A Persona Q AU that features all of the characters from all five Persona games (considering that Persona 2 is split into two games).

When an ominous bell tolls, thirty-five Persona-users find themselves whisked away to a rift in the Collective Unconsciousness. Lying in wait for them is a strange school culture festival, a looming clock tower, and labyrinths and mazes that threaten to tear their minds and bodies asunder. The key to their escape seemingly lies in two strangers who have lost their memories. But nothing is ever as it seems, with not one, but two massive shadows - and a mysterious third party - looming over them...
Prologue

Persona QQQ

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The Velvet Room

"This recording will serve as a reminder of the guests who bravely fought in a marginal spot of the Collective Unconsciousness and survived, despite the odds stacked against them and the consequences of merely being present there. This, and the following recordings of the events that took place at that margin - placed in the year 1999 in Yasogami High School in the Japanese rural town of Yasoinaba - will serve as the sole proof of the battle against Chronos."

To the annoyance of the blue-clad woman with bobbed hair, the recording skipped. The garbled words spilled out for a minute before the tape readjusted and became more coherent again.

"Every Persona-user here is listed with their true Personae, inherent Arcana -"

The recording cut off again, having been taken over by another recording - an irritating jingle turned worse with the 90's electronic synth that had the displeasure of gracing many a Eurobeat and Japanese pop song. It would be a stretch to say that this jingle mangled the hell out of synth, but it sure as hell outright butchered jazz and enka. Those people had the gall to make those versions!

"Welcome to the Satomi Tadashi Drug Store!

To recover hit points, use Medicine or Gems!

When trouble arises and your friends are almost dying, rescue them with a Revival Bead or a Balm of Life!

You can recover SP with a Chewing Soul,

To cure poison, an Antidote will work.

When seeing illusions, use an Awaken G,

And when enraged, a Sedative will do!

The eternal ally of those who fight, Our city's friendly drug store!"
"The Satomi Tadashi Drug Store: Your eternal ally in battle and in life since 1987! Now available at our pharmacy: Muramura G, Japan's number one treatment for erectile dysfunction!"

Elizabeth's hands, fidgeting as if they had been electrocuted, mashed the crap out of the fast forward button, letting it run for a moment before hitting play again.

"If you have an erection lasting four or more hours –"

Click!

For once in her life, Elizabeth was sheepish. Her brother and sister shot her death glares worthy of a cat, the demon painter gave her a sneer, and Marie, the nameless pianist, and Belladonna stared like overly curious puppies. Counting to five in her head, she hit play again, and the recording continued.

"- and weapons of choice. Everyone has recorded their names, so that we may never, ever forget them."

The recording stopped briefly, the tape inside whirring loudly. One by one, new voices took over...

The recording was a solid five minutes in length. With a click, the recording stopped. Satisfied, Elizabeth set the recorder down and smiled. "That's the whole recording. I'm quite happy that every single one of them agreed to speak for me. I promised them no form of compensation for doing it either."

"All of them spoke without a hint of uneasiness. I'm quite envious of them…” the nameless pianist leaned back, stroking his chin. "It makes me wonder if every single one of them feels…'complete' inside."

"I do not think they are 'complete' in the way that you think that they are, but no doubt that all of them are a step closer to finding something that they desire," Belladonna responded with a smile. "To find something to achieve is the cross that mankind must bear, after all."

"Finding that one thing is in itself a journey…I have no doubt in my mind that every last one of them has found some sort of change from meeting one another," Margaret spoke next, ever thoughtful.

"A grand event that can change the lives of others…but sister, as per the consequences of anyone crossing the margin, their memories were erased…” Theodore said, a hint of sadness in his voice. "How can they be sure that they know they changed? I know it had to be done, but I feel a pang of sadness in my heart nonetheless…”

Elizabeth, in two massive strides, went up to her brother and tugged on his cheeks. "You really are my foolish baby brother, Theo!" She smiled, tugging to the point that tears welled in his eyes. "You cannot write off change so easily. It happens, even in the face of something such as memory loss. My guest may not remember what has happened, or why he and his friends have changed, but he will surely sense it. After all, a new resolve to live burns within them."

"R-Reawwy? Aaaagh!"

"Yes, yes, yes!" She tugged harder.

"Swistweeeee!" All of the Velvet Room residents laughed. When the air settled, everyone settled back to their seats. An uneasy silence filled the room.

"Say…” Marie, the newest resident, began, "Aren't there a bunch of recordings of some of the stuff that happened? I wasn't around a lot, so I'm pretty curious…the Nose is away. Why don't we listen to
them before he comes back?"

"Marie! Are you telling us that you want to have us spend our last moments together listening to all of our guests' follies? I suggest that we do something else," Margaret spoke sternly, giving her a hard stare.

"C'mon, please? Besides you recorded some of the weird crap that happened, Margaret. And you used my pathos recorder!"

"Now what have I said about addressing me without titles or honorifics, Marie?"

"That's not the point!"

"Enough!" Marie and Margaret halted at once and, like toy soldiers, turned their attention to the demon painter. The man had an air of assertion and confidence that caused even the siblings to turn. As Margaret herself had learned, the artist had little tolerance for tomfoolery and absolutely none for harassment.

"I have saved some takoyaki and anmitsu from the festival, and there is tea on the table. Belladonna, the pianist and I do not have long before we must depart. I would actually like to listen to some of these recordings. A wise man once said that every person's memory is his or her own private literature...a painting drawn from the depths of their souls, if you will. Won't you let me indulge for a bit?" His tilted chin and crossed arms were stern indicators that he wasn't going to take no for an answer. Margaret humbly set the recorder down, sighing in defeat.

"Think of this as a learning opportunity for all of you. The three of us need some inspiration, and you siblings need an answer, no? It'll be fun, and educational." The painter let out a small chuckle as he pressed the play button.

Theodore's face contorted to a look of worry. "Fun, and educational? But Demon Painter-san, Junpei-san and Teddie-san claimed to me that those concepts contradict one another! It's not possible to marry 'fun' and 'education' together... They have told me horror stories of the results of people trying to marry the two concepts together...Junpei-san told me the dreaded American-made abomination of a purple dinosaur that supposedly sings wicked songs to schoolchildren, and Teddie-san tells me the horrors of this strange idol who teaches children how to cook by morphing into an animated –"

"Theo…stop. Just stop."

Theo sighed as the recorder began to play…
As Maya Amano and her friends deliberate on pursuing Tatsuzou Sudou, the leader of the New World Order, they catch wind of a seemingly useless rumor about a new coffee shop.

Allegedly, it sells coffee that can restore memories and grant omniscience. And who better to show up there than Tatsuya Suou's old friends?

If there was one thing that sergeant Katsuya Suou learned from all of this madness, it was to take everything with a grain of salt. He hung his head in defeat and sighed when he eyed Maya Amano speaking with the oddball Arab tradesman who frequented this bar. Her face lit up his proposed exchange: a number of tarot cards that the Velvet Room residents could use for summoning more Personas from worlds beyond their reach, and all she had to give him was a map that looked like it was drawn by a six year old in Macrosoft Paint. Sumaru City had literally turned into an insane asylum. Implications aside, the worst part about that was Tatsuya – his precious little brother, who was now a living example of things Katsuya had only seen in art house films – had told him that the Sumaru City that was bombarded with rumors on the "Other Side" was ten times nuttier.

He remembered how animated and horrified Tatsuya looked when he mentioned that a teacher at his school, a woman the students dubbed "Ideal-sensei," caused a lot of shit to hit the fan during the mess that happened on the Other Side.

"I knew there was something fishy about Ideal-sensei from the start…when the Seven Sisters clock tower started working again, she made this weird, weird pout and high tailed it to the Narurato Stone, yelling that it was 'time,' like something out of a bad anime…oh, and then she tells us that Sumaru's the cradle of all civilization, which any sixth grader can tell you isn't true, and then when the Nazis showed up…"

His head hit the bar top.
"I'm going to take a solid month off of work when all of this is over...and maybe give the psychotherapist a visit...or ten..."

His mind began to fade out, garbling the chatter that rang in his ears. There were Maya and Ulala, rambling on and on about the Other Side, Tatsuya grumbling about something, Baofu muttering about something else, something, something, something...

...

*bong...

...

...A bell?

Katsuya was on drastically short supply for sleep, but he swore to himself that he heard a church bell ringing. He remembered how the sole Christian church in the city rang that bell for funerals...that church had been torn down years ago though. He gave a knowing glance to the editor and her friend. Their wary glances told him that they heard it as well. Before he could speak, Baofu, ever the mood killer, placed himself between Katsuya and the ladies and began another chat.

Katsuya sighed. The trek through Mt. Iwato, on top of that wild goose chase with Takahisa Kandori in the underwater ruins, left him reeling. They needed to chase Tatsuzou Sudou posthaste, but all that mattered to the police officer at the moment was his much-needed Blue Lagoon cocktail, shaken with the most potent vodka money could buy. Maybe later, he could have an entire dacquoise for himself from Clair de Lune. He felt like he deserved one.

"Suou, if you fall asleep here, I swear that I'll take that girly drink of yours and shove it up your-"

"FUCK OFF, DEMON!"

All of the fighting had given Katsuya a sixth sense. Within less than a second, his Nambu pistol was out, nuzzling Baofu's nose. Helios was ready to pounce out of him.

"Damn Suou, I didn't know you could control your own chi like that. Put that thing away," Baofu retorted, hands up. To the police officer's surprise, Baofu's expression remained steeled. Thank goodness he didn't whip his semi-automatic at him by accident.

It took several deep breaths for Katsuya to calm down, and he slowly returned the Nambu to his holster. Baofu had told him a number of times to ditch it; he was ejected from the force, and thanks to the rumors, more powerful and efficient guns were now for sale (something that shook the city a bit, given Japan's stance on gun ownership). He got a semi-automatic similar to the ones he'd seen a few of his seniors at the station possessed, but the Nambu held sentimentality to him.

"Sorry...I'm wiped out..." He slumped forward, uncaring about what Baofu had to say next. "Just...tell me what we're doing next."

Baofu knew better at this point. He wouldn't admit it, but he was as bushed as the rest of them. He also desperately needed a shower. "Some intrepid reporters spotted Tatsuzou meandering north of this ward. We can catch a breath for a spell, but not for long. Besides, there aren't any good rumors we can exploit right now."

"Seriously?"

"I caught wind of one an hour ago. It's pretty useless.
"What is it?"

"According to the guy from the detective agency, rumor has it that a new coffee place opened up near the harbor."

As he rummaged in his briefcase for a pamphlet about the place, Maya, her friend Ulala, and Katsuya's brother Tatsuya had come to join them. "Let's see…'come on down to Brewed Awakening, Sumaru's hottest new coffee spot. Our beans are cold-pressed with the rejuvenating waters of the river Mnemosyne. One small cup of our coffee will restore and revitalize your mind, making memories from yesterday to decades ago return to you instantly...'' He slammed the pamphlet on the bar top. "Bah! Sounds idiotic."

"Uh…how the hell do you say that? Memo…mena…memah…ah…" Ulala's brows furrowed. "Meh-mo-sine," Maya suddenly interjected. Like a switch, she merrily pulled out a "Greek Mythology for Dummies" book that Eriko had given to them on a whim. "Mnemosyne, a Titaness, embodiment of memory, and the mother of the Nine Muses! And everyone's favorite player, Zeus, is their father!"

Maya, ever the ray of sunshine. None of them could frown in her presence.

"Is that right, Amano? Tell us more," Baofu said.

"Let's see…Mnemosyne grants kings and poets the power of authoritative speech, and they in turn are given a special relationship with the Muses…she slept with Zeus nine nights in a row and conceived the Muses…goodness, the Greek Myths are perverse!"

"A lot of myths and religions are like that, Ma-ya. You should read the Bible," Ulala snickered.

"Hmm…memory…it says here that according to some poetry in the Orphic mysteries, she resided over a pool of water in the underworld that served as a counterpart to the river Lethe."

"Lethe?"

"Lethe…Lethe…" Pages flipped. "Ah, Lethe. Personification of oblivion and forgetfulness. Dead souls drank from her river so that they could forget their past lives when they were reborn. Some mystery religions, in turn, gave the dead a choice between drinking from Lethe's and Mnemosyne's rivers. Drinking from the river Mnemosyne not only allowed the dead to keep their memories from their previous lives intact, but they'd gain omniscience as well…” She flipped some more pages before shutting the book. "That's all the important stuff on her."

"Another Greek god…” Baofu mused. They had seen their fair share of them during their adventure. "Seems like her domain is memories…kind of like what the pamphlet said.” He flicked a stray lock of hair off of his coat, wryly smiling. "So, this coffee can make you remember everything in your life? Now that I think about it, that's pretty damn exploitable."

Tatsuya had remained silent. His face was twisted in horror. He knew the one person who could exploit a rumor like that!

Baofu turned to the group's de facto leader. "Amano, you call the shots on this one. Should we scope the place, or drop it and go after Tatsuzou?"

She pondered the choices: The subway was in the northern half of the ward, and Tatsuzou was
“biding time. He wasn't too far away, however. On the other hand, they could be in for a world of trouble if some nut went to the coffee shop and did something unsavory with its newfound powers. Her reporter's instinct needed to straighten the facts before jumping in. She went for a third option instead: "Who was the one who spread the rumor?"

"If what the agency guy said was true," Baofu began, "then the one who asked for it to be spread was a white-haired man in his fifties. I think he runs the clock shop at the Lotus Plaza mall."

"This is going to sound silly," Katsuya piqued, "But something about him…I can't put my finger on it, but…maybe we should go, just in case…Tatsuya, what do you —"

*crash*

"-The hell!? Tatsuya!"

The boy in question jumped out of the window and, with nary a damn given, hijacked a bus parked outside. He beelined north, right to the newfound shop. The little bastard had caused enough trouble for the adults, but he was their main lead for ending this mess. In a flash, everyone was out the door giving chase, Katsuya flailing his arms in panic.

"Tatsuya, wait! You don't have a license to drive a bus!"

---

*Narumi Ward, near the yacht harbor*

The past few months had been nothing but a bewildering, bizarre ocean of déjà vu for the three students that happened to meet one fateful day. They were so drastically different in looks and hobbies, yet here they were, at a brand new coffee shop, all of them curious to get to know one another. Of course, the rumors about the omniscience-giving coffee bought them there too. Even at Kasugayama, a school for delinquent boys, it was a hot new trend to try.

"Who'd have thought that all the dregs from my school would come down here for a friggin' cup of coffee? I mean, look at this place. It's…kinda girly." Eikichi Mishina, a revered figure at Kasugayama, swept his arm so as to draw attention. He was right on some counts: the walls were a dusty pink color, delicately cast iron garden shelves were the primary décor, and the air was perfumed with floral incense.

His upperclassman, Jun Kashihara, delicately plucked a daisy from one of the watering can flower pots. "White daisies are a classic symbol of innocence," he spoke to no one in particular in a hushed tone. "Of course, like roses, they hold many meanings depending on the color."

"Kashihara-senpai?" Eikichi raised a brow.
"An entire garden of daisies tells us, 'I share your feelings,' or 'I share your sentiments,' but these are in small clusters. For a white daisy alone…it expresses innocence, purity, and loyalty to one's lover. I think there's another message within them, but…"

"That's so romantic, Kashihara-san! Can you tell me more about flower symbolism, please?" Lisa Silverman, a Caucasian girl from Seven Sisters High, leaned closer to him, face lit up.

"There you go, talking to fucking daisies again…how the hell did you wind up at Kasugayama again, Kashihara?" Eikichi sighed. The effeminate-looking Jun stuck out like a sore thumb at the reform school, with his love of flowers and fortunes. Eikichi's notion enhanced itself when Jun hopped out of his seat at the sight of a yellow flower near the door. Jun plucked it out of its stand, studying it.

"What does that flower symbolize, Kashihara-san?" asked Lisa.

"Hmm…" The flower in question was a plain-looking yellow thing, having petals similar to the daisies, a large yellow center, and was fairly tall. "I can't really tell what this flower is by sight alone, but it might be an Adonis flower."

"Adonis…? You mean like, the really good looking Greek guy?" Lisa recalled from one of Ideal-sensei's strange lectures.

"Adonis!? I know what an Adonis is! An Adonis is the sexiest man out there and he knows it…heh, sounds like someone I know." Eikichi smirked. No subtlety was needed to see that he was referring to himself.

"Yes, that's…kind of what an Adonis is..." Jun stuttered. "This flower here, I think, is the Vernalis species."

"What does that mean?"

Jun's face suddenly contorted to sadness. Though the meaning was short, it was bitter, and he connected it back to all of those dreaded feelings of loneliness and déjà vu that he had been feeling lately.

"…Painful memories."

"Excuse me?"

"Painful memories...I remember now. That's what this flower symbolizes..."

The air around them became a looming cloud of dread...

....

...Dread?

....*bong*....

...

As if it were responding to their dread, a bell rang ominously in the distance, to the confusion of the three.
"...What..."

The bus came flying in like a stampede of animals, flailing about and blazing and blurry, with the horrid odor of gas seeping behind in. Glass and debris shot out like meteorites and smashed onto the streets with abandon, the screams and injuries of bystanders be damned…

With three massive stomps, a figure smashed its way from the driver's side window. The sun struck down behind him, a radiant halo bestowing his visage! The brilliant, flaming aura of Apollo swirled beneath him, bursting with passion! Tatsuya Suou, the great atoner, drew out his mighty two-handed blade, determination rendering the birds, the trees, and the terrified civilians (one a senior whose wheelchair had tipped over) asunder with fear! For the three he held dear in another time and place, he was their savior, there for them to heal their possibly scarred minds, no thanks to the Crawling Chaos himself!

"You three, don't you dare drink that coffee!" Tatsuya shouted, Apollo ready to strike behind him.

The three in question were frozen in place, confusion contorting their faces. Thankfully for them, and unknown to Tatsuya, whose aura had reached past the height of the ceiling, they wouldn't be harmed…

"I'm so sorry, I have to do this…I'm sorry, Nova Kaiser-!"

Time stopped.

Apollo rose and appeared. He was a majestic figure, donned in a finely tailored pantsuit with red and white stripes, a tailored square-cut jacket with gold shoulder pads, and a daunting mask, shaped like a flame, his glowing eyes a mysterious shade of blue. He rose his golden hands, ever so slowly…

A loud clapping sound stung the ears of the witnesses there. A flurry of deadly flames shot up, one after the other, leaving a small crater of destruction in its wake.

"Oh, dear…those poor, poor squirrels…"

...Squirrels!? The smoke that Apollo's great flames left behind gently fluttered away in the breeze. The jagged crater it left behind left half of the coffee shop in ruins. Broken pots and charred flowers were strewn about, buried underneath heaps of pinkish colored bricks. The wanton destruction had struck fear in the hearts of the witnesses; some had fled, several were scrambling for either a payphone or a cellular for the cops, and some were as slack-jawed as Tatsuya's intended targets. It didn't matter how good the poor boy's intentions were, because a.) the pose he struck reminded everyone around him of the worst aspects of the average episode of Phoenix Ranger Featherman R, and b.) his intended targets were completely unharmed.

The charred remains of three innocent little squirrels revealed themselves to him.

"Ah...ahhhh...what the fuck...?" Eikichi stuttered, his eyes bulging from his head.

This response prompted Tatsuya - now with the air of despair looming over him, sweat sliding down the back of his neck, tiny, choking gasps coming out of him - to slowly turn, too afraid to look...

Their coffee cups were half-empty.

He prayed to God, Izanagi, Yog-Sothoth, anyone, that they had spilled them.
"It's a shame that he destroyed half the shop. This coffee's pretty good," June spoke quietly, too afraid to look at said destroyer.

"I agree. I was gonna bring Asacchi and Meepo here too...I'd buy a bag of coffee beans if I had a roaster."

"Heh, me too!"

A tight line formed on Tatsuya's lips. Only one word could express how he felt at that moment.

"SHIT."

The adults that had the burden of looking after Katsuya's hellion of a brother all sighed in disbelief. Katsuya, of course, was more concerned over the fact that Tatsuya drove the damn bus without a license, and for that, Baofu "rewarded" his concern with a dope slap and the 317th insult about how much of a dumbass he was. By the time they arrived on the scene, the damage had already been done.

"Oh, God Almighty...Tatsuya, what the hell have you done?" Katsuya's hands clutched his head. His eyes slid toward Maya - despite the fact that Tatsuya had borked up in the worst way since the X-1 incident near the submarine, her saintlike patience was unwavering. His patience for her devotion was beginning to wear itself thin. "Amano-san, you seriously aren't considering letting him get away with this, are you...!?"

"He...well..." Maya looked indecisive.

"Dammit Amano! Come and help us over here!" Baofu yelled her way. Ulala set aside the three traumatized schoolkids, while Baofu resumed his giving Tatsuya an earful. Despite her reluctance, Katsuya dragged her along, muttering something under his breath.

"...you're the one leading us..."

He had a point.

It went unsaid, but she was the unofficial leader of their motley crew. It could be chalked up to a mixture of circumstances and her ability to persuade people; being an editor did her good in that regard. More than that, though, was the fact that her connection to Tatsuya went beyond mere feelings of déjà vu - it spanned across, of all things, space-time. It seemed that those three children were in a similar position; that effeminate looking boy from the delinquent high school had been targeted by JOKER, after all. More and more, the jumpsuit-clad boy was drawing her in, and her inability to resist had consequences.

Tatsuya had told them at Mt. Iwato that she and those three students could not regain their memories of the "Other Side" - that area of space-time - lest they incite the wrath of a horrid being that Maya remembered from some of those nightmarish stories that Ulala loved to tell her. Tatsuya remembered, and he, the city, possibly the rest of the world, were paying the price for it.

And now, that danger could increase due to yet another stupid rumor...

Breaking monotony from an everyday job was one thing. Having your home city being torn apart by
magically-charged rumors made her wish for that monotony back. Adulthood was weird like that.

It took effort on Baofu's end to restrain Tatsuya, who, through sheer desperation, frantically yelled at the confused trio. "That coffee will grant you omniscience because of a rumor! You might find memories that you were unaware that you had...try to block them out! They'll do nothing but confuse you!"

The three of them tilted their heads like a set of puppies. "Er, dude," Eikichi began, "No offense, but omni...whatever the hell that is, sounds awesome."

"You don't understand...our whole city, nay, the world, will be in danger if you remember...!"

"Remember what, exactly?" Lisa asked. "I remember you saying that before...why us three, Senpai?"

She seemed so calm, so composed and gentle, yet still firm. The Lisa that Tatsuya remembered was a spitfire, full of passion, always outspoken...it was eerie. In a sense, she showed signs of that ideal Japanese lady that her father wanted on the Other Side. He wasn't so sure that he actually liked that...

"You know, you also mentioned something like this at the Sky Museum...I thought that bag-headed man was crazy, but now I'm not so sure...Suou-san..." Jun looked at him, eyes pleading. "You saved me, and Silverman-san, and Mishina-kun, and you then proceed to run off without a word...I don't know what kind of mission you're on, but it seems so important..."

The way that Jun gazed upon him squashed Tatsuya's frustration. That sadness on his face was too much for him to gaze at...

He loved Jun once. Leaving him in particular was brutal.

The air grew thick. The wind on the pier began to pick up, the waves frantically sloshing about. Katsuya raised his head to discover that steel-colored storm clouds were gathering on the horizon.

...*bong*...*bong*...*bong*...

The bell rang again, louder than before.

"What the hell...?" Tatsuya glanced over at Maya. The fear in her eyes gave way to an unexpected message: "Something terrible is about to happen!"

"A storm..." Katsuya stepped forward, ushering Lisa, Eikichi, and Jun toward him. "Come on, we can discuss this elsewh-

*CRACCCCK*

A massive bolt of lightning struck far in the distance. As if a Leviathan were being summoned, the ocean waves churned and rose to great heights. With one fells swoop, one smashed through the pier, taking what was left of the coffee shop with it. The resulting spray soaked Ulala and Baofu, both reeling from shock.

"The fuck!? The pier's gonna flood! We have to get out of here!" Ulala sprang back in fear, clutching Maya's arm.
Even as the group began their sprint, the sea twisted and rose further, and further, thrashing about violently. Their efforts were futile; the more they ran, the longer and larger the waves became. The shops and homes beyond the pier were now being struck, debris flying and wrecking everything in its wake. As Maya and Tatsuya picked up their pace, a massive block of wood struck Maya from behind, slamming her into the ground, to Tatsuya's horror.

"Maya, no-!" His face was a mask of fright, mouth agape. The waves behind her were dragging her in! He leapt after her, uncaring of the salt water stinging his eyes, futilely reaching for her hand. He wouldn't lose her again...not like this!

"Tatsuya, are you crazy!?!" Katsuya screamed, now clinging desperately to a guardrail that was miraculously intact. Rain began to torrent downward, tearing at his face. The rest of his companions were struggling underneath it, as was he. "You'll drown, dammit!"

His voice cracked. "Tatsuyaaaa!"

Baofu had a feeling that this was no ordinary storm.

The waves rose to new heights, nearly a hundred feet, and absolutely brutalized the buildings and woods near them. Despite his grip, Jun's grip slipped from the guardrail, and soon, he too was being sucked in by the water. Ulala tried to reach for him, and was brutally punished by being sucked in with him.

"Serizawa, you idiot!" Baofu screamed. What bought about this storm!? Before he could ponder on that thought, A large tree branch collapsed onto his arm. The pain was too much - the ocean took him too, and Katsuya and Eikichi soon followed after being blinded by another branch's splinters.

Lisa looked at the scene in fright. She could see them all being sucked in, dragged under the water, all completely helpless. Her limbs and arms began to burn from grasping the cold, corroding rail. She had spent yesterday negotiating with a lyricist about MUSES' next big hit. She had spent yesterday bonding with her father, a nefarious Japanophile, for the first time in a long time. She had spent yesterday at Kaori, the perfume shop, seeking a birthday present for her mother. She had spent yesterday with said mother, who boldly broke her "Akiko" persona, shed her kimono, and enjoyed a massive, all-beef burger, fries, and a good old chocolate shake at a new 50's America-style establishment at the SMILE Mall. It felt good. She felt as though she had suddenly hit this massive stride in her life, and that if she didn't stop it, everything would be wonderful.

Not only were Tatsuya and these strange adults shaking that stride, now she could possibly die.

Why was her head throbbing so hard?

Why were there images of her spiting her father? Sure, she hated his expectations of her sometimes, but to spite him outright?

Why were there images of a man in a jester's mask? Why did he call himself the Joker? Wasn't the Joker a man who escaped from the insane asylum?

Why was Jun calling himself the Joker?

Why was there a copy of her, red eyes blazing, facing her down?

Why was she fighting a slew of monsters? Why did a strange, ethereal being with a bow and arrow come at her whim and fight alongside her?

Why was that Maya woman bleeding to death...?
A muffled scream and icy cold water rushed over her head, sucking her away as she nearly blacked out. This darkness was cold and harsh, and...eerily familiar.

It felt like she was dying...that too, was familiar.

She found herself with the rest of the group, deep underwater, nothing but silence and the color teal surrounding them...strange, weren't they washed away by frantic waves mere moments ago...? It seemed so peaceful all of a sudden...

She, Eikichi, Jun, Tatsuya, Maya, and those three adults were floating beneath the water, languidly, silently...

She glanced at Maya and Tatsuya, discovering a pair of faces - familiar faces - that boasted a mix of confusion and drowsiness. Their eyes were focused, barely, at a soft, violet glow that flickered a ways off.

Everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

For clarity: In regards to Persona 2, it's all set in the Eternal Punishment timeline. At this point, Maya and co. have defeated Takahisa Kandori, but are too late to stop the summoning of the dragons that were meant to destroy the world (all of them summoned by Kegare that the New World Order siphoned from people). After the battle, Tatsuya reveals that he is from "the Other Side," and he shows them visions of all the events that transpired there. Now they are pursuing Tatsuzou Sudou, and before they can begin their chase, the PQ story begins here.
Welcome to Yasogami High

Chapter Summary

With the eerie toll of an otherworldly bell, a devastating hurricane drowns Maya Amano and her friends into the ocean waters. Instead of the land of the dead, as they expected, they find themselves trapped in another world - a seemingly idyllic high school. But nothing is ever as it seems...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Unknown location...

The jetstream of water distorted, shooting across into what appeared to be an endless void. A flurry of bubbles caressed their skin as they sped onward to a place unknown – somewhere, they'd learn, that was beyond their comprehension. The void became darker and darker, yet the water was eerily warm. Faster and faster they went, all of their bodies being carried on like a rapid, to the point that their bodies began to stretch – it was painful, seeing other bodies contort and stretch.

Silence rang in her ears.

The achy bruise on her chest began to sting once more, this time with more force than ever before. Maya Amano wanted to cry out in pain. The silence was maddening, the stretching unbearable, the water like ice ripping through her skin.

Is this what dying felt like?

It was.

She remembered that moment from a time thought to have died out, when the Spear of Longinus gored her right rib. Mankind's religious streak and love of ancient tales were what destroyed the world – the legend of the spear had become a rumor! It was a rumor two thousand years strong. Because of it, Maya bled in a sea of her own blood, up until her last breath. In a grotesque, twisted way, she, who was another face in the crowd on This Side, was the trigger for the world's destruction on the Other Side - an angel of destruction.

As the torrent rushed further and further, the memories came back to her – there, she was more like a leader. She was Maia, a heavenly mother, especially to poor Jun's Hermes. She was also Artemis to Tatsuya's Apollo, truly like siblings (which made the odd, romantic vibes in her heart directed at him, in retrospect, disturbing.)

This is what Tatsuya was protecting her from…

…

…What was she to do now? There was no reason to pursue him like some lovesick puppy anymore…
What would happen if she gave up and stopped…?

Maya found her body contorting in pain, her left arm numb from her head being planted there for what felt like hours. Her body was awash with cold, her outfit soaked through and through. Even a small stretch felt painful…

"…Huh? I can stretch? But we…"

Maya shot up without thinking.

Not even the sharp pain shooting down her back could hide the relief she felt when she realized that all of them, including the school kids, were in the Velvet Room – or so it seemed. She saw Igor's chair in the middle, along with a table, and four doors.

"Four doors!?"

She gave them a hard stare. There were four of them, all right. But they weren't attached to the wall at all. They seemed to be just propped up there, like cabinets. On top of that, a whopping set of sixteen different locks kept them shut. Twelve of the locks were identical save for the Roman numerals etched on each one, while the remaining four were all unique: they were a pink heart-shaped lock, a golden lock with a rose engraved on it, a rusted storage lock, and a massive bronze lock with four *mitama* etched on it.

"These locks are complete overkill. I wonder if the people living in the Velvet Room are putting on a secret show or something?" Maya thought out loud, not noticing another glaring difference between her Velvet Room and this one.

"If you think that we'd lock our door with locks like these, well…that would go completely against our purpose, Maya Amano."

A voice with a rich timbre drove her out of her stupor. She spun around, finding herself face-to-face with a tall man with deeply tanned skin, rich black hair that reached well past his shoulders, a beanie on his head, and a pair of oval-shaped, violet-tinted shades. Despite the man's black-colored khakis and sweater, his stubble-dotted square jaw and confident posture were indicators of an inner calm and strength. Even with his easel and paints missing, Maya could tell that he was the Demon Painter, the Velvet Room dweller who could take blank cards and, with his brushes and knives, convert them into tarot cards that Igor could use to call forth Personae from the Collective Unconsciousness.

It was when the Demon Painter heeded her when Maya noticed just how *drastically* different the Velvet Room looked: several stairs descended and ascended to nowhere, and massive clockwork gears hung out in the infinite macrocosm of a deep, rich, violet-colored sky. The piano and microphone were missing, and Igor was nowhere to be found, although her companions were nicely laid out on the floor.
"You're the painter...did you save us?" Maya asked, shivering.

The artist nodded his head, a grave look settling on his face. "I indeed did take all of you in here. The Velvet Room had changed its shape some time before your arrival, however...my master, the pianist, and the singer had left, and then it just..." He put his hand on his head, looking downtrodden.

"It seems as though it changed rather suddenly, am I right?" asked Maya. She let out a sneeze.

"I think I'll wait on explaining until the rest of you are awake." The artist fished out a box full of robes, and, from hammerspace, a dryer. When Maya raised a brow in confusion, he quipped:

"I was a regular human like you once. Unlike the rest, I don't mind giving some compassion to guests. I set up a curtain in the back for privacy."

Maya found her way to the back and began to strip down, looking out at the artist with a wary stare. Life was strange indeed.

Within a short span of time, the Suou brothers, Baofu and Ulala were robed and propped on a couch, while Lisa, Eikichi and Jun were tucked away in a separate "sick area" that the painter set up on the fly. Maya emerged, and much to her happiness, Ulala ran up to her, tackling her in a bear hug.

"Ma-ya, it's about time you showed up! I thought you fainted in there or something!" Ulala nuzzled her head on top of Maya's. Katsuya looked on to them, his face glowing pink at the sight of his crush and her friend's chest areas rubbing together. Tatsuya stifled a giggle. Baofu, ever capricious, elbowed him a little too hard for comfort.

"Oh my...could it be that our straight-laced gumshoe is actually a..." Baofu mock-gasped. "...Complete and utter pervert? How can this be?" He smacked his head and fake-fainted. "What is to become of Japan's venerable police force!? Have they no honorable men left!!?"

Katsuya's lip curled up in fury. Swiftly, he gripped onto a lone sculpting knife that was left on the table. Tatsuya stopped him, frantically waving his hands in fear.

"All right, settle down," said the Demon Painter as he came to them. He had a box in his hands, with three distinct objects inside: a set of sparring equipment, some flowers, and a conspicuously large guitar case.

Tatsuya gasped.

"I have something to tell you all..."

"You aren't going to make my old friends fight, are you!?" Tatsuya shouted, pointing at the weapons on the box. "They're in no shape to fight! They can't even summon their Personas..."

"Settle down, Tatsuya." The painter maintained a firm stance. "Listen to me...because of that rumor about the coffee shop in Narumi Ward, your friends are regaining their memories as we speak..."

Despair hung over Tatsuya's face. "No...!"

"But!" He held his finger out. "Hear me out on this! Did you not feel those painful sensations as you were being dragged underwater? You did not drown, whereas if it were a normal flood, all of
you would have died at least two times over. You are now here, in this newly changed Velvet Room. Tell me, did all of you hear a bell ringing before you were dragged by the tide?"

The five members in the room all stared at one another, begging for an answer. Katsuya spoke first. "Actually, when we were at Ebony, I think I heard something ringing. It's funny, because we had a Christian Church in Regendai a number of years ago. It's long gone, though."

"I heard it too," Ulala piped in, and Maya nodded her head, also confirming her hearing.

"That bell's ringing," said the painter, "did not come from reality."

Silence befell the room. Despite all of what they had gone through, this dropped bomb was a first.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Tatsuya.

"I heard it when I was alone in the Velvet Room, before its transformation into what it is now." He gestured towards the massive spanning of clockwork gears before them. "I have a theory that all of you, and possibly those three children as well, have been purposefully summoned here."

"Summoned…?" Baofu raised a brow. "Is this that…Crawling Chaos' doing? Or maybe Gozen's?"

"No…I need to do some research. But know this: Philemon, and this Velvet Room, are inseparable from the fates of their visitors. All of you were bought here for a reason, as was I." The painter looked away, forlorn. Was that a glimpse of sympathy in his eyes, tinted as they were? Maya thought so.

"So we aren't in Sumaru anymore…what of my friends? You said that their memories were returning…" Tatsuya stood, inching closer to the painter in fear. "If they remember, then - "

"Ah, yes…I said that I'd need to research it, but I think that we are in a…different reality from where you are from." The painter, in a rare gesture of affection, placed his hands on Tatsuya's shoulders. "This is why you should not be worried: your summoning here was convenient. As long as you, Maya, and your former friends are not in Sumaru – the reality all of you were born in – then your world is safe. Their returning memories will likely be traumatizing, but you have all escaped the wrath of the Crawling Chaos…for now."

"S-Seriously!?" Tatsuya's face lit up. "Are you absolutely sure that Sumaru and the rest of the world will be - !?"

The painter gave a firm nod, a small smile creeping onto his face.

For the first time in a long time, Tatsuya was happy. His body gave way behind him as he sighed, feeling as though he were floating in midair. His brother caught him, and he, too, was smiling, as Tatsuya finally seemed to have peace of mind. It wouldn't last, but the world's destruction was postponed. The three friends, however, were still an issue.

"I have a thought…" the painter spoke again. "I have not taken a look outside yet, but the air is…something else. Take a rest for a while. When you all feel better, go outside and explore. Tatsuya, I advise that you watch over your old friends. They will, in all likelihood, be confused and afraid. Your presence will surely ease their pain."

"That's a good idea. I'll do it," Tatsuya spoke, full of an unusual amount of vigor. He turned to Maya, who kept her silence the entire time. "Maya…you've stood by my brother and your friends for some time now. Can you lead the way for them?"
He turned to her, a mysterious smile on his face. Her adult friends also turned to her, a mixture of hope and reluctance shared among them.

"Tatsuya and the others have faith in me…" Maya gently nodded her head in agreement.

"Very well then. Look outside and see what you can find."

The four adults opened the Velvet Room door and were met with quite a surprise: a school festival.

The school was nothing like Sevens or Kasugayama: the floors were lined with oiled wood, the walls painted a soft white, decorated with a rainbow of paper lanterns and other decor. The filtering sunlight and pale blue sky that filtered through the window only added more vibrancy to the already-vibrant festival. Above Katsuya's head was a sign for a "Half-Baked Kitchen," and off to the end of the hall, he could see a sign for a "Canned Film Festival," chuckling at the pun. Already added to this seemingly "rustic" (for lack of a better term) school was the students' uniforms: the girls wore sailor *fuku* that were dominantly black in color, while the boys wore black *gakuran* with visible white stitching. Behind them was the Velvet Room door, which had accommodated its appearance to blend in with the rest of the schools' doors.

It was in full swing, with the film festival display students offering pamphlets with what was showing. A boy from the kitchen promoted their newest batch of takoyaki, homemade and ready to eat. A gaggle of girls cooed over another boy who had an acoustic guitar out for the occasion.

The whole scene put a radiant smile on Maya's face. "I remember our festival when I was a Sevens student…I'm getting a little nostalgic…" She stepped forward to get a better look at the takoyaki boy.

Ulala frowned. When Katsuya elbowed her arm in question, she gestured him to her level: "Ma-ya's always been like that. She gets nostalgic easily, you know? I think that there's an old poster from an old magical girl show in her room…"

"Wow, seriously?" Baofu chuckled.

"We were at a matchmaking party," Ulala said quietly, "and that show was one of the first things she mentioned to this guy who was hitting on her. He was pretty damn hot too, and she drove him off! Once a woman hits a certain age, liking that sort of thing gets a little weird, you know? Geez, Ma-ya's never gonna get that family she wants like that. I mean, how would you feel if I walked up to you and said, 'Hey, my name's Ulala Serizawa, I'm a lingerie saleswoman, and what I really like is Magical Devil Silky Momo'?

"…Serizawa-san, what's a matchmaking party?" Katsuya asked, head cocked. Baofu face-palmed.

"Suou, I worry for you sometimes. I mean, do you even know where babies come from?" Baofu asked. Katsuya's face burned like a tomato, half embarrassed, half eager to shoot the asshat in the face.

It was agreed between the three of them that they'd split up; Katsuya would go to the students running the festival, Baofu opted to check outside, and Ulala would crawl around the halls with Maya, providing she didn't get seduced by the festival first.
Ulala grabbed Maya by the arm, just as she obtained a boat of succulent octopus balls from the boy. "Ma-ya, did you forget why we came here already? We need to scout out this area…did that boy give that to you?"

Maya cheerfully fished out a takoyaki from the paper boat. The scent of the wheat flour batter and the minced octopus permeated both ladies' senses. "He sure did! He's energetic as hell about it too! Look at him!" She pointed at the boy, who was now, against all logic, spinning a takoyaki boat on top of his nose, balancing on one foot.

"Ma-ya…we're at a high school festival. Did that boy not find it weird that a twenty-three year old magazine editor wanted some of his takoyaki? Hell, didn't any of the other students say anything?"

"Huh?" Maya stuffed one in her mouth, oblivious.

"Ma-ya, are you serious right now!? Stop eating that thing!" She snatched the boat from her friend's hand. "We're supposed to see what's the deal with this place! You would think that one of the kids here would find having a bunch of random adults loitering would be weird, but look!" She waved her hand in front of a random girl's face. The girl in question didn't notice at all. "We might as well be ghosts!"

Maya glanced back at the takoyaki boy, who was now breakdancing, kicking the boat on his feet. "He really didn't say anything…maybe you're right. I asked him how he made it, and he asked me if I was enjoying myself…I just thought he wasn't paying attention, but when you put it that way…"

"I asked where this place was, and this kid told me this school's called 'Yasogami High.' Then I asked where the hell it was, and the kid goes, 'this festival is awesome!' This place is fishy. Let's go regroup with Bao and Big Suou."

"I don't know, Ulala…maybe these kids are just really into it?" At that moment, the breakdancing takoyaki boy backflipped into the wall, with a fresh batch of hot oil frying him in the crotch.

Ulala sighed, her patience wearing thin. "Didn't you just say you were gonna take this seriously, Leader? Are you just doing it because Little Suou said so? Come on, let's go." She huffed and walked back to the Velvet Room door, where the men waited for them.

Maya's face fell. "Did she really just say that…? I'm doing what I can…Tatsuya said -"

Tatsuya said...

Was she really that dependent on him?

"You three…don't freak out when I say this, but when I tried to exit the front gate, I took a step and it took me back inside. It's like a loop. I also tried going over the fence, but the same thing happened." Baofu rubbed his head. "Damn, I have a headache…"

"So…we're trapped here?" Ulala gasped. "We can't get out? At all? Ever?"

"Seems like it," said Katsuya. "None of the students here can form a coherent response to any of my questions. Those doors in the Velvet Room are locked like a bank vault…"
Gasps spurted from Ulala's throat. Baofu braced himself for the inevitable shouting, cussing, and panic-driven beatdown. All that she needed were her boxing tape and a martini, and he'd find himself flying through one of the windows with a bajillion cuts that wouldn't heal for a week. That, or she'd just kneel him in the testicles. That too.

Ulala slumped to the floor. "We're stuck here…"

Baofu braced for the groin attack. He questioned himself, and the gods, as to why she wasn't doing it. Or cussing. Or…apparently the Demon Painter was right about them being in some weird new dimension. What the hell happened to Ulala?

"This doesn't look good…we'll need to come up with a plan…haaah…hooo…" Ulala inhaled and exhaled, trying to relax. "Gotta stay calm…gotta stay calm…"

Katsuya frowned, wary of Ulala's distressed state. "Er…would it be bad to mention to you all that I think there may be demons lurking around here?"

"Gah!" Ulala shot up – her head, by accident, bashed Baofu's chin, making him topple over. "Are you serious right now, Big Suou!?"

"Yeah, seriously Big Suou, your timing sucks!" Baofu groaned, clutching his chin in pain.

"But it's true! I sensed their presence somewhere on this floor! It was at a classroom display…” Katsuya's face flushed.

Maya, having been quiet up to this point, patted Katsuya on the shoulder. "Well, let's think of it as our first clue. The painter said that this place wasn't normal, and we've got the clues to prove it. Whatever this place is, it's also got a demon nest! Good job, Suou-san!"

Maya's pearly whites flashed, her face a sunny, radiant smile. Katsuya's heart skipped a beat.

"Now Suou-san, lead the way for us!" Maya said cheerfully. "Adventure, ho!" A still awestruck Katsuya lead the way, albeit not without bumping into a wall at least three times. The other two sighed in defeat.

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Second Floor, Class 1 Display, "You in Wonderland…"

"I felt their presence here…it was faint, but there are definitely demons here. Although…"

The four adults stood with a mixture of confusion and amusement at the gaudy green and pink display. Paper mache bushes and flowers were lined up against the wall. A stuffed pink rabbit in a suit gestured towards the entrance, which was covered by a crimson-colored curtain. The display's sign, which was pink and lined with playing cards, bore its name.

"'You in Wonderland…?' Is this based on the book or something?" Ulala asked.

"The flyer says here, 'now you can walk in Alice's shoes!'" Baofu spoke with a mock-girl voice. "Why the hell would anybody want to walk in some dim-witted girl's shoes? She winds up in Wonderland because she can't deal with day-to-day life."
"Gee, somebody's grumpy," Ulala teased. "It's a children's book you know, not everything's gonna be as profound as The Tale of Genji…not that I can see the profundness in that."

"You take that back!"

"Please you two, don't fight…" Maya pleaded to them, splitting them apart. They grimaced. "Besides, something's been bothering me for a while…"

"What is it, Ma-ya?"

"Um, has anyone else noticed that our pool of reserved Personas is missing?"

Silence struck the room.

Though reluctant to check, Baofu shut his eyes and began to breathe, entering a meditative-like trance. He swam through his mind, digging into its vast depths for another "mask," another Persona…

…He snapped from his trance, looking disappointed.

"Amano's right. I can only sense Odysseus within me. All of the others are gone…"

Ulala sighed. "This is turning into one hell of an amazing journey, yeah? We're stuck in some bumfuck countryside high school with no Personas and demons crawling around. Great. Awesome. And now that I look at it, we lost our equipment too, didn't we?"

"Yep!" Maya replied with a smile.

"Ughhh…what are we gonna do?"

Like a Deus ex Machina, the Demon Painter found them, relieved that they were safe. "Never fear, you four. I was able to salvage your weapons when you came here." He then pulled out three guns (a standard-issue Nambu pistol and two gaudy looking pink Colt Pony pistols), a sack of arcade tokens, and some boxing tape. Ulala cheered.

"Gee Painter-san, you sure know just when to deliver good news!" She eagerly took the boxing tape from him, glaring at a particular police officer. "Unlike some people!" Katsuya looked away in shame.

"It's my job to assist, remember?" He glanced at the entrance of You in Wonderland. "And I will continue to do so at this moment. You sensed demons in there, right? You will most certainly need my help. Besides, though my research is threadbare, I can fully assert now that this is not a part of reality at all."

"What!?" Maya gasped.

"This place has no meaning. It is in a continuous state of flux. Actually, with how powerful the rumors have gotten in your native Sumaru, this place is arguably similar to the city's current state…reality distorting, and rife with demons. Yet this place exists in a place that's 'deeper' than either Sumaru or the Velvet Room…" The painter put his hand under his chin, as if in thought.

The four adults mulled over his words. The implications were immense, but there only seemed to be one solution that they could tackle at the moment.

"So we're trapped in this strange place…but there's no other options for us right now, other than the
one in front of us," Maya said, gesturing at You in Wonderland. "There are demons inside, we have at least one Persona for each of us, and we have our weapons. What else is there to do other than investigate this area?"

"Amano's right," Baofu said, nodding his head. "Hopefully we can find some clues in here. Besides, if there are demons, we can probably snag some goods from them, yeah? It'll be a start."

"Yes. And remember this," said the painter. "Many Personas are derived from the demons you've met. Many demons are born from the Collective Unconsciousness. Tarot cards that you can obtain from them are like fragments of their very being…I do not know fusion, but I can convert tarot cards into single Personas with my paints and my canvas, at least."

From his trans-dimensional pocket, the painter pulled out a logbook. "This labyrinth is quite massive. I recommend using that logbook to keep track of where you're going. Its pages are blank. Why not draw out a map with it? Since you're only searching for clues, I wouldn't go too far into this area; not yet anyway. There are some powerful presences inside, on top of something other than demons lurking."

"Something other than demons, you say?" Baofu asked.

"Yes. They are…more wild. More feral. You cannot negotiate with them. If they look weak, take them out, and if they don't, run away."

"How will we know what these creatures look like?" It was Katsuya's turn to ask.

"They are very distinct from demons. All of them have some kind of mask on their body. They also will not hesitate to attack you."

"Fair enough."

"Whenever you are outside the labyrinth, I will also inform you when Tatsuya's friends wake up."

"You've been so good to us, Painter-san…" Maya smiled. Without any sort of hesitation, she gave him a hug, much to his embarrassment.

"Er…anything for our guests…ah ha ha…"

The team took a few minutes to equip themselves and prepare. One minute, they were in Sumaru going after corrupted politicians and chasing after demons, and the next, they were now in the middle of nowhere, in another dimension, stumbling into danger completely blind. It was a peculiar feeling, to say the least. Maya mentally steeled herself for the road ahead. The others were depending on her as their leader, after all.

"All right Leader, are you all set?" Ulala asked, boxing tape on her hands and body raring to go.

"Heehee…I like the sound of that…" Maya giggled. "I'm ready, my dear subordinate."

"Be serious now, Amano," Baofu sighed. A slight smile formed on his lips, despite his words.

Opening the red curtain, the four adults slowly stepped into the labyrinth within, unaware of the dangers and strangeness that lied ahead…
Current party stats for Maya's party:

Maya Amano
Persona: Maia
Level: 1
Arcana: Moon
Str: 5
Ma: 13
En: 4
Wi: 10
Ag: 8
Lu: 6
Resist: Water
Block: Light/Dark
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Slash
Persona Abilities
Aqua: A light Water attack (1 enemy)
Media: Restores a light amount of HP (all allies)
Next: Hama: Slight chance of instant-kill (Light-based, 1 enemy) (Lv. 6)

Ulala Serizawa
Persona: Callisto
Level: 1
Arcana: Star
Str: 9
Ma: 7
En: 9
Wi: 7
Ag: 11
Lu: 4
Resist: Earth
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Wind
Persona Abilities
Magna: A light Earth attack (1 enemy)
Marin Karin: Inflicts Charm on 1 enemy
Next: Mamagna: A light Earth attack (all enemies) (Lv. 8)

Katsuya Suou
Persona: Helios
Level: 1
Arcana: Justice
Str: 11
Ma: 6
En: 9
Wi: 9
Ag: 5
Lu: 8
Resist: Pierce
Block: N/A
Absorb: Fire
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Water
Persona Abilities
Agi: A light Fire attack (1 enemy)
Scratch: A light slash attack (1 enemy)
Next: Patra: Removes all status ailments except for Petrification (1 ally) (Lv. 7)

Baofu
Persona: Odysseus
Level: 1
Arcana: Hanged Man
Str: 12
Ma: 5
En: 10
Wi: 6
Ag: 4
Lu: 10
Resist: Wind
Block: Lightning
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Earth
Persona Abilities
Garu: A light Wind attack (1 enemy)
Illuzone: Inflicts Blind on one enemy
Next: Ninety-Nine Needles: Light stab attack that pierces to the back row (all enemies). (Lv. 10)

I mostly did the stats thing for fun. And what is "Wi...?" It's Will, or magical defense. The older games gave you a move that better blocked against magic (Samakaja), after all. Also, the Gravity (Gry) and Force (Zan) elements will be in this story as well.
We All Have Voices In Our Heads

Chapter Summary

Sakuya Shiomi has a prophetic dream where he meets a godly being wearing a mask. At the being’s behest, he is to play a game with his comrades: the Persona game.

The next night, when SEES opts to explore Tartarus, a mysterious bell echoes through the tower...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9/19/2009

Iwatodai, Gekkoukan High Dormitory, Evening

Sakuya stared in disbelief at the near-empty bottle of cough medicine that he downed over the past day and a half. He knew that he had gotten pretty sick, but was it really so bad in that he consumed the bottle with the same level of enthusiasm that he consumed a can of Dr. Salt?

"I guess it was. Aigis did say that my fever peaked at 40 degrees…and there's all that snot on my pillow. How many bottles of this stuff did I drink?"

No use in pondering about it.

He figured that some bed rest and time away from SEES would be good for his well-being, but it wasn't meant to be. The guys on his floor didn't know how to keep quiet. His fever had broken, but the cough and snot were persistent, and exhaustion overwhelmed him. At least he had a good excuse for more sleep. He reached for his cell and rung up Mitsuru, the unofficial den mother of the dorm.

"Kirijo-senpai? You around?"

"Ugh…" He heard Mitsuru sighing. He could see it: her hand on her forehead, hung low, looking like she wanted to pass out. "You caught me at a bad time, Shiomi. Is it urgent?"

"It is. My throat is killing me and my nose is all runny," He said softly. "Is there any cough medicine that can put me to sleep?"

"A cough suppressant? I believe I-"

*crash*

"Hah! I win, Shinji!"

"For cryin' out loud…"

"I win, dammit! Now apologize to the protein!"
"I swear, if you could marry a jar of that shit, you would!"

Those were Akihiko and Shinjiro's voices, accompanied by a loud shattering sound that made Sakuya cringe. No wonder Mitsuru sounded drained.

"Can I have a bottle when you have a moment to spare, Senpai?"

"Yes, yes, can you sit tight for thirty minutes – Akihiko, I swear, if you break those cabinets -!"

"I can wait," Sakuya responded.

"Thank you so much for being patient, Shiomi. I promise that it'll be thirty minutes at the most." Another thing broke in the background. "If you can walk, I advise you not to go into the kitchen… wait, what the…"

The sound of glass breaking rang in Sakuya's ears. Akihiko had broken a mug, and it sounded like another spat between him and his childhood friend began. Shinjiro knew better, though, and opted not to fight back in Mitsuru's presence.

Three swift stomps stopped Akihiko's onslaught. Even from his end of the phone, Sakuya could feel an icy air breeze through his room. He only got some vague hints from Akihiko on just what Mitsuru's executions were, but the chills that shot down his spine confirmed his suspicions.

Not that Akihiko didn't deserve it.

"Akihiko, guess what kind of punishment you're getting?"

"D-Don't get in between men having it out…"

Sakuya hung up his cell to the sounds of Akihiko's tortured cries of pain.

He flopped on the bed with a dramatic sigh. All of a sudden, he felt drained of energy. His eyes were downcast, seemingly blank and empty.

"They can be such a pain sometimes…I wish they'd just…"

His body felt heavy.

As sleep began to overwhelm him, something that glittered floated into his room, perching silently on his left bedpost. It was gold and shiny, and it reminded Sakuya of a firefly.

"Is that a butterfly…?"

The butterfly's wings slowed, letting magical sparks shower off of it. It turned to Sakuya, and he acknowledged it – barely – as its antennae twitched, seemingly in response to his presence.

The boy yawned like a cat, letting sleep overtake him…

__________________________

Unknown location…
"There is no man alone, because every man is a microcosm, and carries the whole world about him..."

This was a quote that Terauchi-sensei had likely mentioned. Maybe. The memory was blury, split asunder by blurred lines of light. He would retain only small fragments of whatever lessons of the day were given, filtering out whatever was irrelevant or plain stupid. The nutty math teacher, now there was someone who he'd set his filter to maximum to. The same could be said for Ono-sensei, a man so patriotic that the only person who could surpass him in that regard would be a truly raging foreign Japanophile. Bonus points would go to said Japanophile if he were either a naturalized citizen or, at least, fluent in the country's mother tongue.

Hey, wait; didn't that blonde French kid fit that bill? He didn't quite remember.

In fact, there were a lot of things that he couldn't seem to remember...

As his body, swaddled in light and stark nude, traveled on this seemingly kaleidoscopic road of parallel lines, he could see a swelling of pictures swathed in shadows appear before him. There was a picture of him at the kendo club. There was a picture of him at Wuck with a dark-skinned girl who was the same year as he. There was a picture of him the day that midterm scores were posted. There was a picture of him and Akihiko on the train, with Akihiko doing squats. Sakuya was banging his head on the window at how bizarre the whole act was. There was a picture of him eating Fuuka’s lump of mush that she called food. He liked her and encouraged her, but in reality, he wanted her to give up. She was too timid for her own good. There was a picture of him meeting Aigis for the first time, her body ethereal in her sky blue sundress.

For all of his moments of aloofness, the possibility of losing those memories, mundane as they were, scared him. On the night of the August full moon, he realized why he decided to play hero with the rest of the super secret student organization.

He'd risk life and limb to never be alone again...

Never alone...

...

...

...

...Where was this?

He remembered floating in a psychedelic expanse of space and then –

...This place...His body felt coddled.

The cold, marble floor reminded Sakuya of a chessboard. In the very center of this strange, golden shrine that floated in space, a golden emblem of a butterfly was embossed on the floor. The shrine was serene, in the open air of a dimension that made Sakuya feel like floating. The "sky," if one could call it that, was a rippling green shroud, distorting and puckering every so often.

He never felt so calm in his life. He felt like he was a child again, at home with his mother and father. They were ordinary people with ordinary jobs, but they both had a sense of curiosity and wanderlust that manifested with special trips and finding as many new hobbies and things to discover as possible. His parents were the ones who contributed to Sakuya’s global taste in music
from all parts of the world.

He missed them…

As he sat, soaking in his new surroundings, the golden butterfly fluttered in front of him, exuding a beautiful, warm light. It was so delicate and small, but the aura that it projected, for reasons seemingly absurd, reminded Sakuya of his late father. Curiously, he slowly reached his hand out to it…

…And suddenly, in a flurry of light, the butterfly began to transform. It split into many butterflies, twisting and climbing into solid form. Their fusion hit a climax as it took the shape of a man – a man who wore a long white blazer, pants, a black turtleneck, and, pasted on his face, a mask. The mask was whiter than snow, with its right side decorated with purple decal that resembled a butterfly's wing. The starkness contrasted beautifully with his bark brown hair, tied into a thin ponytail.

The man's presence left Sakuya awestruck. He truly felt that he was in the presence of a god...

"Welcome…welcome to the rift between consciousness and unconsciousness. Before you speak, answer me this: what is your name?"

The man's voice was so tender and deep, compelling Sakuya on a level he had never experienced before. Though his mind and memories had splintered like tessellations, he concentrated, dug deep into that mind, seeking that one facet of himself. There was a lot of power in a name...

"My name is…" His voice was raspy. "…Sakuya Shiomi."

His splintered memories slowly sewed back together, whole again.

The man nodded in approval. "There are only so many who can retain their memories when they are bought to this place. You have passed my test."

"Test?" Sakuya raised a brow.

"I can sense that you're confused. I wouldn't be much of a guide if I did not answer the obvious, no?"

This place was like the Velvet Room, in a way. Curious at this familiar feeling, Sakuya positioned himself upright to lend his ear to this stranger…

"My name is Philemon. I am a dweller in this rift. You may not remember me, but I have always been by your side."

He gently gestured his hand. An illumination of a blue butterfly glistened – the same butterfly Sakuya had seen at his side from time to time. He was that…?

"As you are surely aware, the power you wield is called 'Persona.' Personas are your other selves…they are the gods capable of nurturing and protection...they are the demons that can be cruel and sinister. All humans bear these selves within them...these 'masks.' You, in particular, have masks that you can wear in virtually any given situation, so much so that my own servants have given it a special label."

With another gesture, a projection of Orpheus appeared in his hand. Following him was Jack Frost, a Pixie, Neko Shogun, Oberon, Hetaconchieres, Parvati, Dionysus, Decarabia, Samael…the stream of 'masks,' as this man put it, were nearly endless. All of Sakuya's Personas were "him."
"Are you referring to the power of the Wild Card?" Sakuya asked, still overwhelmed.

"Is that what they're calling it now?" For a moment, Philemon broke his façade, his voice taking a tone of disapproval. The façade rebuilt itself in a flash. "Your powers aside, please listen to my story."

Sakuya listened intently.

"For years, I have given myself the duty of observing mankind's evolution. Nine years ago, a band of adults overcame the scourge of humanity's darkest thoughts in its purest form, banishing it to the abyss. They have shown me that mankind has the potential to reach enlightenment, saving the world in the process."

"Enlightenment…?" Sakuya tilted his head.

"As one who guides those who desire growth and hope, I have granted the power of Persona to humans who have sought to reach a higher purpose for the greater good. On that night, when those five souls saved the world, I found it in myself to act as a wholly neutral observer, and keep my hands directly out of the fates of man."

This being was the one who granted the power of Persona…did he have command over Igor and Elizabeth?

"Alas, mankind can easily succumb to weakness as easily as it can gain strength. Because of this weakness, space-time has been distorted, and the most primitive thoughts and desires of humanity stalk the night, consuming the weak and feeble."

Thoughts? Desires?

"Are you…referring to the Shadows?" Sakuya's eyes widened. "Is that what they truly are!?"

Philemon nodded his head. "This world has reached a point where even mankind's inner demons and gods, which display their own level of intelligence, can no longer manifest. Many demons themselves have been reduced to what you call 'Shadows.' It is very fitting, insofar as they are a shadow of what they once were. Because of these Shadows and the distortion of space-time, mankind's yearning for death has dramatically increased."

It was almost too much. "Death…? The Dark Hour and the Shadows…they're consuming the minds of regular people…but death? How can that be?"

Philemon shook his head. "Child, I have taken it upon myself to only observe. I have bought naught but suffering to those I have interfered with. I believe that you and your companions will find that answer in due time."

"But…!"

"But your journey is not why I am here."

It took a lot of restraint for Sakuya not to snap at this being. He claimed to be almighty, yet he'd stand aside and do nothing?

"Sakuya Shiomi…as of now, you and your companions' very existences are at stake. Within the next day, you and your friends will be drawn to another time and place, drawn into two horrid battles…"

"Two battles?"
"Yes…one battle where something horrible has been long forgotten…and another battle where something horrible has been remembered…these will irrevocably affect your destinies. For this reason, your companions can no longer remain as they are now."

"What do you mean?"

Philemon gestured again. In his hand was a familiar face: Io, Yukari's Persona, an ebony-skinned girl in a dress, chained to the head of a bull.

"Unfortunately for your friends, though they have tapped into the power of Persona, they cannot access the many potential 'masks' that they have within them." He gestured again, and in his palm was Hermes, Junpei's Persona. "Your friends are rigid in their thinking. They are so afraid of exposing their weaknesses that their masks remain the same. They cannot grow."

He then gestured both of his hands. In his left was Polydeuces, and in his right was Penthesilea. He gestured his left hand first. "This poor orphan is so afraid of his weakness and so arrogant that he truly embraces the passion for fighting that Pollux once possessed. Pollux cut off his own hands and replaced them with iron gloves so that he could box with reckless abandon. This young man has sides to him that you are only faintly aware of, because he will not expose them, nor will he come to terms with them himself."

He then gestured his right hand. "This regal young woman embraces the same rigid sense of honor that Penthesilea burdened herself with when she impaled Hippolyta with a spear. The Amazonian queen chose to die in battle honorably, just as this woman is burdening herself with atoning for her family's sins. The words of her father about the power of companionship have been lost to her, and she, too, cannot come to terms with certain sides of herself."

The rest of SEES' Personas illuminated on his arms. "The rest of your friends are much like that. They treat their masks like a tool…" When he paused, Castor's projection slid to the forefront. "…Or in some cases, like a parasite. While they must come to terms with their rigidness themselves, I implore you, Sakuya, to guide them. I swore to neutrality, and I cannot assist you with your current journey, but the battle that you will endure will be grueling. For that reason, I will break my oath this one time and implore you to send your companions to me."

A vaguely awestruck look was plastered all over Sakuya's face. This was too much to take in at once, and yet, it all made sense…his friends seemed to have one mandated role per person: Junpei was the happy-go-lucky pervert, Aigis was the stalwart robot, Akihiko was the passionate fighter, Ken was the child who wanted to grow up quickly, Koromaru was the loyal dog…as each day passed, they seemed to warp themselves into these roles, sometimes to an extreme degree (although he could chalk up Akihiko's protein addiction to a freak head injury). If what Philemon said was true, then they would need to change, and quickly, to deal with this foretold threat…

…He might as well throw his hat in the ring. When the seers of fate spoke, fate usually followed suit.

"How can I get SEES to meet you?" Sakuya asked, his resolve firm.

"For thousands of years, mankind has found its way to me via a series of rituals. They differ from culture to culture, but they find their way to me in the end. To have your companions meet me, they need to play a game."

Sakuya's face turned slack-jawed, brow upturned. "A game? Are you serious?"

"Quite." Sakuya swore that he heard Philemon snicker. "There is a ritual inspired by one of your urban legends that the Japanese have performed for a number of years, and that ritual has bought
them to me. It has been lost in this period of time, however, and so, I shall explain this ritual to you…”

Sakuya raptly paid attention…

"…And that is how it goes. I recommend that you do this as soon as possible. Now then…"

A wave of sleepiness struck Sakuya like a punch to the head. He panicked a little, letting out a small gasp.

"Wait! There’s still so much I have to ask…what are you, Philemon?” He shouted, his body fading.

Instead of responding, Philemon removed his mask…

The sight was enough to throw Sakuya completely off guard.

Before he could say anything, he was cast out of Philemon's domain, sleep overcoming him once again.

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9/20/2009

Iwatodai, Gekkoukan High Dormitory Rooftop, Morning

"Well this stinks…”

Sakuya acted dutifully and chose to explain the Persona game to the rest of SEES after his cold died down. Before he could say "I've been getting all of my Personas from a sealed off blue room run by a crazy old man with a long nose," he was bombarded with suspicion and "concerns" that were poorly disguised interrogation questions. Mitsuru and Fuuka immediately went off to prowl the Internet for this so-called game, Junpei went off to see Chidori, Yukari and Ken dismissed it and took off, and Akihiko went off to train. Only Aigis, Koromaru, and Shinjiro stayed put – the former was all too loyal to Sakuya, which he appreciated for once, and the latter two had nothing better to do.

"This is just a dandy start, Sakuya. Just dandy. I swear, we might as well be working for the Prime Minister, acting all secretive and business-like…how old are we again?"

"Sakuya-san, your skin temperature has risen, and your muscles are twitching. Has your cold returned? Are you in need of assistance?” The robotic maiden Aigis inquired, ever conscientious.

"Ah hah…no, Aigis, I'm fine…just…peachy…”
"Your tone of voice and intensity of muscle spasms imply otherwise. I believe that you are, as they say, 'pissed off.'

Sakuya whipped his arms up in frustration, snapping. "All right Aigis, you win. I'm pissed the fuck off. I ask this one favor from the rest of the team, and what do I get in return? I get interrogated, ignored, gawked at, and...and...a fucking preaching about protein! What the hell!?" He yanked his air, shouting profanities and angrish, much to the discomfort of the two people with him.

"If it makes you feel any better, Sakuya-san," Aigis began, placing a gentle hand on the ranting boy's shoulder, "I freely choose to play this game with you, Aragaki-san, and Koromaru-san."

Sakuya stopped mid-rant. "You will!?"

"Your well-being is of utmost importance to me. If this serves to help you, then I will gladly participate." Aigis let off that charming, doll-like smile that, loath he was to admit, Sakuya found cute. He turned his head to the third member of "the Triad," as he mentally dubbed their Senpai. Said member snorted.

"I'll do anything to avoid Aki this week. This game sounds dumb, but then again, so is the idea of escorting a member of the student council who's in potential danger to school via helicopter." He rubbed his head furiously. "What the hell is Kirijo thinking?"

"Anything you'd like to share with the class, Aragaki-san?" Aigis asked with her seemingly clueless (?) charm. These days, it was hard to tell if it was her stunted social growth speaking, or if Aigis somehow understood sarcasm.

The target of her question sighed. "Can we just get this over with? I'll tell you later."

"Then we shall indeed get this over with. I have obtained suspicious data about that incident that I wish to inquire about, Aragaki-san. I also have proof that you are at least partially responsible for Sanada-san's current mental state."

"Sh-shaddup!"

The seemingly oblivious Koromaru barked in happiness.

Sakuya followed Philemon's instructions down to a T: The four of them were arranged in a square, positioned at the corners of the roof. According to the rules, they'd all shout the chant, and then tap the next person on the shoulder. After the fourth person made it to the first person's corner, the spell would begin to work.

"Did you guys get all of that?" Sakuya shouted from his corner.

"I am beginning to suspect that this is based on an urban legend of some kind..." Aigis shouted back.

"Don't think about it. All right..." Sakuya took a deep breath. "Persona, Persona! Come to us!"

He glided across the rooftop where Aigis was standing, at his distant right. He tapped her once on the shoulder, and she smiled in turn, a little too eager.

"Here goes...Persona, Persona, please come to us!"

Aigis then proceeded to bolt away from Sakuya with the jets located in her feet, kicking up dust and cement that sent him into a coughing fit. His body was charred, much to his shock. She glided her
way to Shinjiro in the lower left hand corner and tapped his shoulder. Of course, Aigis being Aigis, that tap was more like a chop, nearly breaking the poor man's shoulder.

"What the hell!?"

"Did I not tap your shoulder sufficiently, Aragaki-san?"

No use arguing with a damn robot.

"Ugh, whatever…fuck, that's painful." He clutched his shoulder and sighed.

"Man, why did I volunteer…Persona, Persona, come here, I guess…"

He stumbled to Koromaru, who decided to mark his territory on his corner of the school roof. He tapped the dog's back. "Dammit Koro-chan, I thought we told you not to pee up here!"

The Shiba Inu did not seem to care. He was all too happy being in this ritual, his tail rapidly wagging. He took his party by barking three times loudly to the sky.

"Koromaru says, 'Persona, Persona, please come here!' He is enjoying this a lot."

"What does he have to say about marking up here?" Shinjiro asked, as Koromaru trotted to Sakuya's starting corner to complete the ritual.

"He says that he couldn't hold it in."

"Sheesh…"

The oddball group stood still, waiting for the game to take effect. All that Sakuya could hear was the wind. Already the regrets and feelings of stupidity were surfacing.

"…Soooo…Shiomi, what's supposed to happen now?" Shinjiro asked, clearly annoyed. "I swear, if Aki fed you protein, I'd understand, because the side effects of it practically turn you stupid."

It took effort for Sakuya not to snap back, because he himself was angry at the lack of results. Given that Elizabeth could be a troll worthy of the average thirteen year old online gamer under the right circumstances, he theorized that her master's master was the same. The man did mention that he bought misery to those he meddled with…huh. No wonder. He was snapped out of his reverie by Koromaru's furious barks.

"Koromaru, what are you…"

Sakuya stopped short, as though he were shot.

Standing in the midst of the rooftop was a specter of some sort…was it female? It looked female. It was too translucent to make out her features, but…

"What the hell!?" Shinjiro stumbled back. "Is that a Shadow!?"

"Analysis verifies that it is not a Shadow…" Aigis' robotic legs were bent, taking her battle stance. "In fact, I cannot get a sufficient reading on it at all…!"

Koromaru hunched over, ready to pounce.

Sakuya couldn't find it in him to fight back. The more he stared at the specter, the more his chest ached.
This specter seemed strangely familiar…why did his chest hurt…!?

*Bzzt*

Electrical currents swirled violently, stirring beneath their feet!

"What the hell's going on!? You have a lot of explaining to do Shi-"

*Bzzzt *

"Agh!"

"Aragaki-senpai!"

One of the lightning currents shocked Shinjiro right through the body, making him collapse. The sparks crescendoed and rose, violently shooting out at every direction. Getting struck by one was unavoidable – Aigis soon joined Shinjiro on the ground, and Koromaru right after. Sakuya reminded himself to curse Philemon out repeatedly once this whole debacle was over, his consciousness fading again…

…Was continuously getting blacked out going to be a theme for him tonight? He hoped not.

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9/20/2009

*The Entrance of Tartarus, Dark Hour*

It was futile for Mitsuru Kirijo to wrangle any answers from the four people who were zoning blankly at a wall, despite the fact that it was SEES' time to resume their exploration of Tartarus after a few days off. Not even Junpei throwing a gum wad onto Aigis' face by accident stirred them from their reverie. The odds were stacked against them, but the rest of the team tried to rouse them, shock be damned.

"Hey, Shinji…guess what, Shinji? I threw out all the veggies from the Stamina Meal that I got at Wakatsu today. I'm lacking in vitamins, and I ate ten protein bars in one sitting. Will you please lecture me now?" Akihiko shook his childhood friend, to no avail. "Please tell me I'm an idiot! Headbutt me, slap me, anything! You're scaring me Shinji!"

Nothing. Akihiko's worried tone rose to levels that the others had never seen, slapping his friend's cheeks to wake him up. Not even rendering his cheeks red and stinging could snap him out of it.

Yukari, ever worried for her leader (even if her attitude told her otherwise), crouched to her level, gazing upward at her leader. "He almost looks like something spooked him."

"Maybe he got spooked because he realized that the school festival got canceled? He realized that he'd never get to see a bunch of girls in maid outfit-"

*bonk *

"Ow-!"
"Ugh…Stupei…"

Mitsuru shook her head. "It had to be done. The typhoon was too much of a risk, so we had to cancel. I do feel bad, but the students' safety comes first, Iori."

"Hey, don't feel bad Mitsuru. It's just proof that we can't beat Mother Nature – hey, hey Shinji! I was gonna go out and run in the typhoon! My training is more important than my safety! Pneumonia!? Pfft, only weenies get pneumonia! I can punch pneumonia and it'll go away! Can you hear me, Shinji!? Hello?" Akihiko became desperate, shaking Shinjiro's body with more vigor than before.

"This is pretty bad…did they play that game that Leader mentioned?" Fuuka, the nervous support member of SEES, suggested. "I couldn't find much online about the game, other than some blurb about the 'Square' urban legend…"

"Is that so? My own search was futile, Yamagishi…I can only assume it's some kind of coincidence. Then again, the term 'persona' has been around for two centuries…" Mitsuru pondered.

"Wait…there was the blurb about the legend, and, for some reason, there was an external link to the Nanjo Conglomerate's website, but I found nothing about the game on it," Fuuka remembered.

"Nanjo!?" Mitsuru was taken aback. How strange it seemed – the same group that her grandfather opted to split from and start his own years ago, being mentioned in tandem with Personas…no, it was too soon to jump to conclusions. "It may mean nothing, but thank you for mentioning that, Yamagishi. It seems as if I have a lot of research on my hands when tonight's operation is over…"

Junpei and Yukari glanced at one another, confused. Though Yukari was successful in prodding answers from their chilly Senpai two months ago, said Senpai still intimidated them. They mutually decided, with a nod, to not question Mitsuru's shock.

Ken Amada, the youngest of the group, remained quiet this entire time. Though he was afraid for their leader, he had no idea how to rouse them. In fact, if a particular, beanie-clad teenager were to remain that way for a while, he thought…

"…No, I can't think about that now…"

"Think about what, Amada-kun?" Yukari quipped, noticing Ken's staring at the floor.

"Ah, I can't think about our leader's new Persona! That's right, he said he was gonna go to that Persona-summoning place and get a new one! Yeah! Now I remember!" He feigned excitement, pumping his fist in the air. "Better not think too hard, because it's gonna be a surprise! I bet it'll look cool!"

"Ahaha, that's right! He did say that!" Junpei grinned, equally as eager. The rouse worked. "Remember that chick in the black bathing suit he summoned last time? I bet that he's got one with big bazongas lined up!"

"Bazongas? Seriously, Junpei-san?"

"Err…wait, how would you know-"

"ELIZABETH!"

Like a firecracker, Sakuya snapped out of his trance, panic and fear drawn madly on his face. "I
forgot that I had to see her today! I need a new Persona! I'm late! Shit! Dammit!"

With all the grace of a drunken man desperate to throw up, Sakuya shoved his companions away and bolted to the Velvet Room door. Since the rest of the team couldn't see it, it looked as if he ran into an invisible portal.

"I'll never get used to that," Junpei mused, still startled by their leader's disappearance. "Every time he goes there, it looks like he freakin' jump cuts out of existence!"

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**The Velvet Room**

Out of reality Sakuya sped, and he wound up into the proverbial frying pan that was the Velvet Room. Gone was the sharp silence of Tartarus, which was now replaced with the ever-omniscient aria, sung by a disembodied soprano, never failing to shake his very core. He slowly looked up to see a smiling Elizabeth, Igor's oddball assistant.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," the blue-clad woman spoke, professional yet coy. "This place exists between dream and reality, mind and matter...how unexpected of you to visit while my master is away."

Sakuya surveyed the room, noticing that Igor was indeed missing. "So you're house-sitting?"

"I am! This is what historians call 'usurping the throne!'" Elizabeth giggled. To Sakuya, it sounded more evil than cute. "I distinctly recall that you wished for one of your so-called 'fusion sessions' today? I know of the process, but alas, only a Kusi Mitama is available for summoning at the moment.

"Sakuya could tell she was lying.

"In Shinto, Kusi Mitama is an aspect of the soul that brings good omens! It can cure the sick and provide great wisdom. You can tell it's so trustworthy and charming because it perpetually winks at you! I never tire of it..."

As she began the fusion preparations, a forlorn-looking man stepped out from one of the four doors that were propped up on the Velvet Room walls. He shared Elizabeth's lucid skin, golden eyes and platinum hair, and his crisply tailored bellhop uniform was decorated much like her dress. With a sigh, he threw down the Persona Compendium without a care.

"Elizabeth, it's unbecoming of you to lie to our guests. I'd say that our current guest's Compendium is half-full. I believe that our guest can fuse whatever he...darn well pleases." The man stopped himself short of cussing.

Elizabeth turned her head to the man, surprised at his sudden appearance. It had been quite some time since she had last seen him. "Theo...how unexpected. How do you do?" She turned to her guest with a frown. "This man is my incompetent younger brother Theodore. I realize his name's rather lengthy, so you can just call him Theo."

The man in question, Theodore, let out an exasperated sigh, too weary to argue. He acknowledged Sakuya with a small bow, but still looked terse. "Thank you for bearing with my sister all this time. My name is Theodore." He slumped down onto a spare chair that had been laying around, not
bothering to look up. "I'm sure that my sister's naivete can be infuriating to deal with at times, but you seem to be working well with her."

He could feel Elizabeth's glare beneath her saccharine smile. Punishment was coming. Normally, he'd be afraid, but Theodore didn't really care this time around. Before she could speak, he continued. "I've been summoned back here because our master is away, in case you were curious, Sakuya-sama."

"Is that so?"

"When our master is away, the Velvet Room's existence loses its stability, but you needn't worry. Still, the end of a storm is happening here right now…"

"You mean the typhoon?" Sakuya tilted his head.

"Storms shake things up," Elizabeth interjected. "It is not just the outside world that is affected, but mankind's souls become encroached as well. We avert our eyes when a storm appears. When a storm clears out, we face what we have shielded our eyes from during it…storms can even affect time itself."

Elizabeth faced her guest, serious for a change. "Tell me, my dear guest…when you were hunkered down during the typhoon, was your soul encroached by something? Did you avert your eyes from it? Or did you confront it?"

Sakuya gasped.

He did face something that struck his very core. Even though their meeting was brief and strange, he knew in his heart that Philemon foretold something drastic; the man said it himself after all. Did these two know about him?

"Actually, something did happen…"

He was cut off with the sharp sound of an ear-shattering alarm. The sudden noise threw off both him and the siblings.

"An alarm!?” Theodore shouted in surprise. "What could this be abo-"

*click*

Everything went dark.

Some time had passed, much to the dismay of the rest of SEES. "If this keeps up, the Dark Hour will be over before we know it," Junpei sighed. "Come to think of it, I know we need to get back into the swing of things, but no one's wandered into Tartarus or anything…”

"This is true," Mitsuru agreed. "There's no new clues or things to find either." She pulled out her rapier and a small rag, cleaning it to a tee. "This may seem sudden, but if Shiomi doesn't come out in the next two minutes, we'll go ahead without him. I'll take the lead, Yamagishi will support, and we'll keep several people down here to keep her safe. I was thinking of trying a five-man team today, after going over some strategies with Akihiko. Let me give you an idea of what I'm talking
The redhead sheathed her blade in one fell swoop, poised and polished as ever. The finality in her voice signified that there was no room for negotiation. No one said a word, agreement unanimous. Mitsuru took out a small sheet of paper and gestured everyone over to review the new strategy. Yukari looked on with a defeated look on her face.

"Why are you always like that, Senpai? I thought we were getting along better too…"

* bong… *

"Wh-what's that sound!?"

Yukari tensed up at the sound of an ominous ringing bell. Its low timbre echoed through Tartarus' ground chamber, sound waves rattling the room.

Mitsuru's body tensed. "Was that a bell?"

The bell rang four times before stopping. The echo that reverberated eerily shook.

"…It stopped." Akihiko took up a fighting stance. "We'd better be on guard!"

Fuuka, ever flustered, pulled out her evoker. "What's going on…? I'll summon Lucia to –"

* click *

The lights in the Velvet Room clicked back on in a flash. The music that permeated the room was cut short. Instead of one young man sitting patiently in comfortable silence, there were now nine others, shouting, confused, and fussing about.

"Wh-wh-what the hell!? Where is this place!? Why is it so blue!? Who are you people!? Is this an elevator!?" Yukari squirmed in place, clearly panicking. The rest of the lot were no better, all of them resembling deer in headlights. If for nothing else, Shinjiro, Aigis and Koromaru were functioning again!

The situation even threw the Velvet Room duo for a loop. Elizabeth took on the situation with her usual charm. "Uninvited guests in a private chamber? My my, how scandalous! The pervert is among us!"

"Ex-CUSE me!?” Junpei jumped back.

"Ahem!" Theodore cleared his throat, taking the courtesy to bow to everyone. "Please ignore what she said. I can only assume that this is a facet of fate…dear friends of our guest, my name is Theodore, and she is my older sister Elizabeth. This is the Velvet Room, and we are residents of it. We welcome you."

Only Aigis bowed back. The others were still reeling in shock.
"Velvet Room…? Is this the place where you get your Personas, Leader?" Yukari asked, still in awe of the atmosphere. Said leader nodded his head, surprised himself.

"Yes indeed," Elizabeth spoke. A small sharpening noise piqued behind her back, clearly intending to use the knife on Theodore later. "We residents provide assistance to our guests, which includes fusing and summoning Personas."

Akihiko was nonplussed. "Did you summon us here?"

Elizabeth sighed softly. "We did not...we are not sure why you are here, actually. Only our very special guests who have signed a very special contract can enter this very special room. In other words, the Velvet Room is like the mile-high club."

Everyone caught that, save for the young Ken. Theodore sighed. "Sister, are you perhaps referring to an airline club for first class travelers? Because last I heard, the mile high club is-"

"The mile high club is a gathering for wealthy first class travelers for wining and dining before partaking in a trip on a massive flying eagle in seats that are no bigger than the average man's bottom. There is no other explanation, Theo." The last sentence was lined with venom. He sighed again giving up.

The elevator suddenly slowed its ascent, skidding to a complete stop…

…And before Aigis could calmly note that they were descending into an uncontrollable free fall that would render most people into spatter and mush, the Velvet Room crashed violently to the bottom.

_____________________________________________________

_Uknown location..._

Sakuya never gave a thought as to where the bottom of the Velvet Room elevator was. He certainly wasn't expecting it to be a countryside high school.

He had once attended a school like the one they were standing in now. Its similarities were striking, from the wooden floors to the narrow hallways. The culture festival that his old school held even resembled the one in front of them to a degree. He could see a takoyaki stand, a "Half-Baked Kitchen," and a couple of kids playing guitar nearby. General consensus among the rest of SEES was mixed; the second years were apprehensive of their new environment, Shinjiro and Mitsuru were a bit bewildered, and Akihiko was pumped for some reason. He probably needs something new to beat up, Sakuya concluded.

"Finally, I get to witness a culture festival with my own two eyes!" Before anyone could speak, Elizabeth fluttered about with excitement. "Once a year, the students release all of their pent-up passion in this grand ceremony of excitement! Ah yes, this is when students work painstakingly hard by making every last decoration, every last takoyaki ball, every last sign by hand…and when all of this is said and done, the students all gather together, sweating and strained from their hard work, and gather together at the stroke of midnight, a student goes under a series of strenuous rites, and with great command, uses his or her will to summon a spirit from a great flame…! And then…and then…when the dead spirit is summoned –"
"Elizabeth, what you are currently describing is a ritual to summon a ghost from a tomb that is usually performed by Satanists," Theodore sighed, slapping his forehead. "Everyone knows that a culture festival ends with the students gathering around a fire and sacrificing their firstborn sons from each of their families. It's quite obvious."

The rest of SEES awkwardly stared at them.

"I guess her brother thinks that a festival ends like the first of Egypt's great misfortunes in the book of Exodus…should I explain that to him, Shiomi?" Mitsuru sighed. He shook his head. Obviously, he had dealt with the woman's antics before, at least. Ever the prudent commander, Mitsuru stepped forward to the still wound-up Elizabeth.

"Just to be clear, you did not bring us here on purpose, correct?"

"Nope!" Elizabeth sang, still excited. "We have no idea what this place is, and we certainly did not intend to see you off to it, since only Sakuya-sama is a guest of the Velvet Room."

As she spun, her line of vision stopped at the three little elephants in the room: the charming little Shiba Inu, the strange mechanical maiden, and the hunchbacked man wearing the suspicious-looking pea coat. Something was quite off about them…

"…In any case," She spoke abruptly, ending her little tailspin, "It was the will of the Velvet Room that seems to have bought you all here. The Velvet Room is inseparable from its guests' fate. There is a reason why you were all summoned here."

"So what you're saying is that us coming here was inevitable?" Akihiko scoffed. "Sounds like a load of bullshit to me."

"Believe that if you want. Destiny bought you here. And if I may interfere with my guest's journey a little…I dare to make a suggestion and recommend that you scout the area. Theo can go with you. He's been so lazy recently." She then turned her line of sight to Sakuya. "Would you come and inspect the Velvet Room with me, Sakuya-sama?"

He nodded his head. Not much else could be done now other than investigating. Before he could say anything, Elizabeth leaned into his ear, whispering:

"…And also, bring those three with you. I need to discuss something with them…"

Sakuya glanced over his shoulder to see that it was, indeed, the three members of SEES that Elizabeth was referring to. It seemed to finally be time to address that issue. As the blue-clad woman found her way back to the Velvet Room, Sakuya gestured at Aegis, Koromaru, and Shinjiro to follow him.

They had entered the Velvet Room…or so it seemed.

"Hey Shiomi, wasn't this an elevator a few minutes ago?" A suspicious Shinjiro asked. True to his words, the room was no longer an ascending elevator, but a stationary little platform with a table and couch, floating off in a midnight blue abyss. A plethora of stairways criss-crossed one another in the air, some of them leading to nowhere, some of them brushing against sets of clockwork gears propped by large metal rods.
"My my, our shady-looking friend is correct…contrary to its purpose, the Velvet Room is now stationary…how unprecedented…"

What caught Sakuya's interest even more were the four doors propped near the couch. Sixteen weighty locks kept them shut, and each of the doors had a little light flashing over it – from left to right, the lights were white, red, blue, and yellow. Elizabeth stepped forward and shook the door with the blue light. Push or pull, the door wouldn't budge. She only succeeded in making the locks rattle more.

"Sixteen locks…and not even I, with my great physical strength, can budge them. I would have considered this a challenge too. What purpose do they have here?"

"My analysis indicates that all of those locks are made with materials that my data bank does not have information about," Aigis spoke. "An attempt to destroy them with my Albireo would likely do more harm than good."

Koromaru curiously sniffed the white and red-lit doors. "Koromaru-san seems intrigued by the scents that these doors are emitting. He finds these scents unlike anything he's ever known," Aigis interpreted. The Shiba Inu's sniffing intensified. "Why do you find these so intriguing, Koromaru-san?"

"There doesn't seem to be anything that we can do about them now," Shinjiro deduced. He turned to face Elizabeth, face stern. "Besides, I wanna know why Blue Lady here invited the three of us…"

The clash between Elizabeth's usual chipper demeanor and her current, serious expression was immense. She folded her arms, holding her scrutinizing gaze on Aigis, Koromaru, and Shinjiro.

"I can sense an immense change in you three…I have a suspicion that you three, in tandem with my guest, have done something that has been forbidden for nearly a decade…"

"She's definitely referring to the Persona game…" Sakuya's eyes were wide with shock. "She knows that we did it…"

"Huh…no one will answer my questions. I thought it was just them ignoring me, but I took that guitar player's takoyaki, and he didn't say anything. Anyone else notice how weird the students are?" Junpei asked, leaning on a wall.

"You're right…I asked where this place was," Yukari began, "and they told me the school's named Yasogami High. I ask where the heck it is, and this same guy tells me how fun the festival is. It's as if the question flew right over his head."

The level of uneasiness in the room increased.

"Has anyone checked outside?" Mitsuru asked. She was poised like usual, but her voice was lower and less stern. Even she seemed nervous.

"I did, Mitsuru." Akihiko brushed his pants, which had remnants of dirt on them. "I don't think we can get out."

"What do you mean?"
"I tried stepping past the school gate, but when I did, I found myself right back inside. The same thing happened when I tried hopping the fence."

"And I am afraid that none of us can go back the way we got here." Theodore stepped in, entering the conversation. "The Velvet Room is no longer an elevator. There is no way back."

The uneasy air exploded into panic within a few seconds. "Why!? It's one strange thing after another…" Junpei moaned, clutching his head. "What's gonna happen to Chidori!? I promised I'd visit her, but if she's left in the hospital alone…"

"Given that Strega is shockingly lethargic when it comes to dealing with us, I think she'll be all right," Yukari assured him. "I tried looking at my cell earlier. Calling for help is out too…"

"We're trapped here then…" Mitsuru actually sounded fearful. "Will we never be able to go back…?"

"Do you remember my sister's words? The Velvet Room itself bought you here. This indicates that something that only all of you can do must be done here. As for what that thing is, all of you need to discover it for yourselves."

"Is there any way you can help us?" Ken timidly asked. Theo, in return, smiled tenderly. "As Elizabeth's current guest is trapped here as well, this situation shall affect his fate as it will all of yours. We will gladly lend our assistance to you, but we cannot do more than that."

"Assistance?" Fuuka piqued. It was just now that the rest of SEES noticed that she was tapping her head – something she did when Shadows were nearby. "I don't know how you can help us, but I have a strange feeling that Shadows are somewhere in this school. Am…am I crazy?"

"Hardly," Theo said. "It would be strange if Shadows weren't around. This place isn't reality at all. Time and space have no meaning here. They're in a continuous state of flux. This place could be argued to exist somewhere 'deeper' than the Velvet Room…your Tartarus only exists during an hour that was spurred by supernatural experiments, correct? In a way, it exists out of reality, just like this place."

"So it's just like Tartarus? Yikes…." Junpei's body tensed.

"And Fuuka senses Shadows here…" Despite the lingering fear, Akihiko's expression changed to eagerness. He snapped his fingers at this discovery: "This can only mean one thing!"

"Akihiko! You've been getting so zealous at the prospect of fighting lately! It's unhealthy…" Mitsuru shouted, angry.

"Well, what else is there to do? This man said this place was like Tartarus, right? There are Shadows here. Fighting is our only option." Despite his straight expression, everyone could sense the excitement laced in his voice.

The red headed girl had known of Akihiko's love of the thrill of battle for over two years now, but it had never quite reached this level before. This wasn't the time to address it, however. "I suppose you're right. There really are Shadows about…Yamagishi, could you lead the way?"
"…Huh. This is a pretty elaborate display they have going on here," Yukari mused. "I wonder if it's interactive."

"The flyer says we can walk in Alice's shoes. Who would want to step in the shoes of a girl who nearly gets friggin' beheaded by some crazy-ass queen?" Junpei sighed.

"B-But it's every girl's dream…" Fuuka sounded disappointed.

"So is being a housewife, Fuuka," Yukari retorted. Fuuka looked crushed for a fleeting moment – that retort was an all-too-harsh reminder of her poor cooking skills.

Mitsuru clapped her hands together, garnering everyone's attention. "I would have preferred to avoid combat, but this is likely our only clue to getting out of here. Hopefully, our leader and the other three won't be much longer. I've thought of a formation for this, but we'll need to…"

"Don't go in there. It's dangerous."

Mitsuru was cut off by a smooth, masculine voice. Turning around, she saw the source of it – an intimidating-looking man with unusually dark skin. Clutching at his side was a disarming young woman with long, blonde locks – quite the mismatched pair.

"There are monsters in there…" The girl pleaded. "You shouldn't go in…"

Unbeknownst to SEES, this duo was the crux of one of the two battles Philemon foresaw.

Chapter End Notes

The P3 hero will be called by his name in the Weird Masquerade Stage Play: Sakuya Shiomi. On the fanfiction(dot)net version of the story, he's called Makoto Yuuki, his name in the P3 films. The link to the FF version:
https://www.fanfiction.net/s/10979851/1/Persona-QQQ
Maya and Sakuya's Adventures in Wonderland

Chapter Summary

Two parties of Persona-users venture into a mysterious labyrinth, "You In Wonderland." Both sides venture out to seek answers as to why they were dragged here, completely unaware of the life-altering sights that lie ahead of them. Meanwhile, Tatsuya's old friends wake up...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Second Floor, Class 1 Display, "You In Wonderland…"

"I am Zen, and she is Rei. That is what we call each other."

The male half of the pair wasted no time with introductions. His facial expression – line free, colored like caramel, all made brighter by a pair of intense, jade green eyes – remained unchanged. His uniform reminded Ken and Junpei of an ominous, wizard-like figure: though it was similar to the Yasogami uniform, he wore a tattered cape held by a spiked collar. Sharply contrasting him was the girl named Rei – porcelain skin and wavy, blonde locks dotted with flower-shaped hair clips. She wore the Yasogami uniform for girls, save for swapping out the usual top with a yellow cardigan sweater. She was short and bent inward, clearly afraid. Like Zen, her eyes were green, but the circular whirlpools that made up her pupils were…off-putting.

"Who are you? Where did you all come from?" Zen spoke again, succinct.

For one thing, everyone was relieved that two students were actually speaking to them. Mitsuru concluded that they were likely trapped as well.

"Um…do you know of a place called Iwatodai?" Fuuka asked. Rei shrunk back, confused. "Er…well, can you tell us what this place is then?"

"It is exactly what it is."

"The students called this school 'Yasogami High.' Are they right?" Yukari asked. "Are you two students here?"

Rei seemed unusually hesitant. "Yasogami High…yes…this is Yasogami. And…we are students here. At this school. Right now. Yes."

Something was definitely off about her.

"Say, you said there were monsters in this display…were they Shadows?"

"Wh-what are Sh-Shadows?" Rei trembled.

"Shadows are creatures that consume the minds of the living. My companions and I have taken it
upon ourselves to fight them. Perhaps what you encountered in there were Shadows," said Mitsuru. "We ask you this because we wish to return to our home. This display is the only lead we have right now."

"Return…home?" Rei's voice rose ever so slightly.

"Y-Yeah…we want to go home," Junpei replied, unnerved.

"You…you can go home from here?" Rei asked, piqued. "Zen…did you hear that? We can go home…I want to go home…"

Zen tilted his head. Rei's words did reach his ears, but he did not quite understand them. To him, this school was the closest thing they could call "home," even though it certainly wasn't.

"But…Rei, where will we go 'home' to?" Zen asked, still stoic. "This school is our home. We have no other 'home' that we can 'go back to."

"You don't have a home?" Mitsuru asked with sympathy. She sized up the pair. She'd be hard-pressed to find a Japanese native with bright green eyes, and she'd be equally as challenged as to find a native with Zen's particular skin tone. "Are you foreigners? Did somebody bring you harm when you arrived to our country?"

"We were here when we gained consciousness. We don't remember anything before that," Zen explained, looking down.

"Is that so?" Mitsuru replied with shock. "Then you…"

"…Our memories were taken."

"Taken?" Mitsuru found that suspicious. She glanced behind her, seeing that the rest of SEES shared that sentiment. "But how would she…?"

"Our memories were taken," Rei repeated, monotone. "We don't know who took them, though."

Junpei rubbed his head, eyeing Rei. It was like seeing Chidori alone in the hospital, all vulnerable and afraid. This girl looked just as afraid as Chidori did when they had captured her. How could he, who took pride in being chivalrous, not try and give her a small degree of comfort?

"Maybe you fell here like we did? Or maybe…." The gears in his head were slowly turning. "…I bet that the person who stole your memories put you here!"

Yukari looked at her fellow junior with shock. "How...what...when did you get smart all of a sudden?"

"It makes sense to me, Yuka-tan." Junpei shrugged.

"Junpei's right." Akihiko nodded his head in agreement. "The culprit is definitely in here."

"Do you sense them, Senpai!?" Fuuka asked in surprise.

"Nope!" He grinned. "But I bet once we go through here, we'll find them. It'll be tons of fun! All we gotta do is take 'em out and get outta here. I mean, we've gotten out of bad situations like that before, right?"

Mitsuru sighed. "What's gotten into you lately…?"
Zen sized up these strangers. It was the first time they had met people like this.

"If they wish to leave this place, then perhaps I can remember…"

He tapped Rei on the shoulder. "Rei, do you wish to accompany these people?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "I want to find a home for us…I don't think we can live here forever."

"…If that is what you wish."

He turned to SEES, resolute. "Ever since the bell at the bell tower rang, I've felt compelled to enter this labyrinth here…now, I ask this of you: please take the two of us into this display. Inside is a vast labyrinth riddled with monsters and traps. I can protect Rei, and I am capable of fighting the monsters within it."

"Does this mean that you're a Persona-user?" Mitsuru inquired.

"Per…sona?"

Zen shyly looked down. For a mere moment, something strange flickered in his eyes. "I do not know what that is."

Mitsuru gestured the rest of the group closer to her, forming a small inner circle. "I don't know how to go about this…do any of you have suggestions?"

"They seem trustworthy to me," Junpei said, tapping his chin. "Besides, the more firepower, the better, right?"

Akihiko nodded in agreement. "I'm eager to get in there. Having an extra set of hands would be great."

"I have no objections," Ken stated simply, neutral to the situation.

"I'd honestly feel terrible leaving them behind," Fuuka piqued in.

Mitsuru lowered her voice: "I…I have my suspicions about them, but…"

"Senpai," Yukari interrupted. "Let's just take them with us. Everyone here thinks that we should. Zen-kun looks capable, don't you think?"

Something unreadable flickered across Mitsuru's face – something akin to annoyance or anger. An objection rose to her throat, but she pushed it down. It would do no good to lose composure here. 

"…Very well. Since our leader is preoccupied, I will temporarily take the lead." She turned to Junpei and Yukari, the former blank-faced, the latter looking as though she wanted to hide. "I intended to bring Akihiko and Aragaki with me to prevent putting you juniors in danger, but it appears that Aragaki won't be back anytime soon either. Iori and Takeba, will you two come with me please?"

"You're leading….?" Junpei sounded disappointed. "Alright, fine…"

Yukari merely nodded her head, too scared to speak.

"C'est magnifique. You've both done so well since April." An approving smile appeared on her face. "I expect even better from you, and I can say the same to you, Akihiko."
"You know me better than that, Mitsuru." He grinned.

"But what about me?" Ken inquired, disappointed.

"Since Yamagishi will be supporting us, I would like you to guard her, Amada. You have only a month's worth of experience in battle. I'd prefer that you stay where it's safe."

The eleven year old growled in frustration.

The air was tense – it was subtle, but there. Rei completely ignored it, happy that there were new people to meet. Hunger pangs rang in her stomach. "So we're going in? This is great! It's good to meet you all!" She bowed down with a smile. "And with that, I'm getting hungry…"

Out of literal thin air came a chocolate-frosted doughnut. If Junpei felt like talking, he'd have demanded whether or not Rei pulled the doughnuts out of her ass. "Frosted doughnuts! This pastry's a classic! You can't beat 'em!"

"Where did that doughnut come from!?" Yukari exclaimed.

"Where do doughnuts come from, you ask!?" Rei asked, jittery with excitement. "They're born from love, of course! The forces of love meet dough, and from that union, doughnuts are born! It's like how babies are born when the stork delivers them!"

Poor Ken looked like he wanted to keel over. This young woman looked to be his seniors' age, but she still didn't know where babies truly came from!? "Th-The stork? But Rei-san, babies don't—"

Junpei clamped a hand over the boy's mouth. "That's…that's enough for now…"

Inside the labyrinth…

As the others had expected to a degree, "You in Wonderland" resembled the very children's book that carried its name: playful and charming, yet a little macabre. Surrounding the tiled floors, which were shades of blue and purple, were colorful cardboard props of books, cards, and flowers. They were built around like a massive hedge maze, with a door (a sliding door meant to resemble piano keys) positioned a ways off. There were real roses that bloomed at their feet and hung in the air, but they looked sickly gray as opposed to white that they were likely intended to be. An eerie crimson shroud of a sky hung above them, partially obscured by a vividly red and black checkerboard canopy. The area was vast and looked unending – truly a labyrinth, as Zen claimed it was.

"This place…" Mitsuru was awestruck, overcome with its sheer presence. "It's quite...well...it's a lot to take in, that's for sure…" She eyed the cardboard walls. "These walls are quite flimsy. Do students really use these for festival exhibits?" She poked it curiously.

Yukari constantly switched between finding Mitsuru's naivete amusing and annoying. Today she, without a doubt, found it the latter. "Cardboard's cheap, and you can do a lot with it Senpai." She, too, fingered it, noting that it was far firmer than normal. "Besides, if this place really is filled with
Shadows, then I doubt this is normal cardboard…"

Rei trembled.

"Are you all right, Rei?" Zen coaxed her to his side. "There's no need to be afraid. I'm right here."

That's right, he thought. Nothing else mattered – the only things that mattered were Rei's safety, and solving the mystery of this place, which now began as he and the members of SEES took their tentative first steps.

"By the way, Zen-san," Mitsuru inquired as she carefully opened the first piano key door, "I have been addressing you and Rei-san as if you were juniors. I apologize if that is not the case."

Like before, Zen's eyes cast down, an indicator that this, too, was a gap in his memory.

"So you don't remember that either...if it is all right with you, may I go under the assumption that you are first years?"

"If you feel that is acceptable," Zen replied. Rei nodded her head in agreement.

It certainly helped that Zen was unusually patient and both of them had their memories tossed out the window, but Yukari's discomfort had reached levels she hadn't felt since April, when the entire debacle against the Full Moon Shadows began. Just when it seemed that she could get closer to the intimidating heiress, which she could attest to the fun that the two of them, together with Fuuka and Aigis, had at the Naganaki summer festival, the moat separating the second and third years was back in full force. There were a number of factors for its return, but Shinjiro rejoining SEES was one of the biggest. The three seniors spent more time in secret together, and not helping was Shinjiro's avoidance of casual conversation. Junpei and Fuuka opted not to say anything, and Aigis and their leader didn't seem to care. Ken, on the other hand…

"You look pretty tense, Yuka-tan. Don't tell me you're scared," Junpei teased. "What's the worst that could happen? A killer rabbit?" His grin changed to fright in nanoseconds. "Actually, a killer rabbit would be pretty bad…"

"I'm in no mood for your teasing, Stupei…" Yukari sighed. She hated him at times, but for better or worse, he was the default choice for her to turn to. If for nothing else, he was a good person to confide in. She lowered her voice to a whisper:

"...Can we talk about them later?"

Normally he'd joke about her having a secret boyfriend for the 9000th time, but when he saw her jerking her thumb at Mitsuru and Akihiko, who were having an intensive talk, he said nothing and nodded. Having him as a conversation springboard was better than nothing.

Five glass bottles wriggled in Junpei's pocket. "Ah, shit. I forgot about these…"

"Forgot what, Iori?" Mitsuru questioned.

"The guy in the blue bellhop outfit gave me these," he said, holding up what appeared to be five bottles of some kind of medicine. "I think he said they were some kind of medical powder."

"Why didn't you show us these sooner?" She sounded harsher than intended. "This is an unknown situation we're in! Medicine is vital!" She snatched the five glass vials out of his hand. "I will carry any items that we find from now on." With that, she marched forward between a warping rainbow fence that stretched up and down like putty. Akihiko shot a glance of pity at the juniors and joined
her, while the two newcomers said nothing.

Yeah, Junpei thought. Maybe that talk wouldn't be so bad after all.

"I remember Sakuya forgetting to mention shit like that constantly. She'd never berate him…" He thought bitterly as they marched on.

A second stretching gate appeared before them when Fuuka's voice cut into their heads.

"Be careful! I sense three Shadows heading your way!"

True to her word, three giant spheres shot in their direction!

They rolled and rolled and rolled, coming to a complete stop a few feet in front of them. Like a bow string, they snapped forward in unison, revealing underneath their swirly exteriors, massive sets of lips and a slobbering ebony tongue within each of them. The teeth that were bared to them were disturbingly human, saliva oozing from each. This was a Shadow that Fuuka had never seen before.

"Finally, Shadows!" Akihiko adjusted the brass knuckles on his hands and took a southpaw stance. "I've been itching for action since we first stepped in here!"

Mitsuru sighed, drawing her fencing foil. "Don't jump in like that! We've never seen this type of Shadow before. Yamagishi, can you detect any weaknesses?"

"Now that's more like it!" Akihiko exclaimed, rolling to his right as one of their assailants charged forward. It struck one of the cardboard walls, stunned. Like an assassin, Zen drew something – an automatic crossbow? – and fired a shot that pinned the Shadow to the wall. It wriggled around, ooze seeping from the pin like blood.

"I know how to fight," Zen spoke softly yet sternly, taking a second crossbow from his back. "Let's see if physical attacks can keep it down." Another shot was fired – the Shadow was stuck, but didn't seem dizzy or weak.

Mitsuru nodded her head, impressed at the newcomer. "Looks like piercing attacks won't do too much -!" She shielded herself in time as one of the other Shadows lashed its tongue at her. Aside from some spatter, she was unhurt. "Can anyone try using a magic attack!?"

"Leave it to me!" Junpei whipped out his evoker from his side, taking a protective stance over a tense Yukari. The cold metal that permeated his temple made his mind whir. Taking a steady breath, he pulled the trigger.

"Hermes!"

The "shot" had fired, glass shattering from his other temple. Junpei's eyes rolled back slightly as he felt his head pounding, his equilibrium taking the left to brace the blow. From the sea of his soul came an ebony figure wearing a gold winged helmet and gauntlets that bore gold, wing-like mechanisms that tapered and attached to his legs. Hermes tucked his legs together, launching his body back, preparing to swoop down.

With a tenor voice, the figure cried out: "Fusion Blast!"

Like an eagle, Hermes shot down at breakneck speed, his feet catching fire in its midst. His foot stubs audibly squelched into the top half the tongued Shadow – it cried out as its massive gash
spattered black blood. The Shadow toppled over, writhing.

"It's vulnerable to fire attacks!" Fuuka shouted over the intercom, her analysis slowly piecing together. "Junpei-kun should take the lead!"

"Leave it to me, Fuuka-chan!" As he shouted with a grin, he shuddered – physical attacks drained stamina from the user, after all. Luckily, trips to Tartarus combined with what he believed was the Power of Love™ from Chidori gave him ample stamina to spare. "C'mon Hermes!" He eagerly fired another shot to the head, with Hermes soaring and shooting downward with his flaming feet once more. The black blood gushed further, with the Shadow on the verge of dying.

"He's almost dead!" Junpei shouted, stumbling. The two consecutive attacks left him dizzy. In a flash, Mitsuru stepped forward with a deadly lunge, stabbing the Shadow for the final blow. A garbled scream permeated the labyrinth as it melted into black mist.

"Two to go!" Junpei let out a cheer, cut short when the third Shadow shot its tongue out at him. He yanked his katana out to block, but was still struck. Damn, that tongue was heavier than it looked!

"Be more careful, Junpei!" Yukari winced at the size of the bruise that now marked Junpei's chin and neck. "Let me heal you." Her own Evoker was now in her hands, with her grasping it inward and putting it to her forehead.

"Persona-!

She, too, stumbled from the recoil of the Evoker. From the swirling blue emerged Io, a black-skinned blonde in a pink dress chained to the head of a bull, floating passively.

"Dia."

The woman spread her arms tenderly as a small light enveloped around Junpei. This was the Dia spell, a healing spell that was capable of fixing minor wounds, and the effect was enhanced with high magical power – fittingly enough, Yukari's raw magical prowess was the best among them, with Mitsuru not far behind. Junpei's bruise faded, with most of the pain fading with it. He gave her a wink and a thumb up as a thank you before charging at the wildly floating Shadow.

"Bashing attacks are also super-effective!" Yukari heard Fuuka shout as she launched an arrow forth. It missed by a wide margin.

"Ack!"

Akihiko's voice: Get back, Takeba!

Her gray-haired Senpai took a protective stance in front of her, tilting his evoker upside down. The shot rang loud. "Come, Polydeuces!"

Swirling behind him in the blue vortex was his Persona, a behemoth-looking male with long, blonde hair and belts and zippers lining his body. Sharply contrasting his bulky torso and biceps were comically skinny legs and a face that was obscured by a massive bulletproof vest. At Akihiko's mental command, Polydeuces reared his weaponized needle of a right hand and launched a large shock wave that pummeled the second Shadow into mist – a Sonic Punch. Akihiko would've loved nothing more than to pound that Shadow with his own two fists, but even he knew that keeping the juniors safe was a priority. He took a breath and turned to Yukari, who was clearly embarrassed.

"You okay?" He wheezed, his face etched with concern. Yukari nodded slowly, averting her eyes. "Be more careful next time."
He trotted off to where Zen was. She and the others noticed something peculiar: an aura of power had risen around him.

"Take this…!"

With his steady grip and Rei cheering him on, a brutal slash of dark energy had finished off the final Shadow. Just who was he?

Junpei sighed in relief as the dust settled. "That was intense… and by God, were those Shadows ugly!" He took off his baseball cap and fanned his now-sweating face with it. "I mean, did you see how big their tongues were!? They looked like something out of some gross anime porno... eeeeeew!" The disgusting image permeated his brain – all of those tongue-Shadows licking them inappropriately. He forced himself to censor his own image, desperately hoping it would burn in the recesses of hell as time went on.

"Ehehe…" Everyone could hear Fuuka chuckling nervously over the intercom. "That Shadow was called a 'Lying Hablerie,' categorized under the Magician Arcana," she informed as Akihiko, Mitsuru, and Zen regrouped. "I guess those predisposed toward the Magician are kind of perverted... definitely, with a tongue like that!"

"What!? Aw, c'mon Fuuka-chan, that's not funny!" Junpei moaned.

"You know it's true," Yukari sighed, noticing that Akihiko, at least, was chuckling. The tension had vanished, but only for a moment.

Rei had managed to position herself underneath Zen's cloak the entire time, despite the fact that he spent his portion of battle swiftly dodging and ducking from the Hablerie that he had pinned to the wall. He managed to pin it again before striking the final blow. Aware that the Shadows were gone, she stepped away from Zen, sighing in relief.

"That was scary…" She sighed, yanking out a corndog from nowhere/what Junpei suspected was her bum. "So scary that – mmph - I got hungry…"

"I'm glad that you're safe," Zen said with content. "Even in here, you're full of cheer."

"Heehee! That's 'cause I have you to protect me, so I have nothing to worry about," Rei said in a chipper demeanor. As the group weaved their way to a third set of doors, they kept their eye on the newcomers. Zen was an enigma, and Rei far too innocent for something like this.

"With the way he looks and the way he protects Rei-chan, it's almost like a shojo manga," Junpei commented to Yukari, "The main heroine is hapless for the most part, and this mysterious guy with powers shows up and vows to protect her whilst being none worse for wear, of course." The image of a handsome man being flanked by sparkles of prettiness™ popped in his head. It pushed back the disturbing Hablerie image, at least.

"That's a pretty fitting image, Junpei. Still, what the hell is up with that collar he's wearing? It almost looks…" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "…I don't know how to describe it."

"Fetishistic? Maybe that's what he's into," Junpei commented. Another bad image popped in his head. "Gah!"

"That's what you get for casually commenting on something like that."

It was when they reached the third door when Junpei noticed how worn down he was feeling. "Geez, already? We've barely made it in and I'm already beat…"
"This place really does have an atmosphere similar to Tartarus," Fuuka commented. "I've had Lucia scan the rest of the area. Not only is this labyrinth big, but I think it has multiple floors. You have a long way to go, that's for sure..." Fuuka sounded despondent at that last remark.

"We should probably head back then," Akihiko commented. "It'll be no good if we exhaust ourselves now. This is probably gonna be a long haul. Besides..." He held up one of the brass knuckles that he used in battle; it was chipped and cracking in the middle. "We're gonna need better equipment..."

Mitsuru nodded her head in agreement. "I feel rather foolish for taking this fencing foil with me. Besides, Shiomi and the others are likely free to join us. After having Shiomi in the field for so long, I can say he's the superior field leader." Her hand was on her head. She was apprehensive to admit it, but her skill as field leader was sub-par, noting that today's battle was won not on cohesion, but due to individual efforts. "I was no good leading that battle, but those Shadows weren't much of a challenge, thankfully."

"Try not to worry about it, Mitsuru." Akihiko stretched his biceps. "You did what you could."

"Whatever 'that' was..." Yukari thought bitterly.

They weaved their way over the path, through the stretching gates, past the floating cards and bushels of flowers. It was eerily silent, with the only sound being the few pockets of water that lead to either streams or distant waterfalls. The gray doors that led out were within reach...

*...b-bmp...*

"Ah...!"

Mitsuru tumbled forward, clenching her chest. A noise akin to a heartbeat rang in her ears.

"Wh-What is this?" She clenched harder, panting. "This feeling..."

"Are you all right!? Where does it hurt, Mitsuru!?" Akihiko was at her side, ready to hold her if need be.

"I...I sense..."

"Something's coming!" Fuuka's voice interjected with a panic. "Ah...I can hear my heart pounding...it hurts! I..."

"What the hell is – ggh!" Akihiko nearly toppled as the pain overwhelmed him. The pounding was unnaturally loud, and clenching like a fist. It felt as if his heart were bending. "Oww...I can't... breathe..." Junpei and Yukari joined them, the former wincing and the latter with tears in her eyes.

"Yuka-chan!? Jun-chan!? What's wrong!? Here, takoyaki always helps with a broken heart!"

From Rei's butt came a boat of freshly fried octopus balls. Her plea fell on deaf ears.

"They seem to be in distress...Rei, something's coming! Get behind me!" Zen's crossbows were at the ready, and Rei followed.

Skulking in the shadows were four canine-shaped figures. When they emerged, Zen was shocked to see not the slimy Shadows he had previously seen, but clearly defined, indigo-colored wolves with streaking, floating manes. Judging by their reared stances and slobbering jaws, they were hungry.

"These creatures..." He kept steady, but as stoic as he was, a flicker of doubt lit in his eyes. "These
are nothing like those 'Shadows' we have encountered…"

The four Persona-users caught their breaths, the pain from the odd heartbeats subsiding. The shock on their faces at the creatures was clearer than daylight at the creatures – no mask to denote their type, no oozing liquids from any orifice – they looked like honest-to-goodness, if oddly colored, wolves!

"A-Are these Shadows?" Junpei stuttered, scared out of his wits. "They don't look like any Shadows I've seen before! H-Hey! What are they, Fuuka-chan!?" He and Yukari stumbled back. Akihiko, however, wouldn't be deterred. He stepped forth, tossing aside his chipped knuckles and tugging on his leather gloves.

"Knuckles or no knuckles, I'll take them out…” The distress he was under had subsided. He pulled his left leg back, taking a boxing stance –

"…Human…"

"Wha-!?"

The wolf-like creature shot through the air with a fierce snarl.

With sharp fangs born, it tackled the first threat it saw – Akihiko – and before he could struggle, a violent spurt of blood shot from his left shoulder. A harsh crack rang out as he hit the floor, him gasping in pain as the creature's teeth sunk further.

"Akihikoooo-!"

Mitsuru let out a scream as her longtime friend was being chewed on, setting her sights on the other wolves. They, too, were quite eager to partake in their alpha's meal. She twirled her evoker and fired a shot to the head, bringing Penthesilea, an Amazonian soldier with a mask, a crown, a set of cochlimarides, and blue armor, to lead the charge. She beckoned Junpei and Yukari to follow her, Hermes and Io joining in her Bufu-charged attack with another flaming blast and a rippling Garu spell, respectively. Rising winds and icicle spears shot up, pinning two of the creatures in their path. With an eerie scream, Hermes rounded the trifecta with a sharp dive, feet blazing hotter than before. Their combined rage had released enough power to take the wolves flanking Akihiko out in a single blow – but no mist to be found. The two wolves collapsed in a massive puddle of reddish colored blood, twitching.

The wolf that stayed behind pulled back, howling in pain as Zen let out a crossbow bolt to its side, while the one biting Akihiko withdrew his teeth and let out a roar, infuriated. He kept the poor boy pinned, threatening to bite again.

The fear in the air was far too obvious. The blood that ran on the labyrinth floors ran redder and redder. Rei screamed.

Through the intense wave of attacks and all of the blood – the blood made it hard to concentrate for the squeamish Fuuka – she was able to pinpoint some data on the monster. But something was off…

"Those creatures aren't Shadows…!"

"What-!?" Mitsuru cried out, stepping back in fear as the one that hovered over Akihiko snarled in their direction. Zen had successfully subdued the third wolf, which now resembled horribly injured road kill.

"It's of the Fortune Arcana, but…” She took a shaky breath. "What's this I'm getting…?"
"So what, this wolf is in touch with his feelings or some bullshit like that!?" Junpei shouted in a panic. Big mistake. Leaving his former prey behind, the wolf approached them in two massive strides…

"…Re…venge…humans…grr…"

The words it formed were quite coherent.

Mitsuru was shivering, despite taking protecting the juniors on to herself. "St-Stay away! Get back or I'll –"

*Psht *

The trio squirmed at the sight of a shining blade that landed head on between the eyes of the wolf. It collapsed, squirming in place for a moment before dying.

The brutal attack was over.

Zen and the trio glanced up to find a heavily panicked Sakuya, gripping the blade for dear life, gauging mentally on whether or not the damn thing was dead. With a sharp breath, he lodged the blade deeper, just to make sure. With the wolf completely motionless, he slowly drew the bloodstained blade. He stumbled, gasping. It had been ten long years since he had seen so much blood…his face paled.

"Sakuya…" Junpei spoke first, his voice squeaky. "That was fucking awesome…"

"Shiomi…I…we owe you…” Mitsuru's voice was higher pitched than usual. She collapsed inelegantly to the floor, still shivering with fear. Zen went off to the side, more preoccupied with a weeping Rei. The two underclassmen ran over to Akihiko in a panic; his white shirtsleeve was lined with a massive red stain, blood pooling underneath him. He was bent inward on his side, the remnants of tears in his eyes. The only noises that he could utter were loud sobs and dry heaves.

"Kirijo-senpai, help us lift him up! Oh my God, there's so much blood…please, Senpai!" Yukari grabbed him by the legs, Junpei by the shoulders. The more they tried to jostle him, the worse his cries of pain were. "We'll drop him like this!"

Barging in mere seconds later were the ones who followed Sakuya to the Velvet Room, Shinjiro, Koromaru, and Aigis. Koromaru barked furiously, dashing around in a panic. Aigis stepped in for Yukari, noting her supernatural strength as a source.

"I recommend that you allow me to handle this," she spoke with urgency. "My carrying weight is three-hundred kilograms, after all."

With carefully guided precision, she crouched to his uninjured side, reaching beneath his unhurt shoulder and knees. Loud whirring noises could be heard as she slowly lifted him up. When he was in place, Junpei desperately applied some medical powder Mitsuru dropped to the wound, while Yukari cast Dia. Unfortunately, for all of her power, its low output could only ease so much of his pain.

"Aki!"

Shinjiro barreled toward Aigis, who kept her pace steady so as not to harm the victim in her arms. "That bellhop guy said that there's a nurse's office on this floor! Hurry!"
They picked up the pace. Zen slid open the doors that lead to safety. Lagging behind them was their leader, who, unseen by them, vomited on the floor. In his dizzy stupor, he found his blade, which now had something stuck to it – some kind of card. He swiped it for the sheer hell of it and stumbled out last.

In front of "You in Wonderland…"

Theodore took the lead in guiding the hapless group of fighters to the nurse's office, where Elizabeth opted to position herself. Before she could bow and make her lovely little speech on the concept of giving and taking, Theodore and the rest barged in, Aigis gently laying Akihiko on one of the beds. Shinjiro took a pocket knife he had in his coat and cut into Akihiko's uniform shirt, hissing at the four punctures that sunk deep into him.

"This is bad…you, Elizabeth! Are there any thread or needles in here!"

"Is this for a sewing circle, now?" Elizabeth's trolling nature was not only on full display, but filled with a little more rancor than before, no thanks to the Persona game. Neither Shinjiro nor Sakuya would have any of it.

"Dammit Elizabeth! Stop playing dumb and help us!" Sakuya's eyes were full of fury. Never before had she or Theodore seen a guest get so angry with them. "Your job is to assist us! Assist, dammit!"

When Elizabeth did not budge, Theodore dug in the drawers, successfully procuring black surgical thread, a needle, some antiseptic, and a pair of scissors. He handed them to Shinjiro, who in turn, cleaned his friend's wounds and began to work.

"H-How do you know how to stitch wounds, Aragaki-san?" A queasy Ken asked.

"You never know when shit like this comes in handy, kid," He replied with a heavy exhale, keeping focus. As the others stood over in worry, Sakuya turned over to a frowning Elizabeth and a worried Theodore.

"It looks like they were caught completely off guard," He sighed, flustered. "The equipment we have now isn't any good. We need new weapons, medicine, gems…" He glanced around the room. "Well, we know we have a place to recover, at least."

"If you plan to use this room, which I have become the master of as of ten seconds ago, I expect payment for services," Elizabeth succinctly spoke. "This world, after all –"

"- Runs on give-and-take, yeah, yeah, I fucking get it Elizabeth," Sakuya sighed, hand on head. "You know, shilling out a million yen to re-summon a Persona isn't exactly what I'd call a battle of wits, or whatever the fuck you called it."

"Give-and-take, Sakuya-sama. Take it, or leave it."

There was no arguing with whatever the hell Elizabeth even was. Theodore was too weary to argue with her, but he did gesture Sakuya to the hallway.

"You do realize that you and your friends committed a grave sin?" He said softly.
"Elizabeth cursed me out about the Persona game earlier. I just don't get why she seems so personally annoyed that three of my friends now have the potential to summon multiple Personas like me."

"She is more annoyed with you yourself than with the fact that you discovered a forbidden ritual and performed it?" Theodore pondered. "The thing is that we Velvet Room residents face dire consequences for breaking our current method of assisting others. That was the order given to us by the chains of commanding that stands above our own master."

"You'll get in trouble? Gee, I sure wish she said that earlier…" Sakuya sighed. "Still, I told her that Philemon spoke to me in my dreams. I don't think I've seen your sister genuinely angry in my life, Theodore-san. She then goes on this soapbox about how my friends and their distinct lack of Wild Card all suck for some reason…I dunno, she was acting really funny after that…"

Theo blinked. A knowing glint flickered in his eyes. Of course, if he explained just why Elizabeth got so flustered, he'd probably be forced to down an entire factory's worth of wheat bran. Instead, he changed the subject. "There's nothing that we can do now, other than see whether or not your three friends can find the strength to don multiple 'masks' like you can."

"Masks, huh…"

"I explored this school and found a possible place where I can create expendables and weapons for you. It's a little craft workshop on the third floor. Come, follow me."

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*Inside "You in Wonderland, near the entrance to Chapter 2..."*

In a sharp contrast to the horribly troubled children that made SEES, the intrepid team of adults led by Maya Amano were faring far better. They were able to recoup with the Demon Painter, and upon confirming that demons were lurking within, he set up shop in the Velvet Room, prepped to prepare any new Personas they might have needed. Through their skill in demon negotiation, a large amount of Tarot cards were tucked away in Maya's small duffle bag. Even with their sub-par equipment, they survived and found a set of stairs that led down.

"Stairs…how deep do ya think this maze goes?" Baofu asked hypothetically, rubbing his chin.

"The painter felt as though the demons were lurking on two or three floors. I hope he's right…" Ulala frowned, readjusting her boxing tape. "Ugh, my knuckles are all raw…"

"Feh, that's not the only thing that's raw…" Baofu snickered.

"Oh fuck you, Bao! Fuck you right in the ass!"

Maya sighed. "I hate it when you two fight. Now look, I know Painter-san can't do much more for us right now, but I'd like to take a peek at the next floor. We can head back after that, okay?" She grinned. "It's times like these when you gotta stay positive."

"I agree wholeheartedly and completely." Katsuya was rigid as a board, trying his darndest to ignore the creeping blush on his cheeks. "Besides, if there's no answer to what this place is here, then maybe it's downstairs."
"Something tells me that's complete bullshit," Baofu sardonically replied.

Maya beckoned them down, and they followed. "Well, let's retrace our steps. Painter-san said that we're in a place far away from reality. It's in a state of flux…so that means that all of this is temporary or something?"

"That actually sounds about right, Amano-san," Katsuya replied. Baofu glanced over at Katsuya, who for all of his lack of polish, always strove to get to the bottom of a mystery. He felt compelled to do the same. "The painter did mention that this place is like how Sumaru is now…that is, after Sumaru got bombarded by the rumors. It's abnormal, like this place. Hm…"

"You think that this place was made by someone like JOKER?" Ulala inquired. "Dialing your own number allowed you to turn him into your own personal hit man…" She winced at the bad memory – she had drunk dialed him. "But then there's the whole thing with kegare…"

"Kegare…" Katsuya mouthed. "Kegare…"

The other three allowed him to fall back a little, giving him some space to think. At the end of the long stairway hung a sign: "You in Wonderland: Chapter 2." While the atmosphere and layout was similar to the first floor, the reddish sky was now yellow, like a perpetual sunset, dotted with purple storm clouds. Instead of books, the walls were now lined with oodles of sweets and teas – constructed from pulp, obviously. The red canopy from earlier was now a light lilac color and lined with lace.

"The air's changed…" Baofu put his hand to his heart. "Odysseus isn't stirring as much. He senses fewer demons down here."

"That's a relief…" Maya spoke, taking time to reload her two pistols.

"Meh, I wouldn't say that," Ulala sighed. "Look over there."

A distorted voice rang in their ears. Not too far off were a pair of black-colored eagles wearing pointed masks made of mother-of-pearl. "They're black and have masks on. If what Bao says is true, then there are probably more of those 'Shadows' down here than demons…and we haven't seen that one before."

As the group stepped forward, approaching a door to the southeast, the eagles swooped down to attack!

"Suou, snap out of it and come help us!" Baofu shouted, pulling out a set of tokens from his pocket. With his qi focused, he flicked one forward, striking the Shadow in the neck. The piercing blow stung, but it reared its head and furiously raked at Baofu's arm.

"Helios!"

Katsuya focused his energy, concentrating– out of habit, he drew his Nambu forward. A bluish aura encircled him, and from the sea of his soul came a charming-looking black cat wearing some manner of 19th century European suit. The cat reared back with a loud hiss, swinging his massive claws downward. Black blood shot out of the eagle as it cried out in pain, stumbling.

Baofu owed him for that. He, too, began to concentrate, despite the pain in his arm.

"Persona."

He was far calmer in his summoning of Odysseus, a strange-looking samurai figure wearing a white
coat, a green jinbei, and had a metallic head with a pipe on top. With a soft chant – "Garu" – the Greek hero took his two swords and crossed them, summoning a pillar of wind on the injured eagle. It collapsed, too wounded and tired to get up.

"Looks like wind attacks are our best bet. Let's get the other one!" The long-haired man shot out a flurry of tokens at the other eagle, which was giving Ulala a hard time. When she was free of its grasp, she let out a war cry, pounding what was left of the injured eagle in a rage.

"That's what you get for messing up my face, motherfucker!" She pounded on it like a jackhammer, even after it melted away.

"That filthy mouth of hers could put an entire public restroom to shame," Baofu thought to himself.

For all of her bubbly cheer, Maya was a fierce combatant in battle. She garnered the attention of the second eagle with a warning shot – it skimmed its wing, but nothing more. She stretched out her arms, inhaling deeply…

"Come to me, Maia!"

From within her was a beautiful, white-skinned lady with short magenta hair and a circular visor. Contrary to her Greek origins, she wore a pink kimono that tapered into fan-like shapes in the back. Her motherly voice rose slightly as she struck out a hand:

"Hama."

A white-lined magical triangle snared the eagle. Three white talismans stuck to its body. It died in a painful, bright flash of light. Judging by its cry, it was susceptible to light attacks.

"Woohoo! Whoopass complete!"

The motley crew regrouped, scratched and bruised, but none too worse for wear. "Whoopass complete indeed, Ma-ya," Ulala boasted proudly. "That felt great."

The air had settled, returning to an unusual level of calm. At the Demon Painter's behest, Baofu took some time to draw out a map of the area. A number of walls re-connected to previous paths from before, indicated by a mechanism in the wall that resembled a clock. At least three of them connected to the walls where the stairway was, much to everyone's annoyance. After the third time they found their way back to the stairs, they opted to rest in a corner with one of the oldest methods of relaxation: good old fashioned alcohol.

"I can't believe you had this entire bottle of tequila on you, Big Suou!" Ulala praised him with a grin. "Did you steal it from the bar!? It looks pretty pricey." She took an audible gulp of the stuff from some porcelain tea cups that Maya found nearby. "Look, look, we're drinking our booze like English gentlemen! I got my pinkie out and everything! Hahaha!"

"Come to think of it..." Baofu downed an entire shot in one go. "This is pretty good stuff...my God, Katsuya Suou has once again demonstrated how far the police have fallen...what's next, Suou? You gonna arrest a baby for littering? Heh."

Katsuya's face resembled a steamed tomato.

"Arrest a baby?" Ulala snorted, the alcohol already affecting her. "You're what, twenty-five? Hah! If you were a woman like me, you'd probably be doing that...you'd prolly be all ugly too...remember, a woman expires at twenty-five! Then you'd know my suffering, Big Suou...hic...why don't men get to expire...dammit..."
"That's enough, Ulala..." Maya pulled her tipsy friend to her shoulder. Said friend fell asleep, clearly looking upset.

"You're too good to her sometimes, Amano," Baofu sighed. "Though, I guess she does have a point...you know about... about Miki..." He choked at the woman's name. "Here's something for you: when we first partnered up, she was so damn shocked when I told her I didn't notice that she was twenty-six. I didn't really care, to be honest. She had what it took..."

Katsuya calmed down enough to join in. "It always bothers me when the female officers in our department get all riled up when we have our New Year's party. They'd have all this talk about marriage and how old they looked. What's up with that? I mean, they certainly don't look any older...what's all the fuss?"

"That's the reality we women face," Maya commented wistfully. "When one of my fellow editors got married, the head of Kismet Publishing dropped her like a hot potato. The editor-in-chief of Coolest is disgruntled because she's in her mid-thirties and still single." Maya glanced over at her friend, giggling at her soft snoring. "Now that I think about it, the woman who got married said she wasn't capable of having kids..."

"That's terrible! They shouldn't have fired her. Why do people have to be like that?" Katsuya sighed. He was naive and hopeless at times, but he was also not so keen on the country's gender divide, and he was very sincere about it. Maya highly appreciated that.

"I agree, Suou-san." She shot him a gentle smile. "I wouldn't mind if there were more men like you working at Kismet."

Baofu cursed under his breath. Katsuya's feelings for the raven-haired woman were painfully obvious. It practically stung. "Just tell her how you feel, you dumbass..."

"But, Suou-san, I'm curious. Before we fought those Shadows, you kept going on and on about kegare to yourself. Why?" Maya inquired, snapping the policeman out of his funk.

"Ah..." He coughed, forcing the blush off of his face. "Well...remember the anti-JOKER seminar that Ginji Sasaki held, where he used that weird machine to extract kegare from a large crowd of people? Nanjo-san theorized - and he turned out to be right - that kegare, the impure thoughts and sins that people bear, were what fueled the Joker Personas...Personas born by peoples' sins." He was deep in thought, digging up memories of Takahisa Kandori and the fortune teller Chizuru, and their plans. "To build on that, there's Tatsuzou's plan of using all of that kegare to summon those dragons...he planned to summon the dragons by pumping kegare into the Earth..."

"The sins and ill thoughts of people will fuel the dragons' summoning..." Maya mouthed. She then realized: "When we revisited Painter-san, he said...!"

"I have found that this is a place that exists 'deeper' than the Velvet Room...we are adrift in a corner of the Collective Unconsciousness." Katsuya mimicked the painter's words. "Tatsuya mentioned a 'Collective Unconsciousness' when we were at Mt. Iwato too. He said that people's souls were born there..."

"So, what you're implying from all of this is..." Baofu pursed his lips. "...This cute little maze we're in was born from someone's thoughts. Is that why you kept pondering about kegare, Suou?"

"Massive amounts of the stuff did more damage than we can fathom. The 'Other Side' was destroyed under similar circumstances. The creature that's tormenting my brother told him..."
"The world is governed by certain principles, and you can do nothing to change them...I am the shadow of humanity. As long as turmoil exists in the souls of mankind, I will not fade away."

He turned to Maya, who mouthed those words subconsciously.

"I don't know why I remember those words, because I had died when he spoke them...his words now make our situation that much clearer..."

"Amano-san..."

"Now the question that remains, providing if Suou-san's theories are correct, is finding out who made this place. Who knows? Maybe there's more than one person influencing it. We could be completely wrong, for all we know."

"We haven't been here very long, but you've become different, Amano," Baofu commented. "You've become quite the leader compared to our adventures back home."

Maya shared a heartwarming moment with her companions...

...

...*b-bmp*...

"...? Huh?" Maya glanced around.

The air had changed. All grew eerily quiet.

"Huh...? What's this?" Katsuya nervously asked to no one in particular. "When did it get so cold?" He glanced around him - the vibrant yellow sky had become stained with an eerie and chilling green mist. Not too far off from where they were sitting, a delicate-looking painting of a garden had torn open, leaking more mist...

"Oh!" Maya winced. She could feel her heart pounding wildly. Maia was crying in anguish! She had not felt this level of pain for ages... "Does anyone else sense that? I feel a terrible presence...it's coming from that open painting over there!" She pointed to the torn painting.

"Whatever creature's on that side is powerful...I don't think we should fight it," Katsuya sighed, shuddering.

He could then hear a small, but present, cry - the cry of a creature. It was a Persona.

"Hey...do you feel that? Like, not just the creature, but..."

"I sense it too!" Baofu shouted a little too loud for comfort. "Someone's there with it..."

"A person?" Maya asked. "Does the person have..."

"This person has a Persona, all right," Baofu sighed, carefully standing up. "It's faint, but I can hear it speak...this person might be in danger, but it might get hairy if we go to that painting." Normally, he'd object, but Maya had been doing well up to this point. It wasn't as if he hadn't changed his views on things anyway. "Amano, it's your call. Should we go?"

"I know it's a bit rash, but let's try and see if that person needs help. Besides, we haven't met anyone we could actually speak to that isn't a demon yet."

"...Very well." He got out a fresh set of tokens, ready to be charged. "Then after Amano gets her
drunk-ass friend off the ground, let's go!"

"Did he just call me a 'ho'!?" Ulala shot from the ground, completely sober, pursuing the offender as he sped to the painting. "You're gonna pay for that!"

Unknown location...

The mist that was seeping out of the painting in You In Wonderland had turned into an all-out fog of darkness as the four adults made their way to the other side of the it.

The eerie change in the air that the mist had beckoned had come in full force. It was hard for Maya to put into words, but to say that the atmosphere was different from You In Wonderland was an understatement. Laid out before them was no longer the world of a children's book, but a cold, steel girder-heavy bridge that seemed to reach the heavens. All that they could hear was a rippling wind that howled past them, made more haunting by a green-tinted sky and a gigantic full moon. The moon's faint rays were their only source of light.

"What the hell? This sure is different," Baofu commented, eyebrow raised. "It's as if we were never in that Wonderland place at all."

"I can't see a thing..." Katsuya dug around in one of his inner jacket pockets. He fished out a portable flashlight. "Good thing I got this from the captain. It's not much, but..."

"You lead the way, Big Suou!" Ulala chirped, afraid. "We ought to stick close."

"Yeah, good idea," Maya agreed. "I don't feel the presence of any demons or Shadows, but..."

They lined up in a row, like a train, with Katsuya in front. The flashlight beam was narrow, but bright enough to illuminate the bridge's path. There was nary a trap or a crack in sight - the bridge appeared to be brand new, and if it were not for the fog and the atmosphere, completely ordinary. No enemies were in sight...

"The sheer amount of nothingness is scaring me shitless, Ma-ya..." Ulala sighed, gripping her friend's hand tightly. "All I can hear is the fucking wind! All I can smell is Bao's B.O! Should we really keep going?"

"Come on, Serizawa, you're stronger than this," Baofu said, frowning. "And I resent that B.O comment."

"Seriously though, did you last shower six years ago or something!?"

"Shhh!"

Katsuya shushed the duo, shining his flashlight ahead. A pair of shadows shifted rapidly a short distance away. "I think someone's here!"

"Everyone, hide!" Maya ordered, ushering everyone to a massive girder off to the side. From that location, Katsuya shut off the flashlight, hoping that whatever was in the distance couldn't see them. As some tense minutes passed, the fog lifted slightly, and the lights that dotted the bridge flickered
with power...

"Look, look!" Ulala pointed up at a higher girder. True to her word, two figures were on top of it!

It was hard to tell, even with the flickering lights, but on top stood a young woman and an older man. Much like when Katsuya and the two ladies encountered JOKER at Sevens for the first time, this older man appeared to be accosting the woman, who, despite reluctance, stood her ground.

"A girl...she looks like she's around Tatsuya's age..." Katsuya observed with a whisper. He scooted closer out of his spot so that he could hear what they were saying...

"...You do realize why you are here, correct?" The man spoke. His voice was deep to the point that it almost sounded unnatural. It certainly clashed with his appearance: shoulder-length hair whiter than snow, grayish skin, and some kind of designer suit that appeared to be red, although that too was hard to see. "What you see here before you...do you not wish to share it? You remembered, after all. In this Collective Unconsciousness, sharing this memory is possible."

The young woman - the shadows made it hard to see her - winced.

"Oh, so you don't want to share it? But it's here. You wish to face this memory. To say otherwise would mean you would be contradicting yourself."

She looked away, wavering.

"You might as well take the trouble of confronting this cold, still past. Think of it as an atonement for stepping into the realm of the gods..."

A reflection from the man's eye bounced off of one of the lights above him - a monocle that resembled a clock was set in his eye. Baofu recognized him instantly, shouting with a whisper: "He's the Time Count! That's the man from the antique store! What the hell is he doing here!?"

Something horrid lingered under Maya's nose, an odor foul enough that she had to cover it.
"Something's wrong with him..."

"What do you mean?"

"He..." She shuddered. She did not remember feeling or sensing something so wicked since she...

The count flourished his arm, his red overcoat swishing like a matador's Capote. With a wicked little chuckle, he spoke: "You are in my domain now. Remember what I said when you first came here? As punishment for daring to tamper with beings like me, you are to complete a journey where you must repent. If you complete this journey and defeat the Fiends I shall send to judge you and your progress, I might just let you go free. It's only proper that a human as sinful and hypocritical as you labor away, atoning for everything you've done all the while...but worry not! You'll be rewarded for every Fiend you slay!"

"...Shut up..."

The young woman's voice, which was rather girlish, was faint. She made no effort in enforcing her words.

"'Shut up?' How rude of you. Remember what I said? You're here because there's a massive slew of regrets that you want to make up for...now you don't want to? How sad. I can sense the feeble resistance that you're putting up. Come on, perk up a little! Because if you don't, well...I think you'll know what will happen, right?"
The young woman looked down, despondent.

"The first Fiend awaits you. Give it your best shot, okay?" The man snickered, taking a gray hand and tracing it delicately down her collarbone.

Baofu broke out in a cold sweat. His tanned skin grew clammy. "The fuck...? Why am I so pale...?"

"It's as if he's exuding something...something like, really dark and...and..." Ulala was shivering. "It's like he's made of...built out of...something pure evil."

Katsuya discreetly gripped his Nambu, clearly disgusted by the sight of the Time Count's suggestive touching of the young woman. His hand slid around like rippling water, fingers caressing her left breast, lingering on her stomach, skidding to a halt -

"I bet this brings back memories, huh?" He spoke mockingly, a wicked grin on his face. "Remember how you threw yourself at them? It will be utterly amusing when you relive all of that. You're completely shameless, you know." His hand moved further down, down...

"To hell with hiding, this is just wrong...!" Maya, infuriated, gestured her friends out of hiding, pink Colt Pony guns at the ready. Ulala and Baofu, though reluctant, sprung out from behind her, and Katsuya readied his own gun, face churned with righteous anger.

"Hey, you! Stop! Get away from that girl!"

The startled duo cast their gaze at them. As the young woman shrunk back, too shocked to speak, her attacker snarled. Even though they were familiar with the count, he was too annoyed to care -

"Who the hell do you think you are, getting in my way!?" The four adults were shocked at the man's wicked growl. "I sincerely hope you enjoy this!

The man gathered his hands together. In them, purple sparks pulsating with raw energy began to form, popping and bursting like fireworks. The air had become bloated with power at a level so immense that the cement on the ground began to crack!

"Oh fuck me! Is that a Megidolaon spell!?" Ulala cried out, panicking. "This already happened once, and I don't want to get Megidolaon'd in the face again!"

Too late.

Three massive, intertwining sparks of power flew down in a flash, thudding and shattering the concrete below. Like a time bomb, it exploded. Everyone panicked and ran about, Katsuya particularly so, frantically waving his hands.

"No, no, no, no, NO-!"

*bwoooom*

"Oh my...oh my, oh my, oh my...hahahaha...amazing, simply amazing! I don't believe it!"

A quiet movement...
"...Persona."

"Hm-? What the-!?"

Some time later...

"The count got away..."

Much like when they arrived, the four adults laid in a row, bodies battered and burnt from the Time Count's horrid attack. Even with their experience, a blow like that would have crippled them, or worse. The accosted stranger had saved them, taking care to position them straight and tend to their wounds. She had little jars of medicine that were quite potent: the strange, gooey extract had eased the burns within several minutes. What few resources she had were salvaged from the labyrinth, including both the long, thin naginata that she used as a weapon and even her clothes. The clothes in question were a pair of sleek black pants with suspenders, a white dress shirt for ladies, and a pale pink scarf - something that seemed way, way too big a coincidence to have simply been left there when she found them...

From the time she had initially woken up, she was able to deduce that this place wasn't even remotely ordinary, and that she was likely being punished in some capacity. She remembered everything, after all. That man's presence and the bridge were both telling, but why there was a labyrinth was something she couldn't figure out. And now, a ragtag group of adults seemed to be stuck here as well...

"I don't want to trouble them..." She thought to herself sadly, pushing a stray lock of Maya's hair away from her face. "I wonder if that count bought them here...he probably had the power to do that."

She could feel the adults' Personas sleeping within them. It was strange; her awareness of them were far stronger than what she had experienced before. Her own Personas had their own distinct voices, but whenever she was in reach of one of her old companions' Personas, they were eerily silent...

She shook her head heavily at the memory. "I can't think about that anymore! There's something I have to do..."

She set aside four containers of medicine, some gems (some to break magic binds, some that held the Patra spell within them), and a needle and thread for torn clothing. Just as she was about to leave, Maya stirred, subconsciously grabbing the girl's left arm.

"Ah!"

With some difficulty, Maya rose, her eyes focusing on her rescuer. Much like when she encountered Tatsuya in the Seven Sisters High clock tower, she gave a surprised, yet tender glance at this young woman. The first thing she noticed right away was how snow white her skin was, with rusty-colored hair and a pair of eyes that were a vivid shade of red, like a cut ruby. The second thing she noticed was the long, thorny-looking scar that snaked on the young woman's arm. She released her arm with a small gasp, letting out a quick apology. The young woman's face turned somber, even as Maya smiled.
"You saved us, didn't you? And here we were thinking that he was about to do something horrible to you. Thank you. Seriously, thank you very much!"

She didn't respond. She shifted her eyes away, eying her weapon and small sack of supplies.

"You were in a real pinch there. Why not come with us? We're trapped here, and we're trying to figure out how to get out. My police officer friend there has a theory, but you can never be too sure of these things. Say, you can use a Persona, right? Do you know what the 'Collective Unconsciousness' is?" Maya's smile was wider than before.

Still no response, other than a weary sigh.

"Ah..." Maya's brow twitched. "Can you not speak Japanese?" She gave the girl a look-over; she certainly looked it, but her eyes were a little rounder than the norm. "I knew an American girl who couldn't speak any English, you know, so...erhm..." She struggled to remember what little English she retained in high school.

"Hello there!" Maya shouted a little too eagerly in accented English. "Can I have an orange soda?"

"I can understand you fine."

"What do you know, she can speak Japanese after all..." Maya sighed in relief at the thought. "That's good to know! Now, I know I'm being a little forward, but since you seem lost, you could come with us. We can use Personas too, so we can protect you."

It was deja-vu all over again, but this time, the genders were switched. The young woman stood up, sack and weapon in hand, and grimaced.

"You shouldn't see me again."

"...Beg pardon?"

Even with the grimace, Maya saw a deep sadness in the girl's eyes. "I mean it, okay? Just leave this place when you can. Stick to exploring that labyrinth. Don't get involved with me. Forget what you saw..."

With a quick flourish, the young woman walked away, quickly crossing to the other side of the nearly-wrecked bridge. A faint presence of some kind tickled Maya's senses, but she was too tired to tell. She leaned back, letting her wounds heal, and sighed. Her eyes glimmered with the same sadness she felt when she remembered everything. Tatsuya kept her at bay then, and now this young woman was doing the same...

"I'm going to be completely helpless again, aren't I"

The flow of time was in a state that neither Tatsuya nor the Demon Painter could pinpoint. Since they were out of reality, it was hard to say how much time passed before his three former friends began to stir. Maya and the others had been gone an awfully long time…
Lisa began to moan in her sleep.

"Lisa…!"

The Demon Painter had opted to kill some time by doing some regular painting, since there were few leads to research on at the moment. When he heard Tatsuya's voice, he set his palette aside and walked over, curious at the events that were about to unfold.

Tatsuya could see nothing but gogginess and confusion in Lisa’s baby blue eyes. There was no great rush of panic when she awoke, though – just a pained look of guilt to go with that confusion. She couldn't bring herself to look at poor Tatsuya, someone who she relentlessly pursued, nay, harassed, on the "Other Side." After witnessing those dreaded memories – Jun as the Joker, her father's heavy handed desire for a "proper" Japanese daughter, the Shadow Selves, the demons, Yukino and Anna, the Last Battalion – she became far too despondent to speak. She stared at her knees.

"Lisa…” Tatsuya came closer.

"Those…those…you were protecting us from our…” Her face was in her hands. She began to weep, disconsolate. "I…I don't…”

"Lisa…”

"This is all messed up…why is this happening to us!? Who am I!?"

He shuffled closer and took hold of one of her hands. "It's all because of me…there should be a memory of the three of us separating…”

She dug around, reluctantly, and found the memory of which he spoke of: they were floating in subspace, on the verge of separation. By giving up their memories, which had stretched back to when they met as children, they could live peacefully in a new world. Eikichi went first, then Lisa after him, and then Jun.

"I see the memory…it seems as though you went last."

He released an anguished breath. "That's because…” Every muscle in his body tightened in nervousness, his face pained. Already the guilt trickled back, racking his very being – but it had little to do with the world being in danger this time. He was so wrapped up in his mission that he neglected the feelings of those three. "…That's because I…I…”

"You what?"

The tears began trickling down his cheeks. "I…when the new world was being created, I…I didn't want to forget…." He spluttered and sobbed. "When Nyarlathotep stabbed Maya, when she spoke to me – to us - as she was dying…I was selfish…I didn't want to forget her…or all of you…I didn't want to be alone."

The dam he had erected had completely broken down.

"I didn't want to lose the bond that we had...everyone's kindness bought us together, but I acted so aloof in front of all of you! I hated my parents and my brother, but Katsuya wanted nothing but the best for me, and my parents couldn't do a damn thing. I never listened to anyone…for all intents and purposes, I wanted Maya to myself, at least for a while…when she died, and we were gonna lose each other for good…so when I crossed to the new world, I refused to forget…"
"Refused to forget?"

"As I crossed over, I refused to give up my memories… and now, because of that horrid sin I committed, a gap exists between the two sides! The new world can be destroyed at any time now…"

"…And it's because you didn't give up your memories…"

Tatsuya sobbed and sobbed, completely broken. "It's all my fault… It's all my fault…!"

"You remembered and knew what would happen if you did!"

*bam*

Out of the blue came Eikichi, who slugged poor Tatsuya in the left jaw. Despite the sting, Tatsuya took it in full. He was being punished in every possible way after all, and he felt that he deserved it. An aura of rage lingered over Eikichi, his face contorting in anger.

"You son of a bitch… you wanted Maya all to yourself… you kept your memories and let us forget! You fucking son of a bitch!"

"Stop it, Eikichi!"

Lisa weakly pleaded with the boy, failing miserably, looking pained as Eikichi repeatedly kicked Tatsuya in the back. The brunette shouted as a sharp pain shot through his back. "The world's gonna be destroyed and you're just sitting there all angsty and shit! You lied to all of us! What makes you so special as you get to keep your memories, huh!? Why do you get to fight with Maya!?"

Eikichi was as emotional as the rest of them, probably more so. He cried.

"Wh… What's up with these memories!? Can you please explain why the fuck we're fighting Adolf Hitler!? I mean, I mean, if our memories were this fucked up, why didn't you just say so!? Like, maybe when Sugimoto died… like… I… I'm so confused…"

He slumped to the floor, sobbing harder. "Dammit… why is this happening…?"

Lisa herself found it hard to restrain her tears. "That coffee we drank… I… I think it triggered these memories…"

"'Our beans are cold-pressed with the rejuvenating waters of the river Mnemosyne.' Tatsuya mouthed part of Brewed Awakening's claim as he slowly rose, despite the pain. "Mnemosyne is the personification of memories in Greek mythology. In myths about her, drinking from the river she presided over would restore a dead person's memories as they reincarnated. Someone decided to turn that myth into a rumor."

Lisa and Eikichi turned to one another, bewildered. "That's right… that whole thing where rumors became real… I remember all of that happening when we lived on the Other Side…" Eikichi whimpered.

"So we got our memories back by drinking coffee that was from a magical river… I guess that means that the river Mnemo-whatever is real now too, huh…?" Lisa sighed. "I… I remember that pervert Ginji… he got famous again because of rumors…"

"You're both right… rumors manifested then, and they're manifesting now in our world… but we
aren't there anymore…” Tatsuya said solemnly.

"Wait…not there? Where are we then!?" Lisa panicked. "I remember that we nearly drowned –"

"This is so damn confusing…” Without warning, Eikichi sobbed, collapsing on Tatsuya. "Why is this happening, Tatsuya!? Why!?"

"Tatsuya…what do we…I…” Memories of her love for him flickered in her mind. "I…!"

He took the two of them to his side, all of them sobbing in earnest. He forced himself to hold them in comfort, despite the heavy sobs that rang out of him once more.

"I'm sorry…I'm so sorry!"

The painter gazed at the sobbing trio with a look of sorrow. From within, the budding potential that had been shut off from Eikichi and Lisa had been reborn…and a peculiar change had occurred within Tatsuya.

Apollo's visage had vanished into a wisp of dimly burning embers. He was no longer there. Instead, a being with bronzed armor, resembling boiler plates, a green-colored torso, and steam pipes on his shoulders, was now in his place. He flickered silently. Instead of blazing with furious flames like Apollo, this being burned softly, surrounded in ash. As the ash and embers settled, he returned to Tatsuya's body.

"His primary 'mask' has reverted to that of Vulcanus, the gentle and humble God of fire and forge…this transformation must be a part of the journey to a greater self. Vulcanus transformed from a despised infant to a blacksmith of incredible skill, turning ugly things beautiful. I suppose, in that sense, he has been 'reborn.' Because of this, he will surely take this ugly situation and change it for the better."

He let out a knowing smile before returning to his work. Humans were smart enough and strong enough to go on. Humans were resilient.

As the bonds between the trio healed, the last of the group, Jun, began to stir from his slumber. He, too, was adrift with confusion and sadness. Despite the raging feelings in his heart, his face was completely placid, turning slowly to one person in particular...

"Tatsuya…"

The boy in question glanced up between sniffles. He noticed Jun looking at him, eyes misty with…something. Tatsuya tapped his two other friends' shoulders and beckoned at Jun, who was still rigid.

"Jun…”

He still didn't move. He was likely overcome with shock, Tatsuya concluded. He slowly stood, along with his friends, and made his way to Jun's bedside. He looked ready to weep.

"Jun…you must be so confused right now…Lisa and Eikichi are in the same boat," He coaxed, hands on his shoulders. "When the rumors struck the "Other Side," it was Jun who took the mantle of the Joker, and Tatsuya Sudou was his second-in-command instead…” Tatsuya thought. Jun was likely the most traumatized of all. "Listen to me…just take a deep breath, and – mmmph!?"

His reverie had snapped. He held Tatsuya's collar with ferocity, ensaring him with a passionate kiss.
"Eeeeeeehhhhh-!?"

Eikichi's and Lisa's shouts were ignored as Jun forced Tatsuya's mouth open with his tongue… it was as exhilarating as he had imagined. All that he could hear was the faint sound of saliva and the thundering of their heartbeats. Damn everything else at the moment!

"Mmmph…mnnh…"

"Wh-what the hell…oh, Jun…"

Tatsuya was completely entranced. He succumbed, slowly collapsing with Jun on his bed.

Even the painter was stunned.

"In addition to regaining the trickster god Hermes, Jun Kashihara's psyche now holds Hyacinthus, a lover of Apollo… this is going to be interesting…"

Chapter End Notes

Sakuya Shiomi
Persona: Orpheus
Level: 1
Arcana: Fool
St: 7
Ma: 9
En: 6
Wi: 3
Ag: 7
Lu: 8
Resist: N/A
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Lightning/Dark
Persona Abilities
Agi: A light Fire attack
Sukunda: Decrease Hit/Evasion rate for 3 turns
Next: Maragi: A light Fire attack (Lv. 7)

Yukari Takeba
Persona: Io
Level: 1
Arcana: Lovers
St: 5
Ma: 10
En: 6
Wi: 4
Ag: 6
Lu: 5
Resist: Wind
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Lightning
Persona Abilities
Dia: Restores a light amount of HP
Garu: A light Wind attack
Next: Media: restores a light amount of HP (Lv. 6)

Junpei Iori
Persona: Hermes
Level: 1
Arcana: Magician
St: 8
Ma: 6
En: 8
Wi: 9
Ag: 5
Lu: 6
Resist: Fire
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Wind
Persona Abilities
Fusion Blast: A light Bash + Fire attack
Rakukaja: Raise Defense for 3 turns
Next: Agi: A light Fire attack (Lv. 6)

Akihiko Sanada
Persona: Polydeuces
Level: 1
Arcana: Emperor
St: 8
Ma: 8
En: 7
Wi: 1
Ag: 7
Lu: 7
Resist: Lightning
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Ice
Persona Abilities
Zio: A light Lightning attack
Sonic Punch: A light Bash attack
Next: Tarunda: Decrease Attack for 3 turns (Lv. 8)

Mitsuru Kirijo
Persona: Penthesilea
Level: 1
Arcana: Empress  
St: 6  
Ma: 11  
En: 7  
Wi: 6  
Ag: 6  
Lu: 8  
Resist: Ice  
Block: N/A  
Absorb: N/A  
Reflect: N/A  
Weak: Fire  
Persona Abilities  
Bufu: A light Ice attack  
Makakaja: Raise Magic for 3 turns  
Next: Dia: Restores a light amount of HP (Lv. 5)  

Fuuka Yamagishi  
Persona: Lucia  
Level: 1  
Arcana: High Priestess  
St: 3  
Ma: 4  
En: 3  
Wi: 4  
Ag: 3  
Lu: 4  
Resist: N/A  
Block: N/A  
Absorb: N/A  
Reflect: N/A  
Weak: N/A  
Persona Abilities  
Analysis: Display detailed enemy information.  
Healing Breeze: Slight HP restore at end of turn, for 3 turns  
Next: Prayer: Full HP restore and remove all binds and ailments. (Lv. 32)  

Aigis  
Persona: Palladion  
Level: 1  
Arcana: Chariot  
St: 9  
Ma: 6  
En: 9  
Wi: 8  
Ag: 5  
Lu: 6  
Resist: Pierce  
Block: N/A  
Absorb: N/A  
Reflect: N/A  
Weak: Lightning
Persona Abilities
Single Shot: A light Stab attack that pierces the back row
Samakaja: Raise Will for 3 turns
Next: Safeguard: Take all attacks in place of an ally, with reduced damage (Lv. 6)

Koromaru
Persona: Cerberus
Level: 1
Arcana: Strength
St: 7
Ma: 7
En: 6
Wi: 6
Ag: 8
Lu: 6
Resist: Fire
Block: Dark
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Light
Persona Abilities
Mudo: Slight chance of instant-kill (Dark-based)
Agi: A light Fire attack
Next: Sukukaja: Raise Hit and Evasion rate for 3 turns (Lv. 6)

Ken Amada
Persona: Nemesis
Level: 1
Arcana: Justice
St: 6
Ma: 7
En: 6
Wi: 11
Ag: 7
Lu: 9
Resist: Light
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Dark
Persona Abilities
Hama: Slight chance of instant-kill (Light-based)
Zio: A light Lightning attack
Next: Recarm: Revive with half HP restore (Lv. 13)

Shinjiro Aragaki
Persona: Castor
Level: 1
Arcana: Hierophant
St: 8
Ma: 7
En: 9
Persona Abilities
Teardrop: A light Bash attack that lowers the target's Defense for one turn
Rakunda: Lowers Defense for 3 turns
Next: Samakunda: Lowers Will for 3 turns (Lv. 9)

Zen and Rei
Persona: None
Level: 1
Arcana: None
St: 8
Ma: 9
En: 8
Wi: 7
Ag: 6
Lu: 8
Resist: Dark
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Light
Abilities (Zen):
Bane Slice: A light cut attack with a medium chance of inflicting Curse
Next: Frozen Spear: A light ice attack that pierces to the back row (Lv. 5)
Abilities (Rei):
Serene Journey (Passive): Restores SP for every step taken in the labyrinth.
Next: Recovery: Slight HP restore (Lv. 3)
Chapter Summary

The Persona game has worked beyond Sakuya's imagining. When he and SEES face an impossible set of foes in the labyrinth, the fruits of his labor are put on display, and they meet a new team of allies in the process.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Yasogami Culture Festival, Nurse's Office

The last time that Shinjiro was in a position like the one he was in now – alone in a medical ward and donning a mask of strength and fortitude despite feelings of great fear – was when Miki died. Akihiko got shipped to Tatsumi Memorial for treatment, having hurt himself trying to get to her. His eyesight had suffered and he gained some burns and cuts, but he survived.

Miki, on the other hand, had been decapitated by a support beam. Shinjiro had seen the autopsy report, and swore that fact to secrecy.

He had successfully closed his wounds with stitches and a few staples, and he badgered Elizabeth into bandaging both his stitches and his bruised head. A steaming hot boat of takoyaki was propped on a nearby stand, along with some water and spare clean bandages. All that Shinjiro needed to do now was wait for Akihiko to wake up, berate him for caring about his well-being, say a prayer to the protein gods, and dash back off into the labyrinth and get killed off by a table Shadow.

"Stupid Aki…stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid Aki…"

"Stupid…brother…"

Shinjiro winced. There was that voice again – the voice of his "other self," Castor.

According to Elizabeth, the voice he heard throughout the night was Castor's. He thought little that was good of him. He was good for battle, but not much else. Castor, and the power of Persona, were both nuisances. It was a bizarre form of science for Mitsuru, an abusive form of power that Akihiko let himself be ravished by, and a tool for everyone else. Shinjiro, on the other hand, wanted none of it. Everything had been perfect: he didn't plan on going back, but when Ken joined them, he followed suit with the intention of letting the kid get revenge. In all likelihood, his life would be cut short.

"There's no future for a guy like me…" He thought with a grimace.

"Bro…ther…"

There it was again! He could see Castor's body flickering like a burnt-out light bulb. According to Elizabeth's big compendium of mythology, Castor and Polydeuces – or, as he was better known as, Pollux – were half-brothers and twins, the latter a son of Zeus, the former the son of a mortal king.
Shinjiro's "other self" emulated this fact insofar as his Castor shared some semblance with Akihiko's Polydeuces, save for hollowed eyes, the black color scheme, and of course, the horse he rode on. In the flowery tales Elizabeth spoke of, the two brothers loved each other dearly. Shinjiro was normally not one to seek deeper meaning in such things, but he felt himself shiver when Elizabeth mentioned the tale of when Castor died protecting his brother.

There couldn't possibly be a connection, right?

He never thought of a Persona being more than a superpower until now. Sure, a Persona was the "strength of a person's heart," but that could be said for anyone with some kind of power. Castor actually talking to him was unnerving as hell.

"It's because of that stupid game...stupid Leader and that stupid blue woman and their stupid Personas...ugh..."

Earlier, in Elizabeth's Velvet Room...

"Sakuya-sama, you have tampered with divine law. Because you have done so, I am very displeased."

Even Sakuya could be shaken under the right circumstances. Seeing Elizabeth frowning with her arms crossed seemed to have that effect, much to the surprise of Shinjiro, Aigis, and Koromaru.

Their blue-haired leader stepped forward to their defense. "I don't know what you're talking about, Elizabeth. A man named Philemon came to me in my sleep. He specifically told me to play the Persona game! Hell, he even alluded to us coming here, now that I think about it. You and Igor go on about journeys and destiny and you weren't wrong then, so if a super-powered god comes to me in my sleep and says that shit's gonna go down, I might as well listen to him."

Shinjiro visibly sweat at the sight of their normally stoic leader theatrically whipping his head. Still, Elizabeth, albeit twitching, was unmoved.

"You were the one who signed the contract. You are the only one allowed in here. I can't say why your friends were dragged into the Velvet Room, aside from speculation about your fate. That being said, though these three intruders have tapped into a potential akin to your Wild Card, I refuse to assist them." She pouted and turned her head away.

Sakuya sighed, hand on head. "I've been patient with you before, but now you're really pissing me off, Elizabeth."

"Pissing...?" She coyly put her finger to her lip, feigning innocence. "The vulgar stand-in for urination? Poor you. Would you like me to supply some diapers for you? I have a selection of twenty-seven brands."

"Elizabeth!"

Koromaru whimpered – A vein pulsed from Sakuya's temple as his anger took over. His body tensed and his eyes bulged as he rounded on Elizabeth. The dog slithered behind Aigis' left leg. The robot girl herself emitted nervousness, which for her was in the form of some audible whirring from her "ears" and a perfectly rigid spine.
"This vivid display of anger is most unprecedented, even for Sakuya-san," Aigis whispered to Shinjiro, himself awash with shock. "His temperature is rising...should this 'Elizabeth' continue to antagonize him, I shall register her as a threat. Do you not agree?"

"Um...I really don't have a say in this, you know..."

He jumped at the sound of a small but still audible beeping sound that came from one of Aigis' "ears." "...Her level of power is high to the point that I can only describe it as 'absolute pwnage.' We must take great pains to 'kiss up' to this Elizabeth and beg that she does not send us into a fiery abyss to die with the rest of the weak that Junpei-san has dubbed 'noobs.'"

"...Have you been playing that stupid online game?"

"I take resentment in you calling it 'stupid,' Aragaki-san," Aigis retorted, a cute little frown on her face. Koromaru barked up in response, tail rapidly wagging. "Koromaru-san says, that you, too, are a noob."

Sakuya's surly glare did not deter Elizabeth at all. "I swear on my life, Philemon came to me and told me to play the game! What's this about divine law? He said that –"

"You tampered with divine law. I don't want to hear whatever flimsy excuses you have."

"Will you just listen to me!?"

"Tampered!" She raised her arms melodramatically. Out of nowhere, pyrotechnics lit up the room! "You tampered with law, and I don't want to deal with your Wild Card-less friends. I refuse!"

Her voice had risen in pitch. It almost sounded...fearful?

Sakuya narrowed his eyes. "Elizabeth...do you know who Philemon is? He knew what the Wild Card was..."

Her pupils shrunk.

"Er...I don't care if it's not politically correct these days! I am not helping a robot or a mutt! He smells, and she could be an A.I planning our downfall as we speak, like in the movies! And that boy...a punk! He looks like a punk! A punk!" Somehow, Elizabeth, while flapping her arms, made her way to the three accused. Her finger had shot up Shinjiro's nostril. "See!? You have snot up your nose! You're a punk!"

"How does having a stuffy nose make me a punk?" Shinjiro sighed with a lot of annoyance. "Look lady, can you just tell us why that dumb game is forbidden? You don't know shit about the three of us." He grabbed her gloved hand and removed it, glaring at her – his signature glare, the glare that drove away a thousand street punks and kept his brood safe. "I don't care who you are. I don't take kindly to people who trash talk my leader or his friends."

She glared back, albeit more with annoyance than with intimidation. How dare he? "You do not deter me. I will not help someone with power as lowly as yours. I can sense your sole Persona... your potential is weak, as are the dog's and the robot's." She pulled her hand away. "A Persona is a façade that reflects the user. This sham of Castor certainly reflects you, young man."

Shinjiro snapped. Against all logic, he was able to yank her toward him and give her a violet head butt. Sakuya gasped.

"Senpai!"
What's more, the head butt actually injured her! She reeled back with a whine.

Aigis tensed, her head reared back in shock. "The discrepancy in their levels of power is enormous, and yet Aragaki-san's head butt has injured her? Updating records: Aragaki-san may be an Elder God."

Sakuya couldn't help himself, and smiled. Shinjiro was aloof, but now Sakuya could see for himself that a heart of gold lied underneath that perpetual frown of his. Perhaps it was time to subvert what the so-called vicissitudes of fate had in mind for him. Besides, Sakuya thought, who knew what kind of wonderful powers that these three could tap into now that they had a potential like his? He took three big strides to his Senpai's side, his blue-gray eyes alight with a protective anger.

"I think that my friends will greatly benefit from being able to don multiple Personas like me," Sakuya spoke firmly. "I bet that you and Theodore-san know who Philemon is. He demanded that all of my friends play the game...please, Elizabeth. Lend my friends a hand. It's probably fate anyway, no?"

Sakuya didn't expect for Elizabeth to tear up.

"...Ugh. Fine! Fine! I'll help your friends!" She sniffed. What the hell? She wasn't trying to trick him again, was she? "You've done this awful thing to me, Sakuya-sama...ugh! Just...let me get set up, and...waaah!"

Her sobbing continued as she began arranging the table, tarot cards, and Compendium. Sakuya was flabbergasted, jaw on the floor.

"Is this behavior normal for her, Sakuya-san?" Aigis inquired.

"Not even remotely, Aigis. Not even remotely."

"As you may be aware, there are many, many methods of using tarot cards to predict the future," Elizabeth stated, her tears gone. "But we are not exactly doing that right now. Fate has led you all here, as you know. As for your future beyond this, I suggest that you wait until you solve the mystery of this place...merely my small suggestion." Sakuya noticed that she was still tense, her voice less lively than usual.

"We assist those with the Wild Card – those whose main affinity lies with the Fool Arcana." From her deck, she pulled out the card in question: marked number zero, with its stained glass silhouette boasting a jovial young man and his dog trotting precariously close to a cliff. "The Fool is unique among the cards in that it can be the first or the last in a deck. This is the card of new beginnings and unlimited potential. This card is even used as a part of a greater story that involves the rest of the Arcana: The 'Fool's Journey.' We Velvet Room assistants offer services to 'Fools' who are on 'journeys.'"

"So you take the interpretation of the tarot cards quite literally then," said Aigis, turning her gaze to the cards.

"Indeed. As I was saying, we help those whose innate Arcana, the Arcana that a person is rooted into the most, is the Fool...but because Mister Philemon..." she said the name with rancor – Sakuya guessed right in her knowing him – "...Want these 'non-Fools' to tap into their potential further, I
shall now lend them my assistance.” She turned everyone's attention to the cards again. "I take it that you all awakened on your own accord and...ran off without a second thought, all willy-nilly?"

"Er..." Shinjiro gagged. "I wouldn't say that, but we did kind of have to adapt to it on the fly...I mean, we don't really see the significant symbolism and shit that Shiomi sees."

"That is the truth. I am a 'mechanical maiden' with a body constructed to resemble a human's. In that sense, I was programmed with the intention to operate a Persona, no questions asked. My knowledge of tarot cards and their connection to Personas is negligible." Aigis drew attention to the firearms on her arms and her oddly stubbed feet.

Koromaru barked happily. Quote Aigis: "I did not question why Cerberus had come to protect me.' That is what Koromaru-san is saying."

Elizabeth let out a resigned sigh. "I see...now, if you did the ritual the way that Sakuya-sama described, then I take it that you have been hearing your Persona's voice."

Shinjiro shivered. Indeed, a deep voice plagued him in his sleep last night, weeping softly, cursing angrily...

"Your Persona is your 'other self,' a façade you don to face daily life. It is much more than a being that you can enter battle with. People with the Wild Card can use many of these 'masks' for any given situation, both in real life and in battle. The masks that my guest can wear are gods, demons, and other oddball creatures. Those who are aligned with the Fool are very multi-faceted compared to those who are not."

"Is that right..." Shinjiro said, pondering. "Personas are how we present ourselves to people...but everyone acts differently in certain situations, right? How can you say that we all only have a single "persona" for our daily lives?"

"The fact that you all have only one Persona for battle is a reflection of your rigidness. Let me show you..."

With a flourish, Elizabeth laid out 22 cards in a line. The sixth card from the left emitted a small pulse that Elizabeth picked up on, and she took it. She flipped it over, the card in question having a blue background. The object, though a bit vague, took the form of a Pope's crown, flanked by two key decorations.

"Young man, your primary alignment is with the Hierophant," said Elizabeth. "I find this strange, because you do not outwardly display active traits of one." She put her finger to her chin, lost in thought.

"Uh, well, what does a Hierophant represent?"

"The Hierophant is a symbol of education, authority, obedience, and, in some cases, a relationship with gods and the divine. The Hierophant may seem staunch and old-fashioned, but he or she is someone who is keenly aware of right and wrong, and can easily guide themselves on whatever trials their journey brings them." She cast her gaze on the gruff young man. "So you have the appearance of a no-good punk, but if this Arcana is greatly tied to you...you're one of those types with a hidden heart of gold."

Two little dots of flushed skin appeared on Shinjiro's cheeks.

"Now, remember what I said about how the Fool can take on many Personas? A Fool innate can summon a Persona tied to all twenty-two Major Arcana. Someone who isn't a Fool innate may not
be able to summon from all of them...I must do my research on this first. This I will need some spare
time for."

Everyone nodded in acceptance.

"Now, young man, have you been hearing your Persona's voice?"

He winced. "I have."

"Do not be alarmed. The side effect of that little 'game' is bringing you and your Persona closer...sort of. Just take a hold of the Hierophant card in my hand. You'll see what I mean."

He did.

*...krk…*

"What the!" Shinjiro clutched his head. "My limbs...they're all numb...!"

"Fear not, young man. That sensation is completely normal...can you see within the very depths of your heart?"

"My...heart?"

"If you wish to truly tame the power in your heart, peer inside of it...embrace it..." Elizabeth flourished her hands as she spoke.

The last thing Shinjiro wanted to do was peer into the ugliness of his heart and face the demons within it...who would want to embrace a drug-addled orphan? But she did say that he could tame Castor...perhaps he could turn him away for good-

"Take...my hand..."

"Who-!?"

"Won't you...accept me...?"

The voice echoed throughout the Velvet Room. It was deep and raspy, as if the voice's holder had smoked a pipe its entire life. It was also faint – flickering in place was none other than Castor, Shinjiro's Persona, feebly reaching its scrawny arm to his master.

"Mas...t...er..."

Castor was out for the world to see, towering over Shinjiro from its massive metal horse. No matter how much Shinjiro wanted to turn away, scream at him to leave, he was rooted to the floor, staring slack-jawed at the face of his so-called "other self..."

The voids that were Castor's eyes...he could see every little thing about himself inside of them...seeing the boy that had nothing but joy in his eyes...

"You...you're...me..."

If there were time for it, he'd give Sakuya hell for what he did.

He gently reached his hand, touching it with that of his other self.

"That is right."
Castor passed through him, rising above him, triumphant once more, just like the Greek hero. His horse brayed; he raised his arms in triumph.

"I am thou…and thou are I…from the sea of thy soul, I cometh…I am the mortal half of the Dioskouri, Castor…the fainter light of the Gemini shall now truly be yours, my other self…"

He could feel Castor, now in the form of a Hierophant card, take a far firmer footing than ever before in his head. He felt oddly calm, drowsiness overcoming him. Elizabeth was now at his side, giving him a wary look.

"Now that you are truly attuned to your default 'mask,' when the time comes, you shall awaken to more Personas. When you venture out with your friends, you may feel some odd sensations, or come across these Personas as you fight…please, remember that."

Sakuya glanced over at Aigis and Koromaru, and they, too, could now hear their Personas' voices:

"I am the Palladion that has watched over the city of Troy…I am the safeguard that protects from the greatest of disasters…this is the duty that we share….""

Palladion's voice, fittingly, was cold and robotic. It made sense; a palladion was a statue, not a figure. Ever astute, Sakuya noticed that Palladion did not necessarily refer to Aigis as her "other self."

It was now Cerberus' turn.

"I am Cerberus, the gatekeeper of Hades…thou art truly my other self? It has been ages…my powers shall be yours to possess."

Cerberus sounded rather weary and old, as if he lived for thousands of years.

The dust had settled. The three all huddled together, sitting on the floor due to dizziness. Elizabeth tapped her chin.

"So…it seems that all of you have the potential to grow after all…and in this strange world that exists out of reality, I am curious as to what will happen next."

"I feel the same way," Sakuya responded with a small smile. Elizabeth still frowned. "Elizabeth…do you need anything else from us?"

"No…" She shook her head. "You should go meet with your friends. Report any new developments to me." With that, she walked away, opening the Compendium and deep in thought.

"Shinji…."

The man in question turned his head down to see Akihiko, slowly stirring from his slumber. His voice was barely above a whisper, still pained. He turned his head toward his friend, cheeks dotted in embarrassment. "Were you…here this whole time…?"

"If I didn't stick around, you'd probably be wolf droppings."
"H-Hey..." The nanosecond he budged, the stitches pulled. "Agh!"

"You're an idiot." Shinjiro gently shoved Akihiko back down, taking care not to jostle him. "It took forever for me to stitch your wounds...granted," he sighed, "I think that Theo took it a little far by doping you with novocaine, but you know what? Your wounds are nearly healed because you didn't go back out there the second I finished stitching them. See what happens when you rest when you're supposed to?"

"Did you just call me...aaah...idiot...oogh..." Akihiko grew dizzy. "Novocaine, you said...? Gee...no wonder my jaw feels...numb..." He laid back down, glaring at his childhood friend.

"Remember, whoever says...idiot first is...is..." He weakly poked his friend's nose. "...The true idiot..." He held his head, still drowsy. "And...and...if you insult...protein again...owww..."

He collapsed on the bed, fuming. "I want back in..." He winced, his head throbbing. "Ow! That hasn't hurt...in a while..."

"Of course that bump is aggravated because your head hit the floor when that thing bit you. But seriously," he chuckled. "I remember you getting that nasty concussion when you reared back to punch me...why in the fuck did you decide to wrestle with me while the vending machine was being repaired?"

Akihiko growled, although his pained state made it seem more like a whine. "Unfinished business... I so won that..."

"Uh, no you didn't. You hit your head, you collapsed, and you made everyone freak out when you got shipped to the hospital. But no, you just had to come back at six A.M the next day, protein in hand, wearing nothing but a your hospital gown, clearly showing all the signs of a concussion, and you marched up to our Leader's room and said, 'Hello! Would you like to learn about my lord and savior, Ama-pro Protein?'" He actually chuckled. "Not gonna lie, I laughed my ass off when you did that. Your left pupil was really tiny too."

Shinjiro swore that he heard steam blowing out of Akihiko's ears, he was that pissed- and even then, even though it was small, he smiled.

At his insistence, he slowly got up to move around, still cringing in pain but steady on his feet. Shinjiro helped him toward the craft workshop where Theodore took it upon himself to create new weapons for them. Akihiko paid no attention to how in the hell Theodore made a set of high-quality boxing gloves made from a book page and instead tested one with his good arm.

"If I were right-handed, I could get by with this," he huffed with confidence. "How much time has really passed anyway?"

"Since we're in a space disconnected from reality, I cannot say," Theodore quipped. "What humans normally perceive as the regular flow of time doesn't really apply here. However, you are still not at full strength, so I do not recommend you head back into the labyrinth, Sanada-san."

"Distorted time, huh...well, how far into the labyrinth have Shiomi and the others gotten?"

"The last time he visited me, he mentioned that he and your friends reached the entrance of the third basement floor of You in Wonderland. Yamagishi-sama reported that a great power lies below, so the end of it will be upon them soon."

"Are you kidding me!?" There he was, back to whining about the lack of adrenaline in his life. "They're almost done! Shit, I've been out of commission for too long!" He rushed over to his best
friend, tugging at the lapels of his coat. "Can you pull the stitches out of me, Shinji? Please? I want to go back!"

The young man in question winced – not just at Akihiko's persistence, but at a voice he heard – the voice of Polydeuces, Castor's twin. In contrast to Castor's gritty yet mellow rasp, Polydeuces said:

"DURRRRRRRRR....."

He recoiled at how absolutely stupid Polydeuces sounded. The Persona was flexing, ready to leap at any moment, much like his master. If bought to modern times, Polydeuces would be the ultimate jock. "Please, take my stitches out, Shinji! I gotta get back on track!"

"Whoa whoa whoa, slow down. I'm not letting you get hurt like that again. You do realize how worried you made the others, right?"

Akihiko's grimace turned into an outright glare.

"Really, now? Are you just saying that 'cause you don't want to lose against me?" He let go of his friend's collar, readying his good arm. "You're always raining on everyone's parade, Shinji. You're such a coward..."

"Hey, where the fuck is this coming from!? I heal you, and you treat me like shit for it!?" Shinjiro tensed. "You know what? I'm not falling for this." He gestured at Theo with a hand signal: "Aim for the neck."

"You are a coward!"

Shinjiro winced at how outright harsh his voice became. "Seriously, you can be the worst sometimes - !?"

A swift chop to a nerve in the neck sent Akihiko tumbling down like a chopped tree, but not so hard as to knock him out. Had Theodore used more force, Akihiko would likely have died. He took a quick look at his stitches, giving one a gentle tug. "His wounds still haven't finished healing, but since he's so eager...Aragaki-san, in his current state, some practice would do him good. You're both strong enough to at least crawl around the first floor of You in Wonderland. Besides..."

"I don't believe this...why should I? It's indulging him like that that makes him act this way! I wish Kirijo picked up on that."

"Just...let him blow off a little steam. I'm sure he'll apologize later."

"Ugh..."

After helping him stand, he took the gray-haired boy in his arm and ushered him to You in Wonderland, to his delight. As for Theodore, he quietly returned to work, pondering on two counts: he was in awe of the change that was brewing within Shinjiro's heart, and he was terrified because for the briefest of moments, Akihiko's eyes seemed to turn yellow.

As there was no determinable point in time to pinpoint in this world, Theodore could not determine how long he had taken to fashion the slew of book pages into a beautiful new sword. It was a one-handed blade, ideal for slashing and the Medieval-style fencing that Makoto was fond of. He was actually quite thankful for Elizabeth's rather grim mood, for she had not harassed nor bullied him due to keeping herself occupied. In fact, if she kept this up, he'd be spared of any pain!

*Shnkt*
Scratch that.

The wide grin on Theodore's face completely contradicted the fact that he was screaming internally with the fury of a thousand raging soldiers. There was also admiration brewing within him at the person who somehow was able to make an azalea flower sharp enough to stab him in the eye. At a snail's pace, he set down his sword and tools and side-shuffled towards the offender, an effeminate-looking boy in a light teal high school uniform.

"Ehehe…" The boy nervously laughed, backing away slowly. "Please don't kill me sir…"

Theodore, slow as molasses, trembling with great fury, took his quivering hand, grasped it firmly around the offending flower, and with a yoink, plucked it out of his eye and let it fall to the floor.

"Young man…I am a poor, weary soul who is growing a severe intolerance to what humans refer to as 'bullshit.' Tell me this: are you an agent of my sister, Elizabeth, sent to cause me nothing but grief?"

"Er, who's Elizabeth?" The young man looked bewildered. "I-I-I was practicing…t-t-training, if you will…I fight with these…these…" Theodore's aura of rage rose ever higher.

Jun yelped, poised to run away. "Oh dear, he's got a truckload of power coming from him…help me, Ta-chan!"

"Jun, how many times have I told you –" A young man in a red jumpsuit, carrying a traditional Japanese sword, ran from behind him. He took a glance at Theodore and made a sound of shock.

"Holy shit, Jun. I guess you've retained more than I thought…"

"Retained, you say?" Theodore sighed, applying some ice to his swelling eye. "So you've really nothing to do with my sister then…"

"Sister? You're the first person we've met outside our group that can speak to us...who are you?" Tatsuya was wary. Before he could move, the Demon Painter approached from behind.

"There is no need for hostilities, Tatsuya. It would appear that this man is in a position similar to mine."

"Similar?"

Theodore was taken aback at the strange man with the knit cap. The man's aura and level of prowess were quite high.

"You…"

"I am a resident of the Velvet Room, just like you." He tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear.

"Theo! Theeeeeeoooooo!

With a massive sledgehammer, Elizabeth smashed down the wall that separated the workshop from the rest of the hallway. Theodore's aura of rage made Tatsuya and Jun whimper in fear.

"Theo, Theo! Quick, come to the Velvet Room! There is something of great importance that you must see! I'm giving you three seconds or else you're buying me ten orders of takoyaki!"

"So much for the peace I've been having the pleasure of experiencing…" Theodore thought bitterly. "Sister, I'm kind of in pain right now…"
"One of the smaller locks on the doors came off!"

"What!?"

"It's been over ten seconds! Twenty orders of takoyaki please! Now go!" With that, she ran off, arms flailing, leaving her brother, the painter, and the two boys flabbergasted.

"…Is she on something?" Jun asked, tilting his head.

"I'm afraid not. In fact, her behavior's returned to normal."

"N-Normal?" Tatsuya gulped.

"She makes me suffer so…in any case, it appears that something has happened in the Velvet Room. Shall we go?" The painter nodded his head and gestured Theodore and the two boys to him.

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Inside "You in Wonderland," Chapter 3

"The level of power that the Shadows are demonstrating is steadily increasing, everyone. Please, be careful."

"We're aware of the power spike, Fuuka," Sakuya commented, brandishing his one-handed sword forward. "More importantly, do you sense any of those strange demon creatures?"

"Hmm…"

Fuuka exerted herself a little, making Lucia fully stretch out her arms. "I sense a sizable amount of those strange demons on this floor. It's a shame that Elizabeth doesn't know what they are, really. Either way, make sure you avoid them."

"Will do."

Yet again, Sakuya was sure that Elizabeth knew what those odd creatures were, but their goal was in sight, so he did not address the issue. He gestured his party forward.

First, they took a pit stop to a potted plant that yielded a blossom that increased spiritual power; he awarded the flower to the magically-inclined Yukari, which greatly flustered her.

Next, it was time to formulate a plan about avoiding the slew of Card Soldiers – dubbed "Fysis Oikein Eidolons," or FOE for short – that stood in their way. Much like the story, they dabbled in painting the rose bushes red. The ever-resourceful Koromaru fetched a watering can, allowing them to divert the soldiers away from their previous posts, allowing them to get through.

Third, after one hell of a detour that involved shrinking Mitsuru and her nearly getting devoured by Koromaru (Yukari wasn't surprised that she had no clue what "rock-paper-scissors" was), the key that was needed to unlock the door to the final stretches of the floor was obtained.

"Good work everyone! Judging by your map, I'd say you're 85 percent of the way from completing this floor! The path you've entered and the chambers beyond it are all that's left now." Fuuka's
"Whew…finally, we're almost done…" A weary Junpei slumped to his knees, still catching his breath from the previous wave of Shadows. "Can we take another break before the last room, please? I'm getting worn out…"

"Are you hungry, Jun-chan?" Rei questioned. Out from the void of the Meat Dimension came some meat skewers. "I heard that boys love big chunks of meat! Here! Eat!"

"Aaah…" He sighed. "My abs are killing me…I just need some water, or, I dunno, a salad…"


"I could say the same to you with all of those anpan you stuffed yourself with, Yuka-tan. You nearly threw up on Kirijo-senpai when she shrunk!"

"Do you want me to dislocate your toe permanently!?"

"Enough, you two!" Mitsuru shouted, shivering. "I forbade you to bring up that incident, remember? Let's continue on…" She sighed. It was hard to keep her composure after that incident…

Even with his mask of maturity, Ken giggled. On top of Yukari nearly puking on poor Mitsuru, he let out a massive fart due to eating some curry. He was standing right above her. Even someone as mature as him thought farting was funny sometimes.

The children of SEES, along with Zen and Rei, reached the door to the second-to-last chamber, which was guarded by a catlike creature. A small toll box was positioned to its right, with the cat perched on a tree.

"In keeping with the Alice theme, that must be the Cheshire cat," Sakuya deduced, pointing at the creepy grinning feline. It was a fat thing, with purple and blue stripes. "He basically speaks riddles to Alice in the book, and when he's beheaded, he vanishes, with only his grin remaining. I wonder if it'll do the same here."

"It doesn't seem hostile," Mitsuru deducted after some observation. "Let's group together and try to approach it. Shiomi, will you lead us?"

"Do you really have to ask?" He asked teasingly. Mitsuru glared at him. He gulped. He forgot that she had no concept of sarcasm.

"…Yes Senpai."

They grouped, all in a line – Sakuya, Junpei, Mitsuru, and Koromaru took the front, while Ken, Aigis, Yukari, Zen, and Rei carefully fell behind them. The cat did not move. Taking that initiative, Sakuya stepped forward.

"Are you guarding this area?" He asked cautiously. "We wish to pass through."

After a moment of terse silence, the cat's eyes lit up. Everyone took a battle stance –

"Insert 100 yen, meow! Insert 100 yen, meow!"

"…The fuck was that!?" Junpei exclaimed, eyes bugging with surprise.
"Hey, look!" Rei pointed at the cat's tail. "I think it's a robot!"

"A…robot?" Mitsuru stuttered. "This could be a trap…"

Aigis trotted toward the dispense mechanism and tapped it. "I sense no traps or explosives within this toll box. The cat itself also lacks those properties. I can assure you all that the 100 yen fee is all it needs."

"Very well then. So…does anyone have 100 yen?"

The team dug through their pockets, to no avail. "Whatever money we had went to Theo at the workshop…" Sakuya sighed. He turned his head to the Cheshire cat-bot. "We're very poor at the moment…"

"Insert 100 yen, meow!"

"Could you please have a little bit of mercy on us and let us pass?" Sakuya used his charismatic prowess, turning up the sympathy dial with puppy eyes. All the coffee at Chagall made him as charismatic as an idol.

It didn't work. The cat's robotic mews turned into one of disapproval.

"…Fucking cheapskates."

Skuya's eyes grew massive. "Cheapskates!?" He stomped toward the cat, throwing his arms out in frustration. "We're broke! Can't you let us through?"

"…Fucking cheapskates, meow."

Ken, who remained quiet the entire time, yanked out a debit card his relative entrusted to him. "I have a debit card." He raised it to the cat. "Do you accept debit?"

The cat's eyes flashed red.

"Debit card detected, meow. Debit cards weed out the time-old tradition of cold hard cash, meow. Code level red, meow. Security team assemble, meow."

Before their very eyes, a line of five Card Soldiers, gem-topped staves in hand, lined themselves like soldiers before them! With a salute, they prepped themselves for battle.

Everyone's jaws hit the floor, eyes bulging.

"I'm s-sorry…" Ken whimpered, trembling violently, tears welling up. "I'll cut this up when we get back…"

"We're fucked, aren't we?" Sakuya sighed. Before he could lead everyone away in a frantic sprint, five more Card Soldiers marched at their only exit.

"Yep. Fucked."

The Card Soldiers marched in place, gems aglow on their staves. Slowly but surely, they began their steady march, stomping in time with one another. Already murmurs of fright rang among SEES, with Rei trembling underneath Zen's cloak.

"Not even with my power can I take them down with ease. We are out of our element…" Zen growled in frustration. Even with one crossbow at the ready, he used his free arm to cover Rei,
which made her flustered.

There were no shortcuts to hop through, nor no bushes to hide in. Sakuya sighed in frustration. "We don't have much of a choice..." They had to fight. But it was impossible, especially since he had no other Personas with him. "Orpheus is as powerful as the rest of the team's Personas...I can hear him speak, but it's faint...shit, I can't be thinking about that now --"

*b-bmp...*

"What the!"

There was that strange heartbeat again – he felt it when he approached that demon wolf and stabbed it. He felt his heart pounding in a similar fashion when Shinjiro, Aigis, and Koromaru trapped into their hidden potential. He could hear a voice in his head...

"...A Persona?"

He could vaguely hear some shifting footsteps from behind the soldiers – suddenly, a white mist permeated above them!

"Mirage Breath!"

The mist culminated in puffs and swirls around the card soldiers' eyes. Makoto had to cover his ears when they sharply cried out in pain – they weren't wounded, but their eyes furiously watered with a mixture of tears and ooze. From behind the blinded soldiers came a group of four, and they definitely weren't high school students. Two of them even came with firearms. Makoto took notice of the man with waist-length black hair and the aura settling around him. He must've been the one who attacked them. Before he could call out to them, a soldier snuck up behind Ken, preparing an attack!

"What the-

"Get down!"

Ken was tackled by an older man in a gray suit. The rest of SEES spread out, taking fighting stances as the Card Soldiers attacked! Before Ken could react, the man who saved him took out a gun! It was a Walther P99, a semi-automatic, and three quick shots to the offending soldier's arms disabled it. It let out an odd-sounding, garbled cry of pain, stumbling backwards. When its brethren prepared a spell, he let out another three shots. It stumbled back, but all three shots missed its arms.

"Damn! Somebody back me up here!" The suited man let the empty bullet chamber drop, replacing it with another loaded one. The Card Soldier's staff glowed a bright green, a slew of green colored chains shooting from it. The chains struck the man's legs, along with the legs of most of SEES.

"Shit! I can't move!" The man spat out in fear, completely aware of the small body underneath him. "Stay under me, kid! I'll tough it out for now...agh!"

A fragment of the Card Soldier's staff struck his backside. A large gash began to stain his suit with blood.

"I can take care of myself!" Ken shouted angrily. With enough strength, he slid his small body out from underneath him, taking his Evoker and aiming for his head.

"Kid!? Why are you --"
"Nemesis!"

Hovering above Ken's hunched figure was a slender black figure whose midsection hosted a massive, circle-shaped razor and an odd, grinning face. Katsuya compared it to a weird action figure Tatsuya once owned. "I know just the spell for this!" Ken let out a cry of confidence as Nemesis spoke and spun rapidly:

"Hama."

Faster and faster Nemesis spun, with her handle arms summoning glowing white talismans that stuck to the soldier's body. A small pillar of light shot up…

…and flickered off, completely shut out by the soldier. It was immune.

"Oh no-!"

"Light attacks won't work on it – Ken-kun!"

The soldier's staff swung down in a massive arc, striking Ken in the head. His small body was tossed to the side, completely limp. A puddle of blood poured out of a gash in his head. Fuuka, from her position in the Velvet Room, cringed in horror.

"Aaaah! Ken-kun, no!" Yukari wailed, her arms up firm beneath another soldier's assault. Junpei was wildly swinging his sword behind her, his momentum all over the place. Both of them were stuck in place by the green chains. "I can't keep up with healing you guys…" She slumped to the floor, hair drenched with sweat. "No…I'm out of energy…"

To Junpei's horror, the soldier above them mowed Yukari down, and he followed, but stayed conscious. His legs were nearly shattered, blood running down his legs.

"Yuka-tan…"

"Marin Karin!"

The Card Soldier turned pink. He giggled like an idiot, stumbling around and swinging his staff madly, striking two other soldiers! Junpei let out a pained smile, looking up at his female (and beautiful!) savior, a woman with dyed hair and a green dress.

"I'll protect you, kid!" The woman shouted, a blue aura flowing around her. "Callisto-!"

From her soul came a female figure, tied in a massive wire, wearing a rubber red dress. Her most striking feature (if one could call it that) was the red high heel that had been stabbed in her face. Even as it was able to drive back the charmed soldier and its compatriots with a rock-chucking Mamagna spell, Junpei couldn't help but keep uttering "what the fuck?" at the damn shoe in her face.

Unusually for a loner like Baofu, he was able to keep another soldier at bay by timing his coin tosses with the angry Shiba Inu leaping in up close and slashing it. *Mudo* skills were also not an option, and the sweat on Baofu's brow noted that he was running low on spiritual power. The blindness that he inflicted on the soldiers helped wear them down, but it was starting to lose its effect. Loathe he was to do it, he took it on himself to watch over the red-headed girl who had been knocked out cold by the soldier he was fighting now.

"Hey, thanks for your help," he said with a smirk as Koromaru limped back to his side, his hind leg wounded. Despite the injury, he growled louder, still needing to fight back. The dog's aura blossomed, and he bent down low, using the last of his power to summon Cerberus. Dog and
Persona howled in tandem as a massive blast of fire engulfed the soldier.

Miraculously, it died, vanishing into a black mist.

"Wow…you did it, boy. I'm not even mad," a weary Baofu said with a sigh. "In fact, that's amazing."

He slumped to his knees, greatly worn out despite the fact that five soldiers remained (Ulala's charming of one of them got rid of several. He owed her for that.). The dog was in worse shape than he, but he was still raring to go. He cursed, rummaging through his velvet pouch and realizing that he was out of coins. He was useless.

"Dammit…"

He glanced at the pained Koromaru, whose aura only glimmered brighter, despite the pain he was in. "Hey…you're bleeding pretty bad, pooch…get back here…"

The dog did not falter. Only protecting his new family mattered to him at the moment. That desire began to manifest in a form previously unseen…

The sound of glass shattered in Koromaru’s mind. Many eyes had turned to him, including Sakuya – was this a new Persona being born!?

"I am the Protector of the Honored Dharma, Skanda! I defend the faithful from the dreaded tempter Mara. My other half, let us slay the demons that threaten our followers!"

The Persona in question was a bodhisattva that found his way to Chinese Buddhist teachings. He was a chubby thing with pale skin, Chinese armor, and a vajra staff in hand. The staff was held high, chanting as one of the worn-down soldiers charged forward –

"Gryva!"

Large pockets of gravity punctuated the ground, crushing the soldier beneath! Three massive dents found their way into the floor, with the disembodied soldier torn apart and spread among them.

Koromaru whined at his new Persona, curiously gazing upon the smiling armored man. He seemed to smile back, to the dog's confusion, before disappearing. The poor dog barked in satisfaction before tipping over like dead weight, blood loss finally getting to him. A frustrated Baofu took the pup to his side, taking note that Maya and the blue-haired kid were taking the lead in taking out the last of the soldiers.

For a civilian, Maya was quite the sharpshooter. She took out the legs of the soldier opposing them, with Sakuya following up with a violent stab to its face. There were two soldiers left, and even with their weak attacks, they were wearing down. The battered soldiers shifted their stances, opting to rush down the two of them much like it did the others.

"Sukunda!"

Orpheus was at Sakuya's command, plucking his strings. The sound waves forcibly slowed down the leading soldier, throwing his swing off balance. Forcibly, Maya yanked the boy out from the soldier's attack range (albeit a little too close to her bosom for comfort) and whispered in his ear:

"Time an Agi spell with my Aques spell. Something cool will happen."

She beckoned a struggling Ulala (trying to ignore Junpei's unsubtle flirtatiousness) to come over and
mentioned the plan: a fusion spell.

"Ready?"

"You bet!"

"I hope this works…” Sakuya had his Evoker ready, summoning Orpheus. At Maya's command, he cast Agi first.

"Magna!"

"Aques!"

Following up Orpheus to his sides were the ethereal forms of Callisto and Maia, the former dropping a massive boulder, the latter summoning a large, cascading pillar of water. The three elements twisted and molded together, creating a twisting whirlpool of steaming hot water accompanied by broken chunks of rock, engulfing the poor soldiers with a vicious whirl. The soldiers were torn asunder, their bodies shooting off all over in streams of black ooze.

Sakuya dropped to the floor, sighing in relief. He turned to the ebony-haired woman who stood firm with him. She radiated with a bright energy and kept a sunny disposition, despite clearly being exhausted herself.

"Thank you very much…my team and I would've died without you guys."

"I'm just glad that you kids are all alive." Maya chuckled and ruffled Sakuya's hair. Even though she was worn to the bone, Yukari was conscious enough to spot Sakuya's small yet luminescent blush. She was also conscious enough to knock Junpei on the head when he made his jealousy quip-slash-lovely older women observation. Before she could continue, an angry Katsuya, still limping from the agility-binding spell, stomped his way over to Sakuya with Ken's Evoker in his hand.

"Listen to me, kid. I'm a police officer, and whatever authority I have in my city doesn't really apply here, but you better have a damn good explanation for where you got these firearms from…more importantly, how the hell they work. What sane person would shoot themselves in the head!?"

He pulled the Evoker's trigger; naturally, it clicked, with only some strange blue residue leaking out of it. "You kids had me worried sick waving around these things like that!"

Baofu, with Mitsuru on his shoulder, sighed in frustration. "Will you cool your tits for five seconds, Suou? We need to get out of here first. I'm exhausted, and at least three of these kids are out cold."

"We all are, Bao," Ulala commented. "And you still have shitty B.O."

"Will you shut up about that!?"

As Junpei struggled to fish a Goho-M from his pocket, Maya couldn't help but notice the gaping cut that was on Sakuya's stomach. "Poor thing...I can fix that up for you. It's bleeding pretty badly."

"Really, I can make it…” Sakuya sputtered, clutching it in pain. Before he could object, Maya used what was left of her spiritual power to summon a Persona – it was not the same lady in the oddball kimono that she used in battle, but rather a beautiful, brown-haired woman in Chinese garb, her robe's sashes floating about. She cast the Diarama spell, which was potent enough to halt the bleeding. When the Persona faded, a sweat broke on Maya's brow.

"You…” Sakuya's eyes widened.
"She's Tensei Nyan Nyan. Pretty useful, huh? That's what the power of Persona is all about. It's the same for my friends too. Of course, we've hit a snag in summoning more of them…"

"Many?" Sakuya let out a small gasp. "Does that mean you all have the power of the Wild Card?"

Maya's purple eyes were wide in confusion. "Beg pardon? I have no idea what that is."

Sakuya sighed in frustration. But then he remembered: "Wait...Koromaru just summoned a new Persona too...those adults are probably in the same boat as he is..."

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Chapter End Notes

Current Status of Tatsuya's Party

Tatsuya Suou
Persona: Vulcanus
Level: 1
Arcana: Sun
St: 10
Ma: 6
En: 8
Wi: 8
Ag: 5
Lu: 2
Resist: Bash
Block: Fire
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Water/Ice
Persona Abilities
  Agi: A light Fire attack (1 enemy)
  Gourentou: A light Cut + Fire attack (1 enemy)
  Next: Infuriate: Inflicts Berserk on 1 enemy (Lv. 8)

Lisa Silverman
Persona: Eros
Level: 1
Arcana: Lovers
St: 8
Ma: 9
En: 5
Wi: 6
Ag: 11
Lu: 10
Resist: Earth/Light
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Water
Persona Abilities
Magna: A light Earth attack (1 enemy)
Dia: Restores a light amount of HP (1 ally)
Next: Holy Arrow: A light Pierce attack with a low chance of inflicting Charm (1 enemy) (Lv. 9)

Eikichi Mishina
Persona: Rhadamanthus
Level: 1
Arcana: Death
St: 9
Ma: 6
En: 12
Wi: 10
Ag: 3
Lu: 4
Resist: Water/Dark
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: N/A
Weak: Ice
Persona Abilities
Aqua: A light Water attack (1 enemy)
Water Ball: A light Bash + Water attack (1 enemy)
Next: Malaqua: A light Water attack (All enemies) (Lv. 6)

Jun Kashihara
Persona: Hermes
Level: 1
Arcana: Wheel of Fortune
St: 5
Ma: 9
En: 7
Wi: 7
Ag: 6
Lu: 9
Resist: Slash
Block: N/A
Absorb: N/A
Reflect: Wind
Weak: Lightning
Persona Abilities
Garu: A light Wind attack (1 enemy)
Poisma: Inflicts Poison on 1 enemy.
Next: Magaru: A light Wind attack (all enemies) (Lv. 6)

Skanda, also known as Wei Tuo, is a bodhisattva under the Mahayana branch of Buddhism. He is a guardian of Buddhist monasteries that protect Buddhist teachings, and he is tasked with protecting devout followers from Mara's evil ways. Meanwhile, Tensei Nyan Nyan is a Chinese figure that shares similarities to the Apsaras from Hinduism.
What Lies In The Sea of One's Heart

Chapter Summary

Akihiko and Shinjiro kill time in You In Wonderland. All seems normal until a bloodied girl is presented before them...

Chapter Notes

This is an add-on, and not in the FF(dot) net version of the story. It began as part of a lengthy exposition chapter where SEES and Maya's team introduce one another, and now it's warped into this. Given that I was initially shaky on the B-plot of the story, I'm glad I put it in.

Also, I really, really, really, really, REALLY hate how Akihiko's character derailed after Persona 3. Heck, I didn't like him in that game either, but he wasn't whoring himself for protein like he was in the sequels. The only theory I have as to why he's a protein junkie is that fitness was the closest thing he had to a funny gimmick in P3. If he did have a primary "gimmick" (which it isn't for the most part) in P3, it's how emotionally insensitive he is and his social skills of a brick, and neither of them are even remotely funny, especially since the latter can really cripple people in real life. His emotional dickishness, as I call it, though, is aggravating.

Also of note: I do not recall specifically if it was in the Official Design Works artbook or the Club Book (a book that covers about Nyx's origins in particular), but one of those books mentions the fact that Akihiko was adopted by a wealthy family some time after Miki died. This is also mentioned in the Persona 3 CD Drama titled "Moonlight."

Spot the SMT cameos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You In Wonderland," Chapter 1

"One, two, three, one, two, three, one, two, three..."

Akihiko steadily timed his punches, continuously practicing strikes in threes. It was miraculous that his right shoulder was working as well as it as, a it had been horribly crippled by the Vanagandr. It tore through his muscles and ripped the skin right off. The remnants of the wound were finally mending and forming a lumpy scar that resembled a tree trunk, but the pain still lingered. It was a small blessing in disguise for him, though, as he was a southpaw. The notion of using his right hand for weaker leading strikes had been engraved into his mind since the day he took up boxing. For once, he opted not to switch his stance and train his weaker arm.

"It's nothing like when I broke my rib...no risk of puncturing my lung, or whatever bullshit the doctor
"One, two, three, one, two...hah!"

He shot his lead hand rapidly, twisting his left hip, forcing all of his weight into the cross strike. The cross was in top form, but even as he repeated his quick lead strikes, they felt slower than usual.

"One-two! One-two! One - agh!"

He shot his lead too quickly, and felt his shoulder muscle pull. Akihiko winced, gingerly grasping his right arm, attempting to position it so the pain would stop. Shinjiro, who had been practicing swings with a battle hammer, sighed and dropped his weapon. He strut over to his childhood friend, hoping that he wouldn't aggravate it further.

"Did'ya pull it?" He asked flatly.

"I think I did...ugh..."

Shinjiro yanked out a medicine jar from his pocket and motioned Akihiko to slowly raise his arm out. Steadily with one hand, Akihiko unbuttoned the top buttons of his red sweater vest and the first few buttons of his shirt, shimmying them halfway down his torso. There wasn't a bit of inherent shyness about their bodies between the two of them; as children, they had seen one another nude more times than they could count, either from playing outside or taking baths at the orphanage bathhouse. Shinjiro dipped his finger in the bead-like ooze that sat in the blue jar. He swept it with feathery strokes onto Akihiko's shoulder, gently pushing and massaging the muscle from time to time. The scent of the medicine reminded Shinjiro of Arnica gel, but it sure as hell wasn't that. After all, Theodore made the medicine out of a book page with a picture with a slice of strawberry shortcake on it.

"How does that feel, Aki?"

Akihiko winced. "Better..."

"I think you should take it easy now. You're clearly in good shape. Even I can see that, and I don't know shit about boxing." Shinjiro idly tugged at his beanie. He fetched the hammer that he had found at some random corner in the labyrinth and hoisted it over his left shoulder. Compared to the axe that he had arrived with, the hammer, while still fairly heavy, was smaller and less unwieldy. It reduced the chance of friendly fire too.

"You may think I'm in top form, but I'm not. My leading strikes are still slower than normal. Can't be having that when we fight." Akihiko pulled his shirt back up when the medicine fully dried. He gave his right arm a test stretch, satisfied that the pain had gone down to a minor burning sensation. "How's your hammer?"

"It's way easier to handle than the axe, I can tell ya that."

"Actually..." Akihiko tilted his head. "Now that I think about it, you've used axes and hammers like those for as long as I can remember. Why'd you pick those? I mean, Mitsuru is a fencer and in the fencing club, Takeba's in the archery club, Shiomi does kendo...and the other day, Amada expressed an interest in studying sojutsu. Aigis has all kinds of guns on her arms, and Junpei is..." He rubbed his neck. He found Junpei's swordplay to be wonky as hell. "...Well, he uses his swords as if they were baseball bats, I guess..."

"Actually..." Shinjiro sighed. "To be honest, Aki, I picked the strongest weapon that I could think of. You don't really need a lot of finesse to wield an axe either. I mean,
Kirijo practically roped you into fighting the Shadows on a whim. When I heard what had happened, well..." He huffed.

Their adolescence had been hard for both of them, finding their way, making something of themselves, addled with hormones and the onset of puberty. It was around their first year of junior high that Akihiko took up boxing. He worked his ass off, sure, but in all likelihood, there was a gift for it in him too. Naturally, a gifted orphan was appealing to all but those who were the staunchest traditionalists, those who found blood far thicker than water. The Sanada family, though extremely shallow and fickle, didn't fall into that category, and thus they adopted Akihiko when he was fourteen. Shinjiro wasn't so lucky, but he had more mental fortitude than most adults, and was able to carry on without the luxuries that Akihiko was given.

After meeting the Sanadas themselves, Shinjiro concluded that he was probably better off alone. Akihiko was happy that he had gained a mother at long last, but she was a meek, slight housewife who never attempted to learn about him. She had a son, even if he wasn't hers by blood, and she was content with that, because she embraced being barefoot and pregnant and empty-headed. Meanwhile, the head of the household was a non-entity, never around, and cold and dismissive when he was.

Akihiko had always been fairly dense as a child, but being with the Sanadas warped that density to levels that Shinjiro didn't think was possible. It was rare to meet a boy who was completely incapable of perceiving both the feelings of others and his own feelings. Akihiko ultimately chose not to care, though. He opted to ignore his parents' treatment of him, because now he had a fat allowance. He could wear good clothes, and eat whatever he wished. He was too old for toys at that point, but made up for it with new boxing gloves and workout equipment and jars and jars of protein powder.

Shinjiro, meanwhile, spent the years working to the bone, honing the one passion he had in life: the culinary arts. He was able to get into Gekkoukan due to Mitsuru's good will, and he had been a good student for the most part.

Aside from his love for cooking, his other concern in life was Akihiko's well-being, and that was why he joined the fucked-up fray that was Tartarus and the Dark Hour. He did it, despite the unstable connection he had to Castor.

Needless to say, whatever budding hope had come from their time together was crushed flat when Ken's mother died.

"...Isn't it strange for you to be asking a question like that?" Shinjiro asked. "I didn't think you'd care about my fighting style."

"Huh? Why do you say that?"

"Well, I mean...you're so bone-headed. You shirk off peoples' reasoning and ideas if it doesn't concern you or hold your attention."

Akihiko snorted. "There you go with the insults again. Why are you like that?"

"Because it's true. And I bet you wouldn't really care that I joined SEES because I was worried about you at the time."

"...What...?" Akihiko was slightly bewildered. Shinjiro sighed again.

"Are you really that stupid!?" He gritted his teeth. "Do you think, for one second, that I'd let you run
off with this shady rich girl who shows up out of the blue one day and hands you a fucking gun? And seriously, you followed her with no hesitation whatsoever!" Before Akihiko could protest, Shinjiro clamped both of his hands on his shoulders. "And don't you dare go off about how well meaning Kirijo was after all, because let's face it, Aki - I can't say how she really thinks of you, but you gotta admit that she's got you on some kind of leash. Fuck, she's put the rest of SEES on a leash, and it's bringing our morale down. Think about it."

Akihiko recoiled, swatting one of his hands away. It was certainly not the reaction Shinjiro was expecting. "Sh...she doesn't have me on a leash. She doesn't...control me...that's a horrible thing to say."

"Then what do you call the incident where she executed you the night before we came here, hm?" Shinjiro mockingly tilted his head. "Sounds like a dog getting punished by its owner to me. And she makes similar threats when the others step out of line."

"And you've clearly forgotten what Mitsuru's been through."

Shinjiro sighed again. "Come on now, Aki, not this again - "

"Yeah, this again!" Akihiko slapped away Shinjiro's other hand with a lot more force this time. "Mitsuru's suffered as much as the two of us have. I mean, can you imagine being treated like a lab rat when you're just a kid? A lab rat with an entire company's future sitting on her shoulders? And yet, here she is, leading us all and trying to bring the Dark Hour to an end..."

Shinjiro grimaced. Whenever this topic came up, Akihiko became unusually melancholy. Had he held favor like this to another, his passions would boil, and there would be a lot more anger and violence. Either way, it was obvious that Akihiko felt nothing but good things - outright respect, even - for Mitsuru. Shinjiro wanted to say that his time with someone like Mitsuru, to the point of nonchalantly going on a first name-basis with her, had a big impact on his view on women, but he had always been disinterested in the ways of romance - heck, even in the proper way of interacting with others - in general.

Now that he thought about it, he was able to speak with the other ladies of SEES with ease, regarding them as if they were a boy like he was. If he knew about anything that wasn't related to the Dark Hour or fanatic-level fitness training, Akihiko could really live up to the popular moniker that Gekkoukan gave him. Alas, that was not meant to be.

Shinjiro huffed at the irony. "We're opposites, and yet I can't even talk to them - to the underclassmen -"

"Shinji, are you listening to me!?"

The boy in question snapped out of his self-loathing reverie. "Y-Yeah..."

"You better, because the next time you disrespect Mitsuru, I'm not gonna stand for it," Akihiko spat.

"It's not disrespect if it's true," Shinjiro retorted, regaining his bravado. "Besides, you shouldn't invalidate us, or the others for that matter, because of Kirijo's past...besides..."

"Besides what!?"

"If you think about it, Kirijo's stuck in the past like you...and me, too."

As Shinjiro had expected, Akihiko was glaring at him with the ferocity of a tiger. He didn't bother to retort. He was beyond listening to him when it came to the past, and if Shinjiro were to ever tell him
the ultimate focal point as to why he left SEES, and why he abandoned his powers in the first place...

"What do you mean, stuck in the past!?" Shinjiro stepped back, surprised at how guttural his friend sounded. "You're the one stuck in the past, not me! How dare you imply that we're the same in that regard!"

*...png...*

"What the...!?"

Akihiko's eyes glowed yellow.

"You're such a stubborn ass, and you think you're so much better than the rest of us! Your own head's shoved up your ass, Shinji!" Akihiko rounded on the taller boy. The latter was so ensconced in the former's yellow eyes that most of his shouts were drowned out. "I mean, you were given a Persona for a fucking reason! Use it! Amada's mother is dead, and that's that! Get over yourself! Don't dwell on it, dammit!"

The seemingly crazed Akihiko reared back to strike - how convenient that the pain in his shoulder seemed to vanish the moment his eyes began to glow. His strike was swift, coming up in a left hook, yet Shinjiro was able to dodge it due to Akihiko's telegraphing. Shinjiro grabbed for his hammer, hoping that Akihiko would come to his senses.

"Fucking stay still and let me hit you!"

That wouldn't be likely.

"What the fuck's gotten into you!?" Shinjiro shouted as his friend launched another crazed, punch. "I-I mean, you - agh! - just listen to yourself, saying all that shit!" He hoisted his hammer in front of him, taking the defensive. "I swear to God, one minute you tell me to get over myself, and the next, you're fucking going off about Miki!" Akihiko's next strike landed smack dab in the middle of the hammer's handle, making him recoil in pain. "Are you even aware of how much of a damn hypocrite you're being!?!"

A devastating aura made the labyrinth run cold. Akihiko's eyes had gleamed brighter, his face curled into a horrid snarl - teeth like fangs, brow lines completely scrunched, huffing like a rabid dog. What Shinjiro could feel wasn't his Persona...was it? It scared him shitless, whatever it was.

The look on his face was outright murderous.

"Oh God, what the fuck is this!? Aki...what are you...!"

He nervously stumbled backward.

And backward....

And backward still...

*b-bmp...*

Ah.

Thank God for distractions. Shinjiro's heart began to thunder - not from Akihiko, no, but from something else. His blood ran frigid as he heard an echoing reverb ring in his head.
"A Persona!? Is this a Persona's voice!?"

The room became frigid. Akihiko, meanwhile, was frozen in his tracks. The yellow had vanished from his eyes.

"Agh!" Akihiko gasped. All of the rage in his voice had vanished like smoke. "It's that feeling again..."

Their hearts were pounding wildly. Shinjiro could hear Castor rasping in fear.

"Castor, he's..."

Akihiko clutched his chest. "What about him!? Don't tell me he's -"

"No, no..." Shinjiro gasped out quietly. The air around them began to shift. "Castor, he's...."

"Be...Beware...."

"He's...speaking to me, Aki. I, I can hear him, he's..."

"Huh?" Akihiko's face contorted in confusion, despite the pain that rang in his chest. "What do you mean by that?"

"Castor's talking to me, Aki!" Shinjiro gasped out, shivering as the room began to warp.

"Right, sure he is." Akihiko somehow let some sarcasm slip out, even as he was pained.

"Dammit, Aki, will you just - "

*ffflssshhhh*

A swirling pool of dirt and lighting appeared like a bat out of hell from a distance. Much like a foul beast spitting out a bone from the helpless animal it consumed, a bloody body was launched from its insides. It landed hard on the ground, landing with a sickening squelch. Following it was some kind of glass shard, landing on the ground with a hard clink. It bounced around a few times until it skidded and fell by the broken mass.

To say that both boys were shocked would be an understatement.

Even as the air around them plunged to freezing temperatures and the Wonderland-themed environment warped to a rotten shell of its former self, Akihiko and Shinjiro could only gape at the bloodied girl that had been tossed at them. In a twisted sense, they were grateful that they couldn't see all of Ken Amada's mother's corpse, for it had been crushed and covered by Shadow ichor. Here, this girl's gruesome wounds were on full display - a cracked-open skull here, a broken nose there, broken limbs and crushed ribs, bruises everywhere. To top it off, there was a wound that was deep enough that it could possibly expose an organ; it would need staples and stitches. Matching the redness of the pool of blood that was oozing out of this girl were her eyes, which had somehow remained open, yet half-lidded. They were blank, completely swimming in nothing but the pain of her wounds; indeed, among her horribly spread-out limbs, her left leg had been broken to the point that it bent inward a little.

Even though he was still reeling, Akihiko sprinted, albeit like a headless chicken, over to the girl, gasping and stuttering as he went. His face changed to one of great worry and sadness - that damn protective instinct, Shinjiro thought. Akihiko would do anything for a victim of something like the Shadows.
"But it's because of Miki, not because he actually cares..."

Shinjiro shook his head. Now was not the time to focus on that.

"Shinji, get over here dammit!"

"Ah....yeah."

Shinjiro was soon at Akihiko's side, struggling to keep his nausea at bay. Getting a bloodied Akihiko to the nurse's office was hard enough; how could they possibly get this girl there safely? Despite her open eyes, the girl was likely in severe shock, for she did not respond to Akihiko checking her pulse at her neck. "Her pulse is really weak..." He muttered softly. His hands roamed around her shoulders, then hovered to her knees. He tapped the not-broken knee; there was no reflexive response. "She really is out cold...how are we gonna do this...?" Stress oozed from his body. "Shinji, try to position her legs as straight as they can get. I'll get her lying on her back."

"Guh - !"

The girl let out a cough, blood dripping from her mouth as she did. Akihiko began to panic. "No, no, no, please stay with us, please...whoever you are..." Akihiko forcibly took the medicine Shinjiro took out for the girl and began to slather it on whatever wounds were exposed. Without even remotely thinking of the consequences, he began tearing at her shirt.

"Aki, what the fuck are you thinking!?!" Shinjiro was blushing, awkwardly turning his head away as he passed more medicine along. "You're...!"

"Look, we can talk about 'modesty in life-or-death situations' later, Shinji!" He managed to get the shirt open, exposing her breasts, and began putting pressure on the wound that snaked around her chest area. "If Takeba, for one, were gushing blood like this, I'd help her even if she screamed at me and kept calling me a pervert for the rest of my life!"

Shinjiro sighed. He had a point.

*ffffffwiviiifff***

From the ignored abyss, flanked by gusts of dust and thunder, a figure emerged from a portal. Akihiko and Shinjiro were too frazzled to notice, and it took a haunting creaking noise to get both of them to notice. The creature inched closer, agonizingly slowly, hiding about in the shadows that had formed from the warped landscape.

The taller boy's heart thundered like stampeding horses.

Wary of the horrid noises and atmosphere, Shinjiro took the time to actually observe their new surroundings. He gawked at the sight of the once-cardboard props that were now mahogany-covered craggy cliffs. The charming checkerboards became dusty and hot. The horizon was no longer joyful and purple, but reddish and stormy. It all seemed so much wider than before. It was no longer a claustrophobic labyrinth, but an open-ended hell. Off in the distance wasn't a slithering waterfall, but shouts and hellish, inhuman screaming.

You In Wonderland became Hell on Earth, a dank field of chaos that served as a birthing ground for the scourge of Creation. Shinjiro's eyes wandered endlessly at the yellowish-red horizon, cringing at the scent of brimstone that violated his nose. A sinking feeling tore through his stomach, making his body convulse as the creaking noises drew nearer.

"It's as if You In Wonderland never even existed...what the fuck is this place...? Why are we..."
From the shadows came a long, rope noose.

No pretense came into his head. Shinjiro shot like lightning to where Akihiko and the girl were, arms spread out as a feeble form of protection. He felt bile rise from his throat as the offender with the noose emerged at last.

The creature's skeletal face was exposed for the world to see.

Strutting like a peacock, the skeletal creature bore himself to the boys, dragging along the rope without a care in the world. The creature's ropes were whiter than snow, cotton and clean, with a golden-gilt sash and a white scarf with golden and sky blue filigree lining its edges. A circular, tube-shaped cap with a cotton veil decorated his head. Shinjiro compared the creature's robes to a priest's, likely from some region in the Middle East. From the back the creature certainly looked like a priest. The image was, of course, wrecked by the fact that its head was an exposed, grinning, maniacal-looking skull.

The skeleton priest looked down at his noose. He looked at the ground at the forgotten shard, a shard that had a dusty shine like an amethyst, that had been spat out along with the girl, and nodded his head. He then cast his hollow gaze at the two boys and the girl, tugging his rope closer to him. It seemed as if judgement had been set for the two of them.

"Well, well, well...'tis my lucky day, I suppose. The Chinvat Bridge nar'ows three times hence for me."

Akihiko and Shinjiro glanced at one another, half-confused, half-paranoid at the priest-creature. No matter what, though, they struggled to keep their panicked breathing silent.

"Ye boys...that girl that lies at thy feet is a sinner. Do ye know of 'er?"

Shinjiro straightened his back, his face taking on a scowl. "A sinner, he says. And he's some kind of...demon priest, or something. I think I see what's going on here."

"Are...are you a demon?" Shinjiro asked. The bile in his stomach churned still, but he kept up his steel. Akihiko took a protective stance over the girl.

"A demon, ye say?" The skeletal creature chuckled with mirth. "Thou 'ave the mettle to dub a Fiend as naught but another demon, young man." He shook his head. "But words are but words, I suppose, so I suppose ye could say that, yes, I am a demon."

And that was why his heart was ringing so violently. And now his mind began to boil like magma. His eye warily shifted toward Akihiko, who began to wince - his shoulder, maybe? The timing couldn't have been any worse.

He could feel the amount of power that this demon was letting out. And that blasted noose made him sick. He dared not think what this creature would do with it...

"I ask of thee again," snapped the Fiend. "Art thou aware of the sins the girl before you hath committed? 'Tis my duty to take her damnable soul to the House of Lies. The proof of that duty lies in her broken body, slain by my hand."

"Dammable...?" Shinjiro's anger sparked without warning. "You're the one who put her in that state...and you're dragging her to hell for it? Aren't you rather fucked up now?"

"I won't let you kill this girl!" Akihiko exclaimed. "I'd kill the likes of you to keep people safe!"
"Oh ho ho! Thou art most chivalrous little boys...and yet ye know not a thing 'bout 'er, it seems..." The Fiend chuckled, reigning in his rope. "And by extension, ye know not of the Trapezohedron of Wrath that lies before thee?"

The "Trapezohedron" glimmered in the dust. Shinjiro and Akihiko both gazed at it briefly.

"It looks important, Aki..." Shinjiro said quietly.

"Oh, who gives a shit about that piece of glass!?" Akihiko shouted, agitated. "If we're gonna save this girl and get outta here, our only way out's gonna be by fighting that guy...!"

Akihiko took a fighting stance. Shinjiro groaned.

"Ye...aspire to defeat me? 'Tis laughable," said the Fiend. "Yet I suppose I can entertain thee."

The fiend lifted the noose, holding the tied end up. He stood unnaturally upright, jutting his chin forward.

"That girl's punishment is for th' crimes of slaying Daena, the Fiend of Priestesses,- taking the Trapezohedron of Patience, and for daring to escape my judgement. For her sins, she is deserving of all eternity in the House of Lies. I, Vizaresh, Fiend of Magicians, shall deny thy paths to salvation and cut thy lives short!"

Vizaresh, as he were, let out a wicked laugh as his unnaturally gray-colored hand rose in the air. Two massive bolts of a Zionga spell smashed through the ground and burned it, leaving behind ash and smoke as Akihiko leaped away in a hurry. Boy and demon gave chase to one another - Akihiko ran with his Evoker in hand, while Vizaresh glided elegantly, the noose skating along behind him, taunting him.

"Lightning won't work on me, ya freak!" Akihiko hissed, aiming his Evoker at his forehead.

"Come, Polydeuces!"

The shot rang out. Polydeuces emerged, swathed in blue light. At Akihiko's mental command, Polydeuces cast Tarunda, a spell that let a strength-lowering miasma seep into the enemy's body. Vizaresh's glide slowed down, but he kept his pace, snickering.

"'Tis nothing, you foolish boy..."

Like a stern schoolteacher disciplining a rowdy student, Vizaresh struck the back side of his hand, forcefully, at Akihiko. It struck him hard, with an audible crack, sending him flying back. A trail of blood was on his lips as he hit the dirt, landing right on his injured shoulder.

"Agh!"

"Aki!"

Shinjiro began to panic as Akihiko hauled himself up from the ground, spitting blood as he did so. Already, an angry welt was forming on his cheek. Without thinking, Akihiko rushed like a bull, landing a furious left strike on his sternum. The creature recoiled, spine bending backward.

"Hah! Don't underesti-"

*hrrrrk*

It wasn't visible to the human eye at all. Vizaresh had wrangled his noose on Akihiko's neck.
"NO---!"

He looked like a dog getting beaten by his abusive master. Akihiko was on his knees, his face already purple due to the air being denied from him. All he could do was choke and drool, futilely tugging at the noose. Vizaresh laughed and squealed with glee, placing a foot on the boy’s rear. He pulled tighter and tighter, howling and howling as Akihiko’s eyes began to roll back into his head.

"AKI---!"

Without realizing it, Castor had burst violently from Shinjiro in a fit of rage. Vizaresh had but seconds to glance upward as the iron spike on the bottom of Castor's horse pierced through him. Vizaresh staggered in pain, but was able to keep a firm grip on the noose. As he fell, so did Akihiko, who was still being strangled.

"Let go of him, you bastard! LET GO OF HIM---!"

Shinjiro frantically swung his hammer at Vizaresh, smashing his body ferociously. His body protested, sending him into a coughing fit - "Fuck! Not now!" - but damn this fucking demon for trying to steal away the boy who was his brother in all but blood! Vizaresh parried with his arms, landing several hits onto the pea coat-clad boy, and with two more strikes from the hammer, their weapons (Shinjiro’s weapon and the demon’s arms, that is) were locked.

"Thou truly art loving toward thy brother, I see. 'Tis the case, though thy brother be akin to a flea on a horse's arse."

"He's a pain in the ass, but he's still my best friend...the only one who's been there for me this entire time---!" Shinjiro howled as he forced Vizaresh off of him, gaining the upper hand.

The fires in his heart were stoked. A sleeping giant was awakening within him.

"That's right...no matter what happens...he's an idiot through and through, and fuck, he needs to open his fucking eyes and see how much of a fucking hypocrite he is! But, but...but...!"

All that Shinjiro could see was fire. Blue flames surrounded him, as the will to live - the will to fight, as it were - sparked in him anew.

"Ah, what is this now!?” Vizaresh exclaimed, yanking the noose still. The action tugged the noose to its tightest.

Vizaresh was a Fiend, a being not of this time and place. But he and the Fiends who came with him were not naive in the ways of the human heart, for they have witnessed its depths and powers in action for millennia on end. No, this crude little "awakening" that this child was having was not new. Perhaps it was for him, for within his soul, there had been but a single facade that he bore to others. The legendary human who bore the body of a demon that his fellow Fiends spoke of had hundreds of demons at his servitude. Though it was no demon, the "facade's" powers were quite similar. But the legendary half-breed did not fight with a single demon, for if he did, he'd have died and been sent to the Great Will's side ten times over. This child, with his sole "facade," was even weaker than the half-breed with one...no, possibly even weaker than when the half-breed had no demons at his side at all.

"What a feeble little soul this child has...I see now...he hath barely peered into the depths of his heart. He still refuseth to see the numerous demons that lie within him..."

"Hark! I see thou art struggling to summon another facet of yourself, boy,” Vizaresh sneered. Shinjiro was struggling to stand. The blue flames were but a boast: nothing came of them, they
simply wavered about. "Is the darkness in thy heart truly so vast? Ye are foolish if ye think it so. Ye hath no hopes of defeating me."

He gave Akihiko's rump a violent kick. Akihiko choked and gagged, blood sputtering from his mouth.

"Stop it!"

"Leave your idiot of a brother at my whims and run. He is bound for the House of Lies without a doubt, even without my judgement. Run off, child, and enjoy thyself in thy stupidity. Thy atonement for thy sins is feeble and a waste. Thou hold no love for thy fellow man, no?"

Shinjiro's eyes bugged. "Wh...what are you saying, I -"

"Go now. Flee."

Akihiko passed out, his body awash in spasms. That was the final straw.

"Ye see!? 'Tis the power of my Bind of Lies! Can thee even hope to undo this noose's grasp!? Can thee even perchance a method of doing so!? Hah! I think not. Run along now, as thou always have done."

Tears spilled right out of Shinjiro's eyes as Elizabeth's words pierced through his head:

"Your Persona is your 'other self,' a facade you don to face daily life. It is much more than a being you can enter battle with. People with the Wild Card can can use many of these 'masks' for any given situation, both in real life and in battle."

"Aki...everyone...I...!"

"If you truly wish to tame the power in your heart, peer inside it...embrace it..."

The flames rose to a great crescendo. Shinjiro cried out and slumped to the ground, feeling his head split in two.

Within the recesses of his mind came a memory. It was the memory of a boy, a brown-haired boy who was all smiles and light...-

"There it is..."

King Frost's Palace of Toys. This was the biggest and priciest toy store in Iwatodai, and it showed. It was in its prime at the time, and had amazing business prior to shutting its doors and being replaced with the used book store some years later. The exterior was nothing but bursts of the primary colors, with pink thrown in for good measure. A young Shinjiro entered deftly, passing by the massive toy block structure that was near the door. He ignored the castle-like walls and loads and loads of action figures and toy structures of all shapes and sizes and immediately ran for the girls' toys. He was immediately assaulted with more pink and purple dolls and flowers and dress-up clothes than what could be deemed necessary.
"Which one was it...?"

This was going to be tricky. Thankfully, Miki showed no interest in the Lucca-chan dolls or the Jack Frost line of toys. There was no easy way to swipe toys from either line, and he'd be caught red-handed in a heartbeat because of their prominence. And because he was some orphan rat with ratty clothes and an alarming amount of scars and bruises for a child his age, he'd be condemned if he got caught.

Miki was a tomboy, but she still took an interest in dolls and the like...and there was one that caught her eye recently. Keeping those things in mind, Shinjiro meandered to the section of lesser-known brands, soon coming face-to-face with the doll that she wanted.

"Ohh..."

It was simple, but charming, beautiful, huggable. She was Futsuko-chan, who was part of an obscure line of dress-up dolls inspired by the "True Reincarnation of the Goddess" line of children's books. Flanking her were two other dolls in the collection, Hiroko-chan and Beth-chan. Futsuko-chan was the doll that caught Miki's eye, however, and it showed, as she wore a mini-dress and a white cape, and had a gun as an accessory. Yep, this was the one.

"Now she'll be happy."

There was nobody at the orphanage who was as young as Miki was. She was often left alone, with only her brother Akihiko and Shinjiro himself as her friends. She'd be left to her own devices, left alone to weep as she despaired over dreams and a future that likely wouldn't come true. Shinjiro was lucky enough to have Akihiko during school, as Miki was the favorite target for bullies and narrow-minded idiots, all spoiled rotten with the latest toys and delicious food and good clothes. One day, the closest thing she had to a friend at school bought in a Hiroko-chan doll, and when Miki spotted the line of dolls at the toy store, she broke down. That was the last straw for Shinjiro.

Security was lax, as it was a Saturday afternoon. Shinjiro was able to take the doll and stuff it in his beat-up backpack without much trouble. He snuck out of the store, and when it was out of sight, he triumphantly marched toward the train station.

"That was easy."

"What was easy, Shinji?"

Damn!

Akihiko was waiting for him at the station, looking like he was about to cry. "You cut class today, Shinji. Where did you go?" He saw how his backpack was stretched out. "Why is your backpack bursting at the seams like that?"

Double damn! "Why do you care?" Shinjiro said gruffly. "I'm here, right? Let's go -"

The backpack tore under pressure, unable to handle the heavier items inside of it. The Futsuko-chan doll fell out the back, landing right on top of the pile.

Akihiko cried. Before Shinjiro could retort, he smacked his face on the pavement, feeling Akihiko's tiny fists wailing on him.

"Why did you do that, Shinji!?" Akihiko screamed, tears and snot dripping down his face. "Why did you steal that doll when I told you not to!? Why!?"
"You idiot!" Shinjiro retorted, shoving Akihiko off of him. Akihiko landed butt-first on the pavement, crying harder. "The orphanage isn't gonna let us buy it! I had no choice!"

"You're a thief, Shinji! We're orphans! We can't be stealing things like that!"

"Don't you care about how Miki feels!? She wanted this doll! You don't care about her feelings at all, Aki!"

Akihiko launched back and landed a hard, brutal punch to Shinjiro's jaw, actually breaking skin. "She's my sister! How can you say that!? Shinji, you're an idiot-!"

And so, a livid Akihiko forcibly dragged an angry Shinjiro back to King Frost's Toy Palace, and forced him to give the doll up. The owner of the store smacked both boys for causing so much trouble, and when word broke out at the orphanage, the caretaker smacked them too. At the end of the night, no one was happy.

Miki heard the news. She was upset that Shinjiro stole, but she wanted that damn doll. She wanted to play with the doll from her favorite book, and she wanted more friends her age. Sometimes, Akihiko being her brother just wasn't enough.

"Miki...that's right...I held her when she cried...I listened to her troubles, I learned about her dreams, her wants...I saw that she was..."

...a flawed human being.

Shinjiro cared for her. He cared.

Such was one of the largest oceans in the depths of his soul, one he did his best to shut away forever.

"That's right..."

Vizaresh had been preoccupied with a dying Akihiko to the point that he ignored the other boy. He actually gasped when he saw the blue flames of the soul burn...and violently did they burn! His resolve did not waiver, as he had hoped...he rekindled it!

"I...I care, dammit...I care...even if I don't deserve people's kindness, even if I try and shut it out..."

*b-bmp...b-bmp...*

"I care about the people I love, dammit!" Shinjiro shouted madly, rearing his back like an animal. "I can't turn it away anymore! I care, and I'll care and love again and again from now on!"

*CRCK-CRCK-piiing---*

Another part of Shinjiro awoke.

"PERSONA---!"

It was a female deity that emerged from the flames this time. She was a curly-haired thing with a body made of metal pauldrons and a green chiffon dress that was cut to emphasize the bosoms and hips. It was ruffled at her shoulder - and at that shoulder was a beautiful vase, a clay vase colored like mahogany. As the woman rose higher and higher, the flames that were pouring from the vase
intensified.

"I am Brigid...I am she who rules over healing and the tender, protective flames. Your skill and noble heart are worthy of my love. With this hearth, I shall protect you, my other self..."

Shinjiro stood tall, angry as hell, as Brigid swept her hand from the vase gently.

"Agilao!"

A blast of hot fire set Vizaresh aflame. The Fiend cried out madly in pain and fell, frantically waving his arms in a feeble attempt to extinguish the flames. The noose slackened on Akihiko and slithered away like a snake. Crying out in a panic, Akihiko fell and began to cough, twitching and thrashing as oxygen returned to his lungs.

"That freak's weak to fire...and that's how the noose can be removed!" Shinjiro thought, feeling a great sense of joy as he saw his best friend taking in air again.

"GAAAAAAAAH! Damn you!" Vizaresh screamed, shuddering as the flames went out. "How can this be!? Thy resolve hath hardened!?"

Shinjiro gave the Fiend a glare, a glare of death that he now knew could make gods and the supernatural quiver in their boots. "You hurt the ones I love...you fucking pay for it."

"Heh...thou truly art...a child..."

"Agilao!"

Shinjiro commanded Brigid once more, setting Vizaresh aflame. The Fiend was actually running away! He was too weak to continue, and too shocked at the wicked soul's behavior. A soul like his should have been irredeemable.

"My judgement lies for the girl...a shameful Fiend I truly am, but I must retreat! And besides..."

He swiped the Trapezohedron off of the floor. After all, per the trial's rules, she did not successfully fight him off herself, nor did she see her memories and reflect on them, thus he could reclaim it. While Shinjiro noticed, he didn't give two shits at the moment.

"Thy resolve steels like a blacksmith's irons...I find thee most amusing!" Vizaresh shouted as he began his retreat. A large portal of reds and yellows began sucking upward. "But not all humans are redeemable like thee! That girl is such a human! If she cannot stand the sight of her memories or the skills of I a second time, she is doomed! Remember this!"

The swaths of lightning and dirt swept Vizaresh away. With one final inhuman scream, he vanished.

Shinjiro gasped and coughed, falling to his knees. He gasped and sputtered; two Agilao spells in a row drained his energy far faster than he had expected. Sweat had now soaked his clothes in full, and his vision was blurry.

"I am thou..."

"Eh...?"

He turned as carefully as he could, struggling to not tip over. A metal-clad hand grasped his cheek, motherly and tender. Above him was a worried, loving, gentle Brigid...his Persona.

His second Persona.
"Thou art I..."

Brigid’s touch was warm and nostalgic. Shinjiro could see himself as a child in Brigid. He was far happier, and far more loving too, much like this Irish goddess of the hearth.

"I'm you...and you're...me...so that's what Elizabeth meant when she..."

Brigid smiled.

"I shall be at thy side...always..."

Brigid vanished, returning back into the depths of his soul. Shinjiro let out a sigh filled with satisfaction and pleasure. He felt Brigid's presence, along with Castor's. Two masks. Two parts of him that he had accepted.

Shinjiro closed his eyes and saw his two Personas sleeping within him. Both had entered his vision as a pair of soft, glimmering lights. With a small pop, a pair of cards materialized in his hand - one for Castor, one for Brigid.

"What are these?" he asked out loud to himself. He held up each card.

He found himself involuntarily laughing. They were tarot cards boasting his Personas, and they reminded him of those old trading cards that he and the other orphans would find in garbage cans. In his left was a card of Castor, his "default" Persona. He was a Hierophant, as Elizabeth said, and a line of markings on the cards noted that he lacked resistances and weaknesses. Even though he and Akihiko had been mostly dicking around in You In Wonderland, Castor had more skills in his repertoire: Along with his "Teardrop" attack and his defense-lowering "Rakunda" spell was "Samakunda." The explanation on the card was that it was a spell that dampened resistance to magic. His encounter with Vizaresh empowered him further, granting Castor the ability to regenerate Shinjiro's stamina and any shallow wounds he'd get, albeit by a small amount.

"He's nothing like he was the night we came here. I guess it's because we're stuck in...limbo. I'll call it that. Whatever the fuck Elizabeth called it. I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case...I mean, how else would one explain all of our Personas losing our skills and shit?"

He then held up Brigid's card in his right hand. The Roman numeral III was in each corner.

"Number three...the Priestess...? No, that's not it...I think it's....a Queen, no...the Empress. That's it. Brigid is aligned with the Empress Arcana."

Now he was starting to sound like Elizabeth.

Brigid's powers were a few levels ahead of Castor's, but not by a significant margin. Shinjiro was no mage, but Fuuka's analysis of him noted that he had middle-of-the-road magical power. Brigid, on the other hand, was clearly a magic-inclined Persona, and had a lot of will on top of that. She had two active skills - Agilao and Diarama - and a more passive one, titled "Invigorate." Come to think of it, he didn't pass out completely when he thought he should have.

"Looks like Brigid can give me an energy boost in a pinch," Shinjiro thought. Unlike Castor, Brigid had strengths and weaknesses: fire magic was outright useless against her, while ice was her Achilles’ heel. There was nothing else to note of her, and he sent the two cards away. He had no time to really rest, though. He now had two bodies to contend with -

"Agh...*cough, cough*...Shin...ji..."

- scratch that.
Akihiko was still twitching, struggling to get up. Shinjiro cringed heavily at the massive, angry-looking violet bruise that had circled around Akihiko's neck. He didn't even bother to notice the other cuts and welts that were inflicted on him. Was it that noose's doing? It strangled him alone, after all, and it didn't stop until Shinjiro struck him with fire.

Before Akihiko could blink, Shinjiro willed himself to summon. He took out his Evoker and gently tapped his head with it, firing a shot: "Persona."

Akihiko was enveloped with the gentle light of a Diarama spell. "But wait - Castor doesn't know anything...like..."

He slowly glanced upward and gasped. Brigid's presence caught him completely off guard. His eyes shrunk, shocked, even as he felt his wounds healing and his posture fixing itself. "Huh...!? Who - "

Brigid finished healing him and vanished, leaving Shinjiro to stumble. He had recovered just enough energy to fix Akihiko up. Now he really had to take it easy, lest he faint from exhaustion.

"Shinji...what was that? Did you - ?"

"Aki..." Shinjiro smiled. This, too, threw the sorter boy off. "Are you...feeling okay...?"

"Y-Yeah...I mean - *cough* - it's hard to breathe, a little, still, but...but - huh!?"

Shinjiro caught Akihiko in a hug. They both slumped to the floor. Shinjiro was quivering with sobs. Akihiko, on the other hand, was confused.

"Shinji...are you crying...?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking crying you idiot!" Shinjiro choked, tears gently sliding down his face. "You, you nearly died, Aki. That fucking, that thing tried to, to - strangle - " He couldn't get the word out and whimpered, clutching his friend even tighter. "I thought you were...you were..."

"Shinji..."

He held his friend, letting him cry. Akihiko, being as bullish as he was, though, was more angry at himself than anything.

"I let that damn skeleton-thing near-strangle me to death...feh. Goes to show how weak I am...and besides, why's he getting so worked up now? He wasn't weeping over me like this two years ago...geez..."

It was faint, but Akihiko nearly twitched at a pulse he felt on Shinjiro's body. It was primitive and it felt more like a howl than a word, but Akihiko could've sworn that Polydeuces said...

"...gaaooollll..."

Akihiko couldn't even remotely figure why Polydeuces was a.) talking in general, and b.) moaning like a drooling howler monkey, but somehow, those two illogical factors made him conclude that the woman he saw was, in fact a Persona. Shinjiro's Persona. A second Persona, just for him.

"So I wasn't seeing things. That was a Persona...how the hell can he summon another Persona!?!"

Akihiko gripped Shinjiro's coat. His face contorted in anger.

"Why can he summon another Persona!? Why!?"
Jealousy - which Akihiko wouldn't even admit, being as prideful as he was - settled in his gut. It was there to stay for a long, long time.

"Aki...we gotta go back..." Shinjiro sniffled. "This shit is...I mean, you know, this all just came out of fucking nowhere, and yet..."

"And yet what?"

Shinjiro shivered. That creature Vizaresh - the Fiend, as he called himself - made him feel extremely ill at ease. "There is probably a one-hundred and ten percent chance that we are gonna run right into that bastard again. And something in my gut is saying that we're not just gonna be dealing with Zen and Rei and their amnesia. We've got a B-plot on our hands, and it ain't gonna be a pretty one."

The boys gently separated from one another, both having regained enough strength to move around. It was at that moment that they noticed the hellish, craggy landscape that they fought Vizaresh in had vanished, and You In Wonderland and all of its charm and claustrophobic walls had returned to its original state. The only noises that filtered the labyrinth were the running of a far-off waterfall and some wayward Shadows and demons. No evidence of Vizaresh's domain remained.

"Huh...it's like he was never here at all. He even took that piece of glass back with him," Shinjiro mused. "Well, almost..."

They had gotten so ensconced with Vizaresh that they had momentarily forgotten about the girl that he had near-slaughtered and unceremoniously dumped in the labyrinth. She was lying flat, having somehow been able to move one of her arms across her bare chest. Weak, pained noises escaped her mouth. It seemed that her shock had subsided, and now all she felt was pain.

"Ahhhh...unhhh..."

The two boys both gasped, turning their heads at the girl. Without a second thought, they ran to her side. Shinjiro removed his coat, while Akihiko took the girl's hand in his.

"I've thought about it. My coat's heavy enough to carry a girl, at least. We'll use it as a stretcher. Sound good to you?"

"Yeah, it does," said Akihiko. He turned his face to the girl with a pained smile. "I...I think she's gonna be okay, Shinji...look, her eyes are...huh?"

Her eyes were open, all right. They looked as if they had been opened with a pair of pliers. Her pupils had shrunk, shaking with shock and surprise. Her pained gasps quickened. Her grip on his hand tightened.

"Hey, hey, we're here to help you," said Akihiko in the gentlest tone possible. "It's gonna be okay, seriously. We're gonna be out of here in no time flat."

He took his free hand and gently removed a stray strand of hair from her face. If she weren't so panicked and if he didn't have the emotional capacity of a rock, Shinjiro could've easily mistaken this for some romantic dallying.

"Hah...hah...ah..."

"Don't talk," Akihiko exclaimed. "Just rest...it's okay..."

"Aaaaah....!"
Shinjiro’s heart lashed out again. That familiar echo rang in his head. He could sense one, two...no, several presences in the girl's body. Presences with voices, much like the ones in his head.

"Aki, this girl's a Persona-user."

"Really?" He turned back to the girl and put a hand to her forehead, despite her vocalizing in protest. He couldn't detect a person's potential as acutely as Mitsuru could without some kind of contact. It was also the one method of finding it that made him feel confident, what with all of the weird heart palpitations that he and the others have had lately. He took a breath and closed his eyes, letting the stir of power flow through his hand...

There it was...with a very loud heartbeat to accompany it.

"You're right...and her potential is enormous. I'm willing to bet that it's on par with our Leader's," he said, brushing her bangs away.

"You sense multiple Personas?"

"Yeah. Funny thing, though...it took me a longer time to find Leader's potential, and even when Mitsuru and I found it, neither of us could sense multiple Personas within him. It really threw us for a loop." He turned to face Shinjiro, glaring at him. "And speaking about being thrown for a loop..."

"Oh, what now Aki? Look, let's get this girl on my coat, okay?" Shinjiro sighed, raising his hands up. "Can't you hear how distressed she is? I mean, look at her!"

"Gee, you think I don't know that?" Akihiko sighed. He reached for Shinjiro's coat and laid it out as flat as it could go. "Before we take her back though...Shinji..."

Shinjiro knew that glare all too well. It was that fucking accusatory glare that Akihiko'd give him when attempting to coerce him back to SEES. But it wasn't about that this time. No, Akihiko saw Brigid, and he was pissed. Shinjiro facepalmed. "Oh, boy...here we go..."

"Shinji...did you really summon a new Persona? That woman with the vase...I wasn't seeing things, was I?"

Nowhere to hide. He was roped back into SEES against his will, and with all of the crazy shit that had happened lately, a lot - a lot - of uncomfortable revelations were thrown at him these days. No other option but to be honest. "You weren't hallucinating, Aki. I...I can summon another Persona. And you can thank Leader for that, sort of."

"Leader...? The hell do you mean by that!?" Akihiko tensed, ignoring the girl's moans of distress.

"This is gonna sound like total bullshit," Shinjiro began, placing his arms under the girl to lift her. "But hear me out. Leader, Aigis, Koromaru and I...we played a game. The morning before we got here, in fact. We played, we all passed out, and the reason why Elizabeth dragged us aside earlier is because we...uh, broke protocol.' She was angry, it was all bullshit, and the point is that because of the game, the three of us can now summon more Personas."

"...That was the single dumbest thing I've heard in a long time." A look of extreme disbelief crossed Akihiko's face, his arms slumped.
"Trust me, it does sound dumb," Shinjiro sighed, "but it's the truth. And yes, Aki..." he began, noticing Akihiko's irritation rising, "...I promise on my parents' graves that I will tell you more." He stressed each word, jutting his chin. "But in case you've forgotten, we have a girl here who's bleeding out of every part of her damn body!"

And as if in agreement, the girl cried out in pain as a wound on her chest ruptured. "Waaaaagh!"

"Shit-!"

Akihiko joined his friend in gently lifting the girl onto Shinjiro's coat. They both were able to blanket her with the coat's front and arms when she shot her not-as-broken arm up and ferociously grabbed Shinjiro's wrist.

"Huh!?"

"A-ah...hah..."

Her blood red eyes, manic and blazing, locked with his. Shinjiro couldn't will himself to move. He returned her gaze, still in awe at how vivid the color of her eyes were.

"They're so red...they're kinda fierce too. Kind of like..."

Like...

...Like...

*b-bmp....b-bmp....b-bmp-b-bmp-b-bmp.*

"Gah!"

His heart violently pounded as his vision went red.

"Y....you...you..."

The girl actually managed to vocalize a word.

"Me...?"

"You...and...!"

The world, for a merest nanosecond, stopped. Shinjiro choked. The sheer redness of his vision overwhelmed him. The color and murk reminded him of blood. It overwhelmed his senses, making him feel deathly ill. Without warning, the girl's touch ripped at his mind, right at the seams. He was bombarded with blank images - empty memories that he had no recollection of. The girl's eyes weren't just manic, they were powerful and fierce...

"...Kind of like - "

Like him. Like their leader...Sakuya Shiomi...

Shiomi...

Imposed over his vision was a crucifix, awash with blood and barbed wire. Juxtaposed over the crucifix was the image of a girl -

"What the-!?"
Akihiko slapped Shinjiro out of his doldrums. "What the hell's wrong with you!? Let's go!"

Without another word, they lifted the girl, whose arm now slackened, up between them. The boys made a bridge between their arms, with the girl slacking between them. She lost her grasp on Shinjiro's wrist, but was staring at him, and Akihiko, still. It was unnerving as hell, but Shinjiro had to ignore both it and the sick, twisted feeling that sunk in his gut for the time being.

"She's here, so it's obvious, but this isn't any ordinary girl...why does she make me feel so uneasy...?"

"Unh..."

Her eyes were a more normal size now. It allowed Shinjiro to see their natural beauty more clearly.

He felt his heart skip a beat when they met again. He couldn't help himself when he thought: "...cute..."

Akihiko was concerned for the girl's well-being, but that was second in importance in his mind. The first was Shinjiro's spiel on he, and a few others apparently, being able to summon more Personas.

"He ain't gonna tell me more. I know it. I fucking know it. Seriously, a fucking game!? Shiomi's pulled of some stupid shit before, but I'm not fooled this time. I don't believe a damn bit of it...not at all. Dammit all...he's so stuck in the past about Amada's mother's death, and yet here he is, with a second fucking Persona! Wherever the hell he got it from, he doesn't deserve it. Not at all."

His eyes didn't glow like before, but his anger and jealousy let out a heavy aura, plain to see.

Silence fell between the two childhood friends. Even after everything that had happened, there was nothing more to be said for now. Slowly but surely, they began their impromptu ambulance walk out of the labyrinth.

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The feeling of a dull, writhing ache has shimmied through my body for a...long time now. There's no way to tell how long it's lasted, exactly. Time isn't as much of a man-made concept one might think - it marches onward, slowly, infinitely. It stretches and bends, and transcends.

It warps.

It all began after I fell asleep.

After I fell asleep, the ache began, poetically enough, in my heart, slithering throughout the rest of my body: chest, arms, legs, head, coming to an apex at my brains. It hurt all over. I did nothing but let the barbed wires, sent down by who-the-hell-knows, circle around me and bind me until I bled. Like a fishing line, the wires reeled themselves in, taking my hapless, bloodied carcass with it. The features of the land I departed from are now little more than miniature beads and blocks, the cherry trees like lumps of something soft. Black mist shoots from around me and fogs what's left of my vision, dragging me away. In the midst of my journey, I skidded to a halt, as if I had hit a glass
ceiling.

And then it shot outward, stabbing me, shooting me upward like a rocket.

Glass splintering. Shards flying everywhere. Darkness accented with harshly lit beams of red light rushed me along a current so forceful that I was afraid my body would fly out of my skin. This vast network held only a distorting noise. No peace. No smells. Nothing to taste. Everything ephemeral.

There were sights, though. Disturbing sights. Sights that I should not have seen again.

Sights...

Things I used to remember.

It only takes a nanosecond of doubt to violently veer a journey off course. Even after all the cards have been played, even after the final choice had been made, the bridge burned, goodbyes spoken and lives finally moving on the road ahead, often on a path less beaten, there's always that sliver of a chance for backtracking.

This probably wouldn't have happened if I didn't fall asleep in the arms of the one I loved so dearly. No...if I had fallen asleep alone, I'd have yearned for that person instead. I'm just a selfish little bitch in the end. I wanted them. I wanted what I had. I wanted what I had obtained over the course of that year. I wanted them all.

I wanted all of those things. The world wasn't gonna save itself, but to hell with the people who wanted it to burn. If they wanted to die, then they probably deserved it...

...of course, I didn't want the whole human race to just die off like that. Those people can burn, but leave the rest of this world, this beautiful world that I wanted to explore, to live in, out of it. Damn the idiots who made that stupid tower come to life in the first place.

Damn them for putting me in this...compromising position.

I didn't find the answer to life. What that old man said was a big fat lie.

What I found was a short-term answer to a mess that some old fart nihilists left a bunch of children to clean up. It was the metaphysical equivalent to slapping a band-aid on a bloody gash that nicked an artery. It probably wasn't even my own answer to begin with. It was a flimsy answer for those assholes in the Velvet Room, giving "Fate" a blowjob for the ages.

Dammit, I have wants and needs too.

But no, I just had to go down the road of martyrdom, didn't I?

I had to go to sleep as a price of choosing martyrdom. I did, for a while. Then I woke up.

I woke up and remembered. And now, because of that...

Because I remembered...I came here.

Other things happened too, I think. But I know for a fact that I came here because I remembered.

When I woke up, I was cold. Naked, too. There was no time to think about that gut-wrenching presence that I hadn't felt before in the deepest depths of my body. I needed clothes.
I needed clothes for two reasons: I was freezing, and I was covered in scars - all of them little reminders that I had woken up. They were itchy, blotchy, painful. The pain and itch wouldn't go away, no matter how hard I scratched.

The pain and itch intensified when...he...found me.

The scars turned into scabby welts that burst when they - the Fiends- found me.

All because I woke up -

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Chapter End Notes

Brigid is a noble Irish deity who represents blacksmiths, poetry, wisdom, and the home and hearth. She has appeared as a Persona in Persona 1, under the Empress Arcana.

Vizaresh and Daena are Zoroastrian figures who preside over the dead. In Zoroastrianism (a religion of Iran that predated Islam), when a person dies, their soul goes to the Chinvat Bridge. If the person who died had a good soul and had done good through life, the bridge widened and Daena, spirit of revelation, would take the soul to the House of Song to be united with Ahura Mazda, the creator god. If the person is wicked, the bridge will narrow and Vizaresh will drag that soul down to the House of Lies, which is similar to Hell.

Vizaresh is often depicted in texts dragging souls with either chains or a noose (the latter which was used here), and I imagined him wearing traditional Zoroastrian priesthood robes, as visuals of Zoroastrian figures are far and few between.

Shinjiro's Personas after the scuffle with Vizaresh
Castor: Level 12
Hierophant Arcana (MAX Affinity)
No weaknesses or resistances
Moves: Teardrop/Rakunda/Samakunda/Regenerate 1
Next: Wild Swing (multi-hit Bash attack): Level 17

Brigid: Level 17
Empress Arcana (Great Affinity)
Null: Fire/Weak: Ice
Moves: Agilao/Diarama/Invigorate 1
Next: Azure Cessation (Medium Fire attack/targets defense and will/chance of causing Sleep) : Level 20

Akihiko's Persona
Polydeuces: Level 9
Emperor Arcana (MAX Affinity)
Res: Lightning/Weak: Ice
Moves: Sonic Punch, Zio, Tarunda
Next: Mazio (Light Lightning attack/all enemies): Level 12
Too Much Exposition

Chapter Summary

Maya and Tatsuya's team formally meets with SEES, and after recovering, they all set out for the final floor of You In Wonderland.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Outside "You in Wonderland…"

"Maya, brother…God, you both look terrible. Still, I'm happy to see you're safe.

A second party was waiting outside for them, and unlike SEES' rescuers, these four looked like they were actually in high school. They stood out like the adults did: the young man who spoke wore a red motorcycle suit and had some odd black tattoo on his arm, the only girl was clearly a foreigner, one looked like a Visual Kei reject, and the last was very effeminate-looking. The boy in the jumpsuit clearly was in charge, and he had the commanding aura to match. A flustered Fuuka was next to him, and even Yukari couldn't help but take in his good looks. Off to the side were Elizabeth, Theodore, and a tanned man wearing sunglasses and a turtleneck.

"…The hell? He looks like some kind of superspy…" Junpei noted on the tanned man.

"So others have come here as well," the tan-skinned man sighed. "I, too, am glad to see you all in one piece."

"I can say the same, as does my sister…" Theo said lightly. He nudged his sister, who was still a bit pensive. "Right, Elizabeth?"

"Yes…"

The tanned man led everyone to the nurse's office, where Elizabeth and Theo took turns fixing up everyone. "Just as you children fell in here, so did my guests – " He gestured at the adults and at the four odd-looking teens. " - All eight of them…well, to say that we 'fell' would be sort of an understatement…anyway, we came from a different origin point than you."

"My high school friends and I were doing some reconnaissance and some training. During one such session, we stumbled onto your assistants," the boy in the jumpsuit piped in, sitting on a desk. "We were both damn near shocked that others with the power of Persona were here too."

The effeminate boy nervously laughed, interrupting the jumpsuit boy. "Speaking of…Theodore-san, was it? I apologize that one of my projectiles…well…you know."

Theo winced at his stinging black eye.

Mitsuru was conscious again, and strong enough to speak, even with a sizeable chunk of her body bandaged. "So you eight can use Personas…four of you are adults, even. Just how did you all get
"We got swept away by a storm," said Lisa. "Lo and behold, Tatsuya and his group ran into me, Eikichi, and Jun. The storm happened out of nowhere... we nearly drowned, but here we are. Maya and her group woke up first, and then we did later."

"You were swept up by a storm, huh..." Mitsuru commented. "And you say it was spontaneous. Does the Dark Hour work differently from where you're from?"

"Dark Hour...? That sounds like something from an RPG," Eikichi piped in.

"Er...why don't we all introduce ourselves first?" Theodore suggested. "As you know, my name is Theodore. The lady over there is my older sister, Elizabeth. We are residents of the Velvet Room, and Elizabeth is currently assisting that young man with the blue hair over there." He pointed to Sakuya, who waved at the others.

"I'm a second year student at Gekkoukan High," Sakuya said, smiling gently. This was a rarity for him. "Sakuya Shiomi's my name. My group and I—"

"Allow me to take over," Mitsuru interrupted, sitting up as straight as she could. Sakuya normally let her have her way, but this was completely inappropriate.

"I am Mitsuru Kirijo. I also attend Gekkoukan, like Shiomi, but as a third year." She gestured her hands around the team. "Our club, 'SEES,' is composed of Persona-users. The club's name is an acronym, meaning 'Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad.' Together, we work to exterminate Shadows."

The opposing eight stared blankly at them. Jun whispered to Tatsuya: "Somebody's uptight..."

"So you exist to fight the Shadows, eh?" Baofu quipped. "A bunch of kids like you?" He shrugged. "Then again, a good lot of people can become Persona-users under the right circumstances."

"Right circumstances?" Mitsuru was genuinely confused. "How can that be? Here I was under the assumption that SEES were the only Persona users in the world..."

"How presumptuous of you to assume that then," Baofu sighed. It was unnecessary, but uppity people were a pet peeve of his. It reminded him of Katsuya's early behavior when their journey began.

"Excuse me?"

"All right, settle down," the tanned man stepped in. "We're not here to argue, just keep introducing away. In case you were curious, I am assisting Amano-san and her team. You can call me the Demon Painter."

"Demon Painter..." Junpei mouthed. "You look like a villain in a spy film, and you have a name that wouldn't sound out of place in a Sentai show."

"...I'll take that as a compliment."

"Damn, he's kinda awesome..." Junpei was in awe.

"Now then..." Sakuya took over again. "As I was saying, we're from Gekkoukan High, a school on Tatsumi Port Island. I'm a second year, as are these guys..." He gestured to Yukari and Junpei.
"Ah! Putting me on the spot here, Sakuya-kun…" Yukari became nervous. "Um, I'm Yukari Takeba, a second year, I'm in the archery club, and…"

"Here I am, clamming up, despite that yearning for the third years to open up more…I'm no good…" She thought, searching for an answer.

"I'm the popular one!" Junpei jeered in a mock-girl voice.

"Ugh, will you ever – what kind of idiot are you!?!"

Jun to Tatsuya: "Yep, she's the popular one, all right. Kinda like the way Lisa was – "

Tatsuya clamped his hand on the other boy's mouth. "It's nice to meet you, Takeba-san," Tatsuya said, nervous. "And who's this lovely fellow you're chewing out?"

"Me?" Junpei grinned. "I'm Junpei Iori, also a second year, member of the go home club, and epic hero of justice! Wherever the Shadows show up, I'll punish them!" He posed, which made Lisa laugh.

"Wh- how do you find that funny!?!" Yukari, still a bit irritated, seemed genuinely offended.

"Er…I'm up next, I guess…I'm Fuuka Yamagishi, also a second year, and…um…I provide SEES with backup. It's nice t-to meet you all!" Her hands fidgeted.

"Backup?" Ulala asked. "You don't actually fight?"

"N-No…"

She's the epitome of what every Japanese girl should aspire to be, Baofu thought, scrunching his brow.

"I am considered a second year at Gekkoukan as well," Aigis interjected. "I am Aigis." She pointed a finger at Sakuya, who frantically waved his hands, signaling her to shut the hell up. "Sakuya-san over there is special to me. Being by his side is my utmost priority." Her thoughts shifted away to guilt, her face downtrodden.

She had been shut down before tapping into her newfound potential...

"Soooo…you're dating him then?" Ulala raised a brow. "You seem pretty serious."

"They are not dating…” Yukari sighed.

"Erm…isn't there a bigger elephant in the room to address about her?" Katsuya asked, but was interrupted by Ken.

"I'll go next. I'm Ken Amada. I'm a fifth grader, unlike the others. I go to Gekkoukan's elementary school."

"And you willingly threw your hat in the ring, young man?" Katsuya questioned, looking worriedly at him.

"Yes, I did!" Ken said with a little bit too much intensity. "I've seen someone I cared about die. I can handle stuff like this. You shouldn't underestimate me because I'm eleven."

An awkward silence fell over the room. Thankfully, Koromaru, leg freshly bandaged, limped in, tail wagging and happy as ever. He curled up to Sakuya's leg, settling there.
"Hey, it's the pooch," Baofu quipped. "Good to see he's okay."

"That 'pooch' is Koromaru-san," said Aigis. "His owner has passed away, so he lives with us now. As you have witnessed, he also is capable of summoning a Persona."

"I saw!" Maya said excitedly. "He looked super-cute, looking all intense summoning that three-headed dog like that! He certainly beats the hell out of Bobby-kun, all he does is ask for donations at the police box."

"Bobby-kun is a goddamn robot, Ma-ya," Ulala sighed. "Pretty big difference."

"We have two other third years on our team," Mitsuru interjected, "but they seem to be missing… Elizabeth, where did Akihiko and Aragaki run off to?"

"They were around earlier," Theodore spoke. "Sanada-san's awake, but still not in good shape. They're on the labyrinth's top floor for a little training."

"Oh, for the love of…" Mitsuru groaned. "I'll save that for later. You're a very interesting group."

"That's because we're not all formal like you," Maya said, more lax than before. "We all kinda just…fell together. Circumstances, you know."

"Is that right?"

"It is. Anyway, my name is Maya Amano. I'm an editor working for Kismet Publishing. Do any of you kids know of the teen magazine Coolest? I mainly work on that magazine."

"Coolest…? I dunno…I might have seen it around, but what I've read in it is pretty lame…" Yukari said. "Stuff about bogus diets and weird sex tips…Er, pardon my frankness, but I mean, who in their right mind thought that using an eggbeater to tickle a guy up there would be pleasurable for him?"

Every male in the room simultaneously clenched their asses.

"Eggbeater!?" Maya gasped. "We don't publish anything like that! In fact, I remember editing an article about resources for sex-related questions for the February issue. It was super-popular with the high school crowd. We got lots of letters praising it…I mean, an eggbeater!?

Ulala got a good chuckle out of that. "I'd actually use that to punish some exes of mine." Once again, the men clenched. "Anyhoo, I'm Ulala Serizawa, Ma-ya's roommate. I sell lingerie."

"Lingerie!? Oh my…" Junpei's dorky grin returned.

"Let's see…I box, I like tipping back a few after work, and I cook. Actually, I do the cooking for both Ma-ya and myself."

"You…can cook…?" Sakuya spoke, completely overwhelmed with shock. "I mean, you… seriously?"

"You bet your fuckin' ass I can cook."

"Hypothesis: the skill level in which the modern Japanese woman can cook is inversely proportional to how feminine she acts," Sakuya thought to himself. He looked at Junpei, who also seemed to catch wind of his hypothesis.

"Hehe, you kill me Serizawa-san," Katsuya chuckled. "But it's my turn now…I am a homicide detective working for Sumaru City's police department. Sergeant Katsuya Suou, at your service."
The young man in the motorcycle suit is my younger brother, Tatsuya." The young man in question waved. "It's kind of my fault that our little ragtag band came together."

"Really?" Sakuya asked, curious.

"Since we aren't in reality per se, I suppose I can break protocol…my unit and I were investigating a string of murders done by a serial killer. I ran into Amano-san and Serizawa-san by happenstance at a local high school. Amano-san was on assignment from her publishing company, you see, and…" He took a deep breath, the memory of JOKER nearly killing them still fresh in his mind. "Well, the principal of the school was killed, the killer himself appeared, and…he sent a demon after us. The three of us awakened to the power of Persona right there, and Baofu had already awoken to his a number of years ago." He tensed. "You'd better not spill those details when we're through with this!"

"I see…if I may ask, did you all do a ritual called the Persona game?" Sakuya asked. Mitsuru wanted to interrupt, but didn't get the chance.

"Why, yes we did. We all did in some capacity. I played the game with Tatsuya when I was in high school. Why do you ask? Didn't you play it too?"

"Well…"

"Can we wrap this up soon, please? I'd like to speak to you all about something," Elizabeth interrupted. Baofu stepped up next.

"You can call me Baofu. I run a website that archives rumors and other news tidbits that circle Sumaru City. I met up with these guys by chance." He adjusted his glasses. "I guess that's it."

"Bao…fu…sounds Chinese," Ken observed. His face was downtrodden, disappointed that a team of adults had joined them.

"I'm from Taiwan, in case you're curious." That was a big fat lie, but Kaoru Saga had officially died according to law, so it wasn't as if he were dodging the question completely. "I first summoned my Persona while I still lived there."

"I see…" Ken crossed his arms.

"Since Elizabeth-san wanted us to hurry up, we'll be quick," Tatsuya interjected. "I am Tatsuya Suou, Katsuya's younger brother and a third year at Seven Sisters High School in Sumaru. Pleased to meet you all." Mitsuru nodded in approval at the presence of another third year, whereas Sakuya's face fell, albeit more at Mitsuru's nodding…

"I am a third year student at Kasugayama High School, an all-boys school. My name is Jun Kashihara. It's a pleasure to meet you all." His delicate looks were not unnoticed by Fuuka and Yukari, both displaying some levels of jealousy at his androgynous face.

"I also go to Kasugayama, as a second year. By day, I am known to many as Eikichi Mishina, but by night, I wrap myself in a cocoon to emerge as the beautiful butterfly known as Michel, spreading love and greatness around the world with song and music…" He struck a pose with dual peace signs and a wink. "…hwooo!"

Absolute silence, with Lisa breaking it by throwing a tissue box at his head.

"For your information, he has the singing abilities of a dying donkey," she said with a snicker. She had braced herself for the slew of shocked looks from the others at a Caucasian speaking Japanese so
fluently. "I'm Lisa Silverman, a second year at Seven Sisters High. Before you ask, I've been raised in Sumaru, and the culture, for as long as I can remember. It's nice to meet you all."

"Seriously, she lives in a friggin' Japanese mansion and shit," Eikichi commented. "She even has a fountain thingy…you know, the one that makes the doinky sound?"

"It's called a shishi-odoshi, Eikichi.“ Lisa sighed.

"So that's what it's called!"

"Excusez-moi, but are you French? You speak japonais very well," said Mitsuru, smiling with confidence. Lisa looked bewildered. She didn't know a lick of French, let alone English. Did she not just mention she had lived in Sumaru her entire life?

"My parents are immigrants from the United States. This may come off as a bit of a shock, but I can speak virtually no English. It was very rude of you to assume that I could speak French." To assert with cold iron instead of shouting intensely was something she picked up from her mother. It certainly came in handy, as Junpei, Yukari, and Ken shut themselves up, and it looked like her little entourage was ready to defend her.

"If…if that's how you feel, then I apologize…” Mitsuru bowed her head. "Desole."

"Come to think of it, does she actually speak French fluently, or…” Sakuya thought to himself.

Zen and Rei, both having appeared from another room, cut him off. All eyes were on the otherworldly-looking duo. They propped themselves on a pair of chairs simultaneously. Neither spoke a word: Rei munched on takoyaki idly, while Zen…stared. Blankly.

A few tense moments passed.

“…Is there something on my face?” Zen asked at last. Everyone gawked.


“Welcome back, you two,” said Sakuya, smiling at both of them. “We have new companions to help us. Care to introduce yourselves?”

All eyes were on the dark-skinned man and the blonde girl. Their gazes were so potent that Zen was seconds away from registering them as a threat, but he and Rei were exhausted. After a minute of observation, Zen realized there was no reason to deem them threats at all.

“I am Zen,” said he, “and she is Rei. The two of us have been…living here for some time now. Sakuya and his friends are the first we have actually spoken with since we woke up.”

“So you’re natives of this place?” asked Tatsuya.

“…No. At least, I do not believe so,” said Zen, feeling slightly distressed.

“They have no memories prior to their awakening,” said Sakuya. “We’re exploring the labyrinths to find out why. Zen believes that their lack of memories are connected to them.”

“Ooohs” and “aahs” sounded out through the room.

“Well now!” Maya exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “You think that your memory loss is connected to this place? That’s a start! In any case, it’s nice to meet you!”
“N-Nice to meet you too…” Rei stuttered, munching on another ball anxiously.

The normally stoic Zen's eyes went wide. "It appears that I have earned this new group's trust instantly...in fact, I gained it too quickly..."

When they finished, Elizabeth clapped her hands to get everyone's attention.

"If I may have your undivided attention…” She said with a bit of flair, "I would like to inform you all that a lock has been removed from the four doors in the Velvet Room. To be specific, one of the smaller locks fell off. The four larger locks are intact. What could it mean? Oh, whatever could it mean?"

Everyone murmured amongst themselves, save for Tatsuya and Jun, who caught wind of it earlier. Everyone came to a consensus that it was unlikely that anything they had done could have taken off a lock.

"Other than that strange dimensional warp thingy that we all went through, I can't think of anything that would trigger a lock unlocking,” said Maya, hand on chin. "We came back after crossing that warp, and the lock was still there, so…”

"Did the area beyond the warp look any different than You In Wonderland?" Zen asked.

"Quite different, actually," said Katsuya. "It was nearly pitch-black, to the point that I needed a flashlight. I remember it being quite foggy, and...were we on a bridge? I think we were suspended up high. We got knocked out by an almighty spell and wound up back on the second floor, so I don't remember too much."

"Do you recall doing anything that caused the warp to appear?"

"Nope. We were talking when the warp appeared. Although…”

"We were talking about kegare and its potency, remember?" Ulala quipped. "You know, pump it in the Earth's crust and we all die in a bloody sea of fire and brimstone, Book of Revelations style? All because some people think negatively sometimes. Life is cruel...I can't get a man, and if I think that, the world might blow up.” She threw her hands out, sighing sadly.

"Your logic went completely sideways and threw itself out the window, Serizawa,” said Baofu sardonically. "It took metric shittons of kegare to summon one dragon, and I'm pretty sure that peoples' ills went deeper than not getting married."

"I know, I know..."

"Kegare? That's a Shinto term," Sakuya said. "It's like...defilement, or bad deeds. Er...what are these dragons you're talking about anyway? Is someone in your city trying to summon them?"

Tatsuya's face became grim. "My brother and his group took it upon themselves to take down the New World Order, a massive cult that holds power even in the upper crust of Japan. The head of it all is the prime minister...our home city has been warped by reality-altering rumors. The NWO has taken advantage of it...by exploiting the people's fears and sins, the NWO has converted those fears into energy, and they have pumped it into the Earth with the intentions of 'cleansing' it."

A gloom lingered over the room. Junpei and Ken were visibly panicking, while Mitsuru kept uttering sounds of confusion.

"We had discovered the source of the rumors' powers - a great being who dwells in a place like this,
a place outside of reality." He held up his right arm, tugging down the sleeve to reveal more of the black brand on it: it resembled a black hand, with an odd symbol etched in his wrist. "That same being branded me with this…"

"I assumed it was some kind of tattoo. But now that I look at it, it almost looks like it was etched into your skin…" Yukari observed.

"Our little hypothesis from our chitcat in the labyrinth is that someone's thoughts created this place. The painter said that we are out of reality, and…it kinda just clicked together," said Maya. "Of course, we need to prove it, and that's gonna be hard to do."

"Thoughts…" Zen sighed. A small bead of sweat trickled down his cheek. Feelings of distress hung over him like a fog. "Someone's thoughts…formed this place…?"

"What's the matter, Zen-kun? Do you remember something?" Yukari asked.

"No…but what Maya-san said…I cannot describe it." He wiped away the sweat and recomposed himself. "Please ignore what I just said."

"Well, you and Rei-chan lost your memories, and you looked kinda distressed, so we kinda can't ignore it," Maya said with a small smile. "You two were here with no memories and we're the first people you've been able to really talk to after a long time, right? My reporter's instincts tell me that going into the labyrinths might help you."

Rei shivered, uttering a noise of distress.

Mitsuru removed a lock of hair from her cheek. "Say, Suou-san – the younger Suou, I mean – you said before that the cult attacking your city converted fear into energy. Do you not mean Shadows? I cannot really fathom that people's thoughts could be turned into physical energy, let alone bring about destruction on that scale. Shadows have been proven to warp the fabric of time on a small scale, but we have no clue as to what their origins are. I also am having a hard time believing your hypothesis about the labyrinths either. It all seems rather absurd."

"Believe what you will, but we saw what we saw. Besides, you can summon Personas too – superpowered facades that protect you in battle. By definition, they are related to the human mind. What did you think they were?"

"Now listen –"

The office door slid open with such force that it nearly broke off. Staggering in came Akihiko and Shinjiro, still both injured from their battle with the Fiend Vizaresh. In their arms was the young woman they found, completely limp, blood staining and still oozing from almost every orifice of her body. Her once pristine white shirt was now a dark crimson, and her brown hair was a mess; the neatly arranged bobby pins (which resembled a Roman numeral for the number twenty-two, funnily enough) were the only things not haphazardly strewn about. Only one of her red eyes was open, and it was rolling backward.

"Help! This girl's lost a shitload of blood!" Shinjiro yelled, unusually distressed. "She's gonna die if we don't…"

A slew of whispers and gasps filled the room, with Maya and Theodore the most shocked of all. A rolling bed was sent out by an unusually spooked Elizabeth. Great pains were taken to assure that she was safe and stable on the bed. "Can you tell me what happened to this girl?" Elizabeth asked, seemingly worried for once. "She has lost a large quantity of blood, and I sense a few broken bones.
"The two of us…" Akihiko shuddered. "We were on the first floor of the labyrinth, training, dicking around…we saw something odd, and before we knew it, out of some weird portal was this girl. She was like this, all bloody and broken…" He broke in a sweat, flustered. "And then….a-and then there was this, this…thing, that…oh, God, she was in so much pain, she was gasping and, and…"

He clutched his head. Memories of Miki dying blazed through his head. The pungent stench of blood mixed with fire…

"Senpai, are you okay!?!" Junpei shouted, at his side. "You look like you're about to pass out!"

Akihiko shook it off. There was no need to burden the underclassmen. "I'm fine. I'll be okay…just let me sit down…" He sat in an empty gurney, desperate to avoid Mitsuru's accusatory glares and the second years' worries.

"Miki's none of their business anyway…this is nothing…just a little setback…"

Shinjiro, on the other hand, was exhausted, too overwhelmed to think. There were bags beneath his eyes and droplets of blood sliding slowly from his nose. The consequences of using Brigid repeatedly were showing themselves.

Vizaresh’s words echoed in his head, making him feel sicker:

"That girl's punishment is for th' crimes of slaying Daena, the Fiend of Priestesses, taking the Trapezohedron of Patience, and for daring to escape my judgment. For her sins, she is deserving of all eternity in the House of Lies. I, Vizaresh, Fiend of Magicians, shall deny thy paths to salvation and cut thy lives short!"

Shinjiro shuddered. “Being back here now, all of that shit seems so surreal....”

Were it not for the girl right in front of them, Akihiko would've begun an epic tirade of jealousy and questioning on where Brigid came from. Thankfully, he knew better at that time.

Maya went over to the girl's side, aghast. "What happened to her!? Why!? Why did she have to go alone…?" Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Ma-ya…? When-"

"I woke up before you guys on the bridge…she healed our injuries and drove the Time Count away. I talked to her and she ran off…she said she didn't want us involved with her." She gently grasped the girl's hand. "I just…I hate letting people suffer alone…"

Tatsuya cast a gaze of sadness upon her. Theodore shifted uncomfortably, finding his way to the door.

"You encountered this girl, Amano-san?" asked Sakuya. "And she saved you…it…it looks like we'll have to tackle another conundrum, b-but for now, I think w-we should stick to helping with Rei-san and Zen-san's memory loss. If she saved you and was…she…she… " He shuddered when she coughed, a small bubble of blood popping from her mouth. It was difficult to remain composed with all that damn blood in his face!

"So much blood…get it together…"

"W-we have no reason at the moment to assume she's an enemy. Besides, we also have the locks to
"You're right...we'll see if our hypothesis works in time," said Maya. "We're near the end of You in Wonderland. That might lead to another clue."

"My thoughts exactly."

Elizabeth clapped her hands, garnering everyone's attention once more. "Well, it seems that I'll have my hands full for a while. Since you kids have taken it upon yourselves to solve the mystery of the broken lock, I shall tend to this girl, and do my share of research. Mister Painter, will you assist my brother and I in this endeavor?"

He sighed. Right off the bat, he did not like this Elizabeth, but he did not know fusion to better help his own guests. "If you can give me some knowledge on fusion, I will. As of now, I can only convert blank cards into tarot cards, and those cards into single Personas. My guests have more Personas on their plate by conversing with demons, but your fusion process and your book seems to make your job easier. Theodore -"

"I didn't eat the flan!" He was startled, trying to escape. If they were in an anime, every human present would have the massive sweat drop of awkwardness rolling down their heads.

"...Theodore, I know you're making everyone's weapons and all, but could you help me set up the materials for fusion in the Velvet Room? We have a slew of people who can use multiple Personas, and I can't keep up by myself. The atmosphere is stable enough to allow all of the usual Velvet Room services. We cannot allow the absence of Master Igor to let us slack off."

Like Junpei before him, Theodore was in awe of the painter's aura of cool. "Oh...of course..." He slid open the door to show him out, his cheeks pink with admiration. "I have another man that I can bond with...the Christian God Almighty does exist!"

"It has been decided. My brother will assist you in fusion when he is not in the workshop. That ought to teach him a little responsibility, after all. Now, that research on Arcana inheritance I mentioned -"

"Oh, I know what you're referring to!" Maya piped in, making Sakuya's brood raise a brow. "All of our Personas have an Arcana attached to them, kinda like a demon's 'race,' yeah? Well, the thing is, Igor taught to us that some people are better attuned to certain Arcanas than others. Sometimes, there's no compatibility at all!"

"...Go on," said Sakuya, curious.

"It all comes back to your primary Persona – mine is Maia. According to Igor, she falls under the Moon Arcana category. I have the best affiliation with it and a few others, but I cannot summon Personas of the Strength Arcana. It all reconnects to your personality...or something."

"It's just as Philemon mentioned... 'masks.' A Persona is a façade. It all makes sense. And now I really have to convince the others to play the game again. But now, Amano-san and Suou-san are with us, and they seem to know what they're speaking of..."

It all felt surreal. Before awakening from his encounter with Philemon, the last thing he saw was his face – Sakuya's own face was plastered onto Philemon's, and his brown hair had turned blue, like his. If Philemon was allegedly breaking protocol to allow his friends to grow, then they were, indeed, headed for trouble.

"...Things are gonna get busy."
"Ehehe...how do you know of this, Amano-san?" Elizabeth asked, eye violently twitching, research put to shame. "You do not have the power of the Wild Card, I take it...?"

"Wild...card?" Maya was thoroughly confused. "Huh. You mentioned that before. That could be a great name for that new boutique in Regendai!" She smiled, much to the concern of Tatsuya and their friends.

"There's a lot we have to catch up on..." Sakuya sighed. "There's obviously a weird gap between how our Personas work and how yours work, Amano-san. And besides, I want to talk to you about the Persona game."

"Of course! I was gonna ask the same thing!" She ruffled his hair again, much to his embarrassment. Junpei and Fuuka laughed. "We have no reason not to team up, after all. We're both stuck here. You can ask me for anything, okay?"

It took effort for Sakuya to not smile.

"My friends have been out of action for a while, but I think they're ready to join us now," Tatsuya said sternly, the friends in question waving at him. "Be sure to keep that in mind, Shiomi-kun."

Jun shook his head. "Wait, Ta-chan...our group is pretty big now. We need a leader, but..."

"Yes, yes, well said," Mitsuru interrupted, stumbling over to the three leaders in question. "I was going to suggest that Shiomi lead us, but Amano-san is our elder, and clearly a capable leader in her own right..."

"Oh my! Are you calling me an old lady, Kirijo-san?" Maya asked with a teasing grin. "You should watch what you say to your so-called 'elders,' you know!"

Her words flew over Mitsuru's head. "But you are older than us...I am senior to most of my group, but you are experienced adults...even if I mostly disagree on your friend's stance on Personas."

"There she goes again, being super senpai..." Yukari muttered under her breath. Looks like that vent with Junpei was going to have to wait.

"I have a suggestion," Aigis piped in. "We have three capable leaders, and seventeen Persona-users. Tatsuya-san is clearly overseeing his friends' training. Amano-san is a good moderator among her fellow adults. My own leader is a good field leader. I highly suggest we divide into squads, and the leaders of each squad can caucus with one another in determining who leads on and off the field. A democratic approach seems to be the fairest way to solve this issue. What do our three leaders think of this?"

Tatsuya nodded his head, letting out a rare smile. "You could not have worded it any better, Aigis-san. I'll form a squad with my school friends here, and I'll lead the fieldwork to someone else. I don't think I'm suited for that...er, that isn't to say-"

"Say no more, Tatsuya," Maya smiled at him gently. "You can be a 'vice leader.' Heck, I should be one too. We were kind of like that back in Sumaru."

"Yeah...yeah, we were..." On the Other Side, he led the charge while she made some of their bigger choices, and for their current situation, it was the other way around. Fate was strange that way.

"But Amano-san, you're an adult..." Sakuya quietly noted. "You seemed pretty good at taking charge back there."
"Me being almost two years out of college doesn't make me wiser in battle than someone your age, Sakuya-kun," Maya turned back to him. "I think that you'd make the best field leader for the time being. I mean, you kids are this super-secret team of Shadow-slaying agents with your own protocol. I'm just a magazine editor." She shrugged, still smiling. "You're practically professionals with the way you present yourselves. Like seriously, you put some real cops to shame." Katsuya blushed with embarrassment at her comment – a blush that doubled as a form of agreement.

Junpei's chuckles only intensified. "We get complimented by this pretty lady about how badass we are, and we get to take the lead? This labyrinth crawl probably won't be so bad after all!" He struck a pose. "We're SEES, professional Shadow slayers, defending innocents in the darkest night!"

Time and time again, the weight and the truer implications of SEES' purpose were laid bare to them. It wasn't remotely like those upbeat super hero shows, and the threat of death always lingered over them. Hell, in their daily lives, they had their own cliques. Yukari found little that was consolable in SEES, except for the leader who she cared for ("It's not love! I don't love him...") and the company of Fuuuka and, loathe she was to admit, Junpei. But even now, she found herself laughing with him, shooting out double peace signs as he posed. "Hehe...we're SEES, alright. Defending the city in secret."

"Gee, I feel better after all of the stuff that happened," Fuuka sighed with a giggle. "Secret defenders...it sounds so cool. But I'm just your backup..."

"If this were a TV series, Fuuuka would probably drive the van," Sakuya commented with a small smile. "Everybody knows that the one driving the van has the most important part!"

"I have seen a foreign program like that once," said Aigis. "The man who drove the van and operated other vehicles for a convicted team of four was also the one who served in the Vietnam War, broke into song and dance numbers, had a fine taste in literature, and had shaving cream as his favorite food. It seems that Fuuuka-san has much to live up to if she were to drive the hypothetical SEES van."

Fuuka nearly toppled over. "Ah...Aigis, I don't..."

Even Akihiko, still shaken, and Shinjiro, who was worried, cracked a pair of small smiles. They glanced at one another. "Maybe we should be more carefree like them," they thought mutually. But the more socially attuned Shinjiro knew that there was another problem that had to be addressed aside from the sheer angst he and his dear friend had. Too bad Akihiko was as good at reading people as a rock was.

"That's quite enough." Mitsuru's harsh words ended the gayety right there. "Honestly, why now do you not take our mission seriously? The situation has taken a grave turn, and we need to put an end to this and get back home. We are going to purchase new equipment and see that our leader's Personas are all set. Do I make myself clear?"

The second years, and Ken, nodded solemnly.

"Then we'll get ready and wait for Amano-san and the others outside the labyrinth. Akihiko, be good and stay here."

"Be good...?" He looked bewildered. "My shoulder feels fine, Mitsuru! I can fight now!" He rotated his arm - the stitches were gone, with a massive sheet of gauze and a bandage now in their place. He still felt pain, but it wasn't to the point that he could harm himself fighting. "Whatever Elizabeth did made it heal quickly."
"Honestly, you can be such a nuisance." With that, she walked out, frustrated. Normally, Akihiko could take on her treatment of him - heck, he never really noticed how...patronizing she could be until Shinjiro pointed it out. That strange sensation of anger that welled up within him when Shinjiro's new Persona emerged burst anew.

"She thinks I'm a nuisance, huh...fine then. I might as well be."

He stomped out in frustration. Theodore caught wind of him outside - his eyes had a small shroud of yellow again...

Awkwardly, the rest of SEES shuffled out, save for Sakuya, who gathered Maya and Tatsuya with him to plan. Maya's team went their separate ways, while Tatsuya's team clustered together outside, whispering. Already, Sakuya was afraid of the impending scathing words that they had for their team - a team that was fragmented and did little more than coexist when not in battle.

"Is she always that bossy?" Maya asked bluntly. "I apologize for my bluntness, Sakuya-kun, but who the heck does she think she is? She acts as though she owns all of you!"

He laughed nervously. "She can be...but she funds our team. She's the heiress to a major conglomerate, and, well, she hasn't had an easy life..."

"Neither have the two of us. It's still no excuse."

"Look, I don't like her behavior either. She really pisses me off sometimes, but she's strong, she keeps the rowdier members in line...her own grandfather, he..." He cut himself off - he already said too much. "...He mistreated her when she was a child. I'll leave it at that."

Tatsuya still looked reluctant, but Maya's demeanor changed. "I see...but still..."

"I'll do the heavy lifting when we're in the labyrinth. Do you have a problem with that, Suou-san?"

"No, not at all."

"...Seriously? You're at a different school, but technically speaking, you're my senpai..."

"Seriously, Shiomi-kun. I have my friends to contend with."

"If you're sure..."

They came to an agreement, and Sakuya got himself prepared, with many questions left unanswered - many of them now about Tatsuya Suou and his self-deprecation. As he left him behind, his face was pained, amassed with a new heaping of guilt. Perhaps that he would learn about that guilt in due time, like they would learn of Mitsuru and the others...

"You In Wonderland," Chapter 3, near the final gate

"Fuuka, you said that you sensed a massive presence beyond this door, right?" Sakuya said, placing
a hand on the piano key doors that now lied before them. Like before, washing the red paint off the roses successfully distracted them, and there were no gimmicks or ambushes that were thrown their way.

"The presence is that of a large Shadow. Its power is comparable to the Shadows we've fought during the nights whenever the moon was full."

"Like a Shadow...the creatures with the masks, right? Then I guess that means it cannot speak," Tatsuya deduced. He was cleaning his blade with a wipe, whipping it out to get the last specks of Shadow ooze off of it.

"Shadows aren't really sentient. They target humans and consume them from inside out. They're absolutely nothing like that wolf we encountered earlier."

"With the right words, you can negotiate with a demon," said Tatsuya. "They're quite sentient. The opposite of a Shadow, really. It's a shame that we haven't found any on this floor."

"Negotiation?" Junpei asked, piqued. "Like in the movies, where the mafia or the yakuza cut a deal with someone?"

"Something like that. Of course, demons have complex personalities, like humans. Some are kind, some are cruel, and some are...uh...unusual." The image of a kraken demon popped in his head. He nearly gagged, remembering that it asked him about the ins and outs of homosexuality...

"How do you benefit from these negotiations?" Aigis asked.

"They usually give you things. Money. Sundries. Some lend tarot cards. The Demon Painter uses them to summon Personas for us. Sometimes, they might make a contract with you too."

"A...contract...oh, dear..." Junpei paled. The image of a fluffy white creature of impending doom loomed in his head. "The heat death of the universe is a real thing after all..."

"What the hell are you muttering about, Stupei?" Yukari sighed. With everything that had happened, her "Stupei" had less rancor than usual.

"Heat death..." Jun muttered. "My dad...that's something my father was studied...I guess the Mayan aliens were more interesting than an old scientific theory by the First Baron Kelvin." He sighed. His unpleasant memories of the Other Side stung him, but he soldiered on for Tatsuya's sake.

"Mayan...aliens? Your dad was fascinated by aliens!" A slightly bewildered Ken asked Jun. "That's kind of childish for an adult to be interested in..."

"It's...it was a hobby of his, I guess," Jun replied quietly. Now he was getting embarrassed.

Maya's team of adults studied the children raptly. Many were favored more than others. Baofu in particular had an acute feeling that he'd be attempting to smack that Amada kid in the not-too-distant future. He also had some harsh words for the Kirijo girl, and neither he nor Katsuya cared for Akihiko or Shinjirō. Ulala found the former's unabashed passion for boxing interesting, but she could also sense something off about him. Ulala was also not very fond of Yukari, albeit it was rooted in her former jealousy of Maya, and she and Katsuya found Fuuka to be completely hopeless. All three of them were fond of the dog, Junpei was fine, if not a bit obnoxious, and they opted not to say anything about the robot girl - they had seen plenty of strange things back in Sumaru, so pondering was useless. Tatsuya's team had a bit of bias in their favor, but all three of them found Eikichi rather annoying. As for Jun and his precious "Ta-chan..."
Katsuya’s latent brotherly instincts were acting up. Jun was kind and calm, but...

"They watched a baby chick hatch from an egg. They were completely wholesome and innocent the entire time. Wholesome. Innocent. I’m sure that any young man would moan and cry out watching a baby chick hatch. I'm reading too much into it. Eggs do throb...right...? Throb...oh, dear lord..."

It took a hefty dope slap from Baofu to snap him out of his frantic stupor.

The final floor was a large, narrow platform shielded with a slew of cards and dark red tiles. The platform's surroundings were awash in a wispy midnight blue sky. At the end of the path was a jail cell door. The presence's power leaked from behind it. Up ahead was something pink and rubbery-looking - a rabbit, the same rabbit that SEES had chased throughout the labyrinth, and yet another allusion to the story.

"It's that fucking rabbit!" Junpei shouted. "Finally, we can catch it-"

Without wasting another nanosecond, the rabbit vanished, evaporating behind the cell door.

"...Dammit."

Zen was off to the side with Rei. Something intense was gnawing in the back of his mind, almost as if one of his lost memories was trying to break through. "A rabbit? Where did I...I feel as if I've seen that rabbit before..."

"Are you remembering something, Zen-san?" Maya asked, her hand on his shoulder. She felt concerned at the sight of a bead of sweat rolling down his brow. He waved his hand dismissively at her, shaking his head. Rei tucked underneath him, equally as nervous.

"Rei, are you all right? There's no need to be afraid," He asked gently.

She shivered, but mustered enough strength for a weak "yes." Zen looked up at Maya. "I think we're ready to face that presence. Shall we go?"

She looked at Tatsuya and Sakuya. With a nod, they gestured their respective teams to the cell door.

"Are all of you prepared?" Fuuka asked.

They answered yes. Slowly but surely, Sakuya yanked the lever and opened the door...

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**You In Wonderland, Queen's Chamber**

The spacious chamber was awash with pink checkerboard tile floors and gold panels adorned with pretty hearts. Shadowy and demonic spectators anxiously gazed over the human intruders from heart-shaped chairs in clustered balconies. At the crux of this little room was a massive, granite-cast treasure chest, covered with chains, and the massive figure that suggestively caressed it. As the others drew their weapons, Sakuya took a cautious step forward - and the figure noticed, sharply
drawing her massive body upward.

To say that this Queen of Hearts was massive would be an understatement. Her massive pink ball gown was comically round, adorned with golden chains, a golden belt in place of traditional panniers, a navy blue corset, rounded, long sleeves, and a spherical blonde hairdo clasped with a hair accessory resembling a golden cage. The queen's face reminded Sakuya of a ko-omote mask. She dramatically whipped out her fan, emitting a harsh gaze down at the intruders.

"That Shadow is the strongest presence in this labyrinth! Please, be careful!" A worried Fuuka warned them.

"So this is the boss..." Akihiko yanked the pair of gloves that Theodore made him, body shaking with anticipation. "Thank goodness. All that walking was getting boring."

The queen shuddered and tensed. Suddenly, she spoke: "Danger...I sense danger!" Her arms shot forward, like tendrils, snaking and slithering about the floor. "You want to take my treasure from me, don't you!? I won't let you! I won't let you have it!"

"It is a Shadow, but it speaks?" Mitsuru pondered, taken aback.

"She definitely isn't a demon," Tatsuya responded. "I see the fog that Shadows emit seeping from her."

"She's likely a product of this place!" Maya shouted, loading her pistols. "The story's climax involves Alice avoiding execution from the Queen of Hearts! The way the painter described this place...I wouldn't be surprised if that were true."

"Either way..." Eikichi, elegantly hoisting his concealed machine gun with a grin, sighed, "...The queen has to go. If not, we'll surely be beheaded...and that would suck."

"I...have to go,' you say!?" The queen was furious. "As if mere peasants like you could harm me! I won't let you escape! I'll keep you trapped here and execute you myself, if I must!"

Zen's stoic demeanor leveled off, swapping it for a small glare. His crossbows were at the ready, with Rei, fearful yet braced for combat, behind him. "I have no intentions of letting you harm Rei or the others. We will leave this place...we'll find a home for the two of us..."

Shinjiro, axe hoisted, glanced warily at the treasure chest behind the queen. "Leader, Amano-san, Suou...she was caressing that thing earlier," he pointed out with a small shout. "I bet that we'll find some answers if we take what's in that chest!"

His innocent point caused the queen to burst with mad laughter. She spun around, her laughter echoing around them.

"You are after my treasure! Peasants or no, now I know that execution is in your future!" Her hands stretched behind her, forming a small magic circle - with a sharp whip of her arm, a massive army of small card soldiers, numbering by the hundreds, emerged from the ground below.

"Execute them, my card soldiers! Behead them! Rend their flesh! Off with their heads-!"

There was no time to form a strategy, no time to align themselves - the soldiers pounced on the Persona-users en masse. Tatsuya gathered his allies to his side, slashing a pair of soldiers in one fell swoop. Eikichi followed up with a shower of bullets, killing three more. He fell back when three more soldiers all whacked him from behind with staves - all right in the ass. With a bruised ass and a bruised ego, anger took over, aura blazing.
The third card's staff was sharp enough to tear through his pants. Eikichi snapped.

"E...hehehe...so that's how it's gonna be, you little pieces of shit?" His grin turned maniacal, his eyes shrinking. "You've exploited my weakness...do you not realized how fucked you little soldiers are now...?"

The three soldiers visibly trembled, much to the bemusement of Lisa and Jun.

"Come, Rhadamanthus! KILL THEM! KILL THEM! FUCK UP THESE SOLDIERSSSS-!"

Sharply emerging from him was a being with a torso and face that resembled the inner parts of a motorcycle, complete with bike handles on his collarbone. This was Rhadamanthus, one Zeus' many sons and he who judged dead souls from the eastern half of the world. He whipped out a pair of swords, rending right through the three soldiers like paper:

"Straight Slash!"

The soldiers died a painful death, their death cries akin to a whimpering Chihuahua.

"...The fuck was that noise?!" Lisa shouted, back-handing a soldier as she spoke. "Either way, those are some ugly-looking undies you - eek!"

She barely had time to roll away from a quintet of sword-wielding soldiers, all moving in tandem. They grasped their swords together, charging ahead gladiator-style. Jun forcefully grabbed Lisa by the shoulder and hoisted her next to him. "Let's attack them together, Lisa-san!"

"Y-Yes!"

"Persona-!"

Together came another pair of Greek gods: from Lisa came Eros; her Eros had a female body, heart-shaped elbow guards, a white afro with matching fluffy crop top and skirt, and a body made of black leather. From Jun came his own version of Hermes; his Hermes resembled an action figure of sorts, with a golden airplane helmet, matching boots, and golden cylinder-shaped armor. Eros rose her bow together with Hermes' rocket staff, massive boulders shook from beneath the soldiers. With a massive burst of wind, the boulders shot up fiercely, violently tearing the soldiers apart. As the boulders continued to spread, Jun's sharp eye spotted a spare soldier aiming for Tatsuya!

"Ta-chan!"

Like a world-class assassin, he leapt to his beloved and swiftly threw a flower into the poor card's face(?). It screamed like a young girl, frantically running in circles before evaporating. Tatsuya's face blossomed with embarrassment before Jun ran off to help someone else. It took Katsuya barking in his ear to snap out of it.

"Incoming foes! Let's take a cue from him and Silverman, eh?"

Tatsuya gave his brother yet another rare smile. He had never felt so close to him until now. He gracefully raised his hand sideways and gently summoned the Roman god of forge, Vulcanus. His shoulder pads were pipes that spewed flame, and said flames intensified as he and Helios summoned dual-charged Agi spells at the row of cards, all of them burning to ash. A spare staff-wielder leapt over the ashes, only to meet his end from a ringing gunshot courtesy of Katsuya's gun.

Sakuya was able to wrangle his fellow second years and Ken together, combining his elemental magic with all of them, as Fuuka's analysis proved that they were more susceptible to magic in
general. Agi and Garu rang out in tandem with Ken's Zio spells and Aigis' hard-hammering strikes from Palladion's inner mechanism. The next wave ceased, but a card with a mace snuck from behind Sakuya, delivering a blow to his back.

"Damn...!"

The bleeding was spreading fast! The sensation of fear whirred within Aigis. Subconsciously, she pushed Palladion from her mind. Instead, another "aspect" of her pushed itself forward, one she had not truly felt until they came here...her hair rose as she bent down and prepared the summoning sequence.

"Summoning...Endovelicus!"

The sound of glass breaking echoed around her friends as a flaming man with a small beard and a ring of radiant sunlight as his halo. His gentle, wavering hands emitted a white flame that sewed Sakuya's wound shut. As he stood slowly, he felt his muscles being reinvigorated, a burst of strength popping in his muscles. He stood slowly, eyes wide at the flaming man that Aigis had summoned.

"It's just like Koromaru! She can use more Personas too..." He thanked Aigis, both verbally and with a hard slash against the mace-wielding card. Junpei and Yukari looked at each other, confused.

Unfortunately for the Gekkoukan third years, the cards were weighing down on them. Akihiko lagged behind in frustration due to the latent pain in his shoulder, and Mitsuru's single target-hitting Bufu spells were inefficient on droves. Upon seeing Akihiko getting struck, Shinjiro lept to his aid, pushing Castor out of his mind to make way for his more protective side:

"Brigid!"

The lady of the hearth was summoned. She took an azure-colored flame from her vase and set the cards on fire with an unusual spell, Azure Cessation. The cards that didn't die fell asleep under the heat of the azure fire. He focused, mustering as much mental energy as he could to keep Brigid afloat.

"Aragaki!" Mitsuru shouted, reeling from shock. "A second Persona!? What is the meaning of this!?!"

"Will you just-"

*PEW*

The tanned young man froze in place, his face stinging horribly from the graze.

The card had a gun.

Before he could blink, the backup horde emerged, all toting firearms, with a wayward card toting a goddamn missile launcher.

"They have guns! Everybody pull back!" Shinjiro screamed in a panic, tapping into his inner strength to lift Akihiko and Mitsuru away by his shoulders. He rallied everyone behind the debris that crashed near the exit - Aigis dutifully rocketed with Sakuya in tow, and Tatsuya and Maya's teams soon followed. Before they knew it, the hail of bullets and ammo began stampeding on them.

"Wh-why what in the..." Katsuya's mind was reeling. "How in the name of God did they procure those things!? They aren't cops! They can't possibly have those-"
"We're about to get shot and you're worried about that!?" Baofu screamed in the cop's ear. "Are you retarded or something!? Fucking shoot them! Fuck!" He himself took a brief stand and flung two coins at some cards, both missing. "You have a gun, mister cop! Use it!"

"Ugh..."

At the next lull, Katsuya fired three rounds in tandem with Maya and Aigis. Eikichi spat in frustration; his concealed gun was too bulky to fire off quickly and duck back down. They successfully took out a row of ten, but the next line advanced quickly, half of them toting semi-automatics. With a yelp, Katsuya forcefully dragged Maya down and covered her, and Aigis took a beating when she also ducked back.

"I estimate a 0.0069% chance of us defeating them. I also estimate an equally low 6.9% chance of us escaping without sustaining any harmful or fatal wounds. If I sustain more hits, my systems risk shutting down..."

"Aigis, sixty-nine, really-" Sakuya cut himself off, trying to stay on topic. "We need to get out of here and regroup...Aigis, I'm sorry, but I need you to resurface one more time so we can crawl out of the door."

In response, Aigis turned around and ripped off part of her back hair covering, revealing several bullet chambers on the back of her scalp. A key pad appeared on her upper back.

"I have a firearm in my skull whose power rivals that of an anti-tank gun. Punch in the code to activate it, Sakuya-san."

"Okay, shoot."

"The code is...six nine...six nine...six nine six nine."

"Are you shitting me!?" Sakuya cringed as he punched in the code.

"My programmer gave me that code, to be fair," Aigis sternly argued as the guns prepared themselves. "This programmer is the same one with a 'maid fetish.'"

"Are all the Kirijo Group scientists a bunch of creepy perverts!?" Sakuya asked in frustration as Aigis began to fire. The bullets themselves weren't much bigger than 9 mm rounds, but their power was clear: the machine gun-toting cards all fell, and a lucky stray crippled the card toting the missile launcher. As it was a last-minute weapon, Aigis was left on the verge of shutting down after three minutes, riddled with bullets with no chance to enhance her own weapon with Orgia Mode. Sakuya caught her as her limbs went rigid and she collapsed.

"Systems...shutting..." Her baby blue eyes blanked.

"This is not good..." Sakuya gritted his teeth.

"Good God, I still can't get over that the Queen of Hearts' fucking soldiers have guns!" Junpei shouted, cringing at a bullet whacking the brick wall. "We're fucked!"

"We're bound to get shot if we try and run!" Tatsuya shouted. "The power of Persona can only protect against the wrath of bullets for so long! We wouldn't last much longer than the average human..."

"They just keep coming..." Mitsuru huffed, keeping a wary eye on Shinjiro's Brigid healing an injured Ken. "We can't rest here...what do we..."
*rat-a-tat-tat-tat*

Three lines of cards fell!

"You can rest now, all of you. Let us fight in your stead."

Sakuya, Maya and Tatsuya warily turned their heads to the source of the gunfire. With a dramatic grayish light piercing the dark room, their saviors greeted them with a flourish, their bodies obscured in shadow...

Chapter End Notes

Not much to say about this one. It's exposition.

As far as SEES' knowledge over the true nature of Shadows - Shadows as human thoughts given form - is concerned, they don't know of it until The Answer; it is Metis who tells it to them. Persona 4, in contrast, has Teddie tell Yu and Yosuke point blank what Shadows really are, right after Shadow Yosuke is defeated. Meanwhile, in the earlier games, the nature of demons and the worlds that the protagonists are trapped in are made clear. An NPC in Innocent Sin mentions that demons are born of human thoughts, much like Shadows, and the spoiler-heavy true nature of one of Persona 1's female leads is also connected to the human mind.

Katsuya fretting over Jun and Tatsuya references an event from a Persona 2 CD Drama ("The Errors of Their Youth"). It's the final track. Grab some headphones. It's hilarious.
Chapter Summary

Thirty-six Persona-users come together at long last. After conquering the first labyrinth, they come together, speculating and planning for what may lie ahead...

Chapter Notes

Naoya Tudou is the P1 hero’s name in the manga, which is probably the most well-known P1 adaptation. I decided to stay with it, even though his name in one of the P1 CD Dramas, Yuuya Narumi, is good too. Fun fact: his VA in those dramas is Akira Ishida, who would go on and voice the P3 MC years later. Also in the dramas, compared to Quaalude McBluehair, he's very lively and expressive.

Yu Narukami will retain his name, as it's more or less canon at this point (I never liked "Souji Seta" anyway).

Yep, the FeMC is in this story, and like Sakuya, she goes by her stage play name, Kotone Shiomi, which is also the only "canon" name she has. I dislike that she's more or less non-canon because Social Links were so damn well-written, plus the general fact that she actually can bond with the guys in SEES (and Ryoji), whereas the male MC cannot. I actually didn't care for the fact that she was a stereotypical perky Japanese schoolgirl, though. Her sunny disposition felt extremely inappropriate during certain moments in the game, such as Ryoji's identity being revealed or when she and the underclassmen go to Tartarus for the first time. Plus, given that P3P's new motif was the butterfly effect, there's a big wellspring of potential that one could do with that: cause-and-effect, counterparts, two different storylines...but alas, she's probably doomed to be in purgatory forever with the P1 and P2 cast. Dam you Atlus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

..and all of them posed, with more firearms than an 80's American action film in their hands. There were nine of them in all; the boys in gray gakuran, the girls in more western-style blazers, also gray, and in assorted styles. They were stacked in a pyramid; five on the bottom, three in the middle, and their leader on top: a pretty young man with slicked, styled black hair, tender brown eyes, and his one distinguishing mark glistening in the light: a single, tiny hoop earring on his left ear.

Sakuya quietly gasped. "What in the...who are they?"

The light lifted, revealing the nine children in full. Just how many guns they had was far more than the light made it seem - machine guns, semi-automatics, TMPs, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, and to top it off, their leader dual-wielding a pair of MAC-10 machine pistols, sans suppressors. Even the two oddballs flanking them - a blindfolded man in a suit and a woman with a massive hairdo and a dress - had guns!

"Who...seriously, who are they!? What the hell!? They're packing in more than...than...holy shit!
This is so damn illegal that I can't count how many charges I'd have to press!" Katsuya screamed. The boy with the earring stepped forth, still posing: "There's no time to talk. We'll keep you all safe."

"All right..." an enthusiastic-looking boy wearing a yellow hat cocked his double-barreled shotgun, grinning like a maniac. "Everyone, CHARGE-!"

With a war cry, the gray-suited school kids charged forth!

With nary a Persona in sight.

It took a solid minute for all nine of them to dramatically cock their guns. It then took a mere sixty nine milliseconds for the bullets to start flying. The cards were dying by the hundreds! Line after line of cards, all reduced to shadowy giblets! All of them crying in fear, screaming and running frantically, only to be shot at, rendered to spatter!

"What in the...what!? What!? What!? Where the fuck did they get all those guns from!?" Junpei shouted, too afraid to pop up.

"Never mind that..." Ulala's eyes bugged, heart bursting. "I can sense it! They're all Persona-users!"

"Seriously!?!" Yukari shouted in turn. "But they aren't -"

*rat-a-tat-tat-tat*

"Eeek!" Yukari twisted down, her legs grazed by spent bullet casings. She glanced up and spotted her savior, a tall young woman with cropped ebon hair. As said savior reloaded her Steyr TMP, Yukari's eyebrow raised in confusion - the woman's skirt was far longer than her fellow schoolmates. She looked like a delinquent...rather, a delinquent from over a decade ago. What was up with that?

"If you don't have a gun, get back!" The young woman's voice was surprisingly deep. "Do you have my shotgun, Uesugi!?"

"Right here!" The young man named Uesugi swapped his own firearm with hers, adjusting the goggles on his head as he did so. "You're way better with it than I am, Mayuzumi! All right!" He pointed the TMP at the next wave, preparing to fire. "Your fate...is in the cards-!"

"Did he just knock off Elizabeth's catchphrase?" Sakuya thought to himself, sneering. "He made it sound so cheesy..."

Shinjiro struggled to keep Akihiko from joining in and getting shot like an idiot, with Mitsuru, who herself was sheltering Ken. "Will you just fucking stay back, Aki!?"

"This isn't...fair..." Akihiko struggled against his friend's grasp. He was clearly pained and tired, forehead moist with sweat. "They're fighting...cheap..."

"Be silent and deal with it, Akihiko!" Mitsuru shouted as the former broke free from Shinjiro's grip. "These cards don't care about a fair fight! Are you truly so foolish!?"

"Don't...call me..." He staggered, lifting his Evoker to his forehead. "...foolish!" A shattering shot rang out. Polydeuces flickered to life, but only for a moment. The Persona had no inclination to move. "Dammit, I'm all out of energy...! Ugh! Fine! I'll let my-"

*Bmph*
"-guh!?

One of the gray-suited students with a shaggy mop of black hair swiftly chopped a nerve in Akihiko's neck, sending him down...again. He unceremoniously scooped up the boy and threw him back behind the wall, lifting his assault rifle back up as he did. Mitsuru and Shinjiro half-gasped, half-gawked at the sight of the x-shaped scar on his forehead and his open uniform top, revealing his toned stomach.

"I won't save your idiot friend next time. If he gets in the way, it's his funeral."

He went off, AK-47 in hand, firing on a slew of cards that were preparing to launch a missile. A pained Akihiko glanced up at his dickhead of a savior, with his mindset wavering between "Who does he think he is?" and "He struck me right in the nerve...he's skilled..."

Speaking of skills, it took Mitsuru a full minute to notice the black-haired, bespectacled youth who snuck right next to her to prep his marksman's rifle. Compared to the others, he had poise and an unusually masculine elegance about him, much like a dashing lead in a period film. His black hair was slicked back, and he wore a large pair of aviator-frame glasses. His uniform was properly worn, save for the not-so-conspicuous teal scarf on his neck, the number one printed on it.

"You..." She sighed out. She inspected him from head to toe, unnerved by how utterly familiar he seemed...

"Please, keep your voice down," the young man said in a gallant tone. "If I can get a good shot..."

*BMPF*

A larger card toting a Gatling gun, fell. "A single enlightened soldier always triumphs over a hundred inept ones!" He let out another shot, the bullet crippling two cards at once. "Of course, a spectacular weapon such as this helps too."

"Y-yes..."

"And I can tell by one look that your fencing blade is...not so spectacular, I'm afraid. Perhaps if you better cared for it - ah! Damn..." He saw a young woman with long hair in a ponytail in trouble, fleeing from safety to cover her.

Steam blew out of Mitsuru's ears. For something as weak of a potshot as a poorly cared-for fencing sword, she was as angry as Akihiko was. "What an arrogant man! I can tell with one look that he thinks that he's superior to others. Look at him, admonishing that young woman!" She frowned, taking a glance at her rapier.

Shinjiro facepalmed. Irony was a bitch.

Within fifteen or so minutes, the entire card army was decimated, save for a few larger ones. The queen's melodramatic antics escalated and escalated, waving her snaking arms about like some sort of crazed gymnast.

"What...how!? How can this be!? You children...you filthy commoners...my army -"

*Pew*

A single, smoking gunshot from a kogal's Walther left a hole in her fan. There it was: the final straw.

"MY PRECIOUS FAN! HOW DARE YOU-!"
With a rapid spin, a massive Mabufula spell shot rapidly from underground, decorating the room with sharp, frozen stalagmites every which way. It nearly struck everyone present, with some rolling and dodging with only seconds to spare. The poor kogal was not so lucky, her left leg partially impaled on an icicle. A girl with a bow in her hair was already at her side, trying to help her out.

"Please hang in there, Ayase!" The brunette shouted as she fished out some odd-looking bottle with a brownish liquid. "This Rattle Drink should help!"

"No way! The stuff in the bottle looks like brains! That's so-mmph!"

"Down the hatch!" The brunette smiled as she pinched the kogal – Ayase's – nose and forced the fishy-smelling bottle down her throat. Even though her wound sewed itself together and the pain dulled, Ayase wanted to, in no particular order, wretch, strangle the brunette with her whip, rip that cutesy red bow out of her hair and eat it, and scream. Setting her on fire was also up there.

"You know…*cough*…Sonomura…if Toudou weren't – *cough* - overseeing us so intently…I'd set that pretty little face of yours on fire with…*cough*….Agilao…*haaaack!*"

"And if Naoya weren't watching, I'd impale you back on the ice, Ayase!" Sonomura's smile was stretched far too wide. "And then I'd use Matsu to revive you and do it aaaaalll over again!"

Ayase half-gawked, half-shuddered. One minute, Maki Sonomura was kind and tender. The next, she said shit like this.

"Ka-POW!" Maki shouted as she used a Colt Anaconda so lengthy that it would serve as the ultimate phallic symbol for some hapless man, on a massive soldier. It blew into chunks, compared to the previous soldiers. Had it been human, giblets worthy of an FPS would be strewn about the room. "This sure beats using a bow!"

"How is your hand not broken!?!" Ayase shouted. "That gun's enormous!" She whipped out her more modest Walther P99 and continued attacking another wayward soldier.

Between the seventeen witness’ jaws that were completely nailed into the floor and the flying bullets that continued to decimate the larger card soldiers, Naoya found himself toe to toe with an aggravated Queen, still reeling over her fan. He gracefully rolled to one side as she launched another Mabufula spell, and shot up at a low angle as her left arm tried to choke him. With both MAC-10s in hand, he opened fire at her comically-inflated bosom.

"I…I won't let you…take my treasure…" She huffed, greatly in pain from the extreme amount of bullets pounding into her. "Not even…if…the king…eeeeeek!"

The leader of the gray-clad pack refused to end his relentless assault. With his stance rigid and back muscles taut from shooting two automatics at once – something nigh-impossible to do in real life, as it would render the bones in one's arms into bits – he salivated, drunk on the sheer amount of power the MAC-10s gave him. He bore his teeth, mouth open, and as he hunched forward, he let out an odd-sounding cry, one that sounded like a forced shout heard in many a generic shonen anime.

"Aaaaaah~!"

The gun in his right hand ran out of ammo. Exposed for the world to see were the queen's breasts; so hideous and bizarre they were in their appearance that even Zen's eyes melted into a slithering goop, foam bubbling at his mouth.

"Eeek! Zen, don't die on me!" Rei cried. "J-j-just look at them like they're a big pair of marshmallows! Yeah! Big…floppy…marsh…" She similarly foamed at the mouth and passed out.
The undeterred leader kept firing into the queen, who at that point was on the brink of death. The only ones who hadn't keeled over were Shinjiro and Sakuya. "I…I don't...I don't even...Leader, I just...can't. I don't even know what I can't do, I just..." Shinjiro's grayish-brown eyes were wider than saucers. He was at a loss.

"Well, we'll at least be in good shape for whatever happens afterward," Sakuya sighed. "Actually, I've found this entire experience quite entertaining."

"...Leader, you are fucking weird."

Speaking of weird things, on the left side of the room, even as the boy kept firing away, another group of high school kids appeared – eight of them this time, plus one adult woman in a blue coat.

"Yo! Sorry we kept you - what the fuck!?"

A young man wearing a black *gakuran* and donning dyed hair completely broke the pose he had planned and staggered, gagging. The seven kids that were beside him also broke character, slack-jawed and completely blown over at how utterly upstaged they were. The sound of rapid gunfire sunk that feeling in further.

The gray-haired leader's shoulders slumped. He ushered his friends back, defeated. "...Well this stinks."

The queen was on her last legs, completely, utterly, pathetically, defeated. Her massive form toppled over, squirming and drowning in a hazy black ooze. "How...vul...gar...ugh...my..."

The boy blew the smoke from both of his guns away, dropping his sixth set of magazines with an effortless snap. "Your reign ends here, Queen of Hearts! The treasure is ours!"

The queen gasped as she writhed in pain. Her arms were slowly disintegrating. "That treasure...it's...it's...gaaaah..."

With a final cry, she disappeared.

A collective sigh of relief permeated the room, with the black haired boy in gray realizing that no more soldiers were showing themselves. As his motley crew gathered around him, the bullet casings that were left behind from their firearms clinked and tapped together – a reminder of the surreal spectacle of the slew of high school kids shooting down an entire army of Shadows, Western-style.

"Glad that's over. Why don't we – oh, oh God..." The black-haired boy was as rigid as a statue, staring at his left hand, which was now gushing blood. All he could do was grin through the pain and stutter small noises every so often. His eyes zoned in on it. "I...I don't feel any pain...is that bad...?" The boy chirped quietly.

"All right, all right, I'll help you for once..." The shaggy-haired boy pulled their leader aside to administer first aid, grimacing all the while. "You owe me for this."

"I know, Kido," The boy sighed as Reiji began examining his hand. "And I know you'll hate me for saying this, but thanks for fixing my hand."

"Tch..."

The crew of seventeen slowly climbed out, some struggling more than others, into the bullet-strewn arena. Everybody took care not to trip over the bullets. Ever a good field leader, Sakuya stepped forth towards Reiji and his patient, the patient's back turned to him. "Er...I guess you really didn't
"We had enough firepower to take them out in the end," Reiji replied snappishly. "All of you would've probably died if you tried to help."

"Kido, stop," The black-haired boy curtly responded. "They were here before us. I bet they probably have a better idea about what the treasure chest holds, am I right?"

The black-haired boy craned his neck toward Sakuya, allowing him to get a better view of his face. His features were soft, yet not quite as boyish as the blue-haired boy's. He had a sharp, angular nose and lightly tanned skin. "My name is Naoya Tudou. We're from Mikage-cho. And who might you be?" He asked courteously.

"Sa...Sakuya Shiomi..." The boy responded, still struck at how at ease the gray-clad student seemed to be. "My friends and I are from Iwatodai..."

"Iwatodai...never heard of it," Reiji shrugged, applying bandages to the wound. "How'd you get here anyway?"

"Hey, hey, no need to be rude, Kido," the girl with the long skirt said curtly. "We can do formal introductions later outside this madhouse. Besides, I'm sure we have loads and loads of questions to..."

"Yukki!"

Maya and Tatsuya trotted to Sakuya's side, the former eagerly approaching the long-skirted girl as she caught up. "It really is you, Yukki! I don't believe it!" Maya held out her hands, conjuring up the image of her dear friend in her head. "Oh, but I thought your hair was long and curly...why are you with these high schoolers, Yukki?"

The girl Maya dubbed "Yukki" was taken aback, tempted to reach for a razor blade that she tucked in her front pocket. "...Who are you to address me so informally? Don't think I won't fight back if you have intentions against my classmates."

"Huh...?" Maya's mouth formed an "o." "But you...we work together at Kismet...you're an assistant photographer, and yet...now that I look at you," she paused, sizing up the girl's delinquent looks. "You look like a delinquent..."

"So what if I were one!?" The girl shouted a little too loudly. "You're starting to annoy me!"

"Yukino, please, calm down..." The kogal grabbed Yukino's arm. "Can we just get out of here first? I'm really tired!"

"Yuka..." She gave a glance to the girl named Yuka, letting out a resigned sigh. "This place is as off as Mikage-cho is anyway. I'm sure we can sort this out later..." She gave one last glare toward Maya, whose own face saddened.

"More to the point..." Mitsuru interjected, giving a somewhat judgmental look toward Yukino and Ayase, "Takeba mentioned that she could sense Personas within you. Is this true?" She folded her arms.

"Personas...can you all use them too?" Naoya said, blinking. "Ah...there...you do have them. I can feel my heart pounding, there's so many."

Akihiko threw up his one good arm up in frustration at Naoya's comment. "Okay, what is it with
everyone being able to sense Personas!? I can't feel anything!" He shouted, extremely annoyed. "And Shinji, I still want an answer about your second Persona!"

"Stop it, Aki…" Shinjiro sighed, hand on face.

"Why do you keep ignoring me!?"

"Hey 'Shinji,,'" Reiji sneered. "If you know that stupid yapping pigshit, tell him to shut the hell up. He's pissing me off."

"What did you call me!?"

"Control yourself, Akihiko!" Mitsuru shouted, making him back down. "You're a third year, for pity's sake! Carry yourself better!" She turned to Shinjiro with a less harsh stare, but he could still feel the air chilling around her. "Aragaki, could you tell me as to why you have a second Persona…?"

He grimaced, looking away. "Ask Leader. He can explain it better."

She sighed in resignation.

Zen had spent the entire gunfight consoling Rei as best he could. The entire time, the scent and atmosphere of the room had unsettled her to the point that she nearly broke down. All of the Persona-users present turned to him, with the gray-clad students gaping in awe at this wizardly-looking boy. Rei shyly peeked out from underneath her guardian's cloak, wary of the strangers that descended upon them. She gave the massive chest a glance, her fear rising again.

"Zen…you aren't really going to open it, are you…?" She cried out quietly.

"I…" He rubbed his temple. "I cannot explain it in words, Rei. I have to open that box."

"The Queen of Hearts was guarding that thing, right?" Ayase commented. "We don't know a thing about it, so if you like, want to open it…"

Zen nodded. With his cape swirling behind him, he hefted the chest open, with a convalescing silver void trapped inside of it. He hefted his body over it, reaching to its bottom. He felt around for the treasure within, pausing when he found it. As he found himself touching velveteen, he felt something popping in his head: packets of memories, popping like balloons. They were fragments, vague and mostly words, but the familiarity that rooted in his head confirmed that these were, in fact, memories.

A single string of words became coherent in the mass of words that were slowly forming in his head…

He yanked out the "treasure" for his companions to see: a stuffed white rabbit, wearing a little gray vest. A tag was at the bottom, the word "NIKO" written in pen on it.

"This is the treasure…" He said softly. "I've no clue to its significance, but I have gained small fragments of my memory…"

"Really?" Maya said hopefully. "What do you remember?"

Zen glanced upward, his face unreadable. "A task…there was something that I had to do here…"

"Can you be more specific?"
"Specific…all that I can tell you is…this task of mine was like a duty of some sort…yes, that's it…" He clenched his fist.

Junpei raised his arms behind his head. "Well, uh…anything else you can remember?"

"No…wait…I think…" He rubbed his head, which was lightly throbbing. "Wait, yes…there is something else…I have seen this rabbit before, and…"

"Zen…" Rei was afraid.

"Four…no…yes, four…" His head was throbbing harder. "Damn, my thoughts are a muddled mess!"

"Are…are you all right?" Yukino asked, reaching her hands out to him.

"Please lower your voice…I think…” The popping fragments that made his memories were clashing with something more violent, something churning like the sea during a storm. It was only through willpower that he could pick apart his memories from this conflicting mass that threatened to consume them. "Four…places…"

"Places…? Do you mean labyrinths?" Tatsuya asked.

"Labyrinths…” The images popped in his head: four of them, all distinct. They all had their own colors – blue, pink, black, and yellow – and they were all able to shine through the muck. "Yes! Four labyrinths! They are being protected…treasures lie within…one treasure in each…” He inhaled, picking his memories apart and making them more coherent. "There are four labyrinths with treasures inside, and they are being protected by Shadows and demons. And then there's my task…"

"There it is," Sakuya sighed, pondering over his words. "Do you remember your task?"

"That I do not remember."

"And do you remember anything, Rei?"

She turned away, shuddering. "I…I don't know…"

"You don't know?"

"No, I don't!" She shouted suddenly, making Sakuya jump. "That rabbit…Zen, can you keep it with you? It scares me…"

"It…scares you?” He was confused, yet possibly due to the amnesia, his voice remained monotonous and rigid. "If you wish for me to hold it, then I will."

Maya's hand was on her chin, pondering. "So when I said earlier that going here would help you two…looks like I was right. In fact, these labyrinths are certainly connected to the two of you." She smiled.

"Yes," Tatsuya agreed. "That theory of yours on how this place came to be seems to be very likely to be true, Maya."

"However," Mitsuru interjected, pondering herself. "We do not know why we in particular were brought here, nor do we know who bought us. In all likelihood, an unknown party spirited us here. I imagine that our way out of here can be found in Zen and Rei's memories as well, and to fully restore them, we have to traverse three more labyrinths and find their treasures."

Sakuya sighed in relief. "We finally have a coherent game plan now, even if it mostly involves a lot of fighting…but we have no choice in the end. Sanada-senpai was right in that regard."

Shinjiro was relaying all of that back to himself. It made sense, for sure. But the red-eyed girl and his newly found powers were still bothering him…

*BONG….BONG… *

"Aiyah!" Lisa shuddered in shock. "It's that bell again!"

"We heard it too," Naoya gasped, his ears ringing.

The somber bell echoed throughout the labyrinth. Sakuya felt something overwhelming his body, piercing right into his psyche, something foreboding…something that sounded like what Philemon warned him about.

After several minutes, it stopped.

Rather suddenly, Sakuya yelped at the two supernatural presences before him: the woman with the bizarre hairdo and the blindfolded man. The man spoke first: "This is the bell that foreshadowed Naoya-sama's summoning to this place. The bell rang four times hence, in which he and his friends were pulled here some seven minutes, thirty-three seconds, and fifty-five nanoseconds afterward."

"…Nanoseconds?" Who was this bizarre man, Sakuya wondered.

"I sensed all of you. There are five groups in all, if you count the raven-haired woman's and the red-clad boy's groups as separate. Naoya-sama's group was the fourth group to arrive, although due to the flux of space-time in this land, I cannot estimate the amount of time between your arrival and his." The blindfolded man smiled, clearly proud of himself.

"Are you the real Rainman or something?" Junpei asked, eyes bugging. "And I didn't see you guys during the big shootout…ehhe, I always wanted to say that!" He grinned.

"Oh, you mean our guns?" The blindfolded man and the woman awkwardly smiled. "Naoya-sama just gave them to us before heading in here. Neither Belladonna nor I have the slightest clue as to how to operate them!"

Reiji facepalmed. "You gave them semi-automatics and they don't know how to use them!? You're a damn idiot, Todou!" Naoya chuckled nervously.

"Needless to say," The lady said - her sentence was poetic. "The Pianist and my guests seem not to be alone in their plight." She gestured her hands in welcome at Sakuya, Tatsuya, and Maya. "Shall we return to the school?"

"Er..." Sakuya stuttered. Why the hell was this woman talking in iambic tetrameter? It was somewhat annoying, he had to admit.

"Don't you know?" The boy with the spade shirt and goggles popped into the conversation. "She's a poet. And she knows it!"

His fellow classmates groaned.

"Actually," The spade-shirted boy ignored the groans. "There's one more small elephant in the room..." He pointed toward the crew of Persona-users on the other side. They were completely dispirited, and even their own supernatural guide looked put-down.
"If we were in the real world, seventeen minutes, thirteen seconds, and six nanoseconds would have passed between the end of the battle and the moment you finally chose to notice us," the blue-clad woman said flatly. She was stunning to behold: wavy, platinum blonde hair held by a headband, an eerie pair of gold eyes, plump, rouged lips, and a finely tailored blue coat that reached her knees. Completing her look were black tights and a pair of blue heels. "My guest and I have spent some time preparing for our entrance, yet your guest -" she pointed an accusatory finger at Naoya - "upstaged him in the most juvenile, testosterone-poisoning way possible."

Only Margaret could take the words "testosterone-poisoning" and make them sound eloquent, Yu thought.

"M-My apologies...I did not mean to offend a fellow Velvet Room resident..." The blindfolded pianist stuttered.

"Hm...? Oh..." Margaret sized up the pair. "I know of you...my master speaks of you both every so often. You two have created the song that always echoes in the Velvet Room, no matter its shape or location. It is a pleasure to finally meet you both." She held out her hand and shook the pianist's while bowing simultaneously. The pianist, in turn, cast a wary glance at Belladonna. She seemed to know about Margaret: during the split between worlds, Igor decided to train new assistants. She must have been one of them.

"Well..." Yu began, sweat trickling down his head. He was honestly a little afraid of the gray-clad kids, what with the sheer level of ease they handled their firearms. Naoto, who herself used a small revolver, was never that bold. "All of you are Persona-users, and...oh, who am I kidding, I'm kind of pissed off that you upstaged us, even though Margaret's idea of an entrance was pretty damn stupid."

"Um, sorry?" Naoya apologized.

"Hold on please!" Fuuka, who had remained quiet this entire time, finally found some backbone to speak. She, like the others, was overwhelmed by the shootout. "Follow the lady in the dress' advice and come back! One of the big locks on the doors is about to come off!"

"Explain, Yamagishi!" Misturu shouted.

"Remember the four doors with all of those locks on them in the Velvet Room? If you look closely, the smaller locks look more identical, while there are four larger locks that all look unique. A lock with a rose engraved on it is clattering. I think it might break off."

"I remember those locks," piped in an intelligent, androgynous young woman from Yu's side. "I had theorized that those doors were an exit."

"So everything that Zen said was true," Mitsuru said. "And Amano-san's theory may not be too far-fetched after all...I still cannot believe it. But those doors probably lead back to our world. It's no coincidence."

"We defeat the four guardians, the locks break off, and we get to go home. Zen and Rei then get their memories back in the process...nice and simple." Akihiko let out a small smile.

Mitsuru stared at him. "You said something normal for once..."

"I'm always normal!" He became angry.

"Uh, no you aren't Aki," Shinjiro retorted. "Besides, we still don't have a clue about the rest of the locks. We don't know how or why one of the little ones broke off...and there's also that girl we found. Something's been bothering me about her..."
Junpei was half tempted to ask Shinjiro if he had a crush on that girl. Through all of the blood and broken bones, she was cute. But then again, Shinjiro Aragaki was not one to be crossed. He'd only ask him if he wanted his skull bashed in. "W-well, hopefully she's better now. We can ask her stuff too."

"Iori..." Mitsuru gasped quietly. "You too? You're more skilled and you've become keen."

"Thanks!" He smiled. He then realized: "Wait...did she think I was dumb before?"

Tatsuya surveyed the area. He and his companions were all injured, and the Mikage-cho kids were roughed up. "It's time for another exodus to the Nurse's Office, everyone. Can we get going?" His cheeks turned pink as a wounded Jun leaned on him - both for support, and a little too suggestively for comfort.

"You're all injured, so you go first," said Yu, scratching the back of his neck. "We'll meet you there."

"See you then," Sakuya said.

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The Velvet Room...

*Clck-clck-clck-clck-clck.*

As Fuuka had predicted, one of the larger locks that kept the four massive doors shut was rattling violently. The spastic lock was one made of delicate filigree with roses engraved in sections. It served as the symbol of the Queen of Hearts, her massive rose garden, and the whole of the storybook-themed labyrinth. It rattled and rattled, the hooks breaking apart -

*KRSH*

- until the lock finally flew off, completely vanishing into space. Three locks remained: the heart-shaped lock, the rusted freezer lock, and the massive, circular lock with four mitama on it. Surrounded by them were the eleven other locks, far smaller, and still a mystery to the Persona-users. Their sole defining characteristic was that each one was marked with a Roman numeral. Not even the Velvet Room residents could unravel the mystery surrounding them.

The number II lock was chipped, but not completely broken...

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Unknown Location...

The fog that set his domain awash blew away for a moment.

The massive entity sat alone atop of his throne, a massive spire adorned by an all-seeing clock. Through the dark, murky fog that encompassed the land, the clock was gilded and golden, embossed with swirling white marble. A slew of nymphs and lesser gods crafted from golden ore flanked the clock, with one of the primordial rulers of old residing over them. The whirring of gears and chains were the only noises in the entire space, stirring in tandem with the ticking clock. Scuttling upon the
god's massive arm was a spider, as alien and mechanical as he. The spider crawled, inch by inch, along the arm till it reached its master's hand. Tenderly the god clutched its precious pet.

"Finally...it begins...

The spider spun in his hand in ecstasy.

"...time resumes..."

The clock stopped.

The fog was murky yet misty, cool to the touch and benign. That benign sensation warped into something far more malevolent, the skies and the fog painting themselves blacker than night. Instead of a haunting yet strangely beautiful silence of a god on his clock, a wicked, cackling laughter completely shattered and bled through it. The infinite sky burst like boils, ugly white faces cackling and swarming the god with their howling. They had voids for eyes and mouths, warping and stretching to their limits as they laughed. So ugly and horrifying was the sight that the spider fled in fear. As the mouths cackled and screeched, a slew of black smoke and primordial ooze bled from behind the god. The ooze was scabby and gory, swirling and slapping itself together with a sickening squelch. Tentacles, all punctured with gash-like faces, all shouting and screaming in agony, rendered the metallic flesh that guarded the god's body. No amount of dignity could hide the god's panic as the faces' mouths sprouted teeth. Below the armor was tender flesh, and below the flesh, gallons and gallons of blood and ichor. The top of the horrific spectacle of a being grew a masculine torso and a head - a head that revealed more bloody gashes and faces, all of them laughing in unison. Blood and black liquid spurted in all directions as the being's mouth frantically ate and gorged on the god's flesh, with the impressions of the god's companions all awash and splattered in gore. As the god softly cried out in pain, his flesh nearly torn asunder completely, the tentacled wraith behind him cocked his head back -

*kreeeeeeeecnnaa*

- a screeching noise emerged from a massive Glasgow grin that ripped into where the being's mouth would be. Razor sharp teeth, bathed in saliva, bore themselves to the half-eaten god. With an ear-piercing, wicked laugh, the black god gnashed his teeth on the mechanical god's head in one fell swoop. A river of blood shot like a geyser from his mouth as the god feasted. Slowly he cranked his head upward, chewing with fervor on his meal. As he finished the savory god, he looked upward and smiled. His laughter seemed to shatter the sound barrier at how unholy it sounded.

"Time...time shall meet its end here..."

The voice was gnarly and scratchy, yet deep all the same. The being arched his shoulders and shot his neck up, spitting out remnants of the mechanical god's head.

Instead of a mechanical edifice, what little was left of the head was organic. The nose and ears were bitten off. His left eyeball dangled on the floor in front of the clock, its green iris the only shred of beauty left on it. Between the curled brown hair were smatterings of gray matter. On his brown skin was a stain - a tear stain. Remains of a spinal chord stuck from his neck.

"This...is the end..."
"NOOOOO---!"

The red-eyed girl shot up from her slumber, gasping and sobbing. Not even the violent pain that shot through her back could get her to calm down. That said, she took in her surroundings through her tears; she was in a nurse's office, albeit in a blocked off room that was plastered with pink wallpaper and Jack Frost memorabilia. She gasped in realization that her clothes were gone, replaced with a small white hospital gown, and that her breasts, arms, and legs were all bandaged. Stitches were sewn into her legs, arms, shoulder and head. Given that her body had already been covered in jagged, line-like scars, she felt that more would join them. Still, her recovery was miraculous, almost as if...

"It's just like when they saved me...one time each..."

She grimaced. That's right. She shouldn't have remembered those...she had no right to remember those. And yet she did.

"I guess I was gonna get caught eventually...especially since someone else's memories are lost here...funny how that works."

Two people lost their memories, and she regained hers, the former having been a question she had finally obtained an answer to. Hopefully her saviors would stay away.

Their voices, their gestures, their figures...all were too familiar to her.

She clutched her arms. Her body began to flush, warm and ebbing with bits of libido she thought had permanently died off.

"Heh...just like old times...first with him, and then with his friend a mere month later..."

She lied back on the mattress and closed her eyes. The warmth that gently glowed and burned within her genitals flared and burst like embers, slithering tenderly across the rest of her body. The burn intensified, old feelings of lust setting her ablaze, her mind briefly going white. This went beyond mere nostalgia. Her cheeks heated up more, remembering the strength of their arms, keeping her safe, keeping her warm...their hands, defiling her body with featherweight touches and vicious slaps and clutches and all of that biting and dirty, dirty words and thrusting -

"What the hell is wrong with me!?!?" She shook her head rapidly, more tears falling. Her reverie was gone. "I'm the worst..."

The door opened. Her moment of strangled peace came to an end as she clenched her blanket, sniffling. She turned her head at the intruder - her eyes widened, half-afraid, half happy.

Even though he was in service to a higher power, he was always compassionate and kind. Their outings together were among her fondest memories, with his naivete and innocence always making her laugh. Now, his sad eyes and downturn mouth suggested something far from that innocence. The moment that her red eyes met his golden ones, she could sense both his sympathy and his resignations at her situation. She also had a hunch that his ability to help her would be heavily limited, especially with the dark-skinned man's and the blond haired girl's problems being more apparent.

She did not deserve his help, yet her heart yearned for it all the same.

"Theo..."

He shut the door with a soft click. Already the sensation of sadness settled in his stomach.
"You're awake...I am glad...truly glad..."

Daringly, he sat at her bedside, right by her feet. She did not deserve his closeness nor his kindness, and she smiled at him in thanks. He winced, with old feelings he once buried in the depths of his heart clawing their way out. He reached a hand out to her, to which she reciprocated after some hesitation. "My sister did everything in her power to treat you. I will thank her on your behalf."

"I feel so terrible, Theo. She had the kindness to treat a stranger like me...thank you for speaking for me."

For the first time, she actually smiled, even if it was weak. The feelings in Theodore's heart threatened to spill out. It took effort for him to quash them.

"Kotone-sama..."

They spent some time in silence, their hands entwined with one another.

"Kotone-sama...how...how are you feeling?" Theodore already began to fret a little. "Are you feeling any pain? Discomfort? Cold, perhaps? That gown is a bit drafty..."

The red-eyed girl - Kotone - shook her head. A ghost of a smile appeared on her face for the merest second. "I'm all right, Theo. I think I just need some sleep."

"I see..."

Slowly - reluctantly - he let go of her hand. He dug around in a nearby cabinet and procured a bottle of water for Kotone to drink later. As for the girl herself, she slid back down onto the bed. Her hand glided down slowly on her chest. Although she was in a state of shock, she was semi-aware of Akihiko tearing her shirt open and putting pressure on the brutal cut that Vizaresh inflicted on her. There wasn't a lick of licentiousness in his eyes or his voice. He did what any good person should have done and tried to stop the bleeding. It wasn't the least bit arousing in context, but thinking about it bought those nostalgic, perverse feelings back into her gut. Having to listen to Shinjiro object to Akihiko's obliviousness only made it flare harder.

"They...he looked at me...why did he look at me...?"

A series of rapid pants puffed from her open mouth. Panic melded and sloshed together with feelings of slight arousal. No matter how many times she shook her head, the memories that returned to her wouldn't go away.

"Kotone-sama!"

Kotone couldn't hear Theodore anymore; all that she could hear was the first memory she encountered - a lonely, hollow night, engulfing her childlike body. When she slept, the canvas in her head was black and untouched. When she awoke and found herself in Daena's domain, the canvas was green and slathered in oils. The bridge was a haunt, awash with little black ghosts with red, beady eyes. Her eyes wandered and wandered for miles and miles, too sick and too afraid to interact with this peculiar canvas.

A torrent of red splashed onto the canvas.

Red was the color of blood. It was the color of the ghastly Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan, a painting where a father had murdered his own son. That ghastly, haunting painting embodied how she felt. Much like the father, whose hands were overwrought with blood, his eyes deathly wide and swimming in guilt and fear, she, too, was doused with the blood of her parents. Though the deed
had been done by another, the fear was no less potent. She was still, letting the smoke and rubble fall around her, shackled into a trance, only seeing pings and flashes - gold and silver - at the two figures that clashed. On that night, the night that Daena and the Time Count had the gall to show her once more, her innocence was violated, shredded into bits.

This memory, and the catalyst for forming what she would eventually become, had materialized into figures called "Trapezohedrons."

"This, child, be thine Trapezohedron that embodies thine Patience. Thou hast fought well for it. Collect thine Trapezohedrons, confront thine memories, rejuvenate thine heart...atone...go forth...go be forgiven and live. Thy soul hath been corrupted...go, child, and restore it, for a human is defined by his or her actions. If thou wish to live again, go. Prove to we Fiends that you are worthy of life...prove that thou art worthy of life, even after thou hath torn your world apart."

Daena, Fiend of Priestesses, chuckled as she faded away:

"My counterpart Vizaresh, and some of my fellow Fiends, are not as forgiving as I...thou must work even harder to prove your worth to them, child...ohohoho..."

"Ngh...I hate this..."

Kotone furiously rubbed her eyes as more tears spilled out. Theodore came to her, yanked her up, and embraced her, letting her cry.

"Wh...what did she mean, Theo...? I, I know what I did...wh-what did she mean b-by...'torn thy world apart...'? I, I know I was selfish, I know I went back on my word at the t-time...what does she mean, Theo!?"

She cried and cried, grabbing at his coat. Theodore said nothing, rocking her body in a feeble attempt to get her to calm down.

"Theo...I don't know if I can fight them...I don't know if I can do this...Theo...Theo..."

"Kotone-sama...!"

"I'm being a coward, a complete bitch, I know I am, I know...but God, I just...I need time..."

The man holding her stroked her hair. His look was a peculiar one: sadness and a need to protect, yet stern and mild agitation at the same time. "Kotone-sama...I take it that you are aware of the nature of this place."

She nodded her head.

"And...you know of the two people who are influencing it...at least, that is what my sister's guest and his friends have deduced. We have much to research still - we know not of why this place is a culture festival - but after seeing them go through the first labyrinth, their hypothesis makes sense."

Another nod, followed by a shiver.

"Kotone-sama...I have born witness to what you've gone through thus far. Managing the workshop grows dull ever so quickly, so I...*ahem*." He grasped her chin and met her gaze. "...I oversaw you slay the Fiend. I saw space-time warp as you made your journey through that memory of yours. I...I wish not to say it, but I am afraid that your presence is affecting this portion of the Collective Unconsciousness as well. This place, no matter what it is truly made of, is not infinite. I would do anything to hide you from your suffering...but..."
The girl shook her head, tears glimmering off of her face. She was horribly distraught, but the truth was bare for her to see since the beginning. "I am aware of all of this, Theo...you're right. I can't hide forever..."

"Kotone-sama..."

She reluctantly let go of him, taking a sip of water. She choked. It had felt like forever since she had indulged in something so simple like a drink.

"I want to hide...for a little while...rather, I want to rest. The Fiends and the demons who follow them will find me, without a doubt. But I need to rest up...I can't go back all shaken up like this..."

Theodore let his gloved hand linger on her shoulder. He wanted her in his arms again, but had to toss that desire away for the time being. His sisters were looking for him. "I agree. I will do everything in my power to make you feel comfortable."

"Anything, huh...well, I do have one request...."

The man gulped, his face heating up. "Y-Yes...?"

The girl rubbed her head, trying her hardest to push the image of her saviors out of her mind. "Don't let Shinji...er, Aragaki and Sanada in here, please. I can't really face them right now..." She then whispered to herself: "Maybe I never will..."

Theodore nodded his head. "That I can do. I will keep them away from here. You have my word."

He became ballsy. Taking his precious guest's head in his hands, Theodore planted a tender kiss on her forehead.


Theodore blushed. Like a rigid toy soldier, he began to walk out the door. "Surely, someone as...as...wary of others' feelings as you are, Kotone-sama...should know how I..." He stuttered. "A-After all that time we spent together, I-It's only natural for me to...to..."

"Don't say it!"

Theodore jolted. His poor little heart - if he even had one - crumpled. He sighed, resigned to yet another defeat.

"Fate is...cruel..."

The man shook his head. "I apologize. I should have...kept my mouth shut." With that, he found his way out the door, dimming the lights and turning on a bathroom fan for white noise.

"...Do not hesitate to call me...Kotone-sama..."

The door shut with a soft click.

Tears glistened on Kotone's face once more. She fell asleep with a bitter smile on her face, her tears stinging the sides of her mouths.

"Yep, I'm pathetic all right...stupid Theo, why did you have to...why..."

She expunged the memories of those two - and of Theodore - from her mind. Bitterness and sadness intertwined, leaving a metallic aftertaste in her mouth.
Rounding out Yu Narukami's crew was yet another unfamiliar face: Rise Kujikawa, a first-year high schooler with reddish-brown hair tied in high pigtails and a lot of spirit. Due to the high number of Persona-users now, Margaret was able to divide everyone into their respective groups and leave just enough space in the hall for them to fit. Leading Naoya and the children in gray were Belladonna the singer and the pianist that had no name; leading Tatsuya and Maya's ragtag group was the Demon Painter; leading Sakuya and his straight-laced-in-blazer classmates were Elizabeth and Theodore (who had gone missing); and leading Yu and his black-clad friends was Margaret and another newcomer, Marie, a vaguely teenage-looking girl with horribly mismatched clothes and a foul disposition.

"...I would be lying if I said that I'm not overwhelmed," Margaret said after a moment of silence, her eyes unusually wide. "We all fell here at different times, at different origin points, and now here we are...all thirty-five of you...plus two extras - " She gestured at Zen and Rei, who were with Sakuya's group - "that makes thirty-seven." She sighed in resignation, stress already taking over her. "What are we going to do..."

"There's no other choice, sister dearest," Elizabeth chirped. She seemed to be finally back to her original self, but not without reservations. "In the human world, new acquaintances get to know one another with an 'ice picker!' Now I just have to find one." She raised her hands up, merry.

"Elizabeth, it's called an 'ice breaker.' We do not want anybody dying of shock, nor do we want anyone mass-vomiting at the sight of a dangling eyeball," the Demon Painter sighed. This woman was going to be the death of him, for sure.

From the back of Naoya's group, a hand shot up, belonging to the exuberant boy wearing goggles and the graphic tee with a spade on it. Elizabeth called out to him, to which he responded: "Either way, we're all in the same boat, right? We're all stuck here?"

"That is true," Jun responded. "But my friends and the group led by the boy with blue hair over there have found out a possible key to our escape." He gestured at Zen and Rei, who were standing close to him. Rei nervously shrunk back.

"It'll take a long time, though..." Ulala sighed. "But then again..." She looked around. For the first time, a genuine smile crept up on her face. "...there's so many of us now. That ought to make things easier."

"Much easier," Mitsuru agreed. "But that still begs the question...my team and I know how Suou-san and Amano-san's team came here." She turned to face Yu, who was the leader of his group. "How did you and your team get here?"

Yu rubbed his nose. "How we got here was pretty simple, actually...we stepped into the Velvet Room one day, and...we just found ourselves here. No struggles, no mess, no TV...we were
"just...here." He looked down. "Now that I think about it, we literally just popped in here with little warning, other than the ringing bell. It's like something out of a shitty film."

"Hm...we came in under similar circumstances." She pondered over his words...something stood out. "Wait, did you just mention a TV?"

"We were here figurin' y'all came through a TV, but I guess that ain't true.." a menacing-looking boy said quietly, rubbing his neck. He was hunched over, much like Shinjiro. "It doesn't make any sense, but hey."

"A TV? Does the Dark Hour - "

Mitsuru cut herself off. No, she asked Tatsuya and Maya that before, and they didn't know of its existence. Instead, they were plagued by supernatural rumors of some sort. Instead, she asked: "Do you know of a phenomenon called the Dark Hour?"

"Dark...Hour?" A young man in a colorful bear costume of all things waddled up to Kanji's side. "One of Inaba's local stations has a horror movie marathon called the 'Hour of Darkness' every Saturday night, but that's probably not what you're referring to, is it, my fair señorita?" The costumed Casanova twirled in place, blushing.

"...señorita?" Mitsuru glared at the bear. So much for that seductive purr he was practicing!

Rise, the analyst for Yu's team, gazed at him, at Mitsuru, and at the boy Tatsuya. "So what you're saying...we have the TV world, you have something called the Dark Hour...what about that guy in the motorcycle suit?"

"He mentioned that his city was plagued by supernatural rumors."

"Rumors?"

"In layman's terms, if you spread a rumor and make it sound believable enough, then the rumor comes true, manifesting as reality. It's quite bizarre, even compared to your claims of a world inside a television."

The menacing boy tensed nervously. "The rumors become...real?" His voice raised its pitch. "S-So, like, if that rumor about me being in a biker gang spread around enough, it would come true!? I'd be in a biker gang!?"

"That would appear to be the case. Of course, I've never witnessed it for myself."

"Th-that's fucked up..."

"We are unsure of what Todou-san's situation is, but it is likely as different as the rest of ours. I t certainly has made me rethink what and how we're fighting things..." Mitsuru sighed, glancing offhandedly at Shinjiro. "Young man...there is no doubt in my mind that we are all Persona-users, but if I may ask, can you summon many Personas, like our field leader?"

"Me?" The gray-haired boy tilted his head. "I can summon many, yes. I have the power of the Wild Card, but..."

"But...? I assume your friends all can summon only one?"

"It was like that before. But now, Kanji and Rise here, and another friend of mine, Naoto-kun, can summon another..." He slapped Kanji's back, making him yelp. "This is Kanji Tatsumi, by the way."
"N-Nice to meet ya..." He halfheartedly bowed.

"I see...Shiomi, our field leader, has what you call the Wild Card. The rest of us only have one Persona, but now we have three people who can summon more. What's more, it seems that Amano-san and Suou-san's group can summon many. And they apparently always could have."

"Always? Seriously?" Rise asked, surprised.

"And that means I have to ask Shiomi, just as Aragaki said..."

Already, millions of questions were brewing...

Margaret clapped her hands, getting everybody's attention. "I imagine that all of you are quite confused and have many things to ask. However, we can make everything easier by introducing ourselves. Shall we begin with my guest and his group?" She gestured Yu and his friends to the front, having them line up like toy soldiers. "This young man is my guest. He has the power of the Wild Card, like that boy over there." She pointed at Sakuya.

"I'm Yu Narukami. I live in Yasoinaba with the rest of these guys, and I'm a second year at Yasogami High. Nice meeting you all." He softly smiled, rubbing his temple. Even that gesture was nicely composed. His mannerisms were very straitlaced.

"You're our age, but you're pretty mature," Yukari mused. He was quite handsome, too. "And you go to Yasogami, you said? But this school is different, right?"

"Yep. We're all Yasogami students, but this place definitely isn't the Yasogami we go to. It looks like our school, definitely, but given that we're kinda trapped in another dimension, it's different." The entire time, Yu's expression never changed.

"Yeah, but...oh, forget it..." Yukari sighed. This Yu was as odd as Sakuya was. So much for that.

Yu's next gesture - hand covering face - enforced that. "All right! Neo Featherman Investigation Team, sound off!"

"Yellow Ranger, Feather Owl: Yosuke Hanamura, second year!" The boy with headphones crossed his arms together and bent backward.

"Green Ranger, Feather Parakeet: Chie Satonaka, second year!" The girl in the green zip-up slid backward and struck her index out.

"Pink Ranger, Feather Argus: Yukiko Amagi, second year!" The girl with long black hair bent her left leg forward and placed her palms in front of her. She snorted.

"Black Ranger, Feather Falcon: Kanji Tatsumi, first year!" Kanji raised his elbows up, thrusting his pelvis forward. "Fuck yeah!"

"B-Blue Ranger, Feather Swan...N-Naoto Shirogane, first year..." The androgynous girl awkwardly raised one arm near her chest and the other near her crotch. She wasn't enjoying it at all.

"Purple Ranger, Feather Shoebill: Rise Kujikawa, first year!" Rise held her left elbow in her right hand and held her face, jutting her right hip out.

"And I'm Teddie, the White Ranger, Feather Horned Owl, the fantabulous mascot of - GAAAAAAH!" The bear costume-clad boy tried stretching backward, but fell on his ass for his effort. "Why me..."
"And together," Yu shouted with authority, "we are Inaba's Investigation Team, and with the power of Persona at our side, those who dare tamper with the law will be smote by the hammer of justice! Yu Narukami and friends..."

"...comin' at ya!" The rest of the team shouted in unison. Teddie came after with a small "owie..."

Silence.

Margaret, completely breaking character, eagerly clapped, beaming. "Bravo! That was brilliant! It completely made up for your failure to introduce yourselves in the labyrinth - I dare say, this was superior even to my entrance! You've done justice twofold, Yu-sama! Neo Featherman and my favorite Japanese comic, together!"

Marie gawked, gnashing gum between her teeth. "So that's what you make him get at the bookstore for you!"

"So that lady's a fan of Jojo, is she..." Baofu trailed off. He winced. "Contain yourself, Kaoru...hide your fanboyish love of Jojo...resist...you're thirty-two...it's time that you let go of the fact that you know just about every single pose that each character strikes...you studied to become a public prosecutor and passed the exam on your first try for fuck's sake, you shouldn't be liking boys' manga at your age..."

Tatsuya and Naoya's teams all chuckled, while Maya's team was highly, highly amused. Sakuya's team, on the other hand, were both too shocked to respond (second years), scoffing at them (Mitsuru, Ken), uncaring (Shinjiro) and confused (Akihiko, Koromaru). As for Sakuya himself, something unfamiliar began to brew within him...

"They look so funny together...look at them laughing. Gee, that punkish-looking guy's getting all flustered around that short girl. And those two, Hanamura-san looks like Narukami-san's second-in-command. He seems really charismatic...they're like best friends."

Best friends...

"Yeah, if my companions are my friends, then Elizabeth is freaking Lucifer himself." Sakuya was despondent as he sighed.

The blindfolded pianist smiled. "From what I could hear, I rate that performance a ten out of ten. Well done!" He gestured towards his guests. "Now Naoya-sama, I believe it is your turn to introduce yourself? You and the rest of the guests get on up there now. Have some fun!"

Naoya gestured toward the front as the Yasogami kids all returned to Margaret's side. "Shall we go?" He asked. The rest nodded, and they all made their way to the front. Naoya himself stood in the center, smiling softly.

"My name is Naoya Todou, and I am a second year at St. Hermelin High School in Mikage-cho. The rest of my friends are also second-years. This has easily been the strangest part of our adventure yet, but it's still great to meet you all." He bowed.

"Man," Junpei sighed, "what is it with all these second year students? It's like the laws of the universe demand that seventeen-year old high school students become God's co-pilots and save everything. I mean, I like having others my age here, but we're completely dwarfing everyone else."

"You speak the truth, kid," Baofu sighed. "There are four adults watching over thirty-something of you kids." He rubbed his temples. "This is gonna suck..."
"It certainly will!" Katsuya explained, nervousness building. "I dare not think of all the unsavory things that could happen within the next hour or so..."

Junpei staggered in shock. "Oh c'mon man, we don't think about \textit{that} a hundred percent of the time! Besides, you were our age once, right!?"

"Well yes, but..." Katsuya sighed. He was backed in a corner this time. "Ugh...foiled again..." To which, he thought to himself: "They don't need to know I'm a virgin..."

Naoya gestured to the rest of his companions, each sounding off more politely and formally, especially compared to the Investigation Team's elaborate intro.

"I am Yukino Mayuzumi. My looks may say otherwise, but I do enjoy school. It's my job to look after these guys, I guess...I keep them in line." She chuckled, folding her arms. "Let's see...I want to take up an art when I graduate...maybe photography. Anyway, it's good to meet you all."

Kanji's cheeks turned pink. "She's so cool...check out how ballsy she looks!"

Yosuke stammered. So much for harassing him about his alleged closet tendencies. "Uh...huh. So that's your type, huh?"

The boy in the graphic tee raised his yellow beanie like some kind of oddball gentleman. "What's up everybody! I'm Masao Inaba of St. Hermelin High. I aim to enter the world of the arts, much like Mayuzumi-san, although I do say that I have an appreciation for the tastes and voices of the masses - that is to say, graffiti! I also -" He shuffled backwards, sharply flashing his finger towards the crowd. " - am a connoisseur of dance, and am the captain of my own dance team, the Tailors! We are the masters -" Another pose. " - of freestyle dancing; so masterful are we that our dancing soothes the souls of even the foulest demons!" He grinned. "Even the demons know how talented we are!"

The bespectacled boy with the scarf scoffed. "Inaba, you're good, but not great. Stop trying to make your 'debut' happen. It's not gonna happen."

Masao's face fell. "I know..." He weakly retorted. "Way to remind me about my \textit{dead dancer team members}, Nanjo..." He shuffled back to his spot, where the girl with the red bow - Maki - patted his back awkwardly as a means of comfort.

Mitsuru knew absolutely nothing about dancing, but she sighed, pointing an accusatory finger at Kei. "I saw you earlier...you're being awfully cruel to someone with such high aspirations. What gives you the right to talk him down like that?"

Kei turned around, familiar with the voice. He sighed. "So we meet again, huh...you're that woman who had that shoddy fencing foil. Actually, I have to ask why you're using something so impractical. Our own fencer actually uses more practical one-handed swords when engaging in melee combat. Isn't that right, Kirishima?"

The girl with her long hair tied in a ponytail chuckled. "You \textit{flatter} me, Nanjo."

"We have barely met one another, and already you are thick with your criticisms...why are you not looking me in the eye? The least you can do is look at me if you are so eager to insult," Mitsuru replied coldly. In response, Nanjo turned around in a whirl, his own gaze sharp.

"Very well then..." As he glared, the sparks began to fly. "If I may ask, what is your name?"

"I am Mitsuru Kirijo. And you?"
Kei staggered back. He was gagging. "Wait...Kirijo...I don't..."

He took one good look at her face. She raised a brow, unaware that this young man's destiny had been linked to hers for quite some time...

"YOU!"

Kei Nanjo pointed the most dramatic, epic accusatory finger at Mitsuru that anyone in the entire room had ever seen. So dramatic it was that the Demon Painter's glasses shattered. Poor Mitsuru, on the other hand, was confused.

"...Me?"

"Yes, you! Mitsuru Kirijo, heiress to the Kirijo Group!? The same Kirijo Group whose founder had ties to the Yakuza!?!"

Mitsuru snapped, rushing like a bull at the black-haired boy. Several toppled over as she doggedly pursued him. "How dare you! Just who the hell are you!?"

She had taken a cue from Shinjiro, to the shock of everyone in the room, and lifted the boy by his collar. He glared at her, half in anger, half in disbelief. "I am...I am Kei Nanjo...of the Nanjo Conglomerate...and unlike your ilk, we are true businessmen born and bred!" He huffed.

It was Mitsuru's turn to reel in shock. "Kei Nanjo!? The heir to that massive conglomerate - the owner of the store that sold contaminated baby formula and refused to pull it from the market!? And you have the gall to accuse my family of being connected to the Yakuza!?"

"You lie!" He shot back. "Your lie is as elaborate as this guise of yours! The Kirijo heiress is only four years old!"

"Wh...are you mad!?" She screamed, taking in his features - quite handsome. "You should talk! The heir of the Nanjo Conglomerate is almost thirty! He certainly isn't as well-groomed as you are!"

"...I'm not sure whether to be insulted or feel jubilant with praise."

Baofu stepped in with a flourish, glaring at the incredibly hostile duo. "You say you're Nanjo? Why are you dressed like a high schooler? You into that sort of thing?"

"I...I beg your pardon!? I am a high schooler! Keep your sick schoolgirl fetishes to yourself, you ape!" Nanjo shouted. Baofu twitched.

"Schoolgirl!? God, and I thought so highly of you too. Guess you really are just some upper class twat..."

"Twat!?"

"Wait...hold on a moment..." Eriko stepped in, face contorted in surprise. "You claim to know Nanjo, mister? Surely either he, or I, or anyone in this room would be able to remember someone as distinct in appearance as you..." Her nose crinkled. A look of displeasure crossed her face. "Distinct...and smelly too..."

"Oh COME ON! I don't smell that bad, dammit!" Baofu shouted, angry. "Serizawa gives me enough shit as it is! I don't need you to - wait..." He gave the girl a hard look. Sure, her hair was far longer, but she had the same single-edged eyes that gently sloped downward, the same plump lips, drawn in that Cheshire grin, the same skinny figure...that was Eriko Kirishima all right - a fairly
famous model with aspirations for fashion design and a deep love for the occult and all things strange. She even had that odd little habit of peppering English words in her sentences. He glanced at her, confusion brewing in his mind like the rest.

"Kirishima?"

"Excuse me?" She tilted her head, speaking in English. "Do I know you?"

Sakuya and Yu glanced at one another. Maya shot her gaze toward Yukino, and she gazed back, mouth agape. Tatsuya was grimacing, mind awash in thought. Maki shot an uncomfortable look at Naoya, who felt similarly. Chatter brewed among the rest, amidst the confusion.

"Nanjo..." Shinjiro mouthed. "Isn't that the name of the big-ass conglomerate that the Kirijo Group broke off from?"

"I don't know," Akihiko said, rubbing his chin. "I knew how important Mitsuru's name was when we met in junior high, but she never mentioned the Kirijo group being an offshoot of another company." He shot a small glare at Kei - he and Mitsuru were stuck mid-throttling each other when the chatter began to grow.

"I wonder..." Shinjiro trailed off. "Seeing this guy is making me curious..."

"Hey now," Akihiko cut him off. "If she knows him, it's not really our business. We know enough about her already, the things she's been through...besides, it's not like you to snoop around and stick your nose in, Shinji."

"That's pretty odd coming from you. You're on a first name basis with her, after all. Don't you know how deep that implication goes? People say a lot of things about you two."

"Huh?" Akihiko raised a brow, completely clueless. "What are you talking about? What implications? I call Junpei by his first name. We're all friends, aren't we?"

"You're a dumbass..." He raised a hand on his brow, sighing. No cure for cluelessness.

"Hey!"

Aigis, surprisingly, attempted to diffuse the air. "It would appear that a slew of contradictions has caused this...first and foremost, Kirijo-san claims that Nanjo-san is thirty years of age, yet Nanjo-san claims that Kirijo-san is a child...is this yet another side effect of this place being in a state of flux?"

Margaret sighed, shaking her head. "I'm honestly surprised it took you all this long to figure out..."

As Margaret led everyone outside to gaze at the clock tower that proved as the source of the tolling bell, she gave a lengthy exposition about the cold hard fact that each group of Persona-users were from different periods of time...

"What...what...what...WHAT!"

Thirty-five Persona-users, in all shapes and sizes - and even species - were standing agape at Margaret, still steely and frosty. She had to ask herself every other day if humans, especially those nearing the end of their compulsory education, were truly as dense as many of the students in front of
her were. The clashes were obvious: Yukino Mayuzumi's delinquent looks were aligned with what was a trend in the '90's, whereas sukeban of her guest's era had shorter skirts or were of the kogal subset, like Yuka Ayase. Katsuya Suou's three-piece suit was of a make that was trendy in the very early stages of the 21st century, as was Maya Amano's casual jacket-skirt combo. The blazers (or lack thereof, for no adequately explained reason) that SEES wore were a common trend in 2009, and though her guest's own group wore gakuran and sailor uniforms, courtesy of being in the countryside, they were far more unusual in looks (both were completely black with white stitches, for one) compared to any prior uniforms of that sort. The skirts that the St. Hermelin girls and Lisa Silverman wore were longer than those of the Gekkoukan and Yasogami girls. The cellular phones of SEES and the Investigation team were far sleeker and more advanced than Maya Amano's portable phone. And that was all before taking all of the personal contradictions (Kirijo and Nanjo, Maya knowing Mayuzumi, etc. etc.) into consideration.

"If you pay attention to all of my personal notes," said Margaret, flourishing a meticulously-written wad of notes noting every last intricate detail of each group's differences, "the fact that you all come from different times is quite obvious. And these are merely from your clothing and behaviors. You do not need to be a commander of higher powers like I to sense this truth."

Aigis finally broke the ice. "Her argument is compelling. When observed, our differences are quite noticeable. In fact, you could chalk up the argument that I, myself, represent the year 2009 A.D in many other ways."

"Like how?" Ken asked.

"Although I am a robot designed with the intent of slaying Shadows, if you look at me, my limbs, figure, and doe-eyed appearance are evocative of both anime character designs made within the last five years - often made to cater to the tastes of the anime otaku demographic - and of female robots designed to pleasure hopeless, perverted salarymen who ignore their wives and children. In fact," she added with her usual mischievous/clueless smile, "Word through the grapevine at Ergo Research claims that I am a model for an erotic robot that they plan to tentatively release in 2012. They will sell it under the Kirijo Electronics name and it can be purchased from vending machines - the 'mistress in a vending machine,' if you will."

Everyone's jaws hit the ground. Mitsuru was stammering, her face the color of her hair, while Kei let out a wicked chuckle. Ken blankly stared at the smiling robot, his mind brewing with a thousand and one questions, which included, but were not limited to the practicality of selling robots in vending machines, and general curiosity about that vibrating object that Fuuka got in the mail. Sakuya, meanwhile, was blushing, trying his darndest not to think about the implications behind Aigis' use as a model for what was basically a glorified sex toy.

Eriko's expression was a mixture of shock and sick curiosity. "My goodness! This robot is a model for a sex toy? I'd say that Miss Kirijo's company is employed by true blue perverts! What do you have to say, Nanjo?"

Nanjo was at a slight distance, still suffering from his fit of evil giggles. "I think that Nanjo's going to be exploiting that fact for a loooong time," Naoya sighed. "And I also think that I sense a clash of wealth and egos brewing between him and Kirijo."

This was the second time that her company had been accused of perversion. Mitsuru was humiliated to the point that she actually hid behind Shinjiro's frame, pushing him in the spine to have him stand tall. Akihiko, meanwhile, kept pelting them both with questions as to what a mistress actually was...and the juniors all looked at them awkwardly.

"Er, Elizabeth-san," the girl in the red cardigan - Yukiko - asked, "Is Yuuki-kun's team always like
that? They look so...stern and serious."

Elizabeth raised a brow. "I would not know for sure. I have only known my guest until this entire incident began. Honestly, though? I do not have much interest in getting to know his friends from what I've seen from then, but alas, I must assist. 'Tis my sad burden."

Naoto was rather surprised at Elizabeth's display of brutal honesty. As frosty as Margaret was, she seemed more open to helping her, Kanji, and Rise adjust to their new powers in summoning more Personas. She even elicited a chuckle or two from the three of them. That being said, with all of the clues they discovered, a more pressing matter was on her mind.

"In any case, please tell Margaret that we should begin our examination of this clock tower," said Naoto in her usual tone of voice. "There are many things about it that pique my curiosity."

"Very well." Elizabeth went to Margaret's side and made note of Naoto's request. With her announcement, the four groups examined the behemoth tower before them. The tower itself was made of shale and turbidite stones, showing faint signs of erosion near the top. The clock was gilded with sterling silver, as was the bell hoisted at the tower's top. Several steel strips were carved into the tower to flaunt the bell, and that same steel was forged into the clock's looping decor and hands.

Chie, the Yasogami student in the green zip-up, remembered upon arrival that the minute hand was stuck at the fifty-five minute mark.

"It's been 11:55 since we came here," she mused. "And there's something really off about it..."

"More than one, Satonaka-senpai," said Naoto. "For one thing, there's no entrance into the tower at all. That begs the question on how it can possibly be maintained."

"Perhaps the time's incorrect due to that lack of maintenance?" Katsuya asked, inspecting the damaged exterior. "The stones are showing signs of erosion and the bell is slightly rusted. In fact, if professionally inspected, it could be found hazardous and would likely be demolished."

"That could be an explanation," said Yosuke, the boy with the large headphones, "But we never had anything like this at Yasogami."

"Is that right," said Lisa. "Seven Sisters High School is pretty famous due to its own clock tower, but it's attached to the school itself. It's pretty big too. I'd imagine that if it were separated from the building, it'd take up over half of the land that the school sits on."

"Hmm..." Naoto struck her usual pose: hand on chin, lost in thought. "Now that I think about it, I remember the principal telling me that we had an old clock tower years ago, but I've never seen it. Do any of you guys know about it?"

"Years ago...oh!" Yukiko had a thought. "I remember from when I was little, Yasogami High did have a clock tower! But it resembled a small monument. It looked nothing like this, and it was demolished before I was in elementary school. I think...it was 1999 when that happened?"

"1999?" Junpei questioned. Once again, the gears in his head whirred. "If you say that, and if we consider that we're all from different points in time, then..." He clasped his hands together, smiling. "...does this mean maybe, just maybe, we've traveled through time to the year 1999!?"

Naoto kept moving through her motions of logic: "Perhaps."

"What!? You're not ridiculing me? You're supposed to be ridiculing me, you know. That's kinda how it goes with my group."
"We're in a place - this 'Collective Unconsciousness,' as Margaret calls it - where Shadows and other odd creatures are roaming about, and how we all came here was by supernatural means. And you heard Margaret - we are all from different periods in time. If we are in a place where thoughts have a degree of influence, then the idea of time travel is not so absurd."

"T-True..."

Chie glanced around at the scenery around them. The sky was clear and blue, and she could hear the faint chirping of birds. It resembled Inaba quite a bit, what with the silence and the birds and the breezes that made the trees sway, but it was still unsettling. "This place is strange...you're right, Naoto-kun. We didn't go in a TV, and we don't need our glasses either. Yu-kun said it perfectly: we came here like something out of a bad movie."

"Wait..." Junpei raised a brow, eying Chie. "I heard your leader mentioning that earlier. Is that how you get to Tartarus during the Dark Hour?"

"And I heard your friend mention the Dark Hour too. I think we oughtta explain ourselves to everyone..."

"Yes, I hear you!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "We could all use a little more exposition in our lives!"

Mitsuru opted to explain for her group. "We live normal lives by day, but at night, when midnight comes, the Dark Hour begins. The Dark Hour is a distortion in the time-space continuum that only those with the 'potential' - the power to summon a Persona - can detect and experience. It manifests as a twenty-fifth hour, simply put. When the Dark Hour strikes, creatures called Shadows appear in a tower called Tartarus. When the moon is full, an especially large one of these Shadows appears..."

"What makes these bigger Shadows so special?" Jun asked. He and his once-amnesiac friends listened raptly.

"There are twelve of them in all. The man who oversees us has research proving that these twelve Shadows are the cause of the Dark Hour. Should we defeat them all, the Dark Hour should disappear."

"Interesting..." Tatsuya said quietly. "I know you mentioned it briefly to us before, but I have to ask...do these Shadows come out during daylight hours at all? Even remotely?"

Mitsuru shook her head. "Never. It takes a considerable effort to even summon a Persona during regular hours. Virtually no one is aware of the Dark Hour or Shadows, save for those who study both of them. My father's company runs several research teams. It's been over a decade, and the concept of Persona in particular is still a mystery to us..."

"Your daily lives seem like they're worlds away compared to when you go to battle...that's pretty convenient, now that I think about it," said Eikichi. "From...from what I recall, when my friends and I fought, a lot of demons and wackjobs ran rampant in public. Some of said wackjobs had Personas too. It became absolute chaos as time went on."

"Wait...demons? And Persona-users too! Out in the open!"

"Out in the open indeed," said Tatsuya solemnly. "When powerful, cult-like groups want to use all-powerful rumors to their advantage, that's what they did. Of course, when one is dealing with something like that, it's inevitable that those who want to abuse power go public."

"Rumors...?" Chie asked. "What do you mean by 'all-powerful rumors?'"
"It is exactly as my brother said," Katsuya replied. "In our city - Sumaru City - a spell was cast (I can't believe I said that...), and now, whenever a rumor is spread, it has a chance to manifest in reality. Of course, skepticism and the outlet for where the rumor is spread can be obstacles...it's human nature, after all. The rumor can be anything. One minute, that lady at your local ramen shop is now selling guns and other weapons. The next, a mummy can be raised from the dead. This dreadful curse has spiraled out of control in our city, and is starting to affect the country as a whole - I wouldn't be surprised if the rest of the world caught the curse too. My brother, my companions and I, with our Persona-summoning powers, are trying to combat the New World Order, a fanatic group that has fallen under the thrall of the rumor spell. It's run by the Prime Minister - the Prime Minister in the year 2000, Tatsuzou Sudou."

"Tatsuzou Sudou..." Naoto mouthed. "Word through the grapevine is that he died in a fire but I'd be willing to bet that's not true..."

"Is that right? Well, since the rumor spell doesn't seem to work here..." Katsuya gulped. "Before we were dragged here, we were pursuing him. I guess we'll at least witness his death, then..."

"Don't assume anything, Suou," said Baofu. "If this kid can't really say how he died, then we'll just have to wait until we return."

"You're right..."

Kanji's eyes were tiny with shock. "This whole rumor thing is scarier hearing it a second time...and...and...you said demons? These demons fuckin' talk, right? We have it easy compared to you guys...ow!"

Rise stomped Kanji's foot, veins popping. "You have a lot of balls saying that, Moronji!"

"How do you mean?" Baofu asked, brows down turned.

Yu decided to speak this time. "We're pursuing a killer."

"A murderer!?" Katsuya exclaimed. "And...I take it you children, with your Persona abilities, have taken the law into your own hands?" He hated to think that, but he resigned himself given how things have gone for him and his group.

"There's been a serial murder case in the town of Inaba, where we live," said Yosuke, arms folded. "And yes, officer, there's a reason we can't rely on the cops...it's because the killer tosses his victims inside TVs."

"...Pardon?" Tatsuya asked with a mock French accent.

"Stay with me on this: inside the TVs is a sprawling world that's filled with Shadows. Teddie over there's actually from the TV World."

The endearing-looking bear-clad boy trotted to Yosuke's side with a bright smile. "I used to live all by myself in the TV World. It was too lonely an existence for me to bear...but Sensei and the others found me, and after some consideration, I decided to follow them into the real world!"

"You live in a world full of Shadows?" Maya said, surprised. "So you were in the same situation as Zen and Rei..."

Rei smiled gently. For a moment, her shyness melted away. "I'm like Teddie...?" Her hands balled into fists. "If I'm like Teddie, then I can go into the real world and find a home with the others...!"
"You betcha, Rei-chan!" Teddie fluttered in the air with a grin. "I didn't even consider what could be beyond my world until Yosuke and the others came to it. For the past month, I've come to live on Earth, and I wish I had done it sooner!"

"Can it, Teddie!" Yosuke shouted, all too aware that Teddie had spent said month drunk on Earthly pleasures. "As I was saying, the weather in the real world affects the TV World too. When it gets foggy in Inaba, and someone's trapped inside, their own Shadow will manifest and try to kill them. People with Personas are usually the only ones allowed to travel between worlds, but ordinary people can be put in there by those with Personas...well, that's what Naoto-kun theorized."

"So the culprit is using their powers to murder others...I'm not surprised," Baofu mused. "And this Inaba...I take it that no one is aware of Personas or anything supernatural, like Kirijo's situation?"

"Not at all," Yosuke said, shaking his head.

"With a power like Persona, your killer can get away with whatever he or she is doing." He gazed off at the horizon, daunting memories returning to him. "You kids have a long road ahead of you...don't get in over your heads."

"Um...thanks?" Yosuke certainly was not expecting encouragement from the shady looking man in the yellow coat.

"Shadows..." Tatsuya mused, eyes wide. "Did you say that your own Shadows attack you in that world, Hanamura-san?"

"Er...yeah. These Shadows, they're -"

"- what you hide from others. They're the worst aspects of you that you don't want others to see..."

"...Yeah," Yosuke breathed, casting his gaze on the older boy. "Yeah, that's right! We all...I mean, when we fought our Shadows, we admitted to our weaknesses, and that's how we got our Personas..."

"Hm...you awakened to your Personas by fighting your Shadows? That's very poetic, actually...sensible too. I'm kind of like Jung's theory on Shadows in action," Jun said with an enigmatic smile. "I suppose that anyone can take on their own Shadow at different stages in life..."

"Y-you know about Shadows...?" Kanji exclaimed.

"The Shadows you speak of, yes. Not the creatures that you've fought though." Tatsuya glanced down, his voice grave. "According to Carl Jung, a famous psychologist, all humans contain a Shadow buried deep within their minds. Overcoming the Shadow, a person's hidden desires and foulest thoughts, is considered to be the first step toward a more enlightened mindset. When Jung was alive, confronting the Shadow was the first step in his psychotherapy treatments."

"And confronting the Shadow gives a person resolve...and it melds into your 'persona,' or your public face," said Naoya. "When I met Philemon and Igor, they made a mention that Jung was one of the most powerful Persona-users to have ever lived because his school of psychology unearthed many truths about both the power of Persona and the appearances of demons."

Kanji's eyes were out of their sockets. Slowly, the gears in his head turned. He wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but what he said surprised his friends: "So, this Jung dude, like, saw how all this stuff works? And he made a 'psychocology' school based on it?"

"Yep."
"And...when we fought our Shadows, it was like one epic therapy session!"

"In a way, yes."

Kanji flexed his bicep with a grin. "Therapy is awesome!"

The Mikage-cho, Sumaru, and Yasogami groups began to mutter when Junpei spoke up. "Uh, hello? You people in gray didn't tell us your story yet. Can we get that before we talk about the miracles of Carl whatshisface please?"

"Oh, right!" Naoya exclaimed, fist in hand. "Well, um, we're from the city of Mikage-cho, and one day, something terrible happened as we went to visit Sonomura-san-" He gestured to Maki, who was shying away - "in the hospital. An earthquake happened, and the next thing we knew, horrid demons attacked us. We awakened to our Personas in the hospital."

"I see..."

"Our city had been warped beyond recognition. Demons flooded the city, the hospital ceased to exist, and half of it was bathed in darkness. We soon came to discover that one Takahisa Kandori, branch president of the SEBEC corporation, was responsible for the mess we were in. It was through a massive device - the DEVA System - that he caused our city to warp. Through our journey we endured, and we fought him and won...we found ourselves here after we defeated him."

The leaders of the other groups glanced at one another. Naoya's account of the journey seemed rather...basic.

"What's the DEVA System?" asked Sakuya.

"It is a device that can take the inner machinations of a person's mind and make them reality," Kei explained. "The city had changed because of the person connected to the DEVA System. The state of Mikage-cho reflected this person's own mindset." He pushed the bridge of his glasses up, gazing downward as if he were pondering. "Our trials were like something out of a film...I'd compare it to either a thriller or a horror story."

"A film?" Yukari tilted her head.

"We have visited locales ranging from a gingerbread house to an elaborate palace run by a queen with a harem. Each place tested our will and fortitude, and we have won all of them." He fixed his glasses again.

"Okay...well, what were you doing before you got here?" asked Lisa. "And who was the person in the DEVA System that created your warped city? You said that a god didn't do it, so..."

The entire group fell silent, unwilling to answer. Naoya cast his glance at Maki, who tried to act as naturally (that is, confused and unsure) as she could.

"We haven't found out yet," Reiji, the boy with the shaggy black hair, finally said, his voice laced with affirmation. "We were going to do that, but we're stuck here now. We'll probably not know for a long time."

Naoto could tell from his forced tone that he was lying, but it was clearly a sensitive subject. She nodded her head in confirmation, convincing the others to do the same.

"Well, it's quite clear that all of our reasons for fighting are very different indeed," said Jun, "but just about all of them have a similar theme in common: all of the places we traveled to are connected to
the human mind. The creatures we fight, too, are connected to it. Maya - Amano-san theorized that this place is similar. With Zen-san's memories returning after the fall of the Queen of Hearts, it is definitely true. The painter had said that we are somewhere in the Collective Unconsciousness. In this place, what we are experiencing now is tied to Zen and Rei's minds."

Teddie turned to the handsome young man, his beady eyes and delicate mouth slanted down in sadness. "Shadows are born from humans...in the TV, when there's no fog around, they go berserk. A strong-willed Shadow calls other Shadows over, and it kills whatever human hosts it...unless the host confronts their Shadow, they're doomed..." He cast his sad face at Rei. "If there are Shadows here, then...oh, poor Rei-chan..."

Rei tilted her head, munching quietly on a dango ball. It was tough to pick up on what everyone was theorizing about. When Jun began speaking about the human mind, and where this school might have been, she completely zoned out, focusing on her food. Whatever joy she had expressed had vanished. "What is it, Teddie? I feel fine. The Shadows don't scare me."

"But the Shadows are...well, they're monsters born from people, Rei-chan!" Teddie became fired up. "I have taken it upon myself to be the protector of all womankind! As said protector, I will be your knight, Rei-chan, and protect you from the foulest of human thoughts!" He pumped his fists and cheered. "Who knows what kind of icky things those Shadows are made of? I bet Yosuke's dirty thoughts make up half of them!" So happy Teddie was that he completely ignored Yosuke throwing a large rock at his head.

Rei was unmoved. "I have Zen with me. No matter what those Shadows are made of, he'll take them out just fine." There was not an ounce of enthusiasm or life in her voice. Even her food offering was monotone: "Would you like some dango?"

Teddie sighed, his frail little heart bursting aflame. "Three strikes in one swing..."

Fuuka appeared to Teddie's side, tapping his head. The perverted bear recovered in record time to appeal to the lovely, demure young lady who now stood before him. "Um, Teddie? May I ask you something?"

"Anything, my sweet Fuuka-chan!"

"During the Dark Hour, it is possible for normal people to be consumed by Shadows. What you said interested me: that the Shadows that consume humans in your TV world tend to be attracted to their Shadows...this is something that SEES has been questioning for months."

"'Tis quite true, my dear! I have seen it for myself!" Teddie spun in place, his dimples red.

"So, going by what everyone else says, then I guess it's likely that...the Shadows we've been fighting are born from other people...it seems so surreal..." Fuuka looked down sadly, musing on the many Shadows she had seen and analyzed. "I wonder if this means that the large Shadows that we've been fighting each month...were they born from people's thoughts too? They're so cruel and can do so many things..."

"Fear not, my darling! Take to heart that you are harming no one in slaying the Shadows!" Teddie took her hand in his paw, kissing it. "But surely you must feel better in knowing that your enemies are not some wicked aliens or parasites from an unknown planet! This knowledge will surely help you in your quest!"

Fuuka smiled. "I think it will...hearing it from you makes me feel a bit better about it."
"Oh, oh-!" Teddie hopped, giddy. "I'm so happy to hear that, Fuuka-chan! May I score with you!"

"What!?"

*SMACK*

Yosuke threw an even bigger rock this time around. Teddie was out cold, his little bear nose bleeding into the dirt.

Mitsuru sighed. "To think, that all this time, the creatures that my grandfather and his fellow researchers had been studying were something so ridiculous...human thoughts, in physical form? Shadows as a fragment of the human mind...? And this place is..."

She thought back to her childhood, something that had been cruelly wasted among researchers and probes. The first time she had been to Tartarus was when she was in elementary school. One of the bodyguards had been consumed by the Shadows...and when he nearly struck her father, Penthesilea had come to her aid. It seemed too cruel to think that Penthesilea could be a Shadow in and of herself, or that someone's thoughts had literally appeared to kill another.

The proof was overwhelming, yet denial rooted itself in her mind. "It seems so foolish for something like that to be true. All of those years spent under the knife, under the eyes of those men...for human thoughts!? I don't know what to say..."

Something dark bubbled in the recesses of Mitsuru's mind.

The tension in the air settled. Naoto decided to take charge this time: "This has been quite fascinating...it seems that we have no answers on this clock tower for the time being. However, we know where we are now, we have a lead to our escape - and an escape route on top of that, albeit one that's sealed off - and we have learned a little bit about each other. Our reasons for fighting all differ, but we seem to be united in helping Zen-kun and Rei-chan." Naoto folded her arms in satisfaction. "Though we are in a fluctuating dimension in the Collective Unconsciousness, we still do not know all of the 'rules' of this world." She glanced at Kanji and Rise, her features softening. "I myself have gone through a few 'game changers'...this is proof that we must reconsider whatever we've learned up until now."

"Game changers...can you summon multiple Personas now, Shirogane-san?" Sakuya asked, tilting his head. She nodded her head.

"The game based off of the urban legend? Yes. Kanji-kun, Rise-chan, Narukami-senpai, and I played the game a day before we arrived here. The three of us awakened to our newfound powers in You in Wonderland."

"So did I..." Sakuya's eyes widened. "Aragaki-senpai, Aegis, and Koromaru, the three of us...Narukami, did somebody appear to you in a dream and tell you to play the game!?"

Yu himself was shocked. "Yes...a man named Philemon came to me...he told me about the game, and gave me a warning about something dangerous..."

The pianist came to the two of them in a whirl, his blindfold swishing about. "Master Philemon came to you, you say? But you say it as if it is a rare event...the children of Mikage-cho have been guided by him since their journey began. Master Philemon is the one who grants the power of Persona to human beings."
The Gekkoukan and Yasogami kids all quietly gasped. Before anybody could potentially riot, Margaret stepped in.

"It is true that Master Philemon is the one who bestows Personas to people...but in the year 2011 A.D, he is silent. He manifests as a specter who oversees others, never directly interfering. Igor has told me that Master Philemon prefers to leave matters in the hands of those who dwell in the Velvet Room. Of course," she stopped, pondering. "You are from 1996 A.D. instead. I was not around in the Velvet Room during that time. I take it that he directed into human affairs more frequently?"

"You can say that..." The pianist gazed downward. "We are not like you, though. Belladonna and I cannot fight, and it is nigh impossible for us to leave the Velvet Room. The music that Belladonna and I provide come from the Sea of Souls. The thoughts of the people become our music, and our music's purpose is to open the doors to the human heart...in layman's terms, the aria that you hear in the Velvet Room ad nauseum is meant to soothe the souls of Persona-users who come to it. It is comparable to the real-world phenomenon known as meditation. These are the 'services' that Belladonna and I provide...we have done these services for exactly two-hundred and forty seven years, minus about two months when considering leap years."

Margaret listened intently, genuinely surprised for a change. "So therein lies the reason for that song..."

"I have sang and he has played for that long," said Belladonna. "Neither of us can remember how or why we began serving Master Philemon. He has been our guiding hand for nearly two and a half centuries. Frankly, I struggle picturing him leaving us to our own devices."

Everyone staggered, Yosuke in particular. "Two hundred and fifty YEARS!? The fuck!? Hearing about this Phil dude is weird enough!" He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't even wanna think how long Margaret's been around..."

"Elizabeth's probably seen the dinosaurs die for all we know," said Junpei. He sighed in acceptance. Adjusting his hat, he shrugged his shoulders and slumped to the ground. "Ah, well. Somebody let me know when some matador with a big ass red Capote shows up and starts whacking everybody around here."

This new development left a somber air among everyone. Maya herself had a memory of the pianist requesting help when the Other Side still existed. "There were "rests" in his music that he had no control over...I see why he can't leave the Velvet Room..."

But now was not the time to dwell on something so sad. There were still questions that needed answering, and steam that desperately needed to be blown off. "Everyone!" She gestured at herself. "We've made great progress on finding our way home! Now, we've got some more things to clear up, but our magical adventures in Wonderland have me pretty beat. I bet y'all feel the same, right?"

The kids all glanced at one another, most nodding in agreement.

"Well then, why don't we just hold off on exploring the next labyrinth for the time being and have a little fun, huh? Let's all indulge in the culture festival!" Maya flashed her signature grin, one that won over many.

The children were ragged and worn, yet there was a surprising amount that objected to the idea. They were drowned out by those who were far more eager to indulge, however. Yukari in particular sighed, rubbing her irritated eye.

"Should we really be wasting time at the festival? We're trapped. I just want to get this over with..."
The debacle with the FOEs and the Queen of Hearts left her weary, yet with Mitsuru icier than ever and the rift between them growing, she had enough. Fuuka clenched her hands together, wanting to object.

"Yukari-chan, there are three more labyrinths that Zen-kun mentioned...we ought to pace ourselves. If we go right away, one or more of us could get seriously hurt, or..."

Before she could say the dreaded words, Rise popped up from nowhere and grasped her hands. "You're absolutely right, Fuuka-chan! There's no need to run ourselves ragged like this! Besides, the festival should be a lot more fun with all these new faces, right?" She grinned, pulling Fuuka aside. "And you're a navigator like me! We have so much to talk about."

"Ah!"

"C'mon, please? I mean it."

Fuuka's face heated up as the idol gripped her hands tighter. It was a little surreal, what with this poppy starlet-looking girl taking a shine to someone as shy as Fuuka Yamagishi. Perhaps she could make yet another friend...like Yukari, she was aware of the rift that permeated SEES. Yukari was far braver than she, however, and Fuuka did not have the will to address that rift, content with their coexisting outside of battle. Perhaps this new friendship could keep her growing feelings of hurt - hurt due to their senpai - from growing. After all, this girl was a fellow non-combatant!

"W-Well, our own school festival was cancelled...you're right, Kujikawa-san." Fuuka smiled.

"Hey now! It's Rise! You're a year above me, but...well...call me Rise-chan!"

"O-Okay!"

Already, many of the more eager participants began filing back into the school: Teddie and Junpei took the lead, taking great strides, with a childlike Ken and a curious Aigis hot on their heels. A happy Rise and Fuuka went next, with Chie and Yukiko, friends since childhood, behind them. Maya dragged a reluctant Ulala and a flustered Katsuya by their hands. Masao and Hidehiko high-fived one another as they waltzed off together, with a cheerful Yuka and a pleased Yukino following. Kanji spotted Koromaru frolicking after them and was in hot pursuit of the adorable dog, with Yosuke chasing him. Yukari gave in, needing a much-deserved break.

"Ta-chan...?" Jun whispered to his love. "Can we -would you like to...?"

Eikichi and Lisa imploringly gazed at him. To their surprise - and joy - Tatsuya said nothing, and smiled. He gestured them over and together, they ran back to the school, eager to soak in the festival and celebrate their reborn bonds.

Baofu shrugged, lighting one up with a sigh. "Geez...they're gonna get me all riled up too..." He followed Tatsuya, keeping his eye on him.

Kei Nanjo, scion of the Nanjo Corporation and affluent progeny extraordinaire, fidgeted uncomfortably. "They're like little kids, I swear...Inaba looks even more like an idiot than before..." Before he could object, Naoya gave Yu a look - an affirming look - and walked off with him! Kei sighed, resigned to remember the promise he gave to himself when he first stepped into St. Hermelin High: to "rule" over the "masses," you needed to live with them. Aspects of the Nanjo Conglomerate suffered because his father (or, in his opinion, his glorified sperm donor) in particular did not see beyond his station. Annoyingly, he could hear Yamaoka objecting to his resignations in his head:
"Oh, Young Master! Why are you ignoring your friends!? A festival is something to be cherished! A festival celebrates our country's heritage, you know! Why, in my day..."

He surrendered and followed his leader, letting out a massive sigh.

Mitsuru and Reiji Kido from Mikage-cho stayed behind; the former rubbed her eyes in annoyance, while the latter grunted and brooded. "Honestly, I told them before that we don't have time for frivolous things like this...!"

Shinjiro rumpled his hat, gazing at the others. "Yeah, but..." He was surprised at his next choice of words. "Your Persona's your 'strength of heart.' We're beat, Kirijo. You don't even have to participate in anything. The atmosphere'll keep everyone's spirits high. Don't forget, we haven't really eaten anything in a while either..."

"Eaten..." Akihiko mouthed. He shot up with a grin, dragging Shinjiro by the hand. "I saw a stand that was selling takoyaki!" The nanosecond she heard the sacred word, Elizabeth rocketed into the school, eager to steal the goods for herself! "I challenge you to an eating contest, Shinji!"

"Wha - hey!"

Reiji hissed in frustration, adjusting his gloves. "Well," he began, facing Mitsuru, "if you're planning on hiding out somewhere, I'll gladly join you." With a wave, he shambled off, seeking a hiding spot. That young man looked to have a horrid temper, but Mitsuru, uneager to participate in the festival, followed him.

Sakuya was the only one left alongside Zen and Rei; the pianist, Belladonna, Marie and Margaret went off to find Elizabeth in her octopus hunt. The blue-haired boy gazed at Rei, who was still in her odd funk from earlier. What was it about the Shadows that made her that way? It wasn't just fright; her expression was a blank slate, her green eyes having lost their sparkle. Despite his status as her defender, Zen only grasped her hand, saying little.

"Rei...the others are attending the festival. Surely you wish to go back and join them?" Zen lightly tugged on her arm. No response. Despite her severe look, his expression and tone did not change.

"Let me try..." Sakuya came to Rei's side and pulled a piece of gum from his pocket. "Rei-chan...hey, Rei-chan. Want some gum?" He waved it in front of her face. "It's meat flavored gum..."

"Wh..." Rei breathed. "M...meat...?"

"Yes...it's...pink flavored meat." Sakuya winced at the lie. "I sound like an asshat right now..."

"Pink...meat? Pink like azuki beans and nikuman?" Rei's eagerness slowly returned. The thought of the two buns - a meat-filled bun and a bun filled with a sweet bean paste - restored her vitality and sense of joy. "I love those! I can mix manju and nikuman together! I'll call it...manjunikuman!"

Given that a manju bun was usually a reddish-brown color, Sakuya nearly hurled at the thought of mixing beef with red beans. He stuck his tongue out in disgust. Rei was surprised. "C'mon Sakuya-kun! It's combining sweet and savory flavors! Every chef knows that those are the best two flavors, so it's only natural that you combine them to make them better!" She smiled, taking Sakuya away to the school. He glanced at Zen - he was expecting the boy to be up on the attack, but instead, he passively followed the two, relieved to see that Rei was back to normal.

It was normal for the traumatized to go in a trance. Given Rei's reaction to the rabbit in You in Wonderland, it was safe for Sakuya to assume that it, and the other three presumable treasures, was as tied to her memories as it was Zen's. Was her trance really fright? Something terrible had likely
happened to her. He couldn't put his finger on just what Zen's story could be, though.

Chapter End Notes

Much of the information you see involving the cast of the older games come from art books (namely Baofu passing the test to become a public prosecutor in one go). In Persona 2: Innocent Sin, if you talk to Nameless (the pianist), he will mention the amount of days he has spent in the Velvet Room; when converted, it becomes around 247 years. In Persona 1, Carl Jung, whose influence on psychology serves as the foundation of the series as a whole, is mentioned to be a Persona-user.

In Innocent Sin, Lisa, as a form of rebellion against her Japanophile parents, injected Cantonese words into her sentences. Naturally, due to the nature of Eternal Punishment, she doesn't do this. You can find a list of the words she most frequently uses on her page on the Megami Tensei wiki. Eriko Kirishima is similar in that she injects English into her sentences (noted in italics here), as she had been raised in America prior to the events of Persona 1.

Bleeeh....I'm not so sure about the part with Theodore and Kotone/FeMC...it's an add-on from the original version of the story, but I think it came out a little too wangsty. If anyone's reading out there, feel free to give a critique, since I'll probably supplant the FF(dot)net version with this in the future.
The Culture Festival (of doom)

Chapter Summary

The Culture Festival is in full swing! With the horrors of the first labyrinth behind them, the Persona-users unwind and cut loose...

...well, most of them do, what with Shinjiro's insatiable curiosity over the girl with the red eyes...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Aw, who gives a damn if these students are poltergeists!? I'm havin' a ball right here!"

Masao Inaba was drawn into the small music festival that the guitar-playing student (donning a very shoddy attempt at KISS' signature style of makeup) was hosting. The player and his band were performing a very American form of dance music: the Madison. According to Masao's intensive ten-year study/obsession of American dance and music that had been born of watching too much television at his family's dry cleaner store, they were doing a bang-up job. He had tossed aside his bulky yellow backpack and uniform top, stepping in time with the music: sliding his feet back and forth in a vertical line, clapping his hands after each shuffle. Eriko, Aigis, Eikichi, and Kanji (who had taken Koromaru hostage on account of his extreme cuteness) served as his impromptu audience.

"I assumed that Inaba-san's repetitive steps would divert my interest away within minutes, but I am quite fascinated by them," said Aigis, her eyes following Masao's footsteps at every turn. "The motions have captured my line of vision and focus quite intensely."

"Inaba-kun likes American things," said Eriko, smiling at the spectacle. "He was on a dance team back home. They practiced dances like this. I've lived in America, and I can safely say that whatever Inaba-kun and the Tailors practiced, I have seen. They did lots of hip hop, which became popular not long before I moved back to Japan."

"Hip hop, huh..." Eikichi breathed. "Not really a fan of what he likes. I'm more of a hard rock kind of guy. Punk, acid, stuff like that. That stuff's pretty popular in the west too, right? I wish we here in the Land of the Rising Sun appreciated the fine art of the electric guitar more." He smiled, taking a bite of a daifuku that he bought from the Sweets Inferno stand.

"Oh, I know exactly what you mean, Mishina-kun! I have fascination with acid jazz myself..." Eriko joyfully clapped at Inaba's buildup of quicker shuffles.

"Acid...jazz?" Eikichi gaped. "Sounds trippy."

"I would say that the music genre that is acid jazz is no less 'trippy' than your Visual Kei cosmetics, Mishina-san," Aigis commented, deadpan. "You have a particularly dark-colored eyeliner. My curiosity is piqued: will you remove your makeup for us and let us see your real face?"

Silence.

Eikichi's eyes were practically out of their sockets. He backed away from the robot at a snail's pace.
He lifted himself up, mechanically dusted off his jacket, and ran like a criminal who had just committed the deed. All the while, he blazed past the students, screaming "NEVERRRRRR" at the top his lungs. In the sanctuary of the boys' washroom, he frantically began reapplying eyeliner.

"That was...weird," Kanji commented, having merely listened until now. "All this stuff about music...I know jack shit about it." He stroked Koromaru's head tenderly.

"That is a shame," Eriko commented. "If you don't like music, what do you like, Tatsumi-kun? Please, tell me your hobbies."

Kanji twitched. The nanosecond his grasp slipped from Koromaru's head, the Shiba Inu bolted, whining like a puppy. "M-M-M-M-My hobbies!?" His eyes were out of their sockets. In the back of his little head, an image of a crocheted doll and a beautifully crafted purse popped in, practically begging him to let his mastery of the sewing needle be known. "Er...well, I..."

"You're getting quite flustered, Tatsumi-kun. What's so bad about a hobby? Oh, are you one of those people who like model kits? I see no shame in liking those." Eriko smiled, to Kanji's embarrassment.

Before he could protest again, Take-Mikazuchi came to his "rescue:" "Just tell her, dipshit!"

"Shut the fuck up, Take-Mikazuchi!" Kanji's face was redder than a beet. "Fuck, talking to you is creepy!"

"Take-Mikazuchi?" Eriko inquired. "The thunder god who slew Kagutsuchi, born from the blood of Izanagi?" Eriko's eyes sparkled. "Is he you!? Or rather, your Persona!? That's so cool!"

"Huh, so that's what Take-Mikazuchi is...wait, he's...me...?"

Kanji suddenly remembered Margaret's little talk about Personas. 

Oh...yeah, he is..."

The talk was damn hard to follow, only making sense when Margaret had the balls to remind him of his own asshole of a Shadow. To rub salt in the wound, when Take-Mikazuchi didn't sound angry, he sounded almost as flamboyant as said Shadow...

"My Persona is Nike, the Greek angel of victory! We're on opposite ends of the mythology spectrum!"

"The Greeks...I think I know about Greek stuff."

"The Grecian gods are a bunch of incest-happy pansies! All hail glorious Japan!"

"Shut up, Take-Mikazuchi!"

Out of coincidence, the grown-ups among the Persona-users – Maya, Ulala, Katsuya, and Baofu - all filed into the shooting gallery. Naoya, Yu, Maki, and Naoto followed them, opting to have an adults versus kids wager on an enormous boat of sushi and sashimi.

"Think you kids can beat us?" Ulala smirked. "We've got you beat in terms of experience and skill."
"We won't lose!" Naoya exclaimed with a gentle smile. "Nanjo-san's connections have left my friends and I well-trained!"

"But..." Yu stuttered, face flat. "But this is a carnival game...Toudou-san, why are you hauling out that...that...MAC-thingy? Why are you using a rapid-fire gun for a carnival game? You're scaring me a little."

"You don't look very scared, Narukami-kun," said Maki. "And for your information, the proper term for Naoya's gun is a 'semi-automatic.'"

Yu was at a loss for a change. "All right, all right...but if I may ask, where did you all...?"

"Connections," Naoya cut in, unwilling to answer.

"We see that..." Katsuya threw in his two cents. "But it is nigh impossible for anybody, let alone you children, to obtain firearms of that caliber. Is Nanjo-kun truly so well-connected?"

"Nanjo learned to shoot at the American Blackwater firing range!" Maki exclaimed with a smile. "Maki!" Naoya became angry, glaring at her.

Katsuya sighed, feeling worrisome. "Well, that explains it. The Nanjo Conglomerate's wealth reaches to about three-quarters of our nation's GDP...in 2000's currency rate, anyway. The Americans were right: money can buy you just about anything, lawful or not. Tatsuzou and his son are proof of that in themselves..."

Baofu heftily slapped Katsuya's back, making him yelp. "Your usual charm and cheery disposition is wrecking our little festival game, Suou," he said with an acidic tone. "Will you just get your panties out of a bunch and relax?"

Katsuya sighed, taking one of the toy pistols from the counter. "Always putting me in line, that Baofu...even now, he's completely unfettered."

Katsuya never denied that he was jealous of the older man, and very much so. If he looked better kept and a little more youthful, he'd be perfection incarnate. Strong, poised, naturally brilliant prosecutor, baseball lover, highly cultured, bilingual...if he were actually half-Taiwanese or something of the sort, he'd be the perfect romance novel hero. Who cares if his ladylove was murdered? Who cares if he's presumed dead and has no real future career? He got his dream. Hell, he got his dream because he was bored with his life.

"Dammit...even after letting it all go in front of each other, it still hurts..."

Something haunting bubbled in the back of his head...and despite its foul connotations, it really made Katsuya want to hijack the Sweets Inferno stand.

"Big Suou? It's your turn," said Ulala, nudging his arm. "Naoto-chan already hit a target." Her chosen suffix threw Naoto off, making her blush.

"Ah...sorry."

He gazed at the target: a fluffy ram figure with horns. He set up the rifle and fired, the popping noise ringing in his ear. The ram tipped over – bull's-eye.

"You know what?" He said, feeling bold. With a flourish, he opened Baofu's sleet metal suitcase, used for holding equipment, and took out what was left of the bottle of tequila he found at Ebony.
"You're right, Baofu. I've got an enormous stick up my ass. Let's throw this in the betting pool along with the sushi."

"Suou, I know you smacked your head in the labyrinth a few times, but what the fuck has gotten into you!??" Baofu exclaimed.

"I'm a cop with a stick up my ass, I said. Do you need me to say it a third time?" Katsuya gave him an odd stare, his eyes like saucers. "This isn't reality as we know it either. Little old me has no say in anything."

"Suou-san…" Maya sighed, worried.

Three-fourths of their kid competitors gawked at them. Maki, on the other hand, had a curious, eager eye on the bottle of alcohol. "Can we really bet on that, Suou-san!?" She asked eagerly.

"What's gotten into you, Maki!?" Naoya exclaimed. "That's alcohol!"

"And this cop is letting us go for it! We'll never get a chance like this until we're actually twenty, Naoya!" Maki exclaimed. "Even if you say no, I'll probably drink it anyway!"

Naoya sighed. Given what was revealed to them prior to their arrival, maybe…

"Senpai…loathe I am to admit it, this makes me feel a bit uncomfortable…" Naoto sighed, gazing away – only to gasp when she saw Yu opening the bottle and sniffing the contents inside!

"What an odd smell…it's kind of sweet, but not really." He imploringly gazed at Katsuya. "What is this?"

"It's tequila. Primarily made from the agave plant, originated in Mexico. Much sweeter compared to other forms of alcohol." Katsuya was proud of himself. "It's actually a good choice for a first-time adult drink, in my humble opinion." He looked at Yu, whose eagerness was showing behind his stoic face. "Well? You wanna try it?"

"You bet your ass."

"You gotta earn it first!"

"I'm gonna own you."

"Bring it on!"

Maya and her crew hadn't had the sheer amount of fun they were having now for a long time. Katsuya and Baofu not only competed against the kids, but against one another, glaring at each other with the intensity of a hundred volcanoes as they repeatedly picked off every line of sheep. Baofu didn't even flinch when he shot Yosuke in the head twice, making him spill three boxes of doughnuts and nearly topple out of a third-story window. All of Naoto's shots were extremely precise, but lacked the speed of the older men's. Maki, by contrast, shot many, but also wound up hitting a lot of people, including Yosuke, again.

"What did I ever do to you guys, huh!?" Yosuke cried, keeled over and covered in doughnut powder.

"Oh, I know you didn't do anything, Hanamura-kun," said Maki, coyly covering her mouth. "I truly did hit you by accident, but…"
She stared at him long and hard. Just what was it about Yosuke that made her want to...throw him out a window? More specifically, she wanted to throw him out a window with the sharpest glass money could buy. It wasn't just him either; she felt the same about Naoto, and she especially felt the same about Yu. She gazed at Naoya, and was able to sense, somehow, that he shared her sentiments.

"I can't explain why," she breathed, giving Yu in particular a hard stare, "but I feel compelled to toss you out that window."

"What!?" Yu hopped in shock.

"It's just...you seem like the guy who's gonna overshadow a lot of people, and said people's feelings are gonna get hurt. So..." She twiddled her fingers, whistling. Naoya looked away, saying nothing.

"That's your reason!?"

"Na-Narukami-kun, Sonomura-chan, please, take it easy...Ulala's about to determine the winner," said Maya, anxious. "It's the tiebreaker..."

One final shot determined it: Ulala barely missed, much to Baofu's chagrin. The kids were the winners. With a hint of reluctance (and despite him placing the wager in the first place), Katsuya took some paper cups from another stand and set them up.

"I'm going to pour a very small amount for each of you. Have any of you had any alcohol before?" He asked sternly.

"I've had a few sips of wine, but that's it," said Naoto, anxious about the booze, even if her face didn't show it. Maki and Naoya shook their heads, while Yu looked away guiltily, whistling. Katsuya opted not to question it.

"Tequila is very potent. Be careful..."

The four kids raised their cups, and with eagerness, downed the shots with ease –

"Hweh!?"

Naoya cried out at the taste of the stuff, throwing his cup down and scrambling for anything he could find to wash it out; the closest thing he could find happened to be one of Rei's bottles of suspiciously-colored ramune. The flavor in question was licorice and beetroot, and his distress doubled, climaxing in his keeling over and loudly vomiting.

"Aww, you shouldn't drink it like a shot unless you're used to it!" Ulala teased. She gingerly picked Naoya up, ignoring her desire to slap him when he vomited again, with some of the yellowish bile winding up on her shoe. Katsuya's brotherly concern surfaced again, but he was the one who proposed the contest. Something unfamiliar bubbled in his gut. He had to admit, it was kind of fun being bad like that.

"Hey, this is pretty good if you get over the burning sensation," said Maki with a smile. "What kind of drinks do you make with tequila? I want to try one!"

"Woah woah there, Sonomura," Baofu interrupted her. "Slow down, your little boyfriend's already thrown up after one sip!"

"B...Boyfriend...?"
Naoto and Yu glanced at one another, noticing the pink hue that appeared on Maki's cheeks. Perhaps they shouldn't have been too surprised. Naoto set aside her shot glass, finding the tequila unappealing, while a twitching Yu was secretly itching for even more.

Maya giggled at the sight. She insisted on joining in the festival though, and though the childish nostalgia washed over her, she couldn't help herself—Theodore had hidden stashes on top of stashes of booze in his workshop, and among many others, she stole a bottle of a spirit titled "Queen Elizabeth" from it.

Sweets Inferno was packed with gaggles of girls, Fuuka and Rise among them. The two were joined at the hip as they watched Rei take on all thirty-one flavors of ice cream that they were selling. Ever wary, Zen stood to the side, watching over the blonde-haired girl as the Leaning Tower of Thirty-One Flavors was revealed to Rei.

"Do you know all of the flavors, Rei-chan?" asked Rise, who herself decided to indulge in a slice of cheesecake.

"I know them, I know them!" Rei shouted. "The flavors are...vanilla, strawberry, mint, chocolate, banana, potato, milk, melon, seaweed, red bean, smelt, peach, beet root, anchovies, lavender, pistachio, cabbage, macaroni and cheese, cotton candy, pralines, St. John's Wort, rose hip, corn gluten meal, coffee, beer hops, cardamom, oatmeal, salt, high fructose corn syrup, caviar, and a long time favorite of mine...red dye number forty!"

Rise and Fuuka gaped. "R-Red dye number...forty...?"

"Of course! Just look at how red it is!" She pointed at the aforementioned flavor, which was second from the top. "Doesn't it look just like a ruby!? And that flavor - well, if it has any kind of flavor, I'm gonna eat it!" She gulped down the horrendous edible dye in one fell swoop, much to the navigators' shock.

Ken shuffled behind Zen, eating a plate of kuzumochi, a traditional Japanese mochi rice cake made with kuzuko starch powder. He clearly was not enjoying it, yet the horizon of puberty and manliness beckoned for him to abandon his love of anything sweet. Like many mochi, the texture was tough, and his jaw began to ache.

"Does the texture of that cake not bother you?" Zen inquired. "I saw you gaze longingly at the ice cream. Why do you not indulge in that?"

"Uh..." Ken looked at his dessert, gazing deeply at the white, textured cake as if it held all the secrets of the universe. "Ice cream's for little kids. And girls. It's too sweet for a boy like me."

"So...boys and men are not allowed to indulge in certain confections...?" Zen's eye floated to Rei, who was in the middle of an argument with Fuuka regarding why vanilla was so inferior a flavor compared to the magnificent corn gluten meal.

"Yeah, that's right. Cake and ice cream are for girls. Because...it's like, a girl is more delicate, she's allowed to like sweet things. Boys and men eat more bitter things, because...well...they're tough and manly."

"...I see."
"So...you are indulging in that magnificent kuzumochi in order to transition to that blasphemous notion that men are not allowed to enjoy sweets, Amada?"

Ken yelped. He turned around and nearly choked, gazing upon the great Kei Nanjo and his plates upon plates of sweets - specifically, Japanese festival sweets from every end of the spectrum. In his hand was a ball of macha flavored ice cream wrapped in a mochi cake. "Our beloved country has thousands upon thousands of delicious sweets, borne from tradition and labored by the greatest of bakers and cooks! They are centuries old, Amada!" He whipped out an Imagawayaki, a delicious, waffle-like biscuit with azuki bean filling. "To not indulge in at least our own country's sweets would be a grave insult!" He angrily waved the ice cream-loaded mochi in Ken's face, the poor boy weeping.

"Ah...Nanjo-san...but..."

"No buts! This is ice cream wrapped in a mochi rice cake! I demand you eat it at once!"

"O-Okay..." Ken gingerly took an azuki-flavored one and nibbled on it; it had all the sweetness he loved wrapped in a less chewy rice cake. "This is good..."

"There are many things in life that a man must make his appearances for. His preference in sweets is not one of them." Nanjo nodded his head seriously as he took a bite of a dango he had on another plate.

"W-Well...that's..." Ken sighed. He was overwhelmed by Kei's enthusiasm, but he couldn't bring himself to agree with him. It was just then that he noticed the sheer level of...Japanese-ness his desserts were.

"Gee, you really like Japanese sweets, huh Nanjo-san?" He inquired. "Why is that?"

Kei turned to him, his expression reading nothing but 'are you an idiot?' all over. To Ken's question, he responded, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world:

"...I like them because I'm Japanese?"

---

Jun suspiciously eyed the fortune teller that was propped up at the end of the first floor hall. He shook his head, taking pity on the person telling the horoscope to the poor, frightened boy at the end of the table. "Does this student know that she's using the Chinese zodiac to predict an outcome you would need the Western zodiac for? I'd say that boy's getting gypped."

"Nobody studies stuff like that as much as you do, Jun," Lisa sighed. "Most people who tell fortunes don't really study it and are in it for the money. Seriously, I did a palm reading for fun with my friends, and the lady charged me 4,000 yen for it! What a ripoff!"

"Well now, you shouldn't have left your fate in her hand, Silverman-chan! Heh heh!" Hidehiko snorted, which in turn earned him a violent smack upside the head from Yuka.

"If you make another shitty pun in the next five minutes, I'm revoking your testicle privileges, Uesugi," She hissed. He cried out and clammed up, clinging to Yukino in fear. She sighed and petted his head, giggling to herself.
Jun's frown lines emphasized themselves to extreme levels as he brutally punted the idiot fortune teller and her poor customer away, both of them landing in, and wrecking, a nearby booth. With flair, Jun pulled a massive book on the Western zodiac and a blood type personality chart. "No more ripping off the innocent! I run this establishment now! And now, your fortunes will be a hundred and ten percent correct! The art of fortune telling shall no longer be shat upon!"

Lisa, Hidehiko, Yuka, and Yukino all twitched, half-laughing and half-terrified at Jun's zeal. His horrifying expression immediately transformed to a charming little smile: "Well Lisa, would you like your fortune read? By a real fortune teller?"

She obeyed out of fear, plopping her butt down in front of him. He began digging through his book. "Now Lisa, you said that your sign was Taurus, correct?"

"H-Hai..."

"Taurus..." He ominously whispered. "Taurus, the bull...the fixed earth sign."

"Fixed?"

"There are three types of zodiac signs, and they all align with the four elements. A fixed sign associates with a person who's stable, persistent, and has a lot of depth, yet they are rigid and stubborn at the same time. I actually realized that Ta-chan, Eikichi, you and I are all born under the fixed zodiac signs. Funny, isn't it? I wonder...did fate perchance that?"

"Ehehe...sure, let's go with that."

As he spoke, the atmosphere took an oddly mystical turn...

"The earth element is associated with those most attuned to day-to-day living. They are guides for all people. They guide those associated with water, yet can be energized by those associated with fire. Those associated with air can add a sense of something more fantastical to their lives. Those aligned with the earth are driven and bold. Due to their 'earthiness,' they are also sensual, completely in tune with their environment. Be wary of this, however: earth types are the most prone to being too deep in their work or too stubborn to change.

"Stubborn...if Chinyan didn't like you the way he does, I'd have decked you by now."

Chinyan...Jun's brow twitched. As a consequence of their regaining their memories, Lisa's ability to speak the Cantonese language resurfaced with them. Chinyan - "darling" - was Lisa's little pet name for Tatsuya, and back then, her pursuit of him was relentless. No, no need for hostility. That would be in extremely poor taste, Jun thought, calming down. She knew how much they adored one another, so perhaps this was downgraded to a friendly nickname now. On the other hand, he was curious as to whether or not Eikichi would dub her "Ginko" again the way he did on the Other Side.

"Taurus is ruled over by the planet of love and fertility, Venus. It is a feminine sign, and is associated with the emerald birthstone. The season of their domain is spring. Taurus' colors are as earthy as they come - browns and greens, along with more pastel-like pinks and blues. Their polar opposite sign is...huh. It's Scorpio. You and Eikichi - "

"Could you not!?"

"Ahaha, sorry...anyway, Lisa, what kind of horoscope would you like? A reading into the future? Your career? Or maybe...your love life?"

Lisa's cheeks bloomed into a tender shade of pink. "It's cliche coming from a girl, but...can you
predict my love life, Jun?"

The rest of the peanut gallery had come in closer, awestruck at how utterly serious Jun was being. With a nod, he flipped a few pages around, spotting Taurus' love life within. He spoke:

"Three signs align perfectly with a person; naturally, three other signs are completely incompatible. There are a few wild cards for a match as well, with one usually being a match between two people of the same sign - a Taurus with a Taurus, in this case. Well, Lisa, would you like the good news or the bad news first?"

"Bad. Might as well get it over with."

"Very well...you are incompatible with...Sagittarius, the archer...a clash of the bull's need for stability and the archer's constant desire for change. I see...and...the twins, Gemini. Also completely incompatible. Your energy levels also oppose one another. The bull is steady and slow, the twins like children on a sugar binge...ha ha ha ha..."

"Jun, what are you-"

"Oh, what's this!? You're not compatible with Aquarius at all! That's so funny! That's my sign, Lisa! Ahahaha! We're complete opposites! You're all clingy and I'm a flighty schoolgirl! Muahahahaha!"

"Kehhei! Do you want me to hurt you!?"

"Kashihara-kun's scaring me, Yukino…” Yuka whimpered. Yukino could only nod in agreement, and slowly at that.

"Mmmmmm~! Heehee! Well now, well now, well now! Who should you be matched with, Miss Lisa Silverman!??" Jun sang, his voice growing more diabolical. "You, the great bull, are perfect for....goats, crabs, and fishes! Teehee!"

"Goats, crabs, and...crabs are Cancer and the fish is Pisces...what's the goat?" Hidehiko asked.

"The magnificent-sounding Capricorn is the cute little goat, Uesugi-san~!" Jun chortled. "Miss Lisa, my dear, do not look so furious at me!" He waved his hands in front of her. "With Pisces, your mutual love of romance and the arts creates harmony; with Cancer is your mutual need for comfort; with Capricorn –"

"The point is that I'm not all that compatible with Tatsuya, right?" Lisa sighed, her patience waning. "He's a Leo, right?"

Jun's evil laughter intensified, climaxing at a hum. "That's riiiiight~! Ta-chan is the magnificent lion! And he and I are com-pa-ti-ble~! His passion and fire and my sparkling mind make for an enchanting combination! My worldliness and his kindness can change this world! My airy presence and adoration shall stoke his flames for-evermore! Ahhhh-hahahahahaha~!"

Lisa could have sworn that she heard thunder rumbling behind Jun.

"Whew....teehee! Oh, Lisa, I feel so sad for you...just kidding! I have read the blood type personality charts...you're type A! Oh my, oh my! Not only are you incompatible with Ta-chan's blood type of B, but also a Scorpio is a 'wild card' match for you! Beyond your epic spats and epic fights, you and Eikichi are possibly compatible! COMPATIBLE! Totally, wholly, possibly, wonderfully COM—PA—TI—BLE~! Eyaaahahahahahahaha-"
Lisa's fist smashed Jun's left eye at rapid speed, blood oozing from it. For a girl who could only "imitate" Kung Fu, she had a brutal right hook. Her and Jun's little audience had screamed and fled, Hidehiko crying out in fear:

"Stay away from Kashihara, he's losing his miiiiind-!"

"Thaaaat's right, I've lost my mind to love~! Love, love, lovelovelovelovelove! Ta-chan is my prince~! Ahahahaha!" Jun was rolling on the floor, foaming at the mouth. "You can't run from me forever Ta-chan~! I looooove youuuuuu-"

Jun shot up in a cold sweat, shuddering from the icy water that Yukino had the brass to throw at him. Coughing fit aside, he was silent, shivering and panting. Whatever wonky love spell had been cast over him had tapered off. His brown eyes were wider than saucers, staring at the distance. He could finally feel some semblances of coherent thoughts in his mind. He looked left and right, horrified.

"…Was I always this psychotic!?"

A less noisy but no less exciting segment of the festival was the carnival games booth. Fishing for balloons were Teddie, Junpei, Yukari, and Tatsuya, and a ways off from them was a karaoke booth that the pianist and Belladonna occupied. Marie kept her distance, chomping on a doughnut and eyeing both groups, secretly desperate for poetic inspiration. The five balloon fishers were having fun, save for the pianist's atrocious singing making them dangerously close to physically ill.

"Hey, hey, I got two!" Junpei pumped his fist. A pair of blue and pink balloons dangled on a pair of sharp fishing hooks, both suspended by a small rubber band. "And they say this is hard!"

"Says you..." Yukari sighed, having caught only one. "But then again, maybe I do suck at this game. I mean, look at Suou-san."

Tatsuya had made quite a collection of balloons at his side. There were seventeen in all colors of the rainbow, and he grabbed his eighteenth and nineteenth with great dexterity. He dipped his hooks in as if it were an arcade crane and quickly pulled them out. It left Yukari and Junpei in awe, to say the least.

As Tatsuya and Teddie were self-absorbed in whatever they were doing, Yukari could finally spit out her thoughts on the third-years. It was no easy feat, dealing with the trio of eighteen-year olds who acted as though they owned the country, acted as though they had the eyes of a war veteran, acted as if their kohai were stupid, naive children, despite the fact that they were all a whopping one year younger. Very few have likely seen the things they have seen; that was truth. But Eikichi Mishina spoke another truth near the clock tower: their lives in battle were drastically different from their daily lives, from school, from clubs. Only Shinjiro seemed to know what "normalcy" was - behaviors and attitudes and outlooks outside of battle - and yet even he put a massive moat between himself and the others. He knew how to act normal, and he probably knew that there was a rift in place, yet he still opted not to breach it. Akihiko and Mitsuru, on the other hand, were completely
It was likely because Junpei understood and knew how to live normally, outside of battle, that Yukari could speak to him. He was lecherous and dim, yet normal all the same - and to her pleasant surprise, perceptive of how people felt in the heat of the moment. Unlike Sakuya, who was stoic, and Fuuka, who was shy, Junpei could speak his mind, given the right time and the right motivation.

It still didn't explain as to why she was drawn to him during their days before Tartarus, but there was no looking back now.

"Say, Junpei...remember how I said...well, you know..." She hesitated, taking a breath. "...our Senpai?"

His lopsided grin instantly transformed into a neutral expression. He faced her, opening his ears.
"You wanna talk about it?"

"...Yeah."

He nodded, listening.

"...I know that you and the others are often badgering me about how I feel about Kirijo-senpai. I know I'm terrible at letting you guys know how I feel about certain things. I still have some issues with trust..."

She gauged a reaction out of him. He said nothing, kept his ears open. Feeling braver, she kept speaking.

"As you know, I hated how Kirijo-senpai and Sanada-senpai kept us in the dark about the Dark Hour. I sort of felt contempt - " She hated that word. " - because they thought that the truth about the Kirijo Group's connection to the Dark Hour was something we didn't deserve to know - something that seemed unimportant to them. And during the summer, I told all of you that, yeah, I also didn't like that Kirijo-senpai doesn't let us help her with her burdens, right? That was true. And we did open up a little during Yakushima..." She winced. That memory was painful. "But Junpei...even after all of that, do you still get the sense that...hm, how do I say this?"

"Take your time, Yuka-tan."

"Well...I don't want to squarely blame Aragaki-senpai's return on it, but Junpei, do you get the sense that our Senpai are...well, they think they're better than us? Like, no matter what, it's futile to even try to sympathize, understand, whatever? They'll always hold us juniors in contempt?"

Junpei cranked his head, lost in thought. Sure, he seemed to brush off their treatment of them with ease, but she could tell in his eyes that he was as perturbed about the issue as she was. After a few moments - with not a sound in the air, save for the pianist's off-key singing - he spoke.

"Honestly, I do feel that way, Yuka-tan, but probably not to the level you do." He nervously rubbed the back of his neck, taking a cue from Akihiko. "They've been fighting Shadows for a long time now. I think Sanada-senpai let it slip that he and Kirijo-senpai had been fighting them for five years or something. Of course, when I probed him about it, he punched me in the face and told me it was none of my business...damn, that really hurt..."

"See!? That's an overreaction if I ever heard one!" Yukari exclaimed rather suddenly. "What's the point of having us act as a team when you don't trust all of your members? Acting like you're better than others splinters a team apart. It's not keeping us safe, like Kirijo-senpai calls it!"
Junpei somberly nodded his head. "That makes sense...makes me think of what they said back before we went to Yakushima. What was it? Uhh...something about Kirijo-senpai's childhood?"

"She mentioned that she had no choice in becoming a Persona-user...which, given how shady the Kirijo Group is, I don't doubt that. It's...it made me think about how she shuts people out to shoulder everything alone. I felt terrible, you know..." She took a breath, her eyes awash with sadness. "It's not pity. I hate pity. I don't pity her at all, Junpei. That would be absurd. No, what really made me angry was when Sanada-senpai demanded she stop talking, and the way he looked at us...it was as if he were trying to tell us, 'you don't deserve to know about us. You can't possibly understand us, and for that, you're lower than us..."

Junpei whistled. "Damn, Yuka-tan, those are fightin' words you're saying. I mean, I admire Sanada-san, but he can be an asshole sometimes." He sighed. "Still...'lower than us?' Don't you think that's an overreaction?"

"You just agreed with me on that a moment ago!" Yukari huffed. "I can't get a definite opinion out of you...maybe I shouldn't have asked you after all - "

A vice-like grip dug its way onto Yukari's shoulder, to her shock.

"Geez, you wanted my opinion, right!?" Junpei glared with a small shout. "I gave it to you! If you're just gonna give me shit for it, why even bother talking to me in the first place!?"

She was indignant. "Well you...I mean you - you're...I thought I told you...ugh!" She threw her arm off of him. "Stupei!"

"Stupei" craned his neck back, scoffing. "Nice comeback. It was insulting the first three out of a bazillion times you used it. God, do you know how much of a jerk you can be, Yuka-tan? And you're a jerk for the stupidest reasons."

"Why you - "

"That's enough!"

Tatsuya threw down a balloon, making it burst in a splash of water. Yukari and Junpei froze in place, casting their startled gazes at the glaring boy in the red jumpsuit. He faced them, scowl locked on, and crossed his arms.

"How are you going to set your problem straight if you argue like that!? You literally just said it yourself, Takeba-san: your Senpai are keeping things from you and treating you poorly. Treating your fellow juniors poorly will get you nowhere. Now stop arguing and take the time to think!"

The two of them felt compelled to obey Tatsuya Suou - he projected an aura of power that bore similarity to Yu Narukami's. He was also technically their Senpai as well; he was in his third year of high school in his time period. Eerily, he also emitted an aura that seemed to scream, "I've seen it all - " but he did not press this towards others, unlike Mitsuru and Akihiko.

"I'm going to apologize right now, because I'm butting into your business. From what I understand," Tatsuya began, firmly, "The second years and those who are younger in your group - SEES - are held in contempt by the third years. This is apparently because of the following: The third years have been fighting longer than all of you, and even I can see that all three of them have had bad childhoods. The third years think that these two big factors make them better - no, more important than you. Am I correct?"

Junpei and Yukari nodded their heads, in a very robotic fashion at that.
"Have you tried to address this with them?"

Yukari became flustered. Her index fingers circled one another, and she averted Tatsuya's gaze. "Well, yeah, sort of...I mean, we tried."

"And?"

"Um, it sort of worked, I guess?" Yukari let out a tiny gasp when Tatsuya tilted his head, silently probing her for more. "I - we tried speaking to them normally, and we began to bond a little, but now they're distant again. I'd say it's worse than before."

It would have been unthinkable for either one of them to spill out life's big problems with a stranger. But the more Yukari spoke, the more at ease she felt. Junpei felt similar. In a way, sharing aches with a stranger was cathartic.

"I see..." Tatsuya nodded his head. Whatever tenseness filled up his body subsided as his spine went slack. He focused on the duo again, this time with a smile. "Well, I have some advice for you, but before I tell you that, let me reassure you that their desire to be your Senpai won't hold a lot of water when they graduate."

"H-Huh?" Yukari shrunk back a little. "How can you say that? I, I mean, you're from a different time period, Suou-san, but where you're from, you're still a third-year in high school. You're technically our Senpai too..."

"Oh, please," Tatsuya sighed, shaking his head. "Do you think I give a damn about that?" Yukari gasped a little. "Being a third-year in high school means you're nothing more than a massive fish in a tiny pond. Being the greatest Senpai on Earth means absolutely nothing once you graduate. The working world doesn't give two shits about the notion that you were superior by virtue of being one year older than others." He nodded his head seriously. "Just ask my brother, or Maya."

"What are you saying!?” Yukari exclaimed.

"Those are also fightin' words, Suou-san," said Junpei.

"Call it what you will, but it's the truth." He clapped his hands together. "Now that we have that silly notion out of the way, let's talk about the bigger half of the issue: their fight against the Shadows."

The two second-years raptly paid attention.

"Takeba. Iori." They nearly jumped when he said their names. "I remember Kirijo mentioning this...Tartarus, this place that you venture to in order to battle Shadows."

Yukari nodded. "I was their first member to join after Aragaki-senpai left them. Tartarus is a massive tower that emerges during the Dark Hour. It vanishes when it ends. I'd known about it before joining SEES, but I never had gone inside until then."

Junpei shook his head. "I never saw the damn thing at all 'till I joined. Neither did Sakuya, apparently."

"So it's a tower..." Tatsuya pondered. "Well, answer me this: how far did your Senpai go before you joined them?"

The two juniors looked at one another. Now there was something they hadn't really thought about before, partly because it went over their heads, partly out of humility. Junpei shrugged, as he hadn't
known about Tartarus before joining SEES. Yukari instead spoke:

"Now that I think about it..." She dug around her memory. "...when Sakuya-kun, Junpei, and I went on our first Tartarus operation, Sanada-senpai mentioned that he and Kirijo-senpai had only gone into Tartarus a few times before we joined. Kirijo-senpai told me that they didn't get up very far, and mostly dealt with Shadows that escaped into the city."

"You see?" Tatsuya said rather suddenly. "They didn't get far at all before you joined them. That's gotta count for something, right? I mean, it seems as if you've all come a very long way since your adventures began. Why, I bet they didn't even consider going up more without more members, right?"

Junpei and Yukari glanced at one another knowingly. He winked at her, feeling far more at ease than before. She, too, could feel herself relax, feel waves of confidence coming her way.

"If you feel like these people are being rude to you, then you should confront them about it. Plan first, though. Rushing right in is never a good idea. Plan what you want to say to them, then do it. But don't overdo it with the planning, either. That'll only get your head in a tizzy."

Tatsuya's face suddenly became downtrodden, his voice more somber.

"Because if you don't, then you'll probably regret it for a long, long time."

"Regret..." Yukari mouthed to herself. He was right.

She and Junpei glanced at the downtrodden Tatsuya once more. He suddenly looked far older than he actually was - he looked sad. There was no other way to describe it, other than plain old sadness mixed with the same thing he hoped they would avoid: regret.

"Takeba...Iori...yeah, that's right." He sighed. "Living with regrets is the absolute worst...even if they hate you forever, telling them how you feel will do both of you good."

He suddenly up and left, walking away at a brisk pace. The air around them became somber rather suddenly. With nary another word between them, Yukari and Junpei kept fishing for balloons. The next step to their little operation would come in due time, as the air had to settle first.

Meanwhile, Marie glared at the singing pianist. Belladonna had long given up at attempting to get the pianist to sing properly. She sat in a corner of woe, too weary to stop the pianist's onslaught.

"Hm...a pianist...a song...singing, sung, song...a pianist who cannot sing..."

The inspiration was there! It was an intangible prize that was just out of reach - !

It was when the pianist hit a high D so unholy in sound that it shattered every single window on the third floor - the floor they were on - and Teddie's physical human body that he had worked so hard to create began to melt. Tatsuya and Yukari screamed in agony. Marie, on the other hand, finally found that intangible prize.

"I got it! I got it!"

An indelible grin was on Marie's face as she yanked a stationary set on her lap. She took a pen with a blue pom-pom on top and began to write:

"The Banshee Who Played The Piano"
"White as bone,
blacker than ebony,
these are the colors that the Banshee plays.

In his sung ritual,
his unholy notes
unlock a frenzied spell, ushering the rise of the Morning Star.

If you wish to slay him,
he shall bewitch you with his night-music,
an opiate birthed from darkness' maw.

Darkness...
A harbinger of death...
A tone-deaf harbinger of death...
...His singing sucks."

Mitsuru had gone out of her way to avoid the festival all together. Joining her was Reiji Kido, who, save for the occasional washroom break or getting a snack, was immobile. The latter had completely shut himself off from the others, satisfied with lazing around, while the former was getting restless.

Bounding down the hall were Hidehiko Uesugi and a few others, all of them screaming in terror over a now-psychotic Jun Kashihara. Bounding in the other direction were Maya Amano, now plastered, and her adult clique, and both groups rammed heads together. They flew backward, with Hidehiko nearly flying out the window. The two groups stared at one another for a moment of absolute silence - and then they broke out laughing, hard.

"You look like you want to join in," said Reiji, eyeing Mitsuru. "You won't offend me if you leave, you know."

"Ah!"

Reiji snorted. "Hey, don't get your panties in a bunch. You look anxious."

Mitsuru sighed, annoyed at his tone of voice. "I am a bit anxious, Kido. I keep telling everyone that we have no time for something as frivolous as this festival, yet they don't listen...where could Yamagishi have gone off to? I want to ask her about the whereabouts of the next labyrinth..."

"You talking about the girl in the turtleneck shirt?" said Reiji, crossing his arms. "Last I saw, she was with the girl with the pigtails at the sweets stand."

"Oh, for the love of..." Mitsuru's hand was on her head, and she shook it. "Even if she was
exhausted after the battle with the Queen of Hearts, we need to set out soon. We need to return home as soon as we can."

"Meh." Reiji shook his head. "We all do, ya know. We got major shit on our plates, you and me both. You're not the only one."

"You're certainly rude..."

"And you carry yourself like the goddamn Queen of Sheba," he snorted. He reamed his eyes over her, observing her appearance: despite Mitsuru's anxiety, she was perfectly rigid in the spine, her chin was tilted slightly upward, and her legs were crossed. Her arms were flat on her lap, although her hands began to tremble slightly. "Have you looked at yourself in the mirror recently? You ain't quite there, but you're damn close..."

"What do you mean?"

"You're almost the same as Nanjo. Prideful, stubborn, arrogant, and God, but you two think you're the shit because you're sodamn rich."

And while Nanjo certainly didn't have a god complex to end all god complexes, wealth and arrogance combined were a good few steps leading into it, just like a particular family member he had the displeasure of knowing and killing...

"Excuse me?" Mitsuru nearly snapped.

"You heard me." He crushed the empty bag of walnuts he had just finished in his hand and tossed them into the nearby garbage bin. "I personally don't give a damn what your little group's doing back home, but having you play god isn't going to help you at all. Nobody likes someone with a superiority complex."

He got up with a huff and went to seek out more walnuts. Before he could go, however, Mitsuru retorted:

"You looked terribly riled up when you mentioned Nanjo and our respective wealth..." Even with him laying on the insults and disrespect, she was able to keep her voice level. "All I can tell you is...you seem to have been wronged by someone - a wealthy someone - in the past. I am sure they deserve punishment, but I will not let you take it out on me. I do not have this alleged superiority complex that you claim that I have." She stood up as he tried to move again. "Besides, you seem so dead-set on avoiding your own comrades. Why would you come here if you think so little of them?"

Suddenly, before Reiji could blink, Naoya and Maki came staggering out of the boys' washroom, with the latter dragging the former by the shoulder. She propped him on the ground, letting him rest on her shoulder, for he looked sick and exhausted. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

Mitsuru did not miss Reiji's terrible glare at the duo. There was the source of his irritability, no doubt. A smile showing a shadow of bravado etched on her face.

"I guess that's what's eating at you, not the person who wronged you?"

Reiji growled slightly. He whipped his head around and spit on Mitsuru's face before stomping off to get more walnuts.

Whatever dignity Mitsuru opted to carry herself with was lost as she - and Sakuya, who had popped out of the boys' washroom himself rather unexpectedly - stared bug-eyed at him. She wiped the spit off her face, making a sound of disgust, and, to Sakuya's shock, she stomped her left heel - too quick
to see, but he heard it.

"The *nerve* of that boy...how dare he - "

Sakuya shuddered.

"*What the hell was that I felt just now...? It's kind of like*..."

He hiccuped. Mitsuru spun on her heel, readjusting herself when she found herself in Sakuya’s presence.

"Shiomi! How unexpected...er, how are you?"

"Kirijo-senpai..."

A sick sensation of satisfaction welled in him, seeing her lose her dignity like that. He cast it aside and took a breath. "I was just passing through...are you having fun?"

She shook her head. "I've been trying to find everyone. It's imperative that we rest, but we also need to get moving."

Sakuya looked down. "...Yeah, it is..."

"Say, Shiomi, I have a question..."

He looked up at her, inaudibly gulping.

She pushed some hair behind her ear, straightening herself. "Aragaki and Aigis...they summoned different Personas when we fought the queen in the labyrinth. I questioned Aragaki about it, and he told me that you had the answer as to why they could summon more." She smiled confidently at him. "I know you're trying to relax, but if you have a moment, I'd like you to tell me why those two can summon more."

Sakuya sighed - this was going to come eventually. He pulled up the chair Reiji had originally occupied and gestured her to sit. He put his hands beneath his chin, taking on a neutral expression. He was actually rather afraid of what her reaction would be...

"Do you remember when I asked all of you to play that game with me - the Persona game?"

Mitsuru faced him and nodded her head, clearly on guard. "I do. And I had my suspicions about it..." Her cheeks dotted with embarrassment. "I feel terribly silly now that I realize that the term 'persona' dates back to the early 20th century. That man in the yellow coat was right to say that when I assumed that SEES were the first Persona-users, I was clearly being extremely short-sighted."

"Yeah..." Sakuya tentatively nodded his head, warily arranging words in his head. "The night before we came here, when I was still sick, a golden butterfly visited my room."

"Oh my..." Mitsuru covered her mouth. Before Sakuya could retort, she replied, "Don't worry, Shiomi. I'm listening."

"When I fell asleep that night, I had this dream. I dreamt...that I was in this shrine, which was adrift in the middle of nowhere, kind of like outer space. In the shrine, I was greeted by the butterfly. He transformed into a man wearing a white suit and a mask...his name was...Philemon."

"Philemon...?"
"Philemon spoke to me...he actually told me a warning. In fact, I'd say that he probably predicted that we'd come here."

"How so?"

"He told me that there would be two great battles that we'd have to face, and in order to better prepare for them, he requested that I have you and the others play the Persona game. By playing the game, you could all visit him. He'd then bestow the ability to don multiple Personas to all of you..."

Mitsuru tilted her head as she absorbed all of that information. What she did not know was what Sakuya had willingly left out - that Philemon had told him that everyone else in SEES had but one Persona due to how stagnant they were. He wasn't quite ready to admit that wee detail to them.

"Is that all?"

Sakuya nodded his head, bracing himself for her response.

Mitsuru was lost in thought, her eyes half-lidded. "So he had a dream...given what Suou and Toudou said about Shadows, this should be taken with a grain of salt. The power of Persona is peculiar and vast, after all...and I was foolish to think that it wasn't rooted in the mind."

After all, why would those scientists take such a potent interest in her blossoming mind when she was a child? Why did she not see it sooner?

"So you predicted that we'd go on this journey in a dream...I take it that you were going to tell us about it, but the Persona game left you and the other three in a state of shock."

Sakuya nodded his head once more.

"Did you see this...Philemon again, after you played the game?"

Sakuya closed his eyes. He could see Philemon in his line of vision, floating over him mysteriously. He remembered Philemon's words, as tender and full of gentleness like before:

"Sakuya Shiomi...I congratulate you, and the three others that have willingly chosen to play the Persona game with you. As you are aware, the power of Persona has already been bestowed upon you. I have no doubt that you will keep seeking out the many 'selves' that are embedded deep within your soul. I cannot help you further at this point. It will be up to you, yourself, to see how deep your potential runs. It is the same with your friends. However, I shall tell of you something that might help you on your journey..."

"And what did he say then...?"

"It is not just you, yourself, that claims our identity, and by extension, your masks. A human's mask can be forged from many things. A mask can be forged from...a dream. A memory. A precious object. Interaction with others. These are but a small pool of examples. If you have been visiting my servants in the Velvet Room, you must be aware of the objects that have allowed you to forge new masks that you can don in battle. We call these objects 'totems.' These totems contain a power that my servants can tap when they assist in creating new Personas for you. You and your friends may encounter these totems on your upcoming journey...who knows what kinds of masks you can create with them? That alone is also up to you."

"...He then bid me farewell. As he left, he told me that we'd be going to a place that was 'trapped between time and space...'"
Mitsuru was taken aback with all of that information. Her burgundy eyes were, for once, wide like a child's. It was mysticism clashing with her more rational mindset. She closed her eyes once more, reaming her thoughts...

"She's been taking it better than I thought...and I hope it's not just because it came from me instead of Aragaki-senpai or Aigis..."

"...This is a lot to take in, Shiomi."

"It is. I felt the same way when he spoke to me the first time." Sakuya tilted his head, his expression softening in order to plead. "Senpai, I won't force you to play the game if you don't want to. All that I ask is that you simply believe in what I said, and not just because it came from me." He put in an effort to smile at her. "This whole diatribe is the answer as to why Aragaki-senpai, Aigis, and Koromaru can summon more Personas. It is because of Philemon, and because of the game...it really is a lot to handle, I know."

Mitsuru sighed. It was one hell of an answer, and a very thorough one at that.

"Maybe I was mistaken to blow you off that day...but I need to think about this for a bit."

Sakuya's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I...I am curious about this game. I feel tempted to play it...what with all of these talks of Shadows and masks, and how it's all connected to the human mind..."

She stared off into space, her face unreadable. Was learning of the origins of Persona too much for her, perhaps? Sakuya couldn't tell.

"Ah...well, I'll spread the word about the game. The others have seen - "

"Shiomi, Mitsuru interjected, "Please, do not trouble yourself. I think that if we're going to play this game, the rest of us ought to do it together. Don't you agree?"

"...I do."

"I can't speak for the others. I am sure they'd be happy to play, but...I do not feel comfortable playing the game right now. If it isn't too much trouble, then could you perhaps refrain from telling the others about it for a little while?"

Super Senpai cometh. The big difference was that she emerged with a whimper. It was plain to see that she was afraid of something.

"Probably afraid of what Philemon might say to her...there's a lot of soul-searching involved when it comes to gaining new Personas..." Sakuya nodded to himself. "She genuinely looks uncomfortable...yeah, I'll tell the others, but I won't force her to play, either. I'd imagine she'd be fighting a lot of inner demons in Philemon's realm..."

"I will refrain from telling the others," Sakuya lied. "I'll keep my word. In any case, thank you for hearing me out, Senpai."

"It is my pleasure, Shiomi." She smiled, but it looked rather sad. With a brush of her skirt, Mitsuru got up. "Perhaps I really should rest a little while longer. Please inform me when you and the other group leaders wish to prepare for the next labyrinth, wherever it may be."

She crossed her arms and looked down as she walked off, no longer a woman of confidence, but of
insecurity. S akuya looked at his feet. He, too, felt the weight of Philemon's words echoing in his mind.

"Masks...our true selves...Shadows and demons..."

His heart pounded painfully. He shook his head as the memory of his parents, blood-soaked and at death's door, violated his mind...

Elizabeth had made a mess of the takoyaki stand, and Akihiko eagerly followed her lead when she left.

The fried goods were strewn about haphazardly all over the table. An eager Chie Satonaka seemed to be following Akihiko's lead and tried to keep up with him, all while appearing somewhat more ladylike in her scarfing. Akihiko had badgered Shinjiro into a takoyaki eating contest, but the latter's heart wasn't into it. Loathe he was to admit it, he hated losing as much as Akihiko did, but something else - the girl - had been nagging him. He didn't even look at his friend, gazing off to the side and quietly chewing on a ball.

"Mmph! Dish ish gud, Shinji - " Akihiko snarfed between bites, his mouth open. "Isn't it?" Shinjiro didn't pay attention, instead focusing on the long-missing Theodore. The latter had finally reappeared, finding that he had been in the nurse's office judging by the bandages. Was he taking care of the red-eyed girl...?

"What's wrong, Shinji?" Akihiko sneered, finally swallowing. "Throwing in the towel already?" He was smirking at his little victory, only to frown when he realized that Shinjiro wasn't paying any attention to him.

"Hey, Shinji! We're competing here! What the hell!?"

"...Sorry, did you say something?"

"Ugh!" Like a child throwing a tantrum, Akihiko slammed his half-chewed takoyaki on the table. "Be serious, Shinji! We're determining who can eat more!"

"Compete against yourself, you idiot." With a resigned sigh, he walked away to the nurse's office, his curiosity taking the better of him. Akihiko hissed, stuffing his mouth with even more rigor than before.

"He thinks he's so much better than us now that he can summon more Personas...he knows that I'm the better man..."

Chie nervously slid away from the overly passionate third-year in the red sweater vest, opting to slow down. Her stomach was beginning to protest anyway. "Gee, he's the real scary one..."

Akihiko fidgeted for a moment when he spotted Chie, his eyes widening in realization. "Hey you!"

"M-Me...?"

"Yeah, you! Get over here and eat with me!" He grabbed Chie's left hand and swung her to the other side of the table, plopping her down. The motion nearly made her vomit.
"B-But Sanada-san, I'm not feeling well..."

"A true man overcomes stomach pains by sheer force of will! Now prove your manliness to me!"
He began scarfing down, glaring at her.

"But I'm not a -"

"PROVE IT!"

Chie whimpered. She reluctantly began to eat again, with Akihiko badgering her still about the importance of manliness. Despite the torrid implications of the whole scenario, Yukiko, who was off to the side getting a drink, fell into a laughing fit.

Outside the Nurse's Office

Shinjiro made strides toward Theodore, who was clearly nervous. The latter set the bandages aside and attempted to make for one of the food stands when Shinjiro appeared in front of him. Theodore yelped.

"Theodore?" Shinjiro stood tall for once, his spine perfectly aligned. "Where've you been? Your sisters have been looking for you."

Though he was still stricken from his talk with the red-eyed girl, he couldn't falter here and give in to his sisters' whims. He had a promise to keep. "The girl you rescued is recovering in the nurse's office. She requested that neither you nor Akihiko-sama visit her." He folded his arms, bravado budding. "If you are on your way there, I request that you avoid the back room."

Shinjiro's eyebrow rose. "She doesn't want to see us? Why not?"

"It is for her own personal reasons. She wishes not to see you. I suggest that you adhere to this and be on your way." Theodore sharply turned away and strutted off.

He was promptly distracted by Maya and the other adults partaking in his whiskey of choice for drowning in his sorrows when his sisters tormented him. He shouted with the ferocity of a soldier and went after Maya's shit-faced posse. Shinjiro actually found it likely that they, and maybe a few others, were drunk. Where the hell they got the alcohol from, he couldn't figure out, and he wanted nothing to do with it. Deftly, he scurried into the nurse's office.

It was larger than he remembered. The overwhelming amounts of tacky Jack Frost décor somehow made it look even bigger, likely because most of it was on the wall. A slew of beds were lined up, with two gurneys at the end of one hall. Near the entrance were a logbook and a desk, flanked by an anatomical skeleton.

"Was it even this big when we came in the first time?" Shinjiro was stumped. Was this Elizabeth's doing? Or perhaps it was his doing, and everyone else's...?

He tried to look where the two gurneys were. Lo and behold, at the very end of it was a pink door. If Theodore wanted to keep this girl hidden away so much, he should have had the notion of locking
the room she was in. He slowly twisted the knob and peeked inside.

This room was far more private and comfy. The décor was less tacky; the bed larger and plusher, and there was even a small, wood-varnished washroom with a toilet and a bathtub. The bed was empty, the sheets all rumpled – Shinjiro's answer lied in the running shower, with steam slowly building up in the room…

"Ah, dammit –"

The shower knob creaked. Cliché as it was, Shinjiro was too compelled to shut the door as the object of Theodore's protection appeared from behind the steam…

"Ack!"

He slid behind the door, keeping it cracked. His face grew hot. He kept his hand over his mouth, worried that his breathing might alert her. He could see her in full now, her body all wrapped in a white towel. With all of the blood gone, he could see her snow-white skin more clearly, along with all of the terrible, snaking scars that it bore initially. The legs and arms were much more toned than he remembered, yet there was still a sense of delicacy to her body, which in itself was emphasized by a pair of plump, round breasts.

"Ah…"

His face couldn't be any redder. Now that he could finally see her face, now devoid of injuries, he felt something softly burning inside of him. Her face was a nice little oval, with a pert nose and a pair of pink lips. Her auburn hair was all soaked, tied up high above her neck. He couldn't help but stare at her craned neck, either due to its shape or because of the particularly jagged scar that circled it. How could somebody survive an injury to the neck like that…?

Those damn eyes were what made his heart skip a beat.

They were abnormally red, like a ruby. They were enticing in how vivid they were. They were beautiful to behold, yet very, very sad. Even as she sat on the bed and undid her hair to wring out the excess water, he kept his gaze on them. How long had she been here? The sadness in her eyes was potent. Just what could have happened to her before she arrived here…?

*b-bmp…*

"Guh!?"

Shinjiro clutched his head. No, this wasn't him sensing the Persona she had – he could feel that too, but it felt mild compared to this – this was like Castor trying to wring his neck. It went beyond nauseating, beyond his head wildly pounding like a stampede. His vision went red and blurry, with disjointed images contorting in the mist.

"What is this!??"

In the red mist of memories, he could make out a rooftop. On the rooftop, he could see a beautiful blue sky. In his line of vision was a girl –

"No…that can't…I've never –"

He plopped onto the floor, gasping and huffing. He felt as though his brains would implode and leak out of his ears, the pain was so severe. His tumble startled the girl. She cast her glance at him…
"Ah...hahahah..."

A creepy laughter poured out of her mouth. She clutched to her towel as if it were a lifeline, shaking and shaking like a terrified animal. As if Shinjiro's pain weren't severe enough, seeing her smile at him with bugging eyes and visibly panicking made him want to vomit. Every ragged scar on her body seemed to pulse, every breath hitched and deranged. She, too, joined him on the floor. She, too, teared up.

"Theo...you had one job, Theo...one job...one...and you didn't fucking do it!" She punched the ground, hard. "Hahhh..."

Shinjiro was able to clear his head enough to coherently speak. He was still in a state of shock, taken aback at her laughter. "You...are you...you're not...well..."

The girl growled.

"I told Theo to keep you and your idiot friend away from me!" She shouted, pants becoming faster. "Why did you come here!? You shouldn't be in here!"

"Ah...listen, I just wanted to - "

She bent over, clutching her head. Yeah, she said that she'd get back to facing her memories, but she really didn't feel like seeing the people associated with them. She especially didn't want to see those particular two -

The atmosphere began to shift.

"Get out...!"

Shinjiro shook his head. The red filter in his brain was gone, but now he was panicking too. "If, if it's 'cuz you got out of the shower, I - "

"That's not the reason!" She screamed. "I want you gone! Don't come see me! I'm not...ready..."

"I, I..." Shinjiro was at a loss, slack-jawed. "I want to...I mean..."

"Get out!"

"But - "

"GET OOOTTT!"

*fwwwwssssshhh*

The boy and the girl both shot their heads around them as the atmosphere grew dull and heavy. Dread reigned supreme in this new atmosphere - instead of the soft pinks and pleasing whites that
permeated the room, a dusty brown filter flickered around them, like a dirt-heavy smog. Specks of dirt flickered up from the ground like upturned soil. Before either could blink, a peculiar pulsing sensation beat and twitched from the ground below them.

"The hell!?"

Without a second thought, Shinjiro jumped beside the girl, his body braced for a fight. The girl, on the other hand, trembled and whimpered - the perfect little image of a hapless damsel in distress. The pulsating of the ground matched the rhythm of her heartbeats, speeding up and echoing louder and louder.

*schloorp*

The pulse bubbled and slurped, like some kind of ooze. Over it, a small tornado of dust swirled around it violently, blowing dirt every which way. It bubbled and bubbled -

*pnnggg*g

A bright, starlit light shot through all corners of the room, blinding the two people who gazed right at it. The vortex wreathed itself with red lightning and dark matter, going from a small puddle in the floor to a large, rapidly-spinning miniature black hole. Shinjiro gasped when a paper-white hand - a hand that stretched at least a meter in length - shot up from the vortex.

"The fuck is that!?

The arm wavered and twitched, letting out a slimy sound as it slunk onto the floor. A second, equally as repulsive arm shot like an arrow along with it. The nails on the creatures' hands dug and dug into the tile as a gloppy sound rang out. From the vortex came a great, puffy mane of twig-like sandy hair, which sat on the head of the creature: a vaguely female-looking beast with legs and breasts as paper-colored as her arms. Red, leather-like tendrils wrapped around her torso and her face, with nought but a pair of egg-colored eyes exposed for all to see. The creature set her leg out and hauled her body up with her arms, sitting above the now-shrunken portal. The only thing that could be heard from her were a few raspy, phlegm-heavy breaths. Slowly, she took in her brown-hued surroundings, seemingly satisfied with them. The girl, meanwhile, was haplessly plopped on the ground in fright.

A haggard laugh came from the creature. To Shinjiro, she sounded as if she had smoked her entire life.

"Well now, well now, well now! What a lovely little place this is!" The creature's raspy voice, oddly, was light and cheerful. "It's awfully warm and snug. It's wonderful for idling time away. Why, it's like the shade of a tree beneath the sunlight: a perfect little place..." she stretched her long arms upward and yawned. "...For a nap..."

Shinjiro's guard had dropped for a mere instant as the creature set its massive arm span above her head, permanently fixing themselves bent up above her. "...What the..."
The creature turned her gaze on the two humans in front of her, her eyes turning upward: a facsimile of a smile. "And isn't this an unexpected treat! I've found two little human piglets I can sleep my day away with! If there's something you two need to do, then forget about it. There's no point in toiling away at a goal if you die a few years later anyway. No need to exert yourselves now." The creature then frowned, turning a hardened gaze to the girl.

"It's especially pointless to keep working and working if you're a piece of garbage sinner. I think you know who I'm referring to, little girl."

The girl gritted her teeth and turned away in shame, audibly pushing back a sob.

"It's very, very funny, you know," huffed the creature, cackling. "I mean, back then, you slayed the Avatar of Death herself. You slayed a creature that hid itself in the moon for eons. Eons! And you just damn near did it all by yourself, and yet here you are, all yellow-bellied and crying and begging for that limp-dick elevator attendant to protect you!" The creature's glare became harsher. "Really, was my master Vizaresh actually too powerful for you to defeat? Or...are you so terribly cowardly insofar that you wanted to cry and scream when your memories and sins bore themselves plain? I mean, Vizaresh cracked open your skull and gutted you like a fish! Hah! For a girl who killed Death, that's damn pathetic!"

The creature inched closer by awkwardly picking up her feet with her knees bent, blocking out an objecting Shinjiro with one of her massive hands. Her countenance leveled itself with the girl, and she could feel the creature's foul breath from beneath the red tendrils on her face. "You poor baby, trembling like a little foal...yes, I can tell. You grew lazy and unwilling to do what the father of the Collective Unconsciousness wanted you to do, and that's why Vizaresh turned you into mincemeat. I mean, he even stole back the Trapezohedron of Wrath, for fuck's sake, and the shithead right next to you nearly defeated him himself!"

"Shithead!?" Shinjiro objected. He was muffled by the creature's hand clamping over his mouth. The acrid stench of it made him ill.

"Now, love, I am she who rules over sloth. I get my kicks out of shoving high-and-mighty assholes off their high horses and keeping them from praying for salvation. But damn, even I can't stand the sight of a stupid little bitch like you." The creature gripped the girl's neck with her free hand. "I mean, look at you, looking so longingly at the shithead in my other hand...don't deny it. You're longing for him, and his brainless beauty of a best friend...and in more ways than one."

The girl's face burst aflame with embarrassment.

"You know, love, I was considering giving you another chance to face the Fiend of Magicians, but..." The creature shook her head. "...Hm-hm-hmm, nope, I don't really think I want to give you that chance now." She released her grip on the girl's neck, who in turn, coughed and sputtered. "Humans are lazy, yellow-bellied creatures...why don't you just join me and...take it easy? You've been doing it splendidly already. I love a good, long nap."

The creature smiled again, and wickedly. Her head twitched as she giggled. The girl in turn slumped, looking defeated.

"See? You've given up. This space is gonna eventually disappear anyway, so why bother? Come, fall asleep with me...I mean, you're a perverted little bitch. Not much else you deserve rea-"

*glch*

"- What!?"
The creature was taken aback when she felt pain - the pain of Shinjiro gripping her wrist like a vice, nails digging into her white flesh. With Castor's might aiding, him, his nails dug into her to the point that pinpricks of blood were drawn.

"How can that be...!?" The creature yelped when he dug harder, forcing herself to let go of his face. Her arm recoiled backward, floating well above her head. "A mere human...no..." She glared at him, sensing that it was Castor granting him power. "...A human with a goddamn Persona. Go figure."

"Go figure' indeed," Shinjiro huffed, glaring at the creature. "You're the second demon that keeps running its mouth...just who in the fuck are you?"

The creature howled, frantically waving her arms around as she did. Her wicked glare settled for Shinjiro this time.

"Who the 'fuck' am I? Aren't you just charming..." She kept glaring, but smiled at him this time - an unsettling one, at that. "I am a daeva of sloth and laziness: Bushyasta. I bring sleep back to the righteous."

"Sleep?"

"I am laziness and idleness, given form," she sighed dramatically, her arms twitching as she did. "I prevent enlightenment for those who work for it..." She shrugged. "...But then again, there are many demons who cover what I cover, so I'm kinda like hired help these days...ugh...

A bead of sweat rolled down Shinjiro's face. "What."

"Nevertheless, little boy, I think you're smart enough to see why I've come for the little bitch cowering next to you. My master kinda shares my sentiments too, and, well, you've met my master, the Fiend Vizaresh...well? What say you? Can you really conceive this stupid girl going back to fight him and reclaim the Trapezohedron of Wrath? I say nay. I say let her sleep 'til this place vanishes forever."

The boy's hand whipped outward, sending away the blood on his fingers. "I say fuck everything you just said. I...I've started going down this new...path..." He looked down slightly, reflecting on all that had happened. "...And I can't stop following it now. I won't stop. And as for this girl..."

His other hand reached for her shoulder - much to her embarrassment and relief.

"...I can tell she's been through hell and a half. I can't exactly judge her just because you expect me to. She looks pretty torn...and I've got a lot of shit to ask her. And I'm not letting you get in my way."

Bushyasta blinked, as if all logic had escaped from her.

All logic and thought and everything else blazed away from the girl as well. Being protected by this stranger was why.

"I don't care who you are. Whatever you have planned, I ain't letting you do it!"

Another blink. Without warning, Bushyasta cackled, trembling all the while, and the cackle soon devolved into a maniacal laugh.

"Hahahahaha! Oh, good grief!" She wiped a tear off of her face with one of her bony fingers, curling her arm as she did so. "Men are sooo stupid. You're thinking with your little head! Hahaha!"
"Wh-Wh-What!?" Shinjiro's face burned like a steamed tomato.

"Oh, don't act all flustered with me! I've seen it all, turd. It's so funny, seeing that men considered themselves paragons of chastity...and now, the opposite's totally the case. Just ask the Greeks."

"I'm being serious!" Shinjiro took a battle stance. At that second, Bushyasta's hands were in front of his face, waving in front of it in a panic.

"Now now, take it easy, turd." She steadily moved her hands back, calming herself before speaking again. "I can't say the same for bitch-face next to you, but...you got spunk. I like spunk. And given that I'm terribly lazy and prefer putting spunky people out of commission, consider yourself lucky."

"Oh, fuck you..." Shinjiro sighed with irritation.

"Hey now, hey!" Bushyasta's hand was at the girl's side once again, this time, leveling off at her neck. "I'm gonna actually barter with you. I said I liked you, yeah? Now barter with me before I actually do put this bitch to bed."

Shinjiro's spine slackened, frustrated. Satisfied, Bushyasta's hand recoiled and she calmed herself.

"Bitch, turdie, listen to me well." The girl sighed at her "bitch" title, while Shinjiro was still bewildered at the demon's not-so-endearing variation of "turd." "I think I'm going to propose a little challenge for the two of you...even with all that you had done, little bitch, you had not encountered a single demon prior to your arrival here."

"...That's true." It was the first thing the girl said since Bushyasta's arrival.

"Well, that's certainly changed now, hasn't it? You've become a decent little negotiator, despite having never dealt with demonkin before." Bushyasta grinned, forcing the binds on her mouth to stretch out. "Hence, the challenge."

"You want me to negotiate with a demon...?" The girl said softly.

"I want you, little bitch, to negotiate with none other than little old me."

Shinjiro couldn't help but gasp. The girl's face actually steeled, on the other hand.

"I am she who diverts those off of the path of righteousness, right into Vizaresh's hands. It doesn't take much for the sinful to go to him. Not an ounce of resistance is given when I appear." Bushyasta chuckled. "What I want you to do, little bitch, is not so much negotiate with me as I want you to...try and scare me off."

"Scare you off?"

"Yep! Scare me off. You get three shots at it. If you fail after the third attempt..." she said as she gestured her hands around, "...I'll put you to sleep, I'll probably kill the other kids who're here, and this place goes poof!" She snapped her fingers.

Shinjiro grimaced. "Something tells me you're not gonna play fair at all...why should we trust you to keep your word?"

Bushyasta tilted her head, feigning innocence. "Need I say it again? I said that I liked you, you turd. I swear that I'll play fair, okay? And I can prove it to you..."

Her lengthy arms, squelching and twitching every so often, reached far, far outward, grasping
something on Elizabeth's desk. Within a second her arms snapped back with a loud crack, presenting the logbook to Shinjiro and the girl.

"This was left behind by that bitch in the pink and white dress..." She scowled as she mentioned Elizabeth. "The bitch in question's probably the second biggest bitch in the entire universe after that damnable fairy...but I digress. This is a logbook. It would appear that the blondie bitch's planning to use it as some kind of record for holding requests. I guess she wanted to spring a surprise on all of you with this, but two requests have already been written down in here. I shall add a third, and it will be my little challenge..."

She did just that. Swiping a pen off of the counter, she wrote down her request, her arms making peculiar squelching noises as she did. She presented the book to Shinjiro and the girl, with Shinjiro in particular gawking at what was written:

1. "Let's Learn Demon Negotitation!" - Naoya Tudou
2. "Help With the Trading Showdown" - Zen
3. "Can You Frighten A Demon?" - Bushyasta the Long-Handed

"Oh my God, you can't be serious right now..." He gasped.

"I am, turdie. And if you don't believe me, I'll stay right here, on this very bed, and not budge until you and bitch-face think you're ready. It looks like one of your new buddies wants to teach you how to negotiate with demons, so why not take up his offer? It will probably help you on your quest."

Shinjiro kept on gawking. "Seriously, why are you -"

"Let's do as she says."

The girl's hand was on Shinjiro's arm, much to his surprise. "If this is how she wants to do it, then so be it." She shook her head. "Besides, she meant it when she said that this entire school will vanish eventually...and I wouldn't be surprised if she tried hurting your friends either."

She was still afraid, but a little bit more resolute. "I accept your challenge."

Nodding in satisfaction, Bushyasta took her unnaturally long arms and managed to get Elizabeth's logbook all the way back to its original resting place. "You actually sounded kinda brave there. I no longer see you as a...total bitch. I still loathe you, dear, but if you are that determined, then you and your friend better scare the ever-loving shit out of me."

Her eyes glimmered with a mischievous, wicked grin...

"...I think that you two ought to get to work...so I'm terribly sorry to say, bitch, that you can't hide in here anymore..."

Bushyasta cranked her neck with an unnatural-sounding crack, reached for the girl's bed, and took up a fetal position on it. With one final chuckle, she yawned and fell asleep.

The only thing that could come out of Shinjiro's mouth were gasps and chokes of shock.

"She's sleeping there. Here. Now. She's just...uh, wow. I'm speechless."
The girl turned her head away, her bravado gone now that Bushyasta had fallen silent. Being in his presence was still too much to take in.

"I mean...seriously, what the hell just happened? It's still so hard to take in..."

She said nothing, other than letting out a small sigh in relief when most of the atmosphere returned to normal; the brown murk had vanished and the portal reduced to a tiny fraction of its original size. Only the dust clouds remained, and they mostly surrounded the demon that was now sleeping on the bed...

"She's fucking sleeping there...I, I don't even...wow, I...are you seeing this shit? I, I - "

"Hee hee..."

Shinjiro spun around to see that the girl, the target of all of the demon's insults, was shyly giggling at his perplexed reaction. She clutched her towel as she delicately covered her mouth, trembling slightly. He could see the ghost of a smile on her face.

"Hah...you're laughing..." He, too, found himself gently smiling at her. "You look nice when you laugh."

She found herself staring at him when he spoke. And so did he.

Nowhere to hide now. Her smile had vanished and left shyness and sadness in its wake. Shinjiro, meanwhile, blushed, terribly embarrassed at his prior statement.

"Why the hell did I say that!?"

Nope, there was definitely nowhere to hide now. She was wearing nothing but a towel and a sad expression on her face, her eyes glimmering and gazing right at him. He gulped.

All that he could hear was the steady pounding of his heart. All that he could feel was his heavy pea coat, which for some reason had grown unbearably hot. All that he could see...was her.

Her, who seemed to permeate his mind.

"All I see is..."

The girl was rueful. The smile that had come upon her face was equally as rueful as that story that Bushyasta had told them. At that mere moment, all he could see were her slow-moving footsteps. All he could see were her hands moving ever-so-slowly off of her towel. All he could see were her glimmering red eyes, which bore themselves right into his as he found her touching his face, curiosity as potent as a kitten's.

"Why are you touching me? Why? Please, dear God, stop touching me..."

All that he could see were the scars upon scars that were permanently etched onto her body. All that he could see was the swell of her breasts, both now poking out at the top, begging to be released. All he could see was that expression of hers, and no, it wasn't quite so rueful anymore.

His heart was steadier than a drum. His breath hitched as her hands glided down his face and descended like a floating feather onto his chest, where she curiously felt his chest rise and fall, heavy with labored breathing.

"You're huffing like a chimney stack..."
He choked.

"What I mean is...you sound unwell."

"His skin's all clammy and he's breathing heavily...his posture is poorer than even I can remember..." The girl thought sadly to herself. Even his eyes were shrouded, still guarded despite his endearingly flustered state. "He really is different..."

Definitely not the man she fell in love with, a man she adored and treasured so.

"But his face, his voice, his appearance, they're all the same as his..."

She didn't even realize that her hands were gliding even lower, and Shinjiro's face burst like fire. He furiously grabbed her wrists and jerked her forward.

"Where the hell do you think you're touching!?"

"Huh...?"

Now she was physically leaning on him, still covered in a shroud of ruefulness - yet a glimmer of life, a speck of cheekiness in her eyes, glistened. He made his little conundrum worse. Go figure.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit,...! Fuck! Shit! Fuck..."

This was nothing like the visceral feeling of coughing and sputtering until he was out of breath. This sensation of having a near-naked girl in his arms was more hellish on his nerves than any of those terrible coughing spells, or getting ravaged by Shadows, or getting bloodied and bruised until he passed out. This feeling was so overwhelming and raw that he couldn't find it in him to push her away. He took in her presence and basked in it. Against all logic, he found himself a little high on her scent. This girl, a girl who had been broken and torn apart, spat on by demonkind and a menace to this little island in the Collective Unconsciousness, had put Shinjiro under a delusion-riddled spell.

Her arms reached around him. It was a tense and terribly awkward embrace, not much more than an indulgence in something that had vanished so long ago. The man she loved had the sensuality and sensibilities of a conservative sixty-year old man, and so was the man she was embracing now.

"I don't care. He can hate me forever and leave me when this is all over...I don't give a shit right now...!"

"I'm sorry..." She managed to choke out as she shivered with a sob. "I, I'm sorry...I'm..."

If he let go of her now, he would likely regret it later. Besides, a god of love and compassion resided within him now, and he was bound to this new, dangerous path...

He let his gentler side speak indulge her selfishness, without words, and embraced her back. With one last inhale, he let his head fall between the crook of her shoulder, closing his eyes as he charged forward into unknown territory.

"I don't even know your name."

A crimson-faced Shinjiro was turned away, using his left hand as a blinder. They split apart when he
felt *something else* rising up, and vehemently demanded that she put her clothes on.

Feeling disappointed - and selfish still - she complied.

"My name is...Kotone."

Sheepishly and sluggishly, Kotone slowly began re-dressing herself. Her body was flushed in shame and want, still lingering from the effect of Shinjiro's embrace. She found some plain cotton panties that she hoped Theodore didn't procure for her on purpose and slowly slipped them on.

"Hey, you dressed yet?"

"N-No..."

She had been so used to her nude state, a state she had been fixed in prior to her arrival, that the sensation of pillowy cotton cushioning her genitals felt peculiar. Shinjiro didn't know this, and naturally, didn't give a damn, so she couldn't keep her fascination for long. The pants that she initially found were replaced with an identical pair made of a stretchier material, while the shirt was white with black buttons like before, but instead of a collar, at the neck was a small turtleneck cowl instead. She'd have to make do without a bra, and found a white camisole lying around that would keep her breasts in line well enough. Theodore even took the trouble to repair both the pale pink scarf that was lengthy and soft, and the suspenders that held up the pants. Naturally, this outfit was a dead-ringer for *someone else* she had gotten to know before...

"What the heck's your last name anyway?"

She twitched. Already, a rift was placed between them. "My last name...is Shiomi."

He let out a quiet gasp. "Our leader's surname...huh. It's the same as yours, providing you don't spell it different or anything. That's not exactly a surname you hear every day."

There was absolutely no reason to hide the truth about her name. She and the "other" Shiomi were destined for hell, after all. She had finished dressing and fished out a marker and some paper to write on. In a graceful fashion, she slowly drew out the kanji that spelled out her name:

"汐見 琴音" - "Shiomi Kotone"

She firmly set the pen down and turned to him. "I'm all dressed now."

Shinjiro dropped his hand and turned to look at her. Illogically, he found her straight-cut, androgynous outfit to be attractive, despite all of this going against any sensibility that he possessed. He took a glance at the paper, eyes wide, and said out loud:

"(汐見) - 'beautiful tide'(琴音) - 'harp sound'...now that I think about it, the kanji *are* the same as his!"

"...Could you spell his name out for me?"

Below, on that same exact sheet of paper, Shinjiro hastily wrote down his field leader's name, far more scrawl-like compared to Kotone's graceful script: "汐見 朔也" - "Shiomi Sakuya."

"The kanji are exactly the same...huh." Shinjiro's brows scrunched. "*I ought to be dismissing this as a coincidence, but something tells me that ain't the case.*" Awakening to his new powers had a profound impact on him, and he sort of hated it. The hatred intensified, but only a little - he could have sworn that nudging, nagging desire to keep on talking, keep on listening to this girl's sad story,
came from none other than Brigid. Brigid, who was maternal and loving, mixing the tenderness of a
mother with the mettle and mindset of a father, was coaxing him into exposing that side of himself,
more and more. He pictured a coy Elizabeth with her big, fat, stupid Compendium of Convenience:

"The Empress Arcana is the 'mother' of the cards, while the Emperor the 'father.' The Empress is
the card of motherly comfort and stability. She is one who is deeply connected to your world,
embracing your fertile earth and your homes. Those who are rooted the most in this arcana are
what humans call 'mother hens'...hee hee."

"...Fuck you, Elizabeth."

"Do you think that means anything? Your surnames, I mean," said Shinjiro, taking a cue from his
best friend and rubbing the back of his neck.

"It...does."

She looked up at him - damn those eyes of hers! They're right out of a damn shojo manga! - and
gravely nodded her head. "I would have to provide evidence as to why your leader and I share a
name. Me simply telling you probably won't be enough."

"Hmm...given all the shit I've been through lately, I'd damn near believe anything, Shiomi."

She cringed internally. His calling her by her family name hurt far more than it should have.

She shook it off as she tilted her head, glancing sideways. "Well, Aragaki..." She stressed it as if to
tease him, and he did, in fact, catch on to that. "...What if I told you, a guy who's so grounded in
reality compared to the rest of your friends, that the reason that I share a surname with your field
leader - something that, for all intents and purposes, is a stupid little coincidence - is because..."

A dramatic, pregnant pause. She then mimicked Sakuya's "signature pose:" a slightly crooked
posture, hands in pockets, a downturn expression that seemed to scream the notion that he was on
some kind of depressant.

They couldn't look any different, and yet something, something just plain screamed in the back of
Shinjiro's head -

"...because Sakuya Shiomi and I...are one and the same?"

Shinjiro blankly stared.

"...You're shitting me."

She dropped her little facade and, to his surprise, put a little smirk on her face. "See? Even that's a
bit much for you to believe in, isn't it?"

She was getting rather comfortable showing off to him like this, when she really shouldn't have.
There was nothing left to hide anymore. She felt the need to shove herself back into her shell, more
out of guilt and shyness, but this Shinjiro wouldn't hear of it, in all likelihood. She did just cry in his
arms not even a few minutes ago.

"You're smiling again," the boy commented. "I don't wanna imply anything, but you've been
swapping emotions at the drop of a hat. Are you sure you're gonna be okay?"

The need to be coy blossomed inside of her for the first time in forever. Theodore was right -
nowhere to hide, and it was futile to try. "Want me in your arms again already?"
"Wha-!? No!" He shouted, blushing. "Y...You moron...!"

"Eeeeeeh? But I'm just a helpless little girl, who needs all kinds of protection, because I'm a girl. Do I really scare you that much?" Kotone scrunched up her body, molding herself into a pure, innocent maiden. She put a finger on her chin, amplifying the "overly-naive" look.

"You're giving me shit, I can tell. You are so giving me shit..."

"I wasn't expecting you to get so bothered over a girl. You seem far more defensive than the Shinjiro I've known."

Ah.

"The Shinjiro..." He rubbed his head. "So she's gonna keep on insisting that she's one and the same with Leader, huh..." He sighed. "The hell you going on about? Are you seriously trying to tell me that you...uh, know me?"

"Well..." The finger went back on the chin. "I know you...and yet I don't. I don't know you, but I know a 'you' that lived with me where I come from."

Shinjiro gawked. "...Huh?"

The girl sighed. "See? You definitely don't believe me." She pointed at Bushyasta, ominously, and then at the tiny remnant of a vortex that she popped out of. It still flickered slightly, like a broken light bulb, and had a faint pulse. "If I bought you down to the Mazes, then you'd definitely know what I mean."

"The Mazes...?" Bushyasta mentioned something like that. He groaned, realizing that the hunch about a 'B-plot' that he theorized about when he and Akihiko met Vizaresh wasn't a hunch at all; it was real, and its evidence was standing right in front of him. "Oh, God..."

"I figured that's how you'd react. Do you need me to tell you that I am also responsible for keeping you all locked away in this subspace, not just the two amnesiacs you found?"

"So you're responsible for all those damn small locks on the doors in the Velvet Room..."

"Locks...I suppose that makes sense."

Kotone twitched. An aching pulse flickered in her breast. She didn't care about Shinjiro's reaction; instead, she simply showed him: she put her hands to her breastbone, letting a small flicker of firefly-like light pulse from it. As if emerging from an animal's maw, a pointed glass shard slid slowly out of the breastbone, glimmering like a green emerald. With a pained cry, it tore the rest of its way out, making Kotone's body convulse and stagger. With a final pulse of light, the shard emerged, covered with rivulets of blood. To Shinjiro's surprise, it shed its image as a shard of glass, instead taking on the shape of an angled, three-dimensional rhombus.

"That's...!" Shinjiro remembered the similar piece of glass that Vizaresh possessed, except that the shard he had was purple. "What did that skeleton demon call that? A Trapo...Trapa..."

"Tra-pe-zo-he-dron." She emphasized each syllable with an audible "pop." "Fragments of the soul that get cut off from a person's body. Fiddling around with a person's psyche enough can damage them to the point that these fragments emerge and scatter across the Collective Unconsciousness. They need to be gathered back together, or the person who loses them would lose their sense of self forever."
"Sense of self..." To Shinjiro, it reminded him of Apathy Syndrome. His expression was soft, as he thought about the connection. "I see...I guess that's kind of what happens to people who completely succumb to Apathy Syndrome..."

"A person's Shadow is often hidden in a Trapezohedron," said Kotone. "Losing the Shadow alone is dangerous. Losing the rest of yourself, having it consumed, well..."

"Then you'd literally be a shadow of your former self," Shinjiro recanted. "You need to collect these Trapezohedrons, don't you?"

The girl smiled and nodded her head. As she did, the rhombus in her hands began to flicker. It pulsed in her hands, beating and clenching like a human heart.

"This is my Trapezohedron that embodies the patience I have. It did this when Vizaresh was nearby, and he had one of my Trapezohedrons too."

"At least we have something we can use to find the rest of 'em," Shinjiro noted. "If this thing's right, then down that rabbit hole..."

"...Is a Maze, and Vizaresh himself."

They settled into a pregnant pause, holding gazes like before. He looked at her and realized that this girl, who seemed to know him, was going to be a guide on the bumpy, curving road of change that he was veering on. He was on it, and there was no getting off of it now. In his heart, he wanted off of it, only because the fall off the cliff was closing in on him as the days passed in Iwatodai. His heart rang in his ears as he shook - getting veered off of that path scared him more than he would ever admit.

It felt like the pulsing of the Trapezohedron of Patience - Shinjiro's mind pulsed, as if the brain were trying to shake free from his skull, at the thought of the course he was going on...

"So..." He breathed. "My friends and I haven't really found a new labyrinth to explore yet. Uh, why don't we plan on how we're gonna break this bit of news to them? I mean, we have a lead for your journey, right?"

She nodded her head, softly smiling at him. "You do."

"Well then..." Once again, against all logic, he held his hand out to her. "Shall we go?"

She steadily, with hesitance, placed her calloused yet delicate hand in his. It was the hand of a man who fought and toiled, as it engulfed hers almost entirely. She found herself grasping it tenderly and eagerly, feeling a spark of delight. Time would tell whether or not she deserved his kindness, but shying away from it was not the answer.

Perhaps, this time, a new, true answer would come to her on this hellish journey, and it would be hers to own.

"No, no, no! Oh, good heavens, no! How can this be!? Who dares slander the hallowed halls of Elizabeth's precious nurse's office!? This is an outrage to all that is good in the world! My innocence has been set aflame! Aaaah, I feel faint..."
Rolling on the floor and having an epic tantrum, Elizabeth's long arms and legs flailed like a spastic duckling. Tossed carelessly on the floor was her logbook, which Bushyasta had put back. Shinjiro angled his head and saw the demon's own little request, which was written in a frantic scrawl in some language he hadn't really seen before, had a massive doodle on the bottom: it was a crude drawing of a comically fat version of Elizabeth, who was pooping and spitting her tongue out. Written below it in English were the words "lizzie suxx!"

Shinjiro sputtered, stifling a laugh.

"You damnable punk! I should have known you would have found that disgusting portrayal of me amusing! And now my logbook...I cannot show it to the world when it has already been discovered and put to use! This is a travesty! Now who will I show off my salacious, nursing self to!?"

"Uhhh..."

He found himself drawn to her, and unlike Kotone, it wasn't a fun, fascinating ride. He hated every bit of her presence, her odd temper tantrums, her love of having the spotlight on her. He hated being at her mercy, because she was the one reliable source that he, Aigis, and Koromaru had for their newfound powers. She had a lot - a lot - of power to play with, and he found it irksome to play along. Just how did Sakuya put up with her anyway?

"Well, uh...you can...er, indulge me, I guess..."

God, how awkward could you get?

"Really!" Elizabeth perked right up, bouncing back to life like a mattress spring. "Oh, you're too kind, you stupid punk!"

"Geez, do you hate me or not?"

Elizabeth ignored him and promptly re-touched her hair, ridding it of any strays that sprang out of place. She dumped her childlike sadness for one of a seductive adultress. Placing a coy finger on her lips, she batted her long, golden lashes and bent forward, making her breasts swell and jiggle.

"Welcome to Elizabeth's room. This is a place where weary souls find sanctuary after a long, long journey. Would you like...medicine? A shot? Or perhaps..." She ended that with a dramatic flourish, ripping open the top of her dress. "...Me?"

It must have been easy being Elizabeth. She had absolutely no filter, nor any inclination for subtlety. It was hard for Shinjiro to keep his shock in check, for he was prone to extreme embarrassment.

"You don't plan on showing that off to the others, I hope...?" Kotone asked quietly, disturbed at Elizabeth's brazen display.

Needless to say, the brazen display was put to a grinding halt, for Elizabeth's glare in Kotone's direction was potent enough to make Shinjiro quiver. Nonplussed at her torn uniform, she crossed her arms. Judgement was set.

"...What's this now? We seem to have an uninvited guest on the premises. How could you drag this thing in, you punk?"

Shinjiro glared.

"So this is why Theo's been so insubordinate as of late. Hm, yes, how troublesome..." Elizabeth
shook her head. "You absolutely, positively do not belong here. You must exit stage left, as they say, and never, ever come back. But in this place, that likely will not happen."

She took several deep strides over to Kotone and peered at her. A wicked countenance shone in her golden eyes, blinking like a firefly. It made her lucid appearance all the more otherworldly.

"You shamelessly welcomed release from whatever prison you were holed up in and had the audacity to take residence in this place. It matters not whether you released yourself on your own accord, or if somebody else released you. You are unwelcome here. You are an anomaly that must be removed."

"Oh, stop it!" Shinjiro hissed. He reared back and ferociously punched Elizabeth in the jaw.

Elizabeth recoiled and stumbled backward. A small reddish bruise marked her cheek. Kotone couldn't hide her shock as Elizabeth's face momentarily went slack, even though it was unlikely that she was hurt.

Kotone blinked, a little awestruck. "Was that really necessary, Aragaki?"

"I'd say so!"

A faint whine emerged from Elizabeth's mouth as she steadied herself. She seemingly wiped off her cheek with a flourish - the bruise disappeared. "That's the second time you've managed to wound me with ease...I find it extremely annoying."

"And I, for one, think that this girl - Shiomi - is our other key out of here, along with Zen and Rei. Theodore probably thinks so. Just ask him." Shinjiro mentally apologized to the man in question, knowing how prone he was to his sisters' cruelty. He then bumped his elbow to Kotone's giving her a knowing look. "Show her, Shiomi. At least she can't throw you around if you prove to yourself that you're one of our keys out."

She nodded her head and complied. "I was expecting her to treat me this way, but..."

Once again, in her hands, the Trapezohedron of Patience emerged with a small burst of light. The pale green beams of soft light reflected off of Elizabeth's own eyes, eyes that were wide and aback with shock.

"A Trapezohedron! But how?" She was unusually rattled. "These are fragments of the soul! Without them, a human surely would be..."

Kotone became surprisingly humble. "I don't know for sure how many of them are actually out there. There are twelve locks on the doors leading to the four different points in time where everyone originated from, but the man who started me on my journey - so to speak - said there were twelve. Theodore probably thinks so. Just ask him."

"There are probably twelve of those 'Mazes' you mentioned, if you think about it," said Shinjiro in a moment of insight. "I'm sure that you'll find what you need and who you'll have to beat up as you go along, Shiomi."

Elizabeth tilted her head and glared at the insubordinate pair. The anger had subsided, but had been replaced with...Shinjiro couldn't place it. Confusion, perhaps? Whenever she was confused, she often masked it with irritation should it genuinely stick, or tackled the source of it with ease. The hypothesis about Kotone was easier to solve than an elementary school student's science project, wasn't it?
The fireflies of green light danced in front of Elizabeth. She seemed to be gazing at them for an answer...

This sparkling emerald was a piece of this girl's soul, a part of herself that had been torn away from her and placed back in the Collective Unconsciousness, but something didn't seem quite right...

...This, too, needed to have its answers sought.

"Look, Elizabeth, if you don't believe us, there's a demon who decided to slum it in the back room. She's sleeping right now," Shinjiro sighed, jerking his thumb back. "You could wake her up and, well, providing she doesn't try to kill you first, she could tell ya everything. And if you read the logbook - "

"- A demon, you say?" Elizabeth interrupted. "And she had the audacity to breach my domain and use my services without paying a fee?"

"...You're obnoxious as hell." Shinjiro was finally blunt with someone who wasn't Akihiko. "But yeah, she's spitting distance from you, and Toudou wrote a request in your logbook about teaching us about how to speak to demons."

The otherworldly woman raised a brow. "The gray-clad boy with the earring knows of demons? I see..."

"And you know what demons are, too. I can tell by the look on your face," Shinjiro accused.

The woman sighed in defeat. "On the Gregorian calendar, nine years had gone by since the last demon sightings. After the year 2000, all that there was were Shadows. The presence of demons here is due to a number of factors - the time discrepancy between your groups being one of them - yet I still find this resurgence to be peculiar. As a result, the Velvet Room's demonology has been lost to an extent."

She clapped her two hands together, her face taking on a look of resolution.

"The request regarding learning to contact demonkin has been written by Naoya Toudou. It would appear that he, along with Tatsuya Suou and Maya Amano, is well-versed in demonology. Ashamed as I am to admit, they are far better-versed than I. I recommend that you seek Naoya-sama out and go from there, if we are to tackle the mystery of this saucy little whore's presence."

"...I resent that!" Kotone shouted, shaken with a small fit of anger.

"Oh dear, did I touch a nerve?" Elizabeth, putting on an air of false ingenuity, covered her mouth. "If I did, I don't care. Now be off, you two. Go find my foolish brother and Naoya-sama, and get to the bottom of this little mystery. I have my own duties to attend to. And as far as my logbook is concerned, do spread the word that anybody can grant requests, and I will have some of my own as well. I assure compensation for each one, so please, do take the time to stop by during your journey."

She turned around, stomping indignantly as she did, and sat at her desk, back turned to Shinjiro and Kotone.

"Well? Let's go," Kotone sighed. She trembled a little, her smile nervous. "So I'm gonna meet your friends, and a whole bunch of other people, huh...?"

She looked too pale, terribly ragged. She had a strong, built figure, yet the air of defeat made her look small. What could this girl have possibly done to deserve such damnation?
Just who was this Kotone Shiomi...?

"I want to find out, and I really fucking shouldn't...dammit, I really, really shouldn't..."

Shinjiro anxiously tugged at his beanie as they quietly exited the Nurse's Office. It wasn't the heap of shit known as *love at first sight*, not even close, but he'd be lying to himself if he didn't feel a spark of attraction to her already.

It was nonsensical and ridiculous, but the spark was there.

Chapter End Notes

Merry belated Christmas!

Parts of this particular chapter were originally different - namely, the Yukari/Junpei/Tatsuya section, the Mitsuru/Reiji section, and the whole final part where Shinjiro and Kotone meet Bushyasta. Thing is, when I went to revamp the FF(dot)net version (which is now up), I deleted the document and didn't keep a backup file. Oops.

So I basically had to rewrite those three sections from scratch. I like how the Shinji/Kotone part came out, since I now have a coherent B-plot, but I feel like the other two could've been better. The Yukari/Junpei in particular, I feel, lost some of its original spirit, but I can't say for sure. Any thoughts on those areas? Let me know!

IMPORTANT: The meaning of Sakuya and Kotone's surname is likely grossly inaccurate, as the meaning shown here is the only one I could find. If any of you readers are well-versed in kanji, I would love a more accurate translation.
The first PQQQ Stroll! We learn of the fighting styles of Team Sumaru and Team Gekkou as they all recover from a massive hangover. All the while, Kotone finally finds the resolve to meet the others.

This chapter has been edited to reflect the changes in the fic. Strolls divert from the story, but often have story-heavy elements. They, along with requests, will all be in this fic. This is basically a take on the first set of strolls where you learn about the Personas and fighting styles of whatever team of Persona-users you didn't pick in PQ..

The nutty antics that the Persona-users had engaged in were now tapering off, much to Shinjiro's relief. However, left in their wake was a mess for the ages: loads and loads of confetti, broken balloon pieces, a miniature river of water, a massive tub of rice used to make mochi that had spilled all over the floor, scuff marks, some stray bags of chestnuts, a shooting gallery that had been turned over, a broken window, some vomit stains, and at least fifteen more bottles of alcohol that Shinjiro never saw prior to this. Collapsed in a magnificent heap in front of said bottles were an inebriated Maya, Katsuya, Ulala, and Baofu, with a completely shitfaced Yu Narukami stumbling nearby, going off on a tangent.

"They're gun' fin' me…they're gun' fin' me…that lady's gunn'a fin' me…n' feed me t' the…the…fuckin fishes'…these people always fin' me…"

Ominously, he pointed to Margaret, who was whipping her hair in satisfaction; a now-bruised Theodore was left in her wake, shaking his head in dismay.

Yu drunkenly grabbed a wayward handkerchief and stroked the side of his face with it, as if he were finding solace in its touch. "There's no…way…out…..

He stroked and stroked, his eyes completely wide and blank. "No way out…no way out…no way out…no way out…no way out…"

He hit the ground with a soft thud, still muttering.

Silence befell over the entire hallway, instilling a sense of unease within both Shinjiro and Kotone. The only sound that rung out was the sound of a traumatized Ken Amada falling out of the spilled rice tub.

"What the fuck!?” Shinjiro shouted.
"That devilish woman, Maya-sama…"

Shinjiro and Kotone turned to Theodore, who was slumped over, his hand on his forehead in dismay. "She and her crew had the nerve to plunder a significant stash of alcoholic beverages that I had acquired for myself…before we knew it, they were doling it out like someone giving free samples on the street…the madness you see before you is the result of that…"

"Seriously!?!" Shinjiro exclaimed. "Even Amada!?"

"Even Amada." Theodore shook his head. "Fifteen of my finest, all wasted away like that…my tequila, my vodka, my gin, my favorite bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon – "

"Sake for the win, motherfuckerrrrrrrrr!!"

Kei Nanjo, also sloshed, shot up at breakneck speed from the pile of rice on the floor, dual peace signs ablaze. With that statement, he collapsed back down, unconscious, like a domino.

"…And Kei-sama indulged in nearly two bottles of some expensive sake that were given to me as a gift." He dramatically sighed, slumping down further if it were possible. "You children have only conquered one labyrinth and you're all an absolute mess…"

When she saw Theodore rise up, Kotone hid behind Shinjiro, looking away. The man sluggishly stood, summoned the Persona Compendium, and opened it.

"I can at least partially clean this up." He summoned Narcissus, a Lovers Arcana Persona, and commanded it to cast a Garu spell. The beautifully nude man that stood before them complied, gently waving one of the flowers that shared his name in the air. A green-tinted breeze blew away the debris, sending it off into oblivion. Now, only the wreckage of the scuff marks and any larger debris remained.

"I think we ought to let everyone unwind on their own," said Theodore, shutting the Compendium as Narcissus vanished. "Besides, you've all been getting to know one another quite well. Perhaps you should all convene and talk about how you shall approach your upcoming battles or something of that nature."

"Yeah…" Shinjiro nodded his head in agreement. "You're right, but…"

"But what?"

"We can't exactly go to the next labyrinth yet, Theo."

To Shinjiro's surprise, Kotone boldly stepped from behind him, gazing at the blue-clad man. Theodore softly gasped.

"Kotone-sama! But I thought you were asleep!" He exclaimed, hand over mouth. "I was going to keep you away from Akihiko-sama and the scrutiny of my sisters…"

"I can't keep hiding, Theo." Kotone shook her head. "My presence is affecting this place as much as Rei-san and Zen-san are. If I don't do anything, then all of the Persona-users will likely be stuck in this place."

"Kotone-sama…"

"Besides, when I was asleep, a demon from one of the mazes came at me. Even if Bushyasta didn't find me then, she would've found all of you eventually." She rubbed her arm absentmindedly. "You
were right in the end. I need to get all of the Trapezohedrons back. I need to defeat the Fiends."

"But Kotone-sama…"

"If I don't bear witness to all of my memories, then there's no hope for me, or everyone else who's trapped here. Please, Theo...let me take back what I said before about hiding me. I have to go to the Mazes...I need your help, even if I don't deserve it."

She met his eyes, afraid yet resolute. He, in turn, bowed his head, taking it upon himself to serve one of his most treasured guests yet again.

"At your behest, I will lend whatever power I have to you, Kotone-sama, for your future battles. I have far more bravado now when it comes to dealing with my difficult sisters. Even if they scorn you, you have my assistance." He took his left fist and laid it upon his heart, taking the oath.

Shinjiro shook his head, cracking a very, very slight half-smile at the girl. "Hear hear."

She turned to face him. "And good to see you're still with us. Now, want to know who the Fiends are?"

"I want to know who you are, Shiomi. And what's the deal with these...Mazes," Shinjiro sighed. "From what you said, they're like the labyrinths: lengthy, and with someone waiting for a fight at the end of each one." He ran a hand through his hair. "This fighting's gonna be the end of me..."

Kotone guiltily shivered, idly moving her hands. "You don't have to come with me, you know. I mean, helping with Bushyasta is a wonderful thing and all - so will the help from your friends - but still – "

"No buts."

He abruptly stood tall over her. A shudder ran down Kotone's spine. "You're likely to get screwed if you go by yourself. Maybe not right away, but these types of guys get stronger as you progress. I don't like the prospect of more fighting, not at all. But it sucks less when you have others backing you up. Understand?"

He firmly planted a hand on Kotone's shoulder, with a feeling of warmth sputtering inside of her. How utterly abrupt his determination was! She sensed nothing of this when she first saw him. But time would tell on whether this change was genuine or not…

She nodded her head and smiled.

"...I think I'm ready to meet everybody now. And I'll tell plenty about myself too," She added softly. She glanced side to side, trying to spot someone. "Why don't we start with SEES - er..." She awkwardly giggled. "...Your friends?"

"She knows what our group's name is." Damn. Another point for her, regarding that she knew them. No, it was still too hard to believe. Shinjiro brushed that aside. "My friends...yeah, that sounds - "

"ceeeey, Shinji!"

In staggered Akihiko, pants missing, shirt torn open, trails upon trails of saliva dangling from his mouth, and in his right hand was a frail, unconscious Chie Satonaka. In his left hand was a bottle of vodka that he managed to chug down. "I win, Shinji! I drank more booze than' you! Neiner neiner neiner! You big bitch!" He threw Chie on the ground. "You're a big, fat pussy! You suck! I got a
bigger cock than' youuu-up!"

He unceremoniously vomited on the floor, which horribly stank and was a foul shade of brown. With a sway and a huff, he fell over on top of Chie's frail form, blacking out.

Shinjiro cringed in sheer embarrassment. "Theo, I think some people are gonna need Elizabeth's services more than others…"

"Y-Yes…" Theodore sighed, grabbing a wayward mop and bucket.

Maki Sonomura, who managed to survive the onslaught by tequila, was off to the side with a sleeping Naoya on her right shoulder. She gave a good look at this strange newcomer: she looked like a deer in headlights, yet looked determined and set to go all at once. Shinjiro was already at her side, vouching for her, and Theodore seemed a little enamored with her. She, in turn, looked grateful for their help, even if what she said betrayed that.

She looked like a ghost of a girl who was on the run from something. It looked as if it were catching up to her, and running would do her no good now.

Kind of like Maki herself.

Like the real Maki, and Aki and Mai…

It all happened such a short while ago, yet Maki's heart was still thick with denial. The touching words and companionship of her friends were a cold comfort.

Neither changed the fact that she was a figment of someone's imagination.

The Nurse's Office, for the umpteenth time

"But in all seriousness, you're absolutely right, Senpai. We ought to get to know how everybody fights. That way, we can formulate how we attack the labyrinths from this point on…oww…"

Sakuya, who avoided the boozefest entirely and instead had a bout of smacked-his-head-on-the-urinal-too-hard syndrome, nodded his head toward Shinjiro in thanks. Much like a sleepover, the beds were clustered together. Four of the six "factions" had to be taken into the nurse's office, while the remaining two were coping far better: SEES took up one corner of the room, the adults were next to them, followed by Rei and Zen, and finally, Tatsuya's crew.

The game plan was thus: Shinjiro could sense how nervous Kotone was, despite her desire to meet the team. He asked her to wait outside instead, and after having a chat over battle strategies, he'd bring her in. And wait she did, getting a cart of medical supplies in order with Theodore. Every so often, Sakuya would spot the brown-haired girl meandering about, never quite able to get a glimpse of her face.

When the tuft of brown hair first entered his sights, Sakuya's heart was erratically beating, but he felt nothing otherworldly…at least, he hoped it wasn't otherworldly.

"That's a great idea…yeah…ugh…!" Katsuya was curled in a fetal position on the bed, his stomach
still churning from the shots he devoured. Latched on his arm was a puke bucket. "Oh god, I hope I don't throw up again…"

"Let's start with us…owie…." Sakuya sighed, gingerly rubbing the large bump on his head. He slowly sat himself up.

"You use a short sword, right Sakuya-kun~?" Maya slurred, still in a daze but sober enough to speak coherently. "It looks super easy to wield~"

"Y-Yeah…" He muttered. "It doesn't reach very far, but it's nice and light."

"And your Persona mainly seems to use fire attacks~."

"Orpheus does use fire attacks, yeah…ugh…" He whimpered. "He can learn many different types of skills, it seems…he's more inclined to magic, but he's quick too. I'd consider him the best Persona I've wielded if it weren't for the fact that he leaves me vulnerable to lightning attacks and darkness spells…"

"Oooh, double whammy~. Poor Orpheus. It's just like the myths where his wifey died~" Maya giggled.

"I hate Mudo…it doesn't feel very nice…" He cast his gaze downward. Junpei and Yukari looked at him, both uttering "what the fuck?" to one another.

"Mudo stinks~! I know how you feel!" Maya jerked her arm, pointing to Yukari. "And what do you specialize in, Yukari-chan~?"

"Oh, well…"

Not long after their talk with Tatsuya, Yukari skulked off. To her shame, she indulged in the booze that the adults found, having felt a bout of depression. She had managed to get the liquor under control for the time being, although she still felt woozy. "Uh, I use a bow, so I can fight from a distance, and Io uses wind magic and can heal. She's a very magic-heavy Persona, and since I'm not that strong physically, I rely on her a lot." She sunk her head down, trying to ease the dizziness. "She's weak to electricity though…b-but there's nothing I can do about that!"

"Are you okay, Yukari-chan~? There's no shame in having a Persona who's vulnerable to something~! It's totally normal~!"

"I guess you're right…"

"Oh, oh, me next! Me me me – agh!" The minute Junpei tried to shoot his arm up, he toppled back on the bed, having eaten far too many sweets. For personal reasons, he avoided the booze like the plague. Every word out of his mouth came out in a frantic rush. "I use broadswords! They're big and awesome and can cut through anything! I can't be too far from the enemy tho, cuz if I am, I'mma cut y'all instead!"

"No kidding…" Yukari sighed.

"An' Hermes, he can use, like, fire attacks, but he sucks at magic so he just beats shit up. He can cut 'em, and bash 'em, and look really cool when casting shit. Oh, Hermes is tanky as fuck too. Like, he can take an explosion to the face and survive it. Oh, the only thing he sucks with is wind. He's weak to wind. But that makes no fuckin' sense cuz wind is oxygen or some shit and that makes fire burn." With speedy legs, he stood on the bed, pumping both fists in the air.
"I, Junpei, will cut you all down~~!"

He angled his leg forward and proceeded to crash face-first onto the floor.

"His P-P-Persona is named Hermes t-t-t-too…?" Jun coughed. The water Yukino had thrown on him was icy to the point that it made him suffer a brief bout of hypothermia. "B-B-But I have H-H-Hermes…"

"No one human is identical to the other," said Elizabeth, "But each person bears similarities to another, and can reflect the same archetype that a Persona represents. Hermes is a Persona who is very multifaceted indeed. Many people reflect him."

"R-R-R-Really?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said with a hint of amusement in her voice. "Junpei-sama's Hermes reflects the kinder intentions of the god. Unlike his fellow Olympians, Hermes was always eager to lend mankind a helping hand, much like when he helped Psyche in her quest to win over Cupid. Junpei-sama's intentions are good, jealousy of Sakuya-sama aside."

"B-But what about me?"

"Hm…" Elizabeth put a finger on her chin, analyzing Jun. "You, my dear, represent Hermes' more mischievous, sinister side. Despite his kindness, Hermes enjoyed deceiving others, and had domain over wit and thievery. You, my dear boy, look like a frail young boy who wouldn't look out of place in a boys' love manga, and yet I can sense something inside of you...you're quite vicious, and you're good at hiding it."

Jun gasped. "I...I look like an uke!?"

"And you're just realizing this now....!?" Lisa muttered to herself.

"So you have Hermes too..." Sakuya uttered, gaping slightly at Jun. "Tell me more."

"Hermes, you say..." Since the power of Persona had only recently returned to him, Eikichi, and Lisa, Jun was still a bit unused to Hermes' presence. Dealing with his haunting memories and horrid sins on the Other Side was terrible enough, even if Hermes embodied his rebirth from said sins.

"He is...very balanced. He has power over wind, he can boost peoples' agility, and he can poison others. He's more of a magically-powered Persona, but he gives me enough physical power to get by. He's just defensive enough, just lucky enough...he's very good, save for leaving me vulnerable to lightning." Jun was able to stop shivering, feeling Hermes linger inside of him. "And as for me, well...I can throw flowers at the enemy and hurt them."

"...I'm sure there's a damn reason you can, and it probably doesn't make a lick of sense," said Shinjiro, sighing.

"I can't quite explain it either," said Jun, taking the azalea in his shirt pocket and fiddling with it. "It's as if they're being filled with power when I touch them. They're like throwing knives." He caressed the flower. "And like many flowers, they can do quite a bit of damage on their own. This azalea can poison."

"You're like a thorny rose...but you're a boy..." Sakuya mouthed in a nonsensical manner.

"Ehehe..." A tipsy Tatsuya awkwardly chuckled. "That's one way to describe him, I guess."
"Mmm, you can call me anything you want, Ta-chan~." Jun sighed, snuggling up to Tatsuya.

"Oh Jun, you're ridiculous…" Tatsuya sighed, feeling content. "But in any case, the Persona that I primarily use is Vulcanus. He's a physical brawler, and compliments it with both fire magic and fire-themed attacks. He can also defend anybody from being overwhelmed by their weaknesses." Indeed, after the battle with the Queen of Hearts, Vulcanus learned Re Patra, a spell that could prevent anyone from being incarcerated from their elemental weaknesses, even though it couldn't completely block out the attack. "I myself use a two-handed sword."

"Once again, the laws of battle demand our heroes use swords, people!" A face-planted Junpei shouted from the floor. "And nobody fuckin' copies my Hermes!"


"Shaddup pretty boy…eugh…"

Jun and Tatsuya chuckled, and Sakuya found himself smiling again. Eikichi suddenly gave a manly slap in the back to Tatsuya, making him gag. "Always the macho one, aren't ya Tatsuya! Even with another man at your side like…that…"

"You're feeling better, Mishina-san," Sakuya observed.

"Of course I am!" Eikichi was burning with embarrassment on the inside, as he wound up in the nurse's office not because of booze, but because he stabbed himself in the eye with his eyeliner pencil. A blood-soaked bandage was sporting over his right eye, and it still stung. "But in any case, the fabulous Michel's main man is Rhadamanthus, the awesomesauce judge of the dead! Master of the high seas and big-time asskicker is he, and capable of withstanding any kind of attack!" His big grin shifted to a frown in a nanosecond. "Well, any attack that isn't ice-related….brrr…"

"That's all well and good, but where in God's name did you get your sub-machine gun from?" Sakuya asked flatly. Eikichi twitched.

"Uhhh…Internet?"

"In 2000? I don't think so," said Sakuya.

"What's it to you!?" Eikichi exclaimed angrily. "It's my sub-machine gun and my guitar case and I love it and why should it matter…?" He whimpered the last few parts. "It's super cool. Leave me alone…"

"We cannot leave you alone, as you so wish." Aigis shot up from behind him, making Eikichi screamed. "That is a very high quality automatic weapon you have in your possession. I must know where you procured it from, Mishina-san."

"Never!"

"Aigis, please leave him alone. He's probably lost a lot of blood..." Sakuya sighed.

"...Will comply."

With that, Aigis activated the rockets located at her foot stubs and shot to his side, analyzing his current state. "Though Sakuya-san's health is my topmost priority at the moment, I shall explain my own battle parameters to all of you. My main Persona is Palladion. With her support, I can withstand blows from weapons and attacks that thrust and can normally pierce through material like
metal. However, she cannot withstand electrical attacks, as it is dangerous for my circuitry."

"Circuitry…you really are a damn robot!" Eikichi exclaimed.

"We've seen flying magic Nazis crash-land on our city riding in mech suits, Eikichi. Aigis-san is completely normal compared to them," Tatsuya stated flatly.

"W-Well yeah, but still…"

"If you are done with your thinly veiled insults, I shall continue," Aigis stated with an air of snark. "Palladion's powers are completely physical in nature. She is also capable of taking blows in place of others. As for myself, I am equipped with high-caliber weaponry, allowing me to attack at any distance." She stopped for a moment, letting her Antikythera "headphones" whirr. "I am also equipped with a special function called 'Orgia Mode.' In Orgia Mode, my internal limiters are disabled, drastically increasing my output of power. However, it is unstable, and after a time, I will overheat. A cooldown period is required, so if you opt to take me into battle, please be mindful of that." She smiled and pumped her fist, unnerving Tatsuya's group.

"Is she for real?" Lisa, who was also dizzy from the alcohol, asked. Her eyes were blossoming with curiosity.

"I am, as you say, 'for real,'" said Aigis. She tilted her head, gazing at Lisa. "Your eyes are the same color as mine, Lisa-san. The hex triplet number for your eye color is #89CFFO, otherwise known as 'baby blue.' You must have been the apple of many a man's eye back in Japan."

Lisa blushed, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. "Y-Yeah, I was as I got older, but when I was a kid, I was picked on because of how different I looked. I hated how I stood out so much. I was like any other kid, but because I had this blonde hair and these blue eyes…" She sighed, trying to cast those feelings aside. Now wasn't the time for it.

"Lisa, it's okay," said Tatsuya, tenderness lacing his voice. "That's all over now. You were born and raised among the Japanese people, and that's that. It certainly matters not to me and the others that you're Caucasian."

"Chinyan…"

"Besides, I've always liked your eyes. They're like a clear blue sky."

Lisa stuttered, her own bravado growing.

"Y-You really are the best, Chinyan!" Lisa exclaimed happily, pumping a fist. With joy, she faced the others, grinning. "My Persona is Eros! She's super-quick! Her element of choice is earth, and she can heal and charm enemies! Unfortunately, she can't withstand water attacks." She flexed an arm muscle. "I haven't had proper training, but I can sort of do kung-fu, so I'm more of an in-your-face fighter." She rubbed the back of her neck, suddenly more demure. "I…can't take too many hits though. Whether I'm getting thrown around or struck by magic, but I am, uh, good at dodging. Ehhehehe…"
"I like using hammers and axes. They're limited in their range, but they're strong. I've used them for three years, and I'll stick with 'em. As for Castor, he's like Palladion. He's a hard-hitter. He's not really resistant to anything, but he isn't vulnerable to anything either. I guess that's it."

Koromaru came speeding into the room, cuddling by Shinjiro's leg. No one could really understand why, but the Shiba Inu looked completely relieved on top of that.

"And this little guy here's Koro-cha…er, Koromaru. He can fight too."

"I know, he's amazing!" Lisa exclaimed.

"His Persona…is it Cerberus? It would be fitting if it were," said Jun.

"That's right." Shinjiro rubbed his nose, holding back a chuckle. "Koromaru's Persona uses fire and dark magic. He's also pretty damn agile, and good with a knife. It's what makes him so…uh, admirable." He spotted Koromaru shying away from the bright lights of the office – what an intuitive dog he was, Shinjiro thought. "Oh, right…Cerberus is vulnerable to light attacks. Watch out for that."

"Aww, we sure will!" said Lisa, fawning over the dog.

"Heehee, this is great~!" Maya cooed. "Now Sakuya-kun and Tatsuya and I can actually make plans when we venture out! It's like we're playing Battleship!"

"Well, that is a good thing…” said Shinjiro, "But we'd need to know more about your Persona, Amano-san…” He braced himself for her half-drunken tirade.

"Ohh, right! Maia! She's my Persona~! And she's a black mage, through and through! She can use lotsa magic! She can splash you with water, freeze you with ice, and kill you with light! Kabwoooooogh! She heals too! And she can block out both light and darkness! And look, look!"

Focusing, Maya shot her palms upward, bringing Maia forth from the sea of her soul. A Moon tarot card splintered into pieces, summoning a flurry of blue flames that nearly forced her companions off of their beds. Despite the impact, and despite the sheer level of shock that everyone had, Maya kept on smiling.

"She's wearing a super-fabulous pink kimono-thingy! And a visor! Isn't she cool!!?"

"That looks like an outfit straight off of a Parisian fashion runway," Aigis observed. "It is quite peculiar because Maia is a Greek deity, yet this Maia is wearing a kimono."

"I told you she's cool!!" Maya bought Maia back, suddenly frowning. "Ohh~, but she crumples when I get slashed in the face with something. Like Tatsuya's sword…” She then perked right back up, taking out a pair of gaudy pink handguns. "But that's what I have these guns for! Pow-pow!"

"Amano-san, please be more careful with those!" Katsuya explained worriedly. "I don't want you or the others to get hurt…urp…"

"I'm fine~, I know what I'm doing…Kat-su-ya~!"

"Wh-Wh-What did you just…!?" Katsuya's face burst aflame – which was promptly wrecked when he had to bend over and vomit in his bucket. Giving Yu Narukami tequila and indulging it with him was a terrible idea.

"Heehee! You're so cute, Katsuya~!"
"M-Maya, please calm down…" Tatsuya tried to coax Maya. "You're making my brother feel uncomfortable…"

"Oh…" Maya sobered tenfold. "I'm sorry, Tatsuya…I'm still feeling lightheaded. I don't know what came over me."

"It's no problem. We're all having tons of fun, right?"

Quiet laughter rang throughout the room, which woke up the members of SEES that were still sleeping, save Fuuka. Ken came to first, rubbing his bleary eyes.

"Huh…?"

"Are you feeling okay, Amada!?" Shinjiro shouted a little too loud. "I found you in a massive tub of rice! What happened?"

"Oh…" Ken sighed, digging in the cesspit of memories that seemed to mostly escape him. The only thing he could instantly recall was Kei Nanjo leaving behind a bottle of what Ken thought was sake. Of course, in order to be a strong adult, one had to withstand the bitterness of alcohol, right? Naturally, being only eleven years old, Ken toppled like Jenga blocks after a few sips, somehow falling into the mochi rice pit with Kei. Everything else was blank after that.

"I fell into the rice pit. That's all I can remember."

"Did you drink too!?" Ken twitched in fear. "Don't tell me that someone made you drink something!"

He didn't want Shinjiro's concern, or sympathy, at all. Instead, he became angry.

"Leave me alone, Aragaki-san! Y…you're not my fucking mother!"

He heard Kanji cussing like a sailor earlier, hence his discovery of the word. Shinjiro was taken aback. "Who told you that word…?"

"Are you deaf!? I told you, you're not my mother! Back off!"

"Ah…"

Shinjiro resigned himself, slumping over like he usually did. Why was he so surprised? Ken hated him with a passion. "You're right. I'm not…I'll…uh…" Shinjiro sat down on the desk in front of Elizabeth's request log, facing away from the others. Before the rest could object to Ken's behavior (indeed, Baofu looked near-ready to slap the poor kid), he began to angrily sputter out his own "battle parameters:"

"I use a spear, and it has prongs that you thrust with. It's long, so I can attack at a distance. My Persona is called Nemesis, and she uses light magic and can save anyone who gets knocked out. She's able to resist light as well, but is weak against darkness. Nemesis is good at shrugging off magic too." With a loud "harrumph," he stomped off, out of the nurse's office.

"What a brat," A now-sober Baofu spat. "He's got some nerve, that kid."

"There's a reason he's like that," Shinjiro said quickly, defending him. "Just leave him alone." Baofu grunted in dissatisfaction.

"W-Well, you're up and about Baofu-san," Maya said nervously. "Tell the kids about how you
fight."

"Oh, yeah..." Baofu sighed. "If you think I'm a weirdo for using coins, it's because I empower them with *chi*. What is *chi*, you ask? Go read a book about it, you kids can figure it out." He leaned forward, still feeling a bit hung over. "Odysseus is the Persona that I primarily use. He uses wind spells and can strike multiple enemies at once. What he's vulnerable to is earth spells." He brushed a strand of his long hair out of his face, frowning at the children. "I'm not exactly the fatherly type, but I can't stand a high school-aged brat who thinks they know everything. You *don't* know everything. Don't be stupid, kids."

While the others were gawking at Baofu's words, Sakuya found himself nodding in agreement. Mitsuru could certainly use a few words from the older man.

Speaking of Mitsuru, she finally woke up, feeling completely ashamed. A wave of nausea washed over her; she indulged in some wine as she pondered over the Persona Game. Before she knew it, she had nearly blacked out. "Ugh..."

"The Ice Queen awaketh," said Baofu acidly. "What did you have? The wine?"

"I...I feel so ashamed of myself..."

"Don't. I'm more of a whiskey guy myself, but a good glass of red wine goes great with a nice meal. First-timers always drink booze too fast."

Mitsuru blushed. "I shouldn't have..." She gazed around the room, with the awakened Persona-users looking at her. She began to feel delirious. "What is going on? A-Are you all playing the Persona Game...?"

"Do we look like we're playing the game to you, Kirijo?" Baofu said with an air of sarcasm. "Most of us got drunk like you. And we're talking battle tips, or...something."

"B-Battle...tips...? Ah...yes..." That was something logical to talk about. It appeared as if they had been discussing that topic for a little while as they recovered. "What kind of tips are we discussing?"

"We're speaking about our Personas, actually – the primary Personas that some of us have started out with," said Tatsuya, noting that despite being hung over, Mitsuru made an attempt to sit up straight and assert herself. She was in no condition to do so. "I figure that we'll have to learn on the fly when some of us begin using even more Personas than what some people are used to."

"Some people..." Mitsuru shook her head. "I'd prefer that we'd try and do that right away, but I suppose it isn't possible...but if we are discussing Personas, mine is named Penthesilea." Mitsuru tucked her lone curly lock of hair behind her ear. "Penthesilea's primary skillset involves ice-based magic and weakening the enemy by ailing them. She can also heal, albeit not to the extent of Takeba's Persona. As for myself, I am a fencer, and thus am better suited for the front lines in battle."

"Haha, 'better suited for the front lines.' I heard that in a movie once. It's like you think we're going off to war, Kirijo," Ulala teased.

"B-But we are in a war...of some flavor," Mitsuru objected.

"And I guess we need uniforms too?" Ulala giggled.

"Of course!" Mitsuru's shout actually made a few people jump. "These are merely school uniforms,
but a uniform is highly important in general. SEES wears its armbands and uniforms as a duty…"

Baofu, Ulala and Maya all snickered. Katsuya sighed.

"B-But it's…true…"

"You're clearly out of it, Kirijo," said Baofu. "Go back to sleep, and don't wake up until you can talk more coherently."

What a boor that man was! Mitsuru sank back onto the comfortable mattress, forcing herself awake so that she could keep up with whoever was left. She tilted her head toward Akihiko, appalled at his sorry state. A blanket was thrown over him because no one could find his pants, and a dribble of vomit was still on his chin. Aigis trotted to his side, taking note of his vitals.

"Sanada-san's vitals are still not functioning at their optimal level. In his stead, I shall tell you all of his battle parameters. He practices the martial art of boxing, therefore, he fights at a very close range. His Persona is dubbed 'Polydeuces,' named for a Greek demigod. He is quite balanced, capable of using lightning magic with ease. Polydeuces can also weaken others with some special spells."

Akihiko moaned and coughed, rolling over on his side. "Mmh…gimme tha' beef…"

Aigis' hand, like a feather, grazed the bump on Akihiko's head. "You must forgive Sanada-san for the worrying intensity of his passion for battle. He had suffered a head injury prior to our arrival, and the result has increased his aggression at least three times his usual level."

"So he's always been aggressive?" Ulala sighed.

"Mostly in battle or when boxing at school," said Aigis. "Indeed, prior to the incident, Sanada-san was remarkably insightful and could restrain himself. Unfortunately, both of those traits have vanished. It is getting harder and harder to reign him in, and he demands five-hundred percent more protein than what is actually recommended for most humans to consume."

"That stinks. I wonder if there's a way to fix that…" Ulala mused. She glanced at the gray-haired boy's sleeping face, awash in a childlike vulnerability. She smiled. "I'm gonna take a cue from Maya on this one. Your little boxer pal is kinda cute."

The members of SEES gasped. Junpei in particular was twitching with shock.

"Y-You think he's cute!? How old are you again!? And what do you mean, 'take a cue from Maya!?'" That remark earned him a rightfully deserved dope-slap from Yukari.

"If it weren't for this damn headache, I'd throttle you by now…" Ulala hissed. "But it's my turn to speak. I'll kick your ass later, Iori."

Junpei whimpered.

"My Persona is named Callisto. Her element of choice is earth. She can also charm others, as our fight with the FOEs has shown you…oh, and she can now cast a spell that can bind the enemy too. I guess she's pretty balanced? She makes me quick on my feet, and that's good because I box…"

Ulala scrunched her brow. "Damn, describing Persona abilities is hard. I must sound awfully cheesy right now."

"It's rather difficult to describe a Persona any other way, Serizawa-san," said Katsuya. "I'll give it a try…Helios is the name of my own Persona. He is like Vulcanus in that he uses fire-themed attacks.
He can also attack physically, and can cure people who might get poisoned, or...gee, this is difficult."

Zen had remained silent the entire time. Rei was asleep in his lap, and being as ignorant of certain subtle behaviors as he was, he saw nothing unusual about it. He silently observed the four groups sound off their abilities, and took the time to carefully analyze each and every one of them. How utterly peculiar these people were: they were all quite different, and yet there were a number of similarities between them as well. The red-haired woman and the gray-haired boy both practiced the fighting style they called "boxing," and the Suou brothers both had Personas that wielded fire.

"But I have seen Tatsuya and Katsuya fight. They differ quite a bit. The younger uses a sword, the elder that mechanical weapon that's much like my crossbow. This must relate to 'personal styles of fighting' that Shinjiro mentioned earlier."

There was still much to learn, clearly. Perhaps he could learn more of that as he recovered his memories.

"Four labyrinths...we have conquered one. Three remain. There are three guardians and three treasures."

Three more labyrinths...

"Oh," Maya softly gasped from a ways off. "We've forgotten about poor Zen-kun."

"...Hm?"

Zen's head rose and met with Maya's violet eyes. She appeared to be what the others deemed "concerned:" Her brows angled upward, her mouth drawn downward. He decided to take a cue and address her state. Perhaps it could allow him to understand these people better.

"Are you 'concerned' about something, Maya-san?" Zen asked, his voice as even as ever.

"You didn't tell us about how you fight in battle, Zen-kun!" Maya exclaimed more clearly. Her drunkenness had subsided. "You've been curled up in a corner the whole time! Come on up and talk about yourself."

"Myself...?"

Now there was a conundrum that Zen could not tackle with ease. He was what he was, nothing more, nothing less. He used a pair of automatic crossbows and could cast elemental magic - as for the source of the magic, he did not question whence it came from. It was the same for Rei's ability to cast healing magic: he knew not why, and did not question it. He did not even question just why he felt this strange, often uncomfortable tug in his chest whenever she cast a spell, or why she only did it when she was in his arms' reach. As one who fought alone, the notion of teamwork was alien to him. The concept of synchronicity with others did not click, hence, the inability to full grasp how everybody explaining their fighting styles was important. There was no 'thrill' in battle (as Akihiko put it); no 'fear' in battle (as Yukari put it); no 'sadness' in battle (as Tatsuya put it) - there was nothing.

It was like clockwork - one all-encompassing motion, endless. It was the same as the gears in the clock tower in front of the school. More than it being to keep Rei out of harm's way, battle just was.

He, Zen, just...was.

"...I am who I am." He tilted his head. "I am the one who protects Rei, and attends to her needs.
Maya frowned. "Uhm...okay? Could you be a bit more specific? Like, how do you wield two crossbows at once?"

Zen held up one of said crossbows. He gazed at it, as if he were pleading it to answer that question for him. It looked like a scaled-down recurve crossbow: very light in the front, a single string to shoot with, and fairly wide. He reloaded them with a mental command: when he wished for a new set of bolts, he would have them instantaneously. These, too, he did not question, nor did he question as to why he used two of these devices.

"I have always used two of these," Zen replied after what felt like an eternity. "I had them with me since I woke up. They are fairly light in their weight, and can hit the enemy from a great distance. I summon the bolts when I wish to use them, in case you were curious."

Maya frowned for once. It was a lousy answer. Despite SEES' plead for her to give up, she kept pressing on. "Gee, that got us nowhere...okay, well...let's talk about your magic." She smiled again. "It's you who seems to be casting spells, and not a Persona. You aren't a Devil Summoner either." She gave him a pleading look. "Can you explain about...your magical power?"

"...That, too, I have always had. I have sets of spells that I have at my command, and I utilize them as the situation demands. The spells grow in power as I do in battle."

His left index finger glimmered with a faint, green light. With nary a second thought, he let several short, rapid bursts of wind burrow through the ground. It dug like a drill through the tile, with the requisite shattering sounds waking those who were asleep and scaring the piss out of everyone else. Rei let out a high-pitched screech as she tumbled out of Zen's lap, right onto the floor.

"Eeeek! Zen!"

It never occurred to the man that he was the one who indirectly put her in danger. One of his crossbows was at the ready, pointing dangerously close to a terrified Koromaru. It was only when Rei tugged at his pants leg from the floor that he was able to relax.

"Are you all right, Rei!?"

She did not smile at him - as air-headed as she could be, even she found his little act to be moronically stupid. She blew out her tongue at him and sighed.

"You're hopeless..."

"Rei?"

She shook her head and glared at him - for once, he was taken aback. "You're an idiot, Zen! You're an absolute idiot! Ugh!"

Rei stomped off with all the dignity of a donkey. Zen, as usual, was left in the dust, completely bewildered.

"Rei..."

Maya put a hand on her mouth. But, no matter how much she wanted to scold Zen, she couldn't bring herself to do it. The look in Tatsuya's eyes, as he looked at her, told her that he couldn't do the same. This Zen was more than just a bit addled in the head from memory loss.
This girl was one of his three constants, aside of the culture festival and the clock tower that loomed over them. He blankly stared at her and her distressed state, doing absolutely nothing about it. It was as if he were a toy robot that repeatedly broke from something mundane, and he'd break again and again should Rei fall into a state of distress once more. The first memory he rediscovered - his so-called "task" - effortlessly molded into his robotic state. Only time would tell whether or not this state would change as they trekked through new labyrinths.

It suddenly struck Tatsuya - Zen's state, and what it reminded him of -

"Like a toy robot... he's a little bit like a... a demon..."

Demons were unchanging and static. They were stereotypes, set from birth to function one or two ways. What separated a demon from a Shadow was the personality given to them and their appearance. In exchange for a human's ability to grow and change was a demon's immortality - in this case, sustenance due to humanity's thoughts. A human's personality was as malleable as gold; a demon's was not. And if a demon's personality was as malleable as magnesium (a non-malleable metal), then Shadows were about as malleable as liquid boron.

It was probably far too soon to assume such a thing, but the resemblance was eerie.

The second Tatsuya opted to speak, Zen let out an intense shudder, feeling his stomach churn.

"Ah..."

There it was: a painful churn that shook his brain. He felt it when he touched the rabbit that they found in You In Wonderland. This time, it went beyond a churn and evolved into a violent rattle.

Zen felt nauseous. He collapsed.

"Zen-san!"

The healthier fighters rushed toward Zen's side, all of them voicing concern. Lisa placed her hand on his forehead. Sweat had stuck onto her palm within seconds.

"Wh-What the hey...? Zen-san's burning up!"

"But how?" Eikichi explained. "He didn't do anything when we were partying! I t's not as if he could've gotten sick, or..."

"...Fi...end..."

That was the million-dollar word Zen uttered before passing out. Silence permeated the room, as the group began whispering among themselves.

"Fiend...? What does that mean?" Maya asked.

"Maybe it's related to his memories...?" said Tatsuya, who looked frightened for a change. "Or perhaps..."

Perhaps that strange correlation between Zen and demonkin wasn't so ludicrous after all?

"No, of course it... is...?"

Sakuya didn't move from his bed. Instead, he himself was shuddering, completely overwhelmed by a prickling sensation that rocked his entire body. He, too, broke out in a sweat. He, too, began to pant.
"Hfff...haaah..."

Shinjiro was alert. He emerged from his stupor and went to his leader's side, removing a handkerchief from his coat pocket. Without a word, he began dabbing the sweat off of the boy's brow, grabbing a water bottle from nearby. During his nights in Tatsumi Port Island's back alleys, he had seen the dregs and addicts and prostitutes get like this when panic struck them. As he felt Sakuya relax a little with a few rubs on his back, he secretly hopes to himself that the feverish states he and Zen were in would pass.

Outside, he could see a wary Kotone sneak a peek into the room, still waiting for Shinjiro's cue. As it was, her timing was poor.

"Psst!" Shinjiro gestured her to him with a wave of his hand. "You can come in in a second!"

Despite his command, she began to nervously shirk - but not before catching the azure glimpse of the boy Shinjiro was taking care of.

And he, too, caught her own crimson.

*...b-bmp...*

It lasted for a mere second.

Sakuya could feel his voice leave him completely, his heartstrings yanking free from its trappings. In his panic, he felt as if all were being drawn from him, and yet -

"Ah...I'll, I'll be, uh...uh...!"

The girl's voice climaxed to a whine as she ran off in fright.

"Hey, Shiomi! Get back here!"

Shiomi...?

"Ah - no, I don't mean you, Leader," Shinjiro said in a hurry, looking frazzled. "That girl, she -"

"Girl...?"

Sakuya felt himself go limp, with Shinjiro catching him frantically.

"...girl...the...girl..."

The boy choked. The pain that swished within him was lethargic and alien. It felt as though his brains would pour out of his ears at any moment -

"Senpai..." He grasped the older boy's coat.

"Y-Yeah...?"

"Who - "

Sakuya retched.

Shinjiro forcibly dragged him to some random basin where he could throw up. Sakuya was retching because the girl he had seen was the same shadow of the girl he saw when he played the Persona game. Normally, he'd feel triumphant at seeing the source of that phantasm, but this went far, far
deeper -

He couldn't explain why.

He and *that girl* were bound by a - a rope. That was the only word he could think of in the heat of the moment.

It was rope thicker than rope used by seafarers. Rope that left behind the harshest of burns on the skin.

Rope that crossed beyond *space-time*.

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Chapter End Notes

Shinji and Kotone...yay or nay on their interactions so far? Too much Kotone and too little Zen? How's everyone's characterizations? B-Plot too weird? R & R is always appreciated.
Stroll 2: Getting to Know You 2

Chapter Summary

The second stroll! This time, Team Hermelin and Team Yaso compare and contrast their methods of fighting, with juicy drama trailing not far behind them.

Chapter Notes

Not much to say about this one, other than a few things: This chapter will not address the three Team Yaso members who got more Personas (Kanji, Rise, and Naoto), and we will not look at Team Hermelin's firearms. These will definitely be addressed in the future, so stay tuned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Mmmnh…Maki…"

Naoya began to stir from his slumber, disturbing Maki's train of thought. The two of them had been at rest for quite a long time, basking in the gentle sunlight that filtered through the windows. She could see the individual sunbeams that were cast upon them, capturing little trails of dust, landing softly on Naoya's charcoal-colored hair. She turned her head to look upon him.

It was plain to see why Naoya would be the apple of many a St. Hermelin student's eye. His features had a feminine, gentle look about them – long, dusty eyelashes, a gently curved jawline, a pert little nose that was round. On the other hand, he was toned and very lightly tanned – the look of a fighter, a man who worked and worked. Fighting demons and nearly dying at the hands of Kandori's men built his muscles up even more than before. Maki could picture it: if Naoya had on a wifebeater and was smeared with dirt and dust, cranking away at some machine, he'd look like one of those sensual-looking laborers she had seen in American magazines.

Of course, being compassionate was a plus.

Maki blushed, hiding her face as Naoya fully woke up. He languidly stretched his arms up, arching his back to remove the kinks that had built up within it. With two cranks of his neck, he felt rejuvenated, no longer stiff. In his line of vision, he could see his classmates sluggishly meandering around. His first greeting came from a grunt from Reiji Kido, who was dragging an unconscious Kei over his shoulders.

"Wh…What happened to Nanjo?" asked Naoya.

"This idiot drank two bottles of sake and went for a little swim in the barrel that's used to make mochi," Reiji scoffed. "I saw a lot of people go into the nurse's office. There any room left?"

"Team Gekkoukan and Team Sumaru all went inside. I think you're gonna have a hard time finding room, Kido."
"…Team what now?" Reiji raised a brow.

"I figured it would be easier to give us team names…or something. Narukami-san and Shiomi-san had special names for their groups, but I thought that naming them by school would be easier to remember…there are three schools, and I chose the name of their home town for the fourth group because those people have a group of adults and four kids from two different schools."

Reiji looked…mildly, mildly impressed. Granted, he was perpetually scowling, so Maki couldn't really tell. "…Huh. Makes sense, I guess. So…I guess we're Team Hermelin?"

"Seems so," said Naoya, smiling gently. "It's funny. Compared to the rest of them, we're a bunch of strangers."

Reiji sighed, gently laying Kei on the floor. He removed the boy's jacket and placed it under his head, making it into a makeshift pillow. "Strangers is right."

He turned to look at the two of them, his dark eyes murky with irritation. He focused on Naoya, then on Maki, and went back and forth between the two of them. The rigidness of his body built and built to impossible levels as his gaze settled on Maki.

Maki wasn't stupid by any stretch of the imagination, but damn her for being so effing cheerful like any other air-headed girl, Reiji thought. "It's as if she weren't wishing for death mere hours ago…"

"K-Kido-san, is something wrong…?" Maki asked, hands up. Nervousness laced her voice.

It irritated Reiji a lot more than it should have.

"Damn you, Sonomura, why are you so fucking cheerful!?"

He growled at her and stomped off, searching for some water for that idiot Nanjo to drink. "Damn you to hell, Sonomura…damn you…"

Maki shook her head and sighed. "I don't understand him at all. Why would he try and help keep me going if he hates me…?"

"There's no doubt that Kido is a good person, Maki," said Naoya. "We just rarely see it because he's so wounded inside. He's the half-brother of the man who did terrible things to you, you know, and it's tormented him for years."

"I do suppose you're right. After all, Nanjo-kun helped me too when I was…well, you know…"

"He did," Naoya said suddenly, overwrought with discomfort. "So much happened before we got here."

He beckoned at the sunlight-bathed scene. The hallways were calm, with the life of the school festival coming and going in spurts. A small sparrow flew at the windowsill above his head. Even with Nanjo blacked out at his and Maki's feet, Naoya felt at peace. Peculiar, given that this place was a dead ringer for the same Sea of Souls that the two of them had braced themselves to enter.

"Somewhere, out there in this peaceful place, the real Maki's soul is wandering alone, swimming toward her death…Philemon said that all life returns here when we die. I wonder what other kinds of things we'll see?"

Maybe, just maybe, the real Maki's soul was here?
"That'd be something…"

"What would be, Naoya?"

"We're on a borderline in the Collective Unconsciousness. I, I thought that, well…this sounds strange, but perhaps we'd, by some utterly random chance, run into…the real you…?" Naoya had to force the last three words out, nervously glancing at the girl in question – or rather, the idealized version of her.

"I see…" Maki said sadly.

She was a shadow – not quite literally, of course, but she was born from the same place that a Shadow was born from – from a real person, but she had a mind and a heart of her own, too. Even after taking a vow to embrace living and conquer nihilism, the possibility that they'd meet the real Maki…hurt. It hurt her terribly, right in the heart.

"I want to save you, real me…but I have these feelings…too…"

"Buuurp-!"

Naoya blinked. Yu Narukami was millimeters away from his face. He belched on him.

"'Sup neighbor?"

Naoya wound up smacking both of them as he crashed into the back of the wall, bashing his head on the windowsill. "What the fuck!"

Yu's face was rosy, but his eyes were clear, and his speech coherent. "I just took the best shit of my life five minutes ago. As I was coming back here, I overheard Shiomi-san's team talking with Amano-san and Suou-san's teams. It appears they're discussing their 'battle parameters…"

"You mean…Personas and weapons, right?"

"Rightey-o, Toudou-san. Standard video game fare. The rundown of skills and magic. Giving just the tiniest tidbits of who you are as a person, ominously foreshadowing what may truly be troubling you – and a solid eighty-five percent of the time, those troubles are gonna get exposed during the journey. You know, an icebreaker."

"…What the hell are you talking about?" Naoya sighed, clutching his head. "You know what? Never mind. My head hurts."

"Here Naoya, let me…" Maki said quietly. She swiftly raised both of her fingers. With an airy incantation, a tarot card burned at her fingertips –

"Help me…"

*clsh-! *

- and emerging in swaths of blue flames came her main Persona, Matsu. She was a masked woman wearing a peculiar-looking sky blue robe, puffed with heavy ruching at the cuffs, two big shoulder pads that wouldn't have looked out of place in the '70's, and a cylinder-shaped hood that stood erect on her head. The Diarama spell made its presence with a graceful wave of her arm, bathing Naoya in a gold-blue glow. The flickers and pops of light eased the pain in his head completely, as the wound itself was minor to begin with. Matsu then vanished – like the Cheshire Cat, oddly enough, as the last thing that Yu saw was her painted mask. In lieu of a mouth, the eyes were painted
upright, as if she had been perpetually smiling evilly at them.

"Hm, so that's your Persona…" Yu tilted his head.

"Isn't she lovely?" Maki said with a smile. "Her name is Matsu. She's my original Persona, so she influences how I fight the most."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you can use many Personas yourself, right Narukami-san?" said Naoya. "The one you start with tends to be the one that's the most representative of you…the 'true you.'" The gray-clad boy looked off, staring at nothing. "Philemon said that there are thousands of possible masks that we can equip, yet only one of them is 'true.' Only through hardship and soul-searching can one find your 'true self…'" He turned back to Yu. "This Izanagi of yours…interesting that the creator-god of Japan is a reflection of your 'true self,' Narukami-san."

"Ah…"

"That's right…they all can summon multiple Personas in battle. And the way they summon them…it's not like the Wild Card, either."

From the corner of his eye, Yu could see an annoyed Naoto and a flustered Kanji coming around the corner.

"And now, because of that masked man, that 'Philemon,' three of my friends can now summon more Personas too…"

"Narukami-senpai," Naoto said curtly. "I see you're feeling fine…given how much of that tequila Officer Suou gave you back there, I'm relieved that you're up and about."

"Glad to see you're feeling better too, Naoto-kun," said Yu, giving her his confident smile. "I saw you stumble near the stairway. Not gonna lie, I was worried for a second there."

"Th-Thank you…for your concern…"

Naoto turned her cap down in a futile attempt to conceal the small blush that appeared on her cheeks. Kanji noticed this for a change. In fact, lately, he had been catching on to a lot of instances where Naoto became flustered at Yu's cavalier gestures and their talks during time spent together.

"It's not like he said anything romantic and shit, right? Right…?"

Whether or not her sudden bouts of demure little stutters and shy gestures actually meant that Naoto had a crush on Yu, Kanji knew that his chances of her noticing him were far less than slim to none. In fact, those chances were probably was in a negative integer.

It sucked.

"I-In any case, Narukami-senpai, what matter of topic were you discussing with Toudou-san and Sonomura-san?" said Naoto, re-equipping her stern, masculine detective mask.

"Sonomura-san summoned her Persona to fix Toudou-san up just a moment ago. It seems that Sonomura-san's primary Persona is a healer and a spell caster."

"A spell caster, huh?" Naoto glanced at her new and old companions. "I guess you can call me a 'spell caster' too…Sukuna-Hikona, that is. Why don't we talk of our roles in battle, senpai? We're all
here, resting. Now that there's a lot of us, we need to form a more concrete set of strategies if we're to explore the labyrinths in full. We can at least start with our personal preferences for weapons and the Personas that we all began with."

"You read my mind, Naoto-kun. We were kind of leading into that anyway," said Yu.

"L-Leading into…what…aagh…"

Yu and friends turned around to see a seriously sick Kei Nanjo on his side, now vaguely alert. "Oh, good lord…I am fortune's…fool…"

"Uh, dude? Quit with the seman…semin…fancy talk, and speak like a normal person…" Kanji sighed, rubbing his head. "…Please."

"Oh, just let me be, you…you…hurk-!

He was able to force himself on all fours, and vomited. Naoya and Maki didn't think it was possible to make something like vomiting not look completely disgusting, but Kei Nanjo had an aura about him that could make that very act look…not refined, no, but less repulsive compared to, for example, Akihiko Sanada. Thankfully, for poor Kei, he did not need to pour out his entire stomach, and was able to stop after a few coughs.

"That's damn crazy that you're not flooding this floor, dude. You drank two whole bottles of sake," said Kanji, in awe. "Takes some serious balls."

"Y-Yes, well…" Kei stammered, forcing himself into an upright position. He wiped his chin off with his sleeve. "…I was foolish enough to get caught up in my passions. That in itself is foolishness, and foolishness does not, as you say, 'take some serious balls,' Tatsumi-kun."

"True that…"

"Say, Nanjo-kun," Maki began, taking on a dulcet tone. "Are you well enough to sit and chat with us for a while? We were just about to talk about how we all fight."

"How we fight…I suppose you will also mention our Personas, no?" Kei nodded his head in approval. "A very wise course of action, considering the state that some of us are –"

"Heeeeeeey, Nanjo!"

Kei sighed. Like a rampaging puppy came Masao Inaba, bounding down the hallway at the speed of a roadrunner. In his arm, for reasons only God or whomever knew, was a massive stuffed unicorn.

"Heyheyhey Nanjo! Look, look!" Masao hoisted up the unicorn. It looked as tacky as they came, what with a rainbow-colored mane and light blue fuzz, but stitched on its side was a massive number "1." "I won this thing at the shooting gallery! It's fucking perfect for you and your fetish with the number one! Now you can finally get laid!"

"…What the hell did you just say, Inaba!?

"Hey man, it's either this unicorn or Brown who's gonna dump your V-card for ya! Nya ha hah!"

"You monkey-!"

"Hahaha, you wanna go, don't y—wha!?"

*Bsh*
Masao tripped over his left foot and skidded four times hence on the floor, dropping the unicorn. He slid and slid, face-first, right into the puddle of vomit that Kei had heaved up.

Masao didn't budge. He knew in his heart that he'd never live this down.

Kei Nanjo, for the first time, laughed his ass off, and laugh his ass of he did. Soon enough, everyone else filed in and began to join in the laughter.

For the first time in a while, Maki felt happy.

Rooftop, Food Court

Between the combined efforts of Team Hermelin and Team Yasogami (sans Rise), whomever was down was successfully hauled up for some fresh air on the roof. Masao had been scrubbed clean of Kei's rotten vomit (using the roughest pumice he could find for extra cleanliness), and those who imbibed themselves were getting nice and sober. Now, laughter and jokes were being swapped between the two teams, with some humorous culture shock thrown in – they were far apart in terms of years, after all, with Team Hermelin hailing from 1996, Team Yasogami from 2011.

"Lemme see that again!" Masao shouted, swiping Yosuke's flip phone from him. "This can't be a real phone! It's so small!" He held the device above his head. "It looks like one of those toy phones that a girl's doll would have!"

Hidehiko took the phone and, crudely, shoved it between his butt cheeks. "I could probably shove this up my –"

"DON'T EVEN." Yosuke swiped his phone back, mustering up a death glare at the overly curious duo. His expression then warped to disappointment. "Teddie actually did that once. Please, look at it all you want, just don't shove it down your pants…"

Hidehiko and Masao looked at one another, shocked. They then directed their gazes at the bear in question, who was now out of his costume. He was, in broad daylight, snuggling his head into Eriko's breasts. Instead of throwing the blonde boy over the roof like any sane woman would do, she was giggling and going along with his antics.

"Mmmm, speak more English to me, my fair lady…" Teddie cooed, blushing heavily. "I've always wanted to meet an all-American girl…"

"I'm not American, you silly goose!" Eriko exclaimed with a chuckle. "I was raised there for years, but I'm all Japanese! I want to start my career here."

"Ehehehe…and what kind of…ka…ker…karear do you want to do, my lady?" Teddie asked, butchering the English pronunciation of the word "career."

"I wish to be a model…if not that, a fashion designer." She winked at him, speaking in English: "I want to become a world-famous fashion designer."

"Oooooh, keep talking to me baby…" Teddie swooned at her perfect English. "This town ain't big
"Ted, that's a line from a movie," Kanji sighed, snacking on some mayonnaise-drenched French fries. "You sound like an idiot."

"Omlette du fromage..." Teddie sighed before fainting. "I finally...scored...uhuhu..."

Eriko giggled one last time. "What a funny boy he is..."

"If you weren't so taken with him, Kirishima, I'd have chucked him off of the roof the moment he set his eyes on you," Yukino spat, shaking her head in disapproval.

"Oh, but look at how he moves, Yukino," said Eriko. Teddie was rolling around like a child in a ball pit. "He was so childish yet shy when he made his moves on me. A true pervert would have leapt on me and gone right for my..." She blushed. "...Ah, well, I could say it, but that would be not safe for work, wouldn't it?"

"N-No, it wouldn't!" Yukino stuttered, blushing herself. "You can be such an airhead..."

"Pfft, yeah, seriously!" Yuka exclaimed. "You're more air-headed than me!"

Eriko cocked her head. "How am I air-headed?" She asked, genuinely confused. "I am quite aware of the dangers that we were in. I am also quite aware how much Maki likes Naoya."

Yukino was shocked. She sighed, rubbing her temples. "This is exactly what I mean...you said that so casually, you know. I mean, what if they heard you?"

"I dunno, Yukino," Yuka commented, jerking her thumb at the duo in question, "I actually don't think those two'd care, y'know? I mean, like, you, me, Inaba, we all see it. They're into each other...uh, 'fragments of the human soul' aside. They like each other."

"Oh, Yuka...I like you, but you have no tact."

"Heeey!"

Kanji looked on at the trio of girls, finding himself blushing again at Yukino and her no-nonsense attitude. He couldn't quite tell what he was feeling - it was some kind of attraction, but he couldn't put it into words. "Man, she don't pull her punches...I like that. I bet she's real smart too."

His gaze began at the tall, proud Yukino, then slowly found its way to a much shorter yet no less proud Naoto, who was conversing with their leader once again. Probably talking about Personas and strategies, no doubt. Probably taking about wherever the hell they were now, too. They looked awfully serious. Both of them probably have half of it figured out anyway.

Naoto cracked a smile at their Senpai, nodding her head eagerly at something he said.

Kanji frowned.

"Stuttering at my appearance? Calling me 'cute?' I'm sorry to say, Kanji-kun, but your little act is...rather pathetic."

"B-But..."

"There's no need to pretend to act all flustered because of this ridiculous costume Senpai made me wear, Kanji-kun. Haven't we both learned that honesty is the best policy?"
He frowned harder. The cluster of fries in his hand oozed their potato-like innards; his grasp tightened like a rope.

"Kanji-kun, are you all right?"

"Gah!"

Kanji's basket of fries went up in the air and splattered on the ground next to Yukiko's feet. He whipped his head around and met her gaze - it was genuinely worrisome, and not teasing like he expected. He was still high off her startling him and his negative thoughts, however.

"Don't scare me like that, Yukiko-senpai! I damn near shit myself!" Kanji barked, saliva landing on the girl's face.

"Goodness Kanji-kun, really?" Yukiko said, covering her mouth. "Well, pooping your pants would be a problem now, wouldn't it?"

"Geez, Yukiko...he nearly threw his fries at you, and that's all you have to say?" Chie sighed, appearing next to her.

"Well...that, and I did want to apologize to him about pouring salt into his wounds about the cross-dressing pageant." Yukiko took on a sympathetic look at her underclassman. "I mean, poor Kanji-kun's dealing with a bad case of unrequited love, after all!"

Kanji's face turned red. After a moment of deafening silence, he slithered under the table and hid.

Chie, meanwhile, gasped.

"Yukiko...after all these months, you've been so darn unaware of those guys who hit on you...yet here you are, saying that Kanji-kun's...in love with someone!? How!?! I, I mean...I...gah!" Chie shook her head in disbelief.

"Well, I thought it was obvious."

"But...Yukiko, can you really fathom Kanji-kun being in love!?"

The boy in question raised his hand, still burning with embarrassment under the table. "Senpai...I'm right here. I can hear you, dammit."

Chie gasped. She looked at her friend, then back at Kanji. She did this several times, slack-jawed.

"I...I still can't believe it..."

"Believe what, Chie-senpai?"

Speak of the devil. Naoto herself appeared before them, making Chie and Yukiko yelp. Naoya joined her, albeit looking far less stern.

"Ah! Naoto-kun, what a surprise! Er...ehehe, it's nothing, really. Really! We were talking about nothing!" Chie laughed nervously.

"...Really now."

"We were talking about Kanji-kun's entry at the cross-dressing pageant. Remember?" Yukiko put a hand on her chin. "Really, it's salt in the wounds for all of us. I mean, what with you and that swimsuit - "

"Th-That's enough! We were about to begin..." Naoto huffed, embarrassed. "Toudou-san and I are
about to talk about...b-battle parameters. You ought to come on over to the end table..."

"Huh, really?" Chie asked. "Well, I suppose that'll definitely help in the future..."

"We'll meet you there," said Naoya, smiling at them. "Tatsumi, I hope you come on down too."

Kanji groaned.

An Emperor tarot card burst into flames. Behind the spectral, cascading flames emerged a slender, blue-skinned figure with a crystalline mask and crystalline formations on his legs, on his lower arms, and around his crotch area. To the amusement of some Investigation Team members, the figure was holding three different monkeys, each wearing a bandanna of some sort. Naoya Toudou's eyes were in a partial trance, his hand covering half of his face - a tic he had developed whenever his "other self" spoke.

"I am thou...thou art I...from the sea of thy soul, I cometh...I am Seimen Kongou, he who protects from the ills of this world. The power to defend thousands shall be at thy side forever, my other self..."

"...This is Seimen Kongou, my 'other self.' He can cast wind magic and can bind - that is, he can block out magic and other kinds of attacks," said Naoya, still concentrating. "Even though he's weak to two different elements, he still resists both fire and ice, and can reflect wind attacks. I'd say even after all this time, after using all kind of other Personas, he's still rather powerful. But I suppose that since he's the one I awoke to first, the Persona I discovered as I accepted myself, it would make some sense that he'd grow along with me."

He gently moved his hand upward and snapped his fingers. Seimen Kongou vanished, taking the blue flames along with him. The boy's hand then returned to his face, his fingers grazing his skin as Seimen Kongou stirred silently. "Ah, and as far as weapons go...a light, one-handed sword is what I prefer to use."

"Uh, why do you do that?" asked Yosuke.

"Do what?"

"You know...touch your face like that. It's kind of weird, dude."

Naoya suddenly became self-conscious and removed his hand. "Ah...it's a habit. Whenever he or some other Persona, comes to mind, I just...it feels comforting, knowing that they're there, I guess."

"Kinda looks like you're in a cologne ad, dude," Kanji commented. A few snickers came from Team Hermelin's side.

"Hah, well whaddaya know!" Masao exclaimed. "Tudou's modeling for 'Essence of Seimen Kongou'!"

"Nya hah! It leaves your skin as supple as a...as a...monkey's butt! Yeah!" Hidemiko shouted.

Silence.

Kei Nanjo groaned. "Your attempts at humor are as pathetic as any penguin's attempt at flight,
Uesugi. I'd say that you've stooped to a new low. I heard no dated pun in that sentence of yours."

"Yeah, seriously..." Yosuke sighed, shaking his head.

Yu twitched, stifling a giggle. "...I thought it was sorta funny..."

"That's because you think saying 'butts' is funny, partner. What are you, twelve?"

"...Butts are funny."

"Dude!"

Hidehiko nervously chuckled. Even he was aware at how poor that attempt at humor was. "Well, the spotlight's on me, I guess...er...lemme try this...uh...everybody calls me 'Brown!' Since I can be a tad prickly when I'm in a bad mood, I use a spear as my weapon of choice! My Persona is called Nemhain, and believe it or not, she's female! Why? Uh, 'cuz I have the passions of a woman! And, uh, she's some crazy goddess who flies in frenzies, apparently, at least that's what Kirishima said...uh...so that sorta makes me womanly?"

*Bonk*

"Ow! Shit!"

Yuka threw a bowl of yakisoba at Hidehiko's head. A small spurt of blood gushed from it as he fell over. "So you claim to be all 'womanly' and stuff 'cuz you're crazy!? Why don't you try dealing with cramps and menstrual blood once a month!? You're an asshole, Uesugi!"

"Pfft, yeah, no kidding," Chie spat. "Just tell us what this 'Nemhain' is like so we can start ignoring you."

"Unnnhh...she uses lightning and force magic...she's weak to fire...pretty good at everything - owww, that burned..." Hidehiko slumped over in pain.

"'Force...?" Naoto asked. "What is 'force?' I've never heard of such an element. It's terribly vague-sounding - "

*FWOOM*

A sharp, rapid blast of air shot from a now-summoned Nemhain's hand. It barely missed Chie and Yuka, leaving them with a severe case of wind burn. Both of them shrieked, shuddering at the overwhelming pain that Hidehiko opted to leave them in.

"That's what 'force' is, you meanies. Think of it as one big fat shock wave. Shocking, isn't it?" The boy slumped back over, ego still bruised.

"Huh...you were actually clever that time!" Kei exclaimed. He began to ponder. "And here I was, thinking you and Inaba were a hundred and ten percent hopeless."
Yu and friends carefully eyed the steely young man that was Kei Nanjo. Earlier, he had made one hell of a scene with Mitsuru Kirijo, and Yukiko caught him lecturing Ken Amada about Japanese sweets. What he had recovered from was from the after-effects of some sake - Japanese rice wine - that he had proceeded to guzzle down, all while loudly singing praises about their mutual motherland. He was remarkably less frosty than his female counterpart, yet far more haughty at the same time.

"He's an...interesting fellow. I ought to keep my eye on him," thought Yu, chewing nonchalantly on a rice ball that was nearly the size of his head.

"Well...erm, Nanjo-san, why don't you tell us about your Persona?" asked Yu casually.

The boy in question raised his glasses, taking on a serious expression. "My Persona, hm? If you mean the one I began with, he is named Aizen Myouou, named after one of the Kings of Wisdom in Vajrayana Buddhism. Given how I was raised and given how I've become the way I am now, I find it utterly fascinating still that this creature represents me the most."

"Uh, why is that?" asked Chie, scrunching her brow.

"Well...how do I say this? Aizen Myouou the figure was a representative figure embodying human lust. The Yogin Sutra, a writing by the original patriarchs of Shingon Buddhism, states that he embodies when human sexual arousal contributes to enlightenment. This has carried over to other interpretations of the god, wherein in our country, he is also considered a god of love and lust, worshiped by prostitutes -"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, big guy, slow the hell down! Too much information!" Kanji shouted, blushing furiously. "I, I mean, why do you find it fuckin' necessary to talk about prostitutes and s-...sex, and, and...dammit man, too much info! Too much!"

"Y-Yeah...can we just stick with what he does in battle, pleeeeeease?" Yosuke begged, equally as embarrassed.

Kei sighed in frustration. "All of our Personas carry some kind of historical or mythological significance, you know. But then again, taking the time to educate yourselves on something fun would be too tiresome for people like you..."

Kanji bristled. "You tryin' to say were' stupid!?"

"Pah! That's quite the conclusion you've jumped to. But if you must know, Aizen Myouou excels in both magic and physical skills, equally, at the cost of being a bit slow. His two primary magic sources are derived from earth - the "Magna" line of spells - and light, the "Hama" line of spells. As for me, I have studied kendo from a young age. Be wary of bashing attacks and Zan spells, however, for he is susceptible to those...and honestly, I find that rather...shocking."

He was still livid as hell, but Kanji and the others stifled a giggle at that one.

"Man, why the hell do they laugh when you say it!?" Hidehiko sighed.

"Because I know that comedic timing is an art form, 'Brown.' An outdated pun cannot be salvaged, whereas a well-timed joke most certainly can.” His serious countenance suddenly took a turn for the wicked. "Such as, for example...a joke surrounding just how exactly you got your little nickname...?"

Hidehiko screamed. "Nooo!"
Kei folded his hands over his lap, satisfied. "I rest my case. Now, who would like to go next?" He turned his gaze on the Investigation Team, all of them too shocked to speak. "Well? Why don't one of you 'harbingers of the future' go? You've either made nary a peep or complained this entire time."

"Uh...if you say so, Nanjo-san," Yu replied. "I am the leader of these so-called 'harbingers,' good sir..."

A tarot card - the Fool - materialized in the air, emitting wisps of flames as it floated. Yu's hand shot at it, grabbing it madly and crushing it.

*KRSH*

The broken card begot more flames, rushing wildly above Yu's head. Materializing from them was the yakuza-clad god himself, Izanagi.

"This is my Persona...Izanagi. This is the one who's been with me since the very beginning..."

"The creator god himself??" Kei exclaimed, taken aback.

"Correct. This Izanagi is good with lightning magic and can use other lightning-based attacks. Also, check this out:"

At Yu's mental command, Izanagi reigned in his arms and shot them back out with a cry: "Dekunda!"

The Investigation Team and Naoya's team were enveloped in peculiar-looking yellow glass bubbles. As they were bought inside each one, whatever maladies had struck them - sluggishness, a bad hangover, sore muscles - were gradually being sucked out of them. A flurry of rune-like green lines slithered around the bubble, pulsing and glowing as everyone's maladies were sucked out further and further -

*PSH* - *PSH* - *PSH*

- Until each bubble began to burst into glass-like shards, leaving behind little flurries of sparks. Everyone staggered and yelped in surprise at what Yu had done.

"Wh-What was that, Sensei!?" Teddie exclaimed. "I - wait, I'm not all passed out anymore! And I was enjoying it too..."

"The Dekunda spell, said to remove any kind of spell or ailment that weakens you. Strength sapped? Feeling slow? Just have me use Dekunda. Count on it."

All that Team Hermelin had seen of Yu was his more eccentric side, so seeing him stand up and act as the "boss" of his team was a pleasant surprise. "I guess you're the dependable type after all," said Kei, smiling in approval. "I actually look forward to collaborating with you."

"Same here." Yu flashed a confident smile. "Well guys? Anybody wanna go next?"
His posse was flustered. It took Chie's stuttering to break the ice once more.

"Uh, uh, well, I use my legs!" She exclaimed, taking a stance.

"Your...legs?" Masao asked, raising a brow.

"Geh! Not like that! I practice kung fu! Well...sort of. Think of it as some kind of kung-fu/Jeet Kune Do mashup...hey, I like Bruce Lee movies, okay?"

"Mixing martial arts together...so you're kind of like Kido, then," Kei commented.

"Yeah, yeah! When I was back in Inaba, I would put on all these awesome greaves and leg guards, and with them I can knock any Shadow flat on its ass!" She spread her left leg outward and bent the right, stretching the former.

"And what of your Persona?"

"Tomoe? She's kind of like me: good at whacking things, and...not much else, really. Uh, except for that Bufu spell she just learned recently, but she's not very good with magic..." Her eyes widened, an idea forming. "Oh! But she can do this!"

A Chariot tarot card materialized at her command. She stopped her little stretch and reared her right leg back. With a breath, she roundhouse kicked the card, blasting it to bits, summoning a yellow jumpsuit-clad woman with black hair and a pointed motorcycle helmet. The naginata-wielding woman reared her weapon back, aiming for Teddie:

"Sleeper Punch!"

The rear end of the weapon violently slammed onto the boy's head. He screamed out like a dolphin and landed flat on his face, sleeping deeper than a baby. After a second, Tomoe vanished, and Chie did a victory twirl.

"Cool, huh?"

"Indeed...so, the legendary female samurai of the Heian Period is your Persona? That's quite fitting," Kei said, cocking his head. Chie giggled and blushed, flattered by his comment.

"Well, if Chie went, I suppose I'll go next," said Yukiko, setting aside the cup of tea she was drinking. "I'm not much of a fighter, but I can throw this fan just fine." She took out the metallic tessen that she found in the labyrinth, flaunting its utilitarian iron plating. "And for my Persona, my Konohana-Sakuya can cast powerful fire spells and heal. She can protect from fire attacks too. Leave any of that stuff to me."

"Ah, you're a fire mage too!?" Yuka exclaimed, running up to Yukiko with a smile on her face. "This is great! I think we'll, like, get along good, don't you think?"

"I certainly hope so, Ayase-san." She sneakily eyed the still-sleeping Teddie. "In fact...why don't we have a little...competition to see whose fire is stronger...?"

Everyone gasped. Yosuke spat out his drink at the proposal.

"Wow, you sounded just like a tough guy!" Yuka exclaimed. "I haven't used Houri in a while. I think I ought to, I mean, I don't wanna get rusty or anything..."

"Shall we...? I have the perfect thing that we can practice on..."
The two ladies stood side by side. In Yukiko's line of sight came a tarot card bearing the High Priestess; Yuka stretched her arms back, letting a Magician tarot card burn above her. In unison, Yukiko used her fan to split her card in two, while Yuka's mental command broke her own. Rising from the flames by Yukiko was Konohana-Sakuya, adorned in a cherry blossom-themed outfit much like the one and only Jun the Swan, with a massive fan of petals emphasizing her motions behind her; rising from Yuka's was Houri, a harem pants-wearing female with a half blue, half pink body, an unusually large head antennae, and a pair of handcuffs with thin chains behind her.

"Agilao!"

Konohana-Sakuya did a magnificent twirl in tandem with Houri's dramatic whipping of her antennae, with both summoning a pair of Agilao spells: a magma-like burst of scorching hot flames blew up from beneath where Teddie was sleeping...

"Wh...oh, what the hell, you two!" Yosuke shouted. "I know Teddie can be a pervert and an asshole, but did you really have to fucking set him on fire!?"

Yukiko's face became deadly serious: "Yes."

"Like, my friends and I fought lotsa cutsey-looking monsters back in Mikage-cho. I'd say that this ought to, like, keep him under control...I mean, you guys know him better than we do, but you did say he was a pervert." Yuka shrugged.

"Put it out! Now!"

The two girls sighed, annoyed that Yosuke had to ruin their fun. They meandered off to look for some water when Masao spoke again: "Hm, you're pretty riled up now, aren't you? Why don't you go next, guy?"

"Ugh..." Yosuke furiously rubbed his head in frustration. "I'm Yosuke Hanamura, and...damn, I was actually looking forward to this too..."

Yu stepped in, giving Yosuke a pat on the back. "Come on, partner. Teddie will be fine, I'm sure of it. Look!" He pointed at Yuka and Yukiko, who were suspiciously fanning the flames - the second they noticed Yu, they began pouring random drinks on him instead. "See? Totally fine. Now, talk about Jiraya for us, will ya?"

"Hmm...Jiraya's good at just about everything, I guess. He's very fast, and since I use a pair of knives in battle, that helps me a lot. He mainly uses wind-based attacks. I can resist it, naturally, but I need to stay away from electricity."

"...That's a pretty bare-bones description, Hanamura," said Naoya; despite his wording, he had a kind look on his face. "Why don't you show him to us?"

"Hm?" Yosuke looked surprised. "Well, if you say so...geez, I can't believe we can summon our Personas out in the open like this." He let the Magician tarot card appear in front of him, concentrating. "Man, this feels weird..."

He let the blue flames rise once more. A gust of wind burst from below him as he called: "Come, Jiraya!"

As he didn't have his knives on him, he took a cue from his partner and clapped his hands shut over the card. It broke, and from the haze came his take on the great shape-shifting folklore hero: a lean, jovial being wearing a white disco suit that had camo accents flared at the bottom and the sleeves. The color of his hands and his black, spherical head with a pair of mouse-like ears, were all
evocative of a frog, the same creature that the hero who carried his namesake turned into. Sharply rising up was a long, red scarf.

"Diamal!"

Jiraya made a sign with his hands, spinning madly like a top. He spun and spun, grinding to a halt when he faced Teddie's direction. He thrust his hands downward, letting the healing magic do its work on the bear. Two discs of light left behind a flickering little star, which hovered around him as he gradually began to heal.

"With that, he'll heal overtime," Yosuke huffed, letting Jiraya retreat. "Well? What do you think?"

Yosuke felt his spirits dampen in ten seconds flat when he heard Masao and Eriko giggling. Masao in particular was clutching his sides as he tried not to fall over. "Oh wow...I, I mean, oh wow...ha ha ha...*pffft*...it's a...it's a...!"

"It's a disco ninja frog!" Eriko shouted, arms shaking with excitement. Masao howled, legs giving out as he fell on the ground laughing.

Yukiko, having overheard, immediately snorted and burst into a laughing fit. "O-Oh, my...oh! I, I never noticed that before! Hee hee hee! Y-You're right - *snort* - ah, hahaha! He, he totally looks like, like, a - *pffft* - f-f-frog in a disco suit! Ahh hahahaha~!"

For once, Chie laughed right along with her, snorting with the elegance of a drunkard. The laughter spread and spread. Even Kei and Yu let out a few giggles.

Yosuke slipped beneath the table, on the verge of tears. "I hate you, Inaba..."

A wicked gleam sparkled in Naoya's eyes for once. "W-Well...hee hee...good grief, that was funny...but you wanna know what's even funnier?"

The others turned to him, confused. Before they could blink, Naoya summoned Seimen Kongou once more, having him lightly chop Masao on the back. The reaction was intense enough for him to summon his own Persona however - shocked at the pain, the boy threw off his backpack and rolled back, frantically waving his arms around as he began his summon.

"Wah-wah-wah-waaah! Persona!"

From within Masao emerged a bandage-swathed stout man wearing an iron mask. Decorating his cuffs, legs, and hair were odd green tendrils, and the same tendrils served as tassels on his spear. The Persona did a little dance, whipping his head and hips in circular motions as a massive pocket of gravity threatened to crush Naoya. With precise speed, Naoya dodged. A blackish sphere crushed into the rooftop floor, leaving behind a sizable crater. With one final head-bashing motion, the Persona vanished.

"...That was Inaba's Persona, Ogun. Physical specialist, with some gravity-based magic for good measure. I'll leave it up to all of you to see which one looks more ridiculous: Disco Ninja Frog or Toilet Paper Man." Naoya flashed a cat-like smile.

It was Yosuke's turn to laugh. "Hah! Finally, a Persona stupider-looking than mine!" Everyone else laughed just as hard. Masao's face fell.

"Ugh...why do you have to be so ridiculous-looking, Ogun..."

"I am thou...I share thy passions, for I am warrior and blacksmith to your dancer." Masao
squawked when he heard Ogun - who appeared to be crossing his arms - speak to him. "Do ye doubt my power? Or...do ye doubt your dancing skills?"

"N-No, it's not that, Ogun..." Masao waved his hands, still in a state of slight shock. "Uh, it's just...I appreciate your help, your magic, your everything, seriously...it's just...your outfit..."

"...Does it not please you? Please understand that such an outfit allows me to dance and battle with no restraint."

"You're pretty damn well-spoken for an African god of war..."

"Art thou implying something, Master? Please, let it not be true...is my master a racist?"

"W-What!? No! I...ugh, forget it..."

Kanji tilted his head in surprise - thanks to his newfound powers, he caught wind of Masao's little conversation with the war god. "Ogun's a god from Africa, of all places? Wow, who'da thunk it? I...think...I dunno man, but all of us...our Personas sound super-Japanese to me."

"They most certainly are, Kanji-kun," Naoto replied stiffly. "Take-Mikazuchi is a son of Izanagi, born from the blood on his sword when he slew the god Futsunushi. There's a story about him where he goes to pacify some local gods - "

"Um, excuse me Shirogane-san," Eriko butted in politely. "But that statement you just made was incorrect."

"H-Huh!?!" Naoto was caught off guard for once. "Wh...how?"

"Uh...oh, you said this before, Kirishima!" Kanji exclaimed, smiling. "It wasn't Futsu-whatever that was killed by Izanagi. It was...it was...uh, the fire god guy...Ka...Kagu...Kage...shit, what was his name!?" He scrunched his brow.

"You almost got it, Tatsumi-kun!" Eriko exclaimed. "You're on the right track!"

"Ka...gu..." He snapped his fingers as the answer dawned on him. "It was Kagutsuchi! Yeah! That's what his name was! Take-Mikazuchi was born out of Kagutsuchi's blood!"

"Ding-ding! That's right! You remembered!" Eriko clapped her hands, happy.

"Fuck yeah!"

Naoto sighed, turning her hat down in shame. "I can't believe I got that wrong...and I nearly lost my composure again, just like back home...what's gotten into me lately?"

She found herself eyeing her senpai - Yu - and felt her face growing hotter again. "Especially him...my composure just flies away when he's present..."

Eriko's chirpy chatter snapped Naoto out of her reverie. "So, Tatsumi-kun, tell us about your version of Take-Mikazuchi!"

"My Take-Mikazuchi...he and I are one and the same: we rely on our muscles! One hit, and Shadows go out like a light! And for an element? His skills revolve around lightning. BZZZZZZZAP!" He flexed his right arm.

"And...your weapon of choice?" Kei inquired.
"Shields!"

"...Beg pardon?"

"Shields...uh, things I can bash with. Desks, folding chairs, steel plates, you name it!"

"...I am not the least bit surprised. A simple weapon for a simpleton with a simple Persona."

"Are you just gonna sit there and be an asshole when we're not fighting!? Huh!?" Kanji spat, glaring at Kei. Eriko took the time to reign him in.

"Now now, Tatsumi-kun, he means well. Nanjo-kun can be terribly abrasive at times, but he does it for all our sake." She flashed him a smile, the kind of smile that an ingenue would give in the midst of a happy frolic in a flower field. "I, for one, eagerly anticipate seeing you fight."

Kanji was at a loss. She was as feminine as could be, more girlish than daisies and refined and proper and all cheerful as all girls ought to be, at least according to what society dictated...

"...Huh. Maybe I really have been looking at all that machismo stuff the wrong way...she seems pretty tough too...she believed in me and all..."

He blushed. And he panicked. This was twice that he became all bothered and borderline-hot - and over a pair of drastically different girls from 1996.

"Yeah...I guess they aren't super-macho...well, they're girls, for one, but...it's like when I made those dolls for that kid and his mom...he said 'thanks' and everything...I guess this is what Senpai calls 'confidence'?"

The rush of emotions - relief, embarrassment, a sense of empowerment from within - nearly made him pass out. Eriko gasped, catching him by his arm.

"Are you all right, Tatsumi-kun!? Your face is all red!"

"Guh!" He let out a gasp and waved his hand. "I...I'm feelin' okay, Kirishima-san. You know, you seem...pretty tough for a girl. I, I mean, uh...well, what about your Persona? Her name was...Nicholas, or something?"

Eriko laughed, giving him a hearty - and surprisingly strong - slap on the back. "It's Nike! Nike, the Greek goddess of victory!"

"H-Huh...that's right..."

"I don't quite have the endurance to summon her now, but my Nike looks like a beautiful silver angel..." Eriko said dreamily. "She's a stalwart protector and can use water-based magic! And as for me, I am a fencer!" She struck a fencing pose. "I am an angelic harbinger of victory! From now on, you have my protection!"

"You're as lively as ever, Kirishima," said Yukino, standing tall. "Well, I guess I'll go next."

She and Yukino exuded the confidence Kanji aspired to. He wouldn't tell them the fact that he was a skilled sewer...not yet, anyway.

"I...well, look, I can see how you kids are all looking at me," she said with annoyance, as Yosuke and Chie were somewhat gawking at her. "I've reformed, you see. I look after others now...and other than these nifty razors that I can throw - " She took out a razor in question. " - any shred of
my past is gone. And as for my Persona, Vesta, she's good with all kinds of magic. She knows a lightning spell and a fire spell at the moment, I think. Her will power is very high, too." Yukino nodded her head in approval. "I can do all sorts of things in a fight. I'll do my best."

Kanji clapped. "Same here!"

The rest of the Investigation Team, sans Teddie, looked at one another, slightly taken aback with Kanji's blossoming enthusiasm. It wasn't like his usual hot-blooded self either. Even Naoto couldn't help but speculate.

"Hmm, it seems that almost everyone on your side went, right Toudou-san?" She asked.

"Sure thing."

"My weapon of choice...I am allowed to use a gun." She carefully took out her single-action revolver, holding it in her palms. "I noticed that many of you...somehow have firearms. With this, in any case, I can fight from any position." She blushed a little at her next statement: "I'm a bit on the frail side, though, so I'm better off fighting at a distance..."

"May I see your gun, Shirogane-san?" Maki asked, having been quiet this entire time. "I think I know what kind it is!"

"Huh!?" Before Naoto could react, Maki was hovering over it with a big smile on her face.

"This is...a Pietta 1873 .45LC Single Action Revolver! I love a good revolver! How powerful is it? How did you go around getting it!? I'd love to know, since you are fifteen..."

Naoto stammered. "U-Uh...well, I, um...I don't..."

"They don't need to know that it was my mother's gun...I shouldn't even be holding it...I'm nowhere near old enough to pass the test to possess it..."

"Hey now, Sonomura, no need to get up in her face like that," Yukino sighed. "Besides, you have your damned hand cannon of a revolver yourself. I'm amazed that you can use the Colt Anaconda so well."

"Heh heh...I'm not that good with it..." Maki replied, blushing.

"...I-In any case, my Persona is named Sukuna-Hikona. He excels in magic, with his specialties being in light and darkness skills. Given that's what he specialized in before we came here, I can safely assume that he will learn similar skills as we progress through these labyrinths...that's all I have to say about him."

"...About him, yes. The rest of my Senpai don't know about Hermaphroditus, or Sappho, or Ame-no-Uzume..."

Naoto put her hand on her chest; her heart beat like a steady drum. Her heart was pounding as a reaction to all of those presences - the presences of the many, many Personas that Team Hermelin held within them.

"The fact that Kanji-kun, Rise-san and I can summon more Personas will be out in the open eventually...and I actually hope it's sooner rather than later."

"That was a...very thorough analysis of your Persona, Shirogane-san," said Maki. "I wonder, maybe I ought to do the same?"
"Well, you could always try..."

"My Matsu is a magical Persona, much like Sukuna-Hikona. She's a healer and a Bufu mage, and she just recently picked up the uber-awesome Megido spell..."

"Megido!?" Naoto exclaimed. "Prior to our arrival, Sukuna-Hikona learned that spell as well...it's powerful, yet draining on the mind..."

"It certainly is, but I have a lot of energy to spare when it comes to spells. Alas, I'm a frail thing like you and Amagi-san, Shirogane-san. I have a nifty composite bow that Theodore-san's holding for me in the workshop, but it doesn't really help...and Matsu just so happens to crumple when she's slashed or bashed in with something. So, if you put me on the front lines...keep me waaaay in the back. Seriously."

The Investigation Team nodded, with Yu in particular keeping note of that fact. "Well, I think we have one more from each team...we have our Teddie, but wasn't there a ninth person with you guys?"

"Ah!" Maki realized. "Kido! We forgot about him! Where is he anyway...?"

"He's right here."

The two teams turned to where Reiji had suddenly appeared: the upper right-hand corner of the food court, far away from the rest of them. His back was turned toward the group, with Reiji himself idly sitting and watching the clouds go by.

"What a stroke of luck that was..." Kei sighed. "Kido, can you take a moment of your time to stop brooding and tell Team Yasogami about your Persona? Please?"

Reiji sighed. He set aside whatever he was holding - a deck of cards? - and turned to face the group, still frowning. "My primary Persona is named Bres. He is a swordsman, and uses darkness-themed magic. As for myself? I do mixed martial arts."

The Devil tarot card flickered in his palm. "I'm good. But don't expect more from me than that."

With a "harumph," he turned back around, fiddling with the deck of cards that he had bought with him.

"Ugh, and after all we went through..." Masao huffed, stomping on over to Reiji. "Hey, Kido! Quit bein' an asshole and get over here!"

Reiji snorted. "I most certainly will not. Leave me alone."

Masao groaned. He picked up an empty can of green tea and chucked it at Reiji's head - it bopped him with a soft clink. Before Masao could even blink, Reiji was snarling up in his face, having taken three massive strides out of his seat. It was at that moment that Masao saw the shaggy-haired boy preparing to gut him -

"Stop it, you two!"

*BMPF*
"Aaah..."

"Huh-!?"

Reiji's eyes widened with shock, realizing too late that his intended blow for Masao had been given to Maki instead. She felt her gut explode in pain and collapsed, whimpering as a rivulet of blood dripped from her mouth.

"Hah...you're both...*cough*...idiots..." Maki huffed, breathing steadily to stop the influx of pain. Masao was right at her side, panicking. She let him hold her, letting a slew of tears fall from her eyes.

"M-Maki...!"

He hissed like a snake. Fuck the fact that Reiji could own his ass in a fight. Him sacking Maki like that was just plain wrong. Masao cocked his head back, pushing Ogun out of his head and making way for a new Persona - a fearful god of pestilence, yet a great defender all the same: Gozu-Tennoh.

Reiji twitched, having taken nanoseconds to push himself backward from Masao's punch. Gozu-Tennoh was a Persona that granted all power and skill - he cringed at the small shockwave that emerged from the other boy's arm. No time to dwell on that: he felt his nose explode in pain as Masao cocked himself back and sharply slammed his head into Reiji's chin. Wasting not a second, Masao cocked his left arm back and landed a clean hit on the other's cheek, sending the welterweight flying backward in a loop. Gozu-Tennoh proved to be a potent asset for Masao, for Reiji cried out at the immense pain that splintered his nose.

"Fuck you!" Reiji shouted, clenching his nose. "You started it!"

"And you fucking socked a girl in the gut 'cuz I threw an empty can at your head!" Masao retorted. "Get over yourself!"

Maki shuddered. Her body's convulsions began to lessen, although she was sure that Reiji, proficient as he was in all kinds of martial arts, had cracked a rib at the very least. She sighed, letting a blanket of anxiety fall over her.

"I just made the situation worse. Why am I not surprised?"

It was exceedingly difficult to keep one's spirits high when you were the cause of repeatedly making shit hit the fan. It was an alarmingly common occurrence in Mikage-cho. Here were two boys, fighting over her, and for a reason that was, for all intents and purposes, damn idiotic.

It hurt to talk, hence Reiji and Masao's little scrap went on. The trills of sonic airwaves wormed their way into the ears of the fighters' spectators as they rushed on over to put an end to it. Masao swung his fist upward, aiming for the chin - it was a poorly telegraphed strike, letting Reiji shuffle back with ease. Even as Gozu-Tennoh's energy looped around and crashed into his side, slamming him in the backside, Reiji wasn't debilitated by it, only by the pain of his shattered nose. Taking a crouch, he shuffled forward and landed a lightning-quick punch to the jaw, sending Masao flying backward and smashing the ground with a trail of blood flying behind him. Masao's agonized groan was cut short by a sharp crunch, gasping loud at the impact of Reiji's foot stomping at the base of his spine.

"Kido, stop it for God's sake!"

Yukino's voice didn't even register as Reiji raised his foot for another vicious stomp, this time dropping it like an anchor on Masao's left hand. There was no way he could get up now - he gasped as he saw the imposing, purple-armored Bres, Reiji's Persona, looming like a phantasm over him. A
whiff of purple energy made a faint wall of smog around Reiji, letting out pulses of power as Bres reared the butt of his blade back, aiming for Masao's head. Bres gripped the butt of the blade violently, letting the waves of power pierce through the food court's floor. Masao cringed in pain as the weight of Bres' great power began to rip into him, drilling into him in a corkscrew-like fashion. Bres was a harsh king and soldier, the son of a Celtic god, and the darkness that was reflected in his aura and in Reiji's eyes boasted that fact well.

Masao shut his eyes, awaiting a deathly blow that never came.

*BAM*

"Aaagh!"

Reiji shot forward, agonizing at the pain that shot through his head. He didn't hear Kanji come from behind him at all. The taller first-year student swiped one of the folded chairs and decked him with a loud smash. Bres vanished instantly, and as the shaggy-haired boy recoiled from the shock, he gargled painfully as he felt the wind leave him - with Seimen Kongou's blessing, Naoya deftly landed a clean punch to the gut, disabling the boy. Eriko had Nike at the ready, letting the ironclad woman with shining jets on her back heal Masao's wounds; Yosuke in turn let the flickering stars of another Diamal spell ease Maki's pain. Reiji shuddered with rage, seriously considering giving Yukino - even if she were a girl - a beating. The mother wolf's iron gaze pissed him off greatly - her earth-colored eyes always exuded an overbearing force that she just loved throwing at people, much like Kei Nanjo and his damn pride. To her, it was "tough love." To him, it was her being a condescending bitch.

"Inaba was a damn idiot for throwing the can. He can be a damn idiot all the damn time, and I'll be damned for saying that to his face, but - but -"

She grabbed his collar with one hand and yanked on his ebon curls with the other, leveling her face with his own. "What you just did was disgusting. You distancing yourself from the rest of us does less, way less than nothing! What happened to seeing our journey through to the end!? What's with this brooding bullshit that you should've fucking dumped when Kandori died!?!"

Reiji spat and hissed. "Fuck you."

"Kido!"

"Shut up, Mayuzumi-san!"

Maki was able to muster enough strength to shout. Pathetic sobs shook her body. "I got in the way! It's my fault this bullshit happened! Just stop it already!"

Yukino gawked at the now-crying Maki, who had effectively cut the violent tension out of the air. "Just...stop it..."

The tension was gone indeed, but instead, a downy sheet of somberness laid itself in the air. Once again, Maki took it upon herself to realize that she was the source of it, that she was the one dragging the group down. It was no surprise: in a group, the one who burdens drags the rest down. If that one placing the burden themselves weren't capable of doing anything about it - even if their cause of burden were out of control - then they risked being ousted.
"...And I held it to myself to stop being a burden...why did I even bother...?"

"Sonomura-san..." Masao let out a cough, giving her a pleading look. "It's...it's not your..."

"It is. Just..." She sighed heavily. "Just...take it easy and leave me alone, okay?"

Naoya took it upon himself to stoop down and look at her in the eye. His normally placid expression was hard and stern. "Maki. Did you not take it upon yourself to stop kicking yourself in the ass and keep going until the end?"

Mechanically - and dishonestly, in all likelihood - she nodded her head.

"Then shake it off. Kido and Inaba are more in the wrong here..." Masao also glanced at her and nodded his head. Naoya was wary of his crush on the girl, and couldn't tell if it was out of genuine guilt or because he was so darn smitten with her, but it would do for now. As for Reiji, he shut his eyes and surrendered.

Naoya turned to Yu, who had appeared with the rest of the Investigation Team behind him; they were still shaken at the mini-battle that took place. He bowed deeply, taking on a far more humble tone of voice.

"We're sorry that you had to see that. Don't worry about what just happened. We'll take responsibility, and I can assure you that something like this won't happen when we go back into battle..." He rose his head slightly, yet still shied on eye contact. "We...we had a big revelation thrown at us before we got here. Tensions are still a bit high, but we're all working on it, right everybody?"

Team Hermelin's members all nodded their heads.

"Right!" Naoya smiled earnestly at Yu and his friends. "So! That was a lot of fun, wasn't it? Either way, I really do hope we learn more about one another as time goes by. My friends and I, we've been through a lot, and...well, that's how bonds grow, no? I, for one, certainly look forward to it." He gave Yu's friends a look-over. "You're a lively bunch. I'm glad you guys all get along too."

The entire team blossomed with embarrassment, all of them stuttering or blushing in some fashion.

"Ehehe...you're too kind, Toudou-san," said Chie softly, twirling her fingers together. "B-But yeah, we...uh, look forward to, um, talking more and...more..."

She personally was still a bit overwrought at how easily the situation was diffused. There was a lack of animosity towards Kanji in particular; Kanji, who Naoya commanded to smack Reiji on the head with that chair. The fault for starting the fight mainly lied in Masao, yet the guilty look on his face was his proof of penance, and Maki also claimed responsibility. They handled it far, far better compared to some of the situations that the Investigation Team had dealt with back in Inaba. That charming little mix-up at the Amagi hot springs came to mind. Of course, all men were perverts, so of course the fact that the girls were still in the baths past their time wasn't their fault - at least, according to Chie and the other girls.

All four of them were absolutely useless perverts at times - wait, four?

"Teddie!" Chie shouted suddenly, eyes wide. "We forgot about Teddie! Yu-kun, Teddie's -"

" - Gonna be fine, Chie," said Yu placidly. "Don't worry about him."

"Y-Yu-kun, we haven't mentioned his Persona -"
"He'll be fine," Yu said, cutting her off.

"But he - "

"Juuuust fine."

"Bu - "

"Shut up."

Silent stares. Yu still said nothing, completely uncaring of both the acrid smell of smoke looming in the air and the suspicious crackling sounds that accompanied it.

Teddie was blacked out. As one ought to have expected, Yukiko and Yuka fanned the flames instead of putting them out, and there was no Diamal to save him now. Like a log burning slowly and ephemerally in a fire pit, Teddie burned.

Slowly, the air grew cheerful again. It was Yu who spoke this time.

"I haven't heard about the next labyrinth from our navigator yet," said he, fingers on his chin in thought. "I guess we ought to relax a bit more, gather items and whatnot?" He took a look at Reiji, who was struggling to stay awake. "Ah, but I guess you'll need to take him to the nurse's office..."

"We'll do that," said Naoya. "Your friend hit him a bit too hard, but it worked." He turned to Kanji. "Thank you for doing that, Tatsumi-san."

"N-No prob..." Kanji awkwardly bowed again, surprised at the thanks.

Kei Nanjo, who had chosen to remain silent as the two "monkeys" (as he dubbed them) went at it, finally spoke for the first time since then. "I'm surprised. You all kept composure, even as these two idiots went at it... Inaba," he said, turning to him with scorn, "You react like a volcano when only one of your buttons are pushed. I think we ought to carefully consider our parties for the next labyrinth, judging by this little farce of yours."

"L-Look, I'm sorry, okay!? I fucked up!" Masao shouted with a frown. He turned to the Investigation Team, scowling. "And I advise all of you to carefully consider taking Nanjo with y'all. It's all too clear to see he's kind of an asshole, but you don't know the half of the shit he's - "

Nanjo swiftly slapped Masao on the back of the head. 

"That's enough of that." Signs of anger lingered, with the resulting heat forcing Kei to tug at his collar. "Let us gather some weapons, as our own leader said..." He turned to Kanji. "...Especially you, Tatsumi. Seriously, folding chairs..."

"I said it before: I fight how I want, asshole!" Kanji shouted. "I mean, look at your fighting stance! I could kick you in the 'nads like that!"

"Wh-wh-wh-what!?"

Bits of laughter sputtered from everyone - even Masao.

The commotion tapered off, with the primary subject shifting to weapons and the like. As some of Team Hermelin and Team Yaso began to file out, Yu couldn't help but muse about his fellow leaders. These leaders were leading ragtag teams that seemed to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. How the fate of the world fell upon them differed, but the world was the world, and
they only had one of it.

And Yu? It was some backwoods country town with a killer on the loose. Even with only two deaths under said killer's belt, Team Yaso bungled their cute little search up multiple times - the arrest of Mitsuo Kubo came to mind.

"That's not fair," Yu thought. "Even that older guy knew what we were going through. Still..."

He could see the image in his head: when they weren't fighting and dealing with the case, Yu and friends were living it up at the local department store, holding concerts, joking around, getting in scraps, getting utterly epic food poisoning, playing with Yu's cousin Nananko-chan...he could hear a comical soundtrack to a 1960's romantic comedy playing out to those scenes. It was like the perfect still to a TV show: all of them dancing and getting drunk on life in a field of flowers bathed in yellow sunlight.

Living in Inaba was a breath of fresh air and a massive splash of color in Yu's life, Shadow world be damned. He needed it desperately after living alone with a pair of parents who worshiped the corporate ladder. But the Shadow world, for its soft fog and bright colors, was a pit of death, the worst recesses of humanity laid bare. So should happy, peppy Team Yaso really be so...happy and peppy, constantly, ignorant of what they fought? He supposed that, maybe, yeah, they don't exactly have the weight of the world on their shoulders, but...

"I'm not exactly alone anymore, so..."

Maybe this whole thing would be a learning experience. Besides, there were a lot more people he met now. He was far from that isolation that had followed him his entire life, right?

The sole sound that lingered in the air was the crackling flames that smothered Teddie's burning body. Despite the fact that some weirdo in a bear costume was burning to death, Kotone found the sound soothing. The rooftop food court had quieted down a little, allowing her to deal with her panicked state more easily. She pulled up one of the chairs and sat silently, willing herself to calm down, ease herself...

She took a deep breath, letting the clean - if false - countryside air soothe her senses. She opened her eyes and gazed at the horizon.

Kotone once remembered Theodore telling her a great legend that had been passed through the Velvet Room for some few years: Once upon a time, in modern Japan, yet not the Japan that she herself grew up in, a boy and five others, on a seemingly normal day, witnessed a great apocalyptic catastrophe where the entire world erupted in a great white light. When the light cleared, only Tokyo remained - the world had turned into a hideous, smothering, embryo that would eventually have been reborn. Tokyo had become Ground Zero for the birth of a new world, with this inverted egg swarming with demons and spirits of the people who died during the catastrophe. The spirits and demons formed alliances and armies, all of them entering a great final battle that would determine what kind of new world would come about.

There were six survivors, all with great roles that they had chosen themselves. The boy Theodore mentioned at the start of the story, however, had the greatest role of all. Chosen by the Morning Star himself, the boy was given the body and power of a demon and the strength to goad legions of them
at his side. He had the power and the heart to serve as the catalyst for the world's change - that world, a little inverted Dyson Sphere, which was on the cusp of vanishing forever, with something unknown lying in wait.

Some trees and sparse amounts of grass stretched beyond the clock tower that dwarfed the school yard, but beyond that was nothing but a vast, blue sky. The backside of the school, conversely, seemed to stretch on forever before vanishing. Was this margin like that legendary place, a sphere on the verge of destruction? Theodore did say this place was "limited," and so was that sphere in the story.

There was a stark difference between the two, however: the boy of legends had many paths to choose from in carving his world's fate. This place had only one: absolute cessation of existence. If there were any "choices" to be had here, it was how that cessation would come about. It reminded her about that godawful notion that the Velvet Room citizens had: fate was set in stone, the owner of everything, and humanity was its whore. So-called choices that humans could have were slim pickings that still tipped the scale in fate's favor.

When she asked Theodore about the fate of that world, he said that no one knew the truth. The boy's final choice for the fate of the new world remained forever unknown - it was equally as possible that he either let it remain in its stagnant state for eternity, or even that he could have destroyed it outright. She was sad that she never learned how the boy's journey ended, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized this: The world was fated to die and be reborn, but the boy and the few who survived its transformation had true, legible, man-made, concrete choices that actually would have made a difference for their future - choices made of their own free will, choices they had the means and time to execute, choices that would create a true meaning for their lives, where their strife had results for not just the people around them, but for themselves.

"I chooseth this fate of my own free will! my foot..."

Having to live through a global apocalypse and getting forcibly transformed into a demon didn't sound like a good time to Kotone, but she was a wee bit jealous of that boy for giving fate the finger and becoming an ubermensch.

"Sitting on my ass and complaining about it won't help me though...it'll just make me look like a whiner," she thought ruefully. "I told myself I was gonna do this...I need to owe up to the shit I've done. And when I do, maybe then..."

There was loud, metal-heavy tapping that she could hear - two people running up the stairs, no doubt. She chose to ignore it and went slack, relaxing further...

"...Shiomi, you really shouldn't - !"

"Get off my ass, Senpai! I - "

She shot up like an arrow. Her gut began to churn.

In the nurse's office, Sakuya threw up. It was because he glimpsed at the face of the phantasm girl.

As he hurled, the memory of his parents' death rained over him. It was as horrifying and saddening as it always was, what with all the blood and flames and his mother desperately wanting him to live.
But as the memory looped and refused to budge, Sakuya felt...different after a certain point. He, in the present, did not feel different, no, but the boy who nearly died that night did.

_How was the boy different...?_

Sakuya himself couldn't see it, as the memory was from his perspective. The boy was too paralyzed to move that night. But from what little the boy could see, he could sense his own _body_ feeling different somehow.

The only proof of this difference were his hands - far, _far_ too delicate-looking, even for a young boy.

Sickness still loomed over Sakuya as he felt himself running up the stairs to the roof, keeping track of where that girl went. He ignored Shinjiro's pleas as he found himself in the topmost corridor that led to the top.

"Shiomi! You just puked! Get back here!"

He threw the door open and was greeted with a thrush of silence.

The food court had nearly emptied for the time being. He could capture it in a painting, and it would make quite a statement, for it was a picturesque scene where food and trash were littered about and chairs thrown around haphazardly. The sole factor in preventing desolation was the beautiful, baby blue sky.

"Huh...? But I can't paint..."

What an odd thought! He was a member of the photography club, but that was only because the damned Gekkoukan administration forced him to join one. Even after spending time there, he'd consider himself average with a camera at best. So why would he even think...?

It was probably nothing.

Sakuya found no signs of life as he steadily strolled across the rooftop, save for some weird boy in a bear costume who was burning to death. He took a few tentative steps, feeling easy and light. There were all kinds of western food stands up here, and Sakuya found himself smiling at the scent of burger grease and freshly cooked fries and deep fried corn dogs -

"Look Sakuya, look! This is a corn dog. It's a hot dog with a deep-fried breading all over it! Hehe, Americans sure do love to fry everything, don't they?"

That was his mother. The memory was faint, but they took him to America when he was five or six.

He shook his head, doggedly getting that memory away from him, lest he be reduced to tears.

The breeze refreshed him. It had been a long time since he found himself smiling, even with that nagging feeling from the girl's presence looming over him. This place was pleasant and full of light, and he found himself regretting that they all didn't go to the Naganaki summer festival together. If everybody could've gotten along for just _one_ day and learned how to bloody relax, then maybe SEES would be in a place like this, laughing and bonding instead of sitting in a room in stifled silence, co-existing at best. Sakuya could see a vision of SEES, every last one of them sitting together and laughing, getting along, forging _real_ friendships and acting their age, as they _should_ be.

But there was irony in all of this, for he found SEES' coldness toward each other to be strangely comforting. They were all a bit _too_ different from one another, with most from broken homes.

Perhaps a great, big friendship wasn't meant to be for them...or maybe, Sakuya admitted to himself,
that he was too afraid to approach the others beyond formalities and such.
He looked at the emptied table again, imagining SEES coming together...

"...returned? How were your summer classes?"

"Huh!?"

"It was, ah...a 'helpful' experience! Heh heh...eh..."

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear that."

Those voices...

"Kirijo-senpai? Junpei...?"

He tossed his head around and found nothing. Just what the hell was that...?

"We gotta make the best of the rest of our summer, guys! C'mon, carpe diem! How 'bout the beach!?"

"Pass."

There was Yukari's voice...

"I'll pass too. It's hot during the day and freezing at night..."

And there was Fuuka's voice too...

"Aaaaaand I got owned..."
And there was Junpei again.

"Game set~!"

And there was - huh?

"Who...?"

"Guys have it so easy when it comes to getting ready, packing, all that stuff...damn, I'm jealous."

That voice - a girl's voice - was unfamiliar.

"W-Well then, where do you suggest we go? The mountains? An amusement park? C'mon, we don't have much time left, ya know?"

That was Junpei's voice for the third time. A few seconds of silence passed before the unfamiliar voice spoke once more.

"I know! How about we go to a festival?"

"A festival? That sounds great!" I think the Naganaki Shrine's having their summer one tomorrow!" Fuuka's voice rang out once more.

"Huh! You did your research, didn't you? As expected of our leader!" There was Yukari again, and -

Wait, leader?

"Wha? There's gonna be a festival at Naganaki? Sorry, didn't know about it!"
The unknown girl’s voice was mirthful and light, yet compared to Fuuka’s - her voice being soft, feathery sounds, or Yukari - a voice that was poppy and girlish, or Mitsuru - a low, almost sensual contralto - there was a macho “bite” to it.

Stranger still, Sakuya felt as if he were there, almost - the ghostly voices had faded into the wind, yet there was something so nostalgic about it all.

It were as if he had lived that experience himself - despite the fact that only a few went to the festival, and they all did separately.

"We all went separately...right? Right...?"

Right...!?

Sakuya let out a gasp he didn’t realize he was holding. At that sound, he heard a pair of feet shuffling on tile.

He could see a pink scarf fluttering from the upper left-hand corner of the roof.

He fell in a trance.

Sakuya didn’t hear Shinjiro finally make it to the roof, having come far too late to drag him back. He ignored the small coughing fit that his Senpai fell into as he slowly walked toward the one who bore the scarf.

He came to the edge of the roof. Nothing but tile and sky remained in his sight - the sole thing standing between them was a girl. His blue eyes slowly widened.

"It IS her...that's the girl I saw when we..."

The outfit was different, but the girl was definitely the one that came to his vision before he passed out from the Persona game - the skin, paler than moonlight, and her hair, tied in a single ponytail and colored like maple leaves, were the same. The outfit she wore made quite a statement, what with the suspenders and the trousers and the straight-cut sweater. He nodded his head in approval of her fashion sense: it was artsy, and tasteful, and "why the hell am I thinking about her clothes at a time like this!?"

He wasn’t going to throw up again, but there was a tremble in his gut. If she were the cause of that, if she was someone he saw in a vision, then surely she held some kind of significance...?

He took a shot in the dark.

"Lovely breeze up here, isn't it?"

The girl gently shook. Slowly, cautiously, she began to turn -
- She halted for a fraction of a second. She seemed so unsure of herself, and yet -

When she faced him at last, her red gaze hit his like a thunderbolt.

Sakuya didn't even fathom his eyes widening as much as they did. The breeze became a small gale, exposing his face to hers; her own scarf flew up like a pair of outstretched arms, taking her brown bangs with it.

Shinjiro finally arrived on the scene, just in time to witness the meeting of his mysterious leader and the mysterious girl who was changing him. To his own surprise, he, too, found himself in a trance at
their meeting one another.

Fate took an insane drop onto a road not taken. At long last, the Shiomi children had met.

Chapter End Notes

Spot the SMT cameos!

Diamal is a fusion spell from Innocent Sin. It's similar to Regenerate from the later games, but more potent, and a multi-target version exists (Mediamal).

I took some liberties with this version of Houri, as here, she is actually based off of a fan illustration I found...the actual Houri looks like a woman with a skeleton face wearing a flower tutu. Even after seeing it in the manga, I thought it looked a bit too ridiculous. Sharp-eyed readers will also note that I took liberties with the P4 game timeline, as the bathhouse incident (the first one in Golden where Marie isn't present) took place on Sunday night on October 30th; in the actual PQ game, October 30th during the afternoon is when the Investigation Team gets whisked away to the alternate Yasogami High.

Fun Fact: Ogun is one of a whopping twelve mythological figures from Africa (Nigeria, specifically) to be represented in the SMT series.
Stroll 3: Navigational Differences

Chapter Summary

The third stroll, wherein we discover the nuances between Himiko, Lucia, and the young women who command them. Meanwhile, tension among the Velvet Room assistants run high.

Chapter Notes

Expect some slow down in production because I'm playing the crap out of Fire Emblem Fates at the moment. I even wrote a (smutty) fic based off it! If you like FEF and smut, check it out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Third Floor, "Sweets Inferno" food stand

"Ah-Peru-Peru-Peru-so-naaaa...a-nata-mo-wa-tashi-mo-Peru-sona-tsu-kee-teee...ah-cha-chacha-cha-cha!"

A big smile was permanently etched onto Rise's face. As she put her hands under her chin, she bobbed her head in time with Ame-no-Uzume's comically sensual dance. Normally, one would scold someone, supernatural deity or otherwise, for doing a little striptease and dancing while waving one's clothes around out in the open, but Rise had grown to accept the fact that she was a bit of a sexual person – in moderation, of course. According to legend, in order to have Amaterasu, the sun goddess, bring her light back to Earth, Ame-no-Uzume made a ruckus by doing a comical dance in the nude outside of her hiding spot. Naturally, the other gods got a kick out of it, and Amaterasu wanted to see it for herself.

"I don't see what's so bad about being like this," Rise thought, as the nude Uzume did a little twirl as she sang the next verse.

"Hooo~~a-Peru-Peru-Peru-so-naaaa....hooo~~a-Peru-Peru-Peru-so-naaaa...."

Beautiful, curvaceous, porcelain-skinned (quite literally), ebon-haired, sensual, jiggling breasts...she is mirthful and sensual and proud – so proud she was that Amaterasu, according to Margaret, was mesmerized by Uzume's everything, naked for the world to see.

Rise recanted those words. "Naked for the world to see, huh? That's been a theme for me for a few months now, hasn't it?"

An image of Yu Narukami popped in her head. Her face grew warm at that mere sight.
"...Has he really affected me that much? Senpai..."

She thought back to their days fighting in the Midnight Channel, and lo and behold, the first thing that came to her was when Yu, for reasons that only God or whomever watched over them knew, decided that it was necessary for he and the other boys to fight wearing nothing but towels.

"Oooh, Senpai, why do you have to be weird like that!?" Rise rapidly shook her head, trying (and failing) to get the image out of it.

Ame-no-Uzume giggled, bringing her dance to a halt. "I see no reason to judge you for your occasional perversions, Master. You did just mention to yourself that there is beauty in bearing even the smallest bits of sensuality."

Rise yelped. She, Kanji, and Naoto could now "speak" to their Personas, thanks to that odd game Yu made them play. It was still a peculiar sensation, even though she'd spend hours on end navigating with Himiko. When she navigated for the team in You in Wonderland, she could now hear Himiko's voice.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it..."

"Oh, but surely you must know?" Uzume mused, putting her white and purple kimono back on. "The shaman queen and I are parts of you. You are more readily aware of this now, and that is why we can speak to you. Was the lady in blue not clear?"

Rise's eyes widened with surprise. "N-No, she was clear! It's easy to see why, actually..."

She smiled. If she were asked, the first thing she'd compare her Personas to was a rainbow. The life of a Japanese idol singer was two-toned, black and white. If one dove deeper, the presence of many colors was obvious. It was the same with music. Even the most banal pop music had a sum to their parts.

"You see? With that mindset, you shall discover more of the gods and demons that lie inside of you... *chuckle.* Who knows? Maybe the sun-mother herself, Amaterasu, is an aspect of you..."

As she said this Ame-no-Uzume seemed to... blush? Rise gawked a little.

"...Try not to think too hard about what I just said, okay?"

With a loud 'hmph", Ame-no-Uzume disappeared, waving goodbye to her master with a flustered smile.

"...Huh. She's kinda like..."

Rise cut herself off. She was about to say "Kanji," but that would make her no better than Yosuke in that regard. After all, he was in the same boat she was.

*png *

"Oh!"

At her behest, Himiko came to her side. The elegant shamaness lent her visor to Rise, pointing her down toward the second floor. Within Rise's line of sight was a pink-hued map of that floor, with the radar emitting waves from the second classroom.

"Shadows detected in room number two on the second level of this building, master," said Himiko.
The shamaness' voice was in the contralto range, yet velvety and tender. "The structure of this area bears many similarities to the labyrinth you have recently completed."

"I see…is it possible to draw out the labyrinth's layout, Himiko?"

The silence had been filled with the beeps and pings of Himiko's satellite dish of a head. Showing up on Rise's HUD was a vast, blocky space, but little else.

"…..No."

"Looks like we'll have to make our own map again…shoot."

"I apologize, master. It is difficult to map out this place. It is not quite the same as your 'Midnight Channel'."

"Hm, what was it that Margaret said? We're near the 'Collective Unconsciousness,' or something?" Having been lost in thought, Rise tilted her head into her right hand. "Unconsciousness…so it's all tied to people's minds, like she said. No matter how she says it, it makes my head spin…"

It all made her head spin. This place was heaps upon heaps of questions, with too few answers obtained. At least she could take to heart that this labyrinth mystery had absolutely, positively nothing to do with the murders in Inaba. Still, there was so much to keep track of! Zen and Rei were the catalysts – at least that's what Maya Amano told them – the labyrinths were connected to them, this place would vanish…overwhelming, all of it. Sensory overload. Too many sights, too many new feelings, too many people –

"…Hmm…"

Speaking of people, Rise gasped when she saw Fuuka Yamagishi emerge at long last. She was two seconds away from giving her a well-deserved hug. Fuuka's drained appearance restrained her from doing so.

"Fuuka-chan…?"

Going by that damnable reminder that all of them were from different periods of time, Rise remembered that Fuuka was technically a year her senior, at least during the time that she had been whisked away from. Rise did some math, and, yes, it would be a bit silly to name Fuuka on such an informal level, for in 2011, Fuuka would be eighteen years old at least. It was in Rise's nature to be as welcoming to others as humanly possible, though, and Fuuka was the epitome of a shrinking violet.

Margaret said that those who bore the Wild Card had vast power because they empathized with others on an unprecedented level. Fuuka was Rise as a little girl; the comparisons she could make were all too real. Simply being nice to her wouldn't be enough, though. No one got through life by playing it safe, and for Rise, becoming an idol singer was just one risk she took.

"Fuuka-chan!"

Fuuka recoiled.

Before, she was joyous with Rise, joyous to be beside a fellow non-combatant – at least initially. Lucia could not speak or see, only touch, listen and taste. The faint echoes of two rippling voices were enough for Fuuka to deduce that Rise carried two Personas, with one clearly being far more suited for combat that either her navigational one, Himiko, or Lucia herself. Girl talk and some much-needed bonding turned from a fun, cathartic experience into one that spiraled into self-doubt
and self-pity, and Rise's sunny disposition and clear-cut confidence only made it worse.

The shadow of doubt didn't stop there.

Fuuka caught a mere glimpse of Sakuya's getting sick and him and Shinjiro pursuing the shadow of a
girl that seemed to be standing outside. What an irrational thing to get worked up about, she thought. There are more important things to worry about, and no, Aragaki-senpai shouldn't be one of them, because why the hell would he think highly of her? The fact that she was the most inept cook on Tatsumi Port Island made her undesirable, right?

Being the navigator, serving as mapmaker, passively guiding "soldiers" (or so Kirijo-senpai thought)
day after day; this was Fuuka's role. That was all.

"Fuuka-chan, are you feeling okay?" Rise asked with concern. "You don't look too good."

She was one who easily burdened others. That can't happen anymore. Fuuka believed in that
wholeheartedly, because to her, her role as navigator was one degree of separation from "dead
weight." Overwrought with embarrassment, she shook her head. "I feel better, Rise-chan. That nap
really helped."

"We all needed one. I've had a little too much to drink before, and...ehehe, I ought to know better by
now..." Rise frowned, mentally kicking herself.

"Too much...oh!" Fuuka gasped. "I keep forgetting that you're an idol..." She suddenly became
self-conscious, her posture bending inward. "Goodness, an idol singer in the flesh..."

"Hey now, what did I tell you?" said Rise, grabbing Fuuka's hand with a smile. "There will be none
of that! In this place, I'm an ordinary girl – uh, sort of...and, uh, we're both navigators! Supporters!"
Rise's face scrunched. "No, that's too vague...uh...mapmakers? Back-up? Erm...video game mage
thingy people? Uh..."

Fuuka couldn't help herself and giggled. "I think 'navigator' will do, Rise-chan. They'd be completely
lost without us, right?"

"Hm, that's true!" Rise frowned again. "Although getting a proper layout of You In Wonderland was
nearly impossible when we first went in. Yu-senpai had to draw out a map of the place and mark
down everything. It was only after we got to the third floor when I was able to get my bearings, and
it wasn't much." She sighed. "The others grow as they fight...I hope the same happens to us as we
find more places to explore."

"You had a hard time mapping the labyrinth, Rise-chan?" Fuuka asked, surprised. "So did I. Sakuya-
kun had to make a map too. He borrowed a notebook from Zen-kun and used that." Her confidence
began to spring anew. "As time went on, I was able to better detect things: treasures, Shadows, even
some of those strange demons. We tried to avoid those, though. I can only have Lucia heal for so
long; it really takes its toll on me."

"Demons...?"

Rise winced. Demons were what forced her to fight for the first time. Demons had drawn out the
new potential that sprang within her, Kanji, and Naoto. Demons, corralled by the strangest-looking
old man she had ever seen...

"Rise-chan? Are you okay?"

The younger girl broke out of her reverie, forcing the memory out of her head. "It's nothing."
"Oh…"

The idol smiled awkwardly as reassurance, but Fuuka wasn't convinced. Ame-no-Uzume seemed to linger over Rise's shoulder. Ame-no-Uzume's presence appeared in Lucia's blinded visage once more, pulsating like a ripple in the water. The blinded saint could almost touch the lively lady from the orient. From that strange sensation, Fuuka could get an analysis of her powers. As if something were thrown into the water, the stats warped and wobbled before materializing into more coherent shapes:

**Ame-no-Uzume: Level 10**

*Aeon Arcana (Great Affinity)*

*Null: Light/Reflect: Force/Weak: Lightning*

*Attack Moves: Hama/Zan*

*Support Moves: Hunting Prayer/Renewal Ray*

*Next: Orb of Haste (Support Move; raises evasion and aim/all allies): Level 15*

"...'Zan?' What's 'Zan'?" Fuuka couldn't really see what this "force" element was; only that it was what the Japanese goddess of dawn repelled. On top of that, she was decked out with attack and support spells that could fix any kink that Rise's team could get entangled in.

"I wonder if she's actually faced battle if this Ame-no-Uzume can attack..."

It made Fuuka uneasy. They were two peas in a pod, yet the tide – whatever that tide was – was tipped in Rise's favor. It wasn't just because of Uzume either; the most obvious area that Rise one-upped Fuuka was her figure. Second to that was the fact that she could talk to damn near anybody without stuttering, and she didn't doubt that Rise-chan was a better cook either. She was the epitome of girlishness, so why would that be any different.

"Rise-chan seems amazing...I hope her friends know that..."

Because if there were any positive things SEES had to say about her outside of her abilities, Fuuka certainly hadn't heard them...

Thankfully for the two of them (or not so much, in Fuuka's opinion), Yu and Naoya came marching down the hall, arms around each other's shoulders, sharing a laugh. Team Hermelin and Team Yaso all eventually filed in behind them, some taking off, and some sticking around. Snaking in from behind was a more somber-looking Tatsuya, who had a basin in his hand that appeared to be freshly scrubbed. At the sight of the two girls, Yu dragged Naoya over. Tatsuya shrugged, and opted to lend an ear for the time being.

"Rise! Yamagishi-san! How are you guys?" Yu asked with a smile.

"Hey there, Senpai!" Rise grinned. The energy that radiated within her seemed to seep into the hallway. "And hello to you too, Toudou-san. What were you guys doing just now?"

"We were getting to know one another," said Naoya. "Narukami called it an icebreaker…sort of…" He felt awkward, remembering Yu's wonky attitude when he introduced himself. "...But yeah, introductions. Some of us even showed off their powers, kind of like an exhibition." He shot a nasty glare toward Yukiko and Yuka; both ladies nonchalantly whistled in response.
"Oh, wow…" Rise's eyes went wide. "Is that why it sounded like the roof was going to cave in earlier?"

"Ooooh yah." Yu sharply nodded his head. "It was pretty fun. Especially when Teddie got set on fire."

"WHAT!?"

"Yukiko and Ayase-san set Teddie on fire. It was awesome."

Fuuka appeared worried. "Don't you think that's pushing it a little too far…?"

"Finally, somebody agrees with me!" Yosuke exclaimed, shaking his head. "And you were the one Teddie made that comment to earlier! I'm a little surprised, but hey."

"W-Well, I don't think he meant anything by –"

"Hey now, Fuuka-chan," Rise frowned, giving her a pat on the shoulder. "I'm not too keen on hearing that he's burning to death either, but Teddie can be pretty gross. Hanamura-senpai's got all kinds of horror stories about Teddie screwing up on the job." She faced the Senpai in question, who in turn sighed. "Wasn't there an ad he made that drove all your regulars away, Senpai?"

"You betcha, Rise," said Yosuke, shaking his head. "I don't know dick about art, but I swear, that ad of his was an insult to those people who throw junk on the floor and say how profound it is or some shit like that. And hentai artists."

"Ouch!"

"Yep, I am so going there."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Ted did rip off that ad from some stupid hentai comic," Kanji added, his face contorting in disgust. "Fuck, half of his ideas on romance come from one!"

Kei Nanjo tilted his head, a sick sense of curiosity reigning over him. "Hentai…those perverse comics…" He turned to Yu, serious. "There are totally millions more of those in the future, aren't there?"

"Yep." Yu audibly popped the "p."

"All over your far more vast Internet, no doubt?"

"Yeeeeeep."

"Catering to fetishes that I certainly do not want to learn about?"

"Yeeeeeeeeeeep."

Fuuka remained silent. She had nothing to say on the topic at hand, save for some stuttering in embarrassment at the mere hearing of the word hentai. She had nothing to say to the leaders, or Rise, Yosuke, and Kanji, or at Yukiko and Yuka, who were chatting together, with Kei joining them.

The two navigators, despite being worlds away mentally, were still sitting together, and Tatsuya couldn't help but notice. En route to fetching some water, he gestured at them.

"Yamagishi. Kujikawa."
The two girls came right to his attention – his voice seemed to have that kind of power.

"I know this is rather abrupt, but I couldn't help but notice. You two are together all the time, although I guess it can't be helped – you two have unusual abilities." He gently smiled at them, staving off whatever intimidation he emitted.

"Oh, are you talking about Lucia and Himiko?" Rise inquired with a smile. "You mean you don't have a navigator on your team, Suou-san?"

"My friends and I have owned many Personas, yet absolutely none of them have worked like yours or Yamagishi's," said Tatsuya, shaking his head. "All of them were for combat. We had to rely on our senses and on things like tarot cards in order to know about demons' weaknesses."

"My friends and I are in the same boat as Suou," said Naoya.

"Huh!" Rise was surprised. "You've had to make do without one, huh? That's amazing!"

"We've only been with you two for a short time, but already I feel like I've taken Yamagishi for granted." Tatsuya chuckled. "I sure wish I had a Persona that could navigate. It would've made everything back home a lot easier. I bet your team feels the same, right Yamagishi?"

Fuuka spaced out, too wrapped in her own thoughts.

"Yamagishi…?"

"Hmm…"

"Hey, Yamagishi!"

"Ah!?"

Tatsuya frowned as a startled Fuuka looked at him. "I'd appreciate it if you at least acknowledge the person who's talking to you."

He sounded harsh enough to the point that Yu and Naoya glared at him, disapproving of how blunt he was. As for Fuuka, she was left in a puddle of her own sad stutters.

"Hey, Suou-san! That's not very nice, you know! You're being way too harsh on Fuuka-chan," Rise huffed. "You've made her upset and everything."

"I can speak for myself, Rise-chan."

Oh, how she wanted to say those words. But they remained welded in place, forever stuck and unspoken. They stewed like oden in her head, hot like magma, melding and brewing into something dark.

"…Sorry, Yamagishi," said Tatsuya, looking a tad embarrassed. "Good grief. I guess everybody finds me peculiar, don't they?"

He looked a little bit endearing for a moment, in Rise's mind. Yu and Naoya decided not to press him for the time being, for that would be as rude as his shouting at Fuuka. Excess bluntness was a terrible way to stand out, after all, yet this trait was what added to the mysterious allure of one Tatsuya Suou.

"…Getting back to the topic at hand," Tatsuya coughed, regaining composure, "I wanted to ask about your Himiko, Kujikawa. I only know of Lucia's ability to navigate." He turned to Fuuka,
taking on a gentler tone. "You, Yamagishi, mentioned that your Lucia could now do more aside from navigation. Please, tell me everything. I'd love to let the others know for the future."

Fuuka sighed. The older boy scared her, sort of, but at least he was gonna let her speak!

"Lucia could only navigate before," she began, finding the spine to look at everyone present. "But during the battle with the Queen of Hearts, she developed a new ability…the ability to heal others."

"She couldn't do this before, you said? Hmm…"

"A-Anyways, I had her heal the others during that time, and…I can say, I'm glad she can do it. The healing works over a period of time, even if it is a bit exhausting." She cracked a tiny smile. "I can't say why she can do that now. It might be because we're in a different dimension, but I sure hope she learns more moves like that."

Tatsuya put down the basin and began to think. "I see…you think it's because of the nature of this place…that could be very well true, but don't shut out the possibility that perhaps the change came entirely from you, Yamagishi. An intense desire in the wake of a crisis can cause Personas to have great changes, you know." The older boy shut his eyes and softly inhaled.

A soft flurry of embers blossomed from him, and from the blossom was the faint visage of Vulcanus. "It was because of my own resolve that Vulcanus was granted to me as a Persona. In fact, the Persona you see here reverted from an even stronger one. And for the reason?" He mirthfully chuckled. "Well…all I'll tell you for now is that I learned how to cry for the first time in a long time. Heh."

"R-Really?" Fuuka lightly stuttered. "Then I guess I shouldn't be so surprised, huh? All that talk on Shadows…it makes me wonder…"

"…Why didn't I get this ability to heal sooner…?"

"Fuuka-chan?" Rise worriedly egged her new friend, who in turn smiled at her softly.

"I'm just thinking to myself, Rise-chan. Why not tell the others about your powers? I'm sure you have new ones too."

The idol smiled. "I do! Not long after my friends and I got here, Himiko gained a new ability! It's a little tough to explain, but basically, she shines her radar down on someone, and the light coming from it, and the light, it, uh…" She tilted her head, conjuring the image of a rapidly moving Kanji in her head. It was pretty damn amusing, given that Kanji attacked and hulked around in battle like a sluggish glacier. "…It makes someone move faster. I'd probably have to show you in a real battle for you guys to understand it."

"Ooooh no, Rise, I think I can explain it quite well," Kanji exclaimed, thoroughly annoyed. "You used your 'Spotlight' thing on me a shitload of times 'cuz you thought I was the best choice for a goddamn meat shield!" To prove a point, he yanked up one of his pant legs to the thigh, revealing an ugly purple bruise that spread all over and tapered off into little dots. "Do you know how many more bruises I have like this? Are you a sadist or something!?"

"…Wow, Kanji. A sadist?" Rise giggled. "You're using big boy words now, aren't you? Is it because of the little poet who sits in your head?"

"S-S-Shaddup! You are a fuckin' sadist!"

Looming over his head and equally as annoyed was Sappho, his second Persona – a lyricist and poet
from the island of Lesbos, whose body was made from colorful, tattered rainbow patchwork. A rose quartz-colored shawl made her outfit, shredded pages made her lengthy hair, and a pair of eternally upturned eyes and lips constituted her face. She waved around her oddly out-of-place electronic harp madly, equally as at a loss as her other self was.

"You are a sadist! A sadist! A sexy little sadist, but a sadist nevertheless! Captivating in your motions and your composure, but a sadist all the same!"

Kanji's face reddened. He could hear this poet – a poet thought to have been one of those *lesbians*, those female *homosexuals*, that *something* that Hanamura-senpai just *loved* to rail him on – and squawked. He furiously turned to the patchwork poet and struck his finger at her.

"You shut the fuck up!"

Naoya and Yu fell into a fit of giggles, seeing Kanji get so riled up at the proverbial voice in his head. "Gee, even I've never had a Persona that temperamental before," said Naoya. "I think the nuttiest I've had was when I had Jack Frost get in a heated argument with a Pyro Jack demon."

"A Pyro Jack demon?" Yu exclaimed.

"Yeah. They were screaming and cussing and everything. The demon scared off my Persona by threatening to throw jelly doughnuts at it. Had one hell of a headache that day, I tell ya."

"...Is that even possible?"

"It is. Demons and Shadows aren't that different, after all," said Naoya with a shrug.

"...Not even gonna ask," Kanji interjected after a futile attempt at conceiving this "Pyro Jack demon" scenario. "I can already tell that my brain's gonna implode just thinkin' about it."

Naoya's face lit up in realization. "Ah, that's right. You guys and Team Gekkou haven't really encountered demons before, right?"

"N-No, not really," said Kanji. "Well, Naoto and Rise and I fought some of 'em once in the labyrinth, but we nearly got fucked over..."

They fought demons that Tatsuya and Maya had come to know as Hellhounds; they were ferocious canines, manes matted and colored like blood, golden tiaras covering their faces, the sharpest sets of teeth imaginable. They showed up like bats out of hell indeed, and therein triggered the event in which Team Yaso's precocious first-years awakened to their newfound power.

Thinking about it made Kanji shiver, and even he could tell that Rise and Naoto still felt that same level of fear. Not *once* – not battling any Shadow, not battling their own Shadows, not staring at an alleged killer in the eye (even if he turned out to be innocent regarding the serial murders, Kubo still killed Yu's homeroom teacher) – did Kanji see as much blood as he did when the Hellhounds attacked. Fuck, his little scuffles (in comparison) with all those damned motorheads and lowlifes were as violent as a Saturday morning cartoon compared to the event Naoto had titled "the Awakening."

"You okay, Tatsumi?" Tatsuya asked with concern. "I can tell that your first encounter with demons was a terrible one."

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine. Just fine."

He remained mum, and Rise looked equally as uncomfortable. Yosuke's face shifted to that of
confusion, for he and the rest of his lot were unaware of Kanji, Naoto, and Rise's new powers.

"They get all quiet like that when that incident gets mentioned...geez, was it really that bad?"

"It's okay if you're feeling scared, you know," said Tatsuya with a smile. "There's no shame in being afraid when death potentially lurks nearby you." He saddened. "Nearly dying was how I awakened to my Persona."

That was a half-truth. On the *Other* Side, getting stabbed was how Vulcanus awakened...

Rise softly gasped. "Suou-san, that's...I..."

He shook his head, motioning his hand in front. "That's enough of that. I think I've depressed you all enough for the moment."

"You can say that again," Kei sighed, with sad memories of his own coming to surface. "But going back to what Suou said: if you and Team Gekkou haven't dealt with demons before, then you'll be in quite a bit of trouble down the road."

The moment Kei uttered those words, Naoya snapped his fingers and grinned. "Say no more, Nanjo! I've concocted just the solution for that problem!"

"Oh?" Kei raised a brow. "And just what is it?"

"When we were all partying at the festival, I overheard Elizabeth talking to herself. There was a lot of weird shit she uttered, but one that I managed to catch was that she was setting up a logbook for personal requests in the nurse's office. So before I played the shooting game with Narukami and Amano-san and their friends, I wrote one down for her." He winked. "And guess what it was?"

"...I dunno dude, what?" Kanji asked, which earned an exasperated sigh from Kei.

"Ehe...er, I wrote in a request where I, Naoya Toudou and friends, teach you, Yu Narukami, and the students of Team Gekkou, to negotiate with demons! Won't that be fun!?"

Silence. Kei in particular was unnerved by Naoya's wide smile – not once had he seen a smile off of him that radiant. He probably hadn't seen him this happy...well, ever.

Yu nodded his head and smiled back, his posture exuding confidence. "An all-too logical idea, Toudou-san," he said. "Although I am curious about where the next labyrinth could be..."

Before he could continue, Rise hopped in place and grabbed his hand. "Senpai, Senpai! I know where it is! No need to worry!"

"Ah...where is it, Rise?"

"The second labyrinth is on the second floor, classroom two – " She gasped in realization. How could it have taken so long for her to realize. "Hey Senpai, aren't you and the others in 2-2 back home?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Ehe..." She nervously chuckled. "You don't think...this labyrinth's a *Group Date Café*, do you?"

"Huh? Why do you think that?"

"I dunno Senpai. Maybe I'm crazy." She tilted her head, looking a little worried. "But when Himiko
pinpointed its location…you know how you guys lit up some incense in your café back home? I could smell some here. And not only that…”

A Lovers card came into her line of vision. She clapped her hands over it, forcing it to shatter, and at her beck and call was Himiko. Once again, the shamaness placed her visor over Rise's eyes, commanding the presence coming from class 2-2 that she had only recently discovered. Like before, the map of the floor was covered in an odd pink hue, and what little Rise could see from inside were cutesy pink bubbles and flowers and popping hearts. It reminded her of a cheesy old music video.

"…Oh wow, I feel like I'm in a visual novel. There are bubbles and hearts and all these kitschy-looking pictures of couples showing up on my HUD. The entrance is all pink and there are tables and stuffed bears sitting at them, and there are fake cherry trees fluttering – oh for crying out loud, it is a Group Date Café!"

"It is?"

"There's a sign for it popping up on my screen, Senpai," Rise said with a sigh. "Says it plain as day.”

Yosuke sighed, shuddering in fear. "Great. War flashbacks. Fuck group date cafes, and fuck group dates. Never doing one again, dammit…"

"But our Group Date Café was fun, Yosuke," Yu prodded. "Why so glum?"

"…I still hate you, Yu."

Kei uttered a noise of confusion. "So you still do group dates in the future? Is it any different from group dating in our era?"

Yu shook his head. "Can't say. I guess we text about each other during dates, but that's probably it. A group date's as fun or as awkward as you make of it."

Kei nodded his head seriously. "I see...I wonder if that applies to business-related group dates too."

"What do you mean? Have you participated in one, Nanjo-san?"

The boy in question sighed. "I have only participated in group dates held by businessmen, and those are more like a get-together after work. There's alcohol involved, so they're probably nothing like a group date held by high schoolers." He suddenly took on a dark look. "I actually wouldn't mind trying some hokey high school romp after seeing the juvenile, disgusting things that businessmen do on adult group dates..."

Yu and his present teammates gasped slightly. "Are they really that bad?" asked Rise.

"These managers and CEOs, they're like apes. All of them." Nanjo shook his head in disapproval. "Give them a single mug of beer and they become the embodiment of depravity. I have had the dishonor of seeing these men do some of the most disgusting and crass acts that a man could possibly do. There is an internal IT division at the Nanjo Conglomerate's main office - brand new, might I add - and one of our female employees quit after a senior manager from another IT company assaulted her in a bathroom during a group date." He snorted. "I sincerely hope this little Group Date Café shows some restraint, but given that there are Shadows and demons lurking inside, I have my doubts..."

Kanji gawked. "Holy shit, dude."

"I guess we should be grateful, then," Yosuke sighed. "Doesn't mean it didn't suck, but...oh, dammit,
this is gonna be awful!" He tugged on his hair, on the verge of tears.

Rise sent Himiko away and gave Kei a reassuring smile. "A regular group date is nothing like what you just said, Nanjo-san! If all goes well, it can be fun and romantic."

"Romantic?" Kei was damn near flabbergasted. "Is that even possible!?"

"Heh! We'll see!" Rise exclaimed. "But what few Shadows I can sense in there are pretty powerful. If we're gonna do Toudou-san's request, I think we should go back to You In Wonderland."

Naoya sighed in relief, happy to be back on the topic of the request. "The demons that lurk in the Wonderland labyrinth aren't that strong, and my friends and I have seen them before. Most of them are pretty amicable, so teaching you guys shouldn't be a problem." He held up his index finger. "I do have a piece of advice, though."

"What is it?" asked Kanji.

"If a negotiation goes sour, a bribe is optimal as a last resort, especially if the demon becomes hostile." Naoya nodded his head, and with a flourish, he took a small box out of his pocket. He flipped the green velvet lid open, revealing a small set of identical gold hoop earrings that were similar to the one he wore. "I have had a disproportionate amount of those slimy little bastards demand for the earring I wear, so I bribe them with one of these. Demons will take absolutely anything and not give a shit, so grab some personal things to bribe them with. I'll spread the word to Theodore so he can make stuff like that at the workshop."

The few from Team Yaso took all of it in, and though there was a grain of salt to be had, they had no choice. "Can they really be bribed that easily?" Yu asked. "For example, if I bribe them with the ten-inch dildo my mother mailed me last week, they'll take it?"

"WHAT THE FUCK, PARTNER?" Yosuke found himself shouting, his face as red as humanly possible. Rise and Kanji followed suit, both with equally loud, disbelief-laced squeals of "SENPAI!?!" launching out of their mouths.

"Ehhh...yeah, they'd probably take it..." Naoya was speechless.

Yu pumped his fist and grinned. "Awesome!"

"Have you been spoon-fed lead paint chips as a child!?" Kei shouted, jaw on the floor.

Yu shifted his eyes. "...Maybe."

"MAYBE!?"

"Maybe I have!"

"Ah...I don't even..."

A balking Tatsuya found himself slowly meandering toward Fuuka. Rise had joined Kanji, furiously discussing the implications of the unholy dildo. Fuuka had virtually melted into the wall - her presence had vanished so inexplicably and without notice to the point that it made Tatsuya think of Marie Laurencin's poem: worse than dead/forgotten. Fuuka did, indeed, look lost, and forgotten not just by them, but by her companions as well...

"Are you all right? You're awfully quiet."
Fuuka squeaked and went rigid. She had turtled up, kept to herself, afraid to derail that colorful tirade that the others went on. She shook her head and forced a small smile on her face.

"I had nothing to really contribute to the conversation, Suou-san, so...um..."

He gave her a hard look. She turtled up more.

"Well, if you're wondering why I have this basin..." He began - anything to keep this poor girl talking. "....It's because Zen got sick."

"Huh!? Zen-kun's sick!?

"He got a fever out of nowhere. He was muttering in his sleep. It's probably not a regular fever, but I suppose we'll see..."

"Oh!" Fuuka gasped in concern. ".If it's not a regular fever, then, then...hmm..." She scrambled to think: Rise-chan was gonna do this request thing, she found the second labyrinth first, she has more Personas, she's perky and has actual friends - Fuuka had to be useful somehow!

A spark of inspiration struck her. ".Maybe some force's affecting him, Suou-san...it's a stretch, it's really silly, I know, but I'll use Lucia to see if there's anything off. I mean, it's worth a try, right...?"

Tatsuya smiled. To Fuuka's great shock - and embarrassment, for she felt her face heat up a little - he grabbed her hand. ".It most certainly is worth a try, Yamagishi. Remember, we don't have a clue as to what Zen's origins really are. Perhaps he is being affected by some demon." He gently released her hand and gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. ".Do you think it's in your power to find out, Yamagishi?"

The proverbial bud of courage was faint and frail, but that fierce look in Tatsuya's eyes gave Fuuka that bud. His tough love was what she needed after all, it seemed. She'd have to nurse the bud into blossoming herself. She'd also have to build her courage on her own, her self-worth, her power. It seemed hopeless, what with her jealousy, but perhaps it wasn't.

Perhaps she was also deluded with the makings of a small crush.

"Y...Yes! I can do it!" She said with a little too much enthusiasm. ".T- Take me to where Zen-kun is, and I'll do my best to help him!"

He gave her an affirming nod and gestured her toward the nurse's office. He turned back to Naoya, Yu, and the others there. ".I'll spread the word about the request to whoever's still resting, okay? Just let us know when you guys want to head out and we'll catch up."

Yu and Naoya nodded in return, and both began to caucus and walk to the Craft Workshop for the equipment check they had initially planned. Kanji and Yosuke opted to follow them, neither having anything better to do. Only Rise and Kei remained.

"Gee, Fuuka-chan got all flustered there...I hope she's okay."

"That girl is a wallflower," Kei stated bluntly. ".I hope, for all our sake, that she is far less of an introvert when it comes to navigation. That in itself is a very valuable power to have."

"Sheesh, Nanjo-san," Rise grimaced, shooting a small glare at him. ".You too?"

"It is the truth, Kujikawa," Kei said shortly, crossing his arms as they began to walk. ".You wouldn't want, say, a navigator on a submarine asleep at the wheel, right? Or a navigator who haplessly
stutters every other word, overwhelmed by their own lack of mettle? What if there were an ambush and she could not speak?"

*BONK*

"Ow!"

Rise hiked up her left foot and sharply stubbed the older boy's toe. She huffed, annoyed at his insults. "You apparently weren't listening when we were all outside. Team Gekkou had their own battle to fight, and it seemed like she had been navigating for them for a while. If you hate the fact that she's shy so much, why don't you try navigating, Nanjo-san?" She turned her head away with a pout. "We may not fight, but maintaining a Persona for that long, laying out a map, spotting enemies, assisting, it really takes its toll on you! And it isn't just wimpy little migraines either!"

The boy sighed. He had been defeated in one aspect, yes. He and his friends couldn't have even fathomed the concept of a Persona that was the supernatural equivalent of a mapmaker.

But he could swipe a victory another way.

"That is the truth...I do not, and cannot, understand the burden of being a navigator." He removed his glasses and wiped them off, turning whatever line of vision he had remaining to the younger girl. "But Kujikawa..."

"What?"

He sighed, carefully arranging his feelings in his head, trying to spell them out properly. If they were not worded well, then she'd completely miss his intent - an intent that he knew all too well from his adventures in Mikage-cho.

"You seem to be terribly protective of Yamagishi. Did you not realize you interrupted her a number of times, or those looks on her face as you did?"

"Huh...?"

Rise realized he was right - and yes, of course she would protect Fuuka-chan! She was shy and sorely lacked confidence, after all, just like -

"...Yamagishi's sore lack of confidence will be her undoing. But she must overcome it in due time, and she must do so on her own accord. Your desire to protect her is admirable, and yet I question your sincerity all the same."

Rise's face heated up. "What do you mean by that!?"

"Perhaps I am wrong...I almost hope that I'm wrong. But Kujikawa, back there you seemed terribly overprotective of the girl. Yes, I saw the way you looked at her...I, I think that there's a reason you're defending her so much. Your eyes, your gestures, they seemed so longing and, hm, how do I say this?" He raised a hand to his chin, putting the visual in his head: Rise's arms grazing ever-so-closely to Fuukka's, with the latter bent down, too ashamed to speak. Rise's eyes, in contrast, blazed with anger.

"...You saw something in Yamagishi that made you want to defend her. It's not really pity, I think...some self-projection, perhaps? Hmm..."

Rise fumed.
"Maybe I just want to look out for her because I'm a nice person, asshole!" She shouted, taking a cue from Kanji. "Wh, Who are you to say I'm, I'm projecting myself on her!? You don't know a damn thing about me!"

Kei sighed - judging by her tone, he was partially right. "You are correct in that I know nothing about either of you. But it's easy to see how little Yamagishi regards herself. She will have to learn how to overcome that in due time." He shook his head. "As for you...I don't doubt your kindness. But still, it's the way you look at her...I can't help but assume - "

She swiftly slapped him in the cheek, hard. Kei found himself reeling with a stinging cheek, feeling flustered as Rise stomped off. He sighed hard, through the nose. Normally, he'd feel angry, with a sensation of superiority lingering on the side. Being forced to see certain things changed that. He felt annoyed at the change at most - worrying, and completely unlike him.

"I went too far, didn't I? But..."

He frowned, feeling his face heat up a little. Yep, he was different now all right. Kei Nanjo had grown to become a little bit more sensitive, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

"Master..."

He gasped, feeling his mind wrap itself in a slew of mantras and an overwhelmingly low, droning hum - the reckoning of Aizen Myouou.

The Persona lurched behind him, wrapping Kei in his own personal mandala. His Aizen Myouou was a peculiar sight to behold, what with his chalky skin and his purple skintight apparel that flared at the shoulders, covered his face, and ended at the legs. His eyes were concealed by a metal mask, his hands equipped with metal talons, his legs clothed in black spandex, with a set of spiked cuffs at the thigh. He outstretched his arms and assumed the lotus position behind Kei, letting the massive wall of densely woven iron chains that hung off of his mask envelop him. A strong sense of calm and serenity overwhelmed Kei's body as his hands entwined with that of his Persona's.

"Master...you are giving in to your passions and falling down the path of hubris. You have made wonderful strides to avoid these treacherous paths thus far. Do not be tempted to fall toward the charnel grounds, for you have not reached a state of mind to traverse them without succumbing to darkness."

Aizen Myouou released Kei's left hand. Ominously, he pointed a bladed finger toward the outer ring of his personal mandala. Surrounded by black vajras was a clouded ring of what appeared to be dark, foreboding burial grounds. Seemingly literal in its appearance, Kei knew all too well that these grounds were hotbeds of fear - representations of extremes and sins that threatened to cloud the mind and lead to personal downfall.

"Your admitting your wrongness when faced with the potential to slaughter an innocent has averted you from being corrupted by two of the poisons that plagues humans, the poisons of pride and anger. Do you wish to be poisoned by such terrible things again, Master?"

Kei shook his head quickly - he forced the memory out, preventing it from ripping into the mandala. This memory was one of great shame, considered to be a weakness, seemingly laced with strength at the time. Despite the sheer wrongness of putting that person out of their misery while on their deathbed, the action itself - the contemplation of it - the position of where he stood among his so-called friends...

"Why do you not cast this memory aside and learn from it, Master?"
Kei could not muster up an answer.

"Why do you act as if you are above others, Master? Why did you feel the need to overexpose the shaman queen's weakness, Master?"

He snorted - his Persona was agitating him.

"Why must you choose to stand out in such an overbearing fashion, Master? Why - "

"Will you stop!?"

The mandala burst into glass. Aizen Myouou faded, splintering into a faint, purple-tinted mist.

"Forgive me, Master..."

The Persona resettled inside Kei's psyche - but he winced at the sharp pain that lingered in his head. It wasn't a smooth landing for poor Aizen Myouou, for in that instant, breaking in shapes through the haze, Kei felt the Wisdom King rip at the seam, allowing something darker to tear through.

"No..."

He forced the feeling out of him, willing his body to calm down - the darkness he saw reminded him of Aki, that devilish child, the embodiment of the darkness and the id of the girl who slept in the DEVA System. She wasn't a Shadow, not quite the Shadow that the others had come to know, but the similarities were damning.

"Is that what a person's Shadow is like...was that my...?"

He shook his head, angry. "I know better than that...I know better than to snap like that. Besides, that Kujikawa...she really is using Yamagishi..."

As he sauntered off, grabbing a bite to eat before the departure, the aforementioned Kujikawa sat by You In Wonderland, still upset at Kei's accusations. She grumbled and mumbled, seemingly on the verge of tears to the point that Himiko and Uzume seemingly escaped from her head. Uzume vanished without her liveliness and Himiko without her regal aura, leaving behind a shattered, tessellation-like barrier. On the fragments were words - they resembled lyrics on sheets - that all screamed that, no, Rise wasn't seeing her pre-idol self in Fuuka-chan, Kei was being absurd, Fuuka-chan could probably put up a fight even though that was probably a lie, Rise wasn't taking pity on her for the most part. Remnants of what Rise rejected lied beneath the barrier, and it was plain for her to see that, yes, Kei was right on many counts, but damn her if she admitted it out loud.

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The Velvet Room

The pianist's melody and the singer's operatic aria permeated the Velvet Room as usual, but pessimism and tension rippled through the power-soaked air, springing at the source from the three
siblings and their new "co-worker," the painter. It was business as always for Belladonna and the pianist, but they could only take the occasional glance at the trio and the painter, as they were not allowed to shirk their duties. As for Marie, she had absolutely no say in whatever damned matter they were speaking of; it wasn't as if they had told her anything beforehand, and they likely wouldn't in the future. Instead, she softly whistled at the revamped room: it was homier, despite being a suspended platform in an abyss. A curtain was set up behind the doors on two sides, with the pianist's quartz-shaded grand piano placed to the right of the yellow-lit door. Belladonna was performing on the opposite side near the white-lit door, and an easel was placed further in the front, adjacent to Margaret's fortune-telling table. She would've enjoyed the room - anything was ten times better than that cramped limo - but those damned locks put her in an extreme state of unease. Three of them were enormous, and the remaining eleven were snaked together tightly like endless vines of poison ivy.

The three siblings and the painter were locked in a stalemate of words and gestures, with none giving an inch.

Marie was fiddling with her pom-pom topped pen, scribbling down words and phrases. If for nothing else, the damned doors, the room, and the anticipating spats between the siblings made for some juicy inspiration for her pathos. She wrote whatever came to mind: "siblings," "rivalry," "inferiority," "locked," "haunting," "vevleteen," "violet," "platinum," "darkness," "intensity," "abyss," "clockwork..."

"Clockwork...clockwork...time...?"

"Uh, guys? I have a question."

Margaret decided to be the one to humor and acknowledge her, albeit displeased that she addressed them casually again.

"Didn't you say that everybody came here from different periods of time? I mean, that's why there's four of those doors, right?"

Margaret sternly nodded her head.

"Well...if you read, like, the pulp stories and stuff - " Yu, an avid reader, liked "pulp fiction," hence where she discovered the term. " - Time travel never ends well for people who do it. I mean, who cares if this is a school festival? Yeah, it's here for a reason, I know, but it's fun. Don't you think that the fact that you have some major time travel hijinks going on is far weirder?"

Margaret gasped, placing a hand on her head. A bead of sweat visibly rolled down her face. "How foolish of me. And to think that I scolded them all for not realizing that fact sooner...the fact that they are all here from different points in time alone is..."

"Is...?"

"...It is troublesome. If this place perpetuates its existence for a long time, and they all stay here for just as long, then a rip in the fabric of reality will form. Reality would be distorted, and it would warp and twist until nothing remains." Margaret shuddered, albeit very slightly.


"I cannot hamper my curiosity as to why this spot of the Collective Unconsciousness has taken the form of a culture festival. This, I still wish to research. But now that you, Marie, have pointed the intricacies of this time travel issue out, we cannot fully ignore it."
Marie smirked. "You're darn welcome!"

The Demon Painter gathered his thoughts, deciding to speak next when neither Elizabeth nor Theodore budged. "Our guests have gathered quite a cache of observations and a hypothesis as to why this place is the way it is. I think we can partially solve this little experiment - a theoretical one, if you will - but there is a massive kink in it now, as Elizabeth had just recently found out."

"I can't believe I actually gave that thing my medical treatment!" Elizabeth mewled, scowling. "I even did it pro bono! It truly took me that long to realize that she did not belong here. And yet that bitch, our torrid kink that the painter has mentioned of, is our only other clue as to what this margin world is."

"Sister..." Theodore hissed, clenching his fists as his arms crossed. "...I will not stand for you referring to that girl as a thing. She is a human being, the same as all of our other guests."

Elizabeth's smile became wicked and acidic - the same face she always gave him when he had the audacity to act out of line.

"Developing the balls to speak against your sister again, I see?" She said, hatred lacing her voice. "I dislike speaking out against our master, but I think that he honestly made a mistake when he gave you approval to begin assisting him. It doesn't take a scientist to deduct that you are clearly unsuited to assist, Theo, for you have fallen completely head-over-heels for your very first guest." She emphasized "very" and "first" with a sharp bite.

This place was strange, indeed, for Theodore was supposed to be cowering like a gazelle, his voice raised several octaves, his body all scrunched up in fear, and it would be oh, so funny because Theodore was male. Elizabeth was beginning to find this place terrible, lacking in amusement, because her stupid brother was glaring at her, clearly intent on going on an offense if she kept talking. It irritated her, for he had one guest to his name, from another portion of space-time - that she seemingly crossed, no less - and he was worshiping the ground she stood on!

"Insult me all you want, sister," Theodore spat. "You are in no position to criticize my feelings for Kotone-sama."

"Of course I am!" Genuine anger found its way onto Elizabeth's features - quite a shock for those who were seeing it. "You would go so far to shirk your duty and protect someone who flagrantly defied both fate and the natural order of things! Her existence is an insult to us, it is an insult to our master, and it is an insult to all other guests who have come before! Why - " She let out a gasp, pointing an accusatory (and not so funny) finger at the Demon Painter, who raised a brow. " - What that girl has done exceeds even the crime of his guest, and that damned Tatsuya Suou gallivanted across the fabric of reality as if he were taking a stroll in the park!" Elizabeth violently jerked her arms in all directions as anger shot about her, rendering her into a robotic toy on auto-pilot. "That cunt should be dead and Tatsuya left alone to rot with her!" She furiously nodded her head, with her audience too shocked to respond. "Yes, yes, she truly is - "

*BZZZT*

"Oh!"

A small crater bolted and emerged from below, with Elizabeth's jerking put to a jittery stand-still - At Theodore's beck and call was a great angel clad in gold armor and a white cloth at the waist, skin redder than blood, eyes with naught but clear green scleroses and an iron will that seemed to stab through the soul of those who looked into them. The great Archangel Michael, with the authority of a battle general, struck Elizabeth with a violent bolt of lightning, with the flow of power creating a
small gale that forced Theodore's Compendium pages to wildly flicker, and his own hair and clothing to sway.

The aria came to a grinding halt.

"Sister..."

Margaret gasped. The painter had tensed, anticipating a brawl. Marie "meeped." She, along with the others, was afraid. Theodore's voice was no longer mirthful and soothing, but chillier than ice, with the force of a hammer smashing a prone skull to spatter and bits. The power that was rippling off of his body - on top of being some of the most damn poignant wellspring for poems she had ever known - screamed with wrath, but not a chaotic frenzy; no, it was a wrath of righteousness, a brutality that was well-concealed. Her crimes be damned, for this girl, to him, was sacrosanct (which she then wrote down on a scrap of paper, for that mental statement was too good to pass up).

"...I believe it is you who deserves the title of 'cunt.'"

His expression did not change as he flourished something in his hand - it glistened in the dim blue light, appearing with a swing, clacking together as it fell into his hand. The object was a pair of headphones. They belonged to Sakuya - indeed, the Audio Technica headphones that sat on his neck might as well have been welded onto his body permanently. These were the same model as the current pair he had, but this pair was colored a midnight blue instead. The wear and tear on them was obvious, but the boy had kept them out of sentimentality.

Elizabeth gasped.

"These earphones are completely useless, yet he allowed you, Sister, to keep them as a gift, for it was you who showed interest in them..." A shadow of a smirk appeared on his lips. "...and don't you dare lecture me about this being evidence to study from the outside world, for I, too, am guilty of that. We are inhuman, that much is certain, but our sense of curiosity and attachment takes a startling amount of cues from humans, don't you think? I'd go so far as to say that you kept these broken earphones, because..."

The bob-haired sister let out a short scream. "Damn you, Theo!"

"...you have developed a longing desire for your guest, Sakuya-sama...I can already tell that you have fallen in love with him, as I had fallen in love with my own. This trinket is a reminder of him. This is the concept of eros, the concept of infinite, appreciative affection for another, aspiration, possession, sublime...this is something that we residents were thought to never be able to experience, and yet here we are..."

"Shut up!"

"Sister...do not insult or belittle me, or Kotone-sama like that, for we are in a similar position. Our desires are one and the same. Now..."

With a snap of his fingers, the headphones were whisked away to the subspace that Elizabeth had put them in. He returned to his polished, welcoming stance, putting on a soft smile as he helped the Demon Painter arrange the little diagram he made from his own set of tarot cards.

"I believe," he said sweetly, "that Painter-san wants to explain our situation thus far?"

The painter nodded his head in agreement. Theodore probably overreacted a bit - just a bit - but Elizabeth deserved some degree of retribution. Her and Margaret's abuse of the man disgusted him greatly. He crossed his arms and glared at the two women - Elizabeth appeared as though she were a
machine that was about to explode in a flurry of sparks; Margaret's stern face and rigid stance reminded the painter of some official on a power trip. He snorted. Damn them and their pride.

"Get over here. Now."

His rumbling voice seemed to vibrate in the ears of the now-shivering Elizabeth and Margaret, to the point that it compelled them to go to him. He gestured them to sit as he began arranging the cards. There was no real pretense to his arrangement - he took the twenty-two major Arcana and some of the minor Arcana cards and picked them at random to show off whatever research was done so far.

"I'll use five cards to represent our fair Persona-users," said the painter. "Group them by the inherent traits of each group's leader, and I think you can figure it out from there." He did as such: the Emperor served as the "emblem" of Team Hermelin, the Sun was the emblem of Tatsuya Suou's group, the Moon was Maya's group (both the halves of Team Sumaru), the Fool was Team Gekkou, and the World was Team Yaso.

"Here we have the five groups, our Persona-users. Why these five? Who knows? But here they are, tasked with a battle that they seemingly have nothing to do with...or do they? This is a mystery in and of itself, but this question will likely not be answered until the journey is nearly done, don't you think?"

The others nodded their heads sagely. Marie sighed, on the verge of falling asleep. Elizabeth, on the other hand grimaced - Sakuya said something that tipped her off.

"A man named Philemon came to me in my sleep...he even alluded to us coming here, now that I think about it."

Bitterness was a hell of an emotion, for she bit her tongue as the painter went on.

"Now, we have our hypothesized catalyst...the amnesiac duo, Zen and Rei."

The painter, after some deliberation, decided to pick a major tarot, even if the duo did not quite represent any Arcana well enough (he considered picking the Lovers, but it was a.) cliche, and b.) neither of them seemed to embody or be aware of the sheer magnitude of choices and thought that embodied the Arcana; Zen was eerily passive, and Rei clinging to him like a toy). The card that came to him was the Tower - for a nanosecond, his eyes went wide. Theodore found this peculiar, but he remained silent.

"Sakuya-san and his friends were the ones who discovered and contacted Zen and Rei first. They know nothing but life in this margin world. Rei has claimed that her and Zen's memories were stolen away by someone - 'stolen' being the key word here. This in itself is suspicious, but neither claim to know the one responsible." The painter did find this suspicious indeed, which validated his next statement: "Both are drawn to the labyrinths, but have chosen not to traverse them until meeting with our guests. Our guests are the very first people they have had concrete conversations with. This, too, is suspicious."

"It isn't suspicious when you consider that the students in the school are not really students...they are more like ghosts," said Theodore. "Kotone-sama once showed me the most amusing thing...it was this toy kitten that could do several commands and would say up to ten phrases. Sad to say, these students are much like that toy: the boy at the takoyaki stand, for example, says only five different phrases, often at random, and create takoyaki ad nauseum. You cannot hold a normal conversation with him, and he cannot do anything else." Theodore nodded his head solemnly. "Painter-san, this fact validates the hypothesis that Maya-sama came up with earlier."
The painted nodded his head in turn. "You're absolutely right." He then took out the number one card from each of the minor Arcana: Sword, Cup, Coin, and Wand. He chose the One of Wands as the representative of the first labyrinth and turned it over, signaling its "completion." "As Zen found out at the end of the labyrinth, he learned that three more lied in wait. He discovered this as he regained a portion of his memory. The memory was regained by discovering the treasure that lied in the depths of You In Wonderland, which was being guarded by a massive Shadow. You In Wonderland has been mapped out in full and its treasure plundered. We can assume that Zen will regain all of his memories after defeating the guardians and obtaining the other treasures from the remaining three labyrinths."

"And what of Rei?" Margaret inquired. "There was no indication that she regained any memories of her own."

"Hmm...according to what Tatsuya-san reported, Rei indeed did not regain any memories, but when she was prodded about it, she became highly defensive. Indeed, when we were all caucusing at the clock tower, she remained placid and ate with reckless abandon. Mhm, suspicious suspicious..."

Margaret looked at the display, with a feeling of satisfaction settling in her gut. "So if we consider what we have seen so far, then we can conclude the following: this finite space, which is an island near the Collective Unconsciousness, was born from either Zen or Rei. All evidence points to Zen, but this is inconclusive. Clearing the remaining labyrinths will give answer whatever questions remain." She began to contemplate. "There is no knowing what Zen's 'task' is, or what the true reason is for the gathering of all these Persona-users, but we will likely find that out when all the labyrinths are traversed."

"The mastermind will likely show itself at the end as well," said Theodore. "However, we still know not the meaning of why this is a school festival, or why even the labyrinths are the way they are...but as we've all said, these, too, will come to us."

"Correct. And on top of all of these problems, there is a time limit of sorts. As our Persona-users are all from different periods of time, this world will tear into the fabric of reality...but not any time soon, thankfully," sighed the painter. He raised his head and sighed - next would be the thing that was complicating their terribly complicated conundrum. He picked a minor Arcana card this time for the 'kink' in question.

"This journey, for all of its unanswered questions, is actually straightforward if you think about it. All answers await by clearing through the labyrinths. Of course, now we have a kink, so this may no longer be the case..."

He drew the card - the Ten of Swords. He gawked. It had to be coincidental, dammit!

"Herein lies our representation of the kink - a girl named Kotone Shiomi." He slid the card on the table a ways off from the rest of the scene. "She was discovered in a state of near-death by two of the Persona-users from 2009 A.D: Shinjiro Aragaki and Akihiko Sanada. Now, if those two little dolts could just tell someone how they found her, then maybe we can find out more about this mess." The painter grunted. He then turned to Theodore, giving him a hard stare.

"Theodore...you know this girl?"

The time had come. There was no otherworldly door for Theodore to escape into now. In his mind, he could see a pair of grudging fists floating above him, threatening to smother him into puddles of blood. The silence that followed was deafening and wretched - silence that Belladonna's rich soprano could not combat. Theodore found himself hunched forward, his chin planted on top of his hands. His fingers intertwined with one another. Instead of sorrow, as one would have assumed, the man
became wistful. His golden eyes glimmered like flickering gold leaf, his lips pursed in a thoughtful smile. He wasn't looking at his fellow attendants, but at something else - a phantasm, a memory. He looked at that ghost - a corner of the room - as if it were the only thing in the world.

"She was my first guest. It was my very first time assisting Master Igor. I was an overseer to her journey."

Elizabeth glowered at her brother, while Margaret grimaced. The latter was as inexperienced as her brother at assistance, but as the eldest among them, the responsibility to remain loyal to their Master and to their duties as overseers of the powers that be was respected by her the most. She held that duty to heart. As for why she did, she couldn't say, but no matter.

The painter was more sympathetic to his plight, but he himself had little attachment to the outside world. He could remember that time of his life, though. Whether or not that was a blessing or a curse was another matter entirely.

"We went through everything with her: the binding of the contract, the Compendium, the nature of bonds, my requests to make her journey just a bit easier..." He was aglow with nostalgia, his voice lithe and fluttering like a butterfly. "The city of her birth, a place that she had not been to since childhood, had been plagued by Shadows and a wrinkle in time. She was chosen to solve the mystery of the wrinkle and to slay the Shadows. At the crux of it was a massive labyrinth that would appear at midnight, every night. With companion and Persona at her beck and call, she tackled the labyrinth, tackled the burdens of others, tackled her own burdens..."

What an oddly familiar story that was. Elizabeth raised her head, and Margaret's eyes amass with confusion.

"...All of this, done within the span of a single year."

The term that Sakuya-sama gave this was "raising a red flag." Elizabeth sensed that red flag, all right. Perhaps she ought to have done her sisterly duties better by monitoring the idiot, space-time hijinks be damned, but it was too late for that.

Theodore's eyes seemed to glow in the eyes of the painter. This was likely him reflecting on times he had with the girl, no doubt. They flickered like fireflies, the gold seemingly amber, enriched with bliss.

"I gave her a number of requests. Many involved the creation of specific Personas - hundreds of them were a part of her! Her potential was massive, gods, demons, so many beautiful aspects of her that..." He sighed, falling into a dreamlike state. "...And after exploring the world outside of the Velvet Room with her, I knew why. Having her fetch trinkets and human oddities weren't enough to sate my curiosity. She showed me around her home, and always agreed to when I asked..."

The red flags in Elizabeth's head turned into blaring alarms.

"Those days were truly..." He sighed happily. "...I cannot properly put it in words. One place she could access the Velvet Room was this place called a shopping mall, a place of frivolousness and passions and, oh, good grief, it's so beautiful to look at! She never did take me to Club Escapade though. I'm kind of sad..."

The alarms made Elizabeth's eardrums explode. Escapade was -

"I wouldn't know the inherent beauty of Earth's cuisine if it weren't for Kotone-sama. She fed me takoyaki. She fed me melon bread. She made me a beautiful truffle made of the darkest cacao and
topped with a mocha coulis... she made it with her own two hands... she toiled for me..." He shook to
the core at the memory of the girl, taking a thumb and wiping his lip free of excess chocolate. It was
as if a reservoir of water had sprung to life within him, triggered by that touch.

Theodore blushed. He felt his body flush with heat, and the other residents began to feel it
themselves - even Marie. His passions lingered into hers and the painter's minds, stirring their
respective pots of inspiration. Margaret blushed too, flustered as all hell. Elizabeth wanted to scream.

"Theo," Margaret panted, taking in a sharp breath. "Your story is... well... goodness, I'm getting
embarrassed. I can say that not even Yu-sama has performed that feat... heh heh...

"I do apologize, Sister, but I cannot help but feel as strongly - as passionately as I do." He took a
breath, steadying himself. "She lived on an island that had a bridge connecting to the mainland. I'm
surprised she managed to take me to so many places." His face lit up as he realized: "Why, she even
took the time to show me her school! It was a beautiful institution too, and massive. She partook in
a number of its recreational groups - she called them 'clubs' - but the one she spent the most time in, I
think it was the 'art club.'" He eagerly turned his gaze to the painter. "Oh, Painter-san! She's an artist,
just like you! She wanted to become an illustrator when she graduated! I bet you'd love to see her
work! It's true what they say: music and the arts are arguably mankind's finest achievements."

The painter couldn't help himself. He chuckled.

"Y'know, Theo," said Marie at last. "You've been pretty vague about where this chick lives. Like,
what's the name of her home town? I guess the name's 'Jap-an-eeze' like the rest of 'em, but I don't
know. Does she live in 'Jah-paan' like the rest of the idiots?"

"Oh, yes! How silly of me to forget. Kotone-sama is half-Japanese!"

Marie's brow twitched. "Uhhh... I guess all roads lead back to 'Jah-paan' then."

"Marie brings up a point, Theo," said Elizabeth darkly. "What's the name of the school she
attended...?"

"Gekkoukan High. Why?"

It looked like something right out of a high school comedy. Elizabeth squatted, jumped up onto the
table with a massive _stomp_, sending all of the tarot cards flying as she did, and found her finger
violently poking her brother's nose. An accusatory glare flared in her eyes. Margaret, Theodore, and
the painter could sense Nebiros flaring up within her; the marquis of hell threatened to consume
Theodore within his dark embrace - a beautiful, rune-loaded circle of darkness, gestured with an
amiable hand, but a life-consuming darkness nonetheless. From behind him was an angry Jack Frost,
threatening to plunge him into a cavern of absolute zero, and for a moment, Theodore realized just
how absurd Elizabeth's preferable choices from the Compendium were.

"Damnation!" Elizabeth hissed, her saliva landing on Theodore's face. "If what you are saying is
true, then not only is this girl from another dimension entirely, but she lead the same life - an _identical_
life - to my guest! What is this tomfoolery you speak of, brother!?!" She willed herself to calm down,
for Margaret's glare of sisterly disapproval began to bore into her skull. She did not move, but let her
inner fury settle; Nebiros' presence was gone.

When Theodore did not respond, save for barely audible chokes and gasps, she took a breath.

"Theo... what you have just described now... this girl - some nobody that ought to be cast aside - is
living a life that precariously aligns with that of Sakuya-sama." She finally relented and dropped her
"Answer me this, dear brother: was the name of the island she resided in 'Iwatodai'?"

"...Y-Yes?"

"And she goes to this 'Gekkoukan High' for her 'higher education.'"

"Yes."

"The mall you went to had a club dubbed 'Escapade.' I take it that the mall was named after the paulownia tree, and also had facilities including the bounty-hunting quarter called a 'police station' and a den of entertainment called an 'arcade'?"

"...Yes."

"And Theo..." Elizabeth took a sharp breath.

Off in the distance, even though the pianist played the same calming melody that he always played, he could feel something change within the Sea of Souls: as if the souls swimming within it were responding to the scene before him, they began to swirl, a squall mixed with a whirlpool, and an overwhelming blare of cellos and string basses began to play. The strings were tense - rapid bow movements playing the same scale of low notes, prickling his senses with a stray pluck from a bass. The cellos began to play a melody that seemed to sway, in tandem with a sudden thumping of timpanis.

"...This is...how fascinating. This music...Georges Bizet? It certainly sounds like one of his compositions. Probably a coincidence, but - "

"Answer me honestly, Theo. Did this thi...Kotone...go into a labyrinth called Tartarus?"

"...Yes..."

"...And did Tartarus appear during a period of time that was spurred by manmade experiments?"

"...Yes..."

"And does Gekkoukan High turn into Tartarus during this period of time?"

"...Yes."

Elizabeth pondered. She grimaced. She glowered. She became fretful.

"Theodore...my one and only brother..." Her voice lowered. "Did Kotone...finish her journey...?"

He remained mum, his eyes darted silently. He put up a defense that made his sisters terribly anxious. The music kept its steady flow, with the cellos growing louder and louder and the timpanis thumping more quickly.

After what felt like an eternity, he answered: "Yes."

Elizabeth nearly fell over. All pretense of her sunny disposition had vanished, with only a body awash with fear remaining.

Margaret turned pale. The world around her turned gray, her throat paralyzed.

The cellos grew louder. A small entourage of trumpets joined them.
Belladonna could not sing, and the pianist could not play. They found themselves as entrenched in Theodore's tale as the rest. The sea of souls churned, transforming into a tsunami.

"Theodore..." Elizabeth sighed, her breath hitching. "Please...we are bystanders of fate, yes...but this is...to come from another plane to a place like this...tell me...is this Kotone the same as Tatsuya Suou...? What could she have done to make it here...? It must have been terrible indeed..."

Theodore said nothing, his face contorted in a mixture of sadness and anguish.

"Her eyes were like those of a fugitive. She looks weary and afraid, as she ought to be. And this makes me wonder..."

"Elizabeth...!" Margaret's voice came out in a faint, futile rasp. Her sister did not hear her.

"...What will fate have in store for my guest...!? If, if her tale is truly one in the same as Sakuya-sama's, then...then - !"

*BZZZZZZSSSSSSHHHHHHPPP*

The music climaxed. A quake powerful enough to uproot the world from its core. It shook the Velvet Room itself, rolling and ripping its way out of reality. The souls that were wildly dancing in the ocean began to scream.

The residents of the Velvet Room were thrown about as the platform bucked and tore, threatening to throw them into the abyss below. In their line of vision was nothing but blurred swirls, swishing and rocking and blazing and blazing away as something unbearably loud began to drill and drill and drill from somewhere, and it ripped and destroyed like a volcano that lost all of its top from an eruption and, and, and -

The gateway that lead to nothing but emptiness had been shred for that moment. There was no telling where the intruder appeared. It was a thing to fear and shun, for it lied beyond the Sea of Souls, leading to a firmament of absolute Chaos, the vast, primordial network whose powers and workings were arcane and too unknown for the overseers of power.

The quake came to an end, the room buzzing and shivering before coming to a complete stop. As the Velvet Room residents recovered from the shock, Elizabeth herself could not help but ponder, for her beloved guest had mentioned the presence - the involvement - of the true overseer.

Philemon.

"...Is he planning...does he...does he know something...!? Philemon...!"

Chapter End Notes

The song at the beginning is the "Persona Ondo." An ondo (音頭) can refer to many aspects of music, mainly older genres of Japanese music, but more often than not, it refers to a song with a swinging rhythm in 2/2 time. Persona 2 has its own "ondo" song, and the Errors of Their Youth CD drama has a track where Tatsuya's VA, Takehito Koyasu, sings it.
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