Stasis

by CCRoyal

Summary

Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

Post Manga. Mai's powers are beginning to get out of control. Two years away from Naru, and things have only gotten worse. Waking up to herself screaming is fine, but destroying an entire house and causing massive poltergeists? Not so much. So what do her friends do? They reluctantly ship her off to England where a less than enthusiastic Naru awaits to train the young girl alongside the greatest psychic researchers from across the globe. Cases ensue, but not without a little chaotic romance to add into the equation. MaiXNaru.
Location: Takigawa Residence, Tokyo, Japan . . .

Date: June, Day I . . .

Time: 3:47 a.m . . .

The room shattered. Shattered. As if made from glass. And Mai Taniyama's scream ricochet off the walls in a sonorous collision that splintered the shards of the walls into fractured pieces.

This was how she awoke.

But it wasn’t for another five seconds that reality finally hit her square on. Nevertheless, the image of —Mai swallowed, attempting to regain her bearings. She still felt the fringes of her vision hitting her in the most sensitive places. Her breathing was ragged, falling from her lips in frantic gasps. Absently, she thought her throat had gone dry. It was only then that she fully understood the consequences of what she’d done to the environment around her.

Her gut dropped to her toes and her blood went cold as death. It was a similar sensation of when she witnessed ghosts only centimeters from her face, like in the Urado case. These days blood was a constant assailant to her nose, and more secularly, to her mind.

"Mai!" Monk called from outside the wreckage. "Mai!"

"I'm fine, Monk," she said, although it came out as more of a haunted whisper than she'd intended.

"Mai!" he continued calling. "Are you okay? Mai!"

Wobbly on her feet from the sustaining remnants of her vision striking her body into submission, she stood up from the bed. It was the only object in the room left untouched amongst the damaged ruins. Everything else… Shattered. Even the desk was in splinters, but the description was inadequate to the reality. Cracked or bruised or exploded did not cut it. Everything was shattered.

"I'm fine, Monk." This time it was audible, but it was tinged with unholy terror. Terror primarily centered on herself. What have I done? Tears blurred her vision.

"Mai!" The thirty-something bass player emerged from the rubble of his home, shifting through furniture and broken pipes. "Mai, we need to get out of here, now!"

The girl in question could only stare up at him amidst the dust and shame of her own helplessness. If the roof fell from above them, her PK would undoubtedly—if not unconsciously—react in time to save them. There was no rush necessary, but Mai couldn't reverse the desire to retreat from her.
failure in that moment. In all moments where she transformed normality into something wholly unhinged, she wanted nothing more than to run. To retreat. To *escape*.

They did just that.

Racing out onto the street in the dead of night, Mai and Monk caught their stolen breath. His house was actually quite large, and her room had been stationed on the main landing just in case a situation such as this arose. This way they had a chance of actually escaping the house. But Mai held no illusions about her latent PK powers. This situation could've ended so much worse than being contained to a single room. She'd already shattered a house once during one of their cases a few months back. Ever since, the team had basically gone into permanent retirement as their 'glue'—as Mai was often referred to as—had gone off the deep end.

"Mai, are you okay?" Hosho Takigawa asked after a period of time. Her silence answered him enough, as a fresh set of tears pooled in the brunette's gaze. Sighing, he wrapped her up in an embrace. "It's not your fault, you know. You just don't know how to control it yet... I don't blame you, Mai. I will never blame you for things you can't control..." But the girl had already begun to sob onto his shoulder. So holding her there was the best he could do.

Seconds thereafter, his house collapsed in on itself. Horror shot up his blood, and Mai's gut wrenching sobs only made his heart tear itself in half for the girl. Sighing and gritting his teeth only in frustration for the girl's woes, he decided right then and there. They needed an intervention. After calling some people to sort through his home for anything salvageable, and contacting his girlfriend (Ayako) that he would have to stay with her for awhile, the duo left the premises.

Traversing to Ayako's home was a quiet affair, especially after Mai took a sleeping pill to finally descend into a slumber that wasn't quite as deep as what she needed. Driving, Hosho couldn't help the third sigh that erupted from his lips. Gliding down the highway, he let himself sink into cruise control and allow the flow of his thoughts to move as they pleased.

Naru, no, *Oliver Davis*, had left SPR about two years ago. To the date if he gaged it correctly. At the time, a many of unresolved conflicts had resulted in a warmonger of problems, one of which led to never mentioning the Narcissist's name ever again. But most predominantly, Mai had obtained the ability of psychokinesis (PK for short) which was continuing to grow at a rapid rate. Tearing apart an entire block honestly seemed rather light to put it. The girl's powers were chaotic at worst, and 'tame' or 'resting' at best. The cause was uncertain, but her other powers progressed as well. Astral Projection, psychometry, precognition, among other latent psychic talents that he couldn't even name. The girl was a walking spiritualistic psychic that had the means to destroy... He didn't want to go there. The extent was unknown, nor did he desire to learn.

Following Naru's departure, SPR had continued with Mai taking the leadership reins of their investigations, and the gang had stuck together of the most part. Mai had done superbly well for about a year, until she had an argument with Masako that led to the levitation of several large objects in the room. Things took a darker turn from then onwards, none of which were from the argument.

Within the last eight months or so, Mai's dreams had begun to take their toll on her mentality and emotions, but apparently whenever she came to, she could never pinpoint the aspects of her nighttime delusions. Either way, they were a deterrent to her health as they left her in a state of unprecedented terror and consequential insomnia. About one in ever four nights, she woke up to herself screaming. One in every five left a dent or crack in the wall. Tonight happened to be one of the ten incidents that led to the destruction of an entire building. These events had only transpired
within the last few months, but the rapid growth of her PK strength was more than a little worrisome.

He also knew that this physical destruction was causing Mai to spiral downwards into a type of internal deprecation. A laugh was unheard of, a smile rare and far between, but tears were often and trembling was commonplace. Ayako herself had diagnosed Mai with a type of mental depression.

Mai didn't even have Gene, or as she once said, 'Dream Naru', to guide her through the labyrinth of her nightmares, since Naru had gone back to England. Apparently, when Naru's and Mai's spiritualities first met, it had caused a reaction of some sort that resulted in Gene placing himself amidst Mai's dreams, but since that physical closeness no longer remained, her 'spirit guide' was no longer around. So basically, without Naru, there was no Gene.

It was no doubt in his mind that the anniversary of Naru's departure left some sort of unresolved emotions to lead to his house's demolition.

When he arrived at Ayako's apartment complex, the priestess turned doctor was waiting for them on a nearby bench. Upon seeing his car come up, she sped towards his window. "Hosho, what happened?! Is Mai okay? By the gods, are you okay? I mean I have some supplies in my house if—"

"Ayako." He caught her hand and squeezed, too tired for anything else. The touch settled her, but her expression portrayed every worry. "I'll let you in on the details inside. I'd rather not have Mai wake up until morning. She's had a rough night."

"More like you've had a rough night," she said, but not harshly, letting him get out of the truck. "But I can't imagine what's going through Mai's head right now."

"Neither can I."

The two spared a glance at the young brunette, whose relaxed posture was more unusual than anything they'd seen in a long time. When they got settled inside, Hosho tucked Mai into the comfort of Ayako's guest bed. Breathing evenly for once in more than two months was a special sight after so much distress. He let the door fall away, and left her to her dreams.

His girlfriend met him in the dimness of her kitchen, gaze trailing the array of pots hanging above her stove. Absently, she yawned into the palm of her hand, waiting. They had to talk.

Noticing him in the doorway, Ayako turned and gestured for him to sit. "Tell me what happened."

So he did. He told her of the screaming, of the crackle he heard before the falling of concrete and wood. The fear and the frustration and the static in the air. Said that this day was the day their unnamed parapsychologist had departed. Ayako sat through the recollection in silence, an unordinary scene that unnerved him a bit.

Afterwards, the only thing she said was, "This can't go on, Hosho. It can't."

"You think I don't know that?" His shoulders slumped. "But what can we possibly do for her? I mean, we have no idea how it even works. That was…" That was Naru's area of expertise.

"She needs someone who can help her control her PK," Ayako stated solemnly. "Someone that can pull her through this muck. She can't do it on her own."

"She has—"

"She doesn't have us, Hosho. Be realistic. As much as it pains me to admit, there's nothing we can do for her."
In the clattering quiet, Hosho raked his hands through his hair. "... Have we failed her, Ayako?"

His girlfriend didn't respond at first, just stared at the table. "Ayako," he called, taking her hand.

"No..." She shook her head, but there was regret in the motion. "I don't think we've failed her. Not exactly. But we can't help her either. She needs someone who can, and that person's not us."

Collectively, they both knew exactly who could, but neither voiced his name.

"What if—" he'd dared to address the idea.

"No."

"But—"

"No."

"He's—"

Ayako's scarlet glare was comparative to blood. "Mai will go ballistic at the thought of him interfering. We don't even speak his name anymore."

"He's the only one, Ayako!" Hosho hissed. "The only one! Without help, Mai will..." It was an unspeakable concept that neither would try to swim too deep towards.

The fear was almost palpable between them both at what the mention of Naru would do to the young girl, especially since she unknowingly cried out his name whenever she slept. Before screeching into the night, she would voice his name like a mantra. It was only in those horrific hours of the night did the alias of Oliver Davis be heard.

Finally Ayako relented, but her tone was less than kind. "Call him. Now. I don't care if it's twelve noon or twelve midnight, call the narcissistic prick and let him know exactly what he left behind in Japan."

Turn back the clock eight hours and England was in its later evening.

At his home estate, Dr. Oliver Davis's mood couldn't be described as anything but pensive. Leaning back against the side of a piano with his arms crossed, echoes of reminiscent strings thundered beyond space and time within the cages of his mind. Violin strings to be exact. Violin strings he used to listen to everyday before.

Before.

"You're laughing at me aren't you?" he asked in a hiss. He turned his head around, half expecting someone to be standing beside him, but all that remained was dust and memory and screaming silence. The music was gone, the recollection lost to time. Absently, Oliver gritted his teeth and stood to his full height. There was work to be done.

"Now, why would I laugh at you, Noll?"

Said man stalled in his tracks. Fraction by fraction, his eyes widened, his composure shattered to ashen remains. This time, he whipped around to stare into a set of identical indigo irises in one of the many mirrors surrounding the ballroom, but they were soft compared to his own. The reflection had an expression of utter empathy, rue, and something horribly somber.
"Gene," he began, his voice far calmer than he expected. Eugene. "What are you doing here?" His shock then transformed into abject rage. "You're dead."

Despite this, Gene smiled slightly. "Obviously."

It was a word Oliver often used to thwart idiots in their tracks, but to be used against him meant he'd let his guard down and spoken without thought. Stupidity. Then again, if there had been anyone to tear the stone walls of Noll's control, it would be his own twin brother. But once upon a time another had nearly done so.

"To state the obvious, Noll, I am dead. Nor shall I ever return."

Regaining his sense of calm, Oliver stood straight and relaxed into interrogation mode. "Says the idiot medium whose speaking to me from the contents of a mirror. You should have passed on by now."

"Something's… Come up." There was a potent sadness that radiated off his twin. "I believe you often referred to it as 'unfinished business'."

"What could you possibly need to finish?"

"Careful, Noll," Gene said lightheartedly, but the words were strained. "No need to cause a poltergeist." Ice had begun to form on the windows, and Noll's breath came out in frosted puffs. The statement then led to a thorough defrosting, and the room temperature rose to its previous state.

Containing his newfound rage, Oliver continued waspishly, "Again, what could you possibly need to finish in this world?"

Gene was about to enlighten him when his cellphone rang. His mood worsened thereafter upon noticing the number blinking up at him.

"I thought I strictly ordered never to call this number," a voice answered in clear, quick Japanese. True to Naru's words, the only contact he'd ever left for anyone in Japan's former branch of SPR was to Hosho. Before leaving, the precocious ghost hunter had handed him a single phone number written in idyllic handwriting. He'd immediately put it in his phone, but had never used it due to Naru's warning.

Hearing the cold, snappish voice of his old employer made Hosho straighten unthinkingly. Despite this, the relief that flooded his system calmed whatever semblance of hesitation left in him. "That's one hell of a way to say, 'hello', Naru," he said by way of greeting.

"What's happened, Takigawa-san?" Naru demanded. "I sincerely doubt this is a social call." Nor should it be, was the unmentioned expectation.

Two years and this is the reception I get? Well, it is Naru. He gave Ayako a look that explained everything, and she snorted offhandedly.

Hosho decided to say, "It's about Mai. Something's… Come up."

Across the world, Oliver shot his reflected twin a glance, reverting to telepathic communication. Something's 'come up' with Mai? Is that why you're here again? Gene only shrugged a single
shoulder in response.

"Elaborate," Oliver said into the phone, never letting his gaze flicker from Gene.

There was a pause on the line. "Mai she… She's…"

Gene looked away, despondent.

"Rambling won't help your cause," Oliver mentioned pointedly, assessing his twin's reaction more than anything else.

"She destroyed my house from an outburst of PK energy," Takigawa finally released, and Noll went still. "Things like this have happened before too. I… I think it's from her dreams, but she can never remember them when she wakes up. She says your name a lot too, when she dreams. She'll mutter your name, scream bloody murder, and wake up. Tonight happened to be one the events that just destroyed everything around her… Naru, she can't control it and she's… I've never seen her like this. The Mai you left here in Japan is gone."

"Gone. The word reverberated in his mind, until Gene throttled him back into the present. You'll want to listen to him.

"What led to this?" he questioned, once again alert.

"Honestly? I have no idea." Takigawa sounded tired. "It just started happening about eight months ago, and before I knew it, Mai gained these uncontrollable powers. Her dreams only make her PK energy worse. The more rattled up she is, the worse the damage. Naru… She's lost her sense of self. I don't even see her smile anymore! It's like the Mai we all knew and loved is gone because of this. She's… She's—"

"Retreated into herself."

"Yeah… That basically sums it up. I don't know what to do to help her, and I don't want her to get worse just because of us."

"I assume you've taken some measure of precaution."

"Basically we don't let her be alone except at night," Takigawa explained. "She talks to Ayako and I a lot about everything. Having the old team around really helps her spirits, but she just keeps getting worse. Most nights she doesn't sleep because of the nightmares, but when she does, cracks appear on the walls or objects levitate. I've nearly been impaled by a set of knives once: we've had to get rid of anything remotely sharp in the house… We give her sleeping pills on the worst nights, but it doesn't help much."

"If anything, you've prevented a worse circumstance by keeping her in this way, but it's true, you're hopeless. You're only postponing the inevitable."

In the room over, Mai had awoken from a restful slumber. Darkness hugged her vision except for the light leading to the hallway. Are Monk and Ayako still up? What time is it? The clock at her bedside read 4:32 am.

Still reeling from her most recent dream, the brunette shivered in her comforters, pressing them close. Then she remembered. She'd… She'd…
"No," she whispered. "No. No. No. No. NO!" She tore the covers over her head, too horrified to move. She'd destroyed Monk's house. Already the tang of blood settled on her tongue, a reminder that her PK was acting up. Static electricity skittered in the air above, and it took all her strength to keep the comforters straddled down. Her attempt failed, and she fought the urge to cry.

"Stop it!" she hissed, but it was to herself.

Then she heard Monk growl, "Naru!"

Mai froze, the comforter falling back onto her chest by having her attention diverted. Her heartbeat ruptured her chest in disbelieving pants upon hearing Naru's name for the first time in over a year.

"We're doing everything we can," Monk continued. "But she needs someone who can help her."

They're actually… Telling this to Naru?

A pause.

"Considering you're the 'famous Oliver Davis', yeah, 'I expect your assistance'? She's also your friend, Naru. You owe her this much."

Tuned in, Mai could actually hear the last portion of what Naru said, "... I owe her nothing."

She gritted her teeth, and pulled her comforters tighter. Narcissistic asshole, she thought, but there was no bite. Rather it was bred out of much sadder exploits.

Then something in Monk seemed to just snap. "Didn't something similar happen to you too, Naru? How would you feel now if you still had the same lack of control as you did then? How do you think Mai feels? The girl was about to graduate high school for gods sakes, then she gains a freak amount of PK and her life's no longer the same! So yes, Naru, I expect you to help. No, actually, scratch that, I expect you to actually want to help the girl you practically fell in love with!"

Mai shot up in bed. Static charged the ends of her tresses as a bright blush stained her cheeks. What?!

The edges of the bed began to rise and a crack emerged on the wall nearest her, but she barely noticed.

The whole apartment went dead after that, until she heard the faintest reply, "... I did no such thing. You're drawing fabricated conclusions to reach your own end, Takigawa-san."

Ayako took a bite out of that, "Way to help us out there, Hosho. That was probably the stupidest thing to say to him. You know how he felt about Mai, so did I, but he would never actually admit it! You're just going to make him angry and hang up!"

Another split appeared on the wall.

Monk did not comment on his girlfriend's words, however but his former employer's, "Would you rather she died from something as simple as emotional control, Naru? Tell me what to do!"

You're being ridiculous, Noll, Gene chastised. Help the poor girl. I can feel her presence from across continents, and Mai will die within the year if her PK continues to grow without proper training.

Oliver fixed a fine glare at his twin. Do you just expect me to drop my work and—

Actually, yes, I do expect you to, because this is Mai we're talking about here. Relent, already!
... There was an echoing silence before...

"As I've stated before, Takigawa-san, there is nothing you can do."

"But what about—"

"The only way to help that idiot is to send her here, to England."

Send me to England?! Mai had tiptoed down the hallway, now leaning against a shadowed wall to conceal her existence and listened on with baited breath.

Anxious, a splinter fell from the ceiling.

Monk choked. "So you'll help?"

But Naru was already pushing past that. "You said before that during her dreams she will cause poltergeists, and based upon the emotional status she's displayed before you, these also happen while she's awake, correct?"

Naru waited in silence, before Monk quickly agreed, "Correct."

"Then the only way she can be transported to England safely is by putting her under for the entirety of the flight."

Monk hesitated. "Isn't that a bit much?"

"Would you rather the plane crash?"

Emotions wild and ready to be done with this madness, Mai stepped out from the darkness. The two adults stood straight, and Ayako attempted to speak, probably to justify their actions, but Mai had had enough.

"I'll do it," she declared softly. "I'll go to England as he says. Besides... It's not like he's wrong." The possibility of shooting down the plane was certainly not unlikely.

Monk's mouth hung open, ready to speak, but nothing came out. Then he and Ayako just took one look at each other, and nodded resolutely.

"Actually, Naru," Monk rerouted, now prepared to get into the doctor's good graces. "I think that's a fantastic idea. When do you think you'll be able to make accommodations for her?"

June, Day II

As it was, Yasuhara (who'd basically become her best friend over the last two years) had secretly transferred to Cambridge University a little less than three months ago to major in parapsychology, and work alongside Naru as a research assistant. Originally, he'd told her he'd gone off to the States to study abroad for some obscure degree that she couldn't even pronounce. Apparently, he'd actually gone to England, hoping to spare her feelings. It was an ironic, if not hurtful fact that she couldn't get over. Nevertheless, she didn't have the energy to fight with him, and honestly, she would be glad to see a friendly face during her 'rehab'. It was because of that-and that both Monk and Ayako had full-time jobs-that Mai had to depart for England by herself.
The farewell had been a bucket-full of tears for the three, as they had all but become her parents in the time they’d met to today. So as the doctors placed a mouthpiece over her lips and sleep overcame her senses for the long flight to England, her last image was Ayako and Monk standing over her, grasping her hand in a warming embrace. The last thing she heard before descending into her coma was that they loved her. Tears pricked at her eyes, but her voice was gone, lost to the lulling waves of sleep, and before she knew it, all sense of possibility was gone.

June, Day III

12:20 pm.

Darkness contaminated the background. Night chilled her to the core. The echoing vibrations of a clocktower high in the distance shook her down to the marrow of her bones. Snow slowly descended from the sky, each flake a prick on the skin. She was stationed on the sidewalk, people passing her by as her legs abruptly lurched forward. Then she was moving, tearing through the crowds of people without concern of their wellbeing. All at once, she was too terrified to care. She wanted to scream, wanted to shout, to screech, to cry out to the world.

Nothing could ever be as bad as this.

Her eyes shot open, but they were sightless, visionless. The only thing she really saw was the people in front of her, not letting her pass. Her distance didn't develop. She was trapped. Too slow. Too far away.

Fractured time-space one second. Then... Light.

At first all she could see was a pair of apathetic indigo orbs watching her. Then she noticed the dripping ebony of his hair, still falling into his eyes. Eyes that were watching her. The eternal paleness of his skin was the same perfect alabaster as before, stark against the colors of his clothes. Not black now, but navy. Navy. It suited him.

Mai's breath caught in her throat upon realizing she'd reached consciousness, but her heart was racing too quickly. A pleasant flush washed along the concaves of her cheeks, and her lips formed the name of her first love, "...Naru."

A sharp crack split the wall across from her in half, and he spared it a glance. "You like making walls crack now, I see," he said, just as stoic as ever. His Japanese was just as fluid as the last time she saw him, and some driving force, some hateful little force made tears rise to the surface. All at once, emotions flooded her very being, and she latched onto him there, sitting up, and sobbing into his shoulder for every grievance and lamentation the last two years of separation and adversity caused.

They stayed like that for the longest time. Naru didn't move, nor did he flinch, nor did he touch her. He just waited, patient for a change. From the window, Gene was there, reflecting off the glass for only him to see.

Angels fall, Noll, he said. It's time to put her back in the light.

I'm ready for the riot to begin, and surrender,

I walked the path that led me to the end,
Remember?

I'm caught beneath with nothing left to give,

Forever...

When angels fall with broken wings…"

-Breaking Benjamin, *Angels Fall*

Stasis
Even from across the hospital Oliver felt it. Electric shockwaves crackled in the air around him, not visible, but mobile and buzzing with energy. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. "This is bad." At his side, Lin shifted uncomfortably and nodded his head.

In the time spent since receiving Takigawa's call, Oliver had laid out a basic plan for what Mai would be doing for the next several days. Firstly, they would test the measure and extent of her PK levels, along with a thorough interrogation. They would also have to keep her as calm as possible, for he himself was wholly aware of how emotions could contradict even the most enforced mask of indifference. And with how expressive Mai was anyway, they would have a difficult starting point. Their two sole positives in this dilemma were that they had Yasu—Mai's best friend—and Gene—who would deliver his own teachings and preach whatever semblance of consoling he wanted to administer to Mai amid her dreams, of which seemed to be a leading factor to her lack of control. Oliver was also confident that Yasu and Gene's mere existence in her daily life would assist in the overall containment, or perhaps a better word would be contentment, of her emotions.

The main SPR office in Cambridge would be their base of operations. The building was teeming with psychic assessment equipment that would assist in their overall evaluation. The SPR office also contained the 'blank room' as Gene would often refer to it as. Constructed from pure concrete, and titled white from floor to ceiling, it was built to sustain even the most powerful PK damage. As such, it would act as an ideal location to begin Mai's PK training if Takigawa's explanation was anything to go by. Destroying an entire house from fear induced PK release was a feat in and of itself. They would have to be extremely careful.

Never mind the fact that his work was on permanent hiatus until Mai fully recovered, which could be months from now.

Oliver could practically hear Gene's tisk of annoyance from the spirit realm. Though their connection had been all but severed after his death, fractions of a single thread surfaced every now and again. He supposed it was the reason why they could still communicate through mirrors and reflections. It was doubtful they'd be able to otherwise.

"Wait outside," Oliver told Lin upon reaching Mai's door. "I'd rather deal with her alone first." Lin didn't look too thrilled at the notion, but complied with his demand.

"Fine, but remember not to upset her. The doctor said that she would be waking up soon."
"Umm, excuse me," a nurse suddenly said, holding a clipboard with a dozen or so sheets about Mai's health record over the years, along with her release forms, "are you Dr. Oliver Davis?"

Oliver turned, but she'd addressed Lin. No one ever expected Oliver to actually be the one in charge, not that it made much of a difference. They shared a glance, Oliver nodding in acceptance. He didn't have time for mealy paperwork when they had a latent psychic in the room over that could plausibly destroy the building if rustled. He left Lin standing outside.

In the hospital room, the only sound to be heard was the steady beat of the heart monitor. Walking over, he decided that despite two years of separation, the girl still looked almost identical to when he'd left. Details were always something he remembered, even despite his own desires to acknowledge them. He almost sighed, hearing the ghost of Gene's laugh in his head.

For a moment, all was still, but then Mai's breathing quickened, followed by the air becoming thicker. Something in Oliver felt it, but whatever it was, was beyond his own comprehension.

"Her dreams only make her PK energy worse. The more rattled up she is, the worse the damage."

Takigawa's voice rang in his head. He didn't know what to expect completely by this statement, as Mai's dreams had often left her in a vulnerable state, anyway. But this time she couldn't remember them? It was odd, especially if it was a recurring nightmare she experienced frequently. And it wasn't as if she'd been subjected to spiritual activity in the last several months, either. He would have to analyze this development in the investigation, but for now he would merely observe.

Then again…

"She says your name a lot too, when she dreams. She'll mutter you name, scream bloody murder, and wake up."

But there was also…

"Me, or Gene?"

Did Mai still see Gene amid her dreams? It was a doubtful possibility, considering that his elder brother had never mentioned it in their most recent conversation, but Gene had always been one to make him learn the trick behind the fact. He couldn't completely rule it out.

Although, he doubted the girl was stupid enough to forget what had happened before he'd left. Contradicting himself once again, he did think, Well, it is Mai, she is prone to stupidity.

He would have to discuss this with her before he drew to any conclusions-

"... Naru?"

Something intangible crackled past him, locking firmly into place. It took everything he had not to visibly flinch at the unknown force.

But then he realized the wall behind him had cracked, and he spared it a glance. "You like making walls crack now, I see," he said in perfect Japanese. The tongue was oddly normal for him, despite having gone over two years without ever speaking a lick of it.

His words alone seemed to shatter whatever semblance of calm Mai possessed, as she suddenly latched onto him, sobbing into his shoulder. For whatever reason, he understood. He'd gone through similar circumstances as a child, albeit even at his worst, he'd never been able to demolish an entire building. It was justifiable if the girl was an emotional wreck, and Mai had been extremely sensitive
in the time he'd known her. Nevertheless, this instance was not what he'd hoped, nor desired to transpire. Consoling had never been in Oliver's wealth of knowledge, as that had been Gene's department.

So he sat there, waiting in complete stillness. He didn't touch her, but he didn't pull away either. It was a compromise, he supposed. Nevertheless, the static in the air was potent and intensifying. It was a miracle the girl had yet to collapse... Then again, how was she able to manage this amount of PK levels without detrimental effects? He'd contemplated that notion before, but had yet to come to hypothesis.

*Angels fall, Noll,* Gene whispered suddenly, breaking his train of thought. He appeared in the window's reflection, arriving without warning. *It's time to put her back in the light.*

Mai's head snapped up, her breath catching. Oliver followed her gaze, only to meet a pair of identical indigo orbs displaying emotions he could never let past his own mask.

"You see him?" Oliver asked quietly.

"I..." she swallowed, biting at her lip. "I've always been able to see him."

Oliver frowned, perplexed at her sudden use of English, but Mai didn't notice. She was looking at Gene.

"So you can not only sense me now," Gene began softly, smiling slightly, "but you're fully able to understand English, Mai?" Gene then broke his connection with Oliver, reaching into the physical realm and projected himself for them to see. Oliver knew it was not a simple feat to accomplish.

Mai's smile was weak at best. "Yeah... I learned a lot from Yasu, and my sense for spirits has grown pretty well... But..." Oliver felt her trembling, the air density thickening. The bed began to rise from the floor. "... I'm certainly... Not an angel, Gene."

Tears pooled in Mai's eyes, until they trickled down her face in lines. Oliver tensed. "Mai!"

The girl flinched at his tone, igniting another fractured split in the wall across from them. The windows rattled, and Gene moved in closer. "Mai," he said tentatively, "this isn't something that will be easy. Controlling your PK will take time, especially with how powerful it is. This'll be a testament of your will, but if you believe in yourself, it's possible to come back from this stronger than ever. And to me, well..." he trailed off, smiling. "You've always been an angel."

The room froze before the bed crashed back onto the floor with a resounding *smack.* Mai was staring wide-eyed at his brother, before she hid her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook, but the energy in the room decreased significantly.

"As for you, Noll," Gene addressed, a frown similar to his own marring his ghostly lips, "I would suggest trying not to act like the idiot scientist that you are, and be a little nicer for a while." The man on the receiving end of that statement glared daggers at him.

Mai actually let out a tiny laugh at that remark however, and faced Gene once again. "Th-thank you, you know... For everything."

Gene actually had the audacity to smirk. "On the contrary, my help has only just begun. You have much to learn, Mai. From both myself and Noll. That being said, you're welcome."

This was the type of magic Oliver had never been able to fully comprehend except for a few specific circumstances, but even then, he'd never been Eugene Davis.
Mai didn't know what to expect from all of this. She'd basically left Japan on a whim, hoping that Naru knew what he was doing, and that she didn't kill everyone she knew in the process. She could only hope for the best at this point. She'd already fallen down the rabbit hole, there wasn't anywhere else to go but up, really.

But having Naru around was going to be more than a little troublesome. All things considered, he had broken her heart before he'd left SPR, and she'd all but cursed his name afterwards. Little was ever said about him back at Japan's old branch of SPR, as she'd distanced herself from the problem, ignoring the remnants of his life there completely.

Never mind the fact she'd balled on his shoulder less than ten minutes ago… But that had mostly been from, well… Everything.

In the last two years between rage and depression, her emotions had risen. Naru's rejection, however, was most certainly not the cause of her PK issues. Rather, her dreams seemed to be. The problem was, she could never remember them upon waking.

In the last several months, pangs of despair had become commonplace, and toiling in disheartened memories only increased her lack of control. Moments of emptiness tempered her emotions every now and again, but other than that, she was a bottled storm.

But in this very moment Mai was feeling… Lethargic and tired and genuinely wiped out. She figured it was the effect of the drugs still swimming in her system from the induced sleep. Another was the extensive use of her PK in the last forty-eight hours. Between destroying Monk's house, to the emotional trauma of it all, Mai was exhausted. Physically and mentally. But she wasn't on the verge of collapse like she'd seen with Naru in the past, nor was she about to die. But she was just… Tired.

She stated as much to Naru and Lin upon entering their van.

"Considering how much PK you've used in the last forty-eight hours, that is to be expected," Naru explained coldly, apparently thinking the exact same thing she was. "Once we return to HQ, you may rest."

*That's rather nice of him to say*—"That is, only after you've answered some of my questions." *And there's the Naru I know… Still as inconsiderate as ever…*

"Fine," she sighed. Once upon a time, she probably would've combated his attitude with wholesome rage, but she was too tired to care. Up front, Lin cast his young charge a worried glance at her lack of ire.

Outside, the world reflected her inner emotions to the tee.

The sky fell with grey rain.

And somewhere in her heart, it became enraptured with unholy remorse and distance.

Arriving at the BSPR Headquarters, Mai stumbled out of the van, letting the rain drench the ends of
her hair. She stood there for a moment, until she vaguely noticed Naru trailing his way up the stone stairs. They were already there? In the midst of Cambridge University? With the mist and the overcast sky and her apathy, the details of their location were almost beyond comprehension.

She didn't feel the rain haunt her cheeks as she ran inside.

"Mai-Chan!"

Absently, Mai looked up from the entranceway of BSPR, only to come face to face with Madoka Mori. The pinkette's eyes were bright and excited, happy. But a trace of sadness tainted the overall animation. Then Mai was pulled to a crushing embrace that unsettled the steadiness of her soul. Thankfully, she was too tired to pour her energy outward into existence, and quietly yelped.

"Aww, Mai-Chan it's so nice to see you after so long!" Madoka buzzed out in fluent Japanese. "I'm sorry I couldn't meet you at the hospital! Yasu and I were on a case and Mr. Coldhearted over there neglected to tell me when you'd be arriving."

"I-It's alright…," Mai managed quietly, replying back in English. "But if you would, please let me go..."

"Oh, sorry, dear!" Madoka said sheepishly, releasing Mai in an instant. "And your English—"

"Your reunion can be continued later, Madoka," Naru interrupted snidely. "I would rather attend to the pressing matters that we've been waiting to confirm for the last day and a half, and begin the interview immediately."

"Oh, how rude of you, Oliver! The poor girl is soaking wet, and not the mention she just got to Cambridge less than an hour ago! You can't just expect her to waltz away with you yet!"

But Naru would have none of it. "Then get her a change of clothes, and bring her to the Blank Room. We begin in ten minutes."

"What?" He'd begun to stride down the hallway, to where, Mai could only imagine. "Oliver Davis you stop right there! Lin, talk some sense into him, would you?"

Lin glanced at where Naru had disappeared off to, and sighed, "He's stressed, I believe. And more than he's letting on. He also wants to finish this as quickly as possible."

Mai barely had the fire to care about Naru's disinterest towards her life, but her fists did clench into fists. Her anger extinguished in less than a second, and a swath of blank gray contorted the remains.

"Taniyama-san." Slowly she trailed her eyes from the floor to meet Lin's watchful gaze. "I understand that this will be a trying time, but it would be in your best interest to follow Oliver's instruction, no matter the strain he may place upon you. You've worked under him before, but not quite has his pupil. Be prepared."

"Don't worry too much about me, Lin. I'll do what's asked of me." She could tell he was momentarily intrigued by her sheer compliance, if not a little surprised. In the past, blindly following Naru's orders had not been entirely frequent. He shared a look with Madoka, who appeared to agree on something. On what, however, she couldn't say.

.  
12:39 p.m.
"This is the Blank Room," Madoka supplied, a forced cheer in her voice. "It's definitely… Blank. That's for sure."

Mai observed her surroundings with the interest of watching paint dry. Tiled down in white from floor to ceiling, it was almost impossible to tell where the room ended and began. She couldn't even tell where the light source emitted, but the room appeared to be quite expansive. The only furniture in the room was a single table with a set of chairs, and a bed. An odd pair of mates, she thought absently.

"It's also where you'll be staying for awhile…" Madoka's cheer was officially gone. "But only until you're able to live normally again, I assure you!"

"The entire room is encased with two meters thick concrete beyond this tile," Naru explained. "It's built to sustain even the most damaging explosions or for your case, Mai, PK outbreaks."

"Now, Oliver, that's—"

"Good…"

Naru's eyes shifted in Mai's direction, discrete, but unruffled.

"That's… Good."

Madoka, however, was blown away. Lin merely put a hand on the pinkette's shoulder and shook his head.

12:45 p.m.

A perpetrating atmosphere of undeniable indifference wafted around the room, and Oliver nearly scowled at the sensation. It was practically radiating off the girl across from him. Gaze glassen and low, posture lax and shoulders slumped to a degree that defined effortless detachment, and breathing even, slow. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

Was this what Takigawa meant when she loses her 'sense of self'? She looks like a shell of a human. It appears that she does, indeed, retreat into herself. It is an effective way to dim the effects of her PK. However…

"Is lethargy like this common?" Oliver asked, officially beginning their investigation. Madoka had departed not more than ten minutes ago after receiving a call from Martin, and said they would wrap up the case by the end of the day. Thereafter, a decent portion of the BSPR team would assist in Mai's case.

Mai didn't blink when she replied, "Yes."

"Elaborate on the effect."

"Total emptiness," Mai stated factually, not a trace of her former emotions in her voice. "I can barely feel a difference in temperature, my attention span is gone, and I can barely tell when someone is touching me. When I get like this, Monk often called me a zombie, or a shell of myself. I can't say I disagree."

"And what snaps you out of this?"
"Sleeping…," she answered slowly. "Or extremely bouts of sudden emotion… You'd have to... Get me pretty riled up to shake me out of this."

Oliver narrowed his eyes. "You mentioned before that you're tired, but I don't think that this 'emptiness' as you say, is from your physical exhaustion. Rather, the emotional strain is affecting your mind, causing you to spiral down into an internal depression. Matsuzaki-san gave you this diagnosis." The papers laid out in front of him stated as such.

"Correct." The fact that she did not appear upset was… Unexpected.

"Tell me about your dreams," Oliver redirected.

"I... Can't remember anything from them."

"Nothing." It was almost a question, but not quite.

"Nothing."

"And yet they're about me?"

Silence. The only sound to be heard was the constant click of Lin's typing.

Then…

"I don't know… Apparently, I call out your name when I sleep, a lot. But I don't know why."

Oliver settled back in his seat and crossed his arms. "It could be precognition, but that theory is rudimentary at best. We'll have to watch what happens when you sleep to determine the effects. Dreams are the cause of all of this, correct?"

"Correct."

"They began eight months ago?"

"Correct," Mai answered quietly. "They started the night I found out that I have PK. It was after a fight with Masako about something unimportant. Then the nightmares began, and along with it, this… Problem."

Yes, Takigawa mentioned that before. And eight months ago… What happened eight months ago? He asked this question aloud.

"You're the PK expert," Mai said flatly. "You tell me. Everything had been nothing beyond ordinary. I'd been on cases like normal, about to finish high school, and get my degree. I was... Happy."

There has to be some factor or variable that caused this. It couldn't have just been dormant for so many years inside of her... Such extremes should be impossible. Mai's psychic abilities did not appear until after she joined SPR, so could it merely have extended beyond what they were already aware of? Could it just have been steady growth? Or was it something else? Generally, people are born with PK.

"What about Gene," Oliver asked instead.

"What about Gene?" Only a trace of genuine confusion caught in her voice.

Oliver's lips thinned, his impatience getting the better of him. "Have you seen him?"
"... I haven't been able to see him since you left Japan. I... Hadn't even known he was still wandering the spirit realm until this morning."

Oliver pressed, "You said you were 'always able to see him.'"

Mai looked away. "I meant... I meant that I could always see him when you're around. I meant nothing more."

"Gene only revealed himself to me minutes before I answered Takigawa's call," Oliver told her, expecting some sort of reaction. He received none. "I haven't seen him in two years, Mai, but then you suddenly need to be here, and he shows up again."

But Mai's expression did not change. "I know no more than you do... Ask him if you're so concerned."

This type of behavior was more than a little strange. Not that it could be helped, but it was thoroughly exasperating. When he'd first begun his own PK training he remembered Madoka had always told him, "Apathy over antipathy." But he wasn't so sure such methods were preferable in Mai's book. Contrary to himself, Mai was anything from apathetic to life. She wanted to be back to her normal self, and if her normal self was anything like what he'd known, apathy was far from preferable. So after a few more questions, Oliver took a different route.

"Do you have any idea what 'stasis' is, Mai?" He closed his own notebook, and gave her his full attention.

"Nope." It was more expression than any of her previous answers, but even then, it barely scratched the surface. For whatever reason, it unnerved him.

"Stasis," Oliver said, the word reverberating in the air around them. "The point between euphoria and terror, tranquility and rage, light and dark, love and hate, and so on. It's a physics term used to describe two opposing equal forces that causes a point of equilibrium or inactivity. For PK users: the point of perfect control and stability. It's what keeps my PK under lock and key until I decide to use it, and what will help you in your own progression.

"It's not a physical force," Oliver continued. "But rather a mental one to bridge together the emotions that have caused your PK to act out in the ways that it has... Tell me, what else comes to mind when two opposing forces collide?"

The girl blinked only once. "... An explosion."

Oliver pursed his lips, shooting her a glare. That was quite literally, the very opposite of what he'd been referring to. "Focus."

"What?"

Had they been in any other situation, he probably would've snapped at her that the answer was wholly obvious given all knowledge he'd just imparted.

Oliver sighed, "The point between euphoria and terror is focus, Mai. Focus."

Standing up, he gestured for Lin to discontinue his typing. "For mental stasis, the point between euphoria and terror is focus. That is also what will bring you back to the Mai we know." In the back of his mind, through whatever shattered bond he shared with Gene, a single thought whispered, And love.
Oliver didn’t deign to speak those words.

"Leaving?" Mai asked. Threads of bored curiosity.

"With how chaotic your dreams have been described to be, Lin and myself will be here overnight to observe and record the spikes in your PK energy," Oliver explained. "It's not visible to the naked eye, but there is an observation deck sectioned off from his room on the second level. It's also where we'll be able to calculate the amount of energy you can create."

"… Alright."

"You'll also need to wear these."

A small box, no bigger than his hand was passed from him to Mai. Amid the transaction, a skitter of energy transferred between them as their fingertips made contact, but the feeling was gone soon as they dropped their hands. Oliver hypothesized it was merely Mai's PK acting out.

Opening the box, Mai remained stoic. Inside were a variety of bands. PKD Bands were the official term, short for 'psychokinesis determinant' that calculated the spikes and downfalls of PK when worn. No wider than a centimeter across, they were positioned at five places on the body: wrists, ankles, and temples. They also read basic heart rate, conscious level, and blood pressure, among other measurements.

Lin explained that one aloud.

"Am I supposed to wear the large one on my head, then?" she asked. "For my temples?"

Lin smiled a bit, actually. "Think of it as a headband."

Mai made no indication that she found this amusing. Silently, she slipped it over head and onto her crown, aligning it along the space of her temples. Secondly, she applied the four other bands where instructed.

"I'm going to turn on the machines," Lin stated thereafter. "That way we'll start immediately."

Oliver only nodded, leaving him alone with Mai. She stared blankly up at him.

Lapsing into silence, Oliver did not know what to say. Conversation had never been his strong suit. Really, the only way for him to start any type of topic was… "Are you going to stare at me all day, or are you going to sleep like you've wanted to since you left the hospital?"

"I could say something similar about you." A bland response.

"We begin our other tests tomorrow," Oliver decided to say. "Along with some mental training, if possible."

"Stasis."

"Correct."

"…"

"…"

"…"
After a moment of merely staring at one another, Oliver turned on his heel, rolling his indigo orbs in exasperation. Halfway there, a twinge of Mai's normal voice broke through the deadened silence, "Thank you, you know, for everything."

It was the same expression of gratitude she'd said to his brother only two hours ago. At the door, Oliver turned back to Mai. "You're welcome." Then he was gone.

June, Day IV

"She's been sleeping like the dead since what time, exactly?"

"2:34 pm."

"And it's what time, now?"

"4:25 am."

"Waaa," Yasu breathed, deliberately using his Japanese accent. "And she hasn't even moved, Big Boss?"

"No."

"Well, I guess I can't really blame her," Yasu amended sadly. "She's been through a lot these last several months. She's got to be exhausted."

Oliver didn't reply, keeping his thoughts solely to himself.

Since Mai had descended into slumber, she'd slept like a rock, immobile and at peace. Somehow he knew that this was the calm before the storm. It could be another hour or a few seconds until she awoke. Her body needed to be recharged, and when she woke up… Well, who knew how that was going to transpire? From the start, her vitals and PK readings had been normal, stabilized and subdued under a shroud of deep unconsciousness. Now, her PK was slowly ascending bit by bit. It was only a matter of time until she woke up.

Around twelve am, Yasuhara and Madoka had waltzed into the observation room, mentioning that if Mai was there, they were staying. And stay, they did. Yasu had slept for about an hour before engaging him in an infrequent conversation about his father's most recent case. Madoka had managed about ten minutes before falling asleep on Lin's shoulder watching Mai's calculations on one of the monitors.

Then the steady beeping Mai's heart monitor began to accelerate.

Oliver lept to his feet. From the observation room's window, he watched as Mai tossed and turned restlessly, aggressively. Volts of electricity sparked off of her hands, and the bed itself moved, lurching a good a meter away from its original position.

"That's not a good sign, is it, Big Boss?" Yasu muttered, standing now. Oliver's silence answered him well enough.

The PK readings were going haywire. Beeps and whistles blasted off the monitor. Mai was murmuring incoherently, whimpering.

"Noll," Lin's cold voice had an edge to it. "You'll want to see this."
"Oh, poor Mai..." Madoka whispered, awake and docile beside Lin.

On practiced control, he strided towards what Lin was specifically addressing. Seeing it, Oliver Davis went still as death. Cold and hot astonishment flooded his veins, capturing the quintessence of what Oliver had never once imagined. "Madness," he whispered. "Madness."

Then Mai screamed.

... "I don't wanna be the last man standing,

  I don't wanna be the lonely one,

  Picking petals when the party's over,

  No, it's not any fun, cause I'm fragile,

    And you know this...

    'Cause I'm hollow."

-Tori Kelly, Hollow

... Stasis
**File I: Euphoria & Horror, Part III: Over You**

*Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.*

Location: B.S.P.R HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK) . . .

Date: June, Day IV . . .

Time: 4:25 a.m. . . .

Mai Taniyama saw bits of pieces of splintered images. Fractured and blurred beyond recognition, the only thing she could truly understand was the grating horror cracking through the ends of her nerves. It was the vanguard of her thoughts, the centre of all passion and harbinger of life, but the sensation was misconstrued with stalwart lamentation.

Darkness crawled across her vision, alternating her sight from something clear to something unrecognizable. Something… Beyond all feeling. Words could not convey the sheer reality of what transpired amid her nighttime despair, but one thing was for certain: Mai was terrified. But for what, or for whom, she could not yet say.

Nevertheless, this terror unintentionally manifested itself into electrifying sparks and tangible thickening of the oxygen within the containment of the Blank Room. Movement shook the softness of her bed, and her body reacted from her discomfort by tossing herself over and over and over again. But the action went unfounded, for Mai's scream began to build and build and build in her throat until it shattered through her vocal cords in a single, decibel breaking ricochet that rocked the very foundations of BSPR itself.

Cracks slithered up the foundation of the opaque tile, and rifts wedged their way through solid concrete. Rubble crumbled to dust in seconds, and whatever objects remained within the confines of the Blank Room rose precariously from the floor and into a PK induced suspension.

Before long, she awoke to her own scream. Not too long after, Mai broke into a bout of deprecating and wholly heart wrenching sobs. Sobs that triggered the suspended objects to crash and grate along the walls in a shrill screeeeeee.

And the worst part of all was that she could do nothing to stop it.

*Damn it,* she thought frantically. Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she shivered furiously.

4:25 a.m.

Oliver Davis had seen a lot in his nineteen years. More than any normal person should, and a whole lot more than any teenager should. So, logically, not much could unsettle him. This was true on quite
a number of accounts, however, in this moment, his composure was gone. And to top it off, cold horror chilled his veins.

"Madness," he breathed. "Madness."

Mai's PK readings exceeded his own, and on a level beyond anything he could've ever possibly imagined. The quantifiable energy should've killed her months ago if this type of distress was a regular occurrence. The fact that she was alive and in standard physical health was… Unprecedented. It was madness incarnate in the scientific society. The fact that he, himself was alive was a miracle in and of itself, but Mai was on another level entirely. Worse yet, the girl was a walking time bomb. If the progression of her PK was any indication, Gene's prediction was highly probable.

_I can feel her presence from across continents, and Mai will implode within the year if her PK continues to grow without proper training._

Absently, Oliver recognized the shrill _screeeeeee_ of strident metal as well as a single scream throttling across the speakers. The combined sounds rattled the transparent glass of the windows beyond and the very foundation of BSPR.

His shock transformed into grim acceptance thereafter, but the remnants of his own horror remained, encrusted in his own deeper frustration.

"She needs to calm down," Lin voiced, his tone grave. "I doubt I could even go in there with how bad the situation is without getting beheaded by one of those chairs."

Yasu tried, "I could talk to—"

"Absolutely not," Oliver snapped. "You can do nothing until she calms herself down. If anything, you'll trigger and even worse reaction."

Yasu was reluctant, but resigned to follow orders. Not even he could dare make a joke about this. He couldn't muster the optimism when Mai was facing whatever demons laid within her dreams and sent her into a bout of hysteria upon waking. Oliver could see that much.

"We can't just do nothing though, Big Boss," the college student said quietly.

"I would agree," Madoka commented grimly. "But I'm afraid only one of us will be able to reach her. Isn't that right, Noll?"

"I can't go in there," Oliver said sharply. "The danger is far too grave."

Madoka's lips soured, an uncharacteristic maneuver of her varying faces. Grabbing at the microphone latched down at the side of the monitor table, she hauled it up to his face. "Speak. It's on."

Oliver accepted it without a word, but there was an edge in his eyes. Frustrated, he went over a mental evaluation of possible methods of calming the girl down. But before he had the opportunity to speak, Mai's PK dropped to a bare minimum and every flying object fell to the tiled floor with a resounding _clack._

All was silent thereafter, but still wrapped by the sheets of her bed was Mai's shaking form. Only now, she was asleep. Oliver set the microphone back where it belonged, perhaps the only one unperturbed by the sudden change of behavior. Although his gaze narrowed, he knew exactly what had transpired.
Quick thinking, Oliver thought to his brother. Next time be quicker.

Gene's whimsical distain shimmered across the bond.

Traveling between realms was a strange thing that Mai had not experienced in over two years. Now, she could comprehend the feeling of being spiritually pulled away from herself. It wasn't a particularly unpleasant sensation, but an odd one. Nevertheless, it was not a feeling one could describe with words, for there was no feeling quite like it in the physical realm of the living.

So in a place not so unusual for her, she awoke. Blinking slowly, her vision gradually returned to her senses. At first, all she could see was bright lights in the distance, a myriad of colors and hues that descended and ascended to wherever they came and went. The ground was not quite ground either, rather a blankness of black that continued on into the eternal distance. Here, time did not exist. Here, space did not exist. Here, spirits existed in a suspended realm beyond true description. Here, was where her rendezvous with Eugene Davis had began, a period of time that had long ago ended, but apparently was about to be resurrected.

"Mai, can you get up?"

And there he was, in an element all his own and a tender smile on his lips. "Eugene," she whispered. Just the sight of him drew tears to her eyes. He'd already been at her level, but after a single breath, she shot herself at him. It was a similar reaction to what she'd done yesterday with Naru, but this time, she had him flat on his back. A chuckle rumbled up from his chest, but Mai was trembling too much to fully recognize the sound.

"How I've missed you," she said amid her tears. "And God, Gene, I'm so sorry! I haven't had the chance to apologise for before when I didn't know you were you, and not Naru. I-I-I never thought I'd have the opportunity to say just how sorry-"

"Oh, hold up there, princess," he chided, getting them to sit up. "If anything, I'm sorry. You can't exactly blame yourself for that mishap, considering I never actually said that I was anything but a figment of your imagination."

"But!"

"But nothing." The sheer finality was strikingly the same as Naru. Mai outwardly flinched, but Gene was smiling, probably not having noticed.

She said, "Tell me… Tell me how you're back."

So he did. It wasn't a surprisingly outlandish story, like she'd originally expected, but it was… Odd.

"I'd just woken up here one day, and felt the bond I have with Noll," Gene explained. "I have no idea how much time had passed since I'd 'passed on', nor do I have any memory of my time spent there. It's as if I'd been asleep for a long time until I suddenly felt a tug down another bond entirely. And strange as it may be, it led right to you, in Japan. At first, I just felt your emotions, but before long I began to feel your energy itself. It was worse than when Noll was a child, and it brought back more memories than I ever care to remember… It took awhile, but I finally got in contact with Noll. Coincidentally, it happened to be at the same time Takigawa called. I… Helped convince that idiot scientist to take your case. Now you're here, so I believe you know the rest."

"How strange..." she said.
Strange, indeed.

"But… If you've been asleep for two years, how come you're here, now? Naru-" Just his name on her lips brought along the beginnings of a scowl. She changed tactics. "Oliver thought it was strange as well. I think he thought you're the cause of something, but who's to dare understand the notorious 'Dr. Oliver Davis'? I mean, I was only his assistant. Who am I to think I know him?"

Exasperatedly, Gene sighed, "What did that idiot do this time?"

The truth was, he'd done nothing. Nothing to warrant her disdain and malice. At least, not recently. His very being was the cause of the bitter taste in her mouth. She stated as much aloud.

"Ah," Gene clicked his tongue. "Still harboring ill will towards my brother for his narcissistic and cold heart?"

Despite all Naru was doing for her now, she couldn't forgive get what he'd done. Not when her emotions were already frayed beyond all possibility. Not when he'd disregarded her feelings with a single line two years ago, and presumed to leave the country the day after.

"Me, or Gene?"

At the time, she'd been confused by the sudden revelation of Gene's very existence. Oliver had blatantly misconstrued her thoughts with his candor, and gave her a conundrum to ponder over and depict until her answer had become definite. The simple fact of the matter was: it had always been Naru. Always. It'd never been Gene, not really. Maybe for a moment, but moments were fractured pieces to the whole of her heart. Naru had given her the world, but then he'd left. Left and never came back.

She'd resented him since.

It was a selfish resentment. A sad, petty resentment that fueled her rage and burned down the bridge of hope once forged for them to cross and intersect and understand… It lived no longer.

She knew he'd left to bury his brother. She knew he'd left to return to his home and family and beloved work. For those aspects, she could not blame him. Never could she blame from for that. But he'd left her too. Left her in his past, never to think of again. She'd become a mere relic of his adventures from across the sea. An image of a deceased story. A damsel in distress. A girl with a name and a face but no true feelings for. Nothing more. She'd never been more than that. The revelation hurt far more than anything she'd ever experienced.

The simple fact of the matter was: she'd been helplessly in love with the narcissistic, supercilious, tea-loving, incorrigible, mysterious, genius ghost hunter that'd given her a reason to live again. He'd given her a family, a home, a life, and a love that hadn't left her heart… Not really. Somewhere where she didn't want, it burned with a candle's gentleness, flickering back and forth in the dark. It had yet to go out completely. And every part of herself hated knowing it still survived.

"Hey, Mai. You still here?" Gene was waving a hand in front of her face.

Too frustrated to blush at her thoughts, she sighed and rose to her feet. "You still haven't told me why I'm here, Gene."

He stood. "You don't remember."

"Why should I-" Mai froze, and memories flooded her thoughts until she was tearing at her hair and shimmering drops pooled in the surface of her amber orbs. "No… I had that dream, again, didn't I?"
Gene nodded resolutely.

"Did you see it?"

"No… Everything was black, but I could feel it…. The terror and fear and sheer heartbreak was almost unbearable, Mai. I… I was trying to see if I could find anything to help you sort out the mystery of your PK, but from that, I got nothing."

"It's my dream, right?" Mai asked. "Not some vision from a case or some ghost."

"It's yours." His gaze was empathetic. "That's what it seemed like to me, anyway, but without a visual it's hard to ascertain."

"Gene, what am I supposed to do?" she demanded, her eyes pleading. "I mean how can I even…"

"Hey." Finding her shoulders, he forced her to look at him. "We're going to solve this mystery. You, me, Noll, and the rest of the SPR. But it's as I said before, Mai, you need to believe in yourself again. This is you. You're an angel, Mai Taniyama. You can do anything you set your mind to. Now…” He smiled a bit, but it was tarnished with rue. "Time to go back to the land of the living."

With a gentle shove, her spirit floated towards a gateway of unending light. Oh… You're wrong about one thing, Gene, she thought frigidly. I won't need Oliver Davis.

6:54 a.m.

Oliver was still wide awake. Not to say that staying up for some twenty-four hours wasn't straining his mental capacity, but he was quite awake despite it all. Next to him, Lin was still watching the monitors with the attention of a raptor, but Yasu and Madoka had once again fallen away to dreams.

After Mai’s abrupt loss of consciousness two hours earlier, the building had been still and subdued to silence.

But then, from the distance of beyond the Observation Room, the sound of footsteps echoed along the hallowed halls of BSPR. Not necessarily unordinary considering that on an average morning, it was swarming with staff and buzzing interns. It was also the exact reason why Oliver had had his office installed without soundproof walls to ensure his own form of solitude. However, after he'd all but mandated the office was closed for another week minimum due to 'personal reasons' BSPR had been all but abandoned. So, why there was sound coming from anywhere when the people permitted access to the property were all within four meters of him. The sudden activity was suspicious.

The doorknob turned without Oliver even making a reaction, because all the height of suspense was lost as his parents waltzed into the room. Inwardly, Oliver began mentally berating himself for his own stupidity. Who else would've possibly had the clearance to enter the building except the lead investigator and his wife? Perhaps he was more tired than he'd predicted.

"Martin," Oliver greeted, getting to his feet. "Luella."

The smile on his mother's face fell. "Nolly, please."

'Nolly', was it? It was a term of endearment his mother used that he—by contrast—did not find endearing in the least. And really, she employed the term just to embarrass him. Already, his patience began to thin by the second.
"Father," he greeted once again, this time his tone graced with intended dispassion. "Mother."

Although Luella rolled her eyes a bit at her son's lack of courtesy, his father chuckled softly, closing the door behind him. "I see our newest recruit and our most trusted mentor have taken a liking to the room's couch."

"Apparently," Oliver allowed. Indeed, Yasu and Madoka were passed out on the couch.

"And, Lin, how have you been?" Martin asked, ever pleasant.

Lin turned from the monitors entirely. "I'm doing quite well, but I'm afraid Miss Mai Taniyama is not."

"Ah, yes," Luella chimed in. "How is the poor girl? She's your former assistant, isn't she, Noll?"

Oliver nodded, and presumed to explain what they'd learned so far.

7:20 a.m.

Mai awoke in the real world with crust coating the edges of her eyelids. Blinking up wearily, she immediately tasted the aftereffect of her PK going berserk. The familiar tang of metallic copper—blood—stained her tongue, and she grimaced. Sitting up, she sighed dramatically, observing her surroundings for the effects of her inflicted chaos. Along the walls, cracks webbed and piles of dust were scattered along the tessellated floor, which was also littered with small fissures. Nearing the only door in the room, an array of chairs and a table were turned upside down and sat at angles only caused by a poltergeist.

*Mai strikes again,* she thought smashingly. Her fingers curled into fists within the sheets, but there were no tears this time. Only forsaken rage because of her own misgivings.

*Why didn't Gene keep me in the spirit realm for longer? He could've taught me some basic methods of containing this... This madness... Maybe it exhausts him to see and actually talk to me... How long was I out, anyway?*

Considering there were no clocks in sight, she asked her question aloud. Speaking louder than intended, her voice echoed throughout the barren wasteland that was the 'Blank Room'. It wasn't until moments later that Osamu Yasuhara came strolling into her current living arrangements, his characteristic smile and gleaming glasses thwarting her from noticing all else. Absently, she realized she hadn't seen him in months.

"Hey, Mai," he said, waving. "Look, I know it's been awhile, but I figured you could use some company... And some food." He shrugged good naturedly, as if she'd seen him yesterday. Perhaps nothing really did change between good friends. He was also holding a tray of breakfast, so...

"Yasu, hey..." Still a bit submerged beneath months of depression, the most she could do was a half smile. "It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

"It certainly has," he agreed, stopping near her bed and handing off the tray. Seeing a pile of eggs and toast, she immediately dug in, then noticing how lacking in nutrients she'd been with the continuous growling of her stomach.

After a few bites, Yasu added, "You know, I was kinda expecting you to kinda wanna break all the bones in my body for lying to you about studying abroad, but I have to say that I definitely don't
mind being able walk."

Sending him a finite glare, she said, "I never said I completely forgave you for that."

Sheepishly, he rubbed the back of his head. "I didn't exactly expect you too. But perhaps I should explain the situation first."

"Elaborate then."

Seemingly startled, he shot a glance at the brunette before bursting out into a fit of giggles. She arched a brow, and he responded with another batch of sonorous laughter. It took awhile, but Mai just continued to eat despite at his disturbing behavior, finishing off the remainder of her makeshift breakfast within minutes.

Finally, he managed, "Oh, that was funny, Mai-Chan. You sounded just like Big Boss for a second. Not only that, but you looked like him too with that eyebrow arch. I never took you for an impressionist, usually that's my department. Haha, jolly good show, my dear."

She snorted at his perfect British impression. Although he appeared quite fluent in the language, the distinguished accent did not come naturally in his common pronunciation. It was more of a standard, toneless English that she also commanded by learning a foreign language in another country other than its roots. But with time, she could already tell he would master it until that was all his English became.

"Anyway," she redirected. "Care to explain what you're doing here instead of the States?"

"Ah, right." He cleared his throat. "Well, it's actually pretty simple. I got bored of my studies in college, you know that. It's why I wanted to study abroad. I figured it'd be a little more of a challenge than studying in Japan, and it also allows me to use my language skills for a change. While I was there, I ran into Madoka of all people. We talked about old cases and such for a while, then about college life and classes, and I guess I realized that I wanted to do something a bit more interesting than what I'd been studying. Madoka seemed to notice that, and told me if I ever wanted a transfer she'd be happy to let me attend Cambridge. My grades were good enough, and I had the references to back myself up.

"Working under the notorious 'Oliver Davis' even unknowing gets you some give in the psychic research community too, so that helped. So about four months ago, I moved here and changed my major to parapsychology."

Mai raised both brows this time. "That's quite a switch, Yasu."

"You got that right," he agreed, huffing. "Even I have trouble with it every now and again."

"Yet you're still the best student in your class." It was half a guess, but really, the answer was obvious enough.

Yasu grinned. "Yeah, well Martin-Big Boss's father-is a great professor though, and Big Boss comes and goes as he pleases. He sits in on lectures on occasion. It tends to cause quite the ruckus in the classroom though. I suppose you can guess why?"

"Hm." Mai pretended to think hard. "Oh, I got it. Is it his narcissism? I mean that will totally attract any girl to him." Though the words were written in teasing, they were spoken in biting sarcasm. In any case, it was made clear to Yasu that'd he'd taken the wrong turn mentioning Oliver Davis.

His grin shattered, reverting to a lackluster smile. "Hey, anyway, I'm sorry about not telling you. I
just knew how mad you'd be if you knew…" Pausing, he moved in closer. Mai watched him warily. "... That I'm currently having an affair with Big Boss behind everyone's backs."

Taken aback, she nearly tumbled into the sheets from her shock. Behind her, a small line crackled up the wall. "What...?" It was thereafter that realization set in, and she did fall back this time. But as she did, her lips quivered upwards into a beautiful little smile that foretold of all possible happiness in the world. It was a glorious, breathtaking upturn of the lips that gleamed bright in the darkest corners of the world. And it was one that had not crossed her lips for oh so very long.

To add, a small chuckle escaped that luminous smile and lit the universe anew.

"Ah, Yasu," she said, shaking her head. "You're forgiven."

9:00 a.m.

Oliver and his parents were currently going through the recent PK readings during Mai's most recent dream. Based on the results, it was clear the girl had been sent somewhere far from her physical body. Since he knew this to be true himself, and the readings were also similar to what Eugene had accomplished in his own tests years back, it was a key indicator that this research could be scientifically proven in the future. It could even, perhaps, become his next book. Mai's abilities in and of themselves were something of a marvel in the parapsychology community and having her around to prove the 'theories' of astral projection among other latent talents would be... Resourceful.

"This is quite extraordinary," Martin commented from across the table. "When you told me that your former assistant in Japan needed our immediate assistance, you never told me that she was quite this… Er..."

"Extraordinary," Luella finished with a smile.

"Yes," Martin agreed. "Extraordinary! How have I never heard of her before, Noll?"

Oliver prepared to speak.

"It's because little Noll wanted to keep her all to himself. Isn't that right?" Madoka appeared at his side with a certain glint in her eye. He fashioned a pointed glare in her direction, but she met it with equal fervor.

This was something his mother found unprecedented. "Oh? Noll, you never told me that this assistant of yours was more than just an assistant."

"She was nothing more than that," Oliver stated.

"Really? Then why-"

"Mai Taniyama is a girl who requested my assistance in finding a way to keep her PK under control." Although his words were barely spoken above a whisper, his tone was dark and waspish and final. He stood to leave. "Why you both are asking questions insignificant to the case itself is irrelevant to the overall purpose of this investigation."

With that, he stalked out of the room. Lin followed him without a word. As it was, he'd let Yasu leave to attend to Mai one hour and forty minutes ago. It'd been Yasu's decision, and they'd been in relative complacency since. It was now time to cut to the chase. Although likely redundant, it was necessary to properly question what the girl dreamed about before Gene had swept her away. In the
next matter of minutes, he entered the Blank Room. Mai and Yasu were conversing cheerily, switch between Japanese and English depending on the sentence. They didn't even appear to see Lin and himself walk in until they were a meter away.

"I need to speak to you, Mai."

The sentence stirred something in the girl, something profoundly wrathful. Eyes went from genuine happiness to cold, old rancor as her gaze swiveled over to meet him. The light fell from her expression and something else contorted the remains. It was an different reaction than anything in the last twenty-four hours. First she'd thrown herself at him, second she'd acted with utter apathy towards both herself, situation, and his overall presence, and now she seemed as though he'd done something positively horrid. It was an perplexing concept he didn't know how to correctly examine. Really, what could he have possibly done? He was attempting to help her, was he not?

"Right," Mai said. "Well, Yasu, I'll see you later, then?"

The bespeckled student smiled amiably. "Course! I'll just be upstairs. Shout if you need me, kay? Strange as it may be, we can actually hear you." Yasu turned on his heel to face him before imparting a bow. "Boss."

He nodded. "Yasu."

Having Yasu leave the premises, and returning the table and chairs back to their original position, Oliver once again sat across from Mai Taniyama, but this time, the girl was glaring daggers at him. Adding 'mood swings' to the list of mental effects of her PK outbreaks, he decided to begin.

"Instead of glaring at me for whatever reason, would you care to explain the essence of this morning's dream?"

"It's black," Mai answered. "Like your heart."

Not one to let insults bare their mark, the only thing Oliver said was, "Elaborate."

A single brow rose in the air. "Not going to ask how I learned to speak English?"

"It's been firmly established that you can comprehensibly speak English, Mai. The background information of this fact is irrelevant to your current issues, so unless it has anything to do with your PK, I'd rather move onto a topic pertaining to the investigation." Nostrils flared at his impassiveness. "Now, if you will, start at the beginning. Tell me what caused this." It was as much a demand as a request.

They had a tense staredown, until Mai scoffed low to herself. "What caused this? This mess that is my life? Well, you're going to have to be more specific for me to answer that one."

"The question has already been asked, Mai," Oliver said coldly. "Surely you can remember ten seconds ago."

"It was actually twenty seconds ago, Dr. Davis."

"Twenty-two and counting, Mai. Answer the question."

"Which one?" Mai bit out. "The one from twenty-four seconds ago, or the one that you asked the day before you left Japan?" A spark of electricity clattered between them then, known and vicious in nature. It was not something to forget and it was not Mai's PK making a scene. It was something else entirely.
Oliver decided to take another route. "Personal matters are also irrelevant to your current woes, unless of course, you'd enjoy taking the next flight out of England and return home."

Mai did not flinch like he'd expected, but sat back at her seat. Smiling bitterly, she sighed dramatically and stated, "Dr. Davis, you're a parapsychologist not a psychologist. You shouldn't be conducting this interview." Her words were painted in glorious loathing and scathing formality, but Oliver was unflappably stoic in expression. The only pretense of concern was the subtle narrowing of his eyes.

"Considering there are few people in the world that both understand the human mind and studies in paranormal," Mai visibly scowled, "I'm all you have. Unless you'd prefer to have Lin conduct this interview rather than myself."

"That would actually be highly preferable."

At this, he closed the notebook he'd been holding with a resounding slap. "Fine," he amended coldly. "Since my being here seems to vex you so much, Lin will continue with the interview."

As he departed, he could feel the burning fire that raged in Mai Taniyama at his back. However, he didn't care to acknowledge that throughout their argument a plethora of newfound fissures sliced down the sides of the floor at his feet. Worse, he didn't notice the pure undulating pulse that pounded in the universe's intangible realm of souls. Worst, he didn't notice that it laid connected between him and Mai, completely unbreakable.

"Now that it's all said and done, I can't believe you were the one,
To build me up and tear me down, like an old abandoned house,
What you said when you left, just left me cold and out of breath,
   I fell too far, was in way too deep,
   Guess I let you get the best of me...
   And now I'm picking up the pieces,
I'm spending all of these years, putting my heart back together,
   'Cause the day I thought I'd never get through,
       I got over you."

-Daughtry, Over You

Stasis
Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

File I: Euphoria & Horror

Part IV: Behind These Hazel Eyes

Location: B.S.P.R HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK) . . .

Date: June, Day IV . . .

Time: 9:04 a.m. . . .

The Observation Room was silent, but questions and queries and lit the air in suspended bafflement.

Martin was a little bewildered by what had occurred in the room below, Luella was covering her mouth for fear of letting her jaw extend to the floor, Madoka was choking back laughter, and Yasu was smiling at the devil incarnate beside him, and just about burst himself.

"Did…" Luella didn't seem to know how to project her opinion without sounding hysterical. "Did Noll just have a-a-a…"

"I believe that's what one would call a 'lover's quarrel,' Mrs. Davis," Yasu supplied excitedly, ever the archive of information. "But don't worry, back in Japan it was quite common for them to squabble."

The woman's bright royal eyes were wide with wonder. "Truly?" Although the argument between Noll and Miss Taniyama had been rather explosive to say the least, the fight displayed by her son was abnormal and purely astonishing. Nothing ruffled her son's feathers even when the most sensitive topics were mentioned in his presence. Never mind the fact that Miss Taniyama was experiencing extreme mood swings and had blatantly disregarded her son's help in the investigation, Luella Davis was marveled by how she'd gotten an actual, argumentative if not emotional reaction out of her son.

And there was right before he'd intended to conduct the interview, when Miss Taniyama had been predicted to have been something more than friends with him, he'd reacted defensively. The fact that her son had actually shone anything other than clear apathy or logic was an interesting development that she would most certainly observe in the future.

Although, it could also be considered that he did merely consider Miss Taniyama a former friend and colleague. Noll was far more compassionate than many gave him credit for when it came to those he deemed worthy of his time. But this in and of itself was incredible! When Noll had told them that a young girl and former member of Japan's temporary base at SPR would be arriving with a serious case of PK troubles, Luella had been immediately intrigued to hear of it, if not a little worried for the girl. However, Noll had never made any stride to fully explain his adventures in Japan in any other fashion than by basic facts, and Lin had not been any assistance in assuring her of that, either. So, to hear that Noll had been sincerely close to Miss Taniyama only reinforced her beliefs that this girl could be the one she'd been hoping to find for such a long time!
As for Miss Taniyama's obvious wrath towards her son, well, she could contribute that to both Noll's attitude and her overall situation. So, if anything, Luella could only be sympathetic to the girl, for she had seen first hand how taxing PK control could be when first attempting to maintain it behind closed doors. Noll had taken and mastered it, of course, but there had been instances such as the ones displayed by Miss Taniyama in the last several hours that were similar to when Noll had first begun. However, she'd been calmed pretty easily by Yasuhara, so, really, it was clear that Miss Taniyama held something over her son that forged a gap of ill will towards one another.

She could only wonder what had happened.

The gleam of mischief glowed in Yasu's glasses as he grinned. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Davis," he assured. "Truly."

At her side, Martin was a bit curious himself. "So he really was friends with this girl, wasn't he?"

Madoka smiled at her mentor's words, as if aware of something no one could ever even imagine. Luella, taking notice, took it upon herself to ask. "Why, what are you grinning over, Madoka? I know that look of yours. You know something about those two that you haven't yet said, I can tell."

"Noll may never admit it aloud," Madoka said, but this time her smile was tinged with rue. "But he always thought Mai was like Gene in many ways. I think it confused him for awhile, honestly, but quietly accepted it when he knew she was at SPR to stay. He... He was fond of her, I think. Definitely more than anyone else at the time. They... They connected well." The pinkette seemed to get lost in her words of explanation, and eventually a frown settled upon her lips as if pondering over a sudden revelation she'd only just discovered amid her recollections.

"He trusted her, too," Yasu cut in, stealing the moment. "Mai has these instincts of hers that made investigations more clean cut. Big Boss often referred to them as 'animal instincts,' much to Mai's dismay, but it was true. She'd have these gut feelings and convince Boss to do something differently, if not a bit more carefully. He trusted her."

"Yes," Luella spoke quietly. "Noll said she had rather animalistic instincts, but he never mentioned that they were quite so important. "Typical Noll, only giving away information of imminent importance. Probably to lead them astray with his apparent connection to Miss Taniyama. He'd probably checked it off as 'irrelevant'. Boy did he use that word a lot."

Madoka chuckled at her statement. "Mai is someone Noll deems as worthy of his time, but it's not like he'd ever tell anyone that."

Luella could not help but smile a bit. "Typical Noll."

"Typical Noll," she agreed.

9:10 a.m.

"Tell me, do you remember what happened in your dream?"

Mai sighed, "Just the same thing as usual."

Lin paused in his typing to look up at her. "The usual?"

"Extreme horror, sadness, and terror with the normal black space of it all. I can't see, hear, taste, smell, or physically touch anything. It's... Just emotions."
"You realize you failed to mention these details during your first interview, Mai. Was this time different from normal?"

Mai's face flushed. "Umm, no. That's pretty normal. I guess I just expected you to understand what I meant. Sorry."

He spared her one of his cold glances and continued to type. "I see." Although not Oliver's cold belittlement, it was still embarrassing to be subjected to Lin's deprecating stare even for a second. She remembered all those days spent before the Bloody Labrinth case, back before she'd accused him of hating her for no reason at all. Those days had been nothing more than distant loathing, if not indifference to her very being. Those stares too had been more than common too. Even now, they brought a quantifiable awkwardness to pass between them that Mai often did not know how to remove without worsening the situation. So, she decided to simply let him ask the questions and she'd answer to the best of her ability.

"Why did you return to sleep exactly two minutes and thirty two seconds after you awoke?"

*He has the exact time from when I woke up to when I fell back asleep? I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. He and Oliver were always extensively thorough during cases.* "That… That was because Gene pulled me onto the Astral Plane."

Lin made no indication whether this was new information or not. "Go on."

"We mostly just… Talked. He saw my dream too, but he didn't know how to decipher it, either. Apparently, he'd only just woken up the moment right before Monk called Oliver about helping me, and convinced him to take my case. I'll probably see him again tonight, but that's only a prediction. I could be completely wrong."

As the interview continued on in its monotony, her thoughts returned to seven, no, eight minutes ago, back when Oliver had been attempting to conduct this very interview. She… She knew she'd been out of line. She knew that snapping at him without real reason was… Wrong. But even the small amount of regret she felt was there for her to consider, it was surmounted by the heaping amounts of heartbreak still crawling its way into her very heart and outward into existence. Just seeing him broke her control. Just knowing that he didn't care, broke her control.

It was stupid and idiotic and simply pathetic, but it was true.

Seeing him for the first time in two years was different than nine minutes ago when she felt her emotions rise and rise and rise until they burst. It was different than yesterday when her PK had ran her emotions out the door from sheer exhaustion. Now was different.

When he'd given her that picture of Gene and himself, she'd cried. His last day at Japan's branch of SPR had been bittersweet and somehow lovely, but afterwards, when the heartbreak had settled in and all was final… It'd torn her apart.

Oliver's departure may not be the cause of her PK, in fact, it was certainly not the original cause, but it was a factor of her outbreaks now. All those chaotic emotions: rage, depression, lost love, dismissal, fear, rejection, and loneliness had all become entangled in one large ball of negative energy. His presence, in one sentence, did not help. He may understand her lack of control, but he did not understand what she felt for him. And for that, she could not bare to look at him anymore. It was too much.

Oliver Davis was too much.
"... ai. Mai. Mai, are you listening to me?"

The girl in question snapped to attention in an almost frantic manner. A fraction of the table rose from her fright before returning to the ground. "S-Sorry, Lin... I'm embarrassed to say that I've probably tuned you out for the last minute or so..."

He gave her another one of those stares, and it took everything she had not to cower under that gaze. Eventually she saw that his laptop was off, and the whole of his attention was planted firmly on her.

"I'm assuming you said something important...?" she tried to prompt.

Her attempt proved to be fruitful in the way that he was no longer exacting his 'cold stare' right at her, and moved onto another look entirely. One of cool patience. Or, whatever patience Lin had, she thought.

"Since you practically ordered Noll leave, I am to begin your instruction. Is that fine by you?"

"O-of course that's fine by me..." She couldn't tell whether he found her... *Argument* with Oliver amusing or annoying. Really, she supposed, it didn't really matter in the end. Lin was willing to help her either way, and she'd be insane not to enlist in his help.

"Good," he allowed, then stood. "I want you to sit on the floor."

Moving several meters from the table, she did as instructed. "Alright... What else?"

"Define 'stasis'."

"... The point between euphoria and terror...?" It was what Oliver had explained yesterday, albeit she hadn't exactly been in the best state to receive information.

"That's an example. I'm asking for the definition."

Mai blinked, and opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. After a good moment of her being completely tongue tied, Lin answered for her.

"The definition for stasis is: the equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces."

Mai's head fell. "Right..."

"Then what *is* stasis, Mai?" he asked, crossing his arms. At least a solid 190 centimeters in height, Lin Koujo was a wall of pure darkness in front of her. To say that she was not at least little intimidated would be a lie.

"Is?" she voiced quietly. "Didn't you just say what it is?"

"The definition is not entirely adequate to the reality. So, I'll ask again. What *is* stasis?"

... How did he just expect her to know this at the top of her head? She'd barely been in the category of 'alive' when Oliver had given her this lecture yesterday! But Lin was asking, and he was obviously expecting an answer, so she racked her brain for any recollecting details.

What had Oliver said?

Something about... Had it... Something about 'mental stasis' or another. Hadn't he stolen the word from some other science field...? Had it been a physics term? What was 'mental stasis'? What did that even mean? How did it help with controlling her PK again?
Then all at once, the answer became clear.

"... Focus."

"Care to repeat that a little louder, Mai?"

Her head snapped upright. "Focus," she blurted out again, this time certain. "Stasis is focus. That's what it is, right? The point between two opposite forces—for mental stasis, anyway—is focus."

The hinting of a smile morphed on Lin's pale lips. "Precisely."

"But..." There were so many questions left unanswered, so much confusion left untended by the hands of clarity. "What exactly is that supposed to mean? I mean, two opposing forces? Shouldn't that create, I don't know, an explosion?"

"With the way you're putting it, perhaps."

Now Mai was absolutely discombobulated. Shoulders slumping, head tossed to the side, her mouth formed a perfect, "Huh?"

Lin sighed, apparently exasperated by her lack of comprehension. "Close your eyes, Mai."

The girl blinked, paused, then... "Okay...?" Eyes closed, the world of color fell from her senses and an expanse of deepest ebony was left in its wake. It was a stark contrast to the opaque walls surrounding the Blank Room that appeared to go off into eternity. This darkness was almost as seemingly infinite, but after only seeing white, it was a pleasant change in scenery. If it could even be referred to as 'scenery' in the first place.

"I want you to imagine a world of black," Lin instructed.

Eyes still closed, she raised a brow as if to brace a silent question that basically said, "What exactly do you think I am seeing, right now?" Not that she actually asked this, but-

"Noll's first example for stasis was what?"

She'd answered this already... "Euphoria and terror."

"Imagine euphoria as a tangible concept in the blackness of your mind. What do you see?"

Oddly enough, she didn't visualize the emotion as something as seen through a smile or laugh. In fact, she didn't see images of people at all, but as a combination of colors. Really, it added up to a multitude of something close to a gaseous substance, as if a nebula of stars. It was a vast variety of greens, a general combination of hues she saw as positive and purely good for the sake of good. Life-bringing and earthen, natural. This nebula also moved slowly, deliberately in her imagination, as if wanting to express itself in such a way. She stated as much aloud.

"Good, now move to the opposite spectrum of this 'nebula'. What is terror made tangible?"

Terror was... Well, in a word, jagged. It was a collision of lightning bolts, dark violet and some tinged an unholy scarlet. It sliced through her mind in a malicious way, striking and violent. In her mind it was a cloud without actual cloud; make purely by lightning, it was a cloud of shattering bursts of crackling, fractured electricity. It appeared abruptly and without warning, vanishing as soon as it came yet maintaining a portion of her mind and stayed there, implanted without actually being present. It was a ghost, for lack of a better translation, staying long after it died. She said this aloud.
"Then tell me, Mai. What exactly is in the middle of these two?"

… Her mind went blank.

Slowly, she began to visualize a line, solid, yet thin and stringy in texture. It connected the two opposites. She didn't imagine them colliding this time, but merely being there on opposite ends of the universe, existing without touching, without interfering in each other's own vocation. And the point between…

*Stasis is the state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.*

*Opposing equal forces.*

*Opposing equal forces.*

*Opposing equal forces.*

Opposing forces did not exactly mean they would openly fight one another. No. They could oppose without striking. They could simply exist without causing an explosion. They could become…

Equilibrium.

Focus.

*Stasis.*

She stated as much aloud.

Mai's very *being* cleared. Her breathing calmed, her heartbeat slowed. But her mind expanded and soared and flew and stabilized.

She'd found something… Something close to stasis.

.

*10:01 a.m.*

"So that idiot actually did it."

The statement was quiet, to himself, and half spoken to the glass in front of him. Oliver was stationed at the corner of the Observation Room, unnoticed by the rest of BSPR who'd taken it upon themselves to watch the monitors and PK readings emitted from Mai's PKD Bands. The girl was currently undertaking the basics of mental stasis by Lin's instruction, and was doing relatively well for her first time.

*You sound surprised, Noll.*

And there he was, the man he'd been hoping to speak with. Still sixteen years old, his brother was all but a carbon copy of himself three years ago. Not much had changed for Oliver himself other than gaining a few centimeters and losing some remaining baby fat from his face, but the details were recognizable to any keen observer.

*You sound impressed, Gene,* he rebuked. *Don't be.*

*With how much you rattled her up an hour ago, it's surprising that she's this calm.* Oliver caught Gene's glance, one that spoke volumes of chastisement. Oliver's blood heated up.
In case you weren't paying attention, Oliver thought defensively, my job here is to help the girl. If she opposes my presence, there is nothing I can do about it.

Sure you can’t. Gene's sarcasm was uncharacteristically scathing. You're just being stubborn.

I'm being stubborn? It was a quiet, lethal question. A single brow rose in the air, elegant, yet calculating. I willing accepted this case. It's not my fault if Mai Taniyama is intolerable of my presence.

You're right—

I'm always right, Gene—

But so am I, Gene interrupted, continuing on with his previous statement. This isn't some single personed relationship that needs fixing. This is a two sided, connected relationship that requires both ends to comply for a positive outcome. How quickly you forget that you are not the only person in the room, Noll. Mai is your equal. Make amends, and get this angel back to where she's meant to be.

Without a mention of goodbye, Eugene Davis disappeared from his reflection.

Thereafter, Oliver didn't deign to speak the remainder of the day, securely locking himself in his office to think without distraction.

8:56 p.m.

Rivulets of water slithered down the concave of her back, warm and fine and concentrated in a streamlike waterfall that Mai could not help but moan over. Darkness and light were awash of abrupt changes in color along the curves of her body, diverging from grey to stygian by mere separation of shadow.

Although she was not entirely sure why, BSPR had its own locker room and shower stalls. Mai had decided to leave the room mostly dark, a personal preference after staring at the white walls of the Blank Room all day. So as it was, her form was contorted with a mess of light and darks, not wholly bright but neither was she completely succumbed to the abysmal black. Mai almost considered the idea poetic, given her current situation.

Lathering the density of her short locks with strawberry shampoo—courtesy of Madoka—she thought about her day.

It was what? The fourth day since she'd destroyed Monk's house? Memory surged forward despite her best attempts to keep it at bay, but it came back like the crack of a whip, quick and relentless. She shuddered, forcing her hands not to rip her hair out, and let them fall limply to her sides. Letting her head rise, freshwater steamed onto her face and she closed her eyes, allowing it to rain without reprieve and breathed life into her lungs. The memory fell away, but a reminder stuck in her head. She needed to call Monk and Ayako if only to let them know she was alright soon, but also to hear their voices.

Back to her day. Her spat with Oliver this morning had certainly not been civil, but her training with Lin had gone well for it being the first time. From what Lin had said, she'd been under heavy meditation for several hours from after she'd begun. Lin had actually had to rouse her from the meditative state to inform her it was time for her to eat lunch. He'd left after that, and Yasu had replaced him, along with a chipper Madoka. The two troublemakers had been a source of amusement and a small amount of laughter for Mai in the following hours. The two had stayed at her side for
hours until Mai had decided to call it a night. Luckily, graciously, Madoka had asked if she’d wanted a shower beforehand.

*Tomorrow we will begin training with your PK, Lin had said before leaving. Moving objects, among other things. It's better to understand how it works than blindly allowing your emotions control over you powers.*

It was a frightening idea. A terribly frightening idea. In truth, she'd nearly refused. She'd stood there, unable to move from the fear slicing down her veins. But had somehow found the courage to give a barely perceptible nod.

So as the water slowly burned down her skin until it chilled her into submission, Mai swallowed and let the rivers run their course.

Later, when the halls of BSPR were dark and only a single light lit the corridor outside the locker room, Mai slid down the wall and to the floor. Goosebumps crumpled up her arms and legs from the coolness of wall, but after a steaming hot shower the cold was a pleasant sensation.

Scrolling through her phone, she located the number she'd been hoping to find. It was early in Japan, very early. Rising just past five in the morning. But the sun was bound to be up and ascending. Such was the way of the Land of the Rising Sun.

Not too unexpectedly, Monk answered on the second ring. "... Mai? Wait, is this Mai?!"

A fond smile breached her lips. "Yeah, it's me. I'm sorry to call you so early, but I kinda have a set schedule here, and have to be in bed by a certain time. Stability purposes, apparently."

"You don't need to apologize to me, Mai." The familiar sound of Monk's voice was a comfort that she hadn't realized she'd missed. "You can call me anytime, and if now is the only time, then I'll consider you my new alarm clock. I wouldn't mind. I need to get up in thirty minutes, anyway."

She chuckled softly, "I wouldn't want to be a bother."


A quiet descended between them. After a moment, he asked, "How are things, Mai? I mean, really? It… It can't be easy with Naru there."

The smile fell. She leaned her head against the wall, staring lifelessly at the ceiling. "It's definitely not easy," she confirmed. "Oliver is… Well, for lack of a better word, he's Oliver. We had a pretty bad fight this morning. It didn't end well… And I-I miss you, Monk. I miss you and Ayako so much…"

"We miss you too, Jou-Chan."

The old nickname brought a warmonger of tears to her eyes, but she forced them back. "Jeez, Monk, you're going to make me cry!" she told him, laughing amid her tears.

"It's not like I'm trying to make you cry!" he protested.

"I know… It's just been a long day. I think it's getting to me. The stress of it all, I mean."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I-I'm sorry, I'd rather not relive it... Maybe some other time. Tell me about yours, instead?"

So he did, and Mai fell into a sweet serenity that night amid her dreams.
"Is this really a good idea?" Yasu asked, scratching the back of his head.

"Noll's stubborn, you know that. I doubt he'd let us interrupt his lecture so quickly."

"But Mai looks like she's about to slam him into the wall within the next ten seconds."

"Intentionally, she wouldn't, but unintentionally…"

"That's my point exactly."

Madoka bit her lip, her charisma officially gone. This was a tumultuous situation at worst, and a catastrophe waiting to happen at best. Honestly, Koujo should be in there in the case of an emergency. Although Noll was almost incapable of allowing his feathers to be ruffled, Mai was a lethal exception to that law. From the stories told by Yasu, Noll had broken the uncompromising promise between him and his parents to destroy the Ebisu with PK after Mai had provoked him into action two years ago at the end the Cursed House case. The idiot didn't seem to realize it after two damn years, either. And if the severe drop in temperature he'd caused during his last argument with Mai was anything to go by, it was logical to surmise that Noll was still affected by her. There was also the fact that he hadn't even seemed to acknowledge that he'd riled her up more than necessary during his failed attempt to interview her, which was both unprofessional and irresponsible. Two very un-Noll-like qualities. Something was getting to him. What reason would it be other than Mai herself? All things considered, sympathy for Mai's situation was hardly a viable idea after his last conversation with the girl...

And strange as it may be, there was something between them. Something… Beyond her capability to understand, but it reminded her of the feeling she had always felt whenever Gene and Noll had been together. She may not be a spiritualist or a psychic, but Madoka had always been intuitive and extremely observant.

There were a few possibilities to this theory.

1.) She was simply wrong and miscalculated her surroundings. Which would be a feat itself.

2.) Noll was in denial, and didn't care to admit there might actually be some supernatural connection between him and Mai.

3.) Noll really didn't know it was there.

So as she was forced to stay and watch the fiery exchange between her former student and daughter-figure from the safe protection of the Observation Room, she couldn't help but wonder what was going to ensue.

For all likes and purposes, Madoka Mori was worried.
Stationed in front of the notorious Oliver Davis—a distinguished doctor of parapsychology, extraordinary psychic, and an exemplary paranormal investigator with genius level intellect—was Mai Taniyama. And she was glaring at him as if he'd murdered her best friend. Why this was, he could spare a few hypotheses, none of which held solid evidence, nor a true follow up, so, really, for once Oliver Davis was stumped. Not that he portrayed any of this vile frustration outwardly, but it was a curious thing that would no doubt bother him until he solved the puzzle that was Mai Taniyama.

However, he would tread carefully with how volatile she acted towards him. And despite how much it irked him to admit, he'd made a mistake during Mai's interview, stirring her up as he had. Mistakes were intolerable in his line of work. Mistakes got people killed. A single mistake could kill him too. Oliver was well aware that he was not immortal. And if the building static in the air was enough to tell him to get down to business, then he would.

"Calm down, Mai," he said aloud. It was the first and only statement he'd bequeathed since arriving. "Unless, of course, you'd prefer to learn nothing, and remain in the state you're in."

"You're the one being rude, staring at me like you are," she bit out. "Also, try being nice for a change. It might just work in your favor."

He would not sink so low as to lash out that she was, in fact, the person who'd begun straining their progress with useless animosity. Instead, he flatly enquired, "Is taking this case not nice enough for you, then?"

She tisked, breaching a topic of importance. "Let's just get this over with."

Providing her with a final glare, he let it go. "Fine. Let's begin."

Snatching at his front pocket, Oliver pulled from his side a deck of cards, and from it, a single card. The Jack of Spades. The rest he put back in his coat for future tests. There, he held it between his middle and forefinger for Mai to view as she pleased.

"Take this from me," he dared.

"What?"

He explained, "Yesterday, you managed to put yourself under a method of mental stasis. It was shallow at best, and certainly not very thorough, but you managed it on your first attempt. Well done. Now, I want you to apply it."

Mai's jaw fumbled. "What—? I thought that was meditation—"

"Meditation is focusing your energy," Oliver interrupted. "Such is the way of controlling PK. This time try it with your eyes open, and closing all your focus onto this one card. Remember what I explained about the point between two opposing forces, as well. It'll sharpen your mind."

"You can't seriously expect me to just take that card from your hand, can you?"

"Considering that you can create cracks in solid concrete, and upsurge objects without thought—yes, I expect you can quite easily given some practice." It was clear she didn't know how to interpret that statement. On an ordinary day Oliver couldn't have cared less, but with how she had an disdainful aversion to his company he would've preferred the positive.

Finally, she shook her head as if dissuading herself of any negative emotions, and glared head on at the card in this hand.
One minute…

Two minutes…

Three minutes…

"Holding your breath is not going to help, Mai." Such was true, and the pallor of her face was similar
to that of blood. Releasing her breath, she coughed for a moment before regaining some normalcy.

"Fine." She raised her hands in mock surrender, but she was far from content. "What am I supposed
to do that I'm not doing right."

"For one, you're concentrating too hard."

Her shoulders straightened. "But you told me to concentrate on the card!"

"Yes," Oliver agreed. "But being frustrated is not how to maintain stasis. Find the point between
frustration and contentment."

Her brows knit. "How—"

"Imagine it."

Mai was skeptical, but eventually gave in. This time, she placed herself on the floor, posture erect,
yet relaxed. And he stood there, waiting, watching.

Five minutes later nothing happened, and Mai near exploded. "Alright, that's it!" Returning to her
feet, she stormed up to him, prodding him in the chest. "You need to leave. Right now."

"I am—"

"Not helping!"

Oliver's frown deepened, etching onto his lips in a cold downward curl. "I have done nothing to
warrant this behavior from you. I am trying to help."

But Mai would have none of it. "You—" She seemed to be grasping at straws, but her expression
was torn between fear and fury. "I can't deal with you! You—You're too much! Your very being
disrupts my composure! I-I can't do this with you! It's just too hard with you around! Everything is
always too hard whenever you're around! You make my life Hell just by being in front of me! I can't
deal with it!" As a result, the air thickened and static charged the oxygen particles surrounding them.

Securing the Jack of Spades back in its container, Oliver crossed his arms and glared at her. "Calm
down, Mai."

"Calm down?" she repeated incredulously. "Calm down?! How do you expect me to calm down
when you're standing smack dab right in front of me?!"

_For what reason would my being physically close cause you to be mentally bothered? Other than
the reminder of Gene._ "May I remind you that you walked up to me," Oliver mentioned crisply after
that last thought. "Not the other way around."

This seemed to shift her attention, and she took a step back. "But still! I can't do this with you! Not
you!"

"Does my attractive physical appearance bother you so much that you're unable to concentrate?"
Now this made her blow up. Teeth bared, and fists clenched tight enough that the bone of her knuckles showed white, a solid clump of ceiling fell from above, landing precarious behind him. Not but centimeters from his feet.

"OLIVER DAVIS, DON'T YOU DARE START WITH ME!" Oliver. Although not bothered by the change in address, it made him further ponder the motives behind her disdain. It might be able to help piece together the mystery behind these emotional tirades.

"Mai." Speaking her name, he grabbed at her wrist for reasons unexplained, and something, something enflamed in that contact. Suddenly frustrated, Oliver snagged her other arm and made her face him. "Mai, you need to calm down."

But she wouldn't listen. The contact of skin ignited a terror in her that Oliver thought he felt himself. She threw herself from his hands and shoved herself away. "Get.Get off of me!" she shrieked. Crashing onto the floor, newly implemented lines spit the tile where she landed, and Oliver could not get to her.

Something laid beyond his feet. Something impenetrable.

"Mai," he said again. "Mai, you need to let me in." Buzzing electricity imprisoned her within a forcefield made of pure PK. Or, perhaps, locked him out. She shook her head frantically, fighting against him.

"Mai, you don't know what you're doing," he snapped. "You're letting your instincts control your judgement."

His attempts were for naught. They made no dent in her decision, intentional or otherwise. He resorted to taking the only option he had left, and all but bellowed down the tattered connection with his brother, Eugene, get her out of here, right this instant!

There was no voiced response, but it quickly became clear that the order came through. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and every force in the room died with an instantaneous snap of disconnection. Oliver caught Mai's head before it could hit the floor, the strands of hair entangling in his fingers. Wordlessly, he hoisted her into his arms, and released a sigh laced with vivid irritation.

He was done here.

"I told you everything, opened up and let you in,
You made me feel alright, for once in my life,
Now all that's left of me, is what I pretend to be,
So together, but so broken up inside,
'Cause I can't breathe, no, I can't sleep, I'm barely hangin' on,
Here I am, once again, I'm torn into pieces,
Can't deny it, can't pretend, just thought you were the one,
Broken up, deep inside,
But you won't get to see the tears I cry,
"Behind these hazel eyes."

-Kelly Clarkson, *Behind These Hazel Eyes*

*Stasis*
**File I: Euphoria & Horror, Part V: Clarity**

**Stasis:** The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

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**File I: Euphoria & Horror**

**Part V: Clarity**

*Location: Astral Plane*

*Date: June, Day V . . .*

*Time: 8:20 a.m. . . .*

It didn’t take Mai long to realize where she was. Heaving a tired sigh, she found herself laying on her side. Haphazardly flipping onto her back, she stared into the deep abyss that was the Astral Plane. Infinite black ascended beyond imagination, and pulsating spirits floated in a dominion all their own. It was a beautiful place. A place of eternal peace.

But Mai was not dead. Her peace had not yet arrived. For now, she was trapped in a suicide mission that brought her no pleasure. But she could look deep into the future and hope for a better outcome than what the present set of events led her to believe. She would deal, she would fight, and she would master whatever she had to, to be herself again.

But there were two entities that thwarted her progress.

The first one was the cause. A infernal cause that started all this insane madness. Her dreams. Dreams of nothing but terror and fringes of other chaotic, if not heart wrenching flares of emotion. Nothing more. Just plain old terror. For what or for whom, she could not yet say.

The second was merely a factor, but a troublesome factor that no doubt stemmed from two years of heartache. Oliver Davis. The man was a pain in her side whether he intended on proctoring her training sessions or not. The simple matter was, she was still in love with him. The problem, however, was that she did not want to be in love with him. It was a grueling quandary she’d been grappling with for over three years! Just the idea of it made her want to smash her head into the wall. Really, what did she see in that prick?

That awkward smile—not Gene’s—littered past her thoughts. Then that cynical smirk, lathered in effortless narcissism. That snarkish, prideful demeanor, meant to dissuade everyone from the truth behind the mask. And what laid beyond that pretty—if not cold—facade? A man who cared. Cared boundlessly, helplessly and wholly.

Oliver cared. He simply never wanted anyone to see it. Mai had seen it, though. The occasions were seldom, of course, but they were forever ingrained into her memory, latched onto her mind like leeches out for blood.

*But Oliver Davis did not love her. That much was obvious. And he'd left her. Left her after giving her the world. It was that single aspect of their outrageously titleless relationship that led to this… This madness. Simple and tragic, but true.*
She hated dependence. Loathed it with every fiber of her being. But somewhere along the way, Oliver had become her center. Her Naru. A petty laugh escaped her mouth. How sad was it that she needed him? How revolting was it that she loved him after all this time? How desperate was she? She didn't want him. She wanted to hate him. She wanted to forget about him and move on with her life. But she could not. He was her ground, her sense of gravity. He always had been. Maybe he always would be, whether she wanted him to be or not. Why did he have this hold on her? Only heaven could say. She was certainly dumbfound about it.

This madness between them would no doubt continue, she knew. Until another variable tipped the scales in whose ever favor it deemed worthy, they would be suspended in a treacherous game of cat and mouse, circling and circling and circling on and on and on again.

"In need of a rock, Mai?"

Mai's mind snapped back to reality. She hadn't even realized Gene had seated himself beside her. Legs crossed out in front of him, his left palm easily held the bridge of his chin.

"Gene!" she exclaimed, immediately forming a sitting position in front of him. "H-hi…"

His smile was rueful. "Hello to you too, angel. I would ask how you've been, but I think I already know the answer."

Mai's mouth tasted of fresh blood. "Yeah… Um… I remember arguing with Oliver, but after that…" She hoped he'd know the details of what she'd forgotten, as she'd stumbled off, her words marked with grim curiosity.

"Noll he... He tried to calm you down," Gene explained tenderly. "but it didn't work. He tried to touch you, but you reacted as if you'd been burned... After that, you literally made a forcefield to block him out. Seeing no other option on hand, Noll basically screamed down the telepathic link I have with him to get you out of there. So, here you are."

"I suppose it's a good thing that you can practically knock me out whenever you feel the need." She'd attempted it as a mock joke to lighten the situation, but Gene's expression was sorrowful at best. She moved onto a different topic. "Umm... You asked me about needing a rock?"

"I didn't mean it literally if that's what you're asking." He spared her a half smile. "What? Ah, I guess not." She flushed momentarily. "I don't quite understand the concept of 'rock' then, I suppose. Some metaphors are still kinda lost to me in English."

"That's understandable," he spoke, reassuring her. "Another definition of 'rock' is to be someone's comfort, or perhaps, the person who holds all their secrets and hears out their lamentations. If that's what you need, than I am more than willing to help, Mai. I'll always be here for you and Noll. It's probably the reason why I have yet to move on, I feel the need to help you both."

Her brows knit. "Gene, you don't have to do anything. It's better for you to move on. You'll be happier there, I know it."

"I doubt my idiot scientist of a brother would be able to make heads or tails of his emotions without me around to explain." Gene's smile returned completely. "Besides, I want to help. And as it stands, it's become clear that my 'unfinished business' needs to be finished before I'm able to move on, which is you and Noll. I want you two to be happy. Always. It's my deepest wish."

Gene's sincerity and drive rang with truth. It bound his words into something purely devoted. There was no changing his decision.
“You're always considerate of everyone else's feelings before your own, aren't you?” Utter present tense. Never the past. Not with Gene. It was never quite the past with Gene.

This seemed to startle him, but then he smiled again. It was warm and kind and brotherly. "No more than you are, angel. At least, on a normal day."

She could tell it was all in jest, but it was embarrassingly true. Her anger had won out against her better judgement on more than one occasion when it came to his brother. It also ignited an indignant blush to sculpt her cheeks afterwards.

Gene laughed at her reaction. It was a sound she would never soon forget.

Someday, somehow she hoped to hear the same thing from someone not quite so similar.

3:47 p.m.

"So… You're umm… Oliver parents?"

Mai was not exactly certain how she'd come to be alone with the two elder Davis's, but here she was. After hours of training with Lin, she'd been left to her own devices. Now, however...

Standing within a meter of Mai were Martin and Luella Davis. The former was a man well past his fifties, almost into his sixties if she had to guess. Tall and lean, he stood only a few cm shorter than Lin if she had to guess, but he had a pleasant demeanor about him, the kind that attracted people to him without much thought. Then there was that smile, warm and bright and well spoken. But it was his eyes that caught her attention! The eyes of an intellectual, keen in fields she of fierce diversity and precision. Although partially hidden behind a pair of thin-framed glasses, Mr. Davis had all the appearances of a man of knowledge and devotion. And if Yasu's personal opinion of him was anything to take into account, he had to be a beloved professor.

Mrs. Davis was a bit different than her husband. She was barely above Mai's height, and she was petite, too. Small, she supposed, but a little adorable. Folds of wrinkles crinkled in her smile, but her bright cerulean orbs accentuated the length of her silvery blond hair. Just from that smile, Mai could tell that Mrs. Davis's life was spent loving those closest to her with unfathomable fidelity and wholehearted kindness. And though she might not the be apart of the certified geniuses of her family, there was a trickle of mischievous cunning in that smile that reminded her of Madoka and Yasu.

Mai wondered how she got to meet the parents of the two twins ghost hunters… Despite her current problems and situation, she couldn't help but feel as if she'd walked into dinner after being invited as one of their dates… The awkwardness radiating off her would probably be laughable for any other ordinary day. But not today.

"I-I'm Mai Taniyama," she stuttered, half bowing before she realized a handshake was considered the proper greeting in England. "I-I apologize, some customs are still kinda, um... What I mean to say is that I'm still getting use to the customs of other countries..."

Throughout this mess, Mai had fastened her eyes firmly on the floor for fear of somehow insulting them. But her hand was out and ready to be shaken.

"My dear girl." The voice was soft and womanly and kind. "Please look up and grace us with those beautiful eyes of yours. I'd hardly think the floor is worthy of such a gaze, after all."

Mai slowly looked up at Mrs. Davis's insistence, but a blush stained her cheeks.
"Ah," Mrs. Davis breathed, "there you are, angel."

Embarrassment continued to assault her senses, and she forced herself to not stare at the floor. *Gene got the nickname from his mother then… He's more of an angel than I am.*

"Honestly, I think the girl would prefer the term valkyrie, instead," Mr. Davis chuckled. He strided easily forward, binding their hands together in a gentle clasp. But rather than a single hand, he encompassed her one in the two of his. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mai. I also apologize for my son. He's a bit of a warlord in disguise, isn't he?"

A burst of giggles fell from her mouth at the sudden joke, and the awkwardness descended to forgotten dust. "Yes, he is," Mai agreed. "But I wouldn't exactly call myself an angel, either. Valkyrie does suit me better, given the notorious arguments I've had with Oliver. That being said, I also have to apologize. My behavior towards him has hardly been... Civil."

She heard a snort. It was Mrs. Davis. "If anything I'm impressed you've managed to ruffle him um so much, my dear. It's not easy to get a reaction out of him, and I'm his mother!" Laughing at her own joke, Mai easily fell into step with the two Davis's. Eventually she began referring to them by their first names, mostly by repetitive insistence.

It was a step in the right direction.

5:12 p.m.

"Is this where you ran off to this morning? Because I have to say, if you wanted a good hiding spot, I would've picked one of the secret passages in your house, not your office at HQ."

This was how Madoka Mori received one of the iciest glares ever seen, and it was pointed in her exact direction. To add, a dip in temperature cooled the room by several degrees.

"Oh, don't give me that look!" Madoka rested her hands on her hips. "And stop being hypocritical, Noll, letting your PK run rampant like this! Proctoring 101: you teach what you should do, not what you shouldn't do." She swatted at the conditioned air, and goosebumps sliced down her back.

"What do you want?" Noll demanded. Demanded, not asked. *Demanded.* She shouldn't have expected any less. Add in the fact that he was in a positively horrible mood did not help matters. Nevertheless...

"How about you stop acting like the child you've long since claimed you aren't, and act like the esteemed doctor I trained you to be?"

Noll's eyes narrowed, but he didn't retort. "Fine," he amended. "Why the visit?"

The lady in question smiled. "Aw, you see, was that so hard? Now, if you started saying 'please' and 'thank you' the world would be a better—"

"My patience does not extend to senseless wordplay and fake awe," Noll interrupted crisply. "Explain why you're here, or leave."

*As always, aren't you a funless little Nolly?* Madoka almost snorted, but refrained for the sake of her queries. Noll could only be pushed so far before he threw his opponents over the edge, may they be friend or foe. Mai however… That was an exception… She was getting off track.
Clearing her throat, Madoka said, "I was wondering what you intend on doing from this point forward, considering you've twice failed to speak with Mai without causing some of the worst poltergeists ever recorded on tape."

Noll made no visible reaction, but she could see it. The personal fury for his own missteps, but also something else. Something that Noll didn't seem to grasp, either. It made her wonders grow in curiosity. What laid between him and Mai—other than the obvious discord? It was not seen by the naked eye, but by the wafting atmosphere around them, between them.

Maybe she should ask. "Oliver—"

"I am to be observing this case," he relented. "Mai's actions and words are clear. She does not want to see me. Fine. Lin will instruct her."

Pulling out, huh? It was the logical course of action, she supposed, but it also felt wrong. It was a gut feeling, instinct perhaps? She let it slide, reverting to her intelligence rather than her heart.

"You're just going to 'observe', Noll? No taking the reigns, like usual?" It was strange, if not unprecedented that Noll bequeath the title of leader in their investigations. He shook his head to clarify. Again, Mai is involved in another one of Noll's odd personality changes. "What else are you planning on doing?"

"Night's watch." That's it? Her eyebrows wrote as much. "If there's one person who needs to be awake when Mai's asleep, it's myself."

Lightbulb moment~! "You called on Gene this morning, didn't you?!"

"There is no need to yell."

"Oh! So that's what happened! Ha, well. It makes sense, actually. We all thought she fainted from the energy expelled creating that PK barrier. We almost phoned the hospital, but when you said she'd be fine, we dismissed it."

"Mai's powers far exceed my own," Noll reminded her, a note to be taken from his tone. "A barrier is hardly enough to wipe her out."

Madoka's energy halted. "But you would've..." Fainted. Nearly died. "How can she..." How can she possibly use that much energy without going into cardiac arrest? Unless there's another outlet for her PK, but that would be impossible, wouldn't it?

Noll leaned back in his chair. "That's the question, isn't it?"

Eugene Davis saw the living world as though looking through a window. What was nice about this window was he could change the perspective and location depending on his own desire. But being the man that he was, he did not intrude on personal affairs that did not require his observation. He merely watched the significant events for his—and sometime's Noll's—better interest. More often than not, the sleepiness of the dead lulled him away from his vigilant watch, and he would miss some details for others. When this happened, especially in an important event, Noll allowed him a visual from his perspective by their telepathic link. Usually, however, missing a day or two this was no pressing matter. He was not needed in the life, but in death. Gene was well aware of this fact, and he accepted it without much distress. It was his duty, he supposed, the right thing to do when he could do no more than simple tasks.
Some days were worse than others. Today, for example, was an ideal illustration of how he desperately wished to be alive, and if only to still the waters drowning the two people he held most dear. Some days he was glad for the deathly sleep. Today was not one of those days.

In the living world, a week of endless monotony continued on in its persistence. It was a long week, as unforgiving as it was resilient.

Mai steadily progressed in her training, having learned various skills of stasis and focus and concentration by Lin's instruction. She meditated for hours on end, her energy flowing in slow rivers throughout her body, contained and caged and locked away. Despite this, her dreams haunted her, throwing her out of her deepest slumber, and into the waking realm by a frenzy of cries and upturned furniture. Gene could only do so much to subdue this, as he himself could not determine the essence of her dreams, nor their cause. Imagery alluded her senses, blinding her with black and pure, unbridled horror. Despite her best attempts at focusing her energy during the day, her nighttime illusions did not stop, nor was there any reprieve. And this failure could lead to a devastating demise in the future, one that his brother would never be able to endure.

As for the beloved narcissist, he spent the majority of the week either cooped up in his office going over Mai's PK readings, researching other treatments, or monitoring the girl over the course of the evening. Make note these jobs were done in the earliest hours of the morning, usually between nine p.m. to ten a.m. every day. It was since the majority of Mai's PK outbreaks were at night, that he'd fixed his schedule to sleep during the day, work in the morning. Not to say that Noll minded this change of pace. He always did have an aversion to sunlight. Personal preference of his, really. Gene had always reminded him that vampires also thrived in darkness. Noll had responded that vampires do not exist. And what did Gene say to that? That Noll was the sole extant vampire. These spats had been common throughout the night hours, mostly just to keep them both awake during long days of relentless case work. They happened no longer. Not since… Well, dear reader, you already know when.

June, Day XII

8:36 p.m.

Oliver had barely left his office all week. And the time it took to return to his office from his insignificant escapades was within a five minute time-frame. He'd also gotten accustomed to sleeping in his office, which usually resulting in various cricks in his neck the night after. Having refused to leave HQ, his parents had bought him clothes and daily meals. Most of the time, Oliver was too consumed in his research to care about nutrience, but he wasn't foolish to believe he could survive without it.

The week had been long and eventful, usually too eventful. Mai's nightmares often made him resort to calling Gene's for assistance when her dreams became too violent. It happened five out seven nights, a 71.4% probability. Her training seemed to make no dent in this dilemma, either, which was an unnerving concept Oliver could not fully decipher. The days she didn't experience nightmares were no more unusual than any other. Her daytime activities were no different, her schedule remained no different. The variables had not changed. The week had been long and eventful. The girl herself appeared content to dream the night away in perfect tranquility. It was a beneficial change, Oliver thought. One she rightfully deserved after
endless nights of fear and instability.

If I knew any better, I would’ve thought you sound happy for Mai, a familiar voice spoke, amused. Gene laid within the mirror to his right, attached to the wall.

Oliver let out a soft scoff. *I'd hardly refer to it as 'happy'*. 

Glad, then. Or pacified. 

*Apeased would be the correct term, Gene.*

Ah, right. *'Apeased' it is, then.* A smile flickered across his mouth, before it disappeared. *Noll, Mai's dreams have not gotten any better, he announced without preamble. In fact, I have to believe they'll get become worse in the near future. I don't know if I'll be able to pull her away next time.*

Oliver narrowed his eyes. *What do you mean you won't be able to pull her away?*

In the mirror, Gene's shoulders slumped. *Every time it gets harder and harder to pull her spirit away from the chaos of her dreams. It's like tugging against a current, but each time the current moves faster than before. The rapidity of her dreams and the danger of them worsen with each passing night. I don't know why, but it's happening whether I help or not. Soon I won't be able to get her out at all, and she'll be stuck until she finds her way back. She'll be on her own.*

Oliver resumed his thinking pose, but his indigo orbs were clouded with darkness. *Can you give be an estimated time of when this will ensue?*

*It… It could next time, or the time after that. We don't have long, Noll. I've barely been able to get her out on the last few attempts.*

*The visual remains unclear?*

*Noll, it's as murky as the Thames River. It can't get much more unclear. The only notable things in the dream are the emotions. Nothing more. Suddenly, Gene stiffened. Noll, it's happening again. I can feel it.*

As he said, Mai's heart rate began to accelerate. A frenzy of alarms were set off from his computer. Oliver instantly got to his feet, prepared. But he didn't know what exactly he was prepared for.

"N-Naru..." Mai muttered, tossing and turning. Static caught the ends of her hair. "Naru… N-Naru..." It was the first time Mai had uttered his name in her sleep since arriving in England twelve days ago. Takigawa had mentioned it before, but it hadn't happened as of yet.

"Gene," he said aloud, not looking at him. "Get her out. Now."

*I'll... Do my best, Noll.* Oliver's lips soured at those words, but he didn't rebuttal.

Objects rose in the air, floating and dancing in a precarious waltz of deadly proportions. Shocks manifested off Mai's hands, shrieking and violet in hue. She tore at the sheets, thrusting them away and tossed herself around. The bed lurched forward. She seemed to struggled with her breath, gasping on something, half coughing, half choking on his name, "N-n-naru—"

*She'll bite her tongue at this rate. Unbeknownst to him, his jawline tightened.*

Gene appeared again, his expression grave and disheveled by forces unknown to him. *Noll—*

Oliver ran before his brother could voice another syllable. Action took his mind from its secured
location. Fight or flight instincts had taken control, and for not for the first time, Oliver let them do their bidding. But his intellect preserved in this entangled mess, assaulting his thoughts with possibilities and theories on what he intended to accomplish by placing himself amidst this insanity.

The darkened halls of BSPR were fractions of memory in his race, but they echoed his footsteps down to the depths of their core—echoing, vibrating, pulsating. Oliver's senses went mad with noise and touch and taste and sight and smell. He felt and was everything in that moment, but really, he was nothing at all except himself.

Bursting into the Blank Room, he barely heard Madoka's warning.

"Mai!" he called.

That rudimentary table nearly impaled him, but he ducked and dodged perfectly, honed by years of ceaseless practice in the martial arts. The room seemed to elongate and expand, but Oliver knew it was his adrenaline. He was closer than ever.

Reaching Mai's bedside, he clamped his fits on the sides of the bed to prevent himself from being wrenched off the shifting mattress. He took care in not touching her. Sparks tumbled off her fingertips. "Mai!" he called again. "Mai!"

She struggled to breath, and metaphorically speaking, something built in her throat. "Damn it, Mai," he bit out. "Wake up, idiot."

"N-n-naru… Y-you can't—NO!" The scream ripped from her mouth.

He slapped her. Hard. Right across the pale of her cheek.

Everything stilled. Five seconds of purgatory swept by. Oliver forced himself not to breathe. Then… Objects fell from the sky, vaulting and crashing onto the floor in harsh, grating tune.

It took awhile. She groaned, and slowly, oh, so slowly, her eyelids ascended. Amber met indigo, and for a moment, a brightness lit her gaze. "N-n…" His name halted on her lips, and she inhaled sharply as realization set in. Her mouth quivered, and water pooled in her eyes, but there was a harsh furiosity in them that would not go unnoticed. Without warning, she pushed him away.

Her head swiveled around, and with each glance, frustration mounted on her face. Finally, she looked back at him. "What are you going to do with me?" she spat out, lines of tears descending down her cheeks. "Are you going to lock me up in a detention center so I can't hurt anyone?"

What… What kind of idea was that? For all he was, Oliver Davis held back his tongue, but a storm brewed in the background, waiting to rage.

The question hung in the air, suspended in silence. Mai rose her eyes to meet his, and she stopped upon seeing the look of his gaze. It was hard. She matched it with every fiber of her being, but pathways of small tears flowed freely down the side of her face, sliding past her neck and leaving tracks to define their existence.

"What purpose would that serve?" Oliver snapped. "Silence will only draw on your nerves, creating an even larger portion of energy until you exploded with PK, decimating everything within a mile radius. What you need is to calm down and get over what apparent grudge you have on me. Honestly, Mai. Get a grip."

She didn't move.
"Mai," he bristled between clenched teeth. "Get up."

She just continued to shudder, but not under his gaze, not by his presence, but by her own destruction. Sobs erupted from her mouth, and Oliver was threw. Pathetic. It ignited a fire in Oliver that he didn't fully understand.

"... Since when did Mai Taniyama need to be coddled like a child?" he snapped, and Mai visibly flinched as he stalked back over to her. Scowling to herself, she did not face him. "What happened to the girl who yelled at me about my pride needing to be made by my own efforts? What happened to the girl who ran towards Urado? What happened to her? Because you are not the girl I used to know."

Mai swallowed thickly, and without looking at him, softly demanded, "Just... What are you doing here, Oliver?"

"You know exactly why I'm here—"

That rage reappeared, and she stood on her feet. "Okay, firstly, don't you dare call me by my first name. And secondly, that isn't the answer I want to hear. Why—Why did you take this case in the first place?! I haven't seen you in two years, Oliver! Then—Then suddenly after a single phone call from Monk—a single phone call—you whisk me away to England to try and help me. I. Want. To. Know. Why."

Oliver raised his chin. When Gene had convinced him to take the case, he'd already been reluctant. The only thing that changed his mind was the fact she could die within the year. Really, there was but one accurate response.

"We are friends, are we not?" It was something Gene would've said. Truthful and personal and right. Perhaps for the first time, Oliver had taken his brother's advice. But he would soon find out it was the very last thing he should've said. Oliver was not Eugene, and his actions in both the past and present proved as much.

By this statement, all energy in the air dissipated into a fractured calm. Shocked, a sharp split shattered the floor beneath their feet. He spared it a glance, but when he looked back, Mai's quivering smile was far from stable. A laugh escaped her lips, but it was tinged with hysteria. She kept laughing, the sound wicked and unhinged. Finally, she calmed down, but another feeling slipped into the air. It was less than pleasant, and Oliver watched her warily, expression devoid of any emotion at all.

"You..." she began, then stopped. She shook her head, her voice crackling with quiet rancor, "You lost every right to even say that word to me when you left me."

Their gazes connected, and something clanged between them. It was equal resentment and equal bitterness and equal betrayal. It resonated between them, known and definite and final.

A sharp sheer cut across his mouth, and the air itself chilled to his word. "If that's what you think, then fine."

Without another word, Oliver Davis turned on his heel and never looked back.

But even as he did, a shudder of something... Something profoundly grievous clattered within all the destructive negatives, barely alive, but alive nevertheless. It breathed the life of something that would transform them forevermore.

And someday, it would be their salvation.
9:54 p.m.

In the last hour, Oliver had made it clear that he was done with this case. His parents and colleagues could continue as they saw fit, but Oliver Davis was done. Mai held a disdain for him, for whatever her reasons, and his being there 'was not helping' as she'd put it last week. Fine. Then, he was done. Mai did not want his help, then fine, he would not even try. So, he'd went home. It was a place of solitude and research. But as he'd driven home, Madoka had followed after him, much to his displeasure.

They'd been at odds for the last ten minutes.

"I absolutely cannot believe you," Madoka hissed, uncharacteristically explosive her in beration. "You just left her there? Oliver Davis, how dare you just leave her alone at a time like this!"

Scoffing, she snatched her jacket and nearly left the building, but Oliver added dryly, "I don't need to go to her, Madoka, and neither to do you. My parents, Lin, and Yasu are already there."

The logic was true, that much was obvious. The pinkette halted at the threshold of the doorway, her fist clenched tight on the folds of her jacket before it loosened to a casual embrace. Swirling around, she strode right back up to him, and Oliver watched her movements warily. What was she planning —

"You know, Oliver, you're right, I don't need to go to her," Oliver only spared her a deprecating glance, as if to say state the obvious, but Madoka rerouted her lecture, grinning, "but you do."

He caught the jacket before it could be thrown in his face, biting back a scowl. "She doesn't want me there—"

"Yes, she does."

"Mai has repeatedly stated that she doesn't. Also, I'm as likely, to become injured by her control issues as anybody else, especially when she's awake," Oliver snapped. "Where in the realm of possibility did that idea emerge in your head?"

"Hmm… Somewhere in the fact that you've been unknowingly in love with her for three years, and that you're unwilling to admit that you somehow have a connection to her. Somewhere in that realm of possibility!"

But Oliver never did have the decency to appear ruffled by blatant candor.

"Madoka, I've stated the simple fact more than once since I received that call from Takigawa. I have never been in love with Mai Taniyama, nor is there a possibility of that actually transpiring in any foreseeable future. As for the 'connection' that is apparent to you, I have yet to feel anything between Mai and myself. Unless you have a better, more solid reasoning for why I should take time out of my evening to treat Mai's emotional status when she doesn't want me there to begin with, I will be in my office."

There was a pause, and the house was suddenly devoid of sound. Still as death incarnate forsook the wood of the English estate, howling into the night, but then Oliver felt something crash into his bones until a shaking stir of unadulterated emotion stood between him and feeling his toes.
Oliver nearly fell off of his feet, but managed to preserve a fraction his dignity by latching onto the railing for support, heart racing, vision blurring, ears ringing, tongue tasting of fresh blood. A dizzying spell of emotion and pain thundered into his mind, thrashing and violent.

Pure instability one second, then… Awareness.

"O-iver—are—yo—k—What… Oliver! Talk to me, what's wrong?"

But the notorious Oliver Davis could only stare, wide eyed at the floor below him. But his gaze was unseeing. He was thinking a mile per minute, chasing through memory files at a furious pace until the pieces of the puzzle snapped together in one very unholy collision that set him teetering on the edge of disbelief and undeniable fact. Swallowing, he made to get away from Madoka's overbearing company, but he could barely stand. Disbelief was part of the equation, but the overall dilemma was the physical aftermath of whatever Mai recently experienced.

Whatever Mai had precariously screeched across the bond.

So even as the conundrum made a wedge in his scientific theorem, a fact was a fact.

Oliver never denied facts.

"I need to see Mai," he said crisply, calm after a period of mental stasis. But Madoka was staring at him as if he'd lost it. Maybe he had, but impatient as he was, he couldn't have cared less. "I need to see Mai," he repeated, snapping waspishly, and fully prepared to bulldoze anyone in his way. "Now."

"Walk on through a red parade and refuse to make amends,

It cuts deep through our ground and makes us forget all common sense,

If you pull then I'll push too deep and I'll fall right back to you,

'Cause you are the piece of me I wish I didn't need,

Chasing relentlessly, still fight and I don't know why,

If our love is tragedy, why are you my remedy?

If our love's insanity,

Why are you my clarity?"

-Zedd feat. Foxes, Clarity

Stasis
Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

File I: Euphoria & Horror

Part VI: Never Forget You

Location: B.S.P.R HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK)

Date: June, Day XII

Time: 8:56 p.m.

He was walking away. Walking away. It was not the first time, but just watching him leave her again... Again. It cracked something in her, something that went past the point of no return. It stirred together her nightmares in one grand chaotic ball of dismal grief and madness that Mai lost it. Eyes widened to rounded saucers, and the tightness in her throat grew and grew and grew. The puncture wound in her heart was ripped open, exposing the creeping blood seeping outward and into reality. Her breathing became shallow and grating and raspy, quickening with each passing breath.

Words resounded in her ears, but she did not hear anything of importance. Thoughts raced and expanded and singled out the problem of this new development. Emotions ran rampant, unseen by the sight of eye, but felt by the charging electrons in the oxygen surrounding her.

"No..." she whispered hauntingly. Her vision became selective, and she watched him walk away over and over and over again. "No..."

Instincts overcame intelligence, captivating her senses and shrouding her deeper and deeper inside a cage of dream and reality. But this cage laid beyond the realm of the living and waltzed towards supernatural dominions, places where she'd found herself on so many occasions. But this time was different.

She did not know how to leave.

Hands tore at the silky masses of her hair, fastening with such ardent strength that welts formed on the soft flesh of her crown. Her back arched, and something overtook her heart. She'd sunk deep into an abysmal consciousness, breaching past walls and warnings where only spirits once walked long ago. The Astral Plain was the doorstep to this realm, but there was much more beyond.

Beyond was the only quantifiable description of this forsaken location. It was somewhere in her mind, somewhere in the past and present and future combined, somewhere where heaven and hell intermixed. Somewhere real and unreal. Somewhere beyond.

Mai's scream foretold of all the aching grief in the world, but it was all too soon that her voice was lost. Set adrift amid her own pandemonium, objects rose from their position and the walls lining the area with cracks and fissures. In this mess, Mai lost consciousness, but her body floated into the open air, suspended and unhindered by gravity's pull. Soon thereafter, furniture was hurled around the Blank Room, beginning to swirl around the epicenter in a tempestuous tornado of wind and electricity and kinesis.
But even as this catastrophe unfolded in life, a string connected her to the living realm she called home. It bridged the souls of two individuals who’d fallen for each other long ago. Magic and mayhem had weaved their hearts and souls together forevermore.

They simply had to acknowledge its existence.

9:53 p.m.

The moment Big Boss began to leave, the air went still. It was the calm before the storm, the split second before catastrophe struck. A pin could drop and it would be heard. Mai was just sitting there, eyes wide and round at where Big Boss had gone. It went on for a few seconds, then minutes. Madoka had left soon after Big Boss in search of their genius investigator. After nearly an hour, Mai still did not move a muscle.

"Have any of you seen this before?" Yasu asked, turning from the window. Confusion intermixed with worry in his gut. "I, for one, have never seen Mai act like this."

"It's not anything i've seen before," Professor Davis confessed from the monitors. "Not even with Noll when he was younger. This is… This is the peak of calm, but something tells me it's not quite what it appears."

"Of course, it's not what it appears, Martin," Mrs. Davis huffed quietly, arms crossed protectively over her chest. "Mai is heartbroken. She's in shock, utter shock. She's paralyzed by it, dear. There is no other explanation for these readings."

Shock… "What will happen when she breaks out of it, then?" Yasu enquired tentatively.

It was not the professor who replied, "When she breaks out of it... Honestly, I doubt even God knows what will ensue."

Yasu swallowed thickly, fighting the rising bile in his throat. "Then—"

Mai shrieked.

It was an undulating decibel, a freakish sound from the depths of never before seen Hell. It was a requiem from the restless souls walking the earth, frosting their grief and pain in one unholy song of groundbreaking nightmare.

The windows of the Observation Room shattered.

Yasu ducked, but fragments of glass pricked his scalps as they rained down. He threw his hand up to defend himself, which helped for a split second until it was over.

But this massacre was far from over.

"Yasu, get over here!" Mrs. Davis barked over Mai's pulsating scream.

When did Osamu Yasuhara ever disobey a direct order from his commanding officer? Especially in a situation such as this? He was hardly about to complain. Gritting his teeth against the newly spilt blood, he quickly raced to the opposite corner of the room. There was a crack in his glasses, he noted absently, but really, did it matter?

On his trek, a shot of wind swept him off his feet. He landed flat on his chest, the air getting knocked
out of him in one swift, *oof*. For a second, the world was blank, but as oxygen was heaved into his lungs, he struggled to his feet and managed to complete the distance. It was then he noted Mai's shriek no longer pierced the air.

Wind wailed in its place.

"What the Hell is happening?"

Lights flickered above their heads as static pulsed. Soon, bulbs began to shattered one by one, and screens were left with hairline fractures webbing about like the a spider's masterpiece. They fizzled out with sparks before breaking down, too. Wind continued to slice down his back, unrelenting and lethal, ruffling violently through his clothes.

"If this gets any worse, we won't be able to get out of here!" Professor Davis declared, voice nearly lost from the wind clogging their mouths.

"What is that supposed to even mean?" Yasu hollered back.

"The wind is growing in density and strength! If it gets any more powerful we will literally be pinned to the wall!"

"You're kidding!"

"I'm afraid not!"

"Yasu, Watch out!"

As Mrs. Davis said so, a table was thrown from its tortanic source outside the Observation Room and through the gaping windows. It was aimed right at him. Yasu couldn't even flinch as it stabbed into the wall behind him, implanting itself there.

"Holy shit," he cursed. The thing had gone right around him. Luckily, it was also long enough to act as a barrier for all four of them stuck in the Observation Room. Yasu immediately saw an opportunity from his close encounter with death.

"Guys!" he called. "Get behind the table!"

They apparently held no qualm with this plan, especially as several large appliances were thrown in the direction of their one escape route seconds thereafter. There was no no way out.

Huddling together under the expansive coverage of the table, they went over several plans that all ended with the a similar, negative result. Thankfully, the table also allowed them to hear each other's words without bellowing at the top of their lungs. Eventually however, they settled for watching the chaos transpire, eyes barely above the edge. There was nothing more they could do.

Yasu's breath hitched as he saw Mai's unconscious body hover in the air, suspended in a tornado of wind and glass and tile and tech and electricity. She was a phoenix in the ashes of her own flame.

"This is absolutely incredible," Professor Davis awed, but there was a horrified honing to his awe.

Perhaps with his dance with death, an idea forged itself in his head. "Why," Yasu whispered, "do I feel as if I've seen this somewhere before?"

At his side, Lin glared at him with such ardent ferocity that he swore he heard a snarl rip from the Chinese man's throat. Sheepishly, he somehow managed a half smile, but it was wobbly at best and
forced to his lips by best of his ability.

"Madoka would've cracked a smile, at least," Yasu attempted, but Lin was having none of it. He backed off. "Okay, maybe not, but I'm still sure I've seen this somewhere before…"

"It was Jean Grey from X-Men," Mrs. Davis muttered, positioned at his other side. "Not that it matters. It's hardly the time for jokes and reminiscing."

It was then Professor Davis cleared his throat, and they all fell back against the wall to hear him out. "As it stands," he began gravely, "we currently have no way out of here without being beheaded, impaled, or worse, darling, nor is there any way for us to contact Noll. Our only hope is that Madoka can convince him to come back to the office."

"And have him do what?" Mrs. Davis retorted frantically. "For all Noll can do with his PK, he can barely bend a spoon anymore without going into cardiac arrest!"

At this, Professor Davis smiled slightly. "Honey, you sometimes forget that our son is born and bred genius with a knack for life and death situations. If anyone can help us and Mai, it's Oliver."


Highway 11/M11, Cambridge, England (UK)

10:24 p.m.

"Noll," Madoka said softly, "I want you to tell me honestly… What the freaking Hell is going on?!"

Oliver kept his gaze vigilant gaze firmly fastened on the darkened roads ahead, scowling at the abrupt shriek. "Mai's in trouble. That's all there is to it."

"It's as if you actually think that's enough of an answer for me," Madoka snapped back, swiveling in her seat to face him. "You were so anti-help not thirty minutes ago, you incorrigible snark! What's changed? You nearly collapsed back at your house, then began spewing nonsense that Mai's in trouble! Noll, I am freaked out! You're freaking me out!"

Oliver sighed to himself. Although he may never admit it aloud, he was quite perplexed. This situation should've never even happened. How this was theoretically possible, yet alone actually possible was enough to strike several new theories on telepathic communication in his mind. It wasn't the idea of a link in and of itself—that was proven to be true—no, it was the variables of it that made him delve into the impossible.

He had an advanced telepathic—if not emotional and psychokinetic transferable—bond with Mai. It was eerily similar to what he'd experienced with Gene before his untimely demise.

How did this happen?

He'd done nothing to create such a bond. No part of this was forged by his own volition. None.

Which left one other source.

Mai herself.

The question was how. The girl had no former experience with telepathy other than through his brother, but Gene hadn't spoken as word of this development if he'd been aware. Truth be told, Oliver was dumbfounded. So, he stuck to the facts. Facts were always the foundation of future
revelations; he'd start there before throwing himself over the edge of theory.

1.) He and Mai had a 'connection'.

2.) He could feel physical aftermath of Mai's experiences.

3.) He felt flash remnants—if not the whole—of her emotions.

"You were right," Oliver relented, gritting his teeth. "I have a connection with Mai. As for why we're heading back to HQ, that's because Mai transmitted her present state of mind and physical wellbeing to me via telepathic communication. The outlook was less than pleasant."

B.S.P.R HQ, Cambridge University, England

10:35 p.m.

Oliver heard it before he saw it. Once again chasing down the barren corridors of HQ, slices of wind slashed through the open air in quick, clean lacerations. In his head, the bond with Mai was alive and buzzing with energy. It was a pulsating emission of power that would've knocked him off his feet if he wasn't focused enough to properly manage it.

Madoka was at his toes, heels clattering along behind him in the darkness.

The door leading to the Blank Room was wrenched off its hinges, blasting into the opposite wall. He did not stop until he hit the threshold of the entranceway even as a swarm of shrill wind blew into his face. Tendrils of deep ebony, tinged by something blue, scattered in the unnatural gusts.

Oliver grit his teeth at the horrors laid out before him.

"By the word," Madoka breathed from behind him. "Noll... What's happening?"

On any other ordinary day, he would've smirked. The teacher questioning the student for answers was not normal for Madoka, but this wasn't an ordinary day.

"She's trapped in a tornado of her own PK," Oliver answered hauntingly. "There's only one way out from it."

He felt Madoka try to grab at his shoulder to keep him from advancing, but he was already pressing forward. A hoarse reprimand of his name was almost lost to him. He heard it, but didn't spare a glance for his former teacher. Backwards progression did no one any favors.

Calculated, measured steps were unheard in normally echoing Blank Room, but wind roared in his ears. It was a warning. One he would not take lightly.

With the revolving, swirling, tumbling mass of tornadic vacuum in still in motion, the Observation Room was in shambles, and as such, pieces of equipment, glass, tableware, and other lethal objects came and went as they pleased. Taking a breath, he made himself acknowledge and commit to a single theory. And if he was correct, then using his PK would no longer wound him. It was a precarious move he would not dare attempt normally, but he was left with little other options.

Mai had forced his hand.

You idiot..., he thought somewhat softly.
A physical barrier surrounded him, glimmering from unseen stars. And slowly, Oliver remembered how to ascend from the ground he walked upon. These PK tricks had not been utilized by his mind in many years, he recognized absently, but they were as natural for him as reading a book. He simply had to find the right language, and the key unlocked for him without much resistance. Flight took him from the discomforts of the shattered floor. The barrier surrounding him forged its way through the chaos as though cutting through paper. There was little in the known world capable of breaking his defenses.

Mai was the very center of everything, unconscious and motionless. Here, it was calm. The eye of the storm. Oliver let his defenses fall, but hovered beside her in the sustained bubble of serenity.

_Touch her, and you'll be transported to Mai's current 'location',_ Gene told him, voice barely above a whisper. _Get her out, Noll._

The tips of his fingers barely found hers before Oliver fell unconscious.

Mai was standing in the middle of a city sidewalk. Blinking rapidly, she kept still despite the less than discreet mutterings thrown her way by passing pedestrians. Her head shot around randomly, completely confused. She had no idea how she’d—Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no... Biting her lip, she screamed between her teeth and fisted her hands in her hair.

_Damn it all to Hell and back._

_Several that went on their way glanced at her with concern and frank distaste, but Mai was too furious to really care about that. Wait... Where was she?_

_Based on the faces around her, she was not in Japan. Was she still in England? Curiosity plunged into helplessness as she searched for any landmarks she would know._

_It was then she realized it was the dead of winter... Winter. Snow powdered the elegant streets, and large detailed flakes descended from the overcast sky high above. Her hands were wound in flexible black mits, leathery on the outside but soft and fluffy in the inside. Somehow, she recognized them, but she didn't know how... She'd never once seen them before. Altogether her body was wrapped in a series of warm attire, but her nose was bit from the cold and tinted red._

_But it was mid-June in Cambridge... It was summertime where she was from!_

_Searching around this time, she noticed that when she looked off into the distance, it almost appeared blurry and otherworldly, as if unreal. It was an odd revelation that set Mai back on her heels in astonishment._

_Her blood ran colder than ice._

_I'm stuck in a dream. Gulping back her terror, she made herself stay still and observe. I need to figure out where I am._

_Taking breathes to ensure her sanity, she looked at the surroundings closest to her, not into the distance. She was on a bridge with a variety of lamp posts springing from the solid stone rail. It overlooked a churning, murky river, and straight ahead, not three hundred meters away, was Big Ben. It was beacon of beauty and history in all its glory, but she couldn't identify the time._

_Okay, why am I in London, on Westminster Bridge?_
Fishing for information, Mai tried her pockets for a cellphone. Nearly shrieking in relief at finding it in the side pocket of her trenchcoat, her shoulders slumped upon seeing the blurred image reflecting back at her.

Alright, why are something's blurry and others aren't?

Staring helplessly at the incomprehensible time set by Big Ben, she sighed.

Should I start walking? Or stay here? For once, her instincts were silent. Thanks, inner animal, you really know when to help me out!

She decided to ask someone for help. "Umm, excuse me, Sir?" She’d stopped an older man well into his elder years. "Do you know what day it is, exactly? I'm afraid I may have gotten the date wrong for my job interview, and I'm kinda worried." She felt terrible to say the least lying to this poor man, but what other explanation was she supposed to give on such short notice?

The man's eyes widened, and he shook his head frantically. Mai was taken aback by his behavior, but let him run away without another word. Brows furrowed, she tried several other people, but they each gave her the same reaction as the last.

So, the people and things in my dream really don't want me to know the date or time... Why?

"Mai."

The sound of his voice speaking her name tore something deep inside her heart to bleeding shreds.

She froze, unable to move. Unable to turn. She was cemented to the snow-encrusted ground beneath her boots. Her breath puffed from her lips in a strangled cry.

It... It was normal for him to say or shout or snap her name when trouble found its way to their doorstep. It was normal, always normal. A comfort in the deep end of discord, it connected them across distances until the bridge destroyed between them rectified and rebuilt itself over and over and over again. Until the end of time.

A term of endearment nearly lit the flames, but it flickered out before it could bloom. "N-n...," she started, then swallowed. "Oliver..."

He moved himself in front of her, but she did not move. Amber orbs were locked on his chest. She couldn't move. Couldn't—

"You idiot," he snapped, roughly snatching her chin and forcing her to look up at him. Into a pair of furious indigo that made her heart want to explode. His hand was startlingly warm, she noted absently. "Do you have any idea what you've done to yourself? What's happening right now?"

Her mouth was fishlike in appearance. "Uhh..." A pretty blush stained her cheeks. "No?"

Oliver's mask was still on, but she could tell that beneath, it was strikingly flustered, endangered by vile frustration. Oddly, she felt it resonate in her. He released her chin.

"You're currently the epicenter of a tornado born of instinctual protection."

The epicenter of a tornado?! "I-I can't say that I follow," she admitted. She'd known she'd gone over the deep end again, but she hadn't exactly expected something of that magnitude... What did that even mean?
Oliver just stared at her, an eternal waterfall of darkness. Adorned in a similar trench coat like her, the only contrast was the midnight hue to her indigo. "Yes, Mai, you do," he informed her coldly. "Think."

Again, Mai was left helpless. "Well, I know I'm in a dream of sorts, but I'm going to assume you're real. How is that possible, exactly? I thought you can't go outside your body as a spirit."

"What you've done caused an exception and allowed me to enter this place." He gave no other explanation.

"I'm the epicenter of a tornado?" she asked quietly for reassurance.

"I shouldn't have to repeat myself."

Annoyed, she clashed her lips to one side. "Nevermind that, do you have any idea what this place is?"

"I'm going to assume it's what you've been dreaming about for the last several months."

Mai nearly fell off her feet. "Excuse me?! But-but this place is so peaceful! It's hardly a nightmare! Well," she paused, "other than you being here..."

He apparently ignored her previous comment. "Where we are is a place beyond reason and science and logic, Mai. This is not the realm of spirits, or heaven, or hell, or even in your mind. This is another place entirely."

The burning anger dimmed to ashen cinders. "What do you mean?"

"You're seeing the future."

"HUH?!" He might as well have told her they were in the middle of a zombie apocalypse.

"You've exhibited precognitive abilities before, Mai," he continued tonelessly. "This shouldn't be a shock. The reason why everything is blurred and difficult to see is because history isn't set in stone. Variables have yet to be solidified."

"B-But that still doesn't explain why this place isn't scary!"

He closed his eyes. "As I said, variables have yet to solidified." Unknowing, perhaps, he'd repeated himself. She almost snorted.

"Either way, we need to return to our world." He began to turn away.

Away.

Something in her ignited at the sight, and suddenly a flush of memories came charging at her. The fighting. The arguing.

The pain.

Watching him walking away. Again and again and again and again and...

Tears ravaged her vision.

Stomping her foot, she cried, "This is all your fault, Oliver! All of it!"
She tried to run in the opposite direction as him, but he latched onto her arm and prevented her from escaping. She scrambled to remove his hand from her, but he wouldn’t let go. Wouldn’t let go. It was sickeningly heart wrenching thought that crushed her soul to pieces. He’d let her go so many times, but had never leapt across the ravine and chased after her. It was twist of fate that he held her here. Irony was cruel.

"How is this my fault?" he asked crisply, grip hard and unrelenting.

She let out a harsh laugh, but it was soured by twinkling tears. "How do you not see it? Have your emotions clouded you like they clouded me?"

"Mai, you're speaking nonsense."

"Am I?" she growled. "Me or Gene? Me or Gene? Me or Gene?!"

"That was—"

"Unforgivable!"

Something in his grip loosened, and she yanked her hand away. He waited. Waited like that day in the cave when she'd provoked him into using his PK like the avenging dark angel he was. His attention was undivided and trained on her. Exacted on her.

Hatred descended into the shadows of lost time. Sorrow swept up the remains as she rubbed her aching wrist. "Idiot, Naru," she whispered, tears spilling anew. "Idiot, idiot, idiot scientist Naru! It always had been and still is you!"

She let herself cry for a moment, letting the frosty air of London freeze her tears in place.

"That still doesn't explain why this is my fault, Mai," he prompted. It was the softest she'd ever heard him speak. It left a crack in her heart.

"You left me, Naru!" she cried out, beseeching him to understand. "You left me..."

"I—"

"I know you left to bury Gene! I know you went home to the place you grew up and learned to be the man you are today! I know you returned to your beloved work as a Doctor and professor! I know that, Naru! I know! I was never mad at you for that! I wouldn't want to imagine a world where you wouldn't be you, ever... No, you wouldn't be you without being a workaholic, narcissistic, incorrigible, supercilious, genius, ghost hunter... Oliver Davis I wouldn't love you if you weren't the Naru I loved since that first case under the cherry blossoms, too."

Indigo met amber in a thousand different universes.

"But, Naru," she redirected, "you left me..."

"I did not intend—"

"You've left me so many times, Naru!" she told him. "Why... Why did you let me come back? Was it because of pity? Was it—"

"It was because Gene informed me that you would die within the year if left alone." The reason was practical. Practical and sensible. But it wasn’t enough to heal the brokenness left between them. Exasperated at her stubbornness, he sighed, "You're asking for too much, Mai."
"But you left me, Naru!" It was a simple as it was tragic, but the loss was still a wound yet to heal. Yet to mend.

"You idiot." Mai snapped her head up to meet his gaze, appalled. "I'm standing right here. How do you think that is if I left for good?"

She straightened, her mouth unable to form a correct sentence.

"I came back, Mai."

Eyes widened, and time seemed to still. Winter reigned around them in a dance of snowflakes and swirling gales.

"Idiot," he repeated. "I came back."

He was as expressionless as she’d ever seen him, but then something in her gut flickered as butterflies and vexation and happiness fluttered about in her belly.

Slowly, he said, "I understand, Mai." In seconds that followed, a beautiful smile adorned his lips. It was an awkward smile, as if he didn't know what to do with himself, but it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

Blushing furiously, she demanded, "What do you mean, 'I understand'?!"

But somehow she saw the compassion in his words, and accepted them for what they were. His response to her confession. He came back. Dove into this forsaken dream to save her and bring her home.

She understood, too.

"I understand, idiot," he retorted, his smile gone, but his voice wasn't harsh. "Everything."

Lips curling in disgust, she muttered, "That's presumptuous and narcissistic." But her heart just wouldn't quite agree with the statement, and a bittersweet smile captured her expression.

"It's enough to get us out of here."

Huh? "Wha—"

One step forward. No steps back. "Wish for it, Mai."

He kept surprising her, and his proximity didn't help her concentration. "Again, you've lost me."

"Wish for us to go home."

She delved into those lovely pair of indigo. All this time, she'd never forgotten them. All these years, all the time apart and the years together. Mai smiled slightly, sniffing. Then she was laughing with a fresh set of tears. "You know," she started, "from the day that I met you, you had me, and somehow... I doubt I'll ever forget you, Naru."

Her smile was a radiant star in the darkest pits of the universe.

She took his hands in hers. "Let's go home."

The world was lost to a sea of unending light.
"And all along, I knew I had something special with you,
But sometimes you just gotta know that these things fall through,
I can't hide my connection with you,
I will never forget you,
And you'll always be by my side,
From the day that I met you,
I knew that I would love you until the day I die."
-Zara Larsson & MNEK, Never Forget You
**File I: Euphoria & Horror, Part VII: Open Up Your Eyes**

*Stasis:* The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

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**File I: Euphoria & Horror**

**Part VII: Open Up Your Eyes**

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*Location: B.S.P.R HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK)*...  
*Date: June, Day XIII*...  
*Time: 4:37 a.m.*...

Everything felt… Serene, as if slowly waking from a beautiful dream. She was warm where she was, and gentle breezes twirled through her hair in a lovely little ballet. The goofy smile on her lips went unnoticed, and a soft hum of pleasure swept past her mouth.

Her name was being called, but it sounded as though she was deep below the surface of water, submerged beneath a closed off space. However, the faint echoing began to increase decibel by decibel. She… She knew that voice, too.

Mai.

Mai.

Mai.

"Mai."

"Mai!"

Her eyes snapped open frantically at the waspish tone, and she whipped around to locate its source. Heart racing in her chest, she gasped for air at the suddenness of her waking.

Her blurry vision slowly found a familiar face staring back at her. Rubbing at her eyes, she watched in shock as he didn't disappear from sight.

"N-Naru?" she asked. He nodded expressionlessly. "Naru!"

She threw herself at him, locking her arms securely around his torso and buried her face in his chest. He went stiff for a moment, but eventually sighed. For this, and for everything he'd done, she cried and laughed and breathed him in. *Real,* she thought soothingly. *Utterly real.*

"You really did come back," she whispered, tears pooling.

"We went over this, already, Mai."

Her laughter increased tenfold, but dimmed quickly enough. Pulling away by a step, she faced him head on. Her smile was a beautiful heartbreak, something that hadn't been seen in a long while. "I-I
can just barely believe it."

Sighing, he said, "We should go back to the ground if we're going to continue this conversation."

"Excuse me?"

He paused. "You may not want to look down."

*What is he—* "Oh… Waaa!" Once again, she latched onto him, but this time, from fear of falling precariously to her death. They were at least twenty meters above the ground… And they were… Floating. She only then noticed their hair and clothes were ruffling about softly, as if touched by an unseen force. It was incredibly magical, as if brought to life from the inside of a wondrous dream. Or perhaps, *nightmare."

"We're not going to fall, idiot." *And it's not like holding onto me would've done any help had that been the case,* was the silent sarcasm Naru didn't admit aloud, but the words were obvious in his tone.

"H-How did this happen? I mean, this isn't possible, is it?"

"I told you that you may not want to look down."

Her grip on his shirt loosened, but she was still quite terrified about how they'd miraculously gotten up here. "Naru, will you please explain…?"

He sighed, apparently exasperated. "Let's get down first."

Their hands found each other's, and something *clanged* together with such ardent strength that she nearly snatched her hands back, but Naru was seemingly unaffected by whatever transferred between them. Her heartbeat stopped accelerating. Pulling her along, they descended to the shattered ground of the once impeccable Blank Room. Mai's eyes widened.

"Naru, are… Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

When he nodded, Mai opened her mouth to berate him senseless, but he cut her off, "I will explain once everyone has gathered safely. Until then, *wait.*"

The others? What? Oh… Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no… Her head swiveled around to interior of the Blank Room, horrified at what laid out in front of her. The Blank Room was absolutely destroyed. Glass intermixed with white rubble, probably the once opulent tile encompassing the walls. The floor beneath them was shattered, peppered with rubble and metal pieces, while trashed electronics, monitors, and cameras were almost unrecognizable. But the worse part was the broken door and windows of the Observation Room, for both were now completely nonexistent. As if they were never there at all.

"Stasis, Mai."

Her gaze connected with Naru's, her lower lip bitten raw, and a fresh stain of blood drizzled from below her teeth. But she couldn't voice her lamentations, for almost immediately when their feet hit the ground, the rest of BSPR came charging into the room, all looking a little worse for wear and utterly terrified.

Mai instinctively let hands drop from Naru's, and something shifted, as if being torn apart. It was an uncomfortable, if not foreign feeling she did not fully understand.
Later, when the hugging and gracious knowledge that they were still alive and well was done, Mai was recognizing the intrinsic aftermath of overusing her PK. She was currently in the 'down in the dumps' phase, and would soon move onto exhaustion, and eventually, apathy. Sometimes a few moments of rapid hyperactivity would pump through her blood, before dwindling out, but she'd skipped over that phase this time around.

They were now in Naru's office, the electricity out from her tirade only perhaps, thirty minutes ago, but candles lit the area in a soft warm glow. The Narcissist himself was leaning on his desk, arms crossed and waiting for everyone to settle in. Mai was closest to him in her seat, wringing her hands together in the silence.

It appeared no one knew how to begin.

Finally, Naru sighed, "It appears the dream that Mai has repeatedly experienced was never really a dream, at all. She was looking into the future."

What a way to start it off. Had it not been for the insidious exhaustion keeping her mouth from speaking much, she would've sighed at his abrupt beginnings. A small bead of sweat fell from the side of her face instead.

Martin shifted uncomfortably. "Not to say I'm disinterested in this development, but I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you mean to say, Oliver. Care to elaborate?"

"The reason behind her nightmares is because she keeps seeing an event far into the future, however, due to history never being set in stone, she keeps only witnessing a black background without specific details," Naru answered, stoic as ever. "That being said, when she put herself in that tornado and locked her mind and soul from outside forces, she put herself into a place that does not have a scientific name. Only there, did we see more detail than simple 'black' and the emotions of it all. However, we were only at the location. No important events truly took place there. It's too soon to know the whole of her vision, but it was centered on Westminster Bridge in London during the wintertime."

"So, it's likely accurate to assume that something terrible will happen there in the future," Martin surmised. Naru nodded curtly.

"The questions now are when, why, what?" Madoka muttered, pensive.

Grim imaginations took flight. Mai visibly cowered in her chair, bringing her knees close to her chest.

"But, Noll," Luella said in the disturbed quiet. "Why did you say 'we'? Did you experience this, too?"

Naru merely stared at his mother, impassive in the night shadows.

"Mai and I are irrevocably linked," Naru revealed, and everyone stared, wide eyed as he continued, "Emotionally, and in the future we should be able to use verbal telepathy. I was able to enter her vision and get her out because of that link, only."

Mai fell back in her seat, stilled to the core of her very being. What? Fingers gripped the soft flesh of the chair in some attempt to pull her back to sanity. That's how he found me? But that's...

"That's not possible," Martin whispered for her.

Madoka snorted, "Not probable, apparently."
"And how, exactly, did this happen?" Yasu asked curiously. Was he the only one not absolutely *astounded* by this?

"Although I don't know how or why, one thing is for certain: Mai and myself are now eternally bound to one another through the bond. It's unlikely to fade, considering it's almost identical to what Gene and I had since childhood, and from what I've experienced so far, it's even more effective."

"Effective?" Mai echoed, somehow finding the ability to speak. "What do you mean by that?"

"I can feel your every emotion, Mai," he told her, point blank. Something in her heart sputtered and a hot blush warmed her cheeks at the admission. "Although it may not directly change my mood, the effect is there. You can also feel mine. And as I said before, in the future, we may even be able to speak telepathically, but that will be left to future tests if we have the desire to go that far."

"But that's not all there is," Luella spoke, smiling slightly, almost—dare she say—knowingly, "Is there?"

Naru closed his eyes. "No," he admitted. "There's more."

What *more* could there possibly be? Shell shocked, Mai could not utter another syllable comprehensively. This was moving way too quickly for her to keep up!

"Mai." Swallowing, she met Naru's burning pair of indigo. "In the past I was able to utilize my PK to the extent of my abilities because Gene had the capability of flexing and transforming it to a stable condition. We referred to it as 'bouncing'. I'd send it to him through our link, and he'd amplify and send it back to me. You also gained a safe method of bouncing my PK, as well. It's why I'm alive right now."

Her brows knit. "That's why you were able to fly...?"

The raising of his brow was barely distinguishable. "That's one way of categorizing it."

"But what about Mai?" Yasu asked, breaking their moment.

"Huh?" Mai blinked. "What about me, Yasu?"

"I mean, how are you alive right now when you can't bounce your own PK like you can with his? When this first started, you were in Japan and Big Boss didn't even know you had PK, let alone problems with it."

"I didn't say I wasn't done explaining," Naru told him crisply. She saw Martin and Luella smile at that comment. "The link itself does the work for her. I only have to be alive for me to bound the PK back for her and her the same. The link works both ways."

Luella's smile dropped, as did Martin's, and they were both fully prepared to bulldoze him with questions, but Yasu spoke first.

"So—wait," the bespeckled student halted, palms out as if prepared to physically stop them in their tracks. "You two don't even realize that it happens? You simply have to be alive for it to work?"

"Correct."

Everyone slammed into the back of their seats in awe. This was way too much information. Way too much to comprehend in one sitting. Mai honestly just wanted to collapse and go to bed. *Please, no more, please~! This is seriously insane...*
Martin whispered, "That really shouldn't be possible."

"Again, Professor, not probable," Madoka said, this time with a crease between her brows and an exhausted smile on her face. Then she turned back to her former student with a triumphant grin. "But I was right, Noll, you do have a connection to Mai! I told you!"

Taken aback and looking insulted, Luella demanded, "You knew about this, Madoka? Why didn't you say anything to us?"

The pinkette smiled, a dastardly devilishly sweet curl that foretold of all the mischief in the world. "It's not like I didn't try, but little Nolly just couldn't get it through his whittle mind. That being said..." She assumed a thinking pose, ignoring the gleaming glare dead set in her direction as everyone else sweatdropped at their exchange. "I never quite expected this turn of events."

_Huh?_ This comment threw everyone off kilter except Naru who continued to glare at his former teacher.

"Madoka," Luella tried, exasperated. "Didn't you just say that you knew about Noll's link with Mai?"

"Huh?" She blinked up before smiling innocently at Naru. "Oh, did I? Sorry, I must've meant something else. My apologies."

Everyone sighed at Madoka's behavior, favoring the idea that exhaustion had hit her too hard, but Mai saw something flicker between her and Naru before it went out completely.

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5:26 a.m.

Since BSPR's main PK observation areas were both wrecked and their sleeping quarters were ruined, the majority of the staff opted to return to their homes until later that day, which basically included everyone except Mai and Naru, who'd claimed wanted to work.

As it was, Mai was lying on Naru's office couch, searching for miniature constellations on the ceiling, while the Narcissist busied himself in whatever suited his fancy. Probably something about their recent experience going 'into the future'. How he was going to solidify that one in the parapsychology community, she had no idea, but knowing Naru, she wouldn't doubt its likelihood.

Her smile was suddenly tinged with rue. Exhausted though she was, her mind rampaged with worries and queries and wonders about the future. Despite her precognition, she didn't really know what was going to happen next. Was she supposed to stay here until wintertime when her vision came into being? Or should she leave and hopefully change the course of history? Perhaps it was too soon to tell. She still had so much training left to do before she could even consider heading back to Japan. Really, a small majority of their mysteries and problems had been solved, and so many more laid beyond the horizon line.

However, with all she'd done in the last few hours, she should expect the worst. She'd probably decimated thousands of yen worth of tech and research from her PK outbreak... Guilt washed over her in a flush of despair. How could she do this to them? The people who'd helped her despite the ungodly challenges left in her wake?

Then there was Naru to think about. Naru who'd come back for her. Naru who'd saved her life. Naru who brought her back from the impossible. Naru who she had an inseverable connection with. Naru who was an insufferable narcissist when he wanted to be.
Where were they, now? What point where they at? She didn't know.

Unbidden, a tear streaked down her cheek.

And then a book landed *smack* on her face. Followed by about… A dozen more. Shrieking at the top of her lungs, she bolted upright to find the wall-length bookshelf just behind her rocking back and forth before going head long, right at her.

Mai froze, too terrified to remove herself from the crash zone, and threw her arms over her head with a cry escaping her lips. *Naru!*

"Mai!"

A hundred or so books dove to the floor, the bookshelf following in their weight. But she never felt the wood hit her. As silence reigned the office, Mai slowly opened her eyes to see that a small force field of pure PK was keeping the wood from crushing her. Shocked at the display of power, she quickly removed herself without severing the flow of her PK. Once a safe distance away, she cut the flow and let it fall to the couch in a heap.

"Destroying a bookshelf…"

Mai jumped, noticing that Naru was standing directly at her side. "Oh... uh, hey, Naru…"

Although he didn't glare at her, he gave her a look that basically said, *Only you would destroy a bookshelf out of nowhere.*

Her shoulders slumped, defeated as the inescapable depression of this entire dilemma assaulted her system. "I'm sorry, Naru. I-I just…"

"You fell into yourself, Mai," he said, obviously trying to explain this to her in his own way. Maybe it was his way of comforting her… "The more you lose your own consciousness, the more your PK will take over. The guilt, the shame, the worry; your PK fed off your emotions and let them rampage outward into existence." There was nothing beyond simple rationalization in Naru's expression, nothing to portray a hint of his inner emotions.

*But does he care? Does he care about me in the slightest?*

She gulped down the sudden dryness of her throat as her hair cascaded over her features and remembered. *Yes,* she reminded herself. *He did care, he obviously cares enough to help you now too, but to what end?*

"To whatever end."

Mai snapped her gaze to Naru's. "What?" There was the sound of ripping fabric, but it was a sliver incision in the carpet, nothing beyond skin deep. She barely noticed it, especially since Naru was holding out a hand to her. Heartbeat frantic at the sight, the temperature of the room catapulted downwards. Naru didn't seem to like that, as he scowled, and forcefully extracted her hand from her side.

"Wha—Naru—"

Then she felt it, and her heart almost stopped beating. A wash of emotion and physical presence suddenly churned in all her mind and body and soul, as if their very beings had connected. She could feel everything he did and so much more.
"Wha—What is this...?" She'd felt this before, she realized. Whenever they'd touched recently, in fact, ever since she'd first arrived in England, she'd always felt a this between them. Now, however, the sensation was at its peak.

His gaze was unreadable. "It's the bond. However, even I cannot precisely elaborate on how it works like this."

"But..." She hesitated, knowing full well the topic of Gene had yet to be breached between them. "... Gene didn't have this with you, did he?"

Naru didn't even blink as he continued, "It's different with you. Gene and I were born with our link, but how you're connected to me it something I have yet to understand. Obviously, its effects and presence are amplified by the contact of skin."

"Why didn't you tell me about this before? Why—Why didn't you tell your parents about this?"

"It was merely a theory until now."

She gulped. This is too much information for one day! "What exactly am I feeling right now, Naru? It's like the bond is tangible."

They locked gazes, the connection crackling and alive between them. It was intimacy in a whole new way, and it scared the living daylights out of her. For a plethora of reasons.

"I have some hypotheses, but until tested, they're no more than that." Releasing her hand, and the bond fell apart. It was akin to losing the other half of your heart, but when brought together, they were both made whole again. It was as uncomfortable as it was disheartening.

"... I see." The hand he'd left was warm from his touch.

"Mai?"

She snapped her hand behind her back, blushing anew. "Yes?"

"I want that bookcase alphabetized by author."

Swiveling her body, she just remembered she'd nearly died from that forsaken shelf not three minutes ago... Sighing dramatically, she hung her head and groaned. "Yes, Boss..."

Maybe it was Naru. Maybe it was herself. Maybe it was the situation. Or maybe it was just the bond itself. But for some strange reason she could not name, from that night onward, she never woke up from the nightmare that'd haunted her from day one, nor did any outward repercussions ensue because of it. In fact, from that moment onward, things began to change for Mai Taniyama in the most positive way possible. She also slept like a rock for the next three nights onward.

June, Day XX

12:46 p.m.

"Naru, this is impossible!"

"Difficult," he corrected. "Not impossible."
"Ugh, Naru~!"

Many people knew him as Oliver Davis, while another majority referred to him as Kazuya Shibuya. Some called him Noll, but only one person ever addressed him anymore as 'Naru'. And for some reason he couldn't quite explain, he didn't mind it. For whatever senseless logic he followed, Naru couldn't help the arrogant mirth in his eyes.

Within a week's time of the near disaster in the Blank Room, BSPR had been under reconstruction. While the research-department sections of the building were closed off for some time, the majority of HQ was clear to maintain working as usual. And since the last semester of university ended several days before Mai arrived in England, there were no students around except for the seldom intern. Regular business was to continue as their offices had been cleared of any damage, and as such, Naru was still in charge of Mai's training.

However, due to the lack of protective walls and precautions the Blank Room provided, Naru was left with one place to conduct their training sessions: his office. Although he preferred his places of work and living in perfect order, the need for Mai to pursue active treatment was far more crucial than the standard cleanliness of his quarters. Nevertheless, Naru was hardly about to allow the more dangerous tests to be conducted with the capricious nature of Mai's abilities, in his office. More often than not they practiced the simpler components of PK, meditation, and learned the overall idea of these processes. Keeping her composed was the start of these sessions, something Lin helped with significantly, but ever since the vision they shared, Mai's demeanor around him had been both civil and dare he say amiable.

The change in personality was stark and contradictory to the previous attitude. Was it the acceptance of her confession that drove this contentment? Naru had to believe that it was actually the fact that he'd told her he'd 'come back'. Apparently, the concept in and of itself was enough to stabilize her composure. He had to admit that it was entirely true what he'd said. He had no intention of leaving her out in the open and in the midst of chaos, especially since he'd also experienced similar conditions as a child. The parallels in their lives were strangely similar and something that struck him on an emotional level. As for the effect Mai had on him, it was a conundrum he didn't want to delve too deep towards. It was something he'd determine in the future, so for now, he'd let it go and follow more important matters that required his immediate attention.

Even more, Mai no longer woke from the repetitive vision she'd been experiencing for the last eight months. She'd often shake or mutter incoherently, but never did her PK act up, nor did she scream herself awake. In fact, the nightmare had only transpired on two of the last seven nights, a severe drop from previous weeks. Was seeing the vision itself, or more likely, the location and approximate date, that the number of times dreamt decreased? Or was it another variable? Was it that they'd shared it? Based on another theory of his, it was plausible. Could it be that—

"Naru, are you even listening to me? It's not like you to just tune out of an argument halfway."

As it was, they were in their daily training session. It was the same test as he'd attempted several weeks ago with a single card in hand—The Jack of Spades once again—and Mai had to take it from his hand by focusing on her PK on singular solid objects. She'd managed to make it drop from his hand in previous days, but had yet to make it travel directly to her.

Naru blinked, retracing the last few minutes. "We weren't arguing."

"Really? Well, I'd hardly call it a conversation."

"No, you were complaining. That hardly stands as an argument, let alone a conversation."
"You and your constant need to be right..." she muttered. "Either way, you were tuning me out. You can't deny that."

Naru crossed his arms over his chest. "I'd rather not listen to insignificant whining."

"I-insignificant whining?" she breathed, baffled. "Insignificant whining?! NARU!"

Crushing insult battled for dominance alongside rage. Naru felt both emotions with the height of Mai's connection to him even without the contact of skin. It was a headache he would have to deal with for some time, he knew. It was also very annoying.

"Care to deny that they weren't complaints?" he snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose. From that, he forced himself to breathe and calmed his own nerves before speaking with a stern edge of softness, "What purpose does it serve to defile the concepts of helping you maintain your PK so you don't someday explode from a sudden outburst?"

Along with the revival Mai's personality, their regular back-and-forth banter had returned from the grave, but it was still rusted from disuse. Add in that Mai was not fully recovered emotionally, their banter was limited and he often had to hold tongue from using the extent of his verbal attacks.

"I'm sorry."

Glancing downward, Mai was staring helplessly at his wall of books.

He almost rolled his eyes. "Whatever. It's fine."

"What? No! No, NARU it's not!"

A brow rose. Since when did she openly accept his insults? "Care to elaborate?" he asked.

"I-I'm sorry," she said again. "I-I never said thank you... Well, I guess I did the first day, but that doesn't really count, does it?" She laughed nervously. "Not when you basically saved my life, you know? In the Blank Room, I mean..." She swallowed, her fists clenched tight into the fabric of her skirt. The white of her knuckles showed. "I doubt I could ever truly repay you for well, risking your life for me... But really, there's so much I have to do to repay your kindness... NARU, what you've done from me ever since we first met... I... Well... I never really thanked you for giving me this whole new world to explore and learn and come to love in ways I never would've expected."

Laughing slightly, she sniffled and quickly wiped her nose. He listened on.

"I'm sorry for being a nuisance to you specifically, NARU," she said, "but I'm also sorry about all of this, the Blank Room, everything... I've caused so much destruction and trouble for everyone I care about, and in the middle of it all is you, the one person capable of helping me, and here I am, complaining about it... I'm sorry, NARU. I'm so, so sorry. But..." she paused, then sighed, raking a hand through her hair, "I also have to thank you, but other times I just want to murder you. Honestly, you... You're the love of my life, and I don't expect more from you than your help. And sometimes my emotions get the better of me, and I can't help but say things I shouldn't, but I just want you to know how grateful I am to have you here helping me when I need you. This has been hard... So, thank you, and I'm sorry. For everything."

Everything. It was a word of unfathomable meaning, and yet, Naru understood. The link between them made him understand.

Reaching out a hand, he patted her head. "For everything," he repeated, the contact igniting otherworldly acknowledgement. "Thank you, and I'm sorry." It meant for every scene, every mood,
every sign, every day of every year and every time. Everything and anything misconstrued, misled, and missed. Everything.

Shock mixed with embarrassment, Naru could tell, as Mai froze in place. He let his hand drop, and he turned away, leaving his office. "We'll continue with the lesson in an hour, Mai."

The door closed with a single click.

A single droplet of water fell into the abyss, awakening a voice from the depths of shadow. She knew exactly who it was.

"It's time to wake up, Angel. Life awaits for the living, not the dead, after all... You can sleep when night falls. Time to wake up, Mai Angel."

5:37 p.m.

Mai woke with a start. Jolted from slumber, she immediately sat up. She regretted it instantly, as stars grilled her vision into submission as the familiar pangs of a headache erupted at the back of her head. Cursing in her home language, Mai held her head in her hands and waited for the dizziness to wear off. She really hated being jolted awake. It was never pleasant.

"Ah, why did you do that, Gene?" she grumbled. "I probably would've slept through the night, but nooooooo…"

"It's because I know my father wants to speak with you, and I doubt he'd like seeing you sleeping while on the job in the middle of the afternoon. Nice jacket by the way, it's Noll's."

Her head snapped up. "Gene?" she whispered, shocked. "Where are you? How are you here? Why can I hear you and—" Why am I wearing Naru's jacket? A scarlet blush stained her cheeks, the familiar scent of leather books and some intoxicating cologne intermixed in her nostrils. The red deepened in color. The scent was undeniably Naru.

"Ever wondered why Noll keeps a mirror in his room?" Gene's disembodied voice wondered. "And no, it's not because he's a narcissist, Mai." Amusement tumbled off his tone in the form of a light chuckle.

"Oh, please, he's a total narcissist," she snorted tracing her footsteps to the back of Naru's desk. "But, I guess I never noticed that he has a mirror in here. Never looked." Deciding against sitting in Naru's chair—for obvious reasons—she leaned up against the back of the desk, and searched.

A chuckle. "To your left."

"Ah! Oh, well, hi!"

Planted on the wall, a nicely sized ovular mirror revealed the profile of Eugene Davis. "Hello to you too, Mai."

"What's up?"

"Forget already?" he asked with a smile. "My father needs to speak with you. He's on his way here now."
"Oh?" her voice rang like a song. "What for?"

His smile turned sheepish. "I believe that's for him to say. I just wanted to wake you up before he arrived. Again, nice jacket."

With a wink and smirk, he disappeared from view, leaving her standing there only seconds before the door to Naru's office opened, presenting Dr. Martin Davis. Panicking from sheer embarrassment, she removed Naru's jacket from her shoulders before Martin could see. But she was still standing behind Naru's desk, so she swerved around the side, muttering incomprehensibly about twins and their annoying tendencies.

"Ah, Mai, there you are," Martin greeted upon entering. "Noll told me I could find you here. I was hoping to speak with you about a few things, but I apologize if I interrupted you in your studies at all."

So Naru hadn't completely sold her out about sleeping in his office, but instead told his father she'd been 'studying'. Sweatdropping, she knew he'd want a favor in return for his 'kindness'. She could already feel the relentless hours of training at her back. *Wait! Stop that, Mai! He's helping you with this! No complaining!*

Had Martin not been there, she would've slapped her cheeks for effect, but he hardly needed to observe her strange habits, now did he? No, definitely not.

"I-it's no trouble, Professor—I-I mean Martin. I'm sorry, first name base's aren't exactly the norm for me. And no, you didn't interrupt. I was just thinking, is all." *Not a total lie, I guess...*

"Thinking is good," he said with a smile, then waved a hand. "And it's quite alright, Mai. Cultural differences come with time, it's understandable. Shall we sit?"

"O-of course!" She had half a mind to ask if he wanted tea, but reminded herself she no longer worked for SPR.

Once they settled down comfortably across from one another, Martin asked, "How have you enjoyed your time the past week, aside from the obvious? Was it nice to see everyone again after so long?"

"If you mean your son, then yes. It's nice to be able to talk with him again, nevermind the fact that I sometimes want to strangle him, you know?"

"Oliver does give off that impression to some people, doesn't he? Never one to happily converse, instead resorting to research and work. Always the same with him. Can't help it, I suppose. He's been like that since Gene died, but before that too." He shook his head, changing topics from his eldest son. "But let's not delve into that now. Mai, I came here to ask about some things concerning your life here."

Like a bird, her head cocked to the side. "What do you mean?"

"It's just... I know you never finished getting your high school degree."

Cue mad blush. "W-w-with my PK acting up, I didn't get the oportunity."

Noticing her discomfort, he took a different approach. "I apologize. Sometimes I come off more blunt than I need to be. Old habit of mine. You'll have to forgive me." He cleared his throat. "I wanted to know if you have any desire to finish your degree during your time in England, considering you'll be here for a few more months."
Get my degree? Now? "It's not that I don't want to—trust me when I say that I really do—but how is that possible?"

"Online courses, of course! It's not like you need to completely retake your senior year, after all! Besides, I'm sure I could pull a few strings."

"What? No. No. No. You don't need to do that for me! The online courses will do perfectly! I mean, you've already done so much for me! I could hardly ask for more…"

Martin grinned, pushing his glasses upward. "If that's the case, I doubt you'll like my second offer."

Second offer? What more is he going to give me?! He's done so much already! "I could hardly ask you to do anymore for me as it is. I'm sure your expenses have already skyrocketed because of the damages I made in the Blank Room…"

The professor breathed a laugh. "Be that as it may, Mai, you have more than paid your fee by merely being alive. The experiments and tests we've ran since you got here are more than any of us ever expected. It's honestly given SPR enough data and explanation for a whole new series of books! I'm sure Oliver has already started writing another thesis on your powers alone. Besides," he winked, the action reminding her of Gene, "it's not like Oliver didn't do something similar in the past."

Unbidden, a helpless little smile crept along the edges of her lips.

"Either way," Martin redirected, snagging her attention, "the second offer I have up for grabs is something I've already discussed with Luella and Oliver. They both agreed. Well, Luella openly said that she loved the idea, and Noll didn't disagree so it's basically a reigning endorsement on his part." He paused, watching her reaction, then said, "We were wondering if you'd care to live in the Davis Manor with us."

At this, Mai was too shocked to even respond to sudden 'request', and Martin continued without preamble. "We simply figured it would be more comfortable than staying here with Oliver all night. The manor—if I do say so myself—is quite large and in need of residents. Often its left to our humble servants to occupy the manor when we're away, and there's only the three of us now, so it's quite lonesome on the average day. I'm sure someone with such a bright personality will be enough to perk up some of the more… How should I say this—isolated people of the household, if you catch my drift. Of course, when you wish to return to Japan, you are free to move as you please, but in the meantime, I'd like to ask that you stay with us. I'm sure Oliver would digress. He's needed in your immediate presence should things go awry. It is what you'd want, correct?"

Martin was waiting for a response, so she answered without thinking, "Correct."

The professor grinned, glasses gleaming. "Brilliant." He stood abruptly, Mai leaping to her feet to catch up. "That's all for now, Mai. I'll take my leave. Noll will grab you when it's time to leave for the evening. Also, I'll make sure to enroll you in those classes you wanted. I'll contact your old school for more information."

"What?" Mai was flabbergasted, scurrying after Martin as he swept out of the office. "Wait! Professor—!

When she was halfway out the door, the escapee had already disappeared from sight. "B-b-but he just…"

"Leave him."

She nearly leapt out of her skin, but upon recognizing the familiar deadpan, she calmed. "Naru, please
don't scare me like that! Ugh, I hardly need it right now!"

"There were no adverse effects, nor did I expect any. It's fine." True, her PK hadn't acted out, but really, scaring the living daylights out of someone was hardly a kind thing to do.

"Fine?" she repeated, incredulous. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"Fright can hardly cause a healthy seventeen year old to have a heart attack," Naru countered.

Frustrated at his seamless logic, she said, "Fine, but still! Stop skulking in corners and appear in places like a normal person! Present yourself!"

Naru, who was leaning casually against the wall, didn't deign to reply, but he was watching her through the ebony tails of his hair. Furious, she wanted to deny him just standing there wasn't effortlessly sexy. It forged a hot blush on her cheeks despite every fiber of her being screaming against the notion.

"I don't even have to know the exact wording of your thoughts to understand what you're thinking, idiot." The smirk on his lips was wholly devious.

"Why—Why do you have to be so infuriating?" she demanded, embarrassed and angry.

But Naru was smirking, which meant he was at least enjoying himself. Perhaps torturing helped with his own mood swings. Arrogant prick, she thought, but there was no real bite.

Ever since the incident in the Blank Room, there had been a peace between her and Naru. Things had settled down to their former combative banter, but it was better than in the past. Vaguely she wondered if it was simply Naru's curiosity about the scientific aspects of their telepathic link, but it could be more. The comfort level between them had grown substantially from two years ago. Maybe it was the bond. Maybe it was each other. Maybe it was the decision that her love had always been for him. Maybe it was a little bit of everything. Either way, they understood each other. And, really, that was all that truly mattered in the end.

Bittersweet solace filled her heart.

"To what end?" she'd asked.

"To whatever end," he'd said.

The bridge between them had been reborn… Somehow she couldn't help being a helpless romantic.

Mai smiled, and Naru removed himself from the wall's edge.

Then a reminder buzzed in her head. "Oh, wait, Naru!" she said, replacing her earlier thoughts with a frown and a declaration, "I am not going to leech off of you and your family anymore! You've done more than enough!"

"If you're referring to living at my house, it can't be considering leaching when you're going to be paying rent," Naru told her.

"Umm… Well, I'm kinda broke right now, but I swear I'll pay you all back for everything! I can hardly afford staying with you, to add."

Naru's expression hardened. "My father should have already told you, Mai. The data collected from the tests in the past weeks and in following weeks is enough for payment. It's fine."
"But Naru—!"

"Idiot," he said, but this time it was in Japanese. It made her halt in her tracks, startled. "It's fine."

Fine. Fine. Pausing to feel the assurance through the bond, it connected perfectly. How strange was it to know the exact emotion of someone else? Weirder than life itself. There was no pure way to describe it, but realization bounded between them. Known. Acknowledged.

"You'd think with this link of ours, we'd never argue about what each other feel," Mai said with a kind of fond sadness, "but something tells me it won't be as easy as it should be."

"Never," he agreed.

She snorted, "Never? Come on, Naru, that's pretty pessimistic."

But he was already walking past her. "Realistic, more like."

She followed after him, falling into step at his side. "Please. We're not that helpless."

"One of us might be."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Exactly as I said."

"Oh, yeah?! Care to tell me which one of us you're referring to?!"

"It goes without saying."

"You—you… NARCISSIST!"

Their words ran through the vacant hallways of BSPR.

Just as they would for many splendid years to come.


"Taking her hand he softly says,

'For the first time you can open your eyes,
And see the world without your sorrow,
And no one knows the pain you left behind,
And all the peace you could never find,
Is waiting there to hold and keep you,
Welcome to the first day of your life,
Just open up your eyes.'"

-Daughtry, Open Up Your Eyes

"
Stasis
Mai's jaw dropped. Spread out before her was a picturesque sight almost beyond words. A manor, no, scratch that—a freaking palace-type mansion was in front of her, lying just past a set of a decorative set of black steel gates.

"Master Davis," a voice greeted from a speaker system outside their BSPR issued van, "welcome home. We'll see you in a moment to assist our newest guest with her luggage."

"Thank you, Reginald," Martin said, and the gates opened with a what she could tell was a signature creek.

No one paid any attention to the gaping brunette until she was escorted out of the van by an elderly butter with what she knew as a monocle and wore what she assumed was a vintage pressed suit. Too shocked to speak, let alone move, Naru made his presence known and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Get on with it."

"Huh?" She looked at him blankly.

"Move, idiot."

The regular term of what she'd come to call 'demeaning endearment' snapped her back to reality just a bit, and she stepped to the side to allow him exit, but her feet did not make any attempt to go further. Absently, she recognized that the butler—Reginald—was attempting to speak with her, but Naru waved him away, probably with a roll of his eyes at her behavior. She was too busy staring at the home in front of her to take too much of this into account however.

The mansion was beautiful. That much was painfully obvious. It was also gigantic and fashioned in a way that was both culturally and aristocratic. She couldn't even begin to imagine the history behind the mansion, since it was clearly not newly built. She wondered if the home had passed down the line of Davis's for ages as a family heirloom of sorts. It was incredible. Add in the fact that they were on the countryside of Cambridgeshire with no other homes for kilometers around, Mai was overwhelmed and astounded.

"Close your mouth or you'll attract flies."
With that, her jaw clamped so tightly it actually hurt. Groaning slightly, she was officially back to normal after the pain dulled to a minor ache. Sighing, she said, "You know, you're father mentioned that you live in a manor with servants, but this…" This is practically the very definition of 'rich beyond your wildest dreams'.

"The more accurate term in 'estate'," Naru told her, being as unhelpful as ever. "So, you're like… Insanely wealthy."

"In case you haven't noticed, Mai, BSPR is the most powerful and influential branch of SPR in the world, and my family and I run it." He spared her a glance, indigo irises gleaming in the evening light. "This information should've been obvious even to an idiot such as yourself."

Mai glared at him. "Well, I'm sorry that I'm not some stalker fangirl who knows all about your personal life and inside secrets from searching you up on the internet. Besides…” She hesitated. "Aren't I supposed to… Um… You know… Live in a dorm?" BSPR was located on the school grounds, and was technically the main building for the Parapsychology Department. In fact, the main classrooms were only down the hallway from Naru's office. There was also the idea that living with Naru and his parents was a little more daunting than she cared to admit, not to mention she hardly deserved the all-expense paid free treatment… Despite Naru's opinion, taking experiments was hardly the right way of paying for rent. It wasn't fair to them.

Naru would have none of it though. "You don't attend Cambridge."

"But—"

"It's up to you whether you want to live here or on the street. My office is no longer open for you to sleep in at your leisure." With that, he strode towards the grand entrance of his home, an emasculate stone stairway of ten or more impressive steps. Reginald only a half step behind.

"Why do I feel as if I got dissed by Mr. Prince Charming? Probably the fact that he's Naru, and he lives in a freaking palace. Gods, this is crazy… Will I ever get used to this?"

"Even to those he cares about, he still can't be nice, can he?" Luella mused, pulling up at her side.

"Cares about?" Mai blushed, but her tone was a tinged with rue. "Naru hardly thinks about me that way. At least, not too much."

Luella's expression softened. "Then I would start looking a little closer, my dear." Taken aback by the sincerity, she opened her mouth, but then the lady Davis smile brightened, and changed the subject, "Best we be going now, dear. The a few members of the staff have been called to Entrance Hall, and Martin and Noll are already far ahead of us. Oh, and Reginald already grabbed your bags, so shall we?"

The only thing Mai could do was nod and follow her lead.

Walking inside, Mai gulped. 'Immaculate' did not properly describe the Entrance Hall. It was larger, grander, and more elegantly decorated than the entrance into the Urado Manor back in Japan! Something told her she'd definitely have her days getting unceremoniously lost in some random hallway and have to call Naru or Luella to track her down.

Eyes traveling from the floor to ceiling, she finally caught the attention of a smiling Reginald and a young maid at his side, whose long brown hair fell down her back straight as a line. "It's always nice to know we keep up appearances well if the Miss's reaction is anything to go by," the butler chuckled.
"Indeed," the girl said with equal enthusiasm, but her accent wasn't British. Startled, Mai recognized it as American. "Oh, and where are my manners? I'm Cass. I'll be acting as your Lady Maid during your time here, Miss Mai." She curtsied elegantly, beaming.

"Always a charmer, Cass. Please do take care of Mai for us," Luella said with a smile.

"Of course, Lady Davis."

"And try not to fall asleep in the library during work," Naru added in.

Cass fashioned the Narcissist with a knowing grin that was neither flirtatious, nor fake. "Of course not, Master Oliver. The same goes with you."

Mai instantly decided that she liked this girl.

Luella clapped her hands, snagging everyone's attention. "As much as I would love to stay and give you a tour, Mai, I'm afraid Martin and I have some last minute paperwork to finish up, but that is definitely something we will do. Reginald, you'll be with us. Noll, be a gentlemen for once and lead Mai to where she can stay. And Cass, I leave the rest to you." Something told her that Luella was the one who took command over the rest of the family, which made her smile a bit.

Everyone complied with their orders, but Naru let out an exasperated sigh.

"Dinner will be at seven-thirty," Reginald told them before bowing and skittering off to follow Martin and Luella.

"Well, then," the maid spoke, chipper. "Shall we?" Cass ended up grabbing Mai's one luggage bag by the handle. She had half a mind to carry it herself, but she doubted Cass would let her, as she turned down the hall, leading the way with a skip in her stride. Mai and Naru walked at a more sedated pace behind her.

"She's seems nice," Mai commented idly, looking around in wonder as the went. Chandeliers, paintings, and antiques were in every direction and she couldn't help the questions popping in her head. "It's also obvious that she's not completely obsessed with you, so that's a plus," she smiled. "I can imagine your fangirls get pretty rabid."

Naru spared her a glare, and she couldn't help but giggle. Heaven knew how Naru would react to being treated as a celebrity—with a crowd of girls screaming his name. Luckily, he was pretty under the radar even as Oliver Davis since only a small majority knew what the famous parapsychological researcher really looked like, so Naru was allowed to have both his anonymity and popularity depending on the situation that arose. It was an interesting quirk that worked well for him.

Having gone through several flights of stairs, a hallway or more, they stopped a single door in the middle of a random corridor. If her current mental map of the house was any consolation, they were on the third floor on the right side of the mansion? It was questionable, but possibly accurate. She was definitely going to need an escort for at least a week to get around this place.

"And this is your room, Miss Mai," Cass said. "I hope it'll be to your liking."

She didn't notice Naru eying her until her hand reached for the doorknob.

"Stop," he said. "Choose the room that feels right, Mai."

Genuine confusion knit her brows. "'Right'? What is he on about?
"Pick a room. Any. There are doors down this entire corridor... But this room was supposed to be mine, wasn't it?"

"Why?" Mai asked, raising a brow in askance. "Is there something wrong with this one?"

"No."

Then... "Why can't I have this room, Naru? You're not making any sense. I know you don't like speaking much, but seriously, tell me what you're talking about, and I might go along with what you're saying."

"Every room on this level is always properly taken care of," Cass cut in. "If you choose to take another room, nothing will specifically change. The choice is yours, Miss Mai."

Naru crossed his arms, giving her no time to consider Cass's words. "What are you instincts telling you, Mai."

Her instincts? Why? For what purpose? But it was Naru—she was hardly about to get away from his demands alive. "Ugh, fine. Whatever. Clearly you're not going to explain. I just need to pick a room, right? Any? Let's just go with it. But I can't promise they'll work for whatever you're talking about, you know, so don't expect much."

"My expectations aren't high."

Her fists clenched, a vein bulged in the back of her head. She huffed, "Whatever, Narcissist."

Naru was watching her through narrowed eyes, as if attempting to gauge something, but for what and why? They were in a random hallway in the middle of the manor. She needed a room to stay in, so what? What was this supposed to accomplish?

She reached for the first door to open, only for Naru to catch her wrist, a flicker of knowledge churning in her veins as their link expanded. She could tell he kept a portion of his wisdom solely to himself. Her suspicions rose. "You don't want me to see what's inside them? But why? What is this supposed to prove, Naru? You're not telling me anything!"

"Use your instincts, not your senses."

She stared at him incredulously. "Are you serious right now?"

This apparently ticked him off. "Do I ever joke, Mai?"

Never, something told her. Naru was nothing if not serious about everything he did and wanted done. Fine, she'd listen to him. It wasn't like she had anything to lose—the size of these rooms were bound to be gigantic and ridiculously elegant no matter which room she chose. Pulling away from door one, she presumed to stride down the remainder of the hallway in a huff.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Narcissist!"

As she went along into the distant hallway, she checked off doors as she went, Naru and Cass silent at her back.

No.

No.

Definitely not that one.
"No.

I don't think it's that one.

Not that one.

Nope.

No.

Not this one either.

She sighed. Really... How am I supposed to know which one to choose? I mean come on, this is pointless, Nar—

Wait... This...

Halting in her tracks, she arrived at a twin set of doors, both facing each other in the at the end of the hall. Curiosity peaked, she picked the one on the right.

This one feels right...

The knob was cool to the touch, but not cold. Gleaming a goldish tint, the window beyond shot its rays onto the metal in a flush of white. It's elegance was marred by a variety of scratches, but something told her it was because of use. Beloved use, at that. Worn love spoke marvelous tales of time and age and persistence. It was a warm sensation she felt in the center of her heart.

The knob turned, and a variety of rooms spread out before her in the evening light.

"Whoa..."

"These chambers are mine."

Cascaded along the walls were world maps, historical timelines, astronomy charts, and so much more. Artfacts and old book bound by leather were stowed away in miniature shelves, and she could tell why he'd referred to the area as 'chambers' as the vintage living room they were in, led to a two other rooms on opposite sides with glass doors outlined by navy shades. One she could tell was a study, while the other was a bedroom with a four-poster bed in the middle. Both sets of doors were open, and a fresh breeze flew from the windows overlooking the front courtyard a few meters ahead of her.

They do say that a person's room reflects their personality, she thought in amazement. Nothing says, I'm Dr. Oliver "Naru" Davis' like a museum dedicated to parapsychology... How incredible...

"This place is yours, Naru?" she asked, awed. He nodded curtly, seemingly distracted. "Then why —"

"The chambers across the hall will be yours," he interrupted, not sparing her a glance. "I merely wanted to have a final question answered. You are free to go."

Mai straightened at the sudden dismissal. "Excuse me? You tell me to find a room and now tell me to leave? Naru, what 'question' did you have answered? You're being cryptic and vague!"

He did look at her now. "It's nice to know that you are capable of such a vast vocabulary, Mai."

"Why you—"
"Master Oliver," Cass called quietly, but her voice was clear. "Are you…" She bit her lip, unsure. "Are you certain the rooms across the hall are to be opened?" This caught Mai's attention. In that moment she felt a spark of something... Sad. A hand drew to her heart, her previous rage forgotten.

"Yes. I'll tell my parents. It's fine." He turned away, retreating into his study and closing the world out behind him. *Naru...?*

"Please come along, Miss Mai." Cass was already across the hall, waiting for her.

"Oh, sorry! Coming!"

Cass took out a key this time, but paused. "These chambers... I suppose you can say that it has a special place in the hearts of the Davis family. It's why I asked for Master Oliver's reassurance on the matter. They... They were Master Eugene's."

"What?" Somewhere along the line, she registered the shock.

The maid smiled a bit. "Please do not be alarmed, Miss Mai. If Master Oliver trusts you with it, so shall I, and so shall the rest of the household. I'm sure Master Eugene is just as pleased to know that someone will liven up the mansion again after so long. Something tells me that you'll bring the light back. No... Actually, I know you will."

Mai slowly asked, "What do you mean?"

But Cass smiled, a pleasant, mysterious thing. "Whatever you wish it to."

And then she entered the former chambers of Eugene Davis, whom she saw reflecting in the glass window across the room. His smile was bright and brotherly and full of glee. She was gracious enough to do the same. But after a single wink, he disappeared from existence.

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10:36 p.m.

Dinner ended up being a quiet affair. With Martin and Luella off to who knows where in the mansion because of business ventures, and Naru locked away in his chambers, Mai had been left to eat in the Dining Hall by herself. Nevermind Cass a constant source of life at her back, the Dining Hall was fit for a palace ball with its thirty or so seats and grand decor to match. Eating alone was hardly comfortable in a place of such refinement. Most of the night she pondered over the possibility that she'd stepped into the Royal Family's resort home or something. Who knew Naru was filthy rich? Sure he basically ran the Fieldwork Unit of BSPR most of the time, but still! She could scarcely begin to imagine how much he had in his bank account if he lived in a place like this! The idea itself sent a shiver down her spine.

In the hours that followed, Mai had officially unpacked her one suitcase into her new walk-in closet. The fact her amount of clothes literally filled one tenth of the near empty space made her sweatdrop, but a remainder of Gene's clothes remained in the corner, still hung up. Sighing, she knew she'd never have the heart to remove them.

She then spent another hour exploring her new 'chambers'.

As it turned out, Gene was similar to Naru in his obsession with the occult, but it wasn't quite as in depth as his younger brother. There were stacks of books and several maps in his study, but there weren't any thesis papers as she'd seen on Naru's desk at BSPR HQ, nor was there a doctorate degree in Parapsychology on the wall. From what Gene had told her, he'd entered college only a few
months before he'd died. What she did find, however, was an unfinished and untitled manuscript laying on his desk. Having leafed through several pages, she knew the main topic was about the evidence to support the reality of mediums. Briefly she wondered if Naru had any inclination of finishing it for his deceased twin. Melancholy at the thought, she moved on.

As through mirroring Naru's chambers, the room design and furniture was exactly the same, but this time, the windows in her room faced the back courtyard. It was the only difference other than the lack of books, maps, posters, and artefacts scattered throughout the area. In essence, it wasn't an eccentric museum solely dedicated to researching parapsychology like Naru's was. Gene's rooms were more practical to living in a laid-back, peaceful serenity while also committing to his job and field of study. It truly fit him.

Currently, Mai was speaking to Ayako about the recent events on the floor in front of her elaborate four-poster bed. Absently, she wondered if the carpet was made out of cloud.

"Yeah, this place is insane," Mai reiterated. "I'm pretty sure it's bigger than the Urado Mansion."

"Well, you better tell Mr. Hotshot Doctor to get his ass in gear and help you find your way around. After all you've gone through this month, you hardly need to get lost in his house to add," Ayako told her.

Mai laughed, "Luckily, I have this maid—Cass—to show me around if need be, but I'd hardly deny Naru the opportunity to show me around, not that he would, of course, but the idea sounds nice. Actually, Luella told me that she'd show me around. I'm assuming we'll take a walk around the property tomorrow some time."

"'Luella', huh? Already on a first-name basis with the parents? How forward, Mai."

She could practically see the smirk on Ayako's mouth, and Mai's signature blush bloomed on her cheeks as a result. "You and I both know it's not like that!" Mai retorted. "Naru is… Well, he's Naru!"

"Yeah, sadly, he is Naru," Ayako muttered. "Never one to make the first move, the robot."

"After all he's done for me, I'd hardly call him a robot, but the concept is close to the truth." Cue sweatdrop.

She heard Ayako snort across the phoneline. "Tell me about these online courses you were talking about earlier."

She shifted the phone from ear to ear. "Well, Martin hasn't exactly said anything about them yet, but I'm going to assume they'll start up soon. Whatever it is that I'll actually be doing, anyways. This afternoon he said that he's going to contact my school in Japan, but other than that, I'll just take his word for it."

The priestess slash doctor hummed her acknowledgement, and a silence descended upon them. Then… "I miss you, Ayako."

"I miss you, too, Mai."

She smiled a bit. "How's Monk? Isn't it pretty early in Japan?"

"That big wretch is fine," Ayako growled, and something told her she shouldn't have asked. "Avoiding me like the plague, but fine. Did I tell you I've haven't seen him all week? I've asked him..."
to go several dates, but he's refused every time."

"Maybe he's busy?" she attempted, hoping to spare herself and Monk from Ayako's wrath.

"Busy, my ass. I've even tried asking him a week in advance, and he still refuses to see me. By this point, he's doesn't even answer my calls or texts. I mean what the hell?"

"What about his house situation? Maybe he's out looking for one?"

"Maybe," Ayako relented. "The idiot lives in a hotel right now after booking it out of my apartment a week ago for whatever reason."

How strange... Why would Monk up and leave? Last I spoke with him, things had been fine. What's changed? "And you guys didn't have an argument?" Mai asked in confusion.

"No more than usual," Ayako told her, then sighed, "You know us, Mai. We're almost as bad as you and Naru. We fight, make up, and go back to normal. That's how it works. When he left the house, we were in the normal phase again."

"That's so weird," Mai said, brows furrowed. "He loves you like crazy. I mean, he wouldn't do this without a reason, so I guess... I don't know. You're going to just have to trust him, Ayako."

"I guess..." The priestess still sounded unsatisfied.

"Okay, look at it this way: has Monk ever lead you in the wrong direction? Has he ever given you any reason to be suspicious of his motives before? Or of his feelings for you?"

"Well, no... No, he hasn't."

"Then trust that he'll come back," she said, assured of her own advice.

A sigh. "You're right. I'll wait. But when that twisted prick does gets back here, I swear I'm going to give him the beating of a lifetime for making me go through this madness."

"That's the spirit!" Mai chirped, laughing. "Just try not to break him too much, alright? Then you'll have to wrap him up yourself, Dr. Matsuzaki."

"That'll be the day."

"Yep."

"Well, I hope things turn out better on your end, and it was nice to hear from you, Mai, but I have to go. Work. I'll talk to you same time tomorrow?"

"Of course. Have a good day at work. Bye!"

She could almost see the redhead's smile. "Sweet dreams, Mai."

The line went dead.

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June, Day XXI

11:25 a.m.
"Naru designed all this?"

Standing before her was the entrance to a gigantic hedge maze teeming with a variety of roses sprouting from the brush. From what Luella had told her, it went on for a long time into the distance and towards the edge of the property, as they were at the very back of the manor. Apparently, people often got lost amid the labyrinth of seemingly harmless bushes, but thorns rose from the stems, and something told her that she hardly wanted to lose herself in its endless depths.

Luella laughed, "Designed it down the last millimeter, he did. He was very strict about the measurements when speaking to the contractors. He'd barely turned twelve when he designed it, but Gene was the only person able to navigate through the maze without Noll's help. Even now, I don't dare go inside without him."

*It's that complex, huh? Since it's Naru, I guess I shouldn't have expected any less. *What's on the other side?" Mai asked.

"That's for me to know and you to find out," Luella said with a grin. "I'm sure Noll will take you sometime when he's not too busy. In the meantime, I'll leave it to your imagination."

Curiosity peaked, she glanced at the rosen entrance. One day she knew she'd find her way though with or without Naru's help. Heaven knew that she couldn't stop herself from the desire to reach the other side.

"Shall we head back to the gazebo for some tea, dear?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, that sounds lovely."

Whispers of awe fell from her lips as she trailed behind the Davis matriarch, her gaze flying from place to place. The back courtyard was gigantic and fit for a queen. Between stone statues of Greek gods and goddesses, fountains, and the walk-through flower gardens all around, it was hard to believe she'd actually be living here for the next month or so. Nevermind the grand gazebo that stood in the middle of a small koi pond. Strolling over the distinctly Japanese style bridge, she wondered if it was a new addition after Naru's return from Japan two years ago.

Birds chirped as the seated themselves at an elegant table under the shade of the gazebo, and Luella poured them each a cup of tea from a china pot. Immediately she recognized it as Earl Grey, Naru's favorite.

"Were you the one who got Noll hooked on this?" Luella asked after a moment of comfortable silence.

"Umm, yeah." Mai rubbed the back of her head sheepishly at the memories of days long gone. "Back in Japan my friends often joked I was his tea-slave, he loved it so much. I swear he often asked for it at least ten times a day."

Luella raised a knowing brow. "Asked, or demanded?"

"Definitely demanded," Mai admitted with a chuckle.

Luella smiled into her cup. "That sounds more like Noll. Asking for things isn't exactly his style, but I must say that he had good taste in tea."

"He was rather obsessed with it. I'm glad he liked it though."

"That being said," Luella dampered, "Noll doesn't drink tea much anymore. He did quite often after
he came back to England, but after awhile his taste for it tapered off. I believe he often said that it wasn't right. If what you said before is true, then I would have to believe that he was inadvertently saying he missed your tea, Mai."

"Aww, Naru missed my tea?" Although slightly embarrassed, she couldn't help but say, "I'd be happy to make it for him anytime, so long it's not ten times a day like before."

"Be sure to tell him that he has to at least say 'please', too," Luella added in. "And that I'm in the room when he does."

Mai laughed, "I'll be sure to do that."

And that was how she enjoyed a pleasant afternoon with Luella Davis.

June, Day XXVII
11:20 a.m.
"You're kidding."
"I do not kid."
"This is… Unreal."
"Real, more like."

Mai gave Naru a disparaging glance, of which he returned with that ever-present mask of his. She wanted to sigh. Did he ever change his facial expression? That angelic smile came to mind... Well, yeah, he did, but still! Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, Naru was an emotionless wall of complete indifference. To sat it didn't irk her would be a lie. Then again, who hadn't been irked by that face of his? At least once? Not anyone she knew. Even down the bond, she only felt fringes of faint changes throughout the day, and usually it was nothing more than a brief murmur before disappearing.

"Would you prefer I simply said 'amazing' instead of 'unreal'," Mai asked sarcastically.

No response except for… "Come."

Turning her nose in the air in annoyance, she kept pace with her former employer.

Where were they? A library. A very large and a very scientific library fit for a king. To say she was impressed was a massive understatement. Suddenly she could imagine why Naru cared so much about his studies if he'd grown up with an all-access pass to library like this. Practically the entire place was dedicated to parapsychology, but from what she observed, there were specific sections used for other fields of interest, such as geology, astronomy, mathematics, physics, english, among more. She had an inkling to believe that Naru had finished about three-fourths of the library in the years he'd lived in the Davis Mansion, if not all, knowing him.

Within the last week, Mai had begun a rigorous daily routine, beginning the day after she'd arrived. Basically her day went as follows:

9:00 a.m. wake up call. Cass usually came in, clicked on some J-Pop to remind her of home, and flood her senses by opening the blackout curtains and letting the sun assault her eyes. She then was
given a quick snack, and had fifteen minutes to prepare for her morning jog with Luella around the property. ‘To get your blood pumping again,’ Naru had said. Whatever that meant. The first day had been a knock-down-drag-out three kilometers, which basically told her just how out of shape she was. They'd stopped at least five times to catch her breath, but the elder Davis had only smiled and kept jogging in place until they went on again. To say that she nearly killed Naru that morning would be an exaggeration, but she did give him a solid piece of her mind later on that day. In return, the impassive Narcissist only said, "Stop complaining, and move on. You're fine." She soon got used to it, and guiltily reminded herself that complaining would do her no good.

Breakfast was served at 10 a.m. with the whole Davis family in the Dining Hall. Apparently it was mandatory for both Naru and Martin to attend lest they be on location for a case, as they both had a natural tendency of forgetting to eat due to their excessive work ethic—it was from this she finally understood where Naru obtained his insane, don't-stop-until-you-drop philosophy. It also reminded her just how much of a rein Luella had on the two men of the household to all but drag them from their beloved studies. It was really quite hilarious.

Following a scrumptious English-style breakfast, her and Naru set to work on her online courses at 11 a.m. For some reason, he'd taken it upon himself to assist in her studies. Usually his help was required for no more than simple questions, but his method of lecturing also kept her track when she was confused. Well, other than when she was in her math portion, then Naru literally had to sit down next to her and correct her answer every other time. But as she soon discovered after day two, Naru made her productivity rate increase *tenfold*. Not only was she ahead in every subject, but she was excelling. She was eternally grateful for this help, even if he was impatient most of the time. Luckily for him, whenever she was fully immersed in her work, he delved into his own.

By 2:00 p.m. she was usually starving and ready to move her feet again, so she and Naru parted ways for an hour-long break for lunch. Most of the time, she joined Luella in the gardens, but when it rained they enjoyed a sojourn to her quarters and told old ghost stories or embarrassing tales on Naru and Gene's childhood. Those were always the most entertaining.

From 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. her and Naru continued on with her schoolwork, but once the clock struck 6, they collected their materials and headed back to the Dining Hall for dinner, before booking it to BSPR for the evening. This was when the chaotic portion of her day began. Between qigong and tai chi training with Lin from 7:30-9:00, she went on to practice her PK control with Naru until 10:30 in the evening. Thankfully, the Observation Room and Blank Room were officially resorted, so her brief stints of uncontrollable outbreaks were kept to the confines of the Blank Room, but from what everyone told her, she'd been improving day by day.

Upon returning back to the Davis Estate by 11 p.m., Mai had hit the bottom of exhaustion. She usually called Ayako or Monk depending on the night for a few minute catch-up and review of her day, before falling into an utterly dreamless sleep. Well, mostly. Twice this week, she'd woken up from that same black vision in the middle of the night, but no poltergeists were made, nor did she scream herself awake. Naru had actually made a point to put a camera in her main bedchamber to ensure this was true, and true it was.

Anyways, that was her day. And as of now, she was in the middle of her morning study-session with Naru. Usually, they stayed in his chambers, but today she apparently needed a certain book for her course-work, and low and behold, Naru happened to have it in this massive library. Or so he'd said.

They made their way through the shelves, Naru guiding her around until they stopped in a reference section, scanning the lines of books before sliding one out and handing it to her.

"Try not to lose it."
Her lips thinned. "Despite your constant assurances, Naru, I am not an idiot."

"Hn."

So much for pleasant conversation. Did they ever converse like regular people? She sincerely doubted it, but that was just how it was at present. Usually if she did initiate a normal topic, she did most of the talking. She supposed it was better than nothing.

Another thirty minutes passed as Mai read the book he'd found for her. Sitting in the dead silence of the library, the words on the page began to blur into incomprehensible fragments. Across from her, Naru was as studious as ever.

"I'm going to the bathroom." A curt nod.

Thoroughly annoyed by this point, Mai practically leaped at the opportunity to distance herself from her former employer. It was as she exited the library that she realized she had absolutely no idea where to go.

She pulled out her phone. "Yeah, hi, Cass, it's me. I'm at the library, and I was wondering..." she trailed off, and a brilliant idea popped into her head. "How do I get to the kitchens from here?"

Thankfully, the directions led her straight into the kitchens. Swerving past white-faced chefs, and greeting the staff as she went, she quickly asked for her desired materials. It wasn't long before a sharp whistle pierced the air and Mai was on her way with a tray in her hands.

Back up a set of stairs, down another hallway and more, and the doors to the library were in sight. Smiling cheekily, she twisted the knob and headed inside to find Naru exactly where she'd left him.

"Twenty minutes," he announced, refusing to look up from his black notebook. Of course. Rolling her eyes, she stayed in place and waited. And waited. And waited. Nothing.

Alright, fine, if that's how you're going to be! Fed up, she slammed the tray onto the table, eliciting a momentary glare, but it wasn't long before Naru stilled in his seat.

"You'd think that you'd at least spare me your attitude, but that's too much to ask for, isn't it?" With a huff and a scowl she sat herself down, now refusing to look at him.

"You made tea." Naru was calm, but there was a twinge of something else she couldn't discern in his voice. Searching through the bond for answers, she felt the scatterings of minimal shock and what she thought might've been fondness. But Naru's emotions were so disjointed and minor they were hard to classify.

"Stating the obvious won't help," Mai muttered, deciding to leave her bitterness behind. With a sigh, she leaned back in her seat, the tray and schoolwork between them. "You know, I only want a 'thank you'. I never got one in the past. I realize that was part of my job, but it would've been nice to know it was appreciated. That's all I want."

Silence.

She was about to throw in the towel and call it quits, but then...

"Thank you."

She smiled, a genuine curve of the lips. "You're welcome."
Pouring him a cup of Earl Grey, she handed it to him. Hands connecting, the bond ignited. Pure contentment drifted between them, along with other floating remnants. It was always a rush.

Naru nodded as she pulled away, a motion that also read 'thank you'. After several sips, he said, "Now get back to work."

Startled, she sweatdropped. "Right…"

The rest of the afternoon was quiet and scented with the familiar aroma of Earl Grey, only broken by the clink of fine china.

8:50 p.m.

Another week had come and gone for the notorious Oliver Davis. Between assisting Mai in her online studies—of which he had opted for by choice, writing a new thesis, reviewing old research about telepathy, observing her other sessions with Lin, and proctoring Mai's training sessions, 'busy' was an accurate depiction of his average day. To his appeasement, the Blank Room and Observation Room were officially restored after nearly two weeks of constant construction.

And ever since Mai moved into the mansion, things had certainly been more lively around the house.

As it was, Naru was safely positioned behind a new protective glass in the Observation Room, silently watching Mai's session with Lin. Mostly they practiced basic meditation and the more spiritual aspects of PK control, such as several qigong exercises and relaxing her mind from her more tempestuous side to keep her PK at bay even during extreme distress. Interestingly enough, Mai took to the training with excellent premision and patience. Despite her notoriously clumsy nature, her balance and form was actually very clean. Transitioning from one stance to the next, she kept care in her movements and executed them with only the slightest bit of flaw. Then there was his sessions with Mai. Her improvement was subtle, but the improvement was there. Part of it chalked up to actually being able to listen and talk to him without an explosive argument. For two weeks, she'd done very well.

"Don't you think she bounced back rather quickly from all this?" Luella asked, appearing at his side. On most days, his father, mother, Madoka, and Yasu were around HQ, assisting in things as they saw fit, but he and his mother were the only ones there at the moment. "I mean, she's been through so much the last several months. It's hard to imagine that she's the same girl who came here nearly a month ago."

Naru closed his eyes. "That's simply how Mai is, mother."

"What do you mean?" Her confusion was clear, but so was the curiosity.

"Mai's like a child when it comes to her emotions," Naru said bluntly. "They change as like the drop of a hat depending on her situation, the people around her, and her own opinions. She usually gets upset first, hence the original depression when she first got here, then she gets mad. When she argued with me, is an example, but she generally bounces back pretty quickly after that. Her personality has hardly changed. Now that her nightmares are all but gone, PK beginning to be under control, and other less important matters, Mai has almost no reason not to return to normal. In fact, it would be more curious if she continued on in the way she had before after the progress she's made."

"Oh, Noll," his mother sighed, "you are the one person in the world that would make a fond recollection of a friend sound like an analysis paper."
Naru did not turn away from the window. "You may take my explanation however you wish."

"Then there's that unflappable part of you," Luella muttered, then smiled wryly, ruffling his hair a bit. "But I wouldn't have you any other way, Oliver."

He fashioned her with a look, and she giggled before withdrawing her hand.

"Anyways," his mother redirected, "I came over here because I was wondering what your plan was."

"My plan?"

"What you plan on doing with Mai after everything that's happened," Luella clarified. "I realize that Mai will make her own decisions, but I'd expect after learning about the link between you two, you'd hardly want to her leave anytime soon, if only for scientific purposes. I imagine that have something in mind. It's not like she intended on staying here forever, Noll. Her home is in Japan. What are you going to do to make her stay?"

"It's as if you're actually telling me to find a way to keep her here, mother," Naru countered, seeing some portion of truth in his statement.

But Luella gave him a flat look in return. "As much as I adore the girl, I'm hardly about to keep her from her family in Japan. I just know you well enough to know you have something up your sleeve. You always keep the good cards to yourself. I want to know what you have."

For whatever reason, his mother was always three steps ahead of everyone else. Perhaps it was the Davis in her, perhaps it was the years spent with three geniuses in the house, or perhaps it was simply her own intelligence and observational skills. No one ever doubted Luella Davis's intellect after meeting her, and Naru was hardly about to forget her cunning nature for even a second. He should've anticipated Luella's move.

"I'm simply going to give her an offer she won't be able to refuse," Naru revealed vaguely.

"Which is?"

"Something practical."

June, Day XXX
12:10 p.m.

Having gone through the data, Naru listed off the results of Mai's PK developments. Finally he'd decided to tell her the exacts of her PK and review the progress she'd made in the last seventeen days, which she was grateful for, but honestly, he might as well have been speaking in a foreign language of numbers and science terms. The rest of the BSPR team seemed to understand, but Mai was clueless. Midway through another sentence, perhaps sensing the confusion, Naru stopped.

"Mai, do you have any idea what this means?"

"Umm…. Not really," she admitted. "No."

"Mai…" Yasu whined dramatically, his expression torn between jealousy and awe.

"Mai, your PK levels are far beyond even what Noll possesses," Madoka explained gently. "To say
"Anomaly," Naru explained, closing his eyes as he fell into lecture mode. "An outlier amongst humanity. No one in history has had this much diversity in their PK, let alone it being this effective. To be honest, you shouldn't even be alive with how much energy is trapped inside your body. You're lucky to be breathing, Mai. Be grateful the link between us exists."

Though mostly recovered, the girl couldn't help but flinch at the thought. Naru's eyes snapped open, probably feeling her reaction through their bond. Almost rolling his eyes, he grabbed her hand. Her breath hitched in her throat, the connection intensifying and pulsating with newfound strength. But amid this infinite chaos, a flush of serene calm flowed into her being, and she let out a sigh. It was Naru's own energy, and a temporary fix until she could properly manage her energy.

"Well, at least a few good things came out of this," Madoka said cheerily, eying their connective hands.

Mai blushed, but refrained from screaming her emotions down the bond. Instead, it murmured across.

"That's a decent start, I suppose." She shot her gaze up to meet her former employer's. His smirk was teeming with mirth, and her face burned brighter. "Although, your face basically says it all, anyway."

Blushing fantastically, she snatched her hand away, breaking the height of their connection, but their normal, intangible bond remained between them. Known. "What good could this catastrophe possibly bring out?" Mai muttered thereafter, folding her arms in an attempt to close herself off from the Narcissist standing only a meter away.

"Well, for one thing, you've come back to us, Mai," Madoka said. "It's good to see that smile again. I'm sure Takigawa-san and Matsuzaki-san will be happy to see you so happy."

She managed a smile at that one, the embarrassment forgotten. "Yeah," she breathed, expressing beyond expression the untainted relief and stability—stasis—that she felt in this moment. "I'm sure they'll be happy for me."

With that, her 'first case' with BSPR had officially closed.

"She was scared of it all, watching from far away,

She was given a role, never knew just when to play,

And she tried to survive, living her life on her own,

Always afraid of the throne, but you've given me strength to find home,

You had your dreams, I had mine,

You had your fears, I was fine,

You showed me what I couldn't find,

When two different worlds collide."

-Demi Lovato, Two Worlds Collide
Stasis
"Your worries are unfounded."

"That's easy for you to say, Naru," Mai bit back. "You've completely mastered using your PK. I, however, have not! The last thing I need is to shatter a building because a ghost popped up behind me inducing an instinctual PK outbreak! So, yeah, I'd say my worries are quite 'founded'."

Naru crossed his arms and closed his eyes, noting the signature verb Mai used when breaking down the essence of her PK troubles. 'Shatter' it seemed was her go-to description for destroying property.

"Mai, you are fine," he reiterated, enunciating each word with vivid irritation. "The possibility of a PK outbreak after all the testing and training we've done is almost zero percent."

"But…” Mai was terrified, that much he could tell. The link between them echoed with the foundations of residual fear. "How can you be so sure?"

"My brain works differently than yours." Mai froze upon hearing the old insult, and a fire flared deep within. Good. That'd been his intention. He continued before Mai could retort, "You haven't experienced any adverse outbreaks since June. To have one after so much time would be extremely unlikely. You've also proven yourself capable of managing your abilities, and as such, I believe you're ready."

Shock twisted with anxiety. This time it was written all over her face, and she looked away. A silence filled the room, an uncommon and uncomfortable thing with Mai present.

"This shouldn't be such a difficult decision," he told her impatiently.

"But, Naru!" she shouted, and he glared. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "You don't understand… What you're asking of me is…” She swallowed. "And it's not that I'm not touched by this, really, Naru I am. Honestly, I can barely believe that you'd trust me so much to offer me this, but it's so much more than I'm ready for… My PK is... And everything..."

"Most people in this field of study would jump at the opportunity to work full time for BSPR as my partner, Mai," he snapped.

"It's…” Her brows knit together, and a pulsating amount of hurt clanged between them. Naru nearly
flinched at the abrupt explosion of pure emotion crackling across the link, and a headache brewed in the back of his head. "It's not that simple, baka!"

Mai ran out of his office, slamming the door behind her, and left it to rattle along the hinges in her absence.

Somehow this was how the last three days had ended up. Fighting. Shouting. Emotional tirades. Headaches. And endless bouts of frustration.

The position he'd offered was simple and to the point: he wanted her to work at BSPR as his partner. It was also permanent spot in the Fieldwork Laboratory with a variety of benefits. One of which led to her attending King's College of Cambridge for a degree in parapsychology on a full-ride-scholarship. Others would be the office-space, salary, and extra credit work during cases for her degree, without any ill effects on her other classes as she would be 'excused for off-campus school credit'. It was an offer most would never refuse.

Most.

When he'd first offered her the position, she'd thought he was joking and actually laughed at his attempt at holding out an olive branch. Having been completely serious, she soon stopped laughing and pestered him with on whether or not Gene had momentarily possessed him. This eventually let to a heated argument that stemmed from his 'inability to understand'. So far, no progress had been made, and once again Naru was locked in his own separate world. Somehow the idea wasn't as appealing as it usually was. His lips thinned when he glared at his black notebook, a new case-file written inside. The client would be arriving in a few days to discuss the details, but he'd left Naru with a basic outline to pick and prod over until then.

Having been busy working with Mai and her unique PK and dream issues, it'd been over two months since his last case. Over the course of July and into August now, Mai had maintained her assigned schedule without missing a day to rest or dawdle other than her birthday last month. Her determination was certainly the leading factor, but their connection was a helpful asset not to be forgotten. Usually it tempered the more raging conflicts about her lack of control and night terrors. More than once he'd woken up from Mai's screeching fear amid her dreams, but soon thereafter he'd send a wave of unperturbed calm across the bond. The tactic had yet to fail, and he'd had to utilize the extent of this power less and less in recent weeks.

And as he'd said before, Mai's progression in manipulating her PK was pleasing. In fact, he had a new experiment for her to try tomorrow, one he himself was particularly known for in the parapsychology community. Not that this was even close to the extent of their PK, but it was a solid method of determining the amount of control she enforce at this point. Already she understood the basics. And if it was any matter, if she did manage to complete the test as he had, then her fears would more than likely be assuaged.

As for the rest of his plan—

"You are such an idiot, little brother."

Gene.

Swiveling around in his chair, Naru faced his twin, reflecting back from his mirror.

"You can't just expect Mai to stay here without any other reason than work," Gene told him, exasperated. "Although she's still probably reeling from the idea that you actually want her as your partner this time around, I'd hardly put your big reveal as something other than your usual
practicality."

"Practicality is all I am trying to get."

"Noll," Gene sighed, and Naru thought it might've been in pity, "your advances on women are so weird. All you think about is work."

"I've stated this before, Gene, but I will say it again since you don't seem to understand. I do not have feelings for Mai Taniyama. Secondly, someone's livelihood is a basic part of one's own vocation," Naru countered snappishly. "To not have one—"

"Noll, stop spouting out facts and retorts and hear me out."

Naru narrowed his gaze, but otherwise resorted to listen to his deceased twin. "Fine."

"First of all, Mai is worried about not returning home to her family in Japan who've been patiently awaiting her return since a few weeks ago. You had to have guessed at least that much." Yes, he'd assumed as much. However—"Secondly, her fear for her PK is normal. Unlike you, most people would be scared of abilities who haunted them for nearly a year. Thirdly, you have to consider her schooling situation. I know you have her graduation letter hidden in your desk, Noll. You've been keeping Mai busy with other work the past several days, but it's all been related to subjects linked to parapsychology. You can't keep that up forever, Noll." He made no attempt to deny it, but a muscle in his throat twitched. "Fourthly, her PK training is fine to maintain a normal, average life if she wanted the opportunity. You're keeping her here without a proper reason, and asking her to stay and work for BSPR is such a shock to her she hardly knows how to answer. In essence, she doesn't know what she wants to do for her future, Noll, and the fear of her PK is reasonable. It's not easy for most people to decide the rest of their lives, let alone someone like Mai who's had a roadblock in her life for so long she hasn't had the time to process the here and now and now let alone what she intends to do with her future. You've kept her so busy she can't even think straight, Noll. Give her a break and give her some time to herself. She needs it."

"You've have talked about this, I assume?" Naru asked thereafter.

"She wasn't complaining about it if that's what you're asking," Gene informed him flatly. "It's just in the way she talks about everything. Noll, she needs a break. Afterwards, you'll get your answer."

"Fine," Naru relented. "I'll leave her be."

"Also, give her the graduation letter already. She's been anxious about it this entire week."

"Whatever."

Gene rolled his eyes. "Don't give me that, you'll thank me later. Oh, yeah, and you never told her about the door choosing thing, either, did you?" Naru didn't even blink, but his brother laughed, "You never plan on telling her, do you?"

"No."

"Wow, that's mean. At least I know why."

Naru only sighed, his previous frustration replaced with solemn acceptance. "Indeed," he said quietly.

"Lastly, Noll," Gene said softly after a pause, "if you're really adamant in keeping Mai here, you're
going to have to do something beyond work purposes and school. Think about this, what does she care about more than anything else in the world? Knowing you, you might get an idea that'll be to both of your advantages."

With that final piece of advice, Eugene Davis disappeared from Naru's reflection, and immediately new ideas manifested into a single plan of attack.

Oliver Davis set to work.

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*Belle's Tea, Cambridge, England (UK)*

*10:57 p.m.*

Mai refrained from hitting her head against the window, but didn't stop herself from repeatedly hitting her forehead against the table, incoherently muttering about Narcissists and stupid idiot scientists.

"Mai, you're going to give yourself a concussion," Yasu informed her, placing his chin on the table to try and get her to look at him. "Big Boss wouldn't be happy if I returned you broken, you know. Then I'd return to my dorm broken as well, and I can't have that. Classes start up soon, Mai, and curriculum here is harder than in high school. Well, I mean, unless your a child genius with a knack for ghost hunting. Then all rules are thrown out the window, but you know how that goes." He shrugged.

"Yasu, do me a favor. Shut up."

"Yeah, sorry, I can't do that. Then you'd go home with a concussion and I would-"

"Return home broken too, yeah, I know." Having stopped hitting herself, she kept her forehead glued to the table and refused to move. "I just wish I knew what to do, Yasu~!" This time she resorted to hitting the table with her fist to make up for the lack of facial hits.

"Well, I know one thing you can do, Mai."

She paused. "What?"

"Stop hitting yourself, and talk to me like a normal person."

Gone was the mischief and flippancy, and in was the caring friend. It made her sigh and sit up. Rolling her shoulders, she noted the increased stress pouring down on her eyes. Sleep called to her like a phone craved battery. Rubbing at her face, she yawned, and looked up at her best friend through heavy lids. Generally she was midway through her conversations with Monk or Ayako at this time of night, and almost to her dreams and nighttime escapades to the Astral Plane with Gene. And since Naru had her on a schedule, everything had become habitual. Exhaustion always hit hardest in the minutes before eleven. *Fantastic. I'll probably fall asleep on the car ride home. Great...*

"Mai, you look like you walked off a zombie movie set," Yasu told her shamelessly. "You sure you can only talk now? After ten-thirty at night?"

"My schedule is very demanding," Mai grumbled.

"Ah, you mean Big Boss is demanding."
"Same thing."

"Eh, there's some technicalities here and there."

"Ugh, Yasu tell me what to do!" she whined. "Should I accept the scholarship and stay here? Or go back to Japan where I belong?"

Yasu raised his glasses, a familiar gleam shining off the glass. "Mai, you belong wherever you want to be."

She snorted at such un-Yasu-like words, "Did you get that off some sappy Hallmark card?"

At this, the bespeckled researcher threw his head back and laughed, earning him a few odd glances from the rest of the tea-shop. "You're almost Naru-like when you're tired, Mai! Sheesh!" But he was hardly insulted, that much was for certain, as he couldn't stop the fit of giggles bubbling from his lips.

Hearing the pleasant sound, Mai smiled faintly and looked to the window. Outside, nighttime rain fell from a blackened sky, making the picture nearly indiscernible, but a few cards bustled down the road with their headlights, lighting up the midnight city in brief flashes. She sighed once again.

What was she supposed to do?

On July 3rd last month, she'd turned eighteen. She'd gotten various cards and sent gifts from everyone in Japan's former branch of SPR, but it was more than a little disheartening not to be able to see her makeshift family on her birthday. They'd been through so much together, and after all the chaos with her PK, seeing them again would've made her world. But Luella, Madoka, and Yasu had hardly been about to forget her birthday. With a tour of the town, a stint of shopping, and a crazy attempt at baking a four-decker cake without hired chefs, her birthday had been full of laughs and smiles. Even more, Naru had given her a gift. A silvery chain hung from her neck, decorated with a single chibi-ghost figurine whose twinkling smile was both creepy and absolutely adorable. She'd almost, repeat, almost kissed him in her joy, and had cried like a child after receiving the toy of a lifetime. Now she never took it off, much to the glee of Madoka and Luella.

Since her birthday, life had been busy. Keeping to her schedule seven days a week for over a month was exhausting. Of course, she'd go on and move forward, but some days she wondered what exactly she was doing anymore. The days melded into one another like colored paints. Nevermind the lasting fear of a PK outbreaks, but other than that, what was she doing? Schoolwork was slowing down into more specified fields, and she had to be graduating sometime soon. What was she going to do afterwards?

What was there to do?

Before her PK troubles, she'd continued where Naru had left off at SPR. Although they'd no longer had an actual office, they still had their investigations as a team. She'd led them through some pretty gruesome challenges and always got out with their heads held high. Mai had been their leader, their glue and centerpiece, and she'd loved every moment of it. The good and the bad, the happy and the horrific. It'd always been worth it in the end.

Being a ghost hunter…

Could she handle it? After all the Hell she'd gone through with her PK, could she manage to complete an investigation without destroying everything around her? Naru seemed to think so, and he was right 99.9% of the time, but what if?

It was the question that could make or break her entire future.
Then there was the fact Naru wanted her to be his partner. His *partner*. In all the time she'd known him never had he bowed to another person, never had he yielded or relinquished power, never traded, never brought someone to his level and handed them his trust. Naru the Narcissist did not share his power and command. Never. And yet... That he would be willing to even ask was a dizzying concept that Mai could scarcely comprehend.

It wasn't that she wanted to leave him. No. Losing Naru again was not an option. Not after everything that happened, but if she couldn't be a ghost hunter, what would happen? She couldn't stay here without a reason... What was she supposed to do?

There was so much to consider, so much to question and wonder and figure out.

What was a girl with a passion for the supernatural to do?

Drawing her fingers into her hair, she raked through her auburn locks, noting the length. It fell to her shoulders now, and it wasn't that she minded it, but it was different from the norm.

In a split second instant Gene reflected off the window with his signature smile, but it was so quick she thought she'd imagined it. Maybe it was to help reassure her?

Blinking rapidly, she watched as nothing beyond darkness reached the glass, and wondered if he'd ever actually been there at all.

"You know, you've been totally spaced out the last five minutes, Mai."

Jolted into reality, Mai's heart shot out of her chest. Slowly she regained her sense of calm. From this, she realized none of her PK had broken out beyond her control. Smiling wryly, she breathed a sigh of relief, nearly sagging with the revelation.

"Huh, what's up?" Yasu asked, visibly curious at her odd reaction.

"Oh, it's nothing," Mai assured him, waving her hands out in front of her. "You scared me is all."

"Scared?" he echoed. "Since when is the notorious Mai Taniyama *scared*? Last I checked, back in Japan you had nerves of steel." Partially true, but not really. Because of her growing abilities the fear factor of cases had diminished little by little, but Yasu was totally exaggerating.

"Oh, please, I'm hardly fearless," Mai rebuked. "Like right now for example. Honestly, Yasu I'm terrified."

"The future can be a scary thing," he admitted, nodding. "Most people going into college think that for awhile. Even I did. But it grows on you, and it becomes normal. Ordinary, almost. Well, I'd hardly call BSPR normal, but I think you catch my drift."

Mai laughed slightly at his attempt at reassuring her. "Yeah, I think I do. The problem, though is my PK. And Naru's offer..."

"Whatever you choose to do, just be sure that it's what you want, Mai. Don't be like me and switch majors midway through college. Student loans are kinda a pain."

Mai blinked. "I thought you got a full scholarship from Naru and his father."

"Oh, no, I did, but there's the schooling I took in Japan and the States." He scratched his head sheepishly. "Sadly, I didn't get such a nice offer there."
"Hmm…” Propping up elbows on the table, she held her the bridge of her chin in her hands, and considered it. "Don't you think it's kinda strange for such an obscure field of study to have so many full-ride scholarships? I mean, parapsychology isn't exactly very popular in the science community. It just doesn't seem right that Cambridge allows them so many scholarships, you know?"

"That's because Professor Davis can only give out one full-ride-scholarship per year."

Mai was taken aback, shocked. "Then… Then when would they offer one to me? My grades were hardly deserving enough. Other than the last two months, my grades were nothing more than average at best."

"Well, take this into account then," Yasu said. "You basically worked for SPR for two years already, are friends with one of their leading researchers, and have psychic abilities useful to the Fieldwork Laboratory. You certainly have the qualifications, all you need is the extra knowledge and you'd be well on your way to becoming worthy of a leadership position at BSPR, or maybe open up an actual SPR in Japan if you wanted. It's not often a laten psychics land at SPR's feet, especially one that's perhaps the greatest PK user to have ever lived. Add in your other abilities, your connection to Big Boss, his family, and SPR, and you have every possibility to earn yourself a scholarship. In truth, it's not as hard to imagine as you'd think. I'm sure that was what Professor Davis thought when he signed off on the scholarship Big Boss requested for you."

"I suppose that makes sense,” Mai mumbled. "But that doesn't explain why Naru wants me as his partner…”

"He is in love with you, for one thing."

A hot blush burned her cheeks, and she slammed her hands on the table. "That is so not true, Yasu, and you know it!"

Her best friend chuckled deviously. "Deny it all you like, it doesn't change the fact that Dr. Oliver Davis is irrevocably in love with you. Although Big Boss is just as oblivious as you to his feelings. It's kinda sad really."

"I'm telling you he doesn't!" Mai hissed furiously, embarrassed. "I would know if he did, Yasu. I can feel everything he does with the bond between us."

"Have you ever considered the possibility that because he had a similar bond with his brother, he's unconsciously hiding his emotions from you? He probably doesn't even realize it."

Mai might've enjoyed that being true, but she was hardly about to think about it and get her hopes up. Again. She sighed. "Who knows? But you said his…” she gulped, cheeks flushing anew, "love for me is one thing. What else would there be?"

He smirked. "Finally thinking about taking his offer then?"

Pursing her lips, she said, "I simply need to consider all my options, is all."

"Right." Yasu sounded unconvinced, but he cleared his throat anyway, preparing for another explanation. "Another possibility is that he wants you to pick up where his brother left off."

Mai's gaped at him, unable to form a proper sentence other than, "E-e-excuse me?!!"

Yasu laughed nervously before saying gently, "From what we know about Eugene Davis, he had almost the same psychic abilities as you, save for being a perfect medium. Big Boss might've been looking for someone to help him in similar way."
Speechless, she couldn't find a word to say. Could that be true?

"I-I could never replace Gene," Mai said, voice breathless.

"I doubt Big Boss would want you to, but I think he wants something similar. He wants a partner again, Mai, and Eugene was his partner for years. He asked you for a reason, and if he sees you as capable, well, that's probably the greatest trust he can ever put in anyone."

Truth rang, and Mai felt it down to the marrow of her bones. But the original questions still remained: was she ready to accept her future and fight for control of her instincts as Naru had so many years before?

She wasn't sure yet.

B.S.P.R. HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK)

August, III days before the investigation

10:03 p.m.

"Stasis, Mai."

"Yeah, yeah," she breathed, straining through clenched teeth. "You and your… Stasis."

Mai was huffing and puffing, attempting to lift a 46 kg block of aluminum and preferably slam it into the wall like Naru was particularly famous for as Oliver Davis. So far, the block hadn't moved a centimeter. She wasn't sure if she had a grasp on it either, which was thoroughly infuriating as she'd been trying this exercise for over thirty minutes. She'd done lesser objects in past experiments, but anything over ten kg and she was done. Why Naru had the audacity to pick something so heavy when her training barely extended to a few weeks was aggravating. Nevertheless, she would try.

"If you'd already achieved stasis, this portion of training wouldn't be as taxing," Naru stated from behind her.

Groaning in frustration, Mai severed her PK flow and whipped around to face her tormentor. "Look, if stasis is so easy for you, why don't you give it a try for once, Mr. Perfection?" The words were drawled in biting sarcasm and blatant irritation.

Naru met her glare head on, a fraction of energy pulsating between them. Mai could've sworn static charged the air and sizzled at the end of her hair. Naru was nothing if not an instigative prick when it came to making her blood boil, but for some stupid, almost masochistic reason, she loved him all the more for it. Fire and ice and lightning. They were everything destructive and belligerent all at once, and she liked it for some reason.

One thing, dear readers… Don't blame her for being a fool while in love. At least not too much.

"Well?" she demanded. "Are you going to do anything?"

"I have nothing to prove," Naru finally pointed out, voice low and soft. Deadly. Lethal. "May I remind you this is your problem, your fear. This test is not for me, and frustration will give you no more than frustration. Find stasis, the point between, and only then will you become something more than just an assistant."
Assistant.
Mai froze.
The single word reverberated in her mind, an endless echo of miscellaneous memories. Both good and bad.
For almost two years she'd been his sidekick, his tea-slave, the extra teammate.
The thought was not pleasant.
Not anymore.
Not when she'd experienced leadership and trust and confidence. Confidence in herself, in her family, in her psychic abilities as the lead investigator of Japan's makeshift SPR. And after all the madness she went through to progress back into herself again from her PK... To be herself was a miracle, with no barrier and no depression, and no person in her way to thwart her path. To decide her fate and future.
Mai Taniyama was an assistant. Not anymore. She hadn't been for a long time. Not even Naru could change that fact. Not anymore. Not ever.
She wanted to be herself. To be unhindered by fear and instability.
She wanted freedom.
She wanted... Life.
Stability.
*Stasis.*
Giving up on fear and relying on herself for answers, she became the point between.
The center.
*Stasis.*
Mai began to glow, a beacon in the whiteness of the Blank Room. Air whipped around her in a torrent of newfound energy, and an incessant ringing ignited from a dimension beyond. Distortion tumbled reality around her into a puzzle, but clarity came in the focus of her goal. From her one desire.
Using her hands as a guide, she felt a weight the block's weight and fixed her PK on its core. This time, the block was comparative to lifting a paperclip. It was too easy. Floating high above the Blank Room, it was suspended midair. Waiting.
Lifting her hands above her head, she let increased the flow of her PK and sent it hurtling into the wall, shattering the new tile.
Once again the foundations of BSPR thundered for her, but this time, she'd done it in her own control.
In her own mind.
By herself.
With no one and nothing to help her but her own will.

The block remained after the rubble disappeared, a web of cracks running along its embrace. Somehow, Mai saw this as proof of her accomplishment. Of her control.

Somewhere along the way, she'd stopped glowing, her PK severed and contained within the locks of her conscious, waiting for another occasion as if to say, "Until next time."

Naru appeared at her side, the image seeming… Right. There was no other way to describe it, as if her instincts saw him as her other half. As if he were the dark to her light, her gravity and pull to Earth. Her sense of stasis.

She smiled at him, a laugh erupting from her lips.

"Way to be the next Oliver Davis, Jou-Chan! Seriously, that was awesome!"

Mai froze, her gaze locked with Naru, whose expressionless facade cracked the slightest bit. The fringes of a smile toyed at his lips and he nodded curtly, looking to a large opened window overlooking the area. Mai followed his gaze, torn at the sight above them. Hands covered her mouth to hide the shock and threatening tears about to spill.

"Monk," she whispered, the familiar nickname shaking against her tongue. He waved to her, bouncing up and down to get her attention. He had it. Definitely, he had it. Her brother and father-like figure who'd bestowed with her momentary solace during her PK outbreaks. He'd always be her hero no matter who else came crashing into her life. Always.

"That was indeed amazing, Mai. Well done. You've gone very far these past few months." There was her second best friend, adorned in cute dress other than a kimono, and allowing her smile to be seen by all. It wasn't often when the world witnessed a sight such as that.

"Masako…"

"Well, now, who would've thought our little Mai would become something so strong? It's really something. Way to show off, girl!" The woman who'd become as much of a sister as a mother in years they'd known each stood smirking proudly and contently at Monk's side.

"Ayako…"

"Mai, that was very impressive to watch. I'm glad to see you doing so well after so long!" The young Australian exorcist with his soft demeanor and kind heart was there as well, smiling as warmly as she'd ever known.

"John…"

Her lips wavered, quivering with such shocked happiness she didn't know how to move. How to speak. How to do anything even remotely intelligent other than stare and cry.

"Are you going to stand there all day, idiot?"

_Huh?_ Naru had his arms crossed, watching her, and rose a brow in silent question.

Realizing the amazing situation, Mai snapped out of her stupor, and raced out of the Blank Room
without another word.

He always knew how to snatch her attention. Perfectly Naru. Perfectly him. Thank you...

Racing through the corridor, tears shimmered off her cheeks as a brilliant upward curl overtook her lips. This—she realized—was euphoria.

In all her times of horror and fear and discord, she'd drawn into herself, but the pieces were picked up and replaced, and euphoria reigned.

Bursting through the door for the upstairs Observation Room, Mai found her family waiting for her with open arms. There was no hesitation as she became the center of one large embrace. Together, they held her up.

As families always did for those they loved.

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Davis Estate, Cambridge, England (UK)

11:32 p.m.

"Wait! You guys are engaged?!"

Fast forward an hour of laughing, crying, hugging, perverted comments from Yasu, random questions, some silly conversations, and they had returned to the Davis Manor. As it was, they were in the midst of a serious catch-up in the Dining Hall. And since Luella and Martin were out of the country for a couple days due to BSPR business, Madoka and Lin staying at their own apartment across town, Yasu living in the dorms, and Naru off to who knew where, it was just Mai and the old gang.

"Remember when I'd been about to blow a gasket because this idiot monk decided to book it out of my apartment for a week without saying a thing?" Ayako asked darkly, jabbing a thumb at the sheepish Monk.

"Yeah, I of course I remember!" Mai defended, standing up from her chair. "But a few days later you said you guys were 'okay', not that you were engaged! That's hardly 'okay'! That's-that's fantastic!"

Ayako shrugged. "Well, he finally came back a few days later. Trust me when I say that I did give him the beating of a lifetime though." The redhead glared at her fiancé.

"Luckily, I grabbed the ring out of my pocket before the worst of it happened," Monk explained, laughing nervously.

"But why didn't you guys tell me?" Mai asked, more confused than upset as she sat back down.

Monk and Ayako gave each other small grins before facing her.

"We knew you'd head back to Japan if you knew," Monk said. "We couldn't have that. Not after all the progress Naru told us about. You had more important things to do, Mai. We were hardly about to take you away from that."

"We know you too well, Mai," Ayako chimed in.

"Yeah," she agreed, laughing a bit. "Yeah, I guess you do. I totally would've dropped everything
had I known. Naru definitely wouldn't have liked that. But wait…” She paused, blinking rapidly. "Why are you guys all here, again? I mean, I cannot convey how happy I am to see everyone, but I'm wondering, was it for the PK demonstration earlier? Or was there a specific reason for your all coming here?"

Stationed at the head of the table, Mai watched as everyone exchanged glances.

"Davis-san never told us the exact purposes of our being here," Masako put in quietly. Because of her guilt and personal hurt towards blackmailing Naru during his sojourn to Japan, Masako had come to place him at a respectable distance, disavowing her feelings and had moved on. It'd been years since their rivalry and as a result, they'd grown closer than ever before. And instead of Naru, someone else had captured her interest, but that was a story for another occasion. "He said he wanted us here immediately, and gave us no room for argument. I suppose you can say he has us here on order."

"Oliver did say it was important," John added in. Over the years, the lovable blonde of their group had grown up. Standing at the same height as Naru, his babyface was gone and he'd become a handsome angel sent down by God. However, due to family and personal problems he'd left the priesthood for good to pursue charity work and volunteering. That tragic story... Was also for another time. "We assumed that something happened with you, but Oliver quickly informed us you were perfectly fine. Afterwards he simply said he would speak to us once we arrived for more information on the matter."

"So you guys booked flights to England for no reason other than Naru's request?" Mai surmised, bemused.

"Well, he paid for the tickets, and we were all available so we took it as a small vacation," Monk said. "But knowing Naru, I bet we have work to do. It wouldn't be like him to call us here for nothing."

Mai's eyebrows rose to the ceiling. "He paid for your tickets? You're kidding."

"It was rather surprising," John said, scratching his head.

"Naru definitely has something up his sleeve," Ayako muttered, chin in her palm. "I wouldn't put it against him."

"Yeah," Mai whispered, "I wouldn't put it against him, either."

"But if you think about it, forgetting his abrupt departure and the secret life, Naru has yet to steer us in the wrong direction." A collective sigh came from the Dining Hall as they reluctantly agreed to Monk's statement.

Ayako leaned back in her seat, suspicions high. "I'd bet it was because Naru wants you to be his partner, Mai, and I wouldn't doubt that he has a case for us to solve."

"Probably to push you into agreeing to his proposal," Monk suggested.

"But…," Masako's voice broke out, silencing the group, "what exactly do you want to do for college, Mai?" she asked, tilting her head to the side. "You have to be close to graduating, and ghost hunting was your nitch in the past. Of course, I understand your apprehension about your PK, we've all seen it at its worst, but with the work Davis-san's done to help you, you seem perfectly normal again."

"Yeah," John agreed. "You're smiling again too. It's been awhile since we've seen that."
Mai was at a loss for words. Again she was met with a crossroads, unable to decide her choice. Was she ready? Why was everyone here? A case? An occasion? A mere visit? Whatever Naru's motives and plan, she knew he held the answer right in the palm of his hands.

August, II days before the investigation

6:03 a.m.

Why Mai was awake at the crack of dawn was a question she repeatedly wondered for about twenty minutes before giving up on sleep and crawling out of bed. With painstaking caution, she slipped out of the middle of her four-poster bed, tactfully remaining as quiet as the grave. Taking secretive glances at the two slumbering spiritualists half hidden behind navy comforters, she slowly tiptoed across the carpet of her bedchamber and made her way towards her window seat, veiled behind wall length curtains to shield from the morning sunrise.

In her bedchamber, darkness shadowed the figures of every object and image known to her, but subdued light flickered from the bottom of the curtains, a mere slice of reality, which meant another rainy day for Cambridge. Rain certainly wasn't uncommon in England, and she'd actually come to expect it more often than not. Usually the sight of rain was a pleasant one, she enjoyed the brief shower on occasion, but endless days of relentless cloud was a bit disheartening. Especially during the summer, when she was used to high temperatures and the scorching heat of Japan's hottest season.

Cloudy days reminded her of her vision. The vision. She didn't like thinking about that.

Peaking through the crack of her curtains, rain fell onto the soft gardens of the Davis Estate in small pecks of drizzle. Sparing one last glance at Ayako and Masako, who'd wanted to sleep in her room and enjoy a mini sleepover for the night, she dived into the dim light of dawn, closing herself out of the darkness.

She sat with her back to the wall, knees tucked into her chest, and observed the world above and below with a sigh. There wasn't even a single burst of sun gleaming through the grey. Everything was a mesh of silvery overcast as needles shattered down from the sky in streaks.

"Feeling glum, little plum?" Eugene's transparent profile appeared on the glass.

She rolled her head in his direction, managing a smile. "How many nicknames do you have for me, Gene? I'm gaining quite the number of aliases these days thanks to you."

"Most of the time I simply call you Angel. Mai Angel."

She shook her head. "I am no angel, Gene."

"To me you are." The pitter patter of rain filled the gap between them for a moment as Mai could not find it in herself to respond to that declaration. Then… "What's troubling you, Mai? Is it about Noll's proposition for you?"

Mai bit her lip. "I have no reason to be troubled. Not when everyone's here for me… I mean just a few hours ago I was happier than ever, but its as if this rain is reminding me of all that's happened."

It was the grey. The in between. The questions and the lack of light. It was a metaphorical aspect that shouldn't bother her, but for some reason, it did.
Her vision of wintertime. Of being in London. Presumably with Naru.

Naru's proposition. Being his partner.

Attending college. At the University of Cambridge.


Her PK. Her fears and adversity. Trials and errors.

Naru. His lack of feelings for her. Her confessions. His closeness.

Everything came crashing down on her with such ardent realization, tears stung her vision and blurred out reality.

"This shouldn't be so hard," Mai whispered, folding in on herself. "It should be easy. It should be so easy. Naru's given me the opportunity of a lifetime. Why would I not agree? My PK's a factor, but that's not it... Not it at all."

A hand rested on her head. It was cold and wasn't really there at all, but the weight was almost familiar to her. Gene whispered, "It's okay to be scared, Mai. Everyone has this happen in their lives. College isn't an easy thing. I got pretty scared too before I took my first classes. It's normal. It's hard to decide what to do for the rest of your life. It's hard to know what to do. It's hard to be away from home. It's hard dealing with my brother on a daily basis. Add in your PK and your dreams, and you've been given a bomb to dismember. But you know what?"

She looked up. "What?"

"You're alive, angel," he whispered reverently, "and you're and surrounded by people who love and care about you. My idiot brother included. But your fate is your own. No one can make it for you. I lived and died by that motto and still believe in it."

My fate is my own. "Thank you, Gene. You always know what to say."

"Yeah, well, when you have Noll as your brother you tend to become a bit more of a gentleman to clean up his messes."

A soft chuckle escaped her lips. "I guess that makes sense."

Gene smiled. "Oh, and speak of the devil."

Huh? Naru was walking the gardens, an ebony umbrella hovering above him as he headed towards the gazebo.

"What's he doing outside?" Gene mumbled. "He doesn't like being stuck in the rain."

"He doesn't?"

The ghostly twin shook his knowingly. "One of his many annoyances, and also one of the few things he doesn't like about living in England. Heat is worse though. Anything above 24 degrees celsius and Noll's mood turns foul."

"Seriously?" Mai was genuinely intrigued. "He's never complained about either of those before."

"As you know, Noll's temper lies beneath that indifferent surface. When provoked, he'll snap."
Mai imagined it, before sweatdropping. "That sounds… Pretty normal, actually."

Gene gave her a look. "Trust me, it's worse."

Mai decided to take his word for it. He knew Naru better than anyone. No one understood Oliver Davis and his odd little tendencies like Gene did.

As if sensing they were talking about him, Naru stalled in his tracks and swiveled around to match her gaze. Bewildered, she started before awkwardly waving, fingers wiggling stiffly in greeting. Keeping to his impassive nature, Naru stared at her, hard.

"I-I can't tell what he's thinking right now, Gene," Mai whispered frantically, weirded out. "His emotions are completely void, I-I can't discern a thing…"

"He probably sensed you were awake," Gene hypothesized, smiling wryly. "There are other, lesser aspects that the bond allows you knowledge on. Noll knows about them because our bond was similar. You'll understand things like that with time, too. As for why Noll is staring at you like that… I would guess that he wants to speak with you?"

Confirming his assumption, Naru beckoned for her to come. It was a icy movement, a command from her senior.

"I doubt he'll take 'no' for an answer," Gene added helplessly.

"But…" Mai trailed off, unsure. "I don't know how to even get out of this house. I mean, I can find my chambers sometimes, but…"

Gene laughed, the sound bright as a sunflower. "Oh, I wouldn't worry. You have the perfect guide."

"But Cass is asle—"

"Whoever said you had to wake her?"

Gene, who'd been speaking to her through the glass suddenly removed himself from the windows, creating a semi-corporeal form appear in front of her. In this way, he was a spirit seen by the eyes of the living.

"I-if you could do something like this before, why didn't you?" Mai asked incredulously, keeping her voice to a minimum.

He winked, a playful, brotherly action. "I'll explain on the way. Shall we?"

She hesitated, before agreeing. To Naru she held up a hand, hoping to assure him she'd be out in five. He nodded. With that, she tiptoed back into the darkness of her chambers. Ayako and Masako were still sound asleep. At least that hadn't changed. After a fourteen-hour plane-ride and a significant time difference, she doubted they'd wake up anytime soon.

Gene met her in the hall. "Let's get walking."

"Right…"

Keeping a half-step behind the elder Davis twin, he began, "As you know, I was asleep for two years after I was buried. It wasn't until Noll received a call from Takigawa that I woke up again, knowing you were in trouble. In truth, I hadn't expected to be able to do this much. Before as a spirit, I was incapable of using a semi-corneal form as you see now. However, only you can see me like
this, Mai. Miss Hara may be able to sense my presence, but you're the only one who can see me."

"Huh? But why?"

Gene smiled. "Due to your connection with Noll and being spiritually sensitive as it is, I'm very in

tune with your specific wavelength. Some spirits actually attach themselves to people when their

wavelengths are near the same frequency, acting a floating specter. Usually to haunt them into an

eyarly grave. As for why I was unable to do this now, it's because I've been steadily growing in

strength after I woke up again. I'm not entirely sure why, but it sure does help. I can actually talk to

you when you're awake now."

"Hmm." Mai tapped a finger to her chin. "How interesting. I'm sure Naru will be glad to know you'll

be sticking around more permanently. He probably missed knowing you were still there beside him."

"Other than helping with cases, my brother is far from glad that I'm lingering in the human realm."

*If that's true... Then Naru must feel how I do about Gene being around... It's bittersweet, I guess. As

much as I love talking with him and earning his friendship, it's hard to acknowledge that he really is

gone... And even if it takes up to a hundred years, I don't want Gene to become like other spirits

trapped here..."

"Be that as it may," Mai began tentatively, placing a hand on heart as the truth rang. "I think Naru is

somehow glad you're here with him. I mean, you're brothers, twins at that. I can't imagine how hard

it must be for both of you, being so close yet so far away from each other, but I still think Naru is

happy about you being around. No. Actually, I know he is."

They'd stopped at a twin set of doors leading to one side of the manor. Outside, the ceaseless rain

continued to fall and Gene was looking at her in shock. Then he tisked in amusement. "You, my
dear, are an angel. Helping the dead cope with life. If I alive was you'd be in a Takigawa-styled

hug."

"You mean where I wouldn't be able to breathe you'd be squeezing me so hard?" Mai's mirth was

written all over her face.

Gene grinned. "Pretty much. But you need to be on your way. You know how Noll is when he's left

waiting too long. I'll see you in your dreams, Mai. Until then."

"Until then." Bowing in goodbye, Gene's semi-corporeal form disappeared from sight, his presence

completely gone. Left alone, Mai mentally prepared herself for being soaked to the bone. Naru was

sure to call her stupid for not bringing an umbrella, but oh well, talking to Gene was more

entertaining.

With that, she threw the door open and ran out into the open rain. Squealing a bit at the cold touch,
she urged her feet to move faster. Sprinting towards the gazebo with her head down and arms

pressed over her head, she didn't see Naru raise a brow at her childish antics.

It wasn't until she reached the threshold of the gazebo did she realize how *drenched* she was. But for

some reason, she wanted to laugh. Between Naru's disapproving stare and her wet clothes, hilarity

bubbled up her throat and came outward into existence in the form of uncontrollable laughter. Maybe

it was the lack of sleep, maybe it was stress was getting to her, maybe it was Naru, maybe it was her,
maybe it was a culmination of everything. Whatever it was, she couldn't stop.

Giggling behind her hands, she saw more than heard Naru's sigh. Wordlessly, he handed her his

jacket, the gesture taming her slightly as her laughter diminished to a small fit of giggles before
descending to a small grin.

"Find getting soaked amusing, Mai?" he asked finally, tone monotonous at best and flat at worse. She sat across from him at a small two-person table.

She shrugged a shoulder, the warmth of Naru's jacket igniting a small blush. "Better than being grumpy about it."

He did not respond to that one, perhaps knowing the hidden meaning. Instead, in a very Naru-like fashion, he changed the subject. "Your emotions have been up and down this whole week, Mai."

"Why, has it been bothering you?" she asked, daring him to admit it.

"I'm not going to lie," Naru told her. "It's been very annoying."

Mai huffed, expecting his candor, "Well, I'm sorry Mr. I'm-Too-Perfect-To-Have-Emotions. I can barely feel any of yours, you know. It's scary how little your emotions fluctuate. Half the time I have to concentrate to be able to tell."

He nodded absently, his mind lost in other things. "You talking to Gene before this." Not a question.

She straightened, but felt his curiosity rather than his negativity and relaxed. "Yes. He can talk to me in a semi-corporeal state now. Apparently, I'm the only one that can see him though thanks to my connection with you, but Masako might be able to sense his presence. That was the majority of our conversation. Everything else you'd check off as 'irrelevant'."

"I see."

"Naru," she called, and those indigo orbs she loved locked with hers. Her heart softened, "what did you call me out here for?"

Instead of an answer, he slipped an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her, the seal unbroken. Blinking, Mai took it, realizing the implications the instant she saw the return address.

"This..."

Soaking wet, hair dripping pellets onto the white paper, and clad in pink monkey pajamas, Mai let out a half gasp, half laugh, and a whole smile. "I've graduated."

No verbal congrats, but the feeling was there. In the pit of her stomach where Naru's soul linked with hers. But there was a faint whisper of dread. ... *Naru?*

"Is this why you asked everyone to come here?" she wondered, breathless.

He nodded curtly.

"For me to celebrate graduation with my family?"

"Yes."

The envelope crumpled in her hands. "Thank you." *Thank you for everything you've done.*

It was the small things. The unnoticeable things. The wordless things. The almost untraceable things. Those were the things that mattered when it came to Naru. The grand gestures came out strange and awkward, but the little ones... Those were always the most savored and beloved because she remembered and saw them as something purely *Naru.*
He may be the biggest narcissist on the planet, and his compassion had to be earned through a long stretch of trial and error, but when Naru gave... He gave in the small things. The big things may be flashy and important, but the little aspects that made up this man were what she really loved about him.

"For everything," she said, repeating her words from months ago. "Thank you."

She stood up without warning, unthinkingly curling her fingers into his signature black jacket. "I'll give you my answer about staying in England within twenty-four hours, okay? I'm sorry for being indecisive, and I know you hate that, but I... I need time to think. Okay?"

Naru's heated gaze made her shiver in the cold summertime rain. "One, don't stutter, Mai. It doesn't suit you. And second, you have twenty-four hours. Once that's over, the deal ends."

Leave it to Naru to ruin the moment with a threat. Somehow she couldn't imagine him acting any other way, and she rolled her eyes, smiling all the while. "Just know I expect you to be at dinner tonight. Ayako will undoubtedly have something planned for the evening. She loves parties, so dress nice!"

She dove into the rain once again, taking Naru's jacket with her.

6:50 p.m.

For Naru, dinner was what he considered 'tiresome'. For most, a general adjective of choice would probably be 'entertaining' or 'interesting', but not for nineteen-year-old Oliver Davis. His sole comforts were his seat next to his father—who'd stationed himself at the head, Lin across from him. Mai was at his side, whose infecting emotions swirled in a mass of wonder, joy, and a slip of indecision in the background. Naru didn't particularly care to feel any of these as they clashed with his on a battlefield of comparison. Luckily for Mai, his emotions were dimmed from years of concealment and didn't surge any higher than aftereffects across the bond. And contrary to some people's beliefs, contracting someone else's moods did not affect their own. What bothered Naru was the constant rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall. The fact that Mai was naturally vibrant did not help either.

With his parents back in town, a rapid stream of meet-and-greets and various congratulatory speeches for Mai took place in the Dining Hall, along with a bout of gleeful hysteria that Naru took no part in, having stuck to the side and observe from the sidelines with Lin. Other than a few tidbits of 'hi' and informative bios, the two more quiet members of BSPR remained silent. However, he could foresee the former Japanese branch wanting to attack him with questions on their other reasons for being in England, and the fact he'd requested for their arrival without his parent's permission shocked both Luella and Martin. Since when did he invite friends over? Especially from across continents? The madness knew no end, and he'd sighed before explaining the simple circumstances with a level-head of logic that was not to be questioned further.

Dinner had been served nearly an hour before, but conversations continued on at his side with Yasu and Mai doing the most of the commentating about Japan's former branch of SPR and their various cases. After five minutes Naru had tuned them out to speak with his father about more pressing scientific matters.

But throughout the night, Madoka continued to smirk at him from her place next to Lin and Yasu. His former teacher was far more conniving than he cared to deal with. Add in Yasu and his mother, and Naru knew his fuse was going to be tested.
"I take it the attempt was successful," Martin surmised, taking him to the present. "If she managed what you did several years ago, that's quite a feat of control. But have you tried any tests recently, Oliver? We haven't been able to record any substantial demonstrations for several years. Unless you'd prefer to keep away from the testing for other fields of interest? I know you're the Chief of the Fieldwork Lab, but you're also apart of the Theory Lab as well."

"In truth there are several theories about the link I have yet to test," Naru said. "PK demonstrations can be Mai's department if she wishes, but I'd prefer to keep to mystery rather than extensions of proven facts. That is, if Mai accepts the scholarship."

Martin was taken aback, and snuck a glance at the girl at Naru's side. "She hasn't accepted?" he asked softly, the confusion evident. "Does she have a better offer somewhere else? Cambridge provides the best Parapsychology courses in the world. Or is for more personal reasons?"

"Personal reasons," Naru clarified, then said, "I gave her a timelimit. She has twenty-four hours to take the scholarship or no deal."

His father almost shot up in his seat at this admission, but managed to preserve his dignity and their privacy by clearing his throat and keeping his jaw from dropping to the floor. Clearly his father was not thrilled to hear his terms of the deal.

"What were you thinking, Oliver?" Martin hissed under his breath. "Miss Taniyama is perhaps the strongest psychic to have ever lived and you're willing to let her go because of what, your impatience? The original agreement was until this upcoming semester!"

"Mai is not an object, father."

Martin gave him a very hard look. "You know me, Oliver E.C. Davis, and I am not an opportunist. I care about Miss Taniyama as much as your mother does. She's also the closest thing you've have to a friend since Eugene, so I hardly base my opinion of her as simply another project. I don't think of anyone that way, and you know that good and well. SPR doesn't operate that way. I don't operate that way."

Naru folded his hands atop the table, about to speak before...

"NARU!"

Very deliberately, he turned to face the rest of the Dining Hall, glare aimed at Mai without the slightest bit of reprieve. "What?" he drawled in the deadened sound. "Do you need?"

Mai faltered, but quickly patched up the cracks. She smiled brightly without a hint of shame at interrupting his serious conversation with his father. His glare intensified.

"Your mother was wondering why I refer to you as 'Naru' instead of 'Noll'," Mai disclosed. "Care to tell the story yourself?" Now this was the type wicked behavior he'd come to expect from Yasu or Madoka, but not from Mai. Did she figure this as some degree of teasing, or was this a premeditated ploy meant to annoy him? Whichever way the coin fell, Naru was hardly amused.

"Yes, Noll," his mother added in, grinning slyly, "do tell us the history behind 'Naru', hmm?"

"As I am not the creator of said nickname I don't hold priority in your line of questioning," Naru snapped.

"Oh, come on, Naru-Chan!" Monk spoke up, and his mother burst out laughing at the added suffix. "Tell the story! Your nickname, your story."
"As I said—"

"I take it 'Naru' is something a little more than a term of friendly endearment if you're differing the answer to our guests, Noll," Martin organized.

"Oh, indeed," Madoka chimed in. "It suits him perfectly. Mai couldn't have done a better job with it. Well done, dear."

"Aww, thanks," Mai laughed, "but my inspiration didn't come from nowhere. It has a reason. Why don't you tell them, Naru?"

He wasn't going to get out this. The door for strategic dismissal was gone.

Lips thinning in displeasure, he deadpanned, "Naru is short for narcissist."

One.

Two.

Three.

Everyone burst out laughing, and he resisted the urge to sigh. Keeping a flat exterior, he sealed off his expression, and refused to let the temperature drop from his growing irritation.

"Oh, what Gene would've done if he'd been there to hear that the first time around!" Luella exclaimed in her laughter.

Martin chuckled his agreement, "Oh, indeed!"

Over the years, the use of Gene's name in an everyday setting had become a more commonplace. Often it used in a sobered environment, but Naru understood the usage now. Gene never called him by Mai's preferred nickname, but had he been there when he'd first met Mai, Naru knew he'd have a similar reaction as his parents.

Somewhere across the distance of space and reality, Naru heard a chuckle flicker past his hearing. *Probably the remnant link with Gene acting up.* Sparing a glance at his former assistant, he saw her line of sight was latched somewhere above Luella. He had more than suspicions she was looking at his brother's spirit.

Amid this chaotic mess, Mai whispered, "You know it's rude to stare at the dead."

"It's rude to pull someone from their conversations," Naru countered. "The dead, however, are used to staring if their presence has been noted."

Mai just smiled at him, and a glimmer of something Naru couldn't truly comprehend shot across the bond. "Always so snappy, Naru-Chan, but honestly, I wouldn't want you any other way."

Somehow, someway, Naru found a twinge of satisfaction in that comment.

8:03 p.m.

Mai was slow-dancing with Monk in the Dining Hall.

Somewhere along the way, they'd gotten to this point. Between a wide variety of greetings, a fancy
dinner, laughs, jokes, reminiscing, ghost stories, congratulations, and plenty of catch-up time with her beloved family, and Mai's night slowed down to its last few embers. After provoking Naru about his namesake, Luella got the idea that a Graduation Party was nothing without a little music. Having danced ravenously for the nearly two hours with everyone she knew in the Davis Estate, including some of the staff, she'd tired.

So as the last rays of amber sunlight fluttered past the windows, Mai breathed to the sound of Monk's heartbeat. A piano melody twinkled from the Davis's sound-system, and she relaxed for the first time since yesterday.

"Hey, kiddo," Monk called softly, and Mai reluctantly withdrew her head to look up at him.

"Hm?"

"Naru's back. You should ask him to dance."

Startled at the mere idea, she thanked her lucky stars for the dim lighting. A hot blush bloomed on her cheeks. "Please," she muttered, "Naru would never dance with me." With the music playing, Naru had kept to his father's side until Luella had dragged him out to dance. Even Lin had been forced out by Madoka more than once. With no one around to speak with, he'd left the Dining Hall. That'd been an hour ago.

"You never know until you try," Monk insisted. "Besides this is your special day, and he did call us out here for you, Mai."

Her brows knit. "I guess that's true… But…"

"He'll say yes." A shock swept up her spine at Gene's abrupt appearance at her side. "Well, he'll say yes, but in a very Noll-like-fashion. You know how he is."

Mai heart softened, and she nodded to both them, starting towards the edge of the hall where Naru leaned against the wall. The light of sundown didn't reach this corner and they were adorned in shreds of shadow. It fit Naru's image, but did little to soothe her nerves.

"Hey, Naru," she said by way of greeting.

"Hi." *What a lackluster response…*

"Umm…" she ducked her gaze, unable to face him with the blush on her cheeks, "I was wondering if you'd… Umm…"

"Playing the meek teenage girl doesn't suit you, Mai."

She huffed, her previous nerves replaced with familiar annoyance, "Has anyone ever told you that you're very rude?"

"Your question is redundant when you already know the answer," Naru replied flatly.

"It was *rhetorical*, idiot scientist!"

"I'm impressed you know what that means."

"*For your information, Mr. Narcissist,*" Mai bristled, "*I aced* English while in high school!"

"Obviously."
That gave Mai pause. *Was that his attempt at a compliment? Or was he being sarcastic?*

Mai sighed, leaning beside Naru as the party went on without them. It was a strategic placement, she noted, with a quick getaway and a easy view of the whole Dining Hall. Of course Naru would be here.

"Anyways," she tried again, lacing her hands behind her back, "I was wondering if you'd give me the honor of being my last dance?" It probably sounded like a joke, but the question was genuine. Spoken by the heart.

Amber met indigo.

"Your answer first. To our deal."

"Heh?" The Japanese uttering came out before she could stop it, and she pointed at him accusingly. "Y-you gave me til tomorrow!"

Naru raised his chin, adding to his height. "A favor for a favor, Mai."

Her shoulders slumped at his stoic attitude. "Come on, Naru…"

"Your answer," Naru repeated. "No more, no less."

"Ugh, fine! Give me a minute, here!"

"Fine." Naru crossed his legs over one another. "I'm not going anywhere."

The single sentence stirred something in her. An old fear, an old grudge, and an old confession gone horribly wrong. Then a new life, a new purpose, and a new confession gone right. Right.

Right.

Right.

Right.

"To what end?" she whispered. Without realizing it, she'd started to shake as the intensity of her emotions wrapped her in a choking hold. She could barely breathe.

"To whatever end."

Her head snapped up. "What?" Frantic fear and desire coursed through her veins. She wanted to latch onto him and never let go, to cry without worry he'd pull away. In this insufferable darkness, he was her source of life. Her sense of stasis.

"I shouldn't have to say it again, Mai."

*He's being sincere... But what do I want other than Naru himself? Do I want to stay here? I know he won't leave again. I know it. He wants me as his partner... Should I accept? What do I want? It's not like I'll never be able to control my PK... The demonstration yesterday shows my potential. What about my family? What about Japan? Is achieving my dream of being a ghost hunter worth losing them?*

*You won't lose them,* her instincts said. *You can never lose family. No matter where you are or what you're doing, they'll always be there.* As if to prove her point, Monk and Ayako waved to her from their slowdance, locked together in an embrace. They were so in love…
Sinking deeper and deeper, Gene's mantra filled her mind, "... Your fate is your own. No one can make it for you. I lived and died by that motto and still believe in it."

*My fate is my own. No one can make it for me.*

She swallowed thickly, absently running her trembling fingers through her hair. *To stay here, to become what I want to be no matter the struggles I'll face...*

*That's... That's what I want.*

*Everyone... Please be happy for me.*

With that, she let herself fall into Naru's chest, his heartbeat steady and calm and wonderful. "I accept your blasted deal, idiot scientist. Dance with me, will you? Preferably before I fall asleep and you have to carry me back to my rooms." He was so warm too...

Naru grabbed her hand, and the bond instantly augmented into a billion sparks of feeling. And what blazed through the deepest depths of their souls? Contentment.

Mai smiled. "Are you happy I'm staying, Naru?"

He responded by dragging her off to where everyone slowly waltzed around the Dining Hall, and her smile grew.

A sweet, haunting melody wafted through the air as Naru stopped them at the edge of everyone. A hand at her waist gently pushed her forward, and she placed a hand on his shoulder. Falling into him was almost instinctual, easy, normal. Breathing in his scent, and their bond at the height of connection, Mai never wanted this moment to end.

"This is as romantic as I'm going to get," Naru told her dryly.

Mai stifled her giggles by laughing into his chest. "That's okay."

"I wasn't apologizing."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course not. Oh, and Naru?"

"What?"

"It's nice to know I have a pretty awesome partner from now on."

"The best."

"..."

"..."

"... Narcissist."

"Just a day, just an ordinary day,

Just trying to get by,
Just a boy, just an ordinary boy,

But he was looking to the sky,

And as he asked if I would come along,

I started to realize, that everyday he finds, just what he's looking for,

Like a shooting star he shines,

He said, 'take my hand, live while you can'"

-Vanessa Carlton, Ordinary Day

Stasis
Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

File II: Wonder & Malice

Part I: Alice

Location: Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, London, England (UK) . . .

Date: August, Day I . . .

Time: 3:45 p.m. . . .

Spread out before Mai Taniyama was the location of BSPR's newest case. Beyond the electric fenced in yard and gated security, there were flower gardens and a cobblestone pathway leading up to a building that was almost manor-like in appearance. Elegant in a way, but after so many years with ghosts, Mai knew appearances could be deceiving.

I have a strange feeling about this place… Also…

"This isn't quite what I expecting..."

"And what exactly were you expecting?" Yasu wondered with a knowing smirk, standing beside her and BSPR issued van. Was he the only one not a little disconcerted by being allowed entrance into a psychiatric hospital? Even Masako had a expression of prickling nerves upon arrival. Perhaps she'd felt the same strange energy she had?

Mai puffed out her cheeks in indignation. "Well, you just hear so much about old psychiatric hospitals that it's hard to shake the image, you know? Shock-therapy, abuse, screaming, shackles, experimentation, and the like…"

"Your modern history skills are severely lacking," Yasu deadpanned, sounding scarilly like a certain someone she knew. "Everyone knows that laws were put in place to prevent and protect against adverse treatments decades ago."

"Don't act like Naru!" Mai hissed under her breath, hoping her partner hadn't heard their conversation. "We hardly need two people insulting me on a daily basis! I can barely handle one."

Yasu held up his hands in surrender, smiling sheepishly. "I'm just trying to lighten the mood, Chief. Everyone is already on edge and we haven't gotten to base yet. And the last thing we need is you scared."

She sighed, "I'm not scared, Yasu, but there's something about this place…”

"Considering there's been various sightings of 'Alice' from Alice in Wonderland, yeah, I'd say there's definitely something up."

Mai rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant! It's in the air itself. Something is wrong with this
"I would at least expect the former head of the Japanese branch of SPR to enlist in carrying equipment instead of staring around doing nothing."

Mai and Yasu both froze at the edge in Naru's tone before jump-starting into action and helping their co-workers who merely watched on in mock satisfaction how reminiscent the scene was to the old days.

"Gomen, Naru!" they cried into the air.

B.S.P.R. HQ, Cambridge University, England (UK)

August, I day before the investigation

2:28 p.m.

"I knew there was something else you wanted us here for, Naru."

"It's as if you think my multifarious reasons matter for another external purpose."

"If it wasn't for Jou-Chan, we wouldn't be here." Monk smiled smugly, leaning back in his chair, seeing dots connect and decipher the mystery behind Doctor Oliver Davis. Mai couldn't see the hidden meaning other than the obvious and pondered what Monk was insinuating. "You killed two birds with one stone."

"I'm glad you respect my genius intellect then," Naru said tonelessly.

Mai heard Gene snicker in the background at his brother's tactless comment, and she let out a breath of laughter herself at his notoriously arrogant attitude. What else would he have said?

"Never one for modesty, are you?" Ayako wondered blandly, lips pushed off to the side in annoyance.

"I see no point in downgrading my intelligence."

"Of course not," she drawled sarcastically, "because that'd be the end of your world."

Before Naru could retort, Masako cleared her throat and effectively stole the spotlight. "I believe we are all well informed on how your mind works better than ours, Dr. Davis, but I would prefer to know the details of the case, if you will."

"Yeah, partner," Mai agreed, almost nudging his shoulder, but decided against it. Knowing Naru, he'd glare at her, and being on his bad side wasn't on her planned agenda today. "Tell us the case file."

Naru's trademark black notebook was clasped in his hand, but he didn't open it. "The client will be arriving soon to fully explain the details of the case. A week ago he called claiming to be the owner of Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital in London."

A collective jolt took the team's breath away. Only Mai was left standing there, curiosity peaked at their strange reaction.

"Lockbridge?" John whispered, voicing everyone's shock. "That's been on TV the past few days."
Apparently someone was dragged across a hall without anyone around. There've also been reports of seeing Alice by both patients and doctors. It's erupted into a pretty intense scandal."

"'Alice'?" Mai echoed, blinking. "I'm afraid I don't follow. What exactly is going on, Naru? Who's 'Alice'? And what's this about a scandal?"

"Don't tell me you've never heard of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', Mai!" Yasu whined from across the room. "If anyone here would've read it, I thought it would've been you! The dreams, the strange characters, the recklessness, I mean come on, the shoe fits!"

"Is 'Alice' the reason why BSPR was called to handle this?" Masako asked Naru, cutting Mai off from responding to her friend. "It's not like she really exists, after all. Characters only live in books, and the author is long dead."

John put in, "Could this 'Alice' be the ghost of someone the original author knew then? Or is this simply fiction and folklore getting the better of people there?"

"My question is: why would a psychiatric hospital ask for BSPR's assistance?" Ayako mentioned, sparking a dozen more questions. "Most people who zealously believe in spirits and ghosts aren't exactly considered, well, 'sane' by most people. The circumstances are weird."

"It's probably the TV issue," Monk offered, and his fiancé nodded. "There's probably a demand for some form of action."

"If this is such a high-profile case that the media is covering will you be needing a stand-in again, Big Boss?" Yasu asked.

"And why didn't Jou-Chan know about anything before today?" Monk said with a slight edge. "I mean, you guys are actually considered 'partners' now, right?"

Yasu head whipped around. "Also, where is Madoka?"

Mai's head was officially spinning with this vault of new information and fast-pace line of brainstorming and questions aimed at Naru. She didn't even know who this 'Alice' character was for starters!

Luckily, Naru had the decency to direct the team into silence. "If you'd all give me the time to speak," he said quietly, deadly, chillingly, "then the majority your questions will be answered." Alright, perhaps the better way of phrasing it would be: Luckily, Naru had the ability to scare everyone into silence especially when interrupted before finishing his lecture. Gene snickered again.

Naru opened his mouth to speak.

Knock. Knock. "Oliver, Mai, the client has arrived," Luella called from outside.

The office fell into a hush.

"Send him in."

The door opened to reveal a young thirty-something young man with a pleasant smile and formal wear. On first impression, Mai thought me might be a businessman, but upon further inspection she found his aura to be something else entirely. Certainly an intellectual, but there was a desire to help people that burned deep. A doctor, perhaps, if he was the owner of Lockbridge.

"Ah, welcome to the Society of Psychical Research," Mai greeted quickly, forcing herself not to bow
and instead take it upon herself to get up and shake his hand. The man took it with a surprised, but not unsettled expression. "I'm Mai Taniyama, and I suppose you can say that I'm the Co. Chief of the Fieldwork Unit alongside Dr. Oliver Davis." She gestured to an unmovng, stoic Naru who leaned on the edge of his desk. "You spoke with him on the phone?"

"Oh, yes, I did. I'm Dr. James Morgenstern, hospital director and new owner of Lockbridge Psychiatric. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me." He glanced around the room, taking in the team. "I take it this is the whole unit?"

Mai then presumed to explain everyone's names and area of expertise. "Also, please take a seat. I'm sorry that we don't have any tea at the moment. We're... Out." A bad excuse that basically meant Naru hadn't given the exact time of when their client would arrive, hence no fresh tea.

"It's quite alright," Dr. Morgenstern said with a polite wave of his hand as he sat across from Naru's desk, the one empty seat in the office. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to get started immediately. I'm afraid leaving London has proved to be an issue with the hospital. I only recently started as director and some components of my new job require my presence more than I would like."

At her side, Naru crossed one leg over the other. Years as his assistant told her that he wanted to get to the point. "On the phone you claimed that several staff members, patients, and yourself have seen an entity known as 'Alice'. Care to elaborate?"

Dr. Morgenstern sighed deeply. "Before that I'll have to tell you several things that don't pertain to the current issues at the hospital."

Current? Does that mean this isn't something new?

"Go on," Naru said impatiently. She nearly swatted him for his disrespect.

"First off, I was a student of your father's almost ten years ago, Dr. Davis." Like always, Naru was the one person not startled by this revelation. Even Lin paused in his note-typing to listen. Dr. Morgenstern scratched the back of his head. "I'm sure many of you were wondering why a psychiatric hospital director was asking for a team of ghost hunters to investigate, well, that's why. I actually have a minor in parapsychology, but I took psychology as my major and doctorate due to being the heir of my father's legacy: Lockbridge. Until his death several months ago, he worked there for over forty years, but refused to listen to what everyone told him about the place.

"You see," Dr. Morgenstern said gravely, "Lockbridge has always been haunted. Ghosts have been walking around the place for years. Doors close on their own, furniture is found upturned, doors to our more aggressive patients will be unlocked, knocking sounds, unexpected shadows during the day, and the usual poltergeist activity and more. There've also been cases of both patients and staff being pushed down stairs or grabbed onto and dragged down the halls. We have some of these events on tape, but due to security purposes, I'm unable to show you until you're in building. Unless they're the leaked videos you've seen on the tele, I cannot show you yet. Hospital policy, I'm afraid."

The truth rang down to the marrow of Mai's bones.

Naru raised his chin, and Mai noted his apprehension, but also his interest. "Almost half of all poltergeists are of human origin. Are you sure none of your patients are the cause of this?"

"While that might've possible in the past, I don't have the knowledge to properly classify or even identify them," the Doctor admitted with a helpless shrug.

"You said that you've seen ghosts haunt Lockbridge for years, Dr. Morgenstern," Mai began
"I'm guessing you've also had a personal experience?"

"That's correct," he answered. "However, it's been exceptionally worse in the past several weeks due to Alice's presence. But even without out her, I would've come to BSPR eventually. I personally have seen her."

"You said on the phone that your staff and patients all have a similar description that matches the character 'Alice' from Lewis Carroll's novel 'Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland'. Would you agree with that description?" Naru questioned, eyes narrowed.

Dr. Morgenstern nodded. "Yes. Although I have only seen brief glimpses of her in the halls, the appearance is uncanny to the original artwork for the book. Some of the less high-profile patients would swear on their very lives they've seen her around, or heard a girl's giggle in the middle of the night. The staff's had similar experiences."

"I take it you've never seen a living person matching her description before?" Mai asked, to which the Doctor shook his head.

"I have no idea who she really is."

Naru tapped a single finger against his notebook. "If Alice is no more than a harmless apparition like other ghosts you claim to haunt Lockbridge then why come to BSPR now? Was it the media scandal? Clearly, there something else you're worried about."

Dr. Morgenstern froze, swallowing thickly at Naru's icy observational skills.

"Naru!" she hissed quietly.

But her partner did not spare her a glance.

"It's quite alright, Miss Taniyama, "Dr. Morgenstern assured her, shifting in his seat. "Dr. Davis's suspicions are correct, and I suppose you'd figure it out eventually. I'm afraid one of our more... Problematic patients has gone missing. The police have been investigating his disappearance, but nothing has come up. Thankfully, the media has not found out about this development, and has been focused on the Alice situation. In truth, this whole scandal about Alice erupted after film-crew experienced some odd poltergeists while shooting a documentary in Lockbridge. While I did not want this type of footage leaking out, it had, and that portion of the scandal has been covered by the media. I'm sure you've all seen how one of the crew-members was dragged down a hall from out of nowhere. I think they connect it to the known rumors spreading around the hospital behind 'Alice', but I'm unsure if she was the actual cause or not."

"Yet you assume Alice has something to do with the missing patient," Naru redirected pointedly.

"Due to patient confidentiality, I cannot disclose his name yet. After the proper forms have been signed I can allow you to see some of his files, but not every. All I can say right now is that he was about to be released, but after Alice started to appear, he regressed to a level where he had to be restrained and put under heavy sedation. He talked about 'madness' and 'being late' and 'tick tock' and much, much more. I'm hardly about to throw away the connection when all he talked about were Wonderland references."

Mai cocked her head to the side. "You said that Alice appeared a few weeks ago? Did anything specific happen at that time? A sign or maybe a catalyst?"

"A staff member screamed, but after I spoke to her, she just said that Alice materialized before her and smiled. She was the first to see her as far I know. Then she appeared more frequently. I don't
know how or why she's haunting Lockbridge all of a sudden." Dr. Morgenstern took a breath. "What I've told you is all I know."

Naru nodded curtly, setting his notebook off to the side and crossed his arms. "We'll take the case. We'll need three rooms. One for our base, and two for residence. However," Naru halted, a chill slicing up Mai's spine, "due to the scandal we will not arrive until every reporter has decided to take their leave."

"Before I left today our security was already escorting any remaining reporters off the premises. They should be completely gone by tomorrow. I'll also take extra care in keeping BSPR out of any media coverage, and keep the guards wary of any suspicious activity outside Lockbridge regarding the media. You have my word."

Although Mai was practically leaping at the opportunity to accept and leave whenever necessary, she knew Naru. Keeping to his anonymity was key. They could hardly risk it.

"Fine," Naru relented. "We will arrive tomorrow at four in the evening. Will that suffice for enough preparation time?"

Dr. Morgenstern let out an audible sigh of relief. "Thank you very much Dr. Davis, and to you too, Miss Taniyama. That will be perfect. I will see you all then."

With that, Mai had begun her first ghost hunt with BSPR.

Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, London, England (UK)

4:02 p.m.

The BSPR team was led to what Mai assumed might've been a recreational room for the patients. With a variety of windows overlooking the back courtyard of Lockbridge, it mostly consisted of a few flower gardens, trees, a walking path, and an electric fence cutting them off from the outside world some hundred meters away. There were also tables with plush chairs positioned around randomly with several mobile white boards and a makeshift kitchen off to the side. Wryly she wondered if Naru would unthinkingly order her to make tea out of habit. The thought made her smile a bit.

"I hope the accommodations suit to your requests, Dr. Davis," Dr. Morgenstern said. "The other rooms you asked for will be just across the hall. The kitchenette is stocked with snacks and some tea as well if you desire it. Ah, and here's the keys and floor-plan you asked for." He handed them to Naru. "It probably goes without saying, but be sure to lock the rooms at night. As secure as the building can be there have been instances where patients have escaped their quarters. Also your team has free reign to walk the building and grounds as they like given the circumstances. Only patient rooms are prohibited. If anyone has a problem with that, send them to me. I will be in my office most of the time. Was there anything else you needed?"

Mai glanced at Naru for confirmation, but he shook his head. "That will be all. You may take your leave."

"And thank you very much, Dr. Morgenstern!" Mai added in hastily, hoping to patch up Naru's lack of tact with some of her own. Dr. Morgenstern gave her a smile before leaving the team to their ventures.

"Alright," Naru declared after a pause, and the team was instantly prepared to meet their boss's
demands. For what it was worth, Mai could feel the excitement in the air as well as a foreboding sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. Despite the sunshine outside streaking into Base, a cloud of fear tumbled within the light. Already, Mai knew Lockbridge was far from any normal psychiatric hospital. "We'll start by setting up equipment while Mai and Miss Hara take a walk of the grounds. Everyone else, back to the van. In one hour I expect everything to be set up and everyone back to base for further instructions. Disperse."

Mai was momentarily confused by Naru's decision, and as if sensing it, he stopped in the doorway as everyone filed out. Masako kept a respectable distance in the hall, eying a painting as she waited for Mai. Gene however, winked at her before disappearing from sight. He'd pop up later.

"You want an explanation," Naru surmised.

"Well, yes," she said, speaking hotly. "Yes, I do. Shouldn't I go with you? And shouldn't we both be issuing orders?" She realized that it was perhaps a little early to be jumping to conclusions, but the very last thing she wanted was to regress back into being Oliver Davis's assistant. Given the contract she'd signed yesterday, her and Naru were considered equals. Not only that, but her instincts flared. Something was up with this situation.

"I acknowledge your strength and leadership capabilities, Mai," he admitted flatly, and her cheeks flamed at such an admission coming from Naru. "It's why you were able to pick up where I left off at JSPR. However, your abilities lie in a different realm of my own. Being my partner does not mean we share the same job, although if it came down to it, if I was somehow incapacitated you would be my replacement. Until that happens, you will be having lessons with Miss Hara and Gene about being an active medium. I spoke with Miss Hara about this yesterday evening. You also neglected to inform me that you were training with her before your PK manifested." His gaze went cold as his voice chilled, "Care to tell me how being a perfect medium happened to be missing from your file before you arrived in England?"

It took Mai a moment to collect her bearings. Flushed with embarrassment and a twinge of guilt, she testily muttered, "You're the one who never asked me how I learned English so well, Baka…"

Usually as a perfect medium, one was able to speak the language of the ghost who possessed them, whether it be the medium's regular tongue or not. Rarer even was the ability to learn any language she heard over a short period of time. That was what Mai could do. It was another one of the little oddities that appeared a few months before her PK. When it'd first started though, half the time she wasn't able to tell which language she'd actually been speaking. It had taken awhile to switch and fall into a certain tongue depending on the situation, but now she was fully fluent in both English and Japanese.

"You're the one who neglected to tell me of its relevance," Naru countered.

"You should have asked about my English in the first place."

"... You guys should seriously kiss already..."

"HEH?!" Mai jumped and accidentally leapt toward Naru in her fear, latching onto his shirt for dear life. "G-Gene… Wh-When did you get here? I-I thought you disappeared…"

"Ah, never think I'm gone, angel," Gene smiled brightly. "I'm always somewhere around. Usually somewhere between you and Noll."

"The useless medium made an appearance, did he?" Naru voiced distastefully at her abrupt outburst, not being able to see, nor hear his deceased twin.
"Umm, yes, he's here," Mai answered Naru.

With the two brothers literally standing side by side it was easy to count the differences in their overall profiles. Taking a step back from Naru, and forcing her heart to calm its frantic beats, a spike of melancholy replaced her fear.

Naru was taller. At least ten full centimeters taller than his twin, in fact. It was perhaps the first time she noticed how much older he was from the boy she'd met two years ago. He was also broader, and stronger if the slight curve of biceps underneath his layered black attire was any indication. His hair was also a little longer and his face a little leaner. Never mind the constant frown, firm set of his lips, and the sharp wit in his eyes.

Gene, by contrast was a different story entirely. All but being a carbon copy of his younger twin from two years ago, Eugene Davis was still at the peak of his teenage years, but there was an ever-present brightness to his eyes and a softness in his expression that told of every kind tale and smile ever given to humanity. It contrasted the twins by a universe and a half. But really, that was something she already knew.

But to see them together should've been unfathomable. And yet here she was, witnessing a scene that should've been impossible.

It was heartbreaking.

Miraculous.

Will I get to see this for the rest of my life?

The single thought halted everything in her mind. I shouldn't think like that. I can't look that far ahead. Not when Gene...

"Considering the vast temperature drop, I'd assume he's standing right next to me," Naru collected.

"Yeah, yeah he is."

Naru's lips thinned. "You're to work with Masako and my brother to learn more about being a medium, Mai. Your position stands as my partner, but my job is still Chief."

"So basically you're his 'Second in Command'," Gene summed up from the side. "It was the same with me, you know. Noll is… Noll. Together you'll work the two sides of ghost hunting, really. But for now you're my student in training, angel. It'll help more once you start classes at Cambridge too, but you'll learn the more hands-on aspects from me."

"I see," Mai said, nodding. "I understand now. I just want you to do one more thing for me, Naru."

"Which is."

"I want you to trust me."

"Hmph." Naru turned away slightly. "To what end?"

Hearing their signature words, she smiled up at him with stars in her eyes. "To whatever end."

Naru nodded as he walked away, but for the briefest of seconds, she knew she saw something reminiscent of a smile on his face. "Already done."

"Are you done with your romantic getaway, Mai?" Masako asked tersely, trapping her in the present.
"I would prefer to get going and learn more about the ghosts here. Unless I heard Dr. Davis incorrectly, he did say to 'take a walk of the grounds', did he not?"

Mai spun on her heel, sheepishly rubbing the back of her head. "I guess he did say to do that didn't he? Sorry, Masako. Shall we get going then?"

"Indeed, we shall," the petite medium agreed, allowing Mai to fall into step at her side. "Will your Davis companion be joining us?"

"You mean Gene? Yeah, he'll be helping us with cases from now on."

"It's going to be aggravating not being able to see him when he'll be more knowledgeable than myself on the topic of perfect mediums. I can sense him, but no more."

Mai laughed slightly, "I guess I'll just have to be your telephone, won't I?"

"A rather incompetent one, I suppose."

Gene chuckled into his hand as if to stifle the sound. Mai deflated, annoyed. "And is that funny to you, Mr. Nice Guy? She just insulted me."

"She's similar to Noll in her way of showing people affection, isn't she?" Gene suspected, and Mai was caught off guard at how easy it was for him to understand people. "Elegant, but waspish."

"More than once they've been accused of being brother and sister," Mai admitted, sweatdropping. "I can see why."

The trio fell into silence as they continued to walk the halls of Lockbridge, concentrating on their surroundings and listening for any signs of possible activity. As Mai settled into her skin, she felt the same prickling sensation as when they'd arrived, but being out of practice with her ESP skills as a medium, she focused all her attention onto seeing behind the physical realm of the living. It took a certain bout of stasis to keep her attention undivided and trained on things outside the living realm.

Taking a breath to maintain her focus, she closed her eyes before slowly letting them ascend. What she saw took her breath away.

"W-why didn't you say anything before, Masako?" Mai demanded shakily. "There are-

"Spirits everywhere. Yes, I am aware of that. But they don't seem to be harmful, merely present. Lost more than likely."

"This hospital must be pretty old if there's so many of them..." Most of the spirits appeared as floating orbs of pure light, but a few manifested into a semi-corporeal form, walking in and out of walls and ceilings. Others were formless shadow.

"That's probably the case, but there's something else here as well," Masako said, gazing into the distant hall of locked patient rooms and white walls. "Surely you felt it when we first came here. Something profoundly foul lurks these halls."

Mai was grim. "It's similar to Urado."

"We'll definitely have our work cut out for us. I wonder if this 'Alice' girl is to blame for it."

For once her instincts did not give her an answer, as if confused. Mai bit her lip. "I guess we'll find out as the investigation progresses."
Continuing on in their trek, they never spotted 'Alice'. Instead they passed some skeptic doctors in the halls who gave them snide glances of varying kinds. About fifty minutes in, they were on their way back to Base.

"The presence here doesn't seem to be coming from a particular place in the hospital," Mai said quietly, perplexed. "It's as if the air itself has been completely tainted."

"It is strange." Masako tapped her lips. "Does Eugene sense anything that we cannot? As a spirit he should be able to see a bit more than we can."

But her spirit guide only shook his head. "Nothing more than you've already seen. I can probably find more on the Astral Plane if you'd like. I'll meet you there after you fall asleep."

With that, Eugene Davis disappeared. She relayed the information to Masako.

"You two must be apart of that bogus ghost chasing group Morgenstern hired!"

Mai and Masako both stopped in their tracks to face an elder man with a clear case of balding and obvious distaste towards the supernatural. She really hated it when they faced clientele like this.

"And here we go..." Mai grumbled. Masako merely sighed in an type of urbane vexation.

"I cannot believe that fool actually called you idiots here to hunt some stupid fantasy about Alice in Wonderland!" the doctor bristled. "The press only made that story up to get a good scoop! As if ghosts really haunt this place. Rubbish."

Mai's eyes narrowed. "Was there something you wanted, doctor? Preferably other than your rants? If not, we need to get back to work. Your boss hired us for a job. If you have a problem, go talk to him."

The two mediums turned to walk away.

"Damn teenagers and their wild beliefs. If it wasn't for Morgenstern, they'd all be having a psych eval. " Mai forced herself not to pop a blood vessel, resorting to aggressive speed walking to calm her frustration. The last thing she needed was to cause a poltergeist.

"Hehe."

Mai's blood ran cold in her veins.

"Hehe."

"Hehe."

"Hahahahahahahahahahaha~!"

The girly high pitched laughing went hysterical along the hallowed halls of Lockbridge, echoing with an earsplitting volume. Grimacing, Mai covered her ears in vain, but the laugher was just as loud in her head.

"Where would you like to go?" the voice whispered in a cheerful glee, as if disclosing a wonderful secret. "How about a little trip? They all seem to enjoy it. Why wouldn't you?"


"Come with me! Follow me down the rabbit hole!"
"Alice," she whispered before she was roughly dragged down the halls of Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital.

"I found myself in Wonderland,

Get back on my feet again,

Is this real?

Is it pretend?

I'll take a stand until the end."

-Avril Lavigne, Alice

Stasis
File II: Wonder & Malice, Part II: When You're Young

Stasis: The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

File II: Wonder & Malice

Part II: When You're Young

Location: Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, London, England (UK) . . .

Date: August, Day 1 . . .

Time: 4:57 p.m. . . .

"Mai!" Masako screamed, trying in vain to catch up to Alice's breakneck pace. "Mai!"

Mai however, gritted her teeth as the agony of being dragged across both carpet and tile burned and sliced the soft flesh of her arms and legs. Officially infuriated, she thought up a mental gong in her head. She wanted Naru's attention. Immediately.

Doctors and staff screamed as she flew past them, and she hoped against hope for something to latch onto and keep herself from being pulled onward. Alas, luck had never been on her side. Alice's constant stream of manic giggles echoed throughout the halls of Lockbridge, and loud enough for everyone in a decent radius of Mai to cower in fear and revulsion, including the doctor who'd insulted Mai and Masako in the hall not minutes before. Hall after hall past and Alice seemed keen on keeping her hold on Mai, charging through open doors and between people without remorse. Masako had long since fallen behind.

With her face practically gliding across the floor, Mai had no opportunity to perform the Nine Cuts or any form of Monk's Buddhist mantra. There was nothing she could do but wait to be saved, which was irksome. Mai had seen enough ghosts not to be fully terrified of being snatched underneath her feet, but to continue on without pause was enough to ignite a fire of wrath in her veins.

It would've been nice had Naru taught her how to destroy spirits with PK. That would've be highly beneficial given the danger factor in their line of work.

Was no one daring enough to even attempt to save her at this point? Half the damn hospital had gone by!

Suddenly in the midst of a vacant portion of the hospital, Mai was led to an abrupt stop. The laughter diminished, but the cold hand on her ankle did not release its grip. Instead, it got tighter.

"Well, what have we here?" Alice cooed, her voice that of a crooked song. With her current position, Mai could not turn to see who Alice was referring to. "You're a useless little twat, aren't you, chosen one? You can never unriddle the riddler, you know. We all know that one, yet here you are. You're powerless. Worthless. Go back to Wonderland, chosen one."

"You will never take the White Queen," someone replied viciously. It was another girl's voice. Young even. Almost of the same nuance.
"Yet here I am."

"You will never take her! The Knave of Spades won't let you! I won't let you!"

The Knave of Spades? The White Queen? What are they talking about? I don't know this story!

"The Knave of Spades hasn't arrived, chosen one," Alice purred back. "And it'll take a lot more than you to stop this."

"Mai!" It was Naru, racing down the hall. Alone. Where's everyone else?

"It appears my fun has been postponed," Alice whined childishly at her back. "But don't worry, My Queen, I'll be back for you soon." This time Alice was speaking directly into the soft curve of Mai's ear. Unbidden, a shiver swept up her spine as both presences disappeared from her senses and her ankle was bequeathed to gravity.

Back to reality, Mai felt every open part of her skin save for her face sting with hot burns. Biting back the bitter pain, Mai was brought to her feet by Naru's helping hand.

"What happened," he immediately demanded. Frustrated by his lack of tact and this overall situation, she bared her teeth.

"You know, a simple, 'are you alright?' would be a nice way of starting things off, idiot scientist!" Mai bit out against her stinging libs.

"It's suffice to say you're not alright, Mai," he countered. "That much is clear. What happened?"

Knowing that being angry wouldn't help either of them, she gave a heavy sigh, brushing back her bangs. "Alice happened, that's what." Wincing as the pain increased tenfold, she forced herself to say, "I'll explain everything else when we get back to base." Naru nodded and pulled a walkie-talkie from his jacket pocket to order the team back to Base.

Quiet reigned during their brief trek, until Mai whispered, "What took you so long to find me anyway?"

"I sent the team off in separate directions after Miss Hara informed me you'd been dragged away by a spirit. The cameras we'd already set up most likely did not function properly due to spiritual interference. We did not know where to specifically begin."

So it's sheer luck Naru ended up finding me first, huh?

She sighed, "Naru, when this case is over you're going to teach me how to use my PK as a defense against spirits. Alright?"

He didn't reveal an inch of his feelings on the matter. "Making demands, are we?"

"I think it's about time I issued a few of my own, Mr. I-Take-Orders-From-No-One."

"Noted." And what was that supposed to mean? Shaking her head in vexation, mostly at her own useless at defending herself despite the various psychic abilities in her repertoire, she kept her mind from wandering towards her myriad of burns. Nevermind the stumble in her step every few strides and the tightness of her jaw.

"I can feel what you do, but the reasonings and thoughts are indiscernible unless you tell me," Naru said. "Currently, you're angry. Why?"
It was a genuine question. Proper curiosity. But was it simply for scientific conclusions or something beyond work? Mai couldn't tell. Like usual, Naru's emotions were clear as dirt.

Mai huffed a sigh, "Because despite my abilities, I can't defend myself. In some instances, yes, but when I can't use the Nine Cuts or Monk's mantra, I'm useless."

"I see." No consoling, no pep-talk, and no attempt to reassure her. What Naru gave her was acknowledgement. Considering how purely Naru it was almost made her laugh. What else did she expect from him? Naru was notorious for his scathing candor, or maybe when he was feeling nice, he would level her with something like this.

"I need more training," Mai said slowly, meaningfully, imploringly. "Maybe learning how to control a PK barrier like that one time in the lab..." Where she'd literally formed a wall to keep him from touching her. She didn't like to think about that.

Naru stilled in his tracks and faced her completed. "It's as if you think I can create barriers myself. That was Gene's specialty, not mine."

Mai straightened. "But Gene didn't have PK," she stated, officially confused. "He could only regulate yours so it would no longer harm you..." Ideas, warnings manifested in her mind, tumbling down a cliffside with no end in sight. Down the rabbit hole... "What... What haven't you told me, Naru?"

At least he had the decency to feel some sort of resignation. Sighing, he admitted, "I haven't lied to you, Mai."

"No, but you're keeping something from me, aren't you? Aren't you?!" Keeping secrets from her... She didn't know why, but she despised the very thought of it. Especially when it came to her own abilities, or Gene. Or himself. It made her sick to her stomach as a knot dread sunk to the pit of her gut.

"If you wanted to know the schedule I had planned for your PK training, you could've just asked," Naru deadpanned. "There's no need for accusations. You're jumping to conclusions without proper evidence."

Ardent truth rang, and instantly a wash of regret and guilt flooded her veins at her abrupt aggression. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I-I was being irrational, judgmental, and rude... I'm sorry... I d-don't know what came over me..." And she didn't. It was so sudden, so out of nowhere that she didn't understand her own actions. Besides... Naru didn't have to tell her everything, he was entitled to his secrecy, and he'd actually been willing to tell her about her PK training had she asked, but here she'd gone and blown everything out of proportion.

Naru watched her for a moment, the gears churning in his head. Finally, he said, "It's fine. As for the what you thought I was hiding from you, I intended on starting your barrier training after this case. I suppose if you're ready now, Gene can teach you on your own time. Then again, seeing as how you were dragged down a hall by a spirit I see how you want to learn as soon as possible..." He turned to walk back to Base, and Mai was at his tail in an instant. "The fault also lies with me. I should've taken the proper precautions and had Gene teach you before the case. For that, I apologize."

To hear two apologies from Naru in a time frame of two months was nothing short of astonishing, let alone the previous gratitude he'd shown since the moments after the PK incident in the Blank Room. She doubted anyone had received such admissions from Naru before other than Gene or his parents, but even those variables were unlikely and probably rare.
"I-it's not your fault," Mai told him, still shaky. "It's not like you could've foreseen this happening, but... What did you mean about not being able to create a barrier?" Better to get the awkward tension out of the air by changing the subject, and what better way than Naru going into lecture mode?

"Gene was incapable of manipulating PK," Naru stated monotonously. "It wasn't in his abilities, hence he was unable to create a PK barrier. He could conform and regulate mine, but to utilize it himself was impossible. As for me, I am generally only capable of creating a weapon with my PK. There are minor exceptions, such as card and magic tricks or moving objects at will. But to form a weaponized barrier... I haven't experimented enough due to the ill effects of using my PK, but Gene as an ESP user and a spiritualist was capable of creating barriers against spirits. Takigawa's tokkosho is a similar example. With some training, you may be able to perform both spiritual barriers and PK barriers. You might even be able to teach me once you've mastered it."

Teach Naru something? Talk about unprecedented! Since when does Dr. Oliver Davis not know how to do something?

Mai smiled wryly. "I guess I'll look forward to that."

"As you should be." Okay, that was a little arrogant.

"More like, as I will."

He spared her a glance out of the corner of his eye. They had walked to the door leading to base, and he nodded. "As you will."

Then he opened the door.

"Mai, by the word, what did the spirit do to you?!" Ayako exclaimed, leaping out of her seat and rushing to locate the first-aid kit the moment she and Naru entered Base. "They're everywhere!"

"Are you alright?" John asked, appearing at her side. He looked willing to catch her if she began to fall, arms outstretched slightly at his sides. "I'm sorry, that's probably not the right question right now... You're hardly alright."

Yasu added in, "Wow, Mai that does look pretty bad... It's just lucky you're not seriously injured."

That was true. Although her open wounds stung with a fiery passion, she wasn't bleeding, and her scratches were nothing more than superficial cuts that would go away within a couple weeks. She was truly lucky Alice hadn't led her down a flight of stairs or worse...

"Jeez, Naru!" Monk admonished, hands at his hips. "You could've at least been a gentleman and carried the poor girl back to Base! I mean seriously, she's in pain, man!" Mai sweatdropped and reddened at the idea of Naru carrying her. The idea just didn't seem real in her mind.

"Seeing as how she's fine to walk by herself, I hardly think my services are required. Besides," Naru closed his eyes, crossing his arms in the process, "I think Mai has been dragged around enough for one day."

With the elegance of a trained ballerina, Masako slowly walked towards Mai to inspect the damage. Grasping her hand, Masako glared at the scratch marks with unordinary disdain. "Although I normally shy away from public displays of affections," the medium declared coldly, "I would digress with Takigawa on this one, Dr. Davis."

"Wha?" Mai was taken aback, especially by Masako's concern. Usually she was as stoically indifferent as Naru. She waved her hands in frantic dismissal. "Really, guys! The burns hurts, but I'll
be fine. You know I've been through worse!"

This was apparently the very last thing she should've said, as the atmosphere in the room went from worried to very, very serious. A knife could've cut the tension in the air.

"Mai," Masako called, the ice in her tone enough to elicit a flinch, "we are all well aware of how reckless you are, as well as the extent you've gone through for cases. We don't need a reminder."

Memories of cases past flashed in her mind, and she deflated like a balloon. This was exactly why she wanted to be able to protect herself. Then she wouldn't have to have people worry about her like this.

"Be that as it may," Naru interrupted their exchange. "We need to learn the facts of your encounter with the entity, Mai. Care to explain?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Of course."

"How about she sits down first," Ayako said, the med-kit in hand. It was more of an order. "Her burns need to be cleaned and dressed. I am this team's medical doctor, after all. The story can wait until I'm done."

"Then proceed." Although Naru had consented, she could tell he wanted to examine Mai's story.

So as Ayako sat her down on a chair, disinfected her burns, and applied a mass variety of bandages on her arms, hands, legs, and feet, Mai told her tale in painstaking detail so she wouldn't be overly interrogated by her partner when she finished. Naru was known to be extensively (more like excessively) through after all.

"Alice believes you to be the White Queen." It wasn't a question on Naru's part.

"Yeah, but who is that?" Mai wondered. "I honestly don't even know what 'Alice' is supposed to be, Naru. Some character from 'Wonderland' or something, right? And who's this 'Knave of Spades' she was talking about? She said that the Knave of Hearts wouldn't let the White Queen, or, well, me, I guess, be taken."

"Had you read the book before we left like I advised, you wouldn't be confused. Idiot."

"Well, sorry that I forgot!"

Yasu intercepted before a fight could break out, "Why don't you give us a mini lecture on the story, Big Boss? We all probably need a bit of a refresher."

"It couldn't hurt," John added in softly. "I haven't read the story since I was a child."

"Same here," Monk admitted, and Ayako said the same.

Naru leaned against the edge of the main table, and crossed one leg over another. It was practically his signature pose. "Seeing as how you're all keen to forget the main priority of our case, I'll have to spell it out for you." Everyone sweatdropped at his waspish attitude. Then he began.

"'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' was published in 1865 by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson otherwise more famously known by his pen name Lewis Carroll, an author of various novels and poetry, most commonly referencing his most notorious work. However, the novel was created for the purpose of entertaining a certain a real, living girl by the name of 'Alice Liddell' whose family was supposedly well acquainted with Carroll.
"The story was about a young girl, Alice, who followed a rabbit down a rabbit hole. She fell into Wonderland, a mythical universe of nonsense and magic. Throughout her adventure she met character after character, who were all strange in their own way. The most famous characters are Alice herself, the Mad Hatter, the White Rabbit, the Cheshire Cat, the Jabberwocky, the Queen of Hearts, the White Queen, among others.

"The White Queen wasn't particularly normal compared to the rest, but through the various adaptations of 'Alice in Wonderland' she is often described as purity incarnate and the like. As for the Knave of Spades… Such a title or character does not exist. There has been a Knave of Hearts, or White Knight, or even a Red Knight, but the title 'Knave of Spades' does not."

"Umm…" Mai spoke up. "How does the novel end, Naru?"

"The whole story ended up being a dream. She woke up. The rest you can read yourself." From his jacket pocket, he slipped out a small book. As expected it was 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. He handed it to her and she took it without much thought.

"My question is, why does Alice think Mai is the White Queen?" Ayako pondered aloud. "What exactly does that mean for her? She said she'd come back, right? Mai's become a target of Alice's whims." That was a good point. How could she be seen as 'purity incarnate'? Sure Mai was nice and kind and innocent, but she was hardly perfect. Being human basically meant you were born with flaws, and Mai had more than a few.

"Mai's aura is beacon of light to spirits," Masako answered eloquently. "It's her soul itself that draws them to her. Her kind personality and willingness to help others reflects in her soul and attracts them to her. It's the only explanation for how she's considered to be the 'White Queen'. Being a perfect medium also helps in this regard, but it's also why Mai is often the one being attacked, taken, or led astray by spirits. Isn't that correct, Dr. Davis?"

"That is correct."

"But then who's this other ghost who stopped Alice from taking Mai?" Monk asked. "She was the 'chosen one', right?"

"All I know is that the spirit almost had the exact same voice as Alice," Mai reiterated. "She seemed pretty adamant in stopping her from taking me, but I don't know why…"

"I think it's a good theory that Alice is behind that one patient's disappearance," Ayako surmised, and most of the group mumbled their agreements.

"Wait!" Yasu interrupted violently, startling the team with his outburst. "Didn't you say that Alice Liddell was the basis for the Alice of the story, Big Boss? Could this be some form of her?"

"That would be impossible," Naru denied. "Alice Liddell was never admitted into Lockbridge, nor did she live anywhere in the common vicinity. She's buried on the other side of London. The same goes for Lewis Carroll. Who we're dealing with is someone else."

"But what of the Knave of Spades?" John mentioned quietly. "Who is that supposed to be? If the character itself never existed…"

"There's also the fact that this place is infested with ghosts," Masako murmured, snagging the group's attention. "Most are harmless, but there's something else here, something riddled in shadow and darkness and the stench of blood. It reeks."

"I felt it too, but…" Mai shook her head. "I don't think Alice is the exact cause of the foul
atmosphere here… I can't really explain it… Something's just off about this place."

"Well, for only being here for an hour, the amount of activity is something to be noted. From now on, none of you are to be alone." Naru leveled each of them with a pointed glare, daring him to defy him. "And since everyone has returned, we need to get back to work. Yasu, you're to research any patients matching the description or name of the entity in the hospital archives. Monk, you will accompany him. John and Miss Hara, you will gather temperature readings and go on another walk-through of the hospital. Ms. Matsuzaki, I want you to make us some charms while Lin, Mai, and myself interview the staff. That is all. Disperse."

So that was how Mai got stuck with Naru interviewing the staff, taking notes and asking questions when curiosity struck. Mind you, this went on for three hours. As it ended up, nearly the entire staff, which was probably over some hundred-fifty people came and went from Base throughout the course of the evening. Some stories were interesting enough, but most were easily-explained poltergeists caused by the less active spirits wandering aimlessly through Lockbridge. Few stories were actually relevant to the Alice situation. Until a young nurse came in, who also happened to be their last on their list of clients to interview.

"What's your name and experience with the paranormal while in the hospital?" Naru asked impatiently, getting straight to the point. Mai had given up on reminding him to be polite and greet their clients since her own pleasantries had gone slack a hour ago. She was ready to be done with this monotony and get some sleep. At least Gene would have something interesting to say about this case… Hopefully.

"Ah, yes," the woman said quietly. "My name is Alicia Gardener." She was petite, with soft blond hair and bright blue eyes. Although Mai had seen similar staff-members with this look, for some reason this woman struck her. Alice, she realized. She looks like an older version of Alice! Mai straightened in her seat, her instincts ringing with truth. What did it mean? She shot a glance at Naru, who caught it, before she whipped back to the current client. Alicia, was it? Even her name is similar!

"Um… Is there something wrong?" Alicia wondered, brows knit.

Mai waved away her worry. "Oh, no, it's nothing! Really, I just thought you looked like someone I knew for a second…"

"You think I look like 'Alice', don't you?"

Mai's gut dropped to the floor. She'd been caught red-handed. How embarrassing… And rude to compare someone to a ghost… Idiot, Mai… Naru's probably mentally rolling his eyes at you for your stupidity!

Mai was about to frantically attempt to clean up her mess, but Alicia spoke before she could try, "It's quite alright, you know. I know you meant no harm by it. Based on your reaction, you're rather upset with yourself for accidentally being a bit, how should we say… Indelicate with your word choice?" She giggled slightly. "Many of the staff who've seen 'Alice' have said the same thing about me. I've gotten rather used to it, I suppose, although I do find it a little strange that we look alike."

"As ironic as that may be," Naru intercepted curtly, "what was your purpose in coming here?"

"Oh, yes, I apologize for distracting your partner." Alicia turned to Naru with certain ruefulness in her eyes. "I believe Director Morgenstern explained a bit about me. You see, I'm the first person to meet Alice." This snatched their attention. "It was July 3rd around 12 p.m. It was so shocking that I can hardly forget it."
"Did something happen in this exchange that was particularly memorable other than being your first experience with the supernatural?" Naru questioned.

"Well, this 'Alice' that's been going around the hospital is considered rather… Malicious… Dragging people down halls or giggling manically, but the 'Alice' I encountered was… Different."

Mai leaned forward. "Different how?"

"She seemed terrified… And that's putting it lightly. She even spoke with me. She said, 'Run away while you still can. Wonderland has reappeared… Nothing will ever be what it seems.'"

A chill crawled along the flesh of Mai's spine. Nothing will ever be what it seems… Why does that line make me so scared?

Naru tapped a single finger on the table. "Did the entity say or do anything else?"

"No… But I haven't seen that version of her since then. I've seen the other one every now and then, although she hasn't done anything to me. I've heard her giggle, but nothing else…"

"The information is appreciated," Naru stated, and Mai knew that he meant it. This data was intriguing and could possibly lead them to answers. "If that is all, please take your leave."

With that, Alicia Gardener left the premises, leaving Mai to the silent duo. Lin had barely spoken a word in the past three hours, and Naru only spoke when addressing clients... What was the rest of the team doing that required being away for so long? They could've at least brought back some dinner for her… As if on cue, her stomach growled. In a dramatic show of annoyance, Mai leaned back in her seat in a rather lackadaisical pose.

"There are snacks in the cupboards," Lin told her, pausing in his typing, and Mai immediately leapt out of her seat to storm the kitchenette for food. "I'm afraid the rest of the team won't be back until a bit late, either. They were sent on a few errands around the building other than Noll's initial orders." So that left out dinner… Great. Well, it was already dark out, and she was pretty tired.

In the land of dreams, the Astral Plane awaited her. And so did Gene.

Making a couple cups of tea for her teammates who graciously muttered their thanks, and a snack for herself, Mai rested on one of the various couches surrounding Base, and began to read 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. As the clock ticked along in relative silence, pages passed and the story unfolded before her eyes. Eventually as she neared the end, sleepiness began to flood her veins. As much as she'd rather sleep on an actual bed, Naru had mandated not to be alone. So until Masako or Ayako came back, she was stuck in Base. It was whatever.

Astral Plane
9:34 p.m.

After a brief meet-and-greet with Gene about learning to manipulate a PK barrier, they planned on practicing tomorrow after she woke up. She also asked if he'd been able to sense anything about Lockbridge, to which he shook his head in the negative.

Then she dove into her post-cognitive dreams.
Shackles adorned her wrists, cutting the skin and forming newfound welts. Her steps were staggered and tremulous, shaky from the fear, the terror, the haunting knowledge behind this entire situation.

She wasn’t crazy. She wasn’t. She wasn’t crazy.

“That’s what they all say,” the men had said before locking the shackles on her wrists and took her away from her family. The family who’d scorned her.

She was eight years old.

A child.

An innocent.

How could a child of eight be condemned as ‘insane’? It was ludicrous, beyond ludicrous. Maddening.

No. She wasn’t mad! She wasn’t!

Heartbeats quickened, her breath caught in her lungs, but bile rose in throat. She felt sick.

Her future was bleak. She’d seen it. Fought against it. But fate had sought her out and dragged her back to the path she’d been meant for.

A path of misfortune and unprecedented pain.

She didn’t deserve this. No one did. Especially not an innocent. Not someone misunderstood.

She never should’ve admitted it. Never should’ve shown it. Never should’ve been able to do it. It shouldn’t be possible. Yet here she was. Her future never came out wrong. Never. Ever. She was always right.

Why couldn’t she be wrong for once? Just this once? She could see all the pain in the world and wouldn’t care. Wouldn’t interfere. She would be a good girl. Be an observer and not attempt to save those she saw… Swallowing the bile, she clenched her shut as the men dragged her onward, pushing her forward and muttering curses about children and their lack of understanding.

She was lying to herself to save her own skin. But that was pointless wasn’t it? Fighting fate… It was what she did. She’d saved someone in the past. Kept them from leaving, from dying. It was the right thing to do, no matter the cost. Was this the cost? She wasn’t crazy.

The world saw her as crazy.

But she wasn’t crazy.

She was special. She should’ve been praised as a miracle, but people misunderstood miracles for curses every now and again. They forsook the incomprehensible as something dangerous, something to stow away and lock in secret rooms. Until all that was left was a shell.

Would she become a shell? Would she really go crazy?

She wasn’t crazy.

Her prison spread out before her, the doors newly polished and distinctly Victorian. It was the style of the age. The wonder of London. But she was entering a world beyond the rich and wonder and soot of London’s intrinsic beauty. She was entering a place where she would take her last breath.
She knew exactly how she was going to die.
And it was not going to be a pretty death.
The doors of Lockbridge Insane Asylum opened up for her, and darkness swallowed her whole.

"You…" a voice whispered, a soft echo murmuring songs of lost time. "The White Queen."

Mai's eyes snapped open, and bolted upright to her feet. She was still in the Astral Plane, but Gene was nowhere in sight. Spheres of light floated around her, and in the distance a figure stood, adorned in a frilly vintage gown. Young. Blonde. Blue irises known only to fairytale.

"Are you talking about me?" Mai asked, prepared to flee.

"Beware, my Queen..." Alice whispered. "Nothing is as it seems. Unclear clarity. May the Knave of Spades save you in time..."

"What are you talking about?" Mai demanded now. "There is no such thing as the Knave of Spades! Who are you talking about?" Okay, maybe yelling at a spirit wasn't exactly the right way to go about an interrogation, but she couldn't help it.

"The Knave of Darkness who stays at the side of light... The one whose string lies entangled with your own. Forever..."

Darkness. Light. String. Entangled. Forever. "You're... Are you talking about Naru? But what about the other Alice? Are you the one from my dream? Why do you act like two different people?"

Alice glanced away, her expression portraying every horror imaginable. "The White Rabbit will appear soon. Find him. Find me. Find Wonderland. Nothing is as it seems, my Queen. I bid you farewell."

Without another word, the Astral Plane vanished in an instant and Mai fell.

Fell.
And fell.
Then...

Whiteness.

Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, London, England (UK)
August, Day II
4:25 a.m.

Mai was throttled into the waking world of the living, the sensation of falling making her flinch as she slammed onto the cold tile floor hard enough to bruise. Groaning at the harsh wake-up-call, she managed to preserve a fraction of her dignity by immediately moving to her feet and snatching up the covers she'd dropped with her.
Wait.

Covers?

She hadn't gone to sleep with any covers.

Officially confused, she whipped her head around to find herself in the girls' residencial room. Stacked with two sets of bunkbeds, Masako and Ayako slept soundly in the opposite bunk, unmoving in the seeable darkness. How had she gotten here? And what time was it? Based on the lack of light, it was still early. Great. Just great. And since she was wide awake, there was no going back to sleep.

_I guess I might as well search for Naru and tell him about my dream… If he's still up, anyway… Wait! Didn't Gene once say that I'd be able to sense if he was awake or something like that? Hmm… It's worth a shot, but Naru's emotions are being stubborn as usual. It's like waiting for paint to dry._

Closing her eyes, she focused on a place beyond physical boundaries, and found her and Naru's bond floating in the intangible realm of souls, strung together and unbreakable. Forever… _This must've been what Alice meant. I guess I never really cared to look at it like this before… It's interesting!_

With a metaphysical hand, she reached for it and curled her fingers around its surface. A flux of new energy engulfed her, making her choke. It was too much information. It was almost sickening. And dreadfully exhausting… Just what was this thing made of, anyway? Their souls? She could hazard a guess, but she'd probably be wrong.

Trying again, she was a bit more tentative and barely scratched the surface. This time, only her desired information combed her mind. Naru was awake and… Thinking? She couldn't understand his thoughts, as if echoing long into a distant hallway without reaching her ears.

_Didn't Naru say that we'd be able to speak telepathically in the future? Maybe this is the beginning of that? Hmm… Better not push it._

Like feeling out his emotions, words would come in time.

_Hold on a second… Can Naru feel me prodding the bond or, well, his mind? If so, whoops…_

Slipping out of the room, she crossed the creepily lit hall and entered Base as quickly as possible, nearly slamming the door shut in her haste. Heart racing, she located Naru at the monitors, the only light source in the room. Strolling up to him, she noted the wetness of his hair and an uncharacteristic flush to his cheeks. Apparently, the Narcissist had recently showered. Jeez… Someone seriously shouldn’t look that sexy after just stepping out of the shower… Especially this early in the morning. It was morning, right?

Scoffing slightly to herself, she seated herself at his side, her arms crossed over the back of the chair as she leaned her head onto her arms. "Do you always wake up this early during a case?" Mai inquired by way of greeting. "I mean, I can see you as an insomniac due to your workaholic tendencies, but it's not exactly healthy for you, Naru."

He spared her a glance out of the corner of his eye. "How I sleep is none of your concern, Mai."

"Hmm… I'm pretty sure when you love someone, you tend to worry about their health. Or is that just me?" Somehow she was feeling slightly playful for so early in the morning. She winked at him.

And Naru sighed, his shoulders falling with the action. Still, she couldn't tell what was on his mind.
"What are you thinking about?" Mai asked softly, curiously. "I suppose for a genius you have a lot to think about on a daily basis, but what are your thoughts right now? In this moment?"

In all their time together in last two months, they rarely, if ever, engaged in casual conversation. In something normal. In something anyone would do. In something beyond work and training and school. In something heartfelt.

Naru stared at her, unspeaking. Then… "I'm thinking that you're too truthful for your own good."

"Most people say it's my most defining quality." Mai smiled.

"Defining doesn't specifically mean best, idiot."

She rolled her eyes. "Way to ruin my happiness. Really, I totally needed to hear that at this hour of the morning."

"You asked."

"Yeah, but you don't have to be rude about it."

"... And you?"

"What?"

"And you?"

"Huh?"

"Your thoughts, Mai."

Oh, this was interesting. What to say? What to say? She could've started listing off his various supercilious qualities just to annoy him, but that wouldn't be the truth, would it? Smiling slightly, she murmured, "I'm thinking that I like this. Simply being able to talk to you without any strings attached. Talking about anything we want to. Anything in the world."

"That's a stupid thought," Naru replied.

Her smile dropped into a scowl. "Oh, because yours was simply fantastic, right? Because an insult is just a great thought. Very enlightening."

Naru sighed once again, but this time it was in exasperation, "Why did you come out here for in the first place, Mai? I know you tried to access the bond's telepathic link, but failed. Is there anything of importance I need to know?"

So he did feel it. "I had a dream," Mai told him, getting down to business. "I think it'll help piece together the mystery. Although, I think we'll have more questions than answers…"

"Tell me."

So she did, and their morning was filled with plots of possibility, brainstorming, and of course, a bit of tea later on.

"You give what you give cause they make you,
Trapped inside a place that won't take you,
And they want you to be what they make you,

It's already over and done,
When you're young."

-Three Doors Down, When You're Young

Stasis
**Stasis:** The state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces.

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**Location:** Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, London, England (UK) . . .

**Date:** August, Day II . . .

**Time:** 8:00 a.m . . .

Oliver Davis observed the building’s structural floor-plan with no spark of development as he analysed the areas in which Mai had been dragged yesterday afternoon.

From Mai’s dream, only more questions arose and fewer answers were made clear. Not to say that the case was stalled, but it was intriguing. How thick did the mystery deepen? A ghost with an identical description of Alice, but whose personality was duplicitous, a missing patient, Mai being dragged the hall, along with other cases of such activity, and the fact that both Mai and himself had been declared characters.

What did it mean?

Why did this haunting happen so abruptly? If Alice had never been a problem more than a few weeks ago… Where was the catalyst? If Alicia Gardener had been the first one to see Alice, was it merely coincidence they had similar appearances? He hardly believed in coincidences. Not in his line of work. Leave one piece of the mystery alone and the entire explanation can become misconstrued later on. Better to check than to leave it alone.

Solving conundrums was his specialty, but without the proper research and evidence and even he was left without a clue. A basis of fact was the sole method of determining a solution. And within a few minutes, Yasu and Madoka would be arriving with news on their individual research projects.

Yesterday morning, he'd sent Madoka off to search for details on their missing patient's family after a receiving the paperwork to allow the team access into Lockbridge's inner workings. He'd also gotten approval for Yasu to leaf through hospital archives for any information relevant to the case. That'd been yesterday afternoon. But due to several annoying inconveniences throughout the course of the evening, their team meeting had been stalled to the following morning.

Sparing a glance at the clock, he mentally counted down the seconds before his team's entry. Such calculations were of simple means. Their patterns had become predictable two years ago, and he doubted it had changed since.

*Three.*

*Two.*
"Ugh, you know, I doubt I'll ever get used to a regular English-styled breakfast," Takigawa groaned, the door to Base opening as a trail of members followed in his wake. "Give me my Japanese food back!"

Mai came in a second later, smiling and laughing. Somehow the image interested him. Peaked his senses. As if her presence made a difference. But why? How? Ever since she'd arrived in England, he'd had a strange sensation emerge in his stomach whenever he saw her. Again questions rose in the air. Even this morning, something in him had shifted.

Perhaps Mai herself and not the bond would be another conundrum in his life to decipher.

"I have to say I agree," Mai admitted. "But it's still really good!"

"True…," Takigawa amended.

"Ah, Naru!" Mai redirected, prancing up to his side. "Hey! Did you even eat breakfast other than the tea I made four hours ago?" A frown of discontent marred her lips, as if prepared to fully berate him if he hadn't.

"I ate," he said simply. Then added, "But I hardly see how that's any concern of yours."

A spark of hurt and indignation flitted across the bond. Perhaps that'd been the wrong thing to say.

"Not my concern?" she repeated slowly, as if echoing it to herself. "Of course it's my concern, Naru! You're my partner!"

Somehow he found that wasn't what he'd wanted her to say. His chest twisted. Why?

"Be that as it may," he found himself saying, "I'm a grown adult, Mai. The last thing you need to be concerned about is my health. I believe we covered that this morning."

"And I believe we covered my response to that as well." A solidary brow rose in the air, daring him to deny it.

Naru pursed his lips. Mai had made her point clear months ago whilst in the midst of perhaps one of the biggest breakthroughs that the parapsychological community had ever experienced. While they'd stood amongst the future. What deviousness. Declaring her feelings for him while set amongst a place of unforetold peril. He was still identifying the details of the experience for his newest thesis. Nevertheless, the scientific portion of that event was hardly of relevance for their current state of affairs.

Truth be told, he was still reeling with the revelation that Mai loved him.

Love.

What an indescribable notion. Another conundrum in his life to dissect. Although he understood the science and anatomy of it, the emotional, mental aspects continued to elude him. It had only been in those final moments spent in the future that the concept-solely driven by the bond's interference and effects-become relatively conceivable.

Not only that.

No. Apparently, it had never been Gene.

It had been Naru all along.

And why did that... Make him... Appeased? Was that what he felt? Appeasement... No...

Something else...

Why?

And what?

"Earth to Naru~!" Mai sang merrily, waving a hand in front of his face. "Earth to the Narcissist~! Helloooo~"

Naru blinked, effectively torn from his thoughts. He frowned. "Stop that." But Mai was grinning, again keeping him from progressing in his work, or really, any form of professionalism.

Why? he thought in a hiss.

"As much as I love for your character to develop in this exceedingly slow-paced love story, I'm afraid we have a case to finish first, Big Boss." Now that, *that* halted whatever confusing thoughts misconstrued his intellect.

So he faced his research assistant and former mentor from the head of the room, and inexpressibly queried, "What do you have?"

Yasu smiled, and it was *that* smile. The one that meant he knew more than he was letting on, before gesturing to Madoka. "Ladies first."

"Such a gentleman, Yasu," his former mentor appraised slyly. Their fake flirting always induced the desire to roll his eyes. The two never ceased to be suspicious in both their actions and motives, as if constantly hatching underhanded schemes beneath everyone's noses. He knew to be wary of them both.

Then the two researchers settled down to business.

"I'm sure you were all wondering why I wasn't here yesterday," Madoka began, "but that was because Noll neglected to inform you that he'd sent me off to London's local archives to locate the family of our missing patient." She sent him an unimpressed glower, to which he duly ignored. "You see, there aren't actual family members that the hospital has on record, nor any relatives to contact. Anyway, the patient's name is Peter Balts, a Latvian-Englishman, I suppose you can say. His family moved here several generations ago and their main occupation was in a local workshop for clocks. In essence, they were clockworkers. His family was small to begin with, but after a string of events, every last member of his family died. They all died of natural and explainable causes, but Peter himself was diagnosed with an extreme case of Bipolar disorder when he was sixteen. More specifically, the issue was his aggression and as such, was arrested four years ago for assault.

"Having been at Lockbridge for several years now, the severity of his condition has decreased and he's apparently become, for lack of a better word, nice. Normal, almost. That's when Alice appeared, and everything became much worse. To go around the complex terminology, I'll just say that exhibited signs of lessening sanity, and became rather *odd*. Between abrupt flashes of unexpected aggression, being locked in the ward for the more violent patients, muttering incoherently about Alice and time and clocks and Wonderland, he became a whole other person. Then three weeks ago, he disappeared without a trace. There was no evidence of tampering with his room or any signs of
departure. To say the least, it's a perfect disappearance. In this regard, I'd like to entertain the idea that perhaps what we're dealing with is similar to Urado."

At the mention of Urado, there was no trickle of fear down the bond, rather there was only contemplation and intensity. Hmm...

"If that's the case, then I still don't think Alice is our main issue here," Mai said, specifically addressing Naru, but there was a crease in her brows that voiced minor fringes of doubt.

"Intuition?" he questioned.

She hesitated. "I… I-I… I'm not sure. It's kind of mixed up at the moment, but if you think about the strangeness of my dream and what Alicia Gardener experienced, it makes some sense."

"Wait!" Ayako said. "You had a dream, Mai?"

His partner then presumed to explain her dream from last night. How she'd taken on the perspective of who she assumed was Alice, and that Alice herself confirmed Naru was the fictionalized Knave of Spades.

When she was done, he distastefully tested, "And you don't remember this girl's exact thoughts, Mai?" They'd gone over this earlier in the morning, but he wanted to reiterate. Finite details were the tailends of future prospects and the more information the better.

She tapped her chin in thought, gaze absently following the angles of the walls. "Oh, yeah!" she burst, startling the majority of their team with her sudden outburst. Naru went unperturbed. "She was thinking along the lines of, 'I know how this is going to end. I know how I'm going to die. I've seen it.' Then she thought, 'I should be considered a miracle, instead I'm thought to be a curse..' It was strange," Mai added as afterthought. "And it wasn't like she was guessing that she was going to live there for the rest of her life, but it's like she was certain of her death and how exactly she was going to die…"

A cord struck deep in Naru's mind, a sonorous clang of massive proportions. Eyes widening, he stalled completely, frozen in the revelation.

"She was a precognitive psychic," Naru murmured.

But does it mean anything? If the girl from Mai's dream was our spirit, then could her being psychic lead her to her demise? Lead to her demise...Suddenly a mass of questions spilled as the answers collided and possibilities arose. Could her being psychic be the cause or reason behind her death? As if she'd been killed because of it... Does this go beyond one spirit? No evidence has been found to prove as much, but the possibility is open. We don't have the whole story.

"Naru, you're a genius!" Mai exclaimed, but he was too caught up in his thoughts to notice the compliment, let alone elaborate on his intelligence as he snapped back to Yasu.

"Did any of your research pertain to this?"

Their secondary researcher grinned at the mention. "You're in luck, Big Boss. In that dirty old basement full of half-written archives and undusted shelves, I actually managed to find several people who could possibly be our spirit. The people I found were under your conditions: from post-1865 and were under twenty. Unfortunately I was unable to locate pictures of these patients, but their ages and diagnoses were documented in relative detail. In total, we have a compilation of ten names, but one in particular stands out. The name Alysse Wild sound interesting to you all? And now that you mentioned Mai's dream, Alysse Wild's file states she was brought to Lockbridge in 1867 due to
her parent's decision, because she was said to have strange 'visions' where she'd black out and wake up hours later muttering incomprehensibly for some time before returning to a normal state of awareness."

_Alysse Wild then..._

"Does her file say when she died?" Mai asked, to which Yasu shook his head.

"The notes on her treatment stopped abruptly in May of 1868, but there isn't any documentation of her death or any type of release papers. It's as if she dropped off the face of the Earth."

"Well, that's certainly suspicious," Miss Matsuzaki mentioned snidely.

Miss Hara added in, "If you consider the time-period and lack of proactive mental health facilities like we have today, it's not too hard to believe, but given the facts of the case, it's possible that something went wrong."

"Wrong as in _died_," Takigawa stated ominously, the group falling into a hush.

Naru crossed his arms amid the silence. "The questions now are how she died, and why she's still here." And if there isn't any mention of a split-personality anywhere in her file, why does her personality change? Earlier... Mai said that the White Rabbit would appear soon. What does that mean? What's the reasoning behind dragging people down halls? Is there meaning in it?

"Well, if you consider the time-period," John mused, "it's possible she was mistreated during her time here. And given the facts of Mai's dream, it seems highly probable."

Yasu repositioned his glasses. "While dragging people down halls is rather harmful and most certainly rude, Alice doesn't seem to have directly hurt anyone though. It's more like she's using scare tactics."

"As if to warn people?" Mai asked, incredulous. "The one Alicia Gardener saw and the one from my dream were nice enough, but the other one? She's dragging people down halls out of her own twisted amusement. She even said she'd come back for me."

"Then there's Peter Balts, who also disappeared rather abruptly," Miss Hara reiterated quietly.

Takigawa intercepted, "Yeah, what's with that? I mean it's not rare for disappearances to occur when it comes to a haunting, but where's the connection to Alice? Is there a certain demographic he falls into for him to have gone missing? Everything seems kinda random right now."

There was only one demographic that would make sense at the moment, but until proven was pointless to mention.

"A possession is plausible, or maybe even physical immobilization," Mai speculated, shrugging her shoulders. "He could've wandered off all on his own like in the Urado case and been taken by whatever else haunts these halls. Like Masako and I stated before, something else is here, hiding in the background. I get the feeling that Alice is only the beginning of a much darker story…"

"Whatever the fact is, won't hinder us from finding it," Naru declared with his ever-monotonous dispassion. "In the meantime, we need to get back to work. The rest of you may walk around the hospital to try and locate our entity in the areas which've had the most significant drop or rise in temperature in the last twelve hours. Use whatever method you see fit to employ, but make sure none of you are ever alone. Madoka, Yasu, I want you two to do in depth research of the Lockbridge staff and peers as well as Alysse Wild's personal history from birth to the timing of her disappearance. Mai
and Lin, you're with me. We're going to speak with Director Morgenstern.

9:24 A.M.

After receiving permission from Dr. Morgenstern, Mai, Naru, and Lin were sent to see a patient whose sudden, current obsession with Alice and Wonderland was far from healthy. His abrupt change had also transpired within the course of a twenty-four hour time period. Apparently, his name was Cedric Quill, and up until their arrival, had been on the road to release and was mostly recovered from a case of severe depression. What was more, was that he was locked inside a padded room. With a strait jacket. To say that Mai was unaffected would be a lie.

What could possibly go wrong?

Right? Right…?

Already her instincts burned with unsuppressed anxiety as they waited to enter the room. Luckily, a doctor and a series of guards were going to be inside with them when they interviewed the client.

"Hey, Naru-

"This is as far as we'll be requiring your services," Naru stated tonelessly. Okay, maybe not…

He was addressing the small crowd of hospital workers and security at their back. When they tried to argue that it was against hospital policy, Naru added, "Director Morgenstern has allowed me full access to the building, which includes its staff and patients when deemed necessary to the investigation. You are to act under my rules and regulations as directed by your superior. If any of you have a problem with that, you may speak with Director Morgenstern. Also, when speaking with a client, their experiences are to be documented under a strict series of protocol divulged only under strict privacy, unless stated otherwise by the client. It is just the same as when they are your client. Strict privacy."

Mai smiled wryly at the chagrined staff, hoping to appease them with an apologetic smile for her partner's less than cordial means of explaining his agenda. But really, she understood where Naru was coming from. She just wished he'd say it with a little less of a deadpan and a little more amicably.

She doubted that was ever going to happen.

"Lin, stand watch outside. Mai and myself will interview Mr. Quill." Basically, he wanted Lin to man the door in case someone got any funny ideas. How quaint.

"Be careful," Lin quietly advised. Naru walked inside, but Mai managed a smile and a nod. With the pervasive dread sitting in the bottom of her stomach, they'd definitely have to be. Surely Naru felt it, too?

Then again, Naru was nothing if not excessively careful. Minute impulses were usually sparked by testing or proking his pride, and neither of those issues had come up yet, so they should be clear to continue like in previous cases.

"Umm, Naru," she tried again, tugging him to her before the door shut behind them. "I don't think this is going to go well…"

He turned slightly, and Mai realized he was closer than she thought. She forced her nerves to remain
calm. "I know," he said, "but that's also what I'm hoping for."

Mai's eyes widened. What was that supposed to mean? But before she could voice another word, Naru stepped forward and the outside world was lost entirely and the door slammed to a close behind her.

A chilling burst of laughter crawled along the concave of her back. Cedric Quill. The patient couldn't be more than thirty, with scraggly black hair dyed a deep blue at the ends with slices of neon green in between. But it was his eyes that were truly fantastic, gleaming a bright, bloodshot blue.

In the padded room, only opaque white washed the walls—a stark, marshmallow hue, but there was a historically cruel undertone to it that set her teeth on edge. And their client was wrapped in strait jacket. It was like a present waiting to be opened.

And it was as if the scene was taken right off a movie set.

Naru positioned himself directly across from Mr. Quill, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest. It was the Narcissist's signature pose, she noted vaguely. Probably by habit, she instantly positioned himself at his side.

Mr. Quill was still laughing uncontrollably, face twisted in a way that made Mai cringe.

This was the incarnate of hysteria. Had Peter Balts experienced similar symptoms before disappearing? Based off various accounts, this was precisely the case. Or at least, that was why Director Morgenstern had told them to start here. They also intended to keep Mr. Quill on full surveillance just in case he ended up disappearing, and hoped to prevent that at any cost. Or maybe attempt to follow him. For the sake of the patient, she sincerely hoped they would simply try to prevent his disappearance rather than risk another life. If it came to that, Mai would fight tooth and nail to preserve Mr. Quill's safety.

Who knew what Alice what capable of? If this was even her work, anyways.

Mr. Quill was still laughing, so Mai whispered, "What exactly are you hoping to get from this, Naru?"

Naru's stare was in line with Mr. Quill's as he said, "A reaction." Mai furrowed her brows at that statement.

The laughter stopped abruptly, leaving a lethal silence in its absence. Mai watched warily for any indication of any other reaction out of Mr. Quill, but none transpired.

"Your doctors state you're obsessed with Wonderland, but I see no indication of such an obsession," Naru mentioned after a full minute, gaze still locked with the patient. "Were they wrong?"

But Mr. Quill smiled. "Wrong, you say? I say wrong is of the mind. Wrong is the way. Wrong is the right. I see no reason of wrongness in their thoughts, for they are wrongfully right."

Mai had no idea how to interpret that.

Their client continued, "But you... The Knave of Spades, you're always right. Always. Forever. Such things speak of eternity, do they not? Like her." His head swiveled to Mai, and she faced him head on, giving no ground to that wicked smile. "The Chosen One wants to protect you. I know she does. You are the light that will save us all... But... My Queen, you will die just like all the rest. Madness will call to you. The clock ticks, but the story has already been told. The last few unwritten pages have to be read, then this will end, and you, with all your light, will be snuffed out. Time will
"Are you trying to say that with the White Queen's death, Alice will move on?" Naru asked impassively.

"If you don't know, you must recite," Mr. Quill answered enigmatically.

"Recite what?"

"This story!" Mr. Quill responded enthusiastically. "Our story! Time's story! Time is key, time is the start, but it's also the end! The White Rabbit will say you were too late, but really, that's the start of the end. Time calls to time, dear Knave."

"Then…" Naru's dark smile was knowing in its arrogance. "Who is the Timekeeper?"

Mai snapped her head to Naru. What kind of question was that?

"Everything he's said relates to Time," Naru explained indulgently, tone devoid of any inflection. "'Time will end us all.' A name, not a thing. It's obvious. It also means that Alice is not the exact cause of Peter Balt's disappearance, but whoever the Timekeeper is."

Mr. Quill grinned impishly. "Clever little knave. The Chosen One was wrongfully right about you. Very clever, indeed. Clever calls to clever, dear Knave, but I'm afraid you know too much." That same smile turned vicious. "Time never thought you'd understand so quickly. Time was unknown, but Time underestimated…"

The door to the outside world locked shut. Whoever was outside then tried in vain to open it. It was shaking on its hinges, muffled shouts coming from Lin and the staff.

Mai felt no sense of spirits in the room either, which only left one other option as to how the door became locked.

Cedric Quill was a PK wielder.

Not good.

Not good at all.

"And to whom and I speaking with now?" Naru queried, blocking Mai behind him. Their own storages of PK were bouncing in their bones.

"I will be the Caterpillar," Mr. Quill replied hauntingly, crazed eyes wide and far, far too blue to be entirely human. "Usually you'd meet me after entering Wonderland, but the story's already been played out, and the White Rabbit is far too late, so here I am. But I'm afraid, this is all I can say."

With an array of clicks, Mr. Quill's strait-jacket slowly came undone. Mai gritted her teeth.

"Mai, I want you to try to form a PK barrier," Naru murmured, attention rapt in front of him.

Taken aback, Mai stared at him incredulously. "Right now?" she hissed. "I'll more than likely cause an explosion!"

"Don't fight me on this. Just do it."

"Oh, yes, you're both very peculiar, aren't you?" Mr. Quill pointed out raspily. "Peculiar and wonderful. Very, very, very wonderful. Fit for Wonderland, you are."
Naru said nothing.

"Visualize a wall." Mai outright jumped at the sudden appearance of the elder Davis twin, who'd simply materialized into a half sentient being in front of her. "Sorry," he said with a sheepish grin. "I have bad timing, don't I? Late, right?"

"I'm just glad you're here!" she admitted quietly. "Tell me how to create a barrier!"

"It's not as hard as you think, Mai," he assured her. "Just find a sense of stasis and visualize a wall in front of you."

"Uh… Okay?" She wasn't sure if she'd be capable, but she'd try. Staying alive was pretty important to her.

So as the last of Mr. Quill's straps came loose, Mai forced herself to close her eyes and maintain her center. Given her raging instincts, it was hard to do. Mai felt her PK fluctuate dangerously on the edges of her fingertips in the form of crackling sparks.

"Mai," Naru warned.

"I'm trying, okay! Just give me a second."

Keeping her eyes shut tight, she closed herself off from her current reality and placed her hands in front of her as a means of outwardly expressing her desires of a wall ahead of her. Inside her soul, latches clashed together in a form of PK stasis as she imagined a single wall conceived of pure energy.

All at once she snapped her eyes open, and it came into existence.

Sparkling, bright and thrumming with sparks of electricity. It was as translucent as a ghost-perfectly see-through. And Mai stood there, flabbergasted at the sight of it—of such tangible raw energy.

"Whoa…"

"Oh, Mai, you did it wrong!" Gene groaned at her side, snapping her back to the present. "You forgot to let Noll inside, too!"

"Huh?" It was only then she realized she'd left Naru on the other side of her barrier, completely alone with Cedric Quill.

What!

"Mai, you idiot," Naru sighed.

Oh no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no!

"Ju-just give me a minute, okay?! I can do this!"

"Time's up!" Cedric Quill sang, those crazy eyes wide as the straight-jacket fell to the ground. "Time wants you to start your fall!"

Mai didn't like the sound of that.

"Apparently, an alternative method will be necessary," Naru muttered. "Fine. Just stay still, Mai. We'll deal with barriers later."
He had an alternative…?

Mai really didn't like the sound of that.

From behind the transparent barrier, Mai watched as Naru's hands began to glow like heavenly fire sent from the gods.

"I never liked it when he did this," Gene murmured. "Using PK to act as a taser, but on a much more powerful scale. When we were younger, the person on the receiving end usually ended up with second degree burns… Hopefully, Noll's control has gotten better." Gene didn't exactly sound convinced though, and she bit her lip.

"The Knave protects the Queen, is he?" Cedric Quill remarked, fantastically enthralled. "Time never lies, and Time never dies."

"Ghosts may be considered immortal, but they are far from infinite. This plane of existence doesn't last forever, only other realms of existence can do that, and this," Naru snapped, "isn't one of them."

_What a piece of poetry, Mai thought. But it's far from the right timing, Naru!_

It was then that the straightjacket was flown in Naru's direction by a gale of PK energy, but all he did was hold up a hand, the fabric literally _burning_ in the matter of seconds. Cinders and ash were all that remained as they fluttered through the air. Mai's jaw dropped at the display of power. She hadn't seen Naru use his PK since the Cursed House case over two years ago, and it was quite a feat how he managed to control his massive stores of energy without batting an eye.

But Gene being Gene muttered, "What a showoff..." Had she been in any other situation she would've laughed, but now probably wasn't the best time.

Naru then had to fight off Mr. Quill by himself, Mai helpless to assist him.

Letting out a deranged war cry, Mr. Quill threw himself at Naru, who easily managed to evade, but the man was quicker than anyone she'd ever seen, as if assisted by some unseen force that wasn't his PK. If not a possession, what could it possibly be?

They parried blows, Naru primarily on the defensive for several moments, and Mai watched as the years of Tai Chi flowed in his every movement. The timing and precision and fluidity was portrayed in a visually spellbinding art. It was honestly quite beautiful, and she probably would've appreciated it a lot more had the situation not been so dire. Luckily for Naru, Mr. Quill couldn't utilize the extent of his PK while immersed in the fight. His movements were also impulsive, rash attempts rather than clean, concise and planned, but it was his preternatural quickness that kept Naru firmly on the defensive despite his obvious ability.

One second they were dodge and attack, dodge and attack, and another...

"Naru!"

Slamming against the door from an unexpected kick to the chest hard enough to rattle the door-frame, Naru was left breathless as the wind departed from his lungs. Unable to help him, all Mai could do was watch on in horror. Mr. Quill advanced, pressing his hands to Naru's exposed throat.

Despite his possibly impending doom, all Naru did was grit his teeth as he struggled to breathe.

"Idiot," Naru hissed, but it was in her home language. Startled, Mai realized that solid contact was all he needed.
Latching onto Mr. Quill's wrists, he channelled a fraction of his PK and let it spark. Crackling electricity tinged in hues of violet and gold fizzled along skin, slicing and burning, and a wretched scream pierced the air. Obviously seeing an opening, Naru then slapped a hand onto the patient's chest, immediately activating another pulse of PK.

This time, as the crack of PK erupted from Naru's palms, Mr. Quill went down, body seizing as his eyes rolled back into his head, instantly knocked out. Or worse.

In the aftermath, Naru let out a panting breath. Severing the flow of PK from his hands, the bright whiteness merely reverted back to his normal smooth palms.

"Is… Is he?" Mai was amazed and horrified at the same time, but concern primarily broke out across her features. "Are you…?"

Naru merely spared her a glance before bending down to check Mr. Quill's pulse. His shoulders instantly relaxed. Clearly someone hadn't been too sure, either.

"He'll be fine," he assured, voice tired yet cool. "Unconscious, perhaps, but fine."

Those wretched burns on Mr. Quill's wrists still steamed, and Mai fought to keep herself from throwing up. The skin was charred, bloodied and…

"Mai."

She snapped her gaze back up to her partner.

"Calm down. It's fine. Everything is fine."

For now. Good Gods. Had she forgotten how terrifying this could be? Swallowing harshly, she raked her hands through her hair. Ghosts were one thing, but PK was another. It was volatile and utterly destructive. Only when utilized correctly could it be used for good.

Eventually, she thought. Eventually, I'll learn.

"He's right, you know," Gene added in a whispered, still at her side. "Let the wall fall, angel. Things should be calm for a while now."

'Should' was the only reassurance one could get in their line of work, wasn't it?

Letting out a mirthless little laugh, she forced herself to breathe and locate her center. Closing her eyes once more, she imagined the crumbling of a great wall, piece by piece, stone by stone, until it fell into nothingness once more. With a final cut to her PK, the consistent thrumming of electricity left, only to be replaced with the sound of pounding.

Pounding... Against the door. Lin! She'd forgotten he'd been out there!

"Come along, Mai."

Naru was already at the door, opening it as a flush of doctors and staff waited for them outside and were they were greeted with relentless questions and a furious Koujo Lin. Naru mention to a worried Dr. Morgenstern that Mr. Quill should be placed under heavy sedation and sent to another hospital for the remainder of the investigation in case he also managed to disappear like Peter Balts, considering their similar circumstances involving 'Wonderland.' Naru was also minutely wincing, and if the flickering lapses of pain rendered across the bond was any indication, then clearly Naru was in far worse shape that she'd initially thought. An ache of worry churned in her gut. Naru
sighed, probably sensing it.

"You used PK on him, didn't you?" Lin muttered on their way back to Base. He shot a glance at Mai. "You both look exhausted."

Odd as it was, Mai was quite tired. Her body was no longer accustomed to expelling this much PK anymore. Most of their larger experiments in the lab were done once a week, but only minimal use was expected for the rest. Usually after a particularly large experiment, she'd have to sleep for about 12 hours to recharge.

"There was no other option," Naru said, and presumed to explain the situation in the padded-room. Afterwards, he added, "Be it best to not use PK again for the remainder of the investigation. The same goes for you, Mai."

"You're really alright, right?" she asked then, speaking for the first time since they'd left Mr. Quill. "No adverse effects? No problems?" She would kill him herself if he lied to her for that. "Your… Neck…" It was bruised and probably hurt. Not to mention his back…

"Your concern has been noted, but I'm fine, Mai. I've been dealt worse."

Descending into her 'down in the dumps' phase of her PK release, Mai merely sighed, "I'm sorry, Naru. Truly. I should be able to help more than just standing by… I was useless in there, and unable to help you despite how strong I could be…" Her hands drew into fists at her sides, a familiar fire igniting in her veins. "I will learn and I will strive. I will be the partner you need, I promise you. I just… Need a bit more time to fully grow into my powers."

Those indigo orbs were their normal stoic hue, but a fraction of them softened. "I never expected the transition to be easy," he admitted. "You have much to learn, but I know you. You're too stubborn to give up."

Grinning a bit despite the exhaustion, she winked. "One of my better qualities I suppose."

"One of many," Lin murmured with a small smile, and she couldn't help but let out a laugh.

She'd been roughly escorted though Lockbridge, the threat of the needle and an effortless sleep keeping her from struggling against their hold. Consciousness was a gift in this mad house. Abysmal black frequented most of her time, until her visions burst through her unconscious state and reminded her of what she would inevitably face in the near future.

A week had gone by already.

She'd already met Maddigan Crawl, a man with little left of his own sanity, even as his exact thoughts slammed into her mind. His thoughts spoke of murder and mayhem before his sentence to Lockbridge. The memories gave her nightmares. The man had a sickening lust for blood, often scratching himself senseless just to witness the scarlett beads trickle from his wrists. She didn't want his mind probing her as much as he did.

Maybe it was his own twisted form of humor.

For whatever reason, however, he never touched her. Maddigan was known for his frequent brawls with other patients, often beating them until they bled and pleaded for mercy. He often screeched with pleasure while decorating himself red with blood.
With both theirs and his own.

Often he'd say that she was 'the one.' But 'one' for what, she had no idea. He tended to call her 'Alice' rather than 'Alysse.'

The guards practically threw her into an office. Tumbling into the opulent carpet, she felt burns scratch into her forearms and legs, the doors snapping closed behind her. Sparing a glance over her thistled golden locks, she realized she'd seen this place before.

In her visions.

A man met her in his office a minute later. She recognized him instantly.

"Hello, my dear, I am Dr. Chessie, one of the main doctors here in Lockbridge. I'm here to help you." His grin was large, with big crooked teeth. She hated it. Loathed it. It wasn't real. When he really grinned, it was enough to chill her bones.

It was so much worse.

He wasn't her killer. But he would make damn sure she couldn't escape.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have the same appearance as Alice in Wonderland?" Dr. Chessie asked with that same grin, perhaps attempting to lighten the mood. Somehow she viewed this as a threat.

No.

She knew it was some form of threat.

"So I've been told," she answered bitingy, finding the strength to fight back as she launched to her feet. "But Alice isn't real. I'm real." She was real. She was human. She was alive.

"Ah, dauntless wrath is what you're feeling, eh? How quaint." From her visions she knew he could feel her emotions without asking or dissecting her expressions. Nor was it due to his knowledge as a doctor.

And for that, he would die like the rest of them.

Either way...

She.

Was.

Real.

She may go down like she expected, but she wasn't some simpering whip of a girl that would break under their gruesome pleasures.

She wasn't some toy for them to fondle and mess with. She wasn't curious. She wasn't elegant. She wasn't fake.

She was real.

She wasn't crazy.
"My name is Alysee Wild," she snarled, "and I will be your worst nightmare come alive."

August, Day III

2:43 A.M.

Thunder cracked, and Mai awoke with a start. Her head narrowly collided with boards of the upper-bunk in the girls residencial room Ayako, Masako, and Mai stayed in. Thankfully she stopped herself before a full on collision occurred. Well, at least she could save herself from at least a bit of pain. Letting out a breath, she immediately checked her phone, learning that she'd once again woken up at an ungodly hour, and this time, in the middle of a thunderstorm.

She doubted even Naru would be awake right now.

Following their encounter with Mr. Quill what was now yesterday morning, Mai had once again fallen asleep in Base almost seconds after arriving. Absently she wondered who brought her back this time, but quickly found that she simply didn't care.

"Noll's up, angel. I think his back is preventing him from sleeping."

Once again, the elder Davis twin had appeared out of nowhere. Wryly she realized she'd gotten used to his random appearances and equally random disappearances.

"In Base, I'm guessing?" she whispered. Sluggishly she rubbed her eyes, flicking away the crust coated there.

"Roger that, Chief."

Smiling tiredly, she sneakily crossed the darkened corridor separating Base from her room, and scampered quickly to the door. The only sound to be heard was that consistent strain of rain and thunder as it shattered down upon the windows outside.

"Years with ghosts and still a little darkness creeps you out." Gene smirked in a way that was identical to his brother, and she found herself glaring daggers at him for it. But he only laughed before once again reverting back to the shadows of the hallway.

A sharp shiver sliced down her spine at the sight, and several spirits walked through the walls, coming and going into existence. Lost, Masako had said. It seemed appropriate. Nevertheless, Mai snatched at the doorknob leading to Base, threw it open, and closed the door within a matter of two seconds.

Mai absolutely hated this place. Despite the seemingly harmless ghost lurking the halls, a foul presence still stained the very air within Lockbridge. Dismal and utterly demented, it reeked of blood and rot.

Base, however, was devoid of the stench due to some very serious warding magic and charms Ayako created on their first day. It was the only area of solace, really.

Already her senses relaxed as the familiar aura settled into her system.

"Mai."
Unlike usual, the Narcissist wasn't planted in a chair watching the monitors, but halted in the middle of Base with a cup of steaming tea in his hands. He was also decked out in striped blue pajamas, similar to the ones he'd worn during the Urado case. For one normally adorned in all-encompassing black, the lighter tones brought out the sheer darkness of his eyes and hair.

And for another thing, he looked positively adorable. Handsome, of course, but undeniably adorable as well.

Mai smiled fondly. "Someday I'm going to have to force you to wear yellow for a whole day."

He gave her a look that merely said, 'You're an idiot.' And she laughed unabashedly at the idea of him in his normal formal attire, but in all yellow. Pants and shoes included.

What a picture.

She was totally going to tell Luella about this idea.

Snickering, she waltzed up to him, but remembering what Gene told her upon waking, her smile dropped. Her previous amusement was immediately washed away with concern, especially as Naru's tiredness echoed across the bond in sleepy waves along with the fringe pains of his aching body.

"Let me make you some tea," she said quietly.

The sole lightsource Naru had given the room was in the small kitchenette closest to the door, the yellow bulb raw and dull in hue. It placed more shadows upon the rest of the room, leaving the corners only visible in black shreds and blurry outlines. And contrary to what she expected, Naru sat himself at the small table nearest her, shoulders oddly slumped forward as he leaned into his cup. Frowning, she made light work of her partner's favorite tea, the kettle already hot from Naru's previous batch and set to work. She finished quicker than expected.

Seated across from him, Mai poured him another cup. Naru had never been particularly fond of his own recipe, anyway, and she always knew exactly how he liked it. Hence why she'd once been dubbed Naru's 'Tea Queen.' The memory was tinged with both annoyance and sweetness, but it wasn't something she necessarily wanted to resurrect from the grave.

"How was the rest of the day?" she asked amid the quiet. Lightning lit up the room in brief flashes from the windows, the sound of rain having filled their previous silence.

"Miss Hara is now under the impression she's become a target after 'Alice' told her to 'be wary,' as she is the 'Duchess.' She also explained that Alice does not have the 'foul presence' you and her spoke of," Naru answered. "We'll probably go through a few exorcisms in the morning."

So Masako had become a target, too? How peculiar... First her and Naru, now Masako? How did they play into all of the madness going about Lockbridge?

"And Mr. Quill?"

"Sent to another hospital for the remainder of the investigation."

"I see..." She wanted to ask how Naru was doing with his back, but already knowing the response he'd give her, she bit her tongue and refrained from asking.

"You slept for 16 hours straight," Naru said a minute later, his annoyance clear.

Thunder rumbled, and a shot of lightning tore at the darkness contorting half of his face.
She groaned, "I know... I'm not exactly happy about it, either. Here I'd been hoping to at least be of some use, but no, I manage to sleep away an entire day."

"I expect you gleaned some information from it." Naru was far from happy, and she outwardly winced.

"Yeah, well, I can now confirm that 'Alice' is indeed Alysse Wild, but the vision I had was only a week into her stay here, or so her thoughts were. The story is only just beginning to reveal itself, but I did get a few other interesting things from it."

"Which are?"

So she told him everything she knew, which sadly, wasn't much. But Naru, being Naru, picked up on things quicker than anyone.

"You're saying that Maddigan Crawl was supposedly feeding her memories?" he questioned, and Mai nodded. "If that's true, then the only way that's possible is if he was a telepath."

"A mind-reader, yeah, that's what I was thinking, too. But what's the relevance of him also being in my vision? And what about Dr. Chessie? He can't be the one who killed her if Alysse Wild is so certain he was merely an accomplice or something of the sort. What's the point of him being there?"

"You said that Alysse Wild knew he could understand or feel her emotions, and if that's also true, then that would mean that Dr. Chessie was possibly an empath: a reader of emotions."

"Um, yeah, I did say that, didn't I? But what's the relevance?"

Naru raised an arrogant brow. "You really can be an idiot, Mai."

The woman in question pursed her lips and made to retort, but a sudden catastrophic sense of dread plummeted to the bottom of her gut before she could react properly.

Naru actually flinched, the bond catapulting her emotions into his mind.

Terror clawed its way up her veins, and bile rose in her throat. Her intuition rang like a pulsating gong in her head.

Something had just gone terribly wrong.

On instinct, Mai was immediately on her feet. Eyes wide and knowing, she simply whispered, "Late."

Then she was out the door, Naru chasing after her a second later. "Mai!"

But she barely heard her partner, even as she raced down the barren, flashing halls of Lockbridge Psychiatric Hospital, footsteps narrowly echoing along the floor at her feet. All around, ghosts floated and nightmares came alive in the dark, while thunder rumbled and rain slaughtered, but Mai Taniyama was in a place she could only understand as instinct. It was a place where outside forces were merely an afterthought.

"Mai!" she heard, but it was in the back of her conscious thought, barely telegabel amid the raging dread and intuition flooding her senses.

Bursting through the back doors of the hospital, she was assaulted by the vicious rain and wind of the storm. Thunder roared in her ears, and her bare feet were matted with grass and mud as she ran
through the back-courtyard.

It was only as she met a positively horrid sight, did Mai halt in her tracks. Steps away from a ripped off doorway leading to a blackened underground passageway, lied the distorted mangled body of who she knew, instinctively, was Peter Balts.

As she fell to her knees, she didn't even notice Naru's arrival, slathered with rainwater and breathing heavily at her back.

But amid the shock and rain and gasping horror, Mai hauntingly whispered, "The White Rabbit has arrived."

"Go ask Alice, when she's ten feet tall,
And if you go chasing rabbits,
And you know you're going to fall,
Tell 'em a hookah-smoking caterpillar has given you the call,
And call Alice, when she was just small."

-Jefferson Airplane, *White Rabbit*

Author's Note:

I'M BACK~!

And we have found our White Rabbit~! It's a terrible way to locate the 'rabbit hole' but it needed to be done. Besides, I needed a little more horror in here. The mystery thickens! The case is now about halfway though, I believe.

Also! While there was a lot of MaiXNaru in this chapter, I think I'll start having more character conversations among everyone now. This chapter went on longer than I expected, and some parts will simply have to wait until next time.

I sincerely apologize for the lateness of this chapter, considering I promised it about say, 9 months ago? But things happen, and It's been crazy for me since my senior year of high school started. Add in my relentless desire to write my own personal novels, I find myself lacking motivation to the extreme... Again, I apologize profusely, especially since this has been over 60% complete since October... But either way, I am officially back! The next chapter will be out in maybe a week or two!

If you wish to read my own personal novels, check me out on Fictionpress which is under the name "Cassandra Royal"

Thanks to everyone who reviewed! I read all of them, I assure you, but I will mainly respond to
questions if you have them. Please review! They're what drive a writer, you know! Have a lovely day!

-Cassandra

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!