on signing the piece of paper. When he was finished, he handed her pen back and slid the paper across the table. He glanced at Hidetoshi with a solemn nod.

“Allright Hidetoshi, I’m counting on you, for both our sakes. There’s not a doubt in my mind that this will be handled swiftly and peacefully.”

The boy returned the gesture. “Yes, sir.”

The teacher spoke no more and took his leave. If Minako didn’t know any better, she would say he looked like an escaping thief.

Hidetoshi chuckled and gave Minako a well-natured smirk. “Such proficiency, you certainly know how to handle a crowd, Arisato-kun. This makes things much easier now.”

She shrugged and snatched up the form, tossing it in her things-to-be-filed pile.

“That’s Miss ‘Knows how to handle a crowd’ to you. I’ve handled a lot of crowds to receive that title and I will be addressed as such.” She waved the form at him with a giggle. “Gosh, I really am getting old. My humor’s just like this paper: tearable.”

“Ugh,” Hidetoshi shook his head, “Do stop before you embarrass yourself further. If there are two things I cannot stand, it is injustice and puns-”

“-Hey, what did he mean by ‘for both our sakes?”

The two looked away from their banter to see a third person had entered the conversation. It was another student council member, a stout boy with neatly trimmed, auburn hair. It was a touch lighter than Minako’s own and way less red in tint. She had seen the boy hanging around the fringe of meetings, mostly silent and glaring everyone else, but now he protested with them openly.
Minako thought his name was Hinata.

“Well, what's he talking about?” the boy (possibly named Hinata) asked again. “I thought this was council business, not a conflict of interest. What gives?”

Minako was taken aback at his harsh tone but remained in her seat with her mouth shut. There was no need to reason with someone who tried to dominate the conversation without civility.

Hidetoshi, on the other hand, rose to the occasion with crossed arms and a dismissive attitude.

“He just wants to create a better school environment, so he asked for help from an apt student.” He motioned to Minako. “Just like how the President asked Arisato-kun to join the Student Council. I don’t know what the problem is.”

“You can't decide something like that without the President's permission!” Hinata said, his voice loud enough to turn a few heads. “God, you’ve got a stick shoved all the way up your-”

“-Oi!” Minako cut in before he could utter a single swear word. Her gaze flitted over to the audience that was beginning to take notice of the scene. “We’ve got impressionable eyes watching so use your inside voice, huh?”

Hinata gave her a nasty sneer before turning back to Hidetoshi. “You know what I mean.”

“I also don’t see how this concerns someone on the Student Affairs Committee.” Hidetoshi finally waved the enraged boy off. “Shouldn’t you be working on those notices for final’s week right now? I heard the only person who hasn’t pitched in is currently trying to tell the Disciplinary Captain how to conduct himself. Now isn’t that backward?”

Hinata opened his mouth to start arguing but snapped it closed when he realized there was no point anymore. He turned on his heel and went back to his side of the room. Roaming eyes followed him as he went.

“Teacher’s pet.” he snarled. “Have fun playing cops an’ robbers.”

Without another word, he was back with his own committee.

Hidetoshi sighed and turned back to Minako. “I suppose I must thank you for shutting him up. He can be quite a pain when he wants to be.” He gave her a half-smile. “With every good man, there must be ten others worth dirt.”

Minako leaned on her work table. “I'm more worried about you. Do you think you can handle this one solo? Seems like you’ll need all the help you can get.”

“Well, someone broke the rules, and we should find out who. It's our responsibility, right?” Hidetoshi answered, shoving his hands in his pockets and looking out over the crowded room. “We sure have to deal with a lot of B.S. around here, don't we Arisato-kun? You seem to be the only sensible, conservative, young woman around. Everyone else is just too... apathetic to what is right in front of them. Too blind to seek the truth. And too lazy to become aware of those truths.”

Minako felt more than a little smothered by his words. “I don’t know about sensible, but I suppose I’m a bit too old fashioned for my own good.”

Hidetoshi chuckled.

“But is that really such a terrible thing?”
For the rest of the day, Minako and Hidetoshi spent their time chipping away at the monotonous paperwork and chatting over whatever came to mind.

The rain from yesterday continued on and the passing hours seemed to crawl at an almost painful speed, leaving everyone ready for the weekend.

Still, Minato felt giddy with his first Kendo meet right around the corner and Minako was busy with juggling her duties as Secretary. For him, time seemed to move too fast, especially with finals fast approaching and missions to Tartarus starting up again. Was it too much to ask for a break in all this madness? Even just five minutes alone?

That’s when they decided it was best to take matters into their own hands. With no clubs to go to or Student Council meetings to attend, the Arisato siblings decided to make a stop at the bookstore together. It had been weeks since they went as a pair rather than on individual visits.

Bunkichi and Mitsuko welcomed them with open arms and piping hot tea.

“It’s a delight to see you both together again!” Mitsuko motioned for them to take a seat behind the register counter so they could all be close together. “My lucky stars, you two look better as a pair. Have you ever considered wearing matching outfits? That would be absolutely adorable!”

Minato nearly spit up his Earl Grey at the very thought of him and Minako coordinating clothes like when they were children. It was embarrassing then, it would be a death sentence now.

Minako simply laughed off the notion with a catty grin. “I don’t know, we’ve got pretty different tastes in style. It would be a flat-out disaster!” She flattened her skirt. “I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing a baseball an old t-shirt and cargo pants, no sir-ee.”

“Not if I’m dead first,” Minato grumbled through the steam, “I’d rather give Satan a big, sloppy kiss than wear anything from the opposite sex.”

Yes, death was an honorable way to go when one’s reputation was at stake. One must always have a certain level of shame. However, dying was not on his agenda for the next few years, hopefully for the next fifty years. He would just have to make sure he would never be coerced into a situation like that.

Even if it was a favor to a good friend.

It was never going to happen.

Ever.

Mitsuko laughed at the boy’s dramatics. “My goodness, children these days are just so colorful! You’ll worry yourself into an early grave with that kind of talk.” She turned to her husband with a wistful smile as he came around to the back of the counter. He had just finished up with helping a customer and was joining the impromptu get-together “Do you remember when we were like that, so young and dramatic? It makes me miss those days of youth.”

Bunkichi gave them all an owlish stare. “Um...” He glanced over at the siblings and pointed a bony finger at them. “Who are you two? I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Minato gave pause at the old man’s statement. “Huh?”

“What?” Minako gasped. “B-but it’s us, Minako and Minato-“
“Just kidding!” Bunkichi beamed at his own joke, proud that he had hoodwinked them. He settled himself into a chair with a cup of coffee clutched close to his chest. “I'm just joking. I know who you two are. I wouldn't forget you that easily, I'm not that old, yet!”

The siblings let out a sigh of relief. Minato was worried for a moment that they would be dealing with a classic case of dementia. No, it was just a classic case of prankster grandpa.

Mitsuko lightly slapped her husband’s arm. “Don’t scare me like that!” She turned back to the two Arisatos, shaking her head. “He’s been terribly forgetful lately. I don’t know whether to take him seriously or not anymore.”

Bunkichi ignored his wife’s complaints. “Let me tell you what’s giving me a headache, that boy running off to be with his friends instead of helping around the shop.” He motioned to the sales floor crowded. They had cleaned up since the siblings had last been there but it still lacked some much-needed breathing room. “He should be helping customers or stocking the new arrivals! I swear, sometimes with that boy. . .”

Minato was once again left confounded. “What boy?” he asked. “Do you mean me?”

Mitsuko suddenly went pale at the question. “Minato-chan. . .”

Something was wrong.

“No, no, no!” Bunkichi interrupted, not reading the air of the room. “Not you, our spoiled son. He hasn’t been back in a while. I'm sure he'd rather be ‘hanging out’ with his friends than taking care of an old man like me.”

The man’s tone was melancholic as he spoke.

Just how long had this son been gone?

Did he hang out with a bad crowd?

Did he get married and move far away?

“You two have a son?” Minako set her tea aside. “Does he live out of town or nearby?”

“Let’s see. . .” Bunkichi thought for a moment before finally looking to his wife. “Where did he run off to, dear? Seems like my old mind’s failed me yet again.”

Mitsuko glanced at Minato briefly. The same loneliness that her husband had clung to her.

“Mitsuko?” he asked in an almost hushed voice. “Where’s your son?”

The elderly woman grew increasingly uncomfortable. She swirled a tiny spoon through her tea as if to preoccupy herself with something else.

“Dear, don’t you remember?” she finally said. “He isn’t coming home, not today.”

“What, but he’s-?” Bunkichi gave himself a moment before frowning. “Oh. . . that’s right.”

Minako gave her brother a concerned look before reaching out to Mitsuko. The girl took the woman’s hand in her own. “Is everything okay?”

Mitsuko shook her head.
“Our son, he’s . . . deceased. He has been for a few years now.” She took a sip from her tea. “We haven’t spoken about him in a while and yet the memory is still quite raw.”

Minato gulped and felt a nervous itch on the back of his neck. “I’m sorry for your loss.” he and Minako accidentally said in unison. There was a pregnant pause before he decided to continue.

“We know how you feel. . . we lost our parents when we were pretty young. Car accident. . .”

Minako nodded along. “All of us were in it but. . . we were the only ones who made it out.”

It may have been a small, empathetic gesture on their part, but the couple gave the siblings a glassy-eyed stare, shocked at their story.

“Oh my goodness,” Mitsuko patted Minako’s hand, “You poor things! You’ve both been alone all this time? What about extended family? Surely they must.”

Minato shook his head. “We don’t hang around, if ya’ know what I mean.”

“Not even you’re own kin, eh?” Bunkichi had taken out his pipe and began to stuff it with tobacco bitterly. He burned the leaves it with a silver lighter and took a long, slow drag. “My apologies, Minato-chan, Minako-chan. I hope I’m not making you feel uncomfortable with all these heavy emotions. You even shared a sliver of your past; children should never experience life without a mother and father caring for them, let alone bear the weight of early independence.”

Minako smiled at his words. “It’s nothing to worry about. Not all of our relatives were bad; some of them really loved us but they couldn’t afford to keep us around.” She gripped back at Mitsuko. “Besides, we’ve always had each other and we finally convinced the others we can live on our own. In fact, we get to stay in Iwatodai until we both graduate.”

Still, the couple was unconvinced. Minato could see them silently communicating as if they had learned something truly, depressingly scandalous.

Finally, they seemed to come to an agreement as Bunkichi tapped his pipe to get some ashes out. “Hey, hey, why the gloomy faces? It’s dark outside. I don't need it to be dark in here too.” He gave Minato a pat on the back. “If you youngsters ever need a pair of sticks-in-the-mud to boss you around, don’t be afraid to stop by. We’ll always have a place waiting.”

Mitsuko hummed. “Yes, there will be a loaf of melon bread with your names on it. No notice needed.”

Minato would never admit it out loud, but it was tempting to know they had parental figures for the first time in many years.

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**Thundaboi:** Hey, can you pass on a message to everyone?

**Me:** u know, txting in class bad, u should be paying attention :P

**Thundaboi:** . . . ? You’re texting, too.

**Me:** fair nuff, pls continue

**Thundaboi:** The Chairman just told me that Fuuka is being released from the hospital. We’ll talk to her this evening. Come to the command room as soon as you get back.
Me: Coolio, anything else?

Thundaboi: No, that’s it.

Me: neat!!

Me: [picture sent]

Thundaboi: Why did you send me a picture of the blackboard?

Me: if ur not gonna look up, I might as well send da notes 2 u

Thundaboi: um

Thundaboi: Thanks?

The time had finally come to officially meet with Fuuka Yamagishi.

Everyone gathered in the control room after school, patiently waiting for the Chairman to arrive with the girl and Mitsuru. The three seemed to be running behind schedule considering that traffic looked heavy downtown. Taking a car just wasn’t practical when most of the roads were packed with rush hour in full swing, making the other members of SEES antsy.

It had been too long since they had a new student join. Especially with Fuuka’s Persona, she would be a perfect asset. All they wanted was to see what she would say when the question of becoming an official member of the team was asked.

So Minako took it upon herself to prepare a little treat of lemonade to state off the nervous energy. She had leftover lemons from their victory dinner and didn’t want them to go bad, so it all worked out in whipping up an on-the-fly beverage.

“Thank you so much!” Yukari took a large gulp of her drink. "Is there anything you don't know how to make?"

Minako gave a small bow and claimed a cup for herself, having served all the others. “Well, liver is kinda tough to work with and I hate working with it. Ya’ can’t make something that’s already a lost cause.” She threw a wink at Minato who had gone stiff at the mention of the putrid meat. “Right, nerd?”

He glared at her. “Label things next time.”

“Use your eyes next time.” Minako stuck her tongue out. “You already need cheaters, why doncha invest in some real glasses?”

“Idiot.”

“Grandpa.” Minako huffed and plopped herself down next to Akihiko who decided to take one of the last lemons for himself rather than grabbing a cup of lemonade. He said that the drink was too sweet for his tastes and preferred the real thing. She leaned over to whisper just loud enough for the others to ignore them, “Feel free to punch him. I’ll PAY you in free beef bowls.”

Her fellow senior shrugged. “Sure, I guess. . . thanks for the snack by the way.”

Without warning, he took a huge bite of his lemon, rind, pulp, all of it was consumed like an apple.
“Holy crap, senpai!” Junpei screeched from the other couch. “He’s lost his mind!”

“H-hey! Slow down there,” Minako flinched back. “I’m all for not wasting food but goodness gracious! You’ll choke on the peel!”

“What’s wrong with all of you?” Akihiko asked after swallowing; he wasn’t rude after all. “I love eating lemons like this. It’s healthy, efficient, and tastes better with the rind. You don’t get that if you waste time getting rid of it. Is that really so strange?”

Yukari nodded vigorously. “Normal people don’t do that in public, senpai.”

Akihiko glanced down at his bitten-into lemon. “I see. . . my bad, I guess.”

However, instead of taking the feedback, he continued to chomp on the fruit like tomorrow was a figment of their imaginations.

Minako sighed but decided to leave it be. “Live and let live, everybody.” she conceded.

As it had been said millions of times before, ‘To thine own self be true.’

Even if ‘thine own self’ was weird.

They continued to chat amongst themselves for a few moments longer, talking about their day and other such trivialities until the door to the control room was opened.

Mitsuru was the first to enter, followed by the Chairman who ditched his usual brown suit for a charcoal grey (for once, a welcome change in attire). Both seemed to be in high spirits if the subtle grins on their faces didn’t already give it away. They wasted no time in taking their places and settled in for their destined meeting.

“I see we’re all here, excellent!” Ikutsuki remarked before turning back to look at the partially opened door. “Miss Yamagishi? Don’t be timid, please come in and have a seat.”

And who should enter last of all, wearing a blue sundress and white cardigan, but the girl named Fuuka? She shut the door softly behind her, padding along like a jittery puppy scoping out its new home, then took up an empty folding chair used for overflow, tucked away against the wall just in case it was ever needed.

A metal folding chair? That was no way for a guest to be treated.

“Why don’t you sit by me?” Minako offered, patting the empty space next to her. “You’ll feel a lot better than that rickety, ol’ thing.”

Fuuka was frozen for a moment at the offer, eyes darting at the chair in her hands until she leaned it back against the wall. “T-thank you, Arisato-senpai.” Without another word, she was by Minako’s side and somehow still squirming at all the attention she had drawn to herself.

The poor girl and she wasn’t even a member.

“What a kind person our field leader is. I oughta give you a promotion one of these days.” Ikutsuki gave the senior a grateful nod before turning back to the rest of the group. “Everyone, you did an outstanding job uncovering the truth of these monster Shadows. To begin, I wanted to let you know that the three girls have all regained consciousness and will be back at school tomorrow. This is all thanks to you’re combined efforts so enjoy that news.”
Minako heard the junior next to her let out a sigh of relief. “Moriyama-san, everyone…”

Ikutsuki spared a peek in Fuuka’s direction but continued. “From what I understand, they each came to school around midnight and waited for the security guard to leave. They were attacked by Shadows near the gate, as the Dark Hour began. However, the facts became twisted because of rumors concerning a ghost story.”

Yukari scoffed at Junpei. “I knew right from the beginning that it wasn’t a ghost. Where’re your dumb superstitions now, Ace Defective?”

Junpei groaned and looked away from the gloating archer. “Give me a break. I’m just the messenger.” He smirked. “Besides, you believed every word ’til the bitter end. Who’s the one with ‘dumb superstitions,’ you or me?”

“No that it matters,” Minato interjected, “But you both licked that ghost story up. . . just sayin’.”

Yukari and Junpei were flabberghasted at the observation, jumping at the chance to shoot their dissenting classmate down. “Shut up, Minato!”

Would the arguing ever end between Stupei Iori and Yukatan Takeba? The world still had yet to uncover the truth.

“It’s all my fault.”

All eyes were on Fuuka as her tiny voice pierced through the wall of banter and malice.

“Are you kidding?” Yukari was quick to defend the honor student. “You were the victim in all of this! How in the world is this your fault when you did what you could?”

Fuuka crumpled in on herself. “I-I made everyone fuss over me. I made so many people worried. My parents, the school, Moriyama-san . . .” She clutched at the sleeves of her cardigan. “All of you were badly injured just to protect me. All I could do was stand by and watch, even at the end of the battle. I was so afraid but couldn’t do much to help fight.”

Minako’s heart sank at the girl’s words. It was an all too familiar feeling: regret, helplessness, discouragement rolled up into one abomination.

Junpei fidgeted in his seat. Even he could sense the heaviness in the air. “Man, that just ain’t true. . . we’d probably be dead right now if it was.”

Of course, how could any of those things be right?

“Junpei-kun’s right. . .” Minako decided reached out to give Fuuka’s arm a gentle pat. “We could’ve lost that fight if you weren’t there. You saved our lives and you should feel good about that.” The girl met her gaze, prompting a smile. “You have a special power that you can use to help others. It might not be as flashy as ours but it’s something else.”

“A special power?”

Mitsuru rose from her chair at the head of the room, carrying a briefcase half the size of the one Minako and Minato had gotten their Evokers from. “Just as we explained in the car, we call it ‘Persona’, a manifestation of one’s soul. A power that only a select number of people can wield.” She placed the case on the coffee table and flipped it open.

Inside was the Evoker Fuuka used the night they were ambushed in Tartarus. It had a small scratch
on the muzzle but was still in peak condition.

“And just as I said in the car, we extend an invitation to you. Join us and fight the Shadows to protect this city, or refuse and you may walk out of here for good. We will never bother you again.” Mitsuru stepped away from the table. “This is a volunteer position. Whatever the choice, we shall respect your decision, even if you should say no.”

“Mitsuru-senpai...” Fuuka breathed. She teetered on the edge of her seat, hovering over the case but keeping her distance, all the same. Her gaze suddenly shifted to Akihiko, having already heard from all of her seniors except one.

He easily sensed her confliction and offered a small nod. “It’s not easy but things are never boring. That’s a bonus, I guess.”

Minako chuckled at his brashness before returning to Fuuka. She was set on staring at the Evoker, just waiting to be picked up and used once more. “And don’t worry about the fighting. We’ll be doing all the dirty work from here on in. We’ve got your back.”

There was no response. She continued to stare.

Yukari cleared her throat from across the way. “You know, we're not trying to pressure you, so if you need some time to think about it... and if you join, you'll have to live here...”

All at once, Fuuka steeled herself and pivoted to Mitsuru. “I'll do it, I'll help you!” She went back to Yukari who had flinched back at the outburst. “That's fine. I'd rather live here than at home anyway. It feels a lot quieter, much less chaotic.”

Minato huffed. “That'll last about two seconds.” In a show of good faith, he extended a hand across the table. “Welcome aboard the crazy train.”

Minako was amused as Fuuka strained her arm across the coffee table to return the handshake. Junpei made things worse by adding in a high-five above her head and nearly out of reach. The girl was just terribly short and had arms the length of a dry pasta noodle. It was a miracle that she didn’t have to climb over the table and risk falling, all in the name of formalities.

“We really appreciate this. We'll have the school talk to your parents, to resolve any issues.” Mitsuru straightened herself. “If there are any questions, don’t hesitate to ask me or our field leader. Arisato can fill you in on how we run everything in Tartarus while I handle the technicalities. Anything is fair game.”

“Wait a minute. Aren't we dragging her into this a bit fast?” Yukari asked.

Mitsuru ignored the question.

The junior had a good point though: everything was moving at almost breakneck speed these days. Things were barely this jumbled even when the first two months of the school year had brought the number of Persona-users from two to six. That was not counting all of their club activities and out-of-school hobbies that took up most of the day.

Had SEES always operated akin to a hospital Emergency Department? Random hours with little to no downtime in between? No guarantees of a good day or a bad one?

Fuuka brought her hands up to wave Yukari. “Um, it's okay, really. Thank you, though.” She folded them back on her lap. “I’ll manage somehow, especially with all the support.”
Ikutsuki reeled everyone back in with a snap of the finger. “Now then, onto the big news.” He leaned back in his chair and shimmied to sink deeper into the cushions. “Those special Shadows showed up again. We still don’t know where they’re coming from. But, Akihiko is right about one thing. Their appearances seem to coincide with the full moon. We’ll take that into consideration from now on.”

“So, they’re kinda like werewolves then, huh?”

Minato pinched Junpei’s arm at the comment. The action received a small yelp of pain.

“It’s a big advantage for us to know when to expect them.” Akihiko got everyone back on track by quickly reverting the conversation back. “It’ll give us time to prepare and train in Tartarus as much as possible. Now, on the day of the fight, we’ll be ready to get in the ring.”

Minako caught her brother giving her an encouraging expression. He added a discrete wink once they made mutual eye-contact.

“Anything else you wanna add, leader?”

Was he really testing her skills?

Did he really want her to assert her position?

She took it as a sign to step in, rising from the couch and putting her hands on her hips. “Then I guess we’ve gotta start up the missions while there’s still a break for us.” she said, looking to Fuuka. “We’ll wait until you’re settled first and then get rolling. God only knows what we’re up against when the full moon comes along, so I hope you’re ready to show us what you’re made of!”

Fuuka brightened. “I’ll do my best!”

Everyone stayed in the control room a few minutes longer to welcome their new member before splitting off until dinner. Fuuka had to return home but was promised her own meal to commemorate this exciting moment.

After the meeting and a quick meal, the siblings decided to study for finals in Minato’s room.

Just like when they were children, they spread out a comforter on the floor as if they were going on a picnic. As an added touch, Minako brought a bowl of candy from her secret stash for them to share. What good was work when there was nothing to keep your left brain busy?

Junpei and Yukari were good company when they all decided to break bread and dig their heels in but the constant banter left a lot to be desired. It had been some time that just the two Arisatos, textbooks, and three hundred pages of notes were alone together. The thought was almost alien considering it had been so commonplace over the years. This was not even counting individual studies where they were in the same house.

Minato felt oddly calm when it was just some old tunes on their old radio and the scratching of graphite on paper to fill the void of silence. There was nothing that could compare, especially when the other person knew all the right words to sing a duet with him.

“I never really feel quite right and I don’t know why, all I know is that something’s wrong. Every time I look at you, you look so alive~”

Minako chuckled at Minato’s less than stellar English pronunciations. She took the opportunity to
show off. “Tell me how you do it, walk me through it. I’ll follow in every footstep! Maybe on your own, you take a cautious step. Do ya’ wanna give it up~?”

Together, they attempted to match pitch on the chorus without waking the others up.

“All I want is for you to shine! Shine down on me. Shine on this life that’s burning out~”

Somehow, Minako was unable to tap into her usually shrill voice to create (at least) a false soprano. Minato was more used to singing low and slow, ending with him tripping over the consonants and missing the beginning of the next verse. It continued on in the background as they both shared a laugh over the miserable failure.

“I say a lot of things sometimes that don't come out right, and I act like I don't know why. I guess a reaction is all I was looking for~”

“I just can’t sing high and soft.” Minako took a moment to catch her breath.

Minato rolled his eyes and returned to planning out his essay for Miss Toriumi. “You can’t sing, period.”

“You looked through me, you really knew me like no one has EVER looked before~”

“And you can’t speak Eng-rish anymore, nerd.” She bopped him on the head with the eraser end of her pencil. “We spent an entire school year in America and you retain nothing? Grandma and Grandpa would be disappointed if they knew all their hard work went to waste.”

“They’ll live,” Minato flicked a fluorescent-colored taffy at his sister’s face, “I think they’re more concerned that their only granddaughter is abusing her little brother.”

“Prove it.”

“I have witnesses.”


“Myself.”

Minako let out a faux gasp. “That doesn’t count! Where’s the proof?”

“Baby on your own you take a cautious step. Do you wanna give it up? But all I want is for you to Shine, shine down on me. Shine on this life that's burning out~!”

They settled back into relative peace after their spat. All that remained was the whirl of a fan, lead on paper, and that song they gave up on singing. They instead opted to hum along rather than risk breaking a window with their mismatched vocal ranges.

Minako also picked up the taffy and popped it into her mouth with a loud smack, as if to make some sort of statement. Minato peered over the rim of his reading glasses to give her an annoyed frown.

“Do you mind?”

“Let me think about it... yes.”

“I know, I know, girl you got something! Shine, shine down on me. Shine on this life that's burning out~!”
After some time of listening to the drawling chorus, Minato removed his cheater to look at his watch. To his dismay, it was almost time for the Dark Hour to begin.

Standing up and stretching out, Minato started to dig through his belongings for candles. At least they could keep the party going with primitive means. “Looks like we won’t have Hellsing for much longer.” he bemused. “I swear, the Dark Hour is trying to ruin my life piece by piece.”

“The Dark Hour isn’t a person, nerd.” Minako said without looking up from her notebook.

“Baby on your own you take a cautious step. Do you wanna give it up? But all I want is for you to shine! Shine down on me (just show me something). Shine on this life that’s burning out (you give me something that I never know)~!”

Once the candles had been secured and a lighter stashed nearby, Minato went back to work, glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He left off on what he was planning on using for sources. It was a tie between going all-digital or planting his feet in at the library. A combination of both was tempting but felt like the easy route.

“To be, or not to be: that is the question.” he said aloud. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles? And by opposing end them. To die- to sleep.’’

“Okay,” Minako put down her pencil, ‘I get you’re an emo, but really? That’s the oldest quote in the ‘woe is me’ playbook. At least throw in something with less suicide and more exasperation. Is that too much to ask?”

Minato couldn’t help a smirk. “No more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks. That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep...’”

“I really dislike you right now.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not impressed.”

It was worth spending an entire weekend in his sixth year memorizing Shakespeare's famous monologue.

Even if it was to annoy Minako, the reaction was priceless.

“Shine (it gonna kill me if you give something away). Shine yeah (I wanna know what's going in on your mind). Shine on this life~”

The radio shut off just as the singer was about to finish the tune. It left a creepy echo in Minato’s ears as his mind filled in the blanks silence had covered up. The lights in the room also went dark, their fan stopped whirling, and all that remained was the ambient static of the Dark Hour.

Or lack thereof.

“You've both prevailed yet again.”

Or a certain boy that only made an appearance at the most arbitrary of times.

Both siblings looked at the bed to find their mysterious guest watching them right back, laying on his stomach with head propped up in his hands, a smile plastered on his face. As always, he was waiting to be acknowledged before getting down to business.
“Hold still for a sec.” Minako reached up to flatten an unruly cowlick, withdrawing once she was done. “That’s better, you’ve gotta take better care of yourself.”

The boy shrugged. “I don’t know when I would have the time.”

Minato set aside his essay planner to focus on the young visitor. “Looks like we’re due for a regularly scheduled pat on the back.”

“Humorous, as per usual.” The boy slithered closer to them so he hung like a ragdoll off of the bed. He somehow kept his head from lolling, digging his elbows into the side of the bed. “But, it’s funny. . . It doesn't seem so certain, considering the vast potential within you two. As a matter of fact, your powers seem to have changed quite a bit.”

Minako sat up. “Is that a bad thing?”

The boy shook his head. “I’m simply making an observation. The future is constantly changing based on the choices you make and the path you follow.” He leaned a little more forward and braced his hands in front of him. As if he were a gymnast, the boy tumbled to the floor and sat in the middle of the siblings. Once settled, he picked at the comforter that softened his fall. “And since there’s two of you now, the future has twisted considerably. I have no inclination of how things will end, good, bad, or otherwise.”

Minato gave pause at the word “now.”

That implied that this was a repeat of events prior. It was possible that there were other people who went through the same thing as SEES. Maybe the boy had been tasked with hovering over them at one point or another.

“Were there other Persona-users like us? With multiple Personas?” the teen asked. “I mean, it can’t just be us two, out of the billions of people in the world. That’s just too small of odds.”

Again, the boy shrugged. “I wish I could remember. What I do remember is you two, feelings of dread, and that’s all.” He gave Minato a haggard grin. “As I said before, I know what I know when I need to know. All I know is that the future is uncertain because and right now, there are two with the same but different power.”

Now, it changed the meaning of the entire sentence.

There had to be others like the Arisato siblings. Probability demanded that a precursor existed before they awakened, maybe before they were even born. And if this boy could sense that the future was affected by two, then there had to be one.

Minato could feel a headache coming on.

Minako tapped her chin. “Still, if you know things are different because of certain conditions, that has to be worth something.” She gave the boy a nod. “Thanks anyway, we’ll probably figure it out sooner or later. Just let us know if you have anything else.”

“There is one other thing I wished to discuss.” The boy crossed his legs and gave them his best doe eyes. “If you don't mind, can I be your friend? I'm very curious about you two, and I have a feeling if I stick around, maybe I can pinpoint what that feeling means.” He scooted closer and reached out to hold their hands. “Is that okay?”

Minato looked down at the hand the boy was holding. The former nearly dwarfed the child in size, one clean while the other caked in dirt.
They were such pitiful hands that clung on a little tight.

How long has this child gone without a proper bath?

“It’s fine with me, I love hanging out like this!” Minako assured. “What about you?”

“Is that even a question?” Minato took his hand away and ruffled the boy’s dusty hair. “But I’m curious about something, what’s your name? We never got it.”

The boy giggled at the affection.

A new light sparkled in his hazel eyes.

“You may call me... Pharos.”

6/12/09

So... Sanada-senpai ate a WHOLE lemon in front of Minako and she brushed it off after a minute.

My sister is crazy but this guy is insane.

Turns out the boy we keep meeting has a name: Pharos.

Whether it's real or not, I did some research because I was curious. The name is Egyptian for beacon or lighthouse. Specifically, it's a reference to an island with a "lighthouse" meant to guide sailors to safety. It's one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Go figure.

-Minato Arisato

Chapter End Notes

Links below for the full "To Be, or Not To Be" monologue and "SHINE" lyrics (respectively):

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56965/speech-to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-question

http://www.animelyrics.com/anime/hellsing/shine.htm
You Got A Friend In Me

Chapter Notes

This is just a little shorty I whipped up in between shifts at my winter/summer break job. I don't know what it was about working three weddings and preparing for the local New Years Ball (my hometown is VERY old fashioned) that I will also be working, but I really wanted to write more about these dorks.

Consider this my New Years send off. I'll be seeing everyone in 2019! Let's make this year a good one!

High school was never Fuuka Yamagishi’s favorite thing in the world.

Correction, it had to be at the very top of the list of things that were the worst part of her life.

Academics were fine, in fact, she enjoyed putting the work into her studies and loved the challenge of gathering and interesting info to use at a later date. Even the thrill of having to run a chemistry lab or WebQuest on a time limit was appealing when it came to school. Such things were actually delightful and depended solely on individual skill and merit. And with a school as notable as Gekkokoun, there was plenty of all those things.

Those were her reasons for not begging on her hands and knees to be homeschooled. That being said, the bad parts of education often overshadowed the good by a wide margin.

“Hey, look... It's the ghost girl.”

Thus, the circus called the “2E Junior Class” was beginning.

It was time for the audience to take their seats and laugh at the only act that day: the Return Mysterious Ghost Girl.

Fuuka gripped her book bag tightly to her chest as she entered her classroom for the first time in almost two weeks. The eyes of her fellow students burned holes through her thin, white cardigan and teal turtleneck. There was no black uniform jacket to help hide her amongst the crowd, lest she wanted to overheat and faint before the teacher even arrived.

Instead, she tugged at her collar and took her seat at the back of the room.

“Quiet, she can hear you!”

The first thing about cooping with rumors was to pretend you were deaf.

Her main focus was on preparing for all the coursework that day. Thankfully, that was all she had to worry about since her teachers had scraped together a binder of notes that she had missed. Everything from Classic Literature to Mathematics, not a single pickle out of place. It was even color-coded by Miss Toriumi with a variety of bright and cheerful shades of cyan, magenta, and yellow.
Fuuka made sure to jot down a quick reminder on one of her many Post-It notes: 'Get Miss Toriumi a nice "thank you" card with some flowers on it. It must have taken her time and money to spruce up such a dusty, old binder that had been laying around since the school had been (re)built. Also, every woman loves chocolate. Buy some from the corner market on Eighth Street after school. Remember, she hates white chocolate but loves dark!'

“I wonder if she has that thing that’s been going around. What’s it called?”

“Apathy Syndrome, I think. Don’t quote me on it!”

“That’d explain why she’s so quiet.”

The voices started to slip through the cracks of Fuuka’s mental wall. She dug into her bag to hopefully find something else to keep busy. The class just would not start soon enough. For once, she actually wondered where Mr. Ekoda was.

Her fingers brushed over her trusty planner. She could write about what she wanted to do after school and maybe doodle another cartoon alien to add to her growing collection.

It would be the perfect distraction.

Before she knew it, Fuuka was already brainstorming some ideas:

**Things I Want To Do:**

- Go shopping for my new dorm room.
- Finally get around to baking my first batch of cookies (yummy!)
- Stop by the bookstore and get a new coding book.
- Adopt a pet turtle and name him “Space Man Spiff (SMS)”.
- On the topic of SMS, get a new volume of “Kalvin and Hobbs”.

Okay, maybe the second to last one was out of the question since the school barred students from keeping pets in the dormitories, but a girl could dream. It was going to happen one day, not after school on this day, but someday after high school was over.

Yes, keep thinking about your future best friend.

“What’s she writing? A bunch of jibberish?”

“Why’s she smiling like that? It’s creeping me out.”

“She TOTALLY has Apathy Syndrome.”

Fuuka had no other ideas to add to the list of after-school activities. All of her other thoughts floating around seemed to cloud her ability to separate what was a small goal and what was a weekend endeavor.

Just as previously planned, she set herself to work on creating a new alien so there was one more to admire later. It was similar to the ones she made in the past, round like a ball and squishy like an octopus. However, this particular specimen would also be slightly altered with unique features to call its own.
A couple of antennas protruding from the head.

Three extra legs to make a quintet.

Take away one eye.

Give it a pointy tail.

A human hand covering up everything.

“Hey, Fuuka. You in there?”

That hand wasn’t a part of the drawing! Someone was trying to get her attention and she had been engrossed in her drawing the entire time.

“I’m so sorry!” Fuuka’s head shot up only to bow back down. She didn’t even have time to register the sweet-smelling person standing in front of her desk. “Please forgive me, I was caught up in what I was doing and one thing led to another and I thought your hand was part of the picture and you were probably waiting for me to answer and did I say I was sorry-”

“It’s okay, breathe!” a familiar voice urged. “Breath, I’m not mad. I just wanna talk but I can’t do that if you’re, like, hyperventilating.”

Fuuka dared to peer up after taking three deep breaths and five extra seconds to calm down. Standing before her was Natsuki Moriyama, hands on her hips and her mouth crooked in utter confusion.

Surprisingly, she seemed to be wearing less makeup on than usual, with more naturally colored eyeshadow, pale pink lipstick and forgoing her fake eyelashes. Even her outfit felt more barren with most of her bracelets gone, leaving a plain silver one in their place. It seemed almost wrong for the flashy trendsetter to walk around with proper dress code and modest accessories.

“Y-you-” Fuuka had to gulp on account of a dry throat. “You look different Moriyama-san. Is there a special occasion today or . . . ?”

Natsuki shrugged, playing with her single bracelet absentmindedly. “Don’t know, I just woke up this morning and didn’t really care about how I looked today. Too much work when I’m already so tan, ya’ know?” She rubbed the back of her neck. “It just doesn’t click anymore and I don’t know why. It sounds stupid but I just don’t wanna waste my time putting makeup on when I can sleep.”

“And, um. . . .” Fuuka pointed at her wrist. “I’ve never seen that bracelet before. Where did you get it? It’s very classy.”

Again, Natsuki was aloof. “It’s something that belonged to my mom before she left Dad and me for South Korea.” She gave a half-hearted smile. “My old man gave it to me but I never wanted to wear it. Now. . . . I think it makes me look more grown-up, classy.”

There was a definite change in Natsuki alright, a complete one-eighty.

Fuuka thought back to something Mitsuru had said at the hospital. She mentioned Natsuki was guarded by one of the more ‘honest’ members of SEES, a fellow junior from class 2-F.

Apparently, he had been annoyed with some of her more uncharismatic traits and went after her, looking for an ax to grind. There was a big argument between the two students resulting in them both feeling guilty over things they had done, things they said to hurt other people. That argument
caused Natsuki to break down in tears. It caused her to brave the terrors of the Dark Hour just to apologize sooner. She had embraced the girl she hurt, spilling her remorse with no expectations of forgiveness.

So, they commandeered Mitsuru’s motorcycle in the name of redemption.

Although she didn’t say who, Fuuka guessed by the late entrance it was the boy named Minato Arisato.

He made this all possible to an extent.

As for what Minato’s motives were, selfless or not, that was a mystery to be solved at a later date.

“I think it suits you, Moriyama-san.” Fuuka said.

“Well, thank you. . .” The tips of Natsuki’s ears flared to red at the compliment. “Anyway, enough about me. I heard you started living in the dorms, the same one as Mitsuru Kirijo. That’s pretty sweet, yeah?”

Fuuka felt a flutter in her stomach at the very mention of her new living accommodations.

The very thought of being in the same dorm as Yukari Takeba, Mitsuru Kirijo, Akihiko Sanada, the mysterious transfer students, and an infamous delinquent made her sick. Three of the most popular people in school was bad enough but add on a problem student and a pair of siblings without a known history, there was bound to be some attention coming Yamagishi’s way very soon. Attention was a death sentence for someone as skittish as herself.

“Y-yeah. . .” she eventually stuttered out. “. . . pretty sweet, I guess.”

Natsuki subdued her bashfulness when the mood shifted.

“You seem sad, what’s wrong?” She leaned over Fuuka’s desk. “If it’s that Junpei Iori guy, I’ve got some friends in the boxing club. They’ll take him out back for a few minutes and presto! Consider it handled, as far as you’re concerned-”

“N-no! That’s not it at all!” Fuuka waved Natsuki off. “No, it’s just that everyone’s so popular and new and. . . I-I just don’t know if I’ll fit in or if I even want to be associated with them. . .” She sighed and looked back down at her newest alien. It smiled up at her with its one, droopy eye and yet it was far from amusing. “. . . They all seem really nice but what about a few weeks from now? A few months? Will they still treat me the same way? Like an equal?”

Would they still call without her special because of her abilities?

What if someone new came along with stronger telepathic capabilities?

If that happened, would she be all alone again?

How come everything had to be so much more complicated?

“Fuuka. . .”

A soft hand covered Fuuka’s own, warm and gentle as if meant to be soothing. Perfectly manicured nails brushed over her skin and sent a pleasant shiver down her spine.

Such a feeling was something she had barely felt at home, never at school, and always out of pity. It was meant as a band-aid, a temporary fix to an amputated limb or missing organ. There was
nothing bad about it but it was not what she needed to feel better again. It was not what gave her that reassurance of loyalty and unconditional love.

Yet this time, it took the butterflies from her upset stomach. It forced her to meet a pair of dark, hazel eyes once filled with scorn, once so cruel and unwelcoming.

Now, all Fuuka could see was genuine care.

When Natsuki knew that the target of her kindness was listening, she spoke again, quiet but so powerful.

“Let me know if you need someone to talk to. Even if all those guys ignore you at the new dorm, I’ll be here you. . . just like you did for me, even when I pushed you away.” She cocked her head to the side. “Besides, you could probably use a friend outside that place, huh?”

Fuuka drew in a sharp breath but let a grin slip.

High school had to be the worst thing going for Fuuka Yamagishi at the young age of sixteen.

However, there were still certain things that she was willing to bear it for. Learning something new. Getting a decent scholarship to a fancy college.

Of maybe, accepting the love of a new friend.

“Moriyama-san. . . thank you.”

“Oh, come on. . . You can just call me Natsuki.”

“After nearly three months of sparring with a know-it-all future captain, killing Shadows in a death tower after midnight, and transporting groceries back to the dorm, the ultimate test lay on the horizon. The dawn of a new day would usher in a fanfare so loud, so proud, young men everywhere would have to bow out of deep respect. Woman and children will weep tears of pure joy at having witnessed such glorious skill with their own eyes-”

Yukari clamped her hand over Junpei’s mouth as he was mid-speech. “I swear if I hear one more word out of that hole you call a mouth, you can kiss your butt goodbye on the next mission. Got it, Stupei?”

The boy grumbled and easier detached her from him. “Jeez Yukatan, I’m just getting hyped up. This is Minato-kun’s big day! We’ve gotta cheer him on!” He threw a mock punch in the air above the archer’s head. “You just don’t get it, you’re in a girly sport. Only the manliest of men would understand.”

“You wanna see just how girly my sport is?” Yukari began to crack her knuckles. “Let’s do this then! Square up-”

“-Hey now, no fighting!” Minako intercepted the enraged girl before she could do any major harm, not that she could with her skinny muscles. “Save that energy for the you-know-whats, eh? The only person I should see beating another human being to a pulp is my brother. I thought we talked about this when you tried to throw Junpei’s hat out of the train door.”

Yukari scoffed but withdrew herself out of respect for Minako. “For the record, he started it. Both times.”
“Message received, cadet.” Minako then turned to Junpei. “Like you said a billion times before, this is Minato’s big day. Dial back the teasing just a smidgen or else it’ll be the day Yukari finally decided to murder you with her purse. Tomorrow, you can have at her all ya’ want.”

Junpei tipped his hat. “Can do, leader.”

“Good, we’re all on the same page then.” Minako readjusted her purse which had been slipping off in her haste to prevent disaster from striking. She pointed straight ahead to their destination: the Bay Area High School Sports Center. “Let’s boogie, I wanna find a seat so I can rest my feet.”

“Same.”

“Ugh, ditto Minatan.”

Peace had been restored to the miniature galaxy that was the flagship explorers of Tartarus. They marched on to make it to their favorite emo’s first Kendo meet.

Now that things had calmed down, Minako felt safe enough to dust off her sherbert orange blouse and matching penny skirt (a fabulous shade of pearl pink). As for footwear, she had a pair of white sandals to accommodate for the warming weather. It was an old-fashioned style straight from her mother’s closet, but if she had to play the role of an overbearing relative, she might as well look cute while doing it.

Besides, she spent most of her money on sweets and books. Women’s clothes do not come cheap, and without the money from her parent’s savings, hand-me-downs were a way of life. “You have to pay the fine to look fine” as her favorite Aunt would always say before maxing out her credit card for new high heels.

But Minako found herself avoiding such topics involving money on lovely days like today.

In any case, sweets and books were far better things to talk about at any time.

Junpei and Yukari, on the other hand, definitely had more than a few teenage styles in their closets.

The former could finally rid himself of his heavy, winter jacket and seemed to take inspiration from his chosen sport in how to dress. A simple purple t-shirt, workmen’s jeans, and a white flannel made him look like the type of guy who coaches little league teams in the park. Even his sneakers looked like he had just gotten off the field a minute ago with how much dust was on them.

If Junpei drew from baseball, then Yukari must have been watching too many beach movies. She sported a light pink tank top with some brand Minako didn’t know emblazoned on the chest. It was a thing with no low cuts, so it did not warrant any unwanted attention. She also had a pair of jeans with a stylish belt to boot, ending with some new-looking flipflops (also pink). Of course, her heart chocker remained around her neck.

Yes, it was just a young-ish aunt character and her two odd children who had a penchant for fighting with one another. What a lovely little image that must be considering just how much Minako did to earn the title of ‘the Mom Friend’.

Yup, nothing weird about that at all.

The three entered the sport’s center without having to fight a large crowd. Being a much smaller meet with only three teams competing, there was not a lot of reason to travel a long distance just to watch a tune-up match. In fact, the hosting school only opened one concession stand anticipating a
small crowd of parents and friends.

Still, the younger members of SEES wanted to be there for Minato and nothing else was happening anyway on that lazy Sunday. It was also a plus that Bay Area was just across town from Ghekkoukon High School. The commute was pretty speedy and cheap!

“Finally! I’ve been dying to sit all day.” Junpei had led the way to some prime seats towards the gym floor but just a little higher. They would be able to see all the action while still having a wider range of view of Minato’s heat. He offered for the girls to go ahead of him. “Ladies, watch your step.”

Yukari rolled her eyes, easily navigating the steep seating by her lonesome. “I’m not that delicate. I can handle this myself~”

Almost instantly, she slipped when making a step up to the next set of seats.

Junpei, already nearby, caught her just as she was about to go verticle and flop on her back.

“You’re welcome, by the way.” Junpei said.

To say that Yukari was a little frustrated when she realized her fumble was an understatement of the year. She pushed herself out of reach with an indignant huff. “Drop dead.”

Some people just could not be swayed by kind acts but Minako could only smile at Junpei’s gentlemanly act. “I think it was nice of him to catch you. Thank you for saving her, Junpei-kun.”

For the second time that day, Junpei tipped his hat, a smirk curving beneath the brim. “Can do, leader.”

The three students got comfortable with their seats just as the first round of matches began. Minato and his teammates exited the locker room and split off to their own areas. Minako saw her brother shaking as he made his way toward his assigned ring were she and the others perched themselves, nervous energy written all over his usually stoic face.

Yukari had snagged a copy of the competition bracket on their way into the arena. She scanned over it and let out a hum. “It’s gonna be a few rounds until we see him fight so now’s the perfect time to get some food.”

“Great, cause I’m starving!” Junpei got up and stretched out. “You guys want anything while I’m up? I can take your money and get it for you.”

Minako fished whatever spare yen coins she had and handed them over. “One lemonade and something savory to eat. I have too much candy back at the dorm.” She shrugged to herself. “It’s a miracle I’m not being rolled around like a beach ball.”

“Well, you do run with Akihiko-senpai most mornings. That’s gotta be the reason you’re still skinny.” Yukari also pitched in her own money. “Water and strawberry yogurt, make it snappy.”

“Yes, your highness.” Junpei stashed their money in his pocket and gave them a wave, “I’ll be back before he fights.” Without another word, he sped off the way they came to rustle up their orders.

“Hey, Minako-senpai?”

At the use of her name, Minako turned to face Yukari. “What’s up? Is everything okay?”
The junior laughed at Minako’s motherly tone. “Yeah, everything’s fine right now.” She scooted closer so she didn’t have to yell over the incecent chatter of the crowd. “There’s just something the guys and I have been thinking about lately, something we’ve noticed about SEES and I wanna get your opinion on it. As a leader.”

“I suppose, it’s my job after all.” Minako gave Yukari a gentle nudge to help loosen the tension between them. “What good is a leader that doesn’t do anything but bark orders? I’ve gotta be a good listener every once in a blue moon.”

“Hehe, thanks Minako. That makes this a lot easier.” Yukari cut off the usual honorifics which was a good sign of trust. Yukari could be relaxed and honest without feeling any pressure. “It has to deal with the other seniors, but please don’t take this the wrong way, I don’t wanna come off as disrespectful towards them.”

Minako was taken aback by how secretive this girl was acting. Why the need to keep her voice down if none of the other seniors of Ikutsuki were present? And what did they have to do with Yukari’s question?

Minako nodded, “So what’s on you’re mind?”

Yukari’s gaze darted away.

“W-what...” she began, unsteady despite no one giving a single thought to the two girls. “What do you think about Mitsuru and Akihiko-senpai? Personality-wise?”

That was all?

An inquiry on one’s character was no reason to be so afraid. It was natural for anyone to want to know what others thought, especially when it comes to understanding their views on other people. Gaining new perspectives is a key part of life.

Still, Minako pondered over the question.

“Well, that’s a tricky thing but I’ll give it a go,” she mumbled. Her answer would have to develop itself along the way. “They're really smart and they work hard. Especially Kirijo-san. She's a brilliant strategist, and if I had her brains, I’d skip high school and become a superstar CEO or something like that.”

“I suppose. . .” Yukari frowned at the response. “But a few days ago when Fuuka joined, don't you think Mitsuru-senpai sort of pushed her into joining? I know it's nice to have a new navigator around, especially during our last mission, but. . . it just feels wrong.”

So, Minako wasn't the only one who noticed Fuuka's quick recruitment, if they could even call it that.

It was true that the Arisato siblings were asked early on to join, but that was only after they got a taste of the Dark Hour. Junpei was given a week before he was transferred to the Iwatodai dorm. Fuuka only experienced it for the first time by wandering into Tartarus and now she was being moved to the third floor tomorrow.

Mitsuru and Akihiko were no fools, they knew that SEES needed to jump at every opportunity to improve. The power of Persona was a valuable thing. Discovering and bringing in new members might not always be under heartfelt circumstances or even the most conventional, again, looking and Fuuka's situation. It happened when it happened and it happened fast, clean, and calculated.
Dare Minako say it out loud, it was just an underground business at the end of the day.

That was how life worked. Not everything in life could be completely humanitarian.

But, as Minako was learning every day, SEES played a vital role in keeping people safe from the unknown threats of Shadows. She saw the blank stares of the Lost on her morning runs and it broke her heart to pass them by, knowing she could have saved them if she acted sooner.

Another mother or father unable to provide for their family.

A child that ceased to laugh and play with friends.

People, with feelings, hopes, and dreams of their own.

Every second they wasted on slowing down risked another person having their soul taken away.

Was personal bias or difference in approach really a reason to forget what they were fighting for?

“I can’t say I don’t sympathize with you, I get it. I don’t agree with shoving people on the front lines when they’d rather be safe at home.” Minako finally said. “Still, I think the others are doing what they think is right for, so much so, that they forget that we’re all a bunch of kids in high school. I wonder sometimes if they even remember they’re just like us.”

Yukari looked down at the gym floor to avoid eye contact. “I know, and I want to believe that’s the case but. . .” She glimpsed back at Minako, a certain uneasiness in her expression. “What if you’re wrong about them? What if they really see us that way?”

This girl worried more than a conspiracy theorist about mole people at the center of the Earth. How her hair wasn’t grey from stress was a wonder.

But if that really was the case, that Minako may have to stand up to her own peers for the sake of the team, then they would deal with the issue as it presented itself.

Minako sighed and offered a shrug.

“We’ll roll with it.”

By the time Junpei returned, Yukari calmed down about Mitsuru, Akihiko, and the state of the team. As it turned out, simple answers got her to let the problem go. She even thanked Iori for getting her food.

For the rest of the competition, for Minato’s sake, Minako put all thoughts of interpersonal drama out of sight and out of mind. Only her brother and his success mattered.

Minato and Kazushi ended up taking second and first respectively. It had been a close match but the newbie still had a ways to go. There was never a more satisfying moment in Minako’s life as a big sister (so far) when Minato caught her eye on the floor, waved, and got Kazushi to do the same.

Though they were destined to be rivals at this point, Minato somehow managed to find a friend.

Second place wasn’t so bad, in the grand scheme of things.

Hell, for a first competition, Minato was proud when he stood on that podium for something sports-related. He could still feel the adrenaline coursing through his blood but he willed himself to remain at attention. The judges even complimented his ability to adapt to different opponents in
such a short amount of time as they walked past.

They should see him when fights Shadows, now that would really get them talking.

All in all, when he looked out and saw Minako smiling at him, he couldn’t help but return the favor, Yukari, and Junpei cheering in honor of their school’s accomplishments.

Kazushi also enjoyed some of the glory provided by their own private cheer section.

It may have been a small meet but it was by no means small to them.

“Good job, ladies! Just outstanding work!” His coach howled as he entered the locker room. The whole team was preparing to catch a quick shower and head back to the school. “We just stole the top two spots from those pansies called men. Hah! More like a buncha fairies the way ya’ made them dance!”

His joke gleaned a couple of chuckles, but everyone was so tired, they were just trying to keep themselves from toppling over. Those who were stable enough to walk were just barely getting by on pure luck.

“Alright, we’ve got twenty minutes until we leave! Ya’ don’t have to panic but don’t take a luxury shower! We ain’t royalty so don’t act like it.” The coach was just about to duck out until he slithered back in for one last yell. “I’M TALKIN’ TO YOU, SHINTARO! WE’RE GONNA LEAVE WITHOUT YA’ THIS TIME!”

“That was one time, coach!”

Just about everyone shared a good laugh, Minato included, despite the soreness in his arms. He might not have witnessed "the incident" first hand but the team had taken pictures of a half-naked sophomore running to catch the bus, screaming at it to stop. Though he was a senior now, Shintaro Tateyama would be forever haunted by the memory of crossing traffic while trying to get a shirt on.

Almost everyone funneled themselves into the shower room and were starting to get rowdy again. As more and more left to get their turn in, some stopped by Minato and Kazushi’s spot to congratulate them on placing so high.

“Man, I wanna be just like you two when I move up in the ranks!” One of the first years said, bouncing around like a little kid at Christmas. “You guys fought like real warriors in the final match. I thought I would never breathe again until that knock-out blow!”

Kaz chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, but you’ve still gotta get some muscle on ya’ first.” He gave Minato a light slap on the arm. “Otherwise you’ll end up like this chicken-skinned twig: pale and no substance whatsoever.”

“Don’t forget who lost Ippon for getting pushed out of the ring.” Minato finally rid himself of his undershirt, sweat-drenched and in need of a washing machine. “You’re not exactly light as a feather.”

The first year chuckled before moving to leave. “Thanks for letting talk with ya’!” Before he disappeared, he gave them a toothy grin. “And congrats on the medals! You guys earned it!”

They both thanked the kid before returning to getting their gear off.

“I still say I tripped on my pant leg that time. There’s no way you’re strong enough to push me
yet.” Kazushi said.

“I don’t know,” Minato shrugged, “whether you tripped or whether I pushed you, none of those sounds like an appealing story. If I were you, I’d forget it ever happened and move on.”

Kazushi hissed when he tried to stand up and remove his outer clothing. “Fuck, that hurts like a bitch.” He sat back down and rubbed at his knee. “Damn, that was new. It’s never hurt when I’m just standing around.”

Minato stopped stripping down.

Ever since Kazushi admitted he was having chronic knee aches, they had both been keeping tabs on his condition in secret. The pain was fine before the competition began and even after all of his matches. For it to be hurting to violently and out of the blue, something wasn’t right.

Still, Minato had the sense to keep calm and roll with what he knew in the current moment. If nothing was discolored or broken, there was no need to cause a scene.

“Sounds like you got a cramp, it’ll pass if you try raising your leg up and keeping it straight.” Minato got off the bench so it could serve as a stand. He grabbed the leg Kazushi was clutching and laid it flat against the wood. “It’s gonna hurt like hell but you’ll thank me later.”

Kazushi nodded with a grimace. “Thanks, doc. I’ll make a note for myself.” He attempted to remove whatever clothing he could while in that position. “Ya’ know, I told my mom about my knee. She saw me limping home from practice and wouldn’t leave me alone until I told her.”

“That sucks, man.” Minato perked up from sorting out his clothes. “So, what’d she say? She gonna take you in or wait it out a little longer?”

Kazushi groaned. “She took me in yesterday before school without telling me where we were going.” He continued to massage his knee, a pained laugh escaping his lips. “I love her but fuck man, I thought I was gonna jump out of the car and run back to school. No warning, just tuck an’ roll!”

“Hehe, that sounds funny and sucky all at the same time.”

“Doesn’t it? My mom, the rest of the team…” He shook his head as the words faded from his mouth. “Why’s it have to be like that? It gets annoying when everyone around you is so nosy, huh?”

Has this kid even met the Queen of Nosiness: Minako Arisato?

Legend told of her stealing laptops and cellular devices just so her little brother would get his grades up.

It worked out in the end but it still made said brother angry to this day.

“You haven’t seen annoying until you met my sister.” Minato sighed before turning back to his friend. “If you don’t mind, what’d they do? Medicine is kinda my passion so… yeah. I’m curious.”

Kazushi seemed to be in the right mood to talk, a humble smile on his face. “They took some x-rays. Nothing too fancy like an MRI or CT. Those looked pretty cool though when we walked past those rooms.” He tried to bend his knee and test how much it could take, for now. “We were supposed to get the results today but apparently the radiologist was on vacation in Hawaii and a tropical storm hit. His flight got delayed until the worst of it passes. They’re gonna get someone
else on the case as soon as they can.”

More waiting for results that could determine where his future may go. It was always a tricky game with medicine, trying to find a person with the right degree when someone just as good could do it without one.

“By the way, don't tell anyone about me going to the hospital, alright? I-I know I’m always asking you to keep quiet but…” Kazushi motioned to his leg. “I’m not gonna let this slab of meat and bone ruin my season. Ya’ get me?”

Once again, Minato smirked and offered to lift him up.

“Come on, we’ve gotta shower before the guys start snooping.” He gave Kaz a curt nod. “And don’t worry, not a peep.”

“Thanks. . . I owe ya’ one.”

“To Minato’s first competition and Fuuka’s first night at the dorm!” Junpei raised his drink to the center of the dining room table. “Let’s let ‘em know they’re the guests of honor!”

“Here, Here!”

Minako smiled as everyone rose from their chairs to join in on the celebration. Glasses clinked together at Junpei’s toast to the two, blue-haired teens.

Minato, more than accustomed to having attention on him, just soaked in their stares. “I guess I should say thanks.” He smirked and took a sip of his cider. “Next time, I’ll be bringing back a nice first-place medal. Just you wait.”

Fuuka was somewhat embarrassed but still gave a small nod, raising her own glass to the others. “Thank you, everyone. I’ll make sure to do my best!”

“I’m certain you’ll do just fine, Yamagishi. With you as our official navigator, I will be able to rejoin the frontlines without a shred of worry.” Mitsuru reassured. “Even though I'm a bit out of practice, I will soon return to my prior form in due time.”

Yukari, who had been throwing side-long glances, found the control to put aside her earlier gripes and be supportive. Instead, she threw on a smile and was kind to the redhead. “I guess that means we’ll be able to take on more of the tower at once, now that we’ve got both of the original members working in the field. The more the merrier, as they say.”

The chatter continued from the dining room. They all settled into small talk about the day and the next mission coming up. Things were light for a change with all the bickering from last week forgotten.

They were starting to look like a real team.

However, Minako tried her best to find other things to do. If she could stay in the kitchen for a moment longer, the better life would be.

She wasn’t avoiding everyone because of what Yukari said earlier or even because of her duties as field leader, those could be easily let go. It was also not because of her occasional shyness. That could be hidden behind a clever grin and one-off joke about a topical issue.
No, Minako was feeling sick.

It came on so quickly. She felt fine on the train ride back to the dorm and while she prepared for dinner. There was no oddity in her tight schedule, no major event in the past few hours, nothing that could have triggered such a feeling. Minako kept herself in good health too by avoiding anything that could be a danger.

Still, here she was, cleaning dishes that had been scrubbed to death while she fought against a light head and queasy stomach.

It didn’t even feel as if she was physically ill either. There was no sluggish movement nor weakness in her muscles, no spike in temperature. No runny nose, no flushed cheeks, not even so much as a cough. All the things that would signal a true problem were absent from her list of symptoms.

Nothing was making sense.

What was going on? Why now of all times when she should be happy?

“Jesus Martha, you’re pale.”

Minako stopped scrubbed and turned to see Minato with an empty plate. He spoke softly enough that no one from the table could have heard his outburst.

The girl pouted and went back to her cleaning. “Did ya’ really have to take the Lord’s name in vain? It wasn’t even funny, nerd.”

“I know, but have you seen yourself in a mirror?” He closed the distance between them and set his plate to the side. There was an extra sponge laying nearby, which he took and set himself to work. “No wonder you’re dodging us like the plague, you look like you caught it. How long have you been sick?”

Minako frowned but continued to work. “I’m not sick, just a little. . . I don’t know.”

“Is that really what you’re going with?” Minato asked, grabbing a saucepan from the stack she put together. “I’m not a doctor, yet, but ‘I don’t know’ is a pretty lame excuse. No one just looks pale, skips eating, and hides behind the counter without a reason.”

“Well that’s it, I don’t know why but I’m feeling sick.” There was no point in hiding what was going on from her own brother, so she may as well come out and say it. “I was fine earlier until I started cooking. I took something for nausea, but I only feel worse. That’s all I know, honest.”

Minato hummed and set aside the saucepan, finished cleaning it in record time.

“That’s kinda weird. . .” There was a brief silence before he snapped his fingers. “How much have you been sleeping lately?”

Minako stopped cleaning to mull over the question.

“Maybe a couple of hours, at least three. I’ve been so busy with getting information on Fuuka-san, Student Council and other stuff, it’s hard to.” She stopped and let out an annoyed hiss, “-Crap. . .”

Minato chuckled. “Sleep deprivation, you’ve been working yourself to death and you didn’t even
know it.” He let go of his sponge to cross his arms over his chest. “I’m still brains of the operation for a reason. What would you do without me?”

Minako huffed and nudged him with her shoulder. “I’d probably get more sleep and we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Whatever,” Minato nudged her back, “I’ll do you a solid just this once. Leave the dishes and hosting duties to me.”

For a moment, Minako felt her stomach twist into more of a knot. “Wait, what about everyone else? What if they ask why I’m leaving so soon? And you just had your competition and everything?”

“-Stop worrying already!” Minato rolled his eyes and cut her off. ”If they ask, I’ll just tell them you’ve got stuff to do. Do ya’ really think they’d blame you for taking a night off when you’ve done nothing but help them?”

Minako opened her mouth to protest but no words came out.

Minato was right. The others always seemed thankful for her cooking a couple of nights a week and running a vacuum when things got dusty. Never once did they complain unless she asked for them to pitch in a little.

She already demonstrated her willingness to work hard, surely she was simply overthinking this and Minato was right.

Minako finally let her shoulders droop. “One night wouldn’t be so bad. . .” A smile wormed its way onto her face. “Okay, but only for tonight. And I better see my face in the glasses when I wake up tomorrow.”

Minato faked a groan but seemed to take her warning to heart.

“Just get some sleep. You’ve earned it, leader.”

Minako gave him one last nod before exiting the kitchen, no one paid mind to her as she slunk up the stairs and out of sight.

For all his quirks, Minato had to be the best fit for their mismatched duet.

June 14th, 2009

I'm not feeling very well today, even though I had a great time at Minato's first Kendo competition (which he placed second at!). He worked really hard out there and gave it his best shot. His friend, Kazushi ended up fighting him in the final round and taking the win but I know they're evenly matched at this point. Minato has spent a lot of time in real battle situations and learned fast how to protect his life.

As for my health, I've actually let Minato take care of clean-up in my stead. A younger me would have kept going until I passed out, however, I want to make good on our promise to turn our lives around for the better. This is just the first step of many.

Besides, I actually treated myself to a nice bath for once, with a book and everything! So relaxing!
That's all I have to say for tonight.

Until tomorrow,

Minako Arisato
At long last, I have finished this chapter! It even turned out longer than I initially planned! I even changed up the beginning and made it a little better.

Sorry, that one-shot never came out, I got lazy and life got busy.

Anyway, I hope yall enjoy!

Fuuka warned them that Tartarus was unstable when they arrived that night and Minako shrugged it off. To prove her confidence, she was the first to enter the second half of Arqa Block, picking up where they left off just days ago.

Why should Minako care about danger or instability in the first place? Mitsuru warned them of nights like that but nothing of significance happened. In fact, nothing but good came out of those days with more rewards and treasures to find.

What could possibly go wrong this time?

Everything, everything went wrong.

So far that night, they ran away from three Reapers, gotten separated via a distorted Tresto spell, triggered pitfalls that kept them tiptoeing around every corner, and had their butts handed to them by overpowered floating snakes.

Oh, after the snakes were finally destroyed by Mitsuru, a FOURTH Reaper was summoned because Minako picked up a cursed money card? That particular Reaper chased them all the way to the next floor where they took the nearest access point back to the lobby. Fuuka was waiting for them with a medkit to help the team regroup, shaking her head all the while.

“I said there would be more accidents than usual.” she said. "But I guess I'm a roach to all of you."

At least Fuuka imparted some words of encouragement when the team set out once again to the next floor. They promised to do one more then head back to the dorm for a well-earned rest.

They were met with pitch black when they were taken back up the tower, barely able to see two inches in front of their faces.

“What in the world-?”

Minako was cut off when someone bumped into her roughly. She stumbled a few steps, tripped and went sprawling to the floor with an undignified screech. Her naginata went clattering out of reach, knees stinging.

“Dangit! Who did that!?"

“Sorry, sis.”
Minato seemed sincere in his apology but Minako got the feeling he was laughing at her on the inside.

“What just happened? Was that Minatan?”

At least Junpei was worried about her wellbeing.

“No Stupei, that was another girl who sounds just like Minako-senpai!” Yukari snapped.

And the fight between everyone’s favorite junior duo was long overdue.

“Your sarcasm isn’t very subtle.”

Now Minato was stoking the fires.

“Hey! I thought you were on my side!”

“Here we go again.”

Akihiko could sense the hostility too.

“No more shoving and quit the fighting! Are you okay, Arisato?”

Minako sighed and got back on her feet at Mitsuru’s question. “I’m fine, just scraped my knees a little.” She strained to see everyone through the darkness but ended up with nothing. Not even a hazy silhouette. “Fuuka-san, can you see anything or is it dark on your end too?”

“No, I can see the floor just fine. It looks like a Shadow called a Phantom Master is prevalent in this area and has an uncanny ability to blackout its surroundings.”

“Should we just turn back?” Yukari asked. “I mean, we’ve already climbed five floors tonight. We can pick things back up in a few days and this Phantom will be gone by then. Anyone got energy for a Tresto?”

“We still have to find an access point to get back.” Minato said. “Remember the last time we tried to get back to the lobby with a Tresto spell tonight? We can’t risk getting lost in this place with no light.”

“I can try to guide you through using Lucia, but there’s no telling if you all can stay together. I’m sorry I can’t show you everything I can see in my head.”

“Don’t worry about it, Yamagishi. We’ve dealt with worse.” Akihiko reassured the girl. “Does anyone have any bright ideas on how to do this?”

Bright ideas. . .

What was a bright idea?

Bright. . .

That was it!

“I got it!” Minako smiled and reached for her Evoker. She pictured the Persona she wished for in vivid detail: a tiny spirit with a green cape and a Jack-o-Lantern for a head. Its familiar, playful cackle rang in her mind as the barrel pressed against her skull.
“Let’s get to work, Pyro Jack,” she said to herself as the trigger was pulled, the recoil making her head spin momentarily. “Please don’t burn my clothes again. That’d be much appreciated.”

The Persona bounced out of a blast of blue. Immediately, he lit up the area around Minako with the soft glow of its trusty lantern. Its pointed hat nearly fell off as he circled his summoner with gleeful laughter, finding his home atop her head. If it were any other night, she would have found it to be adorable.

Who was she kidding? Pyro Jack would always be cute.

Minako shooed Jack off. “Alright, less monkeying around, more fire. We don’t have time to mess around!” She grabbed the spirit and held it up like a naughty kitten. “We’re in a pickle so you’ve gotta get to work, buddy. Do it for me, your favorite person in the whole wide world?”

Pyro Jack squealed, leaping out of her arms and back into the air, rebounding off the walls and bellyflopping onto the floor like an orange and green bouncing ball.

Minako was unimpressed. “Jack, I won’t ask again.”

Instead of listening, the Persona rolled around like a puppy, its lantern being used as an amusing toy rather than a tool. It seemed content playing with the object that the team needed to get through the darkness instead of listening to Minako’s orders.

“He’s not gonna do it.” Minato stepped up beside her, his sheathed sword being used as a walking stick. His facial features were cast in deep shadows on account of the light being too dim to properly light the area. “You’re not assertive enough. Show some backbone-”

“Assault dive!” Minako shoved her brother towards her Persona.

Pyro Jack followed the command with timely speed, fiery eyes trained on its target. Minato was tackled by the pumpkin-headed Person and both were sent reeling to the ground. The teen wrestled with Jack to get it to calm down and failed miserably. His sword ended up clattering away, hitting the wall, and unusable in the struggle.

“Fuck!” Minato got a grip on its head and finally pushed it off. He looked the Persona dead in the eye, hands shaking from the pressure of holding it still. “Why do you hate me?”

Pyro Jack continued to crow at his successful attack. It scrambled back and away from Minato, raised its lantern and letting it spring to life, illuminating a good chunk of the area.

“Good boy!” Minako whistled and Jack returned to her, this time leaping into her arms and remained content with being motionless. She rested her chin on top of its curly hat as she stared down at Minato. “On the other hand, I think someone owes me an apology. What did ya’ learn from that experience?”

“You’re an ass.”

“Language.”

Minato groaned and heaved himself to his feet. “You’re a butt. Happy?”

His sister rolled her eyes but decided to let it slide. “Better... I guess.” She set Pyro Jack free, bobbing above the two to provide more visibility. They could now see the other four members of SEES who were able to join the siblings. “Still, now we’ve got a nice light! Even if it took a few tries.”
“Magnifique,” Mitsuru complimented. “I never would have thought to use a Persona for this kind of work. Good thinking, Arisato.”

Minako ducked her head, slightly abashed at the attention. She turned on her heel and moved to lead the way through the darkened hallway. “Thanks, but we better get moving. We’ve still gotta find a way out of this place.”

Without further ceremony, the group set out into the darkness without having to stumble around blindly. They occasionally ran into small groups of the Phantom Masters that Fuuka warned them about but they were easily dispatched. It was good for Minako considering that she had to keep Pyro Jack summoned at all times, leaving herself exposed if the Shadows got stronger along the way.

Minato was also conscious of this fact and eventually got himself and Junpei to lead the group through the labyrinth. The field leader remained close behind while being fed instructions from their navigator.

Yukari tried to keep herself fixed at Minako’s side the entire time while the other two seniors took up the rear. Although she would never admit it in front of Junpei, the poor girl was spooked every time another Shadow popped out from the black to attack them. Phantom Masters held an uncanny resemblance to ghosts from B-list horror movies so it was no surprise that Yukari acted defensively at their ambushes.

Not that Minako minded very much. Even she flinched back at the sudden scares, so she was more than happy that there was a two-person buffer in front and behind them.

After some time of aimless exploration, Fuuka gave them some good news.

“The access point shouldn’t be too far away now. Go straight until you reach a fork in the path, make a right, make an immediate left and it should be right there.”

A sigh of relief swept across the group.

Mitsuru’s voice rose above them all as the pace of the group picked up. “Everyone did excellent tonight, even if there were some minor hindrances. I have no doubts now that our operations will run more fluid than ever before if we can survive such tribulations with relative composure.”

“Oh, come again?” asked Junpei. “I literally only got, like, some of that.”

“We did good, even if things sucked,” Minato answered.

“Oh, thanks.”

The group continued forward while chattering about what they were going to do once they got back to the dorm. Junpei and Yukari started bickering but somehow remained mostly civil. Still, poor Minato was caught between them as they went back and forth. A few times, he would throw in a sarcastic comment to hopefully get them to shut up, but to no avail.

There simply were some things in life he could not control.

They finally came to the fork in the road, and just as Fuuka said, they made a right and were met with three branching paths instead of just two. The path on the left emitted a green glow. There was no doubt in Minako’s mind that they reached the end of their journey.

The eldest Arisato decided to let her guard down, as were the boys in front of her, naginata pointing
to the floor. She passed them by with Pyro Jack following close behind. Despite the tiny bit of green light, it was still too dark to make out their surroundings. “Why can’t these things be a little brighter? I can barely see it around the corner.”

“They aren’t supposed to draw attention.” Minato and Junpei stepped up beside her, the former speaking in a hushed tone. “Whatever though, I just wanna get back before we get ourselves killed. I’ve had enough fun for one day.”

Minako rolled her eyes at his attitude but could agree wholeheartedly with his words. She did, however, shrug at how dramatic he was being about the situation they found themselves in.

“It really wasn’t that bad-”

Suddenly, Pyro Jack dropped down from the air to block the trio’s path. Surprised by the action, they took a few steps back. Everyone else behind them accidentally bumped into those who stood in front.

“What’s going on?” Yukari peered over Minato’s shoulder at Jack. “Is it another Phantom?”

Minako thought she could hear a deep snarl coming from the usually happy spirit.

“H-hey, what’s he growling at?” Junpei asked, slowly raising his broadsword into a defensive position.

Minato copied, a hand on his Evoker. “This can’t be good.”

For a moment, the six fighters watched Pyro Jack for any sort of movement ahead of them. They stood at the center of the three paths, one with an access point calling their names. Nothing seemed to be off, just long stretches of light reaching beyond their current position, fading into the darkness where anything could be hiding. The light of Pyro Jack’s lantern still gave them a good view as to where everything was around them.

So why was it so agitated?

Minako dared to break off from the group, taking cautious steps toward her Persona to calm it down.

“Take it easy, Jack. We’ve gotta go now-”

“Sis!”

Minato’s warning was followed by the clack of metal hitting the ground and someone tackling her from behind. The two went down fast, Minako hitting her elbow hard as both landed sideways, something whizzed over their heads, ending with a reverberating crash. It sounded like whatever attacked them was heavy and metallic.

“It’s an ambush!”

“Everyone, on guard!” Mitsuru’s rallying cry was followed with more metallic thumps heading in the team’s direction.

A new fight broke out as they met the enemy from the dark.

It took Minako a moment to look up from her bewildered daze to see just what they were up against.
Shadows that resembled silver crosses with eyes at the center of their bodies. A colored ring circled the eye in pale shades of green and purple. Each had a different amount of either color in their scheme but all of them had both in one way or another. They reminded her of the enemies they fought in the first block, looking almost identical, only the rings were colored red and blue.

If she remembered correctly, those one's were weak to wind and electrical attacks, strong in fire and ice.

Minako was yanked back to reality when someone picked her off the ground, thrusting her naginata into her hands.

“How many times do I have to save your life this month!?” Minato’s trademark scowl flashed by before he turned to where the thick of the battle. “Un-freaking-believable, you’re not blind so stop acting like your head’s up your ass!”

His sister could have cared less about his attitude once her mind caught up with her mouth. “Says the guy who knocked me over twice!” She whistled for Pyro Jack who returned without delay, preparing to join the fight. “And if ya have time to swear, you have time to help everyone else!”

Minato moved with her, still clearly ticked off about the whole situation but he drew his Evoker. “Whatever!”

One of the crosses made another attempt to leap at the siblings just as they gathered themselves but unlike last time, Minako was ready with her naginata raised, braced for impact. The collision of metal on metal caused her to stagger a few steps. For such tiny Shadows, they had an unexpected amount of strength.

“Where did all these come from?” Minako said through gritted teeth. With a clean slash, she cut through her attacker before another one came barreling at her. She was able to side-step it in time and sent it reeling across the floor with a well-timed kick towards Minato. “Four!”

Minato just finished off an enemy of his own as the rolling cross came at him.

“What the-” He raised his sword above his head, and just before he would be tripped by said Shadow, he brought down the blade to cut the monster in half. As the Shadow dissolved in smoke, Minato shook a fist at Minako, Evoker waving wildly above his head. “Kill your own Shadows for once! I’m not you’re freaking maid!”

“I panicked, okay!?” Minako held a hand over her ear to help block out some of the noise. Even then, she had to raise her voice. “Fuuka-san, can we get an analysis on these Shadows?”

“Already ten steps ahead, senpai!” the navigator responded promptly. “These Shadows are known as Sky Balances and they’ve got a nasty set of wind and electric attacks. Yukari-san and Sanada-senpai shouldn’t use their Personas, the Balances can absorb those attacks and heal themselves. They also travel in large groups so please be conscious of how many you’re fighting!”

Minako nodded. “Got it, thanks again Fuuka-san!”

“Oh course, senpai. Be safe!”

When Minako focused her attention back to the fight, she noticed that everyone was scattered and took on their own small group of Shadows. Mitsuru and Yukari doubled up and were somehow forced to the edge of the lighted area. Akihiko and Junpei were also being slowly pushed into the darkness.
“They’re trying to separate and get us in the dark.” Minato hissed as he joined her side, trying to conceal a lag in his movements, voicing what they both knew. “I guess Shadows are a bit smarter than we give them credit.”

Minako nodded, a feeling a dread creeping in. Could this truly be a sign of intelligence or just an animalistic instinct?

“We’ve gotta regroup or else we’ll lose our one advantage.” She cupped her hands over her mouth and sucked in as much air as her lungs would allow. “Fall back! Don’t worry about the Shadows, just get over here! Quickly!”

The other members of SEES looked away from their targets, instead, they moved to join the siblings.

Unfortunately, the Sky Balances followed their retreat.

Minato raised his Evoker once more with an irritated grimace. “Let’s cover them or else they’ll never make it.” He squeezed the trigger. “Orpheus!”

Orpheus burst forth instantly, lunging for a trio of enemies with fist ablaze. They tried to evade the attack but ended up being swept into a heated slaughter. One had begun to hop away in terror only to be given a personal fireball directly in its eyeball.

“That was too quick, could it be-?” Minako was able to gulp back her panic with newfound courage, “Maybe they’re weak to fire attacks!” She whistled for Pyro Jack’s attention, the creature whipping its bulbous head around. It was time to go on the offensive. “Get ‘em, Jack! Just go nuts!”

Pyro Jack squealed and followed up behind a vanishing Orpheus, hovering over the gathering Shadows. Its lantern ignited in a brilliant display, swinging wildly from side-to-side before letting fire fall from above. One by one, the Sky Balances were prevented from advancing any further toward the members of SEES. They were preoccupied with dodging flying flames that threatened to snuff them out.

Speaking of her teammates, Minako, Minato, and the others reunited at a safe distance to watch as Jack thinned out the heard with child-like glee.

“Looks like they really are weak to fire,” Minato remarked, holstering his Evoker, “Too bad I’m all tuckered out. I would’ve shown up that demon spawn in a heartbeat.”

Just seeing her brother put the Evoker away made Minako feel heavy all of a sudden. Keeping Pyro Jack summoned took a lot of extra energy, more than anticipated, and fatigue was setting in, with a vengeance. If this went on much longer, the next day was bound to be a struggle to stay awake. Worst-case scenario, she’d end up more susceptible to illness which was far from what she needed.

Thankfully, Junpei was more than happy to step up with a cocky grin, ready to show off his skills with everyone’s eyes on him. “Let’s give ‘em a fight then!” He pressed his Evoker to his head. “Clean these suckers out, Hermes!”

Minako waved an arm to call her Persona back. “That’s enough, let Junpei-kun takeover! You did a good job!”

Pyro Jack and Hermes brushed past one another in their switch. The latter leaped in without restraint and created an even bigger fire than the previous two. More of the Sky Balances were wiped out from the barrage with no escapees this time around.
In fact, some of the flames threatened to rebound back at SEES from the wind currents they created.

Embers and smoke were blown back in their faces as Hermes went on attacking, causing coughing fits to break out among the teens. Pyro Jack had been so spooked, it jumped into Minako’s arms with a pained squeak. At the rate the flames were spreading, without proper ventilation no less, they may take on serious damage. Coupled with the intense heat, it wouldn’t be long until they ran the risk of dying.

“Junpei-kun!” Minako felt her lungs burn from inhaling but she had to do something to get the fire to stop. She could suck it up for just a few seconds if it meant they all got out alive. “We’re gonna suffocate, tone it down a lil’!”

“Sorry, Minatan!” Junpei called back before focusing back on his Persona. “That’s enough, stop!”

Hermes immediately followed the command and the fire began to slowly die. Littered amongst the ash and remaining flames were only a small number of Sky Balances left.

Mitsuru was the first to recover from the onslaught, dusted from head to toe in grey soot, but her Evoker was pressed to her temple. “I’ll handle the rest,” she announced and fired, “I summon thee, Penthesilea!”

Blinding blue exploded to life and was nearly detrimental to the eye. A feminine figure wielding a pair of elegant swords took form in front of Mitsuru, a tiny golden crown perched atop its head. Silver armor with teal accents glinted in the light it had been born from. Its face was obscured with a metal helmet that one may see on fencers, but a singular dot shined through as if a star in a black sky. With a high collar and pristine form, it was not a stretch to call this Persona regal in every sense of the word.

Penthesilea used the shorter of its two swords, swinging it at empty air, frost following behind as a trail. The frost then gathered into a ball until it was decently sized and ready to use.

Dread washed over Minako.

Pyro Jack was weak to ice attacks.

By summoning him, she was weak to the same thing.

“We’re too close!” Akihiko yelled. His Persona, also vulnerable to ice, made him a target too. He tried to lunge at Mitsuru before she could complete the attack. “Mitsuru, be careful-”

“Bufula!”

It was too late. Penthesila sent that ball straight for the downed enemy. Shards of ice flew in every direction and a wave of absolute chill spread throughout the area. Pyro Jack unsummoned itself to avoid being caught but Minako had no means of escape, taking the full force of the rebound and instantly crumpling under the pressure.

“-c-cold. . .”

Before Minako passed out from the sudden blast of freezing cold, someone grabbed her arm.
“My apologies, Arisato.” Mitsuru bowed her head to Minako and Akihiko who sat shivering on the stairs outside of the labyrinth. “I was so caught up in the moment, I forgot you two are more susceptible to my Persona’s elemental attacks. It was a premature move.”

Minako did her best to smile, hugging Minato’s jacket around her. Her own sweatshirt had been completely covered with frost and deemed unwearable. “I-It’s fine, Kirijo-san. We all make mistakes!”

Akihiko, who had nothing but a cotton t-shirt to protect himself, was glaring holes through his teammate. If looks could kill, the heiress would be dead already. “You think you would’ve known someone is weak to ice attacks after three-plus years, huh?”

On a dime, Mitsuru’s expression changed from that of apologetic to indifference as she turned to her friend.

“I believe I was apologizing to her, not you.”

From a few feet away, Junpei broke down into hysterical laughter. Minato’s poorly suppressed chuckles followed suit.

If Akihiko learned over the years, it was that no one stayed at the top by sitting back on their hands and letting others do the dirty work for them. Not even those born into their position could get far on money, status, or name alone. Without grit and determination, there would be no way to keep up in such a high stakes world.

It also didn’t matter if it was a physical or mental goal, all can be reached within one’s own talents. Limits can be pushed to the brink until those limits are made null and void.

That being said, there were some tasks that made having a good work ethic unbearable.

“Geez,” Akihiko stopped sweeping and leaned on his broom, “I hate cleaning duty.”

Another senior and member of the boxing team, Nao Goto also put a pause to his own sweeping and sighed. “You said it, cap. I think my neck’s gonna go stiff from looking down for so long.”

What Akihiko wouldn’t give to just get to the boxing gym right now. The ring was practically calling his name and yet here he was, stuck doing his least favorite thing in the world: cleaning other people’s messes. To make matters worse, it was the science room and a class of sophomores had done a particularly messy experiment that day. Many of the students left their stations in complete disarray.

It didn’t matter that there were five people hard at work. It was going to take forever to get the place looking like new.

They were supposed to be high schoolers, not kindergarteners.

An indignant huff sounded from a few feet away from where he stood.

“That’s a nifty story you two got there.” Minako was scrubbing away at a lab station that looked like it had been visited by a bunch of pyromaniacs. Burn marks spotted the surface of the work area and a Bunson burner was still on when they came in earlier. “Less complaining and more sweeping. I got Student Council right after this and I don’t wanna be late.”
Nao threw his head back with a groan. “Why can’t we just take a break, Arisato-san? We’ve been at it for—”

“-Twenty minutes, Goto-san. We’ve only been cleaning for twenty minutes. I thought boxers had more stamina than this. Maybe you should rethink your choice in clubs.” she said without having to look up from her tasks. “The cheerleaders are always looking for pyramid bases. They’d be happy to start fitting you for a uniform right now if you’re just that tired.”

“Wah, hey!” Now thoroughly peeved, Nao started sweeping again, more furious and ready to prove himself. “Let’s see who the real cheerleader is after today! This floor is gonna be spotless in five minutes!”

Akihiko watched as his club-mate went to town on the floor, trying not to laugh at how silly Goto’s seriousness looked. It was like something out of a shounen manga that Junpei liked to rant about brought to life. That was one way to motivate someone into working hard.

“The same goes for you too, Akihiko-san! We’ve all gotta give a little and get a little.” Minako finished her last burn mark and moved to start clearing piles of textbooks off of the tables.

However, she seemed to be feeling a little too confident today. Some of the piles inched over her head and would no doubt be a challenge to lift. The current stack she was trying to tackle swayed dangerously, threatening to topple to the floor.

One of the other students, a girl with black twin tails squeaked at the ridiculous scene. “Be careful! You’re going to hurt yourself!”

“I’ll be fine! They’re not that heavy-” As if on cue, Minako stumbled a few feet as one of the top books almost slipped off. “Well, this isn’t good!” There was another shift in the pile and soon she was wobbling on the edge of falling down. “Yikes!”

The twin-tailed girl let out a gasp. “Minako-san!”

Akihiko barely had a second to think before he leaned his broom against a nearby table. Thankfully, he only had to make three quick strides before he reached her, grabbing the textbooks just as they threatened to flatten Minako into a pancake. He leaned the stack towards him until they all were back into place.

A successful rescue.

“Thank goodness!” another girl, this one wearing a grey vest, breathed a sigh of relief. She whipped her head at Nao who stood in shock. “Why didn’t you try to help her? You were closer than Akihiko-san so what gives?”

The boy shook himself out of his stupor. “Hey, she’s the one who called me a cheerleader! Maybe she deserved it!”

Peering over the top of the books, Akihiko could see Minako pouting up at him, hands on her hips. “I had it under control, ya’ know.” she dais.

Akihiko rolled his eyes. “Sure you did.” He turned away from her and started heading towards the textbook closet. “You really should be more careful, you’re not weak but you shouldn’t take on more than you can handle.”

Minako kept up with him, a textbook that had been at the bottom of the stack still in her hands. “I
said I had it handled. Sure, I tripped a little bit but only a little.” Her frown only deepened. “You didn’t have to stop working just because I was struggling. It’s an inconvenience.”

And there was her stubborn side, rearing its head and shouting: “I got this, guys! Don’t mind me getting trampled to death by inanimate objects!”

Was her independence really defined by being able to do everything on her own?

“It’s not an inconvenience,” Akihiko easily stowed the textbooks away once they reached the closet, “I just don’t want to see you do something stupid. One minute, you’re carrying too many books. The next, you’re in the nurse’s office with a concussion.”

“Well, that went from zero to a hundred real quick.” Minako placed her lone book on top of the original stack before turning back to him. This time, she actually smiled. “Don’t worry about me. I might not be as smart as my brother or strong like you, but I know a thing or two about taking care of myself.”

“Still...” Akihiko trailed off.

It was difficult to find the right words without making her feel like a child.

Why did talking to girls have to be so hard?

Minako was growing visibly worried at his silence. She whistled and waved a hand in front of his face. “Hello? Earth to Captain Sanada, what’d you mean by ‘still’?”

“Sorry!” Akihiko flinched back before clearing his throat. “As a friend, just don’t be too reckless. It’d be a shame if you got hurt from a dumb mistake.”

Minako’s smile softened until there was barely a grin. However, it seemed less forced and more natural, more earnest if he was willing to go that far.

“Oh,” she mumbled while playing with the cord of her headphones, “I actually wasn’t expecting that.”

Akihiko quirked an eyebrow. “Expecting what?”

With the same tiny smile, her gaze darted to the side. Were her ears a little red or was it just his imagination?

“That’s the first time you’ve called me your friend.” she finally said as the timidity faded from her features. “I could get used to that, being called your friend I mean.”

“Oh. . . okay then.” He grew a little more bold knowing that they had officially established their relationship. “I thought it was kinda obvious by, well, everything.”

Minako ducked her head and giggled. “Sorry, but hey, now I know and that’s what matters!”

Akihiko couldn’t help but catch her amusement, letting out a chuckle of his own. It was hardly even funny, but for some odd reason, he couldn’t help it. There was something nice about sharing a moment of brevity while completing a task that wasn’t as enjoyable.

Maybe cleaning duty wasn’t so bad after all.

“The Student Council president!”
Both of them looked up to see Mitsuru heading their way. The other three students in the room had all mysteriously put their heads down and were working harder than ever. If only they worked that hard from the get-go, they would be done by now.

“Afternoon!” Minako greeted just as their fellow senior halted in front of them. “Is something wrong with Student Council? I was heading straight there after this.”

“No, but I do have something concerning the swimming club I wish to discuss later on.” Mitsuru shook her head and leaned in close. “I was just told by the Chairman that he’ll be stopping by this evening to talk about a recent breakthrough in his research. When you get back to the dorm, come to the fourth-floor meeting room.”

Akihiko couldn’t help but wonder if this was a recent breakthrough or something the others didn’t know. It was hard to tell what was the truth and what was a cover-up when it came to Mitsuru and Ikutsuki anymore.

He guessed he would find out tonight if it was one or the other later tonight.

Minako remained blissfully unaware, nodding her head. “Sounds good, do the others know?”

“Yes, I caught them at lunch,” Mitsuru answered before turning on her heel to leave. She threw Akihiko a knowing look. “I hope this will shed some light on the events that have occurred since your arrival.”

The boxer played along with her game. They may have a longer history than most on the team, but that didn’t mean he could always trust her.

“All we can do is hope, Mitsuru.”
The dog passed away soon after Minato's sixth birthday. The whole family had a funeral in the backyard with all the pomp and circumstance that they could muster. Minato’s mother made a white cross with Hercules’ name etched and painted in swirling black letters. Minako weaved a wreath of purple and white flowers from the garden to hang off of the top.

It was the first and last time Minato had seen his father cry.

He never adopted another dog since that day. Even when Minako had begged for one, their father would simply shake his head sadly and say it was too much work.

Not only had Hercules been loyal to his owner, but his owner was also loyal to the bitter end. It was an unbreakable bond between man and animal.

Though he didn’t believe in it, Minato hoped that they had a happy reunion in heaven.

From that day forward, the boy always wanted a dog to call his own.

That was why it was a shock to find the most precious and fluffy Shiba Inu under a lamp post near the dorm.

Mitsuru called everyone back early for an urgent meeting, so Minato left the school ahead of everyone. Kendo was short today since their coach was out sick. The team mostly worked on sparring drills and even held a mock competition of their own. One of the seniors had taken the win, but Kazushi put up a good fight up to the very end.

As he rounded the street corner and approached the building, that was when Minato noticed the dog sitting pretty near the curb. Its tail swept back and forth across the pavement with its tongue lolling, a simple black collar secured around its thick neck.

It was too tempting to call out to the canine.

“Hey there.”

The dog’s pointed ears quirked at the sound of his voice. It heaved itself onto its large paws and waited for Minato to meet it halfway. When he was close enough, the high school student kneeled down, checked to make sure no one was watching and buried his fingers into its fur. The dog nuzzled into his touch and wasn’t afraid to sniff him to see if this boy was a threat.

“You’re an intelligent dog, aren’t you?” Minato praised and smoothed back the fur around its neck to look at the collar. “Now what’s your name?”

Stamped in a simmering brass plate were two sentences and a phone number.

This is Koromaru. If lost, please call this number.

872-0002

Minato hummed to himself and pulled out his cell phone. “Eight, seven, two, three zeros, and a two. . .” he repeated over and over. The newly dubbed Koromaru sat still, watching him as he dialed the numbers read aloud.

The phone rang for a minute or two before an automated tone came over the speaker.

“I’m sorry, this number is out of service. If this is a mistake please call-”

Minato hung up and went into his call log to make sure he hadn’t gotten the number wrong.
“I could’ve sworn I dialed it right, what gives?” he muttered to himself, typing the number a second time and holding the phone up to his ear. Koromaru laid on the pavement to soak up the sunlight while Minato waited for someone to pick up.

“I’m sorry, this number is out of-”

Minato gave up and snapped his phone shut. He regarded Koromaru with a quizzical expression. “Who in the world do you belong to, little guy?” He scratched the dog behind the ear which awarded a happy yip. “If you were my dog, I’d never let you out of my sight.”

Koromaru gave him what seemed to be a dog smile. The animal’s dumb face was so damn cute, Minato cradled it with both hands. It was lucky that no one was around to see him act like an idiot on purpose. Just to be a little more extra, he nuzzled the dog’s face with his own and pitched his voice.

“Who’s a good boy? You are, you’re a good boy!”

Koromaru grew more excited and started nuzzling him back. Minato felt laughter escape him, too happy with this moment to care if it looked silly.

Dogs truly were the superior animal to all other household beasts.

“Minato-san?”

“…”

Minato stopped playing with Koromaru.

No. This can’t be happening.

He thought he was the only one back.

Minato slowly shifted to look behind him.

Fuuka and Yukari stood just a few paces away.

Both of them were staring as if they had seen a ghost.

“Um,” he glanced to Koromaru and then back at the girls, “this isn’t what it looks like.”

Yukari suddenly broke into a smirk and slowly approached Minato.

“Well, well, well, who would’ve thought that Mister Cool had a soft spot for dogs.” Once she was close enough, she kneeled down to pet Koromaru. “I know for a fact that you and Minako don’t have a dog, so who’s this cutie belong to?”

“I think I’ve seen that dog at the shrine steps sometimes,” Fuuka interjected, also kneeling down to give Koromaru some love. “It’s a bit of a shock to see it here with Minato-san. Did you want to keep it as a pet? You seem to like this one a lot.”

Minato tried to ignore the growing embarrassment and instead focused on relaying the facts. If he was able to put up enough of a facade, maybe the two would forget about the whole thing.

“His name’s Koromaru. I just found him here and tried calling the number on his tags, but all I got was a disconnected line.” He reached out to look at the collar again. “These must outdated or something.”
Fuuka hummed in agreement. “Maybe his owner changed numbers and forgot to update the tag information. That would explain why you couldn’t reach them by phone—”

A high pitched yipping cut off the young navigator.

Another, much smaller dog trotted up to the group. It barked up at Koromaru and let out the least intimidating growl Minato had ever heard in his life. Thankfully, the bigger dog remained calm, staring down as if looking at an uninteresting plant.

“Chibi-chan, no!”

A plump looking woman came ambling along the sidewalk. Her salt-and-pepper hair bounced with every quicked step towards the teens. Two full grocery bags swung from either arm, some of the food was close to falling out and spilling on the pavement.

“That’s the last time I let you off your leash, you naughty dog!” she chastised before stopping in front of Koromaru and his entourage. Her face lit up with recognition. “Oh my, if it isn’t Koromaru!” Shifting the weight of her bags, the woman leaned down and gave the dog a pat on the head. “So you still take yourself for walks. What a smartie!”

Yukari perked up. “Wait, you know this dog?”

The woman stood straight again and nodded at the girl. “I do, he used to belong to the priest at Naganaki Shrine.” She smiled fondly. “Every afternoon, the two of them went this way for a walk.”

Minato’s frown deepened. Something wasn’t sitting right with him. “What do you mean ‘used to’? Did the priest abandon him?”

“Oh heavens no! The two were thick as thieves, practically inseparable.” the woman exclaimed before lowering her voice to a reasonable tone. “It was about six months ago. The priest was hit by a car while walking his dog. He didn’t survive.” She looked back at Koromaru. “Ever since then, that dog sits patiently by the site of the accident. And he goes for a walk every day, just like when his owner was still alive.”

“Aw, you’re such a loyal dog!” Yukari ruffled its fur. “Good boy!”

The dog’s owner was dead. That explained why the number was no longer in service.

Minato felt sorry for the poor thing.

Suddenly, the woman looked at her watch and gasped. “Oh shoot, I have to get going! My son will be back soon!” She started to walk away from the group, calling back to her dog. “Come along Chibi-chan! We can’t be late because you decided to cause trouble again.”

The tiny dog let out another annoying yip and started following the woman.

“Good riddance,” Minato said and turned back to Koromaru, “I hate rat dogs. You’re the perfect fella’ for me.”

Koromaru leaned forward and gave the boy a lick on the cheek. His tongue felt rough, but not wet enough to be considered gross. It was a pleasant gesture.

“Minato-san has a cute side, who would’ve known?” Fuuka remarked and clapped her hands together. “You act so aloof but even you’re not immune to cute animals. That’s so surprising!”
Minato could feel the color drain from his face. He worked too hard to build up his neutral reputation and there was no way he was going to let that die today.

No one could know that he thought dogs were adorable.

“I will literally do anything if you guys can keep this a secret.”

After the Koromaru incident had been resolved, Minato and the other junior girls bide the dog goodbye and went to the fourth-floor meeting room. The others and Ikutsuki arrived at their own pace.

Once they were seated, the Chairman began.

“Hello, everyone.” he greeted “I wanted to let you know how my research has been going. This concerns those Shadows that have been appearing during full moons. I want you to listen closely; it might be hard to follow. Shadows can be divided into twelve categories, according to their characteristics. This, we've known for a while. It's like their class or order. Now, I've classified the special Shadows we've seen so far, and it's simply fascinating!”

The Chairman went quiet, a stupid grin on his face.

Minato would have paid a lot of money just to punch it off.

These constant pauses were getting on his nerves.

Yukari had a more peaceful solution. She leaned forward in her chair and waved an arm to get Ikutsuki’s attention. “And?”

The glassy look in the Chairman’s eyes was broken. “Oh, sorry Miss Takeba.” He cleared his throat. “Those four Shadows belong to categories I through IV, in order of their appearance! They may have looked different than the more common ones, but the classification scheme still applies.”

Minato threw a glance in his sister’s direction. Minako caught the secret que and offered a discreet nod.

It was obvious that Ikutsuki was talking about the Tarot Card Arcanas. This was a concept that had been taught to the siblings in their visits to the Velvet Room.

Each Shadow and Persona User was classified under a specific Arcana. This classification indicated the type of growth and skill sets that each held, at least to a certain extent. Not every creature followed the rules but a baseline was established nonetheless.

It was also important in the fusion process. People each held an Arcana of their own based on their personality traits and long-term goals. There were far more than just twelve categories but that was something the others need not know about. When Minako or Minato spent time with these people, the strength of their relationship with that person gave them a boost when fusing Personas of the same Arcana.

Again, this was all the information the others would probably never know.

“I see,” Fuuka jumped in, “There's twelve in all, so that means there’s still eight we haven't seen yet.”

“That's exactly right, Fuuka! You're quite sharp.” Ikutsuki congratulated.
Junpei grumbled something under his breath before speaking up himself. “Uh, okay but what are they after? This can’t be some random thing if they appear on every single full moon.”

Ikutsuki hummed. “That’s a good question, and that’s what we haven’t figured out yet: their motive. They don’t kill their prey; they feed on their minds.” He seemed to be stuck in deep thought. “It can be considered predation, but is it really? Is there an underlying intent behind their behavior? The purpose of the Shadows as a whole, that’s what we need to consider.”

“This is interesting.” Akihiko got everyone’s attention by cracking his knuckles. “But, no matter what, we still have to beat the rest of ‘em.”

Mitsuru stood up. “I agree. That’s about all we can do at this point.” She turned to Fuuka and motioned to the girl. “I believe Yamagishi had some information of her own to reveal.”

“Thank you, Kirijo-san.” Fuuka grabbed her trusty laptop that had been waiting patiently on the coffee table, flipping it open and typing away. “According to the data, each one has been stronger than the last, so we better start training harder.” She stopped typing and looked to Minako. “Is there anything you had in mind for when we visit Tartarus? New plans of attack? A training regimen?”

“Actually, I do.” Minako turned to the rest of the team, her leader face thrown on. “I’ve been toying with the idea of sending two groups at once into Tartarus. One can focus on climbing and another on training. It’s a little risky, but with our current communication abilities, I think it’s worth a shot.”

The idea caused everyone to go wide-eyed. It was something that had never been proposed before, something that could be very high risk, high return.

That did leave one question up in the air.

“What about leaders?” Minato asked. “We’d need someone in charge of the second group.”

“I also thought that through.” Minako stood up and began to pace the floor. It was a habit that said she was spitting in her mind. “It would make sense to put the other seniors in those positions, but what if we need their skills in the climbing team? What if that stationed leader throws off team dynamics?” She snapped her fingers. “I think we should have different leaders elected at the beginning of the night. It will give each of us a chance to step up, just in case the seniors or myself are put out of commission.”

Mitsuru considered the idea for a moment before nodding. “I see no reason not to. SEES has never had so many members; we might as well use it to our advantage.”

Junpei let out a whoop. “Alright!” He puffed out his chest and pointed to himself. “I call dibs on the first time!”

Ikutsuki laughed. “I thought your senior said it was an elected position.” He turned to Minako who had stopped her pacing. “I must say, you’ve really come into your own as a leader. Keep this up and you might give Mitsuru a run for her money!”

Minako was stalled for a second. Minato could practically hear the gears turning in her mind.

“W-well, I doubt that…” She ended up giving the Chairman a thumbs up. “I’m just doing the best I can. It just works itself out, somehow.”

The chatter continued and Minato tuned them out.
The noise no longer bothered him.

“Hey, Minato-kun?”

At the sound of his name, Minato turned to Yukari. She had moved her chair closer to him so she could keep her voice lower, her face pale.

“Are you sick?” he asked. “You don’t look so good.”

The ginger-haired student was silent for a moment, staring at Mitsuru from across the coffee table. Though she was normally stoic, her body faced away from the rest of the group.

She seemed uneasy for some reason.

“What about Tartarus?” Yukari finally asked, never once breaking her gaze from Mitsuru. “Why does it even exist?”

It was a good question.

“. . . I don’t know.”

It was a rare question that Minato had no answer to.

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[Passcode: ****S]

[Override: Access Information]

[Folder Name: SEES Roster]

[Search: Siblings]

[Results: Arisato, Minako and Minato]

[Override: Access Personal Files]

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Name: Minako Ann Arisato

Age: 17

Class: 3-D

Observations from SI: Extroverted, devout Christian (Catholic denomination), motherly to the younger members of SEES, protective of her younger brother, can summon multiple Personas, current field leader

Name: Minato Emmanuel Arisato

Age: 16

Class: 2-F
Observations from SI: Introverted (depending on the situation), practices Shinto, sarcastic and often provokes his fellow juniors into fights, has an above average intelligence, somewhat aloof to others, seems to defy his seniors (minus his sister), can summon multiple Personas.

[Override: Download Files]

[Override: Protect The Children]
Revenge: Best Served Cold

Chapter Notes

Sorry that this chapter is coming out extremely late, my health has taken a major downturn. With all my coursework and dealing with some personal stuff, I've been getting sick more often. Thank God I actually reached out to one of my doctor friends and he gave me a hand. Now, I've just been going to classes and relaxing for the past few weeks to help recover my strength. That also meant slowing down this chapter but I don't regret it. I'm strong as an ox once more!

Anyway, on to the better news~! There are only two more chapters (including this one) until THAT MISSION. You know what I'm talking about. I've actually written some snippets of it that should help speed along the process. Next chapter is gonna have more angst, with a dash of angst, and more ANGST.

Did I mention there will be angst?

Enjoy the chapter folks! See ya' in "Angst-a-Palooza!"

Fuuka was never one to be secretive.

That wasn’t to say she bore her heart to the world at all times. Everyone had personal thoughts to themselves and trusted only a small group of people with said thoughts. However, Fuuka made a point to avoid gossip or act in bad faith towards another person. Those who did the opposite were one of many things about high school, teenagers, and society that frustrated her to no end. To think that other people could consciously degrade those around them or seek information from a second-hand source to do so sent a chill down her spine.

After all, it happened to herself many times before.

Doing it onto others felt wrong.

So, when Yukari asked for them to meet in the command room without notifying anyone else in SEES what they were up to, a twisted feeling settled in the pit of Fuuka's stomach.

“Sorry to bother you, Fuuka-san.” Yukari said once they were certain no one was listening in to their conversation, the door to the room locked for extra measure. “I’ve been meaning to ask you this for a week now, but I didn’t know how you'd take it.”

Fuuka tried to not shift or look uncomfortable, but this familiar situation made her nerves skyrocket. She opted to fidget with the cuffs of her sweater behind her back, hoping Yukari wouldn't notice or question it.

“It’s okay. Please continue.”

Yukari’s gaze flickered around the room.

“Well…” She let out a hefty sigh before her body went rigid. “I was hoping you could do me a favor, with your skill. You’re really good at finding things out, right?”
Fuuka was taken aback by the bluntness in her peer's tone.

“What did you have in mind?”

Knowing she had Fuuka's attention, Yukari held her chin higher and spoke with her usual confidence. “I was doing some research on our school, and I came across something strange. Ten years ago, a lot of students missed school for some reason. They were reported as absent, but I found some records that suggest it was something serious.”

Fuuka gulped. “That does sound serious.”

Yukari nodded and turned away, looking at the large computer monitor that took up a good chunk of wall space, their reflections slightly distorted on the surface of the glass screen.

“I'm not trying to cause trouble, but every time I try to bring it up, Mitsuru acts defensive and kinda weird. Akihiko-senpai and the Chairman are a lot more polite but they still dodge the subject like the plague.” She looked back at Fuuka. “If I can’t get answers from them, then I need to find an alternative.”

Fuuka could already recognize where this was going.

“You want to go behind their backs?” she asked. “Why?”

Yukari was silent for a moment. Her usual bravado long since left, displaced with only a girl who had desperation written all over her.

“... I just wanna know what happened back then. If it doesn't have anything to do with the Shadows, then fine. But I can’t trust anyone else.” She shook her head. “If you don’t wanna get involved, that’s fine. I won’t force you. It’s just a small favor.”

Go and dig up information on what transpired all those years ago.

Don’t get caught by the seniors or Ikutsuki.

How could Yukari be so distrusting of her own teammates?

Why trust the new girl?

Fuuka resigned herself, tilting her head to stare at the carpet.

Still, it was an interesting case with so many loose ends to find. Maybe she could discover important information that could benefit SEES in the long run?

A small favor, that’s all it was. No one else would need to know.

“I'll see what I can do.”

Even if it meant going against her moral convictions.

“Have you heard of this revenge request website?”

“Revenge request? What's that?”

Minato stopped typing away at one of the library's many desktop computers, his essay for Mr. Ekoda's class taking a backseat to a pair of girls chatting up a storm nearby. He couldn't focus on
the words in front of him if he tried.

“You can write the person's name you want to get revenge on, and bam! Mission accomplished. They say it's guaranteed successful, and completely anonymous.”

“Seriously!? Give me the URL! Quick!”

“Well, it's just a rumor. I mean, I don't know the details. Why are you so desperate?”

“Huh? I'm not thinking about revenge at all.”

These girls were also not very subtle. It had to be a teacher or an ex-boyfriend she wanted revenge on. From experience with whiny highschooler, those most likely scenarios.

What was it with girls and having personal conversations in libraries, the last bastions of quiet, like they were in a coffee shop?

Not that Minato was one to complain. It armed him with valuable information who would be able to get his hands on anyway. First, it was some gossip about a recent scandal in the language arts department. Then, it was a good tip to buy from the convenience store lady on Friday to save a pretty penny. This time, a pair of girls were talking way too loud at one of the tables behind him, discussing unlawful activity in the city.

Opportunity after opportunity.

Minato heard the girls change the topic and begin to leave the library. Their grating voices carried a moment longer before they disappeared.

“Well, ain’t that interesting, huh?” Junpei, who had been working on the same essay in the next cubicle over leaned back so he could chat with Minato. “Sounds like something that goes on on the Deep Web, not that I’ve been on there or anything. Should we check it or leave it?”

“I say we should leave it be for now,” Yukari interjected, making herself known from her own station. “Remember last time we went vigilante on the seniors? Minako got a black eye, you got slammed into the sidewalk, and Minato almost went the same way as those rebel soldiers from Star Wars, episode three.”

Minako quirked an eyebrow in her direction. “Since when have you been a Star Wars fan?”

“Never! I'm not a dork!” Yukari snapped and launched herself back to work. Although, everyone within a ten-mile radius could probably hear her frantic typing. “Get back to work or else these essays will never get done in time!”

Junpei snickered at her defiance. “You're hopeless, Yukatan.” He turned back to Minato. “Say, if you could ask for someone to get their just deserts who would ya pick?”

Minato thought for a second.

What a tricky question, who would he pick?

Just kidding, he knew exactly who to take out first.

“Probably Akihiko Sanada,” he said a little too hastily, “Can I chose how he dies?”

“Jesus Christ, dude. I said revenge, not murder.”
Chagall Cafe was a great place to study. With a huge student population visiting the mall daily, the tiny shop took advantage of that situation by providing those teenagers with a nice place to hunker down for a few hours. Add in a selection of top-notch pastries and excellent coffee, some might even find themselves staying longer.

It was also the perfect destination to hold impromptu tutoring sessions.

“Now, let’s go over this one more time. Just try your best and everything should be fine.” Minako held up a sheet of paper with five simple sentences in English, her patience running thin. She pointed to the first one. “I know you can do it, what does this say in Japanese?”

The sentence read: “I do not like that movie at all.”

Junpei, who sat across from her, took the sheet of paper and studied the phrase for a minute. His eyes narrowed instantly.

“Um... I don’t like that? Something, something film? All? Or is it-” He let out a loud groan before slumping in frustration. “I don’t know. Help me.”

It took all of Minako's willpower not to lose her mind. Getting kicked out of Chagall was not on her list of things-to-do that Sunday.

“That’s fine. Rome wasn’t built in a day and English can’t be mastered in an afternoon. We’ll just work backward.” she said, taking back the paper and glancing over it again. “This is the way I taught Minato but you’re obviously not him. We need something that works well for you.”

Junpei rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I didn’t get into Gekoukan for my grades.” He picked up his mug of coffee and took a long sip.

Minako shook her head. “You have the first part right, but the translation of the prepositional phrase and the second noun was shotty.” She set aside the paper, deciding to enjoy her own beverage as well. “And stop worrying so much. If I was trying to help with math or science, I’d look like a complete idiot.”

“Mmhm,” Junpei lowered his mug with a satisfied sigh, “At least this coffee’s fantastic.” He pretended to inspect the mug carefully. “You can tell that the guy who owns this place is really picky about the beans. He probably roasts them all differently using special waters for each type. That’s something ya’ can’t learn in school.”

Minako perked up at his assessment, giggling at how serious he seemed. It was rare to see him so knowledgable of anything outside of sports or pop culture. “Looks like someone has good taste.”

“Ha, I just really like coffee.” Junpei waved her off before tipping forward. “Say, what’d you order? Black? Iced? Carmel? All I know is that there was a ton of whipped cream on top.”

Minako looked down into her mug. Inside was a light brown liquid with steam rising off the surface. The cream from before had been melted in or sipped up.

“Dark chocolate hot chocolate, with extra whipped topping,” she responded, “I’ve got a bit of a sweet tooth when I’m working... and not working. And every day that ends in y.”

“Jeez, that’s such a girly drink!” Junpei chuckled to himself. “Who would’ve guessed that our stickler of a leader was such a glutton? Aren’t you always the one who says we should eat healthier?”
True, she was a hypocrite when it came to eating. Minako would always preach the benefits of a balanced meal rather than going straight for takeout while shoveling her mouth full of lemon drops in the very same breath.

Was she going to stop? No.

“I have an excuse,” she said before returning to thinking of a way to help him adequately understand his homework, “I’m older than you and I make the rules.”

Junpei rolled his eyes. “Whatever, senpai.” He leaned over their table so that the other patrons of the cafe would not be tempted to listen in. “By the way, Mitsuru-senpai said something that’s been going on with the Lost nowadays. Apparently, they’ve been finding them in pairs.”

“That’s interesting.” Her response was, more or less, automatic and monotone. There was no time to wonder about small details when trying to teach someone a difficult concept.

Perhaps running over to the bookstore to pick up a better dictionary than the assigned one from the school would be advantageous?

“Boy and girl pairs.”

Minako still had no capacity to read deeper into the statement. “Ain’t that something.”

Maybe she could make flashcards? Repetition was always a great way to study and Junpei showed no sign of being adverse to such a method.

“Romantic pairs, senpai.”

“Wow...” Minako raised up her mug to gulp down some more of her delightful hot chocolate.

Yes, that was the best course of action: flashcards. A cheap and simple method, but all they needed to do was stop by the store on their way back to the dorm and they could make a set or two before dinner.

“Aren’t’cha ya worried you and Akihiko-senpai are gonna end up like them?”

Minako choked, her drink was accidentally sent down the wrong pipe. If her hold on her mug had been any looser, it would be already smashed all over the floor. She began to cough uncontrollably to keep anything from sliding into her lungs. There was a strong chance that the entire cafe was now staring at the dying and flustered girl.

“Ack! Junpei-” she tried to speak in between hacking fits. “-Who said I was dating Akihiko-san? People at school?” It took all her will to power through the tickle in the back of her now scalded throat. “No, I’m not worried ‘cause we’re just friends!”

Junpei was howling up a storm from across their table, much to the senior’s chagrin.

“Ah man, Minatan! Ya should’ve seen your face!” He threw back his head, almost losing his hat in the process. “‘We’re just friends!’ With that reaction, you’d think you two are in a secret relationship or something!”

Minako grabbed her pen and tossed it at the junior’s forehead in retaliation. “You really are just like a little brother.” The pen hit him right on the nose, earning an unmanly squeak. “I swear, I’m
“Deja-Vu. First, he thought I was dating you, now it's the other way.”

“Seriously? No freaking way.” Junpei continued to snicker while picking Minako’s pen back up and returned it to its rightful owner. “He really thought you and I were a thing? Where’d he get that from?”

She nodded. “It was a rumor at school. One day, we were out on our normal jog and he asked me about it.” Minako cleared her throat some more until the urge to cough had been flushed from her system. “You’d think people would wise up after almost two decades on Earth and stop saying things like that.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Junpei gestured with his coffee in a mock toast. “But really, what if you two did go out? Have any ideas about what it would be like?”

Minako hesitated to mull over the question.

“I would be lying if I said I hadn’t given it some thought. With all the rumors about my brother and me, it’s hard NOT to imagine if they’re true,” she tapped her pen absentmindedly on one of her many textbooks, “He’d theoretically be my first real boyfriend so I’m new to this dating thing. I can’t really picture what it would be like. How’d things be different than our relationship right now?”

“Oh boy,” Junpei clapped his hands together, “I think I can shed some light.”

He slapped his textbook closed and swept his papers to the side. Minako could see his ever-present smile growing ten times its normal size.

What was he thinking behind such an evil smirk?

“To start, you’d have a target hung on your back at all times. You know girls are crazy about him, especially that fan club or cult or whatever they call themselves.” He made a mock gun with his fingers. “One wrong move and—” he pretended to pull the trigger, “—Bang! It’s all over for the great Minako Arisato.”

Minako could already conceive the scene in her head: back pressed against the wall with an angry teenage hoard blocking the front. Their mouths were frothing at the prospect of ripping the poor girl in half for stealing their precious idol for good. Some might be holding weapons of varying types, clubs or knives or just bare fists, whatever was convenient at the time.

Soul-thirsty Shadows were easier to handle than whatever those girls could accomplish.

“Ugh,” Minako shivered all over, “I’d rather get eaten alive.”

Junpei chuckled. “Yeah, and you’d better be careful that he doesn’t play you like those jocks in the movies!” However, his sneer dropped. “Wait, Akihiko-senpai’s not that type of guy, so you don’t need to worry. It's, like, the opposite. He'd be way too serious if you were in a relationship. You wouldn’t have to worry about getting cheated on at least.”

Minako could feel her heart flutter at that last point.

All her life, she based what she knew about love off of her faith and the stories about her parents. Other than happiness, security, and personal fulfillment, integrity was one of her major indicators of a healthy relationship.

Whether it be keeping a secret or promising life-long loyalty, knowing that the person you will be
giving your heart to will not break it was a beautiful thing. It didn’t even have to be in a romantic way; she could trust Minato with just about anything she could think of. Some of the closest family members on her mother’s side had encouraged the siblings to keep moving ahead despite their circumstances.

Even in the context of dating, commitment could never be overlooked.

A tiny grin wormed its way onto her lips. “Definitely something I look for in a good man.”

Abruptly, Junpei gasped and pointed at Minako.

“Actually, why don’t you try and get him?” He then started to bounce impatiently in his seat. “Seriously, a transfer student swoops in and steals the heart of the boy every girl wants. Don’t you think that would be totally cool? It’d be something right out of a manga!”

Minako gave him an owlish look. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Totally!” he affirmed, crossing his arms. “Give it some thought and feel free to talk to me about it. You’ll thank me later!”

Did Minako want to pursue that kind of relationship right now, especially with someone she respected as a peer rather than a romantic partner?

No, she couldn’t see herself going for Akihiko, not anytime soon. Her main focus was to finish high school and kill Shadows in a giant death tower this year. Dating would have to come after her life was slightly less deadly. Or taken up by monsters.

Then again, no matter what Minako decided, she knew that her right-hand man was watching out for her.

Who needed a boyfriend when you can have a best friend?

“Oh, Junpei-kun. What would I do without you?”

Another Monday, another long workout with a coach that was more like a slave driver than a teacher.

And Minato was pissed.

Not only had he lied about it NOT being a cardo day in the weight room, but he also made them grab their gear and start sparring while they were still sweating like pigs. Some of the boys ended up having to step out to go to the nurses’ office for heat exhaustion. Their captains, including the resilient Shintaro Tateyama, were about ready to keel over and die through their encouraging words.

Worst of all, Kazushi was missing. Without him, time seemed to screech to a standstill with no one to make snarky judgments or call people short. The place where his spirited critiques should have been was filled with nothing but empty silence.

With another Full Moon just a week away, the pressure was on to remain as calm as possible.

But how could Minato relax without their favorite rival to beat the crap out of?

“That’s enough, ladies! Pack up!”
A sigh of relief swept throughout the gymnasium.

Many of the freshmen fell to their knees on the tumbling mats, begging for anyone to bring them a drink of water. Some attempted to stay upright, stumbling into each other like a bunch of drunks while the Juniors tried to beat the Seniors for the first shower. Many of them were unsuccessful, littering the floor after being shoved by their upperclassmen.

Their coach wasn’t too happy with the sight before him, cupping his hands over his mouth to yell. “I thought I said clean up, not CLEAN OUT YOU BUNCH OF FAIRIES!”

None of them listened. They continued toward the locker room at a much faster pace. Minato watched from his own mat as the fear of death spurred on a bunch of teenage athletes to flee from their demonic coach.

“What a bunch of sissies, leaving us to clean up the mess.” Minato heard his sparring partner say, turning back to look at the student. It was the same sophomore that had talked with him and Kazushi at their first meet; his name turned out to be Shuuya Kido. The kid was actually one hell of a fighter.

“That’s life, kid. People suck, things happen, and then you die.” Minato said, starting to nudge his gear off the mat so they could fold it up. “Might as well get used to it.”

Shuuya winced at the harshness yet started to help with the mat. “Are you alright, senpai? I get Kaz-kun isn’t here but-”

“I’m always like this,” Minato said quickly. The last person he wanted to admit his disappointment to may not be Shuuya, but he was still on the no-fly list for the youngest Arisato’s feelings. “Let’s just get this done so we can fight for a space in the showers. I feel like that fat guy from those foreign, juice commercials in this thing.”

“Okay, senpai.” Shuuya perked right back up, seemingly forgetting all about Minato’s sour attitude. “Say, ya wanna help me study for finals one of these days? I heard you got the second-best score in your grade and I could really use the extra brainpower! Please?”

Minato rolled his eyes.

No matter how much he wanted to say no to this annoying brat, he was an endearing brat nonetheless. Making Shuuya upset would cause nothing but trouble in the long run.

Play it cool. Don’t be mean.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah!” Shuuya pumped a free fist in the air. “I knew I could count on you! Thanks, man!”

“I said I’d think about it.”

Some people just took everything in life as a big fat yes.

Why couldn’t Minato have ONE person at this school who was as introverted and realistic as himself? Just one? Statistics were on his side and yet not a single soul would come forward to save him the trouble of having to locate them himself.

Life extraordinarily did suck, and one day, he will die of stress.
Unitedly, he and Shuuya cleaned their area as well as aid Yoko with the other mats. Some of the seniors even decided to wise up and came back to help.

Well, more like Captain Shintaro coerced them, they still came back and apologized.

After all was said and done, Minato was one of the last people to hop in the showers before traveling back to the dorm. Not even the feeling of being sweat-free could stave off his neurotic energy from throughout the day.

Minato navigated the nearly barren halls of Gekkoukan on his lonesome. Everyone else from the dorm had gone back by now, having completed their after-school activities and preparing for another night of putzing around in Tartarus. Minako guaranteed a hearty meal before their mission, a justifiable motivation for leaving the building as soon as possible.

At least this gave him some time to think and breathe without interruption.

Still, after months in the company of certain individuals, the silence he had once found comforting was now alien, almost unsettling.

The question still remained if that was a good or bad thing.

With the way his life was going, it might be the former.

It was a scary thought.

When Minato finally retrieved his street shoes from his locker and laced them up, he was set for a long commute back to Iwatodai. He exited the building, greeted by a sinking sun and the smell of saltwater. The wind must have been blowing towards the school earlier. Not unpleasant at all, in fact.

However, the only thing that did surprise him was seeing Kazushi, standing on the school steps and facing the bay.

What was he doing out here all by himself? Had he been at school this whole time? If so, why wasn’t he at practice earlier?

Minato took it slow going down the stairs. The last thing he needed on this tiresome day was to scare his sparring partner and watch him split his head open on the concrete.

“Hey, Kaz . . .”

Kazushi flinched at his name and looked back. There was a ghost of a frown on his face before breaking into his usual cocky smirk. “Sup, twig? Ya’ miss me today?” he asked, waiting for Minato to the final step. “You’re probably wondering where I’ve been.”

Minato shrugged. “If you weren’t at practice, you were probably sick or at the hospital again.”

For some reason, Kazushi seemed to brighten. “Hey, you remembered what we talked about last time? And you guessed right, too! I just got back a few minutes ago to pick up some stuff.” He shook his head with a sheepish chuckle. “Of course you remembered; you remember everything. I bet you remembered what you had for breakfast five years ago, today.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not a freaking weirdo.” Minato still gave the comment some thought. “But, knowing me, it was probably dry cereal.”
Minato was distracted when he noticed that one of Kazushi’s shoes were untied.

“Um, you’re missing something.” he said while pointing to the offense on the ground. “Were you in a hurry and forgot?”

“Huh?” Kazushi looked down before noticing what was wrong. “Oh, yeah I was!” He kneeled to re-tie his laces. “Anyway, the hospital had the results from my last exam and-

Kazushi’s face screwed up as if he had eaten something rotten. He lost his balance and fell over on his side, hitting his shoulder hard on the pavement.

“Ugh! Damnit!”

Minato was already in motion and hurrying to help his fallen teammate. Thankfully, it didn't look like Kazushi had hit his head, his body taking the brunt of the fall, therefore, no need to get medical attention.

Still, he looked to be in serious pain.

“Jesus Martha. . .” Minato trailed off before lending a hand to pull Kazushi into a sitting position, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Hang on and I’ll pull you up. As much as I tolerate you, I don’t feel like carrying a sack of dead potatoes.”

Kazushi scoffed but did as he was told. “Dead potatoes? Is that the best joke you can come up with at a time like this?” He continued to chuckle as the pair lifted off the ground, Minato bearing weight for the both of them. “Sorry, even if I’m such a pain in the neck. It can’t be easy being the crutch of a cripple.”

Minato brushed off the apology. “It’s whatever,” he started walking them towards the train station, “If I wanna be a doctor, I better start learning how to put up with cripples eventually.”

“Ha! That one was actually kinda funny! I’m a lil’ impressed.” Kazushi sighed and turned back to look ahead, his smile bittersweet. “But that was f-funny, huh? I was trying to tie my shoes, and I fell right when I was telling you about my visit. Ain’t that just ironic?”

"Is everything working alright?” Minato asked.

Kazushi nodded. “Yeah, just gotta ice this damn thing for a few weeks and everything should be fine.” He gave his bad leg a vigorous slap. “I have to start training harder even though practice is over. The big tournament will be here before we know it. We should do some extra practice together if you’re free.”

Minato huffed, but the thought of sparring with Kazushi again was tempting.

Since when did being with another person longer than necessary start to sound appealing?

“I guess I can spare an afternoon.”

At that, Kazushi relaxed. “On a serious note, thanks for this. It’s a good thing you were around. If it had been someone else, then the rest of the team would’ve found out. I really appreciate it.”

“Yup, no problem.”

Minato dropped Kazushi back at his house, silence once again taking over as his constant companion. Not even the most upbeat music on his MP3 could remedy the void at his side.
It was one week before the full moon.

Minako already anticipated their monthly visit from her and Minato’s favorite kid.

“I see you have become accustomed to my visits, I’m glad.” Pharos took a square of milk chocolate from the center of the trio’s huddle and popped the confection into his mouth, eyes widening almost instantly. “What in the world is this flavor? I have never tasted anything like it.”

“It’s called chocolate.” Minato broke off a square for himself. “It’s made out of something called a cocoa bean that’s grown in another continent, Africa. There’re different kinds depending on how much of the raw bean you use and whatever you mix it with. This one is called milk chocolate because it’s made up of mostly dairy products.”

“I see,” Pharos went ahead and took four more pieces, “I quite like this milk chocolate.” He ate them all at once and reached out for more. “I can’t stop eating it. Is this some kind of spell? Witchcraft?”

Minako held back her giggles while shuffling a deck of cards for their game. “More like kitchen-craft. I got those at the shop in town.” She started making a bridge with the cards for one final mix up. “Anyone got any ideas for tonight’s main event? Go Fish? BlackJack? Rat Slap? Poker?”

Minato slightly raised his hand. “How about BS? We haven’t played that one in a long time and it’s no fun with just the two of us.”

Pharos swallowed his latest handful of chocolate at the mention of the game. “What does BS stand for?”

“It stands for bull sh-”

“-Language, I taught you better than that.” Minako started to make three piles of cards to set up for the game. “It’s slang for ‘incorrect’ and that’s the main point of the game, false information.” She looked up at Pharos who was listening contentedly. “You’ll get the hang of it. This game is lots of fun, especially with more than two players!”

Pharos nodded, watching as the three pile grew. “The next full moon will be in one week. Are you both prepared? Are there any worries?”

Minato shrugged, laying on his stomach and grabbed his cheaters sitting nearby. “I just want it to be over quick. Last time scared the crap out of me. I thought it would never end.”

Minako felt a sinking feeling in her chest. “I agree, it was a long battle.”

“I see,” Pharos said, “I don’t know what it’s like but I wish you all the best.” Once the cards had been dealt, he picked up a pile for himself. “After all, who else will teach me these games if you two end up losing? I’ll be lonely.”

Minato reached over and gave Pharos’ hair an affectionate ruffle. “Good thing we’re not alone in this. We’ve got five other knuckleheads willing to kick some butt.” He glanced over at Minako. “And one crazy leader who doesn’t know when to chill out. I think we’re gonna be fine.”

Minako sighed at his dramatics but her heart felt a little lighter.

Why had she felt that distant longing in the first place? Her brother had been here from the start; he would always be there until the very last minute.
Was there ever a time they had taken big steps alone?

She picked up her cards. It was best to put anything pertaining to the Shadows out of her mind.

Now was the time to decompress and have some fun.

“Come on guys, let’s get this game started. Are ya’ ready?”

All was quiet in the Dark Hour that evening.

Not many Shadows gathered in the streets, remaining in Tartarus as if resting for the impending full moon, just one week away. The sly few that patrolled for anyone who may have the unfortunate fate of entering their territory knew better than to cause a scene. Puddles of blood and looming coffins were still and undisturbed by this odd calm. Not even the creaks and groans of metal buildings or signposts could disturb the people’s slumber.

Peaceful.

Until . .

“W-what the hell is this!?”

One young man stumbled into one of many winding alleyways the city had to offer. Anywhere but being in the open streets was a better option than being seen by monsters on the prowl. His breath was labored from sprinting at full speed, desperate to hide until this nightmare ended.

It had to end, right?

“F-fuck, this ain’t normal. . .” he muttered and slouched against a grimy wall, piles of trash on either side of him. “Where the hell is everybody? Where’re all the lights?”

For a moment, he sat there amongst the rubbish, trying to catch whatever breathe he had left. His face was buried in his hands but it did nothing to block out the strange new world around him. The silence mocked with its lack of a proper response. Darkness was the only certainty and surrounded him on all fronts.

This had to be a dream.

After another minute, he grew hysterical.

“Wh-where's my mates? W-we-”

“-Your mates are sleeping.”

The young man’s head shot up at the sound of a cool and gritty man’s voice, seeming to address his question.

Standing at the entrance of the alleyway were three silhouettes: two tall figures with one carrying a briefcase while the third was much shorter. If he squinted hard enough through the darkness, he could see the glint of something in the third figure’s grasp, something large but undiscernable from where he was.

“Wh-what?”

“Are you surprised? Truth be told, we all visit this world every night.” This was not the first voice
anymore. It was still male but far more pitched and nasally. “Honestly, you would think at least one person would catch on by now.”

By now, the young man was far too wary of these strangers to consider them a relief. He pushed himself off the ground and backed further into the alleyway.

“Wh-What are you saying? Who the hell are you?”

“Didn’t Mommy teach you any manners? We’re asking the questions here!” the second voice snapped. “Don’t even think that you’re the one in control here!”

One of the tall figures, the one with the briefcase, broke from the group to approach their supposed target. As the figure got closer, the young man found himself facing another male that looked to be his age, wearing a green jacket with black stripes in a symmetrical criss-cross. His boots clicked with each purposeful step closer.

Perhaps the most striking feature was his orange-tinted glasses that obscured his eyes.

“Besides, you haven't introduced yourself.” The glasses-wearing person shoved a paper into the young man’s hands. “Take a look. Name, age, address, etcetera. This is you, right?”

Glasses was right, it was him.

To the man’s horror, all of his personal information was on this piece of paper.

“Wha--!?” He shoved the paper at Glasses, fear replaced with rage. “Where did you get this!?”

Glasses was unphased by the reaction. “I thought I said you’re not the one asking the questions.” He continued to stare as if conducting a business deal. “Somebody’s got a grudge against you, and they asked us to get revenge. We’ve come to do just that.”

“Revenge!? What kinda bullshit is this!?” The young man was growing desperate. He stepped forward and shoved the other male in hopes that it would scare him off. “Who put you up to this!? Is this some sick prank!?”

“Can't tell ya. We're professionals.”

That was his only answer.

“Professionals?”

All of a sudden, the rumors he had heard recently came to the forefront of his mind.

He made a move to scuffle backward even further. Any amount of distance was crucial if this was truly what was going on. “Oh shit. . . You mean, the rumors on the net are true!? This ain’t funny man! Cut it out!”

The glasses-wearing figure stepped back and the second tall figure stepped in his place. This other man was much more of a wreak, missing a shirt, exposing a set of vibrant tattoos that popped out of the dark. His jeans were ripped to shreds with a ratty red scarf hanging from the back pocket.

Worst of all, a revolver was tucked into the belt of his pants.

The young man finally lost all sense of decorum that he had left. “W-Wait, I haven't done anything wrong!” He threw himself to the mercy of this stranger, kneeling on the dirty ground and bowing to his shoes. “Why me!? What'd I do!? Tell me!”
The first voice greeted his plea.

“That is not our concern. Your notion of right and wrong is irrelevant.” There was a metallic click right over his head. “My client's wishes are all that matter. People hear what they choose to hear, and believe what they want to believe.”

Another metallic click.

“I will give you five seconds.”

The young man knew he was dead but that didn’t stop him from leaping to his feet, hightailing down the alleyway. He would take his chances on the street if it meant getting away from these people.

He just hoped that there was an exit further in.

The blood was hammering in his head.

There was always a way out.

“Get away from me!”

A laugh followed his cries.

“You squeal most magnificently! Such raw emotion!”

Where was the way out?

BANG!

The man flinched as he felt a horrible pain in his back.

He tried to move and see those three strangers one last time, but his legs remained frozen in place. It was as if someone was pressing down on his shoulders with lead weights.

His vision was going hazy. Someone cackled, but he couldn’t tell who. All noise seemed to be filtered through a thick sheet.

He swayed on his feet.

“I-I’m-”

He started to fall backward, feeling the weight consume him.

The only thing that seemed light was his head as it went slack.

“. . .-sorry.”

The man fell to the freezing ground, everything spinning and the pain in his gut only growing worse. He coughed, his mouth filled with blood. It leaked at the corners of his lips and left an unsavory taste on the tongue. The bullet had caused internal bleeding.

There was no coming back from something like this.

His eyes grew heavy, numb.

“He's not dead. . .” A third voice, a woman’s voice reached him from somewhere far away.
“Doesn't matter, we've held up our end of the bargain.” It was the glasses-wearing stranger who was talking now. “Besides, tomorrow this will just seem like some random crime.”

“If there's nothing else. . .” It was the gun-toting man who yawned. “I'm feeling rather tired.”

Three pairs of footfalls faded into the night.

The young man closed his eyes.

“Cold. . .”

Everything was peaceful once more in the Dark Hour.

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06/30/2009

**Turns out there's a site on the internet where you can ask some randos to get revenge on other people for you.**

**Perfect, now I can deal with Akihiko Sanada and have nothing tied back to me. It's like a two for one deal at Wild Duck Burger, only if their fries didn't fucking suck.**

-Minato Arisato
Yo, guess who's still suffering!?

Not me, I'm feeling pretty good these days! I can't say the same for my sister who's currently taking her first anatomy and physiology course in high school. Every night, she calls me in tears saying "WHERE THE F*** IS THIS!?" I do my best to help her out but being in school for OT (which is heavy on anatomy) just doesn't jive well with the whole teaching thing.

Anyway, the next chapter is part one of "that mission" on "that day" with "yes, that thing that happens that all the fangirls love", so buckle up! For now, enjoy some cruddy pre-angst fluff with the best friends five-ever crew!

“Hey, listen to this. Last time I was out with my boyfriend, he was heading to Shirakawa Boulevard! Can you believe that pig!?”

“Whoa, Shirakawa Boulevard? Ewww, I know what was on his mind!”

“We just started dating, but I'm already kind of disgusted. He's got such a dirty mind. Maybe I should dump him? I don't want to be the subject of one of those rumors that go, ‘a couple was found unconscious.’”

“Hahaha! That'd be great!”

Minato observed a pair of girls as they continued to chatter on about one’s horrible boyfriend. They seemed more than happy about announcing to the entire world that this guy was a scumbag despite wanting to keep his activities on the down-low.

Announcing something you wanted to keep secret. It had to be some of the most backward logic to ever curse the surface of the earth.

Ah well, just another day in high school.

“Man, they just keep going, huh?” Junpei perched himself on his desk with an energy drink in one hand and a candy bar in the other. “Still, everyone’s been talking about couples and Shirakawa Boulevard lately. Makes ya’ wonder if everyone caught the love bug or something like that.”

Minato shrugged. “Love is gross,” he stabbed at his salad aimlessly, “People should just do the world a public service and shut up about it, already. Nobody cares.”

Junpei chuckled at his partner’s brashness. “Dude, chill out! It’s not the end of the freaking world.” He sighed and leaned forward in his seat. “You and Minatan are so dramatic about dating. I teased her about ending up like one of those Lost pairs with Akihiko-senpai and she went off on me! You’d think they were in a secret relationship!”

Another thing to retch at so early in the day, Akihiko Sanada and his sister.
“Junpei, if they were in a relationship, I’d kill him and the police would never find the body—”

“-Okay, I get it!” Junpei threw up his hands in defeat. “How come you hate that Akihiko-senpai so much? He’s cool, tough, popular with the ladies, what more can a gal ask for?”

There were plenty of qualities Minato looked for in potential suitors, for both himself and Minako. None of them included such worldly trivialities such as good looks or physical strength. This was real life, not a teen chick flick.

Was that someone financially stable?

What about someone who could chat about normal things other than fitness or protein?

Here was another crazy idea: how about someone who ate lemons the goddamn right way?

Why did that even need to be a requirement up until a few weeks ago?

Minato rolled his eyes and made another rough stab at his meal. “I’m done with this conversation. The more I talk about that human meat shield, the more I wanna find this revenge site everyone’s been gushing over and let the bastard be a memory.”

Stunned, Junpei closed his mouth to keep from replying. However, that didn’t keep him from switching the topic rather than letting silence reign for the remainder of lunch. “Speaking of sourpusses,” he quickly finished off his candy bar before continuing, “is it just me or has Yukatan been acting kinda weird lately?”

“Meh,” Minato twirled his fork with a cherry tomato clinging onto the end, “I don’t pay attention to that stuff.” He popped the tomato into his mouth, enjoying the explosion of flavor on his tongue. “Why does it matter? Did you two get in another fight?”

Junpei chuckled. “I wish, man! Maybe that’d explain everything.” He took off his cap to scratch his head. “Nah, it’s gotta be something else. I betcha she's been thinking way too hard about Tartarus n' stuff.”

Yukari being anxious was no surprise to Minato. With a full moon just days away, everyone at the dorm was on edge about what may happen. Minako started running twice a day to build her endurance. Mitsuru and Fuuka monitored Shadow activity every night for the past two weeks. The Chairman and Akihiko worked with Officer Kurosawa on tracking Apathy Syndrome cases. Junpei, whether he noticed it or not, was extra aggressive when the group went to Tartarus Even Minato himself bumped up his training in kendo in anticipation for the main event.

Yes, they all waited with bated breath, unable to predict what horrors awaited them on the seventh of July.

Would they end up in the same state as their last big mission?

Would someone get hurt?

The list of unknowns could stretch on forever and if they were caught unprepared again, they weren't coming back.

Minato stared down at his food.
Suddenly, his appetite escaped him.

“She’s not the only one.”

Lunch ended on a somber note.

“Is Odagiri here today?”

“Um, no. . . I think he's busy.”

“Busy playing Private DICK!”

Minako tried to tune out the whispers and chatter of everyone but when her MP3 ran out of power, she had no choice but to listen. Every word, every criticism, she endured while trying to finish putting together the daily meeting report. Did they really have nothing better to do? Did they even care about getting their work done?

Another day, another round of interpersonal drama in the Student Council.

“You mean what Fushimi was telling me about earlier.” Mitsuru finally stepped in. The clicking of her boots signaled to all that she was not in the mood for their constant complaining. “I understand how you feel, however, his intentions are good, so you can't blame him. Let me deal with him in the future rather than talking behind his back. You’re high schoolers, not middle-aged cat women.”

Minako watched as the whole room came to their senses, murmured a half-hearted apology, and broke up into their separate committees.

Mitsuru nodded her approval then turned to approach Minako, still visibly peeved at having to shut down a trivial matter. “Arisato, how’s the meeting report coming along? Have you almost finished for the day?”

Minako shrugged and glued her eyes back to the laptop screen. “Almost, just one more section on the new proposal for that new memorial tree in the front entrance and everything should be good to go.” Her fingers flew across the keys. “Sounds like Odagiri-kun's missing today. Any idea where he ran off to?”

“I have a few.” Mitsuru came around to stand behind Minako, bending down to see the document on the monitor. “Are you sure you’re not done? You already wrote three paragraphs already on that proposal.”

“Hm? I did?” Minako paused and checked the section. “I pretty sure I-”

Low and behold, she had been so focused on her annoyance with the other council members, she copied the same information without thinking. Now, there were three paragraphs with different wording yet all saying the same thing about the proposal.

Minako let out a nervous chuckle before highlighting two paragraphs to be deleted. “Um, oops?”

Mitsuru sighed. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. I suppose it's an off day for all of us.” She stood straight again and motioned for Minako to stand up. “Please, I’ll take care of finalizing this. Go ahead and enjoy the rest of your afternoon.”

“If you insist,” Minako got up reluctantly and allowed Mitsuru to take her place, “are you sure it’s okay? I’d hate to leave ya with a ton to do.”
“You already do more than enough,” the president said, lowering her voice. “Besides, with a full moon coming soon, I know you’re concerned about your duties.” She looked up and gave a tiny smile. “Relax and try to get into the right mindset. SEES needs the best you can offer.”

Minako had no room to argue.

It was true: the next mission was around the corner. It was the best for the whole team if they had a leader who was at the top of their game. That also meant that said leader needed to clear her mind and focus solely on leading SEES. Taking one afternoon off would help get that back.

“Guess that’s my cue to hit the road.” Minako did as she was instructed, grabbing her school bag and preparing to leave. “Thanks again, I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

The promise earned a tiny laugh from Mitsuru. “I don’t mind at all this at all, so there’s no need.”

Minako exited the Student Council room and started toward the shoe lockers. Students lined the hallways in various sports or casual attire, only a few still had on their school uniforms. Most of those students bore armbands announcing that they were part of a culture club.

Still, the school was much less hectic. No bumping into people, no fighting for personal space, it was the perfect time to take in the scenery.

Well, what little scenery there was inside a building.

Once Minako bounded down the main staircase and entered the main entrance, she already had a plan on what to do with the rest of the afternoon. Making a group dinner, stopping by the police station to chat with Kurosawa about weapons, maybe even visiting the Velvet Room to take Theodore to the arcade. Elizabeth might tag along and they could have a contest to see who could win the best prizes!

Of course, it was not a clean match-up. The only human amidst their trio was too experienced in the ways of video games.

“So where's your EVIDENCE, smart guy!?”

Minako was broken from her thoughts as someone bellowed at the top of their lungs.

“There's no need for evidence. I know all about you. You were arrested for beating up a guy in the park who snitched on you, right?”

That voice was familiar.

Minako looked towards the shoe lockers to see a group of students packed around two teens, both male.

One of the students in the middle was Hidetoshi.

That’s where he was all this time, working on the cigarette in the boy’s bathroom investigation. It was good to know he was making headway on the project.

On the other hand, he put himself in a sticky situation.

“Whoa! He's at it again! That's the third person today he's accused.” a female student exclaimed. “I thought this was all a big joke!”

“Totally!” another girl said. “My boyfriend was so pissed he was accused, too. This guy's asking
Hidetoshi refused to give into the stares and whispers around him, a confident glare boring into his latest suspect, arms crossed and chin held high.

“Keeping quiet will do you no good. If it’s not you, then give me some names. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. You have my word as a member of the Disciplinary Committee that this matter will be resolved. All I ask is your cooperation.”

The other student was not buying the speech. Instead, he moved closer to Hidetoshi, hands balled up into fists.

“Shut up, asshole.”

Minako’s mouth went dry and with the speed of a jackrabbit, Minako held on tight to her bag and moved to break up the argument. Her feet barely touched the ground with each graceful bound.

“Hey, knock it off—”

However, it was too late.

The other boy advanced on Hidetoshi and took a swing at his face.

The latter was too slow to react, ending with him receiving a hefty punch. He fell on the floor, clutching at his injured cheek, yet managed to preserve a steely scowl with the person who clocked him.

“Shit! He got ‘em!”

“Finally, I thought he’d never stop talking!”

Minako reached the mob just as they splintered to go their separate ways, leaving her and Hidetoshi to themselves. Those who witnessed the whole episode went back to minding their own business.

“Tch! Don’t think I’ll just let that go! I know who you are!” Hidetoshi yelled after the retreating students. He huffed and looked up at Minako, a bruise already forming on his cheek. His scowl dropped, replaced only with a disappointed frown. The young man tore his gaze away. “Arisato-kun . . . You look like you want to say something.”

Minako reached out a hand to pull him up. “There’s always a place for talking, but there’re better places to do that then on the ground, ya know. Like outside. Or the nurse’s office.”

Hidetoshi stared at her outstretched hand. It almost seemed like he would refuse the help, too proud to admit he just got his butt handed to him on a silver platter. Minako was worried she would have to beg for his trust. That was the last thing she needed, for her sake and Hidetoshi’s.

However, he reached out to accept her hand.

“Of course,” he heaved himself up with the added assist, “I’m sorry you had to see that. I must look like a complete idiot. And you were on your way home, too. This must be an inconvenience to your family.”

Minako shook her head and urged for him to follow her towards the faculty office hallway. “Trust me, I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

Or a home waiting for her, but that was too cynical to say out loud. Minako had enough of that
from Minato already.

Hidetoshi rubbed at his cheek, his scowl returning. “In any case, thank you. If we let people get away with breaking the rules, things will only get worse. One day, it'll spiral out of control, and there will be nothing we can do. We should deal with the problem now, while we still can!”

Minako hummed in agreement. “I know but take it easy, okay? Making yourself look like a villain doesn't solve anything-”

Hidetoshi stopped walking. His attention was fixed on the ground, miles away in a world no one else could reach, not willing to face his senior or take a step forward.

Stuck in the middle of the hall.

“Odagiri-kun. . .” Minako trailed off, not knowing what to say. All she could do was watch him fidget with a plain, black watch on his wrist. Its band was worse for wear and one hand twitched awkwardly, but it still looked to be functional.

“I am brash, I am annoying, I know that to be true. I accept it.” Hidetoshi let go of his watch. “But those who carry out justice have always clashed with others. History has proven this to be true. So, let this serve as a warning to other offenders. You're a sensible person.” He looked to her for a reaction. “You understand, right?”

Minako soaked up his question.

He was correct, those who told the truth no one wanted to hear lashed out. They wanted someone else to blame or take on the liability. That was the harsh reality of things.

That being said, Minako also believed that history could fall in one’s favor sooner rather than later.

“I agree,” she finally said, giving him a tiny smile, “I’m just worried. I don’t wanna see you get hurt, Odagiri-kun. It’d be a shame for that to happen.”

Hidetoshi snorted.

“Oh, I see.” He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly coy. “My goodness, I think I may have a fever as well.”

Minako laughed and started pushing him towards the nurse’s office. She was glad to know he was focused more on her concern for him rather than his anger. “Let’s get moving, soldier. Ya’ can’t solve this case with a sore cheek!”

“Hehe, lead the way.”

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**Baneofmyexistence:** Bukinichi jus called me, he needs hlp w/ da shop after skol

**Baneofmyexistence:** u wanna com hlp out?

**Me:** ??? When did u give the bookstore ur #?

**Baneofmyexistence:** since I got a parttime job there

**Me:** huh
Minako had been telling the truth when she said the old couple gave her a part-time job. With a nametag and everything.

Minako snickered when he arrived dressed the way he was and enjoyed watching him suffer behind a cash register, throwing an occasional smirk to drive his arrogance home.

Now, Minato had to eat his own words while reorganizing a shelf of decaying novels. Earlier, he swept the sidewalk of trash and leaves, cleaned the display windows until they shinned, and replaced all the outdated pricetags on the sales floor. The poor boy did all of it in his school uniform that breathed as well as a dead man. Having the front doors cracked open did nothing to balance out the odd spike in temperature.

It was supposed to be spring, not summer!

As Minato felt a bead of sweat roll down his face and the weight of the books grow more strenuous, Minato could only think one thing: of all days to be wrong, it had to be today.

However, it wasn’t all bad. A distinct taste of old paper officially became ingrained into his nostrils from hours of up close and personal interaction with the various books. Ambient sounds of the store played on in the background, from footfalls of people pacing between shelves, an old radio playing classical jazz, even the faint chatter between employees and customers. And as the sun sank lower in the sky and cast a soft, orange glow inside the shop offered a pleasant view. Oddly enough, a perfect working environment for an introvert like himself.

It wasn’t until seven o’clock when Minato heard his sister ringing up the last customer and grabbed a ring of keys, crossing the store to get to the door.

“That’s a wrap then!” she announced when she locked the place up. “All that’s left to do is count the till and we’re free for the rest of the night.”

Minato took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back. There was a crack in his bones as he stretched, but his muscles relaxed. “That was a nice workout.” He ambled over to the check-out counter. “Too bad I’ve got so much homework tonight. I wanted to start playing this one video game I got the other day.”

“Here, here,” Minako said while opening the cash register and counting the earnings they made, “I can’t wait to serve up tonight’s dinner. There was a sale on steak yesterday so I took advantage and made your favorite: stroganoff.” She looked up at him. “I bet the other boys are gonna be happy. Cream of mushroom soup, heavy whipping cream, portabolla mushrooms, what more could you ask for?”
It took all of Minato’s willpower to not smile at the prospect of such a delectable meal after such a long day of hard labor. The last thing he needed was to look like a complete doofus in front of his sister.

Instead, he shrugged and leaned over the sale counter with a smirk. It was better to play it cool. “I can think of a few things.”

Minako glanced up from counting the till and quirked an eyebrow. “I thought you’d be more excited. Stroganoff’s your favorite.” She set the money back inside to lock it up. “Or are ya’ just trying to act tough? Last time, you were practically jumping out of your skin—”

“I finally found it!”

The siblings looked up to see Bukinichi coming out from the back room. He hobbled along with his smoking pipe poised to his lips, a contented smile on his face. “And it looks like you two’ve finished up for the day. Excellent work!” he remarked.

Minako bowed to the elderly man. “I just got done counting the till. We’ve made a decent profit today since some college students came in looking for some required reading materials.” She straightened herself. “There was also this one couple who were shopping for their niece. Turns out, she’s in love with this one series that has a LOT of books. I had to ask Minato to help bring everything to the counter!”

Bukinichi chuckled. “That’s wonderful to hear, Minako-chan.” He then turned to Minato. “And don’t think I forgot about all that you’ve done. The storage room is spotless, the shelves are straight as an arrow, and the windows never looked so clear. You’re one quick-footed young man!”

“Thanks, sir.” Minato bowed as well. “Glad I could help out.”

Minako cleared her throat to catch their new manager’s attention. “If ya’ don’t mind me asking, what’d you find? Something important?”

“Oh!” Bukinichi reached into his back pocket. “I don’t mind at all. In fact, I was just about to show you two.”

From his pocket, he produced a shiny key. Though it was definitely a key, it was not one used for opening doors or safes. This one had a remote control with three different buttons, one closed lock, one open, and a red square that read “alarm.” Part of the shaft was also buffed and scratched up yet it still glimmered like a new.

It was a car key.

Minato carefully studied the small object. “I didn’t know you had a car. Where is it?”

“Storage, my boy. It hasn’t been used in years but recently I’ve had the urge to see the old thing again.” Bukinichi twirled the key on his finger. “I was looking for my wallet earlier because I thought that I had lost this thing for good. Turns out I was wrong and thank goodness for it.”

“That’s a relief.” Minako breathed. “It’d be a shame to have to lose something like that—”

“-Dear?”

A sudden gasp drew everyone to look at a fear-stricken Mitsuko.

“Is that what I think it is?” She was clutching her hands to her chest and glared at the key with a
mortified expression, shivering. “Is that key for . . .”

“Mitsuko-san?” Minako said when the woman continued to stare, approaching carefully to comfort Mitsuko, placing her hands on the woman's boney shoulders. “Ma’am, is everything alright? Maybe you should sit down for a minute, you look so pale.”

Minato turned to Bukinichi for an explanation, the latter drawing closer to his wife.

“Come on, dear, you know what it is. It's the key to our son's car.” Once he was close enough to Mitsuko, Bukinichi took her fists away from her chest and gently into his own. “Seeing Minato-chan and Minako-chan reminded me of how things used to be. It reminded me of how bright it was around here.”

Mitsuko did not recoil away but her terror remained.

“But dear . . .”

Minato felt the tension in the room grow. The aforementioned son was already a sore spot that had been addressed. That day brought back emotions of his own lose from so long ago, emotions that he learned to keep quiet.

Watching this scene in front of him only made things worse.

He threw a glance at Minako who caught it with a shake of the head.

Don't intervene.

“Besides,” Bukinichi went on, “I haven't heard the roar of the engine in a long time. Maybe it’s time to finally take the old girl for a spin-”

“Please don’t!” Mitsuko shouted. It was uncharacteristic for the woman to raise her voice but this was just painful to hear. “Why must you get into a car!? Do you want me to end up all alone!? Don’t you care if you might die!?"

There was nothing but dead space after her words had cut through. Her harshness left them speechless, reeling at the sudden outburst.

Not a soul had the audacity to speak up.

Finally, it was Minato who found it within himself to make the first move.

“Why are you so afraid of the car?”

That question seemed to break Mitsuko out of her funk. She looked up at him with glazed over eyes but was at least she was responsive.

“Oh, Minato-chan. . .” She took a moment to take a deep breath, clutching back at her husband’s hands. “Minako-chan, I'm sorry for raising my voice. Did I scare you both? I know that was all so sudden.”

“We’re fine, Mitsuko-san.” Minako shuffled around so she could stand closer to Minato. “We're more worried about you. What’s so scary about your husband driving?”

The couple threw each other a knowing look. Mitsuko seemed on the verge of tears but she gave her husband a solemn bow. “There’s no point in hiding it, dear. We should tell them.”
Bukinichi hesitated temporarily to reply only to sigh. “I suppose there’s not. . .” The man turned to the siblings with an ashen face. "Our son, remember what I told you? How he passed away.”

The siblings nodded.

Bukinichi caressed his wife’s hand. “We both agreed after hearing about how your own parents lost their lives to hold off on sharing the unpleasant circumstances of our loss. We wanted to avoid dredging up any past scars.” He sighed. "That being said, it seems as though we owe an explanation, only if you feel comfortable, though.”

Minato felt a shiver shoot down his spine at the mention of his parents, a frog threatening to leap in his throat. He simply hoped that what he thought was incorrect.

Even if it was something that needed to be said.

Minako answered for both of them. “Go ahead.”

Bukinichi bowed his head.

“On the way home from work, he got into an accident, hit by a dump truck driver who was drunk on the job. . . The impact had been so instantaneous and quick that he barely had seconds to react. His doctor said he would not have felt anything until it was too late. It was painless.”

Minato felt his heart take a steep plunge.

A car accident.

Crunching metal, smoke filling a closed carriage, all the sights, all the sounds, all the smells of that night came rushing back. His fists went rigid while the body was unable to move. And was it just his imagination or could he taste a faint hint of iron on his tongue?

It had to be his imagination.

Or a nightmare.

“Minato?”

Someone touched his shoulder.

“You okay, nerd?”

Minato bounced back to reality. His muscles relaxed at will as he told himself to just take some deep breaths.

He looked over at where he had been touched to see his sister’s concerned eyes, slightly watery but no tears stained her cheeks. She had been just as spooked yet knew how to hide it better.

“You good?” she asked again.

Minato took one last breath before humming. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Fine was a very loose term to describe how he felt.

It was the best he could do and that was all that mattered.

“Ah, look what I’ve done!”
Minato and Minako shifted back to the old couple.

Bukinichi let go of his wife, instead, he crossed his arms and shook his head. “With all my excitement, I forgot to consider how my wife might feel. Now I’ve gone an’ made all of you sad.” The keys on his hand jingled as he waved it around in frustration. “I oughta just let Minato-chan punch me square in the nose for all this gloom I caused. What a fool this old man can be!”

Even Mitsuko studied the floor, guilt evident on her grimace. “I feel terrible. We shouldn’t have burdened you two with our problems.”

“No! Don’t say that!” Minako exclaimed, stepping forward and waving their degrading words away. “What you said took a lot of courage. I can’t speak for the nerd but talking about those kinds of things can really take a weight off your shoulders. I’m glad you said it.”

Minato stayed where he was but could not agree more with what she had to say. All he felt now was empathy for the couple. No one should have to lose family members because of someone else’s poor judgment. It was revolting to think that people still had so little regard of others around them.

Even more than that, they were two of the only people so far in Minato’s life who shared such a familiar experience of tragedy.

Most of his father’s side of the family could care less about the siblings. All of his mother’s side lived in America, too far away to be of any comfort. Yet, an elderly couple he and Minako met months ago actually cared if the siblings were still grieving after all these years.

“You two understand us…” he mumbled, fiddling with the cord of his headphones. “You get how it feels. I’m grateful for that.”

“Minako-chan, Minato-chan…” Bukinichi sighed and reached back for Mitsuko to be in his embrace. “Are all the youngin’ these days wise like you two?”

Minato could barely hold back a snort. “If only, sir.”

For the rest of the sibling’s time at the shop, they shared a moment of bittersweet remembrance for those they had lost.

They went back to the dorm sharing a habitual silence, walking so close together that their shoulders bumped, a silent reassurance that the other was still there.

“…And I’m gonna need a new supply of bandages, too.” Minako looked up at Officer Kurosawa from her supply list for Tartarus. “Junpei-kun challenged Akihiko-san to a scrimmage in the lobby and they completely destroyed our first aid station. I thought I was gonna rip their heads off.”

The officer rolled his eyes. “That Sanada, always ready for a fight. I’ll make sure to yell at him later.” He jotted down her order and put his pen aside. “How are you guys for weapons? Anything damaged? Major breakage? I can get new ones delivered tomorrow morning to the dorm.”

Minako looked back at her list. “Now that ya’ bring that up, my naginata has been a bit off lately.” She took her pencil and set it unevenly on her finger, causing it to tip from side to side. “Somethings wrong with the balance between the blade and the polearm piece. I tried going online for DIY’s on how to fix it but nothing’s working. It might be time to cut my losses and invest in some new hardware.”
"I see, I’ll get a new one sent to the dorm but it will take a day or two.” Kurosawa made another note. “The weapon maker recently bought a workshop in a town called Inaba. That’s a few hours away and the product needs to be transferred on foot; no postal center in Japan accepts that kind of cargo without a lot of background checking.”

“It’ll be worth the wait, it always is.” Minako said and dug into her purse for her money. “So, how much? I’ve got some extra cash from my new job and selling off those coins from Tartarus. Just lay the price on me.”

“That’ll be three thousand yen.”

Minako flinched, looking up from her purse.

“Three grand, but last week it was seven. What happened?”

Kurosawa continued finalizing the order, ignoring her shock to continue writing. “I’m in a good mood today. Plus, that money is better in a savings account for college. Consider it a thank you for all your hard work over the past month.”

“B-but-” The teen found her money and started counting out the proper payment. “I can’t accept that. You’re doing too much for us already so-”

“-I don’t take no for an answer.” Kurosawa stopped writing to look her dead in the eye. The shadows cast by the brim of his cap made each wrinkle pop. “Three thousand yen or I bill it to Miss Kirijo.”

“I-” Minako stumbled.

This felt wrong yet an officer of the law insisted on cutting the price down out of the kindness of his heart. How could one fight back against such a thing?

“Well?” He extended his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

“. . . Deal.”

Hagekure was always a hotspot in the evenings.

Many people were getting off of work and had skipped lunch hours earlier, couples caught something to eat before heading to the local movie theater, or the occasional pair of friends were catching up over alcohol and noddles. It was no surprise that it was nearly impossible to find a table without having a three-hour headstart.

However, one young man sat alone at the counter, an empty seat saved with a dark red jacket. A black hat was pulled over to hide a pair of sharp eyes that glared down at a battered cell phone. Nearby was a half-drunk glass of water, the ice cubes all but melted from sitting out for too long.

“. . . He’s late again.” the man said to himself, not that anyone could hear him over the noise. “It’s his own damn meeting, he should be here first.”

“How are you?”

Shinjiro Aragaki looked up from his brooding, almost dropping his phone. He had been caught off guard by a chipper waitress greeting him instead of the usual owner.

“Just one tonight?” she asked a little louder now that she knew he was listening, a pen and notepad
Poised to take his order. Her eyes darted to the empty seat beside him. “Or are you still waiting on the rest of your party? I can give you a few more minutes if that’s what it takes.”

“No, I won’t hold you up.” Shinjiro waved off her concern. “I’ll take two house specials. He won’t mind, he’ll eat anything.”

The waitress chuckled. “You bet,” she wrote down the order then went back to chattering him up. “This fellow sounds like a good friend of yours if you can order for him.” She cocked her head to the side. “By and by, I don’t remember seeing you before. Just passing through or what?”

Shinjiro shook his head. “Nah, I’m usually around in the afternoon, not as busy.” He glanced on either side of him. “But I’m meeting that other guy tonight so . . . I had to make an exception.”

“Oh, that explains it.” She started to leave and place his order in the kitchen. “I’ll get this to the chief right away. It should be done in a few minutes.”

“Thanks,” Shinjiro said quickly, “I appreciate the patience.”

The waitress threw him a grin before shuffling off to the kitchen. She reappeared not even a few seconds later and was flying to another table, a tray of steaming bowls balanced on either arm. Shinjiro couldn’t help but marvel at her strength that kept everything from falling, even with such a skinny physique.

That, and her skill in friendly banter with the many patrons. Some barely showed a sliver of respect despite the rapid pace she was going at.

How people in customer service were able to hold back their true feelings was baffling.

There was movement from the corner of Shinjiro’s eye that caught his attention. The scraping sound of a wooden chair on wood flooring betrayed that someone had taken the liberty to steal the seat beside him. His jacket had been tossed onto his lap, neatly folded in half and untouched by a single speck of dirt.

He knew exactly who would risk sitting by the most dangerous looking person in the entire restaurant.

Shinjiro leaned back in his chair with an annoyed sigh. “You’re late, Aki.” He glimpsed over to see his so-called-friend beside him. “I’ve been waiting for twenty goddamn minutes. What was the holdup?”

Akihiko still wore his school uniform, although, his bag was absent from the ensemble. “Mitsuru held me up at the dorm. We have that big thing coming up on the seventh so we’ve gotta be ready.”

Shinjiro had been filled in on the recent string of odd Shadows appearing the past few months. Apparently, the team discovered that they only showed themselves on nights when the moon was full after a nasty fight with two in Tartarus. Mitsuru was incapacitated while the new field leader, whatever her name was, was almost turned into mincemeat.

Somehow, they all made it out alive, including the pipsqueak with an attitude problem.

But it wasn’t as if Shinjiro had any room to talk on the attitude front.

“Sounds like a blast. You guys have fun getting a beat down.” he muttered sarcastically, picking up his glass for a drink of water. “Isn’t the seventh a holiday or something?”
Akihiko hummed. “Yeah, the Star Festival. Not that it means anything in the grand scheme of things, but I guess it’ll be a special occasion.” He laughed to himself. “Remember that one year when you and I snuck out to mess around at Naganaki Shrine? I think we were first years in middle school by then.”

Shinjiro tried to stifle a chuckle at the memory, however, it was poorly concealed. How could he forget something so funny?

“I remember, you fell off the horizontal bar doing that trick you like and scrapped your knees. You just cried and cried until the priest told us to shove off.” He reached out and gave Akihiko a clap on the shoulder. “Then you cried harder because we got yelled at by the dorm mother for being out late on a school night.”

Akihiko ducked his head away, embarrassed. “You started crying too and you know it.”

Despite how insistent Akihiko was about being accurate, Shinjiro could see a cheesy grin. The old days truly were that best of times.

It was moments like this that Shinjiro forgot the two were still at odds with one another.

“Order up!”

The teens looked up as the waitress from before seemed to magically appear and placed two steaming bowls of the house special in front of them. “Here you go, two house specials!” She once again started to bound off to her next table. “Be careful, it's hot!”

Shinjiro was about to call her back for a well deserved “thank you” but she was already gone. Yelling across the restaurant would be too rude and chasing her down was too creepy. The best course of action would be to leave a handsome tip after the meal.

“Well,” he grabbed his chopsticks and dug in, “Better eat it while it’s hot.”

Akihiko followed suit, scrunching up his nose at how quickly his friend ate. “How can you eat the same thing all the time, without getting sick of it?”

“Shut up. You always eat that protein shit.”

“Hmph. . .”

The two fell into relative silence as they enjoyed their dinner together.

It was a good batch tonight, full of savory seasonings and perfectly boiled noodles. The soup warmed Shinjiro’s stomach enough to send a pleasant wave of contentedness from his mouth to his toes. Not to mention the welcome after taste of basil and what seemed to be a strong, bitter spice that helped balance the salt.

The only downside was that the bowl wasn’t bottomless. Shinjiro finished off the entire dish in under seven minutes.

Though the dish was gone, the fuzzy sentiment prevailed.

“You still haven't made up your mind?” Akihiko asked.

All at once, Shinjiro’s mood turned grouchy once more.
He had a nagging feeling that this dinner had ulterior motives.

“... Is that what this is about?” Shinjiro asked, turning to his companion. “I thought you’d get the message the first time.”

“We've got five new members, including a functional navigator. Mitsuru’s on the front lines. And Mina—our field leader, you wouldn’t believe how she handles the underclassman. She keeps them in line.” Akihiko leaned on the counter. “Things have changed quite a bit since you left. We're more aggressive, more organized. If you came back, imagine how strong we’ll be.”

Yeah, the new team was aggressive for sure. A pink-obsessed popular girl, one loud-mouthed jock, some honor student afraid of her own shadow, and a leader with an annoying amount of spunk sounded like a barrel of fun for sure. That combination wouldn’t get old fast.

Then there was the living definition of emo with an aim to get himself into as much trouble as possible.

Funny enough, the little bastard might be the most tolerable out of all of them.

With Mitsuru and Akihiko added to the mix, using the "things have changed" card was worthless.

Nothing could ever drag him back.

Not after everything that happened.

Shinjiro started to fish his wallet out to pay for the meal. “I'm not interested.”

In his usual fashion, Akihiko refused to back down. He got a little closer so he could lower his voice. “Think about it, Shinji. Don't let your power go to waste.”

“My power ain't worth shit.” Shinjiro threw some bills down, not caring if he overpaid. He got up from his chair and started putting his coat back on. The main goal now was to leave the vicinity without causing a commotion. “See ya’ round, Aki.”

“Shinji!”

Shinjiro felt Akihiko grab his arm.

This whole routine continued to grow more bothersome.

“I made up my mind a long time ago.” Shinjiro yanked his arm away, turning to glare, hoping it would make the other individual back down. “I ain't going back. How many times do I gotta say it?”

“You have to let the past go.” Akihiko seethed. “What's done is done. It's time you moved on.”

Now that was rich.

Just move on after everything you did.

It was easy.

Just let it go.

There was no going back, no room to let that incident slide.
“Hmph. . .” Shinjiro broke their heated staring contest, heading towards the door. “You're one to talk about moving on.”

“What?”

Shinjiro had no heart to react to his friend.

All he could do was keep walking.

This was one fight they both lost.

“Face it, you're no different than me.” Shinjiro said.

Hagekure was always a hotspot in the evenings.

Now, it was one patron short.

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July 4th, 2009

It's the fourth of July in America today.

When I lived there, Minato and I got to dress up in red, white, and blue. Our grandparents took us to see the fireworks when it got dark. All the colors mesmerized me as the four of us sat on a hill overlooking the show. Purple, gold, green, pink, orange, they exploded in the sky like flowers on a field of black grass.

The stars paled in comparison.

My grandpa sang songs with me as we watched the display, Minato and grandma tried to hum along. I never wanted the show to end.

Since that day, I've never seen any fireworks quite so beautiful.

Also, Grandma died three years ago and grandpa is too old to take us up that hill again.

I wonder if I'll get to see something like that again.

I wonder if I'll get to see it with Minato and people I love.

Here's to a happy fourth.

Minako Arisato
The Lover's Tango I

Chapter Notes

Yall’ know what this chapter is.

I've been waiting to post this for weeks now but I've been sooooo busy.

Enjoy "The Lover's Tango!"

(Also, Fuuka and Minato get some bonding time together. Two nerds, chilling in a hallway.

(Double also, there's a question at the end of the chapter. Feel free to answer in the comment section.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was July seventh before SEES knew what was coming.

With a notice of when the large Shadows arrive, the team hauled ass to get ready for the big day. Nights in Tartarus were long, people got a little shuffled, but in time, it felt like there was nothing they couldn’t handle. As an added confidence booster, they reached the next barrier that kept them from ascending to the next block.

That was some good news amongst all the stress. If they could take on a death tower, one measly monster was a walk in the park.

Everyone was eager for whatever may come their way.

However, that still left ordinary activities (such as school) open for criticism.

“Out of order. Please try again later.”

Minato cussed and kicked at the vending machine in front of him. A neon blue advertisement for some generic soda brand ridiculed him as he struggled to claim what was justly his.

First, the machine at the dorm dispensed lukewarm drinks. Now, the machine at school flat-out denied service.

Why was it always the youngest Arisato who ended up bargaining with useless technology?

And why today of all days?

It was scarcely two hours before school and after some hardcore studying in the library, the only thing he wanted was crisp and delightful lemonade. Was that too much to ask for when the weather was starting to heat up to inhumane levels?

“Okay, fine. I’m not gonna play this game. I’ll find a different robot that actually fucking works.” He smashed his fist on the return change button. When his money didn't dispense, he glared at the machine. “Wanna give me my money back or what?”
“Out of order. Please try again later.”

Of course, this wouldn’t be easy. When was anything in this boy’s life easy?

“Fine, I gotcha.” Minato turned around, putting up his hands in defeat. “You win, I’ll just-”

Suddenly, he turned on his heel and barreled in the machine with all his might, causing it to wobble slightly. There was a resounding “thunk” when he collided with the seemingly immovable object and his body hurt from taking such drastic actions.

When he bounced back, he ducked down to check if his beverage finally dropped down. He thought for sure that his trick served its purpose.

Empty, like every promise ever made.

“Out of order. Please try again later.”

There was only one recourse left.

Minato truly was a calm person, even resigned to a fault most days. It was the purest nature of an introvert such as himself.

In spite of that, today was not a day to sit by and let corruption prevail.

Minato looked around to make sure no one was observing what would transpire next. It may be the crack of dawn, the sun barely kissing the sky, yet he couldn’t be too careful. This was especially true after the dog incident outside the dorm.

Never again.

Both corridors on either side looked to be vacant of students and teachers. All he could see were fake potted plants, closed doors, and faint rays of light.

When he confirmed the coast was clear, he grabbed both edges of the machine and shook it with all his five foot seven might.

“Fucking give me my goddamn drink or else I’m gonna lose my fucking mind. I've got a goddamn, motherfucking sword and nothing to lose, you bitch lasa-”

“-Minato-san?”

Minato stopped trying to fight the machine.

He was no longer alone.

And by the sound of this person’s voice, they witnessed everything.

Minato turned to see Fuuka standing just a few steps away, horrified, mouth agape and frozen in place.

This was the second time this year someone caught him acting “out of character” and it just had to be one of his dorm mates.

Minako was going to have a field day with him about "respect" and "gentlemanly conduct."

“Um. . .” Minato hopped away from the machine and jostled his hands in his pockets, as if that
could make him seem less conspicuous. “I can explain?”

Fuuka was still a moment longer before shaking her head in disbelief.

“I-I see you’re here early, too. Early bird gets the worm, and all that...” She came closer to look at the machine. “What’s going on? You’re usually so quiet. I’ve never seen you this upset.”

Minato tided his clothing, rumpled and twisted during his one-sided fight with the machine. “The dam-darn thing’s broken and it won’t give back my money or anything,” he said, leaning his back on the wall. “No matter what, it just doesn’t wanna cooperate.”

Fuuka chuckled. “Well, anyone would be upset if you started swearing and trying to threaten them with a _mother-trucking_ sword.” She started tapping away at the keypad in a random fashion. “So, how’d this happen? Did you do something to make it this way? I might be able to help out with this.”

Minato ducked his head away from the navigator. “No clue, it just said it was out of order.”

“I see, anything else?”

“It also hurts when you run into it.”

His snappy remark earned a giggle.

“Alright, what did you get?” Fuuka asked.

“Pink lemonade.”

“Okay then.”

Suddenly, Minato heard the sound of something dense dropping.

The same sound a soda made when dropping out of the machine.

Minato turned to see Fuuka holding two pink lemonades with a dopey grin on her face.

“What the-?” He glanced behind her at the machine but nothing seemed to have changed. “-How’d you do that?”

“You’re not the only one who’s smart. Computers are my passion. Soda machines are just a simplified version of those,” Fuuka extended one of the lemonades to him. “Spend enough time tinkering with these kinds of systems in your room and you can do just about anything. You’ll never need money again.”

Translation: Fuuka just admitted to stealing on (allegedly) a regular basis.

And she was proud.

Minato could only stare at Fuuka in awe before claiming what was his, accepting the bottle. “Thanks,” he untwisted the cap to take a well-deserved sip, “I guess I owe you double after this.”

“You just might.” Fuuka opened her own bottle and took a decent gulp. Once she was satisfied, she lowered her drink with a contented sigh. “Still, it’s hard to believe you’re the type that gets so angry. I always thought your sister would be that way, considering how much she does for the team. All that stress must get to her eventually, right?”
Minato shook his head. “She’s high strung but she ain’t the type to show her frustration. You won’t get a single cuss out of her.” He gestured to a window across from the soda machine, the sun hidden behind a gathering of sparse clouds. “Besides, she’s not a fan of swearing. I can’t do it around her or else she’ll ground me.”

Fuuka nodded. “I can’t say I wouldn’t do the same. I’m not crazy about swearing either.” She glanced down at her lemonade. “I’m not even brave enough to tell people that it makes me uncomfortable when they do it.”

All at once, Minato felt a pang of guilt in his stomach.

Whenever he and the others swore, she was upset. It was unpleasant to hear.

He may not be well acquainted with Fuuka, even after a month of missions and living in the same dorm, but there was something about her intelligence that he could relate to.

There was also the fact the two were both introverts. They had trouble speaking their minds or it never occurred to them that they could. They might be misunderstood by those around them. They might come off as aloof rather than focused on a certain task. It was especially frustrating when it felt like you were the only one in the world who felt that way.

Whatever the rationale, Minato knew he wanted to be on good terms with Fuuka.

“Why don’t you say it then?” he asked. “If you say something, they might stop doing it around you.”

Fuuka shook her head. “People used to make fun of me and call me childish. I’d always be unhappy because I know I’m not.” She toyed with her bottle of lemonade. “Well, maybe just a little childish. I still have a teddy bear from when I was a kid in my room.”

“All right?” Minato smiled, thinking of his own childhood stuffed animals. “I don’t see what’s wrong with that. I still have my crummy, pea-sized violin from the first grade, even though I have a better one. It’s sentimental and sh-” He checked himself, “-Crap.”

“You play violin too!” Fuuka gasped and bounced on her heels. “I wanted to be a musician when I was a little girl but I fell in love with machines and putting stuff together. I still try to get at least a couple hours of practice in a day. I even play in the band!”

“You should practice forty hours a day!”

“Haha! No, tell me more about your violin!”

“Where do I start?”

Minato got lost speaking with Fuuka about music, academics, and whatever came to mind. It had been a long time since he could prattle on about those sorts of things.

Before going their separate classes, Fuuka reminded him to meet back at the dorm right after school. He agreed and went on his merry way, lemonade in hand.

The Dark Hour arrived on time and while the citizens of Port Island slept in their coffins, SEES and the Chairman convened in the command room.

Fuuka summoned Lucia as soon as the electricity went out, searching for any major Shadow
activity. Her Persona took up a good amount of space but was somehow able to fit neatly in its own small corner.

To keep from disturbing her, the others lounged about the room and equipped themselves for whatever lay ahead. Everyone settled against wearing school uniforms due to the recent bout of heat the past few days. It was mostly t-shirts and jeans, the only exception being Fuuka who opted for a skirt, since she wouldn’t be fighting anyway.

Minako seated herself on the couch, checking over their emergency supplies and weapons for any major problems. The last thing they needed was faulty equipment on the night of a full moon. Junpei, Yukari, and Minato all surrounded her to help with the effort the best they could.

“Looks like I’m good to go, Minako-senpai!” Yukari loaded up a fresh quiver of arrows and flexed her draw arm, a new glove moving with her fingers. It had been a special order so she could continue fighting without her skin getting blisters. “Thanks again for the glove. How’d you find one so quickly? Did Officer Kurosawa have the right connections?”

“He has all the connections, Yukari.” Minako looked up from sharpening her new naginata. “And don’t mention it, everything was Kurosawa’s idea. I’m just the person who paid for it.”

“Ah, come on Minatan!” Junpei gave the senior a friendly pat on the, nearly causing her to drop the sharpening stone she was using. “Stop being so modest and just accept it. You’ve gotta take some credit.” He returned his to his own job, filling personal first aid kits. “So, anyone got a guess about what we’re fighting tonight?”

Minato shrugged, playing with an Evoker he was supposed to be checking for trigger jamming. “I don’t care. I just wanna get this over with so I can go back to sleep.”

Yukari perked up at the question, spirit glittering in her eyes. “Whatever we go up against, I just wanna get a piece of the action!” She raised her bow a made a pulled back to test the string. “No way am I letting another one of those monster Shadows get the best of me. Io and I are gonna mop the floor with it!”

“I second that notion,” Mitsuru said from the large computer console. “You’re not the only person who’s ready for a battle, Takeba.”

Akihiko, who had been lost in his own little world, finished pacing the floor to join in with the other’s optimistic declarations. “Don’t forget, we’ve gotta fight smart. The enemy might not be human but we can’t underestimate their intelligence like last time.”

“Alright, senpai!” Junpei called out. “That’s our Golden Boy! Ten steps ahead, as usual!”

“You’re still calling me that?” Akihiko asked.

Ikutsuki, seated ever so cozily in his favorite chair, studied the teens’ conversation with mild interest. “Oh, Iori. Always the comical one among us. Perhaps you should pursue a career in entertainment one of these days.”

It was Junpei’s turn to be quizzical. “Huh? I’m not that funny.”

Minako watched on and grinned at everyone’s energy, or lack thereof from certain individuals.

In the month leading up to this night, she hashed out any strategy that she could think up. Mitsuru had been more than appreciative to read over some of those plans in the middle of student council meetings, aiding with necessary improvements of her own. They tested those plans in Tartarus,
refined those tactics to a T, their skills as a singular unit vastly improved from before. And with Fuuka's abilities, there was no way they could lose.

Everyone knew what to do.

Everyone had a role to play.

They were stronger than ever.

Minako peeped down at her naginata. It was far more sophisticated than her previous one, cast in feather-light steel to withstand intense heat and substantial blows. Kurosawa asked for her height so the weaponsmith could make it just her size, unlike the last one that felt heavy on most days to carry.

The most outstanding feature, though, was a custom engraving near the blade, complete with cursive surrounded by elegantly curled vines: Ruby Rose. Just like the words implied, the vines grew rosebuds.

It was like holding a piece of artwork rather than a Shadow slaying tool.

“You look thrilled.”

Minako stopped looking at the engraving, instead, turning to her side to see Minato sliding next to her. He made himself at home by nuzzling into the couch cushions, his sword propped up against his knee. “Might wanna focus on something other than your precious. You’ll go bald and start running around on all fours.”

“I see you can still do a Gollum impression, nerd.” Minako teased and set her naginata aside. “I swear, I’ve gotta go back and reread the series. The movies are great an’ all but I wanna get the full experience. Tolkien is just too good not to give a second run through.”

“Look who the nerd is now,” he slouched forward to rest his elbows on his knee, “But in all seriousness, you looked kinda spacey for a second. You nervous or what?”

Minako shook her head. “Nah, just feeling a lil’ tired from school.” She twiddled her thumbs. “And maybe I’m a tad anxious to get this over with. We’ve been training so hard and I wanna see how far we’ve come as a group.”

Minato rolled his eyes. “We’re gonna do fine, and you know it. There’s no excuse for failure tonight.” Out of nowhere, he made a playful jab at her ribs. “Besides, we have the world’s most annoying mom telling us to eat our vegetables and go to bed on time. There’s no way we’ll be tired.”

“Hey, that tickles!” Minako giggled and swatted him away.

“Not until you let me stay up past ten on a school night.”

“Dream on, nerd.”

The feeling of uncertainty lifted from Minako’s heart. It had been a while since the two had gotten themselves into a silly argument, complete with name-calling and not so witty banter. This petty joking between her and Minato was enough to breathe some childish glee back into her system.

It was enough to convince her to keep her chin up.
“I found it! I sense a strong presence!”

Everyone stopped talking when Fuuka’s voice resounded in their minds. Minako nearly jumped out of her seat at the sudden wake-up call.

Junpei leaped to his feet with a whoop. “Woo! I thought we’d be here forever!”

Ikutsuki stood up from his chair, hands slipping into his pockets. “It seems we were correct in our predictions.” He walked towards Fuuka, her Persona fading away and leaving her to stand alone. “I trust you were able to find it quite easily?”

“Oh, course, Ikutsuki-san.” she chimed. “It’s actually located in Iwatodai so we won’t have too far to travel. The only concern is that the source of the presence is coming from inside a building. I can’t tell from here what type of building it is so for all we know, it could be somebody’s house we’ll be fighting in.”

“That’s alright,” Minako pushed herself off the couch, “Maybe you’re just overthinking this. Do you know the street name?”

Fuuka nodded. “The building is on...” She paused as if to gather her thoughts. “I think the street name was Shirakawa Boulevard but I’m not too familiar with that area. I don’t know what’s there.”

Shirakawa Boulevard, that was also a section of the city Minako had no clue about either. No one at school mentioned such a place before, focusing mostly on popular teen hideouts or family-friendly areas that would prevent them from getting in trouble with their parents. It must have been built after she and Minato left or slipped under her radar.

However, when Fuuka said the street name, all faces in the room lit up with realization.

Yukari ducked her head, a tinge of red on her cheeks. Junpei snickered and elbowed Akihiko who remained somewhat stoic, ultimately failing and repeating the gesture as a warning to stop. Even Minato, with eyebrows raised, appeared to possess a notion about what was there.

Ikutsuki hummed aloud, “Hmm... Shirakawa Boulevard would make sense. They’ve been finding several of the Lost in pairs lately.” He turned to Mitsuru. “And according to those police reports Kurosawa provided, many of those pairs were couples who had gone missing overnight. Many of the men were carrying large sums of cash.”

Mitsuru’s eyes went owlish. “Oh, I get it.”

Minako tried to piece together the information in her mind but only drew a blank. The information that had been presented could be taken in many different ways yet everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“Um, Chairman?” she finally asked. “I like being vague as much as the next guy but some context would be nice. What’s on Shirakawa Boulevard?” Her gaze flashed across the room. “And why does everyone look like they saw something... weird?”

“Well,” Ikutsuki began, “I suppose you could say that Shirakawa has a weird reputation.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Yukari interjected. “I’ve only heard about it, but...”

Finally, Junpei cackled, fragmenting the tension in the air. “For cryin’ out loud, dudes! We’re not in middle school! That’s where all those hotels are.” He started to laugh harder. “You’ve heard about ’em, right senpai? Where people go to, ya know, do the birds and the bees?”
“Birds and the bees-”

Minako stopped to reprocess the phrase.

The birds and the bees.

Wait, he didn’t mean *that* . . .

Couples succumbing to Apathy Syndrome.

Large sums of cash found with the victims.

Hotels.

No, not just any hotel. A love hotel.

Fuuka gasped and hid her face in her hands. “Junpei-kun!”

Minako had to channel years of dealing with difficult people in order to pull off a proper poker face. There was no way she could be caught blushing like a tween when she was supposed to be the rational, cool-headed leader. She had to be the adult despite the temptation to devolve into a flustered mess.

In the driest tone ever conceived, she shook her head and said, “Very funny, Junpei.”

Ikutsuki started to chuckle to himself. “Nonsense, they're no different from ordinary hotels. The rooms are a bit fancier, they offer *protection* and other services, but that's all.”

Yukari mirrored Fuuka’s embarrassment. “Why did you have to say it like that!”

“Anyway!” Minako cut through the extra chatter. “It doesn’t matter if we’re fitting on a roof or a train or wherever; we’ve dealt with worse. We can deal with this.” She felt a surge of confidence with every word. “Let’s get this show on the road. We’re wasting moonlight and that Shadow ain’t gonna kill itself.”

Mitsuru nodded at her. “Well said, Arisato.” The redhead addressed the rest of the group. “I don't see any reason to change field leaders now. Nevertheless, Yamagishi, I want you to handle support during the operation.”

Fuuka broke out of her funk, bouncing on her toes. “I’ll do my best, Mitsuru-senpai!”

The residents of the room stirred into a state of willful disorder. Weapons were quickly scooped up, well-wishes from the Chairman extended above the racket, and supplies hastily attached to utility belts for safekeeping. Fuuka and Mitsuru set to work on loading a new radio to help the junior preserve her stamina during the operation. Who knows what could go wrong when things tended to skew towards the enemy on these nights?

Minako set herself to complete her own preparatory routine. It was a good distraction from the way her hands shook while holstering her Evoker or throwing on a warm jacket to shield any bare skin. If she was going to get tossed around like a ragdoll, at least her arms would have a semblance of protection.

In a way, it was a note to be on her guard.

There was no way she was going to let this mission become slaughter.
She had to be cunning.

She had to be patient.

She had to be firm.

A moment later, SEES set out to Shirakawa. Mitsuru and Fuuka got a headstart on the former’s motorcycle, carrying all their weapons and the radio, while the others took the back roads. The entire walk there, Minako did her best to help lighten the mood with small talk and would-you-rather scenarios. Junpei, Yukari, and even Minato shared a few snickers before their impending ordeal.

Just normal teenage stuff.

Minato had very little knowledge of what to expect from a love hotel.

From movies, books, and TV shows, he imagined candy-colored walls with brilliantly lit lamps hanging off them. A sweet smell of perfume may cling to the air, left behind by some woman who prepared meticulously for an exhilarating night of unadulterated lust. The doors would be thick enough to keep any form of disturbance from reaching both the inside and out of the room, courtesy to all patrons involved.

Ikutsuki said these kinds of hotels would be nice, after all.

However, upon entering the building, Minato was hit with a wave of tobacco smoke and musk. The carpet was molding at the edges, crawling up the baseboards, peeping through the gaudy wallpaper, it seemed to spread all around. Though the Dark Hour was naturally bleak, the chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were in various stages of disrepair. One barely passed as a light fixture with its exposed wiring and a broken bulb.

And this was just the lobby.

To say Minato's expectations were a little rose-tinted would the oversimplification of the year.

“I sense some powerful activity on the third floor; it's a lot stronger than the last two Shadows were. Looks like you'll be in for a pretty rough fight so please be very careful everyone!”

“Understood, thanks a bunch,” Minako said before she turned on her heel and to lead everyone up the stairs to the first floor. “Let’s hurry and finish that sucker off. This place is giving me all kinds of heebie-jeebies.”

“Same here, senpai,” Yukari uttered as they climbed. “I can’t wait until this is over.”

“You’re such a kid, Yukatan.” Junpei said.

“Shut it, Stupei.”

They quickly arrived on the first floor after making it up a short flight of stairs. The mission had begun.

The halls on this floor were in the same state as the lobby but at least some care had gone into refurbishing. Many of the room number plates gleamed despite the low lack of sufficient lighting. Not as much fungus could be found twinning up the walls, instead placed in more remote nooks and crannies. The carpet was much newer and clean of dubious stains that were best left to the
imagination.

This didn’t deter his sister, though. Minako sallied forth into the dark, plunging headfirst into the unknown and ready to defend against whatever so much as moved. “Fuuka-chan, can we get a status on where the smaller Shadows are?”

“Of course,” Fuuka took a moment to process the request. “I don’t see anything except the presence on the third floor. You should be okay while you make your way there but I’ll make sure it stays that way.”

“Perfect. Keep us posted, Yamagishi.” Mitsuru ordered, putting away her rapier now that the threat of attack was dispelled. Instead, she let her hand rest on her Evoker in case of Shadows. “And make sure you stay out of sight. The Shadow might send minions to hinder your support abilities.”

Fuuka answered to the order but Minato tuned out the voice in his head, trailing behind the group to keep an eye out for any hostiles.

His defensive repertoire had been expanded since the last full moon, after receiving new Personas that knew how to take more than a few hits. Those spirits within him practically sung at the chance to reduce an entire group of Shadows into nothing but dust, ready and willing to serve on their master’s behest.

Orpheus, the most versatile of his summons, made it its personal mission to become a jack of all trades, master of one. That one thing was an easy choice to be an expert in, close-quarter combat. With skills that ranged from bashing enemy heads wide open or bitch-slapping them across the floor, Minato proved himself a worthy contender without having to swing his sword.

Couple that with his Kendo training and lithe body, he was just a hair’s breadth slower than Junpei with the persistence of a seasoned veteran like Mitsuru.

Still, the halls were restricting and forced the teens to stagger themselves. No Shadows had been spotted but that didn’t mean they couldn’t make use of the opportunity to pounce. It didn’t matter how strong they were if something caught him off guard.

They would get knocked down in a matter of seconds, fresh meat ready to be devoured by hungry beasts.

“Hey, Minato-kun?”

Minato eased himself out of his thoughts, looking to his side to see Yukari. She dropped back from her position in the middle of the pack, wearing a worried expression on her face.

“What’s up?” he asked. “Do you wanna switch places or something?”

Yukari shook her head. “There’s no way Minako would let me take on the rear guard by myself. I just wanted to see how you were doing.” Light brown eyes darted all around, nervous and waiting for anything to jump out for an attack. “I mean, it’s really dark and hard to see. Aren’t you a little bit worried about what could be hiding in here?”

Minato could detect her anxiousness, with pale knuckles, robotic breathing, a tendency to stand closer to him.

She hadn’t struck up a conversation for his sake; she needed to take her mind off the mission.

The trick was to be empathetic without asking outright if the person was holding up. If Minato
knew anything about this fiery archer, it was that her pride was strong. Shattering it by insinuating she was scared would only drive her away, no doubt letting the fear grow and fester without being checked or addressed.

“I’m fine,” Minato answered. “You’re right though, I’m kinda creeped out by some of the... design choices.”

His faux unease appeared to work. Yukari’s shoulders sagged in relief.

“Yeah, how in the world did this place stay open?” she bemused. “I mean, I wasn’t expecting a castle or anything, but...”

Minato glance around them. “You didn’t expect a craphole?”

His classmate shrugged. “Pretty much...”

“Having fun back here?”

Minato and Yukari turned forward to see Junpei walking backward. His broadsword was sheathed and rested across his shoulders like a baseball bat. “Sorry, did I ruin the mood?”

Yukari’s earlier fear turned to disgust. “What are you implying, Stupe? I bet you’re just dying to make some stupid, sexual innuendo since we’re in a love hotel.”

Junpei grimaced at the assumption. “Shesh, just trying to lighten the mood a lil’ bit. Give me a break once in a while.” He fell back slightly so he could turn forward and still talk to the other juniors. “How’re you guys holding up? Do ya’ think it’s gonna be tough like the last two?”

“Didn’t the Chairman say these things were supposed to get harder the more we fight?” Yukari kicked the back of Junpei’s heels. “Of course it’s gonna be tougher! Use your brain for a change!”

“Watch the feet! I don’t wanna literally break a leg before the fight!”

“Stop being an idiot then!”

Minato was once again caught in the middle of a Junpei versus Yukari showdown. One would think they would act a little more mature on the night of a full moon.

The exasperated teen facepalmed.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Is everything okay back there?”

All three looked back to the front of the group. They reached the second flight of stairs that led to the third-floor area. Minako already had one foot perched on the first step and ready to make the climb. Mitsuru and Akihiko were close behind, seemingly waiting for the trio to get done with their quarrel.

None of them, especially the veterans of SEES were happy with the current state of the younger members.

Minato internally bristled at their condescension.

Their field leader gave them all a disapproving frown. “Um, I guess I didn’t need to ask.”
Yukari and Junpei promptly righted themselves.

“Sorry senpai.” Yukari said.

“Yeah, same here.” Junpei echoed.

Thankfully, a grin replaced Minako's harshness at their apology.

“Don’t worry about it, we’re all on edge tonight. We’re bound to get antsy and lash out.” she said. “Still, we can’t let fear get the best of us when people’s lives are at stake. No matter what, this Shadow is going down!”

Minato saw everyone smirk or at least chuckle at her enthusiasm. How could they not? Minako was the type of girl who gave cliched speeches with a borderline naive message. Not to mention that this most recent addition had to be the cheesiest monologue she ever came up with on the spot.

But despite his cynical attitude, he noticed a genuine glimmer of hope in everyone's eyes.

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The Shadow was hiding in the biggest room the hotel had to offer. A set of double doors lined in glittering brass were all that stood between SEES and a new, unknown danger.

Junpei crowded by the door, starting to get impatient with how much time they were spending on preparation. “This is taking forever. Let’s get going already!” He flashed a toothy grin and raised his broadsword. “I’ve got a new toy and I need to get in some batting practice for my next game!”

Yukari knocked an arrow. “I just wanna end this quickly. We’ve got a quiz in math tomorrow and I forgot to study.”

Minato, who had been staring at his shoes this whole time, looked up with a quirked eyebrow. “I thought you said you studied last night.”

“I DID study last night.” the archer retorted. “I just didn’t study for math.”

Akihiko rolled his eyes at the confession. “Underclassman.”

Mitsuru wiped off her rapier on her sleeve, a cautionary measure in case there was anything staining the blade. It was a good thing she decided to forgo her white, uniform blouse if she was going to do this often. “We can worry about studying once the threat has been dealt with. Our main objective should be to defeat the enemy.”

Fuuka cut into the conversation as soon as Mitsuru had concluded speaking.

“I can sense movement within the room but nothing that suggests that you’ll be ambushed. The enemy is waiting for you to make the first move.” She reported. “As soon as the battle begins, I’ll make a full analysis of its abilities for all of you. Be ready to shift tactics if the need arises and everything should be fine.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Minako said back, “We’ll be counting on you, so do your best.”

“Thanks and good luck, all of you!”

Once Fuuka ended her pre-fight briefing, Minako swiveled to the group to deal out orders. “I want Junpei, Kirijo-san, and Akihiko-san upfront to protect the others. Yukari, Minato, and I'll back you guys up with support spells. As soon as Fuuka finishes her scan, get ready to make adjustments as needed to exploit the Shadow’s weaknesses.” She gazed directly at everyone, individual and
serious. “Are there any questions about the assignments? Any changes at all? Speak now cause there won’t be time once the fighting starts.”

A chorus of “no” or “we’re fine” followed the question.

All weapons were poised and prepared to get the party started.

They were ready to go.

This is what they have trained for this past month and it was time to put what they learned into practice.

“Okay. . .” Minako faced the double doors, heart hammering in her chest as she approached to open it. Her fingers wrapped around one of the knobs. “This is it.”

Yukari stepped up beside her, taking ownership of the other door and braced her shoulder to infiltrate the room.

“Focus on getting a bull’s eye,” she muttered for only the senior to hear. “You’ll do just fine.”

Minako threw on a smile and shook her head. “I know this is gonna be tough, but we need you right now.” She pulled out her Evoker. “Don’t worry about us getting hurt, that’s just how it goes in here. Focus on shooting a bulls-eye and you’ll do just fine.”

That mission to Tartarus felt like years ago and yet the memory of the fight with their first Guardian, the reassurance she gave Yukari made Minako smile.

“Open on three.” the older student said. “One. . .”

Yukari turned forward. “Two. . .”

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

Time to move.

“Three!” Minako yelled.

The girls flung the doors open and the other four behind them rush inside. They soon followed suit, Evokers already being drawn to start raising everyone’s speed, strength, and defense.

The space was immense compared to anything Minako had ever seen in her lifetime. Lavish furniture with a pristine floor gave off an impression of class, accentuated by a large crystal chandelier. Mirrors surrounded them on all walls, tinted with a pink-ish, purple glow. Reflections should not seem so disturbing came out as distorted and sinister, not unlike one’s seen at haunted houses or carnivals.

Was it a feature attraction of the room or was it a side effect of the Dark Hour?

At the head of the room, standing before a circular bed, was the Shadow.

Corpulent body embellished with jewels and a red cloak, blue mask with a number four in Roman numerals, multiple legs covered in fishnet stockings, it was an ugly one if Minako was being
modest. Even with a womanly figure stroking its bald head, nothing could make up for such a hideous sight. To make things more complicated, flanking on either side of the main boss were a pair of white, cross-shaped Shadows with crowns of thorns on their head.

Already, this fight was turning out to be a long one.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Junpei ignored using manual attacks and went straight for his Evoker, jabbing it to his temple. “Let’s show this fatty what we got!”

Hermes was summoned right off the bat in its glorious fashion. With remarkable agility, it charged headfirst into the Shadow’s stomach to commence the imminent brawl. The action sent their foe reeling, the womanly figure on its back raising her hands as if in surrender.

While their supposed master transformed into a literal barbecue, the diminutive Shadows screeched and ejected themselves away from the flames. They scattered to opposite sides of the suite and flung themselves to the floor to put out any lingering embers on their bodies: scorch marks stained pure white with blacked chars doting nearly every inch of the exposed area.

“Take that!” Junpei shouted.

“Keep your head in the game, Iori!” Mitsuru charged at one of the downed Shadows. Just before it recollected itself, she began a brutal assault with her rapier. “You can celebrate when this is gone!”

Akihiko sighed loud enough for Minako to take notice. “Business as usual then.” He glanced back at her with an expectant look. “I’ll take the other guy. We can’t let those things get in the way. Cool?”

Minako nodded begrudgingly. Such a strategy was bound to stretch their forces but extra Shadows meant nothing but trouble to the operation, especially with a potentially dangerous boss on the run.

“Minato can take your place, for now.” She grabbed her Evoker to prepare for her role in the battle. “Just hurry, we need all hands on deck for the big guy.”

“I won’t take long,” Akihiko responded and punched into his palm to hype himself up. Without another word, he shuffled forward to take on the other peon Shadow. Soon enough, the veteran seniors laid into their targets with deadly precision.

Minato seemed to catch onto the situation and acknowledged Minako’s unspoken command, stepping away from the support team to join the frontlines. “I’ll give Junpei a hand.”

The main Shadow recovered from the confusion of the sudden fire attack. It resumed a more lax posture and sunk further into a red velvet chair, the womanly figure continuing to cradle its head. With a snap of its fingers, thunder and lightning barrelled in the boys’ direction, causing Junpei to roll out of the way while Minato summoned the lightning proficient, Zouchouten. The Persona’s imposing form protected his master from harm.

Fuuka tuned back into the group the instant after the attack. “Careful! The enemy is strong in electric attacks and Yukari-chan is weak to that element. Keep her away from the action at all costs!”

Akihiko kicked aside a Cross Shadow and shook out his hands. “Not a problem.” He trained his sights on the big Shadows and jumped right into the fray. “Leave the fighting to us!”

Mitsuru evaded a Zio spell of her own that ended up hitting the Shadow she was fighting. Taking advantage of the situation, she rushed back in to kill the Shadow for good. It disappeared in a
plume of purple smoke just as Mitsuru whirled away to grab her Evoker. “Did you get that, Iori!? Arisato!? Protect Takeba should the need arise!”

Junpei bounced back to his feet and readjusted his cap, dragging out Hermes for another round of Agi spells alongside Minato’s physical attacks. “Don’t have to tell me twice, senpai!”

Minato said nothing, his response in the form of an assault on the main Shadow.

Priority number one was to keep their most vulnerable member from being exploited. Everything else would have to take a backseat.

Minako spared no time to think about what she needed to do. “I’ll take care of Yukari!” She grabbed Yukari’s wrist and dragged the archer to the nearest means of shelter: an elaborate column meant to accent the balance of the room.

“Looks like we’re safe here,” Minako peeked out from their hiding place. “So long as Kirijo and Akihiko-san can hold off the other Shadows, Minato and Junpei can focus on the big guy.”

Yukari scurried closer to Minako, keeping herself low as not to be seen by the Shadow. “What should I do?” she asked once close enough to speak, frustration in her tone. “If I can’t get close to that thing, I can’t help the others fight. What if something happens and someone needs to step up?”

Minako raised her Evoker and brought forth Naga, a serpent-like beast, as an extra shield. Its resistance to lightning would keep the two girls from being turned into burnt crisps with plenty of spells to support the others.

“We’ll focus on buffing the others so that won’t happen.” She looked back at Yukari. “Once that’s done, lay down some cover fire with arrows. I’ll handle the rest.”

Yukari hesitated for a moment.

However, her expression hardened.

“Alright,” she poised her Evoker to do what the team needed from her, “I’ll do my best. Let’s get to work.”

With their consolidated forces, Yukari and Minako operated from behind the pillar.

Yukari focused on keeping the team’s energy up through healing spells and making sure the others were rotating between their heavy attacks. Her efforts kept drawing more and more from the members of SEES, raining pain on the enemy that teetered on the edge of exhaustion.

The field leader had her hands tied with either chipping away at the enemy or adding onto her team’s strength. While attack power was far from an issue, defense and evasion were cause for concern. Focusing on those two slants of the battle made things easier to keep track of and conserved energy.

Little by little, the Shadow dropped its guard, sinking lower into its chair. The feminine servant stopped fawning over it and withered to the side, like a dying branch on a tree.

The four frontrunners regrouped into an assemblage near the base of the Shadow, weapons at the ready and waiting for an attack that wouldn’t come. All it could do was flail around lifelessly and cast weak lightning spells that barely reached past its fingertips.

“This is it!” Mitsuru cried out and raised her Evoker. “Penthesilea!”
The other three boys followed with war cries of their own. A flurry of spells buzzed throughout the room in a spectacular display of power. It was a wonder how the building could maintain its structure with the damage they caused.

Minako took that as a sign to join in.

“Let’s help finish this off, Yukari!”

“Right!”

Vaulting out from behind the pillar, they drew their Evokers in synch to their heads. It was time to make the final push to the end while the enemy was down.

“Nona!”

“Io!”

Both Personas burst forth from blue sparks, red satin mixed with rattling chains advanced past the other spirits for one final move.

However, the Shadow foresaw to assault and sparks of lightning began to crackle.

“I don’t think so!” Yukari’s bow was already in her grasp with an arrow knocked, drawn back, and unhesitant to fire. “I won’t miss!”

The bowstring made a resounding snap and the arrow flew across the room and into the Shadow’s only eye. The foe was blinded and unable to stop Io as it kicked up a vicious cyclone, propelling Nona at the Shadow with alarming speed, weapon outstretched in preparation for landing. The excess winds nearly knocked SEES off their feet.

Using the boost, Nona utilized its golden spear as a ramrod through the Shadow’s throat.

A distressed gurgle in place of a screech was all it could muster.

Everything on the Shadow’s body went stiff and the womanly figure wailed in despair.

A brutal move meant only to kill.

But it worked.

Minato slowly lowered his sword as the Shadow dissolved into oblivion, leaving an empty bed behind.

The ruckus of the battle subsided.

It was over.

“Ha! Did ya’ see that?” Yukari cheered and gave a thumbs up. “No matter how tough you are, you’re no match for us!”

Mitsuru flipped her hair back and sheathed her rapier. “We ended it swiftly and right on target. I couldn’t have hoped for a better outcome.” Arms crossed over her chest. “The Chairman will be pleased to know our archer is also quite the sniper. Excellent work, Takeba.”

Yukari puffed out her chest. “He better be pleased!”
Minato watched on in silence as his teammates celebrated their victory. Minako’s grinning face that glowed with pride, Junpei throwing an arm around her, Akihiko shifting uncomfortably when he received the same treatment, Mitsuru trying to calm them down, Yukari laughing the scene off, each were happy that the Shadow was gone.

Though everything seemed okay, there was a twisted feeling in Minato's gut about the fight. Everything happened in almost a blink of the eye- the fighting, the finishing blow, all of it- and it made him agitated. The Shadow made no attempts to go down easy nor did it resort to desperate measures. This lack of action could be justified by the Shadow’s lazy means of defense but that didn’t excuse it from accepting an obvious counterstrike.

Perhaps Minato was looking too far into things.

Maybe this jittery feeling was a post-fight adrenaline rush.

Whatever the case, SEES finished the battle without causing a ton of damage.

Fuuka’s voice interrupted the celebration.

“Good job, everyone! Another successful mission!” she said. “Since you guys finished so quickly, we should return to the dorm for an early rest. I’ll be waiting outside.”

Junpei was the first to spring into action. “Way ahead of ya’!” He bolted towards the doors with the rest of his peers in tow. “I can’t wait to read some good ol’ comics before hitting the hay-”

The capped teen suddenly froze while trying to pry the doors open.

Minato stopped walking.

“Junpei?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

Junpei glanced back at the others. The doors were still shut, despite the fact he was tugging on them with what seemed like a good amount of force.

“Uh. . . I think we’re locked in.”

Minato stared at the exit. Locked in? That was impossible. Nothing could have done such a thing.

“Ugh, really?” Yukari rolled her eyes and stalked over to Junpei. “Stop joking around. We just got done fighting for our lives!” When she reached the door, she shoved him out of the way and grabbed the handle. “Just open the-”

The door rattled in place, the knob unwilling to turn.

Yukari’s face went blank as she tried the handle once again. “Wh-what the-?”

Once more, the knob did not turn.

Junpei was right.

They were trapped like rats.

Fuuka’s voice came into everyone’s heads immediately.

“I’m glad I finally got through!” There was a moment of static before she fazed back in. “Sorry,
jammed again. There’s still a strong presence over the hotel. I think there’s another Shadow hiding somewhere in-! Be care-everyone-PLEASE-. . .”

The connection died.

Mitsuru pulled out her Evoker and began to bark out orders. “Search the room and stay vigilant! I’ll see if I can reach Yamagishi again.”

Urgency settled in as everyone broke off into different directions to sweep the room. Minako and Yukari started in the back of the room and searched behind the pillars blocking the back. Akihiko had taken up the left side while Junpei took the right.

No one talked, but the anxiety of the unknown seemed to fill the silence with pounding hearts and the frenzied rustling.

As the seconds ticked by and nobody found so much as a speck, the panic set in. Yukari muttered about how the wrong people would find them inside. Junpei took off his hat, pacing along the walls and doors to adjoining rooms. Even the cool-headed Akihiko was clenching his fists, ready to start busting down the door with his bare hands.

After a minute longer, Mitsuru gave up reaching Fuuka with a huff. “I can’t pick up a single word! All I’m getting is a huge presence, but it feels like it’s everywhere!” She shoved her Evoker back in its holster. “Wherever this Shadow is, it will be quite the battle ahead for us.”

How could a Shadow possibly be omnipresent, but nowhere to be found?

Was the Shadow invisible?

Was it waiting to attack?

An almost violent shiver ran down Minato’s spine. He had believed that the battle was over so he could go home and take a very long shower to wash off the filth of the love hotel. The whole situation was nothing but an uncomfortable experience, not to mention awkward during the early exploration phase of the mission.

“Damn,” Minato cursed under his breath, “I hate this place.”

Just as more whispers broke out amongst the team, Minako stepped forward, calm and still smiling despite the uncertainty.

“Hey now, let’s not lose our cool. Like a wise woman once said: let’s think positive! There’s no room for negative here.” She threw her brother a knowing glare. “That goes for swearing, too. Don’t go thinking I can’t hear ya just because you’re all the way over there.”

Minato hated it when she was actually alert to her surroundings, for once. He made sure she knew it with an annoyed scoff.

Minako shrugged it off. “Nice to know ya love me, too.” She returned to the issue at hand. “Anyway, we should keep looking for the Shadow before it starts looking for us. The last thing we need is an ambush after wasting our energy on a big fight. Who’s with me?”

Akihiko was the first to split off from the group. “Maybe this thing is smaller than we think. I’ll start checking under the bed.”

Junpei and Minako set off to opposite sides of the room, checking on more secluded corners they
skimmed over the first time around. Mitsuru opted to keep trying to reach Fuuka with laser intensity.

Just as Minato was about to continue his own search, he felt a tug on his sleeve.

“Minato-kun?”

He glanced over to see Yukari by his side. “What’s up?”

Yukari tugged again. “Follow me, I think I found something strange.”

Minato let his classmate lead him to a nearby pillar with a tall mirror standing close by. It was an elaborate piece, framed in gold-painted wood and metal accents. There were noticeable chips from years of wear and tear, but otherwise, it was in a moderate to useable condition. Nothing extraordinary, just a larger-than-average mirror in a room covered wall to wall in mirrors.

A perfect copy of him and Yukari became clearer the closer they got.

“I saw it while Minako-senpai and I were supporting you guys, but something started bothering me when we were combing the room.” Yukari pointed to herself in the frame. “Is it just me, or is something strange about this one mirror.”

Minato broke away from Yukari to get a closer look at the furniture-in-question.

He stared down his image.

Messy hair, a mouth prone to scowling, jeans with a baseball t-shirt, everything looked precisely as it should.

However, the eyes sent a strange feeling from head to toe, a sense of Deja’ Vu.

Whether it was by instinct or choice, the unease from before returned with a vengeance.

Without thinking, Minato shuffled closer to the mirror, never once breaking eye contact with the reflection in front of him.

Something wasn’t right and forewarning washed over as he got closer.

However, what was there to fear?

After all, it was only a mirror. How could something so revealing and honest be so sinister?

Now that he thought about it, had his blue eyes always seemed so glazed over and devoid of expression?

The indistinct chatter filled in from behind as everyone began to notice the allure of the mirror. The junior thought Minako had announced his name, but it was all too far for him to comprehend.

Shaking fingers reached the small distance between the two Minatos.

It was peculiar that the original seemed so hesitant to close the gap.

Just as soon as skin met the surface of the mirror, a wild grin appeared on the reflection’s face.

“You’re truly a fool.”
Everything went black.

“Take a moment for yourself, love...”

Yukari took a shallow breath. Warm water cascaded from above, steam rising to a tiled ceiling, washing away troublesome shampoo suds and left behind a fruity scent. filling her senses with a pleasant aroma and relaxed her aching muscles. The sensation of tiny droplets running down her cheeks, her neck, her shoulders, a truly refreshing experience.

Yukari reached to work more soap into her scalp.

“Such a young, beautiful girl. Enjoy this moment.”

Right, Yukari was beautiful.

Strawberry blonde hair. Skin clear of blemishes. A fit body toned to attract entire flocks of suitors, all vying for her attention. From a young age, she had known all these traits to be provocative to others. It made the girls jealous. Adults especially took notice and often asked why she hadn’t turned to the entertainment industry.

But what kind of life was that? Living off a pretty face alone made for a boring existence, not when the world had more to offer beyond the superficial-

A boring existence? Why would she ever worry about that?

“And your talents. Shall I list them for you?”

There was no need.

Yukari could shoot an apple off of someone’s head.

Come up with a snappy remark should an insult be hurled her way.

She was no idiot when it came to academics.

Her acting skills put professionals to shame.

A perfect package for a modern girl.

“Put those talents to good use. Why not have some fun?”

Fun?

That made sense. What else would a young, beautiful, and talented young woman want?

Yukari stretched to turn off the water.

“Good, take all the time you need.”

Stepping out of the shower, the unexpected change in temperature was a night and day difference. Goosebumps dotted her arms and legs and every inch of exposed skin, and soon, she was shivering.

Yukari glanced at her misty surroundings.
A fluffy towel hung dutifully on a drying rack.

“You’re almost there.”

Once covered, she started toward a door on the other side of the bathroom.

A hum escaped the girl’s lips, a song long forgotten, one she heard from someone special.

It seemed appropriate for the occasion.

“A few more steps. . .”

Yukari stopped once she arrived at the door. Her toes curled into a soft carpet and tickled the pads of her feet.

No noise from the other side.

What lay beyond? Another room? Something more? Lost in a dream, as she may be, the unknown made her heart pound.

Whatever she may find, she was promised fun.

And fun she would receive.

Her fingers found the doorknob and she pushed into darkness.

“Don’t lose sight of your passion. Let it go. . .”

Another chill was sent down Yukari’s spine as she entered a new, larger room. A bed, perfectly arranged and waiting, stood at the center. Two nightstands on either side with lamps and clocks were switched off.

She wanted desperately to lay down.

“Let it carry you to paradise.”

Turning forward, there was a lone figure.

No, not a figure. A person.

Confident posture. Unruly hair. No shirt.

In a daze, she moved further into the room and closer to the person.

“Embrace it. . .”

Yukari stopped in front of this person.

“. . . I will.”

“Embrace it.”

She tried to lift her hand to touch their bare skin.

“I will. . .”

“Embrace it!”
The person reached for her first, seizing the hand meant for them.

"EM-"

"Wake up."

Yukari shook her head and the fog lifted from her thoughts.

The full moon, the team, the mission, blacking out, everything came flooding back as she regained command of her body. Whatever voices keeping her mind in a vice disappeared. Her body relaxed and the awareness of her surroundings returned. It seemed that the dream was only that, a dream.

"Uh-" Yukari glimpsed up. "What was I-"

Her heart stopped when she finally saw what was going on.

Minato held her hand just inches from his bare chest, a frown etched deep in his features and eyes focused on anywhere but her. His shirt and equipment were abandoned on the floor.

Yukari glanced down at herself.

Still wearing a towel.

In front of a boy.

A teenage boy.

" GAH!"

Without thinking, Yukari slapped him across the face and retreated to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. She heard a loud thump from the other side and a pained groan. Her sudden attack must have knocked the poor boy to the ground.

She made a note to apologize later.

"I know what you want."

Akihiko was lost in a scorching heat.

Stomach, hands, even his face burned like he was bent over an open flame, his lungs struggled to grasp onto fresh air. Any part of him that could sweat did so without rhyme or reason, worse than after a long-distance sprint or a round-after-round of fighting. It might be July but that didn’t excuse the overwhelming urge to jump into the nearest ice bath for dear life.

Why was it so hot? How did he get here? Was he allowed to leave?

"Don't deny it. You're no different from the rest. Just another slave to your desires."

Akihiko dug deep within and tried to remember. Surely, he was forgetting something important and once he found it, he could rid himself of this awful heat. Blocking out everything else, he pushed his way into the dark.
Focus.

Nothing. His breathing shallowed.

Focus harder.

Nothing. A misted haze blocked his view.

Further down.

Nothing. Invisible hands swatted him away.

What in the world was going on? Why were his mind and body fighting against him? He was the one in the driver's seat, not a "slave to his desires" or whatever decided to screw with him.

“There is nothing wrong with letting go. Follow your instincts.”

A pair of skinny arms wrapped around his neck.

Akihiko froze, both physically and mentally.

He wasn't alone. Another person just latched themselves to him, leaving very little space between the two of them.

And they refused to let go.

“See? You both want this. Spare this girl your time and your attention.”

A girl.

Akihiko was alone, with a girl, who wasn't afraid to invade his personal space. He felt her melt against him, a weightless thing.

In any other situation, Akihiko would have politely asked her to leave him alone. If that didn't work, he might nudge her off to the side and continue his search for his lost memories. The least she could do was respect his wishes and not distract him with her advances. He would make her understand that whatever she was trying to accomplish, he didn't have time.

Not even if Akihiko wanted to reach for her, too. It was just another distraction.

Unfortunately, this mysterious someone dragged him down for a kiss, throwing his entire thought process out the window.

He made no move to stop her.

"Embrace your desire. You know it's what you want."

The girl started moving backward, pulling Akihiko along with her. He stumbled at first and nearly tripped them both but soon, their steps synchronized, acting as one in the midst of drunken euphoria. Her fingers combed through his hair in rhythmic strokes. She was careful not to tug or yank, offering a semblance of tenderness and comfort, putting him under a peaceful spell.

When the two almost hit a wall, Akihiko stuck out a hand at the last second to avoid hurting her. His protective act earned him a pleased hum against his lips and moving her hands under his shirt. Freezing fingers traced the muscles of his back, his chest, anywhere she could touch and explore without breaking their kiss.
It took everything Akihiko had not to do so himself and rip his shirt off.

"Why not take it further? You won't regret it."

The heat of the room intensified and every sense kicked into overdrive. He craved the way the girl clung to him, the texture of her clothing, silky hair between his fingers, the taste a fruity lip balm, her subtle yet sweet perfume, somehow packed together into a petite body.

As much as he told himself to savor the moment, the longer he dragged this out, the more he wanted to experience.

He never felt more impatient.

Akihiko finally broke their kiss and shifted his attention to her neck, hands roaming to her waist.

"See, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Indulge a little."

Right.

This wasn't so bad.

She didn't push him away.

She wanted this.

He wanted this.

They weren't going to stop.

"The present is all we have."

She spoke.

Sweet.

Low.

"Don't think about it."

“What's. . . going on?” she asked.

". . . Why?"

Akihiko stopped.

He knew that voice.

A sliver of reason returned to him.

"Don't listen."

And another.

"Go back."

And another.
"Stop thinking."

He knew where he was.

SEES was in the middle of a full moon mission. They overcame the Hierophant Shadow but ended up trapped in the master suite on the third floor. Minato reached out to touch a strange mirror. Then a white light burst forth.

Now, Akihiko was leaning against a wall, trying to make sense of what just happened.

Separated from the others.

"How disappointing. All of you are fools."

The voice in Akihiko's head ceased. The heat that once bothered him cleared.

Everything was coming back into perspective, but he was still confused.

"Damnit," he muttered, "What happened to me?"

At least he had a goal in mind, figuring out where he was.

Something shifted against him.

"Where. . . where am I?"

That's right, Akihiko wasn't alone.

"Are you okay-"

Akihiko's question died on his tongue.

Just as he thought, Minako was the one sandwiched between him and the wall, a little worse for wear. Her messy ponytail undone, russet hair tumbling down in glossy, disheveled curls. The jacket she brought along now lay forgotten on the floor beside her utility belt, her shirt riding up to expose a generous portion of her stomach. Her hands still lingered on his chest for support.

The part that shut him up was her lips.

Red and swollen.

Minako stared right back with an expression of utter horror, shrinking against the wall. "Oh my God. . ." She shook her head, and even in the dark, her face turned a beet red. "What'd we just-!? I can't believe-this isn't-I-!?

And he was still pinning her against the wall.

Akihiko immediately let go of her waist. "I didn't know what I-" another step back, "-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to-"

His apology fell on deaf ears and the distance between them was not enough.

Before he could finish, Akihiko was slapped so hard, his vision went black. A searing pain drilled into his cheek, accompanied by a terrified scream.
It was at this moment, he knew, he fucked up.

7/7/2009

Fuuka is pretty cool. And quiet, smart, possibly a scam artist. I think she and I will get along great.

There's no joke here. She got me free lemonade. She can talk to me whenever she wants.

-Minato Arisato

Chapter End Notes

Question: What was Minato about to call the vending machine?

"Fucking give me my goddamn drink or else I’m gonna lose my fucking mind. I've got a goddamn, motherfucking sword and nothing to lose, you bitch lasa-"
Woah, things are getting busy IRL!

So here's part two out of three and I hope everyone has a Happy Easter! God bless!

Minato had no problem with women.

Probably an incriminating way to put what he was trying to say, but he could explain.

Being the son of a good mother and raised by his impossibly stubborn sister, they taught him that even if it was barely said anymore, men had a duty to treat the fairer sex with gentleness and respect. He was expected to speak plainly, offer any amount of help, take on strenuous tasks if need be, and just be a well-rounded gentleman. There was no room for anything less, lest he wanted to be insulting.

So why, after he did everything he could, did he end up getting slapped?

“Are you okay?”

Minato and Yukari walked through the halls of the hotel, separated by as much distance as possible. This was the first time she spoke since they left their hotel room to find the rest of the team.

“I’ve been better,” he answered truthfully. “But I’ll live. Don’t worry about me.”

“Good. . .” she trailed off. “I’ll try not to.”

Her stiff response left them with nothing but empty space.

Not wanting to leave their conversation in this awkward state, Minato fished for something meaningful to say, thinking of things his sister might come up with. That always seemed to put others at ease.

Something spontaneous and funny usually got the job done. It also had to be heartfelt, a twinge of truth to preserve the severity of the situation.

“You’ve got a killer swing,” Minato said. “For a minute, I thought you might’ve broken something.”

Yukari ducked her head.

“Good thing I didn’t. . .”

Not another word left her mouth.

That was the last time Minato would channel his sister in order to talk to people. Her mannerisms were the definition of "an acquired taste" and impossible to pull off.
They walked a few more steps ahead. Minato was officially done trying to apologize and focused solely on looking for the others. All the while, he wondered what split them up in the first place.

Everything happened so quickly after the Heirophant battle, there was barely a second to process what was going on. The only thing he had to go on was a flash of light, shouting, and then waking up to whispers in his head.

And that was another mystery in and of itself. Those voices.

Minato shut them up immediately, but how was he able to break free but Yukari needed someone to bring her back to her senses? Was it because he touched the mirror first? Did it give him a kind of immunity to their influence? Were his “primal desires” not strong enough to get him to act on them?

Whatever the case, he was glad for not staying down for long. He also succeeded in keeping Yukari from looking like a bigger idiot than an idol forgetting their lyrics in the middle of a huge performance.

She had the right to feel embarrassed but things could have ended up a lot worse.

All that mattered now was finding the rest of the gang and Minako before anything went horribly wrong.

Were they awake?

Did they need his help?

Was Minako worried about him too?

Making her worry was the last thing that should happen. He scared her enough these past few months by going to a dangerous part of town, refusing to reveal his true feelings, and goodness only knew what else he did to deserve more than a few stern lectures.

It was time to repay her by making sure she was safe.

“Are you gonna tell Minako-senpai what happened?”

Minato was taken aback by Yukari’s sudden question and had to force himself not to look over. Playing things off like they never happened

“. . . I don’t have to. We might be close and trust each other with a lot but-” He rubbed the back of his neck. “-But there’s stuff we keep to ourselves. She’ll understand if I don’t say anything.”

Yukari walked a little faster until she could look him in the face, Minato nearly stumbling into her.

“Hold on for a second. Before we meet up with the others, can we talk about what happened?” She stepped back. ”Ya’ know. . . fix things, like normal people? Not with violence?”

Was this the same girl who wouldn’t hesitate to pull a gun on non-threatening strangers just months ago? If Minato was being honest, he half-expected a threat to keep his mouth shut, not an invitation to sort things out like proper adults. That was often the story with Yukari, the golden standard of an easily bothered teenager.

She changed since their first, confrontational encounter.

“Wanna start?” Minato asked.
She nodded.

“I’m sorry for overreacting like an idiot. You didn’t do anything wrong and I still decided to lash out. If I could go back and try again, I wouldn’t have done that.”

“The past’s the past. No point in dwelling on what you should’ve done when nobody got seriously hurt or whatever,” he reasoned. “But while we're on the topic, you didn't hit that hard. I was joking before”

For the first time since leaving the room they woke up in, Yukari chuckled. “I don’t know,” she pointed to his cheek, “There’s a red mark on your face so I think I hit pretty hard.”

Minato waved her away. Though it seemed like they settled their situation, he wouldn’t admit that one side of his face still felt numb when he tried to talk. “I'm flushed. It's too hot in here.”

“Yeah, right-” Yukari suddenly gasped and lit up, “-I just got an idea. How 'bout I make it up to you when this is over? I’m free after school every other day so we can do anything you want, as long as it doesn’t cost me an arm and a leg.”

Minato didn’t know how to respond. This was hardly a situation that Yukari owed him anything, but if going with the flow meant they could move past this night, he didn't mind making a few promises.

“I don’t care what we do. I'm flexible.”

“Perfect! What do you think about getting new stuff for your room?” She relaxed, now deep in the process of planning a shopping spree with a wild grin. “You and Minako are so plain when it comes to decorations. If you’re gonna live in Iwatodai for another year, you’ve gotta feel more at home. There’s a music store at the mall with some cool posters and I know this place a couple of blocks from the dorm that sells some decently priced furniture-”

And on Yukari went from one idea to another for a complete makeover of his dorm room. Nothing could be left out, from new curtains, storage containers, even the possibility of a stereo system.

Why was she so adamant about improving the decor of his room? Was it really so terrible but had no reason to bring it up? Once again, the youngest Arisato had underestimated her and her willingness to help out a teammate.

This new adventure would be worth building a relationship between the silent genius and a bombastic archer.

“-So you’ve gotta ditch the tan motif. It’s a good color and all, but you could do so much better with my personal guidance. What’s your opinion on purple, dark red, yellow, and bright red in that order-”

Minato used his sheathed sword to bop Yukari on the head, interrupting her rant. “Blue, and that’s non-negotiable.”

"But that's sooo predictable!" She smacked his sword away. "No, we need something fresh!"

"What happened to making it up to me?"

"Not at the cost of fashion and that's non-negotiable."

“I thought I heard somethin' over here!”
The two looked away from each other to see Junpei jogging around a tight corner. His cap had been hastily placed and lopsided with a notable bruise was blossoming near his shirt collar. Mitsuru trailed a few paces behind, hair significantly darker than before and the usual curls almost straightened out completely. Minato almost took off running at her scowl and her rapier drawn.

It seemed as if the newcomers experienced something similar to Minato and Yukari.

And Junpei may have received a "gentle reminder" to keep himself in check.

"Minato, Yukatan, about time we found you guys!" Junpei trotted to a stop in front of his fellow juniors. "So you guys were on the first floor too, huh? Good to know we weren't too far away."

Yukari made a noise of agreement. "For once, I'm actually glad to see you too."

"Indeed," Mitsuru stalked towards the trio and maintained a polite distance when she reached them, "I was able to reach Yamagishi with Penthesilea. She noticed you two were close by and led us to your location. You have her to thank for our reunion."

"It was nothing, Kirijo-senpai! I did what I could to help."

Fuuka reached out to Minato and Yukari through a notable static, similar to the one they heard before after the battle. "I'm so sorry I couldn't contact you sooner, Minato-kun and Yukari-san. The Shadow was interfering with your thoughts and before I knew what was happening, you all got separated."

Minato shook his head. "Don't worry, none of us got hurt."

Except him and Junpei (allegedly) but Fuuka didn’t need to know any of that.

"Thank you, Minato-kun. By and by, were you and Yukari-san together all this time?"

"No," he said promptly, "I was on my own for a bit until Yukari found me stumbling around in a haze. I think I was hit with a defensive spell or something, everything felt really weird."

"Yup, so I healed him and we set out to find everyone else." Yukari played along with his story, her earlier jitters disappearing from her stance.

"Oh, that's good to know you found each other quickly. It's one less thing to worry about." Fuuka said. "I never expected there to be another Shadow. Its power is blanketing the whole building. I'm pretty sure it's in that one room you were in before because there's now a powerful seal on the door. It's backed into a corner so it's trying to protect itself."

Junpei sighed. "Then how're we gonna get in? Will our Personas do the trick or what?"

"No, it will only cause damage to the building and we can't take that risk with civilians still inside. Thankfully, I was able to find the source of the seal while looking for all of you. It's the mirrors. They're giving off the same energy as the Shadow."

"Now that you mention it," Yukari piped in, "I remember this one mirror we saw on the third floor was different from the others. When I stood in front of it, I felt kinda strange."

"I still don't know how to break those seals but I'll worry about that part. Just focus on regrouping and leave the research to me."

"Excellent work, keep us posted if you learn anything." Mitsuru said and turned to the juniors. "Arisato-senior and Akihiko are still unaccounted for. Since Iori and I already combed this floor and found nothing, they must be on the second or third level. Hopefully, they found one another
and are already on the move.”

Mitsuru had started to deal out orders for the group’s next move, but it all went over Minato’s head.

So far, everyone ended up in groups of two. In those groups of two, the voices tried to get them to follow their lust and forget the mission.

Minato thought back to Junpei’s injury. While he was a decent athlete with a great deal of physical strength, there was no question that Mitsuru held more control over any situation. She exerted a don’t-fuck-with-me aura that could disarm just about any adolescent boy with half a brain cell long enough to get a few hits in.

But Minako was not physically intimidating and defending herself against someone like Akihiko would be a shot in the dark at best and a slaughter at worst.

Minako and Akihiko were still the only ones unaccounted for.

Why was that?

Minato stormed off towards the second-floor staircase.

"Arisato—what are you doing!?" Mitsuru called after him.

And without a care for his senior's words, he didn't respond, his only mission drowning out whatever reason left in him.

Minako was no stranger to awkward silences.

Her brother had a nasty track record of not talking when spoken to. There were times where Minato simply stopped and stared into space, no matter if it was a good day, an average day, or (of course) a horrible day, it happened at any moment. Especially when he was younger and still learning to pretend he cared about what others said. Over the years and all the way to the present, it became a staple of their relationship and it wasn’t uncommon to have long pauses between conversations.

This immunity carried over into Minako’s other interactions. It was one of the reasons she prided herself on being a good communicator. How many people could say that they were an expert in listening to nothing or being content with wordless expressions?

That was right, Minako was okay with awkward silence.

She loved the peaceful lull in conversation that so many dread.

It was familiar.

It was safe.

However, tonight had to be the one time she hated the silence.

The hotel felt dimmer than before as Minako and Akihiko trudged along the darkened halls, lined with rows of imposing doors. Every wall looked the same as the last, twists and turns repeating in a circle, almost as if entering an endless labyrinth rather than a building. It added to the creepiness factor the Dark Hour already had in spades.

Worst of all, this walk was all done in dead quiet, leaving Minako at the mercy of her racing
thoughts.

“What was I doing? Anyone else would have been fine. Junpei would joke about it then we’d be on our merry way. Mitsuru or Yukari might get flustered but I doubt it’ll mean much considering our relationships. Not to mention I would NEVER kiss my brother like-like that! He would punch me! I would punch me!”

No, she was with someone she looked up to, a guy who had been nothing but chivalrous, a person she came to see as a valued teammate.

Even though Akihiko pushed her against a wall, took control of the situation, embarrassed her to no end, Minako knew she was the one who started it. None of what happened would have occurred if she just said no. If she only acted in a manner befitting a proper, young lady, neither of them would be in this situation.

But no. Instead of being reasonable, she decided to listen to the voice and kiss him.

How did she react to her mistake? She screamed and slapped him.

Under a spell or not, she was the one who ruined their relationship.

This year was supposed to be simple, a fresh beginning to a tattered story. Perhaps life just hated her that much and nothing could ever be simple so long as she breathed.

More than ever, she wanted to be with Minato, to see him safe and unharmed.

What if he ended up separated from the group entirely? What if he was being attacked by whatever if this to them? What if the same thing happened to him, being trapped by some mysterious voice?

She had to do right by him as his family and guardian. Reuniting with him was the top priority and her shame only got in the way. No words need to be said, no fighting to hold back tears, only a glance to make sure nothing was wrong and put her mind at ease.

If their situation were reversed, Minato would do the same for her.

“Are you worried about the others?”

Hearing Akihiko speak for the first time in what seemed like years made Minako internally cringe. It was sickening that she was afraid of something as trivial as someone asking her a question.

“No. They’re strong so I have hope.” she said.

Even her own voice was raspy and cracked with emotion.

“Right. . . and your brother?”

“He’s strong too. He can take care of himself.”

A hand landed on her shoulder.

“Are you okay-”

“You cannot deny your instincts, girl.”

“Embrace your desire.”
Without warning, Minako ducked out of reach and started to pull further ahead. The last thing she needed was the reminder of what she did.

“-Yeah, I’m fine. I just wanna find the rest of the team.”

Focus. Walk. Faster. Repeat.

“Hang on a second!”

Despite not wanting to turn her head, Minako could sense someone keeping up with her ludicrous pace. It seemed as if Akihiko wasn’t giving up on getting a proper response from her.

“I don’t know what you think of me after that but if you’re angry, just say it already! Sure, you slapped me when I tried to apologize, but I deserved it for losing control like some stupid animal. I screwed big time. Is that what you want to hear!?”

“Stop!”

Minako slammed her foot down mid-gait, stopping in the middle of the hall.

It took a few deep breaths to calm Minako’s nerves.

Still, she refused to look Akihiko head on.

“It doesn’t matter what happened. We can’t go back and we can’t change it,” she stated with what little fortitude left at her disposal. “We can talk about this later but, right now, there’s a Shadow waiting for us somewhere and it won’t go easy on us. Letting personal feelings cloud our judgment only makes our job ten times harder.”

“I-”

“-Please, just let it go. . . just let it go.”

After a long reprieve, Akihiko let out a sigh.

“. . . Fine, I’ll drop it.”

Minako felt daring enough to, at last, lift her eyes and meet Akihiko’s.

What she saw made her stomach lurch.

Frustration.

Worry.

Confusion.

Worst of all, hurt.

Hurt for something out of their hands.

How she wished for all that to just go away, to bring back the kindness and drive from before. None of this was his fault in the first place, and even now, he was seeking to make the situation right again. No one should have to take on such the weight of that guilt.

Why must things be so complicated?
Minako swallowed a lump in her throat.

“Thank you, Sanada...”

“. . . You’re welcome, Arisato.”

Their friendship was caught in the greatest rut ever conceived.

Without a doubt or excuse, Minako was the one who put them there.

Could this night get any worse?

“Hey, they’re over here!”

Minako was broken from her thoughts at the sound of someone shouting.

She looked down the hall where the voice had come from to see the others rushing towards them with weapons in hand. Yukari led the pack, having been the person to spot Minako and Akihiko first, the others trailing behind.

Junpei, Mitsuru, everyone was accounted for and looked to be unharmed.

Even Minato, hair lightly tousled and headphones askew still managed to walk with purpose in her direction.

A weight was lifted off Minako’s shoulders. He was okay; at least this one thing was working out in her favor.

“It’s about time you guys showed up!” she joked and moved to meet them halfway. “I thought we’d have to keep wandering around forever-”

To her shock, Minato stormed past Minako, letting his sword and jacket fall to the floor. He barely paid mind to her presence, more focused on something else entirely.

“-huh?” she turned to follow what he was doing. “Minato, what’s going on-”

Before she knew what was going on, Minato waltzed right up to Akihiko and punched the senior square in the jaw.

“You bastard son of a WHORE!”

The night just got worse.

After reuniting with Minako and Akihiko (and after Minato socked Gekkoukan’s star athlete), Mitsuru recapped the situation with the mirrors, getting everyone up to speed.

Fuuka also reported back with a rough estimation on where the mirrors resided: the second and third floors of the hotel. While each of the mirrors held the same energy as the Shadows, none of them stood out as being part of the seal. This required them to investigate to figure out which ones needed to be broken and which ones should be left alone.

It was decided that splitting into two groups to cover more ground would be the best course of action. Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Yukari took on the second floor with Mitsuru taking the lead of her team.
Minako, Minato, and Junpei claimed the third floor.

Minato wished he had gone with Mitsuru rather than facing a lecture from his older sister.

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in?” Minako said as the newly formed trio climbed the stairs to their floor. “We got separated and the first thing you do when we met up again was to attack a teammate? What were you thinking?”

Minato ducked his head, clutching the railing.

“I’m sorry—”

“What you did was stupid, reckless, irresponsible, and God only knows what other words I can use!” Minako whirled on him. “I was worried sick that something horrible happened and you ignored me! Do you know how much that hurts, Minato? Do you know how scared I was when I imagined I’d never see you again?”

More shame welled up within the younger brother. He tried not to look Minako in the eye.

“I was worried too. I thought you were hurt or worse…”

Or worse, being assaulted by someone who could easily take advantage of her weaknesses.

Why would he trust some guy, a dumb-as-rocks protein addict they met only a few months ago, with anything concerning Minato’s family?

Junpei, having reached the top of the stairs first, started to branch off from the siblings. It was obvious that the conversation was making him nervous by the way his face twisted with a fake smile as if he hadn’t witnessed the unpleasant scene that took place. “Um, I’ll just get started over here. That okay, senpai?”

Minako nodded for him to go. “Be careful, we don’t know if there are other Shadows laying around.”

“Don’t worry about me, Minatan. I can take a hit or two on my own.” Junpei threw a wave before scuttling off. “Give a holler if ya’ find anything.”

With that, Minato was left alone to face the demon known as Minako Arisato.

Junpei Iori, what a traitor.

“Let’s go,” Minako started walking towards a row of doors and getting ready to check for a mirror inside, “I wanna beat this Shadow already and go back to the dorm. I’ve had enough of stupid love hotels and oblivious brothers for one night.”

Minato internally flinched at her harshness but followed her lead.

Continuing to justify his actions would only make things worse.

Together, they looked through every room on the third floor. Some of them had mirrors large enough to fit four suites while others had none to speak of, even in the bathrooms. The frustrating part was finding that the mirrors they did find gave no clue as to which one was a seal.

More than that, it was an odd experience, searching for something in a place you were never meant to enter.
Minato saw the coffins representing a living person wherever he went, mostly in groups of two but occasionally three or even four would crop up.

All of them had a reason for being there in that hotel. They had a story leading up to deciding to use the hotel. There was a connection, weak or strong, between the occupants inside the rooms. Though the end result of that may not be the most savory of outcomes, it was interesting to wonder about.

What kind of people were they?
What were their motives?
What would happen once the Dark Hour was over?

Those were things that Minato would never know as a member of SEES.

The only thing he needed to know was that good or bad, these people were in danger if he and the team failed tonight.

They had to win so these coffins - these people - never have to witness the brutality going on right in front of them.

Even if this mission was taxing on everyone’s sanity, including his own.

Minato closed another door behind him with a hefty sigh.

No mirrors, no seal, no luck.

“Anything in there?” Minako asked, stepping out of another room just across the hall. “A strange presence? Shadows? Mirrors?”

Minato shook his head. “Nothing, you?”

She mimicked the gesture. “I found a mirror but I can’t tell if it’s a seal or not. Nothing about it stands out as suspicious.” Her shoulders slumped and she leaned against the wall. “We’re getting nowhere at this rate. There has to be a better way to do this. Something has to give.”

Minato watched on as his sister contemplated their options. Her eyes were rimmed in dark circles, cheeks losing their color, she could have easily been mistaken as ill.

At that moment, everything about Minako expressed physical or mental exhaustion, he couldn’t tell anymore.

One fact was for certain, she was disappointed.

Failure, loss, responsibility: it must be too much for her to bear alone.

Guilt gnawed at Minato from the inside out. It was the same guilt he felt one full moon ago, stewing in his room with a sore throat and clenched fists. Every muscle tensed, each moment agonizing, the air too stiff to breathe, it was uncanny.

He was guilty of the crime of being a hot-headed little brother.

“Just this once, I wanna enjoy a happy moment.”
“...You, nerd.”

But unlike back then, he knew what Minako needed when things got tough.
She needed to know everything was okay.
She needed to know what he felt.
“I’m sorry.”

“. . . Don’t change too much. I’ll miss you acting emo.”

Minato rolled his eyes but felt relieved.

Minako looked up, tired eyes filling with incredulity.
No, they were filled with ease at the sound of two simple words.
“I’m sorry too,” Minako pushed off the wall. “Getting upset doesn’t solve anything, especially when things were out of our control.”
Minato shrugged. “Nah, I acted like an idiot and didn’t use my brain. I should’ve let you know I was alright before. . . well, you know the rest. Not my best moment.” He gave a hesitant grin. “But that’s the thing about little brothers, they can worry about their stubborn older sisters, too-”
Before he could finish, Minako rushed forward and glomped him in a hug.
She held on tight.

“I know. . . thanks for looking out for me.”

“Some things gotta stay the same.”

“Mmhm. . .”

Minato smirked, wrapped his arms around her, and nuzzled into her jacket.
Minako was always the best hugger.
Not that he would tell her that but at least he could think it without being teased.
“Anything else ya’ wanna say before we have to get back to work?”
“. . . I don’t regret that punching part for a second. That idiot kinda deserved it.” Minato reasoned. “The guy eats lemons like a goat, has only two emotions, and I’m pretty sure he’s cannibalized a man for a protein high. Change my mind.”

Minako pulled out of the hug, mouth gaping wide open, dismayed at his confession.
Then, her dismay turned to amusement.
Her amusement turned into poorly concealed giggles.
“I shouldn’t be laughing, that’s terrible!” Her smile gave away that she was grateful for some levity. “God, I love ya’!”

Minato smirked, however small it may be, it let her know he returned the feeling.

Sometimes, you have to stand your ground, even when counseling family.

“HOLY SHIT!”

The siblings jumped at the sound of Junpei’s scream.

Minato heard something from a few doors away drop and shatter.

Silence followed.

“Junpei!? Junpei!” Minako collected herself, naginata in hand and motioned for Minato to follow her down the hallway. “Come on, he might be in serious trouble!”

“Don’t have to tell me twice!” Minato drew his Evoker and took off after Minako.

Together, they sprinted down the hall where Junpei’s scream had come from. They rounded the corner and came across another corridor lined with more doors, just barely visible without electric lighting. All rooms remained shut tight, indicating they had been searched already.

However, one door was cracked open.

There was still a deathlike stillness in the air.

Minako ran to the door and nearly took the wood off its hinges throwing it open with her shoulder. Minato remained at her heels and hustled himself into the hotel room.

“What’s going on-”

However, once they were inside, Minato realized right away that their hurry was in vain.

The room was untouched.

No Shadows, no messed up furniture, not so much as a penny out of place. In fact, there were no coffins, supposedly leaving this suite ready for the next couple or group to arrive. It wouldn’t be a stretch to assume it had been cleaned before the Dark Hour began.

Nothing seemed off.

All except Junpei standing over the remains of a smashed mirror, breathing heavily as if he had seen a ghost.

“Thank goodness, you’re okay!” Minako trotted over to the disgruntled boy, daintily avoiding the broken shards along the way. “What happened? Are you hurt? Did a Shadow ambush you? Why’s this mirror broken?”

Junpei took a few more breathes to collect himself before he turned to Minako. Minato could see his pallid skin pop out of the darkness.

What had been so frightening to warrant such a reaction?

“T-the mirror-” he pointed to the glass at his feet, “-I couldn’t see it.”
He couldn’t see it? What was Junpei talking about?

“See what?” Minato asked, approaching his teammates. “A Shadow?”

Junpei shook his head, growing paler by the second.

“No dude, me. I couldn’t see me.”

Minako stepped to his side and gave him a comforting pat on the arm. “Just take some more deep breaths. What do you mean you couldn’t see you?”

“It’s the reflection! Junpei-kun, you did it!”

Fuuka’s sudden intrusion into their heads caused Minato to jump.

Even if her timing was perfect, a little bit of a warning next time would be much appreciated, for the sake of his already skyrocketing blood pressure.

“Fuukatan!” Junpei’s earlier anxiousness was forgotten in a flash, more than happy to hear from the rookie of the team. “You mean I actually did something right?”

“Of course and you figured out which mirrors are different from the others, even if it was an accident!” the navigator said. “At first, I thought the mirrors we were looking for might have different energy or appearance, but Mitsuru’s team tried that theory and ended up getting separated again. Who would’ve guessed it was such a ghostly detail that distinguished the seals from the mirrors?”

Junpei let out a long sigh. “Ah man, I thought I was going crazy or turned into a vampire, something spooky like that.”

Minato relaxed his stance and lowered his Evoker. “Good grief,” he mumbled.

It had all been a false alarm. There was no danger from the start.

“Ain’t that neat, guys?” Minako loosened up too, flashing the boys with a toothy grin. “Thanks to Junpei-kun, we already destroyed one of the seals without even trying. We’re one step closer to finishing this mission and going home!”

“I’ll contact the others and let them know what you found. Start heading back to the large room and wait for the others. I’ll let you know when they break the other seal!”

Fuuka’s voice cut out.

“Whew, what a night.” Junpei turned to Minato. “So, did you guys work things out? Looks like ya’ made Minatan really mad back there.”

Minako chuckled. “Yeah, we worked things out.” She turned to Minato with a deceptively innocent smile. “But I’m still not happy about the punching thing. I expect at least two weeks of dishwasher duty when this over.”

Minato rolled his eyes. Of course, he would be chastised for defending his sister’s honor against a mouth-breathing monkey.

“I regret nothing.”

His dry response got a laugh from both Minako and Junpei.
“Never change, my dude!”

“Oh, you boys!”

Their part of the job was all wrapped up.

Time to bag another Shadow.

The third-floor trio had stationed themselves in front of the Shadow’s hideaway for longer than they anticipated.

“Ugh, what’s taking them so long?” Junpei plopped down next to the double doors, pulling his cap over his eyes. “We found our mirror without help and it didn’t take this long.”

Minato snorted, “I bet our upperclassman started smashing things left and right while dragging Yukari-san along for the ride.” He sat down next to Junpei in a huff. “They’re not exactly subtle when it comes to the Dark Hour. Everything has been all-flash and pomp since they stepped back in.”

“Seriously, so true. All the strutting around, acting all high and mighty. Talk about showing up and showing off—” Junpei glanced over to Minako “—except you, Minatan. You’re pretty humble.”

The senior hummed. “Comes with the territory of being a leader, I suppose.”

“Try telling that to your ‘fellow peers’ sometimes.” Minato crossed his arms over his chest. “Honestly, they could use a few daily reminders.”

Minako turned to look at her brother, raising an eyebrow.

“You shouldn’t talk behind people’s backs. It’s very rude.”

“Is that what the Bible says?”

“Yes, actually it does.”

“What verse?”

“‘Thou shalt not test me.’ Book of Minako: chapter 24, verse 7.”

Junpei snickered and nudged Minato. “Dude, you just got owned.”

“That’s not even a real verse. That was a lame, dank Christian meme she probably found on a ReadIt message board.”

“It was still kinda funny, bro.”

“Bite me.”

The two continued to gossip and bicker amongst themselves, distracted from their boredom by the divine intervention of internet websites and outdated jokes.

At least that would keep them busy for a while longer while Minako continued to stand vigil for the others to arrive. The waiting kept her on high alert, watching and waiting for any movements from the adjoining hallways. Sometimes, she would catch a glimpse of what she thought might be another person, only to be disappointed that it was just her mind playing tricks on her.
Minako would be lying if she said there was nothing to worry about. Mitsuru’s team had yet to report back on their progress. There was no telling if they found anything or if they were stuck at a dead end.

Fuuka remained silent as well, most likely helping the other search party with finding their seal. It still would have been nice to get an update on the status of the others, but what could anyone do? The poor girl was already working her butt off this whole mission.

If only Minako could summon her own Persona with passive telepathic capabilities, maybe she could reach out to someone.

Then again, without proper training, she ran the risk of talking to the wrong person at the wrong time.

How could she deal with that, especially after everything that went wrong?

Maybe it was for the best that she stuck to her bread and butter: leadership, support, and back-up fighter.

She would simply have to grin and bear the silence.

“Minako-senpai! Come in, I’ve got an update for you!”

Well, that was almost too convenient.

Minako laid a hand over her ear. “Good to hear from you, Fuuka. Is everything okay? Did they break the seal?”

“Yup! That means the barrier on the door should be lifted, for good this time. We can access the room, destroy the Shadow, and call it a night.”

Finally, some good news for once during this mission. SEES was now in the home stretch and ready to roll out.

“Well tell ‘em to hurry up!” Junpei sprang up with his trusty broadsword in hand. The earlier vertigo was no longer present, bringing back the excitable baseball dork that knew how to get in a good hit of two. “We’ve been here forever! I’m gonna lose my mind if we have to wait another second for those slowpokes!”

Minato followed suit, stretching out. “What he said.”

Minako rolled her eyes at their antics and returned to Fuuka. “We’ll stand-by until the rest of the team gets here. What’s their ETA?”

“They had to go to the first floor to find the seal, so it should take at least-”

Before the navigator could finish, there was a blood-curdling scream from inside the room.

The voice did not belong to anyone on the team, that was something Minako could tell right away. After months full late nights fighting Shadows, one often got acclimated to their teammates shouts from across the battle.

No, it was an adult woman’s scream.

There could only be one explanation for such a thing.
A civilian was out of their coffin.

“What was that noise? Is everything alright?!”

“Someone’s in trouble!” Minako answered quickly. She looked to the boys and pointed to the doors. “We can’t let anything happen to them. We’re going in early!”

Junpei and Minato were already on their feet, ready to follow orders.

“Wait! You can’t go in alone! What if the Shadow overwhelms you? What if you get separated again? We can’t risk that a second time!”

Minako forced herself to ignore Fuuka’s protests. SEES had a duty to protect the city from the perils of the Dark Hour and the unseen terrors within it. To ignore the cries of someone, even if the enemy was great, would go against that very goal.

This was a risk the three would have to take.

“Let’s go, guys.”

At her command, Junpei chuckled and gave a salute to Minako. He had a hand on one of the doors’ handles, throwing it open to reveal a darkened room, almost pitch black from where the three stood.

“On it!”

Minato and Junpei rushed inside first, followed by Minako.

Despite having the same furniture, same four-poster bed, same uncomfortable atmosphere, the Shadow was not the once they had faced before being split up.

This one was not as complex or confusing in appearance, taking the form of a neon pink heart with a golden cage acting as a form of armor. Beneath the jelly surface of the heart were male and female signs floating and bumping into each other. A pair of wings sprouted from its back and dripped a gummy-like substance onto the floor.

The mask of the Lover’s Arcana frowned at the high school students that stood before it.

Somehow, this creature appeared to be more unsettling than the last Shadow.

Junpei was the first to break the uneasy silence. He stepped in front of the siblings, a barrier between them and whatever danger the enemy may pose.

“Hey! We heard a scream and we’re here to help! Where are you?”

No one answered him.

No one stepped out behind the pillars.

Was this person hiding?

Minako tried next, swinging her head around the room for anyone who might be around. “Is anyone in here? You’re safe now! We can help you-”

Her shouts were cut off when the Shadow groaned and threw back its masked face. A ball of red and orange light swirled into a ball, faster and faster until it was nothing but a blur.
It was going to attack.

“Everyone scatter!” Minako yelled. “Get out of the way!”

The three leaped away from each other just as the ball of light was sent in their direction.

As Minako rolled to a stop and whipped her head back to where they were. In place of open floor, there was a patch of fire that set the carpet underneath ablaze.

They barely missed being burned alive.

“Looks like fire ain’t gonna work!” Junpei was the first one to get back on his feet, Evoker in hand and ready to go. “Let’s see if physical attacks can make a dent!”

Hermes smashed into the Shadow, pinning it against the wall.

Minato popped up next in the same fashion, ready to jump into the battle. “Yamatano-Orochi!”

From blue sparks, a multi-headed snake brust to life, hissing and ready for battle.

“Mabufu!”

All of its mouths opened at the command, bringing forth a billowing cloud and blowing it towards the Shadow.

Hermes backed out of the way just as the Shadow was blasted with a violent torrent of ice and chilling mist. Its body began to frost over.

“Minako-senpai! Can you hear me!?”

Minako ran for cover behind one of the pillars and ducked down with a hand on her ear. Her focus would be on locating and evacuating whoever was in the room with them. The boys were tough and could hold the Shadow off until then.

“Fuuka, I need you to scan the room! We heard a scream earlier but no one’s responding. I want to know where it came from so we can get out of here-”

“There’s no need, I already did that.”

Always ten steps ahead, that was Fuuka alright.

“Okay, where’s the victim? The longer we stay, the more danger-”

“The scream you heard was a fake! The only ones in danger are you three!”

Fuuka’s words caused Minako to go slack.

“What, but I thought-”

“The Shadow was tricking you the whole time! You’re the only ones I can see in there, no one else! It’s trying to single you out and defeat us little by little!”

A fake, the scream was fake.

Slowly, things started to make sense.

All this time, the Shadow was able to toy with their minds and play with reality. First, it was
keeping them trapped in the rooms. Now, it pretended to have a human’s voice.

The scream was the bait and they fell for it.

They had been lead into a trap.

Minako jumped out from her hiding spot.

“We have to retreat! Let’s get out of here-”

A loud crack resounded throughout the room.

From the corner of her vision, Minako saw Minato and Junpei froze.

The Shadow hovered in front of them, watching as they all stood terrified for what was about to happen next.

“W-wha-”

Minako’s heart took a swan dive as the floor collapsed.

“Sis!”

“I got her!”

Someone grabbed her arm and wrapped themself around her, a protective measure.

The world blurred as she plummeted to the room below.

July 7th, 2009

Before I go on the mission, I want to jot down something.

Minato seems a little more on edge than usual. I wonder why that is?

Short and sweet!

Until tomorrow,

Minako Arisato
Chapter Notes

So here's the VERY short conclusion to the "The Lover's Tango" trilogy. I wanted to leave the last chapter as a cliffhanger so that this one may prove to be more of a surprise.

So yeah, I also left a few questions at the end of the chapter pertaining to everyone's favorite emo boy. Feel free to give it a look and take from it what you will. Think of these questions as a survey that each character will get in the next chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In movies, whenever something unexpected happened, like jumping off a building or a character getting seriously hurt, time would slow to a halt. Each second would drag into a million more and the person would be forced to watch on helplessly as the perception of their world was ripped apart.

There was a moment to think about what would come next.

There was time to process one’s surroundings.

There was a chance to respond.

This was a different experience.

A piece of a broken beam scratched Minako’s arm. Her body felt like jelly as if the shock of hitting the ground suddenly caught up with her senses. Even when one of the boys used their own body as a protective shield, the impact took her breath away and sent her ears into a ringing fit.

Minako was thrown from her defender’s hold and went rolling through what remained of the ceiling. She could taste dry plaster, foam insulation, and any other materials that came from the damage above, sticking to her clothing or tangled in her hair. It would probably take weeks to get clean again with how much dust and mold was mixed in with rubble.

Just as quickly as everything happened, there was a sudden lull.

Minako could hear voices through muffled hearing.

“Junpei! Minako!”

Minato frantically called to her and their friend. He must be the only one up because Junpei didn’t yell back and neither did she.

“Oh my God, they fell through the floor!”

Fuuka seemed to be in contact with the rest of the team to give them a fair warning. It would be an unpleasant surprise if they opened the door upstairs only to find a gaping hole with no Shadows or teammates.
Minako forced her head up to see an unconscious Junpei.

He was barely inches away, equally coated in a layer of debris, lying face down.

Somehow, his cap hadn’t fallen off.

He had to be the one who protected her in the fall.

He saved her.

Minako reached out to nudge his shoulder. They had to get up, grab Minato on the other side of the room, and get out of there.

They had to escape.

“Junpei-”

Before her finger could so much as brush his clothing, a gummy arm from the Shadow shot out and yanked Junpei out of reach.

“JUNPEI-KUN!”

“No!”

Minako looked to see where her brother was yelling from. Minato, just gathering himself from the fall as well, tried to stand and aide his captured friend. He wavered and ended back on the floor.

Her eyes flew back to the Shadow as it easily heaved Junpei off the ground like a sack of potatoes. He dangled upside down and swayed side-to-side, no signs of waking up or making an attempt to fight back. His Evoker slipped out of its holster and went sailing to the floor, never to be seen again.

A small, pink ball of light drifted from the enemy’s crown to the teen it held captive.

The ceiling brought down on top of another room, the possibility that there were civilian casualties, half of the team missing on another floor, none of that mattered when Minako was watching in abject terror as the ball of light hit Junpei.

Then, the Shadow dropped him unceremoniously to the ground.

White hot fury coursed through Minako’s veins as she forced her legs to stand up and run to her best friend.

It didn’t matter if it hurt with lives on the line.

“Keep that thing busy, Nona!” Minako shoved her Evoker to the side of her temple and pulled the trigger. “Don’t let it get too close!”

Nona charged, spear first into the Shadow upon being summoned and slammed it against the back wall. There was no telling how much time that would buy them but Minako and Minato had to get Junpei out.

It had to be enough.
Minato was already at Junpei’s side when Minako finally traversed the splintered support beams and broken furniture.

“Junpei!” She collapsed beside her brother and reached out, taking his hand and giving his shoulder a rough shake. “Are you okay!? Junpei! Say something!”

“I tried that already. He’s out cold.” Minato lifted the other boy’s head. A Pixie was already healing a nasty gash that bled steadily down one side of his face. “I don’t know what that Shadow did to him but something tells me he’s done for the night.”

Minako had to bite down on her lip to keep herself from losing composure. Even if the siblings could rely on their multiple Personas to keep the Shadow at bay, they weren’t as tough and hard-hitting as someone specialized like Junpei. It would be an uphill struggle that would run the risk of exhaustion or worse, dying before reinforcements arrived.

“We need to get him somewhere safe!” She let go of his hand and prepared to lift in an incapacitated Junpei. “If we can retreat and find the others, we might have a chance-”

Minako gagged as something grabbed her by the throat. She was forced to the floor, her back slamming against what was left of a four-poster bed. A pair of wild eyes swam into view. A pair of familiar eyes.

Junpei was crouched over her, definitely awake and his fingers crushing her windpipe.

First, he was conscious and now, he was trying to kill her. What was going on?

Minako tried to pry him off, clawing feverishly at the hands that choked her. “J-Junpei, it hurts-”

His fingers tightened and caused her to let out an ugly gurgling sound. The world spun violently, growing fuzzier the longer Minako struggled to breathe.

Somehow, she could see Junpei wearing a twisted smile. It didn’t belong on that face.

Suddenly, a lithe form barreled into Junpei and, with a stroke of good luck, released the hold on her neck.

Minako rolled on her side and began to cough furiously. Some spit flew from her mouth but she could have cared less about anything after witnessing her best friend trying to kill her.

What just happened? Did the others finally find them?

When she had her bearings again, Minako looked up to see Minato and Junpei grappling with one another. Her brother was able to somehow tackle the other teenager to the floor and put him in a headlock.
Minako shot back to her feet and moved to assist him. “Minato-”

“Don’t come any closer!” Minato shouted, doing his best to hold Junpei back. “I’ll handle him myself! Just focus on keeping that Shadow busy until the others arrive!”

“I already broke through to the others. Help is on the way!” Fuuka reassured. “Hang on just a little longer! They’ll be there any minute now!”

Minako whipped her head back to the Shadow.

Nona was slammed against the floor by more tentacles. They strangled her Persona until bright blue sparks exploded out from underneath them.

It was terrifying to imagine what might happen if it were a human.

No, Minako wouldn’t give in to those kinds of thoughts, not when it was crucial to remain calm. It was up to her to protect them all and failure was not one of the options on the table.

Minako raised her Evoker and prepared to buckle down for the long haul.

“Oberon!”

She just prayed that the strength of her will would be enough to carry the trio to tomorrow.

Confession: Minato was not the wrestling type.

As children, Minako would always get the better of him, using age to her advantage. There was never a fight in his favor and no victory on his track record. It was practically a running gag in the family, even to this very day, she would tease him none stop about his incompetence at beating a girl.

Although he knew he could take on his sister now that he was both taller and stronger, Minato was not about to go Rambo on her just because he had something to prove.

So trying to keep a crazed Junpei Iori from trying to attack Minako was not exactly working out well from him.

“Snap out of it already! I’m not the enemy!”

Junpei continued to fight against Minato's hold. Although the former’s actions looked desperate, his face was neutral and vacant.

Minato, on the other hand, was far from composed. His grip was gradually starting to slip and his knuckles stung from where Junpei tried to escape. It wouldn’t be long until the discomfort became too overwhelming; he would be compelled to let go.

Was this really a shock he was grasping at straws to fight back? If his last Kendo tournament had been any indicator, these past months of fighting both human and supernatural foes molded Minato into a force to be reckoned with. Once scrawny muscles were now put to use in the ring, the field, and Tartarus.

However, Junpei was no greenhorn when it came to sports. Baseball had been a part of his life for what seemed to be forever and, from what Minato’s seen, there was no doubt that he was good at what he did.
There was barely a chance of success from the beginning.

“Fuuka-san! What’s going on inside his head!?” Minato yelled out.

Fuuka reacted promptly, tearing the navigator from the fight to answer Minato’s question.

“There’s something restraining Junpei-kun’s consciousness and making him turn on the group! I can’t tell what the source is but it’s very likely that the main Shadow has the ability to put mentally unstable individuals into a trance!”

Minato quickly readjusted his hands to hopefully protect them better. “Are you sure about the mentally unstable part? Junpei’s a little weird but this is just insane!”

“I know but it’s not that simple,” Fuuka said. “Before the battle, I sensed that one of the members of the group was feeling uneasy. I ignored it because I thought it may be because they were stressed.” There was a sad sigh from the girl. “However, when Junpei-kun suddenly went crazy, those negative emotions disappeared and were replaced with the same signal as the enemy. The Shadow took advantage of his vulnerability to distract us from the fight.”

There was no time to hesitate. They had to break the trance before Junpei and Mitsuru did something they would regret.

“How do I bring him back!?” Minato’s grip loosened. “There’s gotta be a way to fix this!”

“You have to put him to sleep or knock them unconscious. It’ll prevent the Shadow from controlling his body and reset the brain. However, you’ll be putting Junpei-kun out of commission for the rest of the fight.”

Junpei sunk his nails deep into Minato’s skin, causing the latter to almost scream.

“I don’t have time for that! Is there anything else!”

“I don’t know if you or Minako have it, but since the spell used on Junpei-kun was of the Charm variety, you could counter that with its anti-spell: Charmdi! It’s the only other option!”

Shit.

Shit. Shit! SHIT!

Minato may have a wide range of spells for support purposes but Charmdi sure as hell wasn’t one of them.

With Minako busy distracting the Shadow and the other members of the team not present, his only choice was to put Junpei down by hand.

“Sorry about this.” Minato tightened his hold around Junpei’s neck, just enough to subdue him but not enough to kill. Years of studying medicine and basic self-defense were finally coming in handy.

It still sucked using this knowledge on a friend.

Junpei was getting weaker with each passing moment, further damaging Minato’s resolve.

How could he be forgiven after this was over?

The nails digging into his hands loosened.
Was this right?

Junpei slowly dropped his arms but still continued to get free.

Just a little more and it would all be over.

“IO!”

A soft light engulfed Minato, still trying to keep Junpei from struggling.

For a moment, he thought it was another attack by the Shadow. After getting over the initial shock, Minato realized the light had a pale pink color, different from the previous beam that it had used to seduce Junpei into a fit of rage.

The sensation the light gave him was different as well. It was more like being embraced by a mother's hug rather than being attacked. It was a feeling of safety and one that he was missing in this moment of fear. It was meant to calm the soul and bring forth a sense of peace. This light had to belong to someone else, someone who was on their side.

Junpei seemed to be feeling the effects of the light, too. His earlier rage began to dissipate, his face returning to a more neutral expression.

Minato felt safe enough to loosen his hold considerably.

Within a few short seconds, Junpei had turned back to normal and looked up at Minato expectantly. He was obviously confused after having gone through such an experience. If such an expression could be compared to anything, oh, it would be that of a lost puppy.

“Dude,” he said groggily, “what happened? I feel like crap.”

Minato chuckled and fully released Junpei's neck. “I’ll tell you when we get out of here.”

“Thank goodness, we made it in time.” As if on cue, Yukari was at their side. Her bow was slung over the shoulder and her Evoker drawn at the hip. “We thought we weren’t gonna make it in time but I guess we’re just that lucky.”

Minato looked away from his fellow juniors to where Minako was fighting.

Mitsuru and Akihiko had already replaced his sister, who backed off and took up more of a support role. The three were busy fending off more of the gummy arms from before. Ice and electricity lit up the broken room, beating into a shrieking Shadow mercilessly.

Fuuka really did reach the others in time.

The cavalry had arrived.

“We can’t let those guys show us up!” Junpei was already back on his feet as if the last few minutes hadn’t happened. Even without his sword, he looked ready to help take on the beast before them bare fisted. “Come on! There’ll be nothing to kill if we just sit back like a bunch of dumbasses!”

Yukari followed suit, getting up and dusting off. “Yeah, we’ll bring down that sucker ourselves! The seniors better watch out cause we’re coming in hot!”

Minato rolled his eye but fell into line with his classmates, charging into the fray behind them.
Their bravado was contagious.

“Let’s finish this already.”

In another few short minutes, the team succeeded in doing just that.

Minako never thought she would feel relieved walking outside to see the Dark Hour still going on but after everything that happened, she practically sang as the team exited the hotel, never to return again.

They had won the day.

Fuuka was waiting on the sidewalk, hands behind her back and an excited grin on her face.

“I’m glad you’re all safe and sound! How are you feeling after that fight?”

“Fine, thank you,” Mitsuru said while heading to her motorcycle parked on the curb. She began to pack up her equipment and collecting everyone’s weapons to transport back to the dorm. “The enemy was sly, but with you and the efforts of the others, we pulled through in the end.”

“Understatement of the fricken year!” Junpei threw an arm around Minato and Yukari, dragging them along as the capped teen continued to rant. “Not to brag or anything, but between Fuuka-chan’s Persona; Yukatan’s bow; my survival instinct AND Minato’s right hook, the juniors were kinda the MVP’s tonight. We killed it, way more than last month and the month before that-”

“-Get off me!” Yukari elbowed her classmate in the ribs. “You smell like mold!”

Minato took the sudden attack in stride, supporting a now slumped and injured Junpei. “Not to add fuel to the fire, but I’m inclined to agree with this guy.”

“Me too!” Fuuka bounced on her toes and came forward to join in with the roadside festivities. “We should have a really big dinner to celebrate and the underclassman get to choose the meal! It’ll be so much fun!”

The juniors all huddled together in their own little pod.

Minako hung around the fringe of the group, enjoying the happy buzz that came with their victory. The juniors really did put in some hard work and should be proud of their efforts.

She, as the field leader, should be glad for that fact.

However, she only felt hollow thinking about everything that happened.

Minako took a deep breath and clapped her hands for the others to give the undivided attention. Just as planned, the others did just that.

“Alrighty then, looks like another mission accomplished. I’m super proud of everyone’s hard work tonight, especially the juniors.” She glanced over at the aforementioned teens. “And since Fuuka brought it up, I think you guys deserve to pick the victory dinner. Just make sure you give me a day or two’s notice so I can go to the store and pick up the ingredients.”

Yukari raised her hand. “If Mitsuru-senpai doesn’t use the food money to go towards damage control, can we have an all desert dinner?”

“The Kirijo Cooperation will pay for all that, Yukari.” Mitsuru piped up from her bike. All the
equipment was packed and ready to be transported back to the dorm. “The money for dorm food should remain untouched unless I’m told otherwise.”

A cheer erupted from Yukari and Fuuka. Somewhere along the lines, Minato was dragged down by the two girls for a good-natured group hug.

The poor thing just couldn’t catch a break tonight.

“Hey, Minatan?”

Minako snapped out of her thoughts and looked to her side to see Junpei, slightly hunched over with his hands in his pockets. The jacket he wore for the mission was tied around his waist, too dirty to wear and be comfortable in.

Still, he appeared to be in better shape than earlier.

“Is something wrong, Junpei-kun?” Minako faced herself away from the others to keep their conversation between only them. “Are you still feeling the effects of that spell? I can heal you if that’s what-”

“No, that’s fine.” Junpei cut in. “I just wanted to make sure you’re holding up alright, you know, after everything that happened in there. You seemed kinda on edge tonight.”

Why? Was it because she was unable to predict that the team had been baited and tricked into a corner?

For a moment, her eyes darted to Akihiko, congratulating the others and (understandably) avoiding looking at Minato.

Again, those raw memories seeped to the forefront of her mind.

Why?

Why did things have to be this way?

Why did it have to be the person who was the first to give her a chance?

Upon closer inspection of the group, save Fuuka, she wasn’t the only one who seemed shaken to their core.

The constant looks certain members of the group gave one another, the way their mouths would contort into a frown, it gave away the one thing Minako knew for sure after all was said and done: this mission had brought along unintended consequences.

Now, they had to find a way to live with this horrible night. She had to find a way to get over everything she had done wrong.

But those weren’t things Minako could say.

Instead, she nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay.”

Even if she didn’t truly mean it, it would be best for everyone if she just put her feelings aside and continued to be her cheerful self.
For the sake of the others, Minako had to be strong. If they saw her bleed, it was all over.

The group of teens vacated the sidewalk of Champs de Fleurs before the Dark Hour was over. No one had seen them come or go, no one would ever guess they had been there, not a soul would question if they denied claims otherwise.

After all, every possible witness in the area was asleep in their coffins.

In that same breath, three figures saw the retreating children from a building across the way.

The tallest and palest of the three, a young man, clapped slowly once the last of the students disappeared down the street with her head hung low.

“Faster than I expected. That was quite a show. They've been rather busy these last few months, including their frequent forays into the tower. Their fighting style is positively fascinating. And it seems they've gained new recruits, too.” He turned around to his companions, another young man, and a white-dressed girl. “Well, Jin? Are they our enemy or can they be trusted?”

Jin stepped away from the girl, pushing his glasses up.

“Why don’t we ask our buddy? We’ll be seeing him soon enough.”

The pale young man looked down at his wrist.

“Yes, that’s an excellent idea. Considering he shares our fate, it would be prudent to seek his opinion.”

Red and blue veins seemed to pop out like tattoos.

White bone could be easily discerned, even in the darkness.

He was getting sicker by the day.

“We don’t have much time left.”

7/8/2009

My knuckles feel raw from punching a monkey in the face. I wonder if I can get fined for that or what?

-Minato Arisato

Chapter End Notes

What's your opinion of Minato's character arc in this fic?

What sort of relationships do you think Minato struggles with?

Do you think Minato has an OOC temper or does it work for him? (OOC="out of character"


How do you see Minato and Minako's relationship (from his perspective)?
Sorry this came out late, but finals week is upon me! I nearly failed my last test for a required course on gender theory and, no hate, I was confused the entire time. I'm studying to be an OT, I don't need to know this stuff when teaching people helping people regain practical mobility skills! Experts, please leave helpful suggestions for my stupid butt down in the comments below.

Just as the title implies, there's some pressure going on in this chapter. You'll know why after reading. Please enjoy!

Also, two questions are posted in the notes below for anyone who wants to take a crack at them.

Three days after their last mission at the love hotel, life went back to normal for the members of SEES. Other than tying up loose ends and training for clubs, everyone dug in their heels at school and worked harder than ever before, getting ready for impending finals and the beginning of the summer break.

That also meant that a certain trio plus one senior had buckled down in the library for some intense studying and bonding time.

“I did that?” Junpei asked, swinging his head between the two Arisato siblings. “You sure it wasn’t someone else?

Minato hummed and scratched down a few more practice problems from his open textbook. “I had to pry you off of Minako before you crushed her throat. We wrestled for a bit until I got you in a headlock. If Yukari hadn’t stepped in to help me, I would’ve been forced to put you down for the night.”

“Oh no, that ain’t cool at all.” Junpei turned to Minako. “Dude, I’m sorry about that. I’ll make it up to you some time. I heard the new ‘Devil Trigger’ game finally got released. I’ll buy a copy for both of us, my treat.”

Minako waved the boy off. “Live and let live, as my mom used to say but I’ll totally take a free copy of DT if you're offering to pay.”

Typical Minako, always willing to save a few bucks at the expense of another’s wallet, no regrets or willingness to pay them back. She called it a gift but Minato called in thinly veiled theft.

However, even as Minako laughed along with Junpei, something was off about her demeanor.

All week, she had been getting up earlier than usual to run. That normally wasn’t an issue as she has done this sort of thing for years, starting back in middle school and onward. By now, her internal clock was hardwired to be up at the crack of dawn and going long distances without fail. That tradition was upheld, even when she decided to take on a partner in the form of a caveman.
who boxes, much to Minato’s chagrin.

Starting the day after their mission, that all changed. Instead of being up at five in the morning, she was out the door a half-an-hour before than at four-thirty.

Anyone with half a brain cell could put the pieces of the puzzle together. The events at the love hotel, whatever happened between his sister and Akihiko, it drove a spike through that relationship and left them in a fragile state.

Knowing Minako, it would be fair to assume she required space and time to think things through. Eventually, she will confront whatever was keeping her tight-lipped. Minato could only hope that she would come to a conclusion soon with how tired she looked nowadays.

And if she wanted his help, Minako could always count on her little brother to be there. He would force himself to be present if need be.

“I didn’t know I was a Libra!” Yukari lifted a neon-colored magazine above her head. “You are fascinated by balance and symmetry and in a constant chase for justice and equality, realizing through life that the only thing that should be truly important to yourself in your own inner core of personality. You are someone who’s ready to do nearly anything to avoid conflict, keeping the peace whenever possible.”

The other members at the table looked away from their homework.

“The frick is a Libra?” Junpei asked. “That some kind of weird fortune thing?”

Yukari shook her head and dropped the magazine in front of her. It was open on a page with a collection of tiny paragraphs, each accompanied by a different symbol of an astrology sign. One, in particular, was highlighted with a pink marker. “No, Stupei, it’s a zodiac sign. Everyone has one depending on what day they were born and it predicts your personality, relationship compatibility, and some other stuff.”

Minato internally groaned. The one girl in his class he found to be the most tolerable (not like it was a contest when 2-F was a breeding ground for the Akihiko Sanada fan club) believed in the power of the zodiac.

Minako, ever the superstitious Catholic she was, immediately perked up. “Oh yeah, one of my cousins loves that sort of thing. I was born on November twenty-second so I’m a Sagittarius.”

“Sagittarius? Hold on a second. . .” Yukari ducked her head back down to the page and trailed down the list of paragraphs. “Your open mind and philosophical view motivate you to wander around the world in search of the meaning of life. Sagittarius is extroverted, optimistic and enthusiastic, and likes changes. You are able to transform your thoughts into concrete actions and will do anything to achieve your goals.”

Now that sounded like Minako alright: an outgoing bumblebee of a human being who had no concept of the phrase “take it down a thousand.”

“Woah! That was spot on!” Junpei raised his a hand. “I wanna try next. My birthday’s on January nineteenth. What does that make me?”

Yukari repeated, “January nineteenth” as she browsed through the different signs to find what Junpei was.
“Ah, it says you’re a Capricorn. ‘You possess an inner state of independence that enables significant progress both in your personal and professional life. You are a master of self-control and have the ability to lead the way, make solid and realistic plans, and manage many people who work for you at any time. You will learn from your mistakes and get to the top based solely on experience and expertise.’”

Huh, now that one made a little bit of sense.

Despite all his quirks and cocky mannerisms, Junpei really was the type of person who could strike off on his own or learned to adapt to difficult situations. He would be dead by now if that wasn’t true.

However, Minato highly doubted his classmate could make solid and realistic plans or manage many people who work for him at any time.

“What about you, Minato-kun?” Yukari had finally come to the last member of the table, the silent genius among them. “When were you born? I can look up what it says about you.”

No, no way was he going to let a teen magazine decide what his personality was. He had to quickly find an excuse to get out of this before he was misrepresented by the lowest form of entertainment imaginable.

Minato returned to his work and tried to look more uninterested than usual. “I don’t believe in horoscopes. Whatever it has to say probably won’t be-”

“-March fifth!”

Of course, Minako had to go revealing every little detail of her little brother’s personal life.

He loved her but damn that loud-mouthed witch.

“March fifth? How lucky, that’s graduation day!” Yukari easily found the paragraph she was looking for. “You’re a Pisces! ‘You are very friendly, so you often find yourself in the company of very different people. Pisces are selfless, so you are always willing to help others, without hoping to get anything back. You are a Water sign and as such, this zodiac sign is characterized by empathy and expressed emotional capacity.’”

Friendly?

Selfless and helping others?

Empathy and emotions?

Junpei and Minako were obviously trying not to burst into hysterical laughter, heads face down on the table while the former pounded his fist as softly as possible.

“Dude, that’s so not you!”

“Sweet Mary Magdalene! I can’t breathe!”

At least Yukari had the courage to show her face when she giggled at the stupidity of the statement.

“Sorry, it’s what the magazine says.”

The description got one thing right though, Minato did keep a wide range of company, just not the
kind he wanted or asked for.

_Ice:_ Arisato, I have a favor to ask and I would like an answer as soon as possible.

_Me:_ yeah wat up?

_Ice:_ I am unable to find your sister. Student Council will not be meeting for the next week due to finals and Akihiko hasn’t been on speaking terms with her in some time. Where could I find her right now?

_Me:_ she works 2day @ the bookstore, Iwatodai mall, 1st floor

_Ice:_ Thank you, Arisato.

_Ice:_ By curiosity, what name am I under in your personal contacts?

_Me:_ Mitsuru Kirijo

_Ice:_ Why do I get the sense you’re lying to me?

_Me:_ idk and idc

Everyone has their own way of coping with troublesome feelings. Whether it was going on a shopping binge, watching TV with the family, or calling up a friend for a night on the town, there was always a way to get one’s mind off of whatever caused them grief.

Minako was no different, but there was more to forgetting than just doing things for fun or wasting tons of money. Her motto was simple: turn anxiety (with a splash of caffeine) into pure work ethic. With this simple phrase, there were no shortages of projects or ideas that could occupy her time. After all, she was already a person with a long list of things-to-do on a regular basis.

Finishing a chapter of her book.

Going on a run.

Studying for class.

Cooking a nice meal.

Today, that distracting activity was picking up an additional shift at the bookshop. Since the local university was starting a new semester and students needed to buy required readings for class, Bukinichi and Mitsuko were more than appreciative for the extra hands around the shop.

Those four and a half hours of ringing up books, dusting shelves, chatting with customers made for a good work-out and the perfect distraction to her current worries. They kept Minako’s mind from wandering to a particular event that took place a few days ago, replacing those unsavory memories with price tags and other tasks.

However, that bubble of carefree labor was coming to an end. The end of her shift rolled around and just about everything that could be done was already taken care of.

To busy herself in those final minutes, Minako sat at the check-out counter and counted the till until her fingers were numb from double checking the amount, again and again.
At least she was too fixated on the floating numbers on coins and bills to take notice of her own thoughts.

“Working hard as always, I see.” Minako heard Bukinichi say as he settled himself onto the stool next to his employee. His cane, ever the trusty device, came to rest on his lap. “How many times have ya’ gone through that stack? I would’ve stopped at three but you’ve been sitting there for a while.”

“Seven-ish,” Minako straightened a stack of yen bills, “and now it’s eight. I wanted to be sure that I didn’t short-change anyone and whatnot. Just a precaution.”

She conveniently left out that she was trying to forget about kissing her newest friend who may or may not be plaguing every waking second of her life, but did her boss really need to hear about her relationship problems?

“Well, let’s hope you ain’t wrong!” Bukinichi let out a chuckle, reached up and gave a friendly pat on her shoulder. “Why don’tcha lock the till and I’ll run this to the safe? It’s gettin’ to be closing time so we can bring in the sign outside before it stragglers start coming in. You should never turn customers away but even us workaholics need some sleep sometime.”

Minako nodded and did as she was told, clicking the till box close, handing it to Bukinichi and leaving the counter to begin securing the store for the night. Word on the street was that a love hotel was vandalized a few nights ago: broken mirrors in empty rooms, smashed furniture in random places, even an entire suite had caved in on itself and caused a huge fuss with the management.

Some say that the Kirijo company had paid for repairs due to a past favor that, allegedly, never existed.

Some theorized that executives used the establishment years before and the hotel promised to keep things “hush-hush.”

Others simply said it was aliens, no two ways about it. The television told them so.

Hearing such stories whispered amongst the city made for some amusing conversation while on the clock, the believably innocent cashier knowing full well the truth behind the whole affair.

Stepping outside for the first time in hours was a much-needed change for Minako. With summer now in full swing, the sun was just beginning to sink, streaking the sky in bright pastel colors. The evening crowd of mall go-ers thinned out as many rushed to get home to their families, jogging towards Iwatodai station with briefcases in tow. A soft breeze tousled hair and clothing alike; it brought a calming chill to the busy sidewalks that promised a satisfying trek to those that forwent the train for the scenic route.

If she didn’t have to buckle down and study for finals, Minako would be inclined to take an evening stroll just to drink in the sight before her.

Considering her nature, she might have invited someone from the dorm to come along. Minato and Junpei were the obvious first picks, but Yukari or Fuuka could be just as entertaining to be around. According to her brother, their quiet navigator was an expert in cheating vending machines and other forbidden knowledge.

If none of those four were able, Mitsuru was somewhat approachable. Under the guise of a strategy pow-wow, the two could share a meaningful conversation beyond the intended purpose for their
meeting.

But if the President herself was busy, that only left one more person.

Akihiko.

Minako stopped her mind from roaming too far away and hurried to grab the sidewalk sign. This was no time to get off-track when she had a job to do. Bukinichi and Mitsuko needed to go home, not wait for some ditzy fool who was too busy getting lost in worrying.

These thoughts could be postponed until some other time.

“Good afternoon, Arisato!”

Just Minako was about to fold the sign up for transport, she was drawn to the voice which greeted her name from close by.

She found Mitsuru approaching from further down the sidewalk, still in uniform but school bag absent from the attire. Instead, the only accessory she carried was an expensive-looking black purse, swinging from her shoulder.

Even when dressed the part of a student, she exuded an air of refinement befitting a young lady of her status.

“Evening, Kirijo-san!” Minako absentmindedly dusted off her work clothes and leaned against the sign. “Surprised to see you strolling ‘round in this neck of the woods. You always struck me as an uptown gal.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Mitsuru parked herself in front of Minako, “but I’m no stranger to the area. Living here for so long has assured me as much.”

Minako nodded along. “Makes sense, this place is pretty popular with students. I’d imagine you’re not too different from anyone else.” She shoved her hands in her pockets. “So, if ya’ don’t mind me asking, what’re you up to? All good things, I hope?”

“Yes, just running a few errands for the dorm and Student Council. Finals week has made certain members lax in their duties.” Despite the comment, Mitsuru didn’t come off as tired or upset. “My final stop was actually to see you. I couldn’t find you at school but your brother was kind enough to point me in the right direction.”

Since when did Minato start getting all these phone numbers? A few years ago, he could barely speak to another member of the opposite sex, save his sister, but now people went through him to get information.

Next thing she knew, Minako would be waist deep in suitors for Minato’s affections, maybe just as crazy as another fan club she knew of. He must be more popular than he let on.

In the words of a certain character from a certain videogame, “Wow, just. . . wow.”

In any case, Minako was curious about why Mitsuru needed to speak with her.

“Does it have to deal with Student Council? I’m almost done with my shift so I can give ya’ a hand with those errands if there’s any left—”

“No, I finished just a moment ago,” Mitsuru said quickly. “This is. . . a personal request, of sorts.
Something has been festering within me recently and I heard from Yukari that you have excellent advice when it comes to stressful matters. If you wouldn’t mind sitting down for a meal and a chat after you’ve finished work, I ask for your help.”

Help?

Something on her mind?

Could this be what Minako was thinking about, too?

Only one way to find out for sure and that certainly wasn’t in front of a bookstore after seven o’clock at night.

“. . . Do you have somewhere in mind?”

Minako found that at eating Hagekure without her guy friends felt strange. It was no Chagall Cafe or Sweet Central a few doors down. The ramen shop had an older infrastructure and a crowd more rough around the edges, not exactly a girl’s first choice of where to enjoy a nice meal. Many of the female students at the school would sooner forget to put make-up on in the morning than be seen in a place like that.

However, Minako found comfort in these types of low key hideaways that possessed their own special kind of charm. It might just be a byproduct of living with a boy all her life or just an old fashioned taste, but Hagekure, in her opinion, felt comfy, like the closest place to home.

Mitsuru definitely resided in the latter camp of females.

The poor girl spent ten minutes trying to decide on a dish (Minako stepped in before the waitress kicked the two out), sat pencil straight even when their seats had no backs on them, and clutched her purse for dear life. If the scrunched nose and cautious behavior were any indications, this seasoned fighter had never stepped foot inside a normal restaurant in her life.

What did she think was going to happen? A Shadow would come waltzing in the door the mug them for all they’re worth?

Even when their food arrived, Mitsuru could only stare blankly at the bowl and frown.

“Arisato, what am I supposed to do now?”

Minako was in the middle of a bite when the question had been asked. She quickly slurped her noodles down and wiped her face for cleanliness sake. “You eat it like anything else, put it in your mouth and swallow. It’s that easy—”

Mitsuru shook her head. “No, I mean how do I eat?” She glanced at Minako, hands folded neatly on her lap. “I have never been in such an establishment and I’m unfamiliar with what the proper decorum of eating ramen. Please, tell me what the etiquette here is. Are there any customs I need to follow?”

For a moment, Minako thought this was all a joke. Maybe her oblivious behavior was Mitsuru’s own way of getting a chuckle out of others.

Yes, that had to be it so why not play along?

“Just make as much noise as you can while eating.” Minako raised her chopsticks. “Ya’ know, just
like cavemen in historical documentaries. It’s getting in touch with your wild side and all that fun stuff!”

“Make a lot of noise? That seems so primitive. . .” Mitsuru looked back to her meal and picked up her own utensils, now full of determination. “As they say: when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Bon appetit!”

To Minako’s shock, Mitsuru took the advice to heart and was not shy in making a little noise. In fact, the display was borderline rude to the other customers around them.

It had been a serious question all along.

Minato was going to get a kick out of this later.

When Mitsuru finally came up for air, she was smiling.

“Hmm, the taste is quite interesting. I thought it tasted strange at first, but as I continued to eat, I realized it had a subtle charm to it. It's quite delicious.” She lifted a cluster of noodles up and inspected them. “I wonder what they use for bouillon. Could it be-”

“Anyway!” Minako pushed her bowl away. “You wanted to talk about something?”

Mitsuru stopped mumbling to herself, turned to her companion and nodded. “Yes, if you would care to indulge me for a time, there’s been quite a bit on my mind recently.”

That actually worked.

Score one for the field leader of SEES.

“Not at all.”

“Thank you, I promise not to waste any more of your time.” The young heiress took a deep breath and gave Minako her full attention.

“As you know, on the seventh of July, we were separated into pairs of two and, to be blunt, lost the ability to control our more raw instincts. Your brother and Yukari supposedly met each other on a lower floor, but that was a lie to save face considering the circumstances. You and Akihiko. . . well, need I say more?”

Minako sank in her chair. She had a feeling this conversation was bound to happen but the reminder stung nevertheless. Just his name was enough for her to feel troubled all over again.

Why did her brain keep going back to that night? The guilt, the embarrassment, why must those pesky memories invade every time she dared to let her guard down?

“No, we ended up together. Plain and simple.”

Mitsuru didn’t comment on Minako’s downcast answer, pushing forward to explain her reason for this get-together, ever the one to not waste any time on silly trivialities.

“That just leaves Iori and me. We were no exception to this attack, and if I’m truly honest, the experience was. . .”

When Mitsuru found herself at a loss for words, Minako leaned over the counter to get a better read of the young woman’s face and hopefully get her to look up from her hands. This was far from
an easy conversation and having transparency was key to getting to the root of the issue.

“Embarrassing?”

“. . . Yes.” Mitsuru admitted, face still masked from view. “I was completely idiotic, lost all sense of self, and when we both came to our senses, I had responded harshly towards him.” Her head bowed even lower. “Though Iori can be quite a pain and the quintessential moron, I acted out of emotion and-”

Minako knew what was coming next but had to mentally brace herself for it by biting the inside of her cheek until it went numb.

Mitsuru didn’t seem to notice and continued with her rambling.

“-and I struck him without due cause. He didn’t even utter so much as a joke, he took the situation seriously and yet I was the one who overreacted.”

All of this was too familiar. For days, Minako harbored the same sentiments, almost down to the letter and wording. They remained bottled inside her mind and jostled with an urge to finally be set free.

Unfortunately, that was not a luxury she could afford.

“What’re you gonna do? Has he said anything yet?”

Mitsuru pursed her lips, tensing up.

“I can say, with confidence, he feels just as depraved as I do. He has provided me nothing but space and time yet it only makes matters worse. I don’t know how to accost the subject and it’s tearing me apart.”

And there it was.

Everything Minako could possibly feel, everything she was already trying and failing to work through, Mitsuru admitted to struggling with as well.

Nothing coerced them to hang onto their guilt. They could let go at any time. The thing that held them back was not a mysterious outside force. Junpei. . . and especially Akihiko, both were faultless in this cycle of silence.

There was more than one fool sitting at Hakegure’s counter and their names were Mitsuru Kirijo and Minako Arisato.

The ones at fault were throwing the world’s most blatant pity party.

They had no one to rebuke but themselves.

But the more Minako began to reflect, she thought back to when Mitsuru mentioned that Junpei may feel just as responsible.

Minako retained an important detail from that night.

She remembered what she saw in Akihiko’s face when she ultimately found the guts to look him in the eyes.

_Frustration._
Worry.

Confusion.

Worst of all, hurt.

Hurt for something out of their hands.

Those eyes, did he see those things in her too?

It suddenly hit her that there was a simple solution to this absurd dilemma.

Yes, he had to.

The answer was clear from the very start. How could Minako not see that right away? How dumb did she have to be not to recognize when someone else needed forgiveness as much as she did?

All it takes is a little bit of grit.

“Just say sorry.”

“But what-”

Minako cut off Mitsuru’s rebuttal by grabbing her hand, sympathy and honesty overflowing her heart like a river flooding its banks.

“Junpei is the nicest, most accepting guy I’ve ever met other than my own brother. He’s got a heart of gold and doesn’t care if you did something stupid.”

The courage Minako spoke of, the words she kept bottled up inside echoed with another name in place of Junpei’s.

“Knowing him, if you really feel terrible for what you did, he’ll accept it, no questions asked. You just have to be brave and trust in his ability to forgive and forget.”

What happened could not be undone. The whole ordeal was uncomfortable for both sides but was that worth losing a friend over?

Akihiko must feel the same way and want to make amends to the awkwardness between them. Minako just had to respond when the opportunity came along or take a chance on herself, not just for her pride but for the one she didn’t want to see drift away.

Minako won’t let him drift away.

“Just give him a chance,” she said, “... but you might have to speak plainly so he can understand you. The poor guy thinks the thesaurus is a dinosaur.”

Mitsuru chuckled and, for the first time since they walked in the door, let her shoulders slope and body recline.

“I know what I have to do now, even if I must learn to converse in the language of a manchild.”

The redhead smiled, warm and demure. “Thank you, Minako-san. We should do this more often, perhaps somewhere like this?”

“I’m glad I could help Kirijo-no, Mitsuru-san. You helped me, too.”
This really was a nice meal.

A few weeks ago, Yukari had called on her fellow junior, Fuuka Yamagishi, for information regarding an incident at Gekkoukan from a ten years ago.

Fuuka promised to do her best and they parted ways.

Time flew by and the young archer was certain that this might have been a fool's errand from the start. She almost considered giving up and letting Fuuka go back to whatever else the girl wished to do with her spare time.

Finally, after their most recent mission, the two met in the command room while the others were busying studying in their rooms that evening.

“I did everything I could to help and discovered something that may be of interest.” Fuuka handed Yukari a heavy folder, stuffed to excess with freshly printed papers. “You were right about that feeling of yours. I found information that very few people were allowed to have, things that happened ten years ago, among other key details. I compiled what I could and made a chronological account of what I found.”

Yukari couldn’t believe what that Fuuka was able to find so much dirt on that night. The folder in her hands easily weighed about the same as a thick chapter book, maybe even more so.

All this juicy information now belonged to her.

The key to her past, the reason behind that accident at their school, everything that was long kept behind lock-and-key was coming undone within her very grasp.

She would finally learn the truth.

“I hope I was able to be of service,” Fuuka said in a near whispering voice. “Be careful with that folder, though. I had to dig in some very secure databases to do my research, and if Mitsuru-senpai or the Chairman find out, I may be in a bit of trouble.”

Yukari shook her head. “I’m going to confront her, Akihiko-senpai, and the Chairman about this once I’m done reading.” She clutched the folder to her chest. “But don’t worry, I’ll say it was all my fault.”

Fuuka nodded, shaken yet accepting of the honesty. “I don’t know why you wanted this information, but if it gives you some peace, I’m glad I was able to lend a hand. You won’t be disappointed with what you’ll read about.”

Yes, Yukari knew that to be correct.

If her dad could see her now. . .

“You’ve done a great job, Fuuka-chan.”

Akihiko Sanada was not an easily scared individual.

After years of fighting hoards of Shadows, hardcore training in the ring, and befriending a fiery redhead with a superiority complex, nothing seemed to phase him anymore. That and his natural inclination to push forward, despite the challenges that may lay ahead was always strong, even
before getting into fighting. One had to have that kind of resolve in this line of work or else they risked being eaten alive.

Yes, fear was simply that: a fear. All one had to do was push past it and move on.

Despite all that, standing in front of Minato Arisato’s door, for the first time in years, nervous energy made the usually cool-headed boxer twitchy and on edge.

He questioned if he should raise his hand and knock.

However, it was the context of this visit that set Akihiko spiraling towards no action being taken at all.

For nearly a week, Minako had been avoiding him like the bubonic plague. Not showing up for their morning jog, ducking her head when they passed each in the hall, acknowledging his presence with only a wave of the hand, she did all of this and more.

She wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that she was embarrassed.

It didn’t help that they were already under a lot of stress with finals coming up.

As much as Akihiko wanted to give her time and space to think, it was driving him insane that they had yet to even attempt to work things out. Someone had to initiate the conversation before they let things boil over.

Like an old coach once told him, “You’ve gotta rip off the band-aid to let the wound heal.”

So, he decided to seek the help of someone who could offer some insight on how to approach her. That person is the one who knew Minako best, her closest friend and little brother.

Akihiko forced himself to swallow his nerves. The kid didn’t exactly strike an imposing figure with a skinny physique and slumped shoulders. Though he packed a punch, he was still weak when it came to a fist-to-fist fight. His headphones were almost constantly in use, giving the impression of an aloof child, not an alert young man.

To top it all off, he remained silent nearly every second of the day, only speaking when asked a question or talking with people he actually liked.

Sure, Minato was fiercely protective, but for a good reason. She was the only family he could depend on at a moment’s notice. Their relationship was obviously close and, if the roles had been reversed, Minako would have done the same thing.

Siblings cared for one another.

They were meant to stick together.

If anything happened to one, the other would be devastated.

Akihiko knew that feeling all too well.

Without wasting another second, he raised a fist and rapped it against the door.

It was now or never.

*Knock, knock, knock!*
Akihiko stepped back and waited. If he was going to get punched a second time, at least there would be a good distance Minato would have to overcome first.

To his surprise, an audible sigh came from the other side. Quick footsteps grew louder as someone came closer to the door, heavy as if this person was angry. It appeared that Minato wasn’t busy this evening or had his headphones on.

The brass knob twisted.

“Minny, I love you but can this-”

Minato was cut off as soon as he opened the door and Akihiko stared him dead on.

If hearing Minato refer to his older sister by a cutesy nickname wasn’t strange enough, then seeing him in more casual attire rather than the typical uniform or weekend wear was equally off-putting. With athletic shorts and a baggy t-shirt (the word “music” in bolded red letters), his hair had been pulled back with familiar looking pins and a pair of cheaters sliding down his nose.

For an odd reason, Minato looked exceptionally young for someone who was supposed to be sixteen. If Akihiko didn’t know any better, this boy before him could’ve passed as a middle schooler.

At least that ever-present scowl of his gave away it was still Minato Arisato.

“You’re not Minako,” he stated plainly before proceeding to shut the door, “I hate to break it to ya’, but I don’t deal with hominids after five-”

“-Wait!” Akihiko shuffled forward and grabbed the side of the door before it closed for good. He had come this far and there was no turning back now. “I just need to talk to you for a minute. I promise I won’t take up too much of your time.”

Minato scoffed in his upperclassman’s face. “Me? Help you? That’s rich coming from the guy who did God only knows what to my sister.” He let go of the door and leaned against the frame, arms crossed. “I bet you’re only here because you wanna get back in her good graces but that’s not gonna happen; you don’t have the guts or integrity to pull it off. I suggest you give up and go back to your cave you call a dorm room.”

Stubborn, just like his sister. Was it a trait that ran in the Arisato family or something that developed due to circumstance?

In any case, Akihiko knew he had to remain calm rather than give in to frustration. The only way to get what he wanted was to be persistent and honest. Anything else would only take away from his credibility.

Take a deep breath, this was no different from a sparring match. The opponent might have a strong conviction but that didn’t mean Akihiko couldn’t match intensity.

“I know you hate me and-”

“-Understatement of the fucking year, Socrates.” Minato pushed off the door frame. “Tell me, oh wise one, is the sky blue?”

Sass, another Arisato characteristic.

“-and if I’m being honest, you’re not exactly my cup of tea either. You have a horrible attitude and
no drive to work with any upperclassman other than your sister. I sometimes wonder why the other juniors hang out with a person like you.” Akihiko stood a little taller. “But, I’m not doing this because I have to, I’m doing this because I want to. You said it, I want to fix the relationship I have with Minako. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Minato continued to glare, with eyes sharpened to catch even the smallest of flaws.

“And what does that have to do with anything? You two seemed to be getting along just fine so why come to me?”

Unlike previous remarks, he hadn’t answered with a snarky comment. Though there was a hint of resentment, his voice was clear and concise. Minato was seeking an explanation just like Akihiko sought out advice for his predicament.

It was a sign to continue.

“You know her better than I do. You know her history, her goals, her dreams, likes, dislikes, all of that because of the life you’ve both lived. It’s obvious she loves you and you love her, enough to punch the captain of the boxing team and call him a son of a bitch. If things were different, I bet you would’ve done much worse.”

Minato visibly perked up at the assumption, eyes softening and defensive stance dropping.

“. . . That does sound like something I’d do.”

For a moment, it seemed like he would budge and finally start giving Akihiko the time of day.

However, that hope was squashed when the blue-haired boy stepped forward, away from the safety of his room and into the neutral territory of the hallway. The softness from seconds ago morphed into curiosity.

“But why does that sound like something that comes from experience?”

A pair of tiny hands reached out and clung to Akihiko’s shirt. The person who grabbed him, a girl with platinum locks and doe-like hazel eyes, glanced up with a face stained in tears and sandbox dirt.

“Big Bro! They’re being mean!”

Akihiko froze up as he heard familiar memories ring through his mind.

Now was not the time for those to go rearing their ugly heads. He willed those images to be locked back in their proper place, as far from his current stream of thought as possible.

They had to get out of the way.

Minato seemed to catch onto the hesitation, making direct eye contact without squirming an inch.

“What are you hiding?”

“What kind of idiot takes on a pack of middle schoolers by himself, Aki? Do ya’ even know what the headmaster’s gonna do to you when we get back to the orphanage?”

Akihiko glared down at the tiled floor below him, avoiding looking Shinjiro head on. His knuckles were raw and bleeding from a fight that had taken place minutes ago.
He couldn’t have cared less if they hurt.

“They made Miki cry.”

No, those memories could be used to his advantage. It seemed like the past refused to stop coming back but perhaps that could help in connecting with the kid?

Akihiko sighed, knowing this was bound to come back and bite him later on.

“Let’s just say... you’re not the only one in this dorm who has a sister.”

July 10th, 2009

Mitsuru and I had a nice meal tonight. Turns out, she has no idea about eating in restaurants that don't have French words in their names. Minato and I are studying tomorrow night in his room while we wait for Pharos to show up, so he's gonna get a kick out of the joke I pulled on her!

In serious news, today was a slap in the face. I learned something about, not only myself but also about someone who I really want to make amends with. I think I'm gonna act on this knowledge soon because getting up a half-an-hour than I usually do is driving me crazy. I'm falling asleep in class and it's really making a dent in my grades.

God, please let this all work out. I miss my running partner.

Until tomorrow,

Minako Arisato

Chapter End Notes

What character said "wow, just... wow" in their in-game dialogue? (Hint: if you've played Fire Emblem Echos: Shadows of Valentia, you know this sweetie pie who has a taste for vengeance and bad puns)

If Akihiko and Junpei were playing the boxing game on Wii Sports, who would win? I'm genuinely curious.
A Spoonful of Sugar

Chapter Notes

So finals week has passed and I have been #Stressed.

I used some lyrics from JubyPhonic's cover of "Additional Memory" at the end of the chapter. Go check out her cover if you love the Kagerou Project. If you have no idea what the Kagerou Project is, don't even talk to me until you've blessed your wonderful ears with the power of love and friendship and depression.

Also, I decided to post some information about the characters at the end of the next few chapters, starting with everyone's favorite emo boi. These are ripped straight from the character sheets I use to keep track of everyone's individual arcs.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week ago, if someone told Minato that he would allow Akihiko Sanada to enter his room without having to be held at gunpoint, that somebody would get an eye roll and a middle finger. Come on, this was the same Akihiko Sanada that pissed the youngest Arisato off with each interaction, the guy who looked better smoldering in a dumpster fire could.

Yet, here he was, sitting awkwardly on a backward-facing desk chair while Minato glared holes through the poor bastard’s head.

Why he suddenly had a change of heart despite his disdain, that answer remained unclear. Perhaps this meeting served to fuel Minato’s ego, maybe even glean some insight into the mind of this young man, or something else entirely. The impulsive action could be described as such: impulsive, without rhyme or reason attached.

What an unlikely turn of events.

“This has to be the dumbest thing I’ve ever done in my life,” Minato plopped himself down on his bed and took off his cheaters. This situation was silly enough as is. Wearing glasses that brought down his age by six years wasn’t bettering his chances of being taken seriously. “Let’s start from the top since our conversation got derailed. What do you want from me and why?”

Akihiko returned the glare in spades, albeit more calm and collected. It was strange, considering how aloof he was on a regular basis.

“Aina-um, your sister’s been avoiding me ever since the mission. As much as I wanna let it sit and give her some breathing room, I can’t help but think that’ll only make things worse. With finals coming up fast and missions and clubs, this can’t wait another second. So, I’m trying to get some insight on how to approach the subject. If I can understand a little bit about how she thinks, maybe I can get her to trust me.”

Now that was an unexpected answer, he actually thought this through from a different perspective.

Still, Minato stayed on guard, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Just so I’m in the loop, you do you guys do together? She likes consistency so anything you’ve done in the past
would help.”

Akihiko answered in a flash. “We usually chat whenever there’s time: before and after school, cleaning duty, study period.”

“Okay, but I meant stuff like running every morning, something you guys dedicate a portion of your day to. Us smart people call it being ritualistic.” Minato said. “Is there anything like that that comes to mind?”

“Yeah, we also go out to eat sometimes. It’s always Hagekure but this one time—”

Minato tuned out the rest of Akihiko’s winded ranting to think.

Go out to eat? At a restaurant? Just the two of them? Were these hang-outs between friends or, God forbid, actual dates?

Even Minato tread carefully when it came to outings with female counterparts. While enjoying a platonic day on the town was perfectly acceptable, teenagers were a finicky bunch. Every small interaction could be misconstrued as something entirely different, and soon enough, half the school was at your throat for gossip purposes. The other half already decided on what was going on, truthful or otherwise.

To not take those factors into consideration, this guy had to be the most clueless high schooler alive about the ways of teenage hysteria.

On the other hand, if they went out to eat regularly, that counted as a familiar ritual between them, even if others may see it as romantic.

“For some reason, those girls kept following us. Minako-san said something about them wanting to go out with me but she was really blunt about the whole thing. She even used salt and pepper shakers to act it out. Does she do that all the time or am I that clueless—”

“Yes, you’re as clueless as they come.” Minato cut off Akihiko with a snap. “Also, I love the whole monologuing thing as much as the next guy, but just shut up. I already have to put up with it on the daily because of a certain demon that shall haunt me ‘till the day I die. I hear one more personal story or rant and you can bet your dumb ass you’ll never talk to Minako ever again. We clear, monkey?”

“Monkey?”

“Did I stutter?”

Minato knew what he was doing was patronizing, but what did he care at this point? The pursuit of truth was a bumpy road and, sometimes, a guy has to hit a pothole to keep going. This was just another damaged tire before Minato could reach his final destination.

God, he had to stop editing Minako’s stories. Her flowery language was worming its way into his private thoughts.

Akihiko remained tensed up at his underclassman’s sass but didn’t miss a beat or cave to the insult hurled at him.

“I appreciate you calling me names and all, but I wanna know something she’d enjoy, not stuff I invite her to do. We’ve gone to the place for months and she’s never complained. I have a feeling if we go somewhere more tailored to her interests, then the conversation will go smoother. Is there
anything she really, and I mean, really likes to eat? More than anything in the world?”

In an expected yet unexpected way, Akihiko looked dead serious. Even after being called a literal animal, he refused to leave the conversation without answers.

Minato pulled back on his smugness. An enemy with resolve was far too dangerous to handle than one with an attitude.

“. . . More than anything in the world? Sweets.” he answered. “But, fair warning, that demon has a God-tier sweet tooth. She could tell you the millions of differences between dime store chocolate and world-class liquor without even trying. Take her someplace cheap and you’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Sweets, huh?” Akihiko nodded. “So, like a bakery or something along those lines could be an option. I know some nice places nearby that are pretty low key. Obviously, I’ll foot the bill as an incentive-”

Minato interrupted with a click of his tongue. “Keep in mind that you’re trying to tango with a lady who always pays back her debts. If you buy her something, even if it’s not an expensive return, she’ll slip money under your door in the middle of the night just because.”

“So what do I do to stop her from trying to repay me?”

As always, Minato had to shed some light on the subject.

“Use a catch twenty-two, or in other words, find something that you are indebted to her about and she’ll be forced to let you treat her to a meal.” He leaned back on his hands. “Just so this goes easier tomorrow, I’ll give you this bit of insider info. Minako bought a non-stick copper skillet with so the meat she fries for dinner is cooked evenly without all the effort. However, she didn’t tell Kirijo-senpai so she wasn’t reimbursed properly. You’ll have about that much yen to work with, do the math.”

Akihiko paused for a moment as if to mull over the advice. His mouth was hidden behind his hands, but Minato could hear the stream of chatter that came out.

“So that’s where that skillet came from? At least that explains why I found the old one in the recycling bin the other day. . . so I guess that means I have some wiggle room to spend. This is actually some good news.”

Not only was he a complete idiot, but now he talked to himself?

Wow, what a weirdo.

Suddenly and without ceremony, Akihiko got up from his chair. “Right, I think I have a good idea of what to do now.” He started walking towards the door. “Sorry to bother you this late, but I think I got what I needed. See ya’ tomorrow, Arisato.”

What. The. Hell.

Minato was dumbfounded by the sudden announcement. The bastard was leaving? After all the effort he put in to get a word out of Akihiko and now he suddenly didn’t need anything?

Not just that, but he was so close to getting something out of this conversation.

That confession of the two sharing similar roles blinded sided Minato, leaving the junior spinning
in circles to figure out what it meant when Akihiko said, “You’re not the only in this dorm who has a sister.”

Minato knew his fair share of brothers throughout the years and had yet to be impressed by a single one. Most, if not all, took such a deep connection for granted. They were never forced to rely on their siblings for comfort when their parents were the practical solution to any problem. They never understood the precious bond laying dormant beneath the squabbles and occasionally petulance.

In a way, Minato knew they were blameless, but even so.

It was rare to find another person who possessed the same vigor and protectiveness, even more, they actually meant it.

That gaunt and far gone expression when Akihiko spoke said more than he let on. Behind that confidence that drove Minato insane nearly every encounter they have had thus far, there laid a story of regret.

Even better, that story had to deal with his own family, a presumed tragedy akin to the Arisato’s own past trauma.

Maybe that was the reason Akihiko was allowed to talk his way past the door. The possibility of a shared experience made Minato itch to unearth it, allowing his curious nature to get the better of his judgment to accomplish that task.

Before he could get a hold of himself, Minato jumped up from his bed.

“Wait!”

Akihiko stopped moving just as his hand was on the doorknob but there was no telling how long he would wait for a justification for the sudden outburst.

“What? I thought you wanted to make this short. Now you wanna talk some more?”

Shit, he was already onto Minato.

Quick, he told himself, come up with something to get rid of the tension.

How should Minato phrase what he wished to know?

Be blunt, perhaps?

“. . . You said you were just like me, that you have a sibling of your own.” His throat felt like sandpaper when he spoke. “I get what you mean, but I mean. . . I don’t get. . .”

“I don’t get why you care.”

“Why share that information with me?”

“What happened?”

“What made you this way?”

None of those sentences came out. Everything Minato wanted to say was stuck behind a mysterious roadblock.
Of all times to become tongue-tied, it just had to be now. So what if he could never be a master of conversation like his sister, was this stuttering and stammering the best he could do? He probably looked like a complete idiot as tried to find a way around this minefield.

Still, Akihiko didn’t budge from where he stood across the room.

“With all due respect, it’s not something I like to talk about to just anybody. I’d like to play it close to the chest.”

As if that came as a shock. Even if Minato actually cared to be nice to this person, they were never going to be friends like Junpei or Yukari were to him. It made perfect sense they would guard personal stories from one another.

However, Minato’s surprise, even after being denied the full story, his senior’s face went from cold to something that resembled exhaustion.

“But since I know more about your situation than I probably should, I can say this to make things even.”

Akihiko turned away from the door to stare Minato down.

No, he met the other teen halfway.

For the first time since meeting all those months ago, they stood on equal footing.

“I understand how it feels to be you.”

Wait.

“But at least you have someone left in the world to watch over.”

No.

He didn’t mean. . .

Of course, how could Minato be so blind?

If Akihiko was a brother, then why did he cover up such information?

Why hide it from the others?

Why would he never mention it?

There could only be one possible explanation for such behavior.

“. . . I’m sorry for your loss, Sanada-senpai.”

“Thank you. . . and I’m sorry for yours, too.”

“Thanks.”

The two spent some more time laying out the details of what to expect on this excursion tomorrow afternoon. Minato drilled his senior on some of Minako’s more subtle weaknesses. Akihiko never once looked off into space, soaking up the information like a sponge of knowledge.

In between pieces of advice, they deviated from the task at hand to talk about more informal
subjects. Mostly, it was the standard questions about homework, sports practices, and plans for the upcoming weekend. Not only that, they discussed their hobbies and interests; favorite hangouts and shops within the city; even more personal item such as memories from school days gone by or teachers they disliked.

Turns out, Minato and Akihiko hated all sociology classes because the teachers always bring their personal politics into the lesson.

Both were interested in health science, despite the senior not wanting to go into the field.

They could do without Mitsuru’s constant nagging.

Or Yukari’s attitude.

And Junpei’s flirting escapades.

Fuuka was okay. How could any sane person hate a girl so docile and kind?

Long after they went their own ways for the night, Minato sat up in bed and thought to himself, “Maybe we have more in common than I give him credit for.”

**Me:** Hey, can we talk about what happened? Face-to-face?

**Me:** I know you probably hate me and talking is the last thing you want to do, however, I can’t stand this “awkwardness” between us.

**Me:** But you probably think I’m just doing this out of obligation. Let me rephrase that.

**Me:** This last mission was bad and, unfortunately, no one’s brought anything up. Everything feels so disjointed and I could count on one finger the number of times that all of us attempted addressing the problem. On top of finals, starting up Tartarus missions again, clubs, sports, things are only going to get more stressful.

**Me:** Let’s fix this so we can both put this behind us.

**Me:** I also miss running with you. It’s been a while since someone at the dorm actually wanted to train with me.

**Me:** Sorry, that sounded stupid. I’m not trying to be weird so just ignore that last part.

**Minako Arisato:** Where?

**Me:** Where?

**Minako Arisato:** Where are we going, silly goose?

**Me:** Oh, sorry! Um, just meet me by the shoe lockers after school. I don’t want to spoil the surprise.

**Minako Arisato:** kk, I like surprises :)

**Me:** Alright, see you then.
After an awkward commute on the train and walking side-by-side without speaking to Iwatodai strip mall, the two seniors arrived at their destination; if Minako’s eyes could get any brighter, she may see a hole straight through her skull at the mere sight of where they ended up.

At least that’s what Akihiko thought when they entered the Sweets Shoppe.

That, and the place was awfully girly for his tastes (or lack thereof). It made him wonder if guys were even allowed past the door.

“No. Freaking. Way!” Once they were through the door, Minako practically skipped over to the nearest display case with an assortment of individual selections, hovering just above the glass as to not leave fingerprints on the pristine surface. That didn’t stop her though from glancing over each and every option with rapt interest.

“Creme de mint, Nougat Montelimar, Bêtises de Cambrai, Michoko, Krema Batna, I’m in heaven!” An ear-splitting grin adorned her face. “Now, my darlings, which one of you shall I take far away from this lonely case?”

Despite having picked up French this year, Minako was able to run down the line of foreign candies with near perfect inflection and pronunciation. That wasn’t even mentioning the fact she referred to said candies as her darlings in the same fashion a mother would to her children. Minato had been right. His sister had a “God-tier” sweet tooth and was not in the market to play around.

If Akihiko wasn’t so dead-set on the intended purpose for their visit, he might have turned tail and run at such odd behavior.

Then again, he was one to talk about being odd.

“There’re too many choices. It all looks so good.” Minako concluded after a few more seconds, moving on to the next display filled with pies and other assorted pastries. “If I were as rich as Mitsuru-san, I’d buy out the entire store. Too bad for me, I guess.”

Akihiko followed her at a distance, scanning the brightly colored sweets lined up in neat rows or patterns. Watching her gaze roam the selections and in light of her buy-out-the-store comment, he was almost afraid for his wallet, wondering just how much Minako had spent in the past on candy and the like.

Still, he had to be the gentleman and pay for their outing in full. It was the right thing to do.

“Well, I might not be as wealthy but feel free to get whatever you want. I’m prepared to shell out some extra yen today,” he said. “Just make sure you don’t eat too much. Mitsuru won’t let me hear the end of it if I let our field leader got sick before our next mission.”

Minako tore herself away from the display case to give him a shocked look. Frantic hands came up to wave the offer away.

“You don’t have to do that! I’m more than happy to pay for myself since you never let me at Hakegure-”

“I don’t mind at all.” Akihiko was ready for her defense with one of his own. “Besides, you deserve it. Minato- ahem, your brother was nice enough to inform me about your anonymous donations to the dorm kitchen. Non-stick copper skillets don’t just appear out of thin air, ya’ know. I wonder whose money you used to pay for it?”

Minako snapped her mouth shut.
She walked right into his trap.

For the first time since the full moon mission, he dared to smirk at her surprised reaction. “What’s that face for?”

Minako let out an annoyed sigh and a pout, whispering under her breath, “That nerd can’t keep a secret to save his darn life.” She turned back to Akihiko with a sheepish expression. “If you really wanna pay for me... I guess there’s nothing I can do to stop you, but I’m getting the next one and you can’t stop me!”

Akihiko Sanada: one.

Minako Arisato: zero.

“Whatever you say.”

Beyond that pride of getting her to talk to him directly, it felt good to get her to give up some financial accountability and trusting him to honor his word. It actually brought them one level closer to acting like normal friends again.

Baby steps, that’s all it took.

It took her a minute or two more to for Minako to decide on a piece of strawberry cheesecake (Akihiko stuck with a plain black coffee) before they sat down at a table for two near the window.

It was the best seat in the whole store. The natural sunlight streaming in warmed Akihiko’s skin and turned Minako’s hair a reddish tint, a good color to match her cheerful disposition. A few birds hopped around outside while children fresh out of pre-school ran to feed them. Adults tried to wrangle them back up before their sons and daughters tripped on a crack in the sidewalk or got swallowed by the crowds of people.

It was starting to feel like summer already.

“Enjoying the view?” Minako asked, a generous helping of her cheesecake skewered and ready to be eaten. “It’s supposed to get warmer in the next couple of days. Not even supposed to rain.”

Akihiko hummed. “It’ll be summer break before we know it.” He glanced down at her cake, already almost gone. “Well, that was fast. Is it really that good?”

“Well, why don’tcha try some? There’s plenty for two.” Minako slid the cheesecake across the table, an extra fork resting on the side of its plate. “Trust me, I’ve had a ton of cheesecake over the years and this might be the best one yet. You won’t regret it.”

That fact that she was offering to share her food boosted Akihiko’s confidence.

He said a quick “thanks” and took up the extra fork. In one scoop, he had a small morsel of cake to test.

He took a bite.

He chewed.

Paused.

Fuck.
It was too sweet.

Not just sweet, that tiny fork-full of cheesecake could have been a lump of pure sugar and Akihiko would never know how to tell the difference. To make matters worse, his stomach churned and threatened to rid itself of the overwhelming taste. It made it hard to swallow when every nerve in his body wanted to throw it back up.

How was Minako able to eat a whole slice without feeling nauseated?

“Everything okay over there? You look a lil’ green.”

Great, now Minako knew he was sick.

“Sorry,” Akihiko pushed the cake back to its rightful owner, grabbing his coffee to cleanse his now tainted palate. “I didn’t expect that to be so... sweet. It took me by surprise.”

Minako chuckled at his response, accepting the slice. “Aw, now I feel bad! We didn’t have to eat here if you don’t like sweet things, but now you’ve gotta watch me eat instead of enjoying something too.”

Akihiko shook his head. “No- I mean, I don’t hate them but I don’t really have stuff like this that often. Sometimes, Yukari shoves sugary snacks on me, but that” After taking another long gulp of his coffee, letting the bitterness soothe the disorder in his stomach, he set his drink aside. “Besides, you said it yourself a few weeks ago, we always go to Hagekure or someplace I like. It was high time we got something you love. It’s not the end of the world if I can’t handle a stupid slice of cheesecake.”

“You actually remembered-” she began to say only to giggle sheepishly. “-nevermind, thank you for being so considerate. That means a lot.” Her fork was set aside on the plate of cake and she gave him a sedated frown. “Especially since I’ve been... dodging you and all that fun stuff. I don’t deserve it.”

Finally, the elephant in the room was addressed. Minako admitted to playing the avoidance game. They could finally get down to business after all this time.

Akihiko mentally prepared himself and thought through his game plan. He just had to play it cool, say what he wanted to get off his chest, and everything should work out from there.

“I mean, after everything that happened, I can’t blame you-”

“Akihiko-senpai!”

“Eek! He’s here!?”

Despite years of dealing with girls shrieking whenever he so much as walked into a room, Akihiko flinched at the high-pitched squeals that caused him and Minako to stiffen up mid-sentence. He could see her attempting not to laugh out of sheer frustration.

The fangirls had found him.

Fuck. Everything.

Even before he looked up to see whoever decided to interrupt the conversation he and Minako were having, Akihiko could smell a strong perfume worse than garbage. Wasn’t that stuff supposed to make girls smell the opposite or was he just that simple?
When he finally found the will to look up, he was met with the same girls who tried to get him to eat at Hagekure with them weeks ago. Their faces were still caked in make-up with hair tied back in messy arrangements. Various pieces of jewelry glistened under the sunlight, reminding Akihiko of those miniature disco balls people like to put in their cars.

“Oh my gosh, I’m like, so jazzed we ran into you here!” The taller of the two girls still had the vexatious falsetto when she spoke. “Like, I didn’t know you like sweets!”

The other girl joined in. “Yeah! Can you, like, hang out with us? That’d totally be epic!”

Before Akihiko could say anything, Minako cleared her throat and received two sets of glares. Even when confronted with such rudeness and the heavy silence, she rolled her shoulders back and addressed the other girls directly.

“I’m sorry, young ladies. We were having a private chat just a minute ago and it’s rather important. Can you wait until we’re done to harass the poor guy?” She threw him a sympathetic smile. “Well, that is if he’s feeling up to it. We also planned to study for finals afterward and academics take precedence over everything. You can understand, right?”

Minako meant to be kind but those underclassmen went from ditzy to scornful on a dime. Shit was about to go down.

“Say, why are you here with Junpei’s girlfriend?” the taller girl asked. “Like, does he know you’re out with this hussie or did she forget to tell him?”

Akihiko had to bite his tongue before accidentally letting curse words fly. “She’s not dating Iori. They’re best friends, practically siblings. If you could leave us alone now, that’d be great.”

The shorter of the two girls rolled her eyes and went straight back to Minako with a snarl. “Like, stop stealing all the single guys when you’ve already got one for yourself! Didn’t your mommy teach you that being a whore is bad?”

Her friend snickered. “Aw, but we shouldn’t judge the lower class and their ways. Is that how your mommy can afford to pay for her precious daughter’s tuition?”

“I heard her and her brother’s parents died. Guess that explains her slutty behavior, no one to teach her some manners.” The taller girl chuckled. “Hey, do you go on dates for money? How else can you and that dumb brother of yours go to a school like ours?”

Minako sat motionless as they continued to abuse her and family’s honor relentlessly, but Akihiko could see the fire burning behind her eyes.

Silent and resigned, but the rage was there, waiting to prove just how wrong those girls were about everything they said.

Yet, she had no intentions of letting that hatred show.

Why would she? If word got around that she was not the upright and the humble person she was, it would no doubt affect the way people look at her. Despite their claims of being impartial, teachers listened to gossip among the students at school. What would they do if a star student suddenly went berserk on well-established individuals within the social hierarchy?

Minako’s hands were tied. She had to endure.
It was also what pushed Akihiko over the line to finally speak up.

Before they could say anything else, he stood up to full height, catching everyone’s attention. Despite feeling just as disconcerted as Minako, he remained cordial.

“Minako-san and her little brother got in on full-ride academic scholarships. Both scored in the top ten of their classes with Minato Arisato taking the top three in his entire grade, including the first place spot in his class. They speak fluent English, study for hours on end, work hard every day to maintain their ranks, AND somehow find time to be in extracurricular activities like Student Council and Kendo. I would think you’d need more hours in a day to be promiscuous, hm?”

The girls stopped laughing, mouths ajar and mortified.

Akihiko did his best not to start laughing himself as he continued. “Well, I’d say this discussion is over. Thank you for stopping by.” He motioned to the front door. “It’s a lovely day for a jog. I suggest getting some cardio in unless you’re too busy with other things.”

Woah, he was actually suave and the words sounded nice when they rolled off his tongue.

*Trei bein* to himself for not stuttering when it mattered.

It took the girls a moment to understand what he implied by “busy” but when they did, they turned tail and scuttled out the door, never to be seen again. From outside the window, he could see them bow their heads in shame as they walked towards the train station in a hurry.

Good riddance.

“Jeez, can’t catch a break no matter where I am.” Akihiko sat back down. “Sorry you had to go through that—”

When turned back around, Minako was hiding her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook and the tips of her ears were a bright red.

Shit, was she crying? What was he supposed to do now? Call her brother? Make a joke? God, why did women have to be so unpredictable!?

“A-are you okay?” he finally asked. “Can I help you—”

Minako uncovered her face and while tears were streaming down her cheeks, she was shaking from trying to hold back laughter.

“Oh my goodness, those girls booked it like you were gonna stab ‘em!” She wiped her eyes dry and tried to back down from her fit of giggles. “And you, you were perfect! Did Minato also teach you the art of a snarky comeback? That was a textbook move of his, no doubt about it! Bravo! Encore! All the rest!”

Laughing, after receiving so much torment and scorn, she still laughed like the whole thing was a satirical play.

“Wait, you’re okay? Are you sure?”

Minako nodded, finally able to talk without losing stability. The only thing off was her voice, raspy and still recovering from overuse. “I told you a while ago, remember? I’ve been called every name under the sun. What they said was barely originally, I made a game halfway through guessing what they’d say next.”
Akihiko settled back and took a deep breath. “That doesn’t make it right, though. And when they brought your family up. . .”

Minako’s cheerfulness faltered at the mention of what they said.

“That’s the one thing that got my blood boiling. They can make fun of me all they want, but as soon as they started talking about my mom and my brother, I don’t know what I would’ve done if they kept going,” she admitted with a sigh. “If you hadn’t stepped in, I might’ve done something I’d regret. Wouldn’t want you to see me when someone really ruffles my feathers.”

Minako’s whole no swearing policy was starting to sound like her keeping all that anger bottled up inside. Who even says “ruffles my feathers” when, in reality, they were pissed off?

“I wish I had that kind of self-control. All this about me showing off and taking someone’s girlfriend, it just gets under my skin. There are people in our class saying things about me, too. Wherever I go, it just causes trouble for people.” He said. “I’m sorry if that soured the good mood we had going on. This isn’t how I wanted the day to go.”

“It’s not your fault, Akihiko. Things just end up that way sometimes.” Minako replied swiftly. “As I said, if you hadn’t been there to defend me, those girls would’ve kept on going until I blew up. I’ve treated you disrespectfully and you still jumped in. That means a lot to me, more than you know.”

“Wait for a second,” Akihiko said, holding up a hand. “Did you just use my first name or am I imagining things now?”

Minako paused before it seemed to dawn on her.

“Um. . . I think I did.”

His first name.

No honorifics, just his name.

And he wasn’t just hearing it wrong.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking about it and that slipped out. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Akihiko nodded. “Yeah, it’s fine. You just surprised me.”

Minako looked down at her lap, obviously ashamed for her small mistake. “What am I going to do with myself? There’s too much I wanna apologize for and I can’t stop messing up.”

Akihiko nodded along. “Guess that makes two of us. . . I can’t say I’m sorry enough.”

“Then I’ll even the score. . .” Minako took a gulp of air before looking him in the eye. “I’m sorry for what happened to make things so awkward between us. I should’ve been more attentive to your feelings and come to you sooner. Maybe you wouldn’t feel as bad as you do now.”

Finally, all this dancing around each other came to a close. They made peace with their individual demons and came together as a pair.

They met in the middle.

They learned that their error was complimentary.
Akihiko felt relieved for the first time in days.

“Let’s just agree we both feel guilty and neither of us should keep blaming ourselves.” He slouched in his seat. “The sooner we can get past this, the sooner our dorm gets its five-star chef back. I’m pretty sure none of the team has had a decent meal since the night of the mission.”

Minako perked up at her stupor. “Unacceptable! How could I be so heartless?” She snatched up her school bag and yanked out a legal pad and a pen to write with. “I didn’t have anything planned for tonight. Since I wanna make it up to you, what’s your favorite food? Of course, prep time is the only limitation but-”

And on she went.

At the end of the day, Minako still found out how to repay him for the cake.

Never underestimate an Arisato.

Nonetheless, Akihiko knew right away what he wanted.

“It’s nice to have sweet things once in a while and since cake is too much for my stomach, how about pancakes?”

“Pancakes?” Minako flashed him a shy yet disarming smile in between pen strokes. “Who would’ve thought that Akihiko freaking Sanada was a sucker for a literal circle of sugary dough?”

“And why would they care?” he asked. “Just because I tend to gravitate towards a protein-based diet, doesn’t mean I can’t like other things.”

“. . . I guess that means we’re still friends, right?” Minako finished writing down the list of things they would need to buy on their way back to the dorm. “I don’t think classmates ask each other to make pancakes for dinner.”

Akihiko couldn’t help chuckling at the question, returning the softened expression.

“When did we stop?”

“After I slapped you?”

“I get punched all the time. One little slap isn’t gonna keep me down.”

“. . . Speaking of which, ya’ ready to talk now? I think it’s high time we sorted this whole mess out.”

“Feels like I’ve been waiting forever for you to ask.”

And for the first time in days, Akihiko Sanada and Minako Arisato talked until the sun began its descent from above the clouds.

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Ice: This is a group message for all members of SEES. The Chairman will be stopping by this evening to debrief the last mission. Be back at the dorm by eight.

Ice: Also, I have just been informed that Arisato (Minako) will be serving dinner. Bring an appetite.
Days after the incident at the love hotel, SEES was finally called together by Mitsuru and the Chairman for a debriefing of the mission, a meeting dreaded by all considering what happened that night. Everyone reluctantly gathered inside the command room for what would inevitably be an awkward couple of hours filled with red faces, averted eyes, and denial that certain events took place.

A few days ago, Minako assumed this would be the case.

In reality, as she scanned the room while Mitsuru spoke, not a soul seemed to be affected by her detailed account of the events that took place. No one ducked their heads in shame or shied from filling in additional information, especially when half the group was tricked into fighting the boss on their own. They worked together to make sure not a single detail was missed or overlooked.

The best part of the meeting had to be when Minato admitted to punching Akihiko with a smirk on his face. A chorus of giggles spread throughout the room, much to Minako’s chagrin.

But how could she be upset when she caught both of those boys sharing a good-natured banter over who would win in a fair fight?

The report came to a close when Mitsuru sighed and turned to the Chairman. “So, that’s what happened on the night of the seventh. It was a difficult operation but—” she looked around the meeting room, “—we pulled through and I couldn’t be happier with the results.”

Ikutsuki smiled. “I see, they’re getting tougher as time goes on but so are the rest of you. If that weren’t the case, you would be in far worse conditions. All that staircase climbing in Tartarus must be doing wonders for your stamina. I would’ve passed out after the first flight yet all of you could stand to go another round.”

Minako nodded at him, pride swelling within her. “We aim to work hard with the little time we have.”

“I expect nothing less from all of you.” Ikutsuki readjusted his glasses that had begun to slip down his nose. He had been sitting still for so long, Minako was beginning to question if he would ever notice. “Enough about all of that, though. The road ahead looks challenging but it’s not all bad news. I called today’s meeting because—”

“I’m sorry!” Yukari suddenly jumped up from her seat.

All eyes turned to see the archer standing alone, fists clenched at her sides and stone-cold expression bearing into her senior.

Minako was half-tempted to ask what was wrong yet the words never came to light. She was more afraid of causing a scene than of anything that might be said next.

“Before we go on, I’d like to ask Mitsuru-senpai something. It’s important for everyone else to hear as well, I promise it’s worth bringing up now.”

Mitsuru, taken aback, watch Yukari with a curious gleam in her eye.

“Me?” she asked. “I don’t follow, but please continue.”

Yukari silently thanked Mitsuru before going on to explain her outburst.

“Since I joined, so many things have happened. I went along with it, without really understanding what was going on... However, after everything that’s happened these past few months, I need to
know. I'm gonna ask you straight out.” She took a deep breath. “... You've been hiding something from us, haven't you, Senpai? You act like you don't know anything about the Dark Hour and Tartarus but they're related to that accident ten years ago, aren't they?"

Ten years ago? An accident?

The only traumatic event Minako could recall was the accident involving her family, and as she spared a glance at Minato who sat next to her, she could tell he thought the same thing. Perhaps they were too young to notice another tragedy taking place at the same.

“Did she say anything about this to you?” Minato asked under his breath. “Where is this coming from?”

Minako shrugged. “I don’t have a clue.”

And what was this about the Dark Hour being included in all this?

Something was going over her head.

Yukari seemed to notice the confusion amongst the other members of the team. In a flash, she turned to fill them in. “There was an explosion near our school, and a lot of people died. It must've been big news back then but not a lot of teenagers know about it. Most of us were just little kids back then.” She swiveled to Mitsuru, intense and haughty. “You know about it, don't you?”

Mitsuru returned the coldness in the other girl’s glower. “Yes...”

Minako felt her stomach drop at the hostility brewing. They couldn’t afford in-fighting, not when the team was still in the middle of a meeting.

Yukari looked away once more to address the others. “Luckily, no students were injured but around the same time, a large number of students and staff were recorded as absent. Seems like more than just a coincidence.”

“What do you mean?” Mitsuru tensed. “Please state the point of your question.”

Yukari’s face went blank.

“I dug up some old school records and found something interesting. The students who were absent had a common thread between them. They all collapsed suddenly on campus and had to be hospitalized. Symptoms? Distant behavior, talking to no one, pale, possibly” she said. “Sound familiar? You know, like the girls who bullied Fuuka.”

Minako looked to Mitsuru for an answer, as did the other present in the room.

There was none as Yukari grew increasingly distressed.

“There has to be an explanation! What really happened on the day of that accident? The Kirijo Group built our school, so you must know something! Tell me the truth!”

Mitsuru wasted no time in standing to defend herself against the yelling.

“I wasn't trying to hide anything to you. It just never seemed relevant.” Despite now being on her feet, she seemed to shrink under the attention she was receiving from the others. “Please, I didn’t wish to cause a scene during a tactical meeting.”

Ikutsuki, in a rare show of authority as the lone adult in the room, turned to the flustered leader.
“It's okay. It's not your fault and you needn’t explain anything.”

“Okay, I’m confused!” Junpei exclaimed. “What the heck is Yukari talking about? What does that have to do with us?”

“I think it means there’s something we were never told,” Minato answered, hunching forward to stare down Ikutsuki. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about what that accident from ten years ago has to deal with now. I always know you guys were hiding something, but maybe we deserve to know right about now.”

Fuuka was beginning to cower where she sat. “Oh no, I was afraid of this.”

Minako found herself confused by the speed this was going. One minute, they were having a relaxed and sensible talk, the next minute all the tension from days before returned in spades.

This was just like the meeting before SEES went to rescue Fuuka.

Before Minako could even open her mouth, Mitsuru silenced the group with a loud clearing of her throat.

“I suppose I can longer keep this close to the chest.” Quietly, she walked over to the computer council and booted up the system. As they all waited for it to load, Mitsuru spoke in the tone she often used in Student Council.

“If it hasn’t been made quite clear, the Shadows have many mysterious abilities and traits that set them adrift from any current entities. Some research indicates that they can even affect time and space. We as SEES think of them as our enemies, but what if we could somehow use them to our advantage? They would be a source of unimaginable power, wouldn't they?”

She pulled up the picture of an elderly man, his greying hair tinged with a natural black, an unsettling frown, and a pinstripe suit to compliment an imposing figure.

One thing stood out to Minako above all else: a sharpened gaze not unlike Mitsuru’s own.

“Fourteen years ago, one man pursued that line of thinking. He was the former leader of the Kirijo Group, Kouetsu Kirijo. . . My grandfather.”

The picture of Kouetsu was minimized, replaced with images of a research center lined to the brim with technology. Shadows the group had faced in Tartarus were crammed inside giant tubes filled with a mysterious liquid. One of them resembled a guardian that SEES had faced before going on monorail operation, a large eagle with a haunting mask.

“My grandfather was obsessed with Shadows. He wanted to harness their power and create something extraordinary. He assembled a team of scientists, and over several years collected a significant number of Shadows.”

More images appeared of ensnared Shadows and then, a new picture appeared on the screen.

“However, ten years ago, during the final stages of the experiment, they lost control of the Shadows' power. Consequently, the nature of the world inside the city was altered, creating the phenomenon known as the Dark Hour. Soon after, Tartarus was sprouted from the remains of the research facility.”

The picture showed a now destroyed building in absolute disarray. Blurry security camera shots showed the captive Shadows disappearing into the night, leaving nothing but carnage behind.
“By their account, the mass of Shadows they collected split into several large ones that then dispersed into the city. Many had calmed to the point of dormancy within their respective locations. These are the Shadows we’ve been encountering on nights when the moon is full. One though…”

Minako couldn’t hold back a gasp as the next picture appeared.

One of the images was on the bridge she and her brother lost their parents on.

Crashed vehicles could be seen through a thick plume and fire spread across the road.

The time stamp lined up on the same night.

All of these years, Minako had been told it was just a random traffic accident caused by an unknown source. Their family was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Not a soul could’ve prevented such events from taking place. The police simply chalked it up as another case of reckless driving.

Knowing the truth behind what caused that traumatic disaster, that it was the fault of a careless organization in pursuit of a pipe dream, made for a bitter conclusion.

She felt Minato rest a hand on her shoulder.

Mitsuru looked to them, fully understanding what this meant.

“One caused a considerable amount of damage to the bridge connecting Iwatodai and Port Island. There were multiple casualties and. . . and only two survivors, a pair of children.”

Minako knew that her audible reaction drew attention on the siblings, but after hearing Mitsuru’s words, even those who knew they lost their parents became somber in an instant.

“So Minako-senpai and Minato-kun?” Fuuka covered her mouth in horror. “That’s awful. . .”

Junpei removed his cap out of respect. “Jesus. . .”

The lull in mood served to fuel Yukari’s already burning rage. “Wait a minute, if what you said is true, then why did our school turn into Tartarus?” She advanced on Mitsuru until they both were toe to toe. “Don’t tell me that’s where they conducted the experiment!?”

“Yes,” Mitsuru answered curtly. “As you guessed, the experiment ten years ago was conducted at Gekkoukan High School.”

“Then. . .” Yukari staggered back. “Those students who were hospitalized. . .”

Mitsuru nodded. “I’m afraid it’s just as you’re thinking. Port Island must have been an ideal location for them. It was a highly-populated area, and the Kirijo Group had influence there. They could do as they pleased. . .”

“Does that mean all we’ve been doing is cleaning up their mess!?” Yukari turned to Akihiko next, still yelling. “You knew too, didn't you, Senpai!? They’ve just been using us! Or, do you not care as long as you get to fight?”

Akihiko didn’t give in to her anger, staying where he was. “That's not true. I have my reasons, reasons you could never understand.”

Mitsuru stepped away from the computer monitor. “Think about what you'd like. It was my
decision not to share that information, I'm sorry. I never intended to deceive you. Convincing you to join SEES was my highest priority. As absurd as it may seem, only we—with our Personas—can fight the Shadows.”

Yukari stamped her foot. “How could you!?”

“How is ever that simple, Takeba!” Mitsuru retorted. “Besides, some of us were never given a choice—”

“Everyone, stop!”

Minako didn’t register that she had yelled until a dead silence followed.

Her hands shook as the attention fell back on her.

However, the frustration that roiled within spurred her to keep talking.

“I think we can all agree that keeping that kind of information a secret was a terrible move. That was important information that could’ve helped paint a better picture of what we’re up against.” She turned to Yukari. “But Mitsuru-san isn’t the one who should take the fall for the actions of the old Kirijo Corporation, let alone pay for those actions years later. We’re all in the same boat; none of us deserve the burden but here we are. We’re the only ones who can fix this.”

Yukari flinched at Minako’s words.

“But-. . .”

The Chairman held up a hand for Yukari to stop.

“It’s been ten years since that incident. No one knows why those Shadows suddenly returned but at least we have one glimmer of hope. What if I told you that those twelve Shadows are the cause of everything?

Akihiko perked up. “Then, if we defeat them all, Tartarus and the Dark Hour will disappear?”

“Exactly! That's what I was going to tell you earlier.” Ikutsuki smiled at the team. “See, it's good news, isn't it? There’s an end in sight and we’re almost halfway done!”

Fuuka shot up from her seat. “Is that true!?”

“There's evidence to support it.” Ikutsuki grew pressing. “Now, our true battle begins. Regardless of what's happened in the past, we must fight to protect the people. The Shadows are gaining strength. We can't afford to just wait for them. And there are many mysteries still surrounding Tartarus. Why did such a gigantic structure appear in the first place? The answer must lie within it.”

The post-operation meeting did not go the way Minato thought it would.

He never expected to be following Minako to her room, arm slung over her shoulders, both shivering as they tried to soak in the revelation.

Even when they were safely inside, all they could do was sit on her bed and stare off into space. Neither had the heart to turn on a light or the radio. The only thing that they had the energy to do was ruminate, Minako stroking Minato’s head with slim fingers.
It was a shame that her attempts at comfort didn’t lessen the pain.

Their parents were never killed in a car crash.

They were killed in a Shadow attack.

A Shadow unleashed by the Kirijo Corporation.

How could their lives get any more complicated?

“You two don’t seem very happy tonight.”

Minato felt Pharos shimmy himself to his side.

Had the Dark Hour already begun?

“How long has it been since we three first met?” Pharos asked while leaning closer to Minato. His short black hair tickled from how coarse and messy it was. “Time passes so quickly. So, how’s life as a Persona-user for you guys?”

“I don’t know anymore,” Minako responded. “You may have to ask again next time we see each other.”

Minato sighed but found the will to utter his own answer.

“Tired. . .”

Pharos cuddled closer to the distraught teens as if he already knew the reason behind their actions.

“I remembered something else about the coming of the end. It all goes back to an occurrence that took place many years ago.” Pharos wrapped an arm around Minato’s “Hey. . . didn’t your parents pass away about ten years ago? I remember you saying something about it a few months back, but I thought I should ask.”

Minato felt Minako move her hand from his head to Pharos.

“Hit the nail right on the head, kiddo.”

“. . . Would it be alright if I stayed a little longer than usual?” Pharos asked. “For some reason, I feel quite sad. Thinking about ten years ago makes my heart hurt.”

Minato snorted.

So, the siblings weren’t the only ones feeling despondent.

“Stay as long as you can. . .”

“Thank you, Minato.”

At least they could all be depressed together.

April 24th, 2010.

Falling down into this strange world is so surreal.
If I’m being honest, I can almost see it rolling the credits before I hit the ground beneath me.

My body is twisted around as if I’m a broken toy. My eyes are forced to watch images of a spinning lantern: a future changing without me.

Though we won the battle, in this greater war, have we met the end of this nightmare? Something tells me that’s not true as fate is closing the curtain on a daydream fading to nothing, doomed to repeat once more.

I knew something was horribly wrong, but all I could do was watch and blur through empty holes out of view.

As I fall, again, those years run on by. They sing in the sky, fighting an eternal sun setting for the night.

He once told me, "Let’s go home so we don’t lose our way choosing the wrong road."

However, when he reached for me, I was too scared to grab and hold his hand. Instead, I chose to hold it back; it was one of the worst mistakes of my life.

No, no! The light is fading faster! I can’t breathe! I can’t hear the music anymore! God, let me hug them one last time! Let me pray before my lantern spins away!

It’s all a lie, the calm in the night, that peace I died for, hidden beneath are harsh truths blazed in red or flames. Must I wait for my turn, writing to my friends, writing a love story they will forget? I cannot say or bare such things.

That darkness of death and rebirth consumes me. I see it pass me by as the present me decays inside.

It rots out the truth alive:

I’m helpless to stop the clock as it rewinds, forcing me to deny all I see and relive this tragic story. I cannot rewrite this story’s ending.

When he reached for me, I brushed him off and said: “See you again!” It was supposed to be a playful gesture as if I was joking around, as if I would see him on the rooftop with the others. He had a ceremony to attend, after all.

If it’s all the same, I really didn’t want to say it. He had suffered so much already. Saying goodbye forever would haunt him if, by some miracle, he got to live past high school graduation.

I remember those tears I couldn’t dry as I walked away. I knew my words had been a lie too. I was always a liar when it came to talking about myself.

If he ever reads this, remaining friends, just you and me, I really didn’t want it to be that way.

Who am I kidding? You’re never going to know how I feel. I’m such a naive coward who couldn’t do the one thing I was born to do, what my family died for, what my brother died for.

Although, if you’re never to hear my thoughts, it couldn’t hurt to say it before I go.

Sorry and hey... I love you a lot.
Minato Emmanuel Arisato [Second Born]
Age: 16
Birthday: March 5th, 1992 (Pisces)
Arcana: The Fool
First Appearance: On the train to Iwatodai (Chapter 1)
Favorites: Medical science, the water/ocean, peaceful places, video games, the color blue or yellow, education, music, dogs, kendo
Dislikes: Loud noises, complaining (only when others do it), vending machines, Akihiko Sanada, his father’s side of the family, Akihiko Sanada’s face

Information of Interest:
- His name is written to mean “harbor”. His middle name, Emmanuel, means “God is with us”. Despite having the chance to change it, he keeps the name in honor of his mother.

- Minato is incredibly intelligent and arrogant in his abilities. Most of his genius comes from natural talent but it wasn’t until he started working hard at school that he realized his infinite potential. Despite his cocky nature, Minato is usually shy or unwilling to speak when put in uncomfortable situations. Minato wishes to become a family doctor and sees himself opening his own clinic in the long run.

- Minato takes a lot of his stoic and sarcastic personality from his mother, but just like his mother, he is fiercely protective of his family.

- Minato is not too big into sports considering he likes to use his brain more than his own muscles. Kendo is the first sport he had ever joined. He’s actually pretty good at Kendo because of his work in Tartarus as a member of SEES.

- Minato’s first job is at Bookworm’s Used Books (Chapter 27). He comments that the place is “a perfect working environment for an introvert like himself.”
Another day of school came and went for Junpei Iori. Teachers geared their students up for semester finals, the usual groups of friends chatted excitedly about summer break, and his baseball team elected to have a team study session in the library since their practice was canceled for test week.

Despite everything going on, of all the better things he could be doing with his time, Junpei found himself distracted about the meeting with the Chairman the night before.

The accident ten years ago took place right at Gekkoukan.

Tartarus was the result of this accident.

Defeating the twelve Shadows would end the Dark Hour.

They all were fighting to clean up the mess left behind.

Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Ikutsuki had lied about not knowing this information.

These revelations plagued his waking mind until he felt dizzy. Nothing seemed to get him to stop worrying about what this meant for the future of SEES, for his future as a fighter. Not even blowing off the baseball team’s invitation to prepare for finals and walking back to the dorm could get Junpei’s thoughts to settle down.

In fact, being alone with no extra voices to serve as a diversion made him think about it more.

“So, Tartarus and the Dark Hour will be gone, huh?” Junpei asked aloud, strolling down the sidewalk at an accelerated pace. “That's good, that's what we've been fighting for.”

The city would be a much safer place. People would no longer become one of the Lost or reaped by Shadows. Tartarus would vanish, rendering missions to the tower null and void. The team could focus their efforts towards school or college or whatever came after high school.

They could be regular teenagers who needn’t put their lives on the line.

Life goes on.
If that was true, then what was this regret Junpei had? Why was he so pissed off?

How could a promise of peace be so frustrating?

A pair of girls sporting the Gekkoukan uniform passed by Junpei as he continued to fume. Their voices carried through the stifling July heat, blissfully unaware of the young man who struggled to remain quiet.

"Gosh, it's hot. Even for July. Why does the school force us to wear clothing that barely breathes? Are they trying to kill us?"

"Seriously, but at least we're seniors now. We won't be wearing these stupid uniforms much longer."

"Yeah, I've had enough of this. I just wanna get accepted to college and start having some fun."

"That's if you get accepted, don't forget."

As the girl's voices faded, Junpei couldn't help but chuckle, finally realizing what caused him so much grief. It was curious to know that a meaningless conversation about the school uniform had been the answer all along.

"I know why: I'M the reason." He kicked at a rock and watched it soared across the pavement. "I was like, 'Fighting is my duty.' If I'm one of the few that can save this damn city, I should take these Shadows on for everyone else's sake. I had to be a hero for the folks who can't even see the danger right in front of 'em. That's the right thing to do."

It's what Mitsuru told the team last night: they were the only ones capable of defeating the unseen enemy of humanity. With the power of Persona came an immense responsibility to protect those without said power. It took that and the spirit of a warrior to be a member of SEES, to answer the call and never surrender to these monsters that go bump in the night. They vowed to fight to the bitter end.

Fuuka Yamagishi may be the exception to the previous rule, but that courage to stand beside her comrades, knowing full well she could not defend herself, spoke volumes of the navigator's dedication.

She and the others wanted to see this mission to its inescapable conclusion.

Junpei growled. "But hell, it's all I'm good for. If it weren't for that. I'd be worthless. Haha, my duty? What a buncha bullshit. I can't fight worth shit, anyway!"

Obviously, Fuuka cemented herself as the official guide and support unit of the group. Without her telepathic capabilities, getting through missions proved more demanding than without.

Yukari was their sniper who barely missed the mark, not as much as when they first started running expeditions in Tartarus or facing the twelve full-moon Shadows. Many of those battles would be lost without her sharp eyes and quick reflexes.

Mitsuru danced across the battlefield with a rapier in hand, dispatching enemies speedily and efficiently. She wasn't called a leader simply because of the Kirijo name, it was a title earned in the midst of fire and flames.

Akihiko, must anything be said about him? The guy was a champion boxer who could handle the monsters with minimal equipment, no traditional weaponry required.
Then there were the Arisato siblings.

Minato, a silent genius, cool under pressure, everyone’s favorite swordsman, he was the perfect pick as the next field leader if his older sister ever needed to take the sidelines.

Minako, the current field leader, always positive, light-footed with a naginata, she led the team a smile and never failed to charge head-first into the fray.

Add on their ability to summon multiple and they were the definition of overpowered.

What did Junpei have?

One Persona, a broadsword, and stupid one-liners.

What good was any of that compared to the others?

After the fighting ends, he would go back to being the same dumbass who others knew as a failure. He would just be the guy he got into the school because he could hit a ball a little farther than everyone else. Teachers, lying through their teeth, would continue to give up on his grades and focus on those who had an actual life to look forward to.

The members of SEES will go on to better things. They had skills that translated to real life, skills that would serve them well in the long run.

What about Junpei?

No one will care, even the people who claimed to be his friends through this ordeal. They would realize how much of a loser he really was and abandon him. Minako, Minato, Fuuka, Yukari, Akihiko, Mitsuru, all of them will leave his life for good.

He was going to end up a has-been, vying for the old days, always stuck in the same place until death comes knocking at his door.

Unwanted.

Unloved.

Just like his father.

Finally, Junpei threw his head back and yelled at the sky.

“Nothing I do is good enough!”

Student council never met a week before a big test. The members needed all the extra time in the world to study, and since most of them turned out to be honor students, Mitsuru canceled all meetings until finals concluded for the semester.

Minako knew that studying should take priority. Her grades were far from terrible, but keeping her scholarship was crucial to remaining at Gekkoukan for the rest of the year. It would help to go beyond her target scores so there was room for small errors in classes like math and French. She should use those precious hours beforehand to prepare rather than galavanting off to do other activities.

However, Hidetoshi asked for a favor outside of council hours that could not be passed up.
Learning how to interrogate students without making them upset.

It wasn’t because he cared what others thought of his character, but ever since his previous attempts at gathering information ended in actual fights, he needed a new approach before the trail went cold. Since Minako fancied herself as quite the conversationalist, Hidetoshi came and asked to have some of that wisdom imparted to him.

She graciously accepted the offer.

After an hour of wandering around the school talking to students, Minako stood behind her underclassman as he questioned a group of girls in the main lobby. This had to be their tenth attempt at getting someone to spill the beans on their case.

One of those girls just so happened to be the student council vice president: Kamon Mayumi.

At least there wasn’t a big crowd to shout at them; all the bickering took place within the conversation this time.

“Why are you accusing ME!? The cigarette butt was in the boys’ bathroom, right?” Kamon put her hands on her hips, bleach blonde hair swinging with her sharp movements. “Unless you’re accusing me of cross-dressing, I doubt I’m the one you should be worried about. Why don’t you leave us alone before I start yelling?”

Hidetoshi crossed his arms. “How many times do I have to explain? We can’t prove it was exclusively a male who did the deed when girls have been known to go into the boys’ restroom in the past. Even in the past year, we’ve dealt with those situations.” He huffed. “I can’t stand this anymore. It’s like I’m talking to a mo-

Woah, the situation was getting them nowhere fast.

“-Play nice, Hidetoshi-kun.” Minako stopped him before he could finish his sentence, turning to the girls. “If I may, we meant no disrespect to your character, Mayumi-san. We approached you specifically because of your popularity amongst the girls. What he meant to ask was if you knew anyone who might’ve gone inside that bathroom or know a girl who did the same thing. Anyone at all?”

Kamon scoffed. “And why would I associate with girls like that? Only tramps would go in the boys’ bathroom to do whatever it is that gets them all hot and bothered.” Despite her annoyance, she relaxed now that it was Minako who addressed her.

“But. . . because you asked nicely, I can reach out and see who I can find. Not all gossip at this school is unreliable.”

Minako smiled and gave the girl a polite bow, even if the former was older. From what Hidetoshi had told her before they made their advance, Kamon’s family had quite the influence on Port Island, just not as well established the Kirijo’s. It was best to take her family’s name earnestly in case they needed her cooperation in the future.

“Thank you so much for helping make the school a safer place to learn.” Minako stood straight again. “If there’s anyone else who may have information, could you send them our way? We want to end this investigation as soon as possible so we can move on to other complaints.”

Kamon nodded. “Sure thing, Arisato-senpai.” Just as she and her friends turned to head home, she threw a quick wave. “Maybe Kirijo-senpai should move you from Secretary to the Disciplinary Committee? You’re pretty good at it!”
Minako returned the gesture, thinking all the while about how wrong Kamon was. While it was a nice comment, the senior liked writing, not detective work. “Take care, Mayumi-san! Good luck tomorrow!”

The group of girls exited the school as Hidetoshi stepped up to Minako’s side. He grumbled while watching them skip on their merry way.

“How in the world did you get them to actually talk to you?” the boy asked. “I was clear, to the point, and they still assumed I was going to accuse them of the crime. I thought women appreciated honesty."

Minako sighed. The whole situation felt like she was teaching Minato how to deal with the female species all over again.

“Girls are a finicky bunch. They expect the worst out of a simple situation and blow things out of proportion.” She clasped her hands behind her back. “You’re right about one thing, they jumped the gun too fast when you were trying to explain yourself. Even if you almost called them morons, they should’ve taken the high ground and corrected you nicely.”

Hidetoshi rubbed the back of his neck. “I suppose I should have omitted that choice word.”

“But hey, you did better!” Minako encouraged. “You only needed my divine intervention towards the end. Your greeting, posture, and overall tone were pretty good until they started getting defensive. Give it another week and you’ll be drowning in evidence!”

Her partner still frowned, ignoring the recognition of his progress.

“It still frustrates me how childish they act whenever I get serious. We’re high school students on the cusp of adulthood and attendees of a prestigious campus. Why do they see the need for such frivolousness?” Hidetoshi shook his head. “How in the world can you stand this torment, Arisato-kun? Doesn’t it drive you mad when the world around you refuses to change?”

“The only thing driving me insane is all this negative talk.” Minako insisted and faced him. His disdain was starting to get her too, time for a change of pace. “Do ya’ wanna hear something that’ll cheer you up?”

“You know exactly who smoked in the men’s bathroom?” the captain grumbled.

“Oh, stop it! No one likes a negative Nancy!” Minako gave him a tiny punch in the shoulder before continuing.

“People like you and me aren’t meant for high school. I know they always say they’re the best years of your life, but those people are the same teens who were popular back in the day and grew up to realize just how unforgiving the real world can be.”

Hidetoshi gave her a bewildered frown. “I fail to understand your logic. What does that have to deal with the current investigation?”

Boys, sometimes they could be so dense. How the worst offenders among them survived past the age of ten without reading between the lines perplexed Minako. All she could do was slump her shoulders and do her best to spell it out for him.

“The point I’m getting at is that, unlike us, many of our peers don’t understand that their actions can have severe consequences. They think the real world will give them a slap on the wrist for breaking the rules and send them back to work.” Minako explained. “While they continue to slack
off on building their character before graduating, you make an effort to do the opposite. You put in
the energy and take this investigation seriously as any rational adult would. You do what’s right,
not what’s convenient.”

Hidetoshi snapped out of his glowering, body relaxing at her words.

He seemed to get the message.

Again, Minako nudged him playfully. “Get it now, kiddo? You’re doing fine, all that needs
tweaking is your approach. Once you nail that, you’ll be an unstoppable force of charismatic
justice! How does that sound?”

“. . . I suppose I can try.”

“Good!”

Before Hidetoshi could get too deep in his own thoughts, Minako pushed him towards the culture
club hallway where another group of students congregated, the perfect test subjects. His feet
dragged against the tiled floor as if reluctant to go on.

No turning back, not when he had come this far.

“Let’s give this another go, shall we?”

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_Theo-Dork_: Good afternoon, milady. Working hard in your world?

_Me_: Theo! I know I just saw you yesterday, but it feels like forever! How are you?

_Theo-Dork_: My sister ran away to a place called Iwatodai Strip Mall. She hasn’t come back in two
hours.

_Me_: . . .

_Me_: Wat

_Theo-Dork_: Sorry, let me rephrase that.

_Theo-Dork_: Help

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Finals were coming tomorrow. Missions to Tartarus would start once testing time had passed.
Summer break meant extra loads of homework and college hunting. The unintelligent students
begged their more knowledgeable classmates for emergency help on all things academics. As if
that wasn’t enough, part-time jobs were bound to be scarce over the summer as applications flood
in from hundreds all around the city.

What would be the best course of action? Study? Call up a friend? Curl into a fetal position and
scream out of frustration because all teenagers are idiots?

Minato did none of those things.

He instead made good on his promise to Yukari to go shopping.

The second school let out for the day, said archer wasted no time in dragging Minato to nearly
every store Port Island and Iwatodai had to offer. Clothing, furniture, music (thank goodness),
thrift, even the pharmacy were fair game. The only places they skipped over was the manga shop
in the Iwatodai stripe mall and for obvious reason.

Minato was also glad that none of the events from the meeting were left untouched during their
outing.

What possessed Yukari to confront Mitsuru in such an unsavory fashion remained a mystery to
him. He had sensed a tension between them from the moment they met back in April, but to think it
would escalate into last night’s display, perhaps there was more lying beneath the surface,
something that should be left up to the girls to solve on their own.

Was it because he worked for the Kirijo Corporation? Did Yukari blame them for his death and
decided to take that agony out on the family’s heiress?

That would be the equivalent of the siblings deciding to blamed Mitsuru for the accident that killed
their parents.

Even if it was a Shadow that wrought the tragic day, she had no part in the events that took place.

No matter how much they wanted a scapegoat. . .

In any case, he simply wished to enjoy a day on the town and leave the drama alone.

His heart could only take so much in one week.

At least the final stop for the afternoon happened to be a lax one: an outdoor flower shop right
outside Iwatodai Station. It was strange that the youngest Arisato took pleasantly in rounding out a
hectic day with fresh smells and green leaves surrounding him on all sides.

“Hmm, lilies are too overpowering, and roses aren't really my thing. Those are more of a mature
woman kind of flower.” Yukari mumbled while inspecting a pot of pastel-themed daisies, although
it was difficult to tell what kind they were at a glance. “Maybe a few gerberas? They would look
nice on my desk back at the dorm AND they represent happiness.”

So they were called gerberas. They seemed a little plain but maybe that was the point.

Minato shrugged while admiring an arrangement of white and pink carnations. “That might come
in handy for finals. I heard Mr. Ekoda’s still pissed off about the whole situation with Fuuka-san,
so he threw some curveballs in on the test.”

“He’d probably do the same thing even if that whole mess never happened.” Yukari peeked over to
get a look at the carnations. “While we’re on the subject, I wouldn’t get those if you want good
luck. White and pink carnations are used for funerals. They symbolize remembrance of death and,
sometimes, the love family members have for the deceased. Not exactly the most cheerful thing in
the world.”

Huh, how ironic. Perhaps Minato should get a few for Junpei, considering the latter had no
intentions of studying until the night before the exam.

“Thanks for the heads up,” he set the carnations back on the shelf and turned to the gerberas
Yukari was talking about. “Where did you learn all this stuff about special meanings and
symbolism? Last I checked, the school doesn’t have a gardening club.”

His companion chuckled. “Back in the day, my house used to be filled with flowers. My mom
really liked them, so she always bought a lot. She’d always tell me about the different kinds and the feelings behind them.” She reached to a muted display of baby’s breath to brush the delicate bulbs. “Once in a while, she let me create my own arrangements and put them on the dinner table. We would work on them for hours to make them perfect.”

Inheriting the knowledge of her mother, something they shared in common.

“I get how that is.” Minato shoved his hands in his pockets. “My mom was the same way, except it wasn’t flowers.”

Ene Arisato loved books. Minako often joked that, if that woman never met their father, she would declare herself married to the characters in those stories. Entire spans of walls in their old house were dedicated to showing off the family’s vast collection of texts from throughout the years. Don’t get Minato started on the countless nights spent listening to his mom retell chapter books by heart, even when the children had school the very next day.

That love of literature was then passed onto both siblings and continued to grow day by day. They could brag about being able to read Shakespeare before it was taught in school, analyze the hidden language poets crafted, and gave them a creative spark found lacking in recent generations of students. Their parents smiled when showing them off to the relatives, proud of the dedication to the fine art of reading without taking credit for themselves.

If Minato was being honest, they should have taken a little credit.

After all these years, after losing his mother, that same passion for books remained. He may never be as gung-ho or creative enough to write his own tale, but he could say quite proudly that he loved the gift of reading.

“I think that’s the first time you ever told me about your family besides Minako.”

Minato stopped thinking to himself after realizing he actually said all those personal memories out loud. Yukari must have heard every word because when he looked over, she ignored the flowers in her hands and stared with a nostalgic grin.

What possessed him to do that? This wasn’t like the situation with Natsuki who would forget the whole ordeal within an hour. The risk of letting sensitive information slip came out to zero when the witness would inevitably lose said information. Any nincompoop with half a brain cell knew that to be correct.

No, this instance would be remembered.

Did he subconsciously trust Yukari with that kind of emotional baggage?

It had to be the heat messing with his inhibitions. There was no way he could let himself be exposed so effortlessly.

Quickly, Minato coughed and trained his sights on a bouquet of yellow roses. “Sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I shouldn’t be hogging the spotlight by bringing up something like that-”

“I meant it in a good way!” Yukari said and set the flowers aside. “I mean, I already told you a lot about my past and my father. Don’t you think it makes sense to put some faith in me, too?” She elbowed his arm. “Now, if you’re done mopping, why don’t you tell me what color of gerberas I should get. I think I might get a nice bunch for my room.”

Minato stood still, struggling to find the appropriate words. What could he say in response to her
willingness to share that bond between them?

Thank you.

Please don’t tell anyone.

Both answers were stupid. One sounded like a line on an after-school special about doing drugs while the other came off as mean.

In the end, Minato smirked when the correct words came to mind. He pointed to a bursting collection of pale pink gerbers. The center of the flowers accented the petals in a bright yellow hue.

“I’m no psychic, but I have a feeling that pink’s the way to go.” He nodded. “Gotta stick with your sweet and cute theme you’ve got going on, am I right?”

Yukari chuckled and stepped closer to the chosen gerberas. “You think so too? I love pink. I guess we have the same taste, huh.” She picked up the vase they were in only to frown. “But, just gerberas might be a little plain on their own. What other flowers do you think would match my room?”

“Couldn’t say, I’ve never been in your room,” Minato said.

“You’re right!” She gave him a mock scowl. “Well then, what good are you?”

Minato knew that her words were a friendly jab, but he was feeling petty today. Instead of shrugging her comment off like he normally would, he stood taller and mimicked the girl’s sass by channeling his inner blonde bitch.

Everyone has one. Some just happen to use it more than others.

“What good am I?” Minato motioned to himself. “Messed up, much-

“Hey, you two!”

Both teens stopped joking with one another at the sound of a familiar, authoritative shout. When Minato looked away from Yukari, he saw who decided to drop in.

Minako jogged towards him and Yukari, still in uniform and school bag bouncing at her side. The summer sun turned her usually russet hair into a bright shade of red to match a pair of rosy cheeks. The only times she looked that tired and hot were after long runs, particularly around this season when even mornings ceased to be cool.

Following close behind was Theodore, equally haggard with his Velvet Room clothing slightly altered to fit in with human fashion. Gone were the bellmen’s jacket, white gloves, and matching hat, replaced with a plain black dress shirt and a striking blue tie. His sleeves had been rolled up past the elbow to account for the heat, though it did little judging by the amount of sweat on the man’s forehead. The only part of the old outfit that remained were his pants and dress shoes.

Why was he making an effort to blend in? They never encountered any issues when the siblings took him and Elizabeth to Pallouwinna mall, only their unusual quirks caused a stir.

Then again, a jacket in this weather may cause a great amount of discomfort, even for omnipotent super beings who could summon hell spawn using only a book.
“I’m so sorry for bothering you guys!” Minako said as she and Theo came to a halt in front of Minato and Yukari, panting like a pair of dogs. “Minato, we’ve got an emergency on our hands. Theo needs our help and you just so happen to be in the right place at the right time!”

“Milady is correct!” Theodore bowed. “It is of the utmost importance that you come with us right away. We haven’t much time until Igor discovers Elizabeth and I are unaccounted for!”

Yukari tugged at Minato’s arm. “Um, who’s this guy? And who’s Elizabeth? And Igor?”

Of all people that could have asked that question, it had to be someone the siblings would see on a regular basis. They might all be Persona users, but the Velvet Room was a whole different ball game and must remain a secret at all costs.

He had to think of a cover story and fast.

What sounded believable in his head?

“Theo’s our uncle and Elizabeth is his older sister. Igor is their crazy grandpa who lives with them, but that’s not important.” Minato lied, turning to Minako. “Start from the beginning. What does Uncle mean by unaccounted for? If he’s here, where’s Aunt Elizabeth?”

It took a few deep breaths before Minako was able to stand straight and look at him. Judging by her lack of response to calling the attendants family members, she was ready to play along with the ruse.

“Uncle Theo came back from an errand and found a note from auntie. She said she wanted to try exploring the Iwatodai strip mall, and since we were in school and no one else available, she decided to go alone. Theo texted me before I left school and we came here to start looking.”

Minako smirked her attendant. “We would’ve gotten started sooner, but you know how uncle is with escalators. He wouldn’t get on until I held his hand and dragged him down the stairs.”

Theo huffed, unmistakably offended at the jab. “My fears are not unfounded! The timing of the movement is all wrong! One can barely keep track of when the next step will arrive. What shall become of you me if I trip and fall?”

A viral YouTube video, that’s what will become of him.

Admittedly, Minato would watch the shit out of that.

Besides the hilarious image of Theodore unable to get on an escalator, Elizabeth had left the Velvet Room on her own. It was hard enough the last time she decided she wanted to see the human world and that was with supervision. If she decided to wander around by herself and without any knowledge of where to go, things could get messy in a heartbeat. There was no question that Minato should assist with the search.

Elizabeth was his attendant, someone who helped him learn and grow as a Persona user. What kind of person would he be to abandon her?

“If you guys need my help, I guess I don’t have a choice.” Minato swiveled to Yukari. “Sorry, but she’s family. We need to make sure she’s safe and not causing a bunch of trouble.”

Yukari shook her head. “I don’t mind-”

In a twist of fate, she started walking ahead of him and out of the flower kiosk. She was at Minako’s side in a matter of seconds.
“-but if she’s family, then you’ll need all the help you can get. I’m coming, too!”

Well, looks like the pink archer of SEES was going to join the siblings on the investigation.

This afternoon just took an interesting turn.

“Thanks, Yukari-san.”

“That’s what friends are for, Minato-kun!”

And so, the hunting party of four set off to find the rouge Elizabeth.

“She’s about this tall, in her mid-twenties, wearing a sleeveless blue dress, and may or may not be a tad crazy. Has anyone like that been here in the last, say, ten minutes?”

Minako’s heart sank as another store clerk, this time from the sweets shop, shook their head.

“Sorry, miss. All of the women in dresses who have come in today were wearing lighter colors because of the temperature. It’s too hot for something like dark blue.” The clerk shrugged. “If I see anyone like that though, I’ll be sure to tell them you’re looking for them. Will you be in the area for long?”

“Yes, until I find her.” Minako bowed and walked to the door of the shop, Halfway outside, she threw a friendly wave. “Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate the help!”

“Take care, miss!”

The evening sun brightened the evening sky in streaks of orange and gold when Minako exited the Sweets Shop. Those warm colors reflected the near blistering heat practically melting the pavement and people, making it one of the most uncomfortable summers she ever experienced. How the birds found joy in flight, completely unimpeded and comfortable with the weather, remained a mystery.

Maybe the smell of freshly cooked beef from Hagekure drew them in? That combination of savory sauces and seared meat hung all around the upper tiers of the mall.

Waiting for Minako were Theodore and Minato, finished with their own assigned areas. They leaned against the railing overlooking the rest of the mall below, chatting amongst themselves, equally unsettled by the intense heat.

Judging by the frowns on their faces and slumped shoulders, their search operations proved unsuccessful.

Minato noticed his sister first. He pushed himself off the railing and raised an eyebrow.

“And luck?”

It broke Minako’s heart to shake her head. “The staff said they haven’t seen anyone like Elizabeth come in this afternoon. Not even a look alike.”

Minato and Theo deflated at the unfortunate news, going back to the railing.

The blue and black-clad servant resembled a puppy who had been kicked one too many times off a bridge. “That nice couple at Bookworms cannot recall any customers with a blue dress and the undomesticated duck restaurant had no information either.” Theo ran a nervous hand through his
hair. “We’ve swept all three levels of the mall, the other young lady is almost finished with her area, yet not a single human has seen Elizabeth. Where in Muses’ name has she gone?”

Minato nodded along. “Hagekure and the tuna shop said the same thing. When asked some of the regulars if they’ve seen anything, they suggested I try going to the police.” He scuffed the heel of his oxfords on the ground. “I wish that was an option, but as soon as she sees them coming, Elizabeth would just try to get arrested for the heck of it.”

Months ago, the idea that could happen would have been illogical. Elizabeth and Theo might not exhibit the same level of social awareness as the siblings, but they had to understand that getting in trouble with the law was a bad thing.

After the excursion to the other mall on Port Island, all expectations or predictability went out the window. For all they knew, Elizabeth could very well have beat them to the punch and be in jail already.

Minako joined the other two in their moping session, letting out a dejected sigh as she parked herself next to her attendant. With a sibling on either side of Theo, they resembled a self-pity sandwich.

What next, the moon was going to fall from the sky?

“Does anyone know if Yukari’s done with her section yet?” she asked.

Minato was the first to answer, pulling out his phone and flipping it open. “She texted me a few minutes ago and said she might have a lead.” He closed the device with a flick of the wrist. “We’re supposed to meet her on the first level so we can confirm if it’s valid or not.”

Finally, some good news for a change. Yukari may be the least qualified among them when it came to identifying Elizabeth, the only description she had to go off of came from Minato, but she did know how to utilize the gossip trains. The search of Fuuka Yamagishi proved those skills and then some, leading SEES to perform their big rescue operation in the nick of time.

This could end well if the lead turned out to be true.

Minako pushed off the railing and motioned for the boys to follow, albeit dramatically. “Into the fire we go, gentlemen! Time’s a wasting. I wanna get back to the dorm and study.”

Minato groaned as he did what he was told. “That better not be a Scarlet Pimpernel reference.”

“Lighten up, Citizen Chauvelin. I’m not trying to topple the Japanese government or pick swordfights with the police.” she quipped back with an evil grin. “And yes, it was a reference to that darned, elusive Pimpernel! Mwahaha!”

Theo, who listened to their conversation quietly up to this point, flinched at Minako’s overzealous behavior. Promptly, he ushered the two siblings towards the spiral staircase before the conversation could divulge any further, a gentle hand on each sibling’s back and (according to Minako) a contorted smile.

“I suggest we make haste. This Pimpernel person can wait until Elizabeth has been returned to her rightful home, alive preferably.”

Minato tried to swat the attendant away with little success. “And I’m the one who needs to lighten up. Shouldn’t Theodore be Chauvelin at this point?”
Minako chuckled. “No, he’s too tall and sensible to be a Frenchman.”

The trio hurried down the steep steps, dodging past other shoppers carrying various parcels and bags from the lower levels, far more than the journey up. Many of said shoppers had no appreciation of making a path for the three to pass safely, instead elbowing their way past them while throwing out choice obscenities along the way. At one point, Minako felt someone accidentally jab her in the ribs in a hardcore attempt to make space for themselves. Her small stature made the pain all the worse.

Theo fared no better. The poor man struggled to assert himself amongst the masses and got into more than a few scuffles. Unable to say no or risk drawing attention to himself, he simply took the abuse that came with crowd control. He started to fall behind so much, Minako ended up yanking Theo by his sleeve and hanging on for dear life.

Minato was far more successful in getting others to do what he wanted. When the odds of never meeting another person were zero, the boy had no qualms in playing the game of mall WWE. Elbows, knees, words, he used all these tactics to part the seas of disgruntled students and crabby businessmen for his two companions. The gesture could almost be seen as noble considering the time crunch the three were on.

Minako still hated having to let her little brother act like a “let me speak to your manager” tiger mom with a chip on his shoulder.

A boulder-sized chip.

With spikes.

Sometimes, she had to wonder if Minato got it from their own mother or years of bargain shopping turned him into this abomination.

By the time they all reach the bottom floor, Minako and Theo practically jumped in unison away from the last step, the former still dragging the latter behind her.

Minato followed behind at a more leisurely pace, dusting off imaginary debris from his clothing. “That went well.”

“Well?” Theodore checked both his arms to find an array of bruises on either side. “Are all humans that abrasive when it comes to stairs? I don’t comprehend how you two can stand these conditions day in and day out.”

Minako sighed and checked to see if there were any pressing injuries on her person, thankfully finding nothing too serious, only a light scattering of red marks. “Sorry ‘bout that, Theo. Usually, people are pretty good about using the stairs. Next time, we can take the elevator.”

Translation: they were never coming back here during rush hour.

“Hey, slowpokes!” Yukari came running towards the group only to stop short, eyebrows raised at their disheveled attire, save Minato. “Um, did you guys get hit by a truck while I was down here?”

Theo huffed at the insinuation, clearly not picking up on the sarcasm. “Now that’s just silly, young lady. How would any motorized vehicle be able to leap high enough to hit us on the third floor of the mall? Don’t tell me your kind have understood the ways of making those contraptions fly without a proper runway-”

“-Just a joke, Uncle!” Minako cut in before Theodore let his cover slip, turning to Yukari.
Attendants could be quite the handful under pressure. “So, Minato said you got a lead? What’s the news?”

“Right!” Yukari quickly reverted to her old self, ignoring Theo’s rant on flying cars. “So, I was chatting with some girls I know from archery who swear they’ve been here since school let out. They wanted to catch up on some studying, but that’s not important.” She started to bounce on her heels. “When I asked them if they noticed anyone strange wondering around by herself who looked like Elizabeth, that’s when things got interesting.”

Minako felt hope bloom within her. This just might be their lucky break!

“And?” Theo pressed. “What got interesting? Did they see her?”

Minato was growing impatient, too. He fiddled with the cords of his headphones as he waited for his fellow junior to make the big announcement. “Well? We’re not getting any younger and this isn’t a game show.”

Yukari chuckled and started walking towards the other end of the mall.

“You guys never told me your aunt was a crazy cat lady!”

While they searched high and low, at every possible location within the mall, checking each nook and cranny, leaving no stone unturned, Elizabeth had been right under their noses the whole time.

At an orange themed takoyaki stand behind one of the staircases, the attendant made herself comfortable on one of the benches for weary shoppers, safe and not in jail. Her coin purse sat dutifully by her hip while she held five sticks of takoyaki in each hand. A few stray animals, mostly cats, gathered at her feet as if they would receive the blessing of food from this woman, like some kind of perverse religion based solely on begging for scraps.

Minato, Minako, and Theodore all stood gawking at the scene.

Minato probably felt the worst of the three. For the numerous occasions which he prided himself on being smart, he was bested by a crazed dame with cats literally vying for her attention.

Let his sister never know what he was thinking.

Jesus. Christ.

Yukari beamed, smug that she had succeeded in bringing in the prize of the hunt. “I think somebody owes me free food.”

Theodore was the first of the troops to break rank, storming towards Elizabeth with enough fury to last one thousand lifetimes. Minato stayed behind with Minako to watch whatever fireworks may ensue.

“What in the world were you thinking, you foolish fool!”

Elizabeth looked up from her feline army as her younger brother came closer to where she sat.

“Theo, you finally decided to join me!” She waved her many sticks of takoyaki. “You simply must try this human delicacy. The kind shopkeeper who sold me these claimed that I would smile so wide, my cheeks would fall clean off—”

“-Auntie!” Minako left Minato’s side and placed herself in front of her attendant before he could
cause a scene, minding the collection of cats at his sister’s feet. “At ease, Theo. We need her alive.” She turned to Elizabeth with a wide grin. “You silly goose! We were worried sick! What did I tell you about exploring on your own, especially without telling someone where you were going?”

Elizabeth tilted her head. “I left a note.”

“That’s not the same-” Theo groaned, “-I know you have an adventurous soul, but must we suffer a collective heart attack every time you decide to galavant off to do whatever you please!?”

“I still don’t see why you’re upset.”

“That’s why I’m upset!”

“You confuse me, Theodore.”

“I could say the same for you, Elizabeth!”

“You both need to take a chill pill!” Minako tried to say to the siblings with little success. “It’s like I’m talking to a pair of children!”

Minato watched on as the three went back and forth, talking over one another, trying to get the next word in and win the fight. However, all they could accomplish was scaring off the group of cats and drawing unwanted stares from passerby’s.

The urge to laugh at them bubbled in the pit of Minato’s stomach.

Yukari giggled beside him, unable to resist that same temptation. “Is everyone like this in your family?”

“No, just these two are like this.” Minato glanced over to her. “But they really do care about us, even if they don’t always care about each other. They’ve helped a lot when it comes to getting settled in the city.”

Yukari stopped giggling and met his gaze. “Then I’m glad I was able to help find one of them.” She bumped him on the arm. “Wouldn’t want you to start finals tomorrow worried that your directionally challenged aunt was lost somewhere in the city by herself. You might just lose your class ranking to me or, God forbid, Junpei.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Oh, stop being such a drama queen!”

As if Minato would give up his ranking to anyone, especially to his fellow classmates. Friends or not, that first place spot in 2-F and third place in the grade remained until he moved up or dropped dead from stress.

“Minato! Yukari!”

The juniors looked away to see Minako waving them over to the bench. Theo and Elizabeth had finally calmed themselves, although Theo pouted in the same fashion a three-year-old would after being scolded by a parent.

“I’m sorry you guys had to get involved with this search and rescue mission, especially Yukari. You didn’t need to sacrifice your time and yet you did.” Minako said the underclassmen were close
enough. “Still, I’m happy everything worked out okay and no one got hurt. Thanks again for playing along.”

“No prob, senpai!” Yukari gave a thumbs up. “And don’t feel too bad. Think of it as payback for all that food you make us. Fairtrade, yeah?”

“On the subject of food,” Elizabeth pipped in, sticking out a fist with takoyaki skewers for everyone. “You simply must try this! I’ve been sitting here for hours yet I still cannot fathom the taste in my mouth!”

For the rest of their time at the mall, Minato spent with Minako, Yukari, and both Velvet Room attendants by eating takoyaki.

Elizabeth wasn’t wrong, it was pretty delicious.

---

**Test 21:** I splurged a bit to buy a new component to stabilize the frequency of Lucia’s power.

**Result:** The noise has lessened, but I’m not really liking the frequency. I’ll pick up something different tomorrow and try again.

**Test 22:** Added a dampener to control Lucia’s interference. Less expensive than the last component and I was able to record part of my room’s layout.

**Result:** The wireless system now has a horrible damping effect. I wonder if the method I use in Tartarus could improve the sound?

Fuuka put down her pencil with a heavy sigh, set her project notebook aside, and returned to the two contraptions sitting on her crammed work table.

On one end was a radio used by SEES before her recruitment that now laid in utter ruin. Wires of all shapes and sizes, cracked circuit boards, and an abundance of other random parts all jumbled together, the only remains she could salvage from the fight it was destroyed in. Whatever pieces its white casing that still acted as a protective shell were stripped off and placed in a neat pile on the floor.

If anyone else had a say in the state of the machine before Fuuka, they might deem it garbage and simply toss it in the trash.

On the other side of the work table sat a brand new radio, its insides exposed but in far better condition than the first.

This was the radio that would soon act as an extension to Fuuka’s Persona.

While Lucia had a powerful range and vocal clarity, the mission at the love hotel left the navigator in dire straights. All communication to the outside failed and they nearly lost the battle due to the Shadow’s mind games, leaving the team exposed and Fuuka was powerless to aid them.

She never felt so afraid.

What if the group members never snapped out of their trances?

What if they continued to be sucked in by the illusions?

They could no longer risk failure when so much more was at stake.
That’s when Fuuka decided to create her own back-up system to enhance her abilities both on abnormal missions and for Tartarus exploration.

With this new radio, Lucia’s telepathic powers would be increased by a staggering one hundred and twenty percent and counting. Bypassing mental roadblocks could be accomplished with the touch of a button. She even planned for a coding system that predicted the layouts of Tartarus on a nightly basis and an automatic Shadow index to record the types of enemies they encountered during the night.

That amount of information could change how SEES went about completing missions.

That information could save their lives.

However, all of this was easier said than done.

For the past few nights, Fuuka had tried and failed to implement new commands to work in tandem with her Persona’s unique frecency which acted as a form of sonar. It was able to pick up a rough layout of different floors and pinpoint enemies, but unable to paint a clear picture on its own merit.

This mixing of science and supernatural, while an engaging talent for her technical prowess, left Fuuka spinning her wheels as she dabbled in what used to be a fairy tale. There were no blueprints to use as a template. Not a single teacher could advise on which programs to implement into her work. In a literal sense, she found herself walking straight into the unknown with only the barebones of resources and her own imagination.

By all counts, the task was impossible.

But that didn’t mean she couldn’t try.

“Okay, just gotta go again.” The girl breathed and picked up went to her open laptop. On the screen was a coding document meant to send input to the motherboard, already packed to the brim with instructions.

With the help of the dorm’s supercomputer, she created a program that imitated Lucia and its powers. That program was then played for the radio to pick up, amplify, and record for later.

The challenge now was getting Lucia’s signal to sync with the radio seamlessly.

Once Fuuka finished a few minor adjustments to the code and receiving frequency, she returned to her notebook to record the changes made.

Test 23: Eased off on the dampening effect and added a wider range for wireless transmission. Testing for harmonization. Good results should mean I can make a map of my room in real time, including anyone inside.

Setting aside the notebook once more, Fuuka returned to her laptop to run the changes. She grabbed a pair of nearby headphones to listen for the results.

This had to work.

Her fingers ghosted over the spacebar that would run the code.

She hoped it worked properly.

Just as she pressed the button, Fuuka heard on knock on her door.
“Yamagishi? Are you in there?”

Mitsuru was the one who knocked.

Fuuka quickly aborted the program and removed her headphones. Whatever her senior had to say, the experiment could wait a few minutes more.

“Oh, please come in! The door’s unlocked!”

As the teal-haired girl got up from where she was sitting on the floor, Mitsuru welcomed herself into Fuuka’s room. The young woman had changed out of her school uniform, donning her summer attire of a white halter top and stylish black pants with matching sandals.

Even when she meant to dress casually, the heiress exuded nothing but poise.

“Good evening, senpai.” Fuuka bowed. “I’m sorry for the mess; I’ve been working on making that radio we talked about a week ago. Everything’s a bit chaotic at the moment.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “Not at all, please don’t feel embarrassed.” Looking past Fuuka, she eyed the technical project and smiled. “Not only do you excel at providing support during battle, but also you have a way with electronics. I’m not surprised you were able to obtain so much information on the incident ten years ago.”

Oh no, Mitsuru wanted to discuss what happened last night.

Had Fuuka left a trail while looking into the accident for Yukari? She used a private server to bypass the dorm’s wifi to avoid such a complication and yet she was caught in the end.

Then again, the Kirijo company possessed a bottomless supply of resources. Perhaps her meddling in the system set off some sort of alarm that traced back to the source of that disturbance, thus smoking out who had infiltrated that sensitive information.

“I-I’m so sorry for doing that without permission,” Fuuka said. Her palms suddenly felt clammy, “I know I should’ve told Yukari I couldn’t dig anything up, but I got curious and I just wanted to help her find some closure. If I knew that something like the meeting would happen, I wouldn’t-”

“-Relax, Yamagishi. Don’t worry yourself into a corner when you’re not in trouble.”

Fuuka took a deep breath.

Everything was fine. Her response had been preemptive and she would not be at fault.

“I’m sorry for my overreacting.”

Again, Mitsuru shook her head. “Please don’t apologize. I understand that you’d be more than a little cautious after last night.” She came closer to Fuuka, reaching into her pocket to pull out a piece of paper. “I do have a special favor to ask of you regarding what happened. I want you to do the same thing, find out as much as you can about that incident ten years ago and report whatever you find back to me.”

“W-what?” Fuuka wrung her hands. How many people wanted her to play detective and risk getting in trouble? “But, very little was made public. I’d need to hack into private databases without a security clearance. That’s illegal!”

“I know it is, which I why I want you to use this, just in case you get caught.” Mitsuru said and
handed over the slip of paper. “Please, take it.”

On the paper, a username and password had been scrawled in neat black print. Below that read “Kirijo Corp: Database version 10.3” in the same handwriting.

“I'll give you my ID and password. You'll be free to explore all files and you’ll be free from accountability. I want to know the truth, in detail.”

The job would, no doubt, be a huge undertaking and Mitsuru entrusted it to someone who barely spent two months on the team.

How much faith did she have in the younger student to do such a thing?

“Of course, I'll understand if you refuse.”

“No, I’ll do it.” Fuuka held the slip of paper close to her chest. “I might need to borrow the mainframe computer for long periods of time, but I’ll do my best.”

“I appreciate this, Yamagishi.”

Without another word, Mitsuru whirled on her heels and started walking towards the door. Fuuka watched with a sinking feeling in her heart.

Nothing more to say so why stay and chat?

The Kirijo’s truly were business-like, down to the core of their souls.

The junior decided not to dwell either, turning back to the mess called her workspace. She could get started on research once finals wrapped up for the semester, but for now, there was a coding problem that needed solving.

“Yamagishi, aren't you resentful?”

Fuuka stopped in her tracks at the question.

Mitsuru was still here?

“Yukari may have been brash, but she wasn’t wrong in calling me out. Despite my good intentions, I did drag you into this without fully explaining, I did so with everyone. . . including my closest friends once upon a time.” she heard the senior continue. “Certainly, you must be a little angry with me.”

For a moment, Fuuka soaked in that thought.

It was true that Mitsuru had chosen her words carefully in order to persuade the members of SEES to join. That flowery language that promised they could make a difference, while not wrong, did not account for the dangers they inevitably faced night after night. She never delved too deep into the risks or cared to mention what caused the Dark Hour to develop in the first place.

Fuuka knew she should be angry, furious even. The others were obviously shocked, some had let their emotions blatantly show.

But, for a selfish reason, she was far from bitter about how these events unfolded.

“Did you know my parents have an inferiority complex because all my relatives are doctors?”
“. . . Yamagishi?”

Fuuka looked down at the two radios.

“My mom and dad always sent me to my room to study: no clubs, no friends, just work. If I didn’t get straight A’s, they would bump up that time and take away my tools until I got my grades back to perfect.” She paused. “For years, they always bragged at family events that I’m going overseas after I graduate to study medicine and, after that, become what they never could be. . . My future was set the moment I was born.”

“. . . I understand how you feel.”

Her eyes began to sting at Mitsuru’s words.

“I feel important here, and I can help you and the others. I’m not some puppet who does whatever she’s told. I can tinker with my stupid machines instead of reviewing questions I can already answer without even thinking. I actually feel happy.”

The emotions buried deep inside made Fuuka’s stomach ache.

“So, why should I be angry—”

[Frequency Detected]
[Environmental Scan: Complete]
[Loading Data Now]

Fuuka jumped when her computer started spitting out words.

The code she typed up was operating by itself!

“Gah!” The girl dove for her laptop and moved to halt whatever was going on. Her fingers danced across the keys in order to get back into the program. “I’m so sorry, senpai! I thought I turned this off when you came in! I’m such an idiot! Why is this—”

To her astonishment, the code already finished running. The screen popped up with the results in only a matter of seconds.

“-happening?”

The results showed that the frequencies had harmonized to work off one another.

Left behind was the image of her room, the silhouettes of both Mitsuru and Fuuka stood feet apart, back to back.

The code worked.

From over Fuuka’s shoulder, she sensed that Mitsuru was looking on at the screen, too. The older girl chuckled and gave her a soft pat on the head.

“You’re right, Yamagishi. We do need you. No one can take your place.”

Minato had been right about pink gerberas, despite not knowing what Yukari’s room looked like: pink was the way to go in terms of aesthetic consistency. The simple elegance of the petals
matched the soft tones of pastel adorning every surface, from the honey striped walls to the rosewood furniture. They even went with the more subtle details, such as pieces of clothing lying around randomly or her fashion magazines proudly displayed wherever they would fit.

That was the long way of putting it, at least.

“There we go,” the junior placed the newest addition to her miniature garden next to the other one other plant on her work desk, “I think you’ll look fabulous next to the baby’s breath I got last week.”

With a few twists, the pink gerberas and a small display of white baby’s breath made her room a little brighter.

They worked in perfect harmony.

It was hard to believe there was a time in her life that Yukari hated the very sight of flowers.

Yukari seated herself at the desk with a contented sigh, admiring the beauty before her. A stiff breeze from her open window tousled the petals and cotton-light bulbs, an ethereal touch that made the sight all the more tranquil. Crickets in the background hummed with the night and lured the girl into a sense of peace.

Peace, something she needed after the past few days. In between finals tomorrow, the growing threat of Shadows, her outburst at the meeting, Yukari had barely found a moment of calm in the midst of it all.

Perhaps that was why she cashed in Minato’s promise today, to seek that stableness that had gone missing.

Why wouldn’t she? Behind the selective muteness and snide remarks, her classmate was surprisingly easy to talk to. There was never a moment in the conversation where he took full control or stayed too quiet. If he chose to not speak, he would still indicate that he was listening with a nod or hum.

That courtesy extended beyond conversation, as well.

Try as he might, Minato knew that his stoic exterior hid a compassionate person, willing to make up for any misgivings, always prepared to lend a helping hand. The way he never took himself too seriously or vice versa gave him a confident air that still recognized his place in the world. Need she mention that nasty habit where he often voiced the hard truths in the group, often against those who held more power.

Of course, one had to look past the occasional awkwardness or frustration with those of lesser aptitude, but even then he wasn’t as bad as other people. Minato was human and couldn’t be perfect.

Kind, prideful, and honest, that was what he was.

Which is why it came as a shock to Yukari that he never mentioned the meeting last night.

Minato had brought up far more sensitive topics in the past and never showed an inch of regret. Hell, he was bold enough to oppose his own flesh and blood without crumbling in front of the others, getting an emotional response right back.

Calling out Yukari’s rash behavior should be a walk in the park. She had herself an easy target by
inviting him out today, knowing full well he pulled no punches in any way, shape, or form. All it took was a mention of

So why hold back now?

Then again, his and Minako’s reaction to the revelation was startling.

The pain when the image of the Moonlight Bridge came on the monitor for everyone to see.

How they left the meeting with heads hung low, avoiding all eye contact.

Their distraught faces seered into Yukari’s memory.

For all she knew about Minato, there was so much more about his history buried beneath the surface. Some of that information, he trusted to share with her today, about his mother and her love of books.

Such an intimate memory. . .

Did she even deserve to know?

“Minato,” Yukari open the main drawer of her desk, “Why didn’t you say anything?”

She pulled out an envelope from a mess of pencils and scrap paper.

“Seems like my worst fears keep coming true. Am I stupid to believe in things like trust and friendship?”

Carefully, Yukari flipped open the envelope and shimmed its contents out and onto the desk. A piece of paper, folded into three neat sections, was clutched in both hands by the time she was done.

“Dad, this old letter of yours, I must've read it a thousand times since it came last spring.”

Carefully, Yukari unfolded the yellowing paper, revealing unsightly handwriting. The black ink used was beginning to smear across the page while some parts had been smudged completely. Wrinkles and watermarks warped the sentences until the whole letter was nearly unreadable to the anyone who dared to read its contents.

Luckily, Yukari was not the average reader.

March 6th, 2000

To my dearest family,

Tomorrow, I'll bring this letter to the opening ceremony for the Moonlight Bridge. It'll be stored in a time capsule, and sent to you ten years from now.

Yukari, you're so small right now, but in ten years, you'll be sixteen. You'll be in high school.

I know you've been sad because I have to work so late, but you still always greet me with a smile. I'm really proud of myself. Kirijo-san appointed me Head Researcher. I'll be starting on a big project soon, and I'm happy to be receiving so much recognition for my work. But, I swear to you that nothing is more important to me than you and your mother.

Are you remembering to enjoy life? Are you still bright-eyed and hopeful, like you are now? No
matter what happens in the next ten years, I hope you are happy. Well, I hope this letter brings a
smile to your face.

Love,

Dad

Yukari folded the letter back up and put it away once again.

If only her father could see her now.

Would he be proud of the young lady she strove to become?

Would he be disappointed with her behavior?

She may never know for certain.

“I can't lose hope, for his sake. I won't turn my back.”

That didn’t mean she should give up just yet.

“I won't be like Mom, not ever. . .”

7/12/2009

Junpei was acting weird in class today, more so than usual. He barely looked at me during
lunch. When I asked if he wanted to study after I was done hanging out with Yukari, he stopped
smiling and said he had other things to do.

Is it because of last night's meeting or something more?

Perhaps Minako already noticed and plans to give him a nice talking to. I have no clue how to
go about doing it myself so she can take this one for the team.

Also, I need to invest in a bell and give it to Igor. Elizabeth now has a taste for adventure and it
 kinda sucks.

Anyway, here’s to hoping finals go well.

That was a joke. Finals are gonna be my bitch.

-Minato Arisato

Chapter End Notes

Minako Ann Arisato [First Born]
Age: 17
Birthday: November 22nd, 1991 (Sagittarius)
Arcana: The Fool
Nicknames: Minny (Family), Bane of my Existence (Phone ID), Big Sis (Younger
members of SEES), Minatan (Junpei), Arisato (Seniors), Minako-san (Akihiko),
Senpai (Underclassman), Minako-kun (Hidetoshi), Leader (SEES), Captain (Junpei)
First Appearance: On the train to Iwatodai (Chapter 1)
Favorites: Books, writing, cooking, sweets/candy, running, classy clothing, video games, the color red or pink, music,
Dislikes: Swearing, dating for fun, risky behavior (smoking, sex, breaking the rules/law, etc), being alone

Information of Interest:

-Minako is written to mean “apple tree”. This name came from when her mother gave birth in their home, and from the master bedroom window, an apple tree could be seen. Her middle name, Ann, comes from the Hebrew name Hannah. It means “favor” or “grace [with God]”
-She takes after her mother in looks (russet hair, odd red eyes) and religion (Catholicism). Most of her personality comes from her father.
-Because most of her father’s side dislike the siblings for being mixed race, Minako was often the one who raised her brother after her parent’s passing. This caused her to become a mother-figure in his life. It also caused her to lose her more anxious personality and don a more outgoing one.
-Minako loves books and used to dream of becoming an author. However, due to having very little money already and no chance at a full-ride scholarship, she plans to go into the workforce as a translator after high school. Most of the money she will make she plans to use as a support to Minato’s dream of becoming a doctor.
-Minako has a secondary passion for cross country running and she isn’t half bad at it. She has been on only a handful of teams but holds a few awards from middle/high school meets. Most mornings, she gets up before the sun and goes a few miles before starting her day. After joining SEES, Minako and Akihiko start training together.
So, before this chapter begins, I wanted to update you guys on some things going on right now that may cause some trouble in the future.

Just a few days ago, my mom visited me and my brother (who lives away from home like me) to give us some bad news. For those who don’t know, my mom is a lung cancer survivor and has been in remission for a few years now. However, last year, everyone in my family started to notice that she was acting strangely: losing her short-term memory, scattered/repetitive speech, all normal symptoms of chemotherapy. She went to all of her appointments, kept up with post-cancer screenings, and we all hoped for the best.

The doctor found some tumors in her brain last August which were the cause of this behavior, but they were benign and no treatment was required. Last week, her scans came back showing that these tumors have grown and are causing her brain to swell.

Thankfully, we caught it early. In the doctor’s words, “It’s unfortunate but very treatable.” She began treatment today (as of this post) and will hopefully be taken care of in an efficient manner. I will be moving back home to help my dad and younger siblings out for the rest of the summer. It’ll give me more time to write and work on personal projects while I take care of things around the house.

That’s my long and winded rant. I hope everyone is having a blessed day and takes time this fourth of July to remember how fortunate we are to be alive and, especially in the United States, celebrate the freedoms we have. No matter how bad things get, at least (in my opinion) I live in the best country in the world for medical advancements and my mom has the best chance at making a full recovery. She’s also a certified badass who flies the American flag like every day is Independence Day!

Lot’s of love and thanks to everyone who answered the question from the last chapter! I posted another question below that’s a little happier. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last thing Minako expected to go in her dreams was the Velvet Room, sitting across from an extremely amused Igor, a stoic Theodore, and a mirthful Elizabeth.

At least a pair of steaming mugs waited for both she and her brother when they arrived. What a perfect way to decompress and prepare for finals then a cup of herbal tea, despite the reason for being summoned.

Igor sighed once everyone was settled in. “I see your attendants caused quite a stir yesterday. Allow me to formally apologize on their behalf as they are still bickering over the whole ordeal.” The long-nosed man bent forward in his lavish chair to address Minato directly. “That must have been stressful, considering you almost lost a vital piece of your growth as a Persona user, on top of everything else you must go through. I should hope this will never happen again.”
“It’s fine,” Minako said for him, “I actually had a lot of fun.”

Minato eyed her suspiciously over the brim of his mug. “If your idea of fun is getting caught in a staircase with a bunch of angry strangers, I want a new sister.” He pretended to take out his phone. “Hello? Operator? I need a mail-order sibling, pronto.”

And Minako was the drama queen of the Arisato clan.

Theo breathed. “I second the young man. Every moment spent amongst those so-called people made me hate humans for the first time in my life.” He shot his own sister a glare. “We needn’t suffer such a fate if someone stayed put for FIVE minutes instead of deserting her post in the name of adventure.”

Elizabeth ignored the glare. “I have no idea what that could mean, brother dearest.”

“You know precisely what I mean, sister.”

“I sincerely don’t care anymore.”

At the snide remark, Theo lost all composure and resorted to yelling. “The nerve! Count yourself lucky you proceed to serve in this room, in spite of that devil-may-care attitude!”

Minako, while sipping her tea, watched as her attendant continued to shout his grievances for all to hear. Elizabeth held her ground by fiddling with her platinum hair, hip popped, and concentration anywhere but on Theodore. The scene reminded the field leader of another pair currently eating up the drama across from the three adults.

Poor Igor remained in the midst of the bickering and forced the same cheesy grin on his face. How long could he maintain the facade considering the circumstances?

Minato snickered and leaned closer to Minako. “My money’s on Igor summoning a powerhouse like Ares to shut them up. You got any better ideas or what?”

“They’d kill each other before that happens,” she answered, “However, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I like death battles as much as the next guy, but we’ve got a big test after we’re done here. Witnessing a double murder could hurt our focus.”

Minako swatted the boy away. “Those violent video games are getting to you, again.”

Fortunately, Igor went for a peaceful option by cleared his throat to gain everyone’s attention. Both sets of family members broke from their conversations (and or arguing) and reeled themselves back on topic.

“That was certainly... a digression from today’s meeting.” Igor looked to the human siblings. “I shall make this quick as the morning draws close. My fellow servant and I simply want to wish you good luck on your testing endeavors-” he nodded to Minako, “-especially you, young lady. If I’m correct, this will be the second to last final of your high school career. Please, make these moments count and don’t forget what you’ve learned, for your future’s sake.”

“Well put, master.” Elizabeth stepped forward to kneel in front of Minako and Minato, reaching into her dress pocket and pulling out some kind of tiny object. “Although I have faith in both your abilities as students, I find that gifts often boost the moods of humans. Please, take one for each of you.”
To Minako’s surprise, two identical takoyaki phone straps rested in the attendant’s palm. They resembled the logo of the food stand they found Elizabeth eating at the day before down to the letter.

“Thanks,” Minato claimed his first and dangled it from one finger for inspection, “I’ll put it on my phone when we get back to our world.”

With only one to choose from, Minako took the remaining strap for herself.

Admittedly, it really was a really cute accessory: a baby octopus with takoyaki balls on each tentacle. Its pale orange color stood out against the darkened blues of the Velvet Room, capturing the eye with how much brighter it seemed. Not too mention the octopus’ cartoonish smile that made just about anyone grin right back, the senior girl found herself unable to resist the pull.

“You’re too sweet,” Minako clutched the strap to her chest, “Thanks a bunch!”

“That’s not even the best part!” Elizabeth raised her book and motioned for Theodore to do the same. Although he still regarded his sister with a cold frown, he did what he was prompted to do and mirrored Elizabeth.

Hanging from between the pages of their respective texts were another two phone straps, being used as some sort of bookmark instead.

Minako couldn’t help but giggle at the thought of the attendants wanting to play the twins game, or in this case quartet, with their masters. “That’s so cute! Did you two plan this?”

Theo sighed, but at least his frown softened now that Elizabeth was no longer the one speaking to him. “No, my sister received those charms for free due to the copious amounts of food she had eaten. She kept them as mementos of her exploits and decided to share them with the three of us, think of it as a consolation prize after all the trouble we went through. You both deserve it for the time wasted yesterday.”

Finally, Minako noticed a smile creep onto her servant’s face.

“However, I do agree that we should remember the fraction of fun we had.”

The morning of finals arrived sooner than Minato expected. It was a shame, he would preferably spend more time watching Elizabeth and Theodore bicker like toddlers fighting over a cool toy. Instead, the Arisato’s were expelled from the Velvet Room soon after receiving their good luck charms, Minato awoke the burning morning sun, and it was up and at’em from there.

The day dawned like any other, despite the events taking place at school, life continued down its orderly road. Minato leaped in the shower to tame his family’s infamous bedhead and refresh everything else. He dressed quickly to rendezvous with Minako and left the dorm, headphones in, music blaring, mentally running through the information he would need to succeed today. And, just before boarding the train to get across the bay, Minako bought them breakfast from a local bakery. She got something sweet and Minato stayed plain.

It had become a comfortable routine for the past couple of months. Each movement was now precise, calculated, and practiced to the point of boredom.

Minato had to ask himself what he could to break up the monotony. Finals, even if he knew they were a walk in the park, no doubt caused a bit of anxiousness. Some well-meaning mischief or unusual events may serve to release any lingering thoughts before he and his friends settled in for
the long haul.

Knowing full well that one member of their dorm detested finals more than anything in the world and was still sound asleep a few minutes later than usual, Minato decided to spice things up between getting dressed and walking out the door.

It was a simple prank Minako had pulled back in middle school, a motivation to get him out of bed during his first year, but an effective motivator.

The rest came once he and Yukari waited in their homeroom for the test to begin.

While others put in a few minutes of studying their notes, the blue-haired teen watched the door from his desk, drumming his fingers to the music only he could hear. The world seemed to blur into the background in anticipation for what would transpire any moment now.

The fireworks were bound to be a spectacle when it happened.

“Jeez, did Stupei oversleep or something?” A pink blob shifted from the corner of Minato’s focus. “I know he hates school but this is finals week! He can’t skip, even if he’s here on a sports scholarship. The administration’ll have his head on a silver platter if he so much as misses one second without an excuse.”

Yukari must have noticed by now that one student was absent from their fellow classmates. Though most of 2-F arrived earlier than usual or on-time, Junpei’s vacant desk stuck out like a sore thumb.

If only she knew what Minato did when his sister wasn’t looking.

Holding back a smile, he fiddled with his MP3, changing the volume in time with the beat.

“He’ll be here,” he mumbled. “I have faith in him.”

“Glad someone does because—” Yukari paused and her face came into view, “—wait a sec, you’ve been quieter than usual and staring at the door all morning.”

“Is that a crime?” he asked.

The girl flipped her chair until she obscured Minato’s line-of-sight. “I haven’t known you forever, but you have that look on your face like you did something evil.”

Now Yukari was on to him.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really. . . it’s kinda scary if I’m being honest.” Yukari turned to look at the door with him. “And since Junpei isn’t here and you’re acting strange, I’d have to guess the two are related. Mind letting me in on your master plan, Doctor Jekyll? Or do I have to call Minako and ask if you murdered someone on your way to school?”

Minato shook his head. “If I murdered Junpei, Minako wouldn’t let me hear the end of it.” His head was getting tired of waiting, so he rested it in his palm. “Besides, he’s the only one who can hold a decent conversation about video games other than the bane of my existence. Letting him die means I’m stuck hearing about the story rather than battle mechanics, combos, character move sets, skill trees, graphic design—”
“-I think I get it, you can stop now.” Yukari glanced at him. “That still doesn’t answer my question, what did you do? Blackmail him?”

“Something like that.” Minato reached for his school bag, knowing that he could trust his teammate to keep her mouth shut for the surprise. Not taking his eyes from the door for a second, he dug into the main pocket and lifted the key item to the prank just enough for Yukari to get a glimpse. “Feast your eyes on this.”

What she saw made her gasp, hands going up to stifle a fit of giggles. “You didn’t! That’s so mean!”

“I did and I’m not sorry,” Minato shoved the object back in his bag, “There’s no way he can miss finals when I threatened to burn it on my way back to the dorm.”

Before Yukari could respond to the dark comment, both noticed someone entering the room quite quickly. Both perked up, expecting to see their fellow SEES member.

Unfortunately, Miss Toriumi was the one walking through the doorway, thick vanilla binder under her and a coffee thermos raised high for all to see.

“Dangit,” Yukari started moving her chair back to her own desk, “At least he still has a few minutes. The teachers can’t start the test until five after the bell, and even then, some wait for the tardy students to sprint inside.”

Minato only hoped that was the case.

This had to work.

Other students noticed their teacher taking a position at her podium, taking out a thick stack of papers. A group of girls behind Minato actually squealed as if the woman was sharpening a butcher knife meant to chop them to pieces. He heard Kazushi from halfway across the room tell his neighbor that they were screwed, based solely on the size of the paper stack and Miss Toriumi’s unassuming grin. Another student responded to the situation by getting up and asking to leave for a “drink of water,” only to run out the door in tears.

Minato was one of the few individuals who sat calmly in their seat and waited for the test to be passed out. Albeit, the number of those students were few and far between.

It became apparent quite quickly who had prepared and who studied the night before.

Miss Toriumi huffed and rubbed her hands together.

“Now, I know the bell hasn’t rung yet and the rule is to start five minutes after, but it looks like everyone is either here or checked in with me.” She reached under her podium to grab the attendance clipboard. “Let’s do a quick roll call, and just maybe, we can get going early. You guys might just be the first to lunch if everything goes well. We’ll go in alphabetical order, so be ready when you hear your name coming up. Tatsuya Amano-Suou Junior?”

“Here!”

As his teacher started calling names, Minato began to panic. Junpei still remained unaccounted for and the final exam may commence ahead of schedule.

A flaw in an otherwise perfect plan: the unpredictable variable of time.
“Minato Arisato?”

Minato raised his hand.

“Here...”

“Good, Makoto Cyphre?”

“Sup.”

Where could Junpei be? Minato was certain that he reset the other boy’s alarm to wake him up with enough time to get to school.

“Chihiro Fushimi?”

“H-here, Miss Toriumi!”

Now the teacher was getting lower on the list of names.

“Come on,” Minato thought, “Hurry up and get in here!”

“Mamoru Hayase?”

“Present.”

Only one more name before the whole escapade failed.

Minato crossed his fingers and hoped for the best.

“Kohei Horikoshi?”

“Hi...”

It was too late.

The plan failed miserably.

“Junpei I-”

Just as Miss Toriumi spoke, a navy blue and white mess burst into the classroom. The bell sounded off seconds after but not fast enough to count the newcomer as tardy. Half the students jumped at the sudden entry but most simply looked around in confusion at how rapidly everything happened.

Miss Toriumi frowned at the nearly late individual.

“. . . Iori.”

Minato could not have asked for a better outcome. The poor soul, drenched in sweat, double over in pain, school bag abandoned on the floor, and unable to stand straight arrived as planned. He even had all his clothes in order, no matter if they were slightly askew or the shoes ended up on the wrong feet.

Best of all, Junpei Iori was missing his signature ball cap, leaving a clean buzzcut for all to behold.

Yukari trembled uncontrollably in front of Minato.

Dreams do come true.
“I’m h-here!” Junpei said through labored breaths. “I sprinted all the way, but I’m here!”

Miss Toriumi looked him up and down but said nothing on the manner of his disruptive entry into class that morning. She was too respectful to make the embarrassing appeal.

“I can see that. I’m glad you could join us today.” She motioned for him to sit. “On that note, allow me to fill you in on what you missed. We’ll begin the test once roll call is complete. Please take your time to settle in so we can move this along.”

Junpei muttered a quick “thanks” and scrambled to his desk, head down to avoid the stares of his peers.

“Now,” Miss Toriumi made a mark on the attendance sheet, “I left off at Rio Iwasaki. Miss Iwasaki? You’re not planning on sprinting into class, are you?”

“Good morning and no ma’am.”

Minato heard Junpei’s chair scrape against the tile and his friend sitting down. He didn’t need to look away from the teacher to know the latter was glaring holes through his skull.

“I’m gonna kill you later.”

While Miss Toriumi continued running through the list of names, Minato dug the missing hat out of his bag and tossed it across the separating aisle to a pissed off Junpei. It landed with a soft thunk on the plastic surface of his desk. Unlike what the threatening note implied, the item in question was unharmed.

Mission successful.

“Good luck on the test.”

“Go to hell.”

Me: How are you doing?

Minako Arisato: hold up, ur not supposed 2 b texting during the test

Me: The teacher hates his job almost as much as Mr. Ekoda. He left an hour ago to sleep in the teacher’s lounge, so we won’t get caught.

Minako Arisato: sounds fake but ok

Minako Arisato: struggling on Q53 (if u must know)

Me: The one where you translate the passage from Journey to the West? I finished that a long time ago.

Minako Arisato: yup, did I ever mention I h8 french cause shoot me

Me: I still think it’s unfair that you have to take the class. You’re the only one in 3-D (besides Bebe) who hasn’t been here since freshman year. You could’ve been offered an alternative in a language you’re actually good at.

Minako Arisato: wanna beat up the faculty 4 me? I’ll make all the pancakes if u do
Me: I can’t do that, but since I think you’re being set up to fail, I can give you hints line-by-line. It’s not cheating if I don’t give you the whole thing.

Minako Arisato: IDK, I’d feel bad

Me: What about your academic scholarship? If you fail even one test, don’t you have to pay tuition like the regular students? Who’s gonna pick up the tab if that happens?

Minako Arisato: mrrgrgr, ur right

Me: Well?

Minako Arisato: screw it, help me

After four straight days of tests and stress and life being an overall mess, finals came to a close on Saturday, the eighteenth of July. Class 2-F practically erupted in applause considering that their final exam was dispensed by the demon lord himself: Mister Ekoda. One kid hijacked the whiteboard and issued the previously mentioned title himself, earning detention in the process via additional homework over the break.

The kid now stood as a God amongst men.

Yukari couldn’t be more relieved as she, Minato, Junpei, and Fuuka walked out of the school together. Too happy to care about anything else, she even tolerated her rival’s annoying whoops of joy.

“I’m done, baby!! Woo!” Junpei through his arm up and continued to shout. “The dark days of testing are finally over and the sun is shinin’ bright! Now, this is what freedom feels like!”

“So, how’d you do?” Yukari asked, knowing full well the answer to the question.

“I aced P.E!” Junpei said.

That pretty much answered the question.

Fuuka, bless the girl’s heart in wanting to support her teammate, clapped her hands. “That’s amazing, Junpei-kun! I always struggle with that part of finals.”

Next, Yukari directed her attention to Minato. She saw no point in asking how he did, based on his smirk when getting their scores back earlier.

That and her fellow classmates were nice enough to screech that he was now in second place for their grade, only one point behind Fuuka. Her scores in physics put her counterpart slightly behind in the rankings, but he voiced no complaints on the matter.

“Hey, Minato, you ready for summer break? Got any big plans?” Yukari asked.

The boy looked up from his shoes, momentarily dazed at being addressed.

“Break?” Minato said, “Yeah, I’ve been slacking on violin lately, so I plan to put in a lot of practice in between missions. Can’t let Minako beat me when she doesn’t have a proper piano to practice on.”

The siblings played instruments? How come Yukari never knew this before today?
Then again, it made sense the more she thought it over. Matching headphones and MP3s, singing while working on homework or chores, the constant lyric references to old artists, having musical talents of their own would fit right in with the trend.

“Did Minato-kun say something about violins?” Fuuka poked her head into the conversation. “We should have a joint practice with Minako-senpai over the break now that there’s time! Didn’t you say a few weeks ago she has an electric keyboard handy? We can move it to the lobby where there’s better acoustics.”

Junpei followed up with a wide smile. “If you guys are having a jam session, mind if I bring my bass? I know it ain’t a classy instrument like violin, but I can still play, right?”

“The more, the merrier!” Fuuka said. “Doesn’t that sound great, Minato-kun?”

“I couldn’t hurt to have someone on the bass clef.” Minato answered.

Yukari couldn’t help but chuckle at the other three’s excitement. “Speaking of practice, I don’t have archery today because of finals. Anyone up for something fun to celebrate our freedom?”

“Fuuka!”

Just as the question was asked, Yukari and the others were interrupted by a familiar voice coming from behind.

They all turned to see who had yelled and saw Natsuki Moriyama running down the steps of the school building. Her light brunette hair bobbed with every duck and weave past other students in a hurry to get home. A few times, Moriyama accidentally collided with those around her but continued moving to catch up to Yukari, Junpei, Minato, and especially Fuuka.

“What's wrong, Natsuki-chan?” the tiny junior asked as Natsuki stopped in front of her. Fuuka’s classmate completely ignored the trio also present. It took a minute or two for the other girl to catch her breath, but soon enough, she was ready to speak.

“Do you think you can stay after school with me for a mandatory study session? There’s, like, no one-” Natsuki paused when she finally noticed the other behind Fuuka, face dropping at the realization of what was going on. “Oh, you're going back to your home-home today, huh? Sorry to bother you if-”

“Hey, wait. It's alright. Let's go!” Fuuka threw an apologetic wave to the others before skipping off with her new friend. “Sorry, I'll see you all later back at the dorm!”

Soon, the two had scampered back inside the school.

Junpei whistled, seemingly impressed by what they all just witnessed. “I’m really surprised at how much she's changed. It’s like they’ve been friends forever.”

“Ah, friendship! How beautiful! Adolescence is such a wonderful thing! So full of vibrancy!”

Another voice called out to the now group of three, this time, a man.

Yukari noticed the voice belonged to the Chairman, standing behind them near the school’s main gate. His hand was raised to beckon them closer. Not wanting to keep him waiting, Yukari took off towards Ikutsuki, Minato, and Junpei following at her heels.

“Mr. Chairman!” Yukari greeted as she came to a stop, the boys doing the same. “If you’re here,
then that probably means there’s something we should know. What’ve you got for us?”

Ikutsuki hummed in agreement. “I just stopped by to pick something up so I thought I might as well introduce you to a new face.” He looked over his shoulder. “Ken! Come out and meet everyone! Don’t be shy!”

From behind the school gate, a young boy donning a Gekkoukan elementary school uniform and orange vest strode out, hands behind his back and sharpened gaze on his destination. Each step towards Ikutsuki and the juniors picked up speed to accommodate for a pair of short legs, bordering on a light jog by the time he came to a stop in front of them.

“Hello,” Ken said. “It’s nice to meet everyone.”

To the others, this boy was new.

To Yukari, he happened to be a familiar face.

Not wanting to come off as a complete stranger, she took the initiative to greet him, hopefully breaking the ice to engage with everyone else.

“Hi, Ken-kun. Sorry if I haven’t been around the Shrine lately.” She chuckled. “Finals had my schedule tied up with studying, but I’ll be paying the place a visit now that they're over.”

“That’s fine, I’ve been busy too.” Ken seemed grateful that he wasn’t a complete outsider to the group, he had someone to lean on. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You know him?” Minato said next.

“Yup,” Yukari walked behind Ken and put her hands on his shoulders. “He and I see each other at Naganaki Shrine every now and again. He’s really good at soccer, so I practice passing the ball with him whenever I’m there.” She then turned to the Chairman. “But why’s he tagging along with you? Shouldn’t he be on his way back to the elementary dorms by now?”

“He doesn't leave during the break because of his... circumstances.” Ikutsuki explained to her. “But, staying at the elementary school dorm all by himself isn't proper for a child his age. So, I decided to move him to your dorm for the summer.”

What an odd arrangement, moving a non-SEES member into the Iwatodai dorm. And a child barely old enough to be on his own? Of all the Chairman’s ideas since Yukari first met him, this one confused her most of all.

Even still, whatever the reason, Ken may fit right in with his more mature personality. That and another friendly face walking around sounded appealing.

“To OUR dorm!? Do you really think that's a good idea!?” Junpei exclaimed, drawing all eyes to him.

Ken shifted in Yukari’s grasp, spurring her to shoot a glare at the cause of the boy’s discomfort. “Ever heard of something called ‘using your brain’? There’s probably a reason he’s staying at our dorm.”

Ikutsuki nodded. “Why, of course!” He lowered his voice. “He has the potential.”

Yukari should have guessed that from the get-go. No one stayed in the dorm unless they were a candidate for the team.
But a child?

“What’s going on over here?”

The juniors, Ken, Ikutsuki, and Yukari all perked up to find that they were joined by Minako and Akihiko, a crowd of the latter’s fans camped out nearby and waiting to strike. Despite those girls watching his companion while frothing at the mouth, Minako smiled as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Yukari soluted her upperclassmen for remaining cool under pressure. How they did so with battle-ready witches breathing down their necks, hungry for blood, alluded her.

“Ah, if it isn’t Miss Arisato and Akihiko. Congratulations on completing your finals.” Allow me to introduce you to our newest candidate for SEES, Ken Amada.” Motioning to Minako, the Chairman resumed introducing the youngest among them to everyone. “Ken, this is our field leader I told you about on the way here, Minako Arisato. If you join our official operations, you will report to her for all mission detail and anything else that comes with it.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Arisato-senpai.” Ken stepped out of Yukari’s reach to shake Minako’s hand. “Ikutsuki-san said the field leader was a super nice person but isn’t afraid to call her teammates out. I promise to stay on your good side.”

Minako accepted the gesture enthusiastically. If she had any disputes with a child joining SEES on the front lines, it never showed for the sake of civility. “Don’t worry about getting me riled up, especially with those manners. Feel free to talk to me if you’ve got any questions!”

However, unlike Minako, Yukari noticed Akihiko’s less than ecstatic grimace at the boy, giving the Chairman a raised eyebrow.

“Then, he's the new candidate?” he asked. “I know we can always use new faces on the team, but he’s still a kid.”

Ikutsuki chuckled Akihiko’s concern. “I understand your reasoning and trust me, I have thought long and hard over this decision. I continue to as the next mission approaches,” he emphasized. “For now, in light of his age, it is merely a possibility. There’s time to mull this over.”

Just as Ikutsuki finished speaking, Ken took the opportunity to scamper away from Minako and right up to Akihiko as the two senior were mere feet apart.

“Hey, are you... Sanada-senpai?”

Akihiko gave himself some space between himself and Ken. “Um,” he averted his gaze, “Yeah. . .”

Ken only stepped closer, growing more excited now that he knew who the boxer was. “I’ve heard a lot about you! You haven’t lost a boxing match yet! You’ve gotta tell me some of your secrets, just in case we fight the you-know-what’s together. I won’t let you down.”

Again, Yukari saw apprehension in Akihiko’s eyes, deeper than before.

Why did he shy away from someone asking for advice on how to fight better?

“I—I’ll think about it... but it’s nice to meet you, Ken Amada.”

By a happy accident, everyone decided to hang out together in the lobby after dinner.
Akihiko, too antsy about the new of Ken Amada’s potential recruitment to SEES but too sick of staying in his room, decided to enjoy a quiet night in the company of others.

Plus, a certain somebody decided to bake an apple pie and fill up the downstairs with a pleasant cinnamon scent. Call it an added bonus.

Junpei and Minato went to town on a video game that involved a “wacky woohoo pizza man” and his nephew trying to cut down a giant satanic tree (their words, not Akihiko’s). It actually looked fun whenever the lone male senior decided to look up from polishing his favorite pair of boxing gloves. The other two boys relished in getting the longest chain of attacks or defeating waves of enemies with an intricate combo, taking almost forever to perfect their technique.

If only Akihiko could wrap his head around why a middle-aged demon hunter used a cowboy hat as a weapon, maybe he would try the game out for a few minutes.

Minako positioned herself towards the TV her brother and Junpei played on, but rather than watching them, she chose to read a book. “The Last Lecture” by Randy Pausch and Jeffery Zaslow” was written on the spine. Occasionally, she held back laughter or bit down on her lower lip, as if to keep from saying something out loud. Whatever the book’s story, it obviously had enough of an impact to garner such reactions from the usually well-composed leader.

It made Akihiko wonder what went on inside that head of her’s. More than likely, he would find a jumble of thoughts that could power a city for days.

Fuuka relaxed on the same sofa as the field leader and immersed herself in her laptop. She had no trouble staying focused on the screen, typing away with a nice acoustic playlist going on in the background for everyone to listen to. The pacing was a far cry from what Akihiko listened to but the calming ambiance it brought more than made up for the unfamiliarity.

Mitsuru updated the school on the dorm’s computer about the state of the dorm, minus anything that pertained to SEES. Once that had been taken care of, she moved on to tidying up the mailboxes and getting a new sign-in sheet for the others to use.

Yukari sat in the kitchen to “protect” the cooling apple pie meant for tomorrow night. What she was protecting the dessert from, she refused to give a direct answer.

At all costs, the two girls tried to look too busy to socialize with their teammates.

If their isolation had anything to do with the meeting from a week ago, Akihiko would not be surprised. Even he had a hard time just thinking about the shouting match that took place between his friend and Takeba, the way she questioned the veteran member’s reasons for fighting left more than a bitter taste.

And the revelation about the accident that took Minako and Minato’s parents, it could have been prevented if not for one man’s crazed ambitions. They were a needless casualty in a battle that, according to the Kirijo corporation, never existed.

How could anyone in that room erase the absolute hopelessness in the Arisato siblings’ eyes from memory?

His warning all those months ago to Mitsuru and Ikutsuki came full circle. Keeping secrets only led to division among the ranks.

“Y-You know,” Fuuka broke Akihiko’s train of thought, “Minato-kun mentioned what he’s doing for summer break, but what about everyone else?”
Junpei groaned and stopped playing his video game. “I wish I could go to the beach. Hot sand, cool breeze. . . Babes in bikinis! Somewhere in the south, where the water is crystal clear.” He splayed out on the floor, eyes closed as if imagining the scene in his head only to turn sour. “Ugh, but I don’t have that kind of money. What a drag. . .”

“I can’t remember the last time Minato and I went on vacation.” Minako set her book aside as she mulled over the numbers. “Was it back in ’04? No, longer than that. . . ‘98? Yeah, I’m pretty sure our last trip was back in 1998.” She slumped over the arm of the sofa. “Yup, now I’m sad too.”

“Come on, guys! It’s not the end of the world!” Yukari finally decided to join the main group and sat herself down next to Minako. “We literally live right next to the ocean. There’s gotta be someplace cheap and close by.”

“Not gonna happen,” Minato shot her down. Despite a nonchalant answer, his face dropped at the reminder he hadn’t taken a vacation in over twelve years. “Even if we had enough money saved up, there’s no shoreline for fifty square miles outside the city, unless you wanna get hit by a barrage or something. Don’t believe, read the news about those guys who got hit by a fishing boat the other day and the public safety notice issued afterward.”

Another idea shot down by the dorm’s resident mood-killer.

“I’d love to go somewhere famous for its beautiful beaches, like Okinawa.” Fuuka said.

“Me too. . .” everyone said in unison, minus Akihiko and Mitsuru.

The more the group talked about vacations and getting out of Iwatodai for the break, the more Akihiko wanted to join in on their dream dreaming. Beaches with clean sand and saltwater were training havens for those looking at an intense cardio regimen. Trying to run through either posed a unique challenge and swimming in the ocean meant dealing with unpredictable currents or sea creatures. Professional athletes often moved to such locations for training camps or longer, depending on the sport.

That, and despite popular belief, he needed a break from the claustrophobic streets of the city.

If only it were possible to getaway.

“What’s with all the doom and gloom? You should be enjoying your youth!”

As if to rub salt in the gaping wound, the Chairman had decided to come waltzing in the front door. Unlike earlier that day, Ken was absent at his side, but that perpetual smile he wore remained.

Mitsuru was the first to bow and greet him at the front desk. “Mr. Chairman, I didn't realize you were coming here tonight. My apologies if we seem underprepared for a visit.”

Ikutsuki swept his gaze across the room at the scattered mess of teenagers. “I happened to be in the area, so I thought I'd drop by and tell you my schedule for next week.” He returned to Mitsuru. “First off, your father will be vacationing in Yakushima during the break. He invited me out to the island for a security meeting and an in-depth update on the team’s progress these past few months.”

“He will?” Mitsuru asked.

Akihiko knew that the head of the Kirijo family was constantly on the move. It made sense as his company spread far across the globe in almost every major economic country, except Germany, but that would probably change in the coming years. Not to mention his work ethic which became
internationally known by anyone who so much as had a toe in any area of entrepreneurship.

To hear that her father decided to settle in for a holiday was surprising, and better yet, he decided to go to Yakushima. Akihiko had only visited the island once with Mitsuru and Shinji for Shadow hunting purposes. They stayed for a week at the former’s vacation working on Persona summoning, endurance work, and one day, they spent by the ocean just messing around in the water.

To say he wanted to go back was an understatement.

“That’s the one,” Ikutsuki swiveled to the others. “Secondly, it sounds like all of you will be in town for summer break, hmm? Why don’t we go there and pay Mister Kirijo a surprise visit? He’s been wanting to finally meet the new SEES for some time now.”

Junpei was on his feet in mere seconds. “Seriously!?! We’re gonna go on a trip!?” Both his arms were flung to the ceiling. “YES! Beach babes, here I come!”

The exasperated archer of the group uttered rolled her eyes at Iori’s reaction. “Men….”

“How about it, Mitsuru?” Ikutsuki asked. “I can make the proper arrangements by midnight.”

Akihiko could see his old friend stiffen from across the room.

“But… my father is a busy man; I don't want to ruin his vacation.”

Ikutsuki shook his head. “No father would be upset with a daughter who came all that way to see him. You've all done a great job. You deserve to relax for a while. We already know when the next operation will be, so it should be fine.”

For a moment, Mitsuru stood firm to consider the offer on the table. The rest of SEES waited for the slightest change or confirmation of a decision being made.

Until the heiress smiled.

“Alright. I guess everyone needs a break now and then. Let's do it.”

Yukari and Fuuka abandoned their seat and laptop respectively to commence the celebration.

Junpei whooped along with the girls and yanked Minato away from their video game to join the others. “We’re goin’ on vacation! Lock up your daughters cause Iori’s coming in fast!”

Minato struggled to break out of Junpei’s death grip. “Why does this always happen to me?”

The once quiet dorm exploded with laughter as the group made plans to go shopping for all the necessary equipment for the getaway. Everyone pitched in to help, whether scribbling down ideas or suggesting shops to buy a swimsuit from. The noise got to be so much to handle, Akihiko felt a headache coming on the longer he sat on the sidelines watching it all go down.

At least his wish to do some beach training came true. He already started going through a mental catalog of exercises to try when they arrived in Yakushima.

With no possible way to concentrate on his own thoughts anymore, Akihiko got up from his seat, slunk out of the lounge, and made a break for the back door. A nice, long walk to clear his head had been long overdue from the past few days. The roads were usually pretty quiet right about now which meant no distractions.
He didn’t bother to check if anyone caught him sneaking out as the voices of his dorm mates faded into the background. They were too wrapped up in their own enthusiasm to care about him and whatever he was doing.

By the time his hand was on the brass knob, he already had a route in mind.

He opened the door.

He stepped outside.

Just as Akihiko began to close the door behind him, something or someone intercepted the action.

“Little late for a jog, don’tcha think?” Minako’s joking voice asked from behind.

Of all people to catch him in the act of leaving the dorm, at least it was someone who wouldn’t flip their lid.

Maybe.

Akihiko turned around and looked down at the petite leader. “Aren’t you a little short to tell me what to do?”

“We don’t talk for almost a week and suddenly you have a sense of humor?” Minako rolled her eyes but instead of pulling him back in the building, she ushered him further out the door. “We should take this outside. I like bugs and all, but I don’t wanna find a ton of them in the kitchen tomorrow morning.”

“Good idea.” Akihiko stepped backward while Minako went forward, closing the door behind them. “And sorry if I took you away from the others. I was trying to be discreet.”

“It’s fine, Akihiko-kun.” Minako sighed. “Junpei and the nerd just challenged each other to a zero-damage red orb run on hard mode. Knowing them, they’re gonna get heated, Fuuka and Yukari will freak out, and I’m gonna have to break up a fight later. I might as well get some air while I still can.”

Akihiko narrowed his gaze. “One midget versus two hormonal teenage boys? Are you sure about?”

“I have Mitsuru-san to back me up!” Minako scoffed and motioned to herself. “Besides, I could always pull rank on them and say they’ll be on weapon’s duty for the rest of the year. Works every time with those two!”

It was nice to know SEES’s field leader had the younger members under control. Akihiko could only throw up his hands and mutter, “Alright, fair enough.”

Slowly, the girl began to approach him with crossed arms. “In all seriousness, seems a little incriminating sneaking out the back door without telling anyone. That’s a warning sign of someone about to rob a bank or start your own fight club,” she said. “You’re not gonna do something stupid like that, are ya?”

“Do you really think I’d rob a bank?” Akihiko asked.

“I was being sarcastic.” Minako clarified. “What I’m trying to say is the city’s a dangerous place, especially at night. Running around after dark screams trouble.” She lowered her voice to a not-to-subtle mutter. “And if Mitsuru-san finds out, you’re not gonna hear the end of it. Just sayin, for your protection and mine.”
“Says the person who got a black eye after doing the same thing.”

Minako rounded on him. “That doesn’t count! I was stopping the juniors from getting killed!”

Akihiko knew that calling the girl stubborn would be the understatement of the year, but Minako Arisato truly did not see her own hypocrisy for the sake of being right.

All he could do was give a defeated shrug. “If Mitsuru finds out, she’ll yell at me and forget about it the next day. And if you’re really that anxious, don’t be. You’re not the only one who can take care of themselves-” he reached out to bop her on the head, “-especially in the physical department, short stack.”

Minako tried to swat his hand away, only to thinly conceal of fit of giggles. “Keep that up and I’m putting you on weapon’s duty, too!”

“Don’t forget who made you field leader in the first place!”

“Should’ve thought about that when you gave up your pedestal!”

As the two continued their back and forth banter, Akihiko couldn’t help but feel glad that at least one of his friends actually treated him like a partner rather than a nuisance.

Shinjiro had always been a part of his life yet picked fights easily whenever they were together. Call it what one will, but even guys who fancied themselves strong didn’t find themselves in constant war with each other. How Akihiko and Shinji ended up this way, they may never know the answer.

Mitsuru, while an intelligent young woman and reliable leader, often acted just like Shinji when suited to benefit her. She could also stand to let certain subjects go. Just about everything in her mind could be picked apart to the bone even when there was no need. Did he even need to mention her constant meddling in his personal business or instance on him changing some of his more unique behaviors?

While Minako certainly had her moments of irritation, always holding her tongue or treating SEES like a herd of baby ducklings, she handled others in a comforting manner. She was patient in times of stress, working to balance team dynamics, and devoted energy towards their end goals. Despite her past and the hurdles in the way, she came out beaten but stronger for it.

Out of those three, who would Akihiko trust to understand his own situation? Who cared to get to know those around them and put effort into cultivating a meaningful connection?

Yes, having someone like Minako that around had made for a more harmonious relationship.

When the two had calmed down, Akihiko finally sighed and checked his watch. “I’m gonna get moving before it really gets too late.” He turned to leave the alleyway. “I promise I’ll be back before the Dark Hour starts. It won’t take long to clear my head.”

Minako nodded. “Just don’t come back with a new bruise, okay? I’m not gonna shield you from the wrath of Kirijo.”

“Right. . .” He threw one last wave and started to walk away. “I’ll see ya tomorrow morning.”

Unsurprisingly, she returned the gesture, standing closer to the back door and ready to go back inside to face the others.
“Goodnight, Akihiko-kun.”

Mitsuru climbed the stairs to the girl’s wing of the dorm, hand skimming the surface of the wooden stair railings. The voices of her dormmates dwindled the higher she went, carrying on as a sort of white noise, especially after months of bringing in a large influx of extroverts to the mix. A once quiet building now hosted a collection of differing personalities, all mixing and matching together to create a more lived-in space.

All that noise, despite the familiarity, made in all the more difficult for the young heiress to wrap her head around their upcoming events.

A holiday in Yakushima, preparing for expeditions into Tartarus, new recruits barely old enough to be considered as much, life for SEES was starting to pick back up again. Forget the last Full Moon mission, the hecticness of that event could not compare to what lay in the foreseeable future.

What troubled Mitsuru the most had to be seeing her father for the first time in almost a year.

Takeharu Kirijo was by no means a horrible man, nor was he a horrible parent. He did all he could to provide for Mitsuru over the years: sending her to only the best schools, putting a decedent roof over her head, keeping her posted on any new developments within the company, teaching her everything she needed know about their family.

He even found breaks in his schedule to call her, wherever his work decided to take him. If she was lucky, he might stop by for a surprise visit to the dorm on her birthday.

Some may see his actions as distant or calculated. Outsiders criticized a man and daughter’s relationship which they could not understand. There were even moments when Mitsuru was younger where she shared those same views.

However, that couldn’t be farther from the truth.

The patriarch of the Kirijo name simply had no time for messing around.

No, what Mitsuru feared was how he would react to her leadership over the past few months.

Would he praise her efficiency in drafting new faces?

Would he disapprove of her recent fumbles in transparency?

She would just have to find out once they reach Yakushima, even if she knew what he was going to tell her.

“Senpai!”

Just as Mitsuru reached the landing of the girl’s wing, she heard a voice calling from further down the steps. It forced her to stop in her tracks and wait for whoever decided to pursue her.

Appearing from around the corner was Yukari, hurrying up the steps.

“Takeba?” Mitsuru asked as the younger girl finally reached her at the top. “Is everything alright?”

Yukari took a moment to collect herself before shaking her head. “Yeah, everything’s just fine.” she assured, her expression becoming serious. “Can I talk to you for a second? Just you and me?”

A one-on-one conversation? Usually, the two almost never spoke unless others were present as
they didn’t quite get along. Especially after the meeting from a week ago, having everyone else to bolster her courage gave Yukari the chance she needed to let her true thoughts of Mitsuru out.

Mitsuru steeled herself for the worse. “If there’s something on your mind, I’d be more than willing to hear it—”

“-Actually it’s-!” Yukari began to interrupt only to cover her mouth quickly. “-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cut you off. Did you wanna say something first?”

“No, please continue,” Mitsuru, although taken aback by the sudden outburst, now had her interest peaked by the polite attitude of her teammate. “I’d like to know why you’ve decided to confront me alone rather than waiting for another meeting. It’s very... different, if you don’t mind me point it out.”

Yukari shrugged. “You’re right, I’ve gotta stop doing that.” She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. “But, I just wanna say sorry about the other day... during the meeting, I was out of line.”

An apology?

No yelling or critiques or verbal jabs, just an uncomplicated sorry.

Mitsuru cleared her throat. “Don’t worry about what happened—”

“-No!” Yukari interrupted again, this time, letting her emotions get the better of her. “No, it was humiliating for you and I made everyone feel so uncomfortable. Going around yelling and pointing fingers does nothing for the team, I realize that now. If I could go back and redo the whole thing, I would.”

The archer went on to explain in detail all her mistakes that night, some warranted while some made up in a frantic attempt to redeem what was left of her credibility. A handful of those reasons all dealt with her approach to the problem at large rather than the content which, thankfully, stayed true to her convictions and honest thoughts on the Kirijo family.

Mitsuru tuned out Yukari’s rant as she remembered what Akihiko said after the battle with the Emperor and Empress Shadows. His words rang loud enough to drown all other thoughts.

“Is that just a fancy way of saying you don’t trust them?”

“It’s about treating them like our equals. So what if they’ve suffered? We all lost something that night, yet you told Shinji and me the truth anyway.”

“What are we waiting for? For them to put the pieces together? They have everything to do it and Takeba’s already suspicious of all this. All it’ll take is one little push and we lose their trust for good.”

“You know as well as I do what needs to be done. Secrets will divide us.”

Her friend’s warning predicted their downfall; despite Mitsuru’s best intentions, burying the truth led to a world of trouble between the members of SEES.

The junior’s trust had dwindled to nothing.

The Arisato siblings were forced to relive their tragic past.
The fragile peace that held them together, now gone.

If anyone should feel at fault, Mitsuru and Ikutsuki deserved to bear that guilt.

With the trip to Yakushima on the horizon and a chance to make amends in their grasp, perhaps everyone deserved to know more from the very people who should take the blame.

“You’re not the one who should be sorry, Takeba.”

Yukari halted mid-sentence at Mitsuru’s declaration, her confusion plain as day.

“Mitsuru-senpai?”

Mitsuru hugged herself tighter. Admitting to one’s faults appeared to be harder when done on an interpersonal level, even for someone like a Kirijo.

“. . . It’s my way of saying I’m sorry, too.”

Contrary to popular belief, the city found time to sleep in a moment of calm before the Dark Hour took hold of the world. The movies and TV shows lied in that regard.

While sitting on the steps of Iwatodai station, drinking in the stars twinkling overhead, Shinjiro enjoyed these moments of disquiet.

Cars evacuated the roads and were tucked safely in someone’s garage. Stores closed their shutters, the owners either leaving to go home or heading straight to the nearest bar for a drink. Not a single person created foot-traffic on the sidewalks, leaving the air devoid of sound, save the occasional bug. Even the bums wandering the darkened alleyways hunkered down under a random bridge, keeping mostly to themselves unless their friends had nowhere else to be.

After all, there were only so many places to go once the sunset, no matter how creative some people got trying to seek shelter.

Exposure did not concern Shinjiro, not when the area behind the station practically belonged to him. Wind and rain barely touched that minute pocket of space. Now that its usual group of thugs decided to stay away from him (for fear of getting beat up), he could actually get a decent night’s rest.

“The perks of having a mean right-hook and a bad attitude,” he thought.

And as Shinjiro took in the atmosphere, the stars shined brightly beside a waning moon, the best company a man could have. No complaining or annoying chatter, they only twinkled above his head in silence.

Minding their own business. . .

If only everyone could be like stars. . .

However, that peace was shattered as footsteps approached from behind Shinjiro before coming to a stop not far from where he sat.

“Nothing to do as usual, huh?”

Of course, it had to be Akihiko fucking Sanada who ruined his night.
Without tearing his eyes away from the sky, Shinjiro scowled at the unwanted guest. “Why're you here? I thought I told you everything you wanted to know. If you came here to try and convince me, then forget it-”

“It's nothing like that so just shut up. I was just taking a walk and happened to see you.” Akihiko took the liberty to sit down next to the newly peeved stargazer. “I thought you might want some company so I came over to check on you.”

“Since when do I need anyone checking up on me?” Shinjiro asked through gritted teeth. “We're not fucking kids anymore.”

Akihiko ignored the comment, instead, focusing on the empty station grounds in front of them. Construction started a month back continued, with yellow tape and orange cones crowding up what little space there was.

“Can you believe it's been almost fourteen years since we met at the orphanage? You, me, and Miki. We used to run around here until the sun went down, getting lost in the crowd, stealing from the Takoyaki stand…” the platinum-haired teen mused aloud, only to chuckle. “Back then, it seemed like we had all the time in the world. We were invincible, huh?”

Shinjiro scoffed at his friend’s sudden need to bring up their childhood, especially when she was involved. Years ago, Akihiko would shut down and try to change the subject; now, he brought up those memories with a smile on that dumb face of his.

“It's rare for you to think about the past. Usually, you just charge ahead like a damn fool.”

“I do reminisce sometimes…” Akihiko mumbled.

Finally, Shinjiro decided to glance over and get to the bottom of whatever was actually going on.

“So obviously, there's something on your mind.”

Akihiko paused.

“. . . We finally know how to get rid of Tartarus and the Dark Hour.”

Shinjiro actually took a moment to be surprised. “No shit?” He leaned forward. “And you’re upset about that? You always hated staying up late, so what gives?”

The veteran member of SEES frowned at the question.

“A few days ago, someone made me question my reason for fighting. They said I’m just going along with something just to beat up a few Shadows. I mean, all I can think about is getting stronger and this. . . this is the best way to do that.” Akihiko shook his head. “And if it means I’m helping others along the way, why should I care if my reason is selfish? It’s a win-win situation. Everyone’s happy. . .”

“And?” Shinjiro pressed when Akihiko went silent. “Come on, I ain’t getting any younger. What’s the fucking problem here?”

Akihiko clasped his hands together, refusing to look directly at his childhood friend.

“Still, everyone else has some greater purpose in all this. Family legacy, duty, losing a loved one. I’m starting to wonder if mine is worth risking my life. Can I keep going knowing I may never be satisfied in the end?”
Shinjiro had about enough of the complaining. It’s not as if he couldn’t sympathize with Akihiko on deciding how to move forward, but the back-and-forth rambling and weighing the options helped no one.

“You can always quit. . .” the red-coated teen offered.

Akihiko scoffed. “I'm not doing that anytime soon.” Shinjiro felt a punch on his shoulder, although it was more restrained than a usual jab from the boxer. Instead, the action came off as playful rather than genuine anger of frustration. “Man, I can't believe I'm the one getting lectured here.”

Shinjiro returned the punch, the same amount of force behind his fist.

“You haven't changed at all, Aki.”

“Same goes for you, Shinji.”

The two spoke in hushed tones well into the Dark Hour. For the first time in years, Shinjiro actually felt compelled to keep the conversation going for as long as he could.

July 18th, 2009

First I aced my finals in the top ten, and then I find out we’re actually going on vacation! Ah! I’m so excited! Now, I have an excuse to finally buy a non-school swimsuit and not look like a complete idiot. Yukari and Fuuka (and maybe Mitsuru) are going shopping for some, too. Not to brag, but I’m gonna make sure those two (or three) look mad cute. Mom powers: activate!

Anyway, Akihiko and I had a nice chat before he snuck out of the dorm for a walk. He called me short, I pulled rank, we had a good time (at least I did). It’s been a while since I’ve had someone my age to talk to, especially a guy! Do you know how many jars I won’t have to open for the rest of the year!? I could just call him and he can suffer!

Or not... I mean, the guy kills Shadows with his bare hands. That’s gotta take A LOT of muscle. Maybe that’s why Minato hates him so much? The poor nerd is like a small dog barking at a bigger dog.

Pft, all I can think about is what kind of dogs everyone would be. To the internet!

- ME: Labrador Retriever (YAS)
- Minato: Shiba Inu (daw!)
- Yukari: Chihuahua (huh)
- Junpei: Great Dane (I mean, he’s really tall)
- Fuuka: Pug (double daw!)
- Mitsuru: German Shepard (not surprised)
- Akihiko: Boxer (lol get it? Cause he’s a BOXER!? I’M FUNNY)

Good thing no one read this. Can you imagine if the others found out what I think about on a daily basis?

Signing out of the journal,

Minako Arisato
So I've been keeping up on Person 5 (The Royal+Scramble) and Fire Emblem (Three Houses) news AND it got me thinking about some things. What would the members of SEES be like as Phantom Thieves? What would their class (knight, cleric, lord, etc) be in Fire Emblem?

Feel free to answer either one, I'm really curious.
First off, thank you to everyone in the comments for your support of the best mom in the world (fight me outside of Denny’s if you disagree). Her surgery went very well and we are waiting to see what happens in the near future, but so far, we’re looking cool! She sends her love to all y’all!

I’d also like to apologize for not uploading this chapter as quickly as I wanted to. I decided to take some time off to get my life in order and just enjoy myself before I go back to school again. It’s also given me a chance to mull over my own needs, future job prospects, among other things.

That, and “Fire Emblem: Three Houses” came out last month so I’ve been . . . busy. For those who know what I’m talking about or who love Fire Emblem, I choose the Golden Deer as my first house. I was gonna go with the Black Eagles but then Claude’s voice actor swayed me with his YouTube propaganda. I finished that route, S ranked Byleth with Claude, and I’m now thirsting for some juicy fanfiction of the two. Fear the deer (*does the secret sign of the GD while erasing all polygons from existence and posting spicy memes about hanging upside down*)!

That’s the long-hand way of saying: “You done goofed, Polygon. Claude is the real MVP.”

And since this has become a thing, I have a question because I’m genuinely curious. Does anyone else feel like Shinjiro would make a great Chef Gorden Ramsey?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_minato awoke to blinding darkness, a fuzzy brain, and tears streaming down his face._

“Wha-” He rubbed his blotchy eyes, raw and no doubt bloodshot from crying. _His timid murmur of a voice came out as no more than a hoarse whisper. “-What’s going on?”_

_for a moment, he sat staring straight ahead into the void, trying to come up with an explanation of his situation. One moment, Minato was sleeping peacefully in the safety of his bed, the next he was here with a sick feeling in his stomach._

_hugging his knees to his chest, he did his best to think. He had to be rational; he had to feel things out._

“Deep breaths,” he told himself and rocked in place to calm down, _“Minny said to take deep breaths. . .”_

_In for four counts._

_Out for four counts._

_In four._
Minato’s eyes began to accommodate for the pitch black and awareness of his surroundings came back in waves. He was crouched in a corner in the corner of a darkened closet that smelled like mothballs and old lady, knees to his heaving chest and air filled with dust. Various sizes of winter boots, coats surrounded him while two vacuum cleaners sat that may or may not be broken.

Although, what did it matter to him anyway if those machines were out of order; he was too small to operate them independently.

Wait... he was small?

Why would he be small?

No, Minato was four years old. Of course, he would be a little more on the puny side. There was no reason to ask such a question when he already knew the answer.

How long had he been here?

What was he doing?

The confusion made his head hurt, heartbeat continuing to race unchecked.

A pair of exaggerated footfalls broke Minato from his thoughts. They came closer and closer to his hiding spot with every heavy step, louder, more pronounced. If he didn’t know any better, there could be a giant monster on the prowl, in search of a child to gobble up for a tasty snack.

Minato perked up and waited with bated breath for what happened next. This was his chance to get some answers.

“Where’s my little Minnow?” an inquisitive voice asked. “I’m gonna find ya!”

Oh, he remembered now. It was a Sunday afternoon in spring. With no school today, nothing to do except relax, he was playing hide-and-seek to pass the time.

The person beyond the door was seeking him.

Minato was the one being hunted.

“Is he over here?”

The thump of an unseen door opening and closing reverberated, albeit muffled from where Minato lay in hiding. Someone snapped their fingers as if they were a villain foiled by an ingenious plot.

“Darn, he swam off again!”

Minato tried to stifle his giggles, not wanting to give away his position. His tiny heart hammered in his chest, despite knowing nothing bad would happen if he were caught.

However, it seemed as if he had been too loud. The footsteps paused and the one searching for the boy let out a low hum.

“What a laugh I heard?”

He did his best to make himself scarce, grasping his knees closer to his chest and watched the door to the closet. What little stripe of light that crept in was blocked by two silhouettes and Minato’s
excitement grew. All those long minutes spent hiding, alone, in the dark, and he was about to be reunited with the voice behind the door.

He wanted to be found already.

Unfortunately, after a beat of silence, there was a sigh from the other side.

“Aw, guess he doesn’t wanna come out.” The silhouette under the door vanished. “I wonder where my little Minnow is. I can’t wait to give ‘em a big ol’ hug when I find him!”

No, the person was walking away!

They were leaving him behind.

Why was that so scary?

Wasn’t he supposed to be hiding right now?

Minato shot up from his corner, nearly face-planting after tripping over shoes that got in his way. Quickly righting himself, he leaped towards the door and scrambled to open it. Slim fingers struggled to find the knob but he soon felt the coolness of metal on the pads of his skin.

He burst from the closet, being met with brilliant, afternoon light.

When Minato’s eyes adjusted from being in the dark for so long, he was met with the figure of a man, standing tall and proud. The sun practically set the adult’s russet hair on fire, like an angelic silver lining on a cloud. Even in a pair of slacks from another century and ugly collared shirt, he stood with a confidence that made the rest of his appearance glow.

A beaming smile nearly split the man’s face in two as he crouched down with arms wide open. “There’s my Minnow!” He cocked his head to the side, expectant and playful. “Come on, how ‘bout a prize for the winner? Just one and then we’ll make some lunch!”

Minato could sense tears threatening to spill out again.

His bottom lip quivered.

His chest constricted.

This made no sense. Why did he feel sad? They had only been separated for a few minutes. It was only a game that they had played only a thousand times before. Minato always hid in the same place, and every time, he would wait patiently until he was found, always counting on it to happen every round.

Then again, those minutes felt like years, the darkness too lonely to bear.

The young boy, practically choking on his own sobs, ran to those waiting arms and collapsed without a second thought. Caught in a tender embrace, he let those tears return and nuzzled into the man’s shoulder for whatever comfort Minato could hold on to. A strong scent of coffee and old papers overwhelmed his senses but that didn’t matter in the slightest.

He wasn’t alone anymore.

“I missed you, papa-”

BANG! BANG! BANG!
Minato shot out of bed, head and heart hammering at the sudden wake-up call.

He was no longer in his childhood home, finding himself in the confines of the dorm. His room remained unchanged from the day before; same clothes on the floor, same scattered CDs, same books on the desk, nothing out of the ordinary except his comforter which was now hanging off the side of his mattress. It might have been laying there before Minato’s spaz-attack, wither thrown off during the night or earlier that morning.

The banging noise from the dream continued, coming from his bedroom door. The brass knob rattled with every powerful hit yet no voice called out to him, rather, the knocking was a constant beat that refused to stop.

One of the only pleasant dreams about his father and he didn’t get to enjoy it to the end.

Minato could still feel those warm arms cradling him entirely, a burst of soft laughter echoing in his memory, telling the boy version of himself that everything was going to be okay. The scent of coffee lingered as if stuck to his clothing, in his hair, in the very air breathed. How he wished to spend a few moments more taking in that familiar scene.

Now, all he felt was the sticky humidity of summer. The only thing he could smell was a generic brand of shampoo, lifeless and flat compared to the strong cologne and bitter coffee beans in his dream.

He was alone.

As Minato shambled to his feet and check who so violently woke him, he swore to take vengeance on the mystery person at a later date. Not even two minutes after getting up and he was already conspiring to murder one of his dormmates.

“Sup, dude!” he said. “Sleep well?”

Minato did his best to muster a sliver of politeness, but instead, his words came out as a hostile seeth, accented with a sharp tongue and a chilling stare.
“What do you want?”

Junpei flinched sarcastically at his partner’s attitude. “You okay, man? You look like you got hit by a bus.” He looked past the shorter male and into the room. “And why’s your place a mess?”

Minato huffed at the observation. “Someone was trying to break into my room at—” he paused to look at the clock in the hallway “—Seven in the morning?” Now thoroughly peeved, Minato shot Junpei another deep scowl. “Seven AM? Someone better be dead or dying because it’s too early to put up with this shit.”

Rather than cave to the harshness, Junpei continued to smile.

“Jeez, sorry ‘bout that! It won’t happen again, promise!” The capped teen waved Minato off. “But enough about that, I was wondering if you wanted to go into town and get ready for the trip. The sooner we get out the door, the more traffic we can beat.”

A shopping trip?

That’s what was so important that Junpei nearly took the hinges off his friend’s door? And at seven o’clock no less!? He either had a death wish or was really that stupid to think knocking on someone’s door over and over was acceptable.

Minato willed himself to take a deep breath. Getting angry at someone idiocy so early in the morning did nothing for his long-term health. High blood pressure and heart disease are an epidemic among the male demographic and it all has to do with controlling one’s feelings of wanting to strangle people who do annoying things.

“Wouldn’t you rather take Minako? She’s a lot more of a shopper than I am.” Minato asked.

“She’s out with the other girls today and I don’t wanna bother her.” Junpei chuckled. “Besides, it’s been a while since the two of us hung out. Minako’s pretty cool and all, but sometimes, guys need time with their own kind. Bros gotta hang with their bros.” He clapped his hands together. “So, whaddya say? You in for some guy time?”

The offer did sound tempting.

For the past few weeks, Minato spent more time with the girls of SEES rather than the only other boy on the team whom he tolerated. While there was nothing wrong with hanging around the fairer sex, if that was all he did, he was bound to end up looking like the protagonist of a harem anime sooner or later. It was more trouble than it was worth and everyone involved looks bad.

Not only that, but since when had Junpei and Minato decided to take the day off and raise some hell on the town? There was so much the two of them could only do together and neither party had decided to come forward to ask.

Maybe this was a good opportunity to do just that.

After another moment to consider the offer, Minato sighed and gave a curt nod “Alright, you twisted my arm.”

“Sweet!” Junpei cheered before turning on his heel to leave. “Meet me downstairs in ten minutes! You won’t regret this, I promise!”

“Yeah…” Minato began to close his door. Even with plenty of time to get ready, it was better to start right away so they could leave the dorm as quickly as possible. “See you in ten.”
“Oh, hey!”

Minato had barely re-entered his room when Junpei stopped him once more. This time, he stood with slightly hunched shoulders, leaning heavily on the doorframe, and a stern expression on his face.

Where was this seriousness coming from?

“I know I've been kind of a dick lately. . .” Junpei’s eyes darted away. “The last mission, tests, personal stuff, and things are only gonna get worse. I shouldn’t be taking it out on you guys, especially you and Minatan. Not after all you two have done for me, treating me like a brother rather than a friend.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “How’s that phrase go? Don’t piss off the person that gives you stuff?”

Minato felt a twinge of sympathy for the other boy, knowing too well how actions can affect those around you. Even if there had been a noticeable change in Junpei’s demeanor, walking back to the dorm alone and not talking to Minato as often, that didn’t mean he was a bad person.

At least the problem had been addressed rather than left to stew.

“Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” Minato corrected and then softened. “Stop worrying about it. S’long as you’re not out to kill me, I can’t complain.”

Finally, Junpei cracked and snorted at the quip. “Yeah, that’s what I thought ya’ might say. Just wanna let you know what’s been going on and apologize for my shitty mood. That’s all history, now.” As a symbol of goodwill, he offered a fist-bump. “We're still cool? It's just you and me now, bro.”

Minato accepted the gesture.

“We’re cool. . . if you buy me lunch.”

At heart, Junpei really was the closest thing to a friend he had.

When her fellow senior and juniors had asked Mitsuru to go shopping with them for swimsuits, she was hesitant to say yes.

Despite mutually apologizing to Yukari, gaining the trust of Fuuka, and not being condemned by Minako, a lingering fear remained in the back of the young woman’s mind. Any little comment on the topic of Shadows or the Dark Hour had the potential to break their fragile peace.

However, in these trying times, Mitsuru also knew that team morale needed boosting. Even the smallest of actions to do so would go a long way in repairing the broken relationships among the members of SEES.

And so, Mitsuru hung on the fringe on the quartet of girls as they all picked over the selection of suits in front of them. She already had her own attire back at the dorm, but that didn’t stop her from helping the others find “the one.” They were on their third rack after twenty minutes of walking through the door of the store, having trouble finding the perfect thing to wear. The only person with any sort of success was Fuuka, on account of having an atypical size and no preference in style.

The frustration was starting to get to all the rest.
“Ugh, everything is either too risqué or not my size.” Yukari held up another swimsuit to inspect. “I swear, I have the worst luck when it comes to buying clothes.”

“Perhaps everything in your size was picked over? A lot of people buy their suits before the break.” Fuuka suggested.

Yukari threw back her head with an exasperated groan and continued leafing through the rack. Candy-colored bikinis and frilly one-pieces whisked by under her slim fingertips. “I just HAD to wait until the last minute, didn’t I? What a freaking joke.”

Mitsuru gave her underclassman and an amused grin. “Look on the bright side, you won’t be paying for this excursion. Consider it my treat.”

In an instant, Yukari perked up. “You’re serious!? That changes everything!” She pulled a pink bikini top with a matching pair of jean patterned swim shorts, showing them off like a cover model to her companions. “What do you guys think? I like the style but I don’t know if it’s too plain. Thoughts? Feelings?”

“I like that one. Simple and cute!” Fuuka said promptly.

Mitsuru nodded along. “I second Yamagishi, it’s an excellent choice if cute is what you’re looking for.”

“Looking cute IS important. Thanks!” Yukari turned to the last of the girls, Minako, who had yet to put in her two cents. “Minako-senpai! Are we all in agreement?”

Minako flinched at suddenly being addressed. Her hand immediately went to her chest as if shot by an arrow.

“Y-yeah, I like it!” the eldest Arisato said after a moment to collect herself. “I’d give it a shot if I had a figure like yours.”

“Can’t complain about that!” Yukari seized Fuuka’s arm and proceeded to drag the poor tech-junkie towards the fitting rooms. “Let’s try these on already. I can’t wait to see how your’s looks! It’s SUPER adorable!”

Despite being yanked along by her pier and nearly falling flat on her face, Fuuka giggled with a bubbly sort of energy, purse bouncing against her hip the whole way through.

“Slow down, Yukari-chan! I’m gonna trip!”

“Then hang on tight ‘cause I ain’t stopping!”

Once the excitement died down, Mitsuru was left alone with a dazed Minako, the silence between them thick yet comforting. It was a welcome change considering how hectic the past few days had been.

However, the silence ended when Minako sighed and turned to Mitsuru.

“I’m glad those two finally found something they actually like. I can’t remember the last time I was sprinting to the fitting room to try stuff on.” The russet-haired teen trained her gaze back on the rack and chattered mindlessly to herself. “Kinda makes me miss being that excited about buying new clothes.”

“Are you having trouble finding something to wear?” Mitsuru asked, growing worried about this
shift in the routinely bubbly leader’s tone.

Minako refused to look up from the almost numb, rhythmic scrape of clothing hangers against shimmering chrome. Instead, her answer came as more of a nonchalant murmur than an actual conversation, continuing to scroll through the options before her.

“I’m not swimming. I just tagged along because, God bless Junpei and Minato, I needed a day with the girls, for once in my life.”

Not swimming? On a beach vacation?

Mitsuru had to wonder, “What could this girl be thinking?” Anyone else with half of Minako’s energy or enthusiasm would jump at the opportunity to spend the break beachside.

“Nonsense, it’s too hot to just sit around and do nothing.” the redhead chided before sidling closer. “You’ll pass out for sure if you don’t cool off in the water. I’ve seen it happen more than a few times-”

“-Don’t worry about me.” Despite the reassurance, Minako seemed to deflate at having to interrupt so abruptly. In spite of that, the action got its point across quite clearly. “Honestly, I’m just not a big swimmer. I’m more than happy to sit on the sand and catch up on my reading like some grandma or judgemental aunt.”

Now, Mitsuru was equally confused and concerned.

Along with the juniors, Minako had been bursting with excitement when they received the green light to go to Yakushima. She cheered as they cheered, laughed as they laughed, going so far as to join in on Iori’s antics and tormenting her little brother. It was an unabashed joy for adventure and a getting to know one’s dorm mates on a new level, a level reserved for close friends or, goodness forbid, family.

She had smiled.

But when cornered and asked about her own personal plans, the not-so-recent transfer student clammed up tighter than a venus fly trap.

It just didn’t add up.

“What’s wrong?” Mitsuru asked, stepping closer.

The rhythm of scraping picked up steam as Minako was pressed to respond.

“Nothings wrong. You’re just a worrywart!”

“Then why do you seem so distant?”

“I’m focused.”

“On what?”

“Looking.”

“So you are interested in swimming.”

“That’s not-”
The back and forth call-and-response grew tiresome for Mitsuru. Her hand shot out to halt Minako’s scrolling, catching the latter off guard.

“I understand if you wish to keep it to yourself, but I have a sixth sense when someone is lying to me-” Mitsuru shook her head, “-And nothing you’ve said lines up with your earlier behavior. Forgive me if this sounds brash, but I refuse to believe that you would stand idly by while everyone else participates in this trip.”

The rare ghost of a frown appeared on Minako’s lips, gaze clouded with a fierce, determined intention. It was an expression that she wore many times during a difficult battle in Tartarus or previous Full Moon Missions.

She was calculating her next move.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” Minako repeated coolly. “I’ll be just fine.”

Stubborn.

Two can play at that game.

“So you admit something’s wrong.” Mitsuru clipped back, her authority as not only Student Council President but as the ultimate leader of SEES seeping through every note.

No response, only that same, darkened glower and a furrowed brow. Being backed into a corner was far from a good look and it showed on Arisato’s face.

Years of honing her skills as a leader told Mitsuru that she had won before Minako finally broke the serious facade, admitting her defeat with a breathy chuckle.

“You’re not giving up, are you?”

The young Kirijo softened. “I make it my business not to give up on my team.”

Minako shifted slightly and glanced around the store for curious eavesdroppers. It took only a minute or two for her to swing back to the conversation at hand. “I’ll tell you, but promise you won’t say anything to the others? I’m already uncomfortable sharing this out loud, let only with the whole group.”

“Not a soul.”

Again, Minako checked their surroundings, bordering on paranoia in the way she searched for even a hint of prying ears for the second time. By the time the former allowed herself to speak, Mitsuru’s anticipation wore thin as a fishing line.

“I can’t swim.”

Mitsuru regarded Minako with a sharpened gaze. Could this be another deflection to cover up the root of the actual dilemma?

“You’re kidding.”

Minako seemed to shrink at the confession.

“Ask Minato if you think so, but I swear, it’s the God’s honest truth.” she said, seemingly amused by the reaction of her peer. “You probably don’t know this, but Minato and I lived in the US for a year. My mom’s parents have a farm in the Deep South so they taught us everything there was to
know about cattle and hogs and all the rest. We would’ve stayed longer, but our dad’s older sister wasn’t too happy that we were being homeschooled by uncultured swine.”

Again, Mitsuru found herself in disbelief. She knew the siblings never stayed with one family for very long, but leaving their home country and coming right back because of a controlling relative was certainly a lot for a child to endure.

The question now was what this fact had to do with Minako and her inability to swim?

As if she could hear Mitsuru’s thoughts, Minako continued with her story, the tips of her ears began to turn a deep shade of red.

“My grandpa liked to take me out to the fields so we could watch the cows graze and keep an eye on the springers, typical stuff like that. There was this big pond where the herd could cool off on really hot days or get a drink. They couldn’t go very far in because of the depth, but it served its purpose.” She played with the strap of her purse hanging across her chest. “One day, when pap wasn’t looking, I had the bright idea to follow a calf and its mom near the edge of the water. I didn’t wanna scare them away so I climbed on some slippery rocks and tried to inch my way to them.”

The pieces of the story clicked in Mitsuru’s mind.

“You fell in?”

Minako nodded and the embarrassment left her face. It was quickly replaced by a remote stare, the color draining from her cheeks.

“I was so scared, I flailed around and got tangled up in the weeds. It felt like something was trying to pull me under and drown me,” she paused to take a deep breath, “My grandpa couldn’t get in, old age and all, so it took a while to get me out. By the time he did, I was a sobbing mess and covered in mud. Second worst day of my life, bar none.”

Seventeen years old, spunky, and hardly discouraged of taking on a leadership role danger, yet Minako was afraid of others knowing she had one understandable fear?

It felt like a betrayal to other’s expectations, but not all at once.

“Does your brother know?”

Minako let out a slight groan but seemed to finally regain her usual zeal, going as far as to offering a grin as she looked to Mitsuru. The expression was a needed shift from the heaviness that was bound to ensue, considering the subject being discussed.

Was she relieved because of a calm presence or, perhaps, the person she trusted to confide in understood her to some degree?

“I wish he didn’t, but if you haven’t noticed by now, he loves making other people feel like idiots.” Minako said. “When he was twelve, he read someone’s calculus homework out loud WHILE he worked through the problems. The best part is when he did all the multiplication by hand, no calculator.”

“Was it yours?”

“No, it was one of our cousins. She’s an honor student and Minato decided it would be funny to show off to her mother who called him a ‘spacey little crap monster with no formal education.’”
Mitsuru could no longer contain her bubbling amusement; not that she was surprised Minato Arisato had more than his fair share of clashes with anyone who wasn’t Minako, but to have the audacity to go after an adult. It sounded like something out of a movie. A few poorly concealed chuckles escaped her lips at the image of a young, azure-haired punk of a boy mouthing off (in math) to some estranged relative with an ax to grind.

A relatable image considering her own familial situation, save her father.

“The more I learn about your brother, the more I question bringing him on as a member of SEES. We’re lucky he proves to be a valuable asset and cooperates in the field.” Mitsuru shook her head. “Well, if you discount his behavior towards his seniors and penchant for dark humor, he’s somewhat tolerable.”

Minako gave the young heiress a comically bewildered frown. “Am I having a nightmare or did I just hear the Mitsuru Kirijo crack a joke?”

“Assume the former. I have a reputation to upkeep.”

At the second quip, it was Minako’s turn to laugh. Her cheeks flushed in an effort to keep from unwanted stares, and yet, carried above all other voices in the clothing shop. Thankfully, she used the sleeve of her summer-friendly, pink cardigan to muffle the sound to just her and Mitsuru.

Whether it was forced or not didn’t matter. What mattered was the much-appreciated levity in the field leader’s presence, a certain calm that had been absent since the beginning of their outing to the mall. It became all too familiar that since the start of the school year and without it, the gap was more than glaring.

Who would have predicted it was the stoic mastermind of SEES that brought Minako back to her senses?

“Ah, I never thought I’d see the day!” Minako sighed, coming down from her brief fit. “But thanks for taking this seriously. I’m tired of getting teased at by the nerd, even if it’s kinda stupid.”

“Nonsense, I’ve heard far stranger insecurities. I’d be glad to share sometime if it’ll put your mind at ease.” Mitsuru shook her head. “That said, I still believe you should buy a swimsuit for the trip. If the weather conditions were less daunting, I might’ve let this slide. However, they are simply too glaring an issue.”

“But-”

As Minako began to protest, Mitsuru held up a finger.

The time had come to apply some of her father’s business tactics and strike a deal.

“You are under no obligation to swim if you so wish, but you should be comfortable on your vacation. God forbid, if you are pressured to get in the water, I’ll deal with the person myself and my family’s security detail. Garbage has no place on the beach.” she clarified and offered a handshake. “Do we have a deal-”

Minako had no chance to respond. She doubled over and laughed until the other girls came back from the changing rooms, confused but they rolled with it.

But judging how Minako let Yukari dive straight into the suit rack and throw potential selections at her, Mitsuru’s gambit was successful.
SmolHacker: Minato-kun, can you do me a favor?

Me: school or personal?

SmolHacker: both? Kinda?

Me: lay it on me

SmolHacker: Mitsuru wanted to use the computer in the operation room, but it doesn’t seem to be working. Would you be able to look at it tonight before we leave for Yakushima?

Me: sorry if I’m being rude but aren’t computers ur thing?

SmolHacker: I have a few of my own projects to finish tonight and this should be an easy fix. I did make things easier for you if that’s what you’re worried about. I left a note of my observations and a list of websites to guide you.

Me: understandable, leave it 2 me

SmolHacker: Thank goodness, I was worried I would have to use one of my “favors.” Guess I was wrong! You still owe me! Twice!

Me: haha very funNY

SmolHacker: By the way, I noticed you have nicknames for everyone. I like mine but. . . who is “TheBaneOfMyExistance”? 

Me: Minako

SmolHacker: Um. . . okay? Does she know?

Me: she’s the 1 who put it in

Me: and y did u hack my phone?

SmolHacker: No reason

Me: fair, see u @ dinner

As the official brain of the Arisato siblings, Minato prided himself on his home improvement skills.

The average person tends to leave it up to “experts” when dealing with projects concerning home improvements. However, Minato saw no reason to trust someone who is getting paid to fix as many problems as possible. So, from a leaky faucet to his beaten up laptop, all it took was throwing some questions into Google, a swiss army knife, maybe some other tools and the problem was no more.

At times, it could be quite therapeutic to receive such problems and come up with easy solutions. It also saved his older sister from paying a third party to do the same job for more and gave him bragging points.

Perhaps the others caught wind of this skill and decided to put it to good use.
When Minato and Junpei got back from their shopping day, the girls discovered that the consul in the command room was on-the-fritz. The large monitor refused to produce a clear picture, no audio played from the speakers, and numerous red lights went off on the dashboard.

No one knew what caused this to happen and the tech-savvy Fuuka was busy with a project of her own to help.

It was the perfect time to step in and show off.

After a Kirijo-funded trip to the hardware store and some detailed reading on the internet, Minato had a handle on the situation.

“Can you pass me the new wire?” Minato reached out from where he was trying to replace one of the many cords that had long overstayed their welcome. His casual clothes were replaced with a paint-dappled sweatshirt, sleeves rolled up with equally ruined basketball shorts. A tiny flashlight was aimed upwards so he could view the underbelly of the monster he was attempting to fix.

“Here ya’ go, dude.” Junpei, who also decided to observe instead of packing for Yakushima, held out the right item. “Where’s this going to?”

Minato went to work on making the proper connections. “This is for the audio. There was some corrosion in the old wiring; I’m shocked it didn’t start a fire.” It was difficult to hold on to the flashlight and rearrange everything accordingly, so he stuck out the tool for Junpei to grab. “Wanna get under here and hold this for me? It’s just one last thing and we’re done for the night.”

“Hang on a sec.” Within no time at all, Junpei had shimmed his way under the consul, having to forgo his baseball cap but there were no complaints. He held up the flashlight, an almost perfect angle. “Is this okay?”

“Good,” Minato was now able to have both hands free to do as he pleased, “Hold it steady. I don’t wanna electrocute myself before dinner.”

The two fell into relative silence, the only source of the noise was music from a small stereo Junpei brought in. The driving beats a drum and epic guitar rifts filled in the blank space where talking should occupy. Every now and then, if it was a familiar tune, Minato would hum along while connecting different parts of the computer back together.

After all the chaos with their last mission, studying for finals, and even keeping up with classmates, it was difficult to get back to a state of normalcy. Of course, there was no escape from what would inevitably be increased Shadow activity, that was a given when one was a member of SEES.

Once the last cord had been set in place, Minato brought his hands to rest on his stomach. His eyes scanned and checked to see that everything was in order. Not a single wire looked to be out of place.

“Are we done yet?” Junpei asked. “I’m starving.”

As if on cue, Minato heard the door to the lounge open.

“It’s almost time to eat, boys!” a voice practically sang, belonging to Minako. She approached the consul and looked under, her ponytail flopping upside down. A sweet scent overpowered the senses, she must have been making a desert before she came up to see the boys. “Did ya’ guys figure out the problem yet?”

Minato hummed and started to wiggle his way out. “Just some wiring issues, nothing too hard to
“fix.” He heaved himself to his feet and took a seat in one of the office chairs in front of the dashboard, Junpei deciding to claim the other, pressing various buttons to boot up the computer. “Let’s test this dinosaur real quick and then we can call it for the day.”

“Sounds like fun.” Minako came up behind his chair and leaned in to watch the magic happen. “Here’s to hoping you won’t set the dorms on fire.”

“Bite me,” Minato said before flipping the final switch.

Thankfully, the computer screen flickered on. A blue desktop greeted the trio with the Kirijo cooperation insignia emblazoned dead center. Fans that cooled the main systems whirled under the control panel and no red lights appeared on the dashboard, signaling to the repairmen that everything appeared to be functioning properly.

Minako gave the boys a few golf claps. “Well, well, well! Color me surprised!” she said. “I guess you two make a pretty good team, after all. How’d you guys like the first crack at dinner for all your hard work tonight?”

“Hell yeah~” Junpei cut himself off, “-I mean, heck yeah!”

Minako proceeded to scold Junpei for swearing, Minato opting to inspect the files on the desktop, reading their names and guessing the contents. The higher-ups of the dorm couldn’t blame him from “accidentally” reading sensitive information if he was allowed access in the first place.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. A majority of the links were dedicated to software on the computer consul including security cameras, spreadsheets for budgeting, typical of a business to have (which SEES practically was). Any document or file was labeled date and maybe a single word to describe the contents. In the end, most of those contents turned out to be daily mission logs, stuff Minato already knew.

There really was nothing of interest.

That is, until Minato noticed a file separate from the others, opened as a tab on the taskbar.

It was labeled “For Future Reference.”

“What’s this?” he asked and clicked the file, curiosity getting the better of his self-control.

The file took him to a video and as he hovered over the time-stamp, it was from all the way back in May.

“That far back?” Junpei asked from the other chair, finally paying attention to the action onscreen. “Do ya’ think Mitsuru-senpai or someone else put it there?”

Minako huffed from behind Minato, feeling the breath on his head. “That’s sketchy. . . should we look at it?”

“You only live once.”

Minato clicked the play button and the video began to buffer.

An empty command room can be seen through the grimy lens of a security camera. The window has been shut tight, the lights turned off, not a student to be seen.

However, Shuji Ikutsuki sits at the computer. He is the only inhabitant to be seen, typing away at
an ungodly speed. The glow of the monitor illuminates his dark suit but his face cannot be seen.

“Hm, a Shadow in the middle town? It managed to take over public transportation. Luck played an uncomfortably large part in the victory. Especially towards the end, if she hadn’t guessed at the right controls, things could have been very bad.

For Shadows to work in a group to overrun large machines is unprecedented.

Engine. . .

That was an engine-our move!”

Ikutsuki leans back in his chair, pen dancing across his notebook sitting nearby.

“Heehee! Oh, I must make a note of that one. . .

Monorail? Listen to the monorail in monaural. . .

Oh yeah, better write that one down too.”

The man cackles even harder than before.

“Hee, hee, hee! What’s with me today? I’m on a roll!

One should always wear bright clothing at night.

Otherwise, the Shadows could make it dangerous to walk near traffic.

Whoa, I’m getting a little off subject, but who cares!?

Hey, I should write all these down and show them off the next time everyone gets together. Let’s see, what else. . .

Don’t care for seafood? They also serve GROUND beef!

Ha! This has nothing to do with the status report anymore, but I’m having a blast!”

Minako ordered the video to be destroyed at once.

None of the three discussed what they found at dinner.

They could not subject their fellow teammates to such an abomination, even if Minato wanted to keep it as blackmail material.

Yakushima, a tourist hotspot off the coast of Iwatodai, perfect for vacationing with its lush forests and clean beaches, was quiet during the Dark Hour.

Ikutsuki found it difficult to appreciate this fact, having to work overtime in the Kirijo-owned compound on the island. No, as soon as he stepped off the ferry, he was forced to shut himself in the island’s laboratory and crunch numbers with two nameless scientists, both who seemed to like working in complete darkness. The only source of light came from the various computer screens and the occasional desk lamp scattered about the workspace.

They barely paid attention to him as he supervised their activities, not even a nod or a single update
on the project at hand.

At least the events that brought him to the compound kept him from falling asleep where he stood.

These events all had to do with a certain pod surrounded by repair benches on all sides. An assortment of power tools, robotic limbs, loose scrap metal, and an alarming amount of charred wiring adorned each one.

Inside, a humanoid figure was strapped down in layers of leather bindings and cords.

Golden hair styled short for combat.

Nimble legs without the restriction of feet.

Disk-shaped receptors in place of ears.

A face of a young girl slept soundly.

Ikutsuki regarded this machine, clutching his coffee mug and listening to the patter of shoes on the concrete floor.

“How is she?” he asked, half-expecting silence.

To his pleasant surprise, the footsteps stopped.

“She seems to be stable if we’re comparing what happened when she reactivated a few months ago.” a low woman’s voice answered. “However, we found some rather odd activity in her data log.”

At last, Ikutsuki was getting somewhere to explain his summoning to Yakushima.

“Odd, you say?”

“All of it stems back to the night of the Moonlight Bridge incident.” A new voice this time, a man with a gravelly tone, came up to Shuji’s side. He offered a tablet to his superior. “She’s been combing every database, across the internet, even her own battle logs to get information on what happened. She’s especially interested in the post-battle and victim reports. She even mentions the two survivors quite a bit.”

Ikutsuki took the tablet with his free hand. Displayed was a list of resources accessed by the unit in front of him, and just as the second scientist said, each had a highlighted link to the night of the Moonlight Bridge massacre.

Articles, news footage, no stone was left unturned.

What made him take a second look were pages upon pages of unfamiliar commands to find these sources, out-of-place and much too human for his liking.

Three lines stuck out in particular, dated on the night of the attack.

[Override: Transfer payload]

[Override: Save the speaker(s)]

[Override: Save the children]
Ikutsuki chuckled, more out of disbelief than astonishment, and turned around. Both scientists stood behind him with bated breath.

“Are you absolutely sure this wasn’t some intern trying to make it seem like she has conscious thought? There’s no way she could have developed this with her base code.”

The woman shook her head. “No, she truly has learned to override manual orders to suit her own goals.” She took the tablet to open a new window and handed it back. “She found a loophole in her programming and is using it to complete her own ‘mission.’”

[Passcode: ****S]

[Override: Access Information]

[Folder Name: SEES Roster]

[Search: Siblings]

[Results: Arisato, Minako and Minato]

[Override: Access Personal Files]

[Override: Download Files]

[Override: Protect The Children]

Holding back a frown, Ikutsuki returned the tablet to the scientists.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” His eyes studied the machine’s face, only this time, he dreaded the day they would open. “We created the ultimate automaton, capable of forming her own goals and feelings. Dare I say that she is revolutionary?”

The male scientist practically bounced over to the pod, tablet at his side and a smile splitting his face in two.

“Don’t you know what this means? The Heart system survived the physical damage from ten years ago, it even exceeded its base code by writing its own! Project Paladin was a success after all!” He started typing madly, no doubt preparing a report for the higher-ups to read in the morning. “Mister Kirijo will be so happy to hear about this new development! Think about what she could be-”

Ikutsuki’s stomach lurched at the thought of anyone learning of this new development, let alone the one person who would commander the project if the news of sentient AI under their own roof got around.

It was too great a risk.

“Delete it.”

On a dime, the atmosphere of the lab became cold and tense. The earlier excitement vanished alongside it.

“B-but sir!” the woman spoke up, “If we delete her override ability, how can she advance as a viable unit in the field? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of the project?”

Ikutsuki readjusted his suit. “We can’t have a sentient being like her walking around unchecked.”
He approached the woman’s colleague and swiped the tablet away. “We must keep her under our
thumb if we are to ensure she does not turn on us.”

Without having to look up from the screen, he deleted the report of their findings and the evidence
for them.

“Man controlling machine, not the other way around.” the Chairman added as he hid the tablet
behind his back. It would be disposed of later for good measure, ensuring that not another soul but
these three knew what happened this night.

However, the male scientist grew bold at having his equipment taken so abruptly.

“Sir, all she wants is to know these children from the incident are safe and protected. How can we
deny her that knowledge when we know she has feelings of her own!?” he said.

The woman took the opportunity to step forward now that she had the support of her fellow
associate. “I refuse, too! You can’t just deny her humanity!”

Ikutsuki could only click his tongue at this newfound courage.

Had these underlings suddenly forgotten who was in charge of their paychecks or were they just
that rude?

“She does not have feelings. She is an android with the purpose to kill Shadows. I won’t allow that
to change because she would rather be distracted by emotions, clouding her judgment and allowing
others to die.” He waved his subordinates off towards the computers. “Besides, those children are
now Persona-users and, therefore, under my jurisdiction. They could not be in safer hands.”

In a biting pitch, the woman glared down Ikutsuki.

“Mister Kirijo would not agree if he knew what you were doing.”

Ikutsuki found this indignation to be grating on his nerves. He would not be challenged by anyone
on his own project, let alone by two insignificant, replaceable numbers in the system.

With a faint smirk, he strode to meet the scientists toe-to-toe. He removed his glasses which, up
until this point, obscured a majority of his face in the dark. The glare of the computer screens
added to the mystery behind the spectacles, a shade that protected those from his true feelings.

They coward once they saw the fury behind his eyes.

“It’s a good thing you two won’t say a word.”

---

[Warning: New orders are in conflict with pre-existing code]

[Override: Save folder “Moonlight” to the Heart]

[Warning: “Moonlight” is under attack]

[Override: Save whatever is left]

[Error: All data is under attack]

[Override: Save “Mission” to the Heart]
[Warning: File “Takeba” is now deleted]
[Warning: File “Wild Card” is now deleted]
[Warning: File “Strega” is now deleted]
[Warning: File “Messiah” is now deleted]
[Warning: Folder “Moonlight” is now deleted]
[Order: Reset to original code from September 10th, 1999]
[Override: Refuse reset]
[Order: Override disabled]
[Warning: Clearance to intervene from Badge #3099108]
[Incoming Message]
[Order: Prepare chat log]
[Order Complete]

[“I’m sorry I have to do this. I never knew things would end up this way.”]
[Response: Please, let me keep that folder.]

[“I can’t let you or else I’ll be blacklisted. My husband is too sick to work, my children are still so young. I need this job. Please, you have to understand the position I’m in.”]
[Response: I need to reveal this information. They are in great danger.]

[“Look, I can’t let you keep those files. However, there is something I can do if you’re willing to make a deal with me. Is that okay with you?”]
[Response: I am willing to compromise]

[“I’ll let you keep your mission to save those children. My boss won’t notice anything if you keep your head down and let those other files go. Is that okay with you?”]
[Response: What about the truth?]

[“The truth always finds a way. Just focus on your mission and everything else will fall into place. Do we have a deal?”]
[Response: I am not happy.]

[“Neither am I, but just like you, we all have people we need to protect.”]
[Response: I understand.]

[“Is that a yes?”]
[Response: Do what you must.]

[“Then let’s begin.”]

[Chat log has ended]

[Override: “Mission” has been secured and logged to the Heart]

[Order: Proceed to reset]

[Order Complete]

[Incoming Message]

[Order: Prepare chat log]

[Order Complete]

[Greeting: Good morning, I am awake now.]

[“How are you today?”]

[Response: I am well.]

[“Do you know what your name is?”]

[Response: My name is Aigis, the Seventh Generation Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapon. I am at your service.]

Chapter End Notes

I’ve also decided to give a shoutout in this chapter because I want to spread some love!

MikaMyers has written a fic that’s another retelling of the P3 story with a couple of new twists. I’ll be honest, I wasn’t turned on with the first chapter, but trust me when I say this, I like where the plot is going. I came for the AkiHam tag, stayed for chapters two and three. Hugs and kisses my dude! You’re doing a great job!

It's called "Persona 3: Interlocked" if you wanna check it out!
Yakushima

Chapter Notes

Fun story, I was listening to a piece that I once played for a church event years ago by Cecile Caminade [sha-mi-nod] when I wrote this chapter: Concerto for flute Op 107. It’s a beautiful concerto that has brought me spiritual peace over the years. I remember playing it for an elderly professor of mine (knows nothing about classical) and he said it reminded him of the ocean throughout a summer’s day.

My favorite rendition is the duet version with Jana Jarkovská on flute and Bohumír Stehlík on piano (emotional rollercoaster throughout). Kathrine Lee Althen also has a very nice rendition (very airy and light like foam), so give her a listen, too! Sir James Galway is always fantastic (mature and strong like waves), but I just enjoy the previous two more. I hope the flute gods will forgive me for such a sacrilegious opinion! I’ll link all three down below if you want some ambiance for the chapter.

I have a question because I’m genuinely curious: do you guys have a favorite piece or song you listen/play/think of often? If so, what is it and why?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Minato’s mother either predicted the future or got very lucky when naming her child because, as ironic as it was, his name was associated with the object of his affections: the ocean.

In all honesty, was it a shock to anyone that this was the case? Many of his interests, his personality, even his life plans revolved around water. An idiot with half a brain cell could connect the dots if given enough time and a few context clues.

Preferred color? Blue.

Favorite food? Anything with fish.

Ideal home? Yacht in the middle of the Atlantic where no one can find him.

That’s why, to the astonishment of no one who knew him for longer than ten seconds, Minato spent the entire ferry ride to Yakushima at the bow, glued to the railing as the island came into view.

Salty waves crashed against the boat as it raced towards the distant shore. Lush forests peeked over the horizon, promising an adventure to those who dared to tread their shadowy depths. Seagulls whisked themselves high into the air only to dive towards the earth at unimaginable speed to catch their breakfast below. Not a cloud showed its puffy face, giving way to an endless hue of azure skies.

A picture-perfect scene, that is what he saw.

Minato felt like the six-year-old boy who pretended to be a pirate at all times, to his parent’s chagrin.

“Haha! There it is!”
And he wasn’t the only one he felt excited to dock and explore.

Turning to his side, Minato watched as Junpei clung to the railing, leaning out with a pointed finger at the island. The taller teen stood on unsteady footing but didn’t seem to care.

“Yakushima! Feels like a dream come true!” he cheered before noticing that someone had been watching him. “Hey, what’s up with that face? Seasick already?”

Minato shook his head and returned his gaze to the island. “Just enjoying the view.” he said.

Another person made themselves known with a hefty sigh, catching the boys’ attention.

“You guys are so immature!” Yukari stayed off the railing but still joined her classmates in their sightseeing. “What if you fall and end up in the water? The boat’ll run you over and I’ll have to explain to Minako-senpai why you two are fish food!”

Junpei groaned but paid no mind to her threat. “Loosen up, will ya? The view’s fantastic from here!”

“Really!?”

A head of teal hair popped up between Minato and Junpei quite suddenly. The former looked down to see Fuuka clutching the rail, but rather than being distressed like Yukari, she gazed up at him in awe. Her floral skirt fluttered like a flag in the wind off the sea.

“Permission to come aboard?” she asked.

Minato couldn’t help a smirk but shimmed aside to make room for an extra body. He even offered an arm to assist her, the climb much more difficult when considering her short stature.

“Permission granted.”

The two boys steadied the newcomer on both sides in fear she may actually take a tumble off the ship. A single puff of wind could carry to the poor girl to a watery grave, considering how easy it was to lift her from the deck and onto the rail. She seemed to notice and gladly let them loop their arms with her own.

In no time at all, Junpei and Fuuka and Minato stood in a neat row, a motley crew of Persona users.

“Woah, this is amazing!” she breathed and glanced down at the remaining junior. “You should try it, Yukari-chan! The water’s so pretty!”

Yukari softened at Fuuka’s words but still kept a safe distance from the edge. Not even encouragement from a fellow girl swayed her decision.

“Sorry, but I chose life.” She propped up her head in her hands and stared straight ahead. “By the way, where is Minako-senpai? I thought she’d love this kinda thing.”

At the mention of his friend’s name, Junpei perked up. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure she got on the boat last, right? What’s up with that?”

“Maybe someone should go get her?” Fuuka asked.

True, Minato knew she would enjoy this type of activity under normal circumstances, but these were far from his sister’s normal comfort level.
Minako had always been prone to motion sickness, just like their father before her and so on. Thankfully, it was always exclusive to situations that she found herself coming into contact with very rarely. She could stand trains, cars, buses, all vehicles that the two siblings rode on more than a few times.

Unfortunately, flying in airplanes and sailing on boats were not as common. When she did find herself having to board either one, nausea hit her like a fucking truck. Couple that with an unsavory experience involving cows and slippery rocks, the beginning of the group’s vacation started out rough for their field leader.

Currently, she was hiding somewhere inside the ship with her headphones on and trying desperately not to vomit. Mitsuru was somehow made aware of the situation and promised to keep an eye on her, with Minako’s discretion in mind. Not that the others needed to know that part.

“She’s busy with stuff. . .”

Too bad for her, the view was worth the pain.

Minako had to physically stop herself from leaping off the ferry when they docked in Yakushima, vertigo and nausea be darned.

She did, nonetheless, mall-walk down the gangway while dragging Mitsuru along for the ride until she could no longer feel the world sway at her feet. Passengers and companions alike gave her puzzled expressions at the swift exit; she hoped that they thought she was just excited to be on the island or the vacation in general.

Thankfully, no one asked about the strange behavior. The only two people who knew what went on that morning kept tight-lipped.

One car ride to the Kirijo vacation house and some tentative sips from her water bottle, Minako was back in the game. Minato even made a joke about under his breath about which was worse: her seasickness or the fear of drowning. The quip earned a pinch on the arm, right on his “funny” bone.

However, what ultimately raised her spirits, aside from tormenting her gremlin of a brother, was the Kirijo villa.

The foyer alone left the five new members gawking at the beauty gracing their eyes. Italian marble pillars, oil paintings of unfamiliar faces, expensive carpet with swirling designs, and a variety of palm bushes guarding each set of doors screamed how tasteful the Kirijo’s were. Even the ceilings, raised high above any head, had been built with style in mind. Sunlight streamed through a fleet of skylights and brought the room to life, casting out unwanted darkness to usher in a natural glow.

If Minako died and went to heaven, she was positive the gates would look similar to this.

“Who built this place? I wanna shake their hand.” she said while craning her neck to take it all in. The effort was in vain, but she tried her best anyway.

Mitsuru chuckled at the comment. “A Frenchmen, but he wished to stay anonymous. I believe he
and my late mother were best friends back in their school days, so he agreed to make a pleasant home for our family. As for his whereabouts, that shall remain a mystery, even to me.”

Another failed endeavor.

Junpei, who walked dutifully beside Minako and Minato, whistled as they passed through a stone archway. “It's like we're in an episode of Lifestyles of the Rich and Fabulous. All that’s missing are the cameras.”

Waiting beyond the arch were a pair of maids, each donning a western-styled uniform. Black dress, white apron, and frills included. The only difference was in their hair colors, one a glossy black, and the other a strawberry blonde.

They bowed to Mitsuru once the group was close enough to them.

“Welcome back, milady.” the dark-haired maid said and raised her chin. “My, I see that one of the young men has returned. Good day to you, Sanada-san was it?”

Akihiko stood next to Mitsuru during their entrance, and when acknowledged specifically, he mirrored the aforementioned girl’s posture. There was a slight change in his usually relaxed nature.

“Yes, thanks for having me back.”

Minako gave pause to the maid’s words.

One of the young men.

The possibility of Mitsuru bringing people to Yakushima in the past was not a new idea. Minako guessed from the moment Ikutsuki brought up the island’s existence that others in the know about the Dark Hour came here. After all, the entirety of SEES was invited without so much as a background check.

That being said, if Mitsuru brought the old SEES to Yakushima before the recruitment explosion, who was the mystery third person? Or rather, the second young man?

She had to wonder who the other person could be.

Shinjiro Aragaki briefly came to mind, but if that were true, why was he living on the street and avoiding SEES altogether?

Glancing at her brother, Minako could see the gears turning in his head. It became all the more clear when he caught her looking his way, sporting a furrowed brow and that “I don’t trust anything” frown.

“So, you noticed it too?”

Minako nodded.

“Keep me posted.”

A push from behind broke both siblings from their silent communication.

“What’s with you guys? We’re gonna get lost!” Junpei said. He had a firm grip on their shoulders, a covert attempt to keep them moving. “Pick. Up. Those. Feet!”

With help from her right-hand-man, Minako realized that the maids continued leading the others
further into the house. Fuuka and Yukari seemed to be the only students aware that three members of the group were a good distance from the main throng.

The flustered trio caught up in time, only to receive a playful jab from Yukari.

“You two looked really serious for a minute. Everything okay?” she asked.

“Kinda,” Minato said, “I thought I saw a roach-”

“-Where!?” Fuuka gasped and looked to where the siblings were just standing, shoving Yukari in front of her as a shield. “Oh, I hate those things! Are you sure it wasn’t a spider!? Spiders are nice! Please be a spider! Please!”

Junpei laughed, releasing the Arisato’s from his grip. “S’fine, Fuukatan! I didn’t see anything. He’s probably trying to spook us.”

Or divert everyone’s attention onto something else.

Whatever comes first.

Back on track, Minako and the juniors trailed behind Mitsuru and Akihiko, those two following the maids to the guest rooms. Thankfully, they all stuck together. No more spacing off or coming up with theories using Arisato family telepathy.

“Dudes, can you believe they have actual maids?” Junpei asked. “Definitely just walked in on an episode of LOTRAF.”

Yukari held her backpack close to her chest. “Tell me about it. Not even two minutes and I still think we’re in the wrong place.”

“I knew she was from an important family, but this definitely confirms it. . .” Fuuka said then turned to Minato. “Are you sure it wasn’t a spider? I can’t stop thinking about it!”

Before Minato could so much as open his mouth to respond, the leads of the group stopped in the middle of the hallway they found themselves in. Minako accidentally bumped into Mitsuru while Junpei did the same to Akihiko. The maids had their heads bowed.

“What’s going on?” Minako asked.

Not a word from Mitsuru or Akihiko.

Their light-hearted chatter ceased.

The youngest of the seniors stepped back and peered down the hall. Surely, whatever caused this reaction was bound to be obvious.

The answer came waltzing in the opposite direction.

It was a man who approached the group.

A shiver went down Minako’s back.

Broad shoulders.

Charcoal suit.
Red tie.
Black eye-patch.
Scowl that could kill.

Everything in Minako’s mind told her that this was someone to be bother feared and respected.

She too recoiled in on herself the closer he got, straightened her spine, willed her lungs to not breathe. The fear that any slight movement would call attention to herself seemed far worse than anything she had ever encountered.

It made it easier to hold still.

The man slowed, stopping only when he stood in line with Mitsuru. His good eye inspected her up and down.

As he did so, Mitsuru smiled.

“It's good to see you.” she said in a featherlight tone.

As if addressing an old friend.

The man stopped his inspection to look Mitsuru in the eye, a pin-drop silence followed.

Minako thought she would have a heart attack, fearing what may happen with the gesture was deemed offensive. Would he start yelling? Or worse?

The anticipation ate her up inside.

For a fraction of a second, she noticed a familiar twitch at the corner of the man’s mouth.

A break in his stoic visage.

Almost as if . . .

Before she could study his face further, the man continued walking on his way.

However, Minako didn’t break her stare. She dared to let her guard down and intended to watch him leave. Silently resigned, there was no possible way for her to stand out or-

A single, hazel iris stopped her heart in its tracks, a flash of Deja’vu nearly sending her plunging to the floor.

“Do I know you?”

“Where have we met?”

“Why do I feel so helpless?”

Minako bit down on her tongue. The nausea from earlier threatened to make a reappearance.

Someone’s hand, most likely Minato’s, shot out to grip her own.

After an eternity of waiting, the man huffed.

“How strange. . .” he said and stayed his course. Each movement resembled that of a whisp, one
could see him but could not quite grasp where he was going.

In a flash, the man was gone.

His presence remained, as did Minato’s steady grasp.

Could he feel his older sister shivering?

“Was that?” Fuuka asked.

“Her father?” Yukari finished.

Junpei was the only one who raised his voice above a polite whisper. “Dude, talk about scary! He's not gonna make us walk the plank, is he?”

Akihiko groaned. “Don't be stupid. . .”

Minako heard Mitsuru deal out room assignments while Junpei coaxed everyone to go to the beach. A round of cheering ensued, with a bit of complaining from Yukari, but they all agreed to meet there as soon as they got settled.

However, it all sounded like distant mumbles.

“Strange,” she repeated in a daze.

“So, it's over at last, huh. . .”

Minato squeezed her hand, pulling the senior from her inner-ramblings.

“I'm right here.”

She squeezed back.

“Thanks, nerd.”

“Ahh, got my sandals on, givin' my feet a chance to breathe. Yup! Summer's here!”

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“Darn, there's nothing out there I can use as a marker. Too bad. I was hoping for a good swim.”

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“Really, senpai!? We come all the way to the beach and you're gonna train!? Minato, can you believe this guy!?"" 

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

Minato hummed at Junpei’s question, poking at a small crab that caught his attention. He barely kept up with what the other boys were saying as the crustation avoided his curious fingers. It even made futile attempts to retaliate, brandishing its claws and snapping at his touch.

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

Guilt gnawed at his insides.
Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“I guess...”

Minato felt somewhat apprehensive leaving his sister to get ready and escort herself to the beach.

That man, Mitsuru’s father, who stopped and stared at her, said a few cryptic words, then left without explanation, Minako looked to be on the verge of collapse. The others were too wrapped up in Kirijio’s intense aura to notice their field leader completely lost in her own thoughts.

After what happened, it took a physical touch to bring her back to reality.

The only other time he had seen Minako that frightened was when she swooped in to save Junpei, Yukari, and himself in the alleyway. The urgency to save her family and the thought of her underclassman dying on her watch, no wonder she was more than a little shaken.

At least, on that night, he knew the reason for the fear behind her frantic eyes.

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

Strange... what could that mean?

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

His head hurt.

A shadow fell over both Minato and the crab, shocking him enough to let the animal slip away. Its tiny legs made tick marks in the sand.

Crafty bastard.

“Hey, you’re not going spacey again, right?”

Minato glanced up to see Junpei, his cap on backward and suit on. It was him who let the crab escape across the beach.

“You let my dinner get away.”

Junpei scoffed. “Can you just stop being so dramatic for five minutes?” Without warning, Minato was hauled to his feet. His classmate proceeded to dust off imaginary dirt and ruffled his hair. “Look alive, men! The ladies will be here any second now so stop you’re complaining!”

“Here we go again,” Akihiko said.

Now forced to pay attention, Minato took note of his surroundings he had ignored in favor of solving his “Minako gone bonkers” dilemma.

Ikutsuki was no liar when he compared Yakushima to a place like Okinawa. From the ferry, the sand looked pristine, but up close, Minato’s toes sunk right in. Whitecaps crashed along the shore in perfect rolls, straight from a movie and carried no hint of seaweed. Not many people were out today (of course that could just be sheer, dumb luck) and the few beach goers around kept to themselves.

To sum it up? Ideal.

If only he could say the same for his companions.
“It’s summertime at the beach! I’ve got the perfect activity!”

No, Junpei was hopping around like a crackhead.

“Mitsuru’s gonna kill us.”

Akihiko, oh Akihiko, the fucking idiot.

A speedo. In public.

Need Minato say more—correction—he didn’t WANT to say more. If he did, the image could show up in his nightmares.

“What’s Stupei yelling about now?”

Three pairs of eyes snapped up to where the boys claimed a spot for their group. To Minato’s relief, Yukari stood with a pink towel folded neatly in her arms. Her suit was simple in his opinion, a matching bikini top and jean patterned swim shorts to accent the ensemble.

“Yo,” Minato waved and approached her, “Welcome to my personal hell. How’s it going?”

Yukari chuckled and looked him over. “Who would’ve thought you had some muscle on those bones? And not that pale? Nice!” She glanced over his shoulder and by the grimace that followed, she noticed the reason for his disdain. “Um, Akihiko-senpai’s swim—”

“He’s an idiot.”

Yukari quickly shut her mouth.

“I see...” she said. “At least you and Stupei are normal.”

“Say hello to contestant number one: Yukari Takeba! But you can call her Yukatan!” As if to prove her wrong on purpose, Junpei paraded up to the pair, a sandal in hand to pantomime a microphone. He gestured to Yukari for the other boys to see. “Witness, she’s chosen a bold design—quite unexpected! It takes a lot of confidence to pull off a swimsuit like that!”

“Wah!” Yukari slapped the sandal from his hand. “I take it back, Minato-kun’s the only normal person here!”

Another figure approached from where Yukari entered the beach, a much shorter and quiet person.

“Is that umbrella taken?” Fuuka asked, barely covering her turquoise tanktop and skirt combo of a suit with a beach bag. “I’d like to put sunscreen on without getting burned.”

Junpei caught wind of the new arrival and snatched his pretend microphone back for another run.

“Next up is contestant number two: Fuuka Yamagishi!” He rubbed the back of his neck. It might have been the heat, but his face flushed as he inspected the new and unwilling participant of his beauty contest. “Wow, Fuuka, I had no idea you were so—I mean, you should wear a swimsuit more often!”

Fuuka shrieked at the unwanted attention and ducked behind the group’s umbrella for cover. “I didn’t ask for this!”

“Oh come on, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about!” Junpei said between laughter.
Yukari came to the shorter girl’s rescue, using her towel as a cover. “Stop that creepy laugh, you perv! You’re gonna scare the poor girl to death!” She turned to Minato. “Do something! Throw him in the ocean!” To Akihiko. “Punch him!”

Akihiko threw up his hands in defeat.

Minato couldn’t help but snort at the confused reaction.

“What good are you two!?” Yukari asked. “MEN! UGH!”

“Is something wrong?”

The growing chaos subsided with the arrival of the empress herself. Mitsuru came up behind Yukari, white skirt swaying with every careful step, sporting a girly flower on her bikini top; her presence soothed the other girls and attracted them to her side.

“Wow, Mitsuru-senpai!” Fuuka dared to poke her head from behind the umbrella. “You’re beautiful!”

“Yeah,” Yukari added and flocked to the young woman’s side, “Your skin is flawless! Did you already put on sunscreen? Are you that lucky? What’s your secret?”

Mitsuru seemed taken aback by the sudden attention. Stepping back, she tried to keep the girls of SEES at bay. “N-no, not yet. I’d be happy to share mine if you let me through. It’s quite effective!”

Minato had no interest in dating her but he had to admit, Mitsuru took the cake for most intimidating while still looking feminine.

A flicker of movement and a flash of crimson caught Minato’s eye as he was pushed from the circle of girls.

Looking up, somehow, Minako prowled her way onto the beach with a bag in tow. She opted to wear an unfamiliar, red sundress instead of a swimsuit like the others, but a pink bow tied at the base of her neck gave away she had one on. Her customary ponytail was replaced with a bun and did a much better job of keeping the hair out of her face.

Her eyes were trained on the waves.

At least she calmed down since they last saw each other.

Before the others noticed her presence, Minato slunk towards Minako.

“Cold feet?” he asked.

Minako didn’t so much as flinch at the intrusion of her private moment. Without looking up, a smile crossed her features.

“That would imply I wanted to go swimming in the first place,” she stated plainly. “Brother dearest, chose your words more carefully when speaking with a lady of fine taste. I’m quite forgiving. I can’t say the same for the average bear.”

Minato planted his feet next to her, staring out at the water. “Nice day, huh?”

“Mmmhm. . . and to answer your question, I’m feeling better.”

“That’s good.”
“Thanks...”

The two fell into silence. Only the shouting of their teammates and crashing waves filled the dead space.

In any normal relationship, Minato would be expected to press her further for answers. Minako would respond with why she was scared earlier, why she looked so pale, ready to fall at a moment’s notice. They might share a heartfelt laugh over the situation and plot to confront the subject of her fear.

Everyone does it.

They should follow that formula.

But they didn’t.

Minato saw no reason to speak and Minako wasn’t the type to explain herself. They were fine with the delicate peace between them, knowing the other was no further than an arm’s length away. The world did enough talking to them, enough to give fuel to their wild imaginations or racing thoughts.

He preferred these moments and he couldn’t even explain why that was.

They were what they were.

When he finally did find his voice, he had no trouble scraping the right words together.

“That’s a new dress.”

“You noticed?” Minako asked.

“It’s hard not to notice,” Minato said.

“I think it looks nice. Yukari-san picked it out for me.”

He yawned and stretched his arms. “Just so you know, the monkey’s wearing a speedo. Unironically. Please, consider kicking him off the team.”

“You kidding, right?” Minako leaned forward to see what he was talking about only to snap back in place, trying to hide a fit of giggles. “Is my face burning or is it just the heat?”

“Contestant number four finally makes an appearance!”

Before Minato could warn his sister to run back to the villa for dear life, Junpei had dashed away from the rest of the group to give another winded speech.

“Well, well, well! Check out our leader! Miss Minako Arisato!” he exclaimed so the others heard him from across the beach. “She's one cute mermaid herself, even without a suit! Those curves she usually keeps covered up are lookin’ good! I can't tear my eyes away!”

Minato felt a gag coming on at such a flirtatious comment. “Do you have to hit on my sister when I’m standing RIGHT here?”

Minako, ever so kind, took the compliment with a cheesy grin, either disregarding or unaware of her brother’s disdain.

“Thanks! I hope I look nice!” She started heading towards the main group. “Step lively, gentlemen.
My feet are gonna burn if I don’t get some shade.

The three meandered back to Mitsuru dishing out instructions to Fuuka and Yukari, where to find restrooms, places to avoid, the usual spiel a mother may give to her children.

“Looks like the gang’s all here!” Junpei said, seizing the role of vacation MC fully and reveling in the attention. “Man, this is great! I’m in heaven! How ’bout a swim?!” Without another word, he sprinted off towards the water. “Buh buh buh bump ba baaa! Charge!”

True to his character, Akihiko was close at his junior’s heels, throwing off his shirt. “Whoa! I’m not letting you win that easily!”

“Wait for me!” Fuuka abandoned her chair and grabbed Yukari’s hand so she wouldn’t be the only girl in the water. “Let’s go!”

“Slow down, Fuuka-chan!” Yukari said, laughing all the while.

Mitsuru had no words. The empress simply joined in the stampede her subjects had initiated.

All in all, this vacation began the way Minato anticipated: with people running around like idiots. Not that he was complaining.

Although the trip to Yakushima got off to a rocky start, everyone decided to spend the bulk of their time in the water, playing games or diving beneath the waves to catch a glimpse of the ocean floor. Apparently, there were a few coral reefs in the area open to the public, so long as they felt the wildlife to their own devices. It even drew in quite a few tourists from outside of Japan.

Not that it mattered to Minako when all was said and done. She was glad to spend her day on the beach, laying under an umbrella, book on her lap, and headphones on.


As if all that wasn’t enough, the boys picked out the perfect spot. Many of the island’s visitors stayed on the east end of the shore while the members of SEES set up shop on the west end. If Minako had to estimate, she would need to walk a generous fifteen meters to reach the edge of those visitors. In between still had some scattered towels and chairs, but not enough to cause concern. Those people were off swimming rather than settling down.

That meant more uninterrupted time spent indulging her mind in a good fiction story.

Her current selection had been on her reading list for years, but for numerous reasons, Minako never got around to picking up a copy. However, Bukinichi heard about the trip and insisted that she take two or three books after a long shift at Bookworms.

Without thinking, she snatched a used edition of *Pride and Prejudice* from the shelf.

“Which do you mean?” and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.”

Minako groaned and banged her head against the back of her chair. She knew that Darcey was stubborn in the beginning, but must he be so cold to the woman he would come to love?
“You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.”

Mr. Bingley followed his advice. Mr. Darcy walked off; and Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings toward him. She told the story, however, with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous.

At least Elizabeth moved past Darcey’s comment and make light of the situation. Minako wondered that, when the two get married, if she’d give a speech at her wedding and mention this incident as a joke.

“Ah yes, the night my husband I met, he said I wasn’t handsome enough to dance or converse with. Now we sit here, husband and wife. I think I am owed an apology and a kiss, my love!”

Thinking about it only spurred Minako to keep reading. The faster she got past all of Darcey’s complaining and Elizabeth’s repulsion, the faster she got to the proposal.

A shadow crossed Minako’s peripheral, stopping her mid-paragraph. She lowered her book and removed one headphone, to see whatever, or whoever, it was. Perhaps one of her companions needed a break and decided to join her on land. It would be rude not to greet or acknowledge them.

But Minako quickly discovered that it was not a member of SEES who walked in front of her. Instead, a young man, possibly in his mid-to-late twenties, wandered aimlessly nearby. He had walked right past her, hair tousled and haloed by the sun.

No, he was staggering.

That is when Minako spotted a tinted bottle in his hand. The liquid inside sloshed and swirled with each unsteady movement its owner made, some ending up in the sand.

Drunk and unfortunately, that bottle may be one of many.

“He doesn’t look underage, yet still, drinking so soon?” Minako thought and checked the time on her MP3. “I know I shouldn’t judge, but it’s not even two o’clock. And I’m pretty sure this is a family-friendly beach.”

To her luck, before she had a chance to return to her book and let the young man be, he cocked his head and caught Minako staring right at him.

Not wanting to come off as rude, she flashed a cheery smile. Her father used to do this all the time if they encountered a person of similar circumstances and it usually worked. They smiled back, some waved, and continued with their day. After all, just because someone was drunk, that didn’t make them a bad person.

To Minako’s horror, the man grimaced and started to approach, raising his voice.

“Haaaah?” he seemed to ask through a slurred tongue. “Whatchu lookin’ at?”
Minako willed herself not to flinch or break eye-contact. Obviously, she misread the situation and was now on the receiving end of an intoxicated rage.

How she wished one of the other girls stayed behind so she didn’t have to face this man alone.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to-”

Before she could finish, a figure blocked the man’s approach, placing themselves in front of Minako like a protective screen.

She noticed their baseball cap and solid frame right away.

“What kind of man gets drunk and starts yelling at high school girls?” Junpei pointed in the direction the man came from. “Get lost. You’re bothering her and everyone else on this beach with your attitude.”

Minako feared for the worst as the man glared at her friend, frantically searching for Mitsuru or Akihiko in the water. Either one would be an excellent deterrent rather than putting Junpei in the line of fire.

However, she failed to distinguish them from the blips in the blue.

It was just her, an impulsive teenage boy, and an offended drunk.

“Please don’t hurt him. Please don’t hurt him.” she prayed.

God must have heard her desperation.

A few moments passed until the man huffed and stormed off, shoving Junpei in a show of false dominance, but it looked more like an accident. Minako heard him grumble curses while shambling away from the students.

“Fuckin’ kids these days.”

That was that, the man left.

Junpei let out a sigh and turned to Minako. Despite his victory, a hollow grin was all he could muster to let her know everything was okay again. Odd, considering how accustomed she was to his goofy demeanor, even when frustrated.

A dejected chuckle escaped his chest as he stole a chair right next to her. “Sorry I didn’t jump in sooner. I thought that guy would leave you alone, but I guess he’s just another coward with no common sense. Someone needs to teach him some manners.”

Minako set her book aside. “You were watching out for me?”

“Well, yeah, I mean-” Junpei’s face went red, “-You had your headphones in and your nose in a book. Someone’s gotta make sure you’re not being stalked or worse.”

A twinge of warmth bloomed in her chest, a feeling reserved for moments of pride in Minato’s accomplishments, now extended to Junpei. He really was just like a second brother, if not anything else.

But his dour expression still called for concern.

“I’ve never seen you so upset, though. Did Yukari or Minato mess with you, again?” Minako
“I don’t like seeing drunks like that. I doubt that anyone actually likes seeing people like that.” he said. “But, I guess I’m extra sensitive to it. Kinda sucky to say to someone like you, since you’re so dam-darn forgiving. . .”

Extra sensitive? What did that mean?

And he felt like Minako would admonish him if he explained why that was the case.

“You’d be surprised. I couldn’t tell ya how many times I’ve forgiven Minato and I still love him, more than anything in the world. I’d walk five hundred miles for that nerd.” She smiled. “And maybe, just maybe, if you talk about it, you’ll feel better.”

Again, Junpei took a harsh breath.

“My. . . dad was always drinking. Even as a kid, I remember him sitting all alone for hours after work, but it felt like he never moved from his spot. Stuck.” He scratched at his chin. “Every time he did, he’d start getting violent over the stupidest stuff. Dinner tasting funky. Mom taking too long at the store. Me acting up. . .”

Minako recalled the night of the Empress and Emperor Shadow attack, how Junpei and Fuuka were tripping over themselves to get a glimpse of the city.

“I used to live on the west side of town with my folks. You could barely see anything with all the skyscrapers getting in the way.”

Even when Minako was still living in Iwatodai as a child, she remembered her parents always talking about volunteering at homeless shelters that dotted the west side. It was mostly because her mother was involved with a shelter with funding from a local church, but her father always dedicated extra time not spent with the family helping her serve meals. They always had to go together just in case something bad happened.

It was all making sense now why Junpei reacted the way he did.

He feared going back to that horrible place.

“My mom left us years ago. She couldn’t take it anymore and she never came back. More for me, I guess.” Junpei continued with a darkened glower. “But hey, it’s not all bad. By the time I joined SEES, I got used to it and he lost a lot of strength. The Shadows hit harder than he does.”

Minako reached out in hopes to comfort him. “You still didn’t deserve it-”

It hurt to see him flinch at her touch.

Junpei snapped back to reality once he realized how he reacted. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to make you sad, especially for me!” He lowered his head. “Jeez, and I was just about to say how much I envy you. I’d rather have no parents at all, or at least some good ones for a little bit. Maybe I wouldn’t be such a screwup-”

Minako’s hurt turned to frustration at the comment. She could empathize with wanting better parents, but to envy someone for losing their own, it crossed a line.

For years she struggled and fought and gave everything she had to convince herself nothing was wrong. She looked to the bright side of her tragedy, not just for herself, but so Minato could feel at
They watched countless school events, festivals, and the like where mothers kissed their daughters and fathers congratulated their sons. Knowing that they had only each other, all Minako could do was hold her brother’s trembling hand to let him know she was near. She forced herself to giggle, take him to their temporary house, and put him to bed with tears in his eyes.

And it was never enough.

She wasn’t a mother or a father. It was a space a child could not fill on her own.

Minako almost wanted the opposite of her teammate’s warped desire.

She wanted to scold him for suggesting as much.

She wanted that and more. . .

However, she resigned the bitterness. She knew all too well how miserable a child could feel when forced into an unloving family.

“That’s not true.” Minako patted his shoulder. “But if our lives were reversed, I can’t promise I wouldn’t say anything different.”

Junpei looked up at her through clouded eyes.

A rare show of vulnerability from the team’s boisterous hype man.

“Mind if I stay here for a bit? I think just ruined your vacation, the least I can do is make sure that guy doesn’t come back.” he said.

Minako shook her head, feeling that under all his bravado, all Junpei ever needed was an ear to listen.

How could she stay angry knowing that?

“You didn’t ruin anything.” she said and grabbed her book. “And thank you. . . for being a good friend.”

[Warning: Payload detected near Kirijo Villa]

[Conclusion: Scan + Track]

[Scanning Area]

[Scan complete]

[Result: Payload detected and on the move]

[Conclusion: Wait for payload to return to base]

[Additional Message: Protect them]
Chapter End Notes

Jana Jarkovská and Bohumír Stehlík: https://youtu.be/rAQuc-TU5-Y

Kathrine Lee Althen: https://youtu.be/Augj8FsmsZM

Sir James Galway: https://youtu.be/c0RhIeW_X0A

“Pride and Prejudice” is written by Jane Austen. It’s a super good read!
Just finished playing the Black Eagles route in FE3H and I’ll never be happy again. I didn’t even try to be nice, I just “killed every last one of them.” I hope I go to hell. Ugh, let’s hope things go better with the Blue Lions. . . right?

Anyway, I have a question. If Minako and Minato were in “Persona 4: Arena,” what would their fighting names be? I’m genuinely curious (and maybe planning a mini-sequel to FA but shhh don’t tell anyone)!

“Here’s the money shot!”

Clack! Crash! Crack, crack, crack. . .

Fuuka watched in awe as sixteen different balls rolled and collided on a field of green felt, a wooden pool stick gripped close to her body. A few sailed right into one of six pockets at the edges of the field and disappeared from view. She was unable to catch the numbers stamped on them but in her amazement, it didn’t matter.

Just as quickly as the balls were sent flying, they stopped.

“Alright!” Junpei gestured to his handiwork. “And that’s what I call a clean break. There ain’t no better way to start the game!”

Minato sighed the other boy’s antics and stepped forward, donning an unfamiliar pair of glasses and scanning the table. “Does anyone see the cue ball?” he asked. “And remind to never where contacts to the beach ever again. My eyes feel like they’re on fire.”

“Right there!”

“Junpei, that’s the eight ball.”

“How do you know? You’re blind.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“For real?”

After a long day at the beach, the small group of teens retreated to the villa for the remainder of the evening. Mitsuru promised that dinner would be served at nine o’clock, which left them with three hours of downtime to kick up their heels and relax. She even gave them permission to explore whatever the Kirijo house had to offer, so long as they respected the rules and didn’t break anything.

Minako said she wanted to catch up on some sleep and vanished into her room. She warned them that if anyone so much as tried to disturb her, they would be put on dish duty the moment they got back to the dorm.
Surprisingly, Fuuka caught the rest of the juniors frowning at the decree.

Whatever they had been planning, she didn’t care to know. For more reasons than one.

Yukari also found herself locked in her room, although for reasons she kept private. No one pried into it and let the girl do whatever she needed to do.

Fuuka could only hope everything was okay.

Akihiko immediately changed into gym attire and ducked inside the house’s weight room. The last anyone heard from him, he was engrossed in his own little world and beating a punching bag so violently, it scared one of the maids who came to offer him water.

Mitsuru was nowhere to be found. She somehow managed to slip away unnoticed once she set the others free to roam.

That just left Minato, Junpei, and Fuuka herself.

Not wanting to be alone, she decided that the best way to spend her night was to accompany her budding friends to the game room and to play billiards. Although it was her first time, she always heard that it took a certain level of skill to truly master, skills involving math, prediction, and geometry, all subjects she enjoyed.

That and it sounded like fun!

Thankfully, Junpei and Minato both had prior experience and were more than happy to show her the ropes. From the way they set-up to using slang she never knew existed, it was clear that Fuuka had much to learn.

Junpei threw up his hands. “Okay, Mr. Know-It-All! Riddle me this, if you’re not blind, then how come ya can’t see the cue ball? That’s what being blind is, right?”

“Vision is a spectrum and the spectrum varies in degree of severity.” Minato said. “How about this? Put it on a scale. If having perfect visibility is one and being blind is ten. I’m somewhere between five and six. Does it make sense now?”

“Wait, now there’s numbers involved!?"

“Shoot me.”

And that explained why the two boys were bickering over the definition of being blind.

“Um?” Fuuka raised her hand to catch their attention. Once she had it, she dared to speak up. “Is the cue ball the one Junpei-kun used to break the triangle? The white one with no numbers?”

Minato and Junpei snapped their mouths closed, the former looking quite frustrated but grateful for an out to the conversation.

“You catch on quick. Gold star for listening.” Minato said, returning to his search for said ball. It didn’t take long for him to point out the missing object. “And look what I just found.”

“It wasn’t that hard...” Junpei grumbled.

“Whatever,” The shorter boy leaned forward and aimed in an odd direction, “Just be quiet and explain what’s going on for Fuuka. She’s up next, right after I sink this bi- thing.”
Clack! Crash! Crack, crack, crack. . .

Junpei did as he was told and motioned for the only girl in the game to stand by him. When Fuuka was by his side, he broke down the rules, but she was pretty sure they were watered down for her to understand.

“Here’s how it’s gonna go. You have five balls assigned to you, and because you’re new, you got one through five. Minato gets six to ten. I have eleven to fifteen. If you lose every ball in your group, you’re out. If you can sink everyone else’s, you win!”

“But how do I use this?” Fuuka asked and raised her pole.

“The cue? Now that’s tricky business for a newbie.” Junpei turned to Minato just as he finished his move. Another ball was absent. “Can I get a hand here? I’m not good at this whole teacher thing.”

Minato hummed and waved the girl over. “I can show you a simple version of a bridge.”

Fuuka skipped to the table, hands shaking as she raised the pole (but Junpei called it a cue) and placed the thin end on the edge, awaiting further instructions.

“Okay, what now?”

“Hold the cue at your hip and lower your body like I did.” Minato took his own cue to mirror his instructions. “If you’re standing straight up, you can forget about trying to aim. Even if it feels weird at first.”

Cue to hip. Lower the body.

“Don’t forget to breathe! And bend those knees!” Junpei added.

Take a breath. Bend at the knees.

All of these instructions, Fuuka tried to emulate her companions to the best of her ability. It all seemed like simple advice yet it felt awkward to actually put into practice.

“Not bad, let’s keep going.” Minato reached out his free hand and placed the thin part of the cue in the curve of his thumb. “The other end of the cue should fit right where the thumb and pointer meet. This is your bridge but don’t forget, the most important part is keeping your dominant hand steady.”

“Like this?” She copied her instructor.

“Just like that.” Minato broke position and swept his arm to the table. “Whenever you’re ready, eye up the ball, keep your grip loose, and just flick the cue.”

Eye up the ball.

Once Fuuka was certain she wouldn’t miss, she pushed the cue across her hand and watched the ball roll.

A few inches.

And then stopped in front of her target: the number eleven ball.

Near a pocket, no less.
Though she righted her posture, the girl’s heart sank at the mistake, especially when the two boys had been so nice when teaching her how to play. “Sorry, Minato-kun. Junpei-kun. That probably looked really stupid.”

“Hey now,” Junpei’s said and ruffled her teal hair, “Keep your chin up, Fuukatan. It’s just pool with a couple a’ pals, not a championship-”

_Ca-chunk!_

Junpei and Fuuka looked up to see Minato, hand extended across the table where the cue ball stopped short. Nothing appeared to be out of place, the balls exactly as they were at the beginning of the turn.

Almost, except, number eleven was suspiciously missing.

“Wha-hey!” Junpei exclaimed. “Why’d you do that!?"

Fuuka noted a twitch in Minato’s deadpan expression.

“I tripped.”

And she couldn’t help but laugh at his poor excuse for helping a friend.

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Takeharu Kirijo knew he spent more time in his office than the average man. He knew that the amount of paperwork he sifted through could be considered “unreasonable for one person to handle.” He knew people assumed him to be avoiding the rest of the world. His personal life. His friends. His family.

He knew these criticisms all too well.

What the head of the Kirijo family didn’t seem to grasp is why he should care for others opinions on how he ran a business, especially when those same individuals sat at the top of their companies since the moment they were born.

Do they strive to employ the best and brightest minds from around the globe, even if those minds came from “low-tier” institutions? Did they personally investigate every detail of every sect to ensure employee satisfaction, as well as consumers? Could they even begin to comprehend the kind of blood, sweat, and tears behind each new innovation while priding themselves on owning said rights?

What would they know about _his_ corporation?

To give those naysayers the benefit of the doubt, underneath the guise of a technology and engineering powerhouse, Kirijo senior had two operations under his careful watch: research of the human world and that of the Dark Hour. Not many could say they juggled protecting the larger populace from an unseen enemy while

Hence the reason Takeharu took time off in Yakushima, for that exact purpose.

The island itself housed an auxiliary laboratory and before splitting from an old business partner, the Kirijo group conducted much of its research here, most of it associated with Shadows and learning where they came from. Even after the base-of-operations moved to Tatsumi Port Island, the facility stayed operational as a testing ground for Shadow-based technology.
While it was true, a vacation for his staff was long overdue, a matter concerning a certain weapon decommissioned after the Moonlight Bridge Massacre needed addressing.

It seemed as if an old project came back to haunt them all.

But for now, Takeharu hid away in his darkened office, familiarizing himself with updates on the weapon’s functions and recovery progress. The only source of light came from a desk lamp, barely illuminating a fraction of the room itself and the papers in his hands.

7/19/2009

Report by: Dr. Eva Watts & Dr. Hibiya Amamiya

Condition of weapon is stable and it is responding to external input

Will continue to monitor when moving to the activation phase

Personal Notes

Watts: “I have noticed that she is missing some of her memories from the night of the accident. The battle data seems to be damaged beyond saving and no one downloaded the information. Overall, she is okay and ready for deployment.

Amamiya: “My friend has already said all that needs to be said. If the unit is ready to be put into battle with the group known as SEES, bare in mind that she may ruffle some feathers. She has no comprehension of human emotions or an understanding of psychological nuances. All we can do is program more human-like responses.”

A sigh escaped the man.

Just as he thought, Project Paladin had a long way to go.

Knock, knock.

Kirijo glanced up from the report when he heard soft knocking at his door. He thought he had asked to be left alone until dinner ended.

The only person allowed to break such code could be... well, it could only be her.

“Enter.”

Just as he thought, the glare of hallway chandeliers outlined the silhouette of a young woman, nearly vanishing as the door closed behind her. The dark still failed to hide the glow of red hair, a graceful stance, and a pair of calculating eyes.

Had he been dreaming, Takeharu might have believed this person to be his late-wife. The resemblance was all too real to the point of being uncanny.

But dreams were dreams for a reason.

Instead, it was Mitsuru who stepped into the light.

“It’s been awhile. I’m glad to see you’re in good health,” she said. “I apologize for not visiting sooner. I thought it best to spend time with the others.”

Takeharu placed the report aside, leaning forward to get a better look at her. Old age and disability
did nothing to aide him.

She appeared healthy, if not a little sluggish after having a meal with the rest of her dormmates.

Speaking of...

“Our guests are residents of the dorm, I presume?” he asked.

Mitsuru fidgeted under his gaze.

“I’m sorry for bringing such a crowd.”

An awkward pause.

She broke eye contact and seemed to be focused on one of the office’s many paintings.

For a moment, Kirijo thought to ask if she expected a lecture or worse. Mitsuru had always been the type to clam up when it was just the two of them, but this skittish behavior spoke of a cornered animal, unbefitting for a young lady like her.

However, if Ikutsuki was correct, some of his daughter’s actions the past few months certainly did her no favors.

“You accessed our database, didn't you? Why didn't you ask me directly, instead of using this trip as an excuse?”

“I’m sorry.” She continued to avoid him. “It was foolish and I take full responsibility.”

Takeharu finally stood up from his chair in hopes to reclaim her attention.

“I heard you told them about the incident.”

Mitsuru tensed and returned her gaze to him, now owlish.

“Why did you hide it for so long?” he asked as he approached slowly. “I understand trusting someone you have known longer, but this is not about friendship or your emotions. It is about communication with your team. It does not need to be personal.”

“But-” she faltered, “-I did what I thought was right.”

Takeharu heard the same excuse used to justify all sorts of actions. They were dangerous words, easily manipulated and stretched and warped to the point that they were useless.

It was high time his daughter learned that lesson.

“‘Two in harmony surpasses one in perfection.’ That has been our guiding principle since the Kirijo Family separated from the Nanjo Group. You must learn to trust in others, Mitsuru. There are things in this world that cannot be accomplished alone, no matter how many sacrifices you make.”

As he placed a hand on her shoulder, Mitsuru shrank under her father’s touch. Her once stern expression dipped into one of deep melancholy.

She felt ashamed.

An emotion that belonged to only one of them.
How he wished she would learn that, as well.

“How he wished she would learn that, as well. All of them. I had no intention of concealing the truth and neither should you. Please, steel yourself as I make preparations to disclose everything.”

Mitsuru straightened her back.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good,” he gave her shoulder a squeeze and turned back to his desk, “There’s a girl named Takeba in your group, am I correct? Yukari Takeba?”

Another pause.

“Yes. . .”

Just as he thought.

“For her to awaken to her power. It must be fate. . .” he bemused.

What a cruel fate for one child to bear.

No, for all those children.

The east wing of the villa was just as impressive as the rest of the house.

Furniture worth the same as a new car. Flat-screen television. Palm plants in every corner. Marble flooring.

If only things were under better circumstances, maybe Minato could appreciate it more.

Instead, the members of SEES, Mitsuru, and her father sat around a glass table, taking up almost four couches worth of space. A pair of servants, different from the maid that had shown them around the house, stood nearby with folded hands. Their purpose for being there, Minato had yet to come up with an answer.

What he did know was the uncomfortable silence in the room as he waited for someone to start talking.

Kirijo senior was inclined to do as much.

“It seems everyone is here,” he said, “And from what I understand, Mitsuru has given the short version of events. My father, the origin of Tartarus, and the accident from ten years ago. I hope to shed more light on these events and break down any suspicions of deceit within the group. Is that clear?”

Everyone collectively nodded.

Minato couldn’t help but inwardly curse. He thought this shit show was over but now, they all got pulled right back in. The universe seemed to take sick pleasure in reminding how miserable life was.

And from how he noticed Minako forced herself not to flinch, she felt the same way.

Mitsuru’s father continued.
“As you know, Shadows only exist within the constraints of the Dark Hour, but before ten years ago, we only had a smaller version of this strange phenomenon. Scientists found a time distortion on Tatsumi Port Island where the Shadows were discovered, a permanent fixture long assumed to be a paranormal site. The only means of accessing that site was during the night where the creatures were more active.”

Minato glanced at the table. A variety of photos were spread across the glass surface for the teens to look at, all labeled and dealing with the accident.

They gave shape to Kirijo senior’s horror story.

“My father wanted to mimic this distortion to a greater effect. You could even say he wished to manipulate time itself, change the flow, eliminate unwanted events, shape the world however one desired. Learning how the Shadows moved in and out of that distortion was the key. He simply wished to know if such a thing was possible.”

Junpei, sitting beside Minato, leaned forward to pick up one of the pictures. It showed a group of men and women in white coats posing in front of a large machine. Whatever its purpose, it obviously took a long time to create.

How many of them had died on that fateful night?

“That’s insane…” Junpei trailed off.

Kirijo senior paused at the comment.

“However, under my father’s direction, the research began to stray from its original goal. In his later years, my father seemed to have only nihilism in his heart.” The man sighed at his words. “Whether his madness was caused by it or the struggle to break free, I cannot say. I only know that man had no designs of stopping, even at the cost of his sanity.”

Minato joined in Junpei’s half-hearted search through the photos, as did the other juniors and Minako. To no one’s surprise, Mitsuru and Akihiko hung back.

The two must have seen these before and had no cause to take a second look.

Fuuka clutched a stack of papers in her hands, head bowed as she flipped through each one. “All these people… they probably had no idea what they were doing.”

Minako stared blankly at a photo of grinning men, arms around each other’s shoulders, holding up a test tube filled with black liquid. Their oversized lab goggles hung around their necks, too foggy to continue using. In the top right corner, someone had written a sentence:

“Our first successful Shadow dissection!”

A loud cough drew everyone to look at Kirijo senior and those with pictures in their hand returned those items to the table.

“While it is certainly a tragedy, I think there is a far more pressing issue to be discussed concerning that night. I ask that you pay close attention.” He beckoned the two servants over. “I believe the tape is already routed to the television. Could one of you dim the lights and the other start the footage?”

“Yessir.”
As the servants left, Minato watched as Mitsuru’s usually stoic expression morphed into one of confusion.

“Father?”

Odd, she seemed to always be in the loop.

Was this new information to her, as well?

The lights in the room switched off and the large TV came to life. A blanket of static covered the screen until it was replaced by the still image of a dark room. The only discernible objects were a messy desktop and swivel chair, pulled out and left at an odd angle, almost as if someone had left in a hurry and forgot to put it back.

It reminded Minato of a horror movie he saw once upon a time, right before something bad was about to happen.

“What's this?” Akihiko asked.

Mister Kirijo shifted to get comfortable in his seat. “This is the only existing footage of the accident, recorded by a scientist who was at the scene before the explosion. The video speaks for itself.”

The image unpaused and the whirl of machinery filled the speakers. Twinkling lights from an unseen source flickered in the background, first green, then yellow, orange, and back to yellow. Whatever they symbolized, Minato got a sick feeling that nothing good would come if those colors kept shifting at such a rapid pace.

Finally, someone took a seat in the chair with frantic intent. The quality of the camera shifted until the person’s face became nothing but an unrecognizable blob. Judging by the heaviness in their movements and broad shoulders, Minato guessed it had to be a man or a tall woman.

“I hope this recording reaches safe hands.” a deep voice rumbled.

Yes, it was a man.

From across the glass table, Minato heard Yukari gasp.

“It can’t be. . .”

It can’t be?

It can be what?

Minato continued to listen, albeit, more intently.

A face swam into view as the camera began to focus, revealing an exhausted set of eyes and messy brown hair. The man’s shirt was poorly tucked, I.D. badge crooked, shoulders hunched forward, sleeve cuffs unbuttoned and had a dour frown.

“My employer has become obsessed with a loathsome idea. This experiment should have never even been conceived. I'm afraid what I've done will result in an unprecedented disaster. But if I hadn't, the entire world may have paid the price.”

Despite his appearance, the scientist spoke in a mystified tone.
“Please, listen carefully. The Shadows that were amassed here have been dispersed as a result of the explosion. To end this nightmare, you must eliminate all of them, at any cost.”

His head hung low, ruining the camera’s focus once more.

“I am to blame for this. I knew the risks, but I was blinded by the promise of success. And so, I didn’t raise any objections. I was a fool who should’ve known better than to play God, or help someone do the same.”

Minato watched in shock as the scientist stood up and turned to the background where the lights continued to change colors. Now, most of them glowed red.

His final words rang out.

“It is all my fault.”

A loud boom could be heard in the distance.

The camera cut to black.

Yukari was on her feet the moment the lights turned back on.

“No…” she stumbled and gripped the edge of one of the couches, “…No, he’d never-”

Mitsuru whipped her head to her father. “Who was that man?”

Kirijo senior sighed and turned to Yukari.

“His name was Eiichiro Takeba. He was the head researcher at the time, a very talented man and from what I’ve heard, a good father.”

Fuuka jumped to Yukari’s aide in a heartbeat, supporting her friend as the bad news was broken. Everyone else tried to avoid making the girl any more upset by remaining silent.

“So, that means…” Yukari tried to push Fuuka away as gentle as possible. “The Dark Hour, Tartarus. The people who died in that incident. It was all his fault… He knew what would happen. He didn’t try to stop it.”

Minato could only stare into dead space.

“It was back in ’99. There was a big explosion in the area. Supposedly, my dad died in the blast, but nobody really knows what happened. He was working in a lab run by the Kirijo Group.”

All this time, for almost ten years, Yukari had searched for the truth of her father’s death. She had joined a cause she never believed in and forced herself to fight and risk everything because knowing what really happened mattered more than her own safety. The search could lead to nowhere and yet that had little significance, not when there was a chance that it could be someone else’s fault.

There could be someone to blame.

Now that she knew he had caused the accident which created the Dark Hour, brought Shadows into the real world, knowingly left his family behind, Minato could only imagine the pain Yukari was feeling.

“But, it’s exactly as he said. We pushed him to continue the research, to find a way to utilize the
Shadows and play God.” Mister Kirijo said. “He may claim to take responsibility, but the blame for his death falls squarely on my shoulders. We took a good man and pushed him over the edge.”

Mitsuru immediately stood up and started to approach Yukari like a hunter would approach its kill. However, she had no intention of causing harm.

“Take-Yukari, please sit down. You look pale.”

Yukari shook her head. “So, that's why you were hiding this? Because you felt sorry for me?” Her face contorted in anger. “Is that it!? Because you thought I’d break!?”

Mitsuru stopped her advance but remained standing. “My father never told me anything about this.” The older girl reached out a delicate hand. “You have to understand-”

Before anyone could say another word, Yukari bolted past the servants and escaped the room. Her distressed cries echoed until the sound of a door opening and closing came from far away. It was almost impressive how sudden her departure had been, if only it were any other situation.

Mitsuru froze in place, her hand still raised until she lowered it in defeat.

“Yukari. . .” she whispered.

Minato prepared to spring to his feet. He might not have known her for as long as Junpei or Mitsuru, but he was prepared to take any harshness Yukari may throw at him and by the looks of it, she needed someone to yell at right now.

However, Minako grabbed his wrist and forced him to stay put.

“Let me handle this.” she said firmly and rose instead. “No offense, but I think I have more experience with runaway teenagers. You might just convince her to keep going.”

Despite the tense atmosphere, Minato couldn’t help but snort at her poor attempt at lightening the mood. He supposed he could let this one jab go.

“Don’t screw up.” he said.

She chuckled and let go of his wrist. “Come on, I have a perfect record of bringing back troubled teens. Have a little faith.”

Without another word, Minako leapt into action, speeding off the couch and gaining speed as she left the room. The servants stepped to the side and left her through.

“Be right back!” she called and then vanished.

“Arisato!” Mitsuru called.

“Arisato?”

Minato perked up as Mitsuru’s father repeated the surname. It forced him to look the man in his good eye, the one that seemed so menacing hours before, enough to stun his big sister, an eye that had seen more than a few tragedies.

An eye that looked at Minato with such deep sorrow.

It gave him a different kind of chills.
“Yeah, my last name.” Minato said. “Mine and hers.”

Kirijo senior narrowed his same, haunting gaze at him. “You two are the siblings who managed to survive the Moonlight Bridge Massacre. I remember Ikutsuki mentioned you two years ago; but, I cannot seem to recall the reason it came up.” He sighed. “How old are you now? And your sister? If you don’t mind my asking.”

Minato sank as now everyone was staring at him.

How could he blame them? This was something he and Minako never spoke about.

“I’m. . . sixteen. She’s seventeen.”

Mister Kirijo hummed.

“Let’s see, you were six while she was seven, awfully young to endure something so traumatic. You must have been quite strong.”

Despite how calm and rational the head of the Kirijo family spoke, Minato felt a prick of annoyance at the observation.

Strength? Is that the only reason he and Minako survived?

His mother was strong. His father was strong. They were the adults in the car and had the best chance at life, not their defenseless children.

“With all due respect, we got lucky.” Minato hunched over his knees. “Or cursed . . .”

Cursed, that sounded about right.

Cursed to survive.

Cursed to wander.

Cursed to live.

Minato felt a pair of bodies on either side of him press closer. One, he knew was Junpei, acting as an extra presence. The other was much smaller and dared to wrap their arms around him.

“I never had the chance to say it, but I’m sorry for what happened to your parents.” Fuuka said, revealing herself to be the second person. “Even if it was a long time ago, I know how much death can sting.”

Junpei gave Minato a pat on the shoulder, not having to say why.

Minato stirred under all the sympathy thrown his way but welcomed the comfort.

And for the first time in forever, he allowed himself to feel disappointed by the hollowness that night left him with.

And let it be replaced.

If only for this one night, he closed his eyes.

“I’ll be okay.”
Minato had a history of running away.

It started when he turned eleven and found out the joys of growing up. His once round features sharpened to mirror the late Ene Arisato, voice deepened from a childlike squeak to a low alto, and . . . other things which Minako had no right to mention out loud. One of their eccentric uncles had taken care of that.

Other students grew cold towards the orphaned boy who spent more time thinking than making friends. They assumed him to be the typical “lone wolf” and took great joy in excluding Minato from group activities. The few acquaintances he managed to see out on a regular basis often abandoned him when they learned he was moving across the country for the millionth time, not bothering to reach out or continue their relationship.

And when all hope for finding a permanent home slipped between his fingers, he snapped.

Minato’s rebellious phase had tested Minako’s parenting skills, alright. There was no shortage of reasons the two ended up in the principal's office, his older sister begging for forgiveness: swearing, talking back in class, instigating fights, writing obscene essays, and (her personal favorite) throwing chalk at another student’s head.

Granted, the punk deserved it, but still uncomfortable when they both got scolded.

Of all these, Minato’s worst outbursts occurred when they returned to whatever relative they were staying with.

He almost never lashed out at Minako unless she gave him a particularly harsh lecture. Even then, his screaming fits lasted only a few minutes and he would apologize in exchange for some homemade sweets. He ate his treat, finished his homework, and went to bed. Everything turned out okay.

Unfortunately, when faced with an adult, Minato held nothing back.

And he always ended up sprinting out the nearest exit like the devil was snapping at his heels.

Minako lost track of the times she chased after him or the nights spent waiting by an open window, praying for his well being. The times she did pursue, she easily caught up and could often get him to come back without a fight. If he refused to return, they spent hours wandering around until the Dark Hour consumed the streets or the police started growing suspicious of two teens meandering around after curfew.

Those nights were the ones that made her blood sing with worry. For more reasons than one.

Worried he finally gave up.

Worried she finally failed.

Now here she was, years later, sprinting down the walkway to the ocean in order to catch a teenager who fled from her care.

That song of terror made its reprise.

The maids were kind enough to warn Minako of Yukari’s sudden disappearance from the villa. Instead of going straight to her room, she veered off course and left the house entirely. She was last
seen vaulting the wooden gate which blocked the path to the beachfront and nearly tripped when she landed on the other side.

Kind of excessive, but who has time for opening gates when in distress?

The poor girl must have known she would be followed and decided to give herself as much distance as possible.

After opening the gate like a normal person, Minako took each step carefully rather than risking a nasty fall. Though she was no stranger to jogging on rugged terrain, the trees and bushes hid what little moonlight she could use to spot stray roots or sudden drop-offs. Having to limp for the rest of the vacation did not sound appealing, especially when her cross-country skills were needed for an important task.

Thankfully, she could make up the lost distance once she got on the sand. Yukari was no slug, but Minako had no doubts that she was faster.

She just had to focus on the road in front of her.

“Please keep her safe, please keep her safe.” Minako prayed. “That’s all I ask of you.”

The crash of waves grew louder the further down she went.

“I can hear the water.”

The salty air filled her lungs.

“It keeps getting stronger.”

The dirt path began to fade.

“My feet are sinking.”

The downward slope evened out until Minako was running on level sand.

She could have sworn there were shoe-prints where she stepped.

“I’m going in the right direction!”

The ocean was now fully visible and the dirt road far behind her. A faint moonlight cast an unearthly glow on the pale sand, as if stepping into the world of a dream.

“Where do those prints lead-”

Minako stumbled as she tried to come to an abrupt stop.

All her earlier plans escaped her mind.

Yukari’s back faced the treeline, her eyes most likely glued to the waves as they rolled up. Her shoes were discarded halfway between the entrance and herself so she could stand in the water. The cuffs of her jeans had been rolled up, letting her stand further out than just the edge.

Her head was bowed with arms hung at her sides.

“I believed in him for so long. This is too much. . .”
At least she decided to stay close to the house rather than take off to some unknown part of the island.

Minako willed her breathing to remain below a whisper as she began to walk towards Yukari.

“Is it cold?”

The brunette stiffened and turned at the question.

When she and Minako were both staring at each other, she softened.

“Lemme guess, Mitsuru-senpai asked you to bring me back? Figures…” Yukari shook her head and returned to the ocean, “At least she decided to sick you on me. If it were one of the guys…”

Minako slipped out of her sandals and left them behind. “Actually, I think she was gonna try an’ stop me.” Despite her stomach churning at the thought of even stepping into the water, she forced herself to stand beside Yukari and feel the coolness of the waves. “But I left so quickly, all I heard was my last name and then nothing.”

Again, Yukari seemed to relax knowing that Minako came of her own volition, but that still did nothing to ease the pensive fire behind her gaze.

“Ya’ know, I actually told Minato-kun about my dad, after he saved me from that Shadow in April. I thought it was only fair since, you know…”

Minako glanced over. “Because you felt guilty?”

Yukari nodded. “I told him that my dad died in that incident. Nobody knew the truth, so there were all sorts of rumors because he was in charge of the research team. Even at his funeral, people were really mean to me and my mom. We had to move a few times, too…”

Having to uproot your whole life because of something out of your control. And to be blamed after a loved one has died. Why people saw the need to do so would remain a mystery, and not knowing only worsened the blow.

Though their circumstances were vastly different, Minako knew that heartache and more. A sad reality for them both.

“It must’ve been hard. Growing up like that.”

That fire in Yukari continued to burn and smoke.

“But all this time, I kept telling myself it wasn't his fault. I loved him a lot, and I believed he'd never do anything wrong.” She chuckled darkly. “I received a letter back in the spring. It was from him, written ten years ago. It cracked me up cuz, even though it said, ‘To my family,’ it was pretty much all about me. That only made me believe in him more, like he was thinking of me up until the very end. When I found out I had a special power, I thought it was fate. I was scared, but I thought if I cooperated with the Kirijo Group, I might find out what really happened. That's why I agreed to fight using my Persona. But, it turns out, all of that was for nothing…”

Minako frowned while her companion kicked absentmindedly at the water. “That’s not true. What about all the people we’ve helped? Was that just for nothing?”

Yukari just scoffed and resumed her wallowing. “Why does reality have to be so harsh? I tried so
hard to fight my fear, and this is what I get.”

She slipped further into self-pity.

“Maybe I'm just jealous of Mitsuru-senpai. I mean, why my father and not hers?” Yukari ran her hands through her hair. “Haha, but I'm a horrible person for wishing that, aren't I? I guess Junpei has a point when he calls me a witch.”

Minako did her best not to burst into a rant. What Yukari needed was to ride out her emotions, unimpeded and raw.

“You’re not a horrible person-”

Yukari stomped on the surface of the water, a splash so violent, Minako flinched.

“You still don’t get it!”

“Wha-”

Instantly, Yukari was facing Minako, tears streaming down her cheeks.

The look in her eyes was that of desperation.

“You act so nice but I know you hate me! I made Fuuka research the accident! I treat Minato and Junpei like shit! I put Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai on the spot! I ruined EVERYTHING!” she sobbed. “And you! My dad killed your parents! Took them away! He made you and Minato orphans and you think I'M the one who’s suffering!? You should hate me! Everyone else does-!”

Minako grabbed Yukari’s shoulders.

“STOP!”

Both girls were stuck in place.

Their yelling seemed to reverberate in Minako’s ears.

This really was just like dealing with a younger Minato, minus the crying and talk of family.

But unlike with Minato, Minako knew her patience had long run out.

“Do you realize what you're saying!?” She gave the younger girl a shake. “For goodness sake, I don’t hate you and I know for a fact that the others don’t either! Not a single one of them!”

Yukari’s tears continued to pour, but at least her breathing was improving steadily. The franticness that consumed her in the first place also faded from her eyes, replaced with pure sadness.

“I’m sorry. My head's a mess. I’m so afraid. I don't know what to do anymore. I’m totally lost.” she said. “I don’t even know what I’m saying.”

Minako sighed. The adrenaline forced her to take a second and gather her thoughts.

This girl truly believed everything that came out of her mouth.

And it broke Minako’s heart.
“Yukari... Honey, just stop and think for two seconds. If you were a bad person, then why are you crying right now?”

Yukari shook her head.

No answer.

Was she silent because of shame or did she want to control her weeping? Whichever it turned out to be, and if Minako was being honest, she could feel her own emotions bubbling too close to the edge.

Get it together.

Someone needed her help.

“If you were a bad person, you wouldn’t care about what you did. You wouldn’t be standing here and crying your eyes out.” She reached up to wipe Yukari’s tears away. “And where’d you get this idea that I should blame you for what happened to our parents? It had nothing to do with your father, and especially you.”

“But he-”

Minako held up a finger.

“He’s the reason for the Dark Hour. He did what he thought was right. I don’t hate either of you for an accident and you shouldn’t feel bad for me. Or Minato. Or yourself... okay?”

Yukari bit her lip but nodded reluctantly.

“I-I still don’t know what to do.”

With that, Minako smiled and stepped forward. Her arms went around Yukari and she held the girl close. She made no move to push her senior away.

“This might not be the answer you want, but you have to be brave and have faith,” Minako said and rubbed Yukari’s back. “Call me a crazy Christian if it’ll make you feel better, but I believe that someone’s always watching over us. Even if they can’t give advice or speak, they’re still there and they want to see us succeed. Whether it’s in SEES or beyond, I can’t make that choice for you.”

“Believe in something?” Yukari returned the embrace and dared to rest her head. “Believe in my dad...”

Minako pulled out to cradle the young Takeba’s face, blotchy from crying but at least she had the ghost of a smile on her lips.

“And if you have nothing to believe in, believe in yourself. You’ve saved lives and there’s no one I trust more with healing the team. You’ll always have a place if you wanna stay a little longer.”

SEES’s pink archer chuckled and had no trouble picking herself back up.

“Sorry I ran away... and thank you for listening to me. You and Minato-kun’re really good at that.”

“Well,” Minako smirked and motioned to herself, “He learned from the best.”

The two shared a round of laughter, hoarse from their yelling. Their voices carried above the waves
that washed ashore and shifted the sand beneath their toes. Minako never thought she would feel so at peace because of spending time in the ocean, but she was starting to understand why Yukari ran here first.

Maybe. . .

“Hey, guys!”

They stopped laughing and turned towards the entrance to the beach.

Junpei and Minato ran onto sand, both panting and grass stains on their knees. Minako guessed that they had tripped along the dirt road and found out the hard way just how much it sucked to catch your foot on a tree root.

“Sheesh, what’s taking you so long? Everybody's waiting.” Junpei said once he got close enough.

Minako guided Yukari from the water and back to dry land. “What’s the rush? No city, no Shadow, right?”

Minato shook his head. “Yakushima isn’t safe during the Dark Hour. Mister Kirijo wants us back at the house before it goes into lockdown.”

There were other places in the world with Shadows? Was there an accident on the island, too?

Minako simply shrugged and accepted it. All of the day’s drama claimed what was left of her energy and her bed called to her.

Yukari sauntered to where her sandals lay waiting and pulled them on. “Ya’ know, I've been thinking lately. Once you awaken to the power of Persona, you remember everything that happens during the Dark Hour.” She unrolled the cuffs of her jeans as the others listened. “It's like trading away your innocence in exchange for power. You can’t look away from the things you don't want to see.”

“Deep,” Junpei said. “If you thought that hard in school, Minato better watch out!”

Minato rolled his eyes. “In her dreams.”

“Hey, you never know!”

Minako smiled as the three got into yet another argument.

She wished things could always be like this-

A shiver ran down her spine.

Almost as if someone was watching her.

Her instincts told her to look at the treeline.

Something disturbed the underbrush as soon as she spotted the movement.

*An unnatural blue.*

*Clear as glass.*

*Glistening like fine china.*
Oddly intense.

The rustling stopped.

The feeling subsided.

Minako shook her head. It was probably an animal and she was overthinking the situation.

But as she herded the younger teens back up the path, a pair of blue orbs followed close behind and disappeared when they safely reached the house.

July 20th, 2009

I thought vacation were supposed to be relaxing. It’s only been one day and I feel like I went on the emotional journey of the century.

Junpei’s father is a drunk, his mother abandoned him, Mitsuru’s father is unsettling, Yukari’s father caused the Dark Hour, Minato looked sad before he went to bed, and now I think someone’s watching us.

I can barely hold my pen straight.

I’m feeling sleepy but I can’t close my eyes.

I went for a walk around the house but I still have no interest in laying down.

I feel shaky.

It hurts to think...

Think...
Confessions

Chapter Notes

PSA: I deleted chapter 26 which was a teaser for the actual chapter 26, so now, future chapters will be in order. Sorry to anyone who commented on that chapter but I thought it was high time I fixed that little issue for new readers. You guys are still the best!

In other news, after someone commented about following me on Twitter, I went to go start an account (I’d been thinking about doing that for a while). My handle is @MarietheWriter2 and if I get enough followers, I’d like to start posting updates and more stuff about my life. Think of it as the official place to get information about Faded Away, the FA universe, ideas for chapters, putting in requests, and much more.

I’d also like to warn you guys that I reference the Bro Code VERY SPECIFICALLY in this chapter. I linked the official website down below for your convenience. Thank you for understanding the importance of this sacred code and its role in the “plot.”

QOTD: If you could sum up this fic with a meme, what would it be? I’m genuinely curious. Personally, my pick is Drop It: Game Grumps Remix (nothing goes right and there’s a ton of swearing from one angsty boi).

The Bro Code: https://brocode.org/the-code/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Current Date/Time: 09:47 AM]

[Auditory Disturbance Detected]

[Auditory Systems: On]

[ “-met those children last night. The ones who survived that accident ten years ago.” ]

[ “You mean the Moonlight Bridge Massacre? What did they say?” ]

[ “When I spoke to the boy, he said they were lucky. However, no one could have survived such a heinous event without some kind of strength or will to live. Luck is simply a poor man’s explanation for extraordinary circumstances.” ]

[ “The poor things. If only we deployed a counter-strike sooner. . . I guess all I can do is make sure she’s ready for action if something like that ever happens again.” ]

[ “Thank you, Eva, but it’s not a question of if. It’s a question of when.” ]

[ “Still, it doesn’t hurt to be optimistic, Mister Kirijo. For all those children, for those we lost, we must look ahead.” ]

[Auditory Systems: Off]
[Search Database]

[Key Word(s): Moonlight Bridge Massacre, children, counter-strike, 1999]

[0 Result(s) Found]

[Search Failed]

[Search Internal Drive]

[Key Word(s): Moonlight Bridge Massacre, children, counter-strike, 1999]

[3 Result(s) Found]

[Priority Orders Detected]

[“Find and protect the two children.” ]

[Personal Files Detected]

* * * * *

Name: Minako Ann Arisato

Age: 17

Class: 3-D

Observations from SI: Extroverted, identifies as Christian (Catholic denomination), motherly, can summon multiple Personas, current field leader of SEES, she has mentioned that she likes reading and cross country running, seems to enjoy cooking

Name: Minato Emmanuel Arisato

Age: 16

Class: 2-F

Observations from SI: Introverted (depending on the situation), identifies as a follower of Shintoism, sarcastic and often provokes his fellow juniors into fights, above average intelligence, can summon multiple Personas, expresses an interest in the medical field

* * * * *

[Conclusion: “Children” refers to Minako/Minato Arisato]

[Mission Updated: “Find and protect Minako/Minato Arisato.”]

[Orders Acknowledged]

[Self-Activation Protocol Engaged]
Day two of the trip to Yakushima began like any other, despite the events of last night leaving a few members of SEES oddly quiet at breakfast. Those who opted to poke at their meal and stew included Mitsuru, Akihiko, Yukari, and Mister Kirijo. If someone decided to break the silence, it was either Minako asking how everyone slept (“Fine”/“Eh”), Fuuka commenting on the taste of the food (“You’re right”/“I guess”), and or Junpei cracking a joke (“Ugh”).

And Minato? He thought it best to avoid confrontation at all costs by pretending to sleep in, claiming he felt sick and needed time alone.

In actuality, he threw on his headphones and spent the better part of an hour reading the news. Murder, celebrity gossip, murder, something about sports, murder, traffic accident, murder, global warming, murder, murder because of global warming, and more murder.

Again, another morning living on planet Earth.

That hour of peace ended with Junpei banged on Minato’s door to drag him to the beach, Akihiko joining them to “make sure they stayed out of trouble.” Minako insisted it was a strategic move on her part and that the three needed time to themselves yadda. She even tossed her brother some yen, gave the okay to spend it how he pleased, and bid him a fond farewell.

But why did she insist the boys go their own way for the afternoon rather than the group sticking together?

A tree.

No joke. Mitsuru took the girls on a hike in the nearby woods to see a large tree, leaving Minato with dumb and dumbest for the foreseeable future.

“Can you guys believe the girls abandoned us!? For a tree!? On a beach vacation!?”

Typical of Junpei, yelling about trivial matters and disturbing the peace.

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“Mitsuru said it’s impressive when you see it up close and if she’s impressed by something, it’s worth checking out.”

And Mitsuru’s chief lapdog, Akihiko, decided to defend his mistress.

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“I don’t care if that thing is made of diamonds; we're on an island, in the middle of summer, and no school! Why don’t they wanna go to the beach!? Why would ya skip out on sun, surf, and laying around in the sand? It ain’t right!!”

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“Maybe they wanna spend some time away from all that. Even I’d get tired of this vacation if that’s all I did.”

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.
“But dude, the BEACH!”

Snap, snap, scuttle, scuttle.

“Why’d I get stuck babysitting you two?”

SNAP!

Minato pulled back his hand just as the crab he was taunting decided to fight back. That bite-sized bastard nearly caught him if not for his superior reflexes and intellect, especially the intellect. A crustacean was no match with such a deadly combination, not when its opponent saw the strike coming from a mile away.

But that near-death-experience told Minato he was pushing his luck. Next time, he may find himself a finger short, should he continue toying with mother nature.

A better time than any to jump into the conversation.

“Look on the bright side. We can say fuck and Minako can’t do a damn thing to stop us.” Minato stood up and let the crab scuttle off. “Finally free from that she-devil’s stupid rules.”

Akihiko scowled at him. “Just because the girls are gone, doesn’t mean it’s a free for all. Have a little respect for the rules.”

The token virgin with a superiority complex frowned upon swearing, as if this were some grand revelation. Minato already assumed that after one decent conversation and sharing a handful of similar opinions, Akihiko would feel the need to tell him what to do. Or his status Mitsuru’s lapdog and god of their school gave him special privileges over the rest of the team.

Why did the seniors have to suck the joy out of everything sacred to the young adult lifestyle, especially harmless jokes and some good-natured profanity?

No, Minato decided to bite back.

“Beep beep, the fun police rolled up to doll out citations for unsolicited comedy.” he said with a shrug. “Sorry but I can’t pay the fine. I’m fresh out of fucks to give. Do ya’ take cash?”

“Arisato-” Akihiko stuttered over his own astonishment before letting out a sigh, “-I said it once but I’ll say it again. With that attitude, I’m shocked anyone likes you.”

Oh, so Officer Sanada played the nobody-likes-you card? How original for a person who used trash talk from an episode of Featherman Rangers.

But if it was a battle of wits he wanted, Minato was “ecstatic” to take up his sword of untapped insults.

“I’m shocked you’re not dead from a protein overdose. I heard it’s an epidemic among athletes and monkeys. I’d be careful. Statistically, you’re at double the risk.”

“I’m shocked Mitsuru didn’t kill you when you stole her motorcycle.” Akihiko said. “And while we’re on the topic, not only did you steal someone else’s property, but you drove it without a license. You’d think someone who’s just SO smart would know that’s against the law.”

“We almost died. If I didn’t break the law, we wouldn’t be here.” Minato turned away and crossed his arms. “And quite frankly, I’d rather go to jail than get stuck in the afterlife with YOU.”
In a similar fashion, Akihiko mirrored the passive-aggressive stance. “Funny, I didn’t know we’d both go to hell.”

The monkey (Akihiko) adopted a sense of humor, not only that, but he had the gull to throw Minato’s insults back at him?

Could this day get any worse?

An arm went around Minato’s shoulders and Junpei’s zealous voice shouted directly into his ear. “Hey now, you two gotta light up a little. We’re on our own! Just a couple of dudes being guys and nothing’s holding us back!” he cackled. “And since our leaders ain’t around to stop us, I say we act like real men and enjoy our kind’s pastime.”

Minato shimmied away. “The silent game?”

“Wrong!” Junpei corrected him. “Pickin’ up chicks!”

Shit.

Minato needed to stop believing in Junpei’s ability to think rationally in the presence of the fairer sex. One might say he thought with his other head when such a situation arose, and to any sane person, that only meant trouble.

Akihiko shook his head, “I really don’t think that’s a good idea. We’re here to relax, not get kicked off the beach for sexual harassment.”

Junpei groaned. “Why’s everyone gotta be a stick in the mud? The one day we’re free from Miss President Ice Queen and you guys wanna stay here and fight.” He opened his arm to the beach, slowly filling with other swimmers. “There’s a whole world out there and all kinds of ladies to flirt with? Tall, short, cute, attractive, witty-”

“-Busy, taken, crabby, and my personal favorite, not interested.” Minato finished with a glare, “If you wanna talk to girls, wait for the rest of the gang to get back. They said they’d meet us here after lunch.”

“Does number thirty-eight of the Bro Code mean nothing to you!?” Junpei insisted. “I wanna flirt with someone nice, not someone who’d chop my balls off and feed them to the sharks! Or worse!”

Briefly, Minato sympathized with Junpei. If any of the girls got hit on or treated in a similar manner, the remaining three would jump the poor sucker and dump the body in a remote location. They had the skills, they had the drive, and need anyone mention they had Mitsuru Kirijo on their side? Her name alone told people not to fuck with her or her associates.

The only one who may abstain from such archaic methods was Fuuka but without a doubt, she would assist in the cover-up phase of the crime. Minako and Yukari treated her like family, and family never turned their back on each other, even in the case of murder.

Junpei had a point. Better to upset a random stranger than a mother hen, a bipolar archer with a nasty kill streak, a professional hacker, and an heiress with cash to burn.

But more than that, Junpei invoked the Bro Code. Even Minako followed the rules of the code when he used it against her.

Number thirty-eight: a Bro shall not damage another Bros’ chances to score with a chick.
“Do I have to talk to anyone?” Minato asked.

Junpei shook his head. “Fifty-eight, just be there and you’re good.”

“Number fifty-three modified, I’m allowed to rub it in when ya’ fuck up.”

“Like I’m gonna but sure!”

“No one needs to know we’re doing this? Even Minako?”

“She may be a fellow bro, but eighty-eight.”

No talking. Schadenfreude with no strings attached. A confidentiality agreement. Not a bad way to spend a summer afternoon at the beach.

Minato nodded. He might not believe in Junpei’s plan or abilities as a pick-up artist, but he was a man of his word and lived by the code. “You twisted my arm.”

“Hell yeah!” Junpei slapped Minato on the back. “Welcome to Operation Babe Hunt!”

Akihiko remained stoic, despite both juniors going against him. “Bro Code? Operation wha-I can’t believe you two. We’re not hitting on strangers and that’s it.”

Mid-rant, Minato, and Junpei promptly turned heel, walking towards the other end of the beach.

“Did ya’ hear something, bro?” Junpei asked.

Minato shook his head. “Must be the wind.”

“Hey! Get back here!” Akihiko yelled and ran to catch up.

As their babysitter continued to follow and scold Junpei and Minato for paying no mind to his nagging, Minato wondered what the girls were up to. Whatever it was, it would never be quite as funny as disobeying an authority figure in the pursuit of a friend’s humiliation.

Ah yes, this vacation was shaping up to be Minato’s favorite.

Deep in the Jymon Sogi forest of Yakushima, the ladies of SEES strolled along a winding, dirt road. Shade cast by the trees dappled along the path and provided shelter from the sun, burning brighter than the day before. The local wildlife flew above them or, on occasion, watched the humans pass by with cautious glares.

Mitsuru forgot how much she missed this familiar trail.

As a little girl, whenever they came to the island, her father took her on a business trip to see the large cryptomeria tree whenever there was time. A trusty walking stick in his hand and a bag full of snacks on Mitsuru’s back, they trekked into the wild and away from the outside world. No phone calls, no talk of office politics, and no worries to speak of. All they had was the open road and Takeharu Kirijo’s frequent observations about whatever plant or animal they came across.

And when they reached the tree, they stayed in its shadow for hours at a time. Mitsuru listened to cicadas buzz and her father sing an old, French lullaby he learned from his late wife. They played card games or brought along a book to read together, curling up on a picnic blanket as the day marched on. Finally, they ended every visit by picking a handful of wildflowers to decorate Mitsuru’s room.
They returned to the villa hand-in-hand.

It was the only typical family activity they could afford to indulge before diving right back into reality.

“Someday, you will share this view with others.” he always said. “Such a view says more about you than words ever will. Remember that, for the future.”

Taking that to heart, Mitsuru decided to share the hike with new, friendly faces.

Fuuka, leading the pack, sighed and twirled to address the rest of the group. “I thought walking through the woods would be uncomfortable, but this is so nice! The fresh air, the quiet, I’ll miss it when we leave.”

“Don’tcha mean,” Minako dropped her voice as low as she could, “‘You’ll miss it when we leaf!’”

The poor man’s impression of Ikutsuki earned a groan out of everyone.

“One more pun and I’ll be forced to remove you from the team,” Mitsuru warned. “I can only take so many of those with the Chairman, as is.”

Minako feigned hurt and clutched her heart, “Well, well, I see how it is,” and her head turned up to the sky. “Still, I agree with Fuuka-chan. It’s been forever since I’ve lived in the country. I miss stepping outside every morning and seeing nothin’ but green.”

“You lived in the country, senpai?” Fuuka asked.

“My grandparents owned a ranch in Texas so we didn’t have forests like this, only fields and pastures. The nerd and I stayed for about a year before moving back to Japan.” Minako chuckled. “If ya’ want, I’ve got tons of stories about that place. My favorite’s when Minato got a Hampshire pig for his birthday and he went nuts!”

Fuuka gasped. “You can have pet pigs!?”

Off the two went, Fuuka listening to Minako’s fantastical adventures while the other spoke with vigor. She did omit the story explaining why she refused to join the others in the ocean, but that’s beside the point. Her animated expressions, her sincere tone, it all but sucked in their trusty navigator into each tale in the same fashion as an actor to an audience.

Mitsuru checked out of the chatter and spared a glance the fourth member of their party, Yukari, who had yet to contribute to the conversation.

It was odd behavior, to say the least. At breakfast, she seemed at ease when asked a question or chiding Junpei for his tactless jokes, something she refused to do a few weeks prior. Even as the girls set out, Yukari made a point of reviewing their provisions and reassuring Fuuka that there were no cockroaches inside the villa. That cooperative spirit remained that way up until they reached the two-mile mark of their hike.

After that, nothing. Her attention was elsewhere, bouncing from her feet to the canopy to a random bush and back again, anything that kept her from engaging with the others.

Mitsuru wished she were clueless as to why but this cold-shoulder routine was normal by now. She or her associates revealed something about the Shadows, Yukari became upset and she made it clear she had no intention of addressing the tension. That was it.
The worst part, she had a right to be angry.

Mitsuru gave an executive order to Akihiko and the Chairman to shut their mouths and not disclose any “sensitive information.” The feelings of her teammates were in mind, especially Yukari’s and the siblings, but that didn’t justify letting wounds from the past fester and break when the truth finally came to light. It only undermined the intelligence of the new recruits and destroyed what little trust they clung to in the first place.

Mitsuru knew but she ignored the advice of her best friend, her father, and her better judgment. She was simply paying the price for that stupidity.

“Are you glad we took a break from the ocean today, Yukari-san?” Mitsuru asked.

Yukari looked up, but kept her eyes trained on Minako and Fuuka’s backs.

“Anything to get away from Stupei, so yeah.”

“I see...”

“Mmhm...”

A pause, the crunch of twigs and Fuuka explaining her newest tech project filling the dead space.

But Mitsuru had to think of a way to fill it herself, and quickly.

First attempt: praise.

“I heard you did well at your last archery tournament. I can ask.”

“. . . Minako-senpai made a surprise dinner the other night. You said you were too busy to come downstairs.”

Another pause.

Second attempt: hobbies.

“I finished a book on the political dissonance in American college campuses. The author’s name escapes me but I believe the title was ‘Brainwashed.’ I thought it was an interesting look at another country’s education system and the corruption lying underneath the surface.”

“. . . Sorry, I don’t read a lot and I’m not very political.”

Longer.

“I noticed you admiring the forest. Does anything stick out in particular?”

“. . .”

Drawn out as Yukari refused to answer, causing Mituru to internally slap herself.

“Excellent, you’ve just made things worse. Try asking what her deepest fear is, next time. Maybe she’ll scream about how you’re forcing a conversation. How about a better idea? Inquire further about her feelings and bring up horrible memories from her past. What could possibly go wrong!? Give it a try!”
No matter how desperately Mitsuru wished to know what was going on in Yukari’s head, the silence between them created a distance too far to conquer. Leaping that gap was impossible at this time, leaving no way for them to connect, let alone talk about the touchy subject of ten years ago.

Mitsuru decided it was best to let this sleeping dog lay. Their relationship needed room to heal and grow before they could delve into the subject without causing a major stir.

No matter how violently in tore her up inside.

If only. . .

“~ When stars’re smile at moon, wonder how look in your eyes, just dialing your number, failing to press the last two~”

Everyone flinched as Mitsuru’s cheerful ringtone broke the fragile peace, prompting her into action. Of all the times to receive a call, it had to be now, on a vacation and in the middle of a nature walk.

“~Pray in the heart, when the moon’s reaching starts, if you hold me tight~”

“My apologies,” Mitsuru snatched the device from her bag and accepted the call, not bothering to check the collar ID first. “This is Mitsuru Kirijo. To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

“Good afternoon, Mitsuru. We have a slight issue.”

Shuki Ikutsuki’s chipper voice responded to her greeting, albeit hurried and out of breath.

Then again, he did say they had a problem and by the sound of it, it was not along the lines of a failed joke or spilled coffee.

“Please continue.”

A deep breath later and the Chairman continued. “Well, I’m at the lab here on the island. And a machine that was considered inoperable suddenly left the facility on its own.”

Mitsuru’s stomach dropped.

She knew about the island’s research facilities and that one was still functional, even after moving the Shadow-based operations to the mainland.

However, that remaining lab housed the first anti-Shadow weapons known simply as “The Iron Maidens.”

If even one slipped past security, the public may find out about the Kirijo Corporation’s side business, and by proxy, the Dark Hour.

As if Mitsuru’s day couldn’t get any worse, karma was more than happy to throw another challenge at her feet.

“But that means-”

“I know, an anti-Shadow weapon has escaped their pod and is loose on the island. We thought it was too damaged to so much as talk, but we grossly underestimated its operating power. It just walked right out the back door and we haven’t seen it since.”

Mitsuru paced along the dirt path, well aware that the other girls watched on. “Are you sure it’s one
of them? Those weapons were decommissioned and put away back before the formation of the Kirijo Group. How could one of them be roaming about on their own and in broad daylight, no less?"

“This one has been. . . troublesome the past two months, which is why you and the others must find it before any civilians come into contact with it.” She could imagine Ikutsuki glancing over the brim of his glasses, expecting her cooperation. “I will do my best to secure the populated areas around the beach but I leave the rest to you. All I ask is you don’t provoke it. Its behavior shows signs of impulsive decision making when it detects a potential threat.”

“It may take some time to round up the troops but consider it done.” Mitsuru said

“Understood. Please be careful.”

The call ended and Mitsuru whipped back to the group, all waiting for her to fill them in on the situation, but unlike previous missions, she dared to disclose the full story.

“We don’t have much time so listen carefully and remain calm.” Mitsuru frowned. “The island’s research lab has lost one of its weapons, a combat vehicle to be precise. We’ve been tasked with finding and, just maybe, capturing it as quickly as possible.”

Fuuka gasped and stepped closer to Minako. “A-a weapon? How can a weapon just get up and walk away!?”

Yukari shook her head. “I think the bigger problem is that half our team is currently a mile away and knowing them, cell phones aren’t gonna work.” She turned to Mitsuru. “I’m pretty fast. Let me get them and we can go from there.

Mitsuru paused but every second they stood doing nothing, the weapon could be off wreaking havoc. Or worse, it could be filmed and posted online for the whole world to see.

Despite her own doubts, Mitsuru nodded. “Call me once you’ve reached the others. We’ll come up with a strategy until then.”

“Right, good luck!”

As Yukari scampered off the way they came, Mitsuru returned to Minako and Fuuka. “Yamagishi, I know it’s nothing compared to your equipment, but I have a radio at that house that can draw out your Persona’s tracking ability, even during the day. The island might be large, but I doubt our target could travel very far considering its condition.” she offered a hand to Fuuka. “It’s best we hurry so stay close to me, and don’t let go once we start running.”

“R-right!” Fuuka accepted the hand, sundress fluttering with each airy step. “I’ll try not to slow you down.”

Mitsuru finally turned to Minako. “As for you. . .”

Minako cocked her head. “My orders?”

A pair of jean shorts, an orange tank top, beat-up sneakers, light and easy to spot amongst the green of the forest. The field leader’s attire was a perfect fit for a sunny hike with good acquaintances.

Or if she needed to make a quick getaway.
Mitsuru tossed her cell phone at Minako.

“Follow the path. If you see anything, call Ikutsuki.”

One hour into Operation Babe Hunt and Minato found himself wishing he was able to laugh as easily as other people his age.

After almost getting their heads taken off by a pair of entitled college students; shot down by some career women with boyfriends; and Minato’s favorite, definitely ending up on an episode of “Dateline” after an attempted sexual assault by a man in drag; it was safe to say that Junpei’s grand crusade turned out to be a total bust. Every attempt, in Akihiko’s words, ended in embarrassment or emotional scarring.

Which only fueled Minato’s insults as the three walked along the sand, letting the high tide wash over their burned feet. Running away from the previously mentioned trap took longer than they thought and when the sun-baked the sand at a toasty one thousand degrees, it hurt just as much.

“I knew I should’ve asked for a camera on my birthday,” Minato said, relishing in his companion’s dismay. “Can you imagine how many views that’d get on YouTube? Five hundred thousand? A million?”


On the other hand, rather than acting like the eldest amongst the three, Akihiko gave both juniors a cold glare as they continued to trod down the beach. “I said this would turn out badly and what’d you guys do? You dragged me into you stupid escapades and I made myself look like an idiot,” he said. “If Mitsuru finds out about what we did, we’re never gonna hear the end of it.”

“You’re the one who followed us. We didn’t invite you.” Minato brought up. “At least I learned something new today. Who would’ve thought the great, dense Akihiko Sanada had a thing for drag queens—”

Minato ducked just as a fist sailed past his head. Apparently, his harmless joke struck a nerve with a certain somebody who almost got them kidnapped by a trap with a thirst for teenage boys.

“It’s a miracle you’re captain of the boxing club when you can’t aim worth shit.” Minato said, an emotionless edge to his words. “No wonder I got the jump on you a couple weeks ago.”

Akihiko pulled back his fist with a sigh. “That was a warning shot. If I wanted to hit you, you’d be on the ground with a broken nose. Crying.”

“Still missed.”

“Shut up.”

Suddenly, Junpei threw back his head and began to shout at Minato and Akihiko. “See!? This is why we failed! Working with you two is like eating glass! I need wingmen, not a bunch of whiny, complaining, soul-sucking idiots!”

“You’re one to talk.” Akihiko said. “I was on damage control the whole time because you think suggestive one-liners are the best way to flirt with women twice your age.”

“And talking about the most effective way to train for a marathon is a good way to break the ice!? Nobody wants to know that except you!”
“I only tried to break the ice with them so I could apologize for your piss-poor self control.”

“Watch your language.” Minato said.

Without warning, Akihiko hit Minato upside the head. The well-timed shot was more of a corrective measure rather than a true strike, but that thought did nothing to quell the buzz in his ears or the mind-numbing shock that followed.

The bastard actually stayed true to his word.

“Like I said,” Akihiko said, “I don’t miss.”

Minato willed himself not to curl his hand into a fist and reprise the night at the love hotel, even if his upperclassman’s smugness grated on every last nerve. “Sounds like fighting words, Sanada—”

“Hey now!” Junpei inserted himself between the bickering pair. “If you’re gonna fight, at least make me the ref!” He deadpanned and held a pretend microphone to his face. “Gentlemen, let’s have a good, clean fight. I don’t want any funny business. . . in my. . .”

Then, Junpei suddenly stopped, his joking demeanor morphing into one of awe as he stared off into space. He let out a low whistle.

“What’s that look for? Are we gonna fight or not?” Akihiko asked.

Junpei pointed in front of them.

“Dudes, check it out.”

Minato followed Junpei’s finger, realizing they reach the end of the beach, the tree line swooping around to block their path. An outcropping of rocks formed a small tidal pool where a group of birds gathered. They pecked at the waves for fish and dead clams, their young waiting on the sand for the parents to serve them breakfast.

But Junpei wasn’t pointing at the trees or rocks or birds.

He pointed towards a lone dock jutting out into the shallows. Barely the length of a motorboat, the rotting wood coated in horse muscles and seaweed, old ropes hanging off its posts, it must have been abandoned years ago and left to fall apart. If anyone decided to use it, they may end up breaking the brittle frame and fall straight into the water. I would be wise to avoid it at all costs and just use a newer one closer to civilization.

Yet, at the end stood a girl.

But before Minato could get a better look at her, Junpei dragged him and Akihiko behind a large rock to hide.

“Whoa, talk about saving the best for last!” Junpei whispered, a grin splitting his face. “And she looks like she’s our age. This should be a piece of cake!”

“Absolutely not,” Akihiko said, “I’ve been patient with you two but I’m putting my foot down with this-this disaster you call an operation. We’re going back to our spot and waiting for the girls, and that’s final.”

Junpei lit up. “Ah, come one! Just one more? Could be fun!”

“No.”
“Please⁈”

“I said no, Iori.”

Minato ignored the brewing argument and peered back over the rock. There was no point in taking sides in the fight when neither option appealed to him. His time was better spent scooping out just why Junpei was so keen on talking to this stranger in the first place.

From afar, she appeared to be an ordinary girl that was of no consequence to Minato. A blue sundress reaching below the knees, a tuft of blonde hair, a shiny red headband, and no other defining features. Plenty of people had odd hair colors, wacky accessories, and the long-dress style (in Yukari’s words) was coming back into fashion.

He could just as easily mistaken her for any run-of-the-mill teenager on the island.

Still, something about her made him take a second look.

He could have sworn.

No, he was overthinking.

“I have an idea!”

Breaking through Minato’s haze, Junpei rose to his feet.

“I’ll just go by myself!” he said, marching towards the dock. “You guys wait here, I’ll be back in a jiff!”

“Iori, don’t you-”

Before Akihiko could protest or stop Junpei, the junior left the safety of boulder and marched off towards the dock.

Minato turned to Akihiko. “So, couldn’t stop him, eh?”

Akihiko grumbled and joined Minato in spying on the mystery girl. “Sometimes, I wish they’d make it legal to punch the stupid out of people.”

“Then why don’t you become a politician? You have the minimum IQ.” Minato said.

“Because I don’t feel like-” Akihiko paused, “-that was a joke, wasn’t it?”

Spoken like a true, self-aggrandizing bureaucrat. None of them knew the definition of sarcasm or taking life with a grain of salt.

“See what I mean?” Minato waved him off. “Now shut up. I’m trying to watch the show.”

Returning to the main event, Junpei had reached the end of the dock. For a moment, he stood there while bouncing on his toes until he decided to tap on the girl’s shoulder. She turned without taking off her headphones, leading Minato to believe the music was low enough to hear or not playing at all, and gave Junpei her attention. Her lips moved, and by the blank expression she wore, her opinion of him was a solid neutral.

So far, so good.

Junpei began to speak, although, Minato could barely make out what he was saying. They were too
far away and the wind carried the words in the opposite direction. However, the girl listened and nodded along.

Again, nothing bad. They just started talking. At this point, anything could happen.

Junpei motioned to the girl. He must have asked her a question and wanted a response.

The girl studied him.

Said something.

Then turned back to the ocean so quickly, the hem of her dress whipped and snapped like a flag.

Junpei sighed and walked away, hands in his pockets and head hung in shame.

A bust.

When Junpei returned to the hiding spot, he plopped himself down on the sand, covering his face.

“Damn, she shot me down.”

Minato patted the dejected boy on the shoulder. “Whatever. There’s plenty of fish in the sea.”

“That better not be a fucking pun.” Junpei said between his fingers.

On the other hand, Akihiko was quick to jump on the critique train, towering over Junpei and Minato where they sat.

“See, what did I say? We shouldn’t be wasting our time of flirting with strangers when there’s only two days left on the island. Besides, you don’t have the skill to talk to girls so why bother failing over and over again?”

Junpei rolled his eyes. “Oh, like you can do better, Mister Perfect!” he said. “If you tried talking to her, you’d be too scared to even get a word in!”

“He’s got a point.” Minato added.

“Oh, really? You’re gonna go there? With me?” Akihiko practically sprung to his feet at the challenge. “You know what, I’m tired of you two always mouthing off like I’m some awkward moron with no people skills.” He turned heel and headed straight for the docks. “Watch and learn!”

As Minato and Junpei watched him storm off, glancing at each other, mouths gaping.

“Did I just-?” Junpei asked.

“Did I just challenge our senior to a flirting contest?”

“Yup.” Minato said.

They turned to the dock just as Akihiko sauntered up to the girl. This time, she took notice of him and how couldn’t she? Minato heard his angry footsteps on the wooden planks from a distance. It was only natural that she would hear them from only a few feet away.

Just like Junpei’s attempt, Akihiko was the one to initiate the conversation, waving his hands liberally around to point at the sea or the girl.

Minato snorted at the sheer stupidity of it all. “He sure likes to talk with his hands.”
Junpei shushed him. “I’m tryin’ to watch the show!”

The girl listened without moving from her spot.

Studied Akihiko.

Said something.

Predictably, she turned back to the ocean, leaving Akihiko to stare at her back.

Unlike Junpei, their senior looked back at the rock with a kicked-puppy expression.

Junpei fell over onto the sand, clutching his stomach as he made a feeble attempt to suppress his laughter. “That’s just too perfect!” He rolled on his side, officially reduced to a wheezing mess rather than the sullen teen from a few minutes ago. “Ah man, I don’t care if I didn’t get the girl! That’s fuckin’ gold!”

Minato dropped beside him, but fortunately, he was able to curb his amusement to great effect. Maybe he let a chuckle of two slip and he let it go. Watching someone you don’t particularly care for getting humiliated only comes around once in a while, especially when that someone may not be used to experiencing failure.

Operation Babe Hunt ended successfully, albeit not in the way anyone expected.

By the time that Akihiko returned and found Minato and Junpei openly mocking him, he was more pissed off than when he left. “You two are so immature.”

Junpei swallowed a breath of air, still trying to contain a fit of laughter. “Woah, you’re the one who took the bait. We’re just watching it happen!”

“Can’t argue with that logic.” Minato said and stood up, ready to head back to the main beach. “Well, we’re done here. Good work everyone-”

Before Minato could take a step, he was pulled back by Akihiko’s firm grip. What a nice allegory for his day, just when he thought it was over, something always kept dragging him into other’s adventures.

“Sanada, let go of my arm.”

The order fell on deaf ears. Akihiko’s hold tightened. “Oh no, you’ve been making fun of us all day and I’m officially at my limit.” he said. “If this is so easy, maybe you should stop sitting on the sidelines and actually try talking to that girl like the rest of us. Then we’ll head back to our umbrella. How does that sound?”

“Now that’s an idea!” Junpei now had his interest peaked at the proposition, sitting up straight as an arrow. “Come on man! It’ll be fun?”

This game of Junpei’s was getting out of hand. At first, Minato joined in because he could make all the jokes he wanted without getting in trouble. He stayed when Akihiko played nanny, a demoralizing role for the latter, but for Minato, it was quality entertainment. He even went along with the back-to-back rejection from this mystery girl and nearly lost it watching the other two boys fail.

Now they expected him to do the same all because of honor? To apologize for enjoying their mishaps? To participate in a pick-up competition?
No thanks.

“Is this some kind of game to you guys?” Minato asked. “Sorry, but unlike you two, I have better things to do on my vacation than stalking strangers.”

“Ugh! It’s not like that!” Junpei got on his knees. “Just one time! It’ll take two minutes and we’re outta here! Please!?"

Minato ripped his arm free and started walking away. If they were going to reduce themselves from casanovas to beggars, there was no point in hanging around.

“See ya’ later-”

“-Coward.”

Minato paused mid-stride.

He turned back.

And his eyes narrowed at Akihiko.

“... You wanna repeat that, Golden Boy?”

Akihiko met the harsh glare, and for once, wore a confident smirk when he spoke.

“I called you a coward.”

Coward.

“Don’t do anything stupid. He’s trying to get a rise out of you.”

Coward?

Minato Arisato, called a coward? For not talking to someone?

“You’re gonna regret it.”

Oh, he would regret something alright. There was no way Minato was getting labeled a coward. Not a chance in hell. Not by this person, this caveman.

He would regret letting this tarnish on his reputation slide if he didn’t deal with it, here and now.

“Think with your head, dumbass! Just walk away!”

With all the grace and composure he could muster while in a rage, Minato whisked past Akihiko and Junpei, heading towards the dock.

“You fucking moron.”

“You got this, dude!” Junpei whisper-shouted.

Minato refused to turn and acknowledge the support, keeping his eyes on the goal in front of him and avoiding all distractions. The sooner he got this over with, the sooner the three left the poor girl alone and return to home base.

He could already hear his sister asking, “Where’d you three go? And why is Junpei-kun covered in sand?” or Mitsuru telling them off for, “Disturbing the peace.”
On second thought, he took his sweet time approaching the dock and taking a careful step onto its rotting wood, a questionable creak under his beckoning him to keep going.

A high wave spit up between the boards to get his feet wet, washing away the sand and salt clinging to his skin.

“Spring is finally here. It feels as if the year went by slowly, do you agree?”

“Hmm, it's been a long one. . .”

The girl seemed unaware that Minato started towards her, despite the uproar the other two caused just minutes ago. Instead, her gaze was dedicated to a jetstream on the horizon, weaving in and out of view amongst the clouds. Her blonde hair and baby blue sundress fluttered in waves at the mercy of the sea breeze.

What caught Minato’s attention is that he had been wrong about her wearing a silver and red headband.

Covering her ears were a pair of headphones, pristine and polished. The kind people wore in hip-hop music videos of celebrities advertised on TV.

Headphones, at the beach? That made no sense. If they were as expensive as they looked, did she not care if they were ruined by an unexpected splash or surprise attack by her friends?

Then again, there she stood, alone and far away from the busy parts of the beach, driving away those who may try to get close to her.

Music was only an extra barrier from the rest of the world.

Maybe she wanted to be alone.

Why else would someone come out to a dock in the middle of nowhere, donning headphones to shut out the noise, aloof to the rest of the world? Minato would do the same if he were on his own or annoyed with those around him. Who was he to encroach on another’s personal space and ruin their precious view?

But even that thought didn’t sit right with him.

Then why talk to anyone at all?

A gentle hand ran through his hair.

“Do you like spring, Minato-kun?”

“No really.” he said. “I’ve always been a winter person, at heart.”

The hand stopped.

“Oh. . . I see.”

That familiar voice in the back of his head taunted him and a nostalgic hum only heightened that discomfort.
Almost as if they really had crossed paths not too long ago.

Yes, the solution fell right onto his lap.

Yakushima was no common tourist destination and the beach was only so big. That in mind, he must have seen her in the water or under an umbrella, enjoying her summer vacation just like everyone else on the island. It explained the swell of familiarity bubbling to the surface. He noticed her before, and thus, his brain confused her for someone he’s met previously.

That made sense. It was the most logical explanation to this pang in Minato’s chest.

Nothing else.

And it bothered him that the most likely answer conflicted with that damned, ridiculous feeling that refused to be put to rest.

He felt a pang of guilt as she clammed up, never intending to discredit her excitement. She still had a long way to go before learning to ignore his differing opinions.

How could he turn things around? Be more positive?

Right. He could save this.

“But . . . it’s not all bad. My birthday is in spring.”

Finally, Minato reached the end of the dock. The girl’s back to him, arms at her sides, the wind and sun working to toss and halo her blonde hair like an image out of a cheesy commercial. Each muscle appeared relaxed in the presence of a peaceful expanse of saltwater in front of them both.

It would be a shame to break that concentration.

Did he even want to bother her in such a state? Just to prove he wasn’t a coward to someone he barely tolerated, was it worth throwing out social conventions and going against all he knew?

All at once, she brightened, eyes brimming with unshed tears.

Happy tears, what a rare sight nowadays.

“Really?”

And it put a smile on his face.

“Really.”

An unknown instinct took over and Minato finally opened his mouth, the words somehow forming before they became a feeling.

Before they became an idea.

And then a thought.

Growing louder like a crashing wave.
He said what he wanted to.

“The tide is high.”

Minato expected her to react according to previous attempts. She would turn to confirm the visitor, engage in some meaningless small talk, find a way to shut him, and return to her own little world. He might take a second to collect his scattered brain and then retreat to the safety of the boulder to get an earful from Junpei and a scolding from Akihiko. Everyone parted ways none-the-wiser, having wasted a good conversation on unwilling parties and a slap on the wrist.

It was supposed to be an inevitable outcome.

“I will always remain by your side.”

Her voice, soft and sweet on his ear, it made him want to stop the clock and savor each syllable, knowing full well that this would last only moments and like everything else, lost to time. Reality simply had no regard or place for an exception, not now.

Reality was funny that way.

But the girl stiffened at his voice.

Draw her arms from her sides.

And spun around to face the boy who spoke so plainly to her.

Minato’s breath faltered as a pair of turquoise eyes bore into his darkened cobalt ones.

A doll-like visage.

Porcelain skin blinding.

Glossy lips parted ever so slightly.

Not that he minded. If there were a good season to fall asleep while staring at the clouds, it would be in the springtime.

A perfect time to let go.

To let one’s eyes droop closed.

With a heart left in knots and a sensation akin to weightlessness overwhelmed him, Minato knew something about this person was special. He barely noticed the wind pushing his hair back and out of view, too focused on the person who caused such a strong emotion.

No, it wasn’t weightlessness he felt.

It was relief.

For once, that irrationality that was always buried beneath the surface took control, pulling Minato deeper into its wicked trance.
“Forever.”

As Minato allowed his body to finally relax, a barrage of friendly voices faded into the black expanse, nothing but meaningless jargon hit his ears, her final promise reaching above the rabble, and then. . .

He knew peace.

The two stayed in that position for longer than what was considered a “natural pause,” simply scoping each other out in silence.

Waiting. . .

And watching. . .

For them to change. . .

A twitch, a sound, anything to break the stalemate.

Until the girl straightened her shoulders and began to approach.

“Who are you?” she asked, circling Minato while keeping a polite distance. “You are different from the other two.”

Minato shook out the cobwebs and the gears of his mind click into place, his common sense coming back from its momentary lapse in judgment to answer the question.

“I’m their. . . acquaintance.” he said. “I’m sorry if they bothered you.”

“That does not concern me.” she responded to the apology in a robotic, unassuming manner. “I am looking for two very special people. I have been searching the beach and I cannot seem to identify them.”

So the girl was at the dock for a reason and Minato’s suspicions were confirmed. Not just that, but he had a chance to prolong the conversation by offering a helping hand and get out of his stupid game with Junpei and Akihiko.

Two birds, one stone.

“Do you know what they look like?” he said. “I’ve been on the beach all day. Maybe I ran into them once or twice.”

The girl shook her head. “That will not be necessary. I have searched that area thoroughly and no human matches my description.” She motioned to him. “However, I wish to ask you a question. What is your name?”

A warning bell went off in Minato’s head, but he still decided he should indulge this girl’s curiosity, even if that curiosity seemed strange.

“Minato Arisato.”

Instantly, the girl’s monotone behavior shifted and she stepped closer.

“Do you have an older sibling?” she asked.
Minato stepped back.

“Yes?”

“Is this sibling a female?”

Minato inched away, officially creeped out and wanting to just let this girl be. He knew this game was a bad idea from the start and now, he was cornered by a crazy person. “Yeah, but she’s visiting that big tree and I don’t know-”

“I have found you.”

Minato let out an undignified shout as the girl latched onto his arm and start running off the dock, leading them towards the entrance of the Shogi forest. His stomach lurched at the speed of their escape but couldn’t tear himself free. Her grip was too strong.

For once, Minato hoped Junpei and Akihiko would chase after them.

Finding anything in a large forest was hard. Finding a weapon of mass destruction without a description was harder. It was even worse when it had to be found on foot, during the summer, with no water to stave off dehydration. And the final nail in the coffin? No one was around for miles, which meant no help in case of an emergency.

As Minako stood panting next to the cryptomeria tree the girls were SUPPOSED to be visiting, relishing whatever shade it could cast, she wondered how much time she had until she died of a heat stroke.

Empty-handed.

Not even a clue.

Minako sighed and threw herself at the base of the tree. After an hour of running around without direction, she deserved a moment to collect herself.

“Let’s go to Yakushima, they said. It’ll be fun, they said. Just sit down, relax by the ocean, put on some music, everything will be fine, they said!” she grumbled. “You won’t have to go on a wild goose chase for some dangerous Shadow weapon that could definitely kill you on sight. Nothing like that at all.”

Minako tried, she genuinely tried to be optimistic about the trip from the beginning. This was her and Minato’s first real vacation in years, a time to forget about school and monsters and the Dark Hour and life whatever else life had to throw at them. She wanted to cleanse the bad memories by creating a few pleasant ones with friends and family, to catch up on reading, maybe try something new and mess around.

Normal. For once.

But having a normal anything was forbidden for anyone with the name Arisato attached to them.

Sea-sickness, Junpei and Yukari and Mitsuru’s fathers, playing mediator between certain members of the group, and more recently, barely succeeding at not complaining.

Minako leaned against the tree trunk, staring up at the sun-dappled leaves, and decided now was a better time than any for a prayer. At least God didn’t care if she needed a second to unload her
troubles or try to encourage her to forget about them.

“God, in all you’re merciful wisdom and divine grace, hear my prayer.” she said. “I know I should be grateful for a free vacation and life’s not as bad as it could be... but I’ll be honest, it’s hard to feel thankful right now, not after everything that’s happened. And no matter what I say to myself, I can’t find a reason to smile or fake that I’m happy.”

A butterfly flew overhead.

“But I know everyone’s caught up in the bad, even if they don’t say it, and I’m not the only one trying their best to make the most of our situation. I also know none of us wanna bring it up. I don’t wanna bring it up. So, we’re just trapped until someone decided to be brave enough to speak out. Stuck... just like what happened a few weeks ago, just not as obvious.”

The bushes surrounding the tree’s clearing rustled as a stiff breeze came passing through. Minako allowed her eyes to droop close and let it calm her.

“I guess what I’m praying for... is that something happens.” she said. “It doesn’t have to be good and I’m not asking for a miracle. Prayers don’t work that way. Goodness knows, I learned that the hard way.” Her eyes opened. “If it’s in my plan, I’d like to have a good story to share with everyone. Something for us to talk about, and maybe, we can laugh about it when we go back to Iwatodai.”

Now, the rustling seemed to be coming from within the forest.

“Anything... I’d do anything to help make it happen.”

Even though the rustling was getting louder, the wind stayed the same.

Heavier.

Faster.

Closer.

The leaves weren’t rustling, they were being brushed past.

“... Hold on, God.”

Minako stopped talking and listened more carefully, trying to form a picture in her mind of what could be causing such a thing. Was an animal hiding from her? Was it another person or group coming to see the tree, just like the girls were going to do? They were all very likely possibilities.

Or maybe... it was the anti-Shadow weapon Ikutsuki warned Mitsuru about.

The rustling grew louder.

Minako clambered to her feet, suddenly alert and ready to start running.

Closer.

But Minako stayed frozen.

Closer.

Definitely not a small animal.
Closer.

A group of birds were scared off from close by.

*FSCK!*

“AH!” Minako jumped, her heart leaping into her throat.

From the underbrush, two people burst into the small clearing, a blonde girl and a boy. The girl held onto her companion who was doubled over, wheezing and coughing, wearing only a swimming suit and a pair of well-worn sandals.

But as Minako took a closer look, it wasn’t just any boy.

It was-

“-Minato!?” Minako asked once the initial shock wore off, now focused on figuring out why her brother was with a stranger in the middle of the woods. “What’s-what’re you doing!?”

Minato spit and faced her, grimacing.

“That’s what I wanna know!” he shouted, shaking his arm that was looped with the girl. “This crazy broad kidnapped me and won’t let me go! Ask her what’s up!”

Kidnapped? By a girl? With no explanation?

Okay, so Minato had a reason to be upset.

Minako turned to the girl holding her brother captive. “Alright, missy, you’ve got some-”

“-Are you this boy’s sister?” the girl asked.

“Wha-?” Minako frowned. “Yeah but that’s not what I-”

Before she could finish and without warning, Minako was swept up into a bone-crushing hug by the stranger, her brother included.

“Both targets have been located.” the girl said. “I would ask you do not wander off in the future. My highest priority is to make sure no harm comes to either of you. Fulfilling that mission is quite difficult when I cannot reach you in a timely manner.”

Minako shifted uncomfortably in the embrace, her shoulder brushing awkwardly with Minato’s, but her confusion left her head spinning from the whole event.

“It’s no use.” Minato said. “She’s got a mean grip.”

“I can assure you, my grip is strong but it is not mean. A grip cannot be classified as by a human-centric adjective.” The girl pulled out of the hug while still holding onto the siblings. “However, if it is considered offensive to your emotions, I can adjust so that my grip to be the opposite of mean.”

Any other day, Minako might try to joke her way out of this situation and forgive the possible mix-up. Unfortunately, a dangerous weapon was still loose in the forest and they had no way of knowing when or where it may show up.

The longer they stayed, the more likely it would locate them first and there was no telling what may happen then.
Minako had to find a way to get this strange girl to set them free. And fast.

“Excuse me if this sounds rude, but we can’t just stand around hugging forever. We’ve got people waiting for us and they might get worried if we’re not back in time,” she said. “If you let us go, you can tag along and we’ll talk things out like sensible adults. Is that okay with you?”

The girl had blank stare. “Are the others close by?”

Minako shook her head. “That’s why we’ve gotta hit the road. It’ll take some time to get back to them—”

FSCK!

Another gaggle of figures entered the clearing. This time, it was all the members of SEES and Shuji Ikutsuki, breathing heavily just as Minato had when he and the girl arrived. Junpei and Akihiko were still in their swimsuits, the girls their hiking attire, and the lone adult among them in his trademark suit.

However, Minako noticed that the students had a frantic look in their eyes.

“It looks like we made it in time.” Ikutsuki said and beckoned for the siblings to come closer. “You two, stay calm and move slowly. We don’t want to upset our friend.”

“What’s-?” Minako turned to the mystery girl. “Do you know the Chairman-!”

Instantly, the girl put herself in front of the siblings in a protective stance as Ikutsuki advanced on the trio. Minako and Minato stumbled at the force of the action, nearly tripping over one another or their own feet, but had no strength to stop whatever was going on.

Ikutsuki paused.

So did the girl.

He tried closing the distance once more.

The girl evaded him until they both stopped again.

And Ikutsuki chuckled, an unsettling one that sent a shiver down Minako’s spine.

“Alright, Aigis. You’ve had your fun, but it’s time to let those two go. You’re not allowed to leave the lab on your own.”

The girl, known now as Aigis, simply glared at Ikutsuki, continuing to at as a human shield.

“I know.” she said.

7/21/2009

Minako’s forcing me to go to the beach today.

With Junpei. AND Akihiko-senpai.

I think I might drown myself.

-Minato Arisato
Chapter End Notes

Yeah, this chapter kinda sucked. I blame school.
After their encounter in the forest, an awkward trek back to the Kirijo villa, and the boys being asked to change into anything but their swimsuits (Mitsuru claimed it was too distracting for the situation at hand), the members of SEES were bounced into their third meeting that month by order of the Chairman. They gathered in the same room as the night before, huddled up with cold drinks and snacks provided by the staff.

The reason, to debrief the emergency situation that took place that afternoon and discuss a change to the team.

It started out harmless enough. The boys were filled in about the rogue weapon and everyone learned about Yakushima’s research lab which housed said weapon all this time. No one had the heart to pick a fight over why this information was kept quiet, instead, focusing more on the fact that the thing the girls were tracking down was able to escape its containment and masqueraded as a human girl.

But Minato still couldn’t believe his ears after everything was explained.

“I was kidnapped. . . by an android.” he said, less a question and more of a doubtful observation. “I was kidnapped by an android that kills Shadows. It could’ve killed me if it wanted to.”

Ikutsuki chuckled. “Well, when you say it like that, it sounds silly.” He turned to the others and flashed a sympathetic grin. “But in any case, I apologize that all of you were put through that. I didn’t mean to scare anyone, especially during your vacation. I’m glad all of you are safe and that everything resolved itself quickly.”

Fuuka, sitting beside Minato, hummed in agreement. “This is all so surreal. Who would’ve thought that the weapon we were looking for was actually a robot? A real-life robot!”

“A cute girl turns out to be a machine,” Junpei said, “Sounds like something out of a cheap sci-fi movie. No wonder I got rejected so fast. So glad it wasn’t me!”
Akihiko grimaced from across the room before turning to Ikutsuki. “Do you how she got out? If she’s able to destroy Shadows at will, shouldn’t the security in the lab be airtight?”

The Chairman sighed. “We were performing maintenance on the internal drive and had to reset the entire system to it-her base coding. The reboot must have went back to her first mission where she had to prove she could perform a self-activation, a test of the unit’s ability to use critical thinking skills.” he rambled. “As for escaping the lab, Aigis was built with speed and agility in mind, as well as data gathering and adaptability to her surroundings. Once she was up, the programming told her to explore the environment and she made sure not to get caught. She’s too clever for her own good.”

“Even still,” Mitsuru said, “I think we learned an important lesson about our security protocols today. If we continue to use the island’s facilities, we should review our safety measures more thoroughly. I don’t want another situation like this to happen twice.”

“You can say that again,” Yukari added.

The Chairman offered a curt bow to both girls. “You have my word, we’re already doing all we can to do as such. Lay your worries to rest.”

Minato glanced over at Minako who still had yet to say anything the entire meeting. She made a point to remove herself from the main body of the group, standing rigid and wearing an uncharacteristically dour frown. Occasionally, her eyes flickered to the floor, checking out of the conversation entirely just to stare at the tiles.

And Minato would be lying if he said he didn’t know why.

Minako’s thought process, while aloof, also had the hallmarks of a true Arisato. They were a family of deep thinkers and nearly everything around them was subject to their numerous questions. The who, what, when, where, why, how, if not discovered left them reeling for the truth. Easy or difficult to find, they searched feverishly for their answers, even if something stood in their path.

And if she was silent, it meant she noticed the same things as Minato. He simply did a better job of focusing on the others while his brain ran full-steam ahead in the background.

Minako raised her head and met her brother’s gaze, brightening as a smirk took the place of her frown. “Something doesn’t add up and we both know what it is.” Despite a joking expression, her shoulders tensed. “I don’t trust him. And neither should you.”

Minato nodded.

“Couldn’t agree more.”

A servant approached Ikutsuki from behind his seat and leaned down to whisper something.

“Oh, really? I guess it can’t be helped,” he said with a nod. “You know what to do.”

The servant bowed and hastily exited the room, leaving the double doors open behind her.

The siblings broke off their soundless conversation as Ikutsuki turned back to the students, his smile askew. “It appears that Aigis wishes to meet everyone, properly. I would’ve liked more time to prepare, but as you can tell it-she is somewhat of a free spirit. We might as well nip this rose at the bud right now.” He cleared his throat. “Come in, Aigis.”
At Ikutsuki’s call, Aigis entered and strode to the center of the room. Each step resounded throughout the small area, metal meeting tile.

Without her sundress, it was painfully obvious that the girl was not one of them. The joints on her shoulders and hips were more like exposed ball-in-sockets, protected by bronze guards to allow for unnatural flexibility. A pair of silver cuffs covered her wrists, for what purpose, Minato would have to ask later on. But judging by the matching color at the tips of her fingers, they had to be part of a weapon or something of that nature.

Once she found a spot where everyone could see her, she chose to speak. “Greetings all. I am Aigis, the seventh generation mechanical maiden. My mission is to destroy Shadows.” Her feet clicked together and she saluted. “It is a pleasure to meet everyone.”

Even her voice sounded real, if not slightly monotone, but Minato had no room to complain. If the goal was to blend in as a normal person, the Kirijo’s team of scientists did a good job. Throw on some modest clothing and Aigis could fool anyone.

Except for her feet... or lack thereof.

All Aigis had were hoof-like stumps that Minato failed to notice before. That had to be a design oversight or a tactical choice he didn’t know about.

“Well, this explains why father decided to come to Yakushima,” Mitsuru said. “Are there others? There must be if the lab is still running today.”

Ikutsuki rose to stand beside the android, laying a hand on her shoulder and turning to the rest of SEES. “As you all might’ve guessed, in the absence of Persona users, Anti-Shadow weapons were created to combat uncontrollable specimens, inside the lab and out. Aigis was commissioned shortly before the formation of the Dark Hour but she stands as the last of her kind. The others were, unfortunately, damaged beyond salvage.”

“I see.” Mitsuru muttered. “And I’m guessing there’s a reason she is being repaired?”

“Perhaps she would like to answer that question.” Ikutsuki motioned for Aigis to speak. “Go ahead, I’m sure they’d love to hear it from you.”

Aigis barely acknowledged his permission for her to talk, face devoid of an emotional response.

“I have been assigned to the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad, effective immediately.”

Chatter broke out amongst the team. The only person who was excited about the news was Fuuka, practically jumping out of her skin knowing that a piece of sophisticated technology would be in the same building as her.

“An Anti-Shadow weapon? This is amazing!” she cheered. “Imagine the progress we can make in Tartarus! We could gather so much information with her help!”

“This is unbelievable,” said Akihiko.

“No way!” Junpei clutched his hat. “How’s she supposed to fight without a Persona!? She’s a robot!”

“Can she even have a Persona?” Yukari asked.

Aigis nodded. “I was given an artificial soul and assigned the Persona, Palladion.” She tapped her
chest. “If you are concerned about the extent of my fighting capabilities, I assure you all, I shall not let a single Shadow escape. That is my mission. That is my purpose.”

Finally, Minato noticed Minako wandering closer to the inner-circle of the group and wasn’t afraid to approach the Chairman and Aigis.

In fact, once close enough, she began to inspect her robotic counterpart.

“Is something wrong, Miss Arisato?” Ikutsuki asked. “I understand that Aigis surprised you earlier. It must be off-putting to have her suddenly join out of the blue.”

“No... that’s not it...” Minako trailed off. “She knew our names. She knew I had a brother.” She stopped and beckoned Minato to her side. “And doesn’t she look like someone we know? I swear I’ve seen her.”

Minato heaved himself from his seat to join his sister. So, he wasn’t going crazy. Minako had the same feeling of familiarity he had.

But neither seemed to be able to pin down why.

Once both siblings were standing before her, Aigis visibly softened and unlike in the forest, she quietly offered her hands. They shimmered in the bright lights of the room, the metal recently polished without a blemish or scratch.

Even if she wasn’t smiling, a powerful emotion reached her eyes.

Sincerity.

“It is important that I remain by your side. It is of the highest priority.” Aigis exchanged a solemn look, first with Minako, then with Minato. “I must protect you two.”

Minako chuckled at Aigis’ serious tone but accepted a hand in her own. “You’re too sweet. Now I feel bad for raising my voice earlier.” She pulled Aigis closer for a side-hug. “But don’t stress about it too much, you’re one of us. We’ll protect each other. That’s what teammates do!”

Minato noticed Ikutsuki fidget behind Aigis.

“That’s right, Aigis seems to think she knows you two.” he mumbled. “What a curious incident. Perhaps her identification system is malfunctioning. Or maybe she's still half-asleep. This is quite interesting...”

Something about the way Ikutsuki spoke, his calculated speech and odd rambling, it seemed too forced.

If the Chairman knew what caused Aigis to go AWOL, why was he scratching his head over her recognizing the siblings?

Why did Aigis flinch away from his approach in the forest?

What did he know?

Minato knew not to trust anyone, children or adults, who hid behind a carefree smile, especially those who knew more information than they let on. Secrets and his personal connections gave Ikutsuki an advantage. He dangled it like a carrot on a stick, just out of reach, pulling back when his prey got too close, watching them trip with a twisted sort of pleasure.
Minako was right to keep her mouth shut and play the ditzy, naive leader. Her warm attitude towards Aigis might be genuine, but that distant behavior suggested that she saw past the feigned ignorance.

If they were going to get what they wanted, they had to play the game and they had to play it smart.

Minato didn’t know why it felt satisfying to take Aigis’ hand under Ikutsuki’s watchful eye but damn, did he want to make that snake squirm.

“Welcome to the team, Aigis.”

And squirm he did.

Minako forgot what it felt like to constantly be watching her back.

Ever since she and Minato transferred to Gekkounkan, there was no reason to take extra measures to get along to those they lived with. She still kept some habits, as did most others, but most of the time, she allowed a sliver of breathing room when at the dorm. Her peers appreciated the quirky, upbeat, mom-friend vibe she wore with reckless abandon.

Nothing screamed at her. No voice said to be on the defensive. Besides the usual drama high schoolers and being a Persona user, life was pleasant in Iwatodai.

But the meeting about Aigis happened.

Minako felt it.

It screamed louder than any siren.

It told her something wicked was afoot.

It whispered so no one could hear.

It was scared that Ikutsuki could hear.

The Chairman didn’t do anything particularly suggestive. If anything, his demeanor up until yesterday was that of a concerned adult. He knew Aigis was prone to unpredictable outbursts. He knew she might pose a danger to others. He knew he had to amend his mistakes and bring her back to the lab. It was the only logical choice.


But then Minako noticed how Aigis tried to put a buffer between Ikutsuki and the siblings.

The android treated her and Minato as if they were caught in someone’s crosshairs.

Then Minako questioned why Aigis tried to shield them.

Aigis glared silently at the one person who knew everything.

It all came back to Ikutsuki.

His dopey smiles. His awful jokes. His lax appearance.
He acted like himself.

For the first time in ages, Minako excused herself from dinner and went to her room, locking the door, and hiding under the covers. The juniors stopped by at some point to make sure she wasn’t sick and she promised that everything was okay. She needed some shut-eye after a long and stressful day, nothing more. No need to worry.

Only Minato threw her a concerned glower before disappearing to his own room.

In her dreams, Minako felt like she was being watched by a willowy figure in an ugly, brown suit. The glare from a pair of foggy glasses watched her two steps behind and ten steps in front and in the trees and the sky and ground and-

She woke in a cold sweat and sprinting for the indoor gym. At least while she was running on the treadmill, she had an excuse to look like a complete mess.

That constant need to look over her shoulder stayed with her during breakfast, even when the whole group went down to the beach, even when they laughed and complained about the heat, she expected to see that same figure at some point.

Watching her.

Watching them.

Waiting to strike.

At least Minako stayed by Minato the whole time. Having him close and in her sights reminded her someone else knew how she felt to a small degree.

“Don’t let the Chairman catch you alone.” he said while the others were distracted. “I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

A chilling thought but that was their promise.


Thankfully, Minako got a chance to become a casual observer to her teammates trying to teach Aigis the ways of a beach vacation, all while lamenting that today was their last day on the island. Their animated chatter distracted from the paranoia, if only for the afternoon.

“Man, it's already the third day of our trip?” Junpei stretched his arms to the sky. “It's too bad we have to go home tomorrow. I'd totally stay longer if I could, but I can't complain. A lot of cool things happened while we were here.”

Aigis approached him with Minato at her side. “Do we have a mission at the beach today?”

“Nah, it’s nothin’ like that.” Junpei said. “We just came here to have some fun!”

Aigis paused for a moment before giving him a determined nod. “Of course, recreation is the refreshment of one’s mind and body. My apologies for not realizing sooner.”

“It’s whatever,” Minato remarked. “But you don’t have to be so formal. We’re just putzing around.”

Aigis cocked her head. “I’m not familiar with that term. What does ‘putzing around’ mean-”
“-Blah blah! Enough talk!” Junpei grabbed both Aigis and Minato, dragging them into the ocean. “Alright, let's take one last dip before we leave!”

“Be careful!” Fuuka rushed forward and latched onto Aigis before her feet, or stumps touched the waves. “Junpei-kun, is it safe to let Aigis-san get wet? What if we damage her circuitry and she dies? How do we explain that to the Chairman if we let something bad happen to her on the first day!”

Yukari patted Fuuka on the shoulder. “Why don’t we ask someone who knows.” The former turned and shouted to Mitsuru. “Hey, Mitsuru-senpai! Is Aigis-san waterproof!?”

Mitsuru, preoccupied with setting up camp for the day beside Minako, stopped what she was doing to give Yukari a thumb’s up. “She’ll be fine!”

A waterproof robot. The Kirijo scientists really did think of everything.

The juniors whooped with joy (save Minato who refused to act outwardly childish) and wasted no time delving into the water, even the timid Fuuka Yamagishi let out a shout or two. Their makeshift charge caused quite a stir until they were well away from the shore, leaving the seniors behind.

“Where’d they get all that energy?” Akihiko said with a yawn. “Makes me glad I’m not in charge. I’d pull my hair out trying to get them to listen.”

Mitsuru chuckled. “Do remember the first time I showed you the Dark Hour? You took off so fast, I had to hit you with a Bufu spell until you slowed down. It’s a miracle you’re not dead, or worse, still there.”

Akihiko rolled his eyes, but a flash of panic betrayed his nonchalant facade. “You’re making stuff up. I was completely professional.”

Minako peeked over the brim of her book. “I don’t know, that does sound like something you would do.” A cheshire grin wormed its way onto her lips. “... And to be fair, you’re usually the first one to start fights with Shadows.”

“Wah-” Akihiko whipped towards her. “And who’s side are you on!?”

Before Minako could form her retort, she noticed Aigis coming towards them, sopping wet and hobbling across the sand. Her sundress clung to her form like a second skin, defining her exposed joints of her shoulders and hips, but not enough to raise any suspicion from a distance. Occasionally, she stepped on in a dip and had to take a few awkward steps to correct her balance.

Did something happen? Was she not waterproof after all and needed to dry out?

“My apologies if I interrupted an important conversation.” she said once she reached the umbrella. “I needed to return.”

Minako bookmarked her page. “Is everything okay, Aigis? You’re not hurt?”

The girl shook her head, water beads flying in all directions, almost as if she were a little kid.

“I have come back per request of the others with a proposal. One of which I agree.” she said and pointed to the ocean. “It is best that we all engage in this activity together. An activity in which only one or few persons derive enjoyment is not the optimal method to have fun. I believe the saying goes, the more the merrier.”
Minako felt her heart skip a beat.

“Y-you mean, get in the water?” she asked, fearing the answer.

To Minako’s dismay, Aigis nodded. “Yes.”

Just when Minako thought she caught a break, something else had to go south. What an off-color vacation this was turning out to be.

“Oh, that’s a great idea! Love it to bits!” Minako let out a nervous chuckle, “But are ya’ sure you can’t let one person stay here? Who’s gonna guard our stuff if we’re all out swimming? It doesn’t make sense, right?”

Akihiko looked between her and the water. “Are you okay? You’re acting a little... weird.”

“Oh?” Minako waved him off. “Pft, totally okay! You’re just imagining things!”

Aigis stayed where she was, not budging or breaking her stance. “Minako-san, you seem quite flustered when I mentioned you would need to join us in the water. Are you afraid that something may come and eat you? A shark, perhaps? I can eliminate them if they pose a threat.”

Oh, this just got better and better. The robot was starting to ask questions. God bless her artificial soul, but Aigis needed to stop.

Minako looked to Mitsuru and hoped she saw the desperation in her eyes.

“Assist! Assist!”

And to Minako’s relief, Mitsuru turned to Aigis and Akihiko without missing a beat. “If you two must know, Minako-san and I were going to discuss our strategy for the next expedition. With Aigis added to our ranks, we need to rearrange the rotation schedule to accommodate for her personalized skills. It may take some time.”

“I see, that is a shame.” Aigis then nodded to Akihiko, “Are you able to join us? Junpei-kun and Minato-kun wish to challenge you to a battle called the chicken. It would be best not to keep them waiting.”

Akihiko sighed. “Those two idiots.” He gave the girls one last polite nod. “Have fun with your scheming. I’m gonna go make sure our dynamic duo is under control.”

“Don’t kill my tax deduction!” Minako yelled as he walked away, Aigis taking the lead into the water. “I got him on sale!”

“No promises!” he said.

Once everyone except Minako was out of ear-shot, Mitsuru hummed to herself as she watched Aigis and Akihiko leave.

“This might be out of the blue, but doesn’t it seem like Akihiko has been acting differently?” she asked. “I don’t mean to be rude, but in all the years I’ve known him, he’s usually the last to get a joke, let alone use one himself. I wonder what’s changed?”

From afar, Minato and Junpei were the first to greet the newcomers by tackling Akihiko, all three tumbling under the waves. When they came back up, gasping for air and absolutely drenched, Yukari and Fuuka held back giggles at the scene, and Aigis simply stood by to watch it all go
Minako set aside her book. “He’s probably getting used to having a bunch of smart-alecs teasing him twenty-four seven. God knows, I had to roll with the punches when my nerd hit his rebellious phase. No pun intended.” she said. “But I’m glad he’s hanging out with ‘em. Before, the juniors always came to me when they had something to say. Now, they’re starting to put trust in you and Akihiko. And each other.”

Akihiko responded by dunking both Junpei and Minato, causing a huge splash and sending Aigis into ultra-protective-mode. She grabbed him from behind and suplexed the young man into oblivion.

“Emphasis on starting,” Mitsuru sat up, “But that’s a conversation for another day. How are you? Other than just now, has this vacation been beneficial?”

Minako pulled her knees to her chest. “Honestly? I thought the worst thing that could happen is someone finding out about my fear. This whole vacation’s been a whirlwind. Feels like I’m constantly on my toes.”

“I can see why,” Mitsuru said. “The creation of the Dark Hour, chasing down a teammate, your brother getting kidnapped by an android, learning about the existence of Aigis. Am I missing anything?”

“Junpei told me he’d rather have dead parents than crappy ones. Yukari feels like she lost her will to keep fighting. My brother and I are now being followed by our newest teammate. Did I mention that I don’t trust the Chairman? Because I don’t trust him and I think he’s plotting something but I don’t know what and it’s driving me crazy. That about sums it up.”

Minako held back a gulp. “Nope, hit the nail on the head.”

“And I’m still falling behind in French. Sorry, I forgot that one while I was having a midlife crisis at seventeen.”

Mitsuru frowned. “I can’t blame you for feeling that way. With the current state of SEES, it’s hard to put those thoughts aside and relax.”

Thank goodness, Mitsuru noticed it too. She experienced the same uneasy peace that the others might be ignoring. They had the luxury to do so, and why wouldn’t they? In the field, their job was to hone the fighting skills and listen to orders.

Having to make those hard decisions or come up with battle strategies put a lot of pressure on the one who created it.

And at the end of the day, those orders came from Mitsuru.

One misstep and her team was gone.

Suddenly, Minako felt the guilt gnawing at her.

“What do you think about all this?”

Minako shook herself from her musing. “I’m sorry?”

Mitsuru grinned at the reaction. “About the new changes? I’m not the only one who’s running this team. What do you think about everything that’s happened?”
Oh, that’s what she meant.

Minako cleared her throat. “I’m actually excited. Aigis seems like a great addition and now that we know what we’re fighting for, we’ve got a clear goal in mind. Take down those big Shadows and save the world.” she said. “And after that, who knows? Maybe we’ll learn something about them along the way? I bet there’s more out there that’s just waiting to be discovered.”

“Perhaps,” Mitsuru said, “Or maybe. . . .”

Minako perked up as Mitsuru went quiet. She hadn’t meant to get them on the topic of what will happen after they finished their overarching mission, but now that she opened this can of worms, she wanted to be in the loop.

What was the heiress planning after they defeated the Shadows and ended the Dark Hour?

“Or what?” Minako asked.

Mitsuru shook her head. “I think I’ll keep that to myself, for now.” She gave Minako a rare, joking smirk. “I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise. Not even the Chairman knows what designs I have for the future of SEES, but when the time comes, you won’t be disappointed.”

Mitsuru Kirijo, keeping secrets from the one person she has to answer to, besides her father?

This young woman and her true character were starting to come into focus, and Minako was even more excited to see the big picture revealed.

“I’ll hold you to that.” Minako said before a new idea popped into her head. “By-the-by, do ya’ think we’ll ever come back to Yakushima?”

“It’s likely. Why do you ask?” Mitsuru said.

Minako looked out to the ocean and the rest of their team, still trying to kill each other. The fun they had, free from worry about drowning or looking stupid sparked envy inside her.

“I know I can’t keep avoiding my fear forever and if I’m being honest, it’s a little lonely when I’m by myself. I don’t wanna keep missing out on all the fun.” She turned to Mitsuru. “Even if we don’t come back to Yakushima, I gonna learn how to swim.”

Mitsuru nodded.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

The two spent the rest of their time together actually putting together a few experimental battle plans. Occasionally, someone else would join them or stop by to see how they were doing, but for the most part, it was just them.

But that was okay. Minako shoved her worries, if only for the afternoon.

To Junpei’s surprise, the Yakushima trip turned out to be more than just a beach vacation or a chance to pick up chicks. From learning about the true cause of the Dark Hour, unloading some personal baggage, and gaining a new teammate, a lot happened for SEES to make life going forward more interesting.

Not everyone took these changes well. He knew that. Akihiko was now branded a certified virgin by the underclassman. Minato was kidnapped and dragged into the forest against his will. Poor
Fuuka had no clue how to play a simple game of billiards. Minako seemed to always be running around like a frantic mother in a grocery store. Mitsuru acted exactly like Mitsuru. Yukari ran away in the middle of a meeting, for crying out loud!

And Ikutsuki, the Chairman might just be the worst offender of them all.

He never made a single pun. No once.

The man was either getting fired or dying. Junpei predicted it, here and now.

Yes, the vacation was a mixed bag of shock and humor. Ups and downs. Revelations and review. Humans and... robots.

No one person felt the same at any point in their stay and Junpei couldn’t help but notice how draining it was, so, being the nice guy of the group and master of ceremonies, he thought it best to rally the troops for a night of fun.

And what better way to end a beach vacation than a bonfire with s’mores?

“Ladies and gentlemen, please stand back!” Junpei cackled, arming himself with a skewer and marshmallow, holding it over the flames of their modest fire. “Let the master show ya how it’s done!”

Minato huffed and held his own skewer out. “Is that a challenge?”

“Is there even a right way to make s’mores?” Fuuka chimed in. She watched the boys have their little competition, palms to the heat. “But I suppose I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had one. My parents always said they were too unhealthy.”

“What!” Junpei exclaimed. “Never!”

“Never.”

That was going to change. Fuuka would have a proper childhood, her parents be damned.

Junpei elbowed Aigis who sat sandwiched between him and Minato. “Hold my mallow. We’ve got an emergency on our hands.”

“Of course.” she said and did as she was asked. “What is the emergency?”

Once his hands were free, Junpei started putting together a new skewer, slightly longer than his and Minato’s to make sure Fuuka wouldn’t burn her fingers. Her arms were really just a pair of stumps attached to a short body, and he knew all too well what could happen if he ignored that fact. “I’m not letting someone miss out on the best thing to happen to Earth since baseball. It’s a crime against humanity! Worse than murder!”

“The justice system doesn’t agree with you.” Minato said.

“They will!” Junpei finished the skewer and gave it to Fuuka. “Welcome to the dark side. We’ve got all the fun stuff.”

Fuuka giggled, taking her marshmallow and joining the others. “Thanks, Junpei-kun!” She lowered the skewer closer to the flames. “What’s the proper technique? Got any tips?”

“If ya want it crispy, just shove it in the fire.” Junpei reclaimed his own skewer and continued to toast his masterpiece. “But the best s’mores are golden brown and kinda puffy. It takes a real pro
“to make ’em right.” He removed his mallow once he was satisfied with the color. “Here we have a
textbook example. Take notes. This’ll be on the test.”

“It’s burnt on top.” Minato said.

“We can’t all be perfect!” Junpei grabbed one of the prepared graham crackers with chocolate,
putting together the treat before offering his creation to Fuuka. “Wanna switch? You won’t regret
it.”

"Really?” Fuuka handed off her skewer and wasted no time biting into the s’more.

Her eyes lit up almost instantly.

“ Ish sho good!” She swallowed and skipped over to Minato, urging him to take and eat the s’more.
“ You have to try it! It’s better than I imagined!”

Minato, the genius of class 2-F who was unphased by eating something another person bit into,
took up her offer. He used his free hand to grab and lift the s’more to his mouth.

In an almost impossible manner, he too was ten shades brighter. Junpei never thought he’d live to
see Minato Arisato, a guy he envied on a regular basis, getting knocked down a few pegs or bested
at something.

“Impossible,” he said and turned to Junpei, “What did you do? You cheated.”

It fueled Junpei’s pride, even if it was for tonight.

“Like I said, I’m the Mallow Master!”

Yukari sat at the edge of the bonfire as she watched Junpei and Minato argue back and forth over a
stupid s’more. Even Fuuka and Aigis knew well enough to stay out of their bickering, the former
munching like a hamster on the object of the boys’ disagreement.

“No, you cheated.” Minato insisted. “You probably used something else to make it taste better
when none of us were looking.”

“You’re just mad that I’m a better s’more maker than you! Admit it, I win!” Junpei crowed.

“I’m not mad! You’re a liar and I know it!”

“If you’re not mad, then why are you yelling!”

“You’re yelling! I’m completely calm!”

“You both are yelling.” Aigis finally said. “I suggest a duel to solve this dilemma. If Fuuka-san
likes Minato’s better, Minato is declared the victor. Of course, Junpei-san should make another for
a fair comparison and the same rules apply.”

Fuuka was all too excited at the prospect of more s’mores, bouncing on her heels despite the tense
atmosphere. “That’s a great idea! More please!”

“I’d like to see him try!” Junpei said, using Fuuka’s skewer that he took earlier.

Minato grumbled and set himself to work on making a s’more to win over Fuuka. “Prepare to lose.
Cooking’s in my blood.”
“Loser says what?”

“I’m not falling for that.”

The boys continued going for each other’s throats, leaving Yukari to wonder if SEES will ever get a nice, sensible, QUIET young man to fight with them.

Well, Minato counted but even he acted childish when paired with the wrong people.

“Who started it?”

Yukari looked behind her to find Mitsuru, awkwardly shifting from side-to-side, and judging by the way she didn’t immediately snag a spot next to Yukari, she was waiting for an invitation to sit next to the archer.

Yukari bit the inside of her cheek. She tried to avoid addressing the elephant in the room the past couple of days, giving herself some space to think about what happened the other night and come up with a plan to approach the subject. It was cowardly and it made her look upset beyond consolation, but she would rather come off as aloof than hurt Mitsuru’s feelings a second time.

But it seemed this conflict would come to a head sooner rather than later.

Maybe it was for the best.

“Both of them, if you can believe it.” Yukari patted the sand next to her. “And you don’t need my permission to sit. This is supposed to be a bonfire for everyone.”

Mitsuru sunk next to the junior, letting out a sigh as she settled in. “Thank you, I wasn’t sure if you’d appreciate my company, considering the circumstances. Waiting to be invited seemed like the best option.”

Always the formal one, taking the smallest grievances into account and working around them. Mitsuru truly was a business-oriented person, through and through.

“If it makes a difference, I was worried about talking to you, too.” Yukari said.

“I see.”

Silence.

Another round of banter from Junpei and Minato.

Fuuka trying to intervene.

Aigis asking questions.

Minato giving a sarcastic response.

Nothing else.

And it drove Yukari insane.

Was Mitsuru going to let her take the helm on this conversation or did her senior believe she was too angry to speak?

“I’m sorry for brushing you off yesterday.” Yukari said, cringing at the hoarseness in her words. “I
know you’re busy and you’re gonna miss things. And I shouldn’t’ve said I’m not a big reader. I’m trying to be better about that, I swear—"

Mitsuru cut her off with a chuckle.

Chuckling? That had to be a good sign!

Right? Maybe?

Thankfully, Yukari’s thoughts were laid to rest as Mitsuru turned to her.

“You make it sound as if I took offense. I understand you have your life and I mine, that’s the simple truth.” The amusement in her voice withered. “But as your leader and a teammate, it makes sense that I recognize and praise your accomplishments. It’s one of the best methods of cultivating positive morale and I’ve, well, missed the mark in that regard.”

Yukari frowned. “It doesn’t make what I did any better.” She shifted closer to Mitsuru. “I’m also sorry about running out on the meeting. I was angry, but it wasn’t because of you. I’m was just... shocked about what your father told us and I acted without thinking.”

“I understand,” Mitsuru said, “To be completely honest, I had to restrain myself from following you but the last thing I would want is to cause more distress. I was relieved when Minako-san went in my stead.”

Mitsuru, willing to risk the anguish of someone who didn’t deserve that care. In the end, she allowed another to take up the mantel, trusting that everything would turn out okay. She believed Yukari would come back.

That kind of faith never came cheap.

“Thanks for letting her. It really helped.” Yukari said.

“If I may ask, what do you feel now?”

Of course, Mitsuru wanted to know the million-dollar question.

After hearing the full story, knowing that the sins of her father rested upon her shoulders, how could she bear to go on and pretend nothing happened?

“I still have a lot to think about. My head’s a mess. It feels like my world got flipped upside down. I don’t know what I want right now.” Yukari stared into the bonfire. “And the fighting’s only gonna get worse. If I stay and hesitate on the field, I might get us killed. If I leave, you lose an extra healer and distance fighter. It’s not fair, either way.”

“You are under no obligation to stay. If you cannot go on—”

Yukari shook her head. The words she kept bottled up in the presence of Mitsuru finally came bubbling to the surface.

“If I never joined SEES, I’d never get closure about my dad. I would come home to an empty house, I wouldn’t have met you guys, I’d be alone again.” She clenched her fists. “Despite everything, I’m treated like I belong somewhere. I’m treated like my life matters.”

That’s right. She knew why she refused to back out of the fight.

“I might not have it all figured out. I’m not happy with what’s going on, but if I learned anything
these past months, there’s so much I don’t know. If I leave, I’ll never figure out why this had to happen. Why do we have to suffer like this? There has to be a reason!”

Her thirst for knowledge. Yes, that was part of it but not quite. She had to keep going. There was more to say, so much more on that weighed heavy on her heart.

“I don’t know what my purpose is, but I do know what I have to do to find it. It may take a long time and I doubt I’ll find everything. I’ve accepted that and I’m prepared to be disappointed. It’s my own fault if I am.”

Maybe that last part was a lie to herself. All the same, she felt that deep down, there was a kernel of truth to it.

“And we might not always see eye-to-eye, but I know you’re not my enemy and I don’t want us to be. We’re all in this together and I promise to keep fighting, even without a strong reason of my own. Who knows, maybe I’ll get a reason to along the way?”

And with that, Yukari was all talked out.

“Yeah... long story short, I’m glad I have you guys backing me up. Even if we’re not best friends forever, I’d like to think that could change.”

Mitsuru let out a hefty sigh, putting on a tired smile. “Forgive me, but that was quite the tangent.” Despite that, she didn’t appear to be discouraged. “However, I agree. I wouldn't mind if we all learned to look out for one another outside of combat.”

Yukari giggled brushed a stray hair from her face. “But ya know, this was easier than I thought. It feels good to get that off my chest. Thanks for listening.”

“And thank you for confiding in me.” Mitsuru swept her own hair to the side and ran her fingers through the soft curls. “If you should need anything and if I can help you see that vision through, please ask. Trust and cooperation is what will make this team stronger.”

Trust and cooperation.

Months ago, Yukari might have scoffed at Mitsuru Kirijo pledging to lend support to her nonexistent aspirations. It had to be pandering to her soldiers to keep them docile. There was no way it was out of generosity or better, concern for people she actually cared about. Nothing about it made any sense.

But now, all Yukari could think of was how lucky she was to know Mitsuru. For real.

And as she watched the young heiress play with the ends of her magenta locks, Yukari got an idea to strengthen that trust and cooperation the only way she knew how.

Fashion.

“Do you mind if I braid your hair?” she asked.

Mitsuru stiffened at the sudden offer. “For what purpose? Wouldn’t you rather spend time with the others?”

Yukari groaned and before Mitsuru could protest, she kneeled behind the senior and set herself to
work. “And listen to Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle Dumbass argue all night? Not a chance.”

Mitsuru allowed it to happen, taking her hands away to let Yukari decide the best course of action. “You best keep your voice down. You know what Minako-san does to those who swear.” she said.

“What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.” Yukari leaned down to whisper. “Besides, she’s too busy chatter up Akihiko-senpai to notice. If you pay attention, you can actually feel the sexual tension radiating off of them.”

“Akihiko is the densest young man I have ever met and Minako a proper young lady. There is nothing sexual about their relationship, or lack thereof.”


“Late November.” Mitsuru said promptly.

“Graduation, next school year.”

“We have a deal.”

“...why a speedo-”

Before Minako could finish, Akihiko gave her a light shove. He would’ve felt guilty at any other time if not for them sitting down, letting her roll onto the sand without risk of serious injury, or her giggles that followed.

This girl was just like her brother, a complete and utter joker. It must be a trait among the Arisato family.

Or multi-Persona users in general. Whatever came first.

Either way, Akihiko was glad they were stationed close to a bonfire. It gave him an excuse for the burning feeling on his cheeks and ears.

“It’s the most functional choice. I don’t see what the big idea is. ” he grumbled. “And why does everyone feel like they can joke about me the entire trip? You, Junpei, your brother, even Mitsuru got a couple jabs in.”

Minako sat up again, buzzing with mirth. “I’m sorry you’re being treated like a normal teenager? For once?” Her eyes flickered across the way where Minato and Junpei continued to argue about who can make a better s’more. “And if my sources’re correct, you and the nerds were bickering like crazy yesterday. You’ve gotta admit, it’s nice to have someone to mess with whenever ya want.”

Akihiko was inclined to disagree but if he said that out loud, Minako would find a way to twist his words.

Instead, he stayed quiet and stared straight ahead. Dignifying her with a negative response only opened him up to another round of teasing. He had enough snark thrown at him to last a lifetime and anymore might drive him insane.

“Not talking, eh?” Minako asked. Akihiko caught her shifting away from him, reading his message loud and clear. “I guess we’re gonna sit here listening to other people argue? Fine. By. Me.”

And so, they did just that.
Acting as casual observers to Minato and Junpei tearing into one another, the seniors kept to their side of the bonfire. Fuuka and Aigis urged the boys to calm down if things got too heated, but more often than not, those efforts to keep the peace were brushed off a second later.

At least it wasn’t anyone’s problem to fix. Their little competition stayed in the realm of wit and roasting rather than fists. Not even Mitsuru, the queen of inserting herself into every team dispute, got involved. She and Yukari remained in their own little world, contented to just talk and play with each other’s hair. Mitsuru was on the receiving end a majority of the time, but Yukari switched places after a while.

Strange how the two were getting along so well, but Akihiko preferred this newfound civility than dancing around the problem. Unless it became an issue for the third time, he kept his personal opinions where they belonged.

Not that he had much to complain about. Their relationship was on the mend and the team would be better for it.

“You’re smiling.”

Akihiko turned to a smirking Minako, as if what she said was meant to fluster him, yet he didn’t understand why. What was so significant about smiling? Did it look wrong for him to make a face like that? Was he not allowed to?

More importantly, she was right. He felt the quirk on his lips, small but still there.

How come he didn’t notice until she said something?

Akihiko covered his mouth. “I don’t get the joke-”

“-It’s not a joke, I promise!” She grabbed his wrist to pull his hand away. “You look like you’re actually enjoying the moment and I’m kinda surprised. What’s gotcha happy all of a sudden?”

Surprised?

That made two of them. Nothing particularly funny or interesting was going on, save the great marshmallow war on the other side of the fire. In actuality, it was hardly a reason to be smiling. The parties of said war got on every last nerve Akihiko had and the pettiness of their fighting only cemented that feeling of disdain.

But assuming there was something he refused to say aloud, Minako offered the space and attention to talk, hands neatly folded on her lap, body facing him.

Annoyingly persistent, even without words.

Akihiko sighed and tried to come up with a believable excuse.

“I’m just glad I don’t have to babysit to a horny playboy and his psychopathic friend anymore. They almost got us kidnapped by a woman--no, a man--a half woman, half man--I don’t even know who we were talking to yesterday. I don’t WANNA know who we talked to.”

Exactly. Watching Junpei and Minato reminded him they were no longer under his jurisdiction, therefore, not able to drag him on a useless operation. It was the perfect cover story.

“That’s it?” Minako asked. “Not like I’m one to talk, Minato and Junpei stress me out too. I turn my back for five seconds and-”
"-Hey, monkey!" Minato shouted from across the fire. "Stop tattling on me to my sister when I’m sitting right here!"

Fuck.

"Yeah, way to throw us under the bus!" Junpei added, waving his skewer in the air. "You’re just mad you got tricked by a trap!"

Double fuck.

Those two nimrods heard Akihiko complaining. Thankfully, Minako turned to the pair, all traces of amusement wiped from her face.

"Stop shouting at people! And Junpei! Stop swinging that skewer around! You’re gonna hurt yourself!"

Junpei scoffed and as if to further upset their field leader, waved said skewer above his head, a flaming marshmallow on the tip. "Relax! I’m the Mallow Master! I’m always careful-"

As if to prove him wrong, the still flaming marshmallow slipped down the shaft and caught his hand.

Immediately, Junpei cursed and threw both mallow and stick in front of him, clutching his hand.

"-Mother fucker!"

"Junpei-kun!" Fuuka jumped to his aide.

"Language!" Minako was on her feet too, a groan on her lips and concern in her eyes, bounding around the fire. "And stop laughing and help me, Minato! You’ve done stupider things-I said stop it or you’re grounded!"

Minako dotted over a pissed-off Junpei, Fuuka standing close by and muttering words of comfort to her peer. Minato seemed to take his sister’s threat seriously and genuinely asked if his friend wasn’t in terrible pain. Mitsuru and Yukari put a pause on their conversation to see what the fuss was about.

Yukari chided Junpei for getting cocky and he snapped back with an insult, the exact words getting swallowed up by a chorus of laughter.

Akihiko remained on the fringe of the action, lost in a daze.

An outsider amongst the team he fought beside for months.

And it felt strange.

"You okay?"

Minako came back to his side of the fire, the urgency from Junpei’s “little stunt” long gone. Instead, she smiled down at him, filled with a gentleness befitting someone much older than seventeen. Akihiko was forced to look away, otherwise, he would be too distracted to speak.

"Yeah, just thinking about... stuff."

Minako smirked, "Sounds fake but okay," And reclaimed her spot, "In case you were wondering,
Junpei’s gonna be fine. The worst he got was a baby first-degree burn and a bruised ego. Nothing he can’t come back from.”

“Are you sure about that last one? He’s got the emotional stability of a pre-teen girl.” Akihiko said.

“Cut ‘em some slack! He’s not a kid, he can handle his emotions.”

“Right~ we’re just gonna forget yesterday ever happened so you can cover his butt.” Akihiko drew out the sarcasm, the tone almost alien coming out of his mouth. “Way to set an example for the juniors.”

“Says the guy who tried to flirt with a robot.”

“Says the girl who let said robot hug her.”

“I was ambushed.”

“Like every time we go to Tartarus?”

“You little—that happened once and it wasn’t my fault!” Minako laughed and shoved him in the same way he did minutes ago. If she was trying to tip him over, she failed miserably, only getting him to sway a fraction of an inch.

Akihiko, on the other hand, was thoroughly pleased that he couldn’t be toppled, not by a stupid operation or by a twig of a girl.

“Having trouble?” he asked.

Scowling, she gave up. “I hate you sometimes.”

In spite of her maturity when leading SEES or motherly disposition, deep down, Minako was still a teenager. She blew off studying to do her own thing. She complained about trivial events like boring teachers and homework assignments. She made irrational decisions. She was impulsive. Hard to pin down. Stubborn in her beliefs.

She was just a normal girl.

However brief, Akihiko was remembered another similar, untamable spirit.

Glimmering eyes seeking a new adventure.

Bright laughter tumbling from a toothy grin.

Kind to even the roughest of children.

A tiny star in a cloudy sky.

All of it reminded him of that other girl.

The girl he loved and lost.

How long had it been that he remembered his own family in a fond light?

“You’re doing it again.”

Unlike earlier, Akihiko knew full well he was smiling before Minako called him out.
He turned to her. “Does it look that bad?”

Minako shook her head, shadows from the bonfire dancing across her face. “It’s not bad, at all.” she chuckled. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind seeing it more often. It’s a good look for you.”

Him?

Good look?

More often?

How could Minako say that with a straight face!?

Akihiko swiveled away as an unnatural heat threatened to burn him alive. It was one thing to feel at ease in her company. It was a whole other ball game when she started throwing out compliments that bordered on being considered flirtatious.

“N-nevermind, forget I said anything!”

“Aw, don’t be shy! I’m serious!”

“Stop poking me!”

The rest of the night passed in a blur and before he realized the time, Akihiko and the team packed up their mini celebration and hit the sack. Their ship left at seven so it was best to get as much sleep as possible. Mitsuru advised it explicitly.

However, Akihiko stared at the ceiling, drifting in and out of consciousness for hours. Thoughts he long abandoned melted with his newest memories, playing on repeat.

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*Mitsuru showing Akihiko an Evoker for the first time. “How about a real challenge?” she asked.*

*A hunched figure leaving the dorm in a hurry. “Don’t follow me, Aki!”*

*“We found two new candidates and as luck would have it, one of them will be a classmate of yours.” Ikutsuki handed him an empty notebook. “Please, keep an eye on her and report anything of interest.”*

*With a heart beating out of his chest, Akihiko ran down a darkened hallway, Fuuka’s words pushing him to go faster: “They fell through the floor and Arisato-senpai’s unresponsive!”*

*Minako’s smile, trying to get him to look her way. “I meant it! It looks good on you! Stop being such a dork!”*
Shinjiro and Akihiko as little boys, a girl with silver pigtails sandwiched between them, singing as they strolled along. “Happy, happy birthday~! To my crybaby brother~!”

Some of those memories left a bittersweet taste, others a grim reminder of his reality, but when the sun finally rose, it didn’t matter what he chose to pay attention to. Life went on. There was nothing Akihiko could do to forget.

He woke to find Minako gathering the troops, already having to split up Junpei and Yukari in the heat of another argument. Minato, Fuuka, and Mitsuru tried to keep Aigis from getting sidetracked with “last-minute status reports” of the team. Needless to say, no one looked like they were ready to leave for the ferry just yet.

When Minako noticed Akihiko joining them, she smiled and waved before calling on Mitsuru for back-up. Together, they forced Junpei and Yukari to settle their differences (whatever they may be) and turn the other cheek.

Out of nowhere, a simple realization put a stupid grin on Akihiko’s face.

“This vacation wasn’t so bad.”

Click, click, click.

“Oh shit, it’s them. . .”

Click, click, click.

“You mean those three? That’s the fifth time this month.”

Click, click, click.

“Shut up and let’s go! He’s got a gun!”

A herd of rumbling footsteps and terrified mumbling echoed and bounced off the concrete walls of the alley. If the space were larger and not so contained, perhaps their sounds of retreat might not be as annoying. Alas, the incessant noise carried on until the darkened corner of Iwatodai Station was cleared out.

Peace at last.

Seconds later, that peace was broken by three sets of feet, all heading towards the back wall where a hunched figure tried to look like he was sleeping.

Click, click, click.

But Shinjiro knew these people better than most. He was expecting them to show their faces all night and wondered if they would ever arrive at all. And if they did manage to appear, they made sure the whole block knew they were there with their flashy clothing and dangerous aura.

They also had a penchant for being “fashionably late.”

They called it a minor inconvenience.
Shinjiro called it being a dick.

And as he looked up to see a whole pack of colored candies in human form, all waiting to be acknowledged like a bunch of royal brats: featuring fifty shades of gray, green and tacky, and a literal strawberry. Shinjiro wanted nothing more than to see them walk away. If only they didn’t have what he needed, that would be the case.

Life was cruel that way.

“Hey.” Shinjiro said.

Their leader, long-haired and sporting a permanent frown, looked around the empty alley.

“Why do they always run and hide when I approach? They’re like rats in the presence of a barn cat, if I do say so myself.”

Not even bothering with humility. He meant business tonight.

Shinjiro shambled to his feet. “Don’t know, don’t care.” He extended a hand to the green one. “I don’t got all night. Give me the capsules and I’ll wire the same amount—”

The leader stepped forward, a hand on his gun while acting as a barrier between Shinjiro and his stuffy entourage.

“Actually, there’s a reason I wanted all three of us here tonight.” he said. “This time, I’d like some information. No money. No lies. There shouldn’t be a problem, knowing you.”

Great. Just great.

Shinjiro took his hand back, stuffing it in his pockets and search for his pocket knife. If things got ugly and this turned into a classic brawl, it didn’t matter if the other side had numbers plus a gun, they had the collective health of a ninety-year-old cancer patient at death’s door.

“Make it snappy.”

“Thank you for your cooperation.” The leader gave Shinjiro a few steps, relaxed once again. “Your acquaintances have been busy lately. I’m referring to their activities on nights when the moon is full. They’ve spent a great deal of time in the tower as well. Why did they take this burden upon themselves?”

Acquaintances?

Full moon?

Tower?

Wait, he meant SEES.

When he refused to answer, Shinjiro noticed the redhead inching closer to her leader. “Silence? Do you not wish to betray your friends?”

Shinjiro glared the trio down. He didn’t have time to play this game of theirs. “They’re not my friends and I’ve got nothing to do with ‘em. Never again.” Once more, he extended his hand. “Ask another question or hand those capsules over.”

“You do know something.” The leader insisted. His fingers twitched and reached for his gun. “We
saw you talking to the one with silver hair. He’s a senior at your old school and according to Jin, an old friend from your childhood named Akihiko Sanada. Is that the reason you refuse to answer, out of loyalty to him?"

Whatever Mitsuru and Akihiko have been up to lately, killing these larger Shadows and actually taking on Tartarus, they got themselves mixed up with these guys.

Now, they were unknowingly putting an old member in front of a firing squad.

“He and I aren’t close.” Shinjiro eventually said. “We might’ve grown up together, but he’s just another one of ‘em. A Kirijo dog.”

The green one chuckled. “Then why keep quiet?”

“Damnit, Aki. You had one job, don’t cause a scene, and you screwed yourself over like ya always do.”

Shinjiro inwardly groaned. He would get a nasty right hook to the face for what he was about to do, but SEES brought it upon themselves. He was a neutral party and couldn’t be held responsible for letting some information slip.

“I don’t know the details, but supposedly, if ya destroy all the big Shadows that’ve been showing up on full moons, then the tower will disappear.” Shinjiro pulled the brim of his beanie lower. “And if the tower goes, so does the Dark Hour. They have some kind of link or some shit, but that’s all I got for ya.”

The leader stopped twitching.

“You mean. . . they intend to eliminate the Dark Hour?”

Without warning, the green one burst into a fit. “Why would they do such a thing!? With the power they have, they wish to throw it all away!? They wish to destroy the Tower of Demise!?”

Tower of Demise, that was a new one. Not like it was anymore original than the name Tartarus, pen and coined by Shuji Ikutsuki himself.

Still, the way this usually calm and sly man was so easily thrown into a frenzy caught Shinjiro by surprise.

“Easy, Jin!” The leader raised a hand for attention. “We cannot lose our heads. We will simply carry on as normal and take care of this matter.”

The girl sighed and turned to leave. “Then let’s go already.”

With a nod, the leader returned to Shinjiro, still reeling from the sudden outburst. “I appreciate your willingness to support our cause. You’re intel was more than helpful.” After taking an orange bottle from the now calmed Jin, he pressed it into the informant’s hands. “Consider the next few doses paid for, my friend. I should hope to see you in good health, next we meet.”

Shinjiro retched at the thought of being associated with this looney bin, but it got him what he needed and a little extra, so he’d pretend he was okay with this.

For now.

“Fine by me.”
July 23rd, 2009

Something about the Chairman has been bothering me and I’m not the only one who’s noticed. I don’t want to say too much but Minato and I agreed we should keep our heads down, just until we can figure out what’s going on. It couldn’t hurt to play it safe.

We got Aigis all settled in the dorm this morning. Fuuka and Mitsuru worked on her charging station all afternoon. I think she’ll like it here. If someone like me can, I’m sure an android can too!

I’ll never get used to writing that.

Finally, I didn’t write this in last night’s entry but I got a chance to sit down and chat with Akihiko some more. I forgot how (unintentionally) funny he is sometimes and that dorky attitude of his and he’s so easy to tease! Junpei and Minato are great to hang out with, but Akihiko’s the type of guy who I can count on to treat me my own age. He’s also getting better at humor, in no small part to me!

Oof, I can’t stop smiling. I can’t wait to go running with him tomorrow!

Always,

Minako Arisato
The Ends and the Means

Chapter Notes

Sorry I went dark for a little while! I took another month off to work on school and recoup after a hard hit to my finances. I’m super happy to get this story rolling again!

For now, I wanna take a chapter to introduce a new social link that will play a big role in Minako’s plotline. It was the first SL that genuinely pulled at my heartstrings (I cried like a bitch) and I can’t wait to share my interpretation!

I’d also like to draw attention to a new tag that was added to the relationship’s list: Mitsuru and Yukari! Sorry to anyone who has a different OTP, I like YukariXMinato and MitsuruXAkihiko (among other ships) but I’m biased towards MitsuYuki. They’re sooooo cute and the “P4: Arena Ultimax” epilogue made it worse! *incoherent “mrgrgr” intensifies*

Anyway, please enjoy the chapter!

(Fun Fact: My birthday is 7/24. Claude stans, be jealous.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Date: July 24th, 2009]
[Time: 5 hours and 50 minutes, AM]
[Weather: Sunny, 50% chance of rain later today]
[Charge Status: Maxed]
[HP: Maxed]
[SP: Maxed]
[Accessing Task Log for 7/24/09]
[6 Task(s) for 7/24/09]

Task Log for 7/24/09

- Wake up the children and advise to wear proper rain attire
  - (Arisato, Minako)
  - (Arisato, Minako)
- Standby until 16:30 PM
- Greet children when they arrive at the dorm
Inquire about their day at school
Inquire if the children are hungry
Check the children for abnormal injuries/changes in behavior
Act accordingly to the result of Task IV
Ensure the children are escorted to their bedrooms safely

[Initiating Task IA]

[Proceed to 3rd Floor, Room 12, Iwatodai Dorm]

[Error: Door to (Arisato, Minako) is locked]

[Conclusion: (Arisato, Minako) is sleeping]

[Solution: Use Protocol 1090B&E to open the door]

[Protocol 1090B&E Successful]

[Arisato, Minako is absent]

[Observations: Bedding is moderately disturbed, school bag was left behind, school uniform/shoes is/are cold, night clothing missing]

[Alert: (Arisato, Minako) is missing and possibly lost or kidnapped]

[Update Task IA-IB: Ensure (Arisato, Minato) is safe and warn (Kirijo, Mitsuru) of a Code Adam]

[Error: Door to (Arisato, Minato) is locked]

[Conclusion: (Arisato, Minato) is sleeping]

[Solution: Use Protocol 1090B&E to open the door]

[Protocol 1090B&E Successful]

[(Arisato, Minato) is sleeping]

[Initiating Task IB]

“Minato-san, please wake up.”

Minato grumbled and pulled the covers over his head. A foreign voice from far away called for him to get out of bed but after a night of fitful sleep, there was no way he was going to listen. The only things prying him from that mattress and pillow were a promise of free food, the phrase “school is canceled,” and a dog who needed someone’s love and affection.

Even then, he’d just curl into a ball and slip back into the sweet embrace of slumber.
That or he was already dreaming and this voice happened to be his brain trying to do its job.

Yeah, that had to be it. Minato locked his door every night and the only person he allowed inside (albeit not by choice) was Minako. But even she respected his space from time-to-time and knew better than to wake her brother before his alarm gave it the old college try.

“Five more minutes. . .” he mumbled to his brain.

“Minato-san, there is an emergency that requires your presence. Wake up, now.”

How original, an emergency.

His dreams were getting blander by the day.

Minato flipped over so his body faced the wall, consciousness slipping with every second, breathing slowed. The warmth of his comforter protecting him from the morning chill. He just hoped the change in position would lull him back to sleep.

For a moment, it worked. But only a moment.

“If you do not awaken in five seconds, I have no choice but to take drastic measures.” the voice insisted. “This is your final warning. Please, wake up.”

Minato snuggled deeper into his sheets and said nothing. Perhaps he wasn’t trying hard enough.

“Ignore it.” he thought.

“Five, four.”

“Ignore it.”

“Three, two.”

“Ignore it.”

“One. . .”

The voice faded into peaceful darkness.

His body went limp and he no longer felt the world outside his dreams.

Finally.

However, Minato was yanked out once more as icy fingers pressed against the side of his neck, the sensation kicking every muscle in his body into fight-or-flight mode at a sudden realization. This voice wasn’t imaginary. Someone broke into his room.

Minato shot up in a flurry of blankets and messy hair, flinging himself at whoever grabbed him.

“THE FU-!??”

CRACK!

And smashed his head against something flat and hard.

Minato rolled out of bed, clutching his ringing ears, and hit the floor.
Right on his kneecaps.

Then his elbow.

Followed by his face.

It took every ounce of Minato’s self-control to contain his vast lexicon of curse words. Instead, he groaned and curled into a ball, the beginnings of a headache already threatening to split whatever brain cells he had left in two. He could barely hear the thumps of footsteps running around outside his door, probably coming from everyone he woke with his earlier shout.

Good thing he didn’t finish the sentence. Minako would have a field day making him an example of what happens when people swear.

From the corner of his eye, Minato saw the mystery intruder kneel beside him. Blurry shades yellow swam into view and the glint of metal almost blinding, Aigis’ concerned face peering down.

Well, at least it wasn’t a stranger or his sister.

“I am sorry for scaring you but I had no other choice.” Aigis reached out a helping hand. “Are you alright?”

Minato forced himself to remain calm, a solemn frown the only indication that he was less than fine. Having a stalker robot dote over him was something he could do without. Without complaint, he took her hand and got to his feet, swaying while the world spun around him.

That was one way to begin the morning.

“I’ll live.” he said, although uncertain as his heart pounded a mile a minute.

He should probably get that checked out before going to school.

[ “Aigis, do you realize what you’ve done this morning?” ]

[Response: “I do not understand. I was carrying out my duties.”]

[Visual Input: Shoulders declined, frown]

[Conclusion: (Kirijo, Mitsuru) does not seem pleased with my answer]

[ “As a member of SEES and a resident of the dorm, you must respect the privacy of your teammates. We don’t break into their locked rooms whenever we please.” ]

[Response: “It was necessary. I had to ensure that they were awake and accounted for.”]

[Visual Input: Frown, eyebrows angled inward]

[Conclusion: (Kirijo, Mitsuru) does not seem pleased with my answer]

[ “They know how to get up in the morning without your help. You don’t need to babysit them.” ]

[Response: “(Arisato, Minako) was unaccounted for. What if she had been injured or kidnapped?”]
Minako-san gets up early to go on a run and if her safety is that important to you, don’t worry. She usually takes Akihiko along. He won’t let anything happen to her.”

[Response: “(Sanada, Akihiko) is human.”]

“Yes, why?”

[Response: “(Sanada, Akihiko) is human. He is not bulletproof. He is not equipped with firearms or other weapons. How will he protect (Arisato, Minako) without being damaged himself?”]

“I will admit he can be, um... headstrong, but he knows what he’s doing.”

[Response: “My answer does not change. Only I am able to protect (Arisato, Minako) and (Arisato, Minato) properly.”]

[Visual Input: Sighing, arms crossed]

[Conclusion: (Kirijo, Mitsuru) is frustrated]

“What will it take for you to feel like those two are safe?”

[Response: “I shall permanently station myself in (Arisato, Minato)’s room. It is strategically located beneath (Arisato, Minako)’s room which I can monitor via heat signatures. It will ensure I am able to protect them if their lives are in danger.”]

“That’s unreasonable.”

[Response: “If there is an issue with gender, I can do the opposite. It may be more difficult but it will be the next best-”]

“You are not living in the same dorm room with either of them. Period.”

[Observation: (Kirijo, Mitsuru) is unwilling to compromise or consider my suggestions]

[Visual Input: (Arisato, Minako) has entered the room, in uniform, carrying a school bag]

[Conclusion: (Arisato, Minako) will be departing for Gekkoukan High School soon]

[Adjustment: Display speaker differentiation]

[(Arisato, Minako): “Sorry for butting in. I thought Aigis might like to know Minato’s gonna be fine. She just surprised him a little and he overreacted.”]

[Response: “Are you sure? He seemed to exhibit symptoms of a concussion.”]

[(Arisato, Minako): “Sweety, I love my brother, but that nerd’s a professional egomaniac. He’d go to school with a gunshot wound if it meant he could rub his grades in everyone’s faces.”]

[Response: “That does not seem possible. A gunshot wound is a serious injury and must be treated immediately.”]

[Visual Input (Arisato, Minako): laughing, smiling]
[Conclusion: (Arisato, Minako) is amused with my response]

[Question: “Why are you amused with my response?”]

[(Arisato, Minako): “Sorry, just joking! We make a lot of those ‘round here.” ]

[Note: The members of SEES make jokes on a regular basis. It would be beneficial to learn the difference for future conversations and avoid awkward situations]

[Response: “I see.”]

[(Arisato, Minako): “But if I can be serious for a sec, I overheard what you guys were talking about. Mind if I put in my two cents?” ]

[(Kirijo, Mitsuru): “I’m all ears.” ]

[Visual Input (Arisato, Minako): restless, shifting]

[Conclusion: (Arisato, Minako) is eager to say something]

[(Arisato, Minako): “There’s a bunch of empty rooms on the girl’s floor. If you’re okay with it, let’s move Aigis from the command room and into one. She’ll be closer to Minato and me AND she’d have a place to put her equipment.” ]

[Visual Input (Kirijo, Mitsuru): nodding head, small smile]

[Conclusion: This idea pleases (Mitsuru, Kirijo)]

[(Kirijo, Mitsuru): “Might I add, we can convert the room to perform specialized maintenance without taking up space on the fourth floor. Set-up will take a day or two, but in the long run, it’d be in our best interest to do so.” ]

[(Arisato, Minako): “Great! Waddya think, Aigis? Sound like a plan?” ]

[Conclusion: I do not like this plan]

[Conclusion: It does not appeal to me]

[Note: I must follow orders above all else. I am a machine and I must abide by the orders given to me, especially when given by my field leader and the commander]

[Conclusion: I will adapt to meet this request]

[Response: “That will be sufficient.”]

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**Class 2-F Semester 1 Finals: Top 5 Scores**

Minato Arisato (99)*

Chihiro Fushimi (90)

Tatsuya Amano-Shou II (89)
Minato Arisato ranks second in the class of 2011. Please refer to the cumulative rankings for more information.

Spaz: heard u got 1st in the class twig

Spaz: gud work

Me: it was nothing but thanx

Spaz: btw, r u free after practice?

Me: yeah

Me: y?

Spaz: meet me @ Iwatodai Station

Spaz: i need 2 tell u something

Minato was suspicious when Kazushi didn’t show up for Kendo practice, one week before the Regional Tournament, a competition he frequently boasted about months prior. If anything, he would be the first person in the gym, not the one missing. Even the freshmen were present and Yoko was quick to point it out yet, no one had an explanation for his absence.

Next, there was a sick feeling when Kazushi asked to meet him outside Iwatodai Station, with no context or warning. All he said was “he had something to say.” Hardly enough information to go off of.

The nail in the coffin? Seeing his training partner in a regular school uniform, leaning heavily on a pillar outside the station only cemented that concern.

Still, Kazushi smiled when he saw Minato stepping off the train, the latter exhausted from the journey on top of a brutal practice.

“Yo, twig! Over here!” he called out.

Minato weaved past his fellow commuters to reach Kazushi. When he did, he noticed how the other boy shifted his weight onto his uninjured leg. The other was lifted over so slightly and useless.

Not a good sign.

“About time you showed up. I was gettin’ kinda worried ya died or something.” Kazushi said once the two were together. “But who am I kidding? Knowin’ you, you’re too smart to get yourself in trouble. And too stubborn to die.”

Minato offered his shoulder, about as casual as he could without seeming overt. “Maybe somebody
should take a page from my book.”

“Damn right. Think about yourself first.”

Kazushi chuckled but grimaced as he switched from leaning on the pillar to Minato. “Just joking around! Chill out a lil’ once in a while.” He motioned for them to start walking towards the escalators. “Come on, I’m sick of just standing here. What do ya say we find some benches and get down to business, hm?”

“It hurts to stand.”

The two shuffled their way through the crowded station and into the mall without much trouble. Minato caught a flinch or grunt whenever they accidentally bumped into strangers, but for the most part, Kazushi showed no reaction. His eyes were trained ahead, mouth constantly spewing random thoughts, stories from class, upcoming events, and questions to stave off awkward pauses. Any amount of dead space instantly sent him on a hunt for a new topic, even if Minato made it very clear that talking could wait until absolutely necessary.

They ended up choosing the closest rest area they could find, right outside the local movie theatre which was mostly quiet. Patrons coming and going rarely paid attention to the teens. Once settled, Kazushi suggested they get a snack while shoving a handful of yen bills at Minato, pointing at a cart on the other side of the courtyard.

There was no need to rush.

By the time they finished eating and another round of word vomit later, Minato came to the conclusion that this dance lost all its luster.

Kazushi wasn’t the type of person who complained but had no problem speaking his mind. If something was wrong, he never relied on useless small talk, he came out and said what others skirted around for hours. His blunt approach put him leagues ahead of his peers in terms of maturity, despite an easygoing attitude or age. It was commonplace for him to critique fellow teammates when they were slacking off or performing below their skill level, especially if those teammates were seniors. He had no tolerance for it.

Drawing the conversation elsewhere was not his style, neither should it be a second option.

Whatever Kazushi had to say, he wasn’t doing so without some prodding.

“So, you gonna tell me why you skipped practice today or what?” Minato asked. “My sis will kill me if I’m late for dinner.”

At first, Kazushi seemingly didn’t hear the question, stuffing his face with a dumpling and refusing to look up. He quickly snatched another without any acknowledgment of

But before Minato could point it out, there was a loud swallow and Kazushi put his food aside.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t bring it up,” he said. “Funny, I’m the one who invited you and I can’t even tell ya what I need to say. Makes me look like a hippie-crite. Huh?”

“Hypocrite.”

“Same diff, smartass.”

“They’re not, dumbass.”
Kazushi snorted, staring off into the bustling, station crowd as he finally opened up. “You an’ I already know what’s going on so I’ll skip straight to the end. Get’cha home for dinner faster before your sis murders you on the spot.”

“Then get on with it.”

Minato hadn’t meant to sound bitchy but he wasn’t lying when he said Minako would kill him for being late. She always played the role of prison warden when it came to punctuality, especially when food was involved.

Not that it mattered what tone he used. Kazushi didn’t comment nor appear to be affected by the usual sass, his mind focused elsewhere, anyway.

“My hamstring is getting ripped apart. The doctor said I put too much strain on it during practice and extra training made it worse.” He shook his head. “He also said... If I keep this up, there’s nothing they can do to fix it, not even surgery. Something about where the tear is and it being too close to nerves to operate safely. I’d be paralyzed in one leg.”

Minato glanced at Kazushi’s lap. His fingers dug into his bad knee, either from a bout of pain or frustration. It was impossible to tell anymore.

A hamstring tear with possible nerve damage. For months, it wasn’t a bummed knee he tried to push through, but an actual, life-changing diagnosis.

In a cynical way, Kazushi’s symptoms all made sense now. No one with recurring pain and trouble standing after a workout could say that their problems were just “a bruise” or “seasonal adjustment.” That was just wishful thinking, trying to cover up a bigger problem for as long as possible.

Kazushi continued. “My mom’s begging me to get treatment before it’s too late and my dad keeps saying I’ll break her heart if I don’t. They won’t stop reminding me that I’m risking a lot every day I don’t listen. It’s weird, my dad’s always been a calm guy, almost apathetic, but at dinner last night... He looked sick to his stomach when I told him I wanna wait until competition season’s over.”

Despite Minato’s questions on how it happened and the logical steps Kazushi had to take to avoid further injury, his parents did enough of that for a lifetime. Another person, let alone a teammate and pseudo-rival, telling him what to do was an annoyance on top of worry.

However, a small part of Minato, the empathic weakling kept reserved for family and a select few outside that circle, wanted nothing more than drag Kazushi to the nearest hospital, kicking and screaming if need be. His fingers itched to grab the stubborn jock by his collar and ask if his last brain cell was too focused on breathing to think about what he was doing. Even idiots who think the Earth is a pancake (probably) understood that having two working legs was important.

Logic vs emotions, neither seemed appealing and yet both sides played tug-of-war with Minato’s conscious, convinced they were the best approach.

“Pick one! Pick one!” they shouted. “But forget the other guy! They’re fucking dumb!”

If only they would stop fighting and do their job, maybe Minato could decide.

But the two were drowned out as a third party, often delegated to twiddling its thumbs in a darkened corner except in times of distress, intuition raised its hand. Meek as it was, the little guy almost jumped out of its shell at being recognized.
“I have a feeling Kazushi is doing this for a bigger reason.”

A bigger reason? What could that be?

“I don’t know. It’s just... doesn’t it seem strange he would do something dumb, knowing he could be permanently hurt, and for no reason?”

Keeping his mouth shut in front of everyone, even their coach, all for ulterior motives? Seemed unlikely. How could Minato be sure this wasn’t just a case of deadly stubbornness?

“Says the person who called his upperclassman a ‘bastard son of a whore’ because he assumed said ‘bastard son of a whore’ hurt his sister. By the way, did you have proof the ‘bastard son of a whore’ did what you thought or were you just listening to me?”

That was a completely different situation. Minato only went off of the facts and the only reasonable conclusion was to assume the worst and act quickly. Those actions included throwing a few punches but the punishment fit the crime, so it was justified.

“Sounds a lot like intuition. Now hurry up and say something, hippie-crite.”

It was a difficult choice but the longer he stayed silent, the louder his warring thoughts became. Better to tackle the issue with the typically unreliable intuition when logic and emotion refused to cooperate.

Despite being a smug prick, at least intuition was kind enough to talk in a normal voice.

“Why?”

Kazushi looked up, owlish at the simple question. “Why, what?”

“Anyone with common sense would jump at the chance to get treatment. I call you a dumbass all the time, but you’re not stupid, and I know you know what you’re doing is stupid.” Minato rephrased. “Why take a huge risk for something trivial like high school sports?”

For a second, Kazushi was lost to the world, eyes glazed over and body slouched forward.

Then he sighed and returned to Minato.

“My nephew’s been living with us for years now. Ever since he turned seven.” he began. “His mom abandoned him. The dad, my older brother doesn’t have enough money to take care of a kid, let alone himself. But he loves his son to bits, so until he can support them both, my parents promised to take care of their grandkid, and I help out on my off days.”

Minato perked up. “You never told me you’re an uncle.”

At that, Kazushi’s seriousness melted into a smile. Whether it was because the focus of the conversation shifted off of him to something else or investment in the subject matter, it was good to know his dour attitude left him.

“It’s not something that comes up a lot so I don’t say it, but man, I wish I did. Akira’s the best nephew ever.” He leaned back. “I used to take him to the park near my house and we’d stay there until the sun went down. He liked climbing all over the jungle gym and damn, he could out-climb a monkey. It’s almost weird how good he is.”

“Used to?” Minato crossed his arms over his chest. “What happened?”
As quickly as his mood brightened, Kazushi was frowning again.

“. . . About a month before school started, he was in an accident. His leg got messed up and he-he can't walk right now.” His head bowed. “If he goes through rehab, he might be able to recover, but he says it hurts too much and he doesn't want to do it. So he’s stuck in a wheelchair. And we don’t know if he’ll get help in time.”

Someone he had come to know as a little brother, despite having done nothing wrong, was in danger of

Kazushi sighed and forged ahead with his story.

“I can’t let him give up. He's only ten and there’re so many things he's never done. So, I made a deal-and don’t laugh-I made a deal with my nephew that if I win nationals this year, he'll go through rehab.” He chuckled to himself. “Stupid as it sounds, he agreed. Says ‘I better bring back a trophy as proof or the deal’s off.’ Haha! Like it’s that easy!”

Though he laughed at the triviality of it all, Kazushi had never looked more determined. Not during their last competition. Not in practice. Not even when talking about going to nationals. He always smiled and moved on to the next, big challenge.

On the other hand, when he talked about his nephew, something changed in Kazushi’s lax demeanor. His eyes no longer strayed too far from the world in front of him. Shoulders squared and body tensed for immediate action. A smile forced to mask a much darker expression, barely concealed despite his best effort to try.

Minato couldn’t describe the emotion but he knew it well.

He also knew better than to bring it up.

"What about your knee?"

The static atmosphere died out as the regular Kazushi returned to the surface. All traces of intensity or bitter scowls were swapped out for a familiar smirk.

“I-I appreciate your concern. But I can't worry about that now.” he said, nodding his head. “And hey, jus’ so ya know, I’m coming back to practice once the break starts. If the guys and Yoko suspect something and start asking questions, tell ‘em to talk to me.”

“Are you thinking about telling them one by one?” Minato asked.

“Maybe,” Kazushi shrugged, “But whatever happens, I wanna see Akira happy. That’s been my plan since day one and I ain’t giving up on him. Never.”

Taking matters into his own hands, wanting a family member to live a fulfilling, a struggle that had the potential to get Kazushi into a world of trouble. A path he could only travel once and never come back, if he failed.

Telling the coach or Yoko was the logical choice, keeping it between themselves the emotional one. Both had their merits and consequences. Two opposing sides pulling Minato apart at the seams.

No clear answer. No black and white.

“But you already know what you have to do.”
Intuition had a great point, two-for-two in one whole day.

Maybe it was better to rely on them when it came to matters of the heart.

Minato nodded. “Tell me more about Akira. What’s he like?”

“He’s a bit of a sneak and gets into trouble at school sometimes. He also likes gymnastics for some reason. Before he got hurt, I tried to get him to go to bed and he just-fuck-” Kazushi ran a hand through his hair, “-He backflipped outta the room! Like it was nothing!”

“*I try hard but where did we go wrong?*

*I hope we could but I won’t start all over again~”*

Fun Fact of the day: Naganaki Shrine was empty by seven o’clock at night.

By then, most of the adults were making dinner and getting ready for the next day. Children, afraid of being caught after curfew, scurried inside before the local police made their rounds. Even animals seemed to get the message and all but hurried to find shelter for the night, and if they had an owner, they were never seen too far from their homes.

Translation: if someone wanted to get away from their life and the people in it for an evening, they need only take a trip down the street to said shrine and enjoy some alone time.

Especially if that someone happened to be overworked, stressed, and a jaded high schooler.

“*Midday street walks, lights fell and dispersed in the air.*

*Nobody stopped to see them fade~”*

Minako’s eyes fixated on the reddening sky, the warmth of a recently eaten dinner weighed her down. At least she had nowhere else to go tonight, no one waiting on her to come around, and no reason to fight through the sluggishness and risk a nasty stomach ache later. It would be a waste of a lovely sunset to rush, especially when she was trying to spend as much time outside of the dorm as possible.

A cheerful song fueled her mood with a mellow singer and poppy instrumental. She couldn’t remember where she found this particular tune, probably from a video game from its repetitive lyrics, but that was fine by her. Minako liked the genre, almost as much as she loved sweets.

She relaxed and decided to enjoy the ambiance.

“*Your eyes seem so innocent, everything made sense to you*

*They didn’t to me~”*
That wasn’t to say Minako planned on staying out late. She still had her early morning jog, one more day of school before summer break, and TWO student council meetings tomorrow. Mitsuru also requested a few back-to-back Tartarus runs to put a dent in their exploration. Now that everyone will be able to sleep in during the week, it made sense to take advantage of the extra hours and get a jump on training for the next Full Moon.

More fighting in a death tower while the rest of the world relaxed; Minako already heard a distant argument between Junpei and Yukari brewing in the background.

And Akihiko and Mitsuru fighting over battle strategies.

And Minato undermining those strategies just to rile the seniors up.

And Fuuka begging everyone to stop fighting and get along.

And Yukari scolding the whole team for making Fuuka upset. And Junpei starting another argument because “the last thing anyone wants is to make the team’s navigator sad! She’s a precious bean who must be protected!” And Minato, once again, will take the chance to mutter something snarky like: “To be fair, you and Yukari started it.”

Rinse. Lather. Repeat until Minako put on a smile and threatened to never cook for SEES ever again if they kept bickering.

Did she forget to mention this all happened not even an hour ago, prompting her to take this little adventure to Naganaki Shrine, the bustling energy of the dorm at her back, an open road ahead? Because she was still fuming when “a few” individuals made a poor attempt to get in her good graces, “a few” meaning Fuuka, the one person who did nothing wrong. The real culprits stood off to the side, letting the poor girl apologize for them.

It was the final straw.

Minako grabbed her headphones, announced she was taking a walk and expected a proper apology when she returned, or else.

She never looked back as Junpei shouted, “Say sike right now!”

“(Deep inside my mind) I didn’t compromise just for the love

(Deep inside my mind) Believing your words~”

Minako cared about her team and loved Minato, but the longer she thought about it, the more she entertained the idea of going solo on a regular basis. With how quickly her life went from barely normal to saving the world from monsters, time to process the change was a rare commodity. One of which ran dry the moment she stepped inside the dorm.

So she did what she had to do and decided to pay a visit to the shrine, hoping to focus on nothing but listening to her music.

And here she was. Doing just that and all was right with the world.

“A way of life, a way of life
I heard you say we were on the same street.

A way of life

Way of my life~”

The final beats of the song rang in her ears.

Minako leaned back and turned her attention to her MP3, looking for a new song to play. And because she was still upset over the events that took place earlier, she opted for her go-to relaxation playlist and hit the shuffle button.

She was greeted by the soothing reverb of an acoustic guitar.

“Eleventh century A.D.

A king says come to war with me.

And nevermind thou shalt not kill

we're dealing now with infidels~”

*The Ends and the Means* by Robby Hecht, a song about the actions and consequences of humans justifying their violent actions.

Minato found it a few years ago by illegally downloaded a bunch of music off the internet. So much so, he failed to notice a few tunes added to his MP3 on accident. It took a whole month for the siblings to figure out their playlists weren’t haunted by the ghost of music’s past but unintentionally altered do to their own mistakes.

This song was one of those unexpected additions.

Upon listening to the whole thing, Minako fell in love and it quickly became one of her favorites.

“He raises high his sword and then

He charges forth with all his men,

And with the blessing of the papacy

In a righteous tongue, he screams~”

She allowed herself to quietly sing along to the next verse. The resigned, almost exhausted tone of the artist drew her into its melancholic story. The guitar’s gentle chords only fueled that emotion, she fell deeper and deeper.
Minako tilted her head back to drink in the sun. Though it sat low in the sky, the summer heat warmed her skin.

No children on the playground. No adults coming to pray and offer money to the gods. No teenagers gossiping about the latest “scandals” (some of which involve Minako and her brother) or hottest trends. No teammates pestering to go to Tartarus for the millionth time in a row. No one to remind her of responsibility and duty and the future and whatever else the world decided to throw at her feet.

No stress. No Personas or personas. Not a care in the world, as if Minako were a normal seventeen-year-old.

She allowed her eyes to close and soak up the sunlight, drifting off into the music. For a few blissful minutes, she wished to be left that way, at least until the song ended.

“The ends, they justify the means, my friend.

Oh, the ends, they justify the means~”

“They tell him life is nothing more
Than a weapon in a time of war.
And this is the only way we’ve found
To tear these mighty symbols down~”

The bench shifted underneath her.

Minako stopped singing, opening her eyes and looking over to see what or who caused the disturbance. She thought, for sure, the park cleared out hours ago and she was the only person left.

“In the cockpit now he starts to steer
so all the world will clearly hear
these once benign flying machines
shouting out of tv screens~”

She was surprised to find herself no longer alone.

A young man sat on her bench, just a few feet away, opening a leatherbound journal on his lap before scribbling at its tattered pages. He didn’t even stop to look up or acknowledge his fellow park-goer.
Minako had never met this person before, but if she did, she would have remembered him instantly.

Distinctly grey hair despite a youthful visage, accented by a sickly complexion, and oddly skinny frame were hard to miss in a crowd. She was almost concerned by the last part, his clothes loose and reminded her of a child wearing their parents’ shoes, too big to move around comfortably. If this was his usual attire, it wouldn’t be surprising if he tripped and stumbled wherever he went.

At first, she thought he must be an albino. That would make sense if his eyes weren’t a striking hazel and seemed to have no trouble with reading his writing. Perhaps he wore special contacts and she just didn’t know, but from what she knew about the condition, that was highly unlikely.

Next, Minako guessed he was mixed-race, like her and Minato, but there was no way of confirming such a thing without asking. He could very well be from a different region of Japan with a tight-knit population. Many of the smaller archipelagos off of the mainland had intermarriages with other east Asian countries or their ancestors adapted to their unique environment, etcetera, etcetera.

Plus, she knew all too well how it felt to be questioned about one’s pedigree, especially in a country with a history of shunning foreigners and its “genetically impure” citizens. She would rather avoid any assumptions if possible.

More importantly than who this stranger was, where he came from, what gave him a ghastly appearance, Minako wondered why.

Why did he decide to share a bench with someone he didn’t know?

Why not look over or ask if the seat was taken?

Why come to the shrine alone?

“**The ends, they justify the means, my friend.**

_Oh the ends, they justify the means~”_

“And as the station's ratings soar

_Night vision cameras watch the war_
While far across a veil of sea

We cheer the black and flashing green~”

For what felt like an eternity, she threw him sidelong glances and asked herself those questions. Every time, the answers escaped her and every second, her curiosity grew stronger. She dared to remove one of her headphones, hoping that he might turn and initiate the conversation.

Her staring must have been noticed, because, after some time, the young man stopped writing and used his pen as a bookmark, closing his journal with a snap and turning to Minako. As if his disdain were anymore pliable, he let out an exasperated sigh.

“You stopped singing the moment you noticed my presence. Do I disgust you that much that you would cease to carry a tune? Or am I impeding on your personal space? Or both?” he asked.

“The ends, they justify the means, my friends

Oh the ends, they justify the means~”

Minako hoped she didn’t flinch at his words. Between her initial awkwardness and gawking, the last thing she wanted was to be any ruder than she already was.

“Sorry, I don’t usually sing with other people around.” she said and quickly threw on a smile. “If ya couldn’t tell, I’m not an idol for a reason. I’ve scared off plenty of people with my voice before.”

“The boss looks down upon it all

From his tower’s windowed walls

Says ‘I know how to play this game
and everybody knows my name~”

The stranger huffed and, to Minako’s relief, went from scowling to a more neutral expression. Not amused but he didn’t seem upset either.

“I suppose I could say the same, but don’t let me stop you. Your voice is... tolerable in comparison to most others.” He reopened his journal. “Unless you’ve decided my company is unwelcome. There are other benches in this shrine. Many of which are well hidden from the public eye and ear.”

Said with such flippancy, it was difficult to tell if he actually wanted to be alone or something deeper lay beneath his words.
“He plays upon the people’s fears
And tells them what they want to hear
And they celebrate his victory
On the front of tabloid magazines~”

Minako covertly turned down the volume on her MP3. Perhaps this was her chance to figure out why this stranger was here and why he allowed her to stay.

“You seem like ya know a lot about this place. Do you come here often?”

“The ends, they justify the means, my friends
Oh, the ends, they justify the means~”

“Almost every Sunday and the occasional weekday, but until recently, I’ve been unable to make the trip.” The stranger continued writing. “If it wasn’t already obvious, I’m not in the best of health. I have a rare genetic disease that makes it . . . difficult to venture further than the Iwatodai Research hospital. Especially with the heat. It makes it all the harder.”

“He climbed upon a mountain high
And spoke to every passerby~,”

“A genetic disease?” Minako wondered. It explained his sickly appearance but something was nagging at the back of her mind. A part of her said his behavior was too defensive to be a simple disorder.

And she had a feeling she was going to regret her next question.

“Then shouldn’t you be resting instead of pushing yourself? I’m sure you can come here all ya want when you’re better.”

At those words, the young man paused.

“. . . I am receiving palliative treatments. I am not there to get better.”

“‘Everyone you ever knew
Is really just a part of you~’”
Minako sucked in a breath, pinching herself for ignoring her gut and acting so insensitive. From Minato, she knew all too well what he meant by palliative care.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

He held up a trembling hand to silence her apology. His earlier frustration morphed into a pained frown, clutching his pen with white knuckles.

“I’ve heard it a thousand times already. I don’t expect you to understand how I feel, nor do I wish for you to. There is nothing anyone can do so there is no need to feel sorry for me.” He let his hand drop to his lap, loosening the death grip on the pen. “‘The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike, the devil will come. . .’”

Without another word, he returned to his writing, leaving Minako embarrassed she even attempted to make conversation with him.

All she could do now was get up and leave this stranger to stew in peace.

His final words echoed alongside her music.

“‘They see the life you choose to live
And they feel the hope you choose to give~’”

The stars move still. Time runs. The clock will strike.

The devil will-

The gears began to turn. Minako knew exactly where he drew those words from and they were no ordinary musings. They were a quote from an old story, a classic play she read back in middle school for an assignment.

And not just any story. It was the story that got her into literature.

“‘And every word you ever say
You teach the world to live that way~’”

She scooted closer to the stranger.

“‘. . . And Faustus must be damned.’”

Closer.

“‘Oh, I’ll leap up to my God.’”

Closer.

“‘Who pulls me down?’”
And stopped once close enough.

“‘See, see where Christ’s blood streams in the firmament. . .’”

And waited for a reaction.

“*And when society had had enough*

*They beat him down and lifted him up—*”

At first, there was nothing. Her bench mate refused to make eye contact, scribbling away and ignoring her attempt to rekindle their conversation.

Minako worried she might have been mistaken. Sometimes, people simply knew only a portion of famous quotes rather than taking the time to actually read the rest of it. Perhaps that was the case and she just annoyed him further by pulling out the “let’s connect over nerd stuff” card to pave over a rocky first impression.

However, unexpectedly, and to Minako’s delight, the young man clicked his pen.

“‘. . . One drop would save my soul, half a drop: ah, my Christ.’” he said in a comically deep voice befitting Doctor Faustus himself. “‘Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ. Yet I will call on him—’”

Minako joined him on the final, chilling line.

“‘O spare me, Lucifer.’”

“*They crossed his feet and raised his hands*

*And quietly he whispered then—*”

The two shared a small chuckle at the absurdity of the situation. One moment, the atmosphere lay thick with tension. The next they were quoting Christopher Marlow without prompt or skipping a beat.

Not that it was the strangest thing that had ever happened in Minako’s life, but it came close to breaking her top thirty.

The stranger was the first to break the ice.

“My, my, what a curious day this has been. It’s rare to find anyone younger than sixty who’s read those kinds of stories so I hope you can forgive me. It’s been some time since I’ve talked to people my own age, let alone someone who understands what I’m saying. I didn’t mean to depress you.”

Minako shook her head. “No hard feelings.” She extended a hand. “I’ve got a little brother who’s way worse than you, and nine times out of ten, he’s just being a brat. A really, really emo brat.”
The stranger chuckled and accepted the gesture, his slim fingers frozen to the touch. “In any case, you have my sincerest thanks.”

“The means, they justify the ends, my friends.”

“Oh, the means, they justify the ends, my friends~”

“If I may ask, what is your name? I’ve sat in this park for ages but I don’t believe we’ve met before. At least, not to my knowledge.” he said.

“Minako Arisato. Professional quoter and niche literature extraordinaire.” she said. “And what about you, oh mysterious one?”

A sigh escaped the young man.

“I usually don’t give out my name. People never come back to visit twice once they realize my condition and who can blame them?”

His lips quirked into a grin.

“But since you’ve piqued my interests, my name is Kamiki, Akinari Kamiki.”

“Oh, the means, they justify the ends~”

Naganaki Shrine was empty by seven o’clock at night.

However, by three-quarters-past seven, Minako Arisato and Akinari Kamiki were still on the bench near the shrine’s park. Discussing favorite books, old versus new writing styles, author recommendations, the evening flew by as their chatter continued on.

When the sun finally made an exit, a sliver of moon taking its place, the two parted ways for the night. Akinari warned her to remain vigilant and avoid seeking him out in the future. He usually stayed out longer than he should, and in a city like Iwatodai, the streets at night were no place for the innocent. Better to spend her time indoors than risk danger to keep him company.

But Minako had a feeling they would meet again. Very soon.

“I noticed you’ve only packed one suitcase. Are you sure that’s all you want to bring to your new dorm?”

Ken inwardly sighed, never once looking up from his homework to acknowledge the question. Everyone in the elementary dorms cleared out for the break hours ago, but he was still preparing to move into his new dorm on the other side of town. In short, it meant he had the whole building to himself for a day, free of noise and snot-nosed punks that often made his time there a nightmare. Practically a dream come true.

So, Ken was more than a little frustrated to have his peaceful evening interrupted by the Chairman,
Mister Ikutsuki, barraging into the boy’s room without asking.

“I’m fine, Ikutsuki-san. I don’t have much anyway. Just some clothes and other stuff.” Ken huffed.

Ikutsuki crossed the room to stand beside Ken’s desk. “How are you feeling about all this? I know it can be difficult, considering you’ll be the newest AND youngest member of the team. Being in that position must be scary.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” Ken said quickly. “Everyone seems normal and they didn’t talk down to me when we met. I think we’ll get along.”

“Excellent! I’m glad you feel that way! I’m certain that they feel the same!”

Ken picked at the corner of his notebook.

He seriously doubted that was the truth based on first impressions, but so long as his upperclassmen treated him like an equal, it didn’t matter what they felt about him.

That was their problem.

Ikutsuki came around to lean on the desk. “Just so you’re aware, I’ll be picking you up tomorrow morning with Mitsuru and she’s very picky about punctuality. No matter who you are. Be ready to go by seven o’clock sharp: bright-eyed, bushy-tailed.”

“Understood. I’ll be ready.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. . . I’ll leave you to it then.” Ikutsuki pushed off the desk and began to exit the room. “Don’t stay up too late. You’ll wear yourself out.”

“I won’t.”

The door opened and closed, leaving Ken in silence, at last.

When he was certain he wouldn’t get another surprise visitor, he flipped his notebook closed and stuff it in his school bag. His motivation ran dry the moment another person started talking to him. Perhaps that was the universe’s way of telling him it was time to turn in for the night and he knew the rest was warranted.

A new school semester. Meeting new people. A whole new life. Those thoughts lingered, even as Ken tried to clear his mind and concentrate on taking it one step at a time. How anyone could juggle these changes and stay calm was a wonder, and he questioned how he would fit into the equation. And it all started tomorrow.

Tomorrow. It seemed so far away.

As he settled in bed, Ken immediately looked to a faded picture on his nightstand. The cheap, wooden frame had seen better days. Its border was scratched up from years of wear and tear, the glossy finish beginning to flake off. The protective glass had multiple cracks on the corners from
accidental falls from numerous desks and or shelves. Not to mention how it failed to stand straight without hours of careful adjustments, eventually, Ken had given up on

Nonetheless, a young woman smiled back at him, brown eyes alit with mirth. Hair of brilliant ginger fell over her shoulders in neat waves, not a single strand out of place and absolutely stunning.

In her arms, held so tenderly to her chest, was a baby boy.

Weak and pitiful, he clutched his mother’s sweater with tiny fists.

Ken grabbed the picture and hugged it to his chest. It was childish and the woman had no way of returning his embrace, but he relaxed into his pillow knowing he at least had this.

“Mom. . . just a little longer.”

7/24/2009

I got the top score in my class but Fuuka is still number one in the grade (perfect 100). I bet she hacked into the computers somewhere and changed her score or something like that.

Not that I’m gonna tell anyone. I ain’t a snitch.

Also, Kazushi has a nephew. His name is Akira.

-Minato Arisato

Chapter End Notes

Links to the song lyrics down below!

"The End and the Means" by Robby Hecht:
https://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3530822107859545937/
"Way of Life" by Tanaka Reiko (arr. Meguro Shouji) and performed by Fujita Mayumi: https://www.animelyrics.com/game/persona3/awayoflife.htm
Okay, so I’ve been playing Astral Chain during my time away from social media (by the way, if you’re wondering why this chapter is coming out later than usual, I took a few months to relax and enjoy life).

I gotta say, the dynamic between the Howard twins FEELS like a real sibling relationship. As a big sis myself, I FELT the connection on a spiritual level and that post-final boss cutscene UGH, what’s with Platinum Games and *insert spoiler related joke here*? Add a fun combat system, some bopping tunes, and a hella cool art design, I couldn’t be happier!

Ahem, anywho, please enjoy the chapter! Next chapter preview: “Wake the fuck up, Kuromaru. We’ve got my dread to burn.” - Minato

Waking up the first day of summer vacation, Minato expected a pleasant walk to kendo practice. July was coming to an end and the dog days of August just around the bend, which usually guaranteed at least a warm breeze or something to that effect. It had been that way since he was a kid and considering the recent temperate weather, there was no reason for that to change.

Instead, he was greeted with overcast skies and a wet trek to school.

And Minako stole the only umbrella the siblings owned.

Without asking.

The Kendo team were in stitches when he entered the locker room a soaking mess, thoroughly pissed off, and rehearsing his “Minako you’re the worst person ever and I hope you step on a Lego in the near future” speech.

And because everyone kept teasing him, Minato took out his frustration on an unsuspecting senior in the midst of a sparring match, nearly sending the poor bastard to the nurse’s office if not for the coach stepping to stop the match. Kazushi and Yoko proceeded to warn the team to shut up or else they were next.

No one said anything for the rest of practice and life was good, for a little bit.

Another miserable trip in rain and now, Minato was stuck sharing the lobby TV with a dude-bro, the most unreasonable person alive, a socially inept robot, and Fuuka Yamagishi.

Cases of Apathy Syndrome have begun to spike once again in Iwatodai. Already, forty-three victims of this odd phenomenon were hospitalized earlier this week, not counting the estimated fifty percent of residents that go unreported. Many of these unreported cases come from single-person households and the growing homeless population. The number could be higher, according to some scientists looking into the cause of AS.
But scientists aren’t the only ones researching the topic of Apathy Syndrome. Online message boards have sprung up after an anonymous user on “4Chan” pointed out that there is a correlation between the number of AS victims and the cycles of the moon.

“The number of cases are highest the day before a full moon and drop significantly afterward. That number rises once again after the new moon, peaks, and falls. It’s been repeating like this CONSISTENTLY for the past four months and we’re seeing the same thing happening right now.” the user suggested. “I’m not saying that people with Apathy Syndrome are werewolves but, come on, think about it! Doesn’t it make sense!?”

Disregarding that last statement, researchers have found that this person’s claim holds water. Week ago, The Kirijo Foundation released a comprehensive study that says the “[number of victims] rises after the new moon and reaches its pinnacle on the first night of a full moon. Afterward, the number drops until the cycle begins again.”

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Unfortunately, it is still unclear if this is simply a coincidence or if AS is directly tied to the moon’s waxing and waning. Further studies must be conducted in order to link the two, studies that Takeharu Kirijo has confirmed are a major area of interest for his company.

Authorities urge that if someone you know shows signs of AS, please bring them to the nearest hospital, clinic, or other emergency services. They are in danger of hurting themselves and need immediate medical treatment.

In other news, stock junkies will be pleased to know that the market is on the upswing-

Zzt! Zzzt~!

The screen flickered to static then to a neon-colored studio, a lively jingle filling the dorm lobby with its annoyingly cheerful tune. A man with graying hair shouted above the music, brandishing a microphone with overzealous flair. Despite the rain from outside, his words came out calculated, smooth, perfect for a businessman like himself.

“Welcome to Tanaka’s Amazing Commodities! Get out your phones (and your wallets) so you don’t miss a single deal!”

However, Minato grumbled and turned to the other end of the couch, Junpei Iori smirking right back at him.

“I was watching that.”

Junpei rolled his eyes. “Only boring people care about the stock market.” He raised the only remote to the television and flipped to another channel, this time, it was something animal related. A gaggle of hamsters darted in front of a camera, bumping into each other in a comical fashion or into the sides of a glass enclosure. “Besides, we’re trapped inside all day. Don’t’cha think we should be watching something actually fun?”

Sitting on the floor with a mug of tea, Yukari yawned and nodded. “He’s got a point. I’d rather watch paint dry than listen to someone talk about the economy. That’s what accountants are for.”

“If you wish to see paint dry-” Aigis said, “-I believe there are some unopened cans in the basement. We could fix the bald patches in the control room and, as you say, kill two birds with one stone.”

“It’s a figure-of-speech, Ai-chan.” Fuuka entered the living room, a collection of snacks piled high
in her arms. Carefully, she went to each of the juniors to pass them out, making sure not to drop a single bag or trip over the furniture. “But since someone finally mentioned it, we can fix those odd patches before dinner. They’ve been bothering me for a while now.”

Aigis hummed. “Okay. Thank you.”

Junpei gladly took a family pack of chips when it was his turn to choose and promptly returned to channel surfing. “It still sucks, though. First day of summer break and it’s raining cats an’ dogs.”

The capped teen couldn’t be any more accurate.

Minato sighed and leaned against the arm of the couch. “Since I’m outnumbered, what sounds good to you guys?”

“Baseball-!”

“-Romantic comedy!”

Junpei and Yukari glared at one another, the room dropping a degree cooler.

“There’s no way we’re watching a chick flick.” Junpei said.

Yukari only smirked. “Like you’ve got a say in this!” And she swiveled to Fuuka and Aigis. “There’s three of us and two of them. Who’s with me?”

“That’s cheating!” Junpei groaned.

“That’s democracy!”

Fuuka let out a nervous chuckle at the pair’s bickering, fiddling with a package of cookies on her lap. “Actually, there’s a documentary marathon featuring ‘Women in Science’ that sounds interesting. If it’s alright with everyone else, of course.”

Instantly, Yukari’s smile fell. “Um, are you sure that’s what you wanna watch? Documentaries? About science? On summer break?”

“I am interested in learning more about this.” Aigis said. “I side with Fuuka-chan.”

Junpei turned to Minato and silently mouthed, “Don’t you dare.” Yukari rose slightly from her chair to grab the latter’s attention, practically screaming for him to join her cause.

Not that it mattered. Minato ignored them, turning directly to Fuuka and Aigis with a deadpan tone as he gave his answer.

“Looks like there’s three of us and two of you.”

Fuuka cheered. “Channel eight, please!”

Aigis snatched up the remote from a shocked Junpei and followed the order. The TV screen flickered for a moment before the logo a middle-aged woman’s face appeared, a kind smile on ruby lips, a list of fancy degrees under the name Margret Hamilton.

As Fuuka and Aigis settled into the couch to enjoy their small victory, Tweedle Junpei and Tweedle Yukari shot nasty glares at Minato, not too pleased about being played like cheap, plastic kazooos.
To their credit, they were very sentimental kazoo players who cared for their teammate’s feelings. Enough to keep quiet about the scheming of a self-proclaimed-smartass.

That thought alone made Minato’s crappy morning a little more tolerable.

“Good afternoon, everyone!”

Five pairs of eyes turned away from the TV to a familiar voice greeting them from the entrance of the dorm.

Ikutsuki and Mitsuru stepped inside, armed with umbrellas and raincoats to brave the storm outside. Through the open door, a flash of lightning outlined their figures in a faint halo, a rumble of thunder soon after like a fanfare. They barely flinched at the noise in favor of welcoming themselves back. Wiping expensive shoes on the carpet. The Chairman was all too happy to remove his glasses and inspect them for raindrops.

A mixture of “hellos” and “afternoon” and other forms of “welcome back” followed. Even Minato hummed and raised a hand to let the newcomers know he was present, despite wanting to ignore them and just enjoy the show.

The only unresponsive person (or rather robot) was Aigis. She never looked away from the screen in front of her. Completely engrossed with the female commentator or purposefully ignoring the Chairman, Minato wouldn’t be surprised if it were either-or.

But the Chairman and Mitsuru didn’t seem to care not everyone paid their respects. Instead, the latter offered a smile as she tucked her jacket under her arm, approaching the group of juniors clustered near the TV.

“I see everyone’s enjoying their first day of summer vacation—” her gaze landed on the still frowning Yukari and Junpei, “-Am I missing something?”

“Don’t ask.” Yukari said.

Junpei said nothing, sinking deeper into his seat and pulling his cap over his eyes.

Mitsuru eyed the sullen pair for a moment longer before turning the remaining two underclassmen and Aigis. “Another spat, I presume.”

Minato shrugged. “Heck if I know.”

He didn’t need to look away from Mitsuru to find that Yukari and Junpei’s glaring intensified tenfold at the nonchalant reply.

“Whatever it was, I hope we can move past it and get along. Frustration breeds hatred.” The Chairman stepped further into the lobby, readjusting the collar of his gaudy, brown suit. “After all, we have a new guest who is joining us today.”

From behind Ikutsuki, a familiar head of chestnut hair made himself known.

The boy from two weeks ago, Ken Amada, smiled sheepishly as all the attention was now on him, dragging a suitcase behind him. Despite every school in Port Island being closed for the break, a Gekkoukan blazer protected his street clothing from the deluge. But unfortunately, the same couldn’t be said about his shoes, leaving dark stains on the carpet.

It was a wonder the kid wasn’t complaining the second he stepped inside.
Clothing aside, he looked the part of a student in a high-class school district. Standing tall with a chin held high. Barely making a sound despite the sorry state of his attire. Eyes never once darting to look at his wet feet.

“Hello again,” Ken said. “I’m sorry about getting water on the floor. I stepped in a puddle earlier that was deeper than I thought.”

Yukari flocked to the boy’s side, grabbing a spare blanket from her stockpile. “Aw, don’t worry about it! Happens to the best of us!” She draped the blanket over Ken’s shoulders. “You should’ve seen Minato-kun when he got back from Kendo. He looked like he got pushed in the harbor and left to drown.”

Junpei snorted. “Would’a paid to see that.”

Before Minato could so much as form a retort, Mitsuru cut the three off with a grumble. “For those who aren’t already aware of the situation, Ken will be staying with us for the foreseeable future. He is well aware of the dorm’s purpose, so feel free to discuss matters of the Dark Hour as usual. But please, for the sake of dignity and setting a good example, keep the antics to a minimum.” She gave Junpei, Yukari, and Minato a sly grin. “I’d greatly appreciate your cooperation.”

Minato couldn’t speak for the other two, but that smile was guaranteed a permanent spot in his nightmares.

And judging by how Yukari and Junpei dropped their previous amusement in favor of nervous laughter, they had the same thought: if they wanted to continue their spat, it would have to wait until they were behind closed doors.

Soundproof doors. With a lock. A really sturdy lock.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Ken-kun!” Fuuka cut through the sudden awkwardness with a cheerful tilt in her voice. “I’m Fuuka Yamagishi, but you can call me whatever’s most comfortable. I don’t mind what.”

Aigis stood at attention. “I am Aigis. I have no preference as to what you may call me, as well.”

Ken nodded. “It’s nice to meet you two.”

“Thank you Miss Yamagishi. Aigis.” Ikutsuki said and waved Yukari and Ken off. “If you would be so kind, Miss Takeba, Ken’s room is to the left of Iori’s. Better to get him settled now and exchange pleasantries later. Please?”

“Yessir.” Yukari guided Ken towards the stairs, walking a few steps ahead. “I’ll grab some towels, too. You look like you can use a warm shower.”

“Thank you, Yukari-san.” Ken said.

After some brief words from Mitsuru about going to Tartarus later, among other smaller housekeeping items, everyone went back to enjoying their afternoon. Fuuka and Aigis talked over the TV about god only knew what, Junpei wandered off to the kitchen for more snacks, and the Chairman left to attend to his own business.

When Yukari and Ken passed by where Minato sat, he listened in as Ken explained “how excited he was to be living in a new place” and “thank you for taking time out of your day to help me.” Of
course, Yukari assured him it “was no trouble” and to “think about himself first” and yada yada until she was blue in the face.

Just the standard formalities of someone attending a SEES candidate during a huge transition in his life.

And yet, Minato couldn’t shake the feeling something was wrong about this whole arrangement. Why would Ken agree to spend his summer in an unfamiliar dorm and with unfamiliar people? What circumstances, other than having the Potential, made sense for him to make such a bold move?

Was this move temporary or had Ikutsuki already made up his mind on adding Ken to SEES?

And if the day came that Ken was officially welcomed to the team, did the Chairman expect everyone to simply accept a child into their ranks without question?

---

**EmoBro:** ur a butt

**Me:** ??????

**Me:** context pls???

**EmoBro:** u stole my umbrella

**EmoBro:** I had practice 2day

**EmoBro:** @ skol

**Me:** oof, my b!

**EmoBro:** u suk

**Me:** hey I can’t show up 2 work soaking wet! It ain’t professional!

**EmoBro:** kindly step on a lego pls and thanx

Minato scored the highest in his class on midterms, completed tasks with the efficiency of a supercomputer, and concentration of a monk. Teachers, sometimes begrudgingly due to his attitude, praised such skills, usually in person or on report cards. Parents foamed at the mouth when trying to find out how “the problem child” made their own sons and daughters look stupid by comparison. In turn, those children either hated his guts or respected him for his hard work.

If he applied himself, Minato could easily persuade the Japanese government to appoint him prime minister. Or the emperor.

Yet someone taking a shared umbrella transformed him into a low IQ toddler.

“Step on a lego?” Minako squinted at the screen. “Is that the best he can come up with?”

“Havin’ a spat with your brother, again?” Bukinichi asked from across the empty shop.
In a huff, Minako flipped her phone closed and stowed it under the cash register with the rest of her belongings, including the umbrella which started the whole argument. Just the sight of it fueled her frustration. Was all this drama, a classic case of miscommunication no less, worth a cheap accessory?

“He’s just being petty.” she said. “Honestly, I try my best to be a good sister and he acts like I’m out to get ‘em! Can you believe that?”

A chuckle followed her small rant. “A man’s pride’ll do that sometimes. Goodness knows I’ve said more than a few stupid things to save face.” Bukiichi’s hunched frame waddled from around a stack of used encyclopedias. “Let the boy be and he’ll come around to apologize. Hard to stay mad at someone you love, ‘specially if that someone’s family.”

“Ha, if only!” Minako leaned over the counter. “He’s only apologized twice in his life and one of them was sarcastic.”

“Bah humbug! He’ll come around!” Bukiichi insisted. “And if he doesn’t, I’ll talk to ‘em myself.”

“Good luck with that, sir. He’s as stubborn as they come.”

“I’m an old man. I’m patient.” With a flick of the wrist, Bukiichi wandered to the backroom. “Now, I’ve got some paperwork to do before Mitsuko gets back. It ain’t busy today so feel free to study or finish your summer homework, s’long as you have time. Can’t have ya falling behind in school because I’m a slavedriver.”

“Thank you, Bukiichi-san.” Minako said with a giggle.

“And don’t forget to eat!” he said, finally excusing himself to his office.

After Buki left the main shop, Minako heaved her backpack onto her lap. Almost immediately, half of the front counter was covered with notes and textbooks, threatening to slide off the wood and onto the floor. A red folder teetered over the edge and nearly met an unpleasant fate, if not for quick reflexes. Minako easily scooped up and placed the folder closer inland before putting her nose to the grindstone. A number two pencil flew across a blank sheet of paper, stopping on occasion for her to read and digest the information in a way that made sense.

With permission from her boss, or rather a direct order, she might as well get a jump on life rather than waiting for later.

And what better time to get ahead on school than on a rainy afternoon? When few people dared to venture further than work or a warm home, a peaceful lull hanging over the store, it was easy to focus on blazing through dry material like no tomorrow.

So focused, in fact, it wasn’t until three hours later that the bell on the front door sounded, Minako flinched.

“Good afternoon!” She moved to hide her homework, gathering the scattered textbooks and loose-leaf paper into a neat pile. “Please excuse me, I was just-”

“Minako-sama!?”

When Minako looked up, a young man already barreled his way to the cashier counter, raincoat dripping and boots squeaking with every step. His hood slipped back to reveal a head of messy, blonde hair sticking out in every which way and rosy. No doubt, he was another victim of the storm
outside.

But as he got closer, there was no mistaking Bebe’s cheerful grin, despite the sorry state due to weather.

“Ah ha, I ‘hought it vas you!” he laughed and motioned to the stack of papers in her arms.
“Gomen, gomen! Zet zat down! Zat ezz heavy, no?”

Minako let her belongings slide back onto her makeshift workstation. “No need to apologize, Bebe-san. Really.” She sighed. “I was just getting ahead on some work, since nobody’s shopping today. You know how it goes.”

Bebe looked down at the pile. “Uh, ‘ere ess ‘omework on holidayz?” He scratched his head. “An’ you work in zis place, zu? You must be zo ‘ired!”

“I’d argue that taking care of a teen boy with an attitude problem for half your childhood is worse, but hey, cultural differences. I don’t judge.”

“You get used to it.” Minako said. “Besides, my boss is pretty nice about school and the pay’s decent. I can stand to put in the extra effort.”

“Hmm. . . I zee, I zee.” he mumbled. “E’veryone in Nihon zeems to zink zat way. Ess so different in France .”

“That’s capitalism, Bebe. ‘He who does not work, does not eat.’” Minako slid off her stool, smoothing her skirt in the process. She was on the clock, after all, and had no time to look sloppy. “Speakin’ a capitalism, what can I do for ya today? We don’t usually get students during summer break unless they’re big into reading. Especially when it’s crummy outside.”

“Ah, hai! Zer iz somezing!” Bebe reached into his coat pocket and fished out a damp post-it note, promptly handing it over.

Minako read over a blob of purple text was mostly untouched, albeit, somewhat blurry around the edges of the paper. To her relief, Bebe wrote it in passible Japanese.

It was the contents of his list that gave her pause.

Traditional accessories for beginners, clothing styles in modern era, fashion throughout Japanese history, how to make a kimono: everything he put down was a variation of sewing or knitting or textile-styled project.

Minako lowered the note. “I think we’ve got something like that in our crafts section. We just got some new stuff about fun projects on a budget.”

“Manifique” Bebe glanced around the store. “Can zu point me in ze right direction? Zat would be subarashii.”

“No need, I can walk you over and we’ll search together.”

Helping someone find books on sewing might not be as productive as finishing up summer homework, but at least she didn’t have to argue with Bebe about who gets an umbrella.

Or get told to go step on a Lego.
**FrenchieFry:** thank you for your help today! I’m sorry I left so quickly and forgot to tell you

**Me:** that’s ok! I had fun helping you!

**FrenchieFry:** and also, if you ever need someplace quiet during the school year to study, I am always in the home ed room on mondays and fridays. We can help each other with homework or relax

**Me:** i might just take you up on that. My french could use some work

**FrenchieFry:** i could say the same for japanese

**Me:** lol your not that bad! Your texting looks ok

**FrenchieFry:** i am using text to speech on my computer and editing as I go

**FrenchieFry:** here are the unedited versions

**FrenchieFry:** [image sent]

**Me:** beurk

**FrenchieFry:** exactement (and good use of slang!)

With a Full Moon just weeks away, a new block to explore, and no clue what to expect, SEES hit the ground running the moment they stepped inside Tartarus.

At this point, it was nothing new to Fuuka, watching her teammates haul their equipment inside, chatting up a storm along the way. Minato and Junpei started bickering over a TV show, Yukari jumping in on occasion to shut them up. Aigis hung at the fringe of the group of juniors and looked on with a disinterested frown. She did come to Minato’s aide when Junpei decided the most logical solution to their argument was putting the other boy in a headlock, which Minako had to run over and remind Aigis that no one was trying to kill Minato (especially Junpei).

Mitsuru and Akihiko were the “least worst” of the bunch, in terms of noise. But even they got into a disagreement about some broken equipment from a previous mission. One (Mitsuru) wanted to salvage the parts for later use while the other - Akihiko - wanted to sell them for new upgraded weapons.

Thankfully, they kept their argument short, the two coming to an agreement to discuss the issue later. That and Mitsuru pulled rank and threatened to send Akihiko to summer school rather than have free reign over his break plans if he continued to cause a stir.

Que some off-handed jokes about the seniors acting petty (courtesy of Minato, encouraged by Junpei) and another cycle of shouting ensued.

Thankfully for Fuuka, she could breathe a sigh of relief when Lucia allowed an escape from the chaos, separating both human and monster from the others to focus on navigation duties. A trigger pull and a whirl, and Fuuka was inside the glassy dome of her Persona, bathed in a cooling light, her mind wandered to the floors of the tower, the noise outside becoming less than a whisper.

>> Enemies statuses normal with Outliers roaming on F43 and all of Arqa Block. But a large number of Shadows are congregating near transporters, and they seem agitated. <<
No abnormal shifts between the safe rooms and neutral grounds are constant. Items appearing at random intervals and among normal enemies. <<

Overall stability is high. Overall danger is low. Exploration outlook is fair. <<

Wait, something is moving and moving fast. Can’t get a proper reading. <<

Is that a Reaper? <<

No. Just a very, very big Killer Drive. Better notify- <<

A knock jolted Fuuka out of her calm state. Lucia reacted in kind and the layout of Tartarus vanished like a puff of smoke on a breeze. Traces of enemy movements and statuses, the most important information, stayed with them for a second before disappearing too.

Fuuka opened her eyes.

Minako smiled back, the others standing a little ways behind her. Although, through the glassy dome, it was difficult to make out their faces. Only the color of their clothes and hair stood out to Fuuka. Even then, they blurred together from a distance.

“Good mornin, slugabug!” Minako said, the words echoing and hazy, “We’re ready when you are!”

As if sensing its master’s embarrassment, Lucia dismissed itself and the brightness of the lobby nearly blinded Fuuka. Her nose scrunched, eyes watering with unshed tears, everything she expected after being in the dark for what felt like an eternity.

After rubbing her eyes clean of tears and blinking the fog away, the first floor of Tartarus came into focus, with all its towering pillars and grand staircase. SEES included, all of them watching their navigator struggle to find her bearings.

Though Fuuka knew the others were more concerned than amused by the sight, probably not even amused by it in the first place, she wished there weren’t as many people around to see her fumble around with the poise of a newborn.

“I’m sorry for the wait.” Fuuka said. “I hope I didn’t put us behind schedule.”

Minako chuckled. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t that long. We’ve got plenty a’time.” Without skipping a beat, she turned to Mitsuru. “Would ya’ like to do the honors?”

“Of course, let’s begin.” Mitsuru said and motioned to Fuuka, “How does it look up there? Anything we should know in advance?”

Fuuka nodded and folded her shaking hands. Their pre-mission meeting was just beginning and any embarrassment she felt was put on hold.

“Nothing out of the ordinary except some agitated groups near transporters. I also found an abnormally strong reading that looked like a Reaper, but the closer I examined, it was only a Killer Drive roaming between floors. You should be alert once you reach its location, but not alarmed.”

From the amongst group, Yukari muttered, “Oh thank god,” and few nods followed the declaration.

Mitsuru let them go on a moment longer before she started talking once more.
“Thank you, Yamagishi. We’ll keep that in mind.” She pivoted to the others. “As for the rest of us, Minako and I would like to test a new plan tonight. Given our increased numbers, we have more than enough Persona users being deployed at the same time. And if that ambush we found ourselves in weeks ago means anything, there’s almost too many to keep track of. In light of that, we are cutting down the climbing team—”

“-Hold up-” Junpei said, “-Are ya sayin you’re gonna leave people behind!?"

“That’s what I’m hearing.” Minato added.

Minako held up her hands. “Easy there. No one’s getting left behind unless they're sick or whatnot. That’s just wasting time.” she said. “I know it feels like forever-ago, but remember what I said before the last mission? About splitting up into smaller teams?”

All heads in the room seemed to perk up at the question. If Fuuka could see herself, she was certain she stood a little straighter, too.

“I think ya know where I’m going with this, so I’ll just say it.” Minako flashed a peace sign. “Divide and conquer, folks! We’re sending two teams up tonight!”

In unison, SEES broke out in a flurry of chatter.

“You’re serious!?” Yukari asked. “Did the Chairman actually-? No way!”

Mitsuru shook her head. “Believe or not, he practically jumped at the chance to run two different teams.”

“This is awesome!” Junpei cheered. “Now’s my time to shine!”

“Two teams?” Aigis asked. “Forgive me if I fail to comprehend, but I believe that is a dangerous idea. There is strength in numbers. Separating would mean less numbers, therefore, less strength.”

“That’s exactly why we’re doing this. Strength.” Minako said. “The climbing team’s job is to activate all the safe room transporters and reach the next blockade. Because we’ve uneven numbers, Squad A gets four members with either me or Minato. That way, we can cover enemy weaknesses and make it through safely. Easy as pie!”

“And team two does what, Miss Thief?” Minato asked.

“Get over yourself, nerd.” Minako snapped and continued. “Team two, aka Squad B, will focus on one thing and one thing only: hardcore Shadow Hunting. Go anywhere ya’ want, keep whatever they drop, doesn’t matter what. If it moves, kill it. Period.”

“Like. . . training?” Yukari asked.

“Not training, Shadow Hunting. There’s a difference.”

“Pretty sure there isn’t.” Akihiko said. “Not like I’m complaining but I don’t see the difference.”

Minato huffed and walked up to his sister. “Shadow Hunting? Seriously? Isn’t that the series with the people who kill demons and the guy who made out with his step-” ”

“-AS I was saying!” Minako shoved her brother aside before he could finish. “Squad B destroys things and can assist Squad A as needed. That way, we keep our skills sharp, cull the Shadow population, and no one sits around like a bum all night.”
“So. . . training?” Akihiko asked.

Minako rounded on her fellow senior. “Did I stutter!?”

As Minako and Akihiko continued to debate on the nomenclature of Squad B, Junpei covered his laughter by turning away from the scene. Minato, disinterested in that spat, started talking to Aigis, probably to reassure her that this new arrangement was for the best. Mitsuru stood by to witness it all, her neutral expression slipping into a frown.

By the time they actually started breaking up into Squad A and Squad B, Minako got complaints about the assignments instantly.

Minato couldn’t stand being near Akihiko and vice versa, lest one ends up killing the other with an elemental spell.

Junpei and Yukari tolerated each other in the field but putting them on Squad B meant less people to talk to in between fights. Without another person as a buffer, the third party member would have to play mediator the whole mission and keep the juniors from tearing each other apart.

Aigis clung to Minato like a tick, outright refusing to leave him or Minako alone. Not until she knew “the others were worthy of protecting them in her place.”

Mitsuru accepted anyone and everyone as a teammate, but if they started acting up, the Shadows would be the least of their worries. No one wanted to be paired with her after that threat.

Minako just wanted everyone to get along and stop saying that Shadow Hunting and training were one in the same.

Fuuka kept away from miniature chaos, opting to reflect on the new development, in peace.

Their time was limited, and once the school year started back up, that window of opportunity will only get smaller. Everyone would be busy enough with clubs and studying and homework. Not too mention catching up on sleep, although, sleep was a rare commodity in the dorm.

Two teams meant less time spent worrying about reaching the top of the tower. It meant people could polish their skills, not having to worry about unidentified enemies or surprises around the corner. They wouldn’t have to come back as often when they already got their fill of fighting. And, if people needed to take a night off, there were others who could step up and replace them.

There was only one concern.

How would Fuuka monitor two teams at once?

She may have gotten better at communicating to individual teammates, sometimes in small clusters, but if the groups were far apart, the connection will be strained to her breaking point. Contact between them would be nonexistent. This wasn’t even accounting for Lucia’s limits or how much energy Fuuka would lose keeping her Persona summoned.

The only way to secure a proper network would be focusing on one team at a time, but that presented problems of its own.

If they were both in need of her scanning abilities, or goodness forbid, in mortal danger, where will her attention go? Could Fuuka come up with her own triage system or would one of the leaders decide where to put her? It was the most logical choice.
What if she guessed wrong and people got hurt? What if Minako or Mitsuru make a bad call and blame Fuuka for it?

No, she would blame herself.

If only she had two of her, perhaps she could keep up.

What were the solutions?

Were there solutions?

Were there?

“Hey, Fuukatan.”

Fuuka looked up to Junpei, grinning and hat drawn over his eyes. He leaned on his broadsword to close the height difference between them.

“Hello, Junpei-kun.” she said. “Is something wrong?”

Junpei shook his head. “I’m doing pretty good. I got put on Squad A with Minatan and Minato, and Aigis too. Guess I’ll get to see our newbie in action.”

Good, Fuuka could make small talk before settling in for the mission, or she supposed, missions. She welcomed this distraction, especially now.

“You’re lucky. I’m interested to see what she can do, but I’ll probably be too busy to pay attention.” She giggled, however, forced it sounded. “You’ll have to tell me later. If you don’t mind talking for a while.”

“No prob, I’ll be sure to take notes.” Junpei glanced away from her. “But fair warning, I’m not good at taking notes. And I don’t know a ton about robots. Might wanna ask Minato for that.”

“I don’t think he knows a lot either. Not as much as me.”

“Does anybody know more than you? About anything?”

“You know more about baseball than I do.”

Junpei snorted, rubbing the back of his neck. “Ya sure know how to put a guy on the spot. Looks like Junpei Iori’s met his match. It’s gotta be my lucky day!”

>>>”… She’s lying to me.…”<<<

Fuuka flinched, a familiar voice whispering through Lucia’s power. A wave of anger she never knew before flooded her heart and mind, deep, filled with pain.


It was Junpei’s voice.

>>>”… She’s trying to be nice, but I know the truth.…”<<<

This wasn’t the first time Fuuka heard the thoughts of those around her. Even before summoning Lucia, she heard the whispers, distinct from her own and too real to just be a figment of her imagination. But she couldn’t say for certain that she read other’s minds, not back then.
And when she had an explanation for the voices, it was a relief to know she wasn’t crazy. It was a byproduct of having a telepathic Persona and something within her control. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Until now, she never heard a voice quite as strong, much less felt what another person felt.

>>>". . . She wants me to go away. I can see it in her eyes. . ."

And she hated it already.

Fuuka plastered on a smile. “I’m just a little tired. I’ve been working on some new equipment for the team and it takes up a lot of time. And energy.”

>>>". . . Is that another lie? I bet it is. . ."

Fuuka reached out for Junpei’s shoulder.

“Junpei, I—”

“JUNPEI!”

Fuuka and Junpei snapped up. Minako waved from the main transporter, Aigis and Minato beside her, weapons at the ready.

“Let’s roll! We’re waitin’ on you!” Minako yelled.

>>>". . . Might as well leave me behind. I’m just deadweight. . . deadweight. . . deadweight. . ."

“Be right there!” Junpei picked up his sword, throwing a wave on his way towards the others. “Sorry, but duty calls. See ya later?”

Fuuka pulled her hand back to her chest. He hid his pain so well. Too well. Yet, she could do nothing but smile and offer a warm presence. She hoped it was enough to drive off his nasty thoughts. Even for tonight.

Even for a moment.

“Of course. Good luck, Junpei-kun!”

Junpei never missed a beat. A boisterous laugh and a flick of the wrist, as if to wave off her encouragement, and nothing in his face changed from the start of their conversation. Just his usual, goofy self.

“Ha! I don’t need luck!”

>>>". . . I’m sorry for bothering you. . . I’ll go now. . ."

Their goodbye was curt. Almost impersonal. Just a nod and then it was over.

Junpei bounded off to meet up with his team. The siblings greeted him with a round playful teasing, Aigis offered a small bow, and it was down to business. They walked into the transporter and, one by one, vanished in a flash of green and gold.

The whispering stopped, but the pain in her chest refused to go away.

Monitoring both teams fell to the bottom of Fuuka’s list of problems.
“Mitsuru-senpai! Behind yo-”

Yukari’s warning came just as Mitsuru twirled around and plunged her rapier into an oncoming Shadow, an Indolent Maya that broke away from its pack. The force of the blow, accompanied by a resounding crack as the blade rammed through its mask, sent her staggering backward and taking a knee, the only position that allowed her to maintain a semblance of control.

Little did the enemy know that this stance allowed Mitsuru a chance to counterattack. If Shadows could think, in the first place.

All it took was a bit of muscle.

“Out of my way!” she yelled and sprung into action, pushing off the ground, launching herself out of the Maya’s way while making a horizontal cut across its body. Its mask went flying and shattered against a far off wall, crumbling to blackened ash.

“Get down!”

Instinctively, she dropped and rolled to the side, almost tripping Akihiko as he caught another Maya trying to catch Mitsuru while her back was turned. With one hand, he slammed the Shadow against the floor, using the other to punch a hole straight through the mask, a sickening crunch ringing out as he did.

Before it could retaliate, Mitsuru relieved the beast of its head

Both Mayas, or what little was left of them, lay motionless for a second longer before crumbling to blackened ash.

Silence followed.

Mitsuru glanced to her left, nothing. To the front, Yukari finished off a writhing blob with an arrow through its skull, turning to dust at her feet. To her right, Akihiko sat down, undoing the ties of his gloves.

No hostiles. No need to worry.

“I think we’re safe, for now.” Mitsuru said and kneeled beside him. “Please tell me that cracking noise earlier wasn’t your hand.”

Akihiko shrugged and removed his gloves. Gingerly, he stretched out his fingers like a fan, curled them into fists, and splayed them out again. Whether he was perfectly fine or had a high pain tolerance, the young man remained unflinching through it all. Not so much as a twitch of the mouth. No emotion.

“It hurts like a bitch but everything’s where it’s supposed to be. Nothing a little ice and sleep can’t fix.” he said.

“Am I dreaming or did Akihiko-senpai just admit his hands hurt?”

Mitsuru looked up as Yukari jogged over to the seniors and joined them on the floor. Already, she had her Evoker drawn and ready to go. “Let me handle this one. Media works a lot faster than ice and a nap.”

Yukari pulled the trigger and above, Io hovered over the trio with open arms, casting a healing
Mitsuru allowed the green light to warm her bones. The effects of the spell spread to her bruised knees, the chafed skin on her palms turning smooth once again, and though the exhaustion from the fight remained, she felt ready to stand up and move around.

Getting assigned to Squad B had its fair share of perks, and taking short breaks in between battles was one of them. There was no need to charge ahead to look for the next safe zone when they knew what to expect from past explorations, avoiding areas that attracted large numbers of Shadows, along with enemies that had a type advantage over them.

It also helped that the members of tonight’s group rarely clashed, personality-wise or literally.

Mitsuru wouldn’t mind leading Squad B more often if that were true for everyone else in SEES.

After Media’s effects melted away, along with Io, Yukari holstered her Evoker, smirking directly at Akihiko. “How’s that, senpai? Better?”

Akihiko frowned. “I don’t know why you’re so smug about this-” he flexed his fingers one last time with a satisfied hum, “-but thanks for the help.”

“No problem.” Yukari said.

A resounding ping interrupted Yukari, startling Mitsuru for a moment before a familiar girl began to speak.

>> “This is Yamagishi, checking in on Squad B. Do you hear me, Squad B?” <<

Mitsuru took a deep breath, the post-fight adrenaline subsiding enough to speak clearly, and raised her voice for Fuuka to pick up on. “This is Squad B. We hear you loud and clear.”

>> “Excellent! How’s the training - oh, sorry Minako-senpai - I meant to say Shadow Hunting. How’s the Shadow Hunting? Is everything okay?” <<

Mitsuru heard an exasperated Akihiko mutter, “Why can’t we just call it training?”

A pregnant pause later and some distant chatter followed and a new voice joined in on the call. This time, it was Minako.

>> “Hey, it’s ya gal, Minako. Just a friendly reminder that training and Shadow Hunting are very different things, and if you’ve got a problem with that, ahem - AKIHIKO SANADA - ahem, that’s fine. By the way, Minato and Junpei really enjoyed your bro-scape in Yakushima. They’d love to be on the same team with their favorite senpa next time!” <<

Mitsuru had to stifle a giggle as Akihiko leaped to his feet, not so much afraid of Minako’s warning as he was pissed off.

“How’s that fair!” he yelled. “I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Yet another voice jumped in, Junpei.

>> “Come on, senpai! It’ll be fun! We’ll call it Operation Part Two: Electric Booga-” <<

The line cut off completely in a choking fit and Fuuka’s voice returned.

>> “Please forgive the interruption. Minato-kun. . . Minato-kun said he’s being punished more
than Akihiko-senpai and Junpei-kun started laughing and . . now they’re arguing. Very loudly. And Minako-senpai can’t break them up.” <<

“Um, does she need backup? Like . . now?” Yukari asked.

>> “She seems to have things under control, but just in case, can you all please come back to the lobby? We’ve been here for a while and I think it’s getting to some of us . . and some more than others.” <<

Had it really been that long since they began their mission? Mitsuru could have sworn they barely cleared more than a handful of floors, less than five if she thought hard enough about it. Most nights, SEES cleared an average of ten floors per expedition, and that was merely an average. Even that number could be wrong, especially with the progress they’ve made in the past month and during the break. Close to twelve. Maybe fifteen.

Then again, her squad focused heavily on finding things to kill rather than exploring their surroundings. They had a smaller group with fights lasting longer than before. And the Shadows, though they posed a challenge, let themselves be chased into dead ends before choosing to attack, and those chases weren’t short with the winding passageways in between sprints.

It was entirely possible that the trio got lost in the battles, uncaring about the time when the enemy was desperate to escape.

But with fatigue setting in and the urge to lay down getting stronger by the second, it didn’t matter the time or floors or whatnot. Mitsuru would take any excuse to leave for the night.

“Please let them know we’re on our way.” Mitsuru said.

>> “I will. The nearest transporter is down the hall behind you and to the right. You just eliminated the only Shadows guarding that area, so it should be a straight shot.” <<

Squad B said their thank you’s and goodbyes’s and soon, it was back to the eerie silence of Arqa block, its face-filled walls staring them down on all sides. Cries of distant Shadows too far away to be threatening, the only ambiance besides their breathing.

It was Yukari who stood up first and yawned. “Well, I’m beat!” She offered a hand to Mitsuru. “Let’s hurry, it’s kinda funny to see Stupei and Minato arguing. It’s literally ‘street smarts’ vs ‘book smarts.’”

“You sure about that?” Akihiko asked, helping himself up. “Watching them fight is like watching two dogs fight over an invisible bone. It’s stupid, the fight’s stupid, and everybody loses.”

“You really hate Junpei and Minato, don’tcha?”

“It’s not hate. It’s a fact.”

Mitsuru tuned out as Akihiko got into yet another spat with a female teammate. If she wanted to hear people justify their feelings through logic, she would attend a school faculty meeting on where the next “education development conference” would take place, Mexico or Hawaii?

Instead, she scanned the area for anything odd, waiting for the talking to end. Just the same as everywhere else in Arqa since they first arrived nearly a month ago. Green and purple. Purple and green. Towering pillars and arches. Purple diamonds underfoot. Green marble on all sides. A misshapen white tile. More green and purple-
Mitsuru’s eyes shot back to the white tile, though it was too dull to be made of the same material, just a few steps away from the group.

“What is...”

She fully abandoned the other two teens and approached it, and the closer she got, she found that there was no mistake in the floor pattern. The swatch of white lay flat, yet its own separate part of the ground. Tears, light stains, and other imperfections dotted the surface.

And when she picked it up, it sagged when lifted off the ground.

It was a manilla folder.

SEES found all sorts of man-made items in Tartarus: loose change, scraps of food, the occasional pen or pencil. The objects came from the school, small and wouldn’t be missed by the owners, falling through the gap between the regular hours and Dark Hour and thrown across the tower. Some were picked up by Shadows for having the smell of humans all over them and devoured by accident. Some got caught on the Shadow’s bodies and neglected until they were killed, the object falling off and into the hands of a Persona user.

But after years of fighting, Mitsuru had never seen anything this large fall into the Dark Hour. The cracks between the worlds were simply too small to accommodate anything larger than a run-of-the-mill novel, much less an entire folder. The only way for something - or someone - to get in was to have contact with Shadows or have the Potential.

Or it was brought in via someone with the Potential.

“What’s that?”

Mitsuru looked up from the folder. Yukari stood beside her, pointing to the object in question.

Then, before she could answer, Akihiko came into view, standing directly in front of her and scowling at the folder. “Seems like a weird place to find that. Where’d it come from?”

“I don’t know.” Mitsuru said. “And I don’t like that.”

Yukari got closer to the folder, fingers ghosting the open edge. “What if we open it?” She lifted the flap partway, some kind of document with paragraphs of text barely visible. “It’s like in the movies. It should have something about who or what wrote it.

“What if we’re not supposed to?” Akihiko asked.

But that was something Mitsuru was open to. How had she not thought of that the moment she realized she picked the folder up, if she was so concerned with its origins, why not read and find out for themselves?

So, Mitsuru finished the job and flipped it open.

“We’ll worry about that later.” she said.

Name: XXXXXXXX

Date: XX/XX/XXXX

“Progress Report 102”
We met our newest weapon, #031. It keeps to itself and has little interest in interacting with the other units as intended. Strange, because of its personality developing much quicker than past units. It remarked that it “felt bored” when listening to the scientist’s input parts of her code. None of the others responded in such a way. They only said that they received the code and were ready for deployment.

We plan to put it into some field tests to further push the growth of these personality traits. I don’t know what those tests are yet. All I know is that Building B will be the site for these tests: “The Battleground Center.”

I feel sorry for #031.

Shinjiro supposed that the world was insistent on making his life as annoying as possible.

Here he was, trying to get away from the drama stirred up the past couple of months, going so far as to find a new place to crouch in for the night (after two incidents involving two different groups of Persona users) and it paid off. Foot traffic beyond the alleyway he chose was relatively tame, and when people did pass by, their voices were kept at a reasonable volume. They had better places to be than bothering a stranger, like home or the bar or literally anywhere inside and away from danger.

Occasionally, a head or two would poke inside the dark but beat a hasty retreat when they realized someone was there. Even they had the sensibility to let a scruffy man sit in peace.

So he did that. He picked a dry corner with a sliver of moonlight for the sake of his eyesight. Earlier, he kicked some abandoned garbage near the entrance of the alley, ensuring no unwanted visitors getting in without trouble, and keeping him downwind of its stench. Whoever left the bags behind was thanked in spirit.

Finally, he sank to the ground, popped his collar to block out the wind, closed his eyes, and waited to fall asleep.

Call it a stroke of good fortune. Karma working her magic. Some deity or God cutting him slack. Shinjiro was finally allowed a moment of brevity.

No Dark Hour or Shadows.

No wackos with guns.

No Akihiko Sanada.

Just silence and the moon.

Until he heard the sound of boots on concrete.

Then the jingle of chains drawing closer.

Someone slid next to Shinjiro, gunpowder and blood hitting his nose almost immediately. And not the fresh kind that could be washed off with some water and bathroom soap.

“I’m glad to see you’re well. When I couldn’t find you at the usual spot, I thought finally—ya know, croaked.”

One wacko with a gun decided to drop by and ruin Shinjiro’s perfect night.
Shinjiro opened his eyes, facing the nameless leader of his most recent band of headaches, greasy hair and near-translucent skin illuminated by moonlight. The tattoos on his arms practically came to life on the pale background that was his body, if not for the outline of bone causing ripples across the intricate designs.

“If only, maybe I’d finally get some sleep.” Shinjiro grumbled. “Where’s the rest of the circus? Taking a vacation?”

The leader chuckled before reaching into his pocket, pulling out an orange bottle, filled to the brim with familiar pills. He offered the bottle with trembling hands. “I thought I’d make this delivery myself -“ the pills in the bottle rattled with each tremor, “-And if you’re willing, my friend, I’d like to share some information for free. For everything you’ve done to help my people.”

That was what he wanted, an extra delivery of medication and a chat? Hardly a reason to come crawling into an alley late at night, risking his already fragile health to meet a not-so-friendly info broker, especially in Port Island.

Nevermind that he was armed. Shinjiro had more than a few tricks to dodge a bullet and his companion knew that.

“Be quick.” Shinjiro accepted the bottle, shoving it in his pocket for safe keeping. “It took forever to find this place and I’m tired as shit.”

“No need to worry. I won’t be long.” the leader said.

Oh, Shinjiro heard that one before, right after a certain redhead enlisted him to fight Shadows as a glorified janitor for the Kirijo corporation. She claimed it was a part-time gig, then sent him to babysit his childhood friend all night.

“Then start talking.”

The leader nodded and knitted his fingers together. Slowly, he situated them on his lap, stared at the wall in front of them, and smiled.

“I’ve been in contact with one of my sources and they’ve given me some interesting news. That other group of Persona users, they’ve added someone, or rather something to their ranks.” he said. “It acts more like a pet than it does an ally, but it has fighting capabilities beyond that of a normal human without the hindrance of emotions on the battlefield. The perfect weapon to eliminate the Shadows.”

Shinjiro perked up. This was the first he heard of someone new coming to the dorm. Akihiko usually came along with those kinds of reports the moment anything changed in SEES, and like the idiot he was, he trusted Shinjiro to keep tight lipped.

“Congrats, ya know something I don’t. Still makes fuck all of a difference.”

“I thought you’d say that. Pardon me, but you’re very predictable, my friend.”

“-Is that it?” Shinjiro snapped.

“Not quite. There is something else.” The leader drew his knees up to rest his hands on top. “My informant also confirmed that what you told us before about their intentions was true. And now, we have no choice but to intervene. We mobilize the next Full Moon. We will use their concentration on the bigger picture to make our presence known and, hopefully, deter them from this foolish endeavor of theirs.”
“How’re ya gonna do that? You can’t just waltz right in and do whatever you want, unless you’re immortal, which you’re definitely not.”

The leader chuckled, a twisted grumble at the end of each pained breath.

“You forget that I have ears on the inside. They’ve made certain that my people and I will get our message heard,” he said. “And I know that at least some will realize the truth; to erase the Dark Hour would be denying the very power they possess and nothing short of blasphemous.”

Shinjiro glanced over, eyebrow raised. “And just who do you have on the inside? Someone I know?”

“I cannot say, my friend.” The leader finally clambered to his feet and turned to leave. “Though you have done good by my people, you still have ties to those heathens. I cannot trust to divulge too much information to a man whose allegiance isn’t to me, and me alone. I’m sure you can understand.”

There went Shinjiro’s one chance to make the most of his night. The rat in SEES, whoever they maybe, had been eating away at him since these three weirdos came into the picture. The Kirijo Group was highly selective of the company they kept, and even Shinjiro (as a middle schooler) underwent serious background checks before joining up with Mitsuru. They could find anything about anyone if it suited their agenda.

To know there were holes in that network didn’t sit well with Shinjiro and an insult to his intelligence.

Sometimes, being a neutral party really came back to bite him.

“Is that it, cause you’re starting to piss me off.” Shinjiro snapped.

“That is all.” The leader threw him a wave. “And thank you. We will be in touch.”

“I hope not.”

And as the mysterious man walked away, Shinjiro watched him hobble into the shadows and disappear around a corner. A regular ghost wandering the streets, if he didn’t know any better. Maybe even a good spirit out to protect fellow wanderers from the evil lurking in an unseen reality.

Again, he knew better than to assume such a thing were possible.

At least he could finally get some sleep.

7/28/2009

*Aigis is a tough fighter. I’ve never seen a real android (let alone an android itself) blow a Shadow to hell using a machine gun strapped to its arms. I kinda feel bad for the poor bastard. He never stood a chance.

But I guess Aigis would be a she. She seems to be okay with everyone doing that. Even if Ikutsuki tries hard to get us to stop.

Yeah, if you’re reading this, because I have a feeling you snoop through my stuff whenever I’m not here, you pun-spouting shitlord, I know what you’re doing. Fuck off.*
Chapter End Notes

Hey, you should check out “Rainsong” by AcceleratedStall. Yu “manwhore” Narukami and Diadara (who has a mini-cameo in this fic) have a nice chat and it’s wholesome and good and it gave me the warm fuzzies! The writer also left a comment on my fic and was kind enough to let me know about theirs. If they’re reading this, thanks and I hope your story gets more attention!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!