She did not want to die. Airi Fujihara has reset time to discover another way to end the Dark Hour to save herself and the lives lost along the way. In doing so, Airi learned of the machinations that pulled her and her friends through one turbulent year.

This is her last attempt at a happy ending.
March 5, 2010

The weight of sleep dulled her senses to the point she had to blare music in her headphones to stay awake in class. Food hardly had taste, and voices that once rang sweetly in her ears droned nonsensically. Only the occasional limp, heavy chains trailing behind her as she walked down the halls of school, the dormitory, or the city did not dull with all the natural sounds of life. She dreaded the moment they take her, and the consequences of the past month were harsh. Her eyes could barely focus on the mahogany box, holding the priceless memories she made over the course of the year: movie tickets, keychains, hospital wristbands, photos, drawings, rare coins, anything that could hold on to the feelings that pass with time. The box her mother gave her on her last birthday before the accident would remember when everyone else forgets.

A soft rapping at her door broke her daze, only just a little. The auburn-haired girl uncrossed her legs and slowly brought her feet to the floor. As her weight dragged her down, she drifted sluggishly to open the door. She stiffened her posture to appear normal as much as possible before inviting the guest in. “Aigis?”

The humane robot girl let out a small smile that could not draw attention from the profound melancholy in her eyes she perpetually wore since the day everyone else forgot. “I’m sorry to appear suddenly, but I need to talk to you.”

“It’s alright. I wanted to talk too.” Anxiety overwhelmed Aigis’ blue eyes as she waited for Airi to speak first. “Do you remember anything? Like the promise?”

Those vague words were enough for Aigis’ shoulders to fall, free of the burden the two shared. “Yes! I remember everything! Oh, Airi, I am so sorry! I wanted to tell you sooner, but everyone else... I didn’t want to presume—”

“Don’t worry about it, I understand.”

Before finishing her sentence, she felt the tight, warm embrace the android gave. Having one friend remember nearly brought her to tears. Airi went on for weeks fearing she would bear the weight of that January night alone, and all she could have done was ask. Asking Aigis would have saved her the constant nightmares, could have helped her retain some of the energy that continues to slip between her fingers. Somehow with the meager strength she had left, Airi held her emotions in and patted Aigis gingerly on the back.
“Today is graduation day,” reminded Aigis, flattening a wrinkle in her friend’s uniform. “We’re late; the ceremony’s already begun. I am sorry, but I couldn’t leave without you.”

“Stop apologizing.” Airi let go with the smile her friends once loved dearly. “Let’s go to the rooftop and wait for the others.”

As her newly found sense of worry dictated, Aigis studied the girl. The expression seemed as genuine as always, but her heart rate continued to beat ever slowly. Not much life resided in her. “Of course,” she replied. “Soon we will enjoy the view of the city we saved.”

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Aigis’ lap was not as uncomfortable as Airi expected. For the past several months she became more and more human. Her expressions, her vocalizations, her touch: everything was natural. The sun above them warmed Airi as her senses returned gradually and receded in gentle, rocking waves. Her eyes drooped and fought to stay open. Her rapidly draining energy despite sleeping for twelve hours concerned her when she wasn’t too comfortable with the sunlight and Aigis’ oddly supportive lap. She had to wait for the others; she had to see them before she took another impossibly long nap.

“The wind feels so nice…” Aigis smiled at the flawless blue sky. “This is my first time experiencing spring.”

“It’s a happy season for a lot of people. My birthday is in two weeks.”

“So soon after you leave?” She cried out in a naturally embarrassed manner she had tried to master for months. “How could I have been so thoughtless? Happy early birthday!”

“Thanks, Aigis. Everyone’s been preoccupied lately, and I nearly forgot too. It feels strange to go back home after everything…”

She hadn’t begun to pack because of her exhaustion, but she had finally re-adapted to life in Japan that it felt strange to leave. Worry about the trip and the undeniable longing to see her foster family again preoccupied Airi’s mind enough to forget about how her body felt ten pounds heavier than it did when she woke up.

She and Aigis were quiet for a while. From their relaxed body language, the lack of talking wasn’t very awkward for either of them.

When Aigis spoke again, she chose her words carefully. “I’m glad to be alive to see this. I wish the others were here, but this is still a precious moment.” Melancholy scrawled across her face. “After fighting alongside you as the world nearly ended, I finally began to understand what it means to live.”

Airi had one eye open and focused on her friend. “How so?”

“To think for yourself, to not run away, and to accept the inevitable. All things eventually come to an end. Every living thing will one day disappear. Only by accepting this can one discover what they truly want.”

Her words hit close to home. Airi smiled, happy for Aigis’ newfound understanding. She learned these things so quickly it made her red eyes turn green, but her words still bothered her more than usual.

Aigis gazed into her eyes, unafraid of speaking her mind. “I know you have struggled with accepting mortality, even when someone sacrifices himself so another may live. Please don’t feel ashamed for
feeling that way.”

Airi’s complacent mood soured as she stroked the pocketwatch that rested against her breast. Its once tender, soothing effect that alleviated her depression was gone along with other sensations she took for granted. Despite her perpetually wearing it as a necklace, maintaining it for nearly six months, and cleaning the last of the bloodstains, Airi felt the morbid charm finally abandoned her. An old burning sensation in her wrist and arm socket returned as she heard the echoes of screaming students and shattering glass from only one floor below.

“Those seniors got what they deserved,” she said quietly. “But I was just like them. If I only listened to Mitsuru-sempai and gave him a chance, sempai might still be alive.”

Aigis nodded sympathetically. “I miss Shinjiro-san too, but I know he would not want us to cry forever. He renewed our resolve to end the Dark Hour, and he saved Ken-san’s life. We wouldn’t be here without him. I’ll always be grateful for what he did.”

Knowing her words didn’t bring comfort or changed her mind, the Aigis stroked Airi’s hair. Warmth tickled Airi’s neck; she remembered the days when her mother put her to bed every night by singing her to sleep.

“Once I knew I had to prevent the Fall for everyone’s sake,” Aigis continued, “I realized I wanted to continue to protect you more than anything in the world. I know anyone else can do the same thing, but that’s okay. You gave me purpose when I felt lost, and I believe my life is worth living.”

Her voice cracked upon the last sentence; like when the world was saved, the nonhuman started to cry. If this was her chance to be a mother, Airi felt the worry of one. Her eyes also watered in sympathy. Then she sluggishly lifted her hand to catch a teardrop from the robot’s gentle cheek.

“Oh!” startled, she sniffled and laughed it off. Aigis’ reaction was strikingly identical to Airi’s whenever she was startled. “What am I doing? I should be happy…”

“Hey! Ai-chan! Aibana!”

A familiar voice was full of boundless energy. A sea of other friendly voices blended, creating a symphony of unified compassion. Airi wished with all her heart that they were coming for her. There was plenty of room on the rooftop for everyone. The sunlight warmed her body and the wind refreshed it. It was a perfect mix of comfort, drawing the sleep closer and closer. Airi never thought the world to be so wonderful as it did now. With her friends, she saved it from the Shadows and the Fall.

But she was far from happy. A subliminal message replayed in her head for over a month and she couldn’t understand what it meant.

For what seemed to be the last straw, her body lost all sensation and her senses blurred. The nightmare began and she couldn’t shake it off. Inside, she screamed, beating against the walls of her own body as something pulled at her. She vividly heard the clanging of metal; the metal that stalked her ever since she first heard the voices. Airi screamed louder, begging for silence or inner peace. In the midst of her fight, the various noises overpowered and silenced her own. Crying children. Laughing men. Exploding gunshots. Roaring of fire. Scratching claws against flesh.

With a violent jolt, Airi returned back to the rooftop. Her body did not move from the shock and Aigis didn’t sense anything was wrong with her. It was at that last moment, but Airi finally understood what was happening.
“You are tired, aren’t you?” asked Aigis.

Airi tried to shake her head, but her muscles were too drained and strained to move.

“You can close your eyes. I won’t leave you.”

She could no longer tell if her friends were coming. The birds flying above and around them were hushed and lost their distinct forms. The heavy pocket watch was a feather. Everything was fading and going dark.

“The others… arrive… soon.”

Her heavy eyelids finally and slowly shut the girl away from the world she knew.

In her confusion and fear the bloodcurdling screaming began once more. She had to wake up. She had to avoid that chaos she’d seen glimpses of. She needed to know what she did wrong to deserve this as she died. But her body was too heavy and her spirit shriveled and dissolved in the surrounding darkness.

The words she heard from the world were chillingly clear: “Don’t worry, Airi. Even if the world forgets, I will always protect you.”

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Airi found herself in that familiar chair across from her two spiritual guides. Not once along the journey had she ever been able to summon herself into the Velvet Room by mere thought. Her will was still strong enough to manage such a feet, even without her Persona abilities that vanished after the apocalyptic confrontation.

Her sudden presence alarmed the residents. One expressed his shock more so than the other: the long-nosed, bug-eyed man remained neutral and unfazed. The steel elevator gates behind them remained open, shining brilliant light upon them.

“My, what a rare guest indeed,” said Igor. “It seems your resolve is far more resolute than I anticipated. What brings you back, in need of our services?”

Airi could not bring herself to look at him. Those ever-open, bloodshot eyes were the sharpest daggers cutting her. She muttered fearfully under her breath.

“Hmm? Whatever is the matter?”

Her voice grew faintly louder, though only enough to hear fragmented words.

The tall sleek white-haired man with high cheekbones, Theodore, gave his master a brief look, hoping his wish to speak would be granted. Igor did not tear his gaze from the girl. He did, however, give a slight gesture in response. “Airi-sama,” spoke Theo, “if we are to know your desire, please speak up.”

“I can’t do this!”

A thunderous crack echoed throughout the sapphire-hued Velvet Room. The elevator gates bolted shut and the clock exploded, raining glass and metal. The room jerked violently as it began to descend. The once vibrantly blinding light of the room weakened with every floor they passed. It was amazing how poised Igor was, thought Theo who could barely restrain his trembling confusion.
“What is it you cannot do?” asked Igor. “You have completed your quest.”

Clenching the edge of her seat, Airi finally snapped. “It’s that demon and those damn chains! They grow louder every second and won’t leave me alone!” Upon hearing her acknowledge its existence, the heavy sound that haunted her endlessly softly emerged from the background. All color drained from the girl’s face.

Igor let out a knowing sigh. “You are afraid. Now that time is all but gone, the Seal beckons you to complete your destiny.”

“No! I never asked for this!” She looked behind her to see the twisted, corroded pieces of metal crawl towards her. “You told me that with the Universe, ‘nothing is outside the realm of possibility’!”

“Indeed I did. However, do you remember the contract you signed? ‘I chooseth this fate of mine own free will.’ With your power, you brought a new hope for the world, preventing its tragic end. Is this not to your satisfaction?”

The looming chains from behind rattled like a necklace of bones. Airi cried, horrified by how close they were, “It’s not that! I ended the Dark Hour, but why must I die like this?!”

The girl jumped out of her seat. She turned to Theo, who followed his master’s example by maintaining composure. He always had the horrible suspicion of her fate; he spent months preparing for this day. Yet his heart ached deeply to see her desperation. Not seeing any outward signs of sympathy, tears erupted from Airi’s horror-stricken eyes.

“Theo, please! Why must I leave my friends? I’ll never be able to see them again! What if they never remember me? What have I done to feel and hear the pain and suffering of every human being forever?!”

The chains finally wrapped themselves around her ankles, pulling her back towards the chair. With a high-pitched wail, the Velvet Room descended faster. The fabric hugging the undisturbed door frames swayed violently, ready to blow everywhere at any moment. Darkness consumed the room.

Clinging for her life, Airi shoved the chair aside and launched herself onto the wooden table where many of her Persona were fused. Even with a soul far closer to death than ever, she dug her fingers into the wood. Great chaos pervaded the room. Any longer and the gate would shatter, the elevator crash, and the room collapse. Somehow, amongst the violent maelstrom of noise, Igor’s voice could still be heard very clearly.

“You have worn many masks and extended hope to others through your bonds, but you never seized the opportunity to help yourself. As one with the endless possibilities of the Wild Card, ‘tis a pity you have not realized your true potential.”

The words were bullets tearing through her skin. Her hold loosened as the chains, pulling harder and gripping tighter, coiled up her legs. She knew she only had seconds to spare before her bloody, splintered fingers could take no more. In a last attempt to plead like a spoiled child, she finally looked the long-nosed resident dead in the eyes. “Give me another chance!”

“That is not for me to decide,” stated Igor plainly.

At some point the chains would either yank her in one merciless tug or tear her in two. Somehow, nothing happened yet. Now, when her time was surely up…

“I can stop Nyx without forming the Great Seal! It has to be possible!”
For a moment the stoic resident seemed amused. “How would it be possible when the Seal has its unshaken grip upon you? Your journey has ended. Rest yourself, for your hard work has been rewarded to you.”

“How the bloody fuck is being a glorified doormat a reward?!”

As if the Velvet Room could not shake any more violently, Theo truly feared that the girl’s willpower could utterly destroy their dimension. Worse of all, undo everything she and her friends strived for. Theo’s watery eyes betrayed his stern jaw. How could the girl who once smiled so sweetly put herself through a fight she could not win? He could not bear to look at her suffering anymore.

He begged his master, “Humor her. Give her a moment to believe she has another chance.”

“No matter what can be said, I cannot guarantee she will be offered another chance.” The man’s will was clearly as stubborn as hers. “Fate can be absolute.”

“But if you pretend, my master, for just one moment, then your egos will not end up tearing our world apart.”

Igor never removed his eyes from the girl, who stood her ground quite admirably. If only she were not such a fool – ah, but indeed that was the role she played all along. “Even if you were to have a chance, you will have broken the contract and perhaps bring forth a whole new curse upon you and your world.”

“I won’t break it!” Airi had stopped crying by this point, but her face was clearly an emotional, soaking mess. “If there are endless possibilities, I’ll find the one that’ll save the world without me or my friends needing to die! I’ve always kept my word, and I will follow through this to the end, no matter what happens!”

A fierce tug nearly snapped her legs off and Airi screamed. Only her pointer fingers and thumbs were holding onto the table. She could just feel the other dimension demanding her to serve her spiritual sentence as an eternal barrier maiden.

“I’ll find another way! If I can’t, I will accept my fate as the Seal. Please, Igor!”

“Words will only be words until you bear the resolve to make them reality.” The resident sighed. With a sleight of hand, a piece of paper appeared between his fingers and he held it out to her.

“What is that?” asked Theo.

“An amendment.” Igor extended his hand with the paper towards the girl. “If you muster enough strength to touch this, I will attempt to loosen the Seal’s hold enough for you to sign this new agreement. Once signed, time as you knew it will reset to end this dilemma.”

A mixture of shock, confusion, and joy spread Airi’s strained face. His words gave her a sturdy push for her to grab a steady grip of the table again. As if they were a living being, the chains writhed and screamed as their control weakened. She could finally utilize the upper strength she built up over the year. Yet her body felt stretched, ready to break in half at any moment.

But a familiar voice echoed in her head: “Mitsuru and I knew you’d be a good leader. Your skills really are incredible, but they won’t be of any use if you get exhausted easily.”

In her world she would have either glared at or smacked Akihiko for underestimating her. If only it wasn’t so true at that moment. Could she bring herself to make it? Her brief second of doubt caused
her to lose three inches of progress.

“Y’know, Aibana, I’m glad I got this power. If it weren’t for you and the gang, I mighta done the wrong things with my Persona. So, thanks…”

Junpei and his stupid, goofy jokes. Another big brother helped Airi to refocus and reach further.

“Hey, since you helped me get through this crazy year, wanna get friendship rings? I’ll buy yours, and you buy mine. Oh, and promise me you’ll get a great man to buy you the one for your ring finger!”

Yukari. The skeptic’s rare moments of trust helped too, and even in times of doubt she meant well.

“Huh? Uh-oh… These tears… They won’t stop! Th-This is most unusual! Airi, why am I crying?”

Hearing the voice of the last person she saw before death restored some energy into her weak, aching soul.

"Being with you guys helped me understand how I can make a difference. I-I feel more confident in my abilities. I’ll never again think that my actions and goals are doomed from the start. Thanks, Airi-chan."

Words from her friends rang in her ears all at once, helping her to block out anything that could distract her. Even a few energetic howls from the ever-loyal Koromaru reached her.

“You really are nice, Airi-san. You don’t act like it because you think I need it or because I’m just a kid. You really are kind. I wish more people were like you.”

Memories came rushing back to her of better days. She remembered having Ken smile like a real kid for the first time in months.

“Apoloize, you despicable cretin! Fujihara stands on her own feet and challenges fate with her own strength! How dare you insult her!”

The memories of her friends were there with her. The thought of them never abandoning or forgetting her, as delusional as it may be, cheered her on. It felt like an eternity, but at some point the paper was lightly brushing against her fingertips. It was her last chance to save herself.

“Hey, you seem to be feelin’ better. That’s good. The others depend on you being at your best.”

That same voice from the one who likely thought her selfish, shallow, and pathetic somehow gave her the very last piece of strength she needed. The moment her finger touched the contract, the wailing chains loosened and immediately recoiled into the shadows behind her. The earth-shattering shudders slowly subsided, and the elevator eased its descent to a stop. The pandemonium finally settled to utter silence with the Velvet Room re-stabilized. Overwhelmed by the tension to the point of nausea, Theo collapsed to his knees.

“Excellent.” The grin on Igor’s face widened intensely as he applauded. “It appears fate has more surprises to show you.”

The excited girl held the newly obtained contract to her heart as she rolled off the table and landed on the floor. A thousand angels must have blessed her at that moment as Airi sweated grenades and gasped for air. After gathering himself, Theo returned to his normal posture. His nerves were still badly shot, but at least he could stand. Moments later, Airi sat up and looked at the miracle paper. There was no writing to speak of: just one line for her signature.
“Where are the conditions?”

“It is hardly any different from before.” To Igor’s right, a mature, but stern woman looking strikingly similar to Theo emerged from the dark and stood beside him. The girl saw the heavy book she carried in her arms that bore a striking resemblance to Theo’s.

Numb and faint, Airi could not read the woman’s expression or recognize her face. “Who are you?”

“This is Margaret,” said Igor. “She was ready to prepare for our next guest. Although, it seems your time has been extended a while longer.”

Margaret’s golden eyes, while almond-shaped with flawlessly full eyelashes, were as sharp as her master’s. “So it would seem,” she spoke coolly. “When you sign it, you will take full responsibility for your actions, regardless of whatever happens to you upon your journey. Time will reset until you achieve that supposed miracle. To accomplish this you will retain the memories of those lost in your failed cycles as a consequence of your playing god.”

A silver pen suddenly manifested into the girl’s hand. This seemed riskier than the contract Pharos gave her before, because at least that one had clearly written terms.

“My, you have created quite a commotion moments ago,” commented Igor. “Have you begun to regret your decision?”

“If I sign this,” Airi said, voice raspy and strained, “Will you tell me what I can and cannot do?”

“Oh, it will not be necessary. You already understand what must be done.”

Opening his mouth, Theo wanted to protest, but his master made an unconscious warning to say nothing. The attendant tightly pressed his lips shut and rebelled quietly by clenching his fists. Margaret let out an impatient sigh.

Airi had only one option, and she knew she had to try before giving up. Ink bled blue and formed the name that unknowingly tripped her into the lion’s pit. The conditions of her amended contract appeared, warning:

“I shall confront Death and thwart the Fall as many times needed until I prevent my demise. I shall not fall to despair, believe in false hope, or ponder upon doomed dreams but the reality of my own survival. I chooseth this fate of mine own free will.”

Airi could still faintly hear the comforting voices of her friends, forever known only to her heart and mind. To have everything they went through be undone and unknown to all but her left her feeling even more lonely than the moment she died. She closed her eyes and embraced the darkness pulling her from the Velvet Room and back into reality.
Bright light usually promises hope and a new chapter with friends that would fill Airi’s soul with priceless memories to smile and laugh about later on in life. That was how some sixteen-year-olds were supposed to feel.

It was the day she finally woke up after the Magician Shadow's attack on the rooftop of the dorm. She hardly remembered much of what happened that night, unlike the days after that she effortlessly recalled from reliving the current school year several times. It allowed Airi more time to readjust to time resetting, and others would assume some of her crankiness originated from her brief coma rather than something so unbelievable as time travel. Eyes slowly opening, Airi prepared herself as the scene played exactly as she expected.

A girl’s muffled voice was the first thing Airi heard. “You’re awake! How do you feel?”

“Yuka – Takeba-san? Where am I?”

She smiled and lightly flattened the creases on her pink sweater. She did not seem to pay attention to Airi nearly calling Yukari by her first name. “This is Tatsumi Memorial Hospital. It’s just a short walk from Port Island Station.”

Airi’s vision adjusted well enough to recognize the sterile ceiling and walls to know it to be true. How she hated hospitals. Too many bad things had or will have had started, happened, or ended here. Too much blood…

Blood. She last remembered bleeding to death. The phantom pain punctured her heart as she had not fully recovered from the profound emotions from the last cycle. One minute she lay in writhing pain, bleeding, and lying to the fading face of a young man holding her close. She was happy to have her last moments with him, but she regretting making him suffer yet another tragedy he didn’t deserve. His arms had no right to make her feel so safe and warm when she tortured him the very same way he unknowingly did to her.

Trying to suppress the raw agony that threatened to overwhelm her again, Airi’s hearing adjusted when she heard Yukari continuing to talk. She put aside what happened before in the impossible hope of forgetting it forever and adopted a neutral composure. Since that memory had disappeared in all but her mind, Airi had to focus on the present. Was this her third… fifth… seventh time in this room? She couldn’t afford to miss a second of time. The introductions and tutorials were unavoidable but repetitive. Airi hoped she mastered the art of hiding her impatience.

“But your power was amazing…”

“You mean my Persona?”

Yukari’s thin eyebrows rose in surprise. “You know what it’s called?”
“I guess… It was my first time using it,” Airi lied quickly, managing to sit up despite the stiffness in her body laying still for days. She rubbed her tired eyes and felt mild dampness from her earlier musings. “It’s like I knew what that power was all long. What were those things I defeated though?”

“We call them Shadows,” she replied. “I’m sorry me and the others didn’t tell you sooner.”

“You guys didn’t know when I’d be ready. I would have done the same thing, especially when there’s the chance I’d be called crazy.”

Only slightly relieved, Yukari nodded and bit her lip. “Thanks.”

“What’s wrong?” Recognizing her restless eyes, Airi knew Yukari was hiding more information.

“It’s nothing big, but…” Yukari paused to take a deep breath. “We’re kinda alike. My dad died in an accident when I was little, and mom and I don’t really see eye to eye, so I’m living in the school dorms. You’re on your own too, right?”

Airi slowly nodded. The sun shined quite brightly, dimmed only by cherry blossom pedals dancing in the wind outside. “I live with friends of family in Ireland, but, yeah, I am in a sense.”

Yukari fidgeted, expressing embarrassment. “I’ve known about your past since you were assigned to our dorm, and it didn’t seem fair to not be open about it. I just wanted you to know about mine too.”

She turned back to Yukari to be more personable. “Thanks, Takeba-san.”

Yukari nodded humbly and uncrossed her long legs that have been honed through years of playing sports. She continued to explain how her father worked for the international conglomerate Kirijo Group and that she transferred to Gekkoukan High School to learn more about the company and what happened to her father. The story had been told so many times, but Airi could not bring herself be heartless. Yukari was genuinely putting her heart out in the open. The last thing anyone that brave needs is a blunt “I know” to ruin the moment.

It might have taken many tries to finally say it, given the possible implications, but Airi had little to lose from giving a small nudge. “You’ll find what you’re looking for.”

“I hope so.” The laugh she forced would only fool anyone who wasn't her friend. “I’ll be good after I stop panicking like the other night. It was my first time fighting a Shadow.”

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. I was afraid too.”

“R-Really?”

“It was my first time too. We’ll get used to it soon with enough practice.” It took a few seconds, but in no time her classmate cracked a shy smile. Sometimes little things helped ease a little tension.

“Thanks for listening, Airi. I haven’t been able to share that story with someone for a long time.”

“Anytime. That’s what friends are for.”

It all ended with a beam that highlighted her dimples. It was Airi’s smile. The one thing her friends always knew her for, and she wanted to make sure that was one consistency every time. Predictably, Yukari was thrown off by the expression, but it was enough to lighten her mood.

With that she stood up and bowed. “Alright, I’m gonna let the others know you woke up.” On her way to the door she turned around and added, “Oh, and you don’t have to be formal around me or
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Discharged the next day, Airi was energetic and healthy enough to return to school. It was no surprise when Junpei Iori bombarded her with questions about her brief absence. He was the first classmate outside of her dorm to introduce himself, and the two struck up conversation quite easily as they became fast friends. A five-foot-seven sixteen-year-old with an unshaven face sporting a buzzcut and baseball cap, he smelled of adolescent lethargy cynical adults often mistaken for apathy. His slightly older appearance contrasted profoundly with his laid-back mannerisms and expressive personality.

“You sure you okay, Aibana?”

Amused with the nickname, Airi smiled childishly. “I am! This is the picture of health!”

They sat to have lunch on the roof of Gekkoukan High’s east wing, oddly only popular for students ditching classes. It was always empty around lunchtime, mainly because the wind always blew harsher on that side and the view showed the busier, less scenic side of Tatsumi Port Island. It turned out to work in their favor; a few students in homeroom made a commotion about her being absent, and Airi preferred having a wave of questions crash from one shoreline.

She eyed Junpei’s food like a vulture and teased, “If you’re not going to finish your salmon, I’ll be more than happy to take it.”

Junpei covered his bento box before she finished her sentence. “Dude, if you’re gonna suck up food like a vacuum, at least pick somethin’ edible!”

“What, like cheap ramen?”

“Hell yeah! Well, not all of ‘em are THAT bad. Sometime after school, I’ll show you this place that makes the best in town.”

“Oh, I’m shocked. Junpei-kun placed school above food?”

“That’s because I’ll lose my one and only study buddy, man!”

The girl cleared her throat and gave a look. Unlike Yukari, Airi’s threatening expression attempt did not affect her classmate at all. “Yeah, yeah, trying to be a tough girl when deep down, you always wanna help your ol’ pal Junpei!”

“Aye, right! We just met, y’know. Besides, finals might roll around and maybe a dog will eat my notes.”

The lunch remained animated with no one else in sight. A few other fun jabs were made, particularly with Junpei asking if Airi was always so well dressed and so pale. Nothing was so unique about how she followed the dress code: she wore a mint scarf instead of the red ribbon. Only the rich chestnut hair and red irises contrasted with her skin, giving off the impression that she was much lighter skinned. Another classmate once pointed out she had a slightly curvier frame than most Japanese women, but Airi only considered it a minor nitpick. Her upperclassman and dorm mate Mitsuru Kirijo had more of a shapely hourglass body that even older men desired, but her proud airs and confident personality were enough to scare most away from the mere consideration of asking her on a date.
After surviving Junpei’s interrogations all day and ramen at Hagakure, Airi arrived at the dorm at six. Her stomach was so full from dinner she was tempted to crash on one of the lounge’s couches, but the silky voice of Mitsuru from this morning stopped her.

“The Chairman wants to speak with you today. Come to the fourth floor of the dorm after school.”

She wanted to avoid the meeting primarily because of Ikutsuki. Simply thinking of his prim tan suit, flowing shoulder-length hair, and nasally voice boiled Airi’s blood and gave her the urge to lunge at his smug, beady eyes with a spork. With a gulp and a sigh, she flung her backpack over her shoulder and went to the fourth floor. On the landing were a seating area and a pair of double doors. Airi went through them and entered the command room, set-up as half library, half security room.

“Good evening,” greeted the chairman, oddly patient in an armchair in the sitting area. “Please, have a seat.”

To her left on a cushioned footstool was the lanky, silver-haired Akihiko, carefully holding the side of his ribs where he suffered an injury from the enigmatic Shadow that attacked their dorm earlier in the month. On the couch across from him sat the other two residents: Yukari and Mitsuru. Airi remained standing, directly across from Ikutsuki. A subconscious warning of “I don’t trust you” would suffice. To make it less obvious, Airi slouched her posture a bit to look more casual.

Ignoring her silent rebellion, they went straight to business. Ikutsuki introduced Akihiko, whom Airi bowed to with a smile. It took her a millisecond to notice from his popped collar that he just came out of the shower. She gave a gesture to signal this. Face lightly pink, he nodded to express his gratitude, fixing himself up.

“Let me ask you,” continued the chairman. “Would you believe me –”

“ - if a hidden hour exists?” she finished. Her quick response was more blunt than everyone – including she – expected. Airi spoke more calmly to look less suspicious, “I’ve experienced it since my seventh birthday. The world’s covered in darkness, the moon glows green, and everyone’s in a coffin, save me and a few others. The only things that are new for me are those black monsters you guys are fighting, ‘Shadows’.”

Shrugging off her sempai’s stares, Yukari broke the silent shock. “I told you she was quick.”

“Is that so...” Mitsuru said with a thin, suspicious eyebrow raised.

The chair on Akihiko’s right seemed like a nice place to sit. She placed her bag on the ground against the coffee table, plopped down, and continued. “You guys knew I was capable, but you didn’t know how to approach me. It’s all right. I want to help however I can.”

They all turned to each other and exchanged cautious looks. “So you know about the power you used the other night?” asked Akihiko.

“Persona. Yukari told me the basics.”

“You are quite remarkable,” Ikutsuki said warmly. “To keep things short, we are the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad: SEES for short. Mitsuru is the leader, and I’m the club advisor.”

Mitsuru stood, handing a red armband and a briefcase over to the girl. “We prepared an Evoker for
you. This will allow you to more easily summon your Persona. We’d appreciate it if you’d lend us your strength.”

“Thanks,” said Airi as she took the items. They seemed less concerned than before, but she did her best to keep the conversation going. “If I can ask, what’s ‘Apathy Syndrome’? I’ve heard about it a lot lately in the news and from classmates.”

“After a Shadow feeds on the mind of an unlucky person, he’s left in a braindead-like state,” said Akihiko. “Some stand around dazed like zombies. Others end up missing or dead.” Suddenly, morbid excitement crept in his voice and filled his grey eyes. “What’s really interesting is that after we defeat a certain number of Shadows, the number of cases decreases. Some people make full recoveries if their experience wasn’t too traumatic. You can see why our job is very important.”

In no time Mitsuru’s sharp russet brown eyes turned to him and stood tall with her flowing waist-long hair. “Akihiko, pacify your excitement,” she ordered gravely. “You just got hurt the other day after dragging that Shadow here!”

He grunted, not the least bit intimidated by her grace. “No need to remind me. I’m not dead yet.”

Biting her lip to stifle a smirk, watching Mitsuru discipline Akihiko never ceased to amuse Airi.

“Now, now, Mitsuru, ease your scolding,” the chairman said peacefully. “Akihiko does his work very well. The last time was a mistake he couldn’t prepare for.”

Disappointed, Mitsuru muttered something in French and fell back into her seat. Once everyone settled down, Airi took the Evoker and placed it on her lap. Realizing the meeting was much shorter than expected, Ikutsuki turned his attention to the new member. “Are there any other questions you have?”

After some thought, she knew one thing had to be said. “It’s not really a question, but I just hope we can all be honest with each other. There’s only five of us capable of fighting Shadows, right?”

The chairman coughed uneasily. “Four, actually. I can wander around during the Dark Hour, but I cannot summon a Persona.”

“Ok, but that’s still not a lot of us. If any of us are hiding anything that could distract us later, please let everyone know. As cliché as it sounds, we should all be in this together.”

She felt a little enthusiasm emerge out of nowhere. Two days in and the possibilities were still endless. Starting off on a supportive note could give everyone an edge. Maybe things could be different, she thought. But in the corner of her mind, after many moments of feeling hope before, she knew much of what she felt and expressed was still forced.

“Sounds fair to me,” replied Yukari, brushing back fizzy hair from her eyes. She did not have the luxury to wash up after archery practice. “We should plan ahead whenever possible.”

“We need the manpower more than anything at this point,” said Akihiko with his arms crossed. “I’d feel better if we had a better idea of why the Shadows have been more agitated lately, but we can’t afford to sit on the sidelines.”

Mitsuru’s lips thinned. “Being proactive is necessary, but we are not ready for aggressive offensive measures.”

Akihiko’s face and voice turned sour. “That’s not what I meant, Mitsuru. We won’t know our chances unless we start exploring Tartarus. I don’t plan to let that tower stand there forever!”
“We will discuss this at a later time.” Ikutsuki said before the married couple considered starting a verbal brawl. They acknowledged the Chairman and cooled down. The juniors glanced at them, expecting an explanation.

“What’s Tartarus?” Yukari asked, completely new to the word.

Ignoring the possibly of a lecture later, Akihiko spoke first. “The Shadows are attracted to the place for some reason like a nest. Mitsuru and I barely had the chance to check out the entrance.”

Mitsuru folded her arms. “Once we gain a few more members, we’ll show you. If he’s lucky, Akihiko might be fully healed by then.” The pale boy sighed in frustration.

With a clap from Ikutsuki the meeting ended. Everyone left with enough information to fill a bear’s stomach. Once the older members returned to their rooms, Yukari pulled Airi to the side.

“Are you sure you’re okay about all of this? They threw a lot of information at you.”

“I’m okay,” she waved her hand dismissively. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to lie to make us happy.”

Airi bit her lip. Sometimes she could hide doubts and insecurities behind an air of cheer, but people she had known for a while have said that she could be quite easy to read. Although she liked keeping her burdens until they were necessary to share, she saw no reason to discourage one of Yukari’s valid suspicions. “I hope they took me seriously.”

Then, as if hoping she wasn’t alone in having doubts, Yukari’s concern turned to relief. “Do you think they’re hiding something?”

“I think so, probably. I hope whatever is being kept secret will come to light before something bad happens.” Her expression changed and she started laughing dismissively. “Maybe I’m paranoid. I’m sure we’ll be fine. Let’s take every day as it comes.”

Not amused, Yukari nodded. “If you say so.”

“Give me a few days and I’ll get the hang of things,” Airi smiled as she unlocked her door. “If it’s any help, Yukari, I trust you.”

“That’s good. Thanks, Airi.”

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April 21, 2009

Two blue dots blinked against black, separating eleven from fifty-nine. It was obviously late, but Junpei didn’t feel like going home yet. He closed his phone and stuffed it into his back pocket.

He had some unwanted attention throughout the evening. A few wasted freshmen wanted to drag him to the outskirts behind Port Island Station to watch some stupid girls get drunk and encourage punks to harass them. Junpei never understood their love of American and European subcultures, absurd tattoos, and a serious lack of basic hygiene. Maybe one such person was different. Every group supposedly has their outliers, but he didn’t want to test that theory. Another bunch from his grade school days offered some cigarettes, but he rejected them immediately.

Wandering around the half-empty mall, Junpei noticed his watch stopped working. Walking citizens
transmogrified into static coffins. Water from a nearby fountain turned thickly red; misty dry ice covered the ground. A lens over his vision tainted the world in a green hue. Junpei stood alone, watching everything freeze around him.

“Wh-What the hell?!?” he blurted. When his voice echoed back to him, goose bumps roughened his skin.

Junpei walked off his wariness to keep calm. He couldn’t afford to panic while trapped in a surreal environment. Nothing normal would just stop without warning.

His first instinct told him to go to the police station once he recovered from the initial shock. The way to was less fun with utter silence and people-sized coffins everywhere. That was a morbid thought, and Junpei did his best to ignore it.

Then he heard a scream from around the corner, where he had to be. Junpei gulped, slowed his pace, and pressed on. When he poked his head around, he saw the heart of Paulownia Mall. The police station, arcade, music store, karaoke bar, and various cafes were there. It looked just as creepy as the rest of the place. Only there was a man in a business suit sitting on a bench. He buried his head in his hands and shook violently.

“Hey!” Junpei called out and rushed to him. He was happy to see someone like him. “Are you okay?”

Right as he got within ten feet, the man looked up at Junpei. His eyes were crazed and dilated. He pushed himself away from the teen, screaming, “DON’T TOUCH ME! Th-They’re coming! They’re coming!!”

Even more confused, Junpei said, “Calm down, dude! What’re you sayin’?!”

“You’re one of them!” he continued to ramble and hyperventilate. “I’m one of them! We’re monsters, all of us! They’re gonna kill us!”

Suddenly, the man grasped his head again. Junpei reached out to him, only for the man to push him and run away. Wobbly legs tripped him, and he fell on his face. Except when he landed, the sound of squishing liquid replaced the crunch of bone. Junpei squirmed.

Before he could get near, a dark pool formed beneath the man. He convulsed and flailed helplessly. Something invisible and indomitable pinned him to the ground, and he couldn’t break free. The pool expanded until Junpei could see it perfectly. It was too black, too thick to be blood. The man flipped over to his back, revealing something grotesque. Junpei collapsed to the ground and screamed, a thick oily substance erupted from his facial orifices. He gurgled and gagged as the life was being sucked out of him. The body stopped moving but the muck continued to overflow. Then the pool moved towards Junpei. It crawled along, aware and seeing without eyes.

Junpei embraced his instinct to flee. He encircled the fountain, but the pool followed and caught up with his every move. The pool grew a pair of arms to drag itself along much faster. Two yellow holes poked out of its black center. Slowly thinning its “skin” to form a third orifice, it emitted guttural moans. Junpei cried, losing all sensation in his arms and legs. He dropped to the ground and forgot how to move. He broke into a frozen sweat and lay in horror at the monster. It was on top of him, arching its hand back to rip his head off.

“What the hell is going on?!” he yelled, covering his eyes. "I don’t wanna die!"

He repeated his plea many times knowing it wouldn’t save him. Yet it was the only thing he had left.
Maybe if he actually went home rather than stay out late, he’d be alive tomorrow. He’d help the strange Japanese girl from Ireland readjust to her home country better.

Then something swelled in his chest. The ground around him shook slightly, or he moved a bit, Junpei did not know. A flash of blue light blinded him for a moment. Then it vanished along with the sensation. He felt nothing, not that it was a bad thing. No pain was great, but he was surprised he was still alive.

This time the monster screamed in fear. It being scared snapped Junpei out of his paralysis. When he was brave enough to look, a large humanoid creature floated right above him. Black-clad with golden wings, it faced the monster, rather than Junpei. Otherworldly as it was, something about it seemed protective. With a brisk swoop of the arm, a wing cut into the goopy monster. It recoiled and screamed, only to be silenced by another slash. The boy gathered his bearings and pulled himself away and stopped at a wall. Once far enough, he watched the new creature beat up the monster until a drop kick flattened it back into a still puddle.

The humanoid turned its head, covered by a golden helmet, to Junpei. Rather than attack him too, the creature soared in the air, let out a victory cry, and dissipated like smoke. But it never truly left. Junpei felt something reside in his chest again. Part of him was still scared, even if something told him to calm down. He sat with his conflicted and bewildered thoughts for a long time. The black puddle remained still and dead.

“Damn it! Worst night ever!” he muttered to himself.

“I don’t blame you. The first time’s always the worst.”

The voice made the boy jump for the billionth time in one night. Had he paid more attention, he would have seen the light-haired boy in front of him. Junpei didn’t recognize him, even though he wore a red sweater vest with the Gekkoukan emblem. A red armband on his right side had “SEES” stitched into the fabric.

“I’m impressed you held on well,” he said after catching his breath and slipping a silver gun into its holster. Reading Junpei’s shock at the instrument, the boy quickly replied, "Don't worry, it's not a real weapon."

“H-Huh? Thanks, but… who are you?!” stammered Junpei. He knew they went to the same school, but barely paid attention to anything outside his little world.

The boy stared down sympathetically and held out a hand. “I’m Akihiko Sanada. Sorry to scare you like that, but I was patrolling the area.”

Hesitant at first, Junpei let Akihiko help him up. Around the same time, the mist started to lift and the green film faded. Muttering a curse under his breath, Akihiko scratched the back of his neck and sighed.

“People will ask questions,” he said with experienced composure. “So why don’t I walk you home? I can explain what just happened.”

“S-Seriously?” asked Junpei, half thankful for this stranger, half uneasy.

“I can’t just leave you here after seeing something like that. It happened to me the first time too, and I had to figure out most of this stuff on my own.”

Akihiko seemed amicable. He was the only human being that night who didn’t seem crazy in the bad way, except for knowing this bizarre scenario that happened to be real. Junpei had no choice but to
trust him, and he introduced himself as well.

They ignored the confused whispering of the people, free from their coffined forms. But Junpei quickly eyed a crowd forming around where the man was. In between the curious people, he could see the man stare emptily at the ceiling – alive but muttering nonsense. Akihiko noticed this and shook his head.

“What happened to him?” asked Junpei.

“He’s one of the Lost, suffering from Apathy Syndrome,” Akihiko explained sadly. “That thing that came out of him was a Shadow. It’s the thoughts of a person manifested as a monster. The figure that saved you was your Persona. It’s your inner strength that allows you to defeat Shadows.”

Seeing the poor junior lost and confused, Akihiko tried rewording it.

“Long story short, a few people can see Shadows and summon Persona. You, me, and a few others can walk around and fight the Shadows during the Dark Hour, what we just experienced.” Junpei still stared with a blank expression. Akihiko knew it was a ton to swallow, so he added, “I won’t ask for your help until you feel ready, Iori. So ask away.”

Junpei took a deep breath and unloaded dozens questions. It was a long walk home for them both.
Finding Better Days

April 23-30, 2009

Tartarus.

What once was the grand, three-floored private high school morphed into an irregular structure reaching high enough to kiss the moon. It looked like a giant pile of various toys dumped in the middle of the campus that put most skyscrapers in the world to shame. The newer members of SEES nearly snapped their necks trying to find the top of the titanic tower. Overwhelmed, nearly everyone feared they would never come close to reaching, let alone finding, the halfway point.

Exploring a warped labyrinth of gooey monsters, unpredictable stairs, and murky blood-drenched walls easily beat wading in a sea of green mist and coffins. The tower had a repetitive architecture of protruding hallways and structures that Airi could easily get lost in and mentally escape into fighting. She obtained new Persona when she sometimes defeated a Shadow and used them whenever they proved to be beneficial in a combat situation. She’d let Yukari and Junpei do most of the fighting while she occasionally offered advice. They alternated between using Persona and the melee weapons Mitsuru’s contacts in the Kirijo Group provided for them. Neither of them questioned her laxness at first. Once they became accustomed to summoning their Persona, they expected their field leader to leave the peanut gallery and enter the fray.

The bull-headed Io and golden-winged Hermes belonged to Yukari and Junpei respectively. Mitsuru, Akihiko, and the others who had not joined yet had their own unique Persona as well. The residents of the Velvet Room granted Airi the gift to possess multiple Persona. She felt somewhat jealous of her friends, as they only had one, inspired by their inner selves. Sometimes having one special and unique tool beats having numerous disposable ones. Airi did have Orpheus as her unique Persona, but the feminine interpretation of the Greek musician was very weak and possessed little useful skills. But since it was hers alone, she kept Orpheus in her psyche, even as she gave up more practical and effective Persona.

She tried to take some advantage of her more flexible combat prowess, but Airi did her best to restrict her abilities. Her friends had to improve their own skills at their own paces. She allowed Mitsuru to analyze the enemies from a distance so no one could question how the girl knew nearly every Shadow type’s weakness. Sometimes the gang would struggle with the ice-weak Obsessed Cupids or the Muttering Tiaras, and Airi would summon Apsaras or Jack Frost. Even with a simple naginata Mitsuru gave her, Airi’s attacks were swift, sharp, and meticulous.

One week and two trips later, the three-manned group managed to climb reach the top of Thebel, the first block of Tartarus. They could not progress further because of a blockade surrounded the set of stairs to the next section. On their way back to the dorm, Mitsuru wasted no expense in praising Airi’s leadership.

“You managed to avoid unnecessary battles and allowed Takeba and Iori to develop their skills as you ascended. I am impressed with our progress, Fujihara.”

“I’m surprised we made it as far as we did so soon,” said a drowsy Yukari. Feeling sticky and sweaty, she tied her short hair into pigtails.

“Akihiko-sempai’ll be proud,” Junpei stretched, nearly whacking Airi in the head. “But why’s Aibana bossin’ us around anyway?”
“Watch what you say around me, pal!” She lightly smacked his shoulder.

Mitsuru shook her head and took out her Evoker its holster around her waist. “The process of forcing out a Persona without a natural agent of triggering stress is extremely difficult, Iori. Fujihara has shown to summon hers with an Evoker without hesitation. You and Takeba have improved, but a leader must be level-headed enough to make swift decisions.”

Head spinning a bit, Junpei shrugged and rested his hands on his belt. “Fine… I was just teasin’ though.”

“You sound as convinced as saying Africa is a country,” remarked Airi.

“Ha, that’s more like it!” Junpei laughed. “Glad ya know how to lighten up, man!”

“Of course! I’m stuck every day with the guy who got my name wrong on the second day of school!”

Now Mitsuru’s head spun. “You two to still have quite a lot of energy at this hour…”

Yukari yawned, pressing her hand to her forehead. “They’re always like that, Mitsuru-sempai. They’re worse at lunch. Sometimes I’m too exhausted to keep up.”

Once they returned to the dorm, the Dark Hour ended. An antsy Akihiko was sitting in the lounge with his homework. Reading the atmosphere, he knew they made quite a great accomplishment.

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May 1, 2009

“We were kinda hesitant giving Airi the field leader role. Next thing we knew, the three of them climbed 15 floors in one week. They seem to get along great too.”

Gently stretching to not pull a muscle, Akihiko sat at the edge of a bed in one of the rooms at Tatsumi Memorial Hospital. A visitor sat in a chair by the window. His clothes were odd; donning a maroon peacoat and a black knitted beanie, he was clearly not prepared for warmer weather.

“They’re really something,” Akihiko continued. “Mitsuru is relieved to have Airi in charge in battle. It’s refreshing to see a girl like her be so determined and focused.”

The visitor sighed in annoyance. “If she’s so damn perfect, what’s the problem?”

“It’s got nothing to do with being perfect," he replied flatly. "It’s rare to meet girls like her or Mitsuru, and Yukari’s pretty tough too in her own way. But I don’t know. It just seems like Airi’s very… observant.”

“She’d better be. I wouldn’t put my life in the hands of a klutz.”

Akihiko glared. ‘I’m saying it wrong. Sometimes it’s hard to talk with her about our mission. She wants us ‘to be honest’ like she’s expecting us to stab her in the back at any second. It’s like she knows we’re hiding something.”

The visitor took his hands out of his pockets and folded his arms. His eyes narrowed as he mused over his friend’s concerns.

Thankful he wore sweatpants under his hospital gown, Akihiko sat on the ground to stretch his legs. “I think she knows more than she’s letting on. She completely blew off the Chairman and said she
knew all about the Dark Hour and Personas. She didn’t even flinch at the Evoker looking like a real gun.”

The visitor hated beating around the bush. “And?”

Akihiko stood up, and sighed. “I think she’s hiding something too.”

“She’s a girl, Aki. How’s that a surprise?”

“Damn it, Shinji, you’re still not listening!”

“All you’ve been telling me is that she ain’t stupid. You guys are barkin’ out orders without explaining shit. If I were her, I wouldn’t trust you either.”

Akihiko was used to butting heads with who might as well be his brother, but this time he couldn’t tolerate the lack of sympathy. “And if you were her, what would you like to hear?”

Shinjiro fell silent. He lifted his beanie slightly so his eyes were less hidden. Though both having eerily similar grey eyes, the two completely contrasted with each other physically. Despite being captain of the boxing team and winning many national championships, Akihiko had a youthful face and scrappy body with some noticeable muscle to survive the brutal sport. Unathletic in comparison, Shinjiro stood at five-ten and possessed a harsher jawline and the broader shoulders of an average build.

“Should I tell her about how we founded SEES?” Akihiko asked. “Should I mention you? Should I be honest and say that we have no clue what we’re doing?!”

“Of course not. Don’t be an idiot, Aki.”

Shinjiro stood up and turned his back to Akihiko. He pressed his hand against the window and stared down at the street. Three figures in the Gekkoukan uniform were heading towards the hospital from the direction of the school. The boy with a baseball cap and the girl with a pink sweater seemed to be pushing their reluctant friend with a green scarf.

“You guys just started poking ‘round Tartarus, right?”

“Yeah. What’re you thinking?”

Looking in the direction of the high school, Shinjiro’s rigid expression didn’t change. “Looks like Mitsuru better start talking ‘bout how this mess started.”

“Wait a second… don’t tell me…”

“They can’t be in the dark forever if that transfer student’s using her brain - which you think is some kinda crime. With you and Mitsuru being so uptight, I’d see you’re bluffin’ too.”

Aware of the mocking subtext, Akihiko clenched his dominant left hand into a fist. The sound of the door sliding open ended the conversation. A doctor came in ready to fetch Akihiko for examinations.

“Don’t go anywhere, Shinji,” he ordered. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Shinjiro shrugged and leaned lazily against the foot of the bed as they left. If the check-up were quick enough, he wouldn’t have to meet those three. He was not explaining his involvement beyond having some information.
Akihiko originally called him over to ask if he’d seen anyone with the potential to summon a Persona. Shinjiro told him that he overheard a doctor complain about her family admitting her niece the other night for “seeing black monsters under a green moon.” Knowing his social skills made him disagreeable, he asked Akihiko to investigate. Not long after accepting the favor, Akihiko went on and on about the reliability of the new recruits. Sometimes Shinjiro wondered how in the hell he could jump from topic to topic without getting dizzy.

When the three’s voices approached the room from the hallway, he stiffened his posture and slipped his callused hands into his pockets.

“C’mon! How can volleyball be more important than visiting the ol’ sempai?”

“Airi does have a life, you know. Can you go a day without leeching onto her?”

“Hey! You’re involved in this kidnapping too!”

“I take that as a no. And I’m only doing this in case Akihiko-sempai plans to jump out the window in boredom.”

“It’s alright, Yukari. It’s just that I can’t miss this meeting with the club advisor – ”

“But you can’t leave your friends hangin’ when we need ya most!”

As the door slid open, in came the guy in the baseball cap and the girl with the sweater. The one with the scarf was nowhere to be found, although Shinjiro thought he saw a shadow sneak away. When they registered that a stranger was there and not Akihiko, the juniors’ carefree mood died.

Junpei tried to be brave, but ended up tripping over his own tongue. “Umm… Is th-this Akihiko-sempai’s room… by any chance?”

Not-Aki was tempted to blurt “What do you think, dumbass?” but he bit his tongue and gave him an annoyed glare. The oppressive air stifled the juniors until Akihiko came to the rescue. He slid past them and broke the silence. “What are you guys doing here? This a field trip or something?”

“We came to see you,” said a more-relaxed Yukari. “But it doesn’t look like anything’s wrong with you.”

The senior scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. “Nah, I’m just here for a check-up. The doctors say I’m better, so I’ll be back in action pretty soon.”

Light-hearted talk was Shinjiro’s cue to leave. “We done, Aki?” he questioned bitterly, voice sending shivers down Yukari and Junpei’s spines.

The rudeness rubbed Akihiko the wrong way, and he replied distantly, “Yeah. Thanks.”

Junpei and Yukari’s confused eyes darted between the two. Neither their sempai nor the stranger was willing to elaborate. Shinjiro pushed himself off the bed, pulled his beanie over his eyes, and grumbled under his breath, “I don’t have time for this shit.”

Taking long strides despite his slouched posture, he ignored the frightened juniors and stalked out of the room. As he turned down the hallway, he noticed the girl with the scarf. She stood against the wall with red headphones in her ears. She seemed to be on another planet, as she did not notice the towering young man heading her direction. Gazing at her curiously, Shinjiro slowed his pace. Noticing a shadow falling over her, she took off her headphones. Her crimson eyes met his. Based on Akihiko’s description of her and the Kirijo Group file he briefly skimmed months ago, he knew
she was Airi Fujihara.

Something strange happened as soon as their eyes met; blood rushed to her face until she resembled a swollen tomato. Her expression housed an uncanny amount of impulsive emotions wanting to escape that no one could convey openly in a single encounter.

“Shi–!” Airi cried. As quickly as she blushed, all color drained from her face. She quickly lowered her voice and pressed her back firmly against the wall. “I-I’m sorry, sir… I m-mistook you f-for s-someone else… D-Do you n-need something?”

To simplify, but not accurately describe it, she was utterly terrified. He raised an eyebrow and studied her fidgeting. She knew his name somehow, but part of him felt sorry for her embarrassment. He buried his brewing curiosity, and let it go before the poor girl passed out.

“It’s nothin’. Never mind,” he said.

With a relieved sigh and brisk bow, she abandoned him and bolted to Akihiko’s room. Once she entered her friends greeted her. Shinjiro overheard them because they spoke so loudly.

“I need to get back to my training. Boxing is – Fujihara? What’s wrong?”

“You okay, Aibana? Ya look like you saw a ghost!”

“Y-Yeah, I’m f-fine! It’s n-n-nothing – ”

“No you’re not! You look like you’re gonna faint!”

“Calm down, then tell us what happened.”

Shinjiro scared off too many people to bother counting. Hell, most people can’t even look at him without feeling either timid or pissed off. No girl in her right mind would ever consider talking to him, but he had no idea what to make of Airi. It was like she had known him for years, only to realize they have never met.

Having other plans, he continued dragging his dingy boots out of the pristine hospital. He told himself that he would never see her again, but he couldn’t ignore the conflicted but genial feelings swimming in her eyes. The encounter lingered uncomfortably in his mind as he returned to the dirty, crooked outskirts of Port Island and disappeared.

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“Seriously, sempai. Who the hell was that guy?!” Junpei insisted.

The four huddled together on the monorail heading back to Iwatodai. He dropped the subject earlier, but something didn’t sit right with him. “Are you sure you didn’t see that guy, Aibana?”

The girl jumped and took out her headphones. “Huh?”

“Man, you’re such a ditz. It’s kinda cute!”

Yukari elbowed the boy in the gut. “Don’t flirt in a public place, Stupei.”

Sighing, Akihiko’s tone rang more of frustration than authority. “For the hundredth time, Junpei, he’s a friend from school. I only asked if he knows anyone suffering from Apathy Syndrome.”

“Then how come he’s not wearing the uniform?” Like a reckless idiot charging towards an
oncoming train, Junpei refused to back down. “Are ya really sure you didn’t see him, Aibana? Tall, long hair, red jacket?”

For the ten-thousandth time, she shook her head.

Although Yukari didn’t speak up, she understood Junpei’s restlessness. How could have Airi not seen the thuggish young man that stood out so much at a sterile hospital? She came from the same direction he left in. Once they got off the monorail and made it to the dorm, it was nearly dinnertime. The girls went up to the third floor to change when Yukari confronted her again.

“What’s going on, Airi?”

“What do you mean, Yukari?”

“Remember when you said we should be honest with each other? That includes you as well, y’know.”

Airi’s shoulders arched and stiffened as she gazed down at her feet.

“Is something wrong?” Mitsuru appeared before them, carrying a few textbooks. By the way her lips thinned, she hoped her dormmates were not about to have a heated argument.

Continuing to avoid eye contact, Airi asked, “Kirijo-sempai, have we found any potential Persona-users?”

“I believe so. Akihiko received the roster for class 2-E, correct, Takeba?”

“Uh, yeah…” Yukari folded her arms and furrowed her brow. “Did sempai tell you we all ran into him at the hospital?”

She let out a restrained smile. “No, but Iori was quite vocal about the trip. I had a feeling you two would go along with him.” Mitsuru retained her distant demeanor. “Are you two alright?”

The juniors gave each other looks before Yukari shook her head and relaxed her pose. “We’ll talk after dinner, okay?”

Nervous but feigning confusion, Airi nodded. The archer sighed and went to her room without another word.

“Did I interrupt something important?”

“No, it’s alright,” Airi lied. Her pitch was harsh enough to let the conversation end awkwardly. Neither of the girls said a word to each other. Airi wondered if Mitsuru was uncomfortable around her.

“I know it’s not my business, but if it is pertinent to our mission, please speak, Fujihara.”

Airi nodded. She picked her words carefully to spin the white lie, “We ran into a friend of Sanada-sempai’s today. Something seemed off about him. I think he has a Persona.”

When she looked at her sempai, Airi could not completely understand the ice queen’s expression. Mitsuru inquired, “Who was he?”

“I don’t know his name. He left once we got there and never introduced himself. But I could tell something was not right. It’s not like Penthesilea’s scanning ability, it’s more like a gut feeling I have.”
Not knowing whether to take the claim seriously or not, Mitsuru kept her lips sealed for a moment. “What did your intuition tell you?”

“We shared eye contact for a moment. He looked… off. His eyes seemed so distant and melancholy. Something about him seemed unstable, but I don't know what.”

Although she never changed her expression, Mitsuru nodded slowly, thinking. “I see. That could be problematic…” She shook her head, dismissing whatever thought crossed her mind. “I’ll speak with Akihiko about your concerns. In the meantime, you should get some food and rest. You look like you ran a marathon.”


Once the underclassman was out of sight, Mitsuru relaxed her guard. She knew exactly whom Airi was talking about. As she put her books down near one of the end tables in the hallway, Mitsuru dialed a number on her cell.

Ikutsuki picked up. “Speaking?”

“This is Mitsuru,” she said. She walked to the window on the other end of the hall so Airi would not overhear her from downstairs. “Have you received the Tartarus report?”

“Ah, yes. I checked my email a few minutes ago. Is there something you forgot to add?”

“No, this is something slightly different. Whenever you get the chance, please search the database again. Make sure you cross-reference anything you can find regarding Airi Fujihara. I need to know where our contact obtained his information and why he has been hesitant to reveal more of his identity.”

Ikutsuki hummed and tsk’ed lightly. “Right away. I hope to relieve this royal pain for the Kirijo princess.”

“Thank you very much.” With a frustrated sigh, Mitsuru snapped her phone shut before she could hear Ikutsuki laugh at his own stupid joke.
The Light of the Oncoming Train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 5-9, 2009

May had always been a slow month for Airi, who could only meet classmates and join extracurricular activities to pass time. Spending her Sundays with the elderly couple at the bookstore helped break through some of the monotony. They would offer snacks, and she would buy discounted books and listen to stories of their younger days. Once she heard of the Persimmon tree on Gekkoukan High’s campus being cut down, she made use of her time on the Student Council to start a program to preserve the plant.

She brought up the proposal with fellow member Hidetoshi Odagiri during the lunch break. “We can find a way to convince the staff,” said the stern-lipped junior. “You’ve done well in managing our workload, so I’ll be sure to spread the word, Fujihara.”

“Thank you so much! Oh, and how’s the case on the bathroom smoker coming long?”

He frowned and folded his arms. “Still no leads. It’s not surprising. Students are like children trying to hide the broken vase they knocked over and broke. They don’t understand that the longer this goes on, the harsher the punishment will be. Sooner or later, someone will respect me for that, and it’ll be too late to say ‘I told you so’.” He glanced at the girl, expecting her approval. “I guess I’m preaching to the choir. I apologize.”

“No, I understand,” said Airi. “You’ll find the culprit, but please don’t overdo it. We need you at your best to keep track of our goals.”

Those were not the words he expected, but Hidetoshi found the sympathy in her voice. He brushed some dust off an old book on penal laws he picked up from the library as they stopped by her classroom.

“Thank you, Fujihara. A shame you can’t make the meeting today, but you have many obligations to fulfill. Are you sure you can handle them all?”

“I can! I’m pretty good at taking notes and planning things out in advance. I promise I’ll attend Monday's meeting.”

“Very well. I’ll see you then.”

Adjusting the wrinkle-less tie around his stiff neck, Hidetoshi went in the other direction with the unwavering confidence of a leader not often found in young men his age.

When she returned to her seat in 2-F, Airi overheard some of Junpei and Yukari’s bickering. At some point they stopped bugging the girl about what happened at the hospital and returned to their usual routine. “So,” Airi crashed in the middle of the verbal fight with a mischievous grin. “Have you two finally admitted your love for each other?”

Predictably, the two cringed in anger and disgust. “That’s not funny!” shrieked the pale-faced Yukari.

“I second that!” Junpei’s face contorted unnaturally. “Besides, give a heads-up before swoopin’ in on
a conversation.”

“Oh really? Because last I checked, the school thought you and I were an item, Junpei-kun. If people think I’m mad that you’re cheating, I might have a chance to talk to a guy without being labeled a slut!”

Yukari sat on top of her desk and sighed. “You make it sound like your reputation is on the line. At least you’re still new enough to change your image without consequence.”

“Anyway, I knew you ain’t here to gossip like an old lady.” Junpei spoke with glee, “I’m ready for tonight! I got a feeling this is gonna be the start of an awesome adventure in saving the world, don’t ya think so, Aibana?”

Shocked, Airi stepped back from what she thought was an anomaly in the universe. Did he react this passionately before?

Junpei stared obliviously back at her when she didn’t reply right away.

“Uh, yeah, I think so,” she said half-heartedly. “So, Yukari, is Kirijo-sempai sure about tonight?”

“Absolutely. She’s certain something will happen. The number of Apathy Syndrome cases is at its peak. The same thing happened around the same time you first arrived here.”

The lone male scratched the back of his head. “But what’s so special about today specifically? I mean, I’m glad it’s not a school night, but c’mon! With how much ass we’ve been kicking we can take on anything that comes our way!”

“Anything but exams, in your case” remarked Yukari the moment killer.

“Shit!” A frantic Airi leapt three feet in the air, creating a scene in the room. “When are they again?!”

Junpei scratched behind his ear, making his cap nearly slide off his head. “So it’s not just me who forgets.”

“Relax, Airi,” sighed Yukari, hiding her mild amusement. “They’re not until the 18th.”

The student’s muscles relaxed and she sunk back into her seat. “Thank goodness! I’m not sure how I can handle volleyball, Student Council, SEES, Library Committee, and my studies!”

Sadly for her, the two friends could barely relate. “You could always drop one or two things for now,” said Yukari. "There’s always next semester.”

“If only Toriumi-sensei and Kirijo-sempai didn’t look to me in desperation. And weren’t you the one begging me to play a sport, Junpei-kun? Were you looking for a chance to take pictures of me in my gym uniform?”

The boy turned pale when Airi turned to him expectantly. “N-No! A-Actually, a few guys tried to sneak a few pics…” Horror filled Airi and Yukari’s faces. “But I tracked ‘em down and took the cameras!”

“You did turn them in though, right?”

Junpei arched back, taken aback by Yukari’s sharp tone. “Of course! Why would I let ‘em get away with something low like that?! Their asses are suspended, man!”

She sighed in relief, although Airi gave her a piercing stare. “As perverted as he can be, Junpei wouldn’t do that for me unless he honestly worried.” She turned to him and held up her hand.
Like on the day they first met, Junpei gave her a high five. “A-Anything for the ol’ leader!”

Airi laughed. “You calling me a hag? Do you want to survive to see your exam grades?”

“Actually no. I know I’m gonna fail anyway, so put me outta my misery!”

Yukari pinched the bridge of her nose. “You’re a hopeless doofus…”

Although Mitsuru told the gang to wait out by the Iwatodai train station to anticipate the presence of a Shadow, the night was quiet. Nothing seemed wrong other than the soupy, ugly mist. Sitting on the steps leading to the station, Yukari broke the silence. “There’s a full moon tonight… It looks even creepier during the Dark Hour.”

Airi stood nearby with a can of Cielo Mist she got from the dorm. “Depending on where you are, the Dark Hour can be creepier. Some buildings in London, Paris, and Rome are much older than these, and they have a somewhat Gothic atmosphere to them. It really feels like you’re in a horror movie.”

“You’ve traveled a bit, huh?” commented Junpei, practicing swinging his two-handed sword.

The girl shrugged bashfully. “It happens when a European family who actually cares has to fight with my relatives on how to raise me.”

“Must’ve been rough.” Yukari said sympathetically as she counted the arrows in her quiver. “Constantly moving around and going to different schools isn’t fun.” Airi nodded.

Then the sound of a motorcycle rang through the night. The vehicle appeared from down the street and pulled up to park in front of the group by the station. Airi, Junpei, and Yukari recognized the driver, for her helmet could not contain her long red hair in a ponytail. She hopped off her bike and took off her helmet to greet her comrades.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Mitsuru sincerely, tucking her bangs back. “Akihiko helped me oil the breaks.”

The juniors were stunned. Their sempai having a motorcycle, a vehicle operating during the Dark Hour, or both, they had no idea which one was crazier.

“Y-Your bike…” stuttered Junpei.

Mitsuru nodded with a proud, but rare smile. “Yes, it is mine, Iori. The Group customized the engine with the same technology that enables our Evokers to work.” She took out some odd machinery from her backpack and placed it on the seat of her bike. “I’ll be providing support from here. Everything else is the same as when we explore Tartarus. The Shadow is currently located in a monorail, not far from here. You’ll have to walk on the tracks to get there.”

Yukari and Junpei were still stunned. “No electronic equipment operates during the Dark Hour,” Airi spoke for them.

“Unless acted upon by Persona-users and Shadows or were modified with specialized technology. Now, I’ll notify you if circumstances change.”

“But, Mitsuru-sempai,” Junpei insisted, “your bike – ”

“ – is special.”
The conversation went nowhere, so Airi suggested they start the operation. Mitsuru wished the three of them good luck as they began their long walk to the monorail. Once they danced along the tracks and reached their destination, Junpei and Yukari relaxed. The train did not look out of the ordinary, other than it remaining still.

“Is it really inside?” the skeptical archer spoke into their headset.

“Absolutely,” assured the confident Mitsuru. “Proceed with caution and stay together.”

While Yukari calmly prepared her bow, Junpei was jumping from side to side, sword at the ready. He couldn’t contain his giddy excitement. “Hermes is just beggin’ to be used!”

Airi nodded to her prepped team and guided them to the foot holding to the train door. “Gentlemen first.” Confusion lit the guy’s face. “I’m wearing gym shorts under my skirt, but I’m not taking chances.”

Exasperation settled in. “Yeah, yeah. You two still think I’m a pervert?”

She glanced at Yukari. “One of us does, and she’ll bury you if you try to catch a glimpse.”

That was enough to shut him up and board the train. Once everyone entered the narrow car, they saw a few coffins, but no Shadows. The stuffy air hardly had any circulation without air conditioning, and hardly any wind blow during the Dark Hour. The trio took a step forward when a thunderous slam startled them. Everyone turned to see the doors bolted shut with no visible hint of who or what did it.

“Fujihara! What happened?” exclaimed their backup, sensing something changed.

“We’re trapped inside,” Airi calmly answered. “The Shadow must know we were coming.”

“Very well. Be ready for anything.”

With Airi in the lead, they preceded through the car, passing the occasional coffin. Even in the metallic train, the air was oppressive and stuffy. The teens wondered where the heck the blood red stains on the walls, windows, and floor came from. Could so much water be present on a train? Maybe it was just some random aesthetic to add to the eerie world under the Dark Hour’s influence.

Nothing eventful happened until they met their first Shadow minions in the next car.

“There it is!” shouted Junpei. The loud noise startled it as it left dust trails behind it. “Hey, get back here, you son of a – “

“Wait!” Mitsuru interrupted. “Something’s not right. The enemy is acting strangely.”

“How so?” asked Airi.

“Really, leader?! If we don’t go after it, we’re gonna lose it!”

Hating his tone, she rolled her eyes. “Junpei-kun, we need to be cautious about this. We have no idea what the Shadow is like. For all we know, we’re in a trap!”

“I agree with Fujihara,” said Mitsuru. “It would be foolish to blindly chase after it.”

Not believing how cautious the girls were, Junpei turned his back to the group. “Fine.” He growled, clenching his two-handed sword until his knuckles turned white. “I’ll go myself. You guys just stay back and watch me beat it!” Like an impatient, uncooperative, borderline-suicidal partner, he charged
onward without thinking.

“Junpei!” Yukari called out to him. “You idiot!”

Out of nowhere sprung two Shadows. One missed Airi’s head by pure luck and landed on the bladed end of her naginata. The second charged at Yukari, who was prepared after watching the off-guard leader gaping at the goo on her weapon. She sidestepped the monster and aimed her bow. With a good read as to where to strike it, the arrow struck it dead in one hit.

“Great job, Stupei!” sighed Yukari. “This is what the enemy wanted!”

Holding back a curse, Airi finished cleaning her weapon with her scarf and pressed forward. “Let’s catch up before the enemy starts taking us out separately.”

A few more enemies got in their way, but the ladies easily crushed them without needing their Personas. Airi was impressed by how quickly Yukari analyzed the perfect place to shoot an enemy in one go.

Once they caught up in the next car, several enemies trapped their capped amigo, swinging his sword clumsily like a baseball bat. Relived in spite of their earlier annoyance, the girls ran into the fray to support him.

With one of the four dead, he gave them a harsh glare. “I’ve got it under control!”

As he spoke, a Shadow was ready to strike him with a physical attack. Yukari quickly summoned Io and blew a cool tuft of wind to knock it off balance. Airi summoned Angel to throw the others off with another Garu spell, giving everyone a chance to charge in and deliver a blow in a collective all-out attack. Within seconds only a black pool remained.

Everything calm again, Yukari snapped, “That’s what happens when you don’t listen!”

“Shaddap! I was doin’ fine!”

“Excuse me?!”

The sudden movement of the monorail ended another argument that barely lifted off the ground. The sound of coffins falling over resonated throughout the car.

Junpei adjusted his weight quicker than the girls, but he still was caught badly off guard. “What the –?! Why’re we moving?!”

“The monorail is under enemy control!” Airi cried. “We have to find that thing before something bad happens!”

“Oh, great!” none of the fever left Yukari. “What are we gonna do?!”

“Calm down and listen,” a cold Mitsuru broke in. “I sense a strong presence in the front car. That must be the one we’re after. You’ll have to defeat it to stop the train!”

Pulling themselves together, the team pressed on, slaughtering any Shadows in their wake. Tartarus had a greater concentration of more difficult enemies, so the easy breeze was a welcoming change. Once they reached the door leading to the front-most car, everyone felt ready. The monorail gained even more speed, but they felt ready to face the unknown before them.

Then they saw the monster. An large, busty woman, painted in black and white with her hair flowing
majestically across the entire space. She could have been quite pretty, but even with a dress covering everything below her belly, her legs were sprawled out in a suggestive manner. A red butterfly mask obscured her face and hinted at her Arcana: the Priestess.

Junpei’s jaw dropped. “What is this, the friggin’ boss?!”

“Be careful, you three!” Mitsuru warned.

The first command Airi gave out was to act freely. The Shadow let out a shriek and a few minions appears before her, serving as a shield. The field leader groaned, mentally going through the list of Persona she currently possessed. Angel, Apsaras, Omoikane, Orpheus…

Yukari shot a few arrows at the small enemies while Junpei summoned Hermes to deal Cleave against the Priestess. Once satisfied, Airi dodged a few fire-based attacks from the Maya minions and called forth Pixie. She let her friends build up their strategies while she attended a support role. “Geez!” whined Yukari, putting her bow away and taking out her Evoker. “These guys are a pain!”

“Then focus on the Priestess!” shouted Airi. “As long as she’s busy getting hit, she won’t summon anymore fodder!”

So well spoke the leader until a ball of ice smacked her dead in the face. Even with Apsaras, a Persona resistant to ice, the force nearly tipped her over.

“You okay, Aibana?”

She rose to her feet, rubbed her nose, and sidestepped a few more Bufu spells. “I am! Nothing Dia or a patch can’t fix! How are you hanging, Junpei-kun?”

Hermes had a chance to throw a mass of fire at the Priestess with little success. Charging at her with all his strength, Junpei dealt enough damage to make the Priestess dizzy. “You know how awkward it is fighting a chick at this angle?”

“Don’t get too distracted, Stupe!” Yukari command Io to spam Garu multiple times between the boss and the minions.

“Shut up, Yuka-tan! This isn’t fun at all!”

“Keep up the offensive, guys!” cheered Airi, casting Dia to recover Junpei’s health. “How’s the enemy holding up, Kirijo-sempai?”

Some static interfered with the message, but Mitsuru was audible. “Good thing none of you used ice attacks or else she would have deflected. The Priestess doesn’t have much fight left.”

“How much time do we have?”

“Very little. I can hear the monorail coming towards the station!”

That was the last straw. “Nekomata!” Out appeared the cat woman with a hiss. “Forget the minions, let’s attack the Priestess head-on!”

Her friends let out enthusiastic battle cries as they mercilessly bringing down hell and high – but not frozen – water on the Shadow. The action was far more than overkill as Airi gave Junpei room to bring the final blow on the Priestess, wailing and dying before the team. Airi and Yukari finished off the remaining Maya minions until the car was empty, minus the swamp of remains.
Yet the train kept on rolling.

“Why’re we still moving?!” cried a panicked Junpei.

“We’re going too fast!” yelled Yukari, looking around the car. “We have to put on the brakes or else…!”

Interrupting her kohai, Mitsuru screamed loud enough to destroy anyone’s eardrum. “What are you waiting for?! There’s a train sitting at the station! You’re going to crash!”

“Damn it! How do we stop this thing!”

The tiny leader shoved everyone out of the way and pulled down on a lever with all the strength her body could muster. The monorail screeched deafeningly and slowed abruptly, throwing Yukari and Junpei forward and down to the ground. Airi continued to cling to the lever until the train came to a complete stop. When she opened her eyes, only three feet separated the two trains.

“D-Did we stop…?” groaned a sore Junpei.

Shaking violently, Yukari checked her neck for a pulse. “I-I think so…”

“Is everyone alright?”

“Uh, y-yeah, Mitsuru-sempai… but my knees are shaking…”

“Dude… I’m like drenched in sweat…” barely able to get up, Junpei crawled to Airi. “Hey, are you okay?”

Laying on her back, the girl looked to Junpei. That little adventure never stopped scaring the shit out of her, no matter how many times she relived it.

“Bloody hell… t’at’s still scary…” she muttered in English through tear-soaked eyes.

“Hey, hey, don’t cry!” he managed to sit her up and support her back. “Crap, where’d I put my hankie?!” Junpei found his wrinkled-up handkerchief in his jacket pocket and sighed. “Uhh, you don’t mind if it’s been used, do you?”

Watching the poor boy try to comfort her reminded Airi of simpler days. Junpei would do anything to help out a friend who was in trouble. He did it for all the women he cared about in his life. She loved the little moments like this. Unable to contain herself she laughed, feeling much better than she did a few minutes ago.

“Hey, what’s the deal! Don’t laugh!”

They took some time to stand and recollect themselves before leaving the train for good. Once they made it off the platform and returned to their former meeting spot, they could see Mitsuru performing breathing exercises.

“Welcome back. I-I’m glad you’re safe!” she spoke quickly, despite trying to keep her cool. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more on my end. You guys did a great job.”

Between breaths, Airi smiled and said, “You did the best you could. Thanks, Kirijo-sempai.”

“But, how did you know which one was the brake?” asked Yukari.

“Woman’s intuition?” she deadpanned. Trial and error was more honest, but less amusing.
Not sure whether to take it seriously or not, her classmate sighed. “I don’t think this is the kind of thing that helps with…”

“Whatever,” Junpei dismissed the silly comment. “Wanna grab a bite to eat? I’m starved!”

Ignoring any protests, everyone agreed to grab a snack from the dorm’s kitchen before heading to bed for the night. As the juniors returned to their usual selves, they went back to their usual bickering and conversation. Airi felt the bond between everyone in the group intensify that night.

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May 10, 2009

“A monorail is going overboard, don’t you think?” Akihiko brought up Saturday night’s operation with Mitsuru over breakfast. Both were exhausted from the week’s stress, but they had enough patience to talk out what happened.

“I agree. The Shadows are becoming more unpredictable.”

“Just as the Chairman thought. He’s looking through the Kirijo Group’s archives to find a useful explanation for this. Some things don’t feel right.”

Mitsuru nodded as she sipped some tea. “Do you think we should be more assertive in finding new members?”

Akihiko shot a look he knew no one else could ever give to Mitsuru and live to tell the tale. “We need the help. I’m not giving up on that girl from 2-E.”

“Are you certain about this?”

“Of course. I don’t know how he gets his information sometimes, but Shinji never says anything he’s unsure of.”

Knowing she hit the wrong nerve, she softened her voice. “I understand. I shouldn’t have doubted you two.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said while stirring the strings of meat on his plate with his chopsticks. “He’s a stubborn jackass. No matter what I suggest, he refuses to come back. How can he live on the streets like that?”

Mitsuru lowered her head, reviewing memories of the three of them that she missed but never admitted to Akihiko. “I admire his resilience, but I fear he may be worse off than he’s letting on. Fujihara is worried about him too.”

The silence was so profound; they could hear the plumbing growling through the walls. One of the showers was running on the third floor.

Akihiko’s eyes widened. “She met him?”

“Yes. She did not disclose all the details, but she said she felt something was wrong with him. I don’t blame her. Who knows what else happened before you found him in January?”

She noted Akihiko’s apprehension and waited for him to respond. After a few moments he put down his chopsticks and rubbed his tired face with his hands. “We need to tell them everything, Mitsuru.”

Her empty mug slipped from between her fingers and landed on her lap. “Why now?”
“There’s no way they’ll trust us unless we tell them about what happened. We have to see how Airi handles the information. Her being calm about all of this is kinda strange.”

“I just don’t see why it’s necessary to explain everything so soon. Fujihara’s attentiveness and composure are signs of her competency.”

“It doesn’t change the fact we have to tell them at some point. It’s better to have them upset with us for a while than to pretend everything’s fine. It’ll bite us later if we don’t. The Group has all sorts of secrets, and they told us plenty that isn’t classified and won’t harm anyone.”

The tension lingered a while longer as their food grew cold. Mitsuru bit her lip and pondered his words. She agreed with him, yet she did not enjoy knowing everything they fought against started because of her family’s arrogance. It was a horrible mess to clean up that embarrassed her and her father enough.

“It’ll work out, Mitsuru,” Akihiko’s optimistic voice broke her from her thoughts. “Let’s give them a chance to know what’s going on.”

She regained her poised demeanor and nodded. “Very well. We should tell them after exams.”

May 11-24, 2009

In recognition of a successful encounter on the monorail, Mitsuru gave everyone a watch designed by the Kirijo Group. Powered by the ethereal Plumes of Dusk, they would function in the Dark Hour. Marking that hidden time, the hands and numbers would glow a bright white against a black background. Yukari and Airi agreed it would help keep track of when the Dark Hour ended whenever they explored Tartarus. Junpei, however, was disappointed that the watches were not powered by magic, like Mitsuru’s bike. He was even more upset when she disproved that theory too and admitted her bike also used that technology.

Once they accepted their gifts, everyone in SEES dove their noses into books for exams. A few days passed and another meeting was called into session. That Sunday afternoon they met up in the command room. Airi sat comfortably next to Junpei on the couch while Yukari sat across from her. She has been getting along well with both of her classmates; however, the rumors about her dating Junpei have not ceased even with Yukari’s social influence to dispel the gossip.

Akihiko sat in the same place as their first meeting and Mitsuru took Ikutsuki’s former spot in the armchair. Akihiko gently stretched his newly recovered arm. He was excited being back in the fight, though the Tartarus visit last night left his legs sore from the running. Mitsuru sat with her arms and legs crossed.

“Akihiko and I have thought things through over the past few weeks,” Mitsuru began. “After the successful climbs we made through Tartarus and the battle on the monorail, we are confident in your abilities.” She took a moment to take a deep breath. The air of formality she tried to uphold was failing. “I’m afraid we have hidden some information from you. Please understand that we were unsure how to approach you about these matters. But now that you have proven yourselves, we trust you.”

No one said a word. Airi especially kept a straight face.

When no one showed any sign of wanting to interrupt her, Mitsuru continued. “The Kirijo Group is fully responsible for everything SEES stands for. Including the existence of the Dark Hour and
Tartarus. The Group conducted research on Shadows for the past few decades that hinted that they could potentially affect time and space. My grandfather wanted to harness the Shadows’ powers for something extraordinary, and he assembled a team of the best scientists from Japan and around the world in the 1990s. They amassed an impressive collection of Shadows for projects in various fields of study, including ergonomics and medicine.

"During the final stages of one experiment ten years ago, they lost control of the Shadows’ powers. The facility exploded, and the Dark Hour was born.” Though she spoke at a reasonable pace, Mitsuru stopped to catch her breath. She could not bring herself to look at anyone throughout her talk. For the first time she did, she saw the shocked on Yukari and Junpei’s faces. “According to survivor accounts, the mass of Shadows they collected split into several large ones and then dispersed. If our suspicions are correct, we might have encountered two of them. The first was the Shadow Fujihara and Takeba fought on the roof; the other was on the monorail.”

Silence reigned for Airi to break. “Does our school turn into Tartarus because that’s where the experiments were held?”

Mitsuru nodded. “The high school needed renovations, particularly in removing the basement where the failed experiments took place.”

“So that means,” croaked Yukari. “All we’ve been doing is cleaning up your family’s mess?!”

“We have been cautious, but selfish for not informing you until now. I apologize for this.”

“You knew about it too, sempai?!” The archer’s eyes darted to Akihiko. “The Kirijo have been using us and you’re okay with that?!! Or, do you not care as long as you get to fight?!!”

The silver-haired teen nearly shot out of his seat. He glared at his clenched fists, only letting go when a drop of red blood slid down his white palm and stained the armchair. “I’ve never said anything like that. I have my own reasons for being here…”

“This… is crazy,” Junpei finally voiced the sole thought on his mind.

“I never intended to deceive any of you. Convincing you three to join SEES was my highest priority. As absurd as it is, only we – with our Personas – can fight the Shadows. Some of us never had a choice of getting involved…”

Emotional strain stifled Mitsuru, and Akihiko finished for her. “None of us woke up one day and asked to have a Persona. We’re barely more informed than you guys about Shadows, but the Chairman believes that if we destroy enough of them, Tartarus and the Dark Hour will vanish. That’s our plan, and everything Mitsuru shared hasn’t changed the objective.”

The abundance of words barely allowed Junpei time to process the information. Airi took the time to slowly re-explain everything. As confused as he was, at least he put more effort in trying to understand the situation. Yukari was a lit match too close to a leaky wine barrel. “I knew you guys were hiding something from us! Every time we mentioned Tartarus you pretended that you knew nothing, Mitsuru-sempai. Even when your family is the whole reason this all started in the first place!”

“That’s enough, Yukari,” Airi interrupted. “I know you’re angry, but I distrusted them too!”

All eyes turned to her standing in indignation. The seniors’ suspicions were confirmed, but wanted the girl to explain herself. Yukari stared with her jaw on the ground.

“The Kirijo Group has information about us that we never asked them to keep. You guys knew my
family situation long before I had the chance to tell you. I should feel more offended that you looked into my life without my permission, but I’m not. I understand you’re upset, Yukari, but Kirijo-sempai wants us to know the truth, even if it’s embarrassing for her. And I feel that I forced her to tell us!” Airi turned to Mitsuru and bowed. “I’m sorry I was paranoid, and that I was asking questions that were none of my business. We need to communicate more clearly and we have to think what each of us are going through before pointing fingers!”

She ended her tirade with a huff and plopped down in her seat.

“You know…” Junpei stood up as he sighed. “I ain’t mad at anyone, but all this stuff is fryin’ my brain. I think I need to sleep on this.”

Seeing how he was polite and cooperative, the seniors allowed Junpei to leave the meeting. Things were not done, however, between Yukari and Airi. The former lost some of her chagrin, but not enough to end her argument. “So you’re siding with Mitsuru-sempai?”

“I’m not siding with anyone. I only want the truth.”

“Fine!” The junior scoffed angrily. “Excuse me, but I will put an arrow between someone’s eyes if I don’t go.” Within seconds, she stormed out, slamming the door behind her and nearly knocking an old painting of the high school off the wall.

“Fujihara, you may leave too,” said Mitsuru, massaging her temples.

Airi lowered her head. “May I add something?”

The tension that left the room continued to suffocate the seniors. Akihiko shook his head. “Now’s not the best time. Your apology was enough.”

“No, it wasn’t. I’m sorry for using you, Fujihara.” Dropping her hands, Mitsuru sat up straight and reclaimed her usual poise. “When you told us you expected honesty from us, we panicked. Because you’re so perceptive, we knew we couldn’t hide anything from you for long without losing your trust.”

Understanding, Airi smiled. As if skipping after unloading a heavy burden, she stood up and approached the door to the hallway. “Make sure you two get some rest. It took a lot of courage for you to unload those heavy feelings.”

Surprised by her kindness, her seniors smiled in return.

“You’re quite thoughtful,” Mitsuru said.

“You get some rest too,” Akihiko added. “This might have been easier for you to digest, but don’t overdo it.”

Happy that their interaction did not end on a bitter note, Airi left the command room.

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter references a line from "Ode to Solitude" by HIM. That lyric always amused me, and I’m kinda glad I got to use it in a context where it makes some sense… even if I feel lame for doing so, haha.
Walking with Strangers

May 25-30, 2009

Summer uniforms arrived with the intensifying heat. Everyone was happy to rid of the heavy jackets and to relax in more comfortable clothing. Airi didn’t mind the change much; trading in her previous winter scarf, she wore a lightweight green knitted one with small wooden beads over the school’s standard short-sleeved blouse.

By the end of the month her dorm mates had recomposed themselves enough to make some small talk. Although they reached the first barrier in Arqua, the second block of Tartarus, rather expediently, no one really rejoiced or patted each other on the back like before. Hoping to bring some stability among members of the group, Airi vowed to spend some time with everyone. The relationship between her and Junpei remained unchanged. They continued to visit Hagakure for their routine after-school ramen treats. He thanked her for giving him enough space to think through everything. Even though he wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, Airi knew his heart remained loyal to his “not girlfriend.” All he was mad over was how she ranked number one in the class on the exams while he sat in the bottom tier.

After watching her stand up to Yukari at the meeting, Mitsuru warmed up to Airi a little more. Her time was still limited due to student council and fencing club, but they caught sight of each other in the hallway sometimes. Such an occasion occurred on a Thursday in late May.

“Need help, Fujihara?” After leaving the Faculty Office, Mitsuru spotted the tiny junior and her similarly short friend, each holding a cartoonishly towering stack of files from the Faculty Office.

Airi laughed. “Maybe I do. It’s delivery day for the advisor of health committee. Saori-chan is helping me out too.”

The mousy, heart-shaped faced brunette named Saori smiled timidly. “Oh, I’m not doing much. You’re carrying the majority of the bulk, Airi-san.”

“You joined another club?” Mitsuru asked while taking a significant number of books from both piles, dangerously close to tipping over.

“I think you and I are both the busiest girls in the school!” Airi said lightheartedly.

As they made it to the nurse’s office, Saori felt lost in the banter. She finally spoke up, albeit nervously, “Do you two live in the same dorm, president-san?”

Softening her typically formal façade, Mitsuru replied, “Correct. Fujihara is also a part of Student Council. You may say that I see her often enough to keep her in line.”

“Sanada-sempai and Junpei-kun are the real trouble-makers though,” Airi added.

“I can see that,” Saori agreed, feeling a bit more relaxed. “With the school’s boxing champion and class 2-F’s class clown, it must never be boring.”

“Sometimes the days can be difficult with them,” Mitsuru admitted wryly.

“But it keeps life interesting,” said Airi.

When they finished making their delivery with their advisor and the school nurse Edogawa, he
thanked them and allowed the members of the club to leave. Before going home, Airi invited Saori and Mitsuru to stop by a snack shop in town and grab a bite. Though both apprehensive, they agreed to the suggestion and ended up enjoying the nice break.

Though she managed to crack the ice with Mitsuru, Airi and Yukari’s relationship was still strained. Airi tried approaching her a couple times before finally letting the girl vent. She felt completely isolated from the rest, unable to get over her moment of resentment towards Mitsuru. Once the hot air left her system, Yukari no longer looked like she was ready to shoot anyone who looked at her funny. She and Airi got along again in no time.

Only Akihiko remained. Airi’s recent academic success boosted her popularity enough to finally talk to him in school without being diminished and harassed by his fangirls. That day she decided to take advantage of her supposedly newly enhanced charm and went out to eat with him. With no boxing practice on Saturdays he had no problem killing time with his underclassman. Ramen was never Airi’s favorite food growing up, but sharing a meal with a friend made the food taste better than she ever remembered.

“Ah!” the petite junior sighed happily. “I can’t eat another bite!”

Her sempai was left stunned. “It’s amazing how you completely polished that off.”

“After coming here once a week with Junpei-kun, I somehow learned to kill two extra-large specials and an appetizer with one mighty stomach!”

Akihiko sighed. “Don’t let yourself suffer just to be friendly. Seriously… If you don’t eat right, you’ll never grow stronger.” Even after the billionth time, Airi failed to hold back a childish glare. “Why are you giving me that look? I’m not Junpei. I won’t go easy on you just because you’re a girl.”

“Aye, right,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“I’m serious.” He cut the obvious big brother act. “Mitsuru urged you to be our field leader, and I thought you’d be best in that position too. Do your best, okay? We’ll do our part to back you up.”

The concern in his voice was too genuine to be ignored. Airi could see a little light of hope for her within him, like a tiny star in the clearest, darkest night sky. She acknowledged this, knowing exactly where this whole thing could possibly end up. As much as she hated giving Akihiko any kind of wrong signals, Airi knew being careful here is practice for when the time came for him.

“Well,” said Akihiko when no traces of food remained in their bowls. “Since we’re done eating, let’s head back to the dorm.”

Once he paid for everything, the two left Hagakure. Thankfully for them none of his fangirls came around to bombard them with stupid questions. Due to the conversation they shared, it was good no one interrupted.

“Sanada-sempai, it was wrong of me to not trust you and Kirijo-sempai in the first place. I made you very uncomfortable.”

Confused that she still took that to heart, Akihiko shook his head. “N-No, not at all! We had every right to be yelled at… We should have informed you from day one.”

“Oh, you’re not angry…” she said, relieved. “I’ve been worried about everyone’s morale ever since the meeting. I’m glad you’re doing okay.”
A soft smile escaped the boy’s lips. “It’s not your responsibility to look after everyone like a parent. Just be yourself and everything will work out.”

“If you say so.”

Passing by the heavily constructed train station in Iwatodai after investigating a train malfunction, Airi remembered when she, Akihiko, Yukari, and Junpei talked after visiting the hospital. Then she remembered the conversation in the hospital from past cycles. He never spoke of why he chose boxing this time that day. To earn more of his trust - and maybe to set the year on the right track, she felt she had to ask. “Sanada-sempai, why do you box?”

Noticing her trying to get his attention, he broke from his far-away daze at something ahead of them. Akihiko raised a confused eyebrow and blinked.

“I’m really curious. Did you pick it up before or after Polydeuces awakened?”

Seemingly mellow, he stretched his neck and back as they walked. “I boxed before my Persona awakened. Getting the power was kinda random and it scared the hell outta me. I was with an old friend, who started to experience the Dark Hour not long before me. He didn’t fully wake his Persona yet, but he helped me get through the rough nights.

“Then I met Mitsuru in my last year of grade school. She watched me win my first national championship. After the event, she barged into the locker room and asked me to help her form SEES.” He smiled at the memory. “I thought she was just bold and crazy back then. Now I know she sensed I had the potential, and she’s assertive thanks in part to her upbringing.

“As for boxing,” he scratched the Band-Aid on his forehead, covering an injury or scar he never fully disclosed, “I just wanted to learn how to fight. I’m curious to see how strong I can get. It’s like a game, only I’m competing against myself.”

He only put it lightly; Akihiko always reveled in his undying desire to fight. The sport taught him discipline and controlled techniques, but his eagerness sometimes blinded him from acknowledging if he or anyone around him was hurt. Some of his tendencies reflected on his Persona. The Persona had long white-blonde hair and bulging arms - one having an iron device replace a forearm - large enough to crush a car in a grip. Airi once thought if given the opportunity, Akihiko might consider replacing his arms for robotic ones for the sake of having more strength.

Airi tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. “You do it for self defense and personal growth. I really respect that.”

He stared at her blankly for a second. Then his face turned a light pink. “Heh, I guess I never heard it put like that. Mitsuru would freeze my tongue and call me a liar if I ever said that.”

They were quiet for a few moments. Only minutes from the dorm, they passed by a clinic, mostly empty except for someone pacing behind the desk impatiently. Then, something startled him. He rushed to a door leading to the check-up rooms like it was an emergency. Airi had seen the place a few times, but she never went in. No one in SEES ever used it. If anyone was injured, they rushed to the hospital on Port Island a train ride away. It didn’t make much sense, but Mitsuru insisted that the hospital staff were more skilled and had multiple esteemed specialists with ties to the Kirijo Group who would not ask questions about any serious injuries that outsiders would have.

“Fujihara?”

She bumped into Akihiko, who tried to get her attention. Airi rubbed her nose gently and apologized
He didn’t see what was funny, but he forced a smile as they continued on.

Eyeing her once more to see if she was on Earth, he repeated what he said in a serious manner. “I’m not just fighting for myself.”

“What do you mean?” she cocked her head curiously.

“Nothing’s worse than knowing you can’t save someone,” he confessed. Akihiko looked away briefly and stared at the sky. “I know what it’s like to feel powerless… and I don’t want to feel that way again. That’s why I have to become stronger.”

“I understand.”

She gently poked his arm until he looked back at her. He hesitated at first, but he was relieved when he did. Airi took him seriously. “You do…?”

“I do. Just don’t go overboard. I wouldn’t want you to suffer another injury. We need you in good shape, Sanada-sempai.”

Imagine someone giving a kid a free pass to an amusement park for the whole summer. Akihiko didn’t know how to respond, but he patted her shoulder. Airi envied his quick turn around. “I’m not a little kid, you know,” she giggled at his reaction.

A wry smile escaped his lips. “You’ve got the heart of one sometimes, that’s for sure.”

Somehow in two months, Airi forged reasonably strong bonds with her teammates. At this rate, she felt the team would be united and ready to face anything. This was a great head start that gave her the strength to cheer her sempai on. Once they reached the dorm, something else prodded at Airi’s mind. In order to make more progress, there was another bump in the road and thinking of it made her nervous. Distracted, she stopped walking.

“What’s wrong?” asked Akihiko, who picked up on her behavior rather quickly. For someone who had trouble communicating with girls, he knew a few cues hinting at emotional distress.

“Oh, you being formal’s kinda strange,” she lied. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Please just call me Airi. No need for honorifics. Just Airi.”

Akihiko turned pink for a moment. “Sorry… I guess I’ve been around Mitsuru for so long, that I get carried away. But is that what’s bothering you?”

She shook her head. “Oh, no… It’s not a big –”

When she blinked, he stood where Akihiko was. His eyes of steel stared, studying her, knowing he was in her way. In his calloused hands were a silver pocket watch and a leather wristwatch. His bloody mouth moved but no sound came out. It wasn’t necessary for her to understand; she was supposed to not cry, but she always failed. But from how she last left him, he had no right to criticize her being unable to let go. When she blinked once more, he vanished and Akihiko returned. He held her by the shoulders and supported her. Her body shook slightly against his calm grip. Worry was painted on his face and flowed through his body.

“Breathe, Airi,” he urged, on the edge of panicking. “Don’t pass out on me again!”

Realizing her head was spinning, Airi quickly breathed deeply to calm down. Her pulse stabilized and her vision became clear again. She looked Akihiko in the eyes and smiled halfheartedly when she felt more stable. Akihiko grinned back halfheartedly and let her go.
Inside, she knew wishing him to go away would never happen, though it would be so much easier if he never existed. She had to face him sooner or later. Being indirect like when she prodded Akihiko about his reasons for fighting, she asked, “Did Kirijo-sempai talk to you about me the other day?”

She noticed Akihiko’s lighthearted mood fade away. He seemed both tense and annoyed at the same time, though not at her. He went to the steps leading to the front door and sat down. “Yeah, she told me.”

“I see...” Airi picked at her nails, which needed trimming after one broke during a fight in Tartarus.

“Why did you lie about him? Did he threaten you?”

With his piercing eyes fresh in her mind, it was hard for Airi to look at Akihiko directly. “He didn't. I panicked,” she replied simply despite her nervous tone. “He looked scary.”

As much as he wanted to defend his friend, he understood Airi completely. Ready to cooperate, he scooted over to make a spot for her to join him. “What do you want to know about Shinjiro?”

Airi joined him and asked, “Is he a Persona-user like us?”

It was silent for a while until Akihiko mumbled something under his breath. He then spoke up. “Yeah.”

“Was he a member of SEES?”

He answered much quicker than before. “As soon as he found out that Mitsuru recruited me, he insisted on joining.”

“Did he leave recently?”

“No. He left two years ago.”

“Why?”

Akihiko held his breath and exhaled deeply. It was a weighty subject, but he tried to be brief in the explanation while still giving the subject its proper respect.

“Good evening, and welcome to Junpei’s ‘Believe It, or Don’t’.”

An eerie glow lit the dark dining area. It reminded Airi of one night in the countryside when she, her parents, and uncle went camping. Junpei’s flashlight brought back memories of ghost stories she regretted forgetting.

“There are many strange things in this world…” Junpei’s eyes gleamed over his dramatic performance and his free hand waved eerily. “According to one story, if you get caught at school late at night, you’ll be devoured by a maniacal ghost that roams the halls!

“The other day, this friend of mine – let’s call him Shu – said to me, ‘Junpei, I saw something strange.’ He sounded serious, so I asked him what he’s seen. He said it was about the girl in 2-E…” The junior finally caught Akihiko’s interest. “He claims he saw her go into the school on the night of the incident. I couldn’t believe it. She’s not the kind of girl to be out at night. But Shu was white as a sheet and insisted it was true!” The strange emphases and enunciations added even more charming insanity to the over-the-top presentation. “Then, it hit me. That ghost must’ve tried to make her its
dinner! And that’s why they found her lyin’ on the ground by the gate! I felt a chill run down my spine, and I broke into a cold sweat…

“Yes, there are strange things in this world… Believe it or don’t.”

He clapped for the lights to turn back on and ended with a majestic bow. Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Yukari were processing the information while Airi burst into applause. Turning a bright pink, Junpei bowed at his friend’s enthusiasm.

“What do you think, Akihiko?” pondered Mitsuru, placing the book she was reading on her lap.

The presenter’s jaw dropped. “Huh…? No one else gonna comment on my amazing performance just now…?”

The boxer might not have expressed Airi’s passion, but his eyebrows arched in interest. “I think it’s worth checking out.”

“S-Seriously?” Yukari gulped, face ashy white.

“Whoa, I didn’t know you were afraid of ghosts, Yuka-tan. That’s kinda adorable.”

A glare panned her face. “Watch it! You know what? Let’s investigate. We’ll each ask around for the rest of the week. I’ll prove to you that this ghost story is just an urban legend!”

Out of all the people who would agree with her, Mitsuru nodded. “I appreciate that. The story is a bit unnerving.”

“Well, I’ll let you guys handle it,” said Akihiko, softening his voice as he walked past Yukari and Junpei. “Just make sure you sleep with one eye open.”

“And be sure to check under your bed for monsters,” added Airi with a wicked grin.

The two’s shared mischief bothered Yukari more, who stammered about not being scared. When her protests rang flat, she stormed upstairs.

“She’ll be fine tomorrow,” Junpei shrugged.

“Sanada-sempai,” Airi caught Akihiko before he ascended the stairs. “Isn’t the victim in the same class as the recruit you were looking into?”

“You mean Fuuka Yamagishi? Yeah. The trail I followed went dead, but maybe this is more than a coincidence? That’s why I have no issue with you guys looking into this ‘urban legend’. I have extra practices every day this week.”

With a nod she promised to do her best. Her sempai thanked her and went off to his room. Everyone else followed suit.

Airi barely caught a wink of sleep when a familiar black-haired child in striped blue pajamas pestered her. “Good evening.”

She pointed up at her calendar over her bedside table before giving the boy any eye contact. “I know, Pharos, I know. ‘The full moon is in a week. A new ordeal awaits.’ No need to keep visiting me.”

He was offended by her dismissive tone. “It looks like I’m still not wanted… No matter. Please be careful, my dearest.”
Once he vanished, Airi could no longer hold back her gag reflex. How she hated being called that so affectionately by a creepy personification of Death.

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June 1, 2009

Rumors of the collapsed girl plagued the school. Airi felt some selfish satisfaction knowing she wasn’t the latest sensation of gossip for now, but her being off the list of hot topics didn’t exclude her from popular conversation. She gathered enough information from various worried students to satisfy Yukari’s curiosity in half of a lunch period.

Daydreaming in the middle of a lecture on the Sengoku Period, Airi decided to check out the back alleys of Port Island Station after school to earn extra credit in the investigation. The infamously bad crowd primarily cropped up at nightfall, so she had time to deal with fewer threats. Once she returned to the dorm, Airi changed into capris, sneakers, and a large-sized hoodie her foster brother let her borrow for the cold months. Returning it was a priority she could never attend to.

Retracing the same steps she took from school was repetitive. In past timelines she tried to build a rapport with the regulars to gather information about the effects the Dark Hour had on civilians. Thanks to the seedy alleys of Port Island Station, she picked up some hints on how to blend in with that crowd. Whatever she’d learn from the dejected regulars in dingy places was always worth the risk. The skills best helped in the last cycle when she tracked down a group of people she needed to fight in Tokyo.

Airi only saw two punks smoking and hanging around a closed bar. She instantly recognized them as some of the more reliable guys. Both had brown hair, but one wore a leather jacket and the other a band t-shirt. Airi nicknamed them Iggy and Oz respectively. Very uncreative, yet it reminded her of when she first met each of them. Chestnut-haired Oz dyed his hair black and green one day in late January. The only way he could get through the chaotic days instigated by a local cult was to blast some Black Sabbath in the outskirts. His short, robust companion complained about the noise and stated his preference for Iggy and the Stooges. They never knew why Airi would stop by occasionally to say hello, but they appreciated one sane person among a sea of death-obsessed lunatics.

“Oi,” Iggy grunted, staring warily at the tiny girl. “If you think that getup makes ya look tough, then beat it.”

“Should I wear an Iron Maiden shirt instead?” she asked, unfazed. “I don’t wanna cause any problems.”

The punks laughed. “Ain’t no way you’re gonna cause no trouble.” Oz sneered darkly. “Unless you’re lookin’ for some fun.”

The heavy cigar smoke would have suffocated a much younger her, but Airi barely flinched. After a series of trial and error, she finally was able to deflect many of the perverted advances of the guys.

“Not today. I already have plans for interesting fun. Have you guys seen a group of girls hanging around here lately?”

“And why’d we tell ya?” said Iggy. “They your friends?”

Airi folded her arms. If all went south, she had a Swiss Army knife up her sleeve. “They’re not, but they were all found unconscious. I heard they hung out around here, and I wanted to ask if they were
doing anything more suspicious than usual around here.”

“We got nothin’ for ya,” said Oz. “If you’re done, get outta here, albina.”

She sighed. They always made comments on her pale skin and red-eyed appearance. “I’m not accusing any of you guys of anything. Even if you did, I’m not gonna call the cops or report you. This is your turf.” Then Airi turned to Oz for a moment. “Can I have a fag? I ran out.”

Baffled, the punk laughed. “What? You never smoked a day in ya life!”

“I’ve lived with smokers, and I’m used to the smell. Again, I ain’t here to cause trouble.”

Doubtful, the punks gave each other looks. After a few seconds of nonverbal communication, Oz light one of the cigarettes and offered it to Airi. She pressed the substance to her lips and inhaled the concentrated poison. Resisting every urge to hack up a storm, she slowly and calmly breathed out the smoke.

Her daring surprised Iggy and Oz. After she took a second drag, they couldn’t hold back their howls of laughter. “You’re a strange chick, albina!”

Once the two calmed down from their fit, they seemed a bit more relaxed. Oz leaned against the wall, near the entrance to the underground bar. “Seriously. You’re fuckin’ weird.”

Airi shrugged expectantly and pointed at her red eyes. “I get that a lot.”

Stomping his dead cigarette butt in the ground with his chunky black boots, Iggy spoke first. “Those Gekkou bitches came ‘round a few days ago boastin’ about some prank they pulled. Their voices’re all loud and shit like parrots. Too damn hard to hear yerself think.”

“No one knows why they started showin’ up,” Oz added while lighting two cigarettes. “They think they’re hot shit, fuckin’ bimbos.”

“They just wanted attention,” Airi said, understanding their frustrations. “But why come out here to brag about bullying a classmate beats me.”

Iggy inhaled some smoke and snorted. “That’s what they did? Gotta do more than that to get any cred ‘round here.”

“I figured as much. Like what?”

“Like what she asks.” Iggy laughed.

“How ’bout beatin’ up a rich asshole ‘till his nose’s too broken to fix with surgery?”

“Or takin’ on an entire bike gang – alone – with nothin’ but a broken arm?”

“Or beating a deadbeat man to his wit’s end?”

Their continuing attempts to shock her fell miserably short. She listened to them list off the many ways one could be recognized as a legitimate delinquent on Port Island. She flicked the ashes off her cigarette and took another drag.

“So, what,” Iggy growled, “you gonna tattletale to your mummy and daddy or somethin’?”

“Even if I had any, I wouldn’t.”
Her serious, matter-of-fact tone struck the men silent. They felt a little awkward. “Forget it. We said nothin’ and never saw ya. That all?”

Knowing she wouldn’t get much else out of them, she wanted to get going. The sky was a vivid hot pink, and everyone would wonder where she was the whole day. She tossed her cigarette into a pile of garbage near the bar. Masking the smoke would be a pain too.

“One more thing.” The words left her mouth without her thinking. “Is there a strange guy that comes here? Like he doesn’t quite fit any of the descriptions of what a guy with real ‘cred’ here would be like?”

The two blinked and stared at each other. Airi couldn’t tell if they reacted that way due to the question, her pathetic misuse of slag, or a bit of both.

Oz kicked an beer can, echoing a hollow melody through the alley. “There’s this one dude who hangs ‘round and talks to no one. Broods in his own lil’ corner. Sometimes poppin’ pills. Dunno what his deal is.”

“He’s got this air ‘bout him, so we don’t mess with him. A few guys tried pickin’ a fight a while back over him loiterin’. The bastard knocked ‘em down without blinkin’.” He demonstrated by thrusting his head forward like a bull. “Just his fuckin’ skull. Guy’s a tank. He takes punches like they’re feathers.”

“Ya don’t wanna fuck with ‘im. But when you’re not in the way, he’s pretty cool. Tends to kick spoiled brats outta here when they get stupid and don’t belong.”

Airi wasn’t too surprised. The hat he wore had a thin metal plate. It was decorative, but it made it a great tool when he’d use his forehead to knock someone over. His height and durability only reinforced his scary reputation, but he could fight seriously when he needed to. “Does he wear a long red coat and black hat?” she asked

“Yeah, that’s the guy. You know ‘im?”

She anticipated the question, but she had a hard time finding the correct way to respond. “I-I’ve seen him around the station sometimes.”

A light bulb clicked in their minds. “You’re from Gekkou High too, ain’t ya?”

Airi went pale, realizing she was still naïve in thinking she could blend in.

“Look, albina, we never saw ya or said nothin’. ” There was genuine but awkward concern in Oz’s voice. “We ain’t gonna tell no one ya came snoopin’. And if ya dare come ‘round again, don’t ever mention that elitist hellhole.”

Showing subtle respect, she lightly bowed her head. “Thanks.”

The punks brushed her off. “Just get outta here.”

She never anticipated them cooperating with her. She knew Oz and Iggy were relatively decent guys, but they weren’t ever protective of her in any way. A tense feeling tickled her stomach. Unsure what it meant, she assumed to stay way from the seedy parts of town from now on.

She left the outskirts and headed towards the monorail platform. Paying more attention to her thoughts than her footing caused her to bump into another person much taller than her. Her nose crashed into the individual’s shoulder. It hurt quite a lot; she presumed the person’s build was
average for a man, but quite strong.

“Hey, watch where you’re going.” Airi didn’t need to look at the speaker to know who he was. The baritone pitch mocked her and the faint scent of cooking oil on his maroon peacoat gave him away. She bowed low and began to bolt towards the open doors of the train. The man stopped her and carefully tugged at her sleeve. “No apology? Where’re your manners?”

The girl nearly squealed in shock, but hours of fighting Shadows gave her the split second needed to rebalance herself. Airi muttered an apology, wiggled her sleeve out of the man’s grasp, and ran. She only had twenty feet to go, but the distance felt like a mile. Many confused passerby were aware enough to move out of the way. She slid between the closing doors of the monorail and blended into the full car.

Once the train started moving, she moved towards the window to see if he followed her. He didn’t even move from his place; his eyes tracked her as she boarded, and it took him no time to find her. Shivers crawled up her back and she blushed warmly; she turned away and hid among the evening crowd to stay away from the windows.

June 5, 2009

On Friday evening the three juniors sat comfortably in the lounge and slurped up instant noodles. Yukari’s mood lightened considerably over the last several days. This made Junpei both happy and annoyed that his favorite bully came back at full strength. After three stomachs nearly burst from the junk food, they started discussing what they found regarding the ghost story. Airi could hardly wait to finally tell a white lie.

“As we agreed on Monday,” said an excited Yukari. “We’ll now hold a meeting to discuss what we learned.”

Her daily critic snorted in disbelief, “You’re really into this, aren’t you.”

“Of course!” Her face beamed like a child who just opened her birthday presents. “I got lots of good info. It turns out that no angry ghost was involved.”

“Oh, so that’s what’s important, huh?” Junpei sprawled lazily across the couch and yawned.

Crossing her legs and folding her arms, Yukari ignored him. “First, let’s talk about how this rumor got started. Since the girl was found on school grounds, there’s at least one similarity to the ghost story. But, why did the rumor spread so fast?”

The field leader shot her hand in the air before Junpei had the chance to retort. “The girl wasn’t the only one. There were two other victims.”

“Correct!”

The lone male sat upright. “S-Seriously?!”

“Yeah,” Yukari replied, bored. “I was surprised when I found out about it. A few days after the first incident, two similar ones occurred. All three girls were hospitalized.”

“Geez. No wonder people were panicking.”

“But that’s not all. The victims are in different classes, but they have another connection.”
“They hung out together,” said Airi. “Oftentimes at night with a bad crowd.”

“Wait,” said a pale Junpei. “You’re not talkin’ about that place behind Port Island Station, are you…?”

“Oh, you’re familiar with it?” asked Yukari. “Good! To find out what happened, we need to do some field research.”

Airi inhaled sharply and opened the floodgates. “No need, Yukari. I already checked it out.”

A loud boom echoed through the lounge. Junpei angrily shot up from his seat. “You WHAT?!”

Airi calmly continued, “My activities were cancelled, so I went to take a look. I brought a pocketknife and my phone with me in case I needed help. It took a bit of convincing, but two guys there told me about the girls. Apparently they were bullying the girl Sanada-sempai has been looking for.”

Yukari bit her lip as she tried to remember. “Fuuka Yamagishi?”

“Yeah. At first the girls were bragging about it, asking for attention. Over the next few days they panicked when they found out that Fuuka went missing. They’ve been looking for her, until they all ended up in the hospital. One of the guys told me that there’s a rumor that Fuuka might be dead since she’s been gone for over a week. That might have been how the ghost story started.”

Once she finished, Airi’s eyes narrowed at Junpei, whose anger did not vanish. “Are you tellin’ me you went there all by yourself?!”

“Relax, Stupei,” scolded Yukari. “She went in and came out with some valuable information!”

“It doesn’t change the fact that she could have been seriously hurt.” The gang turned around and saw Akihiko, sharing Junpei’s expression. Sweat drenched his hair and blood flushed his tired face. He overheard their conversation when he returned from his evening run. “Airi, your spunk is refreshing, but please tell someone when you’re exploring a dangerous place. You’re not as invincible as you think you are. Life’s different here compared to what you knew back in Ireland.”

“Thank you, Akihiko-sempai!” Junpei shouted in agreement. “And you’re our leader, Aibana! How can we go on without you, man?!”

The lecture was warranted, but she didn’t like hearing it. Shinjiro’s firm stare from the station left a harsh impression on her mind. “I understand. I’m sorry for the distress.”

Still relatively calm, Akihiko put down his things next to the couch Yukari sat on. “Just be more thoughtful next time.” He gave Junpei a look. “I think she’s learned her lesson. Let’s piece everything together.”

Yukari glanced at him as she spoke, “At least now we know that ghost story is made up.”

“But what are we gonna do about the new girl?” asked the slightly level-headed Junpei, sitting back down. “Should we go look for her?”

“We should ask her homeroom teacher, Ekoda-sensei,” suggested Airi. “He should know something.”

Mutual agreement filled the room. “Then it’s settled,” declared Yukari. “I hope he has a good reason for keeping this quiet.”
Feeling a little left out, Akihiko stood up. “You guys seem to know what you’re doing. If you need it, don’t be afraid to ask Mitsuru to pull a few strings.” A relaxed chuckle slipped through. “Sometimes being friends with a Kirijo has its benefits.”

“Dude, sounds like you have a few stories to tell,” Junpei sounded impressed.

He let out another laugh, although not as confident as before. “Anyway, let me know when you guys get anything useful. The full moon is coming up soon. Mitsuru and I’ve got a hunch something’s gonna happen.”

After cleaning up “dinner”, the juniors said goodnight before heading upstairs. Yukari planned to study, while Junpei either lounged or went to bed early. Before Airi could decide what her plans were, the boxer pulled her back. They stood around in the second floor lounge.

"It's nothing serious," he promised when Airi gave him a concerned look. He already knew she snooped around the outskirts of Port Island, and he knew about the incident at the station. It had been a while since his best friend was so talkative and fervent about anything. "Once we find Yamagishi, I have a request for you. It won't be easy, but I'd appreciate your help when the time's right."

Airi tried reading his expression, and for once she did not know what exactly he was planning. The one thing she was blessed with was her inability to read minds. It felt wrong to know every single detail about her friends. “I understand,” she said. "Just say the word, Sanada-sempai."

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Ekoda was unexpectedly absent on Saturday, thus delaying the interrogation. The juniors asked more people about who may have bullied Fuuka Yamagishi. Some people were too unwilling to talk (either due to Junpei’s social awkwardness, Airi’s fresh reputation, or Yukari’s direct approach.) Many had no idea who Fuuka was, let alone the fact she was missing. After much pressing, they finally found the name of one of the girls: Natsuki Moriyama. Mitsuru kept the name in mind and planned out a method of interrogation for Monday. With that being the day of the full moon, everyone hoped everything would fall into place.

They spent time on Sunday training in Tartarus. The trip was relatively short; the second half of Arqua remained blocked. Airi made sure to let her sempai get a piece of action with his fists. After Akihiko and Polydeuces gained some experience and exercised some electric zio spells, they were ready for the full moon. Airi found that she, Akihiko, Yukari, and Junpei made a well-rounded team as all the elemental attacks were covered. The boys had great offensive skills and the girls were decent with support. As much as they needed more members, SEES could get by with just them in action.

In the background Mitsuru’s power was being less and less reliable. Every once in a while Airi had to cheer her up, despite her denying that her weakened abilities were harming her self-esteem or confidence. Everyone wished that whatever skills Fuuka might have, she would be helpful somehow to make up for this new weakness. Otherwise, field leader Airi dismissed everyone when the Shadow confrontations in Tartarus became a joke.

Planning to stop by the Velvet Room entrance in Paulownia Mall for the first time in months, Airi took the early monorail to Port Island on Monday. Hardly anyone was aboard, which gave the girl the liberty to listen to music and daydream. The sparkling view of the bay looked nice in the early morning. When she got off, she breathed the fresh air and walked with confidence. It reminded her of the first time she arrived at Iwatodai. Oblivious to the world around her, ready to face anything
new that would come her way.

The wind blew strongly for a moment. Loose, restless bangs blurring her vision, she pushed them back, only to knock one of the headphones off her ears. Once she caught the straying bud, she looked around. There were the occasional sufferers of Apathy Syndrome. Standing with blank stares in the middle of the station, sitting in the fetal position near vending machines. Functional civilians were too busy going about their lives to wake them up. Others tried, but realized nothing they could do would help. It saddened Airi that only she and her friends could do something, but when the next full moon comes and goes with a dead Shadow, everything will return to normal for a while. The cycle will start over again, but the temporary fix is better than letting all these people starve to death.

When heading to the street with that hopeful thought, someone caught her attention. She froze. Hands in pockets, he sat at a bench close to the way leading into the back alleys.

No matter what she did, he would see her. After a month of avoiding and running scared, Airi needed to get her act together. She always managed to deal with him somehow in every timeline, so why was this any different? She lightly slapped her cheeks and muttered under her breath to get her act together.

Through closed eyes and clenched fists, she fought her thunderous emotions. After a few seconds of internally disciplining herself and ignoring any memories that would betray her composure, she suppressed her feelings. She dragged her feet across the station until she stood beside him. Unable to stare directly at him, she studied the knitted pattern of his beanie, perpetually worn over his untidy, shoulder-length brown hair.

She turned off her music and shoved her headphones into her pocket. Focused in spite of her shaky knees, Airi finally said his name. “Aragaki-sempai?”

Any stranger would jerk their head in surprise. Whether or not he was startled by her voice, Airi couldn’t tell. He didn’t even turn to look at her, but Shinjiro's voice clearly illustrated his annoyance. “Did Aki tell you to find me?”

Whatever brave platform the girl built for herself was starting to crack. She reminded herself to pray to the gods that he didn’t look at her… yet. “No. I’m on my way to school.”

He grunted.

No matter what she did, she had only known him for a little more than a month each time. Even before she had the chance to get to talk to him, his presence was unavoidable. When he stood without slouching, he was taller than everyone in the dorm. Every inch of him, save his hands and face, were completely covered in simple dark attire. His expressions ranged from apathetic, angry, or annoyed so often, seeing any other emotion was a privilege.

His low voice shattered her thoughts. “What do ya want?”

“The Shadows we’re facing are becoming more powerful,” Airi said. “We could use an extra hand to end the Dark Hour.”

Shinjiro muttered a curse before standing up. “C’mon.”

Anyone else would find his request shady, but Airi didn’t think twice. He led her behind the station and down into a dilapidated alley she was unfamiliar with. The place where she met Iggy and Oz was still nearby, but this part had more abandoned apartments and warehouses. Once hidden in the shadows between the brick buildings covered in graffiti and completely alone, Shinjiro finally turned
“Got half a brain or somethin’? Don’t you know not to bring up that shit in public?”

“Why won’t you come back?” she asked bluntly. "You know exactly what we’re up against. I don’t need to ask Sanada-sempai to know you prefer sulking over helping your friends.”

“What the hell are you talking ‘bout?” he spat, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Don’t start actin’ like you know me.”

“One minute you say you want nothing to do with us. Then another minute you help give Sanada-sempai information about our mission.”

Kicking some of the nearby empty beer cans, he shiftily broke eye contact. “He set you up. Why else aren’t ya running from me?”

“I know you joined SEES immediately after Akihiko, but there was an accident and you left. What happened to make you leave your friends to fight the Shadows alone?”

“None of your business.”

“It's not if it has nothing to do with our mission. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, but I know I can’t run away from my problems.”

The typically stoic mask Shinjiro always wore was breaking. Even his voice was uneasy and desperate. “No matter what you say, I ain’t going back.”

“But why?”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

Reading his body language, Airi could tell Shinjiro was growing more and more restless. Like in the last two encounters, she could sense that off-ness to him. At the hospital, Airi noticed how glassy Shinjiro’s eyes were. The blankness was even more profound the last time she crashed into him at the station. Now, just days later, she couldn’t believe how he could look any more lifeless. The effects of this phenomenon occurred whenever he rejoined the team; his Persona would be relatively weak, despite being capable of dealing brutal damage. When the glassiness faded away over time, Shinjiro fought more effectively.

Airi took a few steps back towards her side of the alley. Staring at him was bad enough, and driving him into a corner was even worse. “I am sorry for being intrusive. Under normal circumstances, I would respect your privacy. I don’t want there to be any future problems if they can be avoided.”

Face twitching, he was struggling to find retorts. “Shouldn’t you be at school?’

“I should be, but I can be late for one day,” she insisted.

A violent storm was coming and Airi braced herself. Nothing happened yet, but Shinjiro turned from her. She thought she saw him tremble in a rare hint of vulnerability. Muttering curses under his breath, he pressed his arm against the wall and rested his head. Seeing him look so frustrated and lonely broke Airi’s heart.

“I don’t want to force you to admit every uncomfortable detail, but I want to understand why you won’t help us.”
When he didn’t respond, Airi wondered if she had to say it for him. The guy was always stubborn, but she had a needle long enough to hit some of his sensitive nerves and enable a reaction. But was it fair to go that far? Perhaps if she got him to open up, he might be more likely to come back. Much to her morbid, guilty curiosity, she gave it a try.

“Did someone die?”

She regretted this instantly. Shinjiro spun around, staring down the girl with unmeasurable anger. He practically drove her into the wall and pinned her there with raw emotion. If it were the Dark Hour, an oppressive, insidious aura would have engulfed the entire alley.

“What do you want me to say?! That I slaughtered her?! That her body was so fucking mutilated she wasn’t human anymore?! That her kid saw it happen?!”

He kept physical distance but the mood suffocated her. Not once did Airi ever hear it straight from the horse’s mouth. Resolve failing fast and knees trembling, she remained silent and struggled to maintain a calm façade despite feeling how deeply he was in pain.

“This was all Aki’s idea, wasn’t it?! He lowered his voice, but the intensity persisted. “The fuck does he know? When he’s not getting stuck in the past, he’s too busy chargin’ forward like a stupid animal ready for the slaughter! ‘Go back to how things used to be’? How the fuck can anyone pretend it never happened?!” He helplessly laughed, weakening his anger and his will to stand. “Nothing will erase what I did. Going back’s not gonna help anyone… And that kid…”

Ears ringing and eyes watering, Airi stood firmly as Shinjiro slowly recomposed himself. He had never lost composure this easily.

With a weak smile, Shinjiro leaned against the wall and looked up at the sky. “My power ain’t worth shit. You get it, right? If you get in my way, I’ll kill you too.”

Even with Akihiko’s intervention in the past, no one ever cracked open his hard exterior as much as she did in this moment. After so many attempts, she began to see the insecurities the he always hid from others. Not wanting to mess up this rare event, Airi struggled to find the right words without inciting him further. She felt so guilty luring this reaction out of him. As quickly as the series of emotions poured out of him, Shinjiro’s enigmatic normal demeanor returned. The only reminders of his outburst were his reddened eyes, obscured beneath the beanie. Recomposed, a pair of white slits glowed from the shadows and stared down at her.

“You got what you needed. Now get outta here.”

Finally finding her voice and hiding most hints of her overwhelming compassion, Airi stepped towards him and stared right into his eyes, avoiding her uncomfortably. She almost forgot how vibrant they could be when he smiled.

“If running away hasn’t helped you, then get back into the fight. You’ll never be able to forget what happened, but you have to find a way to bear it and move on. Otherwise, you’ll be stuck in the past, just like you accused Sanada-sempai of doing.” Her presence wasn’t very intimidating, but that wasn’t the point. She hoped he’d at least react to her poking at his hypocrisy, but Shinjiro’s indiscernible expression didn’t change. “I can’t force you to come back,” she continued, lowering her gaze slightly, “but if you change your mind, we’ll be waiting. Kirijo-sempai and Sanada-sempai haven’t given up on you. They want you back in the fight, and they want to help you get through this.”

Her words felt so corny, and Airi nervously laughed at herself for it. The rest was up to him, and
disgust at her for pressing this issue too strongly in the first place. She began to walk out of the littered alley despite one last thought still lingering in her mind. Taking a deep breath, she stopped about ten feet from where she previously stood. She prayed her confession wouldn’t hurt her later on.

“It’s not even comparable… but I’ve made terrible mistakes too. I can’t run away or else everyone I care about will suffer from my inaction. Sometimes the pressure I force onto myself makes me too scared to react or think straight. Even when I get back on my feet, it’s hard to forget how much the falls hurt. I’ve been told it gets easier as I get older, but I still don’t believe it. It feels like I’m running in circles on the worst days.”

She remembered the moment she promised to not lose hope in saving everyone, no matter how many times she failed. She hated hiding from and lying to her friends, and she hated being unable to ask for their help. With a strong possibility of either never having a future beyond Tatsumi Port Island or being a barrier between two incomprehensible gods, she felt trapped and doomed to not ever having healthy relationships free of foresight and manipulation again.

“Please don’t give up, Aragaki-sempai,” she begged. Her mind conjured the memory of him begging her not to die on his behalf, and it was nearly powerful enough to make her cry on the spot. “That’s all we really can do to live well with what little time we have…”

Checking the clock on her phone, she realized that school was going to start in ten minutes. She would just barely make it. Without another word she pressed on and never looked behind her. Hoping Shinjiro’s long strides wouldn’t allow him to catch her, Airi sped up the pace. She took out her headphones to block out the world and escape into music. Despite her fight, tears finally streamed down her face. She treaded too closely in revealing the whereabouts of her situation, even when she promised herself and the Velvet Room residents she would say nothing. If the younger her from the first time looked at her now, she would say Shinjiro was the last person she would ever tell.
Airi entered her homeroom a few minutes late during first period, but Toriumi mercifully excused her due to her immaculate attendance record up until that point. The day passed by uneventfully. Hardly anyone spoke to her at lunchtime other than her fellow volleyball teammate, Rio, asking if she was going to volleyball practice. After the emotional encounter with Shinjiro that morning, Airi made sure to make some kind of physical activity a priority.

On her way back 2-F after lunch, Yukari and Junpei waiting for her at the top of the west-side stairwell. “Mitsuru-sempai’s in the faculty office,” said Junpei as they descended and walked across the length of the hall past the freshman classrooms.

“Hopefully Mitsuru-sempai can get what we need,” said Yukari.

When they neared the Faculty Room, they heard Mitsuru’s authority eating someone alive. They were only happy none of them was at the receiving end. Once they entered, a teacher and a female student sat frozen and demoralized.

“Mitsuru, this isn’t an interrogation,” Ekoda replied with hopelessly overshadowed clout. “Natsuki, you don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to. You wouldn’t want to give her the wrong idea.”

“Like what?” interrupted Yukari. She faced the brown-haired junior girl named Natsuki. “You’re the girl from the other day…”

Natsuki’s olive skin lost its color long before Mitsuru’s friends arrived, but now Yukari recognize her she looked like a decomposing corpse. “Fuuka… always looked so frazzled whenever I gave her a hard time….”

“Ya don’t say,” Junpei interjected, snorting in indignation.

“What did you do to Yamagishi?” Mitsuru lowered her voice, pretending Junpei said nothing.

“We were just messin’ with her!” she cried. “W-We took Fuuka to the gym and l-locked her from the outside.” Junpei nearly expressed his outrage when Yukari elbowed him in the gut, and the clown let out a falsetto shriek instead. “M-Maki returned to school alone that night. She was a-afraid we’d get in trouble if Fuuka c-committed suicide. But Maki was f-found lying by the fr-front gate the next morning. I-I went to the gym to let Fuuka out, b-but the door was still locked. I o-opened it and w-went inside, b-but she was g-gone…!”

“So you guys started looking for her every night. But one by one you all went missing and ended up like your friend. Right?” Airi concluded. Natsuki nodded.

The story was enough for Mitsuru’s satisfaction. She turned her attention to the other interrogatee and dropped the socially acceptable honorifics. “Ekoda, you’ve attributed Yamagishi’s absences to illness when you must have been aware she was actually missing. What was your intention?”

“I was thinking of the students,” he defended whatever was left of his pride, clearly insulted by Mitsuru’s rudeness. “You children might not understand, but we have to consider the futures of everyone involved and the reputation of the school.”

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees. “In other words, you chose not to report to the
police for the ‘good of the class.’”

“It was in her best interest! I wouldn’t want her records to be stained by something like this. Her family agreed - ”

“Prioritizing a pristine reputation over a missing girl's safety is neither in Yamagishi's best interest nor in our school's. In order to protect your career, you ignored your responsibility as a teacher and disregarded the life of one of your students. How dare you belittle your civil duty!”

Fear and regret silenced Ekoda. The sound of the student council president hammering the final nail in Ekoda’s coffin was sweet music to Junpei, Yukari, and Airi’s ears. Mitsuru's lips curved slightly, breaking the mask she wore for a moment, when she saw her roommates whisper excitedly to each other. She approached Natsuki in a more gentle manner than earlier.

“Moriyama, did you or your friends notice anything unusual before they were hospitalized?” Natsuki glanced around the room from the humiliated Ekoda to the expectant juniors. “Don’t worry,” Mitsuru said kindly. “We’re here to help you.”

“Th-They all heard a voice…” she admitted, as if she could not believe her own story. “A creepy voice, c-calling their name, right before they went m-missing.”

Yukari’s mind made the connection immediately. “Sempai, could it be…?!”

Reaching the same conclusion, Mitsuru nodded. “Thank you, Moriyama. Whatever went after your friends will most likely pursue you too. For your safety, please stay the night at our dorm. If you hear the voice, let us know straight away.”

Natsuki felt confused of what was happening, but sensed the sincerity and assurance in Mitsuru and her friends. The meeting ended quickly and Natsuki was dismissed to return to her classroom. Before Yukari, Junpei, and Airi left the Faculty Office, Mitsuru explained that Ikutsuki would be in the Command Room where he would monitor Natsuki via the security system. The Kirijo heiress told them to wait in the hall while she made a “special call” to deal with Ekoda. She rejoined them five minutes later with a triumphant smile. “Ekoda will suffer the Chairman’s wit by the use of ‘emergency’ emails for the rest of the week.”

The juniors snickered unapologetically for the torture laid before the most despised teacher of Gekkoukan High. “Nice work pulling the strings, Mitsuru-sempai!” Junpei praised.

“Brilliant!” agreed Airi, so excited she slipped into English.

“Toriumi-sensei and Ounishi-sensei might give us no homework if they can’t contain their relief,” Yukari said hopefully. She retained her calm for the most part and asked once everyone settled down, “So, what’s the scoop? Are the Shadows involved?”

“It’s definitely them,” Mitsuru confirmed. “Until now, there was no way of knowing how or why some people are conscious during the Dark Hour. The voice of a person’s Shadow draws him or her in. It’s not a random phenomenon.”

“Could some people be more susceptible than others due to stress?” asked Airi.

“It’s possible. Many of us only awakened to our power in a moment of self-defense or when we earnestly seek inner strength. However, I believe those girls may have become victims of Apathy Syndrome and gave into the voices.”

“Because they would’ve awakened to their Personas if they weren’t?” Yukari said.
“Precisely. Personas are essentially tamed Shadows, both of which are strengthened by our emotions and subconscious thoughts. This is all I know from reading the research done by the Group. I’m afraid there are still many things we do not understand. Their origins, their motives, why they are connected to humanity, and how they manifest in some forms of reality and not others.”

Junpei shuddered, remembering the night he awakened his Persona in Paulownia Mall. “Damn. That Shadow would’ve got me without Hermes.”

Airi remembered the night she faced the Magician on the roof. Defenseless and left with the tool Yukari dropped that looked like a gun. The black haired boy, Pharos, stood smiling before her in her mind and eerily encouraged her to put the Evoker to her head. Without embracing her fear, she’d never be able to summon Orpheus and awaken her powers.

“Just like last month, the girls should recover once we defeat the next Shadow,” Mitsuru reminded them. “Let us meet in the Student Council Room after school to discuss tonight’s operation.” The bell rang and Junpei and Yukari went their separate ways. Airi stayed behind with Mitsuru, who saw her hesitation. “What’s wrong, Fujihara?”

“I might be a few minutes late,” she admitted. “I’ll only be at volleyball. I need a warm-up before the operation.”

“Preparation for battle is good. I know you aren’t as keen about over-preparation as Akihiko, but be sure you have enough strength in case this Shadow is exceptionally powerful.”

“I will.”

Despite sounding sure, the girl still looked on edge. “Speak freely, Fujihara. Did something happen?”

Airi’s eyes widened. She began pacing the width of the hallway. “It’s nothing. I guess I woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

Mitsuru knew it was a lie. Her behavior was very reminiscent to when she returned from visiting the hospital and initiating her into SEES. Only knowing her for a month, she picked up her inability to lie well quickly. “Go to volleyball and ease your stress,” she said in an understanding tone. “We’ll wait for you as long as we can.”

With a short bow Airi thanked her sempai and darted towards the main lobby. Mitsuru’s worry for the junior persisted throughout the rest of the day. She knew it was unlikely Airi would willingly share her feelings so easily.

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The sun had nearly set by the time Airi left the athletic wing. Her hair was drenched; she took a shower after a long practice that only she and Rio attended. The other girls were still angry after being yelled at over a group date they prioritized over practice two weeks ago. Supposedly Rio and Airi had to “be in love” to understand the need to “have fun”. Rio didn’t understand why their teammates worried so much about such relationships when they could focus on school and activities where hard work paid off more often and more reliably when the rules are followed. Much of the practice involved learning new techniques and improving previously learned ones along with both girls talking out their frustrations about their teammates’ priorities and interpretations of the concept of "having fun". They felt comfortable with themselves enough to be self-sufficient and not pursue romance actively to feel complete. Having a man wasn’t their sole source of worth and happiness in their lives. But even doubt tempts the most confident people. Rio may have had simple crushes on
certain boys and moved on, but Airi tried and failed to dismiss the lingering hope of being with the one she loved, no matter how often she told herself that he is an unobtainable distraction. After washing herself of sweat and doubts, she sprinted through the halls and up the stairs to the Student Council Room.

Everyone stood with mixed expressions. Yukari and Junpei had folded arms and tapping feet respectively. Akihiko’s once-worried face went away upon her arrival.

“I’m so sorry!” Airi bowed low.

Yukari heaved an aggravated sigh. “I guess this meeting will be short, then.”

“Then let’s waste no time,” inexpressive Mitsuru jumped into business. “It seems Fuuka Yamagishi managed to enter Tartarus. So before the Dark Hour sets in, we’ll infiltrate the campus to launch the rescue mission.”

“She’s inside Tartarus?” Junpei repeated. “But that was ten days ago! That means -”

“Not necessarily,” Akihiko interrupted, thinking optimistically. “Tartarus only appears during the Dark Hour. What about the rest of the day?”

“You’re saying that time could flow differently there,” said Airi. “Ten days for us might mean ten hours for Fuuka.”

“Exactly. It’s possible she’s still alive.”

“But the Dark Hour's really dangerous,” Junpei reminded, nervously scratching the back of his neck. “We can barely handle an hour; how’s she gonna last ten?! And, even if she’s still alive, we might not be able to -”

Akihiko slammed his fist into the table he sat on. “Then are you gonna let her die?!”

“Th-That’s not what he meant…” Yukari stammered, backing away from him.

Realizing how much he distressed his underclassmen, Akihiko rubbed his brow and lowered his voice. “Let’s try to enter Tartarus exactly how Fuuka did. We’ll go to the gym, and wait for midnight. That’s the quickest way.”

Despite seeing the logic in his point, Mitsuru sat in the same cautious boat and Yukari and Junpei. “Honestly, I have reservations. If something goes wrong, you could all end up lost in Tartarus too.”

“I won’t stand by and do nothing if there’s a chance we can save her,” said Akihiko, averting the melancholy that only Mitsuru and Airi saw in his eyes. “I’d never forgive myself if we fail. So if you guys don’t want to go, I’ll go by myself.”

“We have to try, guys,” Airi insisted. “We can’t just leave her there if she’s still alive.”

No matter how crazy the plan sounded, the worried juniors knew they had no better options. They spent more time planning out logistics, and once they reached consensus everyone returned to the dorm to drop off their things. They stopped by the convenience store and picked up snacks to eat off of rather than order take-out for dinner. Once they ate and relaxed for the evening, they gathered their weapons, supplies, and bottled water for the mission.

They arrived at the entrance to the school at eleven thirty. Ikutsuki gave Mitsuru the keys to the front
gate before they left and she let the group in. Airi and Junpei snuck inside the building and to the faculty room to snatch the keys to the gymnasium. They returned to the others and split into two groups. Yukari stayed outside the main entrance with Mitsuru while Airi, Akihiko, and Junpei entered the gym. With a few minutes to midnight, the group sent to find Fuuka was ready. Sneaking into the school filled them with enough adrenaline to boost their confidence. If the worst should happen they could take on an endless sea of Shadows and stand victorious on the shore.

When the Dark Hour fell and she entered the main hall of Tartarus with Yukari, Mitsuru could not find the search party. Channeling Penthesilea through herself, Mitsuru played with the transmitter on her bike trying to find them. Nothing but static echoed throughout the entranceway of Tartarus. Three minutes passed by, and nothing. She switched to the highest settings once five minutes passed. Ten minutes, and nothing. Fifteen.

“Still nothing,” she said aloud as she placed her hands on her motorcycle and took a deep breath. “Is this really the extent of my power?”

Yukari stood by the green teleportation pad in case anyone decided to find a device and return to give a sign that they’re okay. Maybe they found Fuuka, maybe not. Anything was better than being alone with Mitsuru. Attempting exchange of words physically hurt. She never fully got over the info-dump of a meeting, but she had to deal with her somehow. “I hope Natsuki is okay at the dorm.”

Somewhat relieved by the conversation starter, Mitsuru straightened up and took a step away from her bike. “No place is safe in the Dark Hour. We couldn’t bring her here, and one of us staying behind was out of the question because there are so few of us. The Chairman will keep an eye on her.”

“Yeah, I guess so…” Just as it began, their attempted dialogue died. Yukari tried once more with some, albeit forced, enthusiasm. “But we’re all here for Fuuka’s sake. I’m sure we’ll find her – “

“Mitsuru… you hear me?”

The girls, happy to hear a familiar voice, rushed to the transmitter.

“Oui, Akihiko,” her calm voice did not properly match her smiling face. “I’ve confirmed your position. You’re higher up than I expected… you’re barely within communication range.”

“Is everyone alright?” Yukari asked.

“… don’t know… got separ…..” Static took over again.

“Akihiko?” the senior’s voice shook. “Come in, Akihiko!”

There was no response. The girls began to worry all over again. “Can you still track their location?” asked Yukari, watching the leader scramble over the buttons and switches on her device.

“I have an estimated guess as to where Akihiko is. Iori and Fujihara are a higher priority.”

For a moment she stepped back and took a deep breath. Yukari had seen Mitsuru do it a few times when she stayed behind after exploring with the rest. It rarely ever happened at first, but as they started climbing further and further up, Mitsuru put more effort in concentrating. Too much sometimes, as she would become more fatigued than the rash Junpei who’d tackle too many Shadows that used wind attacks to send him flying across hallways.

“I’ll stay out of your way,” suggested Yukari, setting her eyes on the door to the outside.
Nodding thankfully, Mitsuru placed all of her focus on the transmitter. “Fujihara? Iori? Can either of you two hear me?”

“…ijo-sempai? Are… there? It’s Airi…”

“Are you alright, Fujihara?” Mitsuru asked anxiously. “You’re quite a good distance up in Arqua, too far from normal range. I’m sorry I can’t provide reliable backup. You and Iori got separated from Akihiko.”

“…empai… is… …oken…?” It was Junpei.

The transmitter flashed different colored lights and made various alarming noises that grated upon her eardrums. Voices kept breaking in and out of range. The once-detectable Akihiko dropped off the radar. Airi and Junpei haven’t even been found yet. It was sensory overload. “Where is everyone? Fujihara! Akihiko and Iori aren’t on this floor. Can you please respond?” She lost her concentration and started to hyperventilate.

“Sempai?” a nervous Yukari spoke up. “I think I heard something…”

Not looking at her, the senior briefly cursed in English and French. “Guard the area, Takeba! I’ll try them again! Akihiko! Fujihara! Iori! Anyone?! What’s your current location?! Reply immediately!!”

The ground shook. Mitsuru spun around and saw two massive Shadows stalk across the entryway from the darkness beyond. One was tall, lanky and bearing a red cross on its torso. Its headless form had the teal IV mask of the Emperor. The shorter, round-bellied one was the Empress, clad in a blue and green dress. They were the threat Yukari spoke of. She must have noticed them for a while as she had her bow ready. Being so lost in her emotions, Mitsuru had little time to prepare.

She took her Evoker from her side pouch and tried to call everyone once more. “Can you all hear me? Please answer! Two large Shadows have arrived! We need assistance!” Only Yukari was properly equipped with light armor under her uniform and a weapon. “Takeba, I might not be Fujihara, but do whatever is necessary! I’ll attempt to analyze the enemy!”

With a nod Yukari fired a shot at the Emperor. The arrow barely made a dent as the Emperor flaunted its superiority. In response it swung its sword at the attacker. Catching her pink sweater, Yukari dodged the hit at the last second. She threw it off her and backed up to launch another attack. She aimed another arrow at the Empress and fired. “Please hit!” Quite the opposite of before, this enemy clutched at the arrow that pierced its shoulder.

“Use physical attacks on the Empress and wind on the Emperor!” shouted Mitsuru.

Another swing came from the Emperor that Yukari anticipated. “But I can’t attack two large enemies at the same time!” She yelled after she ducked under its broad sword.

Mitsuru took her Evoker and put it to her head. “I summon thee, Penthesilea!” The blue-clad warrior maiden wielding dual swords emerged from the mist. With a graceful twirl on her toes and wave of her left sword hand, a spiraling white stream of magic danced off her fingers as she summoned a chunk of ice, screaming through the air and punching a clean hole through the Emperor’s armor. The force swooped the enemy off its feet and fell over with a metallic clang, shaking the room.

Before Penthesilea vanished, she let out a piercing scream. Humid air surrounded the Shadows and fanned out, tickling their ankles. “Takeba! The Shadows’ attributes have changed!” By the time she made the warning, it was too late. Empress caught Yukari’s arrow and snapped it like a twig as she approached the girls.
Yukari gasped. “Now what?!”

Then the Emperor rose back to its feet. Like its partner he used Paradigm Shift to change his weaknesses. Whatever upper hand the girls thought they had was lost within seconds. They needed backup fast. “Such persistence!” Mitsuru fired her Evoker again as she ran back to the transmitter. Penthesilea attempted a charming spell, Marin Karin, in hopes of taking the load off Yukari’s back. The Emperor ignored the alluring calls and now set his eyes on Mitsuru.

“Sempai!” Yukari screamed, running from the area of the Empress’ wind spell and summoning Io to pull the Emperor away from his course.

A voice came from the transmitter. “Mitsuru… …ou there?”

Mitsuru threw her weight on her motorcycle and scrambled to respond. Once she caught her breath, she made sure to get her message across again. “Akihiko?! Fall back immediately! Two large Shadows have ambushed us!”

“… can…. me? Mits… …come i…!”,

Inside her head Penthesilea let out another scream. A dark shade blanketed Mitsuru. “Please, be careful! We need you –“

The flat side of the Emperor’s sword dealt an effective blow to Mitsuru’s head. Somehow she wasn’t knocked out, but pain rushed throughout and nearly blinded her. Before her knees collapsed, the Shadow picked up her weakened body. Though never scared of heights, Mitsuru knew the fall back down would hurt even more. Blood filled her mouth and fuzzy film covered her eyes. The Emperor’s grip tightened ever so slightly, squeezing Mitsuru’s ribs, forcing her lungs to seize and force air out. With enough of a headache to kill a kitten, the coughing intensified the pain.

After what seemed like forever, the Emperor suddenly lost his grip. Mitsuru crashed to the ground with every bone in her body rattling. Her lungs cried in relief, forcing yet another coughing fit with blood erupting out of her mouth. Making sure no teeth were lost or cracked, her tender tongue moved across the inside of her mouth. It would be hard enough to explain this mess to the student body tomorrow. Although the ground continued to shake, it seemed the Shadows were too preoccupied to deal with her. She was selfishly relieved.

“…suru!”

“…in the world?”

“Akihi… …gotta distract… mehow!”

“I’ll take… you… …empai!”

They made it back, she realized.

“B-Be… careful,” Mitsuru croaked. “Normal attacks… won’t work…”

She felt her consciousness fading. She wasn’t even sure what was happening anymore. Her vision and hearing were fading in and out to the beat of her heart. Someone must have said Fuuka’s name, because Mitsuru last remembered sighing in relief that the mission was a partial success.

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If having Mitsuru pass out was fun, having Natsuki stumble into Tartarus was even better.
“Why didn’t she transmogrify!?” shouted Akihiko, carrying Mitsuru on his back away from the falling blade of the Emperor. “Damn it, Ikutsuki!”

Natsuki wandered across the floor like a zombie to the group, particularly the newly saved Fuuka. Her face was raw with tears. “I-I’m sorry, Fuuka… wanted… to tell you…”

“Get her out of the way!” Yukari yelled, allowing Io to cast another breeze of wind to knock the Emperor over.

Completely new to everything that was happening, Fuuka stared helplessly between the chaos and the Evoker Akihiko gave her in her hand. Something had to be done. Watching Junpei fly ten feet after the Empress repelled his and Hermes’ physical attacks, Fuuka could see why he failed. It was like seeing an aura that reflected multiple colors, and whatever it lacked, it was weak to. Without her sight, she would have died in the tower. No one else could see it, based on how their strategy was unorganized and counter-intuitive. Airi seemed to pick up on this problem quicker, but she refrained from taking risky actions, even if she seemed more capable than her friends. Akihiko kept Mitsuru under the stairs leading to the upper levels of the tower, but he guarded the area just in case.

Everyone was blind. Someone was injured, and one incapable of fighting just joined the fray. Fuuka grabbed Natsuki’s hand and backed away from the fight. The large Empress spotted her and cast a stronger wind attack, Magarula, at everyone. Junpei flew in the air again and landed halfway up the stairs to the second floor. Weighing a little over a hundred pounds, Airi relied on Akihiko’s arm to keep her grounded. The gust of wind reached Fuuka, who tried to shield her disoriented bully. The force stung and tickled every inch of her skin. Her uniform was tearing into ribbons and cuts formed along her arms. She felt hopeless, but she had to find some way to help.

A voice whispered in her mind. “Summon me. Let me guide you.” The voice was hers. *Is this what they have?* Fuuka wondered. They pulled their Evokers to their heads and brought out strange creatures that defended them.

Airi called out to her over the explosions Junpei and Akihiko sent off with agi and zio. “It’s okay to be scared, Fuuka! Your Persona helped you avoid the Shadows, yeah? It’s your guardian angel!”

“My angel…?” Fuuka looked at her Evoker in her hand again. If it was the only way, she had no choice. Another wave of wind was coming. The threat of it was enough to finally put it to her temple and pull the trigger.

A large globe surrounded her and Natsuki within seconds, blocking off the attacks from outside. Startled, Fuuka jumped, looking at what she brought forth. The transparent sphere surrounding her seemed to be part of a dress. Above her was the torso of a woman with her eyes wrapped in bandages. Though her mouth did not move, Fuuka could hear her speak in her mind. “I am Lucia, and I am your third eye.”

The entire world opened up to her. Better understanding what she had to do, she could see everything perfectly and clearly: who was where, who would cast what spell, and how much energy someone had left. At that moment, she saw the Emperor swing its arm back intently. She feared Akihiko would receive the brunt of the attack, and hoped he could see it before it was too late. *Be careful, sempai!*

Within seconds Akihiko avoided the Fatal End physical strike. Not sure what just happened, he asked, “Is that you, Yamagishi?”

Fuuka’s eyes widened. “Oh! Y-You heard my thoughts?”
Just as confused, Yukari spoke up. “How come I can hear her too?”

“It must be a mental connection,” Airi answered while blocking the Empress’ staff. “It’s better than worrying about broken headsets!”

“Telepathy? This is sweet!” cheered Junpei. He fired his Evoker and let Hermes cast Cleave. “You’re awesome, Fuuka-chan!”

“Less talking and more fighting!” Akihiko barked. “We have to beat these guys!”

“I… I’ll help you as much as I can!” said Fuuka.

The new advantage allowed the battle to end much more quickly. The Emperor and Empress used Paradigm Shift so often to prevent both from falling over at the same time. An opportunity for an all-out attack was not possible, but the four combatants split into two groups and faced each Shadow offensively. Having been hit the most, The Empress fell by Yukari’s arrows and Hermes’ kick to the head. Akihiko’s Polydeuces and Airi’s Omoikane impaled the Emperor with bolts of lightning. The defeated Shadows melted into a black pool and with no other enemy in range Fuuka called Lucia back in her psyche.

After the battle ended, Yukari used Io to heal everyone’s superficial injuries, and Akihiko carried Mitsuru back out from her hiding place and everyone surrounded her like lost children. He wiped his brow, relieved that the battle was over and that Mitsuru was more responsive. “Where did those guys come from?” he asked.

“No idea.” Yukari paused to take a snuff soul candy to revive her stamina before refocusing Io’s magic on healing Mitsuru. “I noticed them first and tried fighting back. Mitsuru-sempai helped me fight and tried to contact you at the same time. I don’t know how she could do it.”

“She’s very capable when she needs to be,” said Akihiko. “But it’s been a while since she’s been on the frontline.”

Whistling, Junpei pointed at where the Shadows used to be. “Dude, Mitsuru's a badass! She put a nasty dent in that Shadow!”

As they waited for Mitsuru to wake up, Airi returned to them after speaking with a traumatized Natsuki. She sat beside Fuuka, who passed out after the entire ordeal, and apologized for everything she did. After talking with her, Airi concluded that Shadows tried to lure her into a trap. “I don’t think Natsuki-san will remember anything that happened tonight,” she told her friends.

“Probably not,” agreed Akihiko. “But she should be safe from now on.”

“Mitsuru-sempai!” Yukari gasped, watching Mitsuru’s eyelids twitch and open.

Akihiko lifted her head slowly and supported her back as she sat up. “Are you alright?”

Relieved, Airi caught up and knelt by Mitsuru’s side. The beloved redhead looked at each of her concerned friends. Akihiko’s worry vanished when they briefly shared eye contact. The two of them, Junpei, Yukari, and Airi shared a silent moment of exchanging cheerful expressions. No words were needed to explain that the mission succeeded. After a few moments Mitsuru smiled proudly to her comrades.

June 9, 2009
The slumber party on the girls’ floor would have been animated if the timing was more appropriate. Everyone huddled together in the hallway with a mountain of sleeping bags, pillows, and blankets, and they were too stressed, injured or fatigued to talk. The clock on Yukari's phone read 11:39 in the morning when she woke up. Fighting off her body’s protests to rest, she put on slippers and went downstairs. Junpei and Akihiko shared a similar tired air as her, but relaxed by the island.

“Mornin’,” she greeted.

Akihiko raised his protein drink. “There’s not much to eat, but the Chairman was smart enough for once to buy us cereal.”

“Did you give him hell for letting Natsuki escape?”

He nodded. “I told him the short version of what happened. After suffering a few soul-destroying puns, I told him to come back later for a formal meeting. He claimed he hasn’t been sleeping well lately, and he did look pretty tired. How can that idiot manage our club and a job?”

The juniors groaned in mutual agreement. “But, man,” an aggravated Junpei changed topics and pushed his bowl of grained oats away. “How can Americans take that much sugar without conkin’ out?”

“Cereal’s really all we have?” Yukari explored the unmapped kitchen.

“We need a professional chef or a dorm mom. I can’t live like this!” Junpei continued to complain.

Akihiko expressed mild agreement, but he was too preoccupied by his energizing beverage and his itchy, unshaven chin to care. Yukari shifted through the various cabinets. None of the various items on the shelves looked familiar to her. Boxes of rice and various spices promised to add flavor to meals, but it required more work than the girl was willing to attempt. Once she found the cereal boxes the boys spoke of, she noticed that the contents were half gone. Take-out was on the menu for dinner again.

Not long after Yukari prepared her lazy breakfast, down came Fuuka in a soft, grey robe one size too large for her. The tips of her fingers poked out of the sleeves and the hem touched the floor. Her light pixie-cut hair stood out in all directions, but a hand easily flattened and tamed the spiky strands.

“Hey!” Junpei wasted no time to express his excitement. “Our lady of the night has awakened!”

The nervous girl blushed violently. “G-Good morning…”

“We don’t have much food, but make yourself comfortable,” said Akihiko.

Yukari came around the corner with two bowls of cereal. “Glad you’re awake. I hope this is alright with you?”

With a quick bow, Fuuka accepted the food and sat at the table. She quickly shoveled cereal in her mouth and ate at an alarming rate. They offered more cereal, a breakfast bar, and some juice, to which she humbly took before inhaling everything. Once she finished, she gave a small burp and bashfully pardoned herself.

Akihiko pulled out the chair across from her. “Feeling better?” Fuuka blushed and nodded. “If it’s alright with you, we’d like to talk about what happened last night.” The girl jumped in surprise. “No need to be nervous. We want to make sure you’re adjusting.”

She stared at her hands and picked at the dirt under her nails. “Oh, I-I’m alright. But… what were
Yukari sat down next to the girl and the three explained the basics. At first they were too worried about saying too much and creating confusion, but Fuuka listened attentively, nodding when she understood their explanations.

“So Lucia is my P-Persona. She helps me to read a friend or enemy…”

Akihiko’s face lit up over how quick she was. “It’s a miracle you survived without getting hurt for ten hours. And thanks to your power, you saved our lives.”

“Are you… asking me to j-join you guys?”

Right as Junpei was about to scream “Yes, please!” Yukari spoke up. “We’re not trying to pressure you. If you need some time to think about it…”

“It’s okay,” Fuuka interrupted with atypical certainty. “I’ll do it.”

Junpei jumped in excitement anyway. “Sweet! Another girl!”

“A- Are you sure? If you join, you’ll have to live here…” said Yukari.

Two other figures in nightgowns and lightweight sweaters came down the stairs with good timing. The redhead shifted her weight towards Airi for support. Akihiko, Junpei, and Yukari held their breaths, letting go when Airi helped prepare a seat for Mitsuru at the dinning room table.

“Mitsuru-sempai’s alive!” Junpei cheered.

“Good to see you vertical, Mitsuru,” remarked Akihiko. “We just told Fuuka about us. She’s willing to join.”

Airi blinked, surprised. “That was quick! It’s not something you can believe at the drop of a hat.”

“I’m alright,” Fuuka assured everyone. “I’d rather live here than at home anyway…”

Despite being in no position – or attire – to be so, Mitsuru held her posture well. “We really appreciate this, Yamagishi. We’ll talk to your parents to resolve any issues.”

Fuuka bowed her head. “Thank you.”

“Well,” Airi clasped her hands happily, “It’ll be nice to have another girl in our grade around, right, Yuka?”

“I’m not the only one who thinks so!” Junpei grinned.

“Not in that way, you pervert,” Yukari snorted.

The carefree banter between the juniors slightly intimidated Fuuka. She stared down at her feet and played with her thumbs.

“Hey, Fuuka?” She looped up to see Airi kneeling right next to her at eye level. She held out a hand and smiled wide. “Welcome to the team. We want you to feel at home here.”

“Fujihara-san…” she reddened as she took the handshake.

Her classmate giggled softly. “Talk to me anytime at school. And, please, call me Airi.”
“We have begun to suspect you forgot about us.”

For the first time only Igor and Margaret resided within the Velvet Room. With loose shoulder-length silver curls held back in a headband, the woman was clearly related to Theo. Airi wondered how long her brother was gone and why. He would never go anywhere without consulting her first.

“Being able to hold twelve Persona and discard them at will limits my trips,” she explained, reclining back in her seat. “Having the best in my arsenal too soon would ruin the fun. I like starting from scratch.”

Igor hummed in response, as if in approval. “Experimentation keeps each trip interesting. Quite a productive approach.”

But she wasn’t here for a critique of her fighting strategy. “Where’re Theo and Elizabeth?”

“Elizabeth is keeping track of your friends and their Personas’ statistics. Theodore is running a few errands,” he said with an elusive grinned. “He insisted on pursuing the lead in Tokyo.”

The face of a man with a disheveled stubble and tangled hair jogged Airi’s memory, and she recalled other moments of her journey. She remembered the euphoric faces of two young men with silver weapons pointed at their temples. Persona emerging from red mist and chanting subliminal praises to the maternal being they believed would bring a righteous end to the world. They were among those who demoralized Airi when she confronted the colossal nocturnal goddess while below growls and grumbles answered each cry of the men’s summoning an infernal monster. Airi only had seconds to forge a Seal with her own soul before the mighty claws would plow through her and reach the sleeping goddess. Doing so ensured her death, and thus her journey started again when she rebelled against her fate.

It all rekindled feelings a much younger Airi would never believe to have festered. “Hemera will die this time.”

“Do not excite yourself too much,” remarked Margaret coldly, flattening the creases in her azure and black coatdress. “May we remind you that your solo parade did not end well the last time?”

“I know,” Airi said, ignoring the festering regret. “But I stopped most of them…”

“At the expense of your friends,” reminded Igor. “Given the urgency and rate your journey is proceeding, we will provide aid in disrupting their routines while you attend to your daily needs. Theodore has begun retracing the footsteps of your investigations. Depending on the circumstances, such actions may require further use of our resources.”

Igor gestured to one of the many doors surrounding them as he spoke. Airi always wondered what they were for.

“Will Theo need to kill him for me?”
“Oh my! Developed a taste for blood, have you?” One of the doors opened, revealing an excited young woman clad in a wide, sleeveless blue knee-high dress in an elegant style very similar to Theo’s and Margaret’s. She stood by her sitting sister and tapped her heeled boots together involuntarily.

“You heard correctly, Elizabeth,” said Margaret. “Our brother’s guest still struggles to defeat the Children.”

“I see what little difference it makes. Is it not like the requests she accepts from Theo? Like the machine oil, the bloody buttons, and the mahjong tile?”

Igor raised a finger and shook it. “Ah, but her typical targets are Shadows. Killing living beings, however, is another matter…”

The girl’s lips crafted a small circle in realization. “Oh, that might explain our brother’s… disco with the task at hand.”

Silence reigned over the room. Margaret pinching the bridge of her nose was the only movement.


“Okay,” slightly annoyed, Airi interrupted. “You don’t want me to go crazy about killing them, I get it. But what else can be done? Those men will awake Erebus from his sleep if I don’t stop them!”

Elizabeth glanced between his sister, her master, and the only human. “Her approach is marvelously pragmatic. I do not understand your apprehension.”

“In her hasty pursuit the consequences of her actions enabled the Fall to pass without resistance,” said Igor plainly.

“Every one of her friends died because of her selfishness,” added Margaret. Her hands usually lay folded on her lap, but her fingernails dug into the cover of a blue and gold-bound book Airi had never seen before.

“That’s because I got caught! Do you know how hard it was to avoid my uncle’s hired ‘help’ and traverse throughout Japan without the Kirijo Group tracking me? Those three were that hard to find. I had to take that risk, and now we need another method. If Theo can take care of the Children, then as far as the public in my world will know, the Kirijo scientists went missing.”

Airi and Igor reached another silent stalemate. Neither of the two liked having their opinion proven wrong. Besides, one was a mysterious being, wise beyond human comprehension. The other a weary soul trapped in the body of a teenager. Their arguments erupted more and more frequently with greater fever. Sometimes the bulls would allow the structure of the Velvet Room to destabilize and alter with damaging results. Last time, the Persona Fusion table burst into flames and nearly spread across the entire floor. To that day, everyone agreed that ornate tablecloths would be put away indefinitely.

“This cycle will end in failure with this attitude.”

“It is too soon to judge, Margaret,” Igor dismissed the pessimist. Bulging eyes redder than usual, he seemed on the edge of losing his temper. “Theodore will contact you when he has completed his task. Meanwhile, Elizabeth and Margaret will remain to be of assistance with your affairs.”

She couldn’t argue with the plan.
“Do you have any other concerns on your mind?” he asked.

“I’m good for now.”

The answer did not satisfy Margaret. “Have you come to terms with your fears?”

“Everything’s fine.”

No one believed her. Elizabeth chuckled, ignoring Igor’s harsh stare.

Airi rolled her eyes. “It’s not funny! You guys never stop creeping me out, you know that?”

“Honesty is the best policy’,” said Igor. “We hope you will remember that.”

“I know. Thanks for the concern.”

Suddenly a soft ring echoed through the room from outside the cage. It was the tiny silver bell beside Airi’s chair. It reminded her of the Reaper’s cloak stalking the halls of Tartarus.

“Time continues in your current path,” Igor sighed simply. “I believe one of your closest friends is calling you. I wouldn’t keep him waiting.”

Butterflies cluttered her stomach as she stood from her seat. If her gut was right, Airi had no idea if it was better to stay with the all-knowing bug eyes or the creepy kid. “Very well,” her voice calm, not reflecting her emotional state. “I’ll try to be a good neighbor next time.”

“Please do,” Elizabeth said in sing-song. “I would love to get to know you better in pears. Fruit? No… person…”

With a sharp inhale Airi closed her eyes. She counted down and hummed a familiar tune for her soul. When he eyes opened, green mist filtered the dark ceiling and walls. She was back in her bedroom. Airi blinked several times to re-orient herself in the late night hours, and a soft weight caressed the outermost side of her calf. Blue hair lingered in the corner of her vision.

“If it’s another reminder about the end, go away, Pharos.”

The boy beamed. “You said my name! I’m so happy.”

“Whatever.”

He scooted closer to her until she saw his face. Pharos let out a melancholic smile and combed his small hand through her hair. The touch burned her cheeks and twisted her stomach into knots. “I’ve been with you from the very beginning, and yet you continue to deny me. Why must you be so cold?”

Airi turned over. If only looking away would make Death disappear.

“I see…” he mused, retracting his hand. “Even your Irish upbringing has instilled this in you. Not many people are allowed to display such affection. The only exceptions are family members and lovers.”

“How long did it take for you to realize that?” she asked as she rubbed her groggy eyes.

“Not long at all. I learned so much that night, I wanted it to last forever.”

Feeling uncomfortable with the reminder – especially with him in the form of a child – Airi
pretended she didn’t hear him. They were silent for a while. Not sure if she was still awake Pharos muttered softly. “If I were a human, and was never Death, would you still be my friend?”

Confused, Airi turned over and finally looked into his vibrant blue eyes. “What are you getting at?”

“I mean what I ask.”

It was too early for questions that Airi would need time to consider. Staying up any more would ruin her mood for the next Tartarus visit. “Come back when a girl is not trying to get her beauty sleep. You did that once before.”

Joy swirled in Pharos’ eyes, creating waves of tears. “At last… I miss talking with you like before. I’ll come again when you’re ready for me.”

“Hmm,” she grunted. “Just let me sleep…”

“He will do.”

He leapt off the bed, gingerly skipping across the floor and to her door. Hands folded, he turned around with cheer. Their eyes remained locked. For the first time he looked and acted like a child. If more awake, Airi would unwillingly admit he was rather adorable.

“Even when that frail flower’s vines ensnare you in your garden, I’ll always wait for you to break from its delusions of happiness. I know you, my dearest friend, will be free from its lies at last!”

With his last words Pharos’ form blended with the mist, fading away and leaving the girl to her thoughts. A soft tick from the alarm clock echoed through the silence. The Dark Hour ended for the day.

Airi tossed and turned in bed for a few more minutes. She wanted to understand what kind of promise she suddenly made with Death, but fatigue eventually won.

June 17, 2009

The heat affected the students so badly that no one felt willing to attend clubs or meetings. Through body language alone, word spread around school that numerous events were cancelled, and no teachers had the energy to put up much of an argument. Only the eccentric nurse Edogawa intertwined his objections within his lecture on magic and mythology (which always caught Airi’s interest enough for her to stay awake.)

When the last bell rang for the day, Airi and Yukari stumbled upon Fuuka, who joined them as they walked off campus. Having no plans, they agreed upon a shopping spree at Paulownia Mall.

“So Natsuki’s friendly now?” asked Yukari, holding a bag of accessories bought from Be Blue V.

“It surprised me too,” said Fuuka. “She s-said she was sorry. Her friends d-don’t pick on me anymore. I guess k-kindness prevails when memories are lost.”

Airi giggled brightly. “Kinda like what happens in Shojo manga. True love conquering all and reuniting the best friends, that kind of thing?”

“Uh,” Fuuka bashfully scratched her cheek and blushed. “Th-That’s not really it…”

“We’re really happy for you, Fuuka,” said Yukari, smiling. “Ever since you came to live with us,
you seem more lively."

“I-I’m glad you invited me!” she stared at her feet. Like a child excited at the thought of candy, her attention went straight to Power Records. “Oh, c-could we check out there before we go?”

“Absolutely!” Airi jumped up and down with glee and pulling Yukari’s arm. “I have to see if they have Ben-chan’s album in stock!”

Yukari was not as enthusiastic, but felt comfortable with the idea. “Why not? It’s been a while since I bought music…”

Not two seconds after they entered the store, the girls ran around in excitement. Their first victim was the J-pop section, where they picked up and compared various artists and albums. Their conversation grew so lively that other customers gave nervous looks.

“Airi-chan,” Fuuka piped up after picking up a double disk edition. “What kind of music do you listen to?”

“Almost anything!” she beamed. “Blair and pa got me into some European and American music. But I always liked anything with energy or passion.” With a cute pout she pointed to a poster advertising an album she wanted. “Oh, Ben-chan… why’s it so hard to find your music?”

A smirk crossed Yukari’s face as she browsed through the selection. “If you worship musicians that much, you’ll drive your future boyfriend crazy.”

“Not a chance! I doubt anyone’s seriously interested in me. Besides my heart belongs only to Ben-chan!”

“At least Airi-chan knows what she likes,” Fuuka said.

At some point the storeowner demanded the girls to cut the chatter and buy something. Retaining their sense of public decency, they paid for their music. Once they left the store and began their way to the train station, Fuuka sighed.

“Th-There goes the last of my allowance.”

Her classmates huddled close and Airi whispered, “Tartarus is swimming in yen. Maybe it’s all the money kids lose in school. If so, finders are keepers. With that and the Kirijo Group giving us a weekly allowance, we’ll never go hungry again!”

They returned to their side-by-side walking formation as if nothing happened. Then a light bulb went off in Fuuka’s mind. “S-So that’s how you guys can afford all that take-out?”

Yukari nodded. “Until Mitsuru-sempai hires a professional cook.” She patted her stomach. “A girl’s gotta watch her weight, you know.”

“At least we work off all the junk when we fight,” Airi said. “Everything we eat is healthier than what I can make.”

Fuuka’s eyes widened in surprise. “Y-You cook, Airi-chan?”

“Aye, right, I can’t cook! More like I can bake sweets and deserts. Maybe pancakes for breakfast, and that’s it.”

“That’s still impressive! I want to learn how to cook so much! I-I’m just not that good…”
“Don’t feel too bad,” said Yukari. “Just looking at a measuring spoon makes me confused.”

They arrived at the station just as they sky transformed into a watercolor painting of orange and red. The fun afternoon the junior girls shared easily fought off the plaguing heat. Once the boarded the train they continued to talk and grow closer.

June 20, 2009

“Can we please go to Tartarus tonight?” Airi was on her knees, bowing and praying to the gods to get her way.

Akihiko’s face was red from stifling laughter. “We would, but the Chairman’s coming tonight.”

Tight-lipped and poised, Mitsuru was better at hiding her amusement, but the corners of her mouth still twitched occasionally. “If the meeting does not take very long, we’ll consider it.”

“C’mon, sempai!” Junpei joined his fellow beggar. “We’ve already covered everything we need to know! Didn’t Akihiko-sempai say so once? ‘Less talking and more fighting’?”

Yukari snorted. “That’s taking a phrase out of context, Stupei!”

“Yamagishi needs to be caught up with our objectives and goals,” Mitsuru spoke firmly. He head injuries had recovered well enough to no longer visit the hospital. “We made the mistake before of letting you all run blind. I cannot allow it to happen again.”

Not used to the limelight, Fuuka stammered in protest, “Please don’t worry about me! I’ll h-help you guys no m-matter what. Y-You all have been so k-kind to me…”

“What’s all the commotion?” A warm man closed the front door behind them and made himself at home in the lounge. He was grinning from ear to ear, especially at Junpei and Airi’s melodrama. “Hello, everyone,” greeted Ikutsuki. “Did I miss anything?”

“N-Not particularly,” Akihiko replied, continuing to laugh and shake.

Mitsuru put her textbook down on the coffee table and raised her voice, “S’il vous plait! Tout le monde calmez-vous!!”

Everyone went quiet. None of the juniors seemed to understand what she said. They turned to Akihiko who calmed down, shrugged, and cleared his throat. “Oui, ma mère.” He smirked and ignored the baffled look she gave him. “Sorry, guys. We can’t go to Tartarus until the meeting is over.”

Airi and Junpei whined in defeat and cursed the seniors for their gratuitous French. Yukari sighed and muttered about how they were such children. Shortly thereafter, everyone settled down and found a place to sit on the sofas.

“So,” Ikutsuki began. “I must apologize for my lacking presence. Mitsuru and Akihiko have routinely sent me updates on your progress. They have also disclosed the information regarding the Kirijo Group and their connections with the origin of the Dark Hour.”

The students nodded, save a slightly puzzled Fuuka. Airi gave a basic rundown of what they learned: mad scientists being curious, careless idiots. The newest member nodded the entire time, showing she understood the basic story.
“Now that everyone is on the same page,” Ikutsuki continued, “I want to confirm your assumption based on what I found. Shadows are divided into 12 arcana, and I’ve classified the unusual Shadows we’ve seen so far. The four you encountered belonged in categories I through IV, in order of their appearance. They may have looked different than the common ones, but the order scheme still applies.”

Junpei was terribly lost. “Is that something to be excited about?”

“Oh, I get it!” exclaimed Fuuka. “There’s twelve in all… and we haven’t seen e-eight yet.”

“Oh, okay. So what happens when we defeat ‘em all? Will the Dark Hour and Tartarus vanish…?”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” said Akihiko as he cracked his knuckles. Mitsuru shot a particular stare he easily ignored.

“But what are they after?” asked Yukari.

“A good question,” Ikutsuki admitted, adjusting his outlandishly corny tie. “We still don’t understand their motive. They don’t kill their prey; they feed on our own minds. It can be considered predation, but is it really? What is their ultimate goal – if there is one?”

The nice philosophical questions barely meant anything to at least half of the members. The answer may be too complex for anyone to fully resolve, study, and understand. Akihiko and Junpei looked completely bored over this proposal for extensive homework.

“How interesting,” the senior tried to sound the part, “but, no matter what, we still have to beat the rest of ‘em.”

“And they keep getting stronger,” Junpei accepted in annoyance. “That’s why we gotta train harder…”

“…by going to Tartarus!” Airi finished.

Exhausted, Mitsuru and Yukari hung their heads. Akihiko let out a smirk. “You two are too much.”

Ikutsuki let out a laugh, “I’m glad to see you all getting along just swell. I only hope you don’t burst from excitement!” Everyone went dead. After a few seconds of thought, the high school students turned on him with intense eyes. “Oh, come on!” he laughed awkwardly and stared at the ceiling, looking for some friends. “You have to admit it was clever!”

Fuuka half-heartedly giggled, “He’s just being himself, right?”

No one was willing to let that serve as a decent defense for the bad pun.

“I guess this means I’m not wanted,” Ikutsuki stood up quickly. “The meeting is now officially over! Have a good night!” Right as he placed his hand on the doorknob he gave one last concerned look. “When heading out, though, I suggest you wear bright clothing…”

Everyone gave each other perplexed glances before looking back at the chairman.

“…Otherwise, the Shadows could make it dangerous to walk near traffic!”

The door slammed shut behind him. He did not have to be around to see the students, particularly Junpei and Airi, scream in rage and frustration. Patting himself on the back, Ikutsuki walked along the street laughing the whole way back home.
On her way to class, Airi remembered the two girls talking near the front entrance. Gossipers tend to talk about pointless things that aren’t worth anyone’s time. Any smart, intelligent person would ignore the ramblings of petty individuals with no life. This time, they discussed something insidious.

“Hey! Have you heard of that revenge request website?”

“Revenge request? What’s that?”

“You write the person’s name you want to get revenge on, and bam! Mission accomplished. They say it’s guaranteed successful, and completely anonymous.”

“Seriously?! Give me the URL, quick!”

“Well, it’s just a rumor. I mean, I don’t know the details. Why are you so desperate?”

“Huh? I’m not… I’m not thinking about revenge at all, honest!”

Then the bell rang before they could go any further. Airi continued on walking behind them and pondered their discussion. Nothing ever came from that site that she knew of. However, it was possible for her to use it without getting her hands directly in the dirt. This suggestion crossed her mind before, but she never acted upon it. Having failed so many times in the past, she was running out of options. Not every possibility was moral, but they would produce results faster. She was willing to give this a chance.

A mysterious voice sung solemnly in her head that the Tower she was climbing was not the safest. The scenic view at the end of the journey may not be worth the trouble to get there.

Classes crawled boringly as usual, leaving lunch the only relaxing and fun time for the juniors. The four of them ate on the school’s rooftop.

“Ah!” Junpei shot his arms towards the cloudless sky. The wind slipped between his outstretched fingers. “Awesome weather we’re havin’!”

Fuuka smiled and hummed in agreement since her mouth was full with curry.

“It’s nice to hang out up here every once in a while,” said Yukari, standing against the railing. She finished her meal first, but decided to stick around. Her friends crowded on one bench and shared food amongst themselves.

“The rice balls came out well, Fuuka!” Airi chirped. “This would make the perfect substitute for all the instant ramen we scavenge for!”

“Yo!” Junpei playfully snapped. “There’s nothin’ wrong about Japan’s greatest delicacy!”

“Only if it’s Hagakure,” she nudged him in the side. “At least their food improves your complexion!”

“I thought it was o-only the tuna,” said Fuuka.

The lone male snorted. “Bullshit! Why do you girls believe that crap?!”

“It’s been scientifically proven!” defended Airi, who stole some of Junpei’s food in revenge.
“Yeah, in gossip rags!”

Yukari watched the scene unfold as the three shallowly bickered. She looked up and watched one lone puff of white drift lazily across the sky. Due to the influence of her friends, she swore it resembled an ice cream sundae. She frowned. “Sometimes I can’t believe I’m surrounded by you guys…”

They stopped their bickering and paid attention to the archer. “What do ya mean, Yuka-tan?” asked Junpei.

“I swear,” she sighed. “You guys are obsessed with food! All you do is ramble about pointless things!”

They blinked. “Isn’t that what friends do, though?” pondered Airi.

Fuuka said, “I-I’m sorry if we’re leaving you out, Yukari-chan. Or… are we b-bothering you?”

“It’s not that,” she remarked. “It’s… just weird.” Yukari looked back to the strange cloud. “We all just met not that long ago. And we’re all caught up in a battle of life or death. To save our city from monsters no one else can fight. All we have is each other, and you three are arguing over food!”

Nearly choking on a rice ball, Airi laughed. “Seriously? That’s you’re deal?”

“It’s not bothering me,” Yukari repeated. “It’s just silly! We’re supposed to be important, right? We should be talking about and planning for important things! And here you three idiots are, packed like sardines, arguing about food!”

Everyone fell silent for two seconds. Fuuka and Junpei glanced at each other, wondering the same thing, and burst into laughter.

“Wh-What’s so funny?!” Yukari snapped.

Junpei covered his face as he snorted. “You’re talkin’ about food too! Welcome to the idiot club!”

“Are you serious?!” she turned as pink as her sweater, tied around her waist. “Did you even get my point?!”

“C’mon! We’re glad that you’re one of us, Yuka-tan! Don’t take everything so seriously!”

Fuuka was laughing so hard she could hardly breathe or speak, despite her efforts to still be polite. Hand shielding her eyes from the sun, Airi managed to calm down from her laughing fit. Then her cell phone vibrated as she received a message from Akihiko: I need help with an errand after school. Meet me by the gate. He usually had practice to attend to on Tuesdays, and under no circumstances would he ever give up boxing. Suspicion made Airi’s stomach tighten enough to nicely lose her appetite.

“What’s wrong, Aibana?”

Either their conversation ended or was put on hold. Everyone completely surrounded the field leader, trying to take a peak at her cell phone.

“Did ya score a hot guy or somethin’?” Junpei joked.

“Wh-What makes you say that, Junpei-kun?” asked an oblivious Fuuka.

“Aibana’s been complaining that the school still thinks we’re dating. We’re not.” He heavily stressed
the last part, as if knowing Fuuka was going to investigate.

Yukari brushed him off and spoke to Airi. “Who’s it from?”

“It’s Sanada-sempai,” she said. “He wants me to meet up with him after school.”

That was enough to fuel Junpei’s curiosity and have him peak over Airi’s shoulder to read the text. “Ooh… a date?”

“Knock it off, Stupei!” Yukari retorted.

“Hey, hey, hey, I’m jokin’!” he raised his hands to protect his face. “But seriously, be careful, Aibana. As funny as it’d be for you to steal him from them, his fangirls will run ya over with their eyes.”

Fuuka felt a bit out of the loop. “Is Airi-chan in trouble?”

“Man, you’re really outta the loop, Fuuka-chan. Some days I wonder how miss popular hasn’t got a death threat.”

Airi shot a glare. “Look, Junpei-kun, Shadows are a far more dangerous than a pack of rabid fangirls.”

“Well,” Yukari voiced her concern. “You’re also involved in that bathroom smoker case. Hidetoshi’s not very well liked, and you’re encouraging his investigation.”

“But not his interrogation methods,” she folded her arms. “I’ve warned him to not go after everyone who ‘looks funny’.”

“What about that girl you help with on the health committee? Rumors say that she sleeps with a bunch of guys.”

“It was a scam,” she defended her friend gravely. “Some guy hung out with her and made up some story to his girlfriend about Saori seducing him.”

Fuuka’s eyes were spinning. “H-How many activities are you active in?”

“Too many to count. Look, I appreciate the concern guys, but this thing with Sanada-sempai isn’t a date. He’s a great guy, and I don’t want to mislead him like that.”

The girls stared dumbfounded, unable to believe what they heard. “Y-You’re not interested in him?”

Tired from correcting every single mess and repeating the same things endlessly in multiple cycles, Airi dropped her face into her open palms. She understood the confusion at least, since she found maturity and kindness in Akihiko not often found in teenage boys. At one point she did feel something for him, and had her feelings stayed that way, she’d probably have a more optimistic outlook.

“And that’s why we’re upset!” Junpei argued. “You can’t be that oblivious to this stuff! And I could’ve been your wingman!”

It took Airi a few seconds to calm down. As much as she hated the dating rumors before, the guy-stealing label crossed the line. She made a mental note to be slightly more careful with her public image and how she treated Akihiko.

“I’ll be careful. I’m not interested in dating Sanada-sempai. He’s attractive if you’re into skinny
athletic guys, I guess. Honestly though, I think there’s someone else who might be interested in him.”

Despite not outwardly appearing interested, Yukari’s ears perked up. “Is that so?”

“W-Who is she?” Fuuka inquired humbly.

Airi smirked widely and gestured everyone to huddle close. “Well, when I say who the lucky girl is, make sure it doesn’t slip out and don’t force them into dating. Got it?”

The three agreed with confused but curious looks on their faces.

The silver-haired Akihiko stood at the front gate and carried a small briefcase under his right arm. Despite the heat, he still wore his red sweater vest and black gloves. If it were the second day of school after summer vacation with the leaves beginning to change colors, this scene would play exactly as she expected. Dread clenched Airi’s guts in its hands. She had to calm down, hide all traces of her apprehension and disorientation.

“Sanada-sempai?” Airi called out as she ran towards him. “What’s up?”

The boxer turned to her and nodded. With grey eyes stone cold, a slightly annoyed expression ruined his more relaxed pretty boy features.

“Did something happen…?”

Akihiko sighed. “Thanks for coming. Sorry for ruining your plans, Airi.”

“It sounded urgent, and I don’t mind helping you.”

The corners of his mouth twitched into a small smile. “Thanks. I’m just at my last straw. Now that you’re here, we should get going.”

Ignoring the stares of jealous girls surrounding her at all sides, Airi stood by her sempai as they left campus: there went caring for her image. Under normal circumstances, Airi would have easily slipped into casual conversation to lighten the mood; knowing this was not such a time, she kept silent. The trip from Gekkoukan High to the Iwatodai strip mall was so dead one could hear a strand of hair touch the ground. They ascended to the upper level and stood outside of the store with blue banners reading Hagakure.

For the first time in about twenty minutes, her sempai finally spoke. “Thanks for coming with me today. Having some support helps.”

“Is there an Evoker in the case?” asked Airi.

“Yeah. We’re bringing him back, and this time I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Airi’s pulse pounded intensely throughout her body. She had to keep her excitement and fear under control. Akihiko needed her for encouragement, regardless if he wanted her to help convince his old friend or to have her presence nearby to feel secure. Understanding how important this was to him, Airi nodded and waited for Akihiko’s lead to enter Hagakure. The rich delectable aroma of ramen washed over them. Rather than bringing out her inner ravenous wolf, the scent stimulated a sense of nausea in Airi’s stomach. They didn’t have to go far to see who they were looking for. Shinjiro sat at one of the counters in front of them, looking into the kitchen where the chefs worked tirelessly for the great food.
“I’ll do most of the talking,” Akihiko lowered his voice for only them to hear. “Sit by one of the tables and keep your distance. I’ll give you a signal when it’s safe to come over.” He held up two fingers, pointer and middle, and flicked them dismissively. “Keep a close eye on me, but don’t act too suspicious.”

Airi chuckled, mainly to relax her nerves. “This is like something out of a spy flick. Nothing like James Bond, but it’s still exciting.”

The boy was confused for a second. Rather than think nothing of her comment, he let a simple smile escape. “You’ve got quite the imagination.”

“I’m ready whenever you are, sir!” she childishly added a salute.

Without thinking, Akihiko ruffled the girl’s hair. It didn’t bother her in the slightest, but realizing what he did, the senior recoiled away and blushed.

“You’re like a protective big brother,” Airi teased. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Timidity painted a layer of embarrassment on his face. “Tell you what. When this is over and we succeed… just call me Akihiko. No need to call me ‘sempai’. Th-There’s no equivalent in English, right? It’s probably easier for you too, so…”

It was an odd deal, but the girl accepted Akihiko’s sincerity with a grin. “I’ll use ‘kun’ just to be polite, then.”

They separated to their assigned positions. Akihiko’s face quickly retained its natural color once he approached the counter. One of the servers noticed him immediately. “How are you today? Just one?”

“Yep. I’ll have what he’s having.” He gestured to Shinjiro next to him.

Airi found a seat close enough to overhear the conversation, but faced away from them. Hoping to make herself less familiar, she took out her headband and undid her ponytail. The heavy, humid atmosphere from the summer and the food was less than ideal. Some strands glued themselves to her neck and shoulders; others stuck up awkwardly, creating a mountain of frizz. Reaching into her book bag, Airi found a mirror inside the makeup kit she borrowed from Yukari. Once the two were in focus, the eavesdropping mission began. If their conversation was ever muffled for a while, Airi could read Akihiko’s more expressive demeanor slightly better than his friend’s.

Once he sat down and made himself comfortable, Akihiko glanced over. “How can you eat the same thing all the time without getting sick of it?”

“Shut up,” Shinjiro barked. “You always eat that protein shit.”

“Hmm, touché.”

Even with it being a busy hour and the demand for it at an all-time high, the ramen arrived rather quickly and Akihiko happily dug in. A second server came by for Airi. She pretended that she needed time to think it over, but she at least accepted water. In that short exchange, she missed very little of what the men were discussing.

“…haven’t made up your mind?”

The man was annoyed. “Is that what this is ‘bout?” Suddenly his body tensed. “The hell’re you carrying?”
Akihiko ignored him and pretended he did not have the bag on his lap. “Things have changed since you left. We’re more aggressive now, and we just recruited Yamagishi, the girl you heard the doctors mention at the hospital last month.”

“I know what you’re doin’, Aki. I’m not interested.”

“Just reconsider this. Don’t let your power go to waste.”

“My power ain’t worth shit.”

“Shinji!” What little was left of Akihiko’s two years of patience began to run on empty. Something about the conversation reminded Airi of her arguments with Igor.

“It’s not your job to baby me so get off my back.”

“What happened is in the past, and you have to let it go. It’s time you moved on.”

Shinjiro wearily sneered. “No need to tell me twice a month.”

“What do you mean?”

He lost what little humor he entertained and stared at Akihiko. “You didn’t know?”

Akihiko sounded just as confused as him. “Know what?”

Shinjiro bit his lip. Quiet for a while, he sighed and returned to his food. “Forget it. ‘Sides, you of all people should talk.”

“What?” Akihiko nearly knocked over his bowl.

“Don’t act stupid, Aki. You’re no different from me.”

Having completed his meal, he took a few yen bills out of his pocket and left it on the counter. Right as he stood to leave, Akihiko promptly seized his arm and gripped enough to make an opponent in the ring squirm. Shinjiro said nothing, but his fierce glower was enough to get his intention across. Not even a feral lion would dare to challenge him. Costumers murmured uncomfortably over the pair.

Akihiko bore a look just as defiant. “Sorry, Shinji, but I’m done asking nicely.”

The boxer tilted his head towards the door, and the other glared in reluctant, grudging surrender. No way were they going to cause a bigger scene in the middle of a restaurant, even if their anger would turn it into a crater. As the two walked outside, Akihiko, never letting go of Shinjiro, gave Airi the signal. She left money by her drink and by Akihiko’s bowl before scurrying behind them.

She made it to the slightly cooler outside and cautiously followed the young men down to the lower floor of the strip mall. There was no solid plan as to whether or not Airi was to help push Shinjiro to rejoin, so she maintained a safe distance. Once they were far away enough from the everyday business of the mall and the monorail station across the street, their heated argument had room to explode. Airi leaned against a brick wall near one of the nearby alleys and stared at her feet. She pulled her hair to veil her face.

Yanking free from the imposing grasp, Shinjiro snarled, “You’re gettin’ on my last nerves.” He finally looked down to see the briefcase Akihiko carried and let out a piercing glare.

Eerily calm, Akihiko held it out in between them. “This belongs to you. We need more firepower,
Shinji. Things will get tougher from here on out, and we need you.”

Shinjiro turned his gaze away. “You’ve said that millions of times. Not once did you ever really need my help.”

“It’s different now. If we weren’t lucky in finding Yamagishi, Mitsuru would have been killed the other night!”

“It’s your fault if you can’t protect her.”

Blood filled Akihiko’s cheeks, but he ignored the cheap attack. “If we had more members, we’d be more prepared if we got separated or ambushed. You’re more experienced than anyone new we find, and what if we don’t find anyone else for a while?”

As much heart as Akihiko poured into his words, they had no affect. The queasiness in Airi’s gut churned, evolving into frustration. She knew Shinjiro will join no matter how long it took, but being there while her two sempai stare each other down made her uncomfortable.

"Just save your breath,” Shinjiro smacked Akihiko’s hand, sending the case flying across the sidewalk. “I’m sick of your damn preachin’. You’re not my mother, so quit acting like it.”

A familiar thud of violent skin-to-skin contact and the screams of strangers forced Airi to jerk her head up. Shinjiro was on the ground, holding the side of his face.

“Are you serious?!” the boxer shouted. “Don’t you remember anything we went through after Miki?! We promised we’d become strong enough to do what we think is right, no matter how hard times got! Why are you running like a coward?! Why aren’t you keeping to our promise?! I’ve been working my ass off to get better, and you’d rather lie down and rot!”

Feeling embarrassed to overhear the more personal conversation Airi lowered her head once more. She searched for her mp3 in her pockets.

Even after getting knocked off his feet, Shinjiro had enough guts to keep up his fight. “You’re stupid as always. You don’t get it, Aki. Not everyone’s obsessed like you.”

Airi cringed away when Akihiko hit him again. The tension nearly suffocated her. A nearby girl from school took out her phone either to take a picture or call the police. Akihiko knelt down and seized Shinjiro by the collar of his jacket.

“Keep it up. I dare you.” He said through clenched teeth.

Shinjiro smirked, knowing silence would hurt more than any words. Another punch. Shinjiro remained silent – save a mild groan – and his stubbornness persisted. They glared at each other for a while until Akihiko shoved him back to the ground. He spent a long time fixing up his gloves, ruined by spots of blood, before kicking a nearby lamppost. Nervous passerby kept their distance, others went in the other direction to shield the children from such disruptive behavior.

“Let’s not do this,” his voice cracked as he paced around in agitation. “Why do you make this harder than it needs to be? What the hell happened to you?”

Too busy coughing and pulling himself back up, Shinjiro didn’t respond right away. He scratched the fresh bruise on his cheekbone and hung his head. “You’re better off without me. I dunno what game you guys’ve been playing, but it ain’t worth the trouble.”

They were silent again; it seemed they reached a stalemate. Watching them pace around awkwardly,
Airi began to question why she was even needed in the first place. She felt intrusive, and listening to music to ignore the feud wouldn’t help. The crowd dispersed for good though.

“You are worth it, Shinji,” Akihiko said quietly. He wiped his bloody fist on his vest. “Being an asocial hypocrite isn’t like you. You have talents you don’t wanna use, and I hate seeing you waste them. Even Airi’s observant enough to notice that.”

The girl in question lowered her posture and sidled closer to the shadows between two nearby buildings. The nausea returned and she prayed that if she were caught, the plan to recruit Shinjiro wouldn’t backfire.

“So what?” spat Shinjiro. “Why bring her up in every damn conversation?”

“You’ve been accusing me of using her to get you back, but I only told her you were one of us. Whatever she said to you the other day didn’t come from me. Ever since she met you at the hospital, she’s been worried about you.”

“Is that right?” he said flatly while brushing the dirt off his peacoat.

“She’s the reason we’ve held on for this long. Without her strength and support, we’d never beat those full moon Shadows. She knows how to lead a fight, look after our wellbeing, and keep us focused on the mission. I can’t think of anyone else better for the job.”

The red-eyed girl couldn’t help but smile bashfully at the praising sentiment. Had he known of alternate scenarios, he would see how right he was.

“Then you don’t need me. You talk like she’s s messiah.”

“I’m serious, Shinji! If you see her fight and if you get to know her, you’ll respect her too.”

“Shes,” he exhaled in exasperation. “You’re both idiots.”

There was yet another period of silence. If Airi weren’t interested in the subject matter or the people involved, this would have been the most circular dialogue she ever had to endure.

Shinjiro hesitated and stared down at his feet. Playing with a loose rock on the sidewalk with his boot, he sighed. “No need to kiss her ass, Aki. I ain’t blind. I know you told her why I left, and I said my life’s none of her business. Yelled both her ears off, but she just said I should bear it and get back in the fight if running’s got me nowhere…”

Akihiko chuckled uncomfortably. “So she beat me to the punch…”

His friend shot a glare that would make a feral beast stand down. “Has she been tailin’ us the whole time?”

Before Akihiko could respond, a lightly flushed Airi quickly left her post and came forward. Her footsteps vibrated through her body, amplifying the intensity of her nausea. Ignoring the raging butterflies and queasiness, she picked up the now dented suitcase, stopped at about ten feet away from the young man. She hesitantly looked at him. The right side of his face was slightly swollen from the beating, and his eyes were hollow. Seeing him in such a state weighed down on her heart. Airi bowed low in an attempt to look more respectful and apologetic than desperate.

“Forgive me, Aragaki-sempai,” she said meekly. “We would like your help.”

Shinjiro heaved another frustrated sigh and scratched at his sore jaw. He’d never admit it, but he
admired her tenacity to help someone she barely knew. “Alright, then… It’s not like I have much choice,” he grunted, pulling at the tip of his beanie to cover his eyes.

Airi’s body snapped back vertically. She and Akihiko stared wide-eyed, forgetting how to breathe.

He stole the case out from Airi’s hands to emphasize his point. “Don’t gawk. Let’s get outta here.”

He started walking off towards the train station. Fearing his temperament, people backed away from him. Akihiko and Airi recovered from their paralysis and regained their ability to speak.

Realizing she overheard everything, Akihiko said softly, “Airi… you’re not gonna repeat anything we said, are you?”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I won’t intrude on your personal life without your trust and permission, Akihiko-kun.”

Not expecting the new way of addressing him, he blushed violently. “O-Okay… Thanks. Let’s get going then.”

They sprinted across the mall to catch up with Shinjiro. Somehow he had the decency to stand by a lamppost at the station. Such courtesy was quickly ruined when he complained that the two were dreadfully slow. He added that he had to go and pick up a few things before returning to the dorm with them. Making sure he wasn’t going to run away, Akihiko decided to tag along and told Airi to wait around the strip mall.

Thirty minutes passed and the boys returned as promised. The air between the two seemed benevolent, much to her relief. Shinjiro carried the briefcase and a duffle bag; not much to own when one lives on the streets. Along the way to the dorm she saw Akihiko wear a proud, but genuine smile. She was content with his happiness over his best friend finally returning home. Still she walked between them just in case they came up with any new ideas. If another brawl would erupt, the brothers had to get past the little girl who’d happily tattletale to Mitsuru.

“Hey…” Shinjiro caught Airi’s attention. His tone and expression were unsmiling to the everyday person, but Airi read the slight curiosity in his aura. “So you’re the one leadin’ the group on the field, right?”

“You could say that,” she quietly answered.

He looked at her carefully, another telltale sign Airi noted. “If you don’t mind me asking, what exactly are you fighting for?”

Within a second, she recalled many memories. Everything blurred into a maelstrom of emotions Airi had struggled to control. The lighthearted moments she shared with her friends. The moment she begged for a second chance. The times she watched her friends lose loved ones. The aftermath of the final battle everyone celebrated with hugs and tears. Then she remembered how it felt when she lay in his arms, when she took the bullet instead.

Trying to hold back the giant lump in her throat hurt too much, but she managed to say, “I want to protect the people I love.”

“I see,” Shinjiro said, nodding to himself. “Well, You do your thing, and I’ll do mine.”

This assured her that he didn’t read too deeply into her response. Shinjiro then pulled back behind her and emerged on Akihiko’s other side. She didn’t need to actively overhear them to know exactly what they were talking about.
“Alright, Aki, four girls? Mitsuru, Yamagishi, Takeba, and her?”

“Yeah, so what about that? I already told you she’s one hell of a–“

“That ain’t my point, numbskull. Can’t speak for the others, but you gotta keep an eye out on her. Honestly…”

“You don’t need to remind me. They can take care of themselves, y’know.”

“Obviously. I’m just tryin’ to teach you responsibility.”

“Shut up. Quit being a freeloader.”

Airi easily noted that the delinquent had no interest in babysitting. He’d rather let Akihiko deal with all the emotional baggage. She figured Shinjiro wasn’t convinced he’d cope with it well anyway.

Back at the dorm, no one expected such a walking bomb to emerge from a birthday present and explode in front of them. With hands in pockets and a slouched posture Shinjiro sure knew how to make an impression, whether he gave a shit or not.

“This is Shinjiro Aragaki,” said Akihiko. The person of interest gave limited eye contact to anyone and dug the tip of his boot into the rug. “He’s a senior, just like Mitsuru and I. We’ve known him for a while, and he lived here at one point. He’s finally decided to join us.”

Mitsuru, sitting one the couch with her many textbooks, allowed herself to be more casual by letting out a convivial smile. “Welcome back, Shinjiro. Your old room is still vacant. Feel free to reclaim it.”

“Thanks,” he replied in a tone less harsh than his demeanor suggested.

Yukari and Junpei, eating instant ramen at the kitchen table with Fuuka, recognized him instantly, but had no clue how to respond. “Tch… It’s the clown,” Shinjiro noted, eyeing Junpei in particular.

Panicked, Junpei scratched the back of his head. “Y-Yeah…! You’re the guy from the hospital! Not the best way to first meet, eh, sempai?” Ridiculing the terrible introduction, Yukari kicked her classmate in the shin.

“It’s n-nice to meet you, Shinjiro-sempai!” Fuuka built up enough courage to be sociable. It paid off rather well as he lowered his head.

“Well, I propose we explore Tartarus either tomorrow or Thursday.” Everyone turned to the suddenly talkative Airi. “Aragaki-sempai should settle in a bit before we go.”

The true leader put down her Advanced Statistics textbook. “Thursday is best for me. Akihiko and I will inform Shinjiro on how things run around here.”

“Any objections?” Akihiko asked his friend.

Shinjiro shrugged and started heading towards the stairs. “You guys call the shots. Whatever the plan is, I’ve got your backs.”

As soon as he arrived, he excused himself and left to unpack. No one spoke as a pair of feet ascended the stairs to the second floor. Everyone waited for the sound of a door shut before speaking. The awkward air that pervaded the lounge finally vented out.

“H-He seems civil…” Fuuka admitted.
“What?!” Poor Junpei slid back in his chair. “The dude’s frickin’ scary!”

Akihiko shot the junior a look that hurt as much as the kick he received not long ago. Returning to her books, Mitsuru took no offense to the comment, but she said, “No need to worry, Iori. He’s rough around the edges, but Shinjiro is reliable. It takes a while, but you’ll see more to him than his façade suggests.”

Anyone being addressed as a friend, rather than an ally, in Mitsuru’s world was one of the highest praises, and Yukari and Junpei refused to challenge her good opinion.

Chapter End Notes

My knowledge of French is very minuscule, so it won’t be a common habit of having Mitsuru or Akihiko say random phrases in the language.

Also, some chapter titles reference some music I listened to while writing this fic. Here, “Changing” by The Airborne Toxic Event influenced my mood when writing and editing parts of this chapter.
“… that concludes the weather report for this lovely June 24th. Now for national news…”

Occasionally Mitsuru would turn on the TV in the mornings before heading off to school. As the future leader of the Kirijo Group, she felt it necessary to be aware of what was happening in the Tatsumi Port Island area. The company owned practically everything; with her situation she might as well be the closest thing to a modern-day princess, whatever that meant to most people.

Nothing on TV caught her personal interests, if she had any. The fashion report meant nothing to her; the family designers selected her own wardrobe, and she respected their eye and talent for finding exactly what would fit and be presentable in every situation. Vacation plans never crossed her mind, particularly when juggling Tartarus and schoolwork created enough stress for some SEES members to suffer unpredictable mood swings. She studied abroad in England and France before high school, making her slightly more approachable to Airi, who helped her improve her English comprehension. Reaching out to the others besides Akihiko and Shinjiro was much harder mainly because she did not know how her interests would be compatible with Yukari's, Junpei's, or Fuuka's.

Right when a commercial break hit, a series of footsteps came from the stairs. Mitsuru looked up to see who decided to wake up. It was too soon for any of the other girls, who usually came down together fully dressed and packed. A typical slacker, Junpei was always last. Akihiko was long up and went out for a jog. Determining that only one pair of feet could produce the heavy sound she identified, the winner was…

“Good morning, Shinjiro. Did you just wake up?”

A low grunt responded. He emerged, running his hand through his brown shoulder-length hair. He had no time, effort, or love to tame the thick, tangled mess on his head.

Watching the young man search the kitchen in a daze, Mitsuru assumed he had no desire to attend school. At least he was properly clothed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt Akihiko lent until he could buy more clothes. Even his face looked decent after patching himself up from “borrowing” the healing patches in Akihiko’s spoils bag. No obvious bruises were present after yesterday’s fight.

“Where’s food?” both he and his stomach grumbled.

Mitsuru returned her attention to the TV. “I’m afraid cereal, bread, and nutrient bars are all we have for breakfast. None of us are particularly skilled in the art of cooking.”

“Obviously.” Shinjiro slammed one of the cabinets shut and muttered another curse. He dragged his limp body to the coffee machine.

“You need more than that to begin your day. The cereal is quite convenient once you get used to it.”

If it were anyone else, Shinjiro would have ignored the speaker. Knowing better, he tried to sound civil despite his hatred for mornings. “I ain’t eatin’ that processed shit.”

“And coffee is much healthier?”

“It’s edible. You don’t need to have enough pixie dust to put down a rhino to drink it.”
Mitsuru couldn’t help but smile. “If you insist, I will not stop you.”

He grumbled what she assumed was a thank you as he prepared a mug. They exchanged hardly any more words; both placing full attention on their tasks, neither cared.

A few minutes later, the commercial break ended and the news continued. “… number of cases of what has been called Apathy Syndrome is on the rise once more. Individuals are often found unable to respond to the world around them, and some have died from starvation or exposure. The causes of this phenomenon are still being investigated. Three people have been declared missing, potentially as a result of…”

“Don’t you ever give yourself a break?” Mitsuru’s heart nearly stopped. Shinjiro snuck under her radar and appeared sitting on the couch across from her with his cup of black coffee. When she gave him a puzzled look, he pointed to the TV. “You’re gonna melt your brain, be it from college prep, SEES, the Group, the damn press, or a bit of all four.”

The concern in his voice didn’t usually come from a half-asleep teenager. Mitsuru acknowledged this and sighed. “I have many responsibilities to bear. Nothing can change that reality.” She tucked some hair behind her ear and turned back to the TV. “Besides, my father believes that a few former employees have disappeared. If the media catches wind of this—“

“… body they found behind Port Island Station early this morning. Kouta Takahashi, a former scientist…”

Her face lost all color. Somewhat curious, though still slightly more interested in his “breakfast”, Shinjiro paid attention to the news. The image of a grey-haired man in his mid-forties looked very familiar to Mitsuru. It took no time to place when and how often she had met him before. Shinjiro noticed her trembling and crossed legs.

“… police have not revealed the suspects or witnesses. When asked about this, a representative of the Kirijo Group did not comment, but they did confirm his identity upon questioning. The sudden murder of one of their most accomplished scientists is indeed disturbing. However, we will keep you posted…”

Mitsuru reached for the remote and turned off the TV. Biting her lip, she breathed deeply to calm down. Shinjiro felt too awkward to say anything that would further upset her and continued his drink in silence.

Suddenly, the front door creaked loudly enough to break Mitsuru’s concentration. Akihiko entered the lobby out of breath and sweaty. After wiping his brow he noticed his peers sitting under a cloud of anxiety.

“What’s with the long faces?” he asked.

Mitsuru replied nonchalantly. “It’s nothing. How was your run?”

Seeing her still ashen face, he ignored her dismissive answer. “What happened?”

“Some Kirijo scientist got himself killed,” Shinjiro answered between sips. “No one knows how or why.”

“Terrific,” he muttered dryly as he grabbed a towel from the front desk. Then he looked back at Mitsuru, still stressed. “Are you alright?”

Not once returning the gaze, she rose from her seat and picked up her bag. “I appreciate your
concern, but this is my family’s business. We’ll have this under control.”

“Mitsuru?”

“I’m fine, Akihiko. Clean yourself up and wake Iori. Everyone needs to head to school soon.”

As student council president, her word was law. Her aura sent chills down Akihiko and Shinjiro’s spines, recalling what happens if anyone crossed or questioned her in a bad mood. Mitsuru walked around the lounge, lightly brushed past the frozen Akihiko and left the dorm. Neither of the boys made an effort to stop her.

Shinjiro pressed his lips to the cold mug and recoiled when he felt its contents. “What a waste…”

Standing behind the couch his friend sat in, Akihiko continued to stare at the front door. “She doesn’t know how to rest herself.”

“Exactly what I said,” Shinjiro put down his beverage with icy film forming at the surface. He reclined and placed his feet on the coffee table. “You’d think a workaholic like her thrives on stress.”

“You’re just saying that because you’ve got no life to speak of,” Akihiko retorted, smacking him across the top of the head. Shinjiro flipped him off. “So, you’re just gonna sit around all day with no goals in life?”

“Better than holdin’ your hand in public.” A sly smirk escaped his lips. “Tell you what, père. I’ll get off my ass when you and mère drop the pretense and work out your frustrations in the bedroom.”

Akihiko’s entire body burst into a violent, burning shade of red. Swift like lightning, he struck his friend once more to nearly give him a concussion.

June 25, 2009

Airi and her friends found the missing people reported on the news in Tartarus, where Shadows dragged them into their nest to feed on them. Once the group brought the traumatized, half-there people back to the entrance, Junpei helped escort them outside while Yukari helped their wounds. They all kept note that this would definitely happen again in the future.

Despite some good news, the first Tartarus run with Shinjiro was very awkward. Airi thought that bringing the original SEES members with her to explore would help familiarize him with the new team, but she learned how the tensions between them still needed to be resolved. It didn’t mean it was a complete failure though; being with people he knew helped Shinjiro to express himself freely without the underclassmen freaking out. Every now and then Airi would articulate her disapproval of his comments, particularly whenever she gave him Medical Powder after he would recklessly overexert himself.

“Tch, I don’t need your help,” he scoffed at her offering some healing with Pixie. Had a stranger seen him like this, they’d think the black goopy mess on the battle-axe he recovered from his bedroom closet deserved more respect than her.

“Then don’t let Castor use Fatal End so much!” she snapped, trying to detract his attention from his weapon. “You might be stronger than most of us, but please don’t be so reckless.”

He rolled his eyes and finally snatched the Medical Powder she shoved in his face. “I told ya before. Mind your damn business.”
Akihiko quickly intervened by reaching for the axe, which its owner jerked away defensively. “She’s more familiar with Tartarus than you, Shinji, and she’s the field leader. You should listen to her every once in a while.”

“Uh, guys?” Fuuka’s voice resonated in their heads. “I sense three enemies from behind. I think they heard you!”

Mitsuru turned around and braced herself as the Enslaved Beasts approached. “The three of you should stop arguing and focus on the task at hand. Just when I thought we cleared the floor…”

Everyone spread his or herself out and surrounded the lion-formed Shadows in the narrow passageway. Being their first encounter with the monsters, Fuuka immediately began scanning the enemy.

The battle ended up being much more difficult than it had every right to be. Airi ordered Akihiko to stay in a support role to debuff the beasts’ attack and defense. When the Shadows nearly had the tiny Airi cornered, Mitsuru casted Mabufu in hopes of changing their prime target. It wasn’t the best possible strategy, but it made some sense.

Before Fuuka figured out the weakness, the Shinjiro pulled out his Evoker and let Castor free. His Persona took the form of a black horse and its rider with a spear through his torso. The man had long blond hair, nearly identical to Polydeuces’, making the connections between them more apparent than they already were. In his offensive streak all Shinjiro managed to do was anger the Shadows, who easily countered the physical-based hits, draining his health further. Airi summoned Slime to deal Maragi, knocking the enemies off balance. While Akihiko stayed back to heal his weakened teammate, the girls delivered the ultimate coup de grace with trusty rapier and naginata.

They all left the battle drained of energy or patience. With no determination to ascend any further, the team located a green warp point two corners from the brawl and returned to the entrance. As if hit by an oncoming truck, the juniors immediately noticed the unpleasant aura emitting from their returned friends.

“You’re back awful soon,” remarked a wary Yukari. She finished bandaging one of the disoriented missing people the exploring group found in their ascent.

Tapping her foot, Mitsuru placed her rapier back it its sheath and folded her arms. “Now, if our recent recruit would learn to be more cooperative to different power dynamics within the group, we could have reached the barricade by now.”

Silent, Shinjiro kept one hand his pocket while the other played with his axe like a blade on a windmill.

“Watch where you’re flinging that!” snapped Akihiko. “Do you wanna get us killed?”

Airi raised her hand. “Forcing him won’t help.” She walked across the floor to a meditative Fuuka. “Hey, what’s our progress?”

Still in Lucia’s protective shell, she sung in a soothing voice. “We’ve reached the 57th floor. The second great presence is only two floors above.”

“See?” she faced everyone with a smile. “We’re almost done. Just one more visit and we’re ready to go!”

“But the full moon is in ten days,” protested Junpei. “Man, aren’t we normally done by now?”
Akihiko took off his newly acquired Bladefist gloves when he spoke up. “No rush. We have enough
time before the next operation.”

“If you say so.” Seeing the frustrated sempai gave Yukari enough of a reason to not press any
further.

“That’s it for the night. Yuka, Junpei-kun, and Fuuka, take these people to the police station.”

When Lucia vanished for the night, Fuuka met up with her peers and the three missing individuals. As they left, they exchanged nervous looks and comments. None of them were a problem, so Airi let it slide. Once they were gone, she faced the seniors with a firm posture to make up for her lack of height. Mitsuru didn’t flinch.

“Junpei-kun is right, we shouldn’t fall too far behind. I have no idea what’s happening between you
three, but I hope this won’t be a future problem.”

“I promise it will not, Fujihara,” Mitsuru assured her confidently. “We’ll readapt quickly so this will
not happen again.”

“Thanks, Kirijo-sempai. You fought well.”

Mitsuru humbly chuckled. “I’m glad I meet your expectations.”

Clearly understanding she was not root of the problem, Mitsuru was excused. Only the boys
remained. Shinjiro quit his antics and stood beside the teleporter with his axe resting on his shoulder. He expected to receive the brunt of the criticism.

“Is something wrong, Airi?” asked Akihiko, wondering why he stayed behind.

Expression still straight, she rocked back and forth with her hands behind her back. “Whenever
Aragaki-sempai steps out of line, I’m trusting you and Kirijo-sempai to handle him.”

Baffled, he blinked. “Is there a particular reason?”

“Clearly I’m doing something wrong if he’s not taking me seriously. You’ve known him longer than
me, and he respects you.”

“If you got something to say, my face ain’t on Aki’s pretty scrawny body,” Shinjiro remarked curtly,
not once looking at them. His eyes quickly shifted to the ground, but Airi noticed that the cloudiness
still lingered. She wondered if he needed time to relax so the moodiness would go away.

His friend cracked his knuckles loudly, but Airi cleared her throat to get them to stop considering any
kind of brawl.

“I’ve said enough for tonight,” she said to them both. Then she smiled lightly at Akihiko and
lowered her voice. “I’d appreciate the help.”

He wanted to her explain herself further, but the silver-haired teen recognized how much she relied
on him. Sometimes he felt she trusted him too much. Akihiko felt she was a better leader than he and
Mitsuru, especially when she played a greater role in bringing back Shinjiro than he ever tried in two
years. It stuck him as odd for her to suddenly feel inadequate in dealing with Shinjiro, even if he had
his obstinate days.

Sometimes something seemed strange about her. Airi was attentive and kind, yet there were other
times she seemed to hide pieces of herself or her feelings. Whatever it was, it explained her flips
between gravely serious and happily content.

“You worry too much,” he said with a thoughtful smile. “Be more confident in yourself. Every one of us believes you’re doing a great job - ”

Out of nowhere, a loud slam of the entrance to Tartarus shook the room and broke their conversation. They sighed and hoped whatever had Shinjirō all wound up would stop soon.

June 29, 2009

One day after class neither had club activities, so Yukari and Fuuka hung out at the shrine. Even with the protective lotion, the blazing heat from the late June sun nearly burnt holes through their skin.

“Huh… So much for that new treatment,” complained Yukari. She sat on a bench near the small playground with her head resting on her knees. Light brown strands of hair pressed on the back of her neck.

“The beauty kit you just bought?” asked Fuuka, cooling herself with a butterfly-patterned fan. “I th-thought this thing would help too…”

They were particularly bummed that the reward money they earned for saving the missing ones was invested in half-assed purchases.

“Dude, we so need to go to the beach!” Junpei emerged from the waves of heat and approached the girls with three sticks of ice cream. “Sorry if I got something you hate. The store’s all out of the good stuff.”

Not caring, each girl greedily snatched a treat for herself. Yukari smiled tiredly, “You’re forgiven. I knew you are sometimes good for something.”

“Oh, c’mon, Yuka-tan,” he groaned, flopping next to her on the bench. “You make it sound like I’m worthless!”

“She’d n-never say that about you, Junpei-kun,” assured Fuuka.

“There are times…” Yukari’s voice trailed off when something large and white entered her field of vision.

Back facing the group, a white shiba-inu laid down near the offertory box. From an unlucky angle, one would assume he had died, as his breathing was soft and mellow. Right beside his front left paw was a plastic bowl. Small puddles of water around it faded away as it evaporated into the humid air.

Recognizing him and feeling sorry, Fuuka skipped to the dog, knelt down and lightly fanned him. “Oh, it’s Koro-chan!” she said happily.

Her classmates stayed behind, unwilling to move. They watched her care for the dog, who raised his head and gave an aware bark. With a wide beam, Fuuka said something to Koromaru and patted his head. In turn his tail wagged lazily and he pressed his face into the girls’ hand.

“Poor guy’s a stray,” Junpei remarked with the ice cream in his mouth. “I see him wander around town sometimes.”
“I heard the former priest here was his master,” explained Yukari, now sitting upright. “He passed
away recently. Ever since, Koromaru sits patiently around here, like he’s guarding the place. Such a
loyal dog…”

“Lonely too,” he added. “At least he’s found a friend.”

“Yeah…”

Koromaru sat up and happily barked as the girl scratched behind his ears. A few minutes passed
when Fuuka finally said goodbye after petting him. She got back up, nearly tripped over the bowl,
and returned to her friends. Her ice cream had completely melted onto her hand, but her face glowed.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said, accepting a napkin from Junpei. “Koro-chan looks well. I
think someone’s been giving him food and water.”

Junpei took off his hat and fanned himself. “That’s good. The pooch’s pretty tough. Imagine havin’
all that fur in this heat!”

“Classes end in a few weeks,” reminded Yukari, wiping sweat from her brow. “I wonder if we’ll go
anywhere during break.”

“M-Maybe the beaches at Okinawa?” Fuuka thought aloud. “Once exams are over, maybe we can
go shopping for swimsuits, Yukari-chan.”

“We could bring Airi along too, if she isn’t so busy.” Yukari wrapped up her ice cream stick and
folded her arms. “You know, Airi’s been acting strange lately.”

“It’s all those clubs she’s been juggling,” the boy robotically answered. “She’s skipped all the times
I’d offer a free bite at Hagakure.”

The color drained from the Fuuka’s face. “Oh! I made her join cooking club… I-If she has other
commitments…”

Regretting the tone of his voice, Junpei sighed. “It’s not that, Fuuka. I’m just saying it in general.
Man, how do I put it…?” He looked up at the sky and counted the clouds. “It’s like she’s been
avoidin’ us lately…”

“Probably ‘cuz she’s spending a lot of time with Akihiko-sempai,” Yukari said bitterly. “I’ve seen
them together at the sweet shop yesterday. Most guys don’t go there unless a girl drags them along.”

“Are you saying…?” began Fuuka.

“I wonder sometimes. And as usual, the school picks up on her activities like the paparazzi. Nothing
she does slips under the radar.”

Junpei blinked in realization. “Man, that explains why Akihiko-sempai’s fangirls have been shooting
angrier glares at us lately.”

“People still think you’re dating Airi.”

“No kidding! That’ll happen when the sky turns green!”

The ice cream might have cooled off the juniors and boosted their mood at first, but talking about
Airi threw them back into the camp of gloom.

“Let’s just wait until after the next operation.”
“Whatcha thinking, Yuka-tan?”

Everyone turned to her when she stood up tall and pulled her hair back. “Maybe it’s just the heat…” Yukari turned around and smiled at Junpei and Fuuka. “Let’s just focus on school and the Shadows.”

“And the next thing we know, it’s vacation and the beach?” grinned the clown.

“Totally,” said Yukari. “You’ll be making more perverted old man jokes in no time.”

He laughed. “C’mon, I’m a guy! What’d ya expect?”

The little boost they gave themselves motivated them enough to start walking back to the dorm. On their way out of the shrine, they threw away their trash. Before they reached the bottom of the steps, Junpei took one last look at the keeper of the shrine.

“Dude… life must be nice as a dog,” said Junpei.

“How so?” asked Fuuka.

He pointed back to Koromaru. “It’d be nice to live without a care in the world. No school, no drama, no Tartarus. You’re only livin’ in the moment, ya know?”

Understanding his meaning, Fuuka nodded respectfully. Yukari, however, placed her hand on her forehead and cackled. “Don’t think that’s gonna get you out of taking the exams, Stupei.”

With a smile Fuuka stood awkwardly between her two bickering friends. It would take a long while before Junpei could start earning Yukari’s respect.
Sitting comfortably the floor, Airi took a brief look through her mother’s box she kept safe under her bed. The carvings etched in the pine were smooth at the edges from age. Characters and illustrations of luck and other generically cheery wishes embraced it, but Airi held it dearly, for she had nothing else from her birth parents.

It was still too early for any real priceless memories to be preserved inside, but she added a few minor trinkets anyway. She kept a stub of one of the films she watched with Junpei the week she recovered and returned to class. It was a rather serious flick that Junpei didn’t hate, but it left him confused as to what to make of the anti-villain. He brought up the film a few times since and they discussed it over lunch or ramen. Beside the ticket stub was a silly picture of the two of them from the photo booth at Paulownia Mall. While everyone cooped his or her self up studying for May’s exams, they snuck out and spent all of one evening playing games at the Game Panic arcade. Emptying a wallet was never so much fun; they laughed and looked stupid playing Dance Dance Revolution until closing time.

Not much else kept the two items company. She, Yukari, and Fuuka each bought different colored bracelets with star beads on one of their shopping sprees. While the other two worse theirs occasionally, Airi said she’d keep it close to her heart, even if neither understood why she would promise something so seriously. She always wore the dolphin earrings her uncle gave her on her seventh birthday… the day her parents died. Keeping them felt necessary, despite the painful memory attached to it.

Everything she collected related more to memories of events, not just individuals. Airi grew close to several people already but the box and her heart still felt somewhat empty.

She spent the rest of her solitary evening starting the early sketches in a series of pictures. Never sure what to give to people in return for their kindness, Airi felt that pouring her heart into a drawing would suffice. But knowing Chidori had that talent and used it far better than she, Airi considered craft making instead.

A knock ended her creative session. Airi slid her mother’s box and her sketchbook under her bed and gathered her equipment, Evoker, and red SEES armband from her closet. At the last second she picked up her duffle bag by her desk, holding many healing items. She then answered her door to see Mitsuru.

“Is it time?” Airi asked.
“Yes. Everyone is waiting in the command room.”

“If I heard correctly…” Airi said as she locked the door behind her, “recent Apathy Syndrome victims were found in pairs, right?”

“Indeed. That might be a clue as to what we’re facing next.”

They continued to discuss their theories as to what might come that night. Lights in the hallways remained on: the Dark Hour had not yet settled. Once they reached the fourth floor, the senior slowed down to a halt once they reached the top of the stairs.

“What’s wrong, Kirijo-sempai?”

“We still have a few minutes,” she pointed towards the couches opposite of the large double doors. “It’s been a few days since we last spoke to each other like this.”

“Of course! We’re both so busy with this and school…”

“That’s why we must take a moment to breathe before the Dark Hour falls upon us.”

Making sure to not to get too comfortable, the girls decided to remain standing by the seating area. Mitsuru was the first to speak, but she did so in English. “How are you, Fujihara?”

The language shift caught Airi off guard, but she smiled at her sempai’s relatively good pronunciation and grammar.

“I t’ink I’m used to my hectic schedule,” she replied, lowering her voice and staring at her feet. “Student Council’s pretty good an’ all, but Hidetoshi oughta do wit’out t’e caffeine sometimes.”

Mitsuru shook her head to hide a wry smile. Airi was right, but her saying that with an unusual accent left her curious and mildly amused. “He is a perfectionist. We needed someone like him after what last year’s council left behind.”

“Bloody t’ankful t’at misused funds mess is over,” Airi added.

“Indeed. What else have you done?”

“Me an’ Fuuka started a cookin’ club. I cannnae make a simple healt’y meal t’at tastes good, but maybe we make somet’in’ for everyone before ya, Akihiko-kun, an’ Aragaki-sempai graduate.”

“I appreciate your kindness,” despite using formal language, Mitsuru's lips were a natural, fluid stroke across a fine canvas. “I may have heard from Takeba that you’re quite gifted with deserts.”

Turning a bright pink, Airi giggled. Her head raised and her raised, tense shoulders slouched. “Nae really. Baked t’ings like cookies, cupcakes, an’ chocolate. T’at’s all I know. Cannae feed a poor country wit’ ‘at…”

“More than I am capable of…” Mitsuru said with a sigh. “Unfortunately, my upbringing has not made me qualified for domestic work.”

“I'm no better off, y'know. I can teach ya to make somet’in’ simple. I promise it be better t’an t’at store-bought rubbish.”

“My, you are quite confident.”

“Aye, right! Every year, I make candies for my foster family. Blair loves ‘em very much. Westerners
ain’t as picky wit’ sweets.”

“You speak well of your family,” noted Mitsuru. She then sighed after glancing at the time on her cell. “I’d love to hear more about them later, if you wish.”

They braced themselves as the familiar crash sounded and the green film blanketed the world. Weapons prepped, the girls walked over to the double doors of the command room. Talking could be heard on the other side.

“Kirijo-sempai,” said the brunette in Japanese. She held her naginata close. “Let’s do this!”

Mitsuru nodded in agreement.

.“~.

“Any luck, Fuuka?” Akihiko asked after his pre-ass-kicking stretch.

Within Lucia’s glass globe, Fuuka never once lost her focus. “I found it! It’s quite strong! It’s located in Iwatodai, inside a building on Shirakawa Boulevard.”

“Hmm, Shirakawa Boulevard…” Ikutsuki scratched his chin. “They’ve been finding the Lost in pairs lately. Now I know why.”

Mitsuru folded her arms and frowned. “…Oh.”

When the Lucia vanished into the green mist and returned into her, Fuuka left her little corner and joined everyone by the seating area. “What’s on Shirakawa Boulevard? I’m not familiar with the area.”

“I’ve heard about it, but…” Yukari’s voice trailed off.

“That’s where all those hotels are,” Junpei explained with a goofy grin. “That explains a lot!” He turned to his innocent classmate. “You’ve heard about ‘em, right, Fuuka? Where people go to… ya know, let off some steam…”

“We know what you mean,” Airi snapped. Everyone noticed her sudden outburst and noticed her entire body flushed red. Finally understanding, Fuuka blushed sympathetically.

“Nonsense,” Ikutsuki dismissed the reactions. “They’re no different than ordinary hotels. The rooms are a bit… fancier, that’s all.”

Airi wanted to ask how he knew if they really were fancy or not but kept silent. She didn’t want her mind to be so tainted that bleach could not scrub away the thoughts from her brain.

Junpei moped in disappointment. “Aw, man, that’s it?”

“I don’t know about this,” Yukari mumbled, obviously sharing her fellow female classmates’ discomfort. “Maybe I shouldn’t go…”

“You’re such a little kid, Yuka-tan! Scared of ghost stories and adult hotels. What’s next, the sight of blood and severed baby heads?”

“Gross! Fine, then! Let’s go!”

Wanting nothing to do with an immaturity shared dialogue, Mitsuru kept quiet the whole time. Then she finally spoke up, “Where’s Shinjiro?”
Airi finally noticed his absence too. The air was much less sour than she expected.

“He’s not feeling well,” replied Akihiko with a shrug. “He said something about a stomach bug around dinnertime…”

Airi thought back to when she saw him very briefly that morning on the second floor lounge. He did seem unusually quiet and lethargic, more like a zombie than anything else, and not nauseous.

“Then we’ll do this without him,” said Airi, holding a firm demeanor and posture. “We won’t be separated this time, and Mitsuru-sempai can finally join in the action.”

The redhead held up her sheathed rapier slightly in agreement. “Fujihara will remain in charge for this mission. Yamagishi, I want you to handle support.”

“I’ll do my best!” The recomposed Fuuka bowed.

“Alright, then. Decide on the rest of the team.” Akihiko placed an affirming hand on Airi’s shoulder.

She took a moment to reevaluate the team skill set in her mind. There were no “bad” choices; the only deciding factor was who would end up with who when they walk into that particular trap…

“Hmm,” she mused. “Mitsuru-sempai, Akihiko-kun, and Junpei, you guys will come with me and check out the hotel. Yuka, I want you to guard Fuuka. If things go south for us, I might need you two to tag along. Just stay within a safe range from the enemy, Fuuka.”

“U-Understood,” she nodded.

“No problem,” Yukari said with a smile. “If a Shadow attacks, I’ll heal us up in no time!"

Tapping her foot eagerly, Mitsuru said, “Alright, everyone. The operation begins.”

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The thick cherry atmosphere made Airi sick. She loved green – heck, she wore it all the time – and she started to miss the Dark Hour’s misty tinge. As much as she hated that accursed hour, at least it was a cold, endless desert of emptiness. Anything was better than the heavy fumes of a love hotel.

“Are you alright, Fujihara?”

Mitsuru shook her shoulder firmly, causing Airi to flinch. She gave a sideways glance and saw the mixed bag of annoyance and worry reflected in her eyes. Apparently she was trying to get her attention for a while.

“Oh, uh… sorry,” Airi mumbled.

“Yamagishi just reported the presence of the Shadow on the third floor. Were you not paying attention?”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“It’s just a hotel, Fujihara. Everyone is asleep in his or her coffin. There is nothing here but the Shadows.”

The attempted assurance helped a tiny bit, but Airi remained unnerved. Even Junpei and Akihiko were just on edge as she was. They reached the second floor and found a few Shadows scattered about. None were of any notable challenge.
“Everyone, separate,” commanded Airi. “We can clear the floor before pressing on.”

“Gottcha, leader!” replied Junpei. “Can I charge at the next boss like in May?”

“No!” everyone said at once.

“Not you too, Fuuka-chan! You guys suck!”

Many of the enemies looked like miniature Cupids with heart-shaped bows, predictably fitting for the sickeningly pseudo-romantic setting. Airi was getting fed up with the love-themed dungeon and sliced and diced it into slabs of black meat with her weapon.

Akihiko must have shared the sentiment as he mercilessly punched one through the wall, leaving a blotch of runny black goo. He chuckled as he wiped his glove with a nearby towel sitting outside one of the rooms. “Heh, my skills have improved.”

Due to her falling a tad behind in engaged combat, Mitsuru had a slightly harder time fighting the Cupids, but she had satisfaction in severing one’s neck with the razor-sharp heel of her boot.

“Hey, I found the stairs!” Junpei cried from across the hall to Airi’s right.

Once they met up and reached the top floor, two large double doors stood out like a zombie at a birthday party. Only a few more Cupids stood between them and the goal.

Airi clenched her naginata until her knuckles turned white. “Who’s sick of seeing these cutesy little pests?” Two eager boys cracked their knuckles.

Raising her hand in the air, Airi snarled and led the charge. The Shadows stood no chance against a barrage of angry-weapon-wielding teenagers. And they were very much afraid.

“What’s the occasion for this suddenly excessive violence?” Mitsuru inquired dryly.

“C’mon, let her vent,” said a relaxed Akihiko. “Blowing off some steam every now and then doesn’t hurt.”

“I’m done kiddin’ around now,” assured Junpei while pulling the tip of his katana out of the ground.

Airi tilted her head and smiled at the Empress. “It’s better to do this now with easy enemies. Who knows what’s behind this – “

Just as she placed her hand on one of the double doors, it swung open and she fell into the next room. The team screamed and bolted in after her. When they arrived, they saw her unharmed, though backing away in disgust.

“What t’e shit…” her blanche lips trembled in English. “I’ll be needin’ t’erapy…”

Though they couldn’t understand her well, her friends turned to see the offending subject. The large Shadow had the appearance of a morbidly obese man struggling to fit in the tiny throne he sat in. A feminine figure stood behind him, as if affectionately caressing his mask, marked with a V. It was the Hierophant. Surrounding them were two quivering paper-thin crosses.

“What is this guy, a pedo otaku?” Junpei gagged at the sight.

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. “Does it matter? It’s ugly and we’re gonna kill it.”

“…gets no less foul each time…” Airi continued muttering.
The Shadow sensed the other three there and with a wave of his hand cast a broad wave of powerful spears of lightning. Junpei and Mitsuru miraculously dodged them for reasons even they could not comprehend. Akihiko twitched at the annoying bug bite to his arm. Airi, however, fell dead on her butt.

Fuuka cried, “Airi-chan’s paralyzed with fear!”

Akihiko ran to her rescue and Polydeuces casted Tarunda on the Shadow. “Fuuka, scan the enemy!”

“Give me second!”

Mitsuru kept her distance across the room and summoned Penthesilea to deliver some light ice attacks. “If it’s the Hierophant, then it could have no weaknesses!”

Anticipating the pathetic attempt, the Shadow barely noticed the specs of ice scratch its flabby belly. Having little idea of what to do, Junpei threw an unused pillow at one of the paper minions and distracted it enough from the group to knock it over in one swing of his sword. When the Hierophant's lady turned her gaze upon him, Junpei hid behind the dresser to avoid the path of her fear-inducing scream.

Without realizing his precise position in the room, Akihiko set himself to be an easy target. He summoned Polydeuces again to get some the pressure off Junpei. “No, sempai!” begged Fuuka. “He reflects – “ The room violently shook at the explosive impact.

“Akihiko!” cried Mitsuru, who witnessed her companion fall over from his backfired attack. Penthesilea flew to his side, rested her hand on his sternum, and healed the blossoming bruise. With a weak wave he laughed awkwardly and got back on his feet.

“Heh… maybe I should wait for Fuuka’s report…”

“Faites attention! Stick to lowering his attack and defense from now on!”

With the fear effect wearing off, Airi regained her senses. She helped pull Akihiko back on his feet. “I’m back,” she chirped, speaking Japanese once more. “So what’s the deal with this one?”

Junpei called out after Hermes spat fireballs at the paper crosses. “No weaknesses. Oh, and you just missed Akihiko-sempai getting struck by his own thunder!”

“I’m regaining my honor,” the senior replied curtly. His Persona taunted the Hierophant with aggressive chants until the next attacks he directed progressively hurt less Junpei emerged from his defensive position when he could more easily recover from an attack he could not avoid in time.

“Alright,” Airi said, clutching her Evoker while browsing through the selection of Personas in her mind’s eye. “Be careful when he starts to yell! He can strike us all with fear!”

On his way to give Mitsuru some aid, Junpei slashed the minions in half and barely tripped when avoiding the Hierophant’s kick. “Yeah! That almost happened to me!”

“Its attacks are electricity-based!” Fuuka reminded. Junpei joke about her being Captain Obvious that no one found amusing.

“I’d be toast if I went in with you guys!” said Yukari via telepathy.

“Good call, Fujihara!” Mitsuru cried after sustaining a minor zap.
As if it understood their dialogue, the Hierophant cast Mazionga again. No one was able to avoid the lightning. Due to her relatively low defense next to the rest of SEES, Mitsuru received even more damage than her electricity-weak underclassman could have suffered. Given another window of opportunity, the fat man and the woman let out a married shriek, summoning a new army of paper figures from the walls to punch them with Swift Strike. After surviving the attack, Airi ran over to Mitsuru and pulled her back on her feet. Everyone was ready for her orders.

“You focus on elementals, Kirijo-sempai. I’ll attack head-on and cast Media when we need healing. Akihiko-kun, keep taunting it so its attack and defense weaken!”

Everyone agreeing, the battle persisted. Airi switched the lightning-weak Nekomata to the white dog Inugami to improve her chances. The strategy worked as best as they tried: everything they did only created tiny bite marks on the Shadow’s brick wall defenses. The Hierophant easily recovered from Polydeuces’ taunting, but he and his host persisted.

Airi performed a few well-timed melee attacks on the fat old monster. Once she leapt high in the air and brought down her weapon to his shoulder as if she was cutting a block of wood in half, but nothing she or anyone else did could deal a good clean critical hit. His fat provided some armor, and any weakness it could have was blanketed in his gluttony or guarded by his mistress. Its resilience didn’t surprise her. With his Persona being of the same Arcana as this Shadow, Shinjiro was very similar in that very little could easily throw him off balance in an one-on-one fight.

The long battle finally came to a close when Penthesilea threw a thin spear of ice. It shot right through the Hierophant’s head and shattered the mask like ceramic. Only the woman was intact enough to throw herself over and scream for him as they and the remaining crosses finally disintegrated into a sea of black muck.

Junpei and Airi leapt high and cheered. The other juniors expressed their amazement, “Way to go, Mitsuru-sempai!”

She put her Evoker in the holster on her waist and said, “I was powerless last time, and I needed to return the favor.” She fell silent for a moment then smiled. “Penthesilea has learned a more powerful ice skill.”

“That’s great, Mitsuru,” assured Akihiko, who crashed on a nearby chair. “Man, I’m drained.”

Airi looked through her bag and threw out a few Snuff Souls for her friends to rejuvenate their magic capacity.

“Good job, everyone,” Fuuka’s melodic voice filled their minds. “Yukari-chan and I are waiting outside. No Shadows have confronted us.”

Everyone took a few minutes to sit back and recuperate on healing items. Once the time came, Mitsuru, who was closest to the exit, turned the doorknob. A blunt click protested her action. “This is peculiar,” she muttered under her breath and backed away.

“What’s wrong?” Akihiko approached the door to check. “…It’s locked?”

Airi counted down to when Fuuka would report the situation. When she did, everyone else nearly jumped out of his or her skin and looked around anxiously. “I sense another Shadow in the room! It’s not the same one you defeated!”

But the room was empty.

“Where is it, Fuuka-chan?” Junpei started kicking on another door across from Mitsuru.
They spread out and searched in the most random places: under the bed, the bathroom, the dresser drawers, the bedside table…

*It’s the* mirror, Airi remembered. *Time for the best part of the show.* She walked over to the large circular mirror, framed in crafted crevices and gold, in the center of one of the walls. A strange energy emitted from it, and all she wanted was to get this entire night’s mission over with.

“Hey, guys…?” She swayed backwards and clutched her pounding head.

“Airi?” Akihiko’s voice became muffled.

“Fujihara – huh?”

“What in the…”

The world turned white before she fell into the abyss.

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Airi’s head was so heavy she didn’t want to get up. It felt like this was the first time she truly rested with the aid of powerful drugs to put down the most hyperactive creature. Gentle fibers tickled the tiny hairs on her arms; a cool breeze that smelled of early morning rain glided across her face. She took her time to open her eyes, smiling as the images of familiarity that she soaked in were strengthened by what was really around her. For the first time in what seemed like forever, she was in her bedroom. Her actual bedroom.

Home.

She missed the small reminders of the family who raised her for the past six years. Ma’s homemade breakfasts, pa’s music, and Blair’s embarrassed, overreacted denials of sleepwalking. Mornings were oddly animated but cathartic. Having not seen them in so long, Airi nearly forgot what she left behind, and how long it has been since she returned. She sat upright and stretched. The cool wind swirled like ribbons between her fingers. Even without all the familiar essences of her Irish mornings, she was happy with fragments of the past.

Awake but with a slightly musty vision, Airi looked out the window beside her. How she missed the chilly weather of Ireland and the smell of spring grass happily nourished by light drizzle. The rolling hills and worn patches of trees smiling under the pale clouds haven’t changed at all. The sight of the countryside and the vines that climbed the side of the house and nearly reached her windowsill revived a piece of her that nearly died.

Once her sight readjusted, she spotted an odd reflection of a figure sitting by the side of her bed. A dagger jabbed at an old wound, and a wave of anxiety constricted her heart and labored her breathing.

“Hey.”

The alien presence never set foot in her home, but the voice was as convincing as the environment around her. Airi spun around, her eyes suspicious of the phantom. Sure enough, there *he* was. Deadpan and listless. He slouched slightly in the chair he dragged over from her messy desk sometime before she awoke and stared unfazed at the state of her appearance. Very few teenage boys could be so unflustered around a reasonably attractive girl in her underwear.

In the awkward silence, she caught him occasionally studying her body, accented by her white camisole. Such curious untroubled stares were the least of her concerns, though she pulled the sheets
up to cover her modestly curvy figure. “Wh-Why’re you here…?”

Upon seeing her flustered response and her burning cheeks, a tinge of disbelief flashed in his eye. “You really did care.”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. You pretended I didn’t exist ‘til that night.”

That vivid, but fleeting experience nearly cracked the idealized glass world Airi was in. Nothing much had to be said to trigger it. A tiny candle flickered in his once hard steel eyes and refused to fight against what he knew was his inevitable end. At first she thought he resented her, and that initial but wrong assumption still haunted her. Not once had she been so wrong about someone and had to learn it through a senseless murder. That night, and every rendition since, deepened the wound in her heart. Anguished tears burned her eyes and carved scars along her blushing face; that alone made her unable to bear him being here. She wanted to forget. Thinking about it killed whatever was left of the mood of returning home, even in a dream.

“You’re too honest for your own good.” His tender, careful voice only twisted the blades and increased the bleeding Airi spent many cycles trying to clean up. "It’s weird you’d suddenly care ‘bout me over my stupidity. And that stupidity only made you care more with each cycle. Why?”

I was scared, her reply suppressed under her sobs. An intimidating guy who refused to socialize deeply with anyone and had a connection with shady people gave off the impression that he was dishonest or hateful. Maybe, just maybe he was a kind person as Mitsuru always said, but he was too difficult to understand. But that was only what she believed when she first met him. Had she not taken the new contract, Airi would never have the chance to simply treat him with basic respect. Otherwise, she’d never realize that she was the one who failed to reach out to him in any meaningful way.

**Embrace your desire… I am the voice of your inner self…**

A voice whispered in her ear. Airi remembered something similar to this happening before. But the more she thought about it, the more she felt distracted.

Callused fingers grazed her cheeks, drying her tears. When she had the strength to turn to her comforter, Airi’s frail heart skipped a beat. Keeping reasonable distance between them, he sat beside her on the bed. And he had that gentle, heartbreaking smile he wore when he laid dying in his own blood.

“You promised you wouldn’t cry.”

**That which cannot be felt is merely a dream… The present is all we have.**

Airi’s intuition told her she was being led into a trap, but more receptive sides of her encouraged this and craved for this attention. She muttered through her brittle, trembling lips, “I-I should’ve trusted you in the beginning. I’m being punished over and over for how I treated you.”

“You’re punishing yourself, idiot.” He only spoke with affection. “Bad things happen for no reason. Nothing changed, no matter what you did.”

His words made her wince. “I tried so hard, but it was only a month each time. This might work… you’re here already. We have more time.”

"Stop worrying ‘bout what can’t be fixed. Let go of me.”
His hand combed through her hair as if it were the last time. He pulled away to leave the dream he ruined beyond repair, only for Airi to lunge forward to stop him and no longer giving a damn of the sheets falling to the bed and exposing how undressed she was.

**The future is but a fantasy, memory a fabrication…**

Her hold of his hand was strong. The hasty reaction stopped him, and his eyes widened in surprise. It made no sense how she came to feel like this, but her chest ached too much and she couldn’t stop it, no matter how many times she tried.

“I can’t, Shinji, I can’t! I have to save you! I’ll do anything I can to help you! Please don’t leave so soon, not like you always do!”

**Let your desire free you from your shackles…**

Airi hung her head, leaning on his forearm. She felt so pathetic and shallow. Maybe her guilt mixed with hormones that created an unhealthy hurricane inside her sometime along her journey. There was no rational reason why she drove herself to insanity over some guy she was only meant to know for a month.

“Why keep ignoring what I want? Playing god always ends badly,” Shinjiro warned, unease slowly breaking the control he had. "Let me go."

“I know, but I can’t keep that promise. I’ll always cry… You don’t deserve to die...”

Then the hand she captured twisted and moved around until it held hers. Airi looked up to meet Shinjiro’s eyes, defying everything he previously said. “You’re hopeless, Riko.”

He pulled her into a close, gentle hug. He buried his face into her shoulder and stroked her back, trying to console her as she began to cry once more.

**Pleasure is what you truly want. You stand before the doorway to bliss.**

The voice was so tempting because it was so right, but her mind began to clear up. This was only a dream. She could give in since this wasn’t the real Shinjiro. She could indulge in something she wanted for a long time and not let anyone else know.

*But I can’t.*

A rational part of her finally broke through the emotional turmoil. Airi noticed that the dream was trying harder to hold onto her, but as her feelings intensified, the more her body acted against what her mind wanted. Airi felt like a spectator of what was happening. She watched herself cling to Shinjiro as if he was the only thing keeping her alive. He pulled back to see her face, and he smiled before kissing her.

**You cannot deny your instincts…**

*I’m not.* She wanted to know what Shinjiro’s arms really felt like around her and how having him love her without holding back could overwhelm her to tears, she would only have feelings for an illusion. *If I want this to be real, I have to earn it... and hope.* The dream began to deconstruct and lose its lucidity.

**Embrace your desire…**

*Not now. I have to wait.*
As the dream died, a voice called from far away. “…na! … Aibana!”

Junpei-kun! Airi finally remembered what she had to do. The mysterious voice disappeared and she regained control of her thoughts.

The Irish morning with her and Shinjiro starting to lose themselves in each other was replaced by the darkness of sleep. As much as Airi wanted to go back home, she had to complete her journey. As much as she wanted to be in that dream with Shinjiro alive, he needed her to mean something to him without any manipulation.

The Lovers’ spell almost successfully overcame her; never before had a dream of Shinjiro feel so real. Any more like this and Airi would lose to her way forever.

Junpei pinched the unconscious girl’s nose for the third time. She twisted and turned so feverously on the double bed that Junpei kept space between them to not get hit. After being trapped in the shower, he made sure to be dry and fully dressed before trying to help her.

“Wake up, Aibana!” he practically shouted. “Whatever it is, it’s just a nightmare!”

Her eyes shot open and sat upright in agitation. She breathed deeply to calm her racing heart. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Junpei sighed in relief. “Welcome back to the living world, leader-chan.”

Airi glanced down and was happy to see herself fully dressed. “H-How long was I out, Junpei-kun?”

“Dunno,” he shrugged, letting out a chuckle. “I was under somethin’ too, but I snapped outta it. When I got outta the bathroom, I saw you tossin’ around and crying in pain. Figured you were dreamin’, but you were mumbling something…”

Airi shook her head firmly and retied her ponytail. Her cheeks were redder than her irises, and her stomach tied into knots. “I-It was j-just a nightmare…”

“Makes sense. Aragaki-sempai’s a creepy dude,” he joked cautiously, knowing he was walking on eggshells. When her eyes became the size of saucers, he backpedalled. “Sorry… It’s just you said somethin’ about him in your sleep. Seemed pretty serious…”

“It’s not. It’s nothing.”

Her repeated statement came out more blunt and harsh than she’d normally intended. Her reaction reminded him of how Yukari would snap when he teased her about something he was right about. A few ideas crossed his mind, and one in particular made him laugh in disbelief.

Before their conversation could go any further, Fuuka interrupted. “Oh, I can finally reach you! Can you two hear me?”

“We hear you, Fuuka,” replied Airi as she slipped off the bed and straightened up her wrinkled blouse. “Where are the others?”

“We hear you, Fuuka,” replied Airi as she slipped off the bed and straightened up her wrinkled blouse. “Where are the others?”

“Yukari-chan and I are with Mitsuru-sempai and Akihiko-sempai now, one floor above you, I n-never expected there to be another Shadow, but its power is blanketing the whole building. It’s what caused all of you to act strangely. I’m pretty sure it’s in that room you were in before, but the d-door is sealed shut.”

Junpei tossed Airi her equipment while Fuuka gave the report. The doubt never left him, so he
pressed again. “You’ve been actin’ weird, Aibana. You sure you’re alright?”

“I am. Just please don’t tell anyone about anything that happened here.” She spoke in a grave tone Junpei never heard her use, and she hurriedly readjusted her uniform, giving him no nonverbal acknowledgement of his existence.

Once she had her things ready, she burst out of the room. Junpei grumbled under his breath and followed after her. No Shadows were present in the halls, so they took advantage of this breather and reached the stairs. Not long after they climbed to the next floor, Fuuka, Yukari, Mitsuru, and Akihiko stood ready, albeit awkward. From Akihiko’s disheveled shirt and Mitsuru’s damp hair, they more than likely ended up in the same room and experienced something pretty uncomfortable thanks to the Shadow’s influence. Upon seeing Airi and Junpei, Fuuka held her heart and exhaled.

“Oh, Airi!” cried Yukari, who hugged her tightly. “I can’t believe there was another one… That was the worst!”

“It has to be the Lovers,” said Mitsuru. Her hair was slightly frizzy and tangled. “That would explain… what happened.”

Airi said between the seniors and Junpei, “Nothing that happened will ever be uttered or repeated. Let’s just all keep our dignities intact, alright?”

No one argued. Yukari stared in confusion, disappointed that she was never going to get juicy blackmail material aside from Akihiko’s rigid brows and untucked shirt… yet.

Fuuka spoke up. “N-Now we’re all together. I just figured it out a while ago. It’s the mirrors! They’re giving off the same energy as the Shadow.”

“You think smashing ‘em will break the seal?” asked the one person who caught on quicker then usual.

“Exactly, Junpei-kun!”

Yukari pursed her lips. “You guys said the mirror on the 3rd floor was different from the others, right?”

“Yeah,” confirmed Akihiko. “When we stood in front of it, we all felt strange… then we ended up… yeah…” His voice trailed away as he blushed and Mitsuru shot a nasty glare.

“There was no reflection of us,” Airi remembered. “I was about to tell everyone before we passed out.”

“Alright, then let’s smash ‘em up!” wasting no time, Junpei ran off ahead.

No one stopped him. Airi ordered the rest to spread out across the floor and destroyed any mirrors that met the criteria. Once the job was done and Fuuka reported that the seal vanished, everyone reassembled outside the double doors that led to the Hierophant before.

“Fuuka, summon Lucia and stay here.” She nodded and did as she was told. “Everyone else, it’s payback time!”

She somehow managed to block the undercut Akihiko threw at an alarming speed. It was ironic that the one who saved her when she was full of fear was now charmed and trying to beat her up. The
petite girl would have never had the guts to challenge a three-year-winning boxing champ, even if she knew his weaknesses. His punches hurt like hell. She used the blunt end of her naginata to deal a few shallow blows to give some distance between them. The most damage it used was a tiny abrasion that bled obviously through his hair. In the heat of the fight Airi changed Persona at least four times. Inugami came around to save Mitsuru from Hermes’ fire attacks. Zouchouten resisted fire from both Junpei and the Lovers. Then she had Jack Frost. A risky choice, but it was the best she had.

She put the Evoker to her head and called for him. “I’m sorry, Akihiko-kun!”

The cute little white and blue demon chuckled mischievously and knocked the boy off his feet with a well-timed sheet of ice to the gut.

“ARGH! I had it with you, Stupe!” Yukari’s Persona stood from her bull-head throne, opened her arms wide, screamed, and knocked out the poor boy in one gust of wind.

Finally free from the pressure, Mitsuru ran to hide behind the bed while Penthesilea carved and threw a large, spear-shaped chunk of ice at the heart-shaped Shadow. A bomb of fire nearly engulfed the bed, but she remained unharmed. Yukari was more out in the open and shot a few arrows back at the Shadow.

Holding his head, Akihiko leaned against the wall. “What… happened?”

Airi switched back to Zouchouten and buffered Yukari’s defense. She turned to her sempai and asked, “You focused again?”

“He’s recovered from the Charm spell,” Fuuka assured her. “I’m worried about Junpei, though.”

“Don’t worry, I got him,” revival bead in hand, Akihiko stumbled to the junior.

The Lovers retracted from its firestorm and prepared another Holy Arrow, this time hitting Yukari. And she was charmed.

“You imbécile!” As Penthesilea cast Bufula, Mitsuru ran towards Yukari, shoving her into a wall and pinning her in place. “Fujihara! Take her Evoker!”

Airi snatched it from Yukari’s hand and took Mitsuru’s former place in the offensive line. From the corner of her eye, she saw Junpei, unchanged despite the Lovers’ Garu spell knocking him over, nearly decapitate Akihiko. Being Charmed and oblivious to the girls’ tactics throughout most of the battle, the senior took it the same way Airi did at first. Like a nice guy he dodged every sword attack and refused to fight back.

“Akihiko-kun! Take my place! I’ll take care of–”

Suddenly, a ball of pale blue light radiated the room. Dumbfounded, Airi recognized it immediately. A miniature explosion shook the room and knocked Yukari and Junpei out instantly. Mitsuru and Akihiko were still standing, though just barely. Airi hunched over, hands on her knees, catching her breath. She switched to Inugami to heal the survivors. Sidestepping another Holy Arrow, she searched through her bag and cursed. Only one Revival Bead remained.

Completely freaked out, Fuuka cried, “Is everyone alright?! Yukari-chan and Junpei-kun–“

Airi screamed. She charged onward, blade-first, towards the Lovers. After two annoying fights, an inconvenient trap, and two unconscious friends, Airi just wanted to go home and sleep, but she knew what she endured would keep her awake. The dream would bother her for hours, days, months, and
knowing how much it easily bothered her pissed her off even further. A mere fraction of the energy she withheld for so many cycles overwhelmed her, setting her emotions ablaze.

“Fujihara!” Mitsuru cried out, only to fall silent when Holy Arrow struck her. Knowing full well that he might not live to see the dawn, Akihiko sucked up his pride and faced down the ice queen alone.

“You’re supposed to be the easiest of the full moon Shadows to kill!” Airi ranted at the monster. “So die already!”

Launching herself in the air, she pushed back the mental reminder on how to properly use her weapon and stabbed the Lovers Shadow. The blade pierced straight through the body, and bloody red contents squirted out, splattering across Airi’s face and her white blouse. She and the Shadow fell to the hot pink carpeting with a thud that made the mirror in the room rattle. Victorious, the girl pulled herself up and took out her weapon. The Lovers deflated as its guts erupted in short, violent bursts, in tune to a heartbeat.

Not once did she divert her eyes from the Shadow. Fuuka burst into the room, nearly crying from nerves, and collapsed when she saw everyone alive. That was enough to snap Airi out of her fit. She wiped the muck from her face and turned from the Shadow, melting into a burgundy puddle, to check up on her friends. A shivering and traumatized Akihiko somehow managed to survive three Bufulas, to which Mitsuru apologized feverishly as she healed him. Airi didn’t want to disturb them, already flustered enough with what trap they fell into prior to the battle. She gave Fuuka a comforting hug, and it was enough to calm her down.

Yukari and Junpei managed to wake up in a daze. Once they saw the dead Shadow they immediately ran to Airi and asked what happened.

“Wh-What…” Junpei blurted after she finished explaining. “You took it on by yourself?!”

“Yeah,” she scratched her cheek shyly. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you guys out… There was only one revival bead left. And I…” She glanced back at the Shadow. “I got tired of seeing you guys fight each other…”

Yukari asked, half impressed, half skeptical, “How’d you manage to kill it so fast…?”

Fuuka piped up, “A great burst of power flowed through you all of a sudden… What happened?”

Airi didn’t look at her friends when she finally admitted. “I wanted payback…” Completely lost and confused, they were dead silent. The red-eyed girl didn’t want to say any more. It was bad enough remembering how much the illusion upset her. Thankfully he was too sick to join the fight this time. She couldn’t face him if he were there.

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Up upon the roof of a building across the street a figure watched the teenagers exit the Hontel Champs de Fleurs. They seemed to be cheering over their victory at defeating the invading presences within. The one in a baseball cap seemed to have yelled something at the auburn-haired girl, who was quickly defended by her two friends. The white-haired boy leaned slightly against the red-haired girl for support.

The blue-haired man pressed his glasses closer to his face as he studied them walk down the infamous street in Iwatodai’s red light district. Just when the group vanished around a corner, he glanced up at the sky. Waiting for something, he sat down next to his laptop and backpack. The green-tinged moon began to whiten. Within seconds the Dark Hour came to an end. Shortly
afterwards he reached for his cell and quickly dialed. He opened his laptop and started up the computer.

There was a quick answer. “Well, Jin?”

“They completed their mission,” he reported. “They just left.”

“Good. They’ve been rather busy these last few months, including their frequent forays into the tower. Have you gathered anything useful about their techniques?”

Jin clicked his tongue as he waited for his laptop to wake up. He took out a thick notebook of handwritten observations and flipped through the pages with his thumb. “There ain’t much to say. They’re kids, thinking teamwork’s gonna save them when the world’s gonna end. I got their affinities, though.”

“How about their identities?”

“Easy. Just like those bastards said, one of ‘em is the daughter of the Kirijo Group’s CEO. Another is a friend of our buddy, but it’s obvious enough with his Persona being Polydeuces. The others are barely worth noting except one.”

“Do tell.”

Jin found the page he was looking for. “There’s that Airi Fujihara chick Aether told us to keep tabs on. Collecting data on her was a bitch. She’s got multiple Persona with a variety of skills and weaknesses. This is more than those bastards bargained for.”

“Fujihara, hmm?” He repeated and he sharply inhaled. “She must have been quite a sight. Who would think that kind of power exists in his niece?”

“Takaya,” a woman’s droning voice interrupted him. “Should we deal with him now?”

“Not yet, Chidori. He still has some information we could use. If only he were cooperative.”

As he typed out his notes into his computer, Jin frowned at Takaya’s disappointed tone. “So he’s working with them?”

“Precisely. In fact, the rat’s right here, begging like a child who wants his toys back.”

Someone else on the line was wheezing painfully.

“What difference does it make?” Jin yawned in boredom. “If he pays, I see no reason to not give him what he wants.”

“Yen will not suffice this time. He’s loyal to them for reasons I cannot fathom. He will not earn his fix until he gives us what we need.” Jin wanted to argue, but he held his tongue. He finished transferring the last of the data and started packing. His partner noticed how quiet the conversation became. “If there is something you wish to verbalize, Jin…”

“Just because he’s with them again, doesn’t mean he’ll be an immediate threat. He’s just like us. Based on his recent transactions, he ain’t gonna live to October.”

It was still on the other line, save for a few less violent coughs.

“You... may have a point.” As Takaya’s voice lowered a bit, Jin assumed he talking to someone else. “We’ll accept your payment. But be ready, for next time we won’t be as lenient. You will tell us
what they’re after, Castor.”

Another period of silence on the other line. Jin gently tapped his fingers against the phone and paced along the rooftop. Patience was a virtue only he shared among his comrades. He expected his leader to make a noise at some point. Just then, Takaya’s voice shook with anger. “They intend to eliminate the Dark Hour?!”

Eyes wide and startled, Jin interjected quickly. “Takaya, put me on speaker!” Within seconds, he heard more of what was happening.

“I don’t know all the details…” the young man said in a weak voice. “I’m still new there…”

“Why would they do such a thing?!” Flabbergasted, Takaya clearly wasn’t paying attention to the fine points. “With the power they have, they wish to destroy the Tower of Demise?!”

“What?” The sickly man coughed. “Who wouldn’t… destroy that damn eyesore?!”

It took Jin a few minutes to process and take mental note of what he heard. Once he did so, he had to restrain a fuming leader. “Easy, Takaya,” Jin couldn’t believe he was still being the commanding voice of reason. “He gave us information…. Now give ‘im the pills.”

He heard muffling crackles through the line, and he assumed the exchange occurred.

“We’re done here.” Jin heard Takaya finally speak clearly. “Now run along back to your pathetic companions. If they cause any more troubles, I’m afraid we’ll have to kill them.”

“Do whatever ya want…”

“Oh, don’t be so indifferent, Castor. If we see you with them, you’ll be first.”

The background noise had less chatter and Jin assumed he was off speaker. He picked up his heavy backpack and went to the ladder on the side of the building to climb from the roof down into the alley. He turned out of the dingy isolated alley and went down the dimly lighted street to leave the district.

“When should we intervene?” Jin asked.

His leader took a sharp inhale before replying, “Let’s wait for a good window of opportunity. Keep investigating. That frequent user on your website is worrisome.”

“Agreed. It’s definitely coming from someone at the high school. Maybe it’s one of them…”

Chapter End Notes

Airi’s accent when she speaks English is a weird hybrid of Scottish and Irish. Since she started learning the language at a young age, she doesn’t have too strong of a Japanese accent thrown in. I struggled to convey the quirks of both dialects in written form, so I settled with something that’s intentionally strange, weird, and wrong.

Also, this is yet another chapter title that references a song I listened to while I wrote this fic: "Sleeping with Ghosts" by Placebo.
July’s Full Moon Operation felt like a repeat of May’s. Instead of Yukari having a soul mood that made the dorm’s atmosphere heavy and caustic, it was Junpei. He knew he was upset with Airi for a variety of reasons, some he already expressed with Yukari and Fuuka, but that night, he was convinced that the friend he knew was acting strangely. Rather than talk about it, he blew up in her face after the operation.

She acted always so confident and fearless in combat, but that night, it felt forced by the end. Maybe she was stressed from school stuff, but she took on the Shadows with even more passion and strength than he had seen before. Something drove her more than usual, but he had no idea what. That so-called nightmare bothered him too. She was crying as if someone was breaking her heart, and why she kept saying Shinjirō’s name baffled Junpei.

Airi held back a lot of strange things about her powers and her feelings, and Junpei didn’t like it.

“Ha,” he laughed as he walked to school under a raincloud. “Maybe it’s me. I fight my damnedest, but… She’s just in another league. I’m not needed at all.” He tried organizing his cluttered thoughts about Airi while standing beside the school gate on Friday morning. No one was willing to talk to anyone the day before. The operation beat them senseless, and they vowed to prepare even more for the next time.

As if she teleported, Airi walked right up to Junpei. Her face was expressionless, but he saw the worry in her eyes. “Hiya, Junpei-kun.”

“How’s up?” he said flatly. How was he going to explain himself?

Looking down, the girl played with the beads in her scarf. “Whenever you want to talk, I’ll drop all my plans and spend time with you.” She looked back up at her friend. “I shouldn’t have ignored you like that. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not gonna change anything. Did Yukat-tan and Fuuka-chan tell ya?” he managed to say.

“They told me to manage my time better so I’m not all over the place. I needed the wake-up call.”

“Whatever, man,” Junpei brushed her off and popped his unbuttoned collar. “I’ll catch ya when you’re not in student council, or some other club—”

Voice fading into silence, something really, really strange distracted him. In reality, it would be a really cute transfer student, very much like Airi. But a little less like a friend, Junpei reminded himself. What he saw, however, was a really bizarre dream. Or the apocalypse had arrived. Airi turned to see what paralyzed him.

“Is that…?” she stammered, sharing his reaction.

It was the usual scene: a pack of fangirls of various grades completely surrounding Akihiko. What was out of place was a warmly complexioned teen standing next to him. And dressed in the summer Gekkoukan uniform… in proper dress code. White short-sleeved shirt buttoned to the collar, black tie, and black pants. The very person who rarely ever came to school stood that day as a model student. It was a terrifying sight because of it being a very rare if not impossible occurrence.
Noticing his friends, Akihiko pushed the girls aside and waved to them. “Hey, you two,” he greeted. “Look at what the cat dragged in!”

“Shut up,” the self-conscious Shinjiro dragged his feet and slouched right next to him.

The juniors saw correctly. Junpei’s brain tried and failed to find an explanation for how and why this came to be. A blind man would notice how happy Airi was to see someone she has barely known.

Akihiko noticed their behavior and laughed. “Honestly, guys, the look on your faces…”

“I told you this would scar ‘em for life.” Shinjiro instinctively touched the ends of his sleek, tamed hair, missing his beanie.

Airi was the first to form words. “Kirijo-sempai actually did it…”

“With my assistance,” completely out of character, Akihiko gloated and pressed a hand to his chest as if this was his own accomplishment. “It was either working full-time or attending classes. I said it’d be good for him to not sit around town all day. Mitsuru wanted him to be an ‘active contributor to society.’ Between the two of us, he barely had a chance!”

The sore loser grumbled something unintelligible and stared at the ground. Akihiko's grin reached his eyes.

Mildly impressed, Junpei whistled. “Dude, that was kinda harsh.”

“But it worked! From here on out, Shinji’s attending school full-time with us.” He moved close to the juniors and lowered his voice. “Help me make sure he doesn’t ditch class and sneak out often, okay?”

“We done yet?” snapped Shinjiro.

Airi tilted her head to the side and examined the humiliated teen. “I think Aragaki-sempai needs a makeover.”

A heavy weight dropped on the boys’ shoulders. That was a word none of them wanted to hear.

“Aibana…?” Junpei’s voice quivered.

“What?”

“Usually you say rational, sometimes funny things, but what are you planning?” Akihiko asked, anticipating the worst reaction from Shinjiro.

“I’m just saying Aragaki-sempai needs a slight change in attire if he’s gonna stay in school. We can’t have him dress up this nice if he’s miserable.”

“What’re you talking ‘bout?!” Shinjiro spat, straightening his posture in hopes of intimidating her.

“How should we handle this?” Unsure, Akihiko’s eyes darted between his flustered friend and the girl.

Airi thought for a moment and let out a wry smirk. “I can help right now.”

“Dude, are you freakin’ serious?!” cried a ghostly Junpei. “Do you wanna walk home alive?!”

“Of course. That’s why I don’t want the school to blow up when people notice Aragaki-sempai is
Airi withstood his outburst and glared at him. With quick hands she undid his tie and the top two buttons of his shirt. She somehow managed to withstand his flails and pushes, all failed attempts to keep her away. Bystanders, students and teachers alike, were amused by the scene and crowded around them. Akihiko and Junpei stared at each other, shocked at how the conversation twisted into something borderline intimate. They had nothing but pity for poor Shinjiro. Once the girl finished, Shinjiro hunched over even more than ever, bangs completely hiding his eyes. Proud of her work, Airi easily stood on the tips of her toes and ruffled his hair to give it more body.

“Now, then,” she smiled innocently as she slowly pulled on his tie. “Make sure you wear your beanie tomorrow. It suits you better. You’ll be feel comfortable in no time!”

Then the bell rang for the beginning of classes. She backed away and laughed as if the dramatic scene never happened. “I’ll see you later, Akihiko-kun and Junpei-kun. And don’t you dare skip class, Shinjiro-kun!” With a victorious giggle Airi skipped towards the school building with the tie spiraling in the summer breeze between her fingers.

At some point the crowd subsided, but the intense talking and gossiping began. The three boys were left in the dust, unable to move. “Well, that was subtle…” Junpei said. He was too tired and confused to accurately reply to the left-fielded moment.

“Hey, Shinji?” The boxer seized his best friend’s shoulders and shook him violently. There was no response, and Akihiko thought the poor guy died standing. But a closer look at the expression on Shinjiro’s flaming red face…”

Once the boy snapped out of it, he straightened his posture and blinked, acknowledging Akihiko’s presence. “Th-The hell’s up with you?!” the disheveled boy stuttered as he pushed him away.

Akihiko cracked a grin. “Welcome back to high school.”

“Tch…” the grinch vehemently spun around, back to Akihiko and Junpei. “I’m outta here…” Swinging his bag over his shoulder, he shuffled his feet as he entered the hell he avoided for so long.

Junpei snickered at the sight despite his pale face. “Teasing the scariest guy in school. Airi has no sense of danger.”

“Guess she’s not scared of him anymore?” Akihiko folded his arms as his smirk widened.

“But now the rumors will start to fly about this… I’m never gonna hear the end of it!”

Their mood grew progressively sour as they went in the main entrance and reached the shoe lockers. Finally wearing appropriate footwear, the two stopped in the middle of the lobby.

“Hey, Junpei,” looking at the ground, Akihiko muttered. “I asked Airi before, but…”

“No, sempai, we’re not dating.” He didn’t mean to be harsh to his sempai, but Junpei’s patience ran out. “And I bet you’re not into her either…”
“R-Right. You’re probably tired of being asked.”

“What a drag…” he complained. “Would it hurt if she tried bein’ careful? I guess it’s not so bad if it’s at the dorm. At least it stays there. But she never pays attention to anything she does in public!”

Akihiko nodded in agreement as he flung his jacket over his shoulder. Staring in the direction of 2-F on the second floor, his eyes hardened. Junpei wondered if something didn’t sit right with him either.

Junpei caught his attention by waving his hand in front of his face. “And hey, sempai, tell Aibana to be careful… I’m no good at this sort of thing.”

“You should do it, Junpei,” he replied sincerely. “After that fight you two had, you’re the one who should talk to her.”

“Allright.” Hands in the air, he accepted the advice. “This better not be an excuse to avoid talking to a girl. Mitsuru-sempai shared a few stories the other night, like last year on White Day…”

With a sharp stare and twitching neck muscles in response, Junpei’s teasing lasted for only two seconds. Although it was nowhere close to winter, the hairs on his arms stood up on end and stuck to his clothes for the rest of the day.

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July 13, 2009

Someone softly poked her face, sending chilly sensations throughout her body. “Ai?”

She forgot how long she lay in a daze. If she had a mirror, the bags under her eyes would be full, dark, and heavy. No way was she going to school with a face even a mother would hate.

“My dear, I know you can hear me.”

The voice seemed much deeper than she remembered. After pretending to not care and ignoring the foreboding dread in her soul, she finally turned to see who her speaker was. She rubbed her dry eyes.

“Ryoji?” she whispered.

With a cheerful chuckle the familiar boy placed his tender hand over his heart. No mistaking it. It was Ryoji Mochizuki, sitting right next to her… on her bed. He even had that silly yellow scarf wrapped around his neck. His jet black hair, sleek and prim, contrasted with the loose two pieced pajamas he wore. They were stripped, just like Pharos’: not surprising, but odd to see them on him.

“What are you doing here?”

He smiled solemnly and glanced at his bare feet. “It’s been so long. I’m glad to see you again in this form…”

“Same.” It was a partial lie. Airi was beginning to think that Ryoji was just as creepy as Pharos. “But why are you here? It’s not even the Dark Hour.”

“It’s 1:19 am.” He noted, without looking at the alarm clock. “This is quite unusual. I even remember everything in this form. It’s too soon for this to happen.”

If she had not been up all night, Airi might not have had the strength to have this conversation. She sat up in bed and kept some space between them.
“Things are different,” she admitted, pulling her legs close to her chest. “But I came in expecting to have everything go as they always were meant to be. Attend school, make friends, save the world… die, and lose those who are important.”

Ryoji placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I’m the reason you’re suffering,” his voice cracked. “If there was a way to defeat Nyx without you dying the first time, I would have done everything in my power to allow it. I want you to be happy, Ai.” His hand covered his face as he started to snuffle. “I know that people die but it’s hard to accept it when nothing I’ve done has brought you any happiness.”

The boy loved to torture himself. Sure, he’s one of the harbingers of the apocalypse, but Ryoji would beat himself up too much. If he were a more cheerful person, like he was in school throughout November, she might have reconsidered accepting his advances. She continued to let him cry for a while. Not once did she ever remember see him do so. He inhaled sharply. Once he revealed his face, the lines of glimmering tears started to disappear.

“Better?” Airi whispered.

“Y-Yes. You’re too kind to me.”

He took a few more seconds to normalize his breathing. Then once he cleared his throat, Ryoji was back to business. “I wish I knew what was happening to me. Something doesn’t feel right… I have more power than ever, but I am still trapped in your soul. What could it be? Perhaps this is a sign that you will survive?”

Airi reluctantly shrugged. “I can’t be too hopeful. I died the last who knows how many times.”

His tone softened with concern. “And you will again if you don’t mind your sanity. I’ve noticed you’re stressed and having trouble sleeping. You wanted to meet me at a more convenient time. This seemed like the right moment to talk.”

“Will you cryptically remind me that I overcame my last ordeal? Mention that the Fall is nigh? That we’ll always be friends?”

As she rattled off the possibilities, she mimicked Pharos’ inflection and mannerisms. He couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll stop reminding you if it annoys you.”

“Thanks. I know our progress.”

Suddenly he got up and stood in the center of Airi’s room. He silently looked at everything that made up her. The shelves were overwhelmed with her shojo manga and CD collections. Her desk had photos of her foster family, one of which was taken in London. Another was one of her uncle and her petting animals at an aquarium. A stuffed dolphin souvenir from that event sat on top of her TV.

Ryoji went to her mirror, with magnets holding pictures of jasmines. He smiled as he held one of them. “You still have the desire to decorate your space. Hope still lives. Remarkable.”

Hardly flattered, she said, “It’s always like this since the loop begins after I finish unpacking.”

He brought the picture close to his lips, only to hesitate and place it back where it belonged. “I want to warn you of something. Because I am always with you, I am aware of your joys, sorrows, and torments.”
Airi’s eyes widened and she stared at her lap. She knew what lecture was coming.

“You can forge and strengthen numerous bonds at school, in the city, and within SEES. You can hunt down by brothers. You could fight and kill me. All of this together, as you understand, is not enough. There is one missing piece, which I am sure you are aware of—

“Shinji,” she replied quickly with a dry mouth.

“You understand your feelings for him, as groundless as they are, but you continue to run away from him…”

“It’s not that,” Airi said curtly. “I’m not running. It’s just not the right time to talk about it.”

“And when will it be?” he interrupted. Ryoji’s face grew as eerily stoic as Pharos’ by every word he spoke. “Before you save him from his fate? After? Or once you return back home, never to return to Japan again?”

“I…” The girl pulled her legs to her chest once more. Being a transfer student never really became a factor in her dealing with her feelings until he mentioned it. So much happened in that year that the consequences of going home and moving on slipped her mind. “I dunno when…”

He stood beside her and lightly touched her hair. “People die, Ai. It was never your fault. Don’t blame yourself…”

“How are you any different? You can never bear to see me die. How is that any different from what happened to Shinji? Junpei and Chidori?! Mitsuru-sempai and her father?!”

He knelt and made her look at him. His dark tone and aura said otherwise, but Ryoji kindly stroked her cheek. The cold sensations returned again.

“I have accepted my fate. Regardless of what I want, I know my place. Your fight always baffles me, not because of your denial. You never believed in the strength you supposedly value to overcome said fate. The Universe is full of endless possibilities… and when you called upon it, you never used its full potential. Maybe you don’t have what it takes to find what will give you that happy ending…”

Suddenly his touch grew faint, his appearance filmy.

“Wait…” Airi whispered, reaching for his hand but catching the air.

His voice was faint. With one last smile, he whispered, “I cannot suffer this agony forever, my dearest… Find another way quickly, for all our sakes…”

With a snap, he vanished. Shortly afterwards words danced in her head to the voice that always reminded her of a new development: act upon your heart’s desires.

She rubbed her eyes as if waking from a bizarre dream. A wave of fatigue crashed upon her, forcing her body to slump and collapse to the side. The bed was a pleasant cloud where the tired girl would finally get her rest.

Just to be sure, she poked one eye open upon the alarm clock. 1:42 am.

Even on less than five hours of sleep, Airi managed to survive the school day. At one point, out of
nowhere, she decided to visit the Home Economics Room after school. One would claim it’s a symptom of her brain’s lack of sleep, but it somehow made sense to her until she realized it was a Monday when she found the familiar note on the door that morning.

Then the fates blessed her at lunchtime. She found a lone transfer student from France sitting by himself on the roof. Happy to know he understood English, Airi eagerly conversed effortlessly. Just as they started to click, Junpei caught up and invited her to join him and the others. Airi remembered her promise and accepted it. In the short dialogue with the boy, who called himself Andre, she agreed to try to attend a Fashion Club meeting next semester. Then Airi reminded herself to create a calendar to manage all of her arrangements, clubs, and meetings. With enough temperance and fortitude, she would succeed.

After a lighthearted lunch and a well-attended volleyball practice (somehow the girls apologized for their intolerant behavior, and the team reassembled), Airi crashed at the kitchen back at the dorm with everyone.

Seeing the exhausted juniors and Mitsuru, the concerned silver Akihiko inquired. “What’s wrong, everyone? Are you hungry?”

“There’s no food left, sempai,” reminded a tired Yukari, who played cards with Fuuka.

The silence that reigned over them stayed, only interrupted every other heartbeat with a growling stomach.

Fuuka spoke up, “I-It’s summer break. Does anyone have plans?”

“I wish I could go to the beach.” Hoping for a cold surface to ease his fried brain, Junpei rested his head on the table. “Hot sands, cool breeze, babes in bikinis…” His voice trailed off into daydreams.

“Man, it sure would be nice! Somewhere south, where the water is crystal clear!”

“If it weren’t for exams…” groaned Airi.

That ruined her friend’s happy trip. “Oh right… we have ‘em to worry about. What a drag…”

“Now, now, you two will be fine.” Fuuka’s warm verbal pat on the back was much appreciated. “But, yes,” she continued. “I’d love to go to Okinawa if we could.”

“Well, it’s not Okinawa, but how about Yakushima?” Everyone noticed Ikutsuki silently appeared in the hallway, carrying groceries. Right behind him was Shinjiro, wearing his uniform as Airi recommended. Once he dropped the bags on the counter, the man stood behind Mitsuru as no chairs were left.

“Chairman-san,” she stood to greet him. “We didn’t realize you were here.”

He chuckled. “I happened to be in the area when I saw a turtle pulling a multi-axle truck full of food. All he needed was an extra hand… or a wagon. Better yet a car if preferable.”

Too busy putting away everything alone, he grumbled about Ikutsuki’s lack of decency.

“Believe me, you are more familiar with this sort of thing than I. Who knows where I’d put the meat? I’ll only be in your way and making mixed steaks.”

“Don’t bother helpin’,” he snapped, nearly throwing the poor wrapped meat into the freezer. “I didn’t ask, and I don’t need it.”
Ikutsuki grinned. “Other than my being a Good Samaritan,” – to which Shinjiro coughed at the bullshit – “I thought I’d drop by and tell you my schedule for next week. Mitsuru, your father will be vacationing in Yakushima during the break.”

She blinked expressionlessly. “He will?”

“You’ll all have some time off after exams, right? Why don’t you go and pay him a surprise visit?”

“Seriously?!” Airi blasted out of her seat.

“We’re gonna go on a trip?!” Junpei exclaimed. “Beach babes, here I come!”

“We can go shopping for suits like we promised, Yukari-chan!” beamed Fuuka.

“That’s true,” she said lightly, feeling more optimistic to the idea.

Proud of the response, Ikutsuki sought the approval of only one. “How about it, Mitsuru?”

“My father is a busy man. I don’t want to ruin his vacation.”

“Haha, don’t worry! No father would be upset with a daughter who came all that way to see him.” Ikutsuki then directed his attention to the rest, even the distanced grocery boy. “You’ve all done a great job. You deserve to relax for a while. We already know when the next operation will be, so it should be fine.”

The Kirijo daughter still wasn’t convinced. “…I don’t know.”

“Ya-ku-shi-MA!” Airi cheered childishly. The lack of sleep somehow made her extra hyper.

It was so infectious that Junpei hopped on board the same train. “Sempai! I’m beggin’ you! PLEASE! I need the fun!!”

Seeing the two mess around together lit Mitsuru’s face a bit. Maybe they have reconciled after the last operation. Even if it was not so, she found the two of them acting up and begging like children rather charming. “Alright. I guess everyone needs a break now and then.”

The two kids screamed for joy. Yukari and Fuuka quietly smiled and high fived at the victory. Finished his task, Shinjiro watched the spectacle unfold. They all agreed to the trip without his consent, not that he was particularly offended.

“Akihiko,” pondered Akihiko. The other mellow senior raised an eyebrow. He let his friend continue the thought. “…I should design a special training regimen.”

“Count me out,” the outsider curtly replied.

“C’mon, Shinji,” he squinted his eyes in disappointment. “Aren’t you even a little excited about the trip?

All eyes attempted to drive the rebel into a corner.

“You’re the one with a problem, you idiot. Can’t you think of nothin’ but training? It’s called vacation for a reason.”

Akihiko twitched resentfully at the offense. “You just hate trying new things when it’s good for you. If anything, you’re the idiot!”
“You’re not coming, Shinjiro-sempai?” Fuuka piped up, worried she jumped into a conversation that may become aggressive.

“You’re not coming, Shinjiro-sempai?” Fuuka piped up, worried she jumped into a conversation that may become aggressive.

“To be honest, it’s kinda hard to image him anywhere near the beach or a sunny place,” teased Airi. “Maybe he should stay cooped up here all by himself…”

Exasperated over the nerve of the peanut gallery, he folded his arms. “I never said I ain’t goin’. Aki’s idea was just profoundly stupid.”

The still offended boxer raised an eyebrow and his temper flared once more. “And you’ve got a stick up your ass!”

“Seriously, man! Just be clear next time!” Junpei said sincerely. He was still too nervous to try to pick any kind of fight with the guy. Shinjiro scoffed at the suggestion and a twisted smirk escaped his lips.

Everyone continued discussing his or her plans for the vacation. After fighting off Junpei’s perverted suggestions, the girls all agreed to shop for swimsuits together. Ecstatic that his friend was breaking out of his personal bubble, Akihiko pushed Shinjiro to not only buy a pair of swim shorts, but more clothes in general. Borrowing from a friend could not fly anymore. The week would be very busy indeed.

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July 17, 2009

One more exam day was left, but Airi felt confident enough to pass. Rather than returning to the dorm immediately, she decided to visit the Velvet Room. It was the same old birdcage, different day, except Theodore was present beside Margaret. It was hard to recognize him, though. She sat on her hands to fight the urge to point.

“Uh, Theo… your hair…”

The assistant chuckled lightly and tipped his hat. “I wanted to immerse myself in human culture as best I could, Airi-sama. If it is of any assurance, the dye will leave eventually… I hope. The color makes my skin appear so sickly… huh…

“But enough about beauty! I returned recently to report that part one of my quest is nearly complete,” Theo went straight to the point. “I have located Hemera, and we shall interrogate him on the whereabouts of Charon.”

“Souta Aizawa was rather easy to find this time,” Margaret mechanically recited the report he gave her. “The June records you obtained from the Kirijo Group’s database appeared again. Upon looking further back at the data, we found one project he worked on: the preservation of the last known functional Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapon.

“We know of the state of Hypnos, Moros, Nemesis, and Thanatos, and you will see the others soon. Morpheus remains in arm's reach, and it is fortunate your self-restraint is strong enough to not attack Morpheus. Meanwhile, the possessor of Aether has been difficult to locate; his movements are unpredictable.”

“Thank you,” Airi lowered her head.

“As for Epiphron,” interjected Airi’s favorite bug-eyed person, “I believe he resided within Kouta Takahashi. Do you know of his fate, my humble guest?”
She hesitated, recognizing the name and squinted. “I think he’s dead…”

“How did he die?”

“Uh, gunshot, I think, according to the news.”

Never blinking, Igor’s stare pressed further. “At a time when the police could never catch the culprit.”

Theo shrewdly pursed his lips. “You are saying the killer either had the potential or has already become a Persona user.”

“Let our valued guest speak up next time, Theo.” The assistant blushed an apology; Margaret sighed. “Yes, the killer might have been a Persona-wielder. However, the weapon is of your world.”

“Strega! Takaya has—” She choked. Everyone knew how the sentence would end.

“Precisely. The answers to this little ‘mystery’ are laid out so plainly. All that is left is… why. Other than our most valued guest, who could possibly wish for the death of such an accomplished scientist?”

Whenever Igor brought up questions like that, Airi would wait to see if they were rhetorical or not. Even when it was not meant to be answered, something nagged in the corner of her mind. It’s another reason why she will celebrate when the journey ends.

“Now then,” he broke the lingering silence. “What can we do for you?”

She finally could do what she came for. “I want some of my medium-strength Persona,” she explained. “It’s too soon for Odin, or Lucifer. This time, I want some Persona with at least one of the four elements. Then I want Titania for healing and Dominion for light spells. I also want Shiva to produce an item for me.”

The residents gave each other curious looks. Margaret seemed mildly amused, very much like Igor, who chuckled at the request. Only Theo hesitated. Once stares pierced his esteem, he took out the large, worn book, engraved Persona Compendium. He browsed through its yellowed pages and pulling out various azure cards, matching the requested Persona. Seeing he finished his search, Airi got up and waited by the Fusion table. Theo did the same and placed various cards of Persona in between them. The layout was that of an octagonal spread. He cleared his throat and said,

“Here we have… Surt, Seth, Scathach, Thoth, Samael, Titania, and Dominion. Some of them share similar attributes, but you have enough to chose from.”

Then a bright light shined from the last card, Shiva, and a strange, small implement took its place. Realizing what it was, Airi reached out and put it in her breast pocket. “Seven Persona and a rudra ring. That’s good enough,” she chirped. “I’ll test them out after we return from Yakushima.” As she spoke, she gathered the cards into a small deck and placed them between her hands, as if in prayer.

The cards slowly dissolved into a radiant blue glow. Flickers of snowflakes danced around Airi’s hands and spiraled around and up her arms. The energy merged together right over her heart before vanishing into her. When she blinked, she heard the voices of the Persona resonate within, granting their blessings.

Leaving her dreamlike trance, Airi noticed a moving smile from Theo. “Go forth, Airi-sama. May your heart continue to guide you.”
With a generous bow, Airi backed away slightly and continued the tune for her soul.

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July 18, 2009

“I’m DONE, baby!” howled Junpei, tossing his baseball cap in the air and dancing victoriously. “The dark days of testing are finally over! The sun is shinin’ bright!”

“Damn right!” cheered Airi, crossing her feet on her desk. She did not care if she dropped a curse word.

Yukari sat on her desk and rested her chin on her hand. “So, how’d you do?”

“I aced everything!”

“I aced PE!”

“Well, Stupeí’s fate is written on the wall.”

“Ha! A real man doesn’t dwell on the past, Yuka-tan” he scoffed, hands on his hips and back straightened. “I’m thinking ahead to Yakushima!”

Yukari's face glowed at the word. “Oh, yeah, that’s next week!”

“Can we get our stuff today?” begged Airi, folding her hands and pouting.

“I don’t have archery practice, so sure! I’ll let Fuuka know.”

She left the classroom to do just that. That left Junpei and Airi, who were a bit friendlier, but some awkwardness was stuck between them. The boy calmed down and scratched the back of his head.

“Um, listen, Aibana,” he looked directly at her. “I’m sorry about the way I’ve been acting. I was just in a bad mood and I took it all out on you. I know it wasn’t too cool of me…”

Airi sat up straight in her seat and returned his gesture with a wink. “It’s okay. I haven’t been myself lately either… Sorry about that.”

His posture relaxed. “It’s no big deal. Let’s go back to how things used to be between us, okay? Friends?”

“Best friends,” she quickly corrected. Liking the sound of that, Junpei let out the stupidly happy grin of a child.

It took them a few seconds to notice that the whole class was paying attention to them. The two sighed in frustration.

“Happy, now?” Airi announced. “I was never dating Junpei!”

Some people seemed convinced, simply by paying attention to the nuances of their conversation. Others still weren’t buying it. There was a term called “friends with benefits” that could still apply…

“Tell ya what, Aibana,” said the boy, adjusting his hat with a smirk. “Let’s ignore these gossiping idiots. Let’s head out with Yuka-tan and Fuuka.”

She let out a lighthearted giggle as they left the room, oblivious to others' speculations. They caught
up with their two friends on their way out. Fuuka was chatting with Natsuki, who invited her to a study session to prep for next semester, and promised she would on Sunday since she had plans with her dorm mates. Surprisingly understanding, Natsuki wished her well and let her leave. Yukari, Junpei, and Airi continued to be amazed at the former bully’s change of heart. Fuuka asked them to not worry so much about her.

Once the four juniors left campus, they ran into Akihiko and Shinjiro. They looked just as relieved as anyone who finished their third-to-last exams of high school. Especially Shinjiro. He had the burden of his oldest friends quizzing him 24/7 on mountains of missed notes to stand a chance to enter the classroom without instantly earning a failing mark.

All relieved from stress, the six of them walked back home together.

“Freedom at last!” Junpei and Airi cheered once more.

“Looks like they’re getting along again,” Shinjiro pointed out. His tone seemed mocking, but his serious expression said otherwise.

Yukari raised and eyebrow and shook her head. “The world can’t go on without them acting like children it seems…”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Akihiko said in a laughing tone. “But it’s good to be done.”

The bickering continued until a familiar voice rang behind them, scaring them all. “Ah, friendship! The beauty of vibrant adolescence can be blinding!”

“Chairman-san…!” gasped Yukari.

Airi, Akihiko, and Shinjiro conveyed their response with intense glares at the adult. Fuuka held her chest as if she had an asthma attack. “D-Don’t just pop out without warning!” Junpei stammered, nearly throwing his baseball cap at him.

Ikutsuki did his usual “I’m so sorry” shtick of scratching the back of his head and laughing in embarrassment. Once he recovered, he spoke, “I just stopped by the grade school to pick someone up. I might as well introduce you to him now.”

“Hello.”

A kid came from behind Ikutsuki. His petite stature and baby cheeks showed he was still around ten years old. He had large coffee-colored eyes and short brown hair, with a tuft of bangs parted on the left side of his face. The Gekkoukan uniform was very similar between the elementary and high schools, although he wore the black shorts. Under his blazer was an orange hoodie.

Hiding her worry, Airi glanced briefly at the seniors. Akihiko’s face remained stoic, but his skin was paler than usual. Shinjiro was unreadable, though the shrewd would notice him tugging at his beanie to obscure his eyes.

“Oh, hi, Ken-kun,” beamed Yukari. “What’s up?”

“Y-You know him?” stammered Akihiko.

Junpei actually beat her to the punch. “Yuka-tan and I see him at the shrine on Sundays.”

Nodding in acknowledgement, Ikutsuki continued. “Ken Amada doesn’t leave during the break because of his… circumstances.”
“Oh, I heard about that.” Yukari’s face fell. “Something about his parents?”

“Yes,” Ken replied maturely. “It was only me and my mom for a while, but she died in an fire two years ago.”

Ikutsuki picked up where he left off, “One of his distant relatives is paying for his school expenses, but staying at the elementary dorm all by himself isn’t proper for a child his age.” Glancing at the teens, his face beamed. “So I decided to move him to your dorm for the summer.”

“To OUR dorm?!” cried Yukari. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?!”

“Why, of course,” Ikutsuki didn’t miss a beat. “He has the potential.”

Although only Airi knew because she was “psychic”, someone’s aura practically screamed an intense and prolonged f-bomb.

“Then,” the boxer said, albeit with some distress imbedded. “He’s the new candidate…?”

Ikutsuki blinked at the odd question. “Yes. But, he’s still just an elementary school student. It’s merely a possibility for now.”

Ken flinched at the comment about his young age. But he brushed it off easily, and looked up at Akihiko. “Are you Sanada-san?”

“Um… yeah,” he hesitated.

“I’ve heard a lot about you!” The boy smiled widely and his body language was highly animated. “You haven’t lost a single boxing match yet! It’s a real honor to meet you!”

Not that he wasn’t flattered by the fanboy’s earnest compliment, but… “Yeah. It’s nice to meet you too.”

Fuuka didn’t speak throughout the conversation, but she knew something felt off. She continued to keep to herself as everyone went his or her separate ways. Ikutsuki and Ken went off in the direction of the dorms; the seniors broke off and headed to Hagakure.

Once the juniors were at the mall shopping for swimwear, Fuuka had the courage to speak her mind. “Guys? D-Did anyone see something off about our sempai?”


She was too busy frowning at the small selection of one-pieces. Rather than being distracted by the possibility of imagining of her in any of the suits, Junpei poked her shoulder.

“Hmm?” Airi twirled around, confused.

“Don’t you think something was bothering Akihiko-sempai?” Yukari repeated.

She feigned ignorance by asking, “Doesn’t he trip over his tongue occasionally?”

Neither of the girls was satisfied. Fuuka’s head lowered. “M-Maybe Lucia and I read too much into it… Shinjiro-sempai seemed tense too…”

Shaking her head, Yukari gave her a kind look. They both weren’t alone in their assumptions at the very least. For the time being, the two of them decided to drop the subject when Airi wouldn’t give
them an inch.

“By the way,” Airi frowned and pointed to the rack. “It’s gonna be hard to find something comfortable for you, Fuuka. Maybe there are a few two-pieces that aren’t bikinis…”

The lighthearted mood seized them once again. They quickly shooed the perverted Junpei away, telling him to wait until they got to the beach. After nearly two hours of browsing and trying on swimsuits, the girls found satisfaction in their purchases.

Junpei stood impatiently outside the store. Even after checking out the video game store, grabbing a bite of food, and walking around the entire mall, he still found himself sitting for them for a long time. As an apology, they went to Hagakure and let him eat for free.
Mass Effect Andromeda has consumed my life for the past two weeks, hence the delay. The next chapter will be up in a few days to make up for the late update. Also, this chapter title is the same as the song "Fallen Leaves" by Billy Talent. Sometimes I can't help but think of Shinjiro whenever I hear that song.

July 19, 2009

A wall of smoke blinded him, but if his instincts were right, only Shadows remained. Most of the residents had evacuated the building long before they arrived. The landlord was there for the evening and did a headcount, confirming everyone’s presence. Not long after he made the report, the Dark Hour's mist settled over all, binding them to their undisturbed sleep. With no witnesses and no potential casualties outside the apartments, the three teens had wrapped wet cloths over their faces before entering the burning complex.

Mitsuru struggled when fighting Shadows and maneuvering through the building, and she stayed behind while he and his brother did the fighting. It was imperative that she healed them if anything happened to them. She had a greater talent for magic than either of the two, but the fire weakened her and Penthesilea. Worst of all, the Kirijo Group had not yet finish developing the watches to keep track of time during the Dark Hour.

Fatigue seized them quickly. The environment was too stressful and Mitsuru had difficulty breathing. Controlling his feelings became too difficult to his brother, who insisted that he'd carry her for the rest of the operation or take her out of the inferno. What a stupid idea. Did he not realize that his Persona’s healing powers could barely patch a scratch? Why waste his energy on what he had no gift in? After a brief argument, broken by an exploding appliance two rooms away, the worried brother reluctantly let him support her instead.

The fire never stopped its attempts to consume them, and the structure of the building threatened to trap them under rubble. They had to press on. One collection of Shadows remained on the upper floor they were trapped on. The stairs crumbled under the three of them when they made it to the landing, the windows were the only “safe” escape routes. If the search failed, there would still be enough Shadows to kill in the city. But he was tired of that excuse. They always admitted defeat. If the cause was ever going to end, they had to keep fighting pointlessly. Even if he had to leave a friend behind…

The older boy coughed from the thick smoke and his own thought. Since when did he let himself get away with thinking that way? Maybe his brother was always just more capable of being soft and wanting no one left behind. Maybe things did change since they met Mitsuru…

Ahead on the third floor, it was taunting them. The last Shadow, indistinguishable through the suffocating smoke, towered over its underlings at its feet. Its dark, mighty wings flailed decisively, knowing exactly what structures to hit and weaken the ground the teens clung to. Even with four months of training, none of them were ready for it.

The floor finally fell through, and the teens landed on sharp, broken floorboard, plumbing, and
bricks. Blood trailed alongside Mitsuru's temple, and the fall probably added a concussion. The river of black formless muck rushed down to attack the weakened group.

They had to leave. The boy yelled at his younger brother to take the unconscious Mitsuru and go. Not wanting to argue anymore, he lifted the injured princess into his arms, and darted through an open window, ignoring the cuts the glass shards inflicted. It was the smartest thing he ever did in his life, and Miki would’ve been proud of him.

The older boy tried to follow them out but the large Shadow and its minions surrounded and blocked the exit. Ignoring his brother’s cries to hurry up, he had no choice but to fight. Praying it to be the last time to use it tonight and end the Shadow, he put the silver gun to his head. He had to ignore the crimson river dripping down his forehead from under his beanie. Forget the pain, the fire, the inability to breathe, and the exhaustion. Pull the trigger and end it.

The black horseman manifested and let out a cry. With swift strikes, he decimated the lesser Shadows around him and avoided the larger creature’s mighty arms. His host added some devastating blows of his own with his soot-covered axe. Their movements and attacks added to the collapse and destruction of the building around them.

Above the struggle, a crystalline object fell from one of the upper floors. Before he could order his Persona to stop, time accelerated. The figures blurred together in a tangled, disoriented mess, colliding into everything in its downward spiral.

The sickening explosion rang in his ears and stained his eyes. The shrill scream impaled him, robbing him of his senses as he fell into a hellish sea of blood.

He opened his eyes and found himself lying in bed. His sheets were awry and sweat dampened his hair and clothes, glued to his skin. He felt relieved it was over, but he had to remind himself he wasn’t covered in soot and more than blood. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he regretted taking that nap.

Glancing around his bedroom, he thought of how much he wasted his life. His room was bare and vacant with nothing of value to leave behind for anyone to save or remember him by. Doing everything he could to distance himself from others and deny his feelings left him hallow and worthless.

He twisted on his side to check his alarm clock and the digits blurred too much to tell the time. No mist, no darkness, no groans of Shadows wandering aimlessly outside his window. The lamp on his empty desk shined rather brightly and the thin sheet of dust on the table reflected a light that stung. He thought the light began to gleam even brighter and stimulated a migraine. The whole room around him started to tip over. Gravity shifted, but the furniture remained still under his touch.

Confused and dizzy, he took off his hat and tried to pull himself up. Something sat in his throat. He tried clearing it, but whatever it was stayed stuck. The hard, large substance slid down into his chest and pulled him back down. Fighting the heavy weight, he tried coughing. A deadweight thrust dug into his chest. Cold wind forced itself into his lungs, but he heaved it right back out. He had to get that thing out of him, and that took priority over breathing. His head felt light and splitting in pain as his vision continued to distort. The indirect brightness in the room was too painful to endure. Another sudden convulsion caught him off guard. His hands clenched his chest unconsciously as something squeezed his insides. The fuzzy ringing in his ears isolated him from the outside world. His mouth moved, but he didn’t know if sound came out or not. His Persona’s voice grew louder and louder, screaming at him for allowing his body to deteriorate to this state. His heart muscles weakened and slowed; the pain that penetrated through his entire body did not consume him as much as before. He
sank into darkness, engulfing in warmth and peace. The world outside and his Persona didn’t matter to him anymore… until a prick of cold hit him.

Everything outside his soul was so distant, but the chill reached and flowed through him in delicate streams. It reached for him and coiled around him, replacing the comfort of death with absolute fear. The world was returning to him, his Persona was panicking, but something hit him harder than that.

He heard crying. He didn’t want someone to cry over him. It reminded him too much of burning buildings and screaming children. With someone trying to bring him back to his senses, it wasn’t his time, as much as he wanted to run away from that girl and her tears.

Everyone else was out doing his or her usual weekend activities. No one else was around to save Shinjiro. Drool and blood foamed in his mouth, and the light in his eyes was fading.

Airi held herself by the doorframe to stop her jellied legs from buckling when she found him. Shinjiro was far worse off than she feared. It wasn’t the right time; he was never meant to die like this. After forcibly reminding herself the time, date, and circumstances were vastly different, she somehow regained a fraction of her strength. She rushed to the closest bathroom to find a glass of water, an empty container, and two towels.

Airi ran back to Shinjiro and rolled him onto his side to hopefully prevent him from drowning. His clammy, sweaty skin boiled and shivered against hers. Blood and spit ran down his cheek. Once she mopped up the mess with a wet towel, Airi felt his muscles calming down. He had slightly more control over his body and began to cough and wheeze. When his body relaxed enough, she checked his mouth to see if any blood came from biting his tongue. His mouth was fine but his internal organs were another story she couldn’t confirm. Airi awkwardly dragged his large body and placed him in a sitting position against the bed. As she took off his peacoat, something clattered and fell out of one of the pockets. Hallow plastic rattled against the hardwood.

Many minutes passed as she continued to wipe the sweat off his face with the dry towel. Airi’s hands moved steadily despite the crushing anxiety. Shinjiro kept coughing blood and spit into the container she held close to his mouth, but it seemed more intentional and less frequent. Whenever she could, she let her free hand feel his neck, cheek, or forehead to keep him cool.

Shinjiro muttered unintelligibly as he improved, but he began to form coherent words. Occasionally he would consciously spit into the container.

“Shinji?” Airi finally spoke, voice frail.

“Castor… not her… not her…”

The mindless mumbling continued, and his coughs finally subsided. Airi checked his neck for a pulse, which was slowly but surely recovering. She took the towel once more and cleaned up his face, which finally return to a warmer and somewhat healthier color. She doubted she could pass as any kind of medic, but bringing a friend back from near-death felt like an immense accomplishment. Her arm rubbed her eyes dry while she exhaled heavily.

It took her two more seconds to realize she never called an ambulance. Airi carefully put down the container half-fill of biohazard fluids and reached for her cell in the pocket of her shorts.

Right when she started to dial, a large hand quietly rested on her wrist. “Don’t…”

Airi jerked up. Having suppressed her sobs despite the pain in her chest, she didn’t know how to
feel. Shinjiro was looking weakly at her but he was finally responsive.

“I have to call for help.”

His grip tightened, but it was hardly firm. “I just… need them…”

“They’re killing you! If I give them to you, you’ll only get worse!”

He closed his eyes, leaned his head back, and coughed. “No… If I take them… ”

“You’ll get worse and you’ll die! I won’t let you take them anymore!”

She broke free of his hold and started dialing again. As she waited for an answer, she saw Shinjiro fumble around, looking for the suppressants. She tried to stop him with her free hand but struggled. He had more energy in him than she expected, as he predicted every one of her attempts to hold him back. His movements were so mechanical, as if someone stood between him and his drugs before.

The addict won. He frantically opened the bottle and poured out at least nine pills into his trembling palm.

Horrified, Airi dropped the phone, launched at him, and smacked his hands, spilling the suppressants all over the floor. Shinjiro fought back, grabbing her arms and tightening enough to cut off blood. Not willing to give up, she slammed her head into his chin. The grip loosened and Airi was able to climb on top of him and pin his wrists to the bed.

A strange vibration coursed through him; Shinjiro completely forgot about the drugs and focused completely on Airi. His once empty eyes were enraged, and she knew her victory was short-lived. She tried going through possible strategies to defend herself. He was taller, larger, and stronger than her. Add on the fact that he and his Persona had no weaknesses and her odds of finding a reliable tactic were slim to none.

He forced her hold off him and seized her neck. His might was strong enough to slam Airi into the ground and have him tower over her. Their violent movements knocked over the nearby glass of water, mixing with the pills. Her hands clawed at his, but Airi panicked when a brief flicker of golden yellow contaminated his eyes. The Shinjiro she knew was fading away.

The pressure of a thousand needles crushed her brittle body. She flailed around, trying to push him off her, until her muscles went limp and cried for air. No options left, she forced herself to relax under the increasing force closing on her trachea.

She concentrated to find a quiet place in her mind. The seven Persona she recently obtained revealed themselves to her. She reached for one in particular: Seth of the Moon Arcana. She thought of the black dragon and his power swelled through her body, weakening from the lack of oxygen. Once she knew he granted his blessings upon her, Airi looked directly into the crazed eyes of the man she loved.

**Shinji, this isn’t the real you. You can control yourself. You’re not a killer.**

Her thoughts couldn’t reach him. Shinjiro’s wrath persisted and he increased pressure on her neck. She couldn’t be afraid of the horrible stabbing pain all through her. For only a second Airi thought she saw the black horseman take the place of his host, only for her to dismiss it as her mind losing grip of the composure she clung to as life support. Her hands relaxed and never left his, and she channeled her thoughts into them.

*Don’t let the drugs take you. You’re a good person, Shinji. Please come back.*
As if her words were starting to touch him, his grip slightly loosened. Airi gasped to collect some of the air she earned from her efforts. Seth granted more strength for her to succeed. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried speaking. Her voice was faint and rasping. “Sh-Shinji… please…”

A whirlwind stirred in his dark grey eyes, the earlier hallucination Airi saw was gone. His aggressive features slowly started to fade away. Be it her intense stare, her gentle hands, or her strained gasps, his hold continued to weaken. Airi didn’t know how, but she felt herself continuing to push the envelope. She raised her hands to hold his face and caressed him tenderly. She had enough strength to speak, but the burning pain all over her body made her eyes tender.

“Please, Shinji… This isn’t… how it should be…”

Something clicked. The aggression dissipated and he pulled back from her. The girl brought her hands to her free neck and respired gradually back to normal. She wasn’t scared of him anymore, and not once did her eyes leave Shinjiro, who face was white with shock. He twisted his body and clumsily slumped to the floor. Ignoring the pills, scattering away like ants, he crawled away from her and hid behind the foot of his bed. Airi could still see his feet between the underside of the bed and the ground. Shinjiro curled in the fetal position like a small child. Apart from an occasional hiccup, he kept silent.

Airi gazed at the chaos across the floor. Suppressants lay everywhere: some dissolved into the spilt water, leaving milky puddles. She played with her pins, hanging for dear life in her hair, and fixed up her ponytail. She hesitantly touched where Shinjiro throttled her. A sharp pain shot at the lightest graze, but she endured it and massaged the sore skin.

From below them front door opened downstairs and the chatter of friends ended their alone time. At some point, someone was going to see the open door on the second floor and investigate. They’d ask about the mess and what Airi and Shinjiro did.

“Leave,” he said, voice hushed and shaky. Airi didn’t budge. Some of the voices from below grew gradually louder. “Get outta here.”

The girl knew what she had to do and was not going to change her mind. As she heard the sound of footsteps, Airi stood in spite of her wobbly knees and silently marched to the doorway. As nimbly as possible, she closed the door and leaned gently against it.

Shinjiro could clearly see her. As he was about to protest once more, there was a knock on the door. “Hey, Shinji?”

Airi shot a firm expression to Shinjiro, who kept quiet. They shared eye contact in those awkward seconds of praying not getting caught. Distressed Shinjiro buried his head in his arms and tried to suppress his hyperventilating. Airi’s heart felt heavy.

The moment seemed to drag forever once the second knock vibrated the door. As usual, no one responded. More silence, until finally another voice on the other side spoke. “Is Shinjiro in?”

“Probably. He hates answering. What about Airi?”

“Airi shot a firm expression to Shinjiro, who kept quiet. They shared eye contact in those awkward seconds of praying not getting caught. Distressed Shinjiro buried his head in his arms and tried to suppress his hyperventilating. Airi’s heart felt heavy.

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“Probably. He hates answering. What about Airi?”

“She doesn’t appear to be in her room. Perhaps they went out?”

“Together? I can’t imagine that happening willingly. He gives her too much grief.”

“You never know. He was harsh on me in the beginning, remember?”

“That’s because you made me move here without telling him. But I don’t get why he’s like that to
Airi. Does he have be an ass to everyone he first meets?"

"If you don’t know that, we’re hopeless." Mitsuru laughed briefly. “He may not follow her orders, but I’m certain he respects her. He just doesn’t know her well enough to be friendlier. I know he’ll relax soon, but don’t force him."

“Is this some kind of ‘woman’s intuition’ or something?”

“Have faith in him, Akihiko. Give him time to get to know her.”

“Alright, alright! J-Just don’t look at me like that…”

Mitsuru laughed once more before their voices trailed off as feet marched down the stairs. Airi slid down to her knees and sighed. She never really understood how well Mitsuru knew Shinjiro as a friend. They hardly talked to each other, but it seemed they didn’t need to since she greatly respected his space as he did for her.

No more sounds from outside gave Airi the chance to talk to Shinjiro. She looked back at him, who didn’t budge since his attempt at hiding. It didn’t matter if he wanted it or not, she needed to make sure someone was with him. Airi still planned to explain what happened to Akihiko and Mitsuru, but now was not the best time for that kind of drama.

She slowly crawled to him. Sitting beside him, she wanted to touch and reassure him, but she hesitated. He had to make a move first, which he did, by mumbling.

“Shin–” Airi bit her tongue. She couldn’t get away with using his nickname anymore. “Aragaki-sempai?”

He glared at her, face raw from his isolated outburst. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” his voice was cracking. “Why didn’t you leave? After I–“ He remembered his act of violence and obscured his head in his arms. “Just get out. Go back to your room.”

She stopped inching towards him when her knee gently grazed his hip. He twitched at the closeness. “I can’t leave you like this,” Airi whispered. Cautiously, she brought her hand to his arm and gently stroked it.

“Don’t touch me.” He reflexively pulled back.

Her heart weighed enough to crush her stomach. “I’m sorry. I’m worried about you.” When he didn’t reply, she continued. “You’re probably mad at me, but I’m not leaving until I know you’re alright.”

“I’m fine.”

“Please don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not. Just… just leave me alone…”

“And if you get sick again? What if you die the next time? Just because you can’t forgive yourself for losing control that doesn’t mean you should push me away! You’re not worthless and you’re not weak, sempai! Please don’t give up! Please don’t leave Akihiko-kun and Kirijo-sempai behind! They can help you control your powers if you just talk to them! Talk to me if you’re scared! We don’t want you to die, sempai, and we won’t let you if you talk to us and let us help you!”

The memories she suppressed became so vivid as she ranted that she was starting to relive them.
Watching Shinjiro bleed to death again and again as everyone stood too paralyzed to help. Akihiko held him and fought the impulse to punch the ground in anguish. Airi was last person he always saved his words for, haunting her every time.

“Please… don’t cry, Riko… This is… how it should be...”

Being enfolded in feverish warmth snapped her back to the present. Untidy, soft hair brushed against her cheek. Opening her eyes, Airi could count the specks of dust stubbornly stuck on Shinjiro’s shirt. The realization of him hugging her made her breathing shallow. She shivered, feeling his forehead rest on her cool shoulder. With his boiling body nearly dissolving her sleeveless shirt, Airi felt naked.

“You’re so nosy,” Shinjiro whispered gently, letting a sardonic laugh escape his parched throat. “Why’s it you who sees me like this…”

Airi wrapped her arms around him, her skin still cool against his sweaty body and causing them both to shiver. Shinjiro weakly laughed off what happened, only for Airi to kindly pat his back. Once they calmed down, they agreed to let Mitsuru and Akihiko know what happened.
July 20, 2009

“Awesome!” Junpei leaped up and down on the ferry, pointing at the stretch of beach before them. “There it is! C’mon, Aibana, cheer with me!”

On cue, she bounced out of her seat and they screamed at the top of their lungs, “YA-KU-SHI-MAAAAA!”

Fuuka joined in the contagious excitement, pointing at every vibrant plant that caught her eye. “W-Wow! So many tropical plants!”

The more serious girls, seeing no good reason to not lighten up around the idiots, swarmed to the side of the ferry to get a better look. Yukari beamed, “It’s so beautiful here and the weather is perfect!”

“I came here often when I was young, but I don’t remember it looking quite like this. Just imagine what it will be like right there on the water’s edge.” A happier, more relaxed side to Mitsuru emerged from her dignified shell.

“It’s totally amazing, man!” Junpei continued to shout. “This is awesome!”

Only Akihiko and Shinjiro sat quietly in their seats. Neither were in the mood just yet; the seniors’ talk about the night before left Akihiko in a very sour mood, and Shinjiro dreaded having to startle the juniors over something actually serious.

The ferry arrived at around noon, and everyone stepped off, following Mitsuru to the Kirijo family’s summer mansion. It had been a while since presenting herself in a more proper setting. Being around her friends for so long without worrying about formalities made her feel rusty, but she held her head high and chose to be as true to herself as she could. The mansion could easily fit three of the dorms and still have an extra room or two. The foyer had tall, marble pillars aligned purposefully and supported the ceiling. A thin well-primed rug covered the stone tiled floor and spanned from the large double door entrance to the carved archway thirty feet away. To bring the room to a more modest plane, various plants and earthly paintings made use of extra ground and wall space.

“Wow…” Fuuka gasped. Airi nodded in awe.

Agreeing, Junpei whistled. “It’s like we’re in an episode of Lifestyles of the Rich and Fabulous…” Thinking of him as rude, Yukari elbowed him in the side.

Standing before the teens were two maids, who bowed the moment Mitsuru came into their view. “Welcome back, milady.”

“Thank you. We won’t be here long, but I’ll be relying on you during our stay.”

"Of course, milady," the younger maid replied with a bow. "Saikawa-kun is still attending to your mother's needs, but she sent a gift to your room and hopes you enjoy your vacation."

Mitsuru’s smile, earnest and almost childlike, revealed itself without hesitation. Once the juniors
noticed it, she recomposed herself.

With a nod, the young maid left to attend her duties. The other turned her attention to everyone else. “You are her schoolmates, correct? Welcome to the Kirijo vacation home.”

The first sign he made all day with a pulse, Shinjiro bowed slightly. With his being near the center of the group, a few people, like Junpei and Fuuka, were slightly surprised by his unexpected manners.

“Um,” Yukari mumbled. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“Dude, real-life maids…” Junpei could barely finish his sentence when he noticed Shinjiro’s stark stare.

Then, a stern, impressive-looking gentleman in his late forties emerged from the archway to greet them. He had bold cheekbones, slanted eyebrows, and a black patch covering his right eye. His presence was intimidating but poised and sophisticated. With how he carried himself and from looking at certain features, particularly the oval shape of the one good eye, there was no mistaking who he was.

“It’s good to see you,” said Mitsuru. He gave a solemn nod to her and the guests before heading towards one of the side doors in the hall.

“Oh, he left…” a disappointed Fuuka muttered. “Was that…?”

“Takeharu Kirijo,” answered Akihiko.

Forgetting that he was just called out for being rude, Junpei said, “Dude, talk about scary! He’s not gonna make us walk the plank, is he?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Shinjiro said with a glare.

Despite her fellow seniors’ correcting their underclassmen, Mitsuru chuckled and faced everyone. “We won’t be here long, but make yourself at home.”

“Thanks so much, Kirijo-sempai!” Airi clapped her hands together.

Her comrade relaxed as well. “Sweet! This is gonna rock!” Jumping from person to person he begged, “Hey, wanna go to the beach? It’s right there! Come on, let’s go!”

Yukari couldn’t bear to process the ramblings of a hamster on coffee. “What, already? I mean, sure, but let me get changed first!”

Mitsuru gave instructions on where to find everyone’s rooms in the massive palace. Once everyone had an idea where to go, the girls left first.

“Then I’ll see ya girls there!” Junpei darted off to catch up with his seniors in another direction. “I ain’t gonna waste a single minute!”

By the fixed laws of the universe, the boys finished changing before the girls and arrived at the beach within minutes. Junpei stood happy and proud wearing his cap backwards and his red trunks.

“Ahh…” he stretched towards the sky, “Got my sandals on… Givin’ my feet a chance to breathe. Yup! Summer’s here!”

Akihiko stood right beside him and nodded in agreement. His friend sat under one of the umbrellas, regretting not buying shades. He managed to find trunks that weren’t just black, but grey and red.
hardly screamed “fun time at the beach”. Still uncomfortable having less clothing on than he’s used to, he wore a sleeveless shirt.

“C’mon, Shinjiro-sempai!” Junpei called out. “Quit actin’ shy, man!”

“I brought water guns for everyone, just in case you need to be persuaded!” Akihiko grinned fiendishly, waving one of his.

With an amused smirk escaping his lips, Shinjiro hesitantly got up and walked into the light. It burned his eyes for a moment but they quickly refocused. Akihiko patted Shinjiro on the back when he caught up to them. Another smile broke through as Shinjiro lowered his head and scratched the back of his neck tensely.

“Tch, it’s not like I won a gold medal or nothin’…”

“C’mon, you got off your sorry behind and joined the land of the living,” Akihiko lightly punched his arm. Then something caught his eye and he waved. “Yo! About time you guys got here!”

The others turned to see the girls finally catch up in their attire. Airi and Yukari were the first to arrive. And thus the joys of being teenagers commenced.

Akihiko blinked. “Huh? Something wrong, Yukari?”

Not just her, but Airi was a little pink in the cheeks. The girls could’ve sworn his was just really, really tight and tiny briefs. Wearing a pink halter-top bikini with blue shorts, Yukari found her voice first. “That’s a pretty… small… swimsuit…”

“What? Don’t you know? Swimsuits like this reduce water resistance – “

Shinjiro pinched the bridge of his nose and heaved a heavy sigh.

“I-It’s okay…” stammered Yukari, secretly happy his best friend understood and agreed with her concerns. “It doesn’t have to be justified.” Her gaze turned to the hanging jaw of Junpei. “Hey, what’s the matter? You look even dumber than usual.”

“Man, talk about a feast for the eyes! Yuka-tan’s wearing a more aggressive model than I imagined! Could her boldness come from her natural confidence or her club?! And her legs are toned and fit for a girl! Wow!”

Half horrified and half disgusted, she threw her sandal at him. “Knock it off! Don’t stare at my legs!”

“C’mon! You show ‘em off all the time with your short skirt! I’m just stating the obvious! Besides, you girls look great! Even our fierce flower of a leader!”

Akihiko and Shinjiro curiously reevaluated Airi… until they registered enough to turn away before turning into shameless perverts. She wore a mint green and white bandeau bikini. For once she wore her layered chestnut hair down, falling at her shoulders. She held herself with more confidence than Yukari, though under the surface she was just as uncomfortable.

“She’s one cute mermaid herself! Those curves she usually keeps covered up are lookin’ good! Unlike Yuka-tan and her ever-exposed legs, I can’t take my eyes away!” Neither could the other two had they checked her out any longer.

She laughed and attempted to sound more flattered than she felt. “Thanks, Junpei-kun.”
That positive reaction made Junpei’s day. “Man, the beach is so great! I love this place!”

Airi glanced briefly at the less vocal members of the group, and noticed their awkward demeanors. While she noticed Shinjiro finally wearing summer clothing, she barely restrained herself from daydreaming being in his arms and touching his chest. Thinking about it made her stare at her feet so no one could see her flaming cheeks.

A light set of footsteps arrived right behind. “Are any of the umbrellas taken?” Fuuka pointed to the place Shinjiro once hid from the sun.

“Oooh, and here we have the adorable Fuuka Yamagishi! Wow, Fuuka… I had no idea you were so… I mean… you should wear a swimsuit more often! It looks good on you!”

Feeling even more exposed than her bikini-clad peers, Fuuka gasped. The poor girl’s modest blue two-piece did compliment her small and less defined figure, but whether it needed that much praise was questionable. The crusade seemed to never end; Akihiko and Shinjiro groaned in discomfort but they secretly admitted to themselves that they were enjoying the fanservice and were surprised that the girls were attractive in their own ways.

Voice found at last, Akihiko asked skeptically, “When would she wear one again, Junpei?”

“Hey! It’s the thought that counts!” He refocused his attention to harassing the girls. “Oh, c’mon, ladies! There’s nothing to be embarrassed about being good-looking!”

“Stop that creepy laugh, you pervert!” Yukari smacked him once more with her sandal.

Ignoring the measly blows, Junpei held his breath. “And here’s our final contestant – ”

Two of the girls’ jaws dropped as dramatically as Junpei’s. Mitsuru’s outfit was much simpler than the others, but even more striking. Her white bikini top held a red flower on one of her straps and her short white skirt made her very elegant. Knowing this, Shinjiro secretly smirked and elbowed Akihiko, who stared back bewildered. A few seconds of reading between the lines resulted in Akihiko clenching his fists and uttering, “Say anything, and you’ll eat my fist.”

Upon examining the scene, Mitsuru raised an eyebrow. “…Hmm? Is something wrong?”

“Wow, Mitsuru-sempai! You’re beautiful!” Fuuka gaped.

“Yeah, you’re skin is so flawless!” Yukari squealed in mixed jealousy and admiration. “Did you already put on sunscreen?”

It was her time to blush. “N-No, not yet…”

Airi shook her head and approached her friends. “C’mon, guys. Give Mitsuru-sempai some room to breathe! Let’s leave these old men before they die of chronic nosebleeds!” They went off by the umbrellas to mingle. Airi brought out a beach bag from under a chair and took out some sunscreen.

Once the girls were out of range, Junpei finally asked the ultimate question with a devilish grin. “So, Akihiko-sempai, level with me. Which one’s your type?”

Shinjiro was about to open his mouth but remained quiet. His eyes never left his friend after the obvious answer arrived. “Seriously, Shinji, cut it out!” Akihiko’s face turned beet red.

Laughing darkly, he folded his arms. “What’re you talking ‘bout?”
“Don’t play dumb! It’s not like that! It was never like that!”

“Right. A shame the speedo didn’t catch her eye.”

“What?! It’s for water resistance!”

“C’mon, Aki, don’t leave the world hanging. We’ll all be dead before you see your own denial.”

"I'm not in deni-!" With a heavy sigh, Akihiko folded his arms and stood closer to a lost Junpei. He whispered something in his ear that carved a comical grin on the clown’s face.

“Heh, heh, I thought so!” Junpei chuckled, ignoring his upperclassman’s impressive blushing. “But no need to be ‘hush, hush’ about it. She can’t hear us from this far!” Having half the task done, he paid full attention to the other. “You next, Shinjiro-sempai! Which chick’s your type?”

All humor gone, he eloquently, wittily, graciously declared, “None of ‘em.”

Everything came around full circle when a recovered Akihiko shorted. “Bullshit!”

“Callin’ me a liar?”

“Damn right I am! After what you did to me, don’t think we’re gonna walk away without some kind of hint.”

Shinjiro remained unperturbed and quiet as the two kept pushing for an answer. “A hint, huh?” he finally spoke. “Alright, then…”

Waiting for something awesome and rare, Junpei’s eyes widened like a child expecting candy. Akihiko was less enthused, knowing Shinjiro way too well. Regardless, he buried his toes under the hot sand and kept his ears open.

Shinjiro’s blank expression never changed as he briefly re-evaluated the girls as they put on sunscreen in the shade. “Yukari’s ‘model’ ain’t that aggressive.”

A weight dropped on Junpei’s shoulders. “What? That’s it?!”

Akihiko paused for a moment to decode Shinjiro’s sentence. Once he attempted to mimic his thought-process, he smirked, mildly surprised. “Huh. Interesting…”

“What, sempai? What’s so interesting?”

“Well, Junpei, looks like Yukari’s yours for the taking.”

“WHAT!” he snapped, getting in Akihiko’s space. “Why’d you think I like her like that?”

He stood unfazed and confident as he rationalized, “We never found out who your type is. I figure its either Yukari, who picks on you constantly, or –”

Suddenly streams of water attacked the three. Junpei got hit dead in the face. Reflexes somehow saved Akihiko from getting water in his ear. Shinjiro was not as lucky, as water exploded right on his shoulder and it trickled, creating tickling sensations, down his back. When the three comprehended what happened, they turned to see Yukari, Fuuka, and Airi with their water pistols.

“What’re you guys drooling about?” Yukari chimed. Fuuka giggled mischievously.

“We’re here if you wanna say how much you think we’re pretty,” said Airi as she tilted her hip.
Of the two, Junpei was the first to react. “Oh, I see how it is!” He picked up his gun, and ran to the water to fill it. “I’m gonna be king of the island!”

“Whoa!” Akihiko grabbed his and started running. “I’m not letting you win that easily!”

“Don’t let them escape!” Airi commanded her brigade.

Before the leader finished her sentence Yukari darted towards Junpei and began torturing him. He was fully ready and the two entered into battle. Fuuka joined in right behind Yukari and attacked Akihiko less aggressively. Outnumbered, Junpei resorted to splashing them while Akihiko chose to play fair and kept his aim on Fuuka.

Wringing out the water from his shirt, Shinjiro stayed behind with Airi. They both watched the scuffle ensue on the shoreline. “Not gonna join ‘em?”

“I’ll join in a bit. How about you?”

He chuckled. “You sound like I’m gonna run off. I won’t, if it makes ya feel better.” When it was silent for a few seconds, he thought she ignored him. “I’m serious, Fujihara. Don’t start attackin’ me with that thing again.”

“How’d you know it was me?” Airi pouted.

Proud of his wild guess, Shinjiro shrugged. “You’re an easy read…”

If only he could see her face before she snuck behind him and attacked him with short water bursts.

“You think you’re so clever, right?” she was laughing in spite of her annoyance. “Go out there and play with the others!”

Back then he didn’t know how she and Junpei would both get excited at the same time. Whatever infectious emotion they spread, he never caught it. Somehow it now made some sense. Shinjiro started laughing as he tried to speak despite the water getting in his face.

“Okay, okay! But I ain’t going nowhere if you don’t back off.”

Slightly satisfied, Airi stopped her fit, but pushed him towards the water. “I’ll believe it when I see it! Go and have fun with everyone!”

“Sheesh,” walking on his own willingly, he sounded more amused than irritated. “You’re a piece of work, y’know that?”

“C’mon! Move faster before the ocean dries up!”

Working on a nice tan, Mitsuru lounged under one of the umbrellas and watched the spectacle unfold. Everyone was surprised when Shinjiro finally joined in. He didn’t express as much enthusiasm as the rest, but he had a few moments when he mercilessly attacked Akihiko until he fell clumsily and spent five minutes coughing water out of his lungs. Even Fuuka managed to nail a few good hits on everyone and managed to trip Junpei underwater. Mitsuru didn’t need to join in the insanity to feel relieved and relaxed for the first time in a while.

That evening after a well-made feast, everyone sat in the reception room of the mansion. Three couches surrounded a large flat-screen TV. All in casual attire, Airi, Yukari, and Fuuka sat on one
Junpei complained about the sunburn he got right on his back, to which the girls had little sympathy. He could have asked for sunscreen if he wasn’t busy gawking at the merchandise. “Damn,” he moaned. “This is gonna hurt for days!”

“It’s just first degree burn. You’re not going to die,” sighed an unsympathetic Akihiko, brushing sand out from behind his ear. “But I’m shocked someone didn’t burst into flames out in the sun.”

Understanding instantly, Mitsuru smiled, restraining a laugh. The subject in question kept quiet. “You all were having fun out there,” she said. “I’m glad we relaxed without troubles.”

“The food was amazing, Mitsuru-sempai,” Fuuka said.

“Anything beats instant noodles,” Yukari agreed. “One more bowl and I’m gonna boycott for life.”

Airi muttered aloud with her hand to her chin, “Then why don’t we hire a cook? Kirijo-sempai, do you know any good ones available?”

“Oh, I believe I found someone. Unfortunately, he remains undecided, so I might have to push a little more. Perhaps an execution may be necessary.”

Though being the one furthest away, the concerned Junpei inched away from her. The juniors shivered and stared worried at each other.

“The Kirijo are persistent,” Akihiko admitted sheepishly. “I’ve learned it the hard way a few times.” Although he was playing with his hands and hardly paying attention, Shinjiro nodded in agreement.

The chatter ended when Takeharu Kirijo emerged from one of the doors behind the couch the junior girls sat in. Everyone turned to him instantly, unsure how to react.

“Relax, everyone. There’s no need for undue formalities.”

His voice was much more genial than his sharp facial features suggested. In spite of that, only the oldest friends maintained calmness. Takeharu approached his daughter and placed himself right next to her on the couch. On his lap were several thick manila folders and a tape with a label reading: March 20, 1999.

Airi recognized the tape… but not the files.

“I came to enlighten you further about what happened ten years ago. From what I understand, Mitsuru has already given you the condensed version.” Everyone nodded. “Well, it is true. We adults in the Group are to blame. I should have done more sooner to atone for our mistakes without allowing your involvement. I must apologize, for I had few options left.” He glanced at each of the seven individuals carefully. “Mitsuru has informed me for the past few months that you all have made amazing progress. For your courage, resilience, and teamwork, I thank you for what you have done thus far.”

Takeharu placed the tape on the coffee table and straightened out the files. “What you see here is classified information within the database of the Kirijo Group. I implore you to keep everything you see and hear tonight locked within this room and strictly amongst yourselves. Do I make myself clear?”
“Yes, father,” Mitsuru spoke on behalf of the group.

Akihiko cleared his throat. “If you don’t mind my asking, how much do those files have about the incident?”

“The majority of the information,” he answered. “Some files have been corrupted, and we are still in the process of cleaning them up. This is the best I can offer at this time.”

Without another word, he split the pile and passed them around so everyone had one copy. When Airi received hers, her heart skipped a few beats. A lump formed in her throat and excitement fueled through her. Then she opened the file along with everyone else.

Fuuka was the first to speak up. “This writing… is it in Greek?”

Peaking over her shoulder, Airi recognized the handwriting on a photocopy of an old piece of notebook paper:

**Νύχτας και του Σκότους**

**Αιθήρ – HOST 5873**

**Χάρων – HOST 5474**

**Επιφρων – HOST 8252**

**Ήμέρα – HOST 2492**

**Υπνος – ERGO**

**Μορος – ERGO**

**Μορφευς – HOST 4588**

**Νεμεσις – unknown**

**Θανατος – 33284**

“I believe so,” said Airi. “Someone must’ve been into mythology back then.”

“Huh? Where?” Yukari joined in with perked ears. Not long afterwards, the others in the background flipped their pages to catch up.

Giving her file back to her father after skimming through the documents, Mitsuru asked, “Do you know what this is?”

“I’m afraid not,” Takeharu’s admittance was drenched in disappointment. “A few within the Group translated the notes, but they found nothing of significance behind it. Only mere trivia on Greek mythology with no connections to the data we gathered.”

“Mopeus…? Ovatoss…?”

The one atypically nonchalant voice that resonated through the room caught everyone’s attention.

“Y-You can read that, Shinjiro-sempai?” stammered Junpei.

Akihiko’s face was mixed with pleasant surprise and humor. “I thought foreign languages put you to
The speaker tensed up and became very defensive at the reaction. “Shut up. I don’t know shit ‘bout translating. Just thought I saw the lettering before…”

“B-But you can understand some of it, Shinjiro-sempai!” Fuuka stammered with praise. “That’s amazing!”

“Not really. I don’t understand it at all. If the Kirijo say there’s nothin’ behind it, it means nothin’.”

Mitsuru, however, smiled at the lavish treatment the misfit received. “Regardless, you made an inference based on limited knowledge on Greek. Fujihara and I should test your knowledge of European languages someday.”

He let out an annoyed sigh, giving up on the friends who did not like to listen. He really did suck at foreign languages, but he’s seen Roman letters enough in books and online to guess how some words could be pronounced.

This meeting continued to exceed Airi’s expectations. When the humorous digression ceased, she spoke her mind. “Maybe that’s a hidden message that we need to decode?”

Mitsuru let a quick dry chuckle. “Possibly, Fujihara, but there is plenty to browse over…”

“Yeah. Way too much,” groaned Junpei, staring blankly at page two.

The file diving continued, and in spite of the dismissal, Airi kept quiet and hoped something else would stir interest among the others. Aside from the crisp flipping of pages, silence reigned for a while longer. Flipping to one section, she gasped. A few other fast readers shared her reaction. Among the papers were photos of four individuals, scientists of the experiment on the Shadows, along with their identification numbers. They had to have been in their mid-thirties at least with age slowly starting to show in their skin.

“Is that Ikutsuki-san?” Akihiko’s voice rattled in surprise. He pointed at the one with dorky oval glasses and low cheekbones.

Junpei pressed his face close to the papers, squinted, and jumped back. “What the heck’s he doing here?”

“Who’d think he’d –” Then even Shinjiro’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. “Shit. That’s the guy who died the other week.”

Upon further inspection, Airi recognized Kouta Takahashi’s wide jaw and pointy chin. Neither Yukari nor Fuuka could add more nuance to the others’ shocked reactions. Mitsuru empathized but she upheld a guise of calm.

“Yes,” Takeharu interrupted, and everyone paid full attention to him. “Besides myself, these are the photos of the survivors of the incident. Shuji Ikutsuki, Kouta Takahashi, Souta Aizawa, and Sora Kurebayashi. They were scientists at the time. Only Aizawa still works within the company now that Takahashi has passed.”

“What exactly were they studying?” asked Fuuka.

“Originally, my father wanted to create a time manipulation device with the Shadows’ power.”

His daughter’s eyebrows rose slightly. “That’s an odd ambition. Why did he choose it?”
He shook his head and his voice rang of disgust. “Imagine if you could control the flow of time, and eliminate unwanted events before they occur. You could shape the future to your liking.” That’s what my father once said to justify his work.”

“That’s insane…” responded Junpei, leaning over to pick up the file he dropped on the floor.

Airi sat quietly and glanced back to her folders. She understood where Mitsuru’s grandfather came from with the idea to prevent tragedy to the point that she wished she could go back in time before he began his work and punch him in the face. Despite that similarity, she refused to perform inhumane acts of torture on those who didn’t deserve it and to bring hell upon earth.

“Somewhere along the way, however, the research began to stray from its original goal. In his later years, my father seemed to have only nihilism in his heart. His thinking became increasingly radical, and somehow it influenced nearly everyone involved in the experiment. The research became highly classified, and the scientists secluded themselves. We should have been more aware of the madness, but every sane man left was either dismissed from the project or chose to disappear. They likely had many disagreements, which resulted in a number of people leaving the Group. Something started the cult, but whatever it was, no one, not even the survivors, claims to know or understand what it was. It evolved quickly, perhaps due to the influence of parties other than my father. A charismatic figure, or a creative spirit.”

With that he took the tape and placed it in the VCR right beside the TV. He took the remote from the table they rested on and returned to his seat. As the TV turned on, the lights dimmed in the room, providing a clearer view of the screen.

Everyone turned in expectation, only for static to emit from the technology. Then, loud indescribable noises filled the space. Someone must have adjusted the camera as a picture emerged into view. It took place in a lab, with panicked scientists running throughout the bleached halls. The lights flickered every now and then, obscuring the view once more.

“What’s this?” Akihiko asked.

“This is the only existing footage of the incident,” Takeharu stated. “One of the scientists had a video camera at the time. As you can see, no other means of recording would have been as reliable.”

The camera turned around to show the face of the person holding it. The quality was so poor that it was difficult to identify him. Thankfully the audio was not as uncooperative.

“I pray this recording reaches safe hands…” A soft gasp from behind Airi was a sign that someone recognized the speaker. “…become obsessed with a loathsome idea. This experiment should have never even been conceived… …I set free a number of Shadows that are certain to torment future generations… …the entire world may have paid the price.”

The audio skipped and glitched more frequently as the video went on. Airi knew why, but she felt someone made a more obvious effort to corrupt the video.

“Please… You must… …hunt the Shadows that have dispersed in the explosion… …blinded by the promise of success… raised no objections… …not much hope… I knew the risks…” For a brief second, the image became clear enough to see the face of the speaker. He had light brown hair and eyes. “…I’m sorry – ”

The video then ended at a large explosion, and static returned. The lights turned back on. Airi closed her eyes, knowing well what was going to happen.
“Dad?” Everyone turned to Yukari, who stood on her feet, eyes paralyzed to the black TV screen.

Takeharu sighed solemnly. “Eiichiro Takeba was one of the head researchers at the time, and a very talented man. The Kirijo Group pushed him to continue the research despite the warnings of numerous ethical violations. We are to blame for his death.”

“I…” the speechless Mitsuru lowered her head. “I cannot believe this…”

Able to move again, Yukari turned to the two Kirijo.“So that means… my dad caused all this?” Her eyes widened in anger. “The Dark Hour, Tartarus… The people who died in that incident… Airi’s parents… They all happened because of my dad?”

Airi sat with her head hung low as she mentally escaped the conversation. If she was able to get Mitsuru to open up early on about the incident, she might plant a few seeds in everyone’s minds for them to figure things out themselves.

“So, that’s why you were hiding this, Mitsuru-sempai? Because you felt sorry for me? Is that it?!”

“No, Takeba, I – “ Mitsuru protested, unable to fully swallow the revelation either. “I didn’t know of this either!”

“I don’t want your pity if you can’t look me in the eye!”

Within seconds she stormed towards the doors behind the couch and slammed the door behind her. The force nearly tipped over several flower vases on nearby coffee tables. The verbal brawl barely lasted a minute and SEES felt it lasted an eternity. The boys were silent, distant observers who wisely stayed out of it.

Junpei nervously scratched the back of his head and played with his ball cap. “It’s May all over again…”

Unsure what to say, Akihiko sighed and rubbed his forehead. Shinjiro took the same approach, though his eyes remained fixed to the photos in his file.

Breaking the stillness, Fuuka spoke up, “Um… Shouldn’t someone go after her?”

Silently agreeing, Mitsuru sat upright and looked at Airi. “Fujihara, please go after her.”

Alright,” she replied. She stood up and placed her file on the coffee table in the heart of the sitting area. “But at some point, you need to speak to her too, sempai.”

“I understand,” she said quietly.

Having one more thing to add, Airi faced Takeharu. “Kirijo-sama, I hate to repeat the question… but you are sure this is everything the Group has on the incident?”

The man remained unfazed, but from his tone he did not expect to be questioned twice. “Yes, Fujihara, I made special preparations to make sure nothing was left behind.”

“If anyone helped you gather all of this, are they trustworthy?”

“What is it you are implying?”

She glanced around at her friends. The seniors – save Shinjiro, still studying his file – had disapproving looks on their faces, particularly the offended Mitsuru. Akihiko seemed more annoyed, both at Airi’s rudeness and Shinjiro’s apathy. Junpei and Fuuka stared like deer in headlights.
confused at the strange direction she was taking them.

“Are none of you going to question anything we were presented with? What about the tape? Just one viewing and you believe everything it says? With it being old, someone with the right technology could have edited it. The picture was distorted and the audio skipped multiple times. Why is it not cleaner? What about the survivors? How did they live? Does no one think it’s strange how Takahashi died and the timing of it? What does Ikutsuki know and why does he keep quiet? And what about the note? What if it’s more than ‘trivia’? What if it’s a secret code for that ‘influence’ that possessed the scientists? So what if a few translators dismissed it? I can’t be the only one with doubts. Kirijo-sama said some data was corrupted, right? So why aren’t we asking more questions –“

A cold, hard force slapped her cheek and the sound echoed through the room. Once she recovered but still leaned on the side that took the hit, Mitsuru appeared in the corner of her vision.

“Enough,” she snarled. “My father revealed this information to us with selfless intentions, and you have insulted his sincerity. Now, please, speak with Takeba.”

Airi straightened her posture and made an empty expression. She lowered her head slightly and calmly followed orders. Inside, she should have felt happy to let it out or upset that a good friend ridiculed her in front of her friends and an important figure, but she felt nothing; whatever possessed her before disappeared. She thought she heard a low voice adding his few cents to the matter. A muffled smack would have shut him up, but a shockingly mild disagreement ensued between him and his friend. When she was far enough away, Airi felt somewhat relieved.

Once she reached the shore of the beach, she spotted Yukari sitting in the sand with her legs close to her chest. She stared out into the dark blue ripples, occasionally broken by splotches of grey and white. The stars were out, peaking in between a few stray clouds. As she approached her, Airi noticed the girl had just finished crying. The red-eyed girl plopped down right next to her and waited silently. She had understood Yukari’s need to stay away from the group for a while.

“I believed in him for so long…” Yukari croaked and sniffled. “I’m so stupid…” She rubbed her eyes and laughed to herself. Airi just sat quietly, waiting for her friend to let it out. “Remember what I told you at the hospital? How my dad died when I was little?”

“I’m sorry, Yukari.”

Her classmate chuckled and wiped her eyes. “Mom and I heard all sorts of rumors about my dad. Some said he ran off with another woman, or he left the country to escape the law. My teachers, my classmates, and our neighbors asked us so many questions about dad. We got sick of it, and we moved away a few times. At one point we thought changing our names would help, but everyone always wondered why mom raised me alone.”

Airi sighed sympathetically. “I had to move a lot too, but for different reasons. It’s rough.”

They remained quiet for a few moments. Yukari played with strings of her khaki capris. “In the spring, I received a letter he wrote ten years ago. Even though it said ‘to my family’, it was pretty much for me.” She laughed dejectedly and coughed, stifling a second sob fest. “His words made me miss him more. I continued to believe he was the greatest dad ever… I believed he’d never do anything wrong…

“When I found out I had the potential, I thought it was fate. I was scared, but I thought if I cooperated with the Kirijo Group, I might find out what really happened. That’s why I agreed to fight using my Persona. But it turns out… all of that was for nothing…”
Still listening, Airi gathered up some sand and started building a small mound. “There’s got to be more to this story than that video showed.”

Yukari slammed her fist into the sand. “You’re just trying to make me feel better! Why are you acting like you have all the answers?!”

Airi fell quiet, though she continued to build her poor excuse for a castle. The reaction would have normally startled her, but the feeling of nothingness persisted. Airi did have many of the answers, but she didn’t know how and when to say them…

“I’m sorry,” said a less violent but still upset Yukari. She was crying again. “My head’s a mess… I don’t know what to do anymore. Airi, what should I do…?”

She stopped her work and wiped her hands on her denim shorts. Airi closed her eyes briefly, inhaled, and looked her friend in the eyes. Yukari was raw from the abundance of tears streaming. As helpless as she felt, at least Airi could still see a flicker of life in her, determined to get back up again with the right push. “Don’t give up on your dad.”

Yukari blinked, confused. “You… think so?”

“I think so, yeah. You missed me yelling at everyone. They took everything Mitsuru-senpai’s dad said as the only truth. I feel in my gut that something’s not right. He may have meant well, but Kirijosan shouldn’t have singled you out like that.”

Airi couldn’t even attempt a kind smile to her friend. It felt too mechanical. But it seemed her words had enough sentiment. When she went back to building her mound and the moon peaked out from behind a cloud, the tender mark on her cheek from the slap became slightly more noticeable. Surprised, Yukari spotted it quickly.

“Thanks, Airi.” Yukari smiled, drying her eyes. “I’m sorry for acting like this… You’ve lost your parents, too. I shouldn’t be so selfish…”

“I’m not offended,” Airi said while helping her friend up. “They backed you into a corner, and you had to protect yourself.”

“I know, but still…”

“Today wasn’t the best day to learn all of this. But at least we have two days left of vacation. Maybe it was best to get the worst news out of the way now, you know?”

“I hope you’re right,” Yukari replied soberly.

“Airi-chan! Yukari-chan!” Down came Junpei and Fuuka, sprinting to their friends to break the heavy air. They read each other’s body language and knew Yukari was back to earth again.

“What’s been taking you so long?” gasped Junpei. “Everybody’s waiting for you two!”

Fuuka coughed a bit before adding, “It’s almost the Dark Hour. We should head back.”

Sure it enough it was. Airi’s cell phone read seven minutes to midnight. “It comes no matter where we go,” she mumbled in frustration.

“Aibana, it’s common sense. Even I know that.”

She gave him an incredulous look. “Junpei-kun has common sense?”
Fuuka giggled sheepishly. “It is strange he would remember something before the rest of us.”

“Hey! Why pick on me all the time?!” he retorted in between impulsive laughs.

Yukari was still the serious one of the group, but felt better seeing them lively. The juniors quit their banter for a second, noticing she wanted to say something. She smiled wryly, apologetic for the serious thing she wanted to say.

“Lately, I’m realizing that Persona-users remembering everything that happens during the Dark Hour is like trading your innocence. In exchange for power, you can no longer look away from the things you don’t want to see. It’s a gloomy thought, but some good things can come from it, I guess. Like it or not, I’m stuck with you goofballs, right?”

Airi stuck out her tongue cheerily. “You’re doomed, Yuka.”

“L-Looks like it…” Fuuka said, blushing.

“Yup,” Junpei stretched his arms and pointed to the mansion. “Now that everything’s good, let’s head back!”

As they made their way back, Airi wrapped her arms around Junpei and Yukari’s necks and cheered, “Remember what we promised at Hagakure? Let the fun in Yakushima commence!”

Although the initial surprise of Airi’s optimism startled her, Yukari warmed up and laughed heartily, remembering that Airi was trying to be supportive. Fuuka walked alongside Junpei and joined in as they revived their spirits. Yakushima would continue despite the obstacles they faced. At least the worst was over…

Although she heard Yukari’s speech multiple times before, Airi found truth in what could have been rambling at the time. Brief images and voices of other timelines returned to her, sending shivers throughout her body. She closed her eyes as the worst memories haunted her. The chanting of the Nine, the scraping of claws, the ringing of gunshots, the crying of her friends. Opening her eyes again, the rocking of waves and mirth of her classmates revived her. The present had to be cherished because the nightmares will return another day.

Chapter End Notes

An early update to make up for my delays (damn you, Mass Effect: Andromeda, for being so fun). I should return to my weekly update schedule now.
“External temperature is 31.2 degrees Celsius.”

She stood at the edge of the dock over the ocean, back facing the various visitors at the beach. No one was swimming, she noted, just relaxing and tanning for beautification purposes. Hopefully they were careful enough to put on sunscreen or move out of the sunlight after a while. Sunburns were known to be painful, yet much like the baby blue lace dress she wore, nothing that would harm an organism would affect her. If the wind blew too hard and lifted the skirt, it would not faze her. There was no need to scream and panic like most girls would; she felt nothing, and she found the behavior too trivial for her to imitate.

The wind blew gently across her, which she admitted would feel nice if she had the sensations of a living organism. Remembering the videos she’d seen of girls tossing their hair with the strands dancing in the wind from behind, the girl tried what she thought was appropriate. It seemed to work, but no one she was concerned about was in the area. Embarrassment was possible, but not likely. Her mission mattered more than anything else. The image was embedded in her mind ever since she awoke from her slumber. Why she woke up confused her. Souta Aizawa’s safety measures must have been faulty even after ten years of constant maintenance. Who was this red-eyed, auburn-haired girl she kept seeing?

“H-Hey! H-how’s it going?”

A young man’s voice came from behind her. She turned her head to the side and examined the speaker’s features. Short dark brown hair, worn with dark blue baseball cap. Short goatee. Grey eyes. Light, but slightly tanned complexion. 170.5 centimeters tall. Age 16. Average build. Probably a high school student.

“I noticed you’ve been, uh, staring at the ocean,” the boy continued, his cheeks pink.

Unsure how to respond the girl tilted her head slightly.

“So, um… do you come here often? M-My name’s Ju-Ju-Junpei.”

The girl was even more puzzled. “Ju-Ju-Junpei?” she repeated. That was an odd name, unless he was stuttering, a sign of apprehension, she noted.

“Don’t worry, I-I just want to talk.” The boy named Junpei scratched the back of his neck and laughed. “I mean it’s more fun than standing here all by yourself, isn’t it?”

She didn’t respond right away. The purpose of him speaking to her was hard to determine. His anxiety level was so high; it was obvious he was nervous talking to her. Behaving like this for too long would cause serious health problems. He should be aware of that.

“I am looking for a human,” she said.

“O-Oh, yeah?” His face relaxed a bit.

“You are not the one. Please consult a therapist if you are unable to control your anxiety.”

Junpei’s eyes widened and jaw dropped, both signs of confusion. Then his face read signs of
disappointment. Perhaps she was too direct in her delivery. She watched the boy walk back towards the sands with his head hanging low.

This was the right time to reexamine her surroundings. No one met the description of the red-eyed girl among the visitors. A wave of body heat emitted from the forest, though the number of people was indeterminable. Right as she was studying the unusual mass, another boy approached her. Short platinum hair. Grey eyes. Pale complexion. Wears band-aid over eye for unknown. 175.5 centimeters. Age 17. Thin but semi-muscular build.

“Well, hello there. Say, do you like the ocean?”

Another strange boy wanting to talk about the ocean, she thought. “Is your question directed at me?”

“Oh, um, yeah, I like the ocean too.” He seemed too excited to notice the purpose of her question. “Hey I heard that triathletes who train at the beach perform better than those who practice indoors. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Of the two, the girl concluded that Junpei behaved the most “normally” by the societal standards her supervisors taught her. This boy did not seem to pay attention to her question at all.

“I am not a ‘triathlete’; therefore, that type of information is irrelevant to me.”

That ended the conversation short enough for the girl to look back towards the forest and continue her investigation. The boy went back in the same direction as Junpei, and the girl thought that a third individual was coming towards her. She ignored him for the time being and gathered a few more hints on what was in the forest: four humans. After dealing with this next person, the girl decided to look further.

“…Hey.” Shoulder-length brown hair. Dark grey eyes. Warm complexion. 177 centimeters tall. Age 17. Average, but strong build. Like the previous two, the boy’s anxiety levels were relatively high; however, he displayed signals more commonly confused with social aggression. “Sorry if those guys were buggin’ ya. They can be idiots…”

It seemed this person was “normal”, like Junpei. He did not seem to be the type to speak of… whatever “triathletes” were.

“Their behavior was most peculiar, but they were not interrupting me.”

His slightly hunched stature remained, though he appeared slightly less nervous. Right as he was about to speak again, he lifted a hand to his mouth and started coughing. Upon listening closely, she heard subtle wheezes in his small fit. It barely lasted long, but it was enough for the girl to sense something was wrong.

“You are not well. Seeing a doctor for that cough would be wise.”

The boy straightened up a bit and his lips twitched. “Yeah, I will. It’s not contagious or anything.” Then his voice lowered into a low mumble, but the girl could still articulate what he said.

“A bet?” she asked calmly. “What is the significance of ‘betting’ amongst your friends? Is that what one considers ‘normal’?”

The boy froze in place. He then sighed. “It was their idea. No offense, but I want nothin’ to do with it.”

“So why participate if you are against it?”
“Heh…” he laughed, staring at his feet. “They were gonna beat the crap outta me if I didn’t.”

Right as she processed his sentence, the individuals in the forest started moving further and further away from the beach. That took higher priority. “I have to go.”

Leaving the confused boy behind, she then darted towards her target. She disabled the inhibitors in her legs to increase her running speed. Nothing else mattered: how she got there and how she looked to others was irrelevant. The sand, sharp rocks, and twigs crunched and snapped beneath her feet as she ran with all of her might. Within seconds, she caught up with the four people in the woods, though she remained at a decent distance. She slowed down to a walk, limited her systems to appear more human again, and approached the girls.


“How may we help you?” Waist-long wavy red hair. Dark brown eyes. Light complexion. 166 centimeters tall. Age 17.

The girl did not respond and continued to archive the individuals before her. The third girl entered her field of vision. Short blue hair. Dark grey eyes. Pale complexion. 152 centimeters tall. Age 16.

Then she saw the last girl. Auburn hair in a ponytail. White jasmine pin on right side of head. Bright red eyes. Pale complexion. 160 centimeters tall. Age 16.

The auburn-haired, red-eyed girl.

“I apologize for all the trouble,” Ikutsuki bowed for the millionth time to the pissed off SEES. “Everything is under control now.”

As usual, no one was buying it. They all resided in the reception room like the other night, though some stood and others sat in different places.

Airi’s frown was permanently carved in her face. “The next time you say there is a ‘combat vehicle’ on the loose, describe it. Say ‘Oh, it’s a female robot’, rather than let us think it’s a military tank or a Shadow of the Chariot Arcana.”

“It could have saved us the misunderstanding, Chairman-san,” Mitsuru added.

“And you two were hittin’ on it,” Shinjiro glared at his comrades in disgust.

“Aw, shaddup!” Junpei barked, raising his fist. “And you didn’t think she was cute at all, sempai?”

“‘Operation Babe Hunt’. What a joke.”

Even his friend clenched his dominant hand. “Care to announce that to the world, Shinji?”

“It’d be my pleasure to expose you for the moron you are.”

“Anyway,” Fuuka squeaked over them, ending the testosterone-fueled feud before it could take off. “What happened to her?”

Ikutsuki adjusted his glasses, thankful the heat is off him. “Oh, she’s been taken care of. Come in, Aigis,” he raised his voice.
“Coming.”

The girl they met earlier arrived in her true guise without the blue dress. Her torso, neck, and limbs were a pearly-colored metal, conjoined by golden joints at the hips and shoulders. The tips of her white fingers were a dull silver and they somewhat resembled gun barrels. Her head was the closest thing to human: short blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. Unlike most humanoid robots created and shown to the public, her face looked extremely life-like despite everything else being mechanical. A red, gold, and black band sat across the top of her head and extended to where her ears could have been, resembling headphones.

“This is Aigis,” Ikutsuki explained. “As you can see, she’s a mechanical maiden.”

The girl’s expression was so blank, so eerie despite her extremely human face. “I am Aigis,” even her speech was life-like, but monotonous. “My mission is to destroy Shadows. I have been assigned to SEES, effective immediately.”

“No way,” Yukari gasped. “It’s like she’s… alive.”

Despite his own amazement at the proof of how much farther humanity has developed than he was taught, Junpei was disappointed she wasn’t dateable. “She’s so cute, but she’s a robot. That’s kinda cool…”

“The Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapons were created fourteen years ago to combat uncontrollable Shadows,” Ikutsuki continued. "Aigis was the last one made, and she’s the only one that still functions today.”

A light went off in Mitsuru’s mind. “Does that mean she…?”

“Yes,” Aigis anticipated the question. “I am capable of operating a Persona, codenamed ‘Palladion’.”

“How is that possible?” Shinjiro muttered.

Airi placed her hand under her chin and said, “I guess anything sentient with its own ego, or sense of self-identity, could potentially develop a Persona. Aigis must be self-aware, even if she is not as… developed as ours.”

“You are correct. My knowledge on human behavior and interaction is still lacking. However, my creators granted my programming the capability to learn and adapt with the purpose of coexisting with humans.”

“Anyway,” Ikutsuki brought everyone back on track. “She suffered significant combat damage years ago and has remained in the lab ever since. It’s still unclear as to why she suddenly reactivated herself this morning. Still, I hope you will get along with her.”

“Of course!” said an excited Fuuka. “An Anti-Shadow Weapon with a will of her own! It’s an amazing feat of technology!”

In the sea of wonder and awe of a seemingly impossible creation, Yukari caught Airi’s attention. “Um, earlier today, it seemed like you knew her.”

“Maybe it’s déjà vu?” Airi dismissed with a shrug.

“It is very important for me to be by her side.” Aigis nodded as she spoke.

This puzzled a normally composed Ikutsuki. Shinjiro noticed right away. “What is it?”
“Perhaps her identification system is malfunctioning. Or maybe she’s still ‘half asleep’. This is quite interesting…”

Overhearing his dialogue, Aigis responded, “When I awoke, Aizawa-san had not updated his activity log since June 29th. He was in charge of observing my condition for the past ten years since the resignation of Yuu Kimijima.”

Ikutsuki’s smile twisted into a frown. “I see. This is quite interesting... By the way,” he quickly changed the subject, “you can participate in a wide variety of recreational activities here. There’s a tennis court, a pool table, even a karaoke machine. Would you care to hear me sing?”

Everyone except Aigis was paralyzed in mixed shock and disgust.

“Uh…” Junpei took out his phone. “H-Hey, it’s getting late! I’m gonna get ready for bed… How about you guys?”

Yukari laughed awkwardly. “You know, you’re right, Junpei. I, uh, should turn in early. I’m still feeling weak from the other night…”

"I have mandatory training," quipped Akihiko.

One by one, the human members of SEES made up some kind of excuse to avoid Ikutsuki and his offer, but none of them went to bed.

The juniors spent time in the athletic rooms, playing doubles tennis. After a few rounds of rock-paper-scissors, the teams were split into Airi and Fuuka versus Yukari and Junpei. By her suggestion, they allowed Airi to hook up her mp3 to the speakers and played some music as they went. She chose an assorted mix of songs by The Rasmus. Their music seemed a bit strange to Airi’s friends, but it was catchy enough to enjoy. Aigis stood by and watched them, taking note of how humans interacted with each other and how they played tennis. Every once in a while she would ask questions in between matches, and they were more than willing to respond.

Meanwhile, the seniors were on the other end of the mansion with Takeharu Kirijo in a spare sitting room that had recently been sterilized. A few maids wearing surgical gloves and lab coats waited patiently by the double doors.

“Has he arrived, father?” Mitsuru asked apprehensively.

He was less intimidating than the other day, but none of the teenagers were comfortable enough to be casual around him.

“He replied to my request rather quickly,” said Takeharu. “Perhaps he has more time to spare now that he practices independently.”

With his sleeves rolled up, Shinjiro fidgeted on one of the couches. Right beside him, Akihiko sensed his best friend’s anxiety. “You alright?”

“Why’s Aki here?” he asked bluntly.

“I insisted,” the boxer snapped back. “Whether you like it or not, I have to make sure you don’t cause anymore trouble.”

“Mitsuru, would you give me the Kirijo blessing to beat him ’til I rewire his brain?”

The girl paced around the room and glared at the boys. “Save your resentment for the Shadows.
You’re almost as bad as Akihiko, particularly last year.”

“Ekoda had no right reciting my personal history in front of the class,” Akihiko defended with a huff.

“I would’ve done the same thing to that asshole.”

Takeharu sighed, giving the two of them a patronizing look. “Mitsuru would better serve as a babysitter or parent.”

His daughter blushed embarrassedly. “It happens to be so sometimes, but they are far more reliable than many young men their age.”

“If they weren’t, I wouldn’t have allowed you to be the only girl to live in the dorms, even under the desperate circumstances at the time.”

Shinjiro shrugged and mumbled something, to which Akihiko elbowed him in the gut. The action was enough for the two to relax a bit.

Muffled voices outside the room informed the maids to open the door, allowing several men to push various kinds of medical equipment into the room. The disquiet returned once again and Shinjiro shoved his hands in his pockets. Behind the parade of hospital-on-wheels stood a middle-aged man in a casual shirt. Without the stethoscope around his neck, no one would expect him to be a doctor. His thin graying auburn hair was unkempt and his complexion fair. His eyes that were quite unusual, yet very familiar.

In a rare moment Takeharu’s lips curved slightly at the sight of the guest. They shook their hands firmly after bowing. “Kurebayashi, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

The man laughed warmly, brushing off the notable signs of minor sleep deprivation. “Oh, no, the pleasure is mine, Kirijo-sama. I am always eager to help a colleague.”

The adults stepped back and faced the teenagers, who recognized the new guest. He was one of the scientists who survived the explosion ten years ago.

“I assume you are the original members of SEES?” Kurebayashi turned to the teens.

Mitsuru bowed as gracefully as any proper lady should. “I am Mitsuru Kirijo.” She lifted her hand towards the apprehensive boys. “These are my classmates, Akihiko Sanada and Shinjiro Aragaki.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” he greeted them. Despite their earlier behavior, they lowered their heads respectfully. “You have eased the fears of those of us who remember the day this all began. Please continue your tireless work.”

Kurebayashi made a few gestures towards the men who were setting everything up in the room. It was enough for them to speed up their work. Once everything was complete, the lounge transformed into a welcoming and colorful hospital room. Seeing as a job needed to be completed, Takeharu nodded to his daughter before leaving the room with the maids trailing not far behind.

Unsure, Mitsuru stood beside her friends and tightened the hold of her folded arms. “I understand if you two want to be alone, but…”

Akihiko assured her, “He’ll be fine with me. You don’t have to stay.”

But it all depended on the patient. He stared at his feet, tapping to a repetitive beat that pulsed through his body. “Get out.”
“Shinji?”

Not looking at them, he rose up and went to the pre-made bed, surrounded by a monitor and various machines with IVs and pumps. “Let’s get it done.”

Just as confused as Mitsuru, Kurebayashi hesitated before going through his supplies and preparing for the procedure. Completely ignored, Akihiko knew there was no need for personal support. “C’mon, Mitsuru,” he insisted, gently pulling her by the sleeve along towards the door.

She brushed him away in protest. “But, Akihiko…”

“It’s what he wants. We forced this on him. As much as I hate it, we have to respect his decision this time.”

She looked at Shinjiro, still pretending his friends never were in the room in the first place. He sat on the bed quietly, his expression as unreadable as ever. Mitsuru felt intimidated by his cold behavior: sometimes she wondered how Akihiko found her scarier than him. At least she made earnest and consistent efforts to be courteous to others. “So be it.”

After they left, the room was silent. The effect didn’t stifle Shinjiro, but it reminded him too much of places he never wanted to be, but had nowhere else to go. He kept everything bottled up and he maintained his stoic expression. The fidgeting long ended on the outside.

Donning gloves and a face mask, Kurebayashi approached the patient. “I presume they told you about this procedure?”

Shinjiro shrugged tensely, wanting him to get everything done quickly.

“Being talkative is not a trait of yours, is it? Very well, I will put it simply. The suppressants you have taken have not left you at the peak of health. Kirijo-sama informed me that you overdosed this past weekend. If Ai did not reach you in time, you would have drowned in your own fluids. Frankly, it is a damn miracle your body has hidden any visible exterior signs of deterioration. Until you grant permission for surgical treat, we must flush your system. Because of how thorough and painful detoxification can be, you will be hooked up until tomorrow evening. You will be unconscious, and someone, be it one of my assistants or myself, will always be here to monitor your condition.”

He paused for a moment, allowing the words to sink in if they haven’t before. Shinjiro’s expression did not change, but he replied, “Just do it.”

With a sigh, Kurebayashi began his work.

Shinjiro was never afraid of needles, though his skin flinched at the gentle pinches of the IVs. He wondered what was the point in these efforts to delay the inevitable. His days were numbered; that was how it was supposed to be. Yet, having no reason to care, that strange transfer student with no relation to him saved him. He only thought of her in that moment because of the doctor’s red irises.

“Are you… related to Fujihara?”

The question threw Kurebayashi off for a moment, but not enough to disrupt his preparation for the general anesthesia. “I am. Ai is my niece. I am quite impressed with how well she took care of you, although she should have called for help.”

Remembering he violently forced her to keep quiet, Shinjiro - feeling the blood leave his face and limbs at the memory - decided to not correct him. “She didn’t tell you ‘bout it?”
“She did not. I only know what Kirijo-sama learned from his daughter. Ai has no idea I am here. We… haven’t spoken since I suggested the transfer to Gekkoukan. We are in the same country, but we have been unable to reconnect. Her family has not heard from her much either.”

Shinjiro heard sadness and worry in his voice. “You used to be close…?”

“I helped my sister reach the hospital, and the doctors let me be the first to hold Ai when she was born,” Kurebayashi spoke like the moment happened just yesterday. “I was the first to come forward to raise her after her parents died, but I was not viewed as an ideal candidate. Legally I am responsible for her finances and pay for her Gekkoukan tuition, but she went to live with close friends of mine. An orphaned Japanese girl raised by Scotts in Ireland. No child deserves a colorful upbringing with little familiarity and stability. I fear she struggles with maintaining relationships. But whenever I see her, she would always smile, as if no time apart has diminished her affection.”

Shinjiro remembered his first day back at school, when Airi adjusted his uniform, not caring the rest of the school watched her harass an upperclassman. The triumphant, devilish grin on her face was enough to piss him off, but he couldn’t bring himself to be angry. They only knew each other for two months, but, like an old friend she hasn’t seen in forever, she looked so happy to see him.

“She’s pushy,” he said, watching the dwindling flames in the fireplace. “But she gives up her time to make everyone happy, like it ain’t a hassle.”

Mildly surprised of Shinjiro’s sensitive tone, the doctor observed with a chuckle, “You’re a young man with a reputation to uphold, so I will keep the contents of our conversation within this room.”

Shinjiro turned his head to his right glance at Kurebayashi. The slight curve of his eyes masked a familiar manner of humor the teen recognized. For a second, the doctor looked exactly like Airi. It was hard to tell if Shinjiro could believe his promise in case there was great teasing and subtext of knowing more than he was willing to let on.

Uncomfortable and impatient, Shinjiro looked back to the crackling fire and ignored the slight burning in his cheeks. “Thanks…”

The door opened behind them and a few of the assistants stood off to the side. With the last needle in his hand, the doctor gave one last explanation. “If all goes well, you will go under and wake up tomorrow night. The detoxification process is very painful, so consider this anesthetic and sleep cocktail a blessing.” With one last twitch, the needle pierced Shinjiro’s skin and the medicine was injected into his veins. Kurebayashi added, “Count backwards from ten.”

“Ten… nine…”

Just like in the movies, despite a quick claim that the drug would have no effect, Shinjiro saw the world blur into a dark cloud. His whole body gained enough weight to drag him into a sea of sleep.

“Eight… sev-”

He could have sworn seeing a small white flower petal dance in his vision before falling into dreams.

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July 22, 2009

The fidgety Akihiko paced through the rugged hallway on the manor. Shinjiro must have known how painful the procedure would have been, but he agreed to it without hesitation. He didn’t even ask for support. While Mitsuru eventually let it go, Akihiko fought the urge to bite his nails. The
others were having fun in the water while his best friend lay in a medically induced coma. Thoughts swirled and spun in his dizzied mind, trying to understand what happened in the past few days. What details had he overlooked? After taking Shinjiro to the hospital for the overdose, Mitsuru expressed concern for Airi and noted that she wore a scarf around her neck, even if the weather was hotter than usual.

With Airi on his mind, he remembered her outburst the day before yesterday. Desperation burned inside her and came across though her words. He knew he couldn’t always read social cues, but this one was blatant. She fixated on Yukari’s father and the Greek notes, suspecting a conspiracy. Despite putting a lid on the matter, Shinjiro later admitted that Airi’s concerns were not entirely unfounded. He stepped down quickly – with an uncharacteristic apology – when Mitsuru threatened to execute him.

Akihiko grabbed a chunk of what little hair he had and groaned in frustration. He was never a genius like Mitsuru, so why were random ideas stimulating his brain? His muscles burned, itching to hit something. Akihiko refused to break anything and suffer a hefty bill with an added frozen execution for desert. Instead he cracked his knuckles until his hands bruised and ached. The rage refused to quell.

As he turned back to start another round of pacing, he recognized a voice coming from the stairs. Akihiko’s stomach churned a little. He followed the voice he knew all too well. Silently and carefully he treaded along the railing down to the main floor. Once he knew he was close, he slowed his pace and sidled against the walls and stopped near the embellished arch leading to the lounge SEES were in the other night.

“I presume Kirijo will continue need your services for a while, Aether.”

“He will. My assistant ran a blood test. I am amazed he survived this long. Corpaxine will leave his system, and his body will recover some of the endocrine damage.”

“Could you determine how many he took that night?”

“Based on how much remained in his system since then, at least four times the recommended dosage. If Kirijo didn’t contact me in time, he would have sent the boy to Tatsumi Memorial and I would not have been able to have access to his files. I first presumed the blood came from his lungs, very much like Epiphron’s symptoms, but the excessive dosage irritated his stomach lining instead. I still do not fully understand the range in symptoms that manifest.”

“Fujihara should have left him to die, given his frail mental state.”

The word choice bothered Akihiko, whose urge to hit something amplified.

“My lovely jasmine did what she felt was right, and I cannot blame her for that. It does not change her role in the slightest. I see no reason to worry, Morpheus. It is bad enough I’ve had to remind Hypnos on more than one occasion to not get too anxious. He and his rats are impatient enough for the Appraiser as it is. Besides, you finally found our sister.”

“But can one with a natural potential like Ken Amada be as effective to accelerate the arrival of the Fall?”

“As much if not more. I believe it depends on how the boy’s feelings of revenge foster Nemesis’ growth. While we may not fully understand natural potential as well as artificial potential, he won’t have side effects to worry about. For now I will study how Castor seems to be more unstable than a usual naturally awakened Persona...”
The queasiness and frustration pent-up inside overwhelmed Akihiko’s ability to stay hidden. He quietly snuck back to the stairway and foyer, far out of the adult’s hearing range. Once far away, he darted through the halls and out the front doors. Not paying attention to where he was going, Akihiko kept running, legs burning and easing some of the internal stress.

What ultimately stopped him was a large rock that he clumsily ran into. Cursing, he sat down on the rocky pathway to the beach to nurse his stubbed toe.


“Why’s everything tying back to Airi?” he muttered in an attempted to clear away the mess in his brain. “If she’s supposed to be involved, does she know?”

He sat there for a while, unsure what to do. Ikutsuki was definitely plotting something for some reason, but Akihiko hardly had any solid proof. Who could he trust among everyone involved in SEES, the Dark Hour, and the Kirijo Group to clear up his confusion?

Then he noticed a shadow towering over him. Akihiko jerked around defensively, knowing it was Ikutsuki.

“Are you alright, Akihiko?” He smiled with concern.

No longer knowing how genuine he was made Akihiko’s stomach tumble and churn. “Oh, I-I tripped.”

Ikutsuki firmly took his arm and helped him get back on his feet. Akihiko reluctantly muttered a thank you. “Were you on your way to the beach? I wanted to remind everyone about our leaving plans for tomorrow.”

“Uh, yeah… I was…”

“My, my. No need to be so shy, Akihiko.” The two began strolling down the path and continued their conversation. “It’s bad enough that Shinjiro loses his backbone and snaps whenever I ask him a question. You two might as well be related.”

He sneered. “Our Personas are the Gemini twins.”

“It’s fascinating how one’s Persona represents a particular myth and reveals one’s character.”

Akihiko simply nodded. A small part of him wished the man beside him did not have the same voice as in that other room, plotting and wishing for some kind of tragedy. He did not recognize the second voice at first, but he still felt unsafe with Kurebayashi sequestering Shinjiro from everyone, even if it meant that he would be healthier in the long run.

At the shore they saw what everyone was up to. Appearing to be having fun, Fuuka, Yukari, Junpei, Aigis, and Mitsuru were yelling and splashing the sparkling, clear water at each other. Under one of the umbrellas laid Airi, watching an amusing scene unfold. Ikutsuki and Akihiko approached her.

“Hiya!” she waved cheerfully.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Airi?” asked Ikutsuki. “We’ve been quite busy during our time here, but it looks as if we can unwind a bit today.”

“I hope so.” Akihiko was unconvinced.
Concern contorted Airi’s face. “This was supposed to be a relaxing vacation. Instead we were bombarded by stressful information. How as this any different from the days at the dorm?”

No one replied immediately, yet no one slapped her again for being out of line. Akihiko was actually thankful for her words.

“Regardless, I’m glad to see everyone is having so much fun,” Ikutsuki changed topics with a hint of nostalgia in his voice.

“Akihiko-san!” Junpei called out from the water. “C’mon! It’s your turn!”

The senior half sighed and smirked. “My turn? What are they doing?”

“The same thing as the other day, minus the –” Airi had to correct herself once she saw Aigis indiscriminately firing water projectiles from the barrels in her fingers and knocking everyone under the waves. “Never mind. Aigis has guns.”

Ikutsuki glanced looked at his waterproof watch. “Well, the ferry leaves tomorrow and I’ll be there early. Please remind everyone when you can.”

“Got it,” replied Akihiko, watching the man returned back to the mansion. The discomfort he felt all day subsided a bit.

Another cry came from the water. It was Fuuka. “Airi-chan! Akihiko-senpai! Help us!”

“We’re dying out here!” wailed Junpei.

“Aigis! That’s not what ‘water gun’ means!” Yukari screamed before getting shot in the mouth.

“Looks like teamwork will not help us anymore!” Mitsuru followed the android’s suit and splashed water at everyone indiscriminately. Laughing, the observers felt no need to step in. Akihiko joined Airi in the chairs and watched the spectacle commence.

“They don’t need our help.” Airi giggled.

The senior laughed nervously in agreement. “Mitsuru can hold her own. They’ll learn that the hard way.”

His mood continued to brighten more and more. At the end of the day, he could admit Yakushima was a rollercoaster that brought everyone together. With Aigis joining the team, SEES felt stronger and more focused. Maybe their chances in the next trip to Tartarus would improve.

But what if the plans they have will lead them running into a trap?

“Hey, Airi?” He broke her concentration and she looked up to her sempai. “About the other night, when you stood up to Mitsuru and her father…”

“Forget about it,” the girl interrupted, looking at her hand picking at the loose threads on arm of her seat. “I was out of line. It won’t ever happen again.”

“That’s not what I meant. I, uh… I just wanted to say thanks.”

“For what?”

“For being brave. If you feel like someone’s bullshitting you, you tell them you’re not buying it. Sometimes I wish I could stand up to Mitsuru like you did. And you’re right about one thing. This
was supposed to be a fun break, but we now have a bunch of info that should’ve been explained much sooner. At least Mitsuru’s father allowed us to keep a copy for the command room.”

It was too risky and inconsiderate to bring up what he overheard earlier at the moment. At least encouraging her skepticism could help in the long-term.

Akihiko studied the girl a bit closely, wondering what role Airi would play in whatever scheme Ikutsuki spoke of. Being a teenage boy, he admitted she was quite attractive. Her combat abilities were nothing to sneeze at too; it took him a week to recover the hit after she knocked him out of the charm on the last operation. She was observant and considerate towards everyone in the group. Sometimes she had a few moments of peculiar seriousness, but nothing spelled out “exceptional” in the sense of changing the world in a way as drastic as something like "the Fall" could imply.

“If I’m distracting you from having a normal conversation, I’m sorry.”

Her voice freed him from his daze. Airi covered her bikini-clad body in a t-shirt. She must have thought he was checking her out.

“H-Huh?” Akihiko’s head swelled from the blood rushing through his veins. “Um… not at all! It’s just… I mean…”

Airi noted his embarrassment and took no offense. She continued as if nothing happened. “Are you suspicious of anything we’ve learned?”

The temporary paralysis wore off a bit and he reclined back in his chair. “I’m more curious than suspicious. Ikutsuki-san was more involved than he let on and never said anything. He hasn’t been the most helpful in our meetings.”

“Isn’t he doing research?” Airi questioned gently.

“Other than telling us about the twelve Shadows, he’s been quiet about what he found. All the common Shadows we fight are of the first twelve Arcana, which a dog with Fuuka's powers can find out in his sleep.”

“I’m only asking because other than when we saw the Greek notes, you and Aragaki-sempai were silent.”

“I just don’t know what to make of all of this… Everything you mentioned are mostly guesses, but maybe you're onto something. I just don't know, Airi.”

It was then he noticed something strange. An impatient look painted her face. If possible, she aged considerably without a single wrinkle cutting deep into her skin and leaving a scar. Whatever cheerful girl he once knew vanished, replaced by a weary woman living day by day. Her face spoke a million words screaming to be said but couldn't for some unknown, but for some likely agonizing reason.

It only lasted a moment though. In a blink of an eye the old Airi returned to normal. With a smile she lowered her head.

“That’s alright,” she said, standing up and leaving the umbrella. “We’ve learned a lot over the past few days. We need a break. C’mon, Akihiko-kun!” She pulled his arm unexpectedly. “Let’s save our friends before they drown each other!”

The mood swing startled Akihiko more than having physical contact with a girl. His shyness returned as he allowed her to drag him across the beach and towards the water. Once in with the fun,
he couldn’t catch up. The strange expression couldn’t leave his mind.

Something definitely is off about Airi, Akihiko concluded, but above all, he really started to hate Ikutsuki.
Chapter Summary

Part 2: Shifting Ground

July 24, 2009

“I told Aigis to not barge into my room every morning to make sure I’m not dead. She can check the footage in the command room if she’s that paranoid. That convinced her enough.”

Airi finished detailing the event as she, Yukari, and Fuuka took the train to school. Only one more day of class was left until summer vacation truly started and the three were supposed to be excited. That was until Aigis chose to follow her programming a bit too exactly.

“Well, she said she wanted to be by your side,” Fuuka stated the obvious.

Annoyed, Yukari ran a hand through her hair. “I really hope she doesn’t become a problem.”

“I don’t think she will,” Fuuka said hopefully. “She’s just not used to living with people outside of a lab. Give her a chance, Yukari-chan.”

“If you say so…”

They boarded off and continued went on their way. Port Island was no Yakushima. The heat and humidity drained them quickly under the pressure of the cloudless weather. Yukari prayed that archery practice wouldn’t make her pass out before lunch.

“By the way, Airi,” her thoughts shifted to others for once, “Have you and Mitsuru-sempai spoken to each other after your argument?”

“We haven’t yet. I want to give her some space.” She laughed, masking the white lie.

“Just don’t live like a hermit and lock yourself up, ok?” Yukari lightly elbowed Airi in the side.

“I’m sure Mitsuru-sempai’s not mad anymore. There’s no need to be afraid of her.”

“I hope so!” She puffed her cheeks. “Akihiko-kun warned me about not getting on her bad side!”

“D-Didn’t he say once that she can ‘execute’ us if we step out of line?” wondered Fuuka aloud.

“Looks like I was lucky to not get that. Just the thought of it makes him squirm. It's so funny watching the captain of the boxing team freak out over a girl four inches shorter than him!”

The girls arrived at the front gates of the school. Some of the students around them slouched and dragged their feet miserably. Others darted for the heavenly realm of air conditioning before them. Nearly late for archery, Yukari left her friends.

As Fuuka and Airi continued their way in, someone standing under the trees leading toward the entrance recognized them and caught their attention.
Fuuka’s eyes lit up. “Is that…?”

“Aragaki-sempai!” Quickly leaving her in the dust, Airi sprinted in his direction. Fuuka managed to catch up to greet the senior.

“…Hey,” he said in a friendlier tone than his narrow eyes and stern jaw expressed.

Airi glowered and put her hands on her hips. “‘Hey’? That’s it? Where were you?!”

“Are you alright?” Fuuka was far less confrontational and more nervous. “You vanished at Yakushima!”

Folding his arms, his face was unreadable. “I’m fine. The beach ain’t my kind of place. Must’ve caught a cold or somethin’ from being in the water too long.”

Airi raised an eyebrow only Yukari would appreciate.

“You must get sick easily,” Fuuka replied. “I’m the same way if I’m not careful…”

“Is that right…?” Shinjiro sighed. “You seem healthy. It’s good you don’t fight or else you’d get yourself in trouble. Stress can still weaken you, so take breaks from using Lucia and stay hydrated, got it?”

His unexpectedly stern delivery confused the girl. She played with her hands and stammered, “I-I will! I won’t cause trouble for anyone.”

“Good. We’re counting on you.”

The warning bell made Fuuka jump and drop her book bag. She brushed off Airi’s attempted to help her recollect her belongings. Within seconds she straightened herself out. “I-I’m sorry. Should we get going?”

“Go on ahead,” a superficial smile stretched across Airi’s face. “I’ll see you guys at lunch.”

“Oh…” Fuuka was disappointed for a moment until she caught something in Airi’s tone. “I see. It was good to see you, Shinjiro-sempai.”

Contrary to his earlier behavior, he lowered his head in response. That was enough of an apology for his disappearance, as Fuuka smiled back and went off towards the entrance.

Airi shared the same sentiment. “You’re so kind.”

His eyes widened slightly, contrasting with his otherwise awkward poker face. “…Don’t be stupid.”

“Oh?” She cocked her head. “I told you, didn’t I? There’s more to you than being a grouch. You might not be a teddy bear, but I know you’ve got a soft side.”

Scoffing, he slouched and tugged at his beanie. It took her a while to pick it up, but she understood his body language well by this point. There were thoughts he sometimes couldn’t fully hide for the sake of looking tough. Since the scene in his room, she knew she had more freedom to poke at his traces of weakness whenever she pleased.

Airi noticed a few puncture marks and bandages on the inside of his forearm. “Where’d you get those?”

Right as she asked, Shinjiro quickly pulled back. The girl seized the arm in question, but when he...
recoiled painfully at her touch, she immediately let go.

“What’s with you?” he said with a grimace.

Never breaking eye contact she backed away a few steps to give him room. He relaxed again with enough distance between them. Airi looked into his eyes briefly, immediately finding his grey eyes reactive and no longer hazy.

“You seem different, Aragaki-sempai,” Airi observed. “You look good.”

His cheeks turned a bright pink. “H-Huh? Who the hell says that?!” Suddenly, as if realizing something, Shinjiro’s startled expression relaxed. “Huh…”

“What’s on your mind?”

He didn’t mean to vocalize his thought aloud, but he hinted at enough to leave Airi curious for answers. “Mitsuru called a doctor. Your uncle.”

His last two words nearly knocked Airi off her feet. The last time she heard from her uncle during the school year was when she hunted the Children in the last timeline. He quickly learned she vanished from the Port Island area and supposedly bribed Shinjiro to find her. He met her in Tokyo and willingly got himself involved in helping her hunt, despite her wishes for him to stay out of the mess.

Airi did her best to hide her disturbed amusement over how fate liked to screw with her head. “Really? He must have more free time than usual, considering his work.”

“Yeah. He got rid of what's left of the suppressants in me. It took a several hours and Mitsuru’s dad wanted to keep quiet ‘bout it. That’s why I wasn’t around.”

It sounded reasonable enough to Airi, who followed up with, “Do you need therapy?”

“Every Sunday. You know that clinic near the dorm? That’s where your uncle transferred. I can’t always be there when we’re in Tartarus if something happens.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Doubt I’m bringin’ much to the team…”

“That’s not true,” she protested instinctively. Shinjiro saw a storm of emotions, too many to describe with accuracy, brewing in her eyes, and he felt compelled to believe Airi was sincere. “It’s just that I haven’t been an effective field leader. It’s my responsibility to make sure everyone’s physical and mental health is good so we’re ready for action. That’s why the last operation went so badly…”

The bell rang, marking the beginning of first period.

“Crap!” Airi looked down, recomposing and talking to herself. “If I’m not in class, Mitsuru-sempai’s gonna be even more mad with me. I need to pull myself together…”

After bowing to her sempai, she walked away. Before she went too far Shinjiro held her back by lightly tugging at her sleeve. She didn’t turn around, but she acknowledged him and kept still.

“Don’t think like that. You’re tryin’ too damn hard to fix things beyond your control.”

Airi heard and felt his care, reducing her anxiety a bit, but it didn’t fully resonate through her voice. “I-I’m just doing my job, Aragaki-sempai.”

“Shinjiro.”
Confused, she glanced over her shoulder. Her heart fluttered and her knees weakened upon seeing him smile, so small and fleeting. The tough façade he always maintained completely shattered to pieces. “Who cleans up a sick guy and still calls him by his last name? That’s just stupid.”

Still left stunned by the surprise, Airi asked lamely, “Wh-What are you trying to say?”

His face fell slightly and he muttered, “It’s not really payin’ you back, but… I hate being too formal. You earned it.”

“Are you sure? My uncle didn’t give you a secret medicine while you were under, right?”

He stepped closer to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, a different persona emerged. An elusive and sarcastic cocktail stirred in his low voice. “If it makes you comfortable, I’ll let you get away with ‘Shinji’ once or twice.”

Realizing how close he was, Airi turned crimson, much to his surprise and amusement - the latter he did succeed in masking.

“N-No…” Airi stared at her feet and wrapped her arms around her stomach. “I… I can’t… O-Only Akihiko-kun c-calls you that… A-And you’re…”

Shinjiro realized how easily he could lure a reaction from her with a tease, and he had a way to even the ground between them. “All right, then, weirdo,” he laughed and nudged her towards the school entrance. “C’mon. Let’s not get the student council secretary kicked out.”

“O-Okay… Shinjiro-kun.”

July 26, 2009

To celebrate the beginning of summer vacation, SEES returned to the marble entrance of Tartarus. There was something about the creepy atmosphere, filtering the placid columns by the green mist of the Dark Hour that put them back on track again. Best of all, there were six other teammates to chose from when entering combat. With the new lineup, Airi proposed the idea that at least three people should stay behind to protect Fuuka in case a rogue Shadow struck like back in June. She knew two more people would eventually join the ranks, but pitching the idea early with a big “if” increased her chances of Mitsuru approving. Not much of a shock; she agreed. The plan was not fully realized yet, but everyone expected it to change soon.

She brought Yukari, Mitsuru, and Aigis along as they explored the newly opened block, the pale and blue Yabbashah.

“Orgia Mode: activate!” Focused on the car-sized Golden Beatle in the center of the hall, the barrels emerged from the android’s wrists and fired missiles along with the bullets from the tips of her “fingers”. Yukari maintained a good ten feet behind her teammate and helped finished the enemy off with a solid wind-based spell. A stampede of other Golden Beetles the size of go-karts charged at them with determination from down the elongated hallway.

“Airi!” she shrieked in panic, “We need to get to the next floor!”

Sidestepping the barrage of arrows from three Devoted Cupids, the field leader and Mitsuru found themselves backing into Yukari and Aigis. Angry Shadows surrounded them, and though Fuuka read their weaknesses a while ago, it still didn’t change the fact they were too outnumbered.
Darn… Fuuka doesn’t know how to find secret escape routes yet! Airi thought. “Keep using Magaru and Mabufu to hit everyone at once.”

“Fujihara, I can only target the Cupids. The Beetles block ice attacks.”

“That’s fine! Just keep me covered! I need to keep Aigis safe while she cools down!”

Right as she caught the immobile and limp Aigis, Airi pinned herself to a nearby wall and braced for the frozen blizzard. Penthesilea and Io’s combined efforts engulfed the entire hallway, white light blinding the girls and Shadows alike. They continuously spammed their spells until their lungs screamed for temperate, fresh air. Not even thoughts were loud enough to overpower the wind and ice, save for a few squishes from mucky black remains painting the ceiling and walls.

Once everything calmed down, Airi shivered and opened an eye. “You got them?”

Yukari sneezed and brushed the shattered ice flakes off her blouse and armband.

“C-Can everyone hear me?!”

“Relax, Yamagishi,” Mitsuru replied as she helped Airi and Aigis get to their feet. “Deep concentration was needed to eliminate the enemies.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! I’ll be more courteous next time!”

Airi tossed a few Snuff Souls at her magic-weary friends and scoffed. “It’s ok, Fuuka. We’re getting used to the patterns of this place. Losing you for a few seconds is no big deal.”

“R-Right… sorry.”

Fully operational once more, Aigis studied the hallway and the scattered piles of white film. Then she closed her eyes briefly and pointed behind Yukari, “The stairs leading to the 72nd floor is at the end there. Turn right. Walk about ten meters, and the stairs will be on the left.”

“Thank you, Aigis.” Mitsuru’s lip curled.

Hoping not to slip and die, the girls carefully walked across the messy floor. Airi took the lead and gently swept some of the ice with the blunt end of her naginata so the rest would have an easier time. Out of the danger zone, they marched onward.

Suddenly Fuuka chimed in again. “Umm… guys?”

“What’s up, Fuuka?” asked Yukari, staying in the back with her newly acquired Pleiades bow ready for potential ambushes.

“It’s strange… I sensed that ominous presence again. But I can’t pinpoint the source!”

Hearing Fuuka say any variation of “I sense death” was Airi’s cue to shudder. No clear signs of dread changed the halls: no murky black fog, no clinging of chains. She heard it only once in this timeline when Junpei stupidly ran off to retrieve a the baseball bat he dropped after a rough battle with a Strength Shadow.

“Are you sure?” Airi perked her ears for the hints. “We haven’t been on the floor for ten minutes!”

Examining her internal clockwork, operating on Plumes of Dusk, Aigis confirmed her leader’s statement. “Affirmative. We have resided here for approximately six minutes, forty-eight seconds.”
“I have yet to be present to feel that aura in person,” Mitsuru added. “But if your instincts are correct, Fujihara, then it surely must not be near us.”

“Still, we shouldn’t bet our lives on it showing up or not…” insisted Yukari.

They approached the elegant stairs leading to the first of two guardians within the block. Once near the presence of the stairs, even the presence could not trespass and continue pursuit. Relieved, the girls moved on.

The layout of floor seventy-two was a spacious square with six pillars similar to the ones in the main entrance. From above, they would be organized in a way that the room resembled the six side of a die. Directly across from them in a deep pocket within the wall sat a teleporter, begging them to turn it on.

As Yukari approached it, she noticed Airi heading towards an entranceway to the hall of the guardian. “Aren’t you coming?”

Peaking around the corner she hummed in response. “It looks like a bunch of buff wrestlers. They’ve gotta be physical fighters.”

“We will plan for attack once we return to the entrance,” Aigis insisted.

Mitsuru activated the teleporter and the rest surrounded her. Within seconds they returned to the entrance and stumbled back in shock as three angry teenage boys stood behind them. Akihiko seized Mitsuru’s wrists, and Junpei had Yukari. Airi turned around to find Shinjiro, who stood calmly with arms folded and eyes narrow.

“Ouch! Let go, Stupei!”

“Akihiko!”

“What the hell!” Junpei growled, struggling with the Yukari’s twists and jerks. “You girls could’ve gotten hurt up there!”

“Are you instigating that women are incapable of fighting without the presence of a man, Iori?”

The temperature dropped a few degrees, but Akihiko had the courage to resist. “It has nothing to do with that, Mitsuru! You guys were being reckless!”

Confused, Aigis spoke her mind. “Given the abilities and statuses of the enemies, Yukari-san, Mitsuru-san, Airi-san, and I had a high chance of victory in combat. You three did not have the most efficient skill set to be of help. This confrontation is pointless and irrational.”

Two of the males were baffled and offended by the remark. Airi expected Shinjiro to be worried enough for them to join in the lecture; however, he tapped his foot impatiently.

Fuuka remained in Lucia’s care and continued to speak telepathically. “I asked them to not go after you… but they didn’t listen…”

“Ignore the idiots,” Shinjiro assured the field leader in a methodical manner. “Who’s gonna take on the guardian?”

“Oddly enough, Shinjiro is the only sane man today. Let us go, or I shall execute you both.”

The “e” word was enough for Akihiko to release the redhead and leap back a few feet. Junpei was
less convinced, but he was distracted enough for Yukari to step on his toe and break free.

Nursing his injury, Junpei snapped back. “But what if that thing Fuuka-chan senses corners and traps you?!”

“Relax, Iori. We lost it. Anyway, Fujihara, who should come along with you?”

Airi thought back to when she confronted the Furious Gigas in the past. The line-up barely changed from before, other than the addition of Shinjiro, not that he was the best option to begin with. He would be facing clones of himself with a few resistances, repels, and a weakness tacked on.

“Junpei-kun, you’re replacing Aigis…” she turned to her remaining teammates of the night. “You two still have enough strength?”

Despite enduring the entire trek that evening, neither of the two girls complained. Akihiko and Shinjiro slouched a bit in disappointment, but agreed to stay behind.

Aigis pondered the decision for a moment. “Preferring elemental teammates over physical-based ones?”

No one dared to question the field leader before (save for Shinjiro on a few occasions, or Akihiko when he wanted to train some more). She might have been nicer than Mitsuru, but questioning orders remained a universal no-no in some human situations, but Airi didn’t mind explaining her reasoning. “Exactly. The guardians appear to be strong with physical attacks. It’s likely that they could be weak to elemental attacks.”

“Wise, Airi-chan!” sung Fuuka. “I had the chance to briefly analyze them before you reached the floor. Sorry, Akihiko-sempai, lightning would be ineffective…”

Junpei’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. “You’re scanning is that good?!”

The girl shyly giggled, and probably blushed. It was too hard to tell with Lucia shielding her. “I’m trying my best to improve my ability…”

“Impressive work, Yamagishi,” Mitsuru praised quickly. “Now, let’s go.”

“Then we can all head back and rest,” Airi beamed. “That snow storm kinda wiped me out…”

Mitsuru and Yukari blushed apologetically. The two of them plus Junpei joined Airi at the emerald teleporter. The rest took positions around the entrance to defend the crystal ball that saved their lives many times over. With a bright light, the team returned to the seventy-second floor to confront the Furious Gigas. Sneaking on them proved futile as the three massive, muscular Shadows flexed and stared down at the teens. Griping their Evokers tightly, the SEES brigade slowly approached the wide arena the enemies stood patiently.

Through clenched teeth, Airi gave a last bit of advice. “Until further notice, Junpei, stay in defense and be careful when Mitsuru and Yukari unleash another blizzard. I’ll use Titania for healing.”

“Gottcha,” the boy grinned, adjusting his baseball cap.

“We’ll be more careful this time,” Yukari said tensely for her friend's assurance.

Right when they entered the open space, the Gigas immediately pumped their fists in the air and a wave of energy emitted from their bodies.
“They charged up, ready for a strong physical attack!” Mitsuru warned warily.

“Split up and be careful!”

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July 29, 2009

For the first time in days the weather was cool enough for a sweat-free walk outside. Akihiko took advantage of this after a two-hour training session at the gym. The gentle breeze cooled the drops of sweat stuck to his skin, shivering and sensitive.

Gentle luminescent lamps lit Iwatodai at night, marking the uglier aspects that inevitability sit at home with city life. Akihiko missed the days when he could see the stars and try to name every constellation he could remember. Light pollution prevented it here more than in the years he lived at the orphanage. Right as he reached for his phone, a vibration flowed through his body, marking the typical transition. The once shrewdly unsightly street transformed into a swamp and his phone fell dead. He took back all previous complaints.

On his way back to the dorm, he passed the red welcoming gates of the Naganaki Shrine. Right at the foot of the steps sat a familiar boy with a goatee petting a white shiba-inu.

“Junpei? What’re you doing here?”

The junior stood up and waved. “Yo, sempai! I was checkin’ up on Koromaru. Poor pal doesn’t get many visitors.”

As if agreeing, Koromaru whined before facing the shrine and howling.

Akihiko couldn’t help but pity the poor thing. “I remember… we passed him after I found you at Paulownia Mall.”

“Oh, Junpei grinned meekly. “Back when I first experienced the Dark Hour. Man, I was such a baby…”

The white dog whined disapprovingly and rubbed against the boy’s leg. Junpei laughed awkwardly at Koromaru’s courtesy.

“It’s like he’s a person. Kinda like Ai-chan. That’s pretty cool…”

Akihiko nodded. “Anyone would be scared by something like that the first time. I know I freaked out when I first saw people turning into coffins.”

“How’d you adjust?”

The senior scratched the band-aid on his forehead and smiled wryly. “Once I learned what the Shadows were and how dangerous they are, I didn’t sit back and let them run free. Besides, I can’t do anything if I’m not strong enough to fight.” He knelt to the ground to Koromaru’s eye level and the dog approached him with intelligence. “I bet you’ve got something you want to protect, don’t you?”

The dog wagged his tail and let out an affirming bark.

“What about you, Junpei?”

He noticed the junior’s typical cocky, friendly aura was nonexistent. It seemed Junpei became
“Heh, to be honest… I dunno,” he removed his hat and scratched the back of his head. Then he laughed it off. “It’s sad, isn’t it? Everyone has their own reasons for fighting… I’m okay, but y’all are better than me. So saying it’s my duty’s a load of bullshit.”

Akihiko didn’t laugh. He stood back up and reached for his Evoker, tucked in behind his shirt. “It took time, but you can summon your Persona without hesitation. You can control it, right?”

“Well, yeah… what do ya mean?”

“We all were scared and confused when we first got our powers,” he replied, watching the light reflect off the silver gun-shaped instrument. “Once we adjust and learn our limits, things start to fall in place –”

He was cut short by Koromaru’s deafening snarl. The teens looked in the direction he focused fixedly. Around the corner of a store across the street came a large creature.

Its design was peculiar; a set of three massive bulging eyes, arranged in a pyramid and held together by gears, cogs, and machinery, very much like the internal construction of an antique clock. Spindly spider legs with blades attached to the ends supported the eyes. As it came closer, they realized it was nearly six feet by four feet, and stalking toward them fast.

The three managed to fly out of the way of an oncoming bolt of lightning. Their timing couldn’t be any better as the force obliterated the sidewalk in an explosion. Cement and debris shot high in the air. Akihiko held back a gasp at an ability he recognized, but on steroids. A third-tier electricity spell: Ziodyne.

Muttering a curse Junpei screamed, “Sempai! What do we do?!”

The boy slipped his hands in his back pockets and grinned. He put his red boxing gloves on and cracked his knuckles.

“Are ya nuts?! We can’t just attack head-on!”

“Sorry, Junpei,” Akihiko dismissed his junior quickly. “But we can’t wait for back-up. It’ll cook us alive…”

“Dude, did ya NOT see the sidewalk?! We’re screwed!”

“I can take the electric attacks. Get Koromaru outta here!”

“You’re crazy!”

“You’ve got a better plan?!”

“Yeah! Run like the reaper wants your head for his drum set!”

Another massive bolt shot out and interrupted the argument. Akihiko barely dodged the attack, which grazed his t-shirt and burnt a small hole in the side. Determined, he summoned Polydeuces to cast Tarunda and Rakunda simultaneously. Then he charged with an undercut punch, which the Shadow easily evaded. In retaliation one of its bladed feet found an opening and stabbed Akihiko in the forearm.

The senior screamed in pain as he pulled back and vowed to maintain a safe distance. He examined
the site of injury, where blood gushed and bits of muscle and bone were exposed. The pain made him dizzy and he couldn’t run without risking another hit.

“Sempai!”

Seeing everything, Junpei tossed some Medical Powder across the street. The Shadow anticipated this, and struck another bolt at the item, frying it in seconds.

“What are you waiting for, Junpei?!” growled the senior, squirming as Polydeuces cast Dia, which barely helped. “Get outta here!”

Unarmed and defiant, Junpei put his Evoker to his temple and Hermes emerged. With a flap of its black and gold wings, the Persona summoned a burst of fire twice the size of a basketball. It hit the Shadow well, but it ricocheted off its one eye and knocked Junpei off his feet.

“Are you deaf?!” Akihiko yelled, wincing at his weakened arm. "Get out of here!"

An ominous buzz vibrated and tickled their skin and eardrums. Junpei collapsed to the ground with his hands coving his mouth. All color drained from his face and he wheezed. Akihiko understood how he felt, nausea and dizziness settled in. Worst of all, that wasn’t an attack; it was a battle cry.

A crackling cloud surrounded the Shadow with the intensity of exposed telephone wires in the rain. If it struck either of the boys, both would either be comatose… or dead.

But then a second cry joined the chaotic symphony, followed by the crackling of glass. A large, three-headed beast emerged right beside Junpei and joined in its summoner’s song. Akihiko was in shock at what he had seen. Dark surrounding clouds distracted the Shadow, ceasing its preparation for another lightning attack. Vibrant purple symbols and circles were etched into the ground beneath it and not in its sights. Koromaru and Cerberus let out another howl, ending the ritualistic circle and putting the monster to rest. Its body remained intact, but fell unconscious.

Cerberus let out a third cry of victory before vanishing into the mist and returning to his owner. Koromaru’s body relaxed once the threat was over and darted straight to Junpei, who managed to let out a chuckle.

“Holy crap, Koromaru! You can summon a Persona too?!”

Relived at his friend’s state, he barked happily and licked Junpei’s cheek. The two of them did not bond for long, as Akihiko was in a far worse state. They sprinted across the street to him, who collapsed to his knees and struggled to get back up. Koromaru whimpered and nudged Akihiko’s head several times, expecting some kind of response.

“Sempai!” Junpei joined in and shook his shoulder. “Don’t tell me you’re out already! Hang on, man!”

“I’m alright… Just try to get Fuuka’s attention somehow…”

Before he finished, Koromaru bolted down the street and barked loudly into the night. He acted as an audio beacon in case anyone was nearby. And his senses were quite sharp as within minutes, help arrived. Deus ex machina at its finest, everyone in SEES arrived out-of-breath and with shot nerves. The first to join Junpei and Koromaru was Shinjiro, who couldn’t look more worried if he tried.

Seeing such a face made Akihiko somewhat amused. “Hey, Shinji… did someone die?”

Examining the damaged arm and wrapping it up, Shinjiro suppressed the urge to punch him. “Shut
the hell up! It could be infected, you idiot!"

Mitsuru, Airi, and Yukari came from behind to see the fuss and gasped in horror at the sight. Rather than being consumed by the emotions, Airi helped out and summoned the fairy queen Titania to heal Akihiko and Junpei.

“Koro-chan!” Fuuka sat next to the hero of the night. “What’re you doing here?”

“He took on that Shadow all by himself…” Akihiko tilted his head towards the limp body. “If he didn’t…”

“Yeah, you totally missed it!” Junpei attempted to divert everyone’s attention from the bleeding boxer to the real hero of the night. “He’s got a Persona!”

Unable to understand the possibility of it, Mitsuru pursed her lips. Koromaru turned to the redhead and barked proudly.

Aigis tilted her head slightly. “He says, ‘They were injured. I had to protect them, as well as this place of peace.’” She smiled in what she believed expressed gratitude. “It appears this dog is capable of bravery.”

Surprised, Yukari’s jaw dropped. “You can understand him?”

“Canines do not have their own language. However, speech is not the only means of communication.” Koromaru wagged his tail happily at the android and acknowledged her acquaintance.

Leaving the healing and lecturing to the rest, Airi went over to the lifeless enemy and examined its features. She knew it wasn’t a Shadow; there was no mask, indicating its Arcana. The girl stared at it for several seconds, mentally noting every single noticeable feature about it for her to report to the residents in the Velvet Room.

“Anything unusual, Airi-san?”

She rose to her feet and turned to face Aigis, blank but curious. Of all the people to try lying to, the android was the hardest to deal with. “Not really,” Airi settled with for a response.

She glanced over the blonde’s shoulders and watched Junpei and Shinjiro support Akihiko as they walked down the street to find medical help. Mitsuru and Yukari waited for the two to catch up.

“Just so you know, Fujihara, we’ll contact the Chairman about the dog having the potential.”

Fuuka nervously played with her thumbs. “Can he stay with us? I-I promise we’ll take care of him!”

Airi knelt down next to the shiba-inu and looked into his eyes, identical in color to hers. “Those Shadows are hurting innocent people. We’re here to fight back and protect this city. If possible, we would like your help.”

The girls stared blankly at her for talking to a dog so seriously. But he patiently observed Airi and every word she spoke. Realizing that they were waiting for him to comment he woofed.

“He says, ‘I want to help.’”

Fuuka and Yukari happily jumped like kids at a birthday party and showered the new member with attention. Even Mitsuru couldn’t help but smile. Looking up into the murky sky, hiding heaven from
her sights, Airi thanked fate for yet another safe addition to offer SEES the strength to survive through the darkness.
Since I just picked it up, I've been playing Persona 5 religiously. It's absolutely wonderful, and it will steal my time for a while until I beat the game.

Just as a precaution, I will upload the next chapter within the next few days before Persona 5 becomes my life. XD

July 30, 2009

The only place for Akihiko to receive quick treatment at that time was at a clinic situated about ten blocks from the dorms. It was ideal in case anyone in SEES needed some basic help when Tatsumi Memorial Hospital was too far like last night, and Takeharu Kirijo had arranged for Sora Kurebayashi to work there for greater convenience. Once he told his daughter, Mitsuru admitted her embarrassment for not considering such provisions sooner. But that also meant that the shrink was too close for Shinjiro’s comfort. Even if no one besides the obvious three mother hens asked questions, he knew someone would catch on to his Sunday absences.

No one was present in the dorm at the moment, which gave him some time to sit in the lounge and read one of the several magazines he secretly bought whenever he went grocery shopping for his cooking-ignorant teammates. Not that it ever bothered him; the fewer people who knew his hobby, the better.

His thoughts and brainstorming ideas for meals were interrupted when someone joined him on the couch and rested on his thigh. Curious, Shinjiro looked down to see Koromaru’s huge red eyes staring back at him. A gentle breeze in the room hinted that the dog wagged his tail in contentment.

Any display of affection caught Shinjiro off guard. His life in the orphanage made him accustomed to limited affection, and two years on the streets taught him to doubt anyone who so much as entered his personal space. Touching someone else could place a permanent death sentence on the offending individual, who tragically was too naïve to know better. He tried to never be that bad, but Shinjiro was sometimes too unsure how to respond to physical contact around unfamiliar people. He could think of only a handful of people whose touch would make him feel safe.

But for a dog who just wanted to say hi? He took off his mask of emotional distance and finally let himself be the real him. He put down his magazine and scratched behind Koromaru’s ears.

“Hey, boy. Good to see you won’t be stuck in the heat anymore.”

Koromaru yawned in agreement and placed his paw right next to his muzzle.

“Wh-What?”

He moved his paw once again, pointing to the magazine.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make something for you, Koro-chan. Homemade is much better than that expensive food. Just keep it a secret. The others’ll think it’s weird for me to like this stuff.”
Confused, Koromaru quietly whimpered.

Shinjiro sighed and gave up. “Gotta be easy bein’ a dog… When you’re happy, you’re happy. Never self-conscious ‘bout nothing.”

Koromaru softly barked and rolled onto his side. Within seconds his eyes became droopy and he fell fast asleep. Sooner or later his legs would tingle from the lack of circulation, but Shinjiro didn’t have the heart to ruin Koromaru’s nap. He smiled once more and petted the soft, thick fur of the adorable dog.

“You’re a rare mutt, y’know that?”

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August 2, 2009

The last of Ken’s belongings were moved into the dorm. He still knew very little about the living conditions, particularly how the building was coed. Whatever the residents did was none of Ken’s business. Every now and then, however, Yukari and Junpei would take time out of their busy days to keep him company.

Today was nice enough for the dorm to be deserted. Ken sat pretzel-style on the couch with his eyes glued to the TV. *Phoenix Ranger Featherman R* aired at that hour, and nothing could tear him away from his “guilty pleasure”. Right beside him sat an action figure of one of the heroes from the show. As long as no one entered the room, he was happy to indulge in acting his age for once.

Once he settled in his comfortable spot, the front door opened and cued him to turn off the TV and hide his toy. Rather than someone big and scary entering, it was Airi, returning safely from some retreat with the volleyball team. Her arched posture and the way she dragged her suitcase across the floor explicitly showed how exhausted she was.

Wanting to be friendly, Ken cleared his throat and greeted her. “Welcome back, Fujihara-san.”

She waved back quickly before dumping her things right beside the front desk, where an unused sign-in sheet rested, waiting for a splotch of ink. Free from her burden, Airi jumped right over the top of the couch across from Ken and plopped down.

“Hiya, Ken!” she beamed. “Were you watching the new *Featherman R* episode?”

The boy blushed in denial. “O-Of course not. I browsed through the channels before turning it off. Nothing’s ever on a Sunday afternoon.”

Airi brought her knees to her chest and perched her neck upon them. “No need to be shy, Ken. It’s alright to enjoy *Featherman R*. I watch it sometimes when my schedule’s not too busy.”

“R-Really? But you’re almost an adult… and a girl…”

“If there’s something you like, it doesn’t matter your age or gender. All that matters is that it makes you happy.”

Her confidence intimidated Ken, who looked down at his feet. How true was she? Was she making things up to make her feel better?

“What you read manga?” she inquired casually.
“Uh… I-I read them…”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what kind do you read? Action? Adventure? Sports?”

“Well… there’s this really cool manga published in this monthly magazine…” relaxed and smiling, Ken lost himself in the story. “The main character’s an alien, and he takes on the shapes of people and animals to fight the bad guys. There’re all these explosions and the battles are really intense. Like mountains blow up and maps change. And then, there was this village that was flooded by a damn that was built, and the dam got blown up! And when the water went away, someone was alive in there, but the story ended before you know if it was a bad guy.” He jumped off the couch with glowing eyes. “And, and the hero is really cool and strong! He can defeat his enemies in a single – “

Once realizing an outburst of excitement normal for his age, he fell silent and slumped back into his seat. Ken expected Airi to mock him for being so immature.

Instead she laughed lightheartedly. “You must really like that series!"

The color drained from his face. “Um… well… I shouldn’t read stuff like that. It’s stupid.”

“There’s nothing wrong with stupid fun. We all need something to get our minds off how crazy real life can get. If you like something that makes you happy, own it.”

He glanced at his feet, not wanting to be judged by a girl who was trying to be friendly. When she was quiet, Ken heard her sit down across from him. Looking up, he acknowledged a layer of genuine candor painted on her face. Airi showed a picture on her phone from a year ago of her hugging her stuffed dolphin Dusky, something Ken thought only five year-olds would have.

“It’s healthy to have occasional moments of being a kid,” Airi said with an unreformed smile. “Life goes by so fast that once you’re an adult, you’ll wish you had more time for fun. So, I think we have some time. How about we finish the latest episode together? I won’t tell anyone else about this, okay?”

Ken turned a light pink at the suggestion and found it hard to hurt her feelings, especially if she was wearing them on her sleeve. “O-Okay…”

He reached for the remote and the two watched the last ten minutes of Featherman R. Although justice prevailed as always, the two of them were animated and yelled at the screen during the intense climax. As dishonest as he was with himself, Ken found it hard to admit he enjoyed having the extra company around. Maybe Airi was as nice as Yukari and Junpei said she was.

Probably never going to see the light of day with someone besides his owner, the action figure remained in his back pocket.

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August 5, 2009

The final trip to Tartarus ended with everyone reaching the blockade on the 89th floor. Everyone felt far more relaxed and confident in his or her abilities. Airi then hoped that meant a more successful full moon operation in two days.

Wednesday was one of the laziest days the crew ever had. No one left their rooms until ten or eleven in the morning, including Mitsuru, who was used to a more conservative early bird schedule. With the kitchen low on food, everyone’s stomachs craved for leftover take-out or instant ramen. Airi started off her day at around ten-thirty after showering and spent some time on her laptop. As she
was about to open a window to look up more on Greek mythology, a few reminders popped up on her screen, one of which mentioned something that nearly made her jump out of her skin.

8/11: Shinji-kun’s birthday~! ☺ <3

It took her a while to think back to the last time she ever typed something like that with that much unabashed enthusiasm. Maybe Ryoji played a prank as payback for her refusing to speak to him for the past several weeks. Or she was blazing drunk one night and figured she would troll her sober self when she least expected it. However it appeared, the message mocked her… but it did remind her to think of something to give Shinjiro. She only remembered his birthday from drilling nonessential info about her friends out of the curious and enigmatic Elizabeth.

Another reminder that appeared noted that several new emails arrived in her mailbox. At least two came from her uncle. Airi didn’t want to deal with him right away because one was sent with an unknown address, but ended with a very familiar name. Her heart sank when she recognized him:

I know who you are. End your escapades in the Tower. Meet me behind Port Island Station at noon today. Do NOT ignore this request. – Jin

Airi knew every single law in the universe told her that following his instructions without backup was a really, really bad idea. But there was no one in the dorm she would take. Everyone knew how shady the Port Island alleys were: Junpei and Akihiko tore her a new one back in June. Mitsuru might not have been as upset with her as she was at Yakushima, but whatever healed wounds would reopen. Not even Fuuka or Yukari could save her from the wrath of the aforementioned three. And though Shinjiro spent most of the last two years there, he’d probably find a way to hang a stricter curfew over her, leaving her bound to her room at all times outside of school and Tartarus.

Before she gave up, she lightly smacked her forehead and remembered she had a loophole.

Blue-haired Jin stood with his arms crossed in the middle of the alley where many inevitable events unfolded. Ten feet away, near the aboveground bar, Airi blocked the memories of blood, gunshots, and the destroyed pieces of a silver pocketwatch from her mind as best she could and maintained a firm posture.

“With backup, in case you were gonna attack me,” she replied wryly.

Behind her stood the ever-reliable Theo, whose hair finally returned to its natural white for only a day. He lowered his head slightly to the young man in a green bomber jacket and navy cargo pants.

“The uptight albino ain’t a part of your posse, right?” Jin spat.

“He’s not SEES, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Upon inspecting her surroundings, Airi noted Jin was alone and unarmed. Typically if assassinations were ever in order, Takaya would do the job. Not that Jin hated hurting a fly with his assortment of explosives; it just wasn’t his style to kill someone to get his way.

He paced back and forth for a few seconds before speaking. “I’ve been monitorin’ ya for the past few months. A regular here dropped some hints about your activities: the monorail, the missing girl, and the hotel. Ya plan to be rid of the Dark Hour and your powers.”

Airi kept still with her arms behind her back. “If you’re saying we have a leak, oh well. Everything will still play in our favor.”
“So your traitorous ‘friend’ is disposable?”

“My friend is valuable. If they were to be disposed of, it would not be enough to change how things are supposed to be.” Airi hoped her lie was convincing enough.

He scoffed at her and pushed his glasses closer to the bridge of his nose. “What made ya so high and mighty?”

Airi closed her eyes for a moment, breathed deeply, and stared Jin right in his eyes. “I seek to unify Death and to kill or incapacitate The Children.”

Jin sneered at her words as his fingers dug into the exposed skin of his forearms under his jacket. To prove their knowledge, Theo stood forward and listed them by name. “Aether, Charon, Epiphron, Hemera, Hypnos, Morpheus, Moros, and Nemesis. The Children who call to awaken Erebus once Nyx is reunited with the avatar of Death, Thanatos.”

“I know nearly all of those who bare these Persona,” Airi continued, inching closer to Jin in silent determination. “Sora Kurebayashi, Kouta Takahashi, Souta Aizawa, Takaya Sakaki, Shuji Ikutsuki, Death himself, Ken Amada, and you, Jin Shirato. All that’s missing is the one who possesses Charon. After so many hours of hunting, tracking, and investigating these men, you can imagine how far I’ll go to make sure the Fall fails.”

A moment of silence hung over the alley, save for the traffic from the monorail and the occasional bird passing above them.

“What good’s knowledge when you don’t act on it? Rather than seek ‘em out, ya rely on bodyguards, ‘friends’, and revenge websites to get what you want. If anything, ya got no right to be so arrogant.”

Airi let out a laugh. “Revenge websites…?”

“Don’t bullshit me. It doesn’t take an expert to track web traffic. I know who’d fill in those names and expect Takaya and I to shoot our brains out. Sorry, little lady, but life doesn’t work that way.”

Theo had his suspicions before, but it finally made sense. Confronting her on it at the moment, however, would turn Airi into a damsel at a disadvantage. As he had done before when she went on her free-roaming escapade last time, Theo pretended to go along with anything and everything the Wild Card said.

Even Airi knew she couldn’t feign ignorance any longer. “That explains why only Takahashi is dead. You stuck with the order and picked one of your own to be killed off permanently without affecting your plans.”

“Who said it was ‘permanent’?” An unpleasant, serpentine smirk crawled across Jin’s face.

“Wait,” Theo injected, masking his startled realization with a glare. “What are you implying…?”

“For us to be ‘killed off permanently’ both the body and the Persona must be accounted for. If they are ever separated and only the body is killed, there’s nothing for the Persona to return to. It’s gone rogue.”

Airi's face blanched and eyes widened as she remembered the spider creature from a few nights ago.

“Looks like you made no progress whatsoever. Did ya confront Ikutsuki, or were ya too scared to confuse your ‘friends’?” He stalked with purpose to Airi, who calmly backed away towards the steps leading to the aboveground bar. “How about the bastard doc? Why say nothin’ to your uncle since
Right when Airi’s ankles hit the bottom step leading to the bar, Theo stood between her and the blue-haired man. The Velvet Room resident, at nearly six feet, had a good ten centimeters of height on him and narrower facial features. That didn’t stop him from emitting an aura that pushed Jin away.

“How much do you know about her, Moros?” Theo hissed, contrasting his relatively tranquil expression.

Jin might have shrunk somewhat over that unsubtle threat, yet he did not remove the smug look from his face. He turned towards the exit leading to the open air of the train station and pulled out a grenade shell from his pocket.

“Watch it, Airi Fujihara,” he added while fiddling with the shell in his left hand. “Toss some sand into the wrong ocean, and the crabs’ll crawl to shore to claw back. Enjoy your next midnight field trip.”

With a triumphant sneer at the defensive girl and bodyguard, Jin gave one last glower before stalking out of the shadows of the outskirts.

Once he was out of hearing range, Airi and Theo dropped their tough act and crashed on the steps.

“Sometimes my gut is too right for it’s own good,” she gasped and held her burning chest.

“You are a child, Airi-sama.” Theo stated bluntly. “Did you not trust me to find them? Why would you resort to the revenge site?”

She stared at him in confusion. “I needed to test if it was possible to use it.”

“Instead, they tracked you down and discovered your identity. Did you once stop to think of the consequences? Did you believe they would not try to discover you? Fuuka Yamagishi can access the Kirijo Database, and she would’ve known what you did in a heartbeat if she knew to look!”

“What would you have done, Theo? I told you it was only a test—”

“It backfired and made this hunt much more difficult than it needed to be! After Epiphron’s host died, Hemera has been too paranoid for me to time and set up my trap. I lost weeks of work within the Group’s Tokyo office to earn his trust enough to lure him! And who knows how many files were moved or deleted, meaning I need to rediscover them again?” He had no qualms talking back to his master, livid at his reservation. They never fought over anything like this, but Theo could not tolerate keeping his own frustrations to himself anymore.

“What are you so angry for?” said Airi, staring at the ground, blemished by old mounds of gum. “No one else was willing to try! It’s not like your or your sisters would go this far if I didn’t end up repeating this year!”

Exasperated, Theo held her chin and forced her to look at him. “But I am going this far for you! I am breaking the rules! You wanted this to be your last cycle, and I am risking my duties to the Velvet Room for you! You promised to not play with events recklessly anymore. Aren’t you tired of living this way?!”

“Of course I am!” Pulling back from him, her eyes squeezed shut and her hands braced her forehead, blood and pain pounding in her skull. “Theo… Nothing I do changes anything! I should just run away and hunt them myself again. At least I’ll have most of them dead in a more efficient way. After that, I’ll come back and help Ken. Then I’ll find Charon before January 31st.”
"Airi-sama, it is August-"

"I know! But right now every one of the Nine are still alive, and we still can’t find Charon! Is everything I do when I’m with my friends pointless? Why couldn’t you tell me everything when I first got here so I could stop the Fall and not be held back?! If I knew everything that happens in this fucking year, I would’ve never come back to Japan!! I sometimes wish I never met everyone!!"

He remembered the moment she first signed the contract. Determined, strong, and hopeful. By Igor’s accounts the girl was a coward unwilling to accept her fate as the Seal: Theo saw it as Airi being Airi. Her reaction was understandable. Unlike those who were to be bewitched by the coming of the Fall, Airi feared death because she loved life. The girl right beside him barely resembled the girl he first met so long ago. Physical signs of her spiritual fatigue manifested clearly. Her posture slouched and sagged under the mountainous burden on her shoulders. The emotional trauma burned lines and wrinkles into her youthful skin. Any minute he expected her hair to fall out and lose its healthy chestnut color.

Pained by the sight, Theo gingerly caressed her cheek. Acknowledging the comfort, she touched his hand and linked her fingers between his. Then with a sniffle, she rested her forehead on his shoulder.

“I'm so sorry, Theo. I shouldn't have said that...”

He wanted to iron out the crevices and erase them until she blushed. He would dry her eyes until she cried out all her sorrows. He wanted to do something, anything to help her. With a helpless smile, Theo wrapped his arms around her and brought her close.

“There is nothing to apologize for. Had I not met you, I would not understand even the slightest of pain you're enduring. Forgive me for saying this, but you are precious to me. No matter how you feel, I will never regret meeting you.” He pressed his lips, tickled by the teasing strands of her hair, to her forehead.

The gesture lightened Airi’s heart a bit. She clung to the fabric of his suit and nestled against his chest. Theo felt teardrops fall on and soak his pant leg. His fear came true when he heard the girl wheeze and felt her back rise and fall from her sobs. Such emotions were sometimes contagious, and he fought the burning sensation in his eyes.

She once she ran to him in hysterics on a day not unlike this. She was so grief-stricken that she couldn’t speak. Rather than help her overcome her pain, he almost allowed her to bask in her misery. He couldn’t bring himself to hurt her any more, but he remembered his duties and did not allow her to escape from her problems. Theo tried to forget that encounter because he knew his love for her was just a two-way mirror. She did not whisper his name that day when she finally fell into a tranquil sleep after hours of crying, but Theo was the reason she did not succumb to that kind of despair again.

With a regretful sigh, he said what he needed to tell her long ago. “And I unequivocally doubt you could completely regret meeting Shinjiro Aragaki.”

Theo felt her body stiffen at the name. Airi choked and her sobs intensified.

“Please, Airi-sama, don’t hold back your feelings because you’re scared of losing him. You cannot rely upon only me for much longer.”

“Pl-Please stop…”

“You must tell him how you feel. Please, do not end up like the Lost and lose faith in your powers.
That would make life unbearable for your friends.”

“I-I know,” her voice croaked as she began to hyperventilate. “But I can’t tell him…”

He pulled her back and gently held her shoulders. Her face was red with tears and snot ruining her beautiful face. Theo channeled his frustration through his carefully chosen words. “I cannot interfere with this affair, but please heed me! You will feel more regret in never telling him your feelings than in never being able to save him. Only you are preventing the two of you from ever having a chance being together.”

“B-But he’ll die, Theo! He dies every time! I can’t make Shinji love me! I’m already too selfish for wanting him to live! He’ll never look at me the same… He’ll just die anyway… I can't give him something else to suffer with…”

Hoping to calm her down, Theo massaged her shoulders. His voice remained composed and tender. “Do not let this narrow perspective blind you. For all you know of him, you don’t know what he is actually going through. It has taken me time to understand human behavior, but I cannot remember a single cycle in which he never felt something for you. If he does fall for you, don’t discourage him. Let him care for you in his own way, so you don’t feel alone anymore. And don’t reject your friends’ aid because of your own insecurities. Let your friends make their own choices. They might help you more than you think, and that might be what will end this.

"This cycle will create wonderful memories for you, just as the others have. Don’t deprive yourself of the happiness that will help you to endure hardships.”

The words were not magical or unique, but it was enough for the girl to slowly and surely calm herself down.

With an awkward laugh, she wiped her eyes. “‘Making memories is important. People can go on as long as they have good things to look back on. They’ll be able to go on without being led astray.’”

Theo smiled meekly as he gave her a light blue handkerchief. “Precisely.”

She thanked him with a hiccup. Another chuckle escaped her lips as she cleaned her face. “Without the cycles, I would’ve never seen that side of him… I’ve been so stupid… I tried to move on, b-but I can’t let him go… not when he never knows why I act strange around him…”

“See, you were never lost in the first place. All you need to do is act on your convictions and have more faith in your friends.”

He rubbed her shoulder once more. Then the chivalrous gentleman stood to his feet and helped her up. She wobbled like a chicken, trying to regain balance.

“Come, Airi-sama, I should return you home.”

Obedient once more, Airi tagged along beside Theo as they left the realm of depressing memories. Standing in the bustling plaza of the Port Island station restored her back to health enough for no one to notice that she nearly fell from her tower and into the spiraling abyss from which she could never return.

Any more threats would surely break her.
Here is the chapter I promised, and it's a longer-than-normal chapter too!

Persona 5 continues to take over my life, and real life stuff is getting busy on my end, but I will try to keep updating on a weekly basis.

August 6, 2009

SEES held another meeting in the command room to prepare for the full moon mission. Yukari and Airi hung out around Junpei and Aigis by the monitors that connected to the cameras throughout the building. Keeping an eye on Akihiko again, Mitsuru and Shinjiro sat on the around the coffee table. Arm bound in a cast, the boxer would be unable to join combat for yet another while.

“How long will it last, Akihiko?” asked Ikutsuki.

“Kurebayashi-san said it would take about six weeks before I can get back in the ring,” he said. “It could have been longer without the quick healing beforehand.”

“You shouldn’t have put yourself in harm’s way in the first place,” Mitsuru snipped.

He shot a particularly nasty glare at her. “You’re still mad about the other day?”

“Of course I am. This being the second serious injury, I’m amazed how reliable you have been at this point. There’s more to you than running recklessly into danger. Why can you not make use of your strengths?”

“I’m fine as I am. It was just bad luck on my part. Why are you doubting me?”

“Help me understand why you fought a Shadow without requesting backup. Did you honestly believe you stood a chance on your own?!”

“It was a chance to put my training into practice. Besides, it’s a good way to keep me on my toes.”

“Then let me put it thusly: for the good of the team and for your own sake, stop playing games with yourself when your life is on the line!”

“Um, sempai?” the meditative voice echoed through everyone’s thoughts. “I can’t focus when you’re both arguing…”

Agreeing, Yukari rolled her eyes and said, “Can you two please leave it for another time?”

“Or another room would be best,” added Junpei.

Cue Mitsuru shooting an imposing gaze upon Junpei. Shinjiro smirked, proud of the audacity the juniors demonstrated. The interaction therefore ended, but Aigis continued to study the environment carefully to pick up on the hidden meanings.

She leaned close to Airi and lowered her voice, “What did Junpei mean when he referred to ‘another
Airi let out a mischievous smile, fully ready to gossip about this topic without any reservations. “He means that the two of them should work out their personal issues in private so they won’t embarrass themselves in front of us.”

The turning gears within the android were visible through her blue eyes. “I see. Higher levels of tension are present when they are together. It is possible they are… concealing their innermost feelings. Why, I have unsuccessfully determined.”

“Isn’t it sad that even a robot can read the signs?” Yukari sighed.

“Now Ai-chan’s joined the waiting game!” said Junpei. “Soon the whole world will know it and they will STILL be blind!”

As they continued speculating, neither the seniors nor Ikutsuki overheard the banter. They waited for Fuuka and Lucia to detect the next Shadow.

“Any luck, Yamagishi?” asked a recomposed Mitsuru.

“I found one!” All eyes turned to her. “It’s by some abandoned houses in the northern edge of Iwatodai. But, there is one thing that’s strange. It’s underground… about ten meters.”

Leaning beside her bow and quiver, Yukari pursed her lips. “It must be in a basement…”

“Got any info on that, Aigis?” Airi sounded hopeful.

“According to my records,” she came with a report within milliseconds, “there is no recent structure in the area that matches those criteria. However, in the past there was an underground facility that was used by the military.”

“The military?” Yukari glanced at Mitsuru and Ikutsuki. “Is that true?”

“I’m afraid I am not acquainted with this. What about you, Chairman-san?”

His expression was more confident. “The architectural and geographical data for the area were uploaded into her memory bank. Then again, the information hasn’t been updated in a decade.”

“That is correct,” replied Aigis automatically.

“What was the purpose of the base?“ Airi pressed, wanting the original question answered. “Was it for the Anti-Shadow weapons?”

“I wish I knew, Fujihara, but the Kirijo Group does not have information on the facility anymore except through Aigis. The database was wiped clean of anything possibly relating to it.”

That struck a bad chord in a number of them. Airi automatically assumed the worst. The Children had to be involved; how else did Ikutsuki have basic information the Kirijo heiress didn’t?

Though far less informed, Akihiko came to a similar conclusion as he tried to study Ikutsuki’s demeanor. A skeptic at heart, Yukari’s gut churned over what she perceived were missing pieces in the story. Once she noticed Airi had a similar uncomfortable aura, her assurance of her doubts strengthened.

“So, how should we approach this?” Akihiko broke the awkward silence.

“There’s no way of knowing details without going there,” admitted a restless Fuuka.
Mitsuru left her post on the side and stood in the center of the room. “It seems war’s scars may run deeper than we think… The situation is still unclear at this time. Therefore, we will wait until we arrive to determine who should be deployed.”

“Understood,” said Aigis, double-checking how much ammunition she carried on her person and in her guns.

“Leave it to me, Kirijo-senpai,” Airi bowed low with her naginata in hand.

The courtesy made her chuckle. “No matter the situation, you’re as dependable as ever.”

Everyone else, save Akihiko and Ikutsuki gathered their weapons and light pouches and bags of Medical Powder, Chewing Souls, Revival Beads, and various other items. Lucia dispersed into misty dust and Fuuka joined up with her friends. Once standing ready beside each other, Mitsuru lead the way to the double doors.

“Let’s go, everyone.”

“Let’s do it!” cheered Junpei.

“Affirmative.”

“Arf!”

At the dog’s urging, a wry Shinjiro declared, “Alright, let’s kick some ass!”

The infectious energy helped Akihiko smile encouragingly as the combatants left for the evening. But it didn’t last until the door shut. Sitting alone with the adult pun machine, his optimism vanished and he slumped into one of the seats.

“Why so sullen?” inquired the Chairman. “Your arm will recover in no time. You’re a fighter, surely you can shoulder on.”

Akihiko immediately flung himself off the couch and stormed to the hallway door.

“Wait! I apologize, Akihiko,” Ikutsuki replaced his cordial laughing with adult seriousness. “Having me laugh at your expense is in bad taste after your argument with Mitsuru—”

“Is there anything you’re not telling us?”

The accusing tone startled Ikutsuki, but he replied, “What do you mean?”

Clenching his fist, Akihiko clarified in a low voice, “You are investigating the Kirijo’s database for everything on our mission, right? Everything about the beginning and Aigis’ kind are true?”

“Precisely. Why do you ask, Akihiko? Not once have you seriously questioned anything regarding the Dark Hour or our mission. Nothing matters to you but the opportunity to fight and prove your strength, correct?”

“That’s not the point.” He turned to shoot a glare as he opened the door. “If you’re lying or playing games with us, Airi will be the first to know.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” The threat went over Ikutsuki’s head. “She’s a clever girl, but her uncle will take action long before she notices. No one else is more protective of his lovely jasmine.”

The Chairman’s unwavering confidence provided enough hints for Akihiko to keep Ikutsuki on
constant scrutiny. They shared one last staring skirmish before the boy left with a newfound desire to
learn the truth.

“I’ve never seen this part of town before…” Mitsuru glanced around the area surrounding the
entrance to the underground base. It was a secluded neighborhood with dilapidated apartments
and family homes nearby an old abandoned harbor.

“It’s practically the suburbs by this point,” Airi explained as they went through the facility’s front
doors. “And a not very well cared-for area too.”

“Maybe it’s too run-down for the Kirijo Group or the local government to maintain,” Yukari
theorized.

Koromaru walked close to Aigis and stared at her. She translated for him. “Some people still live
here; however, they are very poor.”

That, along with the dusty and dirty atmosphere, dampened the mood. The combatants and Fuuka
reached the entrance of the base, deserted and cold. If not for the eerie green lantern in the sky, the
open space would be too dank and dark to see.

“Doubt my old man’s found his way out of the bottle,” Junpei stated bleakly.

After trying to flip a switch on a nearby wall with no results, Shinjiro replied with a touch of
empathy leaking out from the cracks in his mask, “Places like this are lost causes. Not much worth
savin’ if nothing’s there.”

Airi turned to the gloomy boys and said, “At least we all have a place to call home, where we feel
safe and at ease.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Junpei’s face lightened up a bit.

“Well, we finally meet in person.”

Everyone froze. Two figures emerging from the sides of the entrance outside the base. Koromaru
crouched back and snarled at the strangers. Fuuka trembled in alarm. “Who are these guys?!” she
whispered frantically at no one in particular. “I didn’t sense them!”

Airi shot a foul look at Jin, still as haughty as he was yesterday. Beside him was Takaya. His arms
were completely covered in tattoos, and he only wore grungy jeans with a red scarf tucked in his
back pocket. The beloved Smith & Wesson revolver Airi wanted to crush with all her might was
secured to his belt.

“My, my,” his silver tongue rolled, “the aura around the young lady with red eyes is thriving off the
fires of rage today.”

“Who the hell are you, guys?” Airi spat, ignoring the confused stares from her peers, armed in
defensive poses.

“At ease, child. My name is Takaya. This is Jin.” Despite the formalities, their arrogance was
overwhelming. “We are known to some as Strega. We’ve been keeping an eye on your efforts…
From what we hear, you’ve undertaken a ‘righteous’ battle to save the world. But, we’ve come
tonight to put an end to that dream in person.”
“What’d you say?!” Junpei hopped aboard the same fuming bandwagon.

Takaya ignored the outburst and directed his attention to the oldest SEES member. “Your impudence is astounding. It seems you joined their ranks after all despite our warnings.”

Another series of eyes rested on Shinjiro. His expression didn’t change, but he clenched his axe tightly and raised an eyebrow. “So what? Don’t act like ya lost the lottery.”

“You know them?” asked a surprised Mitsuru.

“They’ve been a pain in my ass for two years.”

Preparing an arrow, Yukari glared at the men. “Why are you doing this?”

Jin clicked his tongue impatiently and pointed to the full moon. “If the Shadows and the Dark Hour disappear, then so will our power. We can’t let that happen, now can we?”

“In other words, you use your Persona for personal fulfillment and survival,” concluded Aigis. “I comprehend.”

Her response knocked the wind out of Junpei. “You agree with them?!”

“However,” the blonde continued, “human laws decree that the punishment for your selfish actions will catch up to you if you go too far. You will be held accountable for your crimes.”

Neither Takaya nor Jin expected a strange lecture from an android not fully capable of expressing and understanding human emotions.

“Your pretty little mouth rambles too much, machine,” Takaya brushed off the warning effortlessly. “Only a select few wield the power of Persona. And the Dark Hour is a frontier that is ours alone to explore, just like the Tower of Demise.”

The archer aimed her weapon and clenched her teeth. “That’s your reason? Are you insane?! There’s no telling what will happen if we don’t do something about the Shadows!”

Yet he continued in the charismatic, serpentine tone, and ignored the arrow meant for him. “What difference does it make? There will always be disasters, whether they are caused by Shadows or arise from human folly. No one can predict the future, anyway….”

Yukari and Fuuka nervously screamed when a blade looming a centimeter from his jugular cut him short. The clanging strands of beads from where it tied to the shaft indicated that it was a naginata.

A voice alien to Airi growled deep from her gut. “Get out of here, or I’ll kill you.”

Not intimidated in the slightest, Takaya let out an amused chuckle and stroked the sharp edge of the blade with his fingertips. “Surely, you acknowledge the sense of importance the Dark Hour has given you. Why else would you dare challenge me with such audacity?”

“Why should I be happy about everything and everyone I’ve lost to this damn power?!” Airi cried impulsively.

“Attachment is juvenile,” he bitterly remarked. Ignoring her threat, he then gave his attention to her worried peers. “How about the rest of you? Do you also wish to return to your pathetic, ordinary lives?”

“You think I like this?!” demanded an offended Yukari. "After all the lives lost and people hurt?"
“I don’t enjoy this one bit!” Fuuka protested with a backbone she never thought she had.

Though speechless, Mitsuru and Junpei’s body language made their dissatisfaction clear. Koromaru howled viciously, arguing against the ridiculous question. Shinjiro quietly, but unflinchingly flipped Takaya and Jin off.

Jin snorted. “You’ve each got your own reason for fighting. ‘Justice’ is only an excuse for you to act on your selfishness. To hell with you hypocrites!”

Remembering what would happen next, Airi turned to see Jin pull out a device from his pocket and pressed a button.

The giant groan echoed in the entrance of the base. To the sides were the partitions, reaching for each other to divide the outside from the inside. And Airi stood right between them. As she began to move out of the way, Takaya’s left hand clenched the shaft and pushed the weapon away from his neck. His right hand reached for his revolver.

“Aibana!”

“Let’s see you try to escape, lovely jasmine.” Sneering, he pressed the barrel in the center of her forehead. He lowered his voice to a near whisper. “We Children are far stronger than you could ever imagine, not that you’ll live to witness our unleashed potential.”

Her mind became blank. Whatever she wanted to say or do completely withered into nothing. Her spirit prepared to be torn from her body and lie naked on the cold floor of the Velvet Room. She expected to start over for being hasty. Airi detached from her body and could no longer hear her friends calling her.

“Do it.”

Takaya’s eyes widened in surprise and confusion. “Pardon?”

“Death means nothing to me,” her still voice acted independently of her will. “I’ll always leave this place and everyone in it, only to come back and die again.”

A fierce pain enveloped her ankle and tried to pull her back. Something sharp and smooth punctured her flesh, dripping warm fluid in trails down to her feet. It brought her back enough to gasp at the cold barrel digging into her skull. Either from a direct shot to the brain or the force of crushing metal, Airi would truly feel either one of these agonizing deaths would qualify on her list of failures.

Takaya’s yellow eyes burned and glowed as cruelly as the October full moon. “I see you’ve embraced it a long time ago, and so your death shall be.”

The partitions grazed her shoulder. Her knees trembled at the touch and sight, but she was thankful it would be her last thought –

A strong force from behind yanked her back, tugging the naginata out of Takaya’s grip. Just as startled as she, he pulled the trigger, sending a stray bullet in search of a target. It missed her as she fell to the ground. A loud slam echoed through the entrance and reunited Airi’s mind and spirit with her body. She was laying on something large that cushioned her fall. She glanced down to see who saved her as he loosened his hold around her waist. Despite wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt, she recognized the color and feel of his skin.

“Shinjiro-sempai, is she okay??” Yukari cried in panic.
Feeling Shinjiro’s chest erratically rise and fall from running to her aid, the girl blushed violently. “I- I’m…”

“You damned idiot!” he growled. “Get up!”

Without hesitation, she held her weapon tight and she carefully rolled off him. Daring not to look at him, she sat in place and stared up at the others. They surrounded the two with purely horrified expressions.

Junpei collapsed beside her and squeezed the life out of her. “What the hell is wrong with you, dummy??”

Gasping for air, she looked up at everyone around her. Koromaru’s ears were flat as he whined ruefully. A closer look showed that his muzzle was wet with blood. Next to him was the incomprehensible Mitsuru, who was so upset she nearly lost the ability to stand with Aigis supporting her by the arm. Fuuka clung to Yukari’s shoulder and tried not to cry. Shinjiro left to retrieve his beanie, laying a few feet behind the scene with a bit of the fabric gone from grazing the bullet.

The reactions of the people closest to her tore through her heart more deeply than the sharpest blade. Not once did she ever see how they would respond if she died. The close call was more than a satisfactory answer, and she buried her face in Junpei’s shoulder to mask her humiliation.

“I-I’m sorry… I wasn’t thinking straight…”

“You’re tellin’ us!” he loosened his grip and shook her shoulder. “Don’t ever do that again, you hear me?!”

Yukari sniffled as she summoned Io to heal Airi’s leg, “Wh-What were you thinking?! You nearly got your head shot off!”

“Airi-chan!” The usually soft-spoken and quiet Fuuka cried loudly. “You can’t leave us like that!”

Her last words struck Airi as well. Despite the very little time they had shared together, SEES relied on each other almost like family. She couldn’t leave them without a profound pain sweeping through and crushing their hearts. It made Airi realize how nearsighted and self-centered she had been yesterday. They wanted her alive, no matter what would come.

Once recomposed, Junpei helped Airi up. Mitsuru somehow regained her footing and thanked Aigis for the help. Shoving the beanie in his pocket and uncomfortable with the mood, Shinjiro sulked away from the rest.

Unsure what to say, Aigis frowned. “Airi-san…”

She simply embraced her android companion. “It was my fault, Aigis.”

“But if not for Shinjiro-san you would have died! I would have failed to protect you!” Metal creaked as her body shook. “Just… what is this feeling?”

“That’s fear, Ai-chan,” Junpei assured her with a weak grin. “You know what it’s like now…”

“I… I comprehend…”

Once Airi broke away from them, Mitsuru approached her with a look of desperation she had never seen before. Slightly more stable, she exhaled sharply and spoke with intense authority. “Without
you, Fujihara, I don’t know how we can fight. I never want to know how our odds will change in battle if that were to happen. Never compromise yourself again. Am I clear?"

“Y-Yes, Kirijo-sempai.”

Other than being trapped in, the descent into the base went far less eventful, much to everyone’s relief. Koromaru and Junpei stayed behind to protect Fuuka, who summoned Lucia once more to scan the area. Before leaving, Mitsuru left behind the transmitter for Junpei to report back to Ikutsuki about their situation.

In the lower levels of the facility, Airi brought Yukari, Mitsuru, Shinjiro, and Aigis down to face the Shadow. A few minor Shadows attempted to hinder their progress in murky black vain. Compared to the hotel a month previously, this was a walk in the park with the obnoxious red replaced by green and black.

As they descended, the teens noticed many large gears and metallic shavings lying on the dirt floor. They passed by a few doors, with windows painted over, so no one would pry and see what else was abandoned.

“I know I asked before,” Yukari said nervously, “but what was the military doing here?”

Aigis scanned the walls and analyzed her findings. “It appears to be a manufacturing facility. I detect trances of metal that composes my platform. Other heavy metals and industrial chemicals are present as well.”

“But who’d put so much effort to cover this up?”

“The Anti-Shadow Suppression Weapons were kept secret among many branches of the company,” Mitsuru explained while treading over a large gear she nearly tripped into. “It would make sense to hide the place that created such technology with rare, durable metals. However, I did not expect the Kirijo Group to have such ties to the military that we’d use one of their bases.”

Airi’s nose twitched at something strange she picked up. “Hey, Fuuka? Can you scan the rooms we pass and see what pops out?”

“I’ll try my best,” her mystic voice hummed. “Do you see anything odd?”

“Something smells really bad.”

Upon mentioning it, everyone noticed it. Yukari pinched her nose in disgust.

“My olfactory mechanisms detect small traces of decomposing organisms.”

“D-Dead bodies…?” Mitsuru repeated.

“Oh my God!” replied Fuuka, forcing a calm tone. “There are bones in some of these rooms! Some are decades old… but I sense some are much newer and smaller than a normal person!”

The news weighed heavily on Yukari, whose face drained of color. She clenched her stomach.

“Sick bastards,” a muffled snarl came from Shinjiro, who used his beanie as a filter for him to breathe.

Mitsuru held back her feelings, but her opinion was clear in her tone. “When this is over, I must speak to my father about this.”
The pressure from the descent and the fumes of carcasses got to them, but the team pressed onward. Over time the intensity of the stench would recede, only to be replaced by rustic metal. After minutes of wandering the sloped hallway gradually flattened and opened up to a larger room, hidden in deeper darkness than they experienced. Loud, grinding of metal on metal warned the group that the Shadow was quite massive.

At the bottom they stared in awe at the intimidating monstrosity before them: a giant tank with a strange winged helmet sitting on top of the hatch. On the freeloader’s face was a cross-visor with a VIII.

“That’s a Shadow?!” stammered a paralyzed Yukari.

“It’s using the tank as armor,” Fuuka clarified. “Get ready, everyone!”

Twirling her naginata around, Airi screamed “Split up!”

Everyone obeyed and surrounded the Shadow, making an impossibly vertical strike of the main gun barrel. The girls barely dodged out of the way, while Shinjiro deflected it with his axe and grinned widely at the twitching monster.

He retained some of his scary confidence as he backed away with the Evoker against his temple. “You ready for this, Castor?”

The mighty black horse emerged from the glassy mist and charged forward. Castor’s front legs brought down a brutal dent in the tank, disorienting the Shadow. With no traces of suppressants left in his system, Shinjiro was back to spitting in the face of his enemies.

“C’est magnifique! That almost makes up for your first journey in Tartarus,” Mitsuru beamed after sending Penthesilea to rain ice on the tank.

“Never gonna let me live it down, Kirijo?”

“As long as your style of fighting ends with us alive.”

“Tch, don’t mistake me for your reckless petit ami.”

Both thrown off and flustered, Mitsuru stammered while holding up her rapier to block, “Q-Qelle absurdité!”

The tank led a second swift strike across the front line, aiming for Airi, Shinjiro, and Mitsuru. The girls managed to dodge it perfectly; Shinjiro grunted and flinched from it hitting his shoulder.

Airi laughed and tossed him a healing packet. “Oh! Shinjiro-kun likes to fight dirty!”

“Didn’t ask for your input, clumsy girl,” he snarked, reluctantly catching the item.

The banter boosted the moral of the group, who freely struck the enemy without worrying about which attacks were most effective. A few times it retaliated with status effect spells seeping from out the hatch. Shinjiro happened to be the one most often caught in the poison mist. Aigis called forth Palladion and often aided his agility to help escape.

After several minutes kicking ass and curing poison on the group, Yukari shouted, “Is it just me, or is this too easy?”

Coughing at a cloud of disturbed dust, Airi sidestepped a series of hits from a charged bullet. “I
agree. What’s the status, Fuuka?”

“You’re fighting well, but something is odd with its Arcana!”

Mitsuru covered her mouth as another Poison Mist settled in. Then Penthesilea shrieked. The sound waves were enough to disrupt Aigis’ programming for a few seconds, leaving her open for another blast from the turret.

Recognizing the cry, Yukari tensed. “What do you see, Mitsuru-sempai?!”

“Brace yourselves! It’s separating!”

The room vibrated and shook as the Shadow violently twitched. The winged mutant popped off the tank and hovered right beside it. The tank pulled itself in an upright position, revealing a yellow mask with a VII on its underbelly.

“Oh, I see!” Fuuka confirmed the group’s fears. “The tank is the Chariot and the turret is Justice!”

“Fantastic,” Airi groaned, despite her expecting it.

The intermission period gave Aigis enough time to bounce back on her feet. She quickly changed her battle strategy as she recharged her guns. “Airi-san, attacking the Shadows simultaneously seems most effective.”

The girl couldn’t help but smile at how right the android was. “Mitsuru-sempai and Yuka, use Mabufu and Magaru!” She then turned to her blonde companion. “Aigis, keep supporting us with agility and defense!”

The girls did as they were told by backing way slightly from the fray. The Shadows were fairly static themselves, but two taking up more space was an issue. Airi darted to where Mitsuru once stood so she could speak to Shinjiro.

After sidestepping Justice’s Torrent Shot-infused arrow, he put his Evoker back in his pocket. “What’s the plan?”

“You and I need to attack each one individually. Which of these guys are you more comfortable with?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he shrugged nonchalantly. “Pick one and I’ll take the Shadow out for ya.”

Once he finished his sentence, the Justice shot an arrow at Shinjiro. He dodged the sudden attack, but he lost his breath and started coughing. The fit progressively worsened enough for him to bend over. “Sempai?”

He muttered a curse and brushed off her hand. “I’m fine,” he assured weakly. “Damn it, why now…?”

To make things worse, Justice took the opportunity to cast a series of geometric shapes, glowing like the sun beneath Airi and Shinjiro. Rays of light emitted from the ground, blinding them both.

Airi forced her hand into her duffle bag and took out an oddly textured object and groped around to find the familiar figure. By the time she touched his elbow and opened her eyes, he let out a groan and collapsed to the ground before her. Knowing how vulnerable she was for another possible light-based instant-kill attack, she returned the Homunculus back into her bag and dug around for a Revival Bead.
Yukari’s voice echoed across the room. “What happened over there?”

Too busy to reply right away, Fuuka spoke on her behalf. “Justice knows Hama! Shinjiro-sempai’s unconscious!”

“I’m taking care of him! Just keep attacking!”

Io and Penthesilea teamed up and waved their arms to launch another snowstorm. Knowing getting lost in the middle was a bad idea, Aigis ran to the opposite side of the room towards her teammates. After the attack ended, Shinjiro’s eyes blinked rapidly.

“Are you alright?” Airi sighed with relief when he nodded. As he sat up, Airi reached in her bag and offered two Homunculi. “This is all I have from last week, but as long as you have them, it’ll take the hit for you.”

His eyes darted between the items and the girl. As much as he wanted to protest, the room began to vibrate again, so he kept it short. “Keep one. You’ll need it too.”

“Guys!” Fuuka caught the field leader’s attention. “They’re fusing back together again!”

“Can’t make up their minds, I guess,” Shinjiro scoffed while helping up the girl who saved him twice. “That’ll make the fight easier.”

The group huddled closer together and continued their tactics. Airi maintained a supportive role with her Persona by allowing Titania to heal the two physical powerhouses. When Aigis did not boost up the party’s evasion and defense, she tossed a Chewing Soul for each of the elemental casters.

Once again, as they came close to delivering the coup de grace, Chariot and Justice broke apart again. SEES’s tactic remained unchanged. Finally, a wondrous sound rumbled through the room: Shinjiro’s axe dealt the final blow to the mighty Chariot. Unlike other Shadows it kept its form, though limp. There was always a chance for it to revive.

“Quick!” Airi screamed at her friends and pointed at the fatigued winged demon of light. “Finish Justice before he tries to revive his partner!”

“Everyone, let us commence with an all-out attack!”

“Alright, lemme at him!” Yukari charged with an endless stream of arrows, along with Aigis’ bullets. Mitsuru and Shinjiro were close to the Shadow already, and they mercilessly stabbed and struck it into oblivion.

The overkill was too much and the two Shadows wailed simultaneously. Their once silver and rusty metallic bodies disintegrated into the familiar black ooze their kind left as potential battle trophies.

“Well done, everyone!” Fuuka sang happily. “And good news! Ikutsuki-san has found a way to open the doors. We can leave!”

Exhausted and relieved over the victory, Airi’s knees gave way and she slumped to the floor. Her head stung upon impacting the thin layers of dirt and metal shavings on the ground. Ignoring the pain, she marveled at the swirls and clouds forming from the disturbed debris. The faces of her half-annoyed, half-worried peers emerged in their places.

“Sorry… I’m completely drained…” Airi responded with a chuckle and cough.

A blood vessel burst in Yukari’s temple. “After tonight, you’re never gonna crash like this again!
Two shocks in one night is too much for me to handle!"

Fuuka joined in at the right time and let out a soft laugh. “Oh, let her be this time. I bet you all are tired as well.”

“Yeah, but if Airi’s not gonna move, who’ll carry her?”

“I will.” The android stepped forward with the guise of a military recruit. Whether it was from the seriousness in Aigis’ tone or the idea itself, Shinjiro snorted.

Maturely agreeing, Yukari spoke for the snickering senior. “I dunno that’s a good idea…”

“My carrying capacity exceeds 300 kg.”

”I-It’s okay!” Airi pushed herself in a sitting position. “I can walk…”

“No. The slope is quite steep, Fujihara,” Mitsuru warned. With a slightly lighter tone, she turned to the only viable candidate.

Perplexed, he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “…Me?”

“I see no reason why not. If you disapprove of a mechanical maiden with four times your strength carrying her, clearly, if you pardon the sexist subtext, a man is the superior alternative.”

“No, I’m serious, guys,” Airi bounced straight to her feet. But her enthusiasm did not hide her dizziness. “I can handle the walk back. Don’t worry about – “

Within seconds, Shinjiro knelt down beside her. “Get on…”

Her face turned a bright pink. “But you said I weighed–“

“Like it or not, you ain’t going nowhere with wobbly knees,” he snapped. “Don’t make a big deal outta this.”

Airi glanced at her friends in embarrassment. Yukari felt some sympathy, as she never expected Shinjiro to be so insistent. The android was more curious by her friend’s reaction and refusal to accept a generous offer. Mitsuru, however, had a mild, but secretive curl to her lips. No one was going to get her out of this; thus, she climbed onto his back.

The journey back up was a bit longer due to exhaustion. That only made the most disturbing area with the corpses all the more unbearable. Without thinking, Ari tried to block the stench by burying her face into the back of Shinjiro’s neck. His body tensed at her action, but he remained silent the whole time. She was especially thankful, because it couldn’t be more awkward to have his soft long hair tickle her face. Better yet when she inhaled, she nearly cried. He might have been tired, fatigued, and sweaty, but she remembered how much she missed his scent. Being so physically close to him accelerated her heart rate, and Airi wished the moment would never end. Like when they embraced after his suicide attempt. Like in the illusion the Lovers cast on her. Like the night she died in his arms.

Enjoying the flood of memories, Airi whispered nervously, “Shinjiro-sempai?” He grunted quietly enough for only her to hear him. “Thank you for being so kind to me.”

He simply grunted again, and Airi was left to wonder what his face looked like.
Only Mitsuru and Akihiko remained in the command room after returning from the fight. They held a meeting recapping what happened, and everyone else went straight to their rooms and fell deep into sleep. According to their cells, it was an hour past midnight.

Akihiko held his head with his free hand. “So let me get this straight… These two guys, who call themselves Strega, locked you in the base. Said base has rare metals, potential toxic chemicals, and dead kids lying around. And the Shadow was a two-in-one package with a tank and winged demon.”

“Including the fact the Kirijo Group never informed me about the existence of the facility,” a calm, but slightly annoyed Mitsuru said. “They have a monopoly of Tastumi Port Island. There should be no absence of information regarding infrastructure, geology, and trade in the database.”

Akihiko buried his face in his hands. He felt just as tired as her, even though he stayed behind during the operation.

Right as Mitsuru was about to continue, the double doors burst open. In entered Fuuka, wearing a baby blue nightgown with white paw prints. She looked less exhausted than her seniors, yet she seemed too anxious, too awake.

“Why are you up so late, Yamagishi?” asked Mitsuru.

“Oh, I’m having trouble sleeping…” she sheepishly confessed. “Th-Those children…”

Mitsuru patted the spot next to her on the couch. “It’s alright. Have a seat.”

“B-But your meeting…”

“Ikutsuki-san left a while ago,” explained Akihiko with a light smile. “This is off the record.”

“Oh, okay…” Fuuka tiptoed to the couch and joined the seniors. The room was quiet for a while until she spoke up. “Pl-Please continue. I’m sorry for barging in…”

“Don’t worry, Yamagishi,” assured Mitsuru with a rare smile.

Wanting to make her more comfortable, Akihiko went back to where they left off. “Between Junpei’s updates and your account, Strega’s gonna be a problem.”

“It appears Shinjiro has bumped into them a few times. He won’t elicit specifics, but judging his confrontational behavior, he considers them an enemy too.”

He tapped his foot against the coffee table and stared at his feet. “What did Ikutsuki-san say about them?”

“Nothing really,” Mitsuru bit her lip in disappointment. “He said he will look into it and report back when he’s found something.”

“Do you know where he’s looking?”

She gave him a confused look. Akihiko straightened his posture and looked directly into her eyes. “Haven’t you ever wondered where he gets all this information?”

“You mean, what are his sources, Akihiko-sempai?” Fuuka inquired quietly.
Exactly.” His nervousness resided a bit. “Mitsuru, why does he know so much more about what’s going on with the Kirijo Group than you? What did he base his ideas off of? Is it possible that there’s a fraction of your family’s company that knows more about the Dark Hour and Shadows than even your father?”

A sharp snap resonated through the room and the temperature dropped several degrees. She did not move, but her tone did enough to drive the point home.

“Are you calling the Chairman a liar and my father a fool?”

Color drained from his face. He was dancing on a thin line above an abyss. “Of course not! Remember when we first told Yukari, Junpei, and Airi about the incident? We held back that information because we didn’t feel it was necessary to say anything at that point. Maybe ideally Ikutsuki-san’s doing the exact same thing.”

A small chirp interrupted the conversation and the seniors turned to Fuuka, shivering from Mitsuru’s influence. She apologetically lengthened her fuse and the environment returned to normal. The junior lowered her head in gratitude, but her restlessness remained.

“Is something wrong, Fuuka?” Akihiko gently nudged.

Once more she lowered her head. “I-I hate to anger you, Mitsuru-sempai… But did your father find everything else about the incident ten years ago? He said some information was corrupted…”

Her lip twitched in annoyance, but she maintained her cool. “I spoke to him a month in advance to assemble as much information as possible. Several of his best men put long days and sleepless nights into gathering that data.”

“Did Ikutsuki-san or Kurebayashi-san have any involvement?”

“I believe not. Why are you asking so many questions, Akihiko? It’s not like you.”

His temper flared slightly, but he clenched his healthy fist. “Just hear me out! Something doesn’t feel right.”

After a brief inhale, Akihiko told them about the conversation he overheard between Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi on their third day in Yakushima. To keep Fuuka on track, he briefly revealed the concerns regarding Shinjiro’s health. The knowledge disturbed her, but she quietly absorbed and accepted the truth.

Mitsuru, however, remained doubtful. “What is ‘the Fall’ that they spoke of?”

“I have no idea. It was hard to follow. They’re probably using some kind of secret code. Your father did mention there was cult-like behavior going on prior to the incident.”

“It sounds apocalyptic,” observed Fuuka. “But how is Ken-kun involved? Wait… You and Shinjiro-sempai were acting strangely when we met Ken-kun last month…”

“We’ve known about him for a long time,” Mitsuru spoke for Akihiko. “Who’d think that after it happened, Amada would develop the potential to summon a Persona?”

“Has Ikutsuki-san determined his abilities?” he interrogated.

“Not yet.”
“This is exactly what I mean, Mitsuru! Rather than being upfront with us, he avoids questions and leaves them unanswered for months. Why else would we get a tsunami of information at once and a new recruit at Yakushima? It was just convenient for him!”

“Don’t jump to conclusions so quickly, Akihiko,” she bitterly retorted and folded her arms.

“I think Akihiko-sempai is onto something,” Fuuka admitted, ignoring the cold stare. “In three days, we learned so much. The incident, the survivors, Yukari-chan’s father, Aigis…”

Akihiko appreciated the support. “Some of the data was still being sorted through. So where’s the follow-up? Didn’t Ikutsuki-san say he wasn’t coming to the beach with us? Then he shows up with a rogue robot? And isn’t it strange that Kurebayashi-san arrived too around the same time?”

The little game was annoying Mitsuru. “He’s a medical professional helping Shinjiro improve his health.”

“He’s also one of the survivors. Even if we ignore the doctor because we just met him recently, that still leaves Ikutsuki-san. Why did he never tell us he witnessed the explosion? And what about that note in Greek?”

The temperature dropped once more and the questioning duo silenced themselves. Mitsuru exhaled heavily and gave dark looks to them both, but more towards Akihiko.

“There is not enough evidence to prove any of your claims, but I respect that your instincts are warning you of something potentially terrible. I can assure you that if a conspiracy was developing within the Kirijo Group, my father would be the first to know and he would inform me within a heartbeat.” She stood up from her seat and stalked her way towards the double doors. “I’m off to bed. You two should do the same.”

Without another word, Mitsuru slammed the door behind her, leaving Akihiko and Fuuka alone to thaw out. They quietly meditated over the ideas until room temperature was restored.

“Sorry you had to see that… Mitsuru doesn’t like people questioning her father’s integrity.”

Understanding, Fuuka nodded. “I’m alright. She must be stressed from all the pressure.”

“Yeah. It never was easy living with her,” a weak smile lit Akihiko’s face. Seconds later, it vanished. “But what do you think?”

“M-Me?”

“What stands out the most in this mess?”

The Priestess heeded the call to search in herself for an answer. She closed her eyes and imagined swimming in a vast sea of endless chaos and confusion. On the outside, she was meditative and focused. Fuuka occasionally mumbled a few words, but Akihiko didn’t dare interrupt her.

After minutes of silence, Fuuka opened her eyes. She quickly noted Akihiko’s concern. “I was asking for Lucia’s help…”

It was enough for him. “If you say so… what did she say?”

“From what you said, I don’t trust Ikutsuki-san either. I’m not sure about Kurebayashi-san either, but I can ask Airi-chan to see if she has any ideas. Because you’ve known him longer than us, please watch over Shinjiro-sempai. Make sure Kurebayashi-san is actually helping him get better.”
He nodded. Despite the occasional arguments and dodging heartfelt conversations, such a job can’t be very difficult to accomplish after performing it for years.

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August 8, 2009

Takeharu reread the report for the tenth time over his lunch break at a restricted section of a restaurant on the Port Island waterfront. Unlike the previous ones, this was disjointed, messy, and confused. His daughter and Akihiko Sanada wrote two vastly differing comments and opinions on the debriefing, but he pieced together three reoccurring concerns to have an idea of what to pursue next.

The military base’s existence was not unknown to the CEO. His father informed him of it in passing during his university years and provided basic information concerning its whereabouts and function. It served a crucial focus in secretly studying nuclear weapons until a political and economic scandal forced the facility to shut down. When looking for the files to find out if it reopened in recent years, Takeharu discovered it was code-locked. It concerned him at the time, but he put no further thought into it due to other concerns and duties taking higher priority.

Strega was new to him, but he recognized the sketches Airi drew of Takaya Sakaki and Jin Shirato. A few police officers interviewed a few regulars, these two included, at the back alley of Port Island Station when the death of Kouta Takahashi first permeated in the public consciousness. The case remained unsolved, ending at the rumor of a revenge website that the police still did not make a public statement about. What they did tell Takeharu bothered him enough: the body appeared to be dead for a while when police examined it at 4 am. Two days after it hit the news, three witnesses came forward privately. They said that one minute they were sitting in the back alley of Port Island Station, and the next, Takahashi’s blood-soaked corpse appeared out of nowhere. One of the witnesses had some elementary forensic knowledge and determined that the body seemed to have been dead for half an hour. Takeharu concluded that a Persona-user most likely killed Takahashi during the Dark Hour. Of course the police would never believe that.

Ikutsuki, however, was an odd addition to the report. He kept quiet of his involvement despite all the trouble Takeharu and Mitsuru went through to explain what they knew. Even with access to the database, he would not disclose everything he found. Some fine details about the explosion – such as the survivors’ accounts – remained inaccessible by the time he presented everything. Then Ikutsuki showed up at Yakushima not long after the last functional Anti-Shadow Weapon “escaped” and claimed Aizawa had stopped overseeing her maintenance. Takeharu confirmed his suspicions when he found obscure forms authorizing Souta Aizawa’s transfer from the labs at Yakushima to the Group's office building in Tokyo that no one never informed him of when the divisions' leaders turned in their reports during the last monthly meeting.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that so many concerns with questionable histories were reported in one night. When he finished his final reading, Takeharu put down the file and dialed a number on one of his personal disposable cells.
Exempting a slight fever Airi developed after the stress from the last operation, everyone sat content and healthy in the lounge that Sunday evening. Ken was absent, spending his day at the shrine. In his absence Mitsuru approached everyone with the most delightful news.

Junpei was the first to laugh. “Hey, good one, Mitsuru-sempai! You almost had me there…”

“Oh, it’s no joke. Summer classes begin tomorrow with intensive courses; I’ve already applied for all of us.”

“I had no say in this.” Akihiko had mastered the art of detecting and stopping his best friend’s protests before they could begin. Such a feet left the delinquent slouching low on the couch and basking in a much fouler mood. Koromaru barked in a teasing tone and leaned against Shinjiro’s leg.

“I know how difficult it’s been balancing school and late night excursions,” Mitsuru continued in a diffident tone. “You haven’t had much time to study and I apologize for that.”

“But I’ve been doing well, though,” Airi whined, half seriously and half mockingly.

“Lucky you…” everyone - minus Mitsuru and Fuuka - groaned.

“No one should be singled out, no matter how exceptional your grades are, Fujihara.”

“Are ya serious?!” Junpei interrupted once more with a whine. “Summer classes?! This is the first time I’ve heard of this!”

Embarrassed, Mitsuru flushed. “Je suis désolé, Iori. I thought Takeba and Yamagishi told you.”

“Uh, I’m so sorry,” mumbled Fuuka, flattening a stubborn crease in her skirt. “I forgot to mention it.”

“Aw man! That’s bullshit!”

Yukari elbowed the overgrown baby in the ribs. “Hey, with your grades, you should be thanking her!”

“Yeah, that totally makes me feel better!” The boy threw his hat to the ground and sighed. “This sucks.”

“Shinji, you aren’t skipping. You’re the worst off out of all of us, and you need to graduate.”

“Shut up, dad.”

Koromaru and Aigis sat by watching the upset members grumbling at the last minute announcement. Neither felt the need to comment, as the dog was interested in watching the crazy dialogue ensue and the robot was decoding the social subtleties.

The next morning, everyone rolled out of bed, dreading the week of academia Mitsuru forced upon him or her with Ikutsuki’s endorsement. The day passed by with no violence or death threats; thus, Mitsuru presumed that the nasty medicine went down well without the need for sugar.

Right as she prepared for bed, Airi nearly froze when she checked the calendar. In a desperate
attempt to do something for tomorrow, she found the rudra ring the residents in the Velvet Room gave her. She dragged out her mother’s box and a bin of craft supplies. The ring was fairly malleable once Airi channeled the energy from her Personas. She had to visit the Velvet Room after school earlier that day to obtain Shiva. Shiva’s blessing allowed Airi to mold the metallic band into small beads. She attached them to wiring and they were threaded through thin leather straps, five were bound together to thicken and toughen the bracelet. From eleven at night to three in the morning, Airi worked until the craft was sturdy and ready.

She placed the gift on her desk when finished and examined her mother’s box. A few more things were added, such as a shell from Yakushima that she stepped on during one of the water gun fights and a dented bullet that jammed one of Aigis’ gun barrels in the middle of a fight in Tartarus. Airi also kept an empty bottle of suppressants. It barely fit in with the more warm, sentimental items that called back pleasant memories, and looking at it made Airi instinctively touched her neck, light pink and long healed.

After a few minutes of reminiscing, she caught as much sleep as possible before the second session of lectures on Tuesday. Once she sat in her usual seat at school, Airi was about ready to zone out if it weren’t for the ever-peculiar and disheveled nurse of Gekkoukan High, Edogawa.

“I know it’s hot, everyone, but let’s just try and get through class.” His laidback chuckles soothed the stress of the students. “You must be very curious students to be taking this course over the summer. I’m not sure what to make of that, but let’s talk about something interesting today!” He pulled out a chair from the corner of the room and sat before everyone. “All you future magicians will want to pay close attention! Today’s subject is Tarot.” A few people gasped curiously. “That’s right, those cards often used in fortune-telling.”

Edogawa got up and quickly jotted down the history of the Tarot cards on the chalkboard. He referenced the various types of desks, and specifically stated that the kind he chose to discuss was the Thoth deck. Airi blanked out for a little bit, having known a great deal about Tarot cards through the books bought from the bookstore the elderly couple owned at the Iwatodai strip mall or from her foster father.

“…The Major Arcana features a variety of illustrations on their faces. Beginning with The Fool and ending with The World, they tell a story in numerical order that is a metaphor of an individual’s journey through life. Each Major Arcana represents a stage on that journey… an experience that the individual must incorporate to realize his oneness. They are all important, so let’s take a look at each of the 22 cards…”

The girl closed her eyes and recalled every single bond she forged through the course of one year in timelines past…

_The first card, numbered 0, is the Fool. It represents the beginning and suggests infinite possibilities._

Ripped straight from Igor’s mouth. But besides the direct quote, Airi remembered she and her friends posing in front of a camera in commemoration of defeating the last full moon Shadow. It came out with half of them tripping over and elbowing each other, but they were full of mirth on one of the few days where they were allowed to be happy and free without fear.

_The next card, the Magician, represents action and initiative… but also immaturity._

A dorky smile greeted her as the boy took off his blue baseball cap. In his hand was a worn sketchbook, full of pictures of him. “Let me know if you’re ever going through some hard times,
okay? If you can’t say it, just give me a sign, Aibana. I’ll be there for ya, like you were for me.”

*The Priestess represents contemplation and inner knowledge.*

A timid girl sat in an empty classroom, holding a computer notebook with coupons, lowered her head in reflection. “I could never accept the bad parts of me. You saw my faults, but you always encouraged me to do better… That’s why I should try to like myself for who I am…”

*The Empress represents motherhood and the life it brings forth.*

The young red-haired woman sat on the school’s rooftop and basked in the light of the sun. She turned off her cell phone and smiled as she never had before. “I will no longer allow my sex or my family name to shackle me. There are things only I can do, and I will accomplish them…”

*The Emperor is an opposing card. It represents fathering and relates to leadership and decision-making skills.*

Beneath the firm folded arms of a determined student council member was an empathetic heart. He never did find the culprit behind the bathroom smoker case, but he happy letting it go. “The system only works if you have people’s trust, Airi-kun, and trust is not something you force them to feel. Thank you for letting me see that before I went too far.”

*The Hierophant represents formality and knowledge, and stands for religion.*

An adorable elderly couple stood beneath a Persimmon in full bloom overlooking a Port Island sunset near Gekkoukan High school. “The tree will be replanted on a hill where you can see the whole campus. Our son can still watch over the school and its students…”

*The Lovers card represents choice. Here, the individual’s consciousness has finally surfaced.*

The pink choker and sweater brought out the sweeter side of a short-tempered girl. She held a pair of bags from shopping at Paulownia Mall. “Finding someone to care for, and loving them with everything I’ve got… I want to cherish them to the point that I won’t even have time to feel sad when they’re gone. My memories of being with them will never disappear.”

*The Chariot represents victory for the individual, but only a momentary one.*

A girl with a black ponytail finished a game-finishing serve and waved at Airi. “I thought it was right to sacrifice and devote myself to the club. No matter how tough things got, knowing I was getting better… I had forgotten something important: have fun.”

*Justice represents the knowledge of what is right, and what is wrong.*

A kid with a bittersweet smile in an orange sweatshirt played with action figures from his favorite TV show in the dinning room of the dorm. “I began to think about what it means to be left behind. I still think that my mom must’ve had regrets, but I had a lot of good memories about home. I really miss her, Airi-san.”

*The Hermit represents the individual’s search for answers by looking inward, deep inside his heart.*

A warm girl from library committee held a microphone close to her bosom and beamed humbly. Though she had to transfer to another school, she finally cleared her name from the boyfriend-stealing scandal over the school’s intercom. “No one can take my place, and I have no one to blame but myself for what I let happen to me. That’s why I need to stand on my own. I need to have my own voice…”
Fortune represents fate, and the opportunities that come with it.

Holding her hand tightly, a forlorn young man with a yellow scarf stared longingly with tears in his eyes. “I’m sorry… I wish we could have had more time together. I’m glad we met. I’m glad we could share these last few moments together like this, even if there was someone else more dear to you than I ever could be.”

Strength represents both passion and self-control. It is depicted as power with reason.

A pure white shiba-inu with large crimson eyes laid down beside the entrance to a sacred shrine. Sensing a familiar presence, he raised his head, wagged his tail, and howled.

The Hanged Man reflects the individual’s inability to take action.

A grade school girl stood hand-in-hand with her divorcing parents. She laughed happily, knowing a beaded ring reminded her of the one who helped her through the transition. “We’re gonna be far apart… But you and me are family. I mean, not really, but you’re my sister, okay? Forever and ever!”

Spiritual death awaits the individual with the 13th card, which is aptly named Death. Death is considered a transitional card… The old ends and the new begins.

The blue-eyed kid in stripped pajamas let out an unintentionally creepy grin. “For me, our friendship was a miracle. But miracles don’t last forever. If only they did… I shall cherish our conversations, always.”

Now let us continue along the path, following the transition. Temperance is the balancing of opposites. Opening his eyes to the world allows the individual to grow…

A blonde French transfer student held a traditional Japanese fan in one hand, and a suitcase in another. She never had the chance to see him wear the kimono he made. “I have met many people in Japan, but you are the best friend I have here! If my aunt was still alive… I would tell her about the wonderful friend I have made!”

And as the Devil represents, he then faces temptation…

A well-groomed businessman with a sly smirk stood with folded arms and laughed to himself. “I’m thinking of privately donating ten million yen to charity. By talking to you, I seemed to have developed an interest in watching others mature… I thank you for that. Actually, I should be thanking myself for wisely noticing this.”

At the Tower, his values collapse on him. It seems as if he no longer has anything to believe in, but…

The tired old monk glanced down at the table of booze and cigars and quickly turned away. It was the last time he planned to waste his nights at a nightclub. “I faced the fact that I was drinkin’ to hide my true feelings. I feel so free now. It’s all your fault. If I hadn’t met you, I’d never have seen my family ever again. I owe ya, kid.

…he then finds a glimmer of hope, represented by the Star; and he is suffused with a serene calm…

The silver-haired boxer proudly sat on top of the horizontal bar after swinging around in a full circle. “I thought it’d be better not to let things get too important than to risk losing them. But lately, I don’t think so. If I want to avoid that feeling, I have to protect what’s precious to me without fear… including you, Airi.”
This bliss makes him vulnerable to the illusions of the Moon. Fears arise, and he follows the dim path in his heart with trepidation...

Hands in the pockets of his jacket, the young man had a weak smile, hiding his loneliness and other heartbreaking feelings. “I ain’t worried at all, because I know you’re with the others. I’m leaving the rest to you, Fujihara. Take care of ‘em, but remember to laugh every now and then. You’re… so alive when you’re happy.”

But he is rewarded with a bright future, represented by the Sun, which signifies true achievement.

A sickly young man sat at a bench with a book and red fountain pen. His proudest moment was leaving a piece of art behind for children to enjoy. “…The meaning of my life is not something I should worry about. It’s really what others think of my life or what I was able to do for them. So for me, or you, or anyone the meaning of our lives in something that we make, but don’t see.”

Judgment awaits the individual at the end of his journey, as he looks back on the path he has traveled.

The final blockade had been breached as they ascended the grand pearly stairs. After so long, they reached the top. The large full moon above them shined in fierce intimidation and a majestic black creature descended upon them, but soon, after months of fighting, loss, and pain, they will be free.

The final card is the World, which represents the individual’s full awareness of his place in the world.

There was nothing but pure darkness. Somewhere amidst the emptiness, a heavy singing of chains echoed in the void. They grew louder and louder, reaching for her limbs, ready to capture her. Ravenous roars threaten to tear her open if she stood in its way. A brutal blast to the gut knocked the wind out of her. Hot liquid drenched her legs in a thick waterfall. Sharp claws dug into her face, prying her mouth and eyes open beyond their limit…

Airi’s eyes shot open and she flew out of her seat. The classroom was empty. Disoriented and sweaty, she patted herself down and found nothing physically wrong with her. She pressed her burning forehead to her cool desk and breathed slowly to gather her bearings and ride out the aftermath of the nightmare.

When the bell rang to mark the closing of the school, she turned to the window. Streaks of pink and Clementine-orange darted above the Port Island skyline. Looking at the beautiful world outside her birdcage, Airi hoped what happened would never, ever, ever befall upon her.

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Around the low-sitting pink table in the heart of a yellow bedroom, they stared at the envelope for a while. It arrived sometime after the typical mail delivery, and someone was kind enough to tape it onto Fuuka’s bedroom doorframe. There was no indicator of who the sender was, but she noticed that the royal-blue-inked handwriting was precise, prim, and perfect.

“Well, aren’t you gonna open it?” asked Yukari.

Fuuka’s hand trembled as she slowly and carefully opened it without tearing the thick, paper. Out dropped a thin square-shaped paper with small script on both sides. Fuuka’s vision was good enough to read it; however, that was not what surprised her.
Yukari would rap her fingers on the table impatiently, but she resisted the urge. “What does it say?”

She said nothing right away. The mixed shock and confusion hindered her ability to speak. Instead, she gulped and passed the paper on to the archer, who read the letter aloud:

Yamagishi-san,

We have a mutual acquaintance in Airi Fujihara. She is an observant skeptic, searching for the truth to end the Dark Hour. Do not be alarmed; I am helping her on this journey so in turn she can help you and your friends. This may be frank, but there are threats far greater than the 12 Shadows. Something else is brewing that will affect your mission, and I pray you and your friends will have the courage, strength, and prudence to confront this force. Please contact me via email to discuss all questions you may have. I will answer them to the best of my ability.

Signed,
Teodoa Arisato.

Yukari spoke her thought aloud, “This has to be a prank.”

“What if Airi-chan does know him?” the teal girl hoped anxiously. She rested on her lap one of the potted plants that filled her storage shelves. “Wh-What should I do?”

Yukari found the letter to be a load of crap. If Airi spoke of honesty so many months ago, why would she keep silent over a contact who had knowledge of SEES and their work? Ready to put the letter back in its original home, she spotted a green slip peaking from the envelope. Once she reached for it, she noticed the handwriting was very familiar and expressive. Someone else added her few cents to the suspicious letter.

She reluctantly gave the benefit of the doubt and read it.

I’m sorry to scare you, Fuuka, but you’re one of the best at gathering information. That ‘modified’ rice ball recipe was so tasty and original! So please don’t worry. Arisato-kun will be very helpful, I promise!

P.S.: Let’s throw a party for everyone! ;) Maybe that ‘professional chef’ Kirijo-sempai mentioned will help us out!”

Fuuka choked and let out a huge smile as she remembered Airi’s boundless energy and praises at cooking club after that successful session. They ate all of their onigiri in one sitting.

Yukari was slightly moved as she put the letters down. “The handwriting looks like hers.”

“I did a lot of research on what salt and seaweed to use to make the best onigiri… It was so much fun and it turned out so well. I’ve never seen someone so happy for something I did right.” That same boost affected her in that moment. She put aside a flowering plant she watered earlier and got up to get her sleeping laptop, sitting on the edge of her cluttered desk. “I’ll look up this man. I trust Airi enough to try.”

“If you say so,” she sighed and folded her arms. “I don’t like the idea of her sending a secret message like this. She should have told everyone about this, like Mitsuru-sempai and her father did.”

“That was because of what happened in May, right?” said Fuuka, whose eyes focused to the monitor and whose fingers typed at a superhuman rate. “Keeping secrets hurts, but I’m sure they are withheld for good reasons. Timing might be one of them.”
“That’s being a bit too optimistic. I’m sorry, but this is her going back on her promise.”

“I understand where you’re coming from.” After a few minutes, her face suddenly lit up in surprise. “Y-Yukari-chan, take a look. He’s real!”

The skeptic loosened up enough to give into curiosity. She scooted next to the tech-savvy girl and tried to navigate through the various windows and applications open. In the center of the screen was an email Fuuka started typing, and around it were various web pages. One showed a professional image of a black-haired Teodoa Arisato, whose high cheekbones and narrow nose seemed Caucasian, but his demeanor screamed Japanese. Another had a series of images of him, lanky and refined, in the Port Island area, particularly at events sponsored by the Kirijo Group.

The third one confirmed Fuuka’s trust in her leader. Yukari’s eyes widened. “He knows the Chairman!”

The girl stopped typing and put another web page in view. “He’s the secretary of the Chief Director of Gekkoukan High School. He works for Ikutsuki-san.”

“No way! How did Airi get this kind of connection?” Then her inflection grew dark. “Is she spying on the Chairman?”

“I… I don’t know…” Fuuka sheepishly confessed. “Ikutsuki-san was one of the survivors of the explosion ten years ago, but he hasn’t said anything about what happened back then…”

“So Airi and this Arisato thinks he’s hiding something,” Yukari finished her thought.

“I believe so.”

“That still doesn’t explain how she knows his secretary.”

Fingers dancing away once more, Fuuka said, “I trust Airi-chan. We can ask her for more details when we see her…”

Yukari still didn’t fully buy it, yet Fuuka’s determination stunned her. Two months ago she had the backbone of a worm. Having the newbie spend time with her, Junpei, and Airi helped her settle in, but she remained nervous when talking in front of larger groups. And yet there she was, defending a friend when the most cynical member of SEES doubted.

“Alright, Fuuka,” she smiled apologetically. “We might as well take the lead. Your research skills are helpful, so I’m counting on you too.”

“Th-Thanks! I’ll see what I can do…”

The constant stream of high praises filled Fuuka with happiness and complete fear. She told Yukari that she needed a bit more room to focus and finish the email. Her friend respected that wish and wandered around, looking at assorted plants and flowers on Fuuka’s shelves. Maybe they could finally start getting some answers.

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It was nearly midnight once Shinjiro returned to the dorm with bags of groceries. Usually by this time, everyone prepared for or was in bed. Not even Koromaru would be awake to greet him. The most he did was sleep by the front door, just to show that he was willing to be one of the first people a late arrival would see.
Today was different. After pushing the door open with his back, Shinjiro was greeted by mild, but chipper barks from a fully awake Koromaru.

"Why’re you still up, Koro-chan?" He smiled kindly despite his dry tone.

"Yo. Need help with those?" Shinjiro glanced up and saw Akihiko rise from the couch. Most likely waiting for him too, he must have hung out and watched TV.

"Not gonna happen, Aki," He shot him down at once and worked his way to the kitchen. "That arm’ll never heal."

Shinjiro barely made four feet before having two bags stolen from his hands. Glaring, he tackled the one-armed thief to retrieve his things. "Man, your aim sucks," Akihiko sneered, proudly avoiding every desperate thrash. "Besides, what’s up your ass anyway? Secretly buying porn?"

"Don’t be stupid," growled an offended Shinjiro. Even if he did, he knew how to smuggle it in without anyone suspecting it. "I never asked for your help."

"Relax. I insist. Can’t you take a rest on your birthday?"

"…Huh?"

In the moment of distraction, Akihiko snatched a third bag from his elbow and bolted to the kitchen. Tired of being played with, Shinjiro slumped right behind with the last bag and helped put things away.

"Seriously, Shinji, you’re the only person I know who’d forget his own birthday." Akihiko’s friend gave him the finger. "Lighten up a bit, you old man! There’s still another few minutes before the Dark Hour settles in."

Sorting through the food went by much faster thanks to Akihiko’s aid. Admitting his appreciation for the help would only give the boxer a swollen head, so Shinjiro kept quiet. Nearby, Koromaru sat with expectant eyes.

"Hey, Aki. Where’d you put the meat?"

He raised an eyebrow, trying to remember. "In the fridge… Why?" Koromaru barked, mouth watering in anticipation. "Hold on, hold on," Shinjiro laughed softly as he opened the refrigerator. "I’m gettin’ it for you, boy. Quit begging like I never –"

Right beside the item he needed sat a sugar cookie about five inches in diameter with enough red icing to write out "Happy birthday, Shinjiro Aragaki" without it being too much. He surely wasn’t expecting a gift like this, and he didn’t know whether to be appreciative or indifferent by a sweet treat.

"Looks like ‘sempai’ has an admirer," Akihiko teased. Koromaru’s eyes closed tight as he harmoniously barked, imitating a burst of laughter.

Overhearing the exchange, the birthday boy closed the fridge and grimaced. "Koro-chan wasn’t hungry after all, huh?"

The dog and Akihiko shared eye contact briefly before both staring with cartoonishly amused smiles. "Well? Aren’t you gonna try it?"

"I don’t like sweets."
“It can’t sit there forever, you know. If that certain junior notices that you didn’t touch it, she might get upset.” The superior know-it-all attitude was obnoxious. Shinjiro shot a glare. Akihiko sighed and patted him on the back. “C’mon, who do you think set this up for you?”

“Since when did you start caring ‘bout a girl’s feelings? You growin’ soft, Aki?”

Ignoring the bitter retort, Akihiko opened the fridge and took out the plastic-wrapped cookie. He held it out to his friend and said, “I don’t like sweets either, but this looks pretty tame. Try a bite of someone else’s cooking for once.”

With a heavy sigh, Shinjiro accepted the treat and slowly unwrapped it. The pressure from two observers didn’t bother him too much afterwards, as he immediately nibbled the cookie once enough was exposed. It had the right balance between hard and chewy; hardly any crumbs fell onto his hand or on the floor. There was a nice flavor that did not rely on a busload of sugar.

“So, what’s the verdict, Iron Chef Shinji?”

He launched another pair of glaring missiles before taking another bite. Shinjiro could barely tolerate such attitude from one of the women who looked after him in the orphanage, and as much as Akihiko loved pushing his luck, he was lucky he was like family. Once he patiently chewed and swallowed, he replied, “It ain’t bad…”

Koromaru watched in interest and was the first to notice that after each bite, Shinjiro slowed down more and more. His eyes widened slightly and his cheeks turned light pink. “It’s… really good…” he mumbled awkwardly.

Akihiko struggled to restrain a snicker, imagining the look on the girl’s face after describing his best friend’s reaction. After a few minutes, the green mist settled in, but Shinjiro ignored everything but the cookie, and he frowned in disappointment when he was down to the last bite. Sucking up his sour mood, he placed the tiny piece in his mouth and crumpled up the wrapper.

“Good boy,” Akihiko applauded patronizingly.

“What’s the big deal?” Shinjiro leaned against the counter and tossed the wrapper ball into the trash across from him. “I won’t know who made it…”

“I’ll tell her you prefer to thank her in person. She’ll be happy her sempai noticed her.”

“Tch…”

They stood there quietly for a while, occasionally petting Koromaru as he brushed against their legs.

“Shinji…” A strange lump formed in Akihiko’s throat. He had no idea why the thought crossed his mind, but he had to say it or else the curiosity would torment him for days. Still he doubted he would get a straight answer from a guy who loved dodging personal questions.

Shinjiro’s eyes, cool and mellow, turned to the speaker. “C’mon, spit it out.”

Indecision crippled Akihiko, who shook his head and averted his eyes. “F-Forget it. It’s nothing.”

“It’s enough to make you look like a kid beggin’ for a new toy. Just talk.”

Akihiko weighed his options and concluded it was better to just give in. He envied Shinjiro’s ability to withstand this kind of pressure, something he knew he didn’t learn from the women who ran the orphanage. “Back at Yakushima, Junpei asked which of the girls here was our type. You never gave
Slightly amused over how Akihiko made a big deal out of this topic, Shinjiro smirked and shrugged. “It’s all based on physical appearance. That’s the worst way to judge a girl.”

“Fair enough. But every time Mitsuru was around, you made sure I had a chance to gawk at her like an idiot.”

“Unlike a lot of entitled assholes out there, you like her for far more than just her looks and smarts. Honestly, you’re both idiots for not noticin’ how awkward it gets when you’re in a room together. But am I that big of a prick for pointin’ it out?”

“Of course! Ever think you’re seeing things that aren’t there!?” Shinjiro laughed over Akihiko’s beet-red face matching his passionate protest. “Okay, okay, but it’s not just me. Like it or not, everyone knows you two bicker like an ol’ married couple. Even Aigis noticed, and she’s a damn robot who can’t make a face without it lookin’ uncanny or creepy. Soon there’ll be a betting pool over whether or not you guys will wake up and smell reality if this keeps up.”

Akihiko scratched the back of his head and nervously chuckled. Unlike the immature teases Junpei threw on a daily basis, Akihiko appreciated Shinjiro’s interpretation of a similar comment: no beating around the bush and delivering his opinion prudently and straightforwardly. He didn’t ask for this change in subject, but it was the price he paid for being ambivalent about speaking his mind too.

“But if you’re still wonderin’, none of ’em are my type.”

From a surface reading of Shinjiro’s flat delivery, Akihiko didn’t buy the lie. “You are allowed to like people.” When Shinjiro didn’t respond right away, he tried another approach. “There’s no reason to keep up a tough guy act while you’re here. You’re not on the streets anymore.”

“Next you’re gonna tell me to cook for everyone.” Shinjiro made a face while staring at the kitchen door.

“Yeah, well, it’s Mitsuru’s job to nag, but honestly… why not? It’ll surprise everyone. Hell, you never made me food or asked if I wanted anything whenever the chance arose.”

A soft whine caught Shinjiro’s attention and he knelt down to scratch behind the dog’s ear. “What’s wrong, Koro-chan?” Nudging his nose against the human’s shoulder, Koromaru whined again, the sound hit the right nerve to make Shinjiro feel guilt.

“It’s not that hard, Shinji,” Akihiko pressed. “You’re just not willing to try and change.”

“Once you’ve been on the streets for as long as me--”

“No. Don’t make that excuse again,” snapped the boxer, slamming his free hand on the counter. “You weren’t like this back then. You were never this difficult to talk to. Why are you scared of being friends with anyone but me?”

Shinjiro stood up straight with a smug smirk, another act Akihiko could see through, which angered him even more. “Ya talk like I’m the only one with trust issues.”

“This isn’t about me, you dumbass! I’ve always worried about you, but ever since…” Another lump formed in his throat as he remembered that night. Akihiko could sometimes could still hear him screaming, and the sound would cross over and mix with his memories of the orphanage fire. He
punched the counter as if going so would block out that mind-splitting sound he never thought he would ever hear. “Why didn’t you talk to me? Why don’t you ever tell me what's going on in that head of yours? Why couldn’t you tell me you wanted to die? I could’ve helped you get through this without you resorting to those damn drugs! If Airi wasn’t there to save you, I’d…” He stifled a sob and could not bring himself to finish his sentence.

Stretching his neck, Shinjiro leaned against the countertop once more. His posture slouched and as he stared down at his rugged, worn boots, whatever that magic spell was that kept him resilient shattered to pieces. “So red eyes made the cookie…”

“You mean Airi?” said Akihiko, surprised by the quick observation.

His friend let out a defeated chuckle before pinching the bridge of his nose. “That idiot… Shouldn’t she waste her time somewhere else? The whole damn world bows to her every whim. Ain’t that enough for her?”

Hearing the ominous tone in his voice, Akihiko hated where this was going.

Suddenly, Shinjiro coughed into his sleeve. It barely lasted ten seconds, but the occasional strained wheeze and hunched over back made his condition sound and look much worse than it really was. When it ended, he wiped his mouth with his hand, leaving thick smears of blood.

All color drained from Akihiko’s face, and heavy lead filled his legs. “Is this… a side effect?”

“Yeah,” he admitted uncomfortably, while washing his hand in the sink.

“How much time…?”

“Don’t worry ‘bout— Shinjiro stopped once he acknowledged Akihiko’s left fist, clenched and ready to blow. “Christmas, if I’m lucky.”

The world seemed to fall apart at his feet, but somehow he did not sink into the abyss. Akihiko wanted to do or say something, but he knew Shinjiro would brush it off without giving it any thought. Koromaru did it for him by crying and rubbing against Shinjiro’s leg once more.

Ignoring the terror and grief brewing in his heart, Akihiko felt the need to ask since the thought bothered him for a long time. “What if Airi–”

“No.”

The abruptness sliced the air in half, yet it didn’t stop Akihiko from pushing the super-glued envelope further. “What if you weren’t… dying? What would you say if she said she liked you?”

"Aki, don't."

“You’d still reject her?”

“I…” Shinjiro's voice cracked. After taking a deep breath to suppress the panic stirring from the what-ifs, his tone was more monotonous and balanced. “I ain’t a nice guy.”

“That’s a lie, Shinji. I’ve known you for too long to say you don't care.” Akihiko approached his friend and placed his healthy hand on Shinjiro’s shoulder. “If you like her and she likes you, don’t deny it and don’t run away. You’ll make yourself sicker.”

Shinjiro’s fist clenched, and it took every bit of him not to turn around and punch Akihiko. He
struggled enough to keep his voice low, to not scream until he won one of the stupidest arguments they ever had. "I ain't runnin', I'm being realistic. There's no damned point entertaining the idea. There're plenty of guys out there in the world, and the last one she'd want is a drug-using delinquent on his deathbed."

Akihiko tried to imitate his best friend's anger, but had no more energy to do so. His own feelings didn’t matter at that moment. Even if he did admit to harboring a little crush for the girl at some point, Akihiko felt more for Shinjiro’s dilemma. They hated talking about their feelings and they felt somewhat attracted to the same girl, except only one of them was capable of staying by her side beyond this year. It wasn’t fair, and Akihiko didn’t feel enough to fight Shinjiro over Airi.

“If you say Mitsuru’s my responsibility, then make Airi yours,” he said with the same strictness Shinjiro used when he expected something from him. "Whether anything happens between you or not, I don’t know anyone who’d better protect her."

His words were enough to make Shinjiro sick. His shoulder jerked, letting to of Akihiko’s hold. Hiding his face - pale from illness, yet red from his feelings being discovered and analyzed - with his beanie, he swiftly walked past his confused brother and headed for the stairs. “Don’t worry ‘bout me. Just… do what you think is right and I’ll do the same.”

Once his sulking friend was long gone upstairs and a door slammed shut, Akihiko finally loosened up. He wanted to punch something badly. Koromaru sensed this, and gently butted his head against Akihiko’s knee. He knelt down on his level and thanked the dog.

“If you ask me, he’s a fucking idiot sometimes. After all these years, he’s more than capable of caring for others than I am. I wish I knew how to help him see that.”

Koromaru’s eyes softened slightly and he let out a low bark. Though he still did not understand what he would say, some expressions were fairly consistent. This was one of them and Akihiko replied with a smile.

“I’m glad you noticed it too, Koromaru. Good to know I’m not going crazy."

A bracelet sat on the doorknob: another gift from the cookie girl. Like the treat, he grudgingly took it, and after changing into sweatpants, he examined it, fitting his wrist perfectly. Under the influence of the Dark Hour, the beads coolly pulsed against his skin with calm, content whispers approving of this strange rejuvenating bracelet echoed through his soul. When the suppressants flowed through his veins, the voice was subdued, quieted. Castor would scream, resentful over being silenced after the last dose’s effects faded. Now, completely clean, his Persona was tranquil once more, if not thankful and more cooperative.

Laying on his bare back, sleep could not find him. Akihiko’s words continued to ring in his head. The taste of the cookie lingered on his tongue. The bracelet tickled, sending chills up his arm.

Her voice sang to him in the silence: “Thank you for being so kind to me.”

He should have been the one thanking her for putting up with him for so long. With plenty of admirers and friends, she had no reason to be near him. Or maybe she was manipulative, using him for her own satisfaction. Unless she got kicks out of humiliating guys who hung around the shittiest places in town, a popular girl would stay away from a lowlife and a murderer. Or she simply, genuinely liked being with him; maybe she loved him. The latter possibility was even worse.
“Airi…” Whenever he was alone, he would catch himself saying her name aloud and made up new excuses for it.

He never properly thanked her. Lying in his blood, sweat, and spit on the bedroom floor would have been an embarrassing way to go without her help, but articulating what her overwhelming worry meant to him made him hesitate.

“How is Airi…? This isn’t how it should be…”

Shinjiro couldn’t understand how she stopped him. The pure desperation to stop her from interfering in his suicidal choices completely possessed him. Somehow an overwhelming wave of hopeful thoughts flowed from her cold, thin fingers and tore apart his rage. With no basis he was aware of, she believed in him unconditionally.

“Airi…” He caught his fingers tracing where she caressed his cheek. He whispered her name too softly for comfort.

“From what you have told me, she seems to be enjoying herself. I thought she would struggle to readjust to Japan, but I underestimated her ability to adapt to new places. I only wish I could be there to see my lovely jasmine bloom into a beautiful young woman. You kids at the dorm are good for her, especially you, Shinjiro-kun. Keep watching over my niece. I know she looks up to you.”

Visiting Kurebayashi weekly fed his frustration. Worst of all were the dreams and the lingering feeling that she was always with him in some way. He caught himself thinking about her smile and her laughter when he had nothing to do, and the endless reminders of her at random times of the day often made him forget he was dying. The more she was around and the more she shared her time, her thoughts, or her opinions with him, the more he wanted to be with her and the more he wanted to know about her. The more he wanted a reason to hold her, to feel safe with her and not worry if he looked weak for wanting that kind of contact.

The mere curious thought of her skin against his induced nausea, and the feelings were so intense that he feverishly scratched his wrist to get the bracelet off. Ignoring the cuts his nails inflicted, Shinjiro threw the bracelet across the room and punched the wall. The thoughts his damned teenage brain conjured, slowly unraveling more vivid scenarios, refused to stop, threatening to stir an urge he resisted far better than most his age. His heart cringed tightly in his chest as he hyperventilated. Unable to breathe, a coughing fit consumed Shinjiro once more. The pain nearly split his rib bones and punctured his lungs. Just as Kurebayashi warned him, his body expelled drops of bloody sputum. It looked and felt much worse than it really was, but Shinjiro knew the next episode would always be worse than the last.

Once he settled down, the soreness in his chest lingered and the wheezing never went away. The fantasies ended, and a kind voice wrapped warmly around his neck, like delicate arms trying to comfort him. Shinjiro buried his face in his hands and ignored her. A different kind of pain manifested along with the tearing of his weakened heart. Both threatened to suffocate him when he was alone.
“Damn it… Please stop…”
August 16, 2009

Everyone was eternally thankful when the week of summer classes ended with the summer festival shining brightly and welcoming them at the end of the tunnel. The dorm was vacant besides them when she searched for the others, so Airi and Akihiko agreed to go to the Naganaki Shrine together.

Wearing a red v-neck t-shirt, white pants, and sneakers, he felt very underdressed but nonetheless comfortable. “…That looks hard to walk in,” he commented after helping Airi regain her balance after tripping over a curb. “You didn’t have to wear a yukata.”

Holding her chignon bun from coming undone, the girl she turned slightly to let the fine fabric dance in the summer sunset. “I don’t mind! Blair made this for me before coming here. He’s a wonderful tailor.”

“Oh, er… I didn’t mean to treat you like a kid…” Akihiko rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. Y-You look good in green…”

“Thanks!”

Grateful she did not think much of his embarrassment, he continued the conversation. “But your brother made it? That’s really interesting… your lucky to have a talented foster brother. What are those white flowers?”

“Jasmines. They’re my favorite.” She pointed at her barrette right above her left ear. “Did you know they tend to bloom when the sun sets, and they close again at dawn? There’s something pretty about something that is fleeting and defies expectations.”

Akihiko adopted a teasingly disapproving tone. “It does explain you exploring town at night without a care.”

“I don’t go out at night that often!” she protested with a pout.

“I hope so. It’s bad enough Shinji adopted that lifestyle. He’s getting better, but I still know he sneaks out on the weekends when he thinks I’m not looking. The cameras in the dorm catch everything.”

Her jaw dropped. “You watch us in the command room?!”

Akihiko shook his head, understanding her worry. “Only to check for possible lurkers. Everyone heads home at a good hour, so I’m not worried about anyone breaking curfew. Minus Shinji, but that’s a given.”

“Good to know, but I was only teasing,” she said with an amused giggle. "Since nothing terrible has happened, I guess we’re safe from burglars.”

“Very true. I’d hate for something to happen to any of us. So be careful, Airi.”

“What, do you think I’m unreliable?”
“No, that’s –” He gave her a knowing look. Airi responded with a cocked head and toothy grin. “No, y-you get what I meant. Right? Just stay out of trouble. We worry about you.”

“Who’s ‘we’? And how are ‘we’ going to watch?”

“Everyone! N-Not just me! It’s not spying! Urgh… I’m sounding stupid aren’t I?”

Laughing loud enough to draw attention, Airi had to lean against a lamppost for a moment to recompose herself. She did recover remarkably quickly, however, and she said, “Oh, no, you’re not stupid. Sorry I was a bit too hard on you. Thanks for caring, Akihiko-kun.”

Scratching the neck of his neck, he turned a light pink.

“Airi! Akihiko-sempai!”

Waving to catch their attention, Yukari and Fuuka stood by the entrance to the shrine courtyard and wore bright yukata in their favorite colors, pink and blue respectively. Akihiko and Airi picked up their pace to catch up with them. Her sempai wearing sneakers did not slow Airi down, who ran barefoot holding her pair of geta.

“You two made it after all!” Fuuka said with a light bow.

Yukari failed to mask her giggle with her hand. “Airi, don’t your feet hurt?”

“Not really.” She knelt carefully to put on her sandals. “It beats sitting alone at the dorm while you guys have all the fun in the world!”

The girls huddled together and commented on each other’s yukata. Akihiko stood out awkwardly in casual wear, but he complimented them as well. Then they began walking around the comely shrine, packed with people eating food and playing games at the booths. Floating paper lanterns and singing chimes promised some warmth and light breeze in the peak of the midsummer evening.

“Wow. Looks like business is booming,” gaped Akihiko, passing a bleak stand where the sparklers sold out. “Make sure you don’t get separated, okay?”

“Yes, dad,” the girls harmonized and smiled when he gave them an exasperated glare.

Soaking in the lights, sounds, and chatter, Yukari leapt with every step she took. “The crowd’s a lot bigger than I thought it’d be! The festival near where I lived last year was nothing like this.”

“It’s nice to see everyone let their hair down,” said Fuuka, who smiled quite openly despite her introverted nature.

“Totally! But I’ll never get used wearing a yukata; I tripped on my way here…”

“That happens with traditional clothing, unfortunately,” Airi replied. “But I like wearing nice things for special occasions like this.”

A wonderful smell enchanted them and the girls swarmed the takoyaki stand. They ordered one for each of them, and the vendor added a free extra. He gave Akihiko a hard time about being surrounded by so many cute girls. After ignoring the question of who was his girlfriend, Akihiko paid for the food and insisted that one of the girls had the fifth takoyaki.

“Oh, alright,” Airi caved in under the pressure and accepted it. “I forgot this happens…”

Mouth full of takoyaki, Yukari made a face expressing her confusion. “Not used to being called cute
by strangers?” asked a similarly puzzled Akihiko.

“Yeah, I’m not. I’ve met people who are a bit more cautious about teasing like that.” Airi feel silent and took a nibble. “Some would call it harassment if they’re that sensitive…”

Yukari raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t those people overreacting a bit?”

The transfer student shrugged. “In the worst cases, I only find it annoying. I don’t care for light throwaway compliments, but I’m not going to yell someone’s head off for it.”

“Oh! Hot!”

Fuuka clumsily bounced her food between her hands as it cooled off. The overprotective Akihiko offered her a napkin, to which she thanked him humbly as she cleaned her red, raw fingers. They continued walking around and watched the kids run around with toys they won. Lights gave off red and orange glows, matching the multicolored evening sky. For once Airi enjoyed the thick heat of summer. She was so in the moment; she barely noticed how hot it was.

Her daze was cut short when Fuuka piped up. “Look, it’s Aegis and Mitsuru-senpai!”

Right across from another food stand stood the redhead and the blonde. Aegis managed to look so human in her blue yukata with white daisies and by how she held her posture. She pointed out a minute detail seemingly strange to her to Mitsuru, who corrected her patiently and assured it was normal.

As Airi saw them, a thought scratched in the recesses of her mind. Whenever she went to the festival with one of her dorm mates, Airi never ran into anyone else in SEES all at once.

“I guess we all woke up with the same idea,” Yukari observed gesturing at her own attire.

“Let’s go say hi,” Airi suggested. “We’re all here, anyway!”

No need to, as the two noticed the group right away and approached them. Akihiko was nearly paralyzed at the sight of his friend, donning a beautiful snow-white yukata with lavender flowers.

“It is good to see you,” the android attempted a smile.

Mitsuru lowered her head and said, “Hello. Aegis wanted to come, so I’m supervising.”

“You both look so pretty!” noted Airi and Fuuka.

“How’s the festival, Aegis?” Yukari asked curiously.

The android placed a finger on her chin and said, “This is a peaceful gathering. Nothing seems to be behind it. So many people appear to be having fun.”

“It’ll take a while for her to fully adapt to societal norms,” Mitsuru stated bluntly with a soft expression. “However, her degree of comprehension is simply amazing. At this rate, the Chairman might grant her permission to go out on her own.”

“I am looking forward to that.”

Another first happened; Aegis’s smile was so genuine, it was nearly human for a brief second, and everyone couldn’t help but be ecstatic for her surprising progress. They continued on through the shrine and looked at the stands. One stood out to Aegis in particular.
“What is that?” she pointed to the faces of various animals. Some were just abstract patterns and designs that made no sense, but were beautiful.

“It’s called a mask,” explained a patient Mitsuru. “You wear it over your face to have fun.”

She picked up one of a yellow fox and put it on. “Hiding your face is fun?”

“The purpose is not to hide your face, rather, you wear it to have a different face.”

“You try to be someone or something else by wearing a different face?” Aigis attempted to reword the explanation.

Slightly embarrassed, Mitsuru forced a smile. “Well, yes, exactly…”

“That is odd. The Shadows we fight wear masks, revealing their Arcana. Are they hiding their true nature with this reasoning?”

“N-Not necessarily. Masks tend to be decorative. Sometimes they hide one’s true face, or they accentuate innate features of the wearer. It depends on the intention and circumstance.”

Aigis processed the new, seemingly contradictory information slowly. She kept quiet for a while, giving Mitsuru a welcome break from the barrage of questions and allowing her to interact with the others.

Yukari took a mask from off the stand and showed it off with a giggle. “Does it look like Korochan?”

“You should get it and show him!” Airi chirped. “I kinda like the kitten…”

While they huddled around the stand, the sole male took out his wallet and chuckled nostalgically.

“Is something wrong, Akihiko-sempai?” Fuuka looked up confused.

He shook his head. “Masks were too expensive for me to buy when I was a kid. I would wander around and go home because I couldn’t buy anything. Now I actually have the money…”

“S’up dudes?”

A hand slapped Akihiko’s back and the senior let out a yelp. His first instinct was to punch the poor guy, but the arm that would normally lead the attack was still in a cast. Instead he stuck with defense, turned to the left and faced the speaker. Rather observant for once, wide-eyed Junpei stood with his hands up.

“H-Hey, sempai…!”

Akihiko straighten up and sighed. “You’re lucky I’m not in top shape…”

“Junpei-kun!” Fuuka greeted, holding a panther mask she bought.

Grinning like a basement-dwelling loser, he clown whistled. “Couldn’t recognize you guys for a sec. You girls look great in your yukata!”

Yukari folded her arms. “Oh, no perverted comments this time? Too bad my legs are covered.”

“You think I’d get away with it? Seriously, I’d even get executed for sayin’ something nice!”
A kid in an orange sweatshirt emerged from right behind him. “It seems Iori-san always says something to make girls angry at him.”

“Amada?” Hiding her conflicted feelings of surprise and discomfort, Mitsuru greeted the boy. He bowed. “Hello, Kirijo-san. Everyone.” He turned to the rest with a shy smile.

“I can’t believe everybody’s here,” said Akihiko as he eyed each person in their group.

“I know, right?” Junpei agreed. “It’s kinda bizarre to run into each other all at once outside of the usual business.”

“Everyone… exempting Koromaru and Shinjiro-san,” corrected Aigis, still wearing the fox mask Airi paid for.

Upon realizing it too, Fuuka looked around the shrine. “I wonder where Shinjiro-sempai is…”

Yukari replied flatly, “Knowing him, he might be ditching.”

“It can’t be helped…” Mitsuru sighed, playing ignorant. She and Akihiko knew he was probably still at Kurebayashi’s office. “He only attended festivals when I gave him the option of joining us or receiving an execution. I only expected his participation during the New Year, which he showed more social etiquette than I imagined. He even wore traditional clothing.”

“He only went to a festival willingly with me one summer,” reminisced Akihiko. “Right before the fireworks, he got so bored he tried to sneak out, only for him to crash into one of the food stands. The guy who worked there is at Hagakure now, and he never lets Shinji live it down.”

“You caught him off guard, and he tripped most magnificently,” Mitsuru reminded with a humored beam. “Poor boy was undergoing an awkward growth spurt at the time. It’s hard to believe it, but I believe that was two years ago.”

“Yeah, he grew five inches that summer. I thought he was done after our second year of junior high, but now he’s one of the tallest guys in our class.”

“A pity we didn’t meet sooner. I’d have loved to have seen how clumsy he was back then.”

“Actually, I was the one who tripped a lot, so it felt good to get back at him when he learned how it felt.”

“How cruel. You two are such children.”

She gave him a disapproving look, but it barely held together when Akihiko saw through her attempt at creating a childish façade. The others saw a softer side to Akihiko and Mitsuru for the first time as they casually reminisced over past memories. For a rare time they really looked like very close friends and not the more professional teammates they came across most times.

Waiting for them to finish, Airi said with a smile, “It’s a shame not everyone is here, but I say we make the most of this! Our schedules can be so busy, it’s rare for almost all of us to be together.”

Everyone looked at each other. The summer festival seemed to be the perfect time to be in the same place concurrently. The juniors were their own gang and the same was with the seniors. Aigis still tried to find her place among the humans and Ken just lived around and still had no knowledge of SEES. Airi hoped everyone could see that, and not let a rare instance like this slip by.
A man at the game booth next to the masks caught their attention. “Hey, kids! Would you like to play Lucky Draw? All you do is pick a ball! It’s easy, and everyone’s a winner!”

“Lucky Draw?” Ken repeated.

“Everyone’s a winner?” Yukari was in awe at some of the prizes; stuffed animals, fans, accessories, etc.

Akihiko seemed amused. “I’ve always doubted whether it’s really possible to win the stuff on display…”

With a light beam, Mitsuru suggested, “Then why don’t we all give it a try?”

“Alright!!” Junpei cheered, bouncing over to the stand. “I used to play this all the time when I was a kid! I got my first Pokémon toy with one of these.”

Airi hopped to his side and looked at the prizes. “Let me guess. Pikachu.”

He made a buzzing sound. “Nah, he’s overrated, man! It was Pidgey. I had him since grade school. My mom had to sew the ol’ guy up a few times. I had to shelf him a few years ago cuz he’s all raggedy.”

Their conversation continued on in a very animated fashion. The others felt somewhat left out, and Fuuka was the first to join them. “C’mon, Yukari-chan!” she gently pulled the brunette along. “M- Maybe you can win that necklace there!”

“It is pretty cute. Sure, why not?” That argument barely took a breath.

“Wait for me.” Aigis placed the mask over her head and caught up with the juniors.

Shaking her head and stifling a chuckle, Mitsuru followed suit. She was the chaperone of someone with no money to pay for the draw after all.

“C’mon, Ken-kun!” Yukari encouraged friendlily.

Ken stood by awkwardly, feigning a smile. “Oh, I’m okay. You guys have fun…”

Akihiko approached him with a few coins in hand. “Give it a try. I’ll pay if you don’t have anything on you.”

Ken shook his head. “I’m alright, Sanada-san. The prizes aren’t that interesting anyway.”

“Then what does interest you?”

The kid did not anticipate the question and drew a blank. He stared at the ground. Akihiko backed up a few feet and knelt down so he would not look down at Ken. “Hey, Junpei’s nearly twice your age and leapt like a leprechaun to play a ‘kid’s game.’ He’s too old for it. We all are. But we came here to have fun and be kids because we’re allowed to for once. None of us have enough time to take a breather like this, and these chances won’t come around often.”

Partway through his talk, Ken looked back up at the high schoolers, cheering each other on. Yukari sighed sadly while holding her prize, a menko card. Laughter ensued when Airi squealed over winning a big stuffed doll that resembled a blue-hatted snowman and running from a humorously jealous Junpei. Fuuka’s eyes glowed at the kaleidoscope Aigis held. The poor android was unsure what it was or how it worked.
“I see,” replied Ken, who turned back to Akihiko. “O-Okay… I’ll try it.”

Happy to hear it, the boxer walked with the boy to the group of crazies. The most immature of the group welcomed the boy with noise and cheer. The optimism was so contagious and overwhelming that Ken blushed nervously. After paying 500 yen he slowly put his hand in the box and picked up the first ball he felt. Once he read it aloud, everyone, including the vendor gasped. He won the first place item: a box set of limited edition action figures from *Phoenix Ranger Featherman R*. To say Ken was the star of the night was an understatement. Various kids asking to see the prize surrounded the poor boy throughout the entire festival.

Once the sky got dark, the fireworks went off and everyone watched the exploding colors paint the sky. The highlight of the festival turned all of them into children, full of excitement and stimulation over flashing lights. But every second of forgetting their everyday stress was well worth it.

Airi held onto her prized Jack Frost doll tightly. She never remembered the fireworks ever looking the same in each cycle. She spent time with everyone individually, taking turns to see what going to a festival with a select few friends was like. Each one felt special and irreplaceable in some way; but this one filled Airi’s heart with near-complete joy. Her only wish to make the night perfect was to have Koromaru and Shinjiro with them. Pets were not allowed at the festival, but if everyone stood by the gate entrance, the view of fireworks would be just as magical. Koromaru would like to see his home as a place of bliss and peace as well. And though he may have grudgingly accepted at past events, Shinjiro might have considered this one better than the one he went with Akihiko and Mitsuru. Airi wanted to share a moment like this with him, even if his mind never changed about public events.

The red-eyed girl chose not get too lost in what ifs. She accepted the closest she had been to celebrating with the greatest friends she could have met in one year.

After the show ended everyone walked back to the dorm. The fireworks no longer distracting them, the crowd confronted them over the toys again. A few crazy kids, teens, and parents tried following them for a while, but the stare from the soon-to-be leader of the Kirijo Group dealt with them.

“Stupid jerks,” Yukari spat with his arms folded. “Ken earned that prize fair and square!”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Yuka-tan,” Junpei wiped his brow. In his free hand was the water gun he won. “And, man, we’ve got enough of these to like start a third world war!”

“Go for it!” still high on her euphoria, Airi cheered while snuggling her doll. “I’m happy with Jack Frost-kun!”

The chatter was much shorter, mainly due to the fatigue of being out all afternoon. At one point, though, when everyone was quiet, Ken managed to have the courage to speak up. “H-Hey, guys…” They all slowed their pace and looked at him. The instant attention made him blush. “Th-Thanks for today. I had a lot of fun. You guys… are really cool.”

Mitsuru nodded. “We enjoyed your company as well, Amada.”

“Don’t mention it, dude!” Junpei gave two thumbs up. “Who can hate fireworks, food, and free toys?”

“We’re glad to see you happy, Ken-kun,” Yukari and Fuuka chimed simultaneously, prompting them to giggle.

“You are welcome, friend,” Aigis replied with a smile.
“Hang out with us again whenever you’re free,” said Airi.

Akihiko placed a kind hand on the boy’s head. “There’s no need to call us by our last names anymore. Consider this as us formally welcoming you to our bizarre life.”

Being showered in affection made Ken tear up, and he clenched his prize tight in his arms. It was the best night of his life, though he didn't know how to tell them that.

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August 20, 2009

An abyss of darkness encompassed the plane. Geometric structures bulged out and consumed the organic environment, once rich and lovely. The only light emitted from swirls of blood, crawling along the rough edges of reality. The last pieces of the original world were crimson fireflies, fleeing in hordes from the polluted wasteland. It was a fairytale, tangled, twisted, and gone horribly wrong. Maybe that was true to outsiders, people who wouldn’t dare open their minds enough to understand art so alien to their conventional lives.

It charmed her though. The specific theme and tone mattered little to her; she simply found drawing organic and geometric shapes and making them fit together like a puzzle fascinating. Contrast was probably a better word. It resonated with her somehow. There was always something that seemed out of place with its surroundings. After adding a detail that satisfied her, she put down her paintbrush. She took the murky water sitting in the lid of her water bottle and dumped it in the flowerbed behind her. Near the foot of the bench she sat in, rested the container with fresh water. Once she used it to replenish and fill the lid, she continued her work.

At the corner of her vision she noticed a peculiar boy standing over her canvas. Ignoring his blue athletic shirt and loose-fitting jeans with a chain hanging from his belt, he was an oddity. Maybe he was a random stray fish in the life stream.

“I can’t see. Move.” Her words were acid.

Embarrassed, the boy stammered and played with his hat, “Oh, uh… sorry…”

As apologetic as he sounded, he didn’t act it. He walked a few feet from her, but she could still feel his gaze. Whatever world she could easily escape into was ruined by his lingering presence.

“What do you want?” She snipped once more.

“Uh, nothing. My bad…”

Twice was the charm. The strange feeling she had vanished and she reconnected with her fantastic imagination. More fireflies, golden and red, lit the endless dark of her painting.

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August 24, 2009

Several color-coded files were sprawled across the otherwise spotless modern desk of the Gekkoukan High School Chief Director. The office floor was quite spacious and mostly empty; the walls, however, were buried under rows and rows of metallic shelves, holding various texts and memorabilia. A few windows brought sunlight, but nearly everything would attract and absorb the heat and thus make the room unbearable in the summer. Shades were Ikutsuki’s best friends.
The man sat at his desk and looked at a two-page report typed by the students he advised. Not too many details were relevant to him except the dates, some of which were circled:

April 9, 21, 24, 28

May 9, 13, 23, 28

June 2, 7, 8, 14, 20, 25

July 2, 7, 9, 12, 26

August 4, 6, 17, 20

Across from him sat the doctor, awaiting a response.

“It seems they’re progressing at a consistent rate,” said Kurebayashi he reviewed the papers over. "They rescued the missing people trapped in Tartarus. SEES are quite stable, even with their dynamic personalities."

“Then it’s about time Nemesis stirs things up a bit,” replied Ikusuki. “We should push her host into action.”

“Perhaps,” the doctor flipped to the last page and hummed. “Look at that. Kirijo shares your opinion, with different wording of course.”

“Nemesis will only need to focus on her target. SEES needs to cooperate enough to defeat the last four pieces of Death. We cannot risk missing the Fall when we’ve come so far.”

“My lovely jasmine has everything under control,” he assured his colleague. It didn’t work well enough as they were both restless to have their years of planning come to fruition in less than six months. “She is the mulch that allows the flowers in the garden to thrive and bloom.”

The poetic language amused and annoyed Ikutsuki greatly. He reached for his mug of coffee and inquired, “Has reading those old books influenced your speech as much as it did with Charon’s research?”

“Many fragments of truths of the world can be found in mythology and literature. It has brought me comfort when other forms of therapy failed. I am glad the others have found similar solace, may Charon guide them to Mother and Father.”

An electric tune interrupted their conversation. Once he finished his sip of coffee, Ikutsuki answered his phone. He raised his hand and waved it over the desk, asking Kurebayashi to read the other files while he waited. The doctor had little need to; he knew every little detail about the seven human members, one dog, and one android of SEES. What he came for though, was access to their private, separate database to update information on his most recent patients. Takaya and Jin needed more frequent updates ever since their recent encounter with the kids.

“Ah, he’s here?” maintaining a businesslike tone, an excited grin filled Ikutsuki’s face. “Thank you, Arisato-san, please, bring him in.”

Kurebayashi slipped the new info in the desired files and began to clear things up for their guest. “Should I bring out another chair?”

He hung up the phone. “Please do. We must make him feel welcome.”
One more thing before our guest arrives. Has Moros finished the purging?

Of course he has. When Kirijo ordered another company-wide investigation, Moros had swept up the last of the breadcrumbs by then.” Ikutsuki stood up and looked through the window behind his desk. There was a beautiful view of the west-most region of Port Island, near the monorail, where people rushed to catch a film during the festival season. “You realize that despite your confidence in her, Fujihara-kun has asked too many questions. She might have planted some ideas in the others’ heads. Sanada questioned my intentions while the others underwent the last operation at the facility.”

Leaning on the cushioned seat for the guest, Kurebayashi sighed. “It was nothing but a curious lucky guess on his part. Still, he and Aragaki seem more likely to get ideas in their heads and wanting to follow through with them. Thankfully Castor has a fate he’s destined for to make it easier for us.”

“And you said I was callous.”

“I may be a doctor, but I despise crippling experimentation on children. Hence I let you deal with your crimes without my counsel or participation. It was your choice to extend your control of Strega and dispose the others after all.”

A series of raps on the door finally ended their conversation. Ikutsuki called the guest in, and turned to see Arisato hold the door open for the elementary student. He in his hoodie and shorts nervously approached the suited men. Seeing the meeting was to begin, Arisato excused himself from the room after Ikutsuki wished him well on next week’s vacation in Tokyo.

In spite of his trembling hands, the kid bowed and spoke evenly. “You wanted to meet me, Ikutsuki-san?”

With a kind smile the Chairman gestured for everyone to sit down. “Indeed, Amada. There’s no need to be so nervous.”

His friend bowed and held a hand out to the kid. “Sora Kurebayashi. I’ve known Ikutsuki for many years.”

“Pl-Pleased to meet you, sir,” Ken stuttered at the unconventional greeting.

“I apologize. As a self-employed doctor, I have traveled the world and picked up many customs. I returned to Japan just recently from the United States.”

The boy smiled sympathetically, “I see… You must have seen a lot, Kurebayashi-san.”

The doctor replied enthusiastically, leading the two in a brief conversation about different countries he’s visited. Ken’s eyes were wide with wonder, hoping to travel the world himself someday.

Ikutsuki waited for a moment when the conversation mellowed down before speaking again. “I must ask, Amada. How is everyone at the dorm?”

“They’re very nice people, sir,” Ken said, unable to suppress his involuntary smile. “I was worried they’d be too busy to notice me, but we all went to the summer festival together.”

“That’s excellent!” Ikutsuki expressed his relief. “I’m glad you all are getting along.”

Seeing the boy's happiness triggered something within Kurebayashi as his face fell. He stared down at a manila folder resting on his lap. Part of his changing demeanor was an act, yet he didn’t feel morally clean in crushing a child’s admiration for a group of good people who treated better than most of society. As he pondered, a flash of uncontrollable fire and tangled vehicles hit him in an
instant; the reminder happened enough despite taking medication and going to therapy that the sights and sounds didn’t startle him anymore.

Ken noticed. “Are you alright, Kurebayashi-san?”

Ikutsuki shared a similar expression as his ally, though it was a pretense. “We want to apologize in advance. If unpleasant memories return to you, we are so sorry. But we want you to know the truth.”

“What about?”

With a solemn sigh, Kurebayashi handed Ken the folder, and the boy’s face turned sickly pale when he read the label: October 4, 2007.

Chapter End Notes

After playing 'Persona 5', I’ve grown to hate the phrase “after all” due to how often it was said by nearly everyone, and yet I used it here anyway. Thanks, Atlus’ translating team, I could start a drinking game over it thanks to this stupid phrase’s baffling overuse in a 100-hour or more experience. Regardless, I still love the game. I beat it yesterday, and now I can dive into whatever P5 fics have been written without fear of spoilers!

Anyway, the title of this chapter came from "Wake the White Queen" by The Crüxshadows. The song doesn't really relate to this chapter at all, but the song did help motivate me to write (also I really love 'MirrorMask').
Wanting to Be Closer

Chapter Notes

This is a bit longer than usual, but I wanted to combine the last bit of summer stuff before September 5th.

Yeah. Enjoy the fun times while they last. ...That kinda describes the first half of 'Persona 3' pretty accurately now that I think about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

August 27, 2009

“H-Have you seen a film during the festival yet?”

In vibrant ponchos and skirts, Fuuka and Airi were on their way back from the record store when they passed the crowd huddling around the Screen Shot Theater. Since the 18th, movies would be shown based on a specific theme on a certain day. It was a great way to catch up with friends from school Airi had not seen in a while before vacation ends.

“I have seen a few.” Airi had a skip to her walk that made Fuuka struggle to keep pace with. “I went with some of the girls from volleyball like we promised back at the Inaba retreat, then Junpei and I checked out this cool American action flick. The villain had so many layers to him that we both had a hard time following the plot. Was there something you wanted to check out, Fuuka?” She asked after paying with their passes and boarded the monorail.

“Y-Yes! There’s a theme on Saturday that seems interesting.”

Airi placed a hand under her chin and wiggled an eyebrow. “C’mon, Fuuka-chan, what’s the theme?”

“Wh-Why are you staring at me like that?” Fuuka stammered and blushed like a child a third her age.

“Aw, c’mon! You gotta tell me, or else I might think it’s something really embarrassing!” When the teal girl tucked hair behind her ear and remained quiet, her fellow second-year classmate continued to whine. “Fuuka! Is it B-list movies? Cult classics? Slasher horror? Urban fantasy? Video Game Adaptation? Disney/Pixar animation?”

The whole ride back to Iwatodai consisted of Airi listing off every genre she could fathom and make up under the sun. As the guesses sounded more and more outlandish, Fuuka grew more comfortable and started laughing. It continued all the way through the thick humidity tainted in city fumes and to the dorm, recently cleaned of litter from a recent effort to beautify Iwatodai.


Fuuka was laughing so hard she nearly dropped her keys when unlocking the front door. “I’m not telling!”

“Oh, I can do this until my lungs give out. Maybe it’s something extremely embarrassing… like a movie about disastrous cooking competitions!”
“Hahaha! That’s n-not it either… Try again!”

Once the lock clicked, their enthusiasm sent them flying into the foyer. Airi landed on her knees, and Fuuka stopped herself at the front desk; they laughed at each other’s clumsiness. Rushing their way was Koromaru, who sniffed the girls curiously. Once he saw that they weren’t dying, he greeted them with a loud bark.

“We’re home, Koro-chan!” Airi knelt down and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Sorry if we scared you.”

“Oh, shh!” Fuuka smiled and pointed in the direction of the TV. It being out of her eyesight, Airi stood up to check.

Reclining in the armchair right next to it was the tallest and oldest member of SEES. As usual his dark turtleneck and black pants were too warm for summer weather, but that was not the most curious thing about him.

“We should be quiet,” Fuuka whispered low. “It looks like Shinjiro-sempai is asleep…”

Koromaru nuzzled his nose into Fuuka’s knee and tilted his head to the side.

Slightly disappointed, she couldn’t understand him. “What’s wrong, Koro-chan?”

A mischievous glint reflected off his eyes as he barked firmly. The two looked around to find Airi, who magically teleported right behind the armchair. With a broad smirk, she beckoned them to come closer and pointed at the magazine covering Shinjiro’s face. “I think this is what he’s trying to tell us.”

As if it never registered the first time, Fuuka stood by the couch to the armchair’s right to check closer. “It’s the monthly guide to the ‘Family Cooking’ show…”

“It’s a new issue,” Airi grinned widely, enjoying this new fact as much as if she won the lottery. “Only avid fans of cooking would get it so soon. This magazine can be pretty pricey too!”

“Y-You’ve read it?”

“I bought ingredients for pancakes a few weeks ago and saw it on a stand. 5,000 yen per issue!” She shook her head. “I know we get an allowance from the Kirijo Group and rewards from helping Kurosawa-san find lost people in Tartarus, but does Aragaki-sempai have a vault of diamonds for a wallet? And he buys most of our ‘real’ food too!”

The longer they hovered around him, the more Fuuka worried Shinjiro would awaken and yell at them for hovering. “Uh, maybe we should leave him be…”

“Oh, sempai!” Airi jabbed the magazine where his nose was hidden. “Who’d think a tough badass like you would be so domestic? What other talents are you hiding?”

“Airi-chan! Let him rest! Don’t you agree, Koro-chan?” He whimpered, though for different reasons than Fuuka expected. Instead of siding with her, he bumped her head and muzzle against Shinjiro’s calf. The two pairs of red eyes were smiling imps unwilling to let this golden opportunity pass them by. “Don’t encourage her!”

With a sigh, Airi folded her arms. “Very well, then. Time for plan B.”

She lifted the magazine, revealing a sleepy face. Shinjiro looked completely at ease, so distinct from
his perpetual frowns, glares, and sneers that the sight distracted Airi for a moment, allowing ample
time for her cheeks to turn a vivid shade of pink. After taking a habit of not looking too directly at
him out of fear of displaying too much familiarity and affection, she realized how much she found his
strong jaw and high cheekbones attractive. He looked best when he smiled, but him being relaxed
came a close second. Once she returned to earth, she gently tugged at his beanie.

“Oh, let him be,” Fuuka nearly whispered, similarly surprised with this unseen side of the grumpy
senior. “I’ve never seen Shinjiro-sempai so peaceful before…”

She was not as extroverted as before, but humor lingered in her tone. “Well… He is easy on the
eyes, but I wanna see how messy his hair is today!”

“You’ve harassed him enough, Airi-chan. If he wakes up—“

“He won’t. We’ve been howling like wolves and I poked him until his face bruises. He’s out like a
light!” Koromaru vocalized his agreement and laid down on top of his feet.

The beanie was nearly off his head when Fuuka let out a gasp. The nagging feeling from the tips
of her nerves to her stomach had moved her to react. “No, Airi-chan! He’s been awake this whole
time!”

Her sudden outburst made Airi flinch and completely remove the hat. Within milliseconds, Shinjiro’s
eyes shot wide open so quickly that it’d make the perfect jump scare in a cheap, Hollywood horror
film. Instead of looking confused or angry, exasperation carved his features as he arched forward and
rested his arms on his knees. Everyone was silent, save for a gruff sigh.

“I’m s-so sorry, sempai!” said Fuuka, fanning the tension out of the room as earnestly as she could
muster. “I knew you sh-shouldn’t be disturbed… But Airi-chan w-wouldn’t listen, even w-when
Lucia warned me…”

His eyes peeked out through the shadows of his thick shoulder-length hair and pierced through the
stuttering girl. “No, you didn’t. You stood and whined while the toddler built a tower and reached
for the cookie jar.”

“What was that?” Airi whacked him with the beanie.

Shinjiro groaned and sat back upright to show his face. Other than a slightly warmer color in the
cheeks and his earlier ominous demeanor, he appeared to be the same old grouchy. “Forget it. So what
do you want?”

Happy to see him moving, Koromaru got up and rested his muzzle on Shinjiro’s knee. While he was
busy petting him cautiously on the head, the senior listened as Fuuka briefly explained how they
arrived at the dorm and saw him in that state.

“It’s really amazing, Shinjiro-sempai. I had no idea you are interested in cooking.”

“I-It’s no big deal. I mean… anyone could cook if – ”

“Not everyone can! Airi-chan and I try to make food at the Home Economics room at school. No
matter what I do, almost everything turns out wrong…”

“Not everything! A few cookies and onigiri came out safe!”

“Cooking and baking aren’t exactly the same.” Shinjiro spoke so matter-of-factly when he corrected
what they thought was a minor technicality. “Again, if you have the right recipe, ingredients, and
utensils, you can’t screw up.”

The girls knew they were arguing with an immovable brick wall — and a proud know-it-all despite his claims to the contrary. Airi wanted to play fair and not get carried away, but if times like these arise when all hope is lost, who would punish her for wanting to push his buttons?

Letting down some of her defenses, Airi brushed back his bangs. She applied a little weight on his forehead, tilting his head until they had direct eye contact. Fuuka and Koromaru stared in awe and confusion respectively, and neither knew how Airi’s heart pounded in her throat to the point she felt lightheaded.

“My, aren’t you cocky, Shinji-kun?” she said softly to prevent her voice from cracking.

“‘Aragaki-sempai,’” he corrected through clenched teeth.

“You’ve allowed me to get away with Shinji sometimes, remember?”

He glared. Airi giggled over how quickly he gave up his argument, further weakened with blood rushing into his cheeks by the second. “But since it’s not the best time for you, I’ll make you a deal. Prove that cooking a meal is child’s play, and we’ll keep the rest of your skeletons locked in the closet.”

He fought against her, only for the girl to place both arms on his forehead and fold them. Shinjiro wasn’t hopelessly stuck, but any attempts would create a scene worth preserving on camera. Unwilling to embarrass himself - even if Fuuka did not seem the gossiping type - he let out another scowl. “You know who you’re talkin’ to, right?”

“A delinquent who wants to hurt mom and dad’s precious little girl, but is sweeter than a puppy to act on his word,” Airi sang in his ear as her fingertips tapped his temples. “Even if you did, Akihiko-kun and Kirijo-sempai won’t be happy if you lay a hair on me. How could everyone survive in Tartarus without me?” She rested her head on her arms, adding a bit more pressure. Shinjiro’s hands were now as brilliant a red as his face. “How could everyone go on without the field leader?”

“Alright!”

Making noticeable progress, Airi grinned. “Alright’ what? You get the idea, or do you accept?”

“Both,” he growled. “Now get off.”

Airi slid her arms back, leaving her hands on both sides of his head. She lowered her face slightly, hovering only an inch above him. “How rude,” she whispered musically. “It’s cute watching you try so hard to be a bad role model, Shinji-kun.”

Even with less of her touching him, his body tensed up more when he stopped exercising for a month. Somehow having less of Airi’s skin against his teased him more, and more butterflies gathered in earnest within his gut. To mask his thin, shallow breaths, he resired tensely through his nose. The only obvious sign of his falling for her charms that he needed to cope with was his face, and he prayed Fuuka would tell no one if she noticed anything more. “Please,” he said grudgingly.

Satisfied with her work, she let out one last giggle before standing straight and dropped the beanie on his face. Airi felt a giant weight lift off her weary back for simply expressing a fraction of her feelings. She ached for more, she always did, but she indulged enough for the still budding relationship.

She approached Fuuka, flustered and confused beyond words. Before answering any of the
thousands of questions she had, Airi turned back to Shinjiro one last time. “Since I returned your hat, I’ll throw in another request.”

“Just know I’ll decide if I’ll do it or not.” The amount of patience and control he had over his voice astounded Fuuka, Airi, and Koromaru, the latter who lay on Shinjiro’s feet, planting him in place like an anchor.

“It’s nothing huge. Surprise us with what you’ll make, Shinji-kun. I’m sure it’ll be delicious no matter what.”

With the last nail in the coffin, she nodded to Fuuka and the two of them said good-bye to Koromaru before heading upstairs. Whatever Shinjiro did or said once they left was anyone’s guess. Airi hoped he didn’t break anything.

August 29, 2009

The previous night marked the final addition to the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad: Ken Amada. Everyone expressed their approval openly, but a few held back their utter terror and saved them for more appropriate times to express their concerns.

“Dude, you’re gonna go bald,” said Junpei, sitting on a bench near a flower shop at Port Island Station while on the phone with Akihiko. “He’s just excited to not be left out anymore.”

“That’s not the problem. Ken’s in elementary school. Even I didn’t have the drive to fight monsters at his age.”

“Seriously? I’d thought you always wanted to grow stronger.”

The other side of the line was dead for a few seconds. Junpei could picture Akihiko’s face contort as he tried to reconsider how he wanted to convey his thoughts. “Sure, I got into nasty fights with guys older and bigger than me to test my strength, but this is different. I’ve been reckless, but never suicidal.”

“Hey, man, you’re exaggerating. Ken doesn’t seem suicidal at all, so don’t just say that stuff. That stuff can get kinda heavy, y’know?”

“Well, yeah… I guess you’re right.” Akihiko let out a disappointed sigh. “But I’m not saying Ken’s gonna throw himself off the roof at any second. I only meant that Ken might not have a close friend to keep him from making huge mistakes.”

Junpei groaned and rubbed his sweaty forehead. He really, truly wished Yukari were there to slap the both of them for their horrible inability to communicate. “Ok, look, what I’m sayin’ is that if you’re that worried, tell the guys at a meeting. I’m not good with stuff like this, and I don’t wanna argue with ya about it. Aibana’s more open to that stuff, so let her or Mitsuru-sempai know. Like when she talked about the experiments.”

“If anyone heard you say that—“

“Relax, dude. It’s dead out here anyway. Too damn hot to be out…” Not even the smell of fresh fish from a vender down the street could overpower the inferno.

Akihiko sighed. “You’re right. I’ll talk to Mitsuru and see if there’s a time we can assemble everyone. We gotta talk stuff out. We never followed up with what we learned at Yakushima.”
“Dang, I nearly forgot. That’ll help a ton.” Junpei replied lightheartedly. The abundance of information continued to confuse him to no end. Everyone else seemed quiet too, though not because they followed everything. Talking it out should help tremendously, he hoped.

“Good to hear. Spread the word.”

Once he hung up, Junpei jumped back to his feet to walk off his boredom. It was another day when everyone had plans to hang out elsewhere. Fuuka and Airi invited him to watch some movies at the festival, but the phrase “hard science fiction” reminded him too much of an academic cocktail of disaster crafted by Edogawa.

Coincidentally, school started up again that upcoming Tuesday. Cue the bored slacker’s moan. “Man, this year’s going fast. Next year, I’ll be a senior…”

He waited around outside for a while, soaking up the UV rays until they turned his skin into bacon and sweat saturated his clothes. After pacing around the area a few times and rubbing at a sore burn on his shoulder, Junpei spotted the strange girl from the other day. It was too hard to forget her. After looking online, Junpei found out her attire was based on the gothic lolita subculture. It explained her elaborately detailed and frilly white dress and spiked platform boots. A strange headband rested in her blood-red hair with a needle giving the look like pierce through her skull. She treated him like crap the last time he saw her, but he couldn’t help but wonder what she was drawing.

When he came close enough, despite being quiet, she stopped working and her oval-shaped brown eyes shot daggers. “You again?”

“Uh, w-well… I-I’m surprised you remember me.”

“We share the same sentiment,” she said in a voice deeper than her youthful face would suggest. Junpei had met plenty of men whose bodies and voices did not seem to match. He had rarely seen this in women, and it was yet another oddity that made this girl unforgettable.

“Well, you kinda stand out in that dress…”

Not laughing, her expression remained unreadable as she picked up her pencil and continued her sketch. Junpei walked around her get a clearer view. “So, what are you drawing?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“Uh, no reason. I was just thinking that it must be nice to have something you’re really into.”

Though she kept working, her eyes turned back to Junpei. “It’s no big deal. I only draw because I like to.”

“Oh yeah? I guess you finished that other one. Can you show me this one when you’re done?”

The girl shrugged, which was more than enough for a guy who never seemed to have much luck with girls who weren’t Yukari, Airi, Fuuka… When he thought about it, Junpei has had better luck this year than in his entire life. The gratitude for this small hope overwhelmed him regardless.

When their conversation had another awkward pause, he looked up the time on his phone, which read 5:43. The movies the girls watched probably ended a while ago. He felt bad that they didn’t bother to say hi; however, they probably saw him chatting with this odd girl and didn’t want to interrupt.

Whatever happened, Junpei decided to head back home. Right before he was too far from the strange
artist, he turned around and waved. “You better be here again sometime, okay?”

Her head moved to search for the source of the noise. Rather than dismiss him outright, she watched him leave for the train.

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August 30, 2009

Airi missed the small periods of time in between her busy schedule to put on her headphones and lose herself in music. She knew the streets of the Tatsumi Port Island area so well she could wander around fine blind. By how easily she slipped into her imagination, she most certainly did this time.

The last light of the day vanished into the dusk as she wandered and sang along. It felt good to be so free.

Her teasing Shinjiro all but vanished from her memory. Maybe she went too far to the point of outright manipulating him. Maybe he thought less of her for invading his personal space. Maybe Airi was overthinking it, a habit she adopted as she relived the year and it often drove her closer to madness. When she started to think about that moment and the sights and sounds drowned out the city and her music, she shoved it aside and focused intently on more positive and productive things. With Ken in the group, Airi felt the machine was operating as it should; everyone was assembled together and ready to kick some ass.

When the wind picked up, she regretted not wearing her scarf, so it would fly with her hair as she spun in circles. But skipping and jumping enthusiastically added to her good mood... until her trance broke when she crashed face-first into a lamppost. With a muttered curse, she rubbed her forehead and turned off her music. She didn’t forget to laugh to herself and started walking like a normal person.

The warm lights of Paulownia Mall greeted her from down the street, and she chose to head there for the night. Along the way she saw a few shrubs with white and yellow jasmines slowly beginning to flourish in their preferred time. Their neighboring plants, in much healthier conditions, probably never liked them much, so Airi gently stroked a few of their petals and found herself drowning in the subtle fresh scent they produced.

“It’s not your fault most of the world prefers the day. I think you are the prettiest flowers. I’m named after you after all. Kinda funny, huh? Dad and uncle said it suits me, but ma, pa, and Blair make fun of it sometimes. They think it’s too silly and corny, but I like it.”

“Is talking to yourself a hobby or somethin’?”

Airi jumped upright to face the speaker. It wasn’t a random stranger trying to kidnap an air-headed high school girl in the dark, but it also wasn’t someone she felt ready to see without warning… but she compartmentalized her anxiety.

“’Ello, Aragaki-sempai! What’re you doing out here?”

“I was ‘bout to ask the same thing.” Despite him folding his arms, his jaw line was less rigid than usual. “It’s too dark to be out alone.”

She tilted her head in thought and spun around. “Alright, then. Thanks for the tip. I’m off to let my hair down a bit. Escapade is open I think…”
Right as she started to walk away, Shinjiro’s nearly six-foot form caught up and stayed by her side. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’ve been down these streets at this hour very often. So unless you have business at the mall too, I’ll be ok.”

“Alone?”

“Enough about me,” she turned to him with a carefree smile. “What brings you out here?”

“Don’t change the subject. A well-respected girl who’s top of her class can’t be this reckless. People’ll think you’re an idiot…”

“Hey! I resent that!”

An amused snort escaped him before he could stop himself. “While stealin’ Junpei’s line. Honestly, you’re a trip.”

Once they reached the well-lit and very clean mall, plenty of people were around for Airi to be safe for Shinjiro’s comfort. With the Police Station, headed by Officer Kurosawa, right near the heart of it all, this was the safest part of town.

Near the arcade, Airi could overhear a salesman charismatically reaching out to teenagers passing by and offering them a chance to work as a model for his advertising company. He stopped her at least once in every timeline, only for him to realize she was not phased by the devil’s charms. Taking that lesson, he worked harder to craft his art into a masterpiece no one could deny.

Standing with him by the water fountain at the center of the court, Airi gently tugged at Shinjiro’s sleeve. “Hey, before you go… I wanted to apologize about the other day. I went overboard when I teased you. You don’t have to cook for us if you don’t want to.”

The scene was a little pathetic to watch, but Shinjiro heard the sincerity in her voice. “Weren’t you and Yamagishi worked up over something? You two were screamin’ so loud that you nearly gave me a headache…”

Hopeful of his forgiveness, Airi glanced up at him. “You’re… not mad?”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. I figured you two were still goofin’ around. 'Sides, I don't mind cooking.”

It didn’t answer her question. Yet the lack of death glares was a good sign. Airi played with her mp3 player as she paced aimlessly around the mall and began slipping back into a daze.

“Wait, Fujihara, aren’t ya heading to Escapade?”

“…Aye, me?” she squeaked, nearly letting her mp3 slip between her fingers.

“No, the butterfly behind you.” Shinjiro sneered when she recovered from her confusion and pouted at his tease. “You’re such a kid.”

She ignored his gaze as she made her way to the dance club. “W-Well, you’re such a rough fence!”

His eyes narrowed in morbid curiosity and confusion at her pathetic comeback. That was enough for the senior to continue following her. “Uh… What?”

Airi blew him a raspberry even more pathetic than the comeback. “Every name has some kind of
meaning. Mine is ‘love’ and ‘jasmine’. Your surname, Aragaki, is ‘rough’ and ‘fence’. Sometimes it’s hard to approach you, so it suits you.”

“…Is that right?” He chuckled, somewhat amused with her observation.

When they made it to Escapade, they noticed that the neon lighting wrapped around the entrance was lifeless. A simple piece of paper vibrantly shined on the door instead. Without the familiar purple and pink lights blinding the passerby, Escapade was a black wall of depression.

“‘Due to a recent power outage’,” Shinjiro read the memo aloud, “‘Escapade will be closed for inspection until further notice. We apologize for the inconvenience.’ Looks like your underage mischief is on hold.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t drink. I just like the music. A girl’s gotta keep her library up-to-date.”

“Then turn on the radio, or get on the internet. Next you’re gonna tell me you met an alcoholic monk and talked about the meaning of life…”

“Maybe that did happen one night…” her impish voice trailed off. She last saw Mutatsu a few weeks ago completely sober, and she hoped he managed to reunite with his family. “I learned a few lessons, gave tips as a thank you…”

Her response to what he intended as a joke genuinely upset Shinjiro, who seized grabbed her wrist and pulled her away. “You moron! From now on, you ain’t going there without my permission!”

His overprotective reaction made Airi look away and smile to herself. “Yes, sempai. I’ll behave and tone down my mischief.”

“Good. ‘Cause you’re too smart to set yourself up for some sick freak to snatch ya.”

She lowered her head humbly. It was wrong to tease him, especially if he worried so much about everyone’s wellbeing and ignored his own. She found it morbidly funny how he’d hide his kindness when he had no reason to. On the other hand, her inappropriate feelings were worthy of hiding, and she kept quiet to maintain a feeling of apologetic guilt.

The incident stopped once they reached Chagall Café about twenty feet away. When Shinjiro stared down at the girl, his face still held anger, but it was less pronounced. “Lost your voice?”

She looked back and forth between the former delinquent and the champagne glow of the fancy cafe. By the laws of social expectations, these two could not exist on the same plane of existence without Mario and the Queen of England building a time machine to bring back Shakespeare’s favorite food to the leader of North Korea to end World War III.

Realizing how confused she was, he fell back into his shifty tone. “I need to buy something. It’ll be quick… unless you’re tired from all that frolicking.”

The unexpected add-on made her stammer. “You… saw?! Y-You were following me?!”

“Who didn’t see or hear you at the station?” One second, he scratched his cheek as he snickered; the next moment, his smile vanished. “But seriously, watch where you’re going. Don’t strain yourself or get dehydrated. The heat and humidity can still tire you out some summer nights.”

Sensing more benevolent concern from the dictator, Airi’s face reddened and she stared at her feet. “Yes, sempai… I’ll get something to drink while I wait.”
“And give tips to honest hard workers, Miss Jailbait.”

Airi blew another raspberry, which Shinjiro smiled wryly at. They entered the café together and split up to take care of their needs. Airi found a table in a fairly secluded section and sat herself down. After someone took her order, she quickly seized a napkin just in time before she sneezed. Two possible colds in one season was a really bad sign.

Her drink arrived around the same time Shinjiro found her. He came back with two bags, sitting in the empty chair to his right. He coughed briefly into his sleeve as he sat across from her.

“You okay?” she asked politely, despite knowing the answer he would refuse to admit.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. What’d you order?”

“Herbal tea.” Nothing like the fruity kinds her family spoiled her with, but the aroma filled her lungs with a tranquility her neglected body thanked her for.

He smirked. “Tea’s always been a girly drink.”

“I-I have coffee sometimes! I’m j-just not in the mood for it right now…”

“Right.” He chuckled at her blatant lie. “The Irish converted you to drink the sissy stuff.”

“Not all ‘girly’ things are bad.” She gave him an impressive stare in which a glimmer of confidence in her eyes that always caught fire when she fought Shadows or dared to speak her mind. “And it’s the English who like tea. The Irish prefer beer, whiskey, and lager.”

Shinjiro shrugged, accepting her minor, but passionate victory. “Close enough.”

After the silly exchange, they were quiet for a while. Not wanting to take too much of her friend’s time, Airi drank quickly. The lack of sighs, groans, and fidgeting likely meant he didn’t mind waiting for her. When she took more reasonable sips, her mind wanted to focus on something else. Despite all conscious efforts Airi found herself staring at Shinjiro. He seemed… clean. Not that he had horrendous hygiene in the first place, even with him living on the streets for two years. His appearance was tidier: his hair a richer brown color and his skin tone more even. This was the first time she had ever seen him casually wear a short-sleeved shirt and no peacoat. Shinjiro looked more like an eighteen-year-old than someone in his early-thirties.

If I only knew this side of him the first time, she thought. One day she would forgive herself for how she distrusted Shinjiro when they first met, but today was not it.

Feeling her gazes, his eyes met hers and they were locked for several seconds. Heart fluttering in her tender chest, Airi broke contact first and refocused her attention to the complex blend of her tea.

When she recovered from her childish impulse, she caught him either toying with the bracelet she gave him or checking on his purchases. His eyes took in as much detail around the café as possible; he tended to often be paranoid about any potential sneaky behavior.

After a few sips of tea warmed her throat (which was more parched than she initially believed), Airi gained some courage to speak up. “Wh-What’s in the bag?”

Relieved in talking again, he looked at her again. “Ground coffee.”

“That’s a lot for one person. Stocking up before the otaku revolution takes over the world?”

“What the he–? N-No. No, this ain’t all for me…” Shinjiro, flustered over a stupid joke, sighed and
admitted. “I’m… gonna use most of it for cooking.”

“You’re really going to make something, Aragaki-sempai?”

He ruffled his beanie and rested his forehead in his hands. “I give up, Fujihara. Nobody who knows ‘bout my… hobby… ever shuts up ‘bout it. Even you said I’d treat you and Yamagishi… Why make stuff just for you two when the whole gang walks in laughin’ their asses off at me, then feelin’ left out?”

She distinctly remembered apologizing for it, but a few others must’ve pressured him as well. She could easily see Mitsuru and Akihiko giving him grief. Airi snapped her fingers in realization. “You’re the ‘hired chef’ Mitsuru talked about, aren’t you? I should have known sooner.”

“It ain’t your fault,” he softened his tone. “You just recently discovered my… skills. She’s been harassing me since Aki spilled it back when it was just the three of us.”

“If it’s too much for you, I can help. You’ll be serving eight people and Koro-chan after all. Ma and Pa taught Blair and me how to cook, so I can make a few side dishes or a dessert.”

He dropped his hand that once masked his face and looked directly in her eyes again. Wondering what he could be thinking of or whenever he sees her, Airi’s heart skipped a beat.

“No, it’s ok. I’m sure you’re decent, but… it’s just that…” Feeling tongue-tied, he broke eye contact and scratched the back of his neck. “It’s just that… how do I put it…? You won’t… like what I make as much if you helped out.”

Secretly flattered with his intentions, Airi hide her smile as she sipped her tea. He wanted to express his feelings for her through his hidden gift. She refused to deny him the opportunity and desire to open up to her and their friends. Seeing Shinjiro’s clumsiness and bashfulness only highlighted how hopelessly she wanted to leap over the table and throw herself in his arms. The urge fostered in her heart, but she controlled it well enough to not crave or act upon such affection.

He cleared his throat and returned to his usual self. “Anyway, I decided to serve tomorrow. It’ll be the last day of vacation. Only you know ‘bout this, Fujihara. Even if it tastes awful, you better be responsible and tell everyone it’s great.”

Feeling more like herself too, Airi gasped and shot a playful glare. “That’ll be an insult to your talent! If it sucks, then it means you need to improve.”

Shinjiro laughed at her overreaction. “You better watch yourself with that tone. I ain’t a nice guy.”

“Aye, right! You would’ve kidnapped me while I was talking to the jasmines if you were a bad guy.”

Like on the second-to-last day of school in July, a friendly smile graced his face. “You just don’t like being a normal girl, huh?”

“Of course not! Being happy and crazy keeps me from being boring!”

He laughed. “No, you’re too full of surprises to bore me.”

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August 31, 2009

“We meet again, huh?”
“That’s because you keep coming back.”

“I’m Junpei. What’s your name? You live around here?”

He tried practicing in the mirror for three hours - even while Akihiko used the shower after a cardio workout - for this moment, and he nearly leapt for joy over how everything came out naturally for him. It never happened before, and his excited amplified. Why was he so nervous around girls before this?

In spite of that feeling, she ignored him and continued painting.

“Fine, fine, ignore me. I’m used to it.” He continued to play cool. There had to be a way to get her to put him as some kind of priority. That was when Junpei noticed red where it never belonged on her frail, snowy form. “Hey, wait! What’s with that cut?! You’re bleeding!”

She dropped her things in exasperation and showed off the offensive sight. Blood slid down her thin wrist and landed in perfect circles on the ground. “What is it with you? Why don’t you mind your own business?!

“You’re bleeding for cryin’ out loud!” Junpei knelt down and reached for the handkerchief in his pocket. “Gimme your hand so can bandage the wound!”

For a moment she resisted, but Junpei’s resolve prevailed, and he saved the poor wrist with his handkerchief quite well for an amateur.

The girl examined her newly treated hand and asked blankly, “Why are you in such a panic?”

“Anyone would freak out over this!” Anyone normal, he thought to himself. The more he saw her, the less and less ordinary she seemed, both of which scared and enchanted him. “You need to see a doctor… You want me to go with you?”

“No. You’re weird.” She laughed mockingly. Then she included halfheartedly while she began packing her things: “Chidori.”

Something about it caught him off guard. But he tried saying it himself. “Chidori…?”

“That’s my name, since you asked.” All of her belongings fit into her patched messenger bag and she got up. “I’m almost done with the picture, but I doubt you’ll understand it. If you wish to see it, then you know where to find me.” Without another word, Chidori gave one last glance at the paralyzed Junpei before leaving.

The boy went on the rollercoaster of a lifetime. He was puzzled, but undeniably euphoric. It was hard to snap out of his reverie, chaotic and confused. It was the alarm of his cell phone that eventually brought him back to earth.

He received a text from Fuuka: Dinner @ home in 30 min. Hurry if u want food. Looks 2 good to be real!

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The first to break the profound silence was Yukari. “Is all of this for us?”

“Whoa…” Junpei’s jaw hit the floor. “Is this some kind of party?”

Plates of various colors and sizes filled the kitchen table. Appetizers, condiments, and pitchers
surrounded the numerous main courses. Tomato pasta, sweet-and-sour pork, fried chicken, paella, and omelet with friend rice were just some of the various kinds of food available. Even several vegetarian options were considered; Shinjiro hated how no one ate their vegetables on a daily basis and practically forced them on nearly every entree.

Placing down her apron, Fuuka did a quick headcount and spoke up, “Is Mitsuru-sempai in her room? I’ll go get her!”

After watching her run off, Shinjiro turned to the taken aback boxer. “Aki, go get Ken. It’s a bit late, but he’s probably still up…”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I don’t know how to make even one of these dishes…” Being the first to seat himself, Junpei continued to stare dumbfounded.

“And they’re all made from scratch…” Yukari said, sitting herself down.

Like a child experiencing her first Christmas, Airi merrily plopped down in the chair to Junpei’s right. “I think it all looks amazing! Thank you, Aragaki-sempai!”

“Y-Yeah,” Blushing, he took off his apron and left it on the barstool by the island. Airi giggled at the futility of him turning his back and using his free hand to hide his face.

Right around the corner arrived Mitsuru, Ken, and their summoners. The brilliant restaurant-quality food before him shocked the boy. “D-Did someone call a cook…?”

The redhead, however, smiled condescendingly as if everything went according to a masterful plan she meticulously orchestrated for decades. “Why thank you, Shinjiro. This is a wonderful surprise.”

Ken stared at the person of concern. He couldn’t recognize the master chef for a moment; then he registered the teen without his iconic red jacket. “Aragaki-san made this?”

He nodded. “Everyone, sit down.”

“Done!” cheered Junpei and Airi. Koromaru barked, basically saying the same thing.

Ken and Aigis picked the seats next to Airi and Junpei respectively. Mitsuru took the head of the table closest to the lounge behind. To her left side of the table were Fuuka, Yukari, and Akihiko in that order. Koromaru watched Shinjiro place the food he made in the bowl right beside the last remaining seat, where he chose to sit.

Finally joining them, he continued, “Pick up your chopsticks… and dig in.”

“Bon appétit!” said Mitsuru with a smile.

“Yes!” Fuuka and Yukari cheered.

Aigis held up her chopsticks with a smile. Everyone was finally past the disbelief that she had a built-in system to process human food into fuel for her to function. “Affirmative!”

“FOOD!” Airi nearly screamed Junpei’s and Ken’s ears off.

“Thanks for the food!” Before Akihiko could finish his sentence, everyone immediately dived into the immense sea. No words were spoken for a very, very long time. The power of delicious food was that effective. No one minded losing that fight, since the food had no plans on hijacking
monorails, trapping them in love hotels, or killing them in a tower from hell.

Some chatter started up again once most of the dishes were completely cleared.

“Oh, man,” Yukari wiped her tearful eyes and basked in the aroma of the expansive menu. “I’m in heaven…”

Junpei could not stop crying as everything melted in his mouth. “Th-This is a portal to the awesome dimension of deliciousness!”

Raising her eyebrow, Mitsuru dared to ask, “What does that even mean?”

“The diversity of the entrées is impressive, Shinjiro-san,” commented Aigis. “The quality would earn the respect of a professional chef as well.”

Meanwhile, Akihiko had a whole different reason to have tender eyes. He coughed and hacked, nearly dying from eating too fast. Being right next to the water pitcher, Fuuka poured him a glass.

“Just leave ’im,” Shinjiro deadpanned after taking a bite of fish. “If he chokes and dies, the medical bills’ll vanish.”

Half of the table stared horrified. Knowing his sense of humor very well, Mitsuru and Airi continued eating. Fuuka twitched slightly. The offended individual saved himself from a possible fainting spell, and shot back, “Oh, thanks a lot. I can afford to pay them now, you know. We’re swimming in yen thanks to Tartarus, the Kirijo Group, and Kurosawa’s rewards.”

Turning to face Akihiko beside him, Shinjiro raised an eyebrow. “We ain’t that wealthy. ‘Sides, are ya gonna injure yourself till we’re broke? Who’ll save your ass then?”

“So this is how you treat me when I try your food for once…”

“You never asked.”

“You never offered! Koromaru gets more from you than I ever did and I’ve known you far longer. That’s discrimination!”

“Then make your own damn food.”

“I would if anyone taught me! Ever think of helping your only family every once in a while?”

“Learn to be self-sufficient, and don’t blame others for your own deficiencies, dad.”

“Ass.”

Mitsuru brought a napkin to her mouth to mask her lighthearted grin. The juniors shared similar reactions. It was hard to tell who should end up together thanks to the abundance of unapologetic subtext.

“Uh, how’s your arm, Akihiko-sempai?” Yukari interjected cautiously.

Thankful for the subject change, he raised his right arm, cast-less, but still wrapped in bandages. “The guys at Kurebyashi’s clinic are brilliant. I healed a lot faster than expected. As long as I don’t stress it too much, my arm and I can join you guys for the next operation.”

The junior girls applauded happily. “Being left-handed,” Aigis said, “it should be easy for you to readapt, Akihiko-san.”
Then the infamous chilly tone sprinkled dusty snowflakes upon the room. “As long as you attend therapy habitually, I'll permit you to return.”

“Oui, ma mère,” Akihiko replied curtly and went back to his plate of chicken. He mumbled about the food not having enough protein.

With a piercing scowl, Shinjiro smacked the back of his friend’s head hard and loud enough for everyone to snap into attention. Then he briskly hit his chopstick against his plate. A public service announcement was underway. “If you miss the beef bowls, ramen, cereal, and other protein or instant heart attack shit, then don’t eat my food. I ain’t a fairy who can whip out anything ya want in a second.” His head snapped in Mitsuru’s direction. “And can her! Your Persona is freezin’ three hours of labor that'll never thaw!”

His gruff conviction threw her off. She reluctantly nodded and the air warmed up slightly. Had he called her out too late, some of the cold-phobic food would have been spoiled.

Aigis imitated a hum. “I see… Mitsuru-san thinks of Penthesilea to exercise her influence to intimidate others and empower herself. I comprehend.”

“That makes sense,” said Fuuka. “Sometimes I can hear Lucia talk to me outside of the Dark Hour… but I really have to concentrate.”

“A-Amazing… I wish Hermes was that cool with me,” said the depressed Junpei.

Mitsuru blushed over her secret being exposed. “Oh, it’s nothing particularly special…”

Laughing, Akihiko remarked, “I’m glad to know I wasn’t hallucinating all those times Mitsuru yelled at me and my heated food felt cold.”

“Course Polydeuces would notice,” replied Shinjiro, ignoring Akihiko’s eye rolling. “My coffee freezes over some mornings ‘cause she’s so uptight.”

"Since when am I 'uptight'?"

"S-Seriously?!” Junpei, Yukari, and Fuuka cried in unison. “How?!”

The chattering commenced among the animated bunch. Even Shinjiro seemed content enough to be talkative: snarky, but chatty nonetheless. Only one person was left out, and Airi wanted to correct that. “You okay, Ken-kun?”

He snapped out of his reverie and looked up at the curious girl. A slight blush painted his cheeks and he stared at his empty plate. “Oh… I didn’t eat anything yet…”

“What would you like?” she exchanged empty serving plates for those with some food. “There’s still enough left over. Pick whatever you want.”

The boy reluctantly glanced at the selection. The aroma was still powerful enough to possess his stomach, letting out a growl. Ken pretended he didn’t hear it and stared darkly at the plates. No way would he win an “I’m not hungry” argument, but he felt too sick to eat whatever he made.

“Nothing’s poisonous,” she stated lightheartedly. “I promise.”


“No problem! Eat up!”
Very picky, he lifted his chopsticks and scanned across the selection. Before settling on anything, Ken chose a bit of everything and arranged them on his plate. The whole thing happened very slowly; how he dreaded trying his food. The rest were too busy in conversation to notice his disinclination. Once he finished his reluctance parade, he finally tried out the fried rice. Someone once told him that only the good cooks knew to use soft water when making rice, because the minerals from hard water would ruin the taste. Honey helps make rice taste good too for some reason. If Shinjiro was so phenomenally talented, he would know that.

He took the bite… and he was shocked. The flavor was so rich, it dissolved through his tongue and satiated his hunger. His eyes watered over how much he enjoyed the food. Wondering if it was a one-time fluke, he went for the chicken. Even that was great with the meat having soaked in the juices enough to have flavor. Many of the vegetables he ate had the same result. Once he went through everything and cleared his plate, Ken frustratingly admitted defeat within himself. Not everything was earth shattering, but he couldn’t complain about anything he tried.

“…How is it?”

Another chill shot through his body. He looked up and saw Shinjiro staring back. Unlike how he usually expressed himself, he sounded genuinely curious. No one else was paying attention to either of the two. The others were discussing what day the next Tartarus visit would be.

Ken had no reason to tell the truth if he didn’t have to, but he didn’t want to risk causing a scene. His head lowered and said bashfully, “It’s good… Thanks for the food.”

Chapter End Notes

Just another note I wanted to add:

-- 藤原 愛莉 is how Airi's name is written. The kanji in her first name mean "love" and "jasmine", which doesn't seem to be a common combination but is different enough from Airi Ban's (伴 亜衣梨) in 'Devil Survivor 2' to make me happy. There is no special reason why I picked Fujihara (or Fujiwara) as her last name other than my wanting to find a last name that wasn't strange or uncommon to the point of absurdity.

-- 藍花 ("blue/indigo" and "flower") is Aibana, though I wouldn't be surprised if it's written in hiragana (あいばな) or katakana (アイバナ) instead. I felt the need to have Junpei have some fun way to address Airi like how he calls Yukari Yuka-tan (or Yukaricchi). Aibana stuck with me after a while.
Prelude

Chapter Notes

I'm back! This chapter is on the long side, but there were some things I had to iron out before things get more intense. Oh, Persona 3, I love you, but why are you such a dark, sad story?

September 1, 2009

Something completely different happened the morning after the greatest dinner everyone had in their young lives. When Airi went down the stairs with Yukari and Fuuka, a delicious aroma from the kitchen greeted them. Because he declared that cereal was the most insulting creation to be considered breakfast or food (let alone both), Shinjiro made mini omelets for everyone. Not knowing what everyone preferred, he made various kinds with different ingredients; some were plain, some had cheese, others meat and vegetables.

Fuuka showered Shinjiro with praises and begged him to teach her again either at home or at cooking club. Before he had time to reply, Yukari interrupted them, panicked over being late for school. So they downed the rest of their food, thanked him again and ran out the door. Airi, however, decided to stay behind to help Shinjiro clean up.

“Don’t bother, Fujihara. Model students gotta keep a clean record.”

She brushed off the comment as she carried the plates over to the island behind him. “Being perfect is more than getting straight A’s and being on time. You cooked for us without asking for anything and I want to help.”

Seeing her smile, so honest and sugary sweet, illustrated Shinjiro’s chances of swaying her decision. He turned his head to stare at the sink and hide his defeated smirk. “You’re an odd one…”

“How am I ‘odd’?” Airi pulled at his sleeve and made a face. She held chopsticks at him like they were knives. The pose made her look as threatening as a unicorn with a horn made of gummy bears. “If we work together, you’ll get to school a lot sooner! You’re just being difficult.”

He let his lips reflexively curve into a hopeless smile despite what he really felt behind it. Airi has teased him more and more frequently over the past few days that it exhausted him, and the constant stream of admiration, attention, and warmth from her and the others really started to get under his skin. It started to show as he took the plates rather forcefully from the island.

Startled over the rattling, Airi put the chopsticks down and backed away. She took out a towel from one of the drawers and started drying the clean glasses. “Did something happen?”

“It’s nothin’…” He reached for the soap and eyed her briefly. Shinjiro internally scolded himself when he saw her lower her gaze apologetically. He shouldn’t let out his frustrations on her. Her wounded puppy concern made his chest hurt, a feeling he thought he had become used to lately. Turning on the faucet, he raised his voice for her to hear him. “The guys keep yappin’ at me…”

“What do you mean?”
“Nothing ‘bout what I did last night was special. Anyone can cook a meal if they try. But Aki’s pushin’ requests, Mitsuru’s planning schedules, and Yamagishi’s throwing recipes at me… Soon they’ll all want me to make something every time I walk past the kitchen. They’re so needy…”

Ending his rant with a frustrated sigh, he turned off the water and shrugged before he went to scub the plates. Airi never took her eyes off him as she worked. Shinjiro’s slight slouch and clenched jaw conveyed more than enough of his discomfort.

“I see... I didn't know it bothered you this much.”

Her tone caught his attention once more. His rigid posture relaxed slightly and he eased his temper.

“What’re you sorry for?”

“To be honest… I’m excited too. I can’t wait to try what you make next time. But I know you don’t take compliments very well and you shouldn’t be forced to cook for anyone. You have the right to say no.”

He stopped what he was doing and finally looked directly at her. “Hey, don’t pout like that. I’m… I’m glad everyone liked my food. I’m just not used to the attention.”

Anticipation churned in her stomach just from staring at him. It was appropriate eye contact, but Airi over-thought how long she stared or if she was being creepy. Awkward over the thought, she turned away, but she could still see him well at the corner of her eye.

“Seriously though...” His expression softened slightly. Shinjiro folded his arms and stared down at his slippers. “Do you think… cookin’ is too strange for someone like me?”

Airi immediately smiled and shook her head. “You really remind me of Blair.”

Shinjiro looked back at her as they took a quick break and leaned against the counter. “Your foster brother?”

She nodded. “He’s really good with making and fixing clothes, and someday he wants to be a professional designer or tailor. Other than me he doesn’t talk about it with anyone. He’s scared people would make fun of him, and even Pa sometimes teases him in good fun. Blair still gets picked on at school. A lot of people call him gay or try to attack him to see if he can defend himself like a real man. We had to take him to therapy when he got depressed, but he would’ve given up by now if Ma, Pa, and I haven’t stood up for him at every opportunity...

“I guess what I’m saying is, don’t let go of what you love if it makes you happy. I know you prefer to do your own thing and ignore anyone who insists on changing you, but it’s also just like you to worry about others before yourself, even when you act tough.” She folded her hands behind her back and stared at her feet. “I think it’s amazing that you cook so well. You have a wonderful talent, Shinjiro-sempai.”

After pouring her heart out more than she anticipated, Airi turned pink and fought past the intense pounding of blood in her temple and her eardrums. She took out her phone and checked the time. At this rate, she’ll be late for first period because of Shinjiro… again.

Beside her, Shinjiro tugged his beanie down over his eyes, feeling no less raw and exposed than she. When Airi took a peek from the corner of her eye, she saw how uncomfortable the typically unfettered upperclassman looked in his own skin. It was so strange, but for a moment he looked… cute, only ruined by that tragically familiar aura of melancholy around him. She was dying to do something more for him, to erase all of that pain he bears alone and in silence as October rapidly
drew near. That alone made Airi's blood run cold and her gut twist into knots.

“Y’know, you…” he mumbled. “You don’t need to be here… I can finish this…”

Before he could try to push her away, Airi turned around and went back to dry the dishes. She planted her feet to the ground and shook her head. “I want to help.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Fujihara.”

“But I do!” She snapped. The speed and intensity of her cleaning increased as her breaths shallowed and as the countdown to October 4th sounded in her mind like church bells. “I’m sorry if I’m a nuisance…”

Shinjiro furrowed his brows. “What? What’re you talking ‘bout?”

“There’s not much time left… I don’t want to miss a moment with you… Not when…”

So consumed in her anxieties, she nearly cracked the dish she was drying. Shinjiro swiftly took the towel and dish from her hands and set them on the counter. Head low, she rubbed her arms and mumbled apologies and promises that she would be careful in the future. He didn’t feel relieved in the slightest. Her recklessness and anxiety, so persistent to the point of unintentional self-harm, sprung from nothing Shinjiro could see, and he had no way to begin unravelling the tangled ball of string the girl threw at him. His only relief was Akihiko’s absence; if he were around, the pretty boy would’ve had a panic attack and called a doctor.

Once he saw she calmed down, Shinjiro sighed heavily and gave her back the towel. “You’ve done more than enough for me. I don’t need any more help. Don’t be stubborn.”

Cheeks burning red, Airi stared defiantly back at him, fully displaying she was not willing to let this go. “But I really like spending time with you, sempai!” Her voice fell from an impulsive yell to a humble whisper. “Please… tell me if I’m bothering you… and I’ll give you your space… Just don’t push me away…”

Speechless, Shinjiro looked at the remaining dishes to advert her gaze and scratched the back of his neck. This girl was unbelievable. She noticed his attempts to put some amount of distance between them and refused to play his game. Not only did she move closer to him than he wanted to admit out loud, she was on the verge of tears, making him feel like the world's biggest asshole.

“You’re not bothering me, Fujihara,” he said quietly, trying to calm the fire he helped fuel. “Sorry for confusing you… You can stay and help. Might as well head to school together when we’re done.”

Biting her lip, Airi thought over his words for a moment. Relieved to see him give her a weak smile, she sighed and bowed. “Thank you so much. And I’m sorry about my outburst. That was… unsightly of me.”

They finished the dishes quickly and quietly. Once Airi reached to put the last dish in the cabinet, Shinjiro brought their bags from the dining table to the island. Saying very little, Airi smiled gratefully at him. He nodded reluctantly and watched her carry her backpack and head to the door. Her sharp mood swing from earlier disappeared completely, and she no longer felt like a different person.

Something dark brewed beneath her cheerful demeanor and it made her unstable for only a moment. Both out of concern for her wellbeing and to simply enjoy her company, Shinjiro kept his eyes on her as they set off.
The evening after the first day of fall classes, Aigis approached everyone in the school’s winter uniform. It originally started out as a joke Mitsuru made while having another inconsequential argument with Akihiko. Being a “snooping bastard”, Ikutsuki overheard it and proposed the idea of enrolling Aigis into the same homeroom as Yukari, Junpei, and Airi. Shinjiro got wind of it first and called him out on the ludicrous idea. Then word spread like wildfire. Aigis picked up on it and agreed it give school a try. After a generally positive reception – minus Yukari’s unfailing skepticism and Junpei’s unapologetic laughter – Aigis started classes with everyone on the second day of school.

With the return to school life, new rumors flew around the halls about Airi. This particular thing created an extreme allergic reaction from the nosier girls in school.

“How can you stand your girlfriend, Akihiko-sempai?! She’s a whore!”

Two fangirls swarmed around Akihiko at lunchtime in the hallway. All he wanted was to go to the restroom and return to class undisturbed. The next thing he knew, a bunch of underclassmen stalkers confronted him as if he killed a puppy. There was no easy way for him to get out of it with them blocking the way out of the restroom.

“I have never dated Airi,” he stated for the seven hundredth time in the past four months.

“Oh, you were ‘just friends’ on a first name basis, huh? That’s what she told you to say?!” the petite girl with pigtails shot back. She might have been in Airi’s homeroom but Akihiko couldn’t care less.

Curling a strand of blond-dyed hair behind her ear, her freshman friend agreed. “It doesn’t change the fact she’s a slut! First that Iori clown, then you, and now that delinquent? What does she see in those two freaks? At least she saw how cool you are. But you have to be blind to not know how cool you are!”

Akihiko had to literally bite his tongue to not insult them. That was an ability only Shinjiro mastered without losing any credibility. Still, he managed to shoot an impressive glare. “I don’t have time for these stupid rumors.”

Then the girls calmed down and were nice and sweet again. “Oh, I’m sorry, Akihiko-sempai!”

“We didn’t mean to make you angry!” the blonde whined. “We just want to know the truth!”

“Know the truth about what?”

Slightly annoyed at his obliviousness, the two repeated the rumor again slowly. “Is Fujihara dating Aragaki-sempai?”

Akihiko hid his amusement over the idea becoming more likely to happen with each passing day. “What makes you say that?”

“You didn’t see?” the junior huffed angrily. “This is the second day they came to school together.”

“They’re pretty close,” added her friend. “No one’s ever seen that guy talking to anyone, let alone a girl as popular as Fujihara.”

“And he was smiling! It was really freaky! This is the scariest guy in Gekkoukan we’re talking
about!”

“And of all people, it was that bitch who did it to him. What’s so special about her anyway?!”

“Are two you finished prattling?”

As the girls were rambling away, they did not notice the Student Council President standing behind them. Not even when white clouds puffed from their mouths did they realize she was there. The fangirls spun around and gasped in terror, which gave Akihiko and opening to finally gain some footing in the hallway.

“Kirijo-sempai!” squeaked the junior.

“How are you, Miss President?” her blonde friend stammered helplessly.

Mitsuru kept a hand on her hip and spoke evenly. “I see you are spreading fictitious tales about members of the student body. Do you enjoy wounding the reputations of strangers based on circumstantial evidence?”

“N-No, ma’am!”

The blonde picked her nails as she dug the hole deeper and deeper. “W-We just wanted to learn the truth from Akihi – uh, Sanada-sempai! H-He knows Fujihara-sempai and Aragaki-sempai, and we just wanted the facts!”

“That’s all, honest! We hate gossip as much as you, Kirijo-sempai!”

After listening to their anecdotes, Mitsuru turned over to her friend. “Is this true, Akihiko?”

He said in a tone Shinjiro would hug him for, “Of course not.”

“SEMPAI!” the fangirls wailed hopelessly.

“We’re not friends, so I don’t need to act like one. You girls backstab, lie, and whine so much you’re not worth defending.”

His words stung like acid and the girls nearly started crying. Their precious adorkable Akihiko-sempai transformed from a handsome dream into a rude, apathetic jerk. Disappointed by the colors he revealed, the fangirls sprinted off and yelled curses.

“You’re so mean, Akihiko-sempai! No wonder you’re friends with that street rat! You’re both awful people!”

Their voices trailed off down the hallway and they were long gone. Mitsuru stood by simultaneously confused and displeased at the spectacle. “How tactful. I would like to report them, but I am not familiar with their names.”

“Usagi Kishimoto and Miho Sato,” said Akihiko automatically. It baffled him how he remembered. “And I said it how it is.”

She shook her head at his dismissal, but she could not fault his integrity. “Merci beaucoup. I’ll be sure to turn them in.”

It sounded as if she was ready to leave; yet she didn’t move. She tilted her head, indicating that she wanted him to follow her. Not questioning, Akihiko did as he was told. They went through the halls in silence until they ended up by the Student Council meeting room.
“Aigis wants to speak with us,” Mitsuru explained.

“Is something wrong?”

“I believe not, but we’ll see when we speak with her.”

When they entered, the lights were still off. It typically was empty until after school on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. However, in one of the chairs sat Aigis. She must have waited for them while examining a holder of pencils. She stood up and bowed stiffly. “Good to see you, Akihiko-san.”

He glanced between her and Mitsuru, who shut the door behind them. “What’s going on?”

The ice queen remained stoic as she commanded him to take a seat. He did so, not without giving the most apparent confused expression he could muster. She read it, but said nothing. Instead she paid attention to Aigis.

“You have a question for us,” stated Mitsuru.

“Yukari-san once told me about the nature of ‘rumors’. They attempt to explain behavior seen as strange or unusual. Ever since, I have studied everyone in SEES for any such behaviors.”

“Is there a particular reason?” asked Akihiko.

Registering some suspicion, Aigis’ lowered her head. “The most accurate way to articulate this is to say, ‘I am curious to learn’.”

“It’s alright, Aigis.” Mitsuru turned to Akihiko with a face just as diffident. “In fact, she asked me if it was acceptable to study everyone.”

He barely felt reassured, but Akihiko realized the importance of checking every single odd thing that blipped on a machine’s radar. He decided to roll with it for the time being. “Did you find something?”

“The rumors about Airi-san and Shinjiro-san ‘intrigued’ me. Whenever they are near each other, they behave ‘strangely.’ I have detected an erratic and increased heart rate in them both when together, Shinjiro-san particularly in recent days. What is it that makes them behave in this manner?”

The seniors’ eyes widened and gave each other looks. Their reaction was not what Aigis predicted, but she waited patiently for their answer.

Akihiko was the first to speak. “It’s funny that even Aigis saw it.” Mitsuru nodded with a wry smile.

“What is funny about my question?” inquired the only one not in on the joke.

Mitsuru cleared her through and retained her passive air. “You’ve noticed the same signs Akihiko and I have seen. Shinjiro and Fujihara may be falling in love.”

The term was too alien to Aigis, whose face clearly showed disappointment. “‘Love’… There are many definitions for this word. Could it mean the feeling of attachment for another?”

“It’s complicated.” Mitsuru adjusted her position in her seat.

They envied the patience Aigis had for her two flustered seniors who had plenty of trouble understanding what love really meant to them. Akihiko thought he knew what it felt like, only for the one person he acted strangely around had feelings for someone else. Mitsuru was even worse off;
having grown up a wealthy, isolated lifestyle, she still struggled with coming to terms with basic casual food etiquette.

Akihiko ran a hand through his very short silver hair. “Love is…” He tried thinking of a decent explanation, but sighed in frustration when he had nothing. “How would you put it?”

He turned to Mitsuru, who blushed slightly. “It’s a feeling of personal attraction to someone you care about. There are many kinds of love: between family and among friends. Respect and trust are the foundations of such relationships.”

“I comprehend. There is a sense of trust among us at the dorm, in school, and in combat. Because we are all friends, correct?”

“Yeah.” Surprised at her quick learning, Akihiko felt happy for the semi-human girl.

“However, Airi-san and Shinjiro-san’s behavior still confuses me. I am friends with all of you, yet no one acts that way around me. Your heart rates remain stable.” The android noticed that the air thickened with tension. Mitsuru and Akihiko stared at each other, hiding their dread over explaining further.

“There’s another kind of love,” continued Mitsuru, who tapped her feet against the legs of her seat. “It’s the kind many of us aren’t too familiar with. Romantic love between two people can be just as powerful if not more. However, it’s more intimate and private.”

Despite the vagueness, Aigis accepted what she learned. Then a few gears turned and wires sparked. Once more, she examined the seniors before her. Akihiko was one to have reasonable eye contact with most people he met, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop staring at the empty meeting table or the clock by the chalkboard. Mitsuru was very similar. The heels of her boots continued to tap the seat, sounding mild clings against the cool metal. Very much like how she read before, Aigis could sense similar behavioral oddities between them.

The android stood up, breaking the silence and gaining the attention of the oblivious fools. “I will evaluate what I have learned today.” She turned her attention to the clock. “The bell will ring in three minutes, fourteen seconds. Perhaps we should return to our classrooms.”

Mentioning it snapped them out of it and they rushed to their feet. “Of course!” stammered Akihiko, nearly tripping over his own feet.

“Thank you, Aigis,” said Mitsuru, more outwardly composed but equally emotional internally.

They snuck out of the meeting room just before one of the teachers could catch them. Since 2-F was right across the hall, Aigis waved goodbye to her upperclassmen. As she entered, cheerful voices of Junpei and Airi greeted her and demanded where she was the whole time. Mitsuru and Akihiko found themselves laughing at the insanity that inevitably erupted from the classroom when the two juniors were noisy.

“I think she’s adapting just fine,” said Akihiko.

“I agree. The Chairman’s judgment was as correct as always.” Her tone shifted back to its cool poise. “If only his choice of words were more tasteful.”

“Don’t remind me. I’ll start coming up with bad puns.”

“It’s not that difficult to create puns in Japanese. I asked Fujihara and she confirmed my guess that the ability is more challenging in English and French.”
“Has she helped you master enough languages to take over the world once you lead the Group?”

Mitsuru had to rethink his words for a moment before she detected the joke. She smiled wryly. “Like my father, she said my grammar and vocabulary is excellent. It felt good to hear her say it, since her birth and foster families taught her English. With the influences in the British Isles, her accent is charming. Despite our differences, we can communicate well.”

“That’s impressive. Learning another language is a lot harder than improving strength and endurance. You’re body is more willing to adapt a lot longer than the brain once you’re an adult.”

“A bold, but valid claim. Yet it’s the opposite for me, remember? We all have our talents. Mine is in intelligence, and yours in athletics.”

“Guess we both gotta train to keep our preferred skills honed.”

They were halfway to their homeroom when their conversation died suddenly. Like in the meeting room, the air between them grew awkward. For the first time, Akihiko missed the frighteningly low temperature Mitsuru sometimes emitted.

To remedy this, he tried bringing up another topic. “It’s funny… They never really spoke much to each other until Yakushima. I think it started the night before we left.”

She browsed through her memories to understand what he was talking about and smiled. “Yesterday after fencing, I met Kurebayashi-san outside his clinic. He said speaking about Fujihara has helped Shinjiro become more comfortable with therapy. Shinjiro seems fond of her, and I’m happy for him.”

“Me too. He’s kept even more of a distance around girls ever since Miki died…”

Mitsuru heard a bit of sadness in his voice. “Akihiko…”

“I’m alright.” His face was unreadable and voice melancholic. “It’s about time he’s trying to move on. He needs it more than anyone else. I’ve always been the one who needed to be cared for, and he never had the chance to be anything but a guardian to me.”

She walked in front of him and forced him to stop with her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought the topic up. You have lived through so much…”

“What? No... Don’t ever think it’s your fault, Mitsuru.”

Denying his feelings as always, she thought. Mitsuru bit her lip, reluctantly kept eye contact and got to the point. “Does Fujihara remind you two of your sister?”

Eyes widening, Akihiko glanced at the bulletin board to his right. It being the beginning of the semester, but so many flyers covered the poor surface until it couldn’t breathe. One warned everyone about the cases of Apathy Syndrome being on the rise once more despite more of the victims being adults lately. Another had a notice about the procedures of a fire drill. The mere thought of fire reminded him of the orphanage and the apartment. Two times fire had changed his life and affected the people he cared about around him. Only one lived to tell his tale, and he perpetually punished himself for it. The other sat in a better place, if one even existed. A third close call with or without fire should never happen to someone else close to him again.

“Akihiko?”

He returned from his thoughts and felt a cold hand gently touching his. Realizing it was Mitsuru trying to get his attention, he tensed up. She recoiled quickly like if she was shocked.
“I’m sorry for prying,” she spoke quietly. “I shouldn’t have reopened closed wounds.”

“Stop apologizing, Mitsuru. I’m just a bit distracted…”

Her uncharacteristic nervousness flustered Akihiko. Not once had either of them struggled to have a normal conversation without tripping over his or her tongues or averting eye contact. Then Aigis’ words resounded in their heads. Ignoring them, Akihiko gently tapped the redhead’s shoulder.

“C’mon. The bell rang a while ago. You should report those girls too.”

“Indeed. I will see you later…” Remembering her place Mitsuru put on the mask of formalities and started her way off. Before leaving she turned back to face him once more. “This is my last apology, I promise. I shouldn’t have been as dismissive of you as I have. Not once had I re-evaluated our situation with the concerns you shared.”

Akihiko shrugged. “I had nothing to back up my claims. It happens when I don’t talk with my fists.”

She didn’t laugh at his attempt to lighten the mood. “It’s more than that. I spoke to my father. When he looked through some of the copies of the files he gave us… some traces of information have vanished from the database.”

His jaw dropped. “What?”

“Yes... it’s troubling. My father has called outside help to ease his mind and confirm his suspicions. I’ll discuss more at the next meeting once he provides some new updates. At this rate with an upcoming board meeting with the Group's donors and sponsors, it won’t be until after the next operation.”

“Alright then. It’s not ideal, but I can live with it.”

“Thank you for your understanding.”

Holding back his disappointment at a new discovery, Akihiko watched the Student Council President walk down the hall and towards the faculty office. In that moment how she naturally held her full figure with poise and how her flowing red hair tangled with the sunlight left him stunned.

In his sudden moment of weakness, Aigis’ words echoed. “Erratic heart rate, huh?” He placed two fingers on his jugular to double check. A baby would understand exactly what Akihiko's body was telling him.

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September 3, 2009

Not many people – young, middle-aged, or old – flocked to the downtown area that night. Such lack of bustling activity was quite unusual. The heat had repelled some from leaving the air-conditioned indoors, but late summer was not necessarily an inconvenient time for the bustle and chaos of nightlife. All the busy people searching for entertainment in their mundane, stressful lives, or the young wasting their time and money searching for love on blind dates seemed realistic. Only a very few of these individuals emerged on what could be a perfect scene.

Perhaps Theo took his master’s overdramatic explanations too seriously. Sometimes her pretty head would slip easily into fiction when she tried to explain the unexplainable. He always loved that about her. On a journey as long and distressing as hers was, it was a miracle she hardly changed in that regard.
He might have miscalculated the conditions for that night's operation after weeks of switching jobs, fixing his timetable, and tracking Aizawa's unpredictable movements, but he was thankful he wore appropriate clothing. Donning a navy suit and silver tie, he didn’t stand out too much in the district. Much to his grief, he had dyed his sleek white hair jet black and wore dark brown contacts over his golden eyes whenever he interacted with the human world. Being himself would cause more problems than Airi having red eyes or Fuuka Yamagishi with teal hair. Genetic phenotype oddities and their inconsistent connotations in the homo-normative society of Japan fascinated Theo on good days and annoyed him on inconvenient days when seven police officers question him within a ten minute period.

He had lived in Tokyo long enough in two cycles to understand the basics of city life. Go in the direction of the crowd, be wary of pickpockets, don’t walk in the street without looking, etc. One trick he had to learn was even harder. When following someone, don’t ever draw too much attention and don't reveal too much about yourself.

The target in question stumbled past many restaurants within a two-block area for nearly twenty minutes. Theo grew more pleased than impatient; he received enough exercise after many hours of sitting down at his desk job, and he was grateful he gained enough endurance to complete his personal mission while on vacation. The brown-haired middle-aged man finally settled with a Western fast-food restaurant with gaudy neon signs and lights. Theo followed in seconds later. There were very few tables, since most customers ordered their food at the counter and returned to their business. Theo took the liberty of sitting down to wait for his target to buy his food. At closer examination, the man was disheveled with a patched up sports jacket over a worn white wife-beater. He appeared to be of a towering height, much like Theo, and he had seen better days.

The man wiped his large brow with a raggedy handkerchief before he took his food. Keeping his head low, Theo wondered if the man suspected that he was being followed, especially when he left Yakushima so suddenly and without warning that not even Ikutsuki was aware of his change in behavior. He brushed off his moment of insecurity with a grin. No matter what could happen, the mouse was still going straight for the cheese, and Theo would get what he needed.

Theo pulled back his white glove to look at the platinum watch Airi gave him during one of the many requests she took as she introduced him to her world. Ten minutes to midnight.

“Aren’t you gonna order something?”

Standing right by the table was the man, bearing an analytical expression. If it was an attempt to startle Theo, the man failed. With a polite smile, he answered, “I haven’t yet decided what I wanted.”

“Is that so?” he grumbled, unconvinced. “Do I know you?”

Not missing a beat, he tilted his head. “Teodoa Arisato. A pleasure to meet you.”

Theo’s politeness made the man frown skeptically. In spite of that, he sat down across from him and put down his bag of junk food. “Souta Aizawa. Feel like I know you from somewhere…”

“I worked in the public relations division of the Kirijo Group before transferring to Gekkoukan,” Theo replied.

“Ah, the moron who gave up a suit and tie for a skirt and notepad.” Uninterested, Aizawa relaxed a bit and started digging through his crunching paper bag. “So what brings you back to civilization out at this hour?”

“Vacation. Sitting at the desk all day is not good for one’s health. This is the only opportunity I have
to enjoy a pleasurable walk. What about you, Aizawa-san?"

The man paused to think, only to forget why he hesitated in the first place. Theo heard of how strange the man was, but he did not expect this kind of behavior. “Havin’ trouble sleeping some nights. Midnight snacks help.”

“Mind if I ask, but is it because of your work?”

“Hnn.” Bored by the conversation, he started to unwrap his cheeseburger. “Isn’t how that normally is? Never get anythin’ done at the labs… Kirijo Junior’s been shutting down research branches for years to fund scholarships for that school. Had to leave that shit hole for that alone. Good thing I did ’cuz he lured that Kurebayashi back just to start up old drama. What a pain in the ass. I gave up my life's work to get out from those bastards' grasp.”

Remembering from what he read in the many books on human behavior, Theo wondered why the man casually brought up slightly confidential information. With a quick inhale, he immediately found his answer. “I see,” he said, ignoring the trace of liquor in the air. “To part on such terms must cause pain...”

“Damn right it did! Barely had time to lick my wounds before things got worse. Takahashi goes missin’ for a while and then his corpse shows up on the news? Then the Group and the cops cover up how he died? Fuck Kurebayashi and fuck Kirijo! Takahashi deserved better. Never thought he'd go out like that.”

“A friend too, I imagine.”

Aizawa tilted his head and scratched behind his ear. “Hardly any good old blood left. Junior really hates living in his father’s legacy, the coward. Better him to do it than that Kurebayashi. Arrogant bastard thinks he's in some kinda fairy tale and don't give a shit what other people think.”

Something shiny caught Theo’s attention. Aizawa took out a can of beer out from his pocket. Shortly afterwards, he took out a cigarette and a lighter. He offered Theo a smoke, who humbly declined for health reasons.

“If you say so,” he mocked the not-quite human. “Too straight-laced for that sort of thing?”

Theo smiled wryly and changed his sitting position. “A friend of mine insisted I keep away from such things. Her boyfriend suffered terribly from addiction.” He raised his hand dismissively. “Not that I condone drugs themselves. As long as responsibility is practiced.”

Aizawa chuckled awkwardly, either at the stupidity of the comment or the seriousness of his words. “What is she, your daughter? They always worry too much, don't they?”

"Daughter?"

The man held a pregnant pause. A mist glazed over his face that he brushed away with his beer-clutching hand. "Dunno... She just sounds like a daughter. They're annoying brats, but they've got good hearts... kinda." He uttered the last word to brush the topic under a rug permanently before Theo could have the chance to question it.

The conversation continued on, touching on random topics that Theo had no interest in. He reminded himself not to interact with drunken strangers ever again, but he felt some pity for the man. While much of what he said tied to the Kirijo Group and the Children to some degree, he ranted and meandered down paths that hinted at a more profound instability that the alcohol only amplified. Had circumstances been different, had he never worked with Kurebayashi, Aizawa might still have some
of his quirks, but maybe he would not have walked down the path that would lead to this trap. At one point he took another look at his watch, now reading 11:59 pm. As long as he kept the man talking, things would move smoothly.

“Urgh,” Aizawa slurred. “I gotta get goin’…. Lab’s gotta be attended to early ‘morrow ‘fore I’m out for good…” He stumbled as he stood up. “Heck of a hangover in the morn…”

A piercing shatter of glass rang in Theo’s mind. Thick mist flooded into the room, transforming the few bystanders in the restaurant into black coffins. Lights fought to keep awake before surrendering to the hidden hour. Only Aizawa and Theo retained their forms. The later stumbled back in a confusion powerful enough to bring him to his senses.

“What the – wait…” his face turned pale, allowing a stronger green glow to emit.

Theo beamed in such a simple, childish way that it caused chills to go down the man’s spine. “Pleased to finally meet you, Hemera.”

The scientist dug his hands in his pockets, manically searching for something to defend himself. Not even a beer can could serve as a worthwhile weapon.

“You do not have an Evoker?” Theo observed while pulling out a spare one Airi once lost a cycle or two ago. “Have no fear. I have not come to kill you, although I cannot guarantee your safety.”

“Don’t act all smug. Whadduya want with me?!”

“Charon. Where is he?”

"The fuck’m I supposed to know who that is?!"

"Hemera, you are one of the Nine Children, the cult that brought about the Dark Hour and birthed Thanatos, Death and the Avatar of Nyx. I follow my master’s orders. The Wild Card will bring judgment on you and the remaining scientists who gave birth to Death. So tell me: where is Charon?"

Finally realizing what the strange suited man was rambling about, Aizawa laughed and seemed to undergo a complete shift. The angry, jaded man whose life fell apart due to events beyond his control morphed into a crazed imp. Red mist seeped out of his shoes and danced along his limbs and up his body. In that moment, Theo wished he could have watched Junpei Iori and Akihiko Sanada experience Mitsuru Kirijo’s mass execution at the Kyoto hot springs. At least that insanity would make sense, even without context.

“Seriously?” Aizawa exclaimed in between fits of laughter that progressively evolved into deranged shrieks. His tone and mannerisms had changed completely. “Do you not wish to be saved?!”

Theo took the bait, not seeing how this would affect his plans. “Your idea of salvation is self-destructive and based on uncivilized fear.”

“Humanity seeks its own ruin because we are uncivilized! Why else do we let such horrible acts of violence persist? Misery and hatred have consumed the world! Our Mother of the night shall save us from our despair!”

Remaining calm, Theo left his seat and took out his contacts. He put his Evoker to his head and raised his voice.

“Whether you can accept it or not, my master will prevent the Fall. She stands as the beacon of hope
for this world! If you could only see how much she has endured, you would be in awe at how resiliently she stands. She is the messiah who will prevent the twisted prophecy you venerate from coming to be. You and your siblings’ cries will ring hollow and silent upon Erebus’ comatose ears!”

“Don’t be a wiseass!” screamed the fanatic. He continued to back away and spewed more nonsense as he scratched his bare forearm. “Whoever she is, she’s a sham! No way could that bitch kiss the ground Nyx-sama will walk on! Nothing will stop the Fall once Death returns!”

“Beelzebub!” An aura of dancing shards of glass burst from the side of Theo’s head. His body glowed a violent blue as a massive insectile demon with a necklace of human skulls emerged from the sea of his soul. “That ‘bitch’ is Airi Fujihara.”

In response Aizawa dug his nails into his skin and let out a scream. The red clouds embracing him unlocked the door for his crystalline dragon to emerge with hard golden claws ready to strike away anything that dared to get too close to its host.

A series of crackles echoed loudly in the small restaurant, and the skulls around Beelzebub’s neck rattled and radiated a yellow wave of energy. The temperature decreased as Hemera prepared for ice magic to engulf the impending thunderstorm. Amid the increasing chaos, Theo recomposed his angry stature; however, the fire of passion in his eyes shined golden to rival the madness of Aizawa’s. Red and green married to create a toxic mist ready to anticipate the building tension that threatened to destroy the building and the people within. Mere seconds before either Persona could unleash their destruction, Theo removed a thin silver bookmark from his breast pocket and threw it several feet away from Aizawa. It slid between a fissure within the Dark Hour’s atmosphere, broke it open, and pulled the men and their Personas through a vortex birthed by an open blue door.

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September 4, 2009

On the evening before the next operation everyone was fully ready to take on one last Tartarus visit. The proposal Airi mentioned a while back regarding party management had finally set in; however, in order for it to work out either Mitsuru or Akihiko had to stay behind as second field leader. Airi decided to leave Aigis, Mitsuru, and Junpei the responsibility to protect Fuuka from any stray Shadows. Everyone seemed pleased with the set-up with Koromaru warmly welcoming Ken, who was nervous for his first day of real combat experience.

The youngest member utilized spears twice his size that granted him incredible reach with pierce-based melee hits that would help deal damage Yukari and Aigis specialized in. The rest of the makeup had the slashing blades from Airi and Koromaru, and the striking fists and axe from Akihiko and Shinjiro. They spent time training Ken a few floors below where the last guardian of Tartarus rested. Once the kid was comfortable, the group reached the 110th floor and defeated the Natural Dancer easily with well coordinated attacks.

The enemy would cast Sexy Dance and try to Charm everyone. Shinjiro would get hit the most often, but Yukari easily brought him back with Charmdi. When he was sane, Shinjiro used melee attacks. With High Pixie, whom she awakened after defeating a few Shadows, Airi remained on the offensive with Bufula. Akihiko did his best to lower the Shadow’s attack, defense, and evasion rate and Ken healed when necessary. When the Natural Dancer was defeated, everyone felt accomplished. After months of varying styles, skills, and affinities, SEES was starting to congeal into an effective and precise instrument. Shinjiro – who was overpowered but unrefined when he first joined – remained autonomous but became more patient and flexible with the group strategy.

Akihiko noticed this and smirked. “We’re catching up pretty fast. Don’t start slacking on us.”
“Same to you,” he quipped while wiping the black muck off his guillotine axe with a handkerchief.

Everyone stood on the 114th floor, more like a landing that marked the end of the royal blue hues of the Yabbashah block. A translucent barrier impeded before them to the stairs leading to the imperial golden radiance of the Tziah block above. Nearby sat a familiar neon green teleporter that would send everyone back to the entrance of Tartarus. Before doing so, everyone hung out around it for a break. No Shadows ever appeared on any of the transitional floors.

Airi found a few Chewing Souls in her bag and gave them to Akihiko, Yukari, Ken, and Koromaru. They used a ton of fire, wind, and electricity magic between the various elemental-weak enemies on their journey that night. Then she tossed some Medical Powder to Shinjiro, whose stamina was a bit low.

“How’re you holding up, Ken-kun?” asked Yukari.

Tapping his heels together, Ken glanced up with a weak smile. “Not bad. The Dark Hour isn’t that creepy anymore. The Shadows are tough, but you guys are very reliable.”

“We try our best,” beamed Airi. She summoned the primate-sage Thoth and cast a blue healing light upon the group.

“Great job, everyone,” interjected Fuuka. Not used to the psychic communication, Ken lost his balance until Yukari grabbed his hand. “I think we’re finally ready for tomorrow.”

Koromaru ran around the floor and barked happily. When he settled down, he sat close to Shinjiro’s leg. Looking up, he saw the senior tense, holding in the anxiety he shared with everyone else. As Yukari and Airi gave Ken some tips about combat, Akihiko hung around his friend and Koromaru.

Something bugged him throughout the night and he wanted to address it. “That bracelet Airi made seems to keep your energy up whenever Castor’s summoned. I see you didn’t bring him out once.”

“So what?” he asked, but he knew where this was going.

“You think Ken will recognize him?” Akihiko stopped being vague a long time go.

Shinjiro opened his mouth, only to shut it. He instinctively chose to deny the claim, but he knew Akihiko picked up on what he was thinking. Resting his weapon over his shoulder, he replied plainly, “He’ll figure it out anyway if he doesn’t know by now. ‘Sides, why ruin a successful run by explaining what happened back then?”

“Allright. But we have to tell the others soon. I have a feeling Airi would like some tension and confusion relieved before something bad happens.”

As they packed to get ready to leave, an unnatural tremor seized Tartarus. Everyone fell on the ground and looked for an object or nearby person to hold onto. It stopped as quickly as it began; the source seemed more like an explosion than an earthquake.

“Is everyone alright?!” Airi called out to her group and those in the main entranceway.

Fuuka’s voice trembled within their minds. She went on a fast tangent, making it hard to follow her. “I sensed that presence of death near you, but then a strange door appeared down here. I don’t know what it is or where it came from!”

Eyes wide, Airi shared her classmate’s panic. Everyone wordlessly warped down to join the others. The structure appeared unharmed despite the intense seismic event. Mitsuru and Junpei never looked so confused and stunned in their lives. Aigis studied the newly present door. Everyone took the time
to huddle together and calm each other down. Airi, however, approached Aigis.

“This door is strange,” she said flatly. “There is something ‘unnatural’ about it. It is not of our world, and not of the Dark Hour either.”

Airi blanched, eyes fixed on the familiar blue. “How do you know?”

“My Plume of Dusk is… ‘pulsing’ in response to it.” The android placed her hand to her temple, very much like reacting to a migraine. When the field leader did not respond, she inquired, “You seem to recognize this door. What is it?”

If she spoke any louder, the rest of SEES would ask questions as well. Taking the opportunity to feign ignorance, Airi shook her head. “No. I dunno what it is.”

Before Aigis could ask further, Airi turned away and returned to her friends. The android stared at the mysterious door and mused over her friend’s odd reaction. “She gave minimal eye contact. When she did, her pupils dilated. Her heart rate intensified and her vocal inflection became uneven. Airi-san lied.”

She reached for the handle. It stubbornly refused to move, even when Aigis put inhuman levels of strength and grip into her arms and hands. She noted this peculiarity before returning to the anxious group. Mitsuru, finally calm, was ready to prompt an investigation until she checked her watch. The Dark Hour would end soon. They had to try again after the full moon operation, a thought that filled Airi with dread heavy enough to drag her into the center of the earth.
Chapter Summary

Part 3: The Tower Collapses

Chapter Notes

I had some free time on July 4th to get another chapter up! Consider it another apology for my one month of silence. Or maybe I should apologize for this chapter's existence...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 5, 2009

It was 7pm, and after having yet another well-balanced dinner from the leftovers of yet another cooking spree Shinjiro and Fuuka went on yesterday, Junpei stood in front of the dorm unable to decide what to do.

He had met Chidori again yesterday. Their conversation was livelier and more enjoyable than it had been the first few times. For the first time he opened up to someone beside Airi. They spoke of what made them feel so alive: for Chidori it was painting, and Junpei having a secret power very few know about. He admitted to himself that he said a bit too much about being a Persona user, but Junpei could hardly contain his childish excitement of saving the world from scary monsters. Rather than laughing, Chidori listened. She seemed to take him seriously, as she wanted to meet with him again that day. But she never arrived.

“Heh,” Junpei scratched the back of his head and laughed. “It'd be nice to see her again, but maybe she's busy. Man, who'd wanna hang out with me all the time?”

He wanted to return to the station to find her again, even if he was late for the operation. She had her moments of being obnoxious and rude to him for no reason, but sometimes having Yukari to keep him line was a good thing. Too bad she didn't seem to be in a hurry to hunt him down and drag him into the command room. Leaning against the fence in front of the dorm, Junpei continued to talk to himself. Chidori’s words stuck in his head all day. It brought a smile to his face.

“It’s impressive that I fight without recognition, huh? Can’t be all that bad… Now that I think about it… me and the guys are fighting to protect her too… That so rocks. Maybe we really are like heroes!”

“Junpei?”

The familiar voice caused him to jump to attention. It was Chidori. She barely changed her expression, though she seemed sweeter than the first time he met her.

“Hey, Chidori!” he smiled widely. “You weren’t at the station. You’re doing okay?”
Hands behind her back, she smiled in turn. “Of course. I was low on supplies and had to buy some more.”

“No problem. You take art very seriously. That’s really awesome.”

“Thank you, Junpei,” she said with a wink. “Come, walk with me.”

Detect anything?” asked Mitsuru.

“Only a faint presence,” said Fuuka. “It seems so close, but… why can’t I find it?”

SEES waited around in Paulownia Mall for Fuuka to finish her search for the Shadow. Twenty minutes of searching took its toll on the girl; lines of stress carved into her clammy, porcelain face. Worse, Ken returned reporting that Junpei was nowhere to be found. Even Ikutsuki didn’t show up with any leads or advice. While Mitsuru dismissed his absence as normal, nearly everyone had some suspicion or dislike of the man by that point.

Getting tired of waiting, Yukari suggested, “Why don’t you take a break, Fuuka? You look like you’re gonna pass out.”

Hearing the phrase caused Shinjiro to keep his hand on his bag, full of water bottles and snacks he picked up at the convenience store while returning home from dinner at Wakatsu with Airi. He was ready if anyone was going to pass out from anemia, hunger, or stress.

“No!” Fuuka practically screamed, hands shaking. “Please, give me a moment! This is my responsibility…!”

A bang and blue light rung through the air as Penthesilea emerged. “Let me help you,” Mitsuru insisted. “There must be a powerful force hindering your abilities.”

The two girls concentrated intently and their Persona held hands to strengthen their powers. The extra help seemed to work, as Fuuka relaxed a bit more. “Beneath our feet! It’s some kind of webbing? Like a spider web?”

“Power cables,” Aigis stood up from the bench she shared with Ken. “The closest thing to a ‘spider web’ could be the old power cables underground. They were left there when the island’s construction was complete after the Second World War.”

Finishing some stretched, Akihiko stared skeptically. “That’s what’s interfering with Fuuka’s ability?”

“Possibly,” Mitsuru said. “The energy is electric in nature, and there may be more influences if the cables extend further out of our area…”

While everyone wondered how to beat such an enemy, Koromaru got up from his place and restlessly sniffed around.

Being the only optimistic one, Airi said, “Maybe the cables are used as a network to broadcast a signal. It’s like when the Priestess hacked the monorail in May.”

Relieved, Fuuka closed her eyes. “Of course! Let me try to find the source.”

Shinjiro paced around the mall until he stopped by Escapade. The maintenance notice was still on the
As Koromaru approached, his hair stuck up on end and he growled at the door.

“I found it!” Fuuka gasped. “It’s in this mall!”

“What’s wrong, Koro-chan?” Airi knelt by the dog, howling rabidly.

Satisfied that someone finally paid attention, Shinjiro jabbed his thumb at the building. “Escapade’s been closed for the past week. Some big event was cancelled ‘cause of power outages.”

Airi remembered that the Risette concert she wanted to see at Escapade was cancelled. For a short time, the day she heard about the unfortunate event was one of the worst of her entire life.

“Koromaru smells a Shadow nearby,” Aigis nodded. “This is our best lead.”

“The source is coming from a small chamber underground,” said Fuuka.

“Then that definitely fits,” Yukari beamed. Finally the show could begin. “Great catch, guys.”

Koromaru calmed down once everyone agreed to check out the club. The team was split in two groups as usual. Knowing the Shadow was capable of electric magic, Yukari and Aigis remained with Fuuka and Mitsuru, both needing to recover. Shinjiro chose to stay behind and look after the girls. Otherwise, Koromaru was happy to jump into the fray for once. Ken was nervous, but he happily tagged along. Ready for anything, Akihiko nudged Airi to press on and explore the underground club.

Once they entered the building, light from the Shadow’s influence paved their descent. The team felt wary, but comfortable. They were confident this encounter would be short and sweet.

The dance floor was well lit and heavy techno music blared from the speakers. If it were another day, Airi or Junpei would urge everyone to let loose. They sat in a vacuum, isolated from the green fog from the world outside. Then they saw the Shadow.

Its red and purple body stood on four legs, bound by bundles of wires, leading into the outlets, and thus the power cords of the entire island. Bulbs were mounted into its arched back. It’s head looked that of a lion. A flowing grey mane surrounded the orange mask marked with an IX.

“Hello, dear Hermit,” Airi remarked, standing ready with her naginata. “He might pack a hell of a shock. Be careful guys!”

Remembering the night Koromaru saved him and Junpei, Akihiko winced. “I wouldn’t be surprised…”

“Let’s do it!” cheered Ken, defensive and ready. Koromaru barked in agreement.

Like in many battles, the Shadow took the first move. It didn’t seem to mind their presence, as an aura of electricity intensified around it. Airi ordered the boys to split up and remain on the defensive. Knowing his usual routine, Akihiko and Polydeuces tried to minimize possible damage by lowering accuracy, attack, and defense of the Hermit. Cerberus breathed three streams of fire, bathing the Shadow. The Hermit threw a hot Ziodyne laser that a whimpering Koromaru quickly dodged. Akihiko empathized; that high-tier electric attack was nothing to sneeze at. Ask the sidewalk that exploded two months ago.

Airi summoned Thor, who blocked an electric attack coming her way as she charged. She had no problems in past experiences with relying on melee attacks. Koromaru’s Persona cast Agilao again while Ken’s used the pierced-based Cruel Attack. Akihiko stayed on the sidelines to determine the
behavior of the Hermit. The Hermit curled inwards, accepting the beating it received. A blue aura
surrounded it and the bulbs. Soft humming echoed through the room, but the noise vibrated violently
against Akihiko’s eardrums, inducing slight nausea. Koromaru backed off from the fray and
confronted the boxer.

“Tell them to back off,” Akihiko groaned through gritted teeth.

Before he could continue, the energy amplified, giving him a massive migraine. He cried out and
collapsed to the ground. Airi knew exactly what was going on.

“Don’t stop yet!” she ordered.

Fuuka, who refused to speak up unless it was an emergency, shouted in the field leader’s head.
“He’s charging up for a huge attack! Be careful! You’ll get hurt if you’re not careful!”

“Relax, Fuuka!” Airi insisted. “And tell Aragaki-sempai if he’s that worried, then he’d better get his
ass down here and help out with a better plan!”

“H-How’d you know he’d s-say that?” she asked in amazement.

“I can’t think of anyone else who’d be so passive-aggressively neurotic.”

Right as everyone stood his or her ground – even a weakened Akihiko – the Hermit screamed and
released a broad network of concentrated energy: Giga Spark. A few moments of intense charges
produced a force that struck everyone. Had they not taken a defensive position, they would have
been knocked out cold. Yukari and Aigis would have never stood a chance.

Ken shook fearfully. “Wh-What was that…?!”

“Shit…” Akihiko winced. His right arm was fine, but expressed its dislike for the pain.

“We’re okay,” Airi spoke calmly. “It’s safe to attack until right before that last charge. He seems to
do it three times, so keep count and prepare to be in the defense.”

Akihiko weakly nodded as Polydeuces healed him. “I can tell when he’s ready to go. Just in case
anyone miscounts…”

The battle ended up being very predictable, despite the sudden intensity of the Persona’s power. No
one was used to any elemental attacks of that caliber yet, and no one’s Persona had similarly
powerful abilities yet. Once everyone calmed down, the Hermit ended up being a fairly easy, if not
static, boss. Akihiko continued to wince when the Shadow charged up, but his mental state of mind
relaxed considerably since he knew what was coming. Ken, no longer worried about being a passive
combatant, took more initiative. Sometimes he would help Akihiko in healing the team’s stamina. He
and Koromaru were sad they could not use Hama or Mudo to end the fight quickly. Most bosses
seemed oddly immune to instant-death and instant-light attacks.

Akihiko dealt the final blow with his fists right before the Hermit launched its murderous mass-
electric attack. As it dissolved into muck and angled electrical wires, he kicked its remains. “Ha!
That’s for the damn headache!”

“Oi,” Airi glared and poked him in the shoulder. “Don’t grow a potty-mouth in front of Ken-kun!”

The youngest member laughed as he placed his Evoker in his sweatshirt pocket. “Don’t worry, Airi-
san. I’m not a kid, but don’t like cursing either.”
“That’s good. We have too many bad influences in our little gang.”

“Sorry,” Akihiko lightly blushed. “Once I catch some shut-eye, I’ll be back to my old self.”

The familiar Dark Hour air returned. The operation ended successfully and amicably. Airi, Akihiko, and Ken chatted a bit more as they went on their way to the surface to meet everyone outside. Only Koromaru remained on edge with his hair sticking up everywhere.

“What’s wrong, Koro-chan?” Ken stared sadly at the dog, growling lowly.

Seconds later, Akihiko’s eyes narrowed and turned to Airi. “Hey, when was the last time Fuuka updated us?”

“Right before the first electric attack scared us. Why?”

The group grew silent for a moment, waiting for the musical voice to speak.

“Congratulations! I no longer sense its presence. Oh, and I think I’ve found Junpei! He’s back at the dorm, but something seems strange…”

When those words were never said, Airi knew something bad happened. “Let’s hurry,” she said.

They darted to the exit and emerged into the world outside. That’s when they met a wall of frozen air… and three giant icebergs.

“Mitsuru!” Akihiko sprinted to the chunk of ice she was preserved in. Her face expressed sudden shock. Fuuka and Yukari were in similar states nearby. Something far more powerful than them ambushed them like cattle.

“‘Hi’ to you too, Aki…”

Alongside the brick wall of Chagall Café next to Escapade, sat Shinjiro. Peacoat open and t-shirt sticking to his skin, he was covered in sweat and blood. Clearly he fought to his limits, and barely escaped with cuts and bruises. Akihiko ran to him and quickly healed him with Diarama. The others darted their panicked eyes between him and the girls. Paralyzed, Airi fought her shallow breaths to keep herself calm and assess the situation. Shinjiro may have been more resistant to some magic than the rest of the group, but he’d kill her if she let every one of his blunders or defeats terrify her so easily.

“What the hell happened?!” Akihiko demanded.

In better condition than before, the axe-wielder adjusted himself for better comfort for his sore back. “Bastard came outta nowhere…”

Koromaru investigated by sniffing the area. Something caught his nose and he whined.

“Where’s Aigis-san?!” Ken asked after recounting the number of people present.

Shinjiro shook his head as Akihiko helped him up. “No one saw him coming… He talked ’bout some crazy shit and grabbed Aigis. Then he froze ’em… I fought back, and I thought it’d be easy… That bastard looked he was gonna pass out any second, but that ice hit like a fuckin’ tank…”
Koromaru nudged at Airi’s leg and barked. Once he broke her from her daze, he turned towards the direction of the train station. Trying to keep calm, Airi said, “K-Koro-chan thinks the mystery man went in the direction of the monorail.”

“He took Aigis and ran after he knocked me down…” Shinjiro confirmed and limped to the bench near the fountain in the heart of the mall. “But we ain’t leavin’ the girls behind.”

“Of course not,” replied Akihiko, as if any other option never crossed his mind.

Wanting to deal with the problem, Airi switched Thor with Seth. “Guys, give me some room,” she ordered. Unsure of her intent, the boys listened.

With the Persona’s blessing, she cast the massive roaring flames of Maragidyne in hopes of melting the ice. The first attempt produced little results on Yukari and Fuuka. However, it weakened the ice well enough for Mitsuru to break free by sheer will. Gasping for air she collapsed. Right as Akihiko went to check on her, Shinjiro pulled him and a disoriented Mitsuru back. A second wave of Maragidyne raged through the small corner of the mall.

As Airi continued her work, Ken looked in the direction of the exit leading to the train station. “We need to find Aigis-san!”

“He’s right!” Airi chimed in before the seniors could protest. “This will take a while. Go on without me!”

“Not a chance,” Akihiko barked. “We have to get Mitsuru, Yukari, and Fuuka to a hospital!”

“She’s right,” a weak Mitsuru argued. “But I’m more concerned about that man. I think he reportedly went missing a few months back… He was rambling about a white-haired man and a blue door, but he sounded delirious…”

That was an oncoming bus. Nearly dropping her Evoker, Airi gasped. Based on the ice magic and the man’s interest in Aigis, Theo must have found and fought Aizawa. Then she remembered the vibration from the other night came from the Velvet Room. Something must have gone wrong when Theo captured Aizawa, and he found a way to escape, though not without causing too much external-dimensional damage.

Airi had not seen Theo in a while, and if his siblings and Igor knew anything, they did not say a word or drop a hint. She did not know when he found Aizawa, but it must have been recently enough that he could not inform her soon enough before something like this could happen. Whatever did happen, Airi could only reflect and guess. Did she lose track of her time and schedule? Did she prioritize school and her friends too much to check in on Theo’s mission? Did Theo have a moment of weakness from underestimating Aizawa and overestimating his own abilities? Did she expect too much from Theo? Should she have sought the Children on her own instead like last time?

As she and her friends rushed back to the dorm, Airi brushed off the concerns over her ghostly complexion and tried to anticipate the worst.

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The tenth Bufudyne should have killed her. Luckily she was not human, but the attacks knocked her out, woke her up, and knocked her out with each strike. Her hardware had no time to react and recalibrate itself, leaving her in a perpetual state of disorientation.

Chidori stood back against the wall with her arms folded. What should have been an interrogation mutated into a torture festival. “You’ve overdone it, you fossil. I can’t bring the robot in looking like
a pile of scrap. Has Hemera finally gotten to your head and made you stop taking your suppressants?”

In a second of hesitation Aizawa hunched over and fell into a coughing spell. That seemed to answer her question. Burns and holes from a variety of spells checkered his clothes; his bruised skin lost much color from several instances of blood loss from cuts and coughing. Gone for only a few days, he was more like an escaped prisoner of war, barely holding onto thin threads of sanity that kept him alive past his expiration date.

Tied up and sitting hopelessly, Junpei couldn’t unsee Aigis begging for mercy as the mad scientist ranted, raved, and spewed glaciers of ice out of thin air. “Chidori! Let her go!”

“Or what?” she snipped, back facing him. “You didn’t call off the mission. Is death not a good enough threat to you and your friends? Isn’t it what people fear most?”

The question confused the poor boy. Even Aigis, lying limp, struggled to understand what was happening. A few pieces in her body were damaged, thus altering the sound of her voice. “Aizawa-san… I do not comprehend… What have I done contrary to your expectations?”

Recovered enough from coughing up blood, Aizawa looked at Aigis with a sneer full of needle. Hemera appeared once more and dropped another mountain of ice on her dented and scratched torso. Her limbs were bolts and strips of metal. “You’ve done everything, my dear,” he said evenly despite his frail body begging for rest. “Leaving our home was your greatest mistake, but you found the harbinger of Death and our missing sister. With only a few Shadows to kill, the Children will summon our Parents, who shall renew the world!”

“What the hell are ya smokin’?!” shouted an aggravated Junpei.

His will having full control over his body once more, Aizawa's grin took up half of his face. “The lovely jasmine never told you? She’s knows her place in this beautiful design!”

“Quiet, you’re sounding like a pervert,” Chidori spoke for the brain-dead captives. “Hypnos and Moros wanted to kill her on the last operation, even when Morpheus told them not to. Just what are the plans for the Fall anyway? I see nothing but complete disorganization from everyone besides us!”

What she said hit a nerve in Junpei, who hung his head. “W-Wait… You’re with Strega?!”

“Why are you surprised?”

“Chidori, was it all an act? Was us meeting a way for you to set me up?”

His pathetic voice did not change her neutral expression. “That should be the least of your concerns. Your life is more important than my honesty.”

“It won’t be until I learn the truth! Just say this was a trap and everything was a lie…”

“That’s –”

A monstrous inferno interrupted her and swept the entire rooftop. Junpei winced at the damage; Chidori felt rejuvenated. Aigis was too dazed to react, and Aizawa’s jacket completely disintegrated. Once the flames cooled and the black dragon retreated back into his host’s soul, the rest of SEES emerged. Seeing them did not intimidate Aizawa at all; his laughter - loud, hysterical, and eerie - expressed his disbelief at the timing of their arrival.

“Guys!” Junpei cheered, albeit wearily.
“Junpei, thank goodness!” Yukari exclaimed. Soaking wet and summer dress pressed and heavy, she still didn’t fully recover from the surprise attack.

“Aigis-san!” cried Ken. He and Koromaru ran through the minefield to the android.

“You all have finally arrived,” she said with a forced smile on her uncanny face. Thin but notable cracks in her artificial skin exposed the metal interworkings beneath. Ken took off his sweatshirt and covered Aigis’ damaged body and a building pile of loose pieces Koromaru started.

Yukari fought the increased weight on her drenched uniform to help pick up the pieces of her friend across the roof. “Hang in there, Aigis!”

Unlike Aizawa, who wailed and laughed until he hunched over the railing overlooking the city, Chidori looked annoyed. “Your friends were released from the ice so quickly, Castor.”

Shinjiro clenched his axe until his knuckles turned white and said, “Sorry we’re late, Strega.”

Confused and unimpressed, Akihiko stared at the delusional hyena spewing unintelligible nonsense. “How did that guy beat you?”

“Stealth, timing, and a big fuckin’ ice storm. Let me gut that fucking clown.”

“Wait.” Mitsuru raised her hand to block Shinjiro’s intended path and turned to Chidori with a glare. “You’re a Persona-user. How’d you manage to kidnap Iori when none of us could sense you?”

“It’s her Persona!” Junpei answered for her. “She can track us and weaken abilities! I can’t summon Hermes, no matter what I try!”

Fuuka asked, “Even when you concentrate hard?”

“I did everything!” he said quickly, trying to ignore his kidnapper’s harsh stare.

“Who cares what happens to any of you?!” Everyone turned to Aizawa, who turned back around with a blank face. He switched between so many masks so quickly it was hard to read what his next five actions would be. He found Airi between the oldest SEES members and gave her a yellow-teethed grin. “Everyone but Airi Fujihara is disposable.”

Trying to keep her composure, Airi ignored the questioning stares. Despite her efforts, her face blanched. The disheveled man rested back against the railing and tapped his foot.

“Your lapdog thought he could contain me in that velvet void. If that’s the ‘sea of your soul’ as that white-haired abomination claimed, you’re pretty messed up for a spoiled princess. A lonely, lost jasmine sleepwalkin’ in an endless downward spiral and unable to keep track of time as it quickly nears its end.”

After hearing his voice for long enough, Mitsuru started to recognize the man under the profound stress that warped his features. “Souta Aizawa, you oversaw Aigis while she was asleep for ten years. You risked you and your team’s careers fighting every order to shut down the last Shadow Suppression Weapon when the Group saw no ethical reason to keep them as they are. Now you attack her with the intent to kill. What is your motive?”

“You’re not entitled to anything, let alone an answer from me, you extravagant seductive bitch.” Despite the unforgivable affront, Mitsuru was too busy emitting a cooling aura and restraining her two enraged classmates by the arms to fire back. Aizawa continued, ignoring their reactions. “Only Aether’s niece must speak for her crimes. That honesty talk she fed you was a load of horse shit. She
was better off when she ditched you freaks and pursued my brothers. At least she wasn’t a coward tryin’ to lead three men on at once. Although... the last time October 4th rolled around wasn’t as exciting as it normally is since she didn’t get to see her boyfriend get his chest blown wide open like a piñata.”

Airi let out an uncomfortably loud retch and clamped her mouth shut. It cut the night air and punctured everyone’s eardrums. Aizawa, thin and skeletal, practically bounced with glee and moved to the center of the roof like a town crier to enact his greatest performance.

“Oh yes… October 4th. How dare I not detail Airi Fujihara’s favorite day of the year?”

Airi’s entire body lost all color, her insides dropped and filled the hallow spaces in her legs, and she came so close to screaming to drown out his words so no one could hear what was coming.

“I wonder what will happen this time? Will Nemesis finally grow a pair and enact her revenge plot for once? Will her host chicken out just in time for Hypnos to have his fun at the shooting gallery? Or will poor, lovestruck Airi jump in front of the gun because ‘I can’t bear to see him suffer the same fate over and over again anymore’? Well, guess what your manservant never had the guts to tell ya? Not two minutes after you bleed to death his arms, thanking the universe that you saved his life after countless failures by tearing his sanity to pieces, Castor killed himself!!”

Everything went still. The memory replayed in her mind. She could clearly see the loss, the despair in his broken eyes, but she denied the possibility of him dying anyway. Her mind conjured all the possible ways he killed himself despite the brewing nausea it intensified. Arched forward, Airi clenched her churning stomach. Airi’s nails dug into her blouse as she muffled the scream that needed to escape.

“How else was it gonna end?!” Aizawa continued with no regard to the girl's deteriorating state. "Shinjiro Aragaki is so fucking delusional, so sick in the head, that he’ll die no matter what anyone says or does! He made the choice to die long before ya came here, and you somehow convinced yourself that you could cure his suicidal mood swings? Who do you think you are?! You can’t even keep your own shit together!"

No one in SEES could process the impossible information quickly enough to interrupt Aizawa. Shinjiro, almost as white as Airi, stood completely bewildered and unprepared for what was happening. Each word he said and each effort she made to not break down slapped him in the face and stabbed his heart.

“And didn't you hate him when you first met? How the hell did you think that drug-addicted delinquent had some kind of agenda with Strega?!! Were you born with your skull bashed in?? Then you turn around and call him some kind of hero for protecting the kid that wanted his head on a spear?! How is he a hero for murdering an innocent woman? How is he a hero for drowning in those pills rather than owning up to his crimes? Why do you want Castor to live when he’s always been too self-absorbed with his own misery to listen to your pathetic begging for his life?! What makes him so fuckin' special for you to want to change his fate and no one else's?! Were you ever capable of being rational with Castor, or did your hormones scramble your brain and make you dumber than the average woman?!”

“SHUT UP!!” Airi finally managed to shout as soon as she found a moment. “I’ve found another way! Things aren’t like they were before! Things are different now!!”

"How are they different from before?! You lied about not knowing why he left and manipulated your so-called friends into dragging him back! How's that any different from dragging him into your plot to kill me and Epiphron in Tokyo?!"
"My uncle bribed him! I begged Shinji to stay away from me, but he wouldn't listen!!"

"That's 'cause you're a terrible liar!! You were already so completely convinced that you love him that it was impossible to pretend you hated him and properly abandon him!! You let Castor tie a rope around your neck, and you still can't break free because you're a needy, pathetic, stupid little girl!!"

Everyone stood by completely paralyzed. Aigis silently studied Aizawa’s language and Airi’s behavior to piece together the authenticity of their exchange. Unable to find any words to override his profound guilt of having everyone now know how dark his thoughts really were, Shinjiro's chest hurt watching Airi break into hysterics not five feet from him. Akihiko and Mitsuru were right with him, powerless to know how to react. Knowing for weeks that something existed between them, Fuuka wished for Shinjiro to console or to snap Airi out of her humiliation.

“Don’t you kids ever read a damn mythology book?! Be it slicing open his throat, getting shot in the chest, or lying in his own vomit behind a dumpster, Castor dies! This crazy bitch witnessed him die over a dozen times despite 'trying to save him'! She’d rather he live a life under her twisted omnipotent control than let anyone live or die as they rightfully should!”

“What does this have to do with anything?!” snapped an impatient Chidori. “Do you intend to let this speech continue until the Hour ends?”

Aizawa laughed hoarsely and continued his speech. “C’mon, Medea, you ain’t gotta be a rocket scientist to figure out how everyone wants to see blood explodin’ out of Castor’s chest! Well, not his stalker and the little brat who can’t avenge his dead mommy. Funny how the man who killed that woman in cold blood ends up saving her son’s life!”

There was so much information delivered in so little time SEES felt too overwhelmed, too baffled to take the ludicrous claims at face value. Not even Chidori could follow everything anymore.

“What…” a horrified Ken whispered to himself.

“Airi Fujihara, you are stuck to repeat this year forever. You’ll never stop October 4th from coming and you’ll never save Castor. You’ll never stop my brothers, you’ll never defeat Nyx-sama, and you’ll never see your precious ma, pa, and Blair again. Your friends will never remember you on graduation day. You’ll hear the cries of trillions begging for humanity’s demise when you finally give up. Those ‘damned chains’ will catch up to you and rip your soul into ribbons in front of your ‘velvet room’ posse! Those claws will tear the flesh off your putridly saintly body as you lay like a glorified doormat for Erebus to dance on! You’ll never get your happy ending because it was never meant to exist!”

Then he politely forced a cough, marking the end of his speech. He was a great politician, waiting for the scheduled reactions.

“Sh-Shinji?!“ Airi’s fragile voice rang like a solitary Christmas bell in an abandoned graveyard. The girl’s knees shook violently, and she stared wide-eyed at her trembling hands. “Fuuka, c-call a hospital. I-I’ll try to stop the bleeding… m-maybe no m-major organs got hit…”

She started rubbing her hands against her skirt. Sometimes she brushed at her blouse or stroked the air, intensifying her motions with every second passing.

“Oh, no… No, no, no! Call an ambulance! I don’t care if the Dark Hour’s ending! We have to hurry! Mitsuru-sempai, help me!”
Pupils dilated and skin clammy, Airi scratched violently at her blouse, nearly shredding the fabric. She breathed hysterically and whimpered like a lost child. The composure Airi fought to keep up for so long was utterly shattered before everyone’s eyes.

Unable to just watch anymore, Akihiko gently touched her shoulder. But his attempt to help only made her scream so loudly that every transmogrified person in the city could hear her. She threw herself to the ground and cried loud enough to carve permanent scars into everyone's memories. “NO!! SHINJI'S NOT BREATHING!!”

Trying to calm her friend telepathically, Fuuka summoned Lucia. As soon as she did so, her Persona writhed, shattering into glass fragments, and Fuuka fell as if a wrestler threw her across the roof. Mitsuru caught her before she collapsed.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Yamagishi? What’s happening?!”

“Yuka! Mitsuru-sempai! Akihiko-kun! Fuuka! SOMEONE SAVE SHINJI!!!!”

“No, Airi-chan!” cried Fuuka, blinded by tears. “She’s losing her mind! I c-can’t do anything to help…!”

Unable to take it anymore, Shinjiro broke free from his paralysis and promptly went to her side, seizing her arms to prevent her from further harming herself. She struggled against his iron grip, but with enough pressure and steady firmness that still felt insufficient, her body slowly ceased to flail. Airi’s cries settled into senseless whimpering.

Shinjiro gently brushed back the wild strands of loose hair that stuck to her devastated face. His chest ached as he looked into the girl’s void, lifeless eyes. “Fujihara?” He gently massaged her frail shoulders. “I’m here! I’m still alive! Airi!!”

Her delusion broke down slightly; she reached for his face and stroked his cheek. For a second she recognized him, and a flicker of light shimmered in her red eyes. As their eyes met, Shinjiro recognized and felt a sliver of the deeper affection she had for him that he first saw brewing in her eyes when he met her in the hospital. She was so terrified because she loved him and didn't know how to express it without scaring him away. If she really knew him as well as what was implied from Aizawa’s ranting, he wished she'd sense something similar in him so she could finally wake up.

But the light died, and the beautiful possibility of reciprocated feelings ended as quickly as her temporary awareness. She fell limp, buried her face in her hands, and started sobbing again. “Oh, Shinji… I’m sorry… I couldn’t save you…”

Then the air warped into something foul. Before Shinjiro could try another method to bring Airi back to her senses, he felt a powerful energy pulsing under her icy skin. Snapping out of his desperation, he eyed Fuuka and Mitsuru. Their eyes and mouths gaped open; they also sensed something brewing. When the three agreed with each other’s suspicion, Shinjiro let go of Airi and leapt to his feet. “Get back!”

He and his friends ran as far away as they could without falling off the roof. A black-cloaked figure surrounded by chained coffin lids burst out of the Airi in a cloud of purple mist. His mask was a pristinely polished bear trap. A bloodcurdling roar exploded from his throat and hit Aizawa like a plane breaking the sound barrier. The shockwave knocked everyone else off his or her feet and disrupted Aigis’ circuits. The foreboding creature bellowed once more; streams of white light from a series of symbols scrawled on the ground surrounded a fearful Aizawa, tearing his clothes, slicing his skin, and trimming his hair. Blood poured out of his wounds and formed a shallow pool beneath him.
Akihiko immediately recognized the katana-wielding creature. He wasn’t there personally at the time, but he nearly lost his appetite after watching the slaughter of the Magician Shadow on video in the command room. Mitsuru and Yukari gasped, just as disturbed as the resemblance of now to that memory.

After receiving a near-death beating, Aizawa let out his hyena laugh and cried at the moon. “See, Nyx-sama? Thanatos is not lost to us!”

The feeling of awe at the reunion was not mutual. Thanatos drifted to where Aigis lay. Yukari immediately stood up with her bow to block his path. Koromaru howled, triggering his Evoker-collar and brought out Cerberus. Even the half-alive Ken got up with his spear ready.

The android, however, saw something in its eyes that they didn’t. “Wait.”

“How do you know he won’t attack you?!” Yukari snapped, letting an arrow hit Thanatos’ dominant right arm. The creature ignored it, waiting for the antagonism to cease.

“It won’t,” Aigis said sternly.

Koromaru shook his head and growled. Aware of the hostility, Thanatos gently swept past the bodyguards and used the tip of its katana to poke Aigis’ forehead. Upon the touch, her eyes became wide as that of a porcelain doll.

“Get away from her!” Ken screamed.

He struck one of the coffin lids, creating a dent in one of the engraved images. Thanatos remained motionless and passive, which was enough for Koromaru to let Cerberus vanish. Suddenly, Palladion emerged from Aigis. She stared at her shocked bodyguards and nodded. Reluctantly, they allowed the scary monster drift away quietly.

“You fool!” screeched Aizawa, kneeling in his own blood. “Curse that bitch and her friends! They cannot stop Nyx-sama! They will all die, just like Castor!”

The blonde android’s mechanical voice fluctuated between organic and synthetic. Only her glaring eyes indicated a part of her still functioned reliably. “Aizawa-san, you kept me alive when the others ordered my platform and my programming to be destroyed. They said you did it ‘out of pity’, but I was only a tool for your goals. To enable what you call ‘the Fall’ and to harm Airi-san... am I correct?”

With enough strength of mind, Aigis commanded her weapon-knight Palladion to act in her place. Leaving the rest to the mechanical maiden, Thanatos let out a relieved sigh and vanished into blue mist. Shinjiro caught Airi in his arms as she passed out from shock.

“Thanatos cursed you, Aigis. The Children never betray each other! He planted a bug in you! He will make your unit cease to exist!”

“I... am nothing but a machine?” Her voice, still very robotic, somehow emitted grief. Palladion’s gun loaded and locked onto the scientist.

He stared blankly at the threat, got back on his feet, and laughed. His body shook violently, as if fighting against an inevitable force within that would consume him. “What are you doing? Your ‘anger’ is a mere computation! You can’t ‘feel’ anything!”

“You are correct, but a human can feel pain.”
A series of bullets shot right out of Palladion’s barrel and struck piercing holes in Aizawa’s body. Violently coughing up blood, not much else was needed to take him down. He pulled a knife from his pocket and stabbed his hand. From the red mist around him, Hemera awakened and breathed ice back at the small group.

“Yukari-san, help me defeat him with your bow and arrow…”

The sight of erupted gore created a disgusted reaction from Yukari, but she rose to her feet and joined her fallen friend. Despite his earlier shock, Ken begged the girls to let him help.

In the middle of the nonstop action, Chidori finally had enough. The red-haired gothic lolita finally brought her Evoker to her head. “I’m sick of nonsense! That man will die at any moment anyway! Come, Medea!”

Right before she succeeded, Junpei nudged her leg hard enough for her to fall over. The Evoker flew across the floor and stopped by Ken’s foot. He tossed it to Koromaru, who ran to the others near Airi. He poked Shinjiro, who took the Evoker and put it in his pocket. Chidori scrambled across the ground, but Mitsuru seized her arms and held them behind her back. This provided a distraction for Akihiko to free Junpei from captivity. Once liberated, the two joined Mitsuru and tied up Chidori, who screamed in hysterics.

“No, Medea! Give her back to me!”

“Sorry, Chidori,” Junpei said weakly. He had no will to hide his conflicted feelings.

Ignoring him, her body became limp and she rambled aimlessly, not unlike Aizawa earlier. “I’m not… afraid of dying…”

Mitsuru turned to Shinjiro, Koromaru, and Fuuka, all looking over Airi. “Everyone go downstairs now!”

“What about…?” Fuuka tried to look at Aigis, but changed her mind when she heard Aizawa’s bloodcurdling screams. Her face turned green.

“I’ll take care of them,” Mitsuru snipped. She stared at her clock. “The Dark Hour is nearly over. Get this girl and Fujihara to the hospital immediately!”

Despite being emotionally drained by everything that happened, SEES managed to follow orders. Junpei helped support Fuuka by the arm, Akihiko nudged Chidori along from behind, and Shinjiro cradled the frail Airi in his arms. Once he managed to deflect some ice from Aizawa with his spear, a green-faced Ken ran after the others to leave the carnage. The rest of the “fight” with Aizawa was an anticlimactic unfair dodge ball fight. Palladion did not hold back on the pierce attacks. Yukari had to stop at some point due to exhaustion and pure repulsion at Aizawa’s bloody clothes and ruptured wounds. Mitsuru healed her a few times and gave her some Medical Powder to bounce her back.

Finally backed into a corner, Aizawa used the last of his strength to sit upright against the railing on the roof. He stared back at the girls with a weak smile. “The Fall will come… as Aether promised…”

“What is the Fall?” Mitsuru inquired, full of irritation. “Who do you work for?”

Despite the blood overflowing from his gaping wounds, he smirked. “The Kirijo Group, you brainless child…”

She expected this, but she was no less frustrated and appalled. “Then you wish to die for your futile cause?”
“Night and Darkness will bring death to the nonbelievers… and freedom to their children…”

Held up by Mitsuru, Aigis stared plainly at the poor excuse of a man. “If this is the appropriate time to say it… I hope you suffer in death forever, father.”

“I won’t…” he coughed as his voice weakened. “I will bring dawn’s light… to the world after mankind…”

With one last smile, he dropped his knife and his head hung forward. Then the red mist poured out from his body once more. Hemera’s crystalline scales burst out from Aizawa’s spine, tearing his torso open. Palladion cried and fired another round at the dragon. The crunching of bone and writhing of scales ended. The emerald mist of the Dark Hour vanished not long afterwards, leaving the fatally wounded blue-eyed serpent to scream pitifully as it faded. Its scales dissolved into dust and blew into the late night air.

Exhausted, Yukari dropped to the ground, turned away from her friends and quietly vomited. Mitsuru remained standing, even if her feet were sore and her stomach ached.

Aigis’ features showed contemplation despite the victory. She turned to Yukari, sitting beside her. “You are ill…”

Her fellow junior refused to look anywhere near the remains. “I’m fine… Are you okay, Aigis?”

“You are human. My needs are irrelevant.”

Throwing her fists into the ground, she cried, “What the hell happened?! Who was that man?! How could he do this to you and Airi?!?”

“Takeba…” Mitsuru rested her hand on Yukari’s shoulder. Surprisingly, Yukari did not flinch or push her away.

“Aizawa-san oversaw my creation, taught me how to fight, and shared stories of my non-functioning sisters…” Aigis said aloud. “For him to destroy me without second thoughts… does not com- no… I do not understand.” She examined the pile of parts in front of her that once held her together. “This encounter stimulated much distress… and I… we failed to protect Airi-san…”

Yukari dried her face and shook her head with a cough. Then she got up, kept her eyes away from Aizawa’s corpse, and retrieved her arrows, all of which avoided vital organs. Avoiding eye contact, Mitsuru brushed off dirt on her uniform. Aigis studied the wet drop roll down her cheek and hit the ground. She had seen it in a movie she and the others watched a few nights ago, and she made note of the situation. Upon looking back at the body of Aizawa, more silent tears fell.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, this is where the "Graphic Violence" warning starts to kick into gear. Aizawa's death is pretty quick but nasty. If only things would get easier from here on out...

Anywho, I wanted to share a few bits of trivia. Aizawa's Persona Hemera (Ἡμέρα) is known as a primordial goddess of the day, a daughter of Nyx and Erebus, as well as Aether's sister and consort (thanks mythology for squicky family trees). In Greek
mythology, Hemera and Nyx pass each other as they enter or leave Tartarus and bring day and night to the world. Like some other primordial gods/goddesses, there aren't as many stories as the culturally and literary referenced ones in the Greek pantheon, but Hemera is mentioned in Hesiod's 'Theogeny'.

Unlike some characters that are completely original, Souta Aizawa (相沢総太) actually appears in a Japan-only Persona 3 cell phone spin-off game, 'Aegis: The First Mission'. He was one of the scientists at Yakushima who helped instruct Aigis during her training several years before the events of Persona 3. I have never played it (and Aizawa's article is extremely scarce on details), but reading through the Megami Tensei wiki had helped me save some time in creating original characters. Something about his gruff appearance and attitude compelled me enough to try to write him into this fic.
September 6, 2009

The Kirijo doctors within Tatsumi Memorial admitted Chidori and Airi half past midnight and gave Akihiko, Fuuka, Junpei, and Shinjiro basic first aid before letting them return home before dawn despite their protests to stay longer. Yukari and Ken were in bed by the time three men from the Kirijo Group arrived to take the pieces of Aigis back to Yakushima so the scientists could repair her and learn of Souta Aizawa's death. No one went to sleep at a reasonable hour, but Mitsuru stayed up the latest to write a letter to the school, stating no one would attend Monday.

The overdue and now mandatory meeting was finally held in the command room on the fourth floor. Even with the relief of having an extra day off, everyone had no will to change out of his or her pajamas when they woke up past noon, and they looked like they aged considerably since last night. Being the only viable leader, Mitsuru sat upright with the manila file her father gave them months ago on her lap.

“There are many things we must discuss,” she began after her mute companions sat down and stared at each other blankly. "I suggest we presume all information presented is valid until the speaker is done, and then we can take the time to debate and question the theories and facts until we feel comfortable. If anyone has a question to help us begin, please speak up.”

Not half a second after she finished, Junpei’s hand shot up and slammed into the arm of the couch. “What the fuck is going on?!” The curse made many flinch, but no one stopped Junpei from lashing out until his throat went dry. "I'm serious! Just what the actual fuck happened last night?! I didn't get any sleep from thinkin' about all this crap!! What was that black monster thingy?! Who's that crazy asshole and what'd he do to Aibana?!”

When he ended his outburst, Mitsuru answered, “I believe Takeba, Akihiko, and I have seen that creature before. That ‘Thanatos’ - as Aizawa supposedly called it - appeared when Fujihara demonstrated her Persona abilities against the Magician in April.”

“I-Isn’t it just another one of the many Persona she has?” asked Ken, who found his voice. Minus a bruise on his knee and a slight pale tinge in his skin, he still appeared to be a normal child. “Well…she never explained how she has that power and we don’t.”

"Seems there’s a lot she never told us..." Yukari uttered under her breath. Her hands clenched tightly enough at the skirt of her nightgown to tear it with the slightest movement.

Another well-adjusted member, Akihiko nibbled on a protein bar to stop his restless mind from considering physically destructive forms of coping. “I’m concerned about ‘the Fall’. Aizawa knew about it... and so does Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi.”

"Really, man?!" spat Junpei. "Ya really wanna talk about that and don't give a shit about Aibana?!"

"I never said that, Iori," Akihiko said through clenched teeth. "I'm trying to move the conversation to a topic I heard of before so we can start to go somewhere."

Recognizing a cue to jump in, a baggy-eyed Fuuka dug into her purple messenger bag and took out her laptop she spent the entire morning preparing. Once she opened it up, she explained what she
was doing to four pairs of completely lost eyes. “Ikutsuki-san's secretary, Teodoa Arisato, contacted Yukari-chan and I in August. He had access to Ikutsuki-san's computer and found information hidden from Mitsuru-sempai’s father. Some of the files do mention the Fall, which Akihiko-sempai first learned of from eavesdropping on Ikutsuki-san and Kurebayashi-san at Yakushima.”

“What kind of information could my father not access?” Mitsuru asked.

“The missing files Airi asked about at Yakushima.

Junpei threw his hands up in the air and let out a frustrated sigh. Koromaru, Ken, and Shinjiro seemed more accepting of the news, but were similarly upset about knowledge being shared without their knowledge.

Fuuka flinched. "I'm sorry. I wanted to make sure this information was correct before I shared it..." Grasping for a way to get the others more involved, she thought back to that evening when they were given the folders. "Um... Could someone please find that note that was written in Greek? I want to know if Shinjiro-sempai can read it like he did last time."

Mitsuru took out the paper from the file and gave it to Shinjiro. Easily, he suffered the most obvious signs of distress; he looked more put-together on the day he moved in than he did now. His tired skin and disheveled hair made him look thirty years old, but he denied his deterioration and focused on what had to be done.

Shinjiro’s lip twitched and he replied dryly. “It was a guess. Some of the words looked like they had English letters... The one looked like ‘morphine’.”

“Guess you reading all those myth, cooking, and Featherman books in secret really paid off?” remarked Akihiko with a forced smile. The most ardent Featherman fan in the room was surprised that he and his enemy had one thing in common; meanwhile, Shinjiro ignored the pathetic attempt at humor and humiliation.

“Okay...” raising an eyebrow, he took out a pen to write on the paper. “Aki, make yourself useful and get me that black textbook with gold katakana on the fourth shelf from the top.”

To keep things going along, Akihiko shot up and quickly found the book. He was about to ask how he knew where the book he needed was, but Shinjiro gave him a look that made Akihiko immediately change his mind. Once Shinjiro had it in his possession, he laid the book out on his lap and flipped the pages.

Several minutes passed of page turning and note taking. “It’s a list of gods. Aether, Charon, Epiphron, Hemera, Hypnos, Moros, Morpheus, Nemesis, and Thanatos. The only thing they have in common is them being some of Nyx and Erebus’ children. Whatever’s written next to ‘em – ‘HOST’ and ‘ERGO’ – doesn’t seem to mean anything to me.”

“Thank you, Shinjiro-sempai,” Fuuka said with a relieved smile.

“Wait...” Something hit Junpei and cooled his temper slightly. “Chidori said somethin’ about hearing about the Fall from Hypnos, Moros, and Morpheus...”

After counting his fingers, Akihiko connected the dots too. “That note has nine names. Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi talked about nine of something at Yakushima and called themselves Morpheus and Aether.”

Between Shinjiro and Fuuka sat Koromaru. He felt left out of the conversation with no Aigis to translate for him. However, he stuck his muzzle into the girl’s backpack and took out her Evoker. To
catch everyone’s attention, he cautiously let out a woof.

Even with limited understanding of dog talk, Yukari asked, “What’s wrong, Koro-chan?”

Similar confused stares pierced the air. The shiba-inu whined and placed the tool on Fuuka’s lap. Then, he scooted between the couch and coffee table to reach open space. Once there, he crouched in his fighting stance and howled. This time, the message was a little clearer.


Though not uninterested, Junpei was still lost. “It’s like code names, right? Who’s who?”

“I believe Yukari-chan and I figured them out.” Fuuka petted Koromaru when he returned back to his place near her. “The notes Arisato-san found used these names most of the time. Some were identified clearly while I had to make other connections. Aizawa-san called himself Hemera, who helped engineer the Anti-Shadow Suppression weapons. Aether is Airi-chan’s uncle, Kurebayashi-san. I didn’t know they were related, but red eyes aren’t common… Hypnos and Moros are Takaya Sakaki and Jin Shirato of Strega. I know this because Ikutuski-san, Morpheus, documented some of the ‘successes’ from that military facility. The notes also mention that nearly all of these Persona were ‘artificially bred’ with Aether, Nemesis, and Thanatos being exceptions.”

The last two sentences made Yukari nauseous. “There’s a kid who’s still in a coma, but he never manifested the ‘right Persona’. He got the best of it… if you wanna call it that. What happened to Strega and the rest… isn’t pleasant to read.”

Mitsuru shook her head and frowned. “And the Kirijo created them…”

Clouds of warm air escaped everyone’s mouths or nostrils as they shivered. As much as she disliked the organization, Yukari felt some sympathy for her sempai. “I’m not sure if I wanna know about any other skeletons in the closet either…”

“So I’m guessing Takahashi was one of them too.” Finding the page in the file with the pictures, Akihiko expected the bad news to be confirmed.

Fuuka read an old update aloud, “‘June 24th, 2009. Epiphron’s host confirmed dead. State of Persona unknown. Name submitted via Revenge Website. Other Children are targeted with submitted names. Suspect SEES know more than anticipated.’”

“That’s the day his body was found, right?” said Shinjiro. “Hell of a coincidence.”

“What does it mean ‘state of Persona unknown’?” Junpei folded his arms. He gave up trying to retain the rapid-fire pace of the discussion.

“I dunno,” admitted Yukari. “But the notes keep mentioning it, like he was still alive.”

“‘July 30th, 2009. Polydeuces admitted to Aether’s clinic. Shape of arm wound consistent with Epiphron’s blades. Additional treatment hardly necessary due to his friends’ healing skills. Will proceed to observe Polydeuces and Castor. They remain a high priority for Nemesis’ conversion. Postpone contacting Amada until records are ready.’”

A whole other can of worms opened up. Drilling nails into his skull, Junpei groaned, “What?! Not only we got a dead man’s Persona walkin’, they’re talking about our sempai and Ken?! What the hell is goin’ on?!”
Mitsuru's head fell into her hands. Akihiko threw the snack wrapper too roughly that it missed the trashcan and hung his head instead of picking up his mess. Holding her breath, Fuuka stared at her sempai and spoke with a determination in her voice that she never dared possess before. She suspected something happened, but did not press the issue until now. “Akihiko-sempai, I believed your warnings about Ikutsuki-san, but they were theories. What happened to Ken-kun was real. The others need to know the truth, even if it hurts.”

All eyes darted between them and Ken. Mitsuru breathed deeply and sharply; Akihiko bit his thumbnail, but otherwise nodded. Ken stared down at his feet and clenched his fists. When no one replied, Koromaru rested his head on Shinjiro’s knee. The dog’s red eyes slanted in concern.
Scratching behind Koromaru’s ear, it was too hard for Shinjiro to reject such a large, adorable ball of fluff.

“Two years ago,” Shinjiro began, startling Akihiko and Mitsuru with his initiative, “a few residents in an apartment complex suffered Apathy Syndrome. Accident or not, a fire started. When the Dark Hour came, Shadows swamped the place. Aki, Mitsuru, and me went in to get those trapped out while fighting. But –”

“You killed my mom!” Ken yelled.

The expressions of the ignorant predictably changed sharply and turned to the alleged murderer.

“How long have you known, Amada?” Mitsuru asked. “The incident report was purged from our records. The police promptly dismissed the incident due to lack of evidence.”

“Ikutsuki-san and Kurebayashi-san told me. They did the police’s job and found my mom’s killer. No one else said or did anything, not even you guys!”

Mitsuru and Akihiko stared at each other dumbfounded. Never had Ikutsuki spoke of SEES behind the backs of the founder and first recruit. Akihiko spoke calmly, despite his nervous expression, “Were you alone when they told you?”

“Does it matter? You guys hid this from me! Do you know how long I’ve wanted to find him?! Aragaki-san killed my mom! And no one ever believed me!”

Suddenly the windows froze over completely and creating cracks in the glass. Ken fell back into his seat with stinging eyes. The baffled and confused juniors turned to Mitsuru, whose aura cried for order in the command room. When silence reigned for a few minutes, the leader brought the temperature back to normal and took her time to reveal her side of the story.

“The Shadows we faced were highly unusual, even by our recent encounters. They seemed to have responded intuitively like a hive-mind, and we were too inexperienced to combat them. The heat was so intense that I wavered between consciousness and unconsciousness just from being within ten feet of the flames. Shinjiro was still adapting to his powers at the time, but he and Akihiko made a great efforts to adapt to the oppressive environment and my weakness. Then he was cornered, summoned Castor, and momentarily lost control when multiple floors collapsed above him. Amada’s mother was caught in the middle.

"Even when the Hour ended...” a lump formed in her throat and her stinging eyes fell upon Shinjiro. The sight of him from that night screaming and fighting Akihiko’s grip appeared for a split second. "It was if Castor tried to tear Shinjiro apart inside and out. We had to put him under for a few days to try to calm him down and give him some relief. I have heard that losing control of one’s awakened Persona can happen to anyone under enough stress... but I never thought it could actually happen..."
Though he was right next to her and reliving that night, Fuuka held back her urge to hug her shaking upperclassman. As much as he needed it, the entire situation would only be more awkward and uncomfortable with how private he tended to be. Hearing his labored breathing, Koromaru jumped onto Shinjiro’s lap and rested quietly.

“Fuck…” gasped Junpei, unable to look up from his trembling clammy hands.

Equally shaken, Yukari tried to think of anything but of Shinjiro killing someone, accident or not. She didn't want to believe it after getting to know him as one of the more honestly sensitive guys and mentor figures she's met. Unable to process this at the moment, she realized the connection between Ken and the others. “Ken-kun’s Persona is Nemesis. I feel so stupid for not noticing it.”

“If that's the case…” Akihiko thought a loud. “Then what do they mean that Ken must be 'converted'?”

The host of said Persona grew defensive. “Stop changing the subject!!!”

Akihiko kept his tone level despite his twitches. “What if this is all a game to them, Ken? Don’t you think Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi want this to get under our skin?”

At his last straw, Junpei jumped up and practically yelled, “Y’know what, dude?! I'm sick of this! How can ya be so damn calm about this?!”

"I am NOT calm! I'm just as pissed off as you! I want to know what’s going on and knock the enemy out of the ring, but we have to stick together to get through this! That’s what Airi wants!"

“What good did that do?!" Yukari snapped along with Junpei and Akihiko. “She’s in the hospital after having a mental breakdown! We could’ve avoided this mess if she told us the truth from the beginning! At least you and Mitsuru-sempai had that decency, Akihiko-sempai! I want to call all this stuff nonsense, but Airi thinks it’s all true and I don't know what to feel about it! None of this makes any sense and I wish she were here to say this is all a nightmare!!”

A loud howl interrupted her outburst. Once again, the meeting got too emotional and out of hand. Koromaru whined, and lifted his head to lightly touch the photocopied notepaper in Shinjiro’s hands. Then, he let out a sharp bark, reminiscent of one hitting someone upside the head to pull them back together.

After scratching his comforter's back, Shinjiro spoke evenly for the first time in minutes and brought attention back to what happened two years ago. “I killed Suzume Amada. Ken never deserved to lose her... and to have everyone pretend what I did never happened. And yet... I wanted to forget 'bout that night and to never lose control again…” He took out a bottle of pills from his pocket and passed them around. “I didn’t need ‘em, but I took them anyway. All the good they did was piss off my body and Castor even more. I didn't care 'bout the side effects or if I died... I never wanted to lose myself again.”

Ken’s put-up rage diffused like the air escaping a puncture in a balloon.

“Are you crazy?!” Junpei exclaimed. “Sempai… you’re not–“

Prepared for the expected storm of anxiety, Shinjiro took back the microphone. “Doesn’t matter anymore. I stopped.”

“Akihiko, Fujihara, and I intervened when he overdosed,” added Mitsuru coldly, ignoring Yukari’s intrusive and judgmental stare. “How we managed is irrelevant. The only real concern is that Kurebayashi-san is the doctor overseeing his therapy.”
“It doesn’t change that Shinjiro-sempai’s suicidal!” barked Yukari in indignation. “Why are all of our serious issues kept quiet until the worst time possible?! If Airi were here -”

"I-I'm glad she isn't..." whispered Fuuka, drying her eyes with the handkerchief Junpei offered her.

Before things could get uglier with more yelling, Akihiko raised his dominant hand in protest. “We know, Takeba, but we handled this. Shinji’s in therapy and has been clean since July. I already beat the crap out of him for it.”

She groaned impatiently and decided it best to shut up. Junpei went down that road a few minutes ago, since he still tried and failed to understand everything.

Once silence and order returned, Mitsuru seized the opportunity to reorganize the utter pandemonium the meeting became. “I would like to say the worst has passed, but we still do not fully see the forest for the trees. These nine names are important, and we must remain cautious around the men we once took for granted. They may be our enemy, and we cannot risk being reckless.”

“I agree,” said Fuuka.

“We’re not doing anything without Aibana. And we’re not hurting Chidori either.”

"I agree to only an extent. We should lay low until Fujihara has recovered, but we must question Chidori, Iori. One of the nine children or not, she’s still Strega.”

The youngest person in the room put up a façade of indifference to play along as he glared at Shinjiro. “I’m not working with him.”

“You dealt with it this far, Ken.” Akihiko tried to play the pacifist again. “You don’t have to like or forgive Shinji, but we gotta move on.”

“This is a balancing act. We can’t act too unusually, unless something else arises,” continued Mitsuru. “I know how we all feel, but we have this file and this Arisato individual for help. Regardless of how dependable our informant is we must keep everything in this meeting hidden from the Chairman. Furthermore, bearing personal grudges will weaken our resolve. I suggest we address them as soon as possible in the coming weeks before the fight gets tough in the future. We cannot afford disunity if something as disastrous as the Fall is coming.”

The rest of the meeting entailed repeating previous theories and points. More emotional arguments flared. No one was certain about Airi and how deeply her absence has broken the group, but they agreed that exploring Tartarus remained a constant and necessary evil in their lives. Their winning formula to explore the tower would not change much; however, Mitsuru or Akihiko had to join the exploration to help with leadership and strategy.

After six hours of non-stop debate, brains were too fried and tired to begin worrying about studying. They were grateful for the mental health day tomorrow, yet they feared they needed to spend extra days in the library to make up for energy and power lost in retaining information not relevant to SEES. They needed Airi. They agreed to see her at the hospital on Tuesday to talk to her after some recovery time. With her return to sanity, everyone could hope or have a chance to move on.

On their way back to their rooms after a dinner of instant ramen, Shinjiro and Ken walked through the shroud of discomfort. They knew who stood where, but working together anymore would be problematic.
Before his senior opened his door, Ken spoke up, “Aragaki-san, are those pills killing you?”

If he tensed up, it was hard to tell. Shinjiro had been returned to being his unreadable self after his confession, but upon closer inspection, his eyes were hazy and distant.

“So everything is pointless. All this time you were always going to die? Why?!”

Still no movement but his lips. “Less than a month…”

“Don’t avoid the question!”

“There’s nothin’ else to talk ‘bout,” he said. Finally looking at Ken from the corner, his eyes shined in stark contrast to the empty shadow from the beanie. “Whether that piece of shit was right or not, I’ll be gone. You’ll have your revenge.”

Ken could not understand his twisted logic. The sheep laying itself upon the sacrificial alter took away all possible “fun” in taking matters into his hands. All the planning would be for not if the suppressants or Takaya took Shinjiro out first. “Yukari-san called you suicidal.”

“Don’t worry ’bout it.”

“But -”

The slamming of a door silenced Ken. Blood pulsing, he stared at where Shinjiro once stood. He tried to piece together what pieces of their interaction he missed. Despite his efforts, his head swelled. His thoughts and feelings fought to escape from the boarded window of opportunity. He was trapped.

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Airi woke up in Tatsumi Memorial Hospital yesterday believing what happened after the operation was a nightmare. She cooperated enough with the doctors until they discharged her Monday morning. Not in the mood to go to school, Airi sat in one of the shady alleys of Port Island Station. Her timing was impeccable as no one else was around at the time. It gave her some time and space to think, but it was the worst thing she could possibly do.

She reminisced over what happened that night multiple times, and the feelings she succumbed to began to resurface. Her friends now know she has been hiding information about everything. They will demand why she stayed silent, and how she knew about things that haven’t happened yet. If she made enough mistakes in this cycle, it’d all be over. Igor grew impatient enough to end the deal even if he never said it explicitly because Margaret's confidence in her failure reached its peak when the last cycle ended. More than anything, Airi had grown sick of being the only one outside of the Velvet Room who'd remember the mistakes, the laughter, the friendships, the surprises. She would rather disappear before feeling alone once more with the ones she loved who only saw her as a stranger by default.

Diving deeper into depression and despair, she curled in the fetal position. Watching her state of mind deteriorate brought out a voice in her head. “I’m so sorry, Ai…”

“Go away, Ryoji!”

Like a few months ago, he appeared outside of the Dark Hour, only in her head. “I’ve been away for far too long.” The blue boy sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. His free hand
gently stroked her hair. “I knew they would find out… If only I knew when it’d happen, I could have protected you.”

“GO AWAY!” She jerked free from his grasp and continued to crawl into her hole of misery. He did not attempt to touch her again, but he continued to talk. Very much like Theo’s, Ryoji’s heart ached as he watched her.

“This can’t go on anymore! You were never so pathetic that you’d run away and suppress your feelings to the point of losing your mind! You once told me that it’s never too late to make change happen. I still think you’re naïve, but you never gave up like this! It was never how you wanted it, but you always stopped the Fall. Now your friends finally have the chance to know everything. You might stop the Fall and live! There is plenty of evidence to prove that your situation is true.”

His words didn’t seem to reach her. “I just wanna go home…” she moaned in English.

“Your family will be there on the other side. You might want to escape, but you have to learn to accept everything and move on. Shinjiro took your words seriously enough to come back early. If he were to see you now, he would call you a hypocrite—”

“HE’S DEAD! H-He’s gone! I can’t save him!”

“He’s still alive, Ai. Denying it will mean you’ll never have a chance to try and save him! Tell him you love him before it tears you apart!”

“It’s too late… I should’ve never met him…”

He kicked the wall and yelled, “That’s a lie and you know it! You never worried about anyone else like you did for Shinjiro! You only ran to me and Theo else because you were a mess! Stop dismissing and insulting those who love you! Stop torturing us so easily like this!”

Needing some fresh air after burying her face, Airi lifted her raw face and continued to whimper. When she looked down at her arms again, scars emerged. Some of them developed into fresh wounds, with blood bulging under her clothes. Her mental state continued to deteriorate, even though Ryoji was trying to stop it.

“Please, Airi!” Ryoji, desperate and scared, held her face in his hands. “Tell them your story! Give Shinjiro a chance! Where is that passion that made me wish your desire to live can come true?! I’m the one who’s doomed to fail, not you!”

Sobbing uncontrollably, she tried fighting him off, but she ended up falling over and onto the gum-infested pavement. Not far from her was where it was going to happen. She could smell the blood and hear his labored breaths. Her wounds tingled more with the one in her chest hurt the worst and, unlike in that memory, in this trance she couldn’t feel his arms.

How long she lay lost was unknown. Ryoji rubbed his misty eyes, knowing he failed to knock sense in her. Old words he remembered her saying was his last attempt. “I can’t make you come back, but if you change your mind, your friends are waiting. They won’t ever give up on you. They’ll always welcome you back.”

Deaf to his words, Airi couldn’t stop crying. Blood dripped down her arms, torso, and legs. Her breathing was shallow and her vision blurred and morphed into static. Numbness crawled up her fingers and toes, reaching closer and closer to her heart.

From behind her, she could hear chains against solid ground… claws against metal…
A dark shape peaked through her misty vision. With it a gentle but frantic voice spoke she could not understand.

Chapter End Notes

Yet another chapter referencing a song I listened to while writing: "Without a Reason" by Lacuna Coil. Actually now that I think of it, I listened to quite a lot of Lacuna Coil when writing this fic... I'll try to mention it in the future, and I should probably go back and add a few notes to earlier chapters that are definitely song references.
Akihiko, Mitsuru, and Shinjiro sat around the patient's bed and waited for something to happen. The patient sat in silence, with her drawing in the new sketchbook Junpei bought for her being the only sound she made. All attempts to make Chidori speak produced no fruit, and the seniors were thinking of a new strategy.

“We know about Strega,” said Mitsuru, softening her tone to something more assuring. “We aren’t keeping you because we hate you; we want to avoid unnecessary confrontation.”

Chidori displayed no hint of hearing anything she said.

Letting out a sigh, Mitsuru checked her phone to make sure she did not lose the line with Aigis. The Group picked her and the pieces of herself up early Monday morning and took her to Yakushima for repairs. Her head and torso had completely been repaired by today at noon, and the scientists allowed her to contact her friends as they made the final improvement to her limbs. “I apologize, Aigis, but we must wait for Iori to return.”

"Understood."

Akihiko tapped his fingers against his folded arms. “I don’t get his obsession with her. She and Aizawa were the reason we all walked into a trap.”

“We don’t have many options. We know they want to bring the Fall, but how and when the Nine plan to make this happen remains a puzzle with a few pieces missing. If this is the only way to understand what’s happening and to protect Amada, questioning Chidori is the best we can do.”

“She may be Strega, but that doesn’t mean she’s involved enough to help much,” reminded Shinjiro. He slouched in his seat and picked at the loose threads in his beanie.

“I cannot determine how likely that is, given we lack evidence,” said Aigis over speakerphone. She had spent the afternoon listening to a recording of Monday’s meeting and felt ready to contribute to the discussion after some contemplation. “However, I speculate that Aizawa-san’s behavior was highly disorganized and spontaneous. I cannot determine if what he said about October 4th was truth or fiction. His state of mind... was troubling.”

“That’s the day Ken’s mom died,” Akihiko stated somewhat impatiently. “I can’t remember everything he said, but it having a nasty fight sounded like a reasonable prediction of what could happen. That’s the next full moon this year.”

Mitsuru folded her arms, unsure what to believe. “We have to prepare for whatever is coming for Amada and Shinjiro’s sake. What do you think, Aigis? Do you have any insight that might help?”

“I knew Aizawa-san. I am trying to understand what happened to him. He disappeared not long before I awakened. Perhaps he tried to investigate Takahashi-san’s death when no one else seemed to know what happened to him. He spoke about the Fall as he wanted it to happen, but he seems to distrust Ikutsuki-san and the others enough to act alone. Chidori also mentioned he had no more suppressants to keep his Persona under control. Even with what he supposedly discovered about
Airi-san, he had little time to contact anyone if at all and confront us before his Persona killed him.”

"So you think he did that 'cause he felt like it?" asked Shinjiro.

“The Chairman seemed shocked when I informed him of Aizawa,” said Mitsuru. "He did not appear to have any knowledge of his whereabouts between his disappearance and his death."

"Was it genuine?"

"I believe so. Even a naturally born actor has moments of raw emotion slip through a controlled façade."

"Additionally, based on Akihiko’s explanation of the dialogue with Kurebayashi-san, Ikutsuki-san may be the one Aizawa would contact first if he had an opportunity to share what he knows about Airi-san," Aigis continued. "The Chairman appears to be the mastermind from what little information we have. He seems to be connected to everything; my sisters and I, the suppressants, Kurebayashi-san’s clinic, and perhaps Strega."

Someone voiced his disagreement with a grunt. “Spill it, Shinji,” glaring, Akihiko did not appreciate the cynicism.

“None of them we met look like ‘masterminds’. They’re too cocky and incompetent like teenagers obsessed with some stupid fashion statement. I'm more concerned 'bout Kurebayashi. He seems more the type with some kind of shady agenda.”

“Speaking of which, Shinjiro-san,” Aigis said. “Have you attended your therapy session recently?”

“Hell no. He’s been actin’ weird since - ”

The door burst open with the juniors pouring inside the room and out of breath. They must have run a hundred miles in desperation.

Mitsuru immediately stood up. “What is it?”

Hyperventilating, Fuuka’s face was bluer than her hair. “Airi-chan’s missing!”

“She was gone since yesterday!” Yukari said, leaning against the wall to support her when her wobbly knees failed.

“And no one knows where she is!” added Junpei as he fell to his knees.

“This is another stressful encounter. Call me when the situation has settled.” Aigis spoke over the chaos. Some distress was detected in her even tone.

“Thank you for your contribution, Aigis. We hope to see you soon.”

Everyone said goodbye to Aigis before Mitsuru hung up. She and Akihiko went to the underclassmen to help them relax. Mitsuru concentrated to channel Penthesilea’s thoughts to heal Fuuka’s mental state so she would not lose consciousness. Akihiko helped Junpei to one of the empty beds and gave Yukari a stick of gum to help her deflate when she declined help. The other senior, seemingly apathetic, turned his attention back to Chidori. The patient stared at Junpei with flicker of concern on her face for a moment before promptly returning to her drawing.

Scratching the back of his head, Akihiko lost his previous annoyed mood, now replaced by the panic he contracted from the underclassmen. “What do you mean you can’t find her?!"
“I’ve checked everywhere! Lucia can’t sense her! It's like Airi-chan doesn’t exist! I need to wait for the Dark Hour to search more thoroughly!!”

"The doctors don't know where she went after she left," added Yukari, who stole Akihiko's seat next to Shinjiro. "Just what we needed at a time like this!"

“A man was with her.”

Confused and surprised, everyone acknowledged Chidori. She stared with a clear matter-of-fact expression that made Yukari twitch.

“Medea saw him,” she clarified. "He was with your friend yesterday for a moment before she disappeared. They seemed to know each other.”

Shocked at her sudden willingness to speak and the knowledge she freely gave, Junpei slid off the bed and approached her. “Chidori, why’re you tellin’ us this? What else do you know?”

Her gaze left his and went back to her drawing. Realizing his eyes followed, she shut the book and put it away. Chidori continued, “She and I are similar. No one can understand my pictures and no one can understand her burden.”

“Her burden…?” Remembering that night, the pain in her eyes, convulsive chills shot through Shinjiro. His friends said nothing, but their disquiet and unease clearly stated they thought the same thing.

“I do not understand. Why relive the moments that cause so much pain? Isn’t letting go and accepting death a more reasonable solution? Why would she–?”

Something seized her and pressed her down on the bed. Pillows and blankets fell to the floor from the thrashing. Gasping and wheezing, Chidori clawed at her neck, but could not hold onto what she grasped for.

“Chidori!” Junpei held her by the shoulders. “What’s wrong?!”

“Something’s in here!” Akihiko ran to the emergency button, ready to call a nurse, only to hesitate, wondering how normal people could solve this problem.

Then Fuuka screamed; Mitsuru gasped as well. For a brief moment, the two saw a red humanoid figure on top of Chidori, pinning her down. Someone else was more aware of what was happening, but he couldn’t see the creature. He didn’t need to.

“Shinji, this isn’t the real you… You can control yourself… You’re not a killer…”

“GET OUT OF THE WAY!”

The nerve-racking shout made Junpei leap ten feet backwards until he hit his head against the edge of the windowsill. The others watched Shinjiro throw himself to Chidori’s side. Trembling hands digging into his pockets, he spouted a waterfall of colorful language no one ever wanted to hear him say again. He found what he was looking for and shoved it into Chidori’s mouth. He carefully forced her to swallow despite the pain in her neck. After a few moments, the girl coughed and breathed freely. Relieved but shaken, Shinjiro backed away and collapsed to his knees.
Tears in his eyes from the cut on his head and the turn of events, Junpei found his voice again. “Ch-Chidori?”

“Sh-She’s fine… thank goodness…” Fuuka stammered while holding onto Mitsuru, who patted the girl on the back in turn.

“Shinji?” Akihiko ran over to the unnaturally pale delinquent. Grabbing his shoulder, he helped bring him back on his feet. In doing so, he felt the tremors Shinjiro tried to hide.

Once standing, he cleared his throat and said evenly, “Her Persona went berserk. It happens.”

“‘It happens’?!” Either from the news itself or the thought that Shinjiro still held back information, a blood vessel popped in Akihiko’s head. “And why do you still have the drugs from yesterday?!”

“These ain’t mine. Been clean since Yakushima, remember? I took ‘em from her before being admitted. Kurebayashi could’ve confiscated them and left her to die if a doctor he liked was in charge. That’s not the case, so I’ll give them to the docs so she doesn’t detox again.”

Trusting a rehabilitating drug addict might not be the wisest idea, but if this was a chance to reveal more about the suppressants, Mitsuru was willing to put aside her lecture… for now. “You should have addressed this concern in the first place. I would have found a doctor who did not have connections to Kurebayashi. However, I am also apprehensive learning that a Persona going berserk ‘happens’?”

“She’s not like us. I dunno how those Kirijo scientists did it, but her body and Persona ain’t compatible. I dunno if the others beyond Strega are like this too… that piece of shit seemed to be. The suppressants stop the artificial Personas from killing their host.”

Yukari spoke up for the first time in minutes. “But yours awakened naturally. How did the suppressants affect you?”

Shinjiro tugged at his beanie. He walked over to the window and sighed. “It’s like any other drug people abuse. Just takin’ it makes you forget shit for a while.”

He tried to hide every possible hint of expressing the effect of him nearly losing himself again had, but his posture slumped. The sounds of her thrashing and struggling on the floor beneath him rang in his ears. Shinjiro stroked his own neck, trying to understand the pain of being so small, overpowered, and defenseless. Having held her once, he felt he could easily crush her.

“Anyone who gets in the way could end up dead. Or they live to say you don’t fuck with me.”

A tangled concern lingered in Akihiko's mind for months, and Shinjiro's actions and words finally unraveled the remaining confusion. He remembered the night Mitsuru said she noticed Airi wearing a mint green scarf, too thick for summer; he didn't pick up that detail, but he remembered how soft and hesitant Airi's voice was as she explained the state of Shinjiro's room.

Liquid anger over his obliviousness boiled into fury. Rather than doing the usual act of punching Shinjiro in the face, Akihiko threw the separating curtain to the ground with enough force to bend the metal and tear the fabric. The thunderous noise startled everyone, even Chidori, who finally became aware of her surroundings.

“Akihiko!” the mother of the group screamed, making the temperature drop ten degrees.

He tried to speak, but had no way of doing so with his body and mind screaming to beat Shinjiro until his body turned into liquified mush. There was enough sanity left for Akihiko to know he could
not unleash such toxicity onto his best friend. But after three days of this, he was at his last straw. He threw his backpack over his shoulders and stormed out the door, slamming it hard enough that the glass cracked.

One minute she was in the middle of the Port Island outskirts; now she lay on a soft mattress in a familiarly cool-colored room. A silky royal blue nightgown with silver decorative spirals replaced her school uniform. Immediately sitting upright, Airi felt no pain; her skin, sliding smoothly against the fabric of her gown, was a healthy pale with no scars to speak of. At the foot of the bed sat Theo, completely straight-faced.

As she tried to remember how much time passed, the room reminded her instead of memories she nearly forgot.

“I was here with you many cycles ago,” her heart sank as she spoke quietly.

Theo nodded. “There are times I wish I could put it out of my mind, but no matter how hard I try, I will always remember. Margaret forewarned of our Master expelling me if I ever compromised my duty to assist you in such an off-putting fashion.”

The girl laughed nervously, “We didn’t do anything worth that kind of punishment.”

“I know, but a part of me wants to be by your side forever. I would kill the Nine for you if you granted me permission, if the burden becomes too much to bear alone. However, I will control my selfish desires. I will fulfill my promise to protect and serve you to the very end of your journey.” When he finished his speech, he exhaled cathartically. Shoulders slouched and posture relaxed, he smiled tenderly. “Forgive my rambling. Elizabeth is tending your clothes. Margaret and I are observing you.”

Airi felt slightly less uncomfortable. She knew him well enough to know Theo was not the lecherous type, but his speech left her uneasy. The Velvet Room residents always said something invaluable and relevant to her journey. By this point the message Theo wanted to convey was so beaten and bloody that even Ryoji wanted her to get over herself.

When she thought back on what happened over the past few days, she broke eye contact and hung her head. “Theo… did Shinji… kill himself last time?”

He hated seeing her heart broken, but he couldn’t lie to her. “He wanted to protect you from the Children, and he convinced himself he failed. There was too much tragedy back then. I’m thankful you stayed in Tatsumi Port Island this time. I couldn’t bear to watch your friends die as the Fall arrived unopposed. For a mere bystander to come to tears, I could never imagine the depth of your grief if you witnessed it.”

“I see…” Airi covered her mouth and tried to ease her queasiness. It took time to finally admit it, but the number of possibilities she hoped existed was more numbered than she thought.

“Please do not be offended, but this pain has stirred me. My sisters, my master, and I are forbidden to break free from our domain, yet I have challenged the status quo to more directly assist in molding your vision into reality. I have concluded that observation and imparting wisdom are inadequate.”

“What will happen after…?”

"I will have my own journey to undertake. Some rebellions are worth the risk of losing stability and comfort."
His voice was full of optimism. Airi looked to Theo and saw his childlike smile she feared was lost forever. The journey put a toll on them both.

“Tell me, Theo,” she begged earnestly. “Even though he’ll die, should I tell him how I feel?”

“Unless you want the sickness of the heart to consume you again, that would be wise.” A woman’s cold voice behind her came around and stood at the foot of the bed. Margaret had an emerald book Airi has never seen before in her arms. “I have not always agreed with your decisions; however, we cannot let your journey to end so disgracefully. You must wear new masks to protect yourself and restore your bonds. My fool of a brother cannot bail you out of every disaster.”

Airi shook her head and laughed dejectedly. She shivered, remembering the clinging of the chains. “But I broke the contract. No one was to know about the time travel and the Velvet Room. I have to be vague.”

“You are not alone in breaking vows,” replied Theo. He lowered his head and took off his blue and gold cap. “I fought Hemera and brought him here for questioning. When he had no invaluable information to give beyond what we already know, I was to return him to your world when the suppressants left his system and have his weakened Persona kill him. But his will was far stronger than I anticipated. I only learned enough to confirm the validity of the data I delivered to your companions. The fate of Charon and the plans behind the Anti-Shadow Weapons were locked in his mind. Hemera is the weakest battle-oriented Persona I have ever seen, but she is blessed with a complex, uncharted maze of a mind.”

Even after living in isolated, harsh conditions imposed by the pockets of the Velvet Room, Aizawa didn’t break. Much to her disgust, Airi secretly admired him for that. “He didn’t say much of anything useful when I fought him that other cycle either. But how did he escape?”

Theo lowered his head. Before he could speak, Margaret cleared her throat and glowered at her younger brother. “Hemera made distressingly accurate conclusions about our situation in a short period of time. Theo approached me to help him manage the prisoner. That moment of weakness was enough for Hemera to freeze over the entire Room.”

Eyes wide, Airi had some trouble accepting that. “The loud explosion?”

“Our reality pulsing against yours,” Theo answered quickly. “My mind was clouded. Our Master and my sisters were incapacitated right when the ice took over. It was my last stand, Hemera finished Beelzebub and I with light magic. With no one to preserve the secrecy of the Velvet Room…”

Margaret rapped her fingers against the book and finished his story. “Our Master may have not expected such a mere humiliation for defeat.”

Airi sighed and played with her hands. It baffled her how Aizawa managed to escape. The residents were just as clueless.

“But Aizawa and Hemera are gone now, thanks in no small part to the unpredicted cooperation from Thanatos,” Theo assured Airi. “Once we recovered, I returned to your world and examined the body; I could hear Hemera’s death rattle upon touching his wounds.”

A gross thing to wish for, but it ensured that one of the Nine was completely gone. When she had the answers she needed, Airi slipped off the bed and stretched. The cool ground massaged her feet and gave enough energy for her to get up. The sound of ruffling sheets hinted that Theo wanted to help support her if needed. When she didn’t feel his hands, she assumed Margaret held him back.
With far less pressure consuming her, Airi felt free. She turned to the residents and said, “When can I go back?”

The siblings exchanged a conversation through their eyes. Not much could be understood about what they were saying, but it was easy to tell who was much older and more mature.

“When you have proven your mental resilience is restored,” answered Margaret. For what seemed to be a moment, a page or two let off a faint glow. “However, time flows differently here. I suggest you leave quickly before your world passes by.”

Airi agreed to this vacation time so she and Theo could plan how to recover from the aftermath. Hoping no one has fallen apart without her, Airi graciously bowed to Margaret and Theo. She held her breath and reached for the door to the birdcage she knew so well.

Igor probably had a whole new lecture in store for her.

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September 10, 2009

School seemed dead without Airi. Sticking with tradition, Junpei, Yukari, and Fuuka shared lunch together, but dialogue fell shortly and awkwardly. The unfinished business ate at them and soured their moods so much that they wanted the stupid drama to be done and over with. Mitsuru escaped into her duties as Student Council President. Occasionally Hidetoshi would ask where Airi went, and the Kirijo heiress tried her best to instill damage control over his newer, stricter enforcement policies. As a result, she had no energy for business at the dorm when Fuuka and Yukari informed her that their contact Arisato wanted to speak with them after school.

Everyone gave Ken some space since his outburst, and he missed the few moments of laughs Airi and the rest would share daily. When he arrived at the shrine, he saw Koromaru sitting by the offertory box with his head low. By his paw was a familiar green scarf.

“Hey, Koro-chan.”

The dog’s ears perked and he turned to face Ken. He didn’t move or say anything; his eyes drooped slightly. That was enough to get the feeling across.

“You miss Airi-san too?”

He whined.

Ken sat down beside his teammate and picked up the scarf. The fibers brushed comfortably against his palm, covered in healing blisters. Seeing thin auburn strands of hair stuck between the folds of the fabric made the boy smile sadly.

“I wonder how Airi-san felt about us,” he pondered, not realizing how much his heart needed feelings to spill. His fists clenched tightly, though not quite enough for nails to cut the scarf. “How much does she know about everyone? How does she know Aragaki-san will die on October 4th? I planned to face him then, but… Could I still do it…?”

Asking such a thing disgusted him. He didn’t expect an answer, but Koromaru laid a paw on the boy’s lap. Doubts sickening him, he closed his burning and hiccupped into his sleeve. Koromaru whined once more and rested his head against Ken’s shoulder. The boy cried, holding the dog close in one hand and the scarf in the other.
“Wh-What’s wrong with me? Why do I have this stupid power?!”

A blistering fire, a black horse, and the shredding of skin and bone mixed with a girl’s screams, a smashed android, and a madman. They were the easiest yet most painful things to recall in his short life.

“M-Mom…”

Koromaru, so steady, fuzzy, and warm, buried his face into Ken’s side and whined empathetically.

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Everyone arrived at the outside of the dorm at the exact same time. No words were exchanged; some people were too angry with others to attempt casual dialogue. They all knew why they were depressed, out of touch, unwilling to explore Tartarus further. Whoever Arisato was, they really hoped he had some of the answers they needed to move forward. Some - mainly Akihiko and Mitsuru - considered disbanding SEES or leaving town, and neither option was responsible nor beneficial to ending the Dark Hour.

Their moods lifted significantly as they saw Aigis stand by the steps to the front door. Sensing the dark air around them, she avoided asking what was going on and instead explained the state of her platform. No superficial changes were significant, but the shiny metal and vibrant red and white paints showed that everything but her bandaged face was brand new.

“The rapid-firing barrels are slightly smaller, allowing more storage for ammunition. I can now hold explosive rounds to make up for the lack of power. New rocket launchers have been installed in my forearms. The materials are lightweight, durable, but flexible. Kirijo-san promised and provided the best.”

His daughter, mildly flattered, said, “It’s wonderful to see you ready, Aigis. Welcome back.”

“We got your work together, Ai-chan,” Junpei said. He and Fuuka each held up a bag of textbooks and notes. “They weigh a ton and a half…”

“Thank you. I... I am glad to be back.”

Despite their happiness for her return, she acknowledged the stress simmering beneath their smiles. Aigis concluded that being thoughtlessly cheerful in this moment would not help alleviate the mood. She did not have enough hard data or experience to ensure positive or negative success, so she hid her anticipation to test out her new tools in Tartarus.

When they finally entered their depressing home, they saw a strange man, dressed in black, holding Ikutsuki at gunpoint. Fuuka and Yukari’s jaws dropped.

“H-Hello, everyone!” greeted Chairman, his forehead shining with sweat. “I was here to check up on you, when this crazy man followed and pointed this weapon at me! Call the police, please!”

Unaffected by his hostage’s panic, the white-haired, gold-eyed man lowered his head respectfully to the arrivals. “Well met, Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad.”

“Arisato-san, where's Airi?!” Yukari blurted out. “Please tell us you know where she is!”

He smiled. “Airi-chan is safe, Yukari Takeba. However…” his features darkened slightly, “her mental health is still unwell.”
“You do know? What happened to her?” Mitsuru interjected, distressed both by Arisato’s gun and words.

“You do not recognize your secretary? Oh, yes… my true hair is white and eyes yellow. My apologies, it is only obvious two small changes fundamentally create confusion.” He paused briefly when he noticed the bewildered look on everyone’s faces. Yukari and Fuuka whispered something to their friends and they lowered their defensive guard of the strange man. Bowing slightly, he addressed his allies. “Allow me reintroduce myself. My true name is Theodore, a family friend of Airi Fujihara for over twelve years. Please, do call me Theo.”

“Ha, you’re lying!” said Ikutsuki. “The Kurebayashi and the Fujihara families have never heard of you! Please, children, help me out of this – “

A black-gloved fist shut him up instantly. Ikutsuki landed on the ground and stared dumbfounded at a livid Akihiko. Theo silently adjusted the gun at the new angle.

“Sorry, Morpheus. We’re not paying for your services anymore.”

One moment Ikutsuki’s eyes shined in obliviousness and confusion. Not two seconds later, a grin crossed his face. “You overheard us at Yakushima.”

“It took you this long to figure out?”

“I knew Aether was too apathetic,” he said plainly. He gently touched the sharp sore spot on his cheek. “If things went my way, you and Shinjiro should have been disposed of by now.”

Without the earlier meeting, SEES would have been shocked. This only confirmed their fears.

“Didn’t think you’d pity street rats enough to keep my ass alive,” Shinjiro replied. He left his book bag on the ground and sat himself up on front desk.

“Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi planned to go after you one by one if you knew too much. Airi-chan made sure to drop ambiguous observations that would spark curiosity. Out of all of you, you two helped the most.”

Akihiko furrowed his brow and stared blankly at Theo. He figured as much from the notes and his constant questions confusing Mitsuru, but he needed clarification.

“Fuuka Yamagishi may not have taken my offer had she not learned of your suspicions at Yakushima. You were the most vocal of your concerns, Akihiko Sanada, even at the expense of no one believing you. As for you, Shinjiro Aragaki, Kurebayashi kept some interesting notes from your therapy that were disturbingly easy to access. I am yet to discern if he left his notes open for any user to read was an effort to prepare a trap, but you may believe more in the validity of the existence of the Nine if you know what they plan to do to his ‘lovely jasmine’.”

Those two words were enough for Shinjiro’s fists to clench.

“Hang on! Didn’t that Aizawa bastard say that too?” guessed Junpei.

“Strega called Airi-san that as well at the abandoned military base,” added Aigis.

“A simplistic, juvenile code one can remember and notice connections, so long as you understand English,” commented Theo flatly.
Unimpressed, Ikutsuki scoffed, “How are things going for you if you’re this smug?”

“Oh no, dear sir, I am more confident than smug.” Theo’s face showed it in quite a lighthearted manner. “Until enough evidence emerged for SEES to believe in the existence of the Nine, I made sure Airi-chan would not ‘gouge anyone’s eyes out with a spork’. A morbidly fascinating image, if I may say.”

“What will you do now? The Kirijo Group will never protect you for pulling a gun on your boss and hacking into their networks. No one will believe this nonsense you’re spewing.”

“Don’t be so optimistic, Ikutsuki.”

Everyone turned to the front door to see the dark-haired Takeharu Kirijo and a greying, tired police officer in his mid-forties enter. It seemed to be a long day for them both, especially when it lasted for months.

“Father?”

Takeharu acknowledged his pleasantly surprised daughter with a nod. “I apologize for not keeping in touch. Your doubts concerned me enough to launch another investigation.”

Taking a few steps back, Akihiko greeted the officer. “Kurosawa, it’s been a while.”

“Indeed,” his said gruffly. As soon as he addressed the boxer and gave a nod to Shinjiro, he shifted just as quickly into his role. “The Kirijo hid their secrets for generations. It’s about time one of their own grew tired and came forward.”

Takeharu’s lips twitched into a slight smile. It was practically a bear hug coming from him. “Let Kurosawa and I deal with Ikutsuki, everyone.”

The threat of arrest meant nothing to the Chairman. He sat on the ground and continued to sneer daggers at the people above. “Come and try. Nothing will change. The Fall will be brought forth upon the world, just as your father planned, Kirijo-san.”

“What?!” From the back of the group, Yukari’s voice rang. She pushed past everyone and stared the chairman face-to-face. “But what about my father? He said he was the cause of all of this!”

“He was just another expendable scientist. He was too righteous and idealistic to understand the meaning of the research. We only kept him alive to keep the façade of the leaders not going ‘crazy’ like the former Kirijo.”

“So he wasn’t behind all of this?! You made him say those words in that video?!”

“I edited them.”

Intense steam blew out of her ears. Her face mutated into a series of angry lines in crumpled up clothes. “I’d crush you to death if I could!”

“He recorded his last words at the risk of never warning the world of the Group’s crimes, and you distorted his message! You despicable plebeian!” Mitsuru was tempted to say far more with some colorful expletives, but she bit her tongue.

Unsure of how to contribute to the conversation, Ken cautiously went to Kurosawa and asked, “How much do you know about SEES?”
“This ‘Dark Hour’ and its paranormal nature explain many of the unusual things happening this year. Too many people have become the living dead and caused freak accidents in public spaces. Your actions seem to quell these issues for a time, and you kids are the only ones doing something.”

Ken did not expect that response. Someone of authority outside the Kirijo Group actually believed in them and openly admitted it without hesitation. “So… what happens now?” He twiddled his thumbs and stared at the criminal.

A deep growl vibrate against Shinjiro’s throat. At last, there was a day when Junpei greatly appreciated his sempai’s temper. “This bastard makes me sick…” he spoke for the both of them.

“I am not 100% familiar with the act of enforcing morals and laws,” Aigis gave an apologetic stare at the officer. “But the consensus seems to be ‘an eye for an eye’.”

“No,” though polite, Takeharu snipped firmly. “We would not be able to give a credible enough case to convince the legal system. And any of you killing him is out of the question, unless as a last resort. Even then, I will be unable to protect you from the consequences if it doesn’t work.”

Everyone turned to Theo, who shook his head. “For artificial Persona-users, one’s body must be weakened to a point when his Persona attempts to detach from its host. In doing so, it tries to endure and revert to a Shadow. The process has often been forced, and most times the host and Persona die.”

Fuuka closed her eyes and shuddered. She wondered if something like that would have happened if Shinjiro did not help Chidori.

“That is what happened to Aizawa-san?” Aigis asked.

Kurosawa pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “It seems so. Arisato-san confirmed it the other night. I have never seen a body so torn open like that…”

The faces of Aigis, Mitsuru, and Yukari turned pale from the memory.

Once some doubts were secured, Theo turned back to Ikutsuki. “I sorely hoped you would be reasonable, but perhaps – as some may say – a bullet between the eyes is what you deserve.”

Ikutsuki laughed at the hollow threat.

“Very well, we have nothing more to learn from you, Morpheus.”

“Then what about Thanatos and the Twelve Shadows? How do you plan to deal with Death when--“

Before Ikutsuki could finish his sentence, Theo pulled the trigger. The bullet missed Ikutsuki by an inch, creating a crater in the wooden floor, but he earned the silence he sought.

“Please arrest him,” Theo commanded genially. “Your justice system can punish this man.”

The two men gave each other looks and silently found an agreement. Kurosawa then said, “If he escapes, we will inform you immediately. I will authorize you to kill him on sight.”

Seeing no way out in this hour, Ikutsuki reluctantly surrendered. As Kurosawa handcuffed him and lead him out the door, the man turned to the furious eyes of the children. Unremorseful, Ikutsuki shook his head.

“Locking me away will do nothing,” he said. “You’ll keep on fighting and bleeding for a vein hope
in a better future. The Shadows will never dim. They still lurk in the shadiest of places, but they’re far from blind. You’ll one day see the truth that we need them for our salvation. Until then, sleep well while you still can, your dreams will retire soon enough.”

It was the last straw for them, but Akihiko and Junpei met a human wall, blocking their attempt to wring the chairman’s neck. The girls and Shinjiro sympathized and did their fair share of fighting puns with death stares.

“Get in the car,” Kurosawa said crossly.

A slight nudge silenced Ikutsuki for the rest of the scene. Mitsuru, Fuuka, and Yukari backed the others to the side as Kurosawa directed the Chairman to the cab. Shinjiro stared at them until the officer drove away with a locked-up, but oddly nonchalant Ikutsuki.

Of the new guests, Takeharu and Theo stayed. A storm brewed in the Kirijo’s un-patched eye.

“Thank you for your contributions, Arisato-san. However, how did you obtain a firearm?”

Confused for only a moment, Theo played with the silver pistol in his hands and smiled triumphantly. “Oh, my. This is merely refurbished, much like the Evokers these students carry. The rounds are mere blanks.”

“You sound a bit too happy about that, Ari – uh, Theo-san,” pointed out a concerned Yukari.

“Oh, but it is ingenious! The look of pure terror on Ikutsuki’s face, believing I would lay a harmful hand upon him when I have never fired a bullet in my life! Marvelously priceless, do not you agree?” He nodded proudly at his own question. The others did not share his mirth, though Akihiko restrained a smirk to set a good example. He secretly admitted the trick was rather clever, given how much Ikutsuki deserved it.

Takeharu’s eye narrowed, “…Kurosawa will arrest you too if you become a liability.”

“My speech has offended,” Theo put the gun in an inside pocket his suit and bowed. “But you are most welcome, Kirijo-sama.”

“Nonetheless, we may still need your services for a while longer to keep this arrangement quiet. If it were no trouble, it is possible for you to take Ikutsuki’s place as Chief Director of the High School, as well as advisor to the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad.”

Fuuka and Yukari held their breaths. Having known him the longest, they would welcome such a positive turn of events.

Not three seconds of thought, Theo replied, “If it benefits Airi and her friends, I will play my part.”

“Who are you exactly?” asked Mitsuru and folded her arms.

Her father stood as competently as ever. “Despite his peculiar mannerisms, Arisato has shown to have excellent organizational and empathic skills. He has observed Ikutsuki to understand the work he must perform. If he stays, he will remain an invaluable ally who supervises your activities. The Nine may reinforce the hold of their information, but they have fewer eyes upon you. Most of all, he knows enough about this chaos that we cannot afford to bring an unknown outsider into our situation.”

“Please, Mitsuru-sempai,” Fuuka vouched for the proposal.

“I’ll sleep a little better knowing Ikutsuki’s gone,” argued Yukari. “Theo-san has helped us
tremendously."

Shinjiro said seriously, despite his mocking tone, “The guy’s a nutcase, but he’s better than nothin’.”

Easily going with the flow, Junpei said, “I agree with your dad, Mitsuru-senpai.”

Akihiko muttered under his breath in the background, commenting that Ikutsuki’s death was preferable. Everyone agreed with him, but they had to deal with one mess at a time. One by one, they reached unanimous agreement.

“Excellent.” Takeharu’s voice softened. He and Theo shook hands and set the change in stone.

“Take care of them, Arisato-san.”

“It is my pleasure,” said Theo with a refined smile. Once that was taken care of, he took out a gold watch and gasped. “Oh alas, I must depart. A wilting flower needs nurturing before she can return to reality. Good day, and thank you.”

He tilted his head towards the side and smiled softly as he said his goodbyes. With one last bow, the strange black-suited man went through the front door and around the corner opposite to where Kurosawa drove away.

No one fully understood of what he said, but Yukari nudged Fuuka and whispered, “Does he…?”

“Yes, I think so!” An anxious Fuuka tried not to be too loud or energetic in her reply. “Airi’s staying with him!”

“But why doesn’t he say so like a normal person?”

“Is something wrong?” Aigis interrupted. Her voice spoke on a lower vocal frequency similar to her friends.

Caught and embarrassed, Fuuka blushed. “We’ll tell you later,” Yukari replied with a forced smile.

The girls returned their attention to Takeharu. Some more baggage needed to be delivered before he could properly leave.

“I must apologize to you all,” he confessed, dropping his formalities. “This whole story, the secrets, I never understood them very well myself. I reserved myself so I would not feed you misinformation. For the strain I placed on you and your friends, Mitsuru, I am deeply sorry.”

Seeing him heartfelt was so rare. Mitsuru shook her head meekly. “No, father. I refused to listen when my friends needed me most. I am not worthy of being a leader…”

“But you were right,” Akihiko interjected. “There was nothing to prove. For all we knew, I was probably making stuff up.”

“I know, but…”

Takeharu gingerly placed his hand on her head and his lips twitched into a small smile. The universe imploded. “What’s done is done. You are a strong woman who looks after everyone you care for. Do not let one mistake make you forget that.”

A tingling sensation burned in Mitsuru’s eyes, but she hid any hint of how much those words touched her.

“Yukari Takeba.” The girl jumped at her name. She was more surprised when Takeharu took out a
disc from his briefcase and handed it to her. “I restored the original footage of your father’s final moments. After all you've endured, you deserve the truth.”

Holding the DVD in her hand, a speechless Yukari bowed twice to express her endless thanks.

Before leaving everyone, he gave one last message. “I trust you all to do the right thing. Kurosawa-san, Arisato-san, and I are available if you need our support. We will watch over you. And… please pass my regards to Airi Fujihara. Wherever she is, I pray she is safe.”

“Don’t worry, Kirijo-san,” Fuuka said so hopefully. “She is safe.”

Chapter End Notes

My job situation has changed this past week, making me a bit uneasy... then on the 20th my best friend told me Chester Bennington died.

I listen to a lot of music when I write, and Linkin Park helped motivate and inspire me. So when I edited this segment out from a longer chapter in the original document of 'Through the Empty Spiral' over the past few days it was hard to hear the voice of a man I know is no longer here.

Thankfully this chapter had no title for a while, so I chose "Heavy" from 'One More Light'. The drama surrounding the band and their discography doesn't matter. I love Linkin Park, and I miss Chester.
Aizawa’s disappearance and subsequent death were unfortunate, but it was Ikutsuki’s arrest that made the Children nervous. Without the Chairman to monitor SEES and lead them down the path of blissful ignorance, Jin had to reconsider their plan for the months ahead. He realized too late that “Teodora Arisato” copied all the information Ikutsuki transferred to him over the past year and delivered them to SEES and Takeharu Kirijo. Some further digging through the Kirijo databases showed that Arisato, originally stationed in Tokyo, was transferred to Port Island after receiving high recommendations from his boss and peers. Rather than taking a respectable and lucrative position, he chose to work in the administration of Gekkoukan High School. Seeing Arisato’s meticulous detail-oriented and organization skills, Ikutsuki took him as his secretary.

Then, without warning and without anyone suspecting him of having ulterior motives, Arisato betrayed him. Jin had no idea how he appeared suddenly without a previous work or personal history and seized the right position at the right time within weeks and without creating a stir. His best guess was Arisato was charismatic and persuasive beyond a normal person, perhaps a Persona user or something beyond human. Jin wanted to know more about the man so he and Takaya know how to kill him at his most vulnerable, but his recent activity has been buried under a mountain of passwords and encryption he needed time to crack. The Kirijo Group finally realized how poor their security was since the dawn of time and invested in some of the best software that Jin had not often seen enough to understand the ins and outs.

Safe in the sanctuary of his clinic office, Sora Kurebayashi read Jin’s email analyzing the situation several times and grew more disquiet with every colorful admittance that he needed more time to investigate. Even with the Chairman gone, which the Children knew would only be temporary given the incompetence and overworked conditions of Tatsumi Port Island’s police force, it was clear SEES became a very serious threat sooner than anticipated. Strega operated in the Dark Hour enough to not adjust their schedules too much, and Sora kept his guard ready after investigating the sudden Shadow attack on Akihiko. Now they had to be alert at all times.

While in the middle of reorganizing the files he snatched from Ikutsuki’s desk during the Dark Hour, his cell phone rang. No caller ID came up, but he answered anyway. Strega typically used different disposable phones per call, but this could be anyone. “Kurebayashi speaking.”

“Hi, uncle.”

Her voice was much deeper, if not more tired, than he last remembered, but it wrapped him warmly like a flannel blanket in the middle of winter.

“Ai, my princess. It has been so long. I have been trying to contact you but you have never replied. How are you?”

It was silent on the other line for a few seconds. “Why didn’t you tell me you work in a clinic in Iwatodai?”

“Oh, the Kirijo Group asked me to come here quietly. Confidential, sadly. Once I settled in and the case was resolved, I was free to keep in touch. But it takes two to tango, my dear. I haven’t heard
from you in months.”

Sora knew how to separate his work from personal life sometimes a little too well, but he never failed to make time for his niece. When Airi was younger, she sometimes was left in his office while Hoshiru and Yuuki were busy with their careers. Rather than placing her in the care of a babysitter, they trusted Sora to look after their well-behaved child. At the same time she would be exposed to the medical field; her parents hoped Airi would follow in Sora’s footsteps one day. More often than not, the two would spend time in his office reading the many books on his shelves. Several of them had tales of mythologies from cultures across the globe.

The nostalgia of those days overwhelmed him, ignoring that his own niece was the catalyst for the beginning of the end of the world.

“Is there anything new with you, Ai? How is school life in Japan?”

“Intense, crazy, but fun. It’s spoiling me because it feels more like college than high school, but I keep myself busy. I’m top of my class and Student Council secretary. I’m also in volleyball, cooking club, fashion club, and the library committee.”

Smiling broadly, he was impressed. “You’re a busy lady! Are any boys trying to pull you away from your schedule?”

“N-Not really…”

“Oh, don’t be coy. You’re a clever girl. With you being that involved, many young men are probably wrapped around your little finger and you just don’t know it.”

She chuckled meekly and her tone grew serious. “Maybe… But I’ve never been asked out. Hell, I doubt I’ll ever have a boyfriend.”

“It’ll happen, love. You’ll see.”

“I don’t know. Some days I just don’t know what I want. Some guys are probably terrified of me not wanting to rely on them. Or they think I don’t need someone important in my life because I don’t want to give up having a career if I get married. I wonder how mom did it…”

He could see the stress on her face from her tone and words alone. These were not the words she needed to say to feel better or admit what was happening in her head, but Airi was clearly screaming for comfort and guidance. Sora suspected the anxiety came from the move from Ireland to Japan. Cultural differences were always an issue for both of them. While she spent a good amount of time in both Europe and Japan, Airi felt more comfortable in the English-speaking world where she could be more assertive and blunt in how she spoke about herself and her future plans. Sora learned to enjoy the cultures he engaged in and to relax if he made a mishap, but even he did not conform to what was expected of him. When it came to relationships, he never made women or marriage a high priority for him, and he paid the price for that choice by many assuming he was unqualified to take in and raise his niece.

Feeling powerless to truly reach and help her, Sora reclined back in his chair and stared at a photo on his desk. A seven-year-old birthday girl stood by a glass tank keeping a shark and held a stuffed dolphin. “Yuuki always had doubts. From infancy to the day she died, she asked me to help her think through her ideas. Very rarely she changed her mind, but she just wanted another perspective to prepare for what she could not foresee. You have no idea how many times she called, panicking over your brother when her pregnancy with you was worry-free!”
Airi did not laugh with her uncle. On a nicer day she might have asked more of her mother's eccentricities. "I... I never knew that."

"Of course not, love," he said. "She never wanted you to see her 'weak' and too paralyzed to act without someone else' guidance. A pity we lost her too soon. You both would have learned from each other to not see your compassion and caution as weaknesses. I have tried forever to help her see that, but... it was never to be.

"I know I have not been around much to help you, but you are your own worst critic. If you have a goal, reach for it. You were always good at assessing the world around you and recognizing how realistic your odds are at succeeding, but there is no shame in having ideals to motivate you further. Not everything will go your way, and sometimes how you interpret the world around you does not reflect objective reality.

“You may have to sacrifice some things, but every decision has its risks. You know what you want, so don't be afraid to fight for it with everything you have. Make your career. Make yourself independent so you have some security and experience. Keep the friendships that enrich and keep your life balanced. Love and marriage are possibilities that may come along later, but they’re good things to fall back on in times of trouble. The right people will accept you for who you are and make sure you do not lose your way. I know how hard you work, and I know you will make your dreams become reality with the strength within and around you. Don’t you agree?"

Airi did not respond right away. When she did, Sora heard her voice crack. “Y-Yeah... I agree.”

Sora smiled. “Hang in there, my lovely jasmine. Better days will come.”

“I... I know. Thanks, uncle.”

Airi hated lying because she could never get away with them, but what she said were white enough to fool her only blood relative. At least she did want to be like her mother, balancing a family and work, long ago before the cycles started. Such a future was still possible, but her sanity might have been forever altered to make such a dream difficult to achieve and even more difficult to keep. Her falling in love with someone destined to die did not help her case.

Airi stood outside for a while longer in the pocket alley below the Karaoke Bar Mandragora. The crisp air helped her to breathe more deeply than she could in the strange world of the Velvet Room. Her face, less sullen and heavy than the other day, did not alarm the strangers that walked past her but her outfit did. The vivid blue dress she borrowed from Elizabeth did not have pockets for her phone but its comfortable fabric made up for the baffling design choice.

The residents of the Velvet Room recommended she’d stay with them for a while longer. Her friends needed some time to think about the reality of their mission, and Airi needed to rejuvenate for when they ask her hundreds of questions. A slightly more positive outlook from her brief vacation and some practical advice from her uncle alleviated her condition considerably. Smiling at her newfound inner stability, Airi toyed with her mp3, which Theo managed to bring it to her after Ikutsuki’s arrest. She listened to a few songs until orange and pink watercolors bled through the sky in the windowed ceiling of Paulownia Mall. Back to the Velvet Room to recover she went.

The DVD sat under the TV in Yukari’s room. She sat on her carpet, fiddling with her thumbs, indecisive and unsure. Fuuka was beside her, however, holding her hand. Instant ramen somehow
tasted better than it had been when they ate it constantly in the spring. Without no one else in the building Fuuka and Yukari missed how lively the dorm used to be. Junpei wanted to hang out more, but he visited Chidori nearly every day because no one else had much luck in gaining her trust. Akihiko took out his persistent anger at the gym, and Mitsuru dove deep into her academic commitments. No longer cooking for himself or the others, Shinjiro went out every night and wouldn’t return until dawn. Aigis began to mingle with other classmates because she found SEES’s social interactions gave her “unpredictable results.” Kuromaru stayed by Ken’s side as the boy spent his entire time after school at the shrine. As much as the girls respected everyone needing to deal with their feelings, Fuuka and Yukari missed being a team.

Sniffling, Yukari squeezed her companion’s hand. “I’m sorry for dragging you into this. There’s no one else I can turn to.”

“I don’t mind,” said Fuuka.

“After everything that’s happened, I don’t know if I can take much more of this. I feel we’re going nowhere. Theo-san knows where Airi is, but he doesn't want us to find her. It’s so frustrating. This wouldn’t be happening if she explained things sooner.”

“E-Even if she told us, we might not have believed her. I’m sure she wanted to tell us about the Fall and the Nine, but she was probably scared of how we’d react.”

“Maybe so, but…”

Fuuka reached for a book on a nearby shelf, and out fell a smiling photo of her, Yukari, and Airi from between its pages. It came from the photo booth at Game Panic in Paulownia Mall while they were on one of their shopping sprees. With a nostalgic sigh, she picked it up and gave it to the skeptic.

“I can’t remember a time she never wanted to spend time with us. She’d panic and apologize if she had other plans. Whenever we were in trouble, she was always there. That’s why I believe in her. I believe in everyone. I know we’ll get through this.”

Having poured her heart out, Fuuka blushed. Yukari never asked for a selfish speech. She wanted to be objective and to not judge Airi based on how she initially reacted to the new information. Maybe she came across as the polar opposite - too trusting of an apologist - but Fuuka couldn’t stand by and be silent. Full of strong emotions, she spoke up and defended a close friend Yukari sometimes doubted too quickly.

Rather than being upset at Fuuka’s disagreement, Yukari relaxed a bit and smiled at the photo. “Everything’s changed, hasn’t it? Life was simpler not long ago. Like we just started exploring Tartarus yesterday.”

Once she gave the photo back to Fuuka, Yukari crawled to the TV and reached for the remote. Thumb gently massaging the buttons in one hand, and fingers brushing the DVD with the other, she swallowed hard.

“You’ll find what you’re looking for.”

The bright smile Airi gave after awaking from her hospital bed was similar to the one on their first night at Yakushima. No matter what the true story was about reliving this year over and over
again, she did not doubt Yukari believing dad was innocent. Airi never told her to stop asking questions.

“Yukari-chan?”

Returning to reality, she shook her head. “It’s nothing. Let’s see the real video.”

Yukari turned on the TV. Fuuka repositioned herself so she was right next to her friend. With moral support, Yukari was ready to finally see the truth.

It first started off very similar to the fake tape. The most significant difference was the overall audio and picture quality. It was still late 1990s technology, but everything was cleaner. Eiichiro Takeba’s face was no longer obscured by “smoke”. Like the scrambling scientists appearing on and off camera, he was scared for his life.

“I pray this recording reaches safe hands. My employer and colleagues have become obsessed with a loathsome idea. This experiment should have never been conceived. That’s why I had to attempt to stop it.”

This seized their attention. Hearts racing and stomachs twisting, Yukari and Fuuka refused to be distracted by this invaluable news.

“However, in doing so, I set free a number of Shadows that are certain to torment future generations. But if I hadn’t interfered, the entire world may have paid the price. Please, listen carefully – ”

The alarms in the background blared loudly and smoke filled in the hallway Eiichiro stood in. Camera shaking, he started to run off to reach an exit. While finding a place to escape, he would glance back at the camera occasionally. To make up for the lack of eye contact, he enunciated and emphasized key words when appropriate.

“You must NOT hunt the Shadows that will have dispersed in the explosion! I wasn’t able to stop this madness. No one will listen to me. Most of my colleagues have been blinded by the promise of success and have raised no objections. They belong to a senseless cult, following the leaders who call themselves ‘the Children’. Even worse, the Shadows we studied and modified are growing in strength by consuming each other. If they all reuniite, ‘the Appraiser’ will manifest. By then, it will be too late and I fear the world will come to an end! I must beg you once more: leave the Shadows be! Stop Sora Kurebayashi’s cult! Stop the Children! That is where the real evil lies!”

A blast went off in the distance and Eiichiro muttered a curse. Looking around desperately, he sighed, stopped running, and fixed the camera so it could capture his face properly. A man of maybe thirty bore the wrinkles of a fifty year old.

“There’s… There’s not much hope for me now. I knew the risks of staying to sabotage the experiment, but my attempts have only delayed the inevitable. I only have one last favor to ask. To whoever finds this video, please give my daughter Yukari this message: I know I promised I’d be home soon… and I’m sorry to break that promise. You and mommy have fun at the park without me. Always remember to smile and have fun. I also want you to know that daddy was the happiest man on earth when he was with you.”

The entire world around her expanded and grew until she was a speck of dust. No matter what she could do, it was all just a video. She could scream, cry, claw at the screen, but it all happened in the past. Her father was gone, but ten years later, she finally hears his last words.

“I love you, Yukari. Please take care of yourself…”
The video ended at the explosion. A child again, Yukari sobbed uncontrollably and reached for the screen, but the film replied with empty static. Rather than pull her away to calm her, Fuuka stayed back, only for a while, to dry her own tears. Eventually Yukari sat back and let out a few weaker sobs left trapped in her throat. Fuuka gently tapped her shoulder and offered some tissues. After clearing up her face, she laughed.

“I was right! Fuuka, I-I was right to believe in him!”

Sympathetic, Fuuka gave her friend a hug. Gently patting her back, she finally spoke up. “He tried to stop the experiments when no one else could. I’d be proud to have had a dad like yours.”

Once she recovered from her breakdown, Yukari let go of the hug and smiled.

“How do you feel?” Fuuka asked. She placed the tissue box aside, thinking they were finally past that point.

“I’m… I’ll be okay.” Lifting her head up, Yukari stared out the window and into the sunny sky. “Dad, it took a while, but I finally got your message. I love you too.”

Seeing her friend recover cheered Fuuka up. In the midst of the past few days, she was glad something turned right for once.

Then for a brief moment a halo of soft pink light aura emitted from Yukari. So unreal, it made less sense than the existence of the Dark Hour. As Fuuka was about to express her worry, Lucia whispered to her with a soothing hum. It was like some kind of miracle. Fuuka felt unable to articulate what she saw.

Yukari noticed her daze and gently poked her cheek. “What's wrong, Fuuka?”

The girl squeaked when her daze broke. “I-I’m sorry… what?”

“You dozed off for a second. Are you okay?”

Maybe if she explained it to Yukari, she would understand. “Your Persona is different. I have never seen anything like it…!”

Thankfully, her guess was right. Yukari let out a gentle laugh. “I guess I feel like my eyes are open now. Thanks, Fuuka. I’m still a little mad at her, but Airi helped me. She knew the truth, and I think she wanted me to learn part of it on my own.”

Fuuka could not have been happier for her, but she lowered her head to hide her shameful blush. “I’m sorry for my rant earlier… that was rude of me…”

“It’s alright. You’ve supported me, Fuuka. Thanks.”

She lowered her head slightly, only to change her mind and smile widely. “Oh, not at all! I must thank you too. You helped me with the data from Theo-san. It was a heavy burden, and I needed someone to help me understand it. S-So… I guess we’re even.”

“No way. Best friends don’t hold debts between each other.”

Her words, maybe selfish to some, were not ignored. This realization of worth made a few more tears build in Fuuka’s eyes. “Y-Yukari-chan…”

With the truth fully unveiled, the girls had new information to pass along to the rest. Best of all, they
relieved some tension between them, strengthening their bond.

Relaxed and normal once more, Fuuka reached into her poncho’s pocket and took out a box of cards. “I-It’s been a while since we played, but…”

Yukari glowed. “You bet! I lost the last two games, haven’t I?”

“Best out of five?”

“Loser gets to steal Akihiko-sempai’s beef bowl allowance from his room.”

Fuuka laughed at the ridiculous – if not suicidal challenge.

A normal weekend consisted of exploring Paulownia Mall like a bunch of ADHD children. Escapade allowed them to enter sometimes, though they knew better than to ask for alcohol. Aibana was – or often came across as – too straight-laced even when she actually knew how to blend into dangerous environments. If he remembered correctly, she returned home back in June smelling of cigarettes, just like Shinjiro lately. It really bothered Junpei how they danced too close to dangerous drugs and people that used them. He had his dad as a fine example of the destructive effects of drinking, and that was more than enough. Once he awakened Hermes and met Akihiko, SEES gave him a perfect reason to leave home. Not once did he regret that decision. He never had the chance to tell anyone about it, and he wished Aibana was around.

With her gone, there really wasn’t anyone else to share his insane ideas with. Fuuka and Aigis would cheer him on and Mitsuru and Yukari would set him straight, but no one was even mildly interested in video games, and no one was willing to take a break once in a while. Ken was trying too hard to be mature, and Akihiko was too much into competition and boxing.

Much to his utter shock, he missed hearing rumors of Airi sleeping with half of the guys in school. News of her disappearance spread throughout the campuses and ceased to calm gossiping students and teachers down. Had she been a stranger, Junpei would have been mildly annoyed. Having lived with her for half a year, he felt a family member died. Not used to such heavy thoughts, he kicked the newly painted bench by the bustling Port Island Station plaza and stared at the sky, cloudless and ever blue. The forecast called for a mighty typhoon that would persist for several days. The Cultural Festival would surely be canceled. After everything that happened lately, missing the festival didn’t depress him much. If he wanted to see Yukari in a maid outfit, he’d buy one on her birthday as a prank.

No, it was the humidity that killed him. Willing to escape the festering warmth and wetness radiating off sweaty passerby, Junpei started off in the direction of the hospital. Only one thing could help improve his mood.

“Maybe Chidori’s in the mood to talk,” he thought aloud. He cracked his neck and exhaled. “Just be cool, Junpei.”

Right away the hospital entrance showered him in freezing, dry air. His skin shivered as sweat evaporated. His energy returned and his darker thoughts disappeared into the background.

After going up a flight of stairs and turning a few corners, his feet guided him along the familiar hallway. On one side, three oily figures walked beside him. One had an identical blue baseball cap; the second had a pink sweater wrapped around her waist; and the last held her hair up with a mint
green ribbon. They laughed and joked just like old times. But as they neared one of the rooms, the
girl with the ribbon silently backed up and ran the other way. The boy opened the door and met
another boy a year older than him. He looked pissed off. Maybe he put on the wrong jacket, unfit for
a warm May.

“Heh… ‘Sup with ya?” Junpei laughed at himself for remembering that day. “You’re being way too
sappy, man.”

He continued his way down the hall until he finally reached the correct room. Right as he reached for
the handle, his body froze. For some reason, he could feel his heart pounding against his ribs. The
rate didn’t increase or anything, but he acknowledged the involuntary action that kept him alive. Just
realizing the small, simple miracle organ that never takes a break seemed really cool to him.

At the same time, he remembered Aibana. She ran away from the other room to avoid Shinjiro. If she
knew he was going to die and couldn’t find a way to tell him and have him believe her, she would be
unsure how to approach him. Her odd behavior seemed to make a bit more sense to Junpei. Why
Aibana came to mind so often baffled and annoyed Junpei. Maybe the brief hesitation and that
memory were some kind of warning. Having both make no sense, he ignored it and slid the door
open.

Chidori was probably expecting Mitsuru or Akihiko for some reason, as Junpei’s presence caused
her to jump nervously. The blinds were closed, and only a bedside lamp lit the room. It helped her to
see as she continued another drawing in her sketchbook. Beside the lamp was a vase of four
withered white roses.

Grabbing a nearby chair, he kept his distance. Akihiko warned him that she would cut herself if
anyone startled or approached her suddenly. Only the smeary graphite ruined her snow white fingers.
“Hey. It’s just me again today.”

Pretending she did not lose her cool a moment ago, she did not look away from her work. Holding
her hand in place, Chidori nodded briskly. She acknowledged his presence, and she moved her
pencil once more.

Junpei sighed. He slowly dragged the chair close to her bed and sat down. No reaction was a good
reaction. “They said we still can’t give you back your Evoker.”

“I wasn’t expecting them to,” replied Chidori uninterestedly. “That’s why they started watching me
in the first place.”

The sound of charcoal on paper was harsh and irregular. What was she working on?


Like when the seniors were around, Chidori sewed her lips shut.

“At the station did you cut yourself on purpose?” He tried to press further.

Again, no response. However, the sketching sound grew more erratic.

“Why do this to yourself?”

A slam from the sketchbook shut him up. Never changing her expression, Chidori threw it, along
with her pencil, to the ground on the window side of the bed.

“Chidori?”
She relaxed her back and eyed him. “I never asked for your help. You always misunderstand.”

“Then help me understand,” Junpei leaned towards her slightly. His hand nearly touched hers, but refrained from doing so. “There’s never a good reason to harm yourself. I want you to stop.”

“What does it matter? Why are you so worried? You were like that the other day…”

Oh, he remembered too well. If they hadn’t given her the suppressants, her Persona would have killed her. Whatever happened after Shinjiro’s valiant act that was fuzzy. The shock of seeing someone nearly die before him… Then he thought of Aibana on the roof of the dorm. It was scary how much he started to understand the fear of losing someone who somehow captured your heart without knowing until it was too late.

“So you’re sayin’…” he spoke slowly, dreading the answer. “I should be alright if you die?”

“Dying just means you don’t wake up anymore. It’s nothing to be afraid of.”

His fist slammed into the side of the bed, far from Chidori’s leg. “But I don’t like it! Just ‘cuz you’re not afraid doesn’t mean no one else is… Did you ever think how I might feel?! I don’t want you to die, Chidori!”

He never found a good reason to fight, a reason to care about the Dark Hour and what it did to people. Everyone in SEES knew what they were doing, what they wanted to protect. They had a reason to get out of bed every morning. Everyone had a purpose to pursue, leaving him behind to think of a way to catch up. Moving from home to escape a drunken father only got him to the dorm. That did not sustain him for long. The dark thoughts soured his temper once again. He should have left home and found a new life much sooner.

*But you never gave up, Junpei.* A gentle voice in his head assured him kindly. She would find a bright side. Instead, he remembered the past few meetings where very little was discussed since the initial one. Shinjiro sitting with his head low, ready for an execution. Junpei never understood why would anyone want to die, not even his incompetent father.

“You’re so weird, Junpei.”

Chidori’s soft giggle woke him up. It was the first time he saw her genuinely smile. It was small, sweet, but dismissive and confident.

Unsure if he did reach her, he calmed down and upright in the chair. Junpei felt his face warm slightly. “Y-Yeah, well… Look who’s talkin’…”

As quickly her smile emerged, a pensive look replaced it. “Hmm…”

“What’s up?”

A flicker lit her brown eyes. She reached for the vase of dead flowers and placed it on her lap. Head lowered, her long red hair obscured her face and the vase like a curtain.

“Oh, your flowers are all dried up… Why don’t I go buy you some new ones? What’s your favorite – ?”

A faint white light flickered through the strands of her hair. It filled the room, brightening gently for a moment. A mysterious feeling of hope emitted from her and blanketed over Junpei. He couldn’t describe it without doing it justice. When the moment ended, the lit lamp was alone, struggling to compete with its short-lived rival. Chidori leaned back, revealing the vase. She restored the flowers
to a flourishing, picture-perfect state.

His jaw dropped. “Th-Those… are cut flowers, right?”

Nodding, she lifted the vase and brought it close enough for him to touch them. Smooth and tender, they really were alive.

“Wow…” he gasped. Looking up to meet her eyes, she might as well been the Second Coming. “How’d you do that?!”

“I made them healthy again.”

The impossible happened. Junpei’s eyes jumped between her and the flowers in silence for several seconds. “And the cuts…?”

She rolled up a sleeve of the hospital gown. The exposed skin had a few bandages from her fresh cuts. Once she lifted them away, her pale skin was pristine with not a single scar.

“You have healing powers?” She nodded again. “Dang! To do all this, it’s a miracle or something…”

“It’s nothing special.” Chidori dismissed the compliment. She then placed the vase back on the bedside table. “You have unusual powers too, don’t you?”

Thus the rollercoaster of thoughts he tried to avoid returned. He had a whole new level of respect for people like Shinjiro who had much more control of how they did or did not display emotion.

With a half-hearted chuckle, he stood up and paced the room. “Yeah, I guess… That’s all I’ve got going for me.”

“How so? You have one like Medea, do you not?”

Her expressing any kind of interest in him helped him loosen up a bit. If she listened to boring ramblings from a loser of a high school boy before, maybe she would be as generous this time.

Junpei went to the window and peeked through the blinds. “Yeah, but without Hermes… I’d be a nobody. I just talk a big game, pretendin’ I’m some kinda hero. But really, I don’t know what the hell I’m fightin’ for or why I’m here. Dying’s not gonna solve the problem ’cuz it’ll prove that I wasted whatever potential my life has.” He laughed self-depreciatingly to himself again. “You know, when I was a kid, I had this crazy dream.”

“What kind of dream?”

Had he turned around, Junpei would see that Chidori never once took her eyes from him. She absorbed every word, not that she had much choice.

“I wanted to grow up to be a pro baseball player. I’d be good enough to play against the Americans, y’know? It’s all I used to watch on TV with my dad back then. Even now I still have an old bat he gave me for my birthday. I swung that thing to death till my arms were ready to fall off. Pretty stupid, huh? I guess that’s part of bein’ a kid.”

Turning around, he watched Chidori stare at her hands. Her fingers rubbed against where her cuts once were. “I don’t remember much from my childhood. All I remember is being surrounded by white… and lots of metal. The only people I knew had no faces. I hate hospitals.”
Her situation, trapped in a sterile, plain, isolating, and cold hospital room, matched the description of her past.

“Yeah, I’m sure being stuck here’s not helpin’ ya much.”

He couldn’t imagine how she managed to stand it every day with strangers interrogating. Maybe her cutting herself wasn’t too out there. Still, he was glad she remained calm during his visit.

“I don’t mind it, since you come to visit me so often.” She looked up at her guest with warm serenity.

“Chidori…”

The unexpected sociability she displayed was monumental. Even if his whole day, his whole week sucked since the full moon operation, Chidori cheered him up. Then something inside him stirred. He felt he could take on the world. He may still have not found his purpose, but he had a promise to keep. That helped end his week on a lighter note.

“I understand. I’ll keep visitin’ when I can.”

.~.

September 15, 2009

Taken aback, Ken checked his mental calendar: October 4th was nineteen days away.

Kurebayashi stood in the corner of the room with one hand fidgeting his pager. Even though the whole procedure was approved, he expected some kind of inconsequential endorsement from the boy before contacting the nurses to begin the operation. Ken would have respected the man for stalling a surgery to inform the boy it was happening had he not been wishing for Nemesis to burst out through her host’s eye socket and finally embrace becoming one of the Nine Children. If that’s what “conversion” meant.

Staring at his feet, Ken mumbled, “What does this have to do with me? I can’t stop this even if I wanted to.”

“Don’t play dumb,” spat Shinjiro. He leaned against the patient’s bed in a hospital gown. “You can tell Kurebayashi it’s ok to ‘accidentally’ screw up and have me dead. ‘Sides my chances of comin’ out are jack and shit.”

“Full recovery is slim,” corrected Kurebayashi, shaking his head. “Your liver and lungs have recovered quite well after months of rehabilitation. However, your heart is so weak you might not survive the transplant. Even if you do make it, the new organ may be rejected.”

Only proving his point, the patient threw his hand in the air. “Again. Jack and shit.”

Doctor-patient confidentiality did not seem to matter to either of them, but Ken felt he had no right to overhear Shinjiro’s medical history. Still, he was called in for a reason he did not understand, so having that concise overview did help provide some context.

When he dropped his attitude, Shinjiro eyed the boy with grave sternness. “Don’t play dumb, Ken. After what I did, you should be happy I might not survive.”

He was vague on purpose. SEES didn’t know if Kurebayashi figured out about Theo leaking and distributing information and how much was slipped. Still, the doctor’s eyes narrowed and focused on Ken. They both wanted the boy to do what was expected, but this defied his plan. Shinjiro, who
refused to openly admit his feelings, admitted his crime with blatant remorse. He took drugs that are slowly killing him. He supposedly stopped when the others confronted him, but his heart was still failing. Resolve weakening day by day, what was Ken’s reason to exist if the man who killed his mother was willingly walking into his own grave?

Ken clenched his fists. The bottled pressure finally burst. “Everything went wrong since mom died. No one ever believed what I saw. No one cared or tried to understand. All the adults saw me as a poor kid with no parents. I hated living like no one saw me or wanted to help me! It’s all your fault! I’ll make you remember what you did to her! You’ll pay for taking mom away from me! Airi-san might not blame you, the others might like you, but I see nothing but a murderer! I’ll never forgive you! I hate you!! I hope your death is so painful that every nightmare destroys every happy memory you ever had!! I HOPE YOU DIE WISHING YOU WERE NEVER BORN!!”

Any normal person would not let a child spew such language from his mouth and get away with it. Unlike such individuals, Kurebayashi remained silent and kept his composure. If no sharp instruments were thrown around, it was not his place to get involved any further.

The rant served its job… partially. Ken felt better for letting it out, but Nemesis remained dormant in his heart. She was the foundation for his desire for revenge, and it was still weakening. Shinjiro, however, was fairly convinced Ken stood by his words.

“Then… give me what I deserve.”

No, thought Ken as his angry façade was breaking, it can’t be that simple. Ken searched for the most logical excuse to get out of this baffling situation. “Why me? Shouldn’t Mitsuru-san or Akihiko-san be here?”

Shinjiro frowned. “You think they’d let it come to this?”

“No, but…”

“Man up, kid. Either you kill me on the fourth or let the docs do it now.”

Standing paralyzed, Ken didn’t respond. The moment of his life was now, and he couldn’t bring himself to feel satisfied or excited. He was scared of taking any form of responsibility if everything he heard over the past several days was true, but he might not have another chance to make Shinjiro’s death absolute as his vengeance continues to progressively wither.

Shinjiro slammed his hand on the end table. Kurebayashi and Ken twitched at the violent crash of bone and flesh against metal. “She ain’t here, Ken. Don’t let her magic happy dream girl bullshit distract you.”

It always came back to Airi. Ken regretted ever mentioning her. Everyone knew she was out there somewhere. Once she returned and heard Shinjiro died on the table…

“I-I can’t… Not like this…” Ken’s body shuddered. He was being backed into a corner. “Mitsuru-san told us to wait. And Airi-san…”

Another loud noise startled him. Shinjiro leapt onto the bed, prepped and ready to go. He realized he was talking to a brick wall and gave up.

“If he changes his mind, make sure I get that second injection,” said Shinjiro.

Kurebayashi’s face fell, a sight neither Ken nor Shinjiro expected to see. “Are you sure about this? You’ve made him suffer enough to make an adult need therapy.”
The boy could not tell from his angle, but Shinjiro must have said yes. Sighing, Kurebayashi pressed his pager and within minutes, various doctors and nurses flooded the room. From their muffled conversations, they prepped the teen ready for surgery and warned him about complications and side effects. Everything became a blur to Ken. Everything happened so quickly, and he lost control of everything around him.

Right as someone asked if he was ready to be put under, Shinjiro spoke up. “Ken?”

The boy, hesitant, finally approached the bed. Everyone gave him some room to see his “friend” off. Standing at the foot of the bed, Ken saw so many IVs and needles injected in various parts of Shinjiro’s body. After everything that happened and how much machinery was around to keep him alive, if the best scenario didn’t happen, he wouldn’t survive. In spite of it, Shinjiro remained detached and unfeeling, disturbing Ken even more.

“Don’t regret your choice. If you do, it’ll eat at you ’til there’s nothin’ left. Don’t end up like me. You’ve got a full life ahead of ya, so don’t waste it. No matter how much it hurts, just keep living.”

Then Shinjiro laid back, stared at the ceiling, and let out an exhausted, bitter smile.

With a syringe him hand, Kurebayashi said, “As I inject this, count down from ten.”

Shinjiro succeeded in destroying the boy’s resolve. Ken didn’t want to watch this anymore. But if he were somehow still able to kill him, he had to know what it was like for someone to lose consciousness. This was the closest experience to how one might never wake up again. Even if Ken had the power to change Shinjiro’s fate rather than give a meaningless approval of a risky operation, he knew he was incapable of taking Shinjiro’s life.

“Ten…”

“SHUT UP!! I’ve found another way! Things aren’t like they were before! Things are different now!”

Skin clammy, knees shaky, and voice weak, Ken started to panic. Shinjiro might never wake up ever again, either from surgical complications or whatever mercy-killing drug Kurebayashi had on standby. The eleven year old who hated him was the last person he’d see.

“Nine…”

“Akihiko, Fujihara, and I intervened when he overdosed.”

“It doesn’t change that Shinjiro-sempai’s suicidal!”

“Eight…”

So absorbed in their work, no one could see Ken’s crisis. His paralysis and pale skin were clear, screaming signs of distress. No one listened. No one noticed. No one cared.
Her scream, as real and agonizing as it was that night, forced Ken to no longer be silent and wait for something to change. “YOU STUPID COWARD!! AIRI-SAN LOVES YOU!!!”

Shinjiro gasped, forgetting how to count.

Even if he reconsidered his actions, it was too late. He drowsily surrendered to the anesthesia.

Ken threw himself on the bed, as if it would somehow bring Shinjiro back to consciousness and stop the surgery from happening. “You have to live, damn it! Airi-san will come back! She needs you alive, Shinjiro-san!”

“Be careful!” One nurse warned, pushing the boy off.

Kurebayashi shook his head. “Have him watch the surgery if he wants. Just get him out of the way.”

One of the nurses grabbed the screaming kid. Dragging him out of the room was easier said than done. Ken tried digging his heels into the slick tiled floor and flailed his arms. Still he held no match to the adult twice his size.

“Don’t give up, Shinjiro-san! Don’t be stupid! Please!!”

His plea was ignored. Once out in the hallway, the nurse kept his firm hold on the boy. Seconds later, the others pushed the bed with an unconscious Shinjiro and the supportive machinery out of the room. Kurebayashi stood by the head of the bed, guiding it to the surgery wing. They quickly moved farther and farther away until they became a blur.

Ken stepped on the nurse’s toe and elbowed his gut. The simple tricks were enough for he to slip out and make his escape. He sprinted down the hall after them with all his strength. He went past anyone who got in his way, even an elderly man in a wheelchair. Going so fast, the turns were fairly sharp and nearly threw him off balance. But with the hallways being much longer, Tartarus prepped him well for high-speed exploration.

He finally caught up to Kurebayashi, staring at the white double doors to the surgery ward where no guest could reach Shinjiro.

Out of breath, Ken grabbed the doctor’s coat for support. “Kurebayashi-san, please…!”

“I heard you,” he replied stiffly, not acknowledging the silly grip on his clothing.

“B-But you're…” He had some kind of master scheme. He had to. No way would one of the Nine let Shinjiro live when he was at his most vulnerable.

Sensing this distrust, Kurebayashi took out a syringe from his pocket and ejected its contents onto the floor. “If I saw no benefit to him alive, Shinjiro would have been dead a long time ago, even with your desire for revenge. As great a headache as he is, the boy means a great deal to Ai.”

Ken’s heart sank deep into his gut. “How much do you know…?”

“Arisato leaked a wealth of crucial information about us. I know nothing of your interaction with Hemera, but now I understand why Ai was so reckless in saving Shinjiro from his overdose.”

Though quiet the whole time, Nemesis assured the boy that her brother was telling the truth. Her
voice was distorted, twisted; something about her changed. Despite that oddity, Ken did not worry about her being in danger due to her compliance.

“He nearly died last month,” Kurebayashi admitted.

Ken lost his balance and backed away. The doctor looked into Ken’s eyes, and the boy saw a sadness he could not believe a crazy person determined to destroy the world would be capable of showing.

“He never needed those suppressants, even with his fear of his powers. With enough confidence, with his friends, and with some therapy, Shinjiro would have overcome the trauma of killing your mother. Constantly taking more than the recommended dose of such a needless, toxic drug weakened his body, but he pushed himself despite the fatigue and damage to his organs. After your long sprees in the Tower, he sometimes developed complications and would skip a class or two to see me. I would treat him as best I could, then send him back to school with a note before you kids believed something was wrong. One morning he came in looking relatively healthy. He wanted to talk for a while, to pick up where that Sunday’s discussion left off. His outlook on his mortality was more sullen than usual, but his entire body recovered remarkably well. That was until he started coughing so violently that he collapsed. He had a heart attack.”

The world stopped. Ken was not too familiar with medical terms, but the sound of it painted a grave enough picture.

Acknowledging his shock, Kurebayashi nodded and continued, “We barely saved him from reaching sudden cardiac death. When he came to, I reexamined his heart. It was bad enough that he had early signs of heart failure, but I underestimated how thoroughly the suppressants destroyed his heart. What a fantastic way to celebrate anyone’s birthday.

"Without this surgery, he’d be lucky to live to Christmas. Hearts are difficult to find. There was one I could have given him, but rather than take my offer, he stopped visiting the clinic. I fought to keep his name near the top of the waiting list and put my license on the line to ensure he would have a heart should he change his mind.”

The people were so much more complicated than Ken ever believed. After learning about the Nine, he re-envisioned Kurebayashi as a complete monster hiding behind his polite mannerisms and pretending to be a doting uncle, an earnest doctor, and an adventurous spirit. All of these contradictions were too much to handle at once. Ken's knees turned to jelly, and he collapsed.

Kurebayashi knelt down and grabbed the boy’s shoulders to help him up. He pulled them out from the middle of the hallway and supported Ken until he regained control of his legs. This man’s compassion felt so real that Ken didn't know what to believe about his character anymore.

“Forgive me, Ken-kun. Please return home before your friends worry about you. Know that as his doctor, not Aether, I will do everything in my power to save Shinjiro. For you, your friends, and for my lovely jasmine. I promise.”

With some strength recovered, Ken shrugged Kurebayashi’s hands off and returned a glare to the least trustworthy man in the world. The doctor smiled, knowing he wouldn't trust himself either.

Chapter End Notes
Uh oh. The plot is moving forward, but not how Ken and his friends would want it to be. This ain't good. This isn't good at all. Should Kurebayashi be trusted this time?

Anywho, this chapter shares the same title as "Hurricane" by 30 Seconds to Mars. It can drain me if I listen to the song at the wrong time, but it fits this chapter rather well...
HURRY, KEN!!! >.<
I'm gonna be pretty busy during the month of August, so I may not upload chapters as timely as I want to be. At least this is a semi-long chapter that will help with the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 15, 2009, continued

“‘Sup, Ken?”

He returned to the dorm extremely late. Everyone ate dinner without him, but they stayed up and waited in the lounge until he came back home. With their welcoming and inquisitive eyes on him, he couldn’t slip up the stairs and hide in his bedroom. Ken didn't want to be interrogated, but it was inevitable with his unusual lateness and inability to look at his friends.

“Ken-kun?” Fuuka rose to her feet. “What’s the matter?”

Trying to create an excuse and ignore the fear freezing his bones, he shook his head and yawned. “O-Oh, it’s nothing. I ate at Wakatsu and lost track of time.”

“That is a lie,” Aigis said. “It is eleven thirty-seven at night. Unless you are a European or an American university student, ten-year-old boys do not eat dinner this late. Even more so be out in public without being escorted home by an adult or the police.”

Closing a theoretical book on the history of disease, geography, and warfare her mother bought while in England, Mitsuru took her turn to express her disappointment in the boy. “Is this true, Amada?”

“Come to think of it…” Placing his gaming handheld on the coffee table, Junpei added, “I saw you at the hospital when I visited Chidori. You checkin’ on her too?”

Ken blushed and stared at his feet. “O-Of course not!”

Rather than sound like a scolding parent, Yukari carefully asked, “Then what were you doing there?”

The door broke open behind him. In entered Akihiko and Koromaru, sweaty and out of breath. The dog whined and went to the coffee table, snatching magazine and placing it on Mitsuru’s lap. Ears arched back and eyes droopy, he whimpered in distress. One look at the cover said enough: it was the latest issue of the monthly guide to the Family Cooking Show.

She gazed at her dear friend, hoping he had something to report beyond Koromaru's grim outlook. “Any luck, Akihiko?”

“We searched everywhere!” He almost threw his fist into a nearby wall as he tore off his gloves. “He’s in none of his regular places. Hagakure, the mall, or the outskirts!”

“Are you certain?” The android doubted the possibility how a best friend and a brilliant scent
“I searched for hours!” Akihiko said through gritted teeth. He kicked his shoes off, flying across the foyer, and slouched in the empty spot beside Mitsuru. “Koromaru couldn’t even pick up a reliable trail. That bastard must have worn something different to muddle the scent!”

Junpei scoffed. “Is that even possible?”

His elbows rested on his knees and buried his face in his hands. “Damn it, Shinji! Where the hell are you?!” Unable to find any words to comfort him, Mitsuru placed her hand on Akihiko’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” said Fuuka, fighting off her weariness after a long day at school and cooking her first successful meal for everyone. “It’s my responsibility to keep track of everyone. I failed twice… first with Junpei-kun, now with Shinjiro-sempai. Is Lucia too weak…?”

“Don’t blame yourself, Yamagishi.” Mitsuru said. “Unlike Iori and Akihiko occasionally being too impulsive for their own good, Shinjiro was always more unpredictable when he acts.” She returned a wry smile when Akihiko shot a pathetic glare.

Killing their conversation, Koromaru barked loudly and ran over to Ken. While the group spoke of their missing comrade, the boy could hardly hold back the urge to cry as he hiccupped and sniveled into his sleeve. Once everyone realized what was happening, they got up and circled around him and a clingy Koromaru.

“Ken-kun?” Yukari knelt down to his level and hesitantly touched his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t touch me!” He pulled back, revealing his raw and reddened face. “I don’t want your pity! Don’t treat me like a kid!”

Having his comfort denied, Koromaru hung his head low and whimpered.

“We’re not, dude,” Junpei said. “We wanna help you out. Tell us what’s wrong and we’ll listen.”

“Really?! No one listened to me before! How’s anything different now?!”

“We are your friends,” Aigis answered with some soft nuance in her tone. “The past two weeks have been difficult for all of us. Rather than be lacking unity, we must help each other. This is not out of obligation, but out of loyalty.”

Yukari stood back up and smiled. “I wouldn’t word it like Aigis… but she’s right. We can’t let any of us go at this alone. The weight of everything we know is too much to handle, but we need each other to make it less difficult.” Akihiko, Fuuka, and Mitsuru nodded.

Two years ago, he hated anyone who once claimed that they wanted to help him. All of those people were wrong. The second he explained how he became an orphan, those same people called him crazy for seeing imaginary monsters. Others assured he would get over his problems or grow out of plotting a "pointless" revenge. Ken never told the rest of his family the truth, expecting the same dismissive attitude and stance the rest of the world shared.

Now, surrounded by people who also experience the Dark Hour and fight Shadows, he could more easily believe their promise. Them knowing about his past and acknowledging his account was real made his “you don’t understand me” excuses invalid.

The last words Shinjiro told him rang in his head all night, and it hurt even more this time. Ken did not understand how could anyone hide behind a deceptive mask face for so long without breaking
character. Whatever was locked inside for a long enough time would eat the person until nothing of the old self remained. As great as it would be to feel nothing, the years of discipline in mastering the denial of feelings was not worth it. He didn't want to become Shinjiro, and part of him hated himself for listening to the guidance of his mother's murderer.

Finally, after two years of loneliness, Ken fell to the ground and cried in front of people who would never judge him like the rest of the world did. It was violent and sudden, but everyone huddled close and supported him however they could as he them told the truth.

Happy as they were for Ken to open up and let them into his heart, his story horrified every single one of them.

“H-Heart transplant?!” Yukari gasped as she gave Ken a tissue.

“Kurebayashi?!” repeated Akihiko, cracking his knuckles. “Is Shinji insane?!”

Ken sniffled. “I couldn’t stop them! And I can’t kill Shinjiro-san, not with Airi-san gone! She’ll hate me! She’ll disappear again, and she’ll never come back!”

Too overcome by fear for Mitsuru to control it, the temperature of the room plummeted to fifty degrees Fahrenheit. “Everyone, gather your equipment at once!”

Shaking his fur and showing off his collar, Koromaru snarled. “I am ready,” Aigis translated.

The whole dorm was in a panic. No way was one of the Nine going to stand by with the temptation to drive a shot of morphine into Shinjiro. It didn’t matter if Ken and Nemesis said Kurebayashi promised to do no harm. They did not want to gamble with Shinjiro's life. Fully armed, in their school uniforms, and ready to go within five minutes, they darted to the train station. Going on foot was the best option, as the Dark Hour would come very soon. Once they got off the train at Port Island Station, those who basked in the night life backed away from the crazy kids.

Then Fuuka gasped and tripped over her own feet. She felt a wave of energy overwhelming the essence she felt from others.

“What’s wrong?” Junpei slowed down to help her out. Koromaru growled. Whatever it was, he didn’t like it either.

“We don’t have time for this!” Akihiko shouted angrily.

“Akihiko! Don’t let your feelings cripple your judgment!”

Aigis agreed with Mitsuru. “By my projections, we will make it there five minutes after the Hour comes upon us.”

“Be careful!” squeaked a recovered Fuuka. “I sense something similar to Aizawa!”

“No shit! That’s the son of a bitch who’s got Shinji under a knife!”

“But it’s not Kurebayashi-san!” cried Fuuka.

The air shattered and the green mist settled in once they reached the plaza. A loud crackle sounded from the heavens, and a large rod of blinding light blocked their path. Recognizing it instantly, Akihiko screeched to a halt and pulled back Aigis and Yukari by the arm. Had they passed him, Ziodyne would have fried them into dust.
The electric current obliterated the bench and flowerbed where Chidori once sat. A surge went through Junpei, desperate for payback. “Akihiko-sempai! It’s daddy longlegs!”

Out from the back alley leading to the seedy underground bar emerged the familiar three-eyed spider. It looked no different from before, no less rabid. Eyes glowing, it stared down the kids and let out a low growl. The gaze most affected Akihiko, Junpei, and Koromaru. Once it recognized them, the front-most legs tapped the ground in anticipation.

Junpei held up his hand to push Yukari back. “Best if you and Ai-chan get outta the way…”

“No kidding!” she replied without a hint of humor. It wasn’t worth being completely snarky with Stupei when he was 100% correct.

When the clockwork spider let out another growl, Mitsuru’s skin crawled. “Yamagishi, what’s it’s status?”

Standing behind the electric-weak teammates, the noncombatant summoned Lucia. The impenetrable crystal orb she resided in greatly amplified Fuuka’s scanning abilities. Within seconds she had a report. “It’s Epiphron, Takahashi-san’s Persona!”

“How is it alive?!” Ken gaped as the mechanical beast slowly inched closer to them with its static aura gathering energy. "Is it a Persona or a Shadow?!"

“Just what has my grandfather allowed to exist?!” cried Mitsuru.

The dog stood in a ready position, but his fur stuck up on end. His head tilted to the side. “Koro-chan says, his behavior is slightly less rabid than before,” Aigis translated while loading the barrels in her metallic fingers. "Perhaps it can cause itself to become enraged."

“Doesn’t matter. I’m gonna wreck him good this time!” While everyone stood hesitantly to find a good position, Akihiko had his bladed Wicked Cestus gloves ready. He rocked back and forth, glaring at the thing that put him out of commission for the second time and now stood between him and Shinjiro.

“Akihiko,” Mitsuru spoke authoritatively. “I understand you're angry…”

“Then stop talking!” He growled, charging right towards the beast. “If you guys won’t fight, then I will!”

“Akihiko!”

“Dude!” Junpei yelled. “Did ya forget it punched a freakin' hole in your arm?!”

If spiders could laugh, Epiphron did. It ceased its tapping and raised one of its legs, ready for the teen to run into the same trap twice.

With his recessive side Akihiko jabbed the leg away. Another came up to defend but it was brushed off just as easily. He broke through the line and with his left fist, he decked the beast in one of the eyes. Sounding like a firework, it exploded upon impact. Black muck bled out in violent spurts. When Akihiko backed up, he couldn’t escape some of the mess. His red sweater vest was soaked. The rest of the muck pooled across the station and into the cracks in the sidewalk.

Despite the critical hit, Epiphron didn’t lose it's balance. It didn’t even scream. It felt nothing. With mechanical, grating laughs, it raised its front four bladed feet in the air. A crackle of energy surged through the green mist. Rather than run away, Akihiko went back in to throw a few more strikes. He
summoned Polydeuces, who pitched in with an iron-armed punch from behind the enemy. Whatever work it did seemed negligible. At least it slowed down the rate of charging the next Ziodyne.

Furious, Mitsuru screamed over the increasingly loud growling build-up of energy. “Iori, Aegis, and Amada, protect Yamagishi! Takeba and Koromaru, help me back Akihiko!”

“Are you nuts?!” the archer protested.

Fuuka chimed in before a pointless argument took place. Not much time was left. “Epiphron reflects fire, but is weak to darkness! You and Koro-chan are the best options.”

“And I need another medic to help us out,” added the senior. “You heal us while Koromaru tries to knock out the enemy and Akihiko and I attack.”

“But…”

Within seconds, she transformed into the woman her oldest friends feared her to be. The temperature dropped to near-freezing. She stared down everyone and demanded. “Do not question my commands. Without Fujihara as our wild card we have no better alternatives than to risk having our weaknesses exploited!”

The stress clearly affected her to the point of breaking. There was no middleman, no buffer between their personalities and the monsters many times stronger than them. A confident and sensitive leader like Airi wasn’t there to help them. Fully aware of this, the six teammates nodded and shivered. Everyone went into position as specified. Yukari stayed as far back from the offensive team as possible. If she were ever hit, Ken would take care of her.

This marked the first time Isis emerged. Her form was stranger than Io’s, but no less impressive. Armored in black, blue, and red, she had the torso of a woman, a head of a bull, and white wings for arms. The team knew of the new change within Yukari, but to see it in person left them inspired. After a few seconds of gawking, Mitsuru and Koromaru moved closer to the brawl. Penthesilea and Cerberus left their hosts with Bufula and Mudo already prepared to be cast on command.

“Back down, Akihiko!”

The colder air slowed his progress a bit. Sensing a stream of ice from behind, he knew he’d die if he did not obey. Lunging to the side, Akihiko and Polydeuces barely escaped the impact of Penthesilea’s ice. The spider flinched slightly. Hardly any damage, but a reaction meant it took something. The white armored figure stood by to support Akihiko by the arm. Once back on his feet, they retreated back to the group to avoid the ice. Even at the safe distance, Polydeuces tensed as the ice mixed with the humid weather.

Epiphron continued to build up energy for its next electric attack. It ignored all attempts from Penthesilea’s ice and Isis’ occasional wind. Both would team up to launch their very impressive Garula-Bufula combo. By then, the girls have mastered their abilities to localize and control the attack to deal the most damage on a target. Yet even the beautifully perfect blizzard did not slow or phase Epiphron. Akihiko wondered what it has done over the past few months to be this powerful, and if it was already powerful before its host died.

Unfortunately Cerberus had even less luck than Penthesilea. While the ice and wind were bug bites, Mudo did absolutely nothing. The hex kept failing to knock the monster out. Koromaru reached his limits and howled until his throat rattled and drowned all sound. His Persona burst free from his soul and summoned the giant purple hexing circle around the monster once more. Dark light emitted
through the mist, thickening quickly, then everything fell silent. The spell vanished and the field
grew silent. No sound of the built-up energy. No clicking of the blades against the stone ground. Not
even a sigh from any of the combatants or Epiphron falling to the ground.

Unsure of what was happening, Ken was the first brave soul to speak up. “Is it… dead?”

“No,” Mitsuru replied darkly. “But I think the ice has affected the moisture in the air. The mist has
worsened.”

Ignoring the extra pressure thanks to the cold, Akihiko remained alert. If Epiphron were on the
move, he’d be the first to know. The beast had to get past him before getting the others. Either it
would attack him, or he’d hear it move.

Behind him, Koromaru whined for a moment before a thud sounded the air. From the gasps from
Yukari, the poor animal passed out.

“He overexerted himself,” Aigis reported. “Someone please patch him up…”

“Son of a bitch!” Junpei nearly yelled. He swung his double-edged, two-handed sword around
aimlessly, hoping to hit something. “C’mon out already, you spidey bastard!”

“Don’t jinx us, Stupei!” snipped Yukari. “I don’t wanna—“

Polydeuces screamed loudly through the night air. A spark struck the Persona, creating a pain that
overwhelmed its body. His host felt the brunt of it too, dropping his Evoker to calm the throbbing
headache. It was more than enough for him to know that the spider was still alive and well. Having
no way to track it or see what happened around him, he could only rely on hearing the world around
him. Still, he sluggishly searched to find his friends.

The attack and the ice slowed him down considerably as he combed through the fog. When he found
them, it was too late.

Yukari screamed, clutching her head, and collapsed to the ground. Her body convulsed and twisted
in violent positions. Ken immediately ran to her and summoned Nemesis to heal her. Right before
she could join him, Mitsuru witnessed a large bolt of lightning consume Nemesis. Empathetically
feeling the effects of it, Ken’s body froze in place before falling over on the side, eyes wide with
distress. His Persona’s form turned to dust and sprinkled down like raindrops over him.

One by one, everyone succumbed to the electricity, seemingly having no set origin. Unsure who to
save first and where they were, Akihiko trembled. His mind was still scrambled from the attack, and
he struggled to keep a mental connection with Polydeuces. From what he could hear, friends and
Persona were falling down around him.

Aigis was next; Palladion came apart in pieces and bled gold into the mist. Although her body did
not explode into pieces like before, the android suffered so much trauma, her non-critical systems
shut down to conserve energy and her platform collapsed.

“What’s happening, Fuuka?!” Junpei cried. Staring hopelessly at the bloodless massacre, he feared
he would be the next oblivious prey.

Right as he asked, Lucia the blindfolded woman wailed. She intuitively leaned forward and wrapped
her arms around her glass orb dress. She was a desperate expecting mother, trying in vein to protect
her host from the spell targeting her.

Fuuka’s face twisted from the pain, but she managed to speak. “It's Maziodyne! But I can’t find the
A bolt blew a hole in Lucia’s head. For a moment, her hands abandoned the orb to touch her face. It was then, however, Epiphron popped out of the mist between Mitsuru and Junpei and lunged one of its bladed feet through the protective bubble, shattering it like glass. Breaking into a petrified sweat, Akihiko assumed the worst when he heard Junpei’s bloodcurdling scream and Mitsuru’s terrified cry. Hermes emerged and flew at Epiphron with Torrent Shot, a series of pierce-based stab attacks. It managed to push the enemy aside. In doing so, its leg retracted, where it was caught in Fuuka’s torso beneath her ribs, and yanked the girl out of Lucia, disintegrating into white flakes.

“YOU’LL PAY, YOU BASTARD!!” Pulling the trigger again, Junpei ordered Hermes to lash out and threw himself completely at Epiphron.

The girl who guided them through Tartarus, who helped them defeat Shadows from afar, whose sight saved their lives in many battles, was attacked. No one was able to protect her as she bled and cried out in pain.

Polydeuces vanished with a crackle as Akihiko collapsed to his knees. He could only see a tiny girl’s body, bleeding, burning, and blistering with no hope of relief but through a quick death that was never coming. He saw Shinjiro, lying on a hospital bed, and his body cut open with blood that exploded across the room and painted the walls and equipment as his newly transplanted heart refused to beat.

No one was there to break Akihiko’s daze. Junpei acted blindly with his two-handed sword on pure survival instinct. Regaining some composure, Mitsuru joined in too by sending more waves of ice at Epiphron. Junpei managed to bring his sword down upon the leg that impaled Fuuka. Not enough force was used, as only half of it remained attached. Epiphron limped and slammed a highly confused Fuuka against the ground, instantly knocking her out. Another one of his leg joints struck Junpei in the gut and sent him flying. His body crashed into a soda machine near the movie theater on the other side of the station. He was too far from the fray to see what was happening past the fog. His ears rung and his vision blurred. Unable to gather the strength, his head fell against his arm and he blacked out.

Completely alone, the sweat against Mitsuru's skin solidified into ice. She and anyone around should have been in trouble from such subfreezing temperatures. But Mitsuru couldn’t think of that when she stood so close to the edge of a cliff with no one to help. She allowed Penthesilea to launch more and more devastating ice. By bringing her hands together, she focused intently enough to create a lance the length of a bus. The tip shined and met at an atom-splitting point. Many other spikes, smooth and jagged, propped out on all sides like rose thorns. The Persona threw the javelin across the field. Epiphron saw it coming and dodged it quickly. The ice shattered upon the miss, but some pieces scratched its eyes. Penthesilea created more lances and continued her vengeful tantrum. Sharper, faster, stronger, tougher: anything to make the bastard die.

Epiphron’s feet carved scratches and dents into the stone tiles as it advanced to her. Only one well-timed spiked sheet of ice hit the weakened leg with enough force for it to fall off completely. Black goo oozed from its wound. It hurt greatly, but still not enough to slow the tenacious beast. As it charged towards her once more, Mitsuru turned to where she sensed Akihiko. When he didn’t respond after she called for him, she retreated to find where he was. Penthesilea stayed on guard between her and the spider to keep it distance. Several feet away and only a blurry figure in the mist, Mitsuru finally knew why he was unresponsive.

Typically he would run to anyone’s rescue to save them. Fuuka’s fate was reason enough for him to rage like Junpei did. Only this time, he didn’t.
In between some thinner clouds, Mitsuru saw his face, so terrified and hopeless. Like Shinjiro two years ago.

Whenever there was trouble, Akihiko always ready to go, even if someone had to slap him into shape. But she overestimated his resolve. He had his own demons he never overcame.

Now she was alone. If Mitsuru Kirijo couldn’t stand her own ground, she will die. As her will faltered, Penthesilea wailed in despair. Epiphron easily stabbed her through the torso, making the Persona vanish into the air, and made its way towards her. Mitsuru held her chest, collapsed, and wheezed. She ordered her body to get up and fight, but her brain and body were not in sync.

The monster towered over her. Its bloodstained blades were ready to play with her. Its eyes glowed through the shadow its massive body emitted. Their piercing stare resembled those of the scientist it once had for a host.

“Did you see that?! Persona-users do exist! That was wonderful, Lady Mitsuru! A beautiful expression of your natural potential! At last, our future of developing Persona from artificial potential seems bright!”

It was ironic that Takahashi was one of several scientists to witness her awaken her Persona. His words haunted her for years just as much as the experiments he conducted. Now, this close to death, she had no way to break the curse her family created.

“Why are you so happy about this?! Mitsuru will spend her entire life bound to my father’s cursed legacy without any hope of having a life to forge with her own hands! What is bright about a future of atoning for atrocities she never committed?!”

Everyone involved with the Kirijo Group or SEES suffered and could die because of her. The Nine resent her father who did what he could to subvert their plans. The Shadows would still be dangerous even with proper training. If her father were a target, she’d want to protect him no matter what. He was defenseless, and he was the reason she came this far.

But she was at the end of her rope. Her efforts were worthless. Her friends were defenseless and incapacitated.

With a metallic screech, two blades prodded holes in the middle of her hands. Pinning her to the ground, Mitsuru screamed at the mutilation of her own body and the volts of pain shooting up her arms.

Another pair of blades rushed straight towards her neck.

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Blocks, chalk, dolls, and plastic chairs and tables gave the room much color and light. The windows had vibrant green curtains. Trees, flowers, and rainbows painted the walls throughout the space, creating a mural celebrating the joys of childhood. Everything looked just like it did long before the fire. Unless he went back in time, Akihiko knew this was a dream. The world was much smaller than
when he was a child, where everything seemed vast and endless.

“Aki!”

A familiar voice brought joy and pain to his heart. The little girl ran to the chair he sat in and gave a toothy grin. She looked just like him, but her white blonde hair fell down to her shoulders.

“I missed you, brother!” she pulled at his pant leg. “Can we play hide and seek?”

If it was a dream, maybe he could drop his guard for a second. He immediately lifted the girl up and held her tightly. Since when was she so tiny? She felt so real and so soft in his arms. He broke into uncontrollable sobs as he stroked Miki’s hair.

“Don’t be sad, brother,” Miki said, hugging his neck. “Shin-chan’ll laugh at you again. Like when you ran into the tree.”

He chuckled lightly and sniffled. "Yeah... I remember." He and Shinjiro pushed each other too much when they played, often sending the other into a wall or a fence or a tree.

“What’s wrong, Aki? Why’re you crying?”

Akihiko let her go and looked into her light grey eyes. Innocence and confusion stared back plainly. It upset him that she didn’t know, but he was also grateful of her ignorance.

As he was about to explain that this was just a dream, fire broke into the room through a window. Startled and standing on his feet, he held his sister close to him. She stared at the growing flames around them and buried her face into his shoulder. Akihiko examined the situation carefully. A dream is a dream, but one ending with his sister alive would boost his spirits. He started to move when a set of shackles bound him in place. Flustered, Akihiko eyed the chains and followed them from his ankles, across the floor, and through the wall. So much for happy endings.

“Aki!” the girl whined. “Let’s get out of here!”

Trying not to panic, he shook his head. “I can’t. I’m stuck!”

The attempt failed. Miki started screaming and flailing in his arms. “No! You can do anything, Aki! Break them! I know you can!”

“He could if he wanted to.”

Across the room, another familiar person stood in the doorway. Behind him was a cold, sterile room of white and metal. Splotches of blood stained the walls; a piercing ring of a monitor announced a dead heart.

Before him was Shinjiro. A silver pocket watch, heavily dented, hung around his neck on a chain. A hole was torn through the hospital gown, and underneath, blood dripped from the wound. His chest was wide open, with a heart that refused to beat. Yet the zombified recipient stood there, skin purely ashen and eyes sullen and dark.

Miki heard him too, as she turned to face him. While Akihiko lost his ability to think and hold his stomach, his sister smiled and stretched her arms out to him.

“Shinji-chan!”

She fought out of her brother’s grip. He sadly put her down, giving her the chance to flee and run to
her other brother. The pulsing fire stood in her way, but Miki went through it as if it didn’t exist. When she made it to the other side unscathed, she reached for Shinjiro’s hand.

At that moment, his body started to heal. His heart began to beat; the blood slowly slid back into his body, dripping in reverse.

“What’s going on?!” Akihiko yelled. The fire around him inched closer and closer, cooking him.

“You know what’s happening, Akihiko-kun.”

A third figure appeared from behind the door. She knelt to Miki and gently ruffled her silver hair. They smiled happily like two best friends who haven’t seen each other in years.

Then she approached Shinjiro. As if no one else existed to see or judge him, he embraced her tightly. He brought her face closer to his as he kissed her on the cheek. His wound closed back up and his pocket watch returned to its original shape. His complexion grew healthy and normal once more. The hospital gown changed into his maroon peacoat. Akihiko had never seen Shinjiro be so unafraid in showing affection to anyone. Only one person alive now could possibly make him warm up so quickly. She would do anything - even breaking the laws of the universe - for Shinjiro.

The moment he recognized her, Airi turned around and stared back at Akihiko. She stroked Shinjiro’s arms, wrapped around her waist.

“I could tell you the meaning of everything,” she said with a hint of mockery embedded in her words, “but you're smart enough to figure some of it out on your own.”

“What’re you talking about?” Akihiko asked with a growl. None of the people he saw were like the real versions of themselves. He wanted to get up and punch them, but the shackles did not budge.

“Why are you here?”

Shinjiro saw his struggle and laughed. “You’re so thickheaded.”

“Shin-chan!” Miki piped up with a frown. “Insulting him won’t help!”

“So what? He never listens to a damn thing we say. I should beat him up 'til it starts to sink in.”

Airi linked her fingers with his. “You’re just as bad as him, Shinji. Just remind him one more time so he can understand.”

The banter confused Akihiko, but he didn’t have to say anything to get that point across. All three of them were upset with him for some reason. If only he knew why. If only they could articulate their thoughts and stop playing around. The tongues of fire began to dance along the tips of the hairs on his skin. Pain shot through him, and he bit his tongue to suppress his cries.


He kissed the crown of Airi’s head and let go of her. The two girls stood back and vanished into thin air. As he made his way across the room a battle-axe manifested in his right hand. Shinjiro stalked over to Akihiko with a glare that would maul anyone in a second.

Behind him, a dark cloud morphed into the familiar form of Castor. The horse and rider launched over his host and charged at Akihiko.

Along the way, the Persona underwent a change. The armed figure leapt off his horse and his body transmogrified into a soldier with onyx armor. The spear that impaled its torso split in two and
thinned into arrows. Where his eyes would be, a red pulsing glow peaked through the murky windows of a gasmask. The horse dissolved into dust and blanketed the soldier. When it cleared, the armor had silver ornamental spikes, similar to ones on the reigns of the horse. The blond-haired soldier wielded a shield with engravings of an eye.

A wave of intimidation and undeniable strength overwhelmed Akihiko. Once the soldier stood two inches away with its menacing gasmask, his form dissolved into the air. Shinjiro seemingly appeared not a second after as he slammed his forehead into Akihiko’s. He was in so much pain that a truck hit him over.

“Shinji!” Akihiko snapped, clutching his head in case there was blood.

Then Shinjiro punched him in the jaw. He stared down his friend as if he was one of the scum on the streets of Port Island.

“Quit thinkin’ I’m the only one who keeps fuckin’ up! So what if you ain’t strong all the time? So what if Miki died? Power alone don’t mean shit! Get off your whiny ass, accept the fact you can’t save everybody, and move on! It ain’t goddamn rocket science!”

Somehow those words hurt worse than the physical assault. He was right. Akihiko was so blind, so stupid into believing that there was only one road for him to take, one way to fight.

Shinjiro stuffed one hand in his pocket and played with his axe in the other. Typical him, he looked at the fire around them rather than look at Akihiko. “You only fail when you don’t bother to protect the people who are alive now. The fact you tried to do something matters more than doing nothin’. Miki would want you trying your damnedest, not whine and cry like a baby. No one else fights as hard as you. You’re gonna outlive me. You’ll be a better protector than me, Aki. So stop being so singleminded!”

The lecture lit a spark to his temper and got him back on his feet. Akihiko snagged Shinjiro’s collar and forced to look him in the eye. “What about you, Shinji?! You can’t stand seeing anyone get hurt or need help, yet you keep your distance and act indifferent! How the hell are you better than me?! I might get all ‘sappy’ about the past, but you’re a coward who’d rather run from it! You’d rather die than take responsibility! Life scares the shit out of you! Don’t you dare call me a mess when you’re just as bad off!”

Akihiko expected to get punched again. Instead, he felt the flames cool down in the room. He blinked and noticed the fire was slowly dying. Even Shinjiro’s aggressive approach calmed slightly. His eyes glowed under his beanie and his tone evened out.

“So we’re equally guilty, huh?” he said with a dry smile. “I doubt it, idiot.”

There was affection in that last insult Akihiko did not expected. This was the only fight, albeit short and imaginary, that ended amicably. Sort of. He did feel somewhat relieved from yelling at this hallucination.

“That’s… it?” He cleared his throat as he let go of his grip.

Shinjiro shrugged. He placed his axe against his leg and scratched at his cheek. Eyeing the familiar signs of childhood innocence that remained intact, he laughed. “Usually, we’d stop after we’d beat the shit out of each other and one of us passes out. Guess we’ve changed a bit…”

Akihiko laughed dismissively. “Not really…”

With the simple, mutual agreement, the fires continued to die out, quicker and quicker.
“We used to look out for each other. Then after Miki died, I began to not understand you anymore. I was obsessed with power and ignored everything else that could affect it. The stronger I got, the less I forgave myself for being so powerless. But... I can’t blame myself forever. Neither should you. Power alone can’t help save anyone, but giving up is far worse. Caring about someone, being close to them is what matters. I need to know how important they are to me now, and fight for their life...”

Then a misty chill unnatural for Japan flowed over and extinguished the fire. The walls of the orphanage hid beneath the thickening presence of the fog. A faint green hue emerged, shattering the dream.

Akihiko’s mind returned to reality at Port Island Station, and he gained the strength to get back to his feet. Yet for some reason, Shinjiro stayed by his side, holding the shackles that once bound Akihiko to the burning room. It wasn’t log for them to lose its solid form and dissipate.

“You don’t need me anymore,” said the hallucination.

Akihiko squinted, trying to understand what everything he experienced was. “Then you’re just a part of me... reminding me to keep my promises and accept that I can still fail...”

Shinjiro nodded, this time with a genuine smile. Had he done so more often, fixed up his hair more, and not lived like an outcast, he’d have a decent number of admirers rivaling Akihiko. “Take care of the others... Or the real me'll kill ya.”

Then his skin gradually became transparent. “Shinji...?” Akihiko reached for him but only caught the air. This Shinjiro felt so real, even for a figment of his imagination, that the missing assurance that he exists terrified him. The real guy might already be dead. Like when Epiphron was slaughtering his friends, the boy clenched his head and started to hyperventilate. He called out desperately to the mirage. “Shinji, what am I supposed to do if I lose you too?!”

Akihiko heard that sardonic laugh he knew so well. “Don’t go cryin’ on me. I ain’t dead yet.”

Though not entirely assuring, Akihiko wiped his eyes and cooled himself down. He nearly forgot that he ended up in this mess because he had to make sure Kurebayashi wasn’t trying to kill Shinjiro. That gave him another reason to get back in the fight.

And then he heard a scream he wished to never pierce his ears again.

“Mitsuru?!” Akihiko’s body sprung to life, ready to run to her.

“You’re strong enough. Save her.” With a foreboding but encouraging smirk, Shinjiro’s form vanished completely.

Akihiko was fully awake and ran forward to where he heard Mitsuru’s scream. How could he not join her in the fight? Why did he leave everyone behind? Is he too late? How did it all come to this? The questions and “what ifs” flooded his mind, but rather than be distracted and paralyzed by fear, he felt focused exclusively on Mitsuru. He finally saw the figures in the mist and he bolted towards them. Mitsuru’s bloodcurdling scream stabbed his eardrums, leaving scars that would never disappear. The giant spider pinned the sobbing girl to the ground and raised his legs, blades ready to slice the her neck open.

At the last second, it saw the silver-haired boxer and let out a growl. Before it could react, Akihiko put his Evoker to his head and fired. “GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM HER!!”

A fierce light and bolts of lightning surrounded him, obscuring his Persona from view. Epiphron’s eyes bolted shut, blinded by the sudden flashes. His blades retracted, freeing Mitsuru from captivity.
Before she could fall backward, Akihiko grabbed her and put some distance from the enemy. Taking shelter near an undamaged bench, he knelt down and laid her in his arms. Her eyes were heavy, and her trembling, bloody hands throbbed to the beat of a frantic, stubborn heart he admired.

The show above them died down enough for Akihiko to see what happened. Where Polydeuces once stood was a proud figure, ornate in white and donning a crown of olive branches. He had a sword in his right hand, and a globe in his left. Within his torso sat a tiny room, resembling a temple where a contemplative figure dressed in black sat on a throne. The Persona calmly observed Akihiko. His thoughts bled through the boxer’s mind. He promised that now Mitsuru was safe, he was ready for the next move. Without needing to ask, Akihiko grinned triumphantly and called out for his new Persona to attack.

With a battle cry, Caesar lifted his sword, casting second-tier electricity on the spider. If it were able to block, absorb, or reflect electricity, everyone would have been doomed. Thankfully, that was not the case. The attacks were sudden and frequent despite the low-temperature handicap. They were mere bug bites, but add this onslaught with the blindness left Epiphron dizzy and confused.

Wanting him to revive the medics before fully incapacitating the spider, Akihiko stared at his newly evolved Persona. The telepathic message was sent and Caesar quickly rushed to aid Ken and Yukari with two Diaramas. Once done, he returned to face the enemy.

A muted mumble caught Akihiko’s ear. Barely conscious, Mitsuru struggled to speak, lips pale blue. Her eyes struggled to stay open as she tried to focus on the one who saved her. “...hiko?”

He chuckled awkwardly as he pulled her bangs back. Their eyes met and he held back his urge to let his relief and joy pour out. “It’s alright, the tide is turning. I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Akihiko…” Her frail fingers gently tugged at his vest. “Are you okay…?”

“I hesitated for a moment, but I’ll never be weak like that again.”

She shook her head. "You... were never weak..."

Akihiko chuckled and shook his head, hoping she didn't see how warm his face was turning. "Mitsuru, before you pass out...please tell Pentesilea to bring the world back to its natural temperature. I can’t do much with pins in my Achilles’ heel.”

Even when completely fatigued, Mitsuru managed a faint laugh. Within seconds the world warmed up to a typical September night. Off in the background, Caesar let out an approving cry. He was now more effective on the field and continued his assault.

Mitsuru winced and twitched as Akihiko examined her hands, but she smiled in spite of the pain. “You’re so reckless… But, please, help the others… Yamagishi’s hurt…”

“Of course. I'll protect everyone. I promise.”

“Merci, mon ami…”

Relieved and resting her head against Akihiko’s chest, she closed her eyes and dozed off. She looked so much more peaceful, even with a hole in each palm, dripping blood onto her white blouse. Akihiko gently touched her once flawless hands and let out a sigh of regret. He reached for some bandages in his back pocket to cover the wounds.

Off in the background, Ken and Yukari regained consciousness and worked to get Junpei, Koromaru, and Aigis back on their feet. They quickly rushed to Fuuka, whose wound bled seriously
but didn’t incapacitate her completely. Her head suffered graver injuries, thanks in part to the concussion. The sight of Caesar standing nearby confused but inspired them. The Persona continued to watch the struggling Epiphron lose and regain its balance like a drunken chicken. It continued to be cornered and directed away from the recovery group.

As Yukari finished casting one last Mediarama on the group, she spotted Akihiko caring for Mitsuru while simultaneously commanding his Persona. “Polydeuces became Caesar,” she said with a smile. “I’m glad I’m not the only one…”

“How does that happen, Yukari-san?” Ken asked. Nemesis finished healing Fuuka's torso to stop the bleeding as he bandaged her head.

“Akihiko-sempai might have reaffirmed his reason to fight,” Yukari theorized. “When it happened to me, some doubts I had seemed less significant and more tolerable. I dunno how else to explain it.”

Beside her lay Aigis. Most of her systems were back online, though she remained partially paralyzed from the hip down. She turned to Koromaru, who had enough strength to gently nuzzle against the dazed Fuuka.

“He was worried about you…” she translated loosely.

Staring at the deep emerald-filtered sky, Fuuka was too dazed and distressed to cry. “Everyone… I-I’m so sorry…”

Junpei, standing weakly behind the group with Hermes to serve as backup for Caesar, called back to her, “No, Fuuka-chan, we’re at fault. We failed you. We’re supposed to look after you, and we screwed up.”

Koromaru barked in protest. Aigis turned her head and did the honors. “He says that you managed to cut off one of its legs. That is most certainly not a failure, Junpei-san.”

“Maybe not, but…” he grunted, halfheartedly accepting the compliment. The battle wasn’t over yet. “Fuuka, how’s that monster’s strength? Can you tell?”

Strained and tired, Fuuka closed her eyes and ignored the pain in her gut.

Yukari was starting to feel drained too as she wrapped up her friend’s waist. “It’s really bad that both Mitsuru-sempai and Fuuka are down. I wonder how tough the other Nine are compared to this…”

“Don’t get too ahead of yourself,” Akihiko groaned. He carried Mitsuru over to the group and laid her next to Yukari so she could receive some aid. “Let’s just survive this first.”

“Y-Yeah.” She placed her curiosity aside and went back to work.

Eyeing the rest, Akihiko asked the most dreaded question. “Who’s ready for round two?”

“I am!” Junpei blurted immediately while wiping his bloody brow.

“M-Me too,” Ken spoke calmly, despite his shaky hands.

Koromaru expressed his interest as well and growled at the cowering spider near the movie theater side of the station.

The enthusiasm didn’t die completely yet. Akihiko made a very quick debrief of what would happen. “That bastard shouldn’t have much left in him. So I’ll try to weaken his attack and defense. Ken, you
can attack sometimes, but stick to healing us when needed. Junpei, use physical attacks; Koromaru, keep cursing it. Once it’s knocked out, we’ll go for an all-out attack. Any questions?”

Fuuka let out a mild squeak, full of mixed surprise, excitement, and shock. That never sounded good. Everyone turned to her with worry.

“He’s weak… thanks to Polyd – I mean, Caesar…” she stammered. “K-Keep up that tactic…”

“That is no reason to be startled,” said Aigis. Her platform regained enough energy to sit upright. "Is there another enemy nearby?"

She shook her head fiercely despite her tiredness and the sharp throbbing pain in her skull. “I sense Theo-san… h-he’s coming…!”

That was the best news anyone heard all day. The offensive team rose with their head held high, ready to go.

“We can do this, guys,” Akihiko cracked his knuckles. “Backup’s on the way, and I’m ready to end this!”

“You bet, sempai!” Junpei joined in the fun-filled energy bubble.

“Understood!” added Ken.

When Koromaru howled in agreement, they rushed over to the fray. The mechanical spider was pitiful to look at. Another one of its eyes exploded with its last viable eye still blinded. One of its legs got hacked off while the others sizzled to thin, baked sticks thanks to Caeser's magic. Epiphron screamed, creating a giant shockwave from above its eyes. The electric current was so forceful; it zapped and singed the creature’s already hurt eyes.

The group split up and surrounded the beast in an arc. Akihiko went in first, letting his fists seek vengeance and striking the connective gears in its “head” and its eyes. Even with the blitz it took, the last eye stubbornly did not burst. The gears loosened, but didn’t budge completely. Three legs still had pieces hanging by the joints, refusing to let go. Junpei joined in by slashing at the legs, desperate to cut off as many as possible. Ken stayed back and encouraged Koromaru to try his failed tactic again. Saying his thanks, the dog summoned his three-headed guardian of the underworld. A ring of purple light surrounded Epiphron, making the spider flinch. Never reacting that way before, this was a good sign. Then it had enough. Right as it sent the fully charged electric attack, a crackle exploded through the air. It aimed straight at Akihiko and the tower of electricity consumed him. His friends stopped attacking and stared in horror at the thought of their hero and friend frying into dust.

Caesar laughed. The force that crushed Akihiko shot back up into the mist above. In the epicenter was a shallow crater with the unscathed boxer. A large cloud formed in the sky, with lights flashing everywhere.

“Akihiko-san and his Persona aren’t affected by electric attacks!” said Ken. He summoned Nemesis and casted Zionga to intensify the electric stream above.

“A-Amazing, Akihiko-sempai!” cheered Fuuka via telepathy.

Just as suddenly, Epiphron cried briefly before a thud rang a note of victory. Mudo finally worked. Unable to contain her happiness, Yukari leapt up and yelled, “Good boy, Koro-chan!”

Ken hugged the dog tightly. He barked and nuzzled the boy in turn for showering him with
“Alright! Let’s get ‘im!” Junpei took the opportunity to continue hacking at the unconscious Epiphron’s legs. With the advantage, the three stubborn legs felt to the ground in a pool of black gunk.

As he did his work, Yukari gave the boys a thumbs up and pointed an arrow at the sad lump. “Take it down for me, guys!”

Ken tightened the grip around his spear. His Persona expressed excitement of defeating the brother that hurt her. “I’m ready!” Koromaru stood by his side and growled. He took his dagger from Ken’s pocket and held it ready in his mouth.

Cracking his knuckles one last time, Akihiko gave a signal for everyone to charge. “Okay, NOW!”

“You’re goin’ down, spidey!!” Junpei screamed with his hands squeezing his two-handed sword until they bled.

“For Shinjiro-san!” cried Ken.

“And Airi-san!” cheered Aigis.

“And my dad!” Yukari finished.

The all-out attack commenced. No bars were held back with the barrage of fists, a sword, a dagger, and a spear. Off from a distance, Yukari contributed by shooting a few well-placed arrows while she stayed with Mitsuru. Aigis positioned herself upright with one arm so the other could fire a few bullets. The mechanical maiden Palladion flew low across the ground to avoid the ungodly lightning storm above and sent a Kill Rush onto the enemy. Caesar let out a warning call, which Akihiko understood immediately and warned everyone to evacuate the fray. No one second-guessed as Junpei and Koromaru bolted back to the girls with Ken following suit. Akihiko stayed a bit behind so Caesar could return to his slumber. The great emperor smiled proudly at his host and vanished into the air, flowing over the boxer. Once reunited, Akihiko turned to join his friends.

They sat back from the distance, a good thirty feet, to watch the final act. An enormous wall of white electricity slammed down on Epiphron. The ground vibrated upon impact, creating a seismic event. Chunks of cement, brick, and metal blew out from the ground and scattered across the front of the station. A lamppost fell over and several benches were overturned into the flowerbeds. The energy disappeared as quickly as it came, revealing an expansive lake of black muck, all that remained of Epiphron. The ooze pooled in a localized spot, forming a figure of an adult. The man's soundless footsteps stalked across the station and approached the teens, child, and dog.

“What the hell is that?!?” Junpei spoke for everyone.

The lab coat and suit-wearing man with yellow eyes projected from his rounded glasses examined them carefully. When he noticed a faint Mitsuru waking up, he smirked. “What a waste, Lady Mitsuru. You chose a path of atonement when you should have seen our work as hope for humanity’s future.”

Akihiko instinctively stood in between the girl and the ghost. Their heights were identical, so a glare was the only form of intimidation left. “Kouta Takahashi.”

“Obviously, Akihiko Sanada.” His voice was warped and distorted from what it should have been, and the oily shine to his clothes and skin made him more of the substance that formed a Shadow than a person or specter. “Aether kept a close eye on all of you. We made sure to remember your names,
faces, and Persona in case something like this happened.”

“Did Kurebayashi-san set this up?”

The spirit turned his attention to Ken. “I wandered the city, lost and confused, when we first met. Aether found me after you children went to him for aid. I was to attack if any of you dared confront him during the Dark Hour. Were you not so distraught over Castor’s inevitable death, none of you would be here now nearly dead.”

The boy gasped, the feeling of being torn in half returned. He stared down at his feet and mumbled, “E-Everything was… all my fault?”

“It was not all for nought, Ken Amada. Nemesis helped us tremendously in contextualizing our research.”

Then it was Yukari’s turn to get upset. “What does his Persona have to do with anything?! She’s one of the Nine, but she’s still a part of Ken!”

“Obviously,” he stared at her as if she were mentally retarded. “Ironically, she benefitted us the most by going completely against her raison d’être.”

“That makes no sense!” screamed Junpei.

“Morpheus deserves a raise for keeping you in the dark despite being a ludicrous pun machine. As the eyes are the window to one’s soul, Persona is the fragment of a reflection of one’s subconscious. Everyone possesses a range of Persona to face and endure trials, but we seem to hold greater control of one over all within ourselves. See it as the manifestation of the strength of the heart, if you will. That strength becomes clear when one is focused, yet when in doubt is at war with its host.

"Artificial Persona are incredibly powerful but difficult to create and even more difficult to control. We were too impatient in gathering enough Persona users to bring about the Fall when we could have waited and searched for individuals who would naturally bear Persona reflecting the ideals of Nyx and Erebus' children. But alas, I was correct in relying on our own people than to bring in outsiders who will never understand our vision. Natural users may lose their power if we force conversion on them. We don't need someone who's inherent strength lies in nurturing when our mission is destruction. No amount of conversion, torture, or manipulation can change some fundamental aspects innate within a person when they have even the slightest control of their potential.”

“Your theory… may be sound,” said a pensive Aigis from the back of the group. “However, your method in trapping us was not very wise. It would have been easier if you persuaded Nemesis to overpower Ken-san completely and kill the rest of us. Or you and your kind killing us outside of the Dark Hour saves more time.”

The ghost brought his hand to his forehead and shook his head disapprovingly. “It’s all psychology, weapon. It’s up to the individual and his inability to resist pressure. Is watching an enemy battle his own inner demons not more fascinating? He exposes his own weaknesses because of his crippling self-doubt, thus making him easier to manipulate or dominate.”

Blue mist melded with the green and loud bang echoed outrage through the empty night. Out came the purple Nemesis. Ken spoke up for her with tears in his eyes. “I’m tired of being treated like a kid! If you really care about my Persona, why did you attack her? Why try to kill me?”

“This fight has demonstrated how much you have corrupted that gear-headed toy. You cut this
manifestation of vengeance from an inferior cloth. Hoping for Nemesis to appear, only to find her in the body of an impressionable child who clings to innocence so readily was the most irresponsible mistake Aether ever made. My brothers and I were crafted to be untainted. Death shall be revived for our Mother’s Arrival, and we have no use for crude abominations spawned by child abandonment.”

“Nemesis! Zionga!”

As Ken stated his command, a sheet of ice joined in the attack. Akihiko jumped aside and saw a pained Mitsuru with her Evoker. Penthesilea held her up with one hand and cast Bufula with the other.

“What you’ve done to me and my friends is unforgivable! Be gone, you monster!”

The lighting and ice combo went through the ghost, who dissipated upon impact. Once the attack ended, Takahashi melted back into the puddle, inert and still, but his last words hung in the wind as the mist started to settle away. “Declare war on us as you wish. The lovely jasmine will birth Death, and my brothers will bring paradise to this shit-infested world.”

Everyone collapsed to the ground. Akihiko rushed to Mitsuru to keep her head from touching the ground.

“I-I am better,” she said while resting her hands on her chest. “Bon débarras…”

“Good riddance,” Aigis agreed. She forced a sigh over the state of her new body, damaged again. She smiled weakly when she managed to regain reliable movement in her joints. "I should call Sayama-san and thank her for the upgrades to my platform. I may need a day to recharge, but I do not need to return to the facility."

Between gasps for fresh air, Junpei remarked, “Okay, so that was the second worst night ever, yeah?”

Fuuka nodded carefully as she held the goose egg on the side of her head.

Ken apologetically bowed to the ground for everyone. “I’m the reason this happened…”

“We forgive you, Amada...” muttered Mitsuru in between gasps from her twitching arms. “Two of the Nine have been defeated… That is what matters.”

Regaining some energy after the fight, Yukari stood tall and stretched. “We gotta be more careful next time. I feel like an idiot for charging without thinking.”

Taking her Evoker, Akihiko examined Mitsuru. Ignoring the expanding red pools on her clothing, her hands were burning and swollen. He raised his voice in panic. “We gotta get you to the hospital!”

“Of course,” she agreed. His recent reanimation gave peace of mind to Mitsuru, leaving her mellow despite the shots of pain in her hands that would make a seasoned warrior scream. “We should ask about Shinjiro while we are there as well.”

After they rested for a few minutes, the strongest teammates helped the weaker ones. Aigis could finally stand and walk, but it would take a few hours for her to hide her stiff robotic movements. She deemed it unwise to stress her platform any more than necessary. Covered in cuts and scrapes, Junpei gave shoulder support to Fuuka while Ken carried her Evoker in his sweatshirt’s pocket. Yukari insisted she’d treat Akihiko with some ointments before carrying his old friend around anymore. To add on the nagging, Mitsuru reminded him to ask a doctor to check out his back, in case he strained
himself.

As they prepared their trip to the hospital before the Dark Hour lifted, Theo finally arrived, and he wasn’t alone. Laying in Theo’s arms was an unconscious girl, peacefully resting her head against his chest. She wore the Gekkoukan uniform with a mint green scarf with wooden beads. Were her eyes open, the irises would be an unmistakable red.

Chapter End Notes

Yep. I referenced Marilyn Manson. If anyone has been looking up the songs I mention in these notes, that’s pretty impressive (though I don’t blame anyone who has no patience for it, haha).

Also, YAY AIRI IS BACK!! The gang is (almost) all back together! Things should be smooth sailing and nothing will tear them apart again!! ...Right?

Anywho, here’s some more trivia. Even more so than Hemera, almost nothing is known about Epiphron (Ἐπίφρων) in Greek mythology. He was known as a god of prudence, sagacity, and carefulness, and only the preface to Hyginus’ ‘Fabulae’ mentions him, along with the names of Nyx and Erebus’ other children. It’s interesting how many children Nyx and Erebus have across various stories and yet so little information about them is known. I wonder how much of this is due to time wearing away at the myths, to the Greeks not coming up with stories for every one of the dozens of gods they had, or a bit of both.

Thankfully I can say more about Epiphron’s host. Kouta Takahashi (高橋康太) is an original character I felt the need to add when I saw Mitsuru’s flashback in Persona 3’s epilogue, ‘The Answer’, which is referenced in this chapter. The way the unnamed scientist had no regard for anyone’s safety and got excited over Mitsuru awakening Penthesilea really disturbed me. It made me wonder if some of the Kirijo Group’s scientists ever tried to experiment on Mitsuru, and I have read some fanfics that explore that possibility. I didn’t feel comfortable exploring this topic deeply considering how long this story already is (and I’m not the most qualified person in the world to talk about it without looking like a dumbass), so I kept this part of her backstory vague. Regardless, Mitsuru never liked Takahashi, and she’s glad he’s dead. Her father would be thrilled too once he gets the news. Good riddance, indeed.

Lastly, Mitsuru was reading ‘Guns, Germs, and Steel’ by Jared Diamond. She’s a smart lady who can probably handle that book for leisure. Although I sometimes cannot help my geeking out over historical and cultural research.
Here's a slightly longer chapter for your reading pleasure! I've been taking intensive classes to get a certificate for the past two weeks, but I managed to find time to edit this enough to get it posted.

Another song I listened to while I wrote parts of 'Through the Empty Spiral' is a melancholic track called "Back on Track" by Apoptygma Berzerk, which the title kinda references.

PS - I must also thank Netflix for motivating me to work on this. They took down 'The Shawshank Redemption' and put up 'Death Note'. This hasn't been a very good month. >.<

PPS - I made a few extra edits to grammar and spelling. I'll be more careful when I upload the next chapter.

September 16, 2009

“What do ya mean?” Jin repeated into the phone.

“They killed Epiphron,” a patient Kurebayashi enunciated on the other line in case his ally was deaf for a second. “Do not ask me how they managed. One of my colleagues in the hospital has the file on Takeharu’s daughter and her friends closed tight.”

The blue-haired Persona-user stalked around from outside the Port Island station. Many parts of it were still sealed off from construction and repairs. When the damage suddenly appeared early that morning, no one could explain how it manifested. The police have been investigating since one in the morning, leaving the early traffic more disoriented than usual with nothing improving at noon and the chaos worsening by early evening.

Standing nearby all day, Jin overheard the officers discuss their findings when they hovered over the “crime scene”. He stared at the rubble and said, “Epiphron sure knows to not hold back.”

“He was probably eager for another battle with Polydeuces after that injury.”

“No shit.”

Kurebayashi hummed, and Jin could picture his inquisitive expression. "And? You sound disappointed."

"Are ya sure you haven’t seen them at all?” he inquired once more. Jin hated being in the dark, and he didn’t want to hang out for too long. The police began to notice his loitering around.

“I have an idea where they are but I have not seen SEES. Being my patient, I can only watch over Castor while I'm on call.”

“How is his condition?”
"He lives, visibly apprehensive with the night's turn of events. I have kept him in isolation so he recovers. No one will visit him until I say so."

Sure, this would keep the kids separated, but Jin hated hearing that delaying Castor's death was part of Kurebayashi's plans. He knew Takaya would grab his revolver and blow their brains out to solve the problem. A chance of escape was always possible, and last night proved how desperate SEES are to have Castor back.

"If your niece weren't so fond of him, you’d kill him on the table," Jin snorted.

"You doubt my decision?"

"Tell me why Strega should continue to listen to you. Other than barkin' out orders, ya haven’t done shit to benefit us. Since that bastard Ikutsuki’s not around to give us drugs, we don't owe ya shit.” He lowered his voice and blended into the crowd. One of the officers held his walkie-talkie close, probably to report him. Jin flowed along with the school of people until he entered the station.

"You overestimate Hypnos' pragmatism. He hates Morpheus more than me, but he will only take his shit if I dress it up and serve it. Having an eye on your movements is convenient, but I see no superior advantage to having Strega or letting you go. You and Hypnos are too impatient to wait for the natural descent into anarchy, but renegades do what they must to cure their itch. Do whatever is best to ensure the Fall. I care not what you do."

Once he bought his ticket and boarded the train, Jin continued, “Whatever. I bet that girl’ll find out pretty quickly that her boyfriend’s alive. If she’s really in love with him like that kid said, she ain’t gonna be easy to work with if she hears you toyed with his heart.”

"No doubt. If I killed Castor, my lovely jasmine would be hysterical.”

Hating how convoluted their plans have evolved as of late, Jin groaned. They should have made Amada kill Shinjiro a long time ago, and Airi’s stupid feelings should never have been a factor that changed the paradigm of one of the Nine's motivations.

"Stop being neurotic, Moros. The Fall will arrive no matter what happens.”

Clenching his teeth, Jin grabbed his backpack and took out his laptop. After putting aside an email he started writing earlier that morning, he began filing a report. “It does fuckin’ matter! Those brats got Epiphron and Hemera. Nemesis ain’t on our side either. They’ll kill us!”

“Hemera was always the most unstable out of all the Artificial Persona we created. I trust his expertise with the Anti-Shadow weapons, but after spending years in and out of mental institutions nothing he says about human beings is worth salt. Even when he called me hours before his death, I did not take him seriously .”

Nearly dropping his laptop, Jin bit his tongue to not scream into the phone. "He called?! What the hell about?!!"

Kurebayashi sighed. "Most of what he said was incoherent drivel."

"My ass! Why didn't you say he contacted you?!!"

"Because Teodora Arisato exploited Morpheus, stole our data, and made SEES aware of our existence. He was our top priority as you tried to patch every hole he blew into our mission. That delusional Hemera exploded on a rooftop after verbally vomiting what I believed to be nonsense until Amada confirmed that my lovely jasmine was so rattled by said nonsense that she disappeared. I
do not leap to every outrageous theory about velvet rooms, especially when my niece is suffering because of something we do not fully understand, Moros. Never doubt that for a moment."

Jin shivered. He rued the day Kurebayashi takes up his evoker and starts getting his hands dirty in the ground war. He did not reply, displaying his unwillingness to test the doctor further.

"Hemera said little of benefit to us besides confirming that Castor will die on October 4th," Kurebayashi lowered his voice back to a normal register and continued. "His tale of alternate worlds was no more than confused rambling. Unearthing and re-suppressing that Anti-Shadow Weapon’s memories of 10 years ago was the only work he devoted to that ended in him proving his insanity. With no results worth a damn over the years outside of aiding the Fall, the Group continues to pull funding from the Yakushima facility. Given how useless he was in the end, perhaps we should have put down our first living subject while you tested our theories with Epiphron."

Looking through the database months ago, Jin learned that Aizawa was the most devout of the Children, to the point he treated his status as a religion that guided his whole life. He always did as he was told when preparing for the Fall, but his Persona’s forced awakening traumatized him and the explosion did nothing but worsen his condition. Aizawa hid behind drugs and booze to get through the rough days. Sometimes he would not show up to work for weeks at a time, and no one would ever learn where he went. Wherever he was when he disappeared this time made him snap completely. When SEES attacked, he must have been so out of it, he couldn’t rely on his Persona.

That was Jin’s theory. He crafted several to properly explain what was happening lately so Kurebayashi and Takaya could devise better strategies, but now that Aizawa is dead, no one will ever know how he vanished.

As he typed, a different topic occurred to him. “How’d ya manage to corner the brats last night?”

“Luck. Hold please.” A few voices echoed in the background, meaning he was in the middle of some work. When they vanished, Kurebayashi sounded more focused. “Amada was so frantic, I expected him to talk to someone about what happened. No kid should be forced to endorse euthanasia if given the option. What I did not expect was the whole army moving out. I only anticipated Polydeuces at least.”

“He’d never let you stand over his twin with a syringe,” Jin said unsurprisingly. “And Epiphron?”

“Your hit site launched well, and we successfully separated an artificial Persona from his host. I took care of him during the Dark Hour and he became a watchdog for me. It was convenient when Epiphron sensed the kids coming my way. No strings needed to be pulled, and he had his fun. However, due to the crude and lucky manner in which we succeeded, we will not duplicate the procedure on so few remaining specimens.”

When Jin finished typing the last of his notes, he opened up a window to send it via email. He listened the whole time, but paid more attention to his work. “We’ll get why Charon’s got no host, but we got bigger problems. The site’s been quiet, and the pills ain’t getting any cheaper. He’d be very useful about now burning down more apartments to speed things up, but wishin’ ain’t gonna solve shit.”

“Lo que será, será.”

Jin remembered the words repeated over and over again like clockwork. It was the only way to assure themselves the Fall would still arrive. “It don’t matter if seven, six, or two of us remain on the eve.”
“Ideally, it would be nice if all of us could represent humanity’s desire for rebirth, but our odds of surviving in the present are slimming. Still, as long as the Appraiser awakens, our work was never in vain.”

It wasn’t too comforting, but Jin kept his doubts quiet. “Fine. I’m sendin’ you the report on the scene. The investigation is far more interesting than the battle.”

“How so?”

As the train pulled away, Jin remembered overhearing what the officer said in this device. He pressed his glasses to the bridge of his nose and passed the word along to Kurebayashi.

“‘Interrogate the witnesses, Hideo. The Kansai-ben punk is still hanging around. I’ll take care of him.’ But I ran before he caught me.”

Jin could see the darkly amused grin on the doctor’s normally kind face. “Ah, Hideo Kurosawa. I will keep an eye on him while he’s still here. Then do as you wish.”

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Once Mitsuru called them about Kurosawa’s visiting her, SEES dropped their after-school activities and rushed to the hospital. Their account of the night was very, very long, but Kurosawa managed to follow along with the main points. Everyone took his or her turn to explain what happened. Being so involved in the mess already, the officer knew he had to heavily edit and abridge the real story for filing.

They all sat in Fuuka and Mitsuru’s room waiting for Theo and Airi, who was undergoing a check-up in another part of the building. Until then, everyone had a quiet place to relax.

“What’ll you do, Kurosawa-san?” Sitting on the end table, Akihiko asked curiously. “I noticed your badge is different.”

The gruff dark-haired man sighed solemnly. “All of this work was my own independent investigation. The department disliked that point more than what I uncovered. The name ‘Kirijo’ makes their skin crawl.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Mitsuru, sitting in a wheelchair the nurse allowed her to use for the hour. She left her hands, mummified in bandages, on her lap. “The Group has never been straightforward with its practices as a multinational conglomerate.”

“I don’t understand.” Yukari stopped playing a card game of war with Fuuka, whose stab wound was well cared for that she could head home tomorrow, on the bed to speak her mind. “Didn’t you reveal anything about the Dark Hour?”

The idea bothered Mitsuru. “My father wouldn’t. It’s too complicated to explain…”

“Relax, Kirijo-kun,” Kurosawa relaxed his posture against the windowsill. “Your father authorized a slow, methodical reveal of the experiments. He gave me some initial material when he first asked for my help. I approached everyone in the department with the paperwork and physical evidence: surveillance, Eiichiro Takeba’s warning, shipment records, researchers’ notes, etc. We even found out the identities of the children left in the military facility. One of the scientists dumped them there after most of the kids died during the experiments on controlling artificial Persona.”

“That’s… wow,” Ken remarked awkwardly, impressed with how much Kurosawa knew but disturbed about the news on the kids. He only heard of them from a pale-faced Yukari after
questioning everyone multiple times for days.

“Justice will be served for those children, but it wasn’t enough to convince anyone to look into Apathy Syndrome or the lunar phase phenomena. To spare me from being fired, my boss demoted me. Officially, my skills are ‘valuable, if not misplaced’. The force is too small to shrink because of politics and stifling red tape.”

Just as he feared, Akihiko’s face fell. Mitsuru reacted similarly. “I apologize for the state of your career.”

He shook his head. “I did the right thing. There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“One may say your actions are admirable,” Aigis said. In her arms was the Gekkoukan uniform for Airi to change into. “Going by the logic of letting the needs of many outweigh the few, I believe I would have acted similarly.”

He appreciated the approval from the robot. The others, however, were less supportive.

“But that’s bullshit!” Junpei nearly screamed. Yukari gave him a look and he lowered his voice. “They’ve gotta believe ya! You can't be rewarded for all this by getting the boot!!”

“You gave them what they wanted!” said a far less confrontational, but upset Fuuka.

Full of anger and disappointment, Akihiko slumped into the cool metal chair next to Mitsuru. “Looks like we’re still on our own.”

Ken’s eyes were wide in panic, “But what about Ikutsuki-san?”

Kurosawa’s face darkened. He hid this by staring out the window. “He’s locked away. With enough evidence showing his corruption, he’ll be in jail for sure once the trial date goes through. I’m more concerned about the others trying to get him out, diplomatically or forcefully.”

“Great…” Akihiko quietly shook his head. “Well, I’m just glad one cop has his head on straight.”

A familiar “tsk” chilled the hairs in the senior’s ear. “Akihiko…”

“Relax,” he replied with a shrug. Pretending the ice queen didn’t try to verbally stun him came easier to him than usual. “He knows I’m yanking his chain.”

The man of note fought back a smirk. “Between you and Aragaki-kun, it’s hard to tell who’s worse.”

“They’re both a handful in equal measure, Kurosawa-san.”

In the middle of the open door stood Airi. Unlike last night, her complexion looked much healthier in natural light. She smiled nervously at the eight pairs of eyes. Fuuka jumped off the bed, sending cards flying, and she embraced her. Right behind followed Junpei, hat falling off his head. Ken retrieved it as he joined the growing welcome committee.

“Guys…” Tears pooled at the corners of her eyes. “I don’t know where to start… About everything –”

“Just shut up!” Junpei found room to wrap his arms around Airi’s neck, free from Fuuka’s hold. “Talkin’s gonna kill the moment!”

Like a real kid, Ken hugged her arm. His identically wet and emotional eyes said everything. At the moment, everyone was too happy to be mad at her. Yukari put away her snappy comments she
wanted to say and joined in the group hug. The boxer himself sighed happily along with Mitsuru and watched a fraction of normalcy return.

“About time you came back, Airi,” Akihiko said, voice cracking.

Nodding, Mitsuru kept a composed expression, but her lips twitched, restraining a smile. “Let us save the heavy discussions for another day. We should focus on returning to a more reasonable and normal lifestyle.”

“You kids had it rough. It’s good to see you reunite like this,” Kurosawa agreed. Then he looked at his watch and adjusted his hat. “Now, I have to return to work. Thanks for the info on last night’s attack.”

Just as warm as they were to Airi, everyone said goodbye and good luck to their recent ally. The teens healed reasonably well and Kurosawa showed his support in their fight. Trailing not far behind was Takeharu Kirijo, who worked to clear his family’s accursed name among the police. Even if Shadows and the Nine still lurked in the darkness to harm the people, SEES knew their work was finally getting some recognition.

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September 18, 2009

Once the hospital released Mitsuru and Fuuka, SEES took Thursday off from school to spend some meaningful time with Airi. Theo used some “light pressure” to make a valid excuse for Airi’s multi-day absence as well as this mental health day. No one who was savvy questioned them, and the school administration cleaned the spot on her record on the condition Airi would spend a few more hours at school and complete additional tests to prove she could still pass eleventh grade.

Due to Shinjiro’s absence, everyone agreed to clear up the bulk of the confusing theories of what was actually happening with the Nine Children – especially in regards to Aizawa’s ramblings – once he returned. In the meantime, everyone was free to address all personal complaints and frustrations they had with Airi. As an olive branch, she offered to explain some of the basics of her knowing more than a normal person should and confirmed that Theo was not technically human.

Some of what they learned caused unease, but they had the night to sleep on the information and attend school on Friday without too much emotional baggage. To continue to celebrate Airi’s return, the juniors had lunch under the Persimmon tree in the courtyard by the athletic wing. Airi made chicken noodle soup for dinner last night; because the reception was quite positive, she and the rest brought the leftovers to school.

Airi nearly snorted the broth out of her nose. “Our class is doing a maid café for the Cultural Festival?”

Grinning wide, Junpei purred suggestively. “You and Yuka-tan are the highlights! The two sexiest kitties in Gekkou High!!”

“Not if the typhoon hits, you pervert!” A pink rose pen nearly flew right into his eye.

Holding her spoon awkwardly, Aigis gave up trying an un-Japanese utensil and asked Fuuka for a straw and chopsticks. “Yukari-san is correct. Unless…” She turned to the one who supposedly knew everything.

Airi raised her hands in defeat. “Sorry, Junpei. I love your energy, but the storm’s gonna hit tonight and wash out your dreams.”
“Seriously?!”

“Um, are you sure it’s alright to share…? Isn’t there a limit or…?” Fuuka voiced her worry.

With a serious face, she nodded. “The guys in magical top hats allowed me to rant all I want about my time travel stuff, but I want to save some information for the important moments and not be a bossy know-it-all with you guys every day.”

“Won’t you get in trouble if you say too much?” Yukari carefully chose her words.

“I won’t for now. I know you guys find it hard to believe me, so I wanna take it slow.”

Her friends shared a look of skepticism, except for the most logical one, Aigis. “Your feelings are still something we must respect. No matter the method, you have a greater understanding of what is happening. From your language, the source of your knowledge is supernatural, and therefore impossible in ordinary circumstances. Even though this scenario is far from ordinary, we must rely upon trust. I trust you are using your knowledge to help us.”

Her speech took care of one of the many elephants in the courtyard.

“Thanks, Aigis.”

Yukari understood completely, but she was a bit less eager. “I’m still not sure to be honest. I still can’t believe that Theo-san even appeared at all and was willing to go out of his way to help us.”

"I'm thankful he became more involved," said Fuuka. "I would have had a hard time believing any of this without him. And him not being of this world makes enough sense to me."

"Kinda cool, but creepy," mused Junpei.

Yukari nodded. "We'll just see what happens."

“I’ll do my best,” Airi said nervously.

“Don’t work too hard, Aibana. Some of us can’t remember last class’s lecture. Just know I’m with ya all the way. Don’t handle this all by yourself.”

The class clown leaned back and gave her the thumbs up. He was too carefree for his own good. Happy for the support, Airi laughed, “Oh, Junpei…”

He shrugged it off, then pouted. “But back to the most important news! Really, Aibana?! The typhoon’s gonna cancel the biggest event of all big events?!”

She smiled fiendishly, “Hey! If the costumes come in on time, Yukari and I can still dress up at the dorm.”

The archer choked. Aigis immediately dropped her things and sat next to Yukari in case emergency procedures were needed. Meanwhile, Fuuka and Junpei stared at Airi like she was a freak.

“Y-You serious, right?” He spat, doubting her genuineness.

“There’s no law saying you must!” Fuuka protested.

Someone tapping on her shoulder startled Airi before she could reply. A blond transfer student in high spirits knelt next her. “Lindsay!” He greeted in English.
“Andre!” she waved back. “How’ve yeh been?”

Cooling himself with his black fan, he nodded simply. “I came over to say konnichiwa! The Fashion Club’s been empty and sad without you. But I am happy you returned, my friend!”

“T’at means muchly! If yeh be here for club, I be t’ere ‘round t’e back o’ four.”

“Don’t you have Student Council on Fridays?”

“It’s no trouble. So long I send weekly reports, he be fit if I miss a meetin’.”

“I see, thank you very much! See you after school!”

“Aye. Mind where yeh go!”

The exchange was short and brief, but Andre took the time to find her before running off.

Earlier that day, Rio from the volleyball team gave her a huge hug at the school entrance. Various others, many Airi knew she hadn’t met personally welcomed her back. She wondered if the slut label went in hibernation thanks to her mysterious disappearance. Rather than indulge in feeding gossip, Airi stuck with the people she knew best. The same people sat dumbfounded by something they should have already known about their friend.

“Wh-What the hell?” Green-eyed but amused, Junpei asked in between fits of laughter. “What kinda accent is that?”


Whatever made him react did not concern Fuuka. “[Incredible! You speak English so well! No wonder Mitsuru-sempai is impressed!]

“I have not heard Mitsuru-san speak English,” Aigis stated. “If she is gifted in learning other languages, I will keep this in mind.”

“Speaking more than one language fluently is amazing,” said a mildly impressed Yukari. After she put a lid on her empty bowl, she made a face. “Still, I don’t recognize that accent…”

That was why, with the exception of fashion club and sometimes around Mitsuru, Airi spoke in no other language but Japanese. Even when alone, she wanted to mask her strange speech patterns so no trace could be detected.

Shoulder slumped, Airi tucked hair behind her ear and mumbled, “Pa’s from Scotland and ma’s Irish… I picked up on other things from peers… Please pretend you never heard it…”

That wish seemed ignored. “Only if you dress up like a maid and talk like that for us at the dorm sometime. Yuka-tan, you’re off the hook. This idea’s so much better!”

“Junpei-kun!” For once, Fuuka unreservedly expressed her disproval of him crossing the line.

Yukari felt even more empowered by the support. “Can’t you see she’s embarrassed?!”

“C’mon! Aibana knows I’m messin’ with her! She sounded kinda mature and plain in a cute way!”

Yukari shot a glare, screaming “I hope you’re joking!” If it weren’t, her loafer would have a make-out session with Junpei’s face.
Only Aigis did not join the excitement. She sat pensive, studying the atmosphere. A flicker in her eye hinted at something she was hiding. “What’s up, Aigis?” Airi dared to ask.

The three Stooges stopped their quarrel and paid attention to this. The android folded her hands and couldn’t look directly at her peer. “What I plan to say may be rude.”

“It takes a bit to offend me. Speak your mind.”

“Well,” said the android as she gently brushed the grass off her skirt. “Women often wear maid outfits for men to gaze upon them, correct? Perhaps when he recovers, Shinjiro-san would be pleased to see you dress up for him.”

As everyone predicted, every inch of Airi’s skin turned crimson. Though no one disagreed with Aigis’ theory, Fuuka and Yukari lowered their heads in secondhand embarrassment. Junpei smirked slightly, but otherwise kept his comments to himself.

“I’m sorry, Airi-san. Such a suggestion was inappropriate.”

“N-No, it’s alright…” Not wanting to think about him at that moment when he was lying in a hospital bed alone and waiting for death, Airi started packing up her things.

Trying to lighten the mood, Fuuka placed a sympathetic hand on her shoulder, “It’s not necessary, Airi-chan! Th-There are other ways–”

“I’m fine, honestly,” she said with a forced, dismissive smile.

Everyone gathered his or her things together before the bell would ring. The meal ended on a less than satisfactory note.

“No, you’re not, Aibana,” Junpei argued when he stopped her on the stairs to the second floor hallway. “I’m no good at this sorta thing, but… I’m rootin’ for you and Shinjiro-senpai. If you need me to be your wingman, let me know.”

She laughed halfheartedly and sped up the pace. “Thanks for the thought, but it’s… it’s not gonna work…”

“What?! Don’t tell me you’re still upset ‘cuz of the other night! Well… yeah, you are… But that bastard got what he deserved for being a jack–”

“You’re not helping, Stupei!” Yukari interrupted. “Anyway, while we’re on the awkward subject of love, we’re STILL trying to see if Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai will get together.”

Slowing down, Airi loved hearing their names in the same sentence. “Have they made any progress?”

With slightly sarcastic undertones, Fuuka coughed in the negative. “Ever since the fight with Epiphron, Akihiko-senpai matured a little. I’m not sure if that’s saying much…”

“He displays more evident signs of concern for Mitsuru-san,” elaborated Aigis. “Before the last operation, I studied their behavior when they were together. My analysis and subsequent research on the internet and from peers reveals that they are, as Junpei-san described it to me, ‘oblivious to love’.”

“You’re tellin’ me!” said Junpei, rolling with the change in which couple he wanted to become reality. “It took some pushin’, but he admitted she was totally his type at Yakushima!”
“If you know, do they ever get together?” Fuuka asked.

“They don’t, sadly, but their relationship seems more informal and relaxed this time. It’s pretty neat to know that you guys think they have a chance.”

Proud of their finds, Airi encouraged them to keep an eye on the fledgling lovebirds. Since Junpei figured out his friend’s feelings for Shinjiro, this was the perfectly clean distraction that still dealt with hooking people up.

Wrapped in blankets and towels, the nine members of SEES sat huddled in the lounge. In the kitchen, Airi prepared hot chocolate and coffee for those who were hit the hardest when the sky opened up. In her first timeline, she forgot a jacket and was unprepared for the sudden change in weather. She was left with a cold for three days. Every time afterwards, she was the healthiest and most prepared of the bunch.

Sprawled on the floor with the remote, Ken watched the TV and nibbled on a bowl of chips. According to the report, the typhoon would make outside travel inadvisable until the 21st. That meant no school for anyone on Saturday.

“More time for us to catch up on schoolwork, right?” asked Fuuka. Appearing bald, her pixie cut hair flattened from the rain.

Sneezing, the biggest clown of them all groaned. “It sucks we’ll be stuck indoors. And the festival’s canned… Oh well. Settin’ all that crap up was a pain anyway.”

Akihiko, whose teeth chattered, rubbed his arms to stimulate heat. “I don’t mind as long as we still have power. Training in the dark isn’t as fun as it sounds. Stupid typhoon.” He glared at the dark bay window, bombarded by wind gusts and downpour.

“Damn you, Aibana! Get a few more predictions right, and you’re a psychic!”

Preparing hot chocolate in the kitchen, Airi called out, “Knowing things isn’t all fun, you know. Like our trip to Kyoto. I’d pray if I were you.”

“Kyoto?!” Yukari’s head shot up.

Mitsuru’s eyes widened slightly. She turned in her seat to find her junior in the kitchen. “That’s one of the places we’re discussing for our school trip for this year…”

“We’ll be going there, Kirijo-sempai,” Airi elaborated simply. It was the lazy excuse the group began to expect. “It’ll be loads of fun and the hot springs will be heavenly! At least that’s for us girls. Three blocks of ice won’t be as lucky.”

The mentioning of such harsh structures churned Akihiko’s stomach. “Don’t be so glum! You always managed to survive before!” Out of the kitchen came Airi with a tray of eight mugs and one bowl of warm water.

“It doesn’t mean I slept well afterwards,” he replied flatly. He dropped the attitude when he accepted his drink.

Outstretched arms fought over the beverages she served. Only Koromaru, who curled up beside Ken, rested patiently for his turn. She rewarded him by giving him his water third, right after Ken. Junpei was last, with no hard feelings, Airi joked. The youngest thanked her and checked the surface
of the drink. “Marshmallows?” he gasped.

The waitress winked. “I couldn’t find any Featherman-themed ones. I hope shooting stars work. They’re not particularly girly, right?”

“Oh, no, th-that’s fine,” he replied, hiding his pink cheeks by focusing back on the news.

“… Station will continue to be under construction until further notice. Traffic should not be affected for the next few weeks despite lowered cosmetic value. The police have made no comment on the cause…”

“That place’s gonna be ugly for a while,” Junpei stated the obvious.

“Speaking of which,” Airi said while holding the decaf coffee to the ice queen, “how are your hands, Kirijo-senpai?”

The reminder caused her to wince. White gloves hid her bandages and created less of a distraction. Her palms kept the mug steady as she took small sips. “I sometimes have pain extending up to my elbows, but it could be worse. The doctors warned there might be long-term nerve damage if I stress them too much. The right hand is of greatest concern. Being my dominant side, I must be careful with most activities. Combat will be a challenge.”

“With the ice you deal, fighting won’t be that bad,” Akihiko interjected.

Mitsuru scoffed. With the added gloves to her attire, her classy pose strongly resembled Margaret’s. “Says the one who walks away laughing at a sprained shoulder, broken ribs, and a deep forearm wound.”

“I did have it worse, but now you can at least relate to me.”

“Hardly. In fact I bear even less sympathy for you. Unless I can properly hold a pen and write I will avoid battle. You never consider taking precautions, thus allowing more time for your injuries to mend.”

“You just like to play it safe. There’s nothing wrong with that, ‘til you’re backed into a corner with no way to defend yourself.”

“That only happens to you because you’re reckless. If I am ever in such a hopeless state, I can trust you to rush to my aid. So please be sure to not stick your neck out so frequently and irresponsibly.”

Standing beside the couch her four junior compatriots squeezed in, Airi gave them a mischievous face. Aigis nodded and muttered the “get a room” comment she learned from Junpei. Yukari exasperatedly rolled her eyes in spite of being amused. Junpei and Fuuka faked coughs. Only Koromaru and Ken stared in indifference and confusion respectively. The engrossed married couple across from the underclassmen bickered too intensely to acknowledge the rude commentary.

When subtlety did not work, the field leader interrupted them. “So, other than Akihiko-kun, I hope no one has given you trouble?”

Feeling like they were accused of committing a crime, the seniors stopped their quarrel quickly. Roses bloomed on Mitsuru’s face, but she retained her composure. “No. Not even a stir about my added accessory. Best of all, Student Counsel runs proficiently enough to make accommodations. Thank you, Fujihara.”

Having room to speak, a smiling Aigis clapped her hands for everyone’s attention. “Since the storm
“Studying,” droned Airi. She wiped the screen of her phone with the end of her untucked blouse. “It’s best I review everything before exams roll around again. And those extra tests will be a pain since I never had to take them before.”

“Quit being such a smarty-pants.” Junpei blew a raspberry. “You can afford to lose a few points. I bet ya used a magic ball and saw all the answers ahead of time!”

"Not the new tests they're throwing at me. I managed to get perfect attendance the last two times before now."

“Oh, someone’s jealous!” Yukari faked a shocked look. “Is Stupei gonna study for once?”

“Shut up!”

“I thought so.”

When no new reports on the storm came on, Ken turned off the TV. He sat up to fully join the conversation. “Junpei-san, will you visit Chidori-san?”

It was hard to tell who was the child. “Man, Ken, you’re dead on!”

That was another thing Airi was behind in. “How’re things with her?”

“Thanks to Junpei’s company she’s stable,” Akihiko answered. His face showed he could not understand how the idiot doted on her. “Still, she’s not telling us anything helpful.”

“We shouldn’t keep our hopes up,” warned an unmoved Mitsuru. “The Children’s plans are clear enough that we don’t need to interrogate her right away.”

Finished her mug already, Fuuka let out a small burp before speaking. “She doesn’t seem like a willing enemy. There were times when she could have turned against us… Chidori-san told us Theo took you into hiding after you left the hospital.”

“She did?” Airi was momentarily baffled.

Yukari nodded. “I’m not so sure about her, but Junpei trusts her…” She trailed off when steam came out of his ears.

“She WANTS me to visit!” A bark uncharacteristic of him escaped his throat. Registering this, he tried to calm down and try speaking normally again. “I have to keep an eye on her… What if Strega goes after her?! She's a loose end for them!“

She saw this coming. Another memory Airi dreaded came back in the form of November 22nd. Letting out a sigh, she shook her head. “They’ll find her, but as long as you stay with her, everything will work out.”

Akihiko sensed her hesitation and asked, “Do you know something?”

Defensive, Junpei shot up. “Aibana, is Chidori in trouble?! Will something bad happen to her? If you know things, then are Strega really tough?! Will they hurt her?!”

Relaxing her posture, Airi said, “Strega are planning to get her back, but please keep visiting Chidori. Keep her company, and don’t let her throw away the flowers you buy her.”
“Flowers?!” She threw Junpei off for a few seconds. He knew Airi wouldn’t know about them unless her claims were right. Remaining skeptical until more proof comes to light, he asked, “That’s it?!”

Serious and complacent, she nodded. "Chidori has been through a lot of pain, but she's a good person. Don't ever stop visiting her, Junpei."


The protective emotions continued to brew in him. Chidori could be in trouble. Maybe she could die. He couldn’t bear to have that happen. Airi had to understand that… Looking into her clear ruby eyes, Junpei realized she did. Reason quelled his eagerness enough for him to sit back down. “I’m trusting you’re helping me keep her safe, Aibana.”

“I am.”

When Junpei’s mood swing ended, Aigis turned to the seniors. “While Junpei-san is there, will you two check on Shinjiro-san? Visitors might be allowed soon.”

Simply mentioning the name distressed Koromaru. He rested his head next to Ken’s arm and whined. Empathetic, the boy petted his soft, clean fur.

Dry at last, Akihiko folded his towel and started collecting the others around the lounge. “Yeah. He’s gotta be feeling imprisoned.”

“Why aren’t visitors allowed in the first place?” asked Ken.

“My aunt told me there’s always a chance he could catch an infection,” Fuuka explained after drying her hair, sticking out in all directions.

“You have doctors in your family, correct?” Mitsuru asked to help refresh her memory.

“Yes, that’s why I called my aunt. I found it odd for Shinjiro-sempai to be left alone like this for what seems to be an indefinite amount of time, and she agreed. It doesn't happen often enough…”

Airi let out a smirk, surprised with Fuuka’s words in a deadpan, but polite tone. She then added more to the discussion. “There has to be more than possible infection. It’s not a normal procedure to isolate someone for this long. Surgery is traumatic and receiving emotional support from family and friends is ideal. Uncle is up to something.”

Air growing heavy, everyone disliked Kurebayashi the more they mentioned anything that dealt with him. All towels collected, Akihiko stumbled awkwardly, trying to avoid tripping over feet, tables, couches, and book bags. His clumsy acrobatics caused some to chuckle.

“I suggest we try visiting them both when the storm passes completely,” suggested Mitsuru. “Iori, Chidori will not go anywhere, so I suggest you take my advice.”

Reason won yet again for Junpei. “Fine…”

Leaving a few people with plans unknown, Fuuka picked up the sluggish conversation. “What about you, Ken-kun? What are your plans?”

“Oh,” he broke from his meditative caring for Koromaru and had to think. “Well… I’ll probably go to the shrine before visiting Shinjiro-san.”
Feeling more lighthearted, Junpei deadpanned. “Dude, you’re a kid, not an old man.”

Ken smiled softly and replied, “I always go there. I made a vow to visit mom once a week.”

“Fair enough. Family's important.” Junpei reclined back and folded his arms behind the back of his head. “How ’bout you, Fuuka?”

The cheerful blue girl was surprisingly quiet. She was off in her own world.

“Fuuka?” Airi’s soft voice broke the girl’s deep thoughts.

“S-Sorry?” stammered the blushing Priestess.

Even Yukari expressed her concern. “You alright?”

“Oh… y-yes,” she smiled weakly. “I, uh, don’t have plans…”

“Seriously? C’mon, we’re only young once!” Then Junpei cracked a wicked grin. “Do you have a date?”

“N-No! I-I might go to the movies with Natsuki-chan…”

That was a really old name that hadn’t come up in months. Back then she was one of her bullies that trapped her in the school, sucking her into Tartarus. “How are you two getting along?” Airi questioned, taking the role of a big sibling.

“Qu-Quite well,” replied Fuuka with a smile. “When things were rough here, we’d talk for a bit at lunch or after class. She’s been nice to me, I promise.”

Something still felt wrong. It was very likely that Natsuki wasn’t the cause; Airi could not remember a single time something happened between them that caused Fuuka to feel distracted or upset. There were still several days of a break to check up on everyone, so Airi did not interrogate further.

Another sneeze came out from Junpei. Like the yawning instinct, Akihiko and Ken responded to their irritated, tickly noses. That was the cue to get some sleep.

“Thanks for the hot chocolate, Airi-san,” Ken stood up and bowed to the server of the night. “I’m going to my room. I have a lot of homework to do…”

Before he could head off, Airi got up and went over to him. She hesitated for a second before deciding to ruffle his chestnut hair. “G’night, Ken. Try not to catch a cold, okay?” Pouting and rolling his eyes, the kid who finally started acting his age walked away.

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September 20, 2009

He smelled a familiar waft of air: warm, homey, and plain. No traces of the hospital were around or on him. He lay in his bedroom and wore the school uniform unkempt as she wanted. Wrapped around her little finger, he couldn’t get away with anything without her finding out. Hell, she probably knew his entire life story if she really did relive the year over and over. Their relationship changed, but unless she stopped hiding, they could try to understand each other better. If only he knew what to say to her. So many scenarios and practice conversations should’ve helped him prepare, but he was still so worried she’d slip away again. His fears brought the dreams of her more frequently than usual.
She lay curled up next to him. Slowly tugging the knitted beanie off his head and placing it on the bedside table. A dimpled smile radiated her face, like always, making him forget how to breathe. Traces of her shampoo reached his nose, slowly intoxicating.

She tenderly caressed his face and traced along his features. She combed back his bangs, soft and light from the more constant care he gave it once he returned to the dorm. Her fingers traced his forehead down to his high cheekbones to his chapped lips. She overlooked nothing in between; everything was worthy of her adoration.

She could have that one strange, but predictable reason why she was here. It’d explain the gifts on his birthday and her teases when he returned to school. It’d explain why she saved him, and why she spent so much time with him. It’d explain her emotional outburst on the morning of the first day of Fall term. Even a blind man could read the feelings her body couldn’t hold back. He still wanted her to tell him; he missed hearing her voice. Instead of giving what he wanted she battered her long eyelashes and giggled.

Strands of his hair tickled her hands as she traced the muscles in his neck. Down she continued to his collarbone and ribs. When her wrist bent uncomfortably, she pulled herself over him. Hoping she would never disappear, his eyes followed her.

Giving more comfort for her hands to continue their journey, she hovered above him. Her thick chestnut hair slithered off her shoulders and encircled him. She brushed back the pieces that fell on his face while she unbuttoned his shirt. Her knees grazed his hips and her curled toes stroked his outer thighs.

Wherever she touched him, shudders shot throughout his body. His racing blood burned beneath his skin. His chest, slowly being exposed for her pleasure, stung from his ever-shallow breaths. Not much was happening, yet she excited every part of him.

“Wh-What do you want from me?”

The mime replied to his inane question with a flirty smirk.

She pulled back his shirt to show what she was looking for. A dark line: an ugly scar that the color of his skin would never hide. Rather than being repulsed, she gently stroked it with the tips of fingers and kissed it. He lost his breath and his new heart skipped a beat.

After her teasing advances, her body relaxed and brushed lightly against his. Whatever confidence she bore before fell away. Her red eyes coyly begged him to make a move.

Feeling more and more tense below, he didn’t want to wait for her anymore. This was only a dream, but she was right here. In this moment, he was the center of her world. Yet the intense feelings he wanted suppressed overwhelmed him. Even with the transplant, he still could barely live into his twenties. Dealing with attachment and the loss and heartache that inevitably came with dying was too much. Having no one remember him would be so much easier. Airi should have never fallen in love with him.

But his efforts to hide his turbulent emotions were failing. If he truly didn’t want to be with her, he shouldn’t have let her get so close. He should have stayed true to the idea of swearing off love and girls. She deserved to be happy, and he felt he was the last person who could ever give her what she needed. He’d rather leave nothing behind than a wonderful memory she’d suffer forever. In spite of his wishes, she stayed with him, in real life or in his dreams. Because she relived the year multiple times, Airi fell in love with him long before the moment he met her, dooming any chance of changing her mind.
Why did he always feel so hopeless in the face of what was thought to be inevitable?

Acknowledging his defeat, something calmed him enough to thwart his fears. His hands crawled up her thighs and hips with the same reverence as she had for him. His fingertips absorbed all traces of her figure. Her shorts and halter-top hugged her snugly, accenting the curves he noticed from Yakushima. But, that stupid Junpei, cute was far from how he’d describe her. Stroking the bow of her shoulders, his calloused skin was sandpaper against satin, but how she closed her eyes and moaned at his touch, he knew she didn't want to stop him.

Once he reached her neck, he recoiled. His memory could still see the bruises she tried to hide with makeup and a scarf. She acted as if that incident never happened. There was a reason why, but she still didn’t speak.

With his body and heart so consumed by her presence, it was too hard to hold himself back from falling into her. All of this would end if he stopped. The dream would be over and he’d wake up alone, pathetic, and frustrated in a hospital bed with no idea if he’ll ever see her again. If the real her never came back, he would regret not having the chance to say goodbye before his destined death.

His fingers found the knot to her shirt, sitting on the back of her neck.

“Airi, let me see you again…”

She laughed quietly at his silly request. She closed all the space left between them and teasingly brushed her lips against his. What meager restraint he had left collapsed and he pulled her into a warm, engulfing kiss. The knot undone, he was finally ready to let her in.
Autumn Cleaning

Chapter Notes

Unpredictable real life stuff and making edits to this meant another delay in uploading this chapter, but I got it done!

October 4th is so close you can almost taste it. Almost as if it'll be here by the next chapter...

September 21 - 23, 2009

Having three days off thanks to the typhoon, everyone spent their free time as they wished.

The juniors went shopping for Aigis on Monday to help her better blend in with humans. She preferred the practical shirts, skirts, and pants Airi showed that made movement easier. She appreciated Yukari’s sense of finding colors and styles that complemented her blonde hair and blue eyes. Fuuka, however, remained in charge of the budget, meaning very little of what everyone liked was purchased in the end. Aigis had at least one outfit to try out on weekends: a light-knit cardigan, denim jeans, and white sneakers. When the girls returned to the dorm with the new look, Junpei, Ken, and Akihiko were impressed. Mitsuru wondered if the jeans were too tight for her, but Aigis ensured that she chose looser ones to ensure easy movement. Seeing her friends happy, Aigis smiled and bowed in a manner that imitated Airi’s mannerisms.

On Tuesday, Akihiko and Junpei, both tired from the run through Tartarus the night before, visited the hospital. Chidori seemed amiable with Akihiko both to their surprise. She informed them that Shinjiro was still in isolation; however, she had been monitoring him through Medea. He was understandably irritated at his condition, but he put up no will to fight until he felt healthy enough to break out.

While chatting, a surprise came to Akihiko in the form of a simple text: “You ain’t a kid anymore, but you still gotta eat your damn vegetables.”

Junpei asked what was wrong when his sempai laughed until his eyes turned red. Chidori knew what happened, and she hummed a melody to herself as she revived her flowers. She then gave an iris to the silver-haired young man, happy that his brother remembered his birthday.

Once they returned to the dorm, everyone agreed to visit Tartarus once more on Wednesday night to finish exploring until they reached the next barricade. Most importantly, thinking about the next full moon event stressed them out. The most they could do was prepare for the fight as much as possible with Theo documenting their progress and advising them on battle strategies they had not considered before. His observations and record keeping allowed him to surprise everyone with a new batch of weapons from the Kirijo Group to practice with before the next full moon.

After dinner and before leaving the dorm, Ken caught up with Airi in the lounge on the boys’ floor. She was carrying heavy textbooks, so he kept it short. “Airi-san… Uh… is Shinjiro-san your boyfriend?”

Upon hearing that word, Airi nearly tripped and dropped her books on her toes. She internally
scolded herself as she regained balance.

“I-I’m sorry!” Ken stammered as he helped her pick up the books. “It’s n-none of my business…”

Rather than be angry like most people, Airi laughed, albeit nervously. “I’m not upset, Ken-kun. People ask girls about boyfriends and dating all the time back at home.”

“R-Really?”

She nodded. Then, her expression became melancholic. “I know what he did. It must be hard to forgive him, but he’s also very upset with himself about it.”

Ken lowered his head and stated, “I know…”

“I know he doesn’t have much time, but it’s too late for me to stop caring about what happens to Aragaki-sempai, or what he does to himself…”

That pretty much was an answer enough for the boy. He fought back the tears in his eyes. “Who kills him…?”

Airi bit her lip and thought out her words carefully. “Takaya. Even if I can’t stop the bullets, I’ll kill him before he hurts one of us.”

“I-I see…” Ken muttered, nervous with the girl’s grave language.

Airi knelt down, shifting her height so she could see him eye to eye. Ken blushed anxiously, but kept eye contact respectfully. “I don’t know how Aragaki-sempai feels about me, so don’t feel like I’m bound to him. If you kill him, I’ll understand your reasons. But no matter what happens, just promise me you’ll stay with us to stop the Fall.”

Her sincere and serious words left Ken speechless. He looked away and clenched his fists. It was getting harder and harder not to cry.

Airi patted his shoulder and said, “It’s alright to feel scared. I’m barely holding myself together too.” Surprised, Ken looked back at her. What he saw made him fell less embarrassed and alone. Airi’s eyes were just as swollen and full of tears as his.

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Classes continued on Thursday with the entire student body spending the afternoon taking down the decorations and stands from the cancelled cultural festival. More shenanigans and highjinks ensued for class 2-F.

“Hey, Yukari-san!” fellow dorky classmate Kenji Tomochika stared longingly at the archer’s slender legs as she took down the banner outside the classroom door. “The school trip’s in Kyoto, right? Why don’t I show you around when we go?”

She stopped what she was doing and raised a suspicious eyebrow. “I thought you were into older women?”

“Well, technically you’re a month older than me…” he smoothly rebounded. “Besides, I’m pretty familiar with the area. I know all the best sites and the highlights!”

“So do I. Kyoto’s where I grew up.”
“Wow! Really, Yuka-tan?” Junpei called out from inside the room. He held a box full of ribbons and baskets of flowers Aigis took down from the ceiling.

“I never mentioned it?”

“No you haven’t,” replied Aigis. “You speak very little of yourself, Yukari-san. What was it like living in Kyoto?”

She shrugged and stepped down the ladder. Awkwardly carrying the ladder over his shoulder, Kenji trailed right behind her back in the classroom. “I don’t remember much. We moved away when was young. But my parents named me after the trees that grow there.”

“Ah, ‘beautiful pear tree’, right? What a lovely name!”

Yukari rolled her eyes and continued ignoring Kenji’s obliviousness to his failed attempts to capture her attention. On the other side of the room, Airi folded the assorted designed maid costumes. She checked out several of them for lose thread and put them back in the boxes. Sometime in her organization, she realized something was missing.

There was a knock on the door. Fuuka and Natsuki, carrying empty boxes and bubble wrap, peaked inside the cluttered classroom to see the progress. “How are things in here, guys? Need any extra help?” inquired the former bully.

Airi waved and gestured them to come in. “Thanks. We’re almost done. Things are moving, but I’m missing a uniform.”

“Was it the green one with four-leaf clovers?” asked Natsuki.

“Yeah.”

The two visitors put down their things on a front row desk and put their heads together. Poor Fuuka looked like an airhead. “I-I think I heard about it… this morning. What about you, Natsuki-chan?”

She shook her head and folded her arms. “Maybe some of your stalkers took it, Airi-san. A lot of guys were pissed you and Yukari-san couldn’t dress up.”

“Argh!” Yukari nearly tripped over a desk holding fragile plates, rattling in complementary protest. “They’re still hung up over that?! The nerve of those creeps!”

“C-Calm down!” Another classmate sitting by the windows, the athletic Kazushi Miyamoto tried to reason with her. “No need to get angry at the messenger…”

“Yeah, seriously, Yukari-san!” Kenji winked. “I bet you and Airi-san would be super cute!”

Unimpressed, the glamorized girls shot death glares at their admirers. It wasn't the ideal attention he wanted, but he smirked at Yukari looking at him for once.

“Tomochika-san has ‘added fuel to the fire’,” remarked Aigis. Turning to the side after putting down the boxes, Junpei gave her two thumbs up for her savvy use of words.

“I’m just disappointed. Think about it! That maid outfit and Airi-san’s sexy English would make our class the best in the festival!”

Natsuki joined in the anger. “Hey, if she doesn’t wanna dress up, then don’t pressure her!”

“Y-Yeah!” Fuuka chimed in.
“Sheesh, you just can’t take a compliment! Man, you ladies are so uptight!”

“Oh, get used to it, Tomochika,” grinned Airi as she finished closing the box. “Older women are even worse with all their wisdom and years of experience. They know the difference between flirting and harassment.”

Her change of attitude threw off the boys a bit. Junpei, however, snorted. “Way to kill a man’s dreams, Aibana!”

“That’s why it’s not worth playing that game without a thick skin,” said Kazushi with a sigh.

Aigis nodded. “Perhaps that is why her peers call her a ‘bombshell?’”

Just as she finished speaking, everyone – including Airi – stared in bafflement at her. That was news for the poor person this topic concerned. The boys were awestruck at the deadpan seriousness in her tone. Never had such strange silence overtake the room.

Frowning and hand to chin like a scholar, the robot concluded, “Hmm, perhaps I must research figures of speech more carefully before experimenting.”

Eventually everyone brushed it off and continued cleaning. Fuuka and Natsuki agreed to start the hunt for the missing maid outfit before the day ended. The class of 2-F continued to goof off and ramble on topics from cross-dressing to English accents and group dates to music concerts. The long black-haired ponytail of tomboy Rio from volleyball stopped by too to hang out.

“Hey, did you hear that Risette was gonna perform at Escapade?” Yukari brought up with some girls while taking a water break in the front of the classroom.

“Yeah, I know!” said one girl with pigtails. She bounced around so much, half of her water spilled over the cup. “She cancelled the gig over a stupid power outage!”

“Maybe she’ll come back again next year?” asked Rio, sitting on one of the desks and looking rather mellow.

“I sure hope so!” said Airi. She leaned against the podium and beamed. “I worked up a bunch of money back home for that ticket! I better get another chance. Maybe over the summer when I don’t have classes!”

“You totally should!” another girl with a black bob high fived Airi. “I was so depressed for a week!”

The pigtailed girl tilted her head to the side and commented quickly, “You know, you kinda look and sound like her, Fujihara-san!”

“You think so? But I can’t sing at all.”

“She’s right about that,” Yukari confirmed wryly. “Sometimes she’s listening to her mp3 and starts singing and dancing like no one’s watching. It’s so embarrassing!”

“Yuka!”

Rio laughed and lightly poked her teammate in the arm. “That’s alright! Practice hasn’t been the same since you stopped doing solos in the showers. It was almost as fun as karaoke during the Inaba retreat! You nailed all the English songs!”

“Really??” Yukari was shocked that such gossip did not reach her ears. “Well, you’d be surprised
how many of us often catch Airi in the dorm. Mitsuru-sempai made several references to her hobby when reminding us about not walking out at night. Supposedly some caught her doing that and tattled. Akihiko-sempai hears her from the hallway on the second floor after he returns from his morning jogs. Even Junpei saw her on camera from the security system on numerous occasions!"

Overhearing the public humiliation, Junpei laughed and yelled, “Don’t be shy, Aibana! It hasn’t leaked onto the internet yet! A shame, though! You’d have a great debut!”

“Yet?! What I have done to deserve blackmail, you jerk?!”

“Junpei-san,” Aigis poked his shoulder. “I suggest you start running. Quickly.”

Soon enough, the red-eyed girl launched over the desks and charged after her oldest friend in the room. Both had incredible stamina, so the commotion lasted all throughout the afternoon.

Once Toriumi came to check on everyone before sundown, she sighed at the half-finished mess in a room that supposedly did not suffer the winds of the typhoon. Not much was completed for the rest of the day. The good news? Fuuka and Natsuki found the missing maid costume. Rather than return it to 2-F, they gave it to Mitsuru. The student council president felt lax that day and agreed to take it back to the dorm for future blackmail potential.

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September 28, 2009

Spending hours at a desk did not represent a compelling aspect of the human lifespan, but Theo valued the silence he did not often have with his sisters and Igor in the Velvet Room. That fragment of the Collective Subconscious would always be home to him with its white noise undetectable to the living human ear, but he swore its melody did not resonate as strongly as he remembered. He thought little of it as of late as he dedicated every waking hour to his new role for Airi. In this very moment he wanted to review his notes and predict the growth projections for Airi’s friends, but SEES’ existence depended upon Theo playing his cards right with men who sought to sabotage their mission like Ekoda.

"It’s interesting our stakeholders allowed you to take Ikutsuki’s position within such short notice, Arisato-san. Almost as if they expected the former chairman to lose clout and wanted to resolve an inevitable nuisance quickly."

Theo stirred his untouched, sweetened decaf coffee and smiled. "Your concerns are welcome. I will forward them to the Kirijo Group right away if your heart desires."

"O-Oh, do not worry them. I am merely thinking aloud."

"But surely I should inform Kirijo at the very least. He would appreciate any feedback from school staff who do not approve of how Gekkoukan operates. I will also inform him that many teachers are concerned about the privileged status of the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad and how its members are some of the most productive and well disciplined students in the school."

"Forgive me, but the fact no one understands what that club is and why it exists are valid concerns that continue to be unaddressed. One of my students is a member. She disappeared for a few days last spring, and I am certain her parents would not want her reputation to be further tarnished - "

"SEES found Yamagishi when school staff and the police failed, did they not?" Theo’s voice was a blade that sliced through the cake, its plate, and the table.
Ekoda's face contorted into a frown and his back stiffened. "Yes. However - "

"Kirijo's daughter had a few choice words about your complacency in Yamagishi's disappearance, did she not?"

He cleared his throat, reluctantly replying, "Yes, she did."

"No formal complaints have been made against them, so there is no grounds to launch an investigation. The stakeholders and the Group want to exercise their influence over actual claims of conflicts of interest or violations against the school's code of conduct. Until such actions take place, I will not endorse a witch hunt bred from personal grudges."

Theo watched Ekoda's evolving expressions as he stood from his seat and adjusted his tie. The middle aged man lived in this world far longer than him, and the Velvet Room denizen refused to believe he was winning this game. "Mitsuru cannot hide behind you or her father forever."

"I could not agree with you more!" he added with a smile, sipping his coffee (a bitter brown backwash that a Shadow would never touch and that he reluctantly swallowed) and cushioning the cup back on his barren desk with his pinky. "She grew up in a world people like us cannot understand, and she appears childish sometimes. However, the best method to teach someone like her that the world is not a toy for her entertainment is to find the high ground and seize it. If one abandons order and responsibility to subvert an intelligent and cautious rich man, a senseless storm will brew where all but the original intentional target suffers. Please follow procedures, Ekoda. They exist for a reason."

That silenced the teacher for good. Theo stared, noting the angle of the gaze and the intense purple of the face of his newfound enemy. Nothing could be said to break the painful tension in the room; Ekoda dropped the files on his person to Theo's desk and walked out with a heaviness to his step that would punch a hole through the earth if on the ground floor. Theo read its contents once he counted down the seconds until the teacher was far from the office door and inputed the data into his computer. Computer technology and the bizarre way it channeled magic no longer startled Theo, but he bought many books and pens to ease his mind at work or solve problems.

As he updated the database, he continued projecting SEES' chances of rescuing Shinjiro and drafted the most effective weapons for fusion on sheets of looseleaf and napkins from the cafe he purchased breakfast. Assimilating made Theo crave food, drink, sleep, and entertainment more often than he anticipated. He told no one of the changes he felt, but there was no doubt Margaret would be the first to notice the subtle differences in his behavior. She had every right to worry, but the obsessive need to critique every move made home uncomfortable enough for Airi to comment. His mistress needed to devote herself to her love, not the innumerable years of complicated sibling politics that had no bearing on the fate of her life force. He and Margaret would resolve the growing divide between them with Igor and Elizabeth's help and nothing more.

By the end of the day his body ached of exhaustion from lack of sleep, the burden of serving Airi, and arguing with two other teachers who complained about SEES's existence. After work he strolled through the city to clear his mind and hide all signs of him becoming too human for his siblings' and Igor's liking. As he wandered he arrived at the police department where Kurosawa worked. The officer handled his demotion well, but the fire that could have easily evolved into resentment fueled his motivation to continue helping SEES and the few in the Kirijo Group who had no desire for the end of the world. Kurosawa spotted Theo, waved for him to enter, and finished his conversation with an elderly woman who thanked him for finding her husband who disappeared a few days ago. Theo bowed and smiled at Mitsuko Kitamura as she left the station, and she muttered about the kindness of strangers in this day and age.
"How does it feel to receive the praise meant for another?" Theo as he approached the counter.

Kurosawa briefly broke the facade of calm he wore and buried his face in his hands. Theo noted the bags under his eyes and the deepened wrinkles in his skin. "It would be better if I were back in Paulownia Mall."

"It proves that the people admire you enough to travel to the other side of Tatsumi Port Island to see you."

"Maybe." The officer wiped the frustration off his face and turned to give the report he prepared for his guest. "No escape attempts yet. Interrogation has produced no results, and one officer has threatened violence. Knowing the man, he'll definitely act on those threats at this rate."

Theo skimmed through the report detailing nearly every move, sound, and word Ikutsuki made. "The Nine would not give up their secrets to mundane people. If you need my assistance, I will gladly render it."

"You have enough to worry about. This... conspiracy is beyond my scope and abilities, but Ikutsuki is in my territory and is thus my responsibility. I have already limited his consumption of those drugs." The last thing Kurosawa said caught Theo's ear more than the declining of aid. He added, "There's an unsolved drug abuse case we're looking into. Beyond that I cannot say. We're still running tests on what Ikutsuki 'needs' to take. Once we have a breakthrough, you will have a thorough report."

"I see. Well done, Kurosawa."

"It's my job." He nodded at an officer as she left for the evening. The two exchanged a few more gestures Theo could not decode before the woman went through the door. "For your own sake, minimize your visits. I'm not lacking allies as I used to, and the momentum will slow if you or Kirijo appear too often."

A light blush painted Theo's cheeks. He chuckled and brushed imaginary dust off his jacket. "I understand. Thank you for your consideration."

"If there's nothing else, I need to get back to work. You should go home and rest while you can. The operation is in six days?"

"Six days of sleepless nights, yes." Theo's lip curled into a smirk as he secured the report under his arm and prepared to leave. "I can never rest so long Airi-chan needs me to render her aid, and I wouldn't want it any other way."
October 4, 2009, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Part 4: The Night to Remember

Chapter Notes

Here it is. October 4, 2009. The day that traumatized Airi. The day that was the catalyst for a new journey that created even more torment and heartbreak for the poor girl. I really hope she can work through this and move on, regardless of the outcome.

Back when I first experienced ‘Persona 3’, I frequently insisted that this day was a lie and that it never happened. Shinjirō was my favorite character from day one, and so his death (predictably) broke me. It took me two years to beat the original version of the story via FES because I learned of Minako's route in Portable and I was too devastated to finish Minato's route. Nowadays I've recovered enough to not go into a trigger-happy rage, but the scars still hurt. Sometimes your favorite stories and characters must inflict that kind of misery on you when you don't want or expect it.

Anyway, the day has arrived. Let the pain and drama commence... in multiple chapters.

October 4, 2009

It was 11:47 in the morning. Before starting his entire day of errands with his position at Gekkoukan and meeting with Takeharu Kirijo, Theo visited to drop off new weapons, reports from Kurosawa, and breakfast from a local bakery to keep SEES in as good of a mood as possible. Dressed in long casual wear appropriate for winter, everyone sat in the command room in slightly different places: Akihiko, Aigis, and Ken on the footrests; Mitsuru in the armchair; Yukari, Fuuka, and Junpei on the couch with Koromaru at their feet. Airi stood at the end of the coffee table closest to the door to the hallway. In her hands were a sketchbook and a pen.

“I didn’t know you were artistic,” remarked Junpei.

She shrugged. “I’m nowhere as good as Chidori.”

“It’s still pretty cool if ya ask me, makin' use of your talent and all.”

Mitsuru's eyes fell on him. “Let her focus, Iori.”

He zipped his lips tightly and straightened the sleeves of his heavy blue sweatshirt. The others patiently waited for her to finish her work, but some sat on the edge of their seats. Yukari was particularly fidgety. “You know, my dad said we should avoid the Shadows and take down the Children. Shouldn’t we consider that?”

“We shouldn't. The Dark Hour will remain and Shadows will continue to attack innocent people,”
Airi replied. “The twelve Shadows and the Children – with Thanatos last – must be killed no matter what.”

“There are no other options?” Yukari asked, resting her elbow on the arm of the couch.

“No, there aren’t.” Pangs of regret ate at her, but she said, "In the last cycle, went after the Nine Children and we didn’t go after the twelve Shadows. I failed, SEES fell apart, and the Fall arrived without resistance. Theo told me everything I missed because my soul left that timeline at a certain point, so to speak.”

No one said a word as they let her thoughts soak up her words. They wondered what the details were, but some of the less forgetful and more observant remembered Aizawa mentioning how the last time Airi relived this year ended with lots of death. The thought of Shinjiro dying depressed them enough, but Airi's death - even if it was only short lived in the grand scheme of things - distressed them even more.

"I understand," said Yukari, letting go of her skepticism on this topic for now. "Thanks for letting us know."

Aigis, however, had her hand on her chin in imitative contemplation as her brows furrowed. “If I may change the subject, Airi-san, is Thanatos one of your Persona?”

This admittance made Airi feel a bit more bold in how much she could reveal to her friends without changing the direction of their personal growth. “He is and isn't. What's on your mind?”

“When I awakened in the Kirijo Group's Yakushima facility, I knew nothing but the data my observers transferred into my platform. Something much like a 'gut feeling' told me to find a girl with auburn hair and red eyes. I am to do everything in my power to ensure her safety. From what threat, I have not yet realized. Perhaps Aizawa-san knew the reason and deleted my memories.”

Junpei and Yukari hung their heads.

“As a pain in the ass as this all is, at least Airi sees the bigger picture,” Akihiko reminded halfheartedly. He was not pleased either, but he had to find the bright side.

“But if he's 'not really' your Persona, what is Thanatos exactly?” asked Yukari.

“Long story short, he’s a foreign entity temporarily sealed in my body,” said Airi, focusing as intently on her answer as her drawing. "He only makes himself known when I'm under tremendous stress. Otherwise, he reminds me when the next full moon arrives like an annoying alarm clock you can’t shut off no matter how many times you press the button. Don't worry; he won't be stuck in me for much longer.”

One of the few reasons Airi's friends accept her being supposedly all knowing was Fuuka carefully measuring her truthfulness based off aura and body language. As she had done many times, she nodded to her doubtful peers when Airi said something seemingly outlandish. Junpei trusted his gut, which told him to stick with the field leader. Mitsuru did not appreciate the attempts at humor this time, but she accepted the abridged truth.

Koromaru sat restlessly and whined. “My 'desire' for the truth can wait until after we save Shinjiro-san's life,” said Aigis.

Mitsuru bit her lip and crossed her legs. “Since Fujihara insisted that Thanatos should be our last enemy and we are in no position to stop him now without harming her, I believe we should remain focused on our immediate obstacles.”
“I agree,” said Akihiko. Red scarf was wrapped lopsidedly on his neck, he rocked back and forth on the ottoman. “As long as we’re not lounging around like slugs, we can stop the Shadows and the Nine before January 31st. Besides, we’ve been training every week. I know we can handle this.”

Not much time passed when Airi sighed and put down her pencil on the coffee table. Fuuka tapped her feet together and said, “You’re pretty quick, Airi-chan. What will we face tonight?”

She eyed her companions and gave the sketchbook to Junpei. Everyone took his or her turn to look at it and passed it along. Two figures took up the page. On the right was a woman wearing a mask with an XI. She stood in a floating, swirling bundle of flowers, reminiscent of beds in a public park. To her right was a metallic three-legged winged lion with an X-engraved mask. At its feet sat a roulette wheel.

“Th-There’s two of them?” uttered Yukari, jaw hanging.

Fuuka counted with her fingers. “Ten and eleven. They must be Fortune and Strength.”

Junpei fidgeted, half excited and half anxious. “Alright, tonight’s gonna be tough, but we got this!”

“Are you sure we’ll be fighting them, Airi-san?” Ken asked with a nervous frown.

“We will. Fortune’s a pain, but this is the easiest part tonight. At least I know how we can beat them.”

By Airi's side sat Koromaru, who examined everyone’s reactions, raging from shock to disbelief. He remained silent, waiting for a general consensus. In the meantime, he occasionally rubbed against her leg. No one had to ask what his opinion was on this revelation.

“This illustration is very detailed,” Aigis commented.

“Are you convinced, Aigis?” asked Mitsuru curiously.

“Airi-san lowers her voice and refuses to give steady eye contact when she lies. Fuuka-san confirmed my theory,” she said bluntly. Fuuka slouched and hung her head, fearing any glares Airi could sent her way if she were petty enough. “Ignoring the debate about the probability of time manipulation, this is something we must consider a likely event.”

Her short speech impressed Koromaru, who barked approvingly. She gratefully petted his head when he ran to her. Head low, Akihiko gave Airi back the sketchbook and cracked his knuckles.

“I admit I still do not understand what is supposed to happen to Shinjiro tonight,” said Mitsuru. “How accurate was Aizawa’s account?”

“Remember when you said you’d join us?” Yukari reminded Airi with more disappointment in her voice than frustration. “We want you to be honest with us, Airi. It goes both ways.”

Fuuka hummed her agreement soothingly and carefully compared to her fellow females. The others told their concern with their eyes. Airi held her sketchbook close to her chest and sighed. The floodgates opened and she began to pace.

“Everyone was here in the command room, except Aragaki-sempai and Ken-kun, as Fuuka was searching for Strength and Fortune. Junpei checked the dorms earlier, but he said they weren’t in their rooms. Fighting Strength and Fortune was our highest priority, so we left without knowing exactly where Aragaki-sempai and Ken-kun were. After the battle ended, Akihiko-kun went off to check around town while the rest of us came back here. It turned out they were behind Port Island
Station near the seedy bar and where the burned-down apartments used to be. Ken-kun planned to kill him to avenge his mother on the day she died, so it made sense to meet where that terrible event took place. But before he could try to kill him, Ta–”

Airi hesitated, she realized how quickly she spoke. Blood pulsed violently throughout her body. She breathed deeply. The sketchbook squished her breasts until they hurt. She went on, feeling tears sting her eyes.

“Kirijo-sempai remembered the meaning of the day and knew something was wrong. It took a minute but Fuuka finally sensed them... and she saw Takaya move towards them. We tried to get there in time, but h-he... w-we were too late. Not even Akihiko-kun could…” Her eardrums pounded at the memory of that gunshot. She wiped her eyes and ignored her swollen throat. “Sh-Shinji... he shielded Ken-kun when h-he already was shot…”

The feelings of hopelessness and despair returned, along with the memories. He turned his back to the group and stared at the empty sky. Before he could walk away with little strength he had left, Airi stood in his way. He read her face, finding her reaction pathetic. In spite of the incredible pain, he laughed.

“Tch, now you care? Don’t bother... This is how it should be…”

A shock flowed through his body and Shinjiro collapsed. He fell towards her, leaving no choice but for her to catch him. His weight brought her to her knees. The blood erupted from his chest and onto her clothes. He coughed uncontrollably, spraying even more blood over her. She froze, unable to comprehend the cruelty of cradling the self-sacrificing man she once believed a vagrant.

“Why... are you crying, Airi...?”

He gasped sharply and his body slumped. His face looked forlornly peaceful in spite of the blood and excruciating pain. Airi couldn’t find her voice in time to apologize for how she ignored, doubted, and distrusted him at every opportunity despite her friends’ protests and the lack of evidence to prove her suspicions right.

She nearly lost herself completely into the memory, and all the years of reliving and remembering the moment adding more pain and blood than was ever truly there, had Koromaru not sternly pressed his muzzle against her leg. The scar on her ankle long healed, but the tingling sensitivity occasionally reminded her. Her friends waited for Airi to continue as they painted the story in their minds to understand a fraction of her perspective.

“I’m sorry... We can stop the Fall without him, but... I just wish it didn’t have to happen like that. I-I blamed myself the first time it happened... I still can't forgive myself... I might never.”

Hearing herself ramble on, she continued to clean up her face. Her friends sat quietly and digested the story slowly. When Fuuka started to sniffle in understanding, Mitsuru went around the room with tissues, a handful she slipped into her pocket when no one was looking.

“No, I should be sorry,” said Ken, rubbing his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie. “I’ve been selfish
wanting Shinjiro-san dead. I’d never know that if I hadn’t met you guys. You listened to me, spent time with me, and accepted me. I don't feel so lonely anymore.” He took his Evoker out from his pocket and stared at his reflection. For a brief second, he saw the purple form of his Persona flash behind his other self. “I don’t know if I can forgive him yet, but I can’t try to move on if I keep hating him. I won't throw my life away when I can use my powers stop the Fall. People do care enough to fight for me. If I can understand that, so can Shinjiro-san.”

Something powerful swelled in Ken’s chest. The pain he held onto for so long didn’t vanish completely, but he felt blessed with newfound strength. Upon a second glance at his reflection, a red and black figure appeared behind him. Across from him, Fuuka’s eyes widened and she pressed her hands together happily. Yukari recognized her reaction and smiled, thrilled another one of gang had found some resolution. Unsure what to say, Airi grabbed a few tissues from the coffee table and watched him grow up much sooner than she expected. Fuuka sneezed into a tissue Junpei offered her.

The eldest brother in the room patted the boy on the back. “We’re proud to have you, Ken.”

The boy croaked sheepishly, unfamiliar with someone he admired so much praising him.

A moved Mitsuru batted her eyelashes to mask how swollen her eyes really were. “I hope we will formally bury the hatchet someday when this is all over, Amada.”

“Y-Yes, Mitsuru-san.” Fighting the urge to hug her and everyone around him became even more difficult as Ken placed his Evoker on his lap and sat on his hands.

“Don’t be embarrassed, Ken-kun,” said Airi. She cleared her throat and gathered her bearings. “You cheered me up a little… really.” Shy and quiet, Ken’s lips trembled.

Waiting for a moment to speak, Aigis raised her hand. “What’s up, Ai-chan?” Junpei elbowed her to lighten the air a little.

She nodded hesitantly. Her humanity was shining through very, very clearly by this point. “Forgive me, but we cannot celebrate yet. Shinjiro-san is still trapped in the hospital.”

And thus Ken regained some of his sense of emotional control as the moment of bonding dissipated. At least Aigis apologized, the more sensitive SEES members admitted in the midst of their frustration.

“We must plan for tonight’s operation,” stated Mitsuru. She straightened the collar of her black jacket and welcomed the return to a restrained mood she lived with for much of her life. “Amada is with us, and we know Shinjiro’s location. Our chances for rescue are much higher than in the scenario Fujihara described.”

Junpei took off his hat and scratched his head. “So, what do we do, boss? Split up?”

Yukari put her hand to her chin and thought aloud. “But who goes with who?”

“How’re your hands, sempai? Can you fight?”

“I’m afraid not, Iori.” She wore fewer bandages around her hands, but Mitsuru didn’t want to risk stressing them further.

Akihiko snapped his fingers in realization. “Can’t you analyze an enemy without using your Evoker?”
“Not without my portable device. Both it and my motorcycle will require consistent use of my hands.”

“True, but turning dials occasionally hurts far less than you firing your Evoker every ten seconds. Just keep a safe distance and one of us will protect you.”

“Perhaps. I’m not as talented with analysis as Yamagishi, however.”

“W-We can still communicate with each other,” Fuuka suggested. “The connection you should have with the others will be more stable than when you rescued me.”

“The distance should be much shorter too,” Akihiko added. “You’ll be alright.”

A series of loud, short barks erupted from the canine. “He says, ‘Four of us should stay to attack the Shadows while five can go to the hospital.’”

“Just four?” Ken looked at his upperclassmen anxiously. “Can we handle the Shadows with so few of us?”

“Of course, the rest of us were always backup,” said an impatient Akihiko. “I’ll go with the hospital group since I’m carrying Shinji’s things. Once we get him, I’ll make him join the fight.”

His frequent critic heaved a sigh. “He may not have fully healed and his heart might not take it. Don’t get carried away, Akihiko. Things could end badly if we rush this.”

The air grew sour once more. Not once had they ever thought the stakes would be so high so soon.

Strong at last, Airi got up to her feet. She flipped a page in her sketchbook and started writing. “We’ve got the basics. I’ll help us prepare for what our enemies are capable of.”

“Please do,” said Aigis, adding a salute to her friend.

It was 8:23 at night. Chidori never deviated from her usual routine: two physical therapy sessions and three meals a day. She filled the rest of her time with drawing or sleeping. She allowed some things to take over a few of her many hours of nothingness: Junpei, her need for the suppressants, or tracking other Persona-users.

Chidori often studied what made SEES so strong whenever she sensed them tear Tartarus. Sure, it was mostly the power of friendship that fueled most Saturday morning cartoons, but communication played an important role. They talked out their problems, planned, and cooperated despite their differences. Defeating Epiphron was based on luck without Airi, but SEES pulled through to make up for their lack of preparation and reliable leadership.

Strega never operated like SEES. Takaya was the leader and Jin the informant. Chidori was only the invisibility cloak. She and Jin were only useful tools to further Takaya’s goals, often with a plan he came up with on the spot. In the best-case scenario, their belligerent “allies” put up a few kilometers of red tape in their way. Chidori saw how Airi was a better leader than Takaya. After watching her interact with her friends from a distance, Chidori realized she balanced her interests with those of others in response to her fears. An outside force left a fingerprint on her and fed those fears. Based on what she’d seen, Chidori believed the multiple-timeline story was true, but it was only told through a biased bard.

When she returned back from her thoughts, Chidori examined her new sketch. Airi wielded her
naginata in her right hand, pointing it defiantly at a horned figure upon a platform in the midnight void. In her left was a silver pocket watch with its chain holding a variety of trinkets of some supposed sentimental value. Around her were the shapes of monsters, and a silhouette of silver streams descending from the colossal full moon. Seeing the mysterious image inspired some hope for a peculiar reason. The feeling was so miniscule, however, like it would flicker out because of one minor misstep. The dark shapes and violent carnage filled her with dread.

She shook her head at the crazy image that somehow came from her soul and flipped the page over. However, the image that appeared before her confused her even more. “What am I drawing…?”

“You know, when I was a kid, I had this crazy dream… I wanted to grow up to be a pro baseball player. Pretty stupid, huh?”

The subject of this sketch puzzled Chidori because there was nothing special about it. Just a normal person. Nobody of importance to the world. But it was that contradiction of something ordinary that still inspired her to care that made that boy likable.

Then a knife tickled her spine. A voice growled within her. Eyes wide, Chidori dropped her things and gasped, “Medea…!”

Above her appeared a vision of her dark Persona with long curly blonde hair and a ram’s mask. She held a blade in one hand and a flaming goblet in the other. Unlike the time she nearly strangled her host the Persona raised her glass and showed no signs of aggression.

“Medea, tell me what they are planning.”

The figure lifted her arm with the goblet in hand and pointed to the west. She also brought her free hand with the blade to her own neck.

“That cannot happen. I must warn him.”

It was 10:16 at night in the closed doors of an examination room in the clinic. The news Kurebayashi received troubled him. “I apologize but I believe I misheard you. What happened?”

The white-haired biker leaned against the wall with a vision test. He shrugged, saying, “Jin hacked the database and found the recording. Someone walked in, stole the pills, and attacked Morpheus last night.”

“It happened in the Dark Hour, so we don't know who did it,” added the hacker with the bomber jacket. He sat on the examination table and slipped metallic powder into a fist-sized incendiary shell. “Either your leak's a thug beneath that uptight three-piece suit or someone on the force's got a Persona.”

"Or Kirijo gave the police the temporary power to enter the Dark Hour at will. Any of these possibilities are problematic.”

Twirling his stethoscope in hand, the doctor paced the room. He massaged his temples to clear the budding headache after a long day of tackling a long line of emergencies. “Can you determine potential motivations for this encounter?”
“Revenge? Sabotage? Who the fuck knows?” Finished wrapping up a device in protective coating, Jin folded his arms. “‘Sides it’s not like we can waltz in there and ask questions. That Kurosawa’s got our damn faces on file and I ain’t givin’ him my fingerprints.”

Takaya was displeased with his partner’s response. He swiftly took his newly polished revolver holstered at his belt. “Be still, Jin. The details behind this incident are not of importance. Only the present matters. Tonight is the fourth of October, the night Nemesis can truly become one of us. We must move on with the plan. Do you not agree, Aether?”

Red eyes shined enigmatically. “My lovely jasmine has indeed recovered from the storm, but I am amused you told Jin to be still, considering you appear anxious yourself.”

The bearer of Hypnos checked the cylinder of his revolver, finding all but one chamber bullet-less. He reloaded as he stared inquisitively at Kurebayashi. “I do not understand you. Why waste time preserving that girl's happiness? Castor's life is no more important than any other forced into this world.”

Jin shot up out of his seat and objected, “Maybe you shouldn’t throw your life away over a pointless cause, Takaya. If you kill him – ”

“The spoiled brats will be full of despair and Nemesis will be brought into our ranks. The last three Shadows will be defeated and Thanatos will return. Do you not wish for this?”

“Epiphron and Hemera are dead. Charon is missing. We’ve lost Nemesis too if that bitch, – Jin ignored Kurebayashi’s offense tickling the back of his neck – “talked the brat out of it. We oughta lay low and let the brats do their thing. Our strength should rely on numbers, which we don’t got. Three against ten is suicide!”

Kurebayashi spoke calmly despite his nails threatening to tear holes in the sleeves of his coat. “Epiphron attacked Nemesis, and we must consider that killing Castor will not turn the tide in our favor either. The revenge the boy fostered is waning, Hypnos. We must change our strategy before our advantages lose value and relevance.”

“And without Chidori, we can’t see their progress. If we must do something, gettin’ her back is the priority.”

The metallic singing of a cocked weapon was Takaya’s answer. He held his revolver and caressed it dearly. “You realize they have not faced the true potential of our powers. This is an opportunity we cannot afford to waste.” Takaya put his revolver away and placed a hand on the door. He turned his head to glare in defiance at the cynics. “Castor and Nemesis are within our grasp. I will not let them escape from their fates on this poetic day.”

“Takaya, please!” pleaded Jin, rising to his feet.

The leader of Strega stood aback at this act of defiance. “I see your passion has dwindled as well, Moros. Not once have you ever looked to the future with such dread. You fear death.”

“Fuck that! Ya know I’d rather die than let your wish go unfulfilled!”

“Then join me, Jin. This is for the Parents we were chosen to serve. We must prove our existence by demonstrating our true power over darkness!”

“Not when we have the choice to not act! Don’t be so reckless!”

His words slapped Takaya in the face. “Jin?!”
The blue-haired Osakan adjusted his glasses and replied quietly, “Sorry. Those were your words once, not mine. I’ve never left your side after all these years. This is the only life I’ve ever known! But the cost of actin’ now with everything on the line ain’t worth it, not tonight.”

The two stared at each other silently for some time. Kurebayashi said nothing to push anyone one way or another. The air congealed in a thick but cold film around them. Their auras drained light and energy from the room.

The oppressively empty exchange ended when Takaya sighed. “Never have you disappointed me so, Jin.” He took out a sandwich bag from his back pocket and tossed it to Jin. “I shall return and prove your qualms a fantasy.” Rubbing his clammy forehead, he opened the door and walked out.

Jin lowered his head and crushed the bag in his hands. He reached into his jacket pocket and held out a bottle of his suppressants. In frustration he unscrewed the top and slipped all but three of the pills from the bag into the bottle. He took the remaining ones and swallowed them.

“Are you alright?” inquired Kurebayashi. He knew the young man’s disposition would become a liability if he increased the recommended dosage without flinching.

“Fuck off. Go play with your lab rats.”

The middle-aged man remained stoic while under fire. “Believe it or not, none of us asked for our powers when we received them. Some accepted their fates better than others.”

“Just get your head outta your ass.” Jin leapt off his seat and said with his back to Kurebayashi before leaving, “Thanatos better be worth all this fuckin’ ‘round for.”

Alone in the room, Kurebayashi shut the door and bitterly laughed at himself. “That child is no fool. Perhaps I should fear my own creation.”

It was twenty minutes to midnight. Kurosawa leaned against the counter and stared out the windows of the department. This side of Iwatodai was almost as busy as Paulownia Mall on the weekends, but this night was relatively uneventful. Sometimes while on front desk duty in his old position he would occasionally see the kids from SEES wander around. They would hit the arcade, shop around, or stop by the antique store a former Kirijo employee owned to trade in strange gems they found in “Tartarus” for items and equipment. Now he rarely saw them if only because they had to go the opposite way of Port Island.

Kurosawa read over the notes Takeharu Kirijo gave him through Teodora Arisato. He struggled to suspend disbelief in the beginning of his investigation; eventually he gave up when the Kirijo CEO brought in parts of early prototypes for the time manipulation device his grandfather conceived. Upon touching them, Kurosawa experienced an oppressive force press against his chest. The world was dark and empty, save a few onyx coffins where nearby officers stood in the department. Voices from an unknown person or place scratched against his ear, but he had little trouble ignoring it. If that was only a fraction of what those kids experienced, Kurosawa knew the police were useless. Still, he was satisfied helping out with small legal things, like resolving up property damage disputes or locking up the Children.

“It’d sure be nice if the city doesn’t get completely destroyed in the process,” he muttered to himself. Arisato revealed little of his nature in comparison, but his confidence in SEES’s success did calm him enough to not press a willing ally too much.
Closing and reorganizing the files after the twentieth read, Kurosawa yawned. He hated the overnight shift. Wiping down the counters and re-filing paperwork kept him preoccupied for only so long. His peers often mocked him as they left for home, and they expressed gratitude they weren’t stuck with some joked was low-paying janitor duty. Just as he took out his cigarette lighter to play with, the bell from the entrance door rang. In came someone who actually liked what he did. He almost didn’t recognize her with her hair in pigtails.

“Fujihara-kun, what brings you all the way out here at this hour?”

The girl waved and rushed up to the counter. “Tonight’s an operation. We set out early because something big is coming. But before I go out, I wanted to ask you for something.”

Realizing he probably looked far less pleased to see a friendly face than he really was, he relaxed the furrows of his brow. “Go on.”

Airi bowed again apologetically. “A friend of mine lost something. It’s an old silver pocket watch. Has someone reported it, or turned it in?”

“Ha!” Kurosawa exclaimed in relief, making Airi jump. “Lost people and items are up my alley for once. Give me a moment.”

Within seconds he went to a basket on top of a filing cabinet and took out the item. Upon returning to the front desk to show it, he saw Airi’s face light up like a Christmas tree. He gave it to her, and she bowed enthusiastically, too many times in one encounter.

“Oh my God,” she uttered in English. She took the hunter-case pocket watch and held it close to her heart. Realizing her overreaction, she blushed and spoke again in Japanese. “I can’t thank you enough, Kurosawa-san!”

He had enough energy to let out a small wry smile. “Had you come any later, I would’ve sold it to someone else.” Airi stared at him with a shocked expression. It was exaggerated, judging from the humor in her eyes. “Your friend is lucky to have you. His future might not be the brightest and he’s stubborn, but you’re giving him hope. It’s something we all need more than we want to admit.”

The certainty and warmth of his words threw Airi off. Her eyes widened. “Wait… You know whose watch this is?”

The officer tipped his hat to the girl and let out an elusive laugh. He expected the owner to pick it up before having to wrap it in tape and mail it, but the girl saved them the trouble. “I best not hold you for long, Fujihara-kun. Good luck tonight.”

Upon checking her phone’s clock, Airi gasped. She arranged the chain so the pocket watch could hang around her neck, under her scarf. If it really were a token of misfortune, she faintly hoped it would follow her and not him this time. “Thank you, Kurosawa-san.”
It was the Dark Hour. With sweaters, jackets, hoodies, and weapons no one was unprepared. By the time the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad finished stretching and organizing at the strip mall, the two giant Shadows, the flower woman and the winged lion, arrived at the station across the street from the misty darkness blanketing the city.

Loading her guns, Aigis pointed at the Shadows. “Strength and Fortune.”

“Aibana’s right on the nose again!” remarked Junpei.

Airi turned to her companions and pumped her fist. “Remember, any and all attacks will work except Hama and Mudo. The strategy…?”

“Finish Strength first, then target Fortune,” Aigis recounted.

Behind them on the second floor near Hagakure, Fuuka sat within Lucia’s protective shell. She telepathically said, “Infiltration Team has reached their destination. They reported no confrontations!”

“Sweet!” beamed Junpei.

“Let’s go, everyone;” ordered Airi, standing ready with her weapon.

“I’ll keep you updated! Please be careful!”

She, Junpei, and Aigis sprinted across the street and flanked the Shadows. Hermes emerged from his host’s soul and threw an Agialo bomb. Airi summoned Thoth, waving his hand and sending a medium-tier stream of electricity. Palladion glided across the ground and landed a blunt Fatal End upon the same target. The combined force ensured a critical hit. However…

Fuuka squeaked. “What?! Why is it still standing like nothing happened?“

“You can’t be serious!” screamed Junpei as he swung his two-handed sword fiercely. “That’s cheating!“

“She’s supposed to be stubborn!” yelled Airi, dodging a stream of flower petals aimed for her head.

Fuuka gasped. “Oh no! Fortune’s roulette wheel!“

“Aw, c’mon!“ Junpei groaned, whacking himself in the head with his ball cap.

Sure enough, a red carpet and wheel sprawled across the ground between the party and the Shadows. Fortune landed right on top and spun it. Helpless to chance, Airi mouthed under her breath that it wouldn’t land on a red panel.

When the very thing she dreaded happened, Airi screamed and forced her hand into her duffle bag. “Quick! Grab a Dis-Charm!”

Before her words could reach anyone, Junpei succumbed to the spell. His attention turned to his friends and he charged at Airi. This meant Aigis was left alone to deal with Strength. The Shadow
cast Tempest Slash upon the android, slightly sluggish thanks to her new clothes. Her agility boost wasn’t effective yet and she suffered a light hit to the elbow.

“Junpei-kun! Aigis-chan!” cried Fuuka.

Recovered quickly, Aigis called back, “Do not worry, Fuuka-san.” She started firing again and spoke in between rounds. “Maintain contact with Mitsuru-san.”

“O-Okay!” She shivered under her poncho and rubbed her arms. “I’ll… do my best…”

Airi caught Junpei in a headlock after sidestepping his awkward swing. Then she whacked on the side of the head and placed the Dis-Charm patch on his forehead. Within seconds, he returned to normal.

“Uh… Looks like July again, huh, Aibana?” cracked Junpei while shrugging off the spell and straightening his skewed hat.

She gave him a Medical Potion from her white sweatshirt pocket. “Not on my watch. We’re more than ready this time.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he held his sword. “Let’s do this!”

The two high-fived each other and rejoined Aigis in the fight. Being the only one capable of all types of magic on the team, Airi switched between Thoth’s electricity, Surt’s fire, Quetzalcoatl’s wind, and Titania’s ice and healing. Her friends focused their efforts on Strength and prepared for the worst when Fortune spun the wheel. Off in the background, placing her faith in Airi’s knowledge and leadership to command the battle without demanding her constant aid, Fuuka closed her eyes and tried to reach the others.

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He barely had any time to change into his school uniform when Chidori demanded him to get up and leave. At least a pair of pants and a dress shirt were still in the bedside table drawer so he did not have to hunt for clothes while trying to escape. He always preferred having his peacoat to the school uniform; without it, the cold outside would be unbearable like it was tonight. He had to escape. Chidori could read the Nine’s movements and report to him if he needed to take another turn. Her bored voice was more tolerable but less calming than Fuuka’s, but he couldn’t complain about her unexpected help.

“Your path is clear. Turn left on the next fork.”

Shinjiro lightly jogged through the halls of the third floor, passing onyx coffins. He remained barefoot to minimize chances of detection while providing enough traction on the blood-and-muck-infested dimension. Though most of the lingering Shadows were significantly weaker than him and intimidated by his Persona’s aura, he had no weapons or light protective gear under his clothes. Not even his stamina was that great; laying around waiting for stitches to close made him slightly out of shape. If he strained himself too much, his heart would protest vehemently.

When he reached the northern-most stairs, he sat down to catch his breath. Once he gets to the back door exit, Shinjiro would be free to hide in the alleys of the city. When daylight comes, he would reach the dorm and the prediction of his death would be unfulfilled. He would live. He could just imagine his friends’ reactions, their faces. Her face. Not once in two years had Shinjiro ever felt he could have a future so close to touch. Everyone was waiting for him. She was waiting for him. He instinctively touched his wrist, only to feel the absence of the beaded bracelet.
Wanting that bracelet back where it belongs, his motivation rejuvenated. He stood back up, took a step forward, and was interrupted.

“Wait! Avoid the east wing. Find another path and stay hidden.” Chidori sounded frightened.

“What is it? Are you caught?”

“Don’t question me. Avoid the east wing and get out of here. Your friends need you ali– AH!”

And then there was silence. Shinjiro muttered a curse under his breath and continued to tread lightly through the hospital, towards the east wing. Unsure if anyone was coming for him besides Strega, he chose to stay and investigate until backup returned.

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Thanks to Mitsuru’s guidance, Akihiko and Yukari sneaked around the back of the hospital where the ambulances were parked. Many coffins surrounded one of them, doors open with a small coffin laying on a stretcher.

“There must’ve been an emergency just before the Dark Hour,” he commented sadly.

“Yeah… I hope the person in trouble will be okay.”

“They might not if it’s a fire or a building collapse. I sure hope neither of those things happened.” Akihiko studied the door and his backpack dropped to ground with a muffled thud. “Hey, you got a hairpin or something?”

She nodded. A bunch of them lined up along her white choker. Yukari took one and gave it to her sempai. “You can pick locks?” she asked suspiciously.

“Er… I tried when I was a kid. Never managed to get it right.”

“Probably for the best then,” Yukari teased lightly. “Mitsuru- sempai does everything she can to keep you in a straight line.”

Kneeling down to work on the lock, he let himself laugh. “She can be like a fanatical mother sometimes. She was much harder on Shinji and me when it was just the three of us. None of us knew what we were doing back then.”

“We still don’t sometimes.”

“You think so? I think it’s much different now since there are ten of us rather than three. Even with this whole murder and Fall bullshit, I think we can handle it with the experiences we’ve picked up.”

“I guess you have a point. But I am glad Airi’s back.”

“Same. I was getting tired of the second floor smelling like cigarettes.”

Their conversation died out when Akihiko made little to no progress on picking the lock. Deciding to give him some room, Yukari stood on patrol. The night was quiet. Nothing but a few Mayas and Ravens stalked the area around a bed of red perennial flowers. Knowing those Shadows couldn’t stand a chance, they came nowhere close to the unusual humans. Bored, Yukari shot arrows at a few.

When the third raven wailed at its mortal blow, Akihiko dropped the pin. He turned around and whispered frantically, “What are you doing, Takeba?”
“A little target practice?”

“I’m not against the idea in theory, but you’ll draw too much attention. We’re sitting ducks out here.”

Realizing how much noise the creature made, echoing into the silent night, the girl stopped. Then she realized the stupidity of his statement. His white jacket, hair, and pants were a beacon in a sea of black and green. At least she wore a pink and grey athletic outfit with colors that muddled and darkened thanks to the green-filmed atmosphere. Rolling her eyes, Yukari retrieved good arrows to reuse.

Akihiko muttered curses under his breath. Breaking in wasn’t going too well. “Looks like we gotta break the glass.”

“And that won’t draw attention?” she scoffed at his hypocrisy. Her sempai was not using the right side of his brain that night.

“We’ve got no choice. The door’s not budging.”

Before she could protest, Akihiko threw his good fist into the glass, shattering it magnificently. They waited quietly for a while, anticipating any nearby threats that heard their commotion. Nothing was disturbed and Mitsuru remained silent. All clear, Akihiko put on his gloves and brushed away the sharpest pieces of glass so he could climb in through the window. An awkward thud on the other side marked his successful entry. Akihiko got to his feet and kicked the shards aside, not wanting his partner to suffer an injury. He opened the door once it was clear. Yukari stepped inside and gave him his bulky backpack.

They found themselves in a hallway near the storage wing. Blood and black ectoplasm stained the once shiny floors. The white walls within ten feet in front of them glowed a pale green. Everything beyond blended into pitch-blackness.

“Nice place to stay for a few weeks,” Akihiko said sarcastically. He nursed a cut from the glass with ointment.

The familiar omnipotent teammate contacted through their headsets. She sounded very happy. “Akihiko, do you enjoy leaving a trail of bread crumbs?”

“Relax, mère, we got in. Trust me, we’ll get Shinji back.”

“Takeba, restrain him for me if he gets out of hand.”

Yukari’s eyebrows arched towards her hairline. “Uh... how?”

“I apologize for this, but I slipped a few gifts in your purse.”

Surprised, girl checked her bag, which seen more than one pair of hands lately. It didn’t take her long to search and find a bright gem, glowing and alternating between white and aquamarine. The gem gave off an oddly familiar aura. The moment Akihiko felt it, all color drained from his body.

Yukari put two and two together and failed to suppress her grinning. “Where’d you find this, Mitsuru-sempai?” she asked.

“One of the Brave Wheels that ambushed us the other night was kind enough to leave behind some loot. I began studying the various gems we found in Tartarus that can help us if no one can cast a specific kind of elemental attack.”
“Or friendly fire?!” Akihiko nearly shouted.

“Only if Fujihara and I are not around to enact verbal discipline.” If either of them could see her face, she would have been smiling broadly. Akihiko sighed and rolled his eyes. “Anyway, you must press on.”

“Got it.” Turning around to face her partner, Yukari folded her arms. “Should we start looking on the third floor?”

“Definitely. We have to check if Shinji’s in his room.”

“I will not interfere unless I sense something amiss,” Mitsuru concluded before signing off.

They began their journey through the cold building. Akihiko suggested they lightly jogged so they could move quickly but have control of when to stop. The only downside to the method was the loud clicking their shoes made against the tiles. Either it would catch Shinjiro’s attention or an enemy’s. The hospital’s layout was more predictable than Tartarus’; travel was a cakewalk in spite of the dire circumstances. By now, the both of them had a good sense of direction when exploring the unknown. But since they have been to the hospital numerous times, this trip would be quick if all goes well.

When they reached the second floor of the east wing, they heard a shrill scream.

Yukari turned to her sempai and mumbled fearfully, “Is that…?!”

Thinking the exact same thing, Akihiko sped up his pace as they advanced to the source of the cry. Nothing seemed out of place. The walls and floors were as eerie as they were on the previous floor.

“Can you two hear me?” Mitsuru called.

“Loud and clear,” Akihiko kept his voice low. “You okay?”

“We had to change our location. Something startled Koromaru, and Penthesilea is detecting numerous anomalies closing in on us.”

“What’s going on?!?” exclaimed Yukari. “What do you mean, ‘anomalies’?”

“Don’t worry about us. Yamagishi and the others will back us up once they defeat Strength and Fortune. Their fight is ‘hilariously easy’, in Iori’s words, and Yamagishi and I had a lovely conversation since they did not require too much of her help.”

“Damn it, you better be right.”

“It’s not an emergency, Akihiko. What’s going on over there?”

“You can’t tell?!”

“No. Chidori may have cast a shroud over herself and Shinjiro. Perhaps she sensed another one of the Nine was coming and took precautions. If so, I cannot sense if there is another of the Nine out there.”

Getting her bow ready, Yukari sped up. “Keep us up to date, Mitsuru-sempai!”

“Roger. I expect the same from you.”

Not long after their conversation, Akihiko stopped to study a map of the hospital on the wall. They
were in the heart of the pediatrics ward. Yukari took a few seconds to memorize the layout and egged Akihiko to move on to find.

Then Yukari cursed under her breath. “Damn it! There’s a fork up ahead!”

But before they could make guesses, their backup spoke up. “I have found Chidori! Strega has her! Turn left!”

Akihiko brought out his gloves and lead on with Yukari and her bow in the back. The air thickened around them the further they went. Doors to patient rooms stood ajar, revealing the stuffed beds of vampires. Many of them were small, belonging to children. Muffled whispers crawled from around the next corner. The duo slowed down to a gentle walk to avoid detection. As they inched closer, they could hear the conversation between a man and a woman and an occasional slap that made the woman cry out.

“Now then, I will ask one last time. Where to has Castor escaped?”

“M-Medea…”

Chidori’s voice sounded neutral and dazed. When she did not answer quick enough, the man slapped her again. Then a gun clicked. Akihiko, eyes wide, turned to Yukari, her expression was identical to his. Weapons ready, they sidled against the wall.

“She will return when you cooperate. This delay will only birth more injury than gain.”

“Death is nothing to be afraid of…” Chidori muttered robotically.

“Then why risk your life to save the dying man? Dare you desire to waste your utility? You let Castor and that boy make you forget your place, your true path. What they offer you brings nothing but useless distractions.”

"That's-!" Chidori's protest died in her throat with a cough powerful enough to shatter bone.

Right when he reached the corner, Akihiko held his breath and carefully put his bag down. Holding a hand to stop Yukari, he mouthed a countdown to attack. She nodded in acknowledgement.

“Surely you understand. There is nowhere for you to go, Chidori. You must come with us. Our dream cannot be realized without your talents. So tell me. Where is Castor?”

Regaining some strength after her coughing fit, she said, “B-Behind... me.”

Akihiko nearly tripped over his own feet. Her statement perfectly synchronized with his countdown. Only missing the beat by a second, the boy tumbled across the floor and charged at Takaya once he regained traction.

“You!!” shouted Takaya, holding out his revolver. “How long did you wait there?!”

Blessed with adrenaline, Akihiko tracked the gunman’s aim and moved erratically. No way in hell was there another humanly possible way to dodge bullets. Akihiko demonstrated what he practiced when avoiding arrows from the occasional Cupids in Tartarus. But he lost his confidence when Takaya fired.

Yukari clasped her mouth shut and bit her tongue to not scream. Chidori's eyes widened so much they nearly fell out of her sockets.
“AKIHIKO!”

The bullet whizzed right above the gap between his skull and the cartilage of his ear. Akihiko noted to change his pants if he ever survived, but until then, he had to be deathly careful of the next one.

“What on earth are you doing?!” Mitsuru screamed, giving both the victim and his partner ruptured eardrums and colossal migraines. “Don’t bring fists to a gunfight! Fall back and save yourself! I need EVERYONE alive!!”

There was never a next bullet. For a moment Takaya was vulnerable, needing to reload the revolver after firing a blank. In the midst of this breather, Chidori crawled erratically away from the fray and towards Yukari to seek shelter. Her glazed eyes drooped heavily into the thick bags beneath them and her body was thin and frail from weeks of hospitalization. She bore bruises from the rest of the interrogation Yukari and Akihiko did not witness, and Yukari helped Chidori get in a position that would give Takaya no more power over her.

Akihiko apologized to himself and Mitsuru for his recklessness. He knew what he had to do, and he wasn’t going to run away without trying to fight to save his best friend. Just to be safe, he called out Caesar with his Evoker. This was Yukari’s chance to slip around the bag and pop out of her hiding place. An arrow struck Takaya’s left kneecap, causing him to cry in pain. He dropped his weapon and bullets to nurse the bleeding wound. He ducked to avoid the second arrow aiming for his shoulder.

Akihiko lunged forward. Takaya brought up his forearm to block his head from the punch, but the boy smiled and quickly changed his jab into a hook. The hit knocked Takaya in the chin. Then a lethal shock from Caesar casting Ziodyne burned his skin and singed his hair. Suffering quite a lot of fire so quickly, Takaya fell on his good knee. Akihiko took this moment to pick up the revolver and taking out a familiar object.

“Wh-What raw power… what speed!” hacked the man while opening the bottle. “You truly prepared for tonight!” When nothing came out, Takaya gasped. He shook and trembled nervously, patting down his pockets. He started to panic.

Glaring cockily, Akihiko snarled. “Clearly you haven’t. Unless Jin’s gonna show up? Or Kurebayashi?”

Takaya threw the empty bottle against the wall and sneered. “Only have concern for yourself! This ephemeral body is far from useless.”

Then a translucent lens covered his irises. He picked himself back up as if the beatdown never happened. His knee continued to swell and bleed under the forced strain. He denied the pain in his body from paralyzing his mental capacities. Clenching his head, his nailed dug deep into his scalp until his blond roots turned red. Groaning ecstatically, he collapsed once more. Only this time, Takaya spread his arms wide out and crimson mist poured out of his body like the wings of a butterfly.

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“The protective barrier around Fortune has vanished! You can attack it now!”

Strength was reduced to a large inky pond. The battle was almost over.

Rolling up her cardigan sleeve, Aigis showed off one of her new upgrades. A large barrel emerged
from Aigis’ arm and launched a soda can-sized missile into the defenseless Shadow’s torso. Angry at the new hole, the monster leapt off its roulette wheel and retaliated with a violent Magarudyne. Everyone winced at the killer wind. Junpei stuck his sword into the crevice in the sidewalk and clung for dear life. Airi sprinted across the field to help him restore his balance once the attack ended.

“Thanks, Aibana!”

“Don’t mention it,” she smiled.

“Let us use our strongest offensive abilities to destroy it!” Aigis suggested. Her arm returned to its normal state and she prepared to activate Orgia Mode.

The assault continued onward as Airi continued to support her team. After Junpei and Hermes used Gigantic Fist, she summoned Titania to rejuvenate his health. Aigis gave herself a Snuff Soul and continued to charge up while easily ignoring every single status ailment. Out from her burst Palladion, and together they unleashed a barrage of piercing bullets and Myriad Arrows.

It was too much for the Shadow and it quickly dissolved into nothing.

“YEAH! Who’s da man?” Junpei threw his hat in the air and struck a goofy pose over the easy victory.

Though her leg joints were partially paralyzed due to overloading her platform with increased agility and speed, Aigis waddled like a penguin and said, “Our excessive training has led to this success.”

Airi and Junpei put Aigis’ arms around their shoulders and helped her walk until her system cooled down. When they made their way back across the street, Fuuka stood before them outside the bookstore. Her face was sickly wan. There was no celebration. Hair sticking on end, Airi bit her lip.

Junpei lost all humor and seized the Priestess. “Wh-What’s wrong, Fuuka? Hey, say something!”

Frowning, Aigis loaded her guns. “Something is impeding the progress of our plan.”

Worried, Airi pulled at one of her pigtails. “I know the night’s not over yet… but what’s going on?”

Finally, eyes lifelike again, Fuuka hyperventilated. She tried to push them away and run, but Junpei easily caught her upper arms. She resisted frantically but he held on tightly, yet not to the point of hurting her. Completely baffled at the sudden change, Junpei stared at Aigis and Airi.

The android placed a firm hand on her shoulder and said, “Fuuka-san, you must calm down!”

Her words barely worked because the girl was forced to. Her breathing demanded her to slow down and her face blossomed into a snow-covered blueberry.

Junpei loosened his grip and said, “What’s wrong? Was it Mitsuru-sempai?”

Tired and dizzy, she nodded weakly.

“What happened?!” he begged.

Fuuka coughed and whispered, “Th-The Nine… Strega…”

“What?! Who?! How many?!"

“T-Two…”
“FUCK!”

Everyone, including the android, jumped out of his or her skin. The field leader lost her composure and started to hyperventilate too. Fuuka’s knees shook and mumbled her gratitude to Junpei when he continued to support her physically and emotionally.

“We do not understand the situation, Airi-san,” said Aigis, attempting to calm her nerves. “Their presence does not necessarily mean Shinjiro-san is in immediate danger.”

The unstable girl shook her head and stomped her foot. “You don’t know that! They want Shinji dead, and they’ll do anything to stop us! The others will die if we don’t help them!”

“'We're not gonna abandon them, Aibana. Don't ever think we won't do everything we can to save 'em!'

“M-Mitsuru-sempai wants us to m-meet with her,” gasped Fuuka, still leaning on Junpei. She pointed at the train station behind them and continued, “They need back-up…”

Junpei held no objections. “So we gotta sprint, Should I carry ya?”

The odd android stepped forward with a serious expression. “Allow me, Fuuka-san.”

“You sure?” he asked nervously.

“Affirmative. My modified platform can lift individuals and objects up to five hundred kilograms.” Then she tilted her head slightly. “Furthermore, Airi-san will ‘bring hell upon us’ if we do not hurry.”

Once the five-foot pint saddled on Aigis’ back, the group started their Olympic dash. The robot proved she was quite capable with the relatively nonexistent weight she carried. Lacking the disadvantages of pain and fatigue, she unlocked the inhibitors in her legs and tore along the tracks. The world blurred into walls of green and black with her human companions falling behind. Even if Junpei and Airi took ten minutes to catch up, Aigis knew to reach Mitsuru before misfortune would fall. She had to be useful when her friend was at her most vulnerable state of mind. Someone she cared for was in trouble, and Shinjiro can't end up like Yukari’s father, she convinced herself. Not even like Aizawa, whatever kind of man he truly was. No one, anyone in or close to SEES should die without a fight.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no!! Run, guys, run!! :O

By the way, here's another quick note about music as I write. There were a few tracks in particular for this portion of the story, such as "Survive" by Lacuna Coil and "Never Too Late" by Three Days Grace.

... Not much else to add before the next chapter. Run, SEES, run!!!
Takaya’s Persona summoning was unlike anything they had ever seen. Caesar screamed and held his sword at the ready. His Persona convinced Akihiko enough to run further and further back into the hallway to meet up with Yukari, head peaking out to watch the show.

Mitsuru’s pleads were itches in their brains that nothing could scratch to bring relief. “His energy is far greater than anything we have ever faced! I beg you two to retreat!”

“And let this son of a bitch kill Shinji?!” said Akihiko, temper and blood boiling. He pushed away any image his mind dared to conceive and break his spirit. “We’ve come this far, and I’m not holding back! This bastard’s not leaving this spot!”

“But I can’t lose you either! If you run and look for Shinjiro than you three will survive! Please, Akihiko!”

“We’re staying, Mitsuru-sempai! Trust us!” said Yukari, eyes focused on the red shroud masking their enemy and his Persona. “We have to keep him busy so sempai can escape!”

When the mist faded, Hypnos arrived behind his host. He was a pale lifeless body, suspended in air by black wings. Organic vessels held everything together and met at a tumorous rod above the corpse. Veins branched out and melded with the skin at the spinal chord. Looking at it made Akihiko and Yukari’s stomach churn and twist unnaturally.

The look in Takaya’s eyes was that of an excited killer. “Now, you shall be judged!”

Not taking his threat lightly, Akihiko glanced briefly at Chidori, whose expression remained serious and blank. Bow in one hand, Evoker in the other, Yukari stood near Chidori in the intersection. Though Isis could still help in the forefront, Yukari shielded the only connection to Shinjiro.

“I’m counting on you, Takeba!” said Akihiko.

“I’ll do my best!” she promised. Yukari tossed her pink jacket aside, revealing an athletic grey tank top and yoga pants. With a pull of the trigger, the stubborn Isis charged across the hall to join the boxer and Caesar.

Studying the offensive line of three, Takaya chuckled. “So that is what you choose… Grant them rest, Hypnos!”

The fowl creature let out a bloodcurdling wail. Its black wings and pasty arms contorted and bent, revealing dislocated bones. Its muscles twitched irregularly and painfully. The sounds – popping, crunching, scratching and sliding – added to the grotesque work of art. Hypnos’ casted Mind Charge; around his skeletal torso and stringy arms swam rainbow strips of energy.

Caesar clenched the globe in his hand, and from it flowed a translucent web of black and silver. His host kept low in a kneeling stance with a fragment of a magic mirror in his hand. Akihiko stood centered behind Caesar and Isis, both sturdier than he, forming a defensive wall. Dicing ribbons of wind danced and whistled in swirls from Isis’ mirror. The sharp precision of her spell cut through Takaya and Hypnos. The wound in his knee swelled to twice is original size; blood trickled down his leg. Hypnos’ skin was very delicate, as any hit would result in ruptures, but in spite of the gore,
neither hesitated.

“How persistent are you!?” yelled Akihiko.

Takaya grinned and stood aside slightly to give Hypnos more room to prepare the next attack. The aura around him turned blue. Puffs of white clouds poured out of everyone’s nostrils; Akihiko shivered.

With a howl, an onslaught of ice, sleet, and glass brushed over Caesar and Akihiko. Near the last second, wind bounced off one wall to the next very quickly. It formed a protective barrier for Isis and her companions against the brunt of the attack that Akihiko’s magic mirror did not adequately deflect. The ice-weak duo lost three feet of their ground, but they didn’t lose their balance. Some flakes stubbornly stuck to Akihiko’s clothes, but in front of him was a two-foot layer of needles.

Hypnos charged up again, leaving him and Takaya open for an attack. Since short-distance offenses would expose her and Chidori, Yukari quickly seized her bow and took a few arrows from her quiver. She managed four: one missed, one hit Hypnos in the shoulder, one went through a wing-supporting vein, and the last cut Takaya above the shoulder.

Caesar’s movements disturbed the snow, tossed back into the air. It only bounced back from the protective barrier around the Persona and failed to hinder his progress. He bashed Hypnos in the head with the hilt of his sword and disoriented him. When the strange forecast around the two-winged demon turned yellow, Akihiko immediately jumped in front of Isis. A massive network of electricity ricocheted off the disquieted snow and the walls, cracking them. Akihiko and Caesar took the hit without any harm, but their partners were a bit shaken as some extra energy slipped past their fortified defense. A low grumble from around the corner meant Chidori got nipped too.

Something singed the hairs on Yukari’s arms. She pressed herself against the wall and witnessed a red Persona blow at her torch, sending a raging fire through the hall. Instantly, the ice flattened into water.

Chidori glared, snapping, “I can’t think with all this noise!”

The funnel spun and twisted around the corner, avoiding its allies, and threw Takaya across the hall like a mighty punch from God. The Jesus look-alike flopped over a desk and crashed into filing shelves. Crying in sympathy, Hypnos trailed its master.

“Get back here!”

Akihiko slid across the floor to catch up. Caesar and Isis combined their skills and created a miniature thunderstorm. The wind worked against Hypnos’ wings, greatly hindering its progress. Kept a bit more still, Ziodyne more effectively struck and fried his wings than before.

When the fire dissipated, Yukari returned to her position. She looked over her shoulder to see Chidori sitting cross-legged with her eyes bolted shut. She wanted to thank her for the help, but doing so could unleash her fury again. Instead, she eyed the paths leading to their position. Chidori could handle her own, clearly, but she needed another pair of eyes from a Persona user to react quickly.

But since her mind was quiet lately… “Misturu-sempai?” Yukari muttered under her breath. “What’s going on?”

No response. She checked her portable radio, unharmed enough during the battle. “Mitsuru-sempai? What’s going on? Are you there?”
Nothing.

Chidori opened an eye and sighed, “She is in a fight, do not disturb her.”

“What?!” she whispered. The ground vibrated under her tired feet and her eardrums grew numb, mainly thanks to Caesar and Isis’ electric-wind overkill. “Is it a Shadow? Or one of the Nine?!”

Slowly learning to tolerate these pushy people, Chidori closed her eye again and went back to meditating. “An illusion.”

.~.

At first she did not engage in the fight because of her handicap. Akihiko’s mind was set on rescuing Shinjiro, and Yukari backing him up made sense as they had two elements, healing, and support abilities to rely on. It was risky for Ken and Koromaru to stay behind and look after her despite their insistence but at least her bodyguards had no elemental weaknesses against the average enemy.

That benefit did not last long. Many football-sized egg-shaped forms disrupted and harassed the monitoring group. They seemed like Shadows, but they lacked a mask with their Arcana. If they were a part of a larger Persona, its host was no longer detectable. Regardless, Mitsuru, Ken, and Koromaru knew how much of a nuisance they were, only casting Hamaon and Mudoon. Despite taking down five eggs with fire and lightning, Ken and Koromaru lost enough Homunculi to retreat.

In an alley two blocks away from the hospital, they were finally trapped. Three more eggs caught up with them and ate the smaller substitutes. It was only thanks to Mitsuru, who cast Mabufula so accurately; it was a one-hit knockout for them. She healed her companions and they rested enough to update Fuuka.

Then from the shadows of an empty store for rent, a crimson snake, wrapped around a massive glowing egg appeared and cast Magarudyne. All connections with the others were severed.; her communication device lay in pieces, but Mitsuru’s motorcycle was salvageable enough for repairs.

Just as angry as the beast, Ken and Koromaru stood between her and the monster. Another great burst of wind blew through the alley with the force of a vacuum. Being barely five feet tall, Ken was swept up in the current. Mitsuru caught him and pulled him into her arms. Koromaru dug into the gravel, only for his nails to dull very quickly. He growled defiantly and Cerberus combated the wall of wind with explosive balls of Agidyne.

Losing her ability to breathe and having pain pulse through her arms and hands, Mitsuru croaked. “We must retreat!”

The shiba-inu howled obstinately. “I’m sorry, but I won’t either!”

“Don’t argue with me! This creature is too strong!”

The wind vanished abruptly. Mitsuru lost balance and fell backwards, loosing her hold of Ken, who quickly jumped back up with his spear close to his chest. He stared angrily at the creature a mere thirty feet away from them. The boy pointed the tip of the blade at his enemy and took baby steps to close the gap. Meanwhile, Cerberus’ firebombs managed to strike the egg more successfully.

“Amada, what are you doing?!”

Ken tightened his hold of his spear with two hands and spoke, “I might be a kid, but don’t underestimate me, Mitsuru-san! Koromaru and I’ll hold it off until the others arrive!”
The snake hissed, spewing needles of spit and poison. Many missed the boy and dog thanks to their small size. Only a handful scratched Ken’s cheeks and hands. Even when exposed to the elements thanks to the shorts, his scrawny legs were spared. Koromaru’s face and paws were fine, but a few irregularly trimmed his fur.

With quick timing after the attack, Ken took out his Evoker. Bringing it to his forehead, he trembled with excitement. “Time to get serious, Kala-Nemi!”

The giant black and red robot reflected in his Evoker emerged from his heart. Like a hallow barrel, thin metallic beams guarded its head and torso and met at the ball-and-jointed shoulders. The boy’s guardian stood by Mitsuru and watched its master charge forward.

The snake wound and unwound itself around the egg; it was preparing for an attack. The creature launched off the egg and flew in a straight line towards the group. Knowing its trajectory, Cerberus howled at the moon. The snake bounced off one of the defiant dog’s heads and crashed back into the egg.

Ken leapt into the air like a pole jumper and sent his spear blade-first into the snake where it met with the egg. The monster trapped, Ken took a few steps back and gestured at Kala-Nemi to take his turn. The Persona’s arms spun in circles, like cranking a gear. Flashes and sparks generated around it at an alarming rate. When crackles and snaps intensified to levels to could induce friendly fire, Mitsuru, Koromaru, and Ken pressed themselves against the walls. Cerberus morphed back into mist and returned into his host. Kala-Nemi let out mechanical sounds of a countdown. The snake hissed angrily and curled back around its egg to the best of its ability to prepare a counter attack. Before it could react, a hot laser plowed a budging hole through the enemy.

The snake disintegrated and the egg exploded into pieces, spraying black yoke onto the gum-stuck ground and brick walls. While the force could hardly push a human, the yoke dissolved enough parts of the wall to their left that part of the building began to collapse on top of them.

They reacted as quickly as they could in the fifteen-feet wide space but pieces of building rained on them, hitting Mitsuru on the side of the head and knocking her out. It happened so often and intensely, she might suffer a concussion one day.

A cool splash of liquid forced her eyes wide open. Above was the clear, starry night sky. The full moon stared down like the eye of god: large, green, and distant. The sound of plastic crunched somewhere near her.

“Mitsuru-sempai!” Thin arms wrapped around her neck. Patches of short teal hair tickled her face.

“Y-Yamagishi?”

Nodding, Fuuka let go and picked up her water bottle. “Thank goodness!!”

Not too far off, Mitsuru heard other familiar voices. “Don’t worry, Ken,” said the cheery Junpei. “You and Koromaru kicked a ton of ass. We’re proud of you, man!”

“R-Really?” he sniffled.

“Totally! And see, Mitsuru-sempai’s back up. Ya pulled her and yourselves out of there before the building buried ya. Don’t cry for months about it!”

A low growl protested immediately. Two seconds later, Aigis spoke in monotone, “This experience frightened Ken-san. Crying is not something to be ashamed of.”
“I was messin’ with him, Ai-chan!”

When Fuuka finally calmed down, she gave her sempai some room to breathe. Then over came a tired, sweaty Airi with her hand outstretched. “Glad you’re awake, Kirijo-sempai.” Her smile was weak and her voice hoarse.

Slowly, she took the help to get back on her feet. Mitsuru was completely drained. Glancing down, her coat had bloodstains and tears deep in the fabric. Her knee-high boots were in worse shape: the buckles tore off and patches of fabric burned away. Her hands were throbbing.

Ken noticed how worried she was when she gently rubbed them. He said while drying his eyes, “The swelling’s gone… I h-hope it’s not so bad now…”

“You did great, Ken-kun!” Fuuka assured for the tenth time.

Mitsuru nodded. “Indeed… Thank you.”

The boy blushed and continued to clean his face with his sleeve. A few cuts were still fresh on his arms through his hoodie.

Noticing her surroundings, she realized that they indeed left the scene of the battle and were closer to the hospital. Only fifteen minutes were left of the Dark Hour, and the others were still in the dark. They put their heads together to discuss the final phase of the mission.

To seem more human, Aigis asked for clarification, “So this was a trap?”

Mitsuru eyed Airi, pacing erratically with her arms folded. Any more stress would make her shed her hair and skin. “If Yamagishi sensed two of the Children and Takaya is in the hospital, who was the other?”

“Anything about this ringin’ bells, Aibana?” asked a disappointed Junpei.

“The egg-snake motif sounds like Aether, but I never fought him before. My uncle showed up for the first time in the last cycle, but someone killed him and his Persona before I could test his powers. That was the only time I know of when he was ever confronted.”

Mimicking uncertainty, Aigis placed her hand on her chin and turned to Mitsuru. “One might forget what happened before he or she passes out; however, do you have a theory how this started?”

She shook her head and massaged her hands. “No. We ran out of homunculi, so it was only a matter of time until Amada and Koromaru pulled through. But none of us expected it would cause destruction upon being defeated.”

“I don’t think it was actually a Persona you fought. Once we arrived, the presence and energy surrounding you fled,” said Fuuka. “I don’t sense the Persona-user anymore either, if he was nearby to begin with.”

“Maybe we should cover our weaknesses better next time,” Ken suggested.

Aigis agreed. “We should go to the hospital, save the others, and retreat. The enemy may return if we stay for too long.”

Before saying anything, Mitsuru glanced at her comrades. Ken and Koromaru appeared trauma-free, but Junpei and Fuuka were half as edgy Airi. The world would come to life and their Persona powers will greatly diminish if they did not hurry soon. “Those of us too fatigued to fight should
return to the dorm. I know I am at my limits. The rest shall go into the hospital for Akihiko and Takeba.”

“Have they found Shinjiro-san?” Ken asked.

Mitsuru’s face went pale as she shook her head. “Chidori only contacted me once. She hinted at a disagreement between them before she was forced to drop contact. I think Takaya found her, and that's when Akihiko and Takeba attacked him. Shinjiro may still be hiding in there and trying to help her.”

That convinced Junpei, Ken, and Airi enough to plant their feet to the ground. Koromaru growled under his breath and his paw motioned at his collar with the built-in Evoker; Aigis did not feel the need to translate. She simply walked over to and stood tall with the four.

The two observant Persona-users stared awkwardly at each other. “Th-They need one of us, and I want to stay…” Fuuka played with her thumbs and tapped her heels together.

Then, catching everyone off guard, Mitsuru let out a brief laugh. “Very well. Let's bring Shinjiro home!”

“.~.

“Blue!” said Akihiko. “It's Bufudyne again!”

The boxer leaned against a pile of rubble, what was left of the wall between janitor’s closets and the hallway. Thankfully, no coffins were in sight.

Upon his cry, Yukari snacked on another Chewing Soul and ordered Isis to erect the wind barrier. Behind her stood Chidori, who allowed Medea to reinforce it with fire. Most of the ice melted thanks to Agidyne, while the rest blew away throughout the building.

Water flooded everywhere and met at their ankles. No one had any dry articles of clothing left. Shivers slowed Akihiko, which sucked since the best weapon Chidori could find was a bag of empty, unused syringes. Yukari only had two arrows left.

Blood poured out of Takaya’s wounds and seeped into the pale brown water. Hypnos was crucified with arrows poking out of every odd part. Like its host, it felt so little pain despite its even more disfigured form.

Everyone was exhausted mentally and physically, but no clear winner was notable. Akihiko slipped his Evoker in his pocket. He dragged his soggy feet across the cesspool and held his fists up in a front stance. Hypnos swatted the boy away. Akihiko took the hit, only for him to slide into another position and strike at a different angle.

Waiting for an opening, Yukari aimed for the Persona’s head. Not once had she ever considered ending someone. Sometimes she threatened an enemy by breezing past a vital point, but she never killed what explicitly came from a person. Yukari also knew Strega was a threat to everyone. If killing them was the only way to save the world, Yukari felt she had to bite the bullet at some point. She was capable. With two arrows, she could end Takaya right there.

“Why do you fear death?” interrupted Chidori with a hallow drone.

Yukari had a lock on the head, as long as Akihiko doesn’t get in the way. “What are you talking about?”
“Death is nothing to be afraid of. We are nothing but empty vessels. The world will go on without us.”

“But I care about this world and the people in it!” Yukari did not like the detached demeanor Chidori gave off. “If you don't care and aren't scared of dying, then why are you still alive!!”

“I…” Chidori’s voice trailed off into silence. She clenched her head and groaned, body shivering erratically. What was going on in that girl’s head, Yukari wondered. Did Takaya have anything to do with her fickle behavior?

Akihiko slowed down considerably. His blows were weaker, his tactics were amateurish, and his footwork was clumsy. “Takeba, help me!” he groaned, nearly collapsing under his own weight.

Out of time, she shook off all distractions, held her breath, and aimed. She let go of the plucked string.

The arrow punctured through Hypnos’ forehead. The force sent the creature to fly back and collapse to the ground. The wings wilted and the body slumped. The arrow nailed it in place. Takaya dropped to his knees and screamed like a child. His only friend was dissolving into specks of dust. Akihiko whacked Takaya hard enough to knock him out.

Yukari exhaled and dropped to the ground. It was over. Another one of the Children was defeated, Chidori and Shinjiro were free, and everyone could go home. They will rest and go back to school tomorrow. Once everyone will recover within a week or two, there will be a nice, homemade dinner. Things will return to as they were.

For a moment, a cool breeze brushed against Yukari. It was so refreshing. Being so sweaty, she needed a relaxing bath. The nice moment of comfort helped her feel good about herself. She felt ready to get back on her feet and head home.

The cold was then replaced by a sharp numbness.

“Yukari!”

Yukari was seeing stars. Her hands clasped on the arrow nestled among shallow, torn wounds across her back.

Akihiko stared petrified at a dead-eyed Chidori, whose hospital gown was splattered in blood. He turned to Takaya, very much awake and ecstatic. He was fatigued, but managed to stand well enough to punch Akihiko in the jaw.

“Now you see what happens when you underestimate me and my brethren?” beamed an enthralled Takaya. “I haven’t had so much entertainment in years!”

It took Akihiko a few seconds to register what happened. Blood drops stained Chidori’s arms like freckles, suited her for all the wrong reasons. Eyes wide and white, she turned from the hysterical Yukari to the outraged Akihiko.

“Whose side are you on?!” Akihiko bellowed.

“Everyone makes so much noise! So much noise! I can't stand any of you!!”

“You honestly believed she’d betray me, Polydeuses?” sneered Takaya. “With little trace of the pills in either of our systems, my petulance of a brother and I amassed enough power to overwhelm your little gang. Your blind trust in Chidori played magnificently in our favor.”
Takaya kicked Akihiko back down before he could get up. The revolver slid out of his pocket, allowing Takaya to freely take it back with no resistance. He pointed it at Yukari. “Be at ease, dear girl. Your trivial wound is nothing to cry over. Chidori should better value human anatomy when killing.”

A blast exploded in the air. Gargling muffled Yukari’s scream over the thick waterfall oozing from her abdomen.

Akihiko jumped to his feet and lunged at Takaya. The villain chuckled and backhanded the boy with the butt of his gun. He walked over to Chidori and gave her an evoker from his back pocket. “The great Emperor is the greatest fool of all for throwing his men into a blind crusade! This is the price you pay for your recklessness.”

“Why Yukari? I'm right fucking here!!”

“What fun is there in taking your life when you and your wretched brother can witness each other’s suffering? Chidori, bring me Castor so Polydeuces can watch me rip out and crush his newly transplanted heart!”

Chidori rose to her feet. She kicked Yukari in the back, knocking her down on her face and leaving her to choke on her own blood.

A boiling sea of blue flooded the hall and Caesar emerged; Ziodyne flew out of his sword and lunged at Takaya. With smug satisfaction, he sidestepped it, sending the bolt straight through the wall and out into the city. Plumbing and plaster collapsed under the intense shock. Though the miss was expected, Takaya wasn’t ready for a rejuvenated Akihiko. He flew around Chidori and tackled Takaya to the ground. Having his body pinned down, the boxer repeatedly punched him in the face. On and on he went.

Akihiko’s muscles screamed for rest, but he couldn’t and didn’t want to stop. Takaya shot one of his friends and she was bleeding to death. Shinjiro was going to be next. This monster would kill anyone he wanted without remorse. That scared Akihiko, but he had no more reservations or hesitations to permanently end him.

“Akihiko!”

“YUKARI-CHAN!!”

“Chidori?! What the hell’s going on?!”

A sea of voices outside his head broke his murderous trance. Frozen, Akihiko was wide open for an attack. Chidori wrung his neck tightly and pulled him off Takaya. No longer drunk off his rage, Akihiko was beyond exhausted. He could no longer move. His vision blurred and head ached as he lost consciousness.

Takaya got up despite the beating. His nose and right cheekbone were broken in and his left eye turned violet. Despite getting knocked down twice, he expressed no sensation of pain. The revolver in his hand pointed down at Akihiko.

Just as he expected a hypersonic bullet put a hole in his head, he saw Takaya look up, wide-eyed and shocked.

Someone appeared behind Chidori and struck her in the side of the head with an extendable baton, from Akihiko's backpack. The girl dropped Akihiko in the attack, and as she turned to see her attacker, he held her by the neck and stabbed her arm with a syringe. Chidori screamed and
struggled, but he was stronger. He stole her Evoker before she could join an unconscious Akihiko on the ground.

“WHAT?!” Takaya exclaimed, appearing terrified for the first time that night. “You never left?!”

Extending his arms out in mocking surrender, the boy smirked.

“H-How?! That stupid girl gave you the chance to flee!”

He let out a laugh. Seeing that the hand with the revolver was too paralyzed to act, the eerily poised man put the Evoker to his head. “Horatius!”

Upon pulling the trigger, the Persona broke free from his impatient slumber. A bronze-armored soldier, armed with a sword and shield bearing a symbol of an eye, belted a ghostly cry. The gas mask did not muffle his voice or make his blood-red eyes less menacing. It was only in that moment when Takaya realized why no one on the streets was stupid enough to piss this guy off.

“Shinjiro-sempai!” Junpei and Fuuka cried like it was Christmas morning.

Smiling so wide her face would be sore for decades, Airi knew that with Takaya frozen in bafflement and fear, he wouldn’t be able to put one bullet in Shinjiro.

“Don’t just stand there, you clowns! Grab Takeba and get outta here!”

Realizing Takaya was fearful, despite his superior weapon, Ken and Koromaru immediately teamed up to back up Shinjiro. Nervous under his intimidation, Junpei and Fuuka ran to their severely injured classmate. They fell to the ground and turned her to the side to get her out of her blood.

“C’mon, Yuka-tan!” he cried, shaking the girl’s shoulder and drying her face with the tail of his shirt.

Face painted red and white, Yukari was still alive, but losing consciousness. Her irregular and shallow breathing made her delirious. With every sob and cough, more blood spilled out of the wound.

“Damn it!” Junpei snatched the handkerchief from his pocket. He tried to close the wound, only for the girl to scream. Fuuka took off her poncho to help, and didn’t press as hard as he accidentally did.

A storm of feet and firing of Evokers created more confusion. A red robot and black dog flew right over their ducked heads and flew fire and electricity at Takaya. Airi and Aigis avoided the carnage as best they could to get Chidori and Akihiko out of the away. In the middle of the warzone, carrying Yukari’s discarded sweater, Mitsuru joined Junpei and Fuuka.

“Her back is bleeding too! Use this to put pressure on those stab wounds!” she said, handing it over to Fuuka.

The juniors kept themselves busy, but they trembled. They took more time than needed to stay calm than perform emergency treatment. Yukari’s breathing slowed more and more with every blunder and mistake they made. Desperate and remembering how it helped in past major injuries, Mitsuru summoned Penthesilea with her Evoker to try to heal the internal wounds and minimize the bleeding.

A wall of intense fire nearly cooked the four of them. Junpei and Fuuka carried a better-healed Yukari quickly but carefully away from the fight while Mitsuru continued casting Diarama. They joined Aigis and Airi, who took Chidori and Akihiko forty feet from the dangerous intersection.
Junpei immediately checked the mysterious girl's wrist for a pulse.

"Shinjiro-san injected her with a low-dose sedative," reported Aigis, searching for bandages in Airi’s bag. “However, we must prepare for when she wakes up.”

“Not a chance!” said Junpei. He held the girl tightly in his arms. “Strega’s using her!”

“That does not mean she is harmless, Junpei-san,” Aigis warned.

“She wouldn’t hurt us for no reason! I won’t let anybody touch her!”

“Your feelings for her are irrelevant, Iori! She betrayed us when she stabbed Takeba!”

“Don’t you dare tell me how I should feel, Mitsuru-sempai! You can’t understand what these bastards put Chidori through!”

The three of them continued to argue over the red-haired patient and her questionable loyalty. Meanwhile Fuuka checked Yukari’s pulse, weak but persistent. Airi summoned Titania to help rejuvenate everyone and stop the worst of Yukari's bleeding.

A slowly recovering Akihiko laid on his side near Aigis, helping him nurse a concussion. He felt sand in his eyes when he watched the fight at the intersection. “Shinji… that bastard’s alive…”

Still struck with fear, Takaya suffered even worse than he did in the previous fight. Shinjiro let Horatius aid Cerberus’ fires of hell and Kala-Nemi’s electric storm by striking his sword ala Blade of Fury. Takaya lost his balance and backed closer and closer to the hole in the wall. He had no time to summon Hypnos from the barrage of angry Persona. Koromaru howled, dropped the dagger from his muzzle and bit his enemy in the leg. It snapped Takaya out of his fear. This allowed the winged fiend to break out. It cast Garudyne in revenge, but Kala-Nemi laughed at the bug bite.

Realizing the Persona was no longer purple or called Nemesis, Takaya lost his temper again. “You foolish child! You squandered your potential! Is it not just to kill murderers??!”

“Shut up!” Ken held his spear at Takaya’s neck. “I’ll never be like you!”

One confident lunge sent the blade into Takaya’s right shoulder, pining him into the wall next to the hole. His nerves were so damaged, he lost all sensation in his arm and he dropped the revolver. Shinjiro snatched the gun and aimed it at its previous owner. For more pressure, he nudged the baton into Takaya’s gut.

Takaya said with a sneer, “Amazing how the roles have shifted… if your girlfriend’s delusions are to be believed.”

Shinjiro never dropped his stern, confident expression. “Your point?”

“This is no victory. Nothing will change. Fate is a fickle friend of Death that bitch fights futilely.”

“Don’t talk about Airi-san like that!” yelled Ken, keeping his distance from the enemy. “She’ll stop the Children, no matter what!”

“If the naïve traitor opened his eyes, Nemesis would have understood the truth.” Ken dropped his guard. The white haired biker laughed manically, echoing though the hall and startling Ken, Shinjiro, and Koromaru.

Impatient, Shinjiro shoved the gun in Takaya’s forehead and growled, “Your. Point. Asshole.”
Your futile attempts to end the Dark Hour are too entertaining for us to kill you.”

The prolonged vomiting of secrets stopped shocking SEES a long time ago. Koromaru continued to sink his teeth into Takaya’s leg. Blood gushed out, and the dog only pulled back when he felt bone. Ken and Shinjiro refused to move the spear, gun, or baton away from him. Red waves of energy oozed out of Takaya’s eyes. Then his ears and mouth bled the same mist. It was far different from his earlier summoning. Shinjiro and Koromaru were confused, but Ken’s face waned. Only when Fuuka and Mitsuru yell did the ignorant notice something was wrong.

“His Persona is breaking free!” Airi cried as she stepped away from the healing group.

The mist came out of every orifice, the aura thickened, making the man less and less visible. His eerily calm expression remained unchanged.

Shinjiro put the gun in his pocket and ran away with Ken and Koromaru. On their third step, a great wind sent them flying. Aigis caught Ken in her arms before he hit the ground. Koromaru slid and crashed into Akihiko’s stomach. Shinjiro managed to stay on his feet with Mitsuru and Airi holding him by the arms. He thanked the both of them, but his eyes were immediately locked on Airi. They stared at each other for only a brief moment, but the apprehension for their reunion was mutual.

Airi turned to Takaya and put her Evoker at her temple. The others stared as Hypnos’ wings poked out from the cloud of red obscuring Takaya. Squishes and crunches added to the oppressive tension of the Dark Hour. Thick liquid splashed onto the flour in buckets, as they listened to someone at a buffet with a microphone too close to their mouth. Ken and Fuuka, both pasty, covered their ears. With an unconscious Chidori on his lap, Junpei did the same and hummed a stupidly catchy pop song. Mitsuru, Shinjiro, and Akihiko were disturbed but couldn’t look away from the pool, expanding out from the mist.

Somehow, Takaya still spoke. His voice was erratic and desperate, but still full of self-righteousness. “All of our deaths are inevitable! Nyx-sama will descend and bring the Fall upon us!!”

He just wouldn’t die fast enough. Airi clenched her Evoker tightly and screamed loud enough for the dead, the Velvet Room residents, and denizens of other known and unknown dimensions to hear her. “THIS IS FOR SHINJI AND CHIDORI, YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

An orange-haired robotic girl hurried across the hallway with a large heart-shaped lyre on her back. Approaching the red fog, Orpheus brought her lyre back like a massive hammer and slammed it down into the mist with immense force. With a neck-shattering snap, Hypnos let out cowardly screeches. The robot stood over her enemies and brought down her weapon repeatedly, beating them to death with mixed fury and catharsis. The number of hits was too powerful and countless to keep track. When Orpheus ended her tantrum, she wiped the thick black and red mess off her instrument. Orpheus let out a relieved sigh and vanished with the alien mist. Before the horrified group was a large stain of blood and a mass slumped on the ground. The more human one twitched for a few seconds until it kept still permanently. Hypnos was a mangled mess, but it slowly disintegrated into specs of dust.

The battle was over, but no one felt it. Even with Koromaru’s support, Ken leaned against the wall, arched forward and felt his dinner coming. Junpei held Chidori’s hand and worried for her and her Persona. Fuuka bravely held back her nausea to monitor Yukari. Akihiko was stunned, trying to comprehend what the hell just happened.

An exhausted, liberating laugh broke the silence. Airi drop her Evoker and hold her aching forehead. “I… October 4th… I finally–!”
Two large hands grasped her shoulders and spun her around. His expression was stern as ever, but Airi could feel his sentiment in his iron grip. She stared into Shinjiro’s clear grey eyes, hoping to convey the fact she was indeed sane.

Her sight, touch, and hearing did not deceive her. Airi broke into hysterical tears and wrapped her arms around him. To her surprise, Shinjiro hugged her back tightly. She felt him trembling and heard him sigh into her shoulder. Airi buried her face in his chest and held back her urge to unleash the storm brewing in her heart for too many cycles.

Ten seconds passed when he loosened his grip and said in a tense, low voice, “Hey… I’m not ungrateful, but… the others are watchin’…”

Though everyone was staring at them, no one disapproved of their open display. Airi nervously laughed and pulled back, drying her eyes and speaking in broken Japanese and English. “… you’re alive… thank God… I - we were… scared we lost you… bloody hell… I cannae stop cryin’...”

Mitsuru’s glaring, bloodshot eyes drilled holes into Shinjiro, and her passion was so evident that Airi backed away and watched the senior to slap her friend in the face and scream in three languages. “VOUS CONNARD! NEVER face a man with a revolver ever so stupidly!” She then turned to Akihiko, pale as a ghost, and continued to abuse profanity in French, berate them in Japanese, and threaten execution in English. The two visibly distressed “assholes” she referred to sulked and absorb the reasonably – if not harshly – well-deserved verbal assault.

Shinjiro met the others’ anxious, frustrated, but happy eyes. After everything that happened, he couldn’t argue against disregarding the others’ feelings of abandonment for long, but he refused to admit it. He turned his back on them and lowered his head. “You guys… are somethin' else…”

Mitsuru’s head snapped around. Physically unable to keep up her outrage, she lowered her voice. “Shinjiro, please. Takeba and Akihiko nearly died to save you. I cannot imagine how Fujihara feels. And I - " she choked on a sob her body screamed to release for the past hour. " - I was terrified…”

He scratched the back of his head; his warm complexion well hid his embarrassed pink cheeks. “Thank you, Mitsuru…”

Preparing for the Dark Hour to end, Fuuka, Aigis, and Junpei continued to care for Yukari and Chidori. Akihiko sat against the wall next to Ken and Koromaru, both feeling slightly better.

Shinjiro quietly sat between the humans and was nearly knocked over by the yapping albino shiba-inu. The half conscious boxer squinted his eyes and weakly cracked his knuckles. After petting Koromaru and letting him rest his head on his lap, Shinjiro flipped the bird back at Akihiko. Understanding, they smiled wryly.

Seeing them like this made Ken feel a little more grateful for his gradual changing of heart. “I’m glad you’re back…”

Eyes wide, he turned to the kid on his right. Like how he first saw Airi after a month, he had no clue what to say to one of the last still-living people he knew truly wanted him dead.

Looking up at him with a slight curve of the corner of his mouth, Ken said, “You’re welcome, Shinjiro-san.”
HAHAHA!!! GOODBYE AND %@#$ YOU, TAKAYA SAKAKI!!! *throws confetti* *breaks into song and dance*

I'm reminding myself not to undermine too many ideas in a story by killing off a character I obviously detest, but I could not resist offing that insufferable jerk. He killed my favorite character, damn it! Persona 3 wouldn't let me do it despite having the [illusion of an] option to beat him into oblivion!

Have I mentioned I hate Takaya? XD

His Persona, Hypnos (Ὑπνος), is definitely one of the more well known children of Nyx and Erebus. In fact his Roman counterpart is Somnus, and quite a number of words in English originate from either of those two words (i.e. "hypnosis", "insomnia", etc.) Hypnos is the god of sleep, is Thanatos' twin brother, seems to be close with Morpheus as well since the three share similar associations of darkness: sleep, death, and dreams. He's in quite a number of Greek texts and literature that I can't all reference off hand (especially when he's lives in the underworld, or a cave, or the river Lethe... depending on the writer). If he's depicted in art, Hypnos may very likely be with Thanatos, such as 'Sleep and his Half-brother Death' by John William Waterhouse.

As for Takaya, he did not undergo too many changes from canon since he was already pretty formidable and intimidating... in the narrative. (Gameplay-wise Strega were some of the easiest bosses in the game in my experience.) Since Takaya held strongly to his beliefs and seemed to be a twisted individual in general, especially compared to Jin and Chidori, I didn't want to take away too much of what made him detestable in a good way. And now he's dead. I share Airi's happiness in every way.

So October 4th has concluded in victory and one less of the Children. The good news: more Shinjiro! The bad news: something tells me Jin's not gonna take this news well at all...
Aftermath

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait! I travelled for a bit around Halloween, and I got caught up with job hunting when I wasn't overwhelmed by all the news. I've done well to not be too swamped by the insanity of real world politics, weather disasters, and other news. Lots of things are uncertain, but I have to believe things will get better. Better days will come, so do the best you can to stay safe and sane out there.

Anywho, enough of me being maudlin, I managed to sneak in some time to clear my head enough to get this lovely chapter up. Ready for more canon-diverging stuff?

October 5, 2009

As soon as the Dark Hour ended and hospital staff calmed down after their initial panic over the state of the hallway SEES was found in, Yukari underwent surgery for her injuries. Mitsuru's emergency aid patched most of the damaged arties and tissue, but the bullet caused enough damage for Yukari to need further hospitalization. Before she woke up and could fight back, the doctors transferred Chidori to a new room in the psychiatric ward with security to watch her day and night. From then on all of her visitors had to sign in and go past identity, background, and personal checks. Kurosawa and two other officers arrived at the hospital to take what was left of Takaya and interrogate SEES. As she waited for surgery for her swollen hands, Mitsuru informed Kurosawa of what happened that night to help file paperwork and calm the media obsessed with the gaping hole in one of the hospital walls. She chose to stay for therapy and to look after Yukari. Treatment for the concussion and exhaustion kept Akihiko back as well, but he would be dismissed by the evening if he cooperated. Once they received first aid and learned how long Yukari and Mitsuru would be staying, Junpei, Fuuka, Airi, Shinjiro, Aigis, Ken, and Koromaru returned home sometime around 1:00 am.

The doctor overseeing the hospitalized members of SEES was Shunko Nomura, who had no plans to bring the end of the world and welcomed visitors within reason. Akihiko took advantage of this to make the most of his time; he had no reason to stay for more than two days, yet he insisted on visiting daily until Yukari and Mitsuru were allowed to leave. A five-foot brunette in her early thirties, Nomura appeared very similar to Fuuka. She dressed plainly too; however, her soft round face boasted more professionalism and frustration than timidity and understanding.

“Very well,” she said while rubbing her temple after Akihiko insisted on his visiting schedule, “but if there is any more damage on this property, you must leave. Our patients have suffered enough of your law-breaking.”

Fighting the urge to lash out at her, Akihiko clasped his hands behind his back. Even with Kurosawa vouching for them, he and his friends were still doubted among some in the staff. “Got it.”

Nomura briefly browsed the files she held. “If Fuuka had any involvement in this…”

“She lives in our dorm, but she wasn’t involved, Nomura-san.” The woman arrived on duty at 7:00am, long after Fuuka left, and so she could not challenge the lie that Akihiko gave rather convincingly.
“Even so, her association with you will ruin her future.”

“How so?” he asked calmly despite his hands balling into fists.

Closing the files, Nomura tucked them under her arm. “It’s clear that Kirijo allows the irresponsibility of his daughter without consequence. That man has demonstrated the depth of his and the Group’s corruption, but the police too? Endorsing children to commit acts of terror? Justice does not exist in Tatsumi Port Island anymore, and if my sister knew better, my niece shall have none of these influences in her life.”

The stifling air she emitted tried to rival Mitsuru’s, but she lacked the thorough knowledge of his being to effectively disarm Akihiko. Although no one had to remind him to never underestimate the will of short women, Nomura’s lecture angered rather than intimidated the exhausted young man.

“I don’t like that look, Sanada,” she remarked, arms folded. “You only worsen your case.”

“That’s because you don’t understand what’s actually happening out here!” Akihiko raised his voice. “My friends and I are not terrorists!”

“Then explain why the police and a multinational corporation are forcing us to cover up murder and thousands in property damage that you caused. With bribery and threats of termination and lawsuits.”

Akihiko bit his tongue. The extent went to protect SEES from the legal consequences of their actions made him feel sick to his stomach. He could not argue with Nomura, especially when he had not slept well in nearly two days.

With increasing stares from hospital staff, Nomura lowered her voice, but the intensity of her conviction didn’t fade. “Never will my family associate with delinquents and criminals. An orphan such as yourself will never understand the importance of upholding familial integrity and a healthy reputation. Fuuka’s parents will know of this, I promise you that, Sanada.”

The voice in the back of Akihiko’s head warned him that speaking anymore would do no good. He sucked up his pride and anger as the doctor returned to her duties. Then he went out of the building to breathe in the fresh afternoon air and to find an empty alley for him to scream in.

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After attending the Student Council meeting to finalize the relocation of the courtyard’s Persimmon tree to a nearby park, Airi went to the Naganaki Shrine in Iwatodai. For the thirteenth time that day she felt her breast pocket. She sighed when she felt it still on her person. Once she arrived, surrounded entirely by red arches and leaves, Airi spotted Aigis and Ken lighting candles and praying together. Or, to be more accurate, Ken showed Aigis how to be respectful on holy ground. The unlikely duo fought the wind constantly blowing out their candles. They made some fun out of it, with Ken nudging Aigis to laugh with him. Hers was rather forced until her hand knocked the candles off the altar.

When they finished, Aigis was the first to see Airi waiting by the nearby playground benches. They joined up with her and Ken sat down. Wearing multiple layers, sweatpants, and scarves, he perspired slightly.

“Hello, Airi-san,” said Ken with a smile. “I think my mom was amused today, even if we ruined the shrine.”

“I am sure you would be correct,” said Aigis, eyes light with humor. “On another note, I now learned why one must never cry over spilled milk.”
Airi grabbed a bottle of water from her bag and handed it to Ken. He hesitantly accepted it. “What brings you two out here?”

The boy finished drinking half the bottle in three gulps. “I went on a run with Akihiko-san before coming here. Aigis-san found me and wanted to see what I do when I visit. I don’t mind the company.”

“How sweet of you!” Airi chirped, patting the boy on the shoulder. He blushed darkly and drank larger portions of water.

Aigis, however, stared back at the shrine’s architecture before turning to the dark orange and navy sky. She seemed melancholic.

“What’s on your mind, Aigis?”

“Airi-san…” she hesitated while finding the right words. “Do you believe in an afterlife?” One of the hardest questions to answer for a child was asked by a robot. Aigis may have become human quite quickly, but Airi never expected having this talk with her at all. When the two of them were silent and in thought, Aigis added, “Would you ever wish for someone to suffer forever? Even if that person once meant something of value to you?”

Ken gave Airi back her water bottle and asked, “What’s wrong, Aigis-san?”

“Murder is a crime, and wishing death upon others results in punishable consequences. Takaya was a terrorist, and some may claim killing him is justifiable. Aizawa-san, however… He was not mentally sound, and yet…”

“He was like a father to you,” finished Airi.

Aigis froze unnaturally, staring off into space. When she returned to her senses, she shook her head and pretended her hesitation never happened. “If I learned anything these few months, coping with death is a human practice I must fully comprehend and master.”

Ken stood next to her and stretched his arms. “It’s not easy, Aigis-san. I’ve noticed that even some adults take their whole lives to move on.”

“Then it appears I am not alone…?”

“Not at all. I’ve started to learn that myself too.”

Without her intervention, Airi watched Ken and Aigis bond. It was moments like this where it was clear that everyone in SEES is better off this time, in her opinion.

“By the way,” Ken turned to the red-eyed girl and asked, “why are you out here, Airi-san?”

Remembering her reason, the gift in her breast pocket felt heavy.

“There a surprise party or somethin’?”

Appearing from nowhere behind Aigis was Shinjiro. The youngest of the group nearly screamed; Ken stood in a ninja-like stance he must’ve mimicked from a manga he frequently denied reading.

“Sneaking up on people is not socially acceptable,” scolded Aigis, glaring while loading a cannon in her forearm.

He shrugged and ignored the low mechanical hum from Aigis’ guns. “Shouldn’t you guys be at the
“dorm? It’s gettin’ dark, and the starving kids of the world can hear Koromaru crying.”

“But feeding him is your responsibility, Shinjiro-san...” Standing at rest again, Aigis read signs of Airi’s elevated heart rate. “I retract my argument. The ‘mood’ demands us to leave at once, Ken-san. We should see if Akihiko-san is properly resting.”

The boy stared dumbfounded. With a promissory wink, Aigis whispered that she would tell him later. Once the two were out of hearing range with the last thing they heard was Ken asking if the two were planning another secret dinner, Airi and Shinjiro were alone.

Laughing off Aigis’ oddly worded excuse to leave, Airi rocked back on her heels and grinned. “I’m glad you made it, Aragaki-sempai.”

“You don’t have to call me that anymore.”

She let out a nervous, forced laugh. “Sorry. It’s out of habit.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it. What’s up?”

Hands in pockets, his shoulders arced back as he stretched. No one got much sleep last night, but Shinjiro in particular was up since five in the morning waiting for Airi to get up. They had breakfast together with him insisting she tell him everything he missed. She tried to be concise in the limited time for the one who hated mornings, and she still had more to say when they reached Gekkoukan’s foot lockers. Ready for part two, Airi reached into her breast pocket and covered up the item she knew belonged to him. Shinjiro raised an eyebrow but went along with the surprise.

“Whether you believe my situation or not, thanks for listening.”

She extended her hands out to him and revealed the pocket watch in her palm. Eyes wide, Shinjiro gently picked it up. His fingers studied the grooves and engravings along the silver device. “Where’d ya find this?”

“Someone turned it in at the police station. Officer Kurosawa let me return it to you.”

“I see. This… happened before?”

She nodded. “You once told me you lost ‘a shabby ol’ pocket watch’ that seemed to mean a lot to you. I returned it the night before… well, on October 3rd.”

Shinjiro continued to play with the watch in silence. Rather than asking her to remind him of the facts again, he began to piece things together on his own. He opened the watch and let a small, wistful smile escape his lips. Whatever was inside, Airi never looked for herself, but seeing that small, childlike smile proved its value.

Minutes passed when he realized how awkwardly quiet the moment was. Shinjiro shut the lid with his thumb and slipped the item in the front pocket of his coat. His expression shredded the sentimentality, and his posture hunched more obviously than usual.

“Did that happen… ‘the first time’?” he asked, picking his words carefully.

Airi rubbed her gloveless hands together. The minimal friction warmed up her palms against the increasingly bitter night winds. Between the two, touching the watch gave her more chilling goose bumps than the weather. “No, it didn’t. We didn’t get to know each other back then. To be honest I really disliked you the first time we met. I didn’t understand why Akihiko-kun and Kirijo-sempai trusted you when you showed me no signs of being reliable. For a while... I thought you spied for
Strega or were some kind of drug dealer.” Shinjiro gave her an incredulous stare, which Airi returned with an embarrassed bow of her head. “Once I saw how I was so wrong, I never had the chance to apologize. Kurosawa gave the watch to Akihiko-kun after the funeral, but he later passed it on to me because he didn’t want to break it because he held onto it while training.”

Some color drained from his otherwise stoic, unreadable face. Airi nodded sympathetically, figuring Shinjiro had imagined a scenario like that could happen with Akihiko. She pointed to a bench and communicated she was sitting down. Dropping his book bag at his feet, he joined her, though he kept a foot of distance between them. Airi’s heart sank, but she told herself to get over a tiny subconscious piece of nothing.

“What made you think a ‘drug dealer’ deserved another chance?” Shinjiro questioned dryly, hinting he was slightly offended at that phrase in particular.

“I had to talk and actually listen to you to really know what kind of person you are. After a few runs in Tartarus and eating out once or twice, you were finally comfortable talking to me. It took some time, but I liked it when we hung out together. You’re never afraid to speak your mind, and you notice things others can easily miss. I also learned that being difficult and reserved were your ways to stay calm and protect your feelings. So the moments I saw you smile without a care made me happy, because it felt like you respected and trusted me enough to open up to me.”

He sensed the earnestness in her unusually quiet voice, making him fidget self-consciously. Shivering against the intensifying bitter wind, Airi pulled her scarf over her sore ears. She took a deep breath and rubbed her hands together.

“This all sounds crazy, but I want you to know the truth. I want all of us together to end the Dark Hour without losing anyone.” A lump formed in her throat. She shook her head and laughed to herself again. “But I know I can be so delusional. One minute I run away when I think everything’s falling apart, and then I’m willing to kill people to make sure we survive. What kind of sane person would –”

“Stop it.” Shinjiro’s stern voice slapped her in the face. Fiery embarrassment boiled under her skin. “Quit putting words in my mouth and actin’ like a victim.”

Feeling her mood sink even lower, Airi averted her eyes and mumbled an apology. He threw his hands in the air. Unable to keep still, Shinjiro was ready to tear his hair out as he raised his voice. “You dump this time travel bullshit on my lap to justify you toying with me and runnin’ off? Should I just forgive you and forget what you did? It’s like you own the right to make people’s lives a goddamn mess, right?”

Pools of tears formed in her eyes as she took the verbal blows. She feared his anger would happen. “I didn’t know how to talk to you about this! I was scared to know how you’d react!”

“That can’t be everything,” Shinjiro replied. His rigid eyes stared down at her as the only other hint of anger in his demeanor. “You expected everyone to be open if we knew something would affect the fight. Reliving the year and knowin’ everything that’s gonna happen is really heavy shit you just can’t hide ‘cause you’re scared of the consequences!”

“I’m sorry!” Airi pleaded. “I didn’t mean to hurt you and the others! I’m not proud for messing up! Just because I know things that most people won’t ever believe that doesn’t mean I’m immune from failure. Is it wrong to hide some things for a while that would burden others?! How could I explain myself and earn your trust if you refused to believe me and called me crazy for telling the truth?”

His mouth twitched and he let out a frustrated sigh; he didn’t entirely disagree with her point. Many
of her actions likely did cause unintended effects she did not anticipate or have control over. While his brain understood what she meant, his feelings still had the better of him. “You can’t always predict how people will react. I might’ve believed you, or it’d take some time, but you should’ve thought of the others first. They needed to know this more than me. You guys don’t need me. I’m just a pawn with a fucked up power I never asked for. You’re the only one who knows what’s goin’ on, and everyone went crazy stupid when you left without a clue or guide. The dorm was a fucking funeral home, and nothing got done without you!”

On the verge of crying, Airi didn’t want to argue with him anymore, but she knew he needed to vent. They waited for each other to calm down before saying another word. A few seconds of silence between them, Shinjiro turned his gaze away from her and to his feet. His demeanor was calmer, but far more melancholic.

“I’m glad you’re back after what that piece of shit did to you, but you’re smart and stubborn enough to not give up easily. I’m not like you, Fujihara. I went into surgery expectin’ your uncle to kill me… I’ve always been a mess and nothing’s changed that. Stop worrying ‘bout shit that can’t be fixed. Go have fun with your friends and quit wasting your time nursing worthless stray mutts. It’d have been easier to look after them and not bother with me. I’ve got nothin’ for ya. Just… for your own good, stay away from me.”

Each word uttered threatened to kill all hope in the world. All the anxiety she locked inside for so long over her memories of and concerns for Shinjiro built up so much pressure in her chest that she couldn’t breathe. Every inch of her trembled, nearly feeling the freezing chains she feared wrap around her body and the claws tear open her chest and crush her heart.

Just as Shinjiro was about to get up and leave, Airi blurted out the words she should have said a long, long time ago. “I love you, Shinji!”

He should have seen it coming. The girl’s feelings had been projected on her forehead like a neon sign cutting through complete darkness for so many months despite him trying to deny it. In hindsight he could have figured that out when he first met her at the hospital in May. He should have understood what was happening when she saved him with hysterical tears erupting from her eyes when he overdosed. When she teased him over reading a cooking magazine, he should have known by then if all the other signs failed. Shinjiro had no excuse for being this stupidly stubborn. After nearly falling back to his original way of thinking before her met her, Airi’s words were a train that nearly blindsided and ran him over.

“You’re not worthless! I hate seeing you suffer over and over and feeling that I can’t do anything to help you! I know I can’t fix you, but I don’t want you to be alone and miserable anymore! Everyone, even Ken-kun, worries about you; we’re your friends, damn it! You deserve to have a chance to be happy!”

Every word she spoke demolished the emotional defenses Shinjiro had built and fortified for years from all the hardships he endured and had seen those he loved suffer. He placed his hand on his hat, pulling it over to hide the increasingly vulnerable glint in his eyes.

The wind picked up and Airi tried to dry her eyes with the sleeves of her blazer. The tears were running faster than she could wipe them away. “I know I’m an idiot, but I’ve loved you for so long I can’t deny it anymore. E-Even if you don’t love me, I’m begging you as a friend to not throw your life away! Please stay with us! We need you, Shinji!”

Nearly every inch of his skin ardently crimson, Shinjiro leaned back in his seat and laughed at himself. Watching her cry made him feel like the world’s biggest asshole. He told himself how he wanted to be with her again, but his stupid self-sacrificing crusade was ruining the moment he longed

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This text continues...
for since the day he realized he loved her.

Relaxing his posture and sighing, he scooted closer to her and unbuttoned his peacoat. “Winter’s coming and you gotta dress warmer. You’ll catch somethin’ otherwise.”

She finished drying her face and averted her eyes. His deflection was expected. “S-Sorry…”

Shinjiro sighed. “I’m the one who should be sorry… There’s still a lot to take in, but I can’t keep bein’ an ass to you.”

“N-No, it’s alright… I didn’t consider your feelings. I was so worried about myself and tr-trying to get by on my own. And I said all of those things when y-you only met me in May and you barely know me – ”

“Airi.”

His mellowed voice calling her by name for the first time caught her attention instantly. That alone conveyed enough for her to understand his resolve that never before had the chance to develop. Their eyes met, and Airi’s heart burst in her chest.

“You worry too much.” The smile that made her heart swell for so many cycles remained unchanged as he extended out an arm to her. “C’mere…”

Airi hesitated, trying to read his behavior and failing to stop herself from blushing, but he won in three seconds. She hesitantly curled up against his chest, and he wrapped her inside his warm coat. Airi placed her hand over his heart, near where the stitches were still healing. Shivering, Shinjiro wasn’t used to open affection, but he felt a wave of reprieve wash over him that he really needed for most of his life.

“Don’t beat yourself up too much. I’ve always put someone else’s needs before mine, and that ain’t always healthy either. At some point I forgot how to take care of myself. When I had the chance to be selfish, I wanted to die rather than take responsibility for my own life. Aki called me out on it for years, and I’ve been too stubborn to listen…” Shinjiro let out a self-deprecating laugh. “I should’ve treated you better after what you’ve done for me… even when the truth ‘bout you came out, I ran away too. Some ‘reliable’ sempai I am, huh?”

The young man still had plenty of troubles hiding beneath his skin, but Airi saw he was trying to confront them, even if he judged himself too harshly. She reached for his hand, dry and rough as sandpaper in the cold weather. Nothing was going to dissuade her, especially when he allowed her to indulge this much and he revealed too much to pretend he felt nothing more for her than friendship. Sealing their fate to a new journey, their fingers intertwined.

“Please don’t leave again,” his voice cracked, revealing a fraction of his gentle pleading. “I’m not goin’ anywhere ‘til we finish this together.”

Beyond happy with his words, the girl nodded fiercely as she held back the throbbing urge in her throat to cry for the millionth time.

Content with the moment and with her, Shinjiro tightened his hold of her to help calm her down. Resting his chin on the crown of Airi’s head, he became engrossed in her smaller details he never noticed before, like how richly colored her brown hair was and how long her fingers were. Like a purring cat, Airi quietly hummed a song as she relaxed again. Shinjiro didn’t recognize it, but he encouraged her. She squeezed his hand and sang softly for only them to hear.

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After giving her a day to recover, Junpei rushed to the hospital to see Chidori after school. He passed all the intrusive screenings and tests the guards gave him effortlessly. Sitting beside her bed, he explained what happened to Takaya in the longest tirade he could muster.

“I can't believe that son of a bitch treated you like that. At least he's gone now.” He took a deep breath and lightened his tone with a bit more compassion. “I visited Yukari yesterday. She's gonna heal. You probably expect me to hate you, maybe I oughta, but I don't. If Yukari wasn't gonna make it, I dunno how I'd feel. But I know Takaya hurt you and used you against your will. I just can't blame ya for everythin'.”

Silently she stared at the wall in front of her, only nodding in response. The sketchbook she held was shut tight, and her hands had no traces of charcoal or paint on them.

“Wait… what's wrong?” Junpei asked, lowering his voice greatly.

Not moving at all, Chidori spoke in a monotone, “What will you do before January 31st?”

“Huh? I… I dunno. That's kinda specific… What's so special about that date?”

Awkward silence reigned over them. Junpei felt something was wrong, but he didn't know if it was because she still didn't recover from her breakdown or if it was something else. While his eyes wandered across her pale immovable form, he spotted Chidori's immaculate white arms.

“Hey,” he smiled gently, reaching for her. “You stopped hurting yourself. That's good. I mean, you have such beautiful hands…”

The light graze was enough for the girl to come to life; only she screamed and pulled back. “Don’t touch me!”

“I-I'm sorry…!” he said sadly. He brought his hands to his sides and lowered his head. “I didn’t mean to…”

Chidori turned her gaze to the window. Junpei could see her reflection from the angle where he sat. “This is too painful. It used to be fun when you came to visit, but it’s different now.” Her grip on her book tightened enough to warp the paper. “It hurts. I can’t take this anymore.”

“W-Wait. What’re ya sayin’?” Hoping he could bring her gaze over to him, he pulled himself closer to the bed. “I-I’m sorry if I upset you. Or was it something Takaya said?”

Then for some reason he remembered how Mitsuru, Ken, and Koromaru were trapped. Two of the Nine were supposedly in the area last night, but only Takaya showed up. Where was the last one who stayed hidden? Did they appear at the hospital too but disappeared before Akihiko or Yukari could see them? Was that creature some kind of elaborate illusion? Did one of the Nine have some sway over Chidori? He hated not knowing what was happening, and Chidori's inability to answer simple questions left Junpei's mind to conceive of absurd conspiracies.

“Don’t come here anymore, Junpei.”

Those five words were the last ones he'd ever want to hear, and they snapped him back to reality. “Chidori…?”

“I’m sick of you!” she said shrilly. “I can’t stand the sight of you! I betrayed you and your friends! Why won't you hate me?! I can't breathe anymore!”
“Wait, a sec! Slow down! I don’t understand! What’re you–?”

“Get out.”

Not even Yukari hurt him like this when she insulted his intelligence. Never had his father say something so cruel to him while drunk and throwing glasses and plates at anything - or anyone - that looked like a target. His heart sank into his stomach, and he slouched back into his seat. He looked up, hoping she would look him in the eye. She had to be lying. She had to be protecting him. She had to have been tricked. Takaya manipulated her for god knows how long, and Junpei could never forgive him for it, even in death.

When he didn’t move, Chidori finally turned her head. Her eyes were empty and cold. Whatever hope Junpei had left dissolved. “I never want to see you again! GET OUT!”

He gaped helplessly for a moment, but Junpei closed his mouth and sighed. With the last of his strength, he dragged himself up and out of the room and down the hall.

He didn’t understand how it ended like that. With every step, he lost the motivation to think. Junpei was too tired and sore. Maybe forgiving Chidori was a mistake. Maybe meeting her was a mistake. Maybe his dad was onto something when he picked up the bottle after his mom walked out on them. Realizing what direction his thoughts were moving towards, Junpei smacked himself on the side of the head. He would never end up like that pathetic man. He was better than that.

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Just like that, he dropped the bomb on the man who should have killed him when he had the golden opportunity at his feet.

Kurebayashi finished writing out a prescription note and held it out to his patient. “Very well. You are no longer obligated to continue therapy with me.”

Shinjiro’s brain stopped functioning for a moment. The teen hesitantly took the form he needed, wondering if it had any booby traps like the request. It didn’t seem so. Kurebayashi sat unfazed in his chair with his legs crossed and his hand spinning his stethoscope in circles. He wondered if this was a joke.

Noting his reaction, the doctor with a white polo shirt rather than a lab coat tilted his head curiously. “You need not explain. I am more surprised you tolerated me for this long.”

He may not be as threatening in the school uniform, but Shinjiro stayed on his toes. To be extra safe, he wore a bulletproof undergarment he “borrowed” from Kurosawa and armed himself with a pocketknife. If all else fails, he could grab a chair or a floor lamp. Shinjiro folded his arms and frowned. “Keep enemies closer than your friends.”

“How’s stalkin’ teenage girls a priority?”

“How’s stalkin’ teenage girls a priority?” said the chuckling doctor. “Have you learned all this on the streets, or with your exchanges with Strega? It shows how useless education systems have become in the twenty-first century.”

“Whatever.” He honestly pulled that excuse out of his ass, though he didn’t entirely disagree with that mentality.

“I am serious. You may not be an academic genius, but you understand self-preservation better than most old men my age. Having priorities like yours should be more common.”

“How’s stalkin’ teenage girls a priority?”
“Stalking’? My, I never thought you would be the type to exaggerate,” Kurebayashi snorted despite his tense eyes meaning every word he uttered. “Unless you have intimate knowledge of my niece, every interaction with her you freely shared was perfectly normal and public.”

“That’s not the point. Whether ya wanna admit it or not, you wanted me to talk ’bout nothing but her like an obsessed psycho. You should’ve called her if ya ever really gave a shit. Using my rants to keep tabs on her is pretty damn unethical.”

Kurebayashi put down his stethoscope and took out his patient’s file. Clipped with it was a picture of a thirteen-year-old Airi sitting next to shrubs of blooming white jasmines her family kept in their garden. He smiled at it. “The greatest mistake of my life was my inability to have a family. I never married, and my sister died with a little one on the way. Ai has no other blood besides me, and rather than raise her as my own, I sent her away. Even simply talking to her disheartened me.”

“That’s what happens when you put work above kin,” Shinjiro spat.

The aging man shook his head and sighed. “When you have a busy career and then want to start a family, you’ll understand.”

“If I ain’t in the dirt by then.”

Kurebayashi ignored his rude, defensive rebuttal. “It would be so nice to never work and spend your time with the little one who may grow up to become just like you. You want her to be her own person and to create her own worlds to help her feel safe. To be free and have fun before the world threatens to destroy that sacred home. Once it’s tainted, childhood is over. The poor little girl you held so dear dies before your eyes.”

The man laughed softly, pinched his nose, and breathed heavily; the whites of his eyes matched his irises. He adjusted his glasses, dropped his hands to the desk, and laughed again. “I carried myself away. I apologize.”

Shinjiro stood edgily. The longer he stayed near him, the harder it would be to finish him later on. It made him wonder how Airi managed to kill Takaya so easily and still acted as typical a girl as she always was the next day.

Wanting to get back on track, Shinjiro cleared his throat and said, “What if I quit completely?” Kurebayashi raised an eyebrow but let him continue. “The suppressants are long gone, nothing’s in my system except the stuff to prevent rejection. Transplant’s done. Tartarus is exercise…”

The doctor gestured at the chair across from him. Shinjiro eyed it for a moment and decided – reluctantly – to sit down. This meeting could be long, depending on Aether’s mood.

“Traditionally I would oppose the thought,” he said plainly. His head lowered slightly, very similar how Airi does when she’s genuinely apologetic. “However, unlike many with your background and situation, you have a stronger support network. Your friends killed Hypnos and Epiphron to save you; that is something you should be boasting about it.

“But complications might arise if you do not have a specialist to check up on you. You might relapse or experiment with other drugs to fulfill a missing need. Your friends can only do so much for you. Ai’s an angel, but she is only a tad over half your size and cannot stop you if you get violent. Akihiko dotes, but he is too hotheaded for sensible empathy.”

Shinjiro remembered the first day of therapy with Kurebayashi. The things he said were complete nonsense. He only went because the Kirijo family would execute him and serve him to mountain
he stuck around until he noticed he started to care. He wanted to get better because Kurebayashi was actually spot-on when helping him recognize most of his problems. But his observations still pissed him off. And after being trapped for half a month, Shinjiro finally learned to shut up and listen to the guys who have access to mind-altering chemicals.

“I have a proposition,” Kurebayashi said. He noticed Shinjiro’s face darkening with every word he spoke. “I will recommend you to a few therapists who do not mind patients occasionally making calls. For a month or two, meetings will be weekly, just so they can get to know you. Then afterwards you can call whenever you need to see them. Within reason, of course.”

Shinjiro’s brow lost a few wrinkles over the idea.

“Excellent.”

“Let me make a few things clear. The next doc better not have dirt with the doomsday plot. Never share my files to anyone again. And leave everything ‘bout her out of this.”

With a twisted smile Kurebayashi shrugged. “Are you even physically capable of saying my lovely jasmine’s name?”

Shinjiro’s eyes hardened into razor-sharp diamonds.

“Very well, then. Everything you have mentioned is strictly confidential. Only your records of the detoxification and the transplant will be transferred.”

“That better be all,” he snarled like a crouching tiger. “Or I’ll bash your skull in.”

“I would not doubt your promise, but I will die anyway. I have had all the fun I could possibly need for one lifetime.”

Through with this mess, Shinjiro bolted for the door. With one hand on the handle, the former patient hesitated. Not looking at the doctor again, he said, “You’re a miserable sack of shit.”

“You are quite the inconsiderate asshole yourself, Shinjiro Aragaki. However, without you, I could have never completely accepted the inevitability of my own death had you not watched over Ai on my behalf.”

Having less stomach than before and the immnosuppressant medicine he needed, Shinjiro left the office without another word. Kurebayashi shook his head at the immaturity. He opened up the file sitting on his desk and read through it. The meetings were very strange. Sometimes it was hard to tell who was the one needing therapy each time, but they were always talking about the same thing over and over again. Gossiping old ladies would whack them on the heads with teapots with how they never let go that one topic.

Then he grabbed his personal notebook and reviewed the most recent informal notes he kept. Seeing how spaced apart they are, Kurebayashi couldn’t help but wonder how Shinjiro managed to keep himself together for so long.

August 11, 2009

Patient’s reoccurring dreams continue to persist. Claims to be tired of them, but may be suppressing true feelings. Remains distrustful.

Heart failure at 9:16 am. Resuscitation failed three times. Clinically dead for three minutes twelve seconds. Brain damage possible.

Heart is dying. Need transplant ASAP. Placed name on waiting list.

Start eating cheap. Contacts will expect a fortune.

September 13, 2009

Patient argues against transplant. Speaking very little, gloomy. Voice is muted, lower than usual. Personal grooming worsening. Likely depressed.

Covers eyes with hat. Embarrassment? Shame?

Bags under eyes. Sleeping troubles. Dreams bothering him more than usual. Definitely depressed.

Agrees to surgery. Provides no reason. Leaves suddenly after signing paperwork.

Ai.

Patient wishes for death.

I will not grant it.

Kurebayashi put down his pen, deciding to not record the final meeting and his feelings on the matter. With the diversion over, he tore out the pages of the book, took out a cigarette lighter, and burned his thoughts along with the file. He placed it in the empty trashcan and opened the window near his desk to let the smoke air out.

He focused on other work as he waited for his assistant to page him on the results of the tests Shinjiro originally came in for. Kurebayashi immediately knew his motive in asking for them, but rather than be domineering, he muttered under his breath, “Take care of her, boy. Or we will see who’s skull will be bashed in.”
“Hey, what’s wrong, Junpei-kun?” Airi asked.

She was on her way to the roof for lunch on Wednesday when Junpei started walking in the opposite direction. He was noticeably lacking spirit and humor since last night, and now seemed the best time to check up on him before his mood soured more.

Junpei spun around and threw his hands in the air. “I dunno anymore, man…”

“What happened?”

He looked around and lowered his voice when a group of freshmen boys arguing over how little yen they had to pay off some bet in gym that morning were out of earshot. “I saw Chidori yesterday, and… it sucked. I think she hates me…”

Airi knew those words too well. It was the beginning of yet another roller coaster of desperation and sadness. Though she did manage to avert disaster a few times thus far, hearing Junpei say this concern much sooner than usual caught her off guard. Takaya’s involvement made Chidori regress a month earlier than in past cycles, and Airi was even more thankful he was gone.

“I’m sorry, Junpei-kun,” Airi said while patting his shoulder.

He rubbed the back of his neck, eyeing her with a flicker of desperation. “Hey, Aibana, did you see this comin’ at all?”

She pulled him to the wall to let other students who haven’t found a good place to have their lunch walk on by. Many posts on the bulletin boards advertised the Kyoto school trip for juniors and seniors only. While the student body was thrilled, the spell wore off SEES a while ago thanks to Airi spoiling it.

Careful with her words, Airi bit her lip. “I did. Chidori has acted like this before. You were right to be worried, but remember what I said?”

“Something about flowers?” the jaded joker replied as his heart sank and pulled his vocal chords down with it.

“Go see her whenever you can. Buy her new flowers if you think making it as an excuse to keep coming back helps, but make sure she always cares for her flowers.”

For a second a spark of hope lit in Junpei’s sad eyes despite his recent skepticism. “Did Takaya control Chidori? She couldn’t have had a bad day. It’s just makes more sense if he – ”

Airi’s expression softened and clearly expressed her empathy. “I believe you, Junpei-kun. She’s been
exhausted and let out her anger on you. Please keep seeing her. Rapunzel is lonely with the Swiss guards cooping her up in an empty castle.”

Her awkward joke managed to help Junpei crack a smile. He nodded and straightened in posture. Mild relief resonated in his voice. “Y-Yeah, you’re right. Guess I kinda am her prince right now. I can’t give up on her.”

“That’s the adorable idiot we love!”

“Yeah, yeah.” He scratched the back of his head. Then he arched an eyebrow when he felt his hair. “Gotta get this cut soon. Bein’ bald might not be so bad… and with Yuka-tan not here…”

Laughing, Airi folded her arms. “You’re gonna sneak out just so you can stop by the hospital.”

“Well… that too,” he replied as he stroked his chin. “Besides, a man’s gotta have a buzzcut to at least match this amazing goatee!”

“Uh huh. What’s wrong with having a few strands touch your ears?”

“Dude, you’re just into guys with long girly hair. Only Shinjiro-sempai can pull off that look like a rock star or somethin’. Add the fact he’s a pro with an axe and he’s a badass Viking!”

“Ah, you stayed awake in history class.”

“Keep dreamin’, man. I’ve just been reading some American comics Kenji lent me lately.”

Them bickering with each other again made Airi happy. “If you’re leaving, better do it now. I’ll cover whatever notes you miss. But I’m only doing this once, you slacker.”

Junpei laughed victoriously and ruffled her hair. A few shocked stares went their way, but others ignored the ridiculous drama in the social life of Airi Fujihara. Without another word, he let go, tipped his teal ball cap to her and sprinted down the hall in the direction of the stairs. Airi’s stomach reminded her of her original objective and she went to the rooftop. Once she got there, she joined Fuuka and Aigis for a hearty lunch.

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October 9, 2009

Everyone looked forward for the Tartarus run to continue from the 140th floor after taking a few days off from roaming the hidden hour and fighting Shadows. The halls of Tziah were regally adorned with a thick layer of molten gold. Occasional spots of blood ruined the regal flavor to reduce the sophistication into something disquieting. While Airi brought three for a team of four, the rest waited around the main entrance hall with Fuuka teaching them how to play card games. Theo took the night off from checking in on the Group's corruption investigation with Takeharu Kirijo or Ikutsuki's condition with Officer Kurosawa, and he made more notes on SEES’ progress in between learning fascinating games he would never want to introduce to his competitive sisters.

When Airi’s team reached the 146th floor, the group confronted three Hell Knights that blocked their way to the stairs. They had to make a quick trip down to the entrance to swap Aigis for Junpei before charging forward.

While sidestepping one of the large bolts of lightning that manifested out of nowhere, Airi called out her orders. “I don’t think elemental attacks will work! Check for me, Fuuka!”
“G-Got it! I’m scanning now!”

“Want us to use physicals?” asked Akihiko, smiling when Ziodyne did not hurt him or Caesar at all.

“Time for Shinjiro-sempai to kick some ass!” cheered Junpei. “Show us your new Persona again, dude! Pretty please?”

Seeing the joker distracted, one of the Hell Knights cast Ziodyne on him. Junpei shuddered and yelled; he quickly got back on his feet and brought out Hermes to deal an inelegant dropkick to the Shadow’s face.

“You’re such a lucky goofball!” Airi teased, summoning Titania to heal everyone. “But c’mon, Shinjiro-kun! You barely used him at all!”

Shinjiro rolled his eyes. For a while he merely planted his feet in one place as the Hell Knights tried and failed to attack him. With High Counter, he quickly deflected with a curt swing of his axe.

“And get more exercise for your heart, why don’t you?” shouted Akihiko.

“G-Guys?” Fuuka interrupted just in time when everyone dodged Heat Wave. “Airi-chan is right; they have no weaknesses! Physical attacks are your only chance!”

Putting his Evoker to his head, Shinjiro smirked. “Sounds good to me.”

Junpei literally jumped around in circles for this moment. Too bad he was so gosh-darn happy that he didn’t notice a Hell Knight weakened his defense with Rakunda. Akihiko looked out for him by using the same spell on all three of them. With a new opening, Shinjiro made his move.

“Horatius!” From the blue mist around him emerged the onyx-armored warrior. The gasmask he wore muffled his battle cry, but the intimidation was still palatable. A surge of energy flowed through Horatius and Shinjiro as they focused on building up strength, ready for the next attack to wreck a ton of damage.

Junpei was inspired and summoned Hermes again. His enthusiasm was so strong; his Persona quickly killed one of the Knights in perfectly timed Torrent Shot. On the other side of the hall, one Knight was so pissed off he cast Ziodyne on Airi. Since she was too busy thinking of healing everyone, she forgot her current Persona Titania was weak to electricity.

“Airi-chan! Someone, help her!”

Akihiko quickly darted over to her and brought Airi back on her feet. Seeing her safe again, Junpei and Shinjiro relaxed somewhat and continued attacking the two weakened Knights with their Personas. After swinging their weapons did little good, Hermes tried another Torrent Shot. Horatius finished off the two Shadows for good with an overpowered earthquake-inducing Heat Wave. The two salvaged some gems and curative items from the murky remains and rushed to Airi and Akihiko.

On her feet and leaning on Akihiko’s shoulder, she greeted them with a nervous smile. “Great job, guys! That was pretty easy.”

“If you knew the Shadow used electricity,” Junpei lectured for everyone, “then don’t use a Persona that’s weak to it! It’s common sense, man!”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Guess I better find a extra Persona to support you guys…”

Akihiko shrugged. “Or you could just focus on attacking. Tartarus hasn’t been tiring us out as much
lately."

"Hey, guys?" Fuuka joined in telepathically. "How about you breeze through a few more floors? The Shadows above you seem nonthreatening."

Using her own strength to stand again, Airi clenched her naginata tight. "I agree."

"Just... pay attention," insisted Shinjiro as the four of them started walking to the stairs.

Airi laughed. "You guys worry too much about me."

"It's our job, leader," teased Junpei. "And I'd rather worry about ya than lose to Ken at War. The kid's a demon!"

"Or you're just now realizing a ten year old might be smarter than you at some things."

The pathetic glare Junpei threw at the boxer made Shinjiro snort. "Don't inflate the kid's ego by kickin' the clown while he's down, Aki."

Akihiko shrugged as he lead the group towards the direction of the stairs according to Fuuka's telepathic cues. "I can't help it. Mère taught me I must not tell lies."

"Aw c'mon!" Junpei threw his arms up and wedged himself between Shinjiro and Airi to avoid Akihiko's sharp tongue. "Why do you gotta be an ass about it, 'dad'? I say we kids revolt and pick new parents!"

"Ken-kun would like you remind you that's not how it works, Junpei-kun" Fuuka interrupted. "Experience and age wins every time, 'kid'," Shinjiro added while closing the book on the issue indefinitely.

Junpei groaned and gave up, leaving Airi to collect the fragments of his pride. Their banter lightened up as Shinjiro and Akihiko took time to mock each other as they explored more floors. Aigis warned Fuuka of the Dark Hour's ending. Theo finished recording their progress in a leather-bound notebook. The gang considered the run a success, stopping at the floor with the next obstructive boss before the barricade.

Before heading out of the main entrance, Airi spotted the velvet doorway standing lonely in the distance from the staircase into the labyrinth. No one mentioned seeing it since September, and from the knowing look Theo gave, it meant all returned to as it was before.

"You coming, Airi?" called out Akihiko from the front door gold.

Broken from his distracting thoughts, she sprinted to catch up with the others. Once she made it outside into the stony path outside, the mismatched, protruding structures shot back into the core of the tower. Tartarus compressed and buckled until it transformed back into the four-story high school.

While on their way to the closed front gates, Aigis asked, "Were you looking for that door?"

"Speaking of which, we never figured out what it was," said Akihiko, cracking his glove-free knuckles.

"That earthquake was pretty scary..." said Ken, shivering at the memory and the sudden gust of cool air.

Airi glanced nervously at Theo. He stood on the sidelines as he took out the keys from his pocket to
unlock the school’s front gates. Noticing that split-second movement, Shinjiro shrugged and said, “She’ll tell us when she’s comfortable. Better to take it slow than confuse us all at once.”

“I did not expect patience from you, Shinjiro-san.”

“Just point at a Shadow and I’ll crush it. Worrying ‘bout the details has wasted more than enough time. We’ve got a common goal, so let’s get the work done.” Koromaru brushed lightly against his friend’s leg and expressed agreement with a bark.

“I agree with Shinjiro-sempai,” said Junpei. “All that overthinking made me hate school more than I already do. Gotta keep things cool sometimes, y’know?”

Aigis folded her arms while contemplating why two of her friends were more laid back about this topic. She decided now was not the time to challenge them. “Understood.”

Theo held the gate open for everyone to pour out. When Airi went through last, he winked at her and proceeded to lock the gate. She felt mildly relieved in having some permission. “I can at least say that door is the reason we’re still alive,” she revealed, gaining everyone’s attention as they walked to the Port Island train station. “The ones behind it watch over me and help me manage my Personas.”

“Who are they though?” Ken asked.

Airi looked at an unusually silent Fuuka. The girl stared without focus for a few seconds, masking what she thought of Theo since she and Yukari knew him longer and likely had theories about him that she had not shared. When Fuuka did not comment, Airi continued, “They have enough power monitor my progress through the cycles. So they’re not technically human.”

Akihiko, Ken, and Aigis knew the answer was unsatisfactory, but they shut their mouths. It was late and Airi’s tone hinted that she did not feel confident in explaining something when it would further complicate matters. The supposed contract holders might get angry in theory if Airi wasn’t careful, and if they were gods, it was best if they waited for the answer on their terms.

Once back at the dorm, everyone immediately crashed in his or her room. As soon as Airi’s head hit the pillow, the door emerged in her mind’s eye. Someone was quite impatient to meet with her. She went into the Velvet Room.

“I have been waiting for you.”

It felt like a lifetime since Airi spoke with the pleasantly creepy long-nosed Igor. He conveniently avoided every slip-up that occurred in the past few months. Since it was a different world with different rules, Airi guessed he had other things to worry about. She sat in her seat across from him.

“Long time no see. I assume you know what happened lately.”

“Indeed, I am aware of the events that transpired,” he grinned keenly. “Given the colossal obstacles that fell in your path, you have managed your situation well. The road you paved is clear, leading to your final destination.”

Igor’s odd persona was less creepy this time around and the Velvet Room was full of light flickering between the bars of the elevator gate and dancing along the soft fabrics hiding doorways to elsewhere. The hands of the clock above Igor’s seat sprang to life and filled the silence with gentle ticks.

Airi looked around her and smiled at the more familiar air. “The candles seem more like decorations now.”
“Indeed. Your strength has returned. This time you relied more on the power of your bonds, rather than our influence. Perhaps the revelations brought more good to your effort than I anticipated. However the stakes are indeed much higher than before…”

Airi slouched in her seat slightly and held eight tarot cards in her hand. “Not everyone believes me… but a few don’t seem to care. It’s okay.”

“Is it truly?” asked Igor, leaning forward with elbows resting on his knees.

“They see and know the real enemy. As long as the Nine Children are defeated, I’m okay if there’s some doubt. It’s better than blind loyalty.”

The bald man then chuckled ominously. She knew Igor was a benevolent figure, but he knew how to either be unhelpful or cryptic. If a ventriloquist dummy of him existed, she would gladly express to the world how strange he was by making fun of his pretension. She couldn’t wait to tell of how many times he called for her in her sleep…

She sat upright, shuffled her cards, and glared. “What’s on your mind, oh wise nosey one?”

“Oh, mere speculation on my part.” Igor waved his hand casually. “Several timelines have passed with the same end. Change is upon you, and how strong your bonds are will decide how likely you will survive. I only have one thing left to advise you,” he replied pensively. “In order to obtain true happiness, you must relinquish something you value, lest it be taken from you.”

It was something she heard before. Some teens would roll their eyes and say, “I know.” With mind slightly matured beyond her body, Airi simply nodded. “I understand.”

Igor smiled at her patience. “Excellent. This may be the greatest challenge you will forever face. Whatever comes to light in the end, your journey was a remarkable pleasure to witness.”

“Glad to see you view humans as lab rats.”

“Mankind carries a fascinating variety of shadows and masks. The play is predictable, but the players make each viewing a unique privilege.”

“It’d be nice once in a while if I could just… show them this room.”

He shook his head gravely. “You dare test the strength of your friends’ trust so soon? The contract obligates you to bear the burden alone for a reason. They could never have the chance to understand as you do in such a small window of time. If you indeed fail again, revealing ourselves would be all for naught. Please, remember that.”

She couldn’t deny what she already knew, but Airi had adopted the urge to beat something up from Akihiko. It was unusually and oddly tempting.

“Now, then, as my assistants are off on their own errands, how may I help you?” Next to him sat the blue-bound Compendium that Theo or Margaret were never seen without. Igor picked it up and placed it on his lap. Right down to the brass tacks, Airi relaxed herself. Waves of light poured out of her chest and manifested as a stack on cards in her hand. She placed most of them on the Fusion table and stood by.

“I have to be ready for anything,” she said calmly despite picking dirt from under her nails. “Titania stays with me, and I want Odin, Suzaku, Cybele, Melchizedek, Nom, and Sandalphon. If possible, can Vishnu, Take-Mikazuchi, Melchizidek, and Odin produce items for me too?”
Within seconds, Igor proper the book open and began summoning the Persona. Symbols and circles of summons lit the room from above them and a swarm of creatures emerged from its center. One by one they descended upon the table, dissolved into energy, and manifested into cards.

In the wake of some of the Persona, strange items fell into Airi’s hands: a palm-sized halo, a white armlet, a blue ring, and a golden ring. Having everything she needed, she gathered the newer cards. The older ones disappeared into the light of the circle above. Igor then shut the Compendium and broke the circle.

“Anything else?” he suggested as he placed the book back by his side.

“No thanks,” Airi said. “I have what I need for now.”

Cards pressed in between her palms, Airi absorbed the new Persona into her being. She closed her eyes and breathed meditatively. It had been so long, she forgot how much she missed singing a prayer for her soul. Flowing wind spiraled up her arms, around her torso, and into her heart. It ended when their whispers pledged their servitude to her. When her song ended and she opened her eyes, the familiar ceiling of her bedroom was there. Thrown back into the real world so quickly Airi was surprised how efficient Igor could be when he didn't talk her ears off. Regardless she was glad to see him again; there was little need to visit the Velvet Room very often when she had a solid line-up of Persona.

Mind still exhausted, she buried her face into her comforter and tried to get some sleep. The days have been growing colder. She was used to it, but Airi still shivered and wrapped herself up like a caterpillar.

October 10, 2009

Fuuka sat with her chin in her palm, daydreaming in the middle of class. Natsuki stopped giving her trouble a long time ago, but she still felt cornered. Her parents called willingly for the first time in months. They planned to transfer her to a different private school. Fuuka didn’t want to leave the few friends she made, but she wished things were normal again. Her friends depended on her so much to guide them through the Dark Hour, but Fuuka sometimes felt she offered little else. The scar from Epiphron burned when she had doubts, which filled her mind more and more as of late. Sometimes she would make something edible in cooking class, only for Airi to always make the same thing much better. SEES interacted fervently with each other, which still lead to a few impassioned arguments in spite of the budding web connecting everyone’s hearts together.

And yet anyone could die. Details and effects of Airi’s condition remained clouded in mystery. The Nine could strike back at any minute after the death of Takaya. The Fall was coming…

“Psst, have you been behind the station lately?”

Her ear perked and Fuuka turned her head slightly to overhear the speaker. Two male classmates also agreed that Classical Japanese Literature was too boring to focus on at the end of a long week.

“No way,” whispered his mousey-looking friend. “That Aragaki freak’s been long gone and the place is a complete dump. Kinda wish he’d drop out again and beat the shit out of those punks. He’d set them straight and do the city some good.”

“Damn. Never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“It’s true. No one’s just chill there anymore. I mean, they were always messed up, but Aragaki used
to scare them shitless. A bunch of different psychos moved in a while back and made things crazier.”

“Who were they?”

“A gothic lolita, a biker hippie, and an Osaka-ben with a bomber jacket. Only the blue-haired freak’s been seen lately, stirring up some trouble in town and on the net.”

“He’s some online personality or something, right?”

“Yeah. He’s been lurking in manga cafés and patching up that revenge site of his. The pics and messages he’s been uploading are fucking creepy. For some reason the guy suddenly lost his marbles, but he’s got a stronger following –”

A disapproving clearing of Ekoda’s throat immediately shut them up. They mumbled reluctant apologies, only to go back to gossiping again later. Fuuka listened in occasionally, but they dropped the topic in favor of how the hospital got wrecked the other night.

Once the period ended for lunch, Ekoda called her into the Faculty Room. His expression may have looked nonchalant, but his tone was very smug.

“Your parents called this morning. Is it true that the 17th will be your last day?”

“Y-Yes, sensei,” Fuuka replied, knees shaking under her calm expression. They acted quicker than she feared; Fuuka expected her parents would inform the school on Monday to allow word to catch like wildfire in a prolonged drought.

Ekoda noticed this and sighed. “A pity. This class has fallen behind the others, especially Toriumi’s. Her students perform phenomenally on tests and they possess a tremendous amount of school spirit. Without you, Yamagishi, we could never stand a chance.”

“I-I’m sorry,” she said. “The class is more than just me, b-but...”

“Precisely, and your transferring will reflect negatively on this school. Though it baffles me why it so happens that of the same children are absent around the same time as each other, some prove that they can maintain exceptional grades.”

Fuuka blanched. “Wh-What do you mean?”

“SEES is no ordinary club. Once a month, some kind of property damage is prevalent around town. The same students return to class with minor injuries or are absent around the same time. The previous chairman protected SEES from others’ scrutiny with inconsistent results, but the current chairman goes even further to deflect my concerns despite assuring the rest of the faculty. Suspicious to see such undue preference, don’t you think?”

He picked up on so much like an anxiety-plagued obsessive compulsive. This man was out of line and going off the original topic, but Fuuka couldn’t find her voice to protest. She never knew how to face heat like this; it was never her job and it was never in her nature. Ekoda figured out enough, and she didn’t know what to do. The scar on her stomach started to sting.

“Think, Yamagishi. That club you involve yourself in has a spotty reputation. You can stay here, but leave the club. Do not associate with anyone related to SEES, especially Kirijo. I’m sure your parents will agree and let you stay if you reform.”

Fuuka hung her head and stared at the ground. Once she thought she was good at keeping a respectful pose, and now someone exploited her insecurities. “Y-Yes, I understand.”
“Then you know what to do,” Ekoda finished with a smile. “Think this over for a few days.”

She reminded herself to bow before darting out of the room. Her entire body was shaking.

From what the others said about him when they went to save her, Ekoda was a selfish asshole outside of the classroom. Fuuka wouldn’t word it like they did, but she understood their frustrations. She wished she were in Toriumi’s class because she was a no-nonsense kind of lady and her friends were there. What Ekoda said, however, made some sense. Leaving SEES and avoiding the members could get her on the good side of her parents. They might reconsider moving her away. But she couldn’t abandon her job; they needed her. Most of all, they were the only people she could call friends.

Fuuka felt threatened and cornered. She looked down at her hands, wondering how the others could pull themselves together. Everyone could see her insecurities plainly, even if they could not always understand why she felt that way. Unsure of how to move forward, she returned to her classroom and placed the memory of the meeting in a box on the top shelf, out of sight and out of mind.

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October 12, 2009

Out for a break, Yukari sat in her wheelchair in the hospital courtyard. Aigis came to visit after classes and brought a bag full of gifts from the others at the dorm. They stayed under a tree with vibrant yellow leaves dancing around them.

“… and here is Junpei-san’s,” the android said while taking out a stack of DVDs with one hand. A nearby child gawked at how she could hold so many without trouble. “He hopes you remain entertained as you wait to be checked out.”

The brunette rolled her eyes. In her arms was a stuffed puppy Ken bought for her. “That guy better be studying,” she commented tartly. “Midterm exams are tomorrow.”

“With constant threats of destroyed handhelds from myself and Ken-san. Theo-san has also ensured that he would not protect Junpei-san from the consequences of his poor habits.”

Her deadpan tone made Yukari laugh. “I’m glad everyone’s doing good. I can’t wait to get out and catch up with you guys now that everything’s returning to normal.”

“We made two trips and reached the top of the floor. It seemed we reached the top of Tartarus.”

Yukari’s jaw dropped. “Seriously?! Isn’t that a good thing?”

“What we have learned about the Fall made some of us believe it was an illusion. ‘Is this really it?’ and ‘I expected more resistance’ are commonly said on a frequent basis. To ease our confusion Airi-san and Theo-san assured us that our fight is indeed not over. The boys expressed their disappointment in distinctly loud and colorful language.”

“I don’t blame them. I dunno if I should be happy it’s not over yet or not.”

“Theo-san suggested we climb the rest of the block five times to demonstrate our commitment to our mission before you and Mitsuru-san return.” Her eyes squinted. “From his tone, he was joking, although Airi-san almost made that suggestion reality with a smile on her face.”

Yukari laughed. “It’s good for her to lighten up. She worries too much, but I guess I can’t blame her for that.”
They continued to chat about random things for a while. Yukari then reached for her bag and returned the notes and books Fuuka lent her for the weekend. Aigis packed them in the overstuffed backpack. When she swung it onto her back, she stood like a hunched old lady.

“What are you doing?” Yukari giggled at the sight.

The blonde android explained readily, “I have studied human physiology enough to note that a thirteen and a half kilogram bag for a 162 centimeter tall, 52 kilogram female to have great difficulty in standing upright.”

“Oh… guys will insist on helping you even if you don’t need it,” she reminded sharply. “Just a heads-up.”

From across the courtyard came Mitsuru, who stared incredulously at them. When she arrived, she sat on one of the stone benches on Aigis’ left. “My goodness, Aigis! If you insist on being so ‘normal’, be sure you do not meet Akihiko on your way out.”

Two criticisms rooted in reality were enough for Aigis to straighten her posture.

“Oh, you’re leaving now?” pouted Yukari.

“Ken-san has asked me to tutor him in mathematics, and dinner will be ready shortly.”

Curious, Mitsuru caught a red leaf that entered her field of vision. Upon studying its still yellow-green stem, she asked, “Is everyone eating well?”

When Aigis not respond right away, Mitsuru and Yukari turned to her. She stood motionless with her eyes far away. They knew it was very unusual for her to be this quiet and delayed in responding.

“Um, Aigis?” Yukari poked her arm.

She immediately picked up on the awkward silence. “I apologize. We have been eating out or ordering in. Shinjiro-san complains frequently about our diets, so he makes dinner every other night. Tomorrow is some kind of Irish stew Airi-san learned from her foster family.”

Mitsuru said with a triumphant smirk, “Twisting his arm was well worth it.”

“Indeed. We are doing well. Please focus on regaining your strength.”

The two patients sighed. They have done just that for the past week, and they were sick of hearing it. Mitsuru’s no longer needed bandages and she could move her hands better now than she had in weeks. Yukari was good as new passing all the tests the doctors kept pushing on her. Even her stitches were gone early thanks to the emergency magic first aid.

“By the way, Mitsuru-sempai? Thanks for healing me.”

The redhead blinked at the sudden compliment, but she smiled. The expression startled Yukari in turn, who had never seen Mitsuru soften around her. “Think nothing of it. I am relieved you are well.” Then she looked up at the sky, partly cloudy and slowly turning pink. “I wonder if our luck will run out. It feels we cannot have an entire month with a full roster until someone is incapacitated, injured, or missing. The Dark Hour continues to bring so much suffering, and there is no end to Apathy Syndrome, no matter how many Shadows we defeat.”

“You think we’re in over our heads?”
“Perhaps, but for the sake of my family and the world, the horrors the Kirijo Group birthed must be destroyed.” A heavy cloud hung over Mitsuru’s head. Rarely had she been this honest with her feelings.

“Do not blame yourself, Mitsuru-san,” Aigis said. “Such negativity will do nothing but distract you. You should not apologize in the place of those truly responsible. Rather than wish you could fix every past mistake, remember you saved Yukari-san’s and Shinjiro-san’s lives.”

Seeing the truth in a non-living thing’s words, Mitsuru thought about it for a while. Having finished her speech, Aigis insisted that she had to return to the dorm. Yukari thanked her once more for the gifts and watched her classmate carry the heavy backpack like it was nothing. A few passerby stared shocked at her amazing strength, but Aigis paid no mind to them.

“Aigis is becoming her own person,” Yukari commented to herself, unsure if Mitsuru was paying attention.

A quiet mumble agreed with her. Yukari saw the SEES leader sit upright and pick at the leaves that fell into her hair. Either she stored the information to absorb later or she rejected it outright.

“Are you okay, Mitsuru-sempai?”

She said as she twirled the leaf in her hand, “I wonder how many times she convinced herself to believe in her own advice.”
So... I pre-ordered Yuri!!! on Ice despite my being broke, hungry, and poor. I am a very intelligent person! \( \( T \nabla T \) / \)

Anywho, many thanks to my best friend from high school for the early birthday money to buy it after dropping the news on me as payback for getting her hooked on the anime too. At least I have something to look forward to as my job hunt continues.

Anywho, enough about my bad habits and terrible taste in anime! Back to this fic after a few weeks of silence!

October 15, 2009

Though completely healthy, Akihiko still spent time at the hospital frequently. It was rare for the juniors to see him in school and Ken only passed by him twice since the last operation. Only Shinjiro saw him often because they exchanged class notes. That gave them numerous times to catch up again, even if their first real meeting after the operation mostly consisted of inflicting bloody cuts and bruises.

Today they decided to leave early after exams and hang out in the northern district of Iwatodai where they found an old warehouse near a local gym a few months back. Akihiko forced Shinjiro to adopt some routine of physical activity to keep his heart healthy, and training together was the compromise they grudgingly agreed upon. Their training tended to get dirty, so being aggressive and scaring everyone out in the open was a bad idea.

Akihiko practiced punching on his recessive side with Shinjiro holding one arm up, allowing for two invisible target boxes. He thought he stood looking like an idiot, so he often took out a magazine to read to pass the time.

“You’re a buzz kill, you know that?” said Akihiko with a frown during one quiet session.

“Hmm?” Shinjiro hummed in disinterest as he turned the page.

“You’re not even trying to help me out. While I’m starting to sweat, you’re learning how to make parfaits out of foam.”

Eyes never leaving the magazine, Shinjiro dropped his arm quickly, hitting the inside of Akihiko’s elbow. The boxer lost his balance. After wobbling around like a one-legged chicken, Akihiko glared at the emotionless statue.

“You’re jabs are too erratic because you’re hesitating. Who’d think a stubborn ox like you would hold back? Just ‘cause I had a heart transplant doesn’t mean my entire body is made of glass. And by the way, it’s poulet au fromage: chicken with cheese. Mitsuru would whip your skinny ass for your shitty French.”

Akihiko rolled his eyes and stood back into a relaxed stance. Once his smartass friend stopped
basking in his superiority and brought his arm back up, Akihiko continued punching. “Touché, but that’s still no reason to cheat and be antisocial.”

“Someone’s gotta keep you in line. ‘Sides, mom can’t execute you when she’s away.”

The boxer exhaled deeply, switched to a Southpaw stance, and lead jabs on his right side. “It’s probably gonna bite me later, but remind me why I’m ‘dad’ and she’s ‘mom’? You’re a month older than me, and you practically raised me until I was adopted.”

“Everyone listens to you two more than me. I ain’t the cuddly, nurturing type or a role model. To top it off, you’re always either so happy or stiff to see Mitsuru, you might as well be her bitch.”

A sharp pain shot through Shinjiro’s arm, making him groan, drop his magazine, and nurse the inevitable bruise. Akihiko got him good in the funny bone. He then took the chance to tap his friend on the side, where he could’ve sent Shinjiro flying sideways if he actually put effort into it.

“Attacking my manhood is great motivator to kick your ass, Shinji,” he taunted while picked the magazine off the ground and stuffing it into his backpack. “Time you face the heat!”

Shaking his less sore arm, Shinjiro straightened his posture and cracked his knuckles. “Bring it on, Aki.”

Akihiko picked up the extendable baton from his backpack and tossed it to his companion. Both armed and ready, they immediately attacked each other viciously. Boxing made Akihiko quicker on his feet, providing him multiple chances to hit Shinjiro. The delinquent preferred toughing out the blows so he could find an opening and deliver a good strike. On the side he would harass Akihiko by moving around infrequently and making mocking gestures.

Having got him twice in the shoulder, Akihiko noticed his partner tolerated the attacks more than usual. For every two punches or so, Shinjiro could deal the collective sum of that damage with one well-timed hit to an exposed guard. With the end of the baton, he jabbed Akihiko in the side near the pancreas. The boxer was left a bit disoriented, giving Shinjiro two extra cheap shots: a headbutt and a kick to the stomach. Face scrunched in pain and confusion, Akihiko fell on his back magnificently.

Shinjiro gloated proudly while stretching his arms, “Finally! Been years since I won.”

The loser sat up and rubbed his forehead. He wasn’t bleeding, but he made a note for the future to always bring aspirin. Shinjiro rolled his eyes, grabbed Akihiko by the arm, and helped him up. “Must be all those concussions you got.”

“Shut up,” Akihiko said, slightly annoyed. “You just surprised me… I can’t remember the last time you fought me with fire in your eyes.”

“Bullshit. Either you’re outta shape or you’re gettin’ soft.”

“Or maybe we’re both right,” he sneered. Shinjiro rolled his eyes and went over to pack his things.

The duo gathered their bags and ended the session. They put on their sweatshirts and faced the unusually bitter winds that overran the city. On their way to the monorail, they passed the abandoned housing complex, two blocks away from the harbor and abandoned military base where they fought Chariot and Justice. The mildly salty air from the southeast masked the nastier scents from the poorest district.

Along a slightly busier street with disheveled youth wrapped in dingy blankets, Akihiko slowed down when he spotted a tiny two-story house. Its rusty windows were boarded up haphazardly and
the matchbox of a flowerbed was infested with dying weeds. The homes surrounding it were similarly dilapidated and lifeless. Living there all alone in the winter must have been miserable. The power lines snapped some years ago, leaving the houses without electricity or heating.

Realizing his friend was standing idly at the corner, Akihiko broke from his trance and ran to catch up. Shinjiro said with a frown, “Can it.”

Akihiko stared blankly. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You were gonna throw me a pity party. Save it.”

The dismissive complaint didn’t convince Akihiko to let go of the thought. He figured Shinjiro knew it too, but neither of them had to call each other out. “Actually, I was thinking about how we’ve changed,” he admitted.

Shinjiro stared curiously, though his general expression remained unreadable. “I doubt it. You’re still hotheaded and stupid. Chargin’ forward like a fool when you’re not making up for the past.”

“That’s because I pretended to know what I was doing, when in reality I’ve been dependent on you since the day we met. I was the coward, and you were an immovable statue. It was like that for so long that when you said you were leaving SEES, I didn't believe you. I never thought you’d ever give up. Seeing you so…” Akihiko flinched as he recalled the doctors restraining and sedating Shinjiro - hysterical and covered in smoke, dirt, and blood - in the ambulance. Mitsuru slipped in and out of consciousness, but she told him later that she heard Shinjiro’s screams for months after that night. ”... Seeing you in that state made me realize that I had to grow up. Too bad it took me thirteen years to realize it.”

The two kept on walking towards the livelier parts of the city. Buildings still appeared old, but clearly someone lived there and took care of him or herself. More people were around, so Akihiko lowered his voice and chose his words carefully.

“Sometimes you were more like a parent than a friend. Even when Miki was alive, you stayed calm and strong for us even more than the caretakers at the orphanage. You insisted on doing all the hard work to look after us or making the tough life-changing choices. We didn’t ask you to be a hero, but I shouldn't have taken you for granted. Now that you’re easing off on that mindset, you’re starting to act your age.” He said with a wry smile, “I’m happy you came back, Shinji.”

Shinjiro avoided Akihiko’s eyes and stared at his feet. “Didn’t have much choice, did I?”

“Of course not.” His white-haired friend laughed. “But you’ve been a good sport.”

“Tch.”

Akihiko shot a glare and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t blow me off. Why do you act like this? Just… never mind anything nice I said about you!”

“Good. Because that was the stupidest confession ever uttered by a meat-headed idiot.”

“What?!”

“A shy schoolgirl confessing to her long lost love is more honest than your little act.”

“You only know that from experience!” Akihiko accused with a crooked grin. “Ever think you’re getting soft, Shinji? I bet you took her to your room after hours.”
In all their years together, not once did Akihiko tease him so shamelessly and get a surprising result. Shinjiro’s face turned a light and obvious shade of red. While she hadn’t been in his room since July, Airi and Shinjiro didn’t shy away from any topics regarding their relationship, and they hoped no one picked up any hints or would make shrewd comments about what was between them.

When Akihiko let out a triumphant laugh, Shinjiro’s eyes narrowed and his tone darkened. “‘Take’ me anywhere, and I’ll bash your skull open on the pavement and dissect your brain for tumors!”

“I thought you’d be able to handle your own medicine, Shinji. Think twice before you suggest there’s anything between me and Mitsuru.”

“For the love of – There is more between you two than being friends, you idiot. Airi and I talk things out so we’re on the same page, and I’ve only known her for six months. You two ain’t even close to seeing the reality of somethin’ more, and you’ve been friends for nearly three years. Mitsuru’s in a whole other league, but that hasn’t stopped her from hanging out with us. It’ll raise a bunch of nasty looks, but I know she wouldn’t mind someone different from her world of stuffy shirts.”

It was the boxer’s turn to flush red and deflect the subject. “Kn-Knock it off already! You don’t know that! Stop telling me what to do like I’m a baby! And come up with more original insults!”

“Then open your eyes to see the fire when you smell smoke, dumbass.”

“You’re just overreacting because you know I’m right about you and Airi! I guess acting like a thug with no heart isn’t as easy for you as you claimed it’d be.”

“If you really give that much of a shit, we haven’t done anything, you pretty boy idiot!”

“You know the true idiot is the one who calls others an idiot first, idiot!”

Shinjiro laughed. “Says the one skippin’ classes to watch over his not-girlfriend?”

“At least I didn’t have a risky surgery that required me to be technically dead for a few minutes!”

“And I’ve been in class every day taking notes you missed. Remind me who’s more likely to not graduate again?”

“You son of a -.”

Some passerby were uncomfortable with the insults and arguments flying between Akihiko and Shinjiro in rapid succession. Their ceaseless bickering lasted until they reached the Iwatodai station, where construction was nearly completed and traffic flowed easier than before. Because the hour was busy and their stomachs growled over their drama, the young men crossed the street to visit the strip mall. They entered Hagakure to have guests greet them with confused and intimidated stares.

Akihiko and Shinjiro clearly stood out, but they shrugged and stole some bar seats.

One of the cooks noticed them right away. “Long time no see! The usual for you two?”

Having placed his backpack by his feet, Akihiko smiled and nodded. “Yep. Two house specials.” He turned to Shinjiro and let out a smirk. “Look at the bright side. Not only are you opening up to people, you’re finally eating a variety of food since living with us.”

Shinjiro frowned. “And it’s ‘bout time you’re adding vegetables with all that protein shit you shove down your throat.”

Neither could deny the observations. Instead of keeping up the aggressive charade, they dropped
their bitterness and burst into hysterics. They didn’t care if they scared off the world again; it had been a while since they could just let go. It was the best day they had in years. Miki would’ve been proud to see her big brothers like this.

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October 18, 2009

“Guess who has returned?” announced Theo to the group in the command room.

Everyone stopped what he or she was doing – mainly playing handheld games, reading books, and teasing Koromaru – and paid full attention. Theo refused to keep still, being more childlike and cheerful than he had in a long time. Though everyone knew the answer, they wanted to hear him say it.

Before he could speak, however, the double doors entered behind them. In entered Yukari and Mitsuru, both as pink and sturdy as they had been before their injuries.

“Yuka!”

“Yuka-tan!”

Airi and Junpei cried and leapt out of their seats to swamp Yukari.

“I wasn’t dead, you guys!” she nearly yelled over their childish cheers. “Besides, I’ll strain myself if you don’t back off!”

“But it’ll be done out of love!” Junpei sneered. When she shot him a deadly glare for that, he back up a bit, but never lost his smile. “Ooh, as feisty as ever! I’m scared now!”

Airi rolled her eyes and gave Yukari a hug. “I’m glad you’re better.”

“Thanks, Airi,” she replied happily despite her glare still lingering on Junpei.

The others did not dare to attack Mitsuru in a similar fashion. Instead, Ken and Aigis bowed respectfully while Shinjiro stayed in his seat and waved. Akihiko got up to greet her, though he stood on an internal debate on how to express himself.

She laughed at his awkward posture. “It seems you won’t ever go a day without worrying about me, Akihiko. I appreciate it.”

“Y-Yeah.” He looked down at her hands, palms still wrapped in bandages. Noticing his stare, she lifted up her right hand to him. Akihiko shook it and noticed how Mitsuru did not finch at the touch. Now realizing how much better off she was, Akihiko exhaled deeply and relaxed his shoulders.

His twin coughed, jeering, “Congrats, Aki. Now you can throttle her as much as you want around the rest of us.”

“You are the last person anyone wants to hear implying strangulation.” Everyone took note of Aigis’ rapidly and accurately fired retort. While impressed for a time, they immediately frowned at Shinjiro.

When he noticed Koromaru shaking his head in disapproval, he diverted his eyes and mumbled, “Smartass robot…”

“That wasn’t very smart of you, Shinjiro-san,” Ken said so casually that it was hard to tell if he was serious or joking. “It’s not just Junpei-san and Akihiko-san who don’t think before they talk.”
“Gee, thanks, kiddo,” said Akihiko in a deadpan monotone.

Junpei shrugged to deflect the insult he’s heard a billion times before. “Just a fact of life…”

“My, Iori,” Mitsuru teased, beating the snickering junior girls to the punch. “This may be the first thing you’ve truly learned this year.”

His jaw dropped as the girls ganged up on him. “What?! Not you too, sempai!”

Feeling a bit left out, Theo observed the bickering carefully. He better understood how SEES interacted with each other, and how their dynamic constantly changed. Warm and welcoming one second, bickering and silly another, then serious and contemplative a different time. He had the chance to see human interactions as Airi did and not like his siblings did.

Once everyone had the chance to make fun of each other, they made themselves comfortable. Leaning on the back of the couch, Mitsuru made an observation. “Where’s Yamagishi?”

The room fell silent for a second before Airi, legs crossed on one of the footstools, spoke up. “She said she wasn’t feeling good. I think she’s resting in her room.”

“Maybe she studied too much,” said Ken, sitting between Yukari and Shinjiro. “I got a headache on Thursday from reading so many tiny words all day.”

Junpei laughed over the handheld game he was playing. “Dude, the words’ll only get smaller the older ya get.” The youngest member frowned over that miserable thought.

Feeling curious, Akihiko got up and approached Theo, staring at the consoles and wall monitors nestled between two large bookshelves. The man looked like he never saw such technology before. Half out of his reverie, Theo inquired, “These are… connected to the cameras found throughout the dorm… correct?”

“Well, yeah,” Akihiko replied without ceremony.

The tall man chuckled lightly. Theo was proud of himself for some unfathomable reason. Airi suddenly appeared in between them. So quick and silent, neither noticed her and shivered nervously. “Why so interested in the security footage?” she asked. Her voice and expression illustrated curiosity, but her presence screamed paranoia.

“Relax, curious girl,” Theo laughed off her interrogation while pressing a few buttons. “I was merely captivated by the sophistication and technology the Kirijo Group is capable of providing!”

Had he seen the expressions of everyone behind him, Yukari, Shinjiro, Koromaru, Aigis, and Akihiko officially believed Theo was the strangest human being to ever live. Sure, the Kirijo Group primarily specialized in electronics and technology, but was a common security system found in urban areas something to stimulate enchantment in a grown man? Not wanting to visibly share her sentiments, Mitsuru wore a polite smile as she joined the huddled group.

“Considering what we do, having a state-of-the-art security system is essential.”

Akihiko shot her a look, begging her to not encourage the man-child. Too late. “Your family’s legacy is quite impressive, Kirijo-sama,” Theo praised, adding a humble bow. The needless onslaught of compliments flustered Mitsuru. She had no idea where to begin correcting him.
Noticing this, the master lightly tugged at the sleeve of her pet. “That’s enough flirting. You might wake up with a nasty cut to your pretty face if you keep that up.”

“I apologize for lavishing my applause, Airi-chan.”

“No, you’re not,” she snorted.

“Why do you never believe me?”

Breaking up the conversation, Koromaru growled much louder than usual. Aigis translated, with a tone as dark as the pup’s, “Unless you found something within the footage, please remember you are in a public space and Airi’s boyfriend is present.”

“Y’know, I gave up that fight ages ago,” replied an unusually apathetic Junpei.

Yukari noticed Akihiko and Mitsuru took over the computers while Airi and Theo bickered. Then she turned to an expressionless Shinjiro, casually flipping through a cooking magazine. She did not know how he could put up with Airi’s scatterbrained ways.

“Some things just don’t change… for better or worse,” she surmised with a tired sigh.

The apathetic senior glanced over his magazine to eye Yukari. “Never gets dull. We’re all better off goofing ‘round once in a while. It keeps us focused when it matters.”

“I’m kinda surprised to hear you say that,” she said with a smile. “But you’re right.”

Silently but suddenly, Mitsuru gasped. “What on earth…?”

The others crowded around her, Akihiko, Theo, and Airi. Ken and Junpei gave Koromaru room to hop on one of the chairs to get a look. One of the monitors showed Fuuka’s room, or what was left of it. Only brown boxes and a blue suitcase added color to the blank room. The footage was in real-time, showing Fuuka taking down assorted wires from her bookshelf and placing them in a box marked “electronics”.

Hearts, jaws, and moods dropped.

“What is she doing!!” cried Ken.

Choosing his words carefully, Theo replied calmly, “She appears to be packing…”

“Right when we got back!!” Yukari said. “And she didn’t come see us!”

Distressed, Akihiko bit his lip and averted his eyes from the monitor. The others were just as shocked if they weren’t already in denial. Rather than get emotional, Mitsuru backed up from the group and spoke up before someone else added to the increasing agitation. “I will speak with her.”

As she was about to turn to the door, Aigis jumped right in front of her. “I insist on going with you!”

Mitsuru folded her arms and pressed her lips. The air cooled around them. “No. Having all nine of us storm into her room demanding answers will upset her.”

“It doesn’t matter!” said Yukari, standing with the obtruding android. “Fuuka can’t leave us, Mitsuru-sempai!”

“I understand, Takeba. But we must consider Yamagishi’s feelings and her situation…”
“We don’t have time for that!” yelled Junpei. “You’re making us see her too, sempai!”

“No.”

“Damn it, Mitsuru-sempai!” Yukari threw her arms in the air. “You can’t replace her, not with your hands like this!”

“My condition is irrelevant! I will speak with her myself before we jump to conclusions.”

“But we need her, Mitsuru-san!” argued Ken.

Everyone’s voices continued to rise, even when the breathed air became a visible white. Akihiko shivered until his skin stiffened. Only Theo and Shinjiro stayed out of it. Not that they weren’t concerned, but they stuck with a vacant Airi, who still hasn’t fully comprehended the situation on the screen.

After five minutes of non-stop arguing, Akihiko said, “Go, Mitsuru.” He immediately became unpopular with the juniors and Ken. Mitsuru, however, stared mildly perplexed. “It’s better you talk to her anyway,” he continued, ignoring the glares of death. “None of us have the same abilities as you two, and you’re still the true leader of SEES. We should leave this to you.”

She read his expression carefully. As sincere as he was, she found it odd he showed no signs of panic at all. Mitsuru eyed the other quiet ones and found no reason to intrude upon the nonparticipants. Letting out a sigh, she nodded. “Thank you, Akihiko.”

Then she looked at the protestors again and assured them that she would press Fuuka until she spoke the truth. Aigis and Ken reluctantly backed off. As the Kirijo heiress left the command room, the android fought to keep Yukari and Junpei from attacking her from behind. Ken eyed Akihiko carefully, and watched him help Shinjiro and Theo get some kind of response out of Airi.

October 19, 2009

Heavy clouds blanketed the cityscape as two girls walked in silence to the monorail in the central district of Iwatodai. They used to take it to school, though not once at the same time. Student council required Mitsuru to leave earlier than the others, and usually she would greet Akihiko after his morning run as she departed. She pulled the suitcases while Fuuka carried a box of electronics and a handbag she bought during a spree with the juniors.

When they arrived, a middle-aged couple treated them with vacant eyes. Rather than expressing contempt for corrupting a child, rather than throwing daggers for words of pretense and superiority, the proud family let Fuuka’s conflicting emotions do the damage. Unable to face her parents, she stared timidly at her feet.

Mitsuru gave the luggage to the family and told them how Fuuka was a wonderful student and roommate. They reluctantly thanked the young woman, trying too hard to serve as the face of the Kirijo Group. She was naïve of the growing discord within the city and the school grounds, and the Yamagishi family felt no obligation for them and Fuuka to associate with the Kirijo anymore. Despite the passive-aggressive disapproval, Mitsuru held onto her pride and saw Fuuka off inside the station.

“I will watch over the others in your stead,” she promised with a kind smile.

The sincerity was not enough. Fuuka’s eyes were plagued with dejection. “But my power is more
reliable…”

“Yet you chose to protect your future beyond high school. That is a lesson we need to remember before we willingly put our lives on the line.” Fuuka’s head hung low, hiding her teary eyes. Placing a hand on the petite girl’s shoulder, Mitsuru continued, “It will take time, but the others will respect your choice. Please don’t be a stranger. We would like to hear from you about your new life.”

Before Fuuka could protest further, the announcer on the intercom reported the arrival of the 5:45 train. The girls ended their conversation without fully voicing either of their concerns, but they saw each other off with a brave face. Mitsuru wasn’t ready to deliver the news of letting a friend go.

Dragging her heavy feet along for the ride of shame, Fuuka boarded the train heading east. Her new home would be too far to simply visit the Tatsumi Port Island area without planning a whole weekend. When she found a seat, she pressed her head against the window. Thick droplets of water danced along down as the sky opened up. The rain and fog were so overpowering, opaque grey film erased everything beyond three feet from the train. Fuuka would no longer read the state of the conflicted moods Mitsuru carried on her trek to school.

The five-hour ride was unbearable. Fuuka chose to keep many seats apart from her parents so she could wallow in self-pity. She couldn’t find the right words or time to tell everyone why she left. Mitsuru and Yukari shouldn’t have returned only to learn Fuuka had to go, but it didn’t excuse her being a coward.

The side where Epiphron’s blade grazed her skin burned. It happened occasionally, but she never told her family, friends, or doctors. Only when she pondered on her insecurities did the sensation bother her, and Fuuka knew that not doing so would minimize the discomfort. She used the same excuse when keeping her departure a secret; she felt powerless.

“We all felt that way at one point, Yamagishi. It’s cliché, I know, but it’s the truth. Someone always seems to have a skill he or she surpasses others in, only to have it fail when needed the most.”

Fuuka knew the others verbally attacked Mitsuru for insisting on speaking to her alone. Everyone’s essence emitted stronger and stronger waves with each passing day as her powers honed. Even when she focused solely on packing, Fuuka felt every individual’s mirth and humor from in the command room. This was the closest she felt with the others, but the physical distance was impossible to ignore. Her power reminded her how alone she really was.

“If the school confronted you, they may investigate and attempt to disband SEES. The Kirijo Group cannot cover our tracks forever. My father, Arisato, and I may have overestimated our potential. This may negatively impact our futures, and I’d hate for any of you to live with that burden for the rest of your life.”
Fuuka could see Mitsuru’s crippling doubt under her composed and proper face. Though not yet a true leader in practice, she could play a politician brilliantly. Without her intuition, Fuuka would never suspect her sempai hiding so many burdens on her own, providing hints to no one. Sad as it was, the teal junior admired her senior’s ability to bear it and still stand strong. Everyone was like that too: everyone but Fuuka. She honestly didn’t know what she was doing. She only knew to stand by and watch as the others made decisions for themselves.

Clenching the end of her knitted poncho, she felt a vibration painfully wash over her body. Goosebumps rose on her arms. Fuuka slowly reached for her phone in her messenger bag. Two texts arrived at the same time. Her throat tightened. She knew someone was angry with her, and she didn’t want to deal with it right now.

Then, her phone vibrated again. And again. And again. Seven texts begged her to acknowledge their existence. Fearing an eighth or twentieth, Fuuka opened her messages.

The first was from Natsuki: “Hey, I know we didn’t talk much, but class is boring without you. Thanks for giving me another chance. Keep in touch, okay? Good luck.”

The former bully was the first to say she missed her. Fuuka’s perpetual frown twitched a bit. Natsuki helped her plan for a few exams and walked home with her on days when neither had club activities. Their interests weren’t similar enough for them to be very good friends, but Natsuki was nice enough to keep an eye on her. No one bullied her as often ever since she recovered in June.

Right after Natsuki’s was a text from Akihiko.

“I’m not mad. Don’t worry about me. Your aunt dropped tons of hints about the move, but her idea of subtlety is driving a car into a brick wall. Hope things work out. Keep in touch.”

Fuuka sighed deeply. Now she understood why Akihiko forced smiles lately. Her aunt Shunko was not a pleasant person to deal with.

With two messages being less inflammatory than she feared, she opened up another. Junpei.

“English was my best exam. It’s gotta be the end of the world. What’s worse is you’re not here to cheer me on. You better come back to visit, Fuuka-chan!”

Whether he was yelling out of anger or desperation, learning Junpei aced English was a scary thought. It only happened because Fuuka persistently helped him study.

Closing that message, the next one came from Ken.

“I wish we had another dinner before you left. You guys are my family now.”

His simple text made Fuuka cough up. The hurt feelings crept through Airi’s and Aigis’ too. It wasn’t fair. The guilt trip only made leaving harder.

“I never saw this coming. I’m sorry I let you down. Talk to me when you need a shoulder, okay? I’ll give you more onigiri recipes. :)

“This departure upsets me. Our mission will be significantly harder to accomplish without you, but I understand that family and your future are important to you. I admire your choice. Goodbye and good luck.”

Then Yukari.
“Thanks for the necklace, Fuuka! I wish you’d stay for my birthday. You were there for me when I needed you most. I wish I can return the favor somehow. Please call whenever you need me.”

Mitsuru.

“You and I have the gift to connect with others. Promise me you will cherish it. I will improve my abilities so they are half as reliable as yours. Thank you for your help, Fuuka.”

Fuuka covered her mouth to muffle her sobs. As quietly as she could, she let herself cry. Angry or not, her friends reached out to her one more time, reminding her of what she did for them.

She lightly touched the area where the scar on her stomach was. That monster threw her around like a ragdoll, effectively damaging her confidence in being dependable and useful. It would likely happen again, and she didn’t want to disappoint her friends by being hopeless and unable to defend herself. Their texts said otherwise. They belonged in a cheesy soap opera, but her friends knocked some sense back into her.

She dried her eyes when she heard someone coming down the aisle. The stranger passed her seat not acknowledging her melancholic existence. Fuuka shook her head and laughed.

“I always worry about how other people feel,” she said to herself, “Only the people who matter to me care, and I left them. I’m hopeless.”

Her phone vibrated one more time. More willing this time, Fuuka read the new text. It finally managed to make her smile.

“If you’re stressed, drink white tea or do something that’ll make you happy. Stay safe, Yamagishi.”

She could see and hear Shinjiro’s worry under his curt text. After closing the messages, Fuuka read the clock. She had more than enough time to reply to everyone. Though several prefectures apart, she owed it to herself to stay in touch with them. She could have it both ways if she tried.

“I have to keep helping them. I’ll do as much as I can from a distance.” With a melodic hum, Lucia agreed.

After sending out the texts, Fuuka took out her laptop and searched for the revenge website. Had she not installed new software days ago, she wouldn’t be able to protect herself from the wretched wasteland that became more inhabitable and full of despair since Takaya's death.

Chapter End Notes

As a last second note, my thoughts go to everyone who are in or near the California fires. Hell, everyone stay safe as 2017 comes to a close!
In case this is the last chapter I upload this month Happy Holidays and Happy New Year, my dear readers!

Stay safe out there as we kiss, wish, and/or drop-kick 2017 goodbye!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 23, 2009

“Theodore! Purge this madness from your mind!”

“I will not, sister, cease aiding Airi-sama beyond this realm.”

“Completing half of her chores and absolving her of responsibility for what should be hers is not 'aid'!”

“It has been done, and my decision has been made. I will not turn my back now, and not ever.”

In the once quiet depths of the Velvet Room, the white haired, golden-eyed siblings had let their drama overtake the space. It became so unmanageable that Igor requested a visit to their higher master. He claimed he had important business to take care of, but he wanted to get out of the way before someone forced their dimension to clash with the real world again.

Margaret finally snapped. Her nails rattled against her heavy textbook containing Airi’s contract. She eyed the rebel with enough passion to crush the moon under her heel. “Your decisions have brought nothing but foul omens. Your needless intervention will be the death of that girl!”

Sitting on the sidelines, Elizabeth applauded. “Oh, my! To see my sister so frazzled. This catnip shall be most intriguing to watch!”

Margaret’s leather-bound book fell to the royal carpeting of the Velvet Room with an earth-shattering boom. The weak light from the candles by the doorways and fusion table flickered out. Darkness blanketed the realm, but such the void would not consume the flames of argument. The eyes of the dwellers, however, adjusted to make up for the lack of light.

“Stay out of this, Elizabeth, as you always have!”

“Very well,” she whined with a pout. “I will be a silent spectacle…. spec… dictator? Hmm…”

Margaret pinched the bridge of her nose. By the time she has a chance to have an honored guest, she would have fully understood human behavior, emotions, and stupidity enough to justify an attempt on her sister's life for her tomfoolery.

Clutching his hat in his trembling hands, Theodore continued to meet his sister's glare. “Everything I do is to protect Airi-sama from the pain of losing everything—“

“By searching for and taking advantage of loopholes? A lack of explicit rules dictating how we
interact with the human world does not justify shortsighted acts of charity. Because of your recklessness, you have forced more burdens upon her shoulders on a path she has chosen for herself!"

“How would you punish me? Remove me and you may as well take away the Wild Card. We meddled with her innermost feelings so she could overcome her despair! Everything she has done came to be because of us.”

“We were the spark that lit the fire, but we are not the wind that carry the flames astray. Her bonds, her Persona, the Children, and Tartarus are integral to her journey, but we did not insert them in her path. They do not conflict with the contract. Your acts of sponsoring SEES, communicating with Kirijo, and encouraging police have forced more pieces on the board to take turns. Too many players have claimed the right to interfere in the game, and your arrogance will compromise Airi Fujihara's sanity. She has suffered enough before your mistakes exposed and complicated her circumstances.”

He raised an eyebrow. Theo could not remember a time when Margaret spoke of what the girl may be suffering. “Do I sense admiration for my guest?”

“Only because she continues to rise to her feet after her numerous failures.” The woman gave no sign of hesitation in her response. “She could have revealed everything about us or given up completely. Instead, she speaks only white lies and seeks alternatives. Because of this, I can almost forgive her disastrous attempt at killing the Nine on her own.”

“That is why she needs our help!” protested Theo, whose soft voice now echoed in the room. “Had you aided me in capturing Hemera, we would not be in this crisis!”

“Had you not searched for him, he would not have outplayed your amateur interrogations!”

“He is dead now!”

“You should have killed him in Tokyo! Instead, you took the coward’s way out and locked him up—“

“-to find clues regarding Charon's whereabouts!”

“ENOUGH!”

Margaret’s scream overshadowed and silenced her young brother. Elizabeth winced at the sheer volume. “We are meant to guide our guests, Theodore. If you choose to go against our status quo, fully commit to it. You must never leave your business unfinished. Your naivety allowed humans to manipulate you. Hemera learned of your relationship with Airi Fujihara and demeaned her until she almost lost her will to continue living. That despair we extracted became a whole new monster. Elizabeth may be keeping it sealed in her Compendium, but that girl must face it before the Fall. Had Hemera not learned of her experiences, that thing would have never gained enough strength to nearly kill her!

“You have become a liability! That girl cannot afford to make any more mistakes!”

She may not have had the experience with humans as her brother, but Margaret was far more perceptive of the emotional consequences of interacting with them. No hints of such sympathy for them manifested under this wintry, sophisticated woman. However, this was the first time her true colors shined. She outmatched Theo in frustration and anger, and she could no longer hide it.

Her reveal frighten him, though he would never admit it. “Believe me, Margaret. I have accepted all responsibility for my trespasses, and I will continue to do so once Airi-sama is free. I will not stand
down, not while Morpheus, Aether, and Charon –”

With a mighty force, Margaret slapped her brother into submission.

Theo crumbled to the ground like a house of cards. Where Margaret hit him was a deep purple bruise. The injury only highlighted stress lines, discolorations, and vessels in his skin that appeared just as suddenly and jarringly. His sisters were mortified at the translucent color base of their brother's complexion. Feeling their pain, Theo waved his brittle hand over his face, covering the imperfections in a glamour that restored him to his usual self. Under no ulterior motive, Elizabeth extended her hand, which her brother accepted with a gentle thank you. As he returned to his feet, Theo placed his hat back on his head, curled a lock of hair behind his ear, and acted as if the assault never occurred.

The rage in Margaret perished, leaving cold ashes and gaping holes in irreplaceable fabrics. She wondered how long Theo hid his condition of weakening. Igor warned them since their infancy of existence to never become intimately attached to the humans they serve and the world they inhabit. The youngest sibling had become proof that there were consequences for abandoning their innate station.

Unable to say anything, Margaret picked up her book and placed the text onto the chair near Elizabeth.

Rather than wait for them to fill the silence, Theo spoke. “I have always admired my guest for the strength of her spirit, but the fire inside is dying. I freely chose to cast aside my residency in the Velvet Room to preserve Airi-sama’s life. I vowed to interact with humans to accommodate her, even if I lose everything. My powers, my body, my home... my family are worth sacrificing.”

Elizabeth lowered her head and stared at her own book. Her fingers trembled as they grazed the creases and markings of the cover in a circular, repetitive fashion.

Walking closer him, Margaret stared pleadingly at Theo. “Why go this far for a girl who can never repay you for your sacrifice?”

“Because I require nothing in return.”

“Do you... 'love' her, brother?” Elizabeth asked tentatively.

He nodded.

Margaret reached for his sleeve and gently tugged it. “Please, Theodore,” she begged. “There is no nobility in what you have done. This is your home. You are eternal here. You do not need to be complete because you have always been. Don’t abandon your home over a frail illusion that tears you apart. Don’t let those feelings become the noose around your neck.”

Sadness consumed his sister’s face. It moved him more than any time Airi ran to him in tears. This was Margaret. Not once had she ever shown such weakness to her siblings. The honest sincerity was so clear and so tempting.

Theo had thought his decision over so many times that he wasted time through his inaction. He could no longer stand how the others could not see how cruel it was to simply watch a girl relive the year of her death over and over again. Leaving broke an unspoken rule of the Velvet Room, but he felt that he had no other choice but to rebel.

He had become accustomed to the human world. He enjoyed being involved with the people Airi spoke so fondly of, no matter how indirectly. Too long had he been a cautious spectator of the life the girl he loved cherished. He wanted to be a part of it. Once her journey ends, Theo has no idea
what to do. He learned of so many new places and people. He could find his way through a world of endless possibilities and unknowns if he worked for it. Giving up the comfort of the Velvet Room and falling into the human world did rob him of his naiveté and weakened his abilities, but he knew he would learn nothing by staying in a relatively secret and peaceful room forever.

Eyes tender, sobs quietly erupted from his throat. Still, he held them back as he replied with a bittersweet smile, “I cannot blame you for your lack of empathy, Margaret. I am no longer the brother you’ve always known, and he will never return. One day when you have your guest, you will undergo changes. However, you can allow change to mold you without losing your essence if you only observe the human world from afar. My only wish for you is to be a faithful companion for your most beloved guest, and you must do so with the kindness you once had before Airi-sama’s journey ensnared us all. May he inspire you to live, to grow, to love, just as Airi-sama has done for me without becoming me.”

They were quiet for a while, unsure how comfort the other. A hug seemed appropriate, but the lack of physical intimacy between the siblings made the act too extreme. Instead, they held hands briefly, but tightly.

“I… I see…” Margaret wiped a tear from her eye. Puzzled with the drop of salty water on her finger, she quickly flicked it away. “This is the ending you chose.”

“No, my dear sister. I see this as a beginning.”

When their conversation cooled down at last, Elizabeth emerged between them. “I envy you, brother. You forged an unbreakable bond. This new perspective shall be intriguing to learn from. Be proactive, follow through with your ideals, and do not fall for mere parlor tricks.”

“How can I, after years of suffering your mischief, Elizabeth?” Theo said with a nervous smile. His sister rarely complimented him, and it was starting to terrify him.

“Superb! Now that I am stuck in this disarray myself, so how may I be able to help without losing my powers?”

Margaret stared surprised at the shortest of the three. Quiet for a moment, she turned back to her brother to demand what terrible plans he planted in her head.

“She does not have to leave the subconscious world, Margaret. I have the perfect task for her.”

He sauntered over to the seats. With a snap of his fingers, he relit the candles along the way. When he returned, he carried a silver leather-bound text with numerous blue cards sticking out irregularly. On top of it lay a dozen rusted, dented buttons bound together by string covered in dry blood. Theo gave them to Elizabeth, whose knees wobbled at the heaviness of her Compendium.

Margaret said coolly, eyeing the uncanny handmade necklace, “The Reaper.”

“In many mythologies he creature is a symbol of death, much like the god that ferries souls along the River Styx. I have exhausted all avenues of seeking Charon, except within Tartarus. I want Elizabeth to use these Bloody Buttons Airi-sama collected from confronting the beast in past cycles and track the enigmatic creature's paths. She must search thoroughly and find clear evidence connecting the Reaper to Charon before reporting to me.”

Putting on the necklace, she bounced like a dizzy chicken. “Finally, a chance to play my cards!”

“Master Igor and I will continue take care of Airi Fujihara’s Persona-related needs,” Margaret confirmed with folded arms. The less she saw her excited sibling’s immaturity, the better.
“Good luck to you both,” Theo said warmly and bowed low. “I must return to mingle with my role in their world as a school chair’s man!”

After the revelation of his well-veiled lie, neither sister found humor. They sighed as their brother laughed, further masking the visible and invisible consequences for his rebellion.

October 25, 2009

The week ended with exams long over, but Fuuka’s absence was the only thing on everyone’s minds. Other than one Tartarus trip to help Yukari and Mitsuru get back into shape, no one felt right or safe to go with someone missing. Airi wondered if this was karma for preventing Shinjiro's death, but no one let her finish her train of thought. Mitsuru was the most persistent, either to keep the time traveling junior's spirits high or to reinforce the idea until everyone had to believe it true.

Having another meeting was the only way to be productive, and the command room was more crowded than usual. Mitsuru and Theo convinced Takeharu Kirijo to join them after weeks of persistence through phone calls and emails. His schedule did not accommodate time for SEES, but he eventually found a split second to claim time off before anyone dared to take it from him. On the other hand, Akihiko and Shinjiro persuaded Kurosawa effortlessly in a brief encounter near the Port Island station back alleys after school on Saturday.

After Mitsuru updated him about Fuuka’s situation, Takeharu folded his arms and released a tense sigh he held for twenty minutes. “That must have been a difficult decision. I likely would have done the same thing in your place.”

“I told you not to worry, Mitsuru,” Akihiko said. The tips of his fingers rested on Mitsuru's forearm. “She’s adapting, so don’t blame yourself.”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “I know, but…”

“We’re not as affective without her,” Yukari finished her sentence. She ignored the disapproving stare from Akihiko while Mitsuru politely reminded him that her powers were indeed inferior next to Fuuka’s.

Reading the tension in the air, Aigis raised her hand. Mitsuru nodded, waiting for the android to speak her mind. Aigis placed her hand back on her lap and said, “We should consider two possibilities. Both, one, or neither can be used depending on your preference. Option one is to recruit Chidori. Her abilities are very similar to Fuuka-san’s –”

“No way!” objected Yukari and Akihiko in unison.

In a far less antagonistic and more mature tone, Kurosawa replied, “We still have her under constant watch. Her condition has stabilized, but she needs protection.”

“And she set us up!” Yukari added for good measure. “I nearly died because of her!”

Exhausted and at his last straw, Junpei launched out of his seat. Fire exploded in his eyes. “Y’know, I’m tired of your attitude, Yukari. You shoot down every damn idea anyone comes up with. Chidori’s not the bad guy! Strega used her to throw us off!”

“Use your head, you idiot! She’s working with the Nine. They nearly KILLED me! Chances are she’ll do it again!”
“They’re using her! She’s got nothing to do with ‘em anymore!”

“Did you forget that she’s their eyes? They probably know Fuuka’s gone and we’re fumbling in the dark!”

The shattering of glass against the wooden floor ended the feud and frightened the rest. Had Shinjiro not thrown the glass of water away from the others, Airi, Koromaru, and Ken would’ve had nasty cuts on their ankles. Having the room quieted again, he cleared his throat. “If they needed Chidori that badly, they’d have her by now. Takaya tried to take her back, but she betrayed them the moment she helped me. He may have broken her, but she never told him my location. I might be dead without her.”

“You could have said that without breaking anything, Aragaki,” Takeharu suggested patronizingly. The whimpering Koromaru agreed. His old friend scared him so much, he found a new snuggle buddy in the unruffled Aigis.

He ignored him and turned to Aigis. “What’s the second idea?”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile. It was less uncanny than before, but it was still a tad too mechanical. “The second choice is to remain short-sighted with Mitsuru’s aid. However, we will rely on Airi-san’s ‘foresight’ of the more dangerous encounters.”

It took some time for the idea to sink in and have someone react; Takeharu and Kurosawa were especially perplexed. The surrounding temperature dropped in accordance with Mitsuru’s increased worry.

“No offense, but I’m not sure that’d be a safe option either,” Yukari said while biting her lip. “Airi might know a lot about our situation, but she’s not an all-seeing god.”

“And this is why nobody likes you,” Junpei coughed.

Before she could open her mouth, Aigis elbowed Yukari in the side. She added quietly that Koromaru suggested the act instead of him biting into her ankle. Yukari was visibly upset but ended her cynical commentary. To make her happy – and to express his disapproval with some endorsement - Akihiko smacked Junpei on the back of the head.

Ken shared Yukari’s concern, but chose his words more carefully. “Even if she knows, I don’t think Airi-san can remember everything. Even Fuuka-san couldn’t keep track of every single Shadow while protecting us sometimes…”

“On the other hand, Airi-san knew exactly what the last Shadows we fought looked like and how to defeat them.” Aigis held up the notebook used to sketch the October 4th Shadows. “She might not be reliable with every intricate detail, but she has memorized the ‘big picture’ enough to steer us in the right direction, so to speak.”

Feeling the discomfort levels in the group rise, Airi said with a nervous smile, “It’s okay, Aigis. I’d rather have you guys question me than believe everything at face value.”

“Mitsuru informed me of the fundamental aspects of your situation, but I am still coming to terms with how you obtained and retained your knowledge, Fujihara,” said Takeharu. “If I didn’t give Arisato a chance, what you’ve claimed would not have been as easy to verify.”

“Wait.” Akihiko’s eyed narrowed as he turned to Theo. “How’d you get your jobs in the Group in the first place?!”
Theo grinned proudly and modestly pressed his hand to his heart. “I made connections in Tokyo and – how you say – ‘climbed the business ladder’ with my remarkable talents?”

“Were they not more impressive than his ego, he would’ve never been promoted,” Takeharu added flatly. “He informed me of his relation with Fujihara a few weeks before I vacationed in Yakushima through very specific channels.”

Mitsuru’s jaw dropped. “H-How?! Those are secure!”

Smelling the brewing interrogation, Airi took out her laptop from her backpack and started it up. Junpei was the first to guess her motives and passed word along to Akihiko. He managed to interject into Mitsuru and her father’s argument without having them unleash their wrath. Theo sighed in relief.

“Kurosawa-san, could you give me the blue and white wires from the computers back there? I want everything on the monitors.”

“Very well,” he said without protest.

“What are you doing, Fujihara?” asked Mitsuru. She sounded confused, but her eyes told a more aware and defensive story she kept to herself.

Shinjiro grumbled, got up and closed the blinds just for the princess to not be as annoying as Yukari was despite her protests not being unfounded. Everyone faced the monitors once Kurosawa gave Airi what she needed to hook up her laptop. She looked up occasionally when she toyed around to make sure everything was in sync.

“I’m sorry, Kirijo-sempai, but everyone needs to see this.” Heart throbbing violently in her chest, Airi gave them the hardest proof she could find.

She quickly found basic information on the explosion ten years ago as well as images of the people involved. Pictures and interrogation notes from the apartment fire appeared briefly on-screen. The military base was a new search, along with its operation and shipping history. The folder Takeharu created with the data he gathered for Yakushima and Kurosawa’s investigation. The two pieces of data she highlighted were the list of Greek names and an encrypted file asking for an answer to a curious question in English: “Mari, what were Eros’ words to Psyche after she beheld him?”

Silently overwhelmed and shocked, Takeharu could not mask the apprehension in his voice. “The answer is very precise.”

Airi nodded. “It was only meant for my uncle or myself, but I doubt he expected me to know I’d get in the database.”

When no one replied or raised an objection, Airi filled in the answer with assorted characters and symbols that could be read when simplified into everyday language: “Love cannot dwell with suspicion.” With the correct answer, the floodgates opened.

For the first time someone other than Airi and Theo knew what was shown. Pictures of familiar faces emerged along with photocopies of notes and articles written in English, Greek, and Japanese. Journal entries entailed the activities and whereabouts of individual members within the Kirijo Group, the Port Island police department, and SEES. The original, unaltered video of Eiichiro Takeba’s last words sat next to the fake. A translated copy of an old prophesy about the revival of Nyx and Erebus. The shipment records of heavy metals sent for the abandoned military base as well as brief summaries written by Ikutsuki on artificial Persona experimentation. The last journal entries
of Souta Aizawa before he sealed the documents regarding the brutal combat trainings he and his assistants forced Aigis' sisters to undergo. The illegal production and purchase notes of the Persona suppressants known as Corpaxine and later modifications to the drug. Airi gave some aid by bringing up a few translating sites to help everyone understand the most important information.

“Arisato-san shared most of this info with Fuuka and me…!” Yukari blurted out.

“This is only the surface,” Airi said. “It took several cycles to find the right data and to remember changes in activity. Gigabytes of data would disappear because someone asked the wrong question or made the wrong choice. Once I had enough to go on, I needed Theo to organize everything we made notes of while I lived a normal life. Ikutsuki and Strega carefully monitored the database and expected us to play by their rules. My uncle, Takahashi, and Aizawa only appear willing to become more directly involved in the Tatsumi Port Island area if the local team’s plans fell apart. It was a pain in the ass trying to lure them since my uncle was in hiding and Aizawa and Takahashi always seemed to remain in Yakushima and Tokyo respectively.”

Theo cleared his throat. “The vast amount of information still overwhelms me. I apologize if I did not reveal enough sooner to allow a smoother transition once your secret came to light.”

“No, you did exactly what I asked. Thank you, Theo.”

Airi waited for a time to allow her friends and adult allies to examine and discuss what lay before them. Takeharu allowed some documents to be printed out for SEES to stash in one of the folders he gave at Yakushima. The room temperature fell as Mitsuru processed how little she and her father actually knew about the Kirijo Group compared to Airi and Theo.

Having blown enough minds for one day, Airi decided to end her show with some footage from ten years ago.

Aigis studied the monitor and recognized one of the people. “That is Kurebayashi-san.”

“And the girl is…?” asked Akihiko. He noticed the others glanced at Airi, eyes glued to the screen to not draw attention to herself.

Shinjiro held Airi’s right hand, hidden from direct view of the others. She smiled sadly at him and shook her head. “It’s only fair I give up my privacy too. I owe everyone that much.”

March 20, 1999

Their story time went on for a few hours. Airi sat comfortably on her uncle’s lap and absorbed everything her sponge of a brain could. Sora ignored several phone calls from his employees, often not citing emergencies. If he were not so well respected, Kouetsu Kirijo would have fired him a long time ago.

Once another tale ended, Airi asked with a frown, “How could Persephone stay in a dark place with Hades for so long?”

“They loved each other enough to endure the ‘dark place’, Ai,” said Sora. “Sure, she had chances to leave, but Persephone never took them. Some would call her life a curse, but at least she was loved. After all, Hades was more faithful to her than his brothers were to their lovers.”

“But I wouldn’t want to be with dead people all the time.”
He patted Airi’s head. The braids she kept were coming undone from resting her head against Sora’s arm for too long. “If you and your parents were lost on an island with no way out, would you be sad?”

She blinked and sat quietly. Sora waited, knowing she would find some kind of answer to his hypothetical question. As he suspected, Airi broke the long silence with a toothy grin. “We’d build a giant boat of reeds and sail back home! And we’d watch the stars, and count sheep, and tell ghost stories! Mommy and daddy and I would have fun together!”

Laughing, he pinched her cheek. Twitching from the touch, she blew a raspberry.

“As long as you have people who love you, any situation, no matter how difficult, will always be easier to endure. In our world and in the one below, someone loved Persephone and made her life more meaningful.”

She nodded, and bounced back to her curiosity. “Another one! Another one! How about Heracles? Or Hermes? Or Psyche? Or that guy who protected a city all by himself!?”

Sora laughed heartily. “You spoiled girl, I told you about the *Twelve Labors of Heracles* and the tale of Horatius already. Three times! You want to hear them again?”

The girl tugged on his arm. “Heracles is so cool though! That picture of the Hydra was so creepy, and he killed it! That Horatius guy was really cool and strong too! He faced an entire army alone and survived!”

“Only you would find such stories geared towards boys to be interesting.”

“Everyone should like these stories! Anyone can be a hero. Like Psyche! She did so much to be with her husband again! She’s brave and strong like any hero!”

“Indeed she was a determined, stubborn girl. That reminds me of a little flower I know…”

“C’mon, uncle! Another story! Please!”

Her begging continued on as Sora teased in retaliation. They flipped through pages and fought over what tale to read next. It wasn’t until another image caught Airi’s wandering eyes. She stopped the pages and pointed at the beautiful woman blanketed in black silk and enveloped in silver stars. “Who’s she?”

Sora took a closer look at the page and said, “She is Nyx, an ancient goddess of the night. Little is written about her and she rarely appears in myths. She was one of the first gods to exist since the beginning of time.”

Airi rested her head on his shoulder and smiled. “She’s pretty…”

“Indeed. With Erebus, the god of darkness, she had many children. Some of them are icons and symbols of sleep or death.” He paused for a moment to glance around the room. “Ai, could you get me a paper and pen?”

The girl promptly hopped up, skipped to the desk, and returned with the items. Sora closed the book and used its cover as a surface. Airi stood across from him and watched as he wrote names and drew sketches. His hands moved fluidly and confidently, like if he taught this to someone else before several times.

“You know Nyx well, uncle?”
“She is one of my favorites. So beautiful and mysterious she is.”

“Like the night?”

“Sometimes I think we must be kindred spirits. Not once have a met a girl who loves the nighttime as much as you.”

“But the jasmines don’t appear when the sun’s out!”

Sora looked up at his flustered niece and grinned sweetly. “I am only pulling your leg, love. Do not let the kids at school get to you, alright?”

Remembering a few times her classmates called her weird for reasons she did not understand, the girl bashfully nodded her head. With a satisfied smile Sora added the last finishing touches to his work and sat upright. The paper showed nine names, each with one or two word descriptions and a tiny illustration. The pieces were not worthy of being published, but it was simple enough for a child to follow.

He began by pointing at a figure on a boat. “This is Charon. He is the one who ferries the dead to the underworld. This one-way trip costs one coin, which was placed in the mouth of a dead man before burial, and a soul is guaranteed safe passage. I mentioned him once before, correct?”

“Yep!” She chirped. “Heracles scared him off with angry eyes!”

Not wanting to let the girl relapse too deeply into digressive fantasies based off the many stories he shared, he continued. “Here are the twins: Hypnos and Thanatos. Hypnos is the personification of sleep, and is known for living in a comatose state in a cave. Thanatos is the harbinger of peaceful death, depicted with a torch in one hand and a butterfly in the other.”

“What’s a ‘peaceful death’?”

“One kind might be dying in your sleep. Many gods would find cruel and terrible ways to punish and kill mortals, so perhaps they saw Thanatos as a slightly less violent figure. I sure would find sleep to be more ‘peaceful’ than getting struck by lightning.”

“But won’t dying in your sleep hurt?”

“I am sure it would not. In fact I hope that is so.” He quickly moved on to keep Airi’s mind busy with less heavy topics. “The fourth child is Moros, the formless spirit of doom. Even less is known about him, but some say he would reveal the death of a person and would bring them depression and sadness. I could not capture his image, but I imagine him as a foreboding storm cloud ready to unleash rain, lightning, and thunder at any moment.

“Morpheus is the god of dreams,” Sora pointed to a cartoon person taking a nap and with a sheep in a thought bubble. “Taking any form and appearing in dreams of the sleeping, he is often associated with Hypnos as well. Forgive my childish interpretation, for I am not an artist. Next is Aether, the personification of the upper air that the gods relied upon to live. It is much different from the air we breathe, which was referred to as ‘lower air’. Other times he is known as a god of brightness in the universe.”

“But why does he look like an egg?” Airi asked as she pointed at the drawing. “And what’s the snake? Is he trying to eat the chickie?”

“In some poems, the Greeks described the universe as a cosmic egg. The snake, a symbol of time, separates the universe in many parts. The topmost part represents the realm of the gods. Everything
below is the Earth and then the ocean. This is a simplified answer, but that is why I chose this image.

Aether has no real form to draw easily, but there is more lore and legend to draw from than Moros.

“Epiphron is the spirit of shrewdness and carefulness. Sadly, nothing else is known about him. It’s such a shame for a god with important virtues. Interestingly, Hemera is the goddess of the day. Who’d think she’d come from a god of darkness and one of night? They say that she and Nyx would pass by each other as they entered and left the world between the living and the dead.”

“But not in our world?”

“Correct. That’s the work of Eos, the goddess of dawn, and Helios, the god who carries the sun across the sky on his chariot.”

Airi cocked her head in thought. “There’s a god for everything. It’s more fun than what I learn at school…”

“The Greeks sure had quite the imagination. I’m happy you appreciate it.”

The girl held up her fingers and mumbled under her breath. “That’s eight. Who’s the last one?”

Sora linked his fingers together and rested his head upon them. He was very sober. “Nemesis. The goddess of retribution.”

The girl’s face turned blank. “Red… try buttons?”


The gears turned in her overactive mind, and Airi understood quickly. A heavy frown carved deep lines in her unblemished, young skin. “She’s scary. If gods are bigger than us, they must be powerful. It’d be bad to make them mad.”

“Even the Greeks agreed. Themes of revenge persist through their stories and myths. Much more is known about Nemesis than her siblings. For example, in some legends, she created an egg that birthed the Dioscuri, the Gemini Twins, though, I prefer the version where the twins were born with two different fathers.”

A normal person could lose track of Sora’s intricate tangents, but he spoke leisurely enough to keep Airi’s interest. The girl seemed fond of how he spoke with her rather than at her. If anything she preferred this odd way of storytelling more than the drier approach her teachers used in school. However, she did not always follow along well enough, and she plainly expressed her confusion this time. He quickly sketched another image as he expanded upon a myth he did not cover as thoroughly with her.

“The twins were quite different from each other. The immortal Pollux was a skilled boxer; the mortal Castor was a horseman. Despite their differences, they always remained at each other's side. When Castor died in battle, Pollux refused to be without his brother and Castor without him. Rather than having the honor of sitting upon Olympus with the gods, Pollux shared his immortality with Castor and they formed the Gemini constellation. Together in death as before birth and in life.”

Airi quietly studied the stick figures conjoined at one arm. “Are they happy together? The nine and the twins? I thought siblings don’t get along…”

“I am not sure about every one of Nyx and Erebus’ children. Thanatos and Hypnos are often depicted together and Hypnos and Morpheus share a mutual role of granting dreams to the sleeping. I sure hope they do, or else they would have a lot of fights that the Greeks would be happy to write
stories about! When it comes to siblings, some get along and some don’t,” Sora concluded, putting the book and paper aside. “We fought sometimes, but I believe your mother and I get along very well. Maybe when you have a sibling or very dear friend who is like family, you might understand this better.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “I wanna be as close to my brother or sister like the twins!”

“I know you will, my lovely jasmine,” Sora opened his arms wide. “You will be a wonderful big sister.”

Like a stubborn bull, she stepped back and charged headfirst. The wind was knocked out of Sora’s chest, but he grabbed her and tickled her sides. Her squeals of laughter rang through the small office space, but not loudly enough for it to travel through the walls, cluttered in bookshelves and texts.

Not long after their hug, a soft rapping at the door marked the end of the visit. Airi’s parents arrived at exactly eleven forty that night. The story session lasted for nearly four hours, and neither Airi nor Sora were aware of how late it was. Naomi Fujihara, fairly large from expecting, gently pulled her daughter from her brother and insisted that bedtime was more important than silly old myths. In turn Sora offered Hoshiru Fujihara, eyes heavy with dark rings, a mug of coffee for the road. The tired man refused, insisting he could drive everyone home safely before midnight.

With one last hug, the doctor said goodbye to his little princess and her family. Right after he wished them to travel home safely, an emergency message from the underground facility reached his pager.

October 25, 2009

Airi logged out of the database and shut down her laptop. Mitsuru was clearly vivid: her breath was clearly white.

“You broke into my account, just to prove a point?” Mitsuru said through clenched teeth.

Airi lowered her head in the deepest bow she could muster in her sitting position. “I’ll never be able to apologize enough and earn your forgiveness, Kirijo-senpai.”

“Just… give me time.” Afterwards, she muttered something darkly in French, much to Akihiko’s discomfort.

Her father managed his composure better than she. The others were lost in thought, piecing everything together from the reports and the footage.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, an exhausted Kurosawa said, “My boss will love the paperwork for all of this evidence.”

In similar disbelief, Junpei whistled. “That’s it! All hail the goddess psychic Aibana!”

Yukari’s disposition softened tremendously. She had seen most of the information before and she had time to cool down. “It doesn’t answer all my questions, but I’m sorry for the things I said, Airi….” Her friend smiled nervously, thankful for the support. Yukari returned the expression.

After talking with Theo and Kurosawa briefly about arranging the time and resources for warrants, Takeharu turned his petrifying gaze to Airi. “I question the means you use for the sake of ending the Dark Hour, Fujihara. No matter how invaluable this information is in proving corruption within the Group, you’ve resorted to theft. Unfortunately, due to the nature of this crisis and the thoroughness
of the corruption, there may be more instances where your hands will be forced.

“I implore all of you to minimize your illicit actions.” Mitsuru and her companions shivered under the grave, perturbed aura the man could no longer keep hidden beneath his corporate mask. “Having my daughter awaken the power of Persona was the last thing I wanted, and I resorted to using children in cleaning up after the devastation my family brought into the world. It pains me to see your innocence lost or destroyed because of my incompetence. Once this is over, you may not ever be the same again, but I wish for your futures to be full of more possibilities than you could ever fathom in spite of the circumstances my family imposed upon you.”

The group felt moved by his words, but they haunted them even more. Each one of them thought back to where they stood in life only a year ago. Some had to go back even further in time, to when they still felt like kids before their Personas awakened. Awareness of the Dark Hour tainted whatever perspectives they once had of the world they lived in, and they wondered where they would be in another year.

Kurosawa put away his notepad and stepped forward. “I must apologize for this distress. Leave the legalities and politics to Kirijo and I. As we must use our strengths and depend upon each other to succeed, we trust you will continue your direct fight against the Shadows.”

“Thank you, Kurosawa,” replied Akihiko with a feigned smile. The officer noted the boy’s expression, and Akihiko looked away before Kurosawa could interrogate him.

With little else to discuss the adults prepared themselves to leave. Theo promised to continue serving as the middleman for the separate groups as their duties in dismantling the Nine Children’s plot resumed. But before Takeharu and Kurosawa opened the door to the command room, Airi launched out of her seat, startling everyone. Staring at Takeharu, her face was wan and full of panic.

“Please be careful, Kirijo-sama!” she begged. “If Ikutsuki escapes, he’ll kill you!”

A horrified Mitsuru also leapt to her feet. “Wh-What?!”

“We didn’t know Ikutsuki was a traitor until the last minute, and he trapped us in Tartarus! He was going to sacrifice us to start the Fall earlier, and we had to watch while he – !”

Koromaru interrupted her with a shrill bark. He whimpered and rubbed against her leg. Her desperation, honest and convincing, reached Takeharu. He looked to a tentative Kurosawa, who nodded solemnly.

“The current circumstances are different,” Takeharu reminded the girl while holding no visible sign of rejecting her warning.

“Ikutsuki will not leave our sight,” added Kurosawa. “My men will deal with him. If he escapes or causes trouble, I swear I will not delay in informing you and Kirijo.”

Airi lowered her head. “I… I just wanted you to know… Mitsuru’s father is a target…”

The man with a very probable time limit bore a smile of someone who has accepted whatever may come. “Thank you for your warning, but I have been facing dissent ever since I took my father’s place as head of the Group. Ikutsuki has not attempted to escape; however, we will increase security. If I am to die, I trust you all will still succeed in this mission.”

His words did not quell his daughter’s anxiety. “It’s alright, Kirijo-kun,” Kurosawa stressed evenly. “Let me do my job to protect you and your father.”
Her mouth gaped open for a time, unable to form words or sounds. Mitsuru bit her lip and bowed apologetically. The storm and flood of uncontrollable emotions lay trapped inside.

Sensing this, Theo said, “Let us proceed with prudent caution. It is better this way.”

“Affirmative, Arisato-san,” Aigis spoke for her friends. She was the only objective and calm child in the room.

The others slowly came to an agreement, though not all willingly. After the last second comments were made, the adults left the dorm discretely. The rest of SEES departed for their rooms just to think about something else before tomorrow’s classes. There were enough headaches to put a normal person in a coma.

Chapter End Notes

The song referenced here is one of my favorite songs ever, ”Circle of Fear” by HIM. In fact a lot of the early titles for several chapters in this fanfic were once really lame HIM references. Since they’re one of my favorite bands of all time and I listened to their music quite a bit when writing, it’s not too surprising I guess.

… a damn shame they broke up this year. I wanted to see them perform at the bar they played at during their early days in Helsinki... oh well. TT_TT
The grey clouds and the light drizzle did not stop Akihiko and Koromaru from their morning run along the waterfront. It helped the former to channel his increasing anxiety over the entire situation. Everyone reconsidered some of the theories and ideas tossed around throughout the year prior to what Airi shared in the last meeting. But while his companions tried to make more sense of their increasingly bizarre mission to end the Dark Hour, Mitsuru bothered Akihiko the most.

Though he more readily accepted the time travel nonsense – if mainly to stay focused on the end goal – he understood how apprehensive she was. Only now her concerns were impacting her normal routine. Rather than take the train with him in the mornings, she started riding her motorcycle to school. She stopped pestering Shinjiro with dinner suggestions, much to the former delinquent’s paradoxical relief and disappointment. Not that she became a mute, but it became too difficult to get Mitsuru to talk about anything but her family’s business, Tartarus, and school work. She was otherwise completely unapproachable, and Airi appeared less bothered about it if only to respect the person whose trust she hurt.

Koromaru barked sharply, breaking Akihiko from his brooding. The canine obtained the thankless, unpaid job of preventing anyone from suffering the neurotic and nervous breakdowns that seemed more likely to happen with each passing week.

“Nothing ever seems to bother you, Koromaru,” Akihiko said with a dry laugh. “It’s a good thing we have you around.”

He barked happily. He then growled and sped up his pace, threatening to ditch the boxer if he continued to get distracted.

“Alright, challenge accepted! Winner gets all you-can-eat meat for a week!”

Excited for the proposal, Koromaru increased his speed. Akihiko laughed to himself, knowing four-legged creatures always were faster than humans. Any kind of challenge was welcome, especially if the risk of suffering a serious injury or the infamous Kirijo execution was very, very low. Plus, the crisp cold wintery air helped him forget how much he sweated in the heavy humid summer. The duo took the race to Iwatodai train station and startled everyone they came across. Passerby yelled and cursed at the thoughtless boy and dog, but they had too much energy to care about who they ran into.

What stopped them was the sight of police cars surrounding one of the alleys in the southwestern district five blocks from the dorm. Outside one vehicle in the barricade stood Kurosawa writing in his notepad. Curious, Akihiko and Koromaru ran up to him. The other officers nearby were too busy
focusing on their work to tell them to back off.

Seeing the two catch their breaths, the officer’s tense jaw relaxed and he raised an eyebrow. “On one of your suicide runs, Sanada-kun?”

“Yeah, I gotta stay on my toes for when it really counts,” he replied dryly, catching his breath and wiping sweat from the back of his neck. “What’s going on here?”

“I can’t say much while on duty. To keep it short, some nasty crimes have started up around here lately. The nature behind them is your kind of odd.”

“Seriously?” Akihiko hushed his tone.

“I’ve sent bits of the ongoing report to Arisato. It’s best you head home and wait a few days to hear the news from him. You might have to wait a while until we have everything.”

“Alright, just be careful.”

Just as he finished talking, a few gunshots went off nearby, followed by shouting. Koromaru’s hair stood on end. The two humans turned around to take a peak. Seeing nothing in the alley, they concluded that the noise came from somewhere else in the dark labyrinth of the city.

While Akihiko was edgy, Kurosawa returned to his notes as if nothing happened. “It’s all a part of the job, Sanada-kun. Though I’m curious why you’re covering your ear like that.”

“Huh?”

The officer glanced from his notepad and pointed with his pen. “Early onset of deafness?”

Akihiko quickly moved his hand from his ear and shot a look. “Very funny.”

“Ah, kids can still hear well despite the loud music they listen to these days, albeit it tends to be selective.”

Throwing his hands in the air, Akihiko rolled his eyes and said, “Alright, alright, you don’t want me here. I’m going now.”

“Be safe out there, Sanada-kun,” Kurosawa said.

November 3, 2009

SEES split into two groups. Mitsuru rode her bike around the area Airi designated for her and Akihiko to search. The others allowed Airi to guide them along the waterfront of Iwatodai. Ten blocks away from the desolate district, Mitsuru took a break and used her transmitter to scan the area. Akihiko stood on standby in case an enemy appeared from nowhere to ambush them. Occasionally Mitsuru winced in pain but she dismissed her friend’s barrage of vocal concerns.

“Pay attention to your surroundings, Akihiko,” she snipped for the fourth time while massaging her stinging palm. “I cannot concentrate with you hovering over me like a vulture.”

He kept his distance the last ten times that night she showed hints of pain. But this was the last straw. Akihiko spoke over the radio headset, “Can you give us a clearer hint, Airi?”

“No, we’re fine, Fujihara,” interrupted Mitsuru decisively. Her authoritative tone overpowered
Akihiko’s. “The perimeter has been searched thoroughly. The Shadow does not appear to be roaming the streets. I will investigate the Moonlight Bridge shortly.”

“O-Okay,” Airi replied. “We’re two minutes away from the bridge. Meet you there.”

“Hold on a minute!” Yukari’s voice jumped in swiftly. “What were you going to say, Akihiko-sempai?”

“It’s nothing of concern, Takeba. We’re on our –”

An abrupt absence of static cut Mitsuru short. Akihiko turned off the portable transmitter, finally gaining her attention.

“What on earth are you doing!!”

Akihiko’s eyes housed a range of emotions he could not bring himself to articulate. His voice was unnaturally low. “Why do you keep doing everything by yourself?”

Her gaze turned icy and dark in return. “I invited you to guard me. This task requires an assistant.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

“Then what is the matter? You’ve been particularly nosy as of late.”

Akihiko gestured at Mitsuru’s hands and her motorcycle. “And you’ve focused on nothing but work. Have you been taking care of yourself? Have you let your hands rest for a while after the surgery?”

“We cannot afford delays, even with my hands not at perfect health,” she replied curtly, packing up her equipment. “We can discuss my wellbeing after the mission is over, not before and not during.”

He lightly and quickly grasped her shoulder right before she got onto her bike. Mitsuru turned around and sent a very clear message through her hardened brown eyes. Execution awaited him if he crossed the line again. He surrendered his fight and let her light the ignition. He hopped on the back seat and held onto her waist. It was the only time he could ever be close to her without the consequence of being turned into an icebox, a thought that saddened him for reasons he couldn’t explain.

They drove in silence to meet with the others. Even if they tried to talk, the roar of the engine would drown out their voices. Akihiko used to complain about holding onto Mitsuru and being a passenger just to watch her go on a lecture about gender roles and safety, displaying her intelligence and thoughtfullness. Her reaction used to scare him the first time, but he quickly grew to use it as a way to tease her. Neither had been in the mood for such humorous inside jokes for a while.

Within minutes they regrouped with the others at the rendezvous point. Six blocks from the train station, the Moonlight Bridge provided vehicles a way to traverse over the harbor between Tatsumi Port Island and the mainland. Mitsuru took it to get to school if she used her bike, and she felt perfectly comfortable providing an analysis of the area. The others readied their newly shipped weapons, curtesy of Takeharu Kirijo and two days of Kurosawa completing regulatory paperwork.

“How’s she doing, sempai?” asked Junpei when everyone was far enough from the redhead.

The typical wintery static in the air intensified thanks to Akihiko’s temperament. He kept his voice even as best he could in spite of the frustration. “I don’t know anymore.”

Yukari’s quiver was stocked full of arrows and her bow was polished. “I can talk to her too if it’ll
Her sempai nodded. “Dunno how it’ll turn out, but thanks, Takeba.”

“Who should protect Mitsuru-san during battle?” asked Ken, spinning his spear like a windmill.

Standing in the middle of the road, Airi sharpened her naginata’s blade. “The Hanged Man will be an easy fight. It doesn’t matter who tags along.” The concise report did not alleviate anyone’s concerns. Koromaru articulated this with a disappointed whine. Understanding, Airi sighed and expanded on her thoughts. “Aigis, Akihiko-kun, and Koro-chan can stay with me. The rest of you look after Mitsuru.”

“What are this Shadow’s abilities?” inquired Aigis, searching for Koromaru’s extra kunai knives from her backpack.

“He has no weaknesses and uses physicals, ice, fire, and electricity.”

Both having electricity weaknesses, Aigis and Yukari rarely ever appeared in the same group. Those with similar affinities like Junpei and Koromaru, Aigis and Shinjiro, and Akihiko and Ken often stayed separate too. Each group had a designated healer and a variety of strengths and weaknesses.

Suddenly, the headsets reconnected to the transmitter. “This is a test. Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” reported Aigis.

“Excellent. The Hanged Man is further along on this bridge. I have also discovered it has accomplices.”

Everyone jumped to attention and grasped their weapons. They could see a large figure ahead floating above the street. “Are they human or Shadow?” asked Airi.

“Shadows. That figure you’re seeing dead ahead might be the Hanged Man.”

“Alright then. Let’s split up when you’re all ready.”

After a quick warm up, everyone split into their groups. Yukari, Junpei, Ken, and Shinjiro stayed with Mitsuru; Akihiko, Koromaru, and Aigis joined Airi. Anticipation filled the cold air in spite of their confidence in their preparation.

“Hey, you think Strega’s gonna ambush us?” Shinjiro asked.

“They typically cornered us whenever they could. Since there’s just one left, I doubt Jin’ll come.”

“You sure, Aibana? Don’t ya think he’d want revenge?”

“From our encounters with Aizawa-san and Takaya-san, the capabilities of artificial Persona-users are slightly inferior than our own,” said Aigis. “Their offense is considerable, but they generally lack the endurance that we have.”

Mitsuru and her guards stood by along the length of the road to watch their end of the bridge in case of ambush. The air was oddly still.

Yukari stretched her arms and prepared an arrow. “But Takaya and Epiphron seemed really difficult at first. They wore us out pretty quickly.”

“That giant bug caught us while we were panicking,” replied Akihiko. He let out a low grunt while
squeezing between two cars that blocked his path. “Takaya would have been easier if it wasn’t just me and Yukari. Once we got the hang of it and backup arrived, he was toast.”

Guarding the path to the main group proved to be child’s play. Yukari’s sharp eyes and quick aim silenced most nonthreatening Shadows that considered checking out the odd coffin-less humans and dog. Nothing arrived within twenty feet of the guards, creating a stress-free bubble for Mitsuru. Her supporting the assault party was slower and less efficient than Fuuka’s, but she had enough confidence in the readiness of her friends.

The offense arrived to face down the final full moon Shadow. A cross suspended the Hanged Man’s blackened form by the flesh, nearly tearing from its massive weight. Three alabaster statues pushed cars away to hold the Hanged Man above the ground. With having minimal strength to move a car, very little could be done to move the dozens of cars back into place before the Hour ends. The party focused on what they could change and attacked the statues to reach the big man above.

Akihiko realized why he and Koromaru were needed, as they suffered no damages from two of the statues casting Zionga and Agilao. The third using Bufula occasionally worried the boxer, but Aigis frequently asked Palladion to buff up everyone’s defense and agility. With precise melee cuts Airi targeted the statue that casted electric attacks to protect Aigis. It suffered damage like any other Shadow and dissolved when weakened.

Cerberus used Fire Break on the last statue and decimated it to ashes with a massive Agidyne cannonball; the Hanged Man screamed, terrified of having lost support, and plummeted to the ground. He was within reach, and Airi led her party into an All-Out Attack. Still maintaining some distance on a walkway, Aigis launched rockets out of her upgraded wrist cannons, dealing far more damage to its torso than her bullets would. Airi cut the flesh held by the nails while Akihiko and Koromaru gave it scratches, cuts, and bruises wherever they could as quickly as possible.

The Hanged Man separated permanently from its cross. It moaned pitifully, and a pimple emerged in its right arm. It grew three sizes in seconds until it burst. A common Shadow – a petite thin-armed Maya – manifested from the expelled goop. Mitsuru provided a quick reminder of its affinities, as they encountered it many times in Tartarus lately. Akihiko let out a devious grin, summoned Caesar and blew up the Maya with Ziodyne. With that distraction gone, he rejoined Airi, Aigis, and Koromaru in the defenseless assault on the final full moon Shadow. Primarily using precise melee attacks, SEES were victorious in five minutes.

The guard caught up with them to briefly celebrate the ending of their original mission. It did not last long because Mitsuru insisted they minimize damages by attempting to move the cars back into place. No one argued for making that a priority.

Just as they were warned, the Dark Hour did not vanish upon defeating the twelfth Shadow.

“This means we move on to phase two, correct?” said Aigis. She helped Yukari and Airi align the compact car on the left lane.

Airi grunted, ignoring her arms’ screaming in pain. “Thanatos will fully manifest as Nyx’s avatar soon. Preparing for the end are the Nine’s only desire, and they’ll do more to stop us.”

The boys had a slightly harder time. Shinjiro and Akihiko put in most of the effort on Ken and Junpei’s behalf. It was impossible to help a truck, doomed to fly off the bridge, so they gave the nearby smaller vehicles room to at least see the damn thing and avoid it.

Exhausted, Junpei collapsed to the ground and drank some bottled water. “So there’s four left that we can take on now? Jin, your uncle, Ikutsuki-san, and Charon?”
“Pursuing them may be necessary,” Mitsuru said neutrally. “I’d be against it under normal circumstances, but we may have no other options.”

“Hate to say it, but it might be a matter of killing or being killed,” said Akihiko, as upset over the prospect as he sounded.

When enough preventable future accidents were averted, the group started to head back home in low spirits. They agreed they’d feel much worse if they defeated the Hanged Man and learned the next day that the Dark Hour continued to exist. Not knowing how Ikutsuki would dispose of them after accomplishing his ambitions was best for their health. But knowing the remaining Nine had to be murdered weighed them down all the same.

Airi tasted everyone’s dread, particularly Shinjiro’s, who had more than enough unwilling experience on taking a life. She slowed her pace, turned to her friends, and said, “When we face them, I’ll kill them myself.”

The seriousness in her tone stopped everyone in his or her tracks. They promptly protested. “Are you insane, Aibana?! We can’t let you do that!”

“Don’t talk about this so casually!” said Yukari. “And it’s not your decision to make alone!”

“It’s not a matter of how we feel, Yuka,” Airi replied sternly. “Someone has to do it. It’s better if it’s me than anyone else.”

“You’re talking about murder, Airi!” Akihiko yelled, fists clenched. “It’s no ‘better’ if you do it. Anyone can go crazy over killing one man, and you want to kill four!”

“I know! But sometimes we all have to make a hard decision, even if it’s unpleasant…”

Mitsuru glared intensely, full of indignation. “Are you referring to ‘we’ as SEES or only yourself, Fujihara? You continuously make decisions without consulting us for our opinions, and you’re shocked we’re disagreeing with you? We are supposed to be a team, but you complicate our progress and understanding of the situation! No one is killing anyone until we reach a consensus and you tell us what’s going on!”

Her words summed up the attitude lingering in the darkest corners of their hearts. Ken and Akihiko protested on moral grounds like the others, but Mitsuru’s position was most comprehensive. Shinjiro held back a speech and a half that he wanted to deliver; he was the first to notice Airi’s change in body language and waited for her to finish.

“I’m the only one qualified to do this. Someone has to kill them without hesitation. Someone can’t let confusion and uncertainty stop them. Someone has to face the reality that people die in horrible ways and can still get the job done. I know you guys are worried about me, but I can’t trust you to finish the job quickly and efficiently. Most of all, I don’t want your hands to be as bloody as mine.”

Her strict tone instantly reduced her friends to shivering mutes. She wasn’t anxious or timid as she first came off. The red-eyed girl looked up at everyone with a stare no one expected. Standing before the group was a weary, world-torn woman on her last good leg, shaking under her impossible burden.

A vibration sounded in their hearts and the mist lifted from the world. In the background horns blared and metal slammed with its kin. Screams and collisions echoed through the air, upsetting the group, glancing in the direction of the Moonlight Bridge. The truck crashed, but half of it was stuck on the bridge and the other half was suspended above the river.
“No…” whispered Aigis, whose mechanical heart sank the deepest amongst her friends.

Airi lowered her head out of respect, but the thought of people dying in general hardly distressed her anymore.

“I should’ve known from the beginning that this journey wasn’t just about what I want or deserve. We all were forced into this mess. We’ve been forced to grow up and realize we can’t save everyone, no matter how much we love them. Not many of us will survive or be sane enough to live a normal life after. We can only handle so much pain and insanity before we snap.” Her voice cracked, but she regained her composure and forced back the tears in her eyes. “So I’d rather deal the final blow on the Nine alone and go insane than have you all suffer with me.

“I beg of you, help me fight them. Help me weaken them, but please let me deal the final blow. I can’t bear to have any of you end up like me.”

No one argued with her anymore at that moment. She drew the line in the sand. They had to accept her perspective and move on, deny her request and continue wasting time, or leave. The Fall would come in less than three months, leaving little time left to hesitate or delay. The discussion ended for the night and everyone continued on home to sleep on the facts. From behind, a warm halo the size of a pin peaked through the darkness. A wispy line of smoke reached for the lonely silver eye the sky.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter title is kinda similar to "Kids from Yesterday" by My Chemical Romance. Another band I love that broke up. :( 
Good news: I got a full-time job! It took nearly six months, but it finally happened. I started this week, and I'm patiently waiting for the first paycheck. Maybe I'll be able to afford food! XD

Bad news: Since my work hours are long, my updating schedule may be inconsistent. I'll do the best I can to keep chapters coming. In fact I have two additional chapters prepared to upload within the next few weeks, giving me additional time to figure out how to manage my schedule, work, and hobbies.

Good news: I got some ideas for another fanfic! It's not Persona-related, but I do want to dabble with a Persona 5 fanfic at some point. No idea how long it'll be, but it's most likely going to be a fraction of the length of 'Through the Empty Spiral'.

Bad news: Just as I started on that fanfic project, I became too busy and tired to write new material thanks to new job! *sobs* I'll make it work somehow, but it likely won't see the light of day for quite a number of months at this rate.

Anywho, enough updates. Let's see what happens next...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

November 6, 2009

“... some guy from student council walked in to tell us to shut up,” Junpei told the story in a mischievous voice he couldn’t resist restraining. “Then he saw the mirrors, sinks, and floor were all drenched in yellow. In the middle of one of the puddles was a lit cigarette butt. He lost his shit. He started callin’ out in the hall for a teacher or janitor. Never saw the guy freak out like that at all! It’s like he thought piss was flammable or something!”

Chidori lounged comfortably in her bed, trying not to let out a mildly amused smile. “But it’s not flammable... nor was it pee.”

“Exactly! It didn’t dawn on him till he slipped and fell in a puddle. Poor dude got so mad he was in tears!” Junpei reclined back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. “Best prank ever. Too bad Shinjiro-sempai was too chicken to join me and Kenji. Didn’t know he was that desperate to get rid of the lemonade we made for game night!”

“A pity you didn’t record either event on camera,” said the lonely girl. “That ‘drunken’ game night sounded like fun. It’s better than staring at walls all day.”

Her tone didn’t mean to accuse Junpei of anything, but the guilt settled in quickly. “Sorry I haven’t come around much lately,” he said with a defeated frown. “Dunno how things are gonna be. It’s gettin’ tense at the dorm.”

The news didn’t surprise her. Chidori could sometimes hear the hearts of SEES whenever she saw them get to school outside her window. She told him of this once, and while Junpei knew she caught
Sensing today’s concern worried her somewhat. Chidori touched a shriveled leaf one of the flowers and gave it life again. “The hospital is louder than usual. The deaths on the bridge were unavoidable.”

“Yeah, I know… Still feels crappy though.”

“But you will kill the remaining members of the cult, correct?” She asked curiously, but a vengeful glimmer in her eyes gave away her true feelings about the Children.

Oblivious to the dark aura, Junpei nodded. “Aibana insists she does it herself. She lost her mind the other night…”

Chidori sensed the disapproval in his voice. “She knows she is more capable to complete the act than anyone should, and she wishes to protect you.”

Junpei opened his mouth to argue, but wisely chose to think his words. Being around Chidori helped him to reconsider things before making a move or speaking out. When he had a better idea what to say, he tried again. “I sometimes wonder what kind of girl she was like before all this happened. How much has she changed? How much is she hidin’ or lyin’ about herself? I always thought she was a cute and funny girl. Now, I dunno. It’s kinda scary to see her serious all the time…”

Chidori took out her sketchbook from the end table and gave it to her guest. Surprised, Junpei turned a light shade of pink and humbly took it. He looked through it slowly, examining the sketches, most of which were varied in subject and style.

“Don’t linger on those thoughts for too long, Junpei. There is enough pain in the world some people can never let go of…”

Without warning, a sharp pang resonated in her gut. Her eyes widened for a second and her stomach churned. Chidori recomposed herself quickly, hoping Junpei did not catch her sudden reaction. She saw him adjusting his hat and looking at some practice sketches in her book. With a quiet sigh, she was happy he remained unaware.

“Yeah, I’ll try,” he replied, giving her back the book. “They look really great. Maybe when we get you out, you can paint me one of these.”

She laughed teasingly, a sound Junpei rarely heard. “I’ll consider painting one for you. At a price.”

“Haha, man, you’re so cruel.”

~

November 7, 2009

Another firefight started in the dark alleys around Iwatodai station. The number of crime reports rose tremendously in the past month, but the incidents became increasingly violent for what appeared to be the sake of violence. Kurosawa participated in settling some of the cases when the Corpaxine and Kirijo investigations didn't overwhelm him with mountains of red tape and paperwork, and this one was no exception. He and half of the police officers from the northeastern department went out to deal with the anarchy in the alleys.

The few remaining officers at the station sat on their thumbs, hoping for the unrest to end soon, when a black-haired high school girl entered. She was in tears and clenching her chest. The policeman on
duty at the desk called for some of his men to help him take care of her. There was no blood, but no one had to be a doctor to hear she was struggling to breathe.

“Hey, someone call for the hospital!”

“Yes, sir!”

The girl continued to gasp for breath and curled in the fetal position. A third officer came out from the back with a chair for the girl to sit in. They were badly unprepared for medical emergencies, but they did their best to treat her.

Around the back of the building, a group of punks stood at the back door. One picked at the lock while the rest stood by on watch duty. With little effort, the door opened and two guys poured in. They went in opposite directions. One slid right under a camera so it would not catch his image. He waited while the other snuck past the hall leading to the front and ducked under windows to the predominantly empty offices.

The stealthy man eventually found the locker room and changed into a uniform. Once he took out his nose and ear piercings, he had no reason to hide himself. He made it to the musty and dark surveillance room to find only one cop reclining back with her headphones on. The punk then slowly shut and locked the door, and inched behind the woman. For a moment he was tempted to be a badass and blow her brains out. Upon further thought, he realized someone would hear the noise. Not wanting that, he stuck with the quiet, quick method.

The punk seized the officer by the head and twisted her neck. He threw the bloodless corpse to the ground and stole her chair. He noticed her headphones and placed in one in his ear; he laughed at the song “Smooth Criminal.”

“Huh, no wonder the bitch sat on her fat ass,” the punk laughed to himself. “How come the cops get thrones and high-end headsets? No wonder people dodge taxes whenever they can.” He seized control of the security system and shut it down. Once the alarms turned off and camera footage was deleted, he turned on his wireless radio. “The dam’s been breached.”

“Fucking A!” the second infiltrator responded. “How many in here?”

“Ten, if your countin’ the sad bitch I just offed,” he sneered. Now with all the time in the world, he took out his mp3 to drown out the dead man’s sad taste in music. “Six’re on your way to the target. Stay low and Kyosuke’ll finish off the rest.”

With a confident smirk only a psycho would love, the second man began his part. He sent a signal to the others outside and they poured in like dogs fighting over a small food bowl. They spread out across the department and wreaked havoc for the six unlucky souls. They entered offices to find keys to the temporary prison. If anyone was unlucky to be inside, he or she did not live for long. One fought back and beat an orange-haired punk into submission. His victory was short when the girlfriend retaliated with a taser and pocketknife to his groin. Nearby friends laughed and cheered on as the girl continued to torture the officer by carving too close to his intestines.

Across the hall, a delinquent with an odd comb-back seagull hairstyle cheered and held a pair of keys high in the air. The others patted him on the back and sent him off to finish the job. Someone tagged along with him to carry the blowtorch.

Upon entering the prison area, those locked up yelled and begged for the duo to get them out. Not caring anymore, the key finder took out his gun and shot the guy closest to him. Message spelled pretty clear, some fell silent. Others panicked and started to scream. The punks, who finally decided
to drop all sense of decency, heard their cries. Any officer left standing was immediately shot into submission. They came for only one person, and resisting was futile.

Out front, the officers finally sensed that something was wrong. Just as one got up to check out the noise out back, the sick girl stopped moving.

“What happened?” shouted the first man. “Is she gone?!”

“Where’s the damn ambulance?!” cried the officer next to him.

A low grunt startled them and the girl squirmed. They stared in disbelief as she looked back at them with dead fish eyes and a wide, twisted smile on her snow white face. In her left hand was a switch. She sneered eagerly as her thumb pressed the button.

“… Police Department is one of the most shocking tragedies in recent memory. Nothing so violent has happened since the Gekkoukan explosion ten years ago. Currently we have no suspects…”

There was nothing anyone could say. All sensation and feeling were simply gone. Junpei stared out the window and lost himself in thought, wondering if Chidori knew about the attack. She seemed distracted and scratched at her arms when he left.

“…ten officers were killed. The manners of their deaths are too brutal to describe on the air. We apologize. It would be of great disrespect to the men and women…”

The names and professional images of the dead were put on air with permission from the families. The only disturbing comfort SEES had was that Kurosawa was not one of them, although Akihiko immediately confirmed it the second he arrived at the dorm. As soon as the news came on, he ran outside to call Mitsuru and Yukari. They arrived two minutes later, out of breath and coughing from fatigue and the incoming and eager winter cold.

“…two million yen in damages from gunfire and arson alone. The force’s resources have been cut significantly since last year and this attack only worsened their financial situation. And now with an unconfirmed number of escaped soon-to-be-tried criminals…”

Ken grabbed the remote and turned off the TV. He and his friends sat quietly for the rest of the night, unsure what to say. They ate late night snacks and returned to their rooms when they found the strength before the Dark Hour hit.

As soon as the mist fell, a chill ran throughout Mitsuru. She felt Penthesilea’s trepidation. Unsure of what the case was, she left her room and locked herself in the Command Room. She used her portable tracking devices to channel her Persona and attempted to scan the area around the dorm. More importantly, she waited, hoping for a familiar voice.

“Mitsuru-sempai?”

“I can hear you, Fuuka. Have you heard about this afternoon?” Mitsuru replied mentally, keeping the communication private.

“Y-Yes. I’m sorry… I had a bad feeling about it for a while.”

“How so? Were you informed of this beforehand?”

“I learned of it through Jin’s revenge website earlier this week. It’s changed structurally. Rather than
a user filling in the name of the person they want killed, it became a board with lists of requests for anyone to accept. Most of the incidents Akihiko-senpai told you about match up with the dates and locations of ‘events’ Jin created.”

“Do you know the meaning behind this?”

“I intercepted private messages between Jin and an anonymous follower. They attacked the station to free Ikutsuki-san. They also wanted to take out Kurosawa-san; there’s a reward for his death!”

Mitsuru bit her lip and sat on her trembling hands. “Officer Kurosawa is alive. Fuuka, I know it’s exhausting due to the distance, but I’d like you to help me find the Chairman.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll try to enhance your power.”

She quickly summoned Penthesilea and within seconds, Mitsuru and her Persona could see the entire Tastumi Port Island area effortlessly. She kept her enhancement device on to ease the workload for Fuuka. After combing through the districts of the area bit by bit, she found an anomaly almost similar to the one that attacked her, Ken, and Koromaru on October 4th. It was outside Tartarus along with a non-Persona-user.

“I think that’s him!” Fuuka confirmed. “The air seems distorted around him and I can’t determine who is with him. Could they be someone who can wander through the Dark Hour without a Persona?”

“It’s possible. Some Kirijo scientists have been able to wander without a Persona through meditation as an alternative to artificial experimentation, but their Shadows would often escape and leave them comatose after some time passes.”

Mitsuru could almost see and feel Fuuka’s shuddering discomfort.

“I’ll wake up the others and investigate this matter. Try to get some rest.”

“Good luck, Mitsuru-senpai.”

She turned off the connection, and left the room. Quickly she got the girls on the third floor, none of whom were in bed yet and had their gear ready in seconds. The boys were just as quick, and everyone left the dorm and went on their way to Tartarus.

“How’d you know about this?” Junpei asked the most obvious question as they ran along the tracks of the monorail.

“Penthesilea felt uneasy, and I couldn’t sleep” she replied. “Yamagishi always found Shadows faster than I around town, but I can see the area well enough.”

“But the Dark Hour started five minutes before you contacted us,” said Yukari. “That’s too fast, even for you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Airi interjected. “We have to stop the son of a bitch before he hurts someone!”

They sprinted from the dorm to Tartarus in twenty minutes. When they entered, a thick static crackled in the air and nearly knocked everyone, especially Yukari and Aigis, off his or her feet.

Three familiar men, disheveled as if they had been on the run for hours, stood in the entrance hall. Armed and giggling, Ikutsuki stared down Theo and Takeharu with a twisted look in his eye no one thought a human face could conjure. The man in the sapphire-colored suit flipped a tarot card over in
his leather bound textbook, letting his Persona vanish. Airi noticed the edges of the book were frayed and Theo’s white hair was a tangled mess. His skin looked thin, clammy, and covered in blemishes and discolorations a non-human like him would never bear. His breaths were irregular and heavy, unfitting for the well-dressed image he never failed to present in earnest.

Mitsuru recognized the third man, slouching behind Theo and holding his wounded arm. She ran to meet with him, but crashed into an invisible wall, boxing the group in. “Father!”

Eye wide in horror, Takeharu called to her and her friends. “Mitsuru?! None of you should be here! Return to the dorm!”

“Theo! What’s going on?!” Airi called out, mouth dry from worry. Seeing him directly involved in her journey to the point of fatigue she never saw in all of their practice duels was something she didn’t imagine happening. "Why do you look like that?!”

Terror filled Theo's eyes the moment he heard Airi's voice. His demeanor remained stoic, but his voice cracked, betraying him. “Please, Airi-sama! I am not as strong as I used to be, but I promise I will end this confrontation!” His eyes remained locked on his unpredictable opponent.

Ikutsuki laughed, and stalked slightly closer to his foes. “You weary old fools thought you were safe, but no place is safe in Tatsumi Port Island anymore! And look at you, Arisato! With each pathetic spell, your glamour weakens!”

“Attempting to kidnap and assassinate the head of the Kirijo Group at the tail end of a terrorist attack was your greatest miscalculation!” Theo retorted without missing a beat. “Poison in his dinner wine is easier to hide.”

The latecomers to the party were confused and utterly stunned.

“This wasn’t part of the Children’s plans was it?” Despite his weak condition, Takeharu’s words were sharp as knives, cutting through the confident poise of his enemy. “You took your opportunity of freedom to seek us personally. Now that the Twelve Shadows have been defeated, you hold no regard for your life or the lives of others, is that correct?”

Opening a new page in his book, Theo warned, “You walked into my domain now, Morpheus. I have shown you no mercy, and do not expect any less from me now!”

“Are you still trying to make up for your incompetence, Arisato?” Ikutsuki retorted, unconvinced of either man’s case. “I have no idea what you are or where you came from, but you're one of us now, aren't you? Spending all your time trying to assimilate into our world, you've become more mundane and insignificant! You failed to kill Hemera in that 'Velvet Room'; you let him escape; and you turned Airi into a freak show in front of her friends. And you're too hesitant to kill me with that weak human heart of yours! The Appraiser will be here soon, and I must grant him sacrifices! I’ve waited ten years for his return, and I’d be happy to have all of the flesh here as offerings!”

He pointed the gun at the teens and fired. Aigis quickly leapt in the bullet’s path. It pierced the invisible wall, but Palladion’s body slowed the bullet. It hit Aigis’ arm, but left a small dent. Angry, Ikutsuki fired twice more. Aigis went after one to save Ken and Airi. The other aimed for Yukari and Mitsuru, but Akihiko pulled them away while Shinjiro summoned Horatius as a shield. He and his Persona keeled over from the hit, a sight rarely ever seen since his health improved, but Shinjiro returned to his feet in due time.

While Ikutsuki was distracted, Theo summoned Abaddon. The large fiend crawled along the floor and bit Ikutsuki’s leg. He screamed in pain, suffering enough for Morpheus to emerge from his
psyche. The Persona was a man’s spirit with cavernous holes where his eyes would be. Red, wilting poppies sprouted from his colorless skin and dead petals encircled him. His head, limp and unsupported by his neck, rolled back and let out a wistful wail. A column of intense winds surrounded Theo, threads cutting his fabric and carving deeper marks in his skin.

Ikutsuki shot Abaddon, destroying it. He ran to confront Takeharu Kirijo. Theo tried to stop him after he escaped the Garudyne wind prison, but Morpheus drew his attention with continuous panic-inducing screams. Despite his arm wound, Takeharu took out the gun from his back pocket and pointed it at Ikutsuki, leaving the two at a stalemate.

“Damn it, Theo!” screamed Airi, pounding on the wall. “Let us through!”

“Have you ever thought some things were always destined to happen?” sneered Ikutsuki. “The gods don’t want you to interfere, Airi! Hubris was the greatest crime to commit against the gods! I’d love to put your friends to sleep and have them see every moment that fed your suffering. Then I’ll perform the universe’s work and send the souls of Shinjiro, Kirijo, and Chidori to Nyx-sama!”

Hearing her name was enough to have Junpei summon Hermes and join in the others’ wall-beating tantrum. “You bastard! I’ll fuckin’ kill you first!”

Then a gun fired, stopping and silencing everyone. Ikutsuki stumbled, holding his side and bleeding profusely. The one-eyed man stood over his enemy with confidence. “Death as deliverance is not an ideology anyone should embrace! Even if I die tonight, we will wound your cult’s cause!”

“Father, what are you saying?!” Mitsuru cried, watching in horror as Ikutsuki rise back on his feet.

“You have been ready to lead in my place for months, Mitsuru,” Takeharu said, his assurance pulling her eyes back towards him. It was the first time anyone besides his daughter saw him genuinely smile in a way only a loving father could. “I am so proud of you, little bird. Of all of you.”

Hunched over, Ikutsuki pulled the trigger on Takeharu, who suffered a blow to the chest.

The wall vibrated violently. Penthesilea emerged from her host without use of an Evoker and frantically stabbed the wall with her sword. Mitsuru cried for her father and pounded against the wall, ignoring the crippling pain in her hands. Her friends helped to weaken the barrier by using their Personas’ strongest attacks.

Takeharu pushed himself up and fired at Ikutsuki as he sought shelter around the stairs leading to the upper levels of Tartarus. Theo summoned Beelzebub and stunned Morpheus with electricity. He looked from the gunfight ensuing before him to SEES on the other side of the hall.

“Forgive me, Airi-sama. That barrier is consuming what little power I have left as a result of becoming human. Let me protect you and end this monster so I may atone for my sins!”

Airi lost feeling in her legs. Her eyes filled with tears of rage and betrayal for Theo's decision. Her mouth moved but no sound came out.

“What the hell, Arisato?!” Yukari screamed.

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?!” bellowed Junpei. “We're helpin' you and Kirijo-san!”

“I will not risk you dying because of my mistakes!”

“Fuck that!” spat Akihiko. “We're not letting you fight alone!”
“I am not alone! I should not have hesitated in taking the direct path long ago, and now I must pay the price for my foolishness! When the opportunity arose, I failed to kill Hemera. Airi-sama almost lost everything because of my incompetence. Now that I have one of the Nine before me, I will end Morpheus so his blood will only be on my hands! This time I will not fail in my duty as Airi-sama's loyal servant! The Fall will not arrive, SEES will be victorious, and Airi-sama will be free!!"

Realizing his friends would exhaust themselves before the wall would ever fall and Theo refused to change his mind, Shinjiro clenched his fists in a bitter acceptance he hated swallowing. He could not understand what the Theo has went through - maybe he never will - but trying to dissuade him from his resolve seemed impossible. Even as he "became human", he had enough power to repel every attack SEES threw at the barrier and fight Ikutsuki at the same time. Shinjiro feared what would come from this, but he gave a solemn nod to Theo, who could no longer hide his pain in hearing the children crying over him.

Theo refocused his attention to the battle when Morpheus recovered. Fighting through the fatigue, Theo forced his legs to dart towards Ikutsuki, but the Child sidestepped. Beelzebub appeared once more and cast Zodyne. After traversing through a minefield of flower petals. He seized Ikutsuki by the neck with his book firmly under Ikutsuki’s chin, choking him. He pulled his gun back and tried to aim at Theo’s arms.

“Kirijo-sama!” Theo yelled, spotting the man from the corner of his eye.

Dizzy and losing lots of blood, Takeharu limped out of hiding. His arm wobbled slightly, but he held up his gun and fired. It missed Ikutsuki and hit Beelzebub instead, vanishing. Morpheus threw more flowers at Theo's arm, bleeding and in enough pain to free Ikutsuki. Theo swatted him with his book, only for Morpheus to grab the book and throw it across the hall. Then he cast Garudyne and tore it to ribbons mere feet before Airi. She never once considered the possibility of the destruction of Theo’s tome.

Ikustuki regained his footing, saw Takeharu go back into cover to reload, and fired. Mitsuru watched her father’s body slump to the ground. Her despair echoed through and shook the hall.

As he hit the floor, the gun flew from his hand and hit the floor at the right angle to fire a shot. A bullet struck Ikutsuki in the leg. No one knew if the serene smile on Takeharu's face was from thinking of his family in his last moments or savoring a tinge of revenge on the man who killed him.

Uttering curses he learned from each member of SEES, Theo took out a tarot card from his shirt pocket and summoned Gabriel. The archangel flew across the room and showered Morpheus and Ikutsuki in stabs from her lance. The former stood strong while the latter collapsed, unable to cover every piercing wound in his flesh.

But he lifted himself up enough to get a clean shot at Theo.

He clutched at the blossoming rose on his breast. Tears pooled behind his eyes as he heard Airi screaming.

“Take a nap, Arisato!” taunted Ikutsuki. “Sleeping comes so naturally to me, I could do it with my eyes closed!” His Persona let out a smirk and sang a melancholic hymn. The music reached Theo’s ears, making him disoriented and confused. He held his head as he stumbled, nearly falling to the ground and laying open for another gunshot.

Airi banged on the barrier even harder. Her voice was giving out. “THEO, GET UP!! PLEASE GET UP!! THEO!!”
Hearing her voice snapped him from his ailment. He could barely regain his footing as his knees trembled under the weight of his weakened, injured, tired body. Theo looked into Airi’s terrified red eyes and let out a wide, innocent smile she had not seen since his first times stepping outside the Velvet Room to explore her world. Not since Paulownia Mall, the Iwatodai strip mall, her school, her dorm, the movie theater, her room. She introduced him to the terrible taste of coffee, taught him how to befriend a stray cat, shared the books and music she collected over the years. She also showed him pain, heartbreak, sadness, despair, and death. Once such doors opened before him, Theo could never return to the life he once had. In that moment, he knew he would never regret walking through that doorway with Airi holding his hand and guiding him forward.

Theo took the Evoker from his pocket, put it to his head, and fired before his legs gave in.

Beelzebub gathered an army of flies around his skull staff. Shrill buzzes intensified the room as a sea of black filled every inch of the entrance hall. Koromaru let out a frightened wail and back away from the wall; the others stood back too. The countless flies tackled the wall and tore through it. Muffled screams drowned in the harmony of chattering fly wings.

The chaos ended when the swarm cleared the room. Koromaru sniffed where the invisible wall once was and barked, saying it was safe to go. Everyone waited for the area to empty before running into the fray.

Once the dust settled, they found Ikutsuki lay coughing in a pool of red. A purple translucent liquid dripped from the innumerable bug bites on his skin and mixed with his blood, creating a dark oily soup. His gun lay twenty feet away from him and his Persona was nowhere to be found. Everything else stayed as they were, untouched by the flies. Shinjiro and Akihiko glared down at the former chairman of the school and stood between the villain and his gun.

“… Mother…” he muttered and gagged until he lay still and quiet. Junpei checked his pulse and confirmed his demise.

Mitsuru ran to her father near the stairway and fell to her knees. Airi did the same for Theo when she saw him lay on his side. She held his bloody, sweaty body in her arms. The Evoker fell next to him, and upon closer inspection it was identical to Airi’s, only slightly rusted and covered in scratches and dry blood.

Theo laughed at the state of his body. “The one time I succeeded… after I’ve been a liability for so long…”

Airi shook her head until it almost snapped off her neck. “Y-You never were! You h-helped me... you r-remembered when everyone else f-forgot!”

“Always so kind… Thank you…”

“No! D-Don’t leave me, Theo! I c-can’t go on w-without you!”

That childlike smile he hadn’t expressed in what felt like centuries returned as he cupped her face and wiped the tears from her cheeks. Chills ran down Airi’s spine as she remembered the one and only time he held her without fear of admitting his love. “Serving you… meeting your friends… I have been blessed… to truly live…”

He pulled back once Yukari and Ken approached them. With Evokers in hand, they begged Isis and Kala-Nemi to cast Diarahan to heal Theo’s wounds. He coughed up the purple poison mixed with blood, dripping down the side of his mouth. He showed no signs of relief from the warm light around him. Yukari coughed back a hopeless sob, and Ken punched the ground hopelessly. Airi
cried harder and faster than ever.

Theo lay in peace despite the pain. He thought of no better people to witness his passage from life to the Sea of Souls. “Elizabeth searches for Charon… Prove yourselves to the gods… there is a happy ending…” Tears trailing down his face, Theo lifted his hand to the one who gave him life and love. “Airi-sama… for the last time…”

Bringing his gloved hand to her cheek and failing to choke back the storm of tears, Airi fulfilled his last wish. Theo smiled one last time before closing his eyes and resting his head against Airi’s chest.

His last words of good news regarding the missing Child did not change the fact Airi lost one man she wanted to save and one man she never thought was possible to lose. She tried to convince herself that Theo was only asleep. He managed to pull a prank that seemed so genuine. He’d wake up any moment with a bashful grin and ask how well he grasped acting, humor, and timing.

Reality finally broke Airi with Mitsuru screaming for her father.

Airi failed. Takeharu Kirijo and Theodore no longer exist in this timeline. She would have saved them, could have saved them, if only...

Airi let out a primal scream that tore her mind, body, and spirit apart.

Yukari, Junpei, Aigis, Akihiko, Shinjiro, Ken, Koromaru, and Fuuka, closer to her friends than she had ever been several prefectures away, watched the two girls devolve into toddlers, wailing and clinging to the corpses of their fallen angels.

Chapter End Notes

... 
... Well, er...

I already loved Takeharu Kirijo and Theo in canon, and playing around with them in fanfic made me like and respect them even more. I did not take any joy in writing this chapter. Poor Mitsuru. Poor Airi. They need hugs. TT_TT

If one positive comes out of this, it's that another of the Nine Children is dead. I didn't find Ikutsuki very interesting in 'Persona 3', especially when he could have played a more involved and sinister role in the story. He was involved in the original research Mitsuru's grandfather conducted, and he experimented on children with the only survivors being Strega and Sho Minazuki. It kinda sucks a lot of that info is only touched upon in side material and spin-offs. But that frustration with what was and wasn't in the original plot of 'Persona 3' is what inspired me to write this fanfic in the first place. 'Through the Empty Spiral' would not have existed without the unimpressive tan-suit pun machine. Thanks, Ikutsuki.

As for his Persona, Morpheus (Μορφεύς) is the god of dreams. Lots of artists from various mediums have referenced him throughout the ages, making him another well-known Greek god. According to Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', Morpheus is one of Hypnos' children, which is interesting given they both invoke connections to sleeping and dreaming. However, other myths claim Morpheus is one of the Oneiroi, or spirits of dreams, who reside in Erebus and are children of Nyx and Hypnos. Mythology can be
inconsistent and confusing like that. Regardless of his exact lineage (which is still close to Nyx and Erebus), Morpheus molds the dreams of sleepers and sometimes carried the messages of the gods to kings in their dreams.

Lastly, the song referenced in this chapter title is "Mona Lisa (When the World Comes Down)" by The All-American Rejects. I don't know what mood the band intended to convey with this song, but I always thought it was wistful and melancholic. Like reflecting on the good and bad memories of the past with a friend or loved one as something big or life-changing comes to an end.
Of Death

Chapter Notes

So I lost a tiny section of this fic. Nothing major, but it's annoying because I have to make another round of edits to a copy of a first draft I fixed but accidentally deleted.

Always have backups of your backups, my fellow writers! >.<

In the meantime, here's a shorter chapter.

November 8, 2009

Representatives of the Kirijo Group whom Takeharu trusted escorted SEES back to the dorm and transported Takeharu and Theo's bodies away for preservation. Mitsuru left with them to inherit the responsibilities of her father against her friends' wishes. Denying her feelings any kind of release that would prevent her from completing her responsibilities, she attended a meeting with the executive board members of the Kirijo Group to discuss the future without their leader and how to explain the crisis to the general public. She also requested a few days from the dorm to spend time with her mother.

Airi did not have the luxury to preoccupy herself with duties or find respite with her family. She locked herself in her room and wept over the contents of her mother’s box. She kept the numerous hospital nametags worn by her friends, pictures from the summer festival, and other miscellaneous things from the current year. A silky white glove and the worn Evoker were the most recent additions she had to part with and seal with the rest of her memories. She woke up that morning grasping them so tightly her hands cramped. Realizing they were forever separated from their owner, Airi cried until she fell back asleep. When she awoke, the sun hit its peak in the empty mid-autumn sky.

She reminisced into the evening. The first time she showed him the real world, Theo stood in awe over the water fountains in Paulownia Mall and begged Igor to build one in the Velvet Room. He smiled so eagerly upon learning of and seeing Airi’s favorite places in town. Once he erupted into childish hysterics after summoning Loki during an explosive fusion accident that shook the core of the Velvet Room and brought the wrath of Margaret, having spent several days cleaning up after the pranks her siblings learned from Airi. In the earlier days of knowing each other, Theo freely expressed his optimism and curiosity for their journey. But endlessly repeating the school year did wear him down, and he was never truly the same man after she, absolutely hysterical, threw herself in his arms. Neither was in their right mind at the time, but Airi blamed herself for taking him for granted as her confidant and playing with his feelings. Theo smiled when he calmed her and carried her until she could get back on her feet. In spite of it all, he had such high hopes that withstood tempests, and it shined in his eyes in his last moments in her arms.

The possibility of losing him never crossed her mind. Somehow she had less than a sliver of hope that it wasn’t permanent.

A detached blade from one of the naginata she replaced fell out of one of her supply bags and lay by her foot. It still had its sharpness; she tested it by poking the tip of her finger and getting a small cut. She picked up the blade and brought it to her carotid artery, but a knock on the door stopped the
weapon from grazing too deeply into her skin. She kept silent, pretending to not be in so the guest would leave. There was a second knock, and a voice followed.

“Airi?”

The blade slipped between her fingers. She scrambled to put away the blade without making noise. Once hidden in her bedside table drawer, she let down her hair to hide the cut on her neck and answered the door.

In his typical black attire that was appropriate for once, Shinjiro stood carrying a small bowl of stew. The small shimmer of relief in his grey eyes tortured Airi. “I know this ain’t the best time, but you got to eat something.”

“I know, I’m sorry…” She took the bowl and spoon from him. “Thanks for thinking of me.” Her cheeks dimpled as she smiled, but Shinjiro knew from her tired eyes and formal tone that she forced it.

He lightly brushed a strand of his unkempt hair out of his face. “Hope it turned out good…”

“It always does, I promise.” She took a few steps back and turned her gaze to her feet. “Um… Would you keep me company for a bit?”

The dorm limited time when boys and girls could visit together in one of their rooms, but it mattered the most after dinnertime. Shinjiro scratched the back of his head and accepted the offer in a bashful whisper. They had broken the rule quite a few times by this point, but no one had the motivation or willingness to enforce it while in mourning. Not even thinking of the potential teasing Akihiko could torment him with if he found out, Shinjiro’s eyes scanned the room as he took the chair to her desk, overflowing in papers and pens. He had more things lying around in his room with him having more time to live, but he had nowhere near as many assorted books, pictures, and posters as Airi. Her room seemed less impressive than he first imagined, but he liked how welcoming and ordinary it was.

The red-eyed girl sat on her bed and smelled the aroma of the food in her hands. Her lips twitched, wanting to let out a big goofy grin but too exhausted. The flavor from one spoonful took her back to an early morning in rural Ireland. Overwhelmed by the nostalgia, Airi cried again.

She felt a pair of concerned eyes on her. “S-Sorry…”

“Don’t be,” Shinjiro whispered.

Airi rubbed her eyes to reclaim some emotional control lost, but denying her weakness was counterproductive. “M-Ma made me stew a month after I m-moved in. I had th-the flu, and this was all I a-ate. Pa pl-played his violin and Blair f-fixed up Dusky-kun…” The first thing she took out of her suitcase when she moved into the dorm, the white and black dolphin sitting on top of her TV always watched over her. He had baby blue thread stitched across his underbelly that glowed when she held him up during the Dark Hour.

“It’s alright. Cry for as long as you need to.”

They were silent for a while, save for the emotional outburst Shinjiro allowed Airi to have. At some point, after all the experiences she continuously suffered and will suffer through, the girl will run out of tears to shed. With the last constant she relied upon robbed from her, nothing and no one was stable in her life anymore. Airi began to wonder what was the point in crying over fleeting memories and why she couldn’t simply accept that bad omens will always appear to ruin any trace of
happiness.

When she finished processing the darker feelings that hit her in waves, Airi put the bowl on the end table and dried her eyes with the sleeve of her cat-themed fleece pajamas. Shinjiro grabbed a tissue box from the desk and gave it to her.

As she unconsciously tucked her hair behind her ear, Shinjiro noticed blood on a superficial cut. He joined her on the bed and gave her a look she had never seen before and never wanted to see again.

She covered the cut with her hand and lowered her gaze. She felt the boiling beneath his skin and his severe eyes burned holes into her like a laser cutting metal. Airi reluctantly opened the lower drawer of her bedside table and gave him her first aid kit. Giving her no time to avoid him, Shinjiro wiped her neck with disinfectant. Whenever she twitched from the stinging, he stopped for a second before continuing to clean her wound tentatively. Airi sat as a wounded, pitiful puppy Shinjiro tended to feel weak towards, but he showed no external hint of this.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

His voice – full of fury, fear, and hurt in a tamed whisper – pained her more than his silence. Her hand covered the cut on her pale neck and said nothing.

“Whatever was between you two ain’t my business, but Arisato would never want you to hurt yourself.” When she still kept quiet, he softened his tone to emphasize his distress. “Riko, please.”

Airi shivered. Shinjiro only called her "Riko" twice.

He was dying in her arms with a proud smirk as he was destined to. Nothing about the scene changed no matter how much she made attempts to connect with or save him. Until the pain burned the mask away and displayed every raw emotion he hid from her, one of which she would recognize much later.

“Please... don’t cry, Riko... This is... how it should be...”

Long after she ran to Theo to put her heart back together again, Shinjiro's broken plea replayed in Airi's head for weeks. Without Fuuka, Yukari, Aigis, and Junpei keeping class notes and pushing her outside to remind her of life outside her head, she would have dropped out of school from sleeping sixteen hours a day.

It was when Airi realized that she had fallen in love with Shinjiro. Her determination to save herself thus extended to him, to Takeharu Kirijo, and Chidori until she dreamed of a timeline where no one had to die.

The second time would have been more traumatic if she wasn't slipping out of consciousness and into the Velvet Room for a timeline reset. He had that emotion burning in his eyes and carved into his face again. She dared to call it love as she watched his heart - called cold, closed, and aloof by many - shatter like glass. A love that hurt him more than Takaya's bullets ever could, a fear of hers that Theo and Aizawa confirmed.

Somehow, without fail, some things continued to happen as they were in an obscure page of a book written before the birth of time and the universe. Airi did not know what compelled Shinjiro to call her "Riko", but hearing him call her by that nickname turned her to clay for him to mold. Knowing
he would never cease in demanding the truth, Airi pressed her hands to her forehead and came clean.

“Theo’s not human. He wasn’t born into this world as everyone else is. He’s... some kind of entity that exists to help people like me, a ‘Wild Card’, who can summon multiple Persona.” Shinjiro did not interrupt or question her claim anyone normal would call impossible, so she continued. “That blue door you guys saw once in Tartarus leads to the Velvet Room. It’s another world where time flows differently. Theo and his sisters live there, where they guide and watch over me. Theo has helped me the most from the beginning, and he’s all I had to depend on when the cycles started. Now that he’s gone… I-I don’t know what to do. I know you, Mitsuru’s dad, and Chidori always came back when I start over, but I don’t know if Theo will…”

Frowning and furrowing his brow, Shinjiro let her words sink in for a minute before growling, “That doesn’t mean you should kill yourself. Don’t try anything like that. Don’t you ever even think ‘bout it.”

She flinched. Never having been in a situation with the roles reversed – him begging her to live – Airi’s heart broke hearing the trembling anger and fear in his voice. “I’m just… I’m so tired of this,” she admitted, knowing it wasn’t a good enough excuse. “I can’t keep screwing up… I just want everyone to live… And I wanna go home. I miss ma, pa, and Blair. But I’m afraid of what’s going to happen now that…” She released a heavy breath she held onto for ages.

Shinjiro processed what he heard and found enough of what Airi said made more pieces of the puzzle come together and make sense. The situation has changed enough for her to not know exactly what to say and do, and he admired her honesty. With her unsure and unstable after Theo’s death, he knew she would fall apart, paralyzing herself and the group again if she continued on like this. Worse, there was evidence to prove how far she would go in her despair.

Now he finally better understood what she meant when she begged him to rejoin SEES. Life never stops. No matter how hard things get, one must carry their pain and continue forward. Trying to go backwards or stand still will lead to ruin. And as hard as Shinjiro was on himself over Ken’s mother, Airi bore even more remorse and coped with the pain far worse. He didn’t invalidate his painful experiences, but watching her optimism fade away proved the reality of her supernatural situation.

Stroking her cheek, Shinjiro turned her face towards him.

“Arisato said things are working out for the better this time. Do you remember that? I do, and I’ll say it every day so you never forget it. With or without him, he needs you to finish this. I don’t know why he felt he had to sacrifice himself, but we cannot let everything he did be pointless by failing. And you won’t fail. We won’t fail. Even when you kept all of this time travel stuff to yourself, you were never alone ‘cause our end goal is the same. But now we do know, so we’ll fight even harder to make sure the Dark Hour, those Shadows, and that Nine Children cult are fuckin’ history. And we can’t do it without you. You’re the reason everyone’s still here and not fighting each other over stupid shit. Kill yourself now and everything resets. Everything here will be gone. The bad, the ugly, and the good. Everything. Don’t throw away what you’ve done. You’ll have to regain everyone’s trust all over again. You’ll have to hunt down that bastard Aizawa and that damn spider and your uncle all over again. You’ll have to kill Takaya all over again, and I doubt it’ll be anything like what happened this time. You’ll have to put up with my shit all over again, and -”

Shinjiro swallowed hard. He didn't look away from the knowing, horrifying realization in her eyes.

“Please, don’t die, Airi. For SEES, for your sake, for my sake. Tell us what you need, and we’ll do everything we can to help you get through this. Just hold on. Do not die.”

His spoke those last three words in clear unaccented English. Having his eyes cut into her soul left
Airi feeling completely exposed but wide-awake. She had to remember that some things did go right this time. Everyone trusted each other more in spite of some nasty disagreements; there have been more group activities with high camaraderie; and Shinjiro lived. This was the first cycle when Shinjiro ever displayed his feelings openly with her. His earnest, trembling voice and erratic breaths were an unrestrained plea for her life, and she would lose this chance forever if she failed or chose to give up.

These reminders helped lighten her heart. Airi scooted closer to Shinjiro and kissed his unshaven cheek. She said she didn’t mind him trying something new, but she had to get used to his light stubble tickling her lips. Shinjiro gasped shyly, not expecting the sudden intimacy.

“You’re right, Shinji. I’m sorry I scared you… I almost lost my way… Thank you.”

She let out a gentle smile with genuine dimples and wrinkles around her eyes. Smiling as well, he brushed her bangs aside and kissed her forehead.

“I’m curious ‘bout something though,” he said, breath warm against her skin. Laying her head on Shinjiro’s shoulder, Airi responded with a hum. “You think we’ll ever have a serious talk without you cryin’ all over me and getting my shirt wet?”

He let out a crooked smirk as he offered her tissues. With a light kick to his leg, Airi giggled while blowing her nose. For the first time that day she was a little closer to her real self.

November 9, 2009

Very few accepted the Kirijo Group’s story about Theo, Takeharu, and Ikutsuki. People were even more frightened about the rumored terrorist group arising in the city, and there was growing speculation if the government would get involved. The Kirijo Group prepared for the loss in market shares and invested in more security and improved healthcare within the city to maintain a good image.

In school, students were more talkative than usual as well, but it wasn’t just because of the recent violence. Classmates in 2-F’s homeroom gossiped amongst each other, creating audio pandemonium. Blocking them out, Yukari, Airi, Junpei, and Aigis sat quietly, still upset but feeling more alive after resting all day yesterday. It disturbed them that the police station bombing and the murders were overshadowed by shallower, everyday topics. Airi had known that alienating perspective, yet it saddened her that her friends had to experience some of that before reaching the legal age of adulthood, having committed relationships, or entering the workforce.

After the bell rang and everyone returned to their seats, Toriumi stood at the front of the room, clapping to get everyone’s attention. “Alright, everyone, today we have a third transfer student. What an interesting year this has become!”

The effeminate young man standing before the class wore a yellow scarf and black suspenders with his blazer-less uniform. He had his black hair swept back, displaying his large blue eyes. He bowed to everyone and said in a charming voice, “Hello, my name is Ryoji Mochizuki. I would be grateful if you could show me the ropes around here.”

Numerous girls whispered about how attractive Ryoji was; others wondered by his sociable aura if he was a foreigner. Yukari lightly tapped Airi’s shoulder. Understanding her confused expression, Airi nodded. Junpei spotted their nonverbal exchange and decided to play ignorant so he could ask
later for details.

“Ryoji lived overseas for a long time because of his parents’ work,” explained Toriumi, “so he may not be used to all of our customs. Please, be considerate and explain them to him if he has questions.”

The new student beamed brightly and said, “Thank you for your understanding. I’d love to get to know you all better.”

During the introduction, Aigis noticed Ryoji stared at Airi the whole time despite addressing the whole class. Toriumi assigned Ryoji to the seat right next to the blonde android, sandwiched between him and Airi. Unsure what to think of him, she stared intently as he went to his new place.

He winked and smiled at a girl across from him, making her sigh flirtatiously. Ryoji sat down gracefully and turned to Aigis. “Good morning,” Ryoji said smoothly. “Your blonde hair beautifully complements your sapphire eyes. May I ask for your name?”

Immune to his flattery, Aigis glared. “You are dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” He seemed far more shocked than hurt over her words. “My, you are an interesting girl. I haven’t even asked you out on a date yet...”

“A date?” She blinked, unable to comprehend how his brain processed information.

Ryoji laughed causally and smiled. “Don’t worry. You haven’t offended me.”

The day continued on with little incidents, minus the occasional female student chatting up with Ryoji in the middle of a lecture. Some teachers gave up trying to gain everyone’s attention, and decided to pass out notes to those who did pay attention and left the room. During one of those periods, Junpei got up and talked to Ryoji.

Aigis met up with Yukari and Airi. “Who is he?”

“Ryoji always transfers here,” Airi said.

“That was not my intended question. Is he relevant to our mission? Something is wrong with him. As some people say, ‘I feel it in my gut’.”

She hesitated as she eyed Ryoji, flirting with one girl who recently attempted to make a debut. Noting her behavior, Yukari spoke up before Airi could answer. “If he is involved, is he a high priority at the moment?”

“He’ll be important later. Just go with the flow so things don’t get complicated again so soon.”

Aigis tilted her head slightly. “Are you worried his behavior will change and create more problems, Airi-san?”

“I am. He can be melodramatic, which we really don’t need right now. Fortunately we’re one step ahead of him, since you already know about the Fall.”

The gears spun erratically in Yukari’s head until she had a theory. Her eyes widened and jaw dropped. “Wait... he’s one of the Children?!”

Before Airi could reply, Junpei jumped into their conversation with Ryoji tagging along. “Hey, girls! Gossiping about how awesome I am?”

“Yeah, only in your dreams, Stupei.”
“Aw, that’s sweet of ya, Yuka-tan.”

Airi rubbed her eyes to adjust her vision. She had never seen such a carefree and tensionless exchange of verbal insults between Yukari and Junpei. They reached some form of higher form of content acceptance in them being programmed to naturally piss each other off.

“Anyway, Ryoji, these are my friends. I’ve known Yukari Takeba since junior high. Airi Fujihara transferred in April, and Aigis in September.”

Ryoji bowed to the girls, who lowered their heads in turn. “Yes, I met Aigis-san earlier. Nice to meet you, ladies.”

“Same,” said Yukari with a thin smile. *There* was the condescension that was missing mere seconds ago.

“Nice to meet you too, Mochizuki-san,” said Airi. When he looked at her Ryoji lost his voice for a moment. “Are you okay?”

He snapped out of his brief trance and hummed nervously. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just… had the strangest feeling just now. Have we met before?”

Yukari’s nice façade hardened. Seeing a hint to back up her theory about Ryoji made her grow slightly pale, and she had to work harder to pretend to make up the difference. If she had the capacity to have emotions betray her on a flip of a switch, Aigis would have done the same.

Oblivious Junpei, however, snorted. “Wow, dude! That’s one of the oldest, cheesiest pickup lines in the book! Even Aragaki-sempai’s smoother than you!”

“Th-That’s not what I meant –,” Ryoji lost his voice and became flustered over a detail he almost missed. “What do you mean, Junpei-san?”

“Oh, nothing really. Aibana’s one of the most popular girls in the school. She’s friends with a *lot* of people, even the scariest senior in school. They’re *really* close.” Junpei gave the girls a knowing wink as he explained to the ignorant boy. As thick as he was sometimes, Yukari appreciated him discouraging the transfer student’s flirtations on Airi.

The new student caught on to neither the subtext nor the nonverbal cue. He faced Airi with fascination in his eyes. “You must have many admirers, Airi-chan. It’s not a surprise, for you are quite lovely… Your ruby eyes are especially fetching. I have a feeling we’ll become good friends.”

Holding back her urge to sigh, she returned his kindness. “Thanks, Mochizuki-san.”

“She shrugged apathetically. “If you insist, Ryoji-kun.”

“Wonderful!” He extended his hand, and Airi shook it. “You don’t need to add the honorific, but one can never be too polite.”

Suddenly, Aigis stood up to Ryoji, four inches taller than her. “You are a threat. Please stay away from Airi-san!”

Confused again, Ryoji turned to her and said, “Oh, I apologize, Aigis-chan. Would it be all right if we go out after school to get to know each other better?”
“Absolutely not!”

“Aigis, relax,” Yukari said calmly despite her understanding, “He’s teasing you.”

“Please understand, Yukari-chan,” he said, saddened. “I wish to get along with you all. I do not mean to offend your friends.”

Aigis remained unconvinced and Airi pinched the bridge of her nose. The high anxiety level within the group made Junpei feel awkward. He regretted initiating this encounter.

November 12, 2009

During a short meeting after dinner, Ken suggested they hold a ceremony after they put an end to the Dark Hour once and for all. “To honor everyone we've lost,” he said. “Arisato-san, Kirijo-san, Yukari-san's dad, mom. And if we lose anyone else...”

With everyone more concerned for their mortality than ever - even with Airi's assurance that the odds were low for nearly everyone - many in the group agreed. Junpei felt uncomfortable with the idea at first, but he relented when Akihiko realized that delaying the funeral could allow Fuuka to be part of the ceremony.

Until an agreement can be made on the day to hold it, Yukari and Aigis created shrines for each of the fallen to honor their spirits. Those shrines earned the same undying loyalty Koromaru gave to his former master's shrine. Shinjiro left food each man liked when they stayed late enough to be graced with the young man's cooking.

Takeharu remained protected from any element that would return him to the soil of the earth, and Theo finally became human beyond death.
Ken scrunched up his cheeks and sulked over his plate of pan-fried salmon and vegetable salad. Only he and Koromaru were at the dorm for dinner, so Shinjiro cooked up a custom meal for each of them. When he noticed the boy’s frown, the chief leaned against the island and said in a deadpan tone, “Nearly froze my ass off catchin’ that this morning.”

Ken looked up at him and laughed. “Sorry, Shinjiro-san. I’m eating.” He picked up his chopsticks and nibbled on the salmon. The food tasted so good, he wordlessly finished his meal in ten minutes. “Thank you.”

Having clearing his plate too, Koromaru rubbed his head against Shinjiro’s leg. He petted his canine friend and gathered the dirty dishes to put in the sink. On his way he noticed Ken kick the legs of his chair restlessly. Poor kid kept that up all evening, and the sound bore into Shinjiro’s eardrums. “What’s bugging ya, Ken?”

He shrugged.

“If it’s nothing, stop making that noise.”

Ken’s knees locked, and he blushed. “S-Sorry...” The boy stared at the table and played with the strings of his hoodie. The thought that lingered for days took form, pouring from Ken’s mouth without hesitation. “Arisato-san once asked me about manga after a meeting. He said he asked Airi-san what they were, but she made some tall tales he wanted me to check. Three days later, he walked me home after school and bought me ice cream. It was him thanking me for my ’invaluable expertise’..."

“I didn't know him well, but I miss him...”

The corner of Shinjiro’s lips curled as he pictured the tall man walk an unrelated child through the busy streets with treats. Theo must have had an air of innocence that made strangers assume the best of him. “Yeah... me too, kid.”

“As long as Airi-san is getting better, I'll be okay too.”

“Agreed,” he said, while washing his hands. Shinjiro spun around to face Ken and changed the subject. “It’s gonna be quiet while we’re in Kyoto. Take care of yourself and Koro-chan ‘til we get back.”
“I know. I’m not a little kid.”

“Right… sorry,” he muttered clumsily. “Maybe one of us’ll bring somethin’ back for you.” He took out his food (miso soup made with leftover salmon), sat on the island, and dug in. A pair of questioning eyes drilled into his head. “What?”

“How come you get to sit up there while we can’t?”

“Slave over the stove for a few years and you’ll earn the right to break the rules.” He sat upright and puffed his chest, as if showing off how worthy he was of having this so-called privilege.

“Won’t Mitsuru-sempai execute you?” Ken observed.

Shinjiro let out a self-deprecating laugh. “Not if you don’t tell her.”

“What if she finds out anyway?”

“Airi’ll summon a shit-ton of fire and free me, obviously.”

Ken sighed. He didn’t argue further, swearing to keep Shinjiro’s bad behavior a secret. The two of them got along better over the past two months and put the past behind them for good.

The front doors opened and Junpei returned after being out all day. “Hey, Shinjiro-sempai,” he called out. “Can I see ya for a sec?”

He slurped up the noodles and let out a sigh. “What do you want?”

“Only a moment of your time, oh elder one.”

Ken snickered over Junpei stroking his imaginary stubble and grinned fiendishly when Shinjiro shot him a glare. The senior put down his dinner, slipped off the counter, and met up with Junpei. The usual cocky young man’s face expressed uncharacteristically apparent anxiety. He took Shinjiro outside, showing him his concern.

Chidori stood healthy and strong in her white dress and gothic bangles. A small bag covered in patches and stitches hung over her shoulder, carrying her sketchbooks and paints.

“Kurosawa-san said she’s been released from the hospital,” Junpei explained. “She doesn’t have anywhere to go, and leaving her on the streets is a bad idea. Some punk starts a riot or a shootout every other day.”

Shinjiro folded his arms. “The others won’t like her stayin’ here. The Children wanna keep or kill her.”

“They don’t have the power to find me easily,” Chidori said. “Junpei told me your friend who left has a power similar to mine. Let me take her place, and I can help you fight them.”

“We’re both pretty easygoing about this mess, Shinjiro-sempai. That’s why I wanted to tell you first. What do ya think?”

Shinjiro studied Chidori carefully. She appeared far more mentally and emotionally stable than since he last met her in the hospital. With Junpei visiting her often, he may have significantly contributed to her calmer temperament.

“It’ll take time to convince the others, but you need a roof over your head.”
“Thank you.” Chidori let a comforted smile slip.

Junpei wore the stupidest grin on earth, making Shinjiro a tad nauseous. “I owe ya, man! Thanks so much, sempai!”

Shinjiro muttered something while turning around and tugging his beanie over his eyes.

The three of them entered the dorm and explained the situation to Ken and Koromaru while waiting in the lounge for everyone else. Chidori said little to them, but Shinjiro and Junpei helped her open up a bit more to Ken. Once Aigis, Yukari, Airi, and Mitsuru arrived after a shopping spree, the mood soured tremendously. The tension increased fourfold when Akihiko showed up not two minutes later. After a second round of calm explanations against loud dissent, only Airi relaxed.

“I still don’t trust her,” ornery Yukari said.

Chidori lowered her head in understanding. “Your doubts are reasonable. I am still a threat to you, given my past actions.”

“You’ll be fine, Chidori,” assured Junpei, holding up a small bag of suppressants the more trusted doctors gave him. “I’ve seen her nearly every day, guys. She’s passed all the tests, and she’s friendlier with the doctors!”

“If she betrays us again, this’ll be on your head, Junpei,” Akihiko warned.

“Chill it, Aki. That girl’s one of the reasons Takaya didn’t shot me dead.”

“Don’t tell me to ‘chill it’! Jin might still be following her, and he’ll attack us when we’re asleep!”

Shaking her head, Mitsuru clarified, “The Children have known we lived here since the beginning. If they wanted to eliminate us that badly, they’d have done it months ago.”

Chidori nodded. “That doctor would never let us near a mile of you. He limited our options whenever Takaya wanted to strike. He’d often threatened to withhold our suppressants if we targeted anyone who wasn't Castor or Nemesis.”

“Kurebayashi’s behavior has always been rather strange,” admitted Mitsuru, still giving a doubtful stare, “but that was before the Twelve Shadows were defeated. What about now?”

“Once Takaya died, Strega as I have known it is no more. Jin should have come after me, but I can only guess the doctor has kept him away from me. Even when Morpheus was freed, he did not come after me either. Perhaps I am no longer useful, yet they do nothing to be rid of me given how much I know. The Children’s numbers are limited, but it may not matter now that Thanatos is free... in theory.”

“In theory?” repeated Akihiko, brows furrowed.

“I have sensed Thanatos' presence, as I witnessed his weakened form two months ago.” She stared at Airi for three long seconds when she said this. “The doctor cannot sense Persona as I can, but he does not know the true appearance or ‘feeling’ of the creature beyond theories. If he cared, he would be actively pursuing Thanatos, which he isn't.”

Confused, Yukari folded her arms. “What’s that man’s deal? That doesn’t make sense.”

Airi shrugged. “My uncle has always kept himself distant from everything that’s going on here. I never confronted him about his role, so I don’t know what he’s thinking.”
“You don’t need to believe everything I say,” Chidori added quickly. “Medea has never and will never share the heritage of the Children. They want the Fall to come, they demand peace born of not away from madness, and I… I’m afraid of dying.”

Her fingers clenched tightly in the fabric of her dress, but not a hint of insanity blurred the spark in her eyes. Seeing this unadulterated clarity, Ken looked at his doubtful friends and said, “Maybe we should give her another chance.”

Running out of patience and further confused by the revelations, Mitsuru turned to the unusually quiet Aigis. “What do you think?”

“Based on her behavioral and tonal cues, Chidori-san speaks earnestly. I agree with the suggestion of having her stay with us. Her powers will help us in Fuuka-san’s absence, and we will provide her protection. This is a mutually beneficial exchange.”

“Fujihara?”

Airi immediately nodded, catching the attention of everyone. “She’s definitely changed. Since she’s no longer under their control, we should allow her to make her own choices.”

Her certainty intimidated the remaining doubters to submit to the new change in silence. Chidori let out a small smile and bowed her head. The majority reigning supreme, Akihiko, Yukari, and Mitsuru relented their objections and allowed Chidori to stay at the dorm. With little things to take care of Airi and Aigis helped her move into Fuuka’s old room. Everyone else retired to their rooms early to prepare for Kyoto and the hot springs.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes as I wrote this fic, I had moments where I wish I were more proficient in Japanese. Take Junpei calling Shinjiro "oh, elder one". "Rou" can mean elder (老) or son (郎) depending on the kanji. That could have been an opportunity for a pun based on Shinjiro’s name (真次郎) and him being the oldest member of SEES, but it'd only make sense in a language I'm not fluent in. Oh well. :(

Also, I write "Shinjirou" as "Shinjiro" out of habit. Once I got used to hiragana and katakana, I make an effort to write out every extended vowel in Japanese words and names to help me remember pronunciation. It'd take a long time to correct every single instance I wrote his name, so I left it as it's shown in the official English translation of 'Persona 3'. Makes life easier.

...And "rou/老" is NOT a minuscule hint to my next fanfic idea. Nope. Not at all... >.<
Chapter Notes

It's Kyoto time in less than a week of the last chapter. Enjoy! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 17, 2009

As they were not a part of the trip, Ken and Koromaru promised to care for Chidori until everyone returned. When Airi spoiled the announced city for the school trip, he complained Kyoto was a clichéd choice; now Junpei planned to take lots of pictures to share with Chidori when they all returned. When Yukari pointed out his sudden and shallow flip-flop on the train, he blushed defensively and ran off to hang out with Ryoji, who continued in his mission to schmooze and talk up every girl in their class.

The junior and senior classes arrived at the Godaigo Inn around dinnertime. The warm colors and air relaxed the tired students, anxious to try out the hot springs sometime in the next day or two.

“Whoa, nice place!” Junpei stretched his arms. “Way to go, student council!”

“Yeah, you should be thanking them. This is in an expensive district, you know,” Yukari said, whacking Junpei’s arm out of her face.

Ryoji tilted his head and pointed at a intricately designed umbrella in the lobby. “What’s that indoors for?”

Airi shrugged. “Decoration?”

“I see. How strange. But it’d be nice if I could stand under it with a pretty woman like you, Ai.” He smiled suggestively, standing closer to her. “Say, why don’t we hang out somewhere together later tonight? We can sit by the river and watch lovers pass by…”

“Why do you always go back to shameless pick-up lines?” Yukari snapped, pulling Airi away from him. “Be careful! He’ll go after any girl with a pulse, whether she’s taken or not!”

The shameless flirt pressed his hand to his heart and gasped teasingly. “‘Girl’? Yukari-chan, Love and jasmine is a beautiful combination of kanji for a woman of any age. And besides,” he eyed the defensive Yukari seriously, “I don’t just go for anyone. I want to get to know Ai better because she’s unique beauty with no twin–”

“Please, you’re exaggerating,” Airi said as she averted her eyes. Her face was on fire.

Ryoji stepped closer to her. “Oh, I’m sorry, Ai. It’s just you’re so cute, I can’t help but admire you. Even when you blush in embarrassment, you’re so–”

An arctic shadow blanketed over Ryoji, instantly silencing him a second time. He turned to see Shinjiro; his face didn’t need to express a single emotion as his presence spelled out exactly why he honed in on the junior like a famished shark to a bleeding turtle. The giant raised an eyebrow at the girls before turning his narrowed eyes back to the black-haired junior. “There a problem here?”
“Of course not. I am not sure we’ve met. I’m Ryoji Mochizuki, from class 2-F. And you are Shinjiro Aragaki? Ai has told me a lot about you, sempai.”

Shinjiro folded his arms and straightened his posture. “Clearly she hasn’t told you enough. You usually this annoying around girls?” Feeling an intense aura from their sempai, Junpei and Yukari took five steps away from him.

“You speak rather bluntly, Aragaki.” He retained his good natured smile, but he stressed the name without a honorific. “If my treatment towards Ai offends you, please do not speak so condescendingly to people you’ve just met.”

“Sure, so long the giftedly slow learn to take the hint when everyone's backing away from the high beams of an oncoming bus. I don’t care where you came from, but hittin’ on reluctant women in public for every soul to see tends to be frowned upon for a reason.”

Ryoji’s lips thinned into a white line at Shinjiro’s equally unsubtle and acidic tone. Part of her wondered if this encounter would happen, but Airi stared in bafflement at seeing Shinjiro and Ryoji snarl like defensive lions. She wondered if the two would be just as bitter towards each other if Shinjiro lived to meet him, or if she didn’t date Shinjiro.

Out of nowhere, Aigis butted in and sided with the big scary senior. “I agree with Shinjiro-san. Please be more considerate; you continue to be a problem, Ryoji-san.”

Not missing a beat to the change in tempo, Ryoji laughed in a carefree manner. “Very interesting. I wish to get to know you better too, Aragaki.”

“You’ll regret it.”

Ryoji laughed again, but the air that escaped his lungs left the room significantly colder than when Shinjiro intervened.

The exchange went no further when the teachers called for everyone to check in, get their room keys, and turn in early for the night. Slipping out of a character he didn’t expect to adopt so quickly and eagerly, Shinjiro gave one last watchful glare at Ryoji before gently ruffling Airi’s hair and leaving with his class. Ryoji stared, stunned, noticing for a split second Airi’s eyes glow like embers in a hearth in the middle of winter at the sight of the senior. Yukari and Aigis exchanged relieved expressions before heading upstairs as well.

Awakening from whatever spell the tender gesture cast upon her, Airi said, “I’m sorry, Ryoji-kun. I’ve never seen him like that before, but Shinjiro-kun can worry too much sometimes. I’ll talk to you later, yeah?” She bowed politely at him and left as well.

Junpei placed an arm around the rejected lady-killer’s shoulder. “Dude, don’t feel too bad about being friend-zoned. The whole school thinks she’s after every guy when she’s just bein’ friendly.”

“I see…” Ryoji tried to ignore the painful sting in his chest, a sensation he recognized more than his name. “So Aragaki-san is her boyfriend.”

Junpei whistled in amazement and laughed. “Duh, dude. Man, I’d thought you’d read the neon-lit signs a lot sooner. Talk about lacking subtlety… And now the scariest guy in school has you on his shit list. I’d pray for your soul, man, ’cause he makes Yuka-tan look like a kitten, and for good reason.”

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After visiting a few historic landmarks for the day, Mitsuru and Yukari walked along the Kamo riverbank. “You lived around here, Tabeka?” asked Mitsuru.

“I don’t remember much of this place, except the pear trees. My dad would let me sit on his shoulders so I could reach the flowers. I liked to make crowns with them and pretend I was a noblewoman. After dad passed, I spent less and less time outdoors for fun. Mom threw herself at random men and sometimes brought them home. Most of them were pretty obnoxious, so I’d run out and spend my time here to be away from her and be closer to my dad.”

She glanced at her friend, only to see her seemingly staring into space and ignoring her. Yukari clenched her fist, but asked gently, “What’s wrong, Mitsuru-sempai?”

“You don’t have to force yourself to talk to me,” she said. “I don’t deserve your sympathy. I’ve been so selfish and overconfident, that I shouldn’t be part of our mission. I am a failure to the group.”

“Don’t say that about yourself! Is this because of your father?”

“Of course it is! I awakened my Persona in my desire to protect him, and it was all for nothing as he died before my eyes!”

Mitsuru didn’t always live up to her reputation of being an aloof ice queen, but she suppressed her feelings long enough to make her confession shock anyone. She was strong and confident to some degree of highly proficient finesse, but never to the extent of being mechanical. The intensity of her feelings bleeding unrestrained and raw from her pours struck a chord more profound than the revelation that she did feel emotions beneath her composed mask.

“But it’s not just that. My grandfather’s experiments left a mountain of sins for my father to atone for. His heinous crimes ran so much deeper than we ever imagined, blinding and herding us into a trap I should have foreseen! But I had no gift to see the truth. I had no power to protect my father. Worst of all, I have no will as unfaltering as Fujihara to fight for my convictions!” The professional and refined mask she adorned for so long shattered like glass. Mitsuru batted her eyes to stop the tears from overflowing and carving rivers through and ruining her foundation. “All of my efforts to be of value were futile. Yamagishi possesses a clearer vision; Fujihara carries superior knowledge, leadership, and fortitude. Everyone here has a reason to fight, a reason to live through the trials we face and beyond. What good am I when my reason for living is gone forever?! How can I serve you and the others when I no longer am qualified or competent enough to lead as I have done since the day I founded SEES? Am I not wrong, Takeba?!”

She couldn’t stand the torture anymore. Yukari slapped Mitsuru. Her other hand started to bleed from clenching her fist too tightly. Gasping, Mitsuru gently touched her cheek, flaming red.

From the corner of her eye, Yukari spotted a platinum-haired boy who saw and overheard bits of their conversation. Knowing he wanted to talk to Mitsuru too and was looking for them, she said for him, for her friends, and for herself, “I’m sorry you feel that way, but you’re wrong. What you said isn’t true at all.

“Actually, you and I aren't that different. My dad died to make right the work your grandfather started. I want to fulfill his final wish, and I can’t do it without SEES. I wish my dad were here to tell me how proud he is – even if it’s a little white lie - like your father did.”

Quiet and pensive Mitsuru stared into the water. Her cheek felt less sore and her heart felt lighter upon hearing Yukari’s words.
“You’re not useless, Mitsuru-sempai. You can still fulfill your father’s wishes. He’s no longer with us, but he still exists in the past, in our memories, and in your heart. With his last words, he knew you’ll pick up from where he left off. He’d want you to lead us in your own way. Your father isn’t gone forever, and he never will be if you keep his memory alive. It just takes some practice, a little confidence, and special people by your side who’ll stick with you until the end.”

She gestured to the eavesdropper, who reluctantly approached them. Mitsuru heard his footsteps, but she did not expect who he’d be. “Akihiko…” Her voice cracked, and she averted her eyes so he wouldn’t see exactly how red and swollen they were.

“Yukari pretty much nailed that speech. It still doesn’t excuse me sneaking up on you though.”

“No, it’s…” She sighed, and reluctantly looked into his eyes when she regained some semblance of a guard from the depths of her broken heart. “What would you like to add?”

He shook his head, eyes blinking back emotions he wanted to protect too. “I never knew you felt this way. We’ve all been worried about you, but none of us knew what to say to help. It’s alright to feel a little weak so you won’t lose yourself. You’re one of my closest friends, Mitsuru. No one can or will replace you.”

Akihiko’s intense grey eyes and sincere feelings wiped away the last of the insecurities Mitsuru held in her heart. She stared at the clear sky and laughed, as if mocking her old mindset.

“Yes, you’re both right,” she said after a long pregnant moment of contemplative silence. “I must preserve my father’s memory by continuing where he left off. May he watch over me and grant me strength so I do not succumb to despair again.”

Her own reassurance filled her with confidence. A cool wave washed over her, and the whispers of her Persona matured. The warrior Penthesilea shriveled away as she said her goodbyes; from her remains emerged the queen Artemisia.

Renewed confidence and power flowing through her veins, Mitsuru said with a smile, “Yukari, Akihiko, will you stand with me until the very end?”

The wind carried the wisps of her new aura to her companions, and they smiled at the metamorphosis that took place before them. “Of course we will,” they said.

They enjoyed the moment of understanding and tranquility until Yukari’s phone received a text. She gasped. “I’m glad we had the chance to really talk, Mitsuru-sempai. Aigis wants me to meet with her, so I’ll let you two chat some more.” She left off in a hurry, giving Akihiko a knowing look and leaving the two seniors to their long overdue conversation.

“I wonder what’s she’s excited about,” Mitsuru said, watching Yukari break out into a dash. She did not catch the last second glance towards Akihiko.

He shrugged, grateful for her obliviousness in this one instance. “Maybe Aigis and Shinji turned Mochizuki into a punching bag.”

Mitsuru giggled. Akihiko did a double take. “He is quite the bizarre character,” she said matter-of-factly. “I have to thank Yukari for helping me out on the rooftop. His proposition was... interesting, to say the least.”

“Poor kid doesn’t understand boundaries,” added Akihiko. “More importantly, you weren’t yourself, and it wasn’t the time or the place for that.”
“Don’t be too harsh on him for that. I am not offended by his actions.” She let out a sigh she had bottled up in her chest since the night her father and Theo died. “Thank you, by the way, for giving me time to grieve. I am better, thanks to Kikuno, my mother, Yukari, you, and the others. I must also speak to Fujihara so we can move on. She must be hurting still, and I want to ensure there is no more tension between us.”

“I’m sure she understands. I’m sure we all do. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

She giggled again. “Your kindness never ceases to surprise me, Akihiko.”

He turned a notable shade of pink, which Mitsuru giggled at once more.

They stood quietly and listened to the gentle singing of water rolling over rocks and pebbles. Mitsuru noticed Akihiko’s hair had grown an inch, tickling the top of his ears, and his face lost whatever was left of soft, childish features. He had gained some muscle too, but he still had a while to go before losing his scrawny build. When he felt her stares and sought to confirm his suspicions, she looked away even more noticeably than her staring. A new tension filled the air, and both were unsure how to break the silence.

“I-I should apologize to you as well.” Mitsuru meekly glanced down at her feet. “There was no excuse for my dismissive behavior this past year. I didn’t believe your concerns about Fujihara until the revelations of her timeloops confirmed what you suspected all along. You warned me about Ikutsuki, only for us to not act against him until he stole two good men from this world. You worried about my health when I denied it care, and I was too self-centered to appreciate your care. I should have been kinder to you and more fair.”

Despite the deeper shade of red that flushed his cheeks, Akihiko’s face glowed in the golden sunset. “Pl-Please, it’s alright. I-I’ve been self-centered too... Just because I was right in all of those cases, that doesn’t mean I’m happy about it. It’s in the past, and I care more about all of us moving forward and leaving no one else behind if we can help it. I’m done taking for granted the people I care about. Sometimes I do get carried away, but you always find a way to keep me from straying too far from the path. I’m grateful for that, and I’ll fight beside you to the end, Mitsuru. Beyond the end too if possible.”

For the first time that day, their eyes met. Mitsuru felt his warm, immovable resolve curl around and latch itself to her heart, knowing he considered her to be someone he wanted to protect with every fiber of his being. This young man with his head held high with conviction aflame in his eyes shared no resemblance to the scrawny boy with his listless posture and bored indifference she first met. “You’ve grown so much, Akihiko. I’m proud to have you as a friend for all these years, and I hope there will be more to come.”

A flicker of sadness shimmered in his eyes, but he shared a smile as bright as a child’s.

The distance between them closed substantially, which is what Akihiko wanted the most out of everything they went through during this crazy year.

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November 19, 2009

Yukari met up with Aigis and company last night to find a surprise. Wearing a green and white sailor school uniform, Fuuka stopped by unannounced. She stayed for as long as she could to catch up with her friends. Her school stayed at a hotel a few blocks away, and she promised to see everyone again later if they were to pass each other.
Another day of sightseeing passed with everyone in a good mood. Sneaking out their groups, Airi and Shinjiro did their own personal sightseeing for an hour and purchased nama-yatsuhashi for Ken at a local gift shop. Aigis proudly showed off her ability to pray respectfully at a local shrine after months of training with her young sensei and Koromaru. Yukari and Mitsuru spent more time together thanks to yesterday’s talk, and they ignored Junpei and Ryoji’s pranks the best they could, laughing only when Junpei managed to make himself look dumb enough for even Ryoji to call him out on his absurd ideas and stupid mouth. Everyone stumbled into Fuuka and classmates from her school at least once during the day, giving them all an excuse to see her again.

At lunchtime Fuuka and Airi left the others for a while and caught up over crepes while walking through a historic park.

“So Lucia evolved into Juno?” asked Airi. It pleased her to know this development still happened despite the sudden change in her circumstances.

“I wanted to improve my abilities, even if I was no longer with you. It felt right to do so, and my Persona agreed with me. Since then, I’ve given Mitsuru-senpai advice when she needs help. I also studied the area where I live during the Dark Hour to see if what we experience in Iwatodai is similar elsewhere.”

Airi’s eyes widened. “What did you find?”

Fuuka nibbled on her green tea crepe and lowered her voice. “The further away you are, the less frequent and aggressive Shadow activity seems to be. Tatsumi Port Island seems to be the focal point. After looking further in the Kirijo Group’s database, the number of attacks increased substantially since you arrived. Any events before then, like what happened to Ken-kun’s mom, have been almost as rare as getting struck by lightning twice.”

“That’s very interesting. I wondered if that was the case. When I was in Tokyo by myself in the last cycle, you guys only found two of the Full Moon Shadows, and that was all by chance.” Airi was met with a confused look. “It’s… a long story.”

Sensing her truthfulness, Fuuka nodded slowly and said sadly, “I can only imagine how difficult must have been.”

“It ended, well, very badly… Really, really badly. I got the information I needed and promised myself to not run off with my uncle’s money ever again. It’s tempting with the income he gets, but I know everything that happened after is not worth repeating, ever.”

“Well, I’m glad you have a conscience. Everyone is happy to have you here.”

It took her a while to realize it, but Airi noticed how easily the soft-spoken Fuuka made a wry remark. She had a confidence Airi had never seen before. She stuttered far less and smiled more often. Her pixie cut hair was now styled in a layered bob.

“Okay, who are you, and what have you done to Fuuka Yamagishi?”

Fuuka failed to restrain a goofy grin when Airi elbowed her in the side. “That is a long story.”

“Aye, right! We have enough mysteries in our friend group. You were the innocent, incorruptible one!”

“I’m sorry if I diverged too far from the predictable path I have always treded.”

“Don’t be,” Airi said with a tinge of seriousness. “Just do what feels right to you. I’m not the arbiter
of your life's story.”

It should not have affected Fuuka as much as it did, but those words proved the red-eyed girl, flaws and all, still preserved her principles and her humanity in spite of the trials and pain. She would never know how inspiring that truth really was. “Thank you, Airi-chan.”

She finished her crepe and offered to take Airi’s trash when they reached a trashcan. “I learned something else about Jin-san’s revenge website,” Fuuka continued from their previous discussion. “A friend from tech club and I take turns monitoring the activities on the site and reported anything suspicious to Kurosawa-san. We helped him stop five planned attacks so far and ten suspects have been caught.”

Airi’s eyes widened, for two reasons. “That’s great! Did you know about the station’s bombing ahead of time too?”

“I couldn’t warn him in time,” said Fuuka, lowering her head. “If only I didn’t oversleep that morning, if I checked the site before I arrived at school, Kirijo-san and Theo-san would still be…”

A lump formed in her throat at the mentioning of Theo, but Airi shook her head. “Don’t give up. Make sure Jin doesn’t plan any more raids, and keep Kurosawa-san on the right track.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll do my best.”

They smiled with a new sense of resolve in their hearts... until someone called out, and ran towards them, ruining their short-lived bonding time.

Suddenly, a thought hit Fuuka as Ryoji drew near. “Airi-chan… do you think it’s possible for someone like Chidori to change?”

“I do. If someone recognizes their shortcomings and wants to improve, yes, they can change. Why?”

Her face was pale except a patch of pink on each cheek. “Th-There’s someone I met who’s–”

“Hello, ladies!” Ryoji shaved off the last few seconds Fuuka needed to complete her though. “Why so melancholy on a sunny day as stunning as you?”

Fuuka’s newfound spine turned to jelly as it did before joined SEES. “Oh, R-Ryoji-kun! C-Can we help you?”

“Sorry for startling you, Fuuka-san.” He picked a blue flower from a nearby bush and offered it to her. “Accept this as token of my apologizes.”

Speechless, she flushed brilliantly and accepted the gift.

“You like to shower any and every girl with gifts,” Airi observed with a crooked grin. “Keep that up and you’ll have a line of girls accusing you of cheating on them.”

The dark-haired boy laughed merrily. “A sense of humor sure can add more depth to an individual. But what gifts do you enjoy most, if not flowers, Ai?”

“Music,” she said matter-of-factly. “My pa would play his flute or violin as an alarm clock to wake us up. He got me into a lot of American and European pop and rock.”

“Ah, yes. They say music is medicine for the soul, and your health must almost always be good.”

He suddenly stopped walking. His mood subtly shifted; a wave of wistful longing washed over him.
Fuuka recovered from her daze and studied him. “Wh-What’s wrong, Ryoji-kun?”

“I wonder…?” he admitted, sounding slightly distressed. “It’s this feeling again…”

“Nostalgia?” Airi asked.

He took Airi’s hand, gazing upon her intently. His eyes were dark as the deep sea, but she resisted falling into them and drowning. “I know you somehow… I feel like I have to protect you. But for some reason, being with you makes me want to cry. I feel powerless and torn. These feelings aren’t normal…”

A thousand needles stabbed Airi’s heart and she pulled her hand away. Her face waned and her breath became shallow. Guilt, pain, and disgust ate at her intestines.

“You’re the only one there is for me, Ai... the only one I want. So please, stay with me. Tell me you love me with all your heart. Let me, and only me, be whom you love.”

She hated those feelings so much she couldn’t pretend she didn’t have them. Even when she felt enamored for his charms a long time ago, Ryoji’s fingers were icicles. His inconsolable crying when she told him there was someone else shrilly rang in her ears. He should have known if he was always with her; his child form witnessed her do the same for so many nights after love cursed her to want someone destined to die a cruel and unfair death. How was he any different from her in that regard? He should have known better, but the sword of blame was difficult to wield when in striking him, she’d also strike herself.

Fuuka touched her arm and brought her back to the present. “Are you alright?”

Shaking away her consuming memories, Airi replied, “I’m sorry… I’m fine.”

“No, I should apologize,” Ryoji said, tense and no longer pensive. “Even though you lived in Ireland for years, you still abide by some Japanese customs. I will not encounter you so boldly again. Aragaki-san made his concerns quite clear after all.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad we’re friends, but I think I probably need some space to relax when we get back to the inn.”

“Very well. I’ll see you ladies later.” He politely bowed to the girls and went his own way.

When he was far enough, Fuuka tossed the flower from her twitching hand into a nearby flowerbed. “Airi-chan,” her voice was unnaturally grave and dark for her sweet disposition. “He's not human. His aura isn’t normal. He bears more sadness than a war-torn soldier at the end of his life. There's no epic poem ever written that can describe the pain he bears.”

Letting out a sigh, her red-eyed friend gave up. She prepared herself for the interrogation that would overshadow the entire month’s worth of activities. Fuuka did not judge her, only waiting for her to string the right words together.

“Yuka figured it out too, but I don’t want us to focus on him yet. We need to find Charon.”

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The end of the day back at the inn, the girls waited on the third floor for Fuuka to arrive and join them in the hot springs. On the second floor, Akihiko and Shinjiro sat around in one of the rooms, having to suffer the unabridged stupidity of Junpei and Ryoji.

“You two are thick as thieves who need to be separated. Permanently. Forever.” Akihiko’s face burned as he grumbled over their recent suggestion.

“C’mon, sempai, you’re too uptight!” Junpei teased, grinning from ear to ear. “Don’t you wanna sneak up on the girls as they bathe? We head in now, wait in a shady corner, and watch them enter!”

“Not a chance in hell!”

Pacing around the room idly, Shinjiro sipped some V6 he bought from the vending machine and said with an exaggerated accent, “It’s okay, pere. Even if you get trapped in a block of solid ice, mere will always love you.”

Akihiko grabbed Shinjiro’s shirt, dragged his ass to the ground, stole his beanie, and threw it across the room and into a suitcase. Junpei applauded the fluid and flawless singular Olympian feat.

Confused, Ryoji turned to his partner in crime and asked, “Who’s ‘mere’?”

Junpei got up and pulled a flustered Akihiko to his feet. “Aw, I forgot to mention it, dude. Gekkou’s boxing champ is head-over heels for the Student Council President.” He jabbed at Akihiko’s chest, where his heart pounded heavily at the astute comment.

“Shut up!” Akihiko snapped, pushing away his underclassman and sitting back down in a huff.

“Don’t deny what everyone knows, Aki. Waitin’ nearly three years for fireworks has been a bitch, y’know.” Much to his chagrin, Akihiko couldn’t find an immediate rebuttal to his best friend’s statement that didn’t make him look like a bigger fool.

Frowning, Ryoji stood up and stretched. “So Mitsuru-san has admirers, Ai is taken, and Yukari-san and Aigis-san dislike me. Woe is my luck with the ladies.” He turned to Shinjiro, who continued to sit. “Will you sneak upon the young swans as they bathe?”

Nearly spitting out his drink, Shinjiro raised an eyebrow in mixed repulsion and disinterest.

“That’s not a no…” Ryoji smirked slyly, surprised at how quickly and violently he reacted. Even Akihiko and Junpei sniggered at Shinjiro’s blatant reaction.

The only man in the room in an established committed relationship easily ignored the pressure from the expectant, curious gazes of his single company. “Peepers are pathetic. You’re better off earin’ a girl’s trust ‘til she’s comfortable enough ‘round you. Even then, wait ‘til neither of your reputations’ll get ruined. Or buy a prostitute or a magazine. Or better yet, close your eyes if you're broke and got an imagination.”

Letting out a curious hum, Ryoji was surprised by his moral stance. “You seem to speak from experience, Aragaki. Or do you bluff to avoid Ai’s wrath?”

He pretended Ryoji did not use that nickname despite wanting to straighten him out on a torture rack. “There’s nothing I need to see to risk pissin’ her off,” Shinjiro said with no shame, not even the light blush of an inexperienced virgin. “You want it that bad? Get outta here and march to the tune of your own damn funeral.”

When the senior made his point clear, the three teens left Shinjiro alone. On their way down the stairs
to the hot springs, Junpei finally read between the lines and stifled his snickering. It took twice as long to understand, but Akihiko smirked. No guy would reject a chance at hopefully catching a girl bathing if he’s seen her vulnerable before, unless he was that rare male who really would prefer to put off anything like that for a long time.

“What’s so funny?” asked an oblivious Ryoji as they hit the doors to the hot springs.

Junpei sighed as he found a comfortable place to lounge in the water. “Look, man, I know the friend zone hurts a lot, Ryoji, but try not to feel too bad about it. Plenty of other fish in the sea.”

He furrowed his brow defensively. “Why do you keep bringing that up? I’m not being ‘friend zoned’! That’d imply I don’t respect Ai’s autonomy or her as a person!”

Forget it,” Akihiko interrupted, lowering his voice. “If we’re goin’ in, let’s be quick. The girls’ time better not be soon!”

“It’s not, sempai. Relax and stay awhile! We earned this break!”

No way for him to get out with Junpei and Ryoji’s teasing and joking, Akihiko sucked up his pride and went in the spring. (“If we get caught, I’ll tell Chidori,” he added just to watch Junpei squirm.) He admitted the water was nice, as he rarely indulged in baths of any kind. The conversation would have been nicer if the juniors were not such massive, unapologetic, unironic perverts.

“Y’know, the last time we were this close to seeing some nice bods was at Yakushima,” Junpei told Ryoji. “It was all for fun, of course, but the look on their faces when we complimented their bikinis!”

“Harassment was more like it,” mumbled Akihiko, reclining in a nice spot with his eyes closed.

“You know you two liked the mild, sexy fanservice, sempai! I’ve never seen you so flustered in my life! Even Shinjiro-sempai worked twice as hard to not have a pulse! If you came with us, Ryoji, you’d of had a better shot at the girls.”

Ryoji rocked back and sighed contently over his therapy. “They all are beautiful, Junpei. But referring to your dorm mates as if they are objects is a disservice to–”

Without warning, the doors opened. Five voices could be heard.

“Wow! This is huge!”

“I-It’s the size of a swimming pool. The hot springs at the inn I’m staying at is half this size!”

“I must admit the greatest deciding factor in choosing a hotel for our school was the one with the most highly recommended and rated hot spring.”

“So this is an outdoor hot spring. Unfortunately, its therapeutic healing benefits will not help me.”

“Aye, but it’s the thought that counts.”

All color drained from Akihiko and Junpei’s faces. Ryoji however, got up and smiled with glee. “I hear Ai, Yukari-san, and Aigis-san. Their other friend Fuuka-san is with them too! If Mitsuru-san are here too, this will be my lucky ni – ah!”

Junpei immediately yanked down his friend and nearly shoved his head underwater. “Shut up, you idiot! They’ll hear us!” He wanted to add that Akihiko would pummel him for stealing his girl, but refrained to minimize detection.
“’ello?” Airi’s voice sent icy chills through their bodies. “Is someone else here?”

“Oh no. Don’t tell me…”

“Has someone peeped on us before, Fujihara?”

Nearly falling over, Akihiko lost his spine and whispered frantically, “Shit, we’re screwed! Mitsuru’ll never consider this a misunderstanding!”

Wide eyed, Junpei nervously asked, “Th-The execution can’t be all that bad, right? I-I mean, y-you’re still alive!”

“What are you talking about?” questioned Ryoji.

“Yeah, I think I heard something too. Airi, could you check over there? Mitsuru-sempai, look behind the rock.”

“It might be a ghost…”

“D-Don’t say that, Fuuka! Airi, don’t laugh! You’re encouraging her!”

The splashing of water signaled the boys to begin avoiding the girls. Akihiko took lead. They timed their movement with those of the girls’, to not make extra noise and attract attention. Their timing was so good, the three of them saw Aigis turn the corner around the giant rock in the center of the pool.

“Airi-chan, I think I sense… three people.”

Holding his head woozily, Junpei stared dumbfounded at Akihiko. “How the hell did she know?!” he mouthed.

“Only three? That’s interesting…”

“Don’t tell me you expected more?” Yukari asked in utter shock.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing.” Airi dismissed her concern with a giggle.

“There’s no one behind this rock, Yukari.”

“No one is hiding under water in this obscure corner. He would have drowned by now if that were the case.”

“Aigis, we really need to work on your bedside manner.”

Akihiko cursed under his breath. They knew boys were peeping on them. He anxiously continued wandering when the girls shifted around the hot spring. Memories of the piercing shock motivated him to stay alive no matter what. He had not faced Mitsuru’s wrath since last year, and Shinjiro mocked him for weeks about it. He would not suffer today –

“AH!! Junpei-kun?!”

Terrified, Akihiko spun around and saw neither of his companions were with him. He looked around and noticed he did not get caught. Selfishly, he thanked the gods for that.

“U-Uh, we, um er…” stammered Junpei.
A-Ah, hello, my lovely ladies!” Ryoji said rather calmly. “We lost track of time and Junpei was about to pass out—”

“SILENCE!” Mitsuru’s scream filled Akihiko with terror. “I WILL EXECUTE YOU BOTH!”

“It was nice knowing you, Stupei-san.”

A shriek heard only in blizzards echoed through the hot springs and a wave of cold crawled along the waters and brushed Akihiko’s leg. He panicked. Methodically, he walked as far away from the scene of the crime as possible. The exit stood right before him, but he risked being in pain sight of the flustered girls.

Taking a chance, he said his prayers and bolted to the door as fast as his legs could carry him. The girls screamed and a block of ice nearly grazed him, but Akihiko escaped in time to get his clothes and return to his room.

Shinjiro greeted him with the largest, silliest, un-Shinjiro grin Akihiko ever bore witness to. “Caught in the act, huh?”

Too exhausted and traumatized to speak, Akihiko fell onto his bed and did everything he could to slow his insanely rapid breathing and heart rate. Shinjiro gave him a caffeine-free soda and left him alone until he could speak again.

“N-Never again,” he stammered weakly. “You’re a lucky bastard, Shinji.”

“I ain’t stupid, that’s why.”

“Still… I hate you…” Akihiko drank half of the can in one go and sighed. “Can’t believe you got a girlfriend before me… Guess Miki was right about you having a way with girls…”

Shinjiro grumbled about how stupid that statement was unintelligibly. When his friend pushed to have him repeat and say it aloud, another thought crossed his mind. Punishing Akihiko was mean, but the idiot needed it to end the song and dance once and for all. “Just ask Mitsuru out if you want a chance that badly.”

Akihiko spat out his drink and gagged. That, combined with the trauma of the execution he barely escaped, drained him of any cheer he had left. He rolled onto his side, back facing his asshole of a friend. “Leave me alone,” he whined. “She only sees me as a friend.”

“With that attitude, she'll always think of you that way, leaving you a sad and lonely virgin until the end of your days while Airi and I grow old together.”

“You're an asshole.”

He flashed another stupid grin. “I love you too, dad.”

Akihiko flipped his oldest friend the bird before turning his back to him and letting sleep consume him. Wanting to say he’d thank him one day for the honesty, Shinjiro sat on the idea and let Akihiko wallow in his misery for a little while longer. There was no other way he’d learn.

Chapter End Notes
The title for this chapter is a loose reference to "Pocketful of Sunshine" by Natasha Bedingfield. It's good to reference a happy song once in a while, even the original 'Persona 3' can be morose and melancholic.

The song also has the lyric "Take me away / To better days", and hearing it brought the idea of searching for and hoping for better days to come in the middle of difficult times to mind when I began writing this fic. (The Goo Goo Dolls' "Better Days" did the same in a much less subtle manner). In fact, 'Finding Better Days' was a possible title I considered for a brief time. It obviously didn't happen, but I made sure to keep a reference to this idea in some way.

See you next chapter!
November 19, 2009, continued

Feeling lonely, Ken allowed Koromaru to sleep in his room at the end of his bed. Even then the mutt took hourly naps and made rounds throughout the dorm. The emptiness of the dorm bothered them so much as they were used to the talking and goofing around that ensued daily.

During a patrol seconds before the Dark Hour, Koromaru stopped by Chidori’s room at the far end of the third floor hall. Her door was left cracked open for him to slip in. The gothic lolita felt more comfortable sleeping, but she sat awake at this time.

Confused, Koromaru tilted his head and let out a quiet woof.

Chidori put down her sketchbook and held up her Evoker. “Your instincts can only work so well. Medea will see beyond this property.”

He found her point to be reasonable. Koromaru sat down and lowered his head, as if nodding.

“What an intelligent creature,” Chidori said with a wry smile.

The clock struck midnight and the mist settled in. The hairs stood on Koromaru’s back and the dog growled defensively. Chidori quickly detected the source of his unease and summoned Medea. She floated above her summoner and held up her goblet, fire exploding and overflowing from it. Medea let out a gasp and pointed to the northeast. Nodding, Chidori let her Persona back inside her psyche and bolted out of bed to change.

“Hurry! Wake up the boy!” She ordered at the protective dog as she grabbed her chained hatchet from her bag. “We don’t have time!”

Before Koromaru could react, a loud blast shook the entire dorm. They heard Ken’s scream from below. The two dashed to the second floor to meet the shaken eleven-year-old boy, dressed in Featherman-themed pajama pants and his orange hoodie. He clutched his spear and Koromaru’s collar so tightly; his knuckles were paler than his colorless face. The walls of the building vibrated again. Defensive, Koromaru snatched his weapon in his mouth and guided the group to first floor to find an exit.

“A-Are we being attacked?!” whispered Ken. “I-Is it the Nine?!”

The front door stood secure, but they saw multiple shadows of various sizes in the windows. If the lights were on, whatever was outside would see them.

Chidori shook her head as she and Ken ducked behind the separator between the dinning area and the lounge. Behind them Koromaru sniffed the back door to pick up a scent. “There’s too many of them…” she whispered back. “Ten humans are occupying the front; three in the back.”

“So we go that way and take our chances, right?”

A loud thud against glass startled them. Several voices booed and insisted on throwing bricks and discarded scraps of metal. A young familiar husky voice commanded their silence before the sound
of a fired Evoker. The glass cracked from precise hits to weakened spots in the window. A second thud shattered it into pieces.

The crowd cheered and threw golf ball-sized flash grenades in the lobby along with actual explosives. Cerberus manifested and kicked the grenades back outside into the group. With Koromaru distracting them, Chidori grabbed Ken’s hand and led him behind the island in the dinning room. Once explosions went off out front, thunderous banging shook the backdoor three feet from them. Thinking of a new strategy, Chidori pressed herself against the door while Ken stayed hidden.

“That fuckin’ three-headed demon’s pissin’ me off!” cried a heavy-built delinquent.

“It’s just a dog!” yelled the impatient, rowdy leader to his disciples. “Cook the parasites and hang ’em in the street for that fucker Kurosawa to see!”

Recognizing his voice, Ken visualized Jin’s animated and twisted facial expressions through the speech. As scared as he felt being trapped, Chidori’s body completely trembled in spite of her reserved face. Koromaru barked intensely and ferociously along with his Persona, filling the air with enough dread to break a chasm between them and the cult. Cerberus approached close enough to the front window to let the crowd know what they were dealing with. As the center head poked outside the shattered window, a few in the crowd screamed at the twelve-foot monster, whose jaws could crush a measly twenty-pound bowling ball.

Unfazed, Jin summoned his Persona again, a silver robot with an hourglass torso and holographic runes projecting around its disc-shaped head. Its only arm threw a blinding ball of light at Cerberus. Whining and crying, the dog retreated and disappeared, leaving the entrance wide open.

Desperate, Koromaru charged towards the first person to dare entering the dorm and shredded the girl’s leg with his knife. Chidori wasted no time in letting Medea cast a barrier of fire at the windows. Koromaru remained unscathed; several delinquents were completely consumed.

On his knees, Ken poked his head from behind the island and saw one of the chairs crawl slowly from the dinning room table. Then the entire table moved towards the wall. He called out on it to Chidori, still blocking the backdoor despite the growing pain in her spine. She said nothing, but her eyes screamed doubt.

Suddenly Koromaru cried in panic and scrambled from the infernal lobby. A grenade slid through the wall of fire and blew up the lounge, shooting wood splinters and pieces of couch in all directions. A spring dug into the side of the shiba-inu’s head, throwing him off balance and into the dinning room table. The action flipped the carpet over, revealing a trap door in the center of the room. Curious, Ken ran to investigate despite Chidori’s pleas. The door slid open and the head of a white-haired girl poked out. Chidori and Ken stared dumbfounded; Koromaru shook himself to reorient.

“Greetings!” The girl pushed herself up and waved. “My, what a lively gala you’re hosting!”

Another grenade slid through, landing ten feet from a horror-stricken Ken. The tiny girl clothed in a vibrant blue and black-spiraled dress launched herself from the trap door and kicked the device into the hole. No one heard it go off.

“Excuse me!” Her voice boomed with little effort over all of the noise and chaos around her while opening her leather-bound textbook. “Know your manners, boorish wrenches!”

Bright light bathed her face as a silver-and-gold-armored angel appeared before her. Barely moving his hands, he parted the flames and threw a multicolored crystal orb into the gap. A shockwave detonated, silencing the riot out front and panicking the intruders from behind. They left the back
door alone to check on their companions.

Clenching her chained axe, Chidori rose to her feet and crouched in front of her shaken companions. “You aren’t human. Who are you?!”

“I am Elizabeth,” she replied with a nimble curtsey. “I am pleased to finally meet Airi Fujihara’s companions. However, I would suggest air refreshers to clear the stench of corpses.”

Koromaru whimpered uneasily and slipped down in the trapdoor. Hearing the curses outside, they knew violence would return soon.

“Get in quickly!” commanded Elizabeth, guarding the dining room while Chidori and Ken fled with little questioning.

The fire barrier Medea constructed died. Once they escaped, Elizabeth followed afterwards and carefully sealed the door in time before the delinquents completely stormed through. There were no cracks to reveal the path because the trapdoor fused to the floor and ceased to be.

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November 20, 2009

Iwatodai at sunset drowned in a sea of screaming sirens, and a thick blanket of burning smoke buried the town.

The students got off the train with their backpacks and left the station to find police cars and military personnel guiding civilians through guarded roads and paths. Rush hour was nearly over, but the number of law enforcers was too few. Many people cooperated with the detours; others panicked and started pointless squabbles, creating more uproar.

One police officer, recognizing Airi and her friends, gestured for them to come over. No one questioned it if she had answers. “You’re the kids Hideo-sempai looks after?” she asked, looking at Akihiko specifically.

He nodded without hesitation. “What’s happening?”

“I know you’d hate coming back from a trip with news like this, but you can’t go to your dorm. It’s the target of an attack last night.”

Everyone’s hearts sank. “What are you permitted to tell us, officer?” Mitsuru asked.

The wailing of sirens and ambulances came from the direction of the dorm. Everyone made way in the streets for incoming vehicles. Some had dented bumpers and cracked windows and windshields. One ambulance had a flat tire, but the life of the person inside held more significance than maintenance.

The officer lowered her head solemnly at the passing cars, then turned back to the kids and said unhappily. “I’m afraid I can’t say anything while on duty. Hideo-san will inform you.”

“But was anyone hurt?” asked Yukari fretfully. “Two people and a dog were still there!”

“They were reported missing around noon,” the officer said carefully. “We found no bodies or traces of their disappearance. I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful than that. We’re low on manpower and the city is in a panic.”
A new update reached the officers over radio and the female officer cut their conversation short. She suggested they take the train to Port Island to stay off the chaotic mainland until the violence quelled. SEES thanked her and followed her instructions.

In the main lobby of the station, a teal-haired girl ran to them in earnest while zipping up her backpack and dragging her suitcase. Her face was wan.

“Fuuka-chan?!” exclaimed Junpei. “Did ya fall asleep and miss your stop?”

“I can’t sense Ken-kun or Koro-chan! We have to find them!”

“You need to get home, Yamagishi,” Mitsuru stressed. “Your family will worry about your absence.”

“I’m not leaving!” Fuuka yelled, shocking everyone, including strangers around them. “I don’t want to feel powerless anymore when I have the chance to help! I’ll go home after we save Ken-kun and Koro-chan!”

Her resolve was so passionate that no one could or wanted to convince with her to change her mind under the curious gaze of the passerby. The eight of them took the monorail to Port Island and snuck into the alleys. Shinjiro guided them through the safer paths between the apartment complexes to meet at the rendezvous point: a small bar four blocks from Tatsumi Memorial Hospital. Save for a jaded man in his 40s wearing a dark grey hoodie, the technically closed establishment greeted them.

“Glad to see you still alive,” said Akihiko with a sigh of relief as he dropped his things behind the counter. “I’m sorry you’re in this position.”

The man shrugged, keeping his head low and hovering over some alcohol.

Unlike the rest, Fuuka relaxed her guard. “It’s safe to leave our things here until we return.”

“Okay? If you say so,” said Yukari, giving her bags to Junpei and Aigis to hide and lock away.

Having placed his stuff down, Shinjiro hopped over the counter and bolted into the kitchen. Fuuka and Mitsuru sat together across the room to strategize while the others waited for Akihiko to fill them in.

“You quitting already, or is this a ‘drowning my sorrows’ break?” Akihiko said with a crooked smile.

The man sighed dismissively. “You have little faith, Sanada-kun.” Everyone recognized Kurosawa’s voice instantly and relaxed in his cordial, but somber presence. “Who or whatever is responsible for all of this is targeting people indiscriminately. No one pursued my family yet, and I’m thankful for that.”

“A female officer in Iwatodai said you will tell us what happened last night,” Aigis said bluntly. “We have to find Ken-san, Chidori-san, and Koromaru as soon as possible.”

Kurosawa nodded understandingly and sipped some sake. “A few minutes past midnight I was called off duty to investigate your dorm. We found burnt bodies at front stairs of the building, but nothing was found inside. No evidence of forced entry or theft. I’m thinking the attack happened during that hidden hour, so our findings aren’t reliable. We also need to identify the ashes, but I don’t believe they belong to Amada, Yoshino, or Koromaru.”

“Thanks. We’ll handle it from here,” promised Akihiko. “Dealing with this beats roaming the same
repetitive halls of Tartarus every other week.”

“Regardless, be cautious. Arisato-san and Kirijo-san wouldn’t want you kids to get over your heads.” He bowed his head in respect for the fallen men. “The Special Defense Forces will come at this rate, so let the authorities take care of things outside your specialties.”

“We have to stop the cult before things get worse,” Airi said. “If possible, you should get your family out of the area.”

“Two steps ahead of you, Fujihara-kun. Unless one of those bastards is that desperate—”

A tumbling crash and a sudden expletive echoed from the kitchen. Before anyone could get up to investigate, Shinjiro poked out his annoyed face and his hand full of three long-ranged weapons.

“Never send a soldier out to war without his gear,” said Kurosawa matter-of-factly.

“So lay ‘em on the counter under a goddamn tablecloth instead of shovin’ them in the spice pantry,” Shinjiro snapped, tossing the spear, naginata, and bow to their owners before retreating back and grumbling inaudibly.

Kurosawa shrugged and lamented Shinjiro’s lack of sense of humor.

Everyone enjoyed a small dinner before preparing for midnight. As Airi led a discussion on where to begin searching, Mitsuru called one of her maids to help Kurosawa make living arrangements for SEES until the dorm was fully repaired.

With midnight drawing near, SEES left the bar for Tartarus. On the way they passed a raven-haired woman in disheveled street clothes carrying a worn backpack and walking in the opposite direction. She and Mitsuru shared brief eye contact before continuing on her way.

They entered Tartarus as soon as it emerged and Fuuka began her search. Mitsuru insisted on helping, but the girl refused, missing the days when she was in charge of background support. Meditating in the diamond orb of Juno’s red butterfly-themed dress, Fuuka studied Tartarus much more quickly than before. She felt every inch of a floor in a second and every hint of a Shadow’s company long before it considered appearing to cause trouble.

Five minutes later, Airi returned from a quick visit to the Velvet Room to change Persona. “Any luck, Fuuka?” she asked.

“They aren’t on the upper floors,” she reported to her discomforted friends. “I see you defeated three guardians in the Harabah Block and have only twenty-four floors until you reach the barrier.”

Airi laughed bashfully. “W-We sped through things… No one was in the mood to explore thoroughly and I was a bit impatient…”

“We’re overpowered anyway,” Akihiko added casually, cracking his knuckles. “But if they’re not upstairs or out in town, where’d they go?”

A gentle jingle from above shot shivers down Fuuka and Airi’s spines. The others stayed on the balls of their toes while the two neurotic girls sweat bullets. High-pitched wails accompanied the singing metal, and everyone braced their ears. The sounds came closer and closer, palatable enough to know how it felt to be in the presence of death.

The door at the top of the lobby staircase leading to the second floor blasted open. A funnel of freezing air attempted to suck them deeper into the tower, but a force suppressed it before anyone lost
their balance. The shimmering of chains continued, but an ear-splitting shriek overpowered it. From the doorway emerged a youthful white-haired, golden-eyed girl dragging a ten-foot bloodied monstrosity with a golden leash. The girl skipped down the stairs in her blue knee-high boots Merrily once she noticed the terrified teenagers.

“Pleased to see you in happy health, Airi Fujihara!” beamed a bouncy Elizabeth. “Have your male friends survived unscattered from the Kyoto hot springs blizzard?”

The two boys blanched as they remembered Mitsuru’s judgmental gaze from that time; an unapologetic Shinjirō let out a wistful smirk. Airi replied, “Akihiko-kun and Junpei-kun were unscathed for the most part. More importantly… what’re you doing to the Reaper?”

Elizabeth stood at the foot of the stairs and kept the leash’s hold tight. “Did my brother not inform you? I have combed the entrails of The Tower of Demise to find the ferryman of the dead. My subduing his lapdog will make the journey much easier for you.”

Sealing Juno away, Fuuka pushed to the front of the group. “I-If you’ve been in Tartarus for a while, do you know where Ken-kun, Koro-chan, and Chidori-san went?”

She nodded quickly, reaching into her dress pocket and holding a handful of crimson buttons. “I’ll lead you to them, but this may be a tricky night. I shaggy-rest you each take one. Airi-sama has done well to keep you alive, so please, do not let her labors yield poor fruit.”

Airi approached first to set an example for her more skeptical friends. Despite being within two inches from him, the Reaper only stared down at each member of SEES. Some even earned nasty growls, but everyone took a bloody button without a scratch.

“Where’d these come from?” Face wan, Yukari held hers with two fingers.

Airi pointed to the Reaper. “He leaves one behind after we defeat him.”

“Sheesh,” Akihiko sighed disappointedly as he counted the pile of leftovers in Elizabeth’s hands. “So we were scared of this guy for nothing?”

Fuuka could not express her disagreement any stronger without resorting to yelling. “I-I’m thankful we don’t have to face him!”

“With Elizabeth-san here, that’s one less freak to worry about!” said a relieved Junpei.

Once the gang settled down, Elizabeth led them beyond the teleporter to an uneven section of the lobby floor. The Velvet attendant tapped her foot on one of the tiles and floor split open. A bronze doorway rose from the ground; unrecognizable letters and engravings on the door bled uncanny light upon them.

Elizabeth tugged at the chain, allowing it to alter its hold of its captive. In a language no one recognized, the tiny girl commanded the creature to do her bidding. The Reaper opened the door with his free arm and entered first. Once everyone crossed the threshold, the door shut and vanished behind them.

A familiar-seeming series of hallways lay before them. Other than the oppressive air SEES recognized pressing heavier against them than usual, the maze area seemed straightforward. Elizabeth ordered everyone to keep behind her as the Reaper guided them quickly through the brown and orange halls.

“Keep close,” warned Elizabeth, running and flipping through the pages of her brown hardcover
book. “The Shadows are far more insidious down here.”

“I’m very well aware,” grumbled Mitsuru, coughing into her sleeve.

The Shadows’ presences overwhelmed Fuuka and Mitsuru, who used their combined powers to prevent surprise attacks. Often they asked Elizabeth to “entice” the Reaper to go down another hallway and risk confronting one enemy rather than a pack of three or more. Some fights inevitably happened, but Fuuka and Mitsuru’s constant vigilance and Airi’s defensive strategies helped everyone pull through with bones intact. With every victory the group’s morale boosted enough to override the soreness and pain from the sudden and sometimes embarrassing attacks they suffered.

They pushed through hall after hall as they ascended the alternate tower. More threatening Shadows ambushed them to an inch of their lives, but Airi ordered everyone to spare no expense on healing items. If SEES chose to spend an entire night’s trip in this section of Tartarus, they would have easily reached their greatest potential and would never have to worry about anything but Nyx. But they rushed quickly, limiting their growth but still boosting their combat readiness.

While SEES felt more and more powerful with each battle, Elizabeth impatiently greeted them once the fighting ended. Though no one was ungrateful for Theo’s sister, her unexplained presence started to wear thin.

“Her language is more nonsensical than Arisato-san’s,” Aigis told Airi after being on the receiving end of Elizabeth’s lecture on the group’s sluggish pace. “Is this a ‘quirk’ exclusive to Elizabeth-san?”

Knowing everyone wanted to ask for a while, Airi pinched the bridge of her nose. “Aye, right. Theo was just as bad in the beginning.”

After what felt like twenty minutes, they reached a floor strongly resembling the rest period between blocks; however, there was nothing but a silver briefcase and a teleporter.

Junpei’s face and voice fell flat. “Wh-What? This can’t be right…”

Just as disappointed, Fuuka summoned Juno to search beyond their limited sight.

“Elizabeth, please tell me there’s a secret passage or something that we always missed,” Airi said anxiously. “This can’t be a dead end.”

While the others stood impatiently and questioned a silent Elizabeth, Shinjiro approached and opened the briefcase. At the heart of a plush pillow rested a gold key with a sparkling ruby. Upon Shinjiro taking the key, the briefcase disappeared into the thick air.

“Yo, what’d you find?” Akihiko called out.

Shinjiro walked back to the group and showed them. A satisfied smile beamed across Elizabeth’s face. Knowing she was building suspense for her own pleasure, the group gave her an impatient look while she danced in circles to obtain the key. As baffled as he was, Shinjiro gave it to her.

“Relax! No one can afford to don sour mascaras all the time,” Elizabeth smiled cheerfully. No signs of remorse for her foolishness emitted from her aura. “This is the Key of Truth.” She held it by her pointer finger and thumb. “Boring name aside, it will open all the doors seedling-lee invisible or impossible. Like so…”

She stood at the center of the floor and knelt to the ground. The key slid in between two tiles, and a click revealed a hidden trapdoor. Elizabeth opened the floor to reveal stairs leading into darkness. The Reaper screamed like a lost child, and Elizabeth, letting out a sigh, snapped her fingers to make
the chains vanish. The freed creature rushed down the stairs frantically.

“Will his friends come after us?” Yukari dared to ask.

“They have been aware of my president long before you arrived. The Shadows are likely celebrating the return and wellbeing of one of their highest guardians.”

Fuuka gulped loudly. Mitsuru and Yukari patted their analyst’s back gingerly as they approached the trap door.

With Elizabeth in front again, they slowly went down the narrow, rail-less stairs. The air thickened with even more moisture. Mitsuru and Fuuka pressed their hands against their foreheads again, coping with the shrill voices of their Personas. Each step got slipperier and slipperier, prompting everyone to help each other from falling magnificently.

Once hardly any light was left for the naked eye, Aigis turned on night vision and pressed on to the front of the group with Elizabeth. A few mechanical clicks resounded with the dropping and seeping from a distance, and the next thing everyone knew Aigis had a flashlight.

“Dude, Ai-chan! Did you pull that out of your ass?”

“There are secrets to my platform that are best left unknown.”

“Aigis, it’s just a flashlight,” Yukari sighed in lighthearted annoyance. “Start to worry if someone’s asking where you store emergency stacks of ammo.”

“That will forever be classified.”

“Exactly my point.”

Not long after the juniors’ bickering, a spot of light poked lit the bottom of the stairs. Everyone was relieved to be almost done. As they got closer to the end, scrawny humanoid silhouettes peaked into view.

“What are they?” wondered Yukari aloud.

“I don’t think they’re human…” Mitsuru said, turning to Fuuka, who expressed her agreement.

“Aigis, can you see what’s ahead more clearly?”

“All I can report is that the ground below appears to be foliage, dry grass. Nothing like we have seen before in Tartarus.”

Reaching the end of the stairs relieved them for having to no longer tiptoe and being in the light. Upon further inspection around and before them, however, they found the source of the trickling.

An expansive plain stretched beyond their sight in the humid cave. Heavy clouds hung above and a red sun poked through the horizon ahead. The sources of the shadows were grey bodies wandering aimlessly throughout the plain. Some lay face-first in the grass, serving as bridges over the cracks in the earth where shallow creaks of unidentifiable russet flowed. A variety of stenches plagued and mixed in the air, but only two overpowered everything else: burnt wood and decaying flesh.

Nausea built up in the weaker of constitution, but SEES pressed on. The figures they passed did not acknowledge the intruders. Most were naked, but completely featureless. Faces and biological sex were indeterminable. Age was not reliable either despite the varying heights and elasticity of skin.
“No one lost their buttons, I hope,” Elizabeth looked over her shoulder to her companions. Akihiko pressed his fingers to his breast pocket and felt his token. Airi glanced back and received confident nods from the rest.

When they reached the first stream, they uncomfortably chose to walk over the “bridge”. Being the last one to cross, Shinjiro watched the body collapse behind him and fall into the stream. The liquid disintegrated the body upon contact, snapping it in half. Not a sound emitted from the creature despite the obvious writhing. Shinjiro turned away and silently walked alongside Airi. Noticing his face was clammy she gently held his hand. He squeezed hers to express his gratitude.

The further along they went, the more bodies they saw. The grass became more prickly and parched despite the widening and deepening of the streams. Yukari squirmed around all the bodies and did every body contortion possible to not touch them. After several minutes, they reached a small clearing when Fuuka let out a gasp and waved her arms wildly to her left. Though having more bodies made it harder to see around, it was still easy to spot anything that did not resemble them, such as a dog.

Fuuka called out to them telepathically that she and the others were really here. Though approaching slowly before, three figures broke into a sprint. Junpei, Akihiko, and Yukari darted towards them until the six friends greeted each other.

“Chidori! Oh, thank goodness!” Junpei nearly squeezed the life out of the girl. “Are you alright?!” She rested her chin on his shoulder and hugged him tightly. “I am fine, Junpei. Thank you.”

Akihiko barely had the chance to act before Ken tackled him in a big, tearful hug. Koromaru did the same for Yukari, who happily let the big child shower her in kisses. Once they settled down, they returned to the others and expressed their relief for the reunion in their own ways.

“I didn’t know you’d be here, Fuuka-san,” admitted Ken, drying his eyes with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “But I’m glad you didn’t go home.” Happy as well, Fuuka gave him a hug.

Aigis questioned Koromaru after he begged enough for Shinjiro to promise him an extravagant dinner. He tilted his head towards Elizabeth and barked happily. Chidori told the same story to the others. Regardless of the teller, no one believed it.

“Elizabeth came in through a trap door under the dinning room?” Airi repeated slowly. Chidori nodded.

“You didn’t know, Airi-san?” Ken asked, surprised but amused. “Maybe Junpei-san overestimated your so-called psychic abilities.”

“Dude, you know I was joking. Besides, Aibana probably never anticipated a bunch of things, like the city nearly gettin’ nuked on a weekly basis.”

Giggling, Elizabeth gestured everyone to continue following her towards the setting sun. “The Abyss of Time never fully manifested to Airi Fujihara’s knowledge. Profound regret and despair must trigger its expansion beyond Tartarus. It is only an entry-kite… no, an intricate stairway leading to the real enemy.”

The clusters of bodies grew so large they began clumping together in nit groups. Yet they made a clear path for SEES and Elizabeth to move through. An increasingly disturbing feeling tickled the back of their necks. Koromaru crouched low and growled, warning everyone to be armed and ready.

“Wait a sec…” Shinjiro revived the conversation. “If she didn’t know ‘bout it in past cycles, we
didn’t either?”

“That is incorrect. Once your friends discovered the Abyss of Time in March, she already… abandoned the timeline.”

A heavy lead grappled and pulled at Airi’s stomach. Elizabeth did her best to keep the last secret of the time loops from SEES, but some of the more curious and doubtful members began to pick at her words.

“What do you mean ‘abandoned the timeline’?” questioned Yukari, arms folded and eyes fixed firmly on the strange woman.

Mitsuru sided with her friend. “I understand prying is rude, but if there is a reason why Fujihara must continuously begin new ‘cycles’ despite defeating Nyx, then say it. This is for all our sakes.”

Elizabeth stopped walking and pointed to an opening between the walking dead. “At a later time. For now, you have more immediate calms… qualms ahead. Be sure to not let mirror shards into your eyes and distort the truth.”

Mitsuru opened her mouth to protest, but the strange white-haired woman let out a whimsical smile and waved as her form vanished in a blink of an eye. Yukari, Fuuka, and Akihiko sympathized with her ironic frustration with avoided questions.

They finally poured out from the crowd and arrived at the edge of a broad, glassy river. A small island with a decrepit tree sat a bit away with a boat leaving its shore. The mysterious liquid to remained still and undisturbed despite the boat’s presence. Once it arrived, a humanoid, dressed in a white hooded cowl, placed the oar over his shoulder and extended his thin, clawed hand. One by one, everyone – including Ken, Koromaru, and Chidori, whom received theirs earlier – gave their bloody button to the ferryman.

Satisfied, the figure tapped the river surface with his oar. A row of objects rose from the water, creating stable stepping-stones to the island. Unsure who'd go first Akihiko took initiative. As soon as he made the first step, he cried and leapt back onto shore with his legs buckling beneath him. Shinjiro immediately tensed, urging Fuuka and Ken to stay close to him.

“Akihiko!” Mitsuru knelt next to him and shook him gently. “What’s wrong?”

Koromaru snarled at the ferryman, unfazed by their distress. “This is likely a trap,” Aigis responded to the canine. “However, the exchange seems clear: the button for passage across the river.”

“Let me give it a try,” said Yukari in spite of her petrified expression. Once she touched the first step, her body shuddered in terror. She took another step forward, leaving everyone sane on edge. On the third step everyone heard her sniffling.

“What’s happening, Yukari?” Junpei called out.

“It’s not him… D-Daddy’s in heaven…”

Seemingly back to his senses, Akihiko got back to his feet with Mitsuru’s help. With many eyes on him, he kept his gaze low, even though everyone could see him trying hard to not cry. “M-Miki… I couldn’t… sh-she was so s-small…”

Shinjiro clenched his fists and glared at the seemingly normal platforms. A weak-kneed Yukari somehow managed to take on five more steps. Understanding the nature of the illusion, Mitsuru and Fuuka tried to motivate her friends as they began crossing the river. Junpei and Chidori held hands to
balance each other, allowing them to trek on a lot quicker. Seeing the promising potential of staying together to overcome their fears, Ken stayed close with Shinjiro, along with Mitsuru and Akihiko, Aigis and Fuuka, and Koromaru and Airi. The ferryman stalked them along the river, watching intently at their flailing.

Chidori caught up with Yukari, whom fell down and pulled her knees to her chest. “You cannot give up.”

“Sh-Shut up! I’m crushing my father’s likeliness with every step! How can you understand that?”

“I’m doing the same to those I consider friends,” she admitted, tears of anger pooling in her eyes. “If there is an afterlife, those we’ve lost know we are not disgracing their memories!”

Junpei poked his head over Chidori’s shoulder and said, “C-C’mon, Yuka-tan! This is the first time in months we’re all together! When this is over, Shinjiro-san’ll make us a huge dinner! And I’ll say something dumb enough for you to smack me!”

Laughing, Yukari shook her head. She pushed herself off her butt and took another step forward. Fear tried to seize her again, but she fought it with a new chant. “Stupei’s ‘Believe It or Don’t’… ghosts aren’t real…”

Similar conversations slightly improved morale and Fuuka telepathically quelled the others when hope seemed most lost.

“This may be inappropriate to ask,” said Aigis, “but are we all seeing one or more faces?”

Airi only removed her eyes from staring forward when checking if the muted Koromaru caught up with her. “Too many…”

“Th-Three…” muttered Akihiko, coping better than his partner who clung to him and fought to suppress her sobs. “I think Mitsuru’s only seeing one…”

“I-Just mom…” Ken mumbled while glued to his companion’s arm. He looked up sometimes and noticed how expressionless Shinjiro always was. “Wh-What about you?” The oldest pretended he didn’t hear the boy.

Aigis pondered the varied answers as she ignored Aizawa’s crooked, maggot-infested eyes questioning her.

After what seemed like forever, Yukari touched the soft sand. Her father no longer haunted her. Chidori and Junpei tailed seconds later, holding each other to calm down. Less explicit in their relief, Akihiko and Ken stayed with their hushed partners. Everyone else made it safely as the mysterious steps sank back into the river.

The ferryman stopped his boat along the shore and boarded off to approach the dying willow tree. Out from the trunk emerged a stout shadow, which the ferryman approached and brought out. The light of bloody sun lifted the dark shroud, revealing a wheelchair-bound elderly man with saggy green skin. Unlike the rest of his decrepit form, relying on an oxygen mask, his heavy brown eyes were sharp and lucid as a child’s. They fell upon Mitsuru attentively. No one could read what her face conveyed, but Mitsuru, too eerily calm, stared back at the man with knowing and fury.

“Charon?” presumed Airi.

He coughed deeply, filling his mask with clouds of dust and ash. Dried embers spotted his cowl, matching his attendant’s.
“This wasn’t what I expected…” admitted Akihiko.

The sound of glass shattered the air. Within milliseconds, a sword and spiked whip pointed threateningly at Charon.

“We have no other choice,” said Mitsuru. “The man who assumed the title of a god died ten years ago. This phantom is merely his legacy on life support.”

Her words barely affected the man. He turned to Airi with his devastated eyes while his assistant took out an elegant porcelain doll, cut in two by the waist, and placed it on his master’s lap. From under his cowl, he took out more items: dented clock gears, a shredded collar, a fragments of a glass globe, and other damaged trinkets.

“What are they doing?” Junpei interrogated Airi curiously. “Is that my baseball bat?”

Gripping her Evoker, Airi clenched her teeth. “Don’t guilt-trip me. I’ll blast your backwards cult into oblivion. I’ll beat the universe senseless until I make sure that I won’t lose!”

The speech meant to mock made the old man laugh. He vigorously rose to his feet as his skin pealed off, revealing char and smoking pores. SEES backed off once a spiraling column of fire consumed him, melting the oxygen mask, his wheelchair, and his assistant. The flames receded to unveil a twelve-foot winged creature, armed with a hammer on his left and a splintered lance to his right.

Smoke and flames baking its skin obscured most of its abstract form, but Ken fell back and screamed. Eyes wide, Mitsuru ordered Artemisia to restrain Charon’s hammer-wielding arm with her whip. Cracking his knuckles, Akihiko summoned Caesar. Shinjiro stood stoically, but his Evoker trembled against his temple. Horatius manifested and used his shield to block the hammer – and Artemisia’s flailing body – from hurting the hysterical Ken. An earthquake occurred upon impact, disorienting Horatius. Caesar helped him regain balance, and they teamed up to attack with their weapons.

“Ice and electricity don’t work!” Akihiko yelled over the clashing of weapons. “No one get in range of that hammer!”

“Then you, Shinjiro-sempai, and Aigis should keep up the offense with Chidori as immediate backup,” ordered Airi with an overwhelming amount of control in the face of the unknown. “We’ll stay back to save our strength.”

Overhearing them, Shinjiro took a glance at the cowering child behind him. “Ken, run!”

He looked up at him with his large teary eyes. “D-Did that…? M-Mom…?!?”

Shinjiro helped the boy get back on his feet and placed his hands on Ken’s shoulders. “We won’t let this bastard get you! Stay back with Airi!”

Charon sent Horatius flying until he disintegrated in the murky water. It lunged forward, only for Shinjiro to spin around and stop the hammer with the shaft of his axe. His legs buckled under the weight, but he fought back while ignoring the screaming pain all throughout his body. “KEN, PLEASE HURRY!”

Akihiko came in time to help shove Charon away from them, giving Ken an opening to escape. He sprinted as fast as his dainty legs could go and reached Airi and the others safely. Everyone out of the way, Aigis leaped into the air and unleashed a shower of bullets. When none of them grazed Charon, a pair of rocket launchers emerged from her shoulder blades and spammed explosive missiles. It seemed to work better, because Charon let out an ear-splitting roar and columns of
crimson flames poured out of every orifice, torching the ground and nearly engulfing the frontline team.

“Sempai! Chidori!” yelled Junpei, nearly leaving his post in guarding Fuuka with Mitsuru and Airi.

“They’re ok, Junpei-kun!” assured Fuuka, safe in Juno’s crystal orb. Proving her right, Akihiko and Shinjiro wobbled out from behind a rock they took shelter from and rejoined the offense back in shape. “Chidori can withstand the flames and heal them.”

Mitsuru nodded anxiously, wiping the sweat from her brow. The island became an oven. “I understand his fear. Not many Shadows or Persona have the capacity to bring down an entire block of apartment complexes alone.”

Before Ken could ask a question lingering on his mind, he noticed the water surrounding the island began to bubble violently, as if boiling from the heat building up in the area. However, no one was reduced to ash and he noticed the water was pitch-black.

“They’re weak Shadows. You can defeat them easily,” Fuuka assured him.

A large black puddle broke away from the edge of the water and split into smaller puddles with stubby arms and yellow eyes. The five infantile Shadows pursued them. Airi summoned Titania and dispersed them easily with Magarula. Other Shadows reached the shoreline and broke apart into a variety of abstract designs. Some clustered together and merged to create a larger creature bearing a mask defining their Arcana.

“Shadows with similar traits are fusing to form a stronger one?” Mitsuru asked while Artemisia froze a wave of Mayas with Mabufudyne.

“We gotta make sure they don’t reach the others!” said Junpei. His longsword knocked three mini Shadows approaching Fuuka off the island like baseballs.

“Where are these guys coming from?!” They heard Yukari shout angrily. Isis’ Garudyne hardly bothered a taunting pair of Dancers. Frustrated as well, Cerberus created a purple hexing circle around the Shadow, killing it instantly.

Some approached and distracted the offensive party. Chidori swung her axe at the Shadows while Medea healed a violently blue bruise on Akihiko’s leg. Aigis continued firing as many explosives and bullets in her platform as possible at any foe in her way. She went into Orgia Mode to deal more overwhelming damage. Frequently Palladion and Caesar strengthened the team’s defense and diminished Charon’s attacks; they couldn’t afford to get wiped out in one hit.

The fight lasted for a long time thanks to the sheer numbers of Shadows emerging from the water. Despite spacing themselves out to stop them at all sides, the effort strained Yukari and Chidori enough to not heal Aigis, Akihiko, and Shinjiro as effectively as they wanted. Fuuka was still left wide-open despite Kala-Nemi easily crippling Shadows with blinding group-wide light-based attacks and Ken finishing them off.

While trying to command Medea to heal an overheated Aigis, a Shadow struck Chidori in the back, knocking her over. Junpei tore over to her, leaving an understanding but equally worried Airi. Hermes dive-kicked the creature that attacked the girl and threw Agilao grenades to make a protective circle. Safe for a time, Chidori allowed Junpei to help her up and patch up her injuries.

In this new opening for the defensive team, another Shadow slid past its group and rushed at Fuuka. Ken immediately ran to protect her, but the Shadow cast Mudoon, wrapping the boy in darkness and
temporarily knocking him out.

Fuuka ignored the chaos from her scrambling friends and meditated on the comforting words of an oracle until a powerful collection of energy burst from her heart. Vibrant light emitted from Juno’s butterfly wings and blanketed the entire island and across the water. SEES felt a comforting, invigorating breeze brush lightly over their skin and cooled the air; the Shadows shrieked in agony. The swarm stampeded away feverously, no longer attacking the Persona-users.

When the light faded, a few Shadows lingered, shivering in terror; the rest retreated into the sea. Seeing his allies flee made Charon let out a frustrated roar. White-hot flames erupted from his pores. He dropped to the ground from fatigue and rushed at the frontline, pummeling their Personas in a heartbeat.

“His power is–!! RUN!” pleaded a frantic Fuuka. Her Persona reinforced the sturdiness of her globe to protect her host and a recovering Ken.

Seeing the beast storm at them, an overheated Aegis and athletic Akihiko flew to the other side of the island. Shinjiro and Yukari trailed not far behind. Junpei supported Chidori by the shoulder, slowing them down considerably. This gave Charon the chance to bring down the massive hammer on the vulnerable couple. At the last second, Junpei summoned Hermes to take Chidori away before he took the direct hit to the back of the head.

Following the attack, a series of revolting crunches rang in the air. A limping Hermes dropped Chidori with the others and let out a painful rattle before exploding into dust. Shocked into horrified silence, Airi and her friends saw Charon stand before a still, tangled mass.

Chidori dug her nails into her skull and screamed in utter despair.

Fuuka covered her face, doing everything in her power to not let the image scar her. The screams in her heart and mind were shared among her friends, and something within them snapped.

Not needing an evoker to summon her Persona, Mitsuru let ten years of pain overcome her normally cold and rational self. “I WILL SEND YOU TO HELL!!”

Artemisia’s whip snatched the hammer from Charon’s hands, and she hit him in the face with the stolen weapon and tightly bound the beast into place. Letting out furious cries, Caesar and Horatius blasted Charon what looked like hundreds of feet into the ominous “sky”. Isis and Titania created a pocket of wind to keep the creature in place and extinguished the flames around him. Activating Orgia Mode again, Aegis exhausted the last of her armory on the airborne enemy while Palladion aided her host with Myriad Arrows. Cerberus’s three heads shredded the creature’s flesh while Artemisia impaled Charon with a spiked lance of ice.

The most wounded parts of the monster melted into black goo and rained onto the dying island. Its limbs and head twisted and contorted as the body disintegrated and fell to the ground.

Everyone was exhausted and drained, but they ignored those feelings to investigate what was left of the fight. Chidori was first to reach Junpei in the middle of the chaos and cried over his body. Numerous bones were shattered; a few ribs poked out of his chest; his face was painted in bruises; and his cheekbone was smashed in. Koromaru sniffed the boy’s hand and howled in mourning.

Airi let out a defeated moan and collapsed next to Chidori. She knew this would happen, but she never expected the scenario to play out in such an extreme manner. The hope of ensuring Junpei and Chidori’s future without pain was dead. Airi cursed at herself for failing once again, but she could not bring herself to cry.
“Junpei, you idiot!” Yukari screamed and threw her fists into the ground. “Why did it have to be you?!”

Both sobbing uncontrollably, Ken and Fuuka covered their eyes and hugged each other. Oil leaked from Aigis’ eyes to reflect her feelings of loss, but her facial expression barely remained still. While Shinjiro comforted Koromaru with a hug, Mitsuru and Akihiko studied what Charon left behind: a wooden pipe, a shredded lab coat, and the random trinkets he held.

Mitsuru picked up the severed doll and the pipe. Her grandfather often smoked when he was alive, a habit he continuously discouraged his son and granddaughter from picking up. The doll looked just like the one she received on her seventh birthday. It was the last gift he gave her; she cherished it until the experiments began and she learned the truth. Now she would associate the memorabilia with hatred and suffering.

A kind hand massaged her shoulder. Akihiko tore his eyes from the singed photograph of him, Shinjiro, and Miki to comfort Mitsuru. Their silence and sullen body language was enough for them to understand and appreciate the consolation they gave each other.

Suddenly a gentle light broke the depressing mist that gently embraced everyone. Tears continued to cascade down her face, but Chidori laid her hands on Junpei’s chest. Medea manifested across from her, and the more intently they focused, the brighter the glow shined around them. Everyone stared, bewildered at what she was doing.

Everyone but Airi, who’s eyes widened in dread. “Chidori…”

“I can’t lose him! Don’t stop me!”

She ignored the request and searched for her Evoker. Aigis registered her odd behavior and asked, “What is she doing?”

Yukari shrieked, thinking she saw Junpei’s leg move. It took for a few seconds to realize that his dislocated knee and sunken face were returned to normal. Equally stunned, Fuuka and Mitsuru could see Chidori’s healing powers restore his life.

“Chidori, please!” Airi begged, as another burden on her shoulders grew heavier. “If you do this –”

“It can’t end like this!” The grief-stricken girl twitched in pain as her face swelled, blood dripping from her eyes, from her nose, and between her teeth. “Junpei was never meant to die! I won’t let him be taken from this world!”

Medea let out a sigh and disintegrated into dust particles, falling on Junpei like snow. With that and Chidori’s labored breathing, the others finally understood what was happening. “Her power is the opposite of mine,” said Fuuka. “She doesn’t sense life; she emits life…”

“My fate could have been avoided, but I won’t really be gone…” Airi took out her Evoker to summon a healing Persona, but Chidori rested her hand on hers and forced a smile from her fading life-force. “You have given more than I ever could, Airi Fujihara. Don’t pity me... when the worst of your trials haven’t yet begun…”

The light finally subsided, revealing Junpei with torn clothes but no scars or injuries. Everyone held his or her breaths, waiting for a sign of him awakening. It didn’t take long for him to let out a disoriented groan and slowly open his eyes. Everyone gasped.

“What’s going on, guys…?”
Chidori let a weak, content laugh escape her throat right before she lost all feeling below her neck. She collapsed onto Junpei’s lap. He barely had a second to register what was going on as he held and turned her over to look into her youthful features and nightgown stained with blood and weariness. She was paper-thin glass in his arms.

Her eyes stayed open lazily, but her fearless smile never faded. “The life within you is so bright... Now we’ll always be together…”

“Wh-What’re you saying?!” He shook her gently to keep her brown, glassy eyes locked to his.

“The happiest days of my life... were with you... Thank you... for giving me a chance... to live…”

She rested her head against his chest and giggled happily. Her body weighed heavily in his arms and began to lose its warmth. Junpei was so confused, torn, and scared, he shook her again. “Ch-Chidori! Please don’t go!”

“I love you, Junpei…”

Her eyelids shut in peace. Junpei called her name several times with no answer. Feeling his heart shred to pieces, he screamed until his voice gave out as he held her tightly. Airi brought her body of lead back on her feet and walked away; watching that scene play once again nearly drove her to wanting to put this cycle to a premature end.

No one knew what to say or do but to let him cry. The seniors tried to keep themselves together for the others’ sakes, but even Shinjiro, disturbed with the extremely selfless stubbornness shared between Airi and Chidori, covered his eyes and struggled to hold back a lamenting gasp in his throat. Fuuka controlled her feelings enough to support an anguished Yukari, vowing that she would never let anyone else close to them die. Koromaru whined and stayed by Aigis and Ken, who spoiled him with attention in hopes of staying hopeful and sane.

Numbness overtook Airi, who stood over Charon’s remains and dug her feet in to fight the temptation to kick the pile of filth. The foreboding sky turned blue and the land dried beneath her feet. Grass disintegrated and made way for sand to blanket the Abyss of Time. The sea of aimlessly wandering bodies vanished like smoke, carried away by the desert winds. All that was left from the old landscape was the willow, somehow thriving and regaining its beautiful leaves. The major difference was how the richly green the leaves were and how light particles danced around the tree.

The sight would interest her, but she had to recompose herself. A spirit stood by her and interrupted her thoughts. Airi shivered at the sight of Kouetsu Kirijo, appearing as he did before he died: prim business suit under a spotless white lab coat.

“Grand-père!” A hiss escaped Mitsuru’s throat as she approached them. Right on her heels followed Aigis and Shinjiro.

The ghost stared at his granddaughter, sharing little similarities aside from their brown eyes. He seemed aloof, but a serene demeanor overshadowed his broad, heavy features. “My duty has been fulfilled.”

“What is this ‘duty’ that you speak of?” inquired Aigis. “Do you plan to deceive and confuse us in the last moments of your lingering emotions?”

He simply shook his head. Junpei’s raucous cries reached his ears, and Kouetsu said stoically, “I should have died sooner if a death like hers could be so peaceful. Surrendering to the Shadow Self brought me no closer to answering life’s great mysteries. The project failed the moment I ferried
those who have accepted death and were brave enough to act on their convictions. Souls like that woman’s.”

Akihiko gave him a nasty glare, attempting to clear through the bullshit to pinpoint the mad scientist’s motive for talking their ears off.

Sensing the disbelief, Kouetsu waved his hands over assorted keepsakes on the ground and let out a sigh. His eyes fell upon Airi, who shuddered under his concentrated stare. “Meddling with time corrupts more than the monsters my research unleashed. How must Aether feel to witness his lovely jasmine dabble in the same archaic arts I proposed–”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!!!”

Everyone – including Junpei – froze, turning to look at the source of the ear-splitting noise. Standing tall at his natural height of five feet and ten inches, fists clenched tight enough to bleed, and eyes as feral as a beast, Shinjiro was a millisecond away from punching the ghost straight into a portal to the afterlife. Horatius begged to manifest and cause a one-man massacre, but Shinjiro saved his self-control only for his Persona.

“You let your scientists start a fuckin’ doomsday cult; you are responsible for the explosion that killed Yukari’s father; you unleashed the damned Dark Hour; you let homeless kids like Chidori be used as lab rats for your fucked up projects; you never stopped the Group from experimenting on your family; you destroyed Ken’s home; twice you attacked Mitsuru to the point she nearly suffocated to death; y-you slaughtered Junpei; AND that fucking sick-ass cult you created, indoctrinated, and never question has now warped into a terrorist group that blows up the city on a daily basis!

“There is no, no fucking excuse or justification for ANYTHING you’ve started and let happen for ten years. The deaths, the crimes, the madness, the atrocities! Stop bendin’ over backwards making half-assed excuses like a privileged spoiled little brat, and own up to your crimes! And NEVER call Airi by that goddamned disgusting name! NEVER value a complete stranger more than your son and your granddaughter, you arrogant, vile mountain of shit!!”

His outburst forced a crack in Airi’s depression by erasing morbid contemplations for dying and gave her another reason to fall in love with him again. Mitsuru was shocked and shaken up but moved to tears by Shinjiro’s vicious honesty.

Kouetsu never broke eye contact or changed his expression. After a few minutes of silence, he said in a clinical manner, “Everything after I succumbed to my Shadow was not of my design. Shadows are only basic instincts with the sole desire to empower the Father and awaken the Mother.”

His writing off Shinjiro’s outburst was the last straw. Mitsuru reached for her rapier - damn the fact a blade cannot slay a ghost - only to be stopped by Aigis. “The temptation may be great, but this unscrupulous man is still your grandfather.”

Her words moved Mitsuru enough to ease her hand off the handle of her weapon. She dug her boot heel into the heart of the severed doll. “Explain your perverted fairy tale to my father if you happen met him.” She added in English, “Until the day I die, I will ensure your name will be forever desecrated in the Kirijo legacy.”

Anyone might have seen a hint of sorrow from the man’s heavy eyes, but it disappeared quickly. The ghost bowed to his granddaughter, and his form became completely transparent. Only a whisper in the wind was the last sign of Kouetsu even existing in the strange world. Mitsuru lifted her foot and saw that the doll sank into the sand, along with the other mementos. Shinjiro kicked the sand and
muttered the worst curses he could come up with. The anger he felt only ceased as he felt a sharp pain in his chest. He gave an assuring look to the three girls, who feared his heart was acting up, and suggested they return to the others.

Now silently weeping into her shoulder, Junpei continued to cradle Chidori and stroke her hair. Yukari and Fuuka sat beside him with gentle hands on his shoulders. Akihiko had her axe and evoker after earlier protests from Junpei. Ken spotted the others and said that it would be difficult to leave with Junpei’s condition and the distance it would take to exit.

Aigis pointed to the tree. “The color appears familiar. I will investigate while everyone gathers their bearings.” With Akihiko, Ken, and Koromaru offering to join her, the rest stayed to help Junpei at least get back on his feet.

“We have to leave, Junpei-kun,” said Fuuka in a therapeutic tone as she patted his back. “The Dark Hour will end soon…”

He refused to move, prompting Yukari to get at the right angle to make him look at her. “I'm sorry, Junpei. I was wrong about her. Chidori gave you a second chance, and we'll honor her in death by standing by your side. Let’s go home before more Shadows attack.”

Something tiny finally lit in his eyes, blinking multiple times to confirm that the girl who made fun of him endlessly throughout the year was displaying genuine remorse and compassionate. Junpei sighed at the state of the girl he loved, and muttered, “Ok…”

Yukari and Fuuka waited for Shinjiro to carry Chidori before pulling the boy to his feet. They – along with Airi – continued to support him by the shoulders as the group went to meet up at the tree. Once they arrived, Aigis reported that the tree’s leaves contained the same material that resonated from the teleporters found while they traversed Tartarus. Various carvings and inscriptions covered the trunk of the tree, but no one wanted to study them at the moment. Upon touching the trunk, the markings glowed a neon green and the group left the Abyss of Time and appeared before the marble entrance.

The Dark Hour ended the moment the last person left Tartarus. Feeling more dejected than ever with another dead companion and a ruined home, they returned to the bar to reunite with Kurosawa and Kikuno.

Chapter End Notes

Chidori, nooooo!!! SEES just can't catch a break during this iteration of November 2009, can they? TT_TT

At least Charon, the infamously ferryman of the underworld, has been found and killed. He resides in the underworld with Hypnos and Thanatos but takes up a much more specific and concrete job to earn his un-living. Bad pun aside, he is mentioned as a child of Erebus, though their connection if not association seems to be indirectly stated in works like Statius’s 'Thebaid' and Ovid’s 'Metamorphoses'. With several of the Children having Persona based on obscure Greek gods, Charon seemed to be another "obvious" choice, like Morpheus or Thanatos.

His host, Kouetsu Kirijo (桐条鴻悦), only gets tangential mentions in 'Persona 3', and it seems he died in the explosion with much of the other scientists. (And he's a bit on the
heavy side if we go by the limited concept art of him that's available.) Since so little was established beyond him studying the Plumes of Dusk and Nyx for four years prior to the birth of the Dark Hour, why not add a dash of forming a cult to bring out the flavors of nihilism and insanity? Considering how little Mitsuru and Takeharu spoke of him, he must have not been the best man in the world.

Lastly, while it's not directly referenced in the title, I listened to "This Is Home" by I Am Ghost while writing parts of the aftermath of Charon's defeat. The title is much closer to "Crossing the River Styx", off the same album. I just love 'Lovers' Requiem'.

Troubled Hearts

November 21, 2009

After a needed rest and a quality breakfast any four-star hotel would proudly serve, nearly everyone attended school as if nothing changed, but the usual routine failed to comfort Junpei. As soon as classes ended, Fuuka accompanied him to the hospital, where some of the Kirijo-sponsored doctors made preparations for Chidori’s preservation. Unable to look at her without falling apart again, Junpei only asked for her to be buried with all the flowers he bought for her.

If another death didn’t dishearten anyone in SEES enough, the constant rumors about the high crime rate threatened to ruin the day did. Gekkoukan’s president announced a series of mandatory curfews with groups of students leaving under the supervision of a police officer or a teacher, and multiple security checkpoints were set up in the city to uphold this policy. Most clubs cancelled their meetings and no one felt obligated to stay on the grounds any longer than necessary.

Ken walked to the train station along with his classmates, who were particularly nosey that day. “C’mon, Amada!” a freckled black-haired boy whined. “You’re living with the coolest people in Gekkou. At least one of the high school girls treat you nice!”

“I told you that’s not true,” Ken said for the billionth time through clenched teeth. He really did not have time for immature bullshit.

A boy with glasses who stood a head over Ken sneered. “Then what is true? Everyone knows Takeba-sempai and Fujihara-sempai hit every guy they meet. You’re just lying ‘cuz you want them all to yourself!”

Ken let out a distressed huff and walked faster until the kids could no longer keep up. If he was going to spend the rest of the school year having to tolerate this harassment, the boy felt more motivated than ever to end the Dark Hour.

He slowed down a bit after losing them and mingled with the kids a grade beneath him. A brunette with pigtails waved to him. Ken crossed through the group and said hello. “How are you, Maiko-chan?”

“I wish the city was safer,” she said quietly. “We’re moving next week, and I want to see my big sis one more time.” She held up her wrist and showed off two hand-made bracelets. “If I can’t see her soon, can you give her my bracelet?”

“Of course,” Ken promised. “Airi-san will love it.”

They talked animatedly as they approached the overcrowded station and boarded the train. Ken looked among the high school students and couldn’t find any of his friends. A part of him felt relieved that he had some extra time to think of anything but SEES business.

“Hey, Amada-sempai? Will you be Hana-chan’s friend? I feel bad for leaving her alone.”

Ken did not expect the request. He had often seen the shrinking violet sit under the cherry blossoms as he arrived at and left school, but he paid no mind to her. She kept her eyes locked in a book and rarely talked to anyone but Maiko. Her wishing to be alone hardly came true; Hana’s blue eyes and tan skin raised lots of curious questions and stares about her “true” heritage, and Ken heard rumors that a particularly mean group of students learned the hard way why pressing the issue could be problematic.
“I’ll do my best,” he said, sincere.

“Thanks! I told her about how nice you are, so I hope you two get along!”

He wondered what else the girls said about him for better or worse. His face turned a bright pink, but he replied with a bashful smile, “I-I hope so too.”

Once the train stopped on the main island, the two went their separate ways. On his way to the hotel he spotted Koromaru lying lazily at the gate of the Naganaki Shrine. He reached for a treat in his pocket and fed the shiba-inu, eager to see his companion well and safe.

“Did you have a good day, Koro-chan?”

He left out a tender bark and licked the boy’s hand. The darkening sky and restless city bustle urged the duo to continue on to the closest thing to home. Koromaru slowly followed Ken and panted hoarsely, a sign he and Akihiko goofed off sometime before the extreme vigilance and enforcement of civilian traffic would impede on leisure.

They arrived at the Gekkei Hotel at around 4pm, and, knowing he’ll be let in through the back door, Koromaru stayed outside as Ken went in. Mitsuru’s maid, still dressed in street punk attire, greeted the boy in a stiff, formal bow. Prim mannerisms from a raggy-looking girl caught the attention of several confused heads in the lobby.

“Everyone is waiting for you in Mitsuru’s room. May I take you there, or do you need time to recuperate, Amada-san?”

“I’m fine. Pl-Please lead the way.” Her propriety made the boy uncomfortable, but he wondered if his occasional polite ticks created a similar reaction in others.

The pair went up two floors and passed through a painting-filled hallway lit in a mellow glow. The Gekkei Hotel was known for its modest, nature-themed aesthetic balanced with elegant, high quality comfort. Staying too long with the fluffy lavender-scented beds and therapeutic baths would spoil Ken, who thought he had more than enough luxury in the dorms with his own room and a relatively well-maintained shared bathroom with three teenage boys.

Mitsuru’s maid stopped at the seventh door on their right and knocked. The barely audible conversation from inside ended as Fuuka let them in. Everyone crowded around Junpei, hanging his head and bearing a slightly lighter depression than last night. He occasionally pet Koromaru, who quietly lay by his leg to give some comforting warmth.

Shinjiro and Akihiko informed Ken of the hospital visit and everyone wanting to keep Junpei company during the grieving process. The boy spotted Airi walking over to the dejected clown with a worn backpack in her arms. Junpei recognized it, let out a nervous laugh, and said, “I know… I gotta snap out of this…”

Rather than say what he expected to hear, Airi gave him the backpack. He sat motionless for a few minutes, ignoring the warmly expectant stares of his friends. When a flicker of curiosity finally crept in, Junpei unzipped the bag and took out a sketchbook.

“Y’know… she rarely let me see what she made…”

“Take as much time as you need, Iori,” said Mitsuru, who was more openly sensitive as a result of the increasingly stressful events. “Kikuno and I wanted you to have something of hers to help with the grieving process.”
He nodded, silently thanking the attentive young women for going back to the dorm for his sake. Letting out a pained sigh, he opened to a page. His lips trembled at a painting of a little girl holding a wilted moonflower and sitting in an empty white room. Those closest to him leaned in to see Chidori’s art as Junpei slowly flipped through the pages.

“These are amazing…” Yukari gapped, moved by the image of Medea peacefully engulfed in and embracing spiraling tongues of fire.

“She could’ve gone to a prestigious school with this talent,” said Fuuka.

Some of the pieces were too abstract to make sense of, others were incomplete sketches, but no one denied the passion Chidori put in her art. They only wondered what direction her life had taken her if circumstances were different.

Upon opening the second book, the subjects homogenized. Several drafts depicted a boy in his many forms: sleeping, playing baseball, and picking flowers. What moved them most of all was the detailed, realistic portrait near the end of the book.

“Every page is devoted to Junpei-san,” said Aigis in muted reverence. “She truly loved you.”

It was too much; Junpei dropped everything and helplessly erupted into tears. Airi let him cry into her shoulder as Fuuka saved the sketchbook from falling onto the floor or drowning in tears. She gave Chidori’s things back to Mitsuru’s maid, who bowed and left the room quietly. For a moment Ken felt envious that Junpei’s girlfriend left behind such a wonderful piece of art, but the boy empathized enough to let sympathetic tears slightly sting his eyes.

After many minutes of drying his eyes and receiving hugs from the juniors, Junpei recomposed himself for the time being. “Sorry, guys…”

Koromaru let out a low solemn bark, and Aigis translated, “Every one of us has experienced loss.”

He cracked out a slightly relieved smile, then he said with a steady voice, “I’m all in, Aibana. You supported me and Chidori all this time, and I’m gonna follow ya to the end.”

Airi dabbed her misty eyes and pat his back with a smile. “Just remember that Yuka will be keep you in line too.”

“Heh, so long she remembers to shave her deadly legs.”

The archer’s blood boiled, but she playfully smacked Junpei’s arm while Fuuka and Ken giggled. A feeling of mirth returned to the youngest members of the group, leaving Akihiko, Mitsuru, and Shinjiro happy that they went through years of frustration and pain to finally watch and experience such genial closeness.

“C’mon, mom and dad, don’t stand there lookin’ pretty!” Junpei found enough strength to tease after crying nonstop exhausted much of his energy. The seniors raised their eyebrows, completely confused.

Yukari stroked her chin. “But who’s who? They all fit a role in some way…”

The three unique reactions amused the group for how quickly and openly they expressed their feelings: one’s hair became statically charged, the second’s posture seemed to grow six inches, and the third’s eyes turned into pure ice.

“Well, Akihiko-san and Shinjiro-san fight a lot,” said Ken with a smile he couldn’t suppress. “At
least from the shows I watch, they act like they’re married…”

Akihiko’s jaw hit the ground. “D-Don’t be ridiculous! We wouldn’t fight so much if Shinji weren’t such an idiot all the time.”

“…You’re seriously gonna stir up somethin’ at a time like this? Have some respect for the dead, you moron.”

The once shy butterfly added in a not-subtle comment, “But the only mature one of the three is Mitsuru-sempai. Wouldn’t that make her the mother?”

The two instantly shut up and thought through the implications of that assignment. Neither option made Akihiko comfortable. Mitsuru blushed defiantly at the thought. “Th-That’s absurd, Fuuka! If I’m the mother, then–?”

Shinjiro let out a snort, eyeing the juniors who understood his answer if he could bring himself to talk. Turning red faster than he reacted to any of the jokes, Akihiko smacked the back of his head. “What happened to ‘have respect for the dead’, you hypocrite?”

The others, including Aigis and Koromaru, burst into hysterical laughter, much to Akihiko and Mitsuru’s utter embarrassment. As sadness and silence reigned for the rest of the night after, they embraced what little levity they could seize for a moment.

November 24, 2009

The darkness concealed them well, not that it was needed during the Dark Hour. The meeting ended merely minutes ago for the two of them, but the disorganized rows of coffins leading out of the abandoned base knew nothing of the time shift. Their leaders tended to vanish at random from their perspective, but it only proved that those two truly were the Children of Nyx.

“‘The Messiah will emerge from the depths of the Underworld and will lead the chosen ones along the Stairway to Paradise.’ Have you ever considered becoming a writer or poet?”

“Ever thought of bein’ a politician? A cent for every two-faced thing ya ever said would make me a billionaire.” Jin spat. His jacket was singed and torn from a recent riot. “Anyway, why’d ya show up at all?”

Kurebayashi leaned against the railing of the Moonlight Bridge. The clouds perpetually blanketed the sky that day in spite of the strong wintery winds sweeping the city off its feet. He looked at the waters below and found no reflection from its murky surface. “Medea and Charon are dead.”

Jin broke into an irregular half-cough half-laugh, causing him to keel over and struggle to breathe. His reaction did not alarm Kurebayashi, patiently waiting for him to return to whatever was left of his senses. The fit seemed to last for hours, with Jin nearly throwing up. He covered and wiped his bloody mouth as he finally rose to his feet.

“I thought you were above being suicidal and reckless,” the doctor sneered, receiving another hallow death glare.

“I’m nothing like that bastard. If ya killed Castor, those brats would be fuckin’ dead! Nemesis would be ours and Takaya would still be alive! We would’ve won by now!”

“Firstly, Shinjiro Aragaki no longer bears Castor but Horatius Cocles. ‘To every man upon this earth
death cometh soon or late. And how can a man die better, than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods.”” Kurebayashi ignored how Jin rolled his eyes over the doctor’s pretentiousness. “Secondly, Amada’s Persona evolved into Kala-Nemi, the sorcerer who failed to kill Lord Hanuman in the Ramayana. Thirdly, how am I responsible for Hypnos’ failure in his own mission? I tested the stragglers’ abilities for personal reference and did nothing more to interfere. Attempting to control Medea backfired in spite of her attacking Isis; she had been more willing to abandon us than ever. Even if he killed Horatius, all Hypnos would have accomplished is traumatizing my niece and motivating her to kill him later. He was doomed to fail for his arrogance and impatience.”

With each counterpoint addressed, Jin grew frantic more and more. “We only know that ’cuz your buddy got tortured!”

“May Hemera cross paths with our Mother in the afterlife,” Kurebayashi uttered automatically. A flicker of some semblance of emotion crept into his eyes, but vanished in an instant. “He led Hypnos to ruin, but without Arisato’s incompetence, we would not have known the truth about my niece.”

Jin let out a baffled laugh. “Ya honestly believe that time travel bullshit?!”

“As much as I believe your efforts have been guided by obligation than devotion as of late. How long have you corresponded with ‘Hera’?”

Kurebayashi’s inquisitive stare bored into Jin’s brain, and he shot a defensive glare before staring at the ground.

“I know that the truth brings you despair and you have no one to turn to. I am aware I lack the consideration Hypnos gave you, and for that, I am truly sorry,” the red-eyed man said genially. “I can only promise you that the sacrifices Hypnos and Charon made will not be in vain. Thanatos walks among us, and the Fall will come with Nyx and Erebus more powerful than ever.”

“What’s the fuckin’ point?!?” Jin shrieked, digging his nails into his skull. “I live for the moment, only to lose Takaya and Chidori! I embraced the teachings ya wrote because ya were a bored nerdy freak, and now you’re telling me all our work was for NOTHING?!”

Bearing no emotion or readable expression, Kurebayashi stared down at the young man and his infantile tantrum. “No ideology or methodology supersedes its rivals and peers. Everything you and I have done has enabled the inevitability of the Fall. My lovely jasmine and her friends are just as important in welcoming the end. Humanity has cried for this resolution since the first signs of war, and even the souls of the dead who have no sway in the world of the living wish to be free of existence. Nyx and Erebus will completely devour every last trace of humanity and we will return to nothingness, regardless of the means to reach that end.”

He knelt down to Jin and placed a hand on his shoulder. The young man thrashed out at the doctor and jumped back to his feet with a grenade in his hand.

“Get the fuck away from me,” he growled. His finger caressed the ring of his grenade. “Go back to your shitty clinic and fuck all the dead patients ya want. This is my job!”

Kurebayashi sighed and shrugged as he turned to walk away. “Do what you wish. You are the main attraction for the freak show after all, my little messiah.”

“Call me that again and I’ll make sure that whore, her bitch, and her friends will be inside that dorm when the next bomb goes off!”
The doctor’s white coat twirled in the windless air as he re-approached the delinquent. A red fog surrounded him and the serpentine Aether manifested around him. The snake’s tail knocked the grenade out of Jin’s hand and wrapped itself around the young man’s throat. Moros emerged as well, throwing a flashbang device at the snake. Blinded, Aether set off an explosive blaze of fire, dispelling Moros, and launched itself sideways over the bridge.

Jin’s grenade went off by a car, immediately setting it and the surrounding vehicles ablaze. Unwilling to get dirt and singes on his clothes, Kurebayashi nonchalantly walked to the railing and stared down upon the powerless Jin, choked and suspended hundreds of feet above the bay by the serpent’s tail.

“Death is law, not punishment,” the older man growled, red eyes burning.

Before letting Jin reply, Aether returned to his host’s psyche and let Jin fall into the dark water of the bay. Kurebayashi took a deep breath, stalked off the burning bridge, and returned to the mainland.

November 27, 2009

Airi completed her last day of a junior-year career experience program the school hosted. She was at Wild-Duck Burger during the week and found herself enjoying the repetitive work for a break from classwork. The manager told her some interesting facts, such as where the ingredients came from, that she asked Fuuka to research. While he spoke the truth, some sneaky details were omitted, leaving Airi feeling a bit too grossed out to eat there ever again.

Heading to the train station, Airi was bundled up in a white heavy coat Shinjiro insisted she’d wear. Since then she never went a cold day without it. Her phone rang, receiving a text from Ryoji saying he just arrived at Chagall Café. Airi caught up with him five minutes later, and they greeted each other more formally than usual.

“I’m sorry for the sudden invitation,” he said as they sat themselves at a table by the window. “Life has been crazy since the Kyoto trip and the new school regulations. And I’ve heard that your dorm is still closed?”

Airi placed her coat on her chair and her purse in her lap. “It’ll be open again soon. You and Junpei-kun will finally get to hang out there instead of here until dark.”

Ryoji chuckled lightly. “Sometimes it feels nice to rebel every once in a while. But you’re right. I hope to meet your friends again once things settle down. They seemed so carefree during the trip, but now they’re so busy, it’s hard to say hello.”

“We’re all in a lot of clubs, so it’s not a big surprise. Sometimes I only see Kirijo-sempai come home after dinner. I can’t imagine how she balances fencing club, Student Council, SEES, and the Kirijo Group.”

“She’s a talented young woman, but it’d be a shame if she does not take time to relax and share her burdens with someone she trusts. But I’m happy I have spent a lot of time with Junpei. I know losing his girlfriend is still fresh, but he seems to be feeling better.”

“Yeah. Thanks for looking after him. He’s the main source of entertainment at the dorm, so I’m glad you’re bringing out that side of him when we can’t.”

A waiter came by and the two ordered their drinks. As Ryoji played with his napkin, Airi noticed a thin ring on his finder. He noticed her stare, and said, “I bought it at one of the souvenir shops. It’ll remind me of all the memories I made in Kyoto.” Suddenly his cheerful expression turned sad. “It’s
strange… wearing a ring for a long time will give you the feeling that it’s a part of you forever, but it’s also constricting. I feel that rings bind memories to the people who wear them.”

While Airi had become used to his mood swings, she still felt uneasy around him more than ever. Ryoji looked like a time bomb ready to explode at any moment, but he quickly recovered from his musings.

“I hope I don’t sound crazy to you, Ai,” he said bashfully.

“Not really. Anything can have a deeper meaning to it if you have feelings and memories associated with it. Like if your grandparents give you a stuffed animal for your birthday. When they die, you might still think of them whenever you hold your favorite stuffed animal.”

Her rationale made a lot of sense to Ryoji, smiling at her understanding. Their drinks arrived, giving him a reason to change to a lighter topic. “Do you always drink tea?”

“I always do. I tried coffee once with an old friend who never had it before. We hated it, which made the rest of our stay awkward because we devoured our pastries but didn’t touch our drinks.”

“That’s a shame. You’re missing out on the diverse varieties and unique flavors of coffee. There’s always time to try again!”

Airi covered her mouth as she snorted. “No, it’s alright. Some foods and drinks aren’t compatible with my taste buds.”

“Suit yourself then,” Ryoji smirked playfully as he sipped his black coffee.

They sat quietly for a while and occasionally talked about their homework and what notes they may have missed in class for the next exam. Once they finished their drinks and ordered a few pastries to snack on, Ryoji paid the bill. For the rest of the afternoon they walked through the mall and carried on animated conversations.

Outside of the music store, Ryoji brought up a topic Airi mentioned earlier. “It seems you’re a popular lady, Ai. Tell me a bit about your friend who tried coffee with you.”

Airi slipped her wallet and two newly purchased CDs in her purse. A throbbing pain encircled and clutched her heart, but she ignored it. “He passed away recently.”

His eyes softened and he buried his chin in his yellow scarf. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. I’m moving on as best I can, even when it’s hard some days.”

“Is that true though?” he asked in a cooler tone. “You sound like you’re disregarding your feelings rather than coping with them. If you can’t, then you’ll never accept that he’s gone.”

His words struck that same chord that made her uneasy. Airi knew Ryoji needed time to remember who he really was, but his behavior seemed more erratic and unpredictable. This time he seemed to have impertinently read her like a book.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and answered, “It’s still a scar, and I just need time to let it heal. Not everyone can recover from loss at the same rate, y’know.”

They stopped walking. A cold hand rested tenderly over hers, sending chilly pulses through her body. Airi tried to pull away, but Ryoji held her hand tightly. “Please understand, Ai, I care about you, and that’s why I worry. If there’s anything I can do, please tell me and I’ll be at your side.”
“I appreciate it, but I'll be okay,” Airi replied with a smile. She waited for Ryoji to loosen his grip to end this awkward encounter as soon as possible.

Ryoji was so in tune to her feelings that he didn’t buy her façade. A misty film fell over his blue eyes and his other hand grabbed and massaged her wrists. The air lost all warmth as Airi shivered at his touch. Somehow no one saw Ryoji’s behavior as odd or noticed the increasingly panicked glimmer in Airi’s eyes. He stepped closer to her and caressed her cheek.

“I know I sound strange, Ai, but I feel I’ve known you forever. It’s been driving me crazy trying to understand why I feel this way. And every time I see you with Aragaki-san, I feel so... angry. I don’t know what’s happening to me...”

Airi’s eyes were saucers. She shook her head, and said, “I like being your friend, Ryoji-kun, but Shinji is my boyfriend. I can’t just leave him to be with you when we barely know each other...”

“But don’t we?” he insisted, still stroking her face tenderly. “I think there’s something between us that you’re not telling me.”

Never had Ryoji acted or looked this desperate in other cycles. He was always cryptic and odd, but never jealous and obsessive like this. Airi could not see her way of getting out easily. She could play along and kiss him, if only to run afterwards and do everything she can to avoid him. She could stand her ground and continue lying at the risk of unleashing his anger. Either protect herself from harm or possibly get attacked.

Her eyes darted to the sides and found none of her friends nearby. Ryoji lightly tapped her cheek to get her attention. “Don’t worry about what other people think. Just pretend it’s only us in the world. Please, Ai. Tell me what you feel about me.”

Airi closed her eyes and gulped. She had to be honest yet pull on an act simultaneously, even if it would bite her later.

“We’ve met before,” she said as calmly as her frightened self could muster. Her fingers intertwined with Ryoji’s. “This year has repeated so many times, and you’ve been in love with me for what could be decades. You mesmerized me, but fate would never let us be together, and I gave you up to find another way to be happy. You were my second love, sharing the same end as my first.

“I never stopped worrying about you, Ryoji-kun, but my heart wanted me to be with my first love again. After so many failed attempts, this is the first time I saved him. Somehow, he wanted to be with me too. He hasn’t completely understood my circumstances, but he has accepted my feelings and wants to be at my side.”

She held her breath and watched his reaction. The icy blue irises shook, unsure whether to melt or freeze over again. His hands squeezed hers tightly and his breathing grew shallow. Ryoji didn’t expect the truth to be so complicated, if he believed it at all. He stood in silence, at war with himself until he finally asked, “Your ‘first love’... is Aragaki-san?”

Airi nodded. That answer was enough for him to let go of her and back away. The storm in his eyes never faded, but Ryoji straightened up his sweatshirt. Airi let out a deep breath and clasped her hands to her chest, heart pounding incessantly against her dry throat.

“I... I need to think this over...” he admitted darkly, frustrated and annoyed with himself. “I want to believe you, but... I don’t know.”

Without another word, he bowed respectfully and left her in the middle of the courtyard.
When Airi finally felt her heart return to its normal pace, she looked at her hands, still freezing and shaking. How the melodrama managed to sway Ryoji’s emotions worked too well, much to her discomfort. She waited until she regained the strength to return to the Gekkei Hotel.
November 29, 2009

The dorm opened at last, much to everyone’s delight. Kikuno drove everyone there separately and at different times in case of the cult starting a resistance. They were probably too paranoid, but they refused to let a second attack happen. This time, however, the Kirijo Group had armed and ready guards keeping an eye on the building 25/7. Even the security system was updated to send direct and immediate reports in case of an unexpected attack. Once everyone arrived safely, Kikuno waved goodbye to her mistress and her newly acquainted friends before driving off to meet with Kurosawa.

Celebrating their return, Shinjiro cooked a modest French-styled dinner with the boys’ help. Akihiko and Junpei groaned at the prospect of learning a “woman’s art”, but only Ken was smart enough to agree to the idea of cooking and be spared from Shinjiro’s throwing red-hot pans and utensils. The torture barely commenced because of the former delinquent’s inability to ignore Koromaru’s incessant pacifist whimpering.

Airi killed time with the girls in Mitsuru’s room. It was practically a vibrant, dustless luxury suit condensed into a large dorm room. Yukari insisted on hanging out on the fluffy pearl-white comforters on the queen-sized bed, much to Mitsuru’s embarrassment.

“I’m so poor that I’ll never get a second chance to experience this!” she whined, half serious and half teasing.

Airi lazily reclined along the sofa and fought back the urge to take a nap. Studying the atmosphere, Aigis said while examining a picture of Mitsuru and her parents on the dresser, “To temporarily amend the lacking of privilege and to encourage symbiotic social understanding, I suggest Mitsuru-san should host a sleepover party at her house.”

“Good idea! Once we save the world, we should totally celebrate at Mitsuru-sempai’s place. There are enough rooms for all of us, right, Airi?”

“Wh-What? I’ve never been to Kirijo-sempai’s home!”

The redhead stammered, completely confused at the breathless banter surrounding her. “H-Hold on a moment! I’ve never had a slumber party in my life, and I have no idea how to host one! Yes, the manor is plenty large for all of us – including Koromaru, but I do not understand your intentions!”

“We wanna help you experience something fun before you graduate and take over the world,” said Yukari, who stopped bouncing and lay on her back.

“Sometimes we have to do childish things before we can never get the chance to experience them,” added Aigis.

Mitsuru bit her lip and tried to remember anything acceptably childish she had done in her whole life. Her mind immediately shifted to adult topics and thoughts that have bothered her more than ever since the day her father died. She paced around the room, rubbed her forehead, and sat down next to Yukari.

“Are you okay?” the archer asked.
Aigis and Airi shared identically worried expressions, although the robot appeared ready to bolt out the door and return with medicine, water, and washcloths. Feeling overwhelmed with the attention, Mitsuru tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s nothing related to our mission.”

“Everyone has hung their laundry out in the open, so to speak,” Aigis encouraged the senior with a warm smile. She stood at the end of the bed and leaned against the frame. “It would be good if you opened up to us so we can understand your feelings.”

The juniors gently persisted until Mitsuru finally gave up. She made them promise to not share anything to the boys, but Aigis needed more convincing to comprehend why such selective secrecy would be necessary.

“The senior members have selected a fiancé for me,” she said with poise the girls easily saw through, thanks in part to her pasty skin and trembling hands with gloves perpetually hiding her scars. “Ueno is the president of one of our affiliate companies and is twelve years my senior. Marrying him will create the face of a stabilizing Group, and I will be able to produce an heir to allow the company to continue prospering.”

Yukari needed to pick her jaw off the ground before replying, “An arranged marriage with an older guy you never met?!”

“I’ve had dinner with him twice,” she corrected. Her posture was as firm as ever, but a haze fell over her eyes.

“Still! You don’t seriously think marriage is based on social contracts, right?!”

Slowly raising her hand and ignoring the ornery girl’s pressing stare, Aigis replied, “There are some benefits to such an arrangement, including fiscal and physical security. Having a mate assigned to you eases the burden of looking for years for one on your own.”

Mitsuru nodded in agreement. Sensing a protest in Airi’s fidgeting, she said, “I don’t wish to know how I handled this before. My parents’ marriage was arranged, but they grew to love each other as time passed. That may not happen to me, but I cannot afford to make life-long decisions with my emotions.”

“But does that guy respect you?” asked Yukari through clenched teeth, holding back the urge to throttle her sempai’s neck. “What if you never get to experience love because you married a jackass?!”

“Please stop, Yukari! I can’t afford to be romantic. I’m not good at it, and I don’t have the time for such relationships. This is precisely why I don’t want you to tell the others. Iori and Amada would lose all respect they had for me if they found out; Shinjiro and Akihiko would threaten to kill the senior members and my fiancé.”

While the image of the boys rebelling and becoming overprotective was amusing, none of the girls lost sight of the moment’s gravity. They waited for Mitsuru to recompose herself. When she did, her eyes were noticeably misty.

“I’m sorry for my selfishness. This isn’t something I should burden you with. As amazing it could be to be as lucky as you, Fujihara, I have my duty to fulfill.”

An uncomfortably sullen air surrounded Airi. “That’s not a fair comparison. It wasn’t easy for me either… and I sometimes wonder if it was worth risking my life for someone who’ll never truly know how much I fell for him. And I broke a lot of rules of the universe to end up with him alive
and dating me.” No one wanted the reminder, but the point was clearly made as her voice trailed off. Misturu felt guilty and embarrassed for her argument. Seeing similar uncomfortable looks from Yukari and Aigis, Airi apologetically softened her tone. “Our problems are different, Kirijo-sempai. You have one chance to make a choice and live with it for the rest of your life. I can reset everything to get my way, but either I’ll never see the consequences of other actions or I’ll lose my sanity. It’s also a miracle Shinji likes me enough to reciprocate.”

Mitsuru folded her arms and thought over Airi’s words. She remembered all other times she felt jealous or inferior to her, but this talk gave her more perspective. Airi became a reliable leader and got along well with everyone mostly through memorization and trial and error.

“Forgive me. I have been insensitive.”

“It’s alright. We both had the chance to talk about things that are bothering us.”

“You’re right. Holding this in for the past few weeks has pained me. Thank you for listening.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Aigis.

Yukari smiled sadly. “I don’t agree with your choice, but I’m here for you. If any of the guys find out, like Akihiko-sempai, let me know so they don’t saying anything to upset you.”

“That may not be necessary…” she muttered uneasily.

A delicious aroma entered their room in the middle of their talk. Stomachs growling, the girls turned their thoughts to whatever the boys made for dinner. They went down and joined in an animated dinner. Even if one of the girls were to slip Mitsuru’s secret, she would not be able to get a word in because of the nonstop banter.

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November 30, 2009

“Hey, miss! You can’t leave campus without someone to protect you!”

A male teacher carrying a weird helmet stopped Aigis at the front entrance as she was leaving. The blonde humanoid stared confusingly at her History teacher.

“I appreciate your concern, Ono-sensei,” she said in a respectful manner. “However, I am fully capable of fending for myself. I have watched many samurai films and taught myself self defense.”

“Really?” His eyes sparkled in excitement. “I hope you’ve seen the classics, even if some are very inaccurate. Unless you’ve watched documentaries from Westerners, who claim to have the correct facts about the unified society?”

“I have been careful in retaining factual information. I find the subject far too interesting to be misinformed.”

“I’m not surprised. You’ve done very well on the Tokugawa period in my class, Aigis-chan. But has the knowledge been integrated in your life when it comes down to self-defense?”

“My loyalty lies with my friends, and I will do everything in my power to protect them. However, I will not willingly seek out a fight when it can easily be avoidable because such actions are dishonorable.”
The teacher raised his eyebrow for a moment. He thought over her words carefully, and said with an amused laugh, “You take matters very seriously for a young lady, but you don’t have to sound so robotic about it.”

Acknowledging the irony of that statement, Aigis feigned human confusion. “What do you mean?”

He laughed again, and said freely, “I’m sure you used your own words, but you sound like you’ve cited a book. It’s as if you don’t believe in what you’re actually saying. Having a lack of faith can negatively impact your will. If you do leave through these doors and end up surrounded by criminals, will you fight them bravely and win or cower and get killed?”

“I…” Aigis tried to come up with a counterargument, but lost her voice. Her gaze lowered to her hands as she reconsidered what she said.

Before either could continue the conversation, two students approached them. “Hey, Aigis!” greeted Yukari. “Ready to head home?”

She smiled at the sight of them and nodded.

“I’ll take them home,” Shinjiro told the teacher. “Please make sure no one snuck off campus alone.”

“Y-Yes, thank you, Aragaki-kun.” He felt intimidated by Shinjiro’s blunt tone but respected his concern for the girls.

Free at last, Aigis and her friends walked off campus under the orange late afternoon sky. When Yukari asked why she was held up, the robot explained what the teacher told her about.

“It’s strange…” Aigis continued with a pained frown. “Although I am more socially competent, I still do not understand how it feels to be ‘alive’. All I know is that I am a machine that ‘functions’. I have tried to become more human by practicing rituals, watching movies, and watching people, but I still do not understand. The concept of death does not entirely compute either, because I can always be repaired.”

She ended her talk on an awkward silence. “I am sorry. I should not share my burdens so carelessly.”

“No, it’s alright,” Yukari said. “I wish you told us sooner. I know Aizawa’s death upset you, but you never talked about it.”

“It is easy to ignore those feelings. Him being a father to me does not excuse his crimes.”

The sirens and screeching of a police car passed them. Some people rushed to get to the train station faster while others ran after the car to see what crime it was attempting to stop. The three friends lowered their heads in a moment of silence as they remembered how dangerous that job had to be for people like Kurosawa.

“You are alive, Aigis,” Shinjiro said without any doubts. “If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have a Persona. So don’t act like feelings are beneath you.”

“But giving into emotions can distract you from your objective. You cannot see reality for what it is if you rely on bias and fear. That is why I have suppressed them.”

Hearing her say that upset Yukari. “But you haven’t always done that, right? I’ve always seen you get very upset whenever Ryoji-kun is around.”

“That is why I would rather function than live!” she raised her voice and trembled. “I don’t
understand why, but my ‘gut’ tells me that he is a threat to Airi-san! I have to protect her from him, but I don’t understand why. That is the definition of being irrational!”

Seeing that Aigis was causing more and more of a stir, Shinjiro told the girls to follow him. He led them through a few well-lit alleys that he knew tended to be unpreoccupied by the worst street thugs. A good few blocks away from the busiest streets, he finally answered their incessant questions he briefly ignored.

“What you’re feeling is irrational but not exactly wrong.” He leaned against a brick wall with his hands in his pockets. “I ain't fond of him either.”

“I felt something was wrong with him from the beginning,” Yukari said. “He’s been obsessed with Airi for some reason. It’s crazy how she lets it roll off her back.”

Shinjiro furrowed his brow. For a moment he was mistaken for being angry with them. “She never told you?”

“What are you talking about?” Aigis replied.

The offense in his eyes intensified, scaring the girls. “He harassed her in public.”

Yukari’s eyes grew twice in size and her jaw dropped. Mechanical buzzing and clicking came from Aigis’ arms. She donned a similarly resentful expression on her face. Her voice was so deep, it barely fit her youthful features. “What happened?”

“He wanted her to tell him that she loved ‘im. She hinted at the time travel stuff, and said she liked him as a friend. Seemed like she gave him a confusing answer ‘cause he let her go without puttin’ another hair on her again.”

“The nerve of that guy! I hope he’s one of the Children so I can kick his ass!” Yukari’s statement ended the conversation for a minute. Confused, she watched Shinjiro and Aigis’ expressions change frequently as they took her words to heart. At some point they reached the same conclusion, but the robot was faster at figuring it out.

“Now that I think of it,” Shinjiro muttered, “he transferred a week after we defeated the Hanged Man.”

“Airi-san didn’t deny he was important to our mission,” Aigis added more details she remembered. “She also said that Thanatos would appear after we defeated the twelve Shadows, marking the true coming of the Fall.”

Snapping her fingers, Yukari figured it out too. “She implied that Thanatos acted more like a person than a Persona. If he manifested as a human, he probably knows her very well if he protected her from Aizawa!”

Everything else fell into place, and none of them felt more uncomfortable before now. Ryoji interacted amicably with SEES so he could be closer to Airi. He and Junpei frequently hung out ever since they hit it off on his first day of school. He was probably at the dorm right now, talking with everyone there.

“We need to warn the others and get the truth out of Airi,” Yukari insisted.

“That would be wise, or else I will attack before anyone has the chance to talk to him.” Aigis replied darkly as she prepared multiple rounds of ammunition.
Shinjiro nodded without hesitation and they immediately rushed back home, arriving at half-passed seven. Their friends ordered take-out and lolled around the first floor. Junpei and Ryoji were playing a competitive fighting game in the lounge with Airi and Akihiko watching and placing bets. In the dinning room Mitsuru and Ken played a tense game of Go. Spotting them, Koromaru left Ken’s side and greeted the late arrivers with affectionate barking. Shinjiro scratched behind the mutt’s ears, making him fall to the side and lay mellow and content on the floor.

“Welcome back,” Mitsuru greeted after ending her turn. “There are leftovers in the fridge if you are hungry.”

Yukari forced a smile. “Thanks. I’m starving!”

The three went off to blend in with the crowd and go with the flow. Aigis and Shinjiro sat with the video game enthusiasts and asked Koromaru some questions about Ryoji’s behavior. The dog gave reluctant whimpers and whines, admitting he felt safer with Chidori than Ryoji.

Once she grabbed her food, Yukari watched Mitsuru and Ken’s game. The boy lost and timidly asked if they’d play a cards instead. Wanting to join in, the three settled on War. “Fuuka’s a pro at this,” said Yukari, “so I’m looking forward to some fresh challenge.”

“Challenged you shall be,” Mitsuru replied in a satisfied tone. She rolled up the sleeves of her cream-colored turtleneck sweater.

The night flew by quickly with losers shouting at their lack of prowess at fighting games or their terrible luck with cards. Sometimes people would switch activities to spice things up. Once Junpei and Ryoji joined to take down Yukari as the reigning queen, they declared holding a non-alcoholic drinking game to make things interesting.

A different genre of video game played once Airi took on a hard-mode challenge run of a hack-and-slash game. The bets continued and became more high-risk as the challenges went on.

“What?!” Akihiko yelled at the screen. “How’d she dodge all those instant-kill attacks with only thirty-two seconds left?! No one could possibly do that in real life, especially a woman of her build and stature!”

Shinjiro sneered over the thought of spending Akihiko’s money freely for a month. “Don’t overthink it, you numbskull. It’s a video game.”

“I’d usually warn you to use that beef bowl money responsibly, Shinjiro,” Mitsuru called over to him and laughed, “but feel free to invest what Akihiko lost in charity.”

Aigis claimed Mitsuru’s bet, allowing everyone to spend a night at the Kirijo manor once the operation ended.

Over in the dinning room, Junpei laughed hysterically and fell out of his chair. A teasing Ryoji spoke for his fallen friend, “A pity you lost the game again, Yukari-chan. You could take another drink or go on a date with me.”

Yukari shot him the nastiest glare she could muster and poured her seventeenth glass of pure sugar-spiked lemonade.

“Don’t worry, Yukari-san, I’ll avenge you!” Ken promised, holding onto his hand of twelve cards as if his life depended on it.

Climbing back onto his chair, Junpei coughed and pulled himself together. “Holy shit, man! I kicked
Yuka-tan’s ass so hard she flew to and returned from Yucatan!”

It was his turn to be on the receiving end of a demonically scary look. Mitsuru cracked her knuckles and played as fiercely as Ken. Round after round the duo broke down the juniors and seized their losing cards as they drank more and more. Yukari was impressed by Mitsuru’s sudden competitive passion and Ken’s overexcitement. In ten minutes Ryoji and Junpei finally matched and exceeded Yukari’s drink count respectively, making them act sillier and dumber with each move.

The last round had Ryoji defeated. While he still had to face Mitsuru, Ken faced Junpei with the two having a series of identical cards. With only one card left to end the draw, Junpei played a Jack of Hearts. Ken grinned wickedly and cracked his knuckles. He turned to Yukari and Mitsuru, amused and amazed at Junpei’s hilarious defeat.

“Très bien, Amada!” Mitsuru cheered.

The boy shrugged in an attempt to be badass. “It’s nothing special. They overestimated their skills, and I exploited their pride. Junpei-san should be more careful in the future.”

“Anything to occasionally deflate their egos, especially Ryoji-kun’s” Yukari replied mischievously.

Confused, Ken turned to Mitsuru, who shared Yukari’s sentiment. “Don’t worry about it,” she assured. “Let us see how you fair against me, Amada.”

Other crazy shenanigans happened into the night that continued to bond everyone together over the fun things in life. The next thing everyone knew, it was almost midnight. Ryoji helped Junpei recover from his sugar-induced hangover while Akihiko and Yukari drank warm tea to ease their sore throats. Koromaru laid between a tired-eyed Ken and sleepy Mitsuru, who joined in watching a rerun of Featherman R for losing the game.

Airi and Shinjiro were alone in the kitchen finishing clean up. One washed the cups used during the drinking games while the other dried them and put things away.

“Things are almost back to normal,” Airi said as she added more soap to the sponge. “Maybe we can explore Tartarus in a few days if everyone’s in the mood. The next barricade’s not that far off, and there’s only one more block before we—”

Shinjiro snatched the sponge from her hands and stood behind her. He took over her chore and continued from where she left off. “We don’t always have to talk ‘bout SEES and Shadows and whatnot.”

“You could’ve said that without stealing my job,” she teased.

He frowned, feeling a bit disappointed that she missed his point. “Just tell me if you’re uncomfortable…”


“It’s your call.”
She bit her lip and pondered on a subject they haven’t touched on much. Feeling his chest gradually
rise and fall against her back and watching his hands work in a steady rhythm relaxed her more than
if he wasn’t in her presence.

“I’m in touch with my family again. It’s always been hard talking to them since this all started, so I
avoided them to not sound abnormal. But I feel so dumb, because they seemed to care more about
my social life and language retention. We had so much to catch up on, that I feel I have to call them
every day.”

Shinjiro felt the cheerfulness in her voice and smiled for her. He leaned in closer to her in a semi-hug,
which made washing the dishes a little bit harder. Airi laughed at his awkward posture, grabbed an
extra sponge and helped him.

“How are they?” he asked.

“Blair’s grades have slipped, but he’s working twice as hard to get his standing back. His Japanese
has really improved too. We barely spoke in English because my accent was too silly to take
seriously,” her laugh full of self-deprecation. “Pa transferred, and now he’s in charge of the music
department at my old high school. Ma adopted two kittens from the shelter she works at. They’ve
been helping my family cope with me being gone.”

“That’s good. I’m sure you can’t wait to see them again.”

“Yeah, I can’t. For a while I’ve been thinking about finishing school in Ireland,” she admitted with
mixed feelings evident in her voice. “Depending on how I feel where home is, I’ll stay there or move
back here.”

“Do whatever feels right, but don’t be a stranger.”

“Aw, does Shinji not wanna be lonely?” Shinjiro rolled his eyes and didn’t reply. Half attentive with
the pitcher she washed, Airi glanced up at him. “Speaking of pets, are you a dog or cat person?”

He raised his eyebrow at the random question and subject change, but replied with a shrug, “Bit of
both. Animals seem to like me, I guess. A stray cat followed me back to the orphanage once, but
some kid tattled and I got yelled at for hiding him. We only kept him ‘cause he helped Miki stop
crying. The place seemed happier with him around.”

Thinking of him as a child playing with, feeding, and holding a kitten made Airi’s heart swell.
“That’s so adorable!”

“It was stormin’ out. Kyo-chan – er, the kitt – c-cat was small and malnourished…” he replied
defensively. His face grew redder and redder as he realized how affectionate he sounded for the poor
creature. “Damn it, stop laughing!”

“Don’t worry, I’m done,” Airi recovered from her giggling fit and went back to work.

They finished their work in genial silence, with Airi occasionally nudging or poking Shinjiro
playfully. Once they put the dishes away, Airi noticed that Shinjiro looked a bit reluctant to leave the
kitchen. She went over to him and gently tugged at his sleeve.

He read the concern in her eyes and asked, “That guy hasn’t done anythin’ else to you?”

Airi shook her head. “I’ve been avoiding Ryoji-kun.”

“Good. Takeba and Aigis are worried. They think he’s Thanatos.”
Her skin turned pale, but her gaze never left his. “He is, but we can’t fight him until January 31st or else we won’t be able to stop Nyx. That’s why I didn’t want anyone to press the issue –”

“I believe you, Airi. The others will be askin’ the usual questions, so I’m telling you that I don’t need to be convinced.”

The support gave Airi a small boost of confidence. She hugged him, briefly catching him off guard. “Thanks, Shinji.”

Some days they struggled with their insecurities, but Shinjiro and Airi continued to become more comfortable with their relationship. Their affections often were restrained even when alone, but in small moments like this they ignored their reservations and enjoyed the honest warmth.

They didn’t even know that the Dark Hour fell upon them when they heard screaming and gunfire in the lounge. The couple pulled away and ran out to see what the source of the noise was. Barrels out and emitting smoke, Aigis stood facing a recognizable black figure with a bear trap for a face in the hallway. Four heads poked out from behind one of the knocked over sofas Yukari and Isis guarded.

“Aigis, stand down!” ordered Mitsuru, curls tangled and frizzy. The robot reluctantly obeyed, slightly lowering her arms.

The figure turned to face Airi. She stared back in calm defiance, but her hands clenched into fists. Seeing her reaction and Shinjiro’s threatening glare, the creature let out a dejected, pained sigh, too young and gentle for a monster. He never had an offensive stance in the encounter, but he lowered his arms and let his feet touch the ground. A purple mist engulfed the creature until Ryoji reappeared, grief-stricken and face soaked in tears.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Airi was playing ‘Bayonetta’. I watched Matthewmatosis stream the game a few years back and remember the chat went a bit nuts over the hard mode challenges he attempted and succeeded at. I don't know what compelled me to reference the game here. Past me is weird, haha.

Also, this chapter title references "Laura Palmer" by Bastille. It's one of my most played songs on my iPod ever, and it got me to watch 'Twin Peaks' when I was in college.
A few Kirijo agents arrived in response to Aigis’ impulsive outburst putting holes in the furniture and walls. She apologized for her behavior but insisted her actions were justified. They didn’t believe her story, but Ryoji’s catatonic state and lack of denial made the men uncomfortable enough to not maintain too much skepticism. Akihiko thanked them for their alertness as he led them to the door and asked for repairs in the morning.

When everything settled into silence, the tension was strong enough to strangle someone. Yukari stood over a miserable Ryoji sitting on the floor in the middle of the lounge with his legs folded and hand over his heart.

“What a way to find this out,” groaned Junpei. “Can we do this after we’re done healing from the last disaster?”

Koromaru let out a curt bark and snarled at Ryoji. “This is too important,” Aigis translated as she helped Shinjiro set the knocked over sofa back up.

With couches placed back in their normal places – save for the punctures in the leather that exposed the stuffing – nearly everyone else took a seat. Mitsuru returned from the dinning room after spending some time in meditation. “Yamagishi is here. She wants to understand Mochizuki’s intentions.”

The boy let out a weak, cheerful laugh. “Fuuka-chan was always brilliant. I underestimated everyone’s growth…”

Letting out a tired sigh, Airi began the session. “You spoke to me in this form a few times in the past few months. Since when could you do this? Actually, did you always remember and pretended in the past month or is everything returning to you now?”

“I have remembered enough to know something’s off with this cycle.” His tone was stricter than anyone predicted, but a blanket of sadness wrapped around his shoulders. ‘Fuuka’s powers have never matured like this and especially at such an advanced rate; Chidori never successfully defected from the Children; Shinjiro’s Persona never stabilized enough to evolve; and all of you never
attended the summer festival at the same time. On the other hand, Aether had never been so directly involved in events, and I have never felt like my soul is being torn apart from all sides."

While he did not answer her questions and several new ones formed, Airi read the confusion in his demeanor. Some of his observations that she noted made her reflect on past events and how many of the differences occurred due to her influence or by luck. Fuuka’s powers currently have greatly surpassed its potential when they confronted Nyx. Several Persona evolutions – such as Ken’s and Yukari’s – occurred under similar circumstances but often at earlier times. The summer festival seemed to be nothing more than good timing, but the fact it was the only time it ever happened despite little having been changed at that point fueled her curiosity. By late October Airi could barely predict how any normal day would end.

The last thing he mentioned bothered her too. Ryoji alway fought between the side of him that connected with life despite his nature as a Shadow and Nyx’s Avatar. Airi felt compelled to believe whatever pain he endured before with that conflict had amplified, perhaps to the point that he could manifest as his human form as early as June. That gave Airi some hope and fear of what that could mean when she and her friends fight him in January.

Impatient and unsure about anything Ryoji meant, Akihiko said while leaning forward in his seat, “So you do remember everything now?” Ryoji nodded. “If you were that thing that attacked the Magician and Aizawa, then talk and don’t waste our time with what we already know.”

Ryoji noticed the blonde robot fidgeting and wanting to say something. “Aigis defeated me ten years ago on the Moonlight Bridge.”

Everyone but Airi had their eyes grow large. Nodding, Aigis explained, “He is correct. Aizawa searched my memories to learn how I did it. His tampering likely affected my memory retention of that time.”

“Do you remember what happened now?” asked Yukari. If she had any suspicion, no hints of such feelings etched across her demeanor.

“I’ve known for a while… I’m sorry for hiding this from everyone,” she lowered her head in remorse. “I only had the power to seal Thanatos in the body of a little girl, whose parents died during the Dark Hour’s initial transition. I carried her to a hospital, but…” Oily water filled her pained eyes and she stared upon her trembling hands. “If I only had the power to kill him! Airi-san would have never lost her parents to Shadows… Charon might not have attacked Ken-san’s home… None of you would have to suffer with your powers! I’ve caused nothing but pain! I should have never existed if I am so useless!”

Too upset to let her continue, Airi left her seat and gave the grieving android a hug. She patted her on the back, which Aigis recognized as a sign for her to not be ashamed of her feelings. She let herself cry loudly into Airi’s shoulder and continuously apologized for everything she believed she did wrong. Her metal body felt less cold to the touch than usual.

Everyone waited for Aigis to be comforted, but she insisted that they had to continue. Airi gave her one more pat on the shoulder before returning to her seat. Her face still glistened in light from the oil in spite of drying her face thoroughly with tissues – and eventually a towel.

“Another variation,” mused Ryoji with a sad smile, “Aigis has embraced her humanity much sooner.”

Airi shot a glare at him. “That’s because Aizawa shredded her into pieces instead of you.”
The comment introduced another awkward silence into the room and a new series of questions no one felt willing or comfortable to ask.

“Let me follow up on what you said earlier, Mochizuki,” Mitsuru spoke between thin lips. “Are you the Shadow that escaped the Kirijo Lab ten years ago?”

He nodded without hesitation, and the façade he wore earlier had been replaced by an empty coolness. “I am the embodiment of all Shadows. My brothers have called me The Appriser, or Death, the thirteenth Arcana.”

“You’re also supposed to be a big player in Nyx’s coming,” said Ken, sitting tensely between Akihiko and Airi. “The others talk like you’re the one who’ll trigger the Fall.”

A brief pause of silence overcame Ryoji, nodding at the boy’s points. Mitsuru frowned, trying to read his behavior with no luck. The lack of communication from Fuuka worried her, but a similar sense of confusion kept the junior too preoccupied to interfere.

“So…?” Junpei spat impatiently. “These kinds of games are buggin’ me too, y’know. Just be straight with us, man.”

“I’m sorry…” his voice cracked. His baby blue eyes glistened pitifully, watching at a disaster play in slow motion. “Ai has misinformed you more than I feared. Defeating Nyx is impossible, and her coming cannot be avoided. Attempting a resistance will end in tragedy. Some of you are hurting too much to live with any more suffering.”

“Didn’t ask for your assessment of our mental states.” Shinjiro couldn’t keep quiet anymore with the cryptic way the boy behaved. “We know this ain’t gonna be a walk in the park, but we’ll fight anyway.”

“Only because Ai believes the cycles will end if you kill my brothers. Did you ever think Ai is manipulating to you and taking away your free will?”

“Of course!” cried Yukari without hesitation. “She worked her ass off to know what’s going on here! Of course she’s playing with time to get what she wants, but I don’t see a more thorough way to end the Dark Hour! I’m sure other options have been attempted and failed! You can’t be saying that giving up is the better option!”

Before anyone else could add their few cents. Fuuka’s cautious voice echoed in their minds, excluding Ryoji’s. “I sense conflict in Ryoji-kun. He’s holding back something…”

The Shadow in human form turned to Airi; he shook his head and sighed when she glared back. When others spotted the nonverbal argument between them, Ryoji opened his mouth. “I will give you a choice. Ai may kill me so all of your memories of the Dark Hour and your awaited fate will disappear. The Fall will come and you will not suffer the grief of losing a battle you will have hoped to win. Or you may let me live and serve as Nyx’s avatar. You will face absolute death and will endure more despair than you’ve deserved.”

His words weighed heavily upon the group and their resolve shook slightly. They knew the risks for a while now, but they never had someone say so desolately that their mission could end in absolute failure. Airi assured they would succeed, but Ryoji’s perspective brought back some doubt some of them buried.

“Why are you doing this?” asked Junpei. “And why do ya have to sound so depressed and serious now that the cat’s out of the bag?”
“This is all I can tell you that Ai will allow me to say. Her faith has been strong, but unfounded. Humans cannot defeat a force of nature that is greater than themselves.”

“We understand what you are saying, Mochizuki, but there’s no need to keep telling—”

“No, you DON’T understand!” Ryoji yelled, holding his forehead as if he were in great agony. His voice deepened into a raspy groan, and his eyes dialated widely. “Why do you think the cycles have always started over?! Ai was never alone in watching the people she loved die over and over again! She doesn’t understand what any of this has done to anyone but herself!! She never had to watch a black shadow swallow everything in existence over and over again!!”

The pain hurt so much that he could no longer speak. Fuuka warned everyone to keep some distance and temporarily dropped contact in spite of Mitsuru’s protests. Aigis approached Ryoji to help him from falling over, but she noticed a cooling air around him and his condition seemed to improve. He seemed to be more comfortable and straightened his posture, but his hand remained on his forehead.

He felt everyone’s piercing and confused stares. “I cannot stay for much longer, and I don’t wish for Fuuka-chan to waste her energy mending my madness…”

“Do not harm a soul out there,” warned Aigis, who regained her composure enough to imply threats.

“Believe me, I can’t while looking like this,” he laughed uncomfortably. Koromaru growled, sharing the disbelief plastered all over Shinjiro and Yukari’s faces. “I will lose this form at midnight on New Year’s Eve. If you have changed your minds, I will be here before I become something else.”

“But, Ryoji-san! What did you mean about—!!”

Before Ken could finish his question, Ryoji’s form dissolved into the air until he disappeared completely. It would have reminded her of him in the form of Pharos, but Airi focused too much on what he said during his outburst.

The others were too, but Yukari managed to ask directly. “Do you know what he was talking about, Airi?”

She bit her lip and diverted her eyes, both immediate cues Aigis once told everyone to be aware of. After some probing, Airi allowed Fuuka to sense her mood so she could articulate her feelings more clearly.

“Airi-chan will tell us when she’s ready,” she reported, sounding weakened from her extended power use on Ryoji. “We still have one month, so let’s not rush things.”

Junpei kicked the leg of the coffee table and groaned. “Damn it, why do I attract weirdoes and manic-depressive freaks?!”

“It’s just bad luck. You’re not a mind-reader, Junpei,” said Akihiko calmly in spite of his own feelings on the turn of events.

“I know, but goddamn it! I don’t think I can take this shit for much longer.”

Feeling similar sentiments from Shinjiro and Yukari, the two empathetic teammates knew to take a break. Mitsuru and Fuuka agreed on a suggestion.

“Let’s recuperate as best as we can. In case we need more answers, we have Tartarus and the Abyss of Time to explore. And Fujihara?” The girl looked to her red-haired senior, expressionless but not emitting an aura of coldness. “Provide honest answers when you are more comfortable, but for the
sake of the mission, don’t be tardy with vital information.”

The demands did not seem incredible for the girl. “I’ll do my best…”

No one argued with her or pushed further. While Junpei was too angry to be sociable, the others spent some time checking up on Aigis before heading up to bed just as the Dark Hour ended. The night of fun they thought they’d earned seemed like a distant memory, a dream, or an illusion.

December 6, 2009

Ryoji never returned to school, and no one knew his whereabouts. While they were concerned enough to ask the Kirijo Group to pull a few favors, Airi and her friends wanted nothing to do with him or their mission for a while.

Nothing eventful happened during the week, save for the numerous news reports of the death cult’s rising prominence, the Moonlight Bridge’s repairs allowing traffic to go through again, and rumors of the Japanese government’s plans to interfere. The news speculated that the efforts of an underground resistance affected the decrease in the intensity of attacks in spite of the slight increase in the number of crimes. Police deaths have ceased all together, fueling more credibility to the theory in the eyes of some.

When the weekend came, everyone seemed to have his or her own plans, allowing Airi to visit the shrine and talk to a sickly boy she met when she spent an afternoon a week with Maiko. A genetic disease slowly chipped away at his life, but it wasn’t until recently when he began to accept his condition. During this visit Akinari greeted her with a notebook in his hands and a smile on his ashen, sunken face.

“You completed the story?” Airi said cheerfully.

“It took time, but yes. Rather than spoil the ending, I want you to read it and tell me what you think.”

He never made such a request before, but Airi took the pleasant surprise and thanked him. She sat next to him on the bench by the playground, full of laughing children and nagging parents, and held the battered notebook. Upon opening the first page, she enjoyed Akinari’s clear, elegant handwriting upon the dull paper:

Every fairytale starts with “once upon a time”, but this story is too ordinary for such magical words. Whether you find beauty or truth in this tale, take even the least important word to heart.

Born in the greenest, liveliest of forests was a pink alligator. Though he grew to adulthood, he always struggled for food and was always hungry. He wished his skin were natural so he could hunt without prey immediately spotting him. The other animals feared his brilliant skin and ravenous eyes and never dared to go near. Too ashamed of himself, the pink alligator lived for many years alone, cursed, hungry.

Until one day he found a wounded bird. Her light, fluffy blue wings were bent in an uncomfortable shape and could no longer fly. Unable to find her family, the alligator protected the bird from the other animals of the forest. She thanked him and promised to keep the alligator company until her wings healed.

The pair would rest by the shallow river every day, where he let her to practice flying on his back.
She often found scraps of food for them to share and would sing a honey-sweet melody to him. They became the best of friends, much to the endless joy of the pink alligator.

They enjoyed each other’s company, but the bird could never gather enough food for the alligator. He gave up hunting long ago, and he became so hungry that stars covered his eyes like a shroud.

One drizzling afternoon, weariness consumed the alligator and he could no longer stay awake. The honey-sweet music did not awaken him, but honey-sweet nectar drenched his tongue and filled him with deep contentment. When that wonderful taste pulled the starry shroud from over his eyes, the alligator noticed a purple feather stuck between his teeth.

Realizing what he had done, the pink alligator forced himself to spit out the honey-sweet blood and the once-blue bird from his mouth. She would sleep in his mouth during rainy days, but he had never closed his mouth until now. The alligator called out the bird’s name, but she was long dead.

The hunger returned to consume the alligator. He denied the pleasure he had in eating the bird and refused to eat any living thing ever again. He lay next to the body of his friend and wept.

His tears outnumbered all the raindrops that ever fell upon the forest. In his grief the river overflowed with water, trapping the alligator and the bird in its arms. Rather than fight, the pink alligator closed his eyes and drowned in the newly birthed lake. And from that lake sprung new flowers and a willowy tree with honey-sweet fruit.

All the animals of the forest that once feared the pink alligator were drawn to the beautiful lake and its life-saving shores. The animals loved the newborn sanctuary and often rested in peace and with honey-sweet songs.

They never learned of how the lake came to be, but the lives it saved brought happiness for generations in the greenest, liveliest forest.

A small sketch of the alligator and the bird sat at the bottom of the last page in place of any more obvious closing phrases. Airi closed the notebook and dabbed the corners of her eyes. “It’s wonderful…”

“Thank you, Airi. I struggled with the ending, but I’m glad you like it.” Akinari looked off into the distance and watched people pass by in the city. “The meaning of my life is not something I should worry about. It’s what others think of my life or what I was able to do for them. So, for me or you or anyone else, the meaning of our lives is something we make but don’t see.

“I don’t know if that made sense, but…” he admitted with only a little embarrassment. “I’ve seen some of your friends visit the shrine. The little boy and the blonde girl?”

Airi nodded.

“The priest’s dog still visits every day. Sometimes a man in a red coat joins him with water and treats. He must be finding his way because now he smiles when he thinks no one is looking.” He saw Airi nod again in confirming her ties to them. “We all have our meanings of what life is, but hopefully you can understand my point of view, as well as theirs.”

The girl held the notebook tightly in her arms. As Akinari stood up to leave, Airi spoke up. “If you know you’re going to die and leave friends behind who don’t know, is it better to make promises that can’t be fulfilled or to tell them the truth?”
Her question gave Akinari some pause, but the smile never left his face. “I can’t answer that question. I can only wish you well. I gave you my notebook because it’s the only piece of me I can leave behind. You shared my last moments with me, and I cannot thank you enough for your kindness. Maybe someday… we’ll meet again.”

With a kindly bow and a warm smile, Akinari disappeared into the afternoon sunlight, leaving Airi with the last memory of him.

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December 12, 2009

The end truly felt near for Akihiko. SEES solved enough of the Dark Hour’s mysteries for his mind to be at ease, but some small gaps between certain details still kept him awake at night – Ryoji’s outburst and Airi’s hesitation especially – but his eyes had never lost sight of the end goal since Polydeuces evolved into Caesar. Yet in spite of his resolution, the universe still sought to break him down in other ways.

He returned home after his morning jog and crossed paths with Mitsuru, donning a grey coat and knitted cream scarf Fuuka gifted her in the mail. She bowed her head, grabbed her bike keys from the front desk, and quickly walked out without a word. Akihiko froze in place, only flinching when Junpei threw a towel on his head and rubbed his hair until it stood up in odd directions.

Akihiko pushed the playful boy away. “Don’t sneak up on me like that! You’re as bad as Shinji!”

“Just checkin’ your reflexes,” Junpei grinned. On the receiving end of a glare, he changed his tone. “Hey, are you and Mitsuru-sempai alright? She was pretty chatty with me over breakfast, but as soon as ya came in, she turned white and ran.”

That wasn’t enough to get him worried, but Akihiko shelved the comment to ponder later. He dried his face of sweat and said, “She seemed no worse than usual…”

“Yeah, maybe I’m crazy…” His mood changed again and a glimmer shined in his eyes. “By the way, man, we’re still goin’ to Tartarus tonight? I wanna show off Trismegistus!”

Akihiko raised an eyebrow. “Kiss… your biscuits?”

“Wow, dude, that’s a great one!” Junpei snickered, but some annoyance could be detected in his voice. “Tris-me-gis-tus. Hermes changed the other day like some of the others’ Personas did. It might be ‘cause of... y’know, Chidori… and I don’t wanna let her down.”

“R-Right… I’m sorry.”

He brushed him off in his usual carefree way. “Anyway, Ken got his tongue tied when I told ‘im about my shiny new powers. It’s fun watchin’ the mini adult lose his cool in his kiddy shorts and Featherman t-shirt.”

Akihiko couldn’t help but smile, but his humor left him as quickly when the rest of the gang arrived in the lobby with their schoolbags. They spotted Akihiko’s running gear and Junpei’s sweatpants, forcing the duo to remember how late they’ll be for classes. Aegis made a smartass comment she picked up from Ken (who picked it up from one of his favorite shows), which Akihiko was surprised she understood at all. He showered and slipped into his uniform in ten minutes, leaving with Junpei tripping over his untied shoes all the way to school.

Time flowed slowly, much to his annoyance. Exams began once more next week, but Akihiko
couldn’t bring himself to care or study. Sometimes during lectures he would catch himself staring at Mitsuru two rows to his left. She seemed to be on another planet, playing with her gloves, which she never seemed to take off anymore, and answering questions absentmindedly. When lunch came, she left the room before he had the chance to approach her. She continued to ignore him throughout the day, leaving an empty feeling to eat at his stomach.

He walked home alone with a mixed group of students. Some of the guys wished him good luck on the upcoming boxing competition and a few of his fangirls tried and failed to throw themselves on him. He barely responded to the attention. All he wanted was to talk to his second best friend. Had she not decided to open up more to him and Yukari at Kyoto? What did she run from now?

Standing out in the middle of the station plaza was a raven-haired woman in business slacks. Akihiko spotted her immediately and ducked out of the police-guarded group. Her eyes caught his, and she shared a few words with a caller before hanging up her cell. “Hello, Sanada-san.”

“Hey, what are you doing here, Kikuno?” He did not completely share her geniality.

“Hanae-sama allowed me to leave the house to breathe fresh city air on my day off,” she replied with a wry smile. “The website Tenebre uses has gone dark, so Yamagishi-san is keeping a closer eye on their activities elsewhere.”

The public finally put a name to Jin’s cult after the police found a disturbing message written in Latin and the blood of a teenage couple on the field of a local football stadium. That mark of infamy led to nothing but more conspiracy theories and panic since Sunday.

“We heard,” Akihiko said casually. “That’s why we’re going back into the old Tartarus schedule starting tonight.”

An apprehensive hum escaped Kikuno’s lips. “I hate to admit it, but Lady Mitsuru has plans to be elsewhere tonight.”

The nasty feeling in his gut worsened. Not once had Mitsuru made plans behind his back before. “What’s going on?”

“I’m afraid I am not at liberty to say other than it’s a formal affair, Sanada-san.”

The reply set off a spark. Things could not get more frustrating and confusing for him today. Kikuno had to be joking with him. “Can it wait, though? We all agreed to go to Tartarus tonight!”

“What’s going on?”

Speak of the devil. While she finally faced him, she looked more like mother annoyed with another woman’s child for making a ruckus.

Kikuno let out a tired sigh in spite of the tranquility in her demeanor. “There is nothing wrong. Sanada-san is only complaining about your sudden change of plans.”

“’Sudden?’ Pale skin beginning to glow red, Akihiko let the absurd word be burned into his mind. “What can be more important than fighting? One and a half blocks and a giant labyrinth are uncharted, and we don’t even have two months left!”

“Unless the world will end prematurely tomorrow, please let Mitsuru-sama have this night to herself.”

Akihiko laughed dismissively and turned to his best friend with expectancy. Unsure of how this
confrontation began, Mitsuru became tense. She flattened a wrinkle in the fabric of her gloves as she carefully chose her words. “Forgive my inconsideration, Akihiko. I have enough faith in our abilities that we can cancel one night of exploration. I have not shared personal time with my mother since February, and I miss her dearly.”

“Why didn’t you just say that last night? And can’t you visit her whenever you want?”

“She and I are terribly busy, given the current state of affairs. This is the only day in which our schedules do not conflict, and I will take advantage of this blessing.” Mitsuru stood stiffly and placed her hands behind her back, a gesture Akihiko had never seen before. Her tone was calm, but he heard some traces of anxiety. Hesitation has been her middle name for as long as he’d known her, but he could not stop finding new cues that hinted at something shameful she wanted to hide. Akihiko hated being skeptical, but he couldn’t help but feel a restlessness emit from her he had never seen before.

“You don’t have to lie to me,” Akihiko urged gently. “Don’t be afraid to tell me if you have plans ahead of time.”

“I’m not lying to you. Please don’t make a big deal out of something so insignificant…” Her lips were white. Either from the weather or from her changing feelings, a slight chill engulfed the three of them.

“Then why are you and Saikawa acting like you’re about to commit a crime?”

“What Mitsuru-sama wishes to do outside of SEES should not be a concern of yours,” Kikuno defended. She checked her phone for the time at least thrice during their conversation. “For the last time, she wishes to be with family in the aftermath of Takeharu-sama’s death.”

Akihiko furrowed his brow and let out a disappointed grunt. He hated how he was going nowhere. If only they were just honest with him, he could give up the fight. Before he could attempt to dig more out of them, an overbearing and square-faced man in his thirties spotted the group. Once Kikuno bowed her head as he approached them, Mitsuru’s face turned pale blue. He wore a tailored suit more formal than Kikuno’s and had his hair slicked back.

“I didn’t expect to find you here, Mitsuru,” he said, voice sitting somewhere between smooth and purring. Upon examining her from head to toe, he tsk’ed. “You’re not even properly dressed yet. We’re leaving now or else we’ll be late for dinner.”

“I am very sorry, Ueno-san,” said Kikuno quickly. “I just arrived to escort her home.”

The man named Ueno gave her an unconvinced glance before continuing. “That is no excuse. I am a very busy man, and I expect her to adjust her schedule according to mine so setbacks like this are avoided.”

Without hesitation, Mitsuru’s posture slumped slightly as she apologized for her tardiness. A part of Akihiko’s mind exploded in raging denial at the sight of her inexplicable submission.

“Don’t look so sullen,” the man said coolly to the girl. “This is only a friendly warning. The party will not begin for another three hours. Let’s make the most of this encounter so I can drive you and your maid home. That is enough time for you to change, correct?”

“Y-Yes, Ueno. I will not take long.”

Word by word the image of the Mitsuru Akihiko had known for three years tore apart. He did not just interact with the girl who stood up to her monster of a grandfather and denied him any chance of
redemption. The girl who boldly introduced herself and the world of Personas to a disenchanted orphan did not stand before him. The girl who instantly turned him to ice for making honest observations about her not adequately protecting sensitive parts of her body in combat was no longer here. Did he never know Mitsuru for who she really was?

Despite his growing doubts, he said to the over-assertive man in a smooth, simmering anger, “Who are you to boss Mitsuru around?”

It became so silent one could hear a pin drop. Mitsuru’s eyes almost fell out of their sockets, and Kikuno grew tense and breathed sharply to prepare for some kind of storm.

“That is none of your business, boy. Who are you to refer to a Kirijo by first name? You have no business with us, so run along to indulge in your common fetishes. Know your place in society.”

He did not need this. Akihiko clenched his fists and was ready to hit the businessman before Mitsuru jumped in between them. “Wait! Please forgive him, Ueno. Let us go at once before we run late.”

For a moment Ueno looked disappointed that the encounter ended before it could begin to produce blackmail material, but he forced a sneering smile and agreed to move on. Kikuno gave Akihiko a remorseful look before following the two up across the plaza and up the stairs to the train station. Flabbergasted, Akihiko’s eyes never left Mitsuru, who did not look back at him. She had never stood so small before. Takeharu must have bitterly cried in heaven upon watching his daughter follow the “requests” of a snobbish man nearly twice her age.

Once the shock and dread building in his gut no longer paralyzed him, Akihiko went to the station only to find the three long gone. He rode the train home brooding and second-guessing himself. Ueno immediately lost any hope of redeeming his character, and Akihiko did not understand how Mitsuru tolerated him when she struggled with Junpei’s antics. He worried if she had to interact with similar arrogant men like Ueno in the Group’s meetings. He could not imagine going to a party full of businessmen and putting up with the patronizing and dismissive attitudes towards a girl who just lost her father and has multiple thankless, rewardless responsibilities. He hoped someone like Ueno was not the reason Mitsuru’s distant behavior suddenly emerged.

The worst should have passed when he sat in the lounge with his friends and watched TV while studying. After the usual news, the reporters discussed an extravagant party the Kirijo Group threw.

“…announced his engagement to the only child of the late Takeharu Kirijo. Mitsuru Kirijo is very much a modern princess: valedictorian of Gekkoukan High School, student council president, and heiress to the Kirijo Group. This deal pleased investors during this time of crisis, and Hanae Kirijo expressed her pride in her daughter’s arranged marriage…”

Everyone cowered when Akihiko sent the remote flying across the room, shattering the plastic against the wall and sending buttons and batteries everywhere. Disgust killed his appetite and corroded his perception of the world around him. He didn’t care if anyone was trying to calm him down or if any of the lights in the room went out in a string of static pops. Akihiko stormed out of the dorm and broke into a sprint. He ran all throughout Iwatodai into the Dark Hour, but the feelings would not burn away no matter how far and long he went.

The fear of him not understanding Mitsuru anymore scared Akihiko almost as much as the fact that he could not understand why a hardness that caught his throat hurt more than every injury he ever suffered. His chest nearly exploded, but the pressure didn’t come from his breakless jog. Part of him felt like he was dying and didn’t give a damn if he did.
The title for this chapter comes from "All Through the Night" by Cyndi Lauper. I might be a 90s kid, but I've got a weakness for 80s pop and rock music.
December 17, 2009

Nowhere felt safe with Akihiko around. Airi hoped bringing him to fight the last guardian of Tartarus’ fifth block would help, but, even while fighting to the point of fatigue, his rage refused to quell. His mood worsened with Shinjiro around, and Airi asked her boyfriend to stay behind with Mitsuru and Yukari.

After the last guardian was reduced to a murky pond staining a technicolor floor, Caesar continued to summon lightning on the dead Shadow, spraying the black substance all over the Persona, its user, and the dreamy rainbow-colored walls around them. Junpei and Ken had to drag Akihiko to get him away. Caesar nearly threw his sword at Ken had Kala-Nemi didn’t manifest quickly enough between them. A solid punch in the face from Junpei snapped the boxer out of it. Akihiko glared and let out a snarl but relaxed his stance and threw his Evoker to the ground.

Ken picked it up after the senior stormed off and turned to Airi. “We should reach the barricade and leave. I don’t think we should stay here like this…”

Airi led her group up a few more stairs with Mitsuru reminding them how the number of Shadows seemed to decrease. They were so weak that Aigis halfheartedly kicked a few into a wall, instantly killing them.

Once at the barricade they ran into a familiar face examining the barrier between the fifth and final blocks. She poked the barrier with her leather-bound book but nothing happened to her dismay. Hearing footsteps behind her, Elizabeth greeted them with a forced smile. “If only Tartarus were kind enough to allow the rapid progression of your adventure…”

“Did you find anything since we last saw you?” asked Airi. She approached her while Ken and Aigis activated the teleporter by the staircase.

“The Abyss of Time appears to lack these obstinate obstacles. I took the liberty to exterminate a few pesky guardians who’d do nothing but waste your time. I recommend your friends begin exploring down there soon. The pear is far different from anywhere else you’ve been during the Dark Hour.”

When Airi let out a snort, the white-haired girl beamed playfully. “Or maybe it was ‘air’… The point remains!” Elizabeth then sighed. “Theo used to write haiku. It helped him master the power of language, and it gave me another reason to tease him incessantly. Only he’d reply with a well-worded quip while I tripped over my thoughts…” Her mirth vanished, and shades of a heavy, slow longing pained her.
“Is there a way for him to come back?” Airi. The answer she wanted to hear likely would never be uttered, but she remained slightly hopeful… or in denial.

Elizabeth shook her head in a tried attempt to hide her dull golden eyes. “Margaret advised against impossible hope. ‘We have meddled enough with time when it is not our place to do so,’ she said. ‘Airi Fujihara must focus on her mission first and foremost for everyone’s sake, especially Theo’s.’”

The answer depressed her, but Airi understood where the oldest Velvet Sibling was coming from. The girls stood quietly until Junpei walked over. “We got thirty minutes left. Fuuka-chan and Mitsuru-sempai said we oughta check out that desert place since we got nowhere else to go.”

“Is Akihiko-kun alright with that?” Airi kept her voice low and spotted the boxer teaching Ken a few basic tricks.

“Guess so. He wants to ‘decimate’ every Shadows he sees. It’s... scary.”

“His bad mood will pass soon. Until then, we should change the line-up. I don't want him and Shinjiro-kun trying to kill each other.”

Junpei nodded fiercely. They said goodbye to Elizabeth and agreed to head out with Aigis, Akihiko, and Ken following them to teleport back to the entranceway.

The Velvet Resident took out the key from her pocket and appeared in the Room within seconds. Igor was nowhere to be found. The main room no longer needed candles, but dozens surrounded Margaret as she knelt reverently with an emerald-covered book open on her lap. She did not flinch when she noticed her sister arrive.

“I've never seen you like this before,” said the younger quietly.

Margaret closed her eyes and shut the book, leaving its pages ablaze. “You remember why the Abyss is meant to manifest in this state. It does not reflect their desires as before.”

Sitting on the ground outside of the circle of candles, Elizabeth replied, “Was it the revelation of her situation to her companions that triggered its expansion?”

“Yes, but alleviating the grief from her mind meant the feelings had nowhere to go but the Abyss.” She lightly brushed a spec of dust off her book. “If she does not inform them each timeline ended in failure because of her death, the Abyss will reveal it and something else will break.”

“How do you know?”

“I am not ignorant, Elizabeth. Our brother coddled Airi Fujihara far too much, and now everyone is paying the price.” She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. “Do not make the same mistakes he did, or it will lead you to ruin.”

The air around Margaret had never been so cold despite the warm glow of the candles. Her demeanor hardened to the point no one could read her feelings anymore; her monotone voice removed any life she ever vocalized. Theo’s death hit everyone hard in the Velvet Room, but only Margaret seemed to change significantly. She pulled away from her sister and spoke little with Igor. The long-nosed inquisitor made many attempts to read her, all of which ended in her as an immovable, taciturn statue until the interrogations ended.

Elizabeth glanced at the book on her sister’s lap and reached for it. She was blocked swiftly as Margaret rose to her feet, extinguishing the candles during the motion. The light from the book died.
“Miracles happen to those who earn it, and not one moment has proved her worthy of one.”

Blinking, Elizabeth tilted her head and asked, “You have been observing so attentively to know that for certain, sister?”

She responded with a sharp glare and a turned back. Margaret hugged the book to her bosom and stalked to one of the doors and left in what only Elizabeth could assume was an cross huff.

December 21, 2009

Exam results mattered little to Airi, having already known how her friends would rank relative to everyone else, and she ignored the voracious crowd in the entrance hall blocking the path to the stairs. She went down the vacant east hallway through the home economics and other club rooms to reach another set of stairs. She entered 2-F, found her seat, and basked in the quiet. The few classmates there failed to meet to anyone’s satisfaction and turned their jealous gazes from her when her eyes met theirs.

Airi took a moment to send an early happy birthday text to Fuuka. They still kept in touch, but Fuuka was so absorbed in combating Tenebre and supporting Kurosawa that she’d often send a long apologetic email the next day. The last Airi heard from her was how she met someone online in tech club who has helped her learn to test and improve the security of online communications and databases.

Ten minutes before first period began, Yukari and Junpei rushed into the room and startled everyone. The clown cheered and pointed figures at the red-faced archer. “Six thousand yen, Yuka-tan! Cough up the dough!”

“Don’t get cocky, Stupe! It’s just one exam out of dozens since freshman year!”

“Hey, don’t knock a top victory! I earned that tenth place without resorting to cheat sheets!” Catching Airi from the corner of his eye, he skipped over to her and refused to lower his voice. “You missed my shining moment, dude! I beat Yuka-tan by two spots!”

His infectious cheer transferred to Airi, smiling and returning a fist bump. “Congrats, Junpei-kun! I knew you could do it!”

“Aibana, you are the greatest friend ever! The gods shined a light on me and showed the world I’m not such a loser after all! I can die a fulfilled life! Now Mitsuru-sempai can gimme that special gift for anyone in the top half of the class!” The exhilaration sent him over the edge, flopping down into his seat and laughing until his voice went hoarse.

Yukari rolled her eyes but let out a smile. “I didn’t think he’d do so well. Shows what motivation and effort can do to a person.” She bowed her head when she added, “Chidori would be proud of him.”

“I’m glad he always put his mind in the right place after her death, but he didn’t score this high before, so something really went right this time.” Yukari’s eyes widened in surprise and her mouth hung open. “Just don’t tell him I said that or it’ll strain his inflated ego.”

No sane person could argue with that, Yukari thought as she laughed. She took her seat nearby and chatted with Airi until Aigis arrived two minutes before the bell rang. Her temperament improved slightly since Ryoji’s visit, but she still kept to herself aside from greeting her friends in passing.

When Airi wanted to check up on her days ago, Yukari assured her that Aigis was fine, if not still coming to terms with the recent information.
With the holidays around the corner no one paid attention to class work anymore. Toriumi eased the intensity of her lesson and allowed those with short attention spans to gawk at the white flurries descending from the murky grey sky. Eventually she gave up and left early, giving 2-F free time before lunch.

Christmas was the main topic for everyone, particularly the girls and some boys. Kenji was one such curious fellow who approached Airi and Yukari. “You two seem quiet.”

Yukari rolled her eyes. “That’s because I have no interest in finding a date.”

“Really? That’s odd. Now’s the time for us young people to test the waters!” When he didn’t get a meaningful response, he moved on. “How about you, Airi-san? Do you have a Christmas date?”

A few students paused their gossiping and watched the red-eyed girl. The pressure barely affected her. “It’s none of your business, Tomochika-kun.”

“What?! You weren’t asked out yet?! You should be swimming in guys who wanna ask you out! How come Sanada-sempai and Junpei aren’t making any moves?”

Said boy shot Kenji a vicious kind of glare no one imagined seeing on his usually jovial face. That and the infernal silence in the room made everyone save for Airi, Aigis, and Yukari uncomfortable. Only they knew Junpei wasn’t ready to move on and embrace the frivolous aspects of a holiday.

“It’s none of your business,” Airi repeated.

“Oh, c’mon! Not even Aragaki-sempai? Well, he’s a decent guy to us compared to most seniors, but I figured he didn’t bother since he doesn’t seem the type--“

“We do in fact have plans, Tomochika-san,” Aigis interjected when the boy opened his mouth. “Yukari-san and I will engage in Christmas customs Airi-san has celebrated in Ireland. She wished to celebrate the holidays platonically to minimize loneliness during a joyous time of year.”

Kenji stood baffled and speechless. Clearly embarrassed and disappointed, he returned to his friends without any juicy gossip. Their peers loudly whispered their doubts about what Aigis said, while a minority found the idea interesting enough that they decided to make plans simply with friends.

“That worked too well, Ai-chan,” muttered Junpei, who relaxed back to his normal temperament.

She let out a smile that seemed very coy. “It’s the least I can do to give everyone peace of mind. Tomochika-san should visit an audiologist to correct his hearing.”

Airi let out an amused snort. “Thanks, Aigis.”

Recovering from her laughter, Yukari brought the topic back up. “Aigis is right; screw tradition! Let’s make the holidays a little more unique. We might not have the chance to travel overseas once we’re working adults.”

The idea of sharing a different kind of holiday season never crossed Airi’s mind because no one suggested it before. Most of the days in which an activity would be performed have passed, but delayed traditions couldn’t bring bad luck to every forgetful or neglectful soul so long their heart was in the right place.

“Sure! I can see what I can do.” Her three friends grinned in excitement, especially Aigis who no longer appeared robotic as she emoted. “I can try to organize something between now and New Years. Give me a few days.”
“No problem, Aibana! Just make sure you don’t put snails in anything!” Yukari gagged at the thought and somehow stopped herself from hitting Junpei.

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“Escargot is a part of French cuisine and not Irish, correct?”

“It is, but he’s joking, Aigis.”

“ANYWAY, I can buy anything that’ll help,” said Yukari, patting her sweater pocket holding her wallet. “Just enjoy your special date, ok? Let me know if sempai ruins it, and I’ll ask Mitsuru-sempai to execute him.”

The reminder reintroduced the nervousness she felt when she first realized such a thing could happen this time. Airi flushed red and lightly whacked Yukari’s arm. “Man, you’re so cute when you’re in love, Aibana!” teased Junpei, not regretting the fact he was on the receiving end of a smack as well.

December 24, 2009

Snowing lightly around him in the late afternoon glow, Shinjiro waited under the barren trees along the main entrance. Rarely did he have butterflies in his stomach, and he very much detested the feeling. Airi accepted his invitation via text, which didn’t surprise him, but this would technically be their first “official” date by some standards. He kept telling himself it was no big deal. The pair had gone out to eat, walked around town – sometimes with Koromaru tagging along, and watched movies numerous times up to this point. The uncertainty of what could happen this time kept him on edge.

He didn’t have time to resolve his feelings because Airi arrived five minutes after him. They left the dorm at different times that morning, and only now did he see she left her hair down with a lone jasmine pin that matched her green scarf and white coat. When she stood three feet from him, Shinjiro caught a mild scent of lavender, which simultaneously helped him relax and made him more vulnerable around her.

“Merry Christmas, Shinji,” said Airi with an innocent smile. “Your day was alright?”

He nodded. “Looks like you’ve been ready all day. You’re makin’ me look poor.”

She giggled dismissively as they began to walk off campus. “Really? No hat and tamed hair means you put in some effort too, but I’ll be impressed if you’re wearing the proper dress code.”

“Depends on how well you behave,” he replied shiftily. Her surprised and expectant gaze gave him a good chuckle. When she couldn’t probe him further, she made a pitiful pout that Shinjiro found attractively quirky.

She had been right about him and effort. He replaced his red peacoat with a nicer black one he occasionally wore over his uniform, and he shaved thoroughly to look neater. His wellbeing changed so much over the course of the year that he barely recognized himself in the mirror. A sign something really changed with him was a handful of Akihiko’s former fangirls commenting on his “handsome” looks lately. It freaked him out. While looking “good” for everyone never mattered to him in most instances, Shinjiro didn’t mind breaking another one of his rules for his girlfriend.

After sharing a little about what happened to each other during the school day, they enjoyed a relatively quiet walk to Paulownia Square. Rows of Christmas trees lit up the walkways around the shops and inside the mall. Many police monitored the area and wore festive add-ons with their uniforms to help liven the mood. Shinjiro spotted Kurosawa wearing a modestly festive red and
silver tie and lecturing a bunch of shady-looking teens near the mall entrance. After sending the kids away, he saw the couple and gave Shinjiro an oddly proud smirk before returning to his duties. The former delinquent’s face warmed at the realization that Kurosawa saw him alone with Airi. The feeling in his stomach intensified when the words “potential blackmail” crossed his mind.

Noticing his nervousness, Airi linked her arm with his, catching his attention. “Want to see the decorations?”

“Y-Yeah. I’d like that.”

The many trees and lights could blind enough to ruin Christmas forever if they were tasteless, but Shinjiro found some respect for the people who somehow made everything match and complement each other nicely. A range of wreaths from traditional and Western to artistic and eccentric hung outside the window of a craft store. Some of them seemed to have been made by children, reminding him of the simple toys he had to share with the other orphans.

“I’ve… I’ve never went out to see the lights before. The romantic angle to Christmas made me sick. I didn’t wanna deal with girls and petty drama back then. It’s alright now… ‘cause you’re here and all…”

Passing a tacky silver and gold tree, Airi’s hand patted his forearm gently. “I’m not used to it either. I always celebrated Christmas with my family - my original and foster families. Couples can celebrate too, but it’s not the only love that matters.”

“Exactly. Forcin’ romance down throats makes it uncomfortable for everybody. It ain’t anyone’s damn business.” He let out a sigh, and changed his tone. Being pessimistic felt too counterintuitive to continue. “Sorry…”

Airi tilted her head and gave him a confused look. “For what? I completely agree.”

Relieved that his opinionated complaining did not upset her, he shook his head. “Never mind.”

She let the topic go and a new one quickly replaced it when they walked past a toy store. “Did you celebrate Christmas while growing up?”

“Yeah, the orphanage took care of us better than most places.” He let out a melancholic smile as the old, dusty memories came to him from the depths of his mind. “The caretakers gave us gifts when we did good. When I was five I attacked the new kid ‘cause he got a cooler toy than me. Gave ‘im a bloody nose and he gave me a black eye. Neither of us got food that night. We both got that punishment a lot back then…”

The wistful tone he barely expressed painted a clear image of his childhood in Airi’s mind. Leaning her head against his shoulder, she asked, “Was that Akihiko-kun?”

He laughed sheepishly and scratched the back of his neck. “I’m that easy to read, huh?”

“Aye right. You’re better at reading people than me. I had to repeat this year over a dozen times to understand someone as well as when you meet them once or twice. I still have a lot to learn about you.”

“No way am I that impressive or interesting,” he said with a self-deprecatory laugh.

A hopeless sigh slipped between the thin lips of her smile. When they passed a family of three trying to calm down their whining child, Ari asked, “Do you have other Christmas memories that had significant meaning?”
There’s a few more, but some of ‘em blur together…” His voice softened slightly and slowly trailed off with every word. “Some stand out more than others…”

Reflecting on one particular memory made the pocketwatch feel as cool as the hands of a patient who had not been outside in months. The chills soaked his clothes and tickled his skin. She seemed curious about what he could have been talking about but refused to press further. He thanked the universe for not having an incredibly intrusive girlfriend, yet he felt a little disappointed that she didn’t try to question him.

An hour passed once they’ve seen every decoration and tree in the plaza. Airi muttered about her feet being tired, and they found a place to sit near one of the water fountains. A handful of adult couples commenting how lucky Shinjiro was to be with a cute girl, giving Airi more reasons to tease him.

“That’s the adorably flustered puppy I fell in love with!” she said with unapologetic jest.

“H-Hey! Keep shamelessly announcin’ your feelings in public and you won’t get your gift.” His tone was deadpan, but the pathetic involuntary smirk gave his intentions away.

“Well, because I’m not a terrible person, I’ll give you your present anyway. It’s a box full of rotten eggs.”

“Why thank you, princess.” They exchanged wrapped gifts as they bantered. Shinjiro insisted that a lady always goes first, and Airi opened hers, somewhat large and bulky.

Underneath the wrappings was a stuffed black cat with a leather watch around its neck. Airi devolved into a child and gushed over the adorable ball of fur. She couldn’t help but imitate a cat as she snuggled it. That reaction and that world-breaking smile were worth surviving in a hospital with Strega wanting to kill him. “Tank you!” she said in English.

“Don’t mention it. I figured you’d liked ‘im.”

“Of course! Stuffed animals keep you warm at night and make good sleeping companions!”

He waited patiently with a smile as she calmed down and named the cat Romi. She put on the leather watch, fitting her well and complementing her pale skin. During his turn the present he had was slightly smaller but much heavier, fueling Shinjiro’s curiosity.

A quiet gasp escaped his lips at what he unwrapped; she gave him a new set of knives and a care kit he had his eyes on for a while. He dismissed it for the price a while ago, but some of the utensils at the dorm were dull and unreliable at the worst times. When he remembered the price range and imagined Airi buying it, he went pale. “Wait, you didn’t…”

“It’s alright, Shinji. This wasn’t a burden at all.” When he opened his mouth to protest, she pressed a finger to his lips. “I’d rather get you something you need than something you might not like. I know you’ll make the most of these.”

He still felt bad that she spent a lot more money on him than he did on her, but she stubbornly insisted that happiness mattered more than a price tag. Once he hesitantly accepted the message, she pulled back and tucked a lock of hair behind an ear.

As they placed their gifts in their bags, Shinjiro’s stomach growled. Airi giggled as her body gave the same message. “You choose where we eat,” she said. “I’m up for anything.”

The decision rested on his shoulders, but he generally didn’t mind the weight anymore. Shinjiro took Airi’s hand as they left the mall to find someplace quiet. Most of the restaurants were packed – save
for a small shop that settled in recently three blocks from the Iwatodai train station. A few couples had the idea to eat there too and talked animatedly in the quaint and mellow atmosphere. Once they ordered, Airi and Shinjiro made note how much they’d each pay. By that point they became accustomed to splitting the bill, and they almost never suffered minor squabbles over it anymore.

A few TVs were on in the background showing a football game between no teams anyone in Japan generally cared about. Airi and some of the customers, however, got a little too invested in the game anyway as they drank and commented over the plays. After a few sips of soda that he rarely indulged in, Shinjiro joined in occasionally cursing at the fouls and penalties but he was still much mellower about it compared to Airi.

Choking on her carbonara, Airi nearly yelled at the referee’s decision to pull a player out of the game due to a broken ankle. “Fock you! He barely tripped! That’s a sprain at worst! Piss off!”

“Careful!” Shinjiro hissed as he patted her back. “I don’t know CPR, and Mitsuru’ll kill me if ya die.”

Letting out a cough, she gave him a thumb up with a stupid grin she could have only picked up from Junpei. “But you saw that, right? Their bones must be made of uncooked noodles if they’re making a big deal out of a trip!”

“Or they’re tryin’ to make the game last longer?” he guessed in the flattest, most smartass tone he could muster.

“But still!” One hand supported her long face while the other played with the straw in her sugar-rich soda. “It’s so cheap; Akihiko-kun would agree with me!”

Shinjiro snorted. He chewed on the last of his steamed crab and vegetables and stared at the small mound of grey and brown pushed to one side of the bowl. “You are gonna eat that before desert, right?”

Tensing up like a child caught in the act, Airi said with as much confidence as she could muster, “I don’t believe in eating something that grows on your feet.”

“Mushrooms grow on the ground, you moron.”

“But they’re fungi! Fungi are wet and gross and make you sick!”

“Shiitake ain’t bad for you. They’re low on calories and are full of vitamins and minerals to keep your blood, brain, and heart running. If Takeba can eat ‘em without complainin’, you’ll live.”

He noticed her pouty lips twitching, resisting the urge to smile. Needing no words on her part, Shinjiro knew he won.

“Oh, fine…” she sulked and picked up her chopsticks. “I’ll eat a few…”

“All.” He had the final word with a triumphant smirk.

When they checked on the game, the referee called for 15 minutes of extra-time after pulling out a red card and taking out one of the best players in that game. Both decisions made a drunk elderly couple four tables away yell at the TV. A server similarly complained as she brought desert for the youngest couple.

They ended up watching the rest of the game until ten thirty, a half hour later than the place usually closed. Some of the patrons left borderline drunk but happy from the animated company. No alcohol
was in her system but Airi was slowly weaning off the sugar-high the ice cream added to her two glasses of soda. Similarly content, Shinjiro wrapped an arm around her shoulders to keep her balanced.

“That was so great…” she blathered on in the middle of a giggling fit. “Like the time we went bar-hopping in Dublin last year… Ma was so wasted she sang folk songs with the old men while Blair and Pa recorded her. One of them men tried to propose but he fell and broke a table. A bunch of betting and gambling broke out to not let everyone get into fights, but the bartender was so pissed! We laughed ’til we turned blue and nearly lost our lungs!”

Shinjiro didn’t have to think very hard to picture the scene. While he couldn’t imagine himself being in a situation like that and having any ounce of fun, he caught himself smiling with Airi. The more he learned of her and her family, the lonelier he felt about his upbringing but happier for kids in the world like her. Airi had a home with people who cared for and gave her a life with no want of necessities. Save for her Persona abilities, she was normal, something Shinjiro wanted in his life, but he was still thankful for Akihiko escaping the system and for the silver pocketwatch in his breast pocket.

The sky cleared up and only thin layers of snow covered the ground, but that was a Christmas worth preserving. For the first time in what seemed to be forever, Shinjiro set aside his fears and enjoyed a happy moment. The auburn haired girl made frustrating and confusing decisions, but he didn’t feel unsure about being with her anymore. Whatever was going to happen, he would press on with no regrets, even if by a divine prank he were to die saving the world. Now he had new memories to hold onto, giving him more strength than he felt in years to live and control his Persona. Whatever could happen after graduation worried him as such a time would affect any young adult, and he didn’t mind having stress born of normality.

Ten forty-five was way past curfew when they returned to the dorm and hung up their things. Everyone else seemed to be asleep in their rooms – and Koromaru likely in Akihiko’s room – giving them a few more minutes alone in the foyer. Airi calmed down by this point, save for her fluttering heart rate and rosy cheeks. She watched her boyfriend take off his coat, revealing his uniform complying with the dress code perfectly. Then she wondered what he’d look like in formalwear.

After Shinjiro placed their bookbags aside, he noticed her distant gaze and ruffled her hair to get her attention. “You okay?”

She blinked and realized she had been daydreaming for a few awkward seconds. Letting out a small chuckle, Airi said in a low, bashful voice, “I never thought… I’d be able to share a Christmas with you. I had a lot of fun. Did you?”

Without hesitation, Shinjiro brought her into a hug. His cheek pressed her neck, and he learned the scent he thought of all night came from her body lotion, leaving her skin unnaturally soft. Feeling her rest her guard completely with him, he whispered in her ear, “This is the Christmas I always wanted… Thank you.”

He felt her tremble giddily in his arms. Airi pulled one hand to his chest and the other to his face, bringing his eyes to meet hers. Neither shied away from the other’s gaze. Their noses grazed briefly and inhaled tempting scents; the lavender overwhelmed Shinjiro, as the last traces of his aftershave did for her. They’ve become used to moments like this but never acted beyond a certain point. Usually Shinjiro would slowly let the mood fizzle out; he never felt quite willing to give up any ounce of control. Airi admired and accepted his restraint, but she sometimes disliked how his occasional paranoid tendencies would keep him too reserved.

They would have let go by now, but Shinjiro’s arms made no hint of it. Airi found herself staring at
his lips – those lips she badly wanted to touch – trembling as they struggled to find the right words. She caressed his cheek, encouraging him to speak. Face turning a pure, dark shade of red not thought possible due to his tan skin tone, Shinjiro mumbled something unintelligible.

Airi patiently waited. He took a deep breath and said more clearly, “I’m ready… Just tell me when, and I won’t hold back~”

Barely letting him finish, Airi’s full, swelling lips parted his. The nervousness that possessed him seconds ago melted away. Shinjiro lightly held her by the back of her neck and deepened the kiss. Her sensual moans begged him to continue, to explore every inch of her, but they had to slow down so they’d reach his bedroom without leaving evidence behind. He carefully put some space between them and led her up the stairs for what felt like forever. Somehow without causing a ruckus or tripping over their restless feet, Shinjiro took Airi into his room and locked the door behind them.

Safe and free to set their pace, they took turns initiating each step. Airi took off his blazer and unbuttoned his shirt as he kissed her more passionately than she was used to. His remarkable affection exhilarated Airi, and she was too entranced to be self-conscious. She lured him to his bed as he undressed her, relishing the slim curves he could finally touch. Once his undershirt and her bra joined the growing pile of discarded clothes on the floor, they embraced and craved the new sensation of skin against skin.

They slowed down to ease themselves into the mood, giving them time to learn more about each other. Airi’s lips studied his chest and found his surgical scar. Shinjiro shuddered as she kissed it, and he searched for her weaknesses to savor. Keeping their voices low and laying still proved more difficult with each passing minute, especially with Airi’s sensitive and ticklish skin left helpless to the strokes, kisses, end gentle bites.

When they were warm and relaxed in the right places, they felt ready enough to go all the way. Shinjiro wrapped themselves in the sheets to keep warm from the room’s slight chill. He snatched protection from the bedside table holding their watches as Airi tore off the last of their clothes. After moving around awkwardly to find a comfortable position, he made the first pushes. After a few times Airi gasped until one movement made her recoil and whimper painfully.

Hearing her cry and feeling her writhe awkwardly beneath him, he remembered the pills and his rage. Heart pounding in his ears for the wrong reasons, Shinjiro got off of her and ignored the overwhelming longing to stay with her. Feeling a limb being ripped away, Airi pulled herself up with him and locked her arms around him.

“Riko… I can’t…”

“I’m alright,” she whispered as she ran a hand through his hair. “It was only a little uncomfortable at first…”

“That’s it though,” His husky voice was dark and strained. “At first’… What if I’m too rough? What if I just can’t control myself? Riko… I won’t hurt you again…”

She kissed his forehead as if doing so would erase his doubts. Hearing his deep, labored breaths made her heart ache. “This is different. I’ll stop you when you’re hurting me. I’m not helpless, Shinji. Trust me.”

After another tender kiss, his grey eyes meet hers at last. Airi recognized the tortured conflict within himself brewing that never seemed to disappear despite her efforts to help him. The grief reminded her of his guilt-ridden outburst over Suzume Amada’s death. His truest feelings emerged most clearly when completely vulnerable and put into a corner, and maybe more than anything, Shinjiro needed
to hear say how much she did trust him.

A great pain pulsed throughout his entire body; he wanted to fall into her completely in spite of his mind’s doubts. Warmth and patience filled Airi’s eyes as she waited for him to give her a sign to continue or not. He spent a few more moments rationalizing his fears until he repeatedly forced himself remember this wasn’t like the time he attacked her. Neither would be completely helpless or lost if they listened to each other, which they strove to do once they became a couple.

Once he calmed down enough, Shinjiro let her take lead. While the discomfort did return to her when they tried again, she clung to him and shivered as pleasure gradually replaced it. The electric euphoria burned through their bodies as they fell back onto the mattress. Airi having slightly more control helped Shinjiro lose himself once more without feeling like he trapped her. After some effort he finally completely let go. A wave of innumerable, indescribable feelings he denied himself and wanted to run away from swallowed him whole. Airi reached her limit not long after him, and his arms caught her limp body. Their eyes met as they lay catching their breaths in tranquil, warm silence.

It ended only briefly; Shinjiro ruffled her hair before getting up to throw away the condom. That short time away and his sweat exposed to the cool air made him regret leaving her, but Airi welcomed him back as if they never separated. Feeling safer by her side, he rested his head on her breast and held her in his arms. She ran her fingers through his hair as they waited for their heart rates to return to normal. When his did with no pain or complications, he kissed the nape of her long-healed neck.

He uttered her name for what seemed to be the millionth time, but it never lost its beauty. Actually feeling her was far more wonderful than he dreamed, and he could only imagine if they made love not long before October 4th. He immediately killed the thought, not wanting to think of him capable of breaking her heart so cruelly.

Unaware of the shadow lingering in her boyfriend’s mind, Airi whispered sleepily but truly, “I love you.”

Hearing her say it, feeling her body rise and fall to a serene melody in time with his breathing forced restrained tears to burn his eyes for the first time in what seemed to be years. For too long he told himself he didn’t deserve to be loved; now he had grown tired of wallowing in misery when he is able to improve his life. Having shared his heart, thoughts, and body with Airi, Shinjiro knew to make the most of this if he were to ever be happy with himself and to be strong enough to live again.

He wondered what she was thinking about but drowsiness took over before he felt any pressing concern to ask. They shared one last kiss before falling asleep soundly in each other’s arms mere minutes to Christmas Day.

December 25, 2009

Much of the day passed without much probing from her dormmates. Junpei announced a bet he and Akihiko made over how long it’d take for the lovebirds to sleep together. Just to mess with them, Airi kept silent and revealed no hints of the truth. While Yukari seemed inquisitive about how little was said about the Christmas date, Mitsuru was the first to figure it out.

“I’m glad your night went well,” she said in the courtyard at the beginning of lunch break.

Airi smiled, not understanding her unusually friendly tone at first. They had not crossed paths that
morning because of Student Council duties. She seemed more relaxed today, but were there clues she picked up on without Airi knowing? “Thanks… but how’d you know?”

Her face turned a shade of red matching her hair, but maintained a polite and amicable nature, “To put it without offense, I noticed Shinjiro’s aura around you. Yamagishi once said she could estimate the quality of a relationship people had based on how much their Personas shared an aura. It’s similar to when a cat marks its scent on a person it likes, only it’s mutual… I’ve only recently begun to notice a grain of this phenomenon.”

“I-I see…” mumbled Airi. She wondered how that could happen, and how potent that aura lingered on her… and which Persona had it. Thinking about that and last night most especially sent an embarrassed shiver up her spine.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. I only wish for you two to be happy.” Not an ounce of disapproval lingered in her voice. She seemed to have finally stepped down from her lonely throne and spoke to Airi as a friend. Such thoughtfulness made Airi happy, and she thanked Mitsuru earnestly for her encouragement.

Junpei, Yukari, and Aigis ultimately found and invited them to lunch with Akihiko and Shinjiro, but Mitsuru declined, claiming she needed to work on Student Council paperwork. Once Airi and the others left the area, sadness festered in her heart.

She took off one of her gloves and studied the ring on her finger. Made of pure silver and adorned with eight small diamonds surrounding a larger carat gem, Ueno gave it to her not long after the engagement announcement. As pretty as she admitted it was, she found the piece of jewelry cliché and hollow. She didn’t resent the idea of a Westernized tradition, but the bestowed item inherently displayed a public image, not love. Ueno insisted on putting on the ring for her, and he made incessant comments about her scars, suggesting plastic surgery or make-up to cover the “ugly gashes”. Mitsuru held her tongue, itching to give him a verbal freezer burn, because she knew fighting against this behavior for the rest of her life would drive her insane if she started now.

The choice to marry Ueno haunted her the moment she saw Akihiko’s face after the dinner. With an intense expression she could not explain, he left the dorm without saying hello the next morning. Since then he spoke minimally to her in group settings; they had not had a single private conversation since the announcement. Unable to get his attention to reason with him, Mitsuru focused on things she could control. She regretted having left Akihiko’s foul behavior to the others’ devices, but she struggled to think of what to tell him without being accused of stupidity and selfishness.

Until she figured that out, she often stared into space when alone. No one in the hallway noticed her, giving her the opening to slip her glove back on and went on her way to the Student Council meeting room.

She read through the paperwork for end-of-year reports, but the words blurred together into a tangled orgy of bureaucratic nonsense. The ticking clock droned too loudly to concentrate and decipher the language she had become used to thanks to the Group. Her mind drifted to Akihiko, even though she had been trying to not drive herself crazy about him. Mitsuru had a calm mind, but this agitation gave her a headache and ruined any chance of an appetite. Frustrated by her lack of progress, she refused to touch her food or look at any more papers until she went on a walk.

The halls were mostly empty. A few teachers and students greeted her when they passed, unaware of the hurricane of feelings brewing underneath her guarded demeanor. An underclassman girl she passed seemed to have followed her down a few corridors before realizing Mitsuru lead her into a circle on purpose. Junpei might have mentioned her as some kind of stalker from the same photography club who took pictures of Airi at the beginning of the year, a passing detail Mitsuru was
surprised to have remembered.

Despite getting fresh air outside by the observatory, Mitsuru felt no better than before. She sat on a bench, folded her arms, and sighed. She hoped Yukari would have some idea what’s going on, even if she’d likely tease her and claim it’s because she was in love or something. Airi might be more open-minded, but somehow the topic of love would come up. There was more to life than love, and yet Mitsuru knew she neglected to think about it due to her ignorance and studiousness.

She wondered why love was the first idea that popped in her head. It’s not like she imagined anyone in a way that would hint that she had romantic or sexual feelings for them. Airi could help with that given her experience, but it felt wrong to bring it up when she had far greater problems than Mitsuru did. Thus, the cycle of disappointment persisted.

“Hello, Miss President.”

Mitsuru glanced up at a junior who seemed to one of the girls who ended up unconscious when Fuuka went missing. Her hair was clearly bleached and her uniform tackily customized for whatever subculture she seemed to be following this week.

“Yes, how may I help you?”

The junior folded her arms and flipped her hair over her shoulder like some stereotypical American teenager from another decade. “Oh, nothing really, except every girl and her mother has noticed Akihiko-sempai’s been even more of a jerk lately. You live in the same dorm as him, so you probably know what’s going on.”

The word choice confused Mitsuru, but she did not hint at this. “If you wish to know, why not ask him rather than seek out second-hand knowledge?”

“Oh, so you do know!” the girl’s eyes widened in improvised shock. “If you did something to make him upset, something bad might happen. Happened to me when I teased Yamagishi one too many times.”

Mitsuru graciously stood up, making the girl back away a good foot. Her authoritarian persona manifested. “Threatening the Student Council President and encouraging rumors against a fellow classmate needlessly harms the reputations of everyone involved. It’s bad enough we’ve had bullying reports and Tenebre recruitments in the school. Is it worth all this trouble when there are more pressing and threatening issues that must be resolved?”

Speechless, the girl slouched and backed further away from her. When Mitsuru relaxed her guard somewhat, the junior made a comment in a much more apparently passive-aggressive tone. “F-Fine. Making an epic speech to protect your boyfriend, huh? Wait ‘til his fanclub and your fiancé hear about this.” When the bell rang, the girl let out a sly smirk and slipped away before calling out. “And don’t take Tenebre so seriously. They’re a bunch of psycho clowns, but at least they know how messed up the world really is!”

Hearing the defensive retort sent chills down her spine. The cult seemed to consist of adults thus far according to the news, and she dreaded the day when kids and classmates would get involved.

While that worried her, the topic of love brought her back at her original dilemma. More confused than ever, Mitsuru tucked her hair behind her ear as she walked back to her classroom. It was only going to be a baseless rumor, she told herself. There is no way anything could come out of petty high school gossip to threaten her family name and the engagement. Yet when she went to her seat, Akihiko, sitting a few seats in front of her, would be in view the rest of the day as a painful reminder
of her all her unresolved and misunderstood feelings. To make matters worse for her, Mitsuru could see traces of Artimesia’s essence wrapped around Akihiko like a noose.

Chapter End Notes

It would be a disservice if I don't mention that Airi's irrational hatred of mushrooms is not 100% my idea. I stole this quirk from my nurse practitioner mother. "I don’t believe in eating something that grows on your feet" was something she once said to me over dinner with the straightest face and in the most un-ironic tone I ever witnessed from an otherwise rational and open-minded woman. She expects me to give her credit every time I reference this in something I write, so it's very likely mom will be getting a chunk of my royalties if I use this in a published book, haha. XD

Also, this chapter shares its name with a song by The Rasmus, another band whose music I played to death in college. At this point, I feel tempted to make a playlist of all the music I remember I listened to extensively while writing this fic since the list is kinda long.
December 26-27, 2009

Outside of a run-down dive bar in the back alley a small crowd of twenty-four loitered around with bats, knives, and guns and waited quietly. Some people whispered as they checked their watches and phones. Nearly ten at night and no word or sound of chaos erupted in the area.

A young man sat on the foot of the stairs with a laptop, lopsided headphones, and a half-burnt cigarette. His disheveled, tangled hair was often died black, but the chestnut roots began to show. Two of his regular group of friends turned to him when he let out a groan. “The Kansai-ben's site's still dark.”

“You still think he’s alive?” asked a long-faced woman in her mid-twenties. “No one’s seen him in weeks.”

“The doc’s gotta be hidin’ ‘im,” he replied, throwing his cigarette to the ground. “They probably went underground after sendin’ out some big message that they don’t need more meetin’s.”

A bleach-haired fifteen year old rolled his eyes. His friend, a Gekkoukan freshman, said quietly, “But Hera would’ve found out by now, Oz?”

“Exactly why I’ve been starin’ at this screen for five fuckin’–”

Before he finished talking, the revenge website went back online with an encrypted message on the screen. Oz had to wait five minutes for an email with a summary of the planned attack. Letting out a curse, he read it aloud to the group: “12/27 target: Nanjo-Kirijo Power Plants in SW Iwatodai. Police have been contacted for disarmament.”

The Gekkoukan student whistled his amazement. “That’s pretty ballsy. They’re going nuclear now?”

“So they don’t need us ‘civvies’ then. What’s the point of being here?” complained another student.

Oz continued, “Potential interception at 23:30 tonight. Do not let them infiltrate the plants. - Hera.”

Everyone expressed some form of concern over the plan, mainly at the fact that the cult now wanted to blow up a power plant as a belated holiday present. “We’re in over our heads,” said a young woman, still dressed in her custodian clothes at a nearby office building after her afternoon shift. “I get the turf fights, fires, and hit-and-runs, but can we handle a bomb?”

“We have no choice. Those guys are the reason people like my father are succumbing to Apathy Syndrome,” a well-dressed thirty-year-old man replied, placing a hand on his pocket where he kept a gun. “Once Umezaki’s friend returns, we should go immediately.”

“Speak of the devil,” Oz slurred, pointing at the group arriving from his left.

In a black leather jacket, ripped skinny jeans, and an Iggy and The Stooges shirt, his friend entered the alleyway with a face the group had become accustomed to. Still in uniform, Kurossawa finished reporting his arrival at the meeting point to his men before greeting the crowd. “Good evening. Have you been informed?”
“Just got the memo,” said Oz with an honesty most of his kind would never express to the police.

Iggy whistled. “Hera's damn fast. Ya mighta got it right after the boss here.”

Kurosawa nodded. “Two officers confirmed suspicious activity in the plants a minute ago, confirming the report we received earlier. We still have time to stop the attack as long as you are ready to go immediately. If anyone spots Kurebayashi or Shirato, we authorize you to incapacitate and not kill unless they place you in imminent danger.”

The group made last minute preparations before heading out to the mainland and to the southwestern industrial district. Several people split into groups of three to cover the entire district based on the plan the officer devised earlier at the temporary station in Iwatodai.

By eleven some cultists were spotted in one of the more populated areas and were captured by two yakuza allies to the group. Iggy and stayed with some officers in a meeting room of an office building two blocks from the plant and kept up-to-date with everyone’s statuses. No one found the cultists with the bomb, not even the groups patrolling by the waterfront.

“Maybe a bomb is already inside one of the plants,” mused a grey-haired man, standing over a map of the area. “That Shirato might be good enough to make his own on the fly.”

“No one has seen him, and security hasn’t reported anyone fitting his description,” said a frustrated rookie biting his nails. “And I still don’t think he’s as clever as you keep sayin’! I’m sick of these cockroaches!”

Kurosawa stood by a window and studied the plant carefully. “Shirato is skilled enough to use the internet to Tenebre’s advantage. Who knows how many people around the world have found the site and became engrossed in the cult’s ideology.”

“But the action’s all local,” Iggy reminded the impatient and on-edge officers.

“No for long.” Kurosawa pinched the bridge of his nose, wishing someone brought alcohol. “The number of attacks and reports has declined lately, but the Prime Minister doesn’t want Japan to be seen as an incompetent state, especially in the eyes of the Americans, for not controlling a homeland terrorist group.” One of the officers gave Kurosawa a disapproving look, but he ignored it. “The media’s been talking about it for days; it’s not a secret anymore.”

She let out a hopeless sigh and turned back to her laptop where she kept track of video footage from the plant. “I know, but I hate that civilians are involved at all because we can’t handle a pack of delusional teenagers. This makes the Subway Sarin Incident look easy and professional. We're better than this.”

Wanting to say half a dozen offensive words to the woman for her arrogantly insisting that the police are more qualified and competent than they actually were, Iggy bit his tongue. He had to remember to channel his anger at the real enemy.

“I’m thankful there are people who care enough to take action. I won't turn away help freely given when we need it.” Kurosawa played with a box with the ring Takeharu gave him months ago and hoped he and his fellow officers wouldn’t need to use them too frequently. The Dark Hour made him incredibly uneasy and he couldn’t imagine what SEES had to go through on a nightly basis for years on their own before properly awakening their Personas.

A message came in via radio that broke Kurosawa from his thoughts: gunfire went off outside one of the power plants. The female officer confirmed that the cameras did catch someone inside the plant
who suspiciously resembled one of the two wanted men. Iggy warned Oz and his group, closest to the location, so they could surround the man and provide backup.

Unease stirred in his gut. Kurosawa replaced his blazer with a bulletproof vest and ran out of the building before anyone could stop him. The time on his watch told him that he only had five minutes before the Dark Hour would start.

“Put on the rings,” he interrupted one of his angry comrades. “If you see Beta Group, give them your own so they stand a chance! Give Umezaki in Alpha the specialty bullets.”

“These are civvies, sir! Sticks and spit-balls won’t do anything on that freak!”

“We are to disarm and incapacitate,” Kurosawa repeated. “One hour is enough for the cult to plant the bomb and leave before everything returns to normal.”

“But, sir–!"

“They won’t stand a chance either way, and I know they’d rather die trying! Give them the rings and bullets!”

More voices yelled their dissent until Kurosawa turned down the radio. Slipping the ring on, the world darkened and the air thickened around him. His lungs sank and crushed his stomach as he struggled to breathe, but he arrived at the front entrance in time to see two other officers, three of the resistance, and the reported man. Kurosawa steadied his gun and kept a good thirty feet distance from the Persona-user.

Letting out a small chuckle, the man in a white lab coat turned to his last opponent and let out a surprised, lighthearted grin. “Fascinating name, Hideo Kurosawa. Perhaps your mother chose a name for a mortal who dares to confront a god so foolishly?”

“Cease the attack, Aether, or Orpheus won’t have the chance to fight you,” he ordered without flinching.

“What attack do you speak of?”

“The bomb, ya asshole!” screamed Oz, pointing his gun as well. “You and that Kansai-ben shithead’re gonna blow up the plants, ain’t ya?”

The doctor let out another laugh. “Are you sure you’re not dreaming? Or perhaps you are drunk off the clear quintessence of the gods?”

One of the officers ordered, “Step away from the doors and surrender, Sora Kurebayashi!”

When the doctor did not flinch as he wordlessly obeyed, Kurosawa kept his weapon ready. He commanded the second officer and Oz’s companions to investigate the plant to meet up with the other local group. All conventional communication was otherwise severed. Once he thought of the codeword, a voice echoed in his mind. Kurosawa told her about the situation as the policewoman handcuffed the doctor.

“I’m sorry, Kurosawa-san, but that’s not Kurebayashi-san!” Fuuka warned. His eyes widened, showing no other hint of his surprise. “It’s only a projection in the middle of a hazy fog. I need time to find his real body–”

Kurebayashi exploded, spraying crimson fog and shimmering scales everywhere. The force compressed back into the focal point and a snake manifested, coiling around an egg. Oz stammered a
The snake’s mouth opened wide and a smaller snake projected out, latching its fangs into Oz’s arm. He smacked the creature to no avail as he felt its fangs dig into his flesh and scratch bone. It broke away once the officer yanked it off Oz and shot it until it crumbled into dust. Another snake flew at Kurosawa, who ducked out of the way, watched it explode like fireworks into a tree upon impact, and took cover behind a bench. Fuuka checked in to see if he was all right, but he told her to keep searching for the real Kurebayashi.

For what felt like hours, gunfire continued to erupt in the plaza to keep Aether at bay. Kurosawa guessed this was a distraction, but he hoped there were other groups who had any luck finding the real Kurebayashi, Jin, or the bomb. Screams from the distance rang in his ears louder than the gunshots, neither sound helped him sleep well for many months.

Then he heard a woman’s cry and Oz letting a curse slip out. Peaking out of cover, Kurosawa watched five black waterfalls cascade down the lifeless officer’s face from her orifices as she fell face first to the ground. The oasis beneath her slid across the pavement and to the snake, its tongue lapping up every last drop.

Still disoriented from the wound he wrapped with a torn piece of his shirt, Oz continued to shoot it. “What the fuck?!” Adrenaline rushed through his veins as he dropped the bullets while reloading.

Once the snake devoured what was left of the black, it let out a cry sharp enough to shatter glass. Kurosawa and Oz covered their ears and fell to their knees, struggling to resist what seemed to be a siren. Over the noise shaking their bodies, Fuuka warned of agitated Shadows closing in on the group and attempted to guide nearby allies to intercept the monsters. Then a blanket relaxing thoughts rained on the group. Able to ignore the storm of suppressed emotions stirring within themselves, the two men regained composure and continued the assault. Kurosawa’s well-timed bullet to the neck decapitated the serpent and ceased its lure. Aether continued to prepare attacks in spite of its neck squirting the black substance and some Shadows were still coming, but the group regained some control of the field.

Finally the front doors of the plant opened with the other half of Oz’s group and the people who investigated the building. They emerged victorious with a tied-up blue-haired twig of a man. With the mess Aether made and a sea of fantastically bizarre Shadows of mythological and literary creations coming to surround them, Kurosawa called out to Oz as he ran to the party. “Don’t panic, Umezaki! Keep the monster distracted!”

“Easier said than done, boss! I didn’t sign up for this shit cuz I like it!”

The well-dressed man and the officers joined Oz. The Gekkokan student and a female delinquent showed off a silver gun they seized with triumphant smiles. Having little time to celebrate, Kurosawa asked Fuuka to guide the original plant team back to the main office complex. She led them through less concentrated areas of the Shadow swarm, needing only three bullets to startle the minuscule yet terrifying bastards. They only slowed down for Jin to catch his breath, occasionally tripping over his oversized shoes and brittle legs.

Once back and inside, the resistance members opened the coffins of the officers and gave them their rings. An officer led the girl holding Jin, skeletal and mouth taped shut, to another room to begin an interrogation.

“Our group didn’t find the bomb, but there aren’t many Shadows inside,” said the Gekkoukan student before giving up his ring to Kurosawa. “The plant’s too big.”
The older officer asked calmly, “Where did you find Shirato?”

“Near one of the reactors. Yoshiki-san stayed behind to warn the scientists and guards when they get out of their coffins. The bomb squad is ready to scout the areas we haven't searched. They think there might be more than one bomb, but at least we caught the bastard planting them so there aren’t any more we can't see.”

The boy earned a good pat on the back before transmogrifying into a coffin. Kurosawa passed the ring to one of the more level-headed officers. After the woman near the now-unusable computer awakened and recovered from disorientation, she asked, “What's the report so far?”

Kurosawa waited for Fuuka’s assessment, and he passed the information along gravely. “Epsilon and Gamma attacked seven cultists with only two escaping to the train station. Mu, Alpha, and Kappa lost four to the cult, the Shadows, or one of the snake projections. Lambda set half of the street on fire to stop someone who resembled Kurebayashi and twelve of his followers from reaching the Nanjo plant. No survivors.”

The sole female officer in the deadened room wrote the names of the lost whose families she would contact in the morning. Having seen death enough in their years of service, the older officers felt a sickening brand of luck knowing that was the only suicidal act the resistance performed thus far.

“Did anyone confirm Lambda’s sighting of Kurebayashi?” the rookie growled, nearly hitting his cup of cold coffee against the table. With the heater off for a while, everyone began to shiver.

“It was a disguise. Yamagishi-kun is still tracking him down, but she believes she better understands his powers.” Kurosawa sighed and reloaded his gun. “The fact he has not directly confronted anyone in this area has given her some clues to his whereabouts and attack patterns.”

“She’d better. With eight more dead on our side… I don’t want any of us tired without bringing at least one of these bastards down.”

Kurosawa barely had time to relax when Fuuka asked him to help some of the newer recruits in Kappa by the waterfront. The Hour drained him of enough energy to run, but he pressed on knowing SEES had endured worse trials and did far more for the city than he and his men in this fight. He arrived in time to help the sole survivor of the group to shoot one of the two Shadows surrounding her. The custodian beat the other one to a pummeled puddle with her broken bat and nearly broke into tears at the sight of Kurosawa.

Similar cries for help rang through the night and into the early morning. Everyone felt more ease and familiarity with the world outside of the Dark Hour, driving the remaining cultists to flee. By dawn the bomb squad successfully removed all traces of the planted explosives.

No one found Kurebayashi. Fourteen were confirmed dead – three of whom were police on the field, but the cult lost Jin and twenty-six of their numbers. The report reached the news that day, saddening many for the losses but relieving more when no bomb detonated.

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December 31, 2009

Airi and Shinjiro thanked Koromaru for being talkative. The teasing lasted for days, only dying down slightly by New Years Eve once Airi asked Mitsuru to execute the worst offenders. Despite losing to the bet, Akihiko seemed thrilled to have an excuse to mock Shinjiro as revenge for his best friend’s years of shameless grief about his love life. Junpei had nothing but supportive words for
Airi, save for the same warnings nearly everyone else gave if her boyfriend ever broke her heart. Koromaru had been unapologetically incessant despite Aigis clearly explaining human anatomy and sexuality on multiple occasions after conducting much research online and at the school library.

“He still expects you will deliver a litter of puppies soon,” Aigis said hopelessly as she and Airi walked to Paulownia Mall to join Yukari and Mitsuru for karaoke after school.

“Must be fun being a dog with no worries in the world,” Airi groaned, pulling the hood of her coat over her eyes. “Shinjiro-kun seems like he'd die from a panic attack if he got me pregnant even if we somehow made the chance of that happening be 0%.”

“According to numerous post-industrial culture myths, a teenage boy willing to wait and plan carefully for sex is a rarity,” she said plainly, making Airi agree but hide her face in embarrassment. “You are very lucky, Airi-san. I hope you two continue to be cautious.”

“Th-Thanks, Aigis.”

A snowflake fell on Aigis’ nose and her eyes crossed to focus on it. “But to a more comfortable topic, have you made a decision for when Ryoji-san returns?”

Barely fazed, Airi said with a small smile, “I have. We’re finishing this mission to the end. Why?”

“There’s a part of me that wishes everyone would agree to forget everything,” she admitted, lowering her head bashfully. “I fear the knowledge and pressure of what we’ve endured will distract us enough that we’ll fail. However, watching you fall and rise back up on several instances made me realize how… cowardly I am for thinking this way. I cannot imagine everything you went through, but I believe your pain is real. What kind of… person would I be to give up when I overcame only a fraction of your hardships?”

Airi grabbed the girl by the arm and made her look at her. Aigis’ blue eyes glistened and blinked. “Here I am… crying when I was never designed to do so…”

Airi gave her a tissue from her pocket. “I don’t want you to think I’m more important because I supposedly suffered more than you. No two people cope with bad things the same, so it’s not fair to compare.”

“I remember you said the same to Mitsuru-san. I should have considered your words more carefully.”

“You’re still learning,” Airi assured with a wider smile. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Aigis.”

Eyes dry, the girl nodded and continued walking through the mall. “If you do not mind my asking, how accurate was Ryoji when he said I realized my humanity?”

“Very accurate. You’ve held back your feelings for a while, but I think you understand humans better than you give yourself credit for. Is that scary for you?”

Before she could reply, Yukari and Mitsuru waved to them outside of the karaoke bar. A teal-haired girl stood between them with a huge smile and waved cheerfully. The urge to cry overcame Aigis again. “Fuuka-san!” she cried as she ran to her and gave a dramatic hug. “Welcome home!”

Feet dangling off the ground, Fuuka laughed and patted her back kindly. “I’m glad to see you too Aigis… but I can’t breathe…”

“Her parents allowed her to stay here for the New Year!” said Mitsuru, unable to hold back her mellow brand of joy.
“This will be a multicultural New Year to remember!” beamed Yukari, bouncing up and down like a hyperactive puppy. “And I can give her the presents I bought!”

Once Aigis let go, Fuuka rocked on the balls of her feet and played with her pigtails. “I’ll also be here the weekend of January 31st. There is no way you’re saving the world without me!”

Airi hugged her too. “Welcome back, Fuuka!”

The girls enjoyed karaoke all afternoon and returned to the dorm, stirring similar reactions from the rest. Koromaru tackled her without shame, and Ken disappeared upstairs for a moment, only to return with a present for Fuuka.

“A glow-in-the-dark laptop bag? My old one was falling apart! Oh, thank you, Ken-kun!” She beamed and hugged the bag. Ken blushed uncontrollably and scratched the back of his neck.

“Damn, you gonna ask her out too while you’re at it, kiddo?” teased Junpei, making the boy kick him in the shin.

“Good to see you alive, Fuuka,” said Akihiko, sitting on the couch and twisting his body around to greet her. “Did you gain weight?”

A magazine went flying from the dining room and hit the boxer in the back of the head before anyone else had the chance to react. “That’s not something you ask a girl after she’s been gone for a month, you moron.”

“I’m serious! Fuuka looks healthier and seems more mature since we last saw her—“

“Just shut up, Aki,” Shinjiro groaned as he left his seat and joined the party. “You doing ok, Fuuka?”

The attention made her blush but her smile didn’t fade. “O-Of course! I missed everyone so much!”

“I took your things to your door,” said Ken proudly and gave her the key. “Nothing much has changed to the dorm since you last came by.”

“No attacks, no spooky letters, no threats, nothing,” Junpei added with a smirk as he crashed on the armchair. “So make yourself comfy while the married couple makes dinner!”

Shinjiro shot a glare that could have lasered a hole in the boy’s baseball cap. Taking none of it too seriously, Fuuka gave Airi and Shinjiro sympathetic looks as she returned to her old room to unpack. Everyone else stayed in the lounge, watching TV or playing card games.

A few hours passed as dinner came close to completion. Fuuka took over Airi’s place for a while and had the pleasure of Shinjiro barking orders and correcting her silly little mistakes. Junpei and Akihiko made bets over what food they’d eat while Ken questioned the plausibility of everything they conceived.

“Clearly they haven’t set a foot in a kitchen in their whole lives,” droned Yukari, mildly more interested in the squabble than the terrible reality TV show Mitsuru, Koromaru, and Aigis critiqued. “Well, except that one time not long ago.”

“Hey, don’t hate, Yuka-tan! At least my ideas aren’t entirely based on protein, unlike the boxing dork here!”

“Everything you said is so full of carbs and sugar, I’m amazed you’re not gaining weight! Are you an American and never knew it, Junpei?”
“What are ya, my mom? Your naggin’ is so bad I want nothin’ to do with your bodybuilding obsession! No wonder Shinjiro-sempai punches ya twice a day!”

Akihiko and Junpei continued bickering with Yukari trying to keep them under control and Shinjiro yelling at all of them to shut up. Mitsuru sighed and massaged her throbbing forehead. The ring on her finger cooled her face through the fabric of her glove but offered no comfort.

The lush aroma of wonderful food possessed everyone, who stopped everything they did, and ran to the dining room where Fuuka and Shinjiro placed all the dishes. A mix combination of Japanese, Irish, Scottish, and French cuisine buried the table, and no one doubted the quality.

Arms full of oddly shaped and sized presents, Airi rushed down the stairs. “Awesome! I can warn you guys in time!”

Koromaru tilted his head and let out a bark that did not need to be translated; everyone shared his confusion.

“It’s nothing scary. I only hid a few things in the food, and if anyone finds something, it’ll promise them good luck in the New Year! I had to improvise and create new meanings for some things though…”

Ken kept a polite tone, but his face turned pale. “What kind of things?”

“Stuff we washed ahead of time so you ain’t gonna get sick,” said Shinjiro simply, placing two bowls of different food for Koromaru.

As the dog eagerly dove in, he whined and coughed out a simple toy ring. He gave Airi a look, but she giggled and said, “Congrats! You’ll find a lady Koro-chan and have lots of puppies in the New Year!”

Akihiko snorted with his drink nearly coming out of his nose; Junpei hend onto his seat to stay upright as he laughed until his face turned blue. The dog let out a low nonthreatening growl. Yukari and Fuuka pet him gently and teased.

“We’ll help take care of your babies, Koro-chan,” beamed Yukari.

“Karma and I know you’ll be a great father, Koro-chan,” added Fuuka.

“I believe the joking will be less frequent now that he understands,” Aigis said confidently. “This unique custom will be entertaining to experience, so let us eat!”

“That’s my line,” said Shinjiro, smirking in spite of his annoyed tone.

Once everyone sat down and ate, the feast was too delicious for anyone to speak. Conversation struck up again when someone found an item, which seemed quite often.

“Akihiko-kun will have great wealth in the coming year!” announced Airi when the boxer picked out a coin.

He stared at it blankly. “Isn’t it superstition though? Will I win a lottery or–“

“Just shut up and be happy,” Junpei patted him on the back. “At least your thing was easy to catch. I nearly swallowed my wishbone!”

“Good luck has not arrived to Junpei-san yet,” Aigis stated the obvious with a shrug.
Mitsuru used her chopsticks to take out a little heart-shaped charm lodged in the stuffing. She examined it cautiously and held it up. “What does this mean, Fujihara?”

“You’ll be surrounded by love next year.”

Her face turned pink as the girls giggled. “Th-That’s terribly vague, it could mean anything.”

“It means whatever you make of it.” Airi said, covering her mouth and finishing her bite of pudding. “Ma and Pa always wanted us to laugh and look forward to the New Year. These little surprises always kept me and Blair hoping for the future and that good things will happen and arrive in funny ways.” She twitched, feeling something stuck in her mouth. It was a mini anchor pendant. “Safe travels for me.”

Mitsuru thought over it, and let out a small smile. “You are very fortunate to have them in your life, Fujihara. I believe we will succeed, and you will finally return home to your family.”

The girl nodded intensely so no one would see her melancholic eyes. She ate quicker than normally to avert her eyes. Some of her friends noticed the odd behavior but said nothing.

Dinner and desert went very well with Shinjiro finding a ring – turning Koromaru’s mood back around, Yukari another coin, Ken a meditative rock with the kanji for growth engraved, Fuuka a thimble for resourcefulness, and Aigis a toy shield for protection. They sat around and took wild, hilarious guesses as to what some of the things could happen in the New Year that would fit their trinket. Fuuka had no room to voice her opinion on her item’s meaning; SEES insisted her role in stopping the power plant attack proved she didn’t need any more resourcefulness.

Once Airi was ready to give away her presents, it was nearly eleven and everyone had finished dessert. She walked around the table and gave everyone his or her gift. They opened them as soon as she sat back down, reactions varied.

Ken jumped out of his seat and gawked at the new black spear, longer than his previous ones but sturdier with a sharper blade and a red snake engraving wrapped around the shaft. “AWESOME! It’s just like in that one manga I read the other day! I can take on Shadows or cut a train in half with this!”

“If only you were here back in May,” Yukari said nervously. “You’d probably change your mind—“ Inside her box lay her new weapon with gold engravings along the sleek wood. “A Chinese composite bow!” she gasped, stroking the string delicately. “I’ve always wanted one!”

“How on earth did you obtain these, Fujihara?” Placing her immaculate Italian rapier, Mitsuru instinctively reached for her phone to call Kikuno. “I will reimburse you for spending a fortune on all of us.”

Waving her hands, Airi replied, “Please don’t worry. Theo fused some of my Personas into our old weapons and held onto them until the right time.” She lifted up her new naginata with a teal feather tied along the shaft. “They should help enhance everyone’s abilities.”

Akihiko tried on his pair of heavy brass knuckles and smirked. “These fit great. Caesar’ll be ready for a good fight!”

After some persuasion Junpei tested his katana on Shinjiro’s bludgeoning rod in the foyer. A few hits made the joker step back and admit his sempai had the more powerful, crushing weapon. Knife in muzzle, Kuromaru practiced some attacks on an invisible dummy and expressed his contentment. Fuuka helped Aigis upgrade her guns and rocket launchers.
“What did you receive?” Aigis asked while tapping the metal to determine durability.

Fuuka showed her the necklace with a blue circular pendant with white and black circles in the center. “It’s a nazar, or an evil eye charm. A friend from school is obsessed with Turkish culture. She spends far more time in tech club learning Turkish and buying jewelry than learning how to program.”

“Y’know, I feel like Yuka-tan can’t hurt me anymore,” Junpei dared say out loud as he and his sparring partner returned to the table. Said girl shot him a dubious stare. “Yeah, I’m kidding! But seriously, I don’t think wind can hurt me or Trismegistus like it used to.”

“I feel similarly about fire whenever I grip my weapon,” said Mitsuru, testing her sword’s sharpness and grasping the silver hilt. “The Personas used must have enhanced our weapons and crafted a resistance to our weaknesses.”

Akihiko felt confident knowing he didn’t feel crazy. “Can’t say ice won’t slow me down anymore, but I get the feeling I won’t be needing as much rest or chewing souls to use magic.”

“I won’t need as much homunculi anymore! What about you, Koromaru?” He proudly replied to Ken with a chipper bark.

“Thank you, Theo-san,” Fuuka muttered with her head lowered. “And thank you, Airi-chan, for everything.”

Yukari bit her lip and raised her hands defensively. “W-Wait… why make it sound like this is final?”

“I don’t mean to. I only want to say it now in case I don’t have another moment. No matter what happens from here on out, I will never regret meeting everyone. This is the first time I’ve met and befriended so many wonderful people. I’ll protect Airi-chan from anything Nyx, Erebus, the Nine, and Tenebre throw at her. This time Airi-chan will finally be free.”

Many of her friends silently nodded, and Koromaru let out an approving howl. A familiar glow in Aigis’ eyes did not escape Mitsuru and Fuuka’s attentions as she said, “I choose to live and never falter in this mission again. That is my final answer.”

Holding up her glass of sparkling cider, Mitsuru announced, “Then let us toast to the end of Tenebre, the Children, and the Dark Hour.”

“To better days in the New Year!” Ken joined in.

“To Nyx and Erebus shovin’ their plans up their asses and goin’ back to whatever hell pit they came from!” whooped Junpei. Akihiko and Shinjiro cheered “Damn straight!” in unison.

“To the millions I’ll make off a swear jar!” added Yukari.

Recovering from a fit of laughter, Airi sniffled quietly and ignored her stinging, misty eyes. “To the greatest friends anyone could ever hope for.”

The warm playful toast set the mood permanently for the rest of the night. The routines and fun continued in hilarious attempts at singing holiday songs (with Airi’s accent and Mitsuru’s failure to hit high notes causing uproar), playing a variety of games (which stirred a newfound rivalry between the sexes), and diving into pastries Airi and Fuuka experimented on during cooking club.

Time was a forgotten guest, lost in the mirth.
United in their mission, their hearts swelled with passion so strongly that the lone boy standing outside the front door could feel it. His arm fell limp by his side and could not muster the strength to knock. Tears silently streamed down his face as he turned and walked down the stairs and into the night. The green mist fell upon the world and the boy writhed as he dissolved into smoke, ascending to the unusually large full moon. His mouth vanished; the agony of having his body return to his true home where his body will metamorphize into a permanent tomb for his humanity could never be heard by Airi or her friends.

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes it can be tricky to untangle headcanon from actual canon, but I know for certain that Kurosawa's first name is 100% my creation. Persona has a lot of unanswered questions, and his first name is probably one of the least important ones. Oh well, it was fun though.
January 1, 2010

New Years Day celebrations continued at Naganaki Shrine. The girls donned lovely kimono, and the most the boys did was shave (which Ken gloated about not having to worry about for once) and wear clothes with no folds and creases. Everyone made their wishes and debunked several pathetic rumors Junpei attempted to fed a naïve Ken.

“This traditional clothing is quite interesting. However, it’s difficult to move in…” stated Aigis, trying to not tear any fabric and walking as a stereotypical robot.

“It’s perfectly fine to wear underwear under a kimono, Ken-kun,” Airi articulated clearly and ignored Yukari, Fuuka, and Shinjiro getting flustered and trying to silence her over the topic. “And if a woman decided not to, it’s none of the business of snooping, peeping boys.”

Face nowhere near as red as the other members of his sex, Ken nodded maturely. “I thought so. Thanks, Airi-san.” Eyine Junpei, he added, “I think you shattered a man-child’s hopes and dreams.”

“You little brat!” he groaned, burying his face into his ball cap. “I’m too young and friendly to be a pathetic hikikomori!”

“Women wearing underwear under kimono breaks men’s REM sleep in pieces?”

“H-He’s joking, Aigis,” mumbled Fuuka. Her hair had grown long enough to wear a beaded headband.

“Geez… still oblivious…” Shinjiro muttered darkly, facepalming and inching away from the kid. He was the only male in the group to dress for the occasion, impressing the elderly, baffling the adults, and scaring the kids around them. “Let’s change the subject before strangers get weird ideas…”

By the front gate Mitsuru stood and waited for Akihiko and Koromaru to return. They went out on a walk for twenty minutes and missed nothing particularly eventful. Akihiko adjusted his scarf as he walked up the stairs; the mutt ran to greet the others, now talking about what wishes they would make. The silver-haired boy’s eyes met Mitsuru’s, and rather than walk away as he had done for the past few weeks, he brushed off his grudge and confronted her. Realizing how the kimono’s colors complemented her pale skin and red hair her made his skin warm, but Akihiko pushed back any thoughts about how well her body wore the attire.

“Happy New Year, Akihiko,” she mumbled.

“Happy New Year.”

There was silence between them for three minutes. Strangers gave them odd looks but found nothing scandalous about their obvious awkward tension.

“I am sorry for my behavior. I understand if you are very angry with me,” Mitsuru began as she placed her hands behind her back and stared at her sandals. “I succumbed to the Group’s pressure when I had not recovered from my father’s death. Ueno will be my husband after I graduate, but he asserts no true influence on my personal activities and relations.”
The bomb dropped, but Akihiko barely flinched. “You don’t mind him calling me subhuman?”

“I absolutely do mind!” she retorted, positively but politely indignant. “As soon as we left, I told him to never demean someone because of his or her social status. Ueno said he would consider it, only to belittle a young entrepreneur at the party who wished for the Group to endorse his small but thriving new business.”

Her words were exactly what he feared. Letting out a frustrated sigh, he asked, “Then why marry a jackass who doesn’t listen to you?”

“Akihiko—” she began, sounding like a mother dismissing her child’s plea for a toy.

“I’m serious. Why…” What he wanted to say died in his mouth: Why enter a loveless marriage where neither party respects each other? Why marry someone who hates your friends? Instead he settled with, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I presumed you would disapprove… and I feared you would hate me or call me a coward. Much of my life has been planned before me, and I do not always know when and how to make my own choices instead of following a predetermined path.” She let out a sigh and regained some composure after running her mouth. “You don’t need to forgive me, but you deserve to know the truth.”

Hearing her pour her heart at the speed of a hyperactive hamster on coffee was rare. The script seemed planned ahead but nonetheless real. Akihiko thought through her words and read her face, pain and worry in her eyes betrayed her otherwise retrained face.

Everything seemed genuine, but one question lingered on his mind and he couldn’t stop himself from saying it. “Do you love him?”

The poor girl was a deer paralyzed by the headlights of a speeding vehicle. “It’s not about love, Akihiko…”

“Ever think it ought to be worth thinking about?” he tried to say it with care, but the execution was very sloppy and full of anger. “Not long after you first told us about Shadows, your father told me and Shinji how you gained your powers. He didn’t want you trapped in your family’s isolated world, Mitsuru. The damn Group shouldn’t dictate your life, and there isn’t only one way to live. You have to figure it out yourself, even if you make mistakes.”

Her lip trembled as she processed his words.

When she could not come up with a counterargument, Akihiko added, “I’m sorry. I just… You have more power than I will ever earn, and I want you to be happy with that agency so you can use it on your own terms. No man who plans to be your husband should have the right to boss you around like that guy does, especially when he doesn’t value your voice. You should only submit to him because you know you completely trust him.”

Mitsuru shivered and stared at her feet. They were words she did not expect, but Akihiko had seemed more willing to look out for her in the past few months, hadn’t he? Keeping a guard up around him ended up straining their relationship, and she realized how little she changed at all.

That realization sparked an impulse in her she did not experience since the day she bought her motorcycle behind her parents’ backs. She closed the gap between them and looked into Akihiko’s eyes. His skin turned beat red from head to toe, but her boldness did not make him want to pull away… yet.

“He invited me to celebrate the New Year in Paris,” she said. The only hint of pride in her rebellion
was reflected in how her eyes sparkled more vibrantly than her earrings in the sun – a rare sight. “I’m grateful Yamagishi returned so I could excuse myself… And I wanted to make amends with you.”

Akihiko’s eyes widened in disorienting shock; he couldn’t help but feel some happiness about her defiance against her fiancé. Clearly Mitsuru wanted to say more, but she quickly added as she put distance before anyone noticed, “Please don’t tell the others, especially Aigis and Shinjiro.”

“O-Of course…” His pale skin was likely still violently red, but he ignored that obvious emotional expression.

“Thank you. They overthink our relationship far too often.” She smiled, cheeks glowing a tender pink. “Speaking of which, let us rejoin them. I think they’re planning a group picture…”

“Y-Yeah… I’ll make a wish to play along and boost our luck.”

She laughed. “Everything has worked out thus far; we’ll be fine.”

Some of their anxieties vanished once they rejoined the noisy group, now making a big deal out of a few words Fuuka said about her new tech club and online friends. Listening to the relationship squabbles of others helped set aside their issues, but Mitsuru’s still choosing Ueno felt more painful than when he first met the guy. Perhaps it was the crisp scent of her perfume no longer distinctly lingering in the air and stirring Akihiko’s thoughts. The sight of her in a kimono and the fact she had stood up to her fiancé seemed good enough for now.

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January 2, 2010

With Fuuka leaving tomorrow, SEES agreed to check out Tartarus and continue investigating. Upon entering and sending a team up consisting of Yukari, Ken, Junpei, and Mitsuru to the last topmost floor explored, the sixth and last block opened.

“Looks like a castle of crystal up here,” remarked Yukari via telepathy. “How many floors do we have left?”

Fuuka was silent for a second, allowing Juno to scan carefully. “Twenty-nine until the last barricade. I believe it’ll open at the end of the month.”

“Should we focus on the Abyss instead? We still don’t know how much more there is to it, right?” asked Ken.

Akihiko shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Nothing here’s really a challenge for us anymore.”

A memory from the last expedition made Koromaru’s hair stick out on end. Aigis stared at him, tilting her head slightly. “I believe he is worried about the encounters being more ‘brutal’ than we’re used to.

“You ‘believe’?” Airi repeated, just as confused as her friends upon hearing the word.

“For some reason I am having a more difficult time understanding Koromaru. I comprehend his feelings, but not always what he’s actually saying. Perhaps my becoming more human has something to do with it…”

Koromaru’s eyes drooped, but his tail wagged as fervently as always. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. That won’t change how he feels ‘bout ya,” said Shinjiro as he petted the dog, tail wagging contently.
The decision to go down was met once the search team returned from the 220th floor and defeated the guardian with little input from Fuuka. Upon returning, a slightly shaken but unharmed Mitsuru approached Airi. “Are you certain you’re comfortable with me leading a group?”

That had to have been the seventeenth time she asked ever since Airi proposed the idea yesterday. Discussion of the battle strategy served as the main topic of last night’s dinner and everyone placed their few cents with less tension and conflict than has been seen in months. “I still have to iron out some parts of the final attack plan, but I know we all can’t be in one place together. Once you become used to this in the Abyss of Time, you’ll be ready to lead the Nyx Annihilation Team without my or Fuuka’s guidance.”

Mitsuru was about opened her mouth to protest, but she bit her lip instead. She did muster a small comment. “I will try…”

“You won’t fail,” Yukari jumped in immediately. “You’ve got us around for a reason.” The hopeful and supportive glances from the others made Mitsuru blush.

“So what are we waiting for?” Junpei bounced on the tips of his toes. “Let’s get ‘em!”

The teleporter served as the best way to return to the Abyss without getting caught up in powerful enemies in the Monad Depths. All ten of them arrived by the lush green tree standing alone in a sea of sand. Still air allowed everyone to see further than possible in a desert. To their left was the cave they emerged from initially and a tiny, blurry diagonal line on their right seemed to be the stairs from which Ken, Koromaru, and Chidori came from. Nothing existed between their location and the exits, save for a door standing thirty feet from the trunk of the tree. Leaves and branched carved into the wood, and the door handle crafted in an obelus.

Everyone had one last chance to ready him or herself before entering. They emerged in a familiar series of maze-like hallways, set in a red palace with large windows looking out into a misty unreachable world, where clouds spiraled and folded into bizarre shapes that would never manifest in the real world. With the maze very similar to the structure of Tartarus, they last stopped at the thirteenth floor.

Shadows noticed their presence and quickly dashed to attack. The new weapons gave the team a superior advantage as they rushed through. Shinjiro only had to charge up one mighty blow from his mace to slaughter the Sky Balance to pieces. Koromaru danced around a Snake and slashed him at all sides while Kala-Nemi instantly killed it with light. The fire exploding from one Shadow made Mitsuru instinctively twitch, but the flames barely tickled her; she impaled the creator and kicked it off her rapier for good measure. Akihiko and Junpei counted how many Shadows each of them defeated and occasionally getting lectures from Yukari trying to heal them when they recklessly messed up.

When another wave of enemies arrived, Airi summoned the horned mother goddess Cybele. An orb of white light with specs of rainbow dust surrounded her and flew across the hallway in streams and exploded. The attack spread across the maze and wiped out everything on the floor with ease. When the Persona vanished, a wincing Airi slipped a few chewing souls in her mouth and turned to her jaw-less friends.

“How much power are ya hiding?” asked Junpei, impressed and scared.

“It’s not like I can use this much that often…” Airi said, arched over her knees to catch her breath. “I’d rather you guys to get your strength up then have me show off…”

“True, but some of that could’ve helped us in tight spots months ago,” mused Akihiko, actually
much less critical of her than he sounded.

Ken shrugged apathetically and Koromaru seemed anxious to move on. Reading this cue, Aigis suggested everyone move on while having the conversation.

Shinjiro let out a dry laugh and ruffled Airi’s hair. “Remember to show off to your uncle so he knows who he’s messin’ with.” She smirked.

“I’ve noticed this sudden increase in energy has happened in strenuous circumstances,” Mitsuru thought aloud after picking up a few scattered elemental gems and healing patches where Shadows once were. “The Lovers and Takaya were such times, and it seems Thanatos was not immune to it when he attacked the Magician and Aizawa. It doesn’t seem to be efficient, so save it for emergencies, Fujihara.”

Airi nodded. “I learned that the hard way a few cycles back…”

“How can you have this much power, though?” Yukari said as they reached the spiral staircase leading down to the next level.

“Persona is strength of the heart, and Airi-san’s heart must be full of strong emotions wanting to break free.” An impressed reaction and compliment from Fuuka made Ken blush. “At l-least, that’s my guess…”

“You may have a point, Amada,” agreed Mitsuru.

“Or maybe my Wild Card ability is becoming unstable,” Airi said after biting her lip. "Who knows what else this experience is doing to me that I don’t understand yet.”

At the foot of the stairs lay more sand, much to the others’ chagrin. Once the last person reached the fourteenth floor and spread out, the desert with the glowing neon tree manifested with two doors. The one they originally entered was covered in a white blanket while the new one was wooden.

“A loop? Geez, how long is this gonna go on?” pouted Yukari. “At least I’m not tired yet…”

Mitsuru and Fuuka shared a brief conversation with looks alone before the junior said, “We should go through the covered door.”

Some members expressed their disbelief. “It’s not a trap, right?” asked Junpei.

“It is giving off vibes similar to what Arisato and his sister emitted,” Mitsuru said plainly. “It shouldn’t be a trap.”

“Only one way to find out,” said Akihiko. He cracked his knuckles and walked over to Airi and the door. Aside from Aigis’ stiff posture and Koromaru’s low crouch, no one felt passionate enough to stop him.

Airi pulled back the cloth, disintegrating into the air, and the door opened on its own. Their bodies didn’t move, yet an invisible hook dug into their stomachs and pulled them through the blinding light of the doorway.

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Metal clashed against metal, composing a symphony of madness in the crimson coliseum. Black formless figures in the seats bellowed and cheered at the turbulent mêlée below. A white mechanical maiden flipped into the air and unleashed a torrential rainfall of bullets upon her opponents as she
landed on her feet. Their glassy eyes, stoic faces, and unscathed skins made no indication of pain, rendering the onslaught useless. Once the robot landed beside another very much like her but carrying a bludgeoning rod, the group who fought against each other earlier targeted the machines.

She backed away slowly and gasped when her black-painted companion readied her weapon. “Metis! Please don’t kill them!”

“I have no choice, sister,” she said so flatly and more to her mechanized nature than her counterpart. “Your so-called friends won’t listen. There is no other solution but one that involves bloodshed.”

Their conversation was cut short by a column of lightning consuming Aigis. Her joints sparked and the bullet vest she donned tore open, stuffing and bullets pouring out onto the crumbling stone floor. The intensity would have made a human pass out. White-hot sparks danced out of a crack on her chest plate, but Aigis adjusted her balance to stand steadily. That assuring recovery didn’t stop her Metis from retaliating.

“Don’t you dare hurt my sister!” she screamed, bashing the head of her weapon into the skull of the boy whose Persona summoned the electric attack. The fog lifted from his eyes as he lay still. Her injured sister gasped and reached out to him when she sensed his vitals weakening.

“AKIHKO!"’

A girl from the group, who had a layer of the shroud lift from her eyes, let out a scream and sent a titanic glacier in Metis’ direction. The maiden activated Orgia Mode and cut through it effortlessly; the pieces slid into and through the walls of the coliseum in twin explosions. A three-headed dog and giant robot surrounded Metis with purple and white seals trying to encircle her, but he leapt into the air and dodged them, landing gracefully like a flower on water between them. Not holding back her true strength, she kicked the dog aside and shoved the ten-year-old across the arena and into the wall where he fell unconscious.

A katana nearly hit her neck and would have decapitated her if she were human and hesitated. Her rod clashed with the boy’s sword in a parry. Her mighty swings were slower than his, but far more deadly and threatened to throw him off balance. His blue baseball cap fell off his head and he left it be to keep himself alive. Arrows struck against Metis’ metallic body and bounced off; a butterfly-masked lady in a white gown appeared and shielded Metis from additional ice and wind damage from her enemies. The Persona flew to the archer, picked her up like a rag doll, and threw her to the ground.

“Yukari-chan!!” The only human noncombatant cried over the next friend who fell. Her begging everyone to stop was ignored by all but the white maiden, fighting against her stiffened joints.

“Aigis, please stop Metis!”

The black robot eventually knocked the katana out of the hands of the boy she fought and held him in the air by the neck. “Why don’t you stop them? You’re the one with the psychic connection! Convince your stupid friends to stop!”

The girl trembled. Juno could protect her for a time, but if Metis chose to go after her too, she’d be helpless. “I’m trying! Everyone’s so convinced they know the way out that they won’t listen to me!!”

“Either you’re lying, or you’re nothing more than useless.”

“Damn it, Metis!” yelled Junpei, eyes completely clear from corruption. “We all wanna get outta here! Just calm down!”
“Why should I believe anyone after all of this?! You call each other ‘friends’, but I’ve seen nothing but anger, screams, and fights over matters beyond your control! No one takes responsibility for their actions, and they blame another and shame them as if they committed an atrocity! If you won’t see reason and back down, I’ll do more than leave you at the verge of death!”

Blood dripped down the side of her head, but Yukari found a way back on her feet and hit Metis in the head with one end of her bow. A rapier strike to the side forced the maiden to drop the boy. To avenge Junpei Yukari and Mitsuru ganged up on Metis with another attack, but she flipped in the air above and dodged again. Her head twitched as sparks went off at her mask headpiece where an arrow struck.

“You’ve got no right to talk!” screamed Yukari, throwing her dirty and torn sweater to the ground and firing arrows in rapid succession. “You’re the reason we’re trapped here in the first place! You hate us enough to leave us to die without ever learning the truth! I’m not going anywhere until I know what happened to Airi! We have to go back and save her!”

Her red-haired friend stood next to her, crying tears of rage as she pointed her evoker to her head. “For mon ami!”

“H-H-Hey, wait!” stammered Junpei, finally able to breathe without his neck twitching in sore pain.

Artimesia emerged behind her and created another megaton glacier. A tornado of fire surrounded Metis and Koromaru jumped through, latching himself onto her leg, preventing her from leaving.

On the edge with his friends, Ken stood with Kala-Nemi charging up for a powerful attack. He could barely stand without leaning to one side but he yelled over the roaring flames, “I didn’t want anyone else to die, but we can’t leave unless you stop attacking us!”

“YOU HURT MY SISTER! Don’t you DARE blame me for your selfish stupidity!!”

Metis struck Koromaru and sent him flying out of the dying fire with the tips of his fur burnt. He lay on his side, fur singed, wheezing and whining. He let out a surrendering bark before passing out. The sight upset everyone, weakening the mysterious frenzy that took over them, but they readied their Personas to finish off Metis, still antagonistic but seemed unable to move anymore. She glared at everyone and held her rod tightly even when smoke and sparks spewed out of her platform.

“STOP!” Fuuka held her sides and screamed as loud as she could with her real voice, breaking apart along with her heart. “I can’t take this anymore!! Aigis and Akihiko-sempai are ok!! Please stop trying to kill each other!!!”

Everyone froze and saw Aigis limp to her friends with Akihiko on her back. The metal shell on legs was ready to break into pieces, and numerous crackling exposed wires popped out of the sides of her head where her ears could have been.

Face contorted with grief, she begged, “Everyone… please stop… Airi-san would have never wanted this! We disgrace… her memory…”

Whatever traces were left of the spell seemed to have completely lifted. Artimesia vanished and Mitsuru left the ice to melt as she sprinted over to them, tripping over her impractical boots. She helped Aigis put Akihiko down on undisturbed ground and she knelt beside him.

After giving Aigis a shard of a golden key, she looked to her friends, and said, “I’m sorry, Yukari… I-I can’t fight anymore…”

“Why? So we stay stuck here forever?! Don’t you care about what happened--”
“I do care, but not like this!” She nursed Akihiko’s wounds and denied the urge in allow the burning in her throat to agitate sobs. “Airi helped me realize I can’t always rely on myself for everything and turn away others’ help! I was beginning to understand what things in life I’ve missed out on, and then…” She felt Akihiko’s neck and found his pulse. The burning pain overwhelmed her as a mournful sigh escaped her trembling, chapped lips. “Airi, my father and Shinjiro would want us to move on. If another of us dies, their sacrifices would be even more senseless!”

The next one to succumb to grief was Ken. He fell to his knees, held the silver pocketwatch from his pocket close to his heart, and cried into the bloodied ground for his mother, for Shinjiro, for Airi.

Junpei spun Yukari around and clasped his hands on her shoulders. “We gotta calm down. We’ll find a way out, so just…” His eyes were red and he struggled to not break down. “We gotta stop fightin’ each other, Yukari. I miss Aibana so much, but this ain’t gettin’ us anywhere…”

“Why’d she have to die? Why did we fail her?! Why Airi?!” Yukari dropped her bow and Evoker, wrapped her arms around Junpei’s shoulders, and wailed. Junpei twitched at her violent emotions, but he hugged her back, tears soaking his face.

Seeing her friends give up their arms and composure gave Aigis a sense of peace before collapsing. Metis fell to her side in a panic. “Sister!”

“I’m alright…” she said with a weary smile.

The audience booed and hissed at the resolution. With no hope of another match starting, the figures left the coliseum one by one. When they were all gone, Fuuka released Juno and ran to Aigis, who shut herself down to conserve energy.

When the vision ended, the door dissolved into dust, swept away by a sudden gust of wind. Where the door once was lay a piece of a black and blue card. Knees shaking, Airi bent down to grab it, but she fell and lost the strength to stand back up.

She had never known the consequences of her actions except for some hints and implications Theo shared between visits to the Velvet Room. She had never seen her friends so anguished, desperate and in despair all because she died. Worse, she knew that she actually abandoned them. She left them in timelines in which there would be no way for her to come back. By then, her spirit had moved to the next cycle, and they never would know why.

Two freezing hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up. Airi trembled under Mitsuru’s frigid brown eyes, staring so deep into her soul she knew something worse than an execution was coming.

“What the hell was that, Fujihara?”

Everyone shared similar feelings, all directed at her. Airi wished she were on the roof with Aizawa again. She averted her eyes, knowing that the implied shame was more than enough to communicate.

“Whoa, sempai! Let’s talk it out before jumpin’ the gun~” Mitsuru’s glare locked onto Junpei, shutting him up, then returned to her target.

“Answer me, Fujihara!” she repeated, tightening her grip of Airi’s shoulders. “Was that a memory? An illusion? What was it?!”

Airi lost the ability to speak.
“If I could take a guess,” began Aigis, pausing and waiting for Mitsuru to give her permission to speak her mind. When she didn’t move an inch or change her expression, the robot continued, “That was an event that took place in another cycle, sometime after we stopped the Fall.”

“Then why were we still using our Personas?” asked Akihiko, sounding more confused than angry. “It had to have happened before then.”

“Then where was Aibana? We were actin’ like she died! And who was that other robot?”

A deep chill surrounded them, turning air particles into ice and killing the confused speculation. Airi shivered in Mitsuru’s grip and her hands began to turn blue. She felt if they had eye contact, Mitsuru would execute her. Something caught her attention and made her let go of Airi’s only vertical support. Her jelly knees dragged her back to the ground.

It was Shinjiro who approached them, giving his friend a glare, expressing understanding but disapproval in her method. He wrapped his coat around Airi and picked her back to her feet. She couldn’t bring herself to look at his face, and she could only imagine how he felt beneath his terse tone. “Don’t talk, just nod or shake your head when we ask questions. Was that from another cycle?”

Curling into herself in the coat, her head barely stood out, but her nod could be seen.

“Do you know which one?” asked Aigis. Airi shook her head.

“Did that fight take place before the Fall?” asked Ken. Airi shook her head.

“So it was after?” Akihiko guessed. Airi nodded.

“Did you… die?” asked Yukari. She hesitated for a few seconds, but Airi nodded again.

Nine hearts sank into the pits of their stomachs. A whimpering Koromaru ran to Airi and lightly nudged her leg. Mitsuru’s stern face gave way to dread. Ken and Fuuka remained severely quiet the whole time; the former struggled in vain to comprehend what was going on, while the latter trusted Juno to determine Airi’s mental state. She uttered something that seemed like a prayer to keep herself focused.

“You died in every cycle.”

Everyone turned to ice. They didn’t know what was worse, the fact someone said it or that Shinjiro sounded so calm when he spoke.

Airi buried her face in the coat and squirmed in his grasp. Something began to take over her. He tried to console her, but Airi screamed and pulled away from him. His coat slid off her shoulders and Airi’s frantic, fish-eyed stare became imprinted upon everyone’s minds. Fuuka quickly used Juno to link with Airi.

“GET OUT OF MY HEAD! YOU’LL TELL THEM EVERYTHING!!

“I don’t want you to go insane, Airi-chan! Please let me help you calm down!”

Airi dried the tears in her eyes and her knees fell upon the sand once more. “You don’t get it! Now I really can’t fail or everything will disappear!”

“What do you mean?” Mitsuru inquired more gently, guilty for driving Airi into this state.

“The original timeline will return! Everything here will be undone! Everything that went right…
every new moment… the cultural festival, New Years’, October 4th… everything!” Tears overflowed, but she kept her voice as steady as possible. “I thought all the cycles stopped with my death! But I was wrong! I didn’t know!”

Feeling his own eyes sting, Ken sat down with her. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t want to die! I didn’t want to die, and I hated myself for making things worse every time I relived this year! I didn’t stop Ikutsuki from killing Mitsuru-sempai’s dad. I yelled at Yuka when she asked questions I thought were stupid. I laughed at Junpei for liking Chidori. I kicked Shinji out for being irresponsible. I kept putting Fuuka in danger. I couldn’t save Mitsuru from the Emperor and Empress Shadows. And I wasn’t strong enough to fight off the shrieks of those damn Children stabbing at my ears as they goaded that beast from hell to dig its claws into my back, only for me to wake up every damn morning feeling like I never saved the world in the first place!”

Airi gripped her stomach and hunched over, crying as her regrets returned to her all at once. She didn’t care if her friends hated her – or maybe she did but preferred dying than daring to look at them.

She died so many times for nothing. She abandoned her friends. She drove them to fight each other to the death. After repeated warnings, she could no longer stop nurturing the wish she never rebelled in the first place, the wish she never returned to Japan… the wish she never met her friends.

Sensing her despairing thoughts forced every inch of fur on Koromaru’s body to raise until he looked three times his normal size. He howled as loudly as he could and bounced around the others. Around the same moment he began to freak out, over a hundred voices screamed in Airi’s head, causing a migraine so acute, she collapsed and convulsed.

At her side in milliseconds, Ken saw something black mix with her tears. Kala-Nemi’s healing brought no relief. “G-GUYS! HELP!

Juno shattered to pieces, leaving Fuuka on the ground in tears and a painful headache. Yukari helped her back up. “Her Personas are hysterical! It’s happening again!”

Aigis picked up Airi in an instant and ran to the tree in the middle of the desert. Fuuka, Yukari, Junpei, Koromaru, and Mitsuru followed right on their tail to aid Ken. Witnessing a familiar black liquid begin to seep out of every one of Airi’s facial orifices, Akihiko was so consumed by his rage that he punched Shinjiro in the face. Yukari intervened before a confused and furious Shinjiro could retaliate and had to drag them back to the group.

Once they reached the tree and returned to the main entrance, Elizabeth and her brown heavy-bound book waited in the heart of the hall with the mysterious blue door standing visible for all to see behind her. Her hair and dress were disheveled, as if she recently physically fought someone. It seemed she wanted to share the story of the encounter but shelved it upon seeing the incapacitated Airi.

Expression unreadable, sadness was detectable in her voice. “My master wishes for me to bring Airi Fujihara back. The contract is on its last drop of ink; however–”

“If we give her to you, will this timeline be erased?! Will Airi-san be dead for real?!” Aigis interrupted in panic. If the situation weren’t so urgent, she would not believe how much she emoted.

“We don’t have time for this!” screamed Junpei, practically pushing Aigis to the exit. “Aibana’s gonna be one of the Lost if we don’t get outta here!”
“That won’t be necessary,” said Elizabeth, holding up a steady hand. “I will not allow it.”

She opened her book and took out a torn blank card, missing a corner piece. After muttering words in a language no one understood, the black liquid crawled back into Airi, and the color returned to her skin. No longer trembling and uttering unintelligibly, she lay calm and asleep in Aigis’ arms. The sight made everyone weak in the knees, but the immense relief somehow gave them the strength to remain standing.

Mitsuru looked like she suffered a heart attack. “Sh-She’s ok! How?”

Elizabeth showed them the card, now having lost another piece, splitting it in half. “We have never needed to resort to this method before this cycle, but my brother insisted upon crippling her potential until the final battle.”

A pale glow peeked between Airi’s fingers. Particles of light left her hand and merged with the card, restoring a one of the missing quarters.

“Had she drawn enough courage, she could have been ready for Nyx and Erebus tonight. Now she must face another memory, just as painful for anyone to witness. Until that time comes, leave before the Hour ends. Please bring her to me when she succumbs to despair, and I will disperse the energy through the Abyss. The more I do this, the longer it will take for Airi Fujihara to reclaim her full power. However, I refuse to allow my brother to have died in vain, whether my master and sister like it or not.”

Her heartbroken defiance lived too briefly. They had many questions for her, Elizabeth and the door to the Velvet Room vanished. The clocks read ten seconds before the Dark Hour ends, so the group bolted out in time for Tartarus to collapse back into the size of a normal high school. No one stopped to catch his or her breath; they kept going until they returned back to the dorm.

The Abyss of Time fresh on their minds, nightmares followed them through the night and for the rest of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

It's January at last, and there's STILL baggage for Airi to sort out. Yay for more misery and angst! ^_^'

I had avoided adding Metis to the tags because this is one of the only times she's ever mentioned. I just felt compelled to add her to the story. Despite giving her some attention, my feelings towards 'The Answer' remain to be... mostly negative. One reason is a trope I particularly despise called "The Giant Space Flea from Nowhere". My hatred for it began with Persona 3, and I confess it's one of the biggest reasons why this fix fic was born back in 2013. Even with my irrational feelings for a literary device used in an epilogue I don't enjoy much at all, I still enjoy Persona 3 enough to give it some amount of respect and recognition.

Lastly, a shout-out to HIM's "Play Dead", because I listened to my favorite band far too much when I wrote this fic, lol.
Not Too Late

Chapter Notes

Yesterday was Independence Day, and I celebrated by watching the documentary on Mr Rodgers called 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?'. I watched Mr Rodger's Neighborhood a lot as a young kid since we had PBS on all the time. My mom has the neighborhood trolley car from the show on a shelf somewhere around the house, and I didn't realize what it was until I recognized it in the documentary.

It doesn't have much to do with this fic, but I wanted to reflect on something that was therapeutic for me personally and creatively. The world has been stuck in a dark place for the past several years and I can't imagine how many and how much people are suffering. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how insane and hopeless it feels, keep searching for the light. We need more lights in this world, and brighter lights to remind us that life and death, happiness and sadness are temporary waves we ride rhythmically through the storms of life.

Keep striving to do good, even if the net gain doesn't meet your or others' expectations. Just keep trying and finding the best way to channel your energy and thoughts into good. And please remember to take care of yourself, because someone in this world may see a light in you that's worth preserving.

Anywho... after all that said and done, let the story continue...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January 3, 2010

SEES spent the last moments of the weekend watching over and checking in on Airi. She woke up feeling normal, aside from the crippling guilt of having her friends know more about her situation. Once everyone had food in his or her bellies and Fuuka finished packing up, they held a meeting in the command room. Airi knew the severity of the situation and did not hold back any more of the knowledge she clung to: the fact she always died, how she died, and how she never knew the timelines continued after her death.

An hour passed when she finished explaining every spec of dirt in the closet she had sealed shut from the beginning. Ten hours seemed to pass when someone digested the information well enough to respond.

“So…” Junpei said carefully while crushing his hat between his clammy hands, “ya heard those voices after you created a ‘Great Seal’ from your soul to stop Nyx, only it was killin' ya. You wanted to figure out what they were, so ya made a new ‘contract’ with your blue friends. This year goes around in a loop ‘til you solve the mystery. Only the year resets when you die. So it looped a lot. Ya kept things to yourself in case ya failed. And you failed a lot. Even if you tell us the truth, you could still die. Which you did a lot.”

Airi nodded.

Junpei deflated like a balloon. “Well... shit.”
A wave of depression settled in, but the fact another revelation emerged seemed to annoy the others more than what it was about, not that knowing how likely Airi will die lightened their spirits.

“Ryoji-kun’s words and actions make more sense,” said Fuuka, playing with the strings of her knitted poncho. “He doesn’t doubt we can stop Nyx. He believes we can’t stop the Fall any other way than by Airi-chan forming the Seal. I can only imagine what he was like before experiencing the time loops with Airi-chan…”

Akihiko slammed his fist into the coffee table, snapping it in half and sending books and cup holders awry. Everyone jumped, and while Mitsuru would usually scold him, she let him have his outburst. It was old and needed to be replaced anyway. “I don’t give two fucks what he thinks!” he spat. "If there wasn’t another way to stop the Fall, then why let Airi get in this mess in the first place?!"

Expressionless, Aigis raised her hand. “Ryoji-san may be fond of Airi-san, but he is still Nyx’s avatar. He has to let the Fall happen as he is designed to do. He may have no say in the matter.”

“Ryoji-kun and I have fought a lot about this,” admitted Airi. She felt warmed with a blanket wrapped around her as she sipped her mildly warm tea. “He’d rather have me let things go as they should than fight back…”

“Too late now,” Akihiko muttered. “That bastard…”

“Please, Akihiko-kun, it was my choice. This is a mess I created, and I know–”

“Don't you dare apologize.”

Airi's head snapped up when Yukari interrupted with a scowl and steam blowing from out of her ears.

“Akihiko had a similar anxious look to him that usually motivated him. Koromaru, who sat near her the whole time, licked her leg and barked. Cracking his knuckles, Shinjiro made his intentions explicit to everyone despite his indiscernible face.

Ken got up from his seat next to Shinjiro and walked over to Airi. He had one of his limited edition Featherman figurines that he held out to her. “I-I don’t want you to die, Airi-san. So please… let me protect you!”

“Ken-kun…?” She gave him a confused look while holding the toy.

“If everyone else is too mad at you to do anything, then I’ll be with you until we win! When we win and you go back to Ireland, you can give me back my figurine in a year from now. Please don’t die, Airi-san!”

The boy hardly expressed himself this earnestly. For once Ken was a child. His plea stirred regret in Airi for entertaining her wish to die or never meeting him. She could only nod and hope no one saw if her eyes showed more than how much they stung.

Hoping the comment wasn’t targeting at anyone, Mitsuru broke her silence. “It’s not that I won’t
fight… The stakes are much greater than I imagined.”

Fuuka expanded on her train of thought. “We can't make any mistakes now.”

When the others expressed their agreement, Airi relaxed her guard somewhat. She kept her eyes averted from anyone’s gaze and finished her tea. Realizing the mood had not worsened tremendously, she said, “I don’t know what the supposed other memory the Abyss of Time will show, but I’ve said everything that’s important for the Fall. I don't know if it'll be easier to stop, but… let me know if you need time or a break…”

Yukari sighed. “Thanks for the thought, but we can’t afford it.”

“We must not lose sight of the end goal,” Mitsuru said. “However, if anyone is suffering anything that will affect your wellbeing, please let me or Fujihara know.”

When everyone agreed to keep moving onward, the meeting ended. They were left to their own devices, save for them holding a nice homemade lunch for Fuuka before she left for home in the middle of the afternoon.

January 4-5, 2010

Monday gave everyone more time to be alone by themselves. The space helped them cope, but Aigis was the first to openly admit she sometimes suffered nightmares ever since Aizawa died. As promised, she received support; Junpei kept her mind at ease by teaching her how to play one of his video games. Ken and Yukari gave Aigis time to talk about anything relating to death and the afterlife whenever she asked.

Very little happened that night and into Tuesday, save for Airi going to the hospital for a check-up. When school ended, Junpei stopped by Hagakure and bought enough to have leftovers. He returned to Port Island and snuck the food into the hospital where he met up with Airi while she waited for the nurses to tell her she can leave.

“One ramen bowl special without mushrooms for our cute time traveler!” he announced, sitting next to her on the bed and placing the bag on her lap.

“The nurses will kill you, y’know,” she teased as she grabbed chopsticks from the bag and dug in.

“Yeah, well, they oughta get better food. The stuff I had when I got that concussion was trash, man!”

“Then file a complaint.”

“Too much effort. Besides, who’d listen to a guy like me anyway?”

“No one?”

“Oh, thanks for sticking up for me, Aibana!”

After trading a few more barbs, they worked on some homework – which Junpei snarled at. They shared class notes as they worked and helped each other through a few problems.

“You really are studying more, Junpei-kun. I’m glad,” she said when he got through a difficult question faster than she did.

“Don’t give me too much credit,” he scoffed and played with his hat. “My past grades aren’t gonna
help me get a good job. Still don’t know what I wanna do with my life…

“But, uh, there’s another reason why I wanted to visit.” Junpei dug into his backpack and took out an old pig keychain that survived well for years. “This used to be with my house keys. I’m thinkin’ I’m gonna see my dad for the first time in months. Better now before the end, y’know?”

They both let out a small chuckle. Airi accepted the gift and studied it in her hands. “Good luck, Junpei-kun.”

“Yeah, I’ll need it. Facin’ him must feel almost as bad as you fighin’ your uncle.” He put his backpack down and rested his elbows on his knees. “You haven’t seen or heard from ‘im, right?” Airi shook her head. “Figures…”

Airi placed the keychain with her mp3 player and went back to eating her ramen. “It won’t be a big deal if he shows up on the 31st. We always had to fight Jin and Takaya because they blocked our way to Nyx. Since Fuuka has been analyzing his powers, we’ll have a chance.”

“I think you’re right.”

He reclined back and placed his hat on his lap. His hair was growing out again, but most of it stayed hidden under the cap and hardly made a difference. Eyes narrowed slightly, Airi sensed he was thinking deeply.

“Hey, I know I ran my mouth a lot since we met, and I know I botched your name back then, but I trust you, Airi. I know I’m beatin’ a dead horse, but I need you to know my mind still hasn’t changed. Even if we get another freaky sneak peek in other cycles, I’m not gonna let ya down.”

The topic brought the gloomy cloud she lay under for the past few days. She never doubted Junpei’s commitment, but the fear of losing was always her problem that no one else could fix. Still, she involuntarily let out a small smile. “I couldn’t ask for a better friend.”

Junpei turned pink and laughed. “There ya go again, givin’ me more credit than I deserve.”

They spent another hour chatting when a nurse came in and said Airi was ready to go. Junpei gathered up her trash while Airi went behind a screen to change into her freshly cleaned uniform. As they left they spotted Mitsuru speaking with one of the Kirijo Group doctors in the lobby and overheard the end of their conversation.

“I’ll inform security to continue their watch. Dr. Kurebyashi has not worked his hospital or clinic shifts for the past few weeks. If we see him, we’ll let you and Officer Kurosawa know, Kirijo-sama.”

She bowed her head. “Thank you for your tireless work.”

After the doctor left, Mitsuru eyed her curious friends and joined them on their walk back home. When Junpei and Airi asked why she was there, she replied, “There are a few patients who may be targets, and I want to ensure they are protected from the Children.”

“But who’d be a target?” Junpei asked, not hiding his apprehension and curiosity.

“Kurosawa has formed an impressive anti-Tenebre civilian task force, and some members have been hospitalized for three weeks. If I were Kurebyashi or Shirato, I’d find them at their most vulnerable and strike. Even if common people didn't involve themselves like this, we still must protect them.”

While her words were perfectly reasonable (and arguing against putting everyday people at risk goes against everything SEES represents), there was a reserved manner in her voice that made Airi
suspect another reason. Junpei didn’t notice the subtleties, and rather than press and cause any drama, Airi joined in the conversation and its many changing topics, all a sign they had become used to multitasking for the sake of managing their days of growing desperation.

January 7, 2010

The chances of him going to trial before the 31st were high, but the government seemed more preoccupied with finishing up preparations for the Self-Defense Forces. They captured one of the most invaluable criminals, and that seemed to be enough to stall the cult. In his eyes, however, they clearly were idiots.

Jin sat in that cell for days with only a bowl of rice and a glass of water every twelve hours. The Dark Hour fell about ten minutes before the guard would arrive with the next course. Hands cuffed and dizzy from hunger, he couldn’t summon Moros without having it try to eat him. The last traces of the suppressants lingered in his blood, and getting out was impossible in his malnourished condition.

He thought over everything he had done and accepted how pointless it all was. He was abandoned and alone. Having no internet connection made him more isolated, though the worst of the detox occurred when Kurebayashi turned on him. His laptop, his drugs, his bomb kit, his clothes; all of that was taken away because a selfish old man clung to a delusion of what he believed his last relative was. Airi was no messiah, nor a beacon to bring Death upon the world. She was just a kid thrown into a ritual she never asked to be a part of. As much as it made him gag, Jin began to sympathize with her situation.

But now, locked in a high security cell, he had nothing and no one. Dying now seemed like the best use of his time and the best thing that could happen for the world. He bit into his tongue and slammed his head against the wall.

“Jin-kun, wait!”

A voice rang in his head. Jin recognized that melodic, soothing voice.

“How the fuck’d ya get in my head?” he spat, continuing to beat himself up.

“Please, calm down, Jin-kun,” said Fuuka. “I can form a connection with a Persona-user I’ve become well acquainted with.”

He laughed loudly, voice bouncing off the walls and vibrating against the thick green mist.

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. I-I discovered your website after you and Takaya attacked us in August… I’ve monitored it since it became a request board for terror attacks. And I met you again on the manga café forum… I-I’m Hera.”

Jin burst into hysterics again. He paced around the room, laughing at absolutely nothing. His chest started to hurt, but he didn’t stop. Moros shared his disbelief in an echo, giving him a killer headache. Unable to keep standing, Jin fell to the ground. Hunched over, his laughter slowly died down and the world became fuzzy around him.

He ran into the same girl at least three times in nearly six months. The girl who knew about his attacks and foiled many of them. The girl who helped him pass the time when Kurebayashi did whatever sick things he could to fuck up his powers even more. The girl who helped SEES and
shared Chidori’s powers was talking to him right now in what could be his last hours.

“You’re good,” he admitted in his daze. “Thanks to you and yer friends everything’s ruined…”

It was silent. Jin waited but received no response. His hit of madness drove her away, bringing a pathetic smile to his gaunt face.

“People have controlled you your entire life, haven’t they?”

Her voice made Jin jump upright. He screamed and let out a curse. “Fuck off!”

“I’m sorry…” Fuuka replied, voice full of genuine sadness that made Jin shiver. “I read about the experiments Ikutsuki and Kurebayashi performed… I’m sorry you lived through them. My friends and I want to end the Dark Hour so no one else suffers the crimes the Kirijo Group inflicted."

“Don’t get holy on me, bitch. You need the Dark Hour to use the powers you supposedly never asked for to end it. Ya can’t have yer cake and eat it too!”

“That’s not true. Shadows and Personas have existed before the Dark Hour.”

He did not understand why Fuuka wanted to talk to him. Jin longed for the silence to come back to wallow more. “So what⁈”

“Shadows and Personas are naturally occurring phenomena. Mitsuru-sempai’s grandfather studied them before he started the projects that caused the Dark Hour. There are people out there who have used Personas long before the Dark Hour came to be. Our powers and the hidden hour are not as co-dependent as you claim. Having the potential is a gift, sometimes forced and sometimes voluntary. What matters is how we use our abilities. The Group forced the Dark Hour onto the world; they forced the potential onto you. The Children want to impose the Fall on the world when there many of us who still want to live. I won’t ever agree that what they did was right. I awakened my Persona because I want to be free to chose my own path.”

Jin stood quietly, aside from playing with his handcuffs. The girl he remembered had a stutter when she talked. She stood in the middle of her group of friends to be protected and not feel alone. This was her voice, but it barely resembled the Fuuka it belonged to.

“That’s selfish,” he scoffed, kicking the ground and cracking one of his toenails. “You’re imposin’ your worldview on others. You ain’t as special as ya think ya are.”

“I know.”

“Then why’re ya talkin’ to me?”

“Because you can always start a new life.”

Fuuka’s tone was so serious that Jin had to laugh again. Whenever traces of his life somehow slipped through his messages, she would shrewdly say that phase. This girl was stubborn, another trait he never expected from her.

“Didn’t Takaya help you find a reason to live? When the experiments ended, you were lost and confused… but Takaya saved you. He taught you a worldview, and it gave you something to live for. Without him, you would’ve died, right, Jin-san?”

Pacing around the room didn’t quell the nausea. He wanted Fuuka to shut up and leave him alone. Somehow her words affected him and made him remember Takaya from so many years ago.
Holding a pistol in his hands from the first man he killed, the young preteen had his hair in a ponytail and a scar on his shoulder that would later be covered in tattoos. This image made Jin realize his companion had dark brown irises, not yellow, before they broke free of Ikutsuki’s control.

“Our ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’ might exist, but what does it matter? Don’t let the past control you, and don’t look to the future. Simply live in the moment, Jin. That’s how we’ll survive in this world that abandoned us.”

Something tickled his cheek. Jin quickly dabbed it and saw clear, sparkling tears on his fingertips. The utterances Moros made throughout the night diminished as well; he seemed to have muted completely, even though he was still there. He slouched and leaned against the wall. Sliding to the ground, he felt something heavy weigh him down, rendering him unwilling to get back up.

There were several minutes of silence. Realizing Fuuka was waiting for a reply, Jin uttered, “Now what? Gonna make me join your gang or some shit…?”

“No… I only wanted to talk to you beyond a computer screen.”

“Well, you suck at it.”

She let out a self-deprecatory chuckle. “I guess you’re right… I don’t know how Junpei-kun did it…”

The name caught his attention. “Wait… That katana-baseball clown?”

“Yes,” she replied nervously. For once that sounded like her. “He talked to Chidori a lot–”

“Don’t say that name,” he growled, banging his head against the wall again. “You’re the reason she’s dead.”

“N-No! That’s not–“

“Don’t lie, bitch!” he screamed, banging harder. “Just shut the fuck up and leave me alone!”

Another fit was coming, and blood dripped down his neck as he struck his head repeatedly. The girl continued to protest, but he blocked out her voice. His head was ready to burst, and he prepared for another hit to knock himself out.

Suddenly an image appeared in his mind: Chidori sitting in the hospital and smiling at a snowy sunset. She no longer had that dead fish dullness to her eyes. She wore curly pigtails with her gothic accessories, something Jin had never seen. Her skin was full and healthy. With Jin distracted and confused at the imagery, Fuuka explained what Chidori went through from her capture to her death.

“She lived the same cruel life as you did, but Junpei-kun stayed by her side and helped her get better. Chidori was given another chance, and she wanted to live what little time she had left to the fullest.”

Jin thought about the story, but didn’t know what to believe concerning her motivations. Why was this girl trying to help him? Why was she wasting her time on a criminal who had no second chance at life? Why bother bringing up Chidori at all when she died? He hardly had time to grieve when Kurebayashi informed him, and while Jin learned the truth, the seemingly natural urge to lament failed to trigger.
“The Hour’s nearly over. But, Jin-san?” He grumbled something unintelligible. “If you don’t believe anything I’ve ever told you, please listen when I say this. Kurebayashi no longer has influence over you. As long as you have the willpower, you can take charge of your life so no one will control you again. You can be free like Chidori.”

Fuuka’s last words seemed to have a kind of warmth Jin never felt before, and he didn’t know whether to feel violated or comforted. When her mental presence left, Jin felt completely alone, as he wanted, but her words and the image of Chidori were stuck in his mind, refusing to leave. A heavy spider rested in his chest and bound his insides in thick webbing, yet the sensation generated no semblance of pain or emotion; Chidori was the last “friend” he had, and her absence stirred no significant reaction.

By the time he snapped out of his musing, a tray of rice and water sat by his foot. The weight of the room seemed lighter and he heard people’s voices outside.

He shivered when the door opened. One of the officers who caught him weeks ago entered and stood across from him. Arms folded, she said, “We’re giving you one last chance to talk before you’re transferred. So, what’s your decision, Shirato?”

Jin glanced up at the officer and his lips, defiant, carved into a smirk.

Chapter End Notes

It's a slow-ish chapter, but everyone is bracing themselves for the end. Not much time left for Social Linking, especially if Airi technically doesn't need to in order to summon Surt or Scathach or Odin or Thor or Norn or Attis or Beelzebub or Sandalphon.....

Also, the title is a reference to "Never Too Late" by Three Days Grace. I'm starting to embrace the silly names for my chapters.

Thanks for reading up to this point, and I'll see you next time! :)
January 10, 2010

The heavy snow tried to impede upon the spur-of-the-moment shopping spree to no avail. Yukari, Aigis, Mitsuru, and Airi had their lists of things to buy for themselves, but they gathered to brainstorm plans for Junpei’s birthday and decided to act on Sunday while they had time. Once they bought what they needed, they met up at Wild Duck Burger for lunch.

“I don’t think we need another big celebration,” said Yukari as she sipped her soda. “He’d be happy if he got a huge pile of manga and video games.”

“We should make his favorite dish at least,” suggested Aigis, attempting to build a tower made of fries.

Wiping sauce off her mouth, Mitsuru let out a snicker. “Wh-What are you doing, Aigis?”

“Discovering if I have the potential to be an architect.” A light bulb lit in her head, distracting her from the collapsing pile of food. “How would Junpei-san feel if I made a food sculpture of one of his favorite video game characters?”

Nearly spitting her drink out, Yukari coughed and choked. Airi gently patted her back until Yukari told her she was ok.

“I shall abort the idea…” said Aigis with a carefree shrug.

“He’ll like whatever we give him,” Airi said with a smile. “He’s a simple guy, which isn’t always a bad thing.”

Peaking his head to the side, Mitsuru took another look at the field leader’s bags. “You’ve purchased something for him?”

“I have, but it’s still in the mail along with the cookbooks Ma recommended for Shinjiro-kun. Hopefully the limited edition game I ordered will arrive on time. At least the store had a Featherman poster Ken-kun wanted and a manga he’s too embarrassed to buy on his own, so I didn’t come for nothing.”

Yukari let out a sigh and bit into her burger. “And all I found was a baseball bat… something about it being weather-resistant and stuff.”

“His sneakers are falling apart, so I bought another pair,” said Aigis. “It’s not really ‘fun’ so to speak, but practical.”

When Mitsuru seemed quiet, they waited for her to speak. She hid her face behind her bangs and nibbled on some fries. “My mother suggested something embarrassing.”

“Oh, c’mon!” Yukari whined, nearly reaching over to shake the info out of her. “We know you’d go all out or something. Like guaranteeing him to meet his favorite baseball player or something.”

Mitsuru’s face turned a bright red. In a very unexpectedly unladylike manner, she shoved her burger
in her mouth to hide it, but her friends read between the lines.

“It’s a great idea!” Aigis tried to cheer her up. “That’s a dream any child or adult would want to come true.”

The more Aigis and Yukari continued to shower Mitsuru in sincere compliments, the more she cowered and slouched. The sight was adorable, but humiliating as customers stared curiously at the hijinks.

Airi quickly finished her meal, and interrupted the show. “Well, we still have time for other things. Let’s give sempai room to breathe.”

“Understood.” Aigis quickly obeyed, while Yukari pouted before giving up.

They spent some time walking outside bundled in their heavy coats. Aigis and Yukari walked up ahead trying to catch the snowflakes on their tongues. Airi went to join them, but Mitsuru’s gentle hand held her back. The redhead stood stiffly and her head hung low.

“Fujihara… I wanted to talk to you about last week…”

A lump formed in Airi’s throat, expecting the worst.

“My behavior was inexcusable. I should not have provoked you as much as I did.” She played with the creases of her gloves as she continued. “I understand your reasons to not reveal the truth, but some of us are losing patience. We have to stay focused on the mission, and we can’t afford another panic attack if another one of those… flashbacks manifests.

“However, now that I better understand what’s at stake, I will fight more than ever so you will not have to create the Seal,” she said as her eyed hardened. “As that other me said, I don’t want anyone else dying because of my family and I.”

The weight and strength in her voice gave Airi some hope. Mitsuru finally expressed complete confidence and trust in Airi. The redhead then reached into her pocket and gave her kohai a ring. Before Airi could speak, Mitsuru took off one of her gloves. The only noticeable features were the surgical scaring and an identical ring on her left ring finger.

“I saw friendship rings in a store the other day,” she admitted sheepishly. “They seemed cheap… so I acquired higher-quality ones with a custom engraving inside them…”

Airi looked inside and read a familiar motto: Two in harmony surpasses one in perfection.

She wanted to hug her, but refrained to in a public space. “Thank you, Mitsuru-sempai!”

“It is the least I can do for you, Airi,” she replied in English. It took many months, but they seemed to reach a point to address each other by first name.

Like at lunch Yukari and Aigis jumped into the conversation unapologetically. They noticed the gifts and teased Mitsuru about it, making her put her glove back on and keep her hands in her pockets.

“Anyway,” said Yukari, jumping topics. “Aigis and I had things we wanted to give you too.”

The duo pulled their gifts out of their bags and took their turns. Airi took the pair of earrings Aigis found. Made of recycled metals, the earrings were mismatched, but retained a similar style of spirals twisting around a small aquamarine gem to make them complement tastefully. Yukari gave her a cell phone strap, depicting a sleeping cat with headphones.
Unable to hold back her happiness, Airi pulled the three of them into a hug. There was some protesting from Mitsuru, but Aigis began saying mildly embarrassing things out loud to get them laughing.

“H-Honestly though,” said Yukari after the hug ended, “don’t mention my shoe size out loud.”

She shrugged unapologetically. “I could have publicly announced your bra size.”

Yukari ignored her and turned her attention back to Airi. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you that you’re still a great friend, even if some things I’ve said annoyed you…”

“Yuka…”

“No, it’s fine. You like it when we’re honest with you, and it’s not fair for me to begrudge you when you say it like it is. Whatever we saw the other night… I don’t want that to happen to us. So no matter what, promise me you won’t give up, Airi. You’ve believed in us all this time, and I want to believe in you too. Keep fighting back, and when you’re exhausted, we’ll swoop in and pick you back up. So don’t give up!”

The peer pressure was overwhelming. Airi had not become used to having insane expectations placed on her from anyone but the Velvet Room residents and herself. “I’ll do my best.”

Aigis placed a hand on her heart and said with a smile, “I’ll fight to the death for your survival, Airi-chan. To prove my determination, Palladion has evolved into Athena. Even if you are to die, death will have to defeat me first.”

The intense words were not what Airi expected; she congratulated her friend on her new Persona. Yet the declarations of protected made her feel uncomfortable with how far they would go to save her. She ignored her concerns and continued smiling, thanking her best friends for the wonderful weekend.

January 12, 2010

In downtown Tokyo a swarm of reporters surrounded a Kirijo Group office building, guarded by stern, well-suited men some people suspected of being Yakuza. Pandemonium and hundreds of calls erupted in the public relations division after swamping nearly everyone else in the office.

The manager’s voice for the division retained a sense of calm over the phone, but his face burned a bloody tinge of violet. “For the last time, we have had no contact with the Ergonomics branch ever since Aizawa-san’s disappearance. I do not understand your stubborn insistence, Kirijo-kun.”

“Kirijo-sama, Watanabe-san,” corrected the young woman on the line. “I would be more patient with you following procedure if there was enough transparency within this organization so that hacking does not continue to be a persistent issue. Let me ask once more: did your department coordinate negotiations with major pharmaceutical companies to allow underground distribution of an untested, unregulated drug for the past two years?”

Watanabe exhaled and sat back in his desk chair. The girl was naïve to speak so rudely to him, but she had her father’s confidence. “Corpaxine has been tested for fifteen years, and it is safe and effective in treating mood disorders. The price is perfectly reasonable and no one has filed any complaints. We are doing nothing illegal, Kirijo-sama, and there is no reason to interrogate us at metaphorical gunpoint.”
Her forced sigh frustrated him further. “This is small talk compared to what hell the reporters will unleash upon you once I release the files I have obtained. Send me a copy of all information regarding that drug so the truth can come out gracefully.”

For the past half hour he had been talking to a brick wall. Watanabe hung up, unable to stand Mitsuru’s crude threats. If this were a sign of the Group’s future, brainstorming plans to leave or force her resignation would keep him preoccupied for many moons. Her gratingly rich voice no longer scratched at his ears, but his panicking employees and coworkers barging into the office, calling, and sending emails brought him another breed of pain. The workload doubled as the day went on, over-stimulating the environment and creating less productive work to fix later, but that work seemed to not go anywhere when the computer network suffered tremendous slow-down.

Underneath the panic of the media crisis, tiny insects infiltrated the department and carried away the files Watanabe denied revealing despite Mitsuru’s warning. The software created to detect hackers did not respond, and thus the silent thieves delivered the information to their confidantes.

That evening at the dorm, everyone was surprised to see an uncharacteristically cheerful bounce to Mitsuru’s walk. She gathered her friends into the lounge and turned on the evening news to show the reason for her thrilled desposition.

“…large quantities to Tatsumi Port Island. Since it’s initial release in summer of 2009, about 1,300 patients in Iwatodai alone have been prescribed Corpaxine in a clinic run by former Kirijo Group scientist Sora Kurebayashi, who helped develop the drug fifteen years ago. Unfortunately, the leaked documents detail that the number of under-the-counter transactions, approximately 85,000 as of October 2009, vastly exceed the number of prescribed ones by 500%, dating back as early as 2002. It is unknown how many individuals have acquired Corpaxine or have suffered from its side-effects, which include…”

Broad smiles spread infectiously from the Kirijo heiress to her companions despite their conflicted feelings about the public exposure of information relating to their mission. “What if Kurebayashi-san or the cult retaliate and instigate more chaos?” asked Aigis.

“We won’t know until the fallout,” Mitsuru admitted. “I did what I could from the what we’ve learned thus far. The police had some information thanks to my father, but they told me to wait for the public reaction when I asked to compare notes.”

Ken let out a massive grin when a reporter called out his fellow host questioning the authenticity of this “seemingly crazy conspiracy” – in their words. “Feels good to get the truth out there.”

“I doubt this happened in the past, right, Airi?” Yukari saw a rare expression on the girl’s face: pure glee.

“It’s a belated Christmas miracle…” she whispered.

Akihiko reclined back in his seat and let out a proud smirk. “If the psychic is amazed, we’re really winning.”

While not unhappy for the successful strike against the Children and Tenebre, Shinjiro interjected, “What were the ‘leaked’ documents, and who leaked them?” His question silenced his friends. The report continued, seemingly answering for him.

“…not comment, but there is some speculation that a hacker obtained a ‘missing piece’ to the police investigation. There seem to be attempts to avoid prosecution, so either the police are too incompetent to do their jobs or they are desperate to prove themselves worthy of receiving more aid
after the November bombing. The Kirijo Group’s years of silence regarding corruption and conspiracy should also be questioned. Will the young Mitsuru Kirijo expose every single hiccup an employee makes in the middle of a…”

Among the viewers, Kurebayashi listened to the anchors continue to debate the nature of the drug and how the Group introduced the drug into the world long before any of the healthcare institutions knew of its existence, tested it, and allowed it on the market. They brought up the usual talking points to fuel or discourage propaganda, and Kurebayashi had grown bored of the predictable nature of that game of manipulation.

Once the news had another excuse to bring up Tenebre to theorize the pill’s uses, the doctor turned off the TV and waited for midnight. The Dark Hour fell and turned the nosy reporters waiting outside of his apartment building into coffins; carrying nothing but the clothes on his back Kurebayashi fled into town with his eyes set on Tartarus, somehow taller and more foreboding as the thirty-first drew nearer.

The thick suffocating air did not affect Kurebayashi, who always felt closer to death than anyone in the world for so long that it was as natural as having eyes to see and ears to listen. He cut through the mist leading to the Tower of Demise, and opened the doors to the crispness paved by the group of young explorers. The mysterious white-haired woman was nowhere to be found, and SEES were not here tonight. Kurebayashi wandered the halls and greeted his black-inked and abstractly-shaped kin curious of his arrival. The higher he climbed, the more complexly designed and threatening they became, the latter of which puzzled the doctor.

Upon reaching what seemed to be the limit SEES explored – the impatient groans above begged for a fight or satisfying hunt – Kurebayashi sat at the foot of the stairs to catch his breath when one too many stubborn packs dared to challenge him. His knees ached from early arthritis, and he had no water or food to give his body nourishment even if it cared about staying alive.

A set of footsteps descending from behind gave him no time to ponder his last days. The doctor let out a tired smile. “Ready to awaken Mother?”

He turned his head and saw blue eyes brimming with agony. The young man’s skin lost all color, and his once tame black hair was long, spiky, and tangled. Raven feathers erupted from and covered most of his body, save for two grey, prolonged spears that lay on the lateral side of his arms. This half-Shadow half-human would be more at home in a Victorian English insane asylum than near the pinnacle of Tartarus.

When the chimera did not speak, Kurebayashi added in reverent awe, “To see Thanatos in the flesh before the chosen time humbles me. However, I did not expect you to bear such affliction.”

Thanatos stood frigidly, but the burning pain in his eyes brewed. The intensity threw daggers into Kurebayashi’s gut, and for a split second, he felt the smallest inkling of doubt. That creature knew him in a way the doctor did not prepare for. Thanatos lived within Airi and he was determined to make sure Kurebayashi would never forget the last living person responsible for the Dark Hour. Kurebayashi had mostly accepted Aizawa’s insistence of Airi repeating the year enough to never think of what side effects his niece suffered. Even if she were broken, she would be freed upon Nyx’s arrival and humanity’s extinction. Keeping a distance from her helped him strengthen his conviction in fulfilling the prophecy, and now at the feet of a creature, clinging to the dying humanity born from living within Airi for ten years and the countless cycles she endured, Kurebayashi hardened his heart.

“If you wanted revenge, you should have sought me sooner,” he said as he stood up to the creature. “What is it about Ai that makes those who love her perform the stupidest actions on her behalf? You
could never truly defy your nature and ‘save’ her. Let go of your earthly obsessions and surrender to your fate, my brother.”

When Thanatos did not seem to hear his words, the doctor thought of Aether and called out to him. Somewhere in the process his inner voice hit a brick wall. Kurebayashi focused intensely to bring out his Persona, and despite the snake’s normal temperament, he would not manifest. Outside of his head, the doctor stood awkwardly with a strained expression and did not react quick enough to avoid Thanatos striking him. The man fell to the ground with a large gash across his face and chest. He threw his lab coat aside and dug his nails into his palms, adding more stress to finally bring out Aether.

Thanatos’ arms shredded apart every duplicate snake like tissue paper, forcing Kurebayashi to create more clever diversions to escape. He did not anticipate the speed and cunning of the black creature, dancing as if on ice and forcing the doctor into corners away from the stairs or teleporters. The floor shook from the impacts against the walls and the explosions from thwarted traps from Aether’s egg. Shadows scampered from the two Children and only stopped to drink the blood shed from the human.

Finally trapped in a dead end, Kurebayashi opened his arms and crafted a hexing circle, shining a blinding light that disoriented Thanatos. Aether spun its egg furiously, stirring winds up to eighty kilometers per hour. Feathers tore off Thanatos’ body and the light threatened to weaken him, but he let out a thunderous cry that cut through the wind and knocked the doctor off his feet, breaking the circle. When the air calmed, the creature’s eyes melted and dissolved, leaving empty sockets and damp tears on his snow-white cheeks.

Kurebayashi chuckled at the bleak sight. “The Apprizer at last…”

“I do not need you, Aether,” said the Avatar, pointing in the general direction of an exit. “Step upon my domain again and you will not see the glory of the Fall.”

His distorted voice was as unworldly and commanding as Kurebayashi imagined, but the words had an inherent immaturity that fanned his uncertainty again. Even if he was worthless, he still wanted to make the most of the end of the world. The real world had no meaning, and he refused to suffer another day in slow meandering nonsense. All he cared about was the Fall, only days away. He had no reason to live any longer, and yet… he felt doubt.

When he did not move, the Avatar seized the doctor by the neck and dragged him up the stairs. Kurebayashi gradually lost consciousness from the dizzying pace and sharp turns slamming his brain against the inside of his skull. He barely understood what the creature meant when he said he had a disappointing place for the stubborn fool for refusing to leave.

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January 18, 2010

Everyone responded to the days lost and floors explored in Tartarus and the Abyss of Time differently, and not always in the healthiest manner. Despite the itching impatience for the fights ahead, Akihiko appeared the most clear-headed out of the group some days. His schedule remained unchanged and unaffected by events and his occasional instances to brood when alone. Even Airi felt jealous of his positive attitude, but she always minded her words to not break the possible façade.

After wrapping up errands from volleyball, student council, and fashion club, Airi left the deserted school campus for dinner. Mondays tended to be “fend for yourself” day with Shinjiro feeling too lazy to bother setting one foot into the kitchen. Everyone would arrive home at odd hours lately, and
thus discussing anything on the first schoolday of the week was no one’s top priority. Airi was happy to be free for a while, and her stomach seemed to be in the mood for some well-cooked meat.

She entered the beef bowl shop and read a manga Blair seemed into lately as she sat and ate. The plotline seemed pretty ridiculous with criminals using blood-based magic to fight each other in a hybrid prison-and-amusement-park, but it lacked any romantic themes that she had seen too much lately during movie nights with the girls. Airi was so captivated by a plot twist that she did not hear Akihiko trying to get her attention. He pulled the book out of her hands and laughed apologetically when she whined about how he might get sweat all over the pages.

“Anyway,” she said after allowing the athlete to sit with her. “You’re in the mood for beef bowls too, or did you want to meet me so badly?”

For a split second he twitched, but replied quietly, still trying to catch his breath, “I finished a run with Koromaru and needed a bite. I was on my way out until I caught you.”

Airi poked her head to the side to see Koromaru lying pathetically with his back to the shop. “He acts so spoiled sometimes…”

“Ever since he joined the group, he’s been living like a king. It’s a good thing he’s easy to understand and please, so Aegis doesn’t need to worry about translating his wants once she can’t understand dog talk anymore.”

He took a swig of water from his bottle and Airi continued her food, creating a silence that the two had become accustomed to. Under less stressful times, both would feel awkward for letting conversation die, but being in each other’s company was enough.

When Airi finished her bowl and seemed unwilling to move for a few moments, Akihiko pulled out two things from his backpack. He hated shopping at stores for non-essential things ever since he was a kid, save for toys. Too many memories of having or lacking toys he wanted or not made that kind of shopping feel special to Akihiko. He passed by a toy store while running and found a rabbit doll that seemed to speak to him in a way that convinced him that Airi would like it. When he explained to Koromaru why he made an impulsive purchase, the dog had the odd idea to take off his old collar and insist on giving it to Airi too.

He presented the two humble gifts, both of which warmed Airi’s heart as easily as he expected. From her immediate thanks Akihiko was relieved of explaining his embarrassing motives. Yet he felt he owed her some kind of explanation.

“To be honest, Airi,” he uttered in a near whisper in hopes no strangers would overhear, “You sometimes remind me of Miki. Not really personality-wise, but… I couldn’t save her back then, and now I feel if you die, it’ll be my fault. I know I’m doing the best I can to protect everyone, but the doubt hits me sometimes. Without you, I’d still be seeking out any kind of fight for fun and never dealing with my problems…”

“And… I want to be with you when you fight Erebus! Caesar’s skills are helpful and… I want to destroy that monster that the cult worships and that made you suffer!” Realizing how intense he sounded, Akihiko drank his water and looked away to hide his blushing face. “S-Sorry…”

Seeing he was done, Airi carefully thought of what to say. She placed the red-eyed rabbit on her lap, hugged it, and said, “No, thanks for being open with me. I’m glad I helped, even if it wasn’t much…”

The boy helplessly let out a childish smile. While she was not alone in helping him change through
the year, Akihiko felt she diminished her role too much.

“But don’t worry too much about the final battle,” she continued somewhat firmly in spite of the sympathetic light in her eyes. “Everyone will do their best and have a chance to go crazy on Nyx and Erebus. You all care about me, and I couldn’t be in better hands.”

The inclusivity would have killed whatever unresolved feelings Akihiko had for Airi, but he felt nothing. He might have liked her more than a friend at one point, but he didn’t entertain the fleeting thoughts once everything related to their mission picked up after summer vacation. More importantly, he understood why Airi was mildly dismissive. Logistically it would be impossible for everyone to team up against either Nyx or Erebus; only by working in two groups would they survive. He could live not fighting by her side at all times. His pure intentions turned slightly sour as he wondered who would fight with her and how he’d react if they failed to protect Airi, so Akihiko refused to think more about it. He instead told himself over and over again that Airi will not end up like his sister. Airi is not and will never be Miki.

With the sky pitch black outside, Airi and Akihiko finished their food and conversation before walking back home with Koromaru. She thanked the dog for his present, and he gently butted his head against her leg until she pet him. No one in SEES would ever replace Koromaru’s master or Akihiko’s sister, but their loyalty to Airi and the cause gave them more than enough reason to hope.

Chapter End Notes

Having written this before P5 came out, I feel I could have gone overboard with the news commentators if I wasn't careful. Although if I remember right, the P4 news commentary was a bit more opinionated. Regardless, P3 has it too now in fanfic form!

But at the very least, it's good to see Mitsuru complete Takeharu's work to expose the sins of the Kirijo Group that had been buried for years. He'd be so proud of her...

Anywho, the title for this chapter is loosely similar to a line from "Savior" by 30 Seconds to Mars.
January 23, 2010

The beginning of the weekend gave the perfect opportunity to put homework aside and prepare for the Abyss of Time. SEES fully explored Adamah Block, the sixth and final, to the last barricade on the 254th floor, leaving the rest of the desert beneath the earth. While the others rested or warmed up, Airi, Mitsuru, and Kurosawa held a private meeting in the command room to finalize the strategy for the final battle.

Airi laid out her ideas for possible squad compositions after proposing SEES split into three groups. “We need as much elemental balance as possible in the Nyx Suppression Team, so I suggest Mitsuru should bring Yukari, Akihiko or Ken, and Koromaru or Junpei. The Erebus Annihilation Team should achieve a similar goal, but I can make up for the lack of wind abilities. I don’t think we need to worry about Ground Support too much, right?”

“Correct. Tenebre will give us the usual trouble we have trained to combat for weeks,” said Kurosawa, pointing out the markings he made on the map of Gekkoukan High School’s grounds. “If what you say about the Fall is correct, then the Shadows may be more dangerous than we are accustomed too, even with our weapons infused with plumes of dusk. Feel free to keep a friend or two behind to aid us, but you have two greater monsters to fight. My men and the Self Defense Forces expect you to put all of your efforts in defeating Nyx and Erebus.”

Whether his poise was entirely genuine or masking serious doubts, Mitsuru still expressed her pity and concern. Kurosawa appreciated the kindness, but stood firm in his position.

After they resolved a minor dispute concerning police readiness, Airi continued explaining SEES’s options. “We can split up in a few efficient ways. One has Mitsuru, Yukari, Akihiko, and Kuromaru with Nyx; me, Aegis, Ken, and Junpei take Erebus; and Shinjiro will fluctuate between aiding either team or the ground defense. Plan two has Mitsuru with Yukari, Ken, and Junpei; me with Akihiko, Kuromaru, and Shinjiro; and Aegis on the ground. Others are similar, but it all means that Shinjiro or Aegis are more likely to stay behind as backup. The two main teams will be relatively balanced in terms of strengths, weaknesses, and strategies in the best scenarios.”

“Shouldn’t Aegis be in your team at all times?” asked Mitsuru. “Athena has learned Mediarahan, which will greatly benefit you fighting the unknown.”

“I could, but Ken can heal as well. If I don’t have either of them, I can use Cybele, Titania, and other Personas that can cover whatever elemental styles are missing, which is mainly healing and wind. If Akihiko stays with me, he and I can take turns switching between support and offense.”

Mitsuru sighed, folding her arms uncertainly. “Well, we can always switch out people in case of emergency.”

“Which is why I’m torn about making a finalized and rigid team set-up or not. Maybe it ought to be decided based on who’s comfortable with who…”

“Regardless of what you decide, you have made a strong assessment of your capabilities.” Kurosawa’s voice quieted in an attempt to ease their anxiety. “I’m not sure how much it’ll help, but
I’ve asked the hospital and their affiliate clinics to be on standby in case you kids need emergency aid your magic can’t perform. Several doctors and nurses have helped and saved my men’s lives, so they have relevant practical experience.”

They thanked him for his foresight, including plenty of hot water in case of terribly cold weather. Neither Airi nor the weathermen predicted snow or rain for January 31st, and Junpei remarked how lucky they are to not worry about sliding on ice or the oily remains of eviscerated Shadows. Not every detail was fully resolved by the end, but there had been a newfound understanding that SEES will not be alone in the fight.

Akihiko and Shinjiro let Kurosawa out, and they shared a conversation the more immature members of SEES tried to eavesdrop on. Their eagerness was obvious enough for Akihiko to intentionally increase the intensity of static shocks in the air whenever Junpei stood too close to Aigis. It was not a long meeting, but whatever they shared kept Akihiko and Shinjiro in solemn moods for the rest of the evening. They withheld the information until they reached the school gate moments before midnight.

“Kurebayashi disappeared,” said Akihiko, ignoring the harsh stare from his best friend. “Kurosawa said Fuuka has scanned as much of Japan as she can and cannot find him.”

His words caused Mitsuru to gasp apprehensively. “Yamagishi is still exerting her power to such lengths?!”

“That’s why he told us to keep quiet,” said Shinjiro in a huff. “He didn’t want us to worry ‘bout stuff beyond our control.”

“But she needs to rest!” she said in earnest while they entered the familiar green-lit marble hall. “I’ll speak to her later about this. Meanwhile, I’ll take over analysis for the night. No one should overexert himself or herself to the point of obsession. We all must come back safe, understood?”

It seemed ironic, given how often and quickly SEES explored Tartarus compared to their runs earlier in the year. Nonetheless, Mitsuru’s authoritative tone established order and obedience immediately. She rarely exercised it lately, preferring to give stern advice rather than inspire fear of ice with a deep voice some would argue that barely had an ounce of femininity.

They arrived at the familiar desert that continued to shrink. Eight doors surrounded the great tree, its glow fading as SEES traveled through more of the Abyss’ mazes. All but one door was opened, and the group immediately reached for it. The darkness on the other side gave them chills, but they pressed on and found themselves in a crimson arena.

The coliseum from the memory was empty but soaked in blood, long dried into crusty brown powder. Innumerable deep scars from battles marred whatever ancient beauty could have been found in it. In the emptiness and lack of Shadows every slight sound amplified to the point of shattering glass. SEES traversed over the jagged and rocky ground, long overturned and dismantled from countless physical and elemental assaults to a door on the other side. The door promising progress appeared to be of a polished design compared to its brethren in the desert, but a shadowy, hunched figure blocked the way.

With each step, the ground flattened and became better preserved and unscathed, but the door seemed further from when they first observed it and the figure seemed to be closer. The unnatural silence persisted with a few whispering voices breaking it, occasionally causing someone to stumble upon hearing their own voice uttering alien words or carrying intense emotions from another time. As they pressed further forward, the voices grew in number and intensity; hopelessness, loss, despair, anger, betrayal, and every fathomable and unfathomable emotion too heavy for a soul to bear alone.
screamed out for them to hear. Seconds of the assault induced head-splitting pain for the sensitive Mitsuru while the others noticed the area losing light rapidly. They wondered how Airi kept walking without any superficial signs of hesitation. Once the door seemed no larger than a spec of dust, the coliseum ruins were gone with a sea of darkness and a group of pale glowing figures surrounding them.

The image contorted into a variety of visions.

The first had seven standing around a young man bleeding to death in the arms of his best friend. A girl knelt by the dying man, whose frail, bloodied hand tried to dry her tears and comfort her in spite of his mortal wounds.

Another had a young woman fight two Shadows alone with her meager rapier. The short, rounded monster struck her head with her staff, and the taller, thinner one picked her up and snapped her spine in half, staining the floor with entrails.

People surrounded a dog lying still and quiet in the middle of the road. A police officer had to calm down two hysterical girls, one seemed to know exactly how the poor animal died and the other claimed to have sensed a fight from afar.

A sweater-wearing girl carried her luggage onto the train and said goodbye to her only friend. She regretted her choice, but she needed time away before pursuing the truth about her father’s death.

The same girl appeared with seven companions in another vision, showing a private funeral for two lovers. She held the deceased boy’s hat and lamented how often she mocked his stupid antics rather than trying to befriend him.

A boxer lay comatose in a hospital bed with casts on his dominant arm and leg. His classmate implored her reserved friend to provide more help in the missions with another incapacitated teammate. Her eyes, blinking violently and avoiding contact, implied deeper hurt than she was admitting, but the unusual sight did not convince the friend, who lost everything but an empty shell of a body with no more will to exist.

An invisible hand from the sky forced everyone to his or her knees. The youngest withstood it longer at a price, the bones in his legs shattered and he slumped to the ground, screaming for his mother. In the middle of his agony, what looked like black ink bled out of his eyes and pooled around his neck to strangle and snap.

The eighth vision showed one of the girls from the apparition of the dead dog being thrown off a bridge after a Shadow her friends fought bypassed them and destroyed her Persona’s defensive orb. She struggled to stay afloat and calm in the still, freezing water and floundered helplessly to the pebbled shore before passing out.

A white-haired woman carefully studied what appeared to be her brother in a blue elevator room. He stared dejectedly at an unoccupied chair across the table and couch where he stood. Dropping his leather-bound book to the floor – creating an earth-shattering echo, he collapsed upon the head of the couch and bawled.

The final scene showed a girl in an unknown realm covering her ears to withstand the bloodcurdling screams around her. When a long, sharp nail grazed her back tauntingly, she writhed and overcame her hesitation. A card emitted an indescribably beautiful light that engulfed the girl and the ominous egg the voices and hand desperately desired to unite with.

When the light from the vision dimmed, a doppleganger of Airi appeared. Her entire form was
blackened stone, save for her white, iris-less eyes and blood-soaked arms, holding the trinkets Charon once kept. Among the items lay the final quarter piece of the card the Velvet Room residents had.

Having recovered from the sight of the memories quicker than her friends, Airi took a deep breath and clutched her naginata. Her clone absorbed the trinkets into her chest and held her own naginata at the ready. The doppleganger attacked first, charging straight at her friends. Quickly rushing to block, Airi absorbed most of the hit in her weapon, but she lost enough balance for the next attack to make a scratch on her sleeve.

“I’m no hero.” The doppelganger taunted her, but the tone was so heartfelt and hopeless. “I’m nothing but a pathetic, selfish bitch, aren’t I? No matter how this cycle ends, like in all others I deserve to die for defying my destiny…”

Airi threw her clone back and summoned Leanan Sidhe. While she maintained control in a hand-to-hand fight, her Persona cast Me Patra spell to treat her friends’ paralyzed states.

None were under the spell cast on the Abyss of Time or the doppelganger. What fragments of memories they saw was shocking, but several of them understood enough what was at stake to not let the emotional sights haunt them. Akihiko and Shinjiro were the first to act; Caesar jumped in front of Airi to block a hit that would have knocked her over, and Horatius cast God’s Hand to shatter the clone’s naginata into splinters. Airi glanced back to see Yukari and Aigis aiming their shots and Mitsuru, still clearly distraught over witnessing her own death, advising the others when to attack.

The unarmed enemy took out an evoker and fired, revealing a white Persona resembling Orpheus with one arm wrapped in chains. Airi knew that character well, and she refused to use it ever since the time loops started. Orbs of light surrounded the group and set off an explosion that weakened them significantly. Athena and Isis healed everyone when Mitsuru warned about pierce attacks not working. The red bird Trismegistus helped Akihiko and Shinjiro’s Personas deal damage, but the clone regenerated health fast enough to drag out the fight. Koromaru and Cerberus ran around the field to find the right angle to cast Mudoon, which Mitsuru said the Persona was weak to. Once he found that perfect moment – when another Megidolaon spell nearly incapacitated Yukari and Junpei – the white Persona writhed and turned to dust. An all-out attack helped to disorient the doppelganger and deal significant damage.

The clone knelt on one knee, seemingly catching its breath, until it glared and summoned another Persona: Cerberus. It cast Mamudoon, knocking out half of the group in a cloud of darkness, save for Airi, Akihiko, Ken, and Koromaru. When Ken prepared to cast Hamaon, the former two pulled the unconscious Shinjiro and Junpei out of the way while Koromaru and his Cerberus attacked the doppelganger head-on with knife and fire.

At the end of its rope due to the earlier all-out-attack, Fake Airi switched up Personas, to nullify an oncoming attack. When fire came near, a fake Trismegistus would endure the attack without a wince of pain; ice meant Fake Artemisia would appear; and Fake Isis for wind, etc. Airi stayed on the sidelines with Attis to revive her knocked out friends whenever another almighty spell detonated. The battle continued for what felt like hours, and her watch warned about the Dark Hour ending soon.

When the doppelganger healed half of its health before suffering a charged God’s Hand attack, Mitsuru sought Fuuka for help despite her not wanting to strain the girl further.

“I think Oracle will work!” she said. “Give me five minutes, Mitsuru-sempai!”

“We might not have that time!” she snapped while trying to avoid the brunt of an Agidyne missile
locked onto her. “This fiend is a resilient connard!”

Trismegistus and Junpei leapt in front of the fire to defend her. While successful, he collapsed due to being at the limit of his endurance. Mitsuru replaced Yukari’s role of healing to let Isis combine Garudyne with Caesar’s and Kala-Nemi’s Ziodyne. The doppelganger fell prey to paralysis, allowing Shinjiro and Airi the opportunity to attack. Much like the all-out-attack, their assault significantly weakened the enemy, however, the paralysis was short-lived. A fake Athena appeared and cast Myriad Arrows on Shinjiro, sending him flying across the field in battered shape, unable to get back on his feet as quickly as he usually could.

Rage ruptured Airi’s heart. Half of her wanted to ran to him and heal his wounds, but the desire to beat the shit out of this darker incarnation of her overrode that thought. Orpheus appeared alongside her as she rushed forward and thrust her naginata into the gut of her doppelganger, creating a gaping, bloody hole. Orpheus seized her harp and bashed her enemy in the head.

Two firm pairs of hands grabbed Airi and pulled her back despite her growling protests. A familiar blanket of rejuvenating energy embraced Airi and her friends while simultaneously brutalizing the doppelganger. When the wave subsided, Airi’s mind cleared again, and she heard Fuuka’s thankful prayers for Oracle working. The others praised the girl for her help, but Airi approached the doppelganger, lying on its back with a content smile.

“Ma, pa, Blair…” it whispered. Its stony appearance regained life and color until it looked no different from the real Airi. Its eyes, yellow, met the real girl’s and weakly held up the card fragment. “I’m home…”

A lump formed in her throat and weights pulled her heart into her gut. She ignored the feeling and took the fragment. Her doppelganger let out one more smile before turning into pale mist, revealing one last vision to Airi and her friends.

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Sitting in the chair Airi used to rest in, Aigis held Metis’ hand. Her sister never met Airi, but she lamented her absence and the consequences of her actions. After learning the truth about the red-eyed girl, she and the others Metis reconciled with acknowledged there was nothing left to do about the entire ordeal.

The world as Aigis and her friends knew it would be gone, replaced by a new year with new moments and different scenarios. She would not be gone forever, but her memories and everything that made this timeline version of her unique would be. That thought made Aigis feel a thick cold engulfed the inter-workings within her chest.

“Are you sure… there’s nothing we can do?” Yukari repeated once more but not expecting an answer. She slumped to the ground, and Fuuka held her in case she would cry again.

Theo nodded solemnly. “I will give you a few more moments before letting time reset in your world.”

“What’s the point?” Akihiko said, bitter eyes too frail to look upon anyone. “We never had a choice in this…” He lost his voice when Mitsuru held onto his arm and pressed her forehead against his shoulder. He felt her trembling sobs and ran a hand through her soft, thick hair.

Junpei’s fingers traced Chidori’s cross necklace around his neck and said while trying to dry his tear-soaked cheeks, “I’m glad I met you guys. I don’t regret a thing… betcha Aibana felt the same. I know she’ll win next time. She can’t give up now, not when she's so close!”
In celebratory and lamenting agreement, Koromaru howled. His lament made Ken finally look at his friends and not be ashamed of his raw, wrinkled, wet face. “I'll miss you guys!”

Everyone had their chance to share their hopelessly hopeful sentiments for the last time. When everyone seemed ready for the end, Theo opened his book and cited a poem in a language the humans, robots, and dog could not understand.

His eyes remained fixed upon the book, his voice stayed as tranquil as a lake on a windless day. Only his hands – rapping against the leather cover erratically – hinted his true feelings. “Like Airisama, you all have found your own answers to life. You have reached the end of your journey, and thus, we must part…”

Aigis’ head felt heavy as she struggled to stay awake. “I feel tired, but satisfied… It’ll all be alright…”

“I’ll always be with you, so don’t you ever forget me!” Metis cried as Aigis began to lose consciousness.

“I know… thank you for helping us remember ourselves, sister…”

One by one Airi’s friends fell asleep after saying their last words of affection or faith in everything they worked for. Content with his current state of mind, Junpei passed first with the cross over his heart. Akihiko and Mitsuru had no words as they embraced each other, clung to each other for the first and only time as more than friends.

“Maybe I’ll finally understand Shinjiro-san next time… maybe he’ll forgive himself someday…” whispered Ken as he lay next to Koromaru.

“I want to be a better friend next time,” Yukari promised aloud when everyone’s eyes were shut. She looked at Junpei when she said it and feeling regret in not saying it sooner. She closed her eyes and gave up believing in miracles.

On the verge of fading forever, Fuuka spoke to her telepathically, “I know they heard us…”

As if it were true, every one of them had peaceful faces when they met their end. Theo closed his eyes and chanted another poem. The heavy words and the sight were too much for him, but he fulfilled his duty. When he opened his eyes, Airi’s friends were gone.

A slightly older woman who looked much like him entered the room from one of the doorways. She let out a sigh as if her brother just finished a chore that took far longer than it should have. The sight of Theo’s arms hanging languidly by his sides and his head resting lowly between his shoulders burned into her mind. His book landed to the ground in a loud boom, but neither he nor his sister flinched. Regardless of her feelings on the matter, she respected his silence and gave her brother the room to himself.

After Margaret left, Theo leaned against the head of the couch and let himself cry until his heart gave out. Airi never knew of the cycles lasting beyond her death, and Theo dreaded telling her how many times he erased her friends from existence to reset time. He would never tell her. He would do whatever he could to end the circle of torment they all were trapped in without ever telling her how bloodied his hands became.

“Airi-sama, you will have your happy ending. I promise.”

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When the vision ended, the unique runaway door stood beside the others in the vast desert. Before going through, Airi turned to her friends, standing behind her – including Shinjiro, who sought help from Yukari and Ken. They all had conflicted expressions: shock, thoughtfulness, confusion, and sadness, yet a fragment of hope seemed present. The fragmented perspectives gave them more to think about how they changed as people.

More importantly, they saw Airi with the last fragment and had no hints of going insane.

“I-I hate to intrude,” said Fuuka nervously before anyone opened his or her mouth. “But please leave Tartarus now! The Hour is ending! Airi-chan can give Elizabeth-san the fragment another day!”

Everyone obeyed. The last person left Tartarus right as the tower crunched down to its puty size as a high school. While the madness was over, they talked about the memories with Airi providing more context. They lowered their voices and upheld more composure when on the train filled to half capacity.

“But you are feeling better, Airi-san?” Aigis asked the most important question once everyone arrived back at the dorm. They hardly spoke about herself or the memory of becoming the Seal.

“I am, for now…” she replied plainly. Everyone believed her.

“Now we only have that one door left,” said Ken in between yawns. “Something about it felt… wrong.”

“Aibana won’t drag you through it then,” Junpei said with a half-hearted smirk. “I’d make more stupid jokes, but I’m tired…”

“We can discuss more of this tomorrow,” said Mitsuru as she dismissed everyone. When she reached her bedroom door, she held back Airi for a moment longer. “You handled this much better than before, but please don’t overwork yourself.”

She nodded. “I’ll be fine. Take care of yourself too.”

“Very well,” she said, donning a thoughtful smile. “Try to sleep well, leader.”

Airi in faint surprise said goodnight and watched Mitsuru soundlessly slip into her room. That last word – leader – stayed with her for the rest of the night and into the morning. After another strikingly memorable visit, SEES somehow slept more soundly than they had in weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Airi has regained her full powers! Just in time! :O
Memories of Our Last Days

Chapter Notes

Holy shit, it's October and I haven't updated since August. No excuse, really, as I have had this chapter prepped since July. Life happens, but still. Bad Mel, bad! >.<

Anywho, as I mentioned to my 'Child of Storms' readers, I'm currently living outside of the US for employment. It's only been a month and a half so I'm still adapting to a new schedule and settling in. Although my other fic has been updated more often, I'm still patching the last pieces of the final chapter of this fic.

But yeah, beyond that, things are fine. Enjoy the last days of normal gameplay in Persona 3 in the 50th chapter!

January 30, 2010

Her parents’ months of nagging grated on Fuuka’s nerves, but this morning seemed worse with suggestions concerning their daughters’ searching for medical schools abroad as alternatives to Kyoto University or University of Tokyo. She preferred to study technology or engineering but implying it in the past only infuriated her family, particularly her aunt. The pressure was too much, and she convinced herself to leave home earlier than she originally planned. No one but her friends in tech club knew she planned to skip school.

A backpack and small duffle bag carried everything she needed, and the train ride had pleasant people to talk to when she did not feel the desire to listen to music. The day and refreshingly varied scenery passed by with Fuuka looking forward to the trip back home if only to indulge in her newly found enjoyment of traveling alone.

By five o’clock she arrived and tasted the agitation of customers trying to bypass security and volunteers helping the police settle arguments related to the everyday hinderances and paranoia caused by Tenebre. A few members of the Self-Defense Forces already arrived to establish order for those who chose to evacuate the city on specific trains. Fuuka briefly greeted the officers she associated with through Kurosawa as she cooperated with the security procedures.

Once out of the station, Fuuka strolled the familiar streets, full of graffiti, trash, and the disgruntled engaged in ideological warfare. Some removed graffiti off buildings and helped fix broken windows of stores Tenebre attacked moments ago. The numbers of those suffering Apathy Syndrome were so great that poor vagabonds, who usually hid in the alleys, walked among students, common workers, and businessmen as equals avoiding a plague. Fuuka walked in silence to the dorm, where it appeared no different from before despite an earlier attempt to attack SEES.

Only Junpei and Mitsuru were home when she arrived, and they kept themselves entertained with gossip and other minor updates. They watched the news and played card games while waiting for the others to return after clubs and meetings ended.

Nothing seemed to be interesting, but Fuuka compared how she remembered Iwatodai with what she walked through today. “No one can truly warn you about how much things change…”
Junpei raised a puzzling eyebrow at the philosophical comment. He better understood when Mitsuru replied, “A year or so from now, I might be able to understand how we went through all of this. Being so close to the madness feels oddly normal, and I don’t like it.”

“At least you’re makin’ progress, right?” the only boy said.

“Slowly but surely. Some of the committee members have proved themselves cooperative and useful after the media fallout with Corpaxine. One result has been the delaying of my marriage.” Completely out of the loop, Fuuka stared incredulously while Junpei sneered triumphantly. “My fiancé did not approve,” she clarified.

“The more ya talk about him the more I wonder why the hell you bother to put up with a controlling dick.” Junpei blurted after playing a card that put him back in second place behind Fuuka.

Mitsuru laughed awkwardly, but agreement was very evident in her voice. “Unfortunately about one in three people I have met fit that criteria in the business world. They have their uses despite their opinionated assertions, Iori.”

“But you’re workin’ with ‘em. No one said ya had to marry one.”

“Tell me something groundbreaking, Iori.”

Their conversation seemed so alien to Fuuka, who had never seen Mitsuru join in even the most relevant of Junpei’s banter. She slowly realized she worried too much about her friends, but having to live with positive changes were as difficult as accepting the negative ones.

After Fuuka won two games and Mitsuru and Junpei were tied with one, the rest of their friends arrived one by one. The junior girls went upstairs to help Fuuka settle again in her old room while Mitsuru stayed in the lounge with the rest. They agreed to eat out one last time and they left while still in their uniforms. Mitsuru treated them to a nice restaurant by the waterfront, where they met Kikuno, Kurosawa, and an older woman wearing silver glasses and a royal blue cocktail dress. They sat in a private area where they could converse openly and Koromaru would not upset the other customers.

The woman sat at the head of the table with Mitsuru to her left. When she spoke, everyone knew who she was instantly. “I am pleased to finally meet everyone, even with what has transpired. Mitsuru insisted I do not become involved; however, she spoke so highly of her friends that I had to meet you.”

Mitsuru blushed. “Our mission is dangerous and father did not want you to worry.”

Hanae let out a dismissive laugh identical to her daughter’s. “You two have endured enough fears to sink a fleet of battleships. Now that I have satisfied my curiosity, I will not trouble you more about SEES unless you feel compelled to confide in me.”

Some felt slightly intimidated in meeting another wealthy, high-status individual, but others like Yukari were surprised to see Mitsuru’s mother as a carefree woman. Despite the fact this was the first time they actually met her, Akihiko and Shinjiro relaxed in Hanae’s presence as if they knew her for years.

Once drinks and appetizer arrived, the small talk ended when Airi asked, “Are you ok with what we’ve been doing, Kirijo-san?”

“I am as fine with it as I can be. If Mitsuru were alone as she was in the beginning, I would have never let her use her powers. With there being ten of you, the police, and a resistance force, I am
confident in your success.”

Airi frowned somewhat. She meant to ask if she knew anything about the cycles, but did not want to press further when Mitsuru gave her a concerned look from across the table.

“More men from the Self-Defense Forces have arrived,” Kurosawa added after finishing his sushi. “I don’t know how many are coming, but they seem to be convinced that their wild card will prove to be an invaluable asset.” He and Fuuka exchanged knowing looks that the others could not interpret.

“Don’t worry,” Fuuka said when Junpei tried to fish the secret out of her. “They will be outside of Tartarus in case the Shadows become more aggressive. Is our plan for tomorrow finalized?”

Despite the annoyed and tired scowl, Airi nodded. “I’ll give out everyone’s assignments after dinner.”

Junpei groaned. Even though he hated healthy foods on normal days, the salad Aigis ordered looked undeniably delicious. She noticed his drooling and ate slowly to spite him. Kikuno, Hanae, and Mitsuru engaged in a discussion about language learning and studying abroad with Airi, Fuuka, and Yukari. The conversation inevitably engulfed the entire table, with practice quizzes on Akihiko and Shinjiro, both convinced that the other sucked more at pronouncing English words. When Airi and Mitsuru showed off by having a conversation about movies, Junpei and Ken made a few low blows at Airi’s accent.

“I think her manner of speaking is charming, particularly how defined her L’s and R’s are,” Hanae replied to Junpei’s remark about Airi sounding like a drunken cat. Kurosawa raised an eyebrow as he sipped his wine to suppress his laughter.

“Either way, I can’t understand her at all,” muttered Yukari with her hands on her cheeks. “I wish I was bilingual…”

Airi covered her face with her napkin, but the teasing continued. “I’m living proof that it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Be careful if you want her to tutor you, Akihiko-sempai,” said Junpei, grinning stupidly. “Someone might get jealous!”

For once, the brothers lazily rolled his eyes at the same time. “She’s been helping the both of us, y’know,” Akihiko replied.

“What slip ups she made ain’t shi- er, are nothin’ compared to ours,” Shinjiro added with a wry smirk that made Airi glare and blush magnificently. The sight amused Kurosawa and Hanae, impressed how easily Shinjiro continued to fail to live up to his once scary reputation.

When the main courses arrived and everyone ate their first-class meals in content silence, another waiter rushed in and apologized to Hanae. She barely had the chance to ask what was wrong because of the businessman storming in two seconds after the waiter. Ueno spoke to Hanae, but his disapproving tone masked rage for another person entirely. The waiter ran out uttering about how he’d bring in the manager at once.

“Pardon me, but I would like to speak to Mitsuru alone.”

The redhead went deathly pale, but her expression was unreadable. Despite this, Hanae spoke very calmly and politely despite her personal feelings on the matter. “I am afraid you came at an inconvenient time, Ueno. It is not often I have the opportunity to see my daughter and her friends.”
“I was not aware she befriended disgraced police officers,” he replied dryly, which Kurosawa ignored as he eat his salmon. “Again, I apologize for being intrusive, but the matter is urgent.”

“Let my daughter decide if it is urgent enough for a private audience.”

Had anyone in SEES met the woman on the street, they would have seen a conniving two-faced bitch who took pleasure in tormenting others only by the way her lips curved into a smile. Today they were happy that patronizing smile was directed at someone they hated. Ueno barely flinched, but he waited for Mitsuru’s answer.

She wiped her mouth with her napkin and approached him. “We may speak outside.”

The clear disapproval of unknown cause stained Ueno’s face, but he seemed satisfied in getting his way. When they left the room, everyone let silence reign even though they had the curious desire to catch onto anything that was said.

Five minutes later, the engaged couple returned. Neither’s expressions betrayed anything that might have been discussed in private. Mitsuru faced her mother and said, “I have decided to lead the company of my own volition and without political arrangements that will lead to internal strife.”

The first response was a violent sputter, followed by Akihiko coughing on his food. Ueno’s skin turned a darker shade of red when Hanae appeared thrilled by her daughter’s defiance. The older woman gazed at the businessman and asked in a passive-aggressive tone, “What ever could be the matter?”

“That is not what we agreed to, Mitsuru! Our companies must work together to bring stability back to the market and to restore good faith. You would throw away your future for the sake of your selfish, childish pride?”

Airi, Yukari, and Junpei silently snorted and thought of all the possible comebacks to expose the irony.

“I have pondered my situation for weeks, Ueno,” Mitsuru replied calmly, even though every word spoken exposed some of the anxiety she hid. “We have little in common beyond our social status. Because we are so fundamentally different in opinion and temperament, I cannot see us working together in harmony in business or marriage.”

“Are you saying you have more in common with these people?” His white-knuckled finger gestured at the dinner party. “The reality of life is that you must know who to associate with to survive the nature of the corporate world. You will lose partners for making this decision, and I have more experience and knowledge than you in these matters. Your father has made this arrangement difficult while he lived, but now that he’s dead and the board ignored his will, you will be my wife and you will be obedient.”

“Shut the hell up!” Letting out another outburst and finally catching Ueno’s attention, Akihiko stood up despite Kurosawa trying to physically pull him back to his seat. “Mitsuru is not yours to boss around! And you can’t just ignore wills without consequence!”

The adults went quiet, Hanae from astonishment, Kurosawa from exasperation, and Ueno from outrage. Similarly indignant, Airi stood up after Junpei nudged her for the past minute to intervene. “Mitsuru-sempai’s not a child, and she’s not legally bound to you. Her father would hate to see her be treated so when she is to be head of a multinational company!”

Neither shrank from the glare of the shark. “So this is the company you choose to keep, Mitsuru. A
boy with no rank, restraint, or respect, and a pretty little girl who thinks she can say whatever she desires while drawing attention to her sex—"

Another loud noise broke out, but Mitsuru sent a knowing look to Shinjiro, who seemed to understand her nonverbal cue and reluctantly pulled his seat back towards the table. Submitting to his friend’s command, however, did not stop him from wishing revenge upon Ueno.

“That’s enough.” Mitsuru took off her gloves, exposing her pale, scarred hands, and removed the gaudy ring from her finger to be placed on the table’s edge. “This is precisely why I will never marry you.”

No one knew if the man was confused or pretended to be to save face. “What are you talking about?”

“Thank you for confirming my suspicion that you coerced the board to circumvent the demands of my father’s will in front of a police officer.” As Mitsuru spoke, Kurosawa waved at Ueno, color leaving his face rapidly in realization. “It sickens me how you have no respect for anyone above, below, or of your station. Akihiko is one of my oldest friends, and he saved my life more times than you can imagine. My father denied dozens of marriage proposals, including yours, because none of those so-called ‘men’ – including you – have even a fraction of the concern or opinion Akihiko has for myself and others. Airi – that ‘girl’ who ‘draws attention to her sex’ in the delusional minds of repressed barbarians – has endured sufferings that would kill men thrice her age. She stands on her own feet and fights fate with strength very few people are ever graced with in any generation!

“These ‘people’—“ Mitsuru extended her arms to include everyone beneath her mother, herself, and Ueno in terms of societal class. “—are here in this establishment sharing dinner with my mother and I because I have earned their trust and respect. I repay their compassion to the best of my ability. Their outlooks on life are not the same as my own, but their wisdoms and experiences have provided greater guidance and comfort to me than you ever could, especially as a husband. To insult my friends is to insult me!

“People are not pawns, or things, or servants to be belittled and taken advantage of! Any man who fails to understand that cannot possibly improve the Kirijo Group and the people who work tirelessly within! I will not have such a child as my husband! From this day forward you and I are strangers, and if you try to craft another scheme to bring harm to my family, my friends, myself, or the future man I freely chose to be my husband, I will use the power of the Group to destroy you!

“Get out of my sight, you arrogant, sanctimonious snob!!”

Mitsuru’s speech ended, but the volatile passion in her eyes clearly exposed how long she was willing to continue to get her point across without resorting to infantile screaming. The room was slightly chilly, but her voice communicated all the emotions she bottled up inside for her entire life. Ueno, not used to the viciously bitter side of Mitsuru’s persona, lost all color in his face and backed away, utterly terrified of the woman. He waited for Hanae or Kurosawa to interfere, but their unsympathetic expressions proved whose side they stood on. When it was obvious there was no way out of this, he took the engagement ring and left in a hurry.

After Ueno seemed to be long gone, Junpei, Ken, Aigis, and even Kurosawa erupted into applause. When Airi and the others smiled proudly and appreciated what she did, Mitsuru’s confidence vanished as she slid back into her seat.

“Pl-Please let us continue to eat…” she muttered sheepishly.

Koromaru barked and butted his head against her leg. His approval was much subtler, but easier to
“We mean it, Mitsuru,” Akihiko finally said after returning to his food, now at room temperature. He caught her eyes and he didn’t care if any trace of unfiltered adoration traced his features. “That was extraordinary. Thank you.”

Kurosawa smiled. “I look forward to seeing the look on my boss’s face when he hears of the Kirijo Group’s new leadership.”

“Takeharu would be proud of you, little bird,” Hanae said with a gentle smile, making her daughter even more self-conscious. When Junpei and Shinjiro remarked about the pet name, Mitsuru’s “Do you want me to execute you?” look proved that a lighter mood was returning to dinner.

The rest of the meal continued on with dessert and no interruptions from outsiders. Topics unrelated to Mitsuru kept spirits up, and the teens became so comfortable around Hanae that anything and everything did not seem to be taboo. Having had a few drinks herself, the mother revealed to be fond of Yukari’s assertive character, Akihiko’s straightforwardness, and Junpei and Shinjiro’s blunt mannerisms.

“I always wanted to study abroad in Germany, but my parents insisted I learn French because it’s a ‘prettier language’.” Hanae used air quotes and sighed as if she just heard that reason at that moment. “But it worked out in the end. I met Takeharu, and I had the chance to learn more about my grandfather’s family in Rennes. I could express myself in public with only Takeharu knowing what I would remark about a stranger who implied I wasn’t ‘Japanese enough’.”

Being the most interested in studying abroad, Fuuka enjoyed the story at the expense of her completely melted ice cream that Ken stole scoops of. “I wish I knew where I’d want to study, but thinking about what to study is important too…”

“You’ll figure it out,” said Kurosawa. “The world’s a lot different now than when either of us adults were your age. At least you have people to talk to and the internet to help you.”

“Looks like Junpei-san needs to step-up his game in school rather than on the couch,” Ken couldn’t help but say with a grin that tended to piss the clown off.

Junpei let out a fake laugh and stared back at the kid fiendishly. “Keep rubbin’ it in, shota shorts, or I’ll rat off the spoilers to all of your favorite manga.”

“And thus Junpei-san continues to focus on the irrelevant things in life,” mused Aigis hopelessly. Yukari shrugged but laughed at the playful argument the two children broke into.

A much quieter argument was dying down between Akihiko and Shinjiro, and they engaged in what seemed to be a contest to see who would eat their cake faster. Pinching the bridge of her nose, Airi played referee and had to call out on each of them when they cheated or ate too fast until they choked.

For the rest of that night, no one thought of tomorrow. It could have been their last night to be happy, and SEES didn’t want to ruin it.

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January 31, 2010

Five hours to midnight.
Anxiety made Junpei too restless to play video games and waste time until the final battle. Everyone seemed to have his or her manner of coping. Ken visited the shrine with Kuromaru and Aigis to pray; Akihiko did basic stretches to relax his muscles; and Fuuka and Mitsuru meditated. He assumed Airi and Shinjiro were together but did not know where they were. They seemed to be well for the past month, but Junpei did not ask and invade their privacy.

After yet another lively dinner – possibly the last – everyone had his or her place to be, and Junpei was alone. He visited his dad; not much changed between them since their first meeting weeks ago, but time and effort could heal the damage between them… if the world still exists. Walking around town would remind him too much of what’s at stake and how many could die for him and his friends to save the world.

So he lay on the couch, bored, scared, and worried.

He heard a pair of feet come down the stairs, but he did not look to see whom it was. Junpei let out a sigh and tossed his manga onto the coffee table. The person approached his general area and said, “May I speak to you for a moment, Iori?”

“What’s up?” he slurred as he sat up to face Mitsuru. She appeared as serious as ever, but her lips seemed to twitch, as if she was suppressing the urge to smile.

“I did not know the best time to tell you, so I should speak now rather than never.” Her voice remained even and careful when her face became easier and easier to read. “Remember when Airi said to preserve Chidori’s flowers?”

Brow furrowed, he nodded slowly. Then it somehow took him only a second to be full of hope as he jumped to his feet. “D-Did something happen?”

She nodded and let out that smile she didn’t fight back. “The doctors will let you in.”

Mitsuru barely finished her sentence when Junpei darted out the front door. Too many questions filled his head, but Junpei was far too irrational to think through them. He prayed Mitsuru was right. She had to be; Airi told him about the flowers because she knew. It happened in other cycles.

Mind solely on the hospital, he did not realize how nearly dead and empty the streets were in Iwatodai, even on a Sunday. Port Island was much busier, but the police cars and Self-Defense Force blockaded the way to the Gekkoukan campus, much to the confusion and anger of some people insisting that nothing could possibly go wrong to warrant military intervention. The noise and crowd all but vanished once Junpei entered the hospital, and no one stopped him.

When he reached the room and floor he habitually visited for months, a nurse greeted him after putting away her stethoscope. Her patient glanced at the visitor, who instantly recognized her brown eyes and long red hair, now tied in two ponytails.

“Good to see you again, Iori-san,” said the friendly nurse. “I completed Yoshino-san’s check-up. She has made a remarkable recovery.”

“Yoshino…” Junpei repeated. He could muster no other words and could only stare dumbfounded at the miracle before him.

Holding a Camellia flower in her hands, Chidori lowered her head. “You’re… You’re the one the Mitsuru-san told me about?” Her voice was calmer and more detached than Junpei expected, wounding him. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember much of the past few years. The doctors told me I was gravely hurt and that a room full of flowers helped me heal. Mitsuru-san told me you and your
friends helped. I remember being surrounded by good people, but for some reason it felt like a dream…"

“She’s still trying to regain her memories,” the nurse said. She waited for Chidori to give her permission to continue speaking; when she did, she said, “Otherwise, she has fully recovered. Corpaxine has left her system and her organs have healed. The doctor said she should be ready to leave tomorrow.”

Chidori let out a frustrated sigh and dug her heeled shoes into the ground. “I wish I could remember more. I remember hurting someone… I want to apologize to her. And another girl was in so much pain I want to tell her she’ll be alright. And a boy… I think someone warm was at my side whenever it seemed dark and hopeless. I have to remember a name or face so I can thank him…”

An undignified sound caught her ear. Junpei fell to his knees, buried his face into his sleeve, and bawled. “Th-The flowers worked! Ai-Aibana’s an angel! Th-This… This is seriously the happiest moment in my life!”

Completely baffled, Chidori jumped out of her skin and faced the nurse. “H-Hey! Why’s he crying?”

She could only smile sweetly to the girl before leaving the room. Alone with the strange boy, Chidori knelt down and waited helplessly for Junpei to calm down. Just hearing his pain and happiness made her choke up a bit, but she glanced at the flower in her hands and continued to wait.

“S-Sorry…” he mumbled while drying his face. “I know I look crazy right now… but, Chidori… you’re alive!”

She nodded again. Once she recovered from the surprising last few minutes, Chidori said, “Since you know me, could you answer some of my questions?”

Junpei laughed nervously. “Y-Yeah… I’ve got time…”

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Three hours to midnight.

Having Airi spend the night with him a few times a week had become habit. Ever since he was young, Shinjiro would withdraw from others and deal with stress alone until he could control his emotions and no one could tell what was going on in his heart. It wasn’t normal, some said. It was creepy how a child showed no fear in the middle of disaster, others said. Kurebayashi called him out on this behavior back when he used to go to therapy and said it explained some of the reasons why his body was falling apart. There might have been truth in the idea that denying natural emotional responses to pain and fear weakens the body, but he had to nearly die before he finally learned that lesson and try to reform.

Now that he shared his bed he had less time to himself, and more well-intentioned questions about his wellbeing kept him from resolving his feelings like he used to. He did acknowledge that he became sick less often, much to his friends’ relief.

“What’s on your mind, Shinji?”

After a few minutes of silence and delicately tracing the length of Airi’s spine, Shinjiro replied, “A lot.”

“Do you mind sharing one thing at least?” she asked, voice quiet and tentative. He knew how
hesitant she felt whenever he gave a noncommittal answer. She curled up closer to him until her forehead touched his shoulder, and she played with the chain of his pocketwatch around his neck.

There were too many thoughts to sort through, so he picked one of the most obvious. “I’m glad I met you.”

She giggled. Shinjiro caught his breath, not expecting her casual reaction. “Me too,” she said more seriously. When they both were quiet for another minute, she said in a light tone, “I’ve noticed you haven’t once said ‘I love you’.”

“You know I do,” he said, refraining from rolling his eyes. They were not having that talk.

“But how can I know?” She looked up at him with a teasing gaze he recognized immediately. Shinjiro relented, rolling his eyes. He knew she wasn’t being serious, but he still felt annoyed that she was making light of it. “Okay, I won’t hound you about it.”

He gave her a grateful smirk. A few more quiet moments passed as Shinjiro sorted through his thoughts. He didn’t realize how much he wanted to tell her at the worst possible time. So much could go wrong tonight. He hated himself for assuming the worst, but he had the need, the drive to prepare himself in case they failed. Three hours gave him no time to say even one tenth of his worries, so he had to choose carefully and hope Airi would not react in a negative way.

A small kiss to his collarbone brought him back from his reverie. “It’s all right if you can’t think of anything to say.,. I feel like there’s a fire inside and my brain is scrambling to put it out before everything’s ruined.”

“That’s… oddly specific.”

“Yeah, I’m just scared.” Shinjiro felt her face warm up against his forearm. “Sometimes it’s hard to cope with everything.”

If they were both stressed, Shinjiro wondered what could get their minds off the upcoming battle. He wasn’t gifted at telling the kinds of jokes that guarantee a laugh, and some of his ideas were too serious for some to find comforting or relaxing.

Shinjiro wished he knew how to simply say what was on his mind when it really mattered. Being so self-conscious frustrated him because he hated to say something to upset Airi. She knew so much about him that repeating anything would be counterproductive. He wondered what hadn’t he told her that might make her happy. She occasionally reminded him to not overthink everything, but his naïveté in situations like this illustrated the worst of his social skills.

He felt her fingers along his neck as she continued to play with his pocketwatch… and an idea finally hit him. “Open it.” She froze and didn’t make a sound. “It’s okay, Riko. Open it.”

Her eyes met his and she opened her mouth to protest. Contemplation brewed behind her red eyes, glimmering gently in the dim light of the room, as Shinjiro’s thumb traced her cheekbones. When she found something that convinced her, Airi nodded and opened the cover.

Nothing seemed too unusual. The watch worked, but no one holding it had to open the case to hear or feel the gentle ticks of the parts inside. Time had dulled the metal, but no one could doubt the care Shinjiro put in maintaining it over the years. What caught Airi’s eyes did not require much inspection. An old picture rest inside the lid, protected from the elements and showed little sign of ruin. A high school-aged girl had a soft curve to her lips that did not quite make a smile, but the arch of her eyes revealed her genuine expression. She wore her long, thick brown hair in a ponytail in an
effort to tame it.

“She’s pretty,” Airi whispered. Shinjiro smiled as she studied the picture further. As she was about to ask who the girl was, Airi’s eyes widened in mixed surprise and sadness when she recognized a familiar jawline and the shape her lips. “She’s…?”

When she seemed unable to finish her sentence, Shinjiro said, “She was only sixteen.”

The matter-of-fact way he said it made him seem like he didn’t care. Airi did not pick up on this; her eyes stayed fixed on the picture. Even from the low angle, he saw her slowly piece together hints he may have dropped intentionally or not from this cycle and likely others.

“My earliest memories were of the orphanage.” His tone grew unusually tender as he reflected. “When you’re an orphan, you have to make your own family, or you’ll never survive. I was one of the lucky ones, and it wasn’t just ‘cause of Aki and Miki. There was someone I knew before them who worked there. Hitomi made sure everyone in the orphanage was taken care of so it wasn’t as messed up as the other places kids get dumped in. She was a Catholic sister and practically lived there… The other adults liked her, but they always knew she was very fond of me…”

“During the fire…” His raw voice cracked as he remembered that night. “She got me out before anyone else. Said she’d never ‘let go and be at peace with God’ if she lost me. For as long as I remembered, she was my mother…”

“The day before I started going to Gekkoukan, she gave me this. She held onto my mother’s pocketwatch until I was old enough to learn the truth. She… my mother was scared, alone, and sick when they met. Her parents disowned her when they learned she was pregnant. Hitomi did everything she could to help her, but… she died a few days after she had me. Without Hitomi, I wouldn’t have been born.”

Shinjiro cleared his throat to get rid of the heavy, burning feeling building up in his chest. The noise broke Airi’s attention from the watch she closed sometime in the middle of his story. Seeing the empathy in her eyes made his heart ache. He lay on his back and turned his gaze to the ceiling.

Now stroking his arm, she found her voice, thick and heavy, “What was her name…?”

He reflexively sighed, not as prepared to answer that question as he thought. Part of him regretted telling Airi this; he underestimated how hard he had to fight back his deep-rooted sense to mourn the woman he only heard of through stories. Time did not make this any easier to bear. Shinjiro took a few deep breaths before his voice became steady once more. “…Tokiko. ‘Time’ and ‘child’.”

Airi let out a gentle smile, assuring hum. “It’s not common… but it’s pretty.”

Letting out another deep breath, Shinjiro rubbed his eyes and felt a slight dampness on his fingers. He scolded himself internally for being weak, especially if Airi noticed. If she did, she made no hint of it.

“He gave me grief for havin’ my mother’s hair. ‘The second worst thing that happened to you,’ she used to say.” He laughed as he ran a hand through the tangled mess on his head. “She often wanted to drag my mother to the stylist, but they didn’t have the money. So she cut her hair herself, and they didn’t speak to each other for a few days. She’d threaten to make me bald when I played in the mud or got something stuck in my hair.”

He didn’t know why he said it, but hearing Airi laugh made him feel less upset with himself. The floodgates remained open as he told her more about his mother and Hitomi. Airi asked a few
questions but allowed Shinjiro more time to talk. Somehow through it all, the more he shared, the more at ease he felt. By the time he exhausted his limited knowledge of his mother, his chest felt lighter and he felt less restless. He caught himself laughing with Airi at some of the stories he shared.

“Is Hitomi still alive or...?” she asked.

“Alive, but barely,” he said, barely able to get the words out. “Leukemia.”

“I’m so sorry, Shinji...”

“I’ve accepted it, and so has she. She saw me enter high school with a smile and jokes ‘bout her hair fallin’ out. It’d be good if she saw me graduate, but she’s been in a hospital in Nagoya for years. The last time I saw her was two summers ago, and she told me to not worry. ‘No matter how much it hurts, just keep living, Shin-chan. Tokiko and I are so proud of you.’”

After taking a second to recompose himself, he said, “I’ve never told anyone this before. Not even Aki knows how this much ‘bout Hitomi...”

“I’m glad you told me. I would’ve never known.”

Airi then leaned in to give a chaste kiss on his lips. He caught her before she leaned back and brought her lips back to his. They felt how restrained they were, not knowing if the other was too emotionally upset for affection, and they allowed themselves to indulge in deeper kisses that became second nature but no less enjoyable.

He should have known a long time ago, but he still couldn’t believe how much he needed her. The Shinjiro of only months ago, more a child than a man, would never understand how he was worthy enough to seek comfort from someone so beautiful because of how much she cared about him. Airi being here eased his mind more effectively than being alone ever could. Her listening to him was a potent medicine that relieved a scar he denied healing out of shame, and yet she always did more for him than he asked.

Shinjiro hated how he only had a few more hours left with her before the unknown of the final battle might take her away from him. His heart raced frantically at the thought, and he pulled her closer to him and turned to have her lay beneath him. With how breathless she was and how her fingers became entangled in his hair, Airi must have felt a similar desperation.

They stopped when Airi gasped, struggling to breathe, and rested her forehead against his. Shinjiro brushed her bangs from her eyes and laughed. “You idiot...”

Her fractured voice was a weak, tearful whisper. “I can’t leave you like this...”

Shinjiro’s arm around her waist pulled her closer, and his free hand stroked her cheek. “We’ll win, I promise.”

“B-But what if I— What if you—? I-If we... then H-Hitomi—”

“We will live, Riko.”

She nodded, trying to convince herself he was right. As her breathing returned to normal, Airi kissed him and tightened her arms around his neck. Shinjiro understood her fear completely. He felt her drowning in it with only him as her lifeline. As if he began to fall into his old ways, he had to force himself to be strong for her. This time, however, he felt more empowered. Horatius whispered impatiently in his mind, ready to fight all the monsters that made Airi suffer for too many cycles.
If she were to lose hope and give up, he will continue her fight even beyond death. They will have more days to keep working for their happily ever after whether the universe agreed with him or not.
The Fall, Part 1

Chapter Notes

Well, shit. It's the beginning of the end. The final fight is here at last!

Rather than have a bunch of chapter notes, I'll list the songs I listened to as I wrote the final fight here:

1. "Night Eternal" by Moonspell
2. "Raining Dead Angels" by Tiamat
3. "Unknown Soldier" by Breaking Benjamin
4. "The Catalyst" by Linkin Park

One hour to midnight.

Everyone waited near the path leading to the Port Island Station outskirts for Junpei, Ken, Aigis, and Koromaru. All their last minute errands, preparations, and goodbyes to loved ones were completed. This was the last time for camaraderie before the final operation.

"Is everyone ready?" Mitsuru asked in an effort to break the silence and mask her apprehension. Recently arriving and sitting by Akihiko, Koromaru barked and wagged his tail.

"As ready as can be," replied Shinjiro, holding Airi’s hand. Given the circumstances, they didn’t care how obvious their affection for each other was.

Yukari inhaled deeply and said, “Airi, you once said you were scared we would forget you after we stopped the Dark Hour. Even if that happens, I’ll do everything to make sure I won’t forget, and damn the consequences. We’ve been through too much to have it all end with some stupid form of amnesia!"

“I won’t forget either!” Ken hugged Airi’s free arm, and he only noticed in that moment he gained a few inches in the past year.

The others shared similar sentiments and good wishes, forcing the girl to blush a happy shade that matched her eyes. “Then we’ll meet on the school’s roof on graduation day?”

“Sure! That’ll be easy to remember!” said Junpei, itching with agitation. Fuuka nodded.

“Keep thinking about that, so we won’t forget.” Akihiko gave his first and only command to the team. No one dared or planned to defy it. “I’ll give the Shadows, Tenebre, and the universe itself a fight they’ll regret!”

“Then, let’s kick Nyx and Erebus’ asses!” Aigis cried and raised a fist in the air. Her outburst was so random and unlike her that everyone in the group broke into hysterics. “What did I say?”

“L-Let’s kick ass!” Junpei managed to cheer in between his fit of tear-induced laughter.

Fuuka lowered Aigis’ hand and the others joined theirs in the center of the circle. The giddiness did not fade soon enough to come up with a creative cheer, and Aigis found herself joining in the
senseless mirth. A sense of unity overcame them, igniting flames of hope in the stubborn corners of their souls still dark with doubt.

They only wished that moment could have lasted forever.

The operation began immediately. SEES approached the barricade where the eyes of the Self-Defense Force soldiers followed the motley crew. Whispers about how they were only kids and how a dog could possibly help rang in their ears until they met Kurosawa and his men at the front gate. Mitsuru recognized one as the nephew of one of the Kirijo Group’s board members she met at her engagement party. Several of those involved were no older than them; Yukari recognized some as current students and last year’s graduates from Gekkoukan High. Another select few were delinquents, who shuttered at the sight of Shinjiro, save for two who waved at Airi.

“Still can’t believe yer a pro at this, albina,” Oz remarked while lighting a cigarette. His friend Iggy, leaning against a parked ambulance in case of emergencies, caught the cigarette pack and put it away. “Got a squad ‘n’ everythin’. No way we gonna lose now.”

Airi chuckled nervously when her friends gave her looks. “They helped me with the rumors when Fuuka disappeared.”

“Glad all’s well,” Iggy bowed in mock humility. He eyed Fuuka, who bowed graciously, and shrugged awkwardly. “Seems albina found her boyfriend too. Looks like he’s better off too.” Seeing Shinjiro’s sharp stare amazed Iggy about how on the mark he was. Oz groaned in defeat, pulled out his wallet, and gave his friend 10,000 yen.

Kurosawa stepped in before his allies completely forgot why they were here. He brought Mitsuru and Airi over to the hood of his car where a detailed map lay while the others exchanged tips and stories on how to fight Shadows. Some plans changed to adapt to updates concerning the number of Self-Defense Force soldiers in town relative to the number of people still in the region. While it did not affect SEES in any way, Mitsuru appreciated the amount of careful precision Kurosawa used to minimize casualties.

“You’ve worked so tirelessly for this,” she said. “I do not know how to repay you.”

He shook his head. “Don’t thank me until it’s over, Kirijo-kun. We’re all doing this so you succeed. Whoever stays behind will be protected as well as they protect us. Depending on how badly the situation develops, we might need to bring them into the city. Only thirty percent of the population evacuated, and we can’t have the Shadows create more of their kind to make your battles more difficult.”

“Of course. Is everyone well-armed?” Airi glanced at the soldiers who continued to stand by without question.

“The Group manufactured enough rings, and our guns have the needed modifications to attack Shadows. It’s not as effective as being a Persona-user, but it’s better than nothing. One of their plans involves their wild card, which they paradoxically brag about and keep secret. The last thing we need are unpredictable last minute heroics.” The girls smirked at Kurosawa’s dry delivery. “Anyway, good luck to you. Stay safe, Fujihara-kun.”

Touched by his rare smile and a salute, she saluted in return and followed Mitsuru in rejoining their friends. They held one last meeting to remind everyone of their positions and strategies. Some memorized the orders by heart to focus, but others needed one more piece of confirmation to calm their nerves.
Only ten minutes remained until midnight when a disagreement broke out.

“Damn it, Mitsuru, I’m going with you!” Akihiko protested after being assigned to stay at the front gate. He had reservations over half an hour ago, and now he could no longer keep his opinion to himself.

“This is only temporary. Fuuka will call you when Airi or I need you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” He shouted, not giving a damn if everyone left in the city could hear him. “Airi’s party is balanced but not yours! What if Nyx is vulnerable to electricity for a split second and I’m not there to expose it?!”

Knowing time is running out, Aigis interjected, “Allow me to stay behind and take Akihiko-san’s place.”

“No, Aigis, keep your post.” Mitsuru sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her eyes expressed the worry hidden in her frustrated voice. “If you disagreed with my decision, you should have told me days ago, Akihiko! It’s too late now!”

After giving her group a small pep talk, Airi walked over to Yukari investigate the noise. “What’s wrong?”

“A lover’s quarrel I bet.” A trace of amusement tinged her voice.

No one had seen Mitsuru and Akihiko get so emotional over something as minor as a party line-up. Airi stalked over to the seniors. “Please come to a resolution quickly. We have no time left.” She raised her hand to silence them before they try arguing with her too. “I don’t know what’s going on, but we all will have a chance to fight. There’s no shame in staying behind because at least one person will be safe enough to recover. Remember, Mitsuru-sempai and I need you guys at your best, no matter where you are on the field!”

Seeing her point clearly, Mitsuru stood down first. “Thank you.”

When Akihiko opened his mouth, Mitsuru wrapped her arms around him, immediately stunning him. For a moment she contemplated hiding her crimson hot face in his sweater vest, but she let her arms fall until her hands rested on his and looked into his eyes. “Please trust me. I will need you, and I promise I will ask for your aid. Please be patient and be ready for that moment.”

Something between longing and betrayal still etched his blushing face. His eyes hinted at a fraction of the emotional turmoil exploding in his chest, and he did not doubt Mitsuru could feel his pounding heartbeat in his wrists. Unable to fully agree with her plans but even more unable to refuse her, Akihiko nodded. They muttered their bashful apologies to each other, and they broke apart.

With his friends and Mitsuru heading towards the site of the final battle, Akihiko thought about what happened mere seconds ago and cracked his knuckles. He had to channel his energy into protecting ground zero first, then he’ll confront Mitsuru about that underhanded trick – not that he hated it – later. So long he will live and remember it.

Finally, Kurosawa, the Self Defense Force, and the resistance donned their rings at the end of their countdown. Midnight arrived.

The labyrinthine walls of Tartarus shot violently from the school and climbed over each other to reach the pitch-black sky. Upon closer examination, Airi gaped at the full moon, large and looming over her like a wide pupil-less eye watching her for the right moment to seize and devour her soul. Fuuka nudged her along into the tower and broke her gaze from the omen.
Wasting no time, the Nyx Annihilation Team and the Erebus Repression Team accessed the teleportation terminal and separated. Enveloped in Juno’s mystical orb and donning the evil eye necklace, Fuuka remained in the main entrance and saw with vivid clarity. Seeing everything and everyone everywhere at once, she had a taste of omnipotence for one night and hoped she could last the longest hour of her life.

The first thing she noticed was how many conscious minds she could see. Thousands. Not a single soul in the area transmogrified into a coffin. Juno tuned down the screams of the disoriented and the fearful, realizing too late why some fled the city and gaped at the foreboding moon, almost close enough to touch. Swarms of Shadows encircled Iwatodai, closing in and moving towards ground zero, growing en mass with each person who fell to despair. Some of the Lost fell to their knees and stretched their arms out to the moon as Shadows gushed out of their pale faces.

Wherever the Self Defense Forces were, gunshots cut through the mass hysteria and spared many from joining the Lost. A soldier slaughtered a dozen half-formed Shadows before they claimed a pair of young families evacuating their overrun apartment complex. Juno reached out to Fuuka’s and her friends’ classmates and gave them the gentlest nudge to help them withstand the incomprehensible forces they did not know existed. They and other Gekkoukan students joined Kurosawa’s vigilante teams to protect children and the elderly. A handful of the more sensitive felt inspiration swell within their hearts, and blue light bursting free from their bodies marked the awakening of their own Personas.

Despite all the preparations and the emergence of unexpected people with the potential, the Shadows’ efforts did not slow. Panicked individuals set their homes on fire to kill the expanding sea of darkness consuming entire blocks. Wind blowing at insane speeds purged streets and pushed other Shadows further towards the bay, and the stationed resistance set up traps to reverse any progress the creatures made.

Port Island remained untouched for some time. Fuuka confirmed and corrected many updates Kurosawa received from within the city and within Tartarus. Akihiko stood watch at the edge of campus with Iggy and Oz, eagerly awaiting the signal from the teams at the hospital or Port Island Station for the impending breach. He tried to not get distracted by Kurosawa and Fuuka’s arguing about her priorities in how much she should oversee her friends and her allies. Their debate was cut short when a persistent cluster the northwest district suddenly disappeared. An aura Fuuka had some trouble identifying registered in the region like a lighthouse in the middle of a storm.

A commander rallied his men over radio, increasing morale when another wave of Shadows seemed ready to overtake the business district. “Move westward and defend Iwatodai Station! Stop all fiends from crossing the bay on the tracks! White Stork will defend the Moonlight Bridge. Do not engage White Stork! He is to purge all Shadows where our men have fallen at the bottlenecks. I repeat —”

Another explosion occurred near the Moonlight Bridge and wails of wounded Shadows echoed over the civilians’ screams, the wailing sirens, machine fire, and all the pandemonium Fuuka could barely comprehend at once.

Then a familiar rope tied around her waist and pulled her attention to one of her friends calling to her for help.

They reached the 260th floor without incident. A haze muddied Mitsuru’s sight of what lay ahead, but she knew it was Nyx’ Avatar, one last attempt to push her team away from fighting a god that cannot be killed. Utterly fearless despite his fur sticking out in every direction, Koromaru darted up the stairs and howled when they did not catch up quickly enough. There were Shadows within
Tartarus tailing them, but their numbers dwindled as the Reaper sent out signals to disorient and confuse the lesser monsters like the puppet Elizabeth trained it to be.

When everyone reached the stairs, Yukari scanned the way they came for any stalkers and informed Aigis to do the same for the next floor. Her friend went up two steps at a time with Koromaru by her side and stuck her head out over the top step… and nearly screamed.

An erected pillar of scales and feathers took up much of the 262nd floor. Piles of discarded snake skin lay across the pearly tiles, painted in dried blood and writhing limbs of Shadows that long abandoned this floor for the next. Aigis tiptoed around the structure to study its strangeness. Mitsuru covered her mouth with her sleeve and Yukari plugged her nose; they smelled a corpse.

Koromaru gagged upon sniffing an appendage. He sent a wide range of signals that Aigis could barely translate, only able to understand that the structure was recent and had a strong connection with Nyx’s Avatar like a lifeline. A muffled gurgle hummed just beneath the white noise of the city outside. Uncomfortable with what that noise was and who once stood here, Mitsuru urged them to move onward. She clenched her Evoker and tapped the side of her head, informing them that Fuuka is being informed of the situation.

The Night and the Moon greeted them as they stepped onto the 263rd floor. Crisp air carved away the concerns the Nyx Annihilation Team had before, leaving them raw before a god who embraced the despair of the collective human psyche and the insanity of men who foolishly believed such a detached primordial being to be a mother.

Pitch black sockets of the pale Avatar fell upon them. Its dark wings and gown of mist, smoke, feathers, and anguish tangled with the wind and caressed the light of the colossal moon. At any moment it could reach its hand upward, grip the celestial orb, and slam it into the earth without any effort.

Yukari’s knees seized in utter shock at the being, who had the same hair as one who might have been a friend in another lifetime. “R-Ryoji-kun?”

It’s porcelain face did not acknowledge her as anything more than a trespasser. “The one that bore that name no longer exists.” The Avatar’s voice was high-pitched yet resolute. “What people fear most, what they try to ignore… That is who I am.”

“We know what you are,” said Mitsuru, holding her Evoker to her temple. “Thanatos, the Appraiser, Nyx incarnate.”

“No matter what you say or do, I will stop you, even if I must sacrifice myself to do so!” said Aigis, pressing her hand to the core of her chest.

The Appraiser finally turned from the Shadows it nurtured and let its wings carry it six feet above the platform. “Then the cycle will continue… unless Airi Fujihara climbs this tower to accept her inevitable death.”

Koromaru snarled. Cerberus appeared and crouched, ready to attack.

“You will never have her!” Yukari screamed. “Kill us! Burn down Tartarus to find her if you want! You will not have her without a fight! I won’t cower and bow to death in fear! We all will live tomorrow, the Dark Hour will be gone, and you will return to your sleep!”

The god had heard the protests too many times to feel threatened. It sighed and stretched out its arms. “The moment man devoured the fruit of knowledge, he sealed his fate. Entrusting his fate to the
cards, man clings to a dim hope.” Arcane energy brewed between its fingers, and the onlooking Shadows cheered giddily at the glory of their kin. “Attaining one’s dream requires a stern will and unfailing determination. Show me if you truly possess such strength!”

A cool breeze touched Mitsuru, Yukari, Aigis, and Koromaru as their Personas manifested. Then a force field covered the stairwell behind them. Shadows that finally caught up from below burned upon touching the barrier.

“Phase one is about to begin!” Mitsuru warned her friends. “Failure is not an option!” She thanked Fuuka for her support. “We can handle this. Scan that column and see if Thanatos is gaining strength from it. However, if Airi calls for you, protecting her is your top priority!”

She could see the once shy junior’s trusting smile. “I understand!”

Mitsuru’s team faced the god knowing its tricks, but they did not underestimate its strength. Nyx’s avatar changed tactics every few minutes in synch with the major arcana of the tarot with the very abilities Airi said. The Fool, the Magician, the Priestess… Yukari could rarely cast wind, but she maintained a defensive and supportive position as her companions attacked without hesitation. The Empress, the Emperor, the Hierophant…

The Shadows became silent once the Appraiser shifted to the Chariot Arcana. Aigis stepped back for Mitsuru and Yukari to create the blizzard they had mastered. Their enemy made no hint of his losing momentum in any way, and the mortals wondered if its thralls were indicators of how confident Nyx truly was at winning this fight. The Hermit, Fortune, Strength…

Magic polluted the air, stirring a storm around the fight. Static tickled living skin and strained some of Aigis’ systems. They wondered what the battle looked like from below, and they prayed Kurosawa, the Self Defense Forces, Fuuka, and Akihiko were safe. Above all, they hoped Airi had found Erebus in time before they drain Thanatos’ stamina in its final form.

The phase of the Hanged Man ended, and the Appraiser spoke in deep meditation. “The Arcana is the means by which all is revealed… Beyond the beaten path lies the absolute end. It matters not who you are for Death awaits you.”

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A thick fog strangled the Abyss of Time. The tree lost much of its shimmer to the tendrils of agony crawling out from the last door. No one had the chance to examine it carefully the last time they entered Tartarus. The detailed engravings, moving into ever-changing images of countless horrors and tragedies lived and imagined performed like a twisted play, disturbed them. Shinjiro twitched when Ken grasped his already sweaty hand. He emphatically squeezed his hand as they followed Airi and Junpei to the door.

Airi reached for the handle, frozen against her already cold hand. Her hair stood on end as the air threatened to strangle her and the cries of endless souls crawling through her hand and towards her heart. They wanted to infect her with more fear than she could ever recover from.

Junpei’s much friendlier hand rested on her shoulder and muted some of the more tempting offers of submission. His voice raised an octave, but his sincerity won out. “We’re here for ya, Aibana.”

She felt Shinjiro and Ken’s eyes on her, and she regained some control of herself. Before she was ready to turn the handle, colder than anything she ever touched in her life, she asked, “How are you, Fuuka?”
“I’m good,” she replied immediately. The profound calm implied nothing major happened anywhere yet. “Mitsuru’s team reached the 260th floor and faced no resistance.”

“What do you see down here?” asked Ken.

Fuuka seemed to pause. When she spoke again, her telepathic voice was strained. “G-Guys… I don’t think Erebus is a Shadow! I can’t… I can’t read him from here…!”

Junpei let out a nervous laugh in spite of his scared-shitless look on his face. Shinjiro muttered a curse but otherwise tried to calm a teary-eyed Ken.

“I’m not scared,” the youngest muttered under his breath. “I can do this. We can do this.”

“Remember, Juno and I will support you. Please stay strong!”

Airi swallowed a painful gasp of air as she looked to her team. They all knew what needed to be done. Shinjiro ruffled her hair and Ken and Junpei gave their most supportive smiles they could muster. As inspired as she could be, Airi finally opened the door.

Swamped in complete darkness, they entered the blackest pit imaginable. Nothing surrounded them. Their eyes struggled in vain to adjust to emptiness. Their ears rang, and their eardrums throbbed at the lack of sound. There was no air or wind to breathe, but their bodies did not seem to require it. Anticipation for the moment their bodies writhe and wither in the agonizing struggle against the void mingled with the fearful, dejected thoughts they fought against for months.

Unable to find her companions – whom should not have been far from her given how they entered the realm at each other’s heels – Airi glanced upward and felt relief in finding something leagues away.

A speck of golden light surrounded by the crumbs of white dots in a cluster of silver and sapphire clouds the size of a golf ball against the darkness. She instinctively reached for it like a child groping for a light switch in a bedroom full of hiding monsters. It felt like it was ages ago when she flew through that ocean of light and tranquility to pacify Nyx.

“The Sea of Souls,” she whispered, although in the silence her voice was a scream.

Upon uttering that inconsequential phrase, a deep growl shattered the world of nothing into pieces, disorienting Airi and her friends, clinging to their throbbing heads.

Light arrived, changing the underworld from black to shades and arenas of fire. Sight and sound returned, slowly allowing the trespassers to adapt to the new nature of the realm. The scape defied logic. Up and down, ground and air had no meaning here. The flames brought no heat, yet it fueled and amplified the most cruel intimate secrets in the soul until the person teased along the very edge of collapse. Any push would be enough to destroy and subvert the happiness, hope, ambition, love, passion, intelligence, serenity, tranquility, and every virtue man is capable of embodying in the world.

Airi could see her companions from the corner of her eye; they huddled together several yards away from her, and the door was nowhere to be found. Trapped. Lost in the bowels of the subconscious. Clammy-skinned Ken caught her eye. His lips moved urgently, begging Junpei and Shinjiro to reach her, but their huge, pupil-less eyes were glued to something else.

Something behind Airi. Breathing down her back. A phantom claw caressing her spine. She turned, expecting, dreading the beast that haunted her nightmare for far too many cycles. Fear clutched her
innards, sweat froze against her skin, and her heart beat incessantly in her ears. She wasn’t alone. Her friends were here. They knew her trials. They see the catalyst of her journey and her hell right behind her. Airi had to face it now to put all of this to an end at last.

Erebus.

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