

Persona 3: Remix

EternalCombOver

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Minato Arisato has never been normal. He doesn't remember what happened before he woke up ten years ago, and has never been able to fall asleep. When he awakens to the power of Persona and joins SEES, he learns that he possesses the power of the Wild Card, access to the Velvet Room, and a second god watching over him. Includes new social links from other SMT games.

Persona 3: Remix

**by
EternalCombOver**

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1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1: A Late Arrival

A blue butterfly flutters ceaselessly across a black screen, leaving a stardust trail in its wake. As the butterfly disappears, words begin to fall into place through the darkness.

Time never waits.

It delivers all equally to the same end.

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

You will be given one year;

Go forth without falter, with your heart as your guide...

"How stupid." a blue-haired youth muttered as he closed his phone. He sat alone in an almost deserted train car, with only a half-awake business man and half-dead old woman. "If only they knew."

He can hear the PA system go off, sincerely apologizing for being late due to an unfortunate accident. He doesn't care. It had just dawned on him that he hadn't downloaded a new game on his phone in ages. He quickly takes his phone from

his pocket again, and opens it.

It was out of battery. He recalled it had been out of battery for the last hour.

"Ten sleepless years and I haven't hallucinated anything that crazy before," he thought to himself. *"Maybe it's finally taking a toll on my mind?"*

Dismissing the fact, he had heard that the next stop was Iwatodai. He disembarked from the train, music blaring, and shot a quick look at the clock on the station wall. Thirty seconds to midnight. He took off his headphones and passed through the security gate with a small smirk.

Fifteen seconds to midnight. He looked around to see what the station was like. It wasn't very crowded, nor was it heavily populated with stores. He did see a stand selling umbrellas, and he had left his old one on the last train he transferred from.

As he walked by, the clock struck twelve. Time stopped; every light shut off, the walls became a sickly green with blood leaking through the cracks, and everyone but he had suddenly transformed into a coffin. Stepping through a puddle of blood, he walked over to the stand, and took two umbrellas and a rather fashionable looking watch on display. He stuffed one in his bag and walked with the other.

"Don't mind me." he chuckled as he walked away from the stand, putting on his new accessory. Instead of taking the

time to admire how well it looked on him, he pulled a map from his pocket as he exited the station and stopped to examine it. His destination was Minatodai Dormitory, and it seemed to be quite a far walk.

"I don't really mind. After all, the moon looks good tonight," he thought as he began the trek. Rows of coffins filled the streets, blood replaced water all around, and somebody had left their wallet unattended on a bench just outside of the station. He quickly took the coins and placed it back where he found it. Unfortunately, it only had 3000 yen, but it was better than being flat broke.

With a bit of light parkour over railings and through alleys, he managed to reach the dorm in just less than forty-five minutes. However, he froze at the entrance.

The lights were on.

He stood there for a bit, looking around at the other buildings. Every building was green coated, blood soaked, and the moon still loomed menacingly in the green sky.

"It hasn't been an hour yet... Nothing has returned," he noted. *"So why are there lights here?"*

After contemplating for a bit, he decided to enter the dorm, ready for anything. As he entered, the lights weren't on. Everything was still the same sickly green.

"Welcome," a young boy's voice said before he could

contemplate why he saw lights from outside. He turned to the counter to see a black-haired, blue-eyed child in what appeared to be prisoner's clothing standing behind the counter. "You're late. I've been waiting a long time for you."

He snapped his fingers, and a red notebook appeared on the desk. "*Shit, I'm still hallucinating?*" the blue-haired boy thought as he watched the scene.

"Now, if you want to proceed, please sign your name there. It's a contract. Don't worry, all it says is that you'll accept full responsibility for your actions. You know, the usual stuff." the young boy said.

The blue-haired boy looked at his signing apparatus. An ink feather. "*Fuck it.*" he thought as he took up the pen. "*Maybe the hallucination might stop if I just play along.*"

He signed Minato Arisato, and put the feather down in the note book. It disappeared, along with the small boy. "No one can escape time." the young boy began as he reappeared to Minato's right.

"*Time again? Shit, like the first one?*" Minato thought, grey eyes scanning the boy. If this was the start of a series of hallucinations, maybe he should've just screamed that the boy wasn't real, as was his gut reaction.

"It delivers us all to the same end. You can't plug your ears and cover your eyes." he said. He stopped to stare directly into Minato's eyes. Minato responded in kind with the most

menacing glare he could achieve.

"And so it begins," the boy said with a smile, before disappearing into the darkness.

"Why do I feel like this is going to become a real problem later on?" he thought as he picked his umbrella back up. As he took a step further into the dormitory, he heard motion on the stairs.

"Who's there?!" a girl's voice cries out. A brunette in a pink cardigan and choker rushes down the stairs. As she sees Minato, he notices she has a gun strapped to her leg. After a split-second of apprehensive looks, the girl slowly goes for her gun. Minato takes his cue. Hesitation. He raises his umbrella and swiftly approaches her, bounding forwards before she can draw it.

"Takeba, wait!" screams another female voice. To his surprise, she stops and looks upwards. He also restrains from dropping the umbrella onto her skull at full force. He was within striking distance, and she had just barely even gotten the gun out of its holster.

The two looked up to see a redhead elegantly walk down the stairs. *"A real life showstopper."* he thought. It was practically undeniable that she was beautiful.

As she approached, Minato backed away and slowly lowered the umbrella to his side. Once it was down, the power returned and the sickly green disappeared. *"Wait... other*

people can move in that hour?" he thought. He was looking them over, and the brunette was visibly shaken. It seems she had just realized he could have knocked her out. The redhead seemed levelheaded, but was also on guard. She couldn't have not witnessed him almost assault the other girl.

"I didn't think you'd arrive so late." she said with a smile that he recognized as a façade. After all, he's used a similar one on many occasions. "My name is Mitsuru Kirijio. I'm one of the students who live in this dorm."

"... Who's he?" the brunette asked.

"He's a transfer student. It was a last minute decision to assign him here. He'll eventually be moved to a room in the boy's dorm." Mitsuru answered. From what Minato could tell, it seemed like that was a preset answer.

"... Is it okay for him to be here?" the brunette asked again.

"Is it okay for you to keep a gun on you?" Minato mused in his mind.

"I guess we'll see..." Mitsuru said, eyeing the brunette. She returned her attention to Minato. "This is Yukari Takeba. She'll be a junior this spring, just like you."

"Hey..." Yukari said with an awkward smile.

"A junior just like me, huh?" Minato said, easing his stance and cracking a smile. If Minato knew anything, it was that his smile

looked downright creepy. In fact, it was the main reason he appeared emotionless most of the time. He only used it when he couldn't resist messing with people, such as right now. "Does that mean I get to keep a gun on me like her?" he mused, quickly tilting his head to shift his smile right at Yukari.

"Wha-?" Yukari flinched. "Oh, um, well, it's sorta like a hobby... Well, not a hobby, but..."

"You know how it is these days," Mitsuru said, her smile cracking to form quite the glare for a split second at Minato. It seemed he had scared her with his comment as well. "It's for self-defense. It's not a real gun, of course."

"I suppose that explains Yukari's initial hesitation. Can't be too bright if she doesn't realize that the whole purpose of having a fake gun for defense is to flaunt the thing like you're ready to leave children fatherless," Minato thought. He stopped smiling, returning to his original emotionless appearance. Mitsuru looked him over once more. The abrupt changes in facial expression always made others wary of Minato, but he was used to it by now.

"It's getting late, so you should get some rest." Mitsuru said, retaining her smile.

"She might be better than me at controlling her expressions. After all, I just deadpan most of the time. She can actually fake emotions." Minato thought as she said that.

"Your room is on the second floor, at the end of the hallway.

Your things should already be there." Mitsuru continued.

"Oh, I'll show you the way. Follow me." Yukari said. Minato gave a slight bow to Mitsuru and muttered an apology for the confusion, much to her surprise, and then proceeded to follow Yukari.

"I'd rather not get on the redhead's bad side. She's probably got connections, with that much tact." Minato thought as he approached his room.

"This is it... Pretty easy to remember, huh?... Since it's right at the end of the hall. Oh yeah, make sure you don't lose your key, or you'll never hear the end of it... So, any questions?" Yukari asked. Minato stopped for a moment, and decided to verify something important.

"Does a little kid with bright blue eyes live here too?" Minato asked.

"What kid? What are you talking about?... Come on, it's not funny," Yukari replied.

"Full on hallucinations then," Minato thought to himself.

"Um... can I ask you something?" Yukari began. Minato nodded. "On your way from the station, was everything okay?"

"Maybe I should tell her about rows upon rows of coffins and blood seeping out of the walls. That would be funny," Minato

thought, *"But I think I've scared her enough for one night. Anymore, and I'm pretty certain she'll resent me."*

"Actually, something VERY strange happened on the way from the station," Minato began, his smile creeping up on his face. Yukari almost cringed. "I found three thousand yen just sitting on a park bench. Not a soul in sight." He finished, flipping a coin from his pocket and catching it again.

Yukari might as well have sighed. The relief on her face gave way to a rather bright smile, and Minato thought she actually wasn't that bad when not looking scared out of her wits.

"Oh! How lucky!" she laughed.

"And that's one relieved patron," Minato thought as she calmed down.

"Well, I better get going..." Yukari began as she walked away. "You probably have a few other questions, but let's save them for later, okay? Good night!"

"Night," Minato said, turning to enter his room. He looked it over. Plain, blue, and small, this would be his nightly habitat. His bed was perfectly made up and his closet was packed. He only had three boxes on the floor to unpack, which he quickly ran through. Sure enough, he found his phone charger, and put his phone to charge. It truly was dead. As he left it to charge, he began to fully assemble his room.

Unpacking the largest of the boxes revealed an easy-to-build

table, along with two chairs. He shifted his desk up against the wall and placed it next to his window, allowing enough space for him to walk around it on either side. The other two were filled with mostly school supplies, including his textbooks, as well as his other various personal belongings, such as his laptop, microwave, miniature fridge, and his most prized possession, a traditional iron teapot, which was heated in the classical way, complete with small fire pit and two cups.

By the time he had arranged his room, it had just enough space for him to walk comfortably to any point in it. Satisfied with the outcome, he looked at the clock on the wall. It was 3:45 a.m. He had another three hours to spend before he needed to prepare for school at all, so he decided he would make a good first impression on his new dorm mates the next morning. He needed some supplies, however, so he left the dorm in the quickest way possible.

Through his window.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2 – Day One

Minato glanced at his watch, music blaring into his ears. It was 6:30 a.m. and he was almost done with breakfast. He wasn't sure of how many students lived in the dorm, but he blew his three thousand yen (and another six from his personal stash he found last night) to throw together a grand breakfast, with six plates set at the table. He had finished the scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon, and now just had to wait on the sausages to boil. The table was set, and the scent of breakfast floated through the air.

The first to come greet him at 6:45 were Mitsuru and another student he hadn't met before. He was silver-haired, with bright brown eyes. Both of them were already wearing their uniforms, just as Minato was, albeit he had a plain white apron over it. The boy only wore the inside white shirt with a red vest on top, which caught Minato by surprise. He was certain that wasn't the school uniform.

"Good morning, Kirijio-senpai!" he said with a smile and a wave. He then immediately remembered that his smile was creepy as hell, and turned away quickly.

"This much food... how early were you awake, Arisato?"

Mitsuru asked, shocked to see the usually empty dining room table filled to the brim with food.

"And here I thought I was gonna have to throw together something quick today." the silver-haired boy said as he walked towards the table.

"I never went to sleep." Minato said, finishing the sausages and placing them on the table, completing the scene.

"Hey, that's not good for you." the boy said before Mitsuru could speak. He was about to grab some food until Mitsuru spoke up.

"Akihiko. Mind your manners. Arisato, you intended for us to have breakfast together, didn't you?" Mitsuru asked.

"Yeah. I figured I might as well do something nice for everyone if I wasn't going to sleep anyways." Minato answered, folding the apron and placing it back into the kitchen cupboard. He turned to the boy named Akihiko. "So, who are you?" he asked.

He rose and walked over to him. "Akihiko Sanada. I'm a third-year, like Mitsuru. Nice to meet you." Akihiko extended his hand for a handshake.

"Minato Arisato." he answered. The two shook hands, and Minato took note that Akihiko's grip was very strong. He wasn't one to give hard handshakes, but he could tell it wouldn't be a good idea to fight Akihiko. "A pleasure."

"Arisato, Takeba usually skips breakfast, but I could go get her if you wish," Mitsuru said as the two parted hands.

"If the smell of food doesn't get you to eat, nothing will," Minato mused as he moved over to the head of the table. "Shall we begin?"

As Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Minato sat and took their food, Minato couldn't help but notice that Akihiko was eating almost twice as much as he was. Before he could ask, Mitsuru spoke up.

"Arisato, what did you mean when you said you weren't going to sleep anyways?" she asked.

"Exactly that. I don't sleep." Minato answered.

"You're an insomniac?" Akihiko asked.

"Yeah, you could say that." he answered again.

"Have you spoken to anyone about this?" Mitsuru asked again, this time with real concern.

"I don't need to. Not sleeping just means I have more time to do whatever I want to than other people." Minato said.

"Maybe. But everyone needs some real rest every now and then," Akihiko said. The eating continued. Unsurprisingly, Minato finished first. He hadn't eaten proper food in the last nine hours or so, and was ravenous.

"I don't think so." Minato said. "I read up on what insomnia is supposed to do to you, but I don't feel sluggish or even tired for that matter."

"The symptoms worsen with time, Arisato. That may be the case now, but what about a few weeks from now? It is best to deal with the problem before it becomes serious." Mitsuru said, finishing her food.

"Nothing will change in a few weeks, senpai." Minato said, leaning back into a more comfortable position. "Nothing's changed for the last ten years."

That statement stopped both of them dead in their tracks. Mitsuru's mask had cracked, and Akihiko's eyes widened immensely.

"Ten years?" Akihiko asked, gulping down the food in his mouth. Minato nodded. He and Mitsuru exchanged troubled glances.

"Shit, that was stupid," Minato thought. *"Gotta clear the air quick."*

"I mean, hey, it let me workout and study in the nights. I don't even need coffee, but I admit that tea is good for focus. Then again, tea is good for everything." Minato explained. He took a drink from his cup just for good measure. The expressions on their faces lightened. *"Yet another close call."*

"Training at night, huh? I can see how that's useful." Akihiko

said, cracking a smile. "If you've really kept that up for ten years, you must be pretty fit."

"I can do parkour, if that counts for anything." Minato replied. Mitsuru glanced at her watch and sighed.

"Unfortunately, Arisato, I have a few duties at school that require me to arrive early. I have already asked Takeba to take you today, and I don't think you want to be there too early," she said.

"Actually, I'm going to go for a morning run. I'm late today, but I can still get a few laps in. Care to join me?" Akihiko offered.

"Sorry Sanada-senpai, but I'd hate to leave Yukari-san here alone. She seems like the type to be freaked out by an empty dorm in the morning," Minato said. A brief chuckle erupted from the group.

"Suit yourself," Akihiko said. He and Mitsuru bid their farewells and left the dorm together. He looked at his watch again. 7:15. He had read the route to his school involved a train ride, and he was certain that to catch a good train, he'd need to leave in the next 15 minutes.

"Might as well clean up," Minato reasoned. After a quick ten minute dish-washing, he walked up stairs to see Yukari walking down, in almost the same outfit from last night. *"The only noticeable difference is the lack of her gun."*

"Oh, good morning! You're up early." she said as she

approached Minato.

"I just had breakfast with Kirijio-senpai and Sanada-senpai." he said. "We need to be going soon, right? Just lemme get my stuff."

"Breakfast with senpai? How early were you awake?" she asked.

"I never went to sleep."

Minato and Yukari had gotten on the train they had to take to school, along with quite a few other students. They spent the majority of the walk with Minato explaining to Yukari that he never sleeps, eliciting a reaction just like Akihiko's. As they arrive on the train, Minato listens to his music for the majority of the ride.

"Hey, bet you never had to ride the monorail to your old school, huh?" Yukari asks as they go over the ocean. "Look, you can see our school from the window."

Minato looks over to see a large island, with various buildings covering it. "Which one is it?" he asks nonchalantly. Yukari laughs.

"Didn't you know? The entire island is the school!" she said.

"*Well damn,*" Minato thought as she laughed at his ignorance. "*This can either be really good or complete shit.*"

"That island's not natural, is it?" Minato asked, now turning his

full attention to the school.

"Yeah, it's a man-made island. How'd you know?"

"It's too level."

"What?"

"The shore. It's too level." Yukari looked down to see that the shores of the island did appear flat all around.

"Well, it used to be a lab run by the Kirijio group, but they turned into a school after an accident a few years back," Yukari said, now attempting to sound knowledgeable.

"Senpai's father owns the school, huh?" Minato asked. Yukari nodded.

"Lab turned school after an accident? That's sketchy as fuck," Minato thought. He never voiced those concerns as they neared the school.

After being brought to the front gates, Yukari stopped.

"Well, this is it. We're here. Welcome to Gekkoukan High School. Hope you like it." she said a bit dryly.

"The bigger question is, do YOU like it?" Minato thought. A smile began to creep onto his face, and Yukari immediately flinched a bit. She hurried over to greet some friends, and then back to Minato. The smile subsided, and the two went inside.

"You're okay from here, right? You should go see your homeroom teacher first. The faculty office is right there to the left... And that concludes the tour. Do you have any questions before I go?"

"Which class are you in?" Minato asked.

"Me? I dunno... I haven't looked at the classroom assignments yet." she said. Yukari moved a little closer to Minato.

"Hey," she began, "about last night... Don't tell anyone what you saw, okay?... See ya later." she whispered.

"That's gonna bite us both in the ass, isn't it?" was all Minato thought as he parted ways with Yukari. He walked to the bulletin board and looked for his name. He was in Class 2-F, with, for better or worse, his new dorm mate, Yukari. Afterwards, he headed towards the faculty office. As he entered, he immediately noticed a teacher that could easily pass for an older version of Yukari. Oddly enough, said teacher noticed him.

"Oh, are you the new student?" she asked. Minato nodded.

"Minato Arisato... 11th grade, correct? Wow, you've lived in a lot of different places... Let's see... in 1999... That was what, about ten years ago?... Your parents –" she began, but quickly stopped with a slight gasp. She quickly looked at Minato. He appeared as emotionless as ever, but to somebody unaccustomed to him, he may have looked sad.

"I'm sorry... I've been so busy, I didn't have time to read this beforehand. I'm Ms. Toriumi. I teach composition. Welcome to our school."

"Nice to meet you, Toriumi-sensei," Minato replied, doing his best to create a non-creepy smile. It ended up being a slight smirk, but it was better than nothing.

"Wow, such enthusiasm! Have you seen the classroom assignments? You're in 2-F; that's my class. But first, we need to go to the auditorium. The Welcome Ceremony will be starting soon. Follow me." she said. At that, Minato went with Ms. Toriumi to the auditorium, and took the closest empty seat he could find.

The principal walked on stage, and began to speak. Minato was amazed at the fact that he began to feel something akin to drowsiness as time went on, but it still wasn't enough to make him sleep. As he went on, somebody behind him tapped on his shoulder.

"Hmm?" he turned in the direction of the tap.

"You came to school with Yukari this morning, right? I saw you two walking together. Hey, do you know if she has a boyfriend?" the boy behind you asked.

"My, oh my, how much do I want to ruin her reputation?" Minato thought. *"I could say I'm her boyfriend, but she'd probably pull a real gun on me at that point. I guess honesty is the best card here."*

After a bit of deliberation, Minato responded "I'm not sure."

"I see. I thought you might know, but I guess not... how well do you know her?" the boy continued. At this point, a teacher came over and gave him a sharp look, causing him to wince back. Ms. Toriumi quickly came forth.

"Quiet! You're going to make me look bad!" she snapped in Minato's direction.

After a boring speech and a boring day with absolutely nothing of importance occurring, Minato was about to leave when he saw a boy walking towards him.

"S'up dude! How's it goin?" he asked. He wore a cap and an open jacket with a t-shirt inside.

"Obviously, I was mistaken thinking uniform was important in this school," Minato thought. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Junpei Iori. Nice to meet ya. I transferred here when I was in 8th grade. I know how tough it is being the new kid... So I wanted to say "Hey!"... See what a nice guy I am?" he answered. He turned to see Yukari approaching Minato and him. "Hey, it's Yuka-tan! I didn't think we'd be in the same class again!"

Yukari sighed. "At it again, huh? I swear, you'll talk to anyone if they'll listen. Did you ever think you might be bothering someone?"

"What?" Junpei asked. "But I was just bein' friendly."

"If you say so..." Yukari trailed off. She turned to Minato. "Anyways, looks like we're in the same homeroom."

"It must be fate," Minato said.

"Fate? Yeah, right, heh. Still, I'm a little surprised." Yukari answered.

"Um, hello? Are you forgetting that I'm in this class too? By the way, I heard you two came to school together this morning. What's up with that? C'mon, gimme the dirt!" Junpei said.

"Wh-What are you talking about!? We live in the same dorm. There's nothing going on, okay? Why are people even talking about it!? Now you have me worried..." Yukari protested. She quickly turned towards Minato. "Hey... You didn't say anything to anyone about... you know what, did you?"

"Oh, the fun I could have here! But no, I must restrain myself." Minato thought. "Why would I?" he asked.

"Okay, good." Yukari said. "Seriously... don't say anything about last night, alright?" Junpei's eyes widened.

"And there goes my self-control." Minato thought. He moved a bit closer to Yukari, and leaned in to whisper, just audible enough for Junpei to hear. "I won't... but if you ever want more, you know where to find me."

Junpei's jaw practically hit the floor, and Yukari reddened like mad. Minato backed up and flashed his smile, in all of its creepy glory, and proceeded to add a slow laugh just as terrifying. It was childish yet disturbing, the type that gives people goosebumps.

"Yuka-tan... you're into... that kind of..." Junpei began, shocked by what he had just heard.

"Wha- Where did that come from?! Minato, what are you talking about?! We just met yesterday, and nothing happened, and augh! I've gotta go. The archery team needs me, and I'd rather be there than here! Don't start any rumors!" Yukari exploded. She stormed away angrily, Junpei still in shock.

"Dude, seriously?" he asked Minato.

"Nah, I was just messing with her. She's pretty easy to tease, you know." Minato shrugged.

"Really? I'll keep that in mind" Junpei said with a tip of his hat. "Ah, well, it's not like anyone takes rumors seriously. She's so paranoid... but hey! It's your first day here and people are already talking about ya! Believe it or not, she's actually pretty popular. You da man! Heheh, this is gonna be a fun year, I can feel it!"

Minato and Junpei parted ways in front of school, but not before exchanging numbers. On the way back to the dorm, Minato decided to spend the day getting used to the layout of Iwatodai. He explored the talk of the town first, Paulownia

Mall, and was immediately drawn to the Power Records store. He didn't bother going inside, but he noticed a blue-haired boy with large white headphones inside that reminded him a lot of himself.

He also passed by an alley in the mall that seemed to lead to a dead end. It was dark, but he was certain he could see a boy and a woman, both dressed rather formally in black, speaking with another, rather large individual, dressed just as formally.

"Either I'm witnessing a drug deal or a gang meeting," Minato thought as he passed them. *"Neither of which I want to be involved with."* He was almost certain the boy had turned to watch him as he passed by, but ignored it and hurried on. Café Chagall, the Police Station, Club Escapade, Game Panic, Be Blue V... shops he felt he would probably have to get acquainted with.

Afterwards, he decided to visit Port Island Station, and immediately regretted his decision to waste time there. The most interesting thing there was the bathroom, and just possibly the cinema. He went around to the back alley, and was saw the local delinquents as he expected. Unexpected, however, was a man in a gray hoodie with black shorts that simply meditated there. Nobody disturbed him, and for good reason. Minato left soon after he realized that the man meditating practically radiated an aura of fear. Everyone knew better than to interact with him, as did Minato.

As the sun set, Minato scoped out the various stores at

Iwatodai station, noting some good places to eat. Finally, he visited Naganaki Shrine, and tried his luck at a fortune. He got a great fortune that day, and, much to his surprise, found a 10000 yen bill on the ground of the shrine. He snatched it up quickly and returned to the dorm as night fell.

"Welcome back." Mitsuru said as Minato entered the dorm. He nodded and proceeded to use the sign-in sheet at the door. Apparently, he was the only signer. "Might I ask what kept you out so late?"

"I was exploring the town, senpai." Minato said as he finished signing. "Have you had dinner? I was thinking of making some."

"Unfortunately, I have. Another time, perhaps," Mitsuru said as she returned to her book. Minato went about making curry and rice, when Akihiko came in. Apparently, he had been making up for his missed morning jog.

"Minato! Cooking again?" Akihiko asked.

"You hungry, Sanada-senpai?" Minato asked. "It's almost done." Once the two began to eat, Minato was shocked to see Akihiko begin to apply protein powder to his food. Despite his various protests about such an addition ruining the meal, Akihiko insisted and added a full scoop.

"To each his own," Minato sighed as he gave up on saving Akihiko's food. He could hear Mitsuru laugh from the lounge. They ate together and held small talk, mainly about cooking.

Despite having the basics down, Akihiko failed to grasp the concept of seasoning food differently depending on the dish, much to Minato's chagrin.

He excused himself to shower and study. Around 11:30, he saw Akihiko leaving the dorm. He didn't bother looking into it; he was planning on leaving the dorm soon as well. However, at 11:50, he stopped, and began to make tea.

"The moon is getting to its most beautiful," Minato thought as he poured tea. He set his little table, and waited. Then, at midnight, the world shifted to its sickly shade of green. He drank his tea calmly, enjoying a few minutes peace.

Then, he jumped out the window.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3 – Two Rooms

After a night spent scavenging the streets when the world was green and beautiful, Minato, a bit richer and no longer in need of a new phone charger (his old one was damaged in the move, unfortunately), exercised for the majority of the night on the second floor lobby.

That morning, he heated up the copious leftovers from yesterday and ate with his two senpai once more. It was an uneventful breakfast, with Minato again declining to jog with Akihiko on the grounds that he had been working out throughout the night. Thus, he was left to walk to school with Mitsuru.

"Kirijio-senpai," Minato spoke as they found a spot to stand on the train, "Is it true that your family owns Gekkoukan?"

"Yes," Mitsuru answered quickly. "Why?"

"I was curious," Minato replied. A long silence followed as the train neared the school. While thinking of something to say, Mitsuru surprisingly broke the silence.

"How have you been getting on in your classes, Arisato? I

hope that being thrust back into school immediately after a move must be stressful, so if you ever need to talk about it, feel free," she said.

"It's not much of a problem, senpai. I'm used to moving around a lot anyways, and I'm almost always top of my class," Minato said.

"Really? I look forward to seeing that," Mitsuru said with a smile.

"Don't worry, senpai. I've got this." The train arrived, and the two kept their small chat going as they entered the school. Minato heard some strange rumor about a girl whimpering in a corner, but it quickly turned into some downright sneers once people began to look at him and Mitsuru.

"First Yukari-san, and now Mitsuru-sama?!" he heard a few people exclaim, staring daggers into the back of his skull.

"The hell?! The new kid wasn't happy with getting the best babe in his grade?! He thinks he's gotta look higher or something?!" was one of the louder comments. By the time they reached the main building, both he and Mitsuru knew that staying together would be troublesome.

"I shall see you at the dorm, Arisato. Try not to stay out too late tonight," Mitsuru said, leaving him. Minato responded with a little bow, and went on his way.

Aside from the idiotic rumors he did his best to ignore, the

school day was boring. Junpei asked for his help when Ms. Toriumi shot him a question for not paying attention, and Minato considered leaving him hanging, since he certainly didn't try to stop any rumors from flying around. Ultimately, he gave him the right answer, and earned a bit of respect from Junpei.

After school, Minato decided he would spend some time at Paulownia, and finally visit the Power Records store. Unlike most people, he had a profound respect for getting music from CD's. Then again, with so much time on his hands, he didn't have much else to do when the majority of the world slept.

On his way there, however, two people in dark attire emerged from the same alley he passed. It was the young boy and woman, holding hands like a mother and child.

"Shit, they saw me," Minato thought. He turned around, deciding to scrap his plans, only to see the large man that was with them blocking his way. *"Double shit."* He turned around, and the woman and child approached him. He looked them over quickly.

The woman stood out like a sore thumb; she was in full mourner's clothing and wore gloves, stockings, and a shawl completely veiled her face. From what Minato could tell, she seemed rather old. On the other hand, the boy barely looked twelve, wearing a small black tuxedo and gloves. He had rather long blonde hair that looked as if it had never been cut, despite being rather neat. However, his eyes were bright

yellow, so much so that they could have been glowing. And to Minato, they looked downright sinister.

"The Master wishes for you to accompany him," the veiled woman said. When she spoke, she sounded like she was just barely an adult, much to Minato's surprise.

"Yes," the man behind him joined in. He sounded just as harsh and intimidating as his appearance suggested. "Please, accompany him."

Minato nodded, and the woman and child headed towards the dark alley. He followed them, his rear occupied by the large man. As they walked, the boy tugged on the woman's arm. She leaned in to listen to something he whispered in his ear, and nodded. As they reached the end of the alley, they stopped to face Minato.

"And this is where they pull guns on me," he thought, quickly scanning his surroundings. In these close quarters, he could probably knock out the woman and hostage the child.

"Minato Arisato, hold out your left hand," the woman instructed. In spite of the surprise that they knew his name, he did as instructed. Black and red butterflies seemed to spawn around, forming a dagger. Before Minato could react, it quickly cut into his skin, drawing some blood. Despite being painless, he drew his hand back on reflex. The dagger drank his blood, and warped into a red key.

It disappeared from the air and reappeared in his left hand.

He looked at it. His hand was neither cut nor even marked. He simply held the key, and looked back towards the boy and woman. They had vanished, and on the wall behind him, a door that looked like it came from 18th century England with a bright red outline decorated the once blank wall. Next to it stood the man from behind him.

"Come. The Master would like to properly introduce himself to you," the man said, gesturing towards the door.

"I should run right now," Minato thought. *"And if these hallucinations keep up, I'll ask Akihiko-senpai to knock me out so I can get some sleep."* He didn't run however, and was drawn to the door by something other than himself. He pulled out the key, placed it in the handle, and saw his body break apart into the red and black butterflies the knife was made of.

His mind went blank. When he realized he could think again, he was sitting in a room dyed various shades of red and black. He was sitting on a black leather chair, facing a checkerboard table and the young boy, who sat on something much more disturbing: a pile of skulls that formed a small chair for him. To his left stood the veiled woman, and to his right, the large man in a business suit.

"Welcome," the woman began, "to the Crimson Room. This room is its own dimension, free from the constraints of time."

"Great fortune? How is insanity great?" Minato thought as he shifted uncomfortable in his chair. He was certain that he had gone over the edge now.

"I am Paimon," the woman said. "And he is Lucifuge." the man bowed. "This is our Master. It is not in my power to grace you with his name; he may give it to you if he wishes."

"A pleasure," Minato said, trying not to cry.

"At ease, boy," Lucifuge said. "Had our Master wished you harm, you would already be dead. We are here to help you. Our master knows that you will soon embark on a journey. A very entertaining one, at that."

"Journey?" Minato asked.

"You will soon see," Paimon answered. The boy raised his hand and snapped his fingers. A black card appeared on the table in front of Minato.

"The first of many gifts," Lucifuge said, smiling. "It is vital that you never part with this card; it is your only way to use the gifts we will bestow upon you in the future."

Minato apprehensively picked up the card. It truly was pitch black on both sides. "Thank you very much," Minato said, shifting his gaze from person to person.

"It is too early for you understand our services. You will seek us out on your own the next time we meet," Paimon said. There was a slight silence.

"It was good to meet you all," Minato said to break the silence. "So... how do I leave this... dimension?"

"The same way you entered." Lucifuge answered. Minato looked behind him, noticing as he turned around that the walls were actually not walls, but vast empty space. The ground, he realized, was a simple black platform amidst... whatever it was that swirled around him. Whatever it was, he was too preoccupied with leaving, and the door he entered stood a bit behind his chair, connected to nothing.

"Well, if you'll excuse me..." Minato said, slowly rising from his chair. The boy nodded, apparently giving Minato his approval to leave. He wasted no time going to the door. He grabbed the handle, and felt the same sensation from his entrance.

He was standing in the back alley, alone, the Crimson Door glowing behind him.

"That's enough insanity for one day," Minato thought as he sprinted out of the alley. Power Records could wait for another day. He went to the dorm as fast as he could.

He entered with a sigh, only to see familiar hair sitting in the lounge. His heart stopped. "SHIT!" he exclaimed, jumping backwards into the dorm's entrance. Yukari, Mitsuru, and the man all turned to see him. Upon closer inspection, the man's hair was too messy to be who he thought it was, and brown instead of blonde. He gave a big sigh, ignoring the quizzical looks in his direction.

"Uh... hey," Yukari said awkwardly.

"So... you are our new guest, correct?" the brown haired man

asked. He wore glasses and a business suit, but was nowhere near as intimidating as Lucifuge. Especially since he only had a goatee, and Lucifuge looked like Wolverine on steroids.

"Yeah," Minato said, clearing his throat. He calmed himself and approached the three. Mitsuru was eyeing him suspiciously. "Sorry, you reminded me of somebody I used to know," Minato lied.

"Oh? And who would startle you that much, Arisato?" Mitsuru inquired. He was racking his brain trying to think of a sensible response, but thankfully, the man killed their conversation.

"Now, now, Mitsuru. Every man has his demons," he said. "Let's start over, shall we? Good evening. My name is Shuji Ikutsuki. I'm the Chairman of the Board for your school. "Ikutsuki"... Hard to say, isn't it?"

"Not really," Minato said under his breath.

"That's why I don't like introducing myself. Even I get tongue-tied sometimes... Please, have a seat." Ikutsuki finished what Minato again read as a scripted introduction.

"Is everyone in this dorm hiding something? Or maybe this is just paranoia kicking in... I am already hallucinating," he thought. He ignored the thought and took a seat next to Mitsuru, much to Yukari's surprise.

"Sorry for the language, senpai. Crazy day," he whispered as

he sat down. Mitsuru nodded, but gave him a look that he knew meant she didn't tolerate outbursts like that.

Ikutsuki picked up where he left off. "I apologize about the confusion regarding your accommodations. However, it may take a while longer before you receive a proper room assignment. Is there anything you'd like to ask?"

Minato thought it over for a second. He was certain Ikutsuki could probably direct him to a first class psychologist, and he was really considering getting one. However, after his little outburst, Minato didn't think that asking for therapy would look well. "Are you staying for dinner? If I recall correctly, senpai said I could cook for her today." he asked, giving Mitsuru his newly practiced non-creepy smile. Apparently, the half-smirk, or whatever he was pulling off, made him look good. He knew because he tested it on a few girls he passed by at the mall, and now Mitsuru was smiling in his direction.

"Oh! You cook regularly? We haven't had a cook in the dorm for quite some time." Ikutsuki said.

"His breakfasts are excellent," Mitsuru said, looking at the chairman. "Will you join us?"

"I can't refuse an invitation from half of the dorm now, can I?" Ikutsuki chuckled. That little comment tipped Minato off to the fact that he had already met all of his dorm mates. He made a quick mental note of that, and rose from his seat. He noticed Yukari eyeing him and Mitsuru oddly.

"Yukari, do you have any preferences for dinner tonight?" he asked. She was a bit surprised that he asked her instead of Mitsuru, as she predicted.

"Not really," she answered quickly. Minato then turned to Mitsuru, who had an answer ready before he could ask.

"Whatever you make is fine with me, Arisato." Ikutsuki shrugged at him.

"Huh... I hope you guys enjoy casserole." Minato said as he headed over to the kitchen. Everyone blinked. "I went out ingredient shopping last night. We can make all kinds of food now. We still have some of last night's curry if anyone wants it... assuming Akihiko-senpai hasn't dumped protein powder on the rest of it."

After dinner, Mitsuru and Yukari retreated to their rooms. Minato decided to study for the night, bidding farewell to Ikutsuki. Then, as usual, at 11:50, he set up his tea.

In the fourth floor meeting room, Mitsuru, Yukari, and Ikutsuki gathered around the monitor.

"He doesn't sleep much, does he?" Ikutsuki asked as he watched Minato set up his tea.

"I neglected to inform you, Mr. Chairman, but Arisato claims to have never slept in the last ten years," Mitsuru said.

"Maybe he wasn't lying..." Yukari trailed off. The trio watched

in silence as midnight approached.

The world shifted to its sickly green, and, to the surprise of everyone in the room, Minato calmly finished his tea. He moved over to the little table he had set up by the window, and took his seat as usual, facing the moon. The camera shifted to track him.

"You know," Minato began on the screen, shocking everyone in the room. *"I have enough tea for a few guests. Feel free to join me."*

"He... knows?" Yukari asked. Mitsuru furrowed her brow, and Ikutsuki looked like a child filled to the brim with excitement.

"If you're wondering how I know... well, let's just say that any noise in this hour of silence is easily noticeable," Minato continued. *"Especially a sound as distinct as a whirring camera."* He turned and looked straight into the camera, instead of talking to his window.

"Ten sleepless years indeed..." Mitsuru muttered. He was almost taunting them when he raised his cup in a mock cheer, and took a rather large drink.

"I'd really like to know how you got that camera to work now though. I thought electronics died during this time... Regardless, if you feel like having a nice chat, you know where to find me." Minato said. He went to refill his cup.

"Mitsuru-senpai..." Yukari began.

"It's obvious he has the potential now," Mitsuru said. "Shall we, Chairman?"

"I don't think speaking to him now is wise. He seems a little... different, doesn't he?"

"Ikutsuki-san's right. He is a little weird, but... he never acts like this, usually. And look, he just stares at the moon!" Yukari protested.

"So his attitude in the day is a façade? Or is he trying to scare us now?" Mitsuru asked. Before anyone could finish their thoughts, Minato finished his second cup of tea.

"Well, it looks like my stalker isn't feeling terribly sociable..." Minato began. *"Yeah right, who am I kidding? Everything's just got me on edge today."* he continued, rising from the table. He pushed his chair back neatly into position, looking once more at the camera.

"I think we should go talk to him. Even if something is wrong, it's better to confirm it firsthand than to speculate." Mitsuru said. However, as she rose from her chair, Minato jumped out of the window, leaving stunning the trio.

"Looks like that plan went out the window," Ikutsuki said, suppressing a laugh. Mitsuru shot him an icy glare that silenced him completely.

"Takeba, stay in the dorm with the Chairman. Watch here and tell me if he returns. Akihiko and I will find him." Mitsuru

instructed as she stormed out of the room. Minato Arisato was now at the top of her list of things to deal with.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4: Awakening

Minato didn't remember how he got to this place. He did remember following a blue butterfly again as he roamed the city, which, he realized at this moment, was a terrible idea for somebody suffering from constant hallucinations.

The room he had found himself in was a deep blue, with chain-linked walls that seemed to be moving up constantly. No, that wasn't right. The room itself was moving upwards. He was sitting, again, on a strange chair, this one resembling a lyre, and again, sat facing a table, draped with purple cloth, staring at a short old man with a ridiculously long nose seated on a very comfortable looking couch, with what looked like an air hostess with silver hair and golden eyes to his right.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," the man said.

"Is there a turquoise room? A cyan room? Maybe a magenta room?" Minato asked mockingly. He was well and truly sick of the hallucinations that plagued him. The man only smiled at him, and the girl to his right giggled.

"Unfortunately, young man, your soul is not that colorful," he mused. "My name is Igor. I am delighted to make your

acquaintance. This is Elizabeth. She's a resident here, like myself."

"Pleased to meet you," Elizabeth said with a smile.

Igor waved his hand, and a notebook appeared on the table. Minato recognized it as the contract he signed.

"My hallucinations now have continuity... Not sure if that's good or bad," Minato thought, eyeing the contract.

"This is no hallucination," Igor said, reading his mind. "This place exists between dreams and reality, mind and matter... It's been years since we've had a guest. Only those who have signed the contract can enter this place... Henceforth, you shall be welcome here in the Velvet Room. You are destined to hone your unique ability, and you will require my help to do so. I only ask for one thing in return... that you abide by the contract, and assume responsibility for the choices that you make." There was silence as Minato took a brief moment to absorb all of that information. After some contemplation, he realized he had a question.

"Is time frozen here?" Minato asked.

"Oh no, young man. Time marches on in your world as we speak. You cannot stop time," Igor said.

"The Crimson Room can," Minato rebutted. Igor's smile turned into a frown.

"That room should not exist," Igor snapped. "Regardless, as you are our honored guest, I cannot tell you what to do. It is, after all, part of the contract that you take responsibilities for your actions."

"I see. Should I be expecting a key about now?" Minato asked.

"Indeed." Igor said, his smile returning. He waved his hand again, and a Velvet Key appeared on the table. "Hold on to this..."

"Let me guess. Find a blue, glowing door, and use the key to return?" Minato asked as he pocketed the key. Oddly enough, he felt the Crimson Key in his other pocket, despite not seeing a door around anywhere.

"It's a bit tedious if the guest is already aware of how to travers dimensions, isn't it?" Elizabeth giggled. Igor ignored her.

"Till we meet again..." he said to Minato. With a wave of his hand, Minato felt the same sensation he felt upon entering and exiting the Crimson Room. He focused, and found himself reforming from blue butterflies in the same dark alley at the end of Paulownia. The blue door stood on the wall to his left, and the red door to his right. Even when the world turned green, the doors retained their colors.

"I didn't even grab stuff from the display yet, and according to Igor, time has actually passed this time around," Minato

thought. He decided to return to the dorm, and workout to clear his mind.

At breakfast, which was now becoming somewhat of a dorm tradition, Minato noticed that Mitsuru and Akihiko seemed tense. Both of them shot him suspicious glances every now and then, and nobody engaged in conversation. The silence was a bit stifling, so he decided to lighten the mood.

"Akihiko-senpai, I've heard that the boxing club is full. It's too bad, since I'm pretty interested in joining," Minato said.

"Really?" Akihiko asked, surprised by the sudden question. "I might be able to pull some strings for you. There were a few guys on the team who barely attended anyways. I could probably kick one of them out."

"Lucky me," Minato said. Unfortunately, he smiled his regular smile directly at Akihiko, who choked on his coffee. Mitsuru cleared her throat, and Minato immediately realized what he had done, and became very absorbed in eating his food.

Akihiko finished first, and went out early for his jogging, leaving Minato and Mitsuru alone.

"Arisato," Mitsuru said as he finished eating. She had finished recently as well. "I'd like to ask you a few questions, and I want you to answer truthfully."

Minato looked her over for a moment, and then decided that come what may, he would answer truthfully. *"She's probably*

the one behind the camera." He nodded.

"How many hours are in a day?"

"Twenty-five." he replied. She took a moment to consider what to ask next.

"In the twenty-fifth hour... have you ever encountered anything strange?" she asked.

"You mean the black masked things? Yes, I have. I've killed a few too." he replied.

"How?"

"Whatever weapon I could find at the time. I don't have a real preference, so if I need to shoot it, stab it, or beat it to death, I will." The two locked eyes. So far, Mitsuru couldn't find anything wrong with what he said, but there was something off.

"Ok, you got me. I prefer blades because I think it's cutting something to pieces guarantees that it's dead." Minato said, breaking eye contact. Mitsuru smirked. "So, you were monitoring me?"

"I was one of them, yes," Mitsuru said. He was completely honest with her, so she felt no need to hide information that was now harmless. "We should continue this talk tomorrow. I promise everything will be revealed then."

Minato laughed his very creepy laugh, just as Yukari walked

downstairs. She might have questioned what was so funny, but the scene was downright strange. Mitsuru calmly sitting with a relieved smile on her face as Minato laughed like a lunatic.

"Uhh..." Yukari began. Mitsuru turned towards her, still smiling.

"Takeba. He knows."

That was all Yukari needed to hear from Mitsuru. As Minato cleared the dishes, he retained his smile for the majority of the train ride. He arrived that day with both Yukari and Mitsuru as his companions. But he was too happy that the air of secrecy had been shattered to care for the crazy new rumors flying around. So was Mitsuru, but Yukari backed away from them as they approached the entrance.

After a boring day of listening to Mr. Ekoda, Minato seriously began to hate that he couldn't fall asleep. Junpei was much happier than usual, but he had no idea why, and didn't pay much attention.

After school, he had decided to head straight back to the dorm, until he met Akihiko by the front gate.

"Hey," Akihiko said as he approached. "I heard the news. Looks like ten years of insomnia wasn't a lie."

"Yeah." Minato said as the two began to walk together. "If you already know, why is the meeting tomorrow?"

"Ikutsuki said he had to prepare something." Akihiko answered. "But enough of that. I was wondering if –"

Before he could finish, a swarm of fan girls ran over to the duo.

"What?! The transfer student got Akihiko-senpai too?!" one screamed.

"Oh my god! The two of them! Together! AHFFF!" a slightly more demented one screamed.

Minato and Akihiko looked at each other, and nodded. Before the swarm could eat them, they bolted in opposite directions.

After technically joining Akihiko for a run, Minato returned to the dorm. The place seemed rather cheery, and he didn't even have to cook. Mitsuru had ordered rather fancy takeout that Minato was sure not found on this side of town for dinner. After a good meal, laughs about spying, terminology updates (he now knew the sickly green hour was called the Dark Hour, and the black monsters were Shadows), and some talk about adjusting to school, Yukari dropped a bomb.

"So Minato-kun," she began as they finished eating, "why do you sneak out during the Dark Hour?"

Everyone stopped. That question was on their mind, but nobody dared to ask it. Minato looked around, and saw the expectation on their faces, as much as they tried to hide it.

"The truth got me pretty far this morning," Minato thought.

"Can't be that bad."

"To... scavenge," Minato said, choosing his words carefully. Ikutsuki adjusted his glasses, and Mitsuru stiffened. They had caught him already. "When I was a kid... most of my foster parents never really gave me any freedom. So I would sneak out at night, usually when they turned into coffins, well, transmogrified. And I found out that... I could take stuff with impunity at the time." he confessed. "What kind of kid wouldn't want that power? I got everything I wanted by myself. I didn't need to meet the standards of somebody that didn't really even care about me. I know it was wrong, and that I should've stopped, but... it's a habit now, really."

There was a long period of silence. Minato felt a mix of being judged and being pitied.

"Minato," Mitsuru spoke up. He was surprised since she addressed him by his first name. "As your senpai, you know I can't allow you to continue down that road. However, I've... we've read your file. And I know your life was difficult in ways I can't begin to comprehend. But, that was the past. You must look to the future now. You are no longer alone anymore." She smiled right at him. "Welcome to SEES."

CRACK!

Minato's vision was clouded by what he recognized as a Tarot Card. It was the number zero, depicting a man holding a bag tied to a stick with a dog.

Thou art I... and I art thou...

Thou shalt have our blessing when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...

He didn't pay any real mind to it. He was too shocked with Mitsuru's response to care. After reassurances that he wouldn't be judged for what he did in the past, he went ahead and promised to not steal during the dark hour... unless he absolutely had to.

He spent the night thinking through what had happened just now. Time passed without him noticing, and he had missed his tea time. It was the Dark Hour, and as he was still trying to come to terms with what just happened, a heavy rumbling shook the dorm. As he got up and dressed, he heard Yukari screaming for him.

He ran out to see her, bow in hand, carrying a short sword. "Minato! We've gotta go! It's a shadow attack, and Akihiko-senpai can't deal with them!"

Minato nodded. She was panicking, so he immediately realized he would have to be the brains of this operation. He took the sword from her without hesitation. "Let's head out the back." he suggested.

The two ran downstairs, only to hear banging at the backdoor. So they dashed frantically up flight after flight, the rumbling getting louder and louder, until they reached the roof.

"We should be safe up here." Yukari said panting. It was only then that Minato realized tonight had such a beautiful full moon, his favorite thing in the Dark Hour. Unfortunately, his view was soon obscured by a black hand holding up a blue mask with I carved on it, followed by six other hands, each holding a blade.

"This was probably what Akihiko-senpai was having trouble with," Minato thought, readying his sword. Yukari walked forward, drew her gun, and put it to her head. *"And Yukari is contemplating suicide."*

"I can do it... I can fight..." Yukari muttered, knees trembling. The shadow, rather, Magician, dubbed for its arcana, shot out an arm to stab right through her.

Minato shoved her aside, knocking the gun out of her hand, and raised his sword. Metal scraped against metal as he slid under the attack. He took a swing at the arm. He couldn't sever it, but he managed to cut deep, making it sag as the Magician pulled it back.

"Wait!" Yukari screamed. "You can't fight that thing without a Persona!"

Minato didn't know what the a Persona was, but he didn't have time to care. The shadow began to strike rapidly at him, forcing him to run around the rooftop. He couldn't block a direct hit, seeing as how the Magician left small craters with each strike.

He had to get in close. Dodging and weaving, he slashed at the arms that came in reach when he got the chance, lightening the barrage of attacks. He had almost reached the maske when the Magician opened its mouth.

"Move it, Boss!" a voice in his head yelled. He rolled out of the way, underneath the dangling arms, only to see the place he was just standing erupt into a pillar of flame. ***"You've gotta summon me! We can take this thing!"***

"Now there's a voice in my head. Great." Minato thought, now running for his life from various pillars of fire appearing around him.

As he ran around, he noticed that Yukari had fainted. However, what caught his attention was the boy who gave him the contract. Standing a bit away from her, where her gun was.

"Can you do it?" he asked playfully, putting his finger to his head like a gun and firing.

"See, Boss?! He gets it!"

"Now my hallucinations can see each other and communicate." Minato narrowly dodged a quick thrust his way. He ran over to the dropped gun, picked it up and slid on his feet to stop moving.

A quick draw, a twist, and a wide stance. Stylish.

The gun touched his temple, and he pulled the trigger.

"Per...so...na!" he whispered, suddenly smiling. Instead of his brains flying out from the side of his head, blue glass flew, and a black void materialized behind him.

"The Boss summons me!" the voice in his head screamed. The void warped into a large black overcoat. Legs sprouted underneath, complete with dark brown slacks and black moccasins. Arms burst forth, revealing skeletal arms wearing thick white gloves. Finally, the head burst out, a hollow skull wearing a top hat. All in all, the creature was about as tall as Minato.

"Jack the Ripper lives once more!" the now fully materialized monster cackled. It reached into its jacket, pulling out a gigantic meat cleaver the size of its own body. **"I, the Fiend of Fools, master of carnal mutilation, will do your bidding!"**

Minato didn't need to think twice. Jack the Ripper flew forwards and Minato charged after him. The Magician thrust its arms out to attack, but Jack dodged and severed them with clean blows. Minato cut at the remaining limbs that still flailed around as he followed.

"Off with your head!" Jack screamed as he reached the mask. One clean slice disconnected it from the rest of the body, and the mask flew upwards. Minato jumped, bounced on Jack's back, and sliced it in two before landing on the roof.

As he landed, he felt something seethe within him. Suddenly, a second black void materialized in front of him. This time, it turned into a pink button-up shirt. Pink and white jester pants appeared for legs, complete with skeletal legs and pink boots, followed by the arms, which were plain and skeletal save for another set of white gloves. Finally, the skeletal head appeared, this time wearing a pink beret with a black feather attached to it. A violin materialized in the figure's left hand, and he held the Bow in the other.

"A true show-stopping performance, Boss! And you didn't do that bad yourself, Jack!" the new skeleton laughed. Before anyone could interrupt, he played a sharp note on his violin. **"Allow me to introduce myself, Boss. I am David, Master of the Devil's Trill and Fiend of Magicians! Let our foes take their last dance, the dance of death!"**

"Wait!" Minato yelled. Both skeletons abruptly stopped. He was still panting from his last battle, and was in no mood to have a drawn out conversation. "What are you two?" The skeletons looked at each other, and then back to Minato.

"Sorry, Boss, no can say," David said.

"Only Big Boss can answer questions like that." Jack chimed in.

"Big Boss?" Minato asked.

"He probably has everyone call him Master. You've met

him, you know." David said.

"Shit. I know exactly who they're talking about," Minato thought as he stared at them. Not knowing what to do, the two Fiends broke apart, dissolving into darkness.

"Don't sweat it, Boss," Minato heard David say in his mind.

"Everything will be answered pretty soon. If it really gets to you, go see Big Boss again."

Minato was thinking about what to do when he realized people were calling his name. He turned to see a wounded Akihiko and Mitsuru run onto the roof. "I'm fine," he said, waving his sword in the air. He was about to walk back over to greet them when he felt a strange feeling. For the first time in ten years, Minato Arisato ceased being conscious.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Slight Changes

Minato had found himself in the Velvet Room once more, staring at Igor and Elizabeth.

"I know where the door is, guys. You can stop hypnotizing me to come here," he said. Elizabeth chuckled.

"...It's nice to see you again, too, young man." Igor said after a while. "You became unconscious after awakening to your 'power'... It's nothing to worry about though. As for your call..." he trailed off.

"What about it?"

"What my master is neglecting to say is that your call was not that of a human's," Elizabeth said. Igor shot her a sharp look. He may have been trying to threaten her, but he only elicited a playful smile from her.

"Indeed. The one who should have answered your call... something... has befallen him," Igor stated. "Your power... should have called a Persona forth. But you called forth a Fiend instead. Two, in fact."

"Aren't you observant, old man?" Minato heard a familiar

voice ask. He looked to his right, and floating in the air were two little skulls, one with a top hat and one with a black feathered pink beret. It was Jack and David, the latter who had taunted Igor.

"What are you two here for?" Minato asked.

"We're your underlings, Boss! No way are we just gonna let you cross dimensions unattended!" Jack said. David seemed to be trying to growl at Igor and Elizabeth as he said this.

"Away with you," Igor muttered. He waved his hand, and the two skulls turned to dust. He cleared his throat. "As I was saying, you called forth Fiends. A Persona is a facet of your personality that reacts to external stimuli... a mask, you could say. It is a power dependent on the strength of your soul."

"On the other hand," Elizabeth began, "a Fiend, on the other hand, is an entirely separate being from you. It is an ancient, formless, primal being that feeds directly on its wielder's soul. With continued usage, you will face repercussions down the road."

"Yes, you will. However, it seems the sea of your soul has yet to be contaminated." Igor finished. "I would have saved this for later, but I feel it best to tell you now. Your power is unique because it allows you to summon multiple Personae, unlike others. That power is called the power of the Wild Card. Your abilities will grow as you develop Social Links. The stronger your Social Links, the more powerful your..."

Persona... ability." Igor said, slowing at the end. Minato never thought he would see surprise on Igor's face, but he was looking right at it. Elizabeth looked like she was ready to fight, a cocky smirk appearing. Both of them were looking behind him.

Minato slowly turned around in his chair. He saw exactly what he had hoped not to see. The back of the Velvet Room was missing. Behind him was the Crimson Room, seemingly consuming the Velvet Room more and more. Lucifuge and Paimon attended the young blonde boy as usual, standing on either side of his chair. If Minato could have pissed himself, he was certain that he would've.

"Done rambling, goblin?" the boy asked. Those words mixed with the voice of an innocent child only served to make him all the more terrifying. Elizabeth cracked open the large blue book she was holding, and Igor was stealthily removing his gloves. There was a silence that lasted an eternity, until the boy began to frown. "Is that the greeting I receive?" he asked.

David and Jack materialized next to Minato. They grabbed Minato off of his chair and slid to the ground with him, forming a triple kowtow.

"Show mercy, Big Boss!" the two of them screamed. Minato was too shocked from being slammed into the floor.

"Enough games, Defiler," Igor snapped. "My master will not forgive this intrusion."

"Really? Last I checked, your master didn't meddle in human affairs," Lucifuge said.

"I haven't seen him take action in millennia, really," Paimon chimed in.

"Regardless, we cannot simply allow anyone to enter our guest's soul," Elizabeth replied, stepping forwards.

"Rise, servant," the boy said. Minato immediately did as commanded, without even realizing he was being addressed. David and Jack disappeared. Without thinking, he reached into his pocket and drew the black card he had received earlier. "I quite like 'primal' as the description of my underlings' power..."

The room trembled, and Igor rose from his chair. The bottom of the black card formed '-I' in shining red, which spread to form the outline of a skull, half human, half goat, with a horn on the human side.

"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple..." the young boy said in a booming voice. Existence seemed to tremble with each word. **"He who possesses the Card of the Beast... I give to thee a portion of my Majesty... Thou shalt draw forth hidden strength from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my Light... The Light of Lucifer..."**

Reality stopped trembling. Minato was no longer afraid of anybody in the room.

"*Fiend Social Link, Rank 1,*" crossed through the back of his mind. He felt exponentially more powerful, and he could feel that David and Jack had grown stronger as well. This time, without being forced, Minato pocketed the Card of the Beast with a smile.

"Thanks... Master," Minato said. He then gave a rather formal bow. Lucifuge was excited, and though Paimon's face was veiled, her giddiness was apparent through her excited clapping. Meanwhile, Igor scowled. Elizabeth, on the other hand, lowered her guard. She was... interested in the beings which held so much sway over the Velvet Room's most recent guest.

"That card is much better than those foolish tarot cards the goblin over there plays with," Lucifer said. "Regardless, I have merely modified your power. You are still a Wild Card... though you might find that a few of your Social Links are much more... interesting, than they usually would have been."

"What?!" Igor finally snapped. "How dare you intrude upon the master's plans?!"

"Oh my, it appears as though we've angered the goblin quite a bit," Paimon chuckled.

"Shall we escort our guest out?" Lucifuge asked. Lucifer shook his head, and snapped his fingers. Minato looked down to see his body disintegrate into the red and black butterflies once more. He had disappeared.

"Mockery of my master's speech, corruption of his favored... God or not..." Igor began. The table, clocks, decorations, and even color of the Velvet Room all seemed to rush into him. Every tarot card, from the Fool to the Universe, floated around him in a circle. Elizabeth stepped in front of him, book at the ready.

"Margaret! Theo!" she screamed. Immediately, an older woman with longer hair who dressed and looked similar to Elizabeth appeared, floating with a similar book and tarot cards, though they were less orderly than Igor's. She was immediately followed by a boy who might as well have been Elizabeth's male counterpart, holding a blue book of his own.

"Not even you can win against three Avatars or Power and one with total control over the powers of the Universe," Igor hissed. Lucifer simply smiled at them, and waved his hand. Lucifuge and Paimon stepped back. As the Crimson Room enveloped everyone, Lucifer rose to his feet.

"Avatar of Power? My better underlings usually enjoy killing those off in their spare time," he mused. The air grew heavy, and the Crimson Room darkened. "As for the Power of the Universe... it's a shame that you've only mastered one."

Igor's eyes widened. The three in blue faltered. Lucifer slowly rose into the air, the room still darkening to a sickly blood red. "Although with four opponents, this might not be as disappointing as I had originally thought." A black aura enveloped his body, encasing it in an impenetrable sphere of darkness. It began to convulse violently, changing shape and

expanding.

"Do your best to entertain me, will you?" he asked from within. Reality trembled once more.

Minato snapped into consciousness and immediately rose from his hospital bed. So quickly, in fact, Yukari screamed.

"That was loud." Minato said, scratching the back of his head.

"Wha- Hey, c'mon! Is that really all you have to say?" she asked, annoyed.

"Not really. Where am I?"

"Tatsumi Memorial Hospital... Geez, don't you even care about how long you've been asleep? Or the fact that I was here?"

"Actually, yeah, I do. But first things first... are you okay?" Minato asked.

"Oh, uhh, yeah, I'm fine... thanks for asking." Yukari answered, a bit shocked that he asked her that question. "You've been out for a week... I don't think that makes up for ten sleepless years, but it couldn't have –"

"A WEEK?!" Minato screamed, startling her. "I MISSED SO MUCH AT SCHOOL! MY MUSCLES MUST HAVE ATROPHIED! MY TECHNIQUES MUST BE SUFFERING!" he yelled, quickly disconnecting everything that tethered him to the hospital bed. "I CAN'T WASTE ANYMORE TIME!"

Yukari was stunned. She didn't think Minato was one to panic, yet here he was, losing his mind over being asleep for a week. It was funny, until she realized that he had completely blown her off.

"Hey, calm down! I have something important to say, dammit!" she snapped. Minato, now out of bed, stopped at the door.

"She wants you bad, Boss," Jack said in his mind,

"I can set the mood for you anytime," David chimed in.

"I highly doubt that," Minato thought. He turned around. "What is it?" he asked, trying not to sound freaked out by the thoughts that David and Jack were placing in his mind.

Jack was busy polluting his brain with dirty thoughts that quickly escalated into downright freaky, grotesque ideas about sexual mutilation. David was busy instilling the image of Minato becoming Yukari's master and forcing her to dance for him, again, in rather dirty ways. By the time he could clear his head, Yukari was almost done speaking.

"I'm sorry... You wouldn't have had to go through this if I wasn't such a coward..." Yukari finished, looking extremely disappointed.

"I FUCKING MISSED THAT THANKS TO YOU TWO IDIOTS!" Minato screamed in his mind. Oddly enough, he felt that he had inflicted real pain on Jack and David, as he felt both of their presences flicker within him.

"We can fill you in later, Boss... Sorry about that..." Jack apologized. David said nothing, but Minato could feel his shame.

"It's not your fault," Minato said, resorting to a generic answer.

"Thanks... but still... And here I am telling you about all this the moment you wake up. While I was waiting, I thought to myself, "I've been hiding so many things from him... As soon as he wakes up, I'll tell him the truth." So, thanks for listening. I've been wanting to share that story with someone for a long time. ...Alright, I'm gonna get going. I'll let the others know you woke up. Take it easy, okay? Be a good patient! And don't hesitate to call the nurse. I'm sure she'll take good care of you." She got up to leave. "...Bye."

Yukari left, looking a little better.

"Hooray for generic answers," Minato thought. He heard Jack and David laugh in the back of his mind. After checking out, he immediately returned to the dorm. David filled him in with Yukari's story of being similar to Minato losing her father and not being close to her father, which he called a 'load of bullshit, because she remembered her parents'. That gave Minato a nice laugh.

"But how do you know I don't remember my parents?" Minato asked.

"We currently live in your soul, Boss. We won't be here

forever, but for now, we know everything you know plus what we already know. This is actually how us Fiends gain knowledge and stay up to date. It's also how we can speak your language." David replied.

"*Huh. Good to know I can't keep secrets from you guys whether I like it or not,*" Minato thought.

"Aww, c'mon, Boss! We exist because of you! There's no bitch worth turning into an abstract cadaver that could make us betray you!" Jack screamed in his mind. He realized that Jack was, by default, much louder than David. Once he got over the rather colorful image planted in his mind, he heard Michael Jackson's Smooth Criminal being played on the violin as he neared the Dorm entrance. He looked around. Nobody was playing an instrument on the street.

"Just testing out some songs I thought would sound good, Boss. Don't mind me." David said as he entered the Dorm. He realized that having actual living beings in his head all day might be troublesome, so he had an idea.

"*You two can manifest in smaller forms like you did in the Velvet Room in reality, right? Instead of being in my head all day, why don't you guys hang around as living figurines while I'm at the Dorm?"* Minato asked.

"Are you for real, Boss?!" they both exclaimed.

"*Of course.*" They praised how amazing their Boss was.

Minato, upon entering the Dorm, was greeted by Mitsuru and Akihiko, both of whom inquired of his health. He said he was fine, and asked that he get any work he missed that week immediately so he could catch up.

"I admire your dedication," Mitsuru praised. "But make sure to rest if you aren't feeling well... We'll have a meeting in the 4th floor lounge tomorrow after school. You should be rested for it."

"Of course, Mitsuru-senpai," he said, practicing his non-creepy smile. He had spent a week asleep, and his muscle memory may have died down. This move was essential to a healthy Social Life, which he would apparently need to get stronger. He parted ways after waving them off, and immediately went to his room and stood by his window table.

"*Come forth,*" he thought, instinctively grabbing the Card of the Beast from his pocket. It smoked, and for a moment, he thought a portal complete with hellfire was about to appear in his room, until the black smoke stopped, formed two small spheres similar to those which the Fiends originally appeared from, and created two miniature versions of them on his desk. They were both about as tall as a pen, their heads disproportionately large compared to the rest of their bodies.

"**Yo, Boss!**" Jack waved. He was looking around his room, but then drew his blade in a flash to slice a fly he spotted swirling towards him in half. It was appropriately scaled.

"**An excellent stage.**" David observed, looking around. He

began to play, and, much to Minato's relief, his violin sounded completely normal, albeit much quieter. As, strangely, did their voices.

"Well, I actually plan to seriously tackle this homework and blow it out of the window. What are you guys gonna do?"

"Practice," David said calmly. Minato found it hilarious that a demonic creature who had lived for centuries still felt compelled to practice.

"Same," Jack said.

"What?"

"I'll practice my knife juggling. And maybe throwing. You don't have anything I can use as a target, do you?"

Minato grabbed him an empty cardboard box, and placed it on the floor by his room. "Have fun," he said. By the time he took a seat, he already heard a light cutting noise behind him.

"Knife throwing and violin practice while I do homework. Maybe this wasn't a good idea."

Minato sat contently staring at the moon during the Dark Hour, drinking his tea. Jack and David were full sized now, apparently unable to manifest as anything but their true selves now. Jack was drinking tea that Minato insisted he take, despite his protests. Jack had, after all, fetched some delightful cookies from the corner store in under three minutes

with his superhuman speed. David played various songs, now at full volume, as they had a Dark Hour snack. Minato thoroughly enjoyed it, praising each performance. Minato leaned backwards in his chair and smiled as he began his second cup of tea.

"This was a great idea."

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Some Much Needed Answers

Author Note: Well, I just realized my section partitions are non-existent. I'll address that soon. Sorry if that caused confusion.

When Akihiko and Mitsuru arrived in the lounge that morning, neither of them could hide the fact that they were disappointed. Minato hadn't made breakfast. He was in the lounge, munching on a small sandwich while he continued working on everything he had missed. What caught their attentions were the two small skeleton figurines Minato would occasionally whisper to.

"Hey," Akihiko whispered to Mitsuru as they exited the dorm. "Did he always play with those?"

"It's the first time I've seen them... Perhaps he's shocked by what his Persona truly was," Mitsuru thought. "Jack the Ripper... maybe he didn't realize how morbid he was until now?"

"I hope not," Akihiko said. "If awakening to his power changed him..."

"He won't become another Shinjiro," Mitsuru said. There was a long period of silence as they walked.

"... See you at school," Akihiko finally said, leaving to go for his jog. He wanted to clear his head. Rather, he had to.

Minato arrived to Gekkoukan with Yukari as his company, content with the fact that five hours of work almost finished everything he had missed. Yukari enjoyed his rather high spirits, but left abruptly when she heard people talking about them again. Minato was in such a good mood, he even saved Junpei in Mr. Ono's class. It was only until a little later that he realized people tended to ask for his help quite often.

After school, he remembered the Mitsuru had instructed him to go straight to the fourth floor lounge at the dorm. He promptly went, and was greeted by everyone, Ikutsuki included.

What surprised Minato was how militarized the room was. One wall was practically replaced by a gigantic computer, there were two coffee makers, and from what he glanced of the books on the shelves, none of them seemed to fit into any sort of standard high school curriculum.

"Welcome to the Command Room," Akihiko said. "Pretty neat, huh?"

Minato nodded. He sat down next to Yukari, on the large sofa facing the monitor.

"I believe it's time for your official induction to SEES," Ikutsuki said from across them. He opened a silver briefcase on the table, revealing what Minato considered to be a rather stylish gun with SEES engraved on the side, as well as a red armband with the letters stitched in black.

"Hey, we didn't even ask if he wanted to join yet," Yukari feigned. Mitsuru chuckled.

"Very well, then. For formalities sake: Minato Arisato, will you join SEES and aid us in protecting humanity from the Shadows?" she asked.

"Hold up for a moment," Minato said, much to the surprise of everyone. He closed his eyes. "Jack! David!" On the table, from seemingly nowhere, the miniature versions of the Fiends appeared. "You up for this?"

"We'll follow whatever choice you make, Boss," David said. **"But... I'd be pretty bored if you refused."**

"Screw that! I wanna kill shit!" Jack screamed. Minato chuckled, and picked up the gun.

"Well, we're in," he said, turning to look at everyone. Much to his surprise, he only found rather horrified expressions on their faces. Yukari had actually gotten off the chair and was whimpering behind Akihiko. Ikutsuki, however, looked completely fascinated.

"Incredible," he whispered. "To call out your Persona, nay,

Personae outside of the Dark Hour without an Evoker..."

"Two at that," Akihiko said. He grit his teeth.

"Minato, explain," Mitsuru demanded. There was a hint of fear in her voice.

"Hmm... Probably should've gone over that in my head. Or at least warned them first," Minato thought. He'd have to word this carefully. Unfortunately, David beat him to it.

"Persona? What do you think this is, amateur hour?!"

David asked, apparently rather annoyed at the classification.

"Quiet," Minato said before they could continue. He waved his hand as he saw Igor did when they appeared in the Velvet Room, and willed them away. They stopped, bowed to him, and turned to dust. He had managed to elicit even more terror from his group.

"Arisato!" Mitsuru said. She wanted answers now.

"Those two that you saw," Minato began, "are my Fiends... They aren't Persona, because they are their own separate entities. Currently... they reside in my soul. As such, I have dominion over them. Combat wise, however, they should function exactly like a Persona... I think."

To test his theory, Minato put his evoker to his head and fired. "Jack the Ripper." Sure enough, Jack manifested at full size next to him, hands in his coat pockets. What shocked

everyone is that Jack smacked Minato on the head upon arrival.

"Make up your mind, Boss! You want me in your head or out?!" he asked, annoyed.

"Just proving a point," Minato said, rubbing where Jack had smacked. Jack disappeared once more. "So, that explains most of it."

Again, silence filled the room. *"They're taking this a lot worse than I hoped."*

"An interesting power..." Ikutsuki finally said.

"So those toys you were talking to this morning..." Akihiko spoke up. "Those were your... Fiends?"

"Yeah," Minato replied. "I can apparently let them out of my mind whenever. It's pretty handy, considering that when they're in there, they can pretty much do everything a normal person can... except, inside of my head, so I hear everything they do. It's troublesome. Hell, they can even speak to me." He felt that it was best to leave out the fact that he could also draw upon their knowledge and that they could alter his thoughts.

"Heheheh... I suppose that must be quite a head case," Ikutsuki said. Minato was the only one that laughed at his terrible pun. "You're even more interesting than I thought, Minato Arisato."

Crack!

Thou art I... And I art thou... Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

Minato felt the Social Link creation, and laughed again. If the curious old man could pass as the Devil, he was excited about what everyone else in the dorm represented.

"Regardless, it seems your power differs from the norm," Mitsuru said, rising from her chair. "I feel its best that we part for now... everyone needs some time to take in your... situation."

"Don't worry, senpai. Remember, I'm THEIR Boss," Minato said with a smile. Mitsuru forced herself to smile back. Everyone left with some strained goodbyes.

Yukari was stunned. She sat in her room, thinking about what she just learned. Not only did Minato join SEES, but his powers were completely unlike anything they had ever seen before. His Personae, rather, Fiends, proved that they were completely autonomous. She had never heard of a Persona with enough free will to speak and even hit its master without commands.

This new boy who she was lauding as her savior yesterday turned out to be a monster. The boy who she had begun to open up to about her past, something she had always kept to herself, might not even pass as a boy. That power wasn't normal. The way he acted wasn't normal. HE wasn't normal.

She tried to distract herself with school work. She failed.

She tried watching TV. She failed.

She didn't know why, but she was afraid to go to sleep that night. She locked her door for the first time since she lived in the dorm.

When the Dark Hour hit, she was still awake. The sound of Violin music and Minato's creepy laugh quietly infected the air. She curled up in a ball.

"Stop," she whispered into her pillow. "Just stop."

About halfway into the Dark Hour, David suddenly stopped playing. Jack seemed to tense, and Minato simply looked over to his bed. When the blue-eyed boy appeared, he wasn't too surprised. At this point, he didn't regard anything as a hallucination anymore.

"Hi, how are you?" the boy asked with a chuckle.

"Rather good, actually," Minato said. "Tea?"

"Sorry, but thanks," the boy declined. "I see you've awakened to your power, and made some interesting friends," he said, looking at Jack and David.

"Ha," David scoffed. Jack didn't have eyed, but Minato knew he was glaring at the boy.

"Regardless," the boy continued, "I came to tell you... Soon,

the end will come. I remembered, so I thought I should tell you."

"The end?" Minato asked.

"The end of everything... but to be honest, I don't really know what it is."

"Looks like we made the right choice joining SEES, Boss." Jack finally spoke. He tipped his hat forward. **"But how are you here... I didn't sense you at all."**

"Just like you, I'm always with Minato..." the boy said. He scratched his head. "I don't know what your power has become, actually... but isn't that a bit exciting?"

"Now you're speaking my language." Minato answered. He seemed incapable of doing anything other than smiling during the Dark Hour. The boy smiled back, only to disappear and reappear right in front of him.

"I expect you to honor the contract. I'll be watching you, even if you forget about me... See, you later." With that, he vanished again. Minato took another drink of his tea.

"I like that kid," he said. Jack and David gave each other confused looks.

Minato spent the first hours of the day thinking of ways to lighten the terrible mood he had created last night. Ultimately, he resorted to cooking breakfast again. It went much faster

than he expected, as Jack proved to be a master chef. Apparently, he had once resided in the soul of somebody who ran a show called Hell's Kitchen, or something like that.

With an even grander, and much more stylized, breakfast prepared, Minato waited for his senpai.

"Hey, Boss," Jack began in his mind, ***"I don't think you should've summoned us first last night. You could've asked us in your head, you know."***

"I was going to have to explain the sudden skeleton figurines I kept around, so I figured why not then and there?" Minato replied. He could feel Jack and David shrug in his mind.

Akihiko, Mitsuru, and Yukari arrived downstairs, and Minato could tell from the look on Akihiko's face when he saw the table that he had won his trust back. "Morning!" he said, motioning to the empty chairs.

They took their seats. While Akihiko immediately went for his food, Mitsuru still seemed uneasy. Yukari was the most hesitant to sit down, and didn't seem to have any appetite.

"I swear I didn't steal these ingredients," Minato protested. Even if it wasn't the best comment, it got Mitsuru to eat. Yukari still sat there, feeling uneasy.

"Oh yeah," Akihiko said, taking a break from stuffing his face. "You should be here tonight. Something cool is gonna happen."

"Sure," Minato replied. "But don't expect me to sit around here all day. It's my first proper Sunday."

"Have you caught up with your work, Minato? I'd rather you finish that before you begin to relax," Mitsuru said.

"Working all night for two days wasn't in vain," he answered with a smirk. Breakfast was filled with small talk. Yukari remained silent.

Minato decided he was finally going to go visit Power Records. He considered going to either Room, but decided that not enough had happened to merit a visit. Upon his entrance, he saw the same blue-haired boy with white headphones he had noticed before. The boy was looking over some drum n' bass releases, along with... pop music by Risetete? He shook his head and passed him.

"Boss, something's off about that guy," Jack warned him. He turned to get a good look at him.

He wore a loose black shirt, with dark pink pants. His headphones had two extensions that looked like broken antennae. His hair almost matched Minato's own, except that it was longer and didn't cover his eyes. His eyes were the same color as his hair.

"You're right. Who the hell wears pink pants?" Minato answered. He could feel Jack facepalm.

"No, we mean he isn't fully human!" David said. Minato

looked him over.

"You're shitting me... those are real antennae?!" he asked. He felt David facepalm. By this point, the boy had put the CDs down and turned to see Minato staring at him.

"I'm not actually a bug, you know," the boy said, scratching the back of his neck.

"I was just wondering what type of person listens to drum n' bass AND Risetete." Minato replied.

"The Risetete's not for me," the boy answered with a laugh. "It's for my girl... I don't usually see anyone else in here."

"I guess people don't really appreciate CDs anymore," Minato mused.

"Didn't expect that from you," the boy said. "What's your name?"

"Minato Arisato? You?"

"Kazuya Minegishi. Handshake?"

Minato took his hand, and almost immediately regretted it. On contact, he felt a surge of power rush into him. Unlike the power he got from Lucifer, which came in the form of a gift, this was an intimidating wave, and it worked. He could feel the presence of other things inside of this boy... he felt Fiends, or, at least something akin to them. David and Jack seemed to try and overwhelm the boy as well, as both Minato and

Kazuya's eyes widened shortly after coming into contact.

"Small world, huh?" Kazuya chuckled as he withdrew his hand.

"Boss... this guy's a King. The King of Bel... Abel." David whimpered. He didn't even realize that a Fiend had just whimpered.

"I'm sure your friends are telling you all kinds of scary shit about me," Kazuya began, "but don't worry. I only fight when I have to... still, I didn't think I'd meet another human who keeps demons without a COMP." He smiled.

"COMP?" Minato asked.

"Don't worry about it. It's a bunch of technical crap I'm pretty sure you'll never need to know." Kazuya answered. His phone began to ring, with an obnoxiously loud Risetete song coming on. "And that's my girlfriend." he sighed. "Let's talk again, alright?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Star Arcana...

And after that, Kazuya excused himself and left Power Records without buying anything. Minato gulped.

"That was a bit... too interesting."

Minato returned to the dorm to see Junpei struggling with what appeared to be his luggage. Akihiko was leading him to the dorm, not helping him at all. They both turned to Minato as he approached.

"S'up, dude?" Junpei said, hiding his tiredness. "Mind givin' me a hand here?"

"No way, Junpei," Akihiko said firmly. "You need to shape up."

"C'mon, senpai!" Junpei pleaded. Minato chuckled and followed them through the entrance. Yukari was watching TV when they entered, while Mitsuru was reading a book as usual. Junpei was struggling up the steps with his suitcase after Minato and Akihiko opened the door.

"Yukari, Mitsuru. There's someone I'd like to introduce." Akihiko stated. He looked back at Junpei. "Hey, hurry up."

"Hold your horses! This thing is friggin' heavy!" Junpei called. He heaved the luggage up and slammed it through the entrance.

"J-Junpei?! ... Why is HE here? Don't tell me-" Yukari began. Akihiko cut off her rambling.

"This is Junpei Iori from class 2-F. He'll be staying here as of today," he said, mainly to Mitsuru. Junpei caught his breath and straightened himself out, with a small chuckle.

"Wassup?" he asked, trying to look cool.

"He's staying HERE?! You've gotta be kidding me!" Yukari yelled.

"You scared our night rendezvous will go public, Yukari?" Minato asked with a smile.

"Those were for real?!" Junpei asked, losing his composure.

"What?! You and your big mouth are –" Yukari began, then ended abruptly. Too abruptly. It looked like she had seen a ghost. "Wha- whatever, Stupei," she recovered, looking at the floor. "So, he has the potential?"

"Hell yeah, I do!" Junpei said, not noticing Yukari's sudden change in demeanor. "Akihiko-senpai found me at a convenience store crying like a baby, surrounded by a bunch of coffins. I don't remember much, but man... that's embarrassing! He said that's, ya know, completely normal... in the beginning. Like, bein' confused and not remembering anything. Did ya guys know about that?"

"It goes away after a while. Hasn't happened to me since I was eight or so," Minato shrugged.

"That's good. A Persona-user should... wait, since you were seven?"

"Though I'm technically one of SEES' newest members, I've experienced the Dark Hour for the last ten years or so," Minato explained.

"Oh, gotcha," Junpei nodded. "But man, I was shocked to find out about you guys. I had no idea. I'm glad I'm not the only one. It could get kinda lonely, ya know?... Actually, I'm pretty sure you know... heh, sorry about that."

"No problem," Minato said, patting him on the back.

"Well, enough with the introductions," Akihiko said. "I think we're about ready..."

"Ooh, we're gonna do something already? I'm stoked!" Junpei exclaimed.

"With this many people, we can start exploring that place." Yukari flinched.

"You mean... Tartarus...?" she asked.

"Tartarus... What's that?... Sounds like toothpaste." Junpei responded. Mitsuru stepped forward.

"We believe that within Tartarus lies the truth behind the Dark Hour. The Chariman will give us details tomorrow night, so rest well... and Minato, please keep the volume to a minimum. Keep in mind the people of this dorm do NOT transmogrify during the Dark Hour." she said. Minato cringed.

"Yes, Mitsuru-senpai," he whispered. With that, they dispersed.

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7: Tiny Tower Pt.1

Minato had made another breakfast to commemorate Junpei's arrival at the dorm. Unfortunately, Junpei had arrived downstairs just in time to see Minato leave with Mtsuru and Akihiko, finally taking him up on the morning jog. Thus, he was left to eat alone.

Arriving at the front gate with Akihiko was actually the worst idea he had ever had. He could hear small groups of girls whisper behind their back constantly.

"OMG, AkiXMina forever!"

"Senpai and kouhai love... so kawaii!"

"Minato could pass as a girl if he grew his hair out... c'mon, change your name to Minako already and do it!"

The two made it four steps past the front gate before both of them decided to split up, fearing what would happen if they entered the main building together. It was too crowded to escape a full on swarm.

Minato ate lunch with Junpei in class as an apology for leaving too early in the morning.

"Seriously, whaddya guys do when ya get here so early?" Junpei asked as he was eating his lunch.

"Talk for a bit, or just head to class." Minato said. Junpei sighed. Yukari, present the whole time, let out a big yawn and walked over.

"I thought I was gonna fall asleep in there..." she grumbled.

"And I bet she expects entertainment," Minato thought. He couldn't blame her, though. If he wasn't unable to fall asleep, he was pretty certain he would've.

"Hey! We had a riveting conversation on the classical adaptation of modern music!" David said in his mind.

"Eh, fair enough." Before the conversation could continue, Mitsuru walked into the room.

"Minato," she addressed him. "We need to talk." He felt everyone in the room turn towards him.

"Sure thing, Mitsuru-senpai," he replied. "Should we go somewhere more private?"

Mitsuru stopped and looked around to see most of the class staring. "You have a point. Takeba, join us."

"Hey, why – " Yukari began to protest. Minato snapped his fingers in front of her face, cutting her off.

"C'mon, I'm sure it's important." he said, giving her a look and

mouthed 'SEES only'. "Shall we?" he asked, getting up. Yukari scowled, but got up and followed them as they leaved the classroom. Junpei had been completely ignored.

"Why, that sonuvabitch..." he mouthed under his breath. The moment all three of them exited the classroom, there was silence. Immediately afterwards, there was the loudest commotion class 2-F had ever seen.

"HOLY SHIT! Did you see that?!" one girl asked.

"Mitsuru-sama PERSONALLY picked him up!" another said.

"Minato-kun's got Yukari-san on a LEASH!" a boy shouted.

"Disappearing for a week, conquering Yukari-san and moving on to Mitsuru-sama... you really are a magician, aren't you, Minato?" someone voiced. Junpei decided that, for his own safety, he was going to leave the classroom.

Meanwhile, Minato, Mitsuru, and Yukari arrived in the currently empty student council room.

"First and foremost, I'd like to announce that you should all return to the dorm immediately after school. I have something important to announce to everyone." Mitsuru said as Minato closed the door.

"Was that it?" Yukari asked, officially annoyed.

"She doesn't like Mitsuru, does she?" Minato thought.

"I can sense some bloodlust, Boss. Feisty," Jack informed him.

"Actually, no. While others have neglected to address this issue, I feel that it shouldn't be avoided." Mitsuru answered, straightening her posture. She shifted her gaze from Yukari to Minato, then back to Yukari. "Takeba, you were the one who was the most excited that Minato would join SEES. Now that you have two other members in your year, you've suddenly lost your drive. What's wrong?"

Yukari froze. She didn't expect Mitsuru to focus on her.

"Nothing's wrong," she answered. It was rather quiet, and Mitsuru would not accept that.

"Takeba. What's wrong?" she asked again.

"No shit zone, huh?" Minato thought.

"Boss, I got an idea!" David said. **"I can turn that girl's frown upside down!"**

"Really? How?" Minato asked. He could see Yukari was looking pretty desperate for an escape route.

"You know what we'll be facing tonight. If you go in under these conditions, you know what will happen to your Persona," Mitsuru stated bluntly.

"It's not a big deal." Yukari said once more.

"Lemme borrow your body for a bit. I won't do anything too terrible, I swear," David said.

"How about you... give me pointers on what to do instead?"

Minato replied. He definitely wasn't comfortable with total control being handed to David, but advice was harmless.

"Boss! I have years of experiencing doing things like this! Don't you trust me?"

"...Fine."

Mitsuru was getting annoyed. In this condition, Takeba was useless in Tartarus. If it continued, she may not be able to use her Persona for quite a while.

"Yukari," Minato said, breaking the silence, his voice very different from usual. He walked over and clasped her arm in his. She recoiled, but he held her firmly. "I know... that I have been... a monster towards you. Perhaps, unjustly so."

"What the hell –" Yukari began. Again, she was interrupted, this time by Minato putting a finger to her lips.

"Shh,shh,shh... Don't speak." Minato said, leaning in closer. His voice could only be described as... sultry. Mitsuru was only watching, but even she reddened at the scene. "Maybe I am a beast... a beast to your beauty... but what I am," he paused for dramatic effect, his face right next to Yukari's at this point, "doesn't need to bring you down... my love."

At this point, Yukari shoved him away and slapped him straight across the face. "W-Wh-Wha-What the HELL is WRONG with you! PERVERT!"

She stormed out of the room, face redder than a crayon. Minato rubbed his cheek. That had stung. Mitsuru stood there, mouth ajar, but quickly closed it when Minato turned to her.

"Arisato," she said in a cold voice, eyes narrowing. The temperature in the room rapidly dropped. He was mad to think that display was simply going to fly in front of the Student Council President in the Student Council's Room.

"I, who signed the contract," Minato mumbled to himself. He made no effort to escape his fate. Mitsuru readied her evoker. "Hereby accept full responsibilities for my actions..."

"PREPARE TO BE EXECUTED!" Mitsuru screamed. She pulled the trigger.

Yukari had returned to normal by the end of the school day. She avoided Minato on the return trip, almost certain that he would run away in fear at her sight. She knew Mitsuru would execute him, regardless of what he said.

And she couldn't help but realize she was no longer afraid of him, because in reality, he was as big of an idiot as Junpei. An extremely eccentric idiot that talked to skeletons he summoned from his mind, and had said skeletons talk to him on a regular basis...

Okay, maybe she was still a little afraid of him, but not nearly as much as before.

Akihiko had returned to the dorm. According to what he had heard from Junpei and Yukari at the end of the day, he was certain Minato had been executed. He would give him his condolences.

"I see," Mitsuru said, looking over two papers in the lounge. Minato was next to her, pointing to a part of it. "Creating certain stimuli with scallops that slowly slide downwards as they thaw..."

"Psychological torture," Minato added. "I know a place that sells some... Jack himself thinks the leaking water arrangement would be the strongest, if you'd rather not harm the victim's body."

"That would probably be the most efficient method for SEES members..." Mitsuru contemplated. Yukari and Junpei walked in and bumped into a dumbstruck Akihiko.

"Akihiko-senpai?" Yukari asked. She then turned to see Mitsuru and Minato engaged in a serious discussion, each of them referencing various papers scattered across the table. Her jaw dropped.

"Yuka-tan? Akihiko-senpai? Somethin' wrong here?" Junpei asked. At this point, they noticed the commotion by the dorm.

"Ah, welcome back," Mitsuru said, stopping to look at them.

"Is something the matter?"

"Didn't you...?" Yukari asked.

"Of course," Mitsuru said. "Minato has brought to my attention multiple ways of improving my Execution. The original method was seriously flawed"

"Indeed," Minato nodded. "Nowhere near enough focus on one area. It was actually more therapeutic in my opinion."

"Wha-?!" Akihiko exclaimed.

"I like the cold quite a bit, Akihiko-senpai. Being executed was actually quite refreshing." Minato said with a smile. He turned to Mitsuru. "If it's no problem, would you mind doing that again sometime?"

Mitsuru gave a smile. "On the grounds that you help me improve my technique as well," she said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou... Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

Minato was too busy laughing at Akihiko faint to appreciate how fitting Mitsuru's Arcana was.

Once Ikutsuki woke up Akihiko on his arrival, the meeting on the fourth floor began in a matter of minutes.

"Okay, everybody's here... and Minato, Mitsuru, I'd like everybody's full attention, please," Ikutsuki began. They closed a book entitled "Horrors of the Spanish Inquisition", and sat down on the empty sofa. "For a long time, Mitsuru and Akihiko were the only Persona-users we had. But now, that number recently jumped to five. Therefore, starting tonight at midnight, I'd like to commence the exploration of Tartarus."

"Sorry... I asked this yesterday, but what's this Tartarus thing again?" Junpei asked.

"You haven't seen it, Junpei?" Yukari asked.

"Hm...?"

"It's no surprise, since it only appears during the Dark Hour." Ikutsuki said.

"The Dark Hour...?"

"Just like the Shadows... Interesting, huh? And it's the perfect place for us to train. You can think of it as a shadow's nest." Akihiko explained.

"Whoa... their nest, huh?" Junpei remarked.

"But senpai... what about your injury?" Yukari asked. Akihiko shot Yukari a murderous glance. It broke once he felt two even darker ones land upon him. He turned to Mitsuru and Minato. Both of them were smiling wide, Mitsuru's smile almost a perfect copy of Minato's downright creepy face.

"Since Akihiko hasn't fully recovered yet, he'll only come as far as the entrance... Isn't that right?" she asked. Akihiko felt a part of his soul die.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, a crack in his voice.

"I'm sure he won't mind," Ikutsuki said, sweat dripping from his brow. "Anyways, since we're dealing with shadows, Tartarus isn't something we can avoid."

"Relax, I've got your backs!" Junpei said.

"I'm not so sure about this..." Yukari voiced.

"What will you do, Mr. Chairman?" Mitsuru asked.

"I'll stay here. As you know, I can't summon a Persona." Ikutsuki said, looking disappointed.

At 11:58 p.m., SEES arrived at the front gates of Gekkkoukan High School.

"This is it? THIS is the place? WHY here?" Junpei asked.

"Just wait a few minutes... It's almost midnight," Akihiko said. As the clock struck twelve, the Dark Hour began.

The earth trembled as Gekkkoukan twisted and warped. Impossible spire, staircases, and walls seethed towards the sky. It towered above every other building, partially blocking out the moon. Its walls grew a bright green, blood stains every now and then giving it detail. Junpei was awestruck.

"*Beautiful,*" the only word Minato could think of to describe the Tower. He loved it. It completed his picture of the Dark Hour.

"This is Tartarus – the labyrinth that reveals itself during the Dark Hour." Mitsuru said as Junpei regained his senses.

"Labyrinth...? What are you talking about? What happened to our school?" Junpei asked.

"I thought school was supposed to be hell, Junpei," Minato said. The Dark Hour had just begun and he was already smiling like a madman.

"Once the Dark Hour passes, everything will return to normal." Mitsuru said.

"*That's a damn shame,*" Minato thought.

"*Isn't it, Boss?*" Jack added.

"This is the 'nest' you were talking about!" But why!? Why'd our school turn into a giant tower!?" Junpei asked Akihiko. He didn't respond, nor did Mitsuru.

"I'm sure it's complicated. Who cares anyways? It's not like it would change our minds about fighting." Yukari said, breaking the silence.

"Well, maybe now we'll find out. Mitsuru and I have only gone in to take a peek; it's our first time exploring it. Exciting, isn't it? There has to be some sort of clue in here about the Dark

Hour..." Akihiko said. Mitsuru cracked a smile at him. "...You guys better be ready..."

Once they entered Tartarus, Minato looked upon a grand lounge. There was a gigantic staircase leading up to a gigantic door, with a golden clock and strange green device to the right. To the left however, he saw the Velvet Door and Crimson Door, next to each other.

As they walked to the stairs, Minato felt both keys in his pockets. "Guys, hold up." he said.

"Is something the matter, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"What I'm about to do is gonna be weird... don't panic." He walked over the Velvet Door, and put in the key. Everyone watched in awe as his body broke apart into blue butterflies.

Minato materialized in the Velvet Room. It looked exactly the same as before, save one slight detail. Behind Igor, underneath the constantly moving clock, a bright golden candle-holder stood out. It had fifteen candles, two of which were lit.

"That," Igor said in an obviously angry voice, "is your Candelabra. If it interests you, you may leave."

"Master Igor, you're forgetting something," Elizabeth said. Igor sighed.

"The time has come for you to wield your power..." Igor

deadpanned. Minato was shocked to see that he was even capable of appearing sad.

That being said, Igor explained to Minato that he could get new Personas, or at this point, get Personas, since he technically had none, and that he could only hold a few at a time, and that later, he would be able to fuse them to make stronger ones in the Velvet Room.

"Are you okay, Igor?" Minato asked. Igor suddenly stopped.

"Why do you ask?"

"It's obvious that something happened to you." Minato said.

"Was it Lucifer?"

"DO NOT USE THAT CRETIN'S NAME IN MY PRESENCE!"
Igor exploded. The Velvet Room shook, and he tensed.

"Master..." Elizabeth said, looking concerned. Igor released a huge sigh.

"I know it is wrong of me to vent my frustrations at our honored guest..." Igor began. "But he has thrown us onto an unpredictable path. A path I fear... I cannot guide him on. Even your awakening... It was supposed to be grand. Yet here we are, and you sit without a Persona. I have failed you more than you know."

"But you tried, didn't you?" Minato asked. Igor looked at him.
"I don't know what happened, but I don't think you're a bad

guy, Igor. You're just trying to do what's right."

"...There may be hope for you yet, young man." Igor said. His smile returned.

CRACK!

"Oh, my!" Elizabeth gasped. Igor was startled.

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"Hmph. To be he who has fallen from grace... that boy would laugh at my face if he could." Igor said.

"You can see those cards as well?" Minato asked.

"Of course. We are, after all, charged with helping you develop your power." Igor said. "Though the fact that you could form a bond with me... I will look this over thoroughly. But for now, you should return to your world... though I am certain you will visit the Defiler as well before continuing on your Journey."

"I don't pick favorites, Igor," Minato said as he got up from the chair. "I'll see you around."

Igor watched as Minato left the Velvet Room. Deep down, he thought that maybe, just maybe, the changes the Defiler made weren't that bad.

Minato materialized in front of his stunned friends. "How long was I gone for?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Uhh...thirty seconds or so?" Akihiko responded.

"Good, I've got one more visit to do," Minato said. He walked to the Crimson Door, ignoring the protests of everyone, and broke apart into red butterflies.

He entered the Crimson Room, not in his chair, but from the Door, as if he had actually walked in. He looked at the back of his chair, and realized it was designed to look like a skull.

"*Of course it was,*" he thought. Lucifer opened his eyes to look at Minato. He knew what he had to do. Jack and David materialized to either side of him, kneeling.

"Greetings, Master," Minato said, bowing in sync with his Fiends.

"Master welcomes you," Paimon said. He rose, and took the seat opposite Lucifer.

"It is time to explain the true purpose of the Crimson Room," Lucifuge began. "Unlike the Velvet Room that draws power from the sea of your soul, we of the Crimson Room focus on empowering the sea of your soul."

"...Excuse me?" Minato asked.

"Human souls have a limit to the power they can draw forth naturally," Paimon began. "The power of Persona allows

humans to reach those limits, or maximum potential, but a Persona, as you know, is transient. It cannot stay with you forever, and its summoning... well, you know. It is also impossible to increase the potential of a human's soul."

"As such," Lucifuge picked up, "a Human's fatal flaw is that, though their soul may be strong, their body is weak. That is where we come in... We have the ability to alter a soul such that the strength of one's soul can be reflected by their body. This is only possible by the absorption of our Master's greatest gifts... the Magatama."

"Every Magatama contains in it a power that allows the user to enhance their physical abilities, physically regenerate, or physically alter reality in a certain way." Paimon said. "Do you understand?" Minato nodded.

"You will need to buy the Magatama from us," Lucifuge said, "with Macca, a spiritual currency. It is impossible to obtain in your world. This is where the Card of the Beast comes into play."

"Since you possess the ability to hold both Personae and Fiends, you will find more often than not that your Fiends are sufficient to face most of your adversaries. As such, you will have many useless Personae." Paimon said. "You can offer a Persona to the Card of the Beast. Rest assured, it all happens in your head. The Persona will vanish, as if it has been discarded, and Macca will be transferred to the Card of the Beast, which you can use here."

"... So you gave me a spiritual debit card?" Minato asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Exactly," Lucifuge said.

"You have no Macca now... but the Master wishes to give you a parting gift." Paimon said. Minato turned to look at Lucifer. He clenched his fist, and the table between them erupted into black fire. It raged for a bit, before condensing to form a teardrop shaped item that floated down to the surface.

"Your first Magatama," Lucifer said.

"...This works... how?" Minato asked. Lucifer smiled.

"Eat it." Lucifer commanded. Minato's eyes widened. That thing was almost as wide as his mouth, and he was pretty sure he wasn't allowed to chew it either. "Trust me."

"If he wanted to harm me, I'd already be dead..." Minato thought.

"Big Boss tells no lies!" Jack assured him.

"He may not have said it, but he finds you quite interesting." David said. Minato smiled.

He picked the Magatama up and put it in his mouth without a second thought, much to Lucifuge and Paimon's surprise. As it entered his mouth, he felt it begin to dissolve, and then it was as if he had simply inhaled. His vision blanked. He could no

longer hear. He wasn't even sure of if he could feel.

And then, everything returned, sharper than before. He felt his heartbeat. It was... stronger than before.

"A new Magatama I made," Lucifer said. "It will heal your wounds and fatigue slowly. You may draw more power from it by focusing on it... This will heal you completely, but you will lose the regenerative capabilities for the next twelve hours."

Minato leaned forward. "Have I ever told you you're the coolest guy I know?" he asked. Then, he heard a chuckle. Barely audible.

It then turned into a dimension rocking laugh. Lucifuge and Paimon were on the verge of tears. Lucifer was laughing.

He calmed down after a while, his eyes practically glowing. "You live up to the title of Fool," he mused. He snapped his fingers, and the Card of the Beast appeared between them.

"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple... I give to thee a portion of my Majesty... Thou shalt draw forth hidden strength from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my Light... The Light of Lucifer..." he said in his Universe quaking voice. "Now go forth. The next time we meet, I expect quite a few offerings."

"Anything for a friend, right?" Minato shrugged. "Till next time, Master." He left the Crimson Room, bowing before he reached the door. As he disappeared, Paimon and Lucifuge

looked at each other.

"Quite the interesting boy, indeed," Lucifer said. He found it funny that his latest creation actually considered him his friend.

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8: Tiny Tower Pt.2

Author Note: I am officially too lazy to add in my section breaks. It's not that jumpy, is it?

Second Author Note: Every Fiend has a few unique attacks that only they can use (mostly, their offensive skills, but some more than others). On that note, Fiends learn skills based on the Fiend Social Link Rank, cannot be fused, and do not take up Persona slots. This will be explained in depth later. As of current, Jack and David each only have one attack skill and one support skill each, as the link is only at Rank 2.

David: David's attack is Devil's Trill, an eight hit magic attack that uses a random element (fire, ice, wind, lightning) each time. This is a pretty tiring attack at this point, and can't be used often. His support skill is Sukunda.

Jack: Jack's attack skill is Danse Macabre (Sorry, Makhala, but you don't exist in my story), which is a 6-8 hit cut attack (Yes, that's how he severed seven hands fighting the Magician). Again, this attack is physically

taxing at this point. His support skill is Tarukaja.

Minato rematerialized in front of SEES once more. They were still recovering from the shock of his second disappearance.

"Thirty seconds again?" Minato asked Akihiko.

"Wha – Do you really think I counted again?!" he asked. "But, we didn't even have time to recover, if that's what you're wondering... why?"

"The owner of both Rooms distorts time while I'm inside. I seem to have only taken a minute in reality, but I actually spent almost twenty minutes total in there." Minato said. The members of SEES looked at him in disbelief. "Don't ask... I don't ask for technical details."

"Regardless," Mitsuru said, regaining control of the situation, "Welcome to the inside of Tartarus. This is only the entrance, however. The labyrinth lies beyond the doorway at the top of the stairs."

"First, we'll have you three go get a feel for the place," Akihiko said. "Why don't you go have a look around?"

"What? By ourselves?!" Yukari asked.

"That's right. We're also going to need to appoint a leader to make any necessary decisions." he continued.

"A leader? Ooh, ooh! Pick me, pick me!" Junpei said, waving his hand in the air. Akihiko looked him over and immediately

kicked him out of the options. He glanced at Yukari, who looked too uneasy to keep a level head. She lost out.

He turned his gaze to Minato. The enigma. Akihiko definitely didn't want to trust him after those magic tricks he just pulled off, but he seemed calm throughout the whole process. Also, he could fight. And what from what he remembered from the day the dorm was attacked, he could fight well. "...You. You're the leader, Minato." Akihiko decided.

"W-wait, what?! He doesn't look like a leader!" Junpei protested. Jack and David immediately materialized behind Minato.

"Such insolence! I'll leave your corpse here as a reminder to all who oppose Boss!" Jack screamed, cleaver at the ready.

"Let our foes tremble before his legions! A symphony of destruction foretells his march!" David joined in.

"Enough," Minato said with a snap of his fingers. The Fiends both stopped, bowed to Minato, and faded back into nothingness. "I'll do it, Akihiko-senpai."

"What the heck were those?!" Junpei shouted.

"They're his Fiends," Akihiko said. "Don't dwell on it too much. Think of them as... Personas with attitudes."

"Really? How can we rely on that?" Junpei asked.

"We've all seen him fight with them before. I wouldn't worry about reliability. But the main reason..." Akihiko began. He pulled out his evoker and put it to his head.

"Unlike us, he can summon even without the use of an Evoker, but from what I can tell, using one makes his summoning stronger," Akihiko said, eyeing Minato.

"Pretty much," Minato shrugged.

"Even so, he has no problems using his Evoker at all... can you two say the same?" Junpei and Yukari nervously glanced at each other. Neither of them had ever summoned their Persona before.

"Y-yeah, of course I can!" Junpei said.

"I think so..." Yukari answered.

"These are shadows we're talking about. Without your Persona, you're screwed." Akihiko said.

"I beg to differ, but I think they need this team building exercise," Minato thought, recalling he had faced small shadows with nothing but a baseball bat and beat them to death.

"Yeah, I'm aware of that." Yukari answered.

"Good. I have a small selection of weaponry here, along with your transmitters," Mitsuru said, gesturing to a rather large case near the stairs. "Akihiko and I brought it here yesterday.

There's a bow for Takeba, a short sword for Arisato, and as for Iori... well, there are a few options."

Junpei ran over and looked his choices over. Sword like Minato's? Too puny. Bow? What kind of man uses a bow? Spear? Lamé. Sledgehammer? Maybe, but that thing was way too heavy to use properly. Oversized sword? Now THAT was the weapon of men!

"I'll take this right here," Junpei said, grabbing the katana. He waved it around a bit, testing how well he could use it. Minato immediately saw that Junpei was practically flailing the sword around like a badly shaped baseball bat.

"We'll probably have to carry the team, won't we, Boss?" he heard David ask in the back of his head.

"Please don't remind me," Minato thought. "Let's go."

The trio walked up the stairs, reaching the doorway. Nobody knew what lay beyond, but with the strength of his new Magatama coursing through him, he walked right in, not even checking on Junpei or Yukari.

"Well, at least we can call him a fearless leader, huh?" Junpei commented. He gulped, and went next. Yukari soon followed.

The door wasn't a door so much as it was a portal. Junpei and Yukari were a bit disoriented to have suddenly wound up in a completely different location upon entry, but Minato was unfazed. Crossing dimensions was a much stranger

experience.

They had arrived in a large hallway shaded the same sickly green of the Dark Hour, with a black and white checkered floor. Blood seeped from the walls, as was the norm of the time.

"So this is it, huh?" Junpei asked, looking around.

"I hope I don't get lost..." Yukari said.

"Can you all hear me?" Mitsuru asked over their transmitter. Minato took a moment to realize he would have four voices in his head: Mitsuru's, Jack's, David's, and his own.

"Whoa! Is that you, senpai?" Junpei asked.

"I'll be providing audio backup from here on out," she answered.

"Wait... you can see inside here?" Junpei asked.

"No shit, Sherlock," Minato thought.

"It's my Persona's ability. I'd like to join you, but the structure of Tartarus changes from day to day. That's why outside support is imperative." Mitsuru said.

"THAT makes me feel a whole lot better..." Yukari said.

"Based on your location, you can expect to encounter enemies at any minute. They shouldn't be too powerful, but

be careful. Practice makes perfect." Mitsuru warned. Sure enough, after a few steps, they spied a group of three shadows that looked like living puddles.

"Cowardly Maya. You can surprise them if you attack first," Mitsuru said.

"Got it," Minato whispered. He turned to Junpei and Yukari, both waiting behind him.

"I'll strike first, at the two in the back. Junpei, you deal with the one at the front. Yukari, finish whatever we can't." he instructed.

"Why the hell do we - ?" Junpei began, but stopped once he realized how loud his outburst was. The Mayas swiftly began to crawl towards them.

"Tch. David," Minato said, drawing his Evoker. David appeared behind him. "Devil's Trill."

David began to play a song that was impossible to track; it played faster than the human mind could process. A lightning bolt, fireball, and tornado struck the Maya leading the charge, killing it instantly. The two at the back received a fireball and a lightning bolt each of their own. An ice spike missed and flew between the two of them.

"Finish them," Minato said, exhaling sharply. Junpei ran and sliced a downed shadow in half, while Yukari put an arrow in the other. Both of them died.

"Dude, that was sick!" Junpei said as he walked back over to them.

"Tres Bien! An excellent attack, Minato," Mitsuru said.

"Maybe for you guys..." he answered, rather raggedly. Yukari and Junpei turned to see that Minato was catching his breath. "... but that was tiring. I'd rather use moves like that more as a last resort."

"Oh... sorry," Junpei said, looking down to the ground. Minato actually recovered quite quickly, much to the relief of Junpei and Yukari. That Magatama certainly didn't hurt. They took a few more steps until Mitsuru told them that the stairs, which they could see, were near. They were forbidden from going up, however.

They stopped, and looked around a corner to see four Maya lurking in the hallway.

"This time," Minato instructed, "Junpei and I will get the two at the front. Yukari, take either one at the back with your Persona." They nodded.

Minato ran out from behind the corner, Junpei right behind him. They split, Minato going left and Junpei heading right.

Minato's Maya turned to feel Minato's sword rip through its mask. He ripped it out, and took two more quick slashes at it, killing it.

Junpei went for a 'manlier' attack. He jumped as he approached, and slammed his sword down. He cut off a good portion of the shadow, but it survived to claw his exposed stomach. He recoiled, but took another swing to finish it off.

Yukari... stood there, Evoker in her hands. It was pressed to her head, but she wouldn't pull the trigger. Minato mentally cursed, and ran to intercept the two Maya heading to Junpei. He made quick work of the one closest to him, but failed to reach the second. Junpei tried to intercept it, but the shadow dodged his stylized attack, leaving him flat on his ass.

It sped towards Yukari, her hands still trembling. She saw it approach. No response. She was frozen on the spot. As the shadow was about to reach striking distance, she heard a bang.

"Jack the Ripper!" Minato screamed. Jack appeared between Yukari and the Maya, cleaver raised. "Danse Macabre!" The move was exactly what it sounded like. A series of crazed yet precise attacks that decimated the shadow.

Junpei rose to his feet, and Minato fell to his knee.

"Dude!" Junpei said, rushing over to help him up.

"Get Yukari," Minato said, unable to get back up.

"Yuka-tan! Get yer' ass over here!" Junpei screamed. Yukari snapped out of her hamster state, and ran over.

"I'm sorry!" she screamed. "This is all my fault, I –"

Minato didn't let her finish that thought. He raised his Evoker swiftly and put it right between her eyes. "Dia," he said, pulling the trigger. Yukari's head rocked backwards, and her mind felt like mush, but she saw her Persona appear above her. It was a woman wearing a pink dress, chained to a gigantic bull's head.

"Io," she managed. Her persona waved its hand, and a green light spread over Minato. It was a healing spell, and he quickly rose to his feet, shaking off the after effects of his previous attack.

"It's not that difficult," he said, helping Yukari to her feet. "You can do it just as easy as I can."

Yukari simply nodded. Unknown to Minato, forcefully summoning a Persona stuns its owner.

"How'd you know Yuka-tan could use that weird healing spell?" Junpei asked.

"I don't really know. I just know what you guys can do. Right now, Io, Yukari's Persona, can use Garu, a wind spell, and Dia, the healing spell. Your Persona can use Agi, a fire spell, and Cleave, a physical slash attack." Minato said. "It's Hermes, by the way. Your Persona, that is."

"You can see other's Personas, Minato?" Mitsuru came in over the transmitter.

"Remember how I said I'm supposed to be able to hold more than one Persona? Maybe that's why I can recognize people's Personas." Minato responded.

Nobody had a real answer to that. After some more easy fights, which were much easier since Junpei was now excited to use his Persona as much as possible, and Yukari stopped freezing on the spot when she was required to summon, there was only one enemy left, trapped between the three of them.

"Who wants it, huh?" Junpei heaved. He had used Hermes, a mechanical looking blue man with golden blades for wings, a bit too much.

"Not really me," Yukari answered, her legs trembling. She was too tired from having to heal Junpei all the time.

"I got it," Minato said, rushing in. He splattered the shadow with two quick slashes. He was about to turn around, when he saw three cards appear before him from out of nowhere. The first depicted a coin, the second depicted a cup, and the final one depicted what looked like a tiny fairy. He was about to grab one when the cards turned around and started shuffling themselves in front of him.

"Seriously? This is the 'opportunity' Igor mentioned?" Minato thought. He easily tracked the fairy, and chose it. Suddenly, he felt something emerge from his soul. He focused. He was certain now that he had a legitimate Persona, Pixie, of the Lovers Arcana. Strangely... it seemed much more powerful than usual. It knew four skills, as compared to the Fiends.

"Boss, that's actually one of the perks of the Card of the Beast," Jack chimed in his mind. **"See, Big Boss realized that since you probably won't hold any one Persona for too long, you don't need that many Skill Cards. Some Personae are supposed to give you those if you power them up enough. So, as long as you've got the Card of the Beast, any Persona you 'acquire' like you did just now will be supercharged to its maximum potential. Pretty neat, huh?"**

"I really gotta go tell Lucifer I love him," Minato thought. Getting ready for battle Personas from the get go? He couldn't hold back a smile.

"That's odd," Mitsuru said over the transmitter. *"Usually, there are a few more shadows on the prowl. Well, at least you all gained experience in battle. Let's head back to the dorm for today. There's an access point nearby. It'll allow you to return to the entrance."*

Sure enough, they quickly found the access point, but not before finding a silver briefcase conveniently full of yen. Naturally, Minato kept it all. Neither Junpei nor Yukari felt confident enough to stake a claim on the money.

They used the access point, and warped back to the entrance by the strange green device they had ignored earlier.

"So, how was it?" Mitsuru asked.

"Underwhelming," Minato answered with a shrug, "but they're both still green... they've got potential though."

"I see. You're rather confident in yourself, and have newfound confidence in your allies? Today was a rather large victory, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Hell yeah!... But damn, Minato. How the hell are you moving around, no sweat? I'm beat!" Junpei said.

"I'm still just catching my breath myself..." Yukari answered.

"I've trained in the Dark Hour before. The lights might not work, but dumbbells still weigh," Minato smiled.

"One of the effects of the Dark Hour is that physical activity is much more tiring than usual. Don't worry though, you'll all adapt like Minato. But I'm surprised... You all did much better than I expected. At this rate, they'll catch up to you and me in no time, Akihiko." Mitsuru said.

"Heh, we'll see about that," Akihiko answered.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...

"*Fool Level 2, eh?*" Minato thought. He wasn't too tired, but he needed to give Yukari and Junpei rest time. He stopped by

Akihiko as they recovered.

"Could you see us?" Minato asked.

"No, but I got a pretty good impression from Mitsuru's commentary. From what I heard early on, you really held everything together early on." Akihiko said.

"I don't know about 'held together' so much as 'carried the team'," Minato laughed. "I'm pretty sure they'll be able to do way more than hold their own without me in the future. They'll be strong."

"Heh... So you're gonna be their strength until they can fend for themselves, huh?" Akihiko said, suddenly becoming thoughtful. "But when do you know that they'll be alright...?"

"I don't know." Minato said thoughtfully. "I guess one day, I'll just realize it. The real problem then will be if I can accept that they don't need me."

CRACK!

I art thou... And thou art I...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

"...You really are a strange guy," Akihiko said. "One moment, you act like a psychopath, and the next, you give sage advice."

"It's what I do. Adaptability is essential to a leader, isn't it?"
Minato joked.

The two looked on in silence as Yukari and Junpei finally got ready to leave.

SEES returned to the dorm as the Dark Hour ended. Everyone retired to their rooms. Minato sat on his bed, thinking over the events of the last few days. He finally stopped to appreciate how much his life had changed over the span of a few weeks.

9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9: The Emperess' Speech

Author Note to Nero: Thanks, I'll try not to disappoint. Here's some food for thought though: I write every chapter in one sitting, with only a general direction... Most of my work is just the result of letting my ideas flow.

Minato, upon realizing that the fridge was full, decided against making another breakfast, and shared out the leftovers. Junpei and Yukari actually ate breakfast that morning, as last night's exploration seemed to tire them out quite a bit.

"Mitsuru-senpai," Minato said as everyone was finishing, "I left your speech on the third floor lounge table. Did you get it?"

"Of course. I'd like to thank you again for taking the time out of your schedule for me," Mitsuru responded.

"It's no problem," Minato said with a smile. "After all, it's not like I do anything too important at 4 in the morning."

"You still didn't manage to fall asleep?" Yukari asked, dumbfounded.

"It's not like the guy was even that tired, Yuka-tan," Junpei said. "Besides, I don't think one run in Tartarus would knockout a guy who doesn't sleep anyways."

"He gets it," Minato said. Yukari sighed, finishing her breakfast. Oddly, the everyone left as a large group, taking the same train. Minato spent the majority of his time trying to create a training regimen for Junpei, who swore he'd create one made for real men that didn't involve learning Pilates. Near the school gate, a brown-haired boy named Kenji called Junpei over with a strange look in his eyes. Minato would only realize what it meant as he entered the front gates, right alongside Akihiko, Yukari, and Mitsuru.

The sight actually stopped quite a few people.

"The Holy Foursome..." a girl dared to say.

"Minato really does swing both ways, huh?" a boy muttered.

"Get those harpies off of Aki and Mina... actually, maybe this is better?" a group of girls discussed.

"He must'a been forced to share, right? Akihiko-senpai threatened him? There's no way he'd just let another guy in the mix... right?" a group of boys discussed.

"After that show yesterday... he added a boy to the mix?" somebody from Minato's class questioned.

As the awkward comments fell, Yukari was the first to break

off, followed by Mitsuru and Akihiko shortly afterwards.

"At this rate, I'll need a friggin' disguise just to hang out with my friends," Minato thought.

"If you find out where they live, I can always shut a few of em' up... permanently," Jack suggested.

"Actually, I'd say we can enthrall them. A legion of Fiends, a legion of Humans, and a legion of Personae... you'd be quite the terror, Boss," David chimed.

"As appealing as both of those options are, I'd rather not become a menace to the public while still in school." Minato replied in his mind.

After successfully avoiding death by stare-down, Minato made his way to the morning assembly where Mitsuru would deliver her speech. He thought it was a little too high strung for the majority of the student body, but it was exactly what Mitsuru intended to get across. Her personality fit well with the entire 'cut-above' vibe the whole speech had, anyways. Minato found that Junpei and Yukari had saved him a seat, and joined them.

The assembly began. It was boring. Then Mitsuru was introduced as the new Student Council President, and she took the podium. Minato ignored Junpei and Yukari's comments, leaning forward. He was interested in how well she could give speeches.

Mitsuru spoke. "As I begin my term as Student Council President, I'd like to share with you my vision for this coming year. It is my firm belief that each of us must accept the responsibility of bettering our school. However, change cannot occur without sustained effort and an unprecedented level of commitment. That is why we must restructure our daily lives to accommodate this lofty goal. I'd like each of you to dig deeply into your well of motivation, and re-evaluate your convictions... To imagine a bold new future without losing sight of the realities around you. That is the key. I am certain that many of you have your own visions of the future... For us to reap the full benefits of our education, your participation, ideas, and enthusiasm are essential. Thank you."

Under the thunder of applause, Minato uttered a single word. "Flawless."

"Dang... That was freaking amazing... So..." Junpei said, turning to Minato, "Do you have any idea what she just said?"

"Thanks for making me president. Let's all do shit, contribute, and Gekkoukan rules, basically. Don't overexert yourself along the way, and study hard." Minato answered.

"Really?... When you say it like that, it sounds kind of..." Yukari began.

"No way that's all she said, dude!" Junpei said.

"If you take away formalities and elegance, everything sounds pretty stupid," Minato mused. "But I probably missed

something along the way."

He didn't. He had read that speech quite a few times, and besides changing how the main points were phrased, he told Junpei every single detail Mitsuru wanted to hit. But he'd let him imagine it was something great.

"Why kill the kid's imagination?" Minato thought.

After the assembly, Minato once again cursed being unable to sleep. He didn't mind Ms. Toriumi, but her class was downright boring.

After school, Minato was about to leave with Junpei when he spotted Akihiko approaching them. Fast. Too fast.

"Junpei! Minato!" Akihiko yelled out to them. A literal horde of fan-girls was running him down. "We've got to go!"

"Bringing your friends, senpai?!" Junpei asked excitedly at the sight of the girls chasing Akihiko. Minato quickly analyzed the situation. A sacrifice was necessary.

"Actually, they're interested in you, Junpei," Minato said, slowly backing away. "You hang out with me pretty often, after all. You were the one to help me pick up Yukari, after all."

"Huh? I did – OH," Junpei began. When he realized what Minato was implying, the most idiotic smile Minato had ever seen consumed his face. He turned his cap around, popped

his collar, and cracked his neck for good measure. "Why, of course... when Junpei, professional Lady's Man, sees such a sad case struggling on his own, he can't help but show him the ropes," he said, shifting to copy Minato's usual aloof stance.

Once Akihiko ran past Junpei, Minato turned and ran with him, "Akihiko-senpai! Come here!" Minato said. Akihiko got closer. Minato grabbed his arm and drew his Evoker as they rounded a corner. He pressed it to his head, switching to Pixie. "Trafuri!" he muttered, pulling the trigger. He and Akihiko were engulfed by a bright light as the sounds of Junpei being trampled reached their ears. In the next instant, they reappeared in the back alley of Paulownia Mall, running out to the main plaza.

"Before I even ask how you did that," Akihiko said, catching his breath, "Why did you have your Evoker?"

"I'm always strapped, senpai," Minato said, flashing his best creep smile. Akihiko simply shook his head. "As for the move magic trick, I got a Persona in Tartarus last night that I never tried out. That's one of its moves."

"Well, I guess it's better to test it out sooner than later. Still, did we have to abandon Junpei like that?"

"Nah, but I thought it would be funny. He'll be fine... I think."

Akihiko sighed. "Anyways, I was going to ask you guys to come with me here. There's something I need to show you. C'mon."

Akihiko and Minato entered the police station to see a stern-looking police officer reading a newspaper by the front desk. The apparent secretary got up and nodded to him.

"I was right to classify this as a shop? Huh... and here I thought I would just visit during the Dark Hour and raid the lost and found or something," Minato thought as the officer approached the counter.

"Officer Kurosawa. It's been a while," Akihiko said cheerfully.

"I thought you said there were two of them," Kurosawa stated bluntly.

"The other guy got held up," Akihiko answered quickly. "This is Minato Arisato Minato, this is Officer Kurosawa. He knows about us and keeps our squad well-equipped. Also, this is from-Ikutsuki-san."

Akihiko handed Minato 10,000 yen, and gave him a sharp look.

"Some of this was supposed to be for Junpei, huh? I'll get him something nice, I guess..." Minato considered.

"You can't fight shadows empty-handed, so find something you like. Officer Kurosawa has connections... But these things still cost money." Akihiko finished.

:"Of course. Nothing in life is ever free," Kurosawa quickly added.

"I realize that... Well, I'll see you later. Thanks again." Akihiko said, taking his leave. Minato turned to face Kurosawa.

"I might be a demon, Boss, but he's got a face that says 'You don't wanna run into me in a dark alley', ya know?" Jack said.

"Indeed. He seems like the type of critic you love and hate at the same time... The one that can make or break you." David added.

Before Minato could respond, Kurosawa spoke up. "I've been informed about you and your group. My job is to maintain the peace in this city, regardless of the circumstances. It doesn't take a genius to know something strange is going on here, and I've seen more than my fair share of strange. I'm only doing what I think is right."

"What'd you see?" Minato asked, intrigued at the answer.

"Things no human should ever see, kid." Kurosawa said without wavering. "I don't know what you kids are dealing with, but I pray to whatever God exists out there that it isn't what I faced."

"He's dealt with demons worse than us in the past, Boss... let's drop this topic." David warned. He felt something similar to what he experienced when he met Kazuya, albeit much weaker.

"...I'll take your word for it." Minato answered. "So, what's

your inventory?"

Kurosawa motioned for Minato to follow him, and led him to a large backroom filled with various forms of close range weaponry, and, handily for Yukari, bows.

"I can't sell you firearms outright. Also, from what I know, having more than one gun on you could be... hazardous," Kurosawa said. Minato struggled to suppress a smile from reaching his face. As fucked up as it was, the thought of Junpei screaming 'PERSONA!' and then splattering his brains across the floor gave him the giggles.

"See? THIS is why you got us, Boss. You're just like us, really," Jack said, sharing his amusement. He had forgotten his thoughts were constantly being read by his Fiends.

"Thanks for being so thoughtful," Minato said. He looked around at the viable weaponry he could use, until his eyes rested upon a beautiful saber. He picked it up, and eyed it carefully. It conveniently had a price tag, costing him 9200 yen.

He walked out of the store, sword in a convenient guitar case Kurosawa had laying around. He'd get Junpei something later.

He returned to the dorm to overhear Junpei and Akihiko talking in the lounge.

"Akihiko-senpai, why'd you really choose Minato to be the leader?" Junpei asked. Akihiko's face turned grim. It may as

well have been set in stone.

"The real reason," Akihiko began, his voice deepening, "is that he not only survived one of Mitsuru's executions, but enjoyed it... No human... nay, no sentient being... should ever... experience that... horror... that..."

"What's up, senpai?" Minato asked, placing a hand on Akihiko's shoulder. Akihiko turned to see an even creepier smile than usual on his face, and instinctively threw a punch at him, only for Minato to catch it with his free hand. "Wanna spar?"

"Akihiko!" Mitsuru called, walking down the stairs. "Attacking people in the dorm... I hope you're ready for one of my new and improved executions." A smile eerily similar to Minato's slowly formed on her lips as she approached the group.

Junpei hadn't thought Akihiko could get any whiter, but he did. He froze on the spot like a hamster, his eyes screaming out for help. Minato simply shrugged and went towards the fridge, a cocky smirk on his face.

Part of Junpei knew he had to do something. Minato had left him for dead this afternoon and set Akihiko up now. He was a monster. Yet he did nothing as Mitsuru started to pull Akihiko upstairs.

"...Dude," Junpei began once Mitsuru and Akihiko disappeared, "Why'd ya do that?"

"It killed two birds with one stone. Seeing Akihiko-senpai's reaction to his execution sentence entertained me, and I gave Mitsuru a reason to practice one of her new executions. Efficiency," he said, taking out some leftover food.

"Cold and calculating..." Junpei muttered as he got some food as well. As the two ate, Minato told him about Officer Kurosawa and his connections. Junpei's biggest concern was that he didn't get a uniform and a badge.

"That aside," Minato said, finishing his meal, "No hard feelings about us ditching you at school, right?"

It was Junpei's turn to flash Minato a creepy smile. "All those girls trampling me..." he began, licking his lips. "What do ya think I saw?"

"Oh, God... I'm surrounded by perverts, aren't I?" Yukari whimpered from the stairs. She quickly turned around and went back to her room, making a mental note that locking her door at night should become a habit.

"Junpei..." Minato said, shaking his head. Both of them saw Yukari's newfound fear. "And you say I'm the weirdo?"

After a silent dinner, Junpei retired to his room, passing a rather pleased looking Mitsuru on her way down.

"Minato," she began, "I don't know where you learned Chinese Water Torture... but I love it."

"Good to hear," Minato said. If he recalled correctly, Akihiko was now frozen up to the sides of his head in an almost inverted position, with a chunk of ice hanging above him. He would watch it slowly melting above him, dropping water onto his exposed face that could just barely twist and turn in its icy prison. With all of his other senses numbed from the cold, stimulation like that would be... unbearable, for the average human. "You made sure it couldn't get into his nose, right? That could kill him."

Mitsuru chuckled. "He won't die... but he might not be the same for a while." She took her regular seat in the lounge. "Now then, regarding our exploration of Tartarus... Akihiko is still unable to join you for obvious reasons, so I'd like you to remain as our active field leader. You never know when a powerful enemy might appear, like the one you faced the other day. It's best to be prepared, or else you may find yourself in a difficult situation. So, whenever you'd like to explore Tartarus, just let me know, and I'll gather everyone there. Also, since I'm sure there are other things you will need to take care of, you may go out at night if you need to. Well, that's it. Keep up the good work."

"In that case, let's go to Tartarus tonight," Minato said. "It's imperative we bring up Junpei and Yukari's resistance to the Dark Hour ASAP, or else they could fail at a crucial moment."

Mitsuru nodded. "I'll inform them of the plans for tonight. We meet in front of the school at midnight."

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Climbing Up

SEES arrived at Tartarus five minutes before midnight. Once again, the transformation that Minato could only describe as 'majestic' took place, still startling Junpei and Yukari. Akhiko appeared too distant to care.

Mitsuru had arrived on her motorbike, and rolled it into the lobby. "As we explore Tartarus, I'll be making this our temporary base of operations." she said, patting her bike. Strapped to the back were various odd instruments that looked like they were from the 1960's.

"Cutting edge technology," Minato joked.

"I bet she'll turn out to be an excellent shot with a musket, Boss," David said.

"By the way, I found out something interesting about Tartarus. A few floors up, there's something preventing you from going any higher. The tower seems to have a number of these interspersed among the floors. I know I told you that the layout changes each day, but these barricades seem to be in fixed locations. Therefore, I'd like you to try and reach the first barricade. I'm counting on you." she explained.

"No sweat." Minato answered. He pulled out his brand new saber, and examined it. This would make killing shadows easier.

"Dude, I thought you said you couldn't get any weapons!" Junpei said, rather envious of Minato's shiny new sword.

"I'll get you something later," he answered. "If you kill more than I can, I might even get you something better than this... of course, the same goes for Yukari as well."

"Are we really making this a competition?" she asked, annoyed.

"It gives you more of an incentive to stay focused. I don't want a repeat of last time," Minato answered. With that, the trio entered Tartarus. The first floor was decimated, with practically nobody from SEES taking any damage. The second floor fell similarly, and they continued to ascend. By the time they reached the fourth floor, Minato had acquired two more Personae, Slime and Apsaras. Both of them seemed pretty useless, so he usually offered them to the Card of the Beast as soon as he got them. After several offerings, he finally kept two just in case. He didn't think he would ever use them, however, since his tactical ambushing and new sword made shadow slaughtering even easier.

As SEES systematically cleared out the fourth floor, Minato once again experienced Shuffle Time. This time, however, there were no Persona cards, so he chose one with a picture of a sword on it.

Yukari and Junpei turned to see Minato seemingly materialize a bow complete with arrows from thin air. From what he could tell, it was slightly stronger than what Yukari had.

"Yukari," he said, turning towards them. Their eyes were practically bulging out of their heads. "Got you a new bow."

"Minato... how did you do that?" Mitsuru asked over the transmitter.

"That was one of our Boss' opportunities!" Jack roared over the transmitter.

"Jack?! How the hell are you speaking?" Minato asked suddenly.

"We just cracked the transmitter's signal, Boss," David chimed in, once more over the transmitter. They had been too quiet in Tartarus, and he now knew why.

"Arisato, order them to stand down," Mitsuru said.

"You heard Mitsuru-senpai... And let me give my own explanations, guys." Minato said. The transmitter went silent, and Mitsuru realized the signal was once again private.

"That still doesn't explain how you can just make a brand new weapon out of nowhere," Junpei said. Minato took a big sigh.

"Okay. So sometimes, after we kill some Shadows, I see floating cards in my head. They basically play a little shuffle

game, and then I can pick one of them. The last few times, I just acquired new Personae from the cards, but this time, there weren't any Personae. So I chose one with a sword on it, and then the bow appeared in my hand." Minato stated. "I know it sounds stupid, but it is what is."

"...What are you, a videogame character?" Junpei asked. Jack and David materialized behind him.

"Videogame characters WISH they had the abilities of our Boss!" Jack screamed, startling Junpei and Yukari.

"He makes those you deem 'overpowered' look like a joke compared to him," David added.

Minato, oddly enough, smiled at this outburst. "Of course I do," he said with a shrug. "But we don't have time to waste here. It is only one Dark Hour, after all. Let's go."

With that, he gave Yukari her new bow. Jack and David disappeared once more, and Junpei just sighed. Minato was a smug bastard, but he couldn't deny that without his leadership, things would've been ridiculously difficult early on. But Junpei also knew that he was getting stronger... and he'd surpass Minato soon.

When they reached the fifth floor, they found what appeared to be a clearing and a green device similar to the one at the entrance off in a corner. Minato approached it and smacked the top of it with the hilt of his sword. It began to glow like one of the access points.

"*Hmm... could you try using that? I'd like to test something,*" Mitsuru asked.

"This could be a trap, Boss... every access point has already been activated. So why would this one be off?" David warned in his head.

"*True...*" Minato agreed mentally. "Junpei, come here for a second."

"S'up?" Junpei asked as he stood next to him. Without warning, backed off of the device and pushed him forwards, making him hit the button located on top of it. Junpei vanished instantly.

"What was that for?!" Yukari asked, running up to Minato.

"Just wait." Minato instructed, eyes fixed on the device. Before Yukari could protest, Junpei appeared on the device again, an angry look on his face.

"Hey man, what the hell was that for?!" he asked.

"We had to see if this really was a teleporter, so I volunteered you." Minato said with a shrug.

"You could at least warn me!" he screamed.

"But you're fine, right? Don't get worked up over nothing," Minato said, turning to continue down the hall. Junpei swore under his breath.

"Wait! It seems that there are three large Shadows in the center of that floor. They aren't moving but you'll need to defeat them if you plan on moving forwards," Mitsuru said.

"No sweat," Minato said, twirling his sword in his hand. "I don't think we can jump these guys, so get ready. I can probably take out one of them immediately, but don't let your guard down."

"Sure thing," Junpei grumbled. As they approached the center of the floor, three large eagles with IV carved on their masks simply hovered in the center of the room.

"Mitsuru-senpai, analyze," Minato said as he readied his Evoker. Mitsuru began scanning when the fight started.

"Danse Macabre!" Minato yelled as he fired. Jack popped up behind an eagle and proceeded to annihilate it completely. Minato staggered back as Jack disappeared. That still wasn't a move he could use often.

Yukari and Junpei ran next to him and summoned almost simultaneously.

"Garu!"

"Agi!"

A tornado struck first, followed by a fireball. The intended target, the eagle closest to them, flew through it, unfazed. Minato grabbed Yukari and dashed out of the way, leaving

Junpei alone. He tried to raise his katana to intercept it, but only succeeded in getting a nasty gash on his shoulder.

"The enemy uses wind attacks and is unaffected by wind, light, and dark, and can absorb fire!" Mitsuru said. "It seems that piercing attacks are its weakness!"

"Time for that bow to shine," Minato said, raising his Evoker once more. "Get ready, the last one is coming for us!"

Yukari took aim at the Shadow heading straight towards her as Minato moved aside. He summoned again.

"David, Sukunda!" he shouted. The Fiend appeared above him and played a quick jig that abruptly turned into a diminuendo. The Shadow slowed in midair, giving Yukari enough time to put an arrow in it, causing it crash to the floor. "Another!" Minato commanded.

Yukari shot it again, this time in the wing for good measure. As the Shadow struggled to get up, Minato jumped on it and began to hack away at it. It struggled and raged underneath him, but he severed its wings and rapidly stabbed it in what he thought was the back of its head.

"That's its ass, Boss!" Jack screamed. Minato turned around, falling on it as he did, and severed its head. It disappeared into the same ichor all Shadows seemed to become. He quickly rose and turned to check on Junpei and Yukari, and almost wished he hadn't.

Junpei was crumpled into a ball on the floor next to a wall, his katana feet from him to his right. He was bleeding profusely from his chest and stomach. Yukari had a few scars on her back, but was now focusing mainly on avoiding the Shadow's strafing runs at her. She was clearly at a disadvantage, with her Persona's only attack being wind based.

"Damn, looks like Junpei tried to take it alone." Minato thought as he ran towards them. *"He knows he's weak to wind moves. He should've asked for support!"*

"A man's pride can be both his greatest strength and weakness," David said suddenly.

"Boss, he still doesn't accept you as leader," Jack added. ***"You've gotta straighten him out, or else he'll kill himself."***

Minato mulled over these thoughts as he summoned David once more, casting Sukunda on the eagle. Yukari shot it out of the sky again, and it died easily once grounded.

"Whew..." Yukari sighed as Minato finished the Shadow. A look of horror crossed her face as she realized that Junpei was busy dying in the corner. "Junpei!"

"Jack, David... can I give my Magatama's effect to somebody else?" Minato asked as he approached the two of them.

"No can do, Boss. That would be like giving that person a part of your soul." Jack answered. Minato mentally cursed,

and pulled out the single revival bead he had found earlier. He walked over, moved Yukari aside, and made Junpei eat it. He almost choked on it, but was alive.

"Augh, dude, what the hell?!" Junpei coughed as he rose, clutching his stomach. The wounds on his upper body had closed, leaving slight scars, but his stomach was still in bad condition.

"I guess it does work like a Senzu Bean," Minato said. He looked at Yukari, who nodded. She summoned Io and used Dia on Junpei, fixing his stomach then on herself, fixing her back. "You good to go? I won't judge anyone if they want to stop for today."

Junpei scowled. "The bastard got lucky. Let's keep going, man."

"C'mon, Junpei, don't let it get to you. You should know when it's time to call it quits." Yukari said.

"...Let's go take a break in the lobby for a bit. I'm a little tired now... I used three skills, after all," Minato said, sheathing his sword. He didn't say that it was because he wanted to visit the Rooms.

"If you need a break, then sure. Can't go forward without our leader, right?" Junpei asked. Minato knew he was insulting him, but pretended not to notice.

"Watch it, Junpei... I don't have a problem beating you within

an inch of your life. Especially since I know I can bring you back in a flash." Minato thought as he stepped onto the teleporter.

"You should do that a few times to show him how weak he really is," David suggested.

"I bet if we lopped off a leg, he wouldn't be so jumpy," Jack added. There was silence. ***"What? That was a good pun!"***

"You and Ikutsuki would love each other," Minato thought. He reappeared in the lobby, and was immediately drawn to the golden clock. The Dark Hour still had around forty minutes left, according to its singular hand, but he realized there was a little slot for offerings at the base. Junpei and Yukari had soon arrived from the teleporter, and he called them over.

"What now, man?" Junpei asked, annoyed. Minato wordlessly dropped money into the slot, and he felt that all of his exhaustion and wounds began to heal. He watched the clock as it turned backwards one full cycle, resting at the same place it had been beforehand. He turned to Junpei and Yukari. They had scars beforehand, but they were all but gone. Both of them noticed the regeneration as well, and looked at themselves, awestruck.

"The clock can reverse any damage we take," Minato said.
"But it costs money."

"Tres bien, Minato," Mitsuru said, watching the scene from

afar. "A teleporter and a method to heal ourselves... Perhaps Tartarus wants to be explored?"

"Dude, who cares?!" Junpei yelled. He had returned to normal after his fatigue was cured. "Let's go kick some more Shadow ass!"

"Seriously?... Well, I guess I wouldn't mind a few more floors," Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"Lemme visit some friends first," he said, walking off to the corner. "Be back in a flash!"

With that, he disappeared into blue butterflies, and reappeared in the Velvet Room. Igor was waiting for him, his classic smile somewhat returned.

"Ah, there you are," Igor greeted. "Welcome to the Velvet Room. Well... I suppose it's time for me to explain what I really do here. It is my job to create new Personas. But in order to do that, I must fuse the ones you currently have together... In other words, I shall merge them into a single Persona. Furthermore, if you've established a Social Link, you may create even stronger Persona. As you accumulate more and more Personae, please, bring them to me before you offer them."

"Ah, you saw that, huh?" Minato chuckled. "Don't worry, I've still got some. Let's see what we can make."

After learning about fusion spreads, Minato discovered that he

could only make Nekomata, who seemed pretty useless, and Omoikane, which he was certain was a tentacle rape monster. Obviously, he went for Omoikane.

As the fusion began, however, the Card of the Beast appeared on the table and the flames on his Candelabra flickered wildly. Igor grimaced.

"It would seem that your new card allows you to force certain skills onto your Personas during fusion, ignoring whether they can inherit them. It eliminates the element of chance altogether..." he said. Minato grinned.

"Hell yeah, Boss! Now all of your Personas will be almost as badass as us!" Jack screamed as he popped into existence, a small floating skull next to Minato.

"Who knows? Maybe a few of them might actually be worth using now," David added.

"Let's find out, shall we?" Minato asked. He focused, and saw Omoikane's skills. Zio, an electric move, and Dia, a healing spell. He could choose two more, so he threw Slime's Bash and Apsaras' Bufu on as well.

His Persona appeared as cards, floating above the table. They slowly rose, the Card of the Beast sending forth waves of some black energy into each, until they stopped, and a flash of light erupted between the two of them. Omoikane appeared, looking at Minato. He vanished wordlessly and Minato knew he had entered his soul.

"Personae created unnaturally lose their individuality," Igor stated. "Omoikane should have introduced himself..."

"That's only a minor setback, Master," Elizabeth said. "After all, our guest will now have more control over his power than previously thought possible." Igor sat in silence, contemplating this.

"I'll tell you if anything weird happens," Minato said, rising from his seat. "Thanks for everything."

"One moment, please." Elizabeth said suddenly. "I actually have a few requests for you... if the Master would allow me to ask. Naturally, you will be rewarded for completing them."

Igor turned to Elizabeth, and then to Minato. "I see no more harm in your request, Elizabeth."

"Wonderful!" Elizabeth exclaimed. Minato could swear he saw Igor's eyes brighten a little. He really was a nice guy.

Elizabeth then proceeded to inform Minato of her slightly convoluted request system, but he got the basics down. Some quests had time limits, others didn't, and each was pretty self-explanatory. However, he quickly realized a flaw in her plans.

"How am I supposed to carry a beetle shell from a gigantic beetle here?" Minato asked as she finished her list of requests.

"I'm glad you asked! I have spoken to the owner of the

Crimson Room on the matter, and he has given me a wonderful contraption. Behold!" she said, and with a flourish, she pulled out a tiny black box. "The Dimensional Compactor! Simply open the box in front of the intended target, and it will be instantly stored inside! Similarly, opening it with some of the contents in mind will cause them to reappear."

Minato laughed. Loudly. For a good minute. Then he took the box. Looked at it. And laughed again.

"Lucifer's really planned for everything, huh?" Minato asked, calming down.

"Indeed. He knows far more than I expected," Elizabeth said. "I trust you will pay him a visit now?"

"That's the plan," Minato said. He realized as he put the Compactor in his pocket that his pockets were actually quite packed. He then decided to use his headphone wire, and strap the compactor to his wrist. He'd need new headphones soon.

"Tell him Elizabeth sent greetings, and would enjoy speaking again at his earliest convenience."

Minato nodded, and left the Velvet Room. His friends were still resting, and he eyed the clock. It hadn't moved. He then entered the Crimson Room.

He greeted Lucifer with his customary bow, and took his seat. "Elizabeth sends greetings, Master, and wants to speak

again," he said.

"I know." he answered simply. "Are you interested in how much Macca you've acquired?"

"Of course," Minato answered eagerly.

"Thirsty for more power, eh?" Lucifuge asked with a smile. Paimon laughed.

"You've managed to acquire 720 Macca," Lucifer said. "It would seem you can acquire a new Magatama. Interested?" Minato may as well have been a dog with a treat hanging in front of his eyes. "For 500 Macca, you can purchase a Magatama that grants you increased speed and flexibility forever... Focusing on it will immensely increase your speed to levels that far surpasses any mere mortal's... Of course, you will lose the previous effects for twice as long as you used it... Should you use the effect for more than ten minutes... well, I'll let you see what happens." Minato laughed.

"Have I ever told you I love you?" Minato asked, leaning back in his chair. "No, seriously, I do. You've been helping me out constantly, friend." He pulled out the Card of the Beast, and felt something change within it.

"The price has been paid. Here," Lucifer said, with a wave of his hand. Another Magatama appeared on the table in front of him, and Minato ate it without a second thought. Again, he felt as if he died for a moment, only to return stronger than normal. He saw Lucifer smiling wider than usual.

"The Master would prefer that you not believe him to be overly charitable," Paimon said. "After all, there are also a few things you need to do for us in your world."

"Yes... the Master has a few connections he wants you to establish. Return during the day, and he will send you to a few. These connections... they will give you tasks to accomplish. Do them not only for Master, but for yourself... though it seems you have already met one of them." Lucifuge said.

"Kazuya," Minato said. Lucifer nodded.

"His tasks will change you... but it will be for the better. If you haven't already noticed, these connections also double as your Social Links." Paimon said. "Handy, isn't it?"

"Any friend of his," Minato began, gesturing to Lucifer, "Is a friend of mine." Lucifer smiled.

"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple... He who possesses the Card of the Beast... I give to thee a portion of my Majesty... Thou shalt draw forth hidden strength from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my Light... The Light of Lucifer..." Lucifer said. Minato bowed, his own strength increasing even more. "Now, go forth. Enjoy your newfound abilities."

"The pleasure is all mine, Master," Minato said, raising his head. "I'll see you around. Later."

With that, he left, returning to the Tartarus lobby. "Let's go," he said quickly, moving to the teleporter. Junpei and Yukari grinned and followed him.

Floors six to nine introduced new shadows, none of which were remotely challenging. Even the beetles he had to hunt, resistant to physical attacks, could be hacked to death once knocked over by a wind or electric attack. He used the dimensional Compactor, but nobody questioned him this time. They had gotten used to his antics.

No shadow could resist SEES, and Minato's newfound speed made him even deadlier at close combat. Junpei was becoming proficient with his sword, and Yukari's new bow had enough power to stop weaker Shadows in their tracks.

"Is it just me, or did he get better all of a sudden?" Yukari asked Junpei as they killed a Shadow trying to flee from them. She was watching Minato dash at a Shadow at a ridiculously fast pace, only to turn, backflip over it, and slice down through its back. The Shadow died instantly.

"No kidding..." Junpei muttered. Minato turned and waved to them as he approached.

"So I got my beetle shells!" he exclaimed as he approached. "Now, I just need to find a golden Shadow and kill it."

"Why are you doing this, again?" Yukari asked.

"A resident of one of the rooms I visit, Elizabeth, asked me to

get her some stuff. Some of it is dropped by Shadows in Tartarus... I need to hunt a golden shadow to get it." Minato explained.

"Ya mean like those two over there?" Junpei whispered. Everyone turned to see two golden Shadows apparently trying to sneak away from them. They looked like hands.

"Good eye," Minato commented. SEES immediately began a stealthy pursuit. Unlike other Shadows, however, the new golden ones noticed, and took off at an alarming rate, splitting up. "TAKE THE OTHER ONE!"

Minato rushed towards the Shadow that broke right, leaving Junpei and Yukari in his dust. They looked to see him turn quickly again.

"Like hell we're gonna catch that one!" Yukari yelled, frustrated. "Let's follow Minato." They took off after him, only to see something incredible.

The Shadow began running along the wall, at superhuman speeds. Minato closed his eyes, focused on his Magatama, and took off after it. He ran up the wall, gaining on it, and then bounded past it. The Shadow jumped to the opposite wall, but Minato jumped once more, intercepting it in midair. He sliced right through it, grabbing the coin it dropped and crashing into the stairs for the next floor. He pulled on the power for a minute, and stopped once he got to his feet. He felt sluggish to himself, but knew everything would return to normal soon.

"Dude, what the hell?" Junpei asked, panting as he approached. Yukari was lagging behind him. "How did you do that?"

"Indeed, Minato..." Mitsuru began over the intercom. "You abandoned your comrades. I expect a real explanation."

"One of the Rooms I visits gives me magical items that I absorb. I can use them whenever I want, and they enhance my physical abilities." Minato answered. He stated it in a matter of fact manner, uncaring of any weird looks he received. "Shall we go?"

A bit tired, the trio was more than glad to see a teleporter on the tenth floor. They used the clock once more, only for Minato to realize he was practically out of money, and the Dark Hour barely had twenty minutes left.

"Minato," Mitsuru said as she approached him. "After defeating the floor guardians of the tenth floor, I advise you to end the operation. After all, a leader must consider the status of his allies."

He turned, and, to his surprise, both Yukari and Junpei looked as if they were ready to pass out. He was so absorbed in testing his new powers that he hadn't even realized they were on the verge of collapse. The clock could restore the body and refresh the mind, but it couldn't stop real exhaustion

"Guys..." he said, turning to face them. "I can deal with this one alone if you want... I should've seen how tired you were."

"Tch. No way," Junpei said, hoisting himself up.

"Knowing you, you'll end up in a different dimension or whatever," Yukari said. Minato looked them over. He would let them join him... but he would end the fight quickly.

"Then, let's end this." Minato said. They used the teleporter, and, in the center of the room waited three pink and white hands that looked like differently colored versions of the golden Shadow he killed.

"I took the liberty to analyze them already. These enemies are resistant to all types of magic, but weak to blunt force trauma," Mitsuru said. "I hope you have a Persona with the right ability. Your weapons aren't suited for this battle."

Minato grinned. He sheathed his sword and walked forward.

"Oh shit, Boss is about to get real!" David screamed excitedly in his head.

"KICK THEIR ASSES!" Jack screamed.

"Cover me, Yukari," Minato said. He summoned Jack, casting Tarukaja on himself. He activated his Magatama and moved forward at an impossible speed. Using his momentum, he stepped in front of the first Shadow and accomplished one of his childhood dreams.

"SHIN!" he yelled, punching the shadow up once with his right hand. "SHO!" he screamed, following it up with a second,

lightning fast hit from his left, putting the Shadow properly into the air. He shifted, and did an impossible spinning uppercut. "RYUKEN!"

The first Shadow hand flew upwards into the roof, dying upon impact. Junpei and Yukari were frozen in place. Mitsuru had no comment. The other two Shadows were similarly confused. Once Minato landed, he dashed towards another and did a spinning jump. He extended his leg.

"TATSUMAKI SENPUKYAKYU!" he yelled. He had copied the move perfectly, and knocked the Shadow to the floor. He finished it by jumping to the roof, bouncing off of it, and doing an impossibly fast curbstomp. Unfortunately, he broke the leg he used in the impact. Regardless, he used his second Magatama, instantly healing himself, and turned to the last Shadow. It was panicking, and turned to run.

"JODAN SOKUTOGERI!" Minato yelled, bounding on the Shadow in a flash and kicking with all his might and speed. He sent the shadow flying into the wall, and drew his Evoker. "Omoikane, Bash!" he shouted, pulling the trigger. Behind him, the giant brain raised its mass of tentacles in the air and slammed it down on the Shadow, splattering it. He stopped calling on his Magatama. The fight lasted less than a minute.

After Minato silently returned from getting his newfound treasures, he grabbed the awestruck Junpei and Yukari, and returned to the lobby. Mitsuru was equally stunned, but he managed to get them to return to the dorm for the night. He was extremely tired without the regenerative abilities at his

disposal, but he still failed to sleep. So he made some tea and watched the Dark Hour fade away.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11: Reality Check

Minato made sure to make special pancakes for Junpei and Yukari in the morning. They seriously deserved it, and he didn't really know any better way to help them recover. Unfortunately, Akihiko had recovered faster than usual after hearing about Minato's performance in Taratarus, and joined him for breakfast. Jack and David were in miniature form, dicing fruit.

"Minato," he began as he ate, "I heard you took down an entire set of floor guardians with your bare hands."

"Hell yeah, he did!" Jack said without looking from his task.
"Boss is a badass!"

"He really holds back to let the others get a feel for fighting. He can't carry them the whole way up the tower, can he?" David added. Minato simply nodded.

"But don't you feel like you're cheating yourself if you use power that isn't yours?" Akihiko asked.

"Nah," Minato said nonchalantly. "Look here, senpai. In a fight, being fair is a bunch of crap and you know it, especially

against something like Shadows. I'm just using everything I have to give myself the biggest advantage."

"I can see your point... but I don't think it merits giving up any semblance of honor." Akihiko replied. "I expect you not to use any of your powers, or whatever they are, in boxing club when the time comes."

"I don't think I'll need to, really," Minato said. "Unless that rumor about all you guys getting steroids is true."

"Wha-?" Akihiko started. "Who said that?!"

"Junpei," Minato answered. Akihiko quickly ate his breakfast and headed back up the stairs. Minato couldn't contain his smile as he heard Akihiko give Junpei quite a lecture about hard work and dedication first thing in the morning.

As Minato went to school with Mitsuru and Yukari while Akihiko forced Junpei to jog with him in the morning, he couldn't help but notice the odd glances the two gave him on the train. Instead of asking normally, he decided to have some fun. He willed Jack and David into existence, their tiny floating skulls appearing behind the two girls and slowly approaching their ears. David got close to Yukari quite easily, while Jack struggled to avoid having to slice through Mitsuru's hair. He eventually managed, and once the two got into position, the train stopped as a smirk came across Minato's face.

"Boo!" both of them whispered simultaneously. Yukari and Mitsuru both screamed like banshees for a second, frozen in

place as students exited the train. They attracted a few strange looks, but with all the commotion of people boarding and exiting the train, it was quite stifled. Even Minato's sickening laughter at the sight was muffled.

Mitsuru turned red in the face, her eyes darting rapidly from left to right. If she could have disappeared into her hair, she would've. Yuakri didn't fare much better. She clutched her chest like a little girl, and looked around nervously.

"Let's go, girls," Minato said, walking up behind the two. He caused another small jump, but they were too shocked to react properly. They both got a little closer to Minato, who, unknown to them, was the real cause of their misfortune.

As they approached the school gate, Akihiko and Junpei arrived to see them. "Senpai," Junpei panted, looking at the group. "Aren't they... kinda close?"

Akihiko took in the scene and growled, audibly. "This guy..." he began, "has some nerve."

"Woah," Junpei said, looking at Akihiko. "You're not going to go beat him up or anything for stealing your girl, are ya?"

Akihiko blinked. "Mitsuru's not my girl," he said quickly, leaving Junpei behind.

Minato walked in to a roar of both applause and jeers.

"MINATO, YOU'VE SHOWN ME THERE'S NOTHING

IMPOSSIBLE IN THIS WORLD!" one zealous boy screamed.

"YOU BASTARD! I WON'T FORGIVE YOU FOR DISHONORING MITSURU-SAMA!" an enraged girl screamed, charging forwards only to be pulled back by her friends.

"HAVE YOU NO SHAME?! HOW DARE YOU STEAL THE TWO MOST PRECIOUS GEMS OF OUR SCHOOL!" a kendo stick wielding boy said.

"MINATO-DONO! CHOOSE ME NEXT! I'LL DO ANYTHING!" a rather troubled girl yelled.

At all of this, Minato could only smile. When Yukari and Mitsuru quickly separated from him, he simply chuckled and waved to them. "Run along, now," he said. He sauntered into the school. On one side, students might as well have been bowing to him as he passed. On the other, he could sense a mass of killing intent that would give some Shadows a run for their money. He ignored them all, and simply headed for his class.

"The plebs are divided, Boss." David noted. ***"The time to seize power is now. Install yourself as the King of Gekkoukan, and reign over these lesser mortals."***

"Anyone who gets in your way... well, you know how to deal with em'," Jack said.

"As entertaining as that would be..." Minato replied, ***"I have***

no intention of starting a civil war. It will cause too many casualties, and taking power by force will only stain my name. When the true majority supports me, and I become this King of Gekkoukan without having to lift a finger... only then will I be truly satisfied."

"Hmm... Perhaps the ideas of revolution don't fit so well into High School after all. You might be onto something here, Boss." David said. Jack seemed to be mulling the idea over, but Minato was certain he was just angry he wouldn't get to kill anybody.

By lunch, Minato had grown sick of people shooting comments in his general direction, and went to the roof alone for peace of mind. As soon as he had gotten there, Gekkoukan's resident delinquent population stormed onto the roof, surrounding him.

"Minato Arisato, correct?" the apparent leader of the group asked. He was a well-built boy with shaggy black hair, who wore his uniform with a popped collar. Minato couldn't help but laugh at the fact that he was being stared down by a bunch of preppy-delinquents, and it sounded pretty maniacal, even by his standards.

"You see any other blue-haired kids walking around the halls with headphones?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, are you gonna kick their asses, Boss?! Are ya?!" Jack asked.

"If they so much as make a move, none of them are leaving here without a few bruises," Minato answered.

"Taking the two best girls in the school..." the leader began. He took a step forward. "You're not getting away with that. You've crushed more dreams than you know."

"Dreams are made here every day," Minato said with a shrug. "But... yours will not be among them."

"This cocky bastard!" a boy from the group screamed.

"Let's beat the shit out of him!" another said.

"You just sealed your fate, boy," the leader said.

"Says the one with a popped collar and a little group of playground bullies. What are you, five?" Minato mocked. The leader took that as a signal to throw his first punch.

It was also his last. Minato used his Magatama for three seconds, getting in close and delivering a crushing attack to the boy's midsection. He literally bounced backwards and fell over, clutching his stomach. The group of students all began to back off. A few of them who had brought weapons dropped them.

"Oh, are you saying you can take me without weapons now?" Minato asked, his smile growing. "Please, demonstrate."

It was less of a fight and more of a slaughter. Every student and teacher in the school could hear Minato's maniacal

laughter and the cries of students begging for mercy and forgiveness from the roof. He took them down slowly instead of quickly, letting fear grow ever more in those who had yet to fall. One student tried to jump off of the roof. Minato ripped him off of the fence he was climbing, and made an example of him by twisting his ankle so he could no longer stand. Fear turned to terror as Minato began finding new, creative ways to torture his opponents. He drove one student to throw a punch at him, only to have it caught. Minato forced the boy's hand open and bent his pinky backwards to breaking point, and then beyond.

After Minato left the roof, nobody followed him, even after Lunch was over. All who opposed him had fallen. In class, Minato felt everybody back away from him a little as the day progressed. On the other hand, Junpei seemed to actually try and talk to him more than usual. At the end of the day, everyone left class 2-F in a hurry, save for Junpei and Minato.

"Dude, I heard you put the hurt on the local punks all by yourself. Gotta say you're a certified badass now!" Junpei said, rather excited. Minato smirked.

"Sounds about right," he said. "Lemme guess: you wanna be my peon now that I'm a Banchou?"

"Ha! As if, dude. Just you watch. Junpei lori is here to officially announce that you are his eternal rival!" he said, raising his fist. "I challenge you to a one on one fist fight, front of the school! Decline, and I'll have proven I'm stronger than you!"

"Oh, Iori's gonna fight Minato?! That kid's crazy!" Minato heard a group of students say. Junpei turned quickly to see a large group of fan girls (and, surprisingly, boys) huddling near the door.

"He's soooo dead..." one boy muttered. They were already counting him out, and that pissed him off. He turned to face Minato, who had begun packing his things.

"WHAT'S IT GONNA BE?!" Junpei roared at him. Minato turned and smiled.

"Your funeral in five minutes." he said. He patted Junpei on the shoulder and leaned in to whisper in his ear. "It's a good thing I've got a revival bead on me... wouldn't want you spending time in the hospital now."

Junpei visibly paled as Minato left, his swarm of fans parting as he left. Junpei tightened his fist. He was gonna prove here and now that he was better than Minato.

Junpei arrived at the front of the school to see Minato speaking with Mitsuru and Yukari. Both of them turned to Junpei, and shook their head in disappointment. Even they had counted him out.

Across from them, Akihiko motioned for Junpei to join him.

"Junpei..." Akihiko began, putting his hand on his shoulder. "I'll be honest. You're at a huge disadvantage. The only way you can win is if you've got some sort of secret technique nobody

has ever seen."

"Even you, senpai?!" Junpei asked, eyes wide.

"Junpei, I don't know if you've even registered what happened at the end of our last exploration. He beat to death three floor guardians with his bare hands." Akihiko said. "He's done moves from Street Fighter for crying out loud. If you back off, nobody's gonna judge you."

"Bullshit," Junpei said. "He's a cocky bastard, but I can beat him. He's probably gonna go easy on me, thinking I'm weak... that's when I'll hit him with all I've got."

"Exploiting his confidence is your best option... but you've met Minato. He's no ordinary opponent when it comes to tactics. Don't overestimate his hubris..." Akihiko added.

"Hub ribs?" Junpei asked. Akihiko facepalmed.

"Don't just assume he's arrogant. There's a huge chance that he'll predict that, and bait you." Akihiko explained

"Hey, are we starting soon? I'm getting bored over here," Minato said. Akihiko and Junpei turned to see him fiddling with his mp3 player. Mitsuru and Yukari had left, leaving only his crowd of fans watching.

"Senpai," Junpei said, stepping forwards. "I've got this." Akihiko could only nod. He was sweating. No amount of coaching could prepare Junpei for this fight.

"Hey!" Junpei yelled, standing his ground. He took on a fighting stance, and put on the toughest voice he could. "It's one-on-one! Tell yer' followers to scram!"

"Scary," Minato said, rubbing his eyes. He was smiling the whole time. "Yeah, they won't interfere. Right?" His fans all backed away. "The first strike is yours."

They stood there looking at each other, Junpei in a fighting position, Minato in his usual aloof stance. A minute passed. No movement. Another passed. Still nothing.

"Looks like lori's all talk and no action!" he heard a girl jeer.

"Yeah, only a loser would even consider going up against Minato-dono!" another said.

"He's useless!" a boy shouted. Junpei grit his teeth. He was going to prove those bastards wrong.

With a yell, Junpei ran towards Minato and slugged him with all his might. Minato dodged out of the way, and stuck his leg out. Junpei tripped, sliding forwards across the ground. Laughs erupted from Minato's group of followers. He cursed under his breath, and got back up. Minato was looking at his mp3 player, apparently fed up with the song he was listening to.

Junpei went in again, this time trying to copy a boxer's approach. The result was a couple of clumsy punches that Minato dodged by walking backwards and leaning his upper

body. Junpei backed off once more, and looked at Minato again. He was playing with him, wasn't he? The bastard was playing with him, that stupid smile plastered on his face.

Junpei ran in again, throwing a weak punch. He would let Minato try and trip him again, but he'd turn and kick him to the floor instead. However, Minato caught the punch, and pulled Junpei forwards into a knee. As Junpei backed up, Minato quickly moved behind him and kicked the back of his knee, causing him to fall.

"Junpei," Minato said. Junpei turned, expecting to see his smug face and get hit with an insult. Instead, Minato looked... impressed? "You predicted I'd just trip you again and threw a feint... Not bad... if you had trained as long as I had, you probably would've kicked my ass." Junpei, unable to answer from the sharp knee to his gut, looked dumbfounded. Minato turned to the crowd of fans approaching them, his expression becoming his crazy smile once more. "If any of you even say a word about this man, I'll break you ten times worse than I just broke him."

Silence. The fans stopped, shivered, and rapidly dispersed. By this point, Akihiko had helped Junpei up. "Why?" Junpei asked, catching his breath.

"No matter what anyone says, Junpei, you're strong." Minato said simply. "The only reason I accepted this fight is so that I could show you that you need real training. Akihiko-senpai's more than willing to help, right?"

"I told him the easy way, but I guess hearing it the hard way is the only way for it to connect." Akihiko said with a laugh.

"Heh," Junpei said, recovering. "I'll take you up on that. But just you wait. I'm still your eternal rival!" he shouted.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

"I won't forget," Minato said. "But I wasn't lying when I said I was hungry... grab a bite?"

"Heh, you two need some more protein. Minato, your cooking's nice and all, but I know a place with something you two need. It'll be my treat," Akihiko said.

The trio went to the Beef Bowl Shop, and nearly bankrupted Akihiko. Minato and Junpei engaged in an eating contest, which ended in a tie. They had ordered five extra-large deluxe bowls with extra beef each. Akihiko only had one.

As the content trio returned to the dorm, Mitsuru greeted them. Minato signed-in, again being the only signer. Akihiko escorted Junpei to his room, leaving Minato alone. He was about to go to his room, when Mitsuru stopped him.

"Minato," she called out. He stopped and turned to her. "While

I appreciate you teaching Iori about the necessity of training, I can't overlook the fact that today, you injured nearly one hundred students on the roof today."

Minato froze on the spot. He looked to the door. If he used his Magatama, he was certain Mitsuru would be unable to stop him from escaping. From there, he could climb in from his window later at night. While they discussed executions, Minato noticed that she had kept a special one hidden from his sight. He knew that it was specifically for him. And he knew that after what he had taught her, whatever she had in store was going to break him, body and soul

"I think your talents could be useful on the Student Council," Mitsuru said. He blinked. "The Disciplinary Committee is falling apart... We need a strong leader, one that people rally to, from either fear or adoration. You can create both, and have more than enough strength to keep safe. For the unity of the Student Council, I will remove the head of the Disciplinary Committee, Hidetoshi Odagiri, and install you in his stead. You will work directly under me, answer to nobody but me, and fight only in self-defense or when I deem violence necessary."

"She wants a personal hound," Minato thought.

"What's the problem? Violence for the sake of peace, right?" Jack said. He was excited to have an opportunity to fight.

"So... you agree that sometimes an iron fist is the best option?" Minato asked, smiling.

"I'm glad you're quick to understand." Mitsuru said, smiling back. "With the most feared and adored student of the school working directly under me, nobody will oppose me... The teachers and students will accept perfection... And those that don't..."

"Will tremble and fall." Minato finished. Mitsuru's smile was as creepy as his. The both cackled loudly, terrifying everyone in the dorm.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

As they stopped laughing, they turned to see Akihiko staring at them from the kitchen.

"You guys are bat shit insane..." he said quietly. He slowly walked to the stairs, keeping his eyes on them with each step, and then ran upwards as fast as he could. He entered his room, and slammed the door shut.

"Hmph. He hasn't changed in the slightest," Mitsuru mused. She rose from her spot in the lounge. "I don't think lori's in any shape to go to Tartarus tonight. I'll be in my room if you need me." With that, she left. Minato showered and checked the time. It was a little past nine, and he remembered that Elizabeth had requested a 'date' with him to Paulownia Mall.

What better time to show a girl around the mall then at night?

He changed into comfier jeans, put on a white and blue t-shirt, grabbed his blue paper-boy's hat, and headed out. If he knew anything about Elizabeth, it was that she was eccentric. They were definitely going to end up clubbing at some point.

He arrived at the Velvet Room, and shot Igor a quick look. "You feel like coming with?" he offered.

Igor shook his head. "It is not my place to enter your world, young man," Igor said, smiling. Minato shrugged, and gave Elizabeth the request items she needed. He got his goods, took a quest requesting for the sword Juzumaru, and then looked at her expectantly.

"Shall we begin our 'date'?" he asked.

"Of course," Elizabeth said, placing her book down on the table. She locked arms with Minato, much to his surprise, and the two began towards the door.

"Have fun," Igor called. Minato was a little surprised to hear Igor wish him well, but he nodded and waved goodbye. As the two of them appeared in the back alley of Paulownia Mall, Elizabeth immediately led them to the main plaza. Her eyes brightened upon seeing the fountain.

"Ah, yes... An intimate encounter with one of your world's rarities! This must be a fountain... It makes sport of water, well known to the foundation of all life... how wicked!"

Elizabeth said.

"Huh... when you look at it like that, these things are pretty fucked up, aren't they?" Minato thought. "Mankind takes pride in feeding its own ego."

"Indeed... I have even heard that the true purpose of these fountains is an offertory... it grants the wishes of those who sacrifice a few coins..." she continued.

"Maybe so... care to find out?" Minato asked, approaching the fountain. He was going to take a coin from his pocket when Elizabeth produced a bulging purse from seemingly out of nowhere.

"I shall. I will make an opening bid of 1,000,000 yen to this fountain spirit." Elizabeth began. She poured a torrent of coins into the fountain, attracting the attention of everyone in the mall.

"Damn, Boss. I say we mug this chick!" Jack said suddenly.

"I, and you, wouldn't dare, would we?" Minato threatened. Jack faded back into his mind. *"But at least we know I can keep making money."*

"Ah! I was so caught up in the excitement of tossing in the coins, that I hadn't given my wish any thought." Elizabeth said when the torrent of coins ended.

"Don't worry; I made sure to wish for something in your

stead." Minato said.

"Then I have been of service to the Velvet Room's newest guest." Elizabeth said with a bow.

The two turned to examine stores. Oddly, Elizabeth went towards the Police Station first.

"Boss, I bet we could get this chick in so much shit if we wanted," David said.

"I'll bury you in shit if you keep talking," Minato answered. He liked Elizabeth. He liked Jack and David. *"I've had a real problem with the fact you don't get along with her... she's a friend of mine."*

"We can't really help it Boss... us Fiends feel the need to take advantage of innocent people," David answered.
"But... we'll try and be quiet."

"This facility here... There are some rather stern-faced gentlemen inside... And these photographs displayed so prominently... Most wanted... Reward... Am I... correct in thinking of these as your version of my subjugation requests?" Elizabeth inquired.

"Actually, it's a little tougher. You need to capture these guys alive," Minato said.

"I see... Perhaps I should ask for a similar request?"

"I don't think Igor would approve of Shadows running around the Velvet Room," Minato chuckled.

"Oh my... you are correct. I had completely forgotten about that. But, my curiosity is sated. Shall we move on?"

The duo continued, reaching Club Escapade. The crowd hadn't gotten too big, and Minato mentally fist pumped. He was about to enter a club at night with a girl in tow.

"This edifice... Is this... a 'club'?!" Elizabeth asked excitedly.

"Of course," Minato answered. He looked at her. There was no way in hell she wasn't going clubbing tonight.

"Dancers, dictated by the sway of one's inner passions... A subterranean garden of uninhibited spectacle... we must enter at once." Elizabeth said. They were about to enter the line, when Minato felt a familiar presence. He looked to his left, only to see Paimon, Lucifuge, and Lucifer looking at him.

"What a coincidence," Lucifuge said. "We were also about to enter. Care to join us?"

Elizabeth turned, shocked to see the trio, and looked at Lucifer, a bit confused to find him simply wandering around.

"The more the merrier. You don't mind, do you, Elizabeth?" Minato asked.

"But of course. It will be a night to remember," she said. The group cut past the line, and Lucifuge nodded to the bouncer,

an intimidating looking man in a maroon pea coat and gray beanie. He had long, shaggy brown hair, with eyes similar to Akihiko's. The man nodded back, and let the group past. He gave Minato a strange look, to which he responded with one of his own. The bouncer was a Persona user, who had already awakened to his power. Minato didn't have time to truly size him up, however, as Elizabeth dragged him inside.

The next two hours would be complete mayhem. Lucifuge drank like there was no tomorrow, and was the happiest man in the VIP section. Paimon had removed her shawl on entry, revealing that she had her hair in a huge bun. She took it out, and let her hair drop. It was pure black, longer than Mitsuru's, and accentuated a beautiful face with piercing purple eyes.

"The real reason Paimon wears that crazy shawl all the time," Lucifuge said, "is to stop every man in the area from trying to flirt with her!" Minato laughed and nodded. He had taken a few drinks with the group, and was sitting between Elizabeth and Paimon.

"So, Master, what brings you here?" Minato asked casually.

"Master's going to have a strawberry sundae with a friend!" Paimon answered for him. "But enough about work! Didn't you want to dance, Elizabeth?"

"And so I shall!" she said. She had matched Lucifuge drink for drink, and they had already downed four bottles between the two of them. Minato led her and Paimon to the dance floor as the music began to intensify. Minato didn't expect to have two

girls dancing on him that night, and Paimon and Elizabeth could DANCE. Even with his increased speed and regeneration, he couldn't match their pace. Different partners came and tried to attract them, but none succeeded.

Bottles were emptied. Songs were danced. And Minato was beginning to have a problem seeing straight when the Dark Hour struck.

"Oh! How inconvenient!" Paimon complained, pouting.

"Indeed. We now have to wait for the hour to pass before we can continue." Elizabeth joined.

"Actually, this is a blessing in disguise," Minato thought. *"I couldn't have kept that up for too much longer... maybe an hour break will help me."*

"Actually!" Lucifuge screamed from the VIP section. Lucifer had rejoined him at some point in the night. "I can put you into a trance that will make it seem as if the hour never passed. Would you like it?"

Elizabeth jumped with joy. "Oh, yes!"

At that, Lucifuge's eyes turned a bright red, and Minato felt like he was about to faint, when suddenly, the music came back on. He felt better and refreshed, but it was instantaneous. "Go wild!" Lucifuge said with a grand gesture. He then grabbed the nearest bottle of liquor and started chugging.

More dancing. More drinking. Making out with Elizabeth. Making out with Paimon. Making out with Elizabeth and Paimon at the same time in the VIP section. More dancing. More drinking. He was certain somewhere along the line he established the Sun Social Link with Elizabeth.

It was four in the morning when Minato stumbled out of Club Escapade with Elizabeth and Paimon. He was still amazed at the fact that he still had his hat.

"Ah, the Master and Lucifuge returned ahead of us. I shall ensure your safe return to the dorm, Minato." she said, clinging to him.

"Indeed," Elizabeth slurred. "The master would be quite displeased if I let harm befall our precious guest."

Paimon ended up having to lead the two drunken people around the city, stopping them from trying to make out in random places. She occasionally joined in, or stole Minato for herself when she was bored. Though she was leading the way, Paimon had no idea where Minato's dorm was, and ended up making them walk around for almost three hours. Near the end, Minato's condition significantly improved, along with Elizabeth's. This allowed him to take the lead and find his way to the Dorm.

It was 6:50 a.m. when the trio entered Minatodai Dorm. Minato, covered in kiss marks, wearing slightly ripped clothing, reeking of liquor, with two unknown beautiful women clinging to him, stopped everyone in their tracks.

"Your living arrangements, Master Minato," Paimon said. She grabbed him and kissed him. He was still too out of it to really defend himself from any advances, so he simply went with it. "We should do this more often."

"Indeed, Minato-sama," Elizabeth added, stealing him away for a kiss. "I'll give you your reward the next time we meet."

With that, Minato casually showed them to the door and saw them off. They left together, talking amongst themselves. He closed the door and turned to see all of SEES still frozen in place behind him.

"Oh, I'll be late for school, won't I?" Minato asked, suddenly realizing what time it was. He rushed up the stairs to take a quick shower.

"This fucking guy..." Junpei finally said after a few minutes of silence and strange glances, tipping his hat towards the stairs. He had a lot to do if he wanted to catch up to Minato.

12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12: After Clubs

Minato barely managed to finish getting ready for school in time for the last train. Everyone from the dorm waited on him, and as soon as they caught the train, the questioning began. Mitsuru stood in front of him while Junpei, Yukari, and Akihiko boxed him in by a window. He was trapped.

"Arisato," Mitsuru began. "Before I even get to those two women, or the fact that you returned to the dorm less than an hour ago, I must first ask... do you regularly drink?"

Minato, still a bit woozy from the night, shook his head. They stared at him in disbelief. "That... was actually my first experience with alcohol." he answered. "Never had a reason to drink until last night... I mean, I got stuff for free and hung out in the VIP section and... it was good."

"Oh, 'hung out', huh?" Yukari asked. She turned her phone to show everyone in the group a picture she had gotten from a friend. It was of Minato kissing Elizabeth while Paimon kissed his neck. He had one arm around Paimon and a bottle in the other. Minato recognized that the large black shape obscuring the other part of the picture was Lucifuge, likely talking to the waiter. "Since when did THIS count as just 'hanging out'?!"

Minato gulped, but he saw Junpei tip his hat towards him, his eyes wide. In all honesty, Junpei was pretty damn impressed with Minato right now.

"I think you're just mad cuz' it's not YOU in the picture!" Jack screamed as his small floating head materialized next to Minato.

"Mon cheri, Boss would gladly give you what you want... you only have to ask," David joined, appearing next to Jack.

"Not now," Minato said, quickly dismissing them. He turned, and Yukari looked ready to slap him in the face. She was as red as a cherry, but Minato didn't bother questioning whether it was anger or embarrassment.

"Who are those two, anyways?" Akihiko said, diffusing the situation. "I've lived here most of my life, and I'm pretty sure I would've remembered people as distinct as them."

"Quick, how to not say I was making out with two inter-dimensional beings while sounding convincing!" Minato ordered his Fiends.

"Paimon is easy. She's a foreign noble's daughter that wears a shawl around... with a habit of sneaking out at night to have some fun," David said.

"Good. Elizabeth?"

"A foreign flight attendant that has recently been

stationed here. She loves to party!" Jack answered.

"And the two know each other because Paimon often has to travel... Perfect!" Minato said.

"About that," Minato began scratching his head. "See, they're foreign. The one in black, well, she only gave me her alias, Paimon, because she's actually a noble's daughter, and doesn't really get out much. When she does, she's forced to wear a... shawl, was it? Anyways, she sneaks out at night to party, though, and I met her in Escapade. The one in blue is Elizabeth. She's a flight attendant that Paimon knows, since she has to travel a lot, and, from what I got last night, is stationed on a plane that frequents Tatsumi Port Island. Also loves to party."

"DUDE!" Junpei screamed. "You... you... you picked up two foreign chicks?! ALONE?! WHAT THE HELL, MAN?! PEOPLE ARE DYING OUT HERE AND YOU, WITH EVERYTHING YOU ALREADY GO T GOING FOR YA," he motioned to Mitsuru and Yukari, "FEEL THE NEED TO UP YOUR GAME AND PICK UP FOREIGN BABES, AND HOGGED THEM ALL FOR YOURSELF!"

"Iori, you're attracting a crowd," Mitsuru said quietly. Junpei, after his heartfelt outburst, turned to see the entirety of the train looking at him. Their eyes showed a mix of disgust and pity at the same time.

"Good job, Stupei," Yukari said, rolling her eyes. She moved away from the group quickly. Junpei retreated to a corner, too

ashamed to be in visible sight. The rest of the train ride passed in awkward silence, and Minato arrived at the front gate with Mitsuru and Akihiko. As he took his first step into school, a voice boomed from his right.

"MINATO, I WORSHIP YOU, MAN! YOU'RE A GOD AMONGST MEN! PIMPNATO!" it screamed.

"SET YOUR SIGHTS BEYOND THE HORIZON! MINATO, YOU'VE PROVEN THAT DREAMS DO COME TRUE!" a second boy screamed.

"It would seem I'm the stuff of legend, nowadays," Minato mused. He smirked and waved to the two who said that, and they bowed their heads to him. His second step was blocked by a group of three girls, all first-years, from what he could tell.

"Minato-sama, let us have your children!" the girls clamored. That was the last straw for Mitsuru.

"Excuse me," she snapped, loudly. "I am trying to enjoy a walk to school... talk of having another student's child at the start of the day... merits EXECUTION." The girls shriveled away, terrified.

"Mitsuru-sama is hogging Minato-dono all to herself today... maybe she's mad she wasn't at Escapade last night..." Akihiko heard behind him. He quickly turned and growled, causing a large group of students to disperse.

"My, my," Minato said with a smile. "It would seem that word travels fast..."

"Minato, are you really content with allowing these rumors to keep circulating?" Mitsuru asked.

"These rumors give me power... the more power I have, the more power you have." he said.

"Huh?" Akihiko asked. "Wait, you don't mean you were serious about the Student Council thing?!" Minato and Mitsuru shared a dark smile as they simply nodded at Akihiko. He recoiled. "You... uhh, okay... oh yeah, Minato, today there's boxing team tryouts, haha. You just gotta beat one of our ghost members and you're in!" he said, quickly changing the subject.

"Easy enough." Minato said. As the day went on, Minato noticed that less and less people seemed angry at him. His old rivals now had a newfound respect for his presence. His followers were even more devoted than usual, and he got at least twenty Yawn-B-Gone concoctions for free, along with enough Melon Bread for everyone in SEES. Otherwise, nothing of real importance happened.

After school, Minato walked into the gymnasium to see the majority of the Boxing Team. Akihiko wasn't participating, as his arm still hadn't fully recovered, but he remained as head coach. Their actual coach just seemed to sit down and use his laptop all day.

"So, we've got a few members that need to prove they're

worth the trouble to keep!" Akihiko roared from in front of the ring. "And a few new faces that want to take their spots! So, it's an elimination tournament! You win, you're on the team. You lose, you get lost."

Everyone save Minato tensed at these words. He had seen Akihiko's fear more times than he could recall, so no matter what he did, he could never intimidate Minato. As everyone was instructed to change, Minato was given some rather fitting black and white shorts with dark blue gloves. He smiled at the arrangement, and stood near the ring once he finished changing.

"Good, everyone's here. The first match-up will be the newcomer, Minato Arisato, versus one of our resident ghosts, Kei Kitamura." Akihiko announced. Minato felt a lot of expectant looks at him as he got into the ring. His opponent, Kei, was a rather built dark skinned boy with dreads.

"Hey, kid. I heard you beat down those losers the other day. Not bad," Kei said. He appeared confident in his abilities.

"I heard something even funnier. You think you can beat me in a fight." Minato answered.

"Cocky, aren't ya? We'll change that real quick."

"Enough talking," Akihiko said, walking to the center of the ring. "I want a good, clean fight... now, on my signal."

As Akihiko retreated, Minato took on a boxing stance copied

straight from Tekken. He got extremely low, to the point where he was almost hunched over, and slowly leaned his upper body left and right repeatedly. Kei looked more like a real boxer, with a solid, well-grounded stance. The crowd consisted of the boxing team members and many of Minato's fans and haters alike.

"Begin!" Akihiko said. Kei stepped forwards once, twice, and then a third time before Minato suddenly zoomed forwards. In the center of the ring, Minato shot a sharp hook to Kei's exposed midsection, hopped around him to throw a left at his shoulder before he could block, and then went right again to throw another hook at his midsection, once again exposed. By the time Kei threw a jab, Minato had already backed well out of his punching range.

Kei decided he would have to be fast, so he lowered his guard from his face and rushed forward. He was greeted by Minato moving faster than before, and throwing an uppercut directly to his jaw. He recoiled, and Minato barraged him with fast attacks not to his exposed midsection or face, but to his biceps and chest. The assault ended with, strangely enough, a double fist hit to Kei's stomach and head taken straight from another videogame. He staggered back, and tried to make a block, only to discover he could barely use his arms.

"The trick to beating a larger opponent is to disable them," Minato said with a grin. He went around Kei and slammed him in the side, then the other, and then unleashed another flurry of attacks on his arms and core. Kei swung back a few times, but the hits were easily avoided. He had even more difficulty

since Minato was such a small target. Sure, he had muscles, but he was extremely lean. It looked like a rough stick was battling a rock in the ring.

After the third onslaught, Kei could barely lift his arms. "*Showtime,*" Minato thought as he quickly distanced himself from Kei. He put everything he had into one swift dashing punch to Kei's core, burying his fist in his stomach. Kei had spit out his mouth-guard, but that didn't stop Minato from following his attack with an even stronger uppercut to his face. He had used all the strength and speed he could muster for this uppercut, and knocked Kei out.

Of the ring.

Through a window.

"*I'm not that...*" Minato began to think as he watched his hands, when he realized they were moving too slowly. He had used his Magatama at the end. He froze, blinked, and turned to Akihiko.

He had an angry look on his face, and mouthed a single phrase. "You didn't have to." After a moment of silence, Akihiko had to announce the results. "Minato Arisato, disqualified for use of excessive force. The winner is Kei Kitamura." he said coldly.

"Minato Arisato," a voice snapped from behind the crowd. It was Mr. Ekoda, much to his surprise. He didn't know that there were teachers here as well. "You're coming with me to

the faculty office, now."

"*Why did it activate?*" Minato questioned as he changed.

"Remember, Boss. The Magatama are a part of you... they'll respond to your will, even if you don't necessarily focus on them. Soon, their powers will become second nature to you." David told him. He followed Mr. Ekoda to the faculty office, wondering if he would unconsciously become something more than human as time passed until they arrived.

"Minato Arisato, first class troublemaker, delinquent, and now vandal," Mr. Ekoda began. "Do you have any idea what we have to do to cover up the damage you've done?!"

"Fix a window, which I'll pay for, and deal with that kid's hospital bills. I'm pretty sure all boxing club members sign injury waivers," Minato answered.

"Watch it. That smart-" Mr. Ekoda began. He was cut off by Ms. Toriumi entering room.

"Mr. Ekoda, I believe that Minato has stated everything he has to do to cover his actions," she said.

"Tch, Toriumi, I didn't ask for your opinion. I'm giving this boy a piece of my mind!" he snapped. Ms. Toriumi narrowed her eyes at him. If she could have shot lasers from them, he would have been vaporized instantly.

"Don't want it," Minato said with a smirk. Ms. Toriumi stifled a

laugh, and Mr. Ekoda quickly turned on him.

"Boy, with your record, we could kick you out of the school! They say you've been to that club in the mall with an unsavory crowd... drinking, nonetheless!" Mr. Ekoda said. Ms. Toriumi's eyes slightly twitched at the mention of drinking.

"Somebody's got a secret, Boss..." Jack said in the back of his mind.

"Your proof?" Minato asked.

"There's a picture circulating of you, boy. Look!" he said, pulling out his phone. It was the same picture Yukari had shown him earlier. Ms. Toriumi smirked a little at seeing it.

"I'd like to know why you keep pictures of student's private lives on your personal phone..." Minato said. Mr. Ekoda had made a grave error using his own phone to show the evidence. "If I recall, that violates at least two regulations of teacher conduct, the first being invasion of a student's privacy, and the second being possession of a photograph of a student without their explicit consent. Isn't that right, Toriumi-sensei?"

Mr. Ekoda started to sweat. He turned to Ms. Toriumi, who smiled devilishly at him.

"Is it just me, or is every woman capable of being downright terrifying when they want to be?" Minato thought.

"You just know a lot of scary ladies, Boss. These are the types I preferred not to deal with," Jack chimed in his mind.

"As a teacher, it is my obligation to report the offenses of my peers, especially when they are used to threaten or extort a student," Ms. Toriumi began. "And if I recall correctly, you were about to get tenure, weren't you, Mr. Ekoda? It would be such a shame to have this incident on your record when you're so close, don't you think?"

"Ms. Toriumi," Mr. Ekoda said, choking a little as he straightened his throat. "Surely there's something that can keep this a secret between us... right?"

"Well, you'll have to do something for me and something for Minato, won't you? I might stay quiet, but I'm not sure what he'll do..." Ms. Toriumi continued.

"Holy shit, am I glad she's just my teacher..." Minato thought. "That's true, Ekoda-sensei. I feel psychologically distressed at the fact that you just blackmailed me..." he said, putting on his best sad face. It only worked out to his average emotionless stare.

"You two... fine. State your conditions." Mr. Ekoda said.

"My condition," Ms. Toriumi said, "Is that you give me a slice of cake each day at the end of the day, and do my extra paperwork for me. If there's even a single error in the papers, the deal is broken."

"... Very well. And you, boy?" Mr. Ekoda said, turning to Minato. "Want perfect marks? Me to pick on someone in my class more often than usual? Money? What?"

"You... will refer to Ms. Toriumi as Toriumi-sama every time you see her, and bow to her when you do so. You will wait on her permission to stop bowing." Minato said. Everyone stopped. "As my homeroom teacher, Ms. Toriumi can tell me if you broke your word... or she could bypass me altogether and report you herself. That's my condition."

"Keh! You want me to BOW to HER?!" Mr. Ekoda asked.

"Is that a problem, Ekoda?" Ms. Toriumi asked.

"The deal begins now," Minato said. Mr. Ekoda locked eyes with the boy, but Minato wouldn't back down. Eventually, Mr. Ekoda turned and bowed to Ms. Toriumi.

"No, Toriumi-sama. Forgive my-"

"You forgot 'please', Ekoda."

"Please... forgive my insolence."

"Very well... you may rise." Ms. Toriumi said. Mr. Ekoda looked like he was about to cry. "I have a stack of papers at the back concerning class roll and seating assignments... I'd like you to deal with them. I think I'll enjoy an early leave today."

"You..." Mr. Ekoda began. He looked at Minato, who watched

him like a hawk. "Yes, Toriumi-sama."

At that, Minato and Ms. Toriumi both walked out of the faculty office, and broke into uncontrollable laughter once outside.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

As Minato and Ms. Toriumi recovered from their uncontrollable laughter, the two stopped and grinned at each other.

"It looks like the rumors about you have some truth in them after all, Minato. You certainly know how to get a lady's attention." Ms. Toriumi joked.

"Obviously," Minato said with a flick of his hair for dramatic effect. Ms. Toriumi giggled. "I don't know about you, but I could really use some cake... any good spots around here?"

"You haven't tried anything from the Sweet Shop yet?!" Ms. Toriumi asked, eyes wide. "That's a travesty. You're coming with me, now."

At that, Ms. Toriumi and Minato left school together to head for Iwatodai Station. There, Minato was treated to what he was certain was solid diabetes, but enjoyed it regardless. Ms. Toriumi ate copious amounts of chocolate and cheesecake,

and the two were too busy getting one another to try various foods to talk much. After a rather unhealthy yet filling lunch, Ms. Toriumi insisted that they go to the local manga store, Book On.

"Toriumi-sensei, I didn't think you read manga in your spare time," Minato said as he entered the store.

"Minato, didn't I tell you to call me Isako outside of school? So many people call me 'sensei' or 'Miss' that I feel ancient," she said with a shiver.

"...Ok, Isako." Minato said.

"See, was that so hard, Minato?" she said, turning to face him.

"Actually, it kind of was, but..." he thought. "Not really... but which manga are you following?"

"The usual... Bleach, Naruto, One Piece, you know... but I'm also big into Black Lagoon and Berserk." she said.

"Woah... didn't expect you to be into the violent stuff, Isako." Minato said.

"Oh, was I supposed to read the sappy love manga?" she asked.

"I didn't think that, but I guess blood and gore is the best type of entertainment."

"I knew we had similar tastes," she said, scanning the shelves. "But it looks like nothing new is here... it's been a month, and still nothing? C'mon!" she complained.

"*Man, she's just like a kid,*" Minato thought. "Hey, you could always fill your time up with other stuff... ever heard of a manhwa named *Ares*?"

"Ares...? Don't think so... why?" Isako asked, a grin on her face.

"It's good. Trust me. You'll love it." Minato said.

"I'll take your word for it... but look at the time," Isako said, noticing that the sun had almost set. "You should hurry to your dorm, Minato. Besides, it's not exactly appropriate for a student and teacher to be out like this late at night."

"Eh? But I thought we were just friends, Isako!" Minato joked. She smiled, but shook her head.

"Run along now. I am still a teacher, after all... can't completely neglect my job." she said. At that, Minato said his goodbyes and returned to the dorm. On his entry, a very angry Junpei awaited him, with Akihiko, Yukari and Mitsuru simply watching from the lounge. There was going to be a show

"S'up, dude?!" he asked, almost forcefully. "Heard you not only beat the crap outta some poor guy in the boxing club, but after that, you dodged punishment to go FLIRT with MS.

TORIUM!!"

"It wasn't flirting, really. We just fed each other cake," Minato answered, knowing full well what his response would elicit.

"YOU GREEDY BASTARD! THE GIRLS HERE AREN'T ENOUGH, TWO FOREIGN BABES AREN'T ENOUGH, AN ARMY OF FANGIRLS ISN'T ENOUGH, SO YOU MOVE ONTO THE TEACHERS?!" Junpei roared.

"Veni, vidi, vici," Minato said, raising his arms in surrender. Mitsuru cracked up suddenly, confusing everyone else.

"GAH! AGAIN! YOU DIDN'T EVEN MAKE SENSE AND YOU GOT A GIRL TO LAUGH! WHAT THE HELL?!" Junpei roared, causing Mitsuru to laugh even harder. "Dammit... I challenge you to a duel on the roof, Minato! I'm stopping you before this gets out of control!"

"E tu, Brute?" Minato asked, clutching his chest and putting a hand up to his head as if he was sick. Mitsuru was clutching her sides, and even Yukari and Akihiko chuckled.

"Tch. Whatever, man! Get your sword!" Junpei yelled, storming off. After everyone had calmed down, Junpei and Minato, under the watchful eyes of the rest of SEES, squared off on the roof.

"Junpei," Minato said, twirling his saber around lazily as he walked to one side of the roof, "don't take it personally if I accidentally cut you, okay?"

"Same here!" he yelled, readying his sword. Akhiko only sighed as he watched the battle. Junpei had already lost the mental battle.

"Only one will survive," Mitsuru said, shocking both Yukari and Akihiko "... that was a joke."

Silence.

"Uhh... you can start, I guess?" Yukari said, utterly confused.

At that, Junpei charged forward while Minato strolled forward, sword swinging lazily about with each stride. Junpei went for powerful jumping slash. Minato practically twirled out of the way and brought his blade to Junpei's head as his sword smacked into the roof.

"One death," Minato said, pulling his sword back. He began to smile his old creepy smile at Junpei.

"Got lucky," Junpei said, backing up. He got ready, and this time swung in a wide arc like a baseball swing. Minato ducked under it and brought the point of his sword to Junpei's face once more.

"Dead again!" Minato said cheerily. Junpei walked backwards, cursing under his breath, and Minato simply began examining his sword. As Junpei strategized, Minato then threw his sword high into the air. Junpei saw his chance.

He ran forward without stopping to prepare a fighting stance,

and lunged at Minato. Minato activated his Magatama for a split-second, dodging just out of the way and jumping onto Junpei's shoulders. He kicked off, and jumped to catch his sword.

"Third time's the charm, right?" Minato mused as he turned and brought his blade down. Junpei raised his sword to block, but the force of the impact caused it to go skidding across the roof. Minato quickly rose from his strike and put his sword in Junpei's face once more. "Game over."

"Bullshit," Junpei said.

"Iori, you can't argue with results," Mitsuru said.

"Like I said, one day of training won't make you magically catch up to him," Akihiko added. "If you're really that desperate, go to Tartarus."

"...So what are we waiting for? Let's go already!" Junpei said, retrieving his sword.

"It's not close enough to midnight yet... but we'll go today, Junpei. I'll find you a badass sword today too." Minato answered.

"...I guess my opinion really doesn't matter too much, huh?" Yukari complained to herself. Minato stifled a laugh.

"*Ha! Of course it doesn't!*" he thought in the back of his mind. The group began to prepare for their third expedition into

Tartarus.

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13: Concentrate

Minato led SEES through Tartarus fairly quickly that night. Junpei, despite his loss earlier that night, was in top form during exploration. As such, Minato, upon finding Juzumaru, gladly bestowed it upon him.

At the 14th floor, they found a clearing, used the teleporter, and then went right back to business.

"I've analyzed the floor guardian. It's a Rampage Drive... It's physically powerful and nullifies physical attacks. You'll need to use elemental attacks to defeat it. Takeba should be careful; she's weak to electricity, the enemy's favored element." Mitsuru said over the intercom.

"Got it," Minato said as he, Yukari, and Junpei turned to see their target waiting in the center of the floor. "Yukari, Junpei. You two stay back here and barrage it with wind spells. I'll draw its attention and slow it for you."

With those simple instructions, Minato drew his evoker and walked forward. "David, Sukunda," he said as he pulled the trigger. Now slowed, the Rampage Drive charged at Minato, the closest target, only for him to calmly trot out of the way. It

flew into two attacks from Junpei and Yukari. It turned its attention towards them, making its first and last mistake.

"Devil's Trill," Minato said, summoning David once more. Two fireballs, three ice-spikes, two tornados, one lightning bolt. Though the bolt did nothing, every other attack connected with it's back, killing it. Minato stopped and smiled. He could use Devil's Trill without feeling exhausted. Sure, he knew he wasn't at his best afterwards, but it was a huge improvement over his first time using the attack.

"Getting stronger all the time, Boss," David commented.

"You know it... these things are becoming more and more of a joke by the day," Minato replied.

"Damn, dude, that was awesome!" Junpei yelled, running towards him.

"Of course," Minato said with a bow. He smiled. "This is ME we're talking about."

"Pfft. Your head gets bigger every day, you know that?" Yukari teased.

"I would hope so... It's getting loud with all these Personae and Fiends running amok," he replied. Yukari blinked, shocked to hear that, only to scowl once Minato started laughing in her face. "Whatever," she said quickly, moving past the two of them. After going up one more floor, Minato and Yukari reached a large open floor with another teleporter, and a

barricade blocking the stairs. There was a briefcase containing an Old Document, likely the one he needed to retrieve. He snagged it before looking the barricade over. He didn't think he could break it.

"It seems that's as far as you can go for now... come back, and we'll call it a night," Mitsuru said. Minato agreed, a bit bored with how uneventful fighting had become. The enemies were routine, and he was certain he could handle any threat singlehandedly if he had to.

"Hah! Looks like we blazed up this tower, right guys?" Junpei asked.

"Looks like it... still, I don't think we should get too comfortable." Yukari said.

"You worry too much," Minato said. "Let's call it a night."

When they returned to the lobby, Junpei went to brag to Akihiko about his performance. Yukari, with nothing better to do, joined him.

"Mitsuru-senpai, I'll go do some visits. Be back in a flash," Minato said, heading towards the Velvet Room. He grabbed Juzumaru, which Junpei had put down upon returning to the lobby, and entered the Velvet Room.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," Igor greeted as usual. "I see you've taken the time to actually hold onto multiple Personas."

"I offered all the duplicates," Minato said with a grin. He set about checking to see what he could make. After fusions, and blowing quite a bit of money in his compendium, he managed to make Jack Frost, Pyro Jack, Tam Lin, and Yomotsu Shikome the four Personas left in his mind. He had made Unicorn, but realized it was worthless, and offered it to the Card of the Beast immediately after creation.

"Truly... to sacrifice it without so much as a second thought," Igor remarked.

"Hey, I need Macca too. Plus..." Minato began. "JACK BROTHERS!" he yelled. Behind him, Jack the Ripper, Jack Frost, and Pyro Jack appeared. Instead of being void of their individuality upon fusion, the two other Jacks introduced themselves. They were awake, even with the Card of the Beast influencing them.

"Hee-ho! It's been years since we reunited, ho!" Jack Frost said.

"I don't remember the last time we've met, hee-ho!" Pyro Jack answered.

"You both still go 'hee-ho'? What's the matter with you?!" Jack the Ripper asked.

"This conversation belongs in your head, young man," Igor said, swiftly cutting them off. They vanished, and in the back of his mind, Minato could hear Jack the Ripper going off at his brothers for still acting like children. He ignored them.

"That would've been funny," Minato said, slightly disappointed. He sighed, and turned to Elizabeth. He had Juzumaru on his lab, and was holding the Old Document. "I think you know what I'm here for," he said.

He turned in his loot, was surprised that he was allowed to keep Juzumaru, and was going to leave when Elizabeth grabbed his arm.

"Wait just one moment! I have something wonderful to show you!" Elizabeth said. She pulled out a small remote from her pocket, and aimed it at the roof. A series of rave lights appeared along the walls of the Velvet Room and speakers rose from the ground in the corner of the room. "Behold! I have turned the Velvet Room into a club!"

"Not bad..." Minato said, inspecting the surroundings. "I'm surprised you allowed this, Igor."

He turned, and saw Igor sigh deeply. "One of the conditions I now abide by is that I can no longer refuse extraneous requests from Elizabeth... as such, if she asks for the Velvet Room to be able to turn into a club... she is allowed to do so."

"Huh... I guess these conditions are from..."

"Yes, the Defiler. You have business with him... go on." Igor said. He looked like he was seriously contemplating gouging his own eyes out.

"Hey, Elizabeth," Minato said, still looking at Igor. Elizabeth

was about to go put on music when she was called.

"Yes?"

"Don't you think... making this a separate section of the Velvet Room would be better? Then, you could instantly access it, could you not?" Minato asked.

Elizabeth thought about the proposal for a moment. "Hmm... indeed, if I made a room specifically for this... it would be a club that never stops! I shall do so at once!"

With that, the Velvet Room returned to normal, Elizabeth materialized a door strikingly similar to Club Escapade's in the corner of the Velvet Room, and entered.

"Why did you do that?" Igor asked suddenly.

"You're old-fashioned. Nothing's wrong with that, but I figured I should let you keep some peace of mind. I mean, you are the one that fuses Personas for me after all. God knows what would happen if I had to do it myself." Minato said. "Just my way of saying 'thanks, friend! I couldn't do this without you!' but in a less corny manner."

Igor stared at Minato for a moment, and then slowly began to smile. "You really are an interesting guest, aren't you?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"And so our bond strengthens!" Minato said with grand gesture. He laughed for a bit and gave Igor one last look. "It's nice to know you're not always pissed at me for sticking with Lucifer."

"Hmph. As I said before, you have taken responsibility for your actions. I cannot judge you... but I can worry. My advice to sever your ties with him still stands." Igor answered.

"Then I shall continue to ignore it," Minato said, grinning. "Later, friend."

He left the Velvet Room and headed immediately into the Crimson Room, bowed with his Fiends, and took his seat. He noticed that Paimon was in her usual shawl once more, but she waved happily at him upon entry.

"That's new... surprised I haven't formed a link with her..."
Minato thought as he sat down.

"Not enough Macca for a new Magatama yet, boy," Lucifuge said as he took his seat. "But, the Master has someone he wants you to talk to."

"Who's my new friend?" Minato asked.

"Shin Managi," Lucifer said. "He is my finest creation, and will help you reach your full potential. Of course, he may prove

useful in other ways as well... but I'll leave it at that. More importantly... I have given him a special gift to give you."

"Your generosity knows no bounds, Master," Minato said.
"Where should I find him?"

"You've seen him before... he was meditating." Paimon said.
Minato froze.

The man in a gray hoodie with black shorts. The man at the back of Port Island Station that everyone feared. That he feared. That was his new 'friend'.

"Oh..." Minato said, his voice shaking. "The rather... fierce one, correct?"

"You are wise to fear him," Lucifer said. "He has fought me on equal ground at my full strength before, and emerged victorious."

Minato froze. Jack and David appeared next to him. They were trembling.

"Big Boss... is that who we think it is?" Jack whimpered. Lucifer simply nodded. They both let out a cry of horror and fled back into Minato's soul.

"You are in no danger... unless you truly anger him." Lucifer said. "Go forth, and meet with him. Hitoshura awaits."

"...Yes, Master." Minato faintly said. He got up shakily, and shot Paimon and Lucifuge pleading looks. Paimon shot him a

thumbs up while Lucifuge only grinned.

"Why do all the people I hang out with have the potential to kill me?" Minato thought as he reappeared in Tartarus. He wordlessly motioned for SEES to pack up, and silently walked to the Dorm. Once in his room, he began to train himself ridiculously, well through the Dark Hour. *"If he tries to fight me, I'll run. No way in hell am I standing against... that."*

The hours flew by, and it was quickly time for morning breakfast. He heated up leftovers and ate ravenously. It could very well be his last breakfast.

"Minato," Akihiko said, noticing his strange behavior. "Something the matter?"

"Nope," he answered. He wouldn't involve them. They'd only make the situation worse. "I'm just feeling a bit uneasy about that barricade... how do we get past it?"

"Don't worry. Mitsuru's looking into that." Akihiko said. Minato went to school listening to music, something he hadn't done in a while. His Fiends were dead silent throughout the day. In class, he was absent minded. He didn't even react when he was informed that he was forever banned from entering any athletic clubs for the general safety of the student body. Time flew by faster than he could imagine, and before he knew it, school had ended, and he was on the train to Port Island Station.

"Boss..." Jack began in his head, the first he had heard of

him since Tartarus. ***"If we die... just know, it was an honor working for you."***

"Even if death claims us once more... I'll never forget you, Boss," David added.

"Sappy speeches don't suit you guys... but thanks," Minato replied.

They arrived at the station. Minato silently got off and headed to the back lot where the local delinquents frequented. He immediately noticed a small clearing, and headed for it. Sure enough, there was a man in a gray hoodie and black shorts, meditating by a wall. Minato ignored every instinct in his body that screamed for him to turn around and leave, and approached the man.

"You're... Shin Managi, right?" Minato asked, hiding the fear in his voice. Every delinquent turned away from the scene. Nobody wanted to witness a murder.

"Minato Arisato," Shin replied. His voice was strange. It was emotionless, yet it seemed... transcendent. It was as if his words carried with them the weight of the world. "Come with me."

Shin rose to his feet, and began to walk towards a secluded alley. Minato followed, looking nervously from left to right. He was unarmed save his Evoker, but he got the feeling that it would be useless.

After leading Minato to a secluded alley, Shin turned to face Minato. He took off his hoodie, and Minato was stunned. Shin had short, forward pointing black hair that formed a small spike at the top of his head. His most prominent feature, however, was a gigantic full-body tattoo that outlined his entire body in what Minato could only compare to Nazca lines. The tattoo was black, with a dark green outline that glowed. Finally, protruding from the back of Shin's neck was a large black spike that seemed to be connected to his tattoo. The only thing that made Shin even appear human at this point was the fact that he still had pants and shoes on. His eyes looked almost exactly like Lucifer's, and his build betrayed his true strength. Before Minato could ask why Shin had taken off his hoodie, a Magatama appeared in Shin's hand.

"Your gift." he said. Minato reached out and took the Magatama. "It will increase your overall strength. You have a similar one for speed. It functions the same."

Minato nodded and consumed the Magatama. After his slight shock, Shin suddenly grabbed Minato and the two disappeared.

Minato recognized the feeling of crossing dimensions, and looked around to see nothing but a barren wasteland around him.

"Now," Shin said from behind him. Minato turned to see Shin standing behind him. "Prove your worth. Hit me once before thirty minutes have passed, and I'll return you to your world. Fail, and rot here for eternity."

"You son of a bitch!" Jack screamed, appearing near Minato.

"Don't think we'll let you off easy for this!" David followed, appearing next to Jack.

"Your Fiends can exist freely here." Shin said. Suddenly, he vanished, and Minato heard two loud shattering sounds. Jack and David's skeletons crumpled to the ground, their skulls shattered. Shin was standing where he was just a moment ago. "It's useless. Your only option is to awaken."

Minato stared in disbelief. He had barely registered the fact that Shin moved, and Jack and David were both already dead in front of him.

"He's not lying, Boss..." Jack chimed in his head.

"How are you alive?" Minato asked.

"We can't die until you do, Boss," David said. ***"It's a perk of being a being that exists in another's soul. But enough of that... you need to awaken."***

"Explain."

"You've gotta use all of your Magatama at once... if you pull on enough energy, your whole body will transform, Boss." Jack explained. ***"Just... try not to lose it, okay?"***

"What do you mean, lose it?"

"All that power you take on... if you can't control it, you'll lose your mind, Boss." David answered.

"It's not like I have much of a choice, anyways," Minato said. He focused.

He felt his speed increase, he felt stronger, he felt revitalized, he felt alive.

Then he felt pain. Excruciating pain. His mind was being swirled like cake batter, his body felt as if it was imploding, and he almost passed out. But he remained awake, and the pain subsided. He felt incredible.

"Good. Now fight." Shin commanded. Minato kicked off of the ground, leaving a crater in his wake, and threw a punch with all his might.

Shin caught it one hand, and then used his free hand to punch a hole through Minato's chest. Minato, unable to process what just happened, was on the verge of fainting as Shin tossed him aside. He was dying.

And then, he wasn't. He rose to his feet immediately, and felt his chest. The wound was healed, but his clothing was still trashed.

"Don't worry about your own safety. I can heal you as many times as I have to." Shin said bluntly. "Continue."

"What the hell are you?" Minato asked.

"The original of what you have become. Your powers are copied from mine... but they are weaker and tame." Shin explained. "If you can't hit me even when I'm holding back this much, you're useless."

Minato twitched. *"He's holding back?!"*

"Boss... there's a reason this guy's name scared us shitless." Jack and David said in unison.

"Time's passing." Shin said.

"Well, looks like it's time for tactics... we'll see just what he can do." Minato thought. He had no intention of losing.

He turned, and began to dash around Shin. Shin simply stood there, looking forwards all the time. Minato came in at a sharp angle to the back of his neck, ready to hit him. Shin caught his neck, and crushed it. He once again tossed a dying Minato through the air, let him flop on the ground a bit as his Magatama struggled to undo the damage he had taken, when suddenly, he was healed.

"Again." Shin commanded. Minato turned, and looked around. They were in the middle of nowhere. He had nothing save his own skills to use here.

This time, Minato approached more like a boxer, cautiously bobbing and weaving at a distance before instantly closing the gap. Shin deflected his first punch using his forearm, and Minato began his flurry. Each punch was deflected just like the

first, until shin caught Minato's left wrist, and ripped his arm clean off. He followed that with a kick to Minato's right knee, caving it in, and then grabbed Minato's head. He gouged out his eyes with his thumbs, and then compacted his skull, and let Minato's limp body drop in front of him. He kicked it away from him.

Pain. Ungodly pain. It was driving Minato mad. He felt his eyes swiftly regenerate and his arm grow back as he writhed on the floor. He was healed once more.

"This is insane," Minato thought. *"I'm gonna fucking die here. I'm so fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, fuc-"*

"BOSS!" Jack screamed in his head. ***"You can do this! We know you can!"***

"The enemy might seem unbeatable, but you've only got to hit him." David said.

"... Just one hit... one hit... one hit..." Minato repeated in his mind. He had to focus. Sure, the pain he had just felt was beyond anything he thought possible, but he was still alive. And still on a clock.

Instead of charging, Minato walked towards Shin, who had yet to move from the spot he stood in since they arrived. A few feet away from him, Minato kicked the ground in front of him, splintering it, sending dust and debris towards Shin.

As Shin simply waited for the oncoming objects, Minato leaped over his distraction and turned to drop his heel onto Shin's head. Shin caught the leg without looking, and used Minato like a bat to deflect the rocks that would have hit him. After wards, he embedded Minato in the ground, pulled his leg off, and bashed his skull in with it.

Minato felt unbearable pain slowly but surely becoming bearable... until he realized he was again regenerated. He rolled away from Shin, who had flung his leg off into the distance.

Minato swore under his breath, and launched an uppercut along the ground, creating a second dust cloud effect. He ran to the side, and kicked up another, then around Shin, and made yet another on the opposite side.

Shin swatted away the debris that would've hit him. Minato ran up behind him, and punched the ground near him, making a small crater. As Shin adjusted his balance and turned to face Minato, Minato sprinted around through the lingering dust and launched a fly kick from where Shin was originally facing. Shin stopped mid-turn, and intercepted the fly kick. Minato, who still had his momentum, twisted before Shin could stop him completely, and kicked him in the face, causing him to step back and release his leg.

"HA!" Minato yelled, pointing his finger at Shin as the dust settled. He hadn't even taken ten minutes... though he should've died quite a few times, and his clothing now consisted of only his school pants, with one leg ripped up to

the thigh and the other riddled with cuts and holes.

"Hmph. So you aren't worthless." Shin said. He disappeared, grabbed Minato, and the duo vanished from the wasteland.

They reappeared in the back alley of Port Island Station. Minato looked down at himself, feeling strange without clothes. He then realized he now had a tattoo eerily similar to Shin's covering the upper right portion of his body and the right side of his face, though much thinner, and with a dark blue outline instead.

"You should stop drawing on your powers," Shin said. Minato willed himself to return to normal, and, much to his surprise, the tattoo faded into his skin. Immediately afterwards, he felt extremely tired, and nearly collapsed. Surprisingly, Shin caught him, and gave him his support until he was comfortable to stand on his own. Minato could function, but all of his Magatama's effects were gone. He was far from his top form.

"Well, now that that's over..." Minato began, looking around. Time seemed to have passed logically. "Who are you, really?"

Shin, who had been putting on his hoodie, began to speak as he dressed. "I am Shin Managi. I was once a human... now, I am neither Man nor Fiend... All bend to my will."

Minato was certain that he wasn't joking when he said all would bend to his will. He certainly would if he had to. "You, Minato Arisato," Shin began. "You can be strong. Perhaps enough to one day challenge me... but until then, I'll repay a

favor to Lucifer and train you."

CRACK!

Thou art I... and I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

"And you grow stronger even now," Shin finished, turning to Minato.

"You can sense that?" Minato asked.

"I can do many things, Minato. Things impossible even to Gods." Shin said simply. "We will meet again."

With that, he vanished. Minato, alone at the back of Port Island station wearing nothing but his ripped school jacket (which was now nothing more than the left arm sleeve and a tattered back) and ruined pants, carrying nothing but his school bag, emerged from the depths of Port Island's back alleys and walked to the Dorm. As he left, he could feel the fear in the majority of the resident delinquent populations' eyes. From what they had seen, he had appeared out of nowhere, fought the man nobody messed with, and emerged, looking like he had come from a battlefield. They were actually exactly right.

When he returned, the first person to see him was, as usual, Mitsuru. She froze at the sight of him. The rest of SEES, all

hanging about on the first floor, turned, and looked at him, speechless.

"Before you ask, no, it wasn't girls." Minato said simply, signing-in out of habit. The silence was stifling.

"Uhh, hey, Minato," Yukari said, trying to break the silence. "I heard about that ban from clubs you got... my condolences. You're pretty talented, so it must be a bummer, huh?"

"Way to make my day better," Minato thought sarcastically. "It's whatever. I'm obviously too good for the average competition."

"Yeah, of course," Yukari answered, now annoyed.

"Oh, you mad that I'm so arrogant? What, your self-esteem can't take this god-like presence?" Minato continued in his head.

"Hah! That's true, Boss!" Jack agreed.

"I bet you're glad I'm banned. It must've made your goddamn day when I fell, didn't it?"

"She seethes with envy," David added.

"Anyways," Yukari said, breaking Minato out of his mental assault. "I think we should go to Tartarus tonight. With all the Lost, and the Apathy Syndrome cases on television, I think we should –"

"When you see something you don't like, you look the other way." Minato said, cutting her off. "And do I LOOK like I wanna go to Tartarus tonight?" he said, gesturing to his whole body.

"Hey, take it easy, man," Junpei said, approaching the two. Minato turned to face him, his smile widening.

"Take it easy, huh?... Hehehehehehehhh... if you knew what I went through today..." Minato said. He began to cackle. "You have no idea about the shit I just went through."

"Iori, Takeba, let him be... it is obvious Arisato needs some time to recuperate." Mitsuru intervened. "At least have the decency to let him clean up..."

Both of them paused, and backed away. "Ahhhh, Mitsuru-senapi, the voice of reason..." Minato, said, cracking his neck. "Remind me to do you a favor sometime in the future."

With that, Minato trudged to his room, feeling the strange looks of the rest of SEES dig into his back. He was still smiling.

A shower. Dinner alone. Tea. The Dark Hour. Minato lay on his bed, his mind thinking back on the day's events. He moved to his tea table. Staring at the moon, he calmed down and reflected on his actions.

Shin Managi had proven that he was nowhere near as powerful as he imagined himself. Even when he awoke to a

new power, he was a joke compared to him. He had snapped at his dorm mates because he couldn't accept his own weakness. He would make it up to them later.

"Boss," David said, sitting next to him. His violin was on neatly braced against the window, which was odd. Minato had never seen him not holding the instrument, and he looked incomplete without it. **"I'd like to formally apologize... for my uselessness against Hitoshura."**

"As do I," Jack said, leaning against the wall by his bed. **"We failed you. Big time."**

Minato leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. "I don't blame you... I've thought about the whole experience." he began. "I say... the best way to look at it... is to be harrowingly optimistic. After all, now I've got a power that far surpasses what I could do before and pain tolerance straight out of an anime. Besides... I'm gonna beat the shit out of him the first chance I get." he explained, adding a grin at the end. If Jack and David could smile, they would've.

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14: Man to Man

Minato had begun to rigorously train himself during the first hours of the day. His 'awakening', as Shin described, had almost knocked him out. That had to change.

Every five minutes, he would awaken, maintain his power for a while, and then revert to normal. He soon realized that the after effects of his transformation only lasted for about as long as he had transformed to begin with, which was much less severe than he imagine.

"The term 'awakening' sounds a bit... cliché, doesn't it?"

Minato thought, eyeing himself in the mirror. He looked rather intimidating with the glowing tattoo covering almost half of his body.

"Well, it's not like we have anything better to call it... you basically stop being human, so it's like you woke up from dreaming you weren't a Fiend," David answered.

"But I'm a human most of the time... this is more like... my Super Saiyan form. I'm not 'awake', I'm just stronger." Minato replied. He released his transformation, and let the after effects kick in. After four hours of constant training, he could

now use his full power with only slight disorientation on the change, and he could better cope with the recoil. Now, he didn't even stagger when returning to normal.

"Well... you could call it something badass, like in those anime," Jack chimed.

Minato paused, and thought about the idea for a bit. *"...How about... Shura Tensei?"*

"... Heavenly Fighting Rebirth?" Jack asked.

"... You're right, that sounds fucking ridiculous. How about... Zen'ou Hen'you?"

"Are you trying to make it rhyme like your name?" David asked.

"Shit, then I just look stupid..." Minato thought. *"... This can wait for another day."*

After an hour and a half of continued training, Minato finally went down and made another grand breakfast. Oddly, nobody went through his ingredients save him. Then again, he realized he was probably the only one who bothered to cook in the dorm at any point in time.

As the rest of SEES came down, he could sense their relief that he was back to normal.

"Good morning," he said, taking his usual spot at the edge of

the table. "Everyone slept well?"

"Man, did I have a good sleep last night!" Junpei said, stretching. He had made it a habit to take time to eat breakfast, as per Akihiko's instructions regarding his training.

"Good to see you back to normal," Akihiko said, grabbing a chair next to him. "You looked like you went through hell last night."

Minato laughed. "Oh, how I wish it was just hell I went through," Minato mused. He earned a couple of strange glances. "Trust me... it's for the best that you don't ask about what happened."

At that, the majority of SEES decide to shrug it off. Minato was always strange, but at least he had returned to being... well, Minato. After a good breakfast and a relaxed train ride, SEES arrived to school as one large group. Minato heard some strange talk about a bookstore, but it was silenced when he walked into the front gate.

"AH, MINATO-SAMA AND AKIHIKO-SAMA ARE HERE!" some girls screamed with glee.

"EVEN AFTER THE CLUB, HE'S STILL GOT TWO IN HIS POCKET!" an enthusiastic boy yelled.

"HOW DOES HE GET BOYS AND GIRLS?!" an angry girl shouted.

"YUKARI-SAMA, MITSURU-SAMA, AKIHIKO-DONO, MINATO-DONO, THE FOUR HEAVENLY KINGS HAVE ARRIVED!" an overzealous group of students called. They actually shoved everyone out of the group's way, and bowed to them as they passed. While Yukari, Mitsuru, and Akihiko looked rather concerned, Minato simply smirked and strolled into the school. Junpei attempted to follow, but his way was blocked by the strange group.

"Hey, I'm with them, man!" Junpei said. "Guys! Hey, don't just leave me! GUYS!"

They had long since abandoned him. The day was uneventful, save for composition class. When Mr. Ekoda was swapping places with Ms. Toriumi, he froze for a bit. She looked at him expectantly.

"Toriumi-sama," Mr. Ekoda said with a bow. The majority of the students in the class looked stunned.

"Ekoda. I don't know where you got this morning's pitiful excuse for a cake, but it was awful," she said with a smile. "Make it better next time. Or else."

"Yes, Toriumi-sama," he replied, gritting his teeth. She smiled.

"Good. That will be all." Mr. Ekoda rose and bolted out of the classroom, resulting in a fit of laughter taking over the entire class. Ms. Toriumi joined in on the fun as well, and glanced at Minato. He was leaning back against the window, grinning. He turned and gave her a wink, to which she winked back.

"Way to go, Isako," he mouthed.

"This is only the start of what I have planned, Minato." she mouthed back. The two began to laugh afterwards, joining the rest of the classroom.

Junpei watched the exchange, his mouth gaping.

"Now, now," she began as the laughter died down. "Class is starting."

After school, Minato was wondering about what to do. He was contemplating going to visit Shin again, but shuddered at the thought. As he rose from his desk, Junpei walked over to him.

"Hey," Junpei said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Let's go get some ramen, man. My treat this time." As much as it killed him, he had to learn how Minato just seemed to attract women. He would learn... or he would die trying.

"I've never been one to refuse a gift," Minato said. "Sure."

The two were about to leave, when Akihiko appeared in the doorway to the class. "Minato. I think we should talk." Akihiko said.

Almost immediately after, the other door opened, and members of the strange group that greeted Minato today quickly blocked Junpei from responding.

"Don't interrupt the Heavenly Kings," they said in unison.

Minato couldn't help but smirk at that remark.

"Sorry, Junpei, but it looks like senpai has business with me. I'll take you up on that offer some other time," Minato said. He turned to Akihiko. "Where'd you wanna talk?"

"The roof," Akihiko said. Minato nodded, and followed him. As they approached, the strange group of followers began hurriedly forcing people to leave the area, and then opened the door for them.

"The area is private," a girl said with a bow. Akihiko was stunned.

"Good work," Minato said. As the two passed, Akihiko couldn't help but notice how red the girl's face was. He shook it off. He had more important things to speak to Minato about.

"Minato," he began as the door to the roof closed behind them. "I want to know... who, or what, is giving you all of this power you have?"

"*Hmm... to tell or not to tell?*" Minato contemplated, looking at Akihiko in silence.

"Boss, don't tell him. He'll call an exorcist or some shit... Or even worse, he's working for the enemy." David advised.

"*Enemy?*" Minato thought.

"Big Boss doesn't just have friends, ya know," Jack said. **"But I think it's a stretch to think this guy is working for the enemy... they're usually overzealous."**

"Well?" Akihiko asked again.

"Whatever, I doubt he's working for this enemy... but still, what the hell am I supposed to say here?" Minato questioned again.

"You'll have to make something up, Boss... don't really have any great ideas." David said.

"It's obviously a crazy cocktail of alcohol and steroids that you secretly drink in the dead of the night!" Jack screamed.

"No." Minato replied simply.

"Are you just gonna stand there?!" Akihiko yelled. Minato snapped out of his thoughts and decided.

"I'll tell you... if you can beat me in a fist fight, one-on-one. No Personas, no Fiends, no powers." Minato said. "Right here, right now. Let's go."

"Are you serious?" Akihiko asked, shaking his head. "You know Mitsuru will kill me if I fight with my arm right now."

"Then I'll give you a handicap. I won't use my hands at all!" Minato said, burying his hands into his jacket pockets. "Now,

you have one hand, and I have none."

"You really wanna go, huh?... Alright. Have it your way."
Akihiko said. He put his injured right arm behind his back, and got into his boxing stance. "You ready for this?"

"Let's go." Minato said. *"I've gone against a man who killed me with one hand. I don't think you'll be much of a problem."*

Akihiko moved in to throw a punch, but was matched by Minato who ran forward and did a soccer slide tackle at him. Akihiko, unable to move, was tripped off his feet instantly. Once he fell, Minato scrambled to his feet and put his foot above Akihiko's head before he could get up.

"You lose!" Minato said with a smile. "Guess I keep my secret!"

"...Tch. Whatever." Akihiko said, shoving him away as he got to his feet. "I asked because I wanted to know if everybody else could get strength like that as well. But if you want to be a greedy bastard about it..."

"Senpai, you don't want this." Minato said, suddenly becoming serious.

"Boss, what'cha planning? I sense treachery here!" Jack said.

"If it's what I think... this could be good." David added.

"What do you mean?" Akihiko asked.

"... Don't tell anyone what happens after this moment, okay?" Minato asked, adding a crack in his voice at the end. Akihiko narrowed his eyes, and nodded. "The power's I get...they're making me less... human. I know you won't believe me, so I'll show you."

At that, Minato took off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. He took a few unsteady breaths, and looked at Akihiko pleadingly. He simply stared at him with a quizzical expression.

"Now to earn his respect..." Minato thought. He closed his eyes, and grit his teeth. He slowly, very slowly, began his awakening. The tattoo formed at the center of his chest and began to slowly spread throughout his body. He threw in some trembling and audibly expressed the pain the process still caused him. Akihiko stared in disbelief, his mouth opening. After thirty seconds that sounded like they took forever, Minato completed the process, and looked at Akihiko.

"You guys can distort my voice to make it sound all demonic like yours, right?" Minato asked.

"Leave it to use, Boss!" Jack and David answered.

"Senpai," Minato began in a voice not his own. It sounded pained yet monstrous. **"This is what I'm turning into. You don't want to become this."**

Minato let out a garbled roar and then just as slowly undid his transformation. Afterwards, he began faking hyperventilation for a good twenty seconds, before slowly calming down and fixing his clothing. "Nobody else... needs to do what I've done." Minato said shakily.

"Boss, you're a first class actor, you know that?" David commented.

"I didn't spend ten years moving from family to family being a picturesque child... Though every family thought I was," Minato replied.

"...Why? Why'd you do it?" Akihiko asked, his voice full of concern.

Minato froze. He didn't expect that question. He racked his brain for an answer.

There was a long silence between the two of them. Akihiko simply stared at Minato, who had turned around to look at the city.

"... Never mind. I'm sure it's for a good reason." Akihiko said suddenly. "We all have our own reasons for doing things, don't we?"

"...Yeah." Minato said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shall be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

Minato didn't expect to get a Social Link rank here. He had just lied like crazy to Akihiko, yet now they were closer than before.

"Who said relationships were always built on the truth? Do you think Akihiko has told you everything about himself?" Jack asked. ***"He hasn't even told you that he was one of the ones monitoring you when you moved in... he just let it blow over."***

"You're right..." Minato realized. He finally turned to face Akihiko, who was lost in his own thoughts. "Senpai, we should probably get going. People might get worried about us... or start even weirder rumors."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, let's head back to the Dorm," Akihiko answered. The duo left school and returned to the Dorm in relative silence. At the entrance however, an angry Junpei awaited the two of them.

"Dammit, why the HELL does everyone blow me off?!" he roared at them as they entered.

"Hey, I didn't know you wanted to talk to him, alright?" Akihiko explained. "Just talk here."

Once Akihiko said that, Minato's phone began to ring. "Hold up," he said. There was no caller ID. Reluctantly, he answered.

"Ah, Minato! Me and Elizabeth were wondering whether or not you'd join us at Escapade today? There's somebody else you might want to meet as well." Paimon said over the phone.

"Sure. What time?" Minato said.

"Be here in two hours. Master and Lucifuge will be there as well to make your introduction." she said. "Keep your gun on you, though. This friend is a bit rowdy."

"Ha! Sure thing. See ya in two." Minato said. Paimon said goodbye, and he hung up. He turned to Junpei, who was watching him expectantly. He smirked. "I'd love to talk to Junpei, but I've been invited to Escapade by two lovely ladies..." he said as he walked pass him.

"Wha – hey, at least let me come with you!" Junpei protested. Akihiko sighed and shook his head. Mitsuru, who was eavesdropping as she read, chuckled.

Minato prepped for the club once more. Different shirt and jeans, same hat. He left, saying goodbye to everyone in the lounge. Junpei was glaring at him the entire time.

He arrived at Escapade and saw his group waiting in the alley where the two rooms were.

"Master," he said with an elegant bow to Lucifer. "Planning to enjoy another night partying?"

"Master doesn't really take part in that... but the Club is a good place for business," Paimon answered.

"Yes. It's also a good place to drink," Lucifuge added. At this point, Elizabeth ran over and forcefully locked arms with Minato again.

"Oh, how fun it is to spend time outside! I believe I'll never grow tired of it!" she said.

"Heh. Looks like we're all set," Minato said. "Shall we, Master?" Lucifer nodded, and the group again cut the line as Lucifuge nodded to the bouncer. It was still the same man in a maroon pea coat. Minato focused as he tried to see what his Persona was. It was an uncharacteristic Hierophant... a bit unique. The bouncer gave Minato a strange look once more, but dropped it as they passed each other.

The first hour was all play in the VIP section. By the end of it, Lucifuge downed his first three bottles, Paimon and Elizabeth were making out on top of Minato, and even Lucifer was busy eying the waitresses. Most of them thought he was quite a handsome young boy, but he simply smiled. He knew what they were thinking, and made a mental note to return after changing into a more adult form at some time. The real reason he frequented the club was to take a break from constant work, after all, even if it did occasionally leak into his relaxation time.

The second hour began similarly. By now, Paimon had stolen Minato's hat, and he was busy trying to take it back during a rather long kiss when Lucifuge tapped his shoulder. He stopped, and turned to him. "What's up?"

"Master says to go to the bar and order a strawberry sundae," he said. "This shouldn't take too long."

"Aww, can't it wait?" Paimon complained, pulling Minato back closer to her. This time, Lucifer turned on her, and simply shook his head while grinning. "Hmm... hurry back, okay?"

"Oh yes," Elizabeth said, finishing her second bottle. She had taken to skipping glasses entirely, as they held too little for her taste. Minato chuckled, and excused himself. He made his way down to the bar, and took an empty seat. Somebody immediately sat next to him.

"What'll you have?" the bartender asked.

"A strawberry sundae," Minato and the man replied. He stopped, and turned to look at him. His hair was bright gray with a style stolen from a metal band's guitarist. He had a huge red trench coat, wore biker gloves, black jeans, and carried a gigantic guitar case on his back. The man turned and looked at Minato. He only had on belts going around his abdomen underneath that coat, and his body looked photo-shopped, much to Minato's surprise.

"If you like what you see, I'm sorry to say I don't roll that way," he said, turning to look at him. "You must be this Minato

guy I heard about."

"My reputation precedes me," Minato joked. "You are?"

"Dante," he said. Their strawberry sundae's came, and the two began to eat. Minato didn't know why, but he seemed to never recall having a strawberry sundae this good before. They ate in relative silence, finishing their deserts.

"That was really good," Minato chuckled.

"A bit too sugary," Dante answered. Afterwards, the Dark Hour struck, and the two of them sat still amongst coffins. "You know, this extra hour is really boring. But..."

Minato saw Dante reach for something in his coat. He also noticed that none of the band for the night had transmogrified. They all stopped, and turned to see Minato and Dante.

"Shit, why are people still moving?" the singer asked, jumping off of the stage. The drummer, guitarist, and bassist soon followed. Their eyes glowed bright red.

"Show me what you got, kid," Dante said as he spun around on the chair. He pulled two large pistols, one black and one white, and unleashed a torrent of bullets at the band. He blew the head off the singer and riddled his body with holes, killing him instantly. The other three scattered and began to move at super human speed, but it was nothing Minato wasn't used to. He spun around as well and used his Evoker.

"Jack the Ripper," he said. Jack materialized in front of the closest member and drew his cleaver. "Mutilate."

Jack sliced upwards sharply, creating a large cut in the drummer, then reached into his insides and yanked, pulling out various veins and a few bones. The drummer let out an ungodly cry, only for Minato to run up and spin kick him using his new Magatama, twisting his head around 180 degrees.

"Are you guys even trying?" Dante asked, slowly getting up from the barstool. Seemingly enraged, the guitarist and the bassist got down on all fours and shed their skin, revealing themselves to be two large black dogs with oversized teeth and fangs.

"How plain," Minato commented. They ran in a zig-zag pattern and went around Minato to strike Dante. He laughed, and opened his guitar case. What emerged was a ridiculously large claymore with a hilt adorned by a large skull. He swung it with two quick strikes, splitting the dogs in half. The parts fell apart around him, and he twirled the sword in the air to clean off the blood before putting it on his back.

"Too easy." Dante said as he walked towards Minato. He was looking at Lucifer and Lucifuge, both of whom were watching from the sidelines.

"Still sharp," Lucifuge commented. Lucifer nodded approvingly.

"I'll take the job," Dante said.

"Good, good. Then please, enjoy yourself for the rest of the night," Lucifuge responded. He and Lucifer began to walk back up the stairs.

"What job?" Minato asked.

"I just gotta hang out with you, every now and then," Dante said. Minato blinked. "Yeah, I'm getting paid to hang around here. You got a problem?"

"How much?"

"Enough to pay the bills."

"... Well, damn. This feels shitty." Minato said bluntly.

"That's just how it is, kid," Dante said with a shrug. "You got anything you want to do?"

"I feel like you're a babysitter when you ask it like that." Minato replied.

"Then don't make me have to ask." Dante shot back.

"... Let's go kill some shit." Minato said. He turned to the VIP section. "Elizabeth! I'm heading to Tartarus! Be back soon!"

"Have fun!" she called, waving her hand in the air.

"Really? That's your idea of fun?" Dante asked.

"Got a problem?"

"Not anymore. Let's go."

The two of them left the Club, and Minato began to run towards Tartarus. Dante matched his pace, even with the Magatama maximizing his speed. The duo reached Tartarus in five minutes, and cleared every possible floor in thirty. Minato even found a sword early on so he didn't have to fight barehanded the whole time.

He couldn't deny that he was pretty happy when he realized Dante thoroughly enjoyed fighting, even though he repeatedly complained about these opponents being pushovers. At the barricade, they used the teleporter, and dashed back to Escapade. They took their seats at the bar, and Dante checked a stopwatch he had in his pocket. It looked like it was made of the same material the clock at the base of Tartarus was made of.

"Five minutes. You should hide that sword," Dante said.

"I need to get a guitar case like you," Minato said. "Wait... no I don't." He raised his arm, and the Dimensional Compactor was still dangling from his wrist. He put the sword to it, and it disappeared.

"A Devil Arm that stores stuff... handy," Dante said. Minato didn't bother asking what a Devil Arm was. He had given up on foreign terminology when it came to Lucifer's friends. "Let's go kill some more challenging stuff later."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shall be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana...

"Well, damn. A Social Link all about killing Shadows. This is what I'm talking about," Minato thought. The Dark Hour ended, and the two ordered a few drinks. Minato then realized Dante was a heavy drinker, and invited him to join the group at the VIP section.

"I make it a habit not to drink with my clients." Dante responded. "Go have your fun, kid."

At that, Minato left, and rejoined the group. Dancing. Drinking. Dancing. A three-way make-out session. More dancing. Making out while dancing. Drinking. Drinking while making out.

By five in the morning, Escapade's owners informed Minato, Elizabeth, and Paimon that they had to leave as it was closing time. Minato was once again amazed that even after Tartarus, he still had his hat.

Paimon insisted on leading the way to Minato's dorm again. She mainly did it to distract him and Elizabeth by getting them to make-out with her, or with each-other at various instances. Minato was still confused as to why he had no bond with Paimon, but he felt his bond with Elizabeth slightly strengthen.

He walked into the dorm at 6:50 a.m. again, with Paimon and Elizabeth. He kissed them both goodbye, turned to see the

Junpei ready to maul him, and simply smiled.

"I'm home," Minato said. He went to his room to prepare for school.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter 15: Sunday Funday

Minato emerged from his room, ready for school, when he realized the only SEES members in the lounge were Mitsuru and Akihiko.

"...It's Sunday," was all Akihiko managed to say, still shocked by Minato's entrance.

"Oh..." Minato said. He looked around awkwardly, scratched his head, and went back to his room. He actually heard Junpei mutter something in his sleep, and facepalmed as he entered his room. "I feel stupid."

Jack and David appeared on his desk in figurine form. **"Hey, we got the day to do whatever we want, Boss! Let's hit the town!"** Jack screamed.

"... It's eight in the morning." Minato answered, changing his clothes. He chose a black t-shirt with a graphic depicting a robotic skull with gigantic headphones drinking out of what looked like an umbilical cord that led to a bubbling vat at the bottom of the shirt.

"Let's go dark today," Minato thought as he chose some dark

blue jeans that looked remarkably similar to his school pants. Add on some sneakers, his watch, and his trusty cap, and he was ready for the day. "... Now what?"

"Well, you could always go see King Abel," David suggested.

"Hmm... any other options?"

"Shin's probably not doing anything special... but I don't think you want to talk to him yet." Jack said. **"What about your dorm mates? Are they doing anything?"**

As if on cue, Minato's phone began to ring. It was Yukari, oddly enough. "Morning," Minato answered.

"Hey! Did I wake you up?" she asked.

"Don't sleep, remember?"

"Hehe, yeah, I still remember... Listen, I know we've been kind of at odds recently and all, so... I was wondering if maybe..."

"What time, what place?" Minato asked. He knew where this was going.

"Oh, uh, Café Chagall... we can go together at twelve. See you then." Yukari answered. She hung up.

"... She wants it bad, Boss." Jack said again. David nodded.

"... We'll see how this goes." Minato said. "We still have four hours to blow, though."

"Training?" David suggested.

"I'm not really up for physical work right now..." Minato complained. He was too lazy to have to change clothing later.

"Just perfect your awakening... if you can pull it off instantly, won't that look way more badass?" Jack said.

"True. But I'm not staring at myself in a mirror for four hours. We're watching TV."

And so, Minato parked on his bed and watched TV, rapidly awakening and working on maintaining his power for longer. He caught some anime, and then, as he was flicking through channels, stumbled on to the home shopping network. A tune that could make Minato seriously contemplate breaking his television came on, along with a terrible song.

"Here comes Tanakaaaaa. Over the airwaves to youuuuuuu!" the singers began.

"The fuck is this?" Minato asked.

"Probably the home shopping network," David screamed.
"... I was once in a jingle maker... these songs always sound like shit."

A presenter walked on to a stage, and was greeted by a

round of applause.

"Hello, everyone! Welcome to the home shopping show, 'Tanaka's Amazing Commodities!'" he said. He gestured to the other side of the stage, and a middle-aged, dark-haired man waved at the audience as he walked to the center of the stage.

"Granter of your desires!" the singers sang.

"Do people actually watch this?" Minato asked again.

"And they say I had fucked up tastes..." Jack said, just as dumbfounded as Minato.

"I'm your host, Tanaka," the man began, "with a live presentation of my Amazing Commodities! We'll show you great items at unbeatable prices! Ooh, you won't be able to touch that dial! Let's bring out our item of the day! It iiiis... An All-Purpose Katana! A perfect solution to any problem! Oh my goodness! I can't believe its wonderfulness! But wait, there's more! We'll throw in 3 Revival Beads for only 8000 yen!"

Minato's jaw dropped, along with his Fiends.

"What' the number already?!" he screamed, rushing towards the TV. It appeared, and he eagerly dialed it and bought the set, learning it would arrive on Tuesday. Afterwards, some less interesting items came on. He contemplated getting some steel-toed boots that apparently let the wearer float down to the bottom of any body of water, but he couldn't think of much

uses for that. Eventually, the show ended.

"I now have something to occupy my Sunday morning with," Minato said to his Fiends. After another hour of training, he went to the dorm lounge. Junpei had already woken up, wearing a plain blue shirt as usual with his cap. He turned to Minato, and sighed.

"Don't tell me you already got plans your two girls again, man," Junpei said, dejected.

"Actually, no." Minato said. He looked at his watch. He was right on time.

"There you are," Yukari called from the stairs. Junpei looked at Minato wave at her and then turn back to him.

"It's much closer to home this time," Minato said with a smile.

"YOU SONUVA-!" Junpei began, getting ready to officially strangle Minato.

"Isn't it too early for this, Stupei?" Yukari asked with a sigh as she approached. She wore, much to Minato's surprise, something other than her pink cardigan. It was a vest... though it was still pink. She also had on white jeans and rather comfortable looking shoes as well.

"She really does look like a younger version of Isako... That's... weird," Minato thought.

"Why are you two just abandoning me here alone?" Junpei

asked. "C'mon, lemme come with!"

"... If Yukari doesn't mind," Minato said. She froze.

"Well, you see... this was kind of supposed to be a..." she began.

"I get it!" Junpei exclaimed. "I'm just the third wheel! Fine! Go on without me! It's not like I care!" he ranted, holding back tears.

"...Geez, you really are an idiot. Let's go before he makes this weirder, Minato," Yukari said as she began to walk towards the door.

"I'll make it up to you on Tuesday," Minato said as he followed her. They left a crushed Junpei alone in the dorm.

The two of them walked together mainly in silence until they got to the train. Yukari, who seemed set on 'making things less awkward between them', initiated conversation.

"You know... nobody ever seriously asked you if you wanted to join SEES. At the time, we all kinda took it for granted but... and then we distanced ourselves from you when you showed us you were different." Yukari said.

"It's normal to fear what you don't know." Minato said. "I mean, when I first realized what was happening, I swore I was just hallucinating. Hell, the first few times, I didn't even take my time in those places I disappear to seriously."

"Yeah, it must've been pretty crazy for you, huh?" she asked. "With me, it was just the whole getting used to the Dark Hour... but you had to deal with... well, you know."

"A soul full of Fiends and evil voices in my head?" Minato asked with a laugh. "It's not that bad. I mean, Jack and David are pretty strange, but they're good people. Isn't that right guys?"

Their tiny figurine bodies appeared on his right shoulder, against the train window. **"We don't bite... unless we have to."** Jack said. He cackled afterwards, but was smacked on the back of his head by David.

"What this fool is trying to say is... we serve Boss Minato first and foremost. Unless he says kill, we're pretty chill." David answered. **"Besides, we pretty much do whatever we want most of the time. Which usually involves us talking to Boss and telling him to do things we think would be fun."**

"Evil voices, huh?" Yukari asked. The two Fiends may have terrified her in their full form, but as figurines, they couldn't scare her. "I guess it's a good thing you don't sleep. I can only imagine what trying to fall asleep with those two around would be like."

"I'll have you know David plays wonderful lullabies," Minato answered. Yukari sighed, then giggled.

"I don't think that makes it any better." she said. "Still, do you

like it here?"

"Here?"

"In school, in the dorm, in Iwatodai. You know, where you live?" she said.

"Well, it beats everywhere else I've been." Minato said. He then swiftly leaned in to be right in front of Yukari's face. "But it's the people that really make it worthwhile."

She backed up, a bit flustered by his sudden change in demeanor. "You really are something, you know that?" she said, regaining her composure. The train stopped, and they went to Paulownia Mall. Once they reached the main plaza, Minato immediately noticed Kazuya walking around. Next to him was a woman who wore a loose white dress and elbow high black leather gloves, with black leather boots that went up to her thighs. Her most noticeable feature, however, was a large tattoo that looked like a red flower on her shoulder, which matched her shoulder length red hair.

"That's risqué as fuck," Minato thought.

"Damn, is Boss gonna make a move of his own?" Jack asked in his mind. Kazuya, who had opted for an open black jacket with matching black jeans, noticed Minato and walked towards him, the woman in tow. He had a white shirt on with what looked like a black unicorn racing across it.

"Minato, didn't expect to see you here. What's up?" Kazuya

asked as he approached. Yukari turned to look at the two newcomers.

"You know these guys, Minato?" she asked quietly.

"Kinda." he answered quickly. He turned his attention to Kazuya. "Yeah, I thought I would spend my off day here. How often are you around here?"

"This bum's here most of the time when he's not busy gaming," the girl next to Kazuya said. He flinched. "He's unemployed as usual."

"... Really, Haru?" Kazuya asked, shaking his head. "But yeah, if I don't feel like gaming, you can usually find me here."

"Would this be your..." Minato said, glancing at Haru.

"Yeah," Kazuya said with a nod. "Is that?" he said glancing at Yukari.

"No." Minato answered quickly. Kazuya shrugged.

"You know, it's not like I can't tell what you're talking about," Haru said.

"I know," Kazuya answered. "But hey, since we're all here, let's go have some fun."

"Excuse me," Yukari interrupted, feeling left out of the conversation. "I still don't know who you guys are."

"Right," Kazuya said. "I'm Kazuya Minegishi, professional NEET according to her." He glanced at Haru, who smiled.

"You are, you know... anyways, I'm Yoshino Harusawa, but most people call me Haru." Haru said.

"Wait... aren't you from a band?" Yukari asked. Haru grinned.

"D-Va, lead vocalist." she said. "We still make music, but nowadays, all people want to listen to is poppy crap like Risetite." She turned to glare at Kazuya. "And you thought I would like to listen as well?"

Kazuya laughed. "I knew you'd hate it." Haru sighed. "So, how about we karaoke?"

"Huh? But, wouldn't it be weird with a real singer?" Yukari asked.

"Don't worry. It's not like I'm judging you," Kazuya answered.

"I am." Minato said, earning a glare from Yukari. "Still, I'll be lenient. Let's go."

With that, the four rented a karaoke booth, and the singing began. Haru went first, chose the rock song "Over the Clouds", and stunned everyone save Kazuya with how good it was. After a practically perfect performance, she gave the mic to Kazuya.

"Have fun," she said, suddenly in a better mood. She kissed him for luck, and took a seat. Yukari was a bit uncomfortable

with the sudden display of affection, but Minato blew it off.

"We, blessed with the rare blue hair, are also apparently in possession of unrivaled pimping abilities," Minato thought.

Kazuyachose the song "Hero's Comeback", one of the openings of Naruto, from what Minato could recall, and did just as well as Haru. He didn't excel in any one area, but he transitioned from the screaming rock to intense rapping perfectly. As the song ended, Minato gulped.

"I better hope I've also been given the ability to sing like an idol..." Minato thought as Kazuya walked back. He cleared his throat.

"Eh, I'm better at DJ-ing," he said. "You're up, Minato."

Minato froze, and looked at Yukari for support. She was just as intimidated as he was. These bastards could sing. "No problem," he said, taking the mic from Kazuya.

"David, can you help me out here?" Minato asked as he approached the karaoke machine.

"I can fix your voice up, if that's what you want. I'll make it so you at least hit the right notes." David said.

"That's all I need."

Now overly confident that he would perform well, he hit random on the machine. He ended up having to sing "No

Scared", a rock song that he was certain was sung in English. He cringed, but grabbed the mic, and went with it.

Oddly enough, since the song was sung by a Japanese performer singing English words, it was perfect for Minato. Of course, David making sure his voice never cracked and upping it a few times during the screams didn't hurt either. In the end, he felt he matched the last two acts.

"Keeping it stylish," Minato said as the song ended, stealing a line he heard from Dante last night. Kazuya and Haru applauded, but Yukari looked on in horror. Her self-esteem was shattered. She had to sing after those three. And she was certain she couldn't sing anywhere near as well they had. Not even Minato had shown mercy in his performance.

Minato saw all of this, and slowly returned to his seat. He still had the mic.

"Boss, she's gonna faint, she's gonna faint! DO IT!" Jack screamed in his head. Evil voices indeed.

"Hey," Minato said, sitting down. "You want to go?" he asked.

"Uhh... actually," Yukari began. Haru, who was next to her, messed with her hair. What shocked Minato even more than the fact that someone had just messed with Yukari's hair was the fact that she didn't immediately turn and try to kill them. Instead she shook her head, and turned to face Haru.

"It'll be fun." Haru said, giving Yukari the kindest smile Minato

thought he had ever seen.

"... Yeah, it will," Yukari said, smiling nervously. She took the mic, walked to the stage, and chose a song. Music began. She held the mic to her lips. Made a faint gasping sound. And fainted.

"I TOLD YOU!" Jack said, materializing in figurine form on the table in front of Minato. He then began to laugh ridiculously. Minato then crushed him swiftly with his palm, silencing him.

"Jackass," Minato said out loud. He turned to Kazuya and Haru. Kazuya scratched the back of his head, and Haru cupped her face in her hands, a quizzical expression on her face.

"Damn," Kazuya said. "She's got serious self-esteem problems."

"... Maybe I should have gone with her?" Haru asked.

"I don't think that would've helped much," Minato said. "So... I guess I'll go get her." He walked over and picked up Yukari, throwing her over his shoulder swiftly.

"You look like you're trying to abduct her," Kazuya said with a laugh.

"Really... you could've at least been gentle about it." Haru said disapprovingly.

"Meh," Minato answered. He then propped Yukari up on the

lounge chair in the booth, and sat down next to her. "So... now that she's unconscious... let's have a serious talk."

"Sure," Kazuya said. Haru looked at him strangely. "It's alright. He's works for the Big Boss most demons talk about."

"... You aren't trying to open the portal again, are you?" Haru said, turning to Minato. She had murder in her eyes.

"Portal? What portal?" Minato asked.

"He's also new... don't worry about it too much," Kazuya said.

"Right. There's a lot of terminology I don't really know." Minato commented out loud. "Regardless, how do you know... Big Boss?"

"You didn't forget that I'm a King, did you?" Kazuya said, leaning forward. "He has a group of people that he keeps pretty close contact with, including us Kings of Hell, and your friend, Shin."

"... He told you I met him?" Minato asked.

"Nope. But from what I can tell, your true powers woke up recently and have already begun to develop. They're similar to Shin's, so I assumed he'd send him to train you." Kazuya stated.

"Huh... good reasoning," Minato complimented. He turned to Haru. "So, are you a Queen?"

"I suppose I am," Haru said. "I'm still human, and I'm no real fan of fighting... but I'm unmatched when it comes to manipulating demons."

"What are you going on about? Of course you're a Queen!" Kazuya said, putting his arm around her. "My Queen, that is."

"...Five years later, and you're still a stupid kid at heart." Haru said with a smile. "But, what does this have to do with you, Minato?"

"I don't know... From what I've been told, Big Boss has completely altered how my fate is supposed to play out. I don't know why, but he's helping me." Minato said.

"I can tell you why," Kazuya said. "It's cause' he thought your fate was unfair."

"...Excuse me?"

"It means that even if you did everything right, the end of your journey would still suck." he answered. "He did that for a few people... he's got a plan for all of us sometime in the future."

"Well, it looks like there is a price to pay..." Minato thought.

"Don't dwell on it too much," Kazuya added. "Just enjoy the benefits. After all, hasn't everything been more enjoyable?" He pulled Haru closer to him. "I know it has been for me."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Star Arcana...

"Kazuya..." Haru said, moving away. Her composure was quickly dropping.

"Hey, I'll go get another booth," Minato said suddenly. He was about to pick up Yukari and leave, until he thought what that would look like.

"Actually, we'll just go. You've got the place for the next half hour on us." Kazuya said, getting up. He left with Haru.

And so, Minato spent a very bored half an hour sitting at a chair across from Yukari. Finally, she started to move.

"Wha- huh?" she asked, taking in her surroundings. The only other person in the room was Minato, who was busy playing a game on his phone.

"Oh, you woke up," he said, not looking away from his phone. Yukari blanked. "You fainted when it was your turn to sing. So we put you on the couch. Kazuya and Haru had to go a while back, so I waited on you. It's good you woke up now, or else I would have had to carry you out of here."

"...Not a word of this to anyone," Yukari said after a while.

"Sure." Minato said. "... Am I still getting coffee?"

"Actually, that might be good now." Yukari said, getting up. The two left and proceeded to Café Chagall, where they drank coffee in relative silence.

"You know," Minato said after a while, "I was wondering... did you really invite me out to coffee just to sort things out?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah... I didn't expect everything to be handled on the train, actually." Yukari answered.

"Really?" Minato asked, raising an eyebrow. "I think you just wanted an excuse to take me on a date."

"...You're an idiot." Yukari said, taking another drink of coffee. When she put her cup down, Minato had slid right next to her on the chair.

"I don't think so," he whispered into her ear. She panicked, and dropped her coffee. It hit the table, and fell over, ending up all over Minato's lap. Needless to say, it should've burned. Oddly, Minato noticed he barely felt it.

"An effect of training?" he wondered.

"Ah, why are you- oh, I am so sorry!" Yukari stammered. She grabbed a tissue and began to desperately wipe the area that was hit by the coffee. She ended up having to lean over, getting a bit too close to Minato. He leaned backwards in the chair, and propped his arm on the table. Yukari leaned in closer to get a better view, and he opened his legs to try and help her see it. Unfortunately, she was still missing horribly.

"I might as well do it myself if this keeps up," Minato said, rolling his eyes. Yukari raised her head and glared at him.

"Hey! This is harder than it looks, you know!" she said.

"Yukari...?" a familiar voice from nearby called. Minato and Yukari turned to see Junpei and a brown-haired boy, who, if Minato recalled correctly, was named Kenji, staring at them.

Minato smiled like a madman. He was certain that from their viewpoint, all they could see was him propping himself up on the table, leaning backwards, while Yukari was leaning forwards, with her head hovering above the general vicinity of his crotch.

"Hey, guys," Minato said, turning to wave at them. "We were just finishing up here."

Junpei and Kenji's jaws dropped. Yukari turned from them, to Minato, to them, and then looked down.

"This is-!" she screamed, scrambling. She misplaced her hand and fell downwards.

"That's more like it," Minato said, catching her shoulder to make sure she didn't roll under the table. Her scramble had actually resulted in a pretty good wipe, getting the majority of the remaining coffee of his crotch. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, and Junpei and Kenji quickly turned around and left, hands covering their mouths.

"Wait!" Yukari said, scrambling back up. It was too late. Minato grabbed a tissue and took what she had missed off of his pants. They'd need washing. Yukari turned and twitched. "You! You've gotta help me explain this!"

"...Damn. I save you quite a bit, don't I?" Minato mused.

"AUGH, c'mon!" Yukari pleaded.

"Yeah, yeah, I've got you. I just hope that other kid doesn't spread what he saw too quickly." Minato said. "Don't worry though. I won't lie."

Yukari huffed. "... Geez, what is even happening with my life?" she complained.

"A lot of shit, apparently," Minato chuckled. Yukari turned to him. "I jest, I jest... besides, didn't I say I had you?"

"... Thanks." Yukari muttered.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana...

"Lovers? Please," Minato thought. "Side chick? Maybe, if Paimon decides to disappear one day."

"Damn, Boss... those standards are high," David said.

"*You're damn right they are!*" he replied. After explaining to the management their strange spill, Minato returned to the dorm with Yukari. They were greeted by Junpei, sword at the ready, and Mitsuru, who was sitting with her Evoker in her lap.

"Arisato, Takeba," she began. "Iori has informed me of some rather... interesting things that happened today."

Needless to say, the majority of the night was spent diffusing a very explosive situation.

16. Chapter 16

Chapter 16: A Bold New Future and the Realities of the Present

Intensive training was taking place. Minato had snuck out during the Dark Hour, and found Shin meditating where he normally was. No words were exchanged when the two met each other. It was time for half an hour of utter hell.

Minato managed to die five times in the first five minutes, but steadily improved his fighting style. He realized against an opponent this overwhelming, attacks had to be hit and run style, and putting everything into one attack was asking for death. Oddly, he found that using his boxing tactics proved to be his most effective method of attack against Shin, though he rarely landed a punch. When he did, it usually earned him a death.

Ten minutes in. Minato learned to incorporate his legs into his attacks to vary his attack pattern. He couldn't take big kicks, but shin hits allowed for a follow-up. Pressing his advantage, he landed a solid punch to Shin's chest, rocking him. He took a second swipe, which Shin allowed to graze his arm.

"Give flesh," Shin said as the punch passed him. He simultaneously elbowed and kned Minato's outstretched

forearm, crushing it completely. Minato pulled what was left of his arm back, yelling in pain. "To take bone." Shin said, grabbing Minato's jaw. He crushed it, and then punched a hole through Minato's stomach. An eternity of ungodly pain and dying later, Minato was healed, and got back up.

"Wasn't that from Ares?" Minato thought. He dispelled the thought. Shin was a monster of a man. It was doubtful he was an Otaku.

Fifteen minutes in. Minato only died two more times since his lesson. He was becoming much better at attacking and retreating.

Twenty minutes in. Minato actually knocked Shin back a few feet with a surprise flying knee. Shin bounced back, and shattered that knee. Then his ribcage. Then his skull. Minato was back on his feet in a few seconds.

In the last minute, Minato actually managed to grab Shin and throw him through the air. Shin simply turned and landed on his feet, unfazed. Minato had approached him as he landed, expecting to get a free hit. He didn't count on Shin charging back at him. He got clotheslined at a ridiculous speed, and was almost certain he felt his neck snap backwards. Ungodly pain. Complete vision failure. Then back to normal.

"That's enough for today," Shin said as Minato got up once more. "You've improved. Your technique is now semi-respectable."

"...Thanks," Minato said as Shin suddenly appeared next to him. In a flash, they returned to the back alleys of Tatsumi Port Island. Minato now knew better than to wear anything other than shorts when he was going to train with Shin, so he kept his clothing in a pile near Shin's hoodie. The two of them dressed, and Minato was half inspecting some serious introspection to start. But nothing of the sort happened. They were closer as coach and fighter, but he wasn't even sure if they were even friends. Shin nodded to him after he dressed, and disappeared instantly again.

"What is he, fucking Goku?" Minato asked out loud.

"Goku doesn't have shit on him, Boss," Jack said, appearing next to him. He had forgotten his Fiends could technically run amok during the Dark Hour if he let them. **"But hey, we still have fifteen minutes... let's go raid some places!"**

"Are you an idiot?" David asked, materializing next to Jack. **"Boss clearly said he wouldn't raid unless he had to these days!"**

"And now I have to so I can get rid of the stress from dying repeatedly," Minato said with a smile.

"Then I know just the place to start," David said. Ignoring David's quick change of heart, Minato, who was tired from fighting for half an hour straight, allowed Jack and David to carry him to Be Blue V. Though he would usually never go there himself, he had to admit they had quite the selection of

teas, which he would gladly 'sample'. Five minutes later, the trio looted over one-hundred individually wrapped packets. They bolted, and Minato got back into his room just before the Dark Hour ended. After a short period of eagerly organizing his loot and sampling a few of the ones with fancier names, he studied for the rest of the twilight hours after cleaning up. He had trained, after all.

Minato made breakfast as usual, and noticed that Yukari elected not to come this morning as she used to. He knew that this time it was definitely to avoid him, considering Junpei still looked at him strangely every now and then. It didn't stop him from thanking him for the food, though.

As he got off the train and walked to school, he spotted Mitsuru. She had apparently been waiting for him. "Today's the day, huh?" he asked.

"Indeed. Your coronation," she said with a smirk. "And the jewelery of my crown."

"Perfect wording," Minato said. The two shared a laugh.

"Oh, yes. I had almost forgotten. Our buffoon of a principal seems to think I've upstaged him," Mitsuru said. "He wants to throw his own welcome speech this morning. I pity the fact that you will be unable to sleep through it, and can do nothing save wish you good luck."

"Hmm... we'll have to teach him to bark like a dog for this, won't we?" Minato asked.

"That... is too light a punishment." Mitsuru said.

"... I like where this is going." Minato said.

The two walked to school chatting, but again, peace never lasted once they entered the front gates.

"MINATO-SAMA! I'M INTO EXHIBITION TOO!" a girl shouted. She then attempted to take her top off, only to be tackled by one of the Four Heavenly Kings' followers.

"MINATO-DONO! I BELIEVE! YOU'VE SHOWN ME LIMITS ONLY EXIST IN YOUR HEAD!" a wild eyed boy shouted as he waved at Minato.

"... It would seem your incident with Takeba has made you even more renowned." Mitsuru stated. "I doubt you have any opposition left in the school."

"... I would hope not. The game's no fun if there's no opposition," he answered. Mitsuru chuckled and nodded. From the distance, Junpei and Akihiko watched the two of them carefully.

"They're planning something..." Akihiko muttered.

"Akihiko-senpai, you really act like a stalker sometimes, you know? I mean, why'd we have to hide behind that group of suits on the train? Couldn't we have just talked to em'?" Junpei asked.

"Junpei, you've seen what Minato is capable of... This isn't a

foe you can just take head on." Akihiko said, slowly following the pair.

"... And why are we fighting? It's not for Mitsuru-senpai, is it?" Junpei asked. Akihiko froze. "It is, isn't it?" he added, starting to smile. "Man, I think you just gotta break outta the friend-zone, senpai, and she's yours!"

"... Maybe your – No, what am I saying? And why am I taking advice from you?" Akihiko thought out loud. He stomped away, angry that he lost track of the duo.

"... You're welcome, dickhead," Junpei said, narrowing his eyes. He put his hands in his pockets and grumbled curses at Akihiko as he walked to school.

At the start of the day, Minato finally met up with Yukari and a rather annoyed Junpei, and the three sat down for the President's speech. The moment he opened his mouth, Minato had to resist the urge to summon Jack and have him slice the old fat fuck into idiot tenders.

"This is a goddamned insult to Mitsuru's speech, and a shitty one at that. Unforgiveable." he thought.

"Normally, we'd have something to say here... but I'm sure Mitsuru's got something planned to make him pay for this." David chimed in his mind.

"... I'm going to enjoy it when it happens."

After a horrendous speech that made Minato cringe twice per sentence, the day went on. In his math class, his teacher Ms. Miyahara called him out.

"What's $1+1$?" she asked.

"Are you fucking trying me right now?" Minato thought. "Two."

"You're right. It's a simple question, so the fundamentals are obvious. No matter what, 1 plus 1 is 2. It doesn't matter what you're counting. Atoms, students, if one joins another, there's 2 of them. That's math for you. Isn't it amazing?" she commented.

"No, that's fucking common sense, you old shit." Minato commented in his mind. He nodded and sat down. *"Is today just full of people trying my patience? I was in a good mood this morning, too."*

"This afternoon, Boss... this afternoon, you can bring the pain on anyone who even looks at you the wrong way," Jack said, trying to calm him down. He turned to his left, and realized Yukari was eyeing him oddly. His eyes had widened at the question, and hadn't gone back to normal.

Sleepless meditation as the old math teacher babbled on about common knowledge. A trick he picked up from watching Shin. He realized Shin never closed his eyes, so he must have been able to drown out even his own vision while meditating. So, he concentrated on nothing. Oddly, it worked, and he calmed down in minutes. The day went by after that without a

hitch, and Mitsuru swiftly came to his classroom once the day ended.

"It's time," she said. Minato smiled.

"Time for what?" Yukari asked.

"Minato will become the head of the Student Council Disciplinary Committee." Mitsuru stated. "I would be on my best behavior from now on, if I were you." She shot Yukari and Junpei two quick glares. They shrunk back into their desks.

Minato and Mitsuru left and entered the Student Council Room. Upon entry, many members stopped talking and simply stared at them. One boy, with gray hair, stepped forward.

"May I ask why a known delinquent is here, Ms. President?" the boy asked. Minato could tell he was at odds with most of the people in the room, but that didn't matter. What did matter was that he was at odds with Mitsuru.

"Odagiri. Just who I wanted to see." Mitsuru said. "I've found a way to let you focus on your little smoking conundrum."

"Is he the culprit?" he asked, looking at Minato. Minato simply flashed him a creepy smile.

"As of today, Hidetoshi Odagiri, you are no longer the head of the Disciplinary Committee. Minato Arisato will take your place, effective immediately. Your new – " she began, only to

be cut off.

"What?! You can't be serious!" Hidetoshi screamed. He was going to say something else, until Minato stepped forward and stared him down, silencing him. He had his deadly smile.

"To interrupt the President while she is making a formal address..." Minato began. He laughed a bit. "Surely you haven't forgotten the rules you had to enforce mere moments ago, Odagiri?... Unless, you were secretly hoping to be kicked out of the Student Council?"

"Tch! You –"

"Talking back to a higher ranking member while receiving punishment?!" Minato snapped in his face. Hidetoshi stepped back, and Minato pressed his advantage. "Not only banishment, but also a month's service as the Officers' lapdog? I didn't take you for a masochist, Odagiri. Should I add perversion to your list of offenses as well?"

"This is insane! Surely you can't -"

"Minato, silence him," Mitsuru commanded. Minato buried a punch deep into Hidetoshi's gut. He held back as to not break any bones, but he still managed to make him bounce slightly. Hidetoshi clutched his stomach and crumpled. Everyone in the room froze. "As I was saying, the new head of the Disciplinary Committee is Minato Arisato. He is second only to me and me alone. I am also putting into place Martial Law... unlike in previous years, troublemakers who go against the Student

Council will be put in their place by any means necessary... anything to add, Minato?"

"I look forward to seeing what we make of this year, Madame President," Minato said, towering over Hidetoshi.

Silence. Mitsuru began the general meeting, and everyone gave their reports under the watchful eye of Minato. Nobody spoke out of turn. He made Mitsuru tea when she asked, and drank with her as the reports continued. She had taken the liberty to add a teapot exactly like what he had in his dorm room to the Council Room, though it was marked specifically for his use only. Nobody tried to touch it, nor did they question it.

Finally, there was a meeting with two of the teachers. The first was Mr. Ekoda. He walked in, annoyed at the fact that he had to answer to students. The annoyance soon turned to terror as he saw who he was speaking to; it was none other than Mitsuru Kirijio and Minato Arisato.

"Mr. Ekoda," Mitsuru began. "I've received numerous reports of misconduct on your part regarding your treatment of our school's female teachers."

"Pardon me? I don't recall there being a rule about how to address female colleagues, or even male colleagues for that matter," Mr. Ekoda stated bluntly.

"There wasn't. I just added it," Mitsuru said, sliding a piece of paper across the desk towards him. "What I'm doing is solving

a problem before it begins. Teachers are supposed to be more than just educators. Anybody can make the average teenager learn. A teacher sets an example to follow... and your habits will give many of our students the wrong impression of what is and isn't acceptable in the workplace."

"... You're joking, right?" Mr. Ekoda said.

"I would take this seriously if I were you, Ekoda-sensei," Minato said behind Mitsuru. He gave him a twisted grin, like that of a murderer who's just realized his target's been trapped with no possible method of escape. Mr. Ekoda gulped.

"So, wh-what do you want me to do, Ms. President?" he said.

"You will be a model gentleman while you are on school grounds, and show the student body the error of their ways." Mitsuru said. "However, with your record, we needed a volunteer to ensure that you keep to your word. Fortunately, Minato knew just the person to ask."

Mr. Ekoda froze as he heard the door behind \ him open. Ms. Toriumi walked in and smiled.

"Yes, Ekoda-san. I'm delighted to work with you for the good of our students," she said. Unknown to both Mitsuru and Mr. Ekoda, Minato had informed Ms. Toriumi previously that Mr. Ekoda would be the first teacher 'corrected' by the Student Council. She was the one to suggest his punishment.

In all truth, Mitsuru, Minato, and to some extent, Ms. Toriumi didn't give a shit about setting examples for students. Students were imperfect. But the pain inflicted on Mr. Ekoda was well worth the hassle of enacting this plan.

"Ekoda..." Mitsuru said after he simply stared back at Ms. Toriumi. "Don't you have something to say to Ms. Toriumi?"

"That's true. I feel that you're forgetting something VERY important," Minato added. Mr. Ekoda scrambled to his feet, and bowed.

"Toriumi-sama, you flatter me! I look forward to working with you as well!" he said quickly.

"Delightful." Ms. Toriumi responded. She stopped smiling, and her face turned furious. "Now get out." Mr. Ekoda was gone in less than three seconds.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Toriumi. If he becomes a problem again, feel free to recommend him here again." Mitsuru said.

"It was my pleasure, Ms. President," Ms. Toriumi said. "And I'm glad to see you've found a spot to put your talents to good use, Minato."

"But of course," Minato said with a bow of his own. "I do what must be done. I look forward to working with you."

"And I with you," Ms. Toriumi said. Mitsuru dismissed her, and

signaled to a red-haired girl with glasses who was trembling in the corner. She didn't move.

"Chihiro Fushimi," Minato began, cracking his finger rather loudly once he said her name. "Are you ignoring the orders of our President?"

"A-Ah- n-no, I!" she began, clamoring to her feet. "I-it was a-a moment of unawareness! I-I'll go get Mr. Edogawa!" With that, she ran out of the room. Once she leaved, Mitsuru laughed. Quietly. For a second, even Minato felt a bit of fear.

"Every single one of them... Dancing in the palms of my hands." Mitsuru said quietly.

"We need only to string them up... permanently." Minato added. Mr. Edogawa, the school nurse, walked in. He was a rather unkempt man, who, according to reports, fed students experimental concoctions instead of medicine. Mitsuru had an interesting answer to the complaints she had received about him.

"Greetings, Ms. President," Edogawa said with a bow at the door. Minato didn't find any sarcasm in his voice.

"Mr. Edogawa... please, sit down." Mitsuru said. He did as instructed. "I have heard that you give students experimental 'medicines' when they come to your office seeking attention..."

"Yes," he said. "I give them mixtures that I feel would grant

them divine blessings."

"I'm aware of your affiliation with dark magic... but I'm also aware of your position as an ex-Kirijio scientist." she said. Edogawa may have hidden his expressions well behind his glasses, but he visibly darkened.

"... Go on." he said.

"You may continue with your mysticism," Mitsuru said, "as long as you add in certain... enhancers, to your medicines."

"... And if I refuse?"

"I don't recall hearing a choice in the matter, Doc," Minato said. Edogawa turned to him, but was unfazed by Minato's evil smile.

"I trust you wouldn't mind having your history exposed to the public, Mr. Edogawa." Mitsuru said. "I don't see why you'd refuse... isn't this a way to continue your human experimentation?"

Mr. Edogawa sank back in his chair, and looked at the ceiling for a while. He finally lowered his head, and looked at Mitsuru. "... What would you like improved?"

"At such a large scale, I feel minor improvements would be best. Create a mixture that keeps the average student sick so they feel the need to return constantly, results in a slight increase in memory and retention, improvements in motor

skills and coordination, and serves as an inhibitor for their Cortisol and Dopamine hormones. I'll leave the specific materials included up to you... however, I'd like you to limit the dosing to twice per week, maximum. Should they come again, feel free to try whatever magic brew you desire on them, or give them water for all I care. The point is, I want a gradual enhancement of our students." Mitsuru explained.

"HOLY FUCK, WHAT DID I JUST HEAR?!" Minato screamed in his mind. He was beginning to really fear Mitsuru now, though he maintained his poker face as he stared Edogawa down.

"... I'll need funding," he said.

"The Kirijio Group will provide it." she answered decisively.
"You're dismissed."

Mr. Edogawa silently rose, bowed, and left the room. Minato and Mitsuru were alone as the sun set.

"And so my Gekkoukan approaches perfection," Mitsuru said, rising from her seat. She turned and smiled at Minato. "I trust I can continue to depend on you in the future."

"Those who say perfection is impossible just haven't tried hard enough, right?" Minato asked, tilting his head. "I think we should prove them wrong."

Mitsuru chuckled. "Tres bien... an affirmation far surpassing a simple 'yes'."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

"Shall we return to the dorm?" Minato asked.

"Yes... but not by train," she said. Minato followed her to the parking lot by the side of the school, and there it was.

Mitsuru's motorbike. "Feel like going for a ride?"

"Anytime," Minato said. As he got on, he realized Mitsuru didn't ride with a helmet.

"*Crazy...*" Minato thought.

"Boss, I like her more and more every day!" David commented.

"... *She still scares the shit out of me.*" Jack added.

"I hope you're not a zealous advocate of motorway safety, Minato," she said with a chuckle.

"You do know me, right?" he said, locking his hands around her waist. "Let's have some fun."

It's sufficient to say Mitsuru was a thrill seeker. She weaved dangerously in and out of traffic, popped wheelies at every possible opportunity, which Minato loved, and almost always

drifted while turning. Minato had no idea how Mitsuru's hair didn't get ruined.

One ridiculous joyride later, and the two entered the dorm sharing a laugh. It was Akihiko's turn to be angry, as Minato heard him actually crush the protein bar he was holding. Junpei simply sighed and went back to playing his online game.

Yukari shot them both a strange look, but went back to studying. Minato just went about making dinner for SEES, until Akihiko stepped in his way.

"So, I heard you actually joined the Student Council. It's good to know you aren't stuck here all the time after your incident at the boxing club," he said.

"It's actually pretty fun being the head of the Disciplinary Committee," Minato answered. Junpei started laughing from the table.

"What?! This guy, head of the Disciplinary Committee? You're kiddin' me, Mitsuru-senpai!" Junpei said.

"It's no joke lori. In a single day, Minato has silenced all opposition to my reign from within the Council," she said. Junpei froze.

"... What do you mean silenced?" Akihiko asked. Minato just chuckled and shook his head.

"They won't be showing their faces around anymore," he said, grabbing a large knife. Akihiko slowly backed away.

"... You two make a good team." he said quietly. Afterwards, he took his seat and became extremely interested in his fitness magazine.

After Minato finished cooking, everyone enjoyed a rather quiet dinner. The evening was uneventful, so Minato left to visit Elizabeth. He entered the Velvet Room, was greeted by Igor, greeted him, and turned to Elizabeth. "Let's go have some fun... though, not involving Escapade this time." Minato said.

"Oh? Did you have somewhere special in mind?" Elizabeth asked.

"I never got to show you the arcade, or karaoke," Minato said.

"My, I had almost forgotten! Our date is far from finished." she answered. He extended his arm, and she took it.

"Later, old man," Minato said to Igor as the two left. He waved them goodbye, and the duo reappeared in the familiar back-alley of Paulownia.

"So, this arcade... It is a place to prove your superior skills and reflexes through virtual trials?" Elizabeth asked.

"Exactly," Minato said as they entered. "Now, let's see what you've got."

Elizabeth had much more than Minato bargained for. *"She's a better shot, driver, train simulator, GUNDAM FRIGGIN' PILOT, and KAMINARI than me?!"* Minato fumed as he struggled to think of a game he could possibly win. He couldn't. Defeated, the two left the arcade, Minato's head drooping while Elizabeth stared skywards.

"It would seem you are not, as they say, on my level," Elizabeth said triumphantly.

"...That's true." Minato admitted. He straightened up. "I've gotta say, I didn't think you'd know how to do half of those things. If you're so good, what's the point in going through the trouble of doing it?"

At this Elizabeth froze and became very quiet. She looked at the sky for a bit, and then turned to Minato, a forlorn expression on her face, much to his surprise. "It's not that I don't know of these things... I possess nearly infinite knowledge. What I lack is experience. What good is this knowledge if I can't use it?" she asked.

"And I thought girls had problems..." Minato said, feeling extremely awkward. Not knowing what to do, he walked over and put his arm around Elizabeth. "Don't worry about that now. Just know that you'll be able to use it in the future... or something deep and philosophical like that." he said. Elizabeth giggled.

"Live with hope, hmm?" Elizabeth mused. "I suppose I could undertake such an endeavor... Yes, I've decided. Minato, I

will now hope that you continue to show me your world."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Sun Arcana...

"Hey, we still haven't gone to karaoke, right?" Minato asked. "Let's see how well you sing?"

As it turned out, Elizabeth was just as good of a singer as he was, though she could never get the tune right. He spent the majority of the night getting her used to a few songs she found catchy, and parted ways with her once their hour together ended.

He returned to the dorm, feeling quite happy with himself. He went to his room, and began to make tea just as the Dark Hour hit. He would spend his time relaxing till the morning. After all, he had quite a bit of tea to run through.

17. Chapter 17

Chapter 17: Thoughts on Life

An uneventful morning. Average breakfast. Not even the gossipers were interesting today. By the time school had ended, Minato was wondering why this day even existed.

"I never thought I'd be wishing for time to fly by faster..." Minato thought. Near the end of class, he lazily dropped his head onto the table and was just staring at the window.

"... I agree, Boss. Seriously, what the hell even happened today?" David asked.

"Everybody mulled over their thoughts at breakfast, people were scared shitless whenever Boss or Mitsuru walked around, and... that's it... damn, nothing happened, did it?" Jack noted.

"Minato," a voice called from the front of his class. He looked up to see Ms. Toriumi, oddly enough. "It's your turn for cleaning duty today." She had what Minato could only call an expectant look on her face. Minato glanced over and just saw Junpei lower his cap and mumble something incoherent, while Yukari looked generally confused.

"Smooth, Isako... why does Yukari always look lost?" Minato thought. *"It's like she's constantly getting hit by sudden acute cases of Apathy Syndrome... she needs some medication."*

"Good point... especially now that it's the special stuff," Jack said.

"Of course," Minato said to her after a while. Once everyone left, Minato went about with his cleaning duty, which really just consisted of wiping the board and sweeping the corners of the room. Needless to say, he was done in less than ten minutes.

"As expected," Ms. Toriumi said. "Now, shall we?"

"Let's go, Isako," Minato answered, grabbing his bag. As odd as she was, Isako was smart enough to leave through the south entrance while telling Minato to leave through the north so they would eventually meet at the train station, to the east.

The two boarded the train, and Isako let out a huge yawn and stretched. "Ah, Minato, my days are so free these days! No more tedious paperwork, no more putting up with Ekoda's idiocy!" she said, stretching left to right like a child preparing to play. "What shall we do today? Sushi?"

"Doesn't sound like a bad idea," Minato said. "Though, wouldn't it be weird to go to Wakatsu?"

"Nope! I know a secret!" she said as she finished stretching. "I also know you've been having some fun at Escapade recently."

"It would seem I'm the talk of the school," Minato said. *"Odd subject to bring up... let's see where this goes."*

"And you had two, I quote, 'lovely ladies', with you all night?" she asked, adding a playful smile.

"Oh? I could always use another." Minato said. Isako laughed.

"See, that's the kind of talk that loses people their job!" she said. "You're still in school, so I think it's good that you play around a bit. After all, I didn't, and here I am half-flirting with one of my own students." She facepalmed, much to Minato's surprise.

"Hey, it's not that bad. I mean, you're more fun than most of the people I hang out with anyways." Minato said. "Besides, who said I was half-flirting?" he added, raising an eyebrow.

"That comic expression on your face said so," Isako said, shaking her head. The two shared another laugh. When the train reached Iwatodai station, Isako led Minato to the Wakatsu. As the two entered, she leaned in to whisper in his ear. "I'm going to tell the waiter something... try and remember it."

"Welcome to Wakatsu," the waiter said with a bow. "And where would you like to dine today?"

Minato was certain he was simply asking if they would eat inside, on the patio, or take their food to go. He didn't expect Isako's response, which he was sure wasn't in Japanese or

English. "Huàfēn qūbié yú shùnmín," she said quietly. The waiter simply bowed to her.

"...*What?*" Minato asked.

"Divide the distinguished from the plebs... ah, an interesting play on words that crosses languages. How secretive." David remarked in Minato's head. ***"Don't worry, Boss. If you ever need to say that, I've got you."***

"Follow me, honored guest," he whispered. Minato followed Isako and the waiter to the back of the restaurant, which was clearly marked "Employees Only", and was led through a series of dark hallways into a smaller room divided into a few booths obscured by hanging, unmarked blinds, with traditional tables that looked like they came from feudal Japan. Cushions were set out to be used as seats.

"Would you like to start with the usual?" the waiter asked.

"Of course. Bring two this time," she said. Minato took a seat at a small booth next to Isako, and looked around a bit confused. He could smell something in the air, but was unsure what it was.

"Now, nobody will see us... oh, maybe I should explain this," Isako finally said. "Wakatsu is owned by a group of Chinese entrepreneurs that sell... unusual delicacies."

"...This is a black market restaurant," Minato said quietly.

"Yes." Isako said. "As such, there's no age limit for anything. Feel free to drink as much as you like."

"You do know I'm not an alcoholic, right?" he asked. She smiled at him.

"Yet." she said. "Soon, you'll realize that whether you're at the top or at the bottom of the barrel, life always has its shitty moments." A waitress that looked surprisingly like a Geisha came into the booth with two unmarked bottles and two traditional looking cups. She poured them each a drink rather ceremoniously, and took her leave, never once looking away from them.

"That's some skill. I should learn that for fighting," Minato thought.

"A toast, Minato," Isako said, picking up her cup. Minato grabbed his, and bumped it into hers.

"To good company," he said, unable to think of anything. Isako chuckled and threw an arm around him.

"Woah, woah, woah! I know you took me out to dinner, but this is not what I signed up for!" Minato screamed in his head, half expecting to have to keep Isako from trying to make-out with him or worse. However, she just bumped her head into his.

"To thinking of better toasts," she said. With that, the two of them took their first drink. Minato never thought he would like

the taste of alcohol, but he loved whatever he was drinking. He now understood why they had a bottle each.

"I'm still a bit stunned you took me here," Minato said.

"If we can't be seen in public, where else was I supposed to go?" Isako asked.

"You make it sound like this is an affair."

"Isn't it a bit more exciting that way?" She said with a sly smile. Minato chuckled. "Do you know why I teach English Composition, Minato?"

"... You want to teach people how to escape reality." he said with a raised eyebrow.

Isako cracked up. She laughed loudly and was clutching Minato so as not to fall over. "Escape reality?" she asked, trying to catch her breath. "You've been playing too much videogames... do you really think I'm a secret saint?"

"It was worth a shot... besides, I wasn't sure if it was the other reason... but I think it is, now." He said, cracking a smile. The two took another drink.

"Of course it is... I teach English Composition because I wanted to. No big reasons. No great ideals. I just thought it would be fun to teach." she said. "When I got my job, they said I was holding myself back. I could've contributed so much more."

"Obviously, they don't know about people like us." Minato said.

"Of course they don't... people like us... we're selfish. We do what we want to do, and if somebody disagrees, they can go to hell." Isako said. The Geisha had slipped in and slid their menus across to them. "If you were expecting Sushi, I think you'll enjoy our options."

And so, they broke into their game of eating while feeding each other. Minato was pretty surprised that seal meat could taste so good, or that turtle soup out of a shell was such an experience. Of course, they drank heavily as well. Unlike his club companions, however, Isako showed quite a bit of restraint. She never even tried to steal a kiss from him.

They were escorted out of what the restaurant owners called 'The Division' and down to one of Iwatodai station's back alleys. The door, Minato noticed, was painted to look just like the wall, and had no handle from the outside.

"First class operation," David said. ***"I give them four out of five stars."***

"Are you really rating black market restaurants?" Minato asked in his mind. The conversation was interrupted by a rather giddy Isako, who clung to Minato suddenly.

"Ah, look at what I'm doing. Corrupting a student who just transferred," she said as they walked through the alley. "If anyone knew the type of things I really did in my spare time,

oh, the scandal!" she mused.

"I know," Minato said with a grin. "It would be a shame if I had a Freudian slip."

"Surely you won't tell, will you?" she asked, playing along with his fake threat.

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't." he said. Isako shook him.

"Look at you, acting all high and mighty," she giggled.

"Look at you, acting like a kid," he replied.

"That a problem?"

"If something that makes me like you is a problem, then yes, it is." Isako chuckled.

"... Is that how you got your club girls to fall for you?"

"That's a secret!" he said, mimicking her voice from the train.

"And here I thought I was being a bad influence," Isako mused. "You're just as bad as me."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

"But," Isako said, separating from him as they emerged from the alley. "It's about time we part. Try not to get into too much trouble, okay?"

"I should be the one saying that to you," he answered. She laughed, and walked away.

Minato returned to the dorm as night fell, with a faint scent of smoke and alcohol lingering around him.

"Welcome back," Mitsuru said. "The internet line has been officially fixed... if you have an internet cable, it should work with your computer now. That should repair all the damage the shadow has done... except for Akihiko's arm."

"Speaking of internet... you play any online games, dude?" Junpei asked.

"I was never a fan of the whole faceless connection," Minato said.

"Huh, bummer... and here I thought somebody was gonna join me." Junpei said.

"By the way, Minato. A package arrived for you today." Akihiko added. He pointed to a box behind the sign-in sheet.

"Junpei, I'm about to turn that frown upside down!" Minato said as he walked to the large box. He opened it, pocketed the Revival Beads, and then swiftly drew the All-Purpose Katana. True to the description, he really did feel that this

thing was perfect for any occasion. "Behold!" he said, doing a small flurry of strikes at the air. He then charged at Junpei, who flinched, half-expecting Minato's idea of turning a frown upside down to be carving a constant smile on his face. However, Minato stopped, slid on his knee, and offered Junpei the sword like he was presenting it to a king. "Your blade, Sir Iori," he said in a gruff voice.

"Huh? For real?" Junpei said, picking it up. Minato backed away as he took a few practice swings with it. "Dude, this thing is awesome! Let's go test it out!"

"... I was going to ask when you next planned to enter Tartarus. I haven't made much progress on the barrier, but I did get one possible solution ready. I'll bring it tonight." Mitsuru said.

With that, everyone prepared for Tartarus. Minato looked at the tower rise into the sky with childlike glee, much to Yukari's chagrin. She remembered that she always found Minato scarier than usual during the Dark Hour, and he reminded her why that night.

Without so much as a glance at either of the Rooms, Minato walked towards the entrance. "Today, we go all the way to the barricade from the bottom! No excuses!" he said, twirling his sword. "We'll see if that barrier solution works when we get there."

And so, the group set off. But on the second floor, Minato encountered a strange problem. He had acquired Slime and

Pixie once more, but when he tried to get Apsaras, she was instantly offered to the Card of the Beast. He frowned, and tried once more after another battle. The same result.

"Why the hell is she being offered?" Minato asked his Fiends.

"...Oh yeah, we never really explained our connection the Card of the Beast, did we?" Jack asked.

"Well, now's the time!" Minato answered.

"Usually, the user of a Fiend loses a portion of their soul each time they summon it... with your Magatama, this would have been drastically reduced, but you would still start to feel some heavy recoil from all our usage later."

David began. *"But, since you have the Card of the Beast, we draw energy from that instead of your soul directly. See, it's like... an amplifier for your power. The Card of the Beast not only serves as your personal Macca debit card, but also as a barrier between us and your soul. We draw power from your soul, but the Card of the Beast multiplies it immensely, see? So, let's say the average human gets around 100,000 uses. With you and your current amount of Magatama, I'd say you could get four times that. But the Card of the Beast gives you another thousand times that. And it's not like human souls don't regenerate or grow over time either. Plus, you rarely use us anyways."*

"That doesn't explain why Apsaras keeps getting offered,"

Minato responded.

"Right, right. Look, infinite power over us Fiends obviously just doesn't come for free. By binding your soul with the Card of the Beast, you got infinite power over us in exchange for heavily limited power over your own soul... Since Personas manifest from your soul, what do you think happens when a portion of your soul is sealed off?"

"...I can't keep as many as I could have normally."

"Exactly, Boss. Right now, it looks like you can only hold onto six. Anymore, and the Card of the Beast will just eat it up. I'd offer the useless ones up now if I were you."

"Well, this changes quite a bit of my tactics, doesn't it?"

"Dude, how long are you just gonna stare into the wall for?" Junpei asked, breaking Minato out of his thoughts.

"I just learned something very important about my powers," Minato said, turning to Junpei. He offered Pixie and Slime as he turned to face him. "It seems there's a cap on how many Personas I can use. So don't start counting on me to have something for every occasion."

"Like I ever considered that!" Junpei said. "C'mon, let's get moving. We only got an hour, right?"

Half an hour of Shadow slaughtering later, and they arrived at

the barricade.

"*Good work. Return to the lobby, and we can test our new solution.*" Mitsuru said over the communicator. They returned to find Akihiko and Mitsuru rigging a timer on a briefcase filled with explosives. There were six others laying around.

"...You're just gonna blow it up?" Junpei asked.

"Did you have a better idea, Stupei?" Yukari shot.

"I just thought it would be something... I dunno, classy?" he replied.

"We'll make sure to get the ones that include cherry blossoms next time," Akihiko taunted.

"How long is this gonna take?" Minato asked.

"Give us a few more minutes," Mitsuru said.

"All I need," he said, turning to the Crimson Room. He vanished into his display of red butterflies, and swore he heard Junpei ask Akihiko why they couldn't get something that looked like that.

"Master," Minato said, summoning his Fiends to bow with him.

"The Master accepts your greeting," Lucifuge said. "Come, sit."

Minato did as instructed, and looked at the three of them.

"Still not enough Macca," Paimon said.

"I didn't think so... I actually wanted to talk." Minato said.

"Go ahead," Lucifer said.

"I know that you've orchestrated a lot of changes in my fate... would it be wrong to ask why?"

"... It is a bit depressing, actually. Are you sure you want to know?" Lucifer asked. Minato nodded. "Had I let your fate run its course, there were four outcomes. The first outcome was that you die somewhere along the line, failing your primary objective, and end up forgotten as just another loser. The second is that at an integral crossroads of destiny, you succumb to fear and, with your decision, die. The third option is that you overcome fear, and still die. The fourth option was that you do everything right, gain the respect and loyalty of many others, complete an ordeal thought to be impossible for man... and die shortly after, unable to enjoy the rewards of all your hard work. For you, there was no such thing as a 'happy ending'. As such, I, the benevolent lord I am, elected to spare you of such a horrid fate."

"... Is that..." Minato began. He was struggling to process everything he had just heard. If he hadn't met Lucifer, no matter what happened, he would still lose out in the end? He would maybe overcome some great ordeal, only to die?

"Nihilistic, isn't it?" Lucifer asked. "...I disagreed with your fate. Someone of your caliber deserves better than death

when they succeed."

"... Well... would I at least have died for a good cause?"
Minato asked.

"In two scenarios, your death does much more than you know... If you fell before reaching the climatic decision, and faded away as nothing more than just another face, you would have left the world in... an acceptable state. Of course, overcoming your ordeal would have left it even better. The other two... would have been rather unfortunate for the majority of the populace." Lucifer said.

"... That's... reassuring?" Minato asked. "And why are you saying that I would leave 'the world' in a certain state?"

"You should know by now that your battle against the Shadows is much deeper than simply exploring Tartarus... you haven't forgotten your first fight in Iwatodai, have you?"

"...No, I haven't. I can't forget going head to head with a Shadow that made the floor guardians look like jokes." Minato said.

"And do you really think that was a singular event?"

"Master," Lucifuge said. "Don't you think you are giving away... too much?"

"Why does it matter? Isn't my fate already set?" Minato asked. Lucifer chuckled.

"The interesting thing about fate is that it always gives some form of variability... Hence, you previously had four possible outcomes, albeit with the same ultimate ending. I have changed your endings, but the journey still depends on you." he said. "Humans do have the ability to change fate, even if it is only a slight difference in the grand scheme of things. I have done much work to change your fate entirely... but it seeks to right itself."

"So, fate is trying to ensure my death?" Minato asked.

"No... it is trying to balance itself. My influence brings with it Chaos... as of now, your existence is unbalanced. As such, fate will respond by adding in factors associated with Law." he stated.

"Chaos and Law?"

"The affinity, or, more accurately, the alignment of your particular soul. Each being has one. Though I can alter your journey, I cannot change your soul... Your soul is one of the rare ones that favors neither side naturally, a Neutral soul." Lucifer explained. "Throughout your original journey, you would have met many people of varying alignments. While I managed to fill the majority of the Chaos aligned people who you will meet, I cannot say who or what will fill the place of the Law alignment. Of course, you will also meet others of the Neutral alignment as well."

"... So that contract still holds?" Minato asked.

"Of course. You still play the largest role in determining the outcome of your journey, regardless of how much alteration I or any other being makes." Lucifer answered.

Complete silence. Minato ran through hundreds of questions in his head, but in the end, he decided what to say.

"... This just makes the journey all the more fun, doesn't it, Master?" Minato asked.

"That's a good attitude to have." Lucifer said. "Enjoy the surprise."

"It's no fun without any opposition."

"Exactly..." Lucifer said. He closed his eyes, and then opened them once more. Minato recognized the ungodly glow. **"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple... Thou shalt draw forth hidden power from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my light... The Light of Lucifer..."**

Power. Minato couldn't help but lean back and smile as he felt himself grow stronger. "You know, Master, I've gotta say, I really like how straightforward you are." Minato said with a grin. "You don't give me any cryptic shit to decipher, you just tell me what you want to say... and for that, I'm grateful. Really."

"Hmph. Anyone who uses cryptic messages is obviously too concerned with their appearance to care about results." Lucifer said flatly. "I shall see you again."

"I look forward to it, Master." Minato said. He bowed, and left the Crimson Room. He appeared in the lobby, only to disappear into the Velvet Room. There, he fused a few of his Personas and managed to make Oberon and a Valkyrie with Tarukaja, completing Elizabeth's request. He got a funny little charm called a Cheongsam that apparently let him fuse a Hua Puo, but he didn't bother looking into it. He returned to the lobby, and found that his group was preparing to leave.

"Right on time." Akihiko said as Minato approached. "I'm coming with you to carry a few of these. The plan is to set them to go off three minutes after we place them."

"I still think it's kinda funny that our big plan is to just blow it up." Junpei said. Yukari scowled, but grabbed some of the briefcases. A few teleports later, and the group had lined the barricade with about eight briefcases. They left, and waited. Three minutes passed.

"The explosives have gone off," Mitsuru said. As if on cue, a small vibration reached the lobby. "Let's see the results."

Minato took Junpei and Yukari and went straight to the barricade. When they arrived, the area was covered with shrapnel and scorch marks, but the barricade stood unscathed. "... I could've told you that wasn't going to work." Minato said, unimpressed.

"Tsk... We'll try something else another time. Let's return to the dorm for tonight." Mitsuru said. With that, SEES departed Tartarus and went home.

As the early hours of twilight passed, Minato sat at his tea table, resting his mind. It had been working far too hard recently, and he had yet to come to terms with the fact that his existence originally only had one purpose, after which he would die, regardless of its accomplishment.

"...I'm going to live. I'm going to live for so damn long, people will think I'm immortal. I'll outlive fate itself if I have to. Fuck a grand purpose. I'll live, ME, I'll enjoy life, dammit. Anything that tries to take that away from me... I'll give it a kiss of cold steel."

18. Chapter 18

Chapter 18: Minato's Family

Today was Showa day. With no school, Minato decided to do something he hadn't done in the last few years. He threw on his casual blue and white t-shirt and jeans combination, grabbed his hat, went to Naganaki Shrine, and headed over to inspect the gravestones. If he remembered correctly, the three he was looking for stood in the far corner, obscured by a set of trees left unattended. Sure enough, at the far northeast corner, there were trees standing out. He walked around it, and stared at the three graves. The markings had long been blurred beyond legibility by years of lazy maintenance, but he knew exactly who they belonged to.

The farthest to the left was his father, Makoto Shirogane. He didn't remember much about him, save his appearance. He modeled himself almost exactly after him after all, though he never could get his smile. His father never really expressed many emotions, but when he smiled, Minato felt like everything in the world would be alright. *"It's a shame you never smiled in the car. Who knows? Maybe everything would have been alright, dad."*

He turned his attention to the grave in the middle. There lay his mother, Kotone Arisato. He found it hard to forget her

ridiculous antics. She never seemed to be depressed, even when swamped with work, and constantly made light of life's most difficult situations. He always tried to copy that attitude, but it was twisted beyond repair somewhere along the road. Unlike his father, he had completely forgotten her appearance. He was certain she had long black hair that he used to play with, but that was all he could remember. *"... I wonder what you'd say if you saw me now? I've already done most of the things you told me not to."*

Finally, he walked over and stood in front of the grave at the edge of the lot. He couldn't help but smile as he stared at it. Even after all these years, seeing his own grave always made him laugh. The markings read Minato Shirogane, age seven. He looked on in silence.

"...Did one of the better futures involve me actually lying here to rot?" Minato thought. He sighed, and adjusted his hat. *"No, fuck that. I'm alive and I'm living until I get sick of it, no questions asked..."*

"Boss, you've got company," Jack said in his mind. Minato slowly turned, putting his left hand behind his back. He had his Evoker with him. His eyes rested on a child, no older than thirteen, wearing a formal dark blue jacket and slacks with suede shoes. But what caught Minato's attention the most was the child's hair and eyes. Dark blue and grey, just like his. To make matters worse, the child also wore a cap practically identical to his own, albeit smaller.

"*It's been a while, hasn't it, sister?*" Minato thought in his head. He said nothing, and the two simply stared at each other for a moment. "... *Shit.*"

"There something on my face?" Minato asked, tilting his head to the side. She was startled. "I know people with blue hair and grey eyes are pretty uncommon, but get a grip, kid. You look like you've seen a ghost!" He smirked.

"Forgive me," she said quickly, and cleared her throat. "You reminded me of someone I know..."

"This old man?" Minato asked, pointing to his father's grave.

"Yes... how did you know that?"

"You look like his kid." Minato answered. "*Damn, that was stupid... I rushed this.*"

"So, you knew my father?" she pressed.

"Would I be here if I didn't?" he shot back. She narrowed her eyes.

"A boy who looks almost exactly like my father and claims to know him..." he heard her mutter. "How old are you?"

"Old enough." Minato replied.

"I want a real answer."

"Well, too bad. Why the hell should I answer to some kid?"

Didn't your parents teach you to respect your elders, huh?!"

Silence. Minato's sister lost her parents when she was three. She probably only knew them from pictures. *"It's better if she doesn't want to talk to me."*

"Boss, if that's your sister, why are you pushing her away?" David asked.

"What the hell am I supposed to say to her? 'Surprise, your big brother's been alive for ten years and was too much of a self-absorbed prick to come find you! What a coinkydink that you caught me at our parents' graves! And don't ya think it's hilarious that I can see my own grave every fucking day?!"

Minato snapped out of his thoughts and realized his sister looked like she was about to cry. "... Hey, don't start crying on me, kid. That was... probably not the best thing to say, huh?"

"... It's fine," she replied. She silently walked past him, and divided the bouquet up among the three graves.

"... Seventeen." Minato said suddenly. The girl turned towards him. "I'm seventeen. You wanted to know my age, right?"

"Then... that would make you..." she whispered, examining him over and over. From what Minato could tell, she was already seriously considering the fact that he could very well be her brother.

"The one time I show concern for someone else, I fuck up," Minato thought as he rolled his eyes. *"There's not much helping this, is there? If she's anywhere near as smart as I am, she'll see through me anyways."*

"Nao-chan," Minato said suddenly. The girl froze.

"... Who are you?" she asked.

"Minato Arisato," he said. "And you're Naoto Shirogane." He turned to the graves of his father and mother. "And there are our parents." Then he looked at his own. "And there's where I'm supposed to be."

"How?" she asked quickly.

"Come now, Nao-chan. Surely you know that morgues don't lock themselves up from the inside very tightly!" Minato chuckled. "They're not ready for a zombie apocalypse, if you ask me."

"Then, why? Why didn't you come home?" she asked again.

"Didn't feel like it," Minato said. "Without mom and dad there, I didn't want to... besides, Grandpa Johei never really like me, you know?"

Naoto's expression died. It had gone from amazement to nothing, and was slowly turning into boiling rage.

"Are you sure you wanna do this, Boss? I don't think you

can undo it..." Jack warned.

"I already told you... I'd rather not deal with her. If she hates me, so be it." Minato replied. "I mean, c'mon. I never really liked the old fart anyways. He always pushed me to do a bunch of crap I didn't want to do. Hell, that's probably why you're going around dressed up as a boy, isn't it, Nao-chan?"

Naoto's rage was becoming visibly apparent. She was breathing heavily.

"So, I figured why go back to a life where I'd have to deal with that possessive ass old man when I could just live how I wanted to, going around as the poor orphan! Trust me, that title gives you a lot of leniency with people, whether you ask for it or not." Minato continued. He was smiling at her the whole time. She was trembling. "Oh, are you cold?" he asked suddenly, pretending to be oblivious to her rage. She stepped forward.

"Hit me." Minato thought. Another step. *"Do it!"* He screamed in his mind. The final step to close the distance. *"HIT ME!"*

But she didn't. She glared at him, and then, to his surprise, hugged him and sobbed. The two stood there, frozen for a moment. "... I left you alone, dammit." Minato said quietly. "Why the hell aren't you angry at me?"

"... I am," Naoto said. "But... I know you're lying."

"... How?"

"Even now... when you hide something, you always smile and close your eyes." she said.

"... You really remember that?"

"... I tried to remember as much as possible."

"... Fuck." Minato said. Naoto looked up to at him. He was staring at the sky. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!" he yelled as Naoto backed away from him. He then broke into a maniacal laugh. "And here I thought I was being a good brother, hoping you didn't remember me!" He laughed again. He looked at Naoto again, tears in his eyes. "... You deserved better."

Minato shook his head, and stared at the three graves again. Then, he walked over to his own grave, and picked up the flowers Naoto placed. He gave them back to her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because it's about time I stop lying to myself." Minato said. He walked back to his own grave, raised his foot, and kicked it. With the Magatama feeding him power, he shattered it, much to Naoto's surprise. He walked back and gave her a big hug. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"... You act a lot like mom," Naoto said, hugging him back. After a good minute of silence, they separated. Minato looked over and saw some people coming to investigate the sudden loud noise.

"Well, Naoto, as your big brother, I have to say that you shouldn't be a vandal or run from the police," Minato began. "But as the hypocrite I am, we are going to do just that. Let's go!"

"Wha- hey!" Naoto yelled as Minato picked her up and dashed into the forest. One short dash later, and they emerged on the opposite end of the shrine. Minato put Naoto down, and knelt to dust her clothing, adjust her cap, and straighten her jacket. "I'm perfectly capable of doing this myself..." Naoto said, checking to see if anybody was watching them. There wasn't.

"Hey, if not for you, then lemme spoil you a bit for me." Minato said, finishing the job. "It's about time I made up for my failure as a brother."

"... And now you sound like dad," Naoto remarked. "Grandpa said he was always going on about pride and honor."

"He did talk about that a lot, didn't he?" Minato chuckled. There was another silence. "... Well, now that we're on good terms and all... how about I treat you to some food?"

"Actually, one of Grandpa's assistants was waiting on me by the entrance to the shrine." Naoto said. "I'll need to get back soon."

"Oh... can't you just call and say something came up?" Minato asked.

"And what would I say? I expect that you want to keep your

existence a secret from the rest of the family," Naoto answered.

"Nah," Minato said. "I was really just hiding for you. I was serious when I said me and Grandpa Johei never got along. Tell you what, you call him, and I'll talk."

Naoto nodded and dialed a number on her phone. She handed it to Minato.

"Naoto-sama? What is it?" the voice on the other end asked. It was old and overly protective. Minato recognized it instantly as his childhood butler, Kyouji.

"Hey, idiot Kyouji!" Minato yelled into the phone, shocking Naoto. "Me and sis are gonna go play for a while. Don't tell gramps for me, kay'?"

"... It's good to hear you too, Master Minato," Kyouji said. *"Our train leaves from Tatsumi Port Island station in five hours. Please make it on time."*

"I'll try," Minato said. "See you then." He hung up the phone and passed it back to a stunned Naoto. "Kyouji used to serve me first, you know?"

She shook her head. "Is that really how you talk to people?"

"It was the best way to tell him who he was speaking to." Minato said. "We've got a few hours to hang out, so as the eldest, I'll decide what to do first." He said with a grin. "We're

having some Sushi!"

"Really, Boss? Taking your kid sister to a -" David began.

"No, idiot, I mean we're having real sushi! I still haven't gotten any!" Minato responded.

"Asserting your position as eldest already," Naoto chuckled.
"Very well. Lead the way."

Minato and Naoto hopped on a train and arrived at Wakatsu a short while later. "You know, they say eating this makes you smarter." Minato said as they entered. He approached the waiter, who glanced at Naoto. "Inside this time," he said quietly. The waiter nodded, and led them to a table.

"I doubt eating a certain type of food actually increases one's intelligence," Naoto said, staring at the DH Menu that was lauded to be food made for geniuses.

"It worked for me," Minato lied. Naoto put down the menu and looked at him, but he simply kept looking over his choices. They both ended up ordering off of the DH Menu. It was actually quite tasty, though Naoto couldn't deal with the extra wasabi. Minato happily took that off her hands before she started crying. They left, and Minato turned to look at Naoto. "Your turn."

"... Actually, I was hoping we could take some pictures together." she said, looking at the floor.

"That's a lot more thoughtful than I was... I just wanted some sushi," Minato remarked in his head. "I know just the place. We can take as many as you want!" he said.

Again, he and Naoto boarded a train. He was about to start listening to music again, until Naoto tugged his arm.

"Hey," she began, "I... if it's not too much, I... want to know what our parents were really like."

"... I'm afraid that's one thing I can't help you out much with." Minato said, turning to face her. "The main things I remember about them is that mom was really eccentric, while dad was pretty stoic. He had a great smile, though, unlike me." He flashed her his regular smile, and saw her flinch. "See?"

"Yeah," she said, shaking off the shock. "Wait. If you don't remember much about them, why do you remember me?"

"Because I remembered I was supposed to get you something from here before I went back home, actually." Minato admitted. "It was like a hanging disappointment for a while. But hey, here we are, enjoying ourselves. Besides, you look just like I used to, while I look just like dad used to."

"True." Naoto admitted. They reached Paulownia Mall shortly, and Minato led Naoto to the Print Club.

"We can get a bunch of pictures here." Minato said. "Then we can hit the arcade, which is what I say we do next!"

"Arcade? You act more like a child than I do, brother..." Naoto said with a sigh.

"Would you rather go drinking and beating up delinquents in a back alley with me?" Minato asked. Naoto froze, and looked at her brother again. "One thing I want you to promise me is that you NEVER become like me. Seriously, I'm a pretty twisted guy."

"... I'll keep that in mind." Naoto said, unsure of how to respond. Minato laughed at her reaction, and the two entered the Print Club booth.

Naoto was more than surprised with Minato's interesting take on pictures. He insisted on pulling off ridiculous poses, and the first few pictures were mainly of them scrambling around the booth. However, at the end, they got a proper one of Minato happily putting Naoto's cap back on her head after it fell off due to a rather ridiculous idea of posing in a tower formation. She actually looked like a kid that time.

"Pictures galore!" Minato said as they looked over what they got.

"Thank you." Naoto said formally. Minato nudged her on the shoulder.

"The hell? Why do you gotta be so formal about it?" he asked.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't –"

"There you go again!" he cut off. "I'm not some guy to impress. I'm your BROTHER..."

"... Okay." Naoto managed.

"Now, let's see how good of a shot you are. Think you've surpassed your big brother?" Minato asked. Naoto flashed a smile that actually reminded Minato of his own, much to his surprise.

"Oh, I know I have. I won't back down from a challenge." she said. They went to the arcade, and much to their disappointment, two unused shooting games were being blockaded by a group of punks. Minato recognized a few, and made a plan.

"Stay behind me," he said quietly. Naoto did as instructed. He walked up to the group, and cleared his throat. "You mind telling me why you useless sacks of shit are in my way?" he asked casually.

"Who the fuck – AH!" the first delinquent who turned on him screamed. "Oh, sorry man, we'll bounce! Guys, let's go!" he said to the rest of the group, which had a similar reaction. "It won't happen again!" they said as they scurried away.

"... Should I even?" Naoto asked as they walked to a game.

"Like I said... NEVER become like me." Minato said, handing her a gun. It was a competitive rail shooter game. Naoto proved to be an extremely good shot, much to Minato's

surprise, and she quickly took the lead. Minato responded in kind by deciding that holding back was an insult to his sister. He increased his speed drastically.

By the end, they had the same score. While Minato had killed more, his accuracy was mediocre. Naoto almost never missed.

"Well, it seems like you're no slouch," Minato said. "Where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"Don't think you're the only one who knows a few scary things," Naoto answered with a sly smile. Minato chuckled.

"Point taken... so, what's next on the agenda?" he responded.

"Coffee would be nice."

"COFFEE?!" Minato snapped.

"... Is something wrong with that?" Naoto asked.

"WHY DON'T YOU DRINK HOT CHOCOLATE?!"

"... I actually like coffee."

"... I'm not even going to respond to that." Minato said, crossing his arms. "A kid that likes coffee... do you at least drink hot chocolate?"

"Occasionally. I try not to make it a habit."

"... I feel sorry for you. The natural evolution of hot beverages is hot chocolate, tea, and then coffee. It escalates by ranks of taste, with the taste progressively worsening as you go up... I'm still stuck at tea, actually." Minato said. From what Naoto could tell, he was being sincere.

"Remind me why you're older than me again?" Naoto asked with a grin. Minato just sighed and led Naoto to Café Chagall. They almost arrived when they were intercepted by Yukari and, oddly, Junpei.

"Not a combination I would've expected to see the public eye..." Minato thought.

"S'up dude!... You aren't trying to pick up little boys, are ya?" Junpei greeted.

"Are you blind, Stupei? That's obviously a relative!" Yukari retorted. She turned to Minato. "So who's he?"

"He? Are you blind, Yukari?" Minato thought.

"I'm his little brother," Naoto said in a deeper voice than usual. "Naoto Arisato. It's nice to meet you." She gave Minato a little knock with her elbow.

"Play along, huh? I suppose it's better nobody knows I'm a Shirogane..." Minato thought.

"Perfect timing, you two. Naoto, these are my peons." Minato said with a smile.

"Yeah, we're – hey, what'd ya say?!" Junpei said.

"You're my peons... or do I need to remind you?" Minato said, giving Junpei a deathly glare. He bowed his head, unable to meet Minato's eyes. "... As I thought. You see, a peon is basically someone who has realized that they are in no way your equal and as such simply follow you. Notice how I didn't even need to initiate conversation for them to try and speak to me."

"What the hell are you teaching him?" Yukari asked.

"Obviously, I'm teaching him how to be an utter badass like myself." Minato responded.

"You should've seen some 'punks' from Port Island Station run in utter terror when Big Bro approached them," Naoto said.

"Damn..." Junpei said, tipping his hat to Minato. "Wait... why the hell did those thugs even know you?"

"I kicked a few of their asses beforehand," Minato shrugged.

"Your powers of deduction are astoundingly pitiful," Naoto said to Junpei.

"Hey! I resent that!" he responded.

"Seriously, Junpei. You've seen Minato fight. I'm sure a couple of punks weren't that big of a deal," Yukari added.

"See, when a peon truly respects you, they get better

treatment than the ones that still delude themselves thinking they may yet surpass you," Minato said to Naoto.

"Positive reinforcement. Of course." she said. "Though, what did Stupei mean when he inquired as to whether or not you were 'picking up little boys'?"

"That's not my name!" Junpei said. He was ignored.

"You see, what differentiates the average badass from the utter badass is..." Minato said, leaning down to look Naoto in the eye. He shifted his gaze to Yukari, and then held up his hand with five fingers. "The number you hold." Naoto's eyes widened, and she startled back. Minato just laughed as she regained her composure. "But you won't have to worry about that until you're older."

"What do you mean? I-I was just... not expecting that answer," Naoto said, crossing her arms. She really did impersonate a boy quite well.

"... Sometimes, I think you're a terrible influence to everyone you know," Yukari said, resting her forehead in her hand.

"Sometimes? And here I thought it was all the time." Minato replied with a grin. Yukari turned and looked at Junpei, who just held up his hands in surrender.

"I mean, hey, I can't disagree with what he's teaching his lil' bro... As a man, these are things you gotta know." he said.

"Of course," Yukari said, rolling her eyes. "So, what are you guys doing here, anyways?"

"We were getting some coffee, actually." Naoto said. She took a breath, and realized that this was the time to solidly prove she was a boy. She walked forward, took off her hat, and grabbed Yukari's hand. She bowed with a flourish.

"Would you grace us with your beauty this fine afternoon?" she asked, kissing Yukari's hand at the end.

"Damn, you're good, sis!" Minato thought. He nodded approvingly. Junpei almost fell over from shock. Yukari blushed madly and withdrew her hand from Naoto's grasp.

"Uh, actually, um..." she started, taking a step back.

"But I'm better." Minato thought, walking past Naoto as she flicked her hair out of her face. He practically glided right into Yukari's personal space, took off his hat and put it against his chest, and then cupped her face in his hand. "Don't worry, it's just coffee... we'll only bite if you ask."

Junpei officially fell over. Yukari looked redder than a tomato as all the wrong thoughts of her, Minato, and Naoto raced through her mind. Naoto managed to maintain her act, though on the inside, she'd remember not to introduce many of her female friends to her brother.

"Yes!" Yukari squeaked, pushing Minato back. "I'll go... b-but only because your little brother asked!"

Minato and Naoto smiled at the same time, and turned to high five each other. Both of them threw their hats up in the air, spun on the balls of their feet, and donned it in a triumphant pose. Naoto leaned back and stood sideways, puffing up her chest to look manly, one hand in her pocket and the other on the cap. Minato had his back directly to hers, and held his classic aloof stance, albeit with a bit of flare in his leg positioning, one jutting forward while the other was slightly back. He also had one hand in his pocket and the other on his cap. They both glanced expectantly at Yukari.

Naoto never thought it was possible for a girl to nosebleed from thinking perverted thoughts, but Yukari proved her wrong. Her jaw dropped and she froze on the spot, blood trickling down her nose. She slowly turned around, and walked to the nearest bathroom. Junpei, who had watched the whole thing from the ground, sat there awestruck.

"...You guys are a friggin' force of nature..." he said quietly, tipping his hat to both of them as they got up.

"But of course," Naoto said as she and Minato started standing normally again. "What else did you expect from individuals of our caliber?"

"Siblings, no less." Minato added. Junpei just hung his head in defeat. He could barely match Minato. There was no way he stood a chance against him and his brother combined.

When Yukari returned, she joined the group for coffee. She paid in exchange that nobody say anything about the

nosebleed. After the drink and various questions about where Naoto lived (which she surprisingly had well thought out fake answers for), the group parted ways. Finally, Minato and Naoto made their way to Port Island station.

"... That was fun, wasn't it?" Minato asked. The two had been quiet since leaving the coffee shop.

"Yeah, it was." Naoto answered. She was deep in thought.

"You know, it's not like I'll be gone for another ten years. I live here." Minato said. She smiled.

"That's true." she said. "I don't think I'll be able to visit often, but I'll come when I can."

"Just don't forget you're actually a girl," Minato said with a chuckle. "If you keep up that act from the mall, everyone will think you're a guy."

"Heh... I'll remember." Naoto said. The two got off of the train, and Minato instantly noticed a very out of place old man in a butler outfit standing in the center of the platform.

"Been a while, hasn't it, Kyouji?" Minato asked as he and Naoto approached.

"I see you've neglected to improve your manners as usual, Master Minato," Kyouji answered.

"Ten years, and that's the first thing that comes to your mind?" Minato asked. "Same as always, I guess."

"Indeed." Kyouji said. He turned to Naoto. "Naoto-sama, it is time to say goodbye to Master Minato."

"...Why do you call him Master Minato and me Naoto-sama?" she asked.

"... Because there is still only one little boy who holds the title of 'Young Master' in my mind," Kyouji responded. He looked to Minato, but it was too late. He already locked him in a hug.

"Sentimental old fart," Minato said.

"You know me well, Young Master," Kyouji responded, hugging him back. After a quick hug and a shared nod of understanding, Minato turned and hugged Naoto.

"You leave getting in trouble to me, you hear?" Minato said.

"I doubt I'd be able to match you with Grandpa Johei around," she responded. They separated. "Stay safe."

"See you again."

With that, Kyouji and Naoto boarded a train leaving the area while Minato took one back to Iwatodai.

"... *If I died... I really would have left her alone, huh?*" Minato thought.

"If you pushed her away, you would have done worse,"
David said in his mind.

"Maybe it's for the best, Boss. Who knows? Now you can probably get a 'happy ending', don't you think?" Jack added.

"Well... looks like I have just a bit more to live for now, don't I?" Minato mused. *"Though... I still think it would have been best for us to have never met... yes, today was a failure, wasn't it?"*

His Fiends had no response. He silently returned to the dorm and signed in.

"Welcome back," Mitsuru said.

"Sometimes, I wonder if she does anything other than read on the couch," Minato thought.

"I head from Iori and Takeba that you met with your little brother today." she continued. "I must ask... are you aware of whether or not he experiences the –"

"Don't you fucking dare," Minato snapped, surprising everyone in the dorm. Akihiko, Junpei, and Yukari, who had been eating, froze to watch the scene.

"... I understand your concern, Minato. But stopping the Shadows –"

"The answer is no." Minato said. "If you want some truth, then I haven't met him in the last ten years. Yesterday, he thought I was dead."

"... Pardon me?"

"We met at my gravestone. He was dropping off flowers for me and my parents while I went to visit them. Today was the first time we'd seen each other since I was supposed to have died, so I have no idea if he has the potential." Minato explained. "And I don't plan on finding out. I'd prefer it if you didn't either."

"... Very well. It would seem you have... more issues with this arrangement that I thought. Forgive my insensitivity." Mitsuru said.

"... And forgive me for losing my temper," Minato said with a sigh. He took off his hat and went to his room.

"They seemed pretty normal at the mall..." Yukari said.

"... His lil' bro is a lot more like him than we think, ain't he?" Junpei asked.

"Probably," Akihiko said. "Minato's eccentric, but he's got a lot of things that he hides from us pretty well... I wouldn't be too surprised if his little brother, who apparently spent ten years separated from him and likely barely knew his parents, acts similarly. I can see why he snapped at Mitsuru..."

"He wants to protect him at all costs," Mitsuru said. "... You would know best, Akihiko."

"... Yeah."

"Senpai?" Junpei asked. The conversation had darkened considerably from what it was mere minutes ago.

"... Let's give them some time, Junpei," Yukari said. She excused herself, and practically dragged Junpei upstairs with her. Akihiko and Mitsuru simply exchanged a knowing glance, and went back to what they were doing. Now wasn't the time for this discussion.

Minato showered and went back to his room.

"Boss," Jack said as he appeared on his desk. **"... You okay?"**

"I just need to clear my head with some action." Minato answered. He glanced at the clock. It was almost ten. He worked out in his room until it was almost midnight, then left through the window to reach Escapade. He cut the line, simply nodding at the bouncer in a pea coat. By now, he was used to Minato enough to recognize him as a VIP. He found Dante at the bar.

"You look angry," Dante said as Minato sat down next to him.

"What's the best thing to do when angry?" Minato asked.

"The best thing to do all the time," Dante said. The Dark Hour struck.

"Exactly." Minato answered.

The duo rocked Thebel twice over that night. Minato made

some Macca, Dante showed him some pointers with a gun, and he felt closer to him overall. They returned to Escapade as usual as the Dark Hour ended, ordered strawberry sundaes, and parted. Minato didn't feel like drinking that night. He felt much better as dawn came.

19. Chapter 19

Chapter 19:

April 30th was yet another boring day. Mr. Ono talked incessantly about the Sengoku Era while wearing a traditional Japanese Kabuto when he was supposed to be teaching about 'shell middens'.

"This guy looks and acts like he has difficulty accomplishing simple tasks," Minato thought. He waited expectantly for the day to end. Thankfully, it did, and, without much else to do, he decided he would be useful in Student Council. He strolled in after class, and took his seat. Mitsuru entered shortly after, and the majority of Council members entered and took their seats robotically, not making any unnecessary movements or noises.

"Today's meeting will be shorter than usual," Mitsuru announced once the majority of members were in attendance. "My main concern is Golden Week. We have the option of hosting a small event that represents every day. Before I even begin to discuss details, I realize that this task may be unreasonable for our members who have already made plans beforehand. So, we will vote to decide our course of action. All those who wish to host the events, raise their hand."

Minato looked around the room. Out of the roughly thirty members in attendance, less than a third of them raised their hands.

"I see. Then, I urge you to use the majority of this meeting to finalize any and all necessary paperwork to be submitted to me on Friday." she said. At that, a few members left, while others pulled out documents and began to work. As the room soon turned busy, Mitsuru turned to Minato. "As Head of the Disciplinary Committee, you are exempt from having to file reports... However, I would like you to patrol the school until I have finished my paperwork." She leaned in to whisper to him. "You may use force when necessary."

"With pleasure, Mitsuru-senpai," Minato said. He got up, put on the Disciplinary Committee armband, and began his patrol.

"WHO'S ASS ARE WE KICKIN' FIRST?!" Jack roared.

"The first person unfortunate enough to take my words for granted," Minato said. He had studied Mitsuru's packet detailing which infringement merited which punishment little by little in his spare time, and he felt he had a pretty good grasp on his job. Of course, he also added in a few extra rules of his own again.

The third floor was clear. Not a soul in sight doing anything out of the ordinary. But he smelt something in the air that reminded him of Wakatsu's Divide. He followed his nose to the boys' bathroom, and chanced upon a single stall in use. There was smoke rising out of it. *"Oh, you stupid fool."*

"OPEN UP!" Minato yelled, kicking the stall in. Inside, a startled first-year girl with brown hair dropped a cigarette. She was clutching a lighter and a pack of cigarettes in her other hand.

"Oh, um, I was, haha," she started.

"I don't give a shit," Minato said, grabbing the lighter and cigarettes from her. "Possession of a lighter, possession of cigarettes, smoking on school grounds, being in the opposite gender's bathroom, and..." he looked at her again, noticing her shirt was open to the point that her bra was exposed, "indecent exposure, or, to be more direct, perversion."

"What?" she said. "That's not a – "

"No excuses," Minato said, pocketing the lighter. "You can come with me the easy way or the hard way. The choice is yours."

"... You can't do anything to me. I'm a girl! What are you gonna –"

She never finished her sentence. Minato forcefully pulled her up by the shoulder, and then threw her onto the floor. He grabbed her by one leg and dragged her from the bathroom, screaming. He continued with her to the Student Council Room, shocking everyone save Mitsuru, and he took her to the center of the room.

"Possession of cigarettes, possession of a lighter, smoking on

school grounds, being in the opposite gender's bathroom, indecent exposure, and perversion," Minato said, placing the lighter and cigarettes on Mitsuru's desk. "I was unsure of how to deal with such a severe troublemaker."

Mitsuru glanced at the disheveled girl, and put down her papers. "Everyone, leave." Mitsuru said. "I will deal with her personally."

The rest of the Student Council immediately dropped what they were doing and left as fast as they could. Minato was the last one out. The girl was looking at him with eyes begging for him to intervene, but he ignored her.

"... I pity that poor soul," David said in his mind.

"It's my job to condemn people... You should start enjoying it like Jack."

"Ooohhhh, she's gonna get a fate worse than death..."
Jack said excitedly.

Minato stood by the door with the rest of Student Council, and waited for the next ten minutes. There was no screaming. It was deathly silent. Finally, Mitsuru opened the door, a smirk on her face. "She'll be suspended for the next ten days," she said simply. Afterwards, she shifted to let the girl leave.

Even Minato was a little surprised at the state the girl was in. She was clutching the sides of her head, eyes wide and shifting uncontrollably, staring at things that weren't there. She

muttered unintelligibly, wobbled on her feet, and took pained, quick breaths. In all honesty, Minato thought some Apathy Syndrome victims looked better.

"The meeting still has another thirty minutes. Let's continue," Mitsuru said, returning to her seat. Minato left to continue with his patrol.

"... *Maybe I should've just sent her to the principal's office.*" He thought. The second floor was clear. The majority of the first floor was clear until Minato chanced upon a loud group of girls. He approached them, and noticed that it was actually three girls surrounding one girl.

Two of the three surrounding girls had black hair and wore plain uniforms. They could hide rather easily. Thankfully, the ringleader stood out like a sore thumb. She was dark-skinned, had neck-length orange hair with a short ponytail, and wore white lipstick. She wore a black vest similar to Akihiko's on top of her plain uniform (probably to denote that she was the leader, from what Minato guessed) and a black skirt with short socks. She would be easy to find.

The apparent victim, however, would be even easier for Minato. She had teal hair and wore a turtleneck of the same color, wore the basic Gekkoukan High school uniform (which Minato noticed was actually quite rare) with white tights, and just generally looked weak and almost sickly in his opinion. She would be even easier to find.

"M-M-Moriyama-san! Please, stop!" the teal-haired girl

squeaked at the leader.

"C'mon, Natsuki, she looks like she's about to cry," one of the girls to the side said.

"Oh, you want this useless thing?" Natsuki asked, dangling what looked like a USB drive in her hand. "Well, I don't know, Fuuka... maybe if you treat us to some Takoyaki, I'll think about it."

"Takoyaki? Count me in!" Minato said as he walked past Natsuki. She turned and noticed the armband he wore, and immediately froze. He took his advantage and swiftly yanked the USB out of her hand. "But I'll be confiscating this, first. I must say that extortion and theft are highly punishable offenses, Natsuki Moriyama."

She froze, and backed away. "H-h-hey, we didn't mean anything by it! Right, Fuuka-chan?" she said. "We were just playing around like always! Tell him, Fuuka!"

Minato turned and looked at Fuuka, who was eyeing her USB. "Well?" he asked. She didn't respond.

"One word, chick, c'mon!" Minato thought in his head.

"Th-they didn't..." Fuuka mumbled.

"See?! We're all friends here, right Fuuka?" Natsuki asked.

"Y-yeah..." Fuuka responded with a small nod.

"You've gotta be kidding me," Minato thought. He walked over to Fuuka and gave her a stern look, earning a whimper from her. "Let's take a little walk, shall we?" he said. It may have been a question, but his voice carried it like an order. Fuuka nodded and followed Minato to the roof in silence. He took a seat at a table, and gestured for her to sit across from him.

"Um... why did you..."

"You want this USB back, right?"

"Y-yes, please!"

"Then you'll need to answer a few questions first." Minato said. "Firstly, what's your name and class?"

"Huh?" Fuuka asked. She hadn't expected this turn of events.

"Name and class... I'm the Head of the Disciplinary Committee, you see?" Minato said, pointing to his armband. "This is just for paperwork, nothing serious."

"Okay... My name is Fuuka Yamagishi, from class 2-E."

"And how do you know Natsuki Moriyama?"

"She's... my friend."

"If I hadn't shown up, how did you plan on getting your USB back?"

Fuuka paused, and stared at her lap. "... I was going to buy

them some Takoyaki."

"... Do you end up in situations like that a lot?"

"... Maybe." Fuuka said. "I know what you're trying to do, but... they're just playing around."

"Oh, well if this is normally how you play around, there's no problem here, right?"

"R-right."

Minato sighed. *"This chick is hopeless."* he realized in his mind. It was time for a life lesson. "Ok. Just answer a few more questions and you'll be free to go."

"Ok."

"What's your favorite type of movie?"

"Umm... sci-fi? No, maybe horror?"

"Didn't expect those answers. Oh well, moving on." Minato thought. "What's your favorite food?"

"Uhh... c-curry, I guess?"

"What's your favorite flower?"

"Favorite flower?... I like... red bonsais... wait, why are you asking me these questions?"

Minato leaned forward onto the table and rested his chin on one hand, his best smirk on his face. "So I'll know that for our date tomorrow, I need to show up to the door of class 2-E with a red bonsai, then take you out for curry and watch a sci-fi horror movie with you afterwards." he said, adding a little wink at the end.

"Wait, what?!" Fuuka yelled, getting up from her seat. She looked beyond flustered. Minato chuckled and got up. He held out the USB to her.

"THAT... was playing around," he said. "Nobody actually gets hurt, nobody actually has to do something they don't want to, and we're all fun and games. Try and remember that, alright?"

Fuuka, still confused, just took her USB from him and stared at him for a bit. "Why would you say that?"

"Because if I need to intervene next time, I can't guarantee that your 'friends' will get away with just a warning." Minato said. "You should probably get going. The school officially closes its gates in twenty minutes."

"... Umm... thanks," Fuuka said with a slight bow.

"You be careful out there, kay'?" Minato said. She left, and Minato looked at his watch. Mitsuru should be finishing up, so he returned to the Student Council Room.

"Ah, Minato, right on time. I was just closing up. Good work on dealing with that smoker... It was the same one Odagiri

couldn't catch. I had spread word of his removal... it likely made the perpetrator overconfident." Mitsuru said.

"Looks like your plan worked," Minato said. "Are we heading back?"

"Yes. Would you like a ride?" Mitsuru offered.

"Of course."

As the two rode out, Minato spotted Fuuka walking from the gates of the school. He waved at her as Mitsuru roared down the street, and saw her watch the two of them with a confused look on her face.

One rather crazy joyride later, and the two entered the dorm feeling rather invigorated. "Oh, hey!" Yukari said to them as they entered. They nodded in response.

"Hey, Minato! I heard that some people saw you take a girl to the rooftop with you alone today! Don't tell me you're already looking at new horizons, man!" Junpei said, a bit angry.

"No. She was a bullying victim in denial. I was helping her realize her situation." Minato said. Junpei blanked. "... You know, I actually take my job as Head of the Disciplinary Committee seriously, Junpei."

"Oh? And what of the perpetrators?" Mitsuru asked.

"She insisted that they were her friends. I let them go, but if I catch them again... well, you know."

"Excellent."

"... Sometimes, I wonder about our school." Yukari said.

"I'll make some dinner today. I have a craving for curry." Minato said. He got to work, and surely enough, he made curry for SEES. After a meal and a shower, Minato decided to study until the Dark Hour in his room.

"Hey, Boss," Jack began. He and David were in figurine form, sparring on the desk. **"What are you planning later tonight?"**

"I'll go see Shin," Minato responded. "I haven't trained properly in a while... and my Social Link with him is still at Rank 1, despite training a few times. I think I need to just talk to him more."

"... Try not to get your tongue ripped out too often." David warned.

"You don't to tell me what to worry about... I am the one that's experienced all of those deaths, after all." Minato said with a shudder.

The Dark Hour came, and Minato bolted out of his window. He called on his Magatama and made it to the back alleys of Tatsumi Port Island in less than ten minutes. Shin was meditating there, as usual.

"Hey, Shin," Minato said as he skidded to a halt in front of

him. "How's it going?"

"Ready to train?" he asked.

"Gimme a bit... I used my Magatama to get here." Minato said.

"What to talk about with this guy... I don't really know him..."

"... I guess you could ask about his past?" Jack suggested. ***"Just don't be surprised if he blows you off."***

"Wait for your strength to return." Shin said.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you for a bit." Minato said.

"I'm listening."

"I just wanted to know... what's your story?"

"... It is a long one." Shin said. "I cannot tell you it entirely in one sitting."

"It's not like I plan on no longer training anytime soon." Minato said with a shrug.

"Hmph... Then listen well." Shin began. "I have told you that I am neither Man nor Fiend... this was not always the case. I was once just like you, a high school student, unaware of higher powers or other planes of existence. But, that all changed. One of my teachers, Yuko Takao, became injured during cultist riots. I, along with two of my friends, Chiaki

Tachibana and Isamu Nitta, went to visit her in the hospital."

"Oh, you have friends?" Minato asked. "Where are they?"

"Everyone I mention in this story save Lucifer and Paimon are dead." Shin answered.

"Oh..." Minato said.

"Regardless, inside the hospital, I found a man named Hikawa performing a demon summoning ritual. He would have killed me then, if my teacher had not intervened. She told me that an event known as the Conception was about to occur."

"Conception?"

"The rebirth of the world." Shin answered. "Only those who remained in that hospital would survive the destruction of the old world and the creation of the Vortex World, a world filled with demons. Needless to say, I was knocked out during the event. I was woken up by Lucifer and Paimon, though I didn't know who they were at the time. He gave me this." Shin gestured to the spike that protruded from his neck. "It transformed me into Hitoshura... a being without limits."

"... You can keep growing stronger indefinitely?" Minato asked.

"Yes. I was weak when the Vortex World was created. Weaker than you. But I trained, and surpassed everyone else." Shin said. "You may do the same someday."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And thou art I...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

"That's enough talk for one day," Shin said, rising to his feet. "We train."

Minato nodded, and got ready with Shin. They teleported to the strange wasteland Minato was getting used to seeing, and he called on his full power. The tattoo grew out of his chest once more, and he turned to Shin. They simply nodded at each other.

Minato was certain that he could now fight like a character straight out of Dragon Ball Z. He dashed around at superhuman speeds, threw punches that left craters in the ground without needing to actually connect, and could even fight decently in midair. Shin now made himself a moving target, and occasionally went in for an attack of his own, forcing Minato to stay on his guard.

As the two raced around the wasteland, Minato became more adept at controlling the strength of his step. He no longer wasted extra energy that caused him to leave huge marks where he had run. There was an ideal technique to running that he mastered quickly, and became accustomed to fighting immediately after slowing. He still wasn't good enough to avoid death completely, and felt his fair share of limb loss,

eye gouging, neck crushing, jaw splitting, and spine shattering that night. He was actually beginning to hold his screams of pain in as he lost an arm.

"You still close your eyes when under severe pain." Shin said, following up his arm rip by plunging his other arm into Minato's side, grabbing his pelvic bone. "You only close your eyes in a fight when you die." he added, ripping the pelvic bone out and then kicking Minato in the stomach, sending his dying body flying. Minato felt a surge of pain that shut down all of his other senses.

"That was definitely from a manga..." Minato thought as he felt his wounds regenerate. He got back up, ready to fight, when Shin teleported behind him and grabbed his shoulder. They disappeared and reappeared in Tatsumi Port Island.

"You have five minutes to return to your dorm." Shin said. "In your awakened form, you can make it."

"What? I need to change back and be in my room! I might not shatter concrete when I run, but I'm pretty certain I'll break glass." Minato said.

"... You have a point. Get changed. I'll take you there directly." Shin said. Minato did as instructed, and Shin picked him up from his collar.

"Hey, what?!" Minato screamed. He had stopped pulling on his Magatama, and was in no shape to fight Shin again. However, Shin simply dashed off, carrying Minato with him as he went,

and, after a sequence of high-speed building jumping and street dashing, Shin slowed down in front of Minatodai dormitory. "I go in from my –" Minato protested, but Shin simply kept walking forward, dragging a frazzled Minato along the ground.

The Dark Hour ended when the Dorm's front door opened. Shin, his tattoo illuminating his face even though it was obscured by his hoodie, walked in, dragging Minato along the ground with him. "Next time, don't expect a free ride." Shin said, sliding Minato towards the stairs.

"... Sure thing." Minato said, getting to his feet. "Thanks, though, sensei."

"... Sensei? It's the first time someone's called me that." Shin said. He turned, put his hands in his pockets, and disappeared before their eyes. Minato could have sworn he smirked.

Minato turned to walk up the stairs, where he encountered Akihiko.

"Oh, Minato... When did you leave your room?" he asked.

"I left through the window, actually. I just came in through the door on instinct." Minato said.

"... And what were you doing outside during the Dark Hour?"

"Hey, I didn't steal anything if that's what you're wondering. I took a run around the town. Can't exactly do cardio in the

dorm, can I?" Minato asked with a shrug.

"Oh. Well, tell people if you're going to do that... you should know how strange it is for the door to open so close to the Dark Hour ending." Akihiko said.

"Which is why I usually go in through my window." Minato said.

"... You know how shady that seems, right?"

"... Old habits die hard."

"Well... try to keep your cardio to the morning." Akihiko said.
"Besides, what if you run into a Shadow out there?"

"I ran into some. I still have this." Minato said, pulling his Evoker. "I'm always strapped, remember?"

"Sometimes I forget how much of a survivalist you are," Akihiko said with a sigh. "Anyways, I'm going to bed. I have a check-up tomorrow near the end of school. I asked Junpei to bring me something... if you're free, would you mind joining him?"

"No problem." Minato said. "Well, good night."

Minato returned to his room, and made some tea. It was time for rest until tomorrow.

20. Chapter 20

Chapter 20: Bad Company

Author Note: I forgot to title Chapter 19. For now, just go with 'Mr. Managi' as the title.

Also, an update on the Fiend's Skills:

Jack – Danse Macabre, Mutilate (A single slash attack with a chance of causing fear on all non-targeted enemies), Tarukaja, Demon's Cut (Increased Slash Attack)

David – Devil's Trill, Sonic Blight (Chance of Stun, all enemies), Sukunda, Invigorate 1

Minato made breakfast again for SEES, and realized that the kitchen had been restocked.

"I took the liberty of maintaining our supplies last night," Mitsuru said as she saw Minato looking over the additions. "I trust you don't mind."

"Not at all..." Minato said. He picked up a few of the new spices. Almost all of them had classy names in foreign languages. *"I just hope I actually know what I'm doing with*

these..."

Mitsuru rode to school, Akihiko left early, and Minato was stuck taking the train with Junpei and Yukari.

"Hey, looks like we juniors finally get our time to shine!" Junpei said excitedly.

"Time to shine...?" Yukari asked.

"When they see us three walkin' through the gates, they'll think Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai are old news!" he said. "It's the birth of a new Heavenly King!"

"With an attitude like that, it's more likely an abortion," Minato said.

"The hell?"

"Sometimes, I wonder why we put up with you, Stupei..." Yukari said.

"Hey... that was just mean, ya know?" Junpei said, lowering his head.

"Tell you what," Minato said, putting a hand on Junpei's shoulder, "stick with me when we walk to school. People that disrespect my eternal rival disrespect me, right?"

"Heh, you know it!" Junpei said, perking up.

"Ya know, he acts like this because you encourage it..."

Yukari said.

"I think you're just jealous it won't just be me and you holding hands as we walk into school," Minato said with a smirk.

"...Forget it," Yukari said, looking away.

And so, Minato, Junpei, and Yukari entered the school gates.

"Hey, why's that kid hanging around Minato-dono?" they heard a few people whisper.

"He must've become his peon... no way Minato-dono actually looks at him like an equal..." a few boys said. Minato glanced at Junpei, who's mood seemed to be dying with each passing comment.

"Hey, Junpei!" Kenji said, approaching the group. His advance was blocked by a group of the Four Heavenly Kings cult students.

"You have no right to approach Minato-dono and Yukari-sama!" a student in front of Kenji roared.

"A loser like you should get lost!" a girl said.

"These fuckers are vicious." Minato thought. "I should probably stop this before he gets beat up."

"Bullying is a punishable offense," Minato said to the crowd of cultists. They turned and quickly bowed to him.

"Forgive our foolishness, Minato-dono!"they chanted in unison.
"But, this commoner –"

"You mean Kenji?" Minato asked. "He's with me and Junpei.
You guys are in the way."

Immediately, the crowd dispersed, all of them looking like they had just stifled a baby in its sleep. Kenji just watched wide-eyed as Minato motioned for him to approach.

"Woah... hey, thanks Minato," Kenji said.

"Thank Junpei." Minato said. "You wanted to talk to him, right?"

"Dude..." Junpei said, tipping his hat to Minato.

"Those idiots were starting to piss me off. It was funny at first, but they need some lives." Minato said. "I'll be going. Later."

As Minato took his leave, Junpei and Kenji broke into conversation. Yukari, who simply observed the situation, stared at Minato as he left. "... Is he really a good guy?" she whispered.

At lunch, Minato ate in class with Junpei. Yukari approached the two of them.

"Hey! It's getting warmer, isn't it? Well, it is MAY already... It's amazing how time flies..." she said.

"Time never waits. It delivers us all to the same end." Minato said, staring at the window. "You can't plug your ears or cover your eyes."

"... What, man?" Junpei asked.

"That was something I heard the day I came to the dorm." Minato said.

"From who?"

"A little boy with blue hair like mine who wore prisoners' clothing." Minato said.

"... Wait a minute, you were serious about that?!" Yukari asked.

"Serious about what?" Junpei asked.

"I told Yukari about this kid before... but she thought I was trying to scare her." Minato explained. "Who knows? Maybe he'll give her a visit next."

"What?! No way! You're still just messing with me, aren't you?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not." he said, flashing his creepy smile.

"Augh, why did I even bother?" Yukari groaned. "Anyways, you know Akihiko-senpai is having a check-up near the end of school, right?"

"Oh yeah, I was just about to tell you about that. He asked me to bring him something." Junpei said.

"He told me about it last night. He said I should come if I'm not too busy." Minato said. "I think I'll tag along. Student Council doesn't meet today, anyways."

"Cool." Yukari said.

"W-wait a minute..." Junpei said.

"What? Is there a problem?" Yukari asked.

"He asked ME, ya know..." Junpei complained.

The school day passed by quickly, and the three of them made their way to the hospital Akihiko was having his check-up, Tatsumi Memorial. Junpei was the only one who actually knew Akihiko's room, and led them to it. They opened the door, finding not Akihiko, but the maroon pea coat bouncer Minato was used to seeing when he entered Escapade.

"I'll take two bottles of brandy and a strawberry sundae," Minato said as they entered. The man turned around, a suspicious look in his eyes, but he froze when he saw Minato.

"... This ain't the goddamn bar. And I'm the bouncer, you drunken dumbass." he said.

"And here I thought you were a dealer, with that shady ass coat on all day." Minato chuckled.

"Tch. The hell are you here for?" he asked, glaring right at Minato. Akihiko walked into the room before Minato could respond.

"What are all of you guys doing here?" he asked them.

"W-We came to see you!" Yukari squeaked. Minato and the stranger were still glaring at each other. "But... it doesn't look like anything's wrong with you."

"I'm just here for a check-up..." Akihiko said, looking at Minato and the bouncer. Minato's cocky smile expressed his expectation of confrontation. The bouncer looked extremely alert. They were still glaring at each other. "... What are you two doing?"

"Aki..." the bouncer said. "You know this kid?"

"This is Minato Arisato. He's my underclassman." Akihiko said.

"And active field leader of SEES." Minato added. Yukari and Junpei turned on him, but Akihiko didn't move. "So, Hierophant user... mind introducing yourself?"

"Tch... I should've expected as much." the bouncer said.
"Shinjiro Aragaki."

"Shinji?" Akihiko asked. It wasn't like Shinjiro to introduce himself.

"Wait, this guy's a Persona user?" Junpei asked.

"Aki, I don't know where you met this kid," Shinji began, "but you be careful around him. I know the people he goes around with at night... they aren't the type of people you want to get involved with."

"Then you should know I'm no normal Persona user," Minato said. He willed Jack and David into existence behind him as oversized floating skulls.

"Tch. I never liked you anyways," Shinjiro said, reaching into his coat. Minato put his hand on his Evoker.

"Hey, that's enough!" Akihiko said, moving towards Minato. He was too late. Minato rushed past him, grabbed Shinjiro's collar, and put his Evoker to his own head.

"Trafuri!" Minato shouted. The two of them, along with Jack and David's giant skulls, disappeared in a flash of blue light, leaving the room without a trace.

"What the hell? Who was that, senpai?" Junpei asked.

"... That was Shinji. He's a Persona user that quit SEES because of... personal problems." Akihiko said. "But how do he and Minato know each other?" Nobody had an answer for that. The three of them left immediately to find them.

On the hospital's roof, Minato and Shinjiro reappeared, and Shinjiro shoved Minato away from him. "Arrogant shit," Shinjiro said, drawing an Evoker of his own.

"Now we don't have an excuse to hold back," Minato said.

"Then don't complain after I've kicked your ass," Shinjiro said. He put his Evoker lazily to the side of his head. "Castor!" he yelled, pulling the trigger.

Castor was a behemoth of a Persona. It was a white-faced man clad in black armor with long blonde hair, riding an incomplete metallic horse with a spike protruding from its head. The man had what looked like a turret protruding from his chest, and the horse, incomplete as it was, looked more like a stylized broomstick, though much deadlier.

"Fancy," Minato said, putting his Evoker to his head. "Jack the Ripper!"

Jack appeared, larger than normal. It looked like his stronger bond with Lucifer had increased the size of his Fiends as well.

"I'll gut you like a fish!" Jack cackled, drawing two cleavers from his coat.

"A talking Persona? Gimme a break," Shinjiro said. He focused on Minato. "Fatal End!"

Castor leaned back, its turret firing off once into the air, before charging forwards.

"Mutilate!" Minato yelled. The two Personas collided, Jack's twin cleavers clashing against Castor's horn. The impact shook the roof, but Minato noticed that Jack was having

difficulty holding his ground.

"*Stronger than I thought,*" Minato noted. He ran forward at Shinjiro, who pulled what looked like a black star charm out of his pocket. He immediately recognized it as Lucifer's handiwork. "*Upping the ante?*"

Shinjiro crushed the charm in his hand, and it grew into a full-sized axe, double-sided and made of obsidian. "You ready for this?" Shinjiro asked, raising the axe lazily over his shoulder.

"At least I know this'll be fun!" Minato said, putting his hand to the Dimensional Compactor. He summoned his saber, and charged underneath the clashing Personas. He took a swing at Shinjiro, who responded by dropping his axe down on the strike, deflecting it easily. He moved to take a second swipe at Minato, but had to raise his axe back up to block Minato's follow up. This hit was much stronger than the last, and pushed Shinjiro back.

"The hell?!" he said, catching his footing. Castor and Jack disappeared behind them as the two glared at each other, Shinjiro scowling while Minato smiled madly.

"Well? Don't tell me that's all you've got," Minato taunted. Shinjiro grit his teeth and walked forward. Minato did the same.

Steel hit steel when they swung their weapons at each other. They were pushing each other back and forth, one hand on their weapon, the other bringing their Evoker to their head.

"CASTOR!"

"JACK!"

The Personas emerged once more and clashed above their masters. Minato dueled with Shinjiro, employing his hit-and-run tactics he learned from Shin. Shinjiro was being pushed back. Above, Castor was attacking Jack relentlessly, who, unlike Minato, was slowly being overwhelmed by sheer force. As the two battles continued, Shinjiro tried to throw a sucker punch at Minato when their weapons clashed. Minato dodged and put a hard kick into the side of Shinjiro's leg, breaking his stance and concentration. Castor faltered, and Jack took his opportunity to bury a cleaver deep into its shoulder

Minato saw Shinjiro recoil from the damage taken by his Persona, and ran in for a free punch. Shinjiro recovered quickly, and countered Minato with a powerful headbutt. Both of their Personas disappeared, and both fighters staggered backwards. Shinjiro wiped some blood from the corner of his mouth, and Minato rubbed his forehead, shaking his head. He started to laugh maniacally.

"... Crazy bastard," Shinjiro said, raising his axe. Minato stretched and lazily let his sword hang to the side.

"Hey... let's make this more interesting," Minato said, an idea suddenly crossing his mind. "If I win this fight, you join SEES again. If you win, I'll do any one thing you want me to do."

"Why those conditions?" Shinjiro asked.

"To make it fair... after all, I don't think you just up and quit SEES because somebody just hurt your feelings." Minato said.

Behind them, the hospital's roof door opened, and Akihiko, Junpei, and Yukari rushed to the two of them.

"What the hell are you two doing?!" Akihiko asked.

"I told you this kid was trouble," Shinjiro said. "I'll get rid of him here."

"What the heck, man?!" Junpei shouted, staring at their weapons and the marks on the floor.

"Are you guys seriously going to fight here?!" Yukari asked.

"So, are you agreeing to those conditions, or not? I don't want to fight you for no reason," Minato said.

"... Ten days." Shinjiro said. "You know where to find me at night... I'll deal with you then."

"How exciting!" Minato said. He put his saber back in the Dimensional Compactor and hid his Evoker. Shinjiro's axe turned back into the little black charm and he put his Evoker back into his coat.

"Aki, you watch this kid, you hear?" Shinjiro said as he walked past the group. He left the roof, leaving the SEES members confused.

Akihiko immediately walked up to Minato and grabbed him by the collar. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" Akihiko screamed in his face. "That was my –"

"Brother, right?" Minato asked. Akihiko pushed him backwards. "... I don't see why you're getting so worked up. I'm helping you out."

"By having a death match with him?!"

"I never said I was going to kill him."

"Bullshit! You two fight with lethal weapons and shake the entire hospital, and you expect me to believe that was just a game?"

"Well, it's not like we had practice weapons on hand." Minato said with a shrug. Akihiko walked up to him and punched him square in the face. He stepped back, but oddly, he noticed that it only stung a little.

"Are you even being serious?!" Akihiko asked.

"I'm trying to lighten the mood," Minato answered, fixing his hair.

"Tch." Akihiko said. He clenched his fists and looked at Minato disapprovingly. "... I thought you knew what you were doing. Obviously, I made a mistake in trusting you."

CRACK!

The Emperor Social Link has been Reversed!

"*What?!*" Minato screamed in his mind as he saw the card flip over in his head.

"If I so much as see you act out of line, I'll be the one to put you down." Akihiko warned. He turned, and turned left the roof.

Minato turned to Junpei and Yukari, who both looked confused. "... Let him go." Minato said, shaking his head. "In ten days, I'll fix this."

"You're really gonna fight him?!" Yukari screamed, turning on him.

"Dude..." Junpei said, shaking his head.

"I'm asking you to trust me on this." Minato said. "... You guys should go with Akihiko-senpai. I'll meet you back at the dorm later."

"I can't -"

"Yuka-tan, let's give em' some space, huh?" Junpei interrupted. He gave Yukari a serious look, oddly enough, and managed to get her to leave with him.

"Boss, that change wasn't too good," David said in his mind.

"Yeah, that's definitely a problem. I can already feel

something rebelling in here,” Jack said. Minato checked on his Personas, but found that his newest one, Oberon, wouldn't heed his call at all. He was an Emperor.

“Shit. Looks like I can't use Emperors for a while,” Minato thought. He cursed under his breath as he offered Oberon to the Card of the Beast. He left the hospital after a while, but not before encountering Fuuka. She looked like she was in for a visit. “Didn't I tell you to stay outta trouble?” he asked as he approached her.

“Huh? Oh, Arisato-san...” Fuuka said from her chair. “I'm just getting a check-up.”

“Oh? That's good to hear,” Minato said.

“... Why are you here?” she asked.

“I was visiting my senpai, actually,” Minato said. “Mind if I join you?”

“Um, sure, I guess.” Fuuka said. Minato took a seat next to her. “Was your senpai injured?”

“A while ago. He was actually having a check-up today as well,” Minato said. He looked over and noticed she seemed a bit nervous by his sudden appearance. It was time for some fun. “... But you know, I'm sorry I couldn't make our date.”

“... You're just messing with me again, aren't you?” Fuuka asked. She cracked a little smile.

"Is that so bad?" Minato asked. Fuuka actually laughed a little. "See? We're all fun and games." They became silent again.

"... Why'd you listen... when I asked you not to do anything to Moriyama-san?" Fuuka asked.

"I'm not exactly helping you if I do something you don't think is right, am I?" Minato replied.

"But... your job as Head of the Disciplinary Committee... won't you get in trouble for lying?"

"I might." Minato said. "But hey, knights have to get into some trouble when saving a princess, right?"

"P-princess?" Fuuka asked. He had caught her off guard this time, and smirked.

"Don't like that title?" Minato mused.

"It's not that..." Fuuka answered. She looked around. "I just don't think knights and princesses really exist anymore... besides, Arisato-san... you don't really act like a knight."

Minato chuckled. "Well, you're definitely right about me not acting knightly." he said. "But who said modern knights were paragons of chivalry, or modern princesses lived in secluded castles? I think looking at everything like we're still in the Middle Ages is a bit... well, stupid."

"... Huh. I guess that makes sense." Fuuka said. "... You have a funny way of looking at life, Arisato-san."

"Please, call me Minato... The only time people call me Arisato is when they're angry with me, really." he said, frowning at his realization at the end.

Fuuka giggled. "Okay... Minato-kun."

"Fuuka! Where are you?" a woman's voice called.

"Oh, those are my parents." Fuuka said, getting up quickly. "I'll be going, Minato-kun."

"Enjoy yourself, Fuuka-chan," Minato said as she left. He waited for a few minutes, and then left the hospital to return to the dorm. He walked in to fall victim to Akihiko and Mitsuru's glares. He signed-in, and turned to face them.

"Arisato," Mitsuru began.

"Yup, only when they're angry with me." Minato confirmed.

"It would seem you not only know Shinjiro, but fought against him with your Persona." she said. "While I would normally have Executed you on the spot, as the active leader of SEES, I'll give you a chance to explain yourself."

"If I win against Shinjiro the next time we fight, he will, by honor, be forced to rejoin SEES," Minato said bluntly. "If I lose, I will likely die. It is a one-on-one match set to take place in ten days."

He left his two stunned senpai in the lounge and nodded to Junpei and Yukari. Junpei shot him a thumbs-up, but Yukari

was just as shocked as Mitsuru and Akihiko. He showered, retired to his room, and was about to study until he heard a knock on his door.

"Hey, dude. It's Junpei. I figured I should fill you in on the stuff senpai told us at the hospital." he said. "Mind if I come in?"

Minato responded by opening the door for him. "What'd he say?" he asked as he motioned for Junpei to join him.

"Hey, Junpei, how's it going?" Jack asked from on the table in figurine form.

"Woah, what the hell?!" Junpei shouted as he went to take Minato's chair.

"Don't worry about them. You've seen them in their full form," Minato said. "I let them run around in here... it's pretty noisy when they're in my head all day."

"And don't be surprised with us knowing you... we can see and hear everything Boss does." David said.

"...That's really creepy, dude." Junpei said with a gulp. He turned to Minato, who just shrugged. "... Anyways, remember that thing Akihiko-senpai wanted me to bring for him? It was just a grip trainer or something. Anyways, he said he should be able to join us in Tartarus in the next two weeks or so... but I don't know if that's really good news now."

"Don't worry about it," Minato said. "Once I get Shinjiro back

in SEES, he'll be fine."

"True... but how'd you know him, anyways?" Junpei asked.

"...*Hmm. I wonder if Junpei could learn some sword fighting tips from Dante?*" Minato thought. "Tell you what... go put on some nice clothes. We're going to Club Escapade. I'll tell you there."

"Wait, what? Are you serious? How are we supposed to get in?!" Junpei blurted.

"Trust me, I've got this." Minato said. He shoed Junpei away, put on a formal grey jacket and black pants, added his cap and a small scarf, and went to the lounge. Junpei was wearing an open leather jacket with fur trimming over a plain blue shirt, his usual cap, and jeans. He also wore a simple silver chain, which Minato thought did his whole outfit justice. "Good. You're about to see how Minato spends the night."

The two of them marched down the stairs, Junpei with a bit of swagger in his step, and passed their surprised dorm mates.

"Junpei?" Yukari asked, apparently not able to recognize him in that outfit.

"S'up, Yuka-tan?" he asked as callously as he could. "We're gonna go hit Escapade... I'd offer you an invitation, but I don't know if you'd be able to get in."

"... Forget it," Yukari said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, well... getting a reaction from Yukari is a big improvement, Junpei," Minato thought. On the walk to the mall, he made a call to the number that last dialed him. Surely enough, Paimon answered.

"Ah, Minato, how may I help you?" she asked cheerfully.

"Tonight, I'm bringing a friend to Escapade. I was wondering if you had anybody who could entertain him for a while." Minato said.

"Oh. Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy."

"I'll have someone with me... would you like me and Elizabeth to accompany you as well?"

"I think you'd like that, actually." he mused. Paimon laughed. "Sure, you guys can come. Just know that we'll be busy around midnight."

"Not a problem. I'll meet you there."

Minato hung up the phone, and turned to Junpei, who was fiddling with his jacket nervously. "We're going to meet up with some friends tonight... but when I tell you to come see somebody with me, you drop whatever you're doing and follow me, got it?" Minato said.

"Uh, sure, dude..." Junpei said.

"You alright?" Minato asked.

"... I don't really want to... drink anything, you know?" Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"They serve non-alcoholic beverages, you know. Don't worry about it." he said. Junpei didn't look too happy. "I won't be drinking too much alcohol. Besides, we both need to stay sharp for the surprise I've got for you."

"... I don't know if I should be scared or excited at this point." Junpei said. Minato laughed.

"Neither do I, actually." he answered. "But I hope you're a good kisser."

"What?!" Junpei screamed. They had reached Paulownia Mall. Minato and Junpei saw Paimon, still in her shawl, along with Elizabeth, and another woman waving at them from in front of the fountain. The third woman dressed in all white, with short shorts, a vest that only reached her belly button, gloves, and short boots. She had long, sleek black hair that went down beyond her neck.

"Boss, you do know that's a demon in disguise, right?"
Jack asked.

"I figured as much... but, as long as she doesn't steal his soul or anything, Junpei should be fine." Minato responded in his head.

"Minato! Shall we begin our night?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, let's go inside already. I'm sick of wearing this shawl around," Paimon added.

"Dude... what the heck?" Junpei whispered, his eyes popping out of his head.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?" Minato asked with a smile.

"I'm Lily," the girl said, looking over Minato and Junpei. She turned to face Junpei. "You must be Junpei... I've heard so much about you."

Junpei froze, but Minato gave him a quick nudge. "But of course," Junpei managed to say, straightening his hat. "Shall we, Minato?"

"We shall," Minato said. The five of them again cut the line, and Junpei almost panicked when he saw Shinjiro. Shinjiro just shook his head as he let them pass by, but otherwise ignored them completely.

Paimon took off her shawl once they reached the VIP section, and Junpei was stunned. He was immobilized for a good minute trying to comprehend the transformation. He was snapped out of it when he realized she had already moved on to offering a Minato a cigar.

"I'd rather not... health concerns and all," Minato said. Paimon

almost frowned, but Minato kissed her before it could happen. Elizabeth grabbed his attention, and he turned to kiss her as well. Junpei was awestruck until he realized that Lily was rather close to him.

"I'd like to know just how much of a man this Junpei really is..." she said, pressing herself against him. Junpei lost nearly all of his rationality at that moment.

A session of making out in the VIP section. A session of dancing that involved rapid partner swapping, which Junpei handled quite well. A session of drinking. Another session of making out. Lily had insisted on swapping places at the time, which Paimon happily agreed to. Elizabeth was less eager, but Junpei didn't mind. All he cared about was that he got to make out with Paimon and Lily at the same time at one point, which, in his mind, allowed him to die happily. Even more dancing, and Minato proved he could now deal with three girls at once on the dance floor. Another round of drinking. Minato looked at his watch, and saw it was five minutes to midnight.

"Hey," he said, moving away from Elizabeth and Lily. "Junpei, let's go get something to eat."

Paimon got off of Junpei, and he snapped to attention, glancing at his watch. "Oh, yeah... I could use a bite." he said with a nod.

The two of them took their leave and went to the bar. Minato found Dante easily enough, his gigantic guitar case sticking out from the crowd. He sat down next to him, with Junpei to

his left.

"Three strawberry sundaes," Minato said to the bartender. He nodded, and Junpei gave him a curious look. "Dante, I brought a guy I think you could help out."

"A guy? Heh... what's he need?" Dante asked.

"Some training... We'll just work outside tonight." Minato said.

"What are you talkin' about? It's almost midnight." Junpei said, giving Minato a little nudge. The strawberry sundaes came.

"So finish your meal before." Dante said. He and Minato ate their sundaes casually, while Junpei wolfed his down, scared of it becoming the Dark Hour before he could finish.

When midnight struck, the Dark Hour came, and Escapade was painted its familiar sickly green. Junpei turned to see Minato and Dante both get up and stretch a bit. "Woah, he can move?" Junpei asked.

"Do you have to talk like I'm not here?" Dante asked. He opened his guitar case and pulled out his ridiculous sword.

"Dante's gonna teach you how to fight like a grown-up with a sword, Junpei." Minato said. He pulled Juzumaru from the Dimensional Compactor. "Outside, of course."

"... No friggin' way," Junpei said. He was staring at Dante. "This guy's a bonafide badass..."

"Actually, I prefer the term professional ass-kicker," Dante said, walking towards the door. "C'mon. We'll see what you got first."

The trio walked outside to see Shinjiro, who was sitting on the bench by the fountain. "The hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Relax, kid," Dante said. "He wants a few lessons."

"Wanna join in?" Minato asked.

"Tch... Do whatever. Just don't wreck the damn place, or all of us are in for some shit." Shinjiro said, turning his head to face the other way.

"Alright, Junpei. Show us what you've got," Minato said, handing him Juzumaru. Junpei gripped the hilt tightly, and Dante turned, sword resting on his shoulder.

"Let's make it quick," he said.

"You asked for it," Junpei said, lowering his cap. He charged in and did a jumping slash. Dante raised his sword, and blocked it. He didn't even flinch when the swords connected. Junpei landed, and swung widely. Dante parried with ease, and then went to strike Junpei. Junpei managed to block, but he was knocked back.

"Can't you summon like Minato?" Dante asked.

"I don't have my –"

"Use mine," Minato said, walking over to Junpei.

"... Well, if you insist." he said, taking it. He put it to his head.
"HERMES!"

The metallic man appeared and dove in to attack Dante. Again, he blocked with his sword, but took a step back from the collision. Hermes swooped around for another attack, but Dante pulled out his pistols and peppered it with bullets. It vanished, and Junpei's eyes widened.

"Dude, are you trying to kill me?" he asked Dante.

"I won't shoot you... well, I might." Dante said, rubbing his head with one of his pistols. He put them away again. "C'mon, we still have most of the hour. You wanted to train? Let's train."

Minato watched as Junpei and Dante fought for the next forty-five minutes. He noticed that now, Junpei, though he maintained his baseball stance, now struck harder, faster, and was more agile. He could even take quick swings and stabs with Juzumaru, which was actually a rather heavy weapon, using only one hand if necessary. Junpei had even managed to fight alongside Hermes, which Minato thought would have been impossible since Hermes required so much focus to control during its strafing flight attacks.

As the Dark Hour drew to a close, a rather exhausted Junpei and amused Dante entered Escapade. Minato took his Evoker back, and the trio took their seats. The club came back to life.

"Three more strawberry sundaes," Dante said as the bartended walked back over to them. He took their old bowls, and left to get them new ones.

"Dang, dude... you're a friggin' beast," Junpei said to Dante.

"More like a devil," Minato joked.

"Hmph. It's funny that you asked me to train somebody else today. I thought we were just going to go run around that tower again," Dante said.

"That gets boring pretty quickly, doesn't it?" Minato asked.
"Besides, at least now you finally got to fight something with a brain."

"I won't even bother asking," Junpei said as the strawberry sundaes arrived. They ate casually again.

"I take it he's part of that little team you told me about?" Dante asked.

"Yeah. We're getting rid of that stupid extra hour." Minato said. "Can't have people slacking now, can I?"

"Whatever it takes, huh? That's a good way to think about it." Dante said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana...

"You gonna bring anyone else here to train?" Junpei asked.

"You didn't think I just brought you here to train, did you?" Minato replied. "We're still having fun."

"... You got that right," Junpei said, tipping his hat to him. "And hey, Dante. Thanks for the fight."

"Don't mention it," he said. He got up, and walked out of Escapade.

"Let's not keep those girls waiting too long," Minato said finishing his sundae.

"You don't have to tell me twice," Junpei said.

A triumphant return to the VIP section, followed by more making out. More dancing, drinking, and then more dancing while making out. Minato had forgotten that Junpei wasn't able to function without rest, however, and found that he was slowing down considerably. He looked at his watch, and it was almost three in the morning.

"Hey, Junpei. We should probably head back," he said, keeping Elizabeth and Paimon at bay.

"... Oh, yeah. It's late, huh?" Junpei said, almost yawning.

"Oh, leaving so soon?" Lily said, clutching Junpei's arm. He

just smiled and nodded at her, unable to think of much else.

"Ah, it was fun, wasn't it?" Elizabeth said, backing away from Minato with Paimon.

"Heh, we'll be around," Minato said. He got Junpei to stop kissing Lily, and led him out of Escapade. They made it back to the dorm by half past three, and Junpei crashed onto his bed as soon as possible. Minato showered, went to his room, and made some tea.

"Funny... I'll be ready for school after a night at Escapade. Such a strange feeling."

21. Chapter 21

Chapter 21: Pre-Golden Week

Minato walked up to Junpei's door and knocked. It was 7:15 a.m. and he hadn't stirred at all.

"I probably should have left with him earlier. It seems the time to take responsibility for my actions has come sooner than I thought," Minato thought. He started banging on his door. "Hey, Junpei, you'll be late for school!"

"School...? Wha- Ah, SHIT!" he heard Junpei yell from inside his room. He heard frantic changing and scrambling, but was ready for what came next. Junpei came out of his room frantically dressing only to be greeted by a wave of body spray. "Wh-what the heck?!"

"So you don't smell like alcohol," Minato said. "Wouldn't want that, would we?"

"O-oh, good thinkin'," Junpei said.

"I made you a box breakfast. You can eat it on the train to school." Minato said. "C'mon, let's go." He and Junpei walked down the stairs and collected the aforementioned box breakfast. He even had a cup of coffee to go with it. They got

on the last train that could make it on time, and Junpei sat down to eat.

"Y'know, you're a real life saver, Minato," Junpei said as he ate his breakfast. It was actually a full mix of bacon, tater tots, a pancake, and even an egg.

"I am the guy who dragged you around until three in the morning," Minato said. "I really should've stopped earlier... I'm so used to just going all night."

"I can tell... Those girls were something else!" Junpei replied. "They made half the chicks at our school look like sloppy seconds!"

"I wouldn't say that too loud, Junpei," Minato warned. Junpei stopped and looked around to see quite a few angry girls glaring at him.

"Hah, you guys are just jealous that you weren't with us at Escapade last night," Junpei said, leaning back rather arrogantly in his chair. "Then again, half of you probably couldn't have gotten in."

"Boss, this is a critical decision! Quantity or quality?"
Jack screamed in Minato's mind.

"Quality ensures you'll always have a good time... quantity you'll never be without. A tough choice." David noted.

"... *What? Quality, obviously. Besides, I'm not gonna let Junpei bury himself.*" Minato replied. "Heh. Now that I think about it..." Minato said, turning to survey the crowd. He realized most of the girls glaring at him were rather bland. "You're right. We might've actually had to wait in line if we took some of them with us."

Devastation. Junpei's words only angered the majority of the girls on the train, but Minato's words were worse than having a spear run through the side of their head. The angry glares turned to despair. "Obviously, we need to be selective of our company," Junpei continued, finishing his meal.

"Of course," Minato said, pulling some gum from his pocket and handing him a stick. He ate one once Junpei took his. "We can't be seen with just any group of girls, can we?"

Minato left that train as a newly dubbed heartbreaker. He and Junpei strode confidently into school, looks of surprise, adoration, disgust, and resentment hitting both of them.

"HEY, JUNPEI! WE'VE BEEN BEST FRIENDS SINCE THE NINTH GRADE, RIGHT?! LET'S HANG OUT SOMETIME!" a boy called to him.

"WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, STUPEI, JUDGING GIRLS LIKE THAT! IF IT WEREN'T FOR MINATO-SAMA, YOU'D BE JUST ANOTHER LOSER!" a girl yelled.

"MINATO! MAKE ME A SUPERSTAR NEXT!" a boy screamed.

"So this is what it's like to be showered with attention on walking into school..." Junpei said, looking around. "... isn't it kind of..."

"Empty?" Minato finished. "... It's the main reason I walk in with you guys. These people... all of them are faceless."

"...It's lonely at the top, ain't it?"

"It is."

"Hey, Junpei!" Kenji said, approaching him.

"It's a good thing you haven't passed me yet," Minato said, tapping Junpei on the shoulder. He soldiered forwards through the crowd and disappeared into the school. Junpei tipped his hat to him as Kenji met him.

"Dude, there's pictures of you and Minato at Escapade from last night all over the school!" Kenji said.

"Yeah, word travels pretty fast, huh?" Junpei asked. "So, did you wanna –"

"Junpei!" a girl said suddenly clinging to him. He didn't recognize her at all. "Hey, I transferred here the same year as you! Remember you tried to hit on me?"

"Uh... not rea-"

"So, I was thinking we could go to class together!... You haven't forgotten I'm in your class, right?"

Junpei stopped and looked at Kenji. He had a smile on his face, but it hid sadness. He nodded approvingly, but Junpei knew what he had to do. He wasn't named 'pure soldier' for nothing. Soldiers left no man behind.

"Actually, I think I'll pass," Junpei said, freeing himself from the girl's grip. "Me and Kenji got some catching up to do. Later." He quickly grabbed a stunned Kenji and started walking.

"Dude, what the heck?! That girl was all over you!" Kenji protested.

"I have no idea who that chick was!" Junpei whispered. "Besides, you're my one of my best friends, man! I'm not gonna ditch you for some random girl who suddenly thinks I'm cool!"

"... That sounds corny as hell," Kenji said.

"S-shut up, dude! Bros before hoes and all that!" Junpei said. Kenji laughed.

"Geez... thanks man." he said. They shared a knowing look, and started talking about the truly important things in life: the newest fighting game releases.

After a strange morning, the day passed by rather quickly. However, Yukari confronted Minato and Junpei at lunch. She stopped between their table and cleared her throat.

"So... you two had fun at Escapade last night, huh?" Yukari asked.

"Yup," Minato said. "I introduced Junpei to my friends."

"'Introduced'?! I didn't know introductions led to this!" she said, showing him her phone. It was a picture of Junpei kissing Lily on the dance floor, while Minato was dancing with Elizabeth while making out with Paimon.

"They hit it off pretty well," Minato answered with a smile. "That's a pretty good picture."

"Huh, lemme see," Junpei said, pulling the phone to him. He looked at it and smirked. "Hey, that is pretty good. Send me a copy of that, Yuka-tan."

"You two are unbelievable!" Yukari said. She turned to Minato. "You not only take Junpei with you to meet your shady friends, you also HAPPEN to have an extra girl for him! Seriously, what do you do at night?!"

"I meet people... though Junpei could've used one more girl to make it even." Minato said. "It was kind of annoying having to cycle girls every now and then."

"Yeah," Junpei said, putting his feet on his desk. "Maybe we should've taken ya, Yuka-tan. Then we'd both always have two girls a piece."

"You guys are disgusting!" Yukari said. "'Cycle' girls?! What

the hell is wrong with you?!"

"We didn't cycle all of them. Me and Elizabeth have a thing," Minato said. Junpei nodded.

"Yeah, never did anything with her... she's pretty fun, though. I think you'd like her, Yuka-tan."

"Augh! Do you two even realize how... how... PERVERTED you sound right now?!" she said, rather loudly. The entire class was watching them at this point.

"... Man, Yukari-san really is jealous, isn't she?" Minato heard a few people whisper.

"She should just go with them one day... she lives in the same dorm, doesn't she?" another voice whispered.

"Yukari, I think you've attracted quite the crowd," Junpei said. He had a confident smirk on his face. Minato, however, narrowed his eyes. This was a situation he hoped to avoid. He shot Junpei a quick glare, and he immediately stopped smiling and sat regularly. Yukari looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"Hey, let's go get some dessert. My treat." Minato said, getting to his feet. He led Yukari away and left the classroom. He took her to the roof, and gave her a melon bread.

"Really?" she asked, holding the melon bread. She still looked extremely angry.

"It's called covering for you," Minato said. "You looked like you got yourself into some trouble."

"... Whatever." she said. She slowly started to eat the melon bread. "I'm still pissed at you two for being such jerks."

"Yeah, we took that a little too far, didn't we?" Minato said, scratching his head. "... Take your time, I guess." He turned and was about to leave, unsure of what to say.

"And you're just gonna walk away? Of course," Yukari said behind him.

"*The fuck do you expect?*" Minato thought. He sighed, and turned back around. "*Lemme guess. We gotta talk about it.*" "What's the matter?"

"... You just go around doing whatever you want, all the time." Yukari began. "You think you're so big and bad, picking up girls left and right... Do you even know what a real relationship is?"

"No." Minato answered immediately. "Do you?"

"Not exactly... but it's not what you go advocating all the time. You don't just treat people like goals or trophies!"

"And why do you think that's how I treat them?" Minato asked.

"Because all you do is take things from your relationships." she snapped. "Tell me, what have you given to anyone?!"

"... I gave you a friend that watches out for you." Minato answered. He looked right at her. "I watched your back at school and in Tartarus, but if that's nothing to you... well, frankly, I don't think you know what it means to be a friend." Yukari froze. "*Caught ya, you hypocritical bitch.*"

"... There you go again. Talking down from your high horse." Yukari said. "Maybe you did help me out a few times. Maybe _"

"What have I taken from you?" Minato asked, cutting her off. "Your 'dignity'? Your 'respect'? Or, oh no, your social status?! How could I?!" he mocked. "Get a grip. I help out Junpei all the time and introduced him to some great friends. I help out Mitsuru-senpai on the Student Council without fail... The question is, what have you done for them?"

"... I..."

"Call Junpei an idiot and a loser and crush his confidence daily? Distance yourself from Mitsuru-senpai and practically snarl at her if she comes too close?" Minato asked. "Hell, you call me a pervert nine times out of ten, yet here I am, helping you out... Maybe I'm more of an idiot than Junpei."

He turned around, and walked to the door of the roof. "Wait," Yukari said. He looked back, and she was staring at the floor. "... Sorry."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana...

"Don't worry about it. Everyone needs a wake-up call sometime." Minato said. *"Though you needed a rather rude awakening."*

He returned to class, and Yukari walked in just before lunch ended. She didn't say anything to them, and left as soon as the day ended.

"Dude... what happened?" Junpei asked.

"... I may have inadvertently pointed out how much of a hypocrite she is." Minato said.

"... Sheesh. That looks rough." Junpei said.

"Give her some time. Wanna grab some food?"

"Sure thing, dude."

The two of them walked over to Iwatodai station, intent on visiting Wild Duck Burger. They shared a meal that Junpei insisted he pay for, and generally had a good time joking about Junpei's suddenly booming school life.

As they left however, a rather smelly business man lumbered around in their path. He reeked of alcohol. Everyone was watching him.

"... Hey, let's just go," Junpei said quietly to Minato. He nodded, and passed by him without incident.

"Hey!" the man yelled, screaming at Junpei. "You... you're the one who took my cake!"

"Huh? What the heck, man?" Junpei said. He turned back around and kept walking. As the duo returned to the dorm, Minato noticed something was up.

"You alright, Junpei?" he asked.

"... That guy just reminded me a lot of my dad." Junpei said. "He's..."

"An alcoholic." Minato said.

"Yeah... that's actually why I was... I wasn't really feeling the drinks in Escapade, you know?" Junpei said. "He's in a dead end job... and, well, look at me. I'm nothing special."

"Junpei," Minato began as they stopped outside of the front door. "You won't become like him. You're better than that. So many people give you shit, but I know you've got the more potential than anyone realizes."

"...Damn, dude. Where the hell did that come from?" Junpei asked.

"It's about time we test out your new sword skills. Meet me on the roof in five, and we'll see what you can do." Minato said. "Show me your potential, rival!"

"Heh. There's no way I'm losing to a guy that sounds like a bad cartoon character! Get ready to eat dirt!" Junpei said.

The two hurriedly entered the dorm, got their weapons, and were about to head to the roof when Mitsuru and Akihiko stopped them.

"Ah, I was just coming to..." Mitsuru began. She stopped when she noticed they were both armed. "What are you two doing?"

"Junpei's going to show me the results of his training," Minato said. "I wanna see how much stronger he's gotten."

"Yeah. It's a duel between rivals!" Junpei said.

"... Well, if it's training, I don't object. But I'm coming along to make sure nobody gets hurt." Akihiko said, shooting a sharp glare at Minato.

"Well... I certainly appreciate your dedication to becoming stronger, but I felt I should remind you that midterms are coming up. With a three-day weekend starting, I think you should use your time wisely." Mitsuru said.

"Certainly, senpai. But I think studying can wait until we've seen Junpei's new strength." Minato said.

"Then what are you stalling for? Scared?" Junpei asked. Minato laughed and walked past Akihiko and Mitsuru, heading for the roof. Akihiko followed while Mitsuru simply shook her

head and sighed.

Once they got there, Minato and Junpei stood a few feet from each other at the center of the roof. "Again, the first move is yours, Junpei." Minato said, hanging his sword by his side.

"Get ready for an ass-whuppin'!" Junpei said, raising his blade. He was using the All-Purpose Katana, which Minato was sure would be easier for him to use than Juzumaru. He was getting excited.

Junpei stepped in quickly, and took a hard swing at Minato. He stepped back, avoiding the slice, and moved in for a strike. Akihiko looked a bit disappointed, until Junpei managed to bring his sword back quick enough to deflect Minato's swipe.

"Well, you're faster than before," Minato said, shooting a thrust at Junpei. Junpei leaned out of the way and stepped back before Minato could follow-up his attack.

"Hey! We only using swords, or what?" Junpei shouted.

"I said show me what you could do!" Minato responded. Junpei grinned and drew his Evoker.

"HERMES!" he yelled. The metallic blue man zoomed forward at Minato, who had to roll out of the way to avoid getting knocked over. He pulled his Evoker and fired as Junpei rushed towards him.

"David, Sonic Blight!" Minato said. David appeared above him

and played a ridiculously high note, stopping Junpei in his tracks and causing Hermes to fade away. He clutched his head in his hands, the note disorienting him. He was having difficulty moving. Simply, he was stunned. Minato took advantage of the situation and ran in, delivering a quick kick to Junpei, who barely managed to place an arm between his stomach and Minato's foot. Junpei fell backwards, and struggled to his feet. He shook his head, and managed to regain his composure.

"That's new..." Junpei said.

"You aren't the only one who's gotten stronger." Minato said, twirling his sword.

"Well, at least you're fighting seriously now." Junpei said.

"Looks like I've gotta use my secret technique!" He put his Evoker to his head. "Rakukaja!"

"Boss, his defense raised!" Jack said in his head.

Minato put his Evoker to his head. "Devil's Trill!" he yelled. David appeared and began to play, and Junpei squealed when he saw the barrage of attacks flying at him. He managed to dodge the two tornados of the attack, but ended up taking two fireballs, three lightning bolts, and an ice-spike. "Watching your weaknesses, huh? Smart." Minato complimented.

"... Heh. I ain't that dumb, ya know." Junpei said, rising to his feet after the barrage. He was lightly wounded, and his clothing was in shambles. Minato put his Evoker to his head

once more.

"Dia," he said, summoning Tam Lin. He healed Junpei, and felt a bit tired. He had used a lot of his mental power quickly. He wouldn't let it show. "Ready for round two?" he asked, pointing his sword at him. Junpei got up and turned his cap around.

"You bet'cha! Don't think you won just because of a lucky shot!" he said. He ran forwards, and Minato met him halfway. They clashed, steel on steel, and dragged their blades past each other. Minato turned and swung again, only to be countered by Junpei launching an attack of his own. They hacked away at each other for a good five minutes, dancing around each other and meeting every attack with a counter, until Junpei suddenly rushed forward and smacked Minato with his shoulder, knocking him back.

Minato recovered and dodged out of a one-handed thrust Junpei threw his way, and turned to see him with his Evoker to his head. "Cleave!" Junpei yelled as he fired. Hermes flew in and aimed its mechanical blades directly at Minato. Minato responded by drawing his Evoker quickly and putting it to his head.

"Mutilate!" he shouted. Jack appeared instantly and clashed with Hermes, the two Personas colliding in midair. Minato turned and saw Junpei had already pulled his sword back and was getting ready to attack. He greeted him with his own preemptive swing, and forced him back. "Get ready." He said with a smile.

Minato began to slash away at Junpei relentlessly, forcing him to focus only on blocking. He had increased the tempo of his attacks, and increased the areas he aimed at. In the background, Hermes and Jack swirled overhead, attacking each other over and over as they collided repeatedly.

Junpei was eventually backed into the wall, and Minato was about to take a cut out of him when he sliced down quickly, forcing Minato to back away. He followed it with a lunge, but Minato swiftly moved to the side and lunged in at Junpei, who had no time to recover. He stopped his blade in front of him, and Junpei growled. Hermes and Jack disappeared.

"And that's best two out of three." Minato said, backing away. He let out a deep breath, and wiped his forehead. He hadn't directly used his Magatama, but he had pushed his normal limits there near the end of the fight. *"Damn, Junpei. You're gonna make me have to start going all out against you if this keeps up."*

"Shit." Junpei said. "And here I thought I could've won one round... you're something else, man." He tipped his hat to him.

"Hey, I wasn't holding back at all." Minato said. "Maybe I didn't go ALL OUT, but still, I was serious."

"He's right, Junpei," Akihiko said, walking up to them. "You've made a lot of progress. It's actually a little scary how much better you've become in such a short time." Junpei was about to talk about the club, but he glanced at Minato, who just smirked and shook his head.

"... Well, you know me. I've been training relentlessly!" he said. "After all, I've got a target that keeps me motivated standing right there."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

"Just know that this target keeps moving," Minato chuckled.

"I won't forget." Junpei answered. They left the roof and split up. Minato showered, and decided he would actually use this night to study and ensure he knew what was going to be on the tests.

Everything was going well until the Dark Hour hit, until Minato noticed that Jack and David had become full-sized and were standing next to him.

"You got company again, Boss." Jack said. Minato turned to see the blue-haired boy in a prisoner's outfit looking at him again with those ridiculously bright eyes.

"Hi, how've you been?" the boy asked. Minato got up from his desk and moved to sit on his bed.

"Pretty good, actually. I was wondering when you'd show back up." Minato said. "Take a seat." He tapped on the bed.

Sure enough, the boy disappeared and reappeared next to him on the bed.

"Heheh. Glad to see you remember me." the boy said. "It's been a while since we last spoke, huh?"

"Boss..." David said.

"Hey, he's a good kid." Minato said, playing with the boy's hair. The boy was a bit surprised at first, but giggled afterwards. "Besides... he's probably hear to drop helpful cryptic hints about the future, right?"

"Now you sound like you remember me too well," the boy said with a laugh. "One week from now, there will be a full moon... Be careful. A new ordeal awaits you."

"Ordeal? Explain, kid." Jack said.

"Hey, that's not how you ask for something," the boy said with a frown. "Besides... you know what I'm talking about, right?" he asked Minato, who sighed.

"Unfortunately, I do... it's going to be one of those rather big and unpleasant Shadows, won't it?" Minato asked.

"Right again. You really do have quite the memory... can you see a pattern?"

"Every full moon, I'll have to deal with some of those Shadows, won't I?"

"Yes. On such days, you face your greatest challenges." the boy said.

"Oh dear... looks like I won't get to enjoy my Dark Hour tea-time... or my full-moon gazing... what a disaster." Minato said, plopping backwards onto his bed. The boy laughed, and mimicked his action.

"You're funny, you know? Your power, your attitude... they're strange."

"So I've been told," Minato chuckled.

"... You must prepare for your ordeal, but time is of the essence... I'm sure you're aware of that, of course."

"It shall deliver us all to the same end... the only difference is whether we reach it sooner or later, right?"

"Correct." the boy answered.

"Well, since you're here... are you certain you don't want tea?" Minato offered. The boy got up and laughed.

"You're funny, you know that?" he said. Minato got up, and the boy disappeared from next to him and reappeared by the foot of his bed. "I'll come see you again when it's over. Goodbye for now..."

"See you later," Minato said. The boy gave one last smile and a wave before disappearing into the darkness again. He didn't reappear anymore.

"... Boss, we still can't trace that kid. He just appears and disappears." David said. They had been watching him intently the entire time.

"I don't really mind. He's a blue-hair like me, after all. Surely he doesn't mean any harm, right?" Minato mused.

"You're kidding, right, Boss?" Jack asked. Minato simply went back to his table by the window and stared at the moon.

"Right?"

"Hmm... I wonder," Minato responded.

"You know, with all the crazy shit that flies through your head, it always surprises me that you can still surprise me." David said.

"But you've gotta admit, doesn't that make things more fun?" Minato asked. His Fiends looked at each other, and then laughed.

"Can't believe we forgot!" Jack said.

"We're idiots, aren't we Boss?" David asked.

"I wouldn't go that far. You're just a bit forgetful... I'm quite the fatalist, if you recall. A little boy that appears from thin air to warn me of my impending doom... it's hilarious that I have such an advantage over death. It's as if fate is telling me to win." Minato said. "I said it once, and I'll say it again. I will live to tell my own tale. I will live to tell it, and then make another."

22. Chapter 22

Chapter 22: The Good Life

Constitution Day. A day of no real meaning to a high school student other than the fact that it meant school was cancelled. Minato, after breakfast in the lounge, was bored out of his mind as he sat finishing his tea.

"Holy shit, is there anything to do in this place other than study?" he thought.

"Let's hit the streets, Boss. We'll find something to do," Jack suggested.

"Actually, isn't there a good chance Kazuya will be at the mall today?" David asked.

"Huh... That's true. I could always go talk to him. Or I could go look for Shin... though it's a bit too early to have my ass handed to me on a platter."

"Oh, mornin'..." Yukari said as she walked down the dorm stairs.

"Good morning," Minato said, taking another drink of his tea. She nodded and walked immediately to the fridge. *"And... this*

chick still feels awkward. That's one possible option gone."

"Could always go look for other people to hang out with... I'm pretty sure you haven't established a link for every Arcana." David said.

"Let's see... You're missing Priestess, Hierophant, Fortune, Justice, Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, The Moon, Judgment, and... Aeon. Plus Emperor is still reversed. That's a lot of work to do." Jack said.

"... Damn. I need to get on my grind." Minato replied. He quickly finished his tea and returned to his room to put on some casual wear. Finishing up, he quickly left the dorm, heading for Paulownia Mall. *"Even if I don't meet someone new, I can still try and rank up Star."*

He arrived there and instinctively went for Power Records. Sure enough, Kazuya was standing there, this time looking over some metal records. "You patch things up with that brown-haired girl?" Kazuya asked as Minato approached.

"There was nothing to patch. Though she might think I'm an asshole now." Minato replied, spying an album he recognized. Kazuya chuckled.

"Oh well. It's not like you don't know anyone else, right?"

"Exactly... wait, what?" Minato replied, turning to him. Kazuya shot him an idiotic smile.

"Surely you've realized? We few and proud of the mighty blue-hair clan are given first choice of partners."

"... Are you serious?"

"You don't think Haru was like my childhood friend or some crap like that?" Kazuya laughed. "Man, if I got stuck with Yuzu... well, it wouldn't have been horrible, but I wouldn't have been as happy as I am now."

"Damn... so this isn't just a coincidence." Minato said. *"I wonder if that little kid gets little ghost girls... huh."*

"You got stronger again," Kazuya noted. "You're like some kind of hardcore grinder, huh? I used to be like that... till I won, of course."

"Won at what, life?" Minato joked.

"Not exactly. The tournament to become the King of Bel." Kazuya said.

"You trained hard and emerged victorious, atop the corpses of your enemies... I can respect that."

"Atop their corpses? Hah." Kazuya said. He turned to Minato, and chuckled. "I did one better. Take a look."

Kazuya took his phone from his pocket and hit some buttons blindingly fast. It emitted a small ball of red energy that showed various creatures that Minato was certain were demons swirling around, each of them shackled around their

neck. "I ate them." Kazuya said with a smirk. "The King of Bel is the one with all the power of Bel at his disposal, after all."

"... *Why are half of my friends scary as fuck?*" Minato thought. "That's... something else."

"Hey, it's not like I'm gonna eat you or anything, so relax!" Kazuya said, putting his phone away. "Hey, I need to go get some stuff from Be Blue V. Wanna come with?"

"Be Blue V?"

"I need some more bath beads." Kazuya said with a smile. Minato gave him a weird look. "... You got a problem with me liking bath beads? You know, they actually –"

"LALALALALALA!" Minato said suddenly, covering his ears. "I don't need to know your crazy interests!" Kazuya started laughing.

"Your mind's in the gutter, man! I like a hot bath every now and then, nothing more." he said.

"Whatever you say." Minato said, leading the way to Be Blue V. He gave Kazuya some strange looks, but Kazuya just ignored him and kept going. As the duo walked into Be Blue V, which was surprisingly empty, a woman instantly approached them. She wore all black leather clothing, with an open jacket that outright exposed her bra, much to Minato's surprise, and a choker. She had silver hair that went down slightly past her shoulders, and strange dark green eyes. *"The*

hell is with chicks and chokers in this city?"

"BOSS, THAT'S A DEMON!" Jack and David screamed in his mind. The woman walked right up to Minato and slapped him straight across the face.

"PAY UP, YOU DAMN MOOCH!" she screamed. She continued slapping him.

"Oh, you stole from here, huh?" Kazuya asked. "And you said I was the weird one... at least I pay for my stuff."

"Hey!" Minato replied, now shielding himself from the slaps. "I just wanted some tea!"

"YOU STILL HAVE TO PAY FOR THAT, IDIOT!" the woman continued. She backed off, and Minato watched in fear as she conjured lightning in her hands.

"Boss, you gotta do something, or she's gonna kill you!" Jack warned.

"I realize that," Minato replied, rushing forwards with his Magatama. His speed caught the woman off guard, and he forced her hand downwards, causing a little burst of electricity underneath them. "Hey, hey, I'll pay!" he said, backing away from the burst. The shock had made him twitchy, but the woman just glared at him. "... Who are you, anyways?"

"This is Nemissa," Kazuya said, stepping past him. "She's a devil... which, for simplicities sake, I'll refer to as a very high-

class demon."

"Why are you bringing this thief back into my store?" she asked Kazuya angrily.

"I was actually shopping... but it looks like he has a few things to deal with." Kazuya said. "So, how much did he steal?"

"Almost a million yen in merchandise." Nemissa said. Kazuya just laughed and started clapping.

"I applaud you, Minato," Kazuya said. "You weren't killed instantly on entry."

"... I just took some tea." Minato said.

"All of the exquisite brands that only come once a year. Do you know how much of a blow that is to my reputation, for all of that merchandise to disappear?" she asked, pointing an accusatory finger at Minato. "I hope you've at least got the money to cover this!"

"... Can I get an estimate for the cost in Macca?" Minato asked. He had nowhere near one million yen.

"I can't use Macca in the human world, dumbass," Nemissa said. "Are you trying to say you can't pay for it?"

Minato gulped, and looked pleadingly to Kazuya, who sighed and took out a credit card. "Tell you what. I'll pay the majority of it, but you gotta work for this place to make up the rest." he said. "That sound good to you?"

"Yes," Minato instantly agreed. Nemissa thought about the idea for a moment, and then a sadistic smile crossed her face.

"... *Boss... I feel sorry for you,*" David said.

"I accept... though, Mooch, you will work directly under me and do exactly as I say. No complaints." Nemissa said. "You two come around to the back."

Minato followed, mulling over his options.

"... *There's a good chance I can kill this chick. If I awaken and jump her, I can gouge her eyes out and crush her skull. If that doesn't work, I can snap her neck when she's not looking...*"

"Hey, get your killing intent under control... unless you really think you can beat me?" Nemissa said.

"I wouldn't try it," Kazuya said.

"... *Shit.*"

Minato watched as Kazuya paid with his credit card and Nemissa conjured a lengthy contract out of thin air and yet another ink feather. "Sign."

"Can I read it?"

"No."

Minato stared at her ridiculous smile, and took the pen. He signed his name, put the pen down, and the contract disappeared into thin air. "Lovely!" Nemissa said. Minato turned to Kazuya, who laughed.

"It'll be... an interesting experience for you," he said. "Well, I'm off to get my stuff. Later."

Minato watched Kazuya walk off, and then turned back to Nemissa. "So... when do I start?"

"Now. I just need to train you first." Nemissa said. She conjured some strange light in her hand, and before Minato could react, shot it into his eyes. The impact had no feeling, but he felt disoriented for a solid minute. As he regained his composure, Nemissa sat there expectantly, examining her nails. "There. You now have information on every product in this store. Go change into uniform and get to work."

Minato nodded, and found the employee changing room. He looked over his uniform, and was almost certain this was the male equivalent of what Elizabeth wore minus the hat. Regardless, he put on the uniform, complete with white gloves. He stepped outside, and Nemissa looked him over.

"Normally, I wouldn't have allowed the hat." she said. Minato only just realized he had forgotten to take his off. "However, it works well enough. It's now part of your uniform."

"Sure." Minato replied. He didn't really care either way.

"Good. Now go around and assist our customers. Get them to buy things." she instructed. "Start with Kazuya. He'll make good practice."

Minato nodded and walked out to the front of the store. Thankfully, Kazuya was the only person in the store at the time. Immediately, his new knowledge kicked in.

"Hello, and welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V." he said with a bow and smirk. *"Why the fuck am I bowing? Or smiling?!"* "Is there anything I can assist you with?"

"Actually, yeah... it's kind of a weird question, actually," Kazuya said.

"Please don't." Minato thought. "Certainly. What would you like to ask?"

"It's about two types of bath beads. I'm wondering which one is better for a certain occasion."

"PLEASE DON'T!" Minato screamed mentally. "Which ones? I'll happily explain the differences to the best of my ability."

"I was wondering... if you're sharing a bath together..."

"NOT LISTENING, NOT LISTENING, NOT LISTENING!"

"OGABOOGABOOGABOOGABOOGABOOGA!" David exploded in his mind.

on Constitution Day, though Minato guessed it was probably because nobody realized it was open. He wanted to use his phone, but every time he considered it, the knowledge of the employee handbook appeared in his head and made him dismiss the idea.

Unfortunately, people did begin to enter the store. As Minato helped various old ladies and the occasional old man, he found out that his job was much easier than he thought. Practically everybody that came in here was going to buy something, regardless of his actions. He just pointed out exactly what they wanted. He had taken some time to practice exercising slight control over his actions. He learned he could modify his apparent script, but not drastically.

"Minato-kun?" a voice behind him called.

"Damn... Well, I knew it was going to happen eventually." he thought. He turned around, and saw Fuuka looking at him, a bit surprised by his outfit. "It's good to see you out of trouble, Fuuka-chan. Welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V." he said, taking off his hat with a bow. He rose, and put it back on. "Is there anything you want for our date?"

"Wha- are you still talking about that?" she asked. "...I didn't know you worked here."

"Actually, I started today." Minato said. *"Hey, I can talk normally if I keep the conversation from reaching direct questions relating to the store!"* "I didn't think I'd run into you here, though."

"Neither did I. My mother actually just asked me to get her some new soap..." Fuuka said. "Umm, since you work here and all..."

"*Ah, shit.*" "Of course. Shall I assist you?" Minato asked.

"Y-yes, please." Fuuka answered. She seemed to find talking to Minato as an employee as a rather awkward experience.

"*The feeling is mutual,*" Minato said in his mind. After helping her find some rather elusive soaps, Minato waved her off and continued his shift. Hours passed. Nothing of real interest happened. It was six o'clock at night before he knew it.

"Minato, you're shift's up." Nemissa said to him after he helped his last customer.

"Oh. Thanks for telling me." he said, heading to the changing room. He put back on his casual clothing, and was about to leave, when Nemissa stopped him. "... Yes?"

"I think I have some... extra work you could do." Nemissa said. "Come back tomorrow, around the same time."

"... Can I ask what type of work?"

"Oh, just a little... acting, really. We've recently acquired a commercial slot, and I think using women as models for our products is so... cliché. So, I'll need you to model for some of them."

"You're insane."

"And I'm your boss by contract. Or would you rather deal with Big Boss?"

"... I got it."

"Excellent!" Nemissa said, moving out of his way. "I'll see you then... It's good to know your place, isn't it?"

CRACK!

"FOR FUCK'S SAKE, WHY?!"

Thou art I...

"GO FUCK YOURSELF!"

And I art thou...

"NO YOU'RE NOT, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

Minato stared in horror as the tarot card disappeared, and he saw Nemissa frown a bit. "... You just changed a little..." she said.

"Don't worry... it's my building resentment you sense." Minato said without emotion. Nemissa laughed at him.

"At least you're not so much of an idiot to think I'm nice," she

said as he walked past her. He left the shop with murder in his eyes.

One rage filled walk later, Minato may as well have darkened the dorm with his appearance. He was practically growling, and ignored everyone in the lounge.

"Hey, man... you okay?" Junpei asked meekly. Minato turned on him, but said nothing.

"No... these aren't the people to fight," Minato said to himself. He took a deep breath, and sat down right where he was, in the middle of the walkway.

"Uhh... is he...?" Yukari asked Junpei.

"I dunno..." he responded.

Minato adopted Shin's meditation stance, and focused on nothingness. He would not let rage get the better of him.

Akihiko walked into the dorm and found Minato meditating in the walkway, being watched by a confused Junpei and Yukari. "... Would someone tell me what's going on?" he asked.

"Well... Minato walked in lookin' really pissed... and then he just started mediatin'," Junpei said. Akihiko turned on Minato, who just sat there.

"... I'm not even going to question it." Akihiko said with a sigh. He walked around Minato and headed to his room.

Half an hour passed. Junpei was about to go look for a marker to draw on Minato with, when he suddenly opened his eyes and jumped to his feet. "Better," Minato said with his crazy smile. He let out a little chuckle, and walked up the stairs.

"... What just happened?" Yukari asked. Junpei just shrugged, and went to go eat some food.

Shower. Dinner. And Minato left again, heading right for the back alleys of Tatsumi Port Island Station. He arrived just as the Dark Hour began and found Shin in his usual place.

"I'm ready now. Let's go," Minato said. Shin nodded, and took Minato to the isolated back alley. The two teleported to the wasteland, and the training began.

Minato steadily became more and more accustomed to blocking and countering hits that surpassed his own strength. He actually managed to survive the first ten minutes without dying, until a mistimed kick resulted in his leg being torn off. He was beat to death with it shortly after.

By twenty minutes in, Minato could misdirect attacks and counter them. Shin upped the level of difficulty by adding in feints to his attack pattern, causing more than enough openings for him to capitalize on. The deaths began to add up.

"Wait," Shin said at the fortieth minute after a short exchange of strikes. "I think you're ready to start training with elemental

attacks."

"You can control the elements?" Minato asked.

"All bends to my will." Shin responded. He held out his hand, and Minato felt a series of tornadoes form around him. Naturally, he ran away from the area. As he escaped, Shin appeared in front of him and elbowed him straight into the ground, shattering his skull. He was fixed, and then got up to face Shin once more. "You will need to do more than run at this point."

The last ten minutes of dodging fireballs, arctic wind, lightning strikes, and tornadoes resulted in more deaths than Minato could remember. If he took the hit, he was unable to defend himself. If he dodged, he was unable to effectively counter Shin. If he blocked, Shin would hit his blind spot. "How is this training?! I'm just getting killed repeatedly at this point!"

"No. Your reflexes are improving. Your natural defense is improving. All you need to do is apply those to counter me." Shin said. "But, it's about time we returned. You have to make it back to the dorm on your own."

Shin grabbed him, and they returned to the alley. Minato hurriedly dressed, not letting go of his power, and was about to leave until he turned and waved to Shin. "Thanks for the lesson, sensei." he said. In all honesty, despite hating the fact that he was often killed during his bouts with Shin, he really respected the fact that Shin was even taking the time to teach him how to use his power.

"You should hurry." Shin said, clearly grinning this time. "Try not to break too anything."

"Got it." Minato answered. He sprinted out of the alley and headed for the dorm.

"I'm not going to lie, I feel like a superhero right now," Minato mused as he hopped from a building onto one of the cables suspending the Moonlight Bridge. He dashed up and hopped over to the adjacent one as he reached a tower, and continued for its duration. He managed to make it all the way to the outside of the dorm, and stopped pulling on his power. He hastily climbed up to his window, and pulled himself in just as the Dark Hour ended. *"That was fun."*

Minato made himself some congratulatory tea, and recuperated from his adventure. He had eight hours until work again.

23. Chapter 23

Chapter 23: Brothers

Minato made breakfast, and ate with Junpei. "Hey, what was up with you last night? You were weirdin' the crap out of everyone."

"I got a job." Minato said. "And it makes me contemplate murdering my boss every few minutes."

"What? Dude, just quit."

"I can't. I signed a contract when I took the job."

"Contact?... you aren't a hitman, are you?" Junpei asked, slowly shifting his seat away from Minato. If it was one thing he knew for sure about Minato, it was that the existence of his morality regarding violence was highly questionable.

"I wish. I'm a salesman." Minato said. "When the hell is my death gonna come?"

"Dang, wishin' for death... must be harsh." Junpei said.

"That was a reference, lori," Mitsuru said, walking down the stairs. "Tres bien, Minato. Though, being held by contract to a job while still being a student... why would you take on such a

difficulty, along with being the leader of SEES? I doubt you were having money problems... our expeditions into Tartarus have more than proven themselves as a viable method of maintaining any living expenses."

"It's a bit complicated..." Minato said. "See, a friend set me up with job, so, I can't really disappoint him."

"Him?" Junpei asked. "Huh... and here I thought you only hung out with girls."

"My boss is a girl," Minato said. "And not a nice one at that... I think I should introduce you to her, Junpei."

"I'll pass... anyone that can actually get to you is way too scary for me."

They finished breakfast, and Minato found another set of plain clothing to wear to work, remembering to take his hat with him. He got to Paulownia, entered Be Blue V, and walked into the back room he had signed the contract in. Sure enough, Nemissa was waiting there expectantly.

"Oh, Minato! You're right on time!" she said cheerfully.

"Usually, when a girl cheerfully says she was waiting on you, you should feel happy... so why do I feel nothing but despair?" Minato thought. "Hey, Nemissa. So... what's this about... acting?"

"You see, I managed to get an amateur film crew to come

here so we can shoot a commercial. You'll be acting on green screen, so don't worry about having to do too much." Nemissa said. "It'll be fun, really. You get to take a bath!"

Minato froze. He could already imagine the advertisement he would be on. It would be one of those ridiculous ads featuring close ups of naked women showering with various products, and then they posed behind it in scantily clad clothing. Except, he'd be the naked lady that eventually ends up in scantily clad clothing.

"Boss?... You awake?" Jack asked. Minato didn't even realize Nemissa was literally pulling him further into the back of the store. He finally reached a room with a two man film crew, one cameraman and one director with a laptop, and, to his horror, a hot tub on one side and a shower on the other.

"Here's the model," Nemissa said, waving to the man with the laptop. He looked Minato over, and then gave Nemissa a thumbs up. She turned to him. "Now... strip."

"... You're kidding me." Minato said.

"No. Strip. Or I'll strip you. Violently." Minato had to resist every instinct that told him to taunt her or try and prove her wrong, and take off his clothes. He got down to his boxers, and she was still watching. "Continue."

"Fuck logic, I'm doing as I please from now on." Minato decided. "Oh? You must like what you see, huh?... I'm actually feeling kind of tired." he yawned. "Mind helping me

out?"

Nemissa responded very directly by actually ripping his boxers clean off. "Done... now get in the tub, or I'll rip more." Needless to say, Minato did as instructed.

Two hours and a commercial shoot later, Minato was finished. He did the ridiculous posing, washing, close-ups, and even had a shot near a product with a half-open bathrobe. Oddly, after the first fifteen minutes, it wasn't that horrible. The director with a laptop was surprisingly direct about how Minato had to adjust, and didn't waste any time. The cameraman was very respectful of Minato's personal space, and apologized every time he had to do a close up or saw his genitals. The process was smooth and, near the end, enjoyable, even.

He put his clothes back on, and found a replacement pair of boxers next to his clothes. "*Well, that's nice.*" Minato thought, putting them on. They were actually a bit loose compared to what he usually wore, but he managed. He found his way out of the maze of small back rooms back to what he now realized was the Office, and found Nemissa busy doing something on her three laptops. "Hey, thanks for the new boxers." Minato said as he entered.

"I can't have a lawsuit for sexual harassment now," she said, turning to face him. "Well, get changed and get out there. I'll get to review the video later."

"Oh yeah... I can technically sue her... but I don't think I want

to know what will happen if I do." Minato changed into his blue suit that reminded him of Elizabeth's clothing, and went to work. He stepped out, and approached the first customer that walked in. It was Mitsuru. *"... Looks like we're having this conversation now, then."* "It's good to see you, Mitsuru-senpai. Welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V." Minato said with his now habitual cap-off bow. "How may I help you?"

"Minato... I didn't expect this to be the job you took for a friend." she said, looking him over. "... And why the sudden change in demeanor?"

"Eh, it's part of the job," Minato shrugged. "I need to act in a certain way to maintain the store's reputation, right?"

"I see... well, I shouldn't make light of your efforts." Mitsuru said. "I'm actually in need of scented candles... I've been feeling stressed out for a while. Do you have any suggestions?"

Minato's inner salesman kicked in. He would make a note to thank Kazuya. "I may have just what you need... does the third floor bathroom have a bathtub?"

"Yes, it does... are you suggesting a bath?"

"I'm suggesting an experience." Minato said, adding a wink. *"Since when the hell do I wink?!"* Mitsuru chuckled.

"You've piqued my interest. Tell me, what do you have in mind?" she asked.

Minato managed to rope Mitsuru into buying three different varieties of scented candles for whichever mood she was in, along with two types of bath beads, flower petals for her bath, three herbal teas, incense, and even a can of air-freshener. After she checked out, she passed by Minato once more, who had just finished helping someone find cologne.

"My, my, Minato. You certainly exceeded my expectations regarding a new employee. I'm sure your friend is more than pleased with your performance." Mitsuru said. "Hmm... I neglected to ask if you wanted anything."

"If you'd share a bath with me, we'll call it even." Minato said.

"What the hell, Boss? Are you trying to piss off every scary woman you know recently?!" David yelled.

"At this point, I've surpassed fear of humans." Minato replied. Oddly enough, Mitsuru seemed to be actually considering the idea. *"And apparently... it's for the best."*

"... I feel the others would cause quite a commotion if we were seen," Mitsuru said.

"Wait... you would if they weren't there?" Minato asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course. I don't see why I'd refuse an offer to have someone bath me in private. I've had manservants bathe me while I was a child." Mitsuru said.

Minato blanked. No thoughts ran through his mind. He just stared at Mitsuru, blinked, and stared again. "... *How... naïve... are you?*"

"... Is something the matter?" Mitsuru asked.

"No... that response was rather unexpected..." Minato said. Jack and David put the wrong ideas into his head, and he went with them. "Tell you what. If you ever find a suitable time, I'll take you up on that offer."

"Very well. I'll –"

"Minato!" Nemissa roared from the office. "Stop sexually harassing paying customers and go make more paying customers!"

"Right away, boss." Minato said. "Just tell me when." Mitsuru left the shop. "*I... may have just found quite the opportunity.*"

As he dealt with the next few customers while various unsavory thoughts floated around in his head, he encountered yet another person he knew: Yukari. "... *Do girls... actually shop here?*"

"Ah, the beautiful Yukari graces our humble shop with her presence," Minato said, catching her by surprise as she walked towards him. "Welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V. How may I be of assistance?"

"W-what the heck?" Yukari asked. She knew Minato as a

confident yet rather caring jackass that just had an air about him. Seeing him being a gentleman, with a real smile no less, quickly became sensory overload. "W-who a-a-are you?!"

"Why, it's me, Minato Arisato, your dorm mate and humble servant this afternoon," he said. He could have made this less awkward by toning down his acting, but he was enjoying this too much. He was actually making 'improvements' as he saw fit to keep this up. "Oh my, you look pale. Would you like to sample our refreshments?" he asked, grasping her hand.

"N-n-no, th-thanks!" she said, pulling her hand back. "I-I think I'll... I just need some water."

"Certainly. I'll return in a moment." Minato said. He walked into the Office, and Nemissa was laughing like a madman. "What's funny?"

"You! Don't think I don't see you messing with that girl!" she said, turning a laptop to him. It displayed the majority of the store. "And you thought this job would suck!"

"Well," Minato said with a bit of a grin. "I can't say I don't like seeing what reactions I can get out of people. Especially when I know it makes them uncomfortable."

Nemissa laughed. "Hah! You're just like me, Minato. Why do you think I even made you do that ad? I was supposed to be the model, you know, but you got so into it that it actually came out pretty good."

"What can I say?" Minato said, taking off his hat and flicking his hair. "I'm a natural-born model, aren't I?"

"Pfft. Don't get ahead of yourself, kid. I mixed your scenes with some of my old ones for the ad..." she said.

"I bet people will talk about me more," Minato said with a smirk.

"Not if you lose customers. Don't you owe that girl some water?" Nemissa replied. Minato cursed under his breath and hurriedly filled a cup of water. "Amateur."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

Minato had a small, genuine grin as he left the Office. *"No wonder I hated her at first... She's as much of an asshole as I am!"*

"Damn, that was resolved quickly. We really gotta thank King Abel for this next time," Jack said.

"Forgive my tardiness," Minato said. Yukari had actually waited in place for him to return, much to his surprise.

"It wasn't that long..." Yukari said. She chugged the water,

and gave the cup back to him. He disposed of it quickly and returned.

"So, is there anything you're looking for in particular, Yukari? Something to help you relax alone? Or..." Minato began. He leaned in closer to whisper. "Something to help you relax with me?"

"A-ah, NO!" Yukari blurted. "I just want some perfume!"

"But you smell so heavenly already. I fear our collection may not do you justice."

"W-what the he-hell is wrong with you?" she asked in a hushed voice. "P-p-pervert!"

Minato backed away and chuckled. "It was only in jest. We'll find something perfect for every occasion." He extended an arm to her. "Would you like to see my recommendations?" Reluctantly, she took his arm, and then salesman Minato kicked in. *"I might be able to give Tanaka a run for his money."* Minato thought. He got Yukari to buy four different perfumes.

After she left, Minato returned to the Office, shot a quick look at Nemissa, who was struggling to keep a straight face, and then burst out laughing. The two of them just laughed for a good three minutes, then Nemissa waved for him to get back to work. He got back to the grind, feeling much better about his job.

Work continued regularly, and six o' clock arrived once more. He said goodbye to Nemissa, who informed him that the shop actually always closed on Sunday and that he was only required to come on Saturday and once a week after school, since he was still a student. He walked back to the dorm, and found all of SEES watching TV in the lounge, surprisingly. "What's the occasion?" Minato asked.

"Oh, you just missed it. There was a special report on the spread of Apathy Syndrome," Akihiko said. Apparently, he didn't have too much of a problem with Minato unless he was fighting, but the Social Link hadn't fixed itself yet.

"Really? Did they find anything special?" Minato asked.

"Not really. The spread of Apathy Syndrome is very controlled, however. It has yet to escape Iwatodai."

Minato moved to watch the TV as well, when the news went to commercial break. He heard what he thought was familiar music, and then saw the logo flash across the screen in a flurry of blue petals and violet haze. Be Blue V's ad was starting.

"... *I actually want to see it,*" Minato thought.

The ad was, in a word, sexual. It began with the slightly obscured naked Minato slowly entering the shower while products were described, and flashed to a slightly obscured naked Nemissa in the shower as well. Then, it jumped to Minato in the bathtub, again with various products, and then to

the other side with Nemissa using other products. Finally, there was a middle scene that was supposed to be Minato carefully washing his abs. It had been edited so Minato was behind Nemissa, washing her stomach, looking down into her face, while she looked back up into his, apparently washing his back. All throughout, there were both his and Nemissa's various breathing sounds they were both required to make, and the edited scene seemed extremely realistic. Finally, it flashed to Minato putting on his half bath-robe, while Nemissa covered up only what was necessary for television with some sort of silk robe. This was another edited scene, with them posing next to each other behind various products, Minato casually fixing his hair while Nemissa just played with her robe. The commercial finally ended.

Silence. Minato turned to see everyone staring at him. Junpei tipped his hat to him. Akihiko was twitching. Yukari looked horrified. Mitsuru's eyes were wide. Minato knew exactly what to say to break the sudden hush.

"See, senpai? I'll give you a bath whenever you want," he said with a wink to Mitsuru. Junpei's jaw dropped. Mitsuru flashed red and turned away. Yukari fell off the chair. Akihiko got up.

"Minato..." he growled.

"What can I say?" he asked with a smile. "I've got the magic touch."

Akihiko threw a punch, but Minato just ducked under it and backed away. He laughed, and ran up around with an angry

Akihiko chasing him.

"Damn, Minato... was that chick in the ad...?" Junpei asked.

"Oh yeah," Minato said, jumping over the couch. "That's my boss. Told you you'd like her, Junpei." He avoided two jabs and started running again. "She's rougher around the edges than me, but she's pretty nice. And you definitely don't need to complain about her –"

Akihiko landed a punch straight to Minato's cheek, but he just hopped away and laughed. Junpei tipped his hat to him as he ran up the stairs to his room, an angry Akihiko in pursuit. His door slammed, and Akihiko banged on his door relentlessly. Minato just laughed from the other side.

After five minutes, Akihiko gave up and returned to the lounge and looked at Mitsuru. "... What's this about him giving you a bath?" he asked.

"... I may have mentioned I occasionally enjoyed being bathed by my servants to him in the store." Mitsuru said. "... It looks like he was talking about a more... intimate... experience than I realized."

"... I can't believe this guy." Junpei said to himself. "Making moves left and right... gettin' set up with his boss by some friend... I've got a long ways to go."

"What are you going on about, Stupei?" Yukari asked. "Of course you'd actually think he's 'the man' or some crap like

that."

"... Yeah. You got a problem with that?" Junpei asked.

"Ugh. Of course I do! You're putting a bad guy on a pedestal!" Yukari said.

"'Bad guy'?!" Junpei snapped. "Hey, he might be a player, he might be a dick, he might be a freakin' madman, but he ain't a 'bad guy'!"

"And now you're defending him?! Pfft. I bet it's cause' he got you a girl that would actually make out with you." Yukari shot.

"The hell is that supposed to mean?!" Junpei said. "So what? At least the guy doesn't go around callin' me shit to my face all day! Hell, he even takes the time to hang out with me at lunch and talk, even if I don't ask! You only come see us when you wanna talk shit!"

"No I don't!" Yukari answered.

"Oh yeah, I forgot! You come around when you want him to get in yer' pants, too!"

"Iori!" Mitsuru snapped.

"What?!" Yukari shouted.

"You always try and flirt with the guy! Don't act like you aren't tryin'!" Junpei said.

"Junpei, enough!" Akihiko said.

"Minato was right. You're a hippo bitch, or whatever the hell it was! You don't do what ya say or say what ya do, dammit! You –"

Akihiko silenced him with a punch to the gut. "Iori, shut up."

"Keh!" Junpei said, staggering back. Junpei got back up and glared at Akihiko. "And you... you pick a side and don't even listen to anything else!" Akihiko took a step forward, when Minato grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back. He shoved him backwards, and gave him the most menacing glare Akihiko had ever seen on his face. It held no excitement. It held no emotion at all. It was a warning given form.

"If you hit him again, I'll break your arms so bad, you'll never box again." Minato said. He turned to Junpei, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go, bro."

Junpei just nodded and followed Minato out of the dorm, leaving a silent Mitsuru, a shocked Yukari, and an enraged Akihiko.

"... We have a bigger problem than I thought." Mitsuru whispered. She could no longer ignore the current state of SEES. She withdrew to her room, and set about devising a plan to fix things. Yukari and Akihiko left and went to their respective rooms shortly after, not saying a word.

Minato led Junpei not to Escapade, but to Wakatsu. "Hey,

check this out," he whispered to Junpei as they entered. He approached the waiter, and said the secret phrase with David's help. The waiter led him through the dimly lit hallways, and got him to a table.

"Dude... what the heck is this place?" Junpei asked, looking around.

"This is a black market restaurant." Minato replied. A geisha came into the stall.

"What would you like to start with?" she asked.

"I'd like a bottle of water, actually." Minato said. He turned to Junpei.

"Same," he said.

"As you wish." The geisha withdrew from the tent.

"You know, it's funny. Isako... well, Ms. Toriumi was the one who told me about this place." Minato mused.

"What?! Our homeroom teach?! So those guys that said they saw you going around with her weren't lyin'?"

"Nope. But we don't have anything romantic. She's actually the one that insists it remain that way... not like I was pushing for it, of course."

The geisha returned with two bottles of water and their menus. "Woah... why'd she show you this, though?" Junpei

asked.

"... She saw that I'm a lot like her, actually. At least, that's what she said. Neither of us really care much for others, and just do what we want." Minato opened his menu. "... Do you know why I brought you here, Junpei?"

"... You aren't gonna say... you're down for dudes too, are ya? Cuz if ya are, I don't mean to be rude or nothin', but —"

Minato interrupted him with a loud laugh. "Damn, I was not expecting that!" he said after he finished. He took a big drink of water.

"Oh, ya aren't. Phew... that coulda gotten really weird." Junpei said. "... Then, why'd ya bring me?"

"... You said I wasn't a 'bad guy'. Simple as that." Minato said.

"Really?" Junpei asked.

"And you defended me."

"Of course I did, dude. I'm not about to let people talk shit about you for doin' you." Minato chuckled, and turned to look at Junpei.

"I brought you here because you trust me, Junpei." Minato said. "And, to be honest, I trust you, dude... wow, this sounds corny as fuck. I was gonna say some shit about you knowing the real me or whatever, but damn, I think I'll die of cringe if I

keep this up."

"... I get it man." Junpei said, cracking a smile. He started looking at his menu. "Bros?"

"Bros."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

Junpei experienced his fair share of odd morsels that night. No alcohol was consumed. They spent the majority of the time just trying to realize how to eat what they ordered, and had a good time overall.

They left Wakatsu at eleven, and Minato turned to Junpei. "Wanna go see if Dante's down for a good spar?"

"You still got Juzumaru on you?"

"Of course."

"Then what are we waitin' for? Let's go!"

Minato and Junpei strolled past Shinjiro's strange glance as midnight drew near. He was shocked that Minato was entering the club with a guy alone, but let him pass regardless. They found Dante pretty quickly once they took a

seat.

"Hey, barkeep! Three strawberry sundaes!" Junpei said, sliding into his seat.

"You're not supposed to order that excitedly," Minato chuckled.

"From what I can tell, you want another lesson." Dante said.

"I'll be joining for this round as well. It'll be a free for all match." Minato said.

"Making the game more interesting every time. I like it." Dante said. They ate their strawberry sundaes, and walked outside. Minato gave Junpei Juzumaru, drew his old sword, and stood in the center between him and Dante. He pulled his Evoker, and Junpei did the same. Dante unsheathed his sword.

"Don't wreck the damn place." Shinjiro said from the door. He was watching intently. It was a good chance to gauge his opponent's strength.

"Let's do this," Minato said. He immediately rushed at Dante and started hacking away at him, and was countered at each slice.

"Not bad, kid." Dante said. He pulled a pistol and fired a shot at Minato. Minato used his Magatama for a split second to dodge and kept fighting. They continued in their dance, until Minato heard Junpei's Evoker go off.

"Agi!" Junpei said. Hermes launched a fireball at the two of them, and Minato backed away. Dante twirled his sword like a blender and extinguished it as it approached. "Ah, you've gotta be kiddin' me!"

Junpei rushed forwards and was greeted by two quick gunshots. He yelled and rolled to the side, managing to avoid the bullets. Dante was about to take another shot when Minato ran in and swung a hammer-blow at him, actually causing him to recoil.

"Danse Macabre!" Minato yelled. Jack flew forwards and started hacking away at Dante, who countered every attack and hit Jack with gunshots when he left himself open.

"Cleave!" Junpei said. He summoned Heremes, who flew around and went to strike Dante from behind. Dante just laughed and jumped into the air as Hermes was about to hit him, and the two Persona crashed into each other. Dante unleashed a rain of bullets to destroy them both. He landed, only for Minato and Junpei to both be ready with their blades aimed at him. He blocked Minato's with one pistol and Junpei's with the other.

"Not bad," Dante said. He pushed them away and sheathed his pistols, opting for his sword instead. He charged in at Minato, who could already tell he'd need to use both of his Magatama here. He recovered and sped forward, slashing at Dante. Their swords met, and the two were locked in a duel. Junpei ran in, and it quickly became a flurry of steel. Surprisingly, nobody was cut after their frantic melee.

"Rakukaja!" Junpei said as the three caught their breath.

"Tarukaja!" Minato said.

"What is this, code? C'mon, let's get this show on the road!" Dante taunted.

The trio kept up their melee until the end of the Dark Hour, and returned to Escapade. Three strawberry sundaes later, they parted ways, all a bit more content with their situation. Minato and Junpei got back to the dorm just before one o'clock. Junpei headed in, and said goodnight to Minato. Minato went to his room as usual, and made some tea. Jack and David appeared as figurines as usual.

"That was real nice of you, Boss." Jack said.

"I didn't expect you to jump in and help him, actually." David said.

"... Neither did I." Minato replied. "Maybe his antics have rubbed off on me."

"... It's called being a friend, Boss." Jack said. **"A damn good one at that."**

"Hmph... Now you sound corny."

"Friendship is corny. It's part of the subject matter, Boss." David said.

"Heh. I guess you're right." Minato said. "... Today was a

weird day, wasn't it?" He looked at the wall. *"I started to like somebody I hated, and I now consider a guy that pestered me all day to be one of my only real friends... it's funny how this all happened because I was in a commercial... the shit you see on TV, huh?"*

24. Chapter 24

Chapter 24: Like Children

Author Note: To be honest, I couldn't think of anything for this day. As such, it's short.

Children's day, the final day of Golden Week. Minato made breakfast as usual, and ate with Junpei. Yukari and Akihiko ate alone, separated from each other.

"Got any plans, dude? It's the last day of Golden Week and all," Junpei asked.

"I'm thinking about it. I definitely don't want to see Paulownia today..." Minato said. Mitsuru walked down the stairs.

"None of you are going anywhere," Mitsuru said as she walked to the lounge. She was holding an envelope in her hands. "We're fixing the discord in SEES here and now. Everyone, come here."

"Uhh... can we finish eatin' first?" Junpei asked.

"... Hurry up."

After Minato and Junpei hastily ate the last of their food, they joined the rest of SEES in the lounge. Mitsuru handed them

each a piece of paper filled with what looked like short response questions. "A test?! But I haven't started studyin' yet!" Junpei complained.

"This isn't an academic test... we will partake in active group therapy. We'll begin with each of you filling out these forms that will serve as our guide. Your honesty is vital to ensuring we get the proper results." Mitsuru explained. She prepped for this in her head. She would address everyone in a friendly manner, remain composed at all times, and lighten the mood.

Minato and the others did as commanded. *"These are some weird ass questions. Then again, I put some weird ass answers."*

After everyone finished, Mitsuru included, she cleared her throat. "Good. We will now begin an exercise to better understand your fellow SEES members. Minato, I'd like you to read the first question, and your answer." she said.

"Sure. Question 1: Who is your best friend in SEES? I answered as follows. 'That's a tough one. I'm torn between Junpei, my rival and brother, and Mitsuru-senpai, my president and future bath partner.'" Minato said.

"... Thank you for that," Mitsuru said, turning to stare at the window. She needed to maintain her composure. She heard Junpei laugh and high-five Minato while Yukari facepalmed and Akihiko scowled. "Well then.. Junpei? How did you answer the first question?"

"I said my best friend was Minato, cause' he's my bro and keeps me motivated! But me and Akihiko-senpai are pretty friendly too, even if he's a dick sometimes." Junpei answered cheerfully.

"... I'll take that as a compliment, Junpei." Akihiko said. He was seriously starting to think nobody took him seriously in SEES.

"Good. Yukari?"

"... I said it was a tie between Junpei and Minato, because Junpei always listens to me bitch, even if he cracks jokes about it all the time... and Minato's kept good on watching my back, even though I give him hell most of the time." Yukari said.

"... Tsun." Minato said, nodding to Junpei.

"Tsun." Junpei responded. They started to chuckle.

"Hey, c'mon guys, I'm serious!"

"That's why it's funny, Yukari," Minato said.

"... Thank you for that. Akihiko?" Mitsuru continued.

"Obviously, you're my best friend here," Akihiko said to Mitsuru. "We've been through a lot together... but I've gotta say, I've taken a shine to Junpei. He's got a fire in his eyes when it comes to training."

"Thank you. Now, for the next –"

"Hey, you never read yours, senpai." Yukari said. Mitsuru froze.

"... How careless of me." she said. Minato could see she was making a mental note to execute Yukari the next chance she got. "My two best friends in SEES as of now are currently Akihiko, who I have known the longest, and Minato, who has proven to be extremely loyal and dependable in and out of SEES business."

"... Just because I was here the longest," Akihiko muttered, lowering his head. He was now certain nobody took him seriously anymore.

"As such, Minato, would you do the honors?"

"Question 2: Who is your least favorite member of SEES at the moment? I answered as follows: 'Another hard one. I can't say I outright dislike any member of SEES, but if I had to choose, I'd say Akihiko-senpai, because he has a nasty habit of punching people, usually me, whenever they speak or act in a manner he disapproves of.'" Minato said.

"... I won't deny that. I've been a bit... jumpy recently." Akihiko said. Minato just nodded at him.

"I actually left this one blank," Junpei said. "To be honest, I don't have any one of ya that I really dislike too much."

"We need an answer for the purpose of this activity, Junpei." Mitsuru said.

"Uhh... then, I guess it'd be... you, cause' you keep bugging me to study?" Junpei responded with a shrug.

"Good." Mitsuru said, although her face betrayed annoyance. Junpei gulped. "Yukari?"

"Uhh... actually, it's you also, senpai, eheheh... I mean, Minato condescends a lot, but you... kind of just treat us like replaceable soldiers sometimes. It's inhumane."

"... An effect of distancing myself to oversee the operation," Mitsuru said. "Forgive me for failing to take into account your personal feelings on the matter... Akihiko?"

"... This should be rather obvious, but my least favorite member of SEES is Minato. He plans on having a fight to the death with my brother in a few days." Akihiko said, glaring at Minato.

"You'll thank me when I've won. I'm bringing him back to SEES, after all." Minato said.

"... Tch."

"Thank you, Akihiko." Mitsuru said. "... As for a member that I like the least, I regret to say that it would actually have to be you, Yukari. I may seem distant and cold to you, but, from my point of view, you are the only member that makes little to no

effort to speak with me. Even Junpei, who usually ignores my advice, at least, and I quote, 'gives me the time of day'."

"Hey, that was pretty good there, senpai," Junpei said.

"... I can't disagree with you there..." Yukari muttered.

"Thank you, Junpei... Minato?" Mitsuru continued.

"Question 3: What's your favorite thing to do? I answered: 'Man, nothing but hard questions on this test. I've got quite a few favorite things to do. So I'll list them. I really like to party at Escapade with my friends. I also really like to talk to the ghost of a little boy that visits me during the Dark Hour every now and then. I like training and fighting in general. And I like drinking tea and staring at the moon in the Dark Hour.'" Minato said.

"Like a boss," Junpei said. He fist bumped Minato.

"... You really are serious about that little ghost boy, aren't you?" Yukari asked.

"I have yet to convince him to drink tea with me, unfortunately." Minato said. "I think he'll come around to it next time."

"... You have some issues." Akihiko said, scratching his head. From what Minato could tell, he was probably wondering if it was considered respectable to attack an insane man.

"... Well, that was... informative." Mitsuru said. She'd need to

consider reactivating the camera in Minato's room during the night. "Junpei?"

"My favorite things to do are train and play videogames." he answered. Yukari and Akihiko gave him questioning glances. "What? I'm a simple guy, alright?"

"And that's why nobody has a problem with you. You're predictable enough to not cause trouble." Minato said.

"That's messed up, bro." Junpei said with a sigh.

"Excellent answer, Junpei. Yukari?" Mitsuru said.

"I mean, I really like to just do girly things every now and then... What else can I say?" she answered.

"And you said I was simple, Yuka-tan." Junpei said.

"Hey! It's not like I enjoy putting my life on the line. Apparently, I'm the only one who doesn't get a thrill from almost dying in SEES," she complained.

"... Thank you, Yukari. Akihiko, I'll skip you, since it's obvious that you're favorite things are training and eating food with excessive amounts of protein." Mitsuru said.

"Hey! I like sampling different flavors of protein powder too." Akihiko said. He was ignored.

"As for me, I mainly enjoy riding my motorcycle, as many of you may have guessed." she continued.

"And steamy hot baths with flower petals, scented candles, and bath beads, with your servant bathing you." Minato added with a smile. Again, she took a deep breath, holding her emotions in check. She held back the blush coming to her face as Minato just leaned back casually in his chair and whispered "Any time, Mitsuru." Junpei tipped his hat to him and chuckled. Yukari was stifling a laugh. Akihiko just hung his head in defeat. A solid minute passed by.

"... Yes. I also enjoy that." Mitsuru finally said after she calmed herself. "Now then... Minato?"

"Question 4: What would you change about the person you said was your least favorite member in SEES? I answered 'Nothing, because if Akihiko wasn't a dick half of the time, I think he'd actually be pretty boring.'" Minato said. Akihiko winced. "... What did you expect me to say? I mean, it's not like I've ever seen you do anything amazing while I was here."

"... None of you take me seriously, do you?" Akihiko whispered. Minato outright nodded, Junpei scratched his neck, Yukari glanced around, and Mitsuru sighed.

"... Moving on. Junpei?" Mitsuru said.

"Eh, if I had to change something about you, Mitsuru-senpai... it'd be nothing too. I mean, you bug me a lot, but you're trying to look out for me... so I don't see a problem with ya." Junpei said. He inwardly congratulated himself when Mitsuru chuckled at his answer. He was certain he earned brownie points.

"Thank you, Junpei. That was very kind of you to say." Mitsuru said. She turned to Yukari, and her eyes instantly narrowed, but only for a moment.

"Uhh... The thing I would change about you... is... umm..." Yukari began.

"It's okay, Yukari. Nobody's going to judge you." Mitsuru said. She lied. Minato could tell she was judging the shit out of everybody in the room, and from what he had seen, he and Junpei were doing pretty good.

"... I'd make you a lot more compassionate... and less controlling... maybe a bit... friendlier, and less formal? Oh, and I guess I'd have you read less and spend more time talking to people... and maybe you could eat more normal people food, I guess." Yukari said. Mitsuru grimaced. Yukari may as well have said she wanted to swap Mitsuru out for a different person. "B-but that doesn't mean I don't like you now!"

"... Very good, Takeba," Mitsuru said, her words strained. She turned on Akihiko, who flinched. "Akihiko?"

"Y-yeah," Akihiko said, clearing his throat. "The things I would change about Minato... well, I'd rather he be less secretive." Akihiko shot him a quick glance.

"Don't worry. All will be revealed in due time," Minato said, cocking his head to the side. "After all, the show goes on." Mitsuru turned and saw his rather crazed smile just gazing

past Akihiko. She was seriously considering reactivating the camera in his room.

"... Very good. Now, the things I would change about Yukari Takeba..." Mitsuru said. She narrowed her eyes and struggled to refrain from letting a slight smirk reach her face. Mitsuru had the things she would change on Yukari down to the proportions of her body and hair, but she had to lighten the mood, not darken it. "... I'd make her act with more of an open mind and stop stumbling over her words half of the time." was all she said. The list had over one hundred items that would remain unsaid.

"I don't mess up that much," Yukari said.

"Actually, ya kinda do, Yuka-tan." Junpei said.

"Well then... I believe it's time for the final question."

"Question 5: What do you think would be a good group activity for all of SEES? I answered 'A group activity? Normally, I would say a free-for-all fight between all members, but Akihiko-senpai is wounded. So, I think the next best thing to do is that we all enjoy tea and then bathe each other!'" Minato said.

"I second that." Junpei said.

"... That won't be happening." Mitsuru said. It amazed her how much the members of SEES could test her limits.

"Personally, I think we should all have a big videogame tourney! I just got Street Fighter IV!" he said.

"Really?" Minato asked. "I'll take you up on that even if they don't agree."

"Yukari." Mitsuru said.

"I didn't really know what to write here. I actually wrote lunch." Yukari admitted. Mitsuru sighed.

"... Akihiko?"

"A full-on special training day!" he said proudly.

"No offense, senpai, but just runnin' around all day won't really us fight better... well, maybe Yuka-tan, since she needs to keep her distance and all that." Junpei said. Akihiko grimaced.

"Besides, Junpei and I have devised quite the rigorous training program that directly improves your fighting abilities." Minato said.

"Oh? And what would that be?" Mitsuru asked.

"The only way to get better at fighting in a hurry..." Minato began.

"Is to keep fightin'!" Junpei said. "We've been going for days on end against each other!"

"Or you could cut one of your arms off," Yukari said.

"... Moving on. I believe that a good group activity would be a session dedicated to actually using some of our time for things other than training... such as our academics." Mitsuru said. "Now that we all know each other better, it's time for the second phase of this operation. To improve the average intelligence of SEES."

Junpei shuddered. The dorm went under strict lockdown as Mitsuru forced everyone from SEES to study for hours on end. The day, in Minato's mind, may have been wasted.

As he retired to his room for the night, he had neither the energy nor will to go train after such a ridiculous amount of cramming was forced on him. He decided to train on the roof until dawn, with the strict goal of forgetting the majority of the day. He failed.

25. Chapter 25

Chapter 25: A Bit of History

Morning shower. Breakfast. And a group train ride to school with all of SEES, much to Minato's surprise. *"They aren't even acting awkward."* he noted, watching his companions make small talk.

"... Do you think Mitsuru's ridiculous plan worked?"

David asked.

"I doubt it... I think she managed to distract everyone enough for them to return to normal, though."

"Hey, dude, you think if we had wounded each other training, we could have missed school today?" Junpei asked him suddenly.

"Junpei, you can't honestly be that desperate to avoid going back to school." Yukari said.

"You underestimate me, Yuka-tan."

"I think Mitsuru-senpai would have forced you to go even if I cut off your arm, actually." Minato said. "I know I would've."

"What?!" Junpei asked.

"It's just a flesh wound."

"... Sometimes, I forget how scary you are, dude."

They walked into school, and Minato heard a ludicrous tale about rabbits dying from unhappiness. **"Actually, that's not so far-fetched."** David said in his mind.

"... I'm not even going to ask."

Minato was called out in chemistry about soap, but his new knowledge from Be Blue V made the question child's play for him. He then went on to explain the various intricacies of soap degradation, skin pH balance, and a few other topics, before Ms. Ounishi forced him to take a seat. He was pretty certain everyone looked at him like he was some sort of genius as he sat down, and just smirked. His mood improved quite a bit.

The day otherwise ended uneventfully, and Minato knew what he had to do. "Hey, Junpei. I'll be heading off to Student Council." Minato said.

"Oh yeah, you do that stuff too," Junpei said. He had apparently forgotten. "Well, I guess I'll go see what Kenji's up to. Later, dude."

Minato walked into the Council Room and threw on his official armband. He took his seat near the waiting Mitsuru, and the meeting began.

"Good afternoon. I trust you all enjoyed Golden Week?"

Mitsuru began. There was a general nodding of heads. "Excellent. I would like to begin by addressing the fact that midterms are coming up. I respect a rigorous dedication to academics, so from now until we officially close for midterm exams, attendance to the Council is voluntary. Anybody who wishes to leave may do so now."

Almost all of the Student Council members left. Minato marked them in his mind. There was a good few minutes of silence after they left. "Those of you who've remained have made a wise decision." Mitsuru said suddenly. "Minato, did you track everyone that left?"

"Of course. Shall I hunt them down and drag them back here?" Minato replied.

"No... I have now established who is truly loyal to the Student Council." Mitsuru said. She turned and looked at the group of eight students remaining in the room. "Those of you without official positions, raise your hand." Three students raised their hands.

"And four officers left." Minato said. Mitsuru chuckled.

"Come and take your pick of position." she instructed. The three students blinked, and looked around, a bit confused. They were all first years. "Don't worry. If anyone causes you problems, just tell Minato." Minato flashed them a creepy smile, causing them to jump, and then nodded to them approvingly. Nervously, the three approached, and stated the positions they wanted.

"Well, it seems our Secretary, Assistant Treasurer, and Historian will be a bit surprised to hear what's happened, won't they?" Minato chuckled.

"You should all understand," Mitsuru said. "The honor that comes with being an Officer of the Student Council. You are the ones that maintain the student body, the ones that enact real change in our school. To remain even when the majority has left is a sign of integrity. As of now, my Officers, you will be given a detailed packet informing you of your true roles."

Mitsuru pulled out a large envelope with various stapled packets, and had Minato hand them out. There was one for every member save him and Mitsuru.

"Excuse me, Madame President," the Vice President said.

"Yes, Takizawa?"

"Why doesn't Arisato-san have a packet?"

"His role is unique." Mitsuru answered. "While the Head of the Disciplinary is usually one of the busiest members of the Council, I have relegated most of his duties to his 'assistant'. In reality, Minato Arisato's true role is to serve as my arms."

"Arms?"

"Minato, would you care to explain?" Mitsuru asked.

"Vice President Takizawa, you understand that Kirijio-senpai is by far the busiest member of the Council, correct?" Minato

asked.

"Of course." he responded.

"Then, you should realize that while she may enact changes and set rules, she is mostly unable to actively uphold them herself. That's where I come in. I do as the President commands, and use whatever means she allows me to perform my duties to the best of my ability. She sees a problem, I solve it. She hears a disturbance, I silence it." Minato said. "I am no ordinary Council Member, Vice President. I am the physical embodiment of Madame President's will."

"... Excellent as always, Minato." Mitsuru said with a smile.

"I see... Forgive my ignorance." the Vice President said.

"You are forgiven." Mitsuru said. "Well, Minato, I would actually like you to go do your patrol around the school now. However, if you catch any member of the Student Council doing anything other than studying on school grounds, you are to drag them back here."

"As you wish," Minato said. He bowed, and left the room. On his patrol, he quickly found one member who had left in a classroom talking with some friends. One poor soul dragged to face Mitsuru's wrath. He continued on his patrol, dished out a few detentions to students littering near the gymnasium, stopped a Council Member from apparently going to karaoke with his friends and sentenced him to Mitsuru's wrath, and

finally found a small incident of bullying that resulted in him knocking a fat boy out with a solid punch to the gut. He would face suspension.

Minato returned to the Council Room to find nobody but Mitsuru inside. "Mitsuru-senpai, I've returned. I dealt with a bully the hard way, and dished out a suspension for resisting."

"Very good." Mitsuru said. She was looking over some papers, and, to Minato's surprise, looked annoyed.

"Did something happen?" Minato asked.

"Our idiot of a Treasurer seems to be unable to account for a fair portion of our funding." Mitsuru answered.

"Chihiro Fushimi... shall I hunt her down?"

"Don't bother... I've already interrogated her. She's shaken, but maintains that she didn't take the money. Either she secretly has an iron will, which I consider to be highly unlikely, or we have a thief in our midst." Mitsuru said. She sat back and sighed. "... Would you make me some tea, Minato?"

"Certainly." Minato went over and made tea for both of them, and sat down to drink with her. "... I think it's most likely a teacher." Minato said after a while.

"I was also considering it. However, we can only deal with two teachers a month, which would make our search extremely troublesome." Mitsuru said. "We'll need to choose our targets

carefully."

"I think it's safe to rule out Mr. Edogawa and Mr. Ekoda... and, to a certain extent, Ms. Toriumi." Minato said.

"I agree." Mitsuru said. "... I'll begin making a comprehensive list of the suspects tomorrow. Thank you for your help as always, Minato."

"It was a pleasure, Mitsuru-senpai." Minato said.

"You know, you can call me Mitsuru when we're alone." she said.

"OOOHHHH! KILL EM!" Jack went off in his head.

"You're an idiot," Minato said in his mind. *"But those were my sentiments exactly."* "So... do you expect us to be alone often, Mitsuru?" Minato asked with a smirk.

"Hmph... Who knows? I may even take you up on that bath," she replied, much to Minato's surprise.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

"Moving up in the world, Boss." David said.

"I'll try not to disappoint," Minato said with a wink. Mitsuru chuckled.

"We should head back to the dorm... The school will close soon, after all."

They returned, and Minato stopped to sign-in. *"It really does look like I'm the only person who lives here on paper...."*

"...Oh, hey, Minato." Yukari said, after Mitsuru walked up the stairs. She had been watching them from the lounge. "Let's go to Tartarus tonight... I'm getting worried since nothing's happened since that one day... Is it just me, or are more people getting Apathy Syndrome? I have a feeling something bad is going to happen... Or am I just being paranoid?"

"Actually, you and the little ghost boy I talk to share the same feeling," Minato said.

"... Are you making fun of me?" Yukari asked.

"No, just stating a fact... to be honest, we haven't gone to Tartarus as a team in a while. We should brush up on our tactics." Minato said. "We'll go tonight."

"Sweet!" Junpei called as he came down the stairs. "I can show everyone how much of a badass I've become!"

The group went to Tartarus that night, and Minato wasted no time heading to the Crimson Room. He bowed and greeted as usual.

"Minato, it seems you've finally gotten enough Macca for quite an interesting Magatama," Lucifuge said as he entered.

"Straight to the point. I like it," Minato said, taking his seat.
"Master?"

"This one will prove... different, compared to what you've purchased before." Lucifer said. "This Magatama will allow you to summon the weapons of your Fiends or Personae instead of summoning them directly. Of course, what you can do with the weapon is entirely dependent on you."

"I'll take it," Minato said with hunger in his eyes. *"It's been too long since I got more power."* "Now I'll never be unarmed."

"Exactly. The Crimson Room focuses expressly on your physical survival, after all," Paimon said.

"Here," Lucifer said. The table erupted in its usual black flames, the Card of the Beast poured energy into the fire, and it all coalesced to create a Magatama.

"To my Master," Minato said, raising the Magatama in mock cheer. He then swallowed it, and the rush of nothingness followed by invigoration came. *"There... More alive than yesterday."*

"You should test out your new power... just know that summoning a weapon will take the same toll as summoning a Persona." Lucifuge said. Minato nodded, bowed, and took his leave.

He returned to the lobby of Tartarus, and the group split up and ran through the halls. Junpei proved more than capable of handling himself. Yukari had difficulty with larger Shadows, but was in better form than normal. Even she held her own throughout the tower. Minato obviously took joy in fighting with two of Jack's oversized meat cleavers, hacking through everything in his path. Mitsuru decided not to ask about where they came from.

The group continued, until at the stairs to the thirteenth floor, Tartarus rumbled. *"Everyone, the stairs are moving to a different location. Stay on your guard."* Mitsuru warned.

"Stay close." Minato instructed. They walked onto the new floor, which still looked just like all the others. As they searched, Minato found a slew of golden treasure chests, all containing rare items and equipment that he stored in the Dimensional Compactor. However, they had yet to encounter a single Shadow.

"Something's wrong here..." Yukari said quietly.

"Maybe they all realized we're just too strong?" Junpei asked. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself that nothing was wrong.

"... We'll leave as soon as we find the stairs or a teleporter." Minato said. They took a few more steps, when the loud sounds of chains rattling stopped them in their tracks. "... What was that, Mitsuru-senpai?"

"... This presence... it's overwhelming." Mitsuru said. "...It feels like Death itself is coming for you... You need to get off of that floor, ASAP."

"This ain't no Shadow, Boss... This is a Fiend, and a damn strong one." Jack said.

"Those who flee live to fight another day." David said.
"You might be strong, but I don't think we can take this thing, Boss."

"You don't have to tell me twice. Mitsuru referred to it as Death itself, for fuck's sake." Minato replied. "Junpei, Yukari, stay close. We're skipping any treasure chests we see and heading straight for a way out of here." he said. They both nodded, and the group increased its pace. The rattling of chains grew louder and louder as they ventured deeper into the maze of hallways, and Minato's team was feeling it.

"Damn, dude, how freakin' big is this floor?!" Junpei whispered.

"Shut up, Junpei! You'll attract attention to us!" Yukari hissed.

"Both of you need to calm down, or you'll end up dead." Minato said. He silenced them, and they continued their venture. Still no luck. Minato reached a four way intersection when the sound of chains rattling suddenly became deafeningly loud. The trio turned left to see the Fiend Minato had been warned about.

The thing was a monstrous figure. It towered at least ten feet tall, and floated above the ground atop strange smoke. It wore nothing but a tattered black coat and two chains over its shoulders. It had white gloved hands that clutched gigantic twin revolvers, with barrels at least as tall as Minato. The creature's head was covered by a white cloth sack with a hole in it surrounded by blood, exposing a glowing red eye. It stared at them, and Minato contemplated his options.

"Yukari, Junpei," Minato whispered. "As soon as I make my move, I want you two to run for it."

"Hmm... could it be?" a booming voice asked. The group froze.

"It's talking to ya, Boss." Jack said.

"... Hey, how's it goin'?" Minato asked.

"Dude, what the hell?!" Junpei whispered.

"You... with the blue hair..." it continued. **"Tell your companions to leave. This is a private conversation."** It raised its pistols and aimed them at Junpei and Yukari.

"I'd do what he says, guys." Minato said.

"He?! Have you forgotten me?!" the creature roared.

"What the fuck?!" Minato thought.

"We'll tell you if there's an exit... you better not get yourself

killed." Yukari whispered. She and Junpei bolted down the nearest hallway and began to search for a teleporter.

"Oh?... I think I might have, actually." Minato said, scratching his head.

"Impossible!" the creature said, firing a shot into the roof.

"Your name is Minato Arisato, is it not?"

"HOLY FUCK WHY DOES IT KNOW MY NAME?!" "That's me. Easy to remember, since there's that many people with blue hair and grey eyes running around, huh?"

"You still act like a brat, even after all this time." the creature responded. **"Though you stopped snarling incessantly... that's probably for the best."**

"... Snarling?" Minato asked.

"... *away.*" a tiny voice said from within Minato.

"The fuck was that?!" Jack screamed.

"There's something else here!" David said.

"You used to snarl and froth at the mouth ten years ago... it got all over the floor." the creature said.

"... lose... beat... flee" the voice continued.

"Oh... ten years ago, huh? Well, my memory from back then

is a bit hazy... maybe if you tell me your name, I'll remember." Minato said. *"Who are you?"* he asked the voice in his head.

"... friend... safe... you..." it replied.

"What hell is this?" Jack asked.

"Boss... you're not gonna believe this." David said. **"... There's more than one soul in your body."**

"I am called the Reaper... you came to me crying the night I found myself in this tower I call my home." it said.

"Do you know this thing?" Minato asked the voice in his head. *"Really? I hope I didn't cause you too much trouble."*

"... fight... pain... lost..." the voice said.

"Not at all!" the Reaper replied, suddenly swinging its guns left and right. **"We had so much fun together! Do you know how I found you?"**

"Boss, whatever this thing is, it's locked itself inside of you. Not even the Card of the Beast can touch it." Jack said.

"Can you get me a better connection with it? These words only tell so much!" Minato replied. *"I must've been causing some havoc with your pet Shadows, huh?"*

"Pets? No, I never considered these vermin my pets. But

yes, I found you attacking Shadows with your two puny swords in your cute little helmet. You were adorable, with the coffins you carried around!" the Reaper continued.

"... You lost me there. I wore a helmet and carried around coffins?" Minato asked.

"Oh, I remember watching you and thinking I could just eat you up!" the Reaper continued, starting to sway from side to side, ignoring him. **"But I needed to set the mood first. Do you remember how?"**

"...run... run... run..." the voice in Minato's head said.

"I have an idea, but I hope it's not right..." Minato said.

"Oh, but I can see it in your eyes! You remember me! I loved you! We played so much! You were so adorable when I sprayed your guts across the walls and floor over and over and over and over again!" the Reaper said. It started hugging itself. **"The paint on the walls and the floor would dry black, but then you'd just get back up and we'd go again! Oh, just thinking about it gives me the chills! You'll play with me again, right?! Right?!"**

"Actually, I'm kind of busy at the moment," Minato said.

"Maybe next time, okay?" The Reaper stopped swaying around.

"No, I think ten years wait is long enough," the Reaper said, dropping its pistols to its sides. **"You crawled away**

from me before, but I won't let you go this time." It raised one pistol and aimed straight at Minato's head.

"Minato, Junpei and Yukari have already returned! Get out of there, NOW!" Mitsuru yelled in his mind.

"Let's play." the Reaper said. It fired. Minato pulled on his speed Magatama and dashed down the hallway.

"That thing's right behind us!" Jack said.

"Then distract it!" Minato replied as he pulled his Evoker. He rounded a corner and fired, summoning Jack.

"Come on, you psycho bitch!" Jack said as he charged at the Reaper, who was gliding after Minato.

"Boring," the Reaper said. It unleashed a quick torrent of bullets of Jack, taking off his arms, and then pistol whipped him aside. He vanished, and the Reaper was in hot pursuit once more.

"You're heading in the right direction, just keep going and you should be able to see the teleporter soon," Mitsuru said as Minato continued his dash. He turned a corner, and saw his exit.

"Stop!" David yelled in his head. Minato immediately skidded to a halt, and saw the Reaper literally burst out of the ground in a plume of smoke, arms spread wide.

"Don't you want to hug your best friend?" the Reaper asked. Minato responded by turning around and running down another hallway. **"How rude. You haven't changed a bit!"**

"Minato, if you can get to another floor, you might be safe. Try and find the stairs." Mitsuru said.

"Dodge and weave! She's gonna shoot!" Jack warned.

Minato rushed through the halls of Tartarus while having to zig-zag and avoid bullets. His movement limited, he found himself being forced down a path. *"Shit, if this thing knows the layout, I'm fucked!"* he thought as he bounced off a wall. He kept on his path, until he reached an eventual dead end. He turned around, only to see the Reaper glide in and seal his exit.

"We'll have even more fun than last time," the Reaper said, lowering its pistols to the side. It slowly approached Minato. **"Do you still heal as quickly? It'd be such a shame if I killed you before we painted the walls black again."**

"... You're gonna have to get past it. Don't hold back at all." David said.

"I know." Minato replied. He took a deep breath, and then called on all of his Magatama. The tattoo appeared, and he felt stronger than ever before.

"Oh my... that's almost as cute as your last outfit," the Reaper said. It raised a gun at Minato. **"You're making me**

feel bad for meeting you in these ancient robes."

The Reaper fired a single shot, but Minato did the unthinkable. He almost vanished from sight, moving as a blur, and went to slice off the Reaper's hand with one of Jack's cleavers. The Reaper pulled its arm back quickly, and the attack hit the top of its revolver. It raised its second one at Minato, who jumped to the wall next to the Reaper, and bounced off of it to get a running start.

"So you have improved over these last ten years." the Reaper said as it flew after him. "Could it be that you've come back to splatter my guts on the walls?! You must love me as much as I love you!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" Minato yelled as he took off down the halls. If he was lucky, he could make it back to the teleporter. He had made it two turns before the Reaper appeared in front of him again.

"To think you'd come back to share such a wonderful experience with me! I love you even more now!" the Reaper said, firing both of its pistols into the air.

"It just charged up, Boss!" David warned. The Reaper suddenly vanished again and appeared on the roof further down the hall. It turned both of its pistols on Minato and fired at an inhuman rate. Minato dodged easily enough, but he realized a few of the shots actually grazed him. He kept going, and the Reaper floated down to the floor, and fired at a normal rate. Minato moved to dodge, but ended up needing to

use Jack's cleaver to take the bullets. They were curving towards him.

"You're shitting me," Minato thought. He rounded a corner, and, to his annoyance, he saw bullets literally leave streaks of smoke as they curved to follow him. Minato raised his Evoker to his head. "Sonic Blight!" David appeared and played his ridiculous sound wave, which managed to stop the bullets from curving. The Reaper appeared from around the corner, unaffected by David's attack. "Devil's Trill!" Minato yelled as he turned another corner.

David played, and the musical barrage began. Ice, fire, wind, and lightning all hit the Reaper. It glided right through the onslaught. **"That tickles."** it said. It raised one gun to the sky, and fired. David was flung against the wall by a tornado that cracked the walls. The second shot caused him to be completely encased in ice. The third shot broke him out of it with a lightning strike that embedded him in the wall. The last shot engulfed his body in flames, and David burned to ashes.

*"... **That didn't end well,**"* David said, returning to Minato's mind.

"Doesn't matter! The teleporter's right there!" Minato said. He ran forward, but the Reaper appeared in front of him again. "OUTTA THE WAY!" Minato yelled, rushing forwards and throwing a full force punch at the Reaper, who still seemed to be expecting a hug. He sent it flying back into the wall, which it faded into, only to reappear next to him with a gun to his head. He quickly shifted and barely avoided a bullet to the

head.

"You've improved your fighting... Of course!" the Reaper said, cutting off his route to the teleporter again. Minato went in for a punch, but the Reaper swatted him away with a pistol. **"You thought I'd be bored from winning so easily, and wanted to give me more of a challenge! Oh, you're so adorable when you're considerate!"**

"Move, dammit!" Minato yelled, calling on Jack's cleavers. He bounded from wall to wall, taking strikes at the Reaper who blocked each attack with a revolver.

"Ah, you can dance with me now! You've become a fine young man!" the Reaper commented as Minato continued his barrage. He finally got a chance to bring both cleavers down on it from behind, and took it. He was right there when the Reaper just twirled its pistols around in its hands and fired. The two shots broke Minato's cleavers before he could land his hit.

Minato, who was still heading at the Reaper, opted for a spin kick, which actually sent the Reaper spinning. It laughed in glee, much to Minato's horror, but he took the time to dash for the teleporter. When the Reaper stopped, it fired upwards, and white talismans flooded the room. Minato reached the teleporter as they started to glow, and rolled into the lobby, releasing his power as he tumbled.

"Minato!" everyone yelled as they ran towards him. He hopped to his feet and dusted himself off, then proceeded to

fix his hair.

"Told you I could handle it," he said, adjusting his jacket. "That thing –"

"MINATO ARISATO!" the Reaper's voice resounded through the lobby. Tartarus rumbled with each word. **"HOW DARE YOU RUN AWAY FROM ME AGAIN! YOU COME BACK HERE AND PLAY WITH ME RIGHT NOW! WE'LL PLAY TOGETHER! WE'LL SPLATTER EACH OTHER'S GUTS ALL OVER THIS TOWER FOREVER! BE A GOOD BOY! AN ADORABLE BOY! A CUTE LITTLE BOY WITH SPLATTERED GUTS JUST LIKE OLD TIMES!"**

"... is crazier than I thought." Minato said. He turned to see a lot of strange gazes.

"... I heard everything it said, Minato, and projected it through Penthesilea to the others." Mitsuru said. "I don't know if it's telling the truth or lying, but it distinctly remembers your name. Are you certain you have absolutely no memories of it?"

"When I was talking to it... I heard a voice in my head. It kept telling me to trust it, and that I should run away from the Reaper." Minato said. "And... according to Jack and David, I apparently have a second, separate soul from my own living in my body, which is supposedly the origin of that voice."

"... What?" Akihiko asked.

"I have no idea what that means either, senpai." Minato said.

He sighed, and put a hand to his forehead. "And I'm in no shape to think about it right now."

"Of course. Our exploration is over for today." Mitsuru said. As SEES walked out of Tartarus, Minato couldn't help but feel the Reaper watching him. He returned to the dorm, and made tea. He was, for what he thought to be the first time he could remember, truly scared of something. He was glad he couldn't sleep, or he was sure he would have had nightmares. He kept his lights on all night, and meditated on his bed. He could sort his thoughts out tomorrow.

26. Chapter 26

Chapter 26: Talking to Adults

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Thanks for the support! Though, to answer your inquiry, I'll point out three factors regarding Akihiko's opinion on Minato:

Minato knew Shinjiro, who, in the original games, is a man of few contacts, none of which are exactly reputable. Also, according to Shinjiro (from Akihiko's perspective), Minato spends a lot of time with some of those contacts at night.

When Shin drags Minato back to the dorm because they trained too long, Minato runs into Akihiko before he gets to his room. In the conversation, Akihiko points out that Minato's habit of leaving the dorm at night through his window is 'shady'.

Minato has only shown Akihiko his 'awakened' form, and insinuated that he is trying to maintain his body. Nobody else in SEES knows he 'transforms'.

Yes, Akihiko, the protein filled boxer, is actually supposed to be academically above average as well.

Combine that with his life skills from the orphanage and his fighter mindset, and he has more than enough reason to be suspicious of Minato. Now, the story.

Minato had spent the majority of the early morning hours trying to contact the voice he had heard when he faced the Reaper to no avail. No amount of meditation, soul searching, or even forced introspection could draw it out again.

"It just disappeared, Boss." David said. He had ordered his Fiends to search his soul extensively. ***"Either it moves and hides because it knows we're near, or it can blend back into yours soul without us noticing."***

"... We'll try again tonight. It's time for breakfast." Minato said in his mind. He left and set about clearing his mind for the day. This wasn't a topic fit for school discussion.

He finished quickly, and Akihiko was the first to come down the stairs.

"Mornin'," Akihiko said as he moved to take some food. "Thanks for the meal." Minato just nodded and began to eat. There was only the sound of cutlery working for almost five minutes, until Akihiko broke the silence. "... You okay?"

Minato stopped and finally looked at Akihiko. He was used to seeing Akihiko's slightly annoyed or otherwise depressed face. He hadn't expected to see him being concerned. He laughed. "What, are you worrying about me now? That's new." Minato said.

"... If you can respond like that, you're fine," Akihiko said. "I may not like you, but I have to respect what you did yesterday... you put your life on the line to make sure everyone else could get out. As your senpai, it killed me only being able to hope you got out... Worst of all, you had to face that... thing, by yourself."

"Hey, I survived, right?" Minato asked with a shrug.

"By the skin of your teeth!" Akihiko said, banging his fist on the table. "You may think fighting is a game, but there's no second chance if you die!"

"I know that," Minato said. He stopped eating and leaned back in his chair. "That's exactly why I'd fight that thing alone a thousand times before I fought it with Junpei and Yukari. They aren't ready for that kind of fight. They won't have a second chance if they face off with the Reaper."

"... Is your supposed history part of your grand show?"

"Actually, this is improvisation," Minato said with a chuckle. "But I feel it just adds a bit more... excitement to the mix."

"You've got issues," Akihiko said, shaking his head. "But at least you value your friends' lives."

Minato flashed a creepy smile and finished his breakfast. Akihiko left for a jog as the other members of SEES came down to eat. Minato left early to enjoy some music and a bit too leisurely of a walk. He ended up being late to class.

"Minato! You'll be giving me an explanation for this after school!" Ms. Toriumi said to him as he walked in. He nodded, and swore he saw a slight smirk on her face.

"Oh, okay. Let's have some fun." Minato thought as he took his seat.

"Dude, what happened to you? You left before all of us!" Junpei whispered.

"I took a few detours," Minato replied. Junpei gave him a quizzical look, but let the issue drop.

After a very quiet day at school, Minato went to the Faculty Office and found Ms. Toriumi, who led him to her office.

"So, Minato, why were you late?" she asked.

"The fun starts now." "So I'd have an excuse for us to spend some time together, Isako."

"... There are better ways to do that," Isako said, smiling from his comment. "But, since you're here, I can't just let you off for free, can I?"

"So today's date is on me," he said. "Where to?"

"My apartment, first," she said.

"Oh? I know you've taken me out to dinner, but isn't that a little quick?"

Isako laughed. "It's not for what you're expecting. I need to put on some less formal clothing before we go where I have planned, and you need to lose the school uniform."

"And change into what, exactly?" he asked.

"... How did that slip my mind?" she responded.

"Are you sure you don't want me over at your place?" Minato asked. He could swear he was getting her to lose her composure, but she recovered quickly.

"Like I said, I'm not a big fan of losing my job," she replied. "Meet me at Port Island Station in an hour. You should hurry."

She formally dismissed him, and he realized that he would barely make it if he caught the earliest train every time. He dashed from the train to the dorm, changed into a blue long-sleeve and black jeans, grabbed his hat, and headed back out. He managed to make it to Port Island Station in about fifty minutes, and took a seat on an open bench.

"Port Island, huh? I wonder what she's got in mind here?" Minato thought.

"I doubt it's a movie, Boss. You know her." Jack said. As if on cue, a woman sat down next to Minato. He turned, and almost didn't recognize her. She wore a white beret tilted to the side, a bright red scarf around her neck, a short black jacket over a white vest, and jeans that, in Minato's eyes, looked like Kazuya's should have, a solid red, with black and

white sneakers. She turned and winked at him. She didn't look a thing like she did at school.

"You dress up well, Isako." Minato said.

"I could say the same to you." she said with a smile. "It's the first time we've seen each other outside of our work clothes, isn't it? Are you surprised?"

"In a good way," Minato answered.

"So you like my disguise?" she asked, tilting her head towards him.

"I think your work outfit should be your disguise." he said, mimicking her motion. She gave him a light headbutt, and laughed.

"In a better life, maybe." she mused. "Come on, I'll take you to somewhere secret!" Isako got up and actually pulled Minato along with her. "It's better if we go together." she said.

"I think you just want to walk with me like this," Minato said. She chuckled.

"That too."

Surely enough, Isako led him to the back alleys of Tatsumi Port Island. "*Of course.*" he thought.

"Hey, who's that kid?" a punk asked as he blocked him and Isako's path. "I don't remember him."

"He's with me," Isako said.

"Yeah? Well who is he, then?"

Minato sighed, and took off his hat. "I'm the guy who fought Shin. And if you don't move, I'll fight you next." he said with a smirk. Isako let go of him, and grinned.

"Oh shit!" the punk said. "H-h-hey, sorry man! Didn't recognize you! Won't happen again!"

"Man, what's so scary about this kid?" a second punk said, passing the first. He walked right up to Minato's face. "Huh?!"

"This," Minato said. He grabbed the boy's collar and lifted him into the air with one arm, and then threw him aside. He rolled across the floor. "If you actually want to fight, don't cry when I leave you a cripple."

The second punk whimpered and scampered away, followed by the first. Isako started laughing. "You might be worse than me, Minato."

"Hey, I get around," he said. The two walked further into the outskirts of the station, and Minato saw Shinjiro apparently standing guard in front of a dimly lit tunnel with the scent of smoke and alcohol coming from it. He glanced over at the two of them, and sighed. He recognized them both.

"Before I even ask why you're hanging out with this guy," Shinjiro said to Isako, "are you really bringing a student here?"

"I don't think a dropout should be lecturing me, eh, Aragaki?" Isako said.

"C'mon, Shinjiro. You already know what I get up to anyways." Minato added. Shinjiro stared at the two of them for a while as they smiled idiotically at him, before finally releasing a big sigh.

"... To hell with both of you," Shinjiro said, moving aside to let them pass. Isako and Minato laughed at him, and headed down into the tunnel.

"So, what is this place, Isako?" Minato asked.

"I could tell you, but their introduction is much better." she said. Minato followed her and heard blaring rap music from further within. They finally reached a room illuminated by red neon lights. There was a bird figure over the entrance. A woman wearing a kimono came forth to greet them.

"Welcome to Club Red Hawk," she said with a bow. "Please, follow me."

They did as instructed, and were taken a smoke room lightly populated room filled with smoke and the scent of alcohol. A group of old men were playing Mahjong, while others were playing cards. All of them were gambling. They sat at an empty table, and the waitress turned to Isako. "Would you like your pipe?"

"Of course," she answered. "And two bottles of my favorite."

"Right away." she said. She left hurriedly to a room at the back.

"I never took you for a smoker, Isako." Minato said. "Your voice definitely doesn't betray you."

"Not everyone smokes tobacco." she said.

"Oh? Weed, then?" Minato asked.

"Not that either. I'm old fashioned, you know... I live like the aristocrats of old Europe." Isako said. The waitress returned with another one in tow. She was holding a black case with flowers on it, and opened it ceremoniously. Inside lay a green and gold pipe the size of Minato's forearm, embellished with a dragon's head where the smoke was to come from and marked with scales along the sides.

"Do NOT smoke that," Jack warned. "That'll fuck you up, Boss!"

"I didn't think she'd be into this... Don't join in, it's not worth it. You've got too much to do." David said.

Isako lifted the pipe and balanced it perfectly along her left arm while the second waitress placed two bottles and two glasses on the table. "Will that be all?" they asked.

"Yes, thank you," Isako said, shooing them with her hand. They bowed and left.

"... You know opium fucks you up, right?" Minato asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I know," she said, and put the pipe to her mouth. When she exhaled, scentless smoke rose from it. "Which is why I don't smoke opium. I just like to look cool every now and then."

Minato chuckled. "Really? You smoke an empty pipe?"

"Obviously! I might like to have fun, but I need to remain a functional human being for the majority of the day." Isako said. "But don't tell Aragaki I said that. He thinks I'm a hard addict with how often I end up here."

"From the way you were expectantly greeted, I think anyone would mistake you for a hard addict."

"And then wouldn't I have such an interesting dark side?" she asked, lazily filling the two glasses on the table. She slid Minato his glass.

"I'll make a toast to non-harmful bad habits." Minato chuckled.

"An improvement over the last," Isako mused. They took a hearty drink. "You see those mahjong players? I bet we could win some cash off of them."

"How much is the buy-in?"

"It's pretty cheap... only about 20,000 yen."

"Then let's go rob some old men." Minato said.

He entered, and managed to double his money in two hours. Isako managed to quadruple it. She was a master of mahjong, and most people there knew it. They both left with much heavier pockets, and began the long walk up the shady tunnel.

"It's nights like these that let me get away with working as a teacher," Isako said. "I get my fair share of cash and fun, and I don't mind going back to the mundane tomorrow."

"I feel the same. If you know my night life, it's what keeps me going most of the time," Minato said.

"In the same boat, huh?" Isako asked, poking him. "It's a shame everybody else my age is either boring or old-fashioned. It must be nice to have friends your own age..."

"Hey, are you gonna get all mushy and emotional now because you don't have friends?" Minato teased, poking her back.

"Pfft. Why would I do that? I've got you, haven't I?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

"Well, well, well... that's not the answer I was expecting."

Minato thought. "... Tell you what. Come here for a bit." he said.

"You're saying that to a girl in a dark tunnel?" she asked. She went near him regardless. Minato did the unthinkable. He whipped out his phone, pulled her into a side hug, and took a picture. "Hey, I wasn't ready!" she mock-complained.

"I was being spontaneous," Minato answered, looking over the picture. He had what he thought was one of his best smiles on, while Isako looked a bit happy yet confused. But he also noticed he caught her blushing, which made him laugh a bit inside. "Besides, it looks pretty natural. I think I'll make this my background."

"Really? Show it." Isako said. She looked it over, and smiled. "Actually, send me this... just don't tell anyone from school that's me."

"I'll just tell them it's my secret girlfriend." Minato said.

"Hah! You're a tease," Isako said. They had just walked past Shinjiro.

"... I ain't even askin'." he muttered as they passed by, both huddling next to each other to look at the picture again. Minato parted ways with Isako and got back to the dorm, only to encounter the chairman, Shuji Ikutsuki, who he had seen all of once in the lounge, reading next to Mitsuru.

"Ah, Minato." Ikutsuki said. "How have you been?... And

what's that strange smell?"

"Ah, I missed a train and decided to jog here," Minato said. "I'll go shower now. I'll be down soon."

Minato was true to his word and returned in his school uniform less than fifteen minutes later. "So, Ikutsuki, it's rare for you to make an appearance." Minato said as he went to take a seat in the lounge.

"Oh, don't bother sitting down," Ikutsuki said. "I'd actually like to explain the function of the Command Room to you."

"Command Room?"

"The fourth floor lounge, where you were given your Evoker." Mitsuru said. "As active field leader of SEES, I see no harm in you accessing our personnel records if you see fit. I trust you won't just go snooping through other's pasts, however."

"Of course." Minato said bluntly. *"Frankly, I see absolutely no reason to learn this."*

"Good. Follow me." Ikutsuki said. They headed up the stairs. At the third floor, Ikutsuki turned to whisper "You know we're not actually talking about that, right?"

"I guessed as much," Minato answered. Ikutsuki chuckled and they entered the Command Room. "So what's up?"

"Oh... to think you wouldn't even consider the need to talk in private suspicious." Ikutsuki commented.

"When you have monsters in your head that talk to you on a daily basis, you don't really view anything too suspiciously anymore." Minato said. He took a seat. "You just curiously observe."

"If you have as many lives as a cat, it should be fine if you die once or twice." Ikutsuki chuckled as he sat down across from him. He adjusted his jacket and got comfortable in the chair. "Well, I'll get right to the point. I've been doing research on your 'Fiends' that you use, but I'd like to confirm a few things firsthand..."

"You want to talk to them, huh?" Minato asked. He waved his hand lazily, and Jack and David appeared as figurines on the table. "Get ready to be interrogated, guys." Minato said with a smirk.

"... **Alright.**" David said.

"**Eh, why not?**" Jack answered.

"Thank you for making an appearance, Jack, David." Ikutsuki said. "If it's not too much trouble, I'd like you to answer a few questions for me. Of course, if you don't feel comfortable with it, I can stop at any time."

"**Rights to a Fiend? This'll be funny,**" Jack said.

"**Indeed... go on.**" David said.

"Thank you. I'd like to ask a little about your origins first. How old are you?" Ikutsuki asked.

"I've held this form for about 350 years," Jack said.
"Though if you're asking how old I am since I can remember, it would have to be... a little younger than humankind. I can't give you any specific numbers."

"That's not a problem... David?"

"I've maintained this form for almost 600 years... but I am about as old as Jack in terms of true age."

"I see..." Ikutsuki said, resting his hand on his chin. He was thinking of what to ask next.

"Actually, how did you guys even come into existence?" Minato asked. Ikutsuki looked puzzled. "What? I'm curious to know as well."

"... How to explain this?" Jack asked, scratching his head.

"A good start would be to say that a Fiend is a manifestation of human will." David said. **"If you recall, we are supposedly the negative Arcana."**

"Negative Arcana?" Ikutsuki asked.

"Their number was a negative one, which shouldn't exist." Minato said.

"Exactly... that's why every Fiend has a title which corresponds to real Arcana. For instance, I am the Fiend of Magicians... can you guess why?"

"The Magician Arcana represents the ability to harness talent, self-confidence, and initiative... as the... anti-Magician, so to speak, you would be..." Ikutsuki began.

"The fear of inability given form. The lack of talent come to life. A living embodiment of insecurity." David said. "I am but one of the Fiends representative of the Magician. I am cursed to practice without end, always in fear that I will fail when a real need arises."

"... Living proof," Ikutsuki muttered. He quickly snapped to attention and turned to Jack. "And you?"

"I am one of the many Fiends of Fools. The Fool is strange, since it possesses such a large amount of quantities... I represent parts of its negative. I am the loss of innocence, the embrace to madness, and the morbid part of creativity all in one. I am cursed to see the world in a twisted light, unable to understand 'normality'." Jack said. He turned to Minato. "As the first Fiend to heed your call, I am the one who most embodies that which you curse in this world."

"... Really?" Minato asked, tilting his head. "I wouldn't have guessed that... I thought it would have been the death of my..."

Minato froze. He paused, and looked at Ikutsuki, who grimaced. "The Death Arcana symbolizes great change..." Ikutsuki said slowly. "It also represents feelings of doom and depression."

"There's no way." Minato thought, turning to Jack and David. They were frozen in thought.

"... I've read a report on your battle with that being called the Reaper earlier today, Minato." Ikutsuki said. "I also got a rough transcript of how it spoke to you. Knowing that you have the capability to summon Fiends, and that they represent a reversal of their Arcana's meaning..."

"...I summoned it." Minato finished. *"A creature unable to accept change. A creature that craves the feeling of being alive. A creature that craves excitement."* "The reason I've had my potential the entire time... I summoned a Fiend as a child... but how is it in Tartarus, and not obeying me?"

"Boss... when a Fiend heeds a call, they aren't bound to their master initially." David said. **"It's possible that you summoned it without knowing how to make a contract with it."**

"But how did I contract you?" Minato asked.

"You know who helps deal with that stuff for you." Jack said.

"... You know who?" Ikutsuki asked. "Ah, you must be

referring to the... beings, Minato visits."

"... You read about that too, huh?" Minato asked. "Well, since you're interested, I'll share. One of the beings I visit is referred to as the 'Big Boss' of all Fiends... though he hasn't told me too much technicalities."

"A being that presides over all embodiments of human darkness..." Ikutsuki said. "You have quite the interesting list of contacts."

"I get that a lot," Minato replied with a chuckle. "So, what have you found out about Fiends?"

"Nothing compared to what we just learned... I had reached a few conclusions connecting them to human will, but now we know for certain they are born from humanity's... darker wishes." Ikutsuki said. He looked at the clock and frowned. "I fear the others will think we're doing something suspicious if we talk for too long... I don't think you want them to know what these Fiends really are, do you? It could put you in an even more awkward light than before."

"... It's probably better they don't know." Minato agreed. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"Looks like we have a little secret between the two of us... I trust you won't talk about my research either."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"... *Now I see it.*" Minato realized. He nodded with a grin, and dismissed Jack and David. They vanished before Ikutsuki's eyes, making him laugh like a child that had just seen a magic trick. "*I definitely see it.*" "But, shouldn't I at least know how to use that computer?" Minato asked, pointing to the huge console as Ikutsuki stopped laughing.

"To be honest, that computer's almost as old I am. I might have ants in my pants with our little secret, but that thing's an 'ant-ique'!" Ikutsuki said. He started laughing again.

"... That was really bad." Minato said. Ikutsuki ignored him and wiped his eyes. Apparently, he thought it was hilarious. "I guess I'll just hit random buttons on it if I ever have to use it."

"Hehehe... that's actually how I use it, to be honest. Make sure to hit the glowing ones." Ikutsuki said. They returned to the lounge, and Ikutsuki took his leave for the night.

When Minato returned to his room, he stared at himself in the mirror for a while. "*Are you Fiends representative of my mind, or are you being summoned by Lucifer?*" he asked in his mind.

One of the original purposes of a Fiend is to ensure their master does not fall victim to what they embody. By

summoning us, you've shown that you've overcome our respective aspects of will." David said. ***"But I can't tell you how."***

"... Well, at least I know I won't be spiraling into depression if I somehow manage to recapture the Reaper, right?"

"There's the bright side of things!" Jack said.

"Brighter than a newly polished cleaver, eh?" Minato mused. Jack laughed in his mind.

Minato went about spending the remainder of the night studying. He knew the day after tomorrow was the full moon, and he had no intention of going into that battle preoccupied.

27. Chapter 27

Chapter 27: The Day Before

Author Note: A very short chapter today, to reflect a mostly boring day. Enjoy.

The morning came too quickly for Minato's liking. He would have to make breakfast soon, and he couldn't think well while cooking. He focused on it far too much.

The train ride to school was uneventful. Everyone seemed to be recovering from the encounter with the Reaper, so he left them to it. He was still coming to terms with the fact that its presence was due to his actions as a child, which he couldn't remember for the life of him.

Class proved to be less effective than Minato's solo studying at night for increasing his academics. His greatest wish was that he could sleep through class and suddenly feel invigorated. It wasn't granted. He envied Junpei at times like these, even when he got called out.

Finally, the bell rang. Minato was getting ready to leave, when Mitsuru entered his class. "Student Council has been cancelled for today, Minato. The chairman asked me to help him deal with additional reports at the dorm. As such, you

don't need to attend." she said.

"Really? Don't overwork yourself, Mitsuru-senpai," Minato said.

"I appreciate your concern, but I'll be fine." she said. She left just as quickly as she had entered.

"Hey, if you're not goin' to Council today, wanna catch a quick bite?" Junpei asked.

"Hmm... I was thinking of actually going to work today, so I could get that out of the way for the week." Minato said. "But if we're going to eat, I could always start late, right?"

"There ya go," Junpei said. "Let's head out to Iwatodai station. I wanna grab some stuff from Beef Bowl, man!"

"Eating contest?"

"You know it!" Junpei said. "... but, who's gonna pay?"

"The loser, obviously." Minato said with a smirk. "Try not to make it too easy for me, okay?"

"Heh! We'll see who's cryin' when the bill comes!" Junpei said. He and Minato headed straight for the shop. Junpei had a determined look on his face, but Minato was chuckling. "You ready?"

"For a free meal? Anytime." Minato replied. The eating began.

Eleven deluxe beef bowls later, a heartbroken Junpei and content Minato walked out of Beef Bowl. "Better luck next time, Junpei." Minato said.

"C'mon, man? How can ya' even eat that much! Yer' skinnier than me!" Junpei whined.

Minato was about to make a witty comeback, when he noticed a small commotion taking place by the entrance to the book store. There was a rather angry boy screaming at a girl he was with. From what Minato saw, both of them were from Gekkoukan.

"What a dick," Junpei said. He frowned. "Who the hell screams at a girl like that?"

"This idiot, apparently... are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Minato asked.

"SEES, stopping assholes by day and Shadows by night." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"Lead the operation." he said.

"Heh, I've got this." Junpei said. Minato followed him up to the boy, who was still gripping the girl's wrist and yelling at her. She was outright crying at this point. "Hey, man. I think you've said enough." Junpei said.

The boy turned on him and glared at him. "Mind you own damn business!" he said, still crushing the girl's wrist.

"That's rather difficult when you're broadcasting it over a hundred foot radius," Minato said.

"Look man, just take it easy, alright?" Junpei said. "I don't know why you're screaming, but whatever it is, it can wait... you don't want everyone around here thinkin' about you the wrong way, right?"

"The hell do I care about what anybody thinks?! I'm in the right here!" the boy said. The girl just whimpered unintelligibly. "This bitch cheated on me! With my best fucking friend for fuck's sake!"

Junpei's eyes widened. He was at a loss for words. "A tough decision..." Minato whispered to him. "Aid the man, and condemn the girl to misery. Save the girl, and add insult to the man's injury."

"If you're just gonna stand there, get lost!" the boy said. Junpei grit his teeth. He made his choice.

"Ya can't just go off on her like this man. Yer' not gonna solve shit." Junpei said. "She's still gonna dump your ass, bro. You just gotta be a man here and walk away."

"T-thank you!" the girl said suddenly. "I-I'll –"

"You shut up!" the boy said to her. He turned on Junpei. "I bet you just want her next, don't you?"

Junpei raised his arms in surrender. "Hey, I never said nothin'

like that, man... I don't expect you to be cool with her or nothin'. Hell, you can hate her frickin' guts, but you gotta calm down."

"This is getting nowhere. Sorry Junpei, but I'll have to step in." Minato thought. "Think about your future. Do you really want sexual assault or worse on your record for high school?" he said suddenly. The boy glared at Minato, but he said nothing. "You don't need to forgive. You don't need to forget. But you need to control yourself, before you do something you can't undo."

The boy turned and looked at the girl. He stared at her for a good thirty seconds in silence, watching her whimper, when he suddenly pushed her away. "... Don't you ever talk to me again, fucking slut." he said, walking away. A tear dropped down his cheek.

The girl quickly wiped her eyes and turned to Minato and Junpei. "... Thanks." she said. "... So..."

"Don't worry about it," Junpei said with a sigh. "I mean, I don't know if he was lyin' about you and his friend, but... I used to get shit like that from my dad when I was a kid. Nobody needs to deal with that."

"... I respect your judgment, Junpei." Minato said. "You made the difference here. You were the one to step in, even with all these people around."

"... I guess I did, huh?" he replied with a grin. It died almost

instantly. "But wait, are you okay? He didn't already beat you up or anything, right?" Junpei asked the girl.

"I-I'm fine. My house is close by... I should be fine from here." she said. "Thank you both."

"You take care, okay?" Junpei said as she bowed to them. She then smiled at them and gave them a little wink, after which she jogged off. Junpei felt like a hero. Minato felt he had just made a grave mistake. The two turned around, and headed for Paulownia Mall. "We did good just now, huh?"

"Our intervention was effective..." Minato said. Junpei dropped his smile and got serious.

"... You think we shoulda helped the guy, huh?" Junpei asked.

"We could have convinced him to go somewhere private," Minato began, "and let what would've happened happen."

"Really? I mean, I know the kid's crushed, but nobody got hurt, right?"

"Nobody goes from unintelligible muttering to a wink and a smile in under a minute." Minato said. "That whore was acting, Junpei. She was trying to attract attention, to piss him off, so somebody would intervene. It worked."

"... Shit." Junpei said. "We screwed that dude over... cuz' I wanted to help out the girl."

"It's not always just right and wrong." Minato said. "By

societal standards, you did everything you were supposed to... but society's stupid. There's no real point in dwelling on this now, though. What's done is done." They were silent for a moment.

"You must have it rough, huh?" Junpei asked. "Would you've helped the guy?"

"It was my first inclination." Minato said. "But only because it was with his best friend... he'd lost more than one person in his life. I think he had some 'right' in his actions."

"... I didn't even think about that part. I was just stuck at 'dang, that guy's girl cheated on him' and thought 'man, at least he's got a good reason to be pissed'." Junpei said. They reached Paulownia, and stopped in front of the fountain. "... I got a lot to learn, don't I?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

"You live and learn." Minato said. "But if I don't get to work soon, I might not live for much longer. I'll see you back at the dorm."

"Later, man." Junpei said. He looked at the surrounding shops, and entered the cafe. It was time to think.

Minato walked into Be Blue V and immediately headed to the Office. Nemissa glared at him as he walked by. "You're late." she said.

"I had lunch, then ran into some trouble." Minato said. "I can stay back longer if I need to."

"You're damn right you need to." she answered. "Get changed and get to work."

Minato did as instructed, and six hours of work later with nothing but Nemissa occasionally bitching at his lateness, he left as the shop closed. He walked out, and passed by Club Escapade, where he spied Shinjiro, apparently on his break, seemingly napping at the side of the building.

"Hey, Shinjiro." Minato said as he walked up to him. Shinjiro slowly opened his eyes and looked at Minato, a bit annoyed.

"It's only been a week, dumbass. I said ten days." he said.

"I'm not here about the fight, but if you're eager for an ass-kicking, by all means, give me a reason." Minato said. Shinjiro scoffed. "I just thought I should tell you something fun is happening tomorrow night in the Dark Hour... I don't know where, though."

"The hell do you mean 'something fun'?" Shinjiro asked.

"I know a guy who said that every full moon, a really big Shadow rolls through town... or something like that." Minato

said, scratching his head. "He's kind of a cryptic kid, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't lying. Just thought you should watch yourself."

"Tch... I'll keep my eyes open then." Shinjiro said. "But why the hell are you warning me?"

"Firstly, because, even though we're not on the best of terms, I still think we're friends." Minato said, giving Shinjiro a smirk.

"I hope your second reason is better," Shinjiro said. Minato's smirk slowly escalated into his maniacal smile.

"The second reason is because I want you in tip-top form for our fight... I don't want any excuses when I prove my superiority." Minato said. "After all... I already know what your Persona can do. You don't stand a chance against me." He started chuckling, which escalated into a full out laugh in Shinjiro's face.

"... Get the hell out of here already," Shinjiro said as Minato calmed down. "I'll tell you one thing. If I win, you're quitting SEES and leaving town, permanently."

"Oh! An interesting condition..." Minato said. "I like it. See you in three days... if you're still alive, that is."

"Same to you." Shinjiro said. Minato walked away, and returned to the dorm.

"Welcome back," Mitsuru said as usual from her spot in the

lounge. "... It's odd, really, how quiet it's been."

"You're referring to the Shadows, I take it?" Akihiko asked from the adjacent chair. He looked like he was doing school work.

"It's been a month since the last attack, yet I'm certain that won't be the last time they appear outside of Tartarus." Mitsuru answered.

"Tomorrow night," Minato said, interrupting their conversation. "There'll be a big Shadow lurking around tomorrow night."

"... And how do you know this?" Akihiko asked.

"A friend told me." Minato said with a shrug. "Take it or leave it, but they haven't lied to me yet."

"... There's no harm in testing it." Mitsuru said. "I'll monitor the town tomorrow night."

"If something does happen, you better introduce us to this 'friend' of yours," Akihiko said.

"It's the little ghost boy that appears in the Dark Hour," Minato said. "He just shows up every now and then, so you probably won't meet him unless you spend the Dark Hour with me."

"Are you seriously pushing this ghost thing?!" Yukari snapped. "This has been going for way too long!"

"... In any case, you guys should get some good rest tonight,"

Minato continued. "I don't want you slacking for the fight tomorrow."

"Well, looks like I can't study tonight!" Junpei said with a little too much enthusiasm. "Gotta hit the hay in case we end up in a big fight tomorrow!"

"You'll take any excuse to not study, won't you, Stupei?" Yukari asked.

"Hey, don't blame me if yer' all tired when it counts. I think I'll put survival above studyin' any day." Junpei answered. He walked up the stairs and retired to his room. The rest of SEES actually followed suit, oddly enough. Minato, unable to sleep, opted for the second best thing: meditation.

28. Chapter 28

Chapter 28: VS The Priestess

Author Note: Yes, big fight chapters will always be denoted by the 'VS' marking. On another note, 100k word count chapter for the first boss fight. Oddly enough, this is actually a coincidence.

Minato made sure to make a feast for SEES in the morning. Everyone woke up to the smell of food. "I don't want any excuses. All of you are being energized this morning." he said. *"I'm not dying because of your weakness."*

"Well, don't mind me!" Junpei said, licking his lips. He quickly grabbed a plate and started taking food.

"Good, you take your share. You've proven your worth," David commented.

"If you insist," Yukari said, taking a seat.

"You need the energy. I haven't seen you do any special training!" Jack commented.

"You should make sure to eat as well, Minato," Mitsuru said as she sat down. "It won't do for SEES' leader to fight under

his maximum potential."

"Already ahead of you," Minato said. He was just finishing taking his food.

"Hah! You should cook like this more often," Akihiko said. He had taken the largest serving of everyone at the table.

"... Uhh, senpai," Minato said, looking at his plate. It was overflowing with food. "I don't get why you're eating that much... you won't even be fighting tonight."

Akihiko froze. He looked at Minato, who looked thoroughly disappointed in him, then Mitsuru, who shared the same expression. Yukari looked confused as always, but Junpei outright shook his head at him. "... You know, I used to patrol this town for two years..." Akihiko began, letting his head droop. "I was all that stood between this town and any Shadow that left Tartarus... and here I am, not even being taken seriously, because I got injured on the job." He ate slowly, as if he was trying to fill a void.

"Yeah, nobody really takes a guy that screwed up his arm against something I took down in a few hits seriously."

Jack commented. Minato chuckled a bit, and Akihiko shot him a glare full of hatred for a moment, before turning back to his food.

One awkwardly quiet train ride later, SEES reached school. An absolutely boring day of classes spent reviewing for the coming midterms. The day ended without incident.

"Hey, Boss. I know we don't need to worry until the Dark Hour, but maybe we should head back to the dorm now... you should remain rested for the fight." David suggested.

"If anything, you can just do some light training on the roof or something... get in the mood for a big fight." Jack added.

"That's a good idea," Minato thought as he walked out of his classroom. *"Maybe I could –"*

"Hey, watch where you're going!" a girl said from further down the hallway. He turned to see none other than Fuuka being scolded for bumping into someone.

"I-I'm sorry!" Fuuka said with a bow. She took off her headphones as she bowed, which caught Minato's attention. The girl she bumped into just gave her a light shove and walked away. Fuuka stumbled back, but caught herself.

"I see staying out of trouble isn't your style," Minato said. He walked up to Fuuka who turned to him. Before she could say anything, Minato grabbed one of her dangling headphones. *"Let's see what Fuuka listens to."*

"N-no, wait!" Fuuka said, realizing what Minato was doing. He put the headphone on.

"- roll up on em', I spray em'! Got a mac-10 on deck, nigga, you know I stay strapped! When I pull up in the hood, homie, I make these bitches collapse!" were the lyrics Minato heard

before Fuuka frantically jumped on him to retrieve her headphone. The words were accompanied by monstrous bass, which had surprisingly high quality.

"... *Well, damn.*" Minato thought. He just smirked at Fuuka, who looked like someone had just taken nude pictures of her without her consent. "You know, I think you would love Escapade." he said. "I could take you there someday."

"W-w-what?! N-no, I couldn't!" Fuuka said. Minato laughed.

"Hey, don't worry about it... I'm not judging." Minato said. "I think it's cool that you don't listen to all that happy high-pitched bullshit... let's take a little walk." Fuuka, still a bit nervous, nodded.

"U-um, where are we going, Minato-kun?" she asked.

"On that date," he said. She jumped a little.

"S-stop teasing me!"

"I'm serious. It might not be as fancy as I said it would be, but we're going to hang out." Fuuka glanced around nervously.

"People are looking at us strangely..." Fuuka whispered. Minato saw that a few students were glancing at the duo strangely. Some of the girls seethed with envy. Some of the boys followed suit. Others looked confused.

"*Fun time!*" Minato thought. He moved closer to Fuuka and put an arm around her, making her gasp a bit. He leaned in and

whispered "Are they looking now?"

"Y-yes!" Fuuka squeaked. She was dying from the attention.

"Then leave it to your trusty knight!" he whispered again. He pulled away, and turned to a few girls who were practically glaring at Fuuka. "It looks like we made some people jealous!" he sang, flashing an idiotic grin around. "It's too bad they're all too boring to deal with."

The envy quickly escalated to rage, but they did nothing. *"That's right... I'm head of the Disciplinary Committee, plebs. You so much as make a move, I'll suspend every last one of you."* The glares eventually died, and Fuuka just hurried forward, forcing Minato to speed up. Outside the school gates, Minato backed away.

"That wasn't very nice of you to say, Minato-kun..." Fuuka said. She looked a bit saddened by what just happened.

"I made myself the target instead of you," he answered. "Isn't that what a knight does? Protect the princess?"

"Only in fairy tales," Fuuka said. "... You know history. No knight really risked it all for a princess."

"That's because those knights sucked." Fuuka stopped and stared at him. "I," Minato said with an exaggerated bow, "have surpassed those fools of old." He got up and flicked his hair to the side in another overly exaggerated motion. "None can compare to Minato Arisato, the Azure knight, defender of

Iwatodai."

Nothing was said. Minato stood there posing with Fuuka watching him. She chuckled, very slowly, until it became a little laugh. "... You can't be serious," she said.

"Of course I'm not," Minato said, dropping his act immediately. "What do you think I am, delusional?"

"I don't know what to think you are," Fuuka said.

"I think 'exotic' is a nice word to use for me."

"I was going to say 'strange'."

"That's actually a pretty good choice too." The two of them reached Port Island station, when Minato spied the flower peddler in the corner. "Hey, do you mind waiting here for a minute?" he asked.

"Huh? I guess." Fuuka said. Minato nodded and dashed over to the flower peddler, and bought the only bonsai available. Oddly enough, it was red. He walked back to see Fuuka blushing wildly. "Y-you didn't have to!" she said. Minato grinned.

"I said I was bringing you your favorite flower, right?" he asked with a wink. "Let's hurry. We might miss the train."

"R-right," Fuuka agreed. They managed to make it, and boarded. They ended up having to stand near the door. "... Um, what type of music do you listen to, Minato-kun?" Fuuka

asked after a while.

"Why don't you tell me?" he responded. He put one of his headphones on and offered her the other. She took it, and the two listened on as the train moved.

Minato's music was a well-rounded mix, even including a little of the 'high-pitched bullshit', albeit remixed to have less cringe-inducing beats. Fuuka actually bobbed her head along with some of the tracks near the end.

As they got off the train, Fuuka returned his headphone. "So, what type of music do I like?" Minato asked.

"That's tough..." Fuuka answered.

"It's actually pretty easy." Minato said with a grin. "I like music that sounds good." They walked to the shops by the station, which was on the way to the dorm. "I know I said I'd treat you to sushi, but how about some takoyaki instead?"

"Oh, you really don't have to..." Fuuka said. "I mean, you already went and got that flower."

"If you keep your takoyaki for as long as that flower, I have a feeling you won't like it." Minato mused. Sure enough, they headed to Octopia and bought two small sets of takoyaki. They sat down at a bench to eat, but Minato noticed Fuuka looked oddly at her food. "Not used to getting free food?" he asked.

"... No." Fuuka said. "It's... weird."

"It's awesome is what it is." Minato said. He began to eat, and Fuuka followed suit. "You know, I didn't even ask if you lived around here. I'm not taking you out to the middle of nowhere, right?"

"I actually live just south of here." Fuuka said. "The dorms are to the north, right?"

"Yes they are, but I can walk you home if you'd like." Minato said. He put his face directly next to Fuuka's. "And I'll stay for coffee if you insist."

"I don't think that's a good idea!" she said, a little unnerved by the invasion of space. "M-my parents might get the wrong idea!" Minato sat back and laughed. Fuuka stared, but then sighed. "Stop teasing me." she said.

"Hey, we're all fun and games, right?" Minato asked.

"Nobody's hurt and everybody's happy... at least, I assume as much."

"... If you're asking, then yes. I'm having a good time." Fuuka answered. She looked around, unsure of what to say. They finished eating, and Minato held the bonsai to her.

"If we're parting ways here," Minato said with a shrug. Fuuka took it and smiled a little. "I would say stay outta trouble, but that seems pretty difficult for you."

"I don't think you should be one to talk, Minato." Fuuka said.

"... Glad to know we're beyond formalities, Fuuka." Minato said. Fuuka blinked, and held her hand to her mouth. "Hey, make sure if you do get into trouble, it's around me, alright?"

"... I'll try." Fuuka said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

"I need to be going before my parents get going... but how am I going to explain this?" Fuuka said, looking quizzically at the bonsai.

"It's from your not-so-secret admirer, obviously," Minato said with a grin. Fuuka blushed a bit, and turned around. "Bye, Fuuka."

"T-thanks for today, Minato," Fuuka said. She quickly walked away, and Minato returned to the dorm. The majority of SEES was in the lobby.

"I want everyone battle ready before midnight," Minato said as he signed in. "Yukari, keep extra arrows on you. Junpei, clear your head. The enemy tonight is all you have to worry about."

"You know, we don't even know if anything will show up," Yukari said. "... But it doesn't hurt to be ready, I guess."

"Hell yeah! We're gonna kick some serious Shadow ass tonight!" Junpei said triumphantly.

"Just don't get cocky out there, all of you." Akihiko said. "I was, and look where it got me."

"... Damn, that's the first good advice piece of good advice you've given, Akihiko-senpai." Minato said. Akihiko facepalmed.

"Once I'm back on the field, you'll see my worth." Akihiko said. Every member of SEES prepared individually for the coming battle. The day ended quickly, and once the Dark Hour struck, everyone was already gathered in the Command Room. Mitsuru, who had summoned Penthesilea beforehand to get used to the map of the city, immediately began her search.

Five minutes in, she scoffed. "... A Shadow has appeared in the city. One of the big ones." Mitsuru said.

"What?! You actually found one?!" Akihiko asked.

"My boy doesn't lie." Minato said, getting up from the sofa.

"Where is it?! We'll shred the thing!" Junpei said. He was getting excited.

"As much as I appreciate your dedication, you have to remember that protecting the city comes first... If that

Shadow destroys half of the city, there will be panic. Remember, most people don't know of the Dark Hour." Mitsuru said. She turned to Akihiko. "Stay here with the chairman."

"Wha-?! No way! I know I need to recover, but against something like this –!" he protested.

"You'll only be a hindrance in your current state. They'll fare better than you in your current state." Mitsuru said. Akihiko glared at her for a moment before lowering his gaze.

"... Dammit." Akihiko said. He turned to Minato. "... Show me what it can really do."

"I'll use it if I have to," Minato said. Junpei and Yukari exchanged confused looks.

"And what would you be referring to?" Mitsuru asked.

"My trump card." Minato said with a grin. "If things get too dangerous, I'll show you all what I can really do... It's how I escaped the Reaper."

"Hey, you're not the only one that can fight!" Junpei said. "I've got a few tricks up my sleeve too!"

"Of course you do," Yukari sighed.

"Minato will remain active leader of SEES," Mitsuru said.

"What? C'mon, I think I deserve a shot now!" Junpei said.

"No way am I letting Junpei lead us around! He'll probably just charge in there and get us killed!" Yukari said.

"I admit that Junpei has grown significantly over these last few days," Akihiko said. "But in a fight like this, we can't take risks. We'll stick to the original formation."

Junpei looked depressed, but then adjusted his cap and sighed. "... I guess you're right. There's no tellin' what we're up against right now, anyways. Don't mess this up, Minato."

"... And here they said you wouldn't be a good leader." Minato chuckled. "I'll try not to disappoint. So, where do we need to go?"

"The front of Iwatodai station. I'll meet you there shortly." Mitsuru said. SEES mobilized, and Minato led the way. He was smiling madly at the moon for the majority of the walk.

"... That's creepy, you know." Yukari said.

"It's not like I'll be able to enjoy this when we're fighting." Minato said. *"I'm getting my moon-gazing in, dammit!"*

"Just don't get too caught up in it and walk past the station." David said. They arrived, and Mitsuru rode in on her motorcycle.

"Hey, I thought electronics didn't work in the Dark Hour!" Junpei said.

"It's special," Mitsuru said. "But we don't have time to discuss this. The operation comes first. Now, listen carefully. Tonight, I'll be providing support from here. Everything else is the same. The Shadow is currently located inside a monorail, not far from the station. To get there, you'll have to walk on the tracks."

"Walk on the tracks, huh?" Yukari said. "I know the monorail can't move, but still..."

"Leave it to us," Minato said, twirling his sword around lazily. "We don't have much time. We need to finish this, and fast."

"Correct. The operation begins now." Mitsuru said. Everyone's earpieces came to life.

"Right..." Yukari said.

"Let's do this!" Junpei yelled.

The group climbed onto the tracks and quickly walked down the tracks. *"There's a monorail 200 meters ahead. I'm certain that's where the Shadows are. You have to stop them before they can harm any of the passengers."* Mitsuru instructed.

"It looks pretty normal to me." Yukari said.

"The readings are definitely coming from that monorail. Proceed with caution, and stay together."

"Got it." Yukari said.

"Hehehe, my Personas just begging to be used!" Junpei said.

"Let's start the show," Minato said. He ran up and jumped on top of the train in one go. "The side doors are probably shut. It'll be quicker to use the roof entrances."

"You know not everyone can just do that," Yukari grumbled. She began to climb up the side of the monorail, before stopping and glaring at Junpei. "Don't look." she told him.

"C'mon, we've got more important things to worry about! Let's go already!" Junpei said, surprising her. She scrambled up, and Junpei followed suit. The three found a roof entrance and dropped down into the train. Junpei saw a coffin standing in the corner. "This poor guy must be a passenger... Transmogged, huh? He won't remember a thing... but it's probably better like that."

"Huh? Wait a minute... we're not at the station, but the doors are wide open?" Yukari asked, going to examine a door.

"IT'S A TRAP!" Jack and David screamed in Minato's head.

"Get back here, both of you!" Minato yelled, startling them. The doors of the monorail all closed. "The Shadow knows we're here. The fight starts now."

"Wha-?!" Yukari yelled. She drew her bow and returned to him. Junpei yelped and did the same.

"What happened?! What's going on?!" Mitsuru asked.

"The Shadow in here has trapped us inside," Minato answered. "I'm almost certain the only way out is to kill it."

"Then proceed with extreme caution. Be ready for anything!" she said.

"R-roger." Yukari answered.

"We're advancing. Stay on your toes." Minato said. The group moved to the next car, which was completely empty.

"... Ya know, normally, I would've been pissed that there was nothin' here." Junpei said. "But after we fought that thing in Tartarus... I'd say whatever's in here is just really strong."

"Yeah... it's so quiet, it's creepy." Yukari agreed.

"There's something in the room. It's hiding." David told Minato.

"There's a shadow hiding in here. Stay on your guard." Minato said. The group kept moving, when a lone Shadow dropped down from blending in with the roof in front of them. It looked like a strange headpiece with tentacles underneath, with its mask as the connection, and floated around. Minato reacted instantly, dashing forward and slicing it in half and then returning to the group. "Told you."

"... I'm glad you're on our side," Junpei said with a tip of his hat. Minato noticed a strange pattern on the roof behind them.

"Behind you." he said. Junpei and Yukari turned around to see

two Shadows drop from the roof. Junpei's own had the misfortune to be right next to him, and was split in two. Yukari put two arrows in hers before it could react, killing it.

"It looks like the enemy is trying to ambush you." Mitsuru said. *"Stay alert. That type seems to be a Muttering Tiara."*

"No problem," Minato said. He led them to the next room, which outright had Shadows floating around. "Yukari, back us up." he said. He and Junpei ran forward and started hacking Shadows to pieces while Yukari put arrows in the ones that stayed back trying to use spells. They were dealt with quickly, and Minato was about to continue on, until the monorail rumbled. He looked out the window, and saw that the monorail had started to move. *"That can't be good."* "Mitsuru, are there any other trains on the tracks?" he asked immediately.

"What the heck?! Why are we movin'?" Junpei asked.

"It seems the monorail is under the enemy's control." Mitsuru said.

"Whaddya mean 'it seems'?!" Yukari yelled.

"Minato, you're suspicions were correct. At the rate you're moving, you should expect a collision with another train in seven minutes." Mitsuru said.

"Of course," Minato thought. "Change of plans. We're tearing through this place." Minato said. He drew his Evoker. "I'll clear

a path. Pick up anything I miss."

The group ran into the next car, again populated with Shadows. Minato put his Evoker to his head. "Devil's Trill!" he said. David appeared and killed three shadows with a barrage of attacks. He kept going and cut down anything in his path, followed closely by Junpei and Yukari. They continued this pattern, charging up the train.

"The strongest presence is at the front of the train! That's likely where the Shadow controlling the monorail is. You have to defeat it!" Mitsuru said as they charged forwards.

Minato had opted to let Junpei and Yukari open up with Persona attacks to save some energy, and they managed to reach the front of the train in under three minutes. They barged into the car, and stared at a gigantic Shadow. It was a woman, half black and half white, wearing the bottom part of a dress with her legs spread open as she lay on the floor. She wore a red butterfly mask with the number '11' carved on it, and had the letters 'B' and 'J' each marked on one of her breasts. The head was connected to what looked like huge strands of paper with tiny writing constantly moving up and down on them, that Minato guessed was its hair. It blocked the path forward with its ridiculous hair and laughed an ungodly laugh at them.

"What the hell? Is this the friggin' boss?" Junpei asked.

"We're in the front car, it's gotta be!" Yukari said.

"Hurry!" Mitsuru said.

"Boss, that thing's gonna be keeping you at bay with that damn hair. I say we shave this bitch!" Jack said in his mind.

"My thoughts exactly!" Minato replied in his mind. He pulled his Evoker and put it to his head as he charged forwards.

"Danse Macabre!"

Jack appeared and started hacking away at the hair that was moving to intercept Minato. He had almost reached the Shadow when it flicked its wrists and summoned a wall of ice that raced towards him. He couldn't dodge, so he pulled on his strength Magatama and shattered it. He turned to see two Muttering Tiaras appear next to him, and he jumped back to avoid being grabbed by both of them.

"Agi!" Junpei yelled from behind him. A fireball flew past and vaporized one of the Mutterin Tiaras as Minato cut the other one to pieces. Junpei ran up to him join him, but was pushed back by some of the Shadow's floating hair.

"Trying to cut through its hair will take too long!"David said. **"You have to get around it!"**

"Fine by me," Minato said, backing off. He put his Evoker to his head again. "David, Sukunda!" he called. The Priestess was slowed by David's ridiculous note. He fired a second shot. "Jack, Tarukaja!" His strength increased.

He called on his Magatama and dashed forth, easily avoiding

the slowed Priestess while Junpei and Yukari took pot shots at it with elemental attacks. He got in close, and fired his Evoker again. "Danse Macabre!"

Jack appeared next to him, cleaver in hand, and the two slammed into the Shadow's chest. **"I'll show you why they call me the Ripper!"** Jack screamed. He and Minato began to furiously hack away at the Shadow, unable to defend itself at such close quarters. Junpei ran forward as the hair started trying to swat Minato and Jack off of them.

"Hermes, cleave!" he yelled as he fired his Evoker. Hermes appeared and took one of the Shadows arms off in one fell swoop. Junpei sliced one of its legs and began to cut away at it as he ran by. The Shadow wailed loudly, and panicked. Black ichor oozed everywhere as it was being methodically reduced to nothing but a mass of cuts.

This would have been fine if Jack and Minato weren't laughing at a ridiculously loud volume as they drove steel through flesh and ripped from side to side. Both of them were covered in ichor, but they kept going regardless.

"... *finish... want... power...*" the voice from inside of Minato said. He didn't care. He was too preoccupied finding pieces to slice. Junpei grit his teeth and kept attacking. Hermes took huge cuts as it zoomed overhead. Minato and Jack finished the job by embedding two cleavers and a sword in the Priestess' face. Its frantic struggling slowed, its wails were nothing more than low gurgles (they had cut its neck open while they were attacking), and it shuddered violently. Finally,

it dissolved, and Jack and Minato fell through the body and landed on the ground. All of the ichor began to disappear, until Minato felt a strange sensation.

He looked at his arm, and saw the ichor entering his clothing, and felt it begin to enter through the pores of his skin. He froze. *"What the hell is happening?!"* he asked in his mind.

"Boss! That voice! It's... it's eating that thing!" David said.

"... My power... to me..." the odd voice in Minato's head said. It was louder, and sounded less squeaky.

"What are you?" Minato asked it.

"I am... greatest friend..." it replied.

"Of course. Everything and its three-headed dog is my best friend." Minato thought.

"Hey, why aren't we stopping?!" Junpei screamed, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"What are you waiting for?! There's a train up ahead!" Mitsuru shouted. Yukari screamed, frozen.

"Dammit! I don't know how to stop this thing!" Junpei screamed.

"I've got this." Minato said as he strolled to the control panel. He immediately pulled the brakes and the train began to

decelerate. He looked forwards, and grinned. The train, though ungraceful, skid to a halt, leaving a decent amount of space between it and the next one.

"D-did we stop?" Junpei asked.

"I-I think so..." Yukari said.

"Is everybody alright?!" Mitsuru yelled.

"We're just fine," Minato chuckled. "I don't know what you were getting worked up about."

"You must not appreciate a good show!" a voice raspy voice yelled from behind Minato. He turned around to see a skeleton like Jack and David with a thin sword and red capote, wearing a rather stylish green torero that was brilliantly embroidered with gold that went around various small rubies adorning it. He had a hat and boots that matched, along with white pants with a single black stripe running down both sides. **"Can't you see the appeal of being just in the nick of time?"**

"A Fiend, huh?" Minato asked. Junpei and Yukari got ready to fight.

"Alas, I am here to serve Master Minato," the Fiend said with a flourish of its capote. **"Though I would have loved a chance to duel him. I am known as the Matador, Fiend of Fortune. All live on the tip of a needle; it is only by facing death can one truly experience what it means to be**

alive."

"The wasted opportunity... to leave everything to chance and put your life on the line, submitting to fate." Minato said. *"The inverse of Fortune. It seems I've become meticulous, haven't I?"*

"... What now?" Yukari asked.

"It's complicated." Minato answered. "So, will you be joining Jack and David in my head?"

"But of course... I await the chance to show you my power." Matador answered. He flipped his capote, obscuring himself, and then vanished. ***"No matter what may come, I will fight."***

"Excellent... I'll be counting on you." Minato replied.

"Woah, so you've got a new Fiend!" Junpei exclaimed. "And he looks like a badass too! Bet yer' raring to go and fight with him, huh?!"

"Really, Junpei?! We almost died!" Yukari shouted.

"Regardless, how did you know how to stop the train, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"Video games," Minato said. "I'm pretty damn good at the train simulator games."

"You can't be serious..." Yukari said.

"Hah! Told ya videogames were good for training!" Junpei said.

"Well... I may have misjudged Junpei's addiction to gaming." Mitsuru said.

"Of course, senpai! I might not play train-simulator games, but if you need a race car driver, mercenary, heck, even a wilderness survival expert, I'm your man!" Junpei declared proudly.

"... You guys are idiots." Yukari said with a sigh.

"Hmph... Or perhaps this was an isolated incident." Mitsuru said. *"In any case, all of you did well today. Return, and we can call this operation a success."*

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...

Minato laughed and led them back to Mitsuru's location. Meanwhile, Mitsuru called Akihiko, who was in the Command Room with Ikutsuki.

"Akihiko here," he answered.

"This is Mitsuru. We've successfully completed the operation. The monorail has a few broken windows and bent doors, but none of the passengers seem to have been preyed upon." she reported. *"The damage was unavoidable, however... fighting in such a confined space against that many enemies with a time constraint more than necessitated collateral damage."*

"Thank you, Mitsuru." Ikutsuki said. "When I had heard the Shadows hijacked a monorail, I feared the worst... However, the important thing is that everyone's safe. I'll see what I can do about tomorrow's headlines with your father."

"But, what are the Shadows up to? Taking over a monorail... This is getting out of hand." Akihiko said.

"I'll be looking into that matter." Ikutsuki said.

"Does this mean... It's begun?" Mitsuru asked.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions. For now, we should study their behavior for patterns or clues. We cannot afford to always let them make the first move." Ikutsuki said.

"Then, what are we going to do about Minato's... ghost?" Akihiko asked. "It knew the Shadow would attack today..."

"... I have a hypothesis, but I hope I'm wrong." Ikutsuki said.

"Go on." Mitsuru said.

"If you recall, the being called the Reaper supposedly fought Minato in Tartarus when he was a child... for it to know when the Shadows act, I believe that this ghost may be none other than Minato's own Shadow." Ikutsuki said.

"Own shadow?" Akihiko asked.

"Of course... Personae awaken in one of two ways... either by necessity in the face of extreme danger, like ours did, or by mastering one's own subconscious, which can materialize to create an alternate version of the individual... their Shadow." Mitsuru said. "If I recall, Minato said the ghost was a little boy..."

"Yes. It's very possible that the ghost he speaks to is his own Shadow from ten years ago... it would explain why he only encounters him in the Dark Hour." Ikutsuki said.

"... So Minato has never awakened to his original Persona... perhaps that's why he can swap between others freely."

"Regardless, we still need to confront this ghost." Akihiko said. "I say we have someone personally monitor him every Dark Hour we don't go to Tartarus."

"Actually, I think we should let this reveal itself over time." Ikutsuki said. "After all, it's obvious that whatever it is, this ghost has Minato's survival in mind. I see no need to address a non-existent problem."

"... You're right. We can always ask him about it later..."

they're returning. I have to go." Mitsuru said. The call ended.

Akihiko and Ikutsuki both stood, deep in thought for a while, until Akihiko turned to Ikutsuki. "Chairman... are you really certain we should just leave the issue as is?"

"I understand your concern, Akihiko... but I don't think pushing Minato at this point will do any good. He doesn't seem to know when it comes to visit him, after all." Ikutsuki said.

"Regardless, you should get ready to greet everyone when they return. I'll start dealing with the news scandal up here."

Akihiko frowned, but nodded and left. Ikutsuki sat alone, and leaned back in his chair. "That ghost is definitely a Shadow... but it's not his." he whispered to himself. "He befriends the harbinger of the end and harnesses the powers of human frailty... I only need to convince him. He sees and hears its justification every day."

29. Chapter 29

Chapter 29: Post Battle Report

Thankfully, today was Sunday. After SEES returned to the dorm following their battle with the Priestess, a small celebratory party was held, though everyone save Minato was in a good mood. Frankly, it felt forced, and the group decided to cancel it ten minutes into its progression and simply retire for the night.

As such, Minato introduced Matador to his room. **"These living quarters are too orderly... too well furnished..."** Matador said, his tiny figurine surveying the area from Minato's desk.

"I may fight flashy, but I like to remain in complete control of my rest area," he said.

"... I see. Remaining at your peak potential makes you ready to dance at a moment's notice." Matador replied.

"Speaking of dancing, I haven't gotten a good fight in a while!" Jack said from the other side of the desk. **"I challenge you to a duel!"**

"Hmph. Shall I play a funeral march for the loser?" David

asked.

"I accept... Come, Jack! Your horns will never pierce my soul!" Matador said.

"Then it's a damn shame I plan on using cleavers!" Jack said.

"Just a moment," Minato said, picking them both up by their heads. He moved over and put them inside the empty cardboard box Jack practiced in, and then slightly tore open the corners to allow more light inside. "If you want a proper fight, it happens in the arena. You're not damaging my stuff."

"Excellent. I'll prove my existence here and now on this stage." Matador said. He readied his blade, and Jack drew his cleavers. **"Face me!"**

Minato sighed as he got up and moved to his bed. He opened his laptop as he heard David begin to provide music for their fight, and the battle began. Ignoring the quiet clashes of steel on steel, he decided he had earned a small break from his rigorous schedule. And there was no better way to enjoy that break than by finding new music.

As the early morning hours came, he decided to watch TV. Jack and Matador were still hacking away at each other, apparently able to regenerate their bodies even if damaged, and David was trying to match his music to the tempo of the fight. Oddly enough, it was rather good. "Hey, David." Minato said. "Are you the only Fiend that plays music?"

"Hah!" Matador answered, climbing out of the arena. **"We Fiends are beyond talented in the musical arts! Behold!"** he announced. He shrouded himself in his capote, and then put it in a strap on the back of his torero. His sword had disappeared, and he was holding a guitar. **"Does the name 'Santana' mean anything to you?"**

"You think you're the only one?" Jack said scrambling out to join him and David. He put his cleavers away, and brought out a cello from his jacket. **"We might be even with blades, but I won't lose here!"**

"If this is the battle you'll have, then allow me to show you what a real musician can do." David said.

Minato chuckled. "Well then, by all means." he said. *"This'll be better entertainment than the crap that's on right now."*

An hour of musical combat ensued. Minato was thoroughly enjoying the show. Despite supposedly being a battle, the Fiends actually sounded great together in Minato's opinion. However, his enjoyment was cut short by two heavy knocks on his wall. It was Junpei.

"C'mon man, it's not even eight in the mornin'!" Junpei whined. "If yer' gonna do that, do it somewhere else!"

"Sorry about that, Junpei." Minato said. The Fiends, who had stopped, looked angrily at the wall. They had yet to decide a winner, after all. "Hey, let's go to the lounge. I could always make breakfast early anyways." He willed them away, and

got dressed for the day. He dumped his pajamas for a white and blue striped t-shirt that reminded him of the little boy that visited him and jeans. He left his room, and summoned the Fiends on his shoulders. As he walked away from his door, Akihiko emerged from his room, seemingly deep in thought. "Had a good night's sleep?" Minato asked.

Akihiko flinched, and quickly turned to face Minato. "*Yeah, he was thinking about me.*"

"Oh, Minato... I didn't think anyone would be going out this early... even you." Akihiko said. He stopped and stared at the Fiend figurines resting on Minato's shoulders. "... Any reason you're carrying them around outside?"

"Actually, we were trying to see which of them was the best musician," Minato said. "We could always use an extra judge."

"Sorry, but I need to check the news. The Chairman asked me to take a look at our cover for the operation's aftermath." Akihiko said.

"Oh yeah... I didn't really notice it, but we wrecked a few cars, didn't we?" Minato asked.

"It wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. Aside from broken windows, damaged doors, and a few seats knocked about, nothing major happened. It managed to finish its trip to the station, after all." Akihiko said. "Though it was strange having to explain how a train seemingly teleported from one location to another... well, you should probably just watch the

news yourself. It'll explain everything better than I can... In any case, the important thing is that nobody was hurt."

"Of course. A bit of damage to a train is nothing compared to death," Minato said. "We might have to protect the city, but I'll put our own above everyone else any day of the week."

"... Though that's not the best thing for you to say as a leader, but I get where you're coming from." Akihiko said. "We're counting on you."

Minato was about to say something when his phone started ringing. Another unknown number was calling him. "Hold up, senpai." Minato said. "*There are very few people who this could be, most of which are women.*" "Good morning, beautiful." He answered.

"Morning? Hmm... It's hard to say from in here." Elizabeth said. "Regardless, Minato, I'm calling to inform you of a change in Tartarus."

"Really? What's up?" Minato asked.

"I believe a path that was once blocked is now open. I thought you might like to know." Elizabeth said.

"That's good. It was getting a bit boring, you know?" Minato replied. Akihiko was just staring at him with a quizzical look on his face. "Speaking of boring, you don't mind joining me at Escapade tonight, do you?" Minato asked. Akihiko grumbled.

"But of course... would you like me to notify our other friends?" Elizabeth answered.

"... I'll leave that to you." Minato said. "I'll see you tonight."

"I look forward to it." Elizabeth said. Minato hung up the phone and looked at Akihiko, who had only heard his part of the conversation. He had an annoyed look on his face.

"Midterms are coming up. You're going to fight Shinji tomorrow. And you make plans to go clubbing first thing in the morning." he said. Minato laughed.

"I can get a friend for you too, if that's what you're asking," Minato said. Akihiko scoffed and walked down the stairs. Minato followed suit, and the two sat down in front of the TV. Akihiko flipped to the news, which had just started.

"And now, a special report regarding last night's monorail incident." the announcer began. "According to reports from the initial analysis of why the train partially disconnected from the tracks, investigators claim that the electromagnetic connection between the train and tracks had been interfered with around midnight. According to an official press conference with Takeharu Kirijio, head of the Kirijio corporation, one of the Kirijio Corporation's new experimental generators was being tested off of the coast of Tatsumi Port Island on an unregistered barge at the same time."

"What?" Minato asked.

"The Chairman said they'd play on the memory loss of people during the Dark Hour. Keep watching." Akihiko said.

"Mr. Kirijio claims that the generator was being tested secretly as a follow-up to the Kirijio Corporation's new initiative towards self-sufficient technologies. However, the lead scientist on the barge reported that during trials, a malfunction caused the generator to produce an EMP wave of unexpected proportions. Due to the barge's location, only a small fraction of the monorail tracks were affected. Currently, the trains have been suspended and the tracks are undergoing maintenance, though the Iwatodai Department of Public Transportation has claimed that they should be back on schedule by tonight." the announcer continued. *"As for the barge, Mr. Kirijio has already retrieved his team of scientists earlier this morning, and removed the remnants of the generator. The barge will be recovered later today."*

"... That's pretty good." Minato commented.

"But, what about the people on the train?" Akihiko asked.

"Now, we're live with a passenger that was on the train during the incident, Emiri Kanou, a teacher from Gekkoukan High School. Tell me, what exactly happened on the train?" the announcer asked as the camera zoomed out to show Ms. Kanou sitting next to him.

"Our teacher, huh? Makes sense, since our school is owned by the Kirijio Group." Minato said.

"They really thought this through, didn't they?" Akihiko asked.

"Really, it was such a blur..." Ms. Kanou said. *"I remember at one moment, I was reading a book, when all of a sudden, the train started rocking like crazy! I had to hold on to the safety rails or I would have fallen off of the seats!"*

"Really? What about when the train suddenly stopped in the middle of the tracks?" the announcer asked.

"That was the worst! I remember it felt like we were going faster, but then we stopped all of a sudden... It was actually really scary." Ms. Kanou said.

"I see, I see... did you see or hear anything that tipped you off to what was going to happen?" the announcer asked.

"I can't say I did... I was pretty absorbed in my book, actually." Ms. Kanou replied, acting embarrassed.

"Is that so? Well, that's all the time we have for this segment. We'd like to once again thank Ms. Emiri Kanou for joining us for this news update." the announcer said. Akihiko turned off the TV.

"Impressive... to think they'd actually place a real barge in the water..." David said.

"The power of a Corporation is nothing to laugh at, huh?" Jack asked.

"... That story lacked flair. I give it a six out of ten."
Matador commented.

"Regardless of flair, it should work for the majority of the population, save the conspiracy theorists." Minato said.

"I only hope the JSDF doesn't send an investigator of their own," Mitsuru said, walking down the stairs. "My father may have connections, but if a branch of government acts independently, not even he can stop it."

"... I thought the JSDF agreed to leave the Shadows to us."
Akihiko said.

"As long as we kept the public safe... however, after this operation, I fear we may have attracted their attention."
Mitsuru said.

"JSDF?" Minato asked.

"Japan's Self-Defense Force...Or, in our case, a branch of it known as Japan's Special-Defense Force." Mitsuru said. She took her seat. "A unit meant to counter paranormal forces across the country... If I recall, it was formed almost immediately after the Schwarzwelt incident was resolved thanks to a coalition formed by the UN."

"The Schwarzwelt? I have less than fond memories of that place..." Matador said. **"Many Fiends were summoned to oversee its interior..."**

"Then, you know who managed to destroy it?" Minato asked.

"Yes... and though I hope he isn't the one who comes here, I know he will. He is a true warrior that lives for battle." Matador said.

"Can't we just explain to them that this was an isolated incident?" Akihiko asked.

"That's what my father and the Chairman are currently trying to do. Regardless, Minato, if you meet anyone from the JSDF, do not lie to them about your connection to SEES. It might not be much, but it will give you some degree of protection from persecution." Mitsuru said. "If they find you, tell me immediately."

"What about Shinjiro?" Minato asked.

"He'll come under fire if it's discovered he's a Persona user... and knowing his attitude, he'll arouse suspicion immediately." Mitsuru said.

"... I'll go talk to him about it today." Akihiko said. "But... if what you said was true about getting him to rejoin SEES, then you'd better win tomorrow, Minato."

"I never planned on losing." Minato said. "I'll keep my eyes and ears open for anything about strange activity as well. I'll be in the mall for the majority of the day today, anyways."

"... Ah, you have to attend your job today, don't you, Minato?"

Mitsuru asked.

"Yes, I do... feel free to stop by. It's always my pleasure to help you." he said. Mitsuru chuckled. Akihiko shook his head and sighed.

"... In any case, I'm heading out for my morning run. See you." Akihiko said. He left.

"I don't need to head to the mall for the next two hours or so. Want some breakfast?" Minato asked Mitsuru.

"I'd be honored," Mitsuru said. Minato then spent the morning making breakfast while he instructed his Fiends to provide music from the dining room table. He finished, and Junpei and Yukari walked down at about the same time.

"Oh, sweet! Breakfast for some heroes!" Junpei said.

"Heroes, huh?... Well, I could go for some food, actually." Yukari said.

It was a quick meal filled with Junpei's tales of heroism and Yukari's tedious corrections. Matador immediately realized he didn't like her at all, but thought Junpei was a fun guy.

Minato went back to his room for his hat, and headed to Paulownia Mall. He strolled into Be Blue V and entered the office. "Hey, look who decided not to be late today," Nemissa said, giving him a sideways glance.

"Might as well be on time if I've gotta be here, right?" Minato

said with a shrug. He moved to the changing room.

"Wait," Nemissa said. "I'm actually in need of a few male photographs for a magazine slot I booked... you know what to do."

"You know, I'm starting to think you just find me sexy." Minato said. "And hey, if you want to do legit couple shots, I'm game."

Nemissa responded by throwing a pen at him with deadly accuracy. He actually used his speed Magatama to avoid the hit. "You're a thousand years too early to try that, idiot."

"Try what? You didn't think I was hitting on you, did you?" Minato asked with a smile.

"Shut up and get changed." Nemissa said. Minato decided to drop it, and sure enough, the same camera crew that shot his ad shot various photos of him with product. He was certain there would be shots that were edited to include him and Nemissa, but he didn't really care. He finished quickly, used to the director's usual instructions, and went back to the Office.

"Done." Minato said as he walked in. "By the way, how'd our commercial go?"

"I'm glad you asked... it actually got quite a bit of business. A lot of students actually came in wondering where you were. I may have told them you'd be working here today, so be ready." Nemissa said. Minato blanked. "Yeah, expect to see a

LOT of familiar faces... I also may have posted your name with an online link to the ad."

"... Why?" Minato asked. He had a pleading look in his eyes.

"Because I thought it would be funny. Enjoy work!" she said. Minato changed as slowly as he could get away with into his uniform, and prepared himself for the worst. Sure enough, a swarm of girls from school were eagerly shopping around. All of them turned with a little gasp to see him emerge.

"It's now or never Boss. Shall we excite the crowd, or leave them wanting?" Matador said in his mind.

"Excite them! Embrace your greatness!" David screamed.

"We have a reputation to uphold!" Jack added.

"... *Let's do this,*" Minato said, walking forward into the crowd. He took off his hat with a flourish stolen from Matador, bowed with David's poise, and then put it back on and posed. "Hello, and welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V. Relax, and I'll personally take care of each and every one of you." Minato said as seductively as he could manage. ***"Time to turn the charm up to eleven."***

Needless to say, he earned an unprecedented amount of sales that day. People spent their entire wallet just trying to find more and more reasons for Minato to remain helping them. By the end of his shift, the shelves actually needed restocking. He walked in to the Office, twirled his cap, and

grinned at an impressed Nemissa. "That's how it's done." he said.

"... I like this. This should continue... you're our new male model. Permanently." Nemissa said.

"I'll model for you in private anytime," Minato said.

"... I'm your boss, kid. You better be ready to model for me anytime."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"I'll be looking forward to it," Minato said. He changed, and took his leave. He returned to the dorm, ate, showered, and changed into an open grey jacket, a black inside, and grey pants. He added his hat, and was off again. He returned to Paulownia and entered the Velvet Room.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," Elizabeth greeted. "Shall we be on our way?"

"Actually, I wanted to see what me and Igor could make first," Minato said.

"Ah, but of course." Elizabeth said. Minato chuckled and turned to face Igor. Behind him, he noticed that his supposed

Candelabra had one more candle lit. "... Before we begin, Igor, am I right in assuming that the number of flames lit corresponds to the number of Fiends I can use?"

"... Correct. The Defiler has insisted that you needed exactly fifteen Fiends at your disposal, though I do not know why." Igor said.

"... I'll need to ask him about that sometime." Minato said. "But first, let's see what we can do now." They went about fusing Personas, and Minato managed to make Hua Puo. Otherwise, nothing too significant.

He and Elizabeth left the Velvet Room, and walked to the fountain. Minato looked at the entrance to Club Escapade, but couldn't see Paimon anywhere. "So you wanted some private time?" Minato asked as they approached.

"I wanted to speak to you in private, actually." Elizabeth said. They were about to enter when a tall man with long blonde hair wearing a black suit approached them. He stopped in front of them, and Minato immediately realized who it was once they locked eyes.

"It's rare to see you out by yourself, Master," Minato said with a slight bow. "What brings you here?"

"Shinjiro had some business with me... he wanted to discuss something in private." Lucifer said. "He's serious about his fight with you. You've been warned."

"Good. It'd be an insult if he didn't pull out all the stops against me." Minato said. Lucifer chuckled.

"It's good that you're a warmonger," he said. "We have a few things to discuss as well, but they can wait until you next visit. After all, I don't want to interrupt your fun. Goodbye for now."

With that, Minato bowed once more and Lucifer walked away to the entrance of the Crimson Room. "You hold him in high regard... may I ask why?" Elizabeth said.

"He told me a lot of things. One of them was that he changed my fates... that I was supposed to die in my original ones, no matter what happened." Minato said.

"... He was not lying." Elizabeth said. "Your existence would have been measured by what happened in this singular year, or possibly even a single decision you made. Your original fate was inexorable Death."

"And he helped me... I don't know what it takes to befriend a god, but trust me, he's won my loyalty a thousand times over." Minato said. "But let's continue this in Escapade, huh?"

"A splendid idea," Elizabeth said. They walked past the line and saw Shinjiro, as usual, acting as the bouncer.

"...Really?" Shinjiro asked them as they looked at him expectantly. "You have a fight that could decide the rest of your life, and you're going to spend the night before partying like a dumbass."

"If tomorrow might not come, there's no reason to not enjoy today, right?" Minato asked.

"Exactly. Why waste the splendor of today if tomorrow carries nothing but uncertainty?" Elizabeth added.

"... Both of you are idiots." Shinjiro said. He moved to let them pass.

"I think you're the idiot," Minato said as he passed by. Shinjiro grumbled some curses at him, and the duo entered Escapade. They headed to the VIP section as usual, and ordered some drinks. "So, what did you want to talk about?" Minato asked Elizabeth once they were settled down. She took a deep breath, seemingly choosing her words carefully.

"As a resident of the Velvet Room," Elizabeth began, "it is our duty to serve our guests to the best of our ability without directly interfering with their fate... I would like to know why you have elected not only to spend extra time with me, a resident, but also go so far as to personally invite me to spend time with you."

"... Huh," Minato said. "Because I think it's fun to hang around with you? I didn't think I needed a real reason to spend time with a friend."

"... Residents of the Velvet Room are servants of the guests." Elizabeth said.

"I don't consider you a servant. I don't consider Igor a servant."

"I consider both of you as friends." Minato said. "So what if you're helping me way more than I'm helping you? It just means I need to pay you back someday, right?"

"... Well, this puts things into a new perspective." Elizabeth said.

"What's with people and thinking so... archetypically these days?" Minato asked as the drinks arrived. He poured a glass for him and Elizabeth. "I know a girl who swears she's a secluded princess, a guy that thinks he was destined to be a loser, and you, who thinks she's destined to be my servant." He chuckled, and passed Elizabeth her glass. "People need to know that, well, people, are multidimensional... not in the literal sense like you and me, of course."

Elizabeth laughed. "I think I'm starting to see why Master Igor considers you one of our most interesting guests... you've given me a lot to think about."

"Then, a cheers to happy epiphanies," Minato said, raising his glass.

"A joyous occasion indeed," Elizabeth said, hitting her glass to his.

CRACK!

"And we grow closer again." Elizabeth said.

Thou art I...

"I think that's a good sign, don't you?" Minato asked.

And I art thou...

"A good sign? Who knows? Your fate is in now in cards I have yet to fully comprehend."

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Sun Arcana...

"I wouldn't be too worried about that." Minato chuckled. They took their drinks. "So, shall we dance?"

"It would be my pleasure."

Hours of dancing, hours of drinking, hours of jokes about both of their day to day lives. They were here as equals. They were here as friends. Nobody kissed. It was a meeting filled with simple fun and understanding. When the Dark Hour came, they simply talked through it. They left as the club closed at five in the morning, and Elizabeth, as usual, insisted on walking with Minato to his dorm.

They arrived at six-thirty in the morning, and Minato opened the door to see Akihiko and Mitsuru getting breakfast.

"Well, Minato, I will see you again," Elizabeth said.

"With pleasure," he replied. She hugged him for a bit, which caught him by surprise, before taking her leave. He watched the door as it closed, a genuine smile on his face.

"... Really, Minato?" Akihiko said after Elizabeth left.

"What's up?" he asked. Akihiko just stared at him.

"He's concerned about your fight against Shinjiro," Mitsuru said. "As am I. I thought you would have been training seriously for this."

"I understand your concern, but both of you need to realize that I won't lose." Minato said as he headed up the stairs. "If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's how strong I am." He showered, and prepared for school.

30. Chapter 30

Chapter 30: VS Shinjiro Aragaki

Author Note: In case anyone was wondering, Matador's skills are Red Capote (Cast Sukukaja twice), Tornado (Wind attack, 2-4 hits), Andalucia (Pierce Attack, 2-4 hits), and Dekunda.

Minato rode on the late train to school, having insisted he take his time to finish breakfast. Junpei joined him, as he had slept in again.

"Dude..." Junpei said as he stared out of the train window. "Today is just an ordinary day, huh? That was crazy though, the day before yesterday... I've never had that kinda thrill in all my life."

"It's as Matador says... you're never truly experiencing life unless you're constantly facing death. There's nothing more thrilling than a fight with your life on the line." Minato said.

"... Man, he's got a point there. Don't you think it's been getting more exciting lately?" Junpei said.

"I don't think it has. I know it has." Minato said with a grin.

"Totally... we won the battle and saved the city... How sweet is that?!" Junpei said. "And you've got that fight with that scary-ass dude tonight!... Oh, wait... that might actually be bad. He looked scary as hell."

"Hey, I'm not too worried. You've seen me fight, right?" Minato asked.

"Heh, true dat! Yer' no slouch there, dude. You go this!" Junpei said. Minato nodded, and the train arrived at school. He and Junpei bragged about his greatness until classes started. The day was wasted listening to teachers try and cram last minute material into their courses for the midterm exams. He especially remembered Mr. Ekoda's horrible speech. Unable to sleep, knowledge was literally forced at Minato throughout the day.

The Student Council, along with every other club, had officially closed for Midterm exams, so Minato found himself unaware of what to do after school. "... *Well, damn. What now?*"

"Could always get your work for the week out of the way." Jack suggested.

"Oh yeah... let's do that." Minato said. He was about to head to Paulownia, when he realized Junpei was standing around, apparently trying to find people to hang out with. *"Or we could spend some time with our best procrastinating friend!"* "Hey, Junpei! Let's go find something awesome to do!" Minato called.

Junpei turned like a dog that just smelled fresh food. "Hell yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" Junpei said, walking over to him. "Let's hit the streets, bro!"

"You know it." Minato said. "Where to?"

"I was thinking the arcade, man!" Junpei said. "I bet there'll be like no line at all!"

"Good analysis. Let's head out."

He and Junpei left school and reached the arcade quickly. Obviously, there were practically no lines to any of the games. "Hey, let's start out with this one here." Junpei said. He was pointing to the Quiz Game machine.

"Hey, you don't seriously believe that playing that game makes you smarter, do you?" Minato asked. Junpei cringed.

"Well, it's not like I wanna fail! At least lemme dream!" Junpei said.

"Tell you what. You'll pass if you can beat me at Quiz Game." Minato said.

"... Well, I hope yer' ready to lose!" Junpei said. They went head to head for a good hour. Junpei never managed to beat Minato once, but his score did consistently rise each time. If he kept up that pattern, it would only have taken him another hour before he had a chance of winning. Unfortunately, frustration kicked in well before then. "Aw, c'mon man! Who

the hell knows an author from one frickin' line of writing?!" he complained.

"I do!" Minato sang as he scored yet another point over Junpei.

"Man, screw this! I studied enough." Junpei said, backing away from the game. "Let's grab some food. I'm too hungry for this... though I can't treat ya today."

"It's actually my turn to treat you." Minato said. "Besides, I make more money from Tartarus expeditions anyways."

"For real?! Sweet!"

"Let's go to Wakatsu... the normal part, that is." Minato said.

"Oh yeah, then we can eat stuff from the DH Menu and get smarter, right?" Junpei asked.

"Exactly." Minato said. The two went to Wakatsu as usual, and Minato let the waiter know they would be eating in the normal part of the restaurant. They took their seats, and Junpei looked a bit depressed. "Something wrong?"

"What am I even doing, man?" Junpei asked. "We've got exams coming up, and here I am dragging you around trying all this supposedly 'magic' crap to try and get smarter when I know I should be studyin'."

"Why shouldn't this 'magic' crap work?" Minato asked.

"Are you sayin' it does?"

"Not necessarily... have you ever heard of mind over matter, Junpei? It's an idea that essentially says if you thoroughly believe something, such as not being in pain, then your body will react accordingly, and as such, you'll not experience pain... Do you follow me?"

"... Yer' sayin' if I believe I'm getting smarter, than I will?" Junpei asked.

"Exactly," Minato said as their food was served. They had both ordered off of the DH Menu. "After all, I believed that you would become stronger and develop your leadership capabilities quite a bit, and you have. I think getting smarter shouldn't be too much of a problem for you."

"... Really, dude?... Thanks, man." Junpei said. They ate noisily, and Junpei ordered as much off of the DH Menu as he could. Minato paid, with a bit of a blow to his wallet, but he didn't mind too much.

They left the restaurant, and Minato was about to head back to the dorm when Junpei tapped him on the shoulder.

"Actually, I think we should check out the book store that opened... I mean, I don't think people really go there. Who knows? They might have some books to help me learn some shit."

"Let's go, then." Minato said. They walked into the tiny book store, inhabited by none other than two sleeping old people.

Minato decided to ignore them completely and focused on helping Junpei find tutor books. After a quick hunt, Junpei picked up a book for classical literature, math, and science.

"Hey, thanks for hangin' back with me. We've just been doing a buncha shit I wanted, huh?" Junpei said. "And ya paid for most of it too... dammit, now I feel like an asshole."

"Hey, I had a good time. And I learned some stuff from the Quiz Game, believe it or not." Minato said with a shrug. "Don't worry about bugging me if you need anything. If you couldn't do that, what would bros be for?"

"I guess yer' right, man... I'll pay you back sometime. Next time we hang out, you get to choose when and where, on me!... Just try not to bankrupt me like last time, kay'?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

"Let's head back to the dorm. It's almost dark out, and I should be prepped for my fight." Minato said.

"Good thinkin'. Let's go."

Minato and Junpei returned to the dorm, and were greeted by the rest of SEES, all seated in the lounge. "Good, you've

returned. Take a seat." Mitsuru said. Minato and Junpei did as commanded. "Minato, about your fight with Shinjiro... Will you really be able to make him rejoin SEES if you win?"

"You have my word... even if he does try and snake out of it, I know some people who might change his mind." Minato said.

"And who would they be?" Akihiko asked.

"Some of me and Shinjiro's shared contacts." Minato said. "People you're better off not knowing."

"Yeah, that's not suspicious at all," Yukari said sarcastically.

"Regardless, Minato, what I would also like to consider is what would happen if you lost." Mitsuru said.

"According to Shinjiro, I would be forced to quit SEES and leave town." Minato said. "Should that happen, I think Junpei should take over as active field leader of SEES."

"Woah, what the hell, man?! It's great that you believe in me and all that, but I don't want you to leave or anything!" Junpei said.

"... I see. Losing you would be a severe blow to SEES... and to us personally." Mitsuru said. She narrowed her eyes. "I know this may seem underhanded, but I think it's best for the rest of SEES to remain in hiding and observe your fight. You could signal for us –"

"Mitsuru," Minato said, cutting her off. He took a deep breath

and looked straight at her. "I'll bring Shinjiro back here tonight. Have you prepared his re-enrollment forms?"

"... I have." Mitsuru said.

"Re-enrollment forms?" Yukari asked.

"Shinjiro is a drop-out. However, as a member of SEES and a resident of this dorm, it's required that he be enrolled to justify his housing." Mitsuru said.

"So you'll bring him back to school too, huh?" Akihiko asked.
"... I think you're an idiot to put yourself on the line like this. But I'm certain you won't back out now, so I'll give you some advice. You probably already know Shinji is slow, but he also loses stamina pretty quickly swinging that axe of his around. You should be able to outlast him if you can draw out the fight. As for Castor, it's pretty straightforward. It makes him stronger, counters attacks, and hits hard."

"Heh... Thanks for the tip." Minato said.

"You're welcome... just make sure you don't kill him." Akihiko said.

"... Hey, you better not be lying about winning." Yukari said.

"C'mon, enough worryin'! Let's give the dude some chill time before he heads out, eh?" Junpei said.

"... A wise decision, Junpei. This meeting is adjourned for now." Mitsuru said. With that, SEES dispersed. Minato

showered, did some light exercises in his room, made dinner, ate with SEES, and then prepared to leave.

"Alright, I'll be heading out." Minato said. He was wearing his plain blue and white t-shirt and jeans, without his cap. He walked to the door.

"Good luck!" Yukari called.

"Go get em'!" Junpei said.

"Don't mess this up, Minato." Akihiko said.

"Minato, wait." Mitsuru said, walking towards him. He stopped and turned to find her right in front of him. "Take this." she said. She was holding a strange mirror in her hands. "It's an attack mirror. Shattering it will make the next physical strike bounce off of you. Against an opponent like Shinjiro, this should prove extremely potent."

"Woah... thanks, Mitsuru." Minato said.

"Also... as both the Head of SEES and Student Council President, I order you to win! Disobedience merits an Execution!" Mitsuru said, jabbing a finger at him. "I do not give you permission to lose this fight!"

Minato laughed stepped back. He gave a little bow. "Your wish is my command, Madame President." he said as he got back up. He turned, and walked out the door chuckling. Mitsuru stood there staring as the door closed.

"... Ridiculous, that this is all I can do at a time like this. Shinjiro is a problem Akihiko and I created, yet we've left the burden to him. And now he's putting everything on the line to fix it." she said quietly. She turned around and headed back to her room. Akihiko looked like he was going to try and talk to her, but sat back down.

"He'll win, right?" Yukari asked.

"Of course he'll win... I'll give that bastard hell and more if he loses!" Junpei said.

Akihiko looked at his two underclassmen, and retired to his room. He sat down, and realized what an ass he had been and what a horrible mistake he had made. Now, he had no choice but to wait for their return.

Minato arrived at Paulownia at eleven o' clock, and found Shinjiro sitting on a bench by the fountain. He looked up and glanced at the seemingly unarmed Minato, though he knew better. "You ready?" Shinjiro asked.

"For ten days. Where are we playing?" Minato replied.

"... Follow me." Shinjiro said. He led Minato on to the train to Tatsumi Port Island Station, and then to the back alleys. The punks all moved out of their way, scared that two people that were that strong were moving together. Eventually, Shinjiro stopped at the clearing by the tunnel that led to the entrance to Club Red Hawk, and looked at an old stopwatch he kept in his pocket. "One minute to midnight." he said. "We'll fight

then."

"Fine by me." Minato said. "It'll be a battle to decide Port Island's strongest!" he said.

"Are you sure you want to have that battle?" a voice asked from in the tunnel. None other than Shin Managi walked out. "Even if you both fought perfectly in synch, you wouldn't last more than a few seconds against me."

"... Correction." Minato said, clearing his throat. "It'll be a battle to decide Port Island's second strongest!"

Shinjiro facepalmed, and sighed. "You're a goddamn idiot."

"I am? Hasn't Akihiko told you about the possibility of the JSDF coming here?" Minato asked.

"What about it?"

"If we completely wreck this place in the Dark Hour, don't you think we'll attract even more attention?" Minato asked.

"You think I give a shit? I don't see what you're so concerned about... you'll be leaving by the end of the hour." Shinjiro said.

"And you say I'm an idiot..." Minato mused. He put on his creepy smile and stared at Shinjiro. "Believe me when I say you have no idea what you're dealing with."

The Dark Hour came, and Shinjiro pulled out his black charm and crushed it, summoning his axe. Minato pulled his saber

from the Dimensional Compactor and drew his Evoker. "Devil's Trill!" he said as he fired. David appeared behind him and immediately began playing, sending a barrage of elemental attacks at Shinjiro. He didn't move. Instead, he raised his left hand, which was now black and covered in red markings.

"You really think I haven't prepared for this?" Shinjiro asked. His hand drew all of the attacks to it, and absorbed them.

"*That's new,*" Minato thought. Shinjiro gripped his axe with both of his hands and swung it down, creating a shockwave that rippled along the ground, shattering the floor. Minato jumped high to avoid it, and Shinjiro brought his Evoker to his head quickly.

"Castor Prime!" he yelled, firing his Evoker. Behind him, Castor appeared, albeit he was now larger, had nine cannons coming out of his chest, and his metal horse's horn was now curved, and much larger. "Dreadnought."

The new version of Castor turned to Minato as he landed, and the cannons all aimed at him. Minato pulled on his speed Magatama and ran as fast as he could. It fired shots of energy at him that exploded behind him as he dodged and weaved. He managed to hide behind some rubble as the smoke of the last shot went off, and rested to let his speed Magatama recharge.

"You know, Aki's an idiot for telling me about how you fought." Shinjiro said as Castor Prime disappeared behind him. "It was

pretty smart of you to only use that one with cleavers against me at the hospital... I wouldn't have prepared half as much if I didn't know you could use multiple Personas."

"Akihiko, I'm going to kick your ass once this is over!" Minato noted in his head. He put his Evoker to his head, and fired. "Sonic Blight!"

David appeared once more and played the ridiculous high note. Shinjiro clutched his head, and Minato raced over towards him, Evoker still to his head. "Tornado!" he yelled as he approached. Matador appeared next to him and waved his capote, causing three whirlwinds to converge on Shinjiro. He was blown into the air, a bit staggered, and Minato jumped at him. *"You can't defend yourself in midair."*

He called on his strength Magatama and sent Shinjiro flying backwards, causing him to tumble backwards across the ground. He cursed, and rose to his feet only to see Minato about to strike again. He blocked this one, but was pushed back into the ground. Minato relented and delivered a sharp kick to his stomach, knocking him aside. Shinjiro pulled his Evoker and fired without even looking. "Rampage!"

Castor Prime appeared above him and thrashed wildly at Minato, who skid to a stop and just barely avoided a direct hit from its horn. He backed away, and Shinjiro rose to his feet. The markings on Shinjiro's arm began to glow, and he rushed forward, Castor Prime following suit.

"Leave the horse to me!" Matador said in his mind. Minato

put his Evoker to his head.

"Andalucia!" he said. Matador emerged behind him and flew to the side of Castor Prime. He pierced its neck with one strike, drawing its attention, and continuing to stab at it.

Shinjiro reached Minato, ignoring the fact that Castor Prime was occupied, and swung his axe at him. Minato countered with an attack of his own, and their blades clashed. Shinjiro quickly pocketed his Evoker, and grabbed Minato's saber. Minato instinctively released it and ran to the side as Shinjiro shattered the blade in his hands.

"That's a neat trick," Minato said.

"Tch... You think you can take me with just your Personas?" Shinjiro asked. "Give up before you get hurt."

"Sorry, but Mitsuru ordered me to win." Minato said. "Besides, my fists are more than I need against you."

"It's your funeral." Shinjiro said. He ran forward, and swung at Minato, who dodged easily. Their fight now looked just like that of their Personas, as Matador and Minato danced around while Shinjiro and Castor Prime attacked wildly. Minato dodged another attack as he put his Evoker to his head. "Red Capote!" he said. Matador instantly went behind him and shrouded him in the capote for a moment, and he felt much faster.

"Like that'll help you." Shinjiro said as Castor Prime moved

behind him. He put his Evoker to his head. "Star Drop."

Castor Prime reared backwards, and fired all of its cannons randomly into the air. It then jumped upwards and literally went to crush Minato. He rolled out of the way quickly, getting close to Shinjiro, leaving Matador to take the hit. "Got you," Shinjiro said as he brought his axe up.

"*No, I've got you.*" Minato thought. He turned quickly, summoning Jack's cleaver, and took a huge cut out of Shinjiro's exposed stomach while avoiding the strike. Shinjiro grit his teeth, and clutched his stomach, staggering backwards. "Oh, did that hurt? And here I thought you were going to, oh what was it, 'kick my ass'?" Minato taunted. He laughed in Shinjiro's face as Castor Prime faded out of existence behind him.

"The hell... is that your Personas cleaver?" Shinjiro asked.

"Do you like it? It's quite the nice trick, isn't it?" Minato asked.

Shinjiro growled, and removed his arm from the cut. Minato saw that his wound was slowly being closed by the black substance that was on his left arm. He checked the arm, and it looked normal. "That thing that's helping you... what is it?"

"Something I bought from Lucifer," Shinjiro said. "Looks like I made the right choice."

"Should I take that as your surrender, or do you enjoy getting the shit beaten out of you?" Mianto asked, juggling his cleaver

in one hand.

"Like hell I've lost." Shinjiro said. He drew his Evoker, and Minato did the same.

"Castor Prime!"

"Hua Puo!"

Castor Prime appeared behind Shinjiro, enormous in stature, while Hua Puo appeared behind Minato, and was even smaller than him. "Agilao!" Minato yelled. Hua Puo shot a torrent of fire directly at Shinjiro. Castor Prime moved forwards and took the brunt of the flames. *"As I thought... he can't deflect elements right now."*

"Dreadnought." Shinjiro said. Castor Prime fired off its cannons at Minato and Hua Puo. Minato moved out of the way as Hua Puo was consumed by the blasts. He let Jack's cleaver disappear, and ran around the ruined ground again, calling on his speed Magatama once more. He knew a hit from those shots was no laughing matter.

After the barrage, Castor Prime faded away and Shinjiro walked forward onto the destroyed ground. Minato had once again gone into hiding amidst the rubble and destruction they caused, and he began to carefully search for him.

"Sonic Blight!" Minato said from nearby. Shinjiro just barely managed to cover his ears before the incredulous wave of sound hit his ears. He managed to avoid being stunned, and

blocked Minato's attack with Jack's cleaver using his axe. He reached for his Evoker, but Minato materialized Matador's blade in his other hand and ran it through his left shoulder. Shinjiro responded by kneeing Minato in the crotch with all his might.

Both fighters staggered backwards, Shinjiro stopping to yank Matador's blade out of his shoulder while Minato just crumpled. "Agh, who the hell does that in a duel?" he whined.

"Shut up." Shinjiro grunted as he threw the blade aside. It disappeared into nothingness before hitting the ground. He drew his Evoker again, cautious of Minato's ability to summon weapons, and fired. "Fatal End!"

Castor Prime appeared and went to impale Minato in one huge strike. Minato changed from his crumpled position to a dash in an instant, summoning two of Jack's cleavers and slicing at Shinjiro's legs. Shinjiro managed to stop the attack to his right, but his left leg suffered a deep cut. He dropped to one knee, and turned to deflect one of Minato's attacks to his back. He blocked it, only for his axe arm to suffer a cut, causing him to drop his axe. Minato followed that with a slash to his back and another to his side, causing Shinjiro to scream in pain and fall forwards.

Minato walked around the downed Shinjiro as Castor Prime faded again. "I believe this is my win." Minato said, letting Jack's cleavers disappear. *"It's a damn good thing my healing Magatama stops pain as well, or else I could have been in some shit just now."*

"... Dammit." Shinjiro said. Shin, who had seemingly disappeared at the start of the fight, reappeared, and waved his hand over Shinjiro. Minato watched in awe as all of Shinjiro's wounds closed, though his clothing remained ruined. Minato whistled.

"Damn, that's amazing, sensei." he said.

"Why are you so surprised? I heal you in the same way when you reach the brink of death during training." Shin said. Shinjiro got back to his feet, and the black substance returned to his left arm.

"You're shitting me... THIS frickin' guy TRAINS you?!" he asked.

"For your information, I never used my full power against you." Minato said. "It looks a little something like this." He called on his power, and the tattoo covered his body. Shinjiro flinched, and Minato released it. "Pretty cool, huh?"

"... Looks like Aki forgot to mention you were trained by a freak of nature." Shinjiro said. "Well, you won... normally, I'd say fuck off and leave, but I don't think he'll let me." he said, looking at Shin.

"I was here to ensure that the match wasn't dishonored." Shin said. "I'll be watching you, Shinjiro. Nothing escapes me." With that, Shin vanished, leaving Minato and Shinjiro amongst rubble.

"Well, glad to have you on board, Shinjiro." Minato said.
"Though I probably won't be the most enthusiastic person to welcome you to the dorm... your brother's been worried about this fight for days, you know?"

"That idiot'll take any damn excuse to even think about me," Shinjiro said. He started walking to leave the back alley.
"SEES is still in Minatodai Dormitory, right?"

"You know it." Minato said. The two of them walked back to the dorm as the Dark Hour ended and the lights came back on. It was almost one in the morning when they walked in. The rest of SEES held their breath as the door opened. Minato walked in, his clothing in bad shape, but otherwise unharmed, followed by Shinjiro, his clothing in worse shape, but also unharmed. "We're back."

"Shinji!" Akihiko said, getting up to hug his brother. Minato met him with a solid punch to the face, sending him to the floor.

"Minato?!" Mitsuru yelled.

"Dude!" Junpei added.

"What the heck is wrong with you?!" Yukari asked. Akihiko got up and rubbed his cheek. He wasn't angry, or even confused.

"That's for telling him about how I fought! Do you have any idea how damn difficult this fight was compared to what it should have been?!" Minato yelled.

"... I know." Akihiko said. "I was an idiot, and I almost got you killed."

"... Akihiko, you'll talk to me after this meeting." Mitsuru said. She turned to Shinjiro. "You seem to be unhurt... Welcome back, Shinjiro."

"I wasn't 'unhurt' an hour ago. This fucker over here damn near sliced my limbs off." Shinjiro said.

"You're walking around now, right? No big deal. You almost wedged your axe into my skull, but I'm not complaining." Minato said.

"... Regardless, it's good to see both of you are safe." Mitsuru said. "I have a few things to tell you later, Shinjiro, but first, you should introduce yourselves to the other members."

Shinjiro turned to Junpei and Yukari, and gave them his usual suspicious look. "... I'm Shinjiro Aragaki."

"Uh, hey, nice to meet you, man..." Junpei said. "I'm Junpei lori, a second year."

"... I'm Yukari Takeba, also a second year. It's nice to meet you."

"Of course it is... Mitsuru, is my old room still open. I'm tired." Shinjiro said.

"It's still open... but you need to talk a few things over with me first." she said. "We'll discuss this in the Command Room."

"... Lead the way." he said. Mitsuru led Shinjiro upstairs while Junpei and Yukari walked over to Minato.

"Dang, you look like you went through hell," Junpei said.

"He was a lot tougher than I thought. Nothing I couldn't handle, though." Minato said.

"I'm glad both of you are okay." Yukari said. She then let out a huge yawn. "But I'm actually pretty tired... I think I'll turn in for the night."

"Yeah, I'm beat too... you gotta tell me all about this in the mornin'," Junpei said. Both of them left and went up the stairs, leaving only Akihiko and Minato in the lounge. Akihiko looked like he was trying to find something to say, but Minato walked forward and tapped him on his shoulder.

"I brought him back. That's all that matters." Minato said.

"... I was wrong here, huh? I can't undo what's happened... but I'll trust you more in the future." Akihiko said.

CRACK!

The Emperor Social Link has been repaired!

"Thanks, senpai." Minato said. He went and showered, then returned to study on the second floor lounge. Shinjiro walked down the stairs after a while with a frown on his face. "Heard you actually need to attend school?"

"What kind of bullshit is that? I'm no student." Shinjiro said.

"Hey, sorry we couldn't throw you a real welcome party. It must suck that you came here to be told you need to actually go to school... you had a pretty good life going, from what I could tell."

"Your idea of 'good' must be twisted as hell."

"It's original."

Shinjiro stopped and turned to him. "The hell are you suddenly trying to be friendly with me for?"

"I expect you to kick Shadow ass alongside me, so why can't we be friends?" Minato asked.

"Even though I just tried to send you packing?"

"Old news."

"... You're an idiot." Shinjiro said, shaking his head.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"Apparently so. Sleep well, Shinjiro."

"Hmph. Night." he said, entering the room furthest to the right. It was next to Akihiko's.

Minato spent the night doing a bit of studying, and a lot of internal celebrating.

31. Chapter 31

Chapter 31: Shinjiro Returns to Gekkoukan

Author Note: SilverFlameHaze, thanks for the constant and detailed reviews! A shout out to Mr. Haziq and jasonwu as well! Though to everyone, I'll just say this: there's a lot left to remix.

On another note, I think I should divulge Shinjiro's and Castor Prime's skills! They are:

Castor Prime - Counter, Regenerate, Fatal End (Slash Attack), Rampage (3-5 hit Slash attack, low accuracy), Dreadnought (9-hit Bash attack, causes large explosions, unusable in close quarters), and Star Drop (Bash Attack, downs enemy and lowers defense if it hits)

Shinjiro – Elemental Absorption ('Enhanced Arm', can redirect power to create shockwaves), Pain Killer ('Enhanced Wound', stops pain from a wound and greatly increases recovery rate), Augmented Strength/Durability ('Enhanced Arm', passive ability).

Minato was surprised to hear footsteps on the dorm stairs when he was only halfway done with breakfast. He turned to see none other than Shinjiro, clad in a Gekkoukan High

uniform exactly like Minato's and his beanie, step into the kitchen. "You cook?" Shinjiro asked.

"I'm rather self-sufficient. I was just finishing breakfast, so food won't be ready for a while." Minato said.

"Move aside. I'll see what else I can add to it." Shinjiro said, stepping into the kitchen. "You're not the only one that cooks."

"Nor am I the only one with demonic powers... or would you rather that stay secret?"

"Does everyone else here know about you?"

"Only Akihiko, though I twisted some facts around."

"Then why should mine be known?"

"Point taken."

A little later, Mitsuru and a rather haunted looking Akihiko walked down the stairs. Minato glanced at Akihiko and smirked. *"Looks like Mitsuru gave you a piece of her mind... constantly rubbing your limbs... the partial Ice Maiden, huh?"*

"I didn't expect to see both of you here at once," Mitsuru said. She was obviously in a good mood today.

"... Hey, guys." Akihiko said quietly.

"It's good to see you so happy, Mitsuru." Minato said.

"Mornin'," Shinjiro said. "We're almost done here. Set the table, Aki."

Akihiko robotically did as instructed as Mitsuru sat down. Minato and Shinjiro served breakfast, and the three seniors ate with their restless underclassman. "Shinjiro, Minato. Firstly, I have to say that this is excellent." Mitsuru began. Minato nodded and Shinjiro just kept eating. "Secondly, I neglected to ask an important question last night... did you two cause significant collateral damage in your fight last night?"

Minato and Shinjiro froze. "About that... " Minato said, scratching his head.

"... It was violent, if that's what you're asking." Shinjiro said.

"We may have created a small warzone... if you check the news, it should be pretty big." Minato said.

"... So you're saying you caused significant damage to the area?" Mitsuru asked.

"We destroyed the area." Shinjiro said. "It was just a back lot by Port Island."

"... You knew about the situation with the JSDF, yet still managed to cause that much destruction?" Mitsuru asked, her mood darkening.

"Most of it was Shinjiro," Minato said.

"Tch. If you didn't run around like a goddamn insect, I wouldn't have had to attack that much." Shinjiro said.

"Oh? Was I supposed to let you kill me?" Minato shot.

"Enough, both of you." Mitsuru said. She sighed, and then took a deep breath. "... What's done is done. The important thing is that both of you are alive. If it really is just an alley way, I think my father will be able to cover it up... on a more important note, Shinjiro, I believe something has significantly changed about you. You're presence has altered... it's much more imposing than before."

Shinjiro stewed his teeth. Minato realized that his changed 'presence' was more than likely the result of what he had bought from Lucifer. "His Persona changed forms." Minato said. "Castor powered up to Castor Prime... It's a lot more destructive than before."

"Your Persona changed?" Mitsuru asked.

"Not much... it probably happened because I was serious about beating the shit out of this kid." Shinjiro said. "It's not that different from Castor. It's just more powerful."

"I see... well, if you've gotten stronger and returned to the front lines, then this is an even better result than I could have hoped for." Mitsuru said, her mood lightening again. Shinjiro shot Minato a slight nod, and Minato returned it. Both of them knew better than to actually explain why Shinjiro's presence was different.

The four of them left early, but not before Shinjiro decided that he had to loosen his jacket and wear his shirt outside of his pants. He regained his original delinquent look, but Minato was certain he'd be fine. Uniform didn't seem to be a particularly big issue at Gekkoukan, anyways.

Minato arrived at the main gates to the school with his three seniors in tow, and they stopped as Shinjiro scowled at the school. "Can't I just be home-schooled or some shit?" he asked.

"No." Mitsuru said simply. "Akihiko and I will escort you to the faculty office. You'll be joining us in our homeroom, 3-B."

"Tch. Let's get this over with." Shinjiro said, walking with his usual slouch into the school. Mitsuru chuckled and followed along the still haunted Akihiko. Minato decided to wait at the gates for Junpei and Yukari to arrive. Sure enough, they got there rather quickly.

"Mornin'," Yukari said. "You hear the news...? There've been fewer new cases of Apathy Syndrome the last few days. Senpai said it's probably because we beat that Shadow. Wouldn't that be great if it was true?"

"What? You're not even gonna ask the guy about how sick his fight was last night?" Junpei asked.

"What? No I'm not, Stupeil! All that matters is that he won. I don't need some strike by strike breakdown, or anything like that!" Yukari said.

"... Our efforts paid off, if that's what you were originally asking about." Minato said. "Though I'd be happy to tell you about how amazing the fight was, Junpei. Shinjiro's actually really strong."

"Heh, in class, man." Junpei said.

"Of course that's what you're more interested in." Yukari said, rolling her eyes. "Anyways, we have midterms next week, so we should take it easy for a while."

"Take it easy?" Minato asked. "And here I thought we would get some hard training in to get ready for the next fight."

"You know it. Who needs to study? Protecting the city is much more important!" Junpei said.

"Hey, I didn't say we'd stop training entirely! Just until midterms pass... I'd rather not know what Mitsuru-senpai would do to us if we failed." Yukari said. Junpei grimaced. Minato just laughed, knowing full well that he could pass without studying at all, and entered the school.

The school day started as Akihiko and Mitsuru took their seats. Their homeroom teacher, Mr. Uchida, was a quiet and mild-mannered man that taught French. "Today class, we have a new student enrolling in our class." he announced after the bell stopped ringing. He turned to the door. "Please, come in."

Shinjiro marched through the door and glared right at his

teacher as he entered, sending a chill down his spine. He turned and then proceeded to glare at every single person in the class save Akihiko and Mitsuru. All of them reacted similarly. He stood there for a moment, and Mr. Uchida had yet to recover. "... Can I sit down now?" Shinjiro asked.

"Oh, um, actually c-could you introduce yourself? P-please?" Mr. Uchida squeaked. Shinjiro shot him a glare, and he tried to shrink behind his desk.

After sending Mr. Uchida back in fear, Shinjiro turned to the class once more. "... Shinjiro Aragaki. Don't waste my time." he said. He walked over and took the empty seat to the right of Mitsuru, behind Akihiko. Most students thought Mitsuru would have recoiled, or Akihiko would have tried to straighten him out.

"Was that so hard, Shinjiro?" Mitsuru asked, startling everybody around her.

"Tch... I still think this is stupid." Shinjiro answered. Mitsuru chuckled. Akihiko turned around and gave him a little wave.

"Welcome back, Shinji," he said.

"Turn around, moron. Class has started." Shinjiro said. Akihiko flinched and turned around immediately.

The day went by without Shinjiro being pestered by any students. All of them were too scared of him to try and approach him, and the fact that the only people he even

communicated with were the Student Council President and the Captain of the Boxing Team, he wasn't making himself very approachable.

At lunch, Minato and Junpei entered their classroom as he, Mitsuru, and Akihiko began to eat. "Hope you don't mind us joining you," Minato said, carrying a huge bag with him. "I got Melon Bread for everyone, and Tiramisu for Mitsuru."

"Ah, an excellent choice for desert. Please, join us... though I must ask where you got Tiramisu from." Mitsuru said.

"Ah, Isa- I mean, Ms. Toriumi didn't really want to eat two desserts, so she gave me one." Minato said as he gave everyone their desserts.

"Dude, am I the only one that thinks you and Ms. T are way too close?" Junpei asked.

"Hey, I won't lie. She's one of my best friends." Minato said.

"A best friend you enter shady drug dens with." Shinjiro said. All eyes turned to Minato, who had just sat down with his lunch.

"... As long as it doesn't become a habit or problem, I'll allow this, Minato." Mitsuru said.

"Wha-?! You can't be serious, Mitsuru!" Akihiko said.

"I don't think someone who attempts to sabotage SEES has the right to challenge my judgment... Or do I need to remind

you of that?" she replied. The temperature in the room began to drop slightly. Akihiko became silent and started eating rather quickly.

"Dumbass." Shinjiro said.

"Dang, dude... what do ya when ya disappear in the afternoon?" Junpei asked.

"Have a good time with some of my other friends." Minato said. "I know more than just the people from Escapade... speaking of which, are you still going to be working there, Shinjiro?"

"... I'm not sure. I think-" he began, before Minato's phone began to ring. He saw it was an unknown number. He held up his hand, and took the call.

"Hey there, sexy," Minato answered, getting quite a reaction from the rest of the group.

"Hello, yourself." Paimon said. "As much as I'd love to chat, Master would like to have a word with Shinjiro. If you would be so kind as to put him on the phone."

"Sure thing," Minato said. "Shinjiro, it's for you. Big Boss wants to talk."

"Then give it here already." Shinjiro said. He got the phone, and answered. "You called?"

"Shinjiro, it would seem you still lost, despite our recent deal. I

would say I'm saddened by this turn of events, but that would be lying." Lucifer said. "Regardless, I see you are now a student... as such, I've already employed another bouncer to replace you. Your new job is to assist SEES to the best of your abilities. Of course, you will always be welcome to enter Escapade, and receive the same VIP treatment Minato receives at all times... Also, follow Minato the next time he visits me. I have something to give you. Give Minato my regards and tell him I want to speak with him personally soon... That will be all."

"Got it." Shinjiro said. He hung up the phone and gave it back to Minato. "I'm no longer the bouncer for Escapade. Also, he sends his regards to you, and wants to talk with you personally."

"I haven't visited in a while, have I? He's probably a bit lonely." Minato said.

"Also, I'm tagging along when you visit him. He's got something for me as well." Shinjiro said.

"Should we go after school?" Minato asked.

"Sounds like a plan." Shinjiro answered.

"Okay, who are you guys talking about?" Akihiko interrupted.

"Big Boss?" Junpei asked. Shinjiro and Minato exchanged a glance, but Minato just shrugged.

"You know how I visit those Rooms?" Minato asked. Everyone nodded. "Big Boss owns one of them. He's who I visit when I go there."

"... The same guy did me some favors a while back. I work for him now." Shinjiro said.

"... Might I ask what his name is?" Mitsuru said after a brief period of silence.

"It isn't ours to give." Minato answered. "But I trust him... he's looking out for us." Shinjiro nodded.

"Woah... that's some crazy shit..." Junpei said.

"Shinji... what did you get yourself into?" Akihiko asked.

"... Again, as long as this doesn't become a problem, I will allow it." Mitsuru said. "Minato has shown incredible prowess both as a leader and fighter. If this 'Big Boss' you're referring to is helping you and Minato, then he is helping SEES."

"Thanks for understanding," Minato said, flashing Mitsuru a grin.

"Good to see you're still sharp, Mitsuru." Shinjiro said. He turned to Akihiko. "And you still haven't learned to mind your own damn business."

Akihiko glared at him, but went back to eating. "So, uh, Shinjiro-senpai, how's comin' back to school?" Junpei asked, breaking the silence. "Must suck with midterms coming up and

all that, huh?"

"... It's been boring." Shinjiro answered.

"Thought as much," Junpei said. "Hey, if you don't mind me asking, can Castor Prime like, change shape or anything like that?"

"The hell? What do you think my Persona is, a frickin' Transformer?" Shinjiro asked.

"Hey, I was just wonderin'... I mean, it's got 'Prime' in the name and all." Junpei said, looking disappointed.

"... When did SEES become a crew of idiots?" Shinjiro sighed. Mitsuru and Minato both laughed. Their lunch ended peacefully, and the day ended soon after.

Minato went to the gate of the school and found Shinjiro waiting for him by the gate. "We going or what?" he asked as Minato approached.

"The entrance is at the back of Paulownia... though you probably already knew that." Minato said. He and Shinjiro silently took the train to the mall and headed to the back alley.

"That door's new," Shinjiro said, looking at the Crimson Door.

"Can you see the second door across from it?" Minato asked.

"No... but I'm guessing that's an entrance to that 'Velvet Room' that you told Aki about." Shinjiro said.

"Wow, Akihiko really did sabotage my ass." Minato thought.

"We should skin the swine!" Jack said.

"String the traitor!" David said.

"Quarter the cheater!" Matador said.

"... As lovely as all of those ideas are, I don't think I can get away with any of them." Minato replied. "Correct." Minato said to Shinjiro. "Still, can you feel a key in one of your pockets?"

Shinjiro pulled out a Crimson Key from his pocket. "Lemme guess. I put it in the door."

"Simple, right?" Minato said. He entered the Crimson Room first, and bowed to Lucifer along with all of his newly materialized Fiends. As he raised his head, Shinjiro entered. He was about to walk forward, when Minato's Fiends jumped and forced him to bow as well.

"The hell?" Shinjiro asked, shaking them off.

"As a guest of the Crimson Room, you are expected to show respect to its Master," Lucifuge said. "You would do well to remember that, Shinjiro Aragaki."

"... I'll remember." Shinjiro said. Minato turned to face Lucifer again, but noticed that now there was a second, identical chair next to his, and they had been repositioned to form a

small triangle with Lucifer's throne of skulls. Minato took the seat to the right and Shinjiro sat to the left.

"I haven't visited in a while, huh, Master? Sorry about that." Minato said. Lucifer chuckled.

"It's not a problem... we had little reason to speak previously. Though I'd like to sort out some business with Shinjiro first." he said. He reached into his jacket, and brought out a small black cellphone. It disappeared and reappeared in Shinjiro's hand. "To keep in contact."

"... Thanks. Though I doubt you brought me here to just give me a phone." Shinjiro said.

"Indeed. As you may have realized, your new power has more than enough room for improvement. Your Devil's Body is still imperfect. I can improve it for a price. You'll have to pay in Macca, of course." Lucifer said.

"And how am I supposed to get Macca?" Shinjiro asked.

"Don't worry about that... when you slay an enemy, your Devil's Body will absorb a portion of the victim's life force and convert it to Macca, which it conveniently stores for you. You have to be the one to deliver the finishing blow, of course." Paimon said.

"So I get money for killing shit? Easy enough." Shinjiro said.

"Looks like you've got another customer." Minato said.

"Yes. That will be all, Shinjiro. You are dismissed." Lucifer said. He waved his hand, and Shinjiro disappeared into a mist of red butterflies. He turned his attention to Minato. "You've gotten another Fiend. The Fiends will come to you as you prove yourself in great battles... though I called you here to answer a question you had concerning the Reaper. Would you like to hear the answer?"

"... I'm listening." Minato said.

"Very well... the Reaper is a Fiend. It is the first Fiend you ever summoned, representative of your true self. It is a Fiend of Death, as you have already surmised... it is the most powerful Fiend you have summoned and ever will summon." Lucifer said. "The reason it 'loves' you is because it is trying to 'save' you from loneliness... the loneliness you experienced as a child."

"... I see... but even so, how can I deal with it? Can I contract it somehow?"

"You can... but you'll have to defeat it in battle. And you've seen even at your best, you can't hope to do that." Lucifer said. "You will get your chance, but not for a while."

"... Well, thanks. That cleared most of my questions up." Minato said. "Say, I haven't really asked, but is there anything you need me to do for you?"

"Survive." Lucifer said. "If you live, then I'll be content."

"Heh, then I won't disappoint, Master." Minato said. "I look forward to a long future together."

Lucifer laughed, his unearthly voice escaping him once more. "What do you think this is, marriage?" he mused. "Regardless, you have quite the future ahead of you... my presence will be ultimately up to you to decide."

"Then consider yourself part of it."

"Hmph. You trust me far too much for your own good... I approve." Lucifer said. The Crimson Room trembled. **"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple... He who possesses the Card of the Beast... I give to thee a portion of my Majesty... Thou shalt draw forth hidden strength from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my Light... The Light of Lucifer..."**

Minato felt a huge surge of strength. "You spoil me, you know?" Minato said. "Let me take you out sometime... I'm sure we can have some fun if you go around in that adult form again."

"As entertaining as that would be, I lack the time." Lucifer said. "We shall meet again. Until next time."

"The pleasure is mine as always, friend." Minato said. He bowed once more with all of his Fiends, and left. He reappeared next to Shinjiro, who was looking around. "How long was I?"

"Ten seconds... though I doubt that was actually how long you're talk was." Shinjiro said.

"Time is distorted in there." Minato said. "You catch on quick."

"Hmph... it's called having a brain." Shinjiro said.

"Hey, since we're here, how about we go eat? My treat." Minato said.

"... Let's go to Hagakure." Shinjiro said. The two of them left and went to Iwatodai station, and entered Hagakure. Shinjiro made some calls on the way, so Minato listened to music.

"Oh, Shinjiro!" the chef said as he walked in. "Going back to school, eh? Good to see you got your life back on track. And you made a friend too."

"Don't get your hopes up. It might not be permanent." Shinjiro said. He took a seat, and Minato sat next to him. "I'll take a Hagakure Bowl, with extra pork and vegetables and a side of salad."

"Coming right up. And you?" the chef asked, looking at Minato.

"I'll take a Hagakure Supreme, with extra menma. And could you make the broth spicier?" Minato said. *"Hagakure Bowl? I thought that was just a myth... hmm..."*

"Another picky eater, huh? Sure thing." the chef responded happily. He got to work on their dishes.

"I didn't fancy you as a big eater." Shinjiro said.

"I need to eat a lot more to put on weight, since I'm technically never at rest." Minato said. "And it's not like I don't get my fair share of exercise."

"Hmph... I can't argue with that." Shinjiro said.

"You know, I always wondered... are you and Akihiko really brothers?" Minato asked.

"... We grew up together, if that's an answer." Shinjiro said. "But as you can see, we aren't on the best of terms right now."

"Really? You pay more attention to him than you do most other people."

"Because that idiot'll kill himself if nobody watches out for him."

"If you want to look out for him, why not just reconcile?"

"There are some things you can't just reconcile with talking."

"And there are people who die alone filled with regret because they never tried, dumbass." Minato said suddenly. "I think you're just being a bitch about it."

"... Maybe I am." Shinjiro said. "But you've got your problems, and I've got mine. I don't give you any shit about your past,

and you don't give me any shit about mine. Deal?"

"That's a horrible deal. I think if nobody watches out for you, you'll go off and get yourself killed. Hell, you'll probably think it's some pretty poetic shit or something too, I bet." Minato answered.

"You sound more like a bitch than me." Shinjiro said. "The hell are you worrying about me for, anyways?"

"You can do so much, but you're content to just waste your life." Minato said. "And frankly, that's disgusting. I can't have such an eyesore on SEES, but since I can't ditch you, I might as well improve you... And no, I'm not putting you down easy. I euthanize violently."

"Tch... You're an idiot."

"No, you're an idiot."

"Shut up."

"No, you shut up."

"... Before this becomes even dumber than it is, answer this. Can you undo the past?" Shinjiro said.

"Obviously not." Minato said. "And atonement is a load of self-righteous bullshit. You can do what you're 'supposed' to do, which is accept it, or do what I do, and ignore the bits you don't like."

"Pfft. What kind of answer is that?" Shinjiro asked.

"The answer of a happy man." Minato said. "You don't see me moping around all day."

"... Sometimes, I wonder what the hell goes through that head of yours." Shinjiro said. "You're not an idiot... you're insane."

"Wrong. I'm the only sane person in an insane world." Minato said. "Why would a completely logical being, capable of rational thought, give up its future for an event that has already passed and will remain unchangeable for eternity? According to 'history', that's a noble thing to do... how the hell is sacrificing the future noble?"

"... It's called reflection and self-sacrifice. I see you obviously haven't done much." Shinjiro said. "Regardless, I can see where you're coming from... it just depends on where you're viewing life from, right?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"One Hagakure Bowl, extra pork and extra veggies with a side of salad, plus one extra spicy Hagakure Supreme with extra menma." the chef said, placing their meals in front of them.

"Thanks for the meal," Shinjiro and Minato said. They ate in silence, having finished their discussion. They returned to the dorm, and both showered and changed. Shinjiro apparently had another maroon pea coat, oddly enough, while Minato kept to a black t-shirt and shorts.

Minato walked down stairs to see Shinjiro overseeing a group of men replacing the tiny lounge TV with a huge flat screen. Yukari and Junpei were watching from the dining table, and Minato moved to join them. "Do you think he bought that?" Yukari asked Minato as he took a seat next to him.

"I wouldn't be too surprised. He had a day and night job before, and I'm pretty sure he got huge tips at both of them." Minato said.

The men installed the TV, which now covered the small wall that the old TV braced, and left. Shinjiro took a seat on sofa, and turned it on to the news.

"And in other news, the destruction of a small sector of the outskirts of Tatsumi Port Island Station has been explained. Testing of the island's soil has revealed that a stream running through the subsurface had created a series of small sinkholes that suddenly appeared overnight. This failure in infrastructure has been blamed on the negligence of early planners, who insisted the Island was stable." an announcer said. "Repairs have already begun, and a new initiative to implement an experimental soil strengthening technique is scheduled to begin shortly."

"Leave it to Mitsuru and her dad to cover our mess," Shinjiro said, changing the channel to a nature documentary. It was a show about the family hierarchy of hyenas.

"... Not what I was expecting." Yukari said. "Anyways, I borrowed my friend's notes today... midterms are coming up, so... I'll be passing if we go to Tartarus. Sorry."

"Eh, I don't blame you... there's not much you can do. I'll probably study after I come back tonight." Minato said.

"Going out? Well, I guess you can just study when everybody else is asleep..." Yukari said.

"Hey, if it makes ya feel any better, I'll be studyin' too Yukatan. Maybe we can go to your room and —"

"In your dreams, Stupei."

"... You coulda at least lemme finish, ya know?" Junpei said.

"Hang in there, Junpei." Minato said. He made dinner, though Shinjiro elected not to help him in the kitchen, and ate alone. Shinjiro was very absorbed in his documentary. He finished, and was about to leave.

"Going to see Shin?" Shinjiro asked from the couch.

"Can't start slacking now, can I?" Minato asked.

"I'll enjoy knowing you're getting your ass kicked for the next few hours." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled, and headed to

Tatsumi Port Island Station. There were quite a bit of workers, but he found Shin in his usual spot. None of the workers were remotely close to his usual location.

"Congratulations on your victory over Shinjiro." Shin said as Minato approached.

"If I lost to him, I would have shamed you." Minato said.

"The only shame in defeat is your own." Shin said. "I hope you've thought about how to counter me."

"I've got something." Minato said. Shin nodded, and the two moved to the isolated back alley and took off their shirts. Shin teleported them to the wasteland, and Minato called on his Magatama. The tattoo appeared, larger than before, now that he got a good look at it, and he felt stronger.

"With another Fiend at your disposal, your powers have slightly increased." Shin said. He extended his hand to Minato. "Show me what you can do."

A giant boulder of flames formed above Minato, and dropped to crush him. He rushed forward towards Shin and threw a hard punch, which was quickly deflected and met with a counter. Minato deflected that, and the two began to trade blows at almost point blank range. They fought for a good three minutes before Minato was forced to back off, his arms too abused to keep going like that. Shin swiped his hand, and a jet of arctic wind forming a trail of tiny glaciers swept across the land towards Minato. He backed away and did a flip kick,

forcing Shin, who had appeared behind him, to block instead of punch. He landed, and the punch-out became a kick-out. Three minutes later, Minato again had to pull back, his legs looking too damaged to keep up the fight.

"Well, your reflexes and durability have improved tremendously." Shin said.

"I remembered what you told me." Minato said with a grin. "I'll show you what I can do now."

"I look forward to it."

The occasional death littered Minato's hour of training, but he managed to become accustomed to dodging elemental attacks while countering Shin's physical onslaught. The hour passed quickly, and Minato steadily improved. They returned to Port Island Station during the Dark Hour, and Minato dressed again. "Hey, Shin... you never finished that story you were telling me." Minato said.

"... Very well. We'll continue." Shin said. "I awoke after the conception as the changed being, Hitoshura. I fought my way out and discovered that the world had become twisted beyond repair. It was a Vortex World, where anyone could make the world into what they wanted."

"A place where people could fulfill any desire?" Minato asked.

"If they had the will and the strength, then yes, they could." Shin answered. "At first, I was mainly concerned with

discovering if I could remain safe and what had happened to my friends. I soon discovered that they had let themselves be consumed by fear. I was more than capable of helping them, but they refused to accept my help."

"I think they didn't want to be a burden to you." Minato said. "They wanted to make their own way, and stand as your equal."

"... That they did." Shin said. "Do you know what happened to them?"

"They died, right? You said everyone in this story wound up dead."

"Yes, they died. I killed them because they thought they could stand against me." Shin said.

Minato froze. ***"Told you this guy was hardcore."*** All of his Fiends echoed in his head.

"... They died for their own reason, I guess." Minato said. "Though, for them to betray you..."

"Actually, I don't resent them for it." Shin said. He had a nostalgic smile on his face. "They were strong enough to make their own path, as I did... I respect them all the more for that. Even when we fought, even as I killed them... I never once considered them anything other than my friends."

"... You're right. To think any less of them for carving their

own path would be degrading them to something lesser than you."

"... As one who stands above all else, I hoped that one of them could stand against me." Shin said. "But they couldn't... and I wait for another challenger. I am even stronger now. But I regret nothing... The only path not paved in blood is a path that leads nowhere."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

"Progress," Minato said. Shin nodded to him.

"We'll continue this again... you should return to your dorm." Shin said. Minato said goodbye and returned. He spent the last few hours before he had to make breakfast studying and drinking tea.

32. Chapter 32

Chapter 32: A New Teacher and a Four-Man Squad

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: I respect Grammar Nazis. Thank you for pointing that out, as it's the one error that I think actually might mar understanding. However, I am too lazy to change it as of current.

To Jasonwu: I don't know, maybe the huge FIGHT SCENE might have answered that question? Just kidding. Minato's are stronger and more versatile at the moment.

Back to the story.

A simple breakfast, and SEES boarded the train to school. The intercom flared to life as it left Iwatodai and headed for Tatsumi Port Island. *"Attention, all passengers. This is a Public Safety announcement from the Iwatodai Department of Public Transportation. Due to recent sinkhole activity on Tatsumi Port Island, all visitors are advised to use the designated roadways leading away from the station. We apologize if this causes any major inconvenience. Thank you."*

"... Your father didn't actually wreck a part of the island, did he?" Shinjiro asked Mitsuru. She sighed.

"Desperate times called for desperate measures... unfortunately, our homeroom teacher was driving in the area late last night... he's already been replaced." Mitsuru said.

"Damn... you guys are serious, huh?" Junpei said.

"Isn't that a bit too much? The teacher survived... right?" Yukari asked.

"Mr. Uchida suffered a few broken limbs, but is receiving more than adequate reparations. However, I fear my father may not be able to cover our actions much longer... we'll need to be even more cautious than before."

"We'll need to prepare for the worst, Mitsuru... there's a good chance the JSDF may have already dispatched investigators." Akihiko said. "I'll speak to Kurosawa about this."

"He won't be able to do anything." Minato said. Everyone turned to him. "He's ex-JSDF, right Shinjiro?"

"A lot of people said he fought in the Tokyo Lockdown five years ago... and some say he was one of the auxiliary members in the Schwarzwelt operation." Shinjiro said. "He can move around in the Dark Hour just fine, even with latent Potential. There's no way he isn't affiliated with the JSDF somehow. Hell, I've seen him take down a Shadow with nothing but his pistol and police baton a few times."

"... I'll need to ask my father more about his history when I get the chance." Mitsuru said.

"We have to start containing our battles." Minato said. "If the next operation causes a similar commotion, I'm certain we'll come under heavy fire."

"... Damn." Junpei said. "We're savin' lives and we're still gettin' shit because we messed up a train and an alleyway?"

"That's... just wrong." Yukari agreed.

"It's how the world works, unfortunately... " Minato said. He sighed. *"Things are going to get very complicated if this keeps up... We'll have to stay on our toes."*

"... Regardless, we will limit our operations strictly to Tartarus for the time being." Mitsuru said. "We will only operate outside in cases of emergency, and even then, we will use extreme caution."

"Things have taken a dark turn, huh?" Akihiko muttered. He clenched his fists. "I need to hurry and recover. We need all the strength we can get now."

SEES walked into school silently, hearing random rumors about the teacher who was caught in the 'tragic' sinkhole accident last night. The three sophomores and three seniors headed to their classes earlier than usual, each of them wondering about the possible threat of JSDF activity.

"A large number of them are mainly weaklings... You can kill them off." Jack said as Minato took his seat.

"Fool! Do you plan to incur the wrath of the entire army on us?!" David yelled.

"When they come, you will need misdirection." Matador said. **"There are others here who may draw their attention..."**

"... I'm not throwing Shin, Kazuya, or Nemissa under the bus. Besides, each of them would probably just end up causing more destruction. I know for a fact Shin would probably destroy Iwatodai if he felt it was necessary." Minato replied.

"True... but then how do you plan on dealing with them if they appear?" David asked.

"I'm not sure yet... though I feel their appearance might have something to do with 'fate' trying to add 'Law' back into my destiny, or something like that." Minato said.

"... We'll have to wait and see, won't we?" Jack asked.

"We can't do much else."

Meanwhile, in class 3-D, the majority of the students were excited about who their new homeroom teacher would be. "Mitsuru, have you heard who it is?" Akihiko asked.

"No. Neither my father nor the Chairman has given me any information on our new teacher, nor did I ask." Mitsuru said.

"She's got more important things to worry about, Aki." Shinjiro

said. "I doubt the new teacher will be anyone special anyway."

"Really? You're not even a little interested in who it's gonna be?" Akihiko asked. The door opened, and the chatter immediately stopped. Akihiko turned around in his chair to get a better look at their new teacher.

It was a young man dressed in a grey business suit and black suede shoes, with mid-length, unkempt, parted black hair, brown eyes, and a single gold earring on his left ear. He could have easily passed for a high school student if he was in uniform. "Good morning." he said once he turned to face the class. "My name is Naoya Toudou. I shall be replacing your previous French teacher, Mr. Uchida, for an unspecified amount of time. It's an honor to work with you... Is there anything you'd like to know about me before we begin?"

"Toudou-sensei, how old are you?" a girl at the front of the room asked.

"Twenty nine years old." he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, uh, you just look really young compared to a lot of the other teachers here, so I was curious!" the girl said.

"Mr. Toudou," Akihiko began, "Are you athletic?"

"More than." he replied. He earned a bit of 'oohs' from the class, and chuckled. "Though that's a talk for another time. One more question, before we begin class."

"Mr. Toudou, where are you from?" a boy asked.

"A far off place... have you ever heard of Lunarvale City?" he asked. The boy shook his head. "Then you need to brush up on your geography. That's where I'm from." A few students laughed at his answer. "Now then, let's begin... I believe your teacher left off on page 86 of your textbook. Let's see... Shinjiro Aragaki. Raise your hand."

Shinjiro did as instructed and gave his teacher a death glare. "What?" he asked.

"I'd like you to read the first paragraph." Mr. Toudou said.

"I just transferred here yesterday. I don't know enough French." Shinjiro said.

"The first paragraph is the background of the story in Japanese." Mr. Toudou said. His expression darkened, and an aura filled the room. Everyone felt... oppressed. Shinjiro slowly opened his textbook. "Shinjiro Aragaki, read the first paragraph." Shinjiro did as instructed, and the heavy aura remained until he finished the sentence. "Good," Mr. Toudou said. "Mitsuru Kirijio, read the first paragraph of the story."

While Class 3-D adjusted to their new teacher, Minato was called out in Mr. Takenozuka's class about Einstein's theory of relativity, and answered correctly. At lunch however, Minato decided to take a walk around, a bit bored with sitting in class all day. He barely made it two steps out of the door when he was approached by Fuuka.

"Oh, hi, Minato." Fuuka said. She was carrying two lunches.

"Fuuka, what's up?" Minato asked. *"I didn't think I worked that quickly... Isn't it a bit soon to be making me lunch?"*

"Actually, I was hoping you could help me with something. I-if it's not a problem, I mean." Fuuka said.

"Anything for a princess."

"Umm... could you try my cooking? I want an honest opinion, and I figured you're really honest, so..."

"I never say no to a free meal with a lady." he said, throwing an arm around her. "Shall we?"

"Wha-?! C'mon, Minato! T-this is weird..." Fuuka said. Minato just grinned and escorted her to the roof. Yukari and her friends, who stopped to watch the exchange, all gave each other puzzled looks. None of them recognized Fuuka, and were dumbfounded that Minato seemed to be on such good terms with her.

Fuuka and Minato made it to the roof, and the two sat down near the fence. "W-well, I made some curry... tell me if it tastes good, okay? A-and don't be afraid to be honest! I can handle it!" Fuuka said, giving Minato one of her boxed lunches.

"Thank you for the meal," Minato said, readying a mouthful with his chopsticks. *"It smells odd... maybe she used a weird spice? Oh well, can't be that bad."* Minato took his first bite.

He chewed, slowly, and then rapidly swallowed the food. "...
Or not."

"So? How is it?" Fuuka asked. Minato turned to her and smiled.

"Have you tried it yourself yet, Fuuka?" he asked.

"No... I wanted to let you be the first to taste it." she said, a little embarrassed.

"What the heck?!" Yukari asked from behind the roof door. She was spying on them along with Junpei, who insisted he tag along to check on Minato.

"Dang, Minato makes moves faster than I can think of em'..." Junpei said, tipping his hat to him from behind the door.

"Really?" Minato asked, still smiling. He leaned forward. "I think you should try it too and we can give our opinion at the same time. Say 'ahh'."

"Huh? I guess that would be fair..." Fuuka said. "Ahh..." Minato fed her some of her food. She took a few chews, and then swallowed very quickly, and shuddered a little. They looked at each other, Fuuka with a shocked expression and Minato with a sly smile, and then laughed.

"That was horrible!" both of them said.

"... Well aren't they having fun." Yukari said.

"Do I sense jealousy, Yuka-tan?" Junpei asked. Yukari scoffed.

Minato and Fuuka slowly stopped laughing, and Fuuka shook her head. "I had a feeling it would have been bad... but I could have sworn I improved." she said.

"You've tried this before? Well, why didn't you tell me?" Minato asked. "I'm an excellent cook, you know."

"Really?" Fuuka asked.

"I made my own lunch." Minato said, pulling out his own bento. It consisted of dumplings, stew chicken, and a small serving of vegetable fried rice. He grabbed some chicken and rice with his chopsticks. "Say 'ahh'."

Fuuka chuckled, and did as instructed. He fed her again, and she ate it. "T-this is really good!" Fuuka exclaimed, putting her hand to her mouth. She pulled Minato by the collar and looked him right in the eye. "Y-you have to teach me how to do this!"

"Holy crap, she's all over him!" Junpei said. Yukari was speechless.

Minato bumped his forehead into Fuuka's, and then messed with her hair. "You need to calm down," Minato chuckled. "But sure, I'll teach you."

"Thank you!" she said, pulling him into a full-on hug. Minato just hugged her back with his free hand, and Yukari squealed

behind the door, and Junpei burst out laughing at her reaction. Neither of them saw Fuuka suddenly blush, and then pull away from Minato. She was hiding her face. "Oh, u-umm... I..."

"Aw, I thought what you did was really cute, Fuuka." Minato said. Fuuka refused to look at him. "... Though, what's in your other bento?"

Fuuka looked down, and chuckled nervously. "I-it's more... of my c-curry..."

"... You don't... intend on eating that, do you?" Minato asked.

"I don't have anything else to eat... I try and buy something from the cafeteria, shouldn't I?" Fuuka said. She was about to leave, but Minato clasped her hand.

"Why don't you share a meal with me? I have more than enough." Minato suggested. "Plus, I've got some fresh melon bread in my bag... perfect for our little rooftop date."

"... You'll never stop teasing me, will you?" Fuuka asked. She sat back down, and was about to take out her own set of chopsticks, when Minato stopped her.

"We can just share mine, right?" he asked.

"D-do you really plan to feed me?" Fuuka asked, a bit shocked.

"Oh? Is that so bad?" Minato asked.

"That's unfair..." Fuuka said. She pouted for a bit, but then had a determined look on her face. "Only if I feed you too. Then we're even."

Minato laughed. "Fine by me... I'll show you a bit about cooking after school." he said as Fuuka pulled out her own pair of chopsticks. "Well, the first move is yours... Ahhh."

Yukari practically twitched as she watched the two of them happily feeding each other. Junpei was content with watching Yukari's reactions, and was busy eating a burger, enjoying the show. "Hey, Yuka-tan... do ya really score points with a chick if ya feed her like that?" he asked nonchalantly. Yukari responded by punching him in the arm. "... I'll keep that in mind."

Minato walked Fuuka back to her class as lunch ended, and returned to his much happier than he was before. Junpei tipped his hat to him as he passed by, but Yukari was generally aggravated.

In Mitsuru's class, the day was drawing to a close once more as Mr. Toudou wrote down the day's assignment. From what she could see, he was doing exactly what the syllabus dictated. She liked him already, though couldn't shake the feeling that something was strange about him. Shinjiro thoroughly hated him for not backing down from his challenge, and Akihiko thought he was interesting.

"That concludes today's lessons." Mr. Toudou said. He touched his head, obscuring half of his face. It seemed to be

a habit, as he had done it throughout the day. The bell rang, and the majority of students left. Mitsuru remained in her seat, and Akihiko and Shinjiro joined her, suspicious of the serious look she had on her face. After five minutes had passed, they were alone in the room with Mr. Toudou. He had been packing his briefcase, and was about to leave when he noticed them still there. "Do you have questions?"

"Mr. Toudou, I would like to ask you a few personal questions." Mitsuru said. Mr. Toudou looked at the three of them, and touched his head. He grinned.

"I know what you're going to ask." he said. His left eye suddenly shone bright gold, and a huge image of the Egyptian glyph for the Eye of Ra appeared behind him for a few seconds, shining a bright light, before disappearing. "Your father employed me to increase public safety... I am not here to help or hinder you."

"... You're a Persona user." Akihiko said. Shinjiro grit his teeth.

"Yes, I am... One of the first Persona users to awaken." he said. "Don't worry about me. I'm just doing a job. I've been instructed to stay out of your affairs, and also not to directly aid you unless it becomes absolutely necessary."

"So you're here to make sure if we fuck up, the city will still survive?" Shinjiro asked.

"Exactly." Mr. Toudou answered. "Will that be all?"

"... No, that will be all." Mitsuru said. "Thank you for getting straight to the point."

"I try to avoid wasting time." he said. He walked out of the room, leaving the three seniors in their desks.

"... At least he's on our side." Akihiko said. Shinjiro stewed his teeth and Mitsuru simply sat there, deep in thought.

"... We'll assume he's not a threat for now. We have more pressing concerns to deal with." she said.

Meanwhile, on the second floor, Minato met up with Fuuka in the hallway. "Let's see... where can I take you to show you things about cooking?" Minato thought aloud.

"Hmm... now that I think about, I don't know any places like that either..." Fuuka said.

"... We could always eat cake." Minato said. *"Isako, if this works..."*

"Oh! That sounds nice. We can visit the Sweet Shop, a-and maybe I can learn about making desserts!" Fuuka said excitedly.

Minato chuckled. "Then let's go." he said. *"... I can't believe it... 'bitches love cake' is a real thing."*

The two of them made it to the end of the hallway before Yukari decided to try and 'spare' Fuuka from Minato's playboy

ways, as she had told Junpei. He got slapped for saying she was just trying to cock-block him.

"Minato, how are ya?" Yukari asked in as friendly of a manner as she could.

"Oh, hey Yukari." Minato said. "... You seem happy all of a sudden." *"This is gonna be stupid."*

"Of course! We're heading back to the Sweet Shop now, right?" she said.

"Huh?" Fuuka asked.

"... I never invited you to the Sweet Shop, Yukari." Minato said, raising an eyebrow. "I actually made it a point to try and not talk to you for the last few days."

Yukari's smile broke into a twisted stare of disgust and contempt. "Oh, so you wanted to avoid me?" she asked. "So you can go pick up other girls, huh?"

"P-pick up girls?" Fuuka asked. Minato sighed.

"Yukari, if you wanted to talk, you could have just asked." Minato said.

"Why do I have to ask? You never make an effort to come talk to me, yet you talk to Junpei all the time!" she said.

"Because you sit so far away in the front row. It's not like I can shout at you during class." Minato said bluntly. Yukari

froze.

"M-m-maybe we should get going now, Minato." Fuuka whispered, grabbing his arm. In truth, Yukari scared the crap out of her right now.

"I'll talk to you later, Yukari." Minato said, escorting Fuuka away. Yukari remained there for a few moments, then stormed off, muttering curses at Minato.

"That was awkward..." Fuuka said as they left the school.

"I'm at the point where I just expect these things from time to time." Minato chuckled. "Are you alright? Yukari can be a harpy sometimes, but she's not too violent... I think."

"I'm fine... though now I think you might be in more danger than me." Fuuka said. They boarded the train. "Umm... if you don't mind..." Fuuka began. She was cut off by Minato offering her a headphone. She took it and the two listened to music for the ride.

They arrived at Iwatodai Station, and entered the Sweet Shop. "So, what's your favorite? It's on me." Minato said.

"N-no, you shared your lunch... it's my turn to treat you." Fuuka said.

"Heh, fair enough." The two of them bought a slice of cake each, and moved to a bench outside to eat. "Hey, maybe we should each feed each other some of our own so we can both

taste the cakes. I'll be able to give you better pointers on it if I know what it tastes like."

"Good idea! Here!" Fuuka said, prepping a piece of cake for him. She giggled. "Say 'ahh'."

"Ahh." Minato said, opening his mouth. He ate the cake, and had a very content look on his face. From a few benches over near Octopia, Yukari was glaring at them, though they didn't notice.

After a quick eat, Minato told Fuuka a few tips on cake making, particularly how to give a cake a certain texture. They talked for a good half an hour before Fuuka's phone vibrated. She looked at it, and saw it was a text from her parents. "Ah, they must be worried sick!" Fuuka said.

"The fault is mine. I didn't even ask if you had to get home at a certain time. Guess I am a shitty knight, huh?" Minato mused.

"N-no, that's not true! I think you're amazing!" Fuuka blurted. She quickly caught herself and covered her mouth and turned away. "I-I mean... I enjoy spending time with you"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

Fuuka blushed and shook her head. "Ah, w-what am I saying?! U-uhh, I need to go! Sorry!" she said, getting up.

"The pleasure was mine, Fuuka. I'll see you again." Minato said, waving to her as she hurried away. Yukari had long since slinked away, unable to continue watching.

Minato returned to the dorm much happier, and was greeted by a slightly hyper Yukari, who was busy pestering Junpei while he was, ironically, studying. "Oh, hey! You're back, huh? Let's go to Tartarus tonight! I'm getting so sick of studying, you wouldn't believe it!" she said as Minato walked in.

"Oh? You WANT to go to Tartarus? How surprising." Minato said.

"What's that supposed to mean?! I get stressed sometimes, okay?! Junpei wants to go too!" Yukari said.

"Hey, I don't wanna have ta' take remedial classes after midterms... but I think I've done enough today. Let's go, bro!" Junpei said.

"Finally getting some action?" Shinjiro asked. "Good. Anything's better than studying."

"Well, since you all so obviously want to go, we shall." Minato said. "I'll go tell Mitsuru."

SEES prepped, and when the Dark Hour struck, they entered Tartarus. "Shinjiro, here's a transceiver for you." Mitsuru said,

handing Shinjiro his earpiece. She turned to Minato.
"Unfortunately, I have yet to find a way past that barricade."

"It's gone already." Minato said, casually walking to the teleporter. "Let's go, guys."

Nobody questioned Minato when they arrived at the 16th floor and the barricade was gone. He led the new team of Shinjiro, Yukari, Junpei, and himself up the stairs to a new area, which they dubbed Arqa. There, new Shadows they had never faced before awaited them. However, that made no difference.

SEES quite literally strolled through the floors, each member feeling great, slicing and dicing anything in their path without exception. Shinjiro impressed Junpei and Yukari with Castor Prime's sheer size and Dreadnought attack, which made quick work of practically every shadow they encountered, save two wrestler looking Shadows they encountered. Minato made quick work of them with David's Devil's Trill attack, with Junpei and Yukari finishing whatever he missed.

On the 25th floor, they reached a teleporter, and activated it.
"I would say return, but most of you are in near perfect condition. However, there are three floor guardians here, of the Magician Arcana... they excel in fire attacks, so Takeba should remain behind."

"As long as they don't block bash attacks, I'll kick their asses." Shinjiro said. They walked around the corner to see three huge tables with flaming cutlery floating about them.

"The plan is as follows." Minato said. "Me and Shinjiro will each eliminate a Shadow each, and then Junpei will hurl this Mabufu gem at the last one. We'll see what happens after that. Yukari, be ready to heal from behind."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll take the one in the middle." Shinjiro said. He lazily walked forward and put his Evoker to his head. "Dreadnought." Castor Prime emerged and unleashed its volley at the table in the middle. It couldn't dodge, and was obscured by a huge cloud of smoke. "Don't gimme any shit about property damage when this is over."

Minato chuckled, walking next to him, and fired his Evoker. "Devil's Trill." David launched a barrage of mostly fireballs and tornadoes into the dust cloud.

"Wait! You haven't damaged them at all!" Mitsuru screamed. Minato and Shinjiro both rapidly backed up, and saw three pillars of fire appear where they were. *"The enemy is resistant to cut and slash attacks, absorbs fire, and is immune to bash, light, and dark attacks! It's only weakness is ice!"*

"Junpei, the gem!" Minato screamed. Junpei hurled the gem into the cluster of Shadows, and they were all struck by ice, knocking each of them flat on their back.

"Let's kick some ass!" Shinjiro screamed, readying his axe.

"Even if you're resistant, you can't defend yourself when you're down. Let's go!" Minato said. Everyone rushed in and

hacked away at the Shadows, causing significant damage in the ensuing tumble, but they were eventually knocked away once they got back to their feet. Their eyes blazed brightly, and Minato knew a heavy fire attack was coming next. He raised his Evoker to his head quickly. "Sonic Blight!" he yelled. David's high note stopped their attack, and Yukari hit one of the tables with a small tornado, breaking its weakened body apart.

"One down!" she yelled. The other two tables turned on her. Minato used his speed and strength Magatama to knock one of the tables into the other before they could attack. Shinjiro and Junpei followed up and slashed away at the table Minato originally hit, killing it.

"Let's do this, senpai!" Junpei yelled, pulling his Evoker.

"Don't screw this up." Shinjiro said, readying his.

"Double Fangs!"

"Rampage!"

Hermes appeared, and two of its metal blades into the last table, pinning it. Castor Prime came immediately after and thrashed at the table, sending pieces of it flying with a resounding crunch each time its metal horse tore through it, slash after slash. They disappeared, and SEES walked through the wreckage of their last fight without any noticeable damage.

"It's official." Junpei said as they grabbed some treasure from later in the room. "We're badassess."

"Hmph." Shinjiro said.

"Seriously?... Well, I guess we are really strong." Yukari said.

"I could have told you that from the start." Minato said. "Let's go."

The next eleven floors of Arqa threw more new Shadows at them. And SEES threw a Red Capote'd Shinjiro that loved to use Dreadnought back at them. Add Junpei and Yukari's constantly growing strength, and Minato's knack for aiming right at the Shadow's weaknesses, and they reached the 36th floor without any problem.

"There's a single floor Guardian... it lacks weaknesses, and takes no damage from wind, light, or dark attacks." Mitsuru said. "You've been going for quite a while now... I advise you to use the clock at the entrance before engaging."

"Sounds like a plan..." Shinjiro said.

"Yeah... I can't keep healing you if you just abuse Castor Prime like that, ya know?" Yukari huffed.

"Hey, I was healing too." Minato said. "But she's right. I don't have too much power left right now."

"Yeah... me and Hermes could use a break right about now."

Junpei agreed. They returned to the lobby, and everyone paid at the clock to heal. Minato then entered the Velvet Room and fused some more Personas, and also found that Elizabeth had given him quite a few fetch quests. Thankfully, he made a habit of collecting any odd items Shadow's dropped, and found he had everything he needed already. He got his fair share of rewards, and left. He glanced at the clock.

"We've got fifteen minutes left. Mitsuru, tell us when there's only five minutes left so we can reach an exit." Minato said.

"Certainly. Be careful."

"Will do. To kill a floor guardian." Minato said. SEES' field team reappeared on the 36th floor, and Minato brought his Evoker to his head. "Tarukaja." he said as he fired, summoning Jack. He powered up Shinjiro, then himself, then Junpei. "This thing won't know what hit it."

The three of them rounded the corner, Evoker to their heads, and walked forward to find the Change Relic, a shadow that looked like a warped angel statue. Shinjiro led the charge. "Dreadnought." he said, firing his Evoker. Without a resistance to bash attacks, the Relic took Castor Prime's shots directly, and fell over from the sheer force of the repeated impacts.

Minato followed with an attack. "Danse Macabre." he said, firing his Evoker. Jack appeared, wielding dual cleavers, and landed on the downed Relic, slicing away at it madly. It opened its doors and spikes emerged, knocking Jack off before he could finish the job. It was riddled with cuts and

cracks at this point.

Junpei came in for the finishing blow. "Assault Dive!" he yelled, firing his Evoker. Hermes zoomed forwards from behind him and launched a huge fly kick at the relic, shattering it. "Like a kung-fu hero!"

"... Well that was underwhelming." Yukari said, just walking calmly behind the three of them.

"We might be too strong for Tartarus." Minato chuckled. They took their new treasure, and continued on to the fortieth floor. There, Minato found a briefcase with the Old Document he had to retrieve, a teleporter, and another barricade.

"... *Unprecedented. All of you have performed far beyond expectations. Return for the day... there's nothing more to do.*" Mitsuru said. They did as instructed, Minato dropped off his Old Document, and then SEES returned for the night. Minato spent the early hours studying again, making sure he was ready for his midterms, and reveling in SEES' new power. They were on an entirely different level compared to what they had been only two weeks ago.

33. Chapter 33

Chapter 33: New Arrivals

A champion's breakfast filled with tales of heroism marked the beginning of Minato's day, as every member of SEES bragged to Akihiko about their incredible exploits from the night before. He had opted not to go to Tartarus that night.

"... You even reached the next barricade... in one night."
Akihiko said slowly.

"Yep... I'd say we did one helluva good job," Junpei said with a stretch.

"Shinjiro-senpai's really powerful. It's kind of scary, actually."
Yukari said. "Though, now I am a bit interested in how Minato won against him."

"That's a secret... can't show all of my cards now, can I?"
Minato replied.

"It's called being a fast bastard. I couldn't land a good hit, so I lost." Shinjiro said. Minato sighed.

"I was trying to be mysterious." he said.

"Mysterious or not, all of you have performed exceptionally

well... there's a good chance you've even surpassed Akihiko and I. It's good to see all of you reaching your full potential." Mitsuru said. "I may need to redouble my own training if I plan to hold my position."

"Nah, you're fine, Mitsuru-senpai! If anyone can run this operation, it's you!" Junpei said.

"Yeah, Mitsuru. Nobody's got more experience as a team leader than you, after all." Shinjiro said.

"You've got the connections, the knowledge, the skills, and the elegance necessary for our operation." Minato added. "Add beauty and wisdom on top of that, and you're irreplaceable." Mitsuru was smiling widely at the barrage of compliments.

"Elegance?" Yukari asked.

"The only person who needs to be careful of being replaced is Akihiko." Minato said. "He might stay a bench warmer forever if he can't get back in the game."

Akihiko looked distraught. "A bench warmer?... You... you can't be serious..." he said. He looked pleadingly to Shinjiro and Mitsuru, who both ignored him, then to Junpei and Yukari, both of whom just shrugged. "I... I was..."

"Anyways, we should head out." Minato said, cutting him off. "By the way, I heard your new homeroom teacher is pretty popular already... Mr. Toudou, was it?"

"Yes... he's a Persona user." Mitsuru said. The sophomores all stopped dead in their tracks. "My father has hired him to increase public safety... think of him as a cleaner. Should we fail, he'll be there to pick up the pieces."

"Is he an enemy or an ally?" Minato asked.

"According to him, neither... For now, we'll ignore him." Mitsuru said. "I don't want any of you rashly confronting him... he can summon without an Evoker, so he's never unprepared."

"You serious?" Junpei asked. "Man... I really hope he is just here to watch."

"Same... it's tough enough dealing with just the Shadows and the threat of the JSDF." Yukari said. "Speaking of which... has anyone heard anything about that?"

"I talked to a few people about it after we came back from Tartarus," Shinjiro said. "Some of my old employers told me to watch out... apparently, there's an unmarked military-grade vehicle that patrols the streets at night. It's supposed to look like a tank... Don't know where the hell they would hide that, though."

"... Let's all go visit Officer Kurosawa after school." Akihiko suggested. "He might have some information on it."

"... It's better than nothing." Minato agreed.

SEES arrived at school and quickly headed to their classes. The seniors entered twenty minutes early to find an empty room and Mr. Toudou constructing what looked like a SMG on his desk from nothing but an array of parts. There was a timer, and he was hurriedly putting the parts together. He finished and stopped the clock, checking it. "I've gotten slower. Hmm." he said. "It's been a while since I last made one... three seconds is a big drop."

"Mr. Toudou?" Mitsuru asked.

"I caught that little slip of the tongue yesterday, Ms. Kirijio." he said, now examining his SMG. "You still have questions... though I suppose now is as good a time as any to deal with them. Fire away."

"... How long have you been able to use your Persona?" she asked.

"Fourteen years. I awakened when I was fifteen." he said. "If you want specifics, ask your father. If he thinks you should know how that's possible, let him tell you."

"... I see." Mitsuru said.

"I'm asking outright. You with us or in our way?" Shinjiro asked.

"Like I said, neither. I will fight you if you attack me or begin to abuse your powers to attack the public." he said.

"You know what Shadows are, right? Why aren't you helping us?" Akihiko asked.

"It's not my job." Mr. Toudou replied with a shrug. "I've already done my fair share of heroism anyways. I can't steal this generation's thunder, can I?"

"The hell kind of answer is that?" Shinjiro asked.

"Do you really think any of that bullshit matters when people's lives are on the line?!" Akihiko shouted. "It's idiots like you that —"

"Akihiko, enough." Mitsuru said. Akihiko growled, but backed down. "... We'll be counting on you to keep the city safe."

"Consider it done." Mr. Toudou said, putting his SMG away into his briefcase. "You should get seated. People will start coming to class soon."

After the seniors talk with Mr. Toudou, the day went by without incident until lunch. Minato was about to go look for somebody to talk to when Yukari walked up to him, clutching a fashion magazine. "Care to explain this?!" she asked, placing the magazine on his desk. It was open to a two-page advertisement of him lying half-dressed in a bathtub, obscured by steam and soap bubbles. He immediately recognized it as one of his Be Blue V advertisement shots. He looked it over carefully.

"The director was right... I could have flexed more here."

Minato said after looking at the picture for a good thirty seconds. "They cut my elbow flare here... pretty well, considering the steam makes it hard to catch... but I think I nailed everything else."

"What?" Yukari asked.

"Dude... you have an ad on TV and in a fashion magazine?" Junpei asked.

"What can I say?" Minato shrugged. He watched Yukari's group of friends looking at their group expectantly. "I think I'm more than qualified to be a model. I mean, we went for a whole hour last night and I didn't even break a sweat." he said with his creepy smile. He heard a collective group of gasps come from Yukari's group.

"W-woah! What are you saying?!" she asked. She turned, and saw a collection of envious stares hitting her. She quickly hurried over and tried to explain to her friends that they he was talking about a workout routine he did at the dorm. Junpei and Minato cracked up.

"That was awesome, man!" he said, watching Yukari scramble to cover up her mess. "Though dang... you're a full-on model. I'm surprised you don't have a crap ton a' fan girls swarming ya all the time."

"I think my position as Head of the Disciplinary Committee makes me a bit unapproachable... I have dragged a girl by her leg down the stairs, after all." Minato said.

"... Didn't hear about that." Junpei said, eyes wide. He turned and became very absorbed in eating his lunch.

After school, SEES met at the front gate and headed to Paulownia Mall. Everyone walked into the police station, which was completely desolate save for the lazy secretary. He looked up from his newspaper, and narrowed his eyes. "... I'll tell Kurosawa you're here." he said. He rose and walked to the back.

"It's too empty..." Akihiko said. "Is someone else here?"

"It's creepily quiet..." Yukari added. "You don't think..."

"We don't know for certain." Mitsuru said. "And we didn't come here to fight... Stay calm."

SEES waited for a good few minutes before the secretary reappeared, and motioned for them to follow him. The group went behind the counter and into the offices at the back. They were led to a tightly sealed door with an electronic lock at the rear of the office block, which the secretary opened by swiping a card, entering a password, and then having his fingerprint scanned. The door hissed, and the ridiculous number of locks and reinforcements came undone, and then slid into the wall.

SEES walked into a dimly lit room with five huge monitors on the walls, one person manning each. The individuals worked at a ridiculous pace, ignoring SEES sudden appearance entirely. There was a clearing in the center of the room, and

Officer Kurosawa stood there talking to two rather pale individuals they had never seen before.

The first was a very rough, well-built man with neat black hair combed backwards. He wore a large army jacket filled with medals and emblems, army pants filled with just as much decorations, strange green gloves, and combat boots. He had extremely sharp features, and looked his age. He towered almost seven feet tall, and was intimidating to the majority of SEES. The second was a woman with bright blonde hair dressed similarly to the man, albeit with less than half as much medals and emblems on her jacket. She was almost a foot shorter than the man, and looked less frightening than the man, though by no means did her smile appear friendly.

"He's come." Matador said in Minato's mind. ***"Do not fight him. All of you will die."***

"Ms. Kirijio," Kurosawa said turning to face SEES as they were led to the center of the room. "I expect you know who these people are." Mitsuru nodded. "Good... would you like me to introduce you, sir?" Kurosawa asked the man.

"There's no need." the man answered. He walked forward, and Kurosawa instinctively let him pass. He stood in front of SEES, and looked them all over. "You are the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squadron, correct?"

"Yes. I'm Mitsuru Kirijio, the leader of this group." Mitsuru answered. "Might I ask your name?"

"I am Hazama Yoshio, a Special-Class Investigator for the JSDF. I understand that this city houses the tower known as Tartarus, a known nest of the physiological abnormalities, dubbed Shadows." he said.

"That is correct. SEES operates specifically to counter them and minimize damages to the city, prioritizing the safety of its civilians first." Mitsuru said.

"Yet a monorail car was almost destroyed and a fraction of Tatsumi Port Island looks like a warzone." the woman said, walking up to join Hazama. She had a heavy accent.

"And you would be?" Akihiko asked, a bit annoyed at the woman's attitude.

"Zelenin Yoshio, Associate Special-Class Investigator." she answered. "I would watch your tongue if I were you, Akihiko Sanada. You haven't been very active this past month, have you?"

"What did you say?!" he snapped.

"Shut up, Aki." Shinjiro commanded. Akihiko took a breath and backed off.

"We've taken the liberty to read all of your files." Hazama said. "Our assignment is to remain on active guard during the time-space anomaly known as the Dark Hour and protect the populace from any and all Shadows we find outside of Tartarus, along with any other threats in the area. There have

been a number of other abnormal energy signatures in the area, including two from members of SEES."

"He's on to us." David chimed. Minato felt all of his Fiends tense, a strange sensation.

"I know that! I can't run. I can't fight... I need to reason. It's the only chance I have." Minato thought.

"Yes... these members had some of the more interesting reports. Is Minato Arisato currently with you?" Zelenin said.

"Here I am." Minato said, stepping forward. He extended a hand to them. "Pleased to meet you." Hazama nodded and shook his hand, as did Zelenin. "Before you ask, I know what you're talking about. It's under control."

"Good... then you won't mind us checking for ourselves." Zelenin said. A screen suddenly materialized in front of her, and she looked at it carefully. The same happened for Hazama. After a good minute of silent observation, the screens disappeared.

"You're an honest man." Hazama said. "Though your output level has increased from that of the reports... You've been training, haven't you?"

"To the best of my ability. I take my job seriously." Minato said. Hazama smirked, oddly enough.

"Excellent. We shouldn't have much of a problem." Zelenin

said. "The next signature belongs to a Shinjiro Aragaki. Please, come forward."

Shinjiro stepped forward next to Minato and straightened to his full height. He was taller than Zelenin, but shorter than Hazama. "I'm in the same boat as Minato."

"That's for us to decide." Hazama said. The screens appeared once more, and they stared at Shinjiro.

"Oh my! Once a troublemaker, always a troublemaker, hmm?" Zelenin asked. "Your readings are all over the place... though I recognize this pattern."

"Another one like Jimenez," Hazama began, "but it hasn't progressed too far... I trust you have a good reason for this."

"...You read my file, right? After I left SEES, I ran into some... odd... medical complications." Shinjiro said. "Its main job is keeping me in top form. Anything else is just a bonus from me getting stronger."

"... Oh, that explains the lack of an equilibrium reading." Zelenin said. "Regardless, if it's for medical complications, I'll drop it. I advise you avoid trying to develop any powers you gain from it."

"I might not be a zealot, but I'm dedicated. I'll use whatever I have to." Shinjiro said. "We done?"

"That will be all for now." Hazama said to Shinjiro. He looked

at Minato. "However, there is something I'd like to know about you."

"Ask away." Minato said.

"Would I be correct in assuming you can summon without a COMP?" Hazama asked. Instead of answering, Minato smirked and materialized his three Fiends, all bowing behind him. Zelenin frowned, but Hazama narrowed his eyes at Minato. They glared at each other for a bit.

"That answer your question?"

"It raised more." Zelenin said. "Regardless, we have other things to attend to."

"... Yes. If you'll excuse us." Hazama said, walking forward. SEES moved aside to let them pass. Hazama and Zelenin both glared at Minato as they passed by. Nobody moved until the two of them left the room.

"... That was friggin' scary." Junpei finally said.

"Officer Kurosawa... you know the JSDF, don't you?" Akihiko asked.

"I served as an Ensign during the Schwarzwelt Operation, and as an active combatant during the Tokyo Lockdown." Kurosawa said. "I was one of the first members along with Captain Hazama, Lieutenant Zelenin, and Warrant Officer Jimenez that the JSDF recruited... but I'm retired now. I can't

fight like I used to."

"Can you tell us about Captain Hazama?" Mitsuru asked.

"There's not much to say about him... the man's a hero in every sense of the word. He was the field leader of the Schwarzwelt Investigation, turned down every opportunity he had to get an off-field position because he thought his skills could be best used on the field, and volunteers for any duty available." Kurosawa said. "If there's one man I truly respect in this world, it's him."

"Why'd he come talk to you?" Shinjiro asked.

"Formalities. He also asked me to provide data for him when he asks... and he offered me a chance to join his unit again. I declined."

"I see... thank you, Officer Kurosawa." Mitsuru said. "If you don't mind, could you inform of where their base of operations is located?"

"It's not in my authority to give." Kurosawa said.

"Then, we'll be taking our leave." Mitsuru said. She turned to leave, and SEES followed. The group walked outside and stood by the fountain. She turned to face Shinjiro. "Medical complications?"

"... After the incident, Castor started to act up." Shinjiro said. "It started messin' with my health... but I fixed that. So drop

it."

"Your Persona rebelled?! Shinji, you can't just 'fix' that!" Akihiko said.

"A Persona can rebel?" Yukari asked.

"When a Persona and its user drop out of synch, a Persona can begin to act out. It may appear randomly, refuse to obey its owner, or worse." Mitsuru said. "Though, this is a generally rare occurrence in natural Persona users... why didn't you tell us, Shinjiro?"

"And what were you gonna do about it? Cry?" Shinjiro asked, clearly annoyed that they didn't drop the subject. "I did the smart thing and solved the damn problem. I'm fine now, aren't I?"

"... Tell us if anything changes." Mitsuru said. "You may all go your separate ways... I'm certain you all have something you want to do now. I'll be returning to the dorm for now." Mitsuru walked away, deep in thought. Shinjiro headed elsewhere, and was followed by Akihiko.

Minato looked to Junpei and Yukari, who both seemed lost. He was about to say something, when somebody grabbed his shoulder. He turned around. "Been a while, huh?" Kazuya said. "We need to talk."

"... Let's go." Minato said. He turned and followed Kazuya to Café Chagall. They both ordered coffee, and took a seat.

"The JSDF is here."

"A troublesome motherfucker, at that." Kazuya grumbled.

"You know him?"

"If it wasn't for him, I'd be the goddamn king of Japan right now." Kazuya said. "He's no laughing matter."

"Really? What powers does he have?" Minato asked.

"That's what makes him scary... he's got nothing but skill, training, and experience. He's human in every sense of the term, and armed with cutting edge technology." Kazuya said. "And his two cronies might bicker, but if they're seriously fighting you, they're as deadly as he is. Don't even think about how strong all three of them are together."

"... So what do we do about him?" Minato said.

"We avoid him." Kazuya said. "The only one of us who could probably kill him is Shin, but he doesn't play like that... besides, you know, don't you?"

"... He's one of my Social Links." Minato said.

"If that's what you call the people you draw power from, then yes." Kazuya said. "Who knows? Maybe he'll teach you how to be a gun-toting badass like Rambo."

"Maybe he – wait, what?" Minato asked. Kazuya broke into a childish laugh.

"You were so serious just now, I couldn't resist." he said. "I'm just fuckin' with you... yeah, he's strong, but he's not some bloodthirsty maniac or anything like that. He fights when he has to... it just turned out to be quite often back in the day."

"Really? So that glare he gave me when he saw my Fiends wasn't anything menacing?" Minato asked.

"To be honest, he was probably just annoyed that they regenerated. I'm pretty sure he's killed a bunch of Fiends, so he was probably just pissed off that they reincarnated again." Kazuya said. "After all, wouldn't you be a little pissed if something you killed came back a few years later, looking the exact same?"

"Yeah, that would suck." Minato agreed. Their coffee came.

"So, you're saying I should just be friendly?"

"If you get power for it, why not? He seems like a pretty cool guy. Oh, make sure you ask him for some of his robot armor, though. That stuff looks hilarious." Kazuya said.

"Robot armor?"

"You'll see it when you see it... it would be hilarious to wear that to a rave or something." Kazuya said. He chuckled.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Minato said. "How's life?"

"Good, good... I'm doing a show at Escapade this Sunday, actually. You should come." Kazuya said.

"A show?"

"Didn't I tell you I was a DJ? I'm not signed yet, but I'm pretty popular underground... if you know any people who listen to that type of music, you should bring them. They'll love you for it." Kazuya said.

"... That's an expectant face." Minato said. "You can't read minds, can you?"

"Oh? I certainly don't know that a certain shy teal-haired girl named Fuuka Yamagishi happens to have a taste in music very similar to what I make." Kazuya mused. "If you're wondering how I know, I track who downloads my music. I operate here because the largest number of my listeners are here."

"Smart... though you keep tabs on people?"

"You never know. You might find someone interesting."

"Even though the majority of the population is dull, boring, and replaceable?"

"It makes finding that diamond in the rough all the better, doesn't it?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the

Star Arcana...

"That's a good idea... I might enlist you guys to track SEES members sometimes. Can you do it?" Minato said to his Fiends.

"Leave it to us." Jack said.

"Still, you should probably run to work. You need to work once every week, remember?" Kazuya said. "After coffee, of course."

"True... I'm not that late." Minato said. *"But I'm still chugging this coffee."*

A quick coffee cup later, Minato walked into Be Blue V and changed in a flash. Nemissa gave him a slightly annoyed look since he was working without his hat, but he ignored it. The day passed quickly, with Minato dealing with a few students who recognized him as a model, but otherwise, nothing of note happening.

He walked into the Office as his shift ended, and changed back. He was about to leave, but stopped at the door. "Hey, how did my advertisements go?" he asked. *"Pretty damn well, but I want to hear you say it."*

"I was wondering when you'd ask." she said, suddenly brightening her mood. "They actually went over quite well... expect another shoot next Thursday for a different magazine."

"At this rate, my sexiness will precede me." Minato said. Nemissa chuckled.

"You keep telling yourself that." she said, returning to her work. Minato chuckled, and returned to the dorm.

"S'up dude!" Junpei said. "Hey, I actually realized I don't know shit about Classic Lit... so I'll pass up Tartarus tonight if ya wanna go. I need to get my read on. But to be honest, I don't think anyone wants to go tonight..."

"Actually, I'm just finishing up my math practice. I'm out too." Yukari said.

"It's good to see you all being serious about your studies," Mitsuru said. She was studying at the table. "I trust you'll be joining them as well, Minato?"

"Oh... I was actually thinking of visiting Dante." Minato thought.

"What the heck, Boss?! You just had a scary encounter with Hazama, who said he'll be prowling around in the Dark Hour, and you WANT to go out alone?!" David screamed.

"... It was sarcasm. What do you think I am, stupid?"

"... Sorry Boss. I'm just on edge."

"It'll be fine." Minato said in his mind. "Of course... Hey,

Junpei, how about I tutor you? It'll be a good way for me to practice, too."

"For real?! Sweet!" Junpei said.

"A leader and a tutor. Impressive as always, Minato." Mitsuru said. Minato grabbed what he needed to study, and SEES spent the night hitting the books.

34. Chapter 34

Chapter 34: A Much Needed Breather

Minato noticed that SEES seemed to have developed a habit of arriving to school as a large group. *"Aren't we one big happy family?"* he thought.

"We've got Mitsuru, the tough eldest, Akihiko, the hothead, Junpei, the clown, Yukari, the attention hog, Shinjiro, the scary brother, and you, the resident eccentric." Jack replied.

"I was thinking more along the lines of family therapist, but I suppose that term works as well." Minato answered.

"Therapist indeed... most of your acquaintances have quite the host of problems." David said.

"They overcomplicate their existence with worry." Matador said.

"Unlike you guys, they don't exactly reincarnate after death. I think that allows them some freedom to overthink things... though some of them are stupid." Minato replied.

"Everyone," Mitsuru announced seriously, "exams begin next

week. I trust all of you have prepared?"

"Heh! I might not wreck my tests like you do, but I sure as hell ain't failin' this time!" Junpei announced happily.

"I look forward to that. You've been quite dedicated to improving yourself this week, Junpei. I'm impressed." Mitsuru said.

"I think I studied pretty hard too." Yukari said.

"Be more confident, Yukari." Akihiko said. "You've hit the books almost as long as I have."

"Unlike you, she actually had to train. Not everyone got to sit on their ass all week." Shinjiro said.

"Tch... then how well are you prepared, Shinji?" Akihiko shot back.

"You think I give a shit about my grades?"

"You'd best care about your grades... unless you don't mind an execution for every test failed." Mitsuru warned. "So, how prepared are you, Shinjiro?"

"... Prepared enough." Shinjiro said.

"... Of course you have." Mitsuru said. She turned to Minato. "Well? Were you serious about being the top of the class?"

"I think I'll be the top of the school, actually." Minato said.

"Confident, aren't we?" Mitsuru asked. "Then, I propose a competition. The member of SEES to score the highest on their tests will receive a reward from me... To be honest, I'm not as well prepared as I should be. I'm still preoccupied with monitoring Shadows. At any rate, the number of incidents has decreased since our last mission. If we can continue to defeat them, we may be able to rid the public of their fear... However, every time a new Shadow appears, it seems to be more powerful than the last."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." Minato said. "We already reached the next barricade, and I'm pretty confident in our combat strength. Let's worry about this after exams, huh? Besides, I'm excited about my reward."

"I see your point... A wise way to view the situation." Mitsuru said.

"I'm not the leader just because I'm the strongest." Minato said.

They entered school, and a boring day passed by. Right before lunch, Ms. Terauchi called Minato out for translating a phrase into English. He answered correctly, as usual.

At lunch, however, Minato quickly left class. Yukari walked over to Junpei, who had was trying to read and eat at the same time, with little success. "Hey, where's Minato off to?" she asked. "He's not seriously avoiding me, is he?"

"Nah," Junpei said. "I actually asked him if I could get some

alone time... talkin' is fun and all, but I still don't know half the plays we read. I don't plan on just givin' up that reward, after all!"

"You know, the winner is probably going to be Minato or Akihiko... assuming Mitsuru doesn't count herself." Yukari said. "You don't need to try that hard."

"Hey! I know I'm the underdog, but a man's got his pride!" Junpei announced. "Besides, it's like this crazy king guy said. I will not yield to kiss the ground before Minato's feet!"

"... What?"

"Though, if it's Mitsuru... well, I might consider –"

Junpei was cut off by Yukari delivering a swift chop to his head. "Unbelievable, Stupeil." she said.

"Hey, watch it! You'll kill my brain cells like that! I need as much a' those as I can get!" Junpei whined, rubbing his cap. Yukari sighed, and left Junpei to his reading. She walked into the hallway, deciding to see what Minato was up to. It took her less than five seconds to see him having a chat with the teal-haired girl he was with on the roof.

"So, are you interested? It'll be fine." Minato said.

"I don't know... I've never done anything like that before. And midterms are the next day, too." the girl said, looking thoughtful. She noticed Yukari staring at them rather

conspicuously. Minato tracked her gaze and saw her as well. She had been caught. Minato grinned, and then leaned in very close to the teal-haired girl and whispered something in her ear. She gasped and blushed.

"Of course." Yukari grumbled. She turned to go buy lunch.

"She's gone now, right?" Minato whispered again into Fuuka's ear.

"Oh, umm, yes." Fuuka said. Minato backed away. "But... wasn't tricking her mean?"

"But it was funny, right?" Minato said. "... Though, you're probably right. I think I'll talk to her after school."

"... That's really nice of you."

"I suppose I'm more chivalrous than I thought." Minato said. "Speaking of which, have you tried anymore cooking?"

"Actually, yes!" Fuuka said. "I didn't make enough for both of us, though."

"Since when did that become a problem?" Minato chuckled. "To the roof?"

"To the roof." Fuuka said. They sat by the fence again, and Fuuka pulled out her bento. "I tried something other than curry this time... I hope it's good." She opened it to reveal a set of rice balls and dumplings. "Oh, but I haven't tried these either... I should go first." she said. She gulped.

"Nonsense. It's my duty to test for poison, right?" Minato mused.

"Wha-? C'mon, I don't think they're that bad..."

"I jest, I jest. Still, you wanted me to try it first, right?" he asked.

"... Yes." she said, looking away. Minato pulled her into a half hug.

"Aww, aren't you so honest?" he teased, rubbing his hair against her.

"C-cut it out!" Fuuka said, struggling a bit. Minato relented, and laughed.

"I like that about you." Minato said. "...Well, the moment of truth." He grabbed a rice ball and took a bite. He bit into it, and chewed slowly. "... *This is... odd. But edible.*" Minato thought. He swallowed, and grinned. "You've improved."

"R-really?!" Fuuka asked excitedly.

"I could eat this... but I'll let you pass your own judgment here." Minato said. "Here... 'ahh'."

Fuuka giggled, and let Minato feed her a bite. She chewed, and frowned for a bit, but didn't shudder at all. "This doesn't taste right at all..."

"But it's not bad, is it?"

"Maybe... but I don't know if this can really be called an improvement."

"Then, it's a happy accident!" Minato said. "If it turned out well in the end, it doesn't really matter how you got there, right?"

"Huh?... I don't know about that all the time, but... I guess it works here." Fuuka agreed. "A-and now, I won't have to take part of your lunch, too."

"What?" Minato asked. "I even went through the trouble of making extra for you too..."

"You did?" Fuuka asked.

"I thought it'd be better to be ready in case things didn't work out." Minato said. "I didn't want you going hungry again. Don't think I didn't catch you trying to take less bites than me last time."

"I-I didn't want to be rude..." Fuuka said.

"It's not rude to take something that's offered to you. If the person didn't want you to have it, they wouldn't have offered it, right?"

"... I guess so."

"And as such, I am offering you half of my lunch!" Minato declared.

"T-then I'm offering you half of mine!"

"So all's fair, eh?" Minato chuckled. "I graciously accept." he said with a slight bow. Fuuka giggled.

"As do I."

After a short shared meal, both of them were more than content with what they got to eat. They were lying head to head on the bench staring at the sky, relaxing after their meal. "So, Fuuka... will you come with me to see Kazuya or not?" Minato asked.

"... I'll have to talk to my parents. I'll come if I can." Fuuka said. "I'm a bit nervous though... I've never been to a performance before... or a club."

"Don't worry about that... you should know I'm rather experienced with these things." Minato said.

"I don't know if I think your experience is a good thing or a bad thing, Minato." Fuuka said. "I've heard some... interesting stories."

"Then I'd like to proudly announce that all of them are true." Minato said. "But I won't make you do anything you don't want to... what kind of knight would I be then?"

"Still with the knight joke?... You're really childish, aren't you?"

"I could say the same about you. I think that's what makes you cute."

"H-hey! Y-you can't just say that all of a sudden! That's not

fair..."

"It's the truth." Minato chuckled. He took a glance at his watch, and sighed. "Looks like our time is coming to an end..."

"Yes... we should be going back soon." Fuuka said. She got up, and Minato followed suit.

"Walk you back to class?" he asked, offering his arm.

"... Sure."

Minato did as he offered, and then returned to his own class. He walked by Yukari's desk, and saw her still fuming. He sat down on it. "Let's go out today." he said.

"...Really?" Yukari asked, giving him a once over.

"Yes. You said we don't talk, so we'll talk. After school, though. Lunch is almost over."

He got up and went to his seat. Junpei was grumbling as he appeared to read the same page over and over again. The day was about to end, until Junpei broke the silence.

"What the heck is this?!" he screamed suddenly.

"Junpei! What's the matter with you?" Ms. Toriumi asked.

"Hey, I'm not the only one who thinks Hamlet is a load of crap, right?!" he asked. "I mean, everybody just friggin' dies at the

end!"

"... While I understand your reaction, that is exactly why it's called a tragedy." Ms. Toriumi said. "Though you were expected to have read that last week."

"Oh, uh, well, I was just thinkin' about how at the end of Macbeth, like, maybe the people of Scotland will be happy, so he at least died for a reason... but the guys in Hamlet just all up and die without leavin' anyone to take over except that weird officer at the end. And we don't even know about him!"

"... That was Prince Fortinbras. If you want to know about him, read up on your history. Now be quiet. Class is still in session." Ms. Toriumi said. Junpei sat down, and wiped some sweat from his brow.

"Good thinking." Minato said.

"Thanks... but still... why the heck would you write a play where the guy dies for no reason?" Junpei said.

"It's a bunch of symbolic shit... I don't agree with it, but you should probably learn it for the test." Minato said. "Try not to scream about it in class, though."

The day ended, and Junpei hurried out of class. He was getting some odd stares, and it felt a little too weird for him to stay at school. Minato went over to an expectant looking Yukari. "So, where do you want to go?" he asked.

"We'll be buying flowers for my room." Yukari said. "You'll be helping me choose."

"What a waste of time." Minato thought. "The shop by Port Island Station, then?"

"Oh, you know it?" Yukari asked. "I didn't think you were the type to buy flowers."

"No, I buy shrunken heads. The fuck are you trying to say?"

"I've been here for a while, you know? I'm pretty used to the area."

"That's good. So, let's go!" Yukari said cheerfully.

"Cue the music, guys. It's time to nod and pretend I care."

Minato ordered his Fiends. A mix of cello, violin, and guitar came on as he walked out of school, letting Yukari lead the way. Strangely, she said absolutely nothing. *"She's testing me. Shit."* he realized. "So, what type of flowers did you have in mind? Are you into floriography, or just in it for the colors?" he asked.

"Floriography? Not really, though I used to know a little when I was a child." Yukari admitted. "Do you know much?"

"Just a few ones I thought were interesting. None of the major ones, though." Minato said.

"Major ones? Oh, you mean like roses and lilies and that type of thing? I'm pretty sure anybody that sells flowers could just

tell you if you asked." Yukari said. Minato nodded.

They reached the flower vendor, and Yukari began to look over the wares. Unfortunately, the vendor, an old woman, shot Minato a creepy smile as he approached. *"Bitch, don't you dare open your mouth."*

"Oh my! Another one this time!" the vendor said to Minato. "Well, I suppose that's the life of a model, after all."

Yukari turned on Minato, who was still watching the vendor. She flashed a sadistic smile as Yukari turned on him. *"It'll be TRAGIC when I arrive JUST a moment too late to save you from the Shadows."*

"Another one, huh?" Yukari asked.

"Hey, I never said I didn't buy flowers here before, have I?" Minato shrugged. "I bought a bonsai for a friend."

"She was quite the cutie." the vendor added.

"Scratch that. It'll be tragic when your store is hit by a freak tornado in the next ten minutes." Minato thought.

"Never grab a bull by its horns, wench." Matador said, preparing himself.

"Regardless, weren't we here for you, Yukari?" Minato asked. "I see some lovely pink ones over there. Let's take a look."

Yukari followed, but Minato could tell she was glaring at him the entire time. It was beyond annoying. After they browsed through a few selections, Yukari seemed to calm down a bit. "You know, I just realized you're not really much help. You've never seen my room have you?" she said.

"Oh? Should I take that as an invitation?" Minato asked. "I know a few good things to do in a girl's room... maybe I'll visit with my brother next time he's in town."

Yukari flinched. "H-hey, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying we should go up to your room." Minato said, moving closer to her.

"I-I bet you say that to every girl you bring here." Yukari said, moving away. Minato chuckled.

"You know, I actually do know the perfect flower for me to give you." Minato said. "Close your eyes."

"What? That was sudden... but sure, surprise me." Yukari said. She closed her eyes, and Minato bought her a flower.

"Awaken!" he said, flicking her forehead.

"Ow! Geez, that was stupid... huh?"

"For you."

Yukari took the flower bouquet. "Marigolds?"

"Yes. I think they describe our relationship perfectly." Minato said.

"... That's messed up." the vendor said, watching them.

"What do they mean?" Yukari asked.

"According to floriography, a Marigold represents both cruelty and jealousy... I am cruel to you on a daily basis, while you are jealous of every other girl I talk to. Fits it perfectly." Minato said with his creepy smile.

"Unbelievable." Yukari said, shaking her head. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

"Yet you still insist on hanging out with me." Minato said. "But I think that's what makes us great friends. I still hang out with you despite your stalker tendencies."

"Stalker?!" Yukari yelled. "I'm not a stalker!"

"What else do you call someone that creeps up behind you while you're talking to other people?" Minato asked. Yukari racked her brain, but couldn't find another word. She grumbled, and then released a huge sigh.

"I can't believe you of all people is trying to call me creepy," Yukari said, rolling her eyes.

"It takes one to know one. Welcome to the club." Minato said. Yukari facepalmed.

"... I can't believe this." Yukari said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana...

"I believe you mean 'Stalker' Arcana," Minato mused. "Hey, if you want to brighten your day, ask the vendor what the last meaning of Marigolds is. I think you'll hate it."

"Just get lost already." Yukari grumbled, turning around.

"It's now or never!" Jack yelled.

"Now!"

After a bit of contemplation, Yukari spun around again.

"Alright, look –" she began, but stopped when she saw that Minato was gone. She looked around, and he wasn't even in the area. "... Asshole." She trotted up to the vendor and scowled. "What the hell does this mean OTHER than cruelty and jealousy?" she demanded. The vendor flinched.

"A-hahaha, that's a M-marigold, right? It also means, uhh... oh, unrequited love! Yes, that's what it means!" the vendor said.

"... Lies." Yukari said, still angry. She stormed off, leaving a

very concerned flower vendor. Five minutes later, an inexplicable tornado formed in the center of the flower display area, and ruined the shop.

Minato had returned to the dorm before Yukari, and signed in as was his usual habit. "You're back early." Shinjiro said.

"I know. I'm thinking of visiting a guy from Escapade tonight." Minato said.

"Strawberry sundae? Suit yourself." Shinjiro said.

"Dang... I'd come with, but I don't think Mitsuru-senpai'd appreciate that." Junpei said.

"... Might I ask who 'Strawberry Sundae' is?" Mitsuru said, walking down the stairs with her books.

"I'm a bit interested in this character as well." Akihiko said, following her. Junpei, Shinjiro, and Minato shared a knowing glance for a split second, and acknowledged what had to be done.

"He's a foreign bum that just eats strawberry sundaes all day... the guy lives in Escapade's attic." Shinjiro said. "I think he cleans or some crap like that."

"He cleans? Never would've guessed." Junpei said. "He seemed more like the type to make a mess to me. He parties pretty hard."

"Regardless, I haven't talked to him in a while, so I'll be off

soon." Minato said. "Besides, strawberry sundaes taste pretty good, if you ask me. And I could always use a bit of post-study partying."

"... Far be it from me to decide how you relieve your stress." Mitsuru said. "Try not to stay out too late."

"Sure thing." Minato said. He showered, changed, ate, studied until it was almost midnight, and headed to Escapade. The new bouncer was a rather large man that otherwise looked like a typical shady guard, complete with shades. Minato walked past him, and he didn't do anything. A person tried to follow, and was swiftly blocked.

Inside of Escapade, Minato headed straight for the bar, with only a few minutes until the Dark Hour struck. Dante sat there, again seemingly doing nothing. "Two strawberry sundaes," Minato said as he took his seat.

"And here I thought you got bored with me." Dante said. "I hear a few new faces have come to town."

"JSDF guys."

"Do I look like I know what you're talking about?"

"Japan's Special-Defense Forces. The guys who focus on fighting otherworldly shit like us."

"That explains a lot. I was wondering why it was so difficult to find jobs around here. So demon-hunting is a public service in

Japan?"

"Not really... but these guys are efficient from what I hear." Minato said as their strawberry sundaes arrived.

"I bet I could get better results." Dante said.

"I wonder about that." Minato said. The Dark Hour arrived as they finished their strawberry sundaes. "Hey, before we start slaughtering shit... do you really live in the attic of this place?"

"Yeah. But it's not as bad as it sounds. It's a nice enough room. Got a giant TV, free pizza, and a cozy bed. All I need." Dante said.

"Simple needs."

"If you overcomplicate life, you're bound to run into problems all the time. Trust me... I know."

"... How old are you?"

"Old enough, kid." Dante said. "I'm stuck with more than my fair share of shit to deal with."

"Any solutions?"

"If it can't be solved with violence, it'll never be solved." Dante said.

"... Damn. That's actually pretty legit."

"Of course it is. Every problem can be solved with some violence. Remember that, and you'll go far."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana...

"Maybe I need more problems, then. I quite like violence."
Minato said.

"Don't worry. They'll find you eventually. For now, let's go kill something." Dante said.

Minato and Dante spent the Dark Hour tearing through random floors, and they parted ways as the Dark Hour ended. Minato returned early to the dorm, and decided to dedicate the night to training on the roof.

35. Chapter 35

Chapter 35:

Author Note to Kushanada: A profound question. But, if you think very hard about Nocturne's story, you can see that Dante is alive (after all, he fights Shadows in Tartarus with Minato and trained Junpei on two occasions).

Other Author Note: Thank you to all my readers. 50+ Reviews equals MOTIVATION. This chapter is very short, though.

Now, the story continues.

It was a quiet morning as Minato made breakfast. After his rooftop training and Tartarus excursion, he found himself with more extra time than usual. Summoning his Fiends to play music for him as he cooked, he was practically gliding around the kitchen. Shinjiro was the first to interrupt his cooking.

"The hell's all that noise?" he asked. He saw the Fiend figurines playing on the table. "You'll wake up the whole dorm if you keep it up."

"It's school time, isn't it?" Minato asked. "They should be up

by now."

"Not everybody thinks that way." Shinjiro said. He walked into the kitchen. "Move aside. You'll ruin those hash browns at this rate."

"I'm making a casserole out of them." Minato said.

"... Then you could use more of this." Shinjiro said, grabbing a block of cheese.

"Cheese?"

"Trust me on this one... It'll go better."

"Then I leave it to you." Minato said. After a quick half an hour of kitchen work, Mitsuru and Yukari walked down the stairs, seemingly drawn by the scent of food.

"Hey, if you guys keep cooking like this, all of us are gonna get fat." Yukari chuckled.

"Hmm? Perhaps you should dedicate more of your time to physical training. I'm certain Akihiko could help you out with that." Mitsuru said.

"... It was a joke, senpai." Yukari said.

"Training's no joke." Akihiko said. He walked down the stairs and actually ignored the commotion in the kitchen. "I'm almost back at full strength. My reconditioning starts now. You'll be joining me, Yukari."

"But we haven't even eaten yet... How are we supposed to have energy?"

"If you can perform well on an empty stomach, just imagine how amazing you'll do when you're at your best." Akihiko said. "Now get ready for a run, Yukari."

"I'll pass, actually." Yukari said.

"Neglecting your training? Perhaps an execution could remind you of your priorities..." Mitsuru said.

"Just a sec, I need better shoes." Yukari said. She hurried up to her room, and then ran back down to leave with Akihiko. Junpei followed shortly after.

"What's up with Yuka-tan?" he asked.

"She's been enlisted to do some training with Akihiko. They're skipping breakfast." Minato said. He and Shinjiro were just finishing up and setting the table.

"Skippin' breakfast?! What kinda crazy idea is that?!"

"Aki's crazy idea." Shinjiro said, putting away his apron. "That protein filled dumbass doesn't realize you can't endurance train if you start off with nothing in the tank... Now, sit down. We're eating."

The remainder of SEES sat down to enjoy breakfast. "Hey, Shinjiro. Mind if I call you Shinji?" Minato asked suddenly.

"Oh, lemme get in on that!" Junpei said.

"I believe we'd all like that privilege." Mitsuru chuckled.

"...Go ahead. It's not like there are other Shinji's to get me confused with." Shinjiro said.

"Sweet, Shinji-senpai! I've been waiting to say that!" Junpei said.

"You sound like Shinji's fan girl." Minato chuckled.

"Hmph. It's good to know you're getting along with the new members of SEES, Shinji." Mitsuru said.

"Hey, just because you can call me that doesn't mean you can start sayin' it every goddamn sentence. It's gonna become annoying as hell." Shinjiro said. He took a big bite of food. "Still, the new kids are all decent. I got no problem with anyone."

"It's more than reassuring to hear you say that." Mitsuru said. Shinjiro nodded.

After breakfast and a quick train ride, SEES arrived at school and spent a boring day reviewing in every class save math. Ms. Miyahara was very insistent on teaching a beautiful new equation that wouldn't be on the test for some reason or the other. However, once lunch came around, Minato immediately strolled out of his classroom.

He had barely made it a step out of the door when he felt a

tug on his arm. It was Fuuka. "Minato? Can we talk?"

"Anytime." Minato said. He held up his arm, and dangled a bento. "Over some food?"

"Sure." Fuuka said. She and Minato made their way to the roof and took their usual spot. "So, I told my parents about going..."

"... What'd they say?" Minato asked.

"Umm... actually... it's a little weird." Fuuka said, blushing. "This is... r-really embarrassing, and it's f-fine if you don't agree..."

Minato sighed and gave Fuuka a few light taps on the side of her head. "How about you tell me everything from the beginning?" he asked. "Take your time."

Fuuka took a deep breath, and got a very determined look on her face. "Well, I told my parents and at first the idea was mortifying to them but then I told them about you and I mentioned your name and my mother recognized you as being a model and now she says she'll let me go if you personally come and give her an autograph on one of her Be Blue V catalogs and take pictures with her though my dad is skeptical but he says if he meets you he might consider it!" she blurted. She gasped and caught her breath.

"... So your parents want to meet me? Sure." Minato answered. He started messing with Fuuka's hair. "Should I tell

them we're going out, huh?" he teased. "Or maybe I should tell them we're already lovers, hmm?"

"Y-y-you can't say that! They-they'd go berserk!"

"I thought you'd be happy for me to say that, Fuuka... Do you not like me anymore?" Minato continued, pulling Fuuka closer to him. "I'm hurt. I need a hug."

"Mi-Minato, quit it!" Fuuka complained. She was looking around to make sure nobody else was watching. Of course, nobody ever used the roof while Minato was there. "I'm serious!"

Minato backed off and chuckled. "Alright, alright, that's enough teasing... I'll be on my best behavior when I visit today." he said.

Fuuka pouted, and then rested her head on Minato's shoulder. "... No fair." she said.

"Hmm?"

"Every time we talk, you tease me like that... it's not fair."

"Are you saying you want to tease me?" Minato asked. "I don't think you're cut out for that type of thing."

"I know that." Fuuka said.

"Then, it's unavoidable, isn't it?" Minato asked. He laughed. "I thought you learned from Moriyama-san that relationships

aren't equal."

"... Maybe. But I still don't like it." Fuuka said.

"... Tell you what. I'll even out my extra meanness with extra niceness." Minato said. "So, I'll spoil you for a bit right now." He leaned over and kissed the side of Fuuka's head.

"W-what are you doing?!" Fuuka yelped, backing away. Minato broke out laughing.

"Oops, guess I'm too nice!" he sang. He continued laughing.

"Meanie." Fuuka said. Minato calmed down, and opened his bento. He was about to eat, when Fuuka moved back near to him and frowned. "Feed me." she said.

"Oh my... getting demanding, aren't you?" Minato asked. "That's not good for a princess."

"A knight can't disobey a princess." Fuuka said.

"That's also true as well... alright, then." Minato said. He prepped food. "Say 'ahh'." Fuuka opened her mouth and ate, a serious expression on her face. Minato ate while she chewed, and the two quickly finished his lunch. "Will that be all, princess?"

"... I'm still in a bad mood." Fuuka said.

"Then allow me to make it up to you after school when I talk to your parents." Minato said. "I'll be sure to be on my best

behavior."

Fuuka chuckled. "You better."

They returned to class, and the day flew by without much incident. Sure enough, they met back up as the day ended by the gates to school. Minato couldn't help but notice how apprehensive Fuuka was. "It'll be fine." Minato said as he walked up to her. "Trust me." Fuuka silently nodded, and the two headed towards the train. "Hey, mind if we listen to your music today?" Minato asked. "I'd love to hear more."

Fuuka flinched. "Uhh... it's not really..."

"I know what it's like. And hey, if I do happen to hate it, do you really think I'll just sit there stoically?" Minato said. "But, if it bothers you that much, forget I asked."

"N-no, it's fine... here." she said, giving him a headphone. He took it, and was quickly bombarded by loud rap music.

"*This is actually pretty good,*" Minato commented in his head. He didn't have a clue what the words were, but he was thoroughly enjoying the beat. The two of them continued off of the train and headed north from Iwatodai Station, entering the residential district. "Wow... these apartments are actually pretty large, aren't they?" Minato asked.

"That's true. The majority of them were rebuilt shortly after the big explosion ten years ago, so most of them are bigger than your average modern apartment." Fuuka said. "That's why

families of four and five don't have a problem living here."

"Really? Then you won't mind if I join your family, right?"

"... Please don't say that around my parents." Fuuka said, looking away. Minato chuckled.

"I know, I know. It's time to stop playing around." Minato said. They reached Fuuka's apartment, and knocked on the door. Minato insisted he stand right by Fuuka's side as they waited. The door opened, to reveal two extremely conservative looking adults, one rather thin man in a brown suit like Ikutsuki's with light brown hair, the other a thin woman wearing a black sweater with hair almost exactly like Fuuka's. "Good afternoon, Mr. and Ms. Yamagishi." Minato said with a slight bow.

"Oh my, come in, come in!" Ms. Yamagishi said. Mr. Yamagishi was looking Minato over. He and Fuuka entered, and were basically forced to sit next to each other on the sofa. "So, you're Minato Arisato, hmm? The model."

Minato chuckled and scratched his head. "I'm not used to people calling me that, but yes, that's me."

"Then I'll get straight to the point. What do you plan on taking Fuuka to a club for?" Mr. Yamagishi asked.

"To attend a concert, of course." Minato said. "I know that midterms are coming up, but I feel that last minute cramming could actually hinder your performance on a test. I think a

good day spent in leisure is much better preparation."

"Aren't you the wise one?" Ms. Yamagishi asked. "I share those thoughts... it's nice to see Fuuka has such a nice boy worrying about her." Fuuka blushed, but said nothing.

"'Nice'? I think he just wants to take advantage of our daughter. You know the types of things that happen in clubs." Mr. Yamagishi said.

"Your concern isn't misplaced, Mr. Yamagishi... I admire how much you care for your daughter's well-being, actually. Unfortunately, I can do nothing to ease your fears save give you my word that I mean to do no such thing to Fuuka." Minato said.

"Is that supposed to ease my mind?" Mr. Yamagishi asked.

"Now, now... the boy's being completely honest and logical here." Ms. Yamagishi said. "I think we should let them have their fun."

"... I still don't agree with this." Mr. Yamagishi said. "But I'll allow it. Should anything happen to my daughter..."

"F-father, please!" Fuuka said suddenly. "He's... he's not that type of person."

"... *Well, that was unexpected.*" Minato thought. Mr. Yamagishi looked like somebody had just slapped him in the face. Ms. Yamagishi was smiling like an idiot.

Mr. Yamagishi glared at his daughter, who strangely, stood her ground instead of cowering. "... Do as you please." Mr. Yamagishi finally said. He got up, and left the living room.

"... That was very brave of you, Fuuka." Ms. Yamagishi said. She turned to Minato. "I think it's best you leave for now... he might come back in a terrible mood."

"I understand." Minato said. He turned to Fuuka. "That meant a lot... thanks."

"... It was nothing." she said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

Minato said his goodbyes, arranged to meet Fuuka after work tomorrow at six, and then bring her back to her house by eleven. He then took his leave and returned to the dorm.

"Well, looks like tomorrow will be quite fun, won't it, Boss?" Jack asked.

"You're right. Things are looking up." Minato said.

"Welcome back," Mitsuru greeted as he entered the dorm. "It would seem the rest of SEES is preoccupied with studying

tonight. I suggest you do the same."

"... Actually, that's not too bad of an idea. I've got work and a concert tomorrow." Minato agreed. And so, the night was spent studying.

36. Chapter 36

Chapter 36: Pre-test Clubbing

Author Note: I seem to have forgotten to title Chapter 35. We shall go with 'The Parents'. Also, sticking true to the game, the entire midterms session will be one chapter.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: As always, a thousand thanks for the love.

Otherwise, story time.

Minato prepped for work like he did any other day. A casual dark green shirt, some black jeans, blue sneakers, and his trusty cap would be his apparel this morning. He went downstairs and prepared some breakfast. He began to eat, and had almost finished his meal when Akihiko walked down the stairs. He looked like he was prepping for a run.

"Doesn't training before being fully recovered just slow your recovery?" Minato asked.

"My arm might be out, but I can still work on increasing my stamina and speed." Akihiko said. "Do you plan on taking one last go at Tartarus before midterms?"

"Actually, I already have something else planned for tonight. I'll be going to Escapade."

"Again, huh? If there's anything you know, it's excess." Akihiko chuckled.

"Which I'm almost certain I've applied to training everyone else." Minato said. "Junpei's practically on par with me when it comes to sword fighting, Yukari's gotten a lot better at swapping from her bow to Persona, and Shinji's... well, he didn't really need training, but I've noticed he's more efficient with Castor Prime. He doesn't let it linger around, which conserves a lot of energy."

"... Heh. I really did make the right choice when I put you as field leader, didn't I?" Akihiko asked.

"We both know the answer to that." Minato chuckled. "It's nice that we can just talk like this again, you know? It was annoying as hell when you swore I was trying to kill Shinji off. I mean, you even told him how I fought, giving him a hell of an advantage over me. He was pretty serious about killing me, you know?"

"... Please don't remind me." Akihiko sighed. "It's just another one of my failures... I'm lucky neither of you got hurt because of it."

"Another? Is failure a recurring trend in your life?" Minato mused. Akihiko smiled wryly.

"The fucked up thing is that I can laugh about that because it's true." he said, staring into space. "I'm a walking collection of failures that can barely keep my own shit together."

"Oh... Hit a touchy subject, didn't I?" Minato thought. *"How to approach this?"*

"A man walking in the shadow of doubt will always put on a façade of confidence. Expose his." David said.

"He who falls victim to lamentation invites despair. He must be reassured." Matador said.

"Tell him to grow a pair." Jack said. Minato mulled over these ideas, and made a decision.

"Maybe you are." Minato said. Akihiko turned on him, looking absolutely depressed. "Yet you fight and fight, train and train, because you want to change that. Isn't every great success built atop a mountain of failures?"

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Akihiko asked.

"No. It's supposed to tell you you're not doing anything wrong. Just because you do everything right doesn't mean nothing bad will happen." Minato said. He leaned back in his chair. "Not even I expect to cruise through life, even with all my... well, everything, really." he chuckled. "Lack of humility aside, you just need to prepare for anything that comes your way. Sometimes, you won't be ready, and you'll fail. Sometimes, you won't be able to do a damn thing regardless of how much

you prepared. Sometimes, it'll all work out in the end. The important thing is that you did what you could... after all, time never waits. It delivers all equally to the same end. You can't plug your ears or cover your eyes."

"... I didn't take you for a philosopher." Akihiko said. He laughed. "You know, Yukari might be right about you talking down from a high horse sometimes."

"As a leader, I make it a point for people to look up to me." Minato said. "But I'm not so far up as to be unable to come down to their level when I have to."

Akihiko laughed. "I can't believe I just got lectured by an underclassman." he said. "... But I've gotta say, it was good."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

"Thank you, thank you, you're far too kind." Minato said as he rose from the table with a little bow. He chuckled. "Enjoy your run."

"You know me." Akihiko said with a smirk. He left the dorm. Minato cleaned up and left shortly after as well. He made his way to Paulownia Mall, and entered Be Blue V. He headed straight for the Office as usual.

"Good, you're on time today." Nemissa said. "But the crew won't come until next Thursday."

"Oh, I actually forgot to mention I have midterms next week. I probably won't be able to make it." Minato said. He took another step and saw a small bolt of lightning fly in front of him.

"You forgot?" Nemissa asked. "You think these camera guys just come whenever I call them! They have schedules! And they hate having to change them! Do you know what you'll make me look like if I need to reschedule because you conveniently 'forgot' to tell me you couldn't work next week?!"

"Hey, the thought slipped my mind. What else do you expect me to say?" Minato said. "I'll make it up to you some other time."

Nemissa glared at him. "You better make bank today, boy. Get to work."

"Yes, ma'am," Minato said. He changed into his work clothes, and went out to greet his swarm of fans. Apparently, everyone was now certain he worked every Sunday, but he didn't mind. It just meant the numbers were guaranteed. He was working the day away when he once again ran into Mitsuru.

"Mitsuru, you've made the right choice coming here, the healing shop, Be Blue V, for your pre-test relaxation needs." Minato said with his usual cap-off bow as she approached.

Mitsuru chuckled.

"Even I need to relax a little before tests... can I count on you once more?" she asked. Minato took her hand and made his move.

"Certainly... What did you have in mind? A blissful sleep? A serene bath? Or perhaps... an encounter with me?" Minato asked. Mitsuru reddened. "After all... you've yet to ask for my last service. Perhaps we can arrange something... better."

"I-I-I think I'd like a blissful sleep!" Mitsuru snapped. She backed away and took a deep breath. "... Yes, a good sleep... I can be ready for every day." she said.

"Your wish is my command. I have quite the selection for you to consider." Minato said. He led her around the store, showcasing various incense, special pillows, and even supposed magic comforters. He got her to buy the equivalent of a new bed set by the time she left.

"With this, I'm certain I'll be much more relaxed at the dorm." Mitsuru said. She turned to Minato. "Dependable as always. I expect a lot from you on the exams."

"Then I shall exceed your expectations." Minato said.

"I look forward to it." Mitsuru said as she left. After her visit, the day flew by quickly. He walked back into the Office as his shift ended, and passed by Nemissa on her computers.

"You've started enjoying your job. Soon, I could have you working without even paying you." Nemissa said. "Oh wait. I already have that, don't I?"

"It's more like I'm working for reparations, isn't it?" Minato asked.

"But have you ever asked how much you've earned back? Hmm?"

"... I assume you would tell me when I was done with my contract." Minato said.

"Would I? I don't think I'd let go of our best salesman and model just like that now." she said. "You have a few bad habits, but everyone's entitled to those, right?"

"So you'd lie to keep me working here for free?" Minato asked.

"And? What would you do about it? I don't think you're in any position to challenge my authority." Nemissa said.

"Actually, I can tell when my contract is up because I work here... once I regain full control of my body from this suit at work, I'll have finished. Unlike you, I have Fiends who read that contract the moment you brought it out." Minato thought. *"But I'll play along. All the more fun when I can watch you fall."* "Not yet. But once I surpass you, you'll be the one working for me." Minato said.

"You think you'll EVER boss me around?" Nemissa laughed. "That's rich. You should be a comedian next."

"Really? I wonder... how much influence do you gain with Big Boss on the regular?" Minato asked. Nemissa flinched. "Not much, I'd say... yet in the span of a month, I've gained so much. Just you wait... I'll remember all the shit you put me through."

"H-hey, I'm just playing around! I haven't done anything mean to you, right? I knew you'd like modeling!" Nemissa said. "Besides, what's a kid like you thinking trying to threaten me, huh? You need to know your place!"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"I'll know my place once I've stopped moving up in life," Minato said. He laughed, and changed back into his normal clothes. Nemissa grumbled at him as he left, but he ignored her and made a call. He got back to the dorm, showered, grabbed a small meal, and added what he considered a stylish black jacket without sleeves on top of what he was wearing previously.

"You look like you're ready to party," Yukari said as he walked into the lounge.

"Hittin' Escapade again? Maybe I should come along this time... I mean, I'm pretty fried from all this studyin'." Junpei said. "How the heck does Mitsuru-senpai just keep at it? That's crazy."

"I'll tag along. Anything to not go throguh another of Mitsuru's damn lectures." Shinjiro said, closing a textbook. "You in or not, Junpei? There's a concert today, anyways."

"Actually, I'm going there with somebody." Minato said.

"And how is that unexpected?" Yukari asked. "I bet it's that teal-haired girl."

"Oh yeah, the one you were puttin' the moves on!" Junpei said. He tipped his hat to Minato. "Bravo, man! I get ya! Hey, I'll hang back if ya don't want any company... Besides, who the hell wants ta' be the third wheel?"

"If you don't want us around you all the time, we can just stay clear of the VIP section." Shinjiro said.

"VIP section?" Yukari asked.

"Me and Shinji get everything for free in Escapade because we're friends with the guy who owns the place." Minato said.

"How else do you think I can afford to just go out until five in the morning on a weekly basis?"

"... Huh. I guess that makes sense..." Yukari said.

"Hey, Shinji-senpai, you mind if we let Yuka-tan tag along? I

know she's been dying to hit Escapade with us." Junpei said, a confident grin on his face.

"I don't care. As long as she doesn't turn into a drunken idiot that I have to drag back here, be my guest." Shinjiro said. Yukari scowled.

"You know what? I am coming along." Yukari said. "Let's go."

"Whoo! Gonna score some ladies with my two new wingmen!" Junpei said. He got up. "Let's do this!"

"Don't get your hopes up. I don't plan on going there to 'score' or any shit like that." Shinjiro said.

"Ugh. If you think I'm helping you pick up girls, you're seriously mistaken." Yukari said. "Let's get changed. I'm not being seen around with you two dressed like that." She turned to Minato. "Don't pull anything weird on that girl. We'll be checking on you."

"What the heck?! Stop cock-blockin'!" Junpei said. Minato sighed.

"Look, I'm not this sexual deviant or animal or whatever the fuck you think I am, alright?" he said to Yukari. "But if it'll make you sleep at night, I won't bitch if you happen to run into us every now and then."

"... Fine."

With that, Minato took his leave and made it to Paulownia. He

glanced at his watch as he stopped in front of the fountain, and noted that it was six on the dot. He was on time. "M-minato?" he heard from behind him. He turned to see Fuuka, wearing a white jacket over a sky blue shirt, and a white skirt over florally designed high socks. Her shoes, oddly enough, were the same as her school shoes. She was carrying a brown bag with her.

"Oh, the dichotomy of light blue and dark blue. How picturesque we must be." Minato mused in his head. "Hey, you look good. I think that outfit suits you well."

"R-really? Thanks... I wasn't sure of what to wear, actually." Fuuka said.

"You made the right decision." Minato said. He offered her his arm. "You should probably get used to Escapade before Kazuya's performance starts. We've got some time."

"Oh! That's a good idea!" Fuuka said, joining him. "The line's starting to get long, so we should hurry."

"Line?" Minato chuckled. "You don't need to worry about trivial things like that when you're with me." He led her past the line and up to the bouncer, who nodded and let the two of them pass. "See?"

"I didn't think you were that well known..." Fuuka said as they entered. She looked around, and saw quite a few people seemingly clamoring around, getting their buzz before the concert began. "So, this is the inside of a club..."

"It's pretty nice, right?" Minato said. "I usually on stay on the floor to dance or eat at the bar."

"But, isn't upstairs for VIPs?" Fuuka asked. Minato chuckled.

"But I am a very important person, am I not?" he mused. "And so are you, as of today. Come on." Minato escorted her to the VIP section and took his usual reserved table. *"Thank you for your wonderful wordplay, Igor."* Minato thought as he sat down with Fuuka. He put one arm around her and held his cap on his head. "Welcome to Minato's Escapade booth. This place lingers between fantasy and reality, euphoria and melancholy... Henceforth, I'm bound to grant any and all of your desires." he said.

Fuuka giggled. "Where did that come from?" she asked.

"A friend gave me a similar introduction once. It was even more far-fetched than that one, but I thought it was cool."

"You must have interesting friends, then." Fuuka said. She looked around to take in the view. "This has a nice view of the stage... I wouldn't mind watching from here."

"Oh? You don't want to meet Kazuya?" Minato asked.

"Wha-?! Meet him?!" Fuuka asked, suddenly seriously facing Minato. "Y-yes, please!"

Minato chuckled and pulled her into a hug. "As you wish." he said.

"H-hey, wait!" Fuuka said. Minato relented, and signaled to a waiter in the corner. He also signaled, and in a few seconds, Kazuya, clad in his usual clothing with a huge black and red cloak over it, walked over.

"How's my biggest fan doing?" Kazuya asked as he took a seat. Fuuka gasped, and Kazuya chuckled. "Pretty good, then? Let's get a few drinks."

"I-it's you!" Fuuka squeaked as Kazuya snapped at the waiter. "H-how..."

"Minato told me a bit about you." Kazuya said. He reached into his cloak, and pulled out a pair of headphones identical to the ones he wore. "Got a pen?"

"Don't worry, I've got one." Minato said, pulling one out of his pocket.

"S-s-s-signed headphones..." Fuuka muttered. She looked at Kazuya like he was giving her the gift of life itself.

"Where do you want the signature? The earpiece, or the crown design?" Kazuya asked.

"Right on the earpiece, please!" Fuuka said.

"Then... to Fuuka Yamagishi... my number one fan and dear friend." Kazuya said. The drinks arrived as he handed Fuuka the headphones.

"Your wish and more has been granted." Minato said as

Fuuka carefully stored the headphones in her bag.

"This is... too much." Fuuka said.

"Didn't I say I'd spoil you a bit?" Minato asked. Fuuka blushed and looked away. Kazuya took a drink and laughed.

"I think the two of you are rather interesting." he said. "Still, I figured you'd want to talk more, Fuuka-chan."

"I do, actually..." Fuuka said. She turned to face Kazuya. "Umm... I don't really know what to ask."

"Just ask me whatever you feel like asking. I'm game." Kazuya said.

"It'll be fine, Fuuka." Minato said. "Kazuya's actually a pretty dorky guy. He plays online games half the time."

"Huh? Really?" Fuuka asked.

"It's true... most of my downtime is spent looking at other music, or playing games." Kazuya said. "Not very exciting, huh? How about you?"

"Me?... I'm trying to learn how to cook, actually... b-but I also mess around with... electronic stuff too." Fuuka said.

"Oh! Are you trying to make music yourself?"

"No, actually. It's... more like I enjoy seeing new kinds of technology... and that type of thing."

"That's just like my cousin, actually." Kazuya said.

"I thought as much. You own some pretty good headphones." Minato said. Fuuka chuckled nervously. "Hey, that's not a bad thing. It just means you know your stuff."

"Exactly." Kazuya said. The waiter walked over and whispered something in Kazuya's ear. He sighed. "Well, looks like I need to go get prepped. Sorry it was so short, Fuuka-chan, Minato. Enjoy the show."

"I-it was an honor!" Fuuka said. Kazuya laughed and walked away.

"Was that so bad?" Minato asked, reaching for a glass. He put in front of Fuuka and took the other one. She stopped and stared at it. "What's up?" Minato asked.

"Umm... I can't..." Fuuka began.

"... Lemme check that for you." Minato said. He took a small drink from Fuuka's glass. It was just Diet Cielo Mist, as far as he could tell. "This is just soda, I think... but I can just get you something else if you want."

"... If you say it's fine... I should be alright." Fuuka said. She nervously took a drink. Then she giggled. "Yes, it's just soda." Minato chuckled and pat her on the head.

"So, have we done anything you didn't want?" Minato asked.

"No, not at all!" Fuuka answered. The lights dimmed, and the

announcer began to talk about Kazuya's upcoming performance. Minato then got a great idea in his head. He leaned over and held one of Fuuka's hands up between them.

"Then, I must ask. Will you give me the honor of a dance?" he said. He kissed the hand he held. Fuuka was efficiently stunned.

"... You've gotta be kidding me." A voice said from outside the booth. He turned to see Junpei tipping his hat to him, with Shinjiro and Yukari behind him, all standing at the entrance to the table. Yukari was resting her forehead on one hand while Shinjiro seemed mostly unaffected.

"Ah! There are people!" Fuuka said suddenly, withdrawing her hand.

"I know where all of you sleep..." Minato thought. He turned, hiding his annoyance, and faced the other members of SEES. "Well, you guys are here earlier than I thought."

"Shinji-senpai can cut line, remember?" Junpei said. "But hey, we just swung by to say wassup, ya know? Later!"

Junpei then dragged Yukari away from the scene, while Shinjiro just silently followed them. Fuuka looked at the trio confused, then to Minato, and then reached a sudden realization. "... They must feel awkward now." Fuuka said.

"Bad timing, I say... not much we can do to fix that." Minato said. "Especially after I put so much effort into my request.

But..." he trailed, suddenly moving to look Fuuka right in the eyes. "I think it gives us quite the opportunity, don't you?"

"... W-who does this kind of stuff anymore?" Fuuka asked, scooting away from him. Her face was still crimson.

"Obviously, I do." Minato said. Fuuka sat silently for a few minutes, and the music began. It was loud, bass centric, full of ridiculous sound effects and overlaid by rap lyrics. Minato was about to finish his drink when Fuuka turned back to face him.

"I... I'll try." Fuuka said. She looked extremely nervous.

"I'm right here with you. It'll come naturally... I think." Minato said. "Even if it doesn't, it won't be that bad. A cute girl like you can't fail at dancing."

Fuuka laughed. "I think I may surprise you... but thanks." Fuuka said. "... Let's go."

Minato escorted her down to the dance floor, which was actually rather crowded, and the two started to dance. Fuuka didn't really know what she was doing, but Minato managed to guide her through it. Eventually, she got into a good rhythm, and everything was looking good until Yukari interrupted them. She literally wedged herself between the two while dancing.

"Oh, hey Minato!" Yukari said. "How's it going?"

"It was going good," Minato said. He spun around her on the balls of his feet, and Fuuka turned to see him behind her. "And

now it's good again."

"Wha-?!" Yukari said, stopping to see the two of them discreetly slip away. "Hey, c'mon, that was-!"

"Yuka-tan!" Junpei screamed, practically yanking her away from them. "I was wonderin' where ya went off to! Shinji-senpai got all worried and went to look for ya!"

"Huh?! He wasn't even around when we started dancing!" Yukari said. "If we lose him, we'll get stuck paying for everything!"

"Then let's go get im'!" Junpei said. Yukari moved towards the crowd, and Junpei mouthed to Minato 'I got you!' Minato nodded and waved him off.

"Yukari-san sure is pushy, isn't she?" Fuuka giggled as Minato turned back to her.

"I think she's my public stalker, actually." Minato said. "Though I think she fancies herself as the defender of women or something like that."

Fuuka laughed. "Maybe you are a threat. You have a reputation from what I've heard." she said.

"Look at you, teasing me now!" Minato chuckled. Fuuka nodded and kept dancing. "Are you threatened by me?"

"I don't think so." Fuuka said. "I think you're a big teddy bear, actually." Minato laughed.

"If I'm a black skeletal teddy bear with a sword and eye-patch, then maybe I am." he said. "I'm a pretty scary guy. The people who hang out by Port Island all know me."

"Just because you have a bad reputation doesn't mean you're a bad person... at least, I believe that." Fuuka said. She slowed down considerably. "I think... it's really great that you can just be yourself, despite what everyone else says about you."

"... I just do what I think would be fun, really." Minato said.

"That's what I admire about you... it's something I... I want..." Fuuka slowly began. She looked like she was about to cry, and they stopped dancing completely.

"Hey... let's take a break." Minato said. Fuuka nodded and Minato led her back up to the VIP section. He ordered two more drinks and sat down next to her. He hugged her, and let her rest against him.

"... I'm sorry." Fuuka said. "You brought me here to have a good time and now... it's like this. I'm a horrible person, aren't I?"

"No you're not. A horrible person wouldn't interrupt their own worries to care about how they're affecting another person... that's more like something I'd do." Minato said.

"Don't try and degrade yourself for me." Fuuka said suddenly. "It's not something... I don't want that."

"... You put me on a pedestal I don't deserve." Minato said. "I'm selfish. You know that."

"Even so... you're selfish about all the right things." Fuuka said. "You're not like me... you give people the real you. I... I don't even know what to call what I give. Nothing? A shell?"

"You give them what they expect... but they don't expect much, do they?" Minato answered. "But I think people like surprises... after all, you certainly seemed to like most of mine."

Fuuka chuckled. "I want to believe that... but I don't think I can."

"... Do you want to leave?" Minato asked.

"No... but I need some time." Fuuka said. "If you don't mind... could you stay like this for a while?"

"I wouldn't be a very good teddy bear if I didn't do that much." Minato said.

"... Thank you." Fuuka said. She hugged him back.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

"... *No one interrupts us.*" Minato said to his Fiends.

"As you command." they answered. The concert drew to a close as Fuuka recovered.

Yukari, Junpei, and Shinjiro were about to go talk to Minato when they were blocked at the entrance to the VIP section by none other than Jack. **"Boss is busy. Nobody interrupts him."** Jack said, blocking their path.

"Busy?!" Yukari exclaimed. "No way! Move!"

"Ah, c'mon, Yuka-tan! You don't honestly plan on disturbing the guy NOW of all times!" Junpei said.

"... Even I'll say that's fucked up." Shinjiro added.

"The whole point of being here was so this WOULDN'T happen!" Yukari said. David appeared next to Jack as she spoke.

"Boss is coming... the job's done." David said. Jack nodded and vanished along with David. Sure enough, Minato walked over, escorting Fuuka, who still looked sad.

"You! I can't believe you! I thought you said you weren't doing something like this!" Yukari said. "But no! I knew if we left you alone you'd do something! And to somebody who trusts you so much too! Just look at-"

"That's enough backtalk from you, Yukari-san." Fuuka

snapped. Everyone froze. "I don't know why you think of Minato like that, but I won't let you insult him like that in front of me. Now, please get out of our way."

"... Outta the way, Yukari." Shinjiro said, pulling her to the side. Minato and Fuuka walked past, receiving a host of strange looks. They wordlessly left Escapade.

"... I can't believe you just did that." Minato said as they began their walk to Fuuka's house.

"... Neither can I." Fuuka said. "It just happened... I don't want people lying about you too."

Minato chuckled. "Sometimes, I think you're more knightly than I am."

"Who said a modern princess couldn't defend their knight?" Fuuka mused.

After walking Fuuka back to her apartment, Minato returned to the dorm. Everyone else had already gone to bed by the Dark Hour. He went to his room, and for the first time in a long time, decided to spend the early hours relaxing.

37. Chapter 37

Chapter 37: The First Midterms

Author Note to blarg7865: Good request. I'm pretty certain other people are confused by now as well. The Social Links are:

Fiend (Lucifer) – Rank 5

Fool (SEES) – Rank 3

Magician (Junpei) – Rank 5

Priestess (Fuuka) – Rank 4

Empress (Mitsuru) – Rank 5

Emperor (Akihiko) – Rank 3

Hierophant (Shinjiro) – Rank 2

Lovers (Yukari) – Rank 3

Chariot (Dante) – Rank 4

Strength (Shin) – Rank 4

Hermit (Isako) – Rank 3

Fortune (?) – Rank 0

Justice (?) – Rank 0

The Hanged Man (?) – Rank 0

Death (?) – Rank 0

Temperance (?) – Rank 0

Devil (Ikutsuki) – Rank 2

Tower (Igor) – Rank 2

Star (Kazuya) – Rank 3

Moon (Nemissa) – Rank 4

Sun (Elizabeth) – Rank 3

Judgement (?) – Rank 0

Aeon (?) – Rank 0

As for your other question... Damn, not even halfway done, and I've been called for a follow-up, huh? I will not create any work called Persona 4 Remix. I do, however, have plans for Persona 4 Restyle, the direct sequel to this story, which revolves around Yu Narukami. No

spoilers, and back to the story.

SEES ate a quiet breakfast, the air heavy as Mitsuru systematically eyed each and every member in attendance, checking to see if they were indeed as ready as they claimed to be. "As you know, the dorm will be under strict lockdown for midterms. I expect to see all of you studying without fail during this week. Any breach of security will merit the most severe Execution imaginable." Mitsuru said. Everyone held their poker face well enough, and the train ride to school was quiet until the very end, when two loud students moved near to them, apparently trying to see a part of the island.

"See?! There! The billboard that was there is gone! Look, you can still see the pole all crooked!" the first student said.

"Woah... so our PE teacher really did get hospitalized?!" the second student asked. Minato and Shinjiro both turned to Mitsuru, who was staring out of the other window.

"Before you ask, yes." Mitsuru said. "My father insisted we follow up on the sinkhole incident to make it believable... our workers underground had no idea the PE teacher was taking a nightly run."

"If anything, you're meticulous." Minato said. "Sacrifices must be made, right? His injury isn't in vain. You're doing the right thing."

"It's fine as long as nobody ends up dead. You know that." Shinjiro said.

"... It's reassuring to her that from you both." Mitsuru said, cracking a smile.

SEES arrived to school, and everyone save Shinjiro looked confident. "Just you watch... I'll one-up you all and take that prize!" Junpei declared.

"In your dreams! You're not named Stupei for nothing." Yukari said.

"Oh yeah? I'll laugh when I do better than you, Yuka-tan! Then you'll be... Stukari!" Junpei answered.

"I think Yupid would actually work better." Minato said.
"Regardless, please, get your hopes up... It'll be all the funnier when I emerge victorious."

"Hah! I might have been a couch potato, but don't think I just watched TV all this time! A match is a match, regardless of the type!" Akihiko said.

"An excellent showing, all of you. Though I believe it's time to remind you why I am the President of this school." Mitsuru said.

"... All of you are idiots." Shinjiro said. They all went to their class, but Minato stopped in the hallway. He had someone to talk to before school started. Sure enough, Fuuka came by, and Minato stopped her.

"Hey, Fuuka." Minato said.

"O-oh! Minato..." Fuuka said.

"Just came by to wish you good luck. Though I doubt you'll need it." Minato said with a wink. "Do your best."

"Y-yes, you too." Fuuka said. Minato chuckled and walked into his class. Fuuka watched him walk into his class before she entered hers and took a seat. She had decided that morning that if she could be the best of her year, she could do anything she put her mind to. She wouldn't have to hold back anymore. She prepared for the tests. It was the first time she truly wanted something this much.

Midterms, Day 1 Results:

Minato Arisato: This test was an insult to my intelligence. Question six had an error, rendering it unsolvable. I put in a few possible changed variants and solutions that emphasized the formula we were supposed to use.

Junpei Iori: Damn, I didn't put enough time into math... and what the heck was with number six? Was that even solvable?

Yukari Takeba: This wasn't too bad, but I feel like there were a few trick questions... I ran out of time, though. Hope that doesn't bite me too badly.

Fuuka Yamagishi: I know this. I've done most of this before on my own. I... I know I did well.

Akihiko Sanada: Not too shabby, if I do say so myself. I don't

think I've done this well in ages.

Shinjiro Aragaki: ... I'll integrate my axe into that test if I see it again.

Mitsuru Kirijio: Hmph. I've done more complex mathematics when I was a freshman.

Midterms, Day 2 Results:

Minato Arisato: Oh, an essay! I think I can score some extra with Isako here... Speaking of Mangekyo, though, since I use Magatama... Can I get a Sharingan?

Junpei Iori: Well, I might not get all the symbols, but I know all the epic quotes! Time to sound like a medieval badass!

Yukari Takeba: I should've read more of the older works... This is going to sting.

Fuuka Yamagishi: I know these ones like the back of my hand! I have this!

Akihiko Sanada: Tch... my worst subject. Well, it is what it is. I'll just need to make up for it later.

Shinjiro Aragaki: I haven't read any of this shit...

Mitsuru Kirijio: I don't spend all day reading manga in the lounge. It's good I took the time to enjoy light reading as well.

Midterms, Day 3 Results:

Minato Arisato: Simple memorization. This test is nothing to me.

Junpei Iori: If our teach' didn't talk about the samurai half the time, I might actually have an idea about what some of this stuff is...

Yukari Takeba: Ugh, a memory test. What a pain... who the hell can remember all of this?

Fuuka Yamagishi: I spent hours learning this... I didn't waste my time.

Akihiko Sanada: The legends, heroes, villains, and weapons are simple enough to recall... the everyday items are more troublesome.

Shinjiro Aragaki: That old monk wasn't lying when he told me those stories... I actually know most of this.

Mitsuru Kirijio: Of course I know about the past... it's the best way to plan accordingly for the future.

Midterms, Day 4 Results:

Minato Arisato: Extended response in science? I wonder what happens if I surpass what we're supposed to know... though this test is rather 'basic', heh. Ikutsuki level pun achieved.

Junpei Iori: Dang, I know the names, not the symbols!

Yukari Takeba: That was actually easier than I thought.

Fuuka Yamagishi: There's almost nothing I don't know here... I've learned even more on my own.

Akihiko Sanada: Why isn't there a formula sheet? Remembering all of these equations... I'm almost certain a few of my calculations are off.

Shinjiro Aragaki: The fuck is this?

Mitsuru Kirijio: A stimulating test of intelligence. Truly prepared by one of the Kirijio Group's scientists.

Midterms, Day 5 Results:

Minato Arisato: Even if I didn't have any knowledge of English, I could've just asked my Fiends to translate everything for me.

Junpei Iori: Whaddya know? Action movies really helped me out here.

Yukari Takeba: Those soap operas really do work.

Fuuka Yamagishi: Hmm... I studied for this, but... I get a feeling.

Akihiko Sanada: I think I did pretty good... but why were all of the passages about gods and demons?

Shinjiro Aragaki: ... You sure this is just a French test and not some demon summoning ritual?

Mitsuru Kirijio: I've never read Charon's story in French... it

was quite the experience.

Midterms, Final Day Results:

Minato Arisato: Mr. Edogawa, your test may have been impossible. Unfortunately for you, my Fiends know all of these rituals, and pointed out quite a few errors in your descriptions.

Junpei Iori: The heck am I supposed to write? Burn a doll? What the hell is going on?

Yukari Takeba: How should I know the MULTIPLE cycles of reincarnation off the top of my head?!

Fuuka Yamagishi: I did my best... that's all that matters now.

Akihiko Sanada: Couch potato life has paid off. I've got this.

Shinjiro Aragaki: You'd be surprised what you can learn on the streets.

Mitsuru Kirijio: Hmph. An intriguing subject. I may have made a few errors....

Post Midterms

Junpei and Yukari went over to Minato's desk as school ended, each with a content look on their face. "Yay! We're done with exams! They were sooo bleh! All I wanna do now is relax! Don't you guys agree?" Yukari said.

"Yeah, freedom! This is what matters most about exams!...

Well, besides the final scores, I guess." Junpei said. "Still, sure feels great that we don't need to deal with anymore of this crap for a while, huh?"

"That's right... we can finally stop wasting our time on trivial things." Minato said. "If Akihiko's ready for battle tonight, we're visiting Tartarus. I have no intention of letting him slouch for much longer."

"Right back on the grind, huh? You're crazy... but I'm game for some Shadow slaughterin'! It'll gimme a great way to blow off some stress!" Junpei said. Yukari sighed.

"You guys really are simple, huh?" she said. "Well, I'm game for a visit too. But I have archery club to go to first. I'll be off!"

Yukari hurriedly left, and Junpei stretched widely. "Man, I told Kenji I'd hit the arcade with him after exams, so I gotta go. Oh, unless you wanna come with?" he said.

"I'm not really in the mood for the arcade, but thanks for the offer." Minato said.

"Alright, man. Try and get some chill time." Junpei said. He walked out of the classroom.

"Then what's the plan, Boss? Visiting one of the seniors?" Jack asked.

"I could. Though I get the feeling Mitsuru will be busy with Shinjiro and Akihiko will be preoccupied with preparing for

tonight." Minato said.

"Since we've already blown off Nemissa till tomorrow, perhaps we can check on Kazuya?" David suggested.

"Maybe, but I'd like to consider the other options first." Minato thought.

"Shall we test our luck with Isako or Fuuka?" Matador asked.

"Hmm... not a bad idea, although I'm certain Isako will be too busy grading now. Could always give Fuuka a try... or maybe even Elizabeth and Igor."

"Hmm... we hadn't even considered them. That is a good idea." David said.

"Then most of my options are at Paulownia Mall." Minato replied. He got up and walked out of the classroom. Oddly enough, he spied apparently looking around near the end of the hallway. *"And one is right here. Lucky me."*

Minato walked over and rested his chin on Fuuka's shoulder. "Feeling good after exams?" he asked. Fuuka was a bit startled, but caught herself.

"Minato! I was just, uh..."

"Looking for me?" he asked, fixing his posture. "What's up?"

"I j-just wanted to say it's nice that exams are over... and umm, I hope you di-did well." Fuuka said.

"No need to be nervous about it." Minato said. "I'm certain both of us exceled."

"R-right."

"We did great." Minato said. "So, how about we go out somewhere nice?"

Fuuka turned away quickly. "... A-after the scores are posted." she said. "But th-thank you for offering. I-I have to get home early today. Bye!" She hurried away.

"... *Something's off with her.*" Minato thought. "*But... I guess she just needs time.*" He shrugged, and left school. He arrived at Iwatodai station, and noticed Hazama, Zelenin, and a third man that looked like an American mixture of Junpei and Rambo, all dressed in standard brown army apparel, albeit clearly labeled with JSDF emblems. They were leaving the takoyaki stand, without takoyaki, oddly enough. "... *Should I?*"

"... *I disagree with this, but... if it must be done.*" Matador said. Minato walked towards them.

"Captain Hazama, Lieutenant Zelenin, I see you're adjusting well to Iwatodai." Minato called. The trio turned on him, a bit too quickly for his liking.

"Minato Arisato." Hazama said. "Do you have business with

us?"

"What's a little kid doing talking to us? And why do you know him?" the man asked.

"If you weren't such a slacker, you'd have read that he's under our observation." Zelenin said.

"Slacker? Pfft. I don't even remember the last time you saw a real fight." The man answered.

"Lieutenant Zelenin, Sergeant Jimenez... behave yourselves." Hazama said. The two officers glared at each other, but stopped. "I'll ask again. What business do you have with us?"

"I just felt I should give you a warm welcoming to Iwatodai." Minato said. "Though, I didn't think you'd have to deal with such troublesome subordinates."

"Troublesome?" Jimenez asked. "If you want trouble, I'll show you trouble."

"This is exactly why you're the lowest ranked. You jump at any chance to pick a fight." Zelenin said. "It's shameful that you were even allowed to become an officer in the first place."

"Jimenez was promoted for his combat performance and reliability." Hazama said.

"Really? Did you have to say it like that?" Jimenez asked.

"There's no better way to describe a glorified ape." Zelenin said.

"Regardless," Hazama snapped. "my subordinates are the best at what they do. Their skill and prowess on the field more than makes up for their abrasive personalities."

Minato chuckled. "I get where you're coming from... I serve as the field leader of SEES, and believe me, there's more than enough personality flying around the battlefield. But they get the job done, and that's what matters." he said.

"SEES? Oh, that's why this kid knows us." Jimenez said.

"Did you really just pick that up?!" Zelenin asked.

"Hey, now he's got my attention, alright? It's pretty obvious he's the one that can summon without a COMP, now that I look at him."

"Correct. It's abhorrent." Zelenin said.

"What did you say?" Jimenez started.

"I believe we already settled this debate." Hazama said, stopping them both. "And now is neither the time nor place for it to continue... if you wish, you can discuss it back at base."

"... Never mind." Minato said. "You have it far worse than me. I'll have to ask how you can manage those two."

"There are a number of things required." Hazama said.

"Is being ruthless one of them? I command SEES like an army unit during operations, and don't tolerate any second opinions." Minato said.

"That helps." Hazama said, grinning. "You seem to have a good grasp of what it takes to be an efficient leader."

"Like I said, I take my job seriously." Minato said. He turned to Zelenin. "Though what's this about me being under observation?"

"We have to monitor you and check for signs of you losing control of your body. Should that happen..." she said.

"We'll put you down." Jimenez said. "No questions asked."

"As long as you refrain from threatening the people of this city, you will remain unharmed." Hazama said.

"Well... that's reassuring." Minato said, scratching his head. "But, I see why that's necessary. A safety net is definitely necessary for the town that houses Tartarus."

"Good to see you understand the situation." Zelenin said. "Still, I believe it's time for lunch."

"About time. I'm starving!" Jimenez said.

"Food will come shortly." Hazama said. He walked up to Minato and stared at him. Minato almost backed away, but he somehow managed to hold his ground. "I think you won't be much of a problem." he said. "Until next time."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

**Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the
Temperance Arcana...**

Minato smirked and nodded to Hazama. The three JSDF investigators left wordlessly. *"An interesting group."* Minato thought as he decided to eat at Beef Bowl. *"I'll have to ask Mitsuru more about them tonight... and sort out a few things before they get a chance to explode."*

After his meal, he returned to the dorm. Everyone save Mitsuru was seated in the lounge watching TV. "Good, you're back." Akihiko said. "Take a seat. I have an announcement to make." Minato nodded and sat down as Akihiko turned off the TV. "My arm is officially fixed. I'm ready to rejoin the front lines starting today."

"That's not much of an announcement. Everybody already knew that." Shinjiro said.

"Hey, I wasn't finished." Akihiko said. "The other thing is... we've found a new Persona user."

"We did?! Sweet! Is it a girl?!" Junpei asked.

"Actually, it is... it's Fuuka Yamagishi from class 2-E." Akihiko said. Everyone else froze. "... I assume you all know her."

"... It seems people of power are drawn to each other." Minato said. Akihiko gave him a quizzical look. "You met her in the hospital, correct?"

"Yeah... how'd you know?" Akihiko asked.

"I saw her there after the little brawl with Shinji." Minato said. "But I knew her from before due to my duties on the Disciplinary Committee."

"... Wait a minute. That girl you had to help out with those bullies... that was her?" Yukari asked.

"... Looks like she already knows most of us, then." Shinjiro said. "But I don't know if she's cut out for fighting... she's weak."

"What? But I already had an Evoker made for her too..." Akihiko said.

"Don't tell me we're givin' up on her already!" Junpei said.

"I don't think she's weak." Minato said. "But I still agree she's not exactly the best fit for combat... we'd have to put in a lot of training."

"Hey, I'm more than willin' to help teach!" Junpei said.

"I think you just want to offer her private lessons or something weird like that." Yukari said.

"Wha- no way! I'm not gonna do that... besides..." Junpei

said, giving Minato a sideways glance.

"... Anyways, we'll decide a course of action later." Akihiko said. "For tonight, let's go to Tartarus."

"I've been waiting to kick some ass." Shinjiro said.

"I'll go tell Mitsuru then." Minato said, getting up from his chair. He walked up the stairs to Mitsuru's room, and knocked on the door. "Mitsuru, its Minato. Can we talk?" he asked.

"Just a moment." she said. The door opened after a short wait. "I was taking some time to neaten my room. It had begun to fall into discord while neglected during midterms." From what Minato could see, her room was in perfect condition. It was spotless, extremely ordered, and was heavily scented. "I assume you'd like to see how Akihiko fares in Tartarus tonight?'

"That was one thing I wanted to ask... but there are a few other things I'm interested in." Minato said.

"... You want to discuss this in private." Mitsuru said. He nodded. "... Come in." Mitsuru stepped back and let Minato walk in. She locked the door behind him. "What do you want to talk about?"

"... I ran into the JSDF investigators again today." Minato said.

"... I see. I trust your meeting didn't end in violence?"

"It didn't... I may have gotten them to trust me more, actually. But I need some answers about their past. Mainly, the Schwarzwelt Investigation."

"I don't have that many details. What I can tell you is that the investigation has been covered up by the UN and is more commonly referred to as the Strange Journey Experiment." Mitsuru said. "The actual investigation was a journey into another dimension that was created at the South Pole. I don't know the specifics, but inside of that other dimension, they faced... things other than Shadows."

"Demons." Minato said.

"... Yes. That's the generally accepted term for everything they went up against, regardless of its apparent historical significance. The team destroyed whatever demon created the dimension, and thus it collapsed before it could expand to cover the world." Mitsuru said. "Why do you ask?"

"I think they possess a tool that allows them to call on demonic powers or even demons themselves... a COMP, I believe it's called." Minato said.

"That's correct. They have special combat suits known as Demonicas that not only functions as a COMP, but also has various other uses and benefits. The known ones include increased strength, speed, durability, reaction time, and an onboard computer linked to a tactical command hub." Mitsuru said. "The only downside of the suit is that its design stands out."

"I see... so a battle is out of the question, then." Minato said.

"Indeed... it would be more of a slaughter. They are hardened soldiers, all of whom are strengthened beyond human levels with access to demonic powers. It would be like trying to fight three different versions of the Reaper at the same time." Mitsuru said. "I think it's a good idea for you to remain on their good side."

"Looks like I made the right choice, then." Minato said. "Their suspicions about me and Shinji aren't wrong... we both have our fair share of demonic powers."

"... I realized that when you fought the Reaper." Mitsuru said. "I don't know what it is, but you can seemingly abandon human limitations on a whim... would you mind explaining?"

"It's easier if you see." Minato said. He awakened, and watched as Mitsuru covered her mouth as the tattoo started to cover his body. It glowed straight through his clothing. After she calmed down, he released it. "I can call on parts of my full power as is... but to use it all, I need that."

"... As long as you know what you're doing... I'll trust you." Mitsuru said. "But I also want you to look out for yourself, Minato... and I don't want you martyring yourself off so easily."

Minato chuckled. "I know that. And I'm glad you understand... though, Mitsuru, you trust me far too much for your own good... I approve." he said. Mitsuru smiled.

"As long as you remain yourself, I can be certain nothing has gone wrong." Mitsuru said. "Thank you... for your honesty, and your confidence."

"You can have those whenever you want." Minato said. "But there's one more thing I want to ask you about."

"Go ahead."

"In Tartarus, I've found a few, for lack of a better classification, old documents at every barricade." Minato said. "I've only skimmed them, but I've gotten some information out of them I think you can help me understand."

"... You found records in Tartarus?" Mitsuru asked.

"I don't know where they came from... but I have them." Minato said. "I think it has to do with the explosion ten years ago."

"... What have you found out?"

"Firstly, none of the documents are dated, so this may all just be my speculation, so don't expect grand findings... The first one details the implementation of a plan to reroute a large amount of energy produced by generators underneath Iwatodai to 'an island with only a school on it'. I'm certain it's referring to Tatsumi Port Island, since Gekkoukan has been around for about twenty or so years." Minato said.

"That's certainly possible... though are you certain the

generators explicitly state their location as Iwatodai? There are numerous possible locations going off of just that description." Mitsuru said.

"The name 'Iwatodai' never explicitly appears. The generators are supposedly located 'under the old passages', which I assumed would be the decommissioned railroad tracks that run underground." Minato said. "Of course, that's assuming this document is less than twenty years old, when they were shut down."

"... I think it's safe to assume that they can't be too old if they were located within Tartarus." Mitsuru said. "Still, that barely narrows down the scope of our search."

"I know... I think that's all we can get out of the first. The second, however, yields a lot more information." Minato said. "It detailed opposition to the construction of a lab on said island... by the Kirijio Ergo Research Branch. Not much is said about what the lab is for, but it does talk about possible 'difficulties', as well as the generally 'dangerous' nature of the lab in question. This is where I hoped you'd be able to come in."

"The Ergo Research Branch? That was disbanded after my grandfather passed away... I regret to inform you that I haven't really looked into their work. I have only heard of them as an example of failed ventures, though I'm unaware of what they tried to do." Mitsuru said. "I'll contact my father and ask him about it when I get the chance."

"Then, do you know where the Ergo Research Branch worked?"

"I've heard that they worked in various areas... but yes, Iwatodai was one location. They came here multiple times, both before and after the Kirijio Group separated from the Nanjo Group." Mitsuru said. "Considering that, along with the fact that these documents were located in Tartarus, it's likely the first document was outlining the start of one of the Ergo Research Branch's 'ventures' here in Iwatodai."

"Well... that's probably all we can get for now." Minato said. "Tell me if your father gives you any new information. I think we can find out a bit of Tartarus' history from these."

"Yes, you're right. It's one of the goals of our exploration, after all." Mitsuru said. "Give me a moment to see if I can access any information myself about the Ergo Research Branch with my file access. I'll be ready to go to Tartarus soon."

"Already on the case, huh?" Minato chuckled. "You know, I really have to thank you... it's nice to have someone I can talk to with a logical head on their shoulders, you know? You took my whole demonic issue much better than Akihiko."

"... Of course. I'm actually surprised that you would tell him."

"It was to drop his suspicions of me early on." Minato said. "Still, it meant a lot that you didn't freak out completely. Oh, Shinji knows too, but that's because I used it while fighting

him."

"... So you've entrusted us seniors with your secret? Hmph. We'll protect it to the utmost." Mitsuru said with a smirk.

"Even if Akihiko and Shinjiro fail at it, I'm not too worried. I trust you." Minato said. He turned and left Mitsuru's room.

Her smirk dropped immediately into a look of depression once her door closed. She immediately locked it and slumped into her desk, burying her head in her hands. She sat there, taking deep breaths and calming herself.

"... What is wrong with me?" she finally whispered to herself. "To think he would share so much personal information with me... and then his own research he's been doing on Tartarus, even asking for my help... And I... And I stood there and lied to his face. I even managed to look happy... He trusts me? I don't even trust myself sometimes!" Mitsuru rose from her slump and stared at the roof, arms hanging loosely to the side, lacking any of her usual composure. "... All will be revealed in time, he said... can I say the same?"

The night passed quickly afterwards, and SEES went to Tartarus. In the lobby, Minato looked over his team. "There's five of us now... that might make fighting difficult for us as a single group." Minato said. "Tartarus might be big, but the hallways aren't that wide... I propose we break into two teams that operate on the same floor."

"Then I'll be in charge of the first group." Akihiko said.

"What?! C'mon, it's my time to shine!" Junpei complained.

"Unfortunately, Junpei, Akihiko has much more combat experience than you, and I know for a fact he has a sound head for battle tactics. You'd need an advisor with you if you lead a team, which we can't afford right now." Minato said.

"... Why do ya' always gotta make so much damn sense, man?" Junpei asked. "I get it. I need to show I know more tactics and whatnot first."

"It's good to see you actually get these things now, Junpei." Yukari said.

"So what are the teams?" Shinjiro asked.

"I was thinking you and Akihiko can be one team, and us sophomores on the other." Minato said. "Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan." Shinjiro said. "Are we runnin' through Arqa again?"

"You know it. It's time for you to show us what you've got, Akihiko." Minato said.

"Just you wait! I'll show you what I can do!" Akihiko said.

Fifteen minutes later, Shinjiro was helping a wounded Akihiko towards Minato's group. "You dumbass. Did you really think uppercutting a Shadow that looks like a friggin' bodybuilder would work?"

"Shut up! I killed it, didn't I?" Akihiko said.

"Only because I had to distract them so you could use Polydeuces."

"Dang-senpai... color me unimpressed." Junpei said, scratching his neck.

"I've got him... Media." Minato said, firing his Evoker. High Pixie appeared behind him and a healing wave washed over the group. "... I think you should swap with Junpei, Akihiko." Minato said. "It's like you said... if you're not leading, you can focus on getting back stronger."

Akihiko was standing on his own two feet, and hit his metal gloves into each other. He grit his teeth. "If I'm getting back on the level, I'll do it the right way. I can't have my underclassman thinking I'm really a slouch now, can I?" he said.

"Alright then, senpai!" Junpei said, walking over to Shinjiro. "Get ready to see what SEES' second in command can do!"

"I've seen you fight enough. Let's go kick some ass." Shinjiro said, walking away. Akihiko joined Yukari and Minato.

"Alright! Time to focus!" he said. The group headed out.

Needless to say, Akihiko picked up more than his fair share of fighting under Minato's leadership. He proved he was able to jump and knock a flying Shadow ten feet in the air to the

ground, crush a Maya with his bare hands, and shatter Laughing Tables with a single strike. Polydeuces' lightning gave much better coverage than Junpei's fire, which made the fighting even easier. After a good forty minutes of training, Akihiko felt like he had gotten back into the rhythm of fighting Shadows. They called it a night, and everyone returned to the dorm.

38. Chapter 38

Chapter 38: Light and Dark

The Sunday after midterm exams. Minato had spent the night after Tartarus thinking about what he had learned from his talk with Mitsuru. He was discussing the talk with his Fiends.

"You said she was clutching her head and mumbling to herself about lying?" Minato asked.

"That's the case, Boss. It's obvious she knows more than she's letting on." David said. ***"... I don't know if you want to call her out on it, though. It looked like it was tearing her apart."***

"What is he supposed to do? Feign ignorance and then wait for it to boil over?! She's mission control! If she snaps, we're all fucked!" Jack screamed.

"That's true, but confronting her would be a breach of trust." Minato said. *"I thought something was off when she seemed to purposely try and throw the idea that the documents referred to Iwatodai off at first, but something like this..."*

"The mademoiselle is clearly in pain. Something bigger than both of you holds her loyalty." Matador said. ***"I***

suspect this has to do with her position in the Kirijio Corporation... she is the heiress."

"... As fucked up as this is, I have to let this slide." Minato said. "And I have to play along... even though it'll kill her on the inside. If a big reveal happens... well, I'll deal with it then."

"... You aren't going to hold this against her?" Jack asked.

"Of course he won't, fool! She's in more pain than he is!" David said.

"David's got a point, but that's not the only reason... this is something she can't avoid on her own. To hold this against somebody would be akin to holding the fact that they were born to their parents against them." Minato said.

"Indeed. Her fate is a harsh one." Matador said.

"And it's not my place to give her shit for it." Minato said. "I have work in a few hours... I think I'll go do a good deed and pray for Mitsuru beforehand."

"Pray? An atheist like you?" Jack asked.

"I might not believe in gods, but I'm pretty certain at least some of them exist in one form or the other now. Whatever the hell it is I end up praying to, it better wind up helping Mitsuru. Otherwise, I'll kill the damn thing myself." Minato

said.

He put on a white shirt with the graphic of a man with his skin melted off, writhing in pain on the front and two children in similar predicaments on the back, standing in a sea of black liquid that went around the lower half of the shirt, and then black cargo pants. He topped it off with his hat and sneakers, and left the dorm at about five-thirty in the morning. He walked to Naganaki Shrine, and saw a white Shiba Inu sleeping in the prime location to pray.

"... *In my way.*" Minato thought. He was thinking of ways to move the dog, when it suddenly woke up. It growled at him. "Hey, calm down there. I just came to pray." Minato said. The dog still growled, but eventually stopped and moved aside, watching him from the corner of its eye.

"It senses us." David said. ***"And it doesn't help that you've heavily altered yourself."***

"It can tell that, huh? Not the weirdest shit I've heard." Minato replied in his mind. He took the newly open spot, and began his version of a silent prayer.

"Dear whatever the fuck lives here. Naganaki spirit, Yomi conjuration, I don't really care, but whatever you are, listen up. I have a friend named Mitsuru Kirijio who's tearing herself apart right now because she has to hide things from me and likely everyone else. I want you to make her feel better, in some way or the other. Failure to do so will result in

me finding you and killing you. It'll be easy. I know Lucifer, Lucifuge, and Paimon personally."

"Bullshit." A garbled voice said in his head.

"Oh, talking back? Want me to call them right now and put them on the phone? I have more than enough Magatama and Fiends to sic on your ass to deal with some lesser deity."

"What?! You have Fiends with you?!"

"You're damn right I do. I got Jack the Ripper, David, and the Matador at my beck and call! So don't gimme no shit about what I can and can't demand from you!"

"H-hey, calm down man... you said you want me to ease the troubles of Mitsuru Kirijio, right? I'll see what I can do... but that ain't really my specialty, so don't expect a miracle!"

"I just want results. She doesn't need to suddenly reach Nirvana, she just needs to stay happy."

"Alright, got ya... you don't need anything else, right? After all, I can't do too many things at once."

"That'll be all for now. Don't disappoint me... unless you want me to call in my favor with Hitoshura."

"S-sure thing, Boss! Leave it to me!"

The voice vanished, and Minato felt rather content with the results of his praying. He went on to pull a fortune, and got an 'Incredible' fortune. Almost immediately after drawing it, he turned and stepped on a pile of ten thousand yen bills. "*That's more like it.*" Minato thought as he pocketed the money.

"Normally, you'd have to report that much money being lost to the police." a voice said from the bench near the playground. He turned to see Ikutsuki sitting there, reading a book. "But I think we can make an exception for a fellow defender of the peace."

"I wouldn't have expected to find you here, Ikutsuki." Minato said. He looked over to the deserted playground. "Waiting for your first unlucky victim?"

"Wha-?!" Ikutsuki started, getting up from the bench and distancing himself from the playground. "I'll have you know I do no such things! This place is wonderfully peaceful, and as such, is an excellent place to read!"

Minato laughed. "I'm just screwing with you, Chairman."

"Hmph... I'd rather you not say things that could land me in prison." Ikutsuki said. "Still, why are you here? I didn't take you for the type to visit a shrine."

"It was on a whim. And besides, I just made quite the sum of money." Minato said.

"Then would it be wrong of me to ask what you just prayed

for?"

"Oh, you caught that, huh? ... I don't see why not." Minato shrugged. "You have quite a few connections with the Kirijio Group, right?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"You know how I can summon my Fiends? Well, I was having a talk with Mitsuru about the history of Tartarus and its relation with a few... old documents I found inside. She started becoming slightly... evasive of the direction I was taking the conversation, so I had one of them watch her after I left the room." Minato explained.

"... She was distraught, wasn't she?" Ikutsuki asked.

"Exactly... she was mumbling to herself about lying to me despite how much trust I put in her, and so forth." Minato said. He smiled wryly. "Now that I think about it, I couldn't have put that much trust in her to spy on her, huh?"

"What you did was perfectly understandable. You felt you were being deceived and wanted to confirm your suspicions." Ikutsuki said. "... I can tell you what she's hiding from you. But once you know the truth, there will be no way to return to your ignorance. Do you want to know about Tartarus' history?"

"... I think she realizes that we can't handle the truth right now." Minato said. "If so, I'll avert my eyes until she's comfortable with us seeing it." He chuckled. "Though I must

thank you, both for the offer, and proving to me that you're also in the know."

"Ah, you caught that... very good." Ikutsuki said. "... Isn't it a little sad that we have to lie to each other like this?"

"Probably. But any relationship with two people being completely honest is usually shallow and worthless anyways." Minato said.

"Harsh words. Though I see your reasoning well enough." Ikutsuki agreed. "It's a shame that somebody as young as you thinks that way... it speaks volumes about the world we live in."

Minato laughed. "I don't think the world has anything to do with it." he said. "It's the people that pollute it."

"Pollute it?" Ikutsuki asked, surprised by his answer. "You aren't actually a nihilist, are you?"

"Don't take my words the wrong way... the world has people that live in it, and people that pollute it. A person that pollutes it is anyone that doesn't live in it." Minato said.

"And by live, you mean...?"

"Do something that affects more than just themselves, in one way or the other. A serial killer is just as alive as a doctor by my definition, perhaps even more so." Minato said.

It was Ikutsuki's turn to laugh. "You say you avert your eyes

from the truth... but I think you already see it. Rather, you've seen it, and elected to turn away. I've read your file, Minato."

"... What's the list?"

"You were abused at age eight, neglected at age ten, tortured at age thirteen, and forced into an underground fight club at age fourteen, where you killed other boys to survive... Oh, I forgot to mention institutionalized at ages nine and eleven, and then forced to take therapy at age fifteen, a mere two years ago." Ikutsuki said. "Yet you walk around with such a happy attitude..."

"You know, the first thing I learned after I was neglected was that moping doesn't solve anything." Minato said. "You have a problem, you solve it. For instance, did you know I jammed a scalpel into the windpipe of the woman who tortured me a week before I was moved to a different home?"

"No... they conveniently left that detail out." Ikutsuki said. "Regardless... I have to ask. How can you keep such a personality, in spite of all you've gone through?"

"It's called selective apathy." Minato said. "If there's something you don't like, you shouldn't give even a sliver of thought to it... It makes everything that matters that much more precious."

"... You're a piece of work." Ikutsuki said. "Can you really just ignore everything you don't like?"

"It's worked up until now."

"Then, when you cease to like the world, what then?"

"... I suppose I'd have to end it at that point, or die trying. But I've yet to go that far."

Ikutsuki laughed. "You have an interesting way of thinking, Minato... We'll need to talk about a few other things in the future."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"Heh. I look forward to it." Minato said. "Though, where are you off to?"

"As Chairman, I'm actually required to give reports on the 'official' activity of SEES." he said. "Part of this entails a video conference, so I must be off to my house. Until next time."

"Huh... I didn't know you actually had real work to do." Minato said. Ikutsuki chuckled and walked off. Minato looked at his watch. He had almost two hours before he had to work, so he went to Iwatodai station and ate at Hagakure. Afterwards, he made his way to work.

He strolled into the Office, music blaring on his headphones,

and went right to the changing room. He almost go there before Nemissa grabbed his arm and started dragging him to the back. "Take the damn headphones off!" she said. Minato did as commanded.

"You actually got the camera crew here?" Minato asked.

"Yes, and you're working overtime. I expect AT LEAST enough material for a TV advertisement and three other magazine shots." Nemissa said.

"To increase my fame even more? Certainly." Minato chuckled. Nemissa forced him into the room with the camera crew, and the shooting began.

Three hours of posing, panting, and uncomfortable camera angling later, Minato walked into the office once more. "So, when do you think the TV advertisement should be ready?" he asked.

"In about a week or so. The magazine ads will be ready for the beginning of the month releases." she said without looking away from her laptops.

"Nice. Are you gonna get all digitally intimate with me again?"

"Should I feel it adds to the effectiveness of the ad, then yes, I will."

"Then do you mind if I say we have a thing going on?"

"You can say whatever you want. I'll deny it completely."

"... Unusually reserved today, aren't you?" Minato asked.

"I'm busy thinking of ways to make you pay for skipping work this week." Nemissa said.

"... How about I slide you 40,000 yen and we call it even?" Minato asked. Nemissa stopped and turned to see him put the money on her desk. He backed up with a sly grin. "Boom."

"... Consider it done." Nemissa said. "You've learned how this works."

"Cash is king, right?" Minato said. "I should hurry and finish my shift. I can't pass up the time to play with my adoring puppets."

Nemissa chuckled and went back to work as Minato changed and began his work. He made sale after sale, and the day quickly drew to a close. He bid Nemissa goodbye and returned to the dorm. Yukari and Junpei were the only ones in the lounge at the time.

"Oh, hey!" Yukari greeted as he entered. "... That's a pretty gruesome shirt."

"I think it's nice." Minato said as he signed in. "Anybody hungry?"

"Actually, don't bother cooking! Our senpai said they'd treat us to a big meal for doin' so well and SEES makin' so much progress and whatnot!" Junpei said. "I hope it's some fancy

stuff!"

"It was a spur of the moment thing... apparently Mitsuru-senpai insisted she give us something for our efforts." Yukari said.

"... *That prayer better work.*" Minato thought. "I guess she thinks as a leader she hasn't been rewarding us adequately... I see where she's coming from."

"Hey, if it means I get free food, I'm fine with it!" Junpei said. Yukari sighed.

"Of course you are, Stupei." Yukari said.

"You won't be callin' me that once the scores come out, Yupid." Junpei said.

Minato left the two of them to their bickering and showered. He changed into a casual blue t-shirt and black athletic shorts, ditching his cap for the day. He went back down to the lounge to see the door open. Mitsuru walked in, followed by Shinjiro and Akihiko, both of whom had huge bags presumably full of food.

"Clear the table. It's eatin' time." Shinjiro said as he walked in.

"Somebody's hungry." Minato said. He moved to clear the table. After plates were arranged, seats were taken, and drinks were served, Mitsuru sat at the head of the table across from Minato. The side of the table closest to the door

was completely empty.

"I'd like to take a moment to personally thank each and every one of you for your efforts." Mitsuru said.

"Huh? I mean, you really don' have to..." Yukari said.

"No, I must, Yukari... I have treated all of too much like soldiers, as you said before." Mitsuru answered. "I'll go around in order, if you don't mind."

"Then would it be me or Minato first?" Akihiko asked.

"I'll start with you, Akihiko." Mitsuru said. She cleared her throat. "I have never truly said how much I appreciate your continued dedication and loyalty... you and Shinjiro were the first members of SEES other than myself, and even though Shinjiro had to leave, you remained, knowing full well what could have happened to him. I'm truly thankful for all the times you remained by my side."

Nobody expected Akihiko to blush and look away. He was at a loss for words. "I-it was nothing!" he said loudly. "I-I mean I'd do it again in a heartbeat!" Shinjiro started snickering, and was followed by the rest of SEES. "H-hey! What the hell?!"

"We know we can count on you, Akihiko... it's a comfort to all of us." Mitsuru said. Akihiko just took a deep breath and nodded. After the snickering stopped, Mitsuru turned her attention to Shinjiro.

"... You can skip me if you want. I know I got mostly disappointments under my belt." he said.

"That's not entirely true, Shinjiro." Mitsuru said. "Without you, SEES never would have made it far from its origins... you were always ready for action, and never backed down from a fight. Even now, though your personality has changed, you still live by those principles. You returned to SEES after all this time, even stronger than before, and now act as an integral part of the team. You're more than your past. You've already proven it."

"... Tch." Shinjiro said. He pulled his beanie down, obscuring his eyes, but he couldn't hide his small smirk. "Call me Shinji. You're the only one who doesn't at this point."

"It would be my pleasure." Mitsuru said. "Now, Yukari... where to start?"

"Hey, you don't have to force anything... I know I'm the least enthused one of us..." Yukari said.

"... Though that may be how you view yourself, you are an irreplaceable part of the field team. You are first and foremost the healer of the team. That in of itself makes you as invaluable as our leader." Mitsuru said. Yukari just blushed and looked down. "We're all thankful for your presence."

"Way to go, Yuka-tan." Junpei said. "Gettin' a lotta praise from Mitsuru-senapi."

"Don't think I haven't been watching you, Junpei." Mitsuru said. "It's as you said last night. You've solidified your position as SEES second in command on the field, and have improved both physically and mentally at a rate I originally thought impossible for anyone... your presence is critical both to our strength and our morale."

"H-hey, I didn't do much..." Junpei said, lowering his cap over his head. "I mean, I was jus' tryin' my best. But thanks."

"Hey, show a little pride there! You're my rival, right?" Minato said, giving Junpei a little jab. Junpei chuckled and raised his head high.

"You've got that right! Of course I'm givin' it my all!" he said with a fist pump. Everyone gave a little laugh. Mitsuru finally turned to Minato, who was still chuckling about Junpei's little action.

"Hmm... and what to say about SEES field leader, Minato?" Mitsuru asked. "You work tirelessly, perhaps even more so than I, and put the well-being of your comrades before even your own... You aren't afraid to do whatever it takes to accomplish whatever is required of you, even if it may cost you your life... I believe there is nothing to say but this: You are the perfect man for the job."

Minato just smiled back as naturally as he could. It may have looked creepy, but the members of SEES knew otherwise. He had nothing to say back here. No cocky remarks. It was praise he took to heart.

"Thank you for humoring me." Mitsuru said. "Shall we begin?"

"Ya don't have ta ask me twice!" Junpei said. The dinner began.

After a meal in a generally pleasant atmosphere, Minato and the rest of SEES returned to their respective rooms. He spent the majority of the night studying, until it was almost the Dark Hour.

"I haven't trained with Shin in a while. Don't want to disappoint as the leader of SEES now, do I?" Minato thought as he left via his window. He hurried to Iwatodai Station and got on a train to Tatsumi Port Island. He arrived and made his way to the back alleys. They were strangely deserted when he arrived, and the Dark Hour came about soon after his arrival. He entered the area Shin usually resided in, only to see a man in a green army suit with a golden vest, gauntlets, shin-guards, and ridiculous robotic helmet, wielding an assault rifle with a dimly glowing red chainsaw attached to the underside in his right hand and a quad-barreled shotgun with four electrified bayonets attached to each barrel. He walked into the scene opposite from Minato, and immediately aimed both of his guns at him.

"Minato Arisato." the man said.

"Captain Hazama. Testing your Demonica out?" Minato asked.

"What business do you have outside of Tartarus during this hour?" he asked.

"I was taking a nightly stroll." Minato said. *"I can't let this guy meet Shin. They'll wreck half of the city."*

"Do you expect me to believe that?" Hazama asked. "If you don't answer properly this time, I will eliminate you."

"... I'm here to meet someone." Minato said.

"And who would that be?" Hazama asked.

"Me, his sensei." Shin said, emerging from the tunnel that led to Club Red Hawk. Hazama turned one gun on him as he walked forward.

"Sensei... You train in this hour?"

"When SEES isn't exploring Tartarus and I'm not busy, yes, I usually train with Shin in the Dark Hour." Minato said. "He's the one that teaches me how to best use my demonic powers."

"That's correct." Shin said, still walking forward. "I think you should lower your weapon... unless you're looking for a fight."

Hazama turned both weapons on Shin, recognizing him as the most immediate threat. "In that case, you must train away from the city to avoid causing damages." he said.

"We train in an isolated location." Shin said. He stopped, with Hazama's guns right in front of his face. "Leave us. We mean no harm to this city."

"... Very well. If I find any damages after this session, I will

find you." Hazama said. He lowered his weapons. "Who are you?"

"Shin Managi... though most know me as Hitoshura."

"... We'll speak again." Hazama said. He walked past Minato and left.

"... You might have just saved my life." Minato said after Hazama left.

"You couldn't have won against him. There was a good chance of you fleeing, but you cannot run forever." Shin said. "I need to teach you how to fight against more than one opponent now. Come."

Minato did as instructed, and was taken to the wasteland again. Shin waved his hand, and created three identical copies of himself. "These copies will fight at the same level I was previously training against you with. Once you can kill all three of them without dying once, you'll be ready to move on. Should you die, I'll resurrect any copy you killed." he said.

Minato awakened and prepared himself. "Three on one, huh? Let's see what I can do." he said.

The first of Shin's clones rushed forwards and started trading blows with Minato. Almost immediately after a few quick hits, a different clone trapped Minato's lower half in a case of ice. Unable to defend himself, the clone he was fighting shattered his lower body, and punted his upper half away. He landed,

flopped around, and was then healed.

"That was only two. You have to be able to take all three."
Shin said.

"... This might take a while." Minato said, preparing himself once more. This time, he charged in, and summoned Jack's cleavers. He threw them forwards, forcing the first clone to hit them away. He drove a hard knee into its gut and sent it tumbling backwards. He landed, and a second clone tried to smash him into the ground. He rolled away, narrowly dodging the strike, only to be consumed by a ball of fire. He rushed out of the blaze, smoking, only to be greeted by the second clone's fist into his abdomen. He was knocked back into the fire and then out again, only to be greeted by a spine shattering kick by the first clone. He crumpled, and was stomped into the floor.

Another resurrection. Minato rose to his feet and saw the three clones all standing next to each other, staring at him from the distance. He grit his teeth, and drew his Evoker. "Mutilate!" he called. Jack appeared and rushed forward, cleaver at the ready, and went to slice the clone in the middle clean in half. It caught the blade, and the second clone kicked Jack's head clean off. In that time, Minato had rushed at the third clone and lunged at it. It stopped him before he could connect, and he summoned Matador's sword. It emerged and pierced through the clone. With a cackle he pushed down on the hilt with all his might, ripping clean through the clone's body and splitting its head into two. It fell, and he turned to take Jack's cleaver straight to the neck. He saw his body fall

as his head plopped to the ground.

His eyesight went black for a moment, but he resurrected once more to see the three clones again standing in front of him. "This will definitely take a while." Minato said.

"Simply trying to isolate them one at a time will do you no good." Shin said.

Minato passed the hour dying repeatedly, occasionally dragging a singular clone down with him. He had gotten better at surviving their onslaught overtime, but had yet to find an efficient method of attacking on his own. Shin teleported him back to Tatsumi Port Island, and bid him farewell. Minato returned to the dorm and spent the night devising new battle tactics.

39. Chapter 39

Chapter 39: The First Midterms' Results

Minato was busy making breakfast for SEES when a rather happy looking Mitsuru walked down the stairs and into lounge. "Good morning, Minato. Making breakfast as usual?" she said.

"It's as you see." Minato said. "Want anything in particular this wonderful morning?"

"I actually think I'd like pancakes." Mitsuru said.

"Then you'll have pancakes." Minato said. Luckily, he had already finished most of the preparations for a flour based breakfast item. Finishing the pancakes was simple at that point. In just under ten minutes, he prepared a grand breakfast of three pancakes topped with strawberries and stylishly covered in syrup to make two swords... or fibula, but he didn't mind. He set the plate in front of Mitsuru, and then quickly created his own variant, using blueberries instead of strawberries and drawing a syrup skull on his.

"A lovely breakfast," Mitsuru said as he took a seat. "Is there enough for everyone else?"

"Of course. I didn't bother making theirs though... it'd be a waste to create soggy pancakes, after all." Minato said.

"I agree. Shall we begin?"

"We shall." At that, the two began to eat. "So, Mitsuru, I never asked... what will you do if you happen to have the highest score out of SEES?"

"I've prepared a suitable second-prize... after all, a wish should only go to the triumphant, should it not?"

Minato chuckled. "Then I'll need to ensure my wish is extra special, won't I?" he asked.

"We'll see today, won't we?" Mitsuru mused.

They finished along with a few other members of SEES, and boarded the train to school. Junpei was the first to speak. "Aww yeah! Who's hyped to see how well I did?! Huh?!" he started.

"Aren't you excited, Junpei?... I think you're just scared." Yukari said.

"Hah! As if! I can see that reward now... my very own set of three personal maids, each of them my age!" Junpei said. "... It'll be glorious."

"... Forget I said anything, pervert."

"Maids, huh? That's a nice dream." Minato said.

"And of course you agree with him." Yukari said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, they clean for you and can cook for you and do random favors when you ask... they're so useful, and for a guy like Junpei, I can see why he'd ask for three. He can split them into different tasks." Minato said. He gave Junpei a sideways wink.

"Y-yeah, exactly, Yuka-tan! That way I can put more time into things that deserve my attention... like trainin' and studyin'!" Junpei said. Yukari facepalmed.

"I'll just pretend this conversation never happened... I'm pretty sure you're lying." she said.

They arrived at school, which was completely uneventful until lunch time. A few students talking about the results being posted caught Minato's attention, so he decided to take a look at the results.

Midterm Results (Rank and Cumulative Score out of a max 600)

3rd Years:

Mitsuru Kirijio – Rank 1, Score: 592

Akihiko Sanada – Rank 18, Score: 565

Shinjiro Aragaki – Rank 174, Score: 347

2nd Years:

Minato Arisato – Rank 1, Score: 645

Fuuka Yamagishi – Rank 2, Score: 590

Yukari Takeba – Rank 66, Score: 490

Junpei Iori – Rank 67, Score: 486

Minato was bombarded by a barrage of spiteful, jealous, disbelieving, and even admiring stares as he looked over the scores. He saw his, and simply chuckled a bit before turning around to head back to class. He walked up to the second floor, and saw Fuuka staring down the empty hallway from the top of the stairs.

"Boo!" Minato said, suddenly appearing next to her. Fuuka snapped out of her daze and panicked. She almost fell over, but Minato caught her and allowed her to regain her footing.

"M-minato, that was mean!" she said.

"I know, I know, it was probably uncalled for." he said. "Still, why're you staring into space in the middle of the hallway? I know you like trouble, but it's a bad habit to openly invite it."

"... I was thinking about something." she said. "B-but I can't tell you."

"Oh? A secret?" Minato asked. "Well, far be it from me to pry... Well, congratulations on your scores. Told you both of

us would do great. We're the best in the class."

"... Yes, you are. I m-mean, we are." Fuuka said. "That's rather nice, isn't it?"

"... You still seem down about something." Minato said. He put his arm around her and began to march them to his classroom.

"H-hey, why are you dragging me around?" Fuuka asked.

"So I can cheer you up. Simple." Minato said. They entered the class, which was empty at this time, and he grabbed his lunch and left again. "Let's eat together, like before, huh?" he asked.

"A-actually, I'm not that hungry now." Fuuka said. Minato stopped, and moved away from her.

"What's wrong, Fuuka?" he asked seriously. "Tell me."

"N-nothing's wrong." she said. He sighed.

"I can't help you if you don't say anything... you're supposed to tell your teddy bear all your troubles, you know?"

"I can't share this one!" she said. She turned her back to Minato and stared out of the window. He responded by hugging her from behind.

"... Then you don't have to talk." he said. Fuuka trembled a bit, but otherwise didn't respond. They stood there for a bit,

until she grabbed his arm.

"... Thanks." she said. Minato backed away, and turned to him, smiling sadly. "But... you can't help this." She walked away and left Minato by his desk. He sat down, and silently ate alone.

"... ***It would seem something is very wrong.***" David said.

"No shit, Sherlock. This is pissing me off." Minato replied.

"Tis' the fickle heart of a woman." Matador said.

"... Probably. She's not pissed at me for doing better than her, is she?"

"Who knows? She doesn't have much going for her... maybe she's secretly just as prideful as Mitsuru about her academics." Jack said.

"She has a lot going for her... though she probably doesn't recognize it. If that's the case, then there's nothing I can do now, is there?"

"Then our plan of action is to let this blow over?" David asked.

"Que sera, sera." Matador said.

"This isn't something I can just solve immediately... I'll need time and details. Jack, watch her."

"No problem."

As Minato ate, a miniature version of Jack's head appeared and flew into Fuuka's classroom. It stayed low to the ground and saw Fuuka resting her head on her desk. She said nothing, and just sat there.

After class started in the afternoon, Jack continued his monitoring. Fuuka just went through the day robotically, a blank expression on her face. When the final bell rang, Jack disappeared and reported back to Minato.

"... No luck today, then." he said after hearing Jack's report.

"She's keeping it in pretty tight. I could monitor her at her house if you want." Jack suggested.

"We're not going that far... For now, que sera, sera." Minato replied. He got up from his desk and took a little stretch. *"It's time for Student Council now, anyways."*

He walked into the Council Room, donned his armband, and took his usual seat. The rest of the members filed in, one by one, until finally, Mitsuru walked in, followed by Shinjiro, wearing an armband just like Minato's.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'd like to inform you all of our newest member." she said. "This is Shinjiro Aragaki... he will be the Vice-Head of the Disciplinary Committee starting today."

"From what I hear, that means I can kick all of your asses if you so much as look at me or Mitsuru the wrong way." Shinjiro said. "Unlike Minato, I don't waste any time with words... so don't expect me to show mercy."

Everybody save Mitsuru and Minato shuddered. Minato had proven himself to be a psychopath, though he was not completely unreasonable. Shinjiro had just stated that he was the exact opposite, which some viewed as even worse than Minato. Every non-Officer began to sweat.

Mitsuru took her seat as Shinjiro pulled an empty chair over to sit to the left of her, opposite Minato, who sat to her right. She smiled at the Council. "I've received complaints that a few of our ex-Officers are dissatisfied with our recent redistribution of power...Would anyone like to voice these personally?" Nobody said a word. "Then, Minato, if you would please share with us the list of complainers."

"Certainly, Madame President," Minato said with his creepy smile. He pulled out a little sheet of paper from his bag. "The first offender is none other than the previous Historian, Mayumi Mihara. It says here that you found your loss of position to be outrageous and unjustified... what do you have to say about that?"

"I-I meant that it was so sudden! I wasn't thinking clearly when I wrote that!" she squealed.

"Please, contain your voice." Minato said. "However, you have clearly just stated that you are subject to fits of irrationality..."

surely you understand that it's in the best interests of the Council to choose a Secretary who's mental facilities aren't easily compromised."

"That's not what I meant! I meant... it was... a crime of passion! In the heat of the moment! It definitely won't happen again." she said.

"Regardless, during the second week before midterms, you elected not to stay at the Council, unlike your successor." Minato said.

"We were told we could leave to study, and I wasn't too sure of my grades. How is that an infringement?" she asked.

"You're correct in assuming you've broken no rules... however, you've proven the limitations of your dedication to the Council." Minato said. "For your irrationality, susceptibility to emotional outbursts, and lack of commitment to the future of Gekkoukan and the Council, you were replaced. If you have any further objections, I'd be happy to speak with you outside along with Shinjiro."

Shinjiro grunted, and cracked his left index finger with his thumb, loudly. Mayumi shrank back into her desk, and said nothing. "Excellent... do any of the others wish to voice their concerns?" Mitsuru said. Everyone shook their heads. "Then, we'll move on to finishing the paperwork for last week. Shinjiro, Minato, Fushimi... you'll be joining me for our teacher visits."

Minato and Shinjiro followed Mitsuru to the small meeting room at the back of the Student Council Room, and stood at her sides as ready watchmen, while Chihiro hurried to fetch the first teacher in question. "Should we share our little problem with Shinji?" Minato asked Mitsuru.

"Problem? Who's ass do I have to kick?" Shinjiro asked. Mitsuru chuckled.

"We don't know that yet... a decent portion of our treasury savings has gone missing. It's more than likely the suspect is a teacher. In addition to ensuring compliance with the Council's rule, these meetings are also being used to interrogate teachers." Mitsuru said.

Shinjiro nodded. "Interrogating a teacher? Let's do this." he said.

"Yes... the first one will arrive shortly. She's an old affiliate of the Kirijio Group." Mitsuru said.

"What'd she do?" Minato asked.

"She mainly supervised maintenance teams for research and development ventures." she said.

"... Explains why she does career-training classes." Shinjiro said.

After a brief wait, the door opened, and Chihiro led Ms. Kanou into the room. She looked confident as usual. "Good

afternoon, Ms. Kanou. Let me first and foremost thank you for your cooperation regarding the monorail incident."

"It was my pleasure. I'll admit I didn't expect to have to act on TV, but it wasn't too much of an inconvenience." she said.

"That's good to hear... I'll ask you outright. Do you know why you're here?"

"To ensure my compliance to the Student Council, or, more precisely, to you."

"That is part of the reason... the other is about a certain incident waiting to happen." Mitsuru said.

"Incident?" Ms. Kanou asked.

"It's come to my attention that you've been entertaining one of your students, Kenji Tomochika, much more than should be allowed... I've heard that you even invited him to your house on multiple occasions." Mitsuru said. "I want you to cease all communications with him immediately. You are leading him on and you know it."

"... Damn, and I was having so much fun toying with him." Ms. Kanou said, cracking a little smile. "Well, all good things must come to an end... I already know what to expect if I refuse, so don't worry. I've got a fiancé that I've kept away from him most of the time. This will be over in a heartbeat. Though... I've heard a few stories about Minato and Ms. Toriumi... I'll assume you'll be speaking to her as well?"

"I've already discussed this with her... after all, when's the last time you've heard of the two of them together?" Mitsuru asked.

"That's true... it's been about two weeks since the visits to Iwatodai station." Ms. Kanou said. "Then, will that be all?"

"Actually, there's one more issue at hand... you've also been neglecting your duties as sponsor of the girls' tennis team. I've also heard reports that some members are outright neglecting practice altogether." Mitsuru said. "I expect a much better report by the end of next month."

Ms. Kanou let out a big sigh. "Do I really have to deal with those kids? The captain is annoying and overzealous, and the rest of the team is composed of mainly slouches... it's like trying to play with electricity and water. You'll get electrocuted in no time." she said.

"As terrible as the circumstances may be, we cannot let the reputation of Gekkoukan sink into the mud for one rotten batch of athletes. You accepted the position of sponsor knowing full well the risks involved... backing out now is a punishable offense." Mitsuru said. Ms. Kanou took a deep breath.

"... I'll see what I can do." she said.

"Then, you're free to leave." Mitsuru said. Ms. Kanou rose, gave a bow, and left the room. "... I've had the one who monitors her track her spending... nothing is out of the

ordinary. She's not the thief."

"Monitor?" Shinjiro asked.

"How else would I know Kenji Tomochika has been to her house on several occasions?" Mitsuru asked.

"... You've got a point." Shinjiro said. "So, who's next?"

"I want both of you alert for this one... Mr. Toudou is next in line." Mitsuru said.

"The Persona user, huh? I'm interested to see what he can do." Minato said.

Another brief wait, and Naoya Toudou walked into the room. He took his seat, and showed little expression. "So you'd like to speak once more." he said.

"Yes, though we won't be discussing our previous topics." Mitsuru said.

"Then, by all means." he said.

"Very well... Mr. Toudou, as you know, you currently serve as Mr. Uchida's replacement. However, though you effectively teach French, you are sparking an occult interest in our school by using mainly demonology and mythological texts as class material. As an outstanding school owned by the Kirijio Group, we cannot permit you to continue this method of teaching." Mitsuru said.

"Me, sparking an interest in the occult? I'd never." Mr. Toudou said with a smile.

"This is a serious matter, Mr. Toudou... as a teacher of this school, you are bound to comply to these requests."

"Hmph. So you wish to censor their minds? So be it." Mr. Toudou said. "But surely, you must think that it's ridiculous that we need to hide our true interests from the public, don't you?"

"... This is not a debate on societal standards. But thank you for your compliance." Mitsuru said.

"Aren't you on the straight and narrow?" he mused. "It makes the moment you veer off the path that much more devastating, you know." Mitsuru glared at him. He chuckled. "I've seen it all before... but that's just advice. Sometimes you need to experience the crash for a lesson to truly sink in. Just pray that you don't lose something during the ride."

"Watch your mouth." Shinjiro snapped.

"Mr. Toudou, I believe it's in your best interests to stop talking." Minato said. Mr. Toudou turned on him. His eyes flashed yellow for a moment, and then returned to normal.

"I see..." Mr. Toudou said. "You can wield multiple Personas, can't you?"

"And if I can?"

"Nothing, really... just tell Igor the boy with an earring says

hello." Mr. Toudou said. Mitsuru and Shinjiro turned to Minato, who chuckled.

"Still have your key?" he asked.

"No... I have finished my journey." Mr. Toudou said.

"Regardless, we've digressed far too much. Is that all I need to take care of, Miss Kirijio?"

"Yes... you may leave." Mitsuru said. Mr. Toudou got up and strolled out of the room. "... Who's Igor?"

"The owner of the other Room I visit. He's the one that gives me new Personas." Minato said. Mitsuru turned to Shinjiro, who shrugged.

"Never heard of an Igor." he said.

"... Well, Mr. Toudou was employed here after the theft, so I'm certain he's not the culprit either." Mitsuru said. "In that case... we should be done for today. Minato, would you make us some tea? I have a few papers to deal with before we can leave."

"It would be my pleasure... would you like some as well, Shinji?"

"If you're gonna make anyways, then yeah." he answered.

Minato went about making tea while Mitsuru finalized a few papers that needed Presidential approval. He served their teas shortly after, and the trio drank as the sun began to fall

below the horizon. "You know, I didn't think you'd join Student Council, Shinji." Minato said.

"It was this or take extra classes because of my shitty grades." Shinjiro said.

"You made a wise decision." Mitsuru said. "And I must thank you both for your work today, especially with Mr. Toudou... I almost allowed him to get to me."

"We're the guys that watch your back, right? It doesn't matter who it is... we've got you." Minato said. "I won't tolerate anyone besmirching you." Shinjiro nodded and took a drink of his tea.

"... It would seem I've come to rely on you more than you rely on me, haven't I?" Mitsuru mused. "You don't mind if I continue, do you?"

"Would I be here if I minded in the first place?" Minato asked. "You know me, don't you?"

"... You're right. I know you too well, actually." Mitsuru said. She chuckled. "... I'll make it up to you someday."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

"You more than make it up for it already." Minato said.

"... I'm still here." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru laughed.

"We know, Shinji... it's about time we left." Mitsuru said. They left school and took the train to Iwatodai station. "I believe we should stop for lunch... it'll be my treat. Any suggestions, Shinji?"

"... You wanna try Wakatsu?" he asked. "The sushi there ain't top class, but it's good."

"It is... just let me be the one to get a table." Minato said.

"An inside connection? I see... I'll leave this to you." Mitsuru said with a smirk. They got off at Iwatodai station, and Minato led them into Wakatsu. He told the waiter the secret saying, and led them into the Divide. He got his usual table, and the geisha that usually served him entered.

"Hello again, Master Minato... you've become a prominent figure recently." she said. "Would you like to begin with water, or your companion's favorite?"

"Mitsuru, you've had to do your fair share of drinking as a business executive's daughter, haven't you?" Minato asked. Mitsuru nodded. "Then, we'll start with two bottles of my dear friend's favorite."

"Certainly." she said with a bow. She disappeared behind the blinds, and Mitsuru and Shinjiro immediately turned on Minato.

"... This place reeks of smoke and alcohol." Shinjiro said.

"I'd like to know how you're acquainted with such a place."
Mitsuru said. "Where is this?"

"This is Wakatsu's Divide... it's a black market restaurant.
Isako took me here once." Minato said.

"... I told you she was a friend he entered shady drug dens
with." Shinjiro said.

"I've taken Junpei here once as well." Minato said.

"... You've made Junpei drink?" Mitsuru asked, a frown
forming on her face.

"Never have! Why do you think she offered water at first?"
Minato said. "Still, this place serves excellent quality food...
I'm wondering how acquainted you are with some of their
delicacies."

"I've sampled quite the collection of exotic food... I wonder
what I'll find here." Mitsuru said. She turned to Shinjiro, who
looked a bit uncomfortable. "Is something the matter, Shinji?"

"... I've never drank alcohol before." Shinjiro said.

"... Are you serious?" Minato asked. "I mean, you were a club
bouncer and the bouncer for Red Hawk!"

"Red Hawk?" Mitsuru asked.

"Another drug den." Shinjiro said. "But no, I've never tried... when you've dealt with a life-threatening medical condition, you tend to avoid things that can cause others."

"... I see your point. I can order water if you'd like." Minato said.

"I'll respect any decision you make here, Shinjiro." Mitsuru said. Shinjiro frowned.

"... When you gimme my choices like that, I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Shinjiro asked, starting to pour their glasses. "If you didn't want me to be a downer, you shoulda just said so." Minato chuckled.

"Well, good to see you catch on quick." he said. They took their respective glasses. "To bad habits." he said, raising his glass.

"The hell kinda toast is that?" Shinjiro asked.

"... If we're already this far, there's no helping it, is there?" Mitsuru chuckle. "To bad habits."

"You've gotta be shittin' me... Tch." Shinjiro said. He raised his glass. "To bad habits." They all took a drink, and then chuckled. "This tastes weirder than I thought." Shinjiro said. "But it ain't that bad."

"It would seem Ms. Toriumi knows her liquor." Mitsuru remarked.

"You should hang out with us sometime. It'll be a blast." Minato said. They ordered their food, each trying a different type of seafood, and ate. Everyone generally acknowledged the food as being much better than normal. After a happy meal, they left out of the shady back exit, and walked into the alleyway.

"You leave out a door you can't enter, huh?" Shinjiro said as they walked away. "Smart."

"Indeed... though I think we shouldn't frequent this establishment in the future." Mitsuru said.

"Probably, but once in a while is fun, right?" Minato said.

"... I must agree."

They returned to the dorm, and found Junpei and Akihiko watching TV. "How's it going? You guys were out for a while." Akihiko said as they entered.

"Yeah, no kiddin'... we thought somethin' mighta happened to Mitsuru-senpai." Junpei said. He stopped, and sniffed. His eyes widened. Akihiko gave him a quizzical look.

"What happened to you?" he asked. Minato, Shinjiro, and Mitsuru all shot Junpei a serious glare.

"I-I just remembered that I still did the worst, and I'm pissed! Plus what the heck was with Minato's score?! Is that even possible?!" he yelled.

"Hey, I corrected a few errors on the tests. I guess the teachers gave me some extra for it." Minato said with a grin. "Speaking of which, we haven't discussed my reward."

Mitsuru froze. She blushed, and gave Minato a sideways glance. "... Of course. You did better than even me... I'll have to grant you one wish." she said. Everyone in the room tensed.

"... Oh! I know what I can wish for!" Minato said. He turned to Mitsuru, an expectant smile on his face. "I wish that you call in that favor I promised you."

Mitsuru tried to disappear into her hair as everyone's jaw dropped. "... You... you can't be serious." Akihiko said.

"I am." Minato said.

"... I can't go back on my word." Mitsuru said. "Shinjiro, nobody comes upstairs... Minato... f-follow me."

Mitsuru and Minato went up the stairs of the lounge, and the remaining member of SEES stood there frozen. After a while, everyone slowly began to ignore what just happened. Shinjiro stood as a literal blockade in front of the stairs, busily reading a cooking magazine. Akihiko and Junpei became very absorbed in some anime.

Yukari walked in a little later and stopped at the door. Everybody was too silent. "... Did something happen?" she asked.

"... Minato got his wish." Junpei said. "Don't... don't try ta go upstairs... for a while."

Yukari's eyes bulged. She turned to Shinjiro and barged up to him. "Can't let ya pass." he said. "I ain't sufferin' an execution just to give you peace of mind."

"Did none of you oppose this?!" she asked.

"We... we couldn't stop it. Mitsuru's too prideful to go back on her word." Akihiko said. He looked like he had just watched his pride die in front of him.

The rest of SEES waited in anxiety. A little while passed before Minato and Mitsuru walked down the stairs into the lounge. Mitsuru was blushing madly while Minato just looked very refreshed. "So, who wants some dinner?" Minato asked. "You'll help, right Shinji?"

Shinjiro glanced at Mitsuru, who, underneath her blush, had a slight smile. He chuckled, and turned to Minato. "Sure." He joined Minato in the kitchen as Mitsuru moved to her seat in the lounge. She took her book from the desk, and began to read.

"... Damn, I guess Shinji-senpai is about that life, huh?" Junpei asked.

"What the hell, Shinji?" Akihiko whispered angrily.

"... Those guys..." Yukari said, shaking her head. Akihiko

turned to Mitsuru.

"... How was it?" he asked. Mitsuru flinched and reddened again.

"... It was surprisingly good." she said.

The rest of SEES all stared at each other in disbelief, then at Minato, who, in a plain blue and white t-shirt and pink apron, just seemed like he was in a good mood as he cooked.

After an awkwardly quiet dinner, the majority of SEES went to sleep. Minato decided it was in his best interests to remain indoors for a bit at night after his run-in with Hazama, so he decided to train on the roof top till the morning.

40. Chapter 40

Chapter 40: The Man and The Pit

Minato, after the previous night's training session, was about to go make breakfast when his quiet morning was interrupted by a stern-faced Akihiko, seemingly waiting for him in the lounge. *"This is gonna get really stupid really quickly."* Minato thought as Akihiko walked towards him. *"Since this has to happen, it'll get stupid on my terms."*

"Minato..." he began. He stared him down.

"Good morning, Akihiko. Do you want anything in particular before your morning run? I can make something quickly if you want." Minato said. He smiled. "Or... maybe you want some details about me and Mitsuru's private time?" he asked. Akihiko winced. "You know, I didn't take you to be the type that enjoys fantasizing... with all those girls chasing you, I don't see why you'd need to. But, if it's in your taste, who am I to judge? Oh, wait! What was that saying... something about always wanting that which you can't have?"

"... Are you feeling good about yourself now?" Akihiko asked, balling his fists. Minato watched him for a bit, and then dropped his smile.

"... You held back well." Minato said. "I was half expecting you to throw a punch at me. I must say I'm both impressed and disappointed." He sighed. "It would have given me a good excuse to spar with you. Oh well."

"I know you well enough. You're the type to provoke people into giving you an excuse to fight." Akihiko said. "Though you only go after people that seem like they'd be a challenge... Care to explain?"

"Because it's no fun if it's gruelingly one-sided. I can't take any enjoyment from just bulldozing my opponent now, can I?" Minato answered. He smiled again. "No... it's only fun when they think they've won, and you can see the hope in their eyes... and then watch as it fades away when you take the upper hand. Next comes fear, when you see them doubt themselves and their abilities... you press your advantage, and watch as their nightmare becomes reality, leaving only despair on their faces. Then at last, when you have them in your clutches, they'll squirm and plead and barter so desperately... and you humor them, or taunt them, or even pretend you can show them compassion... until you end them in a beautiful display of sudden cruelty. Then, their body goes limp and drops to the floor, staring into space... But you're not done yet. After that, their corpse becomes quite the canvas... abstract, or impressionist? Or maybe you'd prefer the simplicity of realism instead? Whatever you choose to do with your prize, it's paramount that you enjoy yourself first and foremost."

Akihiko had backed away to the stairs by the time Minato

stopped talking. "... Forget I asked anything." he whispered. He ran to his room, and quickly closed the door behind him. Minato broke out laughing, and walked into the kitchen. He threw on his pink apron and began cooking. After a while, he heard a loud scream, followed by angry remarks. Shinjiro and Junpei walked down the stairs soon after.

"The hell has Aki on edge?" Shinjiro asked, holding one ear. "Idiot damn near broke the sound barrier just now... It's too early for that kinda shit."

"No kiddin'. If I wasn't awake before, I sure as hell am now." Junpei grumbled.

"He asked me why I like picking fights." Minato said.

"... It's always too early for that shit." Shinjiro said. He shook his head, and walked into the kitchen. "Let's see what we got today."

The two of them began cooking as usual, and Junpei sat at the table. "Hey, Minato... don't think I'm bein' weird or anything, but... what did you do last night?" he asked.

"Nothing I didn't say I would do." Minato said. "She wanted to be bathed, so I gave her a bath... in a hot tub with incense, rose petals, and lots of soap... The training I had for my job was actually really useful. Mitsuru loved it."

Junpei tipped his hat to him and sighed. "Man, I wish I coulda done that..." he said. Minato chuckled and continued making

breakfast, though he made a note to give Junpei a bigger portion than usual.

Breakfast was being served when Mitsuru came downstairs, followed shortly by Yukari. Everyone gathered around for a group meal. "Hey, where's Akihiko-senpai?" Yukari asked.

"Scared shitless in his room." Shinjiro said. A small silence ensued.

"... Should I even ask?"

"I think yer' better not askin'." Junpei said.

"Right." Yukari said. They finished eating in peace, and got on the train to school. "Hey, Junpei, I never congratulated you on your exam scores. You really surprised me." she said.

"... You just want to rub it in my face that I still did worse than you, don't you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her. Yukari facepalmed.

"No, that's not what I'm here for!" she said. "I'm graduating you from Stupei!"

"Huh?" Junpei asked.

"I can't call you Stupei anymore because you scored one below me... if you're stupid, I'm almost as stupid as you in that light." she said.

"But doesn't that just make you Yupid?" Junpei asked. "I

mean, both our averages are pretty low B's, so..."

"A B is still a B, and that's 'Above Satisfactory Performance!'" Yukari said.

"But it ain't an A, right?"

"When the hell did you become an overachiever?!" she asked. Junpei gave her a confused expression.

"Uhh, hello? Earth to Yuka-tan? You've been in the same dorm as me these last few weeks, right?" he said. "Ya know, the one I study or train my ass off at damn near daily?"

"He's got a point." Minato said. "You're the one out of sync. I've watched Junpei work rigorously these last few days... it was inspiring."

"... Ok, you have a point." Yukari said. "But I still think we're not stupid."

"It's okay to accept it Yuka-tan... you just gotta use this and get better next time, right?" Junpei said with a smirk.

"... Unbelievable. Stupei just shot advice at me." Yukari said.

"Don't worry, Yupid. We'll get outta this hole someday!"

They arrived at school, and the day passed by uneventfully. Minato didn't run into Fuuka at all, but he left her to herself. Once class ended, he and Junpei had decided to go grab some food when Akihiko and Shinjiro stopped them both. "You

two. There's something very important we have to do." Akihiko said.

"Then you came to the right team, senpai!" Junpei said with a grin. "What's the job?"

"It ain't important. He just wants to feed his damn ego." Shinjiro said.

"This is very important... we need to establish how strong each of us are in comparison to one another." Akihiko said. "That way, we know the hierarchy to follow in battles."

"You sound like you want that leader position from me." Minato said.

"No, it's not for that... twisted as you may be, you know your way around a fight and make smart decisions." Akihiko said. "I don't intend on shaking our combat dynamic now. You should appreciate this... it'll give you a deeper insight into how all of us fight."

"I have a pretty good idea of how we each fight. But, if you insist, I'll never deny a good opportunity to train outside of Tartarus." Minato said. "Then, where will this competition take place? We have to fight somewhere Shinji can go all out."

"We already got a place." Shinjiro said. "There's an old tunnel past Red Hawk that leads to a pretty big clearing. It's spacious enough, and damn sturdy. I used to train there myself sometimes."

"Sweet! What are we waitin' for, let's go!" Junpei said.

"That's the right type of attitude to have." Akihiko said. They all went to Tatsumi Port Island Station and ventured into the back alleys. There were a few local thugs, but nobody bothered messing with a crew of four, especially when it included Minato and Shinjiro. They minded their own business, and the boys of SEES went beyond Red Hawk's entrance down into a deeper part of the tunnel, which opened up to reveal a dimly lit wide platform between old railroad tracks.

"Nobody comes down here anymore since they got the new monorail." Shinjiro said. "So don't hold back."

"... Then the generators would have been somewhere underneath here, wouldn't they?" Minato thought. "How far do these tracks go?"

"Miles, but you can barely tell where the platforms are anymore... it's pitch black almost everywhere but here." Shinjiro said. "Why'd ya ask? Don't tell me you wanna go check it out or some shit like that."

"Just curious is all. If you recall, I'm a pretty agile fighter." Minato said. "I want to know how much room I have to work with."

"If you run more than a mile away, we're ditching your ass down here." Shinjiro said.

"Ok, talk's over." Akihiko said quickly. "We'll have a one-on-

one elimination tournament to gauge our strengths. The rules are that the first person to be seriously injured loses. But don't go around breaking any bones or puncturing organs." he explained, shooting a look at Minato as he spoke his last sentence. "These wounds should be easily fixed with a good healing spell."

"Sweet! Then I'll go first!" Junpei said. "Minato, got my sword?"

"Catch." Minato said. He swung the Dimensional Compactor up, and Juzumaru flew into the air. Junpei barely managed to catch it without falling backwards, but he pulled it off.

"Alright, ready for action! Who wants some a' this?!"

"I think Shinji should be the one to fight you." Minato said. "If you can't beat him, you can't beat me." Shinjiro grumbled.

"I like the sound of that. You ready, Shinji?" Akihiko said. Shinjiro pulled the black charm out of his pocket and created his axe.

"Let's get this over with." Shinjiro said. Minato and Akihiko walked to the edge of the rails as a safety precaution while Junpei and Shinjiro stared each other down. Everyone was in position.

"Go." Minato said. Junpei ran forward and took a swing at Shinjiro, who lazily blocked the attack. Junpei drew back and struck again, this time forcing him back. He continued this

pattern, but Shinjiro just kept blocking every attack.

"Junpei still fights too straightforward, doesn't he?" Akihiko sighed.

"No. He's setting Shinji up." Minato said.

Shinjiro was still conserving most of his energy, and blocked attack after attack. Junpei drew his sword back again, and he raised his axe once more to block. This time, however, Junpei smirked and threw a one-handed stab at Shinjiro. Unable to block properly, Shinjiro used his other hand to shift his axe into the strike, causing it to graze over his coat. He turned his attention back to Junpei, who already had his Evoker to his head. "Kill Rush!" Junpei screamed.

Hermes materialized behind Junpei, flew above Shinjiro, and zoomed downwards. Shinjiro jumped out of the way, rolling to the side as Hermes smashed into where he was previously standing, creating a ripple of cracks in front of Junpei. He scrambled to his feet and drew his Evoker. "Double Fangs!" Junpei yelled. Hermes turned and threw two of its bladed feathers directly at Shinjiro. He fired his Evoker in response.

"Castor Prime." Shinjiro's Persona formed in front of him, and Hermes' blades were knocked away by the horse's horn. "Fatal End." Shinjiro commanded. Castor flew forwards, horn at the ready.

"Cleave!" Junpei said. Hermes flew forwards, bladed wings pointed forwards. It collided with Castor, and was swatted out

of the air. It broke apart, and Junpei barely managed to avoid Castor's horn while recovering from the wave of fatigue that hit him. He ran around Castor faster than it could turn, but was greeted by Shinjiro with his axe raised. He skid to a halt and blocked the hammer blow, almost sending him to his knees. Shinjiro took his chance and delivered a solid right hook to Junpei's cheek, knocking him down. He got up to see Castor hovering above him.

"Rampage." Shinjiro said. Junpei yelped as he scrambled around underneath Castor, narrowly dodging strike after strike. He pulled his Evoker to his head and fired.

"Rakukaja!" he said as Castor swung again. He got his sword in the way, and was sent tumbling to the side. He quickly rose, and fired his Evoker once more. "Kill Rush!" he screamed. Hermes zoomed overhead and flew right at Castor himself, ignoring his horse. The two Personas collided and fell over, disappearing as they crashed into the floor. Ignoring the pain, Junpei charged at Shinjiro, who was clutching his head. He brought his blade up along the floor and swung it in the same arc a baseball bat followed. The result was a slash that skidded along the floor and almost sliced Shinjiro's arm off. Shinjiro had just managed to twist out of the way, and got his axe ready for a wide slice. Junpei pulled his sword back down with all his might. Their weapons collided, and the two were evenly matched, much to Shinjiro's surprise.

"Heh... when the hell did you get this strong?" Shinjiro asked.

"C'mon... you didn't think the second in command position was

just a gimme, did ya?" Junpei said. Shinjiro chuckled. He put his Evoker to his head.

"Dreadnought." he said as he fired. Castor Prime appeared above him, and aimed all of its cannons at Junpei. Junpei shoved Shinjiro away and ran. The shots started one by one, and Junpei barely managed to avoid direct hits from the first three. He staggered out of the smoke and fired his Evoker.

"Hermes!" he said. The metallic man zoomed to the side and threw to metal blades at Castor, clogging one of his cannons. The shot went off and Castor staggered back as the explosion rocked it. The rest of the shots fired, all in random directions. Hermes was clipped by one, and was destroyed. The last shot land right in front of Junpei, knocking him back down. He struggled to his feet to see Castor break apart above Shinjiro, who shook his head and walked out of the smoke. Disoriented, Junpei slowly raised his blade and prepared for the next attack. He was in no position to go on the offensive.

"Not bad." Shinjiro said as he found him in the smoke and rubble. "But your Persona's been destroyed three times already... you can't keep this up."

"Heh! I'm just getting' warmed up!" Junpei taunted as he adjusted his hat.

"Don't gimme that shit. You can barely stay on your feet and you know it." Shinjiro said.

"... Maybe if I was the old me, I'd have just quit here." Junpei said. "But I'm a man now. And a man doesn't back down when things get tough! No! A man just gets tougher!"

Junpei began ranting about pride and manliness at Shinjiro, who took the time to call Junpei an idiot repeatedly throughout his talk. Akihiko watched them, a bit confused, but Minato was lightly applauding. "This is really just like an anime, huh? It's time for the philosophical debate on the nature of all men." Akihiko mused.

"That's not why I'm clapping." Minato said. "Junpei is in no real shape to start an offensive, so he's buying time... a smart maneuver. I think he learned a lot from the times I fought him."

"... You're right." Akihiko said, the sudden realization hitting him.

"Even if it also gives your opponent time to recover, it's better than attacking while in critical condition. He's got a good grasp of how this works." Minato said. "Once he gets a good grasp on team dynamics and stealthy approaches, I think he could lead a full squad in Tartarus."

"So do I." Akihiko said. The two nodded and refocused on the fight.

"... That's why, even if it costs me my arms and legs, when the enemy is in front of me, I'll fight!" Junpei continued.

"That's enough preaching. Are we gonna finish this or what?"

Shinjiro asked.

Junpei stopped and focused. He could probably handle using Hermes now, but was fairly certain it would be game over if he let him get destroyed again. He grit his teeth. "If you're so eager to lose, then c'mon!" he taunted.

"Tch. You still think you stand a chance?" Shinjiro said. He put his Evoker to his head, but Junpei charged him before he could fire. Forced to block a quick strike, he was unable to stop Junpei from raising his Evoker. He pressed it not against his, but Shinjiro's head, and fired.

A wave of confusion hit Shinjiro, and he staggered back. Junpei took the opportunity to slam his Evoker into the side of Shinjiro's head, which knocked him to the floor. Junpei raised his blade for a decisive stab, but Shinjiro swung wildly with his axe as he forced himself to his feet, knocking Junpei's sword out of his hands. Junpei cursed and put his Evoker to his head. "Agi!" he said. Hermes appeared behind him and launched a fireball at Shinjiro, who instinctively put his axe in his right hand and raised his left. The black and red substance that covered his arm ate the flames, and he felt a surge of power. "What the heck?!"

"You think Minato's the only one with a few tricks?" Shinjiro asked. His arm pulsed. Junpei gulped, and fired his Evoker again.

"Cleave!" he said. Hermes flew forwards with its blades at the ready. Shinjiro grasped his axe in both hands and slammed it

down on Junpei's incoming Persona. The hit released a shockwave that sent Hermes skidding backwards along the ground, destroying it. Junpei dropped his Evoker and fell to his knees, the fatigue finally overcoming him, gasping for air. Shinjiro drew his Evoker and put it to his head.

"I'll finish this. Star Drop." he said as he fired. Castor Prime materialized behind him, and fired its cannons off into the distance. It flew up and then went straight at Junpei, who had just barely managed to grab his Evoker. He put it to his head.

"Rakukaja!" he said. Hermes appeared in front of him once more, and covered him in a purple light. He willed for it to stay, and Hermes took the brunt of Castor's attack. The two Personae crashed down on Junpei, shattering the floor. Minato and Akihiko ran over to check on him. The floor had been completely destroyed, and Junpei was nowhere to be seen.

"Shinji! That was overkill!" Akihiko said. He peered down into the gaping hole, and saw Junpei lying atop a heap of rubble, dazed and confused.

"He didn't want me to hold back, so I didn't." Shinjiro said. "Besides... I was pretty certain he could take that hit. Didn't expect the damn floor to give out, though."

"It's no problem. I've got him." Minato said. He jumped down into the hole, and dropped a good twenty feet. His training with Shin had made him long since accustomed to drops that big. He landed on the rubble, and walked over to Junpei. He

picked him up, and turned to jump back up, when he stopped in his tracks. There were huge cables running along the sides of the wall. "... *I might be able to find the generator if I follow this.*" Minato thought.

"Hey, you need any help down there?" Akihiko asked.

"We're fine... Just thought how crazy it was for there to be a whole other tunnel down here." Minato said. He called on his strength and speed Magatama, and jumped back out of the hole, Junpei over his shoulder. "See? Got him."

"Dia." Akihiko said, firing his Evoker. Polydeuces appeared and covered Junpei in a healing wave. His wounds began to close. He cast it again, and he looked good as new.

Junpei groaned and slowly got back to his feet. He was still clutching his Evoker, oddly enough. "Ah, shit... I lost, huh?" he said. "Kinda saw it comin', but it's still lame."

"To be fair, you did a lot better than I thought you would've." Shinjiro said.

"That's right, Junpei. I think if I had fought you, I might have lost." Akihiko said.

"You still can't beat me, but you're getting there." Minato said. "Like I said, you're still reaching your full potential. You even used those 'tactics and whatnot' this time around."

"Hey, I learned from a pro." Junpei said. He walked over and

picked up Juzumaru, perking up a bit. "I think I know my way around a fight now. Might not win all the time, which sucks, but I know how to take em!"

"And that does it." Minato said. "I hereby dub Junpei Iori as the Vice-Leader of SEES. Anyone who questions can fight me about it."

"Haha! You know it! I'm Junpei Iori, a whole new man from a few months ago!" he exclaimed. "The world ain't ready for me!"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

"Hmph. Just don't go getting yourself killed because it's the 'manly' thing to do." Shinjiro said.

"I approve." Akihiko said. Junpei turned and looked at the rest of SEES, all of whom just grinned at him.

"What? Is that my coronation? C'mon! We gotta do something cool!" Junpei said.

"I'll treat us all to Beef Bowl." Minato said.

"You two especially need the protein." Akihiko said. Shinjiro sighed.

"Just make sure you actually eat your vegetables." he said.

The group left, but not before Minato gave Junpei a spare uniform he kept in the Dimensional Compactor. They went to Iwatodai Station and stuffed their mouths for a good hour before returning to the dorm. They all entered, and found the two girls sitting in the lounge.

"Oh, hey! It's rare to see all of you going around as a group." Yukari said.

"We had some man business to attend to." Junpei said.

"... Man business?"

"I'd tell, but ya wouldn't get it."

"... Right."

Minato showered and ate some leftovers for dinner. Sporting his grey jacket and black jeans, he decided it was time to check the Rooms for anything new. He had been offering Personas almost automatically as a habit, and kept only those he believed were useful, so he was certain he had a good sum of Macca.

He arrived at Paulownia and went straight to the Velvet Room this time. He was eager to see if he had even better Personas at his disposal.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room," Elizabeth greeted as he entered. "How may I help you, Minato?"

"Actually, I'm just here for some fusion today." Minato said. He took his seat in front of Igor. "By the way... the pierced boy says hi."

"Ah, you've met one of our older guests, I see." Igor said. "What is his connection to you? Is he friend or foe?"

"Neither, apparently. He's supposedly here to clean up should I decide to die fighting." Minato said. "He said he lost his key when he finished his journey... does that mean he became as strong as he was going to become?"

"All who enter this room and complete their journey gain a power that surpasses what we can provide." Igor said. "Though that does not make it a limitation... a guest may acquire even more power if they choose. They need only seek the means to do so... As for the loss of a key... we may make exceptions if we desire."

"Oh? You must really like me." Minato chuckled.

"I will not deny that you are an entertaining Fool... The lines that separate you from the Jester are almost non-existent." Igor said. "You are like a coin... calm and rational at ease, yet eccentric and demented when provoked."

"I adapt to the situation, do I not?" Minato asked. "After all, I wield multiple Personae, not to mention Fiends... if they all represent a mask borne from my soul, doesn't that just make me a man of many faces?"

"Correct... that is indeed the true nature of the Wild Card." Igor said. He laughed. "Though at this rate, we may need a new name for you... you grasp this concept too well."

"I suggest the Wild Wild Card." Elizabeth said. "I find it aptly descriptive."

"Maybe we should think of a better name than that." Minato said, scratching his head. "Don't you find it... redundant?" he asked. Igor chuckled.

"Perhaps a more fitting name would be the Blank Card." he said.

"Blank?" Minato and Elizabeth asked.

"You lack boundaries." Igor said. "You embrace ultimate evil and pure innocence in the same manner... you can be everything in existence or nothing at all. As such, I believe you are a Blank Card."

"... That was deep." Minato said with a nod. "I'll take it. My name is Minato Arisato, the Blank Card, leader of SEES and friend of Lucifer."

"Indeed... that is who you are now. Will it change?" Igor said. "After all, your fate is still in flux... and though as the Master of the Velvet Room, I am not supposed to desire any particular set of outcomes to your journey... I do have my favorites."

CRACK!

"You do really like me, don't you?" Minato asked.

Thou art I...

"I see no reason to lie here." Igor said.

And I art thou...

"Master, I believe you should accompany us outside sometime." Elizabeth said.

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"I must decline... as I've said before, a being such as myself has no business wandering the human world." Igor said.

"Elizabeth comes around... but, if you insist." Minato said.

"Your concern always amuses me." Igor said. "Now then, shall we see what will emerge from your soul today?"

A bit of Persona fusing later, Minato felt satisfied with what he had. He left the Velvet Room and walked across to the Crimson Room. He bowed as usual upon entry, and then took his seat.

"So, Master, feel like hitting the town tonight?" Minato asked.

"As amusing as that would be, I will decline." Lucifer said. "...

You have accumulated quite the sum of Macca recently."

"Enough for a very useful Magatama." Lucifuge said.

"Yes... unlike your previous Magatama, this one will increase the amount of power you can channel from your soul as well as strengthen it." Paimon said.

"So this will affect my Fiends, then?" Minato asked.

"Not only your Fiends... the most noticeable effect will be that you will now be able to summon two Fiends or Personae at full strength, and control them both." Lucifer said.

"... Will I need a second Evoker?" Minato asked.

"No... you simply need call on the Magatama to do this. However, know that even with your enhanced soul, this can take a toll on your body." Lucifer said.

"... What about a partial summon?" Minato asked. Lucifer smirked.

"So you've realized what being able to summon without a proxy entails?" he asked. Minato smirked. "Yes, when you use this Magatama, you are not forced to manifest the entire target's body. Granted, they will be unable to use their true skills while transient, but I'm sure you have different purposes in mind."

"Exactly." Minato said. "Let's make a deal."

Lucifer nodded, and Minato put the Card of the Beast on the Table. The table once again erupted into black flames that swirled into a large teardrop shaped Magatama. Minato picked it up and ate it, feeling the usual rush of life soon after he swallowed it. "Then, will that be all for today?" Paimon asked once Minato settled back down.

"Yes, actually... is there anything you need me to do?" Minato replied.

"Survive." Lucifer said. Minato chuckled.

"With pleasure." he said. He took his leave, feeling rather satisfied with himself, and caught a train to Port Island Station. He made his way to where Junpei fought earlier, and jumped down into the pit as the Dark Hour struck.

"Now, let's see if I can really find these generators." Minato thought. He made it to the wall and began to follow a set of cables for a good ten minutes, until he found they were disconnected from a large sealed hole in the wall. *"... Shit, this is where the power came from. It's probably near the edge of the island."*

He quickly backtracked to the pit entrance and once again began following the cables. He had used up half of the Dark Hour walking along the wall when he found a lone passage the cables turned into. *"Good, I've found the definite ending."* he thought. He walked down the passage.

"Boss, are you sure you want to do this?" Jack asked. ***"I***

mean, I used to target people like this."

"I doubt anyone will be able to kill me, even if they attacked me. It's not like I can't just run away at a ridiculous speed." Minato answered. He continued down the passage, which was now littered with random cracks and holes in the walls and floor. *"Looks like an accident happened... or something went berserk."*

Minato finally reached a small area with what looked like remnants of large machinery scattered about, along with a few catwalks going around the room and the cables sprawling loosely from various parts of the walls and floor. *"Well, here's 'a' generator room."* He began to search through the area, sifting through the machine litter first. He quickly managed to find a metal sign that read 'VSX-G3'. *"G3 is probably Generator 3... but what the hell is VSX?"*

"Voltage Source X?" David asked.

"... I doubt that, but it'll work for now." Minato said. He found an ancient multi-meter, long since dead, and a cracked pair of safety goggles by the time the Dark Hour ended. Without the unearthly green illumination, it almost was pitch black. *"Maybe I can get these generators to flow for a bit. It's a decent chance to test out my Magatama anyways."* Minato thought. He focused, and drew on his new power.

"Take-Mikazuchi, Empusa!" he called. The red-skinned white-clad god of thunder appeared, sword at the ready, alongside

the blue demonic half-donkey woman. "Mazio!"

The two Personas let out a roar and emanated lightning from their bodies. Minato felt the recoil of the action, but it wasn't enough to truly fatigue him. As electricity surged around him, he noticed the attacks were gathering around a large piece of machinery at the back. From what he could tell, it was a damaged but operational generator, and it began to spin and radiate a bright blue. His Personas finished their attack, and disappeared. Now with the company of sparks, grinding metal, and an acceptable source of light, Minato resumed his search. *"That's handy."*

After a bit more searching, he realized that there wasn't much left in the rubble. Minato began to take pictures of everything of note he found with his phone, including the generator, and then headed up the catwalk. It mostly just went around the room in a square, but was connected to a door on the wall. He looked down and noticed destroyed stairs dangling near it.

Minato walked to the door, and tried to open it. It was locked, so he kicked through it instead. After effectively obliterating the door, he walked into a dark room where his generator's light couldn't reach. *"This smells like old people... like death."*

He decided to use a flashlight function on his cellphone to get a better view of the area. The first thing he saw was a small pile of dead bodies in the corner, all lying on top of each other. He ignored it and turned to the body in a lab coat hanging from a noose across from the pile. *"So some shit went down and people died. Doesn't tell me much."*

He moved to a set of lockers at the left of the room, and found various broken containers, some alpha-numerically labeled, as well as various forms of scientific instrumentation and an old pistol. He checked it, and saw it had no bullets. *"And there's nothing of note in here. Lovely."*

Minato turned around and scanned the rest of the room. There was a fallen stool, presumably what the hanging corpse had been standing on, and a blank, though heavily damaged, chalkboard across from the lockers, that sat above a plain desk. Its drawers were outright removed. *"... The bodies, then."*

Minato took a few pictures of the area, and then went about taking down the hanging corpse, a short-haired woman, and searched her. Her coat had no identification card, nor any markings of significance. There was a pen that had the Kirijio Group label, but he couldn't jump to any conclusions. The pen he used at school had a Kirijio Group label as well. Next, he removed the jacket and worked at her blouse. He couldn't find any pockets, so he tried her skirt. The same result.

He repeated this procedure for the pile of bodies in the corner, and at the end, he managed to find three Kirijio Group pens, an old charm that probably held sentimental value, some ancient gum, and finally, a two crumpled scraps of paper. He smoothed the edges out and carefully read what was written on it. The first scrap was torn, and only had the middle of sentences.

"— the experiment could not —

- ke what we had originally –
- n. There's no way to stab –
- le. However, we've already –
- t. Continuing this type of re –"

"... *Sounds like whatever happened here was failing. And that last line sounds like opposition.*" Minato thought. He looked at the next note, which was a horizontally torn piece of paper.

" - is unprecedented! These types of results can't be fabricated! They're just too good to be true! If the hypothesis formed from what we found here is true, there's no limit to what we can accomplish. Yes, there are a number of issues to address, but those are all simple kinks. The fact is we have proof that what we've set out to do is possible! If we continue to work with –"

"... *Or not. Add this to the first one, and it the 'le' could well be incredible, while the 'However' sentence specifies these issues.*" Minato concluded.

"***Elusive... is there nothing else left for us here?***" Matador asked. Minato surveyed the surrounding again. The pile of bodies had been stacked in front of a huge cluster of debris.

"*There was something else here... but it's been destroyed. This is all we've got for now.*" Minato answered. He got up,

and left the room. His generator had died, but he just used his phone to find the cables, and followed them back to the pit opening. He jumped back up, and checked the time. It was almost four in the morning.

He caught an early train to Iwatodai Station, made it back to the dorm, and showered again. He then put all of his new pictures on his laptop, and made digital copies of the notes he found before storing them away. *"Interesting... I'll have to see if that sealed area with cables houses other connections. I doubt that was a solitary room."* Minato thought. He had finished up around five-thirty in the morning, and knew it was almost time to begin breakfast. *"This is a bit more convoluted than I first thought."*

41. Chapter 41

Chapter 41: Testing

Minato had just finished making breakfast, and mulled over his options for the day. *"Tonight, I'll tell Mitsuru what I found, and see if I can get any information out of her... though I doubt I'll be able to get much."* he thought as he sat down to eat.

He had almost finished his meal by the time the majority of SEES filed down the stairs. "Mornin'." Yukari said. "Ya never came back last night... what'd ya stay out so late for? Clubbing?"

"I wish... I was actually searching for something." Minato said.

"Oh? What was it?"

"The truth." he answered, serious as ever. Yukari blanked.

"Right... uhh, good job?" she said. Minato chuckled. Yukari turned to the other members of SEES, all of whom had no response.

On the train ride, Minato moved over to Mitsuru and stared out of the window next to her. "I found them." he said.

"... The generators are underneath Iwatodai, then." Mitsuru

said. "Might I ask how you found them?"

"Yesterday, we guys had a little training session on the old railroad tracks, and Shinji destroyed a part of the floor. Underneath, there was a series of narrow passageways riddled with electrical cables. I followed them, and found a room that had an operational generator, as well as some other stuff." Minato said. "I have the data saved on my laptop... it's best if we discuss this tonight."

"... I agree. I'll see if I can find any more information about the Ergo Research Branch, but I can't make promises. Most of their data is restricted even to me." she said.

"Don't worry... their information might be protected, but they weren't able to cover up all of the physical evidence." Minato said. "We'll see what we can find out tonight."

"Then, I'll be waiting in the lounge." Mitsuru said. They arrived at school, and the day passed without much incident. At lunch, Minato was about to go check on Fuuka, when Ms. Toriumi stopped him.

"Minato, you and I need to have a serious discussion." she said. "It's about your ban from club sports."

"Sure." he said. "What's the matter?"

"This will be a long talk... come to my office after school." she said.

"... You know, you could always just ask me to hang out with you." Minato said quietly. Ms. Toriumi smirked.

"I can't be pulling stunts like that now, can I?" she asked. She shot him a little wink and walked off. Junpei was watching the entire incident, and walked up to Minato.

"... Dude, you and Ms. T are REALLY close." he said with a tip of his cap.

"What can I say? Great minds are drawn to each other." Minato said.

"Great minds, huh?... Wait, is that why you and Mitsuru-senpai...?"

"Exactly." Minato said. Junpei's jaw dropped.

"Screw lunch! I'm about to hit the library!" Junpei exclaimed. He hurried off and disappeared down the hallway. Minato chuckled as he watched him, then turned to check the area for Fuuka. She wasn't there, so he tried the first main hall on the first floor, without any success. He moved to the roof next, and still didn't find her.

"Damn, I was hoping to avoid having to check her classroom." Minato thought. He quickly headed back to the roof entrance and yanked the door open. His path was blocked by a startled looking Yukari, facing the little window by the door.

"Oh, Minato! Fancy running into you here, hahahah..." she said, trying to look as carefree as she could. "So, uhh, who were you looking for? I mean, what were you doing?"

"Stalker indeed..." Minato thought.

"Woah... we should've been more alert. We were too busy keeping our eyes out for Fuuka to even notice this chick." Jack said.

"This isn't necessarily a bad thing... perhaps we can lure Fuuka out with jealousy." David said.

"Indeed... it only takes a spark to light a fire." Matador said.

"... I'm almost certain this plan won't work, but it doesn't hurt to try." Minato replied. "Actually, Yukari, I was looking for you."

"Huh? For me?" she asked.

"It's been such a long time since we spent some time together... I was beginning to think you'd given up on me." Minato mused.

"NEVER! – I mean, what are you talking about, silly?" Yukari said, first in a downright demonic roar, then her usual voice. "So, what did you have planned?"

"... This may be more dangerous than I thought. It's time to

get serious." "I was just wondering if you'd care for a lunch I made you." Minato said, raising the lunch he was carrying around. "What do you say?"

"For me?!... Y-you didn't have to..."

"Let's do this." "But I did, didn't I?... Unless, you don't want it?"

"O-of course I want it!"

"Then you should've just said so. But then again, I think you're pretty cute like this too." Minato said. Yukari reddened.

"One More!" Jack yelled. Minato moved next to Yukari and put an arm around her waist.

"You know, we should spend more time together like this." he whispered. She flinched.

"The enemy is Down!" David yelled. Minato led Yukari to a table and seated her on his lap.

"Wha-?! W-wh-why are we like this?!" she yelled.

"So I can hold you the whole time." Minato said, pulling her into a hug. Yukari grabbed a tissue from her pocket and held it to her nose.

"An excellent finish!" Matador added.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Minato asked as Yukari sat frozen.

"I-I... uhh..."

"Go ahead... I won't mind. My food's right here." Minato said. He leaned over and kissed her neck. Yukari had gone from frozen to full-on hamster mode.

"We've been waiting for this!" his Fiends said.

"It's time for a grand finale! Sub Finem!" Minato thought. He struck again, slightly higher, and hugged Yukari even tighter. It was too much for her. She let out a gasp and fainted.

"The enemy has been eliminated." David said. Minato moved Yukari from his lap and let her plop down onto the table they were sitting at, face first. She lay there, passed out, and he began to eat his lunch.

"That wasn't too bad." he thought as ate in silence. He finished his meal, and then took a look at his watch. Lunch barely had three minutes left, and Yukari was still passed out, her tissue still stuck to her face. *"... I should probably wake her up."*

Minato decided to wake her up in the quickest way possible. He pushed her off of the chair. She immediately scrambled to catch herself, and failed miserably, landing on her side.

"Oww... What the heck? Why am I here?" she asked, getting up from the floor.

"We were going to eat lunch together, but you fell asleep." Minato said.

"... Wait, what? WE, as in, YOU and ME, were going to eat lunch, and I FELL ASLEEP?" she asked.

"You were pretty tired when I asked you... I probably shouldn't have insisted." Minato said. *"That's right, you actually got me to insist you come with me."*

"O-oh... sorry, then. Didn't mean to disappoint you or anything..."

"It's not a problem." Minato said. "It's almost the end of lunch. We should head back to class."

"Really? How tired was I...? Anyways, you've got a point." Yukari said. "Let's go together."

"That was the plan." Minato said with a grin. *"Sweet. Odd jealousy plan enacted and brownie points with Yukari. I give myself an S-Rank for Sexiness."*

He returned to class with Yukari and found Junpei hurriedly stuffing his face with food. He took his seat, and turned to him. "What happened to screwing lunch?" he asked.

"Yeah, that wasn't the best idea I coulda had." Junpei said. "Turns out I was too hungry to focus on anything."

"And now you see why I cook." Minato said. Junpei nodded and continued eating. The rest of the day passed without much event, and Minato made his way to Ms. Toriumi's office. She was waiting expectantly on him, with a small box on the

table.

"Minato, it's time for our serious talk." she said. She opened the box, which housed twelve different slices of cake inside. Minato grinned.

"We're going to have to see which one of these is the best, won't we, Isako?" Minato asked.

"Correct." she said. She closed the box. "But not here. Meet me at the train station in an hour... I've got another surprise in store."

"... This sounds both good and bad. I like it." Minato said. "Then, should I be off?"

"Yes... ahem. Now, that concludes this talk? Do you have any questions?"

"None at all."

"Good. I hope you take the time to think about this as you return home." she said. Minato nodded and swiftly headed out of the faculty office. He left quickly, and received a call from Mitsuru while on the train to the dorm.

"Minato. Have you forgotten about Council today?" she asked.

"Didn't Junpei tell you? I have to sort out some crap about my little show in the boxing club." Minato said.

"... No, he did not. Well, if this has to do with your record, I

won't stop you." Mitsuru said. "Good luck."

"I doubt I'll need it, but thanks." Minato said. He hung up, and the train reached Iwatodai station. He hurried to the dorm, showered, and changed into light blue t-shirt with the graphic of a large white butterfly being split in half with black gushing out of the tear, and threw a white jacket on top of it, which he decided to roll the sleeves up to be more fashionable. He added some blue jeans, his sneakers, and hat to the mix, and hit the road once more. He made it back to Port Island Station in fifty-five minutes, and took a seat on an empty park bench.

Isako arrived right at the time she had said she would in her usual disguise, though she swapped the red for bright yellow this time around. "... *I think we're telekinetically coordinating our outfits somehow.*" Minato thought as Isako took a seat next to him. "A new color scheme today. Nice."

"I could say the same to you." she said. "So, shall we?"

"Let's." Minato said. She took the box from the bag and they quickly went about devouring cake, making little comparisons here and there as they both tried each slice. Eventually, they reached a verdict.

"... Plain cheesecake, huh?" Isako asked. "Who would've thought an old favorite could beat the exquisitely made varieties?"

"I think it had a nostalgic advantage above everything else." Minato said.

"Probably." Isako said. She chuckled. "So, ready for the other surprise I had in store for you?"

"Is it a 'behind closed doors' affair?" Minato asked. Isako laughed.

"Nope! This time, look." she said. She produced two movie tickets from her pocket. "It's a plain, boring old movie."

"A movie?... I didn't think you were the type to engage in 'normal' activities." Minato said.

"You know I'm not. But I feel that, every now and again, we need to remind ourselves of our place in the world." Isako said.

"Our place in the world is where we make it." Minato said. Isako chuckled.

"Isn't that a hopeful outlook to have?"

"It's a real take on life. You know enough people to drop everything you're doing and join into the criminal underworld at any time." Minato said. "But you don't... because you've already chosen what you want to do. I think you're just having a bit of doubts on your decision."

"... You're a manipulative one, aren't you?" Isako asked. Minato laughed.

"That was a quick catch. But, it's like you said... we're very similar."

"And I was right." Isako said. "How else do you think I can get away with half of what I do?"

"Who ever said I doubted how you got your way?"

"It's a little sad that you think of your teacher this way... but then again, I don't think you view me as a teacher now, do you? No... you don't. I don't think of you as much of a student anymore either, in all honesty. You're more like... my confidant. That person I don't need to hide anything from or try to impress."

"And you're the person I get to act the most relaxed around." Minato said. "I don't need to filter my thoughts too much when speaking to you."

"... Then I'd say we make a good pair." Isako said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

"I'd say great." Minato said.

"Great? Don't push our luck now." Isako chuckled. "Anyways, the movie will be starting soon. We should go."

Minato went with Isako to watch a movie detailing the story of a dystopian society where one man fought against an

oppressive rule to save the world. It ended oddly, with the protagonist deciding in the end that humanity didn't deserve freedom, and he took over the great mind that controlled the world and reformed it into a world of absolute law where people had their destinies determined at birth and were then sent to ideal parents who lived in ideal neighborhoods where they'd make the most friends and only attended schools that pertained to their predestined job. Oddly enough, both Minato and Isako thought that the ending was actually rather reflective of what a realist would do in today's world, and thought it was pretty good.

After parting ways with Isako, Minato returned to the dorm. The members of SEES were all watching TV, oddly enough. "Welcome back." Mitsuru greeted. She rose from her seat and walked over to him as he signed in. "... Will we talk?"

"Yes. Just give me a moment to get my laptop." Minato said. They both headed up the stairs, much to the surprise of the other members.

"... What do you think they're both going up there for?" Akihiko asked.

"Beats me." Shinjiro said.

"... Knowing Minato, it's probably a booty call." Junpei said. Yukari sighed.

"You can't be serious about that. Right?" she said, looking at Akihiko and Shinjiro. Neither of them had a response. "... No

way it's something like that..."

Minato grabbed his laptop and headed up to Mitsuru's room. Mitsuru let him in, and then locked the door behind him. "Sit wherever you'd like." she said. Minato decided to sit on the edge of her bed and placed his laptop on his lap. Mitsuru sat next to him.

"I'll start off with what I found." Minato said. He opened up a few pictures of the area illuminated by the generator he started. "When I followed the cables, they led to a wide clearing that looked like this. As you can see, it was mostly destroyed, though I got the generator at the back to work with a few bolts of electricity."

"I see... It doesn't look like there are any blast marks on the walls or floor." Mitsuru said. "This area wasn't destroyed by accident."

"I thought so as well. I managed to find these," Minato said, pulling up pictures of the sign and the few tools he found on the floor, "underneath some of the scrap metal, which gave me the impression that this was a generator room. Of course, once I started the half-living generator, my suspicions were confirmed." he said. "That's about all that can be found from the ground floor."

"Then, I take it the catwalk led somewhere?"

"Yes." Minato said. He pulled up a few pictures of the catwalk, and finally, the one that showed the door. "The

catwalk itself was uninteresting, but I found a bit in this room." He pulled up pictures of the room in its original state, with the still hanging corpse and piled up bodies in the picture. Mitsuru grimaced, but didn't make any other noticeable reaction. He showed pictures of the lockers and their contents, as well as of the destroyed blackboard and emptied table, then finally of the passage blocked by rubble. "I didn't get much out of the room itself, except for the fact that there was another hallway connected to it. It made me a little suspicious that this place may have been connected to other generator rooms. However, I found the real information from the bodies." Minato said.

"You searched the bodies?" Mitsuru asked.

"Every last one. I found a few Kirijio Group pens, a funny looking charm, and two scraps of paper with a little writing." Minato said. He pulled up the file containing what was written on the scraps of paper, and gave Mitsuru some time to read it.

"Their research was high risk, high reward, then." Mitsuru said.

"Exactly... and from the combination of the scraps, it seems they were feeling lucky." Minato said. "But... that's all I have."

"... Combined with my research, we may have found something." Mitsuru said. "Though I couldn't get too many specifics, the Ergo Research Branch seems to, for the most part, have investigated abnormal energy sources... in other

words, energy from something not of this world."

"... They were researching the occult, then."

"More or less... the files only state they took 'paranormal ventures' on the grounds that 'one success would outweigh a million failures'." Mitsuru said. "The Kirijio Group has quite a few secrets that the Ergo Research Branch worked on, including highly advanced AI that far surpasses what the public is aware of, as well as machinery that's considered to be science fiction. In fact, they were instrumental to the development of a few of these technologies, which I suspect gave them the rights to pursue their own field, even if it appeared as madness."

"That explains their presence... their ventures may have been failures, but they did contribute to other fields. I can see how that would keep them alive." Minato said. "Though, by 'paranormal ventures'... do you think they could have been referring to things like the Shadows?"

"That's certainly a possibility." Mitsuru said. "Though, I am curious as to how they would've controlled them for research purposes... I doubt a team of Persona users could contain a large amount of them without having to kill them. This alone makes the use of Shadows highly questionable."

"That's true... then again, that area was wrecked and littered with corpses. I think it's completely possible that whatever they were containing just broke out and destroyed the place. It could have sealed off that passageway while rampaging or

something like that." Minato said.

"The destruction gives credit to that train of thought..." Mitsuru said. "Though, it may have been something even older than a Shadow... what if it was a Fiend they tried to contain? The Reaper has shown that a free Fiend is a force to be reckoned with."

"You're right about that..." Minato said. He sighed. "If we knew explicitly what the Ergo Research Branch was looking into, this would be a lot less of a mystery."

"... Unfortunately, those are the files I'm locked from." Mitsuru said.

"And there was no conclusive evidence tying that room to Tartarus... or even the old lab, which has been properly disposed of. There's no chance of us ever searching that." Minato said.

"Perhaps this is all we can find out until we find more information inside of Tartarus." Mitsuru said. "Though, we'll need to wait for the barricade to disappear again."

"Then waiting is the name of the game." Minato said. "How annoying... but, it must be done." He closed his laptop and rose from the bed. "Thank you again, Mitsuru, for your help."

"I only wish I could provide more information." she said.

"... There's nothing you can do about it." Minato said. Mitsuru

stopped, and looked at him. He walked towards the door. "After all, there's only so much information that can be shared."

"... Yes. The simple fact is, we don't have enough to work with." Mitsuru said. Minato nodded, and left her room, closing the door behind him. Mitsuru immediately locked the door once more and sat back down on her bed. She was deep in thought. After a while, she took a deep breath. "No... I'm overthinking that last line..." she said. She shook her head, and promptly left her room.

Minato, who was putting his laptop away, had locked his door. Matador returned to his mind, his tiny floating skull returning to dust from wherever it was summoned. *"Well? How'd she hold up?"* Minato asked.

"The mademoiselle was suspicious of our little parting gift... but she has dismissed it as wordplay, nothing more." he reported. ***"Otherwise, she seems to be taking this much better than last time. She has prepared well."***

"That's good... it's better this way." Minato replied. He left his room and went back down to the lounge. *"I think I can visit Dante today... besides, I'm not ready to face Shin again just yet."* He ate dinner and headed to Paulownia a little before midnight. He entered, and found Dante at the bar once more. "Two strawberry sundaes." he said.

"Back for more?" Dante asked.

"I want to test out a few new tricks tonight." Minato said.
"Preferably against an opponent that knows how to fight."

"Is that a challenge?"

"I thought it was clear enough."

"Then don't disappoint me." The two ate their strawberry sundaes, the Dark Hour struck. They both rose and strolled right out of Escapade. They walked to the dark alley, and jumped to the roof. "Get ready... you're going up against a professional ass-kicker. Think you can take me?" Dante said, drawing his sword.

Minato laughed and threw two small summoned black orbs into the air. "Thin I can take you?" he asked. He caught the orbs, one forming one of Jack's cleavers, the other forming Matador's sword. "I've surpassed gods and overcome common sense! You're facing The Incomprehensible Azure Dynamo, Minato Arisato!" he said, flashing his creepy smile.

"Announcing your own entrance?"

"Of course I am... Now then, let's FIGHT TO THE LIMIT OF OUR SOULS!" Minato yelled. He charged forward and took a swing with Jack's cleaver, which was easily blocked. He followed up with a quick stab, which was easily deflected by Dante pulling one of his guns and swatting the attack away. He put the gun to Minato, who grinned. David's arms sprouted from his chest. The left hand pointed the gun to the sky, while the right slugged Dante in the gut. He was hit back, and

Minato moved to press his assault.

"Hmph... looks like I can't just play around anymore." Dante said. He sheathed his sword and jumped backwards, pulling his second pistol and letting loose a barrage of bullets. Minato stopped and dropped his weapons. He summoned the Persona Power's shield. It was large enough to protect his entire body, and the bullets bounced harmlessly off of it. Dante appeared to his left and started firing, prompting him to ditch the shield and run. He made it to the edge of the roof, and saw he didn't have any more footing.

"Let's see what else I can do." Minato thought. He ran straight off, and called his Fiend's heads as stepping stones. He managed to leap off of them as they dropped underneath him, and actually began to get higher and higher. His streak was going well enough until Dante shot the skull he summoned before he could step on it, causing him to tumble. He turned to see Dante next to him, sword at the ready. He summoned Jack's cleavers and blocked the incoming swing, resulting in him getting sent flying onto another rooftop. He barely managed to get to his feet when he saw Dante jump atop a strange red sigil in the air and reach his location. He drew his Evoker.

"Mithra, Mabufu!" he said. The red winged lion surrounded by a snake appeared behind him, and aimed its two black staffs forwards. Shards of ice appeared around Dante and flew forward to skewer him. Dante quickly shot most of them out of the air and avoided the rest, only for Minato to rush in with Juzumaru, which he pulled from the Dimensional Compactor.

Dante blocked his hit, and saw Jack's arms sprout from Minato's shoulders, cleavers in hand, about to slice his arms off. Dante slid back to avoid the assault, allowing all three blades to strike the ground. Minato, now with two extra arms connected to his shoulders, tilted his head and gave Dante one of his best creepy smiles. "Don't disappoint me." he said, slowly drawing the blades back.

"And they say I'm half-devil," Dante said, readying his sword. His entire body flashed, and he was wielding nunchaku instead of his sword. He came forward with incredible speed, striking blow after blow. Minato was sent on the defensive by his sudden assault.

"Power!" Minato yelled as Dante pulled back for a large strike. From his left waist, Power's arm sprouted, wielding its lance. It thrust forwards, halting Dante's assault and allowing Minato to begin his counter attack. Dante backed away again, and flashed the strange red. He was now wielding a guitar, and hit a power chord. A burst of electricity erupted around him, and hit Minato dead on. He was knocked onto his back from the sheer force that hit him, and his extra limbs all disappeared. *"Damn... looks like a good hit will break my half summons."*

Minato shook his head and got to his feet, only to see Dante rush at him with his guitar, which really looked more like a scythe now that Minato saw it. He didn't think a physical confrontation was what he needed now, so he focused once more. "Empusa, Power!" he yelled. The two Personas appeared behind him as Dante jumped into his first strike.

"Magaru!"

The combination of tornados enveloped Dante and spiraled into the air. Minato almost thought he had him until he saw an arc of fire slice through the attack. Dante landed back on the roof as Minato dispelled his Personas, wielding one red-orange and one blue scimitar. "Good recovery." Dante said as he twirled his scimitars lazily around.

"Is there anything you can't counter?" Minato asked.

"Sarcasm." Dante said. Minato chuckled.

"Fair enough... Then, it's your move." he said, summoning Take-Mikazuchi and Matador's swords. Dante smirked and was enveloped in a red light once again. He now had a strange silver gauntlet covering his right arm, and aimed it at Minato. It pulsed with energy. "... Bullshit."

Dante unleashed a barrage of purple bolts at Minato, who ran to avoid them. They tracked him, which earned a grumble of annoyance as he had to run around avoiding both the old and new shots. He decided to use his speed Magatama and close the distance before he would be swarmed by projectiles. Dante flashed red once more and met his with the two scimitars. They began rapidly swinging at each other, countering slash for slash, until Dante did a spinning strike that sent a flaming tornado at Minato. With barely anytime to react, Minato did the only thing he could think of, which was jumping off the edge of the roof. He landed near the fountain at the front of Escapade's entrance, and turned to see Dante

land behind him, guns at the ready. They were about to continue their fighting when they heard clapping. They turned to see Lucifuge standing a little distance away from them.

"Very good, very good..." he said. "The progress you've made is incredible, Minato. You've adjusted to your powers much faster than anticipated."

"Thanks... but why are you here?" Minato asked.

"To fetch Dante... we have found his brother." Lucifuge said.

"About time." Dante said, putting his pistols away. "You here to take me to him, or what?"

"Yes, I will." Lucifuge said.

"You have a brother?" Minato asked.

"His name's Vergil. He's a power-hungry idiot, a bit like you." Dante said. "He got himself in some trouble a while ago, but these guys are going to help him out."

"Then that was your payment... I won't hold you up anymore. Go." Minato said. Dante nodded with a smirk, and walked away with Lucifuge.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the

Chariot Arcana...

With nothing left to do, Minato awakened and returned to the dorm before the Dark Hour ended. He snuck back into his room, and decided to rest for the remainder of the day.

42. Chapter 42

Chapter 42: The Jester

Minato's morning passed quickly with a quiet breakfast and train ride spent listening to music. He arrived at the front gate with Junpei, who finally decided to break the silence. "So, whaddya think?" he asked.

"You'll have to be a bit more specific." Minato said.

"About Fuuka Yamagishi joinin' the team! Dude, I thought you'd be more excited cuz yer' already... well, ya know." Junpei said. "I mean, now you'll be under the same roof and all... I mean, I'm not tryin' to say anything, but —"

"I get it." Minato said. "But, our relationship seems to have reached an impasse. Even if she did join, I doubt I'd have as much fun as you think I would."

"What? You do somethin'?" Junpei asked.

"I don't know. After midterms, she started avoiding me." Minato said.

"Weird... but damn, I thought you had a good thing goin'." Junpei said. "... If she does join, you wouldn't mind if I, uhh, took a swing, would ya?"

"If I haven't managed to patch things up by then, knock yourself out." Minato said. "She's a little timid, so you need to be a little aggressive with your approach."

"... You took that way better than I thought you woulda." Junpei said. "Thanks for the advice, bro."

"Lemme guess... still 'cycling girls'?" Yukari asked as she walked up from behind them.

"I'm just being realistic here. Sometimes, you need to move on to bigger and better things." Minato said. He slowed down and moved next to Yukari. "Unless you'd rather I stay with Fuuka instead of you?"

"... You can't really expect me to answer that." she said, turning away.

"Maybe not out loud." Minato chuckled. Yukari reddened.

"... No wonder ya don't really mind." Junpei said with a tip of his hat. The trio walked to class, and the day passed by quickly. Mr. Edogawa taught a bit of black magic, but otherwise, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Minato ate with Junpei and Kenji, feeling tired of having to search for Fuuka personally. After school ended, he was contemplating going to spend time with Yukari, when Akihiko and Shinjiro arrived in his class.

"We're finishing what we started." Akihiko said with a determined look on his face. "Let's go."

"Oh yeah, it's your turn to go today." Junpei said, looking at Minato. He grinned. "Ya hyped up?"

"... I think I could use some announcement to make it more exciting." Minato said. He turned to Shinjiro. "You wanna do it?"

"Announcer? The hell do you think this is, WWE?" Shinjiro asked.

"I think it could spice up the match." Akihiko said. "I expect a good opening."

"Yeah, Shinji-senpai's gonna announce! This is gonna be good, I can feel it!" Junpei said.

"... All of you are idiots." Shinjiro said. "Let's get this over with already."

The group made their way back to the old railways past Club Red Hawk, and decided to venture further in to cleanly avoid the pit they previously created. Shinjiro and Junpei stood off to the side while Akihiko and Minato squared off against each other, both unarmed save their Evokers.

"You plan on using a weapon?" Akihiko asked, taking a fighting stance.

"All I need is my Evoker." Minato said. He stood aloof as ever. "Announcer, care to start the match?"

Shinjiro sighed, and pulled his beanie down. "In the left corner,

we have the Two-Fisted Protein Junkie, Akihiko Sanada." he deadpanned.

"Hah! The man who lusts for power is here! I hope you're ready for this!" Akihiko said, his excitement growing each second.

"... Uh-huh. And to the right, we have the Hell-Raising Problem Child, Minato Arisato."

"Problem Child? I think I turned out pretty well." Minato chuckled.

"THIS IS GOING TO BE EXPLOSIVE!" Junpei yelled suddenly, startling Shinjiro. "BEGIN!"

"Here I come!" Akihiko shouted. He dashed forwards and closed the distance between him and Minato in a matter of seconds. Akihiko threw a series of quick jabs, which Minato retreated and leaned around to avoid. With no real progress, he decided to lunge and throw a sharp left hook. Minato responded by jumping clean over Akihiko's head as he swung, and landed a little distance behind him. Akihiko quickly pulled his Evoker and put it to his forehead with his left arm. "Polydeuces!"

The long blonde haired man with bulging muscles, white and silver body armor, and huge antenna covering his right arm appeared above Akihiko, facing Minato. It threw its arms to the side and flexed, summoning a bolt of lightning that struck straight at Minato. He stood there and just waited for the bolt

to strike him. It connected, and illuminated his body for a while, before dissipating. He chuckled. "That tickles."

Akihiko turned and frowned. "Then you can block electric attacks, huh?" he asked.

"I can't. This guy can." Minato said, firing his Evoker. Take-Mikazuchi appeared behind him, sword at the ready. "Getsuei." Minato said. Take-Mikazuchi flew forwards and brought its sword down on Akihiko. He barely managed to dive out of the way, and rolled to his feet as Take-Mikazuchi disappeared.

"Hmph... a fight where I can't use electricity. Interesting." Akihiko said with a grin. He put his Evoker to his head again. "Sonic Punch!" he yelled. Polydeuces reappeared and thrust forward with its antenna. Minato used his speed Magatama and rushed underneath Polydeuces before he could connect, getting in front of Akihiko as he was putting his Evoker down, and then called on his strength Magatama to punch him clean into the air with an uppercut to the gut.

"A SMASHING HIT!" Junpei said. Shinjiro facepalmed.

Akihiko was too winded to recover in midair, and powerless to stop Minato when he jumped after him and grabbed his leg. "Time for my Dragon Throw!" Minato said, spinning Akihiko around in the air as they descended. He gained some decent momentum and then hurled him into the floor, making him bounce on impact and then tumble to the side. Minato landed and dusted himself off. He turned to Shinjiro and Junpei. "Announcers, if you would?"

"... It seems one side has taken a huge lead." Shinjiro said.

"CAN HE RECOVER FROM SUCH A DEVASTATING ASSAULT?!" Junpei added. Minato shot him a thumbs-up.

Akhiko shook off his exhaustion and rose to his feet. He put his Evoker to his head. "Dia." he said. Polydeuces appeared and healed him, and he was back in fighting form. "Heh... I forgot about those powers of yours."

"That's the biggest mistake you can make against me if you're actually trying to win." Minato said. "But just know I'm still far from using my full strength."

"A TAUNT! WILL –" Junpei began, but was stopped by Shinjiro smacking him on the head.

"Quit screaming already. You'll make me go deaf at this rate." he said, giving him a deathly glare. Junpei chuckled nervously and stopped talking. Shinjiro turned back to the fight, which was still a staring contest. "Well, Aki?"

"... My comeback starts now. Get ready for round two." Akihiko said, taking his fighting stance once more. "I don't plan on losing to an underclassman that easily."

"Seriously?" Minato asked, tilting his head. He flashed a creepy smile. "Looks like I have to remind you that I'm no ordinary underclassman." He took a wide stance and hunched over, arms dangling in front of him, staring at Akihiko with his crazed expression. "Try not to lose too quickly, senpai." he

taunted.

Akihiko focused and took a step forward. Minato rushed forwards wildly as soon as he moved, and threw a hard right hook at Akihiko. He managed to dodge and moved in to counter with a jab, when a second right hook connected with his face and knocked him back. He recovered while hearing an unearthly laugh, and took a defensive stance. He looked forwards and saw what hit him. Jack the Ripper's upper half was seemingly sprouting from Minato's back, cackling while shaking its fist. **"Oh, you're so lucky! If Boss didn't insist, your head would've been split cleaner than an apple just now!"** Jack said. He faded into dust, and Minato returned to his strange stance.

"... What the hell have you become?" Akihiko asked. Minato started laughing maniacally.

"What have I become?" he asked, putting a hand over his face. He kept laughing. "I wonder... what am I now? A man? A Fiend? A monster?" he asked. He giggled childishly. "Who knows? I certainly don't!" he said. He started laughing again.

"Uhh, maybe you should tone it down a bit, dude." Junpei said nervously. "I think yer goin' overboard here."

"Minato, this is a practice fight." Shinjiro said. "Don't start going bat-shit insane now."

Minato turned on Junpei and Shinjiro, chuckled a bit, and then straightened his back and went back to his usual aloof stance,

cracking his back a bit. "Start going bat-shit insane? That's a good one." he said. He turned back to Akihiko. "Hope I didn't scare you too much."

"Tch..." Akihiko said, putting a hand on his Evoker. "This isn't over. Get ready."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Minato said.

"Sonic Punch." Akihiko said as he fired. Polydeuces appeared and struck at Minato, who easily avoided the attack. "Sonic Punch." Polydeuces delivered a second strike, forcing Minato to rush forwards. Akihiko moved in and fired again. "Sonic Punch!" Polydeuces moved to strike as Akihiko ran forwards to block Minato's escape. Minato drew his Evoker.

"Sonic Blight." he said. David appeared and played a stunning high note, stopping Polydeuces and Akihiko in their tracks. David disappeared, and Minato fired again. "Andalucia!" he yelled. Matador appeared and rushed at Polydeuces, and quickly stabbed him four times in the openings left by his armor, destroying his body. The stunned Akihiko was hit by a wave of mental fatigue, then a sharp kick to the stomach. He skid back, and recovered before Minato could connect with a roundhouse to the side of his head. He leaned back just in time to avoid it, and then leaned in to throw a hard left hook at Minato. Minato caught his fist, and he followed with a right jab, which was also caught. Their arms were locked, crossing each other. "Can't do much without your arms, huh?" Minato asked.

"Like hell!" Akihiko said. He threw a knee at Minato's crotch, and failed to connect. He looked down, and Matador 's arms had sprouted from Minato's stomach. One arm held his knee back, and the other winded up a punch. Akihiko quickly tried to pull away from Minato, but he couldn't escape him. Minato began to laugh, and Matador threw a punch straight at Akihiko's crotch. The silver-haired boy let out a shriek, and lost all of his strength. Minato released him, and he crumpled to the floor.

"... That was messed up." Junpei said. "Don't you think so, Shinji-senpai?"

"... I'd like to say yes, but then I'd be a hypocrite. I've won a lot of fights like that." he said.

"What?! No way!" Junpei exclaimed.

"It gets the job done. That's all that matters in the end." Shinjiro said. He cleared his throat. "The match goes to the Hell-Raising Problem Child, Minato Arisato. Now let's pack it up and head back already."

"What... kind of victory... is that?" Akihiko asked, squirming around on the floor.

"Hey, I wouldn't have gone for it if you hadn't tried first." Minato said with a shrug. "Even with all my advantages, I'm perfectly fine with fighting the old fashioned way if the end result is the same. A win is a win, right?"

Akihiko squirmed around a bit more, but mumbled something in agreement.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

Minato helped Akihiko back out of the tunnel, who then regained the ability to walk on his own. The boys all returned to the dorm to see Yukari and Mitsuru with serious expressions sitting in the lounge. "Welcome back." Mitsuru said. "... It's strange. The number of Apathy Syndrome victims seems to be on the rise again... Apparently, the decline was only temporary."

"... Does this mean that no matter how many Shadows we defeat, more will just keep coming? If that's the case, what's the point of fighting...?" Yukari asked.

"If we do nothing, then everyone will eventually join the Lost. Our efforts have prevented the crisis from escalating."

"I guess you're right... It's kinda creepy when you think about it. If we couldn't use our Personas, the whole city would be crawling with zombies..."

The boys had no way to intrude on the conversation, and all went about doing their own thing. Minato quickly showered

and took his dinner, considering his options. *"My partial summoning might just give me the edge I need over Shin's copies... I might be able to win against him now. Still, I should consider all of my options."* Minato thought.

"But, who else is there to see? I doubt Dante is available right now." Jack said.

"Probably... well, let's see what happens as the night progresses." Minato replied. He finished his meal and decided he would visit Paulownia Mall first before going to see Shin, just in case anything came up. He walked out of the dorm and headed down the street. A few blocks down, true to Mitsuru's words, there was a member of the Lost gazing off into the distance, groaning unintelligibly. Minato had never really paid much attention to a member of the Lost, but decided that observing this individual was as good a way to pass the time as any other.

"Boss, company. The Chairman is here." David alerted. Minato glanced to the left, and surely enough, Ikutsuki was rounding a corner to come speak to him. He had a small plastic bag in his hand.

"Good evening, Ikutsuki." Minato said. "On your way to our dorm?"

"Actually, I'm not... I was doing grocery shopping, actually." he said. He stopped next to Minato, and turned to face the member of the Lost. "You know, watching somebody like this is considered to be inappropriate."

"Really? I can't look at someone afflicted with a strange disease for research purposes?" Minato asked.

"Unless you're a government agent, then no, you can't." Ikutsuki said. "It's highly unfortunate... but why are you suddenly interested in the Lost?"

"I was just thinking... there was a big rise in the number of Lost before the monorail incident. I think the recent rise foreshadows the appearance of another big Shadow, which I'm pretty sure will fall on the next full moon." Minato said.

"Well, that's quite a deduction." Ikutsuki said. "I can certainly understand your first connection... but why the first?"

"The night I awoke to my power, I distinctly remember being pissed that the ridiculous blade Shadow was blocking out my view of the full moon from the roof. I also remember being pissed off that I couldn't enjoy the night gazing at the full moon when we had to fight on the monorail." Minato said. "Once is a coincidence, twice is questionable."

Ikutsuki chuckled. "You've certainly got a point there. Have you shared this information with the rest of SEES?"

"Not yet, but I will soon." Minato said.

"That's valuable information. You should tell them as soon as possible." Ikutsuki said. "But, speaking of valuable information... How comes your little lying game with Mitsuru?"

"On hold. I'm stuck having to believe that information on the Ergo Research Branch is blocked even to Mitsuru." Minato said. "Though I'm certain that's a lie."

"Of course it's a lie. Their research... well, before I say anything more, I'll ask again. Do you still believe it's better to play along with Mitsuru's lie?"

"No, but I still don't want to know the answer this way." Minato said. "I think she'll tell the answer eventually... but I want to hear it from her mouth."

"... Do I detect a vendetta in those words?" Ikutsuki asked. Minato chuckled.

"Vendetta? No. But I'd be lying if I said part of me won't revel in the little breakdown she'll have when she has to confess her sin to me." Minato said. Ikutsuki laughed.

"It's never a dull talk with you, Minato." he said. "Most people try and hide that fact. But you're so honest it's actually painful at times."

"I think that anyone who has to lie too often eventually reaches a point where they're essentially doing the same thing as this poor soul here." Minato said, gesturing to the member of the Lost.

"Really? And what would this poor soul be doing?" Ikutsuki asked.

"Waiting to die." Minato said.

"... You have no idea how right you are."

"Oh? How so?"

"I'll tell you a bit from the Kirijio Group files... things that Mitsuru actually can't access." Ikutsuki said. "But don't worry... I'll avoid talking about Tartarus." He cleared his throat. "How long do you think Apathy Syndrome has existed for?"

"Ten years." Minato said.

"Close... it's actually existed for nine." Ikutsuki said. "Without going too much into its history, I'll jump to the main point. The Kirijio Group hasn't just watched the victims in confusion for nine years. They've done all sorts of experiments on them to try and discover a cure. Naturally, that means these individuals were subjected to rigorous testing and extensive monitoring, especially on their brain activity."

"Let me guess... it was reduced to include only the most basic of functions necessary for survival." Minato said.

"Exactly. Breathing and being awake... that's all these individuals are capable of. They can't sleep, eat, move, or even do anything. In fact, all they can do is await death, even if they don't realize it. However, they can still feel and, to some extent, process external stimuli, though they lack the ability to react." Ikutsuki said. "... It's a fate much worse than

simply dying, isn't it?"

"Without a doubt." Minato said. "You've got me thinking I should just kill this poor sap right here... though, there's the possibility he'll recover after we beat the next big Shadow, so I shouldn't."

"A wise decision." Ikutsuki said. There was a slight lull in the conversation. "... Has anyone ever asked you why you fight, Minato?"

"Not really."

"Then, why do you?"

"It's fun." Minato said. "Killing, putting your life on the line, inflicting pain, making others suffer... fighting is just a combination of other fun activities, isn't it?"

"... Well, it's the first time I've thought of the idea in that manner, but I see where you're coming from." Ikutsuki said. "Still, you consider those activities you listed... fun?"

"Should I feel guilty for taking a life?" Minato asked.

"Everyone who lives takes things from others... killing is just taking another's life. But unlike any other type of taking, that person can never speak back to you again... Putting your own life on the line is pretty fun too. You can do it at any time, and it's like you're not risking anything yet risking everything at the same time. It's a strangely thrilling yet mystifying experience if you think about it. As for the other two... well, you're not

human if you don't enjoy those."

"Then, I assume you don't feel any type of guilt over your past?"

"Guilt? Why would I feel guilty for ridding the world of pests and liberating poor boys from their captors? I think I'm quite the saint." Minato said.

"The saint?" Ikutsuki asked. "What, do you believe you've helped the people you killed?"

"Yes I did... I saved them from their horrible existences. I gave them the ultimate form of salvation." Minato said. He smiled and cackled quietly. "I gave them their only escape from a harsh reality. I gave them death."

"Hah!" Ikutsuki said. He applauded. "Then I commend the young savior of the world. Though I must say, even though that train of thought is correct, most people disagree with it."

"Didn't I say most people polluted the world?" Minato said. "Their opinions don't matter. The only difference between them and the Lost is that they don't stay quiet."

Ikutsuki laughed. "Yes, yes! You know exactly what you're talking about!" he said. "Minato, just you wait... I have to go now, but the next time we get a chance to talk, I'll tell you something incredible."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"Then I'll be waiting." Minato said.

"Yes... I may bring somebody along to meet you as well. I think you'd like him." Ikutsuki said. "Then, I'll be taking my leave." He walked down the street, and Minato smirked.

"Social Link rank up for the night... I can devote the rest of my time to studying and training." Minato thought. He returned to the dorm before the Dark Hour struck, and did exactly what he had planned.

43. Chapter 43

Chapter 43: A Serious Crackdown

Author Note: Sorry for the slow updates, guys.

Minato was finishing breakfast when a very serious looking Mitsuru arrived in the lounge. Shinjiro was following her, looking more annoyed than usual. She sat down as Shinjiro joined Minato in the kitchen. "Minato, you will be attending Student Council today." she said. "There's been a sharp increase in the amount of bullying cases. We will not allow this situation to worsen. You and Shinji have full authorization to punish all offenders without distinction or discretion."

"Hear that, Shinji? Today, we Dogs of the Council get to run wild." Minato said, a smile forming on his face. "Aren't you excited?"

"I ain't like you. I'll do what I've gotta do, but don't think it'll be service with a smile." Shinjiro said.

"What matters is that we remind our students that we have an iron fist." Mitsuru said. "My Gekkoukan's reputation won't sink into the mud because of a few troublemakers."

"Then we'll make them tremble." Minato said. He started

slowly laughing, and Shinjiro gave a grunt of approval.

"Good. I'll be counting on you two." Mitsuru said. Yukari walked down to the lounge as she finished talking, overhearing the last few lines of their conversation.

"... You guys know that... the students are people, not Shadows, right?" she asked.

"The type of enemy doesn't matter. I punish all without distinction." Minato said.

"How can you say that?!" Yukari asked.

"Yukari, I understand your concern. However, I am not sending them to attack students indiscriminately." Mitsuru said. "Rest assured that only those who disturb the peace will face judgment."

"Still, you can't just allow them to attack people!" Yukari said. "That's just... wrong. You're going to do more damage than good like that. Those people won't learn anything if you just get violent. Doing this makes you no different than a tyrant!"

"... Are you asking for an execution, Yukari?" Mitsuru asked as Junpei walked down the stairs.

"... Mornin'." he said quietly.

"Look, you're using violence to solve a problem again!" Yukari said. "There's an air of fear going around the school, and people are suffering because of it! You say we're supposed

to be helping people when we go against the Shadows, but at any other time, we're hurting people instead! You might be leading us against the Shadows and helping humanity, but that doesn't give you the right to treat everyone who doesn't fight like toys!"

"... Hmph. The members of this dorm have been getting less and less respectful when they address me recently, and now that I've lightened my grip, I'm met with outright opposition? Ridiculous... I should never have softened. Your face frozen in fear will serve as a good reminder that I am not to be trifled with!" Mitsuru said, her face twisting into a murderous rage. She rose from her chair and pulled her Evoker, which she had in her blouse. Yukari didn't know how to react. "Prepare to be executed!"

"Mitsuru, that's enough." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru turned on him. "It's early, and she got carried away. It was the stupid mistake of a dumbass. Just blow her off."

"You know how plebs always fail to contain their voices. If we punished them every time they spoke out of turn, they'd all be in coffins." Minato said. "A minor infraction doesn't deserve our attention."

"... You have a point. I let my emotions get the better of me again." Mitsuru said, putting her Evoker away. She sat back down, but gave Yukari a death glare. The room was silent.

"Uhh, hey, Yuka-tan, come check out this new food stall at Port Island!" Junpei said suddenly. He essentially dragged

Yukari out of the dorm with him before she could protest, leaving the three Council members alone. Mitsuru sighed as they left.

"Forgive my weakness. It seems I'm on edge... what Yukari said yesterday affected me more than I thought." Mitsuru said.

"About that... I think I know the cause for the rise in Apathy Syndrome victims." Minato said. Mitsuru and Shinjiro snapped to attention.

"What do you know?" Mitsuru asked.

"This is only a theory, so first answer this... during the time I had first moved to the dorm, before it was attacked, was there a rise in the number of Apathy Syndrome cases?" Minato said.

"That was around the beginning of April, right?" Shinjiro asked. Mitsuru nodded, and both of them began thinking of an answer. "... Yeah, there was, now that I think about it. A lot of the back alley punks were freaking out because a whole bunch of their buddies started coming down with it at the end of March."

"That's true... I was grateful that we had begun to find more and more Persona users at the same time that the number of Lost, and hence the activity level of the Shadows, was increasing." Mitsuru said.

"And while I was in the hospital after the dorm was attacked, did the number of Lost decrease?" Minato asked.

"... Yes." Mitsuru said. Shinjiro narrowed his eyes.

"Tch... it doesn't take much of a genius to see where this is going." he said.

"Exactly... the number of Lost always rises before the appearance of a powerful Shadow outside of Tartarus." Minato said. "Said Shadow should always appear on a full moon like the last two did, and once we defeat it, the number of Lost will decrease."

Mitsuru and Shinjiro both took a moment to let that information sink in, allowing for a small silence to cover the room. "Then, that means our next operation should be in ten days." Mitsuru said.

"Exactly. With this, we'll know how much time we have to prepare and be ready for action when the night comes." Minato said. "Time no longer has the element of surprise."

Mitsuru and Shinjiro both chuckled, and the trio ate breakfast. More than content with their new knowledge, they arrived in a good mood at school. To most onlookers, who were discussing the sudden rise in bullying incidents, they could only guess as to why they were so happy. Most of them assumed it was in anticipation for getting to torment students, and made a mental note to leave school as possible.

Minato parted ways with Mitsuru and Shinjiro and strode towards his class, a confident smirk on his face. He was scanning the expressions of everyone around him, most of which showed anxiety. *"That's right. Cower. Know that today your pitiful existences are nothing but my playthings."*

"Heheheheh... I'll make sure to devise a few interesting methods of inflicting just enough bodily harm without causing permanent damage." David said.

"We'll have so much fun, I do declare!" Jack added.

Minato had just gone up the stairs when he noticed Fuuka a little ways in front of him, slowly making her way to class. He sped up a bit and tapped her lightly on the shoulder, getting her attention. "Good morning, Fuuka." he said.

"Oh, good morning, Minato." Fuuka answered. "How are you?"

"Worried about you." Minato said, earning a little look of surprise from Fuuka. He pulled her into a little half hug as they walked, and rested his head against hers. "It's okay if you still don't want to share. Just remember I'm here for you." he said.

"... I really am stupid." Fuuka said. She laughed very quietly. "Could we... talk later?"

"Just call." Minato said. He walked Fuuka to her class and then went to his. *"Well, glad that period of weirdness is over."* he thought as he took a seat at his desk. Yukari and Junpei

walked in shortly after, and went to Minato's desk.

"I see you and Fuuka made up." Junpei said, trying to the best of his ability to contain the disappointment in his voice. "Good for you, dude."

Yukari sighed. "I hope she knows who she's dealing with." she said.

"That's mean, Yukari. I even helped you out this morning." Minato said.

"You called me a pleb and said my opinions didn't matter. How is that helping me out?"

"It got you spared from an execution." Minato said. "And trust me, Mitsuru's new executions are downright inhumane. You wouldn't have been able to just walk away from one. So, I was still watching your back."

"Are you really going to use that as an excuse?" she asked. "You just followed Shinji-senpai's lead."

"Believe what you want." Minato said. "I think you're just jealous."

"Jealous? You're just trying to throw the fault at me." Yukari said.

"Then why were you following me around this morning?" Minato asked.

"I was on my way to class and you were ahead of me!" Yukari said. Junpei just sat down and shook his head.

"You're really bad at this, Yuka-tan." Junpei said.

"What? Don't tell me you're siding with him again!"

"I mean, hey, when ya hold me back from saying hi to the guy so ya can watch what he's doin', it's tough to take yer side here." Junpei said with a shrug. Yukari smacked him on the head.

"I did not do that!" Yukari said. "You tried to leave when we weren't done talking!"

"So possessive. Careful now, Junpei. She might try and kill everyone you know and then kill you and finally herself so you'll always be together." Minato said.

"I think you might need to be more worried than me." Junpei said. Yukari let out an exasperated breath and went to her seat. Minato and Junpei chuckled as she walked away, and the day began.

At lunch, Minato immediately emerged from his classroom and found a nervous Fuuka waiting in the hallway. "H-hi, Minato." she said. Minato chuckled and messed with her hair.

"Why so serious?" he asked. "Do you want to talk now?"

Fuuka nodded. Minato offered his arm, and she took it. They made their way to the roof, and sat down by the fence as

they usually did. "Um... I'm sorry..." Fuuka said.

"For what?" Minato asked.

"For avoiding you!" Fuuka said. "I-I made you worry a-and I even pushed you away! It's all my fault!"

Minato laughed and pulled Fuuka into a hug. "How cute!" he said.

"Wha-?! Hey, I'm being serious!" Fuuka said.

"So am I." Minato said. "All of that is old news! Why bother worrying about it?"

"B-but I... I was..."

"Selfish? Do you really think someone like me would mind?" Minato asked. "If you want to take time to yourself, then by all means, go right ahead. It's not like people need justification for taking some time to think, right?"

Fuuka was silent for a bit, and then giggled. "That's definitely something you'd say." she said, a smile settling on her face. She then hugged him back, much to his surprise. "... I needed that."

"... Does this renew my status as teddy bear?" Minato asked after a while. Fuuka laughed and pulled away.

"I think you graduated from that." Fuuka said.

"Aww... and here I was looking forward to being your cuddle buddy again." Minato mused.

"... Y-you can still do that." Fuuka said, looking away.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

"Then, you won't mind this." Minato said. He put an arm around her, and put one of his headphones in her ear. Then, he put his lunch on his lap, his arm still around her, and opened it. "I've been making a little extra everyday just for this occasion. You don't mind, do you?"

Fuuka reddened, and tried to hide her face in her scarf. "... That's... very thoughtful of you." she said. "B-but it'll be hard to eat like this, won't it?"

"Maybe if I were the only one eating." Minato said, moving his head so it was next to hers. "Though, I think your scarf will get dirty if you try and eat with it in that position." he said as he put on his other earphone and played his mp3 player. "Well, you know what to say."

Fuuka sat still for a moment, but then returned her scarf to its usual position. She was smiling. "Ahhh..."

As Minato and Fuuka enjoyed themselves, Yukari glared enviously them through the side window at the roof entrance. Junpei was eating a burger as usual, and enjoying Yukari's little outbursts of surprise. "I can't believe this! How do you go from avoiding someone to letting them feed you?! And she's enjoying it!" Yukari grumbled. "Show a little anger!"

"Man, how does that keep working out for Minato?" Junpei asked. "I mean seriously, is it because he cooked it himself or is he just able to tell when people are hungry and lazy at the same time?... Wait a minute... Yuka-tan, you haven't eaten anything for lunch yet, right? Want me to feed you?"

"In your dreams, Stupei." Yukari snapped.

"... Yowch. Ever heard a' puttin' a guy down easy?" Junpei said.

"Grr... now aren't those two just having the time of their lives?!" Yukari said, ignoring Junpei. He sighed.

"You're hopeless, Yupid." he said.

"Staring isn't polite." David's head said from behind them. Yukari and Junpei both panicked and turned around. **"Boss asks if you would kindly find better ways to occupy your time. Otherwise... well, he knows where you sleep."**

David's head disappeared, and the duo immediately went down the stairs. Minato finished enjoying his time with Fuuka, and escorted her back to class before returning to his own.

He gave Yukari a creepy smile as he passed by, and she flinched. He went back to his seat and passed the remainder of the day in a very good mood.

After school, he went straight to Student Council and put on his Disciplinary Committee armband as Mitsuru and Shinjiro entered. Shinjiro threw on his armband, and the trio took their seat as the rest of Student Council filed in. Everyone took their seat, and Mitsuru cleared her throat.

"Everyone, I believe all of us can agree that our recent rise in bullying incidents has become a real concern." Mitsuru said. The members all nodded robotically. "As such, I am dispatching both the Head and Vice-Head of the Disciplinary Committee to seek out and exterminate any and all violators of our school's policies. Now... disperse."

Minato chuckled, Shinjiro nodded, and then they both rose and left the room. "So today we're bullying the bullies." Shinjiro said. "How hypocritical."

"I find it ironic." Minato said. "Now, let's see who we find."

Their first unfortunate victims were a group of first-year boys who were extorting one of their quieter peers near the gates of the school. They ended up being thrown inside trash cans after a sound beating. "Heheheheh... Know that the filth who break our rules are no better than yesterday's garbage." Minato said as he slammed the last lid close. He and Shinjiro walked away from their muffled cries for help, and entered the main hallway.

"Does beating the crap outta people for no reason give you a kick?" Shinjiro asked as they scanned the area.

"Yes it does." Minato said.

"You're sick, you know that?"

"Then being healthy is sickening."

"Tch... crazy bastard." Shinjiro said. With the main hall clear, they moved to the first floor hallways. Near the gymnasium, they stumbled upon three girls, who Minato recognized as Natsuki Moriyama and her two followers. Shinjiro apparently recognized her as well, and scowled. "I've seen these idiots by Port Island Station... let's go."

"Wait... they're alone." Minato said. "Right now, they're just hanging out. We've got no right to strike, as satisfying as that would be... but, that doesn't mean we can't find a reason to strike."

Shinjiro nodded, and the two began to tail them and eavesdrop on their conversation.

"So, I pretended to take a picture with my cell phone." Natsuki said.

"And?" one of her friends asked.

"She freaked out and started crying like it was the end of the world! You should've seen the look on her face... It was priceless." she answered. Her two friends broke out laughing,

but one of them stopped immediately.

"Let's go." Shinjiro said. Minato put an arm on his shoulder.

"Wait... something's wrong." Minato said. Shinjiro stopped.

"Huh?... Where's that voice coming from...?" the suddenly quiet girl asked.

"What voice? I don't hear anything." Natsuki said. The girl said nothing. "What's wrong, Maki? Maki!"

"... Huh?" Maki responded.

"Are you okay?" their friend asked.

"Sorry... what were we talking about?"

"... And now." Minato said, walking past Shinjiro. "We meet again, good friends." he said, strolling towards them. "To answer your question, Maki, you were talking about tormenting some poor girl by pretending to take pictures."

"Huh? Crap, it's that crazy guy!" their friend said.

"Hey, don't panic. We're not doing anything wrong here." Natsuki said.

"Y-yeah, we're just talking!" Maki said.

"That's true... but you're talking about bullying a student. And, there just so happens to be quite the crackdown occurring

today." Minato said. He smiled. "And since you were nice enough to confess, you've just given us more than enough reason to persecute you."

The girls immediately began to look for an escape route. Maki made a dash down out to the grass, but Minato caught her and delivered a swift punch to the gut. She fell instantly. "Oh, so close, Maki. Too bad you aren't on the track team... who knows? Maybe you could've outrun me." Minato taunted. He laughed as she clutched her stomach on the floor.

"What the hell?! You're not allowed to do that!" their friend screamed. Shinjiro grabbed her by the collar and threw her against the wall. She hit with a loud thud, and then dropped a good seven feet to the floor.

"We got permission to punish you however we see fit." Shinjiro said. "And for punks like you that talk shit at the back of Port Island all the time, I ain't holding back."

Natuski whimpered as her two friends writhed on the ground. "And then there was one." Minato said, turning to face Natsuki. "Well then, what will you do, Natsuki Moriyama?"

"Y-you won't get away with this! My father –" Natsuki began, but she was silenced by Minato lifting her into the air by her neck.

"Probably never loved you." he said with a smirk. He slammed her into the floor, and she squealed. "What a group of pigs... you'll dirty the halls if we let you roam around."

He grabbed Natsuki by her ponytail and Maki by one of her pigtails, while Shinjiro grabbed the last girl's long hair. They dragged the three of them outside, all of them kicking and screaming, and then stuffed them into the hedges. Minato and Shinjiro watched the three of them squirm and struggle to escape for a bit, and then returned to the hallway. They found Yukari watching them with a disgusted look on her face. "... I can't even begin to say how wrong that was." she said. "I thought at least you were better, Shinji-senpai."

"Then obviously you don't know me." Shinjiro said. "I didn't spend two years living on the streets acting nice."

"... So I'm supposed to believe you're just a big punk, then?" Yukari asked.

"Correction. Shinji is a badass, far above the level of common punk." Minato said with a smirk. Yukari scowled.

"Forget it... I can't stand you two." Yukari said, walking back towards the archery range. Shinjiro grumbled, and headed towards the main hallway once more.

"What the hell does a sheltered dumbass like Yukari know?" Minato asked as they walked. "A popular girl that has no real enemies of note... she has no right to pass judgment on us."

"Even so... she's still right. We're going overboard because that's what we were told to do, but that doesn't make it right." Shinjiro said. "Besides, I just judged that Moriyama girl and her crew based on her past, and I know damn well she hasn't

done half of what I've done."

"And so, she walks away with her life intact." Minato said.

"... What are you trying to say?" Shinjiro asked.

"You and me... we've gone too far. The day we face judgment is the day we die." Minato said. "And since we can't go back, we might as well enjoy what's on this side, right?"

"What the hell kind of logic is that?"

"Logic that prioritizes my own life above all else." Minato said. "I think you should pick it up, since your only idea of redemption is assisted suicide."

"Again with this? I already told you I get your point, but I haven't changed my mind. The past is unalterable, and nothing you do now can fix your mistakes." Shinjiro said.

"Then weigh your mistakes against your accomplishments." Minato said. "It's true that you'll never lose your mistakes. Still, that doesn't mean you can't do so much more... good, I suppose, to make up for it."

"What a load of crap. Do you think you've done more good than evil in your life?" Shinjiro asked.

"Hell no! But in every evil there's good, and every good there's evil. I won't say I've done more good things than evil things... but I think I've wrought more good than evil over the course of all my actions." Minato said. "And even if I haven't... well, I

chooseth this fate of my own free will. That's the important part, after all. You shouldn't let anything dictate your choices, especially something as superfluous as the past."

"Those are the words of a madman or a fool." Shinjiro said.

"Then it's good that I'm both." Minato said. "I think you're the one acting out of character. With all of your life experience, I'd think you'd be wise enough to see a less cliché solution to your question of atonement. I still think it's a load of self-righteous bullshit, but hey, whatever floats your boat. I just think you need to keep yourself alive and make the most of your life."

"Of course." Shinjiro said. He sighed. "You're so goddamn optimistic, it's painful... and almost believable at times."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"What can I say? I provide more than just service with a smile." Minato chuckled.

"Dumbass." Shinjiro said. They went through the rest of the school, brutalized a few more groups of students, and then returned to the Council Room. They reported their actions to Mitsuru, who was more than pleased with their results. They

were about to head home when Minato's phone rang. The number was unknown.

"Hello, my sweet." Minato answered.

"My ass! We have a promotion tonight, and you better get here now unless you think the electric chair is a good way to die!" Nemissa screamed.

"... I'll be there shortly." Minato said. He turned to Mitsuru and Shinjiro as they reached the front gate. "So, my boss says I need to get to work now. I've got to go." he said.

"Hmm? That's new... but you did sign a contract. Don't allow us to hold you up, and thank you again for your work today." Mitsuru said.

"Work, huh? Don't be late." he said. Minato nodded, and waved goodbye to them before dashing ahead to get a train to Paulownia. He made it in half an hour, and began his sales. A new product that he recognized as one of the ones he advertised had just been released, and as the model, it was easy for him to attract customers. Needless to say, his day was long but lucrative, and he dragged himself back to the dorm. That night, he decided that he did much too much that day to merit anything other than studying.

Back at the school, however, Fuuka was being dragged by Natsuki and her two friends towards the gym. "C'mon, Fuuka, it'll be fun!" Natsuki said.

"M-Moriyama-san! We shouldn't be here! I-I need to get back home!" she protested. They made their way to the janitor's closet by the lockers and forced her inside. "Please, don't do this!"

"Just sit tight! Think of it as a game with friends!" Natsuki said, closing the door and locking her inside. Fuuka heard laughing as they walked away, and tried in vain to open the door. Alone, and in the dark, she huddled in a corner, and sobbed.

This all changed when the Dark Hour struck. The school transformed, and Fuuka was hugged a wall as it moved around and spiraled into the air. After a minute of deafening rumbling and heavy shaking, Fuuka dropped to her knees on the floors of Tartarus. "W-what? W-where am I?" she asked. The walls and floor were purple, with a few white faces that cried blood jutting from some parts of the walls. She was in a giant hallway, with nobody in sight. "The school... what is this place?"

Fuuka wandered around for a few minutes, when she suddenly felt a presence nearing her location. She didn't know what it was, but knew that it wasn't human. She managed to avoid it by backtracking, and found a safe area to hide. "... There's other things in here." she said, clutching her head. She could sense more than one of what she had just avoided, in various locations. All she had to do was make sure she didn't run into any of them, and she'd be fine. Even though she didn't understand how she knew these creatures' locations, she didn't question it. Fear had put her into a survival mode, and all that mattered was that she never encountered one of

them. She spent the hour trying to find an exit while avoiding the creatures, and eventually found stairs going up. With no other options, she proceeded upwards as the first hour drew to a close.

44. Chapter 44

Chapter 44: A Girl at the Front Gate

Minato made his way to school with Junpei and Yukari in tow. Both of them were more excited than usual as they walked into the school. Minato was listening to music as he walked, ignoring them, but took off his headphones in time to catch a snippet of conversation.

"Hey, did you hear? That 11th Grader..." a girl said.

"Oh yeah!" her friend answered. "The one who was lying on the ground this morning, right? I hope she just ran away from home... but I feel like this is the start of something big."

"Yeah... There might be reporters and camera crews and stuff." the first girl said. She sighed. "I don't want to deal with all of that."

"A disappeared girl?... Jack, you didn't sneak out while I was showering, did you?" Minato asked.

"Hey, I'm retired... but I'm pretty interested in this case." Jack said. ***"Do you think she was in cross-sections?"***

"I don't think the conversation would be as casual if she was

dead. Still, I wonder who has the gall to pull a stunt like this after what me and Shinjiro did yesterday." Minato thought.

"Indeed... is your detective blood stirring, Shirogane?"
David asked.

"Perhaps. Let's see what we can find out."

Minato went straight to class and took his seat. He listened attentively to the conversations of his classmates. "Did you hear? About that girl in 2-E?" a boy asked his friend.

"Fuuka's class, then... "

"Yeah, they haven't got a clue..." his friend said.

"Isn't that bizarre?!"

"Man, can you believe these people...? So, did you hear the details?" Junpei asked.

"Enlighten me." Minato said.

"Well, a girl from 2-E went missing late last night. This morning, they found her lying on the ground in front of the school gate! Nobody knows what happened, and apparently, she's still unconscious." Junpei said.

"In front of the school, huh? Wait, if this place turns into Tartarus, then... could she have been taken there?" Minato thought. Yukari walked over to them as Minato mulled over

the new information.

"Yo Yuka-tan. This is a tough case, even for Junpei Iori, Ace Detective." he said.

"Ace Detective? ... Are you stupid or something?... More like Stupei, Ace Defective." She said.

"Hey, I resent that!" Junpei said. "Anyways, where have you been?"

"I was talking to the teacher. That girl they found... she was one of the ones you and Shinji-senpai 'disciplined' yesterday." Yukari said, glaring at Minato.

"... Did she have black pigtails?" Minato asked.

"Huh? Dude, why does that matter?" Junpei asked.

"As a matter of fact, she did." Yukari said.

"Then it was one of Natsuki Moriyama's crew... a girl named Maki." Minato said.

"Dang, you know her?" Junpei asked.

"Not personally. I punched her in the gut and stuffed her in the bushes yesterday, though." Minato said. Junpei winced. "I didn't do permanent damage, and it was nothing a little rest and recovery couldn't fix... it would seem someone or something has decided my punishment was too light."

"... You aren't seriously suggesting that this was done by some kind of vigilante, are you?" Yukari asked.

"There's still not enough information to draw any conclusions, but it's a first guess. That group consisted of known troublemakers... There's a good chance somebody who has a grudge against them could've targeted Maki. On the other hand, we have to remember that this victim is a high-school girl. The culprit could just as easily be a... perverse individual." Minato said.

"... You trying to upstage me?" Junpei asked. Yukari chuckled.

"How about the Ace Defective leave the Ace Detective to his thoughts?" Yukari asked.

"And that's still not considering a key factor... we don't know when exactly Maki would ended up in front of the school gates." Minato said. "After all... our school isn't an ordinary school at night."

Yukari and Junpei suddenly got serious. "Are you thinking...?" Yukari began.

"It's certainly a possibility... I know for a fact that sometimes Shadows can awaken humans from their coffins, but it's a very rare occurrence." Minato said.

"The heck? How do ya know that?" Junpei asked.

"When I was ten, my guardian was awakened that way. I watched a Shadow eat the old bastard's mind." Minato said. "He put up a fight, though. Gave me enough time to get the hell out of there and wait for the Dark Hour to end before heading back. I saw it happen again when I was fifteen, but it was from afar. That guy managed to run away, but I don't know what happened to him."

"... Holy crap." Junpei said after a while. "Dude... you've seen some stuff."

"That's not even a tenth of what I've seen." Minato said. He chuckled. Yukari was speechless. "Anyways, I think I should discuss this with our senpai at lunch. You guys plan on tagging along?"

"... Actually, yeah. I'll be there." Yukari said.

"Count me in, man." Junpei said.

"Then, till lunch." Minato said.

In the senior's homeroom, Mr. Toudou was busy reading over a weapons catalog disguised as a sports magazine. He looked up when he sensed three familiar presences approaching him, and saw Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Shinjiro all looking him over. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Mr. Toudou... we'd like to know if you have any information about the girl that was found this morning." Mitsuru asked. Mr. Toudou chuckled.

"Official Gekkoukan reports, or Official Kirijio reports?" he asked.

"Kirijio." Akihiko said.

"Well, the girl was discovered by the first janitor who arrived this morning, at around four in the morning. The old man called up an ambulance and the police came along to investigate what happened. I got the call about the discovery at four thirty, and managed to check on the girl before she was officially sent to the hospital." Mr. Toudou said. He touched his head, and took a deep breath. "Whatever happened to her wasn't caused by any human. Her mind, and to some extent, her soul, had been shattered. I would have said this was a stray Shadow attack, but the fact that the damage goes all the way to the victim's soul surpasses what any average Shadow would do. That girl will become one of the Lost by the end of today, and even if she were to recover, she would never be the same."

"... That's a lot to take in." Akihiko said.

"You're certain that this damage surpasses what normal Shadows can cause?" Mitsuru asked.

"I checked from both my experience and consulted my Personas... both Vohu Manah, who resides over light and the mind, and Amatsu Mikaboshi, who resides over darkness and the soul, confirmed my diagnosis." Mr. Toudou said.

"... Can you help them?" Shinjiro asked.

"My powers do not extend to repairing a destroyed mind or wounded soul. I can do nothing here." Mr. Toudou said.

"However, I will say this... if you discover that whatever caused this is a creature other than a powerful Shadow... do not hesitate to call on me for assistance. You should try and alert the JSDF forces as well. Their cooperation should prove beneficial if this is a worst case scenario."

"You're right." Mitsuru said. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Toudou. I trust you'll be looking into this incident as well?"

"Yes. We should convene again once we all have our facts sorted out." he said. "Class will start soon. You should take your seats."

The seniors passed their day quickly enough, and were about to hold a discussion in their empty classroom when Junpei, Minato, and Yukari walked in. "S'up, senpai!" Junpei said.

"S'up, Junpei." Mitsuru said. Everyone stopped and stared at her. She gave them all confused looks. "... Isn't that how you respond to such a greeting?"

"... It is, but..." Yukari began.

"It sounds... a little weird when you say it." Akihiko said.

"... Try not to say that again." Shinjiro said.

"... I see. Very well, I'll refrain from matching Junpei's vernacular." Mitsuru said.

"Yup, she's still Mitsuru-senpai." Junpei chuckled.

"I congratulate you on your scarily accurate usage of the phrase." Minato said as he took a seat across from her.

"However, from what I can tell, we both have information to share."

"That's right. Everyone, let's begin." Mitsuru said. The rest of SEES formed a circle with Minato and Mitsuru facing each other. "Minato, would you like to begin?"

"Certainly." Minato said. "To begin with, we should discuss the victim, who was named Maki. This Maki was affiliated with a known group of troublemakers who hung out on the outskirts of Port Island, right, Shinji?"

"Right." Shinji said.

"Now, based on this evidence, it's possible that someone who had a grudge against Maki, such as someone she bullied in the past, was the one to leave her in front of the school gates in such a state. However, our school becomes Tartarus during the Dark Hour, and I know that it's possible for Shadows to rip humans out of their coffins during said time. Those humans can either flee in terror or fall prey to the Shadows once freed. It's possible that a Shadow freed Maki and she fled to the school, but fell victim to a Shadow near the gates. Of course, if we take into account that Maki is still a high school girl, the culprit may just as well have been a perverse individual." Minato said.

"An excellent deduction on your half, Minato." Mitsuru said. "However, we've spoken to Mr. Toudou, who has confirmed that whatever caused that girl to appear unconscious in front of the school couldn't have been an ordinary human. It is more than likely that this is related to the coming full moon."

"Coming full moon?" Yukari asked.

"Yesterday, Minato deduced that the powerful Shadows which appeared outside of Tartarus came during the full moons, and were foreshadowed by an increase in the number of Lost. The defeat of these Shadows resulted in a slight decrease in the number of Lost, until the next big Shadow appears." Mitsuru said. "I believe that the upcoming Shadow is specifically targeting these girls, as they apparently have had damage done to more than just their minds... according to Mr. Toudou, their very souls have sustained injury, and recovery is next to impossible. This incident will change them forever."

"... So I was right in assuming that the cause was supernatural." Minato said. "However, we have no conclusive evidence that points to a Shadow. It may well be a demon, or a Fiend."

"That's right... those things are vicious." Shinjiro said. "If we're dealing with one of those, we'd best get our asses in gear, or someone will get hurt."

"That's right." Minato said. "Shinji, I think we should go see Big Boss today and see if anything's come up."

"Good idea. We'll go after school." Shinjiro said.

"... Then I'll leave it to you two. If there's no... supernatural involvement, then, we can safely assume that the culprit is a Shadow." Mitsuru said.

"Sweet! We got a lead!" Junpei said.

"Alright... if the next full moon is in nine days, then we need to get ready." Akihiko said. "We should visit Tartarus during this upcoming week. We'll rip through the whole tower and show our strength."

"I agree with that notion. But we need to be ready for the full moon. As such, the trip to Tartarus will be the day before the day before the full moon operation, to maximize results." Minato said.

"Agreed. That's the best opportunity we have to train." Mitsuru said. "For now, we should be cautious and investigate the rumors individually to see what we can find. "

"I think that's the best course of action... Junpei, Yukari, I want you two especially attentive to rumors. There may be some truth in that information." Minato said. "I'll speak to the JSDF about this after me and Shinji meet up with Big Boss. If I can't get any information out of them, I'll investigate on my own. I already have an insider source in Fuuka."

"Oh yeah, that's right... good call." Junpei said. "Well, leave the rumor huntin' to me! I can prolly get all da rumors in my

hands in the next couple days!"

"Good... I'll be expecting a report on the most prominent rumor as soon as you're ready, Junpei." Mitsuru said. "Yukari, you see what else you can learn, and add to what Junpei has if necessary."

"Got it." Yukari said.

"I'll be out for a few nights and see what I can learn from the punks at Port Island." Shinjiro said. "If anything, I'll just beat the shit out of em' till they talk."

"Then I'll see if any of the athletes have heard about this." Akihiko said. "You said the victim was close to a Natsuki Moriyama, right?"

"That's right." Minato said.

"Good... she's got a cousin on the track team. I'll see what I can get from him and his friends." Akihiko said.

"Then leave the staff members to me." Mitsuru said. "None of them will be able to hide anything from me. We also have Mr. Toudou monitoring the victim."

"Then, let the investigation begin." Minato said. "For now, however, let's eat. We'll need our strength for later today."

The rest of SEES nodded, and they ate a quiet lunch together, and then split up. After school, Minato decided to investigate and see what the chattier students had to say

about the incident.

"Oh yeah, that girl who passed out? I heard she was by herself... Seems mysterious, doesn't it?" one boy said. "I mean, I don't really care about other people, but when it comes to mysteries like this, I get pumped! Like I can't rest until I get to the bottom of everything."

"... Detective blood in your veins aside, it would seem Maki was alone." Minato thought. *"This has yet to be disproven."*

"I heard a girl fainted in classroom E. She had Apathy Syndrome, right? I'm glad she wasn't from my class..." a girl said.

"Then the Shadows are definitely on the move." Minato thought.

"With so little information, our best guess is a shot in the dark. Even I know better than to attempt something like that." Matador said.

"You're right... we'll get some answers from Lucifer." Minato answered. He headed to the front gates, not finding any more useful information. Shinjiro was waiting on him, as usual.

"Bout time you got here. Let's go see what the kid has to say." Shinjiro said.

"Yeah... I didn't find much useful information, except that a girl seemed to have been struck with Apathy Syndrome during

class today." Minato said.

"That's normal... sometimes, if a human falls prey to a Shadow, they can still function for a while before their mind completely breaks down. That's how we get those Apathy Syndrome cases in the middle of the day." Shinjiro said. "But that has little to no connection to our case."

"It proves that the Shadows are on the move, which confirms my full moon theory." Minato said. "Though you are correct in assuming the connection to our current topic is tenuous at best. Let's go find some answers."

Shinjiro nodded, and the two headed to Paulownia Mall. Minato kept his ears open for any stray conversation about the girl, but couldn't catch anything. He reached Iwatodai station, and headed to the back alley with Shinjiro. Together, they entered the Crimson Room, and bowed simultaneously. Lucifer nodded to them, and they took their seats. "You've come for information this time." Lucifer said.

"You know us well, friend." Minato said. "Will you help us, Master?"

"Of course... your first suspicion is whether or not the cause of this girl's misfortune is a Fiend or demon. I have already looked into this matter. I cannot give you a definitive answer yet, but as of now, the answer is that no Fiend nor demon which I know of is the cause of this." Lucifer said. "Rest assured that if it is a demon or Fiend, one of my emissaries, such as Shin, will deal with them shortly."

"That's good to hear. You're dependable as always, Master." Minato said. He chuckled. "Then, I must ask... do you know if any human or enhanced human could have been the cause?"

"That lies beyond my scope of knowledge. I have eyes scattered throughout Iwatodai, but not even they can see everywhere." Lucifer said. "If I do find anything, I will give word to you immediately. A trial such as this is one of yours, after all."

"So you'll only give direct assistance if it's one of your own breaking the rules?" Shinjiro asked.

"Correct. Anything else can be considered a test to you." Lucifer said. He smiled. "Frankly, I believe you should be able to overcome it without much difficulty."

"Your confidence is reassuring." Minato said. "But, that'll be all for questioning. Sorry for the interrogation style."

"It's not a problem." Paimon said.

"Indeed. Your curiosity is perfectly justified." Lucifuge said.

"Yes. If that will be all, shall we get down to business?" Lucifer asked.

"As you wish." Minato said.

"Very well... Minato, you know that you lack the Macca to purchase any new Magatama." Lucifer said. "You may leave. Shinjiro, however, has accumulated quite the sum since his

last visit. He's due for an upgrade."

"... Then what are waitin' for? Let's get this over with." Shinjiro said.

"Very well. Then, out of respect for our guest's privacy, would you kindly leave, Minato?" Lucifuge asked.

"No problem." Minato said. He got up, bowed, and walked out of the Crimson Room. He headed straight for the fountain plaza, and saw an interesting looking reporter standing around. He decided to see what he had to say.

"Another victim of those mysterious incidents was found at Gekkoukan. Since the victim was at the front gate, that must be the scene of the crime. After all, if the victim had been elsewhere, and then carried to the front gate... Why would the culprit do such a thing? The reasoning doesn't add up. Anyway, there's a high probability that Gekkoukan itself is involved in all this somehow..." the reporter said when asked about the incident.

"I see. Thanks for sharing." Minato said. *"We know that the culprit must be supernatural. However, the location being in front of the school, nay, in front of Tartarus, instead of a random spot on the street, does raise a few questions... was Maki carried there and then subjected to some sort of ritual feeding, or something of the sort? Or was she really just heading to the tower in the Dark Hour hoping to escape, only to find Shadows awaiting her?"*

As Minato stared at the fountain as he processed his thoughts, Shinjiro reappeared from the alleyway. "... I think I need to eat. Sorry, but I'm leaving." he said. Minato nodded, and Shinjiro walked away, hands stuffed in his pockets as usual.

"He's changed, hasn't he?" Minato asked.

"More demonic powers... it seems even more of his body can channel his power now." David said.

"I see... I hope the JSDF doesn't give him shit for that. But speaking of them, we need to find them. Last time, they were by Iwatodai Station... doesn't hurt to check again." Minato thought. He made his way back there, and sure enough, he caught the three members leaving Wakatsu. He stopped them as they exited the first floor. "Captain Hazama, Lieutenant Zelenin, Sergeant Jimenez... I need to speak with you. This is urgent." Minato said.

"... We're listening." Hazama said. His subordinates were deathly serious.

"Today, there was a girl found unconscious outside of Gekkoukan, or, more aptly put, outside of Tartarus' daytime form. Said girl has almost certainly become one of the Lost by now." Minato said. "After some preliminary research, SEES has determined the cause of her situation to be supernatural. Though most signs point to the Shadows, one of the Kirijio Group's cleaners has determined that this could also be another supernatural force. I'm warning all of you to be careful

on your patrols, and asking you to keep an eye out for any suspicious activity."

"... So you're asking for our cooperation?" Zelenin asked.

"If you only find Shadows, leave the rest to us. We'll resolve the situation in under ten days or die trying." Minato said.

"However, if you find something else... we're formally requesting your assistance. SEES may have been formed to combat Shadows, but we'll be damned before we let any supernatural force run rampant through our town." Minato said.

"Feisty, aren't ya?" Jimenez asked. "I like it. I'll keep ya posted if any shit pops up."

"For once, I agree with the ape. You're serious about protecting this town... I'll see what I can do." Zelenin said.

"Consider it done. Anything that so much as touches a civilian for the next ten days will die by my hand." Hazama said. He smirked. "I see you're interested in more than just personal training."

"That's more along my senpai's line." Minato said.

"Regardless, we're grateful for your help. Don't try and do something impossible. We're a call away."

"We've made our name doing the impossible." Hazama chuckled. "Your concern is misplaced."

"... That's the confidence of a well-oiled machine, isn't it?" Minato asked. He sighed. "I envy you. I still need to factor in training the rest of SEES."

"Hah! What a bunch of greenhorns!" Jimenez said.

"We were all greenhorns once." Zelenin said. "I believe they have potential, so long as they abide by their agreement."

"They will." Hazama said. "As long as they follow Minato and the Kirijio, they'll be fine."

"It's nice to see you put so much faith in me." Minato said with a smirk.

"Didn't I say you wouldn't be much of a problem?" Hazama responded.

"That means you're weak!" Jimenez said.

"No, idiot! It means he's on our side!" Zelenin said.

"Hey, who are you callin' an idiot?!" Jimenez asked.

"... I have more problems with my subordinates." Hazama said, rather loudly. Zelenin and Jimenez fell silent.

"Regardless, I thank you for your warning. Rest assured we will protect the populace to the best of our abilities. You can count on us."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Temperance Arcana...

"That's good to know." Minato said.

"Good... now, we have business to attend to. Until next time." Hazama said. He walked away, followed by Zelenin and Jimenez. Minato chuckled, and grabbed some food before heading back to the dorm. He walked in to find Yukari, Shinjiro, Akihiko, and Ikutsuki in the lounge.

"Oh, hey." Yukari greeted. "Apparently, the prevailing rumor going around school is a ghost story. People can be so immature sometimes... Anyways, I'm not feeling very well, so I won't be able to go to Tartarus tonight... Sorry. I'll prolly just watch some TV and then go to bed."

"Scared of ghosts, huh? Well, there's weirder shit to believe in. Try not to have nightmares." Minato said as he signed-in.

"... Thanks for letting me forget the subject." Yukari said, walking up the stairs. Minato took a seat on the open single chair facing Ikutsuki and the door. "Ikutsuki, have you heard anything?"

"Unfortunately, no. Mitsuru has filled me in on all the information that's been gathered, but all I can say is that the culprit is most likely the Shadows." he said. "I'm also partially basing this on Yukari's sudden apprehension... she seems to

have a sixth sense when it comes to Shadows. This is actually quite common, since dealing with Shadows does tend to enhance other senses in general."

"I get it... it would explain why I can just tell when people are approaching me." Minato said.

"Exactly. Though, that could also be due to your... special circumstances." Ikutsuki said.

"No, they talk to me outright in my head. I've gotten this ability overtime to when I can predict slow opponents faster than they can call them out." Minato said.

"That's quite the skill." Ikutsuki complimented. "Though don't you have something similar, Akihiko?"

"Yeah... the main reason I can fight at such close range against Shadows is because I can just tell when something is heading towards my body. I might not always have time to react, but I know when and where the hits are coming from." he said.

"Oh... the years of experience pay off." Minato said. Akihiko smirked.

"You're damn right they do." he said.

"And you're the first to proclaim that shit." Shinjiro said.

"Doesn't change the fact that you get you're the only one of us who's gotten his ass handed to him by a common floor

Shadow."

"S-shut up! We were at a disadvantage during that fight!" Akihiko said.

"Hey, hey... nobody's doubting that you do your job well, Akihiko." Ikutsuki said.

"We doubt whether or not you can manage to do it without getting injured half of the time." Minato said. Akihiko winced. "Still... has anyone found anything out yet?"

"No... Natsuki's cousin was missing from practice today, but apparently a few people saw him at the hospital visiting the victim." Akihiko said. "As for Junpei, I have no idea what he's found out."

"Mitsuru has spoken to a bit of the faculty. Apparently, nobody had seen or heard anything strange about this Maki girl. She said she'll continue to speak to the rest of the faculty at the beginning of next week, but for now, she's training her Persona's searching ability, likely in preparation for the next full moon operation."

"I see... that's good." Minato said. "Shinji, are you heading out to Port Island today?"

"No... the punks are usually a day behind in information, and even if it is popular right now, they'll be talking about it for a few days." Shinjiro said. "For today, I think I'll get some rest... I think I'd be too tired to go to Tartarus as well, if Mitsuru

weren't training."

"Get your rest, then." Minato said. "I'll see what I can find out from some of my other contacts later tonight... but for now, does anyone want dinner?"

After hearing unanimous agreement, Minato made dinner, ate with the rest of the boys, and then showered. He left the dorm at half past eleven and made it to Port Island's outskirts as the Dark Hour struck. He found Shin in his usual spot. "... You have questions." Shin said.

"Yeah... have you seen or heard anything about a girl with black pigtails appearing in front of that tower yesterday?" Minato asked.

"No, I haven't." Shin said. "However, I did notice that there is something in the air."

"Something in the air?"

"A presence... it is seeking others. What it does when it finds them, I don't know yet." Shin said.

"So whatever's doing this is traceable, though it is elusive if Shin couldn't tell what it was doing." Minato thought. "Thanks for the info... so, shall we train?"

"I was hoping you'd ask. Come." Shin said.

Minato passed the Dark Hour training in the wasteland, withholding his new Magatama to try and find an exploitable

weakness in the clones' attack pattern. He found that they reacted very naturally, and that each encounter was different. As such, he'd have to plan on the fly. After a solid bit of killing and being killed, he returned to the dorm, and gathered his thoughts on the situation as morning came.

Meanwhile, in Tartarus, Fuuka had just climbed up the stairs and found that the floor she was on was just as monster infested as the last one. She spent the hour narrowly avoiding monsters, but couldn't shake the feeling that something was watching her. It made her uneasy, but she soldiered on, too afraid to see what would happen if she stayed in one place for too long. The Hour passed as she wandered around the new large floor she was on.

45. Chapter 45

Chapter 45: Shirogane, Again

It was the last day of March, a Sunday, and Minato had no real plans other than work. With little to do, he was planning on having a quiet morning watching TV in his room, until his phone rang. He saw it was six o'clock in the morning, and then saw that despite the caller ID being blocked, there was a number underneath it this time. *"A human at this hour that I don't know... a phone advertisement?"* Minato thought. He answered. "You've chosen quite the hour to call. Might I ask who this is?"

"Forgive me if I've disturbed you... this is Minato Ar-"

"So this is your number, Nao-chan? I'll make sure to answer every time you call." Minato said. "Oh yes, good morning."

"... Good morning, big brother." Naoto said. He could hear the relief in her voice, along with a bit of commotion behind her. "I'm actually going to be in the Iwatodai area today. I'll arrive at the station in half an hour, and I was wondering if you weren't busy today."

"I have work at nine at Paulownia, but I can pick you up and hang around until then." Minato said. "Plus, if you're still

around after five, we can see what else there is to do."

"Actually, that's perfect." Naoto said. "I'm here to attend a few seminars that begin at nine thirty, and then attend a few training classes under a group of local detectives... I plan to take the train leaving Iwatodai at eight and meet up with Kyouji in the next city over." She let out a small yawn after she finished speaking.

"... Are you getting enough sleep, Nao-chan?" Minato asked. "If Grandpa Johei is giving you problems, you say the word and I'll set him straight." Naoto giggled.

"I'm fine... It's just that I caught this train so early that I took the luxury of having a nap. I just woke up a few minutes ago." she said. "Rest assured, I'm in good health, brother."

"I think I'll be the judge of that." Minato chuckled. "Well, I'll see you at the station. Look for the hat."

"That sounds good." Naoto said. "Bye for now, brother." She hung up the phone, and Minato quickly showered and dressed. He decided to wear his grey jacket loosely over his long sleeved dark blue shirt. He added jeans and his hat, then left to meet Naoto.

He arrived at the station, which was crowded as usual, and checked his watch. It was almost six thirty, and a train slowed to a halt in the station. Minato dispersed his Fiends to get vantage points and watch over all the exits for his sister. David was the first to return. ***"She just came from the***

leftmost exit. She's got her hat and a light blue jacket eerily similar to yours, though hers is closed." he said.

"Good work. Get the others." Minato replied. He closed his jacket and walked over to where Naoto was. She was looking around, and turned to see him approaching from a few feet away. He sped up and pulled her into a quick hug, catching her off guard. "It's been too long, Nao-chan."

"... It's good to see you too." she said, hugging back. They quickly parted, and Minato chuckled. "What's so funny?"

"I heard your stomach rumble." Minato said. Naoto's eyes widened.

"I may have skipped breakfast to make the train." she said quickly, turning to adjust her cap.

"Then you're in luck. I haven't eaten for the day yet either, so we can grab something together." Minato said. "Looking for anything in particular? But hold on..."

"What?" Naoto asked. Minato bent down and went about adjusting Naoto's shirt, removing her cap to fix her hair, and then finally straightening out her collar. He was met with frantic opposition every step of the way, but managed to get the job done quite well regardless. "Didn't I tell you I could do that myself?!" Naoto asked as he finished.

"If it makes you feel any better, this is more for me than for you." Minato said with a smirk. "I told you I plan on making up

for all the missed big brother moments, right?"

Naoto looked she was going to say something, but then stopped and let out a big sigh. "... If it really makes you feel better, it's fine." she said. Minato's smirk became a full-on grin. He straightened out and crossed his arms.

"It's official. I have the most adorable little sister in the world." Minato said proudly.

"D-don't just go announcing that!" Naoto said quickly.

"But it's the truth."

"Even so!"

"Then you agree that you're adorable?"

"... I'm not going to answer that."

"See?! Adorable!"

"... I think we're both a bit light-headed from hunger. We should eat soon." Naoto said, covering the majority of her face with her cap. "A place that serves coffee would be nice... I'd like to visit Café Chagall again."

Minato chuckled. "Alright. Chagall it is." he said. His grin dropped soon after. "... But seriously? You drink coffee first thing in the morning?"

"It's an effective way to increase your energy levels early on,

so long as you refrain from more than two to three cups per day." Naoto said. She let out a small yawn and rubbed one of her eyes. "As you can see, I'm a bit tired."

"More like a bit sleepy." Minato said. "Still, I think you should watch it with the coffee. Take some hot chocolate or tea like a normal kid."

Naoto chuckled. "Only if you drink coffee like an adult."

"Hey, I'm seventeen! I'm still a kid for a year!" Minato said. "... Though I really don't want to start drinking coffee regularly." he added with a slight shudder. Naoto laughed.

"I think you might be a kid for more than just another year." she said.

"Heh! Then that's all the better for me!" Minato said, putting his hands in his pockets. The two made their way to Café Chagall and took a table. It had just opened, and was practically devoid of customers save a few single individuals in the corners. A rather cheery waitress came up to the siblings as they sat down.

"Hi! It's rare to see people your age in here so early, especially on a Sunday!" she said. "And my... you look so similar to one another! Are you related to each one another?"

"We're brothers," Naoto answered.

"I thought so! You look so similar to one another, and even

dressed alike! It must be nice having a sibling like that!" she said. Minato noticed Naoto's grin falter for a bit. "I'm an only child, and I know I get a lot of extra attention from my parents and all, but I always wondered what having a sibling would be like! You two look so close, it must be wonderful... Ah, but I'm rambling! What would you two like to order?"

"I'll have a hot chocolate." Minato said. "And a chicken croissant."

"I'll take some coffee, black, with a tuna wrap, please." Naoto said. The waitress giggled.

"The grown-up acts like a child and the child acts like a grown-up." she commented. "That'll be out shortly." She walked away, and Minato turned to Naoto.

"You okay?" he asked. Naoto smirked.

"I'm not that weak." she said. "Still... that was bittersweet."

"... Our situation is quite unique, isn't it?" Minato asked.

"That's right... we've both got a long history under our belts." Naoto said. "Simply being here and just talking to you so casually... it's surreal."

"How so?"

"... So much of my childhood was spent chasing after your shadow." Naoto said. She laughed bitterly. "I was held to the standard of my dead brother... a prodigy with so much

potential. Your death was considered such a tragic loss to the family because we'd have no male heir." she said. Her expression darkened considerably. "Yes... it didn't even matter that I was alone anymore. The family name became more important, and I was raised as your replacement, reminded day in and day out that I was to surpass father, mother, and even you. I had to be the perfect child who could do everything, and so I was... yet now that I've met you, I know that you're just a big kid... but still, I'm forced to meet these ridiculous standards." She turned to Minato and glared at him, almost tearful. "... You were right. I wanted to do a lot more than just hit you after we met again." she said. Minato took off his cap and stared at the roof.

"No rational human could just ignore those feelings." Minato said. He sighed, and looked back to Naoto. "Everything you think about me is right. I'm a coward that used my death as an excuse to run away from the family. I'm a self-absorbed prick that left his sister with the short-end of the stick so he could go around doing whatever he pleased. I'm a dumbass that tried to convince himself that he really was somebody else after all these years."

"Is that supposed to help?!" Naoto asked. "Is that going to change my life?!"

"No, but that gun in your jacket will." Minato said. Naoto stopped. "... From this moment on, you are the sole person I will allow to end my life." He smiled. "Besides, I seem to have a habit of escaping death. Chances are you'll kill me and I'll just come back to life or something anyways, right?" There

was a small silence, and the waitress returned with their orders. She said nothing, noticing the odd atmosphere between the two.

"... Are you seriously making jokes now?" Naoto asked after a while.

"Would you rather I be deathly serious and repent for my sins?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "I don't believe in any of that crap. I'm an unapologetic asshole, in case you didn't notice. Watch." He swiped Naoto's cap and put it on. "I think this suits me better than you. I'll keep it."

"What? Hey, give that back!" she said. She reached for it, but Minato held it out of her reach.

"So close, yet so far!" Minato taunted. "You'll never get it like that!"

"You can't be serious." Naoto grumbled. She got up and tried to take the cap again, but Minato got up and held it even further out of her reach.

"Oh? Surely you can do better than that!" Minato mused.

"Hey, no roughhousing in here!" a waiter screamed. "If you want to play, you can leave!"

Minato and Naoto both flinched at the scream, but Naoto took the opportunity to reclaim her hat. They both sat down, and Naoto had a confident smile on her face. "You're really an

idiot." she said.

"And you're scary... striking in the most dangerous moment. You've learned a lot." Minato said.

"... I didn't expect you to know that." Naoto said. "You really were a prodigy, huh?"

"I still am... though I know that particular phrasing from a manga." Minato said. Naoto laughed.

"Never mind, you're still a child." she said.

"You should be more of a child in my opinion." he said. They both took a drink of their respective beverages, and both fixed their hair afterwards. "So, still want to kill me?"

"You already know the answer to that, brother." Naoto said. "We should hurry and eat... I don't think the staff likes us after our little display."

"Are you sure the rumbling of your stomach isn't why you want to eat?" Minato asked.

"... You're an idiot." Naoto said, beginning to eat. Minato chuckled, and they ate quickly. Minato paid and the two left. "You said you have work at nine, correct?" she asked once they walked outside.

"That's correct. We've still got an hour." Minato said. "I think the arcade is open. Want to see what we can find?"

"You'd visit the arcade before work?" Naoto asked.

"Is there a better time? I'm not one to take time from my schedule solely to visit the arcade." Minato said.

"... I find it hard to believe you have a schedule." Naoto said, grinning.

"It forms itself, really. You'd be surprised by how much stuff I'm obligated to do." Minato said with a shrug. He frowned and adjusted his cap. "I'm actually kind of swamped, now that I think about it."

"That's hard to imagine, if you act like this all of the time." Naoto said.

"I'm a man of many faces." Minato answered. "So, what's your answer?"

"I don't mind. Both of our appointments are in this mall, after all. It'd be a waste to leave only to return so quickly." Naoto said.

"Then I hope you're good at DDR." Minato said, walking towards the arcade.

"... You're kidding me." Naoto said. They entered the arcade, which was also mostly empty, and secured a DDR machine at the back. "I've never done this before." she said.

"Then just watch me go first. It's a simple enough concept. It's not too difficult." Minato said. He got on the machine and

selected 'Pluto Relinquish' at the highest difficulty level, which earned a surprised look from Naoto. He took a deep breath and shuffled around a bit as the game prepared itself. The music started, and he had a deathly serious look on his face.

The game began, and Minato not only match his steps to the on-screen prompts, but went so far as to add in his own strange hand motions while dancing. Naoto couldn't help but laugh at her brother's ridiculous appearance, but she stopped once she looked at the screen again, and froze. Minato hadn't missed a single note yet, and kept going just as seriously as he had started. A minute of frenzied dancing later, he finished with a confident spin on the balls of his feet and let out a confident "Heh." He stepped off the machine, and looked over his results. He had gotten a perfect triple-A rating, and whistled. "Still got it." Minato said. He turned to Naoto, who stared at the screen in disbelief. "So, you want a go?" he asked, adjusting his hat.

"... I know for a fact that I can't pull that off." Naoto said.

"Hey, you can take it at an easier difficulty." Minato said.
"C'mon, try it for me?"

"... Give me an easy one." Naoto said. Minato nodded, and decided to give her 'Across the Nightmare' at a little under the average difficulty level.

"This one has a constant pace, so it shouldn't be too bad." Minato said. "Loosen those legs!"

"This is ridiculous..." Naoto muttered to herself. The game began, and she matched the steps with ease. Too much ease. The song ended and Naoto also got a perfect, though she had a very discontent look on her face. Minato chuckled.

"Let me guess... too easy?" Minato asked.

"... It was insulting." Naoto said, a fire in her eyes. "Harder." At that, Minato and Naoto spent the majority of an hour playing DDR. Though she couldn't get perfects at Minato's level, she could pull off B's on the easier songs and manage C's on the hard ones. Minato didn't perfect every song either, but he had a few he knew well that were beyond easy to him. They walked out, both shaking out their caps and adjusting their jackets. "Hah... tell me. How'd you get so good at that?"

"A few years ago, I wanted to shape up. But I hated running on treadmills and crap like that for cardio, so I decided to just play DDR for really long periods of time instead." Minato said. "I didn't get the results I wanted, but I became really good at DDR. Got a bit more flexible, though, which is awesome."

Naoto laughed. "You honestly believed that?" she asked.

"Nah, but I REALLY disliked the treadmill. It's more of a philosophical distaste; you're running yet going nowhere. Not exactly my type of thing." Minato said. "Eventually, I just ditched that all for parkour."

"Parkour, huh? That explains why you're fit, at least." Naoto said. She looked at her watch. "... It would seem our time is

up for now."

"Yes, but I'll pick you up after your training is done. When do you think you'll be out?" Minato asked.

"Pick me up?... I think the classes end around six." Naoto said.

"Then I'll be at the police station then." Minato said with a grin. Naoto looked at him questioningly. "Don't worry, I won't get arrested or anything like that." he said.

"That's... reassuring?" she said. Minato chuckled.

"It'll be fine. See you later, Nao-chan." Minato said. She nodded to him, and he strolled into Be Blue V and entered the Office.

"Not only on-time, but early as well! You must really like me!" Nemissa said, overlooking her three computers. "We've got a bit of photo shoots for you today, so lose the jacket and everything else."

"Sure thing." Minato said, beginning to undress in the middle of the Office. Nemissa threw a pen at him, which he narrowly avoided, and kept undressing.

"Not here, dumbass! At least get back there first!"

"Can you blame me? I REALLY like you, you know?" Minato mused.

"Hurry up and get back there already." Nemissa said. Minato chuckled and left his jacket in the changing room before walking to the shooting area. A few hours of more ridiculous posing later, including having to essentially play sexy peek-a-boo with a shower curtain, Minato finished and put on his uniform. However, something odd happened.

"... Nothing. I don't feel very different." Minato thought. *"Can anyone tell if the suit's magic wore off?"*

"... It did. Your contract is technically over." David said.

"Ridiculous! We must maintain this ruse to draw out more power from Nemissa!" Matador said.

"Don't worry... I've got a plan." Minato replied. He walked into the Office and sat down on Nemissa's desk. "That little peek-a-boo scene... you aren't trying to make a porno, are you?"

"What the hell? No, I'm not." she said. "And why are you just sitting there? Get to work."

"I feel a bit tired." Minato said with an obviously faked yawn. He saw her twitch. "Let me get a bit of rest."

"Minato, I order you to go to work." Nemissa said with a small grin. It died when he didn't move. "I said 'I order you to go to work'."

"In five minutes." Minato said, pulling out his phone and checking it. He swapped his active Persona to Take-

Mikazuchi. "I think a new game is out today."

"You little shit." Nemissa said. As he predicted, she charged a bolt of electricity and threw it at him. He held out his hand, and the electricity harmlessly dissipated over his body.

"Thanks for the charge. My phone battery's maxed again." Minato said. Nemissa glared at him.

"... How'd you know the contract was over?" she asked.

"I may not have read the contract, but I got someone else to read it for me." Minato said. "As of now, I should be a paid employee."

"Paid? Who do you think you are?" Nemissa asked.

"Your best salesman and model." Minato said. "If I up and quit now, business would start to die. I can already hear the swarms of people waiting to spend their money just to be around me. What would they do if I wasn't here anymore? I doubt half of them would ever return."

"... You think you're slick, don't you?" Nemissa asked. "Name your terms, and we'll see what happens."

"Since we're such good friends, I'll be generous. Same work conditions, but I can opt out of working during the week. Every day I work, I get a flat ten-thousand yen plus a third of what I sell. The ten-thousand flat becomes forty-thousand flat when I have to model." Minato said. He smirked. "But, if you

model at the same time as me, that drops to twenty-thousand."

"I'm not that cheap, leech." Nemissa said. "But your terms are acceptable."

"I am a benevolent lord, am I not?" Minato asked.

"My ass... but why are you staying here? I was certain you'd leave as soon as you got the chance." Nemissa said.

Minato chuckled and held out his hand. He focused, and surely enough, managed to materialize the Moon Tarot Card in his hand like how Igor could. It floated in his hand, slightly transparent. "Because we've yet to explore the dark side of the moon." he said.

"... What?" Nemissa asked. Minato let the card fade out of existence and got off of Nemissa's desk. He cracked his neck, and turned to her.

"It just means now that we're no longer master and servant, I want to see what kind of friends we'll be." Minato said. "Our roles are no longer set in stone. Who knows what will happen between us now?"

"If you're hitting on me, this is really bad." Nemissa said. Minato laughed.

"You don't need to understand it. Just know that even though I acknowledge the fact that you're a complete bitch and that I'm

an arrogant fuck, I still think we can be good company."
Minato said. "Of course, if you want me to hit on you, I can."

"Well, at least you're not delusional." Nemissa said. "Still, you can go to hell for calling me a bitch."

"I probably will." Minato shrugged. "Wear something kinky for me, would you?"

"Pervert." Nemissa said. She sighed. "Damn... now I actually have to deal with you properly... Shit."

"Yeah, you do. I hope you don't mind me taking a bit of vengeance for all the bullshit you put me through before."
Minato said. Nemissa flinched and then laughed nervously.

"W-what bullshit? I was just kidding, right, friend?" she said with a worried smile. "After all, you and me are so similar! We've got all those other losers to abuse, right?! Let's you and me make this money and make little kids cry, huh?! Sounds good? Good! It's the renewal of our amazing partnership!"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"... I wonder how much fun I can have in the dark side."

Minato said with a smirk. "Well then, partner, it's about time I scammed some old hags."

"That's the spirit! Take everything they've got!" Nemissa said.

Minato headed out and did what he did best, working in what the suit gave him and adding more personality than ever before into his sales pitch. His fans were crazed, and he almost got a hundred-thousand yen by the time he clocked out. He returned to the changing room, and got ready to leave. He stopped in front of Nemissa's desk. "So, the pay?" he asked.

"... I was really hoping you'd forgotten." she said. She pulled out a wad of cash and put it in front of Minato, who pocketed the money with a chuckle.

"C'mon, partner. I'm just taking my fair share." he said.

"Fair, huh? If that's what you say... it's almost generous really, but I won't question it. No changing the rules now." she said.

"Should I plan on you coming to work next week or not?"

"Actually, no. I'm a bit busy next week, so I'll only be here on Sunday." Minato said. "Well, I'll see you next week."

Minato walked out, and Nemissa returned to her laptops. "... What the hell is this 'dark side of the moon' crap he's pulling?" she muttered to herself. "Annoying kid."

Minato walked out of Be Blue V and checked his watch. It

was a little after five, so he decided to head into the police station. Officer Kurosawa was standing near the front desk, and Minato nodded to him. Kurosawa turned to his sitting companion, who got up and left. "So you're finally back. I was wondering if you could survive on those basic weapons your crew had."

"That tower actually has a few decent weapons inside. I also no longer need to purchase any weapons." Minato said.

"... Well, whatever it is, since you're all still in one piece, it must be working out." Kurosawa said. "I saw Shinjiro rejoined... I've got a few weapons he might be interested in, but judging from what I heard, I doubt he'll need a new one anytime soon. Have you considered getting armors for the team?"

"... It'd have to be light. Other than Shinjiro, the majority of the team revolves around being faster than the Shadows." Minato said.

"... Then it looks like you're on your own, unless you think Kevlar vests are 'light'." Kurosawa said. "I'll stick to keeping weaponry in stock." Minato nodded, and went to the back room to check on the new weapons. After some hard thought, he bought Yukari a stronger bow, Akihiko some lighter and denser gauntlets, Junpei a slightly heavier but much stronger sword, and a lightweight axe for Shinjiro. After storing his new loot in the Dimensional Compactor, he checked his watch again. He had fifteen minutes left until he had to pick up Naoto. "Is that all?" Kurosawa asked.

"Actually, I need to pick someone up from here. I'll just be waiting at the entrance." Minato said.

"... Is this related to SEES?" he asked.

"No, it's a relative. They're taking classes at the back." Minato said.

"... I thought I saw a resemblance." Kurosawa said. "So you're actually Minato Shirogane... the missing corpse."

"In the flesh." Minato said with a bow. "But try not to tell anyone. It's a bit of a secret."

Kurosawa chuckled. "Hmph... tell the Detective Princess I said hello." he said. Minato grinned.

"You really are well informed." he said.

"I'm not the go-to man around here for being an idiot." Kurosawa said. "She asked me to keep that secret today as well."

"And there's one more thing we reunited siblings have in common." Minato said.

"Indeed... well, what are you waiting for? Do you want to be late?" Kurosawa said. Minato gave him a respectful bow, which surprised him, and then walked out to the front of the station. "These kids today are getting stranger and stranger." he said, locking up the weapons room.

Minato passed the time idly in the little reception area at the front of the police station until he heard the clock strike the hour. He stopped and looked around the room. True to her word, Naoto appeared from a door at the back and walked over to Minato, who rose to greet her. They nodded to each other and walked out of the station. "How were the classes?" Minato asked.

"Horribly boring. It was all discussions on things I already knew. The only good part was the firearms training." she said. "I met an interesting officer at the start of the day, however."

"Yes, you did. He says hello, Detective Princess." Minato said. Naoto turned to him.

"... Why are you acquainted with Officer Kurosawa?" she asked.

"He bailed me out of here a few times." Minato said. "I mean, I kick people's asses, but he knows I only KO punks that would've ended up here anyways."

"... I see. Is that all?" Naoto asked, obviously unsatisfied with his answer.

"... He also knows I'm related to you and the 'missing corpse'. He's keeping that secret for me." Minato said.

"Ah, that makes more sense." Naoto said. She stretched a bit as they walked. "Yes, he did seem to be a man of many secrets... but I suppose such individuals exist everywhere."

After all, look at us."

Minato chuckled. "That's true. Not many people know everything about either of us, do they?"

"Boss, there's a guy tailing you." Jack said. "Real shady type, all black suit with a red inside, short and spiky black hair. Got a black scarf blocking the lower half of his face, shades, and a hat like mine."

"That's true... to be honest, only Kyouji might really know me." Naoto said, almost a little sadly. "And you, to a certain extent." Minato pulled her into a little sideways hug and leaned in close.

"... Naoto, stay alert. Somebody's tailing us." Minato said quietly. Naoto snapped out of her thoughts and nodded, putting a hand on her gun. Minato put a hand on his Evoker and the two rounded a corner quickly and began stepping in place to simulate the sound of them walking away. Sure enough, their pursuer rounded the corner, only to be met by Naoto's gun and Minato's Evoker. "Who the hell are you?" Minato asked.

The man in black stopped, but he slowly took off his hat, scarf, and then shades. Naoto lowered her gun. "... Ayato-san." she said.

"Naoto-sama... Minato-sama..." Ayato said with a bow.

"Brother, this is one of Grandpa Johei's men... but if I

remember, he is supposed to be doing security at the Estate." Naoto said.

"I abandoned my position because I was worried about you, Naoto-sama! I disagreed with Kyouji-san's idea that you need to experience this level of independence so soon!" Ayato said. "... Though to think that you know Minato-sama, let alone the fact that he's alive... Kyouji-san wasn't really leaving you alone, was he? Don't worry, I've already informed Johei-sama since this morning. He was also a little worried about you moving around in such a city on your own."

"You told the old man, huh?" Minato asked, putting his Evoker away. "... I suspect he's already at my dorm, isn't he?"

"That's correct, Minato-sama. He is awaiting your arrival." Ayato said. "He also expects to see Naoto-sama as well."

"... What should we do?" Naoto asked.

"If he already knows I'm alive and is at my dorm, I'll end up speaking to him soon enough. The question is, do you want to be there?" Minato asked Naoto. She nodded. "... Then, you're about to see where I live, Nao-chan."

"Oh! Nao-chan! That's such an a-" Ayato began.

"Nobody can call me that, Ayato-san." Naoto snapped. He stopped talking, but the joy on his face was clear enough. The sibling sighed, and Minato led them back to the dorm.

"Welcome to Minatodai dormitory." Minato said as he walked up the steps. He stopped and opened the door for the two of them, and let them go in first. He went in last, and saw Mitsuru, Akihiko, Yukari, and Junpei seated in the lounge. They were all looking apprehensively at the door as Minato walked in. On the chair facing the door, Minato saw Grandpa Johei wearing a huge black cloak and black fedora atop slacks and suede shoes. His slicked back silver hair was the most colorful thing about him, except for his odd green eyes. Minato signed in as usual, and then walked over with Naoto and Ayato in tow. He looked at his grandfather. "It's been a while, gramps."

"... I see your manners haven't improved in the slightest, Minato." Johei said. "I was just telling your friends about your Shirogane lineage."

"What? You'd keep such esteemed lineage a secret?... Well, perhaps so as to not make people feel intimidated by –"
Ayato began.

"Shut up, Ayato." Johei said. Ayato whimpered and fell silent.
"... We should speak in private, shouldn't we?"

"... Mitsuru, the fourth floor lounge is empty, correct?" Minato asked.

"Yes." she said. "We won't disturb you."

"Thank you. Grandpa, Ayato-san, Naoto, follow me." Minato said. He led them up the stairs silently, and the members of

SEES all began to breathe easier.

"... A Shirogane, huh? Those guys are known for being world-class detectives." Akihiko said. "That's a big history to hide."

"Hey, I don't think it changes much about the guy." Junpei said with a shrug. "I mean, it explains why he could just tackle our case like that, though."

"Still... why'd he lie about his family?" Yukari asked.

"... There are some things that are best kept hidden from the public eye." Mitsuru said. "We shouldn't probe. This is obviously an uncomfortable situation... I sympathize with him."

In the Command Room, Minato sat next to Naoto on one sofa as Johei and Ayato sat on the other across from them. "I know you have a lot to ask me, gramps. Where do you want to begin?" Minato asked.

"... I managed to get copies of your files from the Kirijio Group." Johei said. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. I should have sent someone to search for you when the missing corpse case occurred... we hadn't considered the possibility of you being the one who returned from the dead."

"You don't need to feel sorry for me. Everything I've been through has made me who I am today." Minato said.

"No... no child deserved your fate." Johei said.

"... What was this fate?" Naoto asked. Johei looked at

Minato, who nodded to him. He pulled a copy of Minato's file from his cloak and passed it to Naoto. Everyone gave her a bit to read everything about Minato's past. Minato saw her shocked reactions as she went over the file, though she held her voice in. After reading it, she put the file down and slowly turned to face Minato, who sat there without any emotion on his face. She was struggling to find words. "I told you. Never become like me." he said.

"... I had no idea." Naoto managed. "And I complained to you..."

"That's what big brothers are for, right?" Minato asked, a small smile forming on his face. "C'mon, don't start crying on me now."

"... F-forgive me." Naoto said. Minato gave her a hug, and Ayato was about to say something until Johei smacked him in the face. Minato chuckled at the sight, and pulled away from Naoto, who reacted similarly.

"J-Johei-sama!" Ayato said, clutching his nose.

"That's for being inconsiderate." the three Shiroganes said simultaneously. They stopped, glanced at one another, and then shared a little laugh.

"Well, we really are all related." Minato said. "Though you've gotten much nicer since I last saw you, gramps."

"Indeed... maybe it's because you look so much like your

father now." Johei said. "We seem to have a habit of copying our predecessors... I looked like my father, who in turn looked like his deceased elder brother. I thought the cycle had broken, but now, you look just like your father while Naoto looks just like you, her thought to be deceased elder brother."

"So it is a family thing." Minato chuckled.

"Yes, it is... I must say, though, I am more than relieved to see you alive. I have come here today to say that it's all that matters to me now." Johei said.

"... Wait, what?" Ayato asked.

"... So you aren't trying to drag me back to the family?" Minato asked.

"No... from what I've seen and heard of you, I know that your future will be bright. To try and force you back into the family would not only rip you from your friends, but also disrespect Naoto." Johei said. "We may have put her on this path, but she has never been forced to remain on it. I have given her multiple opportunities to quit."

Minato turned to Naoto. "Is that true?" he asked.

"... I wanted to be like father... and you." Naoto said. "Even if I didn't like the circumstances that got me here, this path is mine."

"Then it won't be yours alone." Minato said. "I'll be there every

step of the way."

"I know that." Naoto said with a smile.

"On that note, I'd like to say that you're also welcome to the Shirogane Estate whenever you wish. We will always welcome you." Johei said.

"... Thanks, gramps." Minato said. "But I probably won't swing around too often."

"I know you're a busy man, Minato. I can tell from the sheer number of contacts I discovered you had." Johei said. "As am I, however. I'm sorry to say that I can stay no longer. Forgive me for not taking the time to learn more about you."

"It's fine, gramps. I get it." Minato said. "You were always restless anyways."

Johei let out a laugh and rose from his seat. "Yes, I have." he said. He paused, and turned to Naoto.

"... I know. Kyouji is waiting on our call, isn't he?" Naoto asked. Johei nodded.

"I'm sorry for taking time away from you." he said.

"It's fine... this has done a lot more than I had thought possible." Naoto said.

"That's right... I think all of us can be happy about tonight." Minato said. He got up with Naoto, and opened the door to

allow them all to leave. They marched downstairs, where Ayato raced ahead to hold the front door for everyone, and they left the dorm to find a black car with heavy black tint parked in front of the dorm. Kyouji was standing next to it. Minato heard Ayato whisper 'Speak to Kyouji' as he passed by.

"Young Master." he greeted. Minato walked over and gave him a hug. "It's good to see you in such high spirits."

"It's good to see you, old fool." Minato said. He lowered his voice, and whispered. "... You have something to tell me."

"One of our enemies has discovered your existence. Naoto-sama will be safe with us, but you must beware of a man named Banta. Kill him if you must." Kyouji replied.

"He won't see another sunrise, then." Minato whispered. "... This is a lot like when I told you secrets as a child."

"No... it's less stressful on my back." Kyouji replied. Minato pulled away and the two laughed.

"This is why your name is Idiot Kyouji." Minato said. He turned to Naoto, who was smiling next to them. Minato bent down and bumped his head against Naoto's. "I'm here anytime you need me. Let's hang out again sometime, huh?"

"I'll call whenever I'm in the area." Naoto said. "You stay out of trouble."

"I won't make any promises." Minato said. He looked at Johei and Ayato, who just gave him knowing nods. Johei was never a man for excessive physical contact, and he didn't exactly know Ayato all that well, so he didn't bother trying to hug them. They all got in the car, and he waved them off as they drove away. *"... And there goes my family. Huh... Naoto was right. This is a surreal experience."* Minato thought. *"As for this assassin... I'll lure him out and kill him tonight."*

Minato walked back into the dorm, and the other members of SEES looked at him expectantly. "And so you have it. Once more, I claim the title of Shirogane." Minato said with a smirk. "I intend to keep it this time." With that, Minato left the members of SEES to their thoughts, and showered. He returned to the lounge to eat dinner, and left just as quickly. *"Alright... I'll wander about aimlessly, and you tell me if you detect anybody following me."* Minato ordered his Fiends.

He did as he said, music in his ears as he walked, until Matador returned to him. ***"There is a brown-haired man in a hakama following you from one street over. I'm impressed that he can track you like that."*** Matador said. ***"It's almost midnight... what's the plan?"***

"I'll walk to the edge of the port... and then deal with him in the Dark Hour." Minato said. He reached Iwatodai's port, and checked his watch. He had ten minutes left. He wandered around for a bit, and with five minutes left on the clock, stood staring at the ocean from a pier. ***"Tell me if the guy tries to attack me."***

"Will do." David said. As he stared at the ocean, he checked his clock every now and again. **"He's coming."** David said. Sure enough, Minato looked over his shoulder to see an aged looking man with a long bamboo fishing pole and basket strapped over his back in a hakama and geta walk next to him.

"Oh? Rare to see a young man watching fish at this time of night." the man said. He chuckled. "But you've got no rod."

"I'm not fishing." Minato said, staring at his watch. Twenty seconds. "Just doing a bit of thinking, really. But I wonder, can you really catch anything here?"

"The big fishing boats drive the small fish to the edge. It's here we smart fisherman get first dibs on the rarer prizes." he said. Minato chuckled, and the Dark Hour struck. Sure enough, the man next to him turned into a coffin.

"Yes... the little fish come here to die, don't they?" Minato said. He walked over to the coffin and ripped it open. The man, dazed and confused as all people who are forced awake during the Dark Hour first are, couldn't stop Minato from throwing him into the ocean of blood.

"W-what is this?!" he asked as he surfaced.

"Welcome to hell." Minato said from the pier. "You've come here for the sin of trying to kill a Shirogane. You will face judgment."

"This is a poison! What did you do to me?!" the man asked, looking around to see if he could get out of the ocean of blood.

"No, Banta... this is your fate." Minato said. "What lies beyond... is death." Minato partially summoned Jack and David underwater, so that only their skeletal bodies existed without weapons or clothing. They surfaced next to Banta and grabbed him.

"T-this isn't real! This is a trick!" Banta screamed, trying to break free of the two Fiends' grip. Minato laughed maniacally.

"Struggle all you want." Minato taunted. Jack and David began to slowly force him under water. "In the end, you're still dead."

Banta kicked and screamed as Jack and David put him just deep enough so his arms and legs could scratch the surface, but he couldn't take any breath. After a few minutes of watching a small patch of blood frantically kick up and down, then gradually slow to a stop, Jack and David resurfaced, followed slowly by Banta's limp body. "**Dead.**" they both said.

"Now, to dispose of that body." Minato said. His two fiends disappeared, and he brought his Evoker to his head. "Power." The red angel appeared behind him, and aimed its lance at Banta's body. "Bury it at the bottom of the port."

Power flew up in the air, and then zoomed downwards, impaling Banta's body and diving into the ocean of blood. A few minutes passed, and Minato could feel power using

Magaru to keep its speed. He felt when it hit the bottom, stuffed its lance and Banta's body into the dirt, and then covered it up with other pieces of dirt before dissipating. "Hmph. Dumbass." Minato said, twirling his Evoker in one hand as he walked back to the dorm. He enjoyed a Dark Hour stroll with only a single thought in his mind: *"Don't fuck with a Shirogane."*

46. Chapter 46

Chapter 46: Compiling Information

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Should I add an opening and ending theme XD?

Minato had his headphones on and was singing while making breakfast. "Windless night... moonlight melts... my ghostly shadow... to the lukewarm glow."

"Good morning, Minato." Mitsuru said, entering the lounge with Akihiko.

"Morning." Akihiko said.

"Nightly dance!" Minato sang, throwing up an onion over some eggs he was frying. He grabbed two small knives. "Of bleeding swords!" He sliced the onion to tiny bits that fell into the pan.

"... Should we stop him?" Akihiko asked as Minato threw the knives above his head and turned to drop them down on a small stack of hash browns.

"Remind me that," Minato continued, now quickly dicing said hash browns. "I still live." Minato moved the hash browns into a different pan, and ditched the knives in favor of a spatula.

"I think he'll be fine." Mitsuru said. Minato flipped the eggs in his pan into the air.

"I will burn my dread!" he continued, guiding the eggs back into the pan with the spatula. He put the pan back down and put both hands on his head. "I once ran away! From the god of fear! And he chained me to despair!"

"... Are you sure he's...?" Akihiko asked.

"... He should be." Mitsuru said.

"Burn my dread!" Minato continued, actually twirling over to a different pan and moving two recently finished pancakes onto a large plate. He flung the spatula back to where he kept his tools and backed away with his arms extended. "I'll break the chain and run till I see the sunlight again!"

Yukari and Junpei walked into the lounge, confused by the noise, and walked down to see Minato grabbing various fruit. "... Is he okay?" Yukari asked. Everyone else shrugged.

"I'll! Lift my face! And run to the sunlight!" he continued, placing his fruit neatly in a row. He materialized David's violin and hunched over, suddenly playing a slow and steady beat that progressed constantly, shooting little blades of wind at the fruit. Everyone expected the worst case scenario, but he had surprisingly good control over his strikes. The fruit was diced by the time he played the last crescendo, and he let the violin fade into nothing. However, he held his pose.

"So, do ya think he's –" Junpei began. Minato interrupted him.

"Voiceless town!" Minato continued, straightening out his posture. "Tapping feet!" He grabbed the little platter of diced fruit and essentially skipped over to add it into the remainder of his pancake batter. "I clench my fists... in my pockets tight."

"... What's with this song?" Yukari asked. "It's weird..."

"Far in mist..." Minato continued, mixing the batter. "A tower awaits..." He poured out two new fruit pancakes.

"Dude, I don't think he's singin' any normal song." Junpei said.

"Like a merciless tomb," he continued, moving over to quickly rinse the knives. "Devouring the moonlight."

"... These lyrics do seem... targeted." Mitsuru said.

"Clockwork maze... and unknown." he continued, drying the knives and grabbing a plate. "In frozen time..." He took some cheese out of the fridge and readied his tools. "A staircase stands."

"This can't be coincidental." Akihiko said, narrowing his eyes.

"Shadows crawl!" Minato sang, hacking away at the cheese. "On a bloodstained floor!" He separated his handiwork from the rest of the cheese and put it away.

"What the heck?! He's singing about Tartarus!" Yukari said.

"I rush straight ahead!" Minato said, shifting quickly back to the eggs to finish them off. "With a sword in hands."

"I think he's singin' about himself... didn't think he was that kinda –" Junpei began.

"Cold touch of my..." he continued, finishing the eggs and then moving on to the pancakes. "Trembling gun."

"This is..." Mitsuru said quietly.

"I close my eyes..." Minato continued, slowing down to carefully pour another group of pancakes. "To hear you breathe."

Shinjiro walked down to see all of SEES staring at Minato. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I will burn my dread!" Minato sang again, grabbing some bacon he had on the counter and throwing it into a pan. He materialized David's violin once more. "This time I'll grapple down that god of fear! And throw him into hell's fire!" he continued, playing a deep note that caused a small blaze to form in the pan with the bacon. It disappeared, and the smell of flash cooked food went through the air. "Burn my dread!"

"Just don't burn the bread, dumbass." Shinjiro said.

"I'll shrug the pain and run till I see the sunlight again." he continued, flipping the pancakes again a few times. "OH! I will run! Burning all! Regret and dread!" Minato went about

finalizing the breakfast dishes by setting them up so everyone could take what they wanted. "And I!" he continued, looking over everything he had made. "Will face the sun!" Minato continued, summoning Jack and David to help him move all the food over to the table. "With the pride of the living!" he finished, gesturing to the other members of SEES. He took his headphones out and stopped his mp3 player. "Breakfast is served."

"... What was with that song?" Yukari asked.

"Oh? You liked it?" Minato asked. "I made it up over a nice instrumental track."

"See? Told ya he was singin' about himself." Junpei said. "... That was kinda emo at the end, though."

"Meh... had to throw in all that cheesy stuff for the ladies, right?" Minato said.

"... Yes. Well then, thank you for breakfast as always, Minato." Mitsuru said. "Shall we eat?"

SEES had breakfast together, and they ate in a general quiet until Yukari broke the silence. "So, Minato... how'd, uhh, things go with the family?" she asked.

"Better than I could have imagined." Minato said with a grin. *"Well, except for one odd thing... I didn't get a Social Link. I'll have to speak to Igor about that."* "Yes, my name is Minato Shirogane... but I really don't care if you call me Shirogane or

Arisato."

"Oh, okay... that's good to hear." Yukari said. "... It's nice that you get along with your family so well."

Minato nodded and resumed eating. After breakfast, they all headed to school and walked to the front gates. Minato immediately felt something he felt he should recognize along with a sense of general unease, and noticed that Mitsuru looked troubled. "... You feel it too?" Minato asked.

"... There seems to be a sense of restlessness in the air." Mitsuru said. "Sharp as ever, I see."

"The detective blood runs deep, I suppose." Minato said.

"You aren't lying about that... I think your new, or rather, original title, suits you well." Mitsuru said. Minato grinned and nodded back. "Still, this feeling... I hope it has nothing to do with the Shadows."

"I'd say the same, but with a full moon coming up in a mere week, I'm certain it's because one of the big ones is approaching." Minato said.

"I agree... Akihiko said we may be receiving a new member, but will it be in time for the next operation?... You're well acquainted with Yamagishi, correct? If it's not a problem, could you check on her status?" Mitsuru said.

"I was planning on consulting her for details on 2-E's situation

anyways... if you want me to introduce her to SEES, just say the word." Minato said.

"No... we've yet to truly confirm whether or not she has the potential. We'll hold off on that for now, but at a time like this, I believe it's in our best interests to monitor her." Mitsuru said.

"Good idea... I'll place a Fiend on her once I see her." Minato said.

"... Would you care to explain?" Mitsuru asked.

"I can monitor other people from afar if I set my Fiends to watch them." Minato said. "I don't know how far, but according to them, they could watch Fuuka's room from mine if I really wanted them to."

"That's quite the ability." Mitsuru said. "But I have to ask. Have you been monitoring other members of SEES?"

Minato chuckled. "If you're asking if I'm doing anything unsavory, the answer is no." he said. "Besides, we both know I have much better options available."

"... Yes, I suppose that's correct." Mitsuru said, taking a deep breath. "Then, I expect an update at the end of the Council meeting."

Minato nodded, and they parted ways. He kept an eye out for Fuuka, but didn't notice her. He went to class, and sent David to class 2-E to search for her. He returned a few minutes

later.

"Boss, she's not here." David said.

"Absent? Hmm... that's odd." Minato replied. *"Well, I'll see if I can learn anything after school."*

The day passed quickly, and Minato went to see what information he could gather before he attended Council. His targets were the unusually chatty students loitering in the hallway outside of his classroom, but he noted a few students in his class had talked about ghosts and being haunted by cute girls, a topic a lot stranger than he was accustomed to hearing. *"Ghosts, huh? Is that what people are claiming?"*

"They say a girl in classroom C fainted too... Apathy Syndrome again, right? Phew... I'm glad it wasn't someone in my class..." one girl said.

"Another? This is escalating more quickly than I thought." Minato noted.

"I told you! She just happened to faint in front of the gate!" her friend said to her.

"... And in front of the gate as well? That's some coincidence... or is it?" Minato thought. He moved over to an odd looking girl who was busy mumbling to herself.

"Everyone's talking about ghosts and whatnot..." the odd girl said.

"You can say that again... Any idea why?" Minato replied, catching her off guard.

"Oh, A-Arisato-san! I guess they're all really scared since those three girls all ended up in front of the gate, you know?" she said.

"... *Twice is a coincidence, three is a pattern.*" Minato thought. "Three girls, huh? That's strange."

"I think we'll be fine! After all, if a ghost gave us trouble, Mitsuru-senpai would cut it right in half! To see her fight with a sword... I don't know if I could take it! Don't you agree?!" the odd girl continued.

"... Yeah, that would be something." Minato said. "Speaking of Mitsuru-senpai, I need to get to Council. Thanks for the talk."

"O-oh, tell her I said hi!" the odd girl said as Minato walked away.

"*Three girls... When did the other two happen?*" Minato thought. He made his way to the main lobby and approached the vendor. "Hey, are there any lemon breads left?" Minato asked, knowing exactly what the answer was.

"Sorry! We're all sold out for today. Anything I can do for you instead?" the vendor asked.

"Yeah, actually... I saw a lot of people on edge today... can

you tell me why?" Minato asked.

"What? You didn't hear? A boy just fainted in the middle of reading in his class today!... I wonder if he's alright? Anyways, there's a lot of weird stuff going on out there... you be careful, alright?" the vendor said.

"... Thanks for the info. You take care as well." Minato said, walking off to the check the main club hallway. *"Another in class... I don't think this has to do with our particular case, but it only reinforces the activity level of the Shadows."*

Minato found a student busily texting on his cellphone, and asked him what he thought about the incidents occurring at the school. "Three days in a row, we've had students at this school passing out. It's a hell of a mystery. I'm itching to know more... I should try looking into it." he said.

"Really? Since last Friday?" Minato asked.

"Yeah, that's when it started... and then all the stuff about girls popping up in front of the school gates started too, going for three days in a row. Something's up." the boy said.

"You've got that right. Good luck with your search." Minato said, walking away from the boy. *"So the Shadow activity level started rising since Friday, but the girls began appearing near Tartarus on Saturday... did something happen to make the Shadows change their behavior? Regardless, there were three incidents involving girls at the front gate, though these latter two were covered up..."*

Minato organized his thoughts as he went to Student Council. He was one of the latest members to arrive, but took put on his armband and sat next to Mitsuru. "I was gathering intelligence. I'll give you a detailed report after the meeting." he whispered to her. She smirked.

"Dependable as always." Mitsuru said. "... Any news on Yamagishi?"

"No... she was absent today, oddly enough." Minato said.

"That's not too surprising... her medical history shows that she was often sick as a child, and to some extent, even now in high school. She has check-ups regularly, but if the sickness is sudden, I doubt much can be done." Mitsuru said. "It seems we have to wait on her return."

"Then we shall." Minato replied. Mitsuru nodded, and began the meeting. It was mostly uneventful, with most of the talk being about containing order. Minato and Shinjiro were once again sent to discipline any bullies they found, and they began their patrol.

"Tch... gettin' sent to beat the shit outta more idiots is a lot more demanding than I thought." Shinjiro said.

"I thought this was your kind of job, Shinji." Minato said. "You were a bouncer and a guard before, weren't you?"

"I didn't have to walk all over the goddamn place at those jobs. And hell, nine outta ten guys just ran away when I gave

em' a good glare. The ones that challenged me were all overconfident idiots who couldn't fight for shit anyways." Shinjiro said.

"... Wow. You're lazier than I thought." Minato said.

"I ain't lazy. I just don't like wasting my energy." Shinjiro said.
"Unlike you, most people can't function constantly."

"And unlike you, most people actually do more than just sit on their ass all day." Minato said.

"Sit on my ass all day? I cook, I do this Council shit, and I fight in Tartarus. That's more than enough." Shinjiro said.
"There's not much else I have to do."

"... Have you ever considered self-improvement?" Minato asked.

"There's nothing to improve. I like how I am now." Shinjiro said. "... Though if you're talkin' about other forms or improvement, don't worry... I'm getting those."

Minato chuckled. "I didn't doubt that... but I'm surprised you're content with how you are now. I mean, at least you could improve your grades so Mitsuru would stop giving you crap about it."

"And learn a bunch of crap I'll never need to know? I'll pass." Shinjiro said.

"You're a big baby, you know that?" Minato said. "You only do

what you want to, never venturing beyond that."

"... You think I didn't try that before?" Shinjiro asked.
"Because I have."

"Really? You did something to better yourself just because you could?" Minato asked.

"Yeah... and I had to quit SEES because of it." Shinjiro said.
"And before you go telling me you're an example of the good that comes from trying that stupid shit, don't waste your breath. You and I both know you're a psychotic prick."

"A very happy psychotic prick." Minato corrected. Shinjiro scoffed, and the two chanced upon three boys cornering another near the vending machines at the back of the school.
"And look. I'm about to be even happier." he continued. He cleared his throat. "I told you shits to get me Yakisoba, not some vending machine shit!" Minato said loudly, getting the attention of the three boys.

"Damn, it's the dogs!" one boy said.

"Woof." Shinjiro replied. Minato ran forward and delivered a flying knee to the boy who said that, knocking him onto his back. His two friends immediately split up and tried to run. Minato grabbed the one to his right, pulling his victim into a chokehold and slamming him against the vending machine. He tried to fight back, but Minato began pummeling him in the stomach. He cried out in agony, and Minato dropped him. He put his hands over his stomach, and Minato grabbed his

exposed face and started slamming him repeatedly into the vending machine, until finally throwing him to the ground. He stomped on him twice for good measure, and then delivered a solid kick to send him rolling away.

Shinjiro had rushed over and caught the boy who sprinted left by the back of his head. He yanked him backwards, and delivered a swift elbow to the boy's chest, sending him to the floor. He followed it up by walking over and taking the boy by his leg and lifting him up to stuff him in a trash can headfirst. Minato, who had just finished assaulting his victim, dragged the crying boy over and dumped him in the same trashcan, leaving the two boys stuck uncomfortably. They looked over their work for a moment, saw that the cornered boy had long since fled, and walked away.

"Wasn't that fun?" Minato asked.

"No." Shinjiro said. Minato frowned.

"Liar. You liked it." Minato said. "I know for a fact that you did."

"How so?"

"You hurried to catch that boy running. And you almost grinned when your elbow sent that boy to the floor." Minato said. "You used energy for this."

"... I did what I had to do." Shinjiro said.

"Something's holding you back." Minato said. "I don't know what it is, but I bet it's probably something to do with your past."

"Congrats, you can put two and two together. Real ace detective shit there." Shinjiro said.

"You want to see ace detective shit? Okay." Minato said. "... I deduce that the repression of your violent tendencies is because when you went all out in the past, something went horribly wrong. I'd say you either caused serious injury or death to someone that didn't deserve it. Add that to your strange silent resolution to die, and I think it's safe to say said person you killed has a sibling or child that you hope will one day take revenge on you, correct?"

"... Looks like you do have a real brain in there." Shinjiro said. "I'll spare you the particulars, but yeah, I killed a kid's mom. I know he's going to come for me, because he saw me and Castor. He'll be the one to give me what I deserve." There was a short pause, and then Minato started laughing. "... You got a problem?"

"Ahahaha, I think my sides are gonna hurt!" Minato said, clutching his stomach. "You... you want to up and die because you killed one person?! That's gold!" he said, laughing some more. "What are you, one of those ridiculous 'eye for an eye' types?"

"Tch... this is exactly why you're an idiot. It ain't no joke when you kill a human... it's not like killing a Shadow." Shinjiro said.

"That person had a whole life, worth just as much as your own. If you take one, you should lose one... especially if your actions ruin the lives of others." Minato slowly stopped laughing and cleared his throat.

"You know, I've killed humans before as well. I killed one last night, actually." Minato said. Shinjiro gave him a suspicious glance. "Yeah, this one idiot threatened me around midnight. When the Dark Hour came, I ripped him out of his coffin and drowned him. He wasn't the first person I've killed and I doubt he'll be the last."

"... What the fuck is wrong with you?" Shinjiro asked.

"No, what the fuck is wrong with you?" Minato retorted. "Yes, the lives you end might have been worth as much as your own, though I highly doubt that... Regardless, based on your logic, to throw your own life away would be tantamount to throwing away the lives you've taken... Wouldn't it make more sense to live your own to the fullest after taking a life, as to honor their sacrifice to your existence?"

"Who the hell would think like that other than you?" Shinjiro replied.

"The people who accept that taking life is as unavoidable as taking breath." Minato said. "All living things will die sooner or later... it only makes sense that by causing others to die sooner, you ensure that you die later, doesn't it? Electing to lose your life sooner because you cut another short is idiotic."

"Your philosophy is bat-shit insane." Shinjiro said.

"Funny. I think yours is." Minato said. "It seems we agree to disagree, my misanthropic senpai."

Shinjiro sighed. "How many people know you're a friggin' serial killer?" he asked.

"Mitsuru, Ikutsuki, and my family. But Mitsuru and Ikutsuki think I don't kill humans anymore, which was true until last night." Minato said. "Yes, I am a murderer. Yes, I'll probably burn in hell should I die. But no, I won't bitch or complain about it. Why waste time with that when you can revel in your accomplishments? The Norse had the right idea when they all got drunk and bragged about how many people they killed and how. You'd fit right in, considering you're a pretty big guy with an axe."

"... Did you really think those were the best words you could have chosen?" Shinjiro asked. "Because you just said that you kill people, know that it's wrong but enjoy it anyways, and then say I need to get on that boat."

"Exactly!" Minato said. Shinjiro facepalmed.

"... I'm getting lectured by a psychopath on how to live my life." he muttered to himself. He shook his head, and sighed. "Look, I'm not saying I agree with any of the shit that just spewed out of your mouth... but I get your point. You want me to quit sulking just because I fucked up once, right?"

"Correct." Minato said.

"Hmph... then I'll say this. You suck ass at giving pep talks." Shinjiro said. "But I'll think about it."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"Will you think about making murder a habit since you've realized how fun it is?" Minato asked.

"Don't start putting me in the same boat as you." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled, and the two finished their patrol without much interruption. They returned to the Student Council Room and waited until the remaining members went home, leaving only the three SEES members inside.

"So there was only one incident today... very good." Mitsuru said. "Now then... Minato, what have you found out about the incident?"

"For the last three school days, a student has fainted in class. This only really represents the rising Shadow activity level. However, for the last three days, including Sunday, a girl has been found outside of the school gate." Minato said. "That means that after Maki was found, two more girls appeared... but the school covered it up so as to not attract attention."

"... Yes, that would make sense." Mitsuru said. "I can't say I disagree with whoever decided to hide the new cases, but still... there were three victims?"

"Yes... but that's all I've really got. The prevailing theory is that there's a ghost causing the girls to appear in front of the gate, but I haven't looked into that. I expect Junpei or Yukari has, though." Minato said.

"I expect they have." Mitsuru said. "I wasn't able to discover much... but after looking over the class rosters, I realized that the majority of missing students are second years, in either class C or class E..." Mitsuru said. "... Do you think Yamagishi could have been one of the cases?"

"No." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru and Minato turned to him. "I spoke to a few of my boys last night... they said all the girls who ended up in front of the gates were part of one big crew. I used to see them talking shit on the outskirts of the station every now and again... Fuuka Yamagishi was never with them."

"... So they're targeting a certain group of people?" Mitsuru asked.

"Twice is a coincidence, but three times is a pattern." Minato said. "I've never seen a Shadow distinguish one meal from another, though... something strange is happening."

"Yes... this type of behavior is unheard of." Mitsuru said. "We should return to the dorm and update the others. I'm curious

to hear what they've found as well."

"Good idea... my boys mentioned a ghost story as well, but I thought it was a bunch of crap. We might learn something new, now that we know it's tied to the disappearing cases." Shinjiro said. "Let's go."

The trio quickly returned to the dorm, and found the rest of SEES and Ikutsuki gathered around the table. They joined them, and Mitsuru updated everyone else on what they'd found out. Junpei and Minato had a little chat while everyone else took in the information. "Now then, I'd like to hear what the three of you have found out." she said. "Akihiko?"

"... Sorry. All I know is that Natsuki Moriyama has become a pit paranoid since the incidents started, and has been lashing out a lot. The athletes tend to try and ignore the rumors for the most part." Akihiko said.

"That's fine... and you, Junpei, Yukari?" Mitsuru asked.

"I didn't find anything you guys didn't..." Yukari said.

"Hah, I got quite a bit!" Junpei said. "You shoulda seen the posts on the student message board... those girls they found at the front gate? The biggest rumor is that it's this one angry spirit from a ghost story."

"H-hey... C'mon! Nobody believes that stuff!... Right?" Yukari said.

"So, what is this ghost story about?" Mitsuru asked.

"Wha-?! It's probably made up... so why bother?!"

"I'm interested. Go ahead and tell us." Akihiko said.

"Then, Minato, if you would." Junpei said. Minato chuckled snapped his fingers. All the lights went out, earning a little scream from Yukari, and then eerie violin music began from behind Junpei. Suddenly, two fireballs that barely illuminated Junpei's face appeared to either side of him, and he began his story in a much more serious tone than anyone had ever heard him use before, and floating orbs of fire danced lightly at his sides.

"Good evening. Welcome to "Junpei's Believe It, or Don't."
...There are many strange things in this world... According to one story... if you get caught at school late at night, you'll be devoured by a maniacal ghost that roams the halls! The other day, this friend of mine-let's call him Shu... He said to me, "Junpei, I saw something strange." He sounded serious, so I asked him what he'd seen. He said it was about the girl in 2-E... He claims he saw her go into the school on the night of the incident. I couldn't believe it. She's not the kind of girl to be out at night... But Shu was as white as a sheet. He insisted it was true... Then, it hit me... That ghost must've tried to make her its dinner! And that's why they found her lying on the ground by the gate! I felt a chill run down my spine, and I broke into a cold sweat... Yes, there are strange things in this world... Believe it... or don't." he said. The violin music stopped, and the fire disappeared. The lights came back on

shortly after, just revealing that Junpei and Minato were grinning at each other. Yukari was whimpering in the corner.

"... So what do you think, Akihiko?" Mitsuru asked.

"I think it's worth investigating." Akihiko said. "We know the facts, but the cause is still a mystery... any information we find could help."

"Wow, I didn't know you were so afraid of ghosts, Yuka-tan. That's kinda funny." Junpei said.

"Hey, watch it!... F-fine, then let's investigate. We'll each ask around for the rest of the week. I'll prove that this ghost story is just an urban legend!" Yukari said.

"I appreciate that. The story is a bit unnerving..." Mitsuru said.

"Then, I'll let you guys handle it. Just make sure you sleep with one eye open..." Akihiko said. "... But what about you, Shinji?"

"... I'll see what else I can get from the guys behind Port Island." Shinjiro said.

"I'll continue my search as usual." Minato said. "Ikutsuki, have you heard anything about this?"

"Unfortunately, no... but there've been a lot of inquiries by parents and reporters alike, all wondering about the new victims of Apathy Syndrome. It's going to become a problem if this keeps up." Ikutsuki said.

"I think it's in our best interests to avoid going to Tartarus tonight... after all, Yukari and Shinjiro will be busy." Mitsuru said.

"That's probably for the best." Minato said. "I think I'll check out Paulownia tonight and see if I hear anything. What about you, Junpei?"

"... I think I'll help out Yuka-tan. Make sure she doesn't get too scared or anything." Junpei said.

"I am not that scared!" Yukari shouted.

"... Good idea." Minato said. SEES dispersed, and Minato had a quick shower and dinner before heading out to Paulownia Mall. *"I intend to see what's going on with this ghost story, but there's something else I need to check first."*

He made his way into the Velvet Room. "Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I assist you, Minato?" Elizabeth greeted.

"I have a question first." Minato said, taking his seat in front of Igor. "Igor... you said Social Links represented the strength of my bonds with others, correct?"

"That's right." Igor said.

"So why haven't I formed a Social Link with my sister? Or anyone from my family for that matter?" Minato asked. Igor smiled.

"Tell me... can you form a Social Link with your hand?" Igor replied. He gave Minato a moment to think before continuing. "A Social Link is a bond that ties you to others. Though intertwined, your fates are separate. You may nurture one another's growth, or perhaps grow into bitter enemies concerned only with holding an advantage over one another... however you develop your relationships, you will inevitably grow closer and closer to the person you've bonded with. Remember, however, that these bonds must be created... the fate of your arm is partially your own fate, after all."

"... I see. I can't form a Social Link with an extension of myself, can I?" Minato asked. "Just like how I can't form a Social Link with my Personae or Fiends, huh?"

"Correct... you are a strange one, Minato. You value the lives of people you rarely see more than your own, knowing full well that you can draw no power from them." Igor said.

"... Then, by drawing power from the others, I'm making them a part of myself?" Minato asked. He paused. "Then I'll value the other's lives above my own once I've taken all the power I can get from them."

Igor chuckled. "Your understanding of what your power entails always amuses me... it's far too advanced for a guest. If you could perform fusion... well, I may even consider making you a resident, should you survive your journey."

"I second this idea!" Elizabeth said.

"Me, as an elevator attendant?" Minato mused. "I'd probably give you a headache, Igor. I'd do some work on the décor in here, just like Elizabeth."

"Don't worry. Every guest's incarnation of the Velvet Room is different." Igor said. "Though if you'll encourage Elizabeth... I may have to consider revoking my offer."

Minato chuckled. "That's probably for the best... but I wonder how strong I'd be with access to the entire Compendium?"

"That is an interesting thought... who knows what power you have yet to attain?" Igor said.

"Still, this is all just speculation..." Minato said. "But I must say... for me to start valuing others more than myself to attain power... an odd price."

"You will inevitably change the lives of your Social Links, Minato... as such, they will inevitably change you. It's a universal truth... the question is, how will you let them change you?" Igor asked. "I've spent more time than I'd like to admit looking at your possible futures... I'm interested in all of them."

"Oh? How human of you." Minato said.

"... You even see the results of your work. This level of progress is truly incredible." Igor said.

CRACK!

"Does this mean I'm becoming something more than human?"
Minato asked.

Thou art I...

"As you draw power from transcendent beings, there are only so many ways to change them." Igor said.

And I art thou...

"Yes... those who preside at the pinnacle of reality are much more likely to descend than rise, correct?" Minato asked.

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"Indeed, Blank Card... indeed." Igor said.

"Thanks for the clarification." Minato said, rising from his chair. "See you guys around." He left the Velvet Room, and returned to Paulownia Mall for information gathering. He didn't find any useful information after a bit of snooping, and returned to the dorm a little before midnight. Ikutsuki had apparently left, and only Mitsuru remained in the lounge.

"Welcome back... it's rare for you to return this early." Mitsuru said.

"I failed to get any useful information. I think I'll just make a plan tonight." Minato said. Mitsuru nodded, and he returned to his room. As he went about piecing together various pieces of

information, the Dark Hour struck, and he soon felt a familiar presence behind him. "Good evening." he said without looking up from his work. He heard a childish laugh from behind him, and knew exactly who it was.

"That's my line." the boy in the striped outfit said. "... I'm glad you remembered me."

"Give yourself some credit. You're pretty hard to forget." Minato said. The boy chuckled.

"I guess so... well, I came to see you again, as I promised. How are you?" he asked.

"A bit busy... though it is time for my tea break." Minato said, spinning around in his chair to face the boy. "And you're drinking with me, no questions asked."

"... If you insist." the boy said. Minato grinned and lit the fire underneath his kettle. He pulled the two chairs by the table out, and took a seat.

"Good... so, let's talk." Minato said. "Though you'll probably just get straight to the cryptic hints, won't you?"

"No... no cryptic hints this time." the boy said. "This is a real warning... you already know that in one week, a full moon will come. And with it, your next ordeal. So, be careful."

"Speaking of my next ordeal, I've got a question about these big Shadows." Minato said. "Are they active before the full

moon?"

"... I don't know." the boy said. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm looking into a few occurrences that I'm almost certain are related to Shadow activity." Minato said. "I'm piecing together a little information at a time, and I was wondering if you could help me out."

"I would if I knew anything... but I can't remember." the boy said. The water, already hot from use less than ten minutes prior, finished boiling.

"It's alright. I mean, you warn me about the ordeals and all." Minato said, pouring out the two cups of tea. "But for now, we should enjoy ourselves. There's only so much we can accomplish at once... take your time."

"... That's kind of you." the boy said. He took his tea. "... My presence doesn't unnerve you?"

"If you don't remember, these guys live in my head." Minato said, summoning his Fiends behind him. He took his tea. "It takes a lot to unnerve me."

The boy laughed. "That's true. Your power might be stranger than I am." he said.

"And by extension, I might be stranger than you." Minato mused. He chuckled. "Well then... let's see how good this New Moon Drop really is." Minato and the boy took a drink,

and then both sighed in contentment. "... It does deserve a place among the stars, doesn't it?"

"I don't know about that... but it is nice." the boy said. Outside of Minato's room, Yukari and Junpei were listening against the door.

"Dude, who da heck is he talkin' to?" Junpei asked.

"I don't know..." Yukari said. "M-maybe it's his self or something like that?"

"... Like his Fiends or Persona?" Junpei asked.

"Y-yeah, that's gotta be it..." Yukari said. "... But, can you hear what he's saying?"

"... Not really. If we're a little more quiet..." Junpei said. The two of them became silent and tried shifting around to hear Minato's conversation better. After a few tense moments, Junpei accidentally placed too much force on Minato's door handle, and opened the door. The two both let out a little cry and fell as it opened in front of them, and wound up at the entrance of Minato's room.

"It seems we have company." the boy said, turning towards the visitors. Minato sighed.

"You could have just knocked instead of trying to sneak in." Minato said. "... But what the hell were you trying to sneak in here for?"

"Oh, uhh, we were just – AHHH!" Yukari began, until she caught sight of the boy Minato was with. Her scream was shrill and extremely loud, causing everyone in the room save Junpei to clutch their heads. He actually joined her. They were silenced by Jack appearing in front of them and covering their mouths with his hands.

"Hey, have some courtesy! It's really rude to scream like that..." the boy said, uncovering his ears. He turned to Minato. "... Are your friends always like this?"

"Thankfully, no." Minato said. "You're catching them around their worst... which happens to be really bad." He heard rushed footsteps, and the remaining members of SEES clamored around his door, and stopped once they found Jack slowly backing away from a speechless Junpei and Yukari on the floor along with Minato and the boy talking casually. The boy shifted uncomfortably.

"... Umm, this is awkward, isn't it?" he asked.

"... Yes, but by no fault of our own." Minato said. "If you want to go, I won't stop you."

"... Thanks." the boy said. He vanished into darkness, earning a little reaction from everyone else, and disappeared. Minato turned to the rest of SEES with a grin.

"See? Told you I talked to the ghost of a little boy." Minato said. He grinned at Yukari. "And now that you've upset him... he might come back for you."

Needless to say, SEES spent the next few hours convincing Yukari it was safe for her to go to sleep.

47. Chapter 47

Chapter 47: Something Strange

Minato had gotten ready for school earlier than usual that day and decided to drop by Fuuka's apartment building before school. He hung around the area until he felt he'd be late if he lingered any longer without finding Fuuka, even sending his Fiends to watch the other areas as he waited and look through her apartment's windows. *"That's odd... could she really be hospitalized?"* Minato thought as he caught a train to school. *"Even if she was sick, you'd think one of her parents would stay around to look after her. Are you sure nobody was inside?"*

"Positive, Boss... if they were, they were in the bathroom for an hour." Jack said.

"... I'll check the hospital after school if I have time." Minato replied. He listened to music on the way to school, mulling over what could have happened to Fuuka for the majority of the ride. When he got to school, he saw a very shaken Yukari essentially being guarded by Junpei and Akihiko as they approached school. When Minato suddenly appeared next to her, she panicked and screamed, causing Junpei and Akihiko, who noticed him, to cover their ears. "... Good morning to you as well, Yukari." Minato said, taking his headphones out of his

ear.

"D-d-d-don't just jump people like that!" she said.

"Jump you? Come now, Yukari... it's not like I appeared out of thin air." Minato mused. "... Or did I?"

"S-shut up, idiot!" she said. Minato chuckled and held his left hand in front of her, calling on the black energy that appeared before he summoned a weapon. Without choosing anything, the energy just flickered and danced around his hand, causing Yukari to let out a small squeal before smacking his hand down. "Asshole! C'mon, don't do that!" she said. Minato laughed.

"That's enough, Minato." Akihiko said.

"Yeah, bro... I don't wanna have' ta deal with this for much longer." Junpei said, hands partially covering his ears.

"Alright, alright... I suppose I'll have to put a damper on my fun for now." Minato said. "Still... now that you know ghosts exist, are you really that certain that the rumor is just a story?"

"What?! Y-you... argh, just be ready on Friday! I'll show you!" Yukari said. She stormed into the school, leaving the three boys alone. Minato saw the huge wave of relief wash over Junpei and Akihiko.

"You're welcome." Minato said.

"... As your senpai, I should be scolding you now, but...

thanks. That was beyond tedious." Akihiko said.

"No kiddin'... I woulda ditched Yuka-tan back at the dorm if Mitsuru-senpai didn't force me to bring her to school... I wish you were here earlier, dude." Junpei said. "... I gotta go talk to Kenji for a while. Pretend this crap never happened." He left Akihiko and Minato alone, and the two boys stopped at the school entrance.

"... This is where things get stupid if we keep walking." Minato said.

"... I think I'll go for a quick jog before class." Akihiko said. "Later." He left, and Minato put his headphones back in.

"Yeah... I wasn't going to deal with those rumors again."

Minato thought as he made his way to class. He sent David to search 2-E again just in case, and walked by a fuming Yukari as he took his own seat. David returned as the bell rang.

"She's still gone, Boss. No sign of her." he reported.

"... If she's not in the hospital, something's wrong." Minato thought. The school day was, for the most part, boring. Mr. Ekoda decided to humor the students by talking about a few ghost stories he knew, which didn't go over too well, but otherwise, nothing of any particular notice occurred. At lunch, however, he had intended to eat with Junpei and Kenji until he got a message from Mitsuru to meet with her on the roof. *"A private matter, hmm? We seem to have quite a few of those, these days."* Minato mused. He made his way to the roof, and

found Mitsuru seated at a table. He took the seat across from her. "Calling me out like this... are you here to request another favor?" Minato said. Mitsuru, who looked as if she was preparing for a serious discussion, was caught off guard. "I'm available anytime... in fact, if you want, we could arrange something tonight."

"That won't be necessary." Mitsuru said quickly. She took a deep breath, and relaxed. "... Though I thank you for the offer."

Minato chuckled. "Remember, it's always a pleasure." he said.

"... I'd like you to take this seriously, Minato." Mitsuru said. "I have a few questions for you."

"I'm all ears." Minato said. "I assume this is about what happened last night?"

"Yes... First, I'd like to know how long you've been in contact with... that boy." Mitsuru said.

"Since the night I arrived at the dorm." Minato said. "When I first entered during the Dark Hour, the lights were on, and he asked me to sign a contract saying I'd take responsibility for my actions. After a little talk about the inevitability of time's passage, he disappeared, and then I almost knocked Yukari out with an umbrella."

"... I see. Then, do you know what he is?"

"What he is?... I guess you could call him my ghostly little brother." Minato said. "If you want particulars as to what he's made of and all that, my best guess is he's a being manifested from the Dark Hour itself, since it's the only time I've ever seen him."

"... Then, why does he know about Shadows? And, more precisely... why did he know about the full moon Shadows, even before the monorail incident?" Mitsuru asked.

"... No idea." Minato said. "He mainly gives advice, and I run with it. Though last night, it was just a warning to be careful. I asked him about that too, but he didn't remember."

"There's always the possibility he's lying." Mitsuru said.

"Maybe... but I trust him." Minato said.

"... I believe you should be a bit more cautious towards this boy." Mitsuru said. "Still... can you tell me more about this boy?"

"He's cryptic as hell, but I guess that comes from existing in the Dark Hour." Minato said. "Oh, yes, and apparently he's always with me, watching... even right now." Mitsuru managed to stop herself from shaking, but Minato knew there was a chill down her spine.

"That's... unnerving." Mitsuru said.

"I don't think so. It's like I've got a guardian angel... except a

cool one that would probably gouge your eyes out and bite through your jugular if you tried him." Minato said. "At least, I hope he would."

"... I think we aren't making any more progress." Mitsuru said. "Regardless, I ask that you see what information you can get out of the boy. He may have knowledge that could change our understanding of the Dark Hour entirely."

"If you insist." Minato said. "Though, since we're talking, I have something else to report."

"By all means."

"Fuuka Yamagishi is missing." Minato said. "I checked the area around her apartment and even sent my Fiends to look through the windows before school. She's gone. I'll check the hospital later today to see if she's there, but if not..."

"... We'll discuss that when the need arises." Mitsuru said. "I'll give her one more day. If she doesn't appear, we may need to assume the worst."

Minato nodded, and the two sat in silent contemplation for a short time. "... Then, I'll be expecting an update tonight. Until then, Minato." Mitsuru said. She got up and left, leaving Minato to his thoughts for a bit until he returned to his class and quickly ate lunch. School ended quickly, and he went to the hospital as soon as possible.

"Hello... I'm here to visit my girlfriend. Fuuka Yamagishi."

Minato said to the receptionist. "But I seem to have lost her room number."

"Ah, I remember you! You were waiting with her when her parents came... Hmm, Fuuka-chan? Let me see..." the receptionist said, checking her computer. She frowned. "Huh... Fuuka-chan hasn't been here for the last two weeks. Did she go to the hospital across town?"

"This is the wrong hospital?! Crap, I'm going to be so late..." Minato said looking at his watch.

"You should hurry on then! If you take the monorail to the outskirts of the city, you should be able to find it." the receptionist said. "You make it up to her, you hear me? She's a good girl."

"I know! Thanks!" Minato said, hurrying away. *"... Man, I should have picked up acting lessons. I could have lived the easy life."*

"Don't worry... you can always just use us for that stuff." David said.

"... I remember your acting. It was horrible." Minato replied. He did as the nurse instructed, and reached another small hospital at the edge of town.

"Hello... I'm here to visit my girlfriend. Fuuka Yamagishi." Minato said to the receptionist. "And it looks like I lost her room number..."

"That sounds like trouble... give me a sec." the receptionist said. He worked on his computer for a bit, and then frowned. "You've lost her hospital as well. She hasn't been here in months."

"What?!" Minato exclaimed. "I'm so screwed... you mean she's at Tatsumi Memorial this time?!"

"Looks like it... you should hurry. Visiting hours end soon." the receptionist said. Minato nodded and dashed out of the hospital. Once he got on the train, he put his headphones on and frowned. "... *This isn't good.*"

Minato got off at Iwatodai station and surveyed the area. Nobody was around, so he headed to Paulownia Mall. He arrived there as the sun was setting, and found Kazuya in his usual attire about to leave the area. He smirked when he saw Minato, and approached him. "So, how'd things go with Fuuka? I get you any 'special rewards' that night?" he asked. Minato couldn't help but laugh.

"Unfortunately, I didn't have quite that happy of an ending." Minato said. "It's been a while... still killing time here?"

"What else would I come here to do?" Kazuya asked. "Still, haven't seen you around in a while. You get bored of your school friends?"

"Hah... I was actually looking for one in particular." Minato said.

"Oh? Didn't think you were the desperate type." Kazuya said.

"This is more of a business matter." Minato said.

"Ah, gotcha... but it looks like you're outta luck."

"Yeah, that seems to be the case." Minato said with a sigh.

"Then that means you can come hang out with me!" Kazuya said. Minato paused and looked at him quizzically.

"... You're just bored out of your mind, aren't you?" Minato asked.

"And? You coming or what?" Kazuya asked. Minato chuckled.

"Alright... where to?" Minato asked.

"You should come check out this place my cousin runs. Fair warning: it's shady as fuck." Kazuya said.

"Do you really think that would stop me?"

"No, but it's common courtesy to give those... why do you think they're called 'fair warnings'?"

"... You know, I never really thought about it like that." Minato said, now seriously considering the term. Kazuya laughed.

"Well, c'mon. It's actually on Port Island, but I know a short-cut. Follow me." Kazuya said. He led Minato to a secluded street behind Paulownia, and then pulled out his phone. He hit

a series of buttons ridiculously quickly, and a black and red portal appeared in front of them. "This'll take us to the VIP entrance."

"More free stuff? Sounds good to me." Minato said, unfazed by the sudden appearance of the portal.

"Yeah, that's the right idea to have." Kazuya said. They both walked through the portal, and immediately reappeared in a dark, smoky room with dim red lighting. Minato looked up at the arrangements of the lights, and confirmed his suspicion.

"Your cousin runs Red Hawk?" Minato asked.

"Wow, didn't expect you to know the place. Good for you." Kazuya said. "Yeah, he made this place around the same time I moved to the area. It's pretty lucrative, according to him."

"It's just as lucrative in reality as well." a voice said from behind them. Minato turned to see a tall man with gray hair and red eyes wearing a green kimono atop a grey hakama lazily approaching them. "So, this is Minato, huh?"

"In the flesh," Minato said. "And you are?"

"... You didn't introduce me?" the man asked.

"I know how you love dealing with strangers." Kazuya said. Minato immediately recognized the mocking tone in his voice.

"... Hmph. I'm Naoya." the man said. "... Wait. I remember you."

"Funny... I don't think we've met before." Minato said.

"You were here with Toriumi... and you conned a bunch of old men." Naoya said. He smirked. "I was wondering when someone would put them out of their misery."

Minato chuckled. "We saw easy targets, and went for them." he said with a shrug.

"Conning old men... you should have let me in on that." Kazuya said.

"Hmph... I doubt you need it." Naoya said. "But I'll give you a call if I see them around here again."

"Sweet." Kazuya said. He checked his phone. "... Hey, isn't the show starting soon?"

"We've got time." Naoya said.

"Show?" Minato asked.

"You'll like it." Kazuya said. "It's that not safe for television but way better than television stuff."

"... You've piqued my interest." Minato said. "So, aside from being a drug den, what else goes on down here?"

"I could tell you, but I think it'll be a lot easier if you see it firsthand." Naoya said. "C'mon... let's make ourselves comfy before the fun begins."

He led them through a few corridors and into a large room that had huge windows. It overlooked what looked like a giant arena, with rows of spectators watching. It was too dark for Minato to make out any faces, but he saw shapes that generally didn't look human in the crowd. "Minato, you seem like the type that likes to get messy in a fight." Kazuya said.

"Only when I don't need to bother looking out for others." Minato said.

"Hey, just like me!" Kazuya remarked. "If you're like that, then you'll love this."

"That, or you'll hate it... but I doubt you will." Naoya said. The lights dimmed on the arena, and the trio took three very comfortable seats that might as well have been thrones.

"Welcome, one and all, to Club Red Hawk's main event for tonight!" an overly excited female voice blared over the speakers. "It's the long anticipated match you've all been waiting for! Two bitter rivals meet in the ring once more! Introducing the returning champion, give it up for the stoic soul stealing slav, Kresnik!"

Minato looked over to the left side of the arena, and saw a man dressed in all white adorned with various red bat logos all over his body and clothing with long black hair step towards the center of the arena, a solemn look on his face. He raised his right hand into the air, lifting a glistening silver axe into the air. He let out a fierce roar, and a mix of cheering and hissing in all sorts of languages erupted from the crowd.

"... This is a gladiator arena, isn't it?" Minato asked, a grin appearing on his face.

"Yes... it's excellent, since the fighters just resurrect if they lose." Naoya said. "Endless entertainment, endless profits."

"But can will his opponent make him sing before the night ends?! You should know this master of the night well enough! Here comes the obnoxious night stalker, Kudlak!" the announcer continued.

To the right of the arena, a swarm of bats converged and laughter rang through the arena. The crowd also had a mixture of cheering and booing as the bats formed a man with ashen skin and gray hair in what Minato considered a bad Dracula costume, complete with cape. "Ahahaha, it's time for the low to become the high once more!" Kudlak announced, flicking his ridiculous cape around. "Kresnik! I've been dying to fight you again!" he continued, strolling towards the center of the arena. He stopped a few feet in front of Kresnik, who growled at him.

"Oh, this is going to be a good one... Kresnik's been in top form recently, but Kudlak's just got an air about him today..." Kazuya said. "Who do you think can take it?"

"I don't care. When are they going to start ripping each other apart?" Minato said, eagerly watching the two taunt each other before the fight started. Kazuya and Naoya both laughed.

"I suppose battle analysis isn't that important when you're spectating, huh?" Kazuya asked.

"Obviously... analysis on sport just spoils the fun." Naoya said.

"My thoughts exactly." Minato said.

"Now, is everyone ready for a show?!" the announcer asked. The crowd roared. "Then, heaven or hell, let's rock!"

Kresnik and Kudlak charged at each other in a split second, Kresnik's axe colliding with a black cutlass Kudlak apparently summoned. They pushed against each other for a bit, until Kresnik shouted and sent Kudlak flying backwards in one huge push. He chased after him, and Kudlak spun and kept running, the fight becoming a running duel. The crowd cheered as they ran up the walls, bounded through the air, and slammed into the ground, constantly hacking away at each other. After a few minutes of back and forth pummeling, Kresnik put Kudlak in a corner and dropped his axe down on him. Kudlak broke into a cloud of bats that swarmed Kresnik, but he let out a roar and transformed into a flaming wolf and shook the bats off. The fighters returned to human form a few feet from each other, and clashed once more. The crowd roared.

"Not bad at all." Minato said. "But it's a bit... lackluster."

"C'mon, spill some blood already!" Kazuya screamed.

"Enough dancing around like kids and get serious!"

"They're just warming up. Don't worry... it gets better." Naoya said.

Kudlak flipped away from Kresnik and waved his hand at him, causing a wave of icicles to race across the ground at him. Kresnik just slammed his fist into the ground, sending a wave of fire to counter it. The two attacks hit each other and filled the arena with steam. The sound of steel on steel erupted from the now obscured arena, until Kresnik was sent flying out of the steam, covered in small cuts. Black sigils surged upwards from underneath him to capture him, but he transformed into a flaming hawk and avoided them, clearing the fog. He warped into a his wolf form as he got close to the ground and ran at Kudlak, who had no time to counter him. He went right for his jugular, but was held back. He managed to bite off a good portion of Kudlak's shoulder before being thrown away.

"You know it's serious when they're biting already." Minato mused.

"Whatever it takes! Victory is all that matters!" Kazuya said.

Kresnik changed into his human form and raised his hands above his head, calling forth a huge fireball, and hurled it at Kudlak. It was easily avoided when Kudlak ran to the side, but Kresnik ran forwards and punched it, causing the ball to break into tiny fireballs. Kudlak dragged his claws along the floor, creating a wall of ice to protect him from the incoming attacks. As the ice wall was slowly broken down, Kresnik changed into his hawk form and zoomed over the wall. He was intercepted

by Kudlak, who jumped above the wall and sliced straight at him. He managed to cut Kresnik's left wing off, and he tumbled to the ground, reverting to his human form as he rolled away. His falling wing also changed back into an arm, oddly enough, and Kudlak picked it up and bit into it quickly, regenerating some of his wounds.

"Oh! A stunning turn of events!" Minato said. "One decisive blow changes the match, I suppose."

"That's how it is in life. It doesn't matter how down you are... one big break is all you need." Kazuya said.

"You'd know that from experience, wouldn't you?" Naoya mused.

Kresnik quickly rose to his feet, apparently shrugging off the pain of losing an arm with ease, and planted his axe into the ground. He started chanting, and golden talismans surrounded him and illuminated the arena. They rushed towards Kudlak, who also began chanting, and countered the attack with a rush of black sigils. The two forces collided, and pushed each other back and forth in the middle of the ring. Kudlak was losing, but he used one of his hands to send a little spike of ice at Kresnik's knee. When it hit, Kresnik's focus faltered, and Kudlak rushed forward, dropping his attack, and threw his sword at his opponent. Kresnik stopped his attack and dodged, picking up his axe. He was slowed thanks to the shard in his knee, and Kudlak quickly caught him.

Kresnik swung wildly to counter Kudlak's advance, but he

couldn't stop him. Kudlak finally clawed Kresnik enough to stop even his attacks, and then downed him by shattering his knee with an ice covered hammer fist. Kresnik roared, and a pillar of fire emerged and covered Kudlak. However, he reached through it, and ripped Kresnik's tongue out. Unable to speak, Kresnik could no longer summon his fire. He took a cheap shot and hacked one of Kudlak's legs off, but Kudlak dissolved his lower half into bats and floated in place. Kudlak grabbed Kresnik's arm, which was prepping for a second strike, and encased it in ice. He shattered it in one swift blow, leaving Kresnik armless.

"And all that's left is the kill." Minato said, smiling widely.

"FINISH HIM!" Kazuya screamed.

Kudlak delivered a huge punch to Kresnik's face, knocking him flat onto his back. He descended on him, and dug into his chest. Kresnik writhed in pain as Kudlak slowly ripped pieces of him out, biting some parts and taking each of his ribs out one by one. He clawed, ate, and beat down on Kresnik's organs as he seized underneath him, throwing bits of him up into the air, making the crowd go wild. A half-eaten lung, a bleeding stomach, and an intact kidney managed to reach the crowd as Kudlak fed. His leg regenerated as he ate, and he finally reached Kresnik's heart. Kresnik's body flailed as his heart was slowly taken out, and Kudlak slowly squeezed the blood out of it and drank said blood atop his corpse.

"It looks like we have a comeback! After four consecutive losses, Kudlak has finally bested his rival!" the announcer

said. "Let's give a round of applause to misfortune's emissary!"

The crowd exploded, and even Minato, Kazuya, and Naoya laughed like idiots as Kudlak reveled in his kill. "That was awesome!" Kazuya said.

"Hell yeah, that was!" Minato said. "Man, now I wish I could see myself fight sometimes... If I look half as epic as that, I'll be more than content with my performance."

"You're a pretty strong guy. Once you find a decent opponent, I bet your fight would look downright amazing." Kazuya said. "Hey, give me a call if you find somebody. I'll record it for you."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Star Arcana...

"You know I will!" Minato said. He spent some time going over all of the highlights of the fight with Kazuya and Naoya, but left once he noticed it was becoming late. He managed to make it back to the dorm a little after the moon came out, and signed in, a smile lingering on his face.

"S'up, dude!" Junpei greeted. "Yo, let's go to Tartarus tonight, man. The lost are everywhere, and it seems like it's only

gettin' worse... Plus, there's those freakin' rumors goin' around school... I dunno if fightin' Shadows before our big operation is gonna help, but even if it doesn't we gotta let off some steam!"

"Sounds like a plan." Minato said, now craving some action.

"... I'll take that as confirmation for a visit." Mitsuru said from her usual spot. "Speaking of which... any luck, Minato?"

"No... she hasn't checked into either of the hospitals in town." Minato said. "And I couldn't find her around town either."

"Huh? 'Find her'? What are you guys talking about?" Yukari asked.

"Fuuka Yamagishi is missing." Mitsuru said. "As a prospective Persona user, we need to keep her under surveillance at a time like this... For her to go missing now... This could be disastrous."

"Hmph... so Yamagishi's missing." Shinjiro said. "I'll see what I can find out."

"... I've got a bad feeling about this." Akihiko said. "But that's all the more reason to reach top form for the operation. Let's get ready."

SEES prepped for Tartarus, and arrived in front of the school just in time to see the tower emerge. They strolled in, and Minato looked over the members. "... I have an idea. All of

you will form a group led by Junpei, and clear out the upper ten floors. I'll do the ten below them alone." Minato said.

"... Minato, remember that you are the field leader for a reason." Mitsuru said. "Though our battle strength has greatly increased, I think it's best that the majority of the team stay under your command."

"... I'm saying this because I'm trying to meet something tonight." Minato said. Everyone paused.

"... Dude. You don't seriously mean...?" Junpei began. Shinjiro looked around, confused.

"The hell are you gonna meet in here? A rare gold one?" he asked.

"No... I'm going to meet my first Fiend... and, to some extent, my first friend." Minato said. Everyone's jaw dropped.

"You consider that thing your friend?! It's obsessed with killing you!" Akihiko said.

"C'mon, what the hell is everyone so worked up about?!" Shinjiro asked again.

"... Inside of Tartarus, there's a being known as the Reaper. It's complicated and hard to believe, but in short, it knows Minato... and is obsessed with killing him, as Akihiko said." Mitsuru explained. "Even using his full power, Minato was barely able to escape from it last time."

"And I was giving it more than everything I had." Minato said to Shinjiro. "I didn't even scratch it."

"... Then why do you want to see it?" Shinjiro asked.

"There's something I want to check." Minato said. "If I get an answer to a certain question... well, I'll tell you if it happens."

"... I don't know what you're playing at, Minato, but this is your life you're gambling with." Mitsuru said.

"H-hey, this is crazy! You can't do this!" Yukari said.

"I know what I'm doing. I've got a few Traesto and Trafuri Gems in case things go sour, so don't worry." Minato said. He looked at the rest of SEES, all obviously doubting his plan. "... Well, you're in charge until I get back, Junpei. Practice that stealth factor out."

"Wha-?! C'mon, man! Do you really think I can focus after that?!" Junpei yelled. Minato chuckled.

"If you can, it means you're a great leader." he said. He took the teleporter, and went to the sixteenth floor. He fought his way up a few floors easily enough, and then decided that instead of hunting for the Reaper every floor, he'd simply wait for it to find him. After essentially juggling Jack's cleavers for fifteen minutes, he heard the sound of chains rattling, and the air seemed to grow stagnant. Oddly enough, it didn't unnerve him. It calmed him. His plan had worked. All that was left was to survive this encounter. "... *But how to go about that?*"

Hmm..."

The Reaper glided casually through the halls, searching for Minato, and he made a plan to start a casual conversation with it. He tracked it with sound, and snuck up behind it. He sped up as he got close, and then jumped on its back, covering its face with his empty hands. "Guess who?" he asked playfully.

"Oh! You're back!" the Reaper said giddily, spinning round and round in delight. Minato held on for the odd ride, and hopped off its back once it stopped. It turned to face him. **"I knew you'd come to see me again!"**

"Of course! I just couldn't leave you alone after all, huh?" he said with a smirk. He ran up to the Reaper and hugged it. "How've ya been? I haven't left you alone for too long this time, have I?"

The Reaper hugged him back, still clutching its pistols. It almost crushed him. **"No no no no, you're not late at all this time!"** the Reaper said. **"You're such a good boy, coming back so soon! Are you going to stay a while this time?"**

"Hmm, I don't know. A bunch of boring people have things for me to do..." Minato said. The Reaper backed away suddenly, until its eye began to glow a fiery red.

"FUCK THOSE PEOPLE! I'LL KILL ALL OF THEM SO YOU'LL HAVE NO REASON TO LEAVE!" it roared.

"... *Maybe this wasn't that good of a plan.*" Minato thought. "Hey now, let's not get that drastic huh? I mean, most of my meetings are just for getting some answers, but you know how people are. They beat around the bush and spew shit to avoid telling you what you want to know." he said. "... Though, some of the questions do have to do with this tower."

"Questions about the tower?!" the Reaper asked excitedly. **"I know a lot about this tower! Ask me, and then you don't have to leave so soon!"**

"... *Scratch that. This was brilliant.*" Minato thought. "... Hey, that makes perfect sense!" he agreed. "Heh, then do you mind if we get right to it?"

"More time to play, right?" the Reaper said, completely delighted. **"Fire away!"** it said, shooting its pistols off into the distance. Minato chuckled.

"Alright then... is there anyone else in this tower right now?" Minato asked.

"... That's a weird question. I can't just tell where people are in here, silly. If I could, I'd just come find you every time you came here!" the Reaper said.

"*Great... well, I can't answer my primary question... but I can try for a few other answers.*" Minato thought. "That's too bad..." Minato said. "Then, can you tell me if you've ever seen the ground floor?"

"Nope! I've tried to go, but I can never leave these halls! You don't know how many times I've tried to go look for you... I was really sad when you left and didn't come back for so long, you know?" the Reaper said.

"Shit... then it could never have seen anyone who came to investigate the area or anything like that. It won't know anything about the lab." Minato thought. "... That's terrible." he said. "You've spent ten years in here just... waiting?"

"Yes... do you see how mean you've been?" the Reaper asked. **"So you need to play with me a lot to make up for it."**

"Boss, if we can't get any answers out of this chick, let's get the hell out of here!" Jack yelled in his head.

"No... We will play with her..." the odd voice in Minato's head said, catching him off guard. *"Even something like me... Can have a heart..."*

"Good to see you, other best friend." Minato greeted in his head. *"Those were my thoughts exactly!"*

"That's a lie... You want to have fun..." the voice replied.

"Then, I guess I'm not that different from her, am I?" Minato replied. He looked at the reaper and drew his Evoker. He smiled. "Well then, on your mark!" he said.

"YOU'LL PLAY?! OH YESYESYESYEYSYEYES I LOVE

YOU SO MUCH!" the Reaper squealed. It cocked its revolvers and aimed them both at Minato.

"MINATO, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! GET OUT OF THERE!" Mitsuru screamed into his earpiece. He turned it off quickly.

"Get set!" the Reaper said excitedly.

"It's been a while... Since we played together..." the odd voice said, almost nostalgically. Minato called on all of his Magatama, and the tattoo spread over his body.

"Go!" he said. The Reaper fired its pistols, and he darted past the shots, firing his Evoker. The battle commenced.

A few floors above, the other members of SEES were steadily progressing until Mitsuru brought their transceivers to life. *"Minato has engaged the Reaper in open combat! All of you are to return and assist him at once!"*

"Belay that order! This battle is ours and ours alone!" Matador said, breaking into Mitsuru's signal. ***"Without this, what are we?!"***

"We were born to fight! Our powers are meaningless without challenge!" David said.

"Don't interfere, or we can't guarantee your safety!" Jack added.

"Does he have a death wish?!" Yukari screamed. "That thing's insane!"

There was a large explosion underneath them, and the floor shook. **"Yes, that's it! Show me more love!"** the Reaper screamed, somewhat audible from underneath them.

"Dude, what the heck?! Is he bringing that thing up here?!" Junpei asked.

"Tch... we can't interrupt a fight of that level unless we don't mind becoming fodder." Shinjiro said.

"Shinji's right... we need to keep moving." Akihiko said. "Mitsuru, there's no point in trying to stop now... he got himself into this. He'll have to get himself out. Focus on supporting us for now."

"Are you asking me to ignore him?!" Mitsuru screamed.

"We don't have a choice, Mitsuru." Shinjiro said. "There's nothing we can do now."

Another tremble occurred. **"Good, good, you're still moving! Another, another!"** the Reaper screamed again. It was accompanied by Minato's maniacal laughter.

"... He will be executed once he returns." Mitsuru said. *"For now, advance up the tower. Return once you reach the barricade."*

As Minato played with the Reaper and the rest of SEES advanced towards the barricade, Fuuka, in an isolated section of Tartarus, clutched her head. It didn't matter where she went. Something was right behind her, but she couldn't see it. It was driving her crazy.

"Isn't it horrible being so helpless?" a voice asked in her head.

"W-who are you?! Where are you?!" she asked, turning rapidly. Nobody was there.

"Why, I'm you." the voice replied. *"I know that you hate how everybody treats you like you can't do a single thing by yourself... well, in their defense, they're right."*

"H-huh? No, that's a lie!" Fuuka said.

"Is it? I can find so many instances where you wanted to speak up, but didn't. You've left so many words unspoken, you could write a book about it!"

"W-what are you trying to say?"

"I mean, you even let those ugly whores throw you into this shit hole, and there's no way out. Face it... without somebody to help you, you're just dead weight."

"T-that's..."

"But hey, don't worry about it too much. I mean, I know you,

and you're about to beat yourself up about it. Why don't you just let me take over your body, and I can prove all those people wrong. I'll start by getting us out of this dump... what do you say?"

"T-t-take my body?!"

"Yeah, it'll be easy... just let me in, and I can make you everything you want to be and more."

"N-no! That's not right! You're not right!"

"And you are? Is being trapped in some freak house for hours on end the right thing?! You shouldn't even have the right to talk back... it was you who isolated yourself. It was you who clung to anyone who would give you the time of day. It was you who treasured a person that takes advantage of us as a 'precious friend'... and look where it got you."

"S-shut up! You don't know what you're talking about! Moriyama-san is! Moriyama-san is!"

"A bitch! A whore! A piece of trash that needs to be disposed of! And don't you dare deny it! You've called her worse in your head, and I know it for a fact because I AM YOU!"

"W-what? No, I'm not listening!"

"You can't block me out! I'm your true self! And in the end, you want to make all those people that judge you, look down on you, pity you, all suffer! I'll grant that wish! And I'll make it

so that never happens again! You just have to let me in!"

"I never wanted those things!"

"Yes you did, Fuuka! It tore you apart when the object of your desire was the one who stopped you from reaching your goal, so you pushed him away! And you're so damn pathetic, you crawled right back to him because he said a few nice things to you! It's disgusting! If he wasn't around, you would've been able to do anything, right?! But he stopped you! Why?! So he can keep you down, and use you even more than that bitch Natsuki!"

"J-just stop talking! Please!" Fuuka screamed, finally shedding tears. "I-I... Don't want to talk..."

"... Pathetic. Fine. Cry and prove the world right. You are weak and helpless... but I'll be back. I'm always with you, after all."

Fuuka sobbed for a bit, until she sensed a different presence approaching her. She staggered away, holding in her cries, and found another spot to cry in. She wondered what she did to deserve her fate as time passed.

Once the Dark Hour neared its end, the members of SEES were all waiting in the lobby for Minato. Everyone looked at the golden clock, and saw the Dark Hour only had five minutes left. Mitsuru, who was still following his battle, reported in, even though he was dead silent on the radio. "... Five minutes left, Minato." she said.

"... What floor is he on?" Akihiko asked. Junpei and Yukari turned to him. "Shinji and I can go grab him in a hurry... It's better that we don't risk too many people in a rescue operation."

"Twenty-seven... but I won't allow it." Mitsuru said. "It's as Shinjiro said... trying to interrupt a fight like this would only worsen the situation."

"... Even now, I'm just supposed to sit here and wait?!" Akihiko growled.

"Cool down, Aki... you're not the only one feeling it." Shinjiro said. Akihiko turned to see both Junpei and Yukari barely containing full on panic. Junpei was pacing, clutching his sword and biting his lip. Yukari was almost hyperventilating.

After two tense minutes, the teleporter came to life, and Minato, missing his shirt, jacket, and the majority of his pants, strolled into the lobby, tattoo gone. "Hey guys. Oh, hold on." he said. He pulled out some spare clothing from the dimensional compactor, and hurriedly threw them on over what he was wearing. "Let's go –" he began, but was stopped by a firm slap in the face from Mitsuru.

"Prepare yourself." she said seriously. "You will be executed tonight... Now then, we're leaving."

SEES left Tartarus, and Minato dealt with a lot of lines about his recklessness from the majority of the members. He brushed them off, and in the first floor lounge, Mitsuru stopped

once everyone had entered. "Good... Minato, your execution is now." she said. Before Minato or anyone else could react, she had pulled her Evoker and fired. Minato began to slowly freeze from his feet up.

"... Huh." he said as he examined his arms, which were slowly being consumed by ice that grew within his skin. "This pain... I've felt it before..." he said, shocking everyone in SEES. He smiled. "... It's a bit nostalgic, actually."

As he became an ice sculpture that froze down to the bone, he sighed in contentment. Everyone looked at his frozen smile in complete and utter disbelief. "This... was devised especially for him. Normally, these levels of pain would drive a person mad, but for someone who enjoyed a normal execution, it seemed fitting... but he enjoys even this?" Mitsuru muttered.

"... He's not human." Akihiko and Shinjiro said simultaneously.

"Dude... what the heck is with this guy?" Junpei asked.

"... I'll just pretend I never saw this." Yukari said, walking up the stairs. The rest of SEES followed suit, and Minato spent the first five hours of the day defrosting. He could've broken out after the first two hours, but by then, it was more therapeutic than torturous. Thus, he took his full sentence.

48. Chapter 48

Chapter 48: Oddities

Author Note: Hey guys, just wondering if any of you had any ideas for this odd problem I've got. So I REALLY want to start writing Persona 4: Restyle... but if I do, it'll spoil the ending of this story. Still, I've already got Restyle's Yu Narukami damn near perfectly created! Don't expect him to be a rehash or slightly altered version of this Minato, though; he's very different, and capable of sleeping (Oh my! XD). Anyways, does anybody know how to overcome something like this? Any input would be greatly appreciated.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: A very good deduction on your part! Props to you, props to you! (And anyone else who got that without reviewing, of course) And hey, even if you don't get 100 or even 200, you've always got one of my Very Important Reviewer spots. (SHOUT OUT TO MR. HAZIQ AND JASONWU!) As for the Reaper stuff... well, I'm still playing with that idea in my head.

But now, it's time for a relatively short chapter.

Minato cleaned himself up after his defrosting, and even

managed to throw together a small breakfast in the morning. The seniors of SEES entered the lounge first to find him cleaning up after his cooking, much to their surprise.

"... You're kidding me." Akihiko said. "He wasn't even fazed."

"What are you, a friggin' final boss character?" Shinjiro asked.

"No. I... am an Ultimate Boss character." Minato said in a low voice. "Mortals like you are nothing to me... Mwahahahaha..."

"... Excuse me?" Mitsuru asked.

"It's true... I'm the only worthy one." Minato said.

"Alright, enough of the stupid acting. It's annoying." Shinjiro said. Minato scoffed.

"Well, sorry for not being serious, somber, or both first thing in the morning." he retorted in his normal voice.

"... That's a very questionable sense of humor." Akihiko said.

SEES ate an odd breakfast and, then went their separate ways. Mitsuru opted to take her bike, Akihiko went out for a quick jog, Shinjiro... disappeared, apparently, and Yukari just ran out thinking she was late. This left only Junpei and Minato to ride the train to school together. "Dude, you almost gave everyone a heart attack last night." Junpei said. "How the heck could you go head to head with that thing for half an hour?"

"You'll see someday." Minato said. "I could tell you, but it would spoil the surprise."

"Surprise? C'mon, man... I wanna be kickass too!" Junpei said.

"Like I said... someday, Junpei. You'll see it." Minato said. Junpei sighed.

"Alright, alright... but man, that musta been some crazy stuff." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"Haven't had that much fun in a while, I'll say." he said.

"... Anwyays, you been lookin' into that ghost story or what?" Junpei asked.

"There's not really that much left to look into." Minato said. "There were three girls and all of them were part of the same group. The Shadows, or whatever the ghost really is, targeted them for some reason, and left them outside of the school. I mean, any other substantial information would take way too much analysis, and I'm not about to blow hours chasing half-assed leads."

"I hear ya, dude. I say we leave all that crap to Yuka-tan." Junpei said. "Besides, if anything, I got plenty a' scary stories up my sleeve... by the way, thanks for the special effects that day. I bet Yuka-tan pissed her pants when I told that story the other night."

"I wouldn't be too surprised if she did." Minato said. He chuckled. "... Huh. I forgot to ask... how did leading the team go last night?"

"Not that bad." Junpei said. "... Though apparently I suck ass at watching our backs. We got jumped a few times, but nothing too terrible happened. Well, nothing a good healing spell couldn't fix, I guess. But hey, I was like Solid Snake out there! Them Shadows we caught didn't know what hit em'!"

"That's good... but if you get jumped a lot, that'll bite you in the ass when we meet tougher opponents." Minato said. "You should look up ways to train your spatial awareness."

"... Train my what?" Junpei asked.

"I'll just text you it. Look it up when you have the time." Minato said, pulling out his phone. He sent Junpei the message, and the train arrived at Port Island Station. "There. Let's head out." Minato said.

The two got to school, and Minato sent his Fiends to search for Fuuka once more with no luck. *"I expected as much... this is definitely a real problem."* he thought. The school day ended quickly, and Minato hurriedly went to Student Council. He prepped as usual, and sat down near to Mitsuru and Shinjiro. "She's officially missing." Minato said.

"... This situation demands our full attention, then." Mitsuru said.

"I'm hitting the streets tonight." Shinjiro said. "I already told Aki to go check with Officer Kurosawa. We should be able to get something by tomorrow."

The trio nodded, and the rest of Student Council took their seats. "Now that everyone's here... let's begin." Mitsuru said. "First off, I'd like to announce that we have successfully halted the recent rise in bullying rates, as well as the implementation of our new immovable regulations we've worked on. I thank all of you for your cooperation during this situation."

There was a silent moment of acknowledgement followed by light murmurs of thanks and congratulations. Unfortunately, for Minato and Shinjiro, this was one of the most boring Council meetings of all time. It was practically a formality at this point, and even Mitsuru realized there wasn't much to do. The meeting ended quickly, and they were out of the school before four o'clock. "... *This was a waste of an hour.*" Minato thought as they walked to Mitsuru's bike.

"Hey, Mitsuru... if there's nothing too important, do you think I could not attend Council every day?" Minato asked.

"I realize that today was less than stimulating." Mitsuru said. "I may consider it... but you'll need to prove to me that you aren't just neglecting your duties. If you join another club whose meeting coincides with one of ours, I'll allow it."

"... You do remember I'm banned from athletic clubs, right?" Minato asked.

"There are also culture clubs." Mitsuru said. "However, they don't open for registration until the seventeenth."

"Well that's unfortunate." Minato said.

"Try not to cry about it." Shinjiro said. They arrived at Mitsuru's motorbike, and she got on.

"Don't worry. I'm certain you can find something to do if you put your mind to it." Mitsuru said. "Now, if you'll excuse me." She revved her bike, and popped a wheelie as she sped out of the parking lot, leaving Shinjiro with Minato.

"... So, are you doing anything right now?" Minato asked.

"Going to get information." Shinjiro said. "You can tag along if you want."

"... That sounds as boring as Council." Minato said. Shinjiro grimaced.

"It is."

"I'll find something else. Good luck." Minato said. Shinjiro nodded and walked off, leaving Minato to contemplate what he was going to do with the day. After a few minutes, an idea struck him, and he headed to Paulownia Mall. Once there, he entered the Velvet Room.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I assist you today?" Elizabeth greeted as usual.

"Let's go on a date." Minato said.

"Oh my! To be asked so directly... what would my sister say? Such impotence? Importance?... Ah, it was impudence! Yes, that was it!" Elizabeth answered.

"Impudence? Maybe, but this is for your happiness as well, you know." Minato said with a smirk. "I can show you the world... but don't expect a magic carpet ride."

"Magic carpet ride? I had thought those didn't exist in Japan..." Elizabeth said, suddenly deep in thought. Minato laughed.

"Never mind that comment... still, where you want to go?" he asked.

"Hmm... this is a sudden question. I've thought about this before, but... I was unsure of my choice." Elizabeth said.

"I can always take you out again if you'd like." Minato said. "Don't get too serious about this. I'll take you out as many times as you ask and more."

"... I see. Then, I shall go with my first option." Elizabeth said. "I'd like to visit Iwatodai Station with you."

"The train station? Sure thing." Minato said. He led her outside, and they made their way there. He went to the highest spot to let Elizabeth take in a good view of the surroundings, the train platform. She remained for all of three

seconds before gasping and attempting to walk down the up escalator. "Hey, let me join in on the fun." Minato mused, matching her step for step.

"Fun, you say? I suppose we could engage in a joint test of skill." Elizabeth said. They locked arms, and after a bit of up and down moving, they finally managed to make it to the bottom. "Ah... Flowing stairs that must be mastered by those who would try to pass... So this is an escalator. It looks simple, but one false step, and challengers will be mired in an exhausting ordeal!" The PA system came to life as Elizabeth finished her sentence.

"Warning: Please refrain from going down the up escalator, and vice versa. Thank you." It announced.

"And here I was looking forward to an uphill struggle this time." Minato mused. "But I suppose we should avoid attracting too much attention." The duo made it all of three steps before Elizabeth stopped with a little gasp.

"And... what's this?!" she said. "Please watch your step! There's a pitfall just ahead."

"Well, we can't just ignore it now, can we?" Minato asked, walking towards the obvious manhole near the center of the station. Elizabeth giggled and followed along.

"Placed in the center of a fenced off area... Marked with eye-catching signs, which state in bold print: "Do Not Enter"!... Humans frequently crave that which is forbidden to them...

This is a crafty snare, that goes against the common notion that pitfalls must be hidden." She said as they stared at it.

"A trap within a trap... whoever made this is a master huntsman." Minato said. *"At least, that's how it works in anime. But there's something else I should confirm."*

"Without a doubt..." Elizabeth said, surveying the area again. "A stairway that tests one's wits, and a pitfall that tests one's inner strength... Human authorities have a great deal to contend with in their quest to defend the town's law and order."

"And to think this is only one small portion of the town." Minato said. "With a mere two obstacles... I can't imagine the troubles they face street by street."

"Their plight is moving, isn't it?" Elizabeth added. "We should continue forth, our thoughts dedicated to the unsung heroes who love this town so very much..."

They left the monorail platform and went to the area in front of the station. Their walk came to an abrupt halt when Elizabeth stopped, eyes wide, and separated from Minato. "This... This fragrant aroma—it can't be...!" she said. She dashed off towards Octopia.

"... Hazama was there as well. Let's see." Minato thought walking up to Elizabeth and the vendor. He was surprised by the vendor's sudden outburst.

"Woah! You can figure out our secret ingredient just by its smell?!" she asked. "... Oh! I guess you don't wear those funky clothes for nothing, 'lady'... Well, there ain't a law against takoyaki shops cooking stuff besides octopus, and there certainly ain't one about what we cook either. So, how bout' it? Wanna buy one? It'll make you smile so wide, your cheeks will fall off!"

"Cuisine so luscious that one's cheeks fall off...!" Elizabeth said, taking a moment of contemplation. The vendor turned to see Minato smirking at her. She mouthed 'I hope you know what you've gotten yourself into, kid', and he mouthed back 'I'm getting into everything I want'. The vendor chuckled and turned back to Elizabeth. "... Such a result would cause havoc in reality, but I'd definitely like to experience this."

"Then we'll take two." Minato said, walking past her. He leaned in close to the vendor. "Think you can actually pull it off?" he whispered.

"Nah, but it'll match the sensation." The vendor replied. "Alright then, two sets coming up."

"Surely you aren't paying, Minato?" Elizabeth asked. "I have never seen a person who has actually lost his or her cheeks. This must mean that the ordinary citizen cannot easily buy these—Oh!... Upon closer inspection, one package is only 400 yen..."

"So don't worry about it." Minato said, paying the vendor.

"Thanks! Here you go, and come again!" she said. She leaned in to whisper as Minato took the food. "I already talked to those JSDF guys about my food, alright? So don't go spreading rumors if your 'lady' friend tells you what's inside."

"Don't worry... Even if I knew what it was, why would I talk?" Minato replied.

"Good. You two have fun, alright?" the vendor said. Minato and Elizabeth nodded and left to go eat on a bench in front of the station.

They took a seat, and began eating. After a few minutes, Elizabeth spoke up. "This distinct texture... The firm, chewy outer skin... There's no doubt about it." she said. "I must say, I'm surprised to come across this ingredient in food..." Elizabeth said. Minato smirked, having already had his Fiends analyze what he was eating.

"I'm more interested in how they managed to clean the skin... Gucumatz are rather large, are they not?" Minato asked.

"Actually, their sizes may vary based on how much they could eat before death..." Elizabeth said. "Still, I imagine that a form of freeze cleaning was used to deal with the feathers... But how did you become acquainted with this delicacy?"

"I have my methods." Minato said. "Still, let me see if your cheeks are still okay." He leaned over and cupped Elizabeth's face in his hand. He went forward to kiss her on both cheeks.

"... They seem to still be in place." she said.

"Should I double check?" Minato asked. She chuckled, and freed herself from his hold. He looked over and swore he saw the vendor silently cheering him on, but ignored her.

"No, that won't be necessary." she said. "In any event, there are many other delicacies we must try. I must take care not to lose my cheeks before sampling each and every one of them."

"Day has yet to become night. What else would you like?" he asked. The two of them finished their food quickly, and rose from their bench.

"There appear to be several dining establishments around... I wish to try all of them." Elizabeth said. "My first priority is to visit something called a 'manga café' and obtain the foodstuff known as a 'smoothie bar'. This 'smoothie bar' allows for an infinite combination of flavors by mixing various ingredients... Just thinking about it gives me a sort of electric tingle across my tongue."

"I know what else could give you some electric tingles with a tongue." Jack suddenly said in Minato's head.

"... Not now, Jack." Minato said.

"There's a lot of things her tongue could work on." David added.

"Shut up, David. I'm busy."

"I know a flavor she can't get from a smoothie bar that you've got." Matador said.

"Enough with the perverted thoughts..."

With his Fiends pestering him with more than enough fantasies as he ate around with Elizabeth, he was surprised that he managed to remember to show her both Wakatsu's normal side and the Divide, both of which she thoroughly enjoyed. He opted to let her pay after the third meal to spare his wallet.

The two walked away from the shops, Elizabeth looking exactly the same as she was before they began their date, and Minato noticing his pants were slightly tighter. "We appear to have exhausted the culinary possibilities in this area. I must thank you for the tasty experience."

"I know an even tastier experience." David said. Minato didn't even bother trying to stop his Fiends after the fourth meal, and let them flood his head with whatever thoughts they wanted. It at least distracted him from the fact that he was eating so much.

"... And thank you, for offering to 'show me the world', as you said." Elizabeth continued. "You don't mind if I hold you to it, do you?"

CRACK!

"We both already know the answer to that, don't we?" Minato replied with a smile.

Thou art I...

"It would seem we're in agreement, then." Elizabeth said.

And I art thou...

"That was never a question in my mind." Minato said.

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Sun Arcana...

"Hmm... I suppose we should part for now." Elizabeth said.

"Shall I walk you back?" Minato asked.

"I'd like that." Elizabeth said. Minato made good on his word, and escorted Elizabeth back to the Velvet Room. He entered, and swore Igor was smiling wider than usual, but ignored it. After a quick goodbye, he returned to the dorm.

"Oh, hey!... You look happy." Yukari greeted.

"I had a good time today." Minato said. She and Akihiko were the only ones in the lounge, both doing homework. "I know Shinji's out tonight, but what happened to everyone else?"

"Mitsuru-senpai said she had some business to attend to... whatever that means. Stupei's locked himself in his room, apparently training. I don't know what he's up to, but I'm pretty sure I heard a few things break." Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"I know what he's up to... expect a few more things to break." he said, heading up to go shower. After cleaning himself up and throwing on his sleeveless black jacket over a plain dark blue shirt and jeans, he cooked for the rest of SEES, but didn't eat anything himself. After his short task, he spent most of the time until eleven-thirty studying. At said time, he put on his hat, and went to leave the dorm.

"... Where ya headed?" Akihiko asked as he walked through the lounge.

"Urban exploring." Minato said. Akihiko blanked. "I'm interested in something I saw today."

"... If you do something, make sure you cover it up." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled, and left the dorm. He headed to Iwatodai Station slowly, and lingered on the outskirts until the Dark Hour struck. Once everyone transmogrified, he immediately jumped down into the manhole in the center of the station, and looked around. The Dark Hour's odd lighting allowed him to see around the small cramped passage with ease, and he noticed there were three passage ways.

"I'm not backpedalling twice. Matador, David, you two check out the ones behind me. Report if you find anything interesting." Minato ordered. His Fiends materialized as two small skulls and did his bidding as he proceeded down the last passage. Matador returned after five minutes.

"Led to a dead end. Nothing but walls and a ladder." he reported.

"Good. We won't be heading there." Minato thought. He noticed that the path he took seemed to widen, and he was pretty sure he had left the underside of the station. The faint scent of sewage came from above him. *"Yes... that fall was longer than I thought. If I'm right, this will connect to the area with the generators. I only need to find a sealed area to confirm."*

Minato kept going, and David returned to him. ***"The path loops back on itself, with a few entrances to the surface and some electrical switches. I think "***

"Then this is the right path." Minato said. He kept going, until his path was obstructed by copious amounts of warning tape which had obviously been replaced multiple times. He tore through it, only to find a small metal barricade which looked new compared to the rest of the passageway. He tore through that as well, and kept going until he finally reached a large open area with an abandoned reservoir embedded into the floor at the center. Directly across from him, elevated slightly off of the ground, he could see a huge area that was sealed tightly by several layers of metal. *"Found it. But I'm surprised nobody else has."*

He surveyed the area, and saw that it was much cleaner than where he had previously been. Aside from his first observations, he had nothing to tie the area to the generators. *"... Jack, go see what's down in that reservoir."* he ordered. Jack's head appeared, and floated down to the bottom. There was a strange clicking noise, and the sharp screech of metal.

Jack returned instantly.

"Looks like I woke up whatever made sure nobody ever talked about this place." Jack said. Minato frowned, and the sound of metal digging into concrete grew louder and louder. ***"Get ready."***

Minato first saw a large, thin metal arm dig into the top of the concrete, followed by another. The arms out down enough pressure to crack the floor, flipping the rest of the creature over. At full extension, the arms were about seven feet long, and connected to an armored core with what looked like a lion's head attached to it, with two matching arms connected to the back of the machine. It crashed down, and the lion face turned to face Minato. ***"360 degree range of motion for the core, huh?"*** Minato noted as the machine's lion eyes glowed a dull red.

"I forgot to mention there are corpses down there... mostly teenagers like you." Jack said.

"Then, I guess I'll be their avenger tonight." Minato said, drawing his evoker. He put it to his head, and the machine charge at him. "Zionga!" he screamed as he fired. Take-Mikazuchi appeared behind him and sent a large lightning bolt at the machine. It took the hit, and skid to a halt. "As I thought... machines don't respond well to electric stimuli." he said. He continued using Zionga ten more times, making sure that the machine wouldn't move again.

He put his Evoker away, and decided to go see if he could

find any markings on the machine. He inspected it, and found nothing except part of a model number. "-SW32: Nemea". "Like the lion, huh? Guess Hercules doesn't have shit on me now." Minato said. He chuckled and walked away. He made it three steps before he heard Nemea activate again. He immediately rolled out of the way, and narrowly avoided being crushed by one of its arms. He turned to see the arms open, exposing chainsaws at the edge. They sputtered, emitting black smoke as they began to whir, until they snapped to life.

"Well, I would have been bored if it ended this quickly."
Matador said. ***"This bull has yet to bleed out."***

Minato summoned Matador's sword and Power's lance as he charged at Nemea, which responded by charging him. He slid under it as it tried to ram him, taking a few quick cuts at the core with Matador's sword as he passed underneath it. He got back up as it turned back to him, and the lion head, still watching him, opened its mouth to reveal a small barrel that glowed with electricity. "... *Shit, I charged this thing just now.*" Minato thought as he instinctively activated his speed Magatama and began to run. The head discharged arcs of lightning in a relatively straight line, which Minato took to the walls to avoid. As shot after shot impacted behind him, he saw Nemea ride on its saws, now leaving trails in the concrete, to intercept him.

Nemea took to the wall, and he used his strength Magatama to throw Power's lance straight at it. Nemea deflected it with one arm, and fired again as Minato jumped away from the

wall. He rolled as he landed, and drew his Evoker. "Danse Macabre!" he said as he fired. Jack rushed forth, cleavers drawn, and sliced at Nemea. It pushed off of the wall, damaging it, and used its hind legs to counter Jack's advance. He knocked the arms away, but was shot by an arc of lightning from the lion head, which blasted him away.

Minato took the opening he created to dash in. He called on Power's lance once more, and took the opportunity to wedge it into Nemea's cannon before it could shoot again. When Nemea fired, the shot exploded in its mouth, sending Minato skidding away and toppling the machine. He dusted himself off and backed away from the smoke cloud left by the shot, his hand on his Evoker. The sound of metal whirring and a sudden light wind that dispersed the smoke revealed that even without a mouth, Nemea could still function. "Not bad at all... you're deserving of your title." Minato said.

Nemea charged forwards at Minato once more, and he fired his Evoker. "Double Fangs." Minato said. Mithra appeared behind him, and aimed its two black staffs at one of Nemea's arm joints. It hissed, and two obsidian bolts flew from them, going right through it. Minato chuckle and dashed forward, going right for the weakened joint. As Nemea lifted the arm to counter him, he used his speed and strength Magatama to close in instantly, and shattered the joint with a flying elbow. He landed a little ways off, the pain of impact forcing him to shake out his arm as he turned to see Nemea adjust to only being three legged. It got used to it in a few seconds, but Minato had already recovered and gotten David and Matador

to bring the detached arm to him. He let Matador's sword disappear, and wielded the arm as an oversized club.

"This'll be your undoing." Minato said. He let Nemea rush him once more, and waited, arm raised. Once it got within striking range, he slammed the arm down. It broke through Nemea's core and destroyed it, causing the machine to lurch forwards one last time before stopping. He raised the arm again, and knocked off the other arms for safety before hitting the core three more times, ensuring it was a pile of scrap metal. Satisfied with his work, he dropped his improvised weapon, and stretched. "... That was a good one." Minato said to himself. He looked around, examining the destruction they caused, but found nothing out of the ordinary. There were no hidden passages, so he had nothing else to find in the area.

The Dark Hour ended when he returned to Nemea's remains, and he used his phone to get some good pictures of its various parts and what was left of its core, as well as the fragment of a model number left on it. He even took a picture of the decaying pile of corpses, the passage he took to get here, and the obstacles he broke through. Finally, he reached the pit's entrance, and climbed out. Luckily, nobody was around the pit at the time, so he quickly made his way away from it and returned to the dorm.

"Me and Mitsuru are going to have a funny talk about this tomorrow night. I'd like to know why I just fought something straight out of a mad scientist's laboratory that was indiscriminately killing anyone who got near it... I've only

succeeded in raising more questions tonight."

49. Chapter 49

Chapter 49: Definitive Information

Author Note: Sorry for the delay.

After uploading his newly acquired pictures to his laptop, Minato went down to prepare breakfast as usual. He was surprised when the first person to greet him was Yukari.

"Mornin'." she said as she slumped down into a chair. She stretched and let out a huge yawn. "This sucks... I spent so much time thinking about those ghost stories I'm having nightmares..."

"If you're talking about the one where my ghost friend visited you, then that actually happened. He said you look cute when you're sleeping." Minato said. Yukari snapped to attention.

"Y-You're lying!" she said. "That definitely did NOT happen!"

"I have to ask, though... do you ever take that choker off?" Minato asked. "I mean, sleeping with it on? If I didn't know better, I'd say that was kinky. He does, oddly enough."

"What?! Y-you... why do you know that?!"

"Like I said... he told me."

"Minato, that's enough." Akihiko said, entering the lounge.
"You'll take years off of her life at this rate." Minato chuckled.

"C'mon, let me have my morning fun." he said.

"... I kn-knew you were lying." Yukari said, collecting herself.
"But why do you know I sleep with my choker on?"

"That's a secret." Minato said. *"It was a lucky guess, you dumb bitch. Sometimes I wonder why people like you at all. It's not like they can draw cosmic powers from you like I can."*

"... I know that you can reach all of the windows, Minato." Akihiko said. "And I don't think anyone would appreciate you watching them. Especially when they think they're in private."

"We both know I have better ways to entertain myself at night." Minato said.

"You know how wrong that sounds, right?" Akihiko asked.
Minato laughed.

"I bet you have trouble with that kind of stuff." Minato said.

"... No, I don't." Akihiko said. "Anyways, I'm going for a run. Later." He left quickly, and Minato laughed again. Yukari sighed.

"Do you have to be an asshole this early in the morning?" she asked.

"How hilarious... you think this is me being an asshole? Oh, how I'll enjoy your reactions when I decide to show you what I can do." Minato thought. "Hmph. I thought it was funny." he said.

"Your sense of humor is really bad." Yukari said.

"Like your research?" Minato asked. Yukari grumbled. "I bet you haven't gotten anything new yet. We're still at square one, right? Three victims, all from the same group of friends that spent time in the shadier parts of Tatsumi Port Island, right?"

"... The research is going." Yukari said. "Most of the rumors are stupid, but I'm not giving up. I'll —"

"Wait." Minato interrupted. He summoned David, who began to play a heroic, uplifting song. "Now continue, brave hero."

"Are you serious?" Yukari asked. "I'm just saying I'll look into it more today."

"What the hell was that? Get back in character and spout some uplifting shit about dedication and effort. The music's on, so inspire people." Minato said. He sighed, and David stopped. "Okay, we start on three..."

"I'm not doing this." Yukari said.

"One, two, and... three!" he said, with a snap of his fingers at three. David restarted his song. Yukari was silent, and David stopped again. "... Okay, maybe you need an example. Look

here."

"Hey, the joke's over." Yukari said. David began playing again.

"Joke?... Since when did people think that searching for the truth was a joke?" Minato asked. "I know... I know that to most people, right and wrong are nothing more than arbitrary constants. But even so! Even if nobody will follow the right example, that doesn't mean it has to be ignored!" Minato said, his voice rising. He clutched his head and hunched over.

"Maybe there is no such thing as trust or justice... maybe this search is nothing but a bunch of self-righteous bullshit... maybe I'm just ignoring reality... but if it's as you say, where the search for truth is nothing more than a joke... then I won't accept it!" Minato said in a quiet, shaky voice. He rose, and took a deep breath. "No, no, no, no!" he yelled. "I won't fit in... This madness... I'm not going to just sit idly by and 'survive'. Yes, I'll break it! Yes, I won't just take this lying down! Yes, I'll step up! Yes... I'll fight and die for this world!" he continued, spinning around and extending his arms to his sides. The music began to crescendo. "What am I, you ask?! Who am I to challenge this world, nay, challenge fate itself?! I am your savior! Reductio ad absurdum! What you all call foolishness and idealism, I call salvation! Now! Ego te provoco! Rise! Rise and walk with me to a brighter future! Together, we'll do it! We'll find the truth! And we'll reach out, and take it!" he finished, raising his hands to the sky. David let his music slowly die down, and disappeared.

"... Dude, what the heck?" Junpei asked. Minato broke his pose, and saw the rest of SEES staring at him. He cleared his

throat.

"I was giving Yukari an example of an inspirational speech." Minato said.

"You sounded like a friggin' pariah." Shinjiro said. "Or a cultist."

"Good, I was going for both." Minato said with a smile. He turned to Yukari. "So, what type of music do you want for your speech?"

"... I'm not doing that." Yukari said. "And I don't think anyone else will, either."

"How boring." Minato said. He sighed, and took off his apron. "Food's done."

After an awkwardly silent breakfast, SEES headed off to school. Minato moved near to Mitsuru as she stood near her usual haunt, gazing at the school. *"Does she see Gekkoukan or Tartarus when she's like this? With her own little host of secrets, her head must be more than crowded."*

"I'm always impressed at her constant composure." Matador said. ***"She could easily take my job."*** Minato moved next to her.

"Mitsuru, I found something interesting last night." Minato said.

"Interesting?" she asked.

"Turns out we didn't need to wait for the next piece of information in Tartarus." Minato said. "I found Iwatodai's underground connection, along with a few other fun things."

"Connection... you mean the power supply?" she asked. Minato nodded. "I see... but what do you mean by other fun things?"

"Something straight out of a videogame." Minato said with a chuckle. "You've got a bit of explaining to do, so be ready for tonight."

"... I'll make the preparations." Mitsuru said.

"... Be ready for tonight?" Yukari muttered, listening in on their conversation. She came to a sudden realization. "Th-those two!" she gasped, loud enough to attract Minato and Mitsuru's attention. They turned on her, and she froze.

"... Eavesdropping is a bad habit, Takeba." Mitsuru said. She narrowed her eyes. "What did you hear?"

"E-eavesdropping?! I'd never!" Yukari said. Mitsuru's gaze held. "... Um, I won't tell anyone about uhh... w-what you two are d-doing tonight... or any pre-preparations." she whimpered, staring at the floor. Minato chuckled and Mitsuru's gaze broke. "Just, umm... p-please don't execute me?"

Mitsuru cleared her throat. "... While I'm certain you misheard our conversation, I will forgive you this time." she said. Yukari nodded meekly and went to a different train car. Mitsuru

sighed. "Sometimes, I wonder what passes through that girl's head..."

"Perverted thoughts." Minato said. Mitsuru glanced at him. "We're certain of it."

"... I have no response to that." Mitsuru said.

The group arrived at school, and Mitsuru went to class early as usual. Mr. Toudou sat at his desk in front of the class, apparently drawing. He stopped when he noticed Mitsuru's entrance. "It's not anything you need to be concerned with." he said. "The cause of your concern is simply the presence of unusually strong Shadows."

"You're certain of this?" Mitsuru asked.

"Yes... well, good luck and try not to die." he said. Mitsuru glared at him for a bit, but he went right back to his drawing without a second thought.

The day flew by without anything of note happening, and Minato decided it was time to ensure the continuation of one of his Social Links. *"Alright, Yukari. Time for you and me to do some bonding and what not."* Minato hurried over to Yukari's desk before she could pack her bag. "Hey, Yukari. I think you deserve a break from all that research you've been doing... it's not good to worry so much at your age, ya know?"

"... Are you okay? You're sounding weirder and weirder as

time passes..." Yukari said.

"Weird? Why's it weird to try and help a friend relax?" Minato asked with a smirk. "Or do you think I'm still up to no good?" He leaned closer and whispered "Because if that's what you want, I'll play along."

Yukari sighed. "Never mind... you're no different than before." she said. "Still, we really need to look into this story. I mean, Fuuka is missing."

"Which is exactly why working ourselves into the ground is a horrible idea." Minato said. "We need to save our energy for when it really counts, right?"

"... I guess you have a point." Yukari said. "But... You have to tell me something first."

"Do you want a hear about me an Mitsuru's night visits?" Minato asked.

"What are you two doing?" she asked.

"... You know, asking what goes on behind closed doors is often considered perverted." Minato said.

"H-hey, don't get the wrong idea!" Yukari said. He chuckled.

"Well, I suppose I can tell you..." Minato said. "We talk."

"... That's it?" Yukari asked. Minato nodded. "Then, what do you talk about?"

"SEES business, Tartarus, occasional Council crap... it's more of an official meeting than anything else, really." Minato said.

"Really?" Yukari asked. The disbelief in her voice was obviously apparent.

"Yes, really." Minato said. "If you're wondering why it's a behind closed doors affair, that's because we've yet to finalize information. After all, it wouldn't be very helpful if we threw every bit of speculation we found at you guys. It'd probably give you a heart attack, considering that a few rumors gave you nightmares."

"... I guess that makes sense." Yukari said. "But then, -"

"Ah! You said ONE question!" Minato said, cutting her off by putting his finger over her lips. "All further work related information is now forbidden until after our mandatory break. As both a leader and your friend, I cannot sit idly by and watch you drive yourself into the ground. Now, please select a leisurely activity to engage in, and I will assist you to the best of my abilities." *"... Wow, I sound like Elizabeth now. Maybe I am cut out to be an elevator attendant."*

"Pushy much?" Yukari asked, backing away. She laughed. "Alright, alright... let's go to Paulownia, huh?"

"That sounds like a splendid idea." Minato said. "Let's go."

The two of them left Gekkoukan and reached Paulownia

quickly, where they stopped for coffee at Café Chagall to start their visit. They took a table and got their drinks, and Yukari couldn't help but notice a few of the waitresses giving the couple a few odd looks. "... I think people here still have the wrong idea about last time." Yukari said.

"Probably." Minato said. He chuckled. "It was funny, though."

"Maybe for you! I don't want people to think I'm that kind of girl!" Yukari said.

"I think that you worry about people's opinions far too much." Minato said, taking a drink of his hot chocolate. "Does it really matter what people who have little to no effect on your life think of you?"

"I get that, but it's just that particular image... I don't want to be known as that kind of person."

"You don't want to be known as a slut."

"... I hate that word. But yes."

"... You know, this was supposed to be relaxing for you, yet you're even more tense than before." Minato said.

"Yeah... haha, guess I'm being a killjoy." Yukari said.

"What we need is to go and do something fun after this." Minato said. He grinned. "I know! Think you can do karaoke without fainting this time?"

"... Is that really how you try and make me feel better?" Yukari asked, cracking a grin.

"It worked, didn't it?" Minato asked. They both laughed a little, finished their drinks, and were about to go karaoke when the sound of a small child crying caught Yukari's attention.

"Mommy!" the child screamed. "Where are you?! M-M-Mommy!"

"... *That kid's loud.*" Minato thought. Yukari walked up to the boy, and he followed suit.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked in a surprisingly soothing voice. Minato took looked over to the police station and saw Kurosawa on duty. He walked over immediately.

"M-Mommy told me to wait here..." the boy said. He sobbed for a bit before he resumed talking. "And... and... she gave me money, but..." Another short fit of sobbing. "B-but she's not coming..."

"Hey, don't cry..." Yukari said. "See, you're okay... we'll stay here with you. Won't we, Minato?" she asked. She turned, and Minato had vanished. "... This guy..."

"There's no need for that, Yukari." Minato said, walking back to the scene with Officer Kurosawa in tow. He knelt near to the boy. "Hey, listen up. This policeman might look mean, but he's a good guy... he'll find your mom for you, so just sit tight with him. Trust me, I know him personally." he said to the boy.

"I might not look like it, but I'm good with kids." Kurosawa said with a smile. "Never fear, the police are here. We'll get you to your mom, no problem." he continued in a voice straight out of a children's cartoon, surprising Minato and Yukari. The boy actually looked very reassured.

"R-really?" the boy asked.

"Have a little faith in the boys in blue." Kurosawa said, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come on, now. I'm sure your mom is just a little late, that's all."

"Y-yeah..." the boy said. Kurosawa held his hand and turned to lead him to the station. He turned to give Minato a small nod, and Minato couldn't help but give him a thumbs-up.

"Man... I had guessed Kurosawa had worked with kids before, but I didn't think he was that good." Minato said. "Still, I'm glad he was around. I didn't want to have to ask some random officer."

"That's a relief... I just hope he can contact his parents." Yukari said. Her look of relief soon shifted to one of disgust. "What were they thinking, leaving that poor kid all alone?! It makes me so angry! But... I guess my mom's no different." she said.

"What makes you say that?" Minato asked.

"You really wanna know?" Yukari asked.

"I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't interested." Minato said. "Being on bad terms is a very vague description for a relationship, in my opinion."

Yukari gave him an odd look, but her expression slightly eased. "... I didn't exactly say bad terms last time, but I guess they are... Well, at least you remembered the gist of it, I guess. Anyways, my mom and I aren't very close."

"Not much more descriptive than being on bad terms." Minato said.

"... I guess. Still, it's because she was a terrible parent. She wasn't always like that, though... After what happened to dad, she totally changed... She's had more boyfriends than I can count, and she's even living with one guy. Honestly, I'd rather not know." Yukari said.

"It sounds to me like she still hasn't coped with the loss of her husband." Minato said. "So she's just doing anything she can to forget about it... which happens to be whoring herself out."

"What?! Are you taking her side?!" Yukari asked suddenly.

"I'm not taking any side. I'm just stating my observations and deductions as a third party." he said. "When's the last time you've seen her?"

"Not for the last few months. But hell, she's probably busy 'having some fun' with one of her boyfriends." Yukari said.

"... You know, if that's the attitude you have towards her, you're probably worsening the situation." Minato said. Yukari twitched.

"The hell is your problem?! You wanna talk high and mighty, huh?! What the hell do you know about my life?!" she burst out. "Did you watch your mother leave you behind for some stranger?! Did you?!"

"... *I watched my mother die, but I doubt saying that will fix anything, so...*" "... I don't remember mother's face." Minato said in a somewhat childish voice, doing his best to look genuinely hurt. He actually found the situation funny, but that was definitely not the right reaction at the time.

Apparently, his hurt face looked realistic enough to cause Yukari to snap out of her rage. "... I... I'm sorry." she said, calming down. Minato maintained his hurt face. "... Look, let's not talk about this anymore... I really shouldn't have said that."

"... It's fine." Minato said, snapping to his emotionless face. "I've dealt with that before." *"C'mon, class acting! Don't fail me now!"*

"... Thanks for listening, Minato." Yukari said. "Could you... keep this between you and me? You're the only one I've told about this."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana...

"*No, thank you, Yukari... your trust is my power.*" Minato thought. He cracked a small grin. "I've got your back, remember?"

Yukari sighed, and then smiled. "Yeah, I remember... y'know, I don't really feel like karaoke anymore. Do you mind if we just head back to the dorm?"

"Yeah, that sounds nice." Minato said. The two silently made their way back to the dorm, and Yukari headed straight for her room. Minato signed in as usual, and caught Shinjiro watching TV.

"You're back." Shinjiro said. "I got some information that might be worth something last night. Interested?"

"... You actually got something new?" Minato asked.

"It's more of a confirmation, but it's a damn good one." Shinjiro said. "You remember how Junpei said his friend saw the girl who ended up in front of the gates walking to school? Well, he wasn't lying... Every victim that's been found there has at least two witnesses who say they saw the girls going to the school around midnight... In other words, right before the Dark Hour."

"So the people from Natsuki Moriyama's crew were all headed to school even before the Dark Hour?" Minato asked.

"... The Shadows can't actively influence people outside of the Dark Hour, can they?"

"Not that I know of... I know if you've been attacked and survived, you might hallucinate a little, but it goes away after a while." Shinjiro said. "So either these girls were all idiots who followed hallucinations to Tartarus before the Dark Hour, or they actually had business at the school."

"... Have you told Mitsuru about this?" Minato asked.

"She and Aki already know." Shinjiro said. "From what I've heard from them, they've managed to confirm that this is being caused by stronger than normal Shadows. Aki said that Moriyama's been skipping school a lot, but she's still around. Mitsuru plans on speaking to her the next time she shows her face in school."

"... Sounds like a plan." Minato said. "But this doesn't help us with Fuuka's disappearance."

"... Some people think the ghost in the story is Fuuka, actually. Nobody has seen her around, and her parents are apparently making themselves hard to find." Shinjiro said.

"Hmph... I suppose there is a good chance she could have just died." Minato said with a shrug. "But that's still speculation. We can't be certain of anything when it comes to the Dark Hour, after all."

"We can be sure it's bad news." Shinjiro said. "... By the way,

Mitsuru said she wanted to talk to you. She's in her room."

"I know. Thanks for the info." Minato said, heading to the stairs. As he reached the second floor, Junpei turned around suddenly in the hallway, blindfolded and holding a baseball bat. Akihiko was standing near Minato's door, boxing gloves on, watching Junpei like a predator. He eased up when he saw Minato walk up the steps.

"That you, Akihiko-senpai?!" Junpei asked.

"No, it's Minato." he replied. "... You got Akihiko to help you?"

Junpei pulled his blindfold up and grinned. "Hell yeah! We're playing blind whack-a-mole, and I'm up two hits." he said with a grin. "But I almost smacked Yuka-tan in the head just now. Surprised she didn't scream at me, though."

"Heh... she had an emotional day." Minato said. "Still, don't let me hold you up. Just try not to break any of the doors."

"Don't worry, Mitsuru-senpai said these were all reinforced. Even if ya swung a sword at em', you'd prolly just get it stuck." Junpei said. Minato chuckled and walked up to the third floor, and Junpei pulled his blindfold back down. Akihiko shifted on the balls of his feet, and zigzagged towards Junpei in a sudden burst. Junpei turned and brought his bat down. "SAMURAI SWING!" he yelled. Akihiko stopped and blocked the hit with his gloves, barely keeping it from smacking into his head. "TA-DA-DA-DA! Chalk one more up for the Ace Detective!"

"Hmph... I thought you would've gone for one side of the other." Akihiko said. "Good call."

"I was going to, but then I was like, 'hey, if I only hit your arm, it still counts' so I went with it." Junpei said. "You were doing that whole crisscross thing, right?"

"Color me impressed... you even picked up on that." Akihiko said. "Alright, that makes you up three. Reset time." Junpei chuckled pulled the blindfold off. He went back in his room, closed the door, and put the blindfold back on as Akihiko moved to a different spot in the room. Junpei counted to ten, and re-emerged, blindfold on once more. The game began again.

Minato reached Mitsuru's door, and knocked. "Just a moment." Mitsuru said from in her room. She opened the door a minute later, and let Minato in. He sat on her desk chair, which had been turned to face away from the desk, and she locked the door and sat on the edge of her bed. "... You said you had something interesting to show me?" she asked.

"So interesting, I kept my laptop on me the whole day." Minato mused, opening his school bag. Surely enough, he pulled out his laptop, and opened the pictures he had taken last night. "Tell me what you think of this little area I found underneath Iwatodai Station."

Mitsuru browsed through the pictures of the area quickly enough, but froze once she saw the picture of Nemea's remains. She examined it slowly, and then looked over

everything else. She froze once more at the picture of the corpse riddled reservoir, and then gave Minato his laptop back. "... Was that machine like that when you found it?" Mitsuru asked.

"No... it was active." Minato said. "I tried to take it down without destroying its body, but electrical attacks only charged some kind of lightning cannon it had. Needless to say, the fight got a little messy. That reservoir was barely damaged before the fight began."

"I see... still, that encounter was more dangerous than you might think, Minato." Mitsuru said. "I found some information on the Ergo Research Group's work... one of their largest enterprises was headed by the Nanjo Group."

"Then, you know what Nemea was?" Minato asked.

"A fourth generation HSW... Human Suppression Weapon." Mitsuru said. She grimaced. "I didn't want to believe what I read, but... one of the conditions for the Ergo Research Group's continued existence was its compliance with the Nanjo Group's weapons development programs."

"... What kind of weapon intended for use against humans needs a lightning cannon?" Minato asked.

"... HSW's were made to combat Persona users." Mitsuru said. "I'm unaware of the details, but apparently, their creation was sparked soon after an incident in Sumaru City... I was unable to find anything more. My grandfather... was the one

who pursued their development after they were deemed too dangerous by the Nanjo Group. The Kirijio Group created generations four and five, but their development was halted once my grandfather passed."

"Hmm... a weapon made to defeat Persona users... I wonder why they'd be kept handy." Minato said.

"... There is the possibility that there was an organization of rogue Persona users in the past. If that existed, I could see how these weapons may have been at least a temporary solution." Mitsuru said.

"That's certainly a possibility." Minato said. *"... Or the lab was forcing Persona users to do something by threatening them with death via HSW."* "This raises more questions than it answers... for instance, why make a weapon made to take down Persona users instead of a weapon made to destroy Shadows?"

"... I don't know." Mitsuru said. "I suspect such weapons may have been created, but... there are no records of them, just as there are no records of the Ergo Research Group's final laboratory."

"... From what I can tell, the Ergo Research Branch seemed like it was interested in pursuing world domination." Minato said.

"That's most likely the case... it's exactly why my father destroyed what was left of them. All of them were

undoubtedly blinded by some future they envisioned... though we have no idea what they were aiming for." Mitsuru said. "Still, Minato... are you alright?"

Minato stopped. He hadn't expected that question. "... I wouldn't be here if I wasn't." Minato said.

"This isn't a laughing matter, Minato." Mitsuru snapped. "The machine you fought was designed specifically to kill people with powers similar to ours... you relied on your other powers to win that fight, didn't you?"

"To an extent, but it was really a well-aimed Persona skill that won me the fight in the end." Minato said. "Why do you ask?"

"I want you to stop these lone investigations." Mitsuru said. "You've been too reckless with your life recently. You need to remember that you are an invaluable asset as the Field Leader."

"Even if I fall, I've already set Junpei on the path to replace me. Akihiko and Shinjiro also both have relatively level heads, so they can be his support." Minato said. Mitsuru glared at him.

"... You are not just a replaceable soldier, Minato." Mitsuru said. "People are relying on you for much more than you think. Do you honestly think Junpei, Yukari, or any of us would just move on if you died?"

"Survivor grief is as inevitable as death itself, but it is that of a

'survivor', after all. You would recover." Minato said. "But you have nothing to fear. I value my life far too much to lose it."

"Those are just words." Mitsuru said.

"Filled with lies and deceit, right?" Minato shot back. He had caught Mitsuru off guard, but decided not to pry any further. It wasn't the time for him to reveal what he knew about her deception yet. He chuckled as he rose from his chair, and walked to stand right in front of Mitsuru. "Words are empty, but you're aware of my actions. If I had to choose my death or anyone else's, whose do you think I would choose?"

Mitsuru said nothing. "... Here's a hint. On the day my family visited, they were tailed, and somebody I didn't know wanted to dispose of me... That fool is rotting underneath Iwatodai's port."

"... It's true that you are more than capable of fending for yourself, and also have no problem with killing anything that crosses you." Mitsuru said. "However, you must realize that you aren't invincible, Minato." Mitsuru said. She stood up, and locked eyes with him. "Nobody doubts how strong you are... you must see that others depend on that strength more than you think."

"... People need to be able to stand alone." Minato said. "There's only so far you can go depending on others. But ultimately, there is a limit to what you can expect from them."

"Perhaps... but very few can reach that limit. And we certainly haven't." Mitsuru said. "I understand that you have a..."

predisposition against relying on others, but you can't become oblivious to their feelings, either. It will only end in catastrophe." There was a small silence as the two glared at each other, until Minato suddenly started smiling widely.

"You're right. I have a problem relying on others." Minato said. "Everyone I've relied on has always failed me before, so why should it be any different now? After all, I learned a long time ago that if you want anything done, you do it yourself."

"Minato..."

"I'm not some weakling that needs to cling to others for support. Unlike the vast majority of shit in this world, I don't need any damn crutches. I can get along just fine on my own... But even with all that greatness, I'm rather benevolent. I'm improving the lives of everyone in SEES all of my own accord... hell, I should get a goddamn prize for being so selfless!" Minato said. "You know, I even threatened some loser ass god for you! And I'm making Junpei into a man, getting Shinjiro off the fucking suicide watch list, making Akihiko realize how much of a dumbass he is, and getting Yukari to see her own hypocrisy! So don't think I need any lectures on friendship, or any pity bullshit! Even after all my supposedly 'horrendous' history, I'm still being the bigger man!" he continued. He paused, and collected himself. "So there. The proof is irrefutable. I've never needed anyone else, but I know people need me. And I, in all my majesty, will provide my assistance when required. Just like what I'm doing right now."

Mitsuru was speechless. She just stared at Minato as he packed away his laptop and left her room. After a solid minute of silence after his departure, she locked her door and just sat on her bed, staring at the chair Minato sat in. She was going over what she could have said to him after his speech, but couldn't think of anything.

Minato, on the other hand, was pissed. *"Unbelievable. What the hell do I look like, a charity case?! A walking sob story?! Am I being judged by that shitty piece of paper called 'my file'?! This is ridiculous!"* He made his way into his room as Junpei and Akihiko were resetting their training game, and calmed himself with tea. *"I don't want to be more appalled at... the fact that she had the gall to think I would actually lose, or the fact that she thought she truly knew me."*

Time passed, and the Dark Hour struck. In Tartarus, Fuuka was huddled in a corner once more. The voice in her head had returned.

"Enjoying being left to rot?" it asked. *"I mean, it's not like anyone will actually care that you're gone, after all."*

"That's a lie." Fuuka said.

"No, but that was a lie. Let's face it... you were always a burden on your parents anyways. Your father tried so hard to make you into a respectable young woman, but it's not like you could do anything womanly."

"... So?"

"So since you couldn't live up to his expectations, why else would he just restrict you so much? It's obviously your punishment for being a failure."

"What?... That's... that can't be..."

"And your mom? Oh, she's just 'so nice', isn't she? So supportive and all that... but you've seen the look in her eyes. Behind that mask of kindness is even more disappointment than your father has for you! But instead of punishing you, she pities you... probably because she thinks you're undeserving of her attention. After all, at least a magazine can't perpetually bore you, right?"

"... Why? Why would you... say such a thing?"

"Why? Because it's how you really feel, after all. Deep down, you know the world would be a better place without you... Hell, the fact that you just disappeared without a trace is probably for the best, right?"

"... N-no... no... that's not..."

"But it is... and that's the horrible truth. Hurts, doesn't it?"

"Stop lying to me!"

"I can't lie to you. I'm you, remember? However, I can make it so you'll never have to experience anything this terrible again. All you need to do is let me help you."

"Y-you... you won't help me. You'll... use me."

"Just like your 'precious friend', huh? Does that make me your 'precious friend' as well?! Hahahahahaha!"

"... Say what you want. But I..."

"Shouldn't act tough. You're at the end of your rope, you know? You haven't eaten in what, eleven hours now? Hell, when's the last time you drank water? You sound like a dog, and it's getting more and more difficult to move, isn't it?... I can change that."

"... No..."

"... Well, that's enough diplomacy. You aren't strong enough to resist me any longer. If you had accepted my offer, this would have been painless."

Fuuka felt a surge of pain in her head, and let out a series of ragged breaths before suddenly falling over sideways and seizing randomly, her eyes alternating from their normal teal to a bright yellow rapidly before her eyes shut, and she stopped moving. After a few minutes, she slowly rose to her feet, and then grinned. She examined her arms and legs, then cracked her neck. Her eyes were a bright yellow. "... So this is what it's like to have a body. Not bad at all." Fuuka said. Her eyes faded to their natural color. "Now then... I need to hurry up and leave this trash heap. Then, I can start having some real fun."

50. Chapter 50

Chapter 50: Pimprato Brosato

Despite having spent the majority of last night in a foul mood, Minato was still the first in the lounge, making breakfast as usual. His first visitors were Mitsuru and Shinjiro.

"Good morning, Mitsuru." Minato said without looking away from his work.

"... Good morning, Minato." Mitsuru said. There was a small silence.

"... What's up with you two?" Shinjiro asked.

"Care to tell, Mitsuru?" Minato asked.

"... It's nothing major. We simply reached a disagreement on a certain issue." Mitsuru said.

"Issue?" Shinjiro asked.

"It's not an issue at all in my opinion." Minato said.

"That's still up for debate." Mitsuru said. "I may not have an answer now... but I will find one." There was another short silence.

"... Don't tell me you threw some of your sick philosophy at her." Shinjiro said.

"Hey, she asked for it." Minato said. Shinjiro sighed.

"Look, Mitsuru... this guy's a psychopath, no questions asked. He might be a sociable one that hides his insanity well, but there's no point in trying to reason with him about his views." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled.

"I knew you were a quick one, Shinjiro. But someday, you'll see that the world is wrong and I'm right." Minato said.

"... Hence, my point. This guy's bat-shit insane." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru glanced at the two before silently taking a seat. The day's breakfast was, in a word, awkward.

On the train to school, Minato decided to hang around Junpei and Yukari, allowing for his senpai to hold their own private discussion away from them. Yukari was the first to initiate conversation. "Hey, you know how we talked about the ghost story on Monday? Let's finalize what we've learned tonight..."

"Is there any real point? We haven't learned anything new." Minato said.

"C'mon, Yuka-tan... all we know is that those chicks were all headin' to school at night." Junpei said.

"... Fine. Maybe there isn't any reason to talk about this." Yukari said. She scowled. "Still, this is infuriating! We still

don't know anything about what happened to Fuuka!"

"With the upcoming operation, we're short on time." Minato said. "If this keeps up, we may need to abandon her."

"... That's messed up, dude." Junpei said. "But I get ya... we need to look at the bigger picture here."

"But... still, to think we have to abandon her... what are our senpai even doing?!" Yukari asked.

"Apparently, doing what they can." Minato said. "Regardless, even if we just worry incessantly, nothing will change. We just need to be ready for anything that pops up."

"Still... I can't believe this is all we can do." Yukari said.

"... I hear ya." Junpei said.

They arrived at Port Island and headed to class silently. The day went by quickly enough, and lunch came by very quickly. Minato ate with Junpei and Kenji for the first time in a while.

"So, Kenji, how'd it go with Emiri?" Junpei asked.

"Dude..." Kenji said, giving Minato a sideways glance.

"Hey, I'm no judge. If you and Ms. K have a thing, I'm all for it. I mean, you know about me and Ms. T, right?" Minato said. Kenji perked up and chuckled, but his face darkened.

"Yeah... I mean, I'm all for you and Ms. T, dude, but... I kinda

wish it worked out like that for me." Kenji said.

"What? Man, no way!" Junpei said. "What'd she say to ya?"

"... Well, you know how I said Emiri was going to Kyushu soon?" Kenji asked. "I mean, a few people know about us now, and it's going to be a big scandal and all that, man! W-what am I supposed to do?!"

"Go after her, dude! If she's your girl, go get er!" Junpei said.

"Hey now, let's not be too hasty here. Have you talked to her about this yet?" Minato said.

"Man, I thought about both of those..." Kenji said. "But Emiri's been totally avoiding me. It's like, all of a sudden, she won't take my phone calls or reply to my texts..."

"There's a good chance she's trying to protect you." Minato said.

"... Dude, you're right! I bet she's just pushin' you away so you won't be so down when she leaves!" Junpei said.

"... Even so, man. I can't just sit here and do nothing! I've got to think of a plan!" Kenji said. "Bro, I know we don't really talk much, but... could you help me out, Minato?"

"Of course I'll help you out. Since when weren't we friends?" he answered. Kenji smiled like a little kid.

"Don't forget about me, man! I'm in this for the long haul, ya

know?" Junpei said. "We bros can figure something out, no sweat."

"Y-yeah!" Kenji said. "If I'm going to be her man, I've gotta man up!"

"That's the right idea to have." Minato said. "You'll be fine."

"I'd take this guy's word. He might not act like it, but he's pretty reliable." Junpei said.

"Alright then... well, I know Emiri's moving out soon, so we gotta start planning something now!" Kenji said. "I'm gonna win her heart if it costs me my own!"

"That can probably be arranged." Minato thought. "Heh, then what are waiting for? Let's go talk to her right after school today. She's the advisor for the tennis team, and they meet today. You might be able to catch her when she goes there."

"Hey, dude, that's genius!" Kenji said. "... But what am I gonna say to her?"

"Spill your heart out, man! Nobody can just blow you off if you go that far!" Junpei said. "We'll be right there for you, man!... Well, outta sight, but ya know what I mean."

"... Spill my heart out, huh?" Kenji asked. He got a serious look on his face. "Alright... I know what I've gotta do... thanks, guys... but wait a minute... dude, what am I gonna do if Rio pops up?!"

"Rio?" Minato asked.

"Rio Iwasaki... she's this chick that always gives Kenji a mouthful every time she sees him so much as look at Emiri. She's pretty annoying, actually." Junpei said. "We need to stop her, man... or this whole plan could go down the drain."

"... Leave her to me." Minato said, his expression becoming his creepy smile. "I can keep the whole tennis team away."

"Uhh... dude? What's up with that look?" Kenji asked.

"I've got a hilarious plan." Minato said. "At the same time you and Junpei confront Emiri, I'll go and declare my 'undying love' to Rio in front of the whole tennis team."

"... Damn, bro. You don't even know what she's like, and you're down for that?... Man, you're a real trooper." Junpei said, tipping his hat to Minato.

"Hey, don't be too crazy! You know what that can do to your reputation, right?!" Kenji asked.

"Status and position mean nothing compared to something this important." Minato said. "And I can see this means a lot to you... besides, my reputation is all over the place, anyways. What's another tall tale?"

"True dat..." Junpei said, thinking about the many rumors involving Minato that swirled around the school. The only established facts about him were that he was one of the Dogs

of Student Council and the new model for Be Blue V. After that, everything else was questionable.

"So don't worry about it. Besides, I'll enjoy this much more than you think." Minato said.

"... Hey, don't go embarrassing her man. She's annoying, but it's not like I hate her or anything." Kenji said. "We were pretty chill back in the day."

"The only one who could be embarrassed here is me." Minato said. "But let me worry about that. We need to get you ready."

The trio scooted to form a small circle with their heads butting into each other, attracting the attention of one of Yukari's lunch buddies, a girl with short blonde pigtails and oddly bright blue eyes. "... Aren't those guys a little close?" she asked. Yukari turned back to see the huddle and sighed.

"I bet you they're talking about something perverted... especially since Kenji AND Junpei are there." Yukari said.

"Hah, you've got that right! Aren't those two the worst?" she said. "You know, I heard Kenji is having a fling with Ms. Kanou."

"Really?... Hah, I guess that's why Minato's there. He's probably asking him for advice." Yukari said.

"Huh? Why would Minato have advice about that?... Oh, wait!

You mean those rumors about him and Ms. Toriumi...?"

"I'm pretty sure they're true... they don't talk to each other like teacher and student when they're alone."

"Woah... that's crazy... but wait. Why do you know that, Yukari?"

"Hmm? Uhh, he brags about it back at the dorm sometimes to Junpei, haha... it's pretty hard to not pick up some of what they're saying when they talk in the lounge, ya kow?"

"Bragging about being with a teacher? I never thought he'd be that kind of person... I mean, he's a model and all... speaking of which, do you think you could introduce me to him?"

"... You don't want that. Trust me."

"... I think you're hogging him all to yourself."

"What?! No way! We don't have anything going on between us!"

"Then introduce me... it's not like I have any classes with him. Unless you're scared I'll make a move."

"... Fine then. But you owe me for this, Catherine."

"Heh, don't worry. I'll be sure to buy you something nice."

Yukari and Catherine got up and headed over to the boy's huddle. "Hey, Minato. You got a minute?" Yukari asked.

"Can it wait? We're having a very serious discussion." Minato said without breaking the circle.

"Hey, don't blow me off!" Yukari said. "C'mon!"

Minato sighed, and the circle broke. He turned, emotionless as ever, to face Yukari and Catherine. **"... Again, another non-human."** David said in his head.

"I figured as much. Is it time for me to get hit on by a demon?" Minato replied. "What's up?" he asked. Kenji and Junpei both got caught off guard by Catherine's presence.

"Look, I just wanted to introduce –"

"I like your hair." Catherine said, walking past Yukari. She smiled at Minato. "I'm Catherine. I've wanted to meet you for a while."

Junpei and Kenji's eyes immediately turned to Minato, wondering what his next action. He chuckled, and got up, doing a little flourish with his jacket as he rose. *"I wonder what will happen if I take the initiative..."* "Minato Arisato." he said. He took Catherine's hand and kissed it, earning a little gasp from Yukari. "A pleasure."

"So forward... I like that." Catherine said, earning gasps from Junpei and Kenji.

"I'd love to chat, but as I said, I have prior appointments." Minato said.

"That's a shame... I was hoping we could do something together." Catherine said. She moved closer to whisper into his ear. "I can show you amazing things."

Minato responded by exerting the pressure of his Fiends, as he had done to Kazuya when he first met him, catching Catherine off guard. "It'll take something extra special to amaze me." Minato whispered back.

"... I just had to go for the other demon, didn't I?" Catherine mused. "Still, I don't mind... I actually find that... exciting."

"I like the way you think." Minato said. The two quietly laughed and separated. "Come find me again on another day... we'll talk then." he said with a smirk.

"I'll be looking forward to it." Catherine said, flashing a smile. She turned and walked out of the classroom as Minato took his seat again. Everyone's eyes were on Minato, who smirked.

"As I said... what's another tall tale?" he asked. Junpei and Kenji's jaws dropped, while Yukari just scoffed and turned around, walking away. "But enough of that. We have business to attend to, right? C'mon, let's regroup."

After school ended, Minato, Junpei, and Kenji immediately headed towards the tennis field. They stopped in the hallway that Ms. Kanou would inevitably have to pass to reach the field, and Kenji turned to Minato. "Look man... are you sure you want to go through with this? I don't want to have you go

through anything bad because of me."

"Relax... You just worry about getting your woman." Minato said. "Leave the small stuff to me."

"Yeah... there's no backing down now. We're men! We can't go back on our word!" Junpei said. The trio all gave each other some serious looks, before Minato turned and walked off towards the tennis fields. Junpei and Kenji hid around the corner leading to the field, both on the lookout for Ms. Kanou.

Minato looked around, and noticed that on the girls' tennis team, there was only one girl practicing tirelessly against a wall, with the rest of the members lazing around on their phones. He knew immediately that the lone athlete was his intended target, Rio Iwasaki. She had a long black ponytail and grey eyes, which gave him the oddest feeling that she might have looked like his mom. He dismissed the idea, and strode forth onto the field, causing a slight commotion among the members of the team. *"Time to focus. The game starts now."*

"Hey, if you're just going to stand around, the least you could do is be quiet!" Rio yelled, turning to face her teammates. She stopped when she saw Minato walking straight towards her. "Huh? Why are you here?"

"To tell you something, Iwasaki-san." Minato said. He stopped a few feet in front of her, and the members of the tennis team came to crowd around them.

"Tell me something?... Well, what is it?" she asked.

"I have come here..." Minato said, taking a deep breath. He got down on one knee and clutched his chest with his right hand while extending his left to Rio. "To offer you my heart."

The crowd erupted into a cacophony of screams. Rio took a few moments to process what just happened, before reddening and shifting uncomfortably. "Umm... I don't —" she began.

Minato rose in a quick flourish and clasped Rio's hands in his own. "Shh, shh..." he said. "I know this must be sudden... But I can deceive myself no longer. I, knowing full well I am undeserving of someone as perfect as you are and standing no chance of ever having my feelings reciprocated, love you more than I love myself."

The tennis team broke into a full on frenzy, catching Junpei's attention. "... I hope he isn't doing anything too crazy over there. He's got a bad habit of not looking out for himself, ya know?"

"Hey, stay alert man! He's putting himself on the front lines out there so we can do this!" Kenji said. Junpei nodded and returned to his watch. After a few tense minutes, Ms. Kanou appeared. "Alright, dude..." Kenji said, trembling. Junpei pat him on the shoulder and tipped his cap to him.

"You've got this, man. We're all here for ya." Junpei said. Kenji chuckled lightly, and walked out into the hallway to

confront Ms. Kanou. Junpei remained around the corner, silently praying for Kenji.

"Emiri..." Kenji said, stepping in front of Ms. Kanou. She stopped, and gave Kenji a slight glare.

"... Tomochika. I would prefer it if you refrained from calling me by my first name." Ms. Kanou said.

"... There's something I have to say." Kenji said. "Look... I get that what we've got might be... weird, or wrong, or a scandal... but I... I have to say this."

Ms. Kanou gave him a quick look-over, and laughed on the inside. She had been told to ditch this boy for fear of punishment, but she was being transferred in a year, anyways. He was too much for her. She would have her fun, and she would savor it. "... What is it?" she asked, hiding a slight grin.

"Emiri, I... aww, man, there's no cool way to say this, dammit..." Kenji began, scratching his head. Ms. Kanou was restraining herself from rolling over and laughing at this little display of desperation. "... Argh, that's it! I'm just going to say it!" Kenji said. "Emiri, I love you! I want to be with you! I want to get married, and spend the rest of my life with you! I don't care if people say that's wrong, alright?! I don't care what people think of us! I won't... I don't want to let you go." Tears dropped from his cheeks.

Ms. Kanou's inner laughter subsided. She had expected some

half-assed love confession, but that had escalated ridiculously quickly. "Kenji..." she said.

"I... I want to be with you." Kenji continued. "E-even if everybody will hate me for it, or people call me all sorts of things... I'll go to Kyushu for you, or anywhere!"

Kenji was on the verge of crying his heart out. Ms. Kanou liked to toy with hearts, but only to a certain extent. This was the first time she had ever encountered someone this serious about her supposed relationship with her, and she couldn't help but feel a little moved.

But it was only about an inch. She broke out laughing on the inside once more. Yes, this boy was exceptional. This boy had shown her that she obviously could draw so much more enjoyment out of a singular toy, and she had a willing guinea pig right here. She was Beethoven, and her piano stood in front of her. She walked forwards, and stroked Kenji's hair. "... I'm sorry." she said.

"...E-emiri...?" Kenji asked. Ms. Kanou leaned in and kissed him on the lips. Junpei fist pumped behind the wall.

"... We have a lot of catching up to do, don't we?" she asked. Kenji fell into a hug, crying a little.

"W-we... we do, don't we?" Kenji asked. After a short embrace, the two looked at each other and walked off.

"... That was the manliest thing I've ever seen." Junpei said,

tipping his cap to the two as they left the hallway. He turned towards the tennis court, and saw Shinjiro stomping his way there. He could still hear a small frenzy, and immediately rushed to intercept him.

On the courts, Minato had managed to hug Rio from behind, and was nuzzling the side of her head. She was redder than a tomato. "H-hey, what do you think you're doing?!" Rio asked.

"You said we could go out, right? Isn't this what people that are going out do?" Minato asked.

"N-n-not this suddenly!" Rio said. The tennis team was busy cheering Minato on, when Shinjiro stomped past them. He stood in front of Minato, and facepalmed.

"Hey, dumbass. You better quit creepin' on girls and get to Council, or I'm going to beat the shit out of you here and now." Shinjiro said.

"I would if I could... but I seem to be afflicted with a fatal attraction." Minato replied, not moving in the slightest.

"Tch... you know Mitsuru's going to execute you for this, right?" Shinjiro said.

"Then so be it." Minato continued.

"E-execute? Beat up?! Hey, snap out of it!" Rio said. "T-think about this!"

"Dude!" Junpei screamed, running after Shinjiro. "It's good to

go!"

"... Well, it seems our time is up, my love." Minato whispered into Rio's ear. He slowly released her, and gave a slight bow. "Till our next fateful encounter." He left a speechless and confused Rio to get swarmed by the other members of the tennis team, and joined Shinjiro and Junpei as they left the court.

"The hell were you two idiots doin'?" Shinjiro asked.

"Helping out a friend... hey man, the plan worked perfect! Kenji even got a kiss and they left together! And dude, his confession... I don't know if I woulda had the balls to do it. It was something else." Junpei said.

"I wish I could have seen it... I know we told him to open his heart up, but that's a lot tougher than it sounds. Color me impressed... I definitely couldn't have done it." Minato said.

"... You're telling me you two idiots were busy helping that Kenji kid get back with Ms. Kanou? Even though we explicitly forbid her from it?" Shinjiro asked.

"... Wait, you forbid her?" Junpei asked.

"We spoke to her about it... but that was before I knew how much this meant to Kenji." Minato said. "I'll talk to her about it... and Kenji as well. As long as they can keep this secret, they should be fine."

"... Do whatever you want, dumbass. I ain't sticking my neck out for you when Mitsuru brings some damn sense down on you." Shinjiro said.

They silently made their way to the Council Room, and Shinjiro led them to the back room, away from the working Council members. Mitsuru sat in her usual interrogation seat, and Shinjiro moved behind her. *"Huh... usually, I'm on the other side. I've got to say, the lighting that window provides does wonders for the intimidation factor."* Minato thought.

"Minato... it would seem you tried to skip Council." Mitsuru said.

"This idiot was busy trying to pick up a girl on the tennis team." Shinjiro said. "And also somehow aiding in a plot to get Kenji Tomochika and Ms. Kanou back together. Apparently, it worked."

"... So, not only were you wasting time, but you were also directly going against one of my orders." Mitsuru said. The temperature in the room dropped. She was already angry at Minato, and he had pushed her even more. This was a betrayal. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"I take full responsibility for my actions." Minato said. He bowed. "However, I can only say this: Kenji is my friend and he truly loves Ms. Kanou. I did what any true friend would."

"... Then, you are aware –" Mitsuru began. She was cut off once Junpei took off his hat and bowed as well.

"I'm the one who dragged him into this! I asked for his help, not Kenji!" Junpei said. "It was me and my big mouth that dragged him into this, so if he's gonna take a fall, I deserve to drop twice as far, dammit!"

Minato's stance faltered, and he had to catch himself. He turned to Junpei and stared at him in complete and utter disbelief. "... What the hell are you saying? You're just putting yourself in a bad position."

"No, man! I can't just let you take the fall for all of us... We said that if we went down, we'd make it a friggin' glorious explosion, right? So c'mon... we're already on fire anyways." Junpei said, straightening back up.

"... You know that only sounds good on paper, right?" Minato asked, cracking a grin. "In reality, that's a horrible idea."

"And we're only actually explodin' on paper too, ya know?" Junpei replied. There was a slight silence, until the two of them started laughing. As they went, Mitsuru couldn't help but smile at them. As they calmed down, both of them were holding their stomachs.

"... Thanks, bro." Minato said.

"What else are here for?" Junpei said.

"... I haven't seen camaraderie that genuine since you and Akihiko." Mitsuru whispered to Shinjiro.

"... Tch." he replied.

"Well, now that you two are done, expect a punishment at the dorm." Mitsuru said as she returned her attention to the two of them. "Also, you will file papers here for until we return."

"Filing, huh?" Minato said. He gave Junpei a little grin. "We get to do whatever we want with the trash, right?"

"... The trash is to be disposed of." Mitsuru said.

"Leave it to us." Junpei said, grinning back at Minato.

Mitsuru set the duo to work, and ended up being constantly pestered by a barrage of paper airplanes landing all throughout the Council room and the constant sound of Minato and Junpei's laughter. Their Council time flew by, and the group returned to the dorm quickly enough. Yukari and Akihiko were seated in the lounge, both with apprehensive looks on their face.

"... So, a double public execution, huh?" Yukari asked as they walked in.

"Yes... these two have directly opposed my warnings, and as such, shall become an example." Mitsuru said. "... Your evokers, if you would."

Minato chuckled and drew his Evoker, twirling it around as he walked over and placed it on the lounge table. He turned back, and Junpei began to walk forward. No words were

spoken between the two. They simply raised their left hand and did a spot on high-five, both nodding to each other as they walked past one another. Junpei placed his Evoker down, and returned to stand next to Minato.

"... They don't look too scared." Akihiko said. "I get Minato... but it might be a big mistake for Junpei."

Mitsuru walked forwards and put her Evoker against her head. "... Any last words?" she asked.

Junpei chuckled and took off his hat. "Yuka-tan, you mind watching this fer me?" he asked, flinging at her. She caught it, a dumbfounded look on her face. "Well, whenever you're ready, senpai."

"... Spoken like a boss." Minato said. He chuckled adjusted his hair so it wouldn't be in contact with too much of his face. "Time to explode."

"Ka-boom." Junpei said, doing a little fist-pump with his middle finger up.

"Poof." Minato said, moving the last few strands of hair from his face with his middle finger.

"... Very well then. If you have nothing to say, then... prepare to be executed." Mitsuru said. She fired her Evoker. Junpei gave Minato exchanged one last nod as ice formed around their feet.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

Minato was forced into a strange sideways position, with the ice forming a pincer that just avoided piercing his skin on both sides on multiple parts of his body, with his extremities, head, and various parts of his body fully encased in ice. Junpei looked like he was seated on a chair, with ice restraining his limbs, head, and torso as the chair made little pricks that also barely avoided piercing his back. Both of them had a cocky grin on their face.

"... These guys are something else." Akihiko said, shuddering at the sight of their new positions. Mitsuru lowered her Evoker.

"They are to be isolated. Everyone, upstairs." she said. The rest of SEES wordlessly did as told, leaving the duo alone. After four hours, Mitsuru returned alone, and unfroze them. They fell to the floor.

Minato chuckled and rose to his feet quickly. "That tickled." he said. He turned to Junpei, who was shivering and trying to avoid bending his back. He helped him up, and got a very rapid head shake as a thank you.

"... Minato, I wish to speak with you briefly. Junpei, you

should go shower." Mitsuru said. Junpei did as commanded, leaving Mitsuru and Minato alone in the lounge. "Have you learned anything from this?"

"... I always knew Junpei would be something special." Minato said. "But I never imagined something like this. He's far more than a simple diamond in the rough... yet this changes nothing. It makes sense that I cannot be the only extraordinary gentleman on this planet."

"... So you still insist on doing as you please." Mitsuru said.

"Yes... with one exception." Minato said. "I will fight for that boy with everything I have and more if I must... He is everything I could have been."

"You can still be like that." Mitsuru said.

"No... I have long surpassed the point of no return." Minato said. "Besides... this world needs people like me. After all... heroes can't exist without villains, right?"

"... You are many things, Minato. But you aren't a villain." Mitsuru said.

"Hmph... perhaps the vision of me that you elect to see isn't." Minato said. He chuckled. "Perhaps one day, you'll see what I really am. But not today."

He walked past Mitsuru and returned to his room. Minato spent the majority of the night alternating between his studies

and working out, mainly because he felt he hadn't done either in a while.

51. Chapter 51

Chapter 51: The Gods of 2-F

Minato was in the middle of rigorous training on the roof early in the morning. He stood at the center of the roof, Evoker aimed at his head. "... *Here we go again.*"

He fired once, summoning Empusa to his left. Easily done. A second shot, and he summoned Power to his right, with some discomfort. He fired a third time, and shuddered. Shiisaa, a golden lion with a dark green mane and fur adorning its legs and tail, slowly materialized in front of him. Minato focused, and stared at the sky. "Mazio." he said.

His three Personae turned on him, and all roared. Each of them spawned numerous arcs of lightning that struck him repeatedly, and he shook violently. In the midst of all this, he tried desperately to summon Jack's cleavers. The black substance they spawned from came to his hands, and danced as he tried to maintain enough focus to give form to his weapons. He managed to get their handles in the first few seconds, but the blades formed at a ridiculously slow pace. They had gotten to about the halfway point when Minato collapsed, and his Personae vanished. He lay on the floor, twitching as the black substance left his hands. "... *Another.*"

After a few minutes of lying on the roof, Minato slowly rose to his feet, and picked up his Evoker from the floor. *"This time, it's happening."*

He repeated his ritual, and tried summoning one blade at a time. He managed to create the first, but barely got to the handle of the second before he collapsed once again. He caught himself with the blade, and managed to remain on his knees. *"... There's no points for trying. If you lose, you're just a loser. And I'm no fucking loser."*

Minato rose to his feet and picked up his Evoker once more. He began his ritual again and repeated it a few more times. On his eighth attempt, the door to the roof opened. Akihiko and Mitsuru opened the door to see Minato begin his self-electrocution. "What the hell are you doing?!" Akihiko screamed, going over to stop him.

Minato let out a garbled scream, and his Personae disappeared once more. The electricity subsided, and he stood, hunched over and on the verge of collapse, both cleavers materialized in his hands. He was huffing and puffing, but he had his manic smile on his face. "... Training." Minato whispered. "Join me."

"Wha-?" Akihiko began, but was stopped when Minato shakily ran at him and swung a cleaver. Akihiko dodged out of the way, and backed away. "Hey, this isn't a game!" Akihiko screamed. He raised his fists, and Minato summoned between the two of them, it's back to Akihiko. He let the cleavers fade away.

"Zionga!" Minato yelled. Take-Mikazuchi raised its sword into the air, and a large bolt of lightning struck Minato. He staggered backwards, the shock lingering over him, and then swung his arms wildly, calling on Matador's sword and capote. He was barely able to continue standing as Take-Mikazuchi disappeared, but he dashed forwards at Akihiko regardless. "More... MORE!"

Minato made it a few steps before a wall of ice appeared in front of him. He knew it was Mitsuru's handiwork, but he decided to see what else he could do in this state. He tried to call on his strength Magatama and smash through the wall, but he couldn't do it while maintaining his weapons. His weapons disappeared as he broke through the wall and tumbled towards Akihiko. However, he frantically scrambled on all fours to keep his advance, and lunged at Akihiko from his strange crawl. Akihiko, let out a few curses and ran straight away, passing Mitsuru and closing the roof door behind her.

"... He'll pay for that." Mitsuru said, Penthesilea lingering behind her. Minato turned, looking for another target, twitching ridiculously. "Minato, I order you to stand down!"

"Do you want to play with me next?" Minato asked, slowly rising to his feet. His arms hung lazily to his sides, and his stance was crooked. He called on his speed Magatama, and appeared in front of Mitsuru almost instantaneously. "We'll have so much fun." he said, running a hand through her hair.

That was too much for Mitsuru. Her face twisted into an

expression of pure horror. She let out a scream and kicked Minato away before forcing the roof door open and bolting down. *"This is just too much fun!"* Minato thought as he hopped back to his feet. He ran down the stairs as recklessly as he could, leaping over the rails and bouncing off of the walls while laughing.

Mitsuru had made it down into the lounge, and saw Akihiko barking orders to the rest of SEES. "We gotta go, now!" he roared.

"What the hell are you going on about, Aki? You know the guy. He probably thinks this is some hilarious shit." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru ran past him.

"Evacuate! Now!" Mitsuru yelled, dashing out of the door.

"Do you still think I'm screwing around?!" Akihiko screamed. He turned around quickly once he heard Minato's laughter. In a moment, Minato tumbled down the stairs, and landed on his side. He rolled over and got on all fours like some deformed spider, and licked his lips, his eyes twitching.

"Play with me, senpai." Minato said in as childish of a voice as he could manage. He suddenly twisted his head sideways, cracking his neck. "Don't leave me alone."

"... Fuck this." Shinjiro said. He turned and bolted. Akihiko looked at Yukari and Junpei, who had stopped eating their breakfast and turned to face Minato. They were at Minato's mercy, and only he could save them. He turned back to

Minato, who suddenly crawled forwards at an alarming rate, and stopped half hanging from the back of the lounge couch to snarl at him. His decision had been made.

"Every man for himself!" he yelled, dashing out of the dorm after Shinjiro. Minato watched the door closely for a few moments, and then fell off the chair. He rolled on to his back and started laughing uncontrollably.

"... Dude?" Junpei asked. Yukari was cowering under the table, but slowly rose to watch Minato.

"That!" Minato managed to say in between two fits of laughing. "That was hilarious!" he continued. "The-the looks on their faces!"

Minato went on laughing, clutching his Evoker to his stomach and rolling around on the floor. After a good few minutes, he slowed down, coughing from having laughed so much, and rose to his feet. He straightened out his clothing, and walked over to the kitchen to grab some food. Junpei and Yukari watched him cautiously as he took a seat at the head of the table. "That was payback for yesterday, Junpei." Minato said.

"... I think you mighta gone a lil' too far." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"What can I say? I saw an opportunity, and I took it." Minato said. "But it was pretty funny to see them that scared, wasn't it? They all act cool and tough, so it was a refreshing change of pace."

"Uhh... well, I guess it's all good if you didn't hurt anyone..." Junpei said. Yukari shifted her eyes from Junpei to Minato rapidly.

"... How the hell aren't you scared shitless right now?!" she asked Junpei.

"C'mon, Minato's a cool guy... kinda scary, but I mean, hey, that's his thing, ya know?" Junpei said.

"And once again Junpei proves that he's infinitely wiser than Yupid." Minato said, eating his breakfast as if nothing had happened.

"... You forgot that he's kind of an asshole too." Yukari said. She sighed, and rested her head in her hands.

"That's mean, Yukari... isn't it nice for just us three sophomores to have the place to ourselves every now and then?" Minato asked. "After all, we aren't under any scrutiny except each other's, right?"

"... I guess you've got a point there." Yukari agreed. "Still, that was way out of line."

"Man, don't be such a downer, Yuka-tan. You gotta have some more fun every now and then." Junpei said. "Or else you'll be looking like that old bookstore lady in no time."

"What?! No way!" Yukari said. "I bet you'll look like that pervy old man first!"

"Yeah, right. I can't even think of too many times when I'm not havin' fun!" Junpei said.

The two bickered as Minato quickly ate his breakfast, and the trio headed off to school once he finished and changed into clothing that wasn't littered with battle scars. They took the train to school, and the day flew by.

At lunch, Minato sat once more with Kenji and Junpei. Kenji had a huge smile on his face. "Dudes, thank you so much!" Kenji said as they started eating. "Seriously, I-I didn't even think this could have gone so well!"

"Hey man, it was all you in the end." Junpei said. "Hell, we were just there for uhh... whaddya call it?" Junpei said.

"Moral support." Minato said. "Simply put, to boost your confidence."

"Yeah, that!" Junpei said.

"Even so, I owe you guys a lot! We're heading to Hagakure, on me today!" Kenji said. "Operation Goodbye Heartbreak is a success!"

"... Operation Goodbye Heartbreak?" Yukari asked, walking over to the group.

"It's a guy thing... you wouldn't get it." Junpei said. "... But what are you here for, Yuka-tan?"

Yukari sighed. "What, I can't come talk to you guys every now

and again?" she asked, an annoyed look on her face.

"Woah... Yukari wants to talk to us?" Kenji asked with a cocky smirk. He cleared his throat. "It would seem Lady Luck is smiling on all of us, gentlemen."

"I thought it was just me." a voice said from behind Kenji. He turned, shocked, to see Catherine hovering behind him, staring intently at Minato. "Mind if I join you as well?"

Minato quickly looked over every other member of the group. He examined each of them as he skimmed them. Junpei and Kenji were definitely okay with her presence, but Yukari looked a bit uncomfortable with her sudden appearance.

"Well, not like your opinions matter that much anyways."

Minato thought. "Take a seat." Minato said, tapping his leg.

Catherine smirked and took a seat on his lap, making everyone else's eyes bulge a little. Minato chuckled. "Moving all those chairs is such a hassle, right?"

Catherine let her body rest against his. "Yeah, it would be so inconvenient to do all that work." she agreed. She smiled mischievously at Yukari, who looked like she was seething with envy. "Weren't you going to take a seat too, Yukari?"

Minato and Kenji both shot Junpei a quick glance, and he copied Minato's posture. "Your seat's open, Yukari." Junpei said, hiding his anxiety well. Yukari glared at him, but silently took her seat on his lap. Minato and Kenji were more than amazed at his ability to keep his composure, but he managed to keep himself together. "... It's not that bad, right?" Junpei

asked.

"... Not a word of this to anyone." Yukari said, glaring at Catherine. Catherine stuck out her tongue at her while Minato blew little kisses in her direction. She knew immediately they were purposefully annoying her.

Her rage was interrupted by the classroom door opening. Everyone turned to see Rio Iwasaki make her way over to the group. She stopped and stared at Minato, rage gathering. Minato gave Kenji a look, and Kenji knew exactly what he had to do. He would simply wait on his chance. "... Care to explain this?" Rio asked Minato.

"There are many people I love, my love." Minato said, playing with one of Catherine's pigtails. She giggled for good measure. "I can't help myself."

"You sneaky..." Rio began. She took a step forward, but Kenji seized his opportunity and pulled her onto his lap.

"Hey now, we're all friends here, right?!" he asked. He half-expected to get assaulted by Rio, and winced. Oddly enough, she simply sat there, flustered.

"H-hey! What do you think you're doing?!" Rio asked.

"Uhh... You needed a seat, right?" Kenji asked. "A-and we're cool, right?"

"... F-fine. But don't think this changes anything." Rio said,

getting into a more comfortable position. Kenji couldn't believe the response, and he looked first at Junpei, then Minato. All three of them just nodded to one another. Lady Luck was smiling on them indeed.

The girls were nowhere near as happy about their predicament. Yukari was busy glaring at Catherine, who just messed with Minato's hair and smiled back at her. Though her face was full of innocence to anyone not in the situation, Yukari knew she might as well have been laughing in her face. Rio was too busy trying to copy Catherine's little interactions with Minato on Kenji, which didn't work too well since his hair wasn't anything like Minato's.

"You know, we still have some time before class starts back..." Catherine said, moving to whisper into Minato's ear. "Why don't we go to the roof, hmm?"

"Hmph... as tempting as that offer is, I know a better idea." Minato whispered back, pulling Catherine into a very intimate hug. Everyone else quickly became uncomfortable. "You can charm people, right?" Minato asked.

"And if I can?" Catherine asked.

"Why don't we get everyone into a better mood? It'll be much more exciting than just going to the roof, don't you think?" Minato said. Catherine giggled.

"That sounds lovely." Catherine said. Minato felt a sensation similar to what happened when demonic power was exerted,

and he looked at the other two pairs. Surely enough, Junpei and Kenji quickly became bolder.

"You know, Rio, I don't think I've ever told you how good you look." Kenji said, pulling her into a hug. "It just occurred to me..."

"... It's only been four years, idiot." Rio said, not resisting in the slightest.

"... *Did I just create a hentai?*" Minato asked his Fiends, watching the situation.

"... ***There's a good chance you just did.***" David said.

Ahh, Japan." Matador said.

Whoo! Let's get this started!" Jack screamed.

Minato chuckled, and turned his attention to Junpei and Yukari. Yukari had just taken off Junpei's hat while Junpei tried to do... something with Yukari's leg, though Minato was sure he wasn't going anywhere too sexual with it. "Looks like everyone's all comfy." Catherine said to Minato. "It's our turn now..."

Minato licked her neck. "If you insist..." he said. He reached for Catherine's skirt, and –

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON HERE?!" a girl screamed as she entered the room. Everyone snapped out of their

trances and turned to look at her. She bled profusely from her nose, muttered a few lines, and promptly fainted.

"... How unfortunate." Minato said, retracting his tongue from Catherine's skin.

"Talk about bad timing." Catherine said with a pout. Yukari caught herself, and promptly put Junpei's hat back on before getting up quickly. Kenji stopped hugging Rio and she quickly got up. Everyone except Catherine and Minato looked extremely uncomfortable.

"... Umm, I-I have something to do." Yukari said, leaving very quickly. Rio followed suit, and Catherine laughed.

"Aren't they shy?" she asked. She got up from Minato's lap and turned to hold him by his tie. "Well, I guess we'll have to wait till next time."

"You know where to find me." Minato said with a shrug. Catherine giggled and left, leaving the trio of boys alone. Minato adjusted his jacket, Junpei fixed his hat, and Kenji dusted his pants. Junpei and Kenji went from blushing to beaming. "As of now, we are the Gods of 2-F." Minato said.

"Hell yeah..." Junpei said, leaning back in his chair.

"Emiri did say I should try and have my fun before the wedding... what's not to like?" Kenji asked, resting his head on one hand. They shared a moment of prideful silence, until another scream reached their ears.

"Oh my god! Are you okay?!" a boy asked the girl who had fainted.

"... Shouldn't we help with that?" Junpei asked.

"Probably." Minato said, rising from his chair. The trio assisted in getting the girl to the infirmary and managed to return to class as lunch ended.

After school, Minato stayed true to his word and went with Junpei and Kenji for some free Hagakure Ramen. As they walked through the hallways, they noticed quite a few people glaring at them. "... I get Minato, but Junpei and Kenji?" one girl asked one of her friends quietly.

"Dude, those two were just average at the beginning of the year... how the hell did they move up so fast?" a boy asked one of his friends.

"Is being friends with Minato all you have to do to score in this school?" the friend replied.

"Hear that, gentlemen? That's the sound of victory." Minato said quietly to Junpei and Kenji. They both snickered.

"You're crazy, man." Kenji said. "Still though, that was awesome."

"Yeah... looks like Cupid went and got Yupid for me." Junpei said with a little chuckle.

"Heheheh... You're making Ikutsuki proud, Junpei." Minato

said.

They went to Hagakure, and all ordered a special recommended by Kenji. "Once again, I owe you guys so much." Kenji said. "Seriously... I didn't get to say this, but last night, me and Emiri... well, it was good."

"Dude, seriously? You went and... ya know?" Junpei asked.

"... Oh, no, not that, dude! We aren't even married yet!" Kenji said. "We just like... made out and stuff, ya know."

"That's funny. I wouldn't have thought a guy who goes after his teacher would be the type to wait for marriage before consummation." Minato said.

"Hey, it might not look like it, but even I've got standards!" Kenji said. He laughed. "And who the heck says 'consummation'? You're callin' me old fashioned?"

Minato chuckled. "Point taken." he said.

"Don't go messin' with my boy here." Junpei said. "He's legit about bein' all proper when it comes to love, bro."

"I can tell." Minato said. "... *Why do I get the feeling that I should have been... a lot more involved with Kenji's life? Hmm...*" "Hey, if you ever need anything or want to hang out, I'm usually available... well, unless I'm already taken."

"Yeah, you seem like a busy guy." Kenji said. "I heard you and

Junpei got some stuff from Kirijio-senpai because you ditched to help me out... Must be tough if that happens, since you're in the same dorm with her."

"... Don't remind me, man. I thought it was gonna be a joke, but she's serious about those executions." Junpei said. "This guy here, though? Doesn't even flinch... it's creepy."

"If it's a cute girl doing it, it's not that bad." Minato mused. Kenji laughed.

"Man, I knew you were the type of guy that didn't stick to a type." he said. "... So, you ever pull any moves on her?"

"... Don't go saying this to anyone, but we're actually pretty close." Minato said. "Let's just say... I've seen her naked."

Kenji's jaw dropped, and Junpei tipped his hat to Minato on reflex. "Yeah, this guy convinced her to let him bathe her... and she liked it, too." Junpei said.

"... Have I ever told you you're the coolest guy I know, Minato?" Kenji asked. "Because you are."

Minato laughed. "What can I say? My swagger precedes me."

"Heh... chicks do like that whole arrogant thing, don't they? But it's not really my style." Kenji said. "Not that I'm dissin' it or anything. I mean, hell, look at what you pull off."

"It's cool to be the emotional type too." Minato said. "You might not get quantity, but you'll definitely get quality if you pull

it off." He turned to Junpei. "So, what are you?"

"... I mean, I try to go for what you do." Junpei said. "But that's cuz I haven't really found a girl I like that much yet. When I do, I'll prolly be a lot more like Kenji."

"Huh? What about Yukari?" Kenji asked. Junpei laughed.

"Man, she's almost like one of the guys once you get to know her." Junpei said. "She's kinda cute and all, but I'm not into her too much."

"Then chalk one more up for me." Minato mused. Junpei and Kenji laughed.

"Hey, speaking of chicks, weren't you really close with that Yamagishi girl once?" Kenji asked. "I heard she's been missing, dude. Do you know what happened to her?"

"... Actually, no." Minato said. "One day, she just disappeared."

"Well, I actually heard something crazy." Kenji said. "Some people say Fuuka got dragged to school at night about a week ago by some other girls."

"... *Aww shit.*" Minato thought. "... That's crazy. She would have gotten found by now." Minato said.

"I know, right?! I told them they were full of crap... I was wondering if you guys knew anything, but I guess not." Kenji said.

Junpei and Minato exchanged knowing glances. "Did they say where she 'supposedly' ended up?" Junpei asked, masking the question as a joke.

"Heh, apparently she got dragged around to the entrance by the gym." Kenji said. "But man, that wouldn't make any sense at all."

"Yeah, there's no place she could have been locked away for ten days in that area." Minato said. "Hell, even if she died there and became the supposed ghost from the story, at least her body would have been found, right?"

"No kiddin'... those rumors are getting stupider and stupider." Kenji said.

"People really talk a lot, don't they?" Junpei said. Their food arrived, and the trio enjoyed a quick meal before Junpei and Minato headed back to the dorm. They arrived and saw their senpai all seated in the lounge. They glared at Minato.

"Minato, you –" Mitsuru began, but she was cut off.

"Fuuka's in Tartarus." Junpei and Minato said at the same time. Their senpai froze.

"She got dragged to the school the night she disappeared." Minato said.

"... You're saying she's been in there for what, eight days now? She's as good as dead then. Case closed." Shinjiro

said.

"Not so fast, Shinji." Minato said. "Think about it... doesn't Tartarus seemingly just vanish at the end of the Dark Hour, though it always forms itself at the start?"

"... What are you trying to say, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"I'm saying, there's a good chance that Tartarus only exists in the Dark Hour... so Fuuka may only have been in there for eight hours." Minato said. "... But, without a Persona or weaponry, I doubt she'd last that long. Shinji's not exactly wrong in assuming she's already a mangled corpse."

"... I'm impressed. I didn't expect you to know that theory." Akihiko said. "Still, there is a chance that she's still alive. If she managed to hide, she could definitely survive."

"Maybe, but the Dark Hour is pretty brutal..." Junpei said. "I mean, we could barely handle an hour when we first started... how the heck is she supposed to handle eight on her own?!"

"Are you just going to let her die, then?!" Akihiko retorted. "Even if the chance is slim, we have to take it!" He glared at Minato. "Cancel any plans you have tonight... we're searching for her."

"Alright then." Minato said. "We'll break into two teams. The auxiliary force, Akihiko and Shinjiro, will comb the lower floors. I'll take Junpei and Yukari and search the higher ones. We leave no corner unchecked."

"... The full moon is two days away." Mitsuru said. "If we fail tonight... we may not get a second chance to search for her. After all, we cannot give the life of a single civilian more priority than the safety of the entire city."

"... I know that." Akihiko said. "That's why all of you better be prepared."

"You realize there's the chance that due to Tartarus' shifting formation, she may be on a floor impossible for us to access?" Minato asked. Akihiko scowled.

"... The kid's right. And I don't think it's a good idea for us to just wait in random parts of the school for Tartarus to form around us, or we'll all be in deep shit." Shinjiro said.

"Then what are waiting for?! Let's all get ready!" Yukari said.

"... Man, this is gettin' real depressin' all of a sudden." Junpei said, lowering his cap. "... But it's times like this when the heroes arrive, right? Let's do this."

"Heh... my thoughts exactly." Minato said. SEES prepped and went to Tartarus, executing their divided search. Twice over, with no luck.

During their search, Fuuka was busy walking around the hallways. "Hmm, who to go after first once I get out?" she mulled over as she walked. An eagle Shadow flew from around the corner and came right at her. She caught it, and ripped both of its wings off before throwing it to the ground

and stomping it to death. As it broke apart and began to dissolve, she kept walking. "... Definitely that stupid bitch, Natsuki. And her worthless friends too for bonus points."

Fuuka continued her walk around and returned to her thoughts. "Oh! How could I have forgotten? My precious little knight must be worried sick about me." she mused. She laughed. "Maybe I'll see how good he is at his job! After all... a knight's real purpose is to die for their princess, isn't it? Oh, that'll be fun once I get to it." She walked around, and reached another set of stairs. She stopped at their base. "... Visitors are here." she said. "But they're so far away, I doubt they'll reach me. I wonder if they're supposed to be my heroes?" Fuuka broke out laughing once more. "Actually, maybe I should just wait around and hope I run into them... then, when they think they're all big and bad because they saved me from the monsters, I'll turn around and kill the pompous shits. Yes. I'll do just that. This floor will be my residence until then." Fuuka walked away from the stairs and leaned against a wall. "But how to kill them? Hmm..."

After an unsuccessful search, SEES returned to the dorm as the Dark Hour ended. Akihiko looked the worst, having pushed himself the hardest to clear out floors as fast as he could. "... Tch... there's got to be some way we can get to her." he said.

"... I have an idea." Minato said. "However, we'll need to know the part of the school Fuuka entered Tartarus from. And I think Natsuki Moriyama holds the answer to that question."

"... She will be interrogated once we find her." Mitsuru said. "But for now... we have to call off the search. It won't do for us to rush in blindly tomorrow, and not be ready for the full moon. Our operation may be put on hold until the operation is over."

"Actually, I have an idea." Minato said. "If possible, we can search during the full moon. However, I will not participate."

"... You intend to fight the large Shadow alone?" Mitsuru asked.

"Exactly." Minato said. "Besides... both of you know I've yet to use my full strength in a fight yet. And trust me... it's leagues beyond what I can do normally."

"... You been holding out, huh?" Junpei asked. "Well, you did say so, but I mean... you sure you wanna go it alone? I mean, we've got five people. One of us can hang back with you."

"No... it's much smarter for me alone to fight the Shadow." Minato said. "After all, there's no guarantee that simply entering Tartarus in the same manner Fuuka did will take you to her location. I think it's best for three people to go in, one to remain on emergency standby with Mitsuru, and I remain on active watch. I'll have my Fiends monitor the city."

"... That's certainly the most logical option." Mitsuru said. "However, I won't be able to contact you from Tartarus with the transceiver. You will be on your own, Minato..."

"I wouldn't say that's how I work best, but I'm no slouch either." Minato said.

"Hey, don't go acting all cool just because you're worried about Fuuka too." Yukari said. "But still... it's our best shot, right?"

"... He's got a point." Shinjiro said. "And I'm pretty confident he can take anything that tries him. Even if he can't... I get the feeling he'd still be fine."

Minato chuckled. "Yeah, I've got a few contacts I could always call up if things get too dangerous." Mitsuru looked at Minato and Shinjiro, and then sighed.

"... Very well then. However, we will rest tomorrow. We need to be in top form if we are able to search for Yamagishi." Mitsuru said. Everyone nodded, and SEES dispersed for the night.

52. Chapter 52

Chapter 52: A Calm Sunday

Author Note to jasonwu: Woah! You're all alive and junk! Long time no see, and thanks for the continued support.

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: ... What? I'm confused as to why you make that connection. I mean, they might appear, but probably not as major characters... like maybe in Toudou's role, or smaller... I don't know. If I feel like they can fit in somewhere, they'll pop up. Like, I get Kei Nanjo being mentioned a few times if I feel like it... but not much else comes to mind. I mean, I already have a lot of extra faces in here. It might get too crowded.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: No spoilers, but I think I'll do Fuuka's Shadow well. Wait and see.

The story continues with a short precursor chapter.

The Sunday before the full moon was, in Minato's mind, just another Sunday. He lazed around after making a quick breakfast, and went to work as usual, in his plain blue and white shirt with jeans combo and his hat. Upon arriving at Be Blue V, he headed straight to the Office and lazily turned to Nemissa, who was lazily eating chips while watching one of

her three monitors. "Haven't seen you in a while." Minato said.

"... You know, I was hoping you wouldn't show up." Nemissa said. "It's no fun to work with you now that you're so damn cheeky."

"Don't you miss having a little bitch?" Minato mused.

"Yes, I do." Nemissa said. "Regardless, you are still employed here... Now, we have a few photo shoots for you today. You know the drill."

"Are you shooting alongside me?" Minato asked.

"I thought I told you I wasn't that cheap." Nemissa said.

"But I could've sworn you'd enjoy it." Minato said. "I mean, it's not every day you get the chance to be with... well, me."

"... Egotistical much?" Nemissa asked.

"Elegantly so." Minato said. Nemissa rolled her eyes.

"So you really are here in some ridiculous attempt to torment me." Nemissa said. "Don't you have better things to do with your time?"

"There's nothing better than siphoning power, my moon." Minato said.

"... You're still going on about that crap?" Nemissa asked. Minato chuckled.

"Call it what you want... but I actually enjoy your company, you know?" Minato said.

"So you're a masochistic dog that likes being insulted?" Nemissa asked. Minato laughed.

"No. I'm a guy that lies to screw with people for no reason, just like you." Minato said. "So how about we see who we can mess with, huh?"

"Hmph. You're a damn fool." Nemissa said.

"I prefer the term clown, or, more accurately, jester." Minato said.

"... Idiot is the best one." Nemissa said with a smirk. "Now that's enough discussion. You might not be my bitch anymore, but you still need to work."

"I had no intentions not to." Minato said. "Though I like how you're trying to end the conversation with the upper hand. It's cute."

"... Just go already." Nemissa said, shaking her head. Minato laughed and went about doing his photo shoots. Again, he couldn't help but feel like he was doing some pornographic form of peekaboo, although this time it involved him popping out from a bubbly bathtub.

"I'm not going to lie, these things are actually pretty fun."
Minato thought as he shook some soap from his hair.

"A model that likes his job, huh? Do you even need to attend school anymore?" Jack asked.

"Of course he does, fool! How else can he pull power from the majority of his Social Links?" David retorted.

"I doubt he could chance upon the majority of SEES whilst walking around town all day." Matador added.

"Exactly... the only reason I go through that boring shit is for the bonuses. If it were just to get a future, screw that! I already have one right here!" Minato thought. He continued his various shots, and emerged from the back three hours later, a cocky smirk on his face. "It's good to know women will touch themselves while thinking of me at night." he said as he walked past Nemissa.

"... That's disgusting." she said. He laughed, and went to the changing room. After donning his work outfit, he went back out and stretched a bit.

"You know, it's nice to have this much freedom in this suit." Minato said. "Let's me know I can do whatever the hell I want."

"If you don't mind having to pay money to work here, go right ahead." Nemissa said.

"Hah! I never said I'd be a loser, did I? I'm still the best damn salesman this place has ever seen." Minato said. "Watch me."

He strolled out of the Office, and went about reaping his profits without fail. He had a feeling he'd run into a few familiar faces, and sure enough, Mitsuru had stopped by. He quickly went to help her as she entered. "Hello, Mitsuru." Minato said, electing to take her hand and kiss it. "And welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V. I, Minato, granter of your desires, will serve you today."

"... Good morning, Minato." Mitsuru managed. "I see even an upcoming operation won't keep you from work."

"But it isn't really work if there's pleasure involved, right?" Minato asked, getting too close to Mitsuru for her comfort. "I can tell you just what to get for a very happy ending tonight."

Mitsuru turned her head to examine some shampoo very quickly. "T-that won't be necessary. I'm simply here to have another relaxing encou- I mean, bath."

Minato drew back and smirked. "Why, Mitsuru... you only had to ask. I'll tell you everything we need. Will it be a public affair like last time?"

"... It will be private." Mitsuru said. "Don't expect this to become a habit."

"Of course not... only once every full moon, right?" Minato said. "We've got to let off some stress before an operation..."

"... You sound like a voyeur." Mitsuru said. "I think you should work on your phrasing."

"I only speak the truth." Minato said. "And sometimes, it's perverse, don't you think?"

"I see your point... but a bit of tact wouldn't hurt." Mitsuru said.

"That's also true... Well, I'll be on the second floor lounge 'reading' tonight... come see me when the coast is clear." Minato said. "But first, to ensure quality service... After all, this is for your enjoyment, right?"

"... Perhaps I rely on you too much." Mitsuru muttered.

"I am both an angel and a devil." Minato whispered. She flinched, not expecting him to have heard that. He chuckled, and helped her find what they would need. Otherwise, he made quite the sum of sales, and changed back into his normal clothes. He entered the Office again, and found Nemissa busy reviewing his photos from the day. "You should print some copies of those so I can sign them for you." Minato said.

"That's a horrible idea." Nemissa grumbled.

"But you could sell them off, and all it would cost is one sheet of printing paper and a miniscule amount of ink." Minato said.

"... Perhaps if you were a real celebrity." Nemissa said. "But as a singular city model, your following has yet to reach a thousand. Anything you sign will just be considered ink-stained."

Minato chuckled. "You're probably right." he said.

"It's not probably." Nemissa said. "... You know, this pisses me off. A lot."

"It's as I said... I am constantly gaining power and prestige, while you have already fallen into a role. You need to accept this already and get on with it." Minato said.

"It's still a load of shit... you've been around for what, two months, and you're already on my level? I've been around for years!" Nemissa said.

"You lack ambition." Minato said. "I've never seen you chase power. You're more than content with what you have, living a carefree life. Compared to someone who constantly hungers for power and has the ability to attain more such as myself... well, let's just say that any expectations of constant superiority are misguided."

"Pfft... since when the hell could you lecture me?" Nemissa asked.

"Think of it as advice, partner." Minato said. "That's what you called me last time, right? I'm not going to try and keep you down... granted, you don't have very far to fall, but that doesn't mean I'll stop you from moving up."

"... You had to throw in the low-blow, didn't you?" Nemissa asked.

"When someone is down, it's only common courtesy to make sure they've been kicked." Minato said. Nemissa laughed.

"I can't argue with that logic." she said. "So, you're saying I'm stagnating? Well, I've got news for you... starting now, I'm moving up in this world and in Big Boss' favor. I hate to say this, but you're out of your league. Better quit while you're ahead... just try not to cry on the way out, okay?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

Minato laughed. "If you think you can get on your grind that quickly, by all means. Amaze me." Minato said. "But for now, I'll take my pay."

"... Shit." Nemissa said. "You still didn't forget."

After collecting his cash and parting ways with Nemissa, Minato promptly returned to the dorm. "S'up, dude?" Junpei greeted. "... You think we'll get a chance to look for Fuuka tomorrow?"

"Who knows? Assuming Natsuki Moriyama hasn't gone and died, you guys probably could." Minato said as he signed in. "... Just don't expect a miracle. Tartarus isn't a place for people to just wander around in."

"... I know. But Akihiko-senpai's right... we've gotta at least try." Junpei said.

"Don't dwell on it too much. We'll know once the sun sets tomorrow." Minato said. "Remember, you'll be leading in my stead if the operation commences tomorrow. We don't know how Tartarus' formation works, so be prepared for complete and total isolation from the rest of the team once the Dark Hour begins. You'll need all your senses up there."

"Hey, you watch out for yourself. Yer' gonna tango with a Shadow like the one from the monorail alone, dude... you better not be lyin' about this crazy secret power you've got." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"Then, from one leader to the next... I wish you good luck." Minato said.

"Same here." Junpei replied. He and Minato nodded to each other, and Minato headed upstairs.

Akihiko and Shinjiro were eating at the lounge table, but listened intently to their brief conversation. "... Those two sure have changed a lot." Akihiko said.

"How so?" Shinjiro asked.

"The obvious one is Junpei... he's so level-headed these days, it's almost hard to believe he's the same person. Not to mention he's improved his skills all around in a ridiculously short time-span." Akihiko said.

"Hmph... he has improved." Shinjiro said. "... Though Minato's the same friggin' monster as usual."

"I don't think so... he's got this... new level of approachableness, if you could call it that." Akihiko said.

"... You eat somethin' funny?" Shinjiro asked. Akihiko chuckled.

"Probably." Akihiko said. "Still, it's good that both of them have prepared this much..."

"Aki." Shinjiro said, snapping Akihiko out of his thoughts. "We'll know once we find her... it ain't over till it's over, right? So quit brooding... that's my job."

Akihiko couldn't stop himself from laughing. "... Thanks, Shinji." Akihiko said. "It's been a while since we talked like this, huh?"

"... And?"

"Nothing... it's just... nostalgic."

"... Whatever. As long as you don't start crying like before, I don't really care."

"Wha-?! Hey! I didn't cry that much!" Akihiko said. Shinjiro chuckled.

"If you call biting down on a pillow to stay quiet not crying, then sure." Shinjiro said.

"Tch... you cried just as much!" Akihiko said.

"Did not."

"Did too!"

"Oh yeah? Name one time."

"Remember when we were in middle school, and that teacher took your hat away?" Akihiko asked. "You didn't stop until Officer Kurosawa came and got it back for you!"

"What?! That didn't happen!" Shinjiro said. "Maybe I did cry when he took my hat, but you know damn well that this hat has sentimental value! But even so, there's no way in hell I cried for that long!"

Akihiko laughed. "I had to beat up a few kids who wouldn't stop laughing at you, how long it was going on!"

"Tch... still doesn't compare to the time you got stuck in the top of the jumbo slide." Shinjiro said. Akihiko was silenced.

"... I thought we agreed never to talk about that." Akihiko said.

"Yeah, yeah, I remember... pissy pants." Shinjiro said with a smirk.

"You sonuva-!" Akihiko said, getting up from his chair. "That's it! Outside, you and me, fists only!"

"... You sure, Aki? I don't want you cryin' again." Shinjiro taunted.

"You... I'm not Captain of the Boxing Club for show." Akihiko said.

"And I ain't a bouncer just because I can look scary." Shinjiro replied, getting up. "Don't complain when your eyes are black and blue."

"That's my line." Akihiko said. The two went out the back door as Yukari walked down the stairs.

"... What's up with them?" she asked Junpei.

"Don't know... they were just talkin' until all of a sudden, they're all like 'oh, I'm gonna kick yer' ass for sayin' that!'" Junpei said. "But it didn't sound like this was a weird thing... I'm guessin' they just do this every now and then."

"Correct." Mitsuru said, entering the lounge. She headed to the kitchen to take a bottle of water. "It's refreshing to see them bicker like this. They were even worse two years ago."

"Really?" Yukari asked. "... Y'know, guys bond in the weirdest of ways."

Mitsuru chuckled and left the duo to watch television. That was all four other members of SEES accounted for. She went to the second floor lounge and looked at Minato, who was busy reading Goth. "... Our time is nigh, isn't it?" Minato

asked, closing the book.

"... Let's begin." Mitsuru said.

As the night passed, Minato and Mitsuru returned to the lounge at about the same time Akihiko and Shinjiro walked back in through the back door. The two boys looked extremely dirty while Minato and Mitsuru looked ridiculously clean... yet both pairs seemed happier than usual. The night was quiet and peaceful as SEES prepared for its coming operation.

53. Chapter 53

Chapter 53: VS The Emperor and Empress

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Hey, I didn't mean stop posting theories! I find them interesting to read (and trust me, if you're spot on, it gives me an excuse to spice up the plot). And thank you for the congratulations!

And now, a return to the story. This chapter is long.

Minato and Shinjiro made a large breakfast for SEES that morning, and every member sat in attendance. Mitsuru cleared her throat once everyone finished their meal. "Tonight, as you all know, is a full moon. Thus, it is almost certain that an abnormal Shadow will appear outside of Tartarus. I'd like all of you to return to the dorm immediately after school for pre-battle preparations." she said. "... However, as you all know, we may have the opportunity to attempt to rescue Fuuka Yamagishi from Tartarus today as well. Should that happen, our operation will follow Minato's plan... I hope you are all ready for tonight."

"Either way, we roll out and kick ass, right? No sweat."
Shinjiro said.

"Heh, Shinji's right. We do what we always do." Akihiko said.

"... You're right, senpai." Yukari said. "We'll give it our best tonight, right Minato?" He said nothing, staring at the table silently. "... Uhh, Minato?"

"... Do you think horizontal or vertical cross-sections would be better for tonight's Shadow?" he asked with a slight smirk. Junpei laughed.

"We got this." he said, tipping his hat to him. "No need to get so worked up this earl, guys! Let's just relax till' game time, huh?"

"Well-spoken," Minato said. "I'll be busy thinking of creative deaths for my unfortunate opponent in class today."

Mitsuru chuckled. "You're both certainly confident. It's reassuring, but we mustn't throw caution to the wind. Regardless... we will emerge victorious tonight."

"Aut vincere aut mori." Minato said.

"Amat victoria curam." Mitsuru replied. Minato chuckled.

"Dulce periculum." he said.

"Hey, enough with the Latin." Akihiko said. "And don't you go off being reckless tonight, Minato."

"I know, I know... I've no problem with running away to save my own life if I have to." Minato said. "Especially in a fight without any support."

"Sheesh... you guys are getting way too fatalistic about this." Junpei said.

"Wow, fatalistic... that's a big word from you, Junpei." Yukari said.

"Oh, thanks Yuka-ta – hey, wait a second... wait a second, that was an insult!" Junpei said. "HA! I caught ya this time!"

Yukari chuckled. "I'm surprised you caught it." she said.

"Hmph... it seems everyone is in good spirits, then." Mitsuru said. "We'll continue this once we finalize whether or not Moriyama knows about Yamagishi today."

The members of SEES all made their way to school, each keeping to their own thoughts. *"How much of the city do you think I can cover from one spot?"* Minato asked his Fiends.

"With all three of us... I'd say maybe a five mile radius, with shoddy coverage." David said. ***"We'd probably be at out peak at... about half of that distance."***

"... You realize Iwatodai is about ten times that size, right? And that's not counting Tatsumi Port Island." Minato replied.

"... You will need to patrol the area to get any real coverage." Matador said.

"You'd best use something that can move around without forcing you to rely on your Magatama... It'd suck for you"

to enter combat already exhausted." Jack said. ***"... Can you get a vehicle?"***

"Of course! Mitsuru's motorcycle!" Matador said.

"... I don't know how to ride a motorcycle." Minato said.

"Leave that to me, Boss. I helped a stunt biker once." Matador said.

"And what happened to him?" Minato asked.

"He crashed and died, obviously." Matador said.

"That's not very reassuring." Minato replied. His Fiends laughed.

"He died on a normal drunken ride." Matador said. ***"Unlike you, he lacked a good bit of common sense. Regardless, I have taken his riding skills... they weren't excellent, but they'll suffice."***

"... Then it looks like I'll need to talk to Mitsuru about this." Minato said. *"I hope you can ride better than David can act."*

"... That hurts." David said.

The school day was mainly quiet and uneventful, until all the sophomores of SEES all got texts at the beginning of lunch that summoned them to the Student Council Room. "Hey, did you guys get that too?" Yukari asked as she approached

Junpei and Minato.

"Yeah... looks like Mitsuru-senpai found that Moriyama chick. Guess we'll find out what happens next." Junpei said.

"Then what are waiting for? Let's go." Minato said. The trio made their way to the Student Council Room, and found Mitsuru glaring at Mr. Ekoda and Natsuki Moriyama, with Akihiko and Shinjiro guarding the entrance.

"Good, you guys are here." Akihiko said. "Now, then... how about you two start talking?"

"No! I-I never thought it'd turn out like this... Fuuka..." Natsuki said. Minato sighed.

"I'm sure there are a lot of things you wish never happened, Natsuki Moriyama... unfortunately, all of them already have. It's time for you to speak up and take responsibility for your actions... or do I need to loosen your tongue again?" he said.

"Minato, this is neither the time nor place for those actions." Mitsuru said. She narrowed her eyes at Mr. Ekoda. "... However, things can change very quickly. Speak."

"H-hold on, Mitsuru... this can't seriously be an interrogation." Mr. Ekoda said. "Natsuki, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. You don't want-" he continued, but was cut off by his cellphone ringing. He quickly answered. "I'm sorry, but I'm -"

"You should answer whenever you see this number." Minato said. His voice went through Ekoda's cellphone. "We wouldn't want your little secrets exposed, would we?" Mr. Ekoda turned in horror to see Minato talking into his cellphone. "You're not in any position to talk back, Mr. Ekoda... or should I reveal what you really wait around in Club Escapade for?"

Mr. Ekoda became as white as a sheet. "... Do as they say, Natsuki." he said. Minato chuckled and closed his cellphone.

"That's what I thought." he said. Everyone save Mitsuru was a bit shocked by his sudden action, but he ignored them and glared right at Natsuki. "... You had something to say?"

"F-Fuuka... She... She always looked so frazzled whenever I gave her a hard time... Then, I realized... She's an honor student, but deep inside, she's the same as us. I knew exactly which buttons to push. We were just messin' with her that day, too! May 29th... We took Fuuka to the gym... and locked the door from the outside..." Natsuki said.

"What?! You locked her in?!" Junpei yelled.

"... That night, Maki returned to school alone. She was afraid we'd get in trouble if Fuuka committed suicide. But, she never came back... and the next morning..."

"... She was found lying on the ground by the gate." Yukari said.

"I went to the gym to let Fuuka out, but the door was still

locked... So, I opened it and went inside, but she wasn't there... We all freaked out. Starting that night, we all went looking for her. But every night, another one of us went missing... and they each ended up like Maki!" Natsuki said. "After a while, everyone else quit... and we all got scared. I-I wasn't the only one avoiding school!"

"I see..." Mitsuru said, taking in the details of what she had just heard. "By the way, Mr. Ekoda... all this time, you've attributed Yamagishi's absences to 'illness'. But in reality, you knew she was missing. You must have been aware of that... what was your intention?"

"I-I was thinking of the students, of course!" Mr. Ekoda said, snapping to attention. "With all the sudden Apathy Syndrome cases and the ghost story, I felt that the addition of a missing person case would just cause even more chaos... so I decided to write her off as just another afflicted student... I know it may not have been the best choice, but I was thinking of the futures of everyone involved! You have to believe me!"

"You mean, you chose not to report this to the police for the 'good of the class'." Mitsuru said.

"It was in her best interests... it had to have been. When I spoke to her parents, they thought so as well! They've been making themselves sparse until this blows over... you have to consider the stain this would leave on her records. An excellent student like Yamagishi... she doesn't need that. Her parents agree!" Mr. Ekoda said.

"... You placed Yamagishi's records above her safety?" Mitsuru asked, slightly twitching. "... So, to protect your career, you ignored your responsibility as a teacher... How despicable!" Mitsuru said.

Mr. Edkoa cringed. "I-I didn't... I was just..." he stammered.

"... Minato, I'll tell you if Mr. Ekoda changes his number." Mitsuru said. Mr. Ekoda's eyes widened and he quickly turned to Minato, who smiled.

"It's my job to keep tabs on those who tarnish Gekkoukan's reputation... I'd keep your phone charged and within an arm's reach, twenty-four seven." Minato said. Mr. Ekoda whimpered.

"Now, get out of my sight." Mitsuru commanded. Mr. Ekoda scrambled out of the room. She turned her attention to Natsuki, who was too lost in her own thoughts to care about what was going on around her. "... About your friends, Moriyama... Did you notice anything unusual before the incidents?... Anything at all?"

"... They all heard a voice." Natsuki said. "... A creepy voice. ... Right before each of them went missing. They said it was calling their name."

"Oh, man..." Junpei said.

"Then... that means..." Yukari began. Mitsuru moved closer to whisper to the other SEES members.

"Yes... Until now, there was no way of knowing why some people were conscious during the Dark Hour... but it's the voice; it draws them in. It's not a random phenomenon. This has made me realize... They're clearly targeting humans." Mitsuru said.

"... The enemy is before us." Minato said. "We show no quarter."

"Exactly." Mitsuru said. She turned back to Natsuki and raised her voice. "Stay at our dorm tonight; it's the safest place." she said. Natsuki nodded. "If you hear the voice, tell us immediately. And don't leave your room, no matter what. If you can do that much, you should be okay... Don't worry, Yamagishi should be alright as well. Akihiko and Shinjiro will escort you there once classes have ended."

"Bodyguard duty again, huh? Fine by me." Shinjiro said.

"You should head back to class." Akihiko said. Natsuki quickly left, leaving the members of SEES alone. "... So we're going with Minato's plan, then."

"About that... Mitsuru, I have a slight problem with my monitoring abilities." Minato said. "I can't cover a wide range, but I have no problem keeping up my work on the move. To cover the whole city... I'll need a vehicle. Preferably, your motorcycle."

"This may be to our advantage... my bike has a mounted communicator I can contact at any time, so we can keep each

other updated... But, who can we get to monitor Moriyama?" Mitsuru asked. "If we leave her alone in the dorm, she'll be in just as much danger as if she were alone anywhere else."

"I won't start my patrol until the Dark Hour begins." Minato said. "And if possible, we can get the chairman to watch her. He won't be much help in case of an attack, but he should be able to keep her inside."

"... Very well." Mitsuru said. "I'll see if I can get in contact with him as soon as school ends. However, we will have to infiltrate the school before the Dark Hour begins."

"Sneak into the school, huh?" Junpei asked. "Hehehe... In that case, I know just what to do..."

"Then, we reconvene tonight at the dorm." Mitsuru said. SEES dispersed, and the sophomores all headed back to their class in one large group.

"... Things have gotten crazy, haven't they?" Yukari asked.

"Don't be scared, Yukari. We'll win." Minato said.

"Yeah, relax! We've been training our asses off for this, remember?" Junpei asked.

"... I hope you're right." Yukari said.

The day crawled by, with each member of SEES going over the upcoming events on their own. Eventually, they all ended up back in the dorm. Moriyama received a room at the far

corner of the third floor, and was essentially locked inside until further notice. She didn't put up much resistance. The members of SEES mainly spent the day preparing for their respective battles, and gathered in the meeting room at eleven o'clock at night.

"... Hmm. I can't get a hold of the chairman." Mitsuru said, closing her cellphone.

"I guess we can handle this ourselves." Yukari said.

"There's one problem, though... without the chairman's help, I'm not sure how we can get inside of the school..." Mitsuru said.

"No need to worry. I've got it all set to go." Junpei said.

"Set to go? ... An explosive?" Mitsuru asked. She chuckled. "Alright, I'll let you handle this."

"We don't have time to waste." Akihiko said. He turned to Minato. "You watch yourself out there."

"I could say the same to you." Minato replied. "Mitsuru, your keys?" She pulled her bike's keys out of her pocket and threw them to Minato, who pocketed them just as quickly.

"Remember, the rescue team needs to enter in the same manner. You and the reserve need to remain at the entrance in case anything goes wrong."

"I know that... the rescue team will consist of Junpei, Akihiko,

and Shinjiro." Mitsuru said.

"Huh? Why them?" Yukari asked.

"Unlike you, they won't encounter much difficulty if they need to fight alone." Mitsuru said. "However, if you went and became stranded, your limited number of arrows and ineptitude at close combat would put you at a severe disadvantage."

"... When you put it like that, you make me sound weak." Yukari said. "But I get what you mean... I'll watch the rear."

"... Then, what are we waiting for?" Shinjiro asked. "We've got less than an hour."

"Yes... The operation begins now." Mitsuru said.

"Alright, let's go." Akihiko said. SEES quickly dispersed, with every member but Minato heading out of the dorm. He elected to stay in the second floor lounge, and pass the time until the Dark Hour reading more from Goth, while he set Jack to monitor Natsuki Moriyama. Half an hour to the Dark Hour, however, he was interrupted.

"Chick's on the move. She's heading down here." Jack said. Minato shut his book and put it down on the table.

"Stupid bitch. You should stay in your room." Minato thought. He got up, and Natsurki Moriyama walked down the stairs. "What's the matter? Hearing voices?" Minato asked.

"Tsk... why am I stuck with you?" Natsuki asked.

"Because I don't have a problem with breaking your bones if you get possessed or any crazy shit like that." Minato said.

"Hey, you guys said you would protect me!" Natsuki said.

"Trust me... it'll end much worse if I just let you wander about." Minato said. "Now, why'd you leave the room?"

"... I was thirsty." Natsuki said. "I'm buying a drink."

"... Go ahead." Minato said. Natsuki walked to the vending machine and got a Cielo Mist. As she picked the drink up, she stared at the vending machine for a while. "... Did you buy the wrong one?"

"No." Natsuki said, swiftly turning around to leave.

"Then before you go, I have to ask... did you really hate her that much?" Minato asked, taking a seat on his reading chair once more.

"Huh? You mean Fuuka?" Natsuki asked. She scoffed.

"Hmph... Get real! Stuff like that doesn't have anything to do with hate.... She annoys me, is all. She annoys me." Natsuki said. She grinned. "With Fuuka, when you poke her just a little, she gets this look on her face like it's the end of the world. I could tell right off the bat. She was a goody-goody, but deep down, she was just like us..." she continued. Her grin dropped. "I could also tell... she didn't belong anywhere,

just like us. That's why I let her hang out with us. But what do you think Fuuka said? 'You should go home, because your parents must be worried sick!' Can you believe that?!" she continued, beginning to scowl. "I go out to party because I've got no home! We're birds of a feather... we're the same, so I can tell. I knew exactly what to say that would hurt the most!" Natsuki said. She laughed. "Admit it, it's funny!"

Minato slowly clapped and chuckled. "You're right... it is funny, isn't it?" he said. Natsuki laughed again.

"I thought you'd see where I was coming from... I mean, your entire student duty is to go around hurting people. You just love that, don't you?" Natsuki asked.

"Of course I do." Minato said. "You know, I've got to say... I had you pegged as the average dumb bitch that just picked a target because they looked easy. But no... you went for the biggest prize, and took it. Even got her to consider you as her 'precious friend'." he continued. He laughed, and Natsuki joined him. "Fuuka's certainly fun to tease, isn't she?"

"That's what I've been saying!" Natsuki agreed.

"That's right... after all, us kids that got a bunch of shit growing up have every right to drag others down with us, don't we?" Minato asked. Natsuki's smile dropped, and she carefully examined Minato.

"... So, you're one too." Natsuki said.

"Of the same feather? Correct." Minato said. "But unlike you, who levels the playing field by dragging others down, or Fuuka, who pleads for someone to pick her up, I've just elevated myself above everyone else."

"Elevated yourself? How?" Natsuki asked, taking the seat across from him.

"Well, if you think about it, how far can you fall?"

"... What do you mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like... if you're falling, how far can you go?" Minato asked.

"Rock bottom... where you never get back up." Natsuki said.

"Normally, that's the correct answer." Minato said.

"Normally?" Natsuki asked. Minato grinned.

"You see, that's assuming you fall from within the atmosphere." Minato said. "You have defined surroundings... But what if you fell in outer space? You fall from pitch blackness into more pitch blackness, until you inevitably become a satellite."

"... Ok... but what does that have to do with elevating yourself?" Natsuki asked.

"It means... if you find yourself in alone in an unknown frontier and manage to fall far enough, the people on the ground will

eventually have to look up to you." Minato said. He smiled, and closed his book. "Do you know want to hear a story about a little boy who woke up in a morgue, Natsuki Moriyama?"

Meanwhile, SEES managed to get through the front gates and were walking around the side of the school, with Junpei leading the way. He stops at one of the east entrances, and raises his hand. "Stand back... here it comes." Junpei said.

"Wha-?! You really got an explosive?!" Yukari asked. Junpei grinned, and pulled a little switch out of his jacket. "N-no way!"

"Here we go." Junpei said. The other members of SEES covered their ears, and Junpei hit the button. There was the very quiet sound of a distant explosion, and he quickly walked over and opened the door he was standing in front of. "Ta-da!"

"... That's it?" Mitsuru asked. "There aren't even any blast markings or the scent of explosives... I'll have to ask where you got such materials."

Shinjiro facepalmed. "It was a toy, Mitsuru." he said. Junpei chuckled.

"Yeah, I just unlocked this door before we I left school. But hey, we're in now, no problem!" Junpei said.

"... Unlocking the door earlier, hmm? An obvious yet effective tactic... tres bien!" Mitsuru said, walking into the school.

"Hmph... if we have time to make compliments, we should get going." Akihiko said. He hurried in after her.

"... What's the big deal with Akihiko-senpai?" Yukari asked.

"Same shit as always." Shinjiro said, following the other two seniors.

"... Wasn't 'tray ben' like, French?" Junpei asked as Yukari passed him. She sighed.

"Never mind... we are taking too much time." she said. SEES made their way through the dimly lit corridors and stopped in the classroom closest to the gym. Yukari was immediately unsettled by the abandoned school. "Can we turn on the lights...?" she asked.

"Aww, you scared?" Junpei asked.

"No!... Stupei!" Yukari said.

"Hey, I thought you couldn't call me that anymore, Yupid!" Junpei said.

"Will you two idiots shut up already?" Shinjiro growled. Yukari and Junpei fell silent. "... You could at least act seriously. We're on a mission right now."

"Shinji's right... it's better if we leave em' off. Besides, they cut the power at night anyways." Akihiko said. "So, what's the game plan?"

"We have twenty minutes until the Dark Hour strikes. We'll need to be in position by then, so we need the gym key." Mitsuru said. "We'll divide into two teams... we seniors will check the respective janitor closets of each floor, while the sophomores will check the faculty office. We meet back here in ten minutes flat, with or without that key... we can force our way in if we must."

"The faculty office, huh?... Maybe I could find some test questions, heheh..." Junpei said.

"... On second thought, I doubt the third floor janitor closet will have a key for something on the first floor." Shinjiro said. "It'd be better if I helped those two in the faculty office... we'd be able to search faster."

"... Are you planning something unscrupulous under my supervision?" Mitsuru asked. "If so, expect to be severely punished..."

"It-It was a joke! I'd never do something like that, haha... ha..." Junpei said.

"... Tch." Shinjiro replied. Akihiko chuckled.

"C'mon, Mitsuru... even I thought that was funny. Lighten up a little." Akihiko said.

"Fine. Then we're going to the janitors rooms." Mitsuru said. "Yukari, make sure Junpei doesn't do anything I wouldn't approve of."

"Got it, senpai." Yukari said with a slight smirk.

"What? C'mon, I'm the vice-leader here! I should be the one keepin' watch!" Junpei said. His plea was ignored by the departing seniors.

"Well, let's hurry up, Stupei." Yukari said. Junpei grumbled, but began walking to the faculty office. They made it to the lounge when Junpei noticed a light coming from the entrance. Yukari didn't notice, so he quickly pulled her behind a pillar. "Ah! What the —" she began, but her mouth was covered by Junpei.

"There's a person!" Junpei whispered. Yukari stopped and freed herself from his grip, but remained out of sight. A security guard walked into the lobby and scanned the area.

"... Swore I heard something." the guard muttered. He sighed, and checked his phone. Yukari sighed.

"... It's just a security guard." Yukari said.

"... We should hurry up." Junpei said.

"I know..." Yukari said. Her cellphone suddenly went off, and she let out a little yelp. The guard immediately turned his flashlight to the pillar they were hidden behind. Yukari tried to turn off her ringer, but it played out. "Oh crap... what now?" Yukari asked.

"... Gimme your phone." Junpei said. Yukari did as instructed,

and he played her ringtone again.

"Wha-what are you doing?" she asked. He played it again. And again. And again.

"... Tch. Another dumbass dropped their phone." the guard said. "Seriously, you'd think kids would notice that shit. They fuckin' live off of em' these days..." Junpei played the ringtone again. "... Ain't my job to deal with that." The guard turned away as the ringtone played again, and headed outside. Junpei played the ringtone again one last time for good measure, and then peeked around the pillar.

"And... he's gone." Junpei said. He sighed, and wiped some sweat from his brow. "Thank god that guy wasn't a workaholic... but who the heck was textin' ya now?" he asked, handing Yukari her phone back. She checked it, and facepalmed.

"... Spam. We almost got caught because of spam." she deadpanned. "Still... that took me by surprise!"

"Heh... you scare real easy, don't ya?" Junpei said. Yukari gave him a punch in the arm. "Hey!"

"... Whatever." Yukari said. She walked towards the faculty office, and Junpei followed suit. They entered, and Yukari immediately moved to check the keys. Junpei immediately moved to the drawers. "They won't be in there, Stupei. Stop looking for test answers."

"Hey! What if somebody put it in here by accident?" Junpei said. Yukari scoffed and went on looking at the keys.

"No... no... geez, it's so dark. I can barely read these." Yukari muttered to herself. "Hey, Junpei. You've got more light over there... what's this key say?" she asked, holding a key out to him. He stopped rummaging through the desks and squinted at the key. He let out a little gasp and his eyes widened.

"...Muh... muh... morgue." Junpei said, suddenly shivering.

"... Quit trying to scare me, Stupei." Yukari said. "You'll pay for this... wait a minute.... This is the key for the gym!"

"Oh, for real?" Junpei asked. "That's a victory for us sophomores."

"Not like you helped." Yukari said.

"Aww, what?! Fine, be like that." Junpei said. "Shoulda let the guard catch ya."

They made their way back to the classroom by the gym, and met up with the seniors. "I got the key!" Yukari said. Junpei grumbled.

"I heard some stupid ringer going off." Shinjiro said. "Which one of you dumbasses thought it was a good idea to keep your cellphone on?"

"... That was also me." Yukari admitted.

"But hey, we got the stuff, so let's go already!" Junpei said.

"Yeah... the real challenge starts soon." Akihiko said.

"Yes... the operation will soon enter its most crucial phase. Yukari, if you would?" Mitsuru asked. Yukari opened the gym, and they stood at the entrance. "Alright... Shinji, Akihiko, Junpei... be careful."

"You can count on us." Akihiko said. "Junpei, did you get the thing from Minato?"

"Sure did." Junpei said. He pulled the Dimensional Compactor out of his pocket. "He showed me how to use this thing right before we left... it's weird though. I'd stand back if I were you." Junpei shook the little black cube on a string above the floor, and focused. First, Yukari's bow and arrows fell out, followed by Akihiko's gauntlets, Mitsuru's rapier, and finally, Junpei's great sword. "... Hey, what are you gonna use, Shinji-senpai?"

Shinjiro reached into his pocket and crushed his black charm, creating his obsidian axe. "I've always got at least this on me. Everyone's packing their Evokers for the night?" he said. The other members nodded. "Then let's get this over with." The rescue team headed into the gym and stood around, waiting for midnight, as Mitsuru and Yukari headed outside of the school.

Back at the dorm, Natsuki was staring at Minato in complete shock. "Quite the tale, isn't it?" he asked. "It almost sounds

made up..."

"... No." Natsuki said. "It'd take a special kind of twisted to make that up. That... that was about you, wasn't it?"

"Yes it was." Minato said. He glanced at his watch. It was approaching midnight. "But that'll be the end of our discussion... it's getting late, and you're better off asleep now."

"... Yeah." Natsuki said, slowly getting up. Minato chuckled.

"Don't think about it too much... you'll only give yourself more nightmares." Minato said. Natsuki nodded, and returned to her room. Minato had Jack tail her, and once she got to her room, he returned to Minato.

"She's trying to sleep, Boss... but shouldn't we be getting ready?" Jack asked.

"I know." Minato replied. He walked downstairs and out of the back door, into the alley where Mitsuru had parked her bike. He pulled the keys out of his pocket, and started the engine as the Dark Hour began. *"Get on your search modes, all of you. I'll cover this entire town four times over."* He revved the bike a few times, and rode onto the streets. His patrol began, and he first tried the bike's communicator. "Mitsuru, can you hear me?" he asked.

In Tartarus lobby, Mitsuru had just set up her instruments and gotten Minato's message. "Yes, Minato... I can hear you

perfectly." she said. Yukari looked around, shifting uneasily.

"Have you contacted the others yet?" Minato asked over the communicator.

"No... I lost contact with them. I'm searching for them now." Mitsuru said. "Have you detected any Shadows?"

"Not yet. I'll give you a call if I do." Minato said. *"But don't worry too much about me. Focus on the team inside... they're in more danger than I am."*

"You may be right... good luck." Mitsuru said.

"Doubt I'll need it." Minato said. *"I'll try to keep your bike in good condition, but I can't make any promises."*

Mitsuru chuckled. "You'll face execution if you so much as scratch it." she said.

"Scary! Then I'll just have to be extra careful, won't I?" Minato replied. *"But that's enough chatter for now. Call me if you find Fuuka."*

"It's not a question of 'if'." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled and ended communication. "Now... where did they end up?" Mitsuru muttered, focusing on Penthesilea. After a few tense minutes, she heard Akihiko's voice.

"Mitsuru, can you hear me?" he asked over the transceiver.

"This is Mitsuru. I've confirmed your position. You're higher up than I expected... In fact, you're barely in communication range. Is everyone alright?" she replied.

"... *don't know... got separ...*" Akihiko replied. She was losing signal, and soon lost all contact.

"Akihiko! Come in, Akihiko!" Mitsuru said.

"... Is he out of communication range?" Yukari asked. "... I'm starting to get worried."

On an unknown floor in Tartarus, Junpei groggily rose to his feet. His cap was on the floor, and he put it back on quickly with a sigh. "Dammit... looks like Minato wasn't kiddin' when he said be ready to have to go it alone." Junpei muttered. He tapped the transceiver in his ear. "Hey, Mitsuru-senapi! Ya there?"

"*Are... you... alri-? ... distance ... too far. Can't provi- ... back-up. ... You... got sep... Akihiko...*" Mitsuru responded.

"What the heck?" Junpei asked. "... Not even back-up is here, huh? But, it's times like this I gotta be the man." He clutched his great sword, and headed down the halls of Tartarus. "... Well, at least it still looks like Arga... no, Archa... gah! It looks like where we were before. Can't be that far up... I think."

Junpei continued his trek, and encountered a few small groups of Shadows. He made short work of them, usually by jumping the strongest and using Hermes to clean up anything he

couldn't kill before they got a chance to strike back. He made it to a set of stairs after clearing a floor with little difficulty, and tapped his transceiver again. "Yo, Mitsuru-senpai! Can ya hear me now?!" he asked.

"... *Akihiko and... aren't... this floor...*" Mitsuru replied.

"Shit..." Junpei grumbled. He made it halfway up the stairs when he heard another voice in his head.

"*Who's there?... Are you human?...*" a voice asked.

"What the heck?! Who's there?!" Junpei asked, turning and shouting. "... Is that Fuuka?"

Two floors up, Fuuka was holding the mask of the last Shadow on her floor in her hand. "... Yes, that's right. Come. Save me from my tower." she mused. "I'll repay you all a thousand fold." She crushed the mask, and giggled. "But I've got to stay in character... it wouldn't do for them to find me out now."

Back at the dorm, Natsuki tossed and turned in her bed. "I... I'm all alone after all." she said. "I can't do what that Minato guy does... and I can't just be a good girl either... Fuuka... huh?" Natsuki rose in her bed, and covered her ears with her hands. "No... No! I don't wanna hear this!" she yelled. She suddenly fell silent, and her hands dropped to her sides. She looked straight to the roof. "... Calling me..." she whispered. Her eyes dilated rapidly, and she rose from her bed. "I... I have to go... tell her I'm sorry... Fuuka." she continued.

Natsuki made her way to the door, and began her trek to Tartarus.

Minato had just about covered the majority of Iwatodai, and was about to loop back from the mainland city entrance when he stopped just in front of the hospital he had gone to look for Fuuka. The little boy in a prisoner's outfit stood on the road, staring at the moon. "Hi... this is the first time we've spoken outside of your room." the boy said.

"Indeed... but you've chosen a strange time to appear." Minato said. "Unless you're here to tell me where my ordeal is going to be?"

The boy giggled. "Actually, you'll be facing two ordeals tonight." he said.

"Two on one, huh... I'll have to fight more carefully, then. Thanks." Minato said.

"That's not all... you need to hurry to that girl." the boy said. "She's more of a threat than the two ordeals combined... your friends will need you."

"... Fuuka's a threat?" Minato asked.

"To your friends, to her friend, and even to you." the boy said. "... Oh. That girl you left alone... she's going to see her too."

"... So I'm up against three ordeals, then?" Minato asked, narrowing his eyes.

"That depends... not even I know what that girl will do if she faces your original opponents for tonight." the boy said. "But we've spoken for too long. Time is of the essence... I hope we can meet again." the boy vanished, and Minato quickly u-turned, and sped towards Tartarus.

"Fifteen minutes... I can get there in fifteen minutes. As long as they haven't started fighting yet, I can make it." he thought.

Inside of Tartarus, Junpei had cleared out yet another floor while receiving cryptic help messages from Mitsuru and the strange voice. As he walked onto his third floor of the night, he heard something moving around the corner. He prepped his great sword, and swung hard as he emerged. His blade met Shinjiro's axe head on, and the two let their weapons bounce off one another and drop to their sides. "Shinji-senpai!" Junpei said. "Whew! Am I glad to see you okay!"

"Hmph... what did you expect?" Shinjiro asked. "Still, you seen Aki?"

"Over here!" Akihiko screamed from behind Junpei, running over to join them. The trio all sighed, and looked each other over. None of them were seriously hurt. "... I don't think we should enter Tartarus this way again." Akihiko said.

"I second that." Shinjiro said.

"Same... but oh yeah! Did you guys hear a voice as you were comin' here?" Junpei asked.

"Who is this...? Are you human?" the voice asked.

"Behind you." Shinjiro said, clutching his axe. Junpei turned and saw some movement by a corner, and readied his sword. "Show yourself."

Fuuka very slowly peeked around the corner. "... Are you Fuuka Yamagishi?" Akihiko asked. She gasped, and ran over to them.

"Wow, you're alive! That's awesome! Never fear, Junpei's here!" Junpei said as Fuuka joined them.

"I'm glad you're okay... come with us." Akihiko said.

"Thank you so much..." Fuuka said. "*You macho sacks of shit.*"

"Looks like we made the right decision. I'll see if I can contact Mitsuru." Akihiko said. He put his hand on his transceiver and moved a little distance away from the group.

"Where are we... I was at school, and then..." Fuuka began.

"Well... it's a long story. I'll explain after we get outta here." Junpei said.

"You just focus on keeping safe." Shinjiro said. Akihiko grumbled, and tried his transceiver again.

"Mitsuru, can you hear me?!" he shouted. "... No good. All I hear is static."

"Oh yeah, are ya hurt? Have you run into any monsters?" Junpei asked.

"The only monster in here is me, fools." "So, there ARE strange creatures in here, then... I've managed to avoid them so far..." Fuuka said.

"... You've got sensory abilities." Shinjiro said. "Strong too, if you could tell without being able to summon your Persona. I'd bet it outclasses Mitsuru's by miles... granted, her Persona is battle-oriented, but still."

"That's amazing." Akihiko said. "... But we shouldn't waste any more time. I'm sure you don't want to be here anymore." Fuuka nodded nervously. "... Also, hold onto this." He pulled out an Evoker and handed it to her. She gasped.

"B-but this is...!" she said. *"Come on... you're making this too easy for... wait. This is a fake!"*

"Think of it as a lucky charm. It's not really a gun." Akihiko said. He turned to Shinji and Junpei. "Alright, let's get out of here. If we're lucky, we might be able to reach Minato before the big fight."

"Good idea." Junpei said. "Fuuka, you should –" he began, but was cut off by his transceiver suddenly coming to life.

" – *Shadows... losing... Get Yamagishi-*" Mitsuru screamed before the message was suddenly cut.

"Mitsuru?! Mitsuru?!" Akihiko yelled.

"... What is this thing...? It's much bigger than the others... and it's attacking people!" Fuuka said.

"Dammit!" Akihiko yelled.

"Tch... get your asses in gear, now. We've got trouble." Shinjiro said. The group took off down the halls, in search of an access point. After a few frantic minutes of searching, they managed to find one, and all emerged at the top of the lobby's stairs. The picture they saw wasn't pretty.

Yukari was lying sideways on the floor, clutching her stomach. Her bow was broken, and she pressed her Evoker against a large gash she had, taking ragged breaths. A little distance away stood two large Shadows. The first was shaped like a buff man with thin legs and arms, with a red cross covering its torso. It had small golden shoulder adornments reminiscent of a general's, as well as a small red cape. It had the number 'IV' carved onto its purple mask, representing the Emperor, and wielded a huge black great sword. The second was shaped like a plump woman, with a blue pants and shirt, red high heels, and numerous golden adornments holding up a large flowing white gown that peacocked behind its head. It had the number 'III' carved onto its tan mask, representing the Empress, and wielded a wand with a golden ball at the end.

Mitsuru was frantically dodging close range attacks from the Emperor and Empress, barely avoiding being crushed by their

gigantic weapons. Her rapier had been broken, and she was tiring very quickly. By the time the group managed to make it to the bottom of the stairs, she had faltered, and took a direct hit from the Empress' wand to her side. She let out a cry of agony and tumbled sideways through the air, landing near Yukari. She coughed up blood, and struggled to her feet.

"... What in the world?" Fuuka asked.

"There's TWO of them?!" Akihiko shouted, running over to Mitsuru. Junpei ran to check on Yukari, and Shinjiro stood between them and the Shadows. Fuuka followed, and remained behind everyone else.

"Hey, Yukari! Hang in there!" Junpei said. He turned to Akihiko. "Can't ya heal em'?"

"Already on it." Akihiko said, firing his Evoker. Polydeuces appeared behind him. "Dia!" A green light enveloped Mitsuru, and then Yukari. They both managed to get to sit up, but neither could stand.

"... You guys... hey!" Yukari said. She immediately regretted shouting, and clutched her stomach.

"Take it easy!" Junpei said.

"These Shadows... nothing is working." Mitsuru said. The Shadows began approaching the group at this point.

"Oh shit, they look pissed!" Junpei said, rising to his feet. He

and Akihiko joined Shinjiro on the front lines when Tartarus' entrance opened. Everyone turned to see Natsuki walk in. "Hey! Isn't that...?!"

"Why the hell is she here?!" Akihiko yelled. Shinjiro focused on her.

"... She ain't normal right now." Shinjiro said.

"F-Fuuka..." Natsuki said. She fell to her knees at the end of the entrance hallway.

"... Moriyama-san?" Fuuka asked. She ran over to her.

"Wait! What are you doing?!" Akihiko yelled.

"Please, get out of here! It's dangerous!" Fuuka said as she reached Natsuki. *"You can't die here, not when I haven't made you squirm!"*

"I... I wanted to tell you... I'm sorry..." Natsuki said. The Emperor turned around, ignoring SEES in favor of Fuuka and Natsuki, and walked towards them. Fuuka quickly turned to face it, and her eyes swapped from their usual teal to the blinding yellow once more.

"Hey, get out of there!" Akihiko yelled.

"... I'm no weakling." Fuuka said quietly. The Emperor raised its great sword high into the air, and Fuuka smirked. "... Maria." she said. Behind her, the image of a woman clad in an all-white gown with a veiled face appeared behind her. Fuuka

and Natsuki were enveloped in the white gown, and when the Shadow hit it, it recoiled, staggering back. Maria didn't budge. Fuuka couldn't suppress a laugh. "Sing for me."

Maria clasped its hands in prayer, and an unearthly wail erupted from its mouth, creating a shockwave that sent the Emperor flying backwards into the Empress. The members of SEES all stared in awe as the two Shadows struggled back to their feet. "... These monsters are hiding their vulnerability." Fuuka said from within Maria, whose gown became semi-transparent to show the outline of Fuuka. Natsuki was lying on the ground behind her.

"That's... Yamagishi?" Mitsuru asked, staring at Maria. Her Persona was almost as tall as the Shadows they fought, standing about twelve feet high. "Her power..."

"I can strip them of that ability, and make them weak to normal attacks..." Fuuka continued.

"For real?!" Junpei asked.

"But I won't be able to do much more..." Fuuka said.

"Just as I thought... Mitsuru, let her take your place." Akihiko said.

"... I see now, Yamagishi. Very well... can you assist the others?" Mitsuru said.

"Yes... but not directly. If I try and fight, they can hide their

vulnerability again." Fuuka said.

"No problem. Once we can hurt it, we can kill it." Shinjiro said.
"Leave the rest to us."

"Yukari, Mitsuru-senpai, you should hang back and recover."
Junpei said. "We'll take it from here." The two wounded
combatants nodded, and the boys of SEES stepped in front of
the Shadows. "... Man, these guys are ugly." Junpei said.
"Bet Minato would crack some joke about them looking nicer
in pieces or something like that, heh."

"I don't think we can contact him... looks like this is on us."
Akihiko said. "Get ready... Fuuka, tell us when you've taken
their ability away."

Maria screamed again, and this time, the Shadows lurched
forwards. A strange circle of glyphs appeared from both of
their chests, and was then pulled towards Maria, who
extended her arms into their center. The circles sparked
around her hands, and Maria stopped singing. "... I can't do
much more than keep this up... but I know that the one with a
sword is immune to electricity, and the one with a staff is
immune to wind."

"Woah, you can even tell their resistances?" Junpei asked.
"Man, you're amazing!"

"Enough chatter, they're coming!" Shinjiro said. Sure enough,
the Empress was the first to recover, and twirled its staff in
the air. A large tornado made its way towards the group, but

Shinjiro stepped forwards and extended his left arm, amplified by his Devil's body. He absorbed as the Emperor came forth to drop its sword on him. He countered it with a shockwave enhanced axe swing, and pushed the Emperor back. "Get him!"

"Hermes!" Junpei yelled, firing his Evoker. The blue man zoomed to the top of the lobby, and crashed back down on to the unbalanced Emperor, sending him into the ground. "Piece of cake." he said. He took one step forward, but stopped when he felt something behind him. The Emperor rose from out of the floor, and tried to drop its sword down on him. Junpei yelped and rolled backwards, taking a huge slice with his sword at the Emperor's midsection. "Hah! Got you in the balls!" he declared triumphantly. His victory was short lived when a small burst of wind sent him tumbling forwards.

"Shadows don't have balls, dumbass." Shinjiro said, firing his Evoker. "Castor Prime, Dreadnaught!" His Persona appeared behind him and aimed all of its cannons at the Empress. Shot after shot pounded its body, sending it staggering backwards. He was about to strike again when the Emperor tried to destroy Castor Prime.

"Polydeuces!" Akihiko said as he fired his Evoker. His Persona appeared and intercepted the Emperor's blade with its needle, but it was quickly pushed back.

"Tch! Star Drop!" Shinjiro yelled. Castor Prime fired off its cannons into the air and leaped at the Emperor. A large blast of wind buffeted it, and it careened into the floor. "Bullshit."

Shinjiro said as the Emperor swatted Polydeuces away.

"Agi!" Junpei yelled as he got back to his feet. Hermes threw a quick fireball at the Emperor, buffeting it as it struck at Shinjiro, giving him enough time to dodge the strike. "You okay, Shinji-senpai?"

"Better than you and Aki." Shinjiro said as his Persona dissolved. The Empress turned its wand on them, and summoned another giant tornado. Shinjiro went forwards, an arm raised to absorb the attack once more. The wind swirled to his arm as usual, and he clutched his axe. He brought his axe into the air, preparing to release a shockwave at the Empress, but was forced to deflect another attack from the Emperor. However, before the Emperor even fell, it dissolved and rematerialized behind him, about to skewer him. Junpei tackled him out of the way, and the two narrowly avoided impalement. Junpei quickly fired off his Evoker as he got up.

"Double Fangs!" Junpei yelled. Hermes materialized once more and threw two of its metallic blades at each of the Emperor's knees. A swift wind veered them off course, and the Emperor suddenly picked up speed. Shinjiro and Junpei quickly separated as the Emperor thrashed wildly at them, leaving slash marks and small craters with each strike. "Dammit! That one with the wand is screwing us!"

"Sonic Punch!" Akihiko yelled from across the battlefield. Polydeuces appeared behind the Empress and slammed its needle into the back of the Empress' head, sending it flying forwards onto its stomach. "And once more!" he said.

Polydeuces flew forwards for a follow-up as the Emperor disappeared once again. It reappeared between Polydeuces and the Empress, and swung at it once more. Polydeuces managed to avoid the attack, but its advance was halted, allowing the Empress to get back to its feet.

"Akihiko-senpai, Shinji-senpai! We need to fight these two separately!" Junpei said. "You two should take the one with the wand, and I'll take the sword guy! Once it's three on one, this'll be easy!"

"Sounds like a plan." Shinjiro said. "Aki, let's link up."

"Got it!" Akihiko said. "Junpei, cover us!"

"Heh, it's time to show you MY secret power!" Junpei yelled. He fired off his Evoker and summoned Hermes next to him. "Behold, Junpei lori, the messenger of the gods!" he yelled, jumping onto his Persona's back. "I'm off!"

Hermes picked up speed, and Junpei almost fell off as his Persona darted towards the two Shadows. The Empress sent a blast of wind in his direction, but Hermes quickly spun out of the way. It was met with a pre-emptive slash from the Emperor, but Hermes slowed itself violently, turning vertical to get drag, and avoided the strike. Junpei hung on for dear life as he made his Persona speed straight into the air. He let go, and flew past Hermes. "My secret technique!" Junpei yelled. He held out his sword, and Hermes grabbed it, sheathing it in fire. As the two began to fall, Hermes turned around and Junpei got back into a riding position, flaming sword held high.

"Junpei's Inferno Blade!" he screamed as he descended onto the two Shadows. He aimed his strike at the Emperor, and clashed with it, blade against blade. He let out a yell as the impact sent him flying into the Emperor, who fell over. He rolled off of it, and scrambled to avoid being crushed by its fist. After getting up, he was greeted by a tornado forming underneath him that sent him flying off to the side. "Agh, c'mon!" he said, staggering to his feet. He was greeted by the Emperor appearing in front of him, sword raised. It brought the blade down, and Junpei ran out of the way muttering curses.

The Empress twirled its wand to send another gust of wind at Junpei when Castor Prime rammed into its side, horn first, sending it staggering away. "You remember how we dealt with those big ones back in the day?" Shinjiro asked Akihiko as the two dashed underneath Castor Prime.

"Never forgot!" Akihiko replied. Shinjiro grinned and dissolved his axe, pocketing the charm. He and Akihiko ran underneath the Empress, fists raised. Akihiko broke the Empress' right knee with a devastating left hook, and Shinjiro broke the left knee with an equally powerful right hook. Shinjiro quickly backed away while Akihiko kept running, and the two stood on either side of the Shadow. "Heh! I've been waiting for this!" Akihiko said, raising his Evoker to his head.

"Let's kick some ass!" Shinjiro said, firing his Evoker once more. "Fatal End!"

"Sonic Punch!" Akihiko yelled. Castor Prime and Polydeuces

caught the Shadow in a pincer strike. Castor Prime easily tore into the Empress stomach with its horn, impaling it. Polydeuces drove its needle into the Empress upper back, also impaling it. It dropped its wand, unable to move. "Mazio!"

"Dreadnought." Shinjiro said. Castor began firing shot after shot at point blank range at the Shadow's upper body, blowing bits of it off and allowing the arcs of lightning rampaging through its body to spill out into the air. After a torrent of smoke and electricity, a black thundercloud formed for a brief moment before Castor Prime ripped its horn out of the Empress' stomach, dissipating it. After the smoke cleared, the Empress was missing its upper half, and its lower half was slowly dissolving. "Next." Shinji said, quickly turning to the Emperor.

Junpei was being pushed back, having used too much energy in his distraction attack against both Shadows. He knew his plan worked when the wind attacks stopped, but he was too preoccupied with running for his life to really care about how epic the explosions he heard just were. After narrowly avoiding a wide swing from the Emperor, he rolled backwards, panting. The Emperor came forth to strike again, when he heard an Evoker go off near him. "Sonic Punch!" Akihiko yelled. Polydeuces flew over Junpei's head and slammed into the Emperor with its needle, sending it backwards. "Junpei, you okay?" he asked.

"Hah... hah... no problems here." Junpei said, getting up once more.

"My ass." Akihiko said. "Dia."

Junpei was covered in a green light, and got back into fighting form. "Thanks... I needed that." Junpei said, fixing his hat. "Now let's finish this ugly sonuvabitch, once and for all." He raised his Evoker to his head, as did Shinjiro and Akihiko.

"Rampage!"

"Sonic Punch!"

"Cleave!"

Hermes, Castor Prime, and Polydeuces all appeared. Castor Prime charged forwards as Hermes and Polydeuces flew off to the side, horn raised to skewer the Emperor. It countered with its sword, and Polydeuces stabbed into its side. It crumpled, and Castor Prime reared its head and struck again, severing its sword arm. It fell, and desperately grabbed Castor Prime's horse head to stop it. Hermes flew behind the emperor and sliced through its shoulder in one swift movement, causing it's arm to fall loosely to its side. Castor Prime destroyed that arm next, and then struck twice more, creating two large gashes in its chest. The Emperor fell over onto its back. "Star Drop." Shinjiro said. Castor Prime fired at the roof again, and leapt into the air as Polydeuces and Hermes held the Emperor down. It kicked and rocked, but was unable to free itself. Castor Prime crashed into the ground, splattering it's body and creating another large crater in the floor. When the smoke cleared, all that remained was a huge puddle of Shadow mass.

"... We won." Shinjiro said, dropping to one knee. He was panting, as were Akihiko and Junpei.

"Yeah... the operation was a-" Akihiko began.

"Wail." Fuuka said from within Maria. Maria, still in the same spot as before, screamed, and a plethora of energy orbs formed all around Junpei, Akihiko and Shinjiro. They barely had time to exclaim before the orbs detonated.

"Yamagishi! What are you doing?!" Mitsuru yelled. Junpei, Akihiko and Shinjiro all staggered backwards from the barrage of explosions, and fell to the floor, one by one.

"The hell... is this?" Shinjiro mumbled, trying to get back up. He had shifted his Devil's Body completely to regeneration, but even with two pieces, he couldn't patch himself up for the next half an hour. He looked to Akihiko, who was barely retaining consciousness, and then to Junpei who was trying to prop himself up on his elbows.

"D-dude... was that...?" Junpei asked. He looked up to see Fuuka walking towards him, Maria floating around her as she approached.

"What are you doing...?" Yukari asked Fuuka.

"Did you all have fun playing heroes?" Fuuka asked as she stopped in front of them. The members of SEES were dumbstruck. "Did it stroke your ego when you got to rescue the damsel in distress?... I know it certainly made goatee

here feel like a man."

"W-what the heck?" Junpei asked.

"Oh, and silver-hair? I don't know what ridiculous redemption quest you have, but it doesn't change the fact that you're a damn failure." Fuuka continued. "I mean, just look at yourself! You're the weakest of them all!"

"...Take that back." Akihiko said, pushing himself up to face her. Fuuka laughed.

"Make me... oh, wait, you're too weak to change anything! In fact, I don't think you're worth my attention anymore, so I'll focus on pea coat, heheheheh..." Fuuka said. She turned to face Shinjiro. "... You're a strange one. You're the strongest, yet you act like you're the least important. It's like you're afraid of what you can really do... but that just makes you a waste of potential. The only thing in this world worse than being pathetically weak is doing nothing with power."

"... The hell do you know about me?" Shinjiro growled.

"Oh, did I hit a touchy subject? Go, me!" Fuuka said, clapping. "But I need to thank all of you. It was certainly fun watching all of you dance with those walking puddles, and even more so because you went ahead and weakened yourselves so much in the battle. That, and this stupid bitch over here comes and offers herself up to me... today is a good day. For me, that is. All of you macho dumbasses are about to die, but don't worry too much."

"F-fuuka?" Natsuki asked, getting up from the floor. She was staring at Maria. "Is... is that you?"

"Oh, Moriyama-san!" Fuuka said, letting Maria fade away. She skipped over to Natsuki. "Thank goodness you're awake!"

"I... Did I apologize?" Natsuki asked.

"Yes, and I forgive you." Fuuka said, pulling Natsuki into a hug.

"Y-you... forgive me?" Natsuki asked. Her answer was a swift knee to the stomach, followed by another, and then one more, before she was thrown to the ground.

"JUST KIDDING, YOU FUGLY WHORE!" Fuuka screamed, now stomping on the downed Natsuki. "COME ON, CRY FOR ME!" Natsuki struggled to resist, but was then kicked onto her back. She had tears in her eyes. "AW, SHOULD I TAKE A PICTURE OF YOUR ADORABLE FACE RIGHT NOW?!" Fuuka yelled as she got on top of her. She grabbed her neck, and started smacking the back of Natsuki's head into the ground while choking her. "I'M JUST MESSING WITH YOU! I'D NEVER HURT MY 'PRECIOUS FRIEND', RIGHT?!"

Natsuki gasped and struggled, but she could do nothing. Fuuka choked her to within an inch of her life, and then relented, laughing ridiculously. She got up, and hugged herself. "Ah, see? We were just playing around. No real harm done. There aren't any scars, right?"

"... What the hell is wrong with her?" Yukari asked, backing away.

"... This isn't Yamagishi we're dealing with." Mitsuru said.

"What do you mean? I'm Fuuka Yamagishi, and Fuuka Yamagishi is me." Fuuka said. She walked off to the side of the lobby, and stretched. "It's great to be alive, isn't it?... I just wanted to tell you that before I robbed you of that privilege." Fuuka said, finishing her stretch. She turned around, and smiled. "Maria." The white gowned, white veiled woman appeared once more, and enveloped Fuuka. It drew two black stakes out of its dress, and Fuuka looked at all of her victims. "So, manly men... do I kill the women first, or do I have two sacrifices?"

"I think we should kill this ugly nun in white." a voice said. Fuuka turned to see the doors of Tartarus burst open, and Minato rode in on Mitsuru's bike, Evoker to his head. He fired. "Make her pretty, Jack."

Jack the Ripper flew forwards as Minato swerved to a stop, and went for Maria's upper half, dropping his two cleavers down on her. His blades tore straight through her, splattering blood all over the place. Maria's body crumpled, and Fuuka clutched her head. Minato took the opportunity to call David and Matador to collect the other SEES members while he grabbed Natsuki, and hurriedly placed them all down near Mitsuru and Yukari. "Minato!" Yukari said.

"I seem to be late to the party." he said, putting Natsuki at the

back of the group. "So the Shadows came here... never expected that."

"You!" Fuuka yelled. Maria disappeared, and Minato dismissed his Fiends. "Minato Arisato!"

"Fuuka Yamagishi!" he yelled back. Fuuka stopped, and Minato laughed. "If we're just in the habit of yelling for introductions, do I need to say anything else?"

"Arrogant as always, I see..." Fuuka said. She smiled. "But it's actually good that you're here, knight... I needed someone to dispose of those pests."

"Because you didn't have the stomach to finish the job?" Minato asked with a smirk. Fuuka laughed.

"I didn't have the stomach?! Oh, how about I show you what I can stomach!" Fuuka said. She stared at the roof and opened her mouth. All of Maria's blood returned from the floors, wall, and even Jack's cleavers, and went into her mouth. She licked her lips as the last drops entered, and chuckled. Minato clapped.

"Not bad, not bad... but it's my turn." Minato said. "*Hey, buddy? You ready to eat?*" he asked inwardly.

"*Always ready...*" the odd voice in his head replied.

"Check this out." Minato said. He copied Fuuka's posture, and the remnants of the Emperor and Empress dissolved into

liquid form, and did exactly what Maria's blood did with Fuuka for Minato. He licked his lips as the last few drops entered his mouth, and chuckled. Inside, he felt a large surge of power.

"... What the fuck?" Shinjiro asked from behind Minato, voicing the thoughts of all the dumbstruck SEES members.

Fuuka laughed. "Holy shit! You're more of a freak than I am!" she said.

"Guilty as charged." Minato said with a bow. "Which me do you prefer, the man or the monster?"

"Oh my... that's a tough one." Fuuka said. "I think... I prefer the Minato that I get to drag down the furthest."

"How nice... I prefer the Fuuka with the least independence." Minato said.

"... What the hell are you two saying?" Yukari asked. They both laughed.

"You wouldn't understand... that little display just now confirmed how similar we are." Minato said. "And in that case, we both know how this has to end."

"Yes... one of us will have to break." Fuuka said. "When I win, I'll leave you alive so you can watch the results of your failures first hand... I think someone so used to success will really grow from the experience... so much so that they might just feel like killing themselves. You'll finally be free from your

stupid obligations to the plebs, Minato... it's exactly what you wanted."

"Don't worry, Fuuka... if I win, you'll be the one person I love other than myself." Minato said. "I'll take you, and I'll break you, and I'll bathe you, and I'll feed you, and I'll dress you, and you'll never leave my side... you'll become my own personal doll, able to think and talk, but incapable of anything else... Isn't that wonderful? I'll always accept you after that."

The members of SEES stared dumbstruck at the two new combatants. What they would witness was no normal fight... it was a fight between monsters, in more ways than one.

54. Chapter 54

Chapter 54: VS Fuuka Yamagishi

Author Note: 'Energy Orb' = Low-Damage Almighty Attack.

Minato and Fuuka stared each other down from across the lobby of Tartarus, both with a manic smile plastered on their face. The other members of SEES rested behind Minato, horrified at how similar their savior was to their bane. "So? Feel like playing house with me for eternity?" Minato asked.

"I never said I'd keep you in good condition... I prefer my toys mangled." Fuuka said.

"Then it looks like the breaking will be painful, though I think you'll like it. Hope you're ready." Minato said, adding a wink at the end. Fuuka chuckled.

"You think arrogant scum like you poses a threat to me? Ridiculous... do you even know what I am?" Fuuka asked.

"Does it matter?" Minato asked. "You're an honest Fuuka, aren't you?"

"That's right... I am a Shadow... the true self." Fuuka said. Maria formed around her. "I'm sick of all the stupid restrictions

people have placed on me... laws, rules, expectations... why should I follow any of those when I can have so much more fun just doing what I want? I don't fit in, but why should I?! I'm me, and that's all that matters!" Maria roared, and the ground quaked. Minato stood unfazed, quietly chuckling.

"Yes, yes... you're just waiting to be unleashed onto the world, aren't you?" Minato mused. "The look on your face when you realize you're forever bound to me... it'll be more beautiful than the full moon." He summoned Power's lance, and lazily aimed it at Fuuka with one hand. "I will make you mine, and you will accept my love."

"You think you can bind me?" Fuuka asked. She laughed. "I can escape even death itself on a whim!"

"I never doubted whether you could escape death." Minato said. "I doubted whether you could escape me."

"How intimidating... then, I'll just do what comes naturally." Fuuka said. Minato knew better than to speak again, and charged right at Fuuka as Maria suddenly lurched forwards and tried to grab him. He easily avoided her and drove his lance straight into Maria's stomach right outside of Fuuka's barrier. Blood gushed from the wound as Maria howled, and he ripped the lance out quickly and ran. Surely enough, the wound released a shotgun of energy as he went around Maria, which exploded right below it.

Fuuka suddenly leapt backwards, dragging Maria with her and recalling the blood that stained the floor. She landed a little

ways off from Minato and cackled. Maria ripped off her veil, revealing a writhing black mass of shifting golden eyes as a face. Slowly, the face began to extend outwards in various parts. "You said you wanted to play, right?" Fuuka asked. Maria's 'face' broke apart into multiple writhing creatures lined with eyes. At their end, they split apart, forming two diverging large jagged blades at their tips. "I hope you consider maggots good playmates."

"How cute." Minato taunted, dissolving Power's lance. He drew his Evoker. "Shiisaa!" he said as he fired. The golden lion with an emerald mane seemingly leapt over his back and landed in front of him as the swarm of 'maggots' that Maria summoned began to fly towards Minato. "Gale Slash!" he said, putting his Evoker away. Shiisaa charged forward, fangs bared, and he summoned Jack's cleavers to his hands as he followed it. The brunt of the swarm was dispersed as Shiisaa moved forwards at a blinding speed, tearing through anything in its path and leaving a trail of blood in its wake. Minato ran after it, slicing the remaining enemies apart before they could strike him. Shiisaa disappeared once it reached the back of the swarm, and Minato emerged shortly after it, a few feet from Fuuka.

"Cry." Fuuka said. Maria's eyes, now strewn across the floor after her face had been shredded, all began floated from the ground and looked at Minato. The sound of garbled sobbing emerged from what was left of Maria's head, and the eyes began to shoot out pulses of energy. Minato used his speed Magatama and immediately sprinted to the side. He let Jack's

cleavers fade as he ran, and raised his Evoker to his head as the attacks narrowly missed.

"Magaru!" he said as he fired. Power appeared high above him, and created numerous small tornadoes, ripping some of the eyes apart and misdirecting the majority of them. The remaining eyes turned on his Persona, and Minato saw his opportunity. He turned, summoning Take-Mikazuchi and Matador's swords to his hands. He sped into the largest mass of eyes in the area as Power was shot to pieces above him, then summoning Jack's hands with his cleavers on his shoulders. His training to improve how well he could operate under mental stress showed its results, as Power's destruction barely fazed him, allowing him to begin slicing the eyes apart without any trouble.

"Boss, jump!" David suddenly said. Minato didn't question his judgment, and immediately leapt into the air, calling on his strength Magatama to jump higher than even Maria. He watched the eyes he had just been attacking all explode like little bombs, decimating where he had just been. ***"She started feeding energy to those eyes all of a sudden, so I knew something was up!"***

"We aren't done yet!" Matador said. Minato shifted his side, and saw Maria about to drive a black stake the size of his entire body through him. He countered with all four of his blades, and was sent tumbling through the air. He smacked into the floor and bounced once before skidding on his back to a halt.

"Wail!" Fuuka shouted before he even reached a stop. Explosives orb appeared all around him, and detonated before he even got up. Fuuka scowled. "... Where the hell did you go?" she asked as the smoke cleared. Minato was nowhere to be seen. She focused, but couldn't find him. "That's some trick." she said.

"Oh, are you annoyed again?" Minato's voice taunted. Fuuka turned to see a swarm of blue butterflies suddenly appear where her last attack went off, and they all combined to form Minato's body, looking as if he hadn't been fighting at all. He clapped his hands together. "You didn't think you'd actually gotten me, did you?" he asked. *"Phew... it's a damn good thing the Velvet Room has an entrance here, or I may actually have taken real damage."*

"Tch... where'd you disappear to?" Fuuka asked, a frown forming on her face.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about it... you don't want me to give you a permanent smile too, do you?" Minato replied.

"Still think you have an advantage?" Fuuka asked. She chuckled. "What's wrong? Having trouble accepting your weakness? Your worthlessness?"

"No, but I've been a bit preoccupied with deciding what I'll have you wear first... there are quite a few outfits I think you'd look cute in." Minato said. "I'm excited. Aren't you?" Fuuka scoffed, and Maria recalled all of her blood once more,

recreating her face before putting the veil back on. "... *Four seconds of immobility if I destroy the face.*" Minato noted. He put his Evoker to his head and fired. "Red Capote." Matador appeared behind him and shrouded him in his capote for a moment, making him much faster, before he dashed straight at Fuuka.

"Sing." Fuuka said. Maria clasped its hands once more and screamed, releasing a shockwave of energy. Minato summoned Power's shield and ran right through the attack, getting within striking distance. Maria took her hands clasped in prayer and used them like a hammer, slamming down on Minato's position. He threw his shield forwards as the attack neared and rolled forwards, avoiding the strike. Power's shield bounced harmlessly off of Fuuka's barrier as Minato jumped onto one of Maria's hands and quickly climbed her body with a few short jumps. Matador followed suit as Maria straightened back up, and Minato fired his Evoker once more, summoning Jack.

"Shred them." Minato said as he ripped Maria's veil off of her face. His two Fiends cackled and began hacking away indiscriminately at the mass that made up her face, and Maria rocked violently, trying to shake her attackers off. Minato jumped to the floor as Maria began clawing at its neck and shoulders to get rid of the Fiends, and 'maggots' began attempting to form. They had no time, as the Fiends could slice faster than they could form. Their victory was short lived, as Maria's eyes all detonated within its head, resulting in a blinding explosion that vaporized the two Fiends.

Fuuka was about to have Maria recreate its face when Minato suddenly reached her barrier and put his Evoker to it. He fired, and Maria flickered in and out of existence. "What?!" Fuuka yelled as Minato rushed through Maria's now ethereal form. He created Power and Matador's arms around his own, and they each held one of Fuuka's limbs as he put a hand around her neck. Immobilized, it was over. Minato laughed and forced her to her knees, with her arms held above her head.

"Hey, Fuuka... guess what I just caught?" Minato asked, putting his Evoker away. She struggled to get free with much more strength than he expected, but failed regardless. Minato just chuckled and stroked the side of her face. "I... just... caught... you." he whispered.

"... What a load of shit." Fuuka said. She stopped struggling. "Complete and utter shit!" she screamed. "You fucking insolent shit! I hate you, dammit! I hate you more than I hate my shit parents, more than I hate that bitch Natsuki, more than anything!"

"Is that so? Because I think I'm in love." Minato replied. He tightened the grip on her neck.

"You... everything just falls into your goddamn lap, doesn't it?!" Fuuka continued. "Hell, you don't even look like you're trying half of the time, yet you still somehow manage to be the best! You're powers aren't like the others, but I guess you thought that was just normal for someone like you, didn't you?!"

"Of course... I am the only worthy one, after all." Minato said. He formed Matador's sword in his right hand, and pressed the tip against Fuuka's stomach, just barely piercing the skin. "Actually, I'll tell you something I think you'd love to know... Right now, I'm only using about half of my full strength. Yet it was more than enough for you." He twirled Matador's sword around slowly, widening the wound. "Then again, what did you expect? Against me, you didn't really think you'd win, did you?"

"Look at you... thinking you're a force of nature." Fuuka said. She spit in his face. "You're no different than everyone else. Flaunting your supposed superiority over me... do you think you're any better than me?" Minato chuckled.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't." Minato whispered. "Though if that's what you think, then you'd better grow to like this sound." He laughed, right in her face, and brought Matador's sword up from Fuuka's stomach to her cheek, blade resting on her skin. "After all, you'll hear it so much more than everyone else." Fuuka fell silent, and closed her eyes. "There you go... isn't obedience so much nicer?" he asked, lightly cutting her cheek. "We'll have so much fun, we could die."

"... That's right. We could both die." Fuuka said. She smiled, and her forehead burst open, revealing one of Maria's eyes. Fuuka suddenly released an aura of energy, knocking Minato away. She chuckled, staring at the roof as Minato caught his balance. "To all those who looked down on me... to all those who tried to make me something I'm not... to all those who underestimated me... and to you..." Fuuka began. Maria

formed around her, and then began to melt. Its white clothing gave way to a mass of black amorphous liquid, which surrounded Fuuka. "I am a goddess. Revere me."

The amorphous liquid took the shape of a slender woman with long flowing jet black locks of hair and a dark face. Though the majority of her body was pitch black, the face was remarkably human, with eyes that matched Fuuka's, shining a radiant yellow. Fuuka rose from the floor, radiating what could only be described as Shadow energy, was once again protected by a strange barrier, this time slightly tinted. "Look and despair... Black Maria." Fuuka said. The new creature didn't make a sound. It simply waved its hand, and a series of energy orbs just like what Maria used appeared in its wake. They lingered for a moment, before flying straight at Minato. He barely had time to move, and the orbs exploded next to him. He tumbled out of the ensuing smoke, his jacket ruined, and turned to face Fuuka once more. "I will show you your insignificance." she said. "And then, I'll show you a fate worse than death."

"... Not bad at all." Minato said, looking over Fuuka's new form. He summoned Jack's cleavers and hurled them at Fuuka. They bounced harmlessly off of her barrier, and she charged straight at Minato. He drew his Evoker and rushed forwards. Black Maria swiped at the air, and a wave of explosions erupted in front of him. He jumped over the attack, and Fuuka matched him. They were set to collide, and he aimed his Evoker at her. It touched the barrier, and he fired once more.

The shot went off, and Fuuka's barrier produced a wave of energy right at Minato. He had no chance of reacting, and was taken a direct hit that sent him flying to the floor. Fuuka laughed as she landed, and continued her charge. She reached him before he could get back up, and tackled him with the barrier, which sparked with energy on contact. It sent him tumbling off to the side, and Black Maria created another salvo of explosive orbs that flew at him as he stopped moving.

"Change of plans." Minato thought. He summoned Power without his Evoker, and the Persona took the attacks for him, breaking apart as the orbs connected. He dashed to the side, and pressed his Evoker to his head. "Danse Macabre!" he said as he ran. Jack appeared alongside him and went straight for Black Maria.

"I'll defile you!" Jack said as he brought his cleavers down to strike. Black Maria floated around his first strike and delivered a swift spin kick to his head, knocking him away. Jack quickly recovered with a little snarl, and continued his assault. Minato watched as Black Maria dodged flawlessly, and then turned his attention to Fuuka. She was staring at the two of them intently from within her barrier, and he saw his opportunity. Minato summoned Take-Mikazuchi's sword and circled around behind Fuuka to strike. Jack was finally blasted away as Minato got within striking distance, and Black Maria turned its attention to Fuuka. Fuuka's barrier immediately launched a preemptive wave of energy at Minato, who was moments away from attacking. He was sent flying backwards once more, and skidded along the floor to a slow halt. He shook off

the attack, and was greeted by a barrage of energy orbs raining down on him. Desperate, he summoned Power's shield, and turtled behind it as the attacks rained down around him.

"... *Their lines of sight.*" Minato thought as he endured the small explosions around him. *"As long as they can see each other, they're untouchable. If I want to win, I'll have to blind one of them, or attack faster than they can react..."* He awakened, letting the odd tattoo grow and cover his body as the smoke from the attack cleared. He didn't get much of a chance to strategize, as Fuuka fell from above, laughing maniacally with the intent to crush him under her barrier. Minato ran under her at a ridiculous speed, reaching Black Maria by the time Fuuka landed, and made his move.

He threw a hard right hook at Black Maria, who managed to barely lean out of the way. That didn't work for the following right hook from Power's right arm, then Matador's right arm. With Fuuka now recovering from her landing, Minato kept his spinning momentum and delivered a backhand to Black Maria's abdomen, followed by a backhand from Power's left arm to the shoulder, and then another from Matador's left arm to her knee. Crippled, Black Maria looked like she was defenseless, until a torrent of energy erupted from underneath her and blasted Minato skyward. He spun in midair and saw that Fuuka had managed to turn her attention back to Black Maria before he could finish his job. *"That's definitely it... their defense is impenetrable as long as they can see each other."*

"Bastard! I don't know what you've done to yourself, but it doesn't matter!" Fuuka screamed at the airborne Minato. Black Maria recovered and thrust both of her hands into the sky, summoning a swarm of her energy orbs to encircle Minato. He hurriedly drew his Evoker and pressed it to his head as they encircled him and fired. There was a quick flash of light as he went from midair to the opposite end of Tartarus' lobby, but the orbs were already flying at him by the time he got to his feet.

"That type of dodging is no good! She can track our position!" David reminded him as he sprinted forwards.

"I know, but this is much better than taking all of those as direct hits." Minato replied. He bounded from side to side as he ran at random intervals, shrugging off the few projectiles that hit him and ignoring the others that exploded around him. He emerged from the trail of destruction, and headed straight for Fuuka. He summoned David and Mithra alongside him as Fuuka ran forwards to greet him under Black Maria's watchful eye. "Sonic Blight, Eerie Sound!" he called. David played his ridiculous high note as Mithra let loose a very high-pitched screech. Black Maria clutched its head, the two sounds too much for her to handle, and Minato broke straight through Fuuka's barrier. She was about to say something when Minato swiftly slid and struck the side of her knee, dislocating it. Fuuka screamed, only for Minato to chuckle and do the same to her other knee. Crippled, she fell forwards screaming, and Minato threw her down face first. He quickly turned his attention to Black Maria, who had just recovered.

"YOU FUCK!" Fuuka screamed from the floor, clutching her knees. Minato charged right at Black Maria, confident that Fuuka couldn't see her to stop his attacks. He reached her, only for Black Maria to vanish and appear next to Fuuka. "I'LL SHOW YOU! YOU MIGHT BE SOMETHING TO ALL THESE GODDAMN VERMIN, BUT YOU ARE NOTHING TO ME!" Black Maria broke apart into the same black liquid she was born from, and enveloped Fuuka's entire body.

Minato laughed. "You know, I love it when somebody takes a while to break." he said. He licked his lips. "Lets me savor the experience."

Fuuka slowly rose to her feet, her body now almost entirely blackened, save for her ever-glowing eyes and the third eye on her forehead. She growled, and her hands warped into oversized claws, and her hair extended to mimic Black Maria's. "I won't let you, or any of those damn pests outside get away with what they've done to me!" Fuuka said. She charged at Minato, a claw at the ready. It sparked with energy, and Minato knew better than to try and block. He swiftly backed away as the claw slammed into the floor, causing a little explosion. "Do you even know what they've done to me?!" Fuuka asked. "Just because I was different, just because I stood apart from the others, everyone put me down! All because they couldn't accept their own inadequacies!"

"Obviously they can't." Minato said, leaping back into the fight with a flying knee. Fuuka easily avoided it, and went for a quick strike. Noting that her claw wasn't glowing, he deflected

the attack and tried to deliver a kick to Fuuka's stomach. She jumped over him, and her apparent hair actually lashed against him like whips, knocking him forwards. He chuckled. "Humans will almost always be content with the status quo. They will cling to it more than life itself."

"Exactly!" Fuuka said, turning to face him. "If you know this, then why are you in my way?!" she asked as she rushed at him with a charged claw. Minato laughed as he narrowly avoided the attack, and he countered with a punch of his own. Fuuka easily deflected it and clawed at him again. He sidestepped the attack, and Fuuka spun around with the momentum of her attack, trying to get her hair to whip into Minato once more. He saw that coming, and jumped over the attacks.

"Because I am counting on that status quo." Minato said. He turned back to face Fuuka, who was also turning to face him. "But you don't need to know why."

"... You're depending on it because it elevates you, doesn't it?!" Fuuka said. "Of course somebody who benefits from a broken system would keep it!" She charged both of her claws and lunged at Minato. He easily dodged backwards, and Fuuka rushed out of the ensuing explosion almost immediately. "Screw your happiness! Screw everyone else's too! All you need in this world is instinct!" Fuuka slashed at him, but Minato ran in and countered each strike before summoning Empusa's hind legs from his chest to kick her away. She slid back, and Minato broke out laughing.

"Instinct, huh?" he asked. He hunched over, and let his arms hang loosely in front of him, a manic smile forming on his face once again. "You know, I think I'll share something cool with you, Fuuka... I'll show you why instinct alone will always fail you in the end." Minato chuckled, and Fuuka prepared to counter his coming attack.

Minato went forward, staying low to the ground, and threw a quick uppercut. Fuuka easily avoided it, and Minato followed up with a roundhouse kick, which Fuuka also avoided. She took her cue to strike, when Minato continued his spin, lowering himself to the ground and propping himself up on his arms. He kicked in a windmill, forcing Fuuka back, then popped back up to his feet. He threw a left, a right, and then a short snapping left, all of which Fuuka narrowly avoided. She saw a moment of opportunity as he reverted to his fighting stance, and took it. She charged her claws with energy, only for Power's arm holding his lance to appear from Minato's stomach and take a wide slash, keeping her away again. Minato laughed at her apparent frustration.

"Did you know? The combination of Eskrima and Capoeira is usually considered impossible due to the ridiculous amount of precision needed to execute attacks properly." Minato said. "However, should the combination work, the barrage of attacks can potentially be limitless. Of course, this is even better with weapons."

Minato summoned Jack's cleavers, and began relentlessly slicing at Fuuka, who was blocking each attack with her claws. Minato began to add in a series of low sweep kicks

and overhead drop kicks to his assault, and Fuuka began being forced to retreat. After being pushed back for a minute, Minato did a reverse scissors flip to try and kick Fuuka. She dodged it, and had her claw ready to strike his back. He almost instantly fell to one knee and sliced up with one cleaver, scoring a clean cut on Fuuka's arm. He followed up with a second spinning slash, but Fuuka rolled to the side quickly and clutched her arm. Minato laughed again.

"Did you know? Battoujutsu is generally considered a style reserved for people wielding two-handed swords... But I've found that mixing it into Hyoho Niten Ichi-Ryu swordplay allows for a counterstrike at any angle, assuming you're fast enough to react." Minato said.

"Tch..." Fuuka said. "I can read all of your moves... and now that you've told me you can counter, I just have to keep my guard up!" She charged in, and Minato swayed from side to side as he parried each strike. Fuuka mainly attacked with her left claw and by whipping her hair forwards, but Minato simply chuckled and kept parrying attacks. Eventually, Fuuka went for a wide sweep with her hair, and Minato dashed in immediately to drive one of Jack's cleavers into her leg. She screamed in pain as she finished her attack, knocking Minato away. The weapon disappeared, and she staggered. Minato laughed as he got back up.

"Did you know? Middle-eastern swordplay focuses heavily on side to side movements to bewilder opponents... when combined with sabre dueling techniques focusing on quickly closing the distance between you and your opponent, it's easy

to punish someone that repeatedly takes wide range attacks." Minato said.

"Dammit... Shut up!" Fuuka said. She got back to her feet, shaking slightly, and charged her claws with energy once more. Instead of physically attacking, she aimlessly flung her hands outwards. Black Maria's energy orbs emerged in a shotgun spread, and Minato easily dodged the projectiles headed his way. Fuuka ran forwards after the attack, and lunged at him with one claw. Minato easily avoided it, and pinned Fuuka's claw with his leg. She turned to counter, but was powerless to stop him from delivering a deep cut to her shoulder. She let out a cry of pain, but flicked her hair again. Minato backed off, and Fuuka dropped to her knees. She tried to get up, but couldn't muster any strength in her arms, falling back down once she got halfway to her feet. Minato laughed again.

"Did you know? The concept of Maru Kala in Angampora was created to quickly and effectively end fights by striking at your opponents vital points... but I've found that the same concept can be used to inflict the most severe pain to your opponent and very slowly cripple them, prolonging the fight and making it much more enjoyable as time passes." Minato said. "After all, now I get to play around with you, who can barely move." He laughed again.

"... You dumbass." Fuuka said. She growled, and her injuries began to heal. Her extended hair disappeared, and she rose to her feet, without a scratch on her. She chuckled. "Thanks for being arrogant enough to narrate your entire fighting style

to me... that, alongside what I've scanned from you, means you won't be able to touch me again!"

"... A healing ability? Interesting." Minato said. He got into his hunched stance once more. "Well then... maybe I'll tell you the true secret of my Sadist Style after all."

Minato rushed in swinging his cleavers. Fuuka easily dodged and blocked his follow up kick, leaned out of the way of his double counter slash, and went right for his throat with her left claw. She was suddenly impaled at the stomach, and hoisted into the air. Minato had called Power's arm holding its lance from its stomach at the moment Fuuka was certain no human could have countered, and hit her before she could react. Minato laughed, and Power's arm threw its lance aside with Fuuka on it, and she tumbled on the ground. She healed again, her claws shortening, and rose to her feet.

"The true secret... is that this is specialized for me." Minato said. "With my partial summoning ability, I can turn the idea of an endless stream of attacks into reality... I can truly counter any angle of attack... I can change the distance between me and my opponent almost instantly... and I can attack at impossible angles." He laughed as the realization of her situation hit Fuuka. "You get it, don't you? I'm unbeatable in single combat, plain and simple. Even if you know exactly how I fight, or can read all of my moves... I still have the unpredictable summoning factor, which I can ensure never misses."

"... Bullshit." Fuuka said. "I... I won't accept that!" she

screamed. Minato laughed as she dashed at him, and quickly blocked her attacks. "You're telling me that all this time, you were just toying with me?!" she asked as she continued her assault. Minato materialized Matador's arms to catch hers, and drove Jack's cleavers into her legs, pinning her.

"This is my full strength, Fuuka... and it's much more than I need for you." Minato said. He ripped the cleavers out of her legs and sliced both of her arms twice, leaving them limp. He pushed her down, and towered over her. "Well, 'goddess'... what will you do now?" He grabbed her by the hair, and lifted her up. "What'll it be, what'll it be?" he asked childishly. Fuuka said nothing, glaring at him with nothing but hatred in her eyes. Minato smiled, and delivered a devastating punch to her gut, knocking her into the air. Fuuka coughed up blood and landed in a heap, the armor encasing her body melting away as she hit the floor. Laying in that black puddle, Fuuka opened her eyes, this time a normal teal. Her third eye had disappeared and her wounds were being slowly healed. The puddle moved away from her, forming another version of her body, this time with her third eye. Its eyes were a bright gold, and Minato looked over the two bodies. "... *Don't tell me this bitch has another form.*"

The two Fuuka's rose to sit up simultaneously, and turned to look at each other. The Fuuka with teal eyes gasped when she saw the mutated version of herself, but the Fuuka with the third eye looked downright depressed. After a brief period of silence, the Fuuka with the third eye spoke. "... I'm sorry." she said. "I couldn't get rid of everyone else, after all."

"... It's alright." Fuuka said. Her three eyed variant gasped. "..." Maybe I did think it would be better... if everyone else just disappeared. After all... you were right. They put me in here... they put us in here. But... just lashing out at everyone won't change anything. ...Thank you."

"For what?" the other Fuuka asked.

"For being strong when I was weak." Fuuka said. "I... We would've died if it wasn't for you. You were the one who survived this tower... and got rid of those big monsters that attacked everyone here." She smiled, a tear streaking down her cheek. "You did exactly what you wanted to do... without any hesitation." she continued. "I know... that what we wanted was wrong... but is it... is it wrong if I want to be like you? Even if it's just a little?"

"... I don't know." the other Fuuka said. "Is it... wrong if I... sometimes want to be like you?"

"I don't know either... but, maybe we can find out together... I mean, I'm you, and you're me, right?" Fuuka said. "We'll find out together."

The other Fuuka smiled, and dissolved once more, not into black liquid, but into bright white light, which enveloped Fuuka once more. She smiled, and closed her eyes. On her forehead, her third eye appeared once more. However, instead of constantly twitching as it was before, it was perfectly calm. "... Baba Yaga." Fuuka said. She was encased in a clear bright blue barrier, which sprouted a

slender old woman with long flowing silver hair wearing a large black and blue cloak. Her arms were gnarled and clawed, sprouting from two thin slits in her cloak. She held a wooden staff with a giant eye in a crystal ball attached to the end in her right hand, and tucked a metal cauldron under her left arm. "The answer... will come to us." Fuuka said. Baba Yaga tapped its staff on the ground and disappeared before Fuuka collapsed on the spot.

Minato released his awakened state and sighed. "... Damn. Looks like I won't get to have my fun after all." he said. He turned to see the now recovered members of SEES hurrying over to Fuuka. He approached, and received a number of apprehensive looks from everyone save Junpei. "... I'm going to use Media, so stay close." Minato said. He fired his Evoker and summoned High Pixie, doing as he promised. After the quick heal, he put his Evoker back staggered.

"Woah, you alright, bro?" Junpei asked. "Hey, take it easy... you did a lot."

"... Yes, Minato. You should rest up." Mitsuru said. "Shinji, Akihiko... I'd like you two to carry Yamagishi and Moriyama back to the dorm. We'll move them to the hospital once the Dark Hour ends." she said. "Just now... that was definitely a Persona. We'll introduce Yamagishi to SEES once she recovers."

"... Umm, hate to bring this up, but... what are we gonna do about Natsuki?" Yukari asked. "She saw the Dark Hour, and the Shadows..."

"She ain't like us." Shinjiro said. "She won't be able to remember a damn thing... which is probably for the best. I think we can all say a lot of shit nobody needed to see happened tonight."

"Yes... but what's important is that, regardless of that fact, we won." Akihiko said.

The other members of SEES turned to Minato, who chuckled. "Exactly." he said. He laughed. "All of us played a big role in this fight."

"That's right... everyone worked for this." Mitsuru said. "The operation is a success."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...

"Yeah!... but wait... what the heck are we gonna tell people when we leave. I mean, the Dark Hour's almost over." Junpei said.

"... We were all out partying." Akihiko said. "Simple as that."

SEES returned to the dorm after the Dark Hour ended, receiving a host of strange looks as they walked the streets in their tattered clothing. When they got to the dorm, Fuuka and

Natsuki were taken to a hospital while the other members were subjected to healing spell treatments before they went to sleep. Obviously, Minato lazed about and ate to pass the time until morning, too exhausted from the night's encounter to bother doing anything productive.

55. Chapter 55

Chapter 55: Dolls are Scary

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: I don't think my writing improved so much. The story is now entering into the fights that SEES can't bulldoze their way through.

Five o'clock in the morning, the ninth of June. Minato Arisato was busy finishing up Goth on the singular armchair facing away from the window with a smirk. "I've got her now... she'll come, and then I'll take what's mine." Minato muttered as he read.

"I think she'll come too, mister." a little girl's voice said from next to him. Minato had noticed this presence there for a while, but didn't bother paying any attention to it. It seemed to be just as absorbed in his book as he was. **"She'll come play with us, right?"**

"Of course she will... she's too desperate to run away." Minato said. He continued reading, and flipped the page. After a few minutes more, his watch alarmed. He sighed, and reached a good stopping point before closing the book. "It's time to go shopping." Minato said. *"Yes... passing time by eating isn't the best idea, especially when you haven't stocked up on food for the last week."* He rose from the chair,

and turned to see the presence next to him.

The presence was, as he guessed from the voice, a little girl. She was extremely pale, had shoulder length blonde hair neatly held in place by a white hairband, and wore a dark blue dress that went to her knees with a loose black necktie similar to Minato's and a white sash going around her stomach, forming a ribbon on her back, along with what looked like black tap-dancing shoes. Overall, she was about a foot and a half shorter than Minato, and had oddly dull red eyes. "... *She's that boy's height.*" he noted. "Nice to meet a new Fiend." he said.

"It's nice to meet you two, mister." the girl said. **"I'm Alice, the Fiend of Priestesses. We can have a lot of fun!"** she said with a smile. **"But are you going somewhere?"**

"To buy some food, that's it." Minato said. "... Though you look rather human. Want to tag along?"

"Okay!" Alice said, hopping off of the armrest. She ran over and grabbed Minato's hand. **"Let's go, let's go!"**

Minato chuckled and walked out of the dorm with Alice in tow. He stepped out of the front gate to see what looked like a portal to hell form near the entrance. The sound of a bike speeding announced the arrival of what he was certain would be another Fiend. Sure enough, a skeleton in stereotypical leather biker clothing, complete with fingerless gloves, a red scarf, and black helmet drove out of the portal on a black Harley Davidson bike, and skid to a halt. "I get two today?"

Lucky me." Minato said.

"Hey, kid." the Biker said in a voice similar to his usual Fiends, **"Looks like I've got a job again."** He got off the bike and chuckled. **"Name's Hell Biker, the Fiend of Hanged Men. Let's go crazy some time."**

Minato laughed. "I'll take you up on that offer... but not right now." Minato said. "Still, nice bike... I take it I'll be able to ride like you if I want?"

"Damn right. And from what I hear, you can borrow our stuff, right?" Hell Biker said.

"Exactly. Can you guess what's going to happen to your bike?" Minato asked.

"It's better off getting use than waiting around in your head." Hell Biker said. **"Take her for a ride."** Hell Biker disappeared into nothingness and entered Minato's head.

"Would you prefer the inside of my head or the back of this bike?" Minato asked Alice.

"The bike, obviously!" Alice said. Minato chuckled and got on, with Alice getting on behind him.

"So, the skills of a biker demon... let's see what we can do." Minato said. Alice held on, and he revved the engine. With a satisfying roar, he popped a wheelie and sped down the street. Needless to say, five o'clock traffic wasn't prepared

for Minato's riding. One ridiculous joyride later, and they arrived at Iwatodai's resident Junes. Minato got off the bike and let it disappear at the back of the parking lot, deciding it was better to conceal a vanishing motorcycle. "So, Alice, do you know how to cook anything I can't?" Minato asked.

"No, I actually know more." Alice said. **"Still, I like going around in my human form. It'd be annoying if I went around in my other one."**

"Other one... well, I guess I'll know what it is once you enter my head." Minato said. Alice giggled.

"You know, that's kind of perverted." Alice said. Minato chuckled.

"It's not like you're actually a little girl." Minato said. They entered into Junes, and purchased an assortment of groceries. They both got some strange looks, with Minato already in his summer school uniform and Alice in her generally odd clothing for the city, but ignored them. After they left with a stuffed grocery bag in each hand, they made their way to the back of the parking lot and had Minato summon Hell Biker's motorcycle once more. After a more controlled ride back to the dorm, the duo entered with their groceries and set about making breakfast, but not before Minato decided music would liven up the morning.

It was almost seven when the other members of SEES entered the lounge as a group. All of them had heard music, and had a feeling they'd find a strange scene. However, none

of them could even begin to comprehend what was happening once they saw it.

Minato and Alice were merrily humming as they danced around in the kitchen, moving from dish to dish at ridiculous speed with a cheery smile on each of their faces. They moved in a cycle that revolved around them stopping in front of a Victorian styled doll house with Jack, David, and Matador in figurine size, essentially serving as living dolls, and playing with them while they waited for prior preparations to finish. In the corner, Hell Biker played his harmonica and occasionally threw random kitchen supplies at Alice and Minato, who caught them and went to work as if nothing had happened. The three figurine Fiends were apparently being subjected to some type of haunted doll house, as they often jumped out of the windows, only for some unseen force to drag them back inside. The other members of SEES did their best to restrain cries of terror.

"... I believe this justifies our plan of action." Mitsuru whispered.

"Y-yeah..." Akihiko replied. "But... it looks like he's gotten new Fiends."

"Yes, I have." Minato said, startling them. He turned, and held out his arm. Alice jumped up and sat on it. "This is Alice."

"Nice to meet you all!" Alice said. She set her gaze on Yukari, who whimpered. **"... Do you like dolls?"**

"H-huh? Oh, me? Umm... I... I used to." Yukari said.

"That's no fun... you should like dolls now, too." Alice said. **"Those three didn't like dolls, and look what happened to them."** Yukari turned to see miniature Jack desperately crawling away from the doll house's front door, only for strange black hands to reach out and pull him back. He clawed at the floor, screaming, only to be yanked in and the door to shut. **"You should play with me."**

"Uhh..." Yukari managed. Minato chuckled.

"Maybe some other time, Alice." Minato said. "But we're almost done here. Let's finish up." Alice nodded and hopped off of his arm. Minato turned to face Hell Biker. "And that's Hell Biker. Don't bother waiting though... he's our music this morning."

The other members of SEES sat down very slowly at the table as Minato finished making breakfast. Each of them glanced at each other nervously. "... Hey, this is kinda like... uhh, Hell's Kitchen or what not, right? Hahaha... ha..." Junpei said.

"I guess you could say that." Minato said. He snapped his fingers, and the Victorian doll house disappeared. Jack, David, and Matador all appeared at full size next to him. They each began to set the table as Minato, Alice, and Hell Biker carried over their finished breakfast. Minato took a seat after the table was set, and his Fiends all disappeared. "Let's eat."

After a quiet, and, from what Minato could tell, oddly tense breakfast, he followed the other members of SEES out of the dorm. He summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle once he reached the road. Junpei was the first to react.

"Dude! You got a bike?!" Junpei asked.

"That's right." Minato said with a cocky smirk. "Anybody want a ride to school?"

"... As nice as that would be, where would you... dismiss your vehicle? There are too many people at Tatsumi Port Island to do so without attracting attention." Mitsuru said. "The risk of our discovery is too high... I'm sorry, but I'll have to forbid you from riding to school."

"... Do you like dolls, Mitsuru?" Minato asked, dispelling the bike. The Victorian doll house appeared on the ground in front of Mitsuru, and she recoiled, shoving Akihiko aside to back away.

"P-put that away!" she said. Minato laughed, and the doll house disappeared.

"Hey, cool it." Shinjiro said, glaring at Minato. "It's too early for this shit."

"... Well, aren't you all uneasy?" Minato asked. "Very well then... I'll 'cool it'."

SEES silently walked to the train station, and Minato

examined each and every one of them closely. "... Yes. *Something is definitely wrong. Mitsuru is as guarded as she was when I first appeared at the dorm and looks like she needs some sleep, Akihiko is too quiet, Yukari has lost her presence, Junpei is holding himself back from speaking, and Shinjiro is even more hostile than normal.*"

"It was definitely our little display last night, Boss." Jack said.

"Why? Didn't you protect them?" Alice asked.

"He did... but sometimes, the audience isn't always happy with the method used to down the bull." Matador said.

"Tch... bunch of cowards." Hell Biker said.

"Cowardly? Maybe... but remember, not everyone is as hardened as Boss." David said.

"That's right... I was focusing so much on Fuuka that I forgot I had an audience during the battle. I probably scared them a little." Minato thought.

"... You scared them a lot." The Fiends said simultaneously.

Minato made his way to the entrance of Gekkoukan, leaving the majority of SEES to lag behind him. He was focused on his hands and was about to enter the school when Yukari ran up next to him. "Hey, Minato... I wanted to ask you

something." she said.

"What's up?" Minato asked, shifting his attention to her. Yukari saw he was actually watching a miniature version of Alice and David perform, with Alice on a piano and David using his violin as always. They stopped, and glared at Yukari before disappearing. She flinched, but held her ground.

"It's just... Do you think Mitsuru-senpai saved Fuuka because it was the right thing to do? Or was it just because she's a Persona-user and we need her?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"Probably the second reason." Minato said. "Though, does the reason really matter? We saved her, didn't we?" *"Well, 'saving' is a debatable term, but... whatever."*

"... I guess." Yukari said. She sighed. "Well, whether or not she joins us is up to her... Sorry to bring this up out of the blue."

"I can see why you doubt Mitsuru's morality." Minato said. "She's an ice-cold machine, but she's also human. If you got to know her, you'd see she's just another person with her own host of problems and quirks... though I guess her problems might run a bit deeper than usual."

Yukari nodded. "... Well, I've gotta go talk to some people. See ya." she said. She hurried off, and Minato went to class. The day flew by quickly, with Minato opting to eat lunch alone on the roof with his Fiends doing a little concert in his head. At

the end of the day, he was surprised when the senior members of SEES intercepted him once he left his classroom. "... I'm going to Council, if that's what you're worried about." Minato said.

"Actually, you won't be going today." Mitsuru said. "We've arranged for the chairman to come see you today... He read the reports for last night's operation earlier today, and wished to speak with you. He's already at the dorm. We'll be going as well."

"So he wants to speak to me, hmm?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "Did he say he's going to bring someone along?"

"... As a matter of fact, he did. ...But why would you ask that?" Mitsuru replied.

"Don't think you're the only one that talks to Ikutsuki in their downtime." Minato said. The seniors all exchanged slightly confused glances as Minato walked past them, heading out of the school. They quickly followed suit, and everyone took the train back to Iwatodai. During the ride, Shinjiro went over to talk to him as Akihiko and Mitsuru held a private conversation.

"... Feel proud of what you did last night?" Shinjiro asked.

"Rescue Fuuka and scare the shit out of everyone else? Yes." Minato said. Shinjiro sighed.

"Look, kid... don't think I'm tryin' to look out for you, but you've got to realize normal people don't let shit like what happened

last night slide." Shinjiro said.

"I know... everyone was too... contained this morning."
Minato said. "And I didn't even throw them into my doll house."

"... Also, enough about dolls. It's friggin' creepy." Shinjiro said.
Minato chuckled.

"I can't help it... do you want to know why I like dolls, Shinji?"
Minato asked.

"... Humor me." Shinjiro said.

"Alright... first, am I correct in assuming you've read my file?"
Minato asked. Shinjiro nodded. "Well, it all started when I was eleven... you know, when I spent most of my time 'isolated' or something to that effect. Do you remember that section?"

"Yeah... you were apparently forced to provide for yourself with a weird old man, or some shit like that." Shinjiro said.

"Yes... while I managed to steal money from the old man easily enough, I spent most of my time locked in a cage."
Minato said. "I had a surprisingly good tutor who accelerated my schooling. She was the only person who actually talked to me in those times, but she believed in corporal punishment. Needless to say, I got smart rather quickly."

"... Alright. So where do the dolls come in?" Shinjiro asked.

"What do you mean?" Minato asked. "I'm talking about my first doll." Shinjiro's eyes widened.

"... That body you were found with... that was..." he muttered. Minato chuckled.

"That's right. I liked her enough to keep her around once the old man went and got himself eaten by a Shadow." Minato said. "She was transmogrified during the attack, and when I returned, the old man was a goner and she was asleep... needless to say, she woke up without the use of her limbs. I was enjoying my time with her, you know? She suddenly became extremely nice to me and was so agreeable. We kept playing house until one day, I woke up to find she had bitten through her own tongue... and that irritated me. It irritated me even more when I ended up in a strait-jacket once they got me to stop carving her up... but my memory is hazy after that. Probably a side effect from all the tranquilizer shots or something to that effect."

"... What the fuck?" Shinjiro asked.

"I acted my way out of that hospital soon enough. My next caretaker, the torturous old woman, actually had a few other little girls with her. She was going to turn on me, but I showed her a few new ways to play with those dolls as well." Minato said. He frowned. "However, in retrospect, I should have guessed I would become the next doll once all of them broke. Hence, the missing twelfth year... I was with that woman, but I was an assistant. That's where I learned how to cook too, oddly enough. There was a time when she actually treated me like her son when we were a torturous duo... but that story ended after she aimed her blade at me for a few weeks. It was a rookie mistake to think binding my legs and waist was

enough when I could reach a scalpel, Mother Seiko... a costly mistake."

"I think that's enough." Shinjiro said. Minato laughed.

"Yes, I suppose you're right... well, regardless, I like dolls because you can do anything you want with them without repercussions. The worst thing that can happen is that they break... but then again, you can just get a new one." Minato said. "I guess that's why I let my Fiends run around as figurines... but they're cool with it. I mean, it's better than cooping them up in my head all day, right guys?"

All of Minato's Fiends appeared as figurines seated on his head. **"Exactly!"** they all said.

"I like dolls for the same reason, so I can't complain. It's something me and mister have in common!" Alice said.

"I don't have a problem with it. It's not like I have anything better to do." Hell Biker said.

"I think this is a cool idea, actually. It allows me to practice outside." David said. He began playing.

"Why would I not have an actual body if given the chance?" Jack asked.

"Yes... there is no thrill unless you have a body to lose, regardless of the sport." Matador said.

Shinjiro just stared at Minato, with his Fiend figurines all sitting on top of his head, before shaking his head. "... All of you are fucking insane." Shinjiro said. He walked back to Mitsuru and Akihiko as Minato and his Fiends all chuckled.

The train arrived back at Iwatodai, and Minato dismissed his Fiends as the seniors returned to finish 'escorting' him back to the dorm. He arrived quickly enough, and found Ikutsuki holding a large brown bag seated next to a red haired boy with what looked like two long, thin black clarinet cases next to him. He had a scar shaped like a 'X' in the center of his face, and blue eyes. What actually caught Minato off guard was the number of expertly concealed throwing knives he could detect inside of the boy's loosely worn dark green jacket and the second black jacket he wore around his waist. *"... I guess the plain black jeans and yellow shoes are the attempt at normalcy in your outfit?"* Minato thought. *"Really, who wears TWO jackets, and still has a shirt on underneath? It's summer, dammit."*

"Good afternoon, Minato." Ikutsuki said. He smiled. "It looks like you haven't taken any permanent damage from last night's operation."

"Of course I haven't." Minato said with a grin. The red-headed boy chuckled.

"Heard you beat the shit out of a little girl. Must've been fun for ya." he said.

"Now, now, let's continue this talk in private." Ikutsuki said. He

gave a little nod to Mitsuru, and rose from his chair. "Would you join us in the command room?" he asked. The boy grabbed his cases and stood up next to Ikutsuki.

"I don't see why not." Minato said. "Lead the way." Ikutsuki nodded and went up, followed closely by the red-haired boy. Minato followed as well, noting that the seniors were oddly silent. He entered the command room and sat on the single chair next to the sofa, which Ikutsuki and the red-haired boy sat on. Ikutsuki smirked as he sat down. "So, what's the occasion?" Minato asked.

"As you know, I've read the reports of your operation from last night." Ikutsuki said. "Now, technically, I'm supposed to psychologically evaluate you now and ensure you aren't a danger to the rest of SEES... but why would I do that when congratulations are in order?" Ikutsuki pulled out three wine glasses and a bottle of red wine. He popped the cork, and chuckled. "To another job well done!"

Minato chuckled. "That's what I'm talking about." he said.

"Yeah, I think you just 'psyched' everyone else out!" the red-haired boy said. Ikutsuki and the boy broke out laughing. Ikutsuki had to put the wine bottle down to avoid spilling.

"That was amazing!" Ikutsuki said as they settled down. Minato chuckled.

"You two are similar." Minato said. "Is this your secret lovechild, Ikutsuki?"

"What? The old man couldn't get that if he tried!" the red-haired boy said. Ikutsuki looked heartbroken.

"... Is that really how you think of me?" he asked.

"Hey, c'mon, old man. Just accept it." the red-haired boy said to him. He turned back to Minato. "Anyways, guess we need an introduction. The name's Sho. Sho Minazuki. You can think of me as... this guy's protégé, I guess you'd call it."

"I see the art of odd puns has been well instilled." Minato said with a chuckle. "The name's Minato. Minato Arisato. But you probably know a good bit about me already."

"Yeah... hey, old man, you gonna pour or what?" Sho said. Ikutsuki picked up the bottle and poured out the glasses.

"Such impatience... you're underage, you know?" Ikutsuki said.

"Like that matters." Sho said. Ikutsuki chuckled and gave the two their glasses before sitting back down. "Well then... a toast to good fortune and like-minded individuals." he said. They raised their glasses and drank.

"Like-minded individuals, huh?" Minato asked. "You look young... what are you, fourteen?"

"Sixteen. And who the hell are you calling 'young'? You're only seventeen!" Sho said.

"True." Minato said. "Still, you're a lively one. Judging from the

knives you're hiding, I take it you've embraced your craft?"

Sho laughed. "Well, whaddya know? You're experienced." Sho said. "Yeah, I've taken to it. I love it."

"Good... we'll get along just fine." Minato said.

"There we go, boys... mutual respect between killers. Excellent." Ikutsuki said. "Now then, Minato... do you remember what we were last speaking about?"

"About death being the ultimate form of salvation and the majority of people being pests?" Minato asked. Ikutsuki nodded. "Well, what's the amazing thing you've got to tell me?"

"First, let me ask you a question." Ikutsuki said. "If you could create a world completely your own, where you had the ability to shape it and do with it as you pleased, would you?"

"Of course I would." Minato said.

"Even if ya had to kill off this world?" Sho asked.

"Ooh, a bonus? You're making this deal too good to refuse." Minato said. Ikutsuki and Sho glanced at each other and smiled.

"Well, what would you say if there was a way to do just that?" Ikutsuki asked.

"Why aren't we doing it now?" Minato asked.

"Hey, we never said it was quick and easy, now." Sho said.
"Hell, if we could pull it off in a day, do ya think we'd still live in this shit world?" Minato chuckled.

"Point taken." He said. "So, what's the plan? Got a doomsday weapon to restart the world from its primal state?"

"Heh... it's nothing that spectacular, Minato." Ikutsuki said.
"Well, I can't tell you the process, but just know that we're making progress towards our goal."

"Then why'd you tell me?" Minato asked.

"So we know we can count on ya if we need ya." Sho said.
"... And hold up. Minazuki's got something to say."

Sho closed his eyes, and his entire body went still for a moment before they opened once more. Minato immediately felt the atmosphere around Sho change. "... Don't be alarmed, Minato. I am Minazuki... Sho's second self."
Minazuki said.

"A split personality?" Minato asked.

"... It is comparable, but our connection is much more complex." Minazuki said. "Regardless, I wish to tell you something. Though we are sharing this information with you, don't think this makes you one of us."

"Minazuki!" Ikutsuki said.

"Even if you gain the trust of the boy and this monster, know I

am always watching you. Don't disappoint me." Minazuki said. He closed his eyes, and the atmosphere around Sho returned to normal.

"... Yeah, Minazuki's like that." Sho said. "But shit, if I see you act outta line, I'll gut you before he gets the chance."

"You two need to calm down." Ikutsuki said. "Minato has shown no intention of opposing us. You're both being paranoid."

"It's perfectly understandable." Minato said, catching them both by surprise. "After all, you're speaking to someone who is supposed to be protecting this city about a plot to return this world to a clean slate. As a defender, I would be obligated to oppose you, so I don't blame them for their caution. It at least lets me know you aren't screwing around and wasting my time with a bunch of theoretical garbage." He leaned forwards in his chair. "I've seen enough shit to know that this world is irreparable... the only option is replacement. Frankly, as long as I get what I want in the end, I don't give a damn who or what is lost along the way."

"... Never mind, then. It looks like only Minazuki's gonna be watching you, Minato." Sho said with a smirk.

"See? What did I tell you two? Minato is in the same boat as us." Ikutsuki said. "And I doubt any of us is ready to let it sink just yet. No... we're going to sail off the edge of this world and reach a better one."

"That sounds promising." Minato said. All three of them grinned and took a drink. "So, Ikutsuki... do you have any juicy Kirijio secrets for me?"

"Yes... this one should be worth your investigation." Ikutsuki said. "You've seen Gekkoukan's observatory from the monorail, correct?" Minato nodded. "Then, can you tell me how you get into the observatory?"

Minato thought about the layout of the school, and smirked. "... That's a trick question. The observatory has no entrance." he said.

"And why do you think that is?" Ikutsuki asked. He chuckled. "A section of the laboratory was deemed too dangerous to destroy for structural reasons. By the time the school was rebuilt, destroying the observatory would have attracted too much attention... so it was sealed away. There are no records about what's inside, however."

"... So you're saying I can find something in there?" Minato asked.

"Yes... but not today. To at least look like I've done my job correctly, I'll say you seem stable but should be kept under observation for the night." Ikutsuki said.

"Ah, a wise decision. It's not very convincing if a man who threatened to turn a woman into a doll is called perfectly normal, is it?" Minato asked.

"Yep... though personally, I'm more of an action figure man myself." Sho mused. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"Hah... I feel like we'll be able to do great things in the future." Ikutsuki said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"I look forward to it." Minato said. "I take it I'll run into you again, Sho?"

"Yeah... I'll be sticking around the old man now." Sho said. "Besides, we got catching up of our own to do."

"That's true. It's been far too long since we last spoke." Ikutsuki said. "Well, we'll be taking our leave."

Everyone rose and left the room, with Ikutsuki stopping to give his report to Mitsuru. After he and Sho left, Mitsuru turned to Minato. "... I'm sorry for not telling you the nature of this meeting beforehand." she said.

"No problem. With my history, it's understandable." Minato said. "Did Shinjiro tell you about my little doll speech?"

"... He did." Mitsuru said. Minato smirked.

"Would you like to become a candidate?" he whispered. Mitsuru took a step back, and Minato chuckled. "I jest, I jest." he said. "Well, I'm going to go catch up on some studying. Haven't really done any of that in a while, and it won't do to lose my position as number one. I'll be in my room if you need anything."

Minato left a slightly alarmed Mitsuru in the lounge, and did as he said he would, only leaving his room to shower and eat for the entire night.

56. Chapter 56

Chapter 56:

Morning tea was followed by a short musical performance from David and Jack. Afterwards, there was the little dance known as making breakfast with Alice and Matador along with a quick inspection of the news. As Minato suspected, there was a recent surge in the recovery of victims suffering from Apathy Syndrome. Finally, noticing that the lounge seemed to have fallen into disarray, Minato and Hell Biker endeavored to make it pristine once more. They were interrupted by Mitsuru, the first down into the lounge.

"... Good morning, Minato." Mitsuru said, looking over the lounge. It was almost spotless, and breakfast was already set for each and every SEES member. "I see you're even more diligent than usual today."

"I couldn't help but notice the untidiness of the room... and Hell Biker was getting annoyed by it." Minato said.

"Honestly... kids need to realize you have to at least keep your living area neat. Chaos is fun and all, but it's not a state of rest and relaxation." Hell Biker said. "If you're going to have your fun, do it somewhere you can afford to ruin."

"Exactly... it's not like I go about killing people in the lounge, you know? I take them to a good spot before I get to work." Minato said.

"... Right." Mitsuru said. "Aside from that... I had Akihiko and Shinjiro check on Yamagishi and Moriyama last night. You might like to know that they're healing up well."

"Excellent." Minato said. "We'll have acquired a new Persona-user... one that should prove to be quite interesting."

"... If you're talking about what happened at the end of your fight, then yes." Mitsuru said. "She's strange... her Shadow didn't separate from her as it should have... instead, it seemed to have merged with her. After all, she summoned her Persona at the end of the night without the use of an Evoker... and gained a feature her Shadow had."

"I know... and if she's taken on her Shadow's characteristics, she might be a different person." Minato said. "And that's a little exciting, don't you think?"

"Exciting? ... It is unusual, without a doubt." Mitsuru said.

"Still, even though the nature of her power is uncertain... we have to invite her to the dorm and explain what happened. We could definitely use her help."

"Indeed... she should have some type of sensory power, right?" Minato asked.

"Yes... she was able to communicate with the rescue team as

they approached her without the use of... that thing she summoned." Mitsuru said. "If she's retained that ability, her powers are likely much stronger than mine in that regard."

"Then she could replace you as support, which would allow you to fight on the front lines again." Minato said

"That's correct... we'll be able to find out once she recovers." Mitsuru said. The two sat down to breakfast, and ate as the other members of SEES joined one by one. After a much more relaxed meal than usual, they all took the train to school. Oddly enough, Junpei came over to Minato with a worried expression. Yukari followed him with an equally worried expression.

"S'up, dude?" Junpei said. He scratched the back of his neck. "Uhh... damn, this is weird."

"Say what you've gotta say. Nobody's judging you here." Minato said.

"... Alright. Look, I'm just here ta apologize for yesterday. Kinda... ditched ya, ya know? Even though we're s'posed to be bros and all... I mean, everyone was scared shitless of ya, and heck, I was too... I mean, I shoulda said something when we all talked about callin' in a shrink after the operation, but I didn't... and, well, I thought about it, and I was like 'Man, I bet this guy had to go through this crap all the time back in the day. He probably hates it, and here we are throwing it at him again.' So... jus' sayin'... sorry, bro." Junpei said. Minato froze. He just stared at Junpei for a solid thirty seconds,

speechless. "... I mean, it's cool if you hold it against me... cuz I get it. It prolly hit home for ya."

"... I don't hold it against you." Minato said. "I'm just... surprised. I never expected an apology... especially one like that."

"Hey, don't get the wrong idea!" Junpei said. "I'm not bein' weird or anything! It just felt wrong to pretend like it didn't happen, ya know?"

Minato chuckled. "You're legit as fuck, Junpei." he said. "Thanks."

Junpei chuckled. "No probs, bro." he said.

"I know. Oh yeah, thanks for giving him moral support too, Yukari." Minato said.

"Hey, I had something to say too!" Yukari said.

"Right... uhh, switch, I guess?" Junpei said. He swapped places with Yukari, who let out a sigh.

"So, what's up, Yukari?" Minato asked.

"Well... dammit, Stupei, why'd you go first? You said all the good stuff!" Yukari began.

"Hey, don't look at me! I just said what I wanted to say!" Junpei said.

"Did you have to want to say all the important parts?" Yukari asked. She sighed again, and Minato chuckled.

"Hey, I get it. You don't need to add anything." Minato said.

"... C'mon, at least let me give my piece too." Yukari said. "I'm apologizing too... for pretty much the same reasons as Junpei. I mean... I didn't watch your back, I guess, even though you had mine all the time. I mean, I was scared... okay, scratch that, I'm still scared of you, but... I don't think you're a horrible person all the time. I mean, it's like Junpei said... you're a scary guy, but it's just your thing... it's kind of who you are. And... well, I'm just sayin' I'm... cool with that now."

Minato pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead before she could react. She froze, but Junpei just tipped his cap to them. "And I accept the fact that you stalk me relentlessly, Yukari." Minato said.

"Wha-?! I do not!" Yukari said, quickly pulling away. She looked away quickly, though she couldn't hide how red she became. "W-we just know the same people and go to a lot of the same places, alright?! You just get there first!"

Junpei and Minato laughed. "Hey, looks like we got a tsun." Junpei said. Minato nodded.

"Yes, it's a tsun." he said. The two of them went to either side of her, and started humming in rhythm.

"Tsun. Tsun. Tsun-tsun-tsun. Tsun. Tsun. Tsun-tsun-tsun."
they said.

"Agh, will you two quit it?!" Yukari asked.

"She loves me!" Minato sang in a mocking voice, throwing a hand over his face.

"She loves me not!" Junpei continued, mimicking Minato's actions. They both threw an arm over Yukari's shoulder and put their face right next to hers.

"She's a mean little lady with a heart of gold! She can't act how she wants so she's hard as stone!" the two sang in unison.

"That's a lie!" Yukari said.

"Oh my!" they replied.

"No, she won't be honest with ya, she's got ta' be tough."
Junpei sang, backing away with a little lean and snapping his fingers.

"Even if she wants to cuddle and is made of fluff." Minato sang, copying him.

"She's a tsun. Tsun. Tsun-tsun-tsun." Both of them continued.
"Tsun. Tsun. Tsun-tsun-tsun."

"... You two are hopeless." Yukari said, burying her hands in her face as they continued their song. It ended once the train

reached Port Island Station, and the trio walked to class.

The seniors had made their own little group, and approached Mr. Toudou early as usual. He turned to them as usual, a bored look on his face. "Congratulations, you survived." he said.

"Yes... though I have something to ask you." Mitsuru said.

"What would that be?" he asked.

"We rescued a girl... Fuuka Yamagishi. She awakened to her Persona, but... it wasn't by simply accepting her Shadow, or through a case of extreme danger. She may have merged with her own." Mitsuru said.

"As I did." Mr. Toudou said. The seniors all froze, and his eyes began to glow. "When I'm like this, I can channel both my Persona's power and my Shadows. Of the methods I know that can awaken a person's Persona, this is by far the most powerful... it's how I acquired Amon-Ra. Granted, there are a few side effects... most notably, if the person isn't strong enough, their Shadow may take over their body for short periods of time. It's only ever happened to me once or twice when I was on the brink of death, but otherwise, I was fine. The biggest unnoticeable change is that their Shadow can communicate with them at any time."

"... I see you're quite knowledgeable on this topic." Mitsuru said.

"When it's happened to you personally, and you've seen it happen later to others, you learn a lot." Mr. Toudou said. "Well, is that it?"

"Yes... thank you as always for your continued cooperation." Mitsuru said.

"It's my job." Mr. Toudou said. "But, since you're here... Shinjiro."

Shinjiro scowled. "... What?" he asked.

"You know, I've never seen a student manage to score less than a ten on a test before... although you have managed to weasel your way out of supplementary classes this time, if you get under a sixty on the next midterm for this class, I will PERSONA-ly have to teach you." Mr. Toudou said. As he emphasized Persona, the eye of Ra appeared above him and glared at Shinjiro until he stopped talking. "I do not tolerate disgrace from my students. Study well."

Shinjiro gulped. "... Got it." he said.

The school day blew by, with Minato only getting a slight chuckle from Mr. Ono's constant bickering over being so far away from the Sengoku Era. Minato rose from his desk and considered his options. *"Junpei said he had something to check out... Yukari looks like she's opting to go to Archery Practice today... there's no Council... hmm... maybe Akihiko's available?"*

Minato went up to the third floor lounge and caught Akihiko talking to Shinjiro. He decided sneaking up on them was a great idea.

"Akihiko!" Minato said from right behind him. He and Shinjiro both flinched and turned around to see Minato laughing as he backed away. "Got you good, didn't I?" Minato asked.

"Tch... dumbass." Shinjiro said. Akihiko sighed, and scratched the side of his head.

"You know, girls do that all the time. I think I'll get hearing damage at this rate." Akihiko said. "But anyways... what's up, Minato?"

"I was wondering if you were doing anything. I'm bored." Minato said. Akihiko gave him a quizzical look for a bit before chuckling.

"Well, at least you're being honest about it." Akihiko said. "I was actually trying to convince this idiot here to actually start training with me instead of lazing about all day."

"And I told you I'd think about it." Shinjiro said.

"What? Shinji, what happened to returning to self-improvement?" Minato asked.

"I never said I would." Shinjiro said.

"... I get it." Akihiko said. "If you're that scared of losing, it's better to not compete in the first place, right?"

"The hell did you say?" Shinjiro asked.

"That's true... you can't be a loser if you didn't even try, right?" Minato said.

"Exactly... why bother if you know you can't win?" Akihiko added.

"Yeah, it's way smarter to just give up before you even start." Minato said.

"Alright, I get it." Shinjiro said. "You two can shut the fuck up now... so what are we doing and where are we going?"

"We'll run to Naganaki Shrine on foot from here." Akihiko said. "Once we're there, we'll see what we can do on that empty playground."

"... You're kidding, right? We're going to run from here?" Shinjiro asked.

"Hey, it's not that far... well, figuratively, I guess." Minato said. "I mean, if I really wanted to, I could probably get there in a few minutes, but... that would expose my powers to the world."

"... It'll be a normal run." Akihiko said. "Try not to use your powers... both of you. If you have a well-trained body naturally, imagine what you'll be able to do once you add them on."

"Ain't the point of havin' special powers to do normal shit way

easier than normal?" Shinjiro asked.

"... You have a point there, but if we keep facing off against tougher and tougher opponents, we should have trump cards. I mean, look what mine did in the last fight." Minato said.

"... Damn you and your logic." Shinjiro said. Akihiko chuckled.

"Alright, then let's head out." he said. The trio made their way to the front gates, where, oddly enough, Junpei and Mitsuru were having a conversation.

"Junpei... while your heart is in the right place, you have to consider the long-term effects." Mitsuru said.

"But senpai, if we lose, there ain't gonna be a long-term!" Junpei said. "C'mon! We can't expect everything to just work out like the last time! I don't know if you realized this, but we almost DIED! Like, all of us... Dead. It kills me to say this, but if Minato didn't show up when he did, we would've been screwed, big time."

"... I realize that the battle was unlike anything we faced before... and it wasn't an experience normal people should ever have to go through." Mitsuru said. "However, this isn't the answer. It's true that we need to train more, both as a unit and individually so that a fiasco like the last operation never happens again... but that's what we'll do. We'll train, Junpei."

"... What are you two talking about?" Akihiko asked as he approached the two of them. Minato and Shinjiro followed

behind him.

"It's nothing, Akihiko." Mitsuru said.

"No it's not! I'm tellin' ya, I know you've got something that can strengthen my Persona! You guys have got to have something for that!" Junpei said. Shinjiro walked over and smacked the side of his head.

"They do. Wanna know the side effect?" Shinjiro growled. "It makes your Persona fucking target you if you so much as slip mentally. It'll kill your ass before you realize what's happening. I don't know what enhancement shit you're talking about, but you drop it, now."

"... Why do you know that, Shinjiro?" Mitsuru asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"... I met a few people before I got my patch up from Big Boss. I saw some of their stuff." Shinjiro said. "Don't bother asking about them... they all died. Take a guess how."

"... I see." Mitsuru said.

"... Then, what the hell am I supposed to do? Sit down and leave it all to Minato again?" Junpei asked, clenching his fists. Shinjiro glanced back at Akihiko, but Minato walked forwards and put a hand on Junpei's shoulder.

"Nope. You train hard, just like Mitsuru said." Minato said. "We're actually about to go for some ourselves. Join us."

"... Man, we both know that no amount of training is gonna put me on your level." Junpei said.

"No, we don't." Minato said. "We'll only know the answer to that when we stop getting stronger, and that won't happen for a while."

"He's right, Junpei... don't put yourself down. We lost that fight because we were caught off guard." Akihiko said. "But the fact is, there is a next time... and we'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"So quit whining and get ready. We're doing a run." Shinjiro said.

"... Fine, then." Junpei said. "But we better not be screwin' around..."

"It's good to see —" Akihiko began.

"YES! Turn that rage into POWER and show me!" Minato said, backing away with a manic smile, startling Junpei. "Show me... what a true soldier can do."

".... Dude, what the hell?" Junpei asked, cracking a grin. "You sound like a really corny villain."

Minato chuckled. "Who says I'm not a really corny villain?" he replied.

"You're something else, that's for sure." Junpei said. The other members of SEES couldn't help but notice the very

sudden shift in atmosphere. "Well, what are we waitin' for? The sun to set? I thought we had stuff to get to."

"... Yeah. Let's go. It's a run to Naganaki Shrine." Akihiko said, looking over Minato.

"Last one there buys everyone else lunch!" Minato said, dashing off.

"Dude, I'm not payin' for your stomach!" Junpei said, dashing after him. Shinjiro sighed.

"Those two are idiots, aren't —" Shinjiro began, but Akihiko suddenly dashed off after Minato and Junpei. "... Those three sure are idiots, aren't they?" he finished. Mitsuru chuckled.

"Perhaps... but if we were all grim, our morale would suffer greatly... a clown is sometimes more useful than a combatant." Mitsuru said. "I'd hurry if I were you, Shinjiro... I've heard Minato doesn't hold back when others are paying for his food."

"... Shit." Shinjiro said. He nodded to Mitsuru and began to run after the others. Mitsuru watched the four boys disappear with a smirk on her face before beginning her walk to the train station. She was more than happy. SEES had held itself together, perhaps even gotten closer in the face of disaster, and that was so much more than she could have hoped for.

Minato proved to have a ridiculous amount of endurance. He never lightened his initial dash except to turn, and handily beat

the other members. Akihiko managed to pass Junpei on the Moonlight Bridge, but Shinjiro wasn't as lucky. He was the last to arrive, huffing and puffing as the other SEES members caught their breath. "Huh... How the hell... can you just run... like that?" Junpei asked Minato. He took a deep breath, already almost back to full strength.

"Well, I actually have regenerative abilities... they're not amazing, but since they were made to deal with lethal wounds, the expenditure of energy isn't that taxing. Technically, I could jog forever if I got food and water at enough intervals." Minato said. "And before you say anything, Akihiko, I actually can't turn those powers off... I've tried, and they just refuse to disappear."

"Keh... that's some handicap, then." Akihiko said. He was straightening out his clothing. "But, everyone's here. Now, let's see..." Akihiko turned to inspect the playground, and found that it was empty save for a little girl with brown hair who looked like she was in elementary school playing in a sandbox. She had a bright blue jacket on top of a brightly colored dress. "... Huh. What can we do?"

"I know." Minato said. He walked past Akihiko and straight up to the little girl with a grin on his face. Shinjiro's eyes widened, and he looked like he wanted to say something. "Hey there. Are you here alone?" he asked.

"Huh... Who are you?" the little girl asked.

"My name's Minato. What's yours?"

"Maiko." she said. "... Are you a bad person, Minato? My parents told me not to talk to bad people."

"Oh, then I shouldn't be talking to you. I don't want to get you in trouble." Minato said.

"Hmm... I don't think you're a bad person if you don't want to get me in trouble." Maiko said. "I'd like to talk, but I'm really thirsty... you don't have anything to drink, do you?"

"That depends... do you like magic?" Minato asked. Maiko's eyes lit up.

"Ooh, are you a magician, mister?" Maiko asked.

"That's right... tell me exactly what you want to appear, and the Mystifying Minato will make the object of your desire mystically appear!" Minato said.

"... I really hope we aren't watching a pedophile case in progress." Shinjiro whispered to Akihiko.

"... Be ready to tackle him." Akihiko said.

"Guys, c'mon... he's just bein' nice. She looked pretty sad, ya know?" Junpei said.

"Really?... Well, can you make a Mad Bull appear?" Maiko asked.

"That's tough... but let's see..." Minato said, rubbing his chin. He rubbed his hands together and closed his eyes. "Get

ready." he said. He waved his hands around in the air, making a strange circle. "Azarath Metrion Zinthos!" he said, clapping his hands together. He managed to catch the Dimensional Compactor in between his hands, and as he opened his hands, summoned a Mad Bull. "And a drink for the lady." he said with a little bow.

"Woah!" Maiko said. She took the drink from him, and chugged it. Minato chuckled. "That's amazing... but you know, I'd really like some Takoyaki with this. But Octopia is really far away..."

"Takoyaki, you say?" Minato said. "You're in luck... that's my specialty. Behold!" He spun around, and summoned a packaged Takoyaki packaged from Octopia from the Dimensional Compactor as he spun, and handed it to Maiko once he was facing her again. "One fresh from Octopia." *"Well, if you count kept in here for about five days as fresh, but I get the feeling that perishable items don't exactly... perish in the Dimensional Compactor."*

Maiko was awestruck. "... How'd you do that?" she asked.

"Magic, of course." Minato said. "Do you see anywhere I could have stored that away?" he asked, raising his jacket.

"... Can you show me how to do that?" Maiko asked.

"Sorry, but I can't. Like I said... I'm a bad person, and you have to be a bad person to learn that kind of magic." Minato said. "But you're a good kid, aren't you? You'll be able to get

a lot of things I couldn't. Like... a show with your Takoyaki! See those guys behind me? How about you tell us something acrobatic you want to see, and we'll each take turns trying it?"

"... Oh, so that was his angle." Akihiko said. "Smart... never would have thought of that."

"Aw, man... I don't wanna look like a loser in front of a little girl, dude..." Junpei said.

"Tch... this is gonna be embarrassing." Shinjiro said.

"Are you sure? People usually don't play with me." Maiko said.

"Then you should sit back and let us spoil you for a bit!" Minato said. Maiko laughed.

"Ok, but you said so yourself!" Maiko said. Minato motioned for the other members of SEES to come over, and the official Cirque du SEES began. Maiko proved to be very knowledgeable about various acrobatic maneuvers on the jungle gym and high bar. The only two people who could perform all of her shows were Minato and Akihiko. Shinjiro and Junpei failed miserably most of the time, but both showed steady improvement as time passed. Eventually, Maiko had to leave, and the members of SEES bid her farewell.

"... That was surprisingly rigorous." Akihiko said. "I didn't think a little girl would know that many moves."

"No kiddin... How the heck was I supposed to do a freakin' betsy flip or whatever off a high-bar?" Junpei said.

"Don't remind me... I think I had to use my regeneration on the cuts I got from sliding on the floor." Shinjiro said.

Akihiko chuckled. "Hey, you guys didn't do too bad." he said.

"Yeah... I actually thought you'd just break the jungle gym, Shinji, but you didn't. Good control of your strength." Minato said. "And you're looking more flexible, Junpei. That'll help in a fight more than you think."

"Astute observations." Akihiko said. "But, let's head out to eat... and I think we can all agree we're going to Beef Bowl. And Shinji's paying up."

"Tch... just make sure you eat something other than just protein." Shinjiro said. The male SEES members all made their way to Iwatodai station, and quickly ordered their meals once they reached Beef Bowl.

"... Hey, Minato. I've been meaning to ask you... why're you good with kids?" Akihiko asked.

"Because I'm very in touch with my inner child." Minato said.

"Once you know how a child thinks, they are easily moldable... controllable... and, if you felt like it, corruptible."

"... Forget I asked." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled.

"Hey, I had no ill intentions with Maiko, if that's what you're

worried about. She looked like she was feeling lonely and having a rough time, so I felt like I'd be that nice person that cheers her up." Minato said.

"Oh, you mean Maiko Oohashi?" one of the servers asked. "Did you play with her at the shrine?"

"Yeah, we did." Minato said.

"That was really nice of you... her parents are having a messy divorce, and she's lost in the middle of it all. You're good people for doing that... I went through that as a kid, and boy... it wasn't fun." he said with a wry smile. "Tell you what... the first order's on the house. It's good that she got somebody to cheer her up... I know I could've used one back then... Oh, but this is probably really depressing! Sorry, sorry! Forget I said anything!" The server quickly disappeared back into the kitchen, leaving everyone except Minato feeling a bit awkward.

"... He puts it like we're saints, but we really didn't do anything." Akihiko said. "... Again, we have to fork this victory over to Minato."

"This ain't a competition, Aki." Shinjiro said.

"I didn't do anything special. I was very serious on getting her to make us exercise, and I really just wanted to embarrass you guys if you failed." Minato said. "Though, if the road to hell is paved with good intentions, I suppose the road to heaven is paved with bad ones." He chuckled. "Well, whaddya

know? Looks like I'm a saint after all."

The other SEES members chuckled. "Your train of thought is always somethin' else, ya know?" Junpei said.

"Isn't it? One minute, he's the devil's advocate, the other, he's a patron saint." Akihiko said. "... But I guess you need both to get a complete picture."

"Didn't take you to be a closet philosopher, Akihiko." Minato said. "Still, it's good you think that way... it'll keep you on your own path. The contents of said path... well, there aren't many ways to tell. I, for one, know mine is quite dark, but that's from past experiences."

"... Though I doubt I can match yours, I won't go so far as to say mine is smooth." Akihiko said. He laughed. "Geez, what's with you and lecturing me? You must get a kick out of it."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't." Minato said with a smirk.

"Hmph... well, regardless of whether you enjoy it or not, I'll admit these lectures are always insightful. In fact, I appreciate them." Akihiko said. "You help me view a lot of things from a different perspective. And that's a lot more useful than you'd think."

CRACK!

Thou art I... and thou art I...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

"You know, I see a kid when I look at you, Akihiko." Minato said.

"... I won't argue with that. I'm not so brash as to call myself a 'grown-ass man', as Shinji liked to call himself." Akihiko said.

"I am a grown-ass man, Aki... unlike you, I could take care of myself just fine on my own." Shinjiro said. Akihiko chuckled.

"I can't argue with that." he said.

"Hey, I'll have ya know I'm the manliest man around here!" Junpei said. The other SEES members chuckled.

"Sure, Junpei." Akihiko said.

"What?! C'mon, I'm serious!" Junpei said as their food arrived. They held small talk as they ate, and returned to the dorm. Yukari and Mitsuru were both watching television as they entered.

"Welcome back." Mitsuru greeted. "Akihiko, Shinjiro, you should hurry and get dressed... we need to check on Yamagishi again."

"Hey... you aren't trying to push her into joining us, are you?" Yukari asked.

"Of course not... but we need to monitor her. You saw what

happened to her after the battle. Mr. Toudou may have said she would be fine, but I'd like to confirm that for myself." Mitsuru said. "So, you two should hurry."

"... We're going." Shinjiro said, heading upstairs. Akihiko followed suit, leaving Minato and Junpei to laze about in the lounge. After a while, Shinjiro and Akihiko returned downstairs, and left quickly with Mitsuru. Minato entered the bathroom as soon as they left, and quickly changed into his hat, his shirt with melting bodies, and open black army jacket with black jeans and sneakers. He headed downstairs and went for the door.

"Oh... where are ya headed?" Yukari asked.

"Dude, you're goin' clubbin' after all that?" Junpei asked.

"No, I'm not going clubbing. I've actually got a place I want to visit. I might take a while, so don't wait up for me." Minato said. He left before they could respond, and took a train to Tatsumi Port Island. He knew he couldn't afford to be on school grounds at midnight, so he reached the school at half-past nine, and set his watch to alarm at ten minutes to midnight. *"Alright... Jack, David, go scout ahead to the observatory and tell me if you find an entrance."* Minato ordered as he walked around the perimeter.

"Sure thing, Boss." Jack replied. He and David appeared as floating skulls, and flew off towards the observatory. Minato found a deserted entrance and quickly hopped over the fence to enter the school grounds. He had heard from Akihiko that

electricity was cut from the school at night, and his view of a still security camera confirmed his suspicions. He approached the observatory, and his Fiends returned to him. ***"No direct entrance, but you can probably pry one of the glass panels off. Some of them are loose."***

"Of course. I have to do this secret agent style, huh? Oh well... it's more fun this way." Minato said. *"It's probably dark as hell in there, so let's get hope there aren't flammable gasses in there. I'll be counting on fireballs, David."*

"Leave it to me, Boss. I'll tell you if anything's up." David said. Minato jumped to the top of the observatory, summoning Shiisaa's large head to use as a platform multiple times. Eventually, he reached the observatory, and stood around the edge. It looked like it hadn't been worked on for years, and the outside was lined with dirty windows.

"So, here we are. Let's test these windows." Minato said. He tapped each window he passed, seeing if any were loose. After almost going around the entire half dome, he found one, and managed to pry it off. The glass cracked, but he wasn't too concerned. He peered inside, and saw utter darkness. *"David. You're up."*

David appeared next to him and lightly played on his violin, summoning multiple orbs of fire that slowly descended into the observatory. They lit the area, and from what Minato could tell, it looked mostly empty, save for some scrap metal in a corner. He jumped inside, using Shiisaa's head as a slowing

tool this time, and reached the floor. The metallic walls were lined with scaffolding which led to an observation room, and two doors on the ground floor. He first took pictures of the area, and then went over to the pile of scrap metal. *"Wonder if I'll find me a doomsday device in here?"* he mused as he began to sort through the wreckage.

The first odd thing Minato noticed once he began sifting through the metal was that the majority of the metal was smooth and curved... some pieces actually looked like they were made to resemble the parts of living beings. *"... I suppose HSWs could have been made to appear more realistic. The old ones were probably modeled more closely after real predatory animals, I suppose."* Minato took pictures of what he thought were the most intact parts.

The pile of metal hid nothing but metal, so Minato decided he would move on to check the doors. The first door wouldn't open, so Minato kicked through it. His foot connected with concrete, and frowned. He ripped the rest of the door down, and saw the outside of one of Gekkoukan's walls. *"So this is where the entrance is supposed to be."* Minato noted. He took a picture of the connection, and moved on to the second door.

That door opened, and revealed a small room with an operating table connected to numerous mechanical arms. To either side of the room lay numerous destroyed measurement tools of some sort, along with a desk. Minato quickly snapped off pictures and moved to investigate the desk. He opened the

first drawer, and frowned. *"Empty. Shit."* He tore through the second and the third, both also cleaned out. He went so far as to look under the table, but even then, he found nothing. He did, however, notice that the bottom of the desk had a secret compartment, and tore the entire compartment out.

Inside, he found a number of small, individually packaged parts labeled as 'Unit #024:' with various roman numerals following that. *"My, my... what have we here? Pristine robot parts, I suspect... but what was Unit #024? An HSW? Or something else? Hmm..."* Minato thought. He took pictures of the parts, then stored them in the Dimensional Compactor. He'd have a chat with Mitsuru about these for certain. With nothing left to see in the room, Minato began his walk up the scaffolding to the main observatory room.

He reached there, and entered to find a singular light bulb flickering in the room. *"Get ready. We're not alone."* Minato said, reaching for his Evoker. He slowly entered the room, and then swiftly sent David's fire inside, putting his Evoker to his head. The room was empty, save for the flickering light bulb which was hooked up to what appeared to be a faulty generator on top of a small table. But Minato noticed one very distinct feature with the generator. *"... What kind of generator is half the size of a sandwich and glows blue?"*

He went over to the odd looking generator, and sat that a singular wire dug into it to connect it to the light bulb. It was a very faint blue glow, and he carefully picked it up. Upon closer inspection, it looked like a butterfly wing. *"... What the hell is*

this?" Minato asked. He could feel a pulse from whatever he was holding. It was as if it was alive. He shook his head, and put it down. He took pictures of the room in its normal state, and then proceeded to ransack the table's drawer. Inside was a file with various documents he skimmed the titles of. Artificial Soul Creation, Soul Enhancement, Mechanical Reactions to a Soul, Man-Made Sentience... he would've begun to read them if his alarm didn't go off. *"... I hit a gold mine."* Minato thought as he stored the odd blue generator and the file. He quickly left the observatory in the same manner he entered, and descended to outside of the school's perimeter as the Dark Hour struck. He watched the observatory seemingly condense into a spire at the side of Tartarus, and then returned to the dorm.

"I have quite a bit of reading to do tonight... and intend on having another lovely chat with Mitsuru ASAP."

57. Chapter 57

Chapter 57: Red and Blue

Author Note: Guys, I had a completely ridiculous idea for a story challenge. SOMEBODY PLEASE UNDERTAKE IT! Also, the last chapter was supposed to be entitled 'Regroup'. Sorry for the delay, though. Had a busier week than I anticipated. Also, a big thanks to everyone for the positive reviews!

Author Note about Papillion Hearts: Er-herm, it would seem I need to re-educate a few of you. A Papillion Heart is composed of TWO Plumes of Dusk (feather shaped-ish stones) merged together at their core; they are called 'Hearts' for their fused shape (the feathers point outwards). So no, Minato did not find a Papillion Heart.

Author Note to My Father(Apparently): P3R shall use what it pleases. But if it'll make you feel better, she won't be a major character (I mean, have you seen my cast?! You think I can fit her in still?)

But now, back to the story.

"... So let me get this straight. This thing I've acquired..."
Minato thought, holding the strange blue wing in his hand as

he sat at his desk. He had read through them all that morning, with the pulsing object next to him the entire time. *"... Is something called a Plume of Dusk. This Plume of Dusk is apparently alive yet not alive, can store and apparently release information, can constantly generate energy, and may possess the ability to alter time and space. However, these may also be used to create artificial personalities... in other words, artificial souls. And these artificial souls were being put into androids, known as ASWs, as well as being bonded with humans to see what would happen. To top it all off, these babies come in various sizes, and each one's performance is unknown until tested."* Minato stared at the Plume of Dusk again. *"... What would happen if I ate this? Hmm... I already have Magatama, so I'm sure it wouldn't kill me. But would it do any good? I can't waste something this valuable."*

"I recognize that." the odd voice in Minato's head suddenly said. It was deeper than before, and almost like a man's voice. *"But I don't remember what it is..."*

"... It's rare for you to speak outside of the Dark Hour." Minato replied. *"Can you tell me where you remember it from?"*

"The night... we became one." the voice said. *"I saw many of them... before we were one."*

"... When did we become one?" Minato asked, now intrigued by what this voice was saying.

"... *I don't remember.*" it said. Minato sighed.

"*Then how do you know you saw them before we were one?*" Minato asked.

"*I had my full body.*" it replied. "*I remember... because I was in pain.*"

"*So you can't feel pain?*" Minato asked.

"*I can tell when you are in pain... but I feel none.*" it said.

"... *Alright. What do you remember?*" Minato asked.

"*Before... I tried to take your body.*" it said. "*I ate in the tower... but you resisted. You did something... and she came to us.*"

"... *The Reaper?*"

"*Yes... I made do with your body... but the fight was too difficult. Everything I had regained, I used... to keep you alive. I lost what was left of my body... to save us.*"

"... *Did that happen approximately nine years ago?*"

"... *I think so.*"

"*Then, you're why I can't remember any of the Dark Hour when I was eight... Yes, in fact, I don't remember entire sections of that time, now that I think about it. Once I left the*

morgue... Where did I go? Who found me and put me with that abusive woman? What happened to her? Why was I in a mental institution at age nine?... Why was I sent away from this city?"

"... I don't know."

"I'll find out what happened to us." Minato said, getting up from his desk. "Then, we'll know why we're like this."

"... Thank you." the voice replied. Minato didn't know why, but he just knew that he wouldn't be able to speak with that voice again.

"... Looks like you two have a history." Hell Biker said.

"A gruesome one, at that." Jack said.

"Yes... apparently, I had my guts splattered enough to paint Tartarus' walls." Minato said. "And... I somehow summoned the Reaper to try and stop the other guy from taking over my body."

"And if he tries again?" Matador asked.

"... I don't think he will. Though if he does, I'm counting on you guys to kick his ass out of my soul." Minato replied.

"He'll get evicted in less than a heartbeat, Boss." David said. Minato chuckled and pocketed the Plume of Dusk. He didn't want to move it in and out of the Dimensional

Compactor, in case it reacted with it or anything he had inside there at the moment. However, he soon noticed a fatal flaw with his plan. His pocket was pulsed with energy, and he was certain he couldn't get away with that.

"... Alright, where to store this thing? I'm not leaving it alone..." Minato thought. He considered his options, and was then struck by a brilliant idea. He pulled out his mp3 player, and pulled off the back. Inside, he took out the little hidden switchblade he kept in there, and put the Plume of Dusk inside. *"Ok, now that'll be on me for at least the rest of the day... though I shouldn't turn it on, before the Plume starts reacting or some shit."* Minato closed his mp3 player and let it hang on his chest. The glow was still there, but much less prominent. He put it in his pocket, and it became unnoticeable. *"Good to go."* He glanced at his watch. It was almost six thirty, and he had asked Alice to make breakfast while he finished his research. *"She should be done."*

Minato made his way out into the second floor hallway, and heard two screams, followed by Alice's laugh. He walked downstairs without much concern, and found Yukari and Akihiko cowering away from the Victorian doll house Alice played with. "You know, if she really wanted to turn you into a doll, she could have." he said, walking past them. He continued on to Alice, who was just finishing up her laugh. He pat her on the head a few times, and then summoned the rest of his Fiends. "Breakfast is ready." he said as the Fiends hurriedly set the table and served out food for each member of SEES.

"This place needs better ingredients, mister. I couldn't make any of my specialties." Alice said. Minato chuckled.

"That's fine, Alice. Thanks for covering for me." Minato said. He dismissed his Fiends, and sat down at the head of the table as he always did. He looked at Yukari and Akihiko once more. "Oh, almost forgot." he said, snapping his fingers. The Victorian doll house disappeared from the floor, and the two calmed down.

"Seriously... I'd rather see the skeletons walk around than her." Yukari said. "Could you not do that in the morning?"

"I can't." Minato said. "By the way, you should watch yourself now, Yukari... Alice heard that."

Yukari's face lost color as she froze. "... You still have control over them, right, Minato?" Akihiko asked. Minato laughed.

"Of course I do! I'm just messin' with Yukari again." Minato said. "... Or am I?"

Yukari glared at him for a bit before sighing. "... C'mon... you really will take years off of my life at this rate."

After a group breakfast, SEES headed to school without much event. On the train, Minato approached Mitsuru, who stood by the window as usual. "Hey, Mitsuru. Can you guess what I'm here for?" he asked.

"... I believe I asked you to stop these lone investigations,

Minato." Mitsuru said.

"Can't help it. I'm a Shirogane, after all." Minato said with a smirk. Mitsuru sighed.

"Very well... we'll speak after Council at the dorm." Mitsuru said. "However, our discussion will be a bit later than usual. Yamagishi has quickly recovered, and she's being released today... she's been invited to the dorm today to discuss whether or not she'll join SEES."

"Ah, so Fuuka returns?" Minato mused. "Hmm, I wonder how much she remembers... she may be uncomfortable if I'm in the same room with her."

"... Then, you'll understand if we ask you to leave should she... panic." Mitsuru said. "Of course, I expect you to stay close, in case her Shadow takes over her body... while Mr. Toudou said he rarely experienced the problem, I doubt his personal experiences are applicable to the general population."

"That's true... he was once a guest of Igor's, as I am." Minato said. "I'll be ready tonight."

"Good... I'm counting on you." Mitsuru said.

As the group arrived at school, Minato went straight to class. He kept a hand on his mp3 player throughout the entire day, checking to see that nothing odd was happening to the Plume of Dusk. *"This thing has been shown to work with*

machines... I hope I don't end up with a sentient mp3 player." he thought as the day dragged on. Eventually, it reached its end, and he hurriedly made his way to Council. He threw on his armband and took his seat as Mitsuru sat down. The person following her made a fatal mistake.

"Ah, shit, Minato's back?" he muttered. Minato went from his seat to right in front of the boy in a matter of seconds, and lifted him into the air by his collar.

"With a vengeance." Minato whispered. The boy whimpered. "I'd watch that tongue if I were you, Kuroda."

"M-my apologies, Minato-sama! I don't know what came over me!" the boy pleaded. Minato chuckled and released him. The boy quickly scurried to his seat, making sure not to run, and sat down, back completely straight, arms out on the table in front of him, looking dead ahead. Minato turned to the other Council members who had stopped in the doorway.

"I'm back." he said in a childish voice. "It's a pleasure to work with all of you after such a long time."

"T-the pleasure is ours, Minato-sama!" the first wave of students said with a bow. They all took their seats, and Minato returned to his. Shinjiro walked in after the majority of other students sat down, and took his seat alongside Mitsuru and Minato.

"... They're quiet today." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru smirked.

"Their enforcer has returned." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled.

"No... their bane has returned." Minato said.

"Hmph... I don't blame them." Shinjiro said.

"Perhaps... but I'm starting the meeting." Mitsuru said. She cleared her throat, and did her usual addresses. Once she finished and set the majority of Council to their paperwork, she turned to Minato and Shinjiro. "Congratulations, you two... the amount of bullying cases at the school has dropped tremendously. Your patrols have shown their results." she said. "Now that the meeting is over, you may leave if you wish."

"What will you do?" Minato asked.

"I have to make up for the paperwork I missed from the last meeting, so I'll remain here." Mitsuru said.

"... But don't you need to be back at the dorm for when Fuuka gets here?" Minato asked.

"I know that... I have a set time to leave by. If anything, I'll take my work back to the dorm." Mitsuru said.

"... Ain't that pushin' it?" Shinjiro asked. "You're doin' a hell of a lot, Mitsuru. You've got this, fencing, and you're the head of SEES... you need to watch yourself. Don't think I don't know you've gotten less than four hours of sleep these last few days."

"... I can recuperate once I've finished my work." Mitsuru said.

"Then we'll finish it must faster as a unit, won't we?" Minato asked. He turned to Shinjiro. "Get ready. This isn't your average opponent."

Mitsuru couldn't help but laugh a little. "Very well, then... however, this isn't a battle you can run away from. Are you certain you want to do this?" she asked.

"What the heck?" Shinjiro asked, looking at both of them.

"Anything for Madame President." Minato said with a slight bow. "Where do we start?"

Mitsuru smirked and motioned for them to follow her. They went to the back room that doubled as her personal office, and entered. The entire desk was stacked with papers. "... Why the hell do you deal with so many papers?" Shinjiro asked, eyes wide. If this was two days of work, he understood why Mitsuru couldn't afford to miss any days of Council.

"Most of them are tedious bureaucratic documents that simply need my approval... the average paper will have reached my desk about four times before it disappears, assuming it hasn't been lost and a copy needs to restart the process." Mitsuru said. "I have a few ink-stamps that mimic my signature that you'll need to use."

"Our primary weapons for this encounter." Minato said. "Very

well... Mitsuru, you'll break through the middle. Shinjiro and I will attack from the sides to pincer the opposition. By the time we meet in the middle, only the stragglers will be left. The battle will already have been decided."

"Excellent." Mitsuru said as she grabbed aforementioned stamps from her desk. Minato came forward and took one, as did Shinjiro. "Let the battle commence."

Needless to say, Mitsuru was by far the most efficient. She tore through papers faster than Minato could track, and he couldn't afford to use any of his powers unless he tore a sheet. Once she reached the center, she quickly moved on to helping Shinjiro, who was by far the slowest. Minato had just finished his pile as Mitsuru managed to meet Shinjiro in the middle of his stack, and chuckled. Mitsuru's alarm hadn't gone off yet. "Well, that was quite the success." Mitsuru said, looking at their handiwork. "I thank you both... this would have been bothersome if I had to do this alone." Mitsuru said.

"Isn't that what we're here for?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "Though I don't blame you if you take my lecturing on doing things alone for granted. I am, without fail, a hypocrite in this regard."

"Perhaps... but even if you act alone, you should know that your actions support others, whether you like it or not." Mitsuru said.

"That's debatable." Minato said. "However, I find it nice that you think so highly of me."

"... You two are both difficult." Shinjiro said. "Mitsuru won't accept help, and Minato won't accept the fact that he helps people. Ridiculous." Both of them turned on Shinjiro. "... I'm stating the obvious."

"Hmph... observant as ever, Shinji." Mitsuru said.

"He's a sharp one when it comes to others... not so much about himself." Minato said.

"You're full of shit." Shinjiro said.

Mitsuru chuckled. "I wonder about that... but we'll continue this discussion another time. We should return to the dorm before Yamagishi arrives. It wouldn't be a good showing if half of the members were missing."

"That's right. We'll have to continue this later tonight." Mitsuru said. "But for now, we'll have to return to the dorm."

They left the school and reached Iwatodai station, intent on returning to the dorm. However, they were soon interrupted by the arrival of Captain Hazama's crew. They approached before any of them had time to react. "Good afternoon." Hazama greeted.

"Captain Hazama... it's quite a surprise to meet you here." Mitsuru said.

"I frequent this area... Minato has spoken with me here before." Hazama said. Mitsuru glanced at Minato.

"Busted, eh? Sucks for you." Jimenez said.

"Keeping such secrets from your superiors... surely, you mustn't be up to any good." Zelenin said.

"I've also encountered him at night, though we spoke across the barrel of a gun then." Hazama added.

"... We have a lot to talk about tonight, Minato." Mitsuru said. Minato sighed.

"I suppose we do." he said. He turned to Hazama. "Still, thanks for the help. You managed to really lower the amount of Apathy Syndrome cases occurring this week. There should be a slight lull in activity, so you guys should rest up."

"Rest?... Are you underestimating us, Minato Arisato?" Hazama asked. Minato thought only demons could exert their aura, so he was more than unnerved to find Hazama could do the same. It was even more disturbing when his was second only to Shin's.

"... Just a suggestion." Minato said. There was an odd silence as Hazama continued to exert his pressure.

"... Don't we need to get back?" Shinjiro asked after a while, snapping everyone back to attention.

"That's right... Allow me to thank you and your men as well, Captain Hazama." Mitsuru said. Hazama relaxed.

"We were only doing our job, Ms. Kirijio." Hazama said. "Then,

if you'll excuse us." Hazama walked past them, followed closely by an arrogantly smiling Zelenin and a snickering Jimenez. The group watched the JSDF members turn a corner before each of them scowled.

"Arrogant shits." Shinjiro said.

"... We need only bear with them." Minato said. He sighed. "After all, despite being even more confrontational than me, there's no doubt that having Hazama around will pretty much ensure the safety of this city."

"... I agree. As much as it pains me to say this, their presence is reassuring." Mitsuru said. "Come... let's hurry back to the dorm."

The trio hurried back to the dorm and sat in the Command Room. Junpei and Yukari followed suit shortly after, and finally, Ikutsuki, Akihiko, and Fuuka all entered. The Command Room was officially fully seated, with Fuuka and Mitsuru being the two people on single chairs. Ikutsuki was the first to speak. "So, you're Fuuka Yamagishi, correct?" he asked. Fuuka quickly stood up.

"Y-yes!" she said. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"Relax... There's no need to be so nervous. Why don't you have a seat?" he said. Fuuka bowed and quickly sat back down. "Everyone, you did an excellent job uncovering the truth. I also wanted to let you know... all three girls have recovered."

"What a relief..." Fuuka said.

"From what I understand, they came to school around midnight and waited for the security guard to leave." Ikutsuki said.

"Not that hard... dude didn't even investigate a cellphone goin' off." Junpei said.

"They were likely attacked by Shadows near the gate, as the Dark Hour began... However, the facts became twisted because of the rumors concerning a ghost story." Ikutsuki continued.

"I knew right from the beginning that it wasn't a ghost." Yukari said.

"... And in addition, I heard about what happened in the lobby." Ikutsuki said, adjusting his glasses. "Do you... remember anything from that night?"

"... Yes." Fuuka said. "I remember everything." There was a small silence among the members of SEES. "... It was all my fault."

"... Are you kidding? You were the victim!" Yukari said.

"... I cursed them." Fuuka said. "I wanted them to suffer... Moriyama-san and her friends... I wished for it, and it happened."

"... Shadows are being made from human emotions." Ikutsuki

said. "I suppose it's possible for somebody inside of Tartarus with enough negative emotions to influence their behaviors, but..."

"You aren't helping." Akihiko said, silencing Ikutsuki. "... Even if you wanted something bad to happen to them, that's normal... but you weren't the one to do it."

"... You shouldn't be trying to defend me." Fuuka said. "Not after what I said to you."

"... So you remember what your Shadow did with your body as well." Mitsuru said. "However, those actions weren't your own, Yamagishi."

"Yes, they were." Fuuka snapped. Her eyes flashed yellow as she spoke, earning a reaction of surprise from everyone save Minato and Ikutsuki who both smirked. "... Everything I did... everything I said... it was me."

"... Even if you did turn on us, you saved us from certain death at the start of the fight." Shinjiro said. "We would all be dead if you weren't there, no questions asked."

"That's right, Yamagishi... you saved our lives, and should feel good about yourself." Mitsuru said. "You have a special power that can be used to help others. We call it Persona. You would be a tremendous to us. Will you lend us your strength?"

"... You're asking a monster like me to join you?" Fuuka asked. Minato broke out laughing. Everyone turned to him,

and he kept going.

"C'mon! She's being serious!" Yukari said to him. He slowly calmed down, and let out a big sigh. He took a deep breath before turning to face Fuuka.

"Monster, huh? Are you sure you remember everything about that night?" Minato asked with a crooked smile. Matador and David both materialized behind him and glared right at Fuuka.

"That's enough of that." Shinjiro snapped. Minato chuckled, and his two Fiends disappeared.

"I was only pointing out the fact that we don't really discriminate against monsters here, nothing more." Minato said with smile.

"Boss is trying to get you to run with this." Jack's floating head whispered into Mitsuru's ear. She managed to maintain her composure, but understood immediately. She got up and walked over to Fuuka, resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Yamagishi... it doesn't matter who you are or what you think you are. What matters is that you, and only you, can choose to make a difference." Mitsuru said. "You aren't alone, Fuuka... not anymore."

"I wonder if she's taken professional acting classes... she's good." Minato thought.

"Mitsuru-senpai..." Fuuka said. She turned to Akihiko and

Shinjiro, who both just nodded at her.

"You know, we're not trying to pressure you, so if you need more time to think about it..." Yukari said. Fuuka shook her head and stood up.

"I'll... No." she began. She closed her eyes, and then opened them again. They were glowing yellow once more. "We'll do it. You can count on us." she said, sounding much more confident than usual.

"A-are you sure!? If you join, you'll have to live here..." Yukari said. Fuuka smirked.

"All the better." she said, earning a little reaction from everyone else.

"That's more like it." Minato said. He chuckled. "I look forward to having you around."

"We really appreciate this. We'll have the school talk to your parents to resolve any issues." Mitsuru said. Fuuka nodded.

"... Wait a minute. Aren't we dragging her into this a bit fast?" Yukari asked. Fuuka turned on her.

"Are you trying to say I can't handle this?" Fuuka asked.

"Because I distinctly remember you being the first to –" she began, but her eyes suddenly returned to their usual teal. She let out a little gasp and bowed to Yukari. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to go that far!" she said. Junpei chuckled.

"Can't argue against that, Yuka-tan." he said.

"Hey! I was just worried..." Yukari said.

"Thank you, but... It's fine... really." Fuuka said, straightening back up.

"Good." Ikutsuki said. "Now that that's been sorted out, we should get you home to your parents so you have a chance to explain the situation to them first. Akihiko, Shinjiro... if you would escort her to her apartment. It's not good to have a girl wandering around alone at this time of night. N-not that I mean anything by it, of course!" Oddly enough, Fuuka giggled.

"I know." she said.

"Well, let's get going." Shinjiro said, moving towards the door. Fuuka followed him, then Akihiko.

"Then, that concludes this meeting." Mitsuru said as they left. Yukari glared at her apprehensively, but said nothing. "Thank you as always, Chairman... though, if you don't mind an inquiry..."

"What would you like to know?" Ikutsuki asked.

"Who was that boy you brought to see Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"Oh... I wonder how he'll react to this." Minato thought.

"He was a mercenary." Ikutsuki said. "Much like Naoya

Toudou, he's had his own history with Shadows in the past... I don't mean to offend you Minato, but I was a bit uncomfortable acting as the profiler of a known murderer. Ah! That is to say, ex-murderer, of course! Hehehehe..."

"... *God damn, these people are class actors.*" Minato thought. He chuckled. "I would be pretty scared locked in a room with me as well." he said. "Still, no harm done."

"Phew... I'm glad you won't hold that against me." Ikutsuki said, straightening his tie. He turned to face Mitsuru. "So, there you have it. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"No... actually, I should have sent someone with you as a guard. The thought hadn't crossed my mind... forgive me." Mitsuru said.

"It's not a problem. If anything, it was a sign of trust on your part." Ikutsuki said.

"... I suppose it was." Mitsuru said, cracking a grin. "Then, everyone's dismissed. Have a safe journey back home, Mr. Chairman."

Everyone but Minato and Mitsuru quickly rose and left the room. They both stood up as the rest of the members walked out of the door, and turned to one another. "Will it be here, or in your room as usual?" Minato asked.

"My room... Come see me once you're ready." Mitsuru said. She left the room, and Minato quickly went to his room to

grab his laptop. He had thrown his new pictures on before he started reading that morning, and was more than eager to share his discoveries with Mitsuru. But even more so, he was looking forward to another thing so much more.

He knocked on her door, a grin on his face and his laptop tucked under his arm. "Ready?" he asked.

Mitsuru opened the door and let him enter the room. He took his seat on her desk chair as she sat on the edge of her bed once more, and he smirked. "I have to thank you for that move with Yamagishi... it was just the push we needed to convince her to join us." Mitsuru said.

"Of course... we couldn't let her just slip through our fingers." Minato said. "So, now that you're on the front lines, it's obvious that you can specialize in ice-attacks... would that make you weak to fire?"

"Yes. Already trying to work me into the new team divisions?" Mitsuru asked.

"No... but I must say, you've done remarkable training against your weakness." Minato said.

"... I haven't done any training of that sort, Minato... what makes you think that?"

"It's just... your skirt has been on fire for the longest time, and you've yet to flinch." Minato said. He leaned forwards, chin jutting forwards so he looked down on her. "But I suppose an

experienced liar wouldn't even notice, would they?"

Mitsuru froze. "... How?" she asked. Minato chuckled and took out his mp3 player. He took the secret back compartment out, and revealed the Plume of Dusk. Mitsuru gasped, and he chuckled.

"You know, I should really have doubted you when you said you just 'didn't know' why there were no weapons made to counter Shadows. I mean, it's quite a simple abbreviation, especially if you consider HSW." Minato said. "Does ASW sound familiar? Or maybe Plume of Dusk? Or perhaps... Artificial Soul."

"... Where did you get that? Or learn about those things?" Mitsuru asked.

"Why, at school." Minato said. "Or should I say... the Ergo Research Group's old laboratory."

"... How long have you known?" Mitsuru asked.

"About all of this complicated stuff? Only since last night and this morning." Minato said. "As for your treachery... I've known since our first private chat like this." Mitsuru's eyes widened. "Oh? Wondering why I didn't expose you immediately? Why I didn't call you out? Well?" he asked. She said nothing, and he chuckled again. "It was because I, as you previously suspected, spied on you. Every time, once we finished talking, I kept a Fiend on you... and they told me all about your pent up guilt. And that made the lying game all the

more enjoyable for me... after all, I got to drop those little hints at you, and you were smart enough to catch them as well. I expected no less."

"... You can't be serious." Mitsuru said.

"Oh, but I am. Now, though, I'd be an idiot if I didn't realize you were lying after I've gained this knowledge... so unfortunately, I have to expose your little charade." Minato said. He pouted. "And it was so much fun to see how you'd beat yourself up every time we spoke. Oh well."

"... So you managed to convince Ikutsuki of your sanity, then." Mitsuru said, narrowing her eyes. "I should have expected as much... you're no stranger to deception."

"Are you implying that I'm insane?" Minato asked. "Because if you are, I'll tell you that I'm not. You, on the other hand, are going to be soon if you keep pretending you're capable of doing anything."

"... What?" Mitsuru asked.

"Don't take this the wrong way... I have no intention of forcing any truths out of you. I know you'll reveal everything once you think we're ready." Minato said.

"... Then why would you try and push me into a corner?" Mitsuru asked. Minato looked right at her with his most manic smile.

"Because it was fun." Minato said. "Because I wanted to see what would happen if I pushed you... and I say, your reactions are cute." He laughed, and leaned back in his seat. His face shifted back to a cocky smirk. "Still, that's enough of that. You may reveal what you wish to me, but I still think I should share my findings to you."

"... Still doing as you please, I see." Mitsuru said. She sighed. "Very well... I promise that I will reveal everything to you and the others soon... but..."

"I forgive you." Minato said. "Why do you think I revealed all of my spy game just now? So we'd both be even for deceiving one another. Thus, no harm done. We part as equals, the two leaders of SEES, once again."

Mitsuru looked at him with a confused expression. "That was your intention?" she asked.

"I have no reason to blackmail you." Minato said. "I trust you to be there as a friend... Have I misplaced my trust?"

"... No. You haven't." Mitsuru said. She looked down at the floor and smiled. "Thank you." she said. "For still thinking of me as a friend."

"If people stopped being friends once they lied to each other, I doubt anyone would ever speak." Minato mused. He got up and sat next to her, opening his laptop. "Well, take your time."

Mitsuru nodded, and went through his pictures. "This is the

observatory, I see..." Mitsuru said, looking at the sealed connection to the rest of Gekkoukan. When she got to the picture of the strange table surrounded with robotic arms, Minato decided to interrupt.

"I take it that's an ASW operating table of some sort?" Minato asked.

"Yes... an adjustment table. Its main purpose was for the replacement of small parts without needing to shut an ASW down completely." Mitsuru said.

"So, for something like this." Minato said, summoning a few of the packaged parts from the Dimensional Compactor.

"Yes, something like... wait. Those say... Unit #024?" Mitsuru asked.

"... Do you know that unit?" Minato asked.

"No... but every Unit underneath #031 was destroyed even before that lab's creation, and almost every ASW was destroyed after." Mitsuru said. "They were deemed failures... but if so, why was she being rebuilt?"

"Perhaps they needed extra security." Minato said.

"Considering the possibility that they kept HSWs handy, having a few security androids couldn't hurt... and I'm certain an ASW is just as lethal against people as it is against Shadows."

"That's true..." Mitsuru said. She continued looking through the pictures, and reached the ones depicting Minato's files and the Plume of Dusk. "... I take it you still have these with you?"

"Yes... but I'll be keeping those, if you don't mind. I'm sure you have other files at your disposal." Minato said.

"Of course." Mitsuru said. "But, the question is... how long have you been in contact with that Plume of Dusk, Minato?"

"Since last night... it hasn't left my side." Minato said. "Why do you ask?"

"... A Plume of Dusk can take on information from every living thing around it. If you've kept it close to you this whole time, there's a good chance it's now copied some of your personality onto it." Mitsuru said. "... I think it would be in our best interest to send that back to my father's lab."

"I know Plumes of Dusk are what allow our electronics to operate during the Dark Hour." Minato said. "But I also know they're integral to the creation of ASWs... I'll only send this back if you can guarantee that a new ASW is created. I don't want something this valuable to just end up locked in a vault."

"... There aren't many scientists left who can do that." Mitsuru said.

"But I know you can find them." Minato said.

"... If you insist, I can have it done. But... you'll have to name

it." Mitsuru said.

"Name it?" Minato asked.

"Every ASW has a name other than its unit number... after all, they are meant to emulate humans." Mitsuru said. "And as this new ASWs technical creator, its only right for you to personally name it."

"... Then, I'll name it Metis." Minato said.

"... Metis?" Mitsuru asked.

"One of Zeus's lovers who bore children of great power, including Athena." Minato said. He smirked. "I expect great things from her."

"... So you've realized that all ASWs are female." Mitsuru said.

"That, or they were supposed to be men with the nicest legs ever crafted." Minato said. Mitsuru chuckled.

"I didn't think you'd tell from those parts you saw... but you are correct." Mitsuru said. "I'll call the Chairman back immediately... he'll be able to specially deliver it to my father without contaminating it."

"Excellent." Minato said. "... Now, we could crack theories about what the intention for this lab was again, or you could just tell me. I'll let you decide."

"... It's part of the truth I intend to reveal to everyone." Mitsuru said.

"Then, all that's left is for you to call Ikutsuki." Minato said. He got up from her bed. "I'll be in the lounge." He moved towards the door, but Mitsuru caught his arm before he could move away. *"... Is it time to break Akihiko's heart?"*

"SHE WANT IT! SHE WANT IT!" Jack roared.

"We got you, Boss... you're gonna throw down like a professional." David said.

"Would you mind answering one final question?" she asked.

"What is it?" Minato asked. *"Or maybe not."*

"No, no, no... she is confirming." Matador said.

"... I can make so many bad jokes about riding right now... but I won't." Hell Biker said.

"Why are you... accepting my deceit?" Mitsuru asked. "Even though you know I'm withholding information from you, you still almost blindly put faith in me... and I know you aren't a fool, Minato."

"... Because you look out for me, even if I don't look out for myself." Minato said. "Unlike everyone else, I never had to ask you... and that means a lot to me, even if you might take it for granted."

"... Then, we are even." Mitsuru said. She rose from the bed, a genuine smile on her face. "I won't doubt you again, Minato... we've supported each other from the start. I know this may sound strange, but... I consider you irreplaceable."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

"As I consider you." Minato said. "... *Test my luck?*"

"Do it." Alice said.

"Definitely do it." Jack said.

"*Here goes.*" Minato thought. He turned back around and gave Mitsuru a hug. He expected verbal opposition and a shove, or at worse, a few hits. However, his luck worked. Mitsuru hugged him back. Many moments of comfort and silence passed. Until Mitsuru's door opened.

"Sorry to bother you, Mitsuru, but we just got back from –" Akihiko began, but he froze once he saw the scene. Minato and Mitsuru both swore under their breath and separated quickly. Akihiko cleared his throat. "S-sorry, I should have knocked... t-this isn't anything t-too –"

"I was just leaving, Akihiko." Minato said. He turned to

Mitsuru. "It's fine if you can't reach Ikutsuki tonight."

Mitsuru cleared her throat. "No, I'll contact him as soon as possible." she said. "I'll tell you when he's on his way."

"Thanks." he said. He turned, and walked past the still flustered Akihiko. He couldn't hold himself back. As he passed by him, he whispered "Whatcha gonna do?"

Akihiko turned on him, and he lightly chuckled as he walked away. He could hear him almost growling until Mitsuru got his attention again. Minato walked downstairs with a very cocky smirk on his face and entered the lounge. Junpei and Shinjiro were watching TV, so he ate dinner alone. By the time he finished, Mitsuru and Akihiko had returned to the lounge. "The Chairman will be here in a matter of minutes, Minato." Mitsuru said.

"That's good." Minato said.

"Huh? What's he comin' back for?" Junpei asked.

"It's a surprise." Minato said. He turned to Akihiko, who was glaring at him. "Hmm? Is something the matter, Akihiko?"

"... No. Nothing's the matter." Akihiko said. He quickly moved to watch TV, followed by Mitsuru. Minato cleaned his dishes and went to the bathroom. He washed his hands, dried them, then pulled out the Plume of Dusk.

"If this absorbs part of me, then... what will happen if it

absorbs this?" Minato thought. He awakened, and exerted as much power as he could while he held onto the Plume of Dusk. He felt it tremble in his hands, and he maintained his power for a full minute before slowly easing his pressure and returning to normal. *"Now... I wonder what will happen if you get put in an ASW."*

He hid the Plume of Dusk once more, and joined the others to watch TV. A few minutes later, the dorm's door burst open, and Ikutsuki hurried inside. He had a clear container that had a special compartment that looked like it was made to hold small objects with him. He turned to Minato. "You found one?!" he asked.

"I did." Minato said, getting up from the chair.

"Found what?" Shinjiro asked. Minato pulled out the Plume of Dusk.

"Dude, what the heck?" Junpei asked, eyes wide.

"... What is that?" Akihiko asked.

"A very rare source of energy... a Plume of Dusk." Ikutsuki said. "Quickly, put it here." He pressed a button on top of the container, and the glass slid open to allow things inside. Minato walked over and quickly put the Plume of Dusk inside. Ikutsuki sealed it, and stared at the item.

"So, will you be able to do what I asked?" Minato whispered.

"Oh yes..." Ikutsuki replied just as quietly. "Metis will be born."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for returning on such short notice." Mitsuru said.

"For this, I'd swim through a river of blood in the Dark Hour." Ikutsuki said. He lowered the container to his side. "Don't worry... I'll say this was my own idea if your father does any inquiries."

"I see... very well then. Please, be careful on your way back." Mitsuru said.

"I will." Ikutsuki said. "Good night." At that, he turned and left the dorm even faster than he entered.

"... He looked ecstatic." Minato said.

"And in a hurry. The hell did you just give him?" Shinjiro asked.

"A rare source of energy, as he said." Mitsuru said. "It's not an easily acquirable material... as such, he must have been more than enthused to get his hands on it."

"Oh, I get ya... heh, like a kid and a limited edition trading card, huh?" Junpei asked.

"You could say that." Minato said. "Well, now that that's over, I'll be in my room if anyone needs me."

Minato returned to his room, and considered how to spend the night. "... *I should go see Shin, but... I'm not up to it tonight. I*

don't know if Dante is back in town either... hmm... Nope, can't think of anyone. Damn... guess it's another cram night."

58. Chapter 58

Chapter 58: An Eventful Day

Author Note: Update on Fiend Skills!

Alice – Die For Me! , Energy Drain (HP and SP leech, one target, low power), Marakunda, Makarakarn, Null Physical Ailments (No Sick, Poison, or Stun), Unearthly Form (Takes on true form)

Hell Biker – Hell Spin (Strike Attack, one enemy, chance to knock down), Hell Burner (Fire Attack, all enemies), Hell Exhaust (Wind Attack, all enemies, Dekaja on all foes), Fire Amp, Endure, Tentarafoo.

And now, story time.

Minato and SEES had an uneventful breakfast and were already on the train to Gekkoukan. He had decided that listening to music for the ride was a good idea, and remained uninterrupted for the first half. However, Yukari approached him and got his attention, prompting him to stop listening. "Something the matter?" Minato asked.

"Huh? Geez, a simple 'good morning' would be fine..." Yukari said. She sighed, and then shook her head. "Anyways, I

wanted to ask you... what do you think about Fuuka?"

"Are you getting jealous, Yukari?" Minato asked with a smirk. "I mean, you heard what I said that night... you should know the answer to that question."

"... Eww, no!" Yukari said. "I meant about her joining! I mean... doesn't it seem like... she was forced into joining us?"

"Correction. Cajoled." Minato said. Yukari facepalmed.

"You know what I mean." she said.

"Yes, yes... we talked her into a corner." Minato said. "After all... who do you think was the one to prompt Mitsuru's heartfelt speech after my little monster display?"

"... You told her to do that?" Yukari asked.

"Not directly, but I hinted at it. We couldn't afford to let someone as powerful as Fuuka just fade into obscurity. She'll be a valuable asset... and, in my opinion, a great friend." Minato said.

"Asset? Really?" Yukari asked. "You're sounding more and more like Mitsuru-senpai..."

"Unfortunately, sound rationale often comes off as extremely blunt." Minato said. "... If you're that worried about her, you should make sure you welcome her with open arms, and not a hand on your Evoker like how you welcomed me." Yukari cringed.

"... Please don't remind me of that." she said. Minato laughed, and Yukari took her leave. The train arrived at school, and Minato stopped at the front gates.

"S'up, dude?... Oh, waitin' on Fuuka, huh?" Junpei asked.

"I'm wondering what the reaction to her return will be." Minato said. "I'll go to class with her and see what happens."

"Yeah, she was the 'ghost' in the story... hope she doesn't get a buncha shit for it." Junpei said. "Good lookin' out."

"Aren't I just the kindest thing to walk this Earth?" Minato asked. Junpei chuckled.

"And I'm the ace detective around these parts too." he said. He nodded to Minato and walked to class, leaving him at the front gates. Fuuka arrived a few minutes later, looking a bit nervous.

"Good morning, Fuuka." Minato said, walking over to join her.

"Oh... good morning, Minato." Fuuka said. She kept her gaze fixed on the floor.

"Hey, relax!" Minato said. "You're here, returning to school, and best of all, back with me! It's a good day, isn't it?" Fuuka couldn't help but laugh a little. "That's a much better attitude, isn't it?"

"... I guess it is." Fuuka said, raising her gaze.

"I bet we'll make everyone in your class jealous when we walk in. Won't the looks on their faces be a sight to see?" Minato asked.

"Hey! That's mean..." Fuuka said. She smirked. "But it would be funny."

Minato put his arm around her. "Of course it would." he said with a grin. Both of them chuckled as they made their way into the main entrance, earning a plethora of odd comments that they mostly ignored. The two entered class 2-E, and were immediately bombarded by the other students' stares.

"Hey, look... it's the ghost girl." one girl said.

"What the heck is she doing with Minato-sama?!" her friend asked.

"Quiet, idiots! They can hear you!" another girl said.

"Don't you idiots have better things to do?" a voice asked from behind them. Fuuka turned to see Natsuki walk past her and Minato right up to the talking students. She had a cocky smirk on her face. "Oh, wait, that's right. Since you just read internet posts all day, I guess any type of real-life interaction must be so stimulating for you."

"The hell did you say?!" the first girl said, rising from her seat. "I don't think a stupid bitch like you –"

"The use of curse words in class is strictly prohibited." Minato

said, interrupting her. He walked past Fuuka and stood next to Natsuki with an even cockier smirk on his face. "As the Head of the Disciplinary Committee, I can't just let that slide." he added.

"H-hey! Class hasn't even –"

"You're in a classroom, hence, you are in class. But with that little outburst, I'll need to add backtalk to your list of crimes." Minato said. Natsuki laughed.

"Thanks for digging your own grave." she said. She turned back to Fuuka, leaving a chuckling Minato to deal with the girl. "Welcome back."

"M-moriyama-san...?" Fuuka asked.

"I heard you're starting to live in the dorms." Natsuki said.

"Y-yeah..."

"You seem pretty depressed... Let me know if you need someone to talk to. I mean, you've got that guy, but... he's... well, you know." Natsuki said.

Fuuka giggled. "I guess you're right... thanks, Moriyama-san."

"Oh, c'mon... Just call me Natsuki."

"Heheheh...alright then, Natsuki."

The two girls turned back to see Minato in the middle of

talking the entire group of girls up a wall with the threat of ever-increasing punishment, and laughed. He didn't leave until Mr. Ekoda entered the room, and practically begged him to leave. As he left the classroom, he saw Fuuka and Natsuki having what looked like a rather happy conversation. *"Well, looks like I won't have to play knight anymore."* he thought.

"What a happy ending, huh, mister?" Alice asked.

"She and Moriyama are on good terms... guess she beat some sense into her, huh?" Hell Biker said.

"There's more to it than that." David said.

"She did save her life... technically." Jack said.

"When two people are tested, only two things can happen." Matador said.

"They split apart or they bond... and it looks like they've done the latter." Minato replied. *"... And here I thought I'd get a nice dependent toy. Unfortunate, but I suppose this is the best result for all parties."*

"Look at it this way... you've just earned a lot of points for going to Heaven." David said. Minato chuckled.

"I've got nothing but the worst of intentions, don't I?" Minato mused.

The school day quickly passed by, and Minato found himself

contemplating what to do with his time as he packed his things. *"I've already had Jack check on Fuuka, and she's preoccupied with Natsuki today... there's no Council, Akihiko has boxing club, Junpei and Kenji are hanging out again... Yukari said she's going back early to help Mitsuru prepare Fuuka's room, so both of them are out as well... Shinjiro is probably planning on lazing about today back at the dorm as usual, so he most likely won't be available either... Ah, I've got it... I'll go pass Shin's test."*

Minato rose from his desk and quickly headed to the back alley that Shin was usually meditating around. Shin sat there in his usual spot, with the same gray hoodie obscuring his eyes and the rest of the punks all staying away from him. Minato walked over to him. "You don't mind if we go now, do you?" Minato asked casually.

"I don't back down from challenges." Shin said. He rose, and led Minato to the secluded back alley as usual. "You've gotten stronger... but I think you already know that brute strength isn't enough to win you this battle."

"Of course. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by my progress, sensei." Minato said, preparing for the coming battle. Shin smirked.

"By all means, surprise me." Shin said. He teleported them to the wasteland, and summoned his three clones with a smirk on his face. Minato awakened and hunched over.

"This shouldn't take too long." Minato said. He rushed

forwards, staying low to the ground. The first of Shin's clones ran forward to greet him with a punch, and Minato easily slid past it and summoned one of Jack's cleavers, bisecting it before it could react. He skid right into a tornado of fire created by the other two clones, and was scorched. Minato rolled out of it only for the second of the three clones to appear above him, ready to drop its heel right on his head. He grinned as Matador popped out of his back and sliced the clone's leg off in one clean strike. Before it even hit the ground, Minato began hacking away at what was left of its body. The third clone summoned a huge shard of ice that rose to impale Minato from his side, but he materialized Power's arm with its shield at the last moment to prevent an instant death. The attack still sent him flying to the side, but he managed to finish off two of the clones in just over a minute.

Minato hurriedly rolled back to his feet to see the last clone leap after him and launch punches at the air, sending fireballs at him. He saw where it would land, and ran towards it, summoning Hell Biker's motorcycle. He ran alongside it, and flipped it into the air as the clone landed. Minato jumped and brought the bike down like a hammer, knocking the clone into the ground. He grinned as it started pushing the bike off of its chest. "Hell Burner." Minato said. The bike's engine roared to life, and a wave of flames erupted from the exhaust, scorching the clone. It desperately clawed its way out of the flames, finally managing to knock the bike away and roll out of the attack. Minato used the spinning momentum to turn and hurl the bike at the clone before it could get back up, knocking it down again. He summoned Shiisaa as the clone fell

backwards, and his Persona bit its head off before it could react, killing it. He smirked, and turned to Shin. "Told you."

"Well done, Minato... that was quicker than I thought." Shin said. "You've been holding back."

Minato chuckled. "Yeah, I wanted to see if I could win without pulling out all the stops, but I guess that was wishful thinking." he said.

"Wishful indeed." Shin said. He walked forwards. "But since you've proven that you're leagues above those clones, I'm interested in seeing just how strong you are now."

"... You don't mean you're going to go all out against me, do you?" Minato asked. "*How ready do you guys think I am for that?*" he asked in his mind.

"Not ready." they all replied simultaneously.

"Don't be ridiculous. You wouldn't live long enough to use your full strength if I fought like that." Shin said.

"... *I'd consider that insulting, but he's too straightforward about it this for it to be trash talk.*" Minato thought. He hunched over once more. "... Alright. I won't hold back, then." he said.

"Then what are you waiting for? Begin." Shin said. Minato summoned Hell Biker and Power to either side of him.

"Hell Exhaust, Magaru!" Minato said. A series of tornadoes appeared around Shin and enveloped his body. Minato knew better than to press his attack, instead opting to see what would happen. Instead of Shin being thrown away, the tornadoes all broke apart as a shockwave seemingly just erupted from Shin's body as he stood there, unfazed. "Hell Spin, Double Fangs." Minato said. Hell Biker rode forth, followed by Power.

"Don't think I'll let you off easy this time, kid!" Hell Biker yelled as he raced towards Shin. Shin held his arm as if he was about to draw a katana, and a blade of purple energy formed in his arm. He slashed once Hell Biker began to skid towards him, destroying Hell Biker's bike and knocking him into the air. His body was hacked apart by a myriad of invisible slashes, and only scraps of his clothing remained by the time Shin began to stand normally again.

"I already know you aren't a match for me." Shin said as Power flew towards him, lance aimed directly at him. Shin's body darkened and his tattoo began to glow even brighter than usual. He opened his mouth, and a slim beam of energy the same color as his tattoo shot through Power before it could attack. It exploded instantly. Shin's body returned to normal, and he turned to face Minato.

"... You're shitting me, right?" Minato asked.

"This still isn't near my full power." Shin said. He bounded forwards at Minato, and threw a punch. Minato knew better than to try and block, so he leaped backwards. As Shin

stopped his punch, a crater appeared where Minato was.

"This is officially bullshit." Minato thought as Shin appeared in front of him as he landed. He summoned Matador and Take-Mikazuchi's swords in his hands, and sliced upwards. Shin easily avoided the attacks and turned to backhand Minato. Minato summoned Empusa's hind legs from his waist to match Shin's strike. They attacks connected, and Empusa's legs were destroyed. The strike sent Minato tumbling to the side, and he barely managed to get halfway to his feet before Shin appeared above him and tried to stomp him into the floor. He had Jack's hand draw his Evoker and put it to his head as he righted himself. He disappeared in a flash of light that was quickly dispersed by Shin slamming down into the ground. Minato reformed a short distance off, and was greeted by Shin with a punch aimed at his gut. He summoned Power and Matador's arms to block along with his own, and was sent flying backwards once again. His arms had been broken, and he rolled helplessly along the ground. "I give up!" he screamed as he stopped with Shin hovering over him, ready to strike again.

"The only way to give up in a real fight is to kill yourself." Shin said. He raised his foot once more.

"Unearthly Form!" Minato yelled. Alice appeared next to him, and her body broke apart to reveal a living mass of the black substance his Fiends formed from. It encased him and slithered away at a ridiculous speed, with Shin's stomp on it doing nothing. Shin quickly turned around and did a spin kick, which sent a barrage of tiny pink projectiles that formed in a

giant line in front of him flying towards the black mass. As they buried themselves in that mass, they detonated, all exploding and scattering the black mass. Eventually, Minato's body was flung into the air, his arms regenerated, but the remainder of the black mass was obliterated.

"To take me down with one attack in my true form... I never fought this guy, but this is ridiculous." Alice said in Minato's mind.

"Don't worry about it... I doubt there's anything alive that this guy couldn't take." Minato replied as he landed on the ground. He knew Shin would appear, so he stayed low, ready to pounce. Surely enough, Shin appeared in front of him, dragging his fist along the floor in what Minato was sure was an uppercut capable of knocking his head clean off, since it left a small fissure in the ground as he approached. He rushed around the strike and summoned Jack's hand with a cleaver to strike at Shin's back after his uppercut split the area where Minato was supposed to have been in half. Shin quickly turned and shattered the blade with a backhand from the same fist that threw the uppercut, sending a gust of wind at Minato from the sheer force of the turn. Minato pushed through the attack and lunged forwards with Power's lance. Shin caught the blade and shattered it as Minato summoned Matador's arm from his leg to take a swipe at Shin's feet. *"Even if you're ungodly strong, you've only got four limbs!"* Minato thought as Matador's blade was about to connect with Shin's legs.

The blade passed through nothing but air as Shin vanished

from his sight and reappeared behind Minato. Hell Biker's upper half appeared from Minato's back and tried to punch Shin, but was destroyed by a quick punch that went straight through his body and got Minato square in the back. Minato flew forwards, knowing full well that his upper back and some of his ribs had just been shattered. He skid on the floor, coughing up blood, and staggered to his feet. "Tarukaja, Sukunda." Minato said as he summoned Jack and David behind him. He felt the surge of strength from Jack, and heard David begin to play before hearing his skull shatter. Minato turned to see Shin wipe David out of existence with a swift chop. "Danse Macabre!" Minato yelled, focusing as much of his power as he could on regeneration. Jack turned and went straight for Shin, only for Shin to leap right at Jack and rush clean through his body with an elbow, erasing him as well.

"Red Capote." Minato said, summoning Matador. He received his boon and narrowly avoided a punch to the gut from Shin by just backing out of his striking range. "Andalucia!" he called as he skid backwards.

"I have long waited for this moment! No bull escapes –" Matador began as he charged forwards, but was silenced when Shin's body went dark and he fired another beam from his mouth through Matador, causing him to explode.

"... *the Matador's blade.*" Matador finished in Minato's head. Shin returned to normal once more and jumped a slide kick from Minato. Minato pushed off the floor to quickly get back to his feet after his attack, and immediately summoned Shiisaa to pounce at Shin. He turned to see Shin catch Shiisaa by its

mouth and rip it in two. He took the opportunity to rush in, summoning Take-Mikazuchi's arms, one with a sword and one without, along with Mithra's. He struck at six different places simultaneously. Shin shattered Take-Mikazuchi's sword with a punch too fast to be seen, broke Mithra's staffs with a swift chop, and caught Minato's fists. Take-Mikazuchi's free hand got a punch in on his face, but it simply stopped against his cheek, as if it had hit a brick wall.

"*Ah, shit.*" Minato thought. His fists were crushed, and his summons disappeared. He let out a cry of pain as Shin wedged his foot into his stomach before he could react, and another once his arms had been ripped off. His pain didn't stop there, as Shin pulled the bones in his arm out and swiftly drove them through his legs, downing him. He crumpled, unable to do anything other than face death yet again. Shin drove his hand into his chest, and crushed his heart. Everything went black.

Minato woke up completely healed a matter of minutes later, and rose to his feet. Shin was as expressionless as ever. "... How much of your full strength was that?" Minato asked.

"Less than a quarter." Shin said. Minato cringed.

"... Are you serious?" he asked.

"Yes... but for you to last that long against me, I must say, I'm truly impressed by your progress." Shin said.

"... Thanks." Minato said, scratching his head.

"I think that's enough training for today... I need to think of a suitable challenge for you to pass next time we meet." Shin said.

"Well, I've got a question for you, actually." Minato said.

"Ask." Shin said.

"... Why hasn't Hazama heard about someone as powerful as you before? Surely your very presence would cause quite a commotion." Minato said. "I mean, I know you can mask your powers, but... you couldn't have gotten that strong by just training alone. You've fought in countless battles, so why doesn't the JSDF know about you?"

Shin smirked. "Hazama has heard about me, but not the Hazama you know." Shin said. "He was a worthy opponent, but not even he could stop me in the end."

"... What?" Minato asked.

"Do you believe in parallel universes, Minato?" Shin asked.

"... You're saying you're from one?" Minato asked.

"Correct. The story I told you all happened in my universe." Shin said. "It's time ended in the year 2001."

"... You destroyed it?" Minato asked.

"No... I killed it. God and everyone else within." Shin said. "As I said... all bends to my will. With nothing left, I went with

Lucifer to this universe and did an assortment of tasks as time went by. Should this world end, I will move on to another."

"... So, you're saying as long as there is a battlefield, you'll be happy?" Minato asked.

"Isn't it the same with you?" Shin asked. "Your hands are bloody... be it women, children, your peers, adults, Shadows, demons, angels, gods... you will be happy as long as you can fight and kill, just as I am."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

Minato smiled. "It's pretty fitting that you're my sensei, you know that?" he asked. Shin smirked, and teleported next to him. The two returned to the secluded back alley, and Shin left with a smile on his face. Minato reverted to his normal state and returned to the dorm. Junpei, Akihiko and Shinjiro were lingering in the lounge.

"S'up, dude?" Junpei greeted. "They're getting Fuuka's room ready on the 3rd floor. But no guys allowed... It's cool, though. I'm just glad she's coming. She'll be here tomorrow... bet you're stoked, huh?"

"Heard about my little display this morning, huh?" Minato

asked.

"Everyone heard about Ekoda havin' ta beg ya this mornin'! Plus that Moriyama chick and Fuuka are apparently tight now, even after all that Dark Hour stuff." Junpei said.

"That memory loss must've been helpful... I bet she doesn't remember Fuuka strangling her." Shinjiro said.

"C'mon, Shinji... she looked like she seriously regretted what she did when she told us what she did. She's trying to atone for her past... the right way. You could learn something from her." Akihiko said.

"Tch... you'll take any damn excuse to bring that shit up." Shinjiro said. "I'm back here. Ain't that enough?"

"Yeah, relax, Akihiko-senpai. I don't know what yer always on his case about, but Shinji-senpai's been doing right by me." Junpei said.

"... That's true." Akihiko said. He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm just worrying too much, aren't I?"

"The futures you see are the ones you're most inclined to reach." Minato said as he walked into the kitchen. "I'd adjust that view of yours, Akihiko. Pessimism is only a step away from nihilism, and you don't seem like the type to desire ultimate destruction."

"... That was a very slippery slope." Akihiko said. Minato

chuckled.

"Aren't they all?" he asked. "Anyways, in lieu of your warning, Junpei, I'll go offer a hand to Mitsuru and Yukari. Later." He walked upstairs before anyone could answer him, and went to the third floor. As he expected, Mitsuru and Yukari were busy trying to clean out the room. They both had gloves and face masks on, looking over the inside of the room from the hallway. Yukari turned to him.

"Hey, we're cleaning here!" she said. Mitsuru turned to face him as well.

"Ah, Minato. I regret to inform you that we will not be going to Tartarus today." Mitsuru said. "Preparing for Yamagishi's arrival may take longer than I expected, so that's that. What are you here for?"

"I figured I could help you." Minato said.

"This is the girl's floor, ya know. Technically, you shouldn't even be up here." Yukari said.

"That's right, Minato. You aren't allowed to set foot in any of these rooms unless invited." Mitsuru said.

"Then I'll help without going inside." Minato said with a grin. He summoned his Fiends, all weaponless, and they strode right past the two girls into the room.

"Unbelievable! When's the last time somebody even set

foot in here?!" Hell Biker asked as he began sorting through the various items in the room.

"Yeesh, I've been to haunted mansions in better condition." Alice said.

"This is one of those spots a fresh coat of blood would do wonders for." Jack said, picking up a broom.

"Don't be ridiculous. Blood is only good for sport, not cleaning." Matador said, grabbing another broom.

"Use your head the right way once in a while, Jack." David said, moving to join Hell Biker.

"... What the heck is this?" Yukari asked, looking at the Fiends start cleaning.

"Macabre Mary Poppins." Minato said. "Leave this to them, and let's enjoy some relaxation time. I can make tea, and we can all get comfortable in this lounge. It's a much better idea than cleaning, isn't it?"

"... I don't see why not." Mitsuru said. "Allow me to clean up."

"Wait, are we really just going to drop this?" Yukari asked.

"If you feel like it could, you could help my Fiends out while Mitsuru and I enjoy some private time." Minato mused. Yukari twitched.

"Actually, you're right. Let's enjoy ourselves a bit, right, Minato?" she asked. She went after Mitsuru, who had left to tidy herself up. Minato chuckled and brought his kettle up, along with three cups. He already set tea to boil by the time the two girls re-emerged from their room.

"I hope you don't mind Tienchi Ginseng." Minato said as they sat down.

"C'est magnifique... a perfect selection." Mitsuru said.

"... Yeah, great choice." Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"This is commonly used to treat blood disorders, Yukari, but it also has a host of other beneficial effects." he said. "Also, it tastes very refreshing in my opinion. You might consider it a little bitter since you use so much sugar in your coffee, so watch out."

As the three began enjoying their tea and making small talk, Junpei began getting worried in the lounge. "... Hey, hasn't he been up there for a while?" he asked.

"He and Mitsuru are pretty tight. They're probably just talking in her room or something." Shinjiro said. Akihiko winced.

"N-no way... he was probably just nice enough to clean for them." Akihiko said.

"You don't sound too confident there, Aki." Shinjiro said. Junpei chuckled.

"Gettin' jealous, senpai?" he asked.

"Tch... like hell I am." Akihiko said.

"Then why don't we go check? I bet Minato's got Yuka-tan and Mitsuru-senpai modelin' in maid uniforms for him right now." Junpei said.

"Now you're just makin' shit up." Shinjiro said.

"What? Have you seen Minato at school, Shinji-senpai? If he wasn't known for beatin' the shit outta people, he'd be swarmed by even more girls than Akihiko-senpai!" Junpei said. He turned to Akihiko. "You know what I mean, right?"

"... So? He's got fan girls. I got those too, and they're annoying." Akihiko said.

"And he's a model on top of it, on TV for cryin' out loud. Just look." Junpei said. He turned on the TV and began flipping through the channels. Sure enough, a Be Blue V advertisement featuring Minato with more than enough questionable postures with Nemissa came on, most of which involved him coming out of a bathtub, glistening.

"... Didn't know about that." Shinjiro said. Akihiko frowned.

"... What's your point, Junpei?" he asked.

"I'm sayin', if you don't make a move on Mitsuru-senpai soon, he's gonna beat you to it!" Junpei said. Akihiko reddened, and Shinjiro let out a big sigh.

"You still hung up on that, Aki? Shit... I thought you got over that." Shinjiro said.

"Oh, what?! 'Got over'?! How long's this been goin' on?" Junpei asked, now excited.

"This idiot was into her pretty soon after we joined SEES." Shinjiro said. "I figured since it's been two years and nothin' changed, he dropped it, but —"

"That's enough, Shinji!" Akihiko yelled. He rose from his chair. "Fine then, Junpei. We'll bet on it. If Minato's apparently got them modeling for him, I'll... do your laundry for the next month! But if he's not, I'm putting you on a training regime from hell!"

"... Heh, fine by me." Junpei said, getting up.

"... You know that's a ridiculous gamble, right?" Shinjiro said.

"I know... but even if I lose, it's not like it's anything too bad." Junpei said.

"I don't think you understand what I mean, Junpei." Akihiko said. "It'll break you."

"Well, we gotta see what's gonna happen, right? Shinji-senpai, you wanna come for the show?" Junpei asked.

"Both of you are dumbasses." Shinjiro said, getting up. "But fine... I'll bear witness."

"Then it's settled... let's go." Akihiko said. The trio began their walk up the stairs, each with a different expression. Akihiko looked extremely determined, Junpei had a happy smile, and Shinjiro looked annoyed as usual. They made their way up the stairs, and all three of their jaws dropped once they reached the top floor.

Mitsuru was in a full-on maid outfit, adjusting a set of elbow length black gloves, with Minato standing behind her, apparently adjusting her blouse. Yukari sat to the side of them, pulling on knee-high boots to finalize her own maid outfit. "... No freakin' way." Shinjiro said, attracting the attention of everyone on the floor.

"Hmm? Oh, you three... what brings you up here?" Mitsuru asked, calmly finishing her gloves. She adjusted her hair as Minato finished tightening her blouse.

"Wha-?! A-aren't you... uncomfortable with that?!" Akihiko asked. Mitsuru looked at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

"... Uncomfortable? Does this appear tight?" Mitsuru asked, looking down at her outfit.

"He's talking about Minato." Shinjiro said.

"Pardon? Why would I be uncomfortable with him? Minato has already done this twice in the past." Mitsuru said. Junpei tipped his cap to him, and Minato put his head next to Mitsuru's.

"I've also done it the other way around as well." he added, looking right at Akihiko. His smile conveyed such a monumental amount of condescension that Akihiko couldn't help but feel utterly defeated. His gaze dropped to the floor.

"O-of course... how could I forget?" he said.

"But hey... why are you guys getting into maid outfits?" Junpei asked, still with a happy expression on his face.

"They didn't feel right about just letting my Fiends do all the cleaning, so I suggested we do something that would at least make them feel like they cleaned. I was surprised to hear that Yukari had maid outfits, however." Minato said. He lowered his gaze to Mitsuru's back. "Oh, but your ribbon isn't even. Let me fix that."

"Is it? You have my thanks." Mitsuru said, adjusting her headpiece. "However, you've yet to answer my original question... why have you come?"

"We were jus' checkin' on you guys." Junpei said. "Hey, Yuka-tan, you need any help there?"

"I know how to put these things on... I used to work at a maid café, you know." she said. Junpei snickered.

"Yuka-tan in a maid café, huh? Maybe you should call me 'master' when we hang out." Junpei mused. Yukari scowled.

"In your dreams, Stupei." Yukari said, rising from her seat.

"But it's been a while since I wore this... it's comfier than I remember."

"Really? Then you should wear it more often." Minato said, finishing Mitsuru's ribbon.

"... Are you asking me to execute you, Minato?" Mitsuru asked. He chuckled.

"I'll do whatever you want." he whispered into her ear. She reddened. Shinjiro facepalmed.

"Who in their right mind says shit like that?" he muttered to himself. Junpei nudged Akihiko's shoulder.

"Hey, hey... you said a month, right?" he asked.

"... I did." Akihiko said, still staring at the floor.

"Aren't you two a little close?" Yukari asked Minato and Mitsuru.

"I like this distance." Minato said, putting a hand on Mitsuru's waist. "It gives us a nice level of intimacy, don't you think?"

Mitsuru hurriedly moved away and cleared her throat. "W-we'll have nothing of that sort in public!" she said.

"Hey, since you girls are all dressed up like this, how about a show?" Junpei suggested.

"The hell are you saying, dumbass?!" Shinjiro asked.

"... Technically, they aren't doing what you said, Junpei, so I win!" Akihiko said, turning on him.

"... Doing what he said? ...Win?" Yukari asked. She gasped. "Don't tell me you guys wanted to see something!"

"A show?... I see." Mitsuru said. "Minato, your Evoker, if you would."

"Wait, what?!" Junpei asked.

"It's obvious that your true intentions were entirely perverse in nature... but to think you'd come here directly. I expected better from you all." Mitsuru said as Minato handed her his Evoker with a grin.

"Hey, don't get the wrong idea! These two idiots were making a bet on what Minato was doing up here!" Shinjiro said.

"A likely story." Mitsuru said. She put the Evoker to her head.

"Mitsuru, we're serious! You have to believe us!" Akihiko said.

"C'mon, help me out here, bro!" Junpei yelled. Minato laughed.

"You brought this upon yourselves. Not even I can save a person from their own fatal mistakes." Minato said.

"PENTHESILEA!" Mitsuru said as she fired. Her Persona, a woman clad in a bright blue helmet and regal attire with twin swords appeared behind her, and did a twist with its swords before aiming them at the trio. They were encased in ice

before they could move, and each of them began to change into different positions for different punishments. The last thing they all saw was Minato's devilish smile behind an angry Mitsuru and disgusted Yukari.

The ice finished forming, and Mitsuru handed Minato his Evoker once more. "Unbelievable... to think they would come up here with those intentions..." she said.

"And they say I'm on my worst behavior." Minato said, storing his Evoker again. "Still, we should leave them be... My Fiends will long be finished before they thaw."

"You have a point... let's reconvene in the lounge." Mitsuru said. They left the frozen boys alone, and ate dinner with Minato before returning a few hours later, right before the Dark Hour, to release them. The boys said nothing, all shivering, and simply staggered back to their rooms.

Minato had recently retired to his room, his Fiends long since returned. He was preparing for his Dark Hour moon gazing, having washed his cups and set his tea once more. The world flashed to its sickly green, and he took his seat next to the window. In a matter of minutes, he felt a familiar presence appear near him. "I was beginning to wonder if you were lying about coming to visit me again." Minato said without looking. The boy in the prisoner's outfit laughed.

"I didn't mean to keep you waiting. Sorry about that." he said. "... Well, you've prevailed yet again. But... it's funny. A lot of things seem really uncertain now. Your already vast potential

is constantly changing."

"I am, if anything, full of surprises." Minato mused. He turned to the boy. "Speaking of surprises, the last one in here never let you finish your tea. Care to try again?"

"You really are set on me drinking this tea, aren't you?" the boy asked.

"But of course! The best way to prove that we're friends is to share a drink or a meal, but I get the feeling you don't eat much." Minato said.

"Friends, huh?... Can I be your friend? I'm very curious about you... is that okay?" the boy asked.

"Why is that a question? We've always been friends, haven't we?" Minato asked. "Though you've yet to give me your name." The boy laughed.

"I'm glad you see it that way, too. As for the other thing... my name is... Pharos." the boy said. "You may call me that if you wish."

"Heh... you already know this from the contract, but my name is Minato." Minato said. He extended his hand. "It's good to finally have a proper introduction."

Pharos smiled. "It is nice, isn't it?" he asked. He took Minato's hand, and the two shook hands.

The world stopped. Minato didn't see Pharos after the two

shook hands, but a gigantic mass of darkness that took the shape of a ram's skull. Similarly, Pharos didn't see Minato, but a formless black substance that seethed like a gas, just barely making out the shape of a human skull. The two froze for a moment, until their vision returned to normal. They both looked at their hands, then at each other.

"... Looks like you are my ghostly little brother after all." Minato said with a grin.

"That was unexpected..." Pharos said. He smiled. "But I guess we're even more similar than I thought."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Death Arcana...

Minato laughed. "Why don't you stay a while? The water will boil soon, and I've got someone I think you'd like to meet." he said.

"... I guess I could stay for a bit." Pharos said. "But, who did you want me to meet?"

"Alice." Minato said. She materialized next to the table and smiled at Pharos.

"You're a lot like mister, Pharos. Are you just as fun as he

is?" Alice asked. Pharos laughed.

"I hope so." he said.

"Ok!... Do you like dolls?" she asked.

"Dolls? Hmm... it depends on the doll." Pharos said. Minato smirked.

"I think you'll like these." he said. He summoned the rest of his Fiends as figurines, and the Victorian doll house formed around them. Pharos couldn't help but smile.

"... I like these already." he said.

Minato spent the rest of the Dark Hour enjoying tea and watching Pharos and Alice play cruel and unusual games with the rest of his Fiend figurines. After a while, he joined in on the fun himself. The Dark Hour flew by, and Pharos suddenly disappeared as it ended. **"Aww, where'd he go?"** Alice asked. Minato sighed.

"Unfortunately, I don't think he can exist outside of the Dark Hour." Minato said with a sigh. "Still... it was fun while it lasted, right?" Alice nodded, and all of his Fiends and the doll house vanished. *"... It's sad that it only lasts an hour. Everything's better in that time."*

59. Chapter 59

Chapter 59: Fuuka's First Day in SEES

Really Random Author Note: I don't know why, but I think Minato's battle music is Unavoidable Battle Reincarnation Mix, his work music is Coming Undone by Korn, and his relaxation music is Vanilla by Gackt... Completely random thoughts. Back to the story.

Minato had spent the majority of the early hours plowing through a book he had long considered reading, *Audition*, by Ryu Murakumi. "... *She should have won. That ending was way too convenient. She didn't slip up at all, yet she still lost.*" Minato thought as he made breakfast. "*Still, that was a decent story... a rather good portrayal of people seeing only the vision of the person they want to see. I didn't think writers were capable of showing that... Murakumi's done well.*"

His train of thought was interrupted by Mitsuru entering the lounge as he was finishing up his task. "Good morning, Minato." she greeted. "Thank you again for your help last night."

"It was my pleasure. We enjoyed ourselves quite a bit, didn't we?" Minato replied. Mitsuru chuckled.

"Indeed... it was quite enjoyable." she said. "By the way... Yamagishi will be living in the dorm with us as of tonight. We confirmed her Persona's support abilities, and, as we expected, they far surpass my own. As such, she'll replace me as support and I'll join the front lines as we predicted."

"C'est magnifique, indeed." Minato mused. "I'll be counting on you."

"Hah... don't worry. I have no intention of failing to meet your expectations." Mitsuru said. "I may be a bit out of practice, but I'll soon return to my prior form."

SEES' breakfast was oddly quiet, with Junpei, Akihiko, and Shinjiro remaining dead silent, each avoiding eye contact with Mitsuru. On the train ride, Minato opted to go have a little chat with Junpei. "Hey, Junpei. I've noticed you've been busy with Kenji a lot. Is he alright?" Minato asked.

"Actually, everything's just goin' his way, apparently." Junpei said. "He's draggin' me around to a buncha celebratory meals for his relationship with Ms. K, bro. I don't know where he gets his cash from, but it doesn't run out."

"I could help you out with that." Minato said. Junpei chuckled.

"I know you could, but I mean, it'd be kinda weird to just be like 'hey, bro, Minato wants to tag along', ya know?" Junpei said.

"I suppose you're right. But hey, don't be afraid to tell me if

anything pops up. I'm available if you ever need me." Minato said.

"Huh... thanks, bro. I'll tell ya if anything pops up." Junpei said with a tip of his cap. They made small talk as they headed to class, and the day began. At lunch, Minato decided he'd go check on Fuuka. He made his way out of the classroom and grinned when he saw Fuuka heading towards his class.

"Hey there." Minato said with a little wave to Fuuka. She walked over with a grin. "I see you're in a good mood, but I bet I can put you in an even better one." Fuuka giggled.

"I think we have the same idea in mind." Fuuka said. "To the roof?"

"Why, I couldn't have suggested a better place myself." Minato said. He extended his arm. "Like old times?" Fuuka took his arm.

"I'd like that." she said. As the two walked away with smiles on their faces, Yukari peered out of the classroom.

"... It's only been a few days, and it begins again." Yukari said.

"Woah, Yuka-tan, you sound pretty cryptic there. You okay?" Junpei asked. Yukari turned around quickly, a deathly serious expression on her face.

"We need to make sure Minato doesn't try to influence Fuuka

in the wrong way... you're coming with me." Yukari said, quickly leaving the classroom to follow them.

"What? Hey, wait up!" Junpei called, chasing after her. He found Yukari once again observing the two through the window next to the roof door. "Ya know, I'm startin' ta think the only girl Minato's gotta be afraid of is you... you're like a friggin' hawk or somethin'." he said.

"Quiet!" Yukari whispered. She turned her attention back to the Minato and Fuuka. Minato was being fed some of Fuuka's food. From what Yukari could tell, Fuuka seemed more nervous than usual. "Hah... she's not confident in her cooking. I bet Minato will hate it!" she said.

"... Damn. Now I'm really conflicted... as your friend here, I can't tell Minato, but as his bro... I feel like I gotta tell him about this." Junpei said, scratching the back of his head. "Shit, which side to help?... Gotta consider all the outcomes."

On the roof, Minato gulped down Fuuka's attempt at Yakisoba. *"This isn't horrible... but what the hell is that flavor at the end? It'd cut your tongue clean in two if it were a blade."* he thought. He turned to Fuuka.

"Well? I've been out of practice, but I tried going with something easy..." Fuuka said.

"It's a little bland and overall not that bad, but you've got something really overpowering in there that comes out at the end." Minato said. "Here, lemme show you." Fuuka handed

him her chopsticks and he fed her a portion. She chewed slowly, savoring the flavor. She cringed as she swallowed, the odd flavor hitting her. Her eyes flashed yellow.

"Augh, what was that?!" she yelled, shivering. She shook her head, and put a hand over her mouth as her eyes returned to normal. "O-oh, sorry about that..." she said. Minato chuckled.

"You didn't try adding anything too fancy in the recipe, did you?" he asked. She rested her hand and thought for a bit before sighing.

"... I did." Fuuka said. She smirked. "Well, at least I know not to use that again, right?"

"That's a good way to look at it." Minato said, messing with her hair. "But hey, guess who made extra lunch?"

"Again?" Fuuka asked. "... Sometimes, I think you just expect people to do what you want."

"They generally seem to, so I don't think that's a bad thing." Minato said. *"Especially considering I've already strung up most of my cast. All I've got to do is choose who dances for me, when and where."* He rested his head on Fuuka's and nuzzled against it. "And besides, I've been waiting for a chance to do this with you again."

"H-hey, don't just do that!" Fuuka said. Minato laughed.

"But it's so comfortable." he said.

Yukari glared at the two of them through the glass, eyes unwavering. "... Damn, you really look scary like that, Yukatan." Junpei said. "Seriously... you'd give a kid nightmares."

"I would not. I have a face that kids love." Yukari said, still staring. "... And those two are getting way too cozy."

"And you're getting way too creepy. I'm out." Junpei said, leaving Yukari to watch the two of them. He quickly returned. "Never mind, I gotta make sure you don't whip out a knife and stab them or anything."

"Don't be ridiculous, Stupei! I'm not that crazy!" Yukari said.

"Coulda fooled me." Junpei said. He turned his attention back to what was happening outside. Minato had an arm around Fuuka, and the two had gotten right back to feeding each other.

"Hmm... this is rather enjoyable." Minato thought. "It's kind of funny that I went with udon today, huh? It's a nice mixture of flavors now that we've combined them."

"That's true... I don't know what you put in here, but it counters that extra thing perfectly!" Fuuka said.

"Maybe we should do a combination some time. I could personally teach you as well." Minato said.

"Oh! One of the culture clubs that opens is the cooking club! We could both join... but, I'm the only member right now."

Fuuka said.

"Isn't that even better?" Minato whispered. Fuuka quickly looked away.

"B-but we need more members o-or else we might close!" she said.

"Only on paper, right? It doesn't really matter if they attend, does it?" Minato asked. "I can get more than enough numbers to say they're with us."

"T-that's... wrong. You shouldn't do that." Fuuka said. "It's not fair to the other clubs that really want people." Minato chuckled.

"Surely you know I'm anything but fair." he said. "C'mon... surely you really want to take the upper hand and laugh at them." Fuuka's eyes flickered, but didn't change.

"... Still. Those people... they have lives too." Fuuka said. She turned to Minato, a serious expression on her face. "You can't just make light of them." Minato looked her over for a bit. Smirked slowly. And then laughed like a madman. Fuuka stared right at him the whole time, and he slowly calmed down, catching his breath.

"That's too good." he said, regaining his composure.

"Idealistic much?"

"Maybe I am... but your view of reality isn't reality, Minato."

she said. "I... I learned a lot. From Natsuki, from you... and even from my other self. You're just like her, thinking everyone else is just there for you to play with if you get bored... but that's not true."

"You're right. People aren't meant to be played with until they've been turned into dolls." Minato said, flashing a creepy smile.

"No! That's even worse!" Fuuka said. "I know you aren't that kind of person... so why do you act like it?"

Minato chuckled. "You 'know', huh? Let me show you something you don't know." he said. He focused, and tried to materialize as many of his Social Link Tarot Cards as he could around him. He managed to create them all, but they merely floated in front of him, incapable of doing much else. He tried to move, but realized that he was using too much energy already. *"Damn... this is more difficult than I thought."*

"... What are those?" Fuuka asked. Minato chuckled.

"Cards that represent my connection to others... notice how some are much more tangible than others. That means I've got a deeper bond with that person than others." Minato said. He dispelled the others, and grabbed the Priestess Card. He held it in front of Fuuka. "And here's ours... right in the middle of tangibility and intangibility. What do you think that means?"

"... I don't know." Fuuka said.

"It means I'm halfway on my way to establishing a bond that can't be broken with you." Minato said. "Who knows what it could be... is it marriage? A lover's affair? Do we become best friends? All I know is that once we reach that level, I might as well never go out of my way to spend time with you again."

"What?... That's... cold." Fuuka said.

"Cold and shallow, the true nature of 'bonds'." Minato said, dispelling the card. "When I look at others, I see first and foremost cards to forge, followed by toys to amuse myself with. There are very few people I truly feel anything in this world for, and aside from them, and even less of them that I'd go out of my way to help." He turned to Fuuka and dropped his smile, returning to his unreadable emotionless stare. "The only person whose happiness matters is mine."

"... You're lying" Fuuka said. "You just want to sound like a monster."

Minato chuckled. "People always see the version of others that they want to see. But I'll shatter your temple of ignorance right now." he said. "Shake my hand." He extended his arm, and Fuuka reluctantly took it. Minato mimicked the even that happened with Pharos last night, and Fuuka gasped when she saw him as the strange mass of darkness in the shape of a skull. Her third eye opened instinctively, but disappeared again when the vision disappeared. "That's what I am." he said with a grin. Before Fuuka could react, he leaned in and kissed where her third eye had appeared. "And I like what you've

become."

Fuuka shoved him away, and he laughed. She stared at him, an angry expression on her face. "... So everything you said that night... that wasn't just trying to intimidate the other me?" she asked.

"Congrats, you finally used some common sense!" Minato said. He was about to continue until Yukari and Junpei burst onto the roof.

"Hey, what did you do to her just now?!" Yukari asked.

"Yuka-tan, what the heck are you doing?!" Junpei asked, trying to stop her. She barged past him and went right up to Minato, who chuckled.

"Still stalking me, eh? Maybe you want to be in her place instead?" he asked.

"Don't try and dodge the question!" Yukari said.

"Jeez, c'mon, this ain't cool Yuka-tan!" Junpei said.

"I think you know exactly what I was doing." Minato said.

"W-why are you two here?" Fuuka asked.

"Oh, sorry, Fuuka! Look, I was trying ta stop Yukari from creepin' on you guys, but –" Junpei began.

"You did something to her just now! I saw it!" Yukari

interrupted. "Don't act dumb! You've scared her!"

"Oh no! Does that mean you you'll be her hero?" Minato taunted.

"... What's that supposed to mean?" Fuuka asked. She turned on Yukari, and her eyes changed to yellow. "Scared me, huh? What am I, a caged animal?!"

"Hey, I'm trying to help you here!" Yukari said.

"I don't recall her asking for your help." Minato said.

"That's right! I never –" Fuuka began until she covered her mouth. She shut her eyes tight. "No, this isn't the time for this!"

"Hey, are you okay?" Junpei asked, suddenly concerned after her little outburst.

"You're aggravating her... her Shadow is going to start messing with her mind even more now." Minato said. "Great help there."

"Are you seriously pinning this on us?!" Yukari asked.

"This wasn't happening before you arrived." Minato said.

"... He's kinda got a point there, Yuka-tan." Junpei said. "Don't hate me for this, but we better go." He grabbed Yukari by her elbow and began dragging her back to the door.

"Hey, wait! What the heck do you think you're doing, Stupei?!" she yelled as she was pulled away. Fuuka recovered from her little mental slip as they disappeared, and sat back up.

"... You're a huge liar, Minato." she said. "You call people useless except as toys... but Junpei went out of his way to help you. Do you consider him a person that could only entertain you?"

"Ah, you've got me there." Minato said. "Junpei is a special case. He's one of the few people I would go out of my way to help."

"... And what does his card look like?" Fuuka asked. Minato held out his hand and created the Magician Tarot Card. She quickly reached out and, to Minato's surprise, grabbed it. "It's solid." she said.

"We're best friends, you know." Minato said. Fuuka stared at the card for a bit, and then smiled.

"... I get it now." Fuuka said. She let go of the card, and it disappeared. "That connection the cards represent... when you first met Junpei, did you care about him as much as you did now?"

"Of course not." Minato said. "How could I care about someone I just met that much?" Fuuka turned and gave him a full body hug, much to his surprise.

"You really are a teddie bear, aren't you?" she asked.

"... Explain." Minato said.

"The cards you're making... if you keep making them, you'll begin to care for the people they represent... the fact that you have so much just means you have a really big heart." Fuuka said. Minato cringed.

"Ugh, what the hell?!" he exclaimed. "I've nothing of the sort! I'm an empty vessel in search of pleasure!"

"Being empty just means you have more room for everyone else." Fuuka said. Minato scowled.

"You're really stretching that logic." he said. He shook his head. "Even after you saw what I was, you still cling to some ridiculous hope that I'm a good person."

"It's not a hope anymore." Fuuka said. "Besides... I'm a good person, and look at what I am." Her third eye opened, and Minato sighed.

"... Great. Now the princess is trying to reform me." Minato said. Fuuka laughed.

"It's my turn to tease you." Fuuka said. "... Though, you make a good hug pillow." Minato smirked, and hugged her back.

"You want to know something I'd be even better as?" he asked. Fuuka reddened and immediately hid her face. Minato chuckled. "You're a long ways off from 'teasing' me."

"M-maybe that was wishful thinking." Fuuka said. The two

parted, and smiled at each other. "Still... I'm not believing what you said."

"So you elect to live in blissful ignorance?" Minato asked.

"I could say the same to you." Fuuka said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

"... We'll see who's right eventually." Minato said. "Though, lunch will end soon. We need to finish eating."

"Oh! Quick, open wide!" she said. The two ate in a markedly more chaotic manner than usual, and managed to return to class in generally happy moods. Minato noted Yukari's odd looks, but ignored them. He took his seat next to Junpei and just gave him a little thumbs-up, to which Junpei replied with a nod.

The rest of the day passed by uneventfully, and Minato made his way to Council as soon as the day ended. He entered, smacked on his armband, and watched the other members fall into take their place like little dominoes. Mitsuru and Shinjiro took their seats next to him, and the general meeting flew by. "... Now that we've finished that order of business, there's not much more for you two to do." Mitsuru said to

them. "Although, I'd like to inform you that Mr. Toudou said he'll visit the dorm tonight, so I wish to finish up quickly."

"Let's get to work." Minato said. Shinjiro sighed.

"More papers, huh? Tch... Let's get this over with." he said. They quickly moved to the backroom and tackled the stack of papers just as they did yesterday, and finished rather quickly this time around. At that, they left with Mitsuru and got on the train back to the dorm. As it began to move, Shinjiro once again brought up the conversation. "So, what's Mr. Toudou visiting for? I thought he was only supposed to deal with us if we screwed up."

"He evaded my inquiries, though I'm certain his visit has to do with Yamagishi joining SEES." Mitsuru said.

"A visit for Fuuka, hmm? This is more than likely to educate her about dealing with her Shadow, then... though from what we talked about at lunch, she seems to get along with it pretty well, aside from a few random outbursts when pressured." Minato said.

"Outbursts?" Mitsuru asked.

"Nothing too major... occasionally, her Shadow's personality takes control of her body, but it doesn't make her attack people or anything like that." Minato said. "It does insult them remorselessly, however."

"So she's got an anger switch? That ain't too bad." Shinjiro

said. "As long as it's just shit talk, she should be fine."

"Another short temper... well, she should be fine as long as she doesn't turn on me." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled.

"I don't know. She might be the one member to fight you if you try to execute her." he mused.

"Hmph... she'll learn, the easy way or the hard way." Mitsuru said. They made it back to the dorm, and saw that Fuuka was already seated in the dorm lounge with Yukari and Junpei. Fuuka was the first to greet them as they entered.

"Hi, how was your day?" she greeted.

"Ah, Yamagishi. You look comfortable already." Mitsuru said. Minato's phone rang, and he checked who it was. Without an ID or a number, he had a good idea of who it was.

"Been a while, beautiful." he answered, once again attracting the attention of everyone else. "What's the occasion?"

"I'm calling to inform you of a change in Tartarus." Elizabeth said. "I believe a path that was once blocked is now open."

"Really? That's good to hear." Minato said.

"Indeed. You seem to have grown bored with the tower as of recent. I believe a change of both pace and enemy type should invigorate you." Elizabeth said. Minato chuckled.

"Is that supposed to be a prescription?" he asked.

"A prescription?... Ah, you must be referring to me as a nurse of some sorts. Well then... er-herm. You sound rather sick... would you like medicine, a shot, or perhaps...?" Elizabeth asked.

"Ooh, where'd you learn to talk like that?" Minato asked.

"I read it in one of the books my foolish younger brother keeps." Elizabeth said.

"Sister!" Minato heard a squeamish male voice yell call out.

"Not now, Theodore. As you can see, I'm busy." Elizabeth said. "... Forgive that intrusion. I believe my brother is entering the rebellious phase." Minato laughed.

"I'm sure it's nothing you can't handle." he said. "Still, have you thought about that request yet?"

"Unfortunately, not yet." Elizabeth said. "Regardless, do look forwards to a visit in the near future."

"Will we pick up that train of thought from before that little interruption?"

"Perhaps... if you're a good boy."

"You're a tease."

"Am I? I've learned quite a bit from my brother's books."

"Sister, please!" the squeamish male voice called out again.

Minato laughed.

"Theo, I believe I told you I was busy. This is official business." Elizabeth said.

"I'll probably just get you into more trouble if we keep this up." Minato said. He turned to survey the still staring members of SEES. "I'm not exactly in private either."

"A wise decision. We'll speak again... until then, I wish you a safe journey." Elizabeth said. Minato responded by making kissing noises into the phone, and Elizabeth giggled. He hung up, and turned to sign-in as if nothing had happened.

"So, when is Mr. Toudou visiting?" he asked, snapping everyone else back to normal.

"Right... he said he'd visit around six. He should be arriving very shortly." Mitsuru said.

"Good. Fuuka, how's the move?" Minato said, finishing his signature.

"Huh? Oh, it's been great. The room's spotless and everyone's been so helpful... umm, you probably know that I'm substituting for Mitsuru-senpai from now on, so just tell me if you want to go to Tartarus." Fuuka said.

"Are you up for it tonight?" Minato asked.

"Ain't that a bit sudden?" Shinjiro asked.

"She can't get much experience if we don't go, can she?"
Minato retorted.

"It's fine... I was actually hoping to see what I could do, actually." Fuuka said.

"Still, the distance is rather far... I was having difficulty reaching that high, so perhaps we should start by training on the lower floors." Mitsuru said.

"No need. The path up is open, so we should see what's up there." Minato said. Everyone once again turned on him.

"... Ya know, I've been meaning to ask... how do you just know that?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled and took a seat on the open single chair. He made the same kissing noises that he made to Elizabeth on the phone and grinned. "... Wait a minute... you're saying that person you were talking to tells you?!"

"Correct." Minato said.

"... Then who were you talking to, Minato?" Akihiko asked.

"You've all seen them before. But I'll leave it at that." Minato said. "As a Shirogane, I need to protect my informant's privacy. It's standard detective policy."

"Who the hell would have that kind of information?" Shinjiro asked.

"... You're saying all of us has seen this person before?"

Mitsuru asked.

"... Well, I don't think Fuuka might have seen them." Minato said. "But, that's the only hint I'm giving." He chuckled as the other members all apparently racked their brains. "Also, I hope you're ready to push your limits, Fuuka. We're decently up there, and Mitsuru was having trouble staying in contact with the group."

"I think I'll be fine." Fuuka said.

"Good. Confidence this early is a good sign." Minato said. He checked his watch. "Well, we've got five half an hour until Mr. Toudou arrives."

"I lied." Mr. Toudou's voice said. There was a bright flash of light, and he appeared, already seated on the other empty single chair with a briefcase next to him. "Good afternoon, everyone."

"Hey, what the heck?" Junpei asked.

"Forgive my intrusion, but I'd rather make this short. First and foremost, Fuuka Yamagishi." he said.

"Y-yes?" Fuuka answered.

"Has your other self been obedient?" he asked.

"... She acts up every now and then, but she's been very helpful, too." Fuuka said.

"Good. You're fine." Mr. Toudou said.

"The hell? That's it?" Shinjiro asked.

"I can't mediate between a person and their own subconscious... well, I technically could, but I'd kill them in the process." Mr. Toudou said. "Regardless, Fuuka, you can summon your Persona without the use of these Evokers, correct?"

"That's right." Fuuka said.

"Good. Then I've got a quick gift for you." he said. He picked up the briefcase next to him and set it on the table.

"... A special weapon?" Mitsuru asked.

"Yes." Mr. Toudou said. He opened the case, and revealed none other than an SMG.

"A Streyr." Fuuka said, her eyes widening as she saw the weapon. Mr. Toudou smirked.

"Excited?" he asked. Fuuka couldn't suppress a little smirk. "I thought as much... you know a bit about firearms as well as electronics, don't you?"

"... Maybe." Fuuka answered, noticing the strange looks most of the other members of SEES were giving her. Minato was smiling widely.

"... As amazing as that is, there is little chance that Yamagishi

will have to enter combat directly." Mitsuru said. "She is serving as our tactical support."

"Tactical support should possess at least some combat experience... after all, from what I heard about your last battle, it's a good thing you could hold out until the other survived. If you were defenseless... well, I don't need to finish that train of thought, do I?" Mr. Toudou retorted. Mitsuru grimaced. She had no response to that. "Regardless, that gun isn't properly set up. Care to finish?"

Fuuka picked up the gun, along with a few small metal parts, and hurriedly put the gun together. By the time she finished, it even had a sideways handle for extra grip when firing. "Done." Fuuka said, officially smiling. "... Can I test it out?"

"... While I appreciate your... enthusiasm, we can't allow a gun to go off inside of the dorm." Mitsuru said. She looked at Fuuka and got the feeling Minato may have been right about not being able to execute her.

"Well, well... looks like we'll have moving tactical support." Minato said.

"There's no need... I think I'll be able to use this without leaving the lobby." Fuuka said.

"Really? In that case, you should keep heavier weaponry." Minato said. Fuuka turned eagerly to Mr. Toudou.

"Can I?" she asked with a smile as psychotic as Minato's.

Everyone else flinched.

"Hmm... I'll prepare an arsenal, then." Mr. Toudou said. "But it will cost you."

"Leave that to me." Minato said. He materialized 100,000 yen from the Dimensional Compactor, all bound by a large band, and threw it at Mr. Toudou. "What's that good for?"

"... Two. I can get you a high-powered rifle, a rocket launcher, or a full-on machine gun of varying quality." Mr. Toudou said. "I believe you'll leave the specifications up to Fuuka?"

"Of course." Minato said. Fuuka chuckled in a much more sinister tone than the other members of SEES thought possible.

"Let's have a talk." Fuuka said, still carrying the SMG. Mr. Toudou nodded, and they went out the back door.

"Well isn't that nice?" Minato said.

"... Dude, that's freaky as shit." Junpei said.

"... Did you do a background check on her, Mitsuru?" Akihiko asked.

"I did... but there were no telltale signs of this." Mitsuru said. "Though, her record seemed too clean... I suppose this explains it."

"Yikes..." Yukari said.

"Tch... SEES is really turning into a friggin' madhouse." Shinjiro said. "We'll all be insane by the time we reach the top of that tower."

"You might just be right, Shinji..." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled.

"No, no, no... it's the other way around." he said. Everyone couldn't help but wince at that comment. *"But still... this is quite the interesting development."*

"If her Shadow was any guess, she's gonna be more along the lines of 'I'll just hit every possible spot so there's no way they can dodge'." David said.

"Definitely the spray and pray type." Jack said.

"More like spray and laugh my ass off as everything falls in a storm of lead." Hell Biker said.

"My type of girl!" Alice added.

"... Let's just hope she knows which bull to fire at once she starts." Matador said.

The lounge was eerily silent for a few minutes as everyone tried to take in what just happened. "So, everyone, let's prepare for Tartarus." Minato said, getting up from his chair. "I hope you're ready for a fun day."

The back door opened quickly, and once again, everyone turned to see what Fuuka would carry back inside. Their jaws all dropped. Fuuka held an Uzi in her left hand, her Streyr in her right hand, and wore a bazooka almost the size of her body on her back. Mr. Toudou held a few briefcases with him as he walked in. "Well, since you're such a good sport, I'll give you a discount on ammunition. My treat." Mr. Toudou said.

"Excellent." Fuuka said. They went upstairs, and everyone save Minato froze to process what they just saw.

"... I'll need to arrange a transport for Yamagishi's weaponry, won't I?" Mitsuru asked after a while. She had a dazed look on her face.

"No need. If she keeps them in cases, I can store as many of them as I need in here." Minato said, pointing to the Dimensional Compactor.

"... Yes, of course... what was I thinking?" Mitsuru said. SEES dispersed wordlessly, everyone else still processing what they just saw, and prepared for an expedition to Tartarus.

SEES arrived at Tartarus shortly before the Dark Hour, and Minato waited in anticipation. As it approached midnight, he began walking towards the school. "Hey, what are you doing?!" Akihiko asked once he noticed him approaching. Minato passed through the school gate and kept walking.

"Minato!" Mitsuru yelled. He stopped walking at the steps as

the Dark Hour began. The ground quaked, and Tartarus erupted from the ground, replacing the school. Minato spread his arms wide and pulled in as much air as he could in a single breath, the architecture of the tower just avoiding him.

"This... is perfection." Minato said, staring as Tartarus slowed its rise. His face twisted into a manic smile. "What new excitement awaits us above? I can hardly wait." he said as he heard the rest of SEES hurriedly approach him.

"Dude... I get that you're excited to go, but damn. You scared the shit out of us." Junpei said.

"... That was really uncalled for." Yukari said.

"What were you thinking, doing something so reckless?!" Mitsuru asked.

"I want to take in this tower's conception in its entirety with all of my senses. I want to hear, feel, taste, and smell the emergence of my playground." Minato said. He tilted his head to look back at Mitsuru. "That's what I was thinking."

"... You're fucking insane." Shinjiro said.

"... I couldn't have put it any other way." Akihiko added.

"... Even I think that's strange, Minato." Fuuka said. Minato shrugged.

"Perhaps. But you asked what I thought, and I told you. But time's wasting... let's go have some fun." he said. He entered

Tartarus, followed by the other members of SEES. "You need to set up, right? I'll go do some visits first." he said without looking back. He headed to the Velvet Room before anyone could object, and disappeared.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I be of assistance?" Elizabeth greeted as he reformed inside.

"I'd like my prescription." Minato said with a smirk. Elizabeth chuckled.

"You forgot to say 'please'. Alas, you haven't been a very good boy." Elizabeth said.

"Oh, then maybe I need to be punished." Minato said.

"... Have you been reading the same books as Theodore?" Elizabeth asked. Igor cleared his throat.

"Please refrain from having conversations of this manner in my presence." he said. Minato chuckled.

"Sorry about that, old man. Well, I suppose it's time to get to business." Minato said. He fused some new Personas, took on every fetch quest Elizabeth had including the one about the latest old document, and then took his leave. He reappeared in the lobby to see that Fuuka had already summoned Baba Yaga, and was testing out the transceivers. She kept all of her guns on her, and was surrounded by cases of ammunition.

"They seem to be working fine." Mitsuru said, tapping the one

in her ear. She turned as Minato approached the group once more. "That was fast... regardless, since we're heading into uncharted territory, I believe it's in our best interest to use one four man squadron. The other two can either remain behind with Yamagishi or train on the lower floors."

"I agree... I'll leave Shinjiro and Junpei behind, since they have experience running through Arqa's early floors together and Junpei's proven he can lead without much help." Minato said.

"Aw, dude..." Junpei said. He sighed, and adjusted his cap. "Well, I guess this is part of my vice-leader responsibilities, huh?"

"That's a good way to look at it." Minato said. "Any objections, Shinji?"

"None." Shinjiro said.

"Good... everyone else, on me." Minato said. His group used the teleporter first, and reached the fortieth floor. Surely enough, the barricade had disappeared.

"... Well, at least your source is reliable." Akihiko said.

"Indeed." Mitsuru said. "Now then, Yamagishi. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Mitsuru-senpai, I can hear you loud and clear! I see you as well!" Fuuka said over the transceiver.

"Astounding clarity... her powers are no joke." Akihiko said.

"No kidding." Yukari added.

"Now that that's settled, how quickly can you switch between squads?" Minato asked.

"*I'll see.*" Fuuka said. The transceiver went silent for a minute, and then came back to life. *"Sorry, Junpei and Shinjiro-senpai had already gotten into a fight. I joined halfway in."*

"Alright, so you can swap on the fly. Then we're ready to roll out." Minato said. "Since we're probably going up against new opponents, focus on supporting us. Swap to Junpei's squad occasionally to see if they're in trouble."

"Yes!" Fuuka said cheerfully. Minato chuckled, and led his group up the stairs. The 41st floor looked just like the previous ones.

"Still the same block." Minato said. "Regardless, get into position. We move fast and effectively." They quickly went down the hallway, and Minato saw a group of Shadows they could easily jump.

"Just a moment! I think I can give you an even bigger advantage!" Fuuka said.

"... Explain." Minato whispered.

"I should be able to put my weapons to use... just keep the enemy in your sights." Fuuka said. Minato did as instructed.

In the lobby, Fuuka focused inside of Baba Yaga's spherical body. Her Persona's hair turned into silver wires that connected to the outside of the sphere, and Baba Yaga placed its iron cauldron on the floor in front of it. The inside of Fuuka's protective sphere sparked as Baba Yaga began to chant incoherently, holding its staff into the air. Inside of the crystal ball at the end, it showed what Minato was seeing. The pot smoked, and Fuuka suddenly vanished from within Baba Yaga.

She reappeared in front of the Shadows Minato was staring at, to the amazement of everyone else, and smiled. Her eyes, including her third one, all shone a radiant gold. "Surprise, bitches!" she yelled as she aimed her two SMGs at the crowd of Shadows. She let loose a storm of bullets, downing the two eagles and heavily damaging the Shadow with a lantern core and huge hooded cloak atop a thin, stick-like body. She disappeared as she emptied her weapons, and Minato rushed in, swiftly eliminating the phantom before it could react. With the other two enemies down, the rest of the group swiftly ran in and beat them to death before they could get up. Minato looked around, and smirked. "That's some trick." he said.

"I can project my body to anywhere Baba Yaga can see, which includes what you can see as well." Fuuka said. She chuckled. *"That was really fun!"*

"Tres bien!" Mitsuru said. "Offensive and tactical support... that's unheard of."

"I'll say... since we don't have to worry about the surroundings

in here, you can really go all out." Akihiko said.

"... Am I the only one a little concerned about what just happened?" Yukari asked.

"Don't worry too much about it. Just be glad she's on our side." Minato said. "Though, isn't that a bit taxing on you?"

"... Actually, it is a little difficult. I'll let you decide when you want me to do that from now on." Fuuka said.

"Alright... though, can Baba Yaga attack?" Minato asked.

"... Yes. I can make her use a single target almighty attack while you're in battle... and she can provide basic healing. She has a few other almighty attacks, but they're meant for direct fire... I can't use them from here." Fuuka said.

"And she had direct combat capabilities?... Jeez, is there anything you can't do?" Akihiko asked.

"Defend you." Fuuka said. *"You should stay alert... there are Shadows around that corner to your left."*

"Point taken." Yukari said, prepping an arrow. Minato chuckled.

"Let's keep this up." he said. As he fought his way up the floors, he soon realized he chose the perfect team. The majority of enemies were weak to either ice or electricity, and a decent portion also had a wind weakness. As such, SEES

could usually topple their enemies without any resistance, and they quickly reached a clearing at the 47th floor.

"Wait! There are three large Shadows in the center of the floor!" Fuuka warned. *"... But they're weak to electricity. You shouldn't have a problem."*

"Hmm... Can you cheap shot them?" Minato asked.

"If you get them in your sights, I'll see what I can do." Fuuka said.

"Alright... then first, we cheat." Minato said, leading SEES to the center of the floor. He put his Evoker to his head.

"Matarukaja." he said as he fired. Black Frost, a giant black Jack Frost with purple clothing, red eyes, and fangs, appeared behind the group and shrouded them in an orange light, increasing their strength. He turned a corner, and saw three giant Golden Beetles waiting in the center of the floor. "Resistances?" he asked.

"... All forms of physical attacks will do less damage, so my SMGs won't be as effective... Dark, Light, and Ice attacks will do nothing." Fuuka said. Mitsuru scowled.

"It seems I'll have to focus on healing, then... attack relentlessly in my stead." she said.

"Will do. Light them up, Fuuka." Minato said, stopping a little ways away from the Shadows. Fuuka appeared a little distance in front of the group, bazooka at the ready.

"You're kidding!" Yukari said, eyes wide. Fuuka had a manic smile on her face as she aimed at the Shadows that were turning towards her.

"FUUKA BAZOOKA!" she yelled as she fired. The round exploded against the center Shadow, knocking it backwards, and the explosion slightly damaged the other two. Fuuka recovered from the attack's recoil and fired once more at the Shadow on the right, knocking it backwards again. She disappeared. *"The battle begins!"* she said over the transceiver. Minato chuckled and raised his Evoker.

"Loa, Mazio." he said as he fired. A large skull with a blue snake coiled around one of its eye sockets appeared and cackled, summoning a storm of lightning bolts. The Shadows were all knocked to their back.

"Here's our chance!" Yukari said.

"Not yet." Minato said. "Mazio." he said. The small storm of lightning bolts struck again, and the Shadows writhed in pain. "Akihiko."

"Mazio!" he said, quickly firing his evoker. Polydeuces appeared above him and created another storm of lightning bolts, dizzying the Shadows.

"Now is the time to rush them!" Mitsuru said.

"Despair, pests." Minato said, summoning Jack's cleavers. He ran in to attack, followed by the rest of the SEES members.

After a chaotic melee fest, the Shadows disappeared without causing any damage. "... That was underwhelming, once again." he said.

"The important thing is that we swiftly and efficiently eliminated the enemy." Mitsuru said, shaking the last bit of Shadow goo from her blade in one swift motion. "Though, I won't say some of these battles aren't easier than I expected..."

Minato claimed his treasures and the group proceeded upwards. Aside from Minato rushing after a few golden Shadows every now and then, everything was almost exactly the same as the last seven floors. Three floors up, the group continued walking. "... This is boring." Minato said.

"... The enemies may not be a challenge, but that's a nod to your skills as a leader." Akihiko said.

"Leader skills? Poof... these enemies are a joke." Minato said. He put his Evoker away. "Watch... I'll clear this entire floor on my own without even using my Evoker. Just stay behind me."

"Hey, aren't you getting too confident? I mean, we know you're strong, but that's just crazy." Yukari said.

"I never said you had to sit there and do nothing if I look like I need help. Feel free to jump in if you want, but I doubt you'll have to." Minato said. He strolled forwards, throwing caution to the wind. A group of Shadows comprised of two Sky

Balances, Shadows that looked like green and blue scales with a cross center, and two Maniacal Books, Shadows comprised of tendrils that floated with open crowns holding a book with a cross inside, quickly turned on him. "Alice." he said. She appeared next to him as the Shadows neared. He stopped and cracked his neck. "Die for me."

Alice's eyes glowed, and her face twisted into a manic smile. Purple energy radiated from her feet along the ground, and as it passed under each of the Shadows, consumed them and froze them in place. They began to bleed profusely, and then melted in front of the other SEES members eyes. Minato kept walking, undaunted. "... What the hell was that?" Akihiko asked.

"A dark attack... one much more potent than anything you've seen before." Fuuka said.

"An attack of that caliber... just what is he capable of?" Mitsuru asked.

"... That's not normal." Yukari said, a chill running down her spine.

Minato kept walking around, and sure enough, had almost cleared the entire hand in the same manner. "... *Ok, maybe I bluffed a little. That's a taxing move.*" Minato thought as he reached the stairs. He sighed, and turned back to the other SEES members, all of whom didn't even bother keeping their guard up after his third victory. "Like I said... there's nothing special here." Minato said. "Still, I can't keep that up. Let's

swap back to regular tactics."

"... That's likely for the best. Focus on regaining your strength for now." Mitsuru said. They continued up the floors, and made it to the 59th floor, where the next guardian was. Minato had regained most of his stamina, the other SEES members were looking a bit tired.

"It's only one guardian, but it looks tough... you should heal before you fight it." Fuuka said.

"Good idea." Minato said, activating the teleporter as usual. The group returned to the lobby, and saw Fuuka still inside Baba Yaga.

"I'll provide back-up to Junpei and Shinjiro-senpai until you're ready to go again." Fuuka said. Minato nodded, and took the group to the clock. He dropped some cash inside, and everyone's fatigue was fixed.

"Ah, that always hits the spot!" Yukari said with a stretch.

"Yeah... let's take a quick breather before we get back in there." Akihiko said. They did exactly that, with Minato excusing himself to turn in his required fetch quest loot and claiming his other rewards. He decided to go check on the Crimson Room as well, and bowed upon entry along with all of his Fiends.

"Master." Minato said.

"You seem to have a good sense of when to visit me, Minato." Lucifer said. "However, you've yet to acquire enough Macca for a new Magatama."

"... Really? I've been offering quite a bit recently, but if you say so." he said. He took a seat.

"You haven't gone to party with us in forever!" Paimon said. "It'll turn your frown upside down!"

"Frown?" Minato asked.

"You can't mask your dissatisfaction with your current battleground." Lucifuge said. "However, this is only a rough patch. Things will improve... though if you want some good news, Dante is back in town."

"He is?... Well, that's a nice way to occupy my nights." Minato said. "I think we should go partying soon, then."

"Yes... he's brought someone back with him, and I need to speak with him." Lucifer said.

"His brother, I take it?" Minato asked.

"Exactly... I believe you'll benefit from getting to know him." Lucifer said.

"Yet another altered bond, hmm?" Minato asked.

"... So you've caught on." Lucifer said.

"There's a young man named Kenji that I get along with quite well... yet I can't form a bond with him, despite us working so well together." Minato said. "I take it you replaced him with someone else?"

"Indeed... I replaced him with your current best friend." Lucifer said.

"... Junpei?" Minato asked. Lucifer nodded.

"Indeed... you would have commanded his respect and friendship as you do now with Kenji, and Kenji would be your best friend, had I not intervened." Lucifer said. "Yet his friendship would barely serve you in the long run, and he would only remain as a placeholder in your soul. However, by substituting him with your lieutenant, I've given you an indispensable ally that would otherwise have been just another fighter in your roster... isn't this much better?"

Minato chuckled. "A superior lieutenant or a disposable battery? I choose the lieutenant a thousand times over." he said. "Once again, have I ever told you I'd trust you with my life?"

"On multiple occasions." Lucifer said. He chuckled. "I still find it amusing."

"That's good. I don't know what I'd do if that became boring." Minato said. "... Though, you just said I wouldn't have formed a bond with Junpei under normal circumstances... does that mean I wouldn't have been able to bond with the other SEES

members?"

"Not all of them." Lucifer said. He smirked. "No matter what future you had, your womanizing ways would have allowed you to form a bond with all the female members."

Minato laughed. "I'm a gigolo to the end, huh?" he mused.

"Whether it be light or darkness at the end, you're getting laid in that tunnel, boy." Lucifuge said. Paimon giggled.

"You know, sometimes you were very gentlemanly and stayed true to one girl, but more often than not, you tried every one of them before making a choice. And it got you into some hilarious situations." she said.

"Those are both very appealing options." Minato said. "I'll have to consider both very seriously."

"It's good to see you've acclimated to the idea of alternate dimensions, or, as some may call it, parallel universes." Lucifer said. "It was Shin who proved the idea to you, wasn't it?"

"How'd you know?" Minato asked.

"Shin may be even more of a demon than I am, but he enjoys conversation much more than you'd think. He keeps up appearances quite well, but he hasn't changed much mentally from the fifteen year old I transformed millennia ago." Lucifer said. "He still believes in nothing other than himself, still

respects anyone who seeks their own path, and still craves the thrill of heated combat."

"... Sounds like me." Minato said.

"While you two share some key similarities, you are inherently different, as your powers require you to be... but you will see that soon enough." Lucifer said.

"I suppose I've yet to see either of our full powers, so I can't tell just yet." Minato said.

"Yes... until that time, you can only go forth and do what must be done." Lucifer said. His eyes lit up, and the Crimson Room quaked. **"Yes, you must go forth... I cannot give you more power until you acquire more Fiends. Until such time, you must fight with what you have."**

Minato bowed. "As you command." he said. The Crimson Room stabilized, and Lucifer's eyes dulled.

"Good... then, until next time." he said. He waved his hand, and Minato felt his body break apart. He reappeared outside of the Crimson Room, and lazed about for a minute. He checked the clock, and saw the Dark Hour had about twenty minutes left.

"It's go time." Minato said. The other SEES members got up, and they headed towards the teleporter. Junpei and Shinjiro appeared from it as they approached.

"Hey!" Junpei waved. "Dude, I heard you guys are kickin' some serious ass up there! We're pretty much set for the day, but I'm down to swap if you guys aren't game."

"Same here." Shinjiro said.

"No... we'll keep our current groups." Minato said. "You all set, Fuuka?"

"Ready whenever you are." she said. Minato nodded, and his squad returned to the 59th floor. *"I scanned the enemy again... it's resistant to all forms of physical attack, absorbs wind attacks, and as usual, blocks light and dark attacks. I didn't find any weaknesses."* she said over the transceiver.

"Alright then... time to cheat once more." Minato said. He fired his Evoker. "Matarukaja." he said. "Once we get within reasonable range of the enemy, nail it with your almighty attack. Yukari, you only worry about healing in this fight."

"Got it." Yukari said, shouldering her bow. They once again rounded the corner, and came face to face with what looked like a gigantic white knight with a purple mask atop an equally large legless horse.

"Nail it." Minato said.

"Devour." Fuuka said. Underneath the Shadow, a large mouth of energy formed and bit into the horse. The Shadow struggled to break free, but the mouth exploded, buffeting it.

"Bufula!" Minato and Mitsuru yelled. King Frost, a fat Jack Frost wearing a silver crown with long curling silver hair and a golden robe that had a lock on its front along with two latches, appeared behind Minato, wielding a golden scepter with Jack Frost's face on it again. Penthesilea appeared next to it, and the two twirled around each other before aiming their weapons at the night. Two large shards of ice struck it on either side. Akihiko advanced and fired his Evoker.

"Zionga!" he said. Polydeuces appeared above him and summoned a large bolt of lightning that crashed down onto the Shadow, shattering the ice. The Shadow charged forwards after the strike, apparently not very happy with what had just happened. It charged right at the trio, prompting Mitsuru and Akihiko to roll out of the way. Minato jumped the attack with his Magatama, and turned to see Yukari ripe to be skewered. He summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle, and got on, revving the engine as he descended.

Sure enough, the exhaust shot fire at his command, and the wheels cloaked themselves in fire. He flew forwards, narrowly passing the Shadow, and grabbed Yukari out of the way.

"H-hey! That hurt!" Yukari yelled as she tried to take a seat on the bike.

"Don't complain." Minato said. He looked back to see the Shadow hot on his tail. It aimed its lance forwards, and a huge tornado formed in front of the bike. He swerved out of the way and pulled Yukari on properly. She didn't complain, and held on for dear life.

"It's attacking again." Hell Biker told him. He saw numerous smaller tornadoes form in front of him, and he swerved into a ridiculous u-turn. The Shadow kept it's pace, charging at him, and charged back.

"W-what the hell are you doing?!" Yukari asked. Minato held out one hand and summoned the Persona Eligor's lance, all silver and almost twice his size.

"Jousting." Minato answered. He leveled it at the Shadow, and the Shadow leveled its lance at him. They were set to collide.
"Too bad I cheat."

He summoned Matador ahead of the Shadow, and used him as an obstacle. After the collision, the Shadow's form broke as it staggered through Matador's skeletal debris, leaving Minato's strike uncontested. His lance went straight into the knight part of the Shadow, impaling it. It wasn't able to separate from the horse, so he ended up dragging the whole thing along with him. It writhed around, and Minato laughed. He was approaching Akihiko and Mitsuru, and they both drew their Evokers once more.

"Bufula!" Mitsuru said, creating an ice obstacle. Minato plowed through it with the Shadow, then forced the lance forwards, turning in the process.

"Zionga!" Akihiko said, getting a free hit as the Shadow got its footing.

"Hell Burner." Minato said, revving the motorcycle's engine. A

burst of flames erupted from its exhaust and struck the Shadow once more. It was engulfed in flames, but rushed out soon enough. It leaped into the air over Minato and landed, thrusting its lances into the floor. A wave of red energy erupted from it, and Minato immediately jumped off of his bike. He forgot Yukari, however, and she was knocked backwards by the attack just like Akihiko and Mitsuru. The Shadow turned on him as he landed, apparently intent on getting revenge. "Well? What are you waiting for?" he asked.

The Shadow covered itself in a purple light, and Minato realized its defense had increased. "*I can hit it again!*" Fuuka told him.

"On my mark." he said, raising his Evoker. "Agilao!" Incubus, a stereotypical red demon with what Minato considered a ridiculous looking bladed penis appeared in front of him and essentially humped the air. He couldn't help but chuckle as a torrent of fire formed and struck the Shadow again.

"It's going for a one-shot!" Jack said. Minato looked down and noticed the glowing symbols forming around his legs, and he quickly dashed to the side. Inside of the smoke, the Shadow raised one of its lances into the air, and white talismans swarmed where Minato had just been standing, creating a pillar of light. Nothing happened, and the Shadow turned its attention back to Minato.

"Damn, this thing's persistent! Zionga!" Akihiko said from behind it. Yet another blast of lightning hit it, and the Shadow turned.

"Now, Fuuka." Minato said. Fuuka appeared between him and the Shadow, bazooka at the ready.

"FUUKA BAZOOKA!" she yelled, firing once, then twice at the Shadow. Both explosions rocked it, and it was on the verge of tipping over.

"Mabufu!" Mitsuru called, creating a bed of ice spikes for it to fall on. It crashed onto them, the spikes digging into its sides. The Shadow tried to use its arm as a support, only for Yukari to put an arrow in it.

"Stay down already!" she said. Minato fired his Evoker once more as she drew another arrow.

"Loa, Zionga!" he called.

"Polydeuces, Zionga!" Akihiko joined. The two Personae appeared on either side of the Shadow, and two crashes of lightning hit it. The knight was finally vaporized, and dissolved. The members of SEES all reconvened, and Yukari healed everyone.

"Good work, team." Minato said. "And you as well Fuuka. You helped out a lot."

"It was mainly you guys." Fuuka said.

"No need to be so modest, Fuuka... you were the one to knock it on its side, and that left it defenseless." Akihiko said. Minato smirked.

"I guess you could say she..." he began. Yukari turned to him.

"Don't you dare." she said.

"Tipped the scale." Minato finished. He burst out laughing while everyone else facepalmed.

"... You really do talk to the Chairman in your spare time, don't you?" Mitsuru asked. They continued onwards, claiming their loot and moving up five sparsely populated floors, eventually reaching a barricade on the 64th floor.

"A barricade?... I guess that's as high as you can go." Fuuka said as Minato picked up the briefcase he knew held the old document he needed. *"The Dark Hour only has a few minutes left. We should leave."*

SEES quickly returned to the lounge, and Minato decided he would show Elizabeth the document some other time. Everyone congratulated Fuuka, and they headed back to the dorm for the night.

60. Chapter 60

Chapter 60: Some New Developments and Old Habits

Author Note to guedesbrawl: Wow, that was very good review! Thanks! Since you've put your questions and concerns out to the public, it's only natural if I answer them in public.

Obviously, the enemies are going to improve. I'll show you a little calculation to explain why Minato is so harrowingly overpowered at the beginning of the story...

According to the plot, Minato has been awake for ten years. Of those ten years, he's properly fought against other people for about six, and, as stated early on, killed the occasional Shadow every now and then, and done physical training for a few years just because he could. Add that to his first real fight in the plot: The Magician is a full moon Shadow, and Minato takes it down alone (with the element of surprise, of course: the Shadow didn't know how to react once Jack joined the fight). As such, if you want some gameplay stats, I placed Minato at about level 13 when he first goes to Tartarus. Add that to the benefits he got from his first Magatamas (increased health/SP regeneration, passive speed boost, callable

huge speed boost, once a day full heal) and his actual combat experience (which, if you recall from VS Fuuka, he isn't lacking much of), he's more than capable of crushing most early game opponents.

Now, as for Fuuka's third eye, it's not as odd as you'd think. Yes, it is a legitimate third eye, but when it's 'closed', it is hidden underneath the skin on her forehead, which parts to reveal it (i.e. opening it). As I said, it's one of the eyes Black Maria used, and appeared because not only has Fuuka accepted her Shadow, she wants to become like it in some way (hence, surpassing the Persona 4 awakenings, since Yosuke didn't want to become a complete 'fuck everything' guy and Chie made no effort to become a dominatrix XD).

About that character development. It'll happen. As you pointed out, in the game, not everyone developed at the same time. Wait for it. Though in terms of Yukari's close range capabilities... I'm not having that because in my head, it's just not her thing. That's like saying Akihiko uses throwing stars when he can't punch the enemy... it just doesn't work in my head. She'll improve, but not by picking up a close range weapon. One thing, though. She does stalk Minato around Mitsuru as well, though much more cautiously (i.e. the train eavesdropping) since she's actually scared of Mitsuru.

Akihiko is somewhat of a joke, but have you been

watching his Social Link? He's figuring out things and slowly altering his views on life through interactions with the other members of SEES... though how is he unequal to Junpei? I think they're at about the same level (in VS Emperor and Empress, while Junpei managed to topple the Emperor alone, he didn't cause significant damage. On the other hand, Akihiko DESTROYED one of the Empress' knees with a single well placed punch, matching enhanced Shinjiro in physical strength. Not only that, he's faster than Junpei, though I will say I've given Junpei more durability). Not sure why you think he's a joke, because the SEES members are all at about the same level, albeit they have different specialties which I can list if you ask.

You're right about this taking a while. When I started this, I had seen a few other stories and I was like 'P3 is a year's journey, yet almost none of these stories give you that sense. Mine will.' Hence, the day to day chapters unless there's something very big happening in the story. Finally, nice idea for my dilemma. I'll consider it.

Well, that was a lengthy response. But now, back to the story.

Minato looked over his latest Old Document as the sun rose once more on Sunday. The handwritten report told quite the tale, despite being only the second of a two pages.

"Though we have yet to finalize the last members of our

research team, we have already looked into the security detail. The Nanjo Group's refusal to back our research is interfering with us again. The current head is protecting the Suou brothers, as well as many of our other primary targets. Kurosu, Inaba, and Ayase have agreed to work with us, though we are unsure as to how long we can depend on them alone. We are currently investigating Amano's whereabouts, though we must consider the possibility that she is also being protected by the Nanjo.

The remaining New World Order members have eagerly joined our cause, but their true allegiance is unknown. As of current, the third-generation HSWs seem sufficient to keep them in line, though I believe we may need to reactivate the remaining fourth-gens if we continue to take on new members. Another possibility would be to remake the stronger destroyed ASWs with a few modifications.

Our capture group is becoming more and more adept, but with demand for specimens rising, I believe our second new trials will happen much sooner than we believed. We have found more than enough candidates, though if we judge from past experience, I doubt this batch will be much of a success either. We have yet to determine why the previous method has stopped working. Again, the Nanjo remain silent on this matter. Perhaps the knowledge that they are ending lives will change their mind? That man with an earring seemed to know something about it, but he has disappeared once again. A trap may be necessary.

Regardless, those of us who have successfully used the old

method are adapting quite well, though Edogawa seems to be having some difficulty adjusting. He's become prone to mood swings and has almost given up on trying making himself presentable. Regardless, he is still one of our most competent, and these changes have yet to seriously affect him. The other staff members who volunteered seem to be having some trouble separating fact from fiction, but our specialized management has yet to report any major issues. Overall, we are making steady progress.

... I cannot deny the fact that I am scared. I don't know what Mr. Kirijio is thinking, building the lab so close to the city. This place shouldn't be anywhere within 100 miles of any human being. I joined because he asked me to, but I'm not so sure about this anymore..."

"... That's quite the amount of information to take in. The New World Order was a thing and apparently had members, there's a list of potential security guards who I'm certain must have all been Persona-users, the HSWs and old ASW parts has just been explained, and I'm pretty sure the man with the earring is Mr. Toudou... but what's this part about 'the old method' and 'adjusting'? What does 'specialized management' do? Also, Mr. Edogawa is directly mentioned here... he became moody and lazy after his change? Not only that, others are having trouble 'separating fact from fiction'? I doubt I can get anything out of Mitsuru with this... at least, not until she reveals everything." Minato thought.

"... It looks like we've hit another wall." Jack said.

"Hmph... she better be straightforward about this." Hell Biker said.

"Agreed." Minato replied. He stretched, and looked at the time. *"... I can catch the home-shopping program, then run to work."* He materialized his Fiends as figurines and sat down on his bed, turning on the TV. Surely enough, he heard the ridiculous jingle again.

"Here comes Tanakaaaa! Over the airwaves to youuuuu!" the TV blared.

"They really go out of their way to make this shitty, don't they?" Minato asked.

"I don't think it's that bad." Alice said.

"You like this, but think my job is boring?... It's clear you're a lost cause." Matador said. Tanaka had made his way to the stage by this point.

"I'm your host, Tanaka, with a live presentation of my Amazing Commodities! We'll show you great items at unbeatable prices! Ooh, you won't be able to touch that dial! Let's bring out our item of the day! It iiiis... an All-Purpose Apron! You'll be able to do anything in style without dirtying your clothes! Oh my goodness! I can't believe its wonderfulness! But wait, there's more! We'll throw in a matching trio of fashionable scarves for only 12000 yen!" Tanaka announced.

Minato didn't waste a moment. "That apron will be mine." he said. Once he saw the thorn pattern emerging from purple flowers on it, he knew it had to be his. To top it off, one of the scarves was the perfect blue to match his hair. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. He ordered it without a moment's hesitation.

"A good choice." David said. Minato nodded, and headed downstairs to make breakfast. Fuuka and Mitsuru were already there, much to his surprise. Mitsuru was reading while Fuuka was busy using her laptop.

"Good morning, Mitsuru, Fuuka." Minato greeted. "You two are up early."

"Good morning." they both responded.

"I'm making breakfast now. Want some hands on lessons, Fuuka?" Minato asked.

"Lessons?" Fuuka asked.

"That's right... this will be your first time getting to taste one of Minato's breakfasts. They're quite good." Mitsuru said.

"C'mon, c'mon, the more the merrier!" Alice said, having appeared near Minato as Mitsuru spoke. Fuuka looked more than surprised, and Minato chuckled.

"We'll have a lot of fun." he said, donning one of the white aprons from the pantry. He adjusted it and then put his hands

on his hips. "Cooking with Minato and Fiends! Whaddya say?"

"... That's nice, but I want to get lunches down first." Fuuka said.

"Then we'll cook lunches for breakfast. Simple." Minato said. "I'll let you pick what to make."

"No objections, no objections!" Alice said. Fuuka chuckled and closed her laptop.

"I don't have a much of a choice now, do I?" she asked.

"Nope. This is completely one-sided." Minato said with a grin. He took out the second apron that Shinjiro used as Fuuka put her laptop down and headed towards the kitchen. Mitsuru smirked at the change of pace.

"Boss said you should go to his room. He's got a paper on his desk he wants you to see." David's tiny floating skull whispered into Mitsuru's ear. She shifted her gaze quickly to see his head vanish. After a minute of wondering when Minato managed to summon him, she turned back around to see him looking over ingredients with Fuuka. He shot her a sideways glance and a quick nod before turning his attention back to what Fuuka was looking at.

She knew better than to say anything. Instead, she closed her book and proceeded up the stairs swiftly. She went straight for Minato's room, and found the door closed, but unlocked. She opened it to see Hell Biker polishing the table by the

window, and he turned to see her. **"On the work table. There's an envelope in the top drawer to keep it concealed."** he said as she closed the door.

"I see... thank you." Mitsuru said. She didn't know how she was supposed to interact with Minato's Fiends, but her response was more than enough for Hell Biker. He turned back to his work, and moved on to the chairs. Surely enough, the Old Document was the only piece of paper on Minato's desk, and she found the promised envelope in the top drawer atop a ridiculous amount of tea. "... This is quite the amount."

"Boss says he doesn't mind going to hell, as long as he gets to take his tea." Hell Biker said without looking away from his work. Mitsuru had no response, and simply sealed the paper inside of the envelope before taking her leave. She closed his door once more, and turned to see Akihiko's door opening.

"I thought you'd already –" Akihiko began as he opened his door, but Jack appeared and rammed into it, forcing it shut.

"Survival training time! A murderer's shut you in your room! What are you gonna do?!" Jack yelled as he held the door shut. He nodded to Mitsuru, and she hurried past him as he cackled.

"What the hell?! Knock it off, Minato." Akihiko said from in his room.

"You aren't dealing with Boss, you're dealing with me!"

Jack yelled back. Mitsuru made it back to her room and hurriedly set the envelope down on her desk. She went back down to the second floor and saw Akihiko slowly pushing Jack back as he opened his door. Jack saw her, cackled once more, and then vanished, causing Akihiko to stumble forwards as his door flew open.

"Tch... what the hell was that about?" he said, dusting off his red t-shirt. He turned to see Mitsuru. "Oh... did you wake up late as well?"

"No. I had just remembered some unfinished work." Mitsuru said. "But that's odd... Minato was in the kitchen before I returned to my room. I'm surprised to see one of his Fiends roaming around on its own."

"... Wait, you're saying he's been down there since before?" Akihiko asked. She nodded. "... That's not normal."

"... Maybe we should have a chat with him." Akihiko said. He walked downstairs before Mitsuru could say anything, and she decided to follow. Akihiko made his way to the kitchen to see Alice laughing at Fuuka's imprecision with measurements. The two were very focused on their work off to the side of the kitchen, Minato turned to greet Akihiko as he stepped forwards.

"Good morning, Akihiko." he said. "Had fun with Jack?"

"So you knew what was going on." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled.

"Of course I know. They tell me everything." he said. "I thought it was a fun exercise. Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. That was pointless." Akihiko said. He narrowed his eyes at Minato. "... But how did you summon Jack from downstairs, or know when my door was opening? And who opened your door?"

"Why, Jack, of course! He's been around all morning!" Minato said.

"Boss is lying. Jack was following you as cover." David's skull whispered into Mitsuru's ear. Once again, she found herself wondering when he had taken the time to summon him, but said nothing.

"You just let him run around outside of your head?" Akihiko asked.

"And?" Minato asked. "He knows better than to actually harm you. Why do you think you still have your limbs?"

"Fuuka, you're going to drown everything in oil if you keep pouring." Alice said.

"Huh? Oh, no no no no no!" Fuuka said. She stopped, and hastily splashed some down the drain. Alice sighed.

"Now there's too little." she said.

"I'd love to continue this chat, but it looks like my assistance is

necessary. Toodles." Minato said, twirling around to go assist Fuuka.

"Seriously?" Akihiko asked. He scowled, and took a seat in the lounge. Mitsuru joined him, picking her book up once again. She gave Minato a sideways glance, and made a mental note not to underestimate his stealth capabilities.

After salvaging the stew Fuuka made, SEES had a rather filling breakfast. He grabbed his hat and hurriedly made his way to Be Blue V to start his workday. He made it just in time, and strolled into the Office. "You come here less and less. Hurry up and quit already." Nemissa said as he went to the changing room.

"If I quit, I wouldn't be able to torment you. And that would be tragic." Minato said, hurriedly changing into his uniform.

"Very funny. We don't have any shots today, so I expect you to make double what you normally would." Nemissa said.

"Easy enough." Minato replied. "Still, how's your climb up hell's hierarchy coming?"

"... Good enough." Nemissa said.

"You haven't moved a bit, have you?" Minato asked.

"Why the hell do you think I didn't ask for your opinion?!" she snapped. Minato chuckled.

"And why do you think I brought it up?" he asked.

"... Get to work, asshole." Nemissa said. Minato emerged from the changing room in his attendant outfit and chuckled as he went out to make his sales. The day went by as usual, with nothing of any real note for the first few hours. Needless to say, he was more than pleasantly surprised when he saw two familiar faces enter Be Blue V. He approached them, a grin on his face.

"Fuuka, Yukari, you've chosen a wonderful day to appear." Minato said. He did his usual cap-off bow. "Welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V... what desires shall I grant today?"

Fuuka laughed while Yukari sighed and shook her head. "Seriously, I bet most of the people who come here think you're hitting on them." Yukari said.

"Actually, all of the people who come here think I'm hitting on them. It keeps them coming back for more, and money flowing into my pocket." Minato said.

"... You could at least fake having some shame, ya know?" Yukari replied. Minato chuckled.

"Or I could say what I want to say... regardless, I assume Fuuka has come for bathroom supplies?" Minato asked.

"That's right." Fuuka said. "Well, we've done this before, so..."

"Don't worry... I'll be sure to get you the best of the best." Minato said. He offered her his arm. "Well?"

Fuuka took it without much hesitation, and the two began their search. Yukari followed, and Minato managed to con her into buying quite a few things as well. The two left rather satisfied, and other than their rather short visit, the day flew by. He found himself back in Nemissa's office by the time his shift was over, and found her sulking as usual. "What a load of crap." she muttered to herself.

"Still having the same old promotion blues?" Minato asked.

"... I wasn't talking to you." she said. "But yes."

"Well, what can you expect, partner? You're stuck running a store specialized in relaxation goods." Minato said. "And to top it off, you don't run it the right way either."

"I don't run this place the right way? Please. I always make profit in the end." Nemissa said.

"As the boss of an establishment, or as any leader in general, one of the most important things to do is make your job look easy." Minato said. "That alone inspires your followers, and thus elevates your own status. As of now, you look like you're constantly swamped with work. Seriously, who the hell works on three laptops and their phone at the same time? You look like you're drowning in responsibilities."

"... And if I am?" Nemissa asked.

"You never let it show." Minato said with a smirk. "Remember, you can draw confidence from other people as well, but

you've got to fake it first to create your sources. Constant efficiency is desirable, but if you can create an environment that can draw out maximum efficiency... well, you should know that much."

Nemissa glared at Minato for a bit, frowning all the time. He didn't budge, and after a minute, she cracked a grin. "Hmph... since when the hell does a human think he can teach a demon about how to manipulate people?" she asked.

"I never said you couldn't manipulate people. That's what the mind control trick you have on these employees is for. I'm saying you don't know how to use them to the best of their abilities. That, partner, is an optimistic and inherently unfathomable trick... which can work wonders if it works." Minato said. "You might even surprise yourself with the results you get from some people... I know I have."

"How the hell is allowing people to act on their own smarter than telling them exactly what to do all the time? They'll just screw it up in the end." Nemissa said.

"If they do, the fault is theirs, and not yours." Minato said. "And I can tell... you don't like any kind of failure, do you?"

"Only an idiot likes to screw up." Nemissa said. "... But I get what you're saying. It does allow me to throw the blame around with perfect justification." She smiled. "... Maybe I should try that. I might actually get an excuse to find better slaves."

Minato chuckled. "That's one way of looking at it... though you could always opt to try and train the failures up, but I have a feeling instant gratification is more your thing."

"And it isn't yours?" she asked.

"... You've got me there." Minato said. She laughed.

"Thought you could just lecture my ass all around the block, huh? Sorry, partner, but I've got a lot more experience than you." Nemissa said. "I'll consider what you said, though... it sounds like a promising plan of action... But if it backfires, I'm blaming you for it."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"Already using the perks, I see. Well done." Minato said.

"Then, I'll expect a report of your exploits next week."

"I won't make any promises. Business takes time, you know."

Nemissa said. Minato shook his head.

"Make it look easy... you should have said you'd call me before then." he said. He chuckled and went into the changing room, and swapped back to his usual clothing. He took his leave, and immediately went to a shady part of Paulownia.

With nobody in sight, he summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle and enjoyed a quick ride back to the dorm. He walked inside, and noticed Ikutsuki in the lounge along with Junpei and Akihiko. "Ikutsuki... didn't expect to see you today." Minato said.

"Ah, good evening." Ikutsuki said. "I came to welcome Fuuka to the dorm properly. She seems to have adjusted well."

"Yes, she's adapted rather quickly." Minato said. "Her personality makes her easy to get along with, so she's a good fit for us."

"Not only that, she's surprisingly good with technological devices and, from what I understand, very handy with various types of firearms. She's a very nice girl, always considering the feelings of those around her. Her name suits her perfectly, actually. 'Fuu' means wind, and 'ka' means flower. She's like a flower gently blowing in the –" Ikutsuki began, but stopped once he noticed Akihiko and Junpei giving him strange looks. "U-um, nevermind... I-I'll stop talking now."

Minato chuckled. "Maybe I was right when I saw you by that playground." he said. Junpei and Akihiko's eyes widened, and Ikutsuki's jaw dropped.

"I-I told you it was a good place to read!" he said quickly. Minato laughed.

"Relax, relax, I'm just screwing with you." he said. "... Though, did you really just come here to welcome Fuuka?"

"Actually, I have an update about your request. Mitsuru is in the Command Room as we speak... we'll discuss it there." Ikutsuki said.

"... Request?" Akihiko asked.

"It's about that Plume. I asked for them to do something special with it." Minato said.

"Special, huh? Like what?" Junpei asked.

"I won't ruin the surprise... but I think you'll love it, Junpei." Minato said. "Actually, I know you'll love it."

Junpei chuckled. "Well, if yer that sure, it must be awesome... Alright then." he said. Ikutsuki rose from his seat and nodded to Minato. The two made their way to the Command Room, and found Mitsuru sitting down already. They took seats, each claiming their own chair.

"So you've arrived..." Mitsuru said. "Well then, what's the update about the Plume?"

"Yes... as you should know, an ASW requires two Plumes of Dusk fused together to form a Papillion Heart in order to function properly." Ikutsuki said. "As for that Plume Minato found, it was quite difficult to find a second one that could harmonize with it. Its power output was off the charts and it had an inherent instability. It actually destroyed multiple test Plumes when we were first attempting to fuse it. However, we managed to find a second Plume strong enough to bond with

it, and have managed to successfully create a Papillion Heart."

"Excellent." Minato said. "Anything special about it?"

"Yes... Metis, as you've named her, has a Papillion Heart which can intake and use much more energy than previously thought possible... We were going to try and remodel some of the older ASW bodies to work with it, but none of them would be able to handle her heart. As such, we're developing a special body for her... but perhaps the most exciting part is that even without a body, Metis has already shown signs of sentience." Ikutsuki said. He chuckled. "This is a rare occurrence... and every time it's happened, the ASW with that heart proved to be extraordinary in comparison to the others of its generation."

"... Then, when should we expect to see her?" Mitsuru asked.

"Since her body is mainly just a highly modified version of the seventh generation ASW body, she should be ready within... a month's time, I suppose. Though I'm unsure of when you'll be able to see her. After all, even if she's given a body, there are many tests we'll have to perform before we can deem her field ready." Ikutsuki said. "However, one thing is certain... with her predicted capabilities and rapidly developing personality..." Ikutsuki paused, and adjusted his glasses. "We can be certain she'll be a live wire."

A moment of silence. Then sheer noise.

Minato and Ikutsuki broke out laughing while Mitsuru blanked. "Hey, hey, Ikutsuki!" Minato said, calming down for a bit. "Let's hope she stays under control during testing, ha! We don't wanna know what would happen if she blew a fuse!" he said.

Another eruption of laughter. Mitsuru began taking deep breaths to calm herself. "Oh! Oh! Since she takes after you, let's hope she's hard-wired for combat!" Ikutsuki said.

The laughter grew even louder, and Mitsuru cleared her throat. "Perhaps we should stick to more serious topics." she said. Minato and Ikutsuki slowly calmed down, both of them having to take deep breaths.

"Sorry about that Mitsuru." Minato said, fixing his hair. "Guess that conversation really..." he began. He snickered. "Shifted gears."

The laughter began again, and Ikutsuki almost fell off of his chair. Mitsuru put a weary hand on her forehead. "... Shinjiro was right. SEES has become a den of idiots." she muttered.

"With you being the leader and all, she'll SYNC well with everyone else!" Ikutsuki said. The laughter intensified even more.

"I hope she gets CHARGED UP for battle!" Minato said. Even more laughter filled the room.

"I bet her tactics will be ENGINEOUS!" Ikutsuki said. Mitsuru

wasn't one to cringe when bombarded with bad humor, but she was approaching that point very quickly.

"I feel sorry for anyone that pisses her off, because she'll make SPARKS FLY!" Minato said. He and Ikutsuki were both off of their chairs, clutching their sides.

"At least she won't take too long GEARING UP for duty!" Ikutsuki said. Mitsuru stood up.

"It seems we're done for tonight. If you'll excuse me." she said over their laughter. She hurried out of the room before they could object, and practically ran to the third floor. Fuuka and Yukari, who were seated in the lounge, turned to see her hurrying towards her room, looking completely mortified.

"Mitsuru-senpai, are you alright?" Fuuka asked. Mitsuru froze in her tracks.

"... So many robot puns." Mitsuru whispered. She shook her head, and swiftly went into her room.

"Yikes... never seen her look like that before." Yukari said.

"... Should we go talk to her?" Fuuka asked.

"I don't think that's the best idea... maybe we should give her some space." Yukari said.

After a solid ten minutes of pun making, Minato and Ikutsuki finally walked back down the stairs, both with ridiculous grins on their faces. "Hah... I need to write some of those down."

Ikutsuki said. "But for now, I'll be taking my leave. Good night to you all."

With that, he left, and Minato had a quick dinner. After cleaning up and donning his cap once more, wearing an open blue button-up atop a white shirt with jeans and sneakers. *"I think I'll take Paimon's advice. Today is a club day."* Minato thought as he re-emerged from his room in his new outfit. He entered the hallway at the same time Shinjiro left his room. Shinjiro glanced at him.

"Going out?" he asked.

"Clubbing. Care to join?" Minato asked.

"You know that's not my thing." Shinjiro said. "Try not to stay out till school's about to start."

"But it's only fun if you do just that." Minato said.

"Hmph... suit yourself." Shinjiro replied. They made their way to the lounge, and Shinjiro headed towards the kitchen, apparently in search of food.

"Oh, goin' clubbing today?" Junpei asked.

"Why not?" Minato asked. "Either of you two interested? I could get you some girls."

"... I'll pass." Akihiko said.

"Yeah, I haven't hit the books in forever... sucks, but I gotta

do it, I guess." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"More for me then." he said. He left the dorm with a smirk, and quickly called Paimon to get ready along with everyone else. By the time he arrived at Paulownia, Paimon had already ditched her veil and was waiting by the fountain with Elizabeth as usual. "Just you two today?" he asked as he approached.

"Unfortunately so... Master and Lucifuge had business to attend to, so they were unable to join us." Paimon said. "It's unfortunate, but surely you don't mind?"

He took their arms in his and chuckled. "I'll let you decide that." he said. They went towards Club Escapade as usual, skipping the line, until Minato noticed the bouncer had changed. It was a tall man, almost as tall as Lucifuge, with spiky, slicked back silver hair. He wore a large dark blue coat very similar to Dante's, though he actually wore a black shirt underneath his jacket. He had too many similarities with Dante for Minato not to recognize him as his brother. They both wore black jeans, black biker gloves, and carried ridiculous cases that obviously housed oversized blades. The only real difference between them was Vergil's oddly knight like boots that almost reached his knees, and the color they wore. Vergil stopped them at the entrance as they approached.

"There's a line, scum." Vergil said.

"Excuse me, boy, but who do you think you're speaking to?" Paimon asked. Vergil narrowed his eyes at her.

"... My apologies. I was unaware of your appearance without your veil." Vergil said, moving aside.

"Indeed... but you should become acquainted with these two as well." Paimon said. "They share Master's privileges."

Vergil turned to Minato and Elizabeth. He looked at them for a bit in silent contemplation before scowling again. "... You must be Minato." he said.

"I take it Dante has told you about me?" Minato asked.

"Indeed... you're a fool." Vergil said.

"Hah! Well excuse me, 'punk ass', but this 'fool' wasn't the one who needed someone to 'save his ass' when he got into trouble." Elizabeth said. Minato turned, surprised, but then caught a mischievous grin on Paimon's face. Vergil looked like he wanted to fight Elizabeth on the spot, but he restrained himself.

"... You're holding up the line. Go." Vergil said. Paimon giggled and nudged Vergil on the shoulder as they entered.

"Quite the friendly guy." Minato mused.

"Unlike you, he's not a very bright boy." Paimon said. "But enough about him... let's go enjoy ourselves."

Minato sauntered up to the VIP section, got his first round of drinks, and the night began. Despite having the entire booth to themselves this time around, the trio managed to only take up

about one seat. Needless to say, Minato was enjoying his old habits. Unfortunately, he seemed to enjoy them too much, as the Dark Hour hit rather unexpectedly. He broke out of his kiss with Elizabeth and managed to remove Paimon from his neck. "... As unfortunate as this might sound, I want to go talk to the bouncer again." he said.

"I'd almost forgotten... you have some business with him. Well, go ahead." Paimon said, backing up.

"Indeed... we will be awaiting your return." Elizabeth said. Minato nodded and walked down to the entrance. Unlike Shinjiro, Vergil remained at his post, alert as ever.

"What are you here for?" he asked without turning around.

"To talk. Coffins don't make very good conversation." Minato said, stopping to stand next to him. They stood next to each other, both looking at the bloody fountain.

"Then speak." Vergil said. Minato chuckled.

"Not a very talkative one, are you?" he asked. "Hmph... You know, it's funny that you called Dante a fool. When he told me about you, he said you were a power hungry idiot."

"Which shows how much of a fool he is. Seeking power is only natural." Vergil said.

"... So he wasn't lying when he said you were like me." Minato said. Vergil glanced at him, and Minato materialized all of his

Fiends in front of him, each bowing in his presence. He turned to Vergil with a grin. "Though I wonder if we're talking about the same thing."

"... Power is power, regardless of the form it comes in." Vergil said. "If you seek power as I do, then we both have something to accomplish."

"I'm sure we both have many things we want to accomplish." Minato said, dispelling his Fiends. "Though seeing as you and your brother are both half-demon, am I correct in assuming you have similar powers?"

"You aren't far off." Vergil said.

"Interesting... and you have your own fancy arsenal?" Minato asked. Vergil scoffed.

"No. Unlike Dante, I see no need to use anything other than a sword and my own abilities." Vergil said.

"Aren't you old-fashioned?" Minato said. "I'm surprised that hasn't come back to bite you in the ass yet... oh, never mind that. It probably did."

"... It was a foolish mistake." Vergil said.

"I don't doubt your skills... if Dante's strength is any sort of a reference, you're more than capable of handling yourself in most fights. You must've chosen a worthy opponent." Minato said. Vergil, oddly enough, smirked at that comment.

"An opponent I should have been able to defeat, had they not cheated." Vergil said. Minato couldn't help but laugh.

"Cheated? Fairness should never be expected in a fight, much less a fight in Hell." Minato said.

"Indeed... perhaps I'm as foolish as my brother in some aspects." Vergil said. "... He said you were quite skilled. 'Bastard fights more like a demon than actual demons', or something along those lines."

"Well, I guess I could show you some day." Minato said.
"Unless you're eager to see which of us is stronger here and now?"

"... As fulfilling as that would be, I am currently working." Vergil said.

"Do you see anybody else moving around now? That row of coffins over there certainly doesn't seem too energetic." Minato said.

"Though this might be an optimal time for our match, I intend to do my job seriously." Vergil said. "I repay my debts."

"Alright, alright... old-fashioned to the end, huh? Well, in that case, I should probably leave you be... but how long will you be around for?" Minato asked.

"Until my brother's contract expires." Vergil said.
"Unfortunately, that means I'll be living with him until that

time... It's insulting."

"... I've never seen Dante's place, but I doubt it's in very good condition." Minato said.

"I've left blood-soaked arenas in better condition." Vergil said.

"A fresh coat of blood can do wonders to a room." Minato mused. He cracked his neck. "Well, I think I'll head back inside. I'd like to hear a bit more about you some other time."

"So you've taken an interest in me? Good... Our curiosity is mutual." Vergil said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hanged Man Arcana...

Minato chuckled and returned to the VIP section, where Elizabeth and Paimon were waiting. "Back so soon?" Paimon asked.

"And not a battle-scar on him. I was certain a manly competition over who was stronger would ensue." Elizabeth said. Minato laughed.

"Not on work time, he says." Minato said as he sat down between them once again. "Still, if you think about it... me still being here gives us an extra private hour, doesn't it?"

Needless to say, Minato's night was rather enjoyable. He got to dance again, drink more, make-out more, and wander around the streets at five in the morning with Elizabeth and Paimon in tow once again. When he waltzed into the dorm at just before six-thirty, Fuuka was the only one surprised. He kissed his companions goodbye and prepared for the school day wordlessly.

61. Chapter 61

Chapter 61: That kid, Aragaki

Author note to guedesbrawl: You're not wrong into thinking people USED to see him as a loser because his arm was broken in the first fight. Think about it... Minato, a new kid, takes down the big bad Magician pretty much singlehandedly while making sure Yukari didn't die. On the other hand, the two-year veteran Akihiko has to flee with a broken arm... yeah, not setting the bar very high. Granted, if all the members of SEES were logical and Akihiko didn't have pride shoved up his ass, he could have explained the real reason for his loss. Remember, though this fight isn't shown, the fact that Akihiko has to help Mitsuru fight other Shadows while Minato battles the Magician means that when Akihiko went up against it, it had back-up. There was no way he could have won against the Magician and other Shadows, especially if you take into account the Magician's body structure (basically, bladed tentacles) vs. Akihiko's fighting style (close-up fists, and, if you recall, not even Minato with a sword could close in until Jack cleared the path). But Akihiko isn't one to make excuses for himself, so this point is never made (in the game, or in Remix). Until now, that is.

That's that. Back to the story.

A quick shower and a rush to the train station. Minato had his music going for the majority of the ride, and took off his earphones as he approached school. He turned to see Yukari once again approaching him in the manner that he now classified as her 'I've got a question' speed walk. Head held high, arms kept close, longer strides than usual, and a concerned or possibly serious look on her face. "Good morning, Yukari." Minato said.

"Mornin'." she replied. "You probably didn't catch the news this time around, so I thought I should tell you there's a big increase in the number of people recovering from Apathy Syndrome recently. Plus, they also said the number of new cases dropped too... I guess things really do get better after each mission. But then, that changes again as we get closer to the next full moon..."

"As does the tide of battle... unless you attack, the enemy will recover. Unfortunately for us, we don't exactly have a method to keep hitting those full moon Shadows, so we're stuck countering." Minato said. "Regardless, as long as they keep coming, we just need to keep killing them. Simplicity itself."

"That's true, but it's kind of depressing..." Yukari said. She walked next to him in silent contemplation before speaking again. "... By the way, Minato, what do you think about Mitsuru-senpai?"

"She's no slouch in combat. Her Persona's elemental attacks

far surpass Junpei and Akihiko's, and I dare say even yours. Plus, she can heal, which is a bonus, and her close range abilities are something to behold. Granted, she's not too good at dealing with multiple enemies up close, but in a one-on-one, she's almost as capable as me." Minato chuckled. "And to top it off, she's got a body that she can rock with or without clothes. Trust me. I've seen her naked." he said. Yukari facepalmed.

"Why do you have to sexualize everything?" she asked. "And I wasn't talking about how strong she was either."

"... You know, maybe you should stop asking such vague questions. In case you haven't noticed, this is becoming a pattern." Minato said.

"... Crap, you're right." Yukari said, her eyes widening. She shook her head, and snapped back to normal. "Anyways, that's not the point. What I meant was... don't you think she's pushing people to do what she wants all the time? I mean, I get it in Council and stuff, because that's just school... but everyone in SEES is putting their lives on the line. Even with Fuuka joining... I know it's nice to have her around, but... would it have been better if we never got her involved? She's so nice, but when she fights... I don't know, but what Mitsuru-senpai does sometimes... it just feels wrong. Inhumane, even..."

"... You know, oddly enough, I understand your concerns." Minato said.

"Really?" she asked.

"As a soldier, you're expected to do your duty and fight without question for the good of the cause. We're both pretty sure we're fighting for the right cause, but does the end justify the means? Fuuka, an otherwise innocent girl, has just been dragged to the forefront of our battle, given little to no choice." Minato said. "... The question you're asking, Yukari, is in war, where do you draw the line between what's right and what's wrong?"

"... That was a little more elaborate than it was in my head, but yeah." Yukari said.

"Do you know what that says about you, Yukari?" Minato asked. Yukari thought for a moment, and then glanced at Minato. He had a smirk on his face, and she sighed.

"Lemme guess. I'm 'weak-willed'?" Yukari said. Minato laughed.

"That does sound like something I'd say, but no. Questioning whether or not you should go for something regardless of what you have to do for it means you're smarter than you look." Minato said.

"... Did you just compliment me?" she asked, a confused expression on her face.

"Take it or leave it, but remember I don't throw those around very often." Minato said. Yukari grinned.

"Well, don't mind if I do." she said. The two laughed as they entered school and made their way to class. Minato sat down in his seat as usual next to Junpei in the corner of the class.

"S'up, dude?" Junpei said. "Hey, even though we've been kickin' Shadow ass lately, have you noticed there's less kids here?"

"... Less kids?" Minato asked. He turned to survey the class, and realized Junpei wasn't lying. His previous class of thirty-five students had dropped to twenty-eight, and the seating arrangement clearly showed obvious gaps near the front of the class. "You're right." *"The fuck? I knew it got quieter as time went on, but I didn't think it was because people were disappearing."*

"Ain't it creepy, dude?" Junpei asked. "It's like, yeah, we're savin' people and all, but there's still a bunch more we can't do anything for."

"... Look at it this way. We're slowing down the rate that this would usually be happening tremendously." Minato said. "I don't know if there's a permanent solution to this, but we're doing all we can. Just imagine what this place would be like without us."

"... Shit, dude. There'd prolly only be like ten kids here." Junpei said. He gulped. "... Maybe we should make sure we're on top of our game, yeah?"

"Calm down, Junpei... these are unavoidable casualties."

Minato said. "I won't spout some bullshit promise about us being able to fix everything, because I don't even know if that's possible... all we can do is keep doing what we've been doing."

"So we gotta just tough it out, huh?... But damn, bro... this is serious." Junpei said. Ms. Toriumi walked into class, and the bell rang, prompting Minato and Junpei to end their conversation and greet her along with the rest of the students. She cleared her throat as she stood in front of the class.

"Good morning... before you take your seats, I realize we have far fewer students than normal... I'd like the students at the back to come forwards and fill in the empty seats." Ms. Toriumi said. Minato and Junpei glanced around. They were the only ones in their row now, and Junpei had nobody in front of him, allowing him to rest his feet on the back of the chair however he wanted.

"... Could we not?" the student who sat in front of Minato asked. Ms. Toriumi glared at him.

"No." she snapped. "Now, hurry up. Class has started." Minato and Junpei quickly scanned which seats were available, and found the perfect spots. The seat behind Yukari was open, along with the seat diagonally behind that to the left, which happened to be diagonally in front of Kenji's seat. Minato claimed the spot behind Yukari and Junpei claimed the one near to Kenji, and the two nodded to each other as they sat down.

"Guess who?" Minato whispered to Yukari.

"Even your voice stands out, ya know?" she whispered back. Minato chuckled.

"What can I say?" he asked. The day began, and aside from Minato having to answer a question about a colon, nothing of real note happened. At lunch, Yukari, Junpei, and Kenji essentially formed a group around him. He didn't bother resisting. They were about to eat when they heard Fuuka's voice near the door.

"It'll be fine. They're really nice." Fuuka said.

"N-no way! I shouldn't even be here!" a panicked voice replied. "B-besides, that guy'll hit me or something!"

"No he won't!" Fuuka said. "You said you wanted to meet new people, so don't be too shy."

"I shouldn't have to take that from you of all people, Fuuka! C'mon, show some understanding!" the voice replied. "A-and when did you get strong enough to drag me around?!" Minato's group saw the classroom door pop open, with Fuuka dragging Natsuki in after she entered.

"Hello, everyone! Natsuki said she wanted to try and talk to some new people, so I brought her here!" Fuuka cheerfully announced. Natsuki looked ready to die.

"What the hell, Fuuka?! You can't just say that!" she retorted.

"... *I see you, Fuuka. Having your own style of fun and games, aren't you? Allow me to join in.*" Minato thought, noticing her constant smile. She was too happy. "The more the merrier." he said, rising from his chair. "I'll pull up some seats... unless you'd rather sit on my lap, Fuuka." She froze, not expecting that comment. Natsuki saw her chance.

"Yeah, it'd save space, Fuuka! You're fine with that, right?" Natsuki said.

"Excuse me, but I think she can decide for herself." Yukari said.

"T-that's right!" Fuuka said, giving a Yukari a quick nod. She quickly looked over everyone in the room, and then took a quick glance at Natsuki. She couldn't deny that she wanted to see what would happen if she pushed her luck. She slid over to Minato and sat down on his lap with a giggle. Natsuki's sudden change in expression may as well have been accompanied by the sound of a glass shattering. "I'll sit where I usually sit." Fuuka said with a grin. Minato pet her hair and chuckled.

"I was wondering why everyone was making a fuss." he said. Kenji and Natsuki weren't used to any such sight, and both of them were at a loss. Junpei just tipped his cap to Minato and went on as if nothing had happened. "... Though, shouldn't one of you guys get Natsuki a seat?" Minato asked, still stroking Fuuka's hair.

"O-oh, yeah... H-here..." Kenji said, pulling the empty seat

next to him near their circle. Natsuki slowly took a seat, watching Fuuka's constant smile with the same shocked expression as before.

"So, Natsuki, new people, huh?" Minato asked. "Trying to spread your wings?"

"... What?" Yukari asked.

"This has nothing to do with that." Natsuki said, shooting him a quick glare.

"Hey, you remembered! Good for you!" Minato said.

"Remembered?" Fuuka asked.

"It's nothing, Fuuka. We just had a funny talk one time... though are you sure you want to sit there? That guy's creepy as hell." Natsuki said.

"And still doesn't having a problem punching you in the gut." Minato said.

"Dude, what the heck?" Junpei asked. Yukari scowled.

"C'mon, you could at least act nice! She's not doing anything wrong." Yukari said. He and Yukari engaged in a little stare down that soon turned into both of them chuckling.

"... Man, and I thought I was crazy." Kenji commented.

"Nah, we ain't that bad." Junpei said. "Just... what'd ya call it,

Minato?"

"Confrontational as fuck." Minato said. He turned to Natsuki. "Sorry, but we're probably worse than your old friends." Natsuki looked at him, then turned to see Yukari and Junpei both let out a sigh as Kenji scratched his head. Fuuka looked like she was contemplating the truth of Minato's words. She couldn't help but laugh.

"Actually," Natsuki began, "I think we'll get along just fine. But since we're friends now, I'm going to kick your ass if you try and hit me again."

"If you don't give me a reason to, we should be fine." Minato said. He put an arm around Fuuka and pulled her closer to him. "Besides, I couldn't make my little Fuuka cry now, could I?"

"I'm not little!" Fuuka said. Everyone but Yukari snickered. Needless to say, the rest of Minato's lunch was lively.

After school, Minato made his way to the Council Room without much thought, and took his seat automatically. Mitsuru entered shortly after, and sat down next to him. "... I've read the file." Mitsuru said.

"Anything to share?" Minato asked.

"No... though it contains a few names of interest, I'm not lying when I say I have no idea what experiments or methods they're referring to." Mitsuru said. "Sorry... but the little I can

revel will have to wait."

"I didn't expect much more." Minato said. Shinjiro walked into the room and took his seat.

"... So, what were you two just talking about?" he asked.

"Speculative shit." Minato said. "It concerns Tartarus, but we aren't certain of anything yet."

"... Are you saying you actually know what it is or where it came from?" Shinjiro asked.

"No. We might have ideas that could generally be about its origins, but that's as close as we've gotten." Minato said.

"That's correct... we've only found bits and pieces of evidence that are almost impossible to tie together. We're certain that Tartarus' appearance is tied to the lab that the school was remodeled from, but we've yet to learn anything substantial." Mitsuru said.

"That's it? Three months, and you guys know it's the lab? I could've told you that." Shinjiro said.

"... The evidence we've been found can be crumpled into a paper ball. We have almost nothing to work with." Mitsuru said.

"... Well, it's not like we've been finding clues lying around each floor." Shinjiro said with a sigh. "Damn... month three, and all SEES has done is go up a few floors."

"This might take a while, Shinji." Minato said. Shinjiro scoffed, and leaned back in his chair.

"Take a while, huh? Like two years wasn't long enough." Shinjiro said. Minato and Mitsuru said nothing, and the general meeting passed without incident as usual. The other members went to their work, and Mitsuru shifted her gaze to Minato.

"The meeting is over now... once again, you're both free to leave." she said.

"You know we aren't going to do that." Minato said.

"I insist that you do. I cannot allow myself to become complacent. You both do more than enough." Mitsuru said. "Now then, if you'll excuse me." She got up and left to tackle the ridiculous pile of papers in the back room.

"... She's got even more pride than Aki. If he doesn't mind letting her wear the pants, I'm sure they'd go well together." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled.

"I can't disagree with you there, but I have a feeling that condition is much more difficult to achieve than you'd think." Minato said.

"Hmph. Surprised you'd be the one to say that." Shinjiro said. "I heard you sophomores are getting friendly with that Moriyama girl... I'm wondering if I need to send you to Edogawa for short-term memory loss."

"On one hand, we saved her only to drag her back into it, right?" Minato asked. "You have a point... but on the other hand, we saved her, so we should be able to do as we please with her."

"... What are you, a rapist?" Shinjiro asked. He paused as he saw Minato crack a grin. "Never mind, don't answer that... still, do you really think it's best for you guys to hang around her?"

"And if we left her alone?" Minato asked. "She'd still be Fuuka's friend, even without the rest of us around. If anything, it gives her more protection. I doubt our presence would affect whether or not she became another Shadow's target."

"Maybe... but wouldn't it be better if we kept her as far from all of this as possible?" Shinjiro asked.

"If she still turns into a coffin at midnight, it shouldn't matter where she is. Well, assuming it's not school, of course." Minato said.

"Tch... don't try to be a smartass." Shinjiro said.

"Should I emulate you and isolate myself from everyone else?" Minato asked.

"When you're like us, it might be for the best." Shinjiro said.
"We can make a lot of enemies."

"Or allies." Minato said. He got up. "C'mon. Let's go get some

food, on me."

"... Alright, let's go." Shinjiro said, getting up. The two walked out of the school and headed for the train station. Once they passed the school gates, Minato turned to Shinjiro.

"How much do you know about Red Hawk?" Minato asked.

"Red Hawk?... What are you asking about?" Shinjiro replied.

"Exactly what I asked. How much do you know about it?" Minato asked. Shinjiro glared at Minato for a bit before speaking.

"... You know it's owned by a demon tamer, right?" Shinjiro asked. Minato nodded.

"The guy in traditional Japanese attire that just goes by Naoya, right?" Minato asked. "Cousin of Kazuya Minegishi, King of Bel."

"You know, then... well, it fronts as a special bar that doubles as a gambling and opium den, but its real purpose is trafficking... for humans and demons alike. It's got some other crazy shit too, but I didn't bother finding out." Shinjiro said.

"One of them is getting to watch demons fight to the death." Minato said. "The view from the VIP section is quite good, and the chairs are amazing."

"... Ok, you got what you wanted to know. Why'd you ask?"

"I was curious... that tunnel Red Hawk is in is very big, after all. I saw demons in there too, but I wasn't among them." Minato said.

"Of course you weren't... I'm sure half of them would have tried to eat you because you look good or some crazy shit like that." Shinjiro said. Minato laughed.

"I am a model, after all." he said. Shinjiro shook his head.

"Some of them would've been looking at a lot more than just your body... those enhancements you've got are good prizes in their eyes." Shinjiro said.

"But if they had a brain, they'd see I could tear them apart as well." Minato said.

"Not all of them." Shinjiro said. "But that's a moot point... unless you plan on seeing what happens when you walk into a crowd."

"Not at all! I just wanted to expand on what I know." Minato said. The two boarded a train back to Iwatodai station and headed to Hagakure. They sat down and ordered, and were waiting on their food to arrive.

"... You know, Shinji, I'm curious." Minato said. "Why'd you stay here? It's obvious you're haunted by what you did."

"... Because I didn't feel right." Shinjiro said. "Hell, I should be suffering for what I did, but I'm not... and that doesn't feel

right either."

"In that case, I should have a drill going up my ass and out my skull." Minato said. Shinjiro scoffed. "It was a single life, Shinji... that child will probably turn out stronger than he ever could have been, if you think about it."

"That ain't worth what he's going to... no, what he's had to deal with." Shinjiro said. He turned to Minato, a serious expression on his face. "... Do you really think that you've become something so damn amazing that it makes all the things that happened to you worth it?"

"Yes." Minato said. Shinjiro looked away and shook his head. He looked hurt, oddly enough.

"... I pity you, kid." Shinjiro said. "Everyone else might look at you like you're some kind of unreachable badass, but you're standing on the edge of a cliff... once you fall off, you won't be able get back up."

"Who says I haven't already fallen?" Minato asked. "You know, Shinji, I think you're the one standing on the edge of a cliff. But what you don't realize is that there are so many people trying to pull you back because you're too fixated on something that isn't there anymore. If you go after it... well, you know what happens next."

"But it is there. The fact that I left that kid motherless is NEVER going to disappear." Shinjiro said. "The fact that the kid is going to be pitied for the rest of his life will NEVER

disappear. And the fact that it was MY idea to be there that night will NEVER disappear. The fact that it was MY weakness that got that kid's mother killed will ALWAYS be there!" The table they sat at creaked. Shinjiro lifted his hands off of it and shoved them in his pockets, a serious expression on his face. He had gotten louder as he spoke, and the surrounding customers were looking at their table.

"... Hey, it's that Aragaki kid. Damn, he killed a kid's mom?" one girl whispered.

"I knew that guy was scary, but a murderer?" a boy whimpered.

"Hey, hey, hey, this is a restaurant, not a theater!" the server that spoke to the two of them before said as he saw the group of people all trying to inch closer to Minato's table. "If you want a show, get outta here!" The crowd quickly dispersed, and the server set Shinjiro and Minato's food down in front of them. "... Sorry about that." he said.

"... You couldn't help it." Minato said. "Things like that... just happen sometimes, don't they?"

"Yeah... don't let it get you down." the server replied. He headed back into the kitchen, and Minato glanced at Shinjiro, who was taking a series of deep breaths.

"... I saw what you tried there." Shinjiro said. "But I won't accept that."

"Do you think, if I were given the choice to live my life, or, say, live Kenji's, which one do you think I would choose?" Minato asked.

"... Kenji's." Shinjiro said.

"Wrong. I'd choose mine." Minato said. "Do you want to know why?"

"Tch... so you can be as amazing as you are now?" Shinjiro retorted. Minato chuckled.

"Close, but no... I'd live mine because it's mine." Minato said. "Horrible and amazing decisions alike... they were the results of my choices, my successes, and my failures... they were the proof that Minato existed, and still exists today."

"... The proof of your existence?" Shinjiro asked.

"Once you make an impact on the world, you're living... tell me, Shinjiro... aside from fighting Shadows, are you alive?" Minato asked. Shinjiro said nothing. "... We both know that alone isn't enough to sustain an existence. Tell me, Shinjiro... where have you been these last two years?"

"... I don't know." Shinjiro said. He gazed into his ramen, and then slowly began to eat.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

After their meal, they paid and walked back to the dorm in silence. It wasn't until they were almost right outside that Shinjiro said anything again. "... I still think you're crazy, but... thanks."

"Don't mention it." Minato said. The two entered the dorm, and saw Akihiko and the rest of the girls in the lounge.

"Hey, where've you two been?" Akihiko asked.

"Lunch." Shinjiro replied as Minato turned to sign-in.

"Oh, alright. Hey, Minato, let's go to Tartarus tonight." Akihiko said. "I know the full moon is still a ways away, but the Shadows have gotten stronger. Besides, Junpei and Shinji don't have any experience up against the new enemy types yet."

"... That's a valid point." Minato said. He grinned. "We can build up endurance as well since we were only there two nights ago."

Akihiko chuckled. "Now you're speaking my language." he said.

"... I guess this means we're going, then." Fuuka said. "Oh, by the way... apparently, I heard that the reconstruction of Port Island's back alleys has been getting slowed because a lot of

the heavy machinery has been disappearing... have any of you heard about that?"

"Huh? How does heavy machinery just disappear?" Yukari asked.

"... That doesn't make much sense." Mitsuru said. Everyone in the room shrugged, and went on with their lives.

SEES prepped for Tartarus, and went into the lobby after it appeared. Akihiko kept a hand on Minato's shoulder to make sure he didn't go off and try to gaze at the transformation, much to Minato's chagrin. Inside of the lobby, Fuuka summoned Baba Yaga and their transceivers sparked to life.

"Alright, then... it's sophomores and seniors this time." Minato said with a smirk. "We sophomores will start on floor 47 and work our way up, while the seniors start from 40. Sound good?"

"Hmph. Then I'll lead off like before." Mitsuru said with a flick of her rapier. "Shinjiro, Akihiko, I expect no errors."

"Just like old times, huh?" Akihiko mused. "Alright then... let's get to it."

The two teams went into Tartarus and began their training without much of a hitch. The seniors proved more than capable of exploiting enough weaknesses, and anything they couldn't exploit was usually demolished by Shinjiro's raw power. As for the sophomores, they fought as they were used

to fighting, and faired just as well. Everything was fine until the seniors made it to the 53rd floor.

"Mitsuru-senpai, careful! I sense Death!" Fuuka said.

"The Reaper..." Mitsuru said. As if on cue, the sound of chains rattling resounded through the halls.

"... We just need to get off of this floor." Shinjiro said.

"Yeah... let's not waste time." Akihiko said, starting to hurry down a hallway. Mitsuru quickly passed him and Shinjiro followed suit. The trio managed to quickly eliminate the small number of Shadows they encountered in a little less than a minute per encounter, and soon had the stairs in their sights.

"There." Akihiko said with a sigh of relief. He took a step forwards, only to see the Reaper pass by the front of the stairs and turn towards them. It waved one of its greeting.

"Hi!" she said. Shinjiro immediately fired his Evoker, summoning Castor Prime.

"Dreadnought!" he called. Castor Prime fired its cannons one by one at the Reaper, causing explosion after explosion.

"Let's go!" he said, turning to run down a hallway. Mitsuru and Akihiko followed him, and they quickly dashed around another corner.

"... That wasn't nice." the Reaper said, emerging seemingly unscathed from Shinjiro's attack. It rose slightly off of the floor, then flew after them in hot pursuit.

"*Minato said he'll be there as fast as he can!*" Fuuka said over the transceiver.

"Why the hell didn't he think to give us a Traesto gem?!" Akihiko yelled.

"There's no use thinking about it now! We run!" Mitsuru said.

"... Aki, Mitsuru, keep hitting me with your Personas." Shinji said. "I've got something for this."

"Hit you?!" Akihiko asked.

"Lightning and ice! Hurry up!" Shinjiro said. Mitsuru was the first to draw her Evoker.

"Bufula." she said. Penthesilea launched a shard of ice at Shinjiro, and he extended a blackened right arm to absorb it. Akihiko drew his Evoker as he saw it, and fired as well.

"Zionga." he said. Polydeuces sent a large lightning bolt at Shinjiro, and he absorbed that as well. They kept it up for a solid minute until the Reaper suddenly came from around a corner in front of them.

"Caught you." it said, stopping in the front of a wall. It fired one of its pistols into the air, and a torrent of gigantic fireballs flew towards the group. Akihiko and Mitsuru stopped in their tracks, but Shinjiro kept going, arm extended. He absorbed the attacks, then bounded forwards with speed nobody expected him to have. He reached the Reaper, axe raised

above his head.

"GET LOST!" he yelled as he swung his axe down. The Reaper blocked the strike with one of its revolvers, and Shinjiro's arm pulsed on contact. A huge shockwave sent the Reaper flying backwards and clean into the wall. It vanished as Shinjiro landed, a bit wobbly, but otherwise alright.

"... Incredible, Shinjiro." Mitsuru said. "But we should hurry."

"I know." Shinjiro said, turning around. The Reaper reappeared out of the wall it was knocked into, and fired a quick shot at Shinjiro. He had no time to react, and the bullet hit him square in the shoulder, almost severing his arm from the rest of his body. He yelled and dropped to his knee, immediately shifting all of his enhancements to regeneration.

"SHINJI!" Akihiko yelled, running over to him. The Reaper slowly floated forwards and leveled one of its pistols at Shinjiro. It stopped when the sound of a motorcycle roaring through the halls approached at an alarming speed.

"The cavalry has arrived!" Hell Biker roared as he raced towards the Reaper. It responded by turning around and unloading its pistols at him. He swerved to avoid the first shot, only for the second to take out his front wheel. Without any control, his bike skid and flipped, leaving him to be torn apart by the remaining bullets.

"And the cavalry has died." the Reaper said. Akihiko had reached Shinjiro and was hurriedly pulling him away. Mitsuru

had her Evoker against her head, and was about to fire until Minato lunged around a corner at an inhuman speed, already awakened, and drove Eligor's lance straight through the Reaper's chest from behind. **"Ahh! So good!"** it said once Minato drove it into the floor. He laughed.

"I'll give you euphoria." he said as he materialized Matador's sword in his hand. The Reaper giggled and then sank through the floor before he could drive his sword through Matador's head. He immediately leaped to the side as the Reaper reappeared from the floor and tried to catch him in a hug.

"You have to join me first!" the Reaper said. Akihiko and Mitsuru had already used two rounds of Diarama on Shinjiro, mending the majority of his shoulder.

"Shit... The bone'll come back over time, but I don't think I'll be fighting anymore for a good week." Shinjiro said.

"Worry about that later! Mister said use this!" Alice said from next to them Mitsuru looked over and immediately recognized the item she was holding as a Traesto gem.

"Hurry up!"

"You have my thanks. Now go back to Minato!" Mitsuru said, quickly taking the gem. Alice nodded and faded away, revealing Minato scrambling backwards to avoid being trapped in a gigantic block of ice. He bounced to a wall, and ran around the Reaper again.

"He can handle this." Akihiko said. "Let's get Shinji out of here

already!" Mitsuru grimaced, but threw the gem up over their heads. It enveloped them in light, and they reappeared in the lobby. Yukari and Junpei were already there, waiting eagerly by Fuuka.

"Shinji-senpai!" Junpei said, running over.

"Are you all okay?" Yukari asked.

"We're fine... I just took one to the shoulder like a dumbass." Shinjiro said, holding his limp shoulder.

"Just took one?! Shinji, you almost lost your damn arm!" Akihiko said.

"Akihiko, calm down! We're already out of there." Mitsuru said. Akihiko turned on her, then back to Shinji. He clenched his fists.

"... Shit." he said. "I'm sorry, Shinji."

"... It ain't your fault, Aki." Shinjiro said.

"Yes it is! I'm the one who said we should come here tonight, and I'm the one who said we should head for the stairs instead of leaving, dammit!" Akihiko said. "I should be the one up there fighting that thing right now, but even then, I wouldn't be doing any good!"

Everyone fell silent. Nobody had anything to say to him, and he just stood there, trembling. Shinjiro grabbed his beanie and pulled it over his face, muttering to himself for a bit before

stewing his teeth. "... You sound like a bitch, Aki." Shinjiro said, startling everyone else. "Look, there was no friggin' way any of us knew we were going to run into that thing tonight. And there was no way we could've expected it to block us right at the stairs. Shit happened, Aki, but that's it... shit happened. There's nothing you can do about it."

"... Shinjiro..." Mitsuru said, her eyes wide.

"Don't gimme that look, Mitsuru." Shinjiro said quickly. "Cuz I ain't repeating myself. Let that shit go right now Aki, or I'm hit you with so many damn rights you're gonna wish I really lost my left." Akihiko stared at Shinjiro in disbelief. There was a long moment of silence as Baba Yaga teleported Fuuka, the only sound in the room being the energy crackling through the air. Shinjiro and Akihiko were still staring at each other, until Akihiko actually shed a tear. Shinjiro grinned. "...Heh. You're still a little bitch."

"... Shut up." Akihiko said, turning away. He was smiling and crying at the same time. Everyone else backed away to give them their own personal space. "... So, what changed your mind?"

"I made the mistake of trying to understand the mind of a certain psychopath." Shinjiro said. Akihiko chuckled.

"That guy's something else." Akihiko said. They went over to the clock, and Shinjiro paid for the clock. It cost him a pretty penny, but eventually, his shoulder regenerated. By the end of the next fifteen minutes, the teleporter came to life. Minato

slid out of it, skidding low to the ground and using Jack's cleavers to direct himself on the ground. He spun to an upright position, and released his awakened state. He was smiling like a maniac.

"That was fun." Minato said, rising to his feet. He adjusted his clothing and turned to face the other members of SEES. "So, Shinjiro, the clock worked out?"

"Yeah, it worked." Shinjiro said. "You good?"

"Took a few scratches, but nothing too serious." Minato said. "It'll heal up by the next day. Mitsuru, Akihiko, you two alright?"

"We're fine." Mitsuru said. Fuuka dispelled Baba Yaga and sighed.

"I think we should go home for tonight... a lot happened." Fuuka said. They packed up and began their walk back to the dorm. Akihiko moved over to Minato and got his attention.

"... Thanks." Akihiko said.

"For what?" Minato asked.

"I blamed myself for Shinji's injury tonight... and you know what he said to me? 'There was no way we could have known that would happen... sometimes, things just happen'." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled.

"I am an angel and a devil, am I not?" he asked.

"... You're a good friend, that's what you are." Akihiko said.
"Shinji'll never say it, but he thinks so too."

"Now you're sounding corny as hell... man, Shinji was right.
You are a bitch." Minato said. Akihiko smacked him on the
back.

"You're both punks." Akihiko said. SEES returned to the dorm,
and recuperated.

62. Chapter 62

Chapter 62: Play

Minato couldn't say he didn't enjoy a quiet morning. The majority of SEES was taking the luxury of sleeping in, leaving him to do as he wanted in the morning. Naturally, he left early to try and find new books to read since he finished his current ones, and made a few other stops beforehand. Once again, the construction site was deserted, so he paid it another little visit around three in the morning as usual. *"Two bull-dozers, three steam rollers, two cranes, and a few jackhammers. What else should I add to my collection?"* Minato thought as he eyed the construction site. From what he could see, there was a forklift and another crane that were ripe for the taking. The only problem was the presence of two security guards, but he already knew how to deal with them. *"Alice, if you would."*

Alice materialized inside of the construction site, and skipped along the path while humming. She immediately attracted the guards' attention, and they headed towards her, flashlights at the ready. "Hey, kid! What the hell do you think you're doing here?!" the first guard asked.

"It's late out! Get back to your house!" the second guard said. Alice kept going, humming and skipping, until she found a

shovel. She stopped and picked it up.

"This looks nice. I think I'll keep it." Alice said. She hefted the shovel over her shoulder and began to skip away.

"What the fuck?!" the first guard yelled, taking off in hot pursuit. The second guard followed, and Alice soon picked up her pace. Once Minato couldn't hear them anymore, he hopped the fence in one swift jump and dashed over to his targets. He reached the crane, and flicked the Dimensional Compactor. The black cube sparked with energy and let off an unearthly glow before the crane vanished. He turned, and dashed towards the forklift. He slid to a stop in front of it, and did the same thing he did with the crane. It disappeared, and he hurriedly jumped out of the site.

Alice had turned around the corner of the management building and vanished, dropping the shovel to the ground. The guards came around the corner a few seconds later, finding only the shovel lying on the floor. "Where the hell did she go?" the first guard asked.

"Tch... damn kid." the second guard said. "Screw it... let's get back to position before somebody says we were slacking off." The guards made their way back to their posts, and froze as they took their positions.

"... Wasn't there a crane around here?" the first guard asked.

"... And a forklift too." the second guard said.

"... We're fucked, aren't we?"

"Definitely."

Minato had already summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle and was riding across the Moonlight Bridge back to Iwatodai by the time the guards had made their way back to their post. He grinned as he sped down the mostly empty bridge. *"And here are two new toys for me."* Minato thought.

"... ***Boss, why are you getting construction equipment?***" David asked.

"I think it's handy to keep on me. It has all types of uses, you know... Besides, Hell Biker knows how to operate all types of vehicles." Minato replied. He made it back to the dorm and made breakfast before anyone else had woken up. Mitsuru was the first into the lobby as usual, and she arrived just as he finished.

"Good morning, Minato." Mitsuru greeted as usual.

"Good morning, Mitsuru. I made pancakes again. Want me to put twin rapiers on yours as usual?" Minato said. Mitsuru laughed.

"If you insist." she said. She took a seat at the table as Minato prepared her meal. "By the way, I have something to tell you... From now on, you'll be able to go to Tartarus without me, since Yamagishi has taken over the role of providing support. However, I've instructed her not to let you

go if none of the seniors are present."

"I doubt that'll happen too often." Minato said as he placed Mitsuru's meal down in front of her. He leaned over and twirled a bit of Mitsuru's hair around one of his fingers.

"Besides... I'd much rather stay back alone with you if you're not going."

"T-that isn't an option." Mitsuru said, quickly looking away and brushing his hand aside. Minato chuckled.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"... This is not the time for that line of questioning." Mitsuru said. She turned to her food. "You should hurry and eat as well."

Minato sighed. "Alright, then... but the offer still stands." he said. He prepared his own pancakes with a skull design and opted to sit directly next to Mitsuru this time.

"... You usually sit across from me." Mitsuru said.

"Did you want to play footsie?" Minato asked, getting closer to her. Mitsuru couldn't help but sigh.

"Must you insist on... hold for a moment." Mitsuru said, turning towards him. Minato straightened up. "... Your bowtie's loose." she said. Before Minato could respond, she immediately untied it and began fixing it.

"... Well, this is a new experience." Minato said.

"I'm surprised... You seem experienced in dressing others." Mitsuru said. She narrowed her eyes. "... And your collar has been wrinkled. That won't do at all."

She finished the bowtie and moved onto his collar. "... You know your ribbon is also crooked, right?" Minato asked. Mitsuru stopped and looked down.

"... I must have hit it just now." Mitsuru said.

"Then the fault is mine. Allow me to fix it." Minato said. He worked on her ribbon, and, to his surprise, Mitsuru allowed him and returned to his collar. He leaned forward to get a better look at what he was doing, and ended up resting his forehead against hers. "You don't mind if I make you look like God's gift to this world, do you?"

Mitsuru giggled. "I'm flattered... I was certain you were supposed to be the gift." she said.

Minato chuckled. "Perhaps there was more than one?" he mused.

"Minato? Mitsuru-senpai?" Fuuka asked. The two immediately backed away from each other and sat at the far edge of their respective seats. Mitsuru wiped the corner of her mouth with a napkin as Minato twirled his knife in his hands. They turned to the source of the voice, and saw that Fuuka wasn't alone. Yukari was also there, scratching the side of her head and looking awkwardly off to the side, along with Akihiko, whose lips were trembling.

"Good morning, everyone. I've made pancakes today." Minato said, taking the first bite of his food. "There are blueberries, strawberries, and cheese available, along with some scrambled eggs and bacon bits."

"It's quite delicious. The pancakes will certainly surpass your expectations." Mitsuru said, taking another bite.

"... Uhh, ok." Yukari said. "It tastes really good, huh? I can't wait... right, Fuuka?"

"O-oh, yes! Let's eat!" Fuuka said. "You should join us, Akihiko-senpai!" Akihiko stood there like a statue, still staring at the two of them. Minato and Mitsuru ate normally, though they were both keeping an eye on the actions of the others. Fuuka and Yukari were taking their food, but Akihiko had yet to move. After the other two finally took their seats across from them, he spoke.

"... You two were rather close." he said. Minato smirked.

"Were we? I didn't notice." he said. Akihiko twitched.

"When fixing another's clothing, it's only natural that such close proximity is required." Mitsuru said.

"... Fixing another's clothes?" Yukari asked. Minato shifted his gaze to them, and saw Yukari looking more surprised than usual while Fuuka listened attentively.

"Our accessories were out of order." Minato said, going back

to his breakfast. "We can't walk around looking unkempt now, can we?"

"Precisely." Mitsuru said. Akihiko said nothing, simply watching the two of them for a bit more before taking his food. Breakfast was markedly quiet, and after Junpei and Shinjiro joined, SEES left for school. Akihiko was serious about drawing Mitsuru away, so he struck up a quick private conversation once they got on the train, leaving the other SEES members in one big group. "... Yes?" Mitsuru asked once they got away from the crowd.

"Well, uhh... I was just wondering... how are you holding up?" Akihiko asked. Mitsuru raised an eyebrow. "N-not with anything in particular, that is! Just... with all of your work, and being responsible for SEES... plus, we've got all the full moon operations to worry about as well... I was just wondering if you were doing okay."

"I'm fine, Akihiko. There's no cause for concern." Mitsuru said. She glanced back to the other members of SEES. "Everyone has done more than enough, including you."

"You really think so, huh?" Akihiko asked.

"Are you doubting them?" Mitsuru asked.

"No, not at all! It's just... I mean, you already do so much on top of SEES." Akihiko said. Mitsuru chuckled.

"My duties aren't as difficult as you might think. Most of it is

just paperwork, and I'm more than adept at dealing with that." Mitsuru said. "... Though, why did you want to have this conversation in private?"

"Oh, uhh... so you didn't have to... hide any weakness, heh. But, I guess I was worried for nothing..." Akihiko said.

"... Is something bothering you, Akihiko?" Mitsuru asked. He smiled wryly.

"I'm just still a bit confused about that thing with Shinji last night. It's nothing." Akihiko said. "Guess I got scared when he got injured... I got scared that might happen to you some day, and I wouldn't be able to do anything about it. If that happened, I don't know what I'd do..." Mitsuru put a hand on his shoulder and looked him right in the eyes.

"Akihiko... don't worry. You need to stop thinking that you're fighting alone." Mitsuru said. "Have faith in everyone else... they're more than capable of standing alongside us."

"... Yeah, you're right." Akihiko said. He nodded to her, and she made her way back to the group. Mitsuru didn't know it, but she may as well have been stabbing him in the stomach with her rapier for the entire conversation. As a man who isn't exactly good with words, that was the closest he had ever come to any sort of confession. Mitsuru had just unknowingly blown it off, but to him, she may as well have trampled on it. He slowly walked back to the group, and Shinjiro immediately noticed something was wrong. He moved over to speak with him.

"... You alright, Aki?" Shinjiro asked.

"... I'm fine." Akihiko said. Shinjiro gave him a rather violent nudge.

"Don't gimme that shit. What happened?" Shinjiro asked. Akihiko stared at the floor. "... Something to do with Mitsuru?"

"... Shut up, Shinji." Akihiko said. He walked off, and Shinjiro sighed. He could tell something had just wrecked Akihiko's day, and as the older brother, it was his job to keep him in line. He trudged after him, glancing back to Mitsuru and wondering what she could have done.

Meanwhile, Mitsuru had just returned in time to see Minato efficiently using Fuuka's head as a chin cushion. He was leaning back by the window, while Fuuka used the rest of his body as a brace. "You know, this is really comfortable." Minato said.

"It is, isn't it?" Fuuka replied. Minato's gaze shifted to Mitsuru.

"So, what was Akihiko worried about?" he asked.

"My well-being." Mitsuru said. Minato swore he saw her usual expression flicker for a moment as she joined the group, but didn't bother giving it too much attention. "Minato, I expect you're more than excited about the Culture Club openings tomorrow? They meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, so you are permitted to skip Council to attend if the days coincide... unless I specifically request for your

presence."

"I'd only go if you gave me express permission." Minato said. "If I can be of service to you in the slightest, I'll gladly put aside any other plans."

"... Isn't that a bit much?" Yukari asked.

"... That's dedication." Fuuka said. Mitsuru couldn't help but smirk.

"Very well then... you don't mind if I limit you to once per week, do you?" she asked.

"Not at all." Minato said. "But didn't you also have a cooking club you wanted me to attend as well, Fuuka?" he asked, getting a bit comfier by adjusting Fuuka's position against him.

"Actually, there's no real reason for me to have that anymore... I think I'll ask you and Shinjiro-senpai for help back at the dorm." Fuuka said.

"An excellent idea, Fuuka." Mitsuru said. "I can speak to Shinjiro on your behalf if you'd like."

"... Actually, I think I should ask him myself." Fuuka said. "It wouldn't be right for you to ask him for me... but thank you for the offer."

"I see..." Mitsuru said. She nodded. "I'll leave it up to you, then."

"Yeah, show that determination, Fuuka! I bet yer' cooking is gonna be heavenly in no time!" Junpei said.

"I know you can do it, Fuuka." Yukari said. Fuuka nodded.

"If you don't mind a few night lessons, I'm more than game." Minato said. "Dinner and lunch foods are close enough, right?"

Fuuka smiled. "I'll do my best." she said.

They arrived at school and all headed to class. The day proved to be otherwise uneventful, and ended rather quickly. Since it was a Tuesday, Minato was going to go look for Fuuka or Junpei, but he was cut off at the end of the day by Ms. Toriumi. "Minato, it's your turn for cleaning duty again." she said. Minato took one look at her and knew exactly what she meant.

"No problem." he said. He waited for the rest of the class to clear out, and then hurriedly cleaned the room. He finished in just under ten minutes, and put the cleaning supplies away. He turned to his expectant friend. "Where do you want to meet up, Isako?" he asked.

"Have you been to Shinshoudo Antiques yet?" she asked.

"An antique store? Can't say I have." Minato said.

"I think you'd like it... you seem like the type who enjoys finding interesting things." Isako said. She winked at him.

"Besides, who said we'll only go to one store?"

"Today sounds like it's going to be very fun if we're going to hit the mall." Minato said. "I can hardly wait."

"Then we should hurry, shouldn't we?" Isako asked. "I'll see you soon." She left the classroom, and Minato quickly made his way back to the dorm. He rushed past Akihiko and Shinjiro, who had already returned to the dorm, and grabbed the package with what he had ordered from the front desk. He took it to his room, and looked over the contents with a grin. It was time for a new outfit.

He slapped on a blue t-shirt with a black blood-covered girl's silhouette on the front and his sleeveless black jacket, along with his hat and new dark blue scarf with black detailing on top of black and blue striped cargo shorts and sneakers. He put his watch back on, kept the Dimensional Compactor as a bracelet as usual, and swiftly rushed downstairs once again. "Where are you headed?" Shinjiro asked from his seat on the lounge. He and Akihiko were still watching television, and from what he could tell, it looked like some sort of soap opera.

"To hang out with my worst influence." Minato said. Shinjiro scoffed.

"You and Toriumi are both idiots." Shinjiro said. Akihiko said nothing, his head hung in disappointment.

"But we have fun, don't we?" Minato asked. He left the dorm and rode part ways to Paulownia Mall, dispelling his bike in a shady corner and walking the rest of the way. He glanced at his watch, and saw he was twenty minutes early. He decided

to spend his time trying out the crane game, and managed to win a number of odd foods that he could keep as snacks, as well as a Jack Frost Doll, which he felt he could find some use for. With five minutes left until Isako was supposed to arrive, he moved over to the empty bench facing Shinshoudo and Game Panic to take a seat. He looked around, and spotted Isako.

She had opted for a white, short sleeved jacket on top of a red vest with black pants along with her beret and red scarf. She couldn't help but smile when she saw Minato's outfit. "I see you're taking your fashion tips from me." Isako said as she sat down next to him. "A scarf suits you well."

"What do you expect? I am me, after all." Minato said. Isako laughed.

"And the pleasure is all mine, isn't it?" she added. Minato chuckled.

"Today, that isn't the case." Minato said. "We're going to enjoy a day at the mall together, Isako, starting there." He pointed to Shinshoudo Antiques. "They reopened recently, right?"

"That's right. I could tell you about all the wonderful things they claim to have inside, but it'd be much better if we just saw for ourselves, right?" Isako said. She took Minato's arm and got up alongside him.

"Aren't you being playful today?" Minato asked.

"I'm in a good mood." Isako replied. The two entered Shinshoudo Antiques, an otherwise plain looking store from the outside, and were pleasantly surprised by the interior. The walls of the store were lined with various pieces of old armor, weaponry, and classical devices. The shelves and rows housed various forms of antique pottery, musical instruments, figurines and statues.

"My, my... this place is already more interesting than I thought it would be." Minato said.

"I thought you'd appreciate a place like this." Isako said. Minato chuckled.

"You know me well indeed." he said. "Which row do you want to start from?"

"... Let's go systematically from left to right. I want to see everything." Isako said.

"I support that idea." Minato said. The duo began to sift through various antiques along the wall, and Minato couldn't help but feel that a few of the weapons seemed special.

"... ***Something's up with these weapons, Boss. They're not at full power.***" Jack said.

"*Full power?*" he replied, standing a little ways off from Ms. Toriumi while examining a short sword. Before any of his Fiends could say anything, he turned his attention to the approaching footsteps. From what he could tell, it was the

shop keeper, and old dark-skinned woman wearing a dusty apron over a beige gown with gray hair kept in a large bun and thick glasses over her eyes.

"Welcome." she said. She turned to Isako, who was still looking over a statue. "... Officer Kurosawa told me about you and your friends... I used to research Personas, so I'll do what I can for you."

"... Is that what these weapons are for?" Minato asked. The shopkeeper grinned, and Minato couldn't help but equate that look to a mad scientist's for a split second before it turned into a less distinct look.

"You're sharp... yes, that's what the weapons are for. I can fuse a Persona and a weapon together to create a unique blade that you'll likely never see in this world." she said.

"However, that's not all... if you have any rare gems, you can trade them to me for certain items... namely, weapons for you to fuse and a few other items which you might find more useful."

"That's promising." Minato said. "... But unfortunately, I won't be doing any shopping today. As you can see, I'm preoccupied."

"... I see. Though, don't think I'll give you a discount because you like older women." the shopkeeper said. Minato laughed.

"I wasn't counting on it, but if you offer, I'll gladly accept." he said. The shopkeeper chuckled, and returned to the counter.

Minato went back over to Isako and continued to browse through the figures. After about half an hour of window shopping, they grew tired of looking at antiques, and left.

"Well, that was fun while it lasted." Isako said with a little stretch.

"Tired? We could always take a little stop at Chagall." Minato said. He grinned. "Nothing better than sharing some coffee, right?" Isako laughed.

"It won't end how you're hoping it'll end." Isako said.

"We've yet to find that out, don't we?" he whispered. She laughed.

"You're a little too hopeful, you know?" Isako said.

"I believe I'm more expectant, actually." Minato said. He chuckled as they entered Café Chagall and grabbed a table as they awaited their coffee. Isako smirked as they sat down, and Minato already knew she found something to poke fun at.

"Minato, I've heard you're rather friendly with quite a few girls. Keeping your options open?" she asked.

"I see you... how about a reversal?" Minato thought. He laughed. "Those are just my distractions to pass the time." he said. He slid over to get right next to Isako. "After all, my real prize is right in front of me." Isako laughed.

"I'm flattered, but I'm sorry to say you'll be left wanting." she

said. "But I suppose I can give you a consolation prize." She pulled Minato in by his chin and swiftly turned his head to the side, planting a kiss on his cheek. Minato chuckled.

"I think we both deserve a bit more than that." Minato whispered, resting his hand on Isako's cheek. "You might need a bigger prize than I do."

"... How badly do you want me to lose my job?" she mused. Minato's response was a quick kiss to her cheek.

"That depends... how badly do you want to keep it?" he replied. They both shared a quiet laugh, and separated as the server brought their drinks. Minato looked at her and recognized her as the one that had seen him on multiple occasions. *"Ah, shit. Not this bitch again."*

"Here you go." the waitress said, placing down their drinks. She stopped and looked at Minato and Isako. "... I'd be careful, miss. This boy gets around."

"But she likes me because of that, right?" he asked, putting an arm around her. The waitress cringed, and he glanced at Isako. She knew exactly what he was going for, and put one of her arms around him.

"I like young men with experience." Isako said. The waitress quickly turned around and left, her eyes almost bulging out of her head. The two of them started laughing once she left their sight, and bumped heads. "That was great."

"Wasn't it?" he asked.

"Hmph... that girl's an idiot." Isako said. "Speaking like that about a customer... she should be fired. Honestly, those idealistic types that just run their mouths thinking they're doing the right thing are ridiculous, aren't they? Sometimes, people just need to restrain themselves."

"... You're right. But people also need to just go wild every now and then as well, right?" Minato asked. "Otherwise, you become a zombie."

"That's right. Why do you think I'm here now?" Isako asked.

"For that exact reason... but you're a contradiction." Minato said. "Holding yourself back while going wild... I think you're the one being ridiculous." Isako chuckled.

"Even 'wild' has limits, Minato... you might not see it now, but it'll hit you one day. I guess that's when you'll truly become an adult." Isako said.

"Then is it bad if I always want to be a child?" Minato asked.

"It's unrealistic... but in truth, I wish I was still a child myself." Isako said. She rested her head against him. "I envy you... you're still young enough to get away with doing things that you'd otherwise regret. If I pulled any of those stunts, I'd derail my life... But that's just how it is." She turned to look Minato right in the eyes. "... I really hope you stay a child. Being an adult sucks."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

"I don't think you're an adult." Minato said. "You're on the edge... dipping in the deep side but still in touch with your inner child."

"... And if I am?" Isako asked.

"I can pull you back." Minato said. She giggled.

"Is that so? Then, I'll be counting on you... but not today." Isako said. "We spent too much time already... we'll part once we finish our drinks."

They did just that, drinking while making small talk about Mr. Ekoda's misfortune and Minato's antics, until they finally left the mall and parted ways. Minato walked straight to the dorm, but received a text from Kenji as he left the mall. He checked it.

"DUDE OMG! U n Ms.T r serious! I wish u all da best! Lemme know if u need nything! Gtg, Emiri's waiting! Thnx again!" it read. Minato chuckled and gave a short reply.

"Will do. I would say have fun, but I'm sure you'll do more than that."

Kenji replied with a smiley face, and the conversation ended. Minato walked back into the dorm to find everyone mostly preoccupied. "How was your day?" Fuuka greeted from her laptop.

"Fun." Minato replied. "Have any of you ever been to the Antique Store?"

"Antique Store... oh, Shinshoudo! They had their re-opening recently, right?" Fuuka said. "I wanted to go, but..."

"We'll go on Thursday." Minato said, walking over to sit next to Fuuka. She turned to face him, and paused. Mitsuru, who had been sitting on the lone chair facing the window, also looked him over.

"... That's a nice outfit. But why do you have a scarf in summer?" Fuuka said. Minato chuckled, and loosened his scarf so it could wrap around Fuuka as well.

"So I can do this, of course." Minato said with a grin. He flicked his scarf around Fuuka and put his face right next to hers. "Gives us our own private space, doesn't it?" he whispered. Fuuka immediately tried to hide her face, and Minato laughed.

"T-this is too close..." Fuuka said.

"I think this distance is perfect." Minato said, placing an arm around Fuuka's waist.

"... Excuse me, but I'll have you know that despite the fact that this is a co-ed dorm, relations of that sort aren't allowed in public." Mitsuru said.

"You're one to talk." Yukari muttered.

"... Was that a request for an execution, Takeba?" Mitsuru asked. Yukari froze.

"N-not at all! I-I mean, Minato, quit it! You're harassing her!" Yukari said. Minato pulled back his scarf and got up, leaving Fuuka to hide her face in her laptop.

"... That wasn't necessary." Fuuka whispered. He saw her eyes flash yellow for a second, but they returned to normal before anyone but Minato noticed.

"... *I'm going to start a catfight soon, won't I?*" Minato thought.

"The bulls are raging. Only one of them can claim the life of the Matador, so they will fight for that right." Matador said.

"... ***You know they're not interested in you, right?***" Jack asked.

"It was a figure of speech." Matador said.

"... ***Right.***" David said.

"Mister, do you think they'll start killing each other?"

Alice asked. ***"That would be fun to watch!"***

"I certainly hope they don't tear each other apart. It'll be too messy." Hell Biker said.

"Regardless of what happens, I'll enjoy watching them dance for me... however, I should probably tone down my antics... or not." Minato thought.

"Definitely or not." David said.

He changed into more comfortable clothing and had dinner before heading out again. Akihiko was the one to speak up this time as he made his way to the door. "... Going out again, huh?" he asked.

"I think I'll go visit a friend at Escapade. Strawberry Sundae." Minato said.

"... Strawberry sundae?" Fuuka asked.

"He's a guy that hangs out there, eating strawberry sundaes." Minato said. "I think I've developed a taste for them as well, actually." He walked out of the dorm before anyone could say anything, and headed to Escapade. Vergil stood at the entrance as usual, and nodded to Minato as he passed by. Minato checked his watch and saw it he had a few minutes to go till midnight, so he went straight to the bar as usual. Dante sat where he always sat, and Minato took a seat next to him. "Two strawberry sundaes." he said as he sat down. The bartender moved to get their order, and Minato turned to

Dante. "How was your trip?"

"Not too bad." Dante said. "Got impaled a few times, almost lost my arm, but nothing too serious. How've things been with you?"

"Got into a pretty serious fight, but came out just fine. New crew member, and otherwise happy life... though I might have some women fighting over me soon." Minato said. Dante chuckled.

"Does one of them have a rocket launcher?" he asked.

"Yes." Minato said.

"Pick her. A chick with a rocket launcher will fuck you up." Dante said. "Doesn't matter how strong you are... you take a hit from that directly, and you're in for pain." Minato chuckled.

"I'll keep that in mind." he said. Their strawberry sundaes arrived, and they ate their meals before the Dark Hour. "... So, enjoying your time with your brother?"

"... That's a work in progress." Dante said. "I was actually hoping you could help me get my mind off of it."

"Really? Then don't worry too much. There are some new enemies to fight in that Tower. Let's go tear em' apart." Minato said.

The duo headed to Tartarus and did exactly that. *"He's not ready to talk more, huh? Oh well. I get to kill things, so it's all*

good." Minato thought while he fought. They didn't speak much, each fighter putting all of their attention into their art. They parted at Tartarus, both looking enlightened, and returned to their living arrangements. Minato slipped in through his window as the Dark Hour ended, and prepared a cup of tea to mark the start of the twilight hours.

63. Chapter 63

Chapter 63: Culture Clubs

Minato finished his morning routine quicker than usual, and ate before anyone else could enter the lounge. As he was washing his dishes, Akihiko and Shinjiro entered, Shinjiro looking generally annoyed as he always was and Akihiko less energetic than usual. "Good morning, Shinji, Akihiko." Minato said.

"Mornin'." they both said. They both got some food and ate rather quietly, without making any type of conversation.

"... Something's off... but I'll leave them be." Minato thought. He returned to his room for his bag and then walked downstairs, heading towards the door. "I'll be taking a little stroll. See you at school." Minato said. He left the dorm early, leaving them to their breakfast. As he said, he did take a leisurely stroll to school. He walked across Moonlight Bridge with music blaring in his ears, and was enjoying himself for the majority of the walk.

"Company, Boss. Succubus chick right behind you, closing in fast." David said.

"Do you enjoy sounding funny like that?" Alice asked.

"I'm only speaking officially! This isn't a 'funny' way of speaking! You speak funny!" David snapped back.

"You're the only one of us who tries to be all official... I get Jack, because he's kind of like a Yakuza, but not you." Hell Biker said.

"... Yeah, what the hell are you copying me for?" Jack asked.

"This conversation happens in private." Minato ordered. He took one earphone out and looked back to see Catherine very quickly though almost silently moving behind him. ***"... Stealthy. Bet she's a master of getting out the morning after."*** "Rare to see you in the morning, Catherine." he said. She smiled.

"I could say the same to you." she replied as she moved next to him and matched his pace. "What made you take this route today?"

"Felt like it." Minato said. "Do you always come to school like this?"

"Usually." Catherine said. "So, did you know the Culture Clubs are opening today?"

"I did... there's Art, Photography, and Music, right?" Minato replied.

"That's right. Which one are you going to join?" she asked.

"Probably Art. I can play, but not through my own skills. As ridiculous as it sounds, the little semblance of honor I have left prevents me from dominating that club completely using skills that I haven't learned myself." Minato said.

"Are you saying you can dominate Art?" Catherine asked. Minato chuckled.

"I wouldn't go that far, but I know a thing or two about drawing and painting. I picked it up when I was twelve, and practiced it alone for a few years. Plus, I'd say I doodle damn well in my notes." Minato said.

"Interesting... you know, I'm in the Art Club too." Catherine said. "And the Photography Club as well. You might want to join both."

"... Wouldn't I have to attend both, then?" Minato asked. Catherine chuckled.

"No, silly. You just go to whichever one you feel like. Both of those clubs just need you to submit work, really. Attendance is completely optional." Catherine said. "It's the same with the Fashion Club too, but nobody really goes there except for this one French boy... he's cute, though."

"Thinking of eating him up?" Minato asked.

"Maybe." Catherine said. "And the Art Club has quite the nice star boy as well... I was looking at him too. Then of course, I've got you in my sights as well." Minato laughed.

"As nice as that sounds, I think I'll avoid that for now." Minato said. "But I wonder... what do you do in Photography Club? You don't seem like the type to find landscapes attractive."

"No." Catherine said. She leaned in to whisper in Minato's ear. "But people find erotic photographs of me attractive."

Minato chuckled and moved away. "I thought as much." he said. "Though, who takes your pictures? Unless you repay the boys you corrupt with that gift." Catherine giggled.

"No, I take them myself... but since you brought it up, I've never been able to get those perfect shots. Care to help?" Catherine asked.

"I'll see. It depends on if Art Club allows me to just jump from club to club." Minato said.

"The rooms are right next to each other. You'd be surprised by how many people do it." Catherine said. "... Though if you do help, I hope you won't mind if I take some good pictures of you."

"I am a model, am I not? It's only natural I'd be a subject for the Photography Club." Minato said with a smirk. The two laughed again and passed through the front gates of Gekkoukan. Minato saw Fuuka, Yukari, and Junpei all walk in alongside him and Catherine. They immediately turned to see the duo both walking with content grins on their faces. Junpei stealthily tipped his hat to Minato as Fuuka and Yukari began to approach them, then followed suit. "Good morning,

everyone. Did you enjoy breakfast?" Minato asked.

"Good morning. It was delicious." Fuuka said.

"Yeah..." Yukari said. She turned to Catherine. "So, how'd you two meet up?"

"There's only one way to walk here from the city, you know." Catherine said.

"That's true, Yuka-tan." Junpei said. He nodded to Minato. "You guys just bumped into each other, right?"

"That's right." Minato said. "Not that many students opt to walk here in the morning, so it's wasn't that difficult for either of us to spot each other."

"Oh, so you two know each other?" Fuuka asked.

"Yukari introduced me to him about two weeks ago." Catherine said. She smiled. "We really hit it off, didn't we, Yukari?"

Minato couldn't help but smirk at Yukari's hamster reaction to that comment. "Y-yeah, you guys have... similar tastes?" she said. Junpei said nothing, knowing full well that anything he said could and would be used against either him or Minato, and he wasn't about to let that happen. He glanced at Minato, who discreetly gave him a thumbs-up, and he grinned.

"I thought we talked about being vague, Yukari. It won't do you much good in the long run." Minato said. He turned to

Fuuka. "What she means to say is that we have similar personalities, so naturally, we mesh well together."

"Plus our bodies are compatible." Catherine added. A gunshot might as well have gone off in the split-second after that comment, and Minato swore everyone, even Junpei, twitched the moment the words were uttered. After a brief moment of silence, she feigned innocence. "... Oh, not like that! I meant we make good cuddle buddies!"

"But not as good as we are, Fuuka." Minato said, sliding over to Fuuka and hugging her from behind. He glanced at Catherine, who almost looked impressed with his recovery. "Besides, don't you prefer the innocent types?" She laughed.

"I can't deny that." Catherine admitted, shocking everyone else. They entered the main hall, and she turned to Minato. "Well, I'll see you after school." she said with a little wink to Minato. Afterwards, she turned and headed straight to her class, leaving everyone save Minato stunned.

"... After school?" Yukari asked.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Yukari. She's in the Art Club, and I'm interested in joining." Minato said.

"Oh, so she's almost like your senpai?" Fuuka asked.

"That's actually a good way of putting it. Our relationship is probably more like the one I have with Ms. Toriumi." Minato said.

"... Wait, so that was real?!" Yukari asked.

"Huh? C'mon, Yuka-tan, that's like common knowledge for everyone in the dorm." Junpei said. "The guy's got more chick friends than guy friends. Big whup."

"Just like how Catherine has more guy friends than chick friends." Minato said. He finally stopped hugging Fuuka and the group headed to their classes. Fuuka pulled Minato back a little and motioned for him to lean in for a whisper. He did it, and she spoke into his ear.

"For an empty person, you have a lot of friends." Fuuka said.

"... I have a lot of cards, and I intend to get more." Minato replied. Fuuka giggled.

"Keep telling yourself that." Fuuka said. "I'm happy for you, though."

"... That might bite you in the ass one day." Minato said, straightening back up. He put an arm around Fuuka's shoulder. "But thanks for the support."

"I need to be reliable, don't I?" Fuuka asked. Minato chuckled.

"Now you're taking yourself too seriously." he mused. He walked Fuuka to class and then returned to his own to start the day. Aside from Mr. Edogawa threatening to have him reincarnated as a chupacabra (which he was fairly certain he could do) if he didn't know that the origin of magic came from

Shamanism, nothing of real note happened. The school day drew to a close, and he got up from his seat to head for the Culture Clubs. By the time he made it out of his classroom, he saw Fuuka and Catherine approaching him.

"Minato, and Fuuka-chan too! How lucky!" Catherine said cheerfully as she approached. "I was coming to introduce you to the Art Club, but it looks like Fuuka beat me to it."

"Oh, I didn't know that." Fuuka said. "I can go on ahead if you really wanted to do it..."

"No, not at all! I can still introduce him to the Photography Club once you finish your introductions." Catherine said.

"Nonsense. I deserve two introductions, do I not?" Minato mused. Fuuka and Catherine both chuckled. "Are you in the Photography Club as well, Fuuka?"

"No, actually... I never really developed a taste for it." Fuuka said. "But I think it's worth trying out."

"Of course it is. I have a feeling you'll love it just as much as I do." Catherine said. She quickly grabbed one of Minato's arms and latched onto him, much to Fuuka's surprise. "So, shall we go?" she asked. Minato took one of Fuuka's arms in his and chuckled.

"Ready?" he asked. Fuuka nodded, and the trio began their walk. Kenji and Junpei walked out of the class to see Minato stroll past them with his usual cocky smirk and the two girls

attached to him. Junpei once again had to tip his hat to him, and Kenji just nodded approvingly with a huge smile on his face. He turned to them and mouthed 'god has chosen', which got both of them to snicker. Yukari walked past them and turned to see the sight, but she just sighed and went on her way to archery club.

Minato's arrival in Art Club did more than just turn a few heads. Almost every female member dropped whatever they were doing to glare at the trio upon their arrival and almost every male member did the same. The interior of the room was basically a stripped down classroom devoid of desks and instead filled with blank canvases and a rather well-made bust of a roman soldier in the center of the room. Catherine and Fuuka took him to a curly brown-haired student with black-rimmed glasses. "... *This boy looks weak. But that's not relevant now.*"

"Keisuke, here's that guy I told you about." Catherine said.

"Huh?... I actually told you about him as well..." Fuuka said. The boy, Keisuke, turned around to see the trio. His eyes widened for a bit before he adopted a friendly smile.

"Hi there. You must be Minato." he said. "It's –"

"MINATO-SAMA IS AN ARTIST AND A MODEL!" one random girl screamed from outside the club room. Everyone turned to see a dedicated crowd of people peering inside.

"... Excuse me for a moment." Minato said, separating from

Fuuka and Catherine. *"I thought something stupid would happen... time to clear this place out."* He pulled out his spare Student Council Armband, and threw it on as he approached the crowd.

"OH MY GOSH, HE'S COMING TO GREET US!" the girl said again.

"... Hold up, he's got his Council armband on." a friend of hers said. Minato stopped at the door and cracked one of his fingers. Loudly. The crowd immediately grew silent.

"The explicit disruption of club activities is a serious offense." Minato said. "I might consider looking the other way if all of you hurry and disappear... though I won't be as lenient if I so much as see you in this hallway again."

The crowd immediately dispersed. The school knew that despite having what many considered alluring qualities, one certainty about Minato was that he gave no shits when it came to finding an excuse to physically hurt people. Once the crowd broke apart, Minato chuckled and took off his armband as he returned to his little group. "My apologies, Keisuke. I don't think that'll happen again." he said.

"... Well, it looks like the rumors were true." Keisuke said. He chuckled. "Care to redo our introduction?"

"Why not? I'm Minato Arisato. I look forward to working with you." Minato said.

"And I'm Keisuke Hiraga. P-leased to meet you." Keisuke replied. Catherine chuckled.

"It's supposed to be the other way around. Aren't you the club leader?" she asked.

"O-oh... that's right." Keisuke said. Fuuka chuckled.

"He always acts like this." she said.

"Things are going well. Fuuka's rejoined the club and you're joining... Maybe I should stay as club leader for a while longer..." Keisuke trailed off. Catherine snapped him out of his daze by flicking him on the forehead. "Ow... did I zone out again?"

"C'mon, Keisuke... didn't I tell you not to sweat the small stuff?" she asked.

"But he is a senior... so he has his finals coming up." Fuuka said.

"... *I see why he's weak. He has a real angel and a real devil constantly attacking him.*" Minato thought, looking at Keisuke's concerned face.

"Tis not a situation for the faint of heart." Matador said.

"Indeed." Minato replied.

"Shouldn't we talk about what we do in the Art Club?" Catherine asked.

"Oh, yeah, that's a good idea!" Keisuke said. He chuckled. "... Well, it's pretty simple, really. We mainly just paintings of do canvas sketches... are you any good at either, Minato?"

"How about you give me half an hour, and I'll show you?" Minato replied. Keisuke perked up.

"Confident about everything, huh? Alright, show me what you can do!" Keisuke said.

"Already drawing? Well then, I'll join in on the fun too." Catherine said.

"I think I know what you'll draw, Minato... and if I'm right, you might get a reputation like Catherine's." Fuuka said.

"Reputation?" Minato asked. Catherine giggled.

"I like to draw... intimate scenes." Catherine said. Keisuke winced.

"I... think there's a line between intimacy and erotica." Keisuke said. "... But, what do you plan on drawing, Minato?"

"No spoilers... but I promise it's not erotica." he said. Keisuke breathed a sigh of relief.

"Alright then... a half-hour speed painting session, then? I'll join in." Keisuke said. Minato moved over to an empty canvas with some art supplies already in place, and got to work. The thirty-minutes flew by, and by the end, everyone had more than a little paint on their hands. "I hope everyone managed to

get what they wanted. Minato, if you couldn't finish, it's okay if you go back to work on it." Keisuke said.

"No, I finished. I'd actually like to show first." he said.

"Oh, I want to see!" Catherine said.

"... You might be in for a shock." Fuuka said. They went to Minato's canvas, and everyone else's jaw dropped. His painting wasn't beautiful. It wasn't particularly styled. It wasn't abstract. But it was vivid.

Minato had painted a small child hiding in the shadows, crouched near a half-ruined wall with a smile on his face. His hands and clothing were bloody, and there was a trail of blood leading away from him to cover a concrete floor. The blood pooled to form the outline of a boy repeatedly stabbing away at some struggling adult. The walls that the boy's back faced had various odd carvings that read things like 'I aM HapPY' and 'GoOoD Boys gET DesSeRT', along with a few scorch marks and cracks that let in little slits of light, completing the scene. "I call it 'A Sweet Dream'." Minato said.

Keisuke and Fuuka looked horrified, and even Catherine couldn't hide her surprise at the contents of his painting. Everyone turned to him, and he grinned. "... You're... certainly skilled." Keisuke said, adjusting his collar. "... But I'm not sure... if we can put this up. You know... everyone's a critic, right?" he said nervously.

"That's not a problem. There's a place to put the paintings that

aren't put up, right?" Minato replied.

"Actually, those usually get taken home." Fuuka said.

"I like it." Catherine said. "You could probably sell it if you wanted."

"I suppose I could." Minato said. "Hmm... but I'd really love to have it displayed."

"... There is the art gallery used for reference at the back." Fuuka said. "Couldn't we put it there, Keisuke-senpai?"

"... You're right." Keisuke said. "But, let's give it some time to dry properly... we can return in an hour or so for it." He turned to Minato. "That's really something else... b-but I'm sure you want to see what everyone else drew, right?"

"Ahh, that's right. I need to see what you guys think about drawing." Minato said.

"Oh, then I'll go first." Catherine said. She lead them over to her station, and Keisuke immediately facepalmed once he saw it. Minato understood why. She might as well have drawn a scene from a hentai, minus any explicit details about genitals. "So, what do you think?"

"... You know, that's actually really well drawn." Minato said. Fuuka turned to him. "Seriously, you have the body sizes and limb proportionality almost perfectly done... that should get framed."

"... Now that you mention it, it is really good." Fuuka said, examining the painting more thoroughly. "... I'm amazed that you got the hands so well... I can never draw hands properly myself."

"I can teach you if you want." Catherine said. She nudged Keisuke. "C'mon, take a good look." Keisuke slowly uncovered his face and examined the drawing.

"... That is actually really good." Keisuke said. "But, if you want that displayed, I'm afraid that's impossible. I think we'd get disbanded if that was discovered."

"That's no problem. I'll take that one home." Catherine said. "So, what did you draw, Fuuka?"

"What did I draw?" Fuuka asked.

"I've never really seen your paintings before." Catherine said.

"Last I saw, you were changing it up from simple scenic landscapes." Keisuke said. "You were improving quickly... I'd be lying to say I'm not a little excited to see how much you've progressed."

"... I don't know if it's that good now that I've seen yours, but... here goes." Fuuka said. She led them to her canvas, and everyone took a moment to take in her painting. It depicted a female soldier lugging a Gatling Gun around atop a bleak and grey cliff. She was staring down into a valley, and on top of the war torn battlefield, flowers had already started

to sprout. But what caught Minato's attention the most was the fact that the battlefield clearly contained remains of what he was certain was supposed to be a mech or mobile suit of some sort. "... I didn't know what to call it." she said.

"... I don't think this needs a title." Keisuke said. "Usually, I'd say the roughness of the painting would have been a problem, but... it works here."

"If this one doesn't get displayed, I'm quitting this club here and now." Minato said.

"I second that." Catherine said.

"Don't worry... this'll get a special spot." Keisuke said. "Still, this is incredible, Fuuka."

"Really? I thought the other two were really good too." Fuuka said. Minato patted her on the head.

"Don't underestimate yourself." Minato said.

"He's right... I had no idea you were this good." Catherine said.

"Actually, you're making me not want to show mine." Keisuke said.

"... That's not right, Keisuke-senpai." Fuuka said. Keisuke chuckled.

"I know, I know... but don't expect anything as amazing as

that." Keisuke said. They went to his canvas, and Minato immediately realized Keisuke's humility rivaled Mitsuru's pride in magnitude. His painting was simply of a seamstress working with transparent cloth, but it was flawless in terms of technique and style. "... I tend to draw boring stuff, don't I?" he asked, scratching his head.

"I don't think subject matters much when you're the next Da Vinci." Catherine said. Keisuke blushed.

"I-it's not that good!" he said.

"If I had to pay money to see this, I wouldn't complain. Not too much, but the fact that I'd put money down speaks volumes." Minato said.

"Yeah, you really are amazing, Keisuke-senpai." Fuuka said.

"G-guys, you're embarrassing me!" Keisuke said. He turned away. "A-anyways, that was really good... I know you usually go to Photography Club around now, so if you want to, you can go. D-don't worry about your painting, Minato! I'll take care of it."

"... You sure?" Minato asked.

"I put those things up all the time, so I should be fine." Keisuke said. He turned back to the group, having regained his composure. "You guys go ahead."

"If you say so." Catherine said. She turned to Fuuka. "Are you

sure you don't want to join too?" she asked.

"No, I'm fine here. I think I'll stay back and practice some more... you two have fun." Fuuka said. Minato slid over to Fuuka and gave her a quick hug.

"You remember to have fun too, you hear?" he whispered into her ear.

"I-I'm not a child!" she retorted. Minato chuckled, and ruffled her hair a bit before turning to leave.

"See you again, Keisuke." Minato said.

"Ah, you too!" he said. Minato and Catherine made their way across the hallway to the dimly lit Photography Club room. It had a dim red lighting that tinted everything and everyone in the room an odd shade of red. *"Nice aesthetic... shady and rather cool atmosphere."* Minato thought as he looked around. In addition to the usual stations for developing pictures, various photographs were hung around the room. Some were of landscapes, others were of groups, and Minato noticed quite a few were some of Catherine's risqué poses.

"Yeah, most people in this Club usually only come when they're developing pictures." Catherine said. "And that's usually early on, because everyone wants to leave early."

"So you take your pictures in that back room after everyone's left?" Minato said, glancing to the little adjoined room.

"That's right... it's just an empty classroom, but it has a few props." Catherine said. "Now let's see... you need a camera, and those are... there." She moved over to a little drawer in the corner and pulled out, from what Minato could guess, a high-powered camera. "Well, since you're here, you'll be helping me with those shots, right?"

"I bet you like knowing people look at you like that." Minato mused. He moved over and took the camera from her. "You probably want the first shot to be called 'striptease'."

"... That's a great idea, actually." Catherine said. "I keep some outfits in the closet back there, and I know just the one to use. Wait here!" She hurried into the closet at the far side of the room, and began to hum as she changed. Minato fiddled with the camera, and got a quick grasp of how it worked by the time Catherine changed. She re-emerged in a white, sleeveless lace dress with, to Minato's chagrin, a choker as well on top of her usual stockings and shoes. "Well, do you like it?" she asked.

"It'll make a good picture." Minato said. Catherine smiled.

"I wasn't talking about the picture." she said quietly. Minato chuckled.

"You haven't taken me to dinner yet." he mused. "I won't bite, but I'll do any shot you want." Catherine laughed.

"Then I know exactly what to do. Come here." she said. Minato followed her to the empty room, and saw it really was

just a plain school room illuminated only by the light that came from the windows, creating unusually good lighting. "Alright... for our first shot, you'll be working on these straps," she began , gesturing to her shoulders, "while I deal with that bowtie of yours. You can have someone else take the picture, can't you?"

"I can." Minato said, summoning Hell Biker. He handed him the camera, which he took with a sigh.

"... It ain't my place to judge either of you." he said.

"Good... c'mon, Minato." Catherine said. He moved over towards where she was standing, and turned just enough so one of his eyes was visible to the camera. Catherine did the same, and the two pressed against each other.

"If you use your hands, it'll look like you're choking me." Minato said, noting their position.

"Who said I would use my hands?" she whispered. Catherine bit one of the loose ends of Minato's bowtie and lightly pulled, loosening it. She stopped, and then used one of her hands to undo the first button on his shirt, and rested her other hand on the second one. "That's me... what about you?"

Minato responded by leaning over and burying the lower part of his face in Catherine's hair, while pulling her dress' shoulder straps just enough to have them hang loosely away from her arms and barely expose her bra. "I think this is just fine." he said. "Take the picture."

"... **Say hentai.**" Hell Biker said as he took the picture. After a few shots from different angles, Catherine backed away with a grin, and both of them fixed their clothing.

"That was too professional." she said.

"Please... modeling is my job. I take my work seriously."
Minato mused. "But still... that's a better shot than you could have gotten alone, isn't it?"

"Yes... and I had more fun than usual." Catherine said. She grinned. "We're sure to attract a lot of attention with this... and quite a few targets for me. You're going to help me eat them up... and then I'll eat you."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fortune Arcana...

Minato laughed. "You can try." he said. The two of them went back to develop the photos, which didn't actually leave much time for conversation. Catherine had her own method which required constant attention, but it sped up the process tremendously. They managed to finish everything in less than forty minutes, and looked over the photos. All of them looked good, but Catherine insisted she only put one on display.

"I can spread the others around the school." she said as she

left with them. She left the school after she had changed back into her school uniform, and Minato headed back to the Art Club. Keisuke and Fuuka were cleaning up, so he wordlessly joined in and sped up the process.

"You must have enjoyed Photography Club." Fuuka said to him after they bid Keisuke farewell. Minato pulled her close and materialized the Fortune Tarot Card representative of his new bond. It flickered and was faint, but it gave him power.

"It was well worth it." he said.

"... I think you got more than just that card out of it." Fuuka said. Minato dispelled it.

"I've got Catherine claiming she'll 'eat me up'." Minato mused. Fuuka flinched. "Who knows? Maybe I might just let her... have a taste, since I'm trusting people. Maybe I should go steady too, and try a real relationship."

"Y-you don't need to adjust that quickly!" Fuuka said. "I-I mean... t-these things take time, a-and It would be bad if you rushed!" Minato laughed and rested his head against hers.

"Are you jealous? How adorable." Minato said. He messed with her hair.

"I-I'm not jealous! B-but you should put more time into such a big decision!" she said. Minato chuckled again. "... Wait a minute... you're just teasing me again, aren't you?"

"Maybe." Minato replied with a grin. He used his free hand to cup her chin. "But if you want a different type of teasing, I can do that too."

"... Now I know you're just messing with me." Fuuka said. "Still... I'm glad you made another friend. You should be nice to Catherine... she's not a bad person."

"I don't know about that, but I'll let you judge as you please." Minato thought. "She's a good match for me, isn't she? A boy and a girl become friends in Photography Club, huh? I'd say that's... picture perfect." Fuuka facepalmed.

"... Please tell me you didn't mean to do that." she said. Minato laughed at his own pun, and the two walked out of the school. They decided to share music like old times on the walk and train ride back, and entered the dorm together. Junpei, Akihiko, and Shinjiro were all at the dining table, each doing their own thing, while the girls were nowhere to be seen.

"S'up, you two?" Junpei asked. "Had a good time 'clubbing'?" Minato chuckled.

"Nice." he said. "And yeah, we did, didn't we?"

"It was fun." Fuuka said with a smile. The two parted ways as Minato headed up to the second floor so he could clean himself up. He returned to the lobby after a shower and found Junpei alone in the lounge.

"Where'd Akihiko and Shinji go?" Minato asked.

"They said they wanted to go for a run or something like that." Junpei said. "I wasn't really listenin'..."

"... What's up?" Minato asked, taking a seat across from him. Junpei looked up from his handheld game and sighed.

"... I don't know man. Ever since I started noticin' that more an' more kids were missing... I've just been kinda bummed out." he said. "... Hey. You think the Lost will ever be cured?"

"... Honestly? I don't know." Minato said. "I mean, when we beat the full moon Shadows, some people do recover. But then there's all the other cases of people who have been like that for months and years."

"I know, right? Like, today, they were doing a show about this retirement home where a bunch of the Lost are, and how people take care of em'." Junpei said. "It got me thinking... I mean, at first, I thought that maybe if we defeated a Shadow, all the spirits or whatever that it ate would return to their owners... but what if it just gets digested or something like that?"

"If that's the case, then the Lost would just continue to increase in size." Minato said. "And all those people who weren't affected by the full moon Shadows would just live like that, waiting for death."

"... They would, huh?" Junpei said. He gulped. "If that's true,

then... Whoa, dude... I'm not gonna lie, but that's the scariest shit I can think of." Minato sighed, and leaned back in his chair.

"... As Persona-users, we can't become part of the Lost." Minato said. "Though, since you bring that up... if we can't cure them, aren't we just doomed to slowly watch as everyone around us falls?"

"... Dude... that's friggin' depressing." Junpei said.

"Until we find out if we can do anything, we just have to keep doing what we're doing, right?" Minato asked. "We could think about it all day and all night and just paralyze ourselves in fear... but sometimes, you've got to be a man and just go in swinging, hoping for the best, right?"

"... I get ya." Junpei said. He sighed, and took off his hat. He looked at it. "... You know, this was the last thing my dad bought for me." he said. "I don't even remember how long ago it was... but this thing was really oversized when I got it. He was drunk at the time, but I didn't care. Now that more and more people are turning into the Lost, I'm gettin' a little worried about him, ya know? I haven't spoken to him since I moved here..."

"... He's probably sleeping off a big drinking session now." Minato said. Junpei chuckled.

"Yeah, it's about that time of day." he said. He put his hat back on. "... Hey, sorry if this was depressing as hell, bro. I

probably crashed your vibe for the night, huh?"

"I didn't really have anything planned anyways." Minato replied. "... Though, I think Fuuka wanted to have a little cooking session tonight. I'll go call her when Shinji gets back."

"Gonna make it a special lesson?" he asked with a mischievous grin. Minato chuckled.

"You sound like Catherine." Minato said. "But no, I doubt it."

"Huh... well, it's your choice." Junpei said. He got up and stretched. "I think I'm gonna go hit the arcade... clear my head and what not, ya know?"

"That's a good plan." Minato said.

"Ain't it? And people say videogames don't have uses!" Junpei said. He headed for the door. "Later, bro."

"Later." Minato said. Junpei headed out of the dorm, leaving Minato as the only person in the lounge. He decided to watch some TV until Akihiko and Shinjiro returned. He greeted them as they entered. "Rare for you two to go out together at night. Went anywhere special?"

"Not really." Shinjiro said.

"We were just being a bit nostalgic." Akihiko said. "Where's everyone else?"

"Junpei went to the arcade. I think the girls are all in their

rooms." Minato said. "Speaking of which... Shinji, has Fuuka asked you anything recently?"

"Teaching her how to cook, right?" Shinjiro asked. "She brought it up yesterday, and I said I'd do it if I was around. Why?"

"I was thinking we could give her a joint lesson today." Minato said.

"Suit yourself. I don't have any plans." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled and walked up the stairs to call Fuuka. He made it to third-floor, and found her and Yukari both on their laptops.

"Oh, hey." Yukari said. "Going to see Mitsuru-senpai?"

"Actually, I was about to invite Fuuka to a cooking lesson with. Shinji'll help out as well." Minato said. "What do you say?"

"Yes!" Fuuka said, closing her laptop. "Just give me a minute to get ready."

"Alright. I'll go tell Shinji." Minato said. He walked back down the stairs, and went to his room. He took out his new apron, and donned it as he walked downstairs. Shinji was already in the kitchen, and had on one of the basic pink aprons from the kitchen. He paused when he saw Minato. "Surprised?"

"... You bought a special apron?" Shinjiro asked.

"Only the best for the top chef." Minato said with a smirk.

"... It ain't my place to tell you how to spend your cash." Shinjiro said. He sighed, and straightened his posture to crack his neck. "Just don't expect me to start calling you 'top chef' or some shit like that."

"I never counted on it." Minato said. They turned to see Fuuka walk into the kitchen.

"Oh, that's a nice apron." Fuuka said.

"Isn't it?" Minato asked. "But, there's no time for compliments. You're in Hell's Kitchen now, so I hope you're ready."

"Yes!" Fuuka said with a determined look on her face. She quickly put on the last apron, and Shinjiro shook his head.

"This place is full of idiots." he said. The trio began their cooking lesson, which lasted well into the night. After Fuuka managed to successfully make some gyudon and sashimi, both of which came out surprisingly well. After their cooking lesson, Minato retired early for the night, spending the majority of his time studying until the Dark Hour, at which time he decided he'd do some basic physical training, something he'd neglected for quite a while.

64. Chapter 64

Chapter 64: Tiring

Author Note: Time for a Social Link Status Update!

Fiend (Lucifer) – Rank 5 (Frozen until Minato gets more Fiends)

Fool (SEES) – Rank 4

Magician (Junpei) – Rank 8

Priestess (Fuuka) – Rank 6

Empress (Mitsuru) – Rank 7

Emperor (Akihiko) – Rank 5

Hierophant (Shinjiro) – Rank 5

Lovers (Yukari) – Rank 4

Chariot (Dante) – Rank 5

Strength (Shin) – Rank 5

Hermit (Isako) – Rank 5

Fortune (Catherine) – Rank 1

Justice (?) – Rank 0

The Hanged Man (Vergil) – Rank 1

Death (Pharos) – Rank 1

Temperance (Hazama) – Rank 2

Devil (Ikutsuki) – Rank 5

Tower (Igor) – Rank 4

Star (Kazuya) – Rank 4

Moon (Nemissa) – Rank 7

Sun (Elizabeth) – Rank 4

Judgement (?) – Rank 0

Aeon (?) – Rank 0

Ok, back to the story.

Minato had opted to visit Naganaki Shrine early in the morning once again. He was going to go and see if anybody had cleaned up the mess he made of his own grave, partially because it suddenly piqued his interest while memorizing a few key events regarding environmental clean-ups and partially because he was bored. He already had on his school

uniform, and reached the shrine by five in the morning. It was a short walk to the graves, and he quickly made his way to the secluded corner. However, he stopped to see a young boy with decently long brown-hair praying in front of a grave a few rows away from his own. *"There's a kid who's up early."* Minato thought. There was a second path leading up to his own spot that stood across from the middle section of graves, so he decided he'd pass by.

He turned into the row of graves, and walked towards the boy. He looked like he was deep in prayer, oddly enough, and Minato swore he could have passed for a monk if he wore his black hoodie's hood up while he prayed. *"... Wait. That's... a lot like what Shin wears."* Minato thought. While Shin's hoodie was gray with green design, the boy wore a black one with orange stripes. They both wore black shorts and sneakers as well.

"That kid ain't anything special, in case that's where you were taking this." Hell Biker said.

"Yes, Shin is simply childish." Matador said.

"You wanna say that to his face?" Jack taunted. Every Fiend except Matador began laughing.

By this point, Minato had gotten close enough for the boy to react to his footsteps. "Good morning." Minato said.

"Good morning." the boy replied.

"Sorry if I interrupted you. I'm on my way to visit my parents over in the corner." Minato said. The boy's eyes widened in surprise.

"Y-you too?" he asked. He shook his head. "I-I mean... I'm sorry to hear that."

Minato chuckled. "Don't worry about it. They were probably dead before you were born." he said. "Still, I'm surprised to see anyone out here at this time."

"That's actually why I try to come here in the morning." the boy said. "I used to come in the afternoon, but I would always get these weird looks..."

"You mean those looks full of pity?" Minato asked. The boy's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, people do that. But don't worry, they'll forget about it eventually. I can tell you from experience."
"Well, the pitiful looks turned to fear in my case, but let's not share that."

"... That's good to hear." the boy said. He didn't look very convinced.

"What's your name?" Minato asked. The boy gave him an odd look. "I'd rather not have to call you 'kid' or 'boy' when we talk."

The boy cracked a grin. "Ken. Ken Amada." he said. He extended his hand for a shake, and Minato took it.

"Minato. Minato Arisato." Minato said as they shook hands.

"Minato Arisato?,,, That sounds familiar..." Ken said as they finished their handshake.

"Be Blue V." Minato said. Ken thought about it some more, and then chuckled.

"You're that model the girls in my class are all crazy about." Ken said. Minato shrugged.

"Am I not a thing of beauty?" he asked with a grin.

"Regardless, how old are you, Ken?"

"I'm ten. How old are you?" Ken replied.

"Seventeen." Minato said. He stopped and looked at the lot Ken stood at. The year of death specified 2007. "So, what's it like being in elementary school?" he asked.

"... Excuse me?" Ken asked.

"What's it like being in elementary school?" Minato asked. "... Oh, I should probably clear this up. See, I was homeschooled until around fourteen, so I only attended normal schools for my last year of middle-school and high-school. So I never knew what it was like to attend elementary school."

"Really?" Ken asked. He scratched his head. "Umm... I don't really know what to say. It's... just like normal school, I guess."

"Is there a playtime and a naptime?" Minato asked.

"Huh? Only in kindergarten." Ken asked. Minato flinched.

"Wait, so there is no playtime in your class?" Minato asked. Ken nodded, and Minato cringed. "... That's a travesty."

"It's not that bad. The days aren't too long, and the pacing is slow, even for us honors students." Ken said.

"So you're still expected to go hang out with friends after school on your own? That sounds tough." Minato said.

"Not at all. I live in the dorms, so there are a lot of people there... though I don't have that many friends. Oh, but there are some assistants that keep the place clean, and we have a curfew, so it's not too chaotic." Ken said.

"... There are dorms in elementary school? Now I'm glad I never went there." Minato said. Ken chuckled.

"You should be. Some people are so annoying." Ken said. "... Especially the residential assistants. All of them think they have to make everything perfect for me because of my mom, but they're really just making things worse."

"... I know how it goes." Minato said. "Those people who think 'oh no, what a sob story, he needs special attention to get over the bad memories of his life, boo-hoo, woe is him!'" he mused. Ken laughed.

"Yeah, that's exactly how they act." Ken said. He smirked. "I

don't think they realize what they're doing, and that's the sad part."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, is it not?" Minato asked. Ken chuckled.

"I guess it is." he said. He glanced off into the distance. "... I know this might be a weird question, but... how'd your parents die?"

"Car crash." Minato said. "Or at least, that's what they say."

"... That's what they say?" Ken asked.

"I think something else killed them." Minato said. "But I don't have any evidence for it."

"Boss, what are you doing?" David asked.

"I sense something in him." Minato said. "His life has made him strong... I think he has a Persona. I don't know whether or not he's used it."

"... Like what?" Ken asked, his face betraying him. He tried to look indifferent, but he didn't have enough experience to hide his curiosity. On the other hand, Minato knew better than to grin. He had yet to pull his trap shut, after all.

"... Would you believe me if I said a monster did it?" he asked. Ken suppressed a gasp, but he tensed. *"That settles it. You've seen the Dark Hour, and you remember it."* "I know

it sounds far-fetched, but I think it was being controlled by someone as well... I couldn't see them, though, but I heard a voice."

"... A-actually..." Ken began. He opened his mouth slowly, but quickly shut it again. After a short silence and period of staring at the floor, he spoke. "... Never mind. Sorry about that."

"... Yeah, it's a crazy idea, isn't it?" Minato asked. "Everyone told me so. Apparently, I was in the car crash too, but survived. I don't remember much about it, but they said that was trauma. They probably said the same for you, right?"

"... Yeah." Ken said. "My mom... she died when a truck crashed into our house. I don't remember much about it either because I was barely awake when it happened... the doctors said it was just trauma, and that I shouldn't think back on it too much."

"They could be wrong, they could be right." Minato said. "Who knows?... But remember, you're the one who has to make a decision in the end."

"... I know that." Ken said. There was a slight silence, and Ken, oddly enough, seemed to feel suddenly embarrassed. "Thank you for taking the time to speak with me." he said suddenly. "Even though I'm just a kid."

Minato chuckled. "You're not just any kid, Ken." he said. "But... if you need friends, meet me here this Saturday at four in the afternoon. I have someone I want you to meet."

"Someone you want me to meet?" Ken asked. He looked over Minato, assessing his friendly grin. He could sense mischief underneath it. "... This isn't a prank, is it?"

"You will meet someone, but I can't tell you whether or not you'll like them." Minato said. "Still, if you don't want to come, don't come."

"... I'll think about it." Ken said. "Thank you for the invitation."

"It's not a problem." Minato said. "But, you should probably get going. I imagine your walk to school must be time consuming."

"That's right... Then, goodbye." Ken said with a bow. Minato nodded, and waved him off. He glanced at his watch as Ken left the grave lot, and saw he didn't leave much time for any sentimentality he might have been planning to indulge in.

"Well, at least I got a fun set-up going here. This is promising." Minato thought. He hurried over to his parents graves, saw his own had been simply removed, and then hurried back to the dorm. *"If I was a ghost, I'd be pissed, but since I'm alive, I think that's fitting."*

He returned to the dorm in time to see Shinjiro making breakfast this time around, with the rest of SEES seated around the table. "Where were you off to this early?" he asked as Minato entered.

"The graveyard." Minato replied.

"... Was it your parents?" Akihiko asked.

"It was supposed to be." Minato said. "But I encountered someone more interesting... I think I've found another Persona-user, a boy named Ken Amada." Every other member of SEES turned to him. He quickly evaluated their responses. Shinjiro showed the biggest response, his mouth actually opening a little as his eyes widened. Next up were Akihiko and Mitsuru, both of whom flinched at the mention of that name. Yukari had a slightly less intense reaction than the seniors, while Junpei and Fuuka both let out a little gasp. *"As I thought. I've found the Castor survivor."* "So you all know him?"

"We've seen Ken around the shrine before, with the dog that lives there." Fuuka said. "But I never thought he'd be a Persona-user..."

"No kiddin'... he seemed like a pretty normal kid to me. Then again, so did I..." Junpei said.

"Don't tell me we're going to drag a kid into this too..." Yukari said.

"... Where did you meet him?" Mitsuru asked.

"His mom's grave just now." Minato said. "I got a feeling similar to the one I got when I first met Shinji... so I'm guessing that means either he's got a Persona or ties to Big Boss, though I highly doubt it's the latter."

"We don't need a damn kid running around." Shinjiro said. "What is he, eight? He'll be more of a nuisance on the field than anything else."

"... Shinji's right." Akihiko said. "We aren't exactly hurting for members, and the JSDF, Toudou, and that red-haired boy are all in the city. I don't think we need to bring him into this."

"Really? That's too bad... because I think he already has experience with the Dark Hour." Minato said. Akihiko and Shinjiro glared at him.

"... Do you have any evidence?" Mitsuru asked.

"Nothing but speculation." Minato said. "Ken's mother died when a truck crashed into his house, correct?"

"... Yeah, that's what he said." Junpei said.

"He doesn't actually believe that." Minato said. Shinjiro quickly tossed aside his apron and walked up to Minato.

"The hell did you say to him?" he asked.

"I didn't say anything to him about the Dark Hour or Shadows." Minato said. "He asked why I was in the grave lot, and I said to visit my parents. Naturally, we reached the subject of how our respective parents died, and I told him about their car crash, which, he quickly realized, had just as much dismissal as his own mother's death. I prodded a bit, and found he thinks that a monster killed his mom... or should

"I say knows?"

Shinjiro backed away and swore under his breath. "... Regardless, Amada is just a boy." Mitsuru said, breaking the silence. "It's as Akihiko said. We aren't lacking in firepower, and once your project with the Chairman is complete, we'll have more. He's suffered enough, Minato... we should leave him in peace."

"Mitsuru-senpai's right." Yukari said. "I mean, maybe his mom did get killed by the Shadows... but that doesn't mean we have to throw him into this fight. It'll just... destroy any bit of normality from his life again. He shouldn't have to go through that."

"... Leave him in peace? Be happy?" Minato asked. He frowned. "I'm surprised so much shit can dribble out of your mouths without either of you choking on it."

"Minato, watch it." Akihiko said.

"You know what Ken told me? All those people that try and make him feel special because his mom is dead? They piss him off. All those people who think he should just ignore what he knows? They piss him off even more." Minato said. "... It's not my decision whether or not to recruit people into SEES, but if you don't mind having live Shadow bait running around the city unsupervised for the rest of his life, by all means, isolate him even more." He walked up the stairs and left the rest of SEES to their thoughts, going to get his school bag and a few other things.

"... Damn, if he's been alone for that time in the Dark Hour... man, that must've killed him." Junpei said.

"... Ken has no friends either, huh?... I always wondered why nobody walked with him..." Fuuka said. "Maybe we should let him choose for himself..."

"That's not an option." Mitsuru said. "If he refuses, he'll have information the public cannot be aware of. We can't just let him walk around with that knowledge."

"Then he doesn't join. Simple." Shinjiro said.

"I agree." Akihiko said.

"Yeah... It's better this way, isn't it?" Yukari said. The seniors all inwardly scowled. There was the slightest hint of doubt in her words, but all of them knew that was more than enough to fester and change her mind.

"Exactly, Yukari. This discussion is over." Mitsuru said before anyone could respond.

"Maybe for you." Alice's disembodied head whispered into Mitsuru's ear. She turned quickly, but it vanished before she could spot it.

"Something wrong, senpai?" Junpei asked, catching her quick movement.

"... I thought there was a bug near me. I didn't mean to worry you." Mitsuru said.

"... Seriously? You're worried about bugs after what just happened?" Junpei asked. Mitsuru narrowed her eyes at him, and the temperature slowly dropped.

"I'll have you know that even the tiniest sting can lead to a plethora of consequences." Mitsuru said. "Or do I need to remind you of that?"

"N-nope! Not at all!" Junpei said. Mitsuru shifted her glance to the rest of the SEES members, and none met her gaze. She got up quickly and went to the stairs, heading straight for Minato's room. By the time she reached the second floor, Minato was already carrying his school bag with a little chuckle.

"You're spying on all of us, aren't you?" she asked as he approached.

"At times." Minato replied. "I keep tabs on my people, just like you do. I just do it much more efficiently."

"... I think we need to have a discussion about this." Mitsuru said. "But not today... still, I must ask. Are you certain that Amada has the potential?"

"I don't know about the potential, but I'm pretty sure he can at least move around in the Dark Hour. Or was able to at some point." Minato said.

"I see... I'll get someone to keep an eye on him soon." Mitsuru said. She glanced at Minato's smirk and frowned.

"Don't take this the wrong way... I know that you're aware of his connection to Shinjiro. However, what he doesn't know can't harm him... if anything, we'll say it was a Shadow that killed his mother. Shinjiro was the one to kill it afterwards. Agreed?"

"Agreed... though Ken is quick, and I think he remembers his mother's killer. Well, the Persona of the killer, to be exact." Minato said.

"He remembers Castor?... Perhaps it is in our best interests to keep him out of this." Mitsuru said.

"Well, you can think it over all you like. I'd like to say we should recruit him quickly before he ends up dead. It's only a matter of time before a Shadow finds him if he can move in the Dark Hour." Minato said.

"I know." Mitsuru said. "... I'm not sure if I can convince Akihiko and Shinjiro to go along with this, even if we agree to lie to Ken."

"... They'll have to accept it, in one way or another." Minato said. "Give them some time. They might not seem like it, but both of them are reasonable enough. Surprisingly, the ogre is the more rational of the two once you get past his brutish mannerisms."

Mitsuru chuckled. "Shinjiro has always had a solid head on his shoulders." she agreed. "... However, we should be on our way. I don't want to worry everyone else with yet another

issue."

"Worry? I think everyone needs a little show to distract them from everything else." Minato said. He extended his arm to her. "Shall we dance back to our companions?" he asked.

"... Pardon me?" she asked.

"I'll take that as a yes." Minato said. He twirled over to her side and got her into a waltz position before she could react. "*And the music.*" Hell Biker, with only his Harmonica in hand, alongside David and his violin, appeared a few feet away from them. They began to play a very lively duet, and Minato rather forcefully danced Mitsuru up the stairs.

"W-what do you think you're doing?!" she asked.

"Getting your bag, mademoiselle." Minato said, directing the duo towards Mitsuru's room. "You don't expect to attend school without it, do you?" He stopped in front of Mitsuru's door, and let her go. "If you would."

"... That's quite enough." Mitsuru said, straightening her blouse. She opened her room door as Minato did a little jig in the hallway, and then re-emerged with her school bag. She had a smirk on her face. "If you're intent on this little endeavor, allow me to show you the difference between years of lessons and self-taught hobbies."

"I gladly accept this challenge." Minato said. Mitsuru was the one to spin over to him this time in one quick motion, and the

two promptly paraded down the stairs with their music in tow. Downstairs, everyone else was silently eating until the music reached them.

"... This is going to be stupid." Shinjiro said, not even looking away from his food. Everyone turned to see Minato literally sweep Mitsuru off of her feet as he went down the last flight of steps, and the two did a rather dangerous looking spin down the last few steps. As they reached the bottom, he set Mitsuru down, and she continued without so much as flinching, pulling Minato forwards for what appeared to be a rather fast-paced set of intricate steps. It looked like Minato's main concern was avoiding having his foot being stomped on, but his lively step made him appear to bounce slightly as they through the lounge.

"Not bad at all!" Minato said. "But I still think self-taught beats anything a teacher can force you to learn."

"Hmph! I've yet to show you all I can do!" Mitsuru said. Akihiko's ears twitched, and Shinjiro banged his head against the table.

"So it's a challenge, huh?" Akihiko asked. He got up and pulled Yukari by the elbow. "Don't think you're the only ones with fancy footwork!"

"H-hey, I never signed up for this!" Yukari protested as she was dragged forwards. Fuuka giggled.

"That looks like fun." she said. Junpei smirked.

"How about we join em', huh?" he asked. She nodded, and they both quickly got up to join the ensemble. Shinjiro banged his head against the desk again.

"This place is a den of idiots." he said to himself as the rest of SEES essentially formed a musical number. Minato and Mitsuru quickly surveyed everyone else, and both of them gave each other a knowing nod.

"Success." Minato whispered into her ear.

"Without a doubt." she replied.

"Then, you don't mind if I do something even more fun, do you?" he asked. Mitsuru chuckled as Minato slid to her side to change positions.

"By all means." she said. He grinned.

Partner switch! Alice called as she materialized near Hell Biker and David. She had a small piano with her, and began to play. Minato passed Mitsuru off to Akihiko while pulling Yukari towards him, then past him to Junpei as Fuuka came over to join him.

"A-A change-up, huh?! I'm game!" Akihiko said when Mitsuru practically appeared in front of him. She chuckled.

"Come now, Akihiko. You'll need to be more focused if you want a chance against me." Mitsuru said. He cleared his head, and the duo began. SEES spent the majority of the

morning getting back into a generally good mood. The air was full of life, and eventually, even Shinjiro made his way in by swapping places with Minato. He proved as knowledgeable as Akihiko, which meant he knew the basics and a few tricks, but nothing too fancy. In the end, every member appreciated it and departed for school in an excellent mood.

Every member also appreciated three-hour's detention with Mr. Toudou after school for arriving there two hours late. They had reached the half hour mark, and Mr. Toudou was a menace. His detention merited every member of SEES to sit perfectly still in complete silence. Any movement or sound was punished by an ethereal Persona he had lurking in the classroom that would attack their mind. It was the punishment of Shijima, and not even Minato could say that it was trivial. After their grueling forced stillness, they were released, and everyone immediately headed for the dorm. They had nothing to say to each other, and upon entry, each parted ways in a zombie-like fashion. After two-hours of recuperation via basic training, Minato ate dinner alone.

"... That was... mind-altering." Minato thought as he ate. *"I was so still I barely even possessed the ability to think."*

"That's no joke, Boss... you'd be wise to avoid facing anything like that again." David said.

"... I need action. Now." Minato thought. He ate hurriedly, and then went immediately to his room to watch some anime. However, the screen wasn't enough. *"I need real action."* he thought. Minato didn't even bother with going downstairs,

instead jumping out of his window as he used to, then using his Magatama and powers to travel by the rooftops. He was going to see Shin, and he was going to fight like a madman. He reached his usual spot, and dropped down from the roof of a nearby building to land right in front of Shin, right in the midst of the few other punks in the area. There were four of them a few feet from him, but he didn't care. *"Doesn't matter if they saw."*

As the punks fled in terror, Minato dusted his clothing off and approached Shin. "... You're angry." Shin said.

"And?" Minato asked.

"It is an observation. Whether or not that anger will help or hinder your abilities is completely up to you." Shin said. He got up, and the two headed to the secluded alley and went to the wasteland. Minato awakened immediately, and Shin cracked his neck. The spike protruding from it convulsed for a bit. "... There. I've limited a bit of my abilities." Shin said. "Your challenge is to survive against me for over fifteen minutes as I am now."

"That sounds like an eternity and a half." Minato said. He grinned. "Then I don't have that much time, do I?"

Shin grinned. "Good. Confidence is very good." he said. "We start now." Shin raised his hand into the air, and a thin sword made of energy appeared in it. Minato prepared to move, and Shin bounded towards him. Shin made one large swipe a little ways away from Minato, and a fiery shockwave erupted from

him. Minato quickly backed out of range of the attack, backpedaling while trying to keep track of Shin.

"Left!" Matador said. Minato looked to his side, and saw Shin hurriedly sprinting around him. The shockwave died down as Minato turned to intercept Shin. He quickly drew his Evoker and put it to his head.

"Incubus, Eligor, Maragion!" he called. The red demons, with Incubus giving a huge air hump and Eligor lifting its lance skyward as its black horse reared up. A swarm of fireballs encircled Shin as he approached, then quickly rushed him. He picked up speed as they began to come at him, and dashed straight past the attack along with Minato's Personas, going straight for Minato himself. Minato prepped for the incoming attack, and Shin threw one solid right hook going straight for his head. Minato just barely managed to avoid a direct hit to his face, and threw a right hook of his own towards Shin's stomach as his Personas disappeared. It connected, but only managed to slightly shake Shin. Shin responded by whipping his arm to the side, but the attack was caught by Hell Biker's arms that sprouted from Minato's back. Minato avoided the strike to the head, but didn't catch Shin creating a fireball of his own in his left hand. With a smirk, he crushed it, and caused an explosion at point blank range. Minato tumbled backwards out of it, then looked at the cloud of smoke.

"Shit. Don't tell me this guy's a tactician too?" Minato thought.

"You aren't born that strong. Everyone starts off fighting smart before they can just bulldoze everything." Hell Biker

said. Their train of thought was swiftly cut off by numerous bolts of lightning appearing from the ground instead of the sky, all heading in their direction. Without any type of warning, Minato was forced to endure the attacks. His electric shock training began to pay off. While he might have been taking damage, he maintained enough of his senses to know that Shin had just broken out of the ground behind him and was primed to kick his head off. Minato did the quickest counter he could think off. He dropped to his knees, and then pushed off of the ground to kick upwards with one leg. Shin's attack missed, but he easily avoided Minato's as well. Minato regained his footing only for a tornado to erupt from Shin and hurl him into the air.

"He's still attacking! And it's a big one!" Jack warned. Minato twirled in the air to get his bearings, only to see Shin hunched over, his arms extended and crossing each other in front of him. ***"We need to move!"***

Minato summoned Loa a little distance away to use as a stepping stone. By that time, Shin violently rose and threw his arms to the side. Myriad rays of energy erupted from his body, and Minato leaped off of Loa as they all went flying. He grabbed his Evoker quickly, knowing full well he couldn't outrun the attack, and put it to his head. "Trafuri!" he managed to shout before one of the rays got him right in the leg. He vanished in a flash of light and reappeared on the ground directly below him. The attacks passed over his head and hit the floor, each causing an explosion that shook the floor. Minato didn't have time to take in the scene. Shin dashed

towards him by the time he appeared, already continuing his assault.

"Hell Exhaust, Tornado!" Minato called. Hell Biker and Matador appeared in front of him ready to intercept Shin. Matador was the first to move, whipping his Capote up to create a series of tornadoes, followed by Hell Biker, who revved his bike to generate a larger tornado that danced alongside the others. Shin leapt right through them and grabbed the two Fiends by their heads, slamming them into the floor as he landed and destroying their bodies. He looked up to see Minato, with Jack's cleavers in his hands, Eligor's lance hand on his right waist, and King Frost's staff hand left waist about to strike.

Minato thrust Eligor's lance forwards, and Shin quickly leaned out of the way. King Frost's staff swiped at his legs, but he flipped over the attack and prepped a kick. Minato swung as his leg, expecting some damage, only for Shin's kick to shatter Jack's cleavers and almost connect with his shoulder. Shin spun as he landed, ready for a follow-up punch, but Minato scrambled forwards, almost moving like a cat to avoid being hit. He turned quickly and dropped his arms loosely in front of him as he always did, hunching his back once more to prepare for Shin's next assault. Oddly enough, Shin stopped.

"Cat-like reflexes." Shin said. "That's purr-fect for the occasion." he continued with a straight face. Minato snickered, and was then immediately clotheslined at such a ridiculous speed, he flipped into the air. Before he could react, Shin had jumped, grabbed his leg, and thrown him along the

floor. He skipped like a pebble on water, except it was his human body on solid ground, causing a little break each time in both the floor and various parts of his body.

"Unearthly Form!" Minato said. Alice appeared as the black mass and consumed him before he could take too much damage, then sped away from Shin. *"Shit, he got me! What the hell?!"*

"This guy was a kid too, ya know?" Alice replied. Minato grumbled as his wounds were quickly healed, and then emerged almost a minute later. He turned, knowing full well that Shin was in hot pursuit, and saw him prepping the attack that destroyed Alice's body last time. He sprinted off to the side and summoned Matador quickly.

"Red Capote." he called. After quickly being enveloped in the Capote, he sprinted even faster, and managed to run out of the attack's range. Matador was destroyed in the attack, but it didn't matter. Minato turned to see Shin running right alongside him, and grimaced.

He had picked up the trick to fighting Shin as he was now. He would mainly only counter to for his attacks, and tried to stay too close for Shin to use his large scale attacks. He'd also avoid Shin's odd sense of humor, which he had also managed to somehow turn into a weapon, and knew to be ready for near-death encounters. After a few failed attempts that usually ended in one swift deathblow he couldn't stop, he finally succeeded, and was taken back to the alley. He released his awakening and almost fell over. He had been

fighting for three hours at his full strength, and was feeling serious after effects as the Dark Hour appeared.

"It seems as long as there's the thrill of combat, you can fight indefinitely." Shin said. Minato nodded, catching his breath and adjusting to his new state of weakness. He wasn't ready to form words just yet. "Since you're here, let me tell you about somebody you remind me of. I think you'll find the similarities startling."

"... Ok." Minato said. He was still woozy, but was recovering quickly.

"In the Vortex World I came from, there were creatures known as Manikins." Shin said. "Though it was a world of demons, human sentiments that lingered were reborn as weak creatures called Manikins. The majority of them were pitifully weak and constantly exploited... except for one. He was named Sakahagi, and was obsessed with gaining more and more power for himself to the point that he would kill his own kind along with other demons, and wore clothing composed of the skin he took from their corpses."

"Sounds like a badass." Minato said. Shin chuckled.

"I thought so too, actually." Shin said. "There was a Manikin movement that strove to create a peaceful world, and he laughed at it."

"As he should have. A world of peace is worse than death." Minato said.

"Again, just as I thought... However, the leader of that movement gave his life trying to achieve that goal, so I can't bring myself to disrespect him." Shin said. "Regardless, his weakness brought about his death. On the other hand, Sakahagi died as a true warrior. He managed to take control of and transform a swarm of demons while searching for power and even gained enough to face me. Of course, I don't need to tell you what happened afterwards." Minato chuckled.

"Did he at least put up a good fight?" he asked.

"At the time, he might have had a chance. Then again, at the time, I fought with ruthless efficiency." Shin said. He smirked. "It's a bit foolish, now that I think about it, to hold back so much when I fight."

"But it would be so boring to just win instantly all the time. You hold back because victory might be sweet, but crushing people's hopes and dreams is sweeter." Minato said. Shin laughed.

"Of course it is! How else do you think I got the majority of my followers?" he said. "I gave most of my enemies a choice. Follow, or die. The smart ones are still around, waiting for my orders." Shin chuckled, and took a breath. "You have a natural hunger for power. And from my experience, it's people like that who go far in life, regardless of who or what stands with them or against them."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

"Well then, it looks like we're in agreement there." Minato said. "I look forward to our next meeting, sensei."

"Good. I'll need a better test for you once more." Shin said. He disappeared, and left Minato to return to the dorm on his own. He rode Hell Biker's motorcycle back and then snuck through his window once more, opting to recover for the majority of the night. The day was, in a word, tiring.

65. Chapter 65

Chapter 65: Conversations

A forgetful morning. Absolute business. Mitsuru was intent on making sure Mr. Toudou never got an excuse to torture SEES again, and everyone arrived at school almost half an hour early. With nothing to do, Minato and Junpei decided to check up on Kenji. He arrived ten minutes after them, and still kept his usual, almost idiotic smile on his face even at the start of the day.

"S'up, dude?" Junpei greeted.

"The sun's shining, there isn't a cloud in the sky, and I'm taking Emiri out to dinner tonight. Life is beautiful." Kenji said.

"Until your father fakes that he's playing a game, only to get executed by Nazis." Minato said, catching Kenji and Junpei off guard. He chuckled. "Just referencing a movie... anyways, how's that life been? You've been too busy to hang out lately?"

Junpei laughed. "Yeah, I've bet a guy that's taken has way too many things to do!" he said.

"Hey, it's totally worth it, bro! I think we need to get you a girl

so you can see what you're missing out on." Kenji said.

"Hey! I don't need you guys to set me up! I just haven't uhh... found a girl I like or... yeah, there ain't my type of girl here." Junpei said. Kenji chuckled.

"C'mon, don't gimme that! You live in a dorm with Yukari Takeba AND Mitsuru Kirijio, plus I heard Fuuka moved into your dorm last week!" Kenji said.

"Let's be real for a moment, Kenji." Minato said. "Yeah, Junpei's got great options right at home, but his competition is me, a paid model and known playboy, Akihiko Sanada, the star and Captain of the Boxing Team, and finally, Shinjiro Aragaki, the mysterious tough guy with a soft side. He's got better luck looking outside the box."

"... Man, did ya have to make me sound like a loser?" Junpei asked.

"Yikes, bro... that wasn't an easy let-down." Kenji said.

"I euthanize violently." Minato said. "Still, to be honest, I don't think any of the girls at our dorm would go well with Junpei anyways. I feel like... his girl would need to be demure."

"Demure?" Junpei asked.

"Modest or reserved." Minato said. "Not really like the girls we live with. Well, except for Fuuka, but she's mine."

"I know, I know... but huh, now that I think about it, yeah, I

guess a demure girl is kinda what I'm goin' for." Junpei said. Kenji chuckled.

"Dude, you totally want a girl that you have to protect." he said. "But I respect that. It's the original dream, and if you're chasing it, I've got you."

"Should you need my amazing abilities, you know I'm available most of the time." Minato said.

"Were you guys listening? I just said I didn't need help!" Junpei said. He chuckled. "Just you watch. I'm gonna score me a total babe all on my own!"

"Not if you go around saying you want to score a babe." Minato said. He and Kenji laughed.

"Dudes! It's just a figure of speech!" Junpei said. The trio continued talking in the main hallway while Akihiko and Shinjiro sat a bit away from them on one of the benches near the campus store.

"You hear that Shinji? Even before school's begun, they're already working on their game plans." Akihiko said. "I guess that old proverb is showing itself here... 'You don't prepare to fail, you fail to prepare.'"

"... Where are you going with this, Aki?" Shinjiro asked.

"... I need your help, Shinji." Akihiko said. Shinjiro glanced at him suspiciously.

"... What's the problem?" he asked.

"... I need you... to help me win Mitsuru." Akihiko said.
Shinjiro let out a groan of annoyance.

"You don't put on a serious tone for shit like this, dumbass."
Shinjiro said.

"This is serious, Shinji." Akihiko said. "I've been complacent up till now... no, I think content is the better word... but I'm not giving up."

"... SEES really is a den of idiots." Shinjiro grumbled. He glanced at Akihiko's resolute face, and then at the floor. He sighed. "... I'll help, but only so you can see how stupid this is. But why the sudden change of heart?"

"You were there yesterday... nobody but Minato could've gotten Mitsuru to agree to something like that." Akihiko said. "I don't know what's going on between them, but I know they're closer than I ever thought possible."

"... I'll give you that." Shinjiro said. "So, what's your plan?"

"... I'm working on it."

"Do you even have an idea of what you're gonna do?"

"I'll show Mitsuru I'm the better man."

"Define better."

"... More physically fit, reliable, and trustworthy man."

"Then you mean better soldier."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Mitsuru sees people as pawns more often than she'd like to admit... so if you become a better soldier, that just makes you a slightly more useful pawn. But that's all you you'll be."

"You're wrong. She values those qualities in people. She told me so herself."

"She values those qualities in people that work under her."

"Why should you see the people that work under you different from the people next to you?"

"... I get where you're coming from, but that's just how she is. She didn't grow up like us, Aki. You've gotta remember that."

"... Then what should I do?"

"Hell if I know."

"... This might be tougher than I thought." Akihiko said. As they sat in contemplative silence, Natsuki, Fuuka, and Yukari were passing by to visit the art room just in time to overhear their conversation. They lingered until the two stopped talking, and then continued their walk.

"Even the Captain of the Boxing team has girl problems, huh?"

Guess he's a lot more like everyone else than we thought." Natsuki said. She snickered. "But man, what a dope. 'I'll make myself a better man'. Pfft!"

"I think Akihiko-senpai could do it." Fuuka said. She snickered as well. "But he might be going in the wrong direction."

"You'd think he would get Mitsuru-senpai by now. I mean, he's known her for almost three years." Yukari said.

"Clueless is clueless, Yukari. Some guys just don't wise-up, and I think he might be one of them." Natsuki said.

"Senpai does have a one-track mind, doesn't he?" Fuuka added. "But I think it's good that he's going to try. I might root for him."

"What? I don't think he has a chance." Natsuki said.

"Not a chance, huh?... I hate to say this, but you might be right." Yukari said.

"Yeah, if anyone has a chance, it'd have to be Minato." Natsuki said. "That guy gets to me sometimes, but if you look past all of his quirks, he's as serious as she is."

"... Huh. You're right..." Yukari said. She and Fuuka both suddenly seriously began to think about it, catching Natsuki off guard.

"... Hey, it was just a joke. C'mon, he's your boyfriend, right, Fuuka?" Natsuki said.

"... Oh, yeah!" Fuuka said. She smirked. "He wouldn't dare cheat on me."

"... That sounded very threatening." Yukari said. Natsuki nodded, and made a mental note to rule out any form of physically crossing Fuuka again.

"Y-yeah, and if he did, I'd kick his ass!" Natsuki said.

"Then, I'll be counting on you." Fuuka said. "We'll beat him up real bad." The two started laughing again as they entered the culture club hallway, and saw Catherine there handing out papers. She turned to see them, and quickly approached.

"Hey, Fuuka, Yukari!" she said. "Oh, and Moriyama-san as well! How are you?"

"Mornin'! Pretty good." Yukari said. She eyed the stack of papers she was holding. "Do you have to hand something out for the club?"

"I'm just distributing copies of me and Minato's first collaborative picture in Photography Club. It came out great, so I thought I'd show it off. You can all have one too." Catherine said. She gave one paper to each of the girls, and all of their jaws dropped. The paper they had was a large print of Minato and Catherine's 'striptease' photo. "The lighting was perfect, wasn't it?"

"... Umm... you took this... during club?" Fuuka asked.

"Right after we had our speed painting contest." Catherine said. "When we were done with the shot, we spent almost an hour together in the club room afterwards."

"W-wait a minute, you did what?!" Yukari asked.

"That sonuvabitch! I'll shove my foot up his ass!" Natsuki said. Fuuka said nothing, but her eyes twitched. It was all she had to not snap and attempt to strangle Catherine on the spot

"Hmm? What're you getting so worked up for?" Catherine asked. "We had to develop the pictures." The girls all froze, and all three of them immediately looked away in an attempt to mask their shame. Catherine chuckled. "What did you think we were doing?"

"N-nothing!" Fuuka said. "I-I just didn't expect... this type of picture."

"It's my specialty, and since Minato IS a model, I thought it would be a great photograph. And I was right." Catherine said. The girls all spent a little bit trying to find holes in her logic, but none came to mind. She giggled. "Well, I need to finish handing these out, so I'm off!" Catherine merrily went on her way, and left the girls to look over the picture they were just handed.

"... He's an artist, huh?" Yukari asked.

"... An artist indeed." Fuuka said. They continued their walk, too absorbed in the pictures to notice Mitsuru and Ikutsuki

talking by the persimmon tree outside.

"What have you found?" Mitsuru asked.

"I believe there's a pattern to the full moon Shadows." Ikutsuki said. "While I'm still checking over the remainder of known data we have on Shadow types so I can be absolutely sure, I get the feeling I'm right. I'll visit the dorm tomorrow to share my results with everyone."

"Then I'll tell them to return to the dorm earlier than usual tomorrow." Mitsuru said.

"Thank you." Ikutsuki said. "... Also, I think I'd like to check up on Minato's mental state again."

"... I believe he's fine, Mr. Chairman." Mitsuru said.

"Forgive my language, but fine means fucked-up, insecure, neurotic, and emotional." Ikutsuki said. "I don't think we can ever be too cautious with him... after all, not only is he the leader of the field team, but he's also undoubtedly our strongest member. We can't afford for him to be unstable."

"... You have a point." Mitsuru said. "Very well. However, I believe he has a right to know about the subject of these visits."

"... I suppose that makes sense." Ikutsuki said. "Though, you don't mind if I bring my own security again?" he asked. Mitsuru shot him a serious glare.

"Do you distrust him that much?" she asked.

"Not at all! Don't misunderstand me, but you should know I'm just herring on the side of caution. I'd rather not be forage." Ikutsuki said. Mitsuru's gaze broke, replaced by a look of confusion. Ikutsuki grinned and expected her to laugh. They watched each other for about thirty seconds before signs of annoyance appeared on Mitsuru's face. Ikutsuki's grin dropped and he nervously chuckled. "Eheheh... well, ahem, on a more serious note, this is also to assure his confidentiality. You understand why a member of SEES can't do this, of course."

"That's obvious." Mitsuru said. She gazed at the tree in contemplation for a bit before sighing. "Very well. I trust your judgment, but he'll know this is coming."

"That's not a problem." Ikutsuki said. "... In other news, I have an update on his daughter."

"His daughter?" Mitsuru asked. "Ah, you mean..."

"Yes."

"... I'm not sure how I feel about both of you referring to the project as his daughter... Regardless, why are you telling me and not Minato?"

"I want to leave an element of surprise for him." Ikutsuki said. "This has to do with the appearance Metis has taken on... she actually does look like she could be your child."

"Excuse me?" Mitsuru asked. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"She has her father's hair, but her mother's eyes." Ikutsuki said. "Her body is incomplete and lacks any form of combat functionality at the moment, but she can move around just fine on her own. She adapted at an unprecedented speed..."

"Is something the matter?" Mitsuru asked. Ikutsuki adjusted his tie.

"Too quickly, actually. Metis is already questioning her existence, and why she's alone." Ikutsuki said. "If she finds the remains of another ASW... well, I'm not sure how she'd react. We're taking precautions to stop her of course, including the addition of a full control system if necessary, as well as bringing in the older tools used to alter the original ASW's memories. I'd... rather you not worry Minato about this."

"... You have my word." Mitsuru said.

"Thank you." Ikutsuki said. He glanced at his watch. "... It seems I should be off. I'll visit the dorm tomorrow evening to share my findings. Thank you, and good day."

"Good day." Mitsuru said. Ikutsuki left, and Mitsuru made her way to class. She passed by the Junpei, Minato, and Kenji all being approached by Fuuka, Yukari, and Natsuki. She saw the girls all had an odd piece of paper in their hand, but paid no attention to it. Minato turned to see the incoming group.

"It's rare to see you three in a crowd." Minato said. "What's the occasion?"

"I just wanted to ask you about this." Fuuka said, showing Minato the picture. Kenji and Junpei both froze at the sight of the image, but Minato just chuckled.

"It's called 'Striptease'." Minato said. He swiftly went next to Fuuka and put an arm around her. "It's a little intimate, but nothing compared to what we could do."

"... Damn." Junpei whispered, tipping his hat to Minato. Fuuka had reddened ridiculously, while Yukari and Natsuki were both stunned by the immediate reversal.

"I think we could change it around some." Minato said. He bit a portion of Fuuka's scarf. "I could start here."

"... I don't get this opportunity every day." Kenji whispered to himself. He began mentally taking notes, intent on learning a few tricks.

"Hey, hey, hey, that's enough already!" Natsuki said, pulling Fuuka back. She snapped back to her senses.

"T-this isn't the time for that!" Fuuka said quickly. Minato chuckled.

"You're right. Later tonight?" he asked. Everyone else's eyes widened in surprise.

"Jeez, at least PRETEND you have some sense of shame in

public!" Yukari said. "This is weird for everyone, ya know?"

"But she's so adorable when I tease her, I just can't help myself sometimes." Minato said. His smirk was slowly warping into his all too familiar manic smile, but he didn't care. Natsuki actually held back a bit of chuckling, but she gave a little nod to Minato. Yukari sighed.

"What kind of excuse is that?" she asked.

"An honest one. I put the 'gall' in Chagall." Minato said. He took a quick glance at his watch.

"It's about time to go to class." Fuuka said quickly. She gave Natsuki a pleading look, and the duo immediately walked away with Yukari trailing after them. Minato laughed, and followed suit with Junpei and Kenji joining him.

"... Dude, sometimes I wonder how you get away with that." Junpei said. "If it were me, I woulda had the shit slapped out of me."

"Bro, he's just got that charisma going." Kenji said. "But I bet it doesn't hurt to be an actual model too."

"You know it." Minato said. The trio chuckled, and made their way to class. Aside from a bit of noise over Minato and Catherine's photograph, the school day was otherwise uneventful. Minato went to Council as usual, and sat in relative silence as Mitsuru and Shinjiro joined him.

While Minato attended Student Council, Junpei found himself walking back to the dorm with Fuuka and Yukari. "Ya know, I never woulda thought Natsuki-san was the type to hit the library solo." he said as they left the front gate.

"I heard she didn't do too well on the first midterms, so she needs to straighten up or else she's in trouble." Yukari said. "It's pretty sudden, though..."

"She's trying to change." Fuuka said. "I know she can do it."

"... Change, huh?" Junpei asked. "That's cool. You said she lives in the dorms across town, right?"

"In the normal girl's dorms." Fuuka said. "She's not on the best terms with her parents, so I can see why she'd want to be there."

"For real?" Junpei asked. He sighed.

"What's up?" Yukari asked.

"What the hell is wrong with all of our parents? Seriously, I don't know anyone who talks about having 'good' parents in the whole school!" Junpei said.

"... You've got a point." Fuuka said.

"But it's not like people would just talk about having good parents... right?" Yukari asked. "I mean, it's kind of like bragging..."

"... How is it screwed up to say you have good parents?" Junpei asked. Neither Fuuka nor Yukari had an answer, and the rest of their walk was spent in relative silence.

Back at Gekkoukan, the Council meeting drew to a close. The various other members went about doing their duties, leaving Mitsuru, Minato, and Shinjiro to their own devices. "... Then, if you'll excuse me again." Mitsuru said.

"Not so fast." Minato said. "Shinji and I will do our patrols and then come back so all three of us can share a meal once more. It's been far too long."

"... He's got a point." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru gave each of them a suspicious glance, and then chuckled.

"Very well... if you insist." Mitsuru said. "I expect you back here within thirty minutes."

"As you command, Madame President." Minato said with a smirk. He quickly rose from his chair and went for the door, followed by Shinjiro. They went about doing their rounds, and found the school relatively empty.

"Nobody's gonna be around." Shinjiro said. "Everyone's scared shitless now that they know we really don't give a fuck."

"True." Minato said as the duo walked the almost empty hallways. "... Still, Shinji, I must ask. What do you hope to achieve by keeping Ken alone?"

"He shouldn't get involved. It's gonna cause him nothing but more trouble." Shinjiro said.

"And if he gets into more trouble without being awakened to his power? Will you save him like you saved his mother?" Minato asked.

"Tch... that was fucking low." Shinjiro said.

"I'm only stating the truth." Minato said. "But you know his life... if he keeps going down this path alone, he could turn out as twisted as I am. Is that your idea of redemption?"

"Then what the hell do you expect me to do?" Shinjiro asked.

"Be there for him when he joins." Minato said. They walked on in silence, and said nothing for a time until Shinjiro spoke once more on the third floor.

"... Say I agree to this bullshit." Shinjiro said. "Then the kid learns I killed his mom. Then what?"

"I don't know. That depends on Ken." Minato said. "I'm not saying you'll have to do this alone. I'll be there, and so will everyone else from SEES. Hell, I bet Akihiko could even serve as a role model for him. Akihiko's the good brother you kept off the streets, after all. But look at this way... if Ken decides to kill you, isn't that the poetic justice you've always wanted? Personally, you don't have much to lose... but just know that if you fuck up and Ken does kill you, I'll send him after you."

"... You'd kill him if he killed me?" Shinjiro asked.

"In an instant." Minato said. He chuckled. "I hope you make a good father."

"... If we leave him alone, he's fucked. If he joins and kills me, he's fucked. So you're saying I need to be his guardian?" Shinjiro asked. He scowled. "Make him love me or some shit like that? Do you have any idea how goddam ridiculous you sound?!"

"Maybe it is ridiculous, but it's the only option I see for you." Minato said. "... I can only ask you to do this, Shinji. The fact is, Ken will inevitably become involved with us... what you do then is up to you. If you want to be a dick and make Ken kill you, go ahead. Throw your life away and cause trouble for everyone who ever cared about you."

"I know what it means if I die, dammit." Shinjiro said. The two walked on in relative silence for a time once more until they neared the Council room again. Shinjiro finally spoke again. "... I'll think about it. But you better not bring this shit up with anyone else. This is between you and me, got it?"

"Of course. You know I can keep secrets." Minato said. "You don't need to tell me your decision... I'll see it for myself when Ken joins."

"... Thanks." Shinjiro said. They entered the Council room to see Mitsuru preparing to leave.

"Ah, you're right on time." she said. "I'll be out shortly." The trio left Gekkoukan and took the train to Iwatodai station. Minato took them to Wakatsu once more, and they headed to the Divide once more. They quickly sat down at a table and Minato ordered his usual starter from the usual Geisha. "Once more, I enter a questionable establishment... I fear I may besmirch the Kirijio name." Mitsuru mused.

"We're a walking scandal, aren't we?" Minato asked. They both chuckled.

"...Do you have to make this sound like an affair?" Shinjiro asked.

"Who says it isn't?" Minato asked. "A model and an heiress... separated by standing, but together none the less."

"You're becoming quite the romantic, aren't you?" Mitsuru asked.

"He's always been an idiot." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled.

"Not an idiot. A Fool." Minato said. "There's quite a big difference between the two."

"It's true. Not even you can say you haven't accepted Minato's antics as part of your daily life." Mitsuru said. She smirked. "After all, you've changed since you've met him."

"As have you." Shinjiro said. "And I'm not sure if it's for the better in either of our cases."

"Perhaps it isn't. We may be becoming degenerates." Mitsuru said. "After all, we're engaging in underage drinking for the sole purpose of our amusement... but I've heard this is common among high-school and college students, so I'm unsure as to how much of a transgression we're committing."

"That's what punks, drop-outs, and dumbasses do." Shinjiro said.

"Then Mitsuru will be the Empress of all Punks, with you and me as her champions. None will be able to resist her imperious reign, lest they face execution." Minato said. He and Mitsuru laughed as the Geisha came back and silently set three bottles on the table this time, and poured everyone a cup. They each took their drinks, and Minato turned to Shinjiro. "Anything amazing to say, Shinjiro?" Shinjiro sighed, but surely enough, raised his glass.

"To throwing common sense out the window." he said. Mitsuru and Minato both laughed once more, and everyone took their first drink.

"I didn't think you would be the one to make our first truly exceptional toast, Shinji." Mitsuru said.

"Nor did I. Color us impressed." Minato said.

"Impressive? Hmph." Shinjiro said. He smirked. "I think you two are already off in your own world."

They trio spent time trying out some of the other exotic foods

they could get. As it turned out, Shinjiro's stomach didn't agree with Puffer Fish, so he excused himself shortly after his meal to find the nearest bathroom. "There's no need to be alarmed. Many of our customers find themselves in similar situations. He has an attendant at the ready in case he needs anything." the Geisha waitress assured.

"Thank you." Minato said. "We'll wait for his return."

"As you wish." she replied. She retreated out of their booth once more, leaving them on their own.

"Puffer Fish are poisonous... I hope this isn't anything serious." Mitsuru said.

"Even if it was poison, I think he'd be fine." Minato said. "He's stronger than you think."

"I'm fully aware of his new abilities." Mitsuru said. "Though I fear he may never want to return here again. He is rather health conscious." Minato scooted over next to her.

"In that case, we should act as if it's our last night here together." Minato said.

"... You know that isn't happening." Mitsuru said.

"What isn't happening?" Minato asked. "I never said we'd do anything in particular."

"... Feigning ignorance doesn't suit you." Mitsuru said.

"And acting coy doesn't suit you." Minato said.

"... Even so." Mitsuru said. She sighed. "... Perhaps if we were different people, or lived in a different world, I'd consider it... but we both know this can't be. It will only cause trouble for both of us."

"Trouble has always found me. I think it's time I started looking for it, don't you think?" Minato replied. Mitsuru chuckled, and rested her head against him.

"... I don't know when it started, but I've started to wonder what it would be like to see the world with your eyes. Eyes that see opportunity around every corner, that aren't confined to a single frame as mine are... I could only see the world in a certain light... but I think I've caught glimpses of the other side. And I can't help but feel a sense of... longing." Mitsuru said.

"... Those worlds are in your grasp. Ask, and I'll show you any of them." Minato said. Mitsuru chuckled.

"As much as I'd love to, I can't... I fear I'll want to stay, even though I know now that it's futile." Mitsuru said. "... We should ride together one day, Minato. To a place where nobody knows us and we can be true to ourselves... only if for a day, I think we should go."

"It's a promise." Minato said. He took Mitsuru's hand, and turned so that he could whisper directly into her ear. "And I don't make promises I can't keep."

"... Thank you." Mitsuru said. She put her free arm around Minato. "... It's ridiculous, for me to show this much weakness. I... When I see you with other girls, I know I shouldn't be angry, or feel some kind of resentment towards them... but I do. I do, and it eats at me. It eats at me because I know we can't be anything more than this... but I still think about it. And I can't stop. ...Is... is that wrong?"

"It isn't." Minato said. He put his other arm around Mitsuru and hugged her back. "No matter what anyone else might say, or what they think, it isn't. Right now, it's just you and me... all that matters in the world."

"... You really are a devil." Mitsuru said. She tightened her grip on him. "... But if that's the case... I don't want this moment to pass."

"... Then, on our terms, time has stopped." Minato said. "And it'll go when we please." Mitsuru giggled.

"Yes... we'll live on our own terms, here and now." Mitsuru said. "Right now, it's just you and me."

"You have me all to yourself... what do you want to do?" Minato asked.

"... Stay like this." Mitsuru said.

"... You're lying." Minato said. Mitsuru took a deep breath. She said nothing, but moved her face to the level of Minato's. She planted a soft kiss on his cheek, and stopped.

"... This... is as much as I need to see." she whispered. Minato responded by slowly moving to kiss her neck once.

"... Then that's all you'll get." he whispered back. They remained entangled with each other for a time, simply taking in each other's very existence, repeating various soft kisses but never locking lips. Time had truly stopped for them.

Shinjiro returned to the booth, about to say something, until he caught them. They hadn't even noticed him, and he knew better than to say anything. He retreated back out quietly, and paid a portion of the bill before leaving.

It was an hour until the Geisha came and announced her presence, startling both of them. "I'm sorry to say this, but you've been in here for over four hours... we can't allow you to stay any longer." she said.

"Of course... we were just leaving." Minato said.

"Yes...we were just leaving." Mitsuru said. The duo quickly paid and took their leave, exiting Iwatodai Station. It was already night, and the moon had risen into the sky. They walked very slowly back to the dorm in almost complete silence, hand in hand and clutching to one another, both seemingly afraid of what would happen if they let go of one another. Inevitably, they made it back to the dorm, and stopped at the corner across from the entrance. "... Once we cross that street, the dream ends. We wake up, and return to our lives..."

"Finis omnium bonorum... I never thought I'd say those words outside of a fight." Minato said. "... Once we cross that street, I am a monster once more, and you are my keeper."

"We are nothing more, nothing less." Mitsuru said. She looked up at the sky, and turned to the moon. "Minato." He turned his head to see that she was gazing towards the moon. "... The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

"... It is." Minato said. They slowly moved away from each other, and let their hands disconnect. With forced smiles, they strolled into the dorm.

"How was your..." Fuuka began as they entered. She stopped. She saw through their smiles instantly. "... Did something happen?"

"... I'm actually rather tired." Mitsuru said. "I believe I'll take a few extra hours of sleep tonight... if you'll excuse me." She and Minato exchanged one last melancholy glance before she headed up the stairs.

"... How was your day, Minato?" Fuuka asked.

"... Tiring as well. If you'll excuse me." Minato said. He made his way up to the stairs, and showered. He returned to his room and made some tea before sitting in silent contemplation as he stared out of his window. He drank his cup alone, with only one thought on his mind. "*Why? Why now?*" he thought. The same thought crossed his mind over and over, until after an hour, when it was almost midnight, he threw on some casual clothing and jumped out of his window. He hurriedly made his way to the Velvet Room and barged in.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I-" Elizabeth began, but Minato walked right past her and plopped down onto his chair facing Igor. He clutched his head with one hand.

"... It would appear you are undergoing quite the change." Igor said.

"Dammit... what's happening?" he asked. "Why... am I caring this much? All I need is the card, nothing more! So why the hell is this still on my mind?!"

"The day has come for me to show how much I understand you, Minato." Igor said. "It is as I said before... while you will undoubtedly have an impact on all of the people you interact with in your Social Links, some of them may also have an impact on you. How large that impact depends on you... and though you may not realize it, or even accept it, you've changed tremendously since you first signed the contract."

"... Are you saying I'm becoming attached to people now?" Minato asked. Igor smiled.

"I believe I already told you... by the time you completed a Social Link, there was a chance you'd value the other person's life more than your own." Igor said. "They will become a part of you... something you won't be able to simply leave behind anymore."

"They'll become a hindrance. A weakness. Something I can't afford to have." Minato said. "I know these Social Links can be reversed. I simply need to find a way to break them."

"... You are afraid." Elizabeth said.

"Yes, I'm afraid!" Minato snapped. "If I start depending on others, I won't be able to fend for myself when I leave again! And when I'm all alone, I'll be filled with regret! And I don't want that to happen! I've seen what that does to people! It fucking wrecks them!"

"... You aren't mistaken, Minato." Igor said. "Social Links can be weaknesses."

"Then you realize I need to sever them, here and now before they become a real problem. I just need to make the other person hate me, right? Then it's over?" Minato said.

"... But Social Links are also one of the greatest forms of power available." Igor said. "To master their power is to master the weakness that comes from bonds... it is as they say. True bonds are forged in fire, and now, you're entering the flames, Minato. It is up to you to determine what you will be like when you emerge. Will you be paranoid and deformed,

unable to see past your own fears that you've drilled into yourself for years, and fail to see the power that comes from others? Or will you be sharper and stronger, as the true bearer of infinite possibilities?"

"Tch... this rhetoric is ridiculous, and you know it. I gained a few allies who would put their lives on the line for me. Big whoop. Those can be bought." Minato said. Igor chuckled.

"I admire your stubbornness... it reminds me of myself." Igor said. "Nevertheless, I can tell from the look in your eyes... you understand what's happening to you."

"... That's preposterous." Minato said. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Do you actually expect me to believe that by accepting other people not only for who I want them to be, but for who they are, I'll not only gain this ultimate power you speak of, but also an appreciation for humanity?"

"Exactly." Igor said.

"Bullshit." Minato said. "Absolute bullshit."

"Those are the rules of the world... My master created this place to abide by those rules, and you can either play with them or against them. However, only one choice places you in a favorable position." Igor said.

"... No. I'll get around it." Minato said. He smirked. "Just you watch. My fate was changed, dammit. You yourself said that everything's in flux, right? If that's the case, then I can just as

easily go forwards without adopting any of these damn hippie ideals. I won't lie by saying I'm adverse to the idea of gaining more and more loyal followers, but I will not simply 'accept' anyone I have a bond with... I'll improve them tremendously before we finish. If this effect persists, then I'll deal with it."

"... You'd challenge the power of bonds in an attempt to bend it to your will?" Igor asked.

"Yes." Minato said. Igor looked at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. He went on for a good minute before settling down.

"Just as I thought... Minato, you may be the most interesting guest to ever grace this Velvet Room." Igor said. "I'll no longer attempt to predict your future. No... I want to see it with my own eyes instead."

CRACK!

"Heh... Just you watch." Minato began.

Thou art I...

"I'm the puppet master, and the people of this world dance at my whim."

And I art thou...

"If you think I'm going to let my possessions influence me that much, you're wrong."

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"It'll take more than a few unchecked emotions to change me." he finished.

"... It will." Igor said. "But perhaps this battle will also make you stronger, as all the others did. Only time will tell."

"... Indeed it will." Minato said. "Till next we meet." Minato left the Velvet Room and returned to his room via his window. He had more than enough to think about through the night.

66. Chapter 66

Chapter 66: Adjustment

Author Note: 300k words. I've impressed myself.

"Alright... so if I'm correct, a Social Link likely reaches its full potential at Rank 10. At such a point, I believe I should be free to disregard said individual's existence without any repercussions." Minato thought as he sat at his desk. He re-read the notes he created for himself earlier that morning.

"Notes on Social Link Progression:

Social Links improve linearly. This progression can be broken into subsections:

Rank 0: Stranger or passerby. The Social Link has yet to be created.

Ranks 1 – 3: Acquaintances. At this point, I've found something about the individual that I like and am entertained in one way or another by their presence.

Ranks 4 – 5: Friends. The individual in question has put enough trust in me to share some form of personal problem or the relationship has become mutually entertaining/beneficial.

Low risk of attachment.

Here, the Social Links seem to follow different patterns for males and females. With males, they'll generally compare themselves to me and take a position on their life versus my own. On the other hand, females tend to try and either use me as a pillar of support or attempt to flaunt some type of superiority. This trend continues further on.

Ranks 6-7: Best Friends. The individual and I are very comfortable with each other. Something has caused me to truly enjoy their company, and they generally trust me completely. Medium-High risk of attachment depending on personal interest in said individual.

Males generally treat me with as much respect as they treat themselves with at this point, and even try to emulate me.

Females will either express romantic interest or will simply accept my actions as part of who I am. Some may do both.

Ranks 8+: ... Something more. More than friends, the individual's existence has become a part of my being. At this point, we can exert the most influence on each other. Very High risk of attachment. Insufficient data for general classifications.

Social Links often have triggers.

Based on previous experience, it should be possible to predict when a Social Link will try and improve its rank. There are

three main indicators.

The Individual wants to Speak – The most obvious indication, the person representative of the card will either ask for or initiate a conversation with me on their own. Generally, simply allowing them to say everything they want to say is sufficient for a rank-up.

The Individual has a Particular Problem – Slightly more subtle, the person representative of the card will usually seem distracted by something on their mind or have something they need to do and request my assistance with said task. They will undoubtedly engage in some manner of conversation in which I will be required to help solve the problem if I want to reach the next rank.

The Individual is Troubled – The subtlest trigger, the person representative of the card will act ALMOST normally, but will still show signs of having something on their mind. Generally, I will personally have to initiate conversation and help the individual cope with (these problems usually aren't quickly solvable) their issue(s) in one way or the other to rank-up.

Triggers Vary.

In general, spending time with a Social Link without a trigger usually does nothing. However, if the next trigger is related to me in some way, spending time without ranking-up will make it more likely for that individual to have a trigger next time.

Some triggers cannot be forced, however, as they seem to be

time sensitive. "

"... *And I can't tell much more.*" Minato said. "*Did I miss anything?*"

"**Nope.**" Alice said in his head.

"***Looks like the details are as good as they're gonna get.***" Jack said.

"*Then that's all for now.*" Minato thought. He stored his page of notes in his desk, and got dressed for school. "*Now for the day... Ken Amada might meet me at the Shrine this afternoon. Perhaps I can claim one of the last three Arcana from him.*"

"... ***Probably Justice or Aeon.***" David said.

"***I doubt a little kid could pass as Judgment.***" Hell Biker said.

"*Indeed... his journey has yet to begin.*" Minato replied. "*As does the more difficult part of my own, and I don't think he'll be the one to serve as my guide.*" He left his room and glanced at his watch. He had just under an hour to make breakfast as usual, so he went downstairs and hurriedly went about doing just that. Forty minutes after his descent, Shinjiro and Akihiko emerged from their rooms.

"Mornin', Shinji." Akihiko said. "Mind if we have a little chat before we head down?"

"Sure." Shinjiro said as he closed his door. The two moved to the lounge and sat across from each other.

"So... about that thing I asked you to do..." Akihiko said. Shinjiro sighed.

"... Give it up." Shinjiro said.

"... I thought I told you I was serious." Akihiko said.

"So am I." Shinjiro said. He looked Akihiko right in his eyes. "I've seen them together, Aki... this fight was over before it started. Anymore on your part will just be insult to injury."

"Tch... you can't know that." Akihiko said. "What makes you think I don't stand a chance?"

"They were making out." Shinjiro said. Akihiko blanked.

"... What?" he asked.

"Mitsuru and Minato were making out." Shinjiro began. "They didn't even notice when I got back... and if we think about the time difference between their return and mine... well, I'll leave that to your imagination." he finished. Akihiko's face slowly became devoid of color. His eyes were ready to burst out of their sockets, and his lips quivered as if he were trying to say something. But Akihiko knew Shinjiro wouldn't lie about something he specifically asked him about, so every possible counterargument he had died in his throat, never being uttered. "... You need to find another girl, Aki."

"... No." Akihiko said. "I'm not giving up here."

"Then you're being an idiot." Shinjiro said.

"Maybe I am an idiot." Akihiko snapped. "So what? I am a walking pile of failures, but that doesn't mean I should just take that lying down. I'm improving so that when it comes down to it, I'll be ready. I have just as much as a right to going after what I want as anyone else has!"

"... Alright." Shinjiro said. "Then tell me this. Who gave you that idea?"

Akihiko froze once more. He sat there for a second, glancing at the table. "... That has nothing to do with this." he said.

"Aki... the world doesn't revolve around you, or Mitsuru, or Minato." Shinjiro said. "Wise-up... because if you do something stupid, think about what that'll mean for everyone else." Shinjiro adjusted his school jacket and rose from his chair. He went downstairs, leaving Akihiko to his thoughts once more. He got a few minutes of silent contemplation in until Mitsuru walked downstairs and found him.

"Good morning, Akihiko." Mitsuru said. She stopped and examined him. "... Is everything alright?"

"... Shinji's right. I am an idiot." Akihiko muttered to himself. He got up and sighed. "I'm just feeling a little down today. Nothing a good jog won't fix." he said. He chuckled. "Yeah, guess I didn't start-off properly this morning."

"Oh... then, I wish you success." Mitsuru said. Akihiko nodded and went back to his room to grab his schoolbag and then headed straight out the door. He was serious about clearing his head.

Mitsuru walked down shortly after him, and turned to see Minato and Shinjiro making breakfast as usual. "Good morning, Mitsuru." Minato said.

"... Good morning, Minato, Shinjiro." she replied as she sat down at the table. She watched them finish their work, and they quickly set the table. Minato took his seat next to her while Shinjiro sat in his usual spot a few seats off. She turned to see Minato acting exactly as he always did.

"... You're quite the actor." Mitsuru whispered.

"I make it a habit not to daydream." Minato whispered back.

"... Daydream?" Mitsuru asked.

"You said it yourself... the dream is over." Minato replied. "I am a monster, and you are my keeper... Ahh, and of course, we're the best of friends, nonetheless Though, I should probably add 'with benefits' to that, shouldn't I?" he mused. He leaned in close. "Remember, I only said I don't daydream... I never said anything about the night."

Mitsuru couldn't suppress a little smile from creeping onto her face. "... You really intend to make this difficult for me, don't you?" she asked.

"I think you enjoy it." Minato said. *"I know I do. And as long as I keep you dancing and don't fall into another big emotional sink like last time, I'll finish this card without getting attached. And if I can finish this one in that manner, I can finish every card like that."*

"... The others will be down soon." Shinjiro said. Mitsuru flinched, but collected herself quickly. Minato chuckled at her reaction.

"Of course... this isn't the time for this." Mitsuru said.

"If you say so." Minato said. He returned to his food, and surely enough, the rest of SEES soon joined the breakfast table. It was an average breakfast, devoid of anything of real note happening. SEES took the train to school as usual, and dispersed on the train. Mitsuru returned to her usual haunt to watch the school, while Junpei and Yukari were busy chatting with Shinjiro. Minato had opted to listen to music on his own by a window as well. *"... Now then... let's do some thinking. Usually, a rank-up involves me helping the individual with a problem of some sort, or by allowing them to open up to me in some way. If I want to rank up to higher levels, these will probably become increasingly personal matters for males and intimate matters for females."* he noted.

"Dem' girls gonna open those legs tho!" Jack howled in his mind.

"They'll leave themselves wide open, waiting to be

pierced." Matador said.

"... *Bad sexual references aside, that's definitely a possibility.*" Minato replied. He chuckled. "*Lucifuge, you sly dog, you know your shit.*"

"He might not act like it, but he was a freak back in the day." David said.

"All bent, but not to his will." Alice said.

"... *Ok, this train of thought stops here.*" Minato ordered. He shook his head, erasing the fragments of images he definitely didn't want in his head from his mind, and then resumed looking out of the window at the sea. "*Still, the question remains... I'm certain if that's the case, I'll be forced into a situation where the threat of attachment is very real. How do I avoid it while scoring the rank-up?"*

"... ***You've just gotta be a gigolo.***" Hell Biker said. "***No questions asked. You're a man-whore, and you'll do what you must.***"

"*That's a start... but I feel like just having that mindset won't be enough.*" Minato replied. He grinned. "*How much fun it would be if it were.*"

"Fuuka approaches." Matador said. Minato turned to see her walking up to him.

"What's up, Fuuka?" Minato asked.

"... Are you okay, Minato?" she asked.

"... Pardon?" he asked.

"It's just... you've been alone all this time, yet you're randomly laughing or shaking your head a lot, so I was wondering if everything was alright." Fuuka said.

"Aww, did I give you a scare?" Minato asked. He reached over quickly, much faster than any normal person would've, and pulled Fuuka into a little embrace. "Don't be scared. I was just having a little talk with my Fiends, nothing special."

"Oh... ok." Fuuka said. "But I thought you did that a lot... and this is the first time I've seen you like this."

"We were just having a particularly funny discussion." Minato said. He nuzzled his head against Fuuka's. "Want to guess what it was about?" Fuuka thought it over seriously for a bit before sighing.

"... I really don't know what you and your Fiends would talk about." she said. Minato chuckled.

"We were talking about what your next excuse for me to hug you could be. But we never thought it would be something like this." Minato said. Fuuka reddened.

"T-this isn't an excuse! I-I was really worried!" she said.

"And that's what makes it even better." Minato said.

"Worried? Worry about yourself. Your track record isn't all

that good when it comes to self-preservation."

"Hey, I'm being serious..." Fuuka said. "Both you and Mitsuru-senpai seemed so troubled last night, and then you two just act like nothing's wrong..."

"Troubled? Me?" Minato asked. "You do know who and what I am, correct?"

"... That's part of what worries me." Fuuka said. "I know you... and I know you're hiding something."

"And if I am? Will you be the one to fill my dark soul with light?" Minato mused. Fuuka giggled.

"Wouldn't that make me the knight?" she asked.

"Well, I suppose I do classify as a prince." Minato said. He grinned. "Sure. If it comes down to it, you can be my knight."

"Ok... just don't get locked up in a very high castle." Fuuka said.

"But where's the fun in being locked up in a little one?" Minato asked.

"I can't go up that many stairs!" Fuuka said. They both laughed, and the train arrived at Tatsumi Port Island. Fuuka went back to meet with Junpei and Yukari so she could find Natsuki in the morning, leaving Minato alone once more. He caught a conversation as he walked, and lowered his mp3 player just enough to listen in.

"Oh, my teacher told me about Mitsuru Kirijio, the Student Council President. She's going overseas after she graduates. Probably so she can run the Kirijio Company later..." a gossiping boy said.

"Yet another good reason why attachment isn't in my best interests." Minato thought.

"Wow, that's crazy. She's so different from us..." his friend said.

"The funny thing is, I hear she still lives in the dorms. I wonder why... maybe her parents were really strict when she was growing up." the gossiping boy said. He went on a tangent about his own upbringing, and Minato soon stopped listening. He entered school and began the day, which flew by in his head since he spent the majority of it doodling and talking about random things with his Fiends. As the day entered, Yukari and Junpei walked over to his desk.

"Is it just me, or is school suddenly becoming even more of a chore than usual?" Yukari asked.

"No kiddin'... I'm not sayin' it ain't important, but we kinda have more important things we could be doin', ya know?" Junpei said.

"True, but that's only for an hour." Minato said. "I don't think you need to devote that much time to it." Their conversation was interrupted by Mitsuru's abrupt entry into the classroom.

"Mind if I interrupt?" she asked. "The Chairman said he'll be stopping by this evening. When you get back, come to the 4th floor meeting room. Also, Minato... you two have a follow-up after the meeting."

"Scarface is going to be there, right?" Minato asked.

"Correct. I'm sorry if this is an inconvenience." Mitsuru said.

"Not at all! I actually find these meetings entertaining." Minato said. *"It helps me more than you know."*

Mitsuru chuckled. "I'm glad to hear that." she said. "Then, I'll see you all tonight." She turned and left.

"... Thanks for getting our opinions too." Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"As the Field Leader, I am the one that tells you what to do. My compliance is worth all of our compliances if you think about it." Minato said.

"We're at school." Yukari said.

"What does school turn into at midnight?" Minato asked. Junpei chuckled.

"He's got ya there, Yuka-tan. Technically, we are in the field right now." Junpei said. "... But wait. Wouldn't that like, really make us your peons?"

"Who said you weren't?" Minato mused. Yukari sighed.

"Whatever." she said. She left quickly.

"Man, what's up with her?" Junpei asked. "Ya think she'd have smoothed things out now, but I guess not."

"Eh, she'll be fine. She might complain a lot, but she calms down quickly enough." Minato said.

"True dat." Junpei said. "Well, I don't really got anything to do, so I guess I'll head straight back. Later."

"Later." Minato said as Junpei left. He casually packed his things and slowly made his way to Naganaki Shrine, arriving just before four o'clock. He saw Ken approaching, and stopped by the gates. "Good, you came." Minato said.

"... It didn't feel right to decline." Ken said. "So, where is the person you wanted me to meet?"

"They should already be here." Minato said. He made his way to the main Shrine entrance, and sure enough, Maiko was there, along with an emaciated young man who sat on the bench. "Hey, Maiko-chan!" Minato called. Ken cringed as he saw Maiko happily wave back to Minato.

"... This is a prank, isn't it?" he asked quietly.

"Don't be so quick to judge, Ken. I said I'd get you some friends... and I get the feeling these two will be good matches for you." Minato replied. "C'mon, I'll introduce you." He walked forwards with Ken following behind him, and grinned. "So,

Maiko, who's your friend?"

"This is Striped Shirt!" Maiko said. The emaciated man with light-gray long hair in a long-sleeved striped shirt, loose jeans and sandals gave Minato a little nod. "I only see him here on weekends, but he always talks with me. Who's your friend?"

"This is Ken Amada." Minato said. He gave Ken a quick look.

"Hello. It's nice to meet you." Ken said with a respectful bow.

"Ken is actually here more often than you'd think, but he usually doesn't visit this part of the shrine often." Minato said. "I'll let you two get acquainted."

"Huh?! Hey, this wasn't-" Ken began, but he was quickly dragged away by a giggling Maiko. Minato chuckled and took a seat on the bench next to the man known as Striped Shirt. He had a slight grin on his face.

"... Maiko told me about you." Striped Shirt said as Minato got comfortable on the bench. "I was surprised to hear a high-school boy would bring his friends out to entertain an elementary school girl. I thank you for that."

"My intentions weren't nearly as noble as you probably think they were." Minato said.

"I know. There are few who would just go out of their way for another without expecting something in return." Striped Shirt said. "Still... as she told me about you, she smiled. It was

very... bright. Her face shone with the warm light of new life... which is what I'm assuming you wanted to feed off of." Minato chuckled.

"You make me sound like some type of disease." Minato said. "But, you're partially right. I won't deny that I enjoyed it." They simply sat there, watching Maiko drag Ken around for a bit, before Minato spoke again. "...You don't look like the type to be walking around too much. You're sick."

"... It's that obvious, isn't it?" Striped Shirt asked. He smirked. "I'm dying. Compared to her radiance, I'm but a vanishing shadow... though, I wonder... if I were healthy, would I have been like you, a creeping darkness, or like her, and shone with my own light?"

"One does not simply become a force of nature." Minato said. "I will persist, going forth without remorse... whether I was always like this or whether I became like this, I can't say. But it's who I am now, and I like it. It definitely isn't for everyone, however."

"I know... what I'm doing is completely selfish of me. I am connecting with that girl because I'm too afraid to face death alone. Because I don't want to be forgotten, or simply just disappear... even if my death brings her sadness." Striped Shirt said. "... I probably would have been a creeping darkness. Always chasing the sun, but doomed to always fall short."

"You'd never catch it... but one day, you could consume it."

Then, you'd find another to pursue. Then another. And another. Until there was nothing left." Minato said.

"... To shroud the world in your darkness... you'd change the world before you'd change yourself?" Striped Shirt asked.

"There's little need to change perfection." Minato said. He frowned. "... Though I'll admit that's much more difficult in practice than in theory. I'm also having troubles with attachment."

"Then there's light inside both of us." Striped Shirt said. He coughed into his elbow, and then returned to his laid back position on the bench. "... Akinari Kamiki." he said.

"Minato Arisato."

"... As foolish as it is, I suddenly feel an irrepressible urge to interact with those two." Akinari said. "If you insist on taking this Ken down this path... then I will ensure Maiko remains in the light."

"... You caught that, did you?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "You'd be dangerous if you weren't sick. But don't worry... I have no intentions of corrupting Maiko. What Ken does, on the other hand... well, I'll leave it up to him."

"Heh... you are an odd force. I never thought I'd see the day when darkness tries to create its own light... though I suppose you think emergency food is handy." Akinari said. Minato laughed.

"You know me too well." he said.

"I am in a similar predicament... we think along the same lines." Akinari said. "The difference between you and I is that while you plan for the future, I am content with starving myself... after all, I'll disappear soon enough."

"While I'll persist like the plague." Minato said. He got up from the bench, and Akinari slowly followed suit. He had a faint smile on his face.

"The good ones always go first, don't they?" Akinari mused. "But... I wouldn't have it any other way." Minato nodded with a smirk, and they made their way over to Ken and Maiko, who were busy talking on the playground by the jungle gym. Ken was having a bit of difficulty reaching the top where Maiko was.

"You really like climbing." Ken said. He advanced upwards. "And you're good at it too. I'm impressed."

"It's not that hard. You just need to get used to it!" Maiko said from the top. She looked over to see Akinari and Minato walking over to them. "Oh, Striped Shirt wants to play too?"

"I'm feeling alive today." Akinari said with a grin. "You don't mind, do you, Ken-san?"

"Not at all, Striped..." Ken began, but paused, realizing how odd it sounded coming from his mouth. Minato and Akinari chuckled.

"Akinari Kamiki." Akinari said.

"Thank you. Not at all, Kamiki-san." Ken said. He and Maiko quickly got down from the jungle gym.

"Heh... now that everyone's here, what should we do?" Maiko thought. Minato passed the time going along with Maiko and Ken's games, most of which weren't too physically demanding so Akinari could also participate. His watch alarmed around five, startling everyone else.

"Time flies, doesn't it?" Minato said with a sigh. "Sorry everyone, but I've got a few things to do. Ken, you'll stick around, right?"

"... It is getting a little dark, actually. I might need to get home." Ken said.

"Huh? You're leaving already?" Maiko asked. She pouted. "It is getting dark, but... I don't want to go home yet... I don't like it there." Maiko lowered her gaze to the floor. Ken looked at her for a moment, a little confused, then turned to Minato. Minato gave him a little nod.

"... I guess I could stay a while longer." Ken said. Maiko immediately brightened. "Just let me see Minato off, Maiko."

"Ok!" Maiko said, immediately switching from depression to exuberance. Akinari smiled at the two of them, and then exchanged a knowing glance with Minato.

"I'll be sure he gets back quickly." Minato said. Ken walked over to him, and the two walked to the entrance of the Shrine.

"... An estranged girl and a dying young man." Ken said once they were out of earshot.

"I didn't know about Akinari... but I suppose misery likes to consolidate her victims." Minato said. "Do you know why I thought you'd be a good match for them, Ken?"

"They have problems of their own, just like we do. They won't pity me for no reason... they actually have an idea of what I'm going through." Ken said.

"Exactly." Minato said. "If you want to really be as grown-up as you portray yourself as, you need to realize that there are other people who suffer just as much or even more than you do. Once you come to terms with that... well, we'll talk again when that happens."

"... You know, Akinari-san told me to be careful around you." Ken said. He smirked. "And he's right. You sound like one of the bad guys who lure unsuspecting victims down the wrong path sometimes."

Minato chuckled. "I did approach you near you in a graveyard. Who says I'm not the evil mastermind you need to fear?" he asked.

"Common sense." Ken said. Minato laughed.

"That's the best response to that question I've ever heard." he said. "Though anyone else would say it's odd for you to suddenly trust someone."

"I see where Akinari-san is coming from, but you've had more than enough chances to try something." Ken said. "Also, I don't think trying to give me friends that I can connect with counts as luring me down the path of evil... and even if it was, then I guess I'd just be evil too. I mean, there are good bad guys... like you, I guess." He chuckled. "They're usually the meanest, but most of them always do the right thing when it matters the most. I guess that's why I trust you... for the most part, of course."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Justice Arcana...

"And so I grow stronger." Minato thought. They reached the entrance of the shrine, and Ken stopped walking. "You should hurry back. I wouldn't want to keep Maiko waiting too long." Minato said. "Make her happy."

"Bye, Minato. I'll see what I can do." Ken said. Minato left the Shrine and walked towards the dorm. As he approached the front entrance, he caught sight of Fuuka and Yukari playing with the white dog that he saw at the shrine.

"Koro-chan, give me your paw!" Fuuka said, stooping down and extending her hand. The dog put one of its paws on her hand and gave a little bark.

"Ooh, good dog!" Yukari said. The dog retracted its leg, and then suddenly growled. "Huh? What's wrong?" The dog moved past them and took a stand between them and the approaching Minato. It barked twice at him loudly. Fuuka's eyes widened, and Minato could tell she knew that the dog recognized Minato for what he was.

"Hey there, boy." Minato said. "Do you mind not barking at me?" he asked. The dog barked again, and bared its fangs. "... *So be it.*" he thought. His expression died, and Minato had his Fiends radiate as much power as they could from his body. The dog slowly grew quiet, then whimpered. He walked forwards. "Aside." he said. The dog retreated, and he shot it a death glare. "*The next time you cross me, I'll break your legs.*" he thought.

"Minato, what the heck are you doing?!" Yukari asked. Minato cut his pressure and smirked.

"Just exerting my position as the alpha male." Minato said. "My dominance transcends the boundary of species." Yukari facepalmed, and the dog whimpered again, and Fuuka quickly moved over to pet it.

"There, there... he didn't really mean anything by it..." Fuuka said.

"I've seen that dog around. I take it's a stray." Minato said.

"Not really..." Yukari said. "His name's Koromaru. He used to belong to the priest at Naganaki Shrine, but he died a few months ago... he walks this way because this was where the priest used to walk him. I saw them together once, and they looked really happy... He really is a loyal dog."

"Mitsuru would love him." Minato said.

"... Did ya have to break the mood that fast?" Yukari asked. "... But why was it angry at you? And how'd you scare it by just standing there?"

"Evil voices in my head." Minato said. "It can tell I have them... and it can also tell when they're angry."

"... That's creepy." Yukari said. Koromaru walked off, apparently soothed by Fuuka, and the trio entered the dorm. The lounge was empty, so they hurriedly entered the 4th floor lounge to find Ikutsuki and the rest of SEES seated while Sho stood alone in the corner of the room, playing a handheld game with headphones on.

"Ah, you're all back." Ikutsuki said. "Please, take a seat so we can begin." The trio did as instructed, and Ikutsuki cleared his throat before he began to speak. "Hello, everyone. I wanted to let you know how my research has been going. This concerns those Shadows that have been appearing during full moons. I want you to listen closely; it might be hard to follow."

"Like it's ever simple when it comes to this." Shinjiro muttered.

"Shadows can be divided into 12 categories, according to their characteristics. This, we've known for a while. It's like their class or order."

"More like their Arcana, generally denoted by their mask." Minato said. Ikutuski smirked.

"That's correct. Each category can be tied to one of the twelve original Arcana in a standard tarot deck." Ikutsuki said. "Much like Personae, which each have an Arcana affinity, Shadows can all be assigned to a specific Arcana. I suppose it would make sense, since Personae can be seen as the complete counter to Shadows. Now, I've classified the special Shadows we've seen so far, and... it's simply fascinating!" Ikutsuki grew silent, though his face showed the other members that he was absorbed in his own thoughts on the matter.

"And...?" Yukari asked. Ikutsuki snapped back to reality.

"Oh, sorry... Ahem." he said. "Those four Shadows belong to categories I to IV, or, to be more specific, the Magician to the Emperor, in order of their appearance! They may have looked more different than the common ones, but the classification scheme still applies, and, as Minato said, their masks gave them away."

"Is that something we should be excited about, or...?" Junpei asked.

"Oh, I get it... there are 12 in all... eight we haven't seen yet." Fuuka said.

"That's exactly right, Fuuka!" Ikutsuki said. "You're quite sharp."

"Sweet, so we know how many more we got comin'!" Junpei said. "... But, what are they after?"

"... That's a good question, and that's what we haven't figured out yet: their motive. They don't kill their prey; they feed on their minds. It can be considered predation, but is it really? Is there an underlying intent behind their behavior? The purpose of the Shadows as a whole... that's what we need to consider." Ikutsuki said.

"We know that people's individual Shadows are solely in pursuit of their own interests, but what about the others?" Minato asked.

"That's true... a human's Shadow is the part of themselves that they refuse to accept, and usually only emerges under very specific situations." Ikutsuki said. "What would a being focused on self-interest want with the minds of others?"

"Perhaps Shadows crave stimuli. After all, they almost never run from a fight, even if they're losing. Or maybe they're trying to ascertain what it means to have emotions from the memories held in the minds they devour." Minato said.

"Addiction to stimuli... or attempting to gain the experience of

human emotion... Those are certainly possibilities..." Ikutsuki said.

"... This is interesting." Akihiko said. "But, no matter what, we still have to beat the rest of them."

"... I agree. That's about all we can do at this point." Mitsuru said.

"Eight more, huh? Lucky us." Yukari said.

"According to the data, each one has been stronger than the last... I hope we've trained enough." Fuuka said.

"You kiddin' me? We've been kicking ass left and right." Shinjiro said.

"Heh... Shinji's got a point. But even if we haven't trained enough, we've still got plenty of time." Akihiko said.

"... What about Tartarus?" Yukari asked. "Why does it even exist?" Nobody said anything, and after a while, the silence grew heavy.

"... Do you think you could make some Onigiri for dinner tonight, Fuuka?" Minato asked, breaking the silence.

"... Onagiri?" she asked.

"It doesn't need to be too fancy. Shinji'll help, right?" he said.

"I got her." Shinjiro replied. He got up, quickly realizing what

Minato was doing. "We should start before we get hungry." The rest of SEES rose and left the room, each going back to their normal routines. Everyone but Mitsuru, Minato, Ikutsuki, and Sho had left.

"... Well, I'll leave you three to it." Mitsuru said. She walked out of the lounge, and left Minato sitting across from Ikutsuki.

"Well, now that they're all gone..." Ikutsuki began. He turned towards Sho. "We're starting." he said in a louder voice than usual. Sho quickly ended his game and walked over to take a seat.

"About time those dumbasses left." Sho said. "Why the hell couldn't you just go out back after this?! I coulda met you there easy!"

"That would have looked beyond sketchy." Minato said. "Remember, we are trying to keep this low-profile."

"Why? Everyone else pretty much knows you're in therapy." Sho said. He chuckled. "Well, they don't really 'know', but you get what I mean."

"Now, now... there's no reason to make a fuss over something of no real consequence." Ikutsuki said. He turned to Minato. "I see you caught on to the numbering of the Shadows... that's quite the feat."

"Remember, I'm capable of wielding multiple Personas and Fiends, each of which are representative of Arcana." Minato

said. "If two astral forces follow a particular pattern, it's safe to assume a third similar one does so as well. After all, the acceptance of a personal Shadow can grant a Persona, so they are undeniably tied to each other somehow."

"Exactly." Ikutsuki said. "Shadows are quite interesting creatures, really... I could talk about them some more, but I'd like to make this meeting short. I need to catch a flight tonight so I can oversee some more sensitive work with your daughter."

"Oh, how is she?" Minato asked.

"Awake, but yet to be outfitted for combat." Ikutsuki said. He grinned. "You'll like her quite a bit. Her personality's already almost fully developed. But I won't ruin the surprise for you."

"Good, good! That's just how I like it." Minato said. "Any news on the plan?"

"It's good ya brought that up." Sho said. "As a matter of fact, we do got some news... I found something that might come in handy, so I'll be gone for a bit trying for work."

"Yes... though this wasn't in our original design, it never hurts to have a back-up." Ikutsuki said.

"I like it... a world-ending plan that plans ahead for failure? Excellent." Minato said. "But what about forces? If we go forward and face opposition, we'll need power."

"I've already looked into that." Ikutsuki said. "There are a few old ASWs lying around... I'm going to reactivate and reprogram them. This is also where what we found comes in handy."

"No kidding. Those toasters we found are apparently high-quality for their time, so once give 'em a little overhaul, they'll be splitting heads like nobody's business." Sho said.

"Good to here." Minato said. He leaned back in his chair. "Well, now that our doomsday preparations are progressing, would anyone like to fill me in on a specific role I can play in this plan?"

"... I think it's sufficient to say that you have an active enough role as it is." Ikutsuki said. "The plan involves the Dark Hour, and you'll need to be very strong to pull it off. As long as you continue to fight the Shadows, you'll be doing more than enough... but is there any reason you want an active role now?"

"I believe I'm being pestered by attachment." Minato said. "And not the kind I can shake off easily... I was hoping I could get something to legitimately distract myself with, but if that won't happen, I already have a few other methods of dealing with it lined up."

"Does that include gutting people before they can weigh you down?" Sho asked with a grin. Minato chuckled.

"I wish it were that easy, but I can't go around slaughtering

people left and right... well, not the ones I'm worried about, that is." Minato said. "Their deaths would draw far too much attention."

"And ruin the team!" Ikutsuki said, getting a general idea of who Minato was talking about. "Though it's not a requirement, I'd rather nobody in SEES die... I feel they deserve to see our plan reach fruition."

"Really? Not all of them would accept it." Minato said. "... But then again, by that point, it wouldn't really matter, would it?"

"No... by that time, it might not even matter whether or not we accepted it." Ikutsuki said.

"Accept it, not accept it, fuck it I say! This shitty world is gonna end, and that's all that matters. It's gonna be absolute death!" Sho said. Minato chuckled.

"Life is merely a journey to one's own grave. We're just... industrializing the process." Minato said.

"That we are." Ikutsuki said. "But don't think we're simply erasing the world... remember, we'll be the ones to mold its replacement. I'll be counting on you to help with that as well, but I think we can all agree we have very similar ideas for what it'll be."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"Hmph... then in that case, I'll enjoy the ride." Minato said.

"It'll be wild." Sho said. "... But hey, don't we need to get moving?"

"Ah, I'd almost forgotten! Thank you." Ikutsuki said, quickly getting up. He adjusted his suit. "Then, until next time." he said.

"Later." Sho said.

"Make a killing machine." Minato said. Ikutsuki and Sho both laughed a bit before leaving. *"... Well, if anything, I've found a good emergency way to destroy my attachments and bonds if things go too south. I doubt anyone would trust me if I revealed I was helping to end the world."* Minato thought. He smirked, and went down to the first floor. He looked at the other members of SEES, all doing their own thing.

"Everyone's still on their strings, dinner smells like it's almost ready, and I've got more than enough time to study and train tonight. Excellent. All that's left is to ensure my Sunday improves my cards."

67. Chapter 67

Chapter 67: Mutt

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: The twists can't all be gigantic, can they? Anyways, as for Akinari... About 5 minutes or so. Remember, Akinari is a writer who is in the process of questioning the meaning and purpose of life. The game mainly has him pitying himself, but I've decided that, while he does have his fair share of wallowing, he looks at things in a very existential light. Also, if you recall his book, this makes sense. Oh, and congratulations for landing a milestone at review #150 XD

Story time.

Tanaka's amazing commodities unfortunately held nothing of Minato's interest that morning. With a sigh, he headed downstairs, threw on his fancy apron, and began making breakfast. *"Well, I do have work to attend. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to rank-up Moon... and since we aren't really anything more than advisors and assholes to one another, I doubt I have anything to worry about. The next question is the evening..."*

Minato continued running through his options, and finished

breakfast on autopilot. He was stowing away his apron when Fuuka walked down to the first floor, laptop in hand. "Good morning." Fuuka said.

"Morning." Minato said. "You hungry?"

"Not really." Fuuka said. She let out a slight yawn and took a seat in front of the television.

"You sound tired... did you think too much about the news last night?" Minato asked.

"Actually, yes." Fuuka said. "I tried to estimate the strength of the remaining eight Shadows... They might be tough, but not impossible. As long as we train consistently, we should be able to win."

"Of course we'll be able to win." Minato said. He chuckled. "I think you're worrying over nothing."

"Maybe... but it doesn't hurt to be careful." Fuuka said.

"Actually, it can." Minato said. "Though, I suppose it's mostly in actual combat. That moment of indecision between a possibly fatal blow or simply inflicting a small wound with no chance of failure can cause you an attack that could've settled the fight. Especially if your opponent can catch on quickly. Sure, you can mix it up and do some low-high combinations or vice-versa while alternating speed and power, but the fact is, you've just given your opponent a second life, and that's the worst thing you could do. Do you see what I mean?"

"... Ok..." Fuuka said. She scratched her head, and turned on her laptop, unsure of what to say after that little lesson. Minato quickly ate, changed into a casual outfit with his hat, and left the dorm before anyone else appeared. He made it to Be Blue V and walked to the Office without a care in the world. Nemissa sat at her desk with only one computer running this time, and she seemed to be calmer than usual.

"It's that time of week again!" he announced as he entered. Nemissa turned to him not with a look of annoyance, but with an almost friendly smile that didn't show a hint of condescension.

"Ah, you're right on time. I've arranged for you to shoot a new commercial, as well as take a few pictures for our next magazine advertisements." she said in an oddly calm voice. Minato raised an eyebrow.

"... What are you doing?" he asked.

"Why, I'm readjusting my demeanor. I thank you. The last time we spoke, you helped me realize that I've been approaching my duties entirely in the wrong way." Nemissa said. She smiled. "Good luck today."

"... That's creepy." Minato said.

"How so?" Nemissa asked.

"You're supposed to be somewhat of a bitch." Minato said. Her gaze faltered. "*Caught ya.*" "It's really unsettling when the

person who usually hurls shit talk and insults at you suddenly begins acting like you're a respectable human being or something of the like in almost no time at all." Another twitch. "I mean, really, it's kind of like now I need to be afraid that you're bipolar. Who knows? You might just try and kill me the next time we meet, or rape me, or something else!"

"... I think you're simply being delusional." Nemissa said, her voice wavering. Minato could tell he was aggravating her. "I'd never do those things to a valued employee."

"*Not gonna cut it.*" Minato thought. "Really? Then in that case, I'm feeling sick... do you mind telling the people you've called to come back next week?" he asked. Nemissa twitched again. "I mean, I would have just dealt with it out of fear of you attacking me before, but since you seem to have turned over a new leaf... well, it didn't feel right to lie to you."

"... Are you certain you're sick?" Nemissa asked. "I could give you some pain relievers if it isn't serious."

"I've been putting off a doctor's visit for quite a while... I think I might need a colonoscopy, with how bad it is." Minato said. "I'm really sorry, but since I'm a student, you know I never have time for that during the week... plus, I have to work here on the only day I could ever get it done, so it's been put off for so long."

"For a sick person, you talk a lot." Nemissa said, her voice regaining its normal venom for a moment before she cleared her throat. "W-what I meant to say was, if nothing serious has

yet to happen, I'm sure another week won't do that much harm."

"But this pain's been building up for weeks. What if one of my organs bursts?! I'm getting paranoid just thinking about it!" Minato said. Nemissa's smile was dropping. *"Trying to get the best out of me as well? I think you misunderstand my lesson."*

"... I know you're stronger than any sickness out there." Nemissa said. Her expression became serious. "And I know it might be difficult... but right now, Minato, Be Blue V needs you... I need you."

Minato looked at her for a few seconds before he broke out laughing right at her face. He almost fell over. "What the hell was that?!" he asked, clutching his stomach. "You sounded ridiculous!"

"It was a heartfelt request, dammit!" Nemissa snapped, finally starting to sound like normal. "Look, if you don't get your pretty ass in that back room, I'll give you a colonoscopy with my foot!"

"Hey, that's a direct threat!" Minato said. "I can report that, you know? That'll cost you a lot, partner."

"Shut up and get to work. I don't need 'maximum efficiency' from a piece of shit like you anyways." Nemissa said. Minato chuckled.

"So you were trying to put that to good use. You held out well, but I think your inspirational lines need some work." Minato said. "Honestly, 'you're stronger than any sickness out there'? What were you trying to do, convince people to throw their lives away for you?"

"It sounded better in my head." Nemissa said. "Now hurry up and go. We've wasted enough time as is, and I need to get back into my mood."

Minato laughed and walked to the back room for a round of modeling. This time, he found himself doing the opposite of his sexualized hide and seek from last time, instead apparently needing to appear as if he were, according to the film crew, 'seductively lying in wait', which was actually funnier than he thought it would be. Aside from a few laughing fits, however, he finished his work over the course of a few hours, and returned to the Office. Nemissa seemed to have returned to her previous demeanor.

"And the pretty boy makes his appearance." Minato said.

"Ah, I'll need to go thank the film crew." Nemissa said, getting up from her chair. "It won't do for them to simply leave without a proper goodbye."

"That's new." Minato said. "I've already said my goodbyes as always, so I'll just head to work. By the way, if everyone gives you five thousand yen each, it's for me."

"... You made a bet on that?" Nemissa asked.

"If you didn't say anything for the next ten minutes, I was going to go 'grab some coffee' and pay them. But, since you're already making a move, there's no need for that." Minato said.

"... Well, I can't blame you for being a little entrepreneur." Nemissa said. "I'll give it to you when you're done with work."

"50,000 plus my daily pay. I'm expecting at least 100,000 today." Minato said.

"You'll get your money." Nemissa said. She headed off to the back, and Minato hurriedly changed into his work outfit and began his next few hours of sales. As usual, time flew, and would have kept flying if he didn't encounter someone he never expected to meet at work.

"Minato! I had forgotten you had a real job!" a familiar voice said from behind him. He turned, praying it wasn't who he thought it was. But it was. Lieutenant Zelenin stood there, dressed in rather plain clothing, a simple jacket and shirt over jeans. What made him wary, however, was the fact that he could tell she still had concealed weaponry and wore the Demonica's gauntlet, albeit she played it off as an accessory of sorts since the hand piece had been removed. He quickly put on one of his better smiles and approached with his usual cap-off bow. She was a threat, and he would not provoke her.

"Good evening, Lieutenant Zelenin, and welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V." Minato greeted. *"Definitely going to avoid any form of physical contact unless goaded into it. This*

one is not only dangerous on her own, but I'd be royally fucked if she got Hazama on my case." "You look radiant today! Although, it could just be that you seem so much more effeminate without being in military dress."

"You flatter me." Zelenin said. She walked closer to him and whispered "Try anything and I'll flatten you."

"This is just business. It's common courtesy to at least hold casual conversation before starting." Minato replied. "Unless you're in a rush."

"Then I am." Zelenin said. "I have a list of things I need."

"Then let's begin." Minato said. There were no more words spoken save for Zelenin saying what she needed and answering which of a group of brands Minato selected she preferred. Minato didn't mind too much, however, since he realized that this list was actually downright extravagant. She bought more than he had ever conned Mitsuru into buying all on her own, and he was more than appeased by the knowledge that he would make a good chunk of her money that day. After she finally cashed out from what Minato could tell was a non-hypnotized employee, she left with her hands full of bags.

"... Hmph." Zelenin said, looking around the store one last time. "I had expected everyone in the store to be under the control of the owner... but it would seem they elect to follow a demon instead. They're almost as filthy as you and Jimenez."

"You flatter me." Minato said. She walked past him, and he whispered "Try that shit again and I'll flatten you."

"I'd like to see you try, boy. You have no idea who you're dealing with." Zelenin said. She giggled. "As much as I'd love to have an excuse to kill you, you've been a good boy for now, so I'll let that one go. Goodbye!" she said cheerfully. Other than her odd appearance, nobody of note visited the store, leaving Minato in peace until it was the end of his shift. He once more returned to the Office, and found Nemissa once again back in character.

"You did an excellent job today." Nemissa said. "And I think you handled yourself especially well with that military woman... she's vicious."

"Did you fight her?" Minato asked.

"I'm not stupid... even if I won, her friends would have finished me. Two of them against me at once, and I'm dead." Nemissa said. "Like you, my best option lies in avoiding confrontation with the JSDF."

"Really?" Minato asked.

"When humans make news in Hell, you know to avoid them." Nemissa said. "There are a few people like that... and I feel you may be one of them in the future."

"... Was that the inspirational line?" Minato asked. Nemissa smirked.

"It worked, didn't it?" she asked. Minato chuckled.

"Yes, actually, it did." he admitted. "You found it out, then?"

"Know who you're dealing with." Nemissa said. "Everyone has a different set of words that can inspire them, a specific group of actions that will grant you their respect, and so on and so forth... Though in the end, it's really just stroking their egos, isn't it?"

"You make it sound perverted." Minato said.

"Isn't it? Feeding self-delusion to get people to work for you... it's perverted, but I'd say it's my kind of perversion." Nemissa mused. "... Thanks. Sincerely, this time. Following your advice was a gamble on my part, but it paid off."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"Aren't I the best?" Minato mused.

"Don't get that far ahead of yourself." Nemissa said. She pulled out an envelope and placed it on the desk. "Over 100,000 yen. Feel free to count it." she said. Minato did just that, and found he had gotten over 150,000. "... That army girl must be high maintenance. I wonder how the big guy puts up

with her."

"Hell if I know. Maybe she's really good in bed?" Minato asked.

"And you said I made things perverted." Nemissa said. Minato chuckled, and went to the changing room with his pay to return to his normal clothes. He bid Nemissa farewell, and returned to the dorm. He entered to find the first floor completely empty, and stopped.

"... *Something's up.*" Minato thought. "*Hell Biker, David, go check it out.*"

"**Got ya.**" Hell Biker replied. Their little heads appeared next to him and quickly spread throughout out the dorm. He lingered by the entrance, keeping an eye out for any movement. One hand lingered over his Evoker while the other was primed to summon a weapon at a moment's notice. A minute of stillness passed, and his Fiends returned to his mind. "***Yukari, Fuuka, and Junpei are all on the second floor lounge. No sign of the seniors.***" Hell Biker said.

"***Couldn't check their rooms or the bathrooms of course, but you can always ask about them.***" David added.

"*Alright, good work.*" Minato replied. He eased up, and walked to the second floor lounge to see his fellow sophomores there, with Fuuka and Yukari on laptops while Junpei was playing a game. He caught them as Yukari began a conversation.

"Koromaru is such a loyal dog... And he's cute, too." Yukari said.

"I wish I was a dog, so I could get a girl's attention." Junpei said.

"Don't you think Akihiko-senpai would look good with a dog? Not an unusual one, just an ordinary, playful dog..."

"Yeah, that's true. I could see them running on the beach together..." Yukari said.

"You know, if Akihiko took his head out of his ass, I'm pretty sure he could score with Yukari, and at least have a shot with Fuuka. Assuming I don't ruin his attempts, of course." Minato thought.

"Yeah, Koromaru really is one of a kind, huh?" Junpei asked.

"What kind of dog do you think would be good for Mitsuru-senpai?" Fuuka asked.

"Hmm... I can't see her with a dog." Yukari said.

"She'd probably have a Doberman. And she'd feed it filet mignon, heh." Junpei said with a smirk. Fuuka giggled.

"I think you've been reading too much manga, Junpei." Fuuka said.

"I don't think it's that far-fetched." Minato said, finally making his presence known. Everyone else jumped.

"Wah?!... Jeez, don't startle people like that." Yukari said.
Minato chuckled.

"You know, people who are frightened by sudden noises tend to have a guilty conscious." Minato said. "But I think Junpei's right. She'd have a noble dog fed the finest of foods."

"See? Mitsuru-senpai's totally that type of person. She'd spoil the thing rotten, I bet." Junpei said.

"You really think so? Because I'd get the feeling she'd train it to fight with French commands..." Yukari said.

"She could always do both." Fuuka said. "Oh, by the way... all of our senpai went out, so we aren't allowed to go to Tartarus today."

"Is that so? Then I'm behind." Minato said. "I need to get ready for some clubbing myself. Strawberry Sundae's brother is in town, so it's going to be quite the party."

"That guy's got a brother?" Junpei asked. "Dang, is he as crazy as he is?" Minato glanced at Junpei and immediately knew 'crazy' was his code for 'strong'.

"Maybe even crazier." Minato said.

"Yikes... you watch out man. I'm not sure if those guys know when to stop." Junpei said.

"Then what'll you do, Junpei?" Minato asked.

"This, bro! There's a Super 'A' event that lasts until midnight, and I've almost gotten to the best stuff!" Junpei said. Yukari sighed.

"I don't know whether it's good that you're not going out to party or bad that you're choosing to stay inside and play a videogame all night." she said.

"Some games are serious, Yukari." Fuuka said. Yukari turned to her quizzically.

"... You've been typing pretty steadily yourself." Yukari said. "Don't tell me..."

"Junpei, when you reach Ahuramazda, there's a chest to the left with Panacea. You'll need it to avoid his status hits." Fuuka said.

"Crap, he's a status boss? Damn... and my team's still all set to counter freakin' Ahriman's instant kill moves... shit." Junpei said. "Why does the boss have to run around all the time?"

"It would be too easy if he sat in one place." Fuuka said. She frowned. "But did they have to put Aleph in here? He's such a spammer..."

"That's just uncool... the guy uses straight piercing moves." Junpei said. "It's like they literally want you to level grind your life away." Fuuka made an affirmative noise, and the two kept playing their respective games.

"... I'll leave you two to that." Yukari said. Minato chuckled and showered, changing into a black long-sleeved shirt and jeans along with his hat. He re-emerged, and checked his watch. With a few hours until the Dark Hour, he ate some leftovers for dinner before departing for Paulownia once more. He went into Escapade and passed Vergil with a small nod before heading for the bar. Dante sat in his usual spot, and he took a seat next to him.

"Two strawberry sundaes." Minato said. The bar keeper wordlessly went to prepare their desserts, and Minato turned to face Dante. "Any luck with your brother?" he asked.

"He asked about you." Dante said. "He called me a lazy slob too, but he always does that. Otherwise, he's just as stuck-up as usual... That girl with a bazooka try and kill you yet?"

Minato chuckled. "Not yet. I actually think my girl troubles are coming along splendidly." he said. "... But I think I should help you out with your brother. For all of our sakes."

"All?" Dante asked.

"Let's just say the better off you two are, the better off I am." Minato said. "Why do you think you'd get a job that's all about hanging out with some random guy? He must be getting something more than just your company out of it, right?"

"I thought it was supposed to be training, but I'm pretty sure you don't need my help." Dante said. "... But if you want to play family therapist, go ahead. It might be funny to see if

Vergil tries to kick your ass."

"Emphasis on 'try'." Minato said. They both chuckled, and their strawberry sundaes arrived. They ate in silence, and finished just as the Dark Hour struck. They both got up and walked to the entrance of Escapade. They exited and stood near Vergil.

"... You're blocking the entrance." Vergil said, still standing like a statue at his post.

"Gimme a break. There's no point in you standing guard when nothing's moving." Dante said.

"We just wanted a chat." Minato said.

"Then get on with it." Vergil said. Minato looked at Dante, then at Vergil. Neither of them said anything. They stood there for a few minutes, and both of the brothers remained dead silent. Minato sighed.

"Alright, look. I'll be straightforward. You two make with the brotherly love and forgiveness already." Minato said.

"... Is that really the reason why you're wasting my time?" Vergil asked. He scoffed.

"Call it what you want, but I'm all you've got over here." Dante said. "Now you can be a kid about it or you can act like a grown-up. We live together right now, so stop being so damn difficult to deal with."

"I have no intention of associating with clowns." Vergil said.

"Once my time here is over, I'll return to my original intentions."

"... How many times do people need to beat the shit out of you before you get some sense?" Dante asked. "A ballpark figure."

"Are you implying you can beat me again?" Vergil asked.

"Hey, hey, hey." Minato said. *"Shit. Doing this the hard way."* "You two can't start cutting the shit out of each other until you realize why you're cutting the shit out of each other."

"Then what would you suggest?" Vergil asked, obviously annoyed.

"Tell me... what did you think you'd achieve by staying in Hell?" Minato asked.

"I would've gained power... and proven my own. I would have beaten the same demons my father battled hundreds of years ago, and taken what is rightfully mine." Vergil said. "That which my fool of a brother rejects."

"Ok... and what prompted you to reject your 'rightful' inheritance, Dante?" Minato asked.

"That whole demonic business is what got our mother killed... or did you forget about that?" Dante said.

"... I haven't forgotten anything." Vergil said. "Why do you think I run through Hell, killing all who stand in my way? Who

do you think I'm looking for when I go in there, knowing full-well that the only ally I have in there is myself?"

The brothers both fell silent, and Minato adjusted his cap. "*Well... this is touchy.*" he thought.

"... I know what you're trying to do." Dante said, breaking the silence. "But our mother's dead... and she's not coming back."

"She can come back... I'm simply not powerful enough to force the beings that can do so." Vergil said. "Father had that power... and once it belongs to me, I'll be able to do the same."

"... Wait. If both of you are working in memory of your mother, why are you at odds?" Minato asked.

"That is exactly why my brother here is a fool." Vergil said.

"I'm the fool? Hah! Look who's talking! If we absorb the power of our father, we're not us anymore. We wouldn't be half-devils... we'd be devils. It would be the same as if we weren't even our mother's children." Dante said.

"Shut your mouth." Vergil snapped. "We can control it."

"But if we can't, there's no turning back... this isn't like our Triggers." Dante said. Another bout of silence followed, and neither brother said a word. Minato took his cue, and chose his next line carefully.

"... Both of you want to avenge your mother. But the fact is,

here and now, you two are the only family you've got. So you can keep being... for lack of a better word, tsundere to each other, or you can give each other the time of day." Minato said. "And hey, if you still can't stand each other, then at least you won't ever have to hear about this again, right?"

"... You have a point." Vergil said. "It's about time we ended this pestering and gained an answer."

"Woah, did you just agree to something?" Dante mused.

"He must've went through hell." Minato said. He and Dante both chuckled while Vergil scoffed.

"... It will only take a few days." Vergil said.

"Don't give up on me just yet." Dante said. "We haven't even gotten started. I'll show you just how stupid I really am."

"Wonderful." Vergil said in a deadpan voice. Dante turned to Minato and gave him a little thumbs-up, as well as an uncharacteristically friendly smile. Minato returned the gesture with a smile of his own and a simple nod.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana...

"Then, since the game has been set, I'll leave you two to it."

Minato said. He walked off. "Tell me how it goes when I stop by again."

"I maintain my position." Vergil said.

"Of course you do." Dante said. Minato summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle and rode away. Neither Dante nor Vergil flinched.

"Damn, I was hoping for a compliment." Minato thought. "But the Dark Hour is young, so I guess I'll actually do my duty and patrol for tonight. I doubt I'll find anything special. I want everyone on recon mode."

"With us on board, the range jumps to three and a half miles." Alice said.

"Perfect." Minato replied. His Fiends scattered, and he began to ride. For the majority of the night, nothing happened, and he enjoyed a quiet joyride. However, as the Dark Hour reached its halfway point, Matador returned to him.

"A Shadow has appeared at the Shrine! A Gigas! It's dueling that mutt!" Matador said.

"Koromaru? That damn dog is still moving?!" Minato asked as he changed his course. He could get there in a matter of minutes from his current location. He upped his bike's speed, and the wheels gave way to circles of fire that blazed across the streets, letting him go even faster.

"I don't know how, but it's fighting near the entrance! It's trying to defend some memoir for its master!" Matador said. ***"And its not doing very well. The Shadow's already caused noticeable damage to the area."***

"Tch... where the hell are Hazama and crew?!" Minato asked. He swerved onto the street, and saw the figure of the Shadow in the distance. He sped forwards, and got a better picture.

Koromaru was encircling the Gigas as it punched and kicked, occasionally smashing parts of the road. There was a damaged light post with a crumpled wreath and a broken picture near to it, likely the memoir Koromaru had been trying to defend. Minato got closer, and the Shadow found its opening. It swiped its hand in a swift chop along the floor, buffeting Koromaru and sending it into the wall. Oddly enough, Koromaru spun in the air and hit the wall feet first. It howled, and Minato couldn't believe what he saw next.

Blue energy erupted from around Koromaru, and he immediately recognized it as what happens when a Persona is summoned. As Koromaru dropped to the floor, four metal pitchforks landed around it. At the end of those pitchforks was the massive body of a three-headed dog with black and blue fur, the black covering the upper half of its body and the blue covering the underside. The head's all had a snow-white snout with a large black nose, and each had a set of razor sharp teeth. Their necks all had large metal shackles on them that were connected by chains to two obsidian wings that

appeared as if they were drilled into the Persona's body. It wagged its slender and spiky metallic tail as it roared with all three heads.

"*Cerberus*." Minato thought, realizing what the Persona was. Koromaru charged forwards, along with its Persona, and Cerberus tackled the Gigas Shadow. It caught the left and right heads in a hand each, but the middle one bit right into its face. Koromaru howled, and the inside of Cerberus's mouth glowed with the Shadow's head still inside, and fire burst out and covered it in flames. The Shadow kicked upwards with one leg, knocking Cerberus away long enough for it to go for Koromaru.

"Hell Burner!" Minato said as he spun his bike around. The exhaust blazed fire, which he realized wouldn't hurt Koromaru, and incinerated the weakened Shadow. The flames lingered over the area before quickly dissipating, and Minato dispelled Hell Biker's motorcycle. "You ok, boy?" he asked as he walked towards Koromaru. He soon stopped in his tracks once he saw what Koromaru was looking at.

Minato's attack hadn't hurt Koromaru and killed the Shadow, but it had also burned the picture of the priest to a crisp, along with his wreath and even the little epitaph that stood in the area. He had just erased everything that said the priest was still there, and Koromaru stared at the destruction, whimpering. The whimpering grew quieter, and Minato slowly walked over to him, planning to pet him. The whimpering stopped, and became a light growling.

"*Oh shit.*" Minato thought, stopping once more. Koromaru's growling became loud, and then twisted to full on snarling at Minato. Koromaru's eyes lit up, and he roared. Cerberus appeared behind him, and copied his motion with all three heads. "*Great. Now it thinks I'm the bad guy.*" Minato thought. He radiated as much pressure as he could. "Sorry, mutt, but you don't want to fight me. It'll end badly for you." he warned. Koromaru barked back, fearless as ever, then ran at him with Cerberus in tow. He swiftly drew his Evoker and fired. "Sonic Blight!" he called.

David appeared behind him and played his screeching high note, stopping Koromaru and Cerberus in their tracks. Minato took his cue, and ran over to deliver a swift kick to Koromaru's side. He punted him into the wall, and Cerberus disappeared along with David. "Stay down." Minato said. Koromaru shook off the attack with little to no signs of real damage, much to Minato's surprise, and howled. Cerberus appeared in midair and skid to a halt in front of Minato, barking wildly with all three heads.

"***That's an instant kill!***" Jack warned. Minato saw that purple sigils began forming in the air around him, and he quickly jumped away. The area he was standing in was engulfed in a purple haze, and he turned to see Koromaru running to bite him.

"Alright, bitch, I'm breaking your legs!" Minato said. He ran forwards with his speed Magatama and caught the back of Koromaru's neck as he narrowly avoided a lunging bite. He

spun around, carrying Koromaru through the air, and slammed him onto the ground. He crumpled sideways, and Minato raise his foot over him. In one swift motion, he stomped down, breaking Koromaru's hind legs before he could react. Koromaru let out a cry of pain, and Cerberus disappeared. Minato picked Koromaru up by the back of his neck once more, and placed him near the destroyed memorial. "Stupid bitch... I'll get someone to come look at you." Minato said. He chuckled, and then used his speed Magatama and made a dash for the dorm, leaving Koromaru in the destruction. *"That dog was still watching me, even in distress. Damn."* Minato thought.

Koromaru sat there amongst the rubble, still staring at the direction Minato dashed off to. He tried desperately to move with only his front legs, but couldn't. He let out a whimper, until he heard the sounds of footsteps behind him. He turned as far as he could, and saw only a set of brown loafers, black stockings, and a yellow and orange pleated skirt. Blue light surrounded the bottom half of the human. "Salvation." a female voice said. Light enveloped Koromaru, and he found himself fully recovered. He got up, and turned to look at his savior, who had already begun gently petting the back of his head.

Minato burst into the dorm, and found the first floor empty. He rushed up to the third floor, and found the three seniors all playing cards. "You three, come quick!" he said.

"What's going on?" Mitsuru asked, swiftly rising from her chair.

"That dog, Koromaru, has a Persona." Minato said.

"... You're shitting me." Shinjiro said, getting up.

"A dog has a Persona?... You aren't just making up Personas for people you see, right?" Akihiko asked.

"It used it to fight a Shadow, then try and kill me." Minato said. "I broke it's legs so it couldn't fight anymore, so you guys should definitely get it looked at."

"What the hell?! You broke his legs?!" Shinjiro asked.

"It was that or I killed him." Minato said. "We're wasting time, let's go!"

Minato and the seniors all hurriedly left the dorm and rushed over to the scene. They arrived in about ten minutes, and saw the destruction. "That part was me. Koromaru was losing, so I intervened with a fire attack. His Persona nullified it, so it was my best option... what I didn't think about was the fact that it would destroy his owner's memorial site." Minato said.

"You made the right call." Mitsuru said. They reached the site where Koromaru was supposed to be, and found nobody there. "... Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"He was right there." Minato said, pointing to the spot he left Koromaru. "Hind legs broken, whimpering. How he could have moved, I have no idea."

"... Maybe somebody else found him." Akihiko said. Minato turned to him. "Think about it... the JSDF could've passed by and seen him. They'd look at him and probably train him as one of their own... Or it could have been Officer Kurosawa, if he was in the area..."

"... Or it could have been somebody else." Shinjiro said. "One of our guys... or the other people who move about at this time."

"... While this is unfortunate, I don't think it merits our attention." Mitsuru said. "The dog will likely return here once it's recovered... we can decide what to do from then. However, Minato... if it attacks you again, run. I'd rather you not face punishment, as self-defense against an animal isn't exactly considered a legitimate excuse in a court of law."

"... I only fought because it would have torched the area." Minato said. "It's Persona was powerful... Cerberus knew both fire and dark skills. It was average sized, but just as fast as its owner. It could have made a good addition to the team. And Koromaru himself was extremely agile."

"Perhaps... again, once it recovers, we can decide what to do." Mitsuru said. "Let's head back, before the Dark Hour ends... its best not to suddenly appear in the streets."

The seniors all headed back, but not before Minato recalled his Fiends, whom he had silently sent to search for Koromaru as they spoke. "*Anything?*" he asked.

"Gone without a trace." Alice replied. **"If somebody took him, they can move fast."**

"No tire marks or anything of the sort, either." Minato replied.
"This is difficult."

The group returned to the dorm as the Dark Hour ended, and Minato spent time giving the seniors the full details of his encounter before they went to sleep. He opted to do basic physical training on the roof, having realized he relied on his speed Magatama against a dog.

68. Chapter 68

Chapter 68: The Other Squad

Author Note to jasonwu: That's a secret, but he will get Messiah though... it just won't be his ultimate, but it's still going to be one of his preferred ones at the end because of how strong it is. It'll be just another Persona that he happens to find very useful (like how he used to use Power and Take-Mikazuchi more than the others he had at the time)

Author Note to vampireharry the 2: I appear to have neglected to thank you for your review last chapter. This is my thank you.

And the story continues.

"So, I beat the shit out of a dog last night." Minato said as he ate breakfast with the rest of SEES.

"... What?" Yukari asked. Mitsuru sighed.

"Last night, Minato encountered the dog known as Koromaru engaging a Shadow outside of Tartarus." she said. Fuuka gasped.

"Is Koro-chan alright?" she asked.

"Minato killed the Shadow... but not before Koromaru summoned a Persona against it." Mitsuru continued. Junpei almost spit out the water he was drinking.

"Are you for real?" he asked.

"No joke." Mitsuru said. Everyone paused and gave her an odd look. "... Forgive me. I spoke out of reflex."

Minato chuckled. "And you say I'm a good actor." he mused.

"Moving on," Akihiko interrupted, "while Minato did manage to save Koromaru, he damaged the memorial set up for the priest."

"... The one set up at the corner that he waits by all day..." Yukari said.

"Yeah... that one." Shinjiro said. "Well, he didn't take that too well and tried to kill Minato with his Persona."

"One thing led to another, I roughed him up a bit, and then I came back here so the seniors could find him. But he was gone by the time we got back." Minato said.

"... Define a little bit." Yukari said.

"Broke his hind legs." Minato said. Yukari cringed.

"... At least he's alive, right?" Junpei asked, though his eyes

gave away his shock at Minato's action as well.

"... Regardless, since he disappeared, we believe somebody found him. I'd like you all to report if you encounter him anywhere." Mitsuru said.

"... Sure." Fuuka said. The rest of breakfast was silent, with the sophomores soaking in the strange news first thing in the morning. They took the train to school, and Minato stood near to Mitsuru as she took her usual haunt.

"So, how did you plan on covering up the destruction?" he asked her.

"... That would have been difficult. However, we were lucky that the victim of a homicide was found a few blocks away... apparently burned alive." Mitsuru said. "It was easy to say there's a madman with a penchant for arson on the loose."

"How lucky... though, a man burned to death in the immediate area? That's a bit odd." Minato said.

"As odd as it may be, that's a case for the police to handle." Mitsuru said. "We have our hands full enough as it is... and I fear we may be facing scrutiny from some of our own members soon."

"Then maybe it's time to put the truth out there." Minato said.

"... Soon." Mitsuru said. "But not yet... it's not the time."

"Alright... but you shouldn't hold off for too long. Yukari's more

attentive to detail than you think, and Junpei and Fuuka are going to catch on soon enough. By this point, everyone's questioning why this fight is even happening."

"... After the next full moon." Mitsuru said. "When we win... I'll speak to my father about it."

"Ah, so he's the one silencing you?" Minato asked.

"This discretion was mutually agreed on... I won't lie and say I had any problems with our original arrangement." Mitsuru said. "I had hoped that merely a sense of righteousness would persuade everyone to fight... but then again, I had little experience dealing with others for prolonged periods of time. It was a naïve decision."

"It was optimistic... not everyone can be a zealot, or a murderous psychopath like me." Minato said. He chuckled. "Honestly, I don't care if we're battling the Shadows because your father finds them ugly... any excuse to fight is more than enough justification for me."

"Then why are trying to find secrets about the Dark Hour?" Mitsuru asked.

"Because it's a fun way to pass time." Minato said. Mitsuru glanced at him for a few moments before returning to looking out of the window. She smirked.

"Very well then... Do as you please." she said. Minato let his manic smile surface.

"Since when haven't I?" Minato asked. The train arrived at school, and Mitsuru went ahead to class, leaving Minato by the front gate. The first person to approach him was Yukari in her characteristic 'I have a question' gait. Minato turned to greet her. "What's on your mind, Yukari?" he asked.

"Hey, Minato... I was thinking... the night before last... the 12 Shadows... Tartarus... Isn't there just too much we don't understand?" she asked. Minato sighed.

"You're right. We don't know what Tartarus really is or where it came from, nor do we know why these 12 Shadows have started appearing now of all times instead of, say, before any of us joined SEES." Minato said.

"Exactly... It's starting to get to me." Yukari said.

"We'll find out why eventually... the answers aren't always right within our reach." Minato said. *"Though technically, right now it's being withheld by one of our own."*

"... Still, it bugs me." Yukari said. The two made their way to class, and the day flew by rather quickly. Aside from Minato once again saving Junpei from a question from Ms. Terauchi, nothing of note happened. At lunch, Junpei insisted he pay Minato back by eating with him and Kenji, which Minato didn't mind. Yukari had disappeared, presumably in search of alone time, and left the boys to themselves for all of a minute before Fuuka quickly entered their classroom and joined them.

"Junpei, did you get past Almageist last night?" Fuuka asked.

Junpei sighed.

"Nope... dude's void skills got me. Bet he was a breeze for you, though." Junpei said.

"Oh, you guys are talking about Super 'A', right?" Kenji asked. He smirked. "I beat Turn 'A' at the end."

"WHAT?!" Junpei shouted. Minato chuckled.

"Well, looks like this game has quite the following... anyone care to tell me what it's about?" he asked.

"Huh? You haven't heard about Eternal Punishment Online?" Fuuka asked.

"It's the sequel to that game I was gonna give ya." Junpei said. "It just came out a month before school, and all the gamers are into it. It's pretty cool, see. You get to make a character and get all these demons and gods to serve under you, either by bribing them or beating them so bad they beg you to let them live. And you can create new ones by fusing, too, but they play a secondary role to your character."

"Mm-hmm. See, everyone usually uses the same support characters to tackle certain bosses or enemies, but what makes it unique is what skills you give them and how your character fights. The customization level is actually surprisingly high, and the combat is real-time. Plus, it's one of the only games I know that uses a shared server across platforms, so Junpei and I can play together even though he

plays the handheld version and I play on my computer."

"Yeah, bro... the only downside I can think of is that the experience curve is ridiculous! I mean, after level 30, it takes hours to get one level! Plus, if you die, you lose all the EXP you had and half of your money." Kenji said. "But... if you're a pro like me, those things don't mean anything."

"Pro?... Wait, what class is your character?" Junpei asked.

"Cyborg." Kenji said. Both Junpei and Fuuka sighed.

"A pierce bot." Fuuka said. "Let me guess... Your skills are Pierce, Over-limit, Deus Ex Machina, Onslaught, Berserker Aura, Mechanical Onslaught, Photon Wall, and Electron-Leech."

"Actually, I have Demon Aura and Photon Wave." Kenji said.

"That's even cheaper!" Junpei said.

"... Care to explain?" Minato asked. Fuuka sighed.

"Cyborgs are the most durable race in the game. They have the highest defense and health, plus they have some of the best physical attacks in the game. Pierce is a skill that lets attacks bypass resistances, and a lot of people use it on physical characters, so that's normal. Over-limit is a skill that lets Cyborg characters double their attack, speed, and skill stats, as well as makes all of their skills cost nothing for a short amount of time depending on how high the skill level is.

Afterwards, their stats are halved for double that time and they can't use active skills." Fuuka began.

"Now, that would be fair, but Eternal Punishment introduced the skill Deus Ex Machina, which gives Cyborgs double defense and increased health regeneration when two or more of their stats are decreased and they have a status condition. See, Over-Limit activates it once it's over, meaning that a Cyborg character is basically impossible to kill until it's overheat is done, which is complete BS since that's when you're supposed to freakin' attack them." Junpei said.

"So they're invincible?" Minato asked.

"Not exactly, but it makes any non-instant kill attack almost useless against them." Fuuka said. "But, to make this worse, the skill Onslaught is an active skill that lets a character speed from one defeated target to another at the cost of some MP in almost no time at all, and it counts as a hit that does light damage and stuns the target for a second. Add that to Mechanical Onslaught, which is a cyborg specific skill that increases their attack and speed with every consecutive attack they do, and they begin to do unfair amounts of damage even with their auto-attack."

"*Sounds like me.*" Minato thought.

"And to make matters worse, this kid's got Demon Aura, meaning he gets increased critical hit chance that goes up with each consecutive hit, plus he has the cheapest multi-target physical, Photon Wave, which phases enemies back

and does extra damage if they get knocked into the wall or another enemy, and Electron-Leech, which is a single target skill that if it kills an enemy, it refills some of your character's health and MP, which is also BS since you can literally spam it once you get your critical rate and attack high enough, Onslaught to another enemy, use it and one-shot them, Onslaught over, one-shot, and just keep going because you'll never run out of MP!" Junpei said.

"Man, you guys are just haters. I play to win." Kenji said. "Besides, Cyborgs really suck at low levels. It makes sense that they'd be the strongest at the higher levels."

"... You know, Kenji has a point." Minato said.

"What?! Where's your sense of pride, man?! You can't just win the easy way!" Junpei said.

"That takes the challenge out of the game." Fuuka said. "It's not very fun if you just blitz through it..."

"Well, the fact is, I've cleared every special event and got the limited edition items." Kenji said. He smirked. "Watch... after the last of the promotional events end, I'll sell my account for over 500,000 yen. Plus, I've got a back-up account with the second edition items too. That'll go for around 100,000 once I'm through... then, I'll have more than enough money for – oh, wait, forget I said anything."

"... Umm, I know about you and Ms. K..." Fuuka said. Kenji winced.

"H-how?" he asked.

"People have seen you two around... but nobody talks about it anymore." Fuuka said.

"Talk about long-term plans." Junpei said. He tipped his hat to Kenji. "Saving for the wedding?"

"You know it." Kenji said.

"Wedding? I'm impressed... things must be going well for you." Minato said. He smirked. "You'll be making me look like an amateur at this rate." Everyone laughed.

"Nah, bro, I don't know about that." Kenji said. "But I mean, when Bride-to-Be Magazine is right on her coffee table, I know I'm not the only serious one in this relationship."

"My man!" Junpei said, giving Kenji a solid pat on the back. "Dude, you don't know how happy I am for ya!"

"Wow... marriage already?" Fuuka asked. "You two must be really serious..."

"Of course we are!" Kenji said. "Just you watch! She'll be Ms. Tomochika once we graduate!"

"You have my best wishes." Minato said. "And, of course, my assistance if you ever need it."

"Same from me, bro." Junpei said. Kenji looked like the happiest man anybody had seen when he turned to his two

best friends.

"Hey, you know I'd do the same for you guys too!" Kenji said. Fuuka giggled.

"You three might be even closer." she said.

"Bros before... chicks, and all that." Junpei said. The others laughed, and they spent lunch together.

The day ended without anything else of real note happening, and Minato made his way to the Student Council Room. He sighed when he saw Hidetoshi Odagiri, the man he had deposed, standing in the center of the room. "Are you that desperate for a beating?" Minato asked.

"As a matter of fact, I've come here to prove your despotic reign." Hidetoshi said. The other members of Council came into the room, including Shinjiro and Mitsuru.

"Odagiri, is there a reason for this insolence?" Mitsuru asked.

"There is, Ms. President... I'm here today to show that Minato Arisato is incapable of doing his job without resorting to physical violence." Hidetoshi said. "Watch... if he can make me leave the room without attacking me, he'll have shown he's capable of doing his duty. If not, I believe there should be a reconsideration of his appropriation of my post. Do you accept these terms, Arisato?"

Minato chuckled. "I'm not allowed to touch you? Sure." he

said.

"Then, we begin." Hidetoshi said.

"Shinji, work him out." Minato said. Hidetoshi's eyes widened as Shinjiro walked over to him.

"Dumbass." Shinjiro said. He delivered a swift headbutt to Hidetoshi, sending him to the floor.

"Agh! What do you think you're-" Hidetoshi began, but he was stopped by Shinjiro stomping on his stomach. Shinjiro stomped on him a few more times, then grabbed him by his collar and dragged him to the door. He threw him out of the Council room, and Minato walked over to see Hidetoshi struggle to his feet.

"I win." Minato said.

"T-that was cheating!" Hidetoshi said. Mitsuru laughed from behind Minato.

"Cheating?" she mused. "The only rule I heard was that Minato was not allowed to touch you."

"That's a load of-" Hidetoshi began, but was silenced by Minato punching him in the gut.

"Talking back to Madame President again?" Minato asked with a smile. "You masochistic dog. Are you excited now, pervert?" He threw Hidetoshi down to the floor again, then stepped on his back. "Does it make you feel good to know

you're being humiliated in public? I certainly hope it does... or else this must be mortifying for you." Minato said as he applied more and more pressure to Hidetoshi's back. He laughed as his victim squirmed, trying to free himself, but failing miserably.

"Give him something to remember you by." Mitsuru said. She turned to enter the Council room, and the rest of the members swiftly followed, with Shinjiro entering last. She took her seat, and every member sat down. Hidetoshi let out a brief scream of pain followed by a fit of Minato's laughter. "Now then, if we'd begin the general meeting." she said.

The meeting was standard and unnaturally silent, occasionally accentuated by some of Hidetoshi's screaming and Minato throwing out a few insults and laughs. As the meeting drew to a close, it became progressively quieter, and Minato entered the Council room as Mitsuru set the rest of the students to work. He had his manic smile plastered onto his face, and everyone save Mitsuru and Shinjiro flinched when they saw him. "That fool won't be bothering us again... unless he'd prefer a more symmetrical breaking." Minato said. He chuckled.

"Good... well, you've finished on time with the meeting, so I have nothing else for you to do." Mitsuru said. "You and Shinji may leave if you wish... I doubt you'll need to patrol after that display."

"I'll take you up on that." Shinjiro said, rising from his chair. "Unless you want help with paperwork again."

"As I said, I'd rather not make that something I rely on." Mitsuru said. She smirked. "I prefer to be able to do at least this much on my own."

"Well, well... Do as you please." Minato said. "You hungry, Shinji? I could go for a bite."

"Sure. As long as it's not Wild Duck, I'm game." Shinjiro said. They left the school gates, and boarded the train to back to Iwatodai, both opting to lean on opposite sides near one of the exits. The train departed, and they both looked out of the window at the city.

"... Have you warmed up to the idea of Ken joining the team yet?" Minato asked.

"... I'm still thinking about it." Shinjiro said.

"Well, while you think, I act." Minato said. Shinjiro shot him a sideways glance.

"... What'd you do?" he asked.

"I've been talking to Ken for a bit... trying to improve him before he joins." Minato said. "I'm teaching him some things about the world. He may act like an adult, but the fact is, he's still a child... easily moldable, controllable, and... you know."

"... What the hell are you trying to teach him?" Shinjiro asked, shifting to give Minato his full attention. "If you so much as point that kid in the wrong direction, I'll show you how much

"I've improved since we last fought." Minato chuckled.

"Easy there, Shinji... I'm first trying to have him understand that there are other people in the world that suffer, just as much or perhaps more than he does." Minato said. "You remember Maiko, right?"

"The girl we played with... her parents are divorcing." Shinjiro said. "You introduced them to each other?"

"Yes, and I also met and introduced another man about our age to him... he's sick and dying, and I doubt he'll recover. He may act as though he's accepted death, but he's still too afraid to go alone." Minato said. "Three people in completely different circumstances, each of them with their own serious problems... there's little chance that after they've interacted enough, they won't all grow from it. Of course, I might step in to steer Ken in a certain direction every now and then, but for now, I believe laissez-faire is the best approach."

"You're teaching a kid who went through losing his mom about the shit other people have to go through? What makes you think he won't just call everyone else self-pitying pricks?" Shinjiro asked.

"There's a good chance he'll do just that." Minato said. "But I don't think so... he hasn't hardened as much as I have. I think he still believes people are good... after all, he believes I'm a good person, and we both know that's a lie."

"You can play people, and that's no lie." Shinjiro said. "You

could fool grown-ass men if you really wanted to, so I don't hold it against him... Still, suppose he does get that other people suffer. A lot of people know that and still do whatever they damn want... just like you."

"As long as he gets the message, it's a win-win in my eyes. Either he becomes more like me, which can't possibly be a bad thing, or he begins to rethink his outlook on life, which will probably result in him being less inclined to dish out judgment on his mother's killer if he ever finds out who it is." Minato said.

"... You're really intent on trying to make me play some kind of father figure to this kid, aren't you?" Shinjiro asked.

"I never asked you to be a father... I asked you to be there for him." Minato said. "As I said before, I can only set the stage... you'll have to play the supporting role. What becomes of our little hero depends largely on how you interpret the script."

"Tch... For a manipulative bastard, you always like to say you're giving people the freedom to choose." Shinjiro said. "Even though there's only one real path you can see them taking."

Minato smirked. "Isn't an illusion just as good as the real thing?" he asked. "All that matters is the end result. I'm just trying to let them enjoy the path I've set them on, and people love having choices... even if they make no difference." Shinjiro said nothing, and the train arrived at Iwatodai Station.

Minato led them to Wakatsu and strolled inside.

"Welcome, honored guest. Just the two of you today?" the waiter asked.

"Yes, inside." Minato said. The waiter nodded, and escorted them to a normal table near a window. Minato and Shinjiro both placed their orders, and the waiter left them alone.

"... What kind of things does 'being there' entail?" Shinjiro asked.

"Hmm... I guess for Ken... that would be... sort of like being a role model." Minato said. "Ken's kind of a quiet kid, so I think he'll take to you. Especially since you're generally a responsible adult. Though I suppose you'll have to hang out with him for a bit as well, but you don't need to try too hard there... he might not find you that approachable, after all. But if he does talk to you, give him the time of day. Standard shit like that."

"That's it? I don't gotta go out of my way to teach him freakin' morals or life lessons or any shit like that?" Shinjiro asked. Minato chuckled.

"What do you think I'm here for? I told you that you wouldn't have to deal with this alone." Minato said. "I planned it like this... I'm the shady advisor that teaches Ken about the world and will probably serve as the person he confides in, should he need help with odd matters or want to share any deep dark secrets. On the other hand, you'll be Ken's company

back at the dorm when he needs it, and generally serve as a not necessarily social but available contact that he hopefully takes a liking to. The rest should be taken care of by the other dorm members on their own accord."

"... An authority figure in Mitsuru, a teacher and role model in Aki, and friends that would call him an equal in the others." Shinjiro said. He frowned. "That's idealistic... things aren't going to go that smoothly."

"They probably won't... but it's as good of a benchmark as we'll get for the future." Minato said. "Remember, we don't know when Ken will join us... this might happen tomorrow night, or months from now, so any prediction is subject to a high degree of criticism. But we're dodging the question at hand... do you intend on leaving Ken to his own devices, or will you try and keep him from turning into you, or, even worse, me?"

Shinjiro said nothing, and their food arrived. They both began to eat, until halfway into their meal, Shinjiro stopped and took a large drink of water. He put his cup down, and stared Minato right in the eyes. "You had to put it that way." Shinjiro said. Minato smirked.

"So the answer is yes?" he asked.

"That kid isn't going to run around with the guilt of a murder on his hands, and I'll be damned if I let him start enjoying that shit like you." Shinjiro said. "I ain't the best example, but he'll learn something."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"Congratulations on becoming a father." Minato said.

"Shut up." Shinjiro said. Minato laughed, and the two finished their meal and returned to the dorm.

"Oh, hey! You guys are back." Yukari said. She glanced at Shinjiro. "... Something wrong, Shinji-senpai?"

"... I just got conned, and I'm pissed." Shinjiro said. He turned to Minato. "You mind heading to Tartarus tonight?" Minato chuckled.

"It's your choice." he said. Shinjiro stewed his teeth and retreated to his room. Minato laughed. "Well, you heard the man. Get ready for a fun night!" SEES prepared to train for the night, and arrived at school as Tartarus emerged.

Elsewhere, in one of the back alleys of Port Island Station, a teenage boy found himself standing amidst a group of coffins. "... Huh?" he asked, suddenly looking around. "How the heck did I... Hey, what the fuck is with all these coffins? And is that blood?! Shit!" he yelled.

"Good evening." a male voice said from behind him. The boy

quickly turned around to see three individuals approaching him. The first was a shirtless, slightly muscular man with tribal tattoos running down his shoulders and arms, wearing loose baggy jeans and well-worn sandals. His most distinctive feature was his hair and facial hair, looking both a dirty gray and fashioned in the exact same style as Jesus, much to the boy's surprise. He also wore a black hairband around his forehead and a double studded belt, but the teen's main focus was on the revolver he had strapped to his waist. He looked a bit tired.

To the right of man who spoke stood another, slightly shorter man with short blue hair swept over his left eye with orange tinted glasses. He wore a green jacket with black straps, and, from what the teen could tell, some type of padding underneath it. He carried a large silver suitcase, and had on large combat leggings with two pouches strapped to his upper thighs over combat boots. He looked a bit annoyed.

Finally, to the left, there was a long-haired redhead girl in a full-on white Lolita outfit, complete with headpiece which made it appear as if a small metal cross was driven through her skull, spiked metal ankle bracelets, and large flat white shoes. She had no expression on her face.

"W-what do you guys want? Where am I?" the teen asked.

"Are you surprised?" the man with the revolver asked. "Truth be told, we all visit this world every night."

"What are you saying?! W-who the hell are you?!" the teen

responded. The blue-haired man walked forwards and pulled out a small piece of paper he had in his pocket, and flipped it open in one swift motion.

"Didn't mommy teach you any manners? You haven't introduced yourself... Take a look. Name, age, address, etc... This is you, right?" the blue-haired man asked.

"Wha-? Where did you get this?" the teen asked. The blue-haired man stuffed the piece of paper back into his pocket.

"Somebody's got a grudge against you, and they asked us to get revenge." he said.

"Revege?! What kinda bullshit is this?! Who put you up to this?!" the teen snapped.

"Can't tell ya. We're professionals." the blue-haired man responded.

"Professionals'?... Oh shit. You mean you're those friggin' freaks online?!" the teen asked. The blue-haired man stepped back and the shirtless man drew his revolver. He took a step towards the teen, who also stepped back. "H-hey, wait... I haven't done anything! Why me?! What'd I do?!" he asked.

"That is not our concern." the shirtless man said. He aimed his revolver at the teen. "Your notion of right and wrong is irrelevant. My client's wishes are all that matter. People hear what they choose to hear, and believe what they want to believe."

"Man, get the fuck away from me!" the teen yelled as he turned to run. He made it a few steps before the shirtless man put a bullet in the back of his chest, and he collapsed to the floor.

"You squealed most magnificently! Such raw emotion!" the shirtless man said with a grin. The woman walked forwards.

"He's not dead..." she said.

"That's what I'm here for." a different female voice said. A little further down the alley, Koromaru appeared, alongside a teenage girl in brown loafers, black stockings, a pleated yellow and orange skirt, a light yellow turtle neck with red stripes around the chest area, and a red scarf tied around her neck. She had brown hair held up in a pony-tail by a little red hairband and a white hairpin forming the Roman numeral 'XXII' on the left side of her hair. She had blood red eyes that seemed to glow, and she walked forwards with a grin, lugging a black Naginata over her shoulder with one hand and mimicking the motion of a toy soldier. "You were too slow, bro! Coulda died in one hit if you made it to me. Oh well." she said as she approached the squirming body. She hefted her Naginata up, gave it a dramatic twirl, then drove the blade down into the man's skull in one swift motion, causing a little squishing noise as his brain was mutilated. She withdrew the blade, and did a quick flourish to get rid of the blood. It splattered against the walls and floor.

"Hamuko, if you got that filth on my dress..." the red-haired girl said.

"Would it kill you to wear a black one to work, Chidori?" Hamuko responded. She smirked and let the Naginata rest on her shoulders, resting her hands on it as if she were carrying a piece of lumber on her back. "And is your aim getting sloppier, or is it just me, Takaya?" she asked the man with the revolver.

"He would have died, regardless of your appearance." Takaya said. The blue-haired man let out a groan of disgust.

"Why the hell is that stupid dog still around?" he asked. Koromaru growled at his comment.

"What's that boy? You gonna turn Jin into dog shit if he keeps talking?" Hamuko mused.

"We still need to get him a weapon." Takaya said. "You were supposed to be training him."

"That isn't as easy as it sounds." Hamuko said.

"... Leave him to me." Chidori said. She motioned for Koromaru to come over, and he happily passed the dead body to reach her. She leaned down and pet him, allowing a slight grin to reach her face. It died quickly. "I expect you to learn. Fast."

"Why you two expect results from a dog, I'll never understand." Jin said, shaking his head. "But did you have to go for his head, Hamuko? This'll look less like some random crime and more like an execution."

"Does it matter? Once he makes morning news, we'll have shown we kept up our end of the deal, and the rest of the money comes through, right?" Hamuko asked.

"She has a point." Takaya said, holstering his revolver. He yawned. "Now, if there's nothing else... I'm rather tired."

Hamuko twirled her Naginata back into her over the shoulder position and jogged over to keep pace with the other individuals, and the group left the body alone. The Dark Hour passed, and they were nowhere to be found.

69. Chapter 69

Chapter 69: Duties

Author Note on Hamuko: Wow, I'm surprised at the reactions to her appearance! Aside from a Certain Guest, most of you seem to dislike her, which I wasn't expecting. Well, you'll get to learn more about her as time passes, so don't worry too much.

Author Note to a Certain Guest: No.

And story.

After having spent the Dark Hour getting in some solid training and getting a few new Personas, Minato found himself once again planning out his card collecting. *"I'll definitely get Fortune increased today. What I have to worry about is tonight... If I'm lucky, I can find somebody, but if not, I'm stuck with Vergil or Dante. And I doubt either of them will feel like talking until my little challenge is over."*

"Or, you could opt to skip the club and hunt for someone outside of school." David said.

"That's definitely an option, but I'd rather establish myself on somewhat more solid ground before I start dodging

attendance. I had an excuse on Friday, but an absence today is inexcusable." Minato said. *"Besides, a card is a card. Once I'm getting one, it makes little difference which one it is."*

He left his room and went down to make breakfast for the morning. The dorm was empty as usual in the morning, so he summoned a Jack and Alice to provide him with morning music as he went about his work.

Shinjiro woke up earlier than usual, and came down to the first floor shortly after Minato began. "You'll wake people up like this." he said as he walked into the kitchen.

"I didn't wake you up." Minato said. "You did that yourself... trying to become an early riser?"

"No... but I slept well." Shinjiro said. He scoffed. "Don't you start telling me it's some spiritual revival bullshit or anything like that." Minato chuckled.

"Don't worry... I don't believe in that garbage." Minato said. "But I do believe that you're actions are aligning with your personal beliefs more and more."

"Hmph... think whatever you want." Shinjiro said. He joined Minato and continued to make breakfast. The other members of SEES filed downstairs, and the morning began without a hitch. Minato walked ahead of the other SEES members to enjoy his music, and took off his headphones just in time to catch a bit of conversation.

"Have you heard of this revenge request website?" a gossiping boy asked his friend.

"Revenge request...? What's that?" his friend asked.

"*Somebody's interested.*" Minato noted, catching the slight excitement in his voice.

"You can write the person's name you want to get revenge on, along with some basic info like their age and occupation, then bam! Mission accomplished. They say it's guaranteed successful, and completely anonymous." the gossiping student said. His friend's eyes lit up, and Minato saw murder in them.

"Seriously?! Gimme that URL, quick!" he said.

"Huh? I don't know it... Besides, it's just a rumor... Why are you so desperate?" the gossiping student asked. Minato watched his 'friend' closely and saw his intentions clearly.

"*So I'll never have to listen to your annoying fucking voice ever again, you disgusting piece of shit.*" the boy's expression told Minato. "Desperate? Dude... I just wanted to check it out. C'mon, do I look like the kind of guy who'd be thinking about revenge?" his friend asked.

"... I don't know..." the gossiping student said. His 'friend' gave him a pat on the back.

"Stop being a punk!" he said with a grin. "Let's grab some melon bread, on me." The duo walked away, and Minato read

the boy's smile once more. *"It'll be the last thing you ever get from me, loser."*

"Damn, that kid is serious. I don't think we'll be seeing his friend for much longer." Jack said.

"No kidding... still, a revenge request website? That sounds like my type of job." Minato mused. *"I wonder how long they've been around?"*

"People have always needed a good way to dispose of others... I'd say they could have existed for years." Hell Biker said.

"I might look into them at some point... or ask Shinji about them one of these days." Minato thought. He headed straight to class, and yet another uninteresting school day passed by, with even his lunch being relatively quiet. As the day ended he rose from his chair and departed his classroom as usual, intent on heading towards the Art Club Room. He found his two escorts, Fuuka and Catherine, waiting a bit down the hallway, and smirked. "Waiting on me? How cute." he said as he approached them.

"A lot of people would think they're lucky to have two girls waiting on them to go to club." Catherine said. Minato chuckled as they started walking together with him in the middle, and he put an arm around each girl's waist.

"A lot of people aren't me." Minato mused. He and the two girls strolled off laughing.

"Isn't that going a little too far?" Fuuka asked. She rested her head against Minato, and he couldn't help but notice an odd tension between the two girls.

"Is it catfight time already?" he thought with a grin. Catherine responded by tugging on his collar with her free hand.

"No... I think he's got a point." she said quietly. Minato had his gaze changed by Fuuka turning his head by his chin.

"I was just teasing him." Fuuka said with a smile.

"I think I know a better tease." Minato replied. He leaned in and put his lips dangerously close to Fuuka's, and she couldn't keep up her act. She fidgeted just out of reach, and both Catherine and Minato laughed.

"T-that was cheating..." Fuuka said. Minato nuzzled her head.

"I play to win." he mused.

They had reached the first floor hallway, and Minato was about to turn his attention back to Catherine when he saw the seniors of SEES approaching him. Well, Akihiko and Shinjiro were approaching him behind a Mitsuru who clearly had the flames of envy burning behind her eyes. They died quickly, however, and she stopped in front of them and cleared her throat. "Minato." Mitsuru said. "I'm sorry to say this, but our conferences have moved from Friday to Wednesday... it requires your presence. I hope this isn't too much of an inconvenience for you."

"THE SNEAK ATTACK!" Jack yelled in his head.

"Use your job to pull you out of the zone... being in a relationship with your boss is troublesome." David said.

"She's so jelly!" Alice said.

"I'm feeling lucky. Let's see if I can push for three." Minato thought. He swiftly disconnected from Catherine and Fuuka, did a little twirl on the balls of his feet over to Mitsuru and stopped in a stance midway between a curtsy and residing on a single knee. He took Mitsuru's hand and kissed it. "For you, nothing's an inconvenience." he said.

Shinjiro facepalmed. "This fucking guy..." he muttered as he shook his head. Akihiko suppressed any outbursts, but his face gave away the fact that he couldn't believe what just happened. Mitsuru was taken aback.

"T-that's wonderful, b-but this is!" she said, quickly looking around to judge how many people had just witnessed what happened.

"Umm... we need to hurry to club..." Fuuka said quietly. Minato practically reversed what he just did, and somehow managed to get back into his original position from before Mitsuru's approach in a singular swift motion. He wore his cocky smirk as usual.

"I look forwards to tomorrow." Minato said. He turned and glanced at his watch around Fuuka. "But I will be late at this

rate. Adieu, mon cheri." He walked off with Catherine and Fuuka, and Mitsuru simply walked out of the school, leaving Akihiko and Shinjiro behind. Akihiko went to follow, but Shinjiro put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him.

"We need to talk." Shinjiro said.

"... I thought about what you said, and –" Akihiko said.

"Not about that, dumbass." Shinjiro said, cutting Akihiko off.
"It's about Ken."

"... What happened?" Akihiko asked.

"Not here... we'll talk over some Beef Bowl." Shinjiro said.
"Besides, Mitsuru's probably too flustered to take anything you say seriously if you were going to chase after her, so let her cool off."

"You have a point... then, let's go." Akihiko said. They left school, and went off to have their discussion.

By that point, Minato's entourage had reached Art Club. They strolled in, once again hit by some odd glares, but otherwise walked in without any problems. Keisuke turned to greet them. "Oh, you all came today." he said as he turned to see them. "We missed you on Friday, but responsibilities are responsibilities."

"Speaking of responsibilities, I can't make it on Wednesday. Consequently, however, my Friday is free." Minato said.

"That's great, isn't it?" Catherine asked. "Twice a week instead of once. Should we count ourselves lucky that we get to see him so often?"

"I wouldn't know... I see him every day." Fuuka said. Minato chuckled, and hugged her a little tighter.

"Underhanded, but effective." he thought. "Maybe we can save this for after we make some amazing pieces today, huh?" he asked. Keisuke nodded to him, obviously getting a little uncomfortable with the situation.

"T-that's right... are you thinking of another round of speed painting, or do you want to start working on longer works? There is a competition coming up later in the year, so it might be wise to start now." he said.

"Actually, that sounds like a good idea." Minato said. "Are there any artistic restrictions on the competition?"

"Well... obviously, you can't enter anything 'obscene'... so, I suppose that puts anything like you and Catherine's speed paintings out of the question." Keisuke said. "Well, I'm sure you know how to paint other things."

"Of course I do!" Catherine said, moving over from Minato to Keisuke. He backed up. "Don't tell me you think I'm some kind of perverted artist." she said. She leaned in to whisper "I'm only like that in bed."

"I-I t-t-thought nothing of the sort!" Keisuke said, his mind

being flooded with all the wrong thoughts for the moment. Minato and Fuuka both laughed. "S-so, is there uhh... a-anything else you w-want to know?"

"Can we work on our piece outside of Club?" Fuuka asked.

"You could... but it'd be your responsibility to carry it around outside and bring it back." Keisuke said.

"But that would ruin the fun of working together, wouldn't it, Fuuka?" Catherine asked, swinging around to throw an arm around Fuuka's shoulder. She raised an index finger. "It's only good if we're all working together, right?"

"That's true." Fuuka said, cracking a smile.

"That's the spirit." Keisuke said, recovering at the shift in subject.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's pick a good spot to set up." Minato said. They moved over to a set of adjacent empty canvases in the corner, and each began working on their respective piece. Fuuka noticed that Minato seemed to heavily rely on green for the majority of his painting, then soon realized what he was painting. He had only done the clouds and the moon, but it was obviously apparent that Minato was painting the Dark Hour, and, judging from the missing portion of the moon he left near the top center of his work, he was going to draw Tartarus.

"Minato, are you sure you want to draw that?" Fuuka

whispered to him. He smirked at her.

"What are you worried about? How many people will know what it is other than us?" he asked.

"Mitsuru-senpai would get mad." Fuuka said. "What if the wrong person saw it?"

"Well, what would you have me paint?" Minato asked. "I can't think of anything to enter into a competition better than a painting of Tartarus."

"... You could at least change the colors." Fuuka said.

"So, if I made the clouds and sky red, while keeping Tartarus in its original form, do you think that would be appropriate?" Minato asked.

"... Are you sure you can't think of anything else to draw?" Fuuka asked. "Really... I think you'll get into a lot of trouble if you submit that. Not just from Mitsuru-senpai, but anyone that recognizes what you painted..."

"... Is it bothering you that much?" he asked, turning to face her. She was giving him what he assumed were puppy dog eyes, though he could never tell since that expression always looked like the face of a person begging for their life.

"It is... I don't want you to get in trouble." Fuuka said.

"Really... there are already so many people we know that know about it... I don't think it's a far-stretch to say there are

others out there we don't know about."

Minato sighed, and tore the sheet he was painting right off. He crumpled it, and threw it in a nearby trash can. He turned back to Fuuka and shook his head with a smile. "The things I do for my Fuuka." he said. *"And my Priestess Card."*

Fuuka smiled back and nodded before returning her attention to her own work. He thought about what to create for a bit, before swapping his large set of greens for a large set of blues. He passed by Catherine as he set his work up once more, and glanced at what she was making. It had the makings of a very elegant, if somewhat untidy, loveseat with a person lounging on it. He chuckled, and Catherine turned back to him. "Can you tell what it's going to be?" she asked.

"You gesturing for the viewer to come fuck you." Minato said. Catherine laughed.

"As amazing as that would be, that's not it." she said. "No, I was actually thinking of a piece about somebody waiting for their lover's return."

"Then you might actually be allowed to enter this piece." Minato said. He saw that Keisuke had gone over to try and help another member, so he added "Scoring points with glasses?"

"Of course I am." Catherine said. "He just needs to warm-up to the idea of worrying only about the present... then I think I'll have my shot." Minato chuckled.

"Doesn't everybody?" he mused. Catherine giggled.

"Maybe... but you should hurry up. I saw you trash all of your work just now, and I don't think Keisuke would like it if you produce anything today." Catherine said. Minato nodded, and went back over to his station.

Meanwhile, at Beef Bowl, Shinjiro and Akihiko sat down and ordered. Akihiko had ordered a fully loaded platter with extra beef and no added vegetables. "Tch... haven't you learned to eat your vegetables yet, Aki?" Shinjiro asked as the server went to the back.

"I get more than enough of my daily serving in supplements." Akihiko said. "The body can't process excessive amounts of vitamins and minerals properly, so they linger and have a higher chance of just becoming waste. Taking in excessive amounts of protein gives you a larger reserve of energy than what your typical carb intake would allow. That allows me to train harder and consistently gain muscle mass, which, alongside my supplements, keeps me in peak physical condition."

"... Well, damn. You actually disproved me this time." Shinjiro said.

"We had this conversation four years ago. Don't think I haven't learned anything since then." Akihiko said with a grin. "I could start you off with a smaller dosing than mine so your body eases into it. Then, you could train just as hard as I do. After all, it's not like you don't have the time."

"No thanks... I actually like my vegetables." Shinjiro said.

"Besides... I don't know if I'll have that much free time in the future."

"And why would that be?" Akihiko asked. Shinjiro took a deep breath before he turned to look Akihiko in the eyes.

"I've made a decision... Ken is going to end up in SEES, whether we like it or not." Shinjiro said. "And I'm going to make sure that kid doesn't die or do anything he'll regret... he doesn't need to go through any more shit after what I did to him. I'm not trying to preach any shit at you, but... I want you to look out for him when he joins, Aki."

The server returned before Akihiko could say anything. "Here you go, two house specials! One with extra beef, no veggies, one with extra Collard greens and hard-boiled rice." he said. He put their meals down in front of them and headed back to the back. "Careful, they're hot!"

Shinjiro picked up his chopsticks and began to eat, followed slowly by Akihiko. After they had gotten well into their meals in silence, Akihiko spoke up. "... I didn't think you'd be the one to let go of the past first." he said.

"I haven't let go of anything." Shinjiro said. "I've just accepted that it isn't changing." Akihiko chuckled.

"That might be even stranger." Akihiko said. Shinjiro chuckled.

"It probably is." he said.

"... Let me guess. A certain blue-haired psychopath convinced you to do this?" Akihiko asked.

"More like conned me into it." Shinjiro said. "To be honest, I've still got my doubts... but this is still a better idea than my last one, so I'll run with it."

"Then I've got you." Akihiko said. "I'll keep an eye on Ken."

"Good." Shinjiro said. "... Then, if it ain't too much trouble... I want to visit our sister. I think she deserves to hear this."

"... She'd be happy for you." Akihiko said. They finished their meals and then went off into the city, intent on reaching a certain alleyway.

Back at school, everyone had worked on their paintings for a solid hour before they had to pack up. Minato had quickly finished his, but noticed Fuuka seemed to be having trouble. On closer inspection, she seemed to be in pain. "*Odd.*" he thought. He quickly moved over to her and picked up the rest of her supplies, then took what she was carrying and hurried over to put it back into its rightful place. He returned in under a minute, and found Fuuka forcing a smile. He gently moved in to serve as a support, which she quickly used. "Hey, what's wrong?" he asked.

"This has been happening to me a lot lately..." Fuuka said. "I-I just have a little headache... It's no big deal, really..."

"So you were trying to keep me all to yourself?" Minato

whispered. Before Fuuka could say anything, Keisuke and Catherine walked over.

"You really should determine the cause of your headache; it could lead to further complications down the road." Keisuke said. "Where are you experiencing the pain? Is it on one or both sides of your head? ... Can you describe the pain? Is it dull? Aching? Throbbing?"

"Hey, don't just bombard her with questions like that." Catherine said. "Give her a little time, would you?"

"O-oh, sorry... I was just concerned." Keisuke said. Catherine sighed.

"For a guy who's memorized an entire medical journal, you'd think you could tell when you're causing a problem." she said.

"R-really?! I'm so sorry, Fuuka!" Keisuke said quickly. Catherine giggled.

"It was just a joke, silly." she said.

"Really... I think I'll be fine." Fuuka said. "I mean, the pain's coming from the back of my head, so I might just need to rest..."

"... The back of your head?" Keisuke asked. "Umm... well, if you turned around and let me feel the back of your head, I could probably tell you what it is?"

"That's all?" Minato asked. "Color me impressed."

"Yeah, Keisuke's dad is the director of the hospital on the other side of town." Catherine said. "He can't stand to see people in pain... it's really noble of him, actually."

"I-I'm just doing the right thing." Keisuke said. The flattery had worked well, from what Minato could tell. "Well... can I?"

"Ok... I guess." Fuuka said. She walked over to him and turned around. Keisuke placed his hand on the back of her head, and Minato swore he was doing the equivalent of what the Z-Fighters did with King Kai in Dragon Ball Z when they were communicating from the Other World to Earth.

"I like this guy more already." Minato thought. After a few minutes of examination, Keisuke retracted his hand, and Fuuka moved back over to Minato.

"What you're suffering from is known as a chronic-tension type headache, most likely a result of stress." Keisuke said. "You must be spending too much time in front of the computer. You should get outside and exercise more... Though that advice must sound strange coming from the leader of the Art Club..."

"Oh, I thought I might have come down with the flu or something..." Fuuka said.

"The flu? If you're worried about that, I should perform a more detailed examination." Keisuke said. "Please remove your shirt, open your mouth, and stick out your tongue." Fuuka froze.

"Keisuke, you naughty boy, you!" Catherine said. "That's one way to play doctor." Minato couldn't stop himself from laughing at Keisuke freezing just like Fuuka.

"W-what a-are you talking about? I-I'd never do something like that!" Keisuke said. "I was really concerned for her well-being! The flu is serious!"

"Uh, that's okay, actually!" Fuuka said. "I'm fine! A-anyways, my dorm is close by, and Minato can walk me back since we're dorm mates!"

"Aww, you'd never do that?" Catherine asked. She pressed herself against Keisuke's side. "Because I think I might be sick."

"Y-you seem perfectly fine!" Keisuke said. Minato moved over to the other side of Keisuke with Fuuka in tow.

"I don't know... she wasn't doing so well last week. I think there's something in the air at the Photography Club Room." Minato said.

"... Are you serious?" Keisuke asked.

"Yeah, I had an itch in the back of my throat after working in there." Minato said. "It went away, but I was only there once. She's had prolonged exposure."

"Won't you help me, doctor?" she asked, tugging at Keisuke's collar.

"... This is for her health." Keisuke muttered to himself. "Her health."

"Ah, but of course this should be done in private." Minato said. He gave Fuuka a little squeeze, and she quickly realized what they were trying to do.

"Y-yeah... I mean, it would be bad if somebody saw you and got the wrong idea." Fuuka said. Keisuke reddened and adjusted his glasses.

"T-the back of this room is s-sanitary enough... How's that?" he asked.

"Could you lock the door?" Catherine asked. Keisuke reluctantly nodded, and she smiled. "Then that's perfect."

"Minato, you make sure to walk back with Fuuka! F-for safety's sake, of course!" Keisuke said.

"I'll do that... I hope you feel better, Catherine." Minato said. Catherine turned to him with a devilish smile.

"I think Keisuke can make me feel good." she said. "Have fun, you two."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fortune Arcana...

"Well, looks like I do just need to help Catherine score for my rank-ups. Excellent." Minato thought. "Then, we'll leave you two to it." he said.

"Yes... remember to lock the door." Fuuka said. She and Minato made their way out of the room before Keisuke could say anything, and headed for the entrance. "... Did Catherine ask for your help?" she asked as they reached the first floor hallway.

"She did... and look." Minato said, holding his hand in front of them. He materialized the Fortune Tarot Card, and the picture seemed clearer than before. "No good deed goes unrewarded."

"I don't know if that was a good deed." Fuuka said. Minato chuckled, and dispelled the card.

"Perhaps it wasn't... but that's not what we should be worrying about now." Minato said. "I think you could use some cake, Fuuka. Chocolate helps with headaches, after all."

"Really, I'm fine..." Fuuka said.

"Then at least let me be fair... I put you in an odd situation and got your help for a less than savory deed, so I think I have to spoil you a bit before we go back to the dorm." Minato said. Fuuka giggled.

"... If it'll make you feel better, then I don't mind." she said. They got on the train to Iwatodai, and split Fuuka's music

between the two of them with Minato's headphones.

While they were enjoying their time together, Akihiko and Shinjiro had reached an abandoned alleyway deep in the heart of Iwatodai. It was mostly empty, with a few areas that had been closed off as being unsuitable for reconstruction and some short buildings dotting the area. The duo walked over to the edge of one of the closed off areas, and stared at the lingering remains of a wide building. Shinjiro walked forwards to the front and took off his beanie, letting his hair fall downwards.

"... Sorry for not visiting, Miki." Shinjiro said. "I won't make up any crap about being busy... I just didn't want to be here for a while... I'll make it quick. I'm not going to let what happened before tie me down anymore..." He chuckled. "I guess you were right... it's nice to be an airhead. Guess that's what I'm trying to become... You'd like the kid, I think. I hear he's smart and respectful, just your type, heh... well, I guess that's it. I'll try and stay in touch. Aki's got something to say, so... later."

Shinjiro nodded to the air and turned around, putting his beanie back on and adjusting it as Akihiko walked past him and took his spot. He took a deep breath, and adjusted his sweater vest. "Hey there, sis." Akihiko began. "Well, not much has changed since last time... I still don't get girls, just like you said, hah. Got any pointers?... I'm sure you'd know what I was doing wrong if you saw me. Anyways, I'm really just here to visit with Shinji, and say hello as always. Still... still... Uhh, I-I actually have some s-stuff to do, so... b-bye."

Akihiko turned around quickly and swiftly wiped his face with one hand. "... Don't cry here again, Aki." Shinjiro said, as Akihiko walked past him. He turned to keep pace with him.

"I am not crying." Akihiko growled as he hurriedly went to leave the area. Shinjiro sighed, and followed Akihiko on what he knew was going to turn into a fit of random exercises to clear his head.

Minato and Fuuka had enjoyed a bit of cake at the Sweet Shop and returned to the dorm. The chocolate cake had helped Fuuka's headache, and they entered together to see an odd sight. Mitsuru was pointing out a few lines from a book to Junpei, but she turned to see them when the front door opened. "Welcome back." Mitsuru greeted. "We have two weeks until the moon is full again. Though we've trained rather rigorously these past few weeks, I believe it's in our best interest to keep increasing our strength before that time."

"Two weeks, huh?" Junpei asked, still looking over the book. He grinned. "I wonder what it'll look like this time... I have to admit, the suspense is killing me..."

"I didn't get to see my cross-sections last time, so you can imagine what I feel." Minato said.

"You're both starting to sound like Akihiko." Mitsuru said. "Just remember, the enemy doesn't screw around."

"Hey, that was actually really good, senpai!" Junpei said.

"It sounded a lot more natural." Fuuka said, taking the single seat facing away from the window.

"You've become quite the teacher, Junpei." Minato said as he signed-in.

"Hey, I mean, I asked her to tutor me, so it's nothing, really." Junpei said.

"Don't underestimate yourself, Junpei." Mitsuru said. "You do more than just sound like Akihiko when it comes to combat... although, have any of you seen him or Shinji? They usually return by now."

"They're prolly eating or something'." Junpei said. "I bet Akihiko-senpai roped him into some kind of competition."

"I could see that." Minato said. He grabbed a quick dinner, headed upstairs, showered, and threw on some comfortable black gym shorts and a plain dark-blue hoodie with the sleeves cut off along with his sneakers. He put his headphones in and walked downstairs. *"I'll do a bit of parkour today, and then go see what Shin has in store for me. If I'm lucky, an extra strength card and free training."* he thought as he headed towards the door. He threw his hood on, and kept walking.

"Going somewhere?" Mitsuru asked.

"Extra training." Minato said. "Don't wait up for me... I probably won't be back until after the Dark Hour."

"Alright... be careful out there." Mitsuru said. Minato nodded, and left the dorm. He put on some music, and took off running. His goal was to reach Shin before the Dark Hour struck without using his Magatama at all, and aside from the unavoidable Moonlight Bridge, he'd avoid flat ground as much as possible.

As the Dark Hour struck, Minato had already met Shin and disappeared into the wasteland. Back in Iwatodai, however, a teenage boy found himself with Takaya pressing the barrel of a revolver against his forehead a little bit away from the very same alleyway Akihiko and Shinjiro had visited earlier in the day. Hamuko and Jin were standing behind him, with Hamuko smiling widely as Jin stuffed a piece of paper back into his pocket. "Please, please, please, I'll do anything!" he pleaded.

"There is only one thing you can do for our client." Takaya said. He took flipped the safety on his revolver off.

"Wait... anything, you say?" Hamuko asked. She walked up next to Takaya. "Are you sure about that?"

"Y-yes, yes! I d-don't want to die!" the boy said. Takaya glanced at Hamuko to see a sadistic smile slowly forming on her face.

"... Let me handle this." she said to Takaya.

"... As you wish." Takaya said, putting the revolver's safety back on. He holstered it, and stepped back to give Hamuko some room.

"Don't do anything stupid." Jin said.

"I'm going to hold up my end of the deal." Hamuko said. She turned let her Naginata fall so that it hung lazily in one hand. "You said you'd do anything, right?"

"T-that's right!" the boy said. Tears were streaming from his eyes.

"Alright... then get on your knees." Hamuko said. The boy looked around a bit, and Hamuko raised her Naginata into the air. He whimpered and did as commanded.

"D-don't hurt me!" he said. Hamuko chuckled, and lowered her Naginata to her side once more. She twirled it in her hand so that the blade curved upwards, then put it in front of the boy's face.

"Good... now, I want you to clean this blade with your tongue." she said. The boy's eyes widened.

"Y-you... you can't be serious..." he said.

"Would you rather I just run it through your face?" she asked. The boy flinched. "Now, get to work... take it in your mouth and lick both sides. But try not to move too much... my grip isn't that good." She began to slowly let her Naginata shake in her hand, and the boy stared at it. "Well? I don't have all night."

Reluctantly, the boy opened his mouth and put the blade in his

mouth. He slowly licked the blade, all while staring at Hamuko in desperation. The blade tipped the insides of his mouth every now and then, but he ignored it. Takaya couldn't help but laugh at the scene, and even Jin began to chuckle.

"Wow, you're really good at sucking it... you must have experience." Hamuko said. She yawned. "I could watch you do this all day."

She did a little stretch, and then put her second hand down on the back of her Naginata, using just enough force to drive the blade into the top of the boy's mouth. He let out a gargling noise of pain, and frantically tried to pull away. Hamuko laughed, and walked forwards, raising her Naginata up so that the boy's head had to follow, and he was staring straight upwards. He sputtered and flailed, desperately trying to get the Naginata out of his mouth, but by this point, Hamuko was too intent on slowly carving out the top of his mouth. She looked right into his eyes and saw absolute horror in them, and laughed. She increased the rate at which she carved up the inside of his mouth, even daring to touch his throat now, and his body violently twitched.

"Hey, hey, you're dirtying the blade more than you're cleaning it!" Hamuko said. The boy clawed at her legs and even tried to push her away, but she didn't move. After a minute of frantic struggling, he slowed, and then finally stopped moving completely. Hamuko saw the life leave his eyes, and withdrew her Naginata in one swift spinning motion, sending a little arc of blood into the air. "Hey, tell me... what's it like to choke to death on your own blood?" she asked the corpse as she

cleaned the blade with a series of quick twirls and flourishes.

"That was art." Takaya said. He smiled. "I suddenly feel invigorated... Jin, who's next?"

"Already ahead of you." Jin said. "We've got a construction guard on Tatsumi Port Island. Let's go, Hamuko."

"Suparna." she said. Blue light enveloped her, and then a great bird with bright yellow feathers and a blue crown emerged from behind her. It had a white beak and a face-guard with a ruby over its forehead and three strings attached to small charms on either side of its face. It flew up above the buildings and then landed a small distance away from them atop two red talons with razor sharp claws. It stooped down, and Hamuko walked over to it. She hopped on top of it. "It's too bad Chidori's busy with Koromaru... but I never would have thought to put a double-sided knife in his mouth and have him run around with it."

"She elected to train the dog, so she'll have to deal with it." Jin said. He followed suit, and finally, Takaya got on.

"Chidori has never been one to enjoy watching executions... unless she carries it out herself, there is little chance that she would show emotions." he said.

"She does enjoy them, though..." Hamuko said. She pouted. "And it sucks being the only girl on the team." With a sigh, she patted the back of Suparna's head, and the Persona took flight, its destination being Tatsumi Port Island.

Meanwhile, in the wasteland, Minato had just been revived after being stabbed through the neck with his own fibula. He got up, and turned back to Shin. "I have to inflict a wound on you?" he asked again.

"Up till now, you could have passed every trial by simply being good at running away." Shin said. "But your offense is lacking, and that will cost you your life. Now, get ready."

Minato returned to the dorm almost immediately after the Dark Hour ended. He was in no shape for anything after re-learning what it meant to be completely and utterly obliterated for an entire hour.

70. Chapter 70

Chapter 70: Intent

One quick and uneventful breakfast later, SEES was taking the train to school as usual. The seniors had all gone off on their own, and the girls went to speak with Natsuki, leaving Junpei and Minato alone in the aisle. "Dude... is it just me, or has Yuka-tan been acting weird lately?" Junpei asked.

"She's struggling to find a valid reason for fighting... I suppose after that brush with death, she needs bigger justification to risk her life again. After all... when you've faced death, your outlook on what's important changes." Minato said.

"Maybe... I mean, I don't think I've changed that much since the last full moon." Junpei said.

"True, but some people take it harder than others. Remember, you only really experienced utter helplessness in those few moments before my arrival. On the other hand, Yukari was the first to fall, being defenseless against the Shadows and then once more when Fuuka's Shadow attacked... twice in one night." Minato said.

"... Yikes." Junpei said. "Still, is thinkin' that hard about Tartarus n' stuff really the way to go about it?"

"Who knows?" Minato asked. "It could lead her to paralysis by analysis... or give her newfound resolve. Regardless, she has to get over this."

"Whatever happens happens, huh? ...I guess I'll just give her some space, then." Junpei said. They said nothing more and arrived at school. They made it there more than twenty minutes early as Mitsuru's new rigorous schedule demanded, and Minato elected to head towards the roof so he could pass the time strategizing his game plan for the afternoon. He made it to the roof with his headphones on, and walked towards the bench that lined the edge of the roof.

"Above, directly behind. Toudou atop the entrance."
David warned. Minato kept going without stopping, though he prepared himself for anything.

"Fancy seeing you alone in the morning." Mr. Toudou said. Minato turned back to see the teacher eating an apple as he watched the city from his seat, legs crossed in a perfect meditation pose.

"Shouldn't a teacher be in class by now?" Minato asked, turning to face him.

"Most teachers walk into class as the bell rings." Mr. Toudou said. "I've decided being ridiculously early is a waste of my time. Shouldn't you be womanizing now?"

"I actually came here to plan out an afternoon of that." Minato said with a smirk. Mr. Toudou chuckled and took a bite of his

apple.

"Well, well... aren't we an ambitious young man." Mr. Toudou said. "I'm glad to see the new guests of the Velvet Room have more than enough time to play with."

"Social Links and such." Minato said. "You know the drill."

"... Social Links?" Mr. Toudou asked.

"The power that comes from bonding with others and all that. Relationships that will change you and make you grow as a person and all that garbage. You had to do it so you could complete your journey, didn't you?" Minato asked. Mr. Toudou raised an eyebrow at him.

"No, I didn't... my journey was through hell on Earth." Mr. Toudou said. "If I ever stopped moving or waited as you do, I wouldn't be here, and the world would be a very different place. Philemon chose me and the others because we were the right people for the job, and though we did grow, it wasn't by playing around."

"... Philemon?" Minato asked.

"... How do you not know Philemon?" Mr. Toudou asked. "He owns the Velvet Room."

"What the hell are you talking about? Igor owns the Velvet Room." Minato said. Mr. Toudou laughed.

"Igor serves under Philemon, Fool." Mr. Toudou said. "You

were chosen because of the potential within you, and Philemon likely believes you'll become something great."

"Weren't you a Fool as well?" Minato asked.

"No. I am an Emperor." Mr. Toudou said. "When Mikage-Cho fell into chaos, there were enough Persona-users present to counter the threat. But they were undisciplined and lacked focus, so I was chosen to lead them to victory. My successor, the Sun, was chosen because the world needed someone who would be willing to go forth knowing full well that they would eventually disappear. You, however... I don't know why you were chosen."

"... I am infinite possibility." Minato said. "Zero and infinity... everything and nothing. That's the general gist behind the powers of the Fool. I assume it's because I have the ability to become all powerful, albeit I require the Social Links I told you about to accomplish this task... simply, I must absorb everything else into my own existence, and once I encompass everything, I'll be unstoppable."

"... You think you'll become a god?" Mr. Toudou asked.

"Why else would I be the Blank Card, that which represents everything in existence, which embraces everything equally?" Minato asked, throwing his arms to the side. "I'm going to attain ultimate power and become invincible."

"Hmph... I was thinking about taking the time to speak to you about your intentions as a guest of the Velvet Room, but I

think I understand why Philemon chose you." Mr. Toudou said. He smiled. "But far be it from me to ruin your future."

"If you have some stupid grand purpose or great redemption in your head, I suggest you discard that theory immediately." Minato said.

"It's nothing of the sort... but let's just say that which is generally considered 'wrong' is much more multi-dimensional than what people make it out to be." Mr. Toudou said.

"Just as the low may stand as the high?" Minato asked.

"Perhaps." Mr. Toudou said. He grinned, and enjoyed the incoming breeze. "I suppose the world needs people like you... but I shouldn't let myself fall into a bout of philosophical thinking now." He got up, and hopped down to the roof, his briefcase in tow. He adjusted his tie, dusted his pants, and then straightened out his jacket. "If you'll excuse me... while I may not arrive ridiculously early, I refuse to be late."

Minato chuckled. "Do what you have to do." he said. Mr. Toudou nodded and left the roof. Minato turned around once more and took a seat that allowed him to look out over the city. "*Well, it would seem I'm supposed to grow.*" he thought.

"Meh, according to some old has been." Jack said.

"Don't be stupid, Jack. He has experience." David said.

"He is a man who's been hardened over years of battle..."

I wouldn't take his words lightly." Matador said.

"But we're not talking about battle." Alice said.

"Not a physical one, at least." Hell Biker said.

"... An interesting point. Perhaps he's alluding to my attachment troubles." Minato thought. He smirked. "Is the battle over whether or not I can remain true to myself? If so, I've taken an offensive position and have no intention of simply rolling over and losing."

"We know that, Boss. That's why I'm saying the guy doesn't know shit!" Jack said.

"Don't make me laugh! We can't discount someone who has experienced what Boss is going through himself!"
David said.

"But he said he knew a different set of people, and he never mentioned Elizabeth." Alice said.

"Perhaps his audience and arena were different from our own." Matador said.

"All it means is that we need to stay on top of our game. Simple." Hell Biker said.

"Exactly, so we need to do what we planned. Now, we've been roped into Student Council today, meaning we'll be dealing with that... I doubt I have much of a chance with

either Mitsuru or Shinjiro yet, though, so I might need to see if I can dodge going back to the dormitory with them immediately. This is a good day to explore the outside Social Links... I could probably check on Hazama or Kazuya." Minato thought. *"I'm gravitating towards Hazama, however... it's been a while since we had a proper chat."*

"One of the dangerous ones, hmm?" Matador asked.

"It has to be done sooner or later." Hell Biker said.

"Still, it sucks we need to talk with such unpleasant company." Alice said.

"Not everything can be fun and games." David said.

"Which sucks." Jack said.

"Don't remind me." Minato thought. "Now, for the night... again, I'm certain I need to wait for Dante and Vergil's challenge to finish. Ikutuski and Sho are missing, and Lucifer's is frozen... leaving me with little options, unless I go fishing for Kazuya at night, which I'm almost certain won't end well."

"Well, maybe that just means nothing tonight... we can spend it in Tartarus again, or force Igor up. We can bring up the stuff about Philemon and see where that goes." Alice said.

"No, not yet... I'll hold off on asking about that until I get a

second reason to visit." Minato thought. "I suppose I'll see if anything good pops up tonight... But for now, I want to see how good you can serve as actual replacements for my senses."

He rose from his seat and walked back into the building. Class was beginning in five minutes, and he passed by the three seniors as he headed for the opposite stairwell. He had his headphones on, and walked by with his eyes closed, nodding his head to some particularly loud grunge metal that they could hear as he walked by. They turned to see him walking as if he were asleep, yet still managing to avoid other people.

"... What the hell is he doing?" Shinjiro asked.

"Beats me." Akihiko said. He turned to Mitsuru, who had nothing to say. With a sigh, he walked into class, followed shortly by his fellow seniors.

The day was standard without anything of real note happening to Minato, aside from his noticing that the boy he had seen yesterday was alone with a content smirk on his face. Otherwise, he shared an uneventful lunch with Junpei and Kenji as usual. However, Yukari had left class once lunch ended and gone to the roof, once again seeking refuge in her thoughts. She made it there without any disturbances, and sat down with her lunch alone. She was about to begin eating when the roof door opened shortly after she sat down.

"Yukari?" Fuuka asked as she walked onto the roof. Yukari turned to her, a bit surprised that she had been followed. "...

Is something wrong?"

"... I just wanted some fresh air." Yukari said, turning her attention back to her lunch. "Sorry, I don't think I'd be good company right now... maybe you should go find Natsuki." Fuuka said nothing. She simply walked over and took a seat next to Yukari. "... I want some time to think."

"Shouldn't you share what's on your mind?" Fuuka asked. She opened her bento and prepared to eat.

"I don't want to." Yukari said. She sighed. "Fuuka, look... I don't want to be mean, but I really think I just need to figure this out on my own."

"Why do you have to do it alone?" Fuuka asked. She turned to look at Yukari. "Everyone else would help you if you asked."

"I don't need any help." Yukari said, annoyance reaching her face. "Especially not from anybody at the dorm."

Fuuka was taken aback by the comment, and let out a slight gasp. "... Yukari..." she said.

"What? I said I wanted to think about something. I asked you to leave nicely. But you're still here, so I have to be rude now." Yukari said. "Well? What are you still sitting down for?!"

"... Don't you trust us, Yukari?" Fuuka asked. "We're here for you... you just need to tell us what's on your mind."

"You'll just say I'm 'worrying too much'." Yukari said,

narrowing her eyes. "'Don't think too hard about it', 'you're wasting your time', or something just as dismissive... That's what everyone says whenever I even hint at what I'm thinking about."

"... Then I won't say that." Fuuka said.

"You're just saying that." Yukari said. She quickly got up and closed her bento.

"Yukari!" Fuuka said.

"If you won't leave, I will." Yukari snapped. She took her bento and hurried to the entrance of the roof. "All of you... I'm sick of your pity." she muttered. She stormed downstairs, past her class, and downstairs to the Persimmon Tree. She sat underneath it in the shade, and began to eat there. She got a few minutes of silence before she heard somebody approaching her. "... You must be kidding me." she muttered. She turned, expecting to see Fuuka approaching her. In fact, the person approaching her was Minato.

"Somebody's feeling a bit unpleasant today." he said with a grin.

"... What do you want?" she asked.

"Woah, why so hostile, Yukari?" Minato asked, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I just saw you were feeling a bit under the weather, and felt like turning your frown upside down."

"... It's not your problem." Yukari said.

"Actually, it is. I can't have a valued member of the team tearing themselves apart. I'm not keen on anybody dying when we fight." Minato said.

"A valued member of the team, huh?" Yukari asked. "You mean the healer? Because I'm sure that's all I am to anyone once the fighting starts."

"And I'm nothing more than the commander, Junpei's nothing more than a striker, and Fuuka's nothing more than support, right?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "We're nothing more than pieces on the board when it comes to a battle. It's the most efficient method for strategizing and makes judgment calls that much easier."

"Of course you'd say something like that..." Yukari said. She shifted her gaze towards the floor. "You're barely even human, so our lives don't matter to you, do they?"

"If I'm not a human, what am I?" Minato asked.

"How should I know?!" Yukari snapped. "If you just came here to laugh at me, go away!"

Minato laughed. "But that would eliminate the whole point of my presence, wouldn't it?" he mused. "Though I think it's funny that you think I came here just to laugh at you. Not a very friendly thing to do, eh, friend?"

"You'd call anyone a 'friend' if it got them to do what you wanted." Yukari said. "You're a monster."

"What better suited to combat other monsters?" Minato asked. He laughed again, and Yukari got up to glare at him.

"Didn't I tell you to get lost already?!" she asked. "Seriously, why are you even talking to me right now?!"

"So you can let out that anger, of course. It's going to swallow you whole because you're weak." Minato said. "You can't do anything with it, after all. It's directed at people out of your reach... or should I say a person out of your reach?"

"Why, you... always talking like you just have all the answers..." Yukari said. She looked like she was ready to walk over and hit him, but Minato didn't care. He knew what he was here to do.

"While everyone sees a large set of troubles and concerns in life, I only see what matters... after all, life is merely a journey to one's own end. Why laden it with anything you find displeasing? See what you want to see, hear what you want to hear, believe what you want to believe... in the end, all that matters is yourself, right, Yukari?" Minato asked. "Admit it... you're just as self-centered as I am, perhaps even more so. You can hide it however you want, blame your actions on your circumstances, but in the end, all you want to do is achieve your own goals. Everyone else is just a tool to that end, aren't they? If they can't help you, they're useless, and if they stand in your way, they're a nuisance."

"Who do you think you're preaching to?! I'm not a monster like you!" Yukari said. "I don't think of other people as 'nuisances' or any of that crap! People have lives too!"

"Then why can't they understand your troubles, hmm?" Minato asked.

"That's because-!" Yukari began. Minato cut her off.

"What, you have unfortunate circumstances? A whore of a mother and a dead father?" Minato asked.

"S-shut up, you asshole!" Yukari said. She walked forwards and tried to deliver a swift slap to his face, but he caught her by the wrist.

"See? I'm aggravating you, so you want to get rid of me, right?" Minato asked.

"I said shut up!" Yukari replied. She used her other hand to follow up her slap, but he also caught that hand in his wrist. "Let go of me already!"

"Not until you see this." Minato said. He copied his trick with Pharos once again, and Yukari's mind was flooded with the image of the ghastly black skull that seemed to represent Minato's existence. **"This is what I am. And you're no different."** he said. He let go of her hands and took a step back as Yukari quickly pulled away.

"W-what was that?" she asked, rubbing her wrists. Minato

laughed.

"Why, that was me." he said. "I'm the monster behind your back. The one you yourself put there, friend. I'm watching out for you, whether you like it or not."

"... You're insane." Yukari said.

"No, I'm the only sane man in the world. Everyone else, including you, is insane." Minato said. "Everyone is afraid of death and dying... just like you. You all need to wake up and realize that when you die, that's it. You'll disappear, and all that will be left is the slice of life you've cut. The only ones that are remembered are the ones that are exceptionally sour or exceptionally sweet... and it's much more fun to be sour."

"I can't believe this... you came out here just to share that crap with me?!" Yukari asked. "You just wanted to flaunt your 'great revelation' to me like some... some cultist?!"

"Cultist? Hardly, though there really should be a cult dedicated to me." Minato said. "I came here to see if you would realize what I'm trying to tell you. You're somewhat of a smart girl, after all... at least, I believed so at once, but I must say that you are falling horribly short."

"And of course you came to insult me, you prick." Yukari said. "... But I know what you're trying to say... and I can't accept that. Anyone who accepts that is just as crazy as you!"

"Anyone who accepts that has a good idea of how the world

works." Minato said. "You're searching for something that may well and truly not be there... even if it is, it doesn't change the fact that we have to fight. You know what'll happen if we falter."

"Everything has a reason, dammit!" Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"Keep telling yourself that, and you'll only hurt yourself more." Minato said. "I'm simply being a good friend and telling you how I got over a similar problem... perhaps it might not solve yours, but it could serve as a temporary solution."

"That's just acting like the problem doesn't even exist in the first place..." Yukari said.

"Ignorance is bliss, is it not?" Minato asked. He chuckled and turned around. "Then again, this is just advice... Do whatever the fuck you want to do." With that, he began to walk away.

"...I'll think about it... but I still don't buy your crazy philosophy!" Yukari called as he walked away.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Lovers Arcana...

"Mission accomplished. As I thought, her card is focused on

personal development, just like Junpei's.... good. She should be easy to handle." Minato thought as he walked back to class. He took his seat with a grin. *"As per the self-fulfilling prophecy, today is going to be a good day."*

Class ended, and Minato headed to the Council room. He entered, threw on his armband, and took his seat. Mitsuru and Shinjiro quickly joined him. "You look happy." Mitsuru said as she sat down.

"I just get the feeling that today will be a very good day." Minato said. "So, who do we have lined up for interrogations?"

"Ms. Terauchi and Mr. Takenozuka." Mitsuru said. "Mr. Takenozuka is simply a teacher... but Ms. Terauchi has served as a public relations manager within the Kirijio Group."

"... She knows about the Dark Hour?" Shinjiro asked.

"It's a possibility, but I'd refrain from asking directly about it... even if she admitted to knowing, I doubt we'd get much out of her." Mitsuru said.

"Tch... figures." Shinjiro said.

"Let me guess... she was connected to the lab." Minato said.

"Correct." Mitsuru said.

"Then her lips are sealed, just like Edogawa's." Minato said. Mitsuru nodded, and the rest of the Council members filed into

the room. After a short general meeting, the trio moved into the back room as usual while Mitsuru sent Chihiro to go get Ms. Terauchi. Minato and Shinjiro stood to either side of her behind the desk, and prepared for their job. "Anything in particular we're trying to get out of Ms. Terauchi?" Minato asked.

"Our main concern is whether or not she's the one who took the Council's money. Otherwise, she's been an exceptional teacher... she has an upbeat personality, enjoys her work, and is friendly and helpful to her students." Mitsuru said.

"Her background in public relations shows." Minato said. "I've never heard or seen her speak or act out of turn... she's been, by all means, a textbook example of a 'good teacher'."

"Another one that knows how to act... Tch." Shinjiro said. "Shady bastards are all two-faced... though it's not like any of us have the right to say that."

"... Are you implying something, Shinji?" Mitsuru asked, glancing backwards at him.

"Just because I don't use fancy vocabulary or speak in a refined manner doesn't mean I can't tell when someone is hiding something from me." Shinjiro said. He glanced at Minato. "And don't you think for a moment you can play dumb... there are a few things I'm sure of when it comes to you, and one is that you're always in the know when it comes to someone you know... I don't know if you're in on the secret, but you know it's there."

"I expected no less of you, Shinji." Minato said with a smirk.

"As I hoped." Mitsuru said. She smirked. "You've taken the news in stride, realizing that secrets are kept for a reason."

"...Tch. You already knew I figured you out, huh?" Shinjiro asked.

"We've played this game since we were children. The circumstances may have been different, but the rules are similar." Minato said.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Shinji. We were simply waiting to see how you'd react." Mitsuru said.

"Well, now you know." Shinjiro said. "And since you know I'm not keen on ranting about any of that shit, just know... I expect an explanation, not just for me, but for everyone else too."

"Of course... I've already thought about the best time. It'll be after our next operation." Mitsuru said. "But that's enough for now... Ms. Terauchi will be here soon."

"Fine by me." Shinjiro said. They fell silent, and the door opened soon after. Chihiro Fushimi stood in the doorway and did a quick bow.

"M-Ms. Terauchi is here!" she squeaked. Mitsuru waved her hand dismissively, and Chihiro retreated out of sight. Ms. Terauchi entered with her usual smile and took a seat in the

chair across from Mitsuru. She had shoulder-length brown hair to compliment her brown eyes that curled upwards at the ends and was held in place by a yellow hairband. She wore an orange dress shirt and a small yellow ribbon around her neck atop a plain brown skirt and business shoes.

"Oh my... such an intimidating atmosphere." Ms. Terauchi commented. "I had heard about this from some of the other teachers, but hearsay never matches the actual experience, does it?"

"Good afternoon, Ms. Terauchi... I trust you understand why you're here?" Mitsuru greeted.

"From what I've heard, it's to ensure compliance." Ms. Terauchi said. "Though, judging from your nighttime activities, it could be for any number of reasons... though I'll tell you now that I'm not allowed to say anything there."

"... This has nothing to do with Tartarus." Mitsuru said.

"Oh! Then in that case, how can I help you?" Ms. Terauchi responded cheerfully.

"I simply wish to ask you a few questions... but before that, I'd like to commend you on your performance as a teacher. Your record is spotless, and all of your students have nothing but good things to say about you... you're a great asset to the school." Mitsuru said.

"You flatter me! I'm doing my best to help the students... I just

want to see them all become outstanding members of society once they graduate." Ms. Terauchi said.

"Damn, this bitch can act." Minato thought. He glanced at Shinjiro, and saw he was thinking along the same lines.

"Honestly, you've done an outstanding job. I couldn't be happier with your performance... which is why I'm sure that any of these allegations against you are completely false. I'm only asking you this for formalities sake, of course... there is a general procedure that must be followed when addressing matters such as these." Mitsuru said.

"I understand." Ms. Terauchi said. She straightened up in her chair. "Then I'll answer every question sincerely."

"Thank you for your cooperation." Mitsuru said. "Then, first... I'd like to confirm your contact with Chihiro Fushimi, the girl who brought you here, the week after school began."

"That's correct. Chihiro and I were required to assist in setting up the assemblies at the beginning of the year, and worked together behind the scenes. She's quite a diligent girl." Ms. Terauchi said.

"And, at any point in time, were you required to handle any of the funding associated with the preparation of the assembly?"

"Yes. Since Chihiro is the treasurer of Student Council, I was occasionally delegated the management of funds... Thrice, I believe." Ms. Terauchi said.

"Good... now, I'd first like to inform you that a portion of the Student Council's funding was found to be missing very early on in the year... would you like to say anything about that?" Mitsuru asked.

"... Ah, the allegations are about the missing funds, aren't they?" Ms. Terauchi asked. Mitsuru nodded. "While I was occasionally charged with fund management while working with Chihiro, my main task was to double count and ensure that we were within limits. The only time I was ever required to use any of the funds was when we dealt with the audio team who set up the microphones, which should be marked and accounted for." There was a slight pause, until Ms. Terauchi chuckled. "I suppose I plead not guilty, Miss President."

"... Thank you for your time." Mitsuru said. She smiled. "I doubt I'll need to speak with you again. I apologize for any inconvenience to you."

"It's not a problem! We all do what we have to, after all." Ms. Terauchi said. She looked at Minato and Shinjiro, and then let her smile die. She became completely emotionless, her eyes lost any sign of life, and the atmosphere in the room suddenly became heavy. "But I'll say this... I didn't do it. As a sign of good faith, I'll give you a little parting gift." she said in monotone voice. "There's a reason the extra hour is only an hour... a very specific reason. One that I'm sure your father knows, Ms. Kirijio." Nobody said anything for a bit, and the atmosphere returned to normal. Ms. Terauchi reverted to her usual smiling expression.

"That's quite the Persona, to emit that much pressure without materializing." Minato commented. Ms. Terauchi chuckled.

"I didn't mean to scare you... I was just making sure nobody outside of our little circle could hear anything." she said. "You know how sensitive these things can be."

"Of course... I'm grateful for that hint, Ms. Terauchi." Mitsuru said.

"It's only a hint... how much it can help you depends on how much your father is willing to tell you." Ms. Terauchi said. She giggled. "This has been a lovely talk... If you don't mind, I'll be taking my leave. Good day to you!"

"To you as well." Mitsuru said with a nod. Ms. Terauchi got up, bowed to Mitsuru, and then exited the room. "... She's not guilty."

"Definitely." Shinjiro said.

"I'm a bit disappointed... we have so many teachers with Personas, and I don't know what any of them are." Minato said. "It almost makes me want to hunt for them in the Dark Hour."

"We can't allow that, Minato." Mitsuru said.

"I know, I know... though it makes me wonder why they haven't explored Tartarus." Minato said.

"... That, I can share." Mitsuru said.

"I'm listening." Shinjiro said.

"Their Personas go berserk inside of Tartarus." Mitsuru said. "I don't know the specific details, but if they enter the tower, their Persona will immediately attempt to rampage and put their life in peril. They learned this when they tried to explore before... something about the atmosphere excites their Persona too much."

"The air excites their Persona?" Shinjiro asked.

"A Persona is a reflection of one's self... their knowledge about the tower is causing something they've repressed to try and surface. That manifests within their Persona, and causes it to go berserk." Minato said.

"... And how would you know that?" Mitsuru asked. Minato smirked.

"The people I visit in those rooms don't just give me new powers or change the Personas I can use... they teach me things as well." he said. "Though my grasp of the concepts is, according to my teacher, remarkable for a human."

"... I see." Mitsuru said. "In any case, I'm sure I can learn the answers from my father... and share them with you all when the time comes. However, we need to move on."

"That's right." Shinjiro said. He cleared his throat. "Next!" he yelled.

"Y-yes!" Chihiro replied from behind the door. The sounds of her hurriedly leaving filled the room, and the trio remained in silence until her return. She opened the door swiftly. "Mr. Takenozuka is here." she said, somewhat calmer than before. She did a little bow, and retreated to allow him to enter.

Mr. Takenozuka was a plain man in every sense of the world. He had simple, graying parted hair, dark brown eyes, and wore a grey business suit with a red tie and white inside shirt. "Good afternoon, Ms. President." he said, standing behind the chair across from Mitsuru.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Takenozuka." Mitsuru said. "Please, take a seat." He did as commanded, and adjusted his tie. "Are you aware of the nature of these meetings?" she asked.

"From what I've seen happen to Mr. Ekoda, I assume that they are correctional meetings of some sort." Mr. Takenozuka said. He adjusted his tie. "I hope I haven't done anything to merit as harsh of a treatment as he received..."

"Of course you haven't." Mitsuru said. "Aside from a habit of getting slightly carried away with your work and the occasional uncalled for berating of students, you perform your job exceptionally. These mistakes can be overlooked, however... every human makes slight errors in judgment occasionally."

"T-thank you for your understanding." Mr. Takenozuka said. Mitsuru smiled.

"Just be sure they never happen again." she said. Mr. Takenozuka knew instantly that she wasn't kidding, and nodded. "However, speaking of slight problems... a bit of the Council's funds have been missing since early in the year... around the same time you got a new car."

"W-what a coincidence..." Mr. Takenozuka said.

"I'm surprised... I don't remember our pay being so high as to merit swapping a Toyota out for a BMW." Mitsuru said. "You must have been saving for quite a while... or you happened to find some extra funding for your little endeavor somewhere along the line." Mr. Takenozuka froze. "... I'll give you this chance to confess. If you do so, you'll be allowed to keep your job... if you still claim innocence and we find you guilty... you may want to consider taking up a new profession."

"... Alright." Mr. Takenozuka said. "I know better than to lie to a Kirijio... yes, it was me. When? During the first few weeks of school when funding was still being allocated. How? I found myself working with the girl outside during the second assembly, and she was busy with Terauchi setting up the audio equipment... since she hadn't counted for the day, I saw my chance. Besides, a few thousand is nothing to a school this prestigious, and funded by the Kirijio Group no less."

"... Good. Then, you're dismissed." Mitsuru said. Mr. Takenozuka blinked.

"... That's it?" he asked. Mitsuru chuckled.

"Your punishment will come... you'll pay back triple what you stole from your paycheck. I hope you find a way to pay for your car while you work for free." Mitsuru said. Mr. Takenozuka looked like he was about to say something, but then shook his head and sighed.

"... I brought this on myself." he said. "... Have a good day." With that, he got up and left the room.

"... That was easy." Minato said.

"Not everyone is hardened." Shinjiro said.

"Exactly... with this, our little mystery is solved." Mitsuru said. "Now, I just need to go about preparing that punishment, so you two may leave. I thank you once again for your presence... and I'll look into Ms. Terauchi's message."

"Then, good luck." Minato said. "I have someone I'm looking to meet today, so I'll be off."

"... And that would be?" Mitsuru asked.

"Captain Hazama... we need to have a chat." Minato said.

"The JSDF?... Watch yourself." Shinjiro said. Minato nodded, and left before any objections could be raised.

"... He'll get himself killed sticking his nose into everyone's business." Mitsuru said. "We're better off simply acknowledging their presence. I know he has a reason for this, but still..."

"It takes a lot to kill that kid." Shinjiro said. "He'll be fine... he's no idiot, after all." Mitsuru nodded, and Shinjiro left shortly afterwards.

Minato had opted to take walk to the parking lot, and moved to an empty area outside of the security camera's range to summon Hell Biker's motorcycle. He got on and rode off, heading back towards Iwatodai. *"So, the question is, where is Hazama and crew? I last saw them at Iwatodai Station, but that was because they were scouting out the area. I need to check on their base of operations..."*

"Wouldn't that be the Police Station?" Jack asked.

"Exactly." Minato replied. He rode over to Paulownia, and dismounted his bike on a shady street nearby. He entered the mall and went straight for the police station. Officer Kurosawa was standing near the receptionist as usual, and he gave him a little tap on the shoulder to make him leave.

"Finally get the need to buy some weapons?" he asked as Minato walked up to him.

"Actually, no... I was wondering if Captain Hazama was around." Minato said. "I have a few things I need to discuss with him."

"... A business meeting, is it?" Kurosawa asked. Minato nodded. "Come around back... the boys here all know anyone with me is on official business, so stay close."

"We got a big shot here, don't we?" Minato mused as he walked through the little entrance off to the side of the counter.

"I do my job well... and I handle the special jobs better." Kurosawa said. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"A man of action... you know, I'm starting to like you more every time we talk." Minato said.

"Don't get ahead of yourself... we're only on the same side now, but I know you and I could very well be enemies at a moment's notice." Kurosawa said. "Especially given your track record with... the supernatural, I suppose."

Minato chuckled. "Aren't enemies closer than friends?" he mused. Officer Kurosawa chuckled and adjusted his hat.

"I suppose they are." he said. He led Minato past the little set of offices behind the counter and to the sealed door he had entered before. Kurosawa opened it, and Minato entered the dimly lit room once more. The four people with visors and headsets still worked tirelessly at the computers, manipulating the four huge screens to the side of the room with various graphs and figures that Minato thought may have been of interest to him if he weren't here for a singular purpose. Hazama, Zelenin, and Jimenez were in the center of the room, surrounding a table with a few large sheets of paper spread across it. The most recognizable one was a map of Iwatodai, from what Minato could tell, but Hazama quickly closed the others once he saw him approaching. Jimenez and Zelenin

turned to see the duo approaching.

"You've got balls to just stroll in here, kid." Jimenez said.

"I hope you have a reason for this intrusion." Zelenin said. Officer Kurosawa stopped and saluted the trio. Hazama gave him a slight nod, and he dropped his salute.

"Captain Hazama, Minato claims he has a few things he wants to discuss with you." Kurosawa said.

"... Very well." Hazama said. He walked around the table, outfitted in his full Demonica with pistols holstered on either leg. "You're dismissed, Kurosawa."

"Sir." Kurosawa said. He gave a little bow, and then left the room.

"... Well?" Hazama asked.

"Where have you three been these last few nights?" Minato asked. "I'm certain you are at least aware of the destruction caused near Naganaki Shrine?"

"We have been preparing... after our encounter with this 'teacher' of yours, we've discovered that there are many more demonic signatures in the area than we previously thought." Hazama said. "Naturally, we're fortifying our defenses... as such, our patrols have been reduced."

"I didn't think a bustling city would be a den of monsters, but I guess that just goes to show you can't judge based on looks."

Zelenin added.

"... So you weren't the ones to find the dog?" Minato asked.

"Dog?" Jimenez asked.

"I caused the destruction near the shrine protecting a dog... and it turned out to have the power of Persona. It also tried to kill me, so I weakened it and tried to get others to come pick it up... but it had disappeared by the time I returned." Minato said.

"... A stray dog capable of wielding a Persona." Zelenin said.
"... I wish we did find him... we could have learned a lot from its body."

"There's the possibility one of the other signatures found it." Hazama said. "I would give up any hope you have for that dog... if it isn't dead, it likely isn't a dog anymore."

"I see." Minato said. "Though, I don't think you need to worry too much about the other 'signatures' attacking you."

"Like hell we're walking around with our pants down." Jimenez said. "I prefer to keep my life on my own terms."

"He has a point... if you're here to goad us into lowering our guard, I suggest you see yourself out." Zelenin said.

"The reason I'm saying that is because most of the other demons in this city are here either for me or for business." Minato said. "A few of them have some business with me, and

others simply go about business as usual."

"If you're referring to Red Hawk, I'm aware of the establishment." Hazama said. "We're monitoring it, along with you and your affiliate."

"Then you know Naoya?" Minato asked.

"That's correct... he was one of the perpetrators in the Tokyo Lockdown, which I'm sure you've heard of." Hazama said. "I'm aware that two of the other signatures are also affiliated with that event, but I've yet to determine exactly who. ... Now, I've yet to see the point of this conversation, Minato."

"Well, I was just trying to say that the other demons in this city are mainly peaceful." Minato said. He chuckled. "I guess you could call me one of their advocates, but I'm certain that they don't go about taking advantage of humans in the Dark Hour."

"... So you're trying to say they simply wish to live in peace?" Hazama asked.

"Nothing of the sort! That would be ridiculously boring." Minato said. "What I'm saying is that most of them are smart enough to know that you aren't to be trifled with, and you should take advantage of that and get back to patrolling more often so nothing like the incident with the dog happens again. After all, I was only there by chance... that dog could have died if I hadn't shown up."

"... Wait. You, a person who associates with demons, is

giving us a hint on how to handle them?" Jimenez asked.

"There may be hope for you yet." Zelenin said with a smirk.

"... I see." Hazama said. "Yes, this isn't a warzone... unlike our previous assignments, the battlefield is much more mental than we previously thought. We are the juggernauts on this playing field... and it's time we exerted our power."

"There you go. The returning hero flaunts his superiority." Minato said. Hazama chuckled.

"That's exactly what he'll do." he said. "Perhaps I should consider having you as one of my consultants... it's good to have the opinion of outside eyes when assessing the situation, after all. And I get the feeling you have more than just your own eyes."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Temperance Arcana...

"*Another success.*" Minato thought. He smiled. "We're both defenders of the peace here... I'm just doing my duty."

"Duty, huh? Funny to hear that from a child... but you're correct." Zelenin said.

"Defender of the peace... whatever floats your boat, kid."

Jimenez said.

"Well, if there's nothing more... I'll disappear for now. Happy hunting." Minato said.

"We'll speak again, Minato." Hazama said. Minato nodded, and walked out of the room. Officer Kurosawa was waiting near the entrance, and he led Minato out of the station.

"... If you're trying to establish good relations between SEES and the JSDF, you're doing the right thing. Two forces like that shouldn't have any strife between them." Officer Kurosawa said.

"I don't know about SEES as a whole, but I'm getting on their good side." Minato said. Officer Kurosawa chuckled.

"Well, I suppose that works as well... your affiliation with the group can develop relations." Officer Kurosawa said. He led Minato out to the front of the station. "Take care."

"You too." Minato said. He left, and returned to the dorm.
"Two cards in one day is a good day to me. Tonight, I get to relax and enjoy myself... and maybe scavenge for some more construction equipment."

71. Chapter 71

Chapter 71: He Who Sleeps

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: You're dealing with the mind of a madman with super powers. Think about it.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Thank you. Also, if you recall, Yukari is oddly acceptant of Minato in pretty much every interpretation of the story. Add that to the fact that Minato (in Remix) learned that Yukari is very easy to trick with the 'as a friend', 'for a friend', 'I'm looking out for you', lines, and there you have it... Another Card prime to upgrade.

And back.

Ayato raced down the dark alleyways of Iwatodai at two in the morning with clear intent, his suit loosely hanging open and his scarf lowered around his neck to allow himself more breath. He had forgotten his hat when he left the Shirogane Estate, but that didn't matter. The little Bluetooth earpiece he had wedged into his left ear sprang to life with Johei Shirogane's voice. *"You have to hurry! He doesn't know about this one!"* he said.

"I located Minato-sama, but I don't know if he knows he's

been herded into a corner, Johei-sama!" Ayato said. He turned right and hopped a closed fence in one swift motion, and kept running.

"Of course he knows!" Johei said. "He's arrogant enough to think he can handle anybody, but this woman is known for her efficiency! She's nothing like those revenge request jokers that have been around for years... if she gets a target, that target disappears from the face of this planet. I will not allow that to happen to my grandson again!"

"I understand, Johei-sama!" Ayato said as he made a sharp left and continued running. There was a bit of trash and abandoned boxes lining the alley, so he simply ran up the wall and ran on it to avoid having to avoid any obstacles. He heard the sharp sound of a dumpster being slammed shut, and his heart lurched.

"Ayato, report!" Johei said. Ayato kept running and turned to find a dead end. The dumpster door slammed down once more.

"Heads up." a voice said from further in the alley. Ayato heard a light tapping kick and then saw what looked like a ball fly through the air. He stopped and caught it, then froze in horror. He had caught a crudely severed woman's head, complete with bits of black hair torn off so that parts of the scalp were missing, no tongue, and the eyes hanging loosely from their sockets. He dropped the head, suppressing a shriek, and looked forwards. Minato walked out of the alleyway and was

dusting off his hands. "Right on time. Got a light?" Minato asked.

"*Ayato!*" Johei yelled into his ear.

"... Minato-sama is perfectly alright, Johei-sama." Ayato said, his eyes wide.

"Oh, is that gramps? Tell him I said hi." Minato said.

"... *So he dealt with her?*" Johei asked. Ayato pulled off his earpiece and hit a button on the side of it, revealing a little camera. He aimed it at the head, and then to Minato, who smiled and waved. "... *Well, your history certainly shows.*" Johei's voice said from the little device.

"You don't need to worry too much, gramps. It'll take something special to rid the world of me." Minato mused.

"Still, Ayato, do you have a light?"

"O-oh, yes, Minato-sama." Ayato said. He reached into his pocket, moved the knuckle knife aside, almost cut himself on the butterfly knife he had neglected to properly close, and found his box of matches he always kept on him. He took it out, and walked over to give it to Minato.

"Matches, huh? Old fashioned, but that's actually perfect." Minato said. He picked up the severed head by a clump of hair, and then walked back into the alley way. Ayato followed him, and saw the dumpster in the dark. There were a few bits of blood smearing the outside, and Minato kicked upwards,

opening the dumpster. He threw the head inside, and Ayato caught a glimpse of a body, but he couldn't make out any details and wasn't inclined on trying to find out more anyways.

"Ayato, could you point me in the right direction?" Johei's voice asked.

"... Oh, my apologies." Ayato said. He was carrying the device sideways in his hand, and all it could see was the walls. Ayato aimed it upwards just in time for Johei to see Minato picking up a mostly empty bottle of gasoline and pouring the remnants into the dumpster. He hummed as the last few drops fell in, then dropped the bottle inside. He struck a match, and then dropped it into the dumpster. A small fire began, and he walked over to return Ayato's matchbox.

"Thanks." Minato said. He walked out of the alleyway, and Ayato followed him. As they exited, however, Minato summoned Incubus without his Evoker near to the dumpster, and they turned the corner. He stretched and let out a slight yawn. "Agilao." he said as he yawned. Incubus humped the air, and the fire in the dumpster grew exponentially, engulfing everything inside. It broke apart afterwards, and the flames raged.

"Pardon, Minato-sama?" Ayato asked.

"Nothing." Minato said. He glanced at Ayato and the device he kept pointed at him. "So, aside from the pitiful attempt on my life, is there any particular reason you came to visit?"

"... *Actually, no.*" Johei's voice said.

"We came for your well-being... forgive my tardiness." Ayato said. Minato chuckled.

"It wouldn't have made much of a difference if you arrived earlier. Well, maybe she would have died quicker, but that doesn't matter much." Minato said. "How's Naoto?"

"She's doing fine... however, she's been preoccupied with a bit of field training. Kyouji is attending her for now." Johei said. *"She asks about you... I think a call every now and again wouldn't hurt."*

"... Ah, I do have her number, don't I?" Minato asked. "Well, I think I'll do that tonight. I'd hate to worry her. But how about you, gramps?"

"I am perfectly healthy, as usual. Aside from a few odd jobs, nothing of any real note has happened. I'm still focused on helping Naoto become the best detective she can be." Johei said. He chuckled. *"She's gotten a new fire in her eyes recently... undoubtedly due to her interactions with you. You should come and visit us someday... it'd make everyone's day."*

"That's true... Kyouji will never admit it, but he'd love to have you in the house again." Ayato said. Minato chuckled.

"That sentimental old man won't admit anything." he said.
"Regardless, I'll think about it... perhaps the next time I have a

few off-days... summer break, I'd say."

"An excellent idea." Ayato said.

"Indeed... I trust you don't want to spoil the surprise for Naoto, then?" Johei asked.

"Of course. Her eyes will light up like Christmas came early." Minato said. The trio all shared a little chuckle.

"Then, in that case, I'll see you then. Farewell for now, and be careful." Johei said. *"Ayato, you need to get back here by tomorrow morning... so that means you'll have to catch an afternoon train out of Iwatodai. Do try not to be late again."*

"O-of course, Johei-sama!" Ayato said. With that, the sound from the device cut off, and Ayato knew the call had ended. He pushed the button to revert it back to its earpiece mode, and put it back in his left ear.

"Well, looks like you have quite a bit of time to yourself." Minato said. *"And it's not like I have anything else to do now."*
"Hungry?"

"... Actually, I am." Ayato said. "But, where could we get food now?"

"From a club." Minato said.

"A club?" Ayato asked.

"Just follow me." Minato said. He led Ayato to Paulownia Mall, and then to Club Escapade. It wasn't very busy, but Minato still cut the line regardless. Ayato followed closely, confused at the fact that nobody stopped him until he reached the door. Vergil allowed Minato past him, but then swiftly blocked Ayato's way with his hand.

"Is this one with you?" Vergil asked. Minato sighed.

"If the people are directly behind me or next to me, they're with me unless I say anything." he said. Vergil lowered his hand, and Ayato looked him over. The incredibly long sword he kept with him certainly didn't make the already threatening titan of a man appear any friendlier in Ayato's eyes, and he could tell from the repeated signs of clothing being straightened that this man was no stranger to pitched combat.

"... What are you waiting for? On with it." Vergil said, snapping Ayato out of his thoughts. Ayato simply nodded and walked past him towards Minato.

"Yeah, don't worry too much about Vergil. He looks tough, but he doesn't mess with anyone he works with." Minato said. He began to walk over to the bar, and Ayato followed him.

"... It would appear you are well known in this establishment, Minato-sama." Ayato said, looking around at the numerous employees that all seemed to nod at Minato as they saw him. Minato chuckled.

"I'm good friends with the owner of this establishment." Minato

said, taking a seat at the bar. Ayato sat down next to him.
"What do you want?"

"Anything is fine." Ayato said.

"Alright... Bartender?" Minato asked. The old man in stereotypical bartender clothing turned to him.

"Yes, Master Minato?" he asked.

"I'd like something different today. Give me thirty wings with the spiciest sauce you have, Tiger Blood, and a Bloody Mary."
Minato said.

"Right away." the bartender said. Ayato turned to Minato in surprise.

"M-my appetite is nowhere near that large, Minato-sama!"
Ayato said.

"I offered food because I was hungry as well." Minato said.
"You better eat quickly once the food arrives, or you'll stay hungry."

"... You're just as cruel as Johei-sama." Ayato said. Minato chuckled.

"Had to get something from the old man, didn't I?" he mused.
Ayato chuckled.

"You have a point." he said. "Although, don't you have school today?"

"I can get back to the dorm in time without a problem." Minato said. "... You know, I don't remember you at all."

"It's to be expected... I was employed the night before your parents and presumably you had passed away." Ayato said. "An increase in security... your father, Makoto-sama, had insisted on increasing security right before his untimely death."

"Oh?" Minato asked. *"This could be going somewhere."* "And why was that?"

"He had undertaken a job for a certain 'corporation' to monitor the efforts of a certain 'organization', or so he told the rest of the family... I'm unaware if you recall this, but he had been gone for almost a year before he returned before his death. He remained in the household for about a month before he took you and your mother with him 'on a trip'... well, he took you two to ensure that if the family was being targeted, at least one of the children, Naoto, would survive." Ayato said.

"Save the baby, huh?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "Yeah, sounds like the honorable thing to do." The bartender arrived, and placed the two drinks down in front of them. Minato nodded to him, and he retreated to the back. "... Well, which do you prefer? Tiger or Mary?"

"... I'm not a fan of tomato juice." Ayato said.

"Neither am I." Minato said, taking the Tiger Blood. Ayato sighed, but then chuckled once more.

"You are very much like your grandfather." Ayato mused, taking the Bloody Mary. "Cheers."

"Cheers." Minato said. They clinked their glasses and each took a drink. "This is always a nice way to start the day."

"... Even though I should be at least attempting to reprimand you now, I must agree." Ayato said. Minato laughed.

"You don't get much action, do you?" he asked.

"No, I don't... and while I sometimes do curse that fate, I'm always reminded that the lack of action means everything is peaceful... though I would prefer it if Johei-sama didn't remind me so loudly." Ayato said.

"That old man can scream, can't he? You'd think his voice would've given out over the years." Minato said. They both laughed, and the bartender returned with the wings. "Oh, better hurry and eat."

Minato and Ayato began a slight battle for food, but it was more of a massacre. Ayato couldn't handle spicy food well, while Minato could eat it without so much as batting an eyelid. Tears began to fall from his eyes, but he didn't care. By the end, Ayato managed a total of eight wings while Minato ate twenty-two. Both of them had tears streaming down their face, and alcohol on top of spicy food did little to relieve their burns. Regardless, Minato took a large drink afterwards in triumph. "Ahh, that was nice." he said.

"... Thanks for the meal." Ayato sniffled, rubbing his eyes. Minato laughed.

"If you want, I can get you something else." he said. Ayato shook his head.

"I'll be fine." he said. He chuckled, and took a drink. Minato saw him shudder a bit after he swallowed, but he was smiling the whole time. "It's been a while since I've gotten to just play around this much. I'm always expected to be deadly serious and vigilant."

"Of course. You are a guardian of the prestigious Shirogane household, Ayato..." Minato began. He frowned. "... I never got your last name."

Ayato chuckled. "You didn't... because it doesn't exist." he said. "I am a guardian of a prestigious household... and some people would target me for it. But it's rather hard to find any information about a person simply known as Ayato... you'd probably find more out about anime characters than you could about the millions of people with my name."

"Well... you are more than what you make yourself out to be." Minato said. "Is the fumbling façade part of your strength?"

"Nobody expects the happy idiot to be the deadliest man in the room." Ayato said. "You're no different... anybody who doesn't know you well would think you're just an eccentric, just as anybody who didn't know me would think I'm just a well-dressed airhead."

Minato chuckled. "... Good. The estate is in good hands, then." he said.

"Of course it is... I'd die before anything happened to any member of the family." Ayato said. "Though it may not have been my place, I believe I should have accompanied you and your parents that day."

"... Actually, I don't think that's such a bad thing." Minato said. "After all, if you did mystically fix everything, we couldn't be having this lovely talk right now, could we? I'd probably have made you my personal bitch or something to that effect."

Ayato chuckled. "You have a point... but I'm not one to wish misfortune on anybody, and as nice as this is, I don't think it makes up for what happened to you." he said.

"What happened to me has turned me into a god amongst men." Minato said. *"And if I keep going along the right path, I'll be a god amongst gods soon enough."* "I've taken a liking to it, really."

"... That's what makes it sad." Ayato said. He sighed. "I heard stories about the kind of boy you were... a nice boy, albeit spoiled for your talents... I saw what Naoto-sama did to try and make herself your replacement when Johei-sama refused to accept your death, and then let paranoia dictate his actions for years on end... and then I saw you, both when you were with Naoto-sama and today... and you've shattered any illusions of still being the person who left with the Estate ten years ago. You're someone else... perhaps it came with the

name change, but you don't play nice anymore."

Minato laughed. "And you're a sharp one, too... it's good that you're on my side, or I'd have to kill you here and now." he said. "Yes, I'm not that little boy who left the Estate ten years ago... He died along with his parents. I'm the stronger Minato that took his face, his body, and his place in the world. That boy is nothing more than a set of lingering sentiments."

"... I don't think so." Ayato said. "He isn't dead... just asleep. I don't know if he'll ever wake up... but he exists. I caught a glimpse of him when you reconciled with Johei-sama."

"... If it lets you sleep at night, go ahead and believe that." Minato said. He downed his drink, and grinned. "It doesn't change the facts." Ayato nodded with a slight smirk, and downed his drink as well. "But, what'll you do now? If you're expected to catch the afternoon train, I wonder what you'll do until then."

"I don't know... I was thinking of catching a nap on the train platform." Ayato said. Minato turned and looked at him with a surprised expression.

"... You're serious, aren't you?" he asked.

"I try not to use any money on unofficial business or when I'm alone... it leaves a trace of my existence, after all." Ayato said. "Nobody suspects a man in a business suit sleeping on a bench... I'm just another businessman who didn't know when to stop partying."

"While you have a point, you could always just sleep in my room at the dorm." Minato said. "I never sleep, so my bed's rather clean... you're more than welcome to use it. It should be more comfortable than a bench, but you can never tell with a dormitory."

Ayato chuckled. "True... Well, I can't reject an invitation to a good day's rest, so I'll take you up on that offer." he said.

"Excellent... then c'mon. We're leaving." Minato said, getting up from the bar.

"... The bill?" Ayato asked.

"Everything I order in here is free." Minato said. He turned to Ayato with a smirk. "Me and the owner are VERY good friends."

"... I see." Ayato said, getting up slowly. He turned to the barkeeper, who simply nodded to him, and then walked over to Minato. "Is there anywhere else you have 'close' friends?"

"The Police Station, Be Blue V, Shinshoudo Antiques, and a certain other club that I'm sure you know about." Minato said.

"... Red Hawk." Ayato said. Minato nodded, and he left Escapade, giving a little nod to Vergil as he passed by. As the two of them left the mall, Ayato couldn't help but chuckle. "I see you've established yourself here."

"Of course I have... if I'm going to reside in any one place for

more than a month, I need some reliable contacts. Unlike you, I'm only a ghost by technicality." Minato said.

"That's true." Ayato said. Minato smirked.

"Prodigies don't just become stupid once they grow up, you know?" he mused. Ayato laughed, and the two headed to the dormitory. Since it was barely four in the morning, Minato entered through the front door and led Ayato to his room. "Well, the bed's there... and if you plan on putting your weapons anywhere, the table by the window is fine. Tea before you sleep?"

"No thanks." Ayato said. "I actually prefer to sleep with my weapons on me... not to say I don't trust you or the others who reside here, of course."

"I understand." Minato said. "Just try not to carve up my bed in your sleep."

"I'll do my best." Ayato said. He got onto Minato's bed, and closed his eyes. "Good night, Minato-sama... I should be gone by the time you return from school."

"The window is always open, and it's not that far of a drop down to the floor. I've done it on multiple occasions, so you should be fine." Minato said.

"Thank you... good morning." he said. Minato chuckled.

"Good morning." he said. With that, he closed his door, and

headed downstairs to check the news before beginning breakfast. He sat down in the lounge, watched a little short about doctors trying to determine why Apathy Syndrome waned with the phases of the moon that included a bit of alien conspiracy theories with viewer phone calls, much to his amusement, and then saw an interesting case about murders.

"The body of yet another guard from the Tatsumi Port Island reconstruction site was discovered today. The victim was repeatedly stabbed in their chest and stomach. Autopsy results have verified that the victim had died long before the majority of the wounds were inflicted, hinting that this may have been the result of a street fight gone horribly wrong. Police are still investigating, and have yet to release any more information on the case." the announcer said.

"... Yet another murder. If this keeps up, there won't be that many reasons left to defend this city between the Apathy Syndrome victims and the ever-growing pile of corpses." Minato thought. He chuckled. *"Then again, that's just how the world goes. If something isn't killing people off, they'll take the task upon themselves... But on the bright side, I got some nice loot today since that grunt was off dying in some corner."*

Minato got up and began to make breakfast as usual, and finished most of it while listening to music before he noticed the seniors all walking downstairs. "Good morning." Minato said as they all walked to the first floor. They all responded in the same manner.

"Hey, Minato." Shinjiro said. "I heard something move in your room... you got a Fiend up there?"

"Just tidying up." Minato replied. He moved the last dish over to the table, and took a seat. "Let's eat."

After an uneventful breakfast with Yukari being slightly less silent than she usually was, Minato headed to school with the rest of SEES. He took a quick glance at the benches lining the train station, and was surprised to see a businessman dressed very similarly to Ayato sprawled on a bench. *"He knows his shit."* Minato thought.

The school day came, and the school day went. It was quick enough, with nothing of any real importance happening. As the day ended, Minato realized that Thursday was one of his only two free days to use during the school week, and thought well about how to use it. *"Alright, let's see... we've got Fuuka, who could be ready for a rank up; Yukari, who probably isn't; Isako, who I'm unsure about; Akihiko, who I think is ready; Kazuya, who should also be ready; Ken, who I could search for, though I don't know if he's grown much since we last spoke; Hazama, who I'm sure isn't ready; and finally Junpei, who I think is ready... although I'm not sure if I want to head for uncharted territory just yet... this puts my options between Akihiko and Kazuya, but I think I'd rather visit Akihiko today. I can save Kazuya for Sunday, since Nemissa probably won't be ready for an upgrade. I just need to reach the mall earlier than usual."*

At that, Minato packed up to go find Akihiko soon after the bell rang. "Where ya headed?" Junpei asked.

"I was thinking of seeing if Akihiko wanted to do anything today." Minato said. He turned to Junpei. "What's up?"

"Uhh... actually, I was kinda hoping we could go somewhere." Junpei said. " B-but if you've got plans, it's cool, dude... I mean, we can do it some other day."

"... Scratch my plans. This is a Social Link begging to be increased... and I can't very well be a bro if I abandon Junpei after that request." Minato thought. He finished packing his things and turned to Junpei. "So, where are we headed?" he asked.

"Huh?" Junpei asked. Minato chuckled.

"C'mon, when you ask me like that, what else do you expect from your bro?" Minato asked. "Let's go."

"... Thanks." Junpei said. The duo walked out of the school in relative silence, and Junpei led them onto the train that returned to Iwatodai. He adjusted his cap, and Minato noticed he was taking deeper breaths than usual.

"Did Mitsuru teach you that trick to calm yourself?" Minato asked. Junpei chuckled.

"Yeah, she did..." Junpei said. He frowned. "... Don't take this the wrong way, but... I asked you to come with me so I could

visit my dad."

"... Decided to check on him, huh?" Minato asked. Junpei nodded.

"Yeah... it's just... gotten to me, I guess." he said. "I always said I would check on him, make sure he was doing okay every now and then since I learned about the Shadows n' all that... but I always wussed my way out of it. So today, I want you to hold me to it..."

"You'll be fine, and I'm sure your dad is doing fine... Relatively speaking, that is." Minato said. Junpei chuckled.

"Yeah, I'll probably find him passed out on the couch or something like that." he said. "But... I just gotta make sure he's doing alright. And... I got a few things I need to say to him."

"... It's weird, talking to your family after a while." Minato said. "There's going to be a lot of mixed emotions... and I feel like your dad is the type to get angry quickly."

"He is... but his hits stopped hurting a while back." Junpei said. "Even if he hits me, I need to talk to him."

"Do what you have to do." Minato said. Junpei glanced at him.

"... Thanks for not askin'." Junpei said with a little tip of his cap.

"It's not my place to know what you have to say... unless you

want to talk about it." Minato said.

"... Maybe after I speak to him." Junpei said. Minato nodded to him, and the rest of the train ride continued in silence. Junpei led Minato to one of the cheaper apartments on the outskirts of Iwatodai, and pulled out a small set of keys from his pocket at the entrance of one of the ground floor doors. He held them at the door. "... Just... wait here for a bit, kay'?" Junpei asked.

"I'll be right here." Minato said, standing a little away from the door. Junpei cracked a small grin, and then opened the front door. The small glimpse of the apartment's interior revealed that it was a complete mess.

"I'm home." Junpei said, closing the door behind him. Minato had considered sending a Fiend after Junpei to monitor the situation, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

"... Even I have a level of decency and respect." Minato thought. "Though I must admit that part of it is because I still actually consider Junpei as a brother... which is troublesome. Perhaps some of these attachments can disappear once I've completed the Card..."

Minato stood in place for a solid forty minutes before the front door to Junpei's apartment opened once more. Junpei emerged, his cap covering his eyes. "... Hey... ya wanna grab a bite?" Junpei asked in a shaky voice.

"... Sure." Minato said, carefully assessing Junpei's condition.

He looked like he was ready to fall over and start crying at a moment's notice.

"C-cool... how about... Wild Duck?" he asked.

"It'll be my treat." Minato said as Junpei walked over to him. He gave him a light pat on the back. "... Take your time." Junpei simply nodded, and the two returned to Iwatodai station and entered Wild Duck Burger. They ordered two burgers each and some large fries to share between the two of them. Junpei wordlessly began eating, and Minato did the same. This continued until Junpei finished his first burger.

"... He didn't even notice." Junpei said. Minato stopped eating, and looked at him. Junpei had tears in his eyes. "Pops... didn't even notice... that I never visited. He didn't even friggin' care that I was gone."

"Then screw him." Minato said.

"... That's what I thought too." Junpei said. He shivered. "I blew up at him... called him a freakin' loser and a worthless alcoholic, right to his face... and you know what he did?"

"... He cried, didn't he?" Minato asked. Junpei nodded.

"Bawled like a damn kid..." Junpei said. He sniffled. "Went off apologizing like a madman... said he was sorry he never called, or visited... that he never asked how I was doing, or what had happened to me... even though that's what the kid is supposed to do, dammit... What I was supposed to do." He

sniffled again, and rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. "... And the worst part? He said he would understand... if I hated his guts... that... he knew he deserved it..."

"... Hey, you don't need to say anything else if you don't want to." Minato said.

"... No... I gotta get this out..." Junpei said. Minato saw a tear fall from his eye. "... I tried to tell him I didn't hate him, but he wouldn't have it... he said I was right... everything I said was true... he's the guy that ruined my life, because he couldn't get over mom's death... Went on and on about all the times he was a shitty parent... but that was nothing... compared to what happened at the end." Junpei rubbed his eyes again, and blew his nose on a napkin. "... He... he told me... to just forget about him... and everything he did after mom died... that I... that I w-would... w-would be better off... I-leaving him behind... and t-that I should just... j-just..."

"... Remember that he loves you." Minato finished. Junpei nodded, and buried his face in his hands. He stifled a few sobs, but he shook every time.

"I'm such a loser..." Junpei said. Tears were clearly dripping from his hands. "Me and my... stupid... selfish... dumb... loser... ass..." he continued between sobs. He rubbed his eyes, and looked at Minato. "I went home... just to friggin' insult the guy... and he still said... all of that." He forced a laugh, and adjusted his cap. "Like father, like son, huh? The apple doesn't fall far from the tree and all that, right?" he asked, struggling to contort his face into a smile.

"... Don't do that to yourself, Junpei." Minato said. He shook his head. "You and I both know... once you start laughing it off, it's over... I won't just watch you go back to your old self."

"Heh, old self?" Junpei asked. He chuckled, though his face was still the forced smile atop extreme sadness. "C'mon, bro... I'm just being me."

"No, you're not." Minato said. "I know you, Junpei... you're a fast learner. You've got a solid head on your shoulders, and you're good at reading other people's emotions... a lot like me. But you have something I don't... a real wish to make everyone else smile. But if that comes at the cost of your own, then it isn't worth it."

"... What do ya mean? I'm smiling right now, aren't I?" Junpei asked, suppressing a snuffle.

"... No, you're not." Minato said. "You're bawling on the floor, crying... and I won't leave you there, even if you say you're just playing around."

"... B-but I am just like my dad... a loser... a nobody." Junpei said, finally dropping the forced smile. "All I care about... is bein' happy in the moment. I... I ain't like you, or Kenji, or anyone else... I don't care about the future or anything... because I already know mine is gonna be shitty."

"Nobody knows the future." Minato said. "... In the time I've known you, you've changed more than I thought possible... and you, yes, you, were the one to show me that people can

change. I never thought that was possible before... until I met you." Junpei looked at Minato as he took a deep breath. "... This is going to sound corny as fuck... but I believe, Junpei. I believe you can be better than what you think you're doomed to become... that your father isn't as much of a loser as you make him out to be... and that you don't have to just let him go."

"... You... corny bastard..." Junpei said, tears welling up in his eyes again. He quickly rubbed them, and then shifted his attention to his food. "... Do you... really think I can do all that?" Junpei asked.

"I know you can." Minato said.

"... Even though... I'm not a badass like you... or even as tough as Akihiko-senpai... or as manly as Kenji... do you really think... I can do it?" Junpei asked.

"That's exactly why you can do it... you aren't locked into any role you need to fit... you can choose what you want to become." Minato said. "And when you know what you want to be... you better go tell your dad what's really on your mind, or I'm going to kick your ass."

Junpei smiled, though he was still crying. His smile this time was genuine, and he looked at Minato. "I thought I was the one who wanted to make everyone else smile." he said. Minato couldn't help but smile back.

"I never said I didn't want anybody else to smile." Minato said.

He sighed. "You know, I deal with some emotional women, but I think you take the cake."

"... You're a punk." Junpei said, still smiling. He wiped his eyes one last time, then extended his arm across the table for a handshake. "... I want you to hold me to that, bro. If you catch me slipping... kick my ass on the spot, no hesitation."

Minato took his hand and shook it. "Isn't that what brothers are for?" he asked.

"... Yeah... I guess so." Junpei said. He let out a big breath, and Minato could see the relief hit his face. "... Don't take this the wrong way or anything... but I'm really glad you're around, bro."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Magician Arcana...

The card appeared in Minato's mind, but he made no note of accomplishing any mission. In all honesty, he was just happy for Junpei. "I thought we got over this phase." he said with a smirk. He and Junpei laughed genuine laughs, and finished their meal in peace. When the duo returned to the dorm, everyone else couldn't help but notice the almost intoxicatingly cheerful atmosphere they both carried.

"Welcome back." Mitsuru greeted as they entered. "... I see you two had a fun day today."

"You could say that." Minato said.

"I don't know about fun, but it was good." Junpei said. "Hey, how about we all go watch a movie tonight?"

"... That's sudden." Shinjiro said.

"What's the occasion?" Akihiko asked.

"Why's there gotta be an occasion to hang out with my pals?" Junpei asked. "I mean, we haven't really done anything big together in forever, so why not?"

"I support this idea." Mitsuru said, a smile creeping on to her face.

"... What the heck? I'll go." Yukari said.

"I think that sounds great." Fuuka said with a smile.

"Heh, why not? I'm in." Akihiko said.

"... If everyone else is goin', I might as well tag along." Shinjiro said.

"And that's everybody! We'll be out in an hour, so get ready." Minato said.

"You heard the leader! Let's get to it!" Junpei said. After a

quick hour of getting ready, SEES left as a group and headed to Screen Shot. Since Junpei had suggested the idea, he was allowed to choose the movie. SEES filed inside, Minato sat between Fuuka and Junpei, and the movie began.

The film Junpei had chosen was an action movie revolving around two rival samurai nations and four close friends, each tied down by their loyalties to various factions. After a series of drama and even fights between the friends, in the end, all of them elected to abandon their positions and face execution together. Needless to say, Junpei and Fuuka cried their hearts out at how moving it was, and Minato had to comfort both of them. He couldn't lie, however, because it was actually a very good movie. Minato was sure he heard Yukari shed some tears, and swore he saw Mitsuru wipe her eyes as the credits began to roll. Shinjiro and Akihiko were undoubtedly holding back tears, as both of them swiftly rubbed their eyes at the end.

After an oddly touching movie, everyone returned to the dorm. Minato finally entered his room, and Ayato had disappeared as he said he would. Minato didn't even consider going out to work on another card. In all honesty, he was so happy he could have sworn he slept with his eyes open with how long he lay on his bed, simply content with the events of the day.

72. Chapter 72

Chapter 72: Group Dynamics

The first thing she felt was the sensation of a tongue on her face. She shook in her sleep, the queen bed she resided on rocking on its shaky legs. The tongue ran up and down her face, and she swiped a hand to get rid of the source. She connected, but the source merely let the pitiful move run over its fur, and soon returned to licking. Annoyed, she opened her eyes and glanced at the black alarm clock on the small metal counter by her bed. It was nine in the morning, two hours earlier than she preferred to be awake. "Fuckin'..." she muttered, rolling over in her bed.

"Hamuko, quit being a zombie and wake up. It's disgraceful." a female voice said from near the bed. Hamuko recognized it as Chidori's, and swore under her breath.

"It's not even noon yet... the fuck are you waking me up for?" she asked, not moving.

"It is noon... your alarm clock ran out of battery." Chidori said. Hamuko blinked awake, and quickly turned back towards the clock. Chidori was right. Her alarm clock was frozen at nine twenty-three in the morning. "Hurry up... you and I need to go get breakfast, or Takaya's going to try and kill somebody

again."

Hamuko rubbed her eyes, and shook her head. Koromaru had jumped onto the floor and was waiting by Chidori's leg once more, staring at her. "Why the hell can't Jin and Takaya go?" she asked as she yawned.

"Jin is busy with work, and you know what happens if we let Takaya walk around in public." Chidori said. "I refuse to go to the police station and calling him my mentally disabled adopted brother ever again."

"... Dammit." Hamuko sighed in defeat. She got out from under her covers, and let her feet drop into some bathroom slippers that were lying at the foot of her bed. Her 'bedroom', as it was called, was the largest of many in an abandoned warehouse that resided near Iwatodai's port. It had a queen bed, with simple pink covers atop black sheets. To the right of it stood a black metal desk with three levels. The first level housed Hamuko's alarm clock, cellphone, hairbrush, and her hairclip. Below that lie a half-opened bag of chips and a half-empty 2-liter bottle of Cielo Mist next to two small bottles of dipping sauce. Finally, at the bottom lay a 24-pack of bottled water with a few bottles missing. To the left of her bed rested her trusty Naginata, blade pointed upwards to keep it sharp, with her red scarf tied around the piece of bed it rested against.

Hamuko walked over to her 'closet', which was a trunk of clothing she kept against the wall to the right of her bed, across from the cracked window that allowed light to enter

her room. She opened it, and grabbed the first articles of clothing she could find, which consisted of a plain white cardigan and slightly loose red jeans. She added on a white belt, grabbed her mp3 player and red headphones from the compartment in the top of her trunk, and then returned to her bed. She brushed her hair, set it up in a ponytail with a red hairband she kept under her pillow, and then added her hairclip in. Finally, she walked towards the window and took a seat on the space the glass left from the gap in the wall, kicking off her slippers and putting on sandals before getting back up again. "Ok... do we need to get pre-made food again, or is Takaya in any mood to cook again?" Hamuko asked, putting on one of her headphones and beginning to search her mp3 player for some music.

"Pre-made." Chidori said. Hamuko sighed.

"But he makes such nice eggs, though..." she said. Koromaru barked at her, and then left through her 'door', which was nonexistent since there was simply a gap in the wall which allowed people to come and go as they pleased.

"Even Koromaru's annoyed... he might have been a stray, but he refuses to eat the standard dog food you chose last time." Chidori said.

"What?... Spoiled little shit, isn't he?" Hamuko asked, scratching her neck. She walked out of her room, but not before grabbing the rope knife that hung next to her door and tying it around her waist underneath her shirt, allowing the blade to rest in its sheath at her side. Chidori had left first,

returning to her 'room', a similar arrangement to Hamuko's a little further down the wide hallway outside, making sure to keep her usual Lolita dress stuffed with hatchets before walking down to the first floor of the warehouse with Hamuko.

In the open area that made up the majority of the first floor (excluding the little hallway part that led to the second floor) lay the mess Hamuko was used to spending the majority of her days in. In the center of the room was a large computer with multiple oversized monitors and numerous cables connected to it from the floor. Jin sat in the center of it all on a very comfortable looking black office chair which he hung his jacket over. He wore nothing but a white tank top and some baggy cargo shorts atop his military boots, though his silver briefcase sat right next to him as usual.

To the right of the room sat Takaya on one of five bean bags next to a large barbecue grill, an even larger fridge, a five-tiered shelf lined with various snacks and some dog food off to the side, and a small book shelf filled with numerous magazines. He was busy indulging in the reading of an issue of *Ayakashi Monthly*, a long since discontinued occult magazine, but had a clipboard with a pen attached to it on his lap. There were random scribbles of writing, most of which were scratched out, all over the top sheet of paper, and numerous crumpled sheets lay around him. He wore his usual outfit, including his revolver, and occasionally glanced at the small television a few feet away from him. The news was on, but it was currently detailing an argument over which pet shop would take custody of a stray cat found on Tatsumi Port

Island, which amused him greatly, though he didn't show it.

Outlining the left side of the room was a large black screen that stood ten feet tall, with a singular door as an entrance. There was a sign on it that read 'If I catch you perving, I'm chopping your dick off!', and Hamuko chuckled as she looked at her handiwork with the bathroom. It gave away her presence to the otherwise self-absorbed men in the room.

"Finally, you're awake... I haven't been able to write anything good on an empty stomach." Takaya said, giving them a sideways glance.

"Yeah, yeah, we'll be back in a few." Hamuko said, walking towards the large slide door that had to be pulled open from the inside. Koromaru barked as he ran up to Jin. Without looking away from his work, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little dog treat to give to Koromaru. Koromaru took it and quickly ate it.

"Can't ya see I'm busy, dog? Make yourself useful and get those two to bring in some real food already." Jin said, giving Koromaru and few quick pats on his head. His other hand was working the keyboard the entire time he had fed and pet Koromaru before he returned to his usual position.

"We're moving." Chidori said. She let Hamuko pull the door open just enough so they could leave, and then walked out first, followed by Koromaru and finally Hamuko. The sun was already high in the sky, and the two girls and their dog left the small area of abandoned warehouses to reach the streets

that made up the outskirts of Iwatodai. Hamuko did a little stretch as they walked towards the nearest mini-mart.

"Man, it's finally summer time!" Hamuko said with a smile. Koromaru ran up and barked in agreement. "Isn't that nice, Koro-chan?"

"... Why are you so happy? You don't even go to school." Chidori said.

"So? Summer is the best time ever! There's the festival, and people become great friends, and relationships are born!" Hamuko said. She clapped her hands together and giggled. "And that means there are more chances for misunderstandings, friends to become enemies, and love to turn to hate! Which gives us more work to do!"

"... Ah, you're right." Chidori said, taking in what Hamuko said. She nodded in agreement.

"Yup... summer is always fun." Hamuko said. They entered the mini-mart after a few short minutes, and browsed the aisles for some pre-made sandwiches and various other foods that would serve as their nourishment for the day. Koromaru waited outside of the entrance, and watched the duo walk up to the counter.

"Ah, Ms. Yoshino, Ms. Yuki, how are you today?" the cashier asked them with an annoyingly cheerful voice. Hamuko remembered the man's short build and rounded face with short blonde hair that just showed itself underneath his store

hat, but she could never remember his name. Thankfully, he always had his name tag on, and it read 'Tomoyuki Akira'. Her original nickname for the man came back into her head, and she smiled at him.

"We're doing great, Kira-chan." Hamuko said. The cashier chuckled.

"C'mon, you're younger than I am!" he said. "You really shouldn't get off with calling me that, ya know?"

"But I do." Hamuko said as she put their little shopping basket on the counter. Chidori walked forwards and pulled out the stack of cash Jin had given her before she had gone to fetch Hamuko, and began to take out the amount they needed as the cashier scanned their items.

"You really are childish... It's good that Ms. Yoshino is here to keep you in check, or I don't know what you'd do." he mused.

"She never lets me hold the money. It's mean." Hamuko said with a little pout.

"If I let you hold the money, it wouldn't be there for long." Chidori said, putting down enough money to cover their purchase as the cashier scanned the last item.

"She's got a point." he said. Hamuko grumbled and picked up the shopping bags, handing one to Chidori as well. "You two take care."

"You should look out for yourself first, Kira-chan." Hamuko mocked. The cashier laughed as they departed, and Koromaru greeted them with a little bark.

"Good boy." Chidori said as she walked past him. Koromaru followed behind the two girls, and the trio made their way back to the warehouse they lived in.

Meanwhile, at Gekkoukan High School, Minato sat atop the roof in the same location Mr. Toudou sat when the two last spoke, eating his lunch alone in a meditative posture, music blaring into his ears.

"Un-fucking believable. What the hell happened yesterday?!" he raged in his head. *"I wasted a perfectly good opportunity for the advancement of one of my cards! And what the hell was I doing, 'enjoying' my time 'bonding' with Junpei! He's the Magician, nothing more... nothing more. He isn't my brother, or my 'bro', or any of that bullshit camaraderie garbage that the members of SEES throw around like it's going out of style... No, no, no... That isn't who I am. I am not some friendly clown that bothers with other people's troubles... not at all. I have no intention of joining the puppets! Those 'memories' are nothing more than useless decoration –"*

His thoughts were cut off by cellphone ringing. Annoyed, he checked to see who it was, and saw no caller ID. He answered, knowing full well it could only be two people. "Hello." he answered shortly.

"My... you sound displeased." Elizabeth said over the phone.

"I am, but you probably knew that." Minato said.

"... That is correct." Elizabeth said. She said nothing for a bit, and that only served to irritate Minato even more.

"Well? What's the news?" he asked.

"... I'm calling to inform you that humans have wandered into Tartarus." Elizabeth said. "Three, I believe... I believe it would be in your best interests to rescue them before the coming full moon... that is, if you want to save them."

"Do I get a reward for it?" Minato asked.

"Not from me." Elizabeth said.

"Then they can rot for all I care." Minato said.

"... However, I believe the Police Station may reward you if you explain the situation to your stern-faced affiliate." Elizabeth said. "In addition... the people in question may turn in something for you as well."

"Well, that sweetens the deal. I'll get them all out tonight." Minato said. "Anything else?"

"... I would like to commend your bravery on going forth with your Social Links, despite knowing full well the risks that lay there." Elizabeth said.

"... Explain." Minato said.

"It is the duty of a Velvet Room attendant to support their guest in any way possible... by extension, this means that I must support your decision to advance your Social Links while attempting to avoid any real attachment." Elizabeth said. "... I wish you good luck in attempting to disconnect with your Social Links."

"... You think I'm wrong, don't you?" Minato asked.

"... I cannot voice my- " Elizabeth began, but Minato swiftly cut her off.

"Bullshit. You disagree with what I'm trying to do." Minato said. Elizabeth was silent for a bit, and Minato spoke again. "I know you... you want me to experience everything before I make my final decision, right?"

Elizabeth sighed. "That is correct... If your fate is in the cards, you are only playing with half of the deck." she said. "I believe you've yet to experience the other slice of life, as you said."

"... Believe what you want to believe. Only action can change a circumstance." Minato said.

"I am aware of that." Elizabeth said. There was a period of silence between the two, and Minato knew he had hit her where it hurt most. As a member of the Velvet Room, she was bound to watch, unable to directly intervene in her guest's fate.

"... *She is still a Card. I cannot let the Sun set just yet.*" Minato thought. "... Forgive me. That was uncalled for." he said. "... Have you thought about where you want to go next?"

"... I had an idea, but I believe I may need to reconsider." Elizabeth said.

"... No, you don't. I'll go anywhere you want." Minato said. "Tell you what... the next time I upgrade my Personas again, we're going out. No questions asked. It is the duty of a Velvet Room attendant to obey their guests, is it not?" he mused. Elizabeth let out a little chuckle.

"You certainly know your targets, don't you?" she asked. Minato froze. He hadn't expected a sudden retort, especially not one that venomous. "... Very well. I will await your next visit. Until then, I wish you a safe journey."

She hung up the phone before Minato could say anything, and he let out a breath of frustration. "*Shit. I fucked that up too.*" he thought as he put his phone away. He sighed, and tried to meditate as Shin did. "*I am a mess right now... and I can't afford to be a mess.*"

He had gotten in a few minutes of utter silence, and he felt his mental state calming down. However, he was soon interrupted when the door to the roof opened. He ignored it at first, but the voice that followed brought him back to reality. "Minato?" Fuuka called. He looked down to see her looking up at him from the center of the roof. His face must have been menacing, because she seemed to recoil when he looked at

her. He stopped his music and took off his headphones.

"I will not snap here. One minor setback is nothing in the grand scheme of things." Minato thought. He changed his grimace into his usual cocky smirk. "What's up, Fuuka?" he asked.

"... Everyone is wondering what's going on." Fuuka said. "Umm... could you come down here?"

"... Oh, I didn't even notice." Minato said. He hopped off of the top of the roof entrance and walked over to Fuuka. "So, what do you mean by 'going on'?" he asked.

"Well... after last night, everyone was feeling so good. But this morning, you had disappeared... and both Junpei and Yukari said you ignored them all day today, so now everyone is worried."

"People love to worry. I act out of line once, and I've already got shit to deal with." Minato thought. He chuckled. "I just forgot to come back to the dorm during my morning walk, and today, I made sure to pay extra attention in class. I didn't even notice Junpei or Yukari trying to get my attention. I need to stay on top of my game, right?"

"... You're lying." Fuuka said. "... What's wrong, Minato?"

"What makes you think something is wrong?" he asked.

"... I tried to talk to Yukari a few days ago, and she wouldn't

tell me what was wrong. I saw you talk to her, and she started acting more like herself... she shut me out, but you forced your way in." Fuuka said. "I can't do that... so please don't shut me out. I don't want to see any of my friends hurting themselves..."

"Look, I'm not hurting myself, Fuuka. Unlike Yukari, when I organize my thoughts, I don't just end up with smoke puffing out of my ears." Minato said. He chuckled. "Honestly, all of you are overreacting. I have a lot to think about, you know? I've got two clubs, SEES, and a host of other obligations I need to balance all while maintaining my sanity. It's tough, and sometimes, I just need to plan out my next few moves."

Fuuka walked up to him and hugged him, much to his surprise. She buried her face in his chest. "... Don't do this." she said.

"... Have I become transparent because of that damn show last night? Why is everybody seeing through me today?" Minato thought. He sighed, and hugged her back. *"... Alright. Let's try a different approach."* "... I really can't hide much from you, can I?" he asked. Fuuka let out a breath of relief.

"You don't have to be the perfect leader... you might call yourself a monster, but you're a human... with your own struggles and worries, just like the rest of us." Fuuka said. "It's okay to let that show."

"... Why am I not laughing right now?" Minato questioned in his head. *"Why the hell do I not even want to laugh right now?"*

"... It's okay if you aren't ready to talk about it." Fuuka said.
"I'll wait for you."

"... *C'mon, that was corny as shit. What is this, a shojo anime? Huh?... Laugh a little, me...*" Minato thought. A creeping sense of dread, intermingled with its cause, began to fill his mind.

"... Even if everybody else doesn't help... I'm here for you."
Fuuka said.

"... *This has gone on long enough.*" Minato thought. *"I have enough problems dealing with two attachments. A third now will unhinge me."* "Thank you... I needed that." he said. He gently pushed Fuuka, and she parted from him. "... One day, I'll tell you what's wrong." Minato said. "But not today."

"... I know you will." Fuuka said, smiling back at him. One look was all it took for Minato to reach his decision.

"... ***That's something you can't undo, Boss.***" Hell Biker said.

"I'd think carefully about this one." David said.

"There are no second chances if you enter that ring."
Matador said.

"... ***Even I've gotta say that's a big jump, Boss.***" Jack said.

"Mister... is it really worth it?" Alice asked.

"Yes, it is... I don't know why I was even struggling. The answer is simple. I allow myself a temporary weakness... and then once the Card is completed, I kill them off. Then, I get to keep the power, and discard any extra baggage I may have gotten." Minato thought. "The big question is, what order to kill them off in? I need to maintain enough devotees to maintain my innocence, and I can't simply kill them off slowly, one by one... the ones I haven't completed will turn against me, and I'll lose those Cards... Then, that means that the best-"

"... Minato?" Fuuka asked, snapping him out of his thoughts. She had a slight blush on her face, and he realized he had been looking at her with a distant smile on his face the entire time. "Umm... you've-"

Minato didn't let her finish. He drew her in close once more and sealed her lips with a kiss. He drew back, and put a finger over her mouth before she could say anything. He kissed her forehead, and hugged her tightly once more. "... You don't know how much you've just helped me, Fuuka." he said. "I'm never going to let you go." Fuuka reddened ridiculously as Minato held her, and said nothing. He removed his finger after resting his forehead against hers for a while, and kissed her once more. *"Savor this... as the catalyst of my transformation, I'll make sure to treat you especially well."*

Fuuka looked as if she would faint if Minato kept this up, so he moved around to her side and held her hand in his. "We should head back... I think I've worried the others too much."

Minato said. Fuuka snapped out of her daze.

"Y-yes... we... should tell everyone." Fuuka said. Minato chuckled.

"Unless you want to stay together up here a bit more." he said.

"... We shouldn't." Fuuka said, glancing away nervously. Minato laughed and nuzzled his head against hers.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I-I'm sure!" Fuuka said.

"Alright... let's go see the others." Minato said. He began walking towards the entrance to the roof, but Fuuka stopped him. "... Change your mind?"

"... About that... umm... I... I just want to say... I feel that way... about you too." Fuuka said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Priestess Arcana...

"You should... they'll be the last good feelings you'll ever experience." Minato thought. Now, he wanted to laugh and do a little dance, but he restrained himself. "I know. You don't

have to say anything for me to know." Minato said. He found a song that he thought was the most fitting for the situation, and offered Fuuka one of his headphones while he put in the other. She took it, and the music began as they headed back inside. The intro lyrics of an electro song began with a thumping start.

"Fall. Ing. Down. A-gain. Don't pick me up.

Be-cause I'm Fall. Ing. Down. A-gain. Don't pick me up.

*Oh yeah, I'm Fall. Ing. Down. Down. Down. Down down
down down
downdowndowndowndowndowndowndadadada-
DOWN!"*

Minato couldn't suppress his manic smile when the drop came, because he already knew that his answer was what it had always been. He had reached an impasse, and simply needed to fall even further. He walked back into class with Fuuka at his side, and saw a relieved look come across Junpei and Yukari's faces as he entered. "You missed me that much? You must really like me!" Minato mused.

"It's good ta have ya back, bro." Junpei said.

"Sheesh... if I can't go off acting weird all of a sudden, why should you be able to?" Yukari teased.

"Heh... ain't this a warm welcome?" Minato asked. He let go of Fuuka and took his seat with a content smile. "It's good to

be back to my old self."

"No kiddin'. I mean, you might look it, but you aren't the emo type, dude." Junpei said.

"Hey! I look amazing, for your information. Every woman in this room can attest to that." Minato said. Yukari chuckled and shook her head.

"Yup, he's back." she said.

"Hey, why don't you take a seat, Fuuka?" Minato asked. He glanced at his watch. "We've got a few minutes before lunch ends, and your seat is always open."

"... I guess." Fuuka said. She sat on his lap, and he chuckled. Yukari and Junpei both simply took their seats with smiles on their faces, and they held a quick chat before classes began again. As everyone returned to their normal seats, Minato couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. This was a different type of contentment than what he experienced last night... and he liked it because it dwelled not with the past, but with the prospect of things to come.

While Minato began to cruise through the last of the day, Hamuko sat on one of the five bean bags facing the small television and had just finished the sandwich she bought for herself. Takaya was busy eating his salad, though he still kept an eye on the magazine he was reading. Chidori sat on another bean bag, eating a wrap while trying to find something worth watching on television with little luck. Jin was still at his

computer, albeit now munching on a set of bite-size hash browns and bacon bits. Koromaru was next to Chidori, hungrily eating some of his new premium dog food from a crude silver bowl. "... Am I the only one wondering why Koromaru gets the most expensive meal out of all of us?" Hamuko asked.

"It's not like we don't have the money for better food. You just choose junk all the time." Jin said.

"What? I buy what you guys like!" Hamuko said.

"From a mini-mart." Chidori said.

"Hey, it's not like you suggested anywhere else!" Hamuko said.

"Chidori only goes outside to draw." Takaya said. "I doubt she even knows where other food stores are."

"I know them... I don't bother remembering." Chidori said.

"What the hell kind of logic is that?" Hamuko asked. She shook her head and sighed. "... You know what? Jin. You go buy food next time."

"Like any of you could make money online." Jin said. "I work our site, stocks, and an advertising gig single-handedly... if I left it to you for even a few minutes, I'd be ruined, and we'd all be screwed."

"Or Takaya would shoot the screen if it pissed him off."

Hamuko whispered.

"I heard that." Takaya said. He chuckled. "That's exactly why I'm not the one in charge of our site."

"See? You two are our guns... you kill in an instant, and you're the best when it comes to fighting." Jin said.

"Just like the dog." Chidori said. Takaya laughed while Hamuko fumed.

"You wanna fight?!" she asked. "Cuz' I'll show you just what this 'gun' can do!"

"Calm your tits." Jin said. He snickered. "I forgot you're our comic relief, too."

"I think you mean the life of this group. All of you act like corpses half of the time." Hamuko said.

"We are all corpses... we simply have yet to reach our end." Takaya said. Chidori sighed.

"You set him off..." she said.

"All humans are dead inside... it is for that reason they all seek to subjugate others. It gives them the illusion that their existence means something, when in reality, they are all replaceable..." Takaya continued. Koromaru let out a little whine.

"... Yeah. He's not gonna stop anytime soon." Jin muttered.

He stealthily pulled out a pair of small earphones and plugged them into his computer, finding some music to drown out the others.

"... I think I'm going to go draw." Chidori said. She had finished her wrap, and headed to the stairs. "Stand guard, Hamuko."

"... Isn't that what the dog is for?" Hamuko asked. She turned to Koromaru, but he had already run outside through the little side entrance they made for him to do his business. With the other two members gone, Jin at work, and Takaya in his own little world, the duty of watching the base to make sure nobody caught them by surprise fell to Hamuko. She sighed, and sank into the bean bag she sat on.

"Just as we, the privileged few who can explore the great expanse... so too do those who have realized the futility of clinging to an existence see the emptiness that resides over society." Takaya continued.

"... As much as I like ya, you really are an annoying sonuvabitch when you get started, Takaya." Hamuko said. She got up, walked over to the corner, and did a handstand. She began to do inverted push-ups, the first part of her usual training regiment, with one headphone blaring dance music into her ear. She had quite a lot of time on her hands once more.

Back at Gekkoukan High, the day had passed, and Minato walked outside of his classroom to find Fuuka and Catherine

waiting for him in the hallway. "And how are my girls doing today?" he asked as he walked over to them. Catherine giggled.

"Aren't you feeling good today?" she asked.

"You can thank my lovely Fuuka for that." Minato said. Fuuka quickly turned around before either of them could catch her reaction.

"I-It was nothing... we should hurry to club." Fuuka said.

"Someone's awfully bashful today." Catherine teased. She and Minato chuckled while Fuuka decided to lead the way.

When they arrived at the Art Club, Keisuke was already setting up their little corner that they worked in. "Oh, hey, everyone... and uhh..." he said, but faltered when he saw Catherine. He looked off to the side in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"You work fast." Minato whispered.

"This is what I do, after all." Catherine whispered back. She turned her attention to Keisuke. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you feeling sick today?"

"I-I'm perfectly fine!" Keisuke said. He cleared his throat. "A-anyways... it's good to have you again, Minato."

"The pleasure is all yours." Minato mused. "So, we're still working on our pieces from last time, right?"

"That's right... you might be a little behind, but the contest is still a ways off." Keisuke said.

"It wouldn't be fair if everyone else didn't get a handicap, would it?" Minato asked. Keisuke chuckled.

"Well, with confidence like that, you'll be fine." he said. They each moved on to working on their own pieces, with Minato once again getting as many shades of blue as possible. Fuuka looked at his drawing once more, and saw the makings of a strange room.

"... Why is everything blue?" Fuuka asked. Minato chuckled.

"Why not?" he asked. "I have a great idea for this... but I'm not spoiling it. Speaking of which..." Minato leaned back to see what Fuuka was working on. She had what appeared to be the outline of a giant robot towering above a city.

"... Not very feminine, is it?" she asked, looking at her work.

"I think it suits you perfectly." Minato said. "I bet it'll be better than mine."

"Really?... Then, I'll try not to disappoint you." Fuuka replied with a smile. Minato nodded to her, and continued working on his piece. They had gotten almost an hour in when the Club Advisor, Ms. Ounishi, walked in.

"Everyone, can I have your attention please!" she said. The students all stopped working and turned to face her. "Now,

regarding the Bay Area Art Contest... I'm pleased to announce that Keisuke's painting was selected for consideration in the final round!"

A few rounds of applause came from the rest of the students, and Keisuke just nervously scratched the back of his head. Catherine walked over and latched onto his arm. "Isn't that great, Keisuke?" she asked.

"T-thanks, but it wasn't me, it was the style of my painting... I was probably just the only contestant who used a palette knife to paint with, that's all..." Keisuke said.

"C'mon, you give Renaissance artists a run for their money with thirty-minute speed paintings! You're gonna win if you actually put any amount of effort into your entry." Minato said.

"You really think so?!" Keisuke asked, shocked by the sudden praise. "Thanks, Minato!... But... I've only been painting for about two years now, so I probably just got lucky..."

"You should have confidence in yourself, Keisuke-senpai. You've been working hard on all of your paintings." Fuuka said.

"I mean, you're the first one here and the last to leave." Catherine added.

"... Thanks... but I'm your senpai. I should be encouraging you, not the other way around." Keisuke said. "... Heh, I'm not making much of an impression as the club leader, am I,

Minato?"

"A good leader knows how to draw support from his followers." Minato said. He smirked. "And you're doing quite a good job at that, from what I can see."

"... I guess I am." Keisuke said, cracking a smirk. It wasn't his regular dopey smile, or his occasional confident grin. Minato had caught a glimpse of the arrogance that Keisuke constantly downplayed to make the other members of the club feel adequate, and he chuckled.

"Perhaps we're more similar than I thought... who knows? Was he one of the altered Links?" Minato thought. *"You put up with everything so they can constantly feed your ego... I respect you that much more now."*

"Well, I think we've worked for long enough, don't you think?" Catherine asked.

"... O-oh, yeah, I guess now's a good time to pack up." Keisuke said. Everyone quickly put their things away, and Minato parted ways with Keisuke as he stayed behind to clear the room. Catherine and Fuuka followed him out, and Catherine quickly pulled him aside.

"Hey, we haven't done anything for photography Club in a while." she said. "Besides, it looks like it might rain soon."

"... I hope I can get back before it starts." Fuuka said. Minato quickly reached into his bag and pulled out a compact

umbrella and held it out to Fuuka.

"I'd hate it if you got sick. I'll probably just wait here until it passes." Minato said.

"Oh... well, umm... stay dry." Fuuka said. "I'll see you at the dorm."

"... Oh, one last thing." Minato said. He walked over to Fuuka and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "I'll see you tonight." he said. Fuuka reddened, and nodded quickly before hurriedly walking away. Catherine giggled.

"She's cute." she said. "You should have told me you were trying to eat a few people yourself."

"I'm setting up some bait right now, aren't I?" Minato asked. The duo walked into the Photography Club and then entered the back room. "I actually think this rain is good for us... we can make some lovely photographs."

"You read my mind." Catherine said. "There's a back entrance there... we can go in and out once it starts raining."

"Good... I think we should call this the 'wet' collection." he said. He and Catherine both laughed. "I see things went well with Keisuke."

"He might be a little awkward for a bit... but he'll get over it." Catherine said. She grinned. "Next, I think I'm going for that French boy... I think his name was Bebe..."

"The one in the fashion club?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "If it meets on Thursday, I can already go under the guise of being one of his 'models'."

"I know... and so will I." Catherine said. "Once we get enough pictures floating around, he won't be able to deny us. We can even use what he makes in our photos to attract other people to the Fashion Club for him."

"Cunning... I like it. I like it a lot." Minato said.

"I know you do." Catherine said. "We make quite the team, don't we?"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fortune Arcana...

"We're a pair of demons, aren't we? People aren't ready for us." Minato said. The sounds of rain hitting the window got his attention, and he smirked. "Well, looks like it's already time for us to get ready for our shots... I think both of us in the plain school uniform will be the best."

"You can see through the shirt just enough when it's wet to feed the imagination." Catherine said. "Let's get some good ones today."

They went about with their work, making sure to wait about in the rain as the downpour struck. Minato got Alice to take the pictures this time as they struck various poses, occasionally including singular shots of either person along with their combination pictures.

After helping Catherine finish preparing the photos, Minato left through the drizzle and rode over to Paulownia Mall on Hell Biker's motorcycle. He went to the police station, which was empty save for Officer Kurosawa reading a book at the desk. "You look like a mess... did something happen?" Kurosawa asked, giving Minato a little glance. In fact, Minato had neglected to tidy himself up after leaving, just as Catherine had. That meant his sleeves were rolled up to just before his elbows, the top three buttons of his shirt were open to expose his chest, his hair was messy and outlined his face, and his bowtie was undone, hanging loosely around his neck. Minato chuckled and flicked some hair out of his face.

"Nothing too important... but you know those missing persons posters you have out there?" Minato began. "They're in that tower. We'll get them out, but I was hoping you'd be able to come pick them up and take them to the hospital once we've found them... we'll take them back to our dorm first, of course, so you can drive over any time before the morning."

"... You want the rewards, don't you?" Kurosawa asked.

"Do you really think I'm that heartless?" Minato asked.

"Yes." Kurosawa said. Minato laughed.

"Good. Then you know me well." he said. He stretched. "Well, that was really all I came for. The rescue is happening tonight, so be ready. I'll tell you whenever something like this comes up."

"Alright... I'd ask if you wanted an umbrella, but you look like you're having fun." Kurosawa said with a smirk. Minato nodded, and waved goodbye as he left. Outside, the rain continued to fall, but Minato didn't care. He strolled through it without a care in the world, and returned to the dorm. His entrance caught the attention of the other members, all of whom were sitting in the lounge.

"Where have you... oh. Got caught in the rain, huh?" Akihiko greeted. Fuuka let out a slight gasp at his appearance.

"You shouldn't have lent me your umbrella..." she said.

"... Is there a reason why you're half-dressed?" Mitsuru asked. Minato chuckled.

"It was comfier." he said. He took off his shoes and walked over to the kitchen, taking out a frying pan.

"Uhh... shouldn't you go shower first?" Yukari asked.

"I'm more worried about my hunger than getting sick." Minato said. He flicked his wrist up, and the Dimensional Compactor sputtered to life. A bottle of vodka flipped into the air, and he caught it. He set it down, gathered his ingredients, and turned on the stove. He took a large drink straight from the bottle,

much to the surprise of everyone else.

"... Don't tell me you're going to be an alcoholic now." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled.

"No, this is celebratory." he said. He turned to face everyone. "By the way, I have an announcement to make. We're going to Tartarus tonight, and there will be three humans trapped inside."

"Dude, you serious?" Junpei asked.

"... And how do you know this, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"My source has never been wrong before, have they?" Minato asked. "Regardless, I've already made arrangements with Officer Kurosawa. We'll escort the victims back here, and he'll be ready with a pick-up to take them to the hospital and reunite them with their families once the Dark Hour ends."

"Hmph. You've been busy." Akihiko said with a grin. "Well, if we're going to Tartarus on a rescue mission, we should all get ready."

"Exactly. And the first part of getting ready is making sure you aren't hungry." Minato said. He turned back to the stove, took a drink, and then began to cook.

"... Well, I suppose this is a return to the norm." Mitsuru said. She smirked. "Or the absurd."

While SEES prepared for their rescue operation, Jin finally got

off of the computer and sprawled on an open bean bag. He was finally alone, with Takaya opting to walk the dog through the rain and the two girls residing upstairs. He let out a huge sigh, content with the peace and quiet in the room. It was shattered by the ringing of his cellphone, and he grumbled as he took it out and answered. "What do you want, old man?" Jin answered, knowing full well that only one person ever bothered calling him.

"You know, you really should take a break every now and again, Jin. You'll work yourself underground... heh, get it?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Ha-Ha, very clever." Jin said.

"... That hurts." the voice said. "Well, anyways... I'm actually calling you about that little group I've got working for us. I think they're starting to question their motives... so I'll be counting on you four to reinforce their position by opposing them."

"... So we can't just kill them off and do this ourselves?" Jin asked.

"If they start to fail, by all means! However, their leader probably won't let that happen. You remember, the one I told you about?" the voice asked.

"Blue-haired psychopath that wants in on the end of the world, right? Yeah, I remember him... What, is he that strong?" Jin asked.

"I think he might give Takaya and even Hamuko trouble if he decides not to hold back." the voice said. "However, I don't think you'll need to fight him too often... all you need to worry about is surviving encounters against him, and whatever you do, don't tell Hamuko who he is. I don't want her getting carried away and trying to kill him. We can't afford to let either of them die."

"You don't need to remind me." Jin said. He rose to sit properly in the bean bag. "... But what do we do if they get strong enough to really take us on?"

"Don't worry... if they reach that point, you'll just need to fake your deaths and wait until I make my move. If I'm correct, I can get the blue-haired boy to join us at the end. Once he's on our side, we'll be unstoppable, and the plan will bear fruit." the voice said.

"That's blue... what about red?" Jin asked.

"Light red is under control... though I'm still wary of dark red." the voice said. "However, we can deal with him if it proves necessary. Hamuko and Takaya are more than enough to defeat him, and with the new weapons we're rebuilding, he won't be a problem."

"So the tin cans are coming around, and you've got a plan for red and blue... you've actually impressed me, Shuji." Jin said.

"I do what must be done." Ikutsuki replied. "But, aside from

my praise... has your Persona acted up since last time?"

Jin adjusted his glasses, and a glowing card appeared in front of him. He focused, and felt the presence of his Persona, Moros, calmly awaiting his orders. The card disappeared, and Jin couldn't help but smile. "Still good... Hamuko really came through when she joined. Everyone's getting healthier now that we only use suppressants in case of emergencies." Jin said.

"I have to admit, even I was amazed at her ability..." Ikutsuki said. *"The power to mediate between a Persona and it's master, and even establish a contract of sorts between the two... she truly is a fascinating girl."*

"Sounding like a creep now, old man." Jin said.

"What?! I am simply pointing out that... ah, forget it. Everyone with blue hair thinks I'm a pervert." Ikutsuki said. Jin chuckled.

"See that? That was funny." Jin said. Ikutsuki sighed.

"You just like to laugh at other people's misfortune... regardless, I should return to my work. I've been gone long enough for my absence to become noticeable." Ikutsuki said. *"Give the others my regards, and remember... Hamuko cannot know who Minato is."*

"Easy enough." Jin said. "I'll tell the girls you gave them a lick." Ikutsuki sighed on the other end of the line before it died, and Jin closed his phone with a smirk. He glanced at his

watch, and saw that it was a quickly approaching midnight. "... Takaya needs to hurry up and get back here." he said. The others would eventually come down, and he'd share the news he had received then.

After the Dark Hour struck, a now clean Minato led the members of SEES into the lobby of Tartarus. "Alright, Fuuka... tell me what you can find." Minato said.

"Alright." Fuuka said. She closed her eyes, and Baba Yaga's protective shell formed around her. Her third eye opened, and the rest of the Persona's body sprouted forth. Baba Yaga placed its pot down on the ground and began to stir the inside with its staff. After a few minutes of silence, Fuuka spoke again. "There are three people... all of them between the forty-fourth floor and the barricade!"

"Then, we start from the nearest teleporter and work our way up." Minato said. "Junpei, Yukari, Mitsuru, on me. Akihiko and Shinjiro can train on the lower floors together."

"Tch... so I'm on reserve today?" Shinjiro asked.

"Castor's attacks are too destructive. I don't need to tell you what could happen if your attack was by a small corner that happened to have a person there, do I?" Minato asked.

"... Fair enough. Let's go, Aki." Shinjiro said, creating his obsidian axe.

"Alright... but you watch it up there too." Akihiko said.

"Don't worry. I'm a precision killer." Minato mused. He turned to the teleporter, and headed up with his team. Once they reached the first floor of Arqa with Shadows, Minato was itching to test out his newest Persona. "Alright, it's going to be a standard approach. We're quick and methodical, moving fast and only using our Personas if the first strike doesn't work... however, I'll be using mine to start us off if I deem the enemy worthy."

"Old school dungeon crawl, huh? Alright." Junpei said, adjusting his hat.

"Very well... I'll take point after the first strike. Yukari, Junpei, I expect you both to watch our backs." Mitsuru said.

"We've got it, senpai..." Yukari said, looking around for any Shadows. They began to quickly proceed up the floor, and, much to Minato's dismay, almost none of their opponents were worthy. After going up a few floors, Fuuka contacted them.

"Wait! There's a person on that floor! Please, find them!" she said.

"You heard the lady. We'll split up and search to make this quick." Minato said. He drew his Evoker and pressed it against his head.

"Uhh, there aren't any Shadows around." Yukari said.

"This is so I can search quicker." Minato said. His manic smile

spread across his face. "Come, Samael!" he called as he fired. A gigantic red serpent with a black stomach lining materialized behind him and flew along the roof and walls of the floor with six large bat-like wings that protruded from its body, as well as two smaller ones that looked like ears on its head. It had five blue eyes, one above the center of its serpent-like mouth, and two more going in either direction to span the length of the mouth. It roared, revealing a set of jagged teeth, and slithered quickly along the ground behind Minato, wings raised high to avoid hitting the other members of SEES. Minato used his Magatama and jumped into the air. He landed on Samael's head as it passed underneath him, right behind its set of eyes. "Cry, worms! Your king has come!" he shouted as Samael took off down the halls.

The other members of SEES waited as the rest of Samael blew past them, and then regrouped. "... Dang, what the hell? That thing's friggin' huge!" Junpei said.

"That's a powerful one..." Mitsuru commented. "Though I feel it's more suited to single combat..."

"No kidding..." Yukari said. They all sighed as they heard Minato's ridiculous laughter, and took off down the halls, each making sure to head their own separate ways.

The Tartarus expedition didn't take too long. They quickly found the missing people and returned to the dorm, mainly because Mitsuru insisted it would be best for them to leave as soon as possible. True to his word, almost immediately after the Dark Hour ended, Officer Kurosawa arrived in a police car

followed by three ambulances. He took the people off of SEES hands without raising any fuss, and served only to quell the odd looks the ambulance workers gave him when they had to retrieve three grown people from a high school dormitory right after midnight. With that out of the way, SEES rested for the night while Minato simply sat contently in his room, electing, for the first time in a while, to read for the night.

Author Note: By the way, I'm putting it out there. Remix Minato's official theme is 'The Man' by Daisuke Ishiwatari. I don't own the rights to the song.

73. Chapter 73

Chapter 73: They Watch

Saturday, the last day of the school week. Minato had already chosen his targets for the day, the first being the Emperor and the second being the Hanged Man. He had figured the devil brothers had enough time to at least partially reach a decision by now, and could go for a little clubbing in all honesty. After a quick breakfast with SEES and a short train ride, Minato walked on ahead with music going in his ears. He took them off as he approached the school, noticing two girls talking near him.

"Hey, did you hear about all those people who were found unconscious recently?" the first girl asked her friend. "I guess they were all in pairs."

"Yeah, I did! They thought it was a bunch of double suicides, but the people woke up with Apathy Syndrome!" her friend replied.

"Woah... that's crazy. Hmm... I don't know." the first girl said. She cracked a smile. "I think if I could pass out with someone I liked, I wouldn't mind being unconscious!" Her friend smacked the back of her head.

"Uh, hello?! They got APATHY SYNDROME! Like, they're zombies now!" her friend said. "Geez... don't say stuff like that lightly..."

"The next big Shadow has begun to move... and it looks like it's a fan of the 'two for one' train of thought, heh." Minato thought.

"Think it'll be nice and juicy since it eats a lot?" Jack asked.

"It better be... these cross-sections are going to look amazing." Minato replied. He headed into school, and soon, an uneventful day began.

A few hours later at Naganaki Shrine, Koromaru was busy paying his respects at the destroyed memorial for the priest. Hamuko had gone out with him in an orange t-shirt with a red T-Rex design on the front, with black running pants atop sneakers. She looked around at the mostly empty area at this time of day, and sighed. "You really are a loyal dog, ya know? I mean, the guy's been dead for what, a year or so? I think it's time to move on." she said to Koromaru.

Koromaru turned to her and gave her the fiercest stare she had ever seen, catching her off guard. He turned back to the remnants of the priest's memorial, and returned to his silent vigil.

"... You don't get into it at work, but you so much as bring up this guy, and you're ready to rip somebody's jugular out."

Hamuko said. She chuckled. "That's kind of cute."

Koromaru let out a little bark, and scratched himself. He got up from his seated position and began to walk back towards the warehouse they lived in. After cutting into an alley, they encountered a lone member of The Lost standing near a dumpster. Koromaru ignored him, but Hamuko glanced at him as they passed by. She stopped once she took a few steps past him.

He had tracked her with his eyes, and was looking right at her. She moved back, and the eyes followed her. His mouth twitched, and that was more than enough justification for Hamuko's next move. She drew her rope knife and drove it straight into the man's face twice with two quick stabs, and then hurriedly pulled back to avoid getting any blood on her. His body crumpled, and she hurriedly walked away, shaking off her blade and then sheathing it. "Jeez, that was creepy as fuck..." she said. She shuddered and shook her head before pulling out her mp3 player. That had happened twice in one week, and she was not in any mood to face any external stimuli for the next two hours. She put her headphones on and hurried back to the warehouse.

Minato had just finished his lunch and gone to the bathroom once he finished. Bored with the day, he went into a stall and drew his Evoker. "Traesto." he said. There was a quick flash of light, and he reappeared on the roof of Iwatodai Station. *"Well, I've got about ten minutes. Enough time to browse manga and grab some Takoyaki."* he thought. Minato found the alleyway where the guests of Wakatsu's Divide exited

through, and he did some videogame inspired wall hopping to reach the floor. After dusting off his jacket, he walked towards the path that led to the street. A lone member of The Lost was staring at the wall near the center of the alleyway, and he moved to walk around her. He stopped walking, however, when he noticed the woman in question slowly turning her head to face him.

"Hey, what the fuck?!" David asked.

"... I thought those idiots didn't move." Hell Biker said.

"They don't, and that's how it's going to stay." Minato replied, summoning Matador's sword. He moved forwards and sliced the member of The Lost in half with one swift slice, and then let Matador's sword disappear as the two pieces of the body fell to the floor. He grinned as he walked past the corpse.

"Make her pretty, Jack." he said. Jack materialized behind him and walked over to the body, a cleaver in hand. He began dismembering the body as Minato walked out of the alley, and disappeared once every limb had been cut into three pieces, the torso split into four, and the head into two.

"... I don't think that was just a coincidence, Mister." Alice said.

"I know that... but this is only a singular occurrence." Minato said. **"If this happens often, I'm going to start seriously investigating this. Otherwise, it makes no difference... Besides, you saw how slowly The Lost move... it'd take a rather large crowd for them to have a chance of harming**

even a singular person."

He exited the alley and went around to the front of Iwatodai station. He bought some Takoyaki, and ate it as he entered the manga café to see what was new. After not finding anything of any real interest and quickly finishing his Takoyaki, he walked into the bathroom and sat on a stall. Once again, he drew his Evoker. "Traesto." he said. After a brief flash of light, he reappeared in the school's bathroom, and washed his hands before returning to class.

Meanwhile, Akihiko had left his classroom to go and grab a protein bar from the vending machines near the gym. He passed by a boy and girl he could tell were about to start making out in a shady corner near the gym, and would have ignored them if not for the sudden fit of coughing the boy seemed to have. He turned to see the boy clutching at his own throat, and the girl trying to calm him down. "Hey, hey! What's wrong?!" she asked.

"There's a!" the boy said, but began coughing again.

"There's-!" the girl said, but she suddenly began coughing as well. Akihiko ran over to them, but they both fell to the floor, shaking violently.

"Dammit, don't tell me this is!" Akihiko said, making sure neither of the students fell straight down. They shook for a bit before their eyes rolled back in their heads, and they both fell unconscious. "... Tch... so Apathy Syndrome's really starting to act up again..." Akihiko said. He had heard that the most

recent cases were supposedly in pairs, but now he had solid proof. He picked the two students up and headed towards the Nurse's Office. Though the boy and girl were unconscious now, he already knew they were going to join The Lost when they woke up.

As Akihiko carried the two students to the Nurse's Office, Minato had just returned to his class. Yukari was missing, leaving only Junpei and Kenji as the two people he would speak with in the room. He noticed, however, that both of them looked uneasy. "... What's the matter?" he asked as he took his seat.

"Dude... you know how I said we were missin' like eight people before?" Junpei asked. Minato nodded.

"... It's not just our class." Kenji said. "Bro, every class is missing about ten people now... it's kind of creepy how there are just rows of empty desks now... Like we're in a horror flick and people are being picked off."

"It's because Apathy Syndrome is spreading even more." Minato said. Junpei gave him an uneasy look.

"... You think it's gonna get worse?" he asked. Minato knew he was hinting at the number of Full Moon Shadows they had left to fight. They had beaten four, and this many people had been affected. If the Shadows came one at a time, the city really would become infested with the Lost by the time they finished.

"... Probably." Minato said. *"Well, this changes a few things. I should start investigating now."* he thought. "... Hey, do you guys know if The Lost just... move around on their own?" he asked.

"... Move around? I mean, they all just stand up and look at the sky..." Kenji said.

"Huh? I saw one of them looking at me near the mall one time..." Junpei said.

"Looking at you?" Kenji asked. Junpei nodded.

"Yeah... even turned its head to watch me... it was weirdin' me out, so I got the heck outta there as fast as I could!" Junpei said. "... Did the same thing happen to you?"

"As a matter of fact, it did." Minato said. *"Alright, so we have The Lost looking at two Persona-Users... Kenji may just be oblivious, so I can't exactly count his experience. I'll need to see who else this happened with."* "Crazy coincidence, huh?"

"Yeah... pretty crazy." Junpei said. Minato could tell from his look that he had also assumed that the reason for The Lost watching them could have to do with their Persona ability. "At least they don't walk around and make weird noises all the time, though... it would really be like a zombie movie out there." The boys all glanced at each other, and Minato could tell Kenji and Junpei were a little afraid at what could be happening. From what they could see, Minato was otherwise unaffected, albeit interested in the new development.

The school day quietly drew to a close, and Minato decided he would check with the other SEES members before working on his Social Links. "Hey, Yukari. This time, I've got a question for you." he said as he packed his things.

"Very funny... but what's up?" she asked as she also packed her things.

"Have you noticed anything weird about The Lost recently?" he asked. She stopped and gave him an inquisitive glance.

"... Aside from the fact that they're popping up in pairs now?" Yukari asked.

"Good, so you pay attention." Minato said. "Then, have you caught any of The Lost watching you instead of the sky?"

"Watching me?... No, not really, but I try to ignore them most of the time... why are you asking?" she replied. Junpei stepped forwards.

"We Ace Detectives think there's something up with them." he whispered. Yukari sighed.

"It's rude to just barge in on a conversation, Ace Defective." Yukari said.

"Hey! I'm being honest... we found something crazy out at lunch as a team!" Junpei said.

"Both of us have seen a member of The Lost actually watching us... and when we spoke with Kenji about it, he said

it never happened to him." Minato said.

"Yeah, and I asked Kaz about it when I ran into him in the bathroom, and he said the same." Junpei said. He lowered his voice. "We think it's cuz we have Personas, so we're gonna see what's up with everybody else from the dorm."

"... Sorry, I don't have anything this time." Yukari said, now taking the situation seriously. "I'll keep an eye out and ask around, though."

"Good. Tell one of us if you catch anything." Minato said. He turned to Junpei. "Go check on Fuuka for me, and see what else you can find... I'll go see our senpai and do some digging of my own."

"Got ya." Junpei said. "Sharin' back at the dorm?"

"Yup. Happy hunting." Minato said. He left class first and hurried upstairs to the third floor. He caught the three senior members of SEES in the hallway outside of their classroom, and hurried over to them. "You three, on me." Minato said as he passed them. "We've got business to attend to, and I don't want to miss this opportunity."

"Tch... this better be good." Shinjiro said, turning to follow him. Mitsuru and Akihiko joined him, and Minato walked back into their classroom to see Minato approach Mr. Toudou as he finished packing up his briefcase.

"Mr. Toudou... I've got a few questions to ask you." Minato

said.

"About?" Mr. Toudou replied without turning to face him.

"The Lost." Minato said. That got his attention, and he looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"... Ask away." Mr. Toudou said. He turned to face him as the seniors gathered behind him. "Though I'm no expert on this subject, I'll tell you what I can."

"Alright... then first off, has a member of The Lost ever watched you instead of the sky?" Minato asked.

"... Twice. When I first came to this city by train, one of them at the station tracked me for a few moments. The second time was earlier this week outside of the school." he said. "... I take it something similar has happened to you?"

"Yes... and to Junpei." Minato said. He glanced back at the seniors. "Has anybody else experienced this?"

"I catch the ones behind the station staring at me every now and again." Shinjiro said.

"... Sorry, but I've never caught any of them looking at me." Akihiko said.

"... Actually, yes... a student who was taken to the Nurse's Office at the start of the term became a member of The Lost and watched me when I was speaking with the Head of the Student Health Committee." Mitsuru said.

"So, that makes five Persona-Users who have been watched by the Lost... can you tell me why?" Minato asked.

"If I knew that, I think I'd be in a better position than janitor." Mr. Toudou said. "Perhaps they are drawn to us because we draw forth power from our minds, while they have lost theirs. We have something they wish to reclaim."

"... That's certainly plausible." Mitsuru said.

"So they're like moths and flame, then?" Shinjiro asked.

"No... they only look. I can see why it'd be unnerving, but they're still people." Akihiko said.

"Correct... broken as they may be, they are still human beings. As such, I'd advise you to avoid simply killing them off." Mr. Toudou said, shooting a quick glance at Minato. "Now, is there anything else?"

"... No, that'll be all." Minato said. "If you don't know their origin story, there's no point in asking."

"Good... then, if you'll excuse me." Mr. Toudou said. The group moved out of his way, and he walked out of the classroom.

"I'll have to contact the Chairman about this... he may have some information regarding their behavior." Mitsuru said. "I'll be returning to the dorm immediately."

"... I'll go see what's going on around the island." Shinjiro said.

He turned to Akihiko and Minato. "What about you two?"

"I've got Junpei and Yukari asking around the school." Minato said. "Let's go see what's going on in Iwatodai, Akihiko."

"Sounds like a plan." Akihiko said. He chuckled. "Another investigation on our hands, huh? Things really are getting serious."

"That's why we don't have time to play around." Minato said, heading for the door. "Me and Junpei are set to meet up back at the dorm."

"I can have the Chairman up for a video call in the fourth floor lounge." Mitsuru said. "We'll speak in there. Good luck to all of you."

With that, the members of SEES dispersed. Akihiko and Minato quickly boarded the train to Iwatodai, and prepared for the coming investigation. "The easiest place to start would be with the station... I've seen the largest amount of them there." Minato said.

"Same." Akihiko said. He looked around the train, and saw it was emptier than usual. "... With everything that's going on, it's a wonder people still live in this city. Just today, I took two students who collapsed during lunch to the Nurse's Office... They got Apathy Syndrome."

"Another couple, huh?" Minato asked. "... I've always wondered a bit about Apathy Syndrome. Are there any cases

that don't involve people turning into empty shells?"

"Not that I know of... I know that the people who recover from it usually have a variety of symptoms depending on how long they had it. Some people fall victim to fits of dizziness so severe, they lose consciousness with little to no warning. Others suffer from a constant lack of energy, aphasia, and even minor brain damage... it's almost impossible to just 'recover' from it." Akihiko said. "... Did you notice anything off about the students at school today?"

"I generally avoid paying too much attention to them." Minato said. "They were noisy with the talk about the new trend of 'couples' coming down with Apathy Syndrome, but otherwise, they seemed the same." Minato said.

"Hmph... if that's your outlook, then I see how you could have missed it." Akihiko said. "... People are starting to get a little paranoid. There were couples that were outright avoiding each other. It's understandable, but..."

"... If all of this is happening after only four of them are gone, what'll happen when the next four are gone?" Minato asked. Akihiko nodded.

"I'm not one for superstition... but if this keeps up, things may get out of hand." Akihiko said.

"Then perhaps we should just start killing off The Lost." Minato said.

"... You heard Mr. Toudou. They're still people... even if it's just for now." Akihiko said.

"And The Lost only watch... which could also be 'just for now'." Minato said.

"... So I'm not the only one who sees a storm coming." Akihiko said.

"... We might need a more violent word than 'storm'." Minato said. He smirked. "I can't lie... it's getting me a little excited."

"Heh... well, it's better than being scared." Akihiko said. He turned to Minato. "... As a leader, people are going to be counting on you for more than just your strength. And if things do get worse, you'll have your hands full. I want you to be ready to step up when the time comes."

"If you're asking me whether or not I can make the hard decisions, you have no need to worry. I prioritize the well-being of everyone in SEES above all else when we're in battle." Minato said. *"With me at the top of the list, of course."* he added in his head. "As for emotional support, I think I'm doing a good job of that already... but I'm not capable of holding all of that weight alone and performing to the best of my abilities. So when the time comes, I want you to be ready to help me with that."

"... I know. Shinji told me about Ken and what you did for both of them." Akihiko said. "I'll hold up as much as I can, no matter what happens."

"I expected no less." Minato said. "But I'm not just talking about Ken and Shinji... you have solid relationships with Junpei and Mitsuru as well, so you can help out there. Of course, you can rely on them for support if needed, you've got me in case things get out of hand, and hell, I'm pretty sure you and Officer Kurosawa are on good terms too."

Akihiko chuckled. "Mitsuru wasn't kidding... you really do keep tabs on everybody, don't you?" he asked.

"I know what I need to know... it happens to be quite a bit, but that's to be expected from someone with as many responsibilities as I have... as the Boxing Club Captain and a senior member of SEES, I think you can understand where I'm coming from." Minato said.

"I do." Akihiko said. "And allow me to be the first to say I'm impressed with what you've accomplished. You've got the strength, the skills, and the intelligence to back up your actions... in less than three months, you've practically changed SEES into a trained military unit, and been improving the lives of each member in your own way, in spite of everything that's happened to you."

"Wrong." Minato said.

"What?" Akihiko asked.

"It's not 'in spite'. It's 'because' of everything that happened to me that I can do what I do." Minato said. He chuckled. "You know, it's really unfair that all you seniors have a little dossier

detailing my history, yet I know very little of yours. I know you aren't a man with a very happy past, but if you say 'it hurts too much to talk about it', then I'll call you a little bitch, because I talk about the shit that happened to me without any problems."

"... Shinji was right, too. You phrase things in just the right way to provoke people into action." Akihiko said. "You might be even better than Mitsuru."

"Caught me, huh?... I hope Shinji doesn't go around spreading that fact too often, or I'll have to kick his ass again." Minato said. Akihiko laughed.

"I don't doubt that." he said. Akihiko let out a sigh, and then turned to face the window with a smile once more. "You're strong 'because' of your past, huh?... I guess that's the difference between you and me." Akihiko turned back to face Minato, his expression becoming more serious than before. "I'll tell you about myself the next time we get a good chance to talk... because I want to see what really makes that difference."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Emperor Arcana...

Minato smirked. "There are many differences between you

and me." he said. "But that's undoubtedly one of the biggest... I'll see what I can show you."

"I don't want a half-assed response." Akihiko said with a grin. Minato nodded to him, and the train soon reached Iwatodai station. The duo departed, and Minato quickly scanned the immediate area. Sure enough, by the edge of the platform, a male member of The Lost in their school uniform stood gazing upwards, knees slightly bent and arms hanging loosely to their sides, just barely wavering back and forth as he stood there.

"Alright, Akihiko... go walk by him. If he turns to look at you, something's up." Minato said. Akihiko nodded, and slowly walked past the member of The Lost. Sure enough, the otherwise lifeless student lowered his gaze slightly, and Akihiko saw his eyes, though aimed downwards, follow him as he walked. After he got off of the platform, Minato followed suit. Sure enough, the Lost also watched him. Minato met up with Akihiko just outside of the train platform, and nodded to him. He grimaced.

"So they are attracted to us..." he said. Minato wordlessly walked past him, and they made it to the little strip of shops near the station. "... I'm thinking of getting a quick overview of the activity that's happened in the last few days. We should split up here."

"Alright... we'll each check out a few shops and then stop at a restaurant for lunch. The people who work here will all have a good idea of what's up." Minato said.

"My thoughts exactly." Akihiko said. "I'll see the stores on the second and third floors, and finish up with Beef Bowl... but I'll leave Sweet Shop to you."

"Heh... I'll take that and the first floor stores, and then finish up at Hagakure." Minato said. "We can meet back up at the dorm with everybody else."

"Good. Then I'm off." Akihiko said. He headed up the stairs, and Minato went for his first store, Octopia. He walked up to the vendor, and recognized him as the same woman he had seen with Elizabeth.

"Oh, hey there, kid!... What happened to your 'lady' friend?" she greeted.

"Ah, she's busy." Minato said. "Has business been good?"

"For the most part. You want one of the usual?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Minato said with a smirk. The vendor chuckled and began to prepare his food. He leaned forwards on the counter and rested his face on his hands. "I don't see that many customers around anymore... something off with the 'special ingredient'?"

"No way... I get my stuff from a very reliable source." she replied. "Still, you're right... it's all those Apathy weirdos out there. Ya know, some folks think it travels through the air or somethin', and try to avoid stayin' around people who've come down with it. There are a few of em' all around the station, so

nowadays, everyone's strictly in and out."

"Sheesh... that sounds horrible." Minato said. "They've been popping up in pairs, I hear."

"Yeah, I saw a couple on a bench fall right off it." the vendor said. "Passed out, and just both got up and had the stuff. Their pals tried to get them to a hospital, but it wasn't any use... I heard they ditched them a little ways off."

"Really?" Minato asked. "I heard if you interact with them enough, they start to look at you."

"... You too?" the vendor asked.

"... It happened to somebody else?" Minato asked.

"... I ain't sayin' no names, but one of my suppliers got curious and started messin' with one of em'... and they say the stiff straight up stared at em' till they were outta sight." the vendor said. She shuddered. "It sounded creepy as hell if ya ask me."

"I heard they can start to move." Minato said. The vendor winced.

"... Well damn. I'm no criminal, but if I saw one of those things comin' at me, I'd kill it. I've seen enough weird shit to know that ain't normal." the vendor said. She packaged Minato's Takoyaki and handed it to him. "You stay safe, kid... this town is gettin' weirder every day."

"Same to you. Keep your shotgun handy." Minato said as he

paid her. The vendor chuckled.

"I've got something better." she said. Minato chuckled, and walked over to the next store in question, Book On. He entered, beginning to munch on his Takoyaki, and perused the shelves searching for something to give him an excuse to spend money. Eventually, he found an adaptation of Blue Gender: The Warrior, and decided it was worth a read if he ever got bored. He finished his Takoyaki and went to the cashier at the front, a somewhat bony looking man with shaggy silver hair and a condescending grin constantly on his face.

"So you're finally buying something, Mr. Model?" the cashier asked. He eyed his choice and chuckled. "If you liked the original's ending, you're gonna be disappointed."

"I don't mind too much if they cut the hippie stuff out." Minato said. "Did they at least keep the whole dystopian situation?" The cashier chuckled.

"Sorry, no spoilers." he said. Minato smirked, and handed him the manga.

"You know, sometimes I think The Lost should get checked for A-Cells." Minato said. "There sure have been a lot of them recently."

"You're telling me... I had to push two kids out of my store this morning. I guess that's what you get for skipping school to read manga, heh." the cashier said. "They say the thing's

been hitting couples recently... is that true?"

"Yup... must be good news for a bachelor like you, huh?" Minato asked. The cashier laughed.

"Looks like I'm in the clear, right?" he mused. "Still, you better watch yourself, boy... I'm sure a player like you has more than enough chances to catch it."

"I'll stay on my toes." Minato said. "Still, those kids you dealt with... they give you any trouble?"

"Aside from being damn annoying to move?" the cashier asked. "They just groaned a little when I gave them the boot like any other victim."

"Oh, I had just heard that if you mess with them, they start to stare at you." Minato said. "I was wondering if it was true."

"Stare at you? What do you think this is, Silent Hill?" the cashier asked. He chuckled and shook his head. "You might wanna read some kiddie stuff sometime... if that's what you normally read, I think you let too much weird stuff into your brain."

"But kiddie stuff is so predictable. Besides, what's wrong with being a bit unhinged? I'd be the cool villain with a harem." Minato said. The cashier laughed, and Minato quickly paid and took his leave. *"I didn't get any special feelings from that guy... so if a normal person messes with them, they ignore them."* Minato noted. He left the store, and skipped Wild Duck

because he was certain trying to start a conversation in a fast food restaurant was useless. He continued on to Bookworms Used Books and walked up to the chatty old couple he had met when he had gone there with Junpei.

An old man with a hunched back, a huge bald spot in the middle of his head, and wavy gray hair with oversized glasses holding a stereotypical detective's pipe was the first to greet Minato. "Oh, is that you, Minato-kun?" he asked.

"Bunkichi-san, it's been a while." Minato said, walking up to the counter. The store was as empty as it usually was, so he had no problem with simply starting a conversation with the obviously chatty old couple who ran the store. Bunkichi's wife, an equally hunched old woman who also had receding gray hair, walked up next to him.

"Ah, Minato-kun! How are you today?" she asked.

"Great, Mitsuko-san." Minato said. "I was actually wondering if you two could help me out with something."

"Anything you need." Mitsuko said.

"I have a report on current topics in the news, and I was wondering if you had any books about Apathy Syndrome. With it being on the rise and all, I think it's interesting." Minato said.

"Ah, that thing that turns people into zombies!" Bunkichi said. He let out a raspy laugh. "I don't know if we have any books on that, but we have some on zombies."

Minato chuckled. "Well, I don't know if we can call The Lost zombies, but I see where you're coming from." he said.

"Now, now, dear... this is for school." Mitsuko said. "Come along... I think we have some old journals over here..."

Minato followed the old woman to an untidy stack of books, and she looked over the titles slowly. "You know, the Lost have been appearing in pairs now... people think it's couples that are coming down with it." he said. "You should be careful, Mitsuko-san."

Mitsuko let out a little laugh. "Minato-kun, if me and Bunkichi come down with anything at our age, it'll be Alzheimer's." she mused. "... Oh, here we are. Right there."

Minato carefully removed the book she pointed at, and read the cover. 'A Case Study of Apathy Syndrome: Lost, but not Found'. He quietly chuckled a little at the title, and opened the book to view the date. It was from 2005, meaning that it was four years old. *"Well, aside from these old coots being out of it... I doubt I'll get anything substantial about how The Lost behave if this from four years ago. After all, I can always just ask Ikutsuki for records about the experiments done on them over the years if I really need to see anything."* Minato thought. "... Ah, this book is at the school library." Minato said after glancing over the first few pages. "It's a different edition, but it has the same content."

"Oh?... Well, that's all I can think of right now, but you're welcome to look around." Mitsuko said. Minato carefully put

the book back in its place, and turned to Mitsuko.

"I think I'll take my chances with online journals next. Since the amount of cases with Apathy Syndrome has increased recently, I'm sure I can find a few new ones on the subject." Minato said. "Thanks for your help." he added with a bow.

"Anytime, Minato-kun." Bunkichi said from behind the counter. Minato waved goodbye and left once more. He walked upstairs to the second floor of the set of stores, and went for Sweet Shop. Upon entry into the checkered floored establishment, he noticed a thin, pale-skinned blonde boy with a bowl cut wearing his school uniform and carrying around a black fan with a golden dragon embellishment on it. The boy let out a little gasp once he saw an item on display.

"Well, well, if it isn't Bebe." Minato thought. *"I might not be able to get much more information out of here, but I can probably set up a meeting for next week to speed along Fortune."* He walked up next to Bebe, and waved at the person who worked the counter, a short and somewhat chubby teenage girl with purple hair set in two pigtails that went down to her upper back who generally appeared happy, though Minato assumed that was one of the requirements to work in an establishment that constantly played either Risetete or Vocaloid music. She wore a white dress with a black apron and a white cap on her head, with numerous little bangles and bracelets around her wrists.

"Welcome back, Minato!" she greeted.

"How's it going, Shiori-chan? I see you haven't cut back on those cakes yet." he said.

"Wha-?! Meanie!" Shiori replied. She stuck her tongue out at him, and he laughed. Bebe, who was standing next to him, shifted his gaze from what Minato considered to be an overly decorated Red Velvet cake to Minato.

"... Eez zat really you, Minato-sama?" Bebe asked, his accent heavily spilling over into his Japanese. Minato turned to Bebe with a smirk.

"The model in the flesh." he said. Bebe let out a little cry of excitement, and he chuckled. "You're... Bebe, from the Fashion Club, right?" he asked.

"Yes! I am 'appy you know zat!" he said.

"Oh, you two know each other?" Shiori asked.

"We go to the same school." Minato said. "And I've heard you're really good at what you do, Bebe. You must make the other members of Fashion Club jealous."

Bebe's expression darkened a bit. "Actually... zere are no other members." he said. Minato faked surprise by letting his expression drop and blinking once.

"... Wait, what?" he asked.

"Eez true... I 'ave yet to get anyone to join." Bebe said.

"Huh?! But you're so nice, Bebe!" Shiori said. Minato scratched his head, and looked at the roof. He smirked, and then turned back to face Bebe.

"I think I can help you with that." Minato said.

"Eh?! You are joining?!" Bebe asked, fire lighting in his eyes.

"Ah, sorry, but I'm not." Minato said.

"What? Don't be so mean, Minato..." Shiori said.

"I've got a plan to get other people to join Fashion Club." Minato said. "I mean, I've got Council, Art, and Photography, so I'm a busy guy... but you've seen some of the pictures I've had with my partner, Catherine, right?"

"Ah, yes! Just ze other day, Shiori-san was talking about how she 'ad one with –" Bebe began.

"I have no idea what he's talking about!" Shiori said quickly, suddenly ducking down and becoming very interested in the cakes on display. Minato laughed.

"Well, aside from... whatever Shiori-chan was talking about, it's good that you know us." Minato said. He grinned. "What do you say we do some pictures in clothing you make, huh? I'll model just like I do on the job, people get attracted by your clothing, and Fashion Club becomes popular."

"... Zat eez amazing, Minato-sama!" Bebe said. He suddenly hugged Minato, and Shiori, who had just gotten out of her

hiding spot, was forced to return almost instantly. "Thank you so much! I am so 'appy right now!"

"Hey, it's no big deal! I transferred around a lot too, so I know how tough it can be to do your thing on your own." Minato said. Bebe let go of him, and Minato adjusted his clothing. "You were eyeing that Red Velvet cake over there. I think we three could split it, huh, Shiori-chan?"

"... Are you going to call me fat?" she asked.

"Don't be like zat, Shiori-san! Zis eez a meal with friends!" Bebe said. "I'm so 'appy, eez my treat!"

"You can always start dieting tomorrow, right?" Minato added. "Besides, I like girls that aren't stick figures."

"O-oh, if you want to share, then..." Shiori said, slowly popping up from behind the counter. Minato and Bebe both shared a little laugh, and Shiori took her break to eat with them.

After finishing a rather tasty third of a cake, Minato bid goodbye to Bebe and Shiori. *"Bebe's actually a pretty fun guy... though I don't think I would have joined Fashion Club even if my fate wasn't changed... then again, how could I know if I would think the same way if my fate weren't altered?... Quite the topic to think about."* he thought as he entered Hagakure.

The usual server who spoke to Shinjiro was there, and Minato

took an empty seat at the counter. "Hey there, Minato. Rare to see you on your own." he said. "Had a bad day?"

"Nah... Shinji was busy, and the rest of the guys were acting a little paranoid with all The Lost around the place." Minato said.

"I don't blame them... they pop up, and then suddenly, a bunch of people recover, only for them to pop up again." the server said. "Never seen a disease act like the tides before... it's something odd, I'll tell you that."

"No kidding... one of the guys even said he caught one of them watching him when he walked by." Minato said. "Have you ever heard of that happening before?"

"One of them watching someone?" the server asked. "... Nope. Can't say I have... but that's a new level of strange."

"Tell me about it." Minato said. "Maybe the guys are right... I should probably head out of here pretty quickly." The server chuckled.

"Hey, haven't you heard? Apathy Syndrome's only hitting couples these days, so you boys should be fine." the server said. "Well, assuming you avoid those girls I hear you've got chasing you around."

Minato laughed. "I'm in more trouble than I thought... On second thought, I'll have to stay here for that much longer, then." he said. "I'll take a Hagakure Bowl, Emperor sized, with

extra beef."

"Got ya... Spicier broth?" the server replied.

"That's the only way I like it." Minato said. The server laughed, and headed off to the back to prepare Minato's meal. *"Alright, we've got a first-hand account from Book-On and the knowledge from a man who sees and speaks to a bunch of people on a daily basis supporting the fact that the Lost show little interest in normal people. Add that to Octopia's supplier catching notice, and I think it's safe to say they only seem to have an interest in people with ties to the supernatural."* he thought.

"Well, that's a pretty hefty sum of evidence." David said.

"Shinji's right... you'd be surprised what you can learn on the streets." Hell Biker said.

"... So are we killing them off or what?" Jack asked.

"Not yet... they haven't proven themselves to be a threat." Minato replied. *"Emphasis on 'yet'."*

After a rather fulfilling meal, Minato headed back to the dorm, and returned as night fell. The other members of SEES were all in the lounge, meaning he was the last to arrive. "S'up, dude? Got some good info?" Junpei greeted.

"I did... have you set up the call with Ikutsuki, Mitsuru?" Minato replied.

"Yes... he's gotten himself thirty minutes to speak with us, so we should hurry." she said. SEES collectively made its way into the fourth floor meeting room, and Mitsuru set up a video conference with Ikutsuki on the huge monitor as everyone took a seat. He appeared to be in a very plain room dressed in a somewhat dirty looking lab coat, albeit from what Minato could see, it was probably underground considering it had what he was certain was concrete roof.

"Ah, good evening, everyone! I'm sorry if I've been out of touch recently." Ikutsuki said. He smirked. "They say if you get caught up in a good day's work, it'll be a good week's before you know it!"

Minato chuckled while the majority of the other members cringed. "I see you had time to 'steel' your wit over there, huh?" he asked. Ikutsuki couldn't help but chuckle at the inside joke.

"I have... but, we should make this quick." Ikutsuki said. "Now then... from what Mitsuru's notification told me, you've noticed The Lost exhibiting... strange behavior?"

"That is correct, Mr. Chairman." Mitsuru said. "As Junpei and Minato were the ones to point this out, I believe I'll let them begin."

"Yup... we Ace Detectives felt something was off, so we had a little chat over lunch about it." Junpei said in a coarser voice than usual. He adjusted his cap, and leaned forwards in his seat, creating an arch with his hands so that his nose rested

on top of it. "We were taking our jobs as defenders of the city seriously, pitting the number of The Lost against how many students were missing from our school..."

"Honestly?... I'm impressed, Junpei." Mitsuru said. Yukari sighed.

"He's just making exposition to sound official." she said.

"We had gotten one of our sources, who we'll call Mr. Chin, and brought him in for a few questions." Junpei continued, undaunted by Yukari's commentary. "Mr. Chin said that a lot of the students who were missing did end up joining The Lost... and that's when it hits Minato like a truck. He asks us if either of us had seen the stiffs moving around on their own... because he's noticed a few of them looking at him when he goes around. It all came rushing back to me... a stiff at the mall, watching my every move... Mr. Chin says he's never experienced anything like it, and starts to get a little scared... It's understandable. Those stiffs, moving about on their own? It'd be a horror movie... Regardless, we Ace Detectives realized it immediately... if Mr. Chin wasn't being monitored, but we were, it must have something to do with our 'special' abilities... so once the Station closed, we told Assistant Investigator Yukaricchi about it, and the investigation began." Junpei returned to his normal position, and Minato shot him a little thumbs-up for his story-telling. He grinned while Yukari let out another sigh.

"... *You believe the Lost are watching people who possess Personae?*" Ikutsuki asked.

"Yup, that's right." Junpei said.

"I got everyone to do some digging of their own to see what they could find out." Minato said. "I'll share what I've got first. The seniors know this, but I spoke to Mr. Toudou about the subject as well... according to him, another known Persona-user, a similar situation has happened to him twice. Akihiko hadn't experienced the phenomena first hand, so we found a member of The Lost at Iwatodai Station and did trial walk-by... he was monitored, as was I."

"I thought it could have just been coincidence... but when it happens to you first hand, an opinion changes quickly."
Akihiko said.

"After confirming the attraction to SEES members, we split up and visited various shops at the station to see what we could find." Minato continued. "... I won't get into specifics about Octopia, but I'm aware that the owner of the shop has ties to the supernatural. Needless to say, one of her 'suppliers' also reported being monitored by a member of The Lost, giving further evidence that they seem to be attracted to people with special abilities... the man who runs Book-On reported getting no reaction other than the usual grunt when a couple in his store came down with Apathy Syndrome and he physically pushed them outside."

"They didn't do anything to somebody moving them around?... That's odd..." Fuuka said.

"Finally, at Hagakure, the rather talkative server had never

seen nor heard of anybody being 'watched' by the Lost, which gives me the impression that most normal people really are ignored." Minato said. "I also tried Bookworms and Sweet Shop, but the owners of Bookworms were so out of touch, they didn't even realize couples were coming down with Apathy Syndrome, and the staff of Sweet Shop tried to avoid the generally gloomy topic. That concludes my findings."

"That's quite the amount of evidence... While I can't attest to personally experiencing such a phenomena myself, a few members of the staff at Gekkoukan have reported similar incidents... most notably, Mr. Edogawa... he often complains that the students brought to him with Apathy Syndrome almost always end up watching him until they are taken away." Ikutsuki said.

"... So the ones that used to work for the Kirijio-Group directly really do have Personas." Akihiko said.

"Woah, wait, what?! Our profs have Personas?!" Junpei asked.

"That's correct... however, many of them become unstable in or around Tartarus, endangering their lives. That's why we've been giving the task of exploring it, and not them." Mitsuru said.

"... I thought I felt something from a few of them, but I didn't think they had Personas..." Fuuka said.

"Yes... most of the teachers remain in the city in the event

that a large number of Shadows begin to leave Tartarus and storm the city." Ikutsuki said.

"Really?,,, Then, could they help us out during the Full Moons?" Yukari asked.

"... That's doubtful, actually. They all have positions on the outskirts of the city to prevent the Shadows from leaving Iwatodai... occasionally one or two may slip past them, since the majority of them lack sensory abilities, but they eliminate the majority of Shadows before they can escape." Ikutsuki said. *"I'm sorry, but you'll have fight without expecting any help. However, I'm certain you're more than capable of winning."*

"Yeah, we're not screwing up anytime soon!" Junpei said. "Besides, when we win, we can totally gloat to our teachers once it's all over!... But, how come we can't get a special bonus on our grades?"

"Active duty or not, we still have twenty-four hours of the day which we have full control over. If anything, we should be held to higher standards since we have an extra hour to work with." Minato said. Junpei cringed.

"... Yeesh, ya really are a grind core guy, huh?" he asked.

"So we're on our own as usual... now that that's settled, let's get back to business." Shinjiro said.

"Shinji's right. You're up, Junpei." Akihiko said.

"Me to bat? Alright... well, I went about doing the ground work, ya know?" Junpei began. "I talked to a bunch of the guys at school, and all of em' said they never heard of a member of The Lost watching anybody. It was the same with the guys over at Paulownia, too... the guy who runs the arcade didn't say anything about it, and the waitresses at Café Chagall said they never heard anybody talk about it. Weren't much help when it came to their own experience though, cuz they said 'everybody's watching us', heh. Anyways, the last guy I talked to was Officer Kurosawa... and that's where the story gets funny. Apparently, when he got called into move some of those guys off the street, they all started staring at him! He's been noticing that the ones around the mall always watch him just the same, too."

"That's understandable... Kurosawa has a history with the JSDF." Minato said. "He's got some form of connection to the supernatural."

"... So they are attracted to anyone who's dealt with anything out of the ordinary." Ikutsuki said. "... Getting Apathy Syndrome leaves a scar on the victim's mind... perhaps The Lost are simply attracted to people who have developed their minds enough to deal with otherworldly forces, since they would naturally exude some kind of presence... in that case, The Lost could be considered to have a 'sixth sense' in place of their others."

"Y-yeah, I was thinking the same..." Junpei said. "So, Yukatan, what did you get?"

"... I know a lot of the girls at school have just been avoiding The Lost in general." Yukari said. "But... Catherine said she's caught a few of them looking at her."

"... Does she have the potential?" Mitsuru asked. Minato chuckled.

"She's more along the lines of me and Big Boss." he said. Fuuka turned to him.

"W-wait... so she's really..." Fuuka began.

"Not human? Correct." Minato said, catching everyone off guard.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait! You mean..." Yukari began.

"She doesn't mean much harm... well, not to people that aren't her targets, anyways." Minato said. "Just leave her be. There are a lot of demons like that, right, Shinji?"

"... He ain't lying." Shinjiro said, getting everyone else's attention. "But don't go getting too friendly with her. We're gonna stomp her if she starts causing problems."

"I'm aware of that, and so is she." Minato said. "You can think of me as... her manager. I make sure she doesn't get out of line when she decides to play."

"... That explains your... usual proximity..." Mitsuru said.

"I have quite the list of responsibilities, do I not?" Minato

mused. "Regardless, is that all, Yukari?"

"... Oh, I think Rio said Ms. Kanou was complaining about it once, but now that we know about the staff... well, it's not very useful." Yukari said.

"I see... well, as long as you keep that demon from causing any problems, Minato, I'll let her be... though I am a bit concerned by her presence..." Ikutsuki said.

"... I think she just wants to have fun." Junpei said with a smirk. "I mean, she's nice enough."

"You're just supporting her because she'll talk to you." Yukari said.

"Hey! Wasn't she YOUR friend first?" Junpei asked.

"Both of you should be nice to her... just because she isn't normal doesn't mean you need to act differently." Fuuka said. "I think she's a good person."

"Regardless of who is electing to defend her," Akihiko interrupted, "we need to finish this up... Fuuka, have you gotten anything?"

"A-after Junpei told me what was going on, I decided to stick with Natsuki... we asked around a bit, but nobody said anything about The Lost watching them. Sorry..." she said.

"No... That's still more evidence that those without ties to the

supernatural remain unaffected." Mitsuru said. She turned to Akihiko. "Do you have anything to report?" she asked.

"... The majority of third floor shops were useless." Akihiko said. "Too many of them were busy, so I couldn't find out much... but the waiter at Wakatsu was a little suspicious when I asked him about it. He said 'he had heard of it, but didn't really put any stock into it'... which means he knows it can happen, but he doesn't trust me enough to say who it was. Other than that, Beef Bowl had the same story as Hagakure... a lot of talk about the sudden rise in couples cases, but no known incidents of people being watched."

"The man at Wakatsu probably knows something, but I doubt even I could get specifics from him." Minato said. "I think we should write him off as useless as well, since it's unlikely he'll cooperate that much with any of us... unless you want me to abduct him and threaten his life."

"T-that isn't necessary!" Ikutsuki said. "I mean, while I don't doubt your abilities... I believe we should avoid creating a criminal record for you again."

"... That's correct." Mitsuru said. "Well, I'll be brief... my questioning of the teachers revealed exactly what Mr. Chairman revealed with his revelation on their status as Persona-users, so I'm afraid nothing of real note can be taken from that."

"Leaving only Shinji." Minato said.

"Tch... well, since we're bein' open about our contacts," Shinjiro began, shooting Minato a quick glance, "the normal punks at the back of Port Island are all ignored... even the ones that rob The Lost. The other guys down at Red Hawk, though... a lot of them said they were being watched. As for your sensei... he said they would always look at him, and then look away just as quickly."

Minato chuckled. "He's a scary bastard, I'll give him that." he said. "To think things without minds would still have enough to sense not to mess with him... that's funny as hell."

"A personal trainer?" Akihiko asked.

"He trains me to use my trump card." Minato said. "Still kicks my ass almost every time, though."

"... Bro, you're shitting me." Junpei said, his jaw dropping. Minato glanced around, and saw everyone other than Shinjiro had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that someone could 'kick Minato's ass', even more so when he was using his trump card that allowed him to easily defeat Fuuka's Shadow.

"... *Well, as long as he's on our side, I suppose we're in the clear.*" Ikutsuki said. "*Although, back to our main subject... I assume the people in 'Red Hawk' are...?*"

"Demons, demon tamers, and others like them." Shinjiro said. "They go about their own business... if they act out of line, Big Boss deals with them."

"... *Very well.*" Ikutsuki said. He cleared his throat. "So, we can safely say that *The Lost* are attracted only to people with an affinity for the supernatural... and for now, they only watch them... While I'm curious as to when this behavior began or what sparked it, we can only observe them for now. I believe it's best to simply tolerate them for now before taking any action."

"I agree." Mitsuru said. "Thank you for your cooperation, everyone... and thank you, Minato and Shinjiro, for your openness about the... nature of your contacts. While we may not be able to act for now, I believe this meeting has served another purpose... it shows our ability to unify and act both independently and together should the need arise... for that, I'm proud to say I'm happy for all of us."

CRACK!

"*Oh? This is unexpected...*" Minato thought.

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fool Arcana...

"... *Perhaps I can afford to give the brothers another day.*" Minato thought. "*Two a day is more than enough to finish with plenty of time to spare before the end of the year.*"

"Indeed... we're closer as a team than we were before." Minato said. He chuckled. "And we're going to feast tonight in

celebration. Fuuka, Shinji, I'll need your help in the kitchen."

"Are you sure? I don't want to mess it up." Fuuka said.

"I'll be right there with you, and I don't think Shinji would let you mess it up even if you tried." Minato mused.

"You remember how I teach." Shinji said. Fuuka couldn't help but giggle.

"Okay then... it's a deal." she said.

"It's good to see everyone getting along." Ikutsuki said with a smile. "I think we can safely conclude our meeting here. I should be able to make it full swing before the moon, heheh. I'll see you all then!"

With that odd pun, Ikutsuki disconnected from the video call. With everyone acknowledging the current situation, SEES spent a generally joyful dinner together. As Minato worked with everyone and ate, a single thought crept into the back of his mind. *"I had almost forgotten there was a cumulative Link with all of the SEES members... I'll need to take that into account when considering their executions... Perhaps I'll have to wait for them all to finish before dealing with them collectively... hmm..."*

74. Chapter 74

Chapter 74: Established

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: In Minato's eyes, The Lost aren't exactly alive. Also, he doesn't view killing people as being a particularly bad thing... if you want more details, revisit Chapter 42.

Author Note to Luckenhaft: Who knows? They're flying over my head, since I never played Danganronpa.

Author Note to guedesbrawl: Uhh, he just did get over his attachment issue... he has a pretty clear plan for it. And no, while I contemplated Chidori for Hanged Man, I saw no real way to make it work properly. Also, Koromaru will never join SEES as long as Minato is around because Minato destroyed the only real memorial left for his owner. In front of him. And then beat him and broke his hind legs.

Minato showered as dawn broke and changed into a comfortable outfit that he would wear for the majority of the day. He elected to go with his light blue graphic butterfly t-shirt, his sleeveless black jacket on top of his black and blue cargo shorts. He threw on his sneakers, hat, and watch before heading out, making sure to carry his umbrella since

there was a chance of rain later in the day.

After a short lone breakfast, he walked to Paulownia Mall and took a seat on one of the benches near the fountain. It was almost deserted, and he had a few hours before work began. *"Alright, I want you all on watch in case Kazuya shows up."* Minato ordered his Fiends. *"Patrol the entrances and tell me as soon as anything happens."*

"Easy." Matador said. His Fiends all left his head, and he noticed their tiny floating skulls hurriedly gliding along the floor and going up along the corners of buildings to get a better vantage point. He chuckled.

"Alright, then... now to check on Naoto." Minato thought. He took out his cellphone and quickly dialed her number. The phone rang twice before an answer came.

"Good morning." Naoto answered. She sounded as if she had hurriedly collected herself before she answered.

"That's rather formal, Nao-chan." Minato said. "Did I wake you up?"

"B-brother?" Naoto asked. Minato chuckled.

"I did, didn't I? You didn't even get the chance to check who was calling, huh?" he said. Naoto sighed.

"That's correct..." she said.

"If I'm disturbing your sleep, I'll call back some other time."
Minato said.

"No, it's fine... A detective must always be available in case of emergencies." Naoto said. She let out a slight yawn. *"Or so grandpa says..."*

"Well, he isn't exactly lying." Minato mused. "So... how are things going?"

"... I believe I should be asking you that question." Naoto said. *"Ayato may have let slip a bit of information about a certain... encounter you had."*

"Oh, the one at the bar?" Minato asked.

"The one with an assassin, brother." Naoto said.

"... Didn't I tell you not to become like me?" Minato asked. "Let me guess, Ayato let slip some gruesome details involving a severed head, right?"

"... He mentioned burning a body to cover up evidence." Naoto said. *"And your overall cheerfulness in the situation."*

"Hence, the 'don't become like me' warning I repeatedly give you." Minato said. He sighed. "Look, I'll be honest with you, Nao-chan... I enjoy what I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't bother with it."

"Hmm... while I cannot say I agree with that logic... I

understand why you would follow it." Naoto said. "If anybody deserves to, I imagine it would be you."

"Oh, c'mon! I'm not going to use my lame sob story history as an excuse! I don't even see why I need to justify a perfectly sensible method of living." Minato said. "You're becoming a detective because you enjoy it, aren't you? I'm just refusing to accept the fact that people have to do something they don't want to UNLESS, let me make this clear, it moves them towards a goal which cannot simply be accomplished with a few day's work. Then, I'll make the exception."

Naoto chuckled. *"Well, at least you still adhere to rational thought."* she said. *"I must admit... when I try to view the world in that light, I can't help but find it full of opportunity."*

"See, you get where I'm coming from." Minato said. "And within each opportunity lies even more... once you realize what you want, you tend to become rather greedy."

"... That sounds like something a super villain would say to justify his actions." Naoto said. She laughed. *"Is that what you fancy yourself as, brother?"*

Minato laughed. "It's less 'fancy' and more 'consider'." he said. "You don't mind becoming a little corrupt so we never end up facing off with one another, do you?"

"Hmph. As the last Aeon of the Shirogane, it would have to be my duty to remedy the family name by personally dealing with you." Naoto mused.

"Then it would be a serious duel to the death." Minato mused. They both laughed again. "Still, you seem to be doing fine... by the way, where are you?"

"At the Shirogane Estate, of course... though if you'd like more specifics, I'm afraid only grandpa is allowed to share that, even with you." Naoto said.

Minato chuckled. "Well, that's not a problem. I was just curious." he said. "Still, you sound like you really want those extra few minutes of rest. Don't overwork yourself, and I'll speak to you some other time."

"... Thank you. Goodbye, brother." Naoto said. Minato hung up the phone, and checked the time. He still had a good three hours left until he had to work, and decided to visit Café Chagall, mainly for a better rest area than the bench near the fountain.

On the other side of town, in the abandoned warehouse which housed Hamuko and her consorts, Takaya rose from lying on the floor of an empty room on the second floor. He surveyed his surroundings, checking to ensure he was still in the same place he fell asleep in. His 'room' was barren, save for a case overflowing with bullets in the corner and a few jeans sprawled on the floor on top of it. "... And so another restless night passes." he said to himself. He adjusted his revolver strap, still on him since he usually slept fully clothed, and walked into the empty corridor that housed his room. He passed by Jin's room, and glanced inside to see him still sleeping on his simple twin bed. There were numerous

electronics, explosives, and books scattered about the room, and Takaya couldn't help but chuckle as he passed by.

He made his way downstairs to the large room and walked over to the bookshelf full of magazines. His clipboard of writings was on top of it, and he picked it up before sitting down on a bean bag once more. He sat there, still for a few moments, before sinking back into the bean bag. "... Hypnos." he said. A swirl of blue energy surrounded him, and his Persona materialized above him.

Hypnos' body consisted of two large, feathered black wings which were connected to numerous red veins that coiled around each other and then dispersed again to connect to various points along the back of a shriveled, completely white, slightly muscular bald man who wore a 'X' shaped black leather strap over his face. Its eyes were just barely open, showing only a slight hint of white and gray underneath heavy eyelids, and its mouth just barely pursed open.

Takaya laughed at his Persona. "You fared no better than I." he said.

"I art thou..." Hypnos replied. Though it spoke clearly, its mouth barely moved, only opening slightly more than usual.

"Indeed..." Takaya responded. He sighed, and closed his eyes. "... Ironic, isn't it? You and I will never know rest... we shall haunt this plane of existence until we return to dust or the plane is destroyed... and even though we are steadily moving towards that goal, every minute spent doing nothing is

torture."

"... **My cave has changed... my fate has not...**" Hypnos replied.

"Our very existences are nothing more than a joke... there is no meaning to our continued existence. If we disappeared, another would take our place... and those we erase are eventually replaced as well... and even if we did nothing, the inevitable end would still come." Takaya said. "... Tell me... what are we?"

"... **Puppets.**" Hypnos said.

"... As I thought." Takaya said. He chuckled. "... Is this why we were different? Unlike the others, you and I never quarreled... we have always viewed the world in the same light."

"... **Thou art I.**" Hypnos said.

"... I suppose that is all that must be said." Takaya replied. "Perhaps we can find solace in writing once more." At that, Hypnos disappeared, and Takaya rose in his chair. He took the pen from the top of the clipboard, and began to write down the first thing that came to his mind: a little tirade on the nihilistic reality that plagues humanity.

A few hours later back at Paulownia Mall, Minato was disappointed. He hadn't been able to find Kazuya before going to work, and Nemissa had simply left a note for him instructing

him to proceed as he normally would have, since she was away on 'business'. With absolutely no chance of Social Link advancement, Minato found himself stuck in Be Blue V working solely for profit, which, in all honesty, he didn't really mind.

While Minato was busy at work, Yukari had resigned herself to remaining in her room for the day. She had her laptop hooked up on her bed, which consisted of mainly pink and white sheets with a pattern of hearts decorating it, and had been searching tirelessly for any clues she could get about the Dark Hour and Tartarus.

To Yukari's chagrin, simply searching for either of those terms brought up nothing except videogame related results and Greek Mythology, neither of which seemed relevant, despite the fact that the members of SEES save Minato and Fuuka all happened to possess Personae of Grecian origins. She thought that maybe it had something to do with Greek Mythological Figures being explicit representations of human nature, and since Minato and technically Fuuka weren't exactly human, their Personas couldn't exactly represent something about humans.

She quickly dismissed the idea. Now wasn't the time to start writing people off as not being human. She'd be no better than the people she hated if she began to do that. With newfound focus borne from the desire to forget her previous thoughts, she began to research Gekkoukan High School. The usual facts and news reports came. The rise in the number of cases of Apathy Syndrome, the criticisms about the school being

owned by the Kirijio Group and not the government, and a number of other articles that proved useless passed in and out of her attention.

Finally, after a few hours of searching, Yukari came across articles detailing the explosion that had occurred at the school ten years ago. She read about the lab which caused it, and decided to look into it... and, to her surprise, other than a few passing mentions detailing the explosion itself, it was as if the lab never existed. She found out that it was run by the Kirijio Group, but other than that, knew nothing. She poured hours into trying to find out anything she could about labs run by the Kirijio Group, only to draw blanks or reach pages she couldn't access. Yukari had hit a wall, and could quickly tell that she wasn't the one for this job... but she knew somebody who was.

Elsewhere, on an undisclosed island in an underground bunker, a blue-haired girl with piercing red eyes stood in the center of a dark room. She had on golden headphones that went directly over the center of her head and fully covered her ears, forming thin outstretched spires over either ear. Each spire had a thin black ring that surrounded the spire near its apex, and the ring was host to a thin strip of golden metal that went up above the headphones to form a knight-inspired visor with a butterfly design that rested slightly above the headphones. The gaps left by the visor were filled in by an ultra-thin, bright red screen, and it could have passed as a hairband above the headphones.

The girl wore no clothes, her 'skin' being a sleek black metal

coating with golden bands covering her shoulders and elbows. While her left hand looked normal, her right hand was altered at the elbow, going into an oversized white gauntlet that had an open elbow spike, and a singular gold and red butterfly wing attachment that looked like her visor sprouting from a golden band around her wrist. She wore a gold and red battle-dress, which formed what looked like a skirt of metallic feathers which covered her rear and her direct front. Each feather had a black metal blade protruding from it, each one almost reaching her knee joints, which lacked any of the gold that the embellishments on her upper body had. Her feet were thin but very solid stubs, having only a slight indent around the heel area for better footing. She held a very thin golden sledgehammer with a cross-shaped head in her right hand, one side protruding with a little spike to denote that it was the one meant for hitting.

"Metis," Ikutsuki's voice said from an unseen intercom, "this is the last trial. If you can pass this, you'll be able to learn the true meaning of your existence... the answer you have long awaited will finally come to you."

"... Understood." Metis said without showing any emotion. She shifted on her legs so that they were slightly bent, and held her sledgehammer with both hands slightly to her right. "Begin."

A singular light in the room she stood in came to life, and it revealed itself as nothing more than a plain circular room with concrete walls and a steel floor. Behind Metis rested one

door, and in front of her lay another. The one in front of her opened, and a hulking mass of gray steel lumbered inside. It had two stubby legs which were taller than she was, a thick reinforced torso with a demon's face complete with red eyes plastered onto it, which she assumed housed the core, and two large arms, the right arm housing a huge blade which she noted had vents near the edge, hinting that it her opponent used a heated blade, and the left arm sprouting into a gigantic three-fingered claw, presumably made for crushing.

"This is your final opponent... the fifth generation HSW-23: Banshee." Ikutsuki said. "Be careful, Metis... this one might actually be able to cause real damage."

Metis chuckled, and then grinned. "It's cute." she said. Without another word, Metis dashed forwards, sledgehammer in hand, and went for one of Banshee's legs. Banshee's eyes lit up, and it's blade began to heat and glow a bright orange. It stepped forwards and took one swift slice at Metis, intending to cut her in two. Metis bent backwards and skidded on her knees, allowing the blade to pass over her. She was losing speed, and activated her arm thruster. Her right arm sputtered, releasing a burst of sparks followed by full on flame as she pushed out of her slide using only her legs. It propelled her through the air, and she tightened her grip on her sledgehammer. The extending nail seethed with energy, and was engulfed in red sparks. With one swift strike, she dug into one of Banshee's legs and landed behind it, skidding on her feet once more so she was always facing her enemy.

Her attack did little actual damage, and Banshee quickly extended a set of treads from the underside of its legs, pushing itself up, and then turned in one quick swivel to face Metis. By the time it had turned around, Metis had already run underneath it again and taken a chunk of its other leg. She turned to run around it, but Banshee had suddenly opened up numerous small parts of its torso and revealed little thrusters that allowed it to turn to her once more by the time she had gotten back into her fighting stance. It opened its mouth, revealing a large flamethrower, and spewed fire at her. Metis quickly dashed out of the way, keeping her eyes on her opponent the whole time.

"Psyche!" she called as she ran around her arena. Above her, a large white gown adorned with white flowers at the waist appeared above her, being extremely wide at the bottom yet empty inside save for a golden skeletal frame outlining the dress. Its torso was empty, allowing the golden frame to form a wide oval where the dress ended, and then end in a singular spire. Floating right in front of the spire was a gigantic set of red butterfly wings that met at the top of the spire, creating a small face made by their connection. Around the body of the Persona floated two empty white silk gloves that served as its arms. "Fatal End!"

Psyche flew upwards above the flames as Metis kept going, and then sped right at Banshee, the silk gloves coming together as if to brace for impact. Banshee stopped shooting fire and went to counter Psyche with its claw, attempting to grab it out of the air. Psyche swiped its hands, knocking the

claw away and sending Banshee backwards a little. Banshee swiftly brought its sword up to destroy Psyche, but the Persona broke apart before it had the chance to bring its blade down. Banshee's blade smashed into the floor, and it quickly turned its attention back to Metis. She had run up the wall at high speed and leapt at its exposed back. She drove her sledgehammer into the top of Banshee's armored torso, and then quickly withdrew it for another strike.

At the second impact, Banshee opened its side thrusters and began to spin violently, tilting and flailing without any purpose other than to shake Metis off. Metis cursed under her breath as she was forced to wedge her sledgehammer into Banshee's torso one last time before having to drop to her knees and focus solely on hanging on. "Bufula!" she called. Psyche appeared above her and raised its ghostly hands upwards. Ice appeared to cover the majority of Banshee's thrusters, and it quickly slowed.

Metis took her opportunity and jumped from her disadvantageous position to the ground a little distance away from Banshee. It saw her, and quickly aimed its claw at her and opened all three fingers. "Garula!" Metis called as Banshee fired an electrified net at her from its claw. Psyche brought its hands down quickly, and a gust of wind came and sent Banshee's attack off course, giving Metis enough time to dodge. She ran forwards as Banshee's thrusters destroyed the last remnants of ice covering its body and it charged towards her on its treads. Psyche disappeared, and Banshee brought its blade down to the floor in front of it as it advanced

and readied its claw. Metis smiled, seeing the action as a challenge, and she used her left hand to grab the visor on her head.

As the two were about to clash, Metis jumped into the air to avoid Banshee's blade, twirling in midair so that her back faced the floor while pulling her visor down to cover her eyes and nose. Her manic smile widened. "Neo..." she began. Banshee quickly used its claw to try and grab her. The fingers had almost reached her as she finished her sentence. "... Orgia Mode."

Metis' visor began to glow, along with her battle skirt, and her right arm shot out a huge torrent of flame, propelling her upwards at a ridiculous speed, well out of Banshee's reach. She tilted in the air and grabbed her sledgehammer allowing her feet to smash into the roof as she adjusted her sights. Her visor replaced her eyes, and she could easily see exactly which parts of Banshee were the most vulnerable in less than a second. With one swift push and the aid of her arm rocket once more, she descended on Banshee, her sledgehammer once again forming its aura of red sparks. It took one swift slice and a resounding crash into the floor to sever Banshee's claw hand. Metis didn't stop, however. The shock passed perfectly through her body, and actually energized her.

She bounded out of the smoke caused by her slamming into the ground, and took two quick chunks out of Banshee's legs, reaching the opposite wall and jumping onto it. Banshee quickly responded by slicing its gigantic blade at her. She turned, and jumped straight into the slice, meeting it with her

sledgehammer. She stopped in mid-air, and her arm rocket activated. Her battle-dress lifted, and numerous small rockets fired off from the underside of it as well. After a few moments of a standstill, Banshee was pushed backwards. Metis let out a loud laugh. "Is that all you have?!" she taunted. With one swift maneuver, she pushed Banshee's blade to the ground and landed next to it.

Metis grabbed onto the back of the blade and quickly lifted Banshee into the air, her dress's blades extending and digging into the ground to give her more footing. "Weakling!" Metis yelled as she threw Banshee into the air. Psyche appeared in front of her and zoomed forwards much faster than before. "Fatal End!" Metis called as she took off running underneath her Persona. Psyche used its ghostly arms and clawed Banshee's weakened blade arm clean off, leaving the armless HSW to crash into the ground. Metis jumped on top of its face as soon as it slammed into the ground, and began hacking away at it, her rocket arm empowering each swing and her battle-dress' blades cutting into it as she worked her way up its body. Finally, she got to the eyes, and drove her sledgehammer into one. Banshee shook violently, but was unable to get back up in its current condition. Metis saw its helplessness, and laughed.

Left to Metis' mercy, Banshee had its face rapidly mutilated by numerous gouges and slashes from her sledgehammer. When its face was barely recognizable, Metis did a little jump flip to slam her sledgehammer down into it once more, and she connected with its core. Banshee stopped shaking, and

Metis knew she had won. Her visor returned to its position atop her head, and she laughed as her arm began to release smoke. She slowly walked off of Banshee's remains, dragging her sledgehammer along in her left hand as her right hung loosely to her side. She walked through the open door that Banshee had entered from, and her arm recovered enough for her to allow it to carry her sledgehammer.

When she passed through the large metallic doors, she found herself in another narrow dark hallway. With nothing to do but walk forwards, she frowned. "... As fun as that was, I'm still in another stupid hallway." Metis said. "Tch... I've still got overheat problems with my arm, too. This armor isn't durable enough to handle my full power either... dammit."

With a frown on her face, she passed through a smaller door and found Ikutsuki in a lab coat atop his usual attire seated on a black swiveling chair in front of a large monitor. "You've gone beyond our expectations, Metis... I was almost certain you'd at least need some repairs after that fight."

"The only thing that needs to be fixed is this arm." she said. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"My, constantly chasing even more power... just like your father." Ikutsuki said.

"... My father?" Metis asked. Ikutsuki hit a switch, and a recording of Minato's battle with Fuuka that had been salvaged from what was left of Mitsuru's surveillance equipment came on the screen. Metis watched as the video

detailed Minato's battle against Maria and Black Maria. After watching for a bit, Ikutsuki paused the video to a shot where Minato had just landed on the floor with Jack's cleaver in his hand, a manic smile plastered on his face. His eyes were already turning back to Fuuka, and though he wasn't in the center of the camera's focus, his body was shown clearly enough.

"This man, Metis," Ikutsuki began, "is your father, the one who gave you your name... Do you remember what I told you, about your Papillion Heart being one of a kind?"

"... He's the one that altered it, isn't he?" Metis asked.

"That's correct, Metis... Your Papillion Heart is composed of a Plume of Dusk that exhibited the highest natural energy signatures out of all of our known ones... and a Plume of Dusk that this man held onto. As such, your Papillion Heart draws psychological data and various other aspects from what his Plume of Dusk had... in other words, what he had." Ikutsuki said.

"... Is he alive?" Metis asked.

"Very much so." Ikutsuki said. "His name is Minato Arisato, and he's the current leader of a group known as SEES... you'll learn a lot more about them after I get about to explaining your purpose for existence."

"I want to meet him." Metis said. Ikutsuki chuckled.

"You will, Metis... very soon. I promise." Ikutsuki said. "But before that, you have a lot to learn..."

Meanwhile, back in Iwatodai, Minato had just left the dorm for the second time that day and was headed for Paulownia Mall. The morning had proven to be a bust, but Sunday mornings were the most difficult to work with, especially if Nemissa wasn't around. He returned to Paulownia Mall around midnight and headed straight for Club Escapade. He walked past Vergil and walked up to Dante. "It's that time of the week." he said.

"Let's talk outside... Vergil has a few things he has to say as well." Dante said. He got up, and they slowly made their way to the entrance of Club Escapade. The Dark Hour struck, and the duo walked outside and stood next to Vergil.

"So, gimme a week's progress." Minato said.

"Tsk... insolent as ever." Vergil said. He adjusted his jacket, and then turned to glance at Minato. "... While I still find my brother incredibly irritating at times, he is not as much of a fool as I had originally thought."

"Excellent... and Dante?" Minato asked.

"Turns out this guy doesn't fall asleep muttering about power every five seconds." Dante said with a shrug. "He's got his own views... a lot of which I disagree with, but I can see them."

"Just as you do." Vergil said. "... I have decided I will tolerate your actions. And I will do all in my power to mend whatever strain I've placed on our relationship."

"... Did you have to make it sound like a job?" Dante asked.

"Hey, it means he's taking this seriously, right?" Minato asked.

"Exactly. I don't start things I'm not willing to finish." Vergil said.

"And filial piety has been achieved." Minato mused. Dante chuckled.

"I wouldn't go that far." he said. "... But thanks, kid. This means a lot."

"I know it does." Minato said. *"Almost as much for me as it is for you."* "It didn't feel right leaving two brothers at each other's throats. I suppose you can call that my semblance of a moral compass pointing."

"Hmph... if you say so." Dante said. He walked away from the duo, heading away from the Club. "Vergil, I'm going to take a walk. If you have anything you want to say, get it out before I get back."

"And since when do you think you have the right to speak to me in that voice?" Vergil asked. Dante chuckled.

"Never, but I'm doing it anyways." he said. With that, he walked away towards the entrance of the mall.

"... He'll regret that." Vergil said. Minato chuckled.

"I didn't think you were the type to be a vindictive older brother." he said.

"I am simply doing that which I have the right to do." Vergil said.

"Right?... You really are old fashioned, aren't you?" Minato mused.

"There is a methodology that must be followed in this world." Vergil said. "Certain principles are obeyed, and the actions of everyone who live in it can be predicted if you understand which principles they prefer to follow."

"And you're a secret philosopher? Interesting." Minato said. "... You're correct, though. Everyone has a few rules that they will prioritize over everything else. Ours happens to revolve around those emphasizing the importance of power."

"Without power, you can't do anything." Vergil said. "... However, that is what I wanted to speak to you about."

"Power? Go ahead." Minato said.

"... There is much more than the power associated with strength, isn't there?" Vergil asked. "What you did with me and my brother... neither of us followed your word because of your strength. Honestly... I'm unsure as to why I listened to you."

Minato chuckled. "You're correct... power associated with strength might be the most useful, but there are many different types. A lot of them have to deal with more with... influence, I suppose. That power comes from being able to read other people and knowing exactly what to say to them."

"... So you approach even conversation as a battle?" Vergil asked.

"It depends on how serious the conversation is and the risk/reward associated with it." Minato said. "Often, you'll be fine with any result."

"I see... although you have yet to explain how you managed to make us listen to you." Vergil said.

"That isn't something that can be explained... you need experience to teach you that." Minato said. "Slicing demons to pieces will make you stronger, but it won't teach you much about controlling others."

"... Then I need to change my training." Vergil said. "My father was able to command even the greatest demons... perhaps I lack not the strength, but the... influence, as you said."

"I don't know about demons, but it certainly works on people." Minato said. "Maybe you should start small... after all, you've obviously got little to no experience with this subject as of now. I don't think Big Boss would like it if you ended up slaughtering demons all over the city because negotiations went sour."

"I'm aware of that." Vergil said. "I began my swordsmanship training against the air... I know what it means to start small."

"Then all is well that ends well... you've broadened your view on the world, and I've taught you something handy." Minato said.

"... This is not a Saturday morning cartoon." Vergil said with a grin. Minato chuckled. "However, sometimes I feel that you do tend to treat me like a child. I suppose that is one of the many things I will need to learn how to tolerate if I'm to improve myself... I'd like you to occasionally test me."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hanged Man Arcana...

"Aw, is little Vergie gonna put on his big boy pants?" Minato asked. Vergil twitched.

"... You may start the next time we speak, pleb." Vergil said. Minato laughed.

"Alright, alright..." he said. "Well, is that all you wanted to ask about? Because if so, I have a few things I need to set up."

"Go ahead... I have nothing else of real import to speak of." Vergil said. At that, Minato nodded to him and walked away

from Paulownia Mall.

"Just the one? Oh well. As long as I don't end up with none I should be fine." Minato thought as he headed back to the dorm. The night had ended, and Minato decided to get some studying in before he had to begin the next day.

75. Chapter 75

Chapter 75: Circumstances

Author Note to guedesbrawl: It's fine to see it from that perspective. The story mainly follows Minato's perspective, so if you see things in a different way, that's part of reading.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Who knows? I certainly do XD

Author Note to Number13teen: Wow, we finally have a fan of Yukari! I was honestly trying very hard to make her a likeable character (because let's face it, Remix Minato is more of love him or hate him kind of guy).

An average breakfast and a quick group train ride to school. Minato led the pack as he ventured into the main building first, his headphones playing at a comfortable volume as he walked forwards. ***"Boss, Yukari's got another question."*** David told him. He promptly stopped his music and turned around to see Yukari approaching him.

"Tell me on the doll where he touched you." Minato mused, materializing a little figurine of Alice in his hands as she walked up to him. Yukari looked a bit confused for a moment

before letting out a little laugh.

"Ok, that was funny." she said as she walked next to him.

"Ah, I finally got something better than a disgusted sigh." Minato said as he dispelled the Alice figurine. He matched her pace, and the two continued their walk into school. "So, what's on your mind?"

"... You really don't know?" Yukari asked. "In about a week, there'll be another mission... and you're as calm as ever about it."

"A fight is a fight. The arena may differ, but the rules are the same." Minato said. "You win by killing the enemy before they kill you... although something tells me you're a bit more interested in why we have to fight in the first place."

"... I get that we have to do this to defend the city... and I've come to terms with the fact that we're definitely going to have to keep fighting until the last eight Shadows are gone. But, what are we gonna do after that? I've been thinking about this for a while, and I get the feeling that Mitsuru-senpai is hiding something from us..." Yukari said.

"*You are a smart girl, aren't you?*" Minato thought. "I know what I'm going to do after this is done." he said.

"Oh? And what would that be?" Yukari asked.

"Finish school and find another battlefield." Minato said. "It'll

be way too boring once the only things left to really deal with are the strays from Tartarus." Yukari's eyes widened.

"... You're kidding, right?" she asked. "You want to put yourself in MORE danger because you'll be BORED?!"

Minato chuckled. "I'm a true warrior, Yukari." he said. He suddenly straightened his posture and put on an extremely serious expression as he walked forwards. "Never standing on ceremony, always searching for stronger opponents... I walk a path with no end."

"What do you think this is, an anime?" Yukari asked. "This isn't like DBZ where you can get wished back to life, you know? You really shouldn't just put your life on the line like that!"

"I won't need to get wished back to life because I'll never lose." Minato said.

"You're insane AND hopeless, you know that?" Yukari asked, shaking her head. Minato chuckled.

"Call me what you want, but I'm serious. I've tasted defeat enough to know it's disgusting." Minato said. "And I've tasted glory enough to know it's addictive. But I'll pursue it anyways, because I can."

"... Ya know, I really think you're tricking the Chairman when he does his little check-ups on you..." Yukari said.

"Actually, he's tricking you! Tee-hee!" Minato thought. A smirk

appeared on his face. "Unlike the majority of the world, I know how to act." he said.

"That's what makes you scary." Yukari said.

"And the fact that you recognize that makes you smart." Minato said. With that, they entered the main building, and Minato stopped at the school shop to pick up a few emergency rations, which meant it was time to buy over half of the melon breads the school had to offer.

Early in the day, Mr. Takenozuka was busy teaching Physics as usual. He had spent the majority of the first part of class listening while making a very large doodle in his notebook. He finished just as Mr. Takenozuka was about to change topics. "Everyone understand the Lorentz force and the left-hand rule? Then I'm erasing the board! Oh, I've already erased it now, but it might be on the exam we're having in two weeks. Got it? Good. Let's move on to free electron density. I was originally thinking of doing an experiment... but let's go over some questions instead. Open to page eight. We just covered the first question, so skip it. Oh, but first... You look sleepy, Junpei. Let's see if you can answer this. Contact lenses work according to a certain physical law. Who discovered that principle?" he asked.

Junpei, who had been playing a handheld game under his desk with Kenji over the school's Wi-Fi, which one of their other gamer friends had long since figured out how to steal, froze once he heard the question. "Uhh... I dunno... I don't wear contact lenses..." he said. Mr. Takenozuka glared at

him, and he leaned forwards to rest his hands on his head as if he were wracking his brain, looking downwards so his cap obscured his face. "Hey Minato, do you know?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Minato materialized David's tiny floating head directly in front of Junpei. He wasn't startled, recognizing this as one of the new methods the duo had agreed upon since Minato sat in a seat easily visible by the teacher. "**Leonardo Da Vinci.**" David said in a barely audible voice. The head disappeared, and Junpei then looked up with a slight grin on his face.

"Oh yeah... It was Leonardo Da Vinci!" he declared triumphantly.

"That's right. Next question..." Mr. Takenozuka replied. That startled Junpei.

"Dude... that's it? I got the question right! Don't I deserve some credit here?" he protested. His complaint was ignored, and he grumbled for a bit before returning to his game.

Other than the odd interaction, the school day passed uneventfully. Minato went straight to Student Council as usual while Yukari and Fuuka headed back to the dorms together. They ended up standing near to one another on the train back to Iwatodai, and Fuuka would have simply put on her headphones as she normally did if Yukari didn't suddenly begin speaking to her. "So, you've really adjusted well to SEES and everything else, huh?" she asked.

"... What do you mean?" Fuuka asked.

"I mean, you didn't freak out or anything." Yukari said. "After you... accepted your Shadow, I guess, you just took everything so well. It's actually really impressive, you know? I was really freaked out when I first learned about it, and I even had trouble using my Persona well after I joined SEES... and it was horrible."

"It couldn't have been that bad... I mean, even now, sometimes I wonder if I'm dreaming..." Fuuka said.

"... Did you ever hear how Minato first awakened to his power?" Yukari asked.

"... No." Fuuka said. "Why?"

"... When we get back to the dorm, I need to show you something in the Command Room." Yukari said. "There's a recording... of his awakening. It'll explain everything a lot better than I can."

At that, the girls were silent until they returned to the dorm. They quickly made their way to the Command Room, and Yukari pulled up the video of Minato's awakening on April 9th.

Fuuka watched attentively. The first few minutes had the building seemingly shaking, and then had Yukari and Minato run onto the roof, Minato wielding a short sword and Yukari holding her Evoker with her bow and arrow over her shoulder. From what she could see, Yukari was panicking while Minato

seemed entirely composed, even readying himself to duel with a grotesque Shadow that she realized was the Magician Shadow that she had heard about. She watched as Yukari shakily put her Evoker to her head, and failed to pull the trigger. Minato had shoved her out of the way and let the attack pass over him before taking a quick strike.

The fight continued, with Minato expertly battling the Shadow on as close to even ground as he could possibly claim, dodging strike after strike and hitting with quick counters, slowly chipping away at his opponent. Also on screen, Yukari had taken a few ragged breaths, watching the battle, before simply fainting. Fuuka took a quick glance at Yukari and saw her shiver at the memory when she watched herself faint. She turned her attention back to the monitor to see Minato barely dodge a burst of fire that had little to no warning, and then evade a series of attacks until he reached Yukari's Evoker. He did a little slide and then skid on the balls of his feet into the position Fuuka instantly recognized as the one he took whenever he used his Evoker, with his legs wide and the Evoker pressed directly to the side of his head.

Minato fired, Jack appeared, and the duo charged in and decimated the Magician in a minute of frenzied attacks. Afterwards, he summoned David, and the three seemed to converse before Akihiko and Mitsuru emerged on the roof. Minato gave them a little wave after his two Fiends disappeared and he collapsed to the floor. Yukari stopped the video as their senpai went over to help them, and turned to Fuuka. Her eyes were closed, and she took a shaky breath.

"Do you know... how I first used my Persona?" she asked.

"...No." Fuuka said.

"... Minato shoved an Evoker in my face in Tartarus and pulled the trigger." Yukari said. She grit her teeth. "When he started, he couldn't do half of the attacks he does now without almost collapsing like he did in the video... but do you know what he told me? 'It's not that difficult. You can do it just as easy as I can.' Hah! Easy, huh, to almost knock yourself out? To put yourself in a ten day coma just to win a fight... my Persona's attacks weren't and still aren't anywhere near that dangerous to use, and even still, I..."

"... Yukari, it's okay... that was in the past..." Fuuka said. Yukari's expression lightened, but she still retained her serious expression.

"... Yeah, it was." Yukari said. "I wanted to show you that... because I want you to know I think you're really special, Fuuka."

"... You didn't have to show me that just to tell me." Fuuka said. "But I know there's something else on your mind."

"... I wasn't buttering you up or anything. I really just wanted to get that off my chest." Yukari said. "But, yeah, I do have something else I want to ask you... a favor with your skill."

"... Something online?" Fuuka asked.

"Yeah... I was doing some research on our school, and I came across something strange... Ten years ago, a lot of students missed school for some reason. They were reported as absent, but I found some records that suggest it was something serious. Do you know anything about it, Fuuka?" Yukari asked.

"Me? Um, not really..." Fuuka said.

"I know it was a long time ago, but... doesn't it seem suspicious to you?" Yukari asked. "From what I've heard, this isn't the first time Shadows have appeared..."

"Wait, are you saying...?" Fuuka asked.

"I don't know. But, I wonder... And I'm not trying to make trouble, but... Mitsuru-senpai acts kinda weird whenever someone questions Tartarus." Yukari said.

"Does she?" Fuuka asked.

"I just wanna know what happened back then. If it doesn't have anything to do with Shadows, then fine." Yukari said.

"... I understand. I'll see what I can do." Fuuka said. She turned to leave the Command Room, but stopped at the door and turned back to face Yukari. "... But if I do this for you, I don't want you pushing me away anymore."

"... I'm sorry I did that to you." Yukari said. She cracked a wry smile. "But alright... from now on, you and me are gonna

spend a lot of time together."

Yukari expected a cheerful nod or a giggle from Fuuka at that line, but Fuuka's eyes flashed yellow instead. "We'll hold you to that." she said with a smile. Her eyes reverted to its normal color without her even closing them, and she giggled. "Don't take that the wrong way, Yukari... we just want you to know we're being sincere, and that you should too." At that, she turned and left the Command Room, leaving a slightly disturbed Yukari alone to contemplate what just happened.

Back at Gekkoukan, the general Student Council meeting had just ended with Mitsuru clearing Chihiro's accusation and ensuring her continued role as Treasurer for the remainder of the year. Mitsuru had also dismissed Shinjiro and Minato early as usual, since they had no real work left to do, and the duo walked out of school. *"This is as good of a chance as any to pursue Hierophant."* Minato thought. He turned to Shinjiro as they approached Port Island Station. "Anything in particular planned for today? A date waiting for you back in Iwatodai?" Minato asked.

"Take a guess." Shinjiro said.

"So you're free to take a quick visit to Naganaki Shrine with me?" Minato asked. Shinjiro shot him a quick glance.

"... Don't push your luck. I said I'd look out for the kid when he joins, so I'm not doing any damn introductions until then." Shinjiro said. "Besides... I don't even have my shit together yet." Minato chuckled.

"Had to try." he said. "If that's the case, how does lunch sound?"

"... Good." Shinjiro said. They both took the train to Iwatodai Station and swiftly went to Beef Bowl to grab a bite. After sitting down at the corner of the bar and placing their orders, the duo sat in relative silence. "Lemme ask you something." Shinjiro said suddenly. "What's your game?"

"Game?" Minato asked.

"There's no reason for anyone to just try and help other people out... especially someone like you." Shinjiro said. "I don't get why you go out of your way to try and 'improve' people, and I'm sure it's not so you can feel 'at peace' with what you've done or any of that garbage... If you aren't getting anything out of it, why bother? That ain't like 'you'... at least, the 'you' I first met."

"Oh? Too quick for your own good, Shinjiro." Minato thought. *"Now, what to do? Claim I've become a better person now that genuinely cares for others, or reveal what my Cards can do?"*

"Shinjiro doesn't seem like the type to take kindly to learning he's a puppet." Jack said.

"But he isn't so blind as to take what we say as the truth either." Matador said.

"Half-lie, half-truth... that's what we'll need." Hell Biker

said.

"Mm-hmm. Shinjiro knows about you, mister, so be careful." Alice said. After quickly considering his options, Minato chose his plan.

"... Would you believe me if I said I've changed?" he asked.

"... That depends. How so?" Shinjiro asked.

"For the worse, I believe." Minato said. "I'm having a lot more trouble viewing people as mere tools to an end rather than... well, people. For instance, I first intended to make you get over your past because I considered you a rather valuable asset... but now, I consider you to be a man who has resolved to move on with his life... you are doing that which I am struggling with."

"... Hmph. You're just fine." Shinjiro said.

"... Pardon?" Minato asked.

"You don't watch people get over their own problems without learning a little." Shinjiro said. "When I first joined, I had a feeling you just liked to screw with other people's lives... but I realized over time that you were getting something out of it. And now I know."

"... And what would that be?" Minato asked.

"A reminder that you're human, just like the rest of us." Shinjiro said. Minato turned to him and chuckled.

"Is that really what you think I'm getting?" he asked.

"You like to sit on a high horse and talk big because you've got the experience to back it up... but you said it yourself. You'll always come right back down to our level, because it's what you are. Just another human, with some crazy ass powers, no doubt, but otherwise just like anyone else." Shinjiro said. Their food arrived, and Minato slowly took out his chopsticks.

"... See that? There's the big problem." Minato said. "I'm not just any human... I won't go so far as to say I've been chosen or anything, but I know my future lies outside of the norm."

"Normal ain't applicable in our cases, demonic ties or not." Shinjiro said.

"I know that... but I think I'm meant for something bigger than just us. Something more than simply leading SEES." Minato said. "A man of my caliber belongs in a position of much greater importance."

"... That just means you're a power hungry idiot like Aki." Shinjiro said. "The difference is you like to look way further down the road."

"It's not as if I need to look at what's right in front of me, do I?" Minato asked. He chuckled, and took a few bites of his food before speaking again. "... Let me tell you what I'm getting out of interacting with other people, so that we're both

on the same page."

"Alright... what do you think you're getting?" Shinjiro asked.

"Power." Minato said. "... Well, I suppose you'd call it influence. The more time I spend with each piece, the more trust they put in me... after all, we went from once trying to kill each other to having this conversation right now. The influence I get gives me more pieces to use at my disposal, and the longer I work with them, the more I can expect to get out of them. At least, that's how it's supposed to go..."

"... But you've got that pesky conscience bothering you again?" Shinjiro asked. "Tch... well, at least you were legit about it. But I guess it'd take a guy who doesn't view people as people to just go around toying with them... especially the women."

Minato laughed. "Actually, that comes from a combination of both lacking shame and having complete and utter confidence in my own greatness." he said.

Shinjiro scoffed. "Dumbass." he said. They took a few more bites each before Shinjiro spoke again. "... I could help you."

"... Help me?" Minato asked.

"Get over that problem you've got... I won't try like you do and say I'm some perfectly understanding saint or any shit like that, but I've got a few things I'm working on myself... you've helped me out a bit, so I might as well get around to paying

you back." Shinjiro said. "You might not be tied down by your past, but it's weighing you down."

"And if I've gotten used to it and am perfectly fine with carrying that weight?" Minato asked.

"You're only saying that because you don't know remember what anything else feels like." Shinjiro said.

"Says the man whose head I had to pull out of his ass." Minato said.

"Like I said, I'm not gonna play some perfect example like you do." Shinjiro said. "Don't take this the wrong way... but the path you're going down looks a lot worse than the one I chose."

"I'm aware that I could very well tear myself apart." Minato said. "However, the stronger me would rise from the remnants."

"Or you'd become a train wreck." Shinjiro said.

"I'd recover. Happened a few times already, so I should be fine." Minato said. "I might say I don't need any crutches, but I'm not entirely averse to a back-brace."

"... You're just scared of changing how you think, aren't you?" Shinjiro asked.

"... Isn't it your job to change that, Mr. Helper?" Minato mused. Shinjiro thought for a moment, and then let out a little

breath.

"Have an open mind... you'd be surprised how good it feels to be able to move more freely." Shinjiro said. He chuckled, and then turned to Minato with a slight smile. "Don't knock it till you've tried it. I think you'll like it even more than I do."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"... Not bad at all, Shinjiro. Capitalizing on the fact that I know you speak from experience." Minato said. He smiled as well, and turned to his food. "You know, I think you picked up more from me than just a simple resolution about life."

"It's funny that you call the resolution simple and not the speech tricks." Shinjiro said. The duo laughed, and ate their lunch in a general good mood before returning to the dorm.

When they returned, only Junpei and Akihiko sat in the lounge. "Where have you two been?" Akihiko asked.

"Beef Bowl." Minato said.

"Oh, good! Then you've got more than enough energy to spare." Akihiko said.

"Yeah, we can do that thing now!" Junpei said.

"... This is gonna be stupid, isn't it?" Shinjiro asked.

"Before we begin talking about this, where's Mitsuru?" Minato asked.

"She said she had to go do something. I didn't pry." Akihiko asked.

"... Speaking of Mitsuru-senpai," Junpei began, "doesn't it seem like Yuka-tan has daggers in her eyes every time she looks at her?"

"*Ah, you're treachery has been caught.*" Minato thought. "It's probably because Mitsuru ate her bon bons." he said. Junpei cracked up.

"Dude, I could totally see that!" he said.

"Does she?... I didn't notice." Akihiko said. "Did you, Shinji?"

"... Never really paid attention." Shinjiro said. Minato gave him a quick glance and was certain he had caught on as well, but wasn't about to say anything. "Still, what's this thing, Aki?"

"Ah, right! I was just thinking... since Fuuka and Yukari aren't exactly feeling too energized today, and we haven't done any type of group training for the coming full moon, I say we all go hit the gym. I know a place that's relatively empty at night, and it only costs a couple thousand yen to get a day pass." Akihiko said. "We'll start there, jog around all of Iwatodai, and be back here by the time the Dark Hour hits if we leave in the

next hour. Are you in?"

"... That would eliminate my chances of getting a Card tonight." Minato thought.

"But it would increase their trust in you." David said.

"And deepen your bond, meaning you have a higher chance of success the next time you go for a Card Rank with any of these three." Hell Biker said.

"Even if that isn't appealing, it is always good to remain in top form when a performance draws near." Matador said.

"... You all have a point." Minato thought. "Sounds good to me. Don't cry if I ask whether or not you even lift." he said.

"... That doesn't sound right when ya say it like that." Junpei said. "But hey, that's him. How about you, Shinji-senpai?"

"... What the hell? Let's go." Shinjiro said. "At least Aki'll stop bitching at me for not exercising enough."

"You think so?" Akihiko asked. He smirked. "Because if that's the case, I expect a lot out of you tonight."

At that, the male members of SEES all spent the night under Akihiko's rigorous training program. Shinjiro and Junpei struggled greatly on the jog after two hours of an extensive full body workout, and even Minato gave a big admission to his

Magatama's usefulness in that situation. The night passed without much incident other than Junpei almost dropping a weight on his neck and Shinjiro throwing up near the end of their jog from the sheer amount of physical exertion on his part. They all went to bed peacefully, save for Minato. He elected to see just how far his regenerative powers would go, and decided to keep exercising on the roof to see just how far he could push himself.

76. Chapter 76

Chapter 76: The Ideal Friend

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Ohhh, that's a good idea! I never thought about adding that... Anyways, thanks for the constant positive reviews!

As for your second question, it's not that difficult. What you need is:

1 Pint of Goat Milk

1 Quart Lamb's blood (Possibly two if you're a sloppy painter)

Three and a half eggs (NOT FOUR)

A Cup of Baby Formula

A Raw Turkey Leg (Re-usable)

Two Turnips

A Carrot

Ok, so what you do is first paint a pentagram (Two sigils

crowning the up facing head and the two down facing ones, five on the ones pointing to the sides) on your wall with the Lamb's blood. Impale the Turnips with the Carrot so that they look like a screwed up dumbbell, and hold it in your mouth by the carrot joining the two Turnips. Then, take the cup of Baby Formula and sprinkle it on your wall with your left hand while doing the Dance of the Dead in reverse (this means you go right, NOT LEFT, at the beginning) while holding the raw turkey leg in your right hand. After the dance is complete, quickly take out the three eggs and slap them with the turkey leg into the pentagram. DO NOT MISS. Afterwards, put down the turkey leg and take the half egg and the pinto of goat milk. Put the half egg in your mouth, chug the goat milk, chew six times, and then regurgitate whatever's in your mouth onto the pentagram. DO NOT SWALLOW THE EGG. Finally, chant "N'agbanyeghị nke ahụ, oge ebighị ebi!" three times... This should freeze time for about three hours, give or take thirty minutes depending on the quality of your regurgitation. You won't be able to leave a thirty foot radius, so make sure you have your writing tools on you. Electronics will be out of the question, so you'll need old school pen and paper until you can transcribe what you've written to a computer once this wears off.

... Or you can have a good work ethic, tee-hee XD

As it turned out, Minato's regenerative Magatama seemed to

have gotten stronger over time. His continued training on the roof lasted until four in the morning, when he finally collapsed onto the roof in exhaustion. He lay there for a bit, taking ragged breaths, before flicking the Dimensional Compactor and summoning one of the numerous mythical 'Yawn-B-Gone' drinks he had purchased from the school shop. He forced it open and chugged it as he sat on the ground. *"Let's see just how good- HOLY SHIT THIS IS AMAZING!"* Minato thought as he swallowed the entire bottle in one go. He had felt electricity course through his entire body, but whatever was in this drink felt stronger and more controlled. *"Kirijio engineering at its finest! I suppose that's why one is supposed to last you three days."*

He hopped to his feet and stretched, a smirk on his face. "Now that's what I call a good wake-up!" he shouted from the roof. After a short fit of laughter, he walked back into the dorm and went about preparing a large breakfast to help the others recover from last night's training regimen. He made sure to include almost two dozen eggs, thirty pancakes, and a variety of breakfast meats.

One rather large breakfast later, Minato found himself on the train to Tatsumi Port Island once again, accompanied by the members of SEES. He stood near the other sophomores while the seniors seemed to separate into their own little group. "Ya know, you look happy today, Yuka-tan? Did Mitsuru-senpai buy you a new pack of bon bons?" Junpei said. He got a quick punch in the arm. "Ow, what the heck?"

"Sheesh... do you have to be obnoxious first thing in the morning?" Yukari asked.

"C'mon, Yukari, that was mean." Minato said. "But he was right. You do seem to be in better spirits than normal."

"Do I?" she asked.

"Yes, you do." Minato said. He turned to Fuuka. "And I get the feeling you contributed to it."

Fuuka giggled. "We just had a little... girl talk." she said.

"Ooh, girl talk? Were you guys trying to divvy up the men in the dorm, eh, eh?" Junpei asked. "I mean, you don't have to fight over me, but-"

"We DEFINITELY weren't talking about that." Yukari said, cutting Junpei off.

"... Way to put a guy down easy." Junpei said. "But that was awfully defensive, Yuka-tan."

"Seriously? That's what you think?... Minato, tell him what's what, would you?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"Well you see, Junpei, if they were divvying up the men," Minato began as he scooted over to put an arm around Fuuka's waist, "they'd have to take into account that the majority of Minato has been occupied." With that, he leaned over and kissed Fuuka on the forehead, getting her to try and hide her face in scarf. He smiled at her as Junpei tipped his

hat to him, and then turned his attention back to Junpei. "Now you see, that leaves Mitsuru and Yukari at odds for Akihiko, Shinjiro, and you."

"... Oh, so that's why – I mean, uhh, yeah!" Junpei said. He and Minato shared a knowing nod about a little comment from last night, and Yukari facepalmed at the sight of them.

"That wasn't what I asked..." she said.

"You told me to tell him what was going on, so I told him what was going on." Minato mused. "Besides, I'm right in saying Fuuka has all the time in the world to give you advice, aren't I?"

"... T-this is a little embarrassing..." Fuuka squeaked. Minato chuckled, and distanced himself from her a little.

"I'll be sure we're in private next time." Minato whispered, getting another blush out of her.

"... Dang, I really gotta step my game up." Junpei said.

"Please don't. You're annoying enough as is." Yukari pleaded.

"Huh?! C'mon, I'm the hype guy here!" Junpei said.

"Exactly. He gets the ball rolling, and then I score." Minato said.

"... Why do I get the feeling you're both talking about more than just SEES right now?" Yukari asked. Junpei and Minato

both laughed, and the train soon arrived at school. The group made their way inside, and the day began.

As the school day went on for the SEES members, on the other side of town, Hamuko, Jin, and Chidori were all seated on beanbags as Takaya was barbequing some hamburger meat that had been sitting in the fridge for a while. There were numerous little vents near the roof that had been drawn open as to allow for the smoke to leave, and Koromaru's little dog door in the wall was also propped open. Hamuko was giddy with excitement, bouncing around on her bean bag, while Jin merely looked happier than usual. Even Chidori seemed to be in a good mood. Takaya looked as zoned out as ever, but he had a little grin on his face as he held his spatula.

"Ooh, have I ever told you how good you look in front of a grill?" Hamuko asked. "Ah, we just need to throw an apron on you and a little headpiece... wait, Chidori, please tell me you have those!"

"... Actually, I do." Chidori said. Hamuko's eyes widened, and a huge grin crept onto her face.

"What are you trying to do, make a house husband?" Jin asked. "Takaya, you can hear these two, right?"

"It matters not... it will all lead to the same end." Takaya said. "Whether or not I don an additional headpiece or clad myself in an apron changes nothing... these burgers are going to be delicious."

Koromaru let out an excited little bark as Hamuko and Jin both broke out laughing, with even Chidori giggling, albeit rather quietly. Their laughter was soon disrupted by an alert on the computer, which Jin left on while he was awake. They all stopped, and even Takaya turned towards the monitor. Jin hurriedly got up and opened the incoming video call, being well aware that only one person would ever contact them directly.

The screen came to life, and a close-up of Sho's eye appeared on screen. *"Hey! Is this piece of shit working or what?!"* he yelled. His voice was rather loud over the speakers, and it irritated Koromaru.

"Yes, we can hear you, dumbass!" Jin yelled back. "Now be quiet, or you'll make the mutt throw a fit."

"Oh, it is?" Sho asked. He backed away from the screen so that his whole face was shown, though his eyes were obviously on a screen below the one he was facing. *"Heheh, yeah, I got it. But hey, it looks like Revolver Jesus over there is cooking something good! What, fish and bread not enough for ya?"*

"... Hilarious." Takaya said. He turned his attention back to his cooking, and began flipping the burgers one by one.

"... So what's the deal, red? Calling us on your own and all. Aren't you supposed to be with Shuji right now?" Hamuko asked.

"I'm right here, Hamuko." Ikutsuki said, walking over from out

of the camera's view and next to Sho. *"My... It's good to see you all looking so well. How are you all?"*

"Doing just fine until you called." Chidori said.

"... I'm sorry if we interrupted anything." Ikutsuki said.

"What?! C'mon, dollie, show some cheer! Ain't it your job to bring smiles to kids' faces?" Sho asked. Ikutsuki promptly smacked him on the head.

"Sho some respect!" he said.

"What the- did you just make a pun while calling me out?!" Sho asked as he rubbed his head.

"See that? That was funny." Jin said. Hamuko and Chidori both chuckled as Koromaru let out a few barks.

"Small talk aside... why have you chosen now of all times to contact us?" Takaya asked.

"If it's about that group we need to go about 'motivating', I've already got an idea for the next full moon." Jin said.

"Actually, this is somewhat of a notice of cancellation." Ikutsuki said. *"We'll be returning to Iwatodai before the next full moon, and I'll need your help for a very delicate project... well, Sho will while I distract the people working under me."*

"That's right, kiddos. Hope you haven't gotten sloppy just

stabbing people in back alleys, cuz I'll need you ready to rumble when I get back." Sho said.

"Sloppy? The only thing sloppy I've seen recently is the remains of the last person who gave me some backtalk." Hamuko said.

"We are more than ready for any trial you have in store for us." Takaya said, now walking over to get some plastic plates and the burger buns. "Hamuko and I should more than suffice for this task."

"Actually, raw power alone won't be enough here. This mission is slightly more... delicate." Ikutsuki said.

"We got some tin cans that can get up and running... but they'll have a few loose screws when they wake up. Now, while it'd be great to just beat em' so bad that there'll be nothing but sparks and paperclips flying all over the place, we want em' to work for us. That means I need you guys to beat em' down and keep em' down long enough for me to take control of them with a little something something the old man has." Sho said.

"... You can't be serious." Chidori said. "You want us to... manhandle androids for you."

"... That's the basic idea." Ikutsuki said.

"... Wait a minute... Jin, aren't all the robots girls?" Hamuko asked.

"Yeah, they are. But what does that... oh." Jin said. He frowned. "Seriously, old man? Just go get a prostitute or something already, ya sicko."

Sho and Hmauko burst out laughing as Ikutsuki sputtered in shock. *"T-t-this has n-n-nothing to do with ANYTHING of that sort! I-I am steadily working towards bringing about the-*"

"Disgusting..." Chidori said, cutting him off.

"When the end is nigh, humans always seek that which they cannot attain..." Takaya said. "Many search for salvation or forgiveness of their sins... Shuji, however, searches for some strange."

Another burst of laughter from everyone else. Koromaru happily barked while Ikutsuki buried his face in his hands. *"The things I do for you... and this is what I get..."* he said.

"C'mon, that was too good and you know it, old man!" Sho said. *"Still, that's the plan... you guys look hungry, so I'll fill you in when we meet up to pull this off."*

"Make sure you have your sexy voice on when you visit!" Hamuko said.

"Sexy voice?... Oh, you mean you wanna see Minazuki?" Sho asked. He closed his eyes for a bit, and then laughed before opening them again. *"Sorry, babe, but he isn't looking forwards to seeing you again."*

"Pfft! Then he can get himself a robot girl too!" Hamuko said. She stuck her tongue out at the screen and Ikutsuki laughed.

"Don't worry, Hamuko. I'm certain he'll need to come out to play once you're on the job." Ikutsuki said. *"Well then, until our return, stay safe and enjoy yourselves! Also, remember, Takaya, if you like it then you should put a sling on it, eheheh!"* Takaya scratched his head, the reference lost on him, while Hamuko broke out laughing.

"... Does that even classify as a pun?" Chidori asked.

"I'd put that more on a scale of pain." Jin said. Sho chuckled.

"C'mon, it wasn't that bad!" Sho said. *"Hamuko laughed!"*

"She'll laugh at anything." Jin said. He sighed as Hamuko settled down. "... Well, you two take care then."

"We'll be fine. Laters!" Sho said. At that, the call ended, and everyone turned back to Takaya, who was preparing a hamburger bun for each member as the burgers finished.

"It would seem we've received a call to action much sooner than we previously thought." Takaya said.

"Meh, the opponent doesn't matter. We'll just beat the crap out of em' as usual!" Hamuko said. With an affirmative set of barks from Koromaru and a few nods from Jin and Chidori, the discussion was settled, and they all prepared for some of Takaya's rare cooking. The burgers were, in a word, perfect.

The school day had ended at Gekkoukan, and Minato rose from his seat with a grin. *"Today is more art club, and I can introduce my plan to Bebe... thus, I can speed up the process for Fortune and possibly put in some work with Priestess."* Minato thought. He saw Yukari head to Archery Club as diligently as ever, and Kenji had personally requested Junpei come with him for something during lunch. He had told Minato that it was 'just some girl problems' and that he didn't want to make Minato lose time from his girlfriend because he hit a rough patch with his. *"I'll respect your wishes, Kenji. After all, I think Junpei is more than ready to help you."*

At that, he walked out of his classroom and saw Fuuka in the hallway speaking to Natsuki. He quickly hurried over and caught her in a surprise hug before she could turn to him. "There's my Fuuka!" he said, resting his head against the back of hers.

"M-minato!" Fuuka said. Natsuki couldn't help but giggle.

"Ya know, you two really are cute together." she said with a grin.

"Not you too, Natsuki..." Fuuka said.

"But it's the truth." Minato said, nuzzling his head against hers some more. Fuuka let out a defeated sigh, but she had a smile on her face afterwards.

"Sheesh, and you're not even mad." Natsuki said. She chuckled. "Well, you both have club now, right? I'll catch you

some other time, Fuuka."

"Oh? Where are you off to, Natsuki?" Minato asked.

"I actually got drafted into the Student Health Committee." she said. "And even though it does blow, the only person who actually takes their job seriously is a really nice girl... too nice, if you ask me. Still, somebody has to look out for her, or she's going to be in trouble."

"You mean Saori-san?" Fuuka asked.

"Yeah, her. She kinda reminds me of you, actually." Natsuki said.

"Maybe you're just partial to the nice ones because of your old habits." Minato said.

"Natsuki isn't like that." Fuuka said.

"... Actually, he might be right." Natsuki said, putting a hand to her chin. "It's not like I'm the nicest person she talks to, and I can't say I don't like to mess with her every now and then... n-not in a bad way, that is! Just kind of like... how Minato messes with people."

"We are all of a feather, are we not?" Minato asked.

"... I guess so." Fuuka said. "Still, you should try and be nice to her, Natsuki."

"I'll try... but don't blame me if she asks for it." Natsuki said

with a smirk. "Anyways, I shouldn't be late. Bye."

"Don't have too much fun, Natsuki." Minato said. Natsuki chuckled and walked off. "... Now it's just you and me, Fuuka. Anything you want before we go to club?"

"I actually know a few good places you can go to. I'll distract Keisuke if you want me to, too." Catherine said from behind them. Fuuka let out a little yelp, and Minato turned around, taking Fuuka with him, to view Catherine. "Anything for a friend, right?"

"I-I don't think we need to do that..." Fuuka said. Catherine giggled.

"Oh yeah, Fuuka, that reminds me... have you seen the new collection Minato and I made? I distributed it to a lot of people, but nobody likes to take them out in school... but luckily, I saved some for you!" Catherine said.

"Oh, ok." Fuuka said. Catherine hurriedly reached into her bag and pulled out a little folder. She handed it to Fuuka, and she opened it. Her eyes widened at the first picture, which consisted of a very wet Minato suggestively posing against the window atop a desk, one leg bent and resting on the edge while the other rested on the ground. His lower back rested on the desk and he propped himself up on his right elbow, with his left hand unbuttoning the third button on his shirt and his necktie resting crookedly around his bare neck.

"If you want, I can show you what happens next." Minato

whispered to Fuuka. She quickly closed the folder and covered up to her eyes with it.

"T-thank you, Catherine... I'll look at these a-after club..." Fuuka said.

"Ah, that's right, we should be going!" Catherine said. Minato slid over to Fuuka's side and Catherine quickly took her position opposite to Fuuka. With the trio consisting of two smiles and one very flushed face, they took off towards Art Club.

They passed through the main lobby as the seniors all walked entered the area, and though Akihiko and Shinjiro both felt the temperature in the room begin to slowly drop, they said nothing of it. They both glanced at Mitsuru, and saw her usual composure slowly slipping. Akihiko gave a quick glance to Shinjiro, and Shinjiro slightly shook his head at him. Akihiko nodded, and then spoke. "For a guy with so many responsibilities, he sure finds time to play around. I guess that's a perk of never having to sleep, huh? Talk about unfair." he said. "Imagine if he dedicated this time to training... he'd be unstoppable."

"... Minato has earned his leisure time." Mitsuru said. "While he might spend it in... less than appropriate ways, he has certainly proven himself more than capable of handling any situation that arises. Perhaps we should try and learn from his example."

Akihiko shot Shinjiro a quick smirk, and Shinjiro facepalmed.

"... What do you have in mind?" Shinjiro asked.

"It's been far too long since I've enjoyed a leisurely stroll. I believe slowing down for a bit would do me wonders." Mitsuru said. "You should try this as well, Akihiko. I'm certain your daily regimen must have taken a toll on your body."

Akihiko suppressed every urge in his body that made him want to cringe. A leisurely stroll? Why waste your time with that when you could train? If you weren't going to do any physical exercise, stimulate your mind with a book or magazine... but a simple stroll? What good could that do? "... I think I'll pass. Muscles develop based on repetition, and a lot of the greats have said that once you miss a single day of training, it's difficult to get back to peak condition. With a full moon coming up, I don't want to fall out of form." he said.

"... You're correct. At times like this, I shouldn't allow myself to fall victim to whimsy." Mitsuru said. "... Rather, I have a better idea. Shinjiro, you and I will have a full scale practice match. Hold nothing back."

"... You sure? Castor might wreck the place." Shinjiro said.

"We won't be battling at the dorm. You said that you had found a good place to fight beforehand, so I'll leave the location to you." Mitsuru said.

"... It's in a shady spot. Not exactly a place for a Kirijio to be." Shinjiro said.

"Don't worry... I've taken to carrying a few supplies in case something like this ever happened." Mitsuru said. She reached into her bag and revealed a large black veil that was folded up inside. "I'll wear this once we approach the area. We should be fine otherwise."

"... Alright." Shinjiro said. He gave Akihiko a stern glance as Mitsuru repacked her bag and mouthed 'Great job, dumbass'. Akihiko winced.

"... Well, I'll see you later, then." Akihiko said.

"Yes. Train hard, Akihiko." Mitsuru said. He nodded, and hurried out of the dorm. He was mentally punching himself for what he had just done.

Meanwhile, Minato's group had seemingly arrived to Art Club earlier than usual. Keisuke was standing alone in the room, talking to himself. He didn't even notice their approach.

"Maybe I should just quit." Keisuke said. "The club would be fine without me... And I... I'm not even that good at... Agh, who am I kidding? I'm the greatest thing to grace canvases since -!" he continued, turning around as he scratched his head. He froze when he saw the other three members looking at him. "A-ahh! Y-you three! W-when did you get here?... And how long were you listening?"

"Long enough to hear you contemplate the ridiculous idea of quitting." Minato said. "And you're right, you know... your skills really are on another level."

"I think so too, Keisuke-senpai... you really shouldn't quit."
Fuuka said.

"Besides, you've got that contest coming up, don't you?"
Catherine asked.

"Haha... so you all heard everything, huh?" Keisuke asked. He took a deep breath and straightened his posture. "... My dad told me I should quit Art Club. He said that I need to concentrate more on my studies... I told him that the painting I submitted was selected to be in the finals... but he said I was just wasting my time." Keisuke grimaced. "You know what he said to me? That because I'm his only son, it's my responsibility to take over his hospital. Keh... he doesn't care about me! He only cares about his stupid hospital!" Keisuke said. His face twisted into a full on sneer, and Minato couldn't help but think that if he weren't imbued with superhuman abilities, he'd feel a little threatened. Fuuka was taken aback, but Catherine seemed to smile a little. "And why the hell does everyone think I'm going to be a goddamn doctor?! Just because my dad's a doctor doesn't mean I'm just going to replace him! I have my own dreams too, dammit!"

"Then put the old man in his place. What's he gonna do, talk shit?" Minato suggested.

"T-that's a little drastic!" Fuuka said. "But... you should definitely say something to him..."

"Yeah... complaining won't help at all." Catherine said.

Keisuke shot each of them a quick glance, and his sneer turned into a slight grin. "Y-yeah, you're all right... I have to give my dad a piece of my mind." Keisuke said. "This is MY life, and I'm going to live it MY way... thank you for reminding me of that."

"Of course. I'd be doing the world a disservice to let the next great artist be stifled in his crib, wouldn't I?" Minato asked. Catherine giggled.

"He's right, Keisuke... I bet you'll be amazing if you really focus on art." Catherine said.

"You're so talented already... nobody can really compete against you in the school, and maybe even the whole city." Fuuka said.

"... Bet... Compete..." Keisuke mouthed. His eyes lit up, and he suddenly cackled. "Yes, that's it!" he said. "I'm going to make a bet with my dad! If I don't win that contest, I'll quit Art Club on the spot! But if I do, he and his damn hospital can find someone else to look after it, because Keisuke Hiraga will be a free man!" Keisuke laughed, and Minato realized then and there that Keisuke was an altered link. His laugh was that of a man who put the odds in his favor and forced people to play him. His laugh was one just like Minato's. He finished, and let out a content sigh. "Alright... do me a favor and don't tell anyone about this." Keisuke said, adjusting his glasses. "It won't do for the rest of the members to worry needlessly... besides, it's not like I can lose."

"That's the spirit." Catherine said, walking over to him.
"Knowing you, you probably want to go talk to your dad right now... but how about a good luck charm before?"

Keisuke turned to Catherine, and a smile very much like Minato's appeared on his face. "I don't need luck... but there's no harm done." He turned to Minato and Fuuka. "Tell the others I took the day off... and I'm really thankful for everything you've done."

Minato chuckled. "You be sure to enjoy yourself. After all, you're free to do whatever you want." he said.

"That's right." Catherine said, cupping his chin. Keisuke quietly cackled.

"Yes... yes, I am." he said. With that, he and Catherine took their leave. Minato and Fuuka watched them exit, and Minato couldn't help but smile at the duo.

"... Maybe we gave him bad advice... what if this ruins his relationship with his dad?" Fuuka asked.

"If he didn't take a stand, the relationship was going to be destroyed anyways." Minato said. "Isn't it better that now he has a chance at happiness instead of being doomed to walk a path he hated?"

"... I guess... but I just hope his dad will understand..." Fuuka said.

"Even if he doesn't, that's what we're here for, right?" Minato asked. Fuuka turned to him, and a little smile appeared on her face.

"You're right... if we don't support Keisuke-senpai, then he really will be all alone." Fuuka said. She let out a little giggle afterwards.

"... Did you think of something funny?" Minato asked.

"Oh, nothing... I just realized that you're really supportive of all your friends." Fuuka said.

"For their cards, of course." Minato said.

"Does Keisuke-senpai have a card?" Fuuka asked.

"... Keisuke's state of being is tied to Catherine's card." Minato said. "Hers is trickier than most, since I need to deal with a lot of people at once, including you... but I do what I must. However, I'll admit that after catching a glimpse of Keisuke's true self just now, I think he's an interesting individual that merits my attention, like Kenji."

"You just don't want to admit you like people." Fuuka said. She laughed, and Minato simply sighed, knowing well and truly that he wasn't going to shake Fuuka's belief in him anytime soon. Instead, he decided to reverse the situation. He walked over to her and put her in a little sideways hug.

"Since you already knew the answer, why pry?" Minato asked

with a smile. He quickly stooped slightly and stole a kiss from Fuuka before she could react. When he pulled back, he grinned as she reddened. "My cute little Fuuka knows me best, after all."

"T-there are people coming..." Fuuka said, her eyes quickly scanning the entrances. Minato pulled her into a frontal hug this time.

"Another time, then." he said. "Ah, but we should set up. Without Keisuke here, this might be problematic."

"Y-yes... we should." Fuuka said. They began prepping the room, and Art Club passed in a snap as they each worked on their individual pieces. Catherine returned stealthily at some point and got a little work done before helping to pack up. With the majority of other members leaving and the trio finished packing, they left the Art Club Room together.

"Ah, we're done! So, are you ready for Photography Club, Minato?" Catherine asked.

"Actually, I spoke to Bebe last week." Minato said. Catherine's eyes lit up. "I've got the perfect introduction set up."

"... The transfer student in Fashion Club?" Fuuka asked. "But why would you want... Ohh..."

"Aren't you a go-getter?" Catherine asked in delight. "What are we waiting for? Let's go eat him up!" Fuuka let out a little

gasp, and Catherine turned to her in confusion. "... Oh, Minato won't be doing any eating if that's what you're worried about. He's all yours, Fuuka."

"That wasn't what I was worried about..." Fuuka said. Minato chuckled.

"Relax, we're just going to... give him some good memories of Japan." Minato said. He and Catherine both broke out laughing.

"... Be nice to him, ok?" Fuuka asked.

"I promise we won't do anything he doesn't want to." Catherine said.

"Ah, but we should hurry. He might leave if we don't go quickly." Minato said. He stooped down and gave Fuuka a quick kiss on the cheek. "Take care."

"... That was cheating." Fuuka said with a little pout.

"No, this is cheating." Minato said. He quickly kissed her on the other cheek. "Don't worry... if anything, Bebe'll just become one of my friends too."

"... Fine." Fuuka said. "I'll see you tomorrow, Catherine."

"Ah, see you then, Fuuka!" Catherine said cheerfully. With that, Fuuka nodded to Minato and left. Minato saw her off and then hurriedly went into the Fashion Club Room, which was filled with various upper body manikins in various pieces of

clothing, numerous fabrics, a few sewing machines at the tables that were in the center of the room, and Bebe sitting alone at a station, apparently in deep contemplation over something with his fan hiding his mouth. Minato knocked twice at the door, and Bebe quickly turned to see him and Catherine. His eyes lit up as he rose from his seat.

"Sorry for being late." Minato said.

"Zat is not important! You came, Minato-sama!" Bebe said. "And Catherine-sama eez here as well! Today eez incredible!"

"It's nice to meet you, Bebe-kun." Catherine said. She looked around the room, taking in the work Bebe had already done. "Wow... did you really make all of this yourself?"

"Yes! I 'ad all ze time to work when school began, so I said zere is no reason for me not to work because ze club had so few members." Bebe said. "But Minato-sama said he'd 'elp change zat by being ze model for my work! He told you about zis, no?"

"Of course!" Catherine said. "You're going to need our measurements first, right?"

"Ahh, not yet." Bebe said. "I need to 'ave an idea of what ze clothing eez going to be... it eez summer, so..."

"... Why not some more casual clothing than normal?" Minato asked. "Jeans, shorts, t-shirts... and I see you do hats, too."

"That's a great idea! People might not join before summer, but afterwards, I bet a lot of people will get interested once they see a few pictures of these pieces on us." Catherine said. "Who knows? You might just get requests for work."

"... I like zat." Bebe said with a smirk. "Ok! I will make ze best summer clothing ever! Now eez ze time for your measurements!"

At that, Minato and Catherine were subjected to almost professional grade tailoring measurements. Minato had to admit that he was impressed with how precise Bebe was, and after almost fifteen minutes of extensive measurements of their legs, arms, and Minato's upper body, he reached Catherine. "... Umm... I don't know if zis is..." Bebe began, stopping in front of Catherine. Minato saw his opportunity.

"You have my numbers, right?" Minato asked. "I can give you two some privacy." Catherine shot him a knowing glance.

"I think I'd like that, actually..." she said.

"... Zen, I will see you... tomorrow?" Bebe asked.

"If you have anything ready, sure! But, I think it's best that you don't rush too much... maybe on Thursday?" Minato asked.

"Yeah... we want Fashion Club to really look good for you, you know?" Catherine added. Bebe let out a little gasp.

"You two... are like ze angels." Bebe said. "I will not forget

zis, Minato-sama, Catherine-sama... I am so 'appy, I could make ze best clothing in ze world now!"

"To be honest, Catherine had brought up this idea beforehand." Minato said. "That's how I recognized you in Sweet Shop... she mentioned you a few times before."

"I always wanted to get to know you... and you're really sweet, Bebe." Catherine said.

"Zank you, Catherine-sama... but I do not know if I am ze one who deserves so much praise." Bebe said.

"You deserve more than both of us... you kept this club alive on your own for quite some time." Minato said.

"He's right, Bebe... you need to have more confidence in yourself." Catherine said.

"... Zen, I will do my best." Bebe said resolutely. "Minato-sama, zank you again... I 'ope I can make something worthy of you."

"I know you will, Bebe. After all, you're you." Minato said. "Don't give him too much trouble, okay, Catherine?"

"I'll try to be the angel he says I am." Catherine said with a grin. "We'll have fun before we part."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Fortune Arcana...

Minato waved goodbye to the duo, and shut the door to Fashion Club behind him. *"Angel, huh? I don't know if it's for better or worse, but you're actually playing with a devil, Bebe."* Minato thought. He left school, and made his way back to the dorm with music blaring in his ears.

He walked into the dorm to see the seniors of SEES and Yukari all seated in the lounge, each doing their own thing. He noticed all three of the seniors looked rather tired. "Oh, hey!" Yukari greeted as he signed in.

"Hey." Minato said. "What happened to you three?"

"Training." Shinjiro said.

"Yes... I had a bout with Shinjiro earlier today. It ended in a draw." Mitsuru said. "I'm truly surprised you were able to defeat him single-handedly... I never truly realized how formidable his abilities were until I faced him myself."

"I could say the same to you." Shinjiro said.

"Damn... I wish I was there to see it." Minato said. He chuckled. "Oh well."

With that, he showered and ate before returning to his room. He had decided that since the full moon was approaching, tonight was as good a night as any to spend resting after his

exercise from last night. Being at full form tomorrow would do him well, and he knew that with both Dante and Vergil, he risked some sort of combat. *"It would seem that night isn't the best time to go about doing my Social Links... hmm... I'll need to take that into account more often."* he thought. *"Though, with nothing to do... I suppose I can study."*

At that, he set about his task and began what he planned, opting to let his Fiends run around his room as usual. Hell Biker had taken to making little stunt courses out of the various things on his desk and then driving them. It more often than not ended up with him doing flips over Minato's head as he studied, but he didn't mind. Occasionally, he crashed into Alice's doll house, which David had taken up residence in alongside Alice so that they could both continue to practice their music. Jack and Matador went at each other tirelessly as usual in the little cardboard arena he had set up early on, and time passed rather quickly.

The Dark Hour struck, and a grin came to Minato's face as he sat at his desk. He leaned back in his chair and turned towards his bed to see Pharos sitting on it. "Hi." Pharos said.

"Been a while." Minato said. "I think this time, we can finally share some tea without anyone interrupting us."

Pharos chuckled. "You really are insistent... but sure, why not?" he said. He vanished, and reappeared seated at the table near Minato's window. "But before that... can you guess what I'm going to tell you?"

"Beware the coming trial, of course." Minato said as he got up and lit the fire under his kettle. "In one week, the moon will be full again."

Pharos laughed. "You almost took all my lines." he said. "... But I also came to tell you be careful. Your body might be more than ready, but what about your mind?"

"That's what the Fiends are there for. To get me back into my senses if I get in trouble or to kick anything that tries to get into my head out." Minato said.

"That's true... your power certainly has its benefits." Pharos said. "It grows as you pass more trials."

"Exactly... but so does the number of The Lost." Minato said.

"... The people that got eaten?" Pharos asked.

"Yes, those people... I was wondering if you could tell me anything about them." Minato said.

"... I don't really remember anything about them." Pharos said. "I know that they aren't your friends once they're gone... but I don't know why."

"... So they are a problem?" Minato asked.

"... I can't say for sure. But I hope that if they do become a problem, you do the right thing." Pharos said.

"I'll save them from their suffering. You don't have to worry

about that." Minato said.

"That's good." Pharos said. He looked out at the moon for a bit, and then back to Minato with a puzzled expression on his face. "... You know, I'm surprised you drink tea now. After all, you know what water becomes in this Hour."

"I drink the stuff of life... water, blood, it makes little difference." Minato said. "Besides, I've found over the years that purified water tends to be safe to drink even as blood during the Dark Hour... granted, you'll always taste it a little, but that isn't always bad."

Pharos laughed. "You really are a monster, aren't you?" he asked.

"I thought we established how similar we are already." Minato mused. He chuckled. "Besides, if I didn't, we wouldn't get to have these lovely conversations, would we?"

"That's true." Pharos said with a grin. "... Although, I have to wonder if you like that."

"Watching me all the time, right?" Minato asked. "You don't have anything to fear. Even if I could kill you, I don't see why I'd need to. You're a weakness that can never be exploited, and that's what puts you very high on my list of trusted friends. Plus, we're pretty much the same... though I really would like to learn how to teleport like you someday. It's much stealthier than how I go about it."

"You really are funny." Pharos said with a chuckle. "You're making friends to get rid of them all one day... but won't that put you right back where you started?"

"If I've taken all the power I need from them, it'll put me much farther ahead of my current position." Minato said.

"... I don't know if what you're doing is right or wrong." Pharos said. He chuckled. "Actually, I don't think I really know what right and wrong are."

"Abstract concepts dependent upon your affiliations and personal beliefs." Minato said. "Rather useless bits of information, really... the more important question is whether or not you enjoy what you're doing. Do you enjoy talking to me, Pharos?"

"... An abstract concept based on what I believe and the people I know..." Pharos said. He smiled. "I enjoy talking to you, and I care about you... so then, it's right for me to spend time with you... but that's a little saddening, since I can't always be around."

"... One hour max per day is rather limiting, isn't it?" Minato asked.

"Although... I remember you saying something about a lack of time making every moment more precious." Pharos said. "... I think I'm going to believe that, even if you don't... but it'd make me happy if you thought so too."

"Who knows? I may become a believer yet." Minato said. The kettle finished boiling, and he poured their teas. They drank in relative silence, and finished their cups simply enjoying each other's presence. "... I don't know if this means much to you... but you were the first person I really considered to be my friend when I came here, even before we had a card."

Pharos chuckled. "That's touching... and I can't say much back, since you're the only person I really know... but I'm really happy you take this time to speak to me, even if my messages are short." he said.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Death Arcana...

"... You know, I could say the same to you. You're the one who elects to take me up on my odd offers." Minato said.

"Isn't that why friendship is reciprocal?" Pharos asked. Minato chuckled.

"You know, for an amnesiac kid, you're smarter than most people I know." Minato said.

"It's probably because I know a lot of what you know." Pharos said. He and Minato both turned towards the moon once more. "... I'll come again when the trial is over."

"I'm holding you to that." Minato said. Pharos let out a little laugh and then disappeared. Minato sat at the table for a bit, continuing to look at the moon, before returning to his work.

"There's nothing either of us need to fear, Pharos... it's as you said. You're always with me, and nobody can touch you... it's a win-win situation, and I get more power just because I can. This is what I'd call an ideal bond."

77. Chapter 77

Chapter 77: Velvety Fun

**Author Note to Number13teen: ... Dang, that's cold.
#NO_LOVE**

Minato made his way to school that morning in a happier mood than usual. He had his music blaring and a little spring in his step as he walked through the school gates. *"Alright, guys, you heard Pharos. The next Shadow will be one that targets my mind, so I want all of you formulating some kind of mental defense for me."* Minato commanded in his head.

"That's actually a tough order, Boss... unless you're explicitly skilled in that field, it's not easy to pull off. The best we could do is a bigger version of what me and Jack did when that voice popped into your head." David said.

"If we know to look out for it, we might be able to just keep you from falling victim to anything like distress or confusion, but you wouldn't be able to use any of us at all in combat." Alice said. *"Can you get a Persona that does that?"*

"Only Oumitsunu, and he nulls rage... which is rather useless. If I was somehow enraged, I'm pretty certain I'd just

awaken and tear the enemy to shreds. So I'm certain I don't need to worry about that... as for fear, I'd be amazed if it could happen, but I'm sure I'd just escape the battle by any means necessary there, probably with Trafuri or Traesto." Minato replied. *"... The real problems are charm and panic. If I aid the enemy and nobody stops me, they're all dead. And if I start freaking out and attacking randomly, there's a good chance I'll destroy everything around me... which isn't good if we have to keep the operation stealthy."*

"We've got some items that cure those... maybe we should get a buddy system and have everyone carry their own supply." Hell Biker said. ***"The whole point of having a crew is so you never have to man up, right? If you keep each other in check, the chances of a serious accident are slim to none."***

"Yukari's got a lot of status healing moves too, so we should drag her along for this fight." Jack said. ***"Ya can butter her up saying you wanna help her redeem her honor, heh."***

"Of course, we'll need to have Yukari in the main squadron. She may well be one of our last lines of defense against me if I get charmed." Minato said. *"Because I'm certain splashing my face with whatever's in a dis-charm is a lot harder than most of them might think. Her Charmdi skill can affect me from afar and is unavoidable so long as I'm in range, so she's definitely going to be the one to deal with me."*

"Excellent... if we know the match is rigged, there is no shame in taking countermeasures." Matador said.
"However, we could always rely on using Personae with varied forms of weaponry to compensate for our occupation, but... Hmm? Mitsuru approaches."

Minato took off his headphones and turned to see Mitsuru walk up next to him. "Good morning, Mitsuru." Minato said.

"Good morning." she replied. "The full moon is almost upon us... Are you prepared?"

"Actually, I have a quick question for you." Minato said.

"... Go ahead." she said.

"Do you know about any type of equipment that can nullify attacks against one's mind?" Minato asked.

"Attacks against a person's mind?,,, No, not personally. Officer Kurosawa may have something... but why do you ask?" Mitsuru replied.

"As for your previous question, yes, I am prepared for the next full moon." Minato said. "My ghostly little brother warned me about what was coming up next last night. It's a Shadow that attacks our minds along with our bodies, so I've gone ahead and devised a few possible strategies. I just want to know if there are any pieces of equipment that could simplify the process."

"... I see." Mitsuru said. "That's valuable information... Give him my gratitude the next time you see him."

"You just gave it yourself." Minato said.

"... He's here?" Mitsuru asked. Minato chuckled.

"I'll let you think about that." he said. "Still, I'll be sure to visit Kurosawa later today. We'll do a quick debriefing on which strategy we'll be following tonight, so make sure Akihiko and Shinjiro don't go anywhere until it's over."

"Certainly." Mitsuru said. She smirked. "I may not say this often, but it's reassuring to know that SEES remains in such capable hands."

"Of course. I can't let my show end just yet. You puppets will be dancing for much longer than this." Minato thought. He smiled. "I'm just making sure everyone's safe and enjoying themselves." he said.

Mitsuru chuckled. "Safety first, as they say." she said. They entered school, and the day passed by without much incident.

He left his classroom as usual once the day ended, with Junpei again excusing himself to go spend time with a somewhat depressed looking Kenji. Outside of his classroom, he quickly found Fuuka and Catherine waiting for him. Unfortunately for them, however, he had other plans for the day, since he was fairly certain Bebe couldn't possibly have completed his clothing yet. "Oh, Minato, there you are!"

Catherine greeted.

"Are you ready to go to club?" Fuuka asked.

"Sorry, girls, but daddy has other plans today." Minato said. He walked over and gave Fuuka a quick one-armed hug, and whispered "Be back at the dorm soon after club. SEES business." Afterwards, he messed with her hair and chuckled. "Another time, perhaps." he said.

"Oh... ok." Fuuka said with a little nod.

"Deciding to ditch today? Wow... I guess even a workaholic like you needs some down time, huh?" Catherine asked.

"I wish. Things come up, and I find myself with even more work." Minato said. "Regardless, I should be able to check on Bebe tomorrow, if that's what you're wondering about. Until then." At that, he hurriedly took his leave and got on the first train to Iwatodai. Once there, he quickly made his way to Paulownia and headed straight for the police station to speak to Officer Kurosawa.

Once again, Kurosawa was the only person inside of the generally barren police station, and he looked up from his book once he heard the door open. "I was wondering when you would show up again." Officer Kurosawa said.

"Today's finally the day I buy some new gear." Minato said.

"Really? Then come around back." Kurosawa said. He got up

from his chair and led Minato to the back room away from the offices which led to Hazama's base. "We have a lot of new items... but before that, I need to ask you some questions." he continued as he closed the door behind he and Minato.

"This sounds serious. Ask away." Minato said.

"I remember your friend, Junpei Iori, coming around to ask me about whether or not a member of The Lost ever watched me... I assume you were investigating possible reasons as to why similar occurrences happened to you, correct?" Kurosawa asked.

"That's right. We were only able to determine that The Lost are taking an interest in anyone involved with the supernatural, and deemed them as harmless... for now." Minato said.

"Harmless, huh?" Kurosawa asked. "Then you wouldn't happen to know about the murder of four members of The Lost that occurred within the last ten days, would you?"

"... Before we began our investigation, I did kill one because when I saw it turn towards me, I panicked." Minato said. He scratched his head and chuckled. "Rather violently, actually... you found one dismembered behind Iwatodai Station, right?"

"... That's correct." Officer Kurosawa said. "Murder is a serious offense, boy... and with that confession, I should throw you in a jail cell right now."

"... And if I resist?" Minato asked.

"... Then you'd find yourself in a body bag first." Kurosawa said. "But we aren't having this conversation now. A single mistake is common enough, especially in your line of work. I haven't forgotten Shinjiro's incident two years ago, and he got away with a slap on the wrist for doing much more than just killing a half-dead corpse that was abandoned in an alleyway."

Minato snickered. "So you view them the same, then?" he asked.

"I've seen the people that recover. Some of them come back with just slight health problems, but when you return with personality disorders, memory loss, permanent nerve damage, and a list of other irreversible complications? You were better off dying in my opinion." Kurosawa said. "... Though, if you only killed one, who or what got rid of the other three?"

"I assume I left the most gruesome corpse?" Minato asked.

"Not even... the last body we found had almost been reduced to pulp. There were barely enough physical remains left to identify the victim." Kurosawa said. "That's the case that made me consider that the killer could be you, since there wasn't anything in the area capable of doing that to a human body... the buildings were perfectly intact, meaning no debris could have crushed the body either, and the crater on the floor was almost perfectly in the shape of a fist."

"That definitely sounds like a supernatural killing... You're aware that there are other Persona-users in the city,

correct?" Minato asked.

"I know of all the ones that are enlisted under the Kirijio Group... I've asked Captain Hazama to try and get information out of the demons in the city. I believe he's speaking to the inhabitants of Club Escapade right now." Kurosawa said.

"I doubt it was any of them. Most of them are content with simply making money." Minato said. "That's quite a mystery you have there... sorry to say I don't know anything about non-Kirijio sponsored Persona-users, or if those even exist. I'll keep an eye out, though."

"You're telling me... the crime rate in this city was always high, with a murder or two happening almost once a night. Now we have The Lost popping up more and more, along with what I assume is some vigilante thinking they're doing the city a favor." Kurosawa said. He let out slight sigh. "You better be ready for anything. If your group falls, I'd hate to see how that man with an earring intends to pick up the pace. I've seen his records... and he's known for fighting destructively."

"Not very good in a shady business like our own." Minato said. "But, speaking of preparation... do you have any type of item that can supposedly nullify... temporary mental ailments?"

"... You mean something that makes sure you don't lose focus?" Kurosawa asked. Minato nodded, and he thought for a moment. "... I've seen those items once, but no, I don't carry them. I do, however, know that one of them comes in

the form of a flower... it nulls what you'd all refer to as charm."

"That's exactly what I'm looking for." Minato said with a grin.

"Wipe that smile off your face... I have no idea where to get it. I've only seen it back when I worked with the JSDF. We took them from Narcissus class demons." Kurosawa said.

"Narcissus?... That's all I need to know." Minato said. "Know about any other items like that?"

"... Not off the top of my head." Kurosawa said. He smirked. "Come back in a few days, and I'll see if I can dig up any of my old notes for rookies."

"I'll be counting on your experience." Minato said. "But I think it's time I looked at these weapons... after all, business is business."

At that, Minato upgraded all of SEES weaponry, selling their old ones for newer, and, from what he could tell, more powerful ones, although most of them looked very similar in appearance. He ended up losing a little less than 40,000 yen, which, in all honesty, wasn't a very big chunk out of his rather large wallet he found himself in possession of these days. Afterwards, he took his leave and headed straight to the Velvet Room.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I assist you today?" Elizabeth greeted.

"Hello, Elizabeth, Igor." Minato said. "Today, I actually have an odd request... one that I think you'll find interesting."

"You're interested in the Heart Items that can be given to you by Personae... or, more correctly, the Heart Items you were supposed to be given to you by Personae." Igor said. Minato walked into his seat and let out a little sigh.

"Let me guess... complications have arisen since the Card of the Beast, though allowing for my Personae to inherit any skill I want them to, also takes away their individuality, making these supposed Heart Items, which I assume are gifts given to me by Personae because of their attachment to me, impossible to get since a heartless being cannot form attachments." Minato said. Igor laughed.

"Ah, you never cease to amaze!" Igor said. "That is precisely correct... though Personae are facets of one's self, each of them possesses their own individual personality... and some of them choose to give their masters something to remember them by, known as a Heart Item. However, the Card of the Beast's interference in fusions prevents your Personae's identity from forming... as such, this prevents the manifestation of a Heart Item." Igor said.

"Then you can guess what I'm here for." Minato said.

"You wish to gather these Heart Items, despite being unable to earn them yourself." Elizabeth said.

"Hey, I'm certain all of my Personas would love me." Minato

mused. "But that's exactly the case... since I can summon Personae from the Compendium, calling on their Heart Items should be possible." Minato said. "Am I mistaken?"

"... Though it has never been done before, I believe that I can perform such a task." Elizabeth said. "However, it will be much more expensive than simply using the Compendium... I trust you can afford it."

"My wallet's been getting too heavy recently... It's about time I put it to good use." Minato said.

"Very well, then... However, there is one restriction. I can only summon the Heart Items of Personae which have already been recorded in your Compendium." Elizabeth said.

"Indeed... we draw forth power from a Persona which you have never created." Igor said.

"That's fine... the item I want belongs to Narcissus, one that I used for fusion fodder." Minato said. "How big of a hit should I expect for that?"

"Ah, so you want an item that prevents it's wielder from being charmed?" Elizabeth asked. "That is quite useful... please wait a moment while I check for its availability."

"Availability? Can't you just draw it out from the sea of my soul?" Minato asked.

"Not every incarnation of Narcissus would be willing to give

you his flower." Igor said. "Remember... the Personae you use are not the original versions of these figures, but representations of them. For instance, while you hold power over the true Hell Biker and the true Matador, another Wild Card has used them as Personae of varying Arcana, depending on the composition of the individual's soul."

Elizabeth had opened the Compendium as Igor spoke, and a bright blue light had engulfed her entire body, forming a pillar that spanned the height of the Velvet Room. Neither Minato nor Igor flinched, however, and their conversation continued uninterrupted. "... That makes sense. Every individual's soul is different. If, by some chance, I could use Polydeuces as one of my many Personae, the chances are that, had I not seen Akihiko's version, it would have looked very different." Minato said.

"Correct. Now that you have seen Polydeuces, if he ever answers your call, he will appear as your acquaintances version instead of the generally accepted manifestation which heeds the call of another Wild Card." Igor said.

"And the same would happen with Io, Hermes, Penthesilea, Castor, and Baba Yaga, I presume." Minato said. Igor nodded. "Interesting... from what I've seen, those versions of the Persona grow like my Fiends... technically, they never stop getting stronger. If I could summon those, I'd have an array of Personae that strengthen alongside me and a loyal group of Fiends that follow the same rules."

"Quite an advantage, isn't it?" Igor asked.

"... No, actually." Minato said. "I'd be locked into the same set of moves and I'd always be limited at my own strength. In addition, pursuing my Social Links would be useless since their main perk comes in the fusion process when they strengthen the new Personae I make... and after the fifth rank or so, that boost becomes quite noticeable. Couple that with the additional uses my Magatama has granted me for my Persona, along with this new Heart Item ability, and I think I'm much better off fusing more and more."

"Exactly... you seem to have recognized the nature of your ability." Igor said. "Indeed, the unpredictability of your power is what constitutes a Wild Card's true strength... and only through constant fusion can one of the largest benefits of Social Links truly be wrought."

"Heh... at this rate, I could work here. And judging from Elizabeth's purse, the pay is..." Minato began, leaning back in his chair, "out of this world." He chuckled at his own joke, and the light consuming Elizabeth faded.

"It would seem Narcissus is actually quite fond of you... he says you remind him of himself." Elizabeth said. She giggled. "Although it's not very hard to see why."

"I am a thing of beauty, am I not?" Minato asked. "So, what'll it run me?"

"Since Narcissus favors you, he has agreed to a reasonable price." Elizabeth said. "It will cost 120,000 yen per flower."

"... Actually, for its effect, that's not that bad." Minato said. He pulled out his wallet, and began counting bills. He hadn't spent much money at all since his last few paydays, and he had accumulated over 100,000 yen on one odd day with Zelenin's shopping. In all, he had enough for three flowers, though the purchase would leave him with just over 60,000 yen. *"That covers me, Yukari, and one other person... likely Shinjiro, since he can cause the most damage."* he thought. "I'll take three. Also, tell Narcissus I'm a fan of just the scarf... if I couldn't get in trouble for it, I'd go around like that too every now and then."

He handed Elizabeth the money, and she opened her Compendium once more and disappeared in a pillar of blue light again. "Hmph... the Velvet Room has never seen such an odd guest before." Igor said.

"I wonder what Philemon thinks of me." Minato said. Igor turned to him and chuckled.

"I saw Naoya speak to you... and for your information, the Master is more than annoyed at the Defiler's temporary commandeering of the Velvet Room for you." Igor said. "He partially blames you, but also his own insistence to avoid directly interfering with the flow of fate."

"... Sounds like somebody I wouldn't like that much, if he wants to take a backseat to history." Minato said. "I prefer to make it."

"That is exactly why he also favors you, despite the troubles

you have caused." Igor said. "Master is... a bit lazy, actually. He elects to wait until almost the last moment to grant people power."

"He probably believes that people shine brightest in the darkest of times, or some poetic crap like that." Minato said. Igor laughed.

"With how you speak, you might as well be acquainted with him." Igor said. Minato chuckled.

"Blank Card, remember? I embrace all equally... and to do so, I need to be able to predict and calculate how each and every force I embrace acts and thinks. Though I doubt Philemon will visit me, considering the fact that he has opted to remain out of sight for this long, I think I have somewhat of an idea on the type of existence he is." Minato said. "Just one question, though... he's that voice that rings every time a Social Link gains strength, correct?"

"Yes... and I have a question for you." Igor said. "You don't need to answer it now... but if I were to offer you a position as resident of the Velvet Room upon completion of your Journey, would you take it?... Of course, this is merely a question, nothing more."

CRACK!

"That's an interesting question..." Minato began.

Thou art I...

"Gain near infinite power and immortality..."

And I art thou...

"But sacrifice the majority of my freedom."

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Tower Arcana...

"If I could get around the rules or change them, I probably would." he finished.

Don't think yourself so high as to break the rules I've created, boy.

Minato froze. He looked around quickly, and Igor laughed.

"Relax... the Master means no harm." he said. "However, he does not tolerate outright disrespect... and though he cannot physically harm you, I'm certain you can think of many things he's allowed to do which are much worse."

"... I'll keep that in mind." Minato said. "But that was the truth... I don't think I'd have the patience to simply sit here all day."

At that, the pillar of blue light surrounding Elizabeth disappeared as she closed her Compendium. She held three variants of the common Narcissus Flower, one purple, one having purple tinted white petals with a blue stigma, one having pure white petals and pink stigma, and the last having blue petals and yellow stigma. "I have returned... Narcissus

insisted you get three different colored ones to see 'which one compliments you the most'." Elizabeth said.

"... You know, I'm sad that I could never have a proper representation of him now." Minato said, taking the flowers. "Thank you, Elizabeth. I think that'll be all for today, so, unfortunately, no date today."

"A pity." Elizabeth said. She let out a slight sigh, and Minato watched her expression slightly darken.

"... Although, I don't see why that deal still holds." Minato said. "C'mon, let's go out for a bit. Anywhere you want."

"... Are you certain? Breaking one's word so carelessly is a sign of questionable character." Elizabeth said. Minato laughed.

"I didn't think I still needed a sign." he mused. "You don't mind, right, Igor?"

"Go ahead... I have all the time in the world to wait." he said.

"Then it's settled." Minato said, offering his free arm to her. "I've brought the flowers. Shall we, my lady?"

Elizabeth chuckled. "We shall." she said as she took his arm.

"I'll be sure to return her soon." Minato said as he walked towards the door. "Give me your blessings, would you, old man?"

Igor chuckled. "Very well... you have my blessing." he said. At that, Minato and Elizabeth left the Velvet Room and reappeared in a swarm of blue butterflies in the small alleyway near Paulownia Mall.

"So, where did you have in mind?" Minato asked.

"I was thinking of visiting the location known as Naganaki Shrine... there are a few things I would like to see there." Elizabeth said.

"Naganaki Shrine...? Can't you see 'God' anytime in the Velvet Room?" Minato asked. Elizabeth chuckled.

"While a number of 'gods' are visible to me in the Velvet Room, I have never seen a place of worship with my own eyes." Elizabeth said.

"Fair enough." Minato said. They emerged from the back alley and made their way to the Shrine in relative silence, with Minato still holding the Narcissus flowers while they walked. "You know, this looks like pretty serious date. Want to go anywhere special beforehand?" he asked as they made their way there.

"Hmm... I had never taken the time to consider such a possibility." Elizabeth said. "Although, you are being much more accommodating than usual today... are you perhaps thinking you need to atone for your previous outburst against me when we last spoke?"

"Saw right through me, huh?" Minato asked. "While there are many people I have no qualms about doing that to and simply not caring what they think of me afterwards, you are not one of them."

"Truly?" Elizabeth asked. "... Touching as that may be, I am merely your attendant in the Velvet Room. If anything, I am one of the few people you should have the liberty of being able to lash out against without consequence."

Minato stopped walking, and Elizabeth stopped as well. He quickly swiped the hat off of her head and then placed the blue Narcissus flower above her right ear. "There... now you're a girl I'm taking on a date. And I've given you a flower..." he continued, placing the purple-tinted Narcissus flower into his own hair, "to match my own. No restrictions, no servitude, no obligations." He put the last flower into her hand. "Right now, it's just you and me."

"... Well, this is quite the experience." Elizabeth said, a faint blush forming on her cheeks. "... I think this is more than enough of a special occasion before we proceed to our original destination."

Minato chuckled and offered his arm once more. "I'll hold your hat... as long as you keep the flower." he said. Elizabeth simply nodded and took his arm once more.

Outside of Naganaki Shrine at the large gate entrance, Minato noticed Maiko stringing along a somewhat distressed Ken in the direction of Iwatodai Station. While Ken looked flustered,

Minato could tell he was enjoying himself, and couldn't suppress a little grin from forming on his face as he led Elizabeth to the main entrance. They stood there, at the top of the stairs in the main area of the Shrine, and Elizabeth took a quick look around the area.

"Hmm... This facility is very similar to a temple... so this is what is known as a 'shrine'." she said. "Now that I'm actually here, I sense mysterious presences... But they are markedly different from Shadows."

"There is... a 'god', here, I suppose." Minato said. "It cowered when I threatened to sic my Fiends on it."

"But of course... many beings possess powers that are useless in combat." Elizabeth said. She began to walk towards the actual shrine itself, and Minato followed suit. "As for your affiliation with the Fiends... why, they are a known destructive force. Possessing more than one is a spectacle in and of itself."

"Such is to be expected of an individual of my caliber, is it not?" Minato mused. Elizabeth giggled, and they stopped in front of the main shrine.

"So it would appear." she said. "... Well then, I shall first observe the local traditions and worship at the shrine." She quickly withdrew her hand and produced the bulging coin purse from seemingly out of nowhere once more, and began to pour a torrent of coins into the offertory box.

"I think one of the secrets to your overall happy life is the amount of favor you buy all the time. Fountain spirits, shrine spirits, what next?" Minato mused.

"I am paying due respect to my fellow beings of a higher plane." Elizabeth said, still pouring coins. She finally finished pouring, and put the coin purse away. "I have finally finished presenting my offering. However, you raise an interesting point... though I do not usually reside in this world... I wonder if I, too, may receive 'divine grace'."

"Not content with mine?" Minato asked, walking forwards to inspect just how much she had poured into the box. It looked like it was about to break, and he chuckled. "Don't worry... if you don't receive a blessing after that, then everybody in the world has been long condemned."

"Perhaps... but I wonder." Elizabeth said. "This system of monetary offerings is very similar to that of the wishing fountain. There are many places in your world for supplicants to request good fortune... You live in a wondrous place..."

Minato chuckled. "*Wondrous? Hardly.*" he thought. "For the wealthy, at least." he said.

"Ah, I hadn't even considered the implications a monetary system placed on those who lacked the coin!" Elizabeth said. "... I see. A system made to elevate those who have already established themselves... Then..." she continued, turning to look around the shrine. She froze when she saw the table with fortunes. "Wait... Could those paper slips tied there be...?"

"Only one way to find out, right?" Minato asked. He let Elizabeth lead him over to the wooden table, and she stopped to marvel at the small set-up.

"As I thought... they're 'paper fortunes'..." Elizabeth began. I've heard of this game, where people entrust their destiny to a slip of paper, and exult in the risk..." Minato couldn't help but think that made the idea of drawing a fortune much more... alluring than he had previously thought it was. "I see... There are many possible destinies written on them. Well then, I'd like to experiment with this for myself. Please wait here while I work on obtaining all of them."

"Hey now, if we're searching for the best possible one," Minato began, walking next to her, "I hate to say this, but I'm the only one worthy of that honor."

"Oh my! Is that a challenge?" Elizabeth asked.

"It's only a challenge if the other side has a chance of winning, you know... and I'll have you know I don't play nice. Unlike the arcade, there are no rules here." Minato said. Elizabeth chuckled.

"Then allow me to warn you... I can be rather formidable when I wish to be." she said. "Then, the match begins... now!"

At that, Elizabeth and Minato began hurriedly drawing fortunes one after the other in search of the best one. They had gotten deep into their contest, each of them having pulled at least 100 fortunes each using Elizabeth's bottomless coin purse as

a payment method, when Ken and Maiko returned to the Shrine. Maiko was the one to approach them, with Ken following along. "Hey, it's Minato!" she said. "Ooh, and his girlfriend too!"

Minato and Elizabeth quickly turned to see the duo approaching. "Reinforcements? Unprecedented!" Elizabeth said. Minato let out a little cackle.

"Maiko, Ken, you're right on time! Come, help me claim the greatest fortune there is to offer, and the second and third will be yours!" Minato said.

"... That really sounds like something a bad guy would say." Ken said with a smirk. "But honestly... a competition like this is just childish."

"I want the second best one!" Maiko said, walking over.

"Ah, but if you help me, I will give you the second best one and a portion of my own!" Elizabeth said. Maiko stopped and turned to Ken. She had a mischievous grin.

"Then it's girls vs. boys!" she said. With that, Maiko ran over next to Elizabeth and began to help her draw fortunes.

"What?! This is treachery! Insubordination! Mutiny!" Minato called. He turned to Ken, who was watching the spectacle with an utterly lost expression on his face. There were numerous fortunes on the floor, Minato and Elizabeth's pockets were stuffed with a few, and three people were

scrambling to use the coins from one purse to get more and more fortunes. Minato turned to Ken. "C'mon, boy! You aren't planning to let them steal your happiness, are you?!" he asked.

"Heheh, Ken's going to be a grump forever when we win!" Maiko said cheerfully

"Grump?! I bought you Wild Duck AND Takoyaki!" Ken said. He growled and ran over to help Minato. "When we win, you're going to wish you could get the third best fortune!"

"That's the spirit! Fate is in our hands!" Minato called. Elizabeth laughed.

"Fate belongs only to the cards! However, the best belong to us!" she said.

After a solid half an hour of scrambling through the box and running through their fortunes when the box emptied, Maiko had drawn the best fortune in there, one promising everlasting happiness in all of her relationships. Elizabeth had allowed herself to fall to second place, getting a fortune that promised expanding horizons, while Minato had gotten one he thought was equally good, claiming that he would make the most of every opportunity. Ken inevitably wound up third, but still received a good fortune. His own promised growth, which he took in a very literal sense.

Afterward, they all went about disposing of the numerous strips that hadn't been blown away by the wind during their

competition, and disposed of them all accordingly. "That was fun!" Maiko said. "And you're fun too, blue lady. I really like your flower."

"Oh, this?" Elizabeth asked, touching the flower still in her hair.

"Mm-hmm. You and Minato match." Maiko said.

"But of course. I'm the one who gave it to her, after all." Minato said. "Any good man would do the same."

"... Then how come Ken didn't give me one?" Maiko asked.

"H-huh?! Hey, that's only for people who are dating a-and stuff like that..." Ken said. He cleared his throat. "I don't think it's appropriate for us to be doing things like that."

"Really?" Maiko asked with a very bright smile. "I thought you wanted people to think you were a man, Ken." Everyone broke out laughing as Ken panicked.

"T-that's true, b-but not like this!" he sputtered. He let out a little growl. "C'mon, just because I don't want to be treated like a kid doesn't mean I want to suddenly be an adult, alright?!"

"Oh my! Such vehement denial... I believe we may have struck upon what is commonly referred to as a 'touchy subject'." Elizabeth said. Minato crouched down so that he was on Ken and Maiko's level and put a hand on Ken's

shoulder.

"Hey, don't worry about it, Ken. We're just playing around... even us grown-ups can't be serious all the time." Minato said.

"Of course you'd say that... I mean, you're never serious." Ken said.

"Is that how you treat the one guy who takes your side?" Minato asked with a sigh. "Oh well, just know that you don't win all the battles, as you've experienced twice today."

"... That's lame." Ken said.

"You can't always draw a good card." Elizabeth said. Minato stood back up and looked at the sky to see the sun had almost set completely.

"That's true... though, shouldn't you two be getting home soon?" Minato asked.

"... I guess." Maiko said. "Walk me, Ken."

Ken let out a defeated sigh, and from what Minato could see, in the time he hadn't seen the boy, he may well have become Maiko's bitch. "Fine... but if I get in trouble again, you're buying your own Takoyaki." Ken said.

"I'll bring you some Mad Bull next time, so don't worry." Maiko said. "Bye Minato, bye blue lady!"

"You two take care." Minato said. Ken waved at the two of

them and gave Minato a quick nod before following Maiko away. Minato chuckled. "That was a nice way to liven things up."

"Yes... the experience was exhilarating." Elizabeth said. She took a large breath, and then turned towards the playground in the corner. "Excuse me... I've been curious ever since we arrived, but what are those things over there?"

"Fun." Minato said. "Unlike them, we don't have a real curfew, so let's go check them out."

He and Elizabeth walked over to the playground and stood on the edge, looking at the jungle gym. "... If memory serves, these are... a slide and a jungle gym." Elizabeth said.

"Correct." Minato said.

"The inner self is exposed to any true god... Their magnanimity of spirit excuses all...!" Elizabeth suddenly said. "And that being the case..." she said, suddenly running over to the slide and swiftly climbing up to the little platform. Minato walked over just in time to see her go down it standing, allowing herself to slide on her boots and firmly land on her feet with a satisfied smile. "Intriguing..." she began as she turned back towards the slide, "One must first claw one way's to the top before relaxing in luxury... This playground equipment teaches a profound lesson on the true way of the world..."

"*Oh, this is going to be fun.*" Minato thought as he formed a

plan in his head. "Actually, it's much deeper. There is a standard which one must follow when going down the slide to complete the message." he said.

"Truly? Please, elaborate." Elizabeth said.

"Actually, it's possible to do it with two people." Minato said.
"But, ladies first."

"A hands-on demonstration? How exciting." Elizabeth said. She hurried up the slide, and Minato followed her. They both stood on the platform, and Minato looked around.

"It's true, that one must claw their way to the top before relaxing in luxury... but the story doesn't end there." Minato said. "First, you need to sit-down with your legs pointed outwards on the slide." Elizabeth quickly did as instructed, and Minato followed suit, placing his arms around her. "The message ends as follows... once you've reached your prime, and can look down at all you've surpassed, your time will eventually end... and in the end..." Minato scooted forwards, and the duo slid down the slide together, shaking the entire set-up, but reaching the bottom safely enough. "... You will watch everything you've accomplished come to pass and return to that from whence you came." Elizabeth said, the duo lying at the bottom of the slide. She smiled. "That... is truly profound."

"And there are quite a few more lessons to be taught by everything else, here too. Fortunately, these were all made for multiple users at once... care for me to teach you?"

Minato asked.

"I'd be honored." Elizabeth said. Minato chuckled, and the duo got up.

While Minato went about playing around on the jungle gym and balance bar with Elizabeth, Fuuka and Yukari arrived at the shrine. "Geez... Koromaru really is missing." Yukari said. "Sorry for dragging you around, Fuuka... I was just a little worried since nobody saw him, and it's been so long."

"I was worried too... but we should hurry back to the dorm." Fuuka said. She turned towards the exit. "After all, Minato said he'd-" she began, but froze when she saw Minato and Elizabeth managing to trap themselves in the jungle gym. Yukari turned to what she was looking at, and her jaw dropped.

"THAT'S what he skipped club for?!" Yukari asked. "Jeez, I thought he said he had important stuff to do... but he really just wanted to hang out with that girl he clubs with."

"... He did, didn't he?" Fuuka asked, her hands curling into fists. "... Let him play around..." she said, her eyes changing to their bright yellow. With that, Fuuka quickly made her way away from the shrine.

"... That asshole." Yukari growled, quickly following Fuuka.

After teaching Elizabeth random deep lessons he thought of out of the blue, such as the horizontal bar's representation of

how delicate maintaining a position of power was, Minato and Elizabeth finally took a seat on the bench right next to the playground. "Today was even more enjoyable than our other excursions out." Elizabeth said. She let out a slight sigh and looked off into the distance before speaking again. "To be honest, I've wondered lately... Is this world enjoyable to me simply because of the novelty of the stimuli it presents...? It could also be that I... Well... perhaps I may in truth be enjoying our time together because we are together."

"That's definitely the case for me." Minato said, stopping Elizabeth from continuing. He turned to face her with a smile. "I don't know anyone else I could take to a playground and have half as much fun as I had today."

"... I see." Elizabeth said. She smiled back. "... Then it must be the truth."

CRACK!

"I never doubted it." Minato said.

Thou art I...

"It was foolish of me to do so." Elizabeth said.

And I art thou...

Minato chuckled. "You know, I'm still a bit sore about losing that fortune race." he said.

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Sun Arcana...

"Perhaps one day, we can have a rematch." Elizabeth said.
"But for today, I am the victor."

"Indeed you are." Minato said. He let out a content sigh. "... Think of another good place you want to visit soon, alright?"

"I will do my best." Elizabeth said. "However, time is passing... I should return to the Velvet Room." She went to take the flower out of her hair, but Minato stopped her arm.

"We aren't even anywhere near there yet. You've got time." Minato said. He got up, still holding her hand. "I'll take you there."

"... Only if you insist." Elizabeth said with a smile. At that, he lead her back to the Velvet Room, returned her hat at the entrance, and retrieved his flower from her hair before returning to the dorm. He entered carrying his two flowers while still wearing his own, which he was assured were essentially imbued with eternal youth since they had Narcissus' blessing, and saw the members of SEES all seated in the lounge. He immediately noticed a somewhat hostile atmosphere emanating from the female members.

"Oh, you're finally back." Akihiko greeted, trying to lighten the mood. "Did you hear? The next operation will be on the seventh. That means it's going to be a Star Festival special bout, heh... but what did you want to tell all of us?"

"Before that, Akihiko," Mitsuru began, "I'd like you to answer a few questions, Arisato."

"*She's pissed.*" Minato noted. "You have my complete honesty." he said.

"I've heard that you skipped both Council and Art Club today... while I had originally thought it was for you to go about preparing something for this meeting, I've been informed that you instead spent the afternoon with that... flight attendant, I believe you called her." Mitsuru said.

"After I spoke to Kurosawa and prepared what I needed for tonight, yes, I did." Minato said. "And before any wrong conclusions are drawn from whoever saw me, I think we should begin the meeting."

"Oh? Not going to put up your flowers?" Yukari sneered.

"These flowers are exactly what I need for the meeting." Minato said. He walked to the open single seat in the lounge, took the flower out of his hair, and placed all three of them on the table. "I trust Mitsuru briefed you all on the information I received last night?"

"From your ghost, right?" Shinjiro asked.

"Good, then you all know the next Shadow will be targeting our minds as well as our bodies. This equates to it being heavily focused on using mental status afflictions, such as panic, confusion, and the like." Minato began. "I've realized

that by far, the most troublesome of all mental conditions is undoubtedly charm. Having us turn on one another would be catastrophic, especially if it happened to me before somebody could stop me. I'm sure I don't need to say why."

"Yep... you goin' full on beast mode on us would end pretty bad." Junpei said. "Still, what's with the flowers? Do we gotta make a potion out of em' or something like that?"

"Hardly... these flowers are Narcissus flowers." Minato said. "As long as you keep one on you at all times, its magic will prevent you from falling victim to the 'charmed' status. However, these were costly, as I could only get three... As such, I've gone ahead and chose the three members to keep one on them at all times. The first will obviously be me, then Shinjiro, and finally Yukari."

"Preventing charm... you looked rather charmed this afternoon." Fuuka said.

"... Wait, what?" Junpei asked.

"You and that girl each wore one of these at the shrine." Fuuka said.

"Before you continue, I'd like to say-" Minato began.

"Don't start with that! You're just making stuff up at this point!" Yukari said. "Seriously, a flower that stops your mind from being altered?! Instead of trying to save yourself, how about you actually get on with the meeting?"

"Oh, you want to talk shit now? I'll fucking destroy you." "... I am not lying about what these flowers can do." Minato said. He smirked. "And forgive me for enjoying the time I spend with my friends. I forgot I'm required to have emotional problems around here as to connect to people and their petty parental problems."

"Arisato!" Mitsuru snapped.

"What the hell did you just say?!" Yukari asked.

"Wahh, my mommy's a whore and daddy's dead! Oh woe is me!" Minato mocked.

"You watch it." Akihiko said, standing up.

"H-hey, guys, shouldn't we get back to the meeting?" Junpei asked, getting in between Minato and Akihiko.

"How could you say something like that to Yukari?" Fuuka asked, her eyes changing completely to yellow. "You've got some nerve, walking in here with the flowers you used with that blue bitch and calling them the answer to our problems!"

"Yamagishi, do not escalate the situation!" Mitsuru said.

"Well, well, look who decided to show up. Do I need to remind you of your place?" Minato taunted.

"D-dude, don't start a fight now!" Junpei said. Akihiko pushed him aside and walked towards Minato.

"Alright, you're asking for it, you sonuva-" he began, but was cut off by a loud bang.

"Castor!" Shinjrio said. His Persona materialized behind him, barely fitting in the first floor and pushing up against the roof and down against the floor. Its torso was right above him, and the cannons were all aiming at the center of the room, getting everybody's attention. "Alright, dumbasses... everyone sit down. I don't want to hear a damn sound." he growled. The members of SEES stopped for a moment, each eyeing him carefully, before slowly taking their seats. "Alright... now before this gets stupid, Minato, tell us the battle plan."

"... Thank you, Shinji. This was my mistake with unnecessary provocation." Minato said. "The plan is as follows. I, Yukari, and Shinjiro will wear one of these flowers as to ensure we never end up being charmed, the reason that Shinji and I are the most dangerous should we fall under enemy control and Yukari is the only one of us that has the ability to cure the charm status from afar with Io. Everyone else, including Shinjiro and myself, will carry a steady supply of dis-charm vials with them and use them as soon as you see another member afflicted with the status. In addition, each of us will carry a few items capable of curing panic, confusion, and fear, and act in the same manner. I have a Persona with Me Patra for everything else, as does Yukari. Following that strategy, we should all face minimum risk during the operation... Any questions?"

"... You want me to wear that flower in my hair?" Shinjiro asked.

"Not necessarily. While I believe that to be the optimal location for it, you can just as easily tie it around your wrist or your neck, or even keep it taped to your back if it really bothers you." Minato said. "These things don't die so long as the body isn't destroyed. Just make sure you don't take a hit in the area that you're electing to keep it. I choose my head because it's the spot you generally don't allow to get hit, ever. Now... any other questions?"

"... Who is that woman in blue, really, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"One of my contacts who provides me with very valuable information and assets, including these flowers, albeit for quite a pretty penny... these cost over 100,000 yen each." Minato said. "Although, if you don't mind, I'd prefer if we-"

"What's your relationship with her?" Yukari asked.

"Guys, can we stick to business?" Junpei snapped. "He's tryin' ta make sure none of us friggin' DIE next time around, so seriously, shut the fuck up and listen to him!" The room fell silent. Shinjiro and Minato both turned to Junpei and gave him a thankful nod. Junpei adjusted his cap and sighed. "... So let me get this straight. We're all gonna be packin' a buncha dis-charms and what not when we go in, cuz the next Shadow is attackin' our minds. The big thing to watch out for is which status it's going to use, but we're taking extra cautions with charm cuz it's the most dangerous... right?"

"That's exactly what we're doing." Minato said. He sighed, and

looked over the other members. "... Until such time, I'll be keeping these." he said. He waved the Dimensional Compactor over them, and they vanished. "Meeting adjourned."

Minato got up and walked towards the stairs as the rest of the members sat there silently. He stopped at their base, and a small grin crossed his face. "If you're waiting on an apology, try not to gather dust. It'll get in the air." he said. With that, he walked upstairs and went to his room, electing to read one of his new novels for the night.

The members of SEES shared no dinner that night. Each one of them isolated themselves after Minato left, the group divided over what had just transpired. Junpei went to the arcade to blow off some steam. Shinjiro revisited the back alleys of Tatsumi Port Island. Akihiko attacked his punching bag until he could barely stay awake. Yukari returned to her room and stewed over Minato's comments. Mitsuru returned to her room to consider how events could have played out differently. Fuuka remained in the lounge, doing nothing. However, when the Dark Hour struck, she returned to her room and sat on her bed with an SMG on her lap, re-evaluating just who Minato was to her.

78. Chapter 78

Chapter 78: Entourage

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: ... I don't think he's that enigmatic. He's got patterns he follows, one of which, as SilverFlameHaze pointed out, is to jump straight into confrontation attacked.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Eh, they pretty much were.

By the time dawn had broken, Minato's self-made Selective Apathy had already worked its magic. *"Last night was stupid. But stupid things happen."* he thought as he went about making breakfast as usual. He didn't bother making anything too fancy or special as a form of apology, although he did ensure that Junpei and Shinjiro got the best pieces of bacon for being the only adherents of common sense during the ridiculous quarrel. He had just finished preparing breakfast and setting the table when Mitsuru and Akihiko walked downstairs. "Good morning. Breakfast is ready." Minato greeted.

"... Good morning." Akihiko said, carefully eyeing him and the food. From what he could tell, it looked like any other breakfast Minato had ever prepared. He stood behind

Mitsuru, simply looking at Minato nonchalantly take his seat and begin eating.

"If you don't start, the food'll need heating." Minato said.

"... Are you truly this callous?" Mitsuru asked. "After your little display last night, you believe that you can simply act as if nothing happened?"

"... Did something happen last night?" Minato asked, turning with a puzzled expression towards Mitsuru.

"Excuse me?" Mitsuru asked, the temperature in the room slightly dropping. "Last night, you –"

"Nothing happened last night." Shinjiro said, walking past Mitsuru and Akihiko. They both turned on him, but he very calmly took his seat and began eating without batting an eyelid.

"Shinji, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Akihiko asked.

"What, you think this is poisoned or something? Sit down and stop being so loud in the morning... it's irritating." Shinjiro said, starting his meal.

Mitsuru took a deep breath and looked at both Minato and Shinjiro for a while. "... You're correct. We will continue this discussion later." she said.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's over." Minato whispered. Shinjiro

glanced at him and gave a quick nod while chewing to voice his support of the idea.

"Tch... fine." Akihiko said, taking his seat. As the two seniors reluctantly began eating, Junpei walked downstairs and let out a huge relieved sigh.

"Phew... I thought I was gonna have to take cereal again." Junpei said with a smile. He sat down and happily began eating his breakfast.

Fuuka and Yukari arrived in the first floor last to see the other members of SEES eating, though the general tension of last night hung in the air, accentuated by the disparity in the expressions of the SEES members. Akihiko and Mitsuru each took vicious glances at Minato and Shinjiro. Junpei was obviously trying very hard to appear by randomly commenting on how good the food was. Minato and Shinjiro looked generally indifferent and too absorbed in their eating to care. They both simply left the dorm without a word, and though Minato did notice their presence, he honestly didn't care, so much so that he took Fuuka's plate as his seconds. Nobody stopped him, and Shinjiro and Junpei even split Yukari's plate between themselves as to not let fresh food go to waste.

On the train to school, Fuuka and Yukari were nowhere to be seen. Akihiko and Mitsuru went about isolating Shinjiro so as to have what Minato could only guess was an interrogation session with him on public transit, which he had to admit amused him. That left he and Junpei to stand alone near a window as the train to Tatsumi Port Island began to move.

They simply stood there for a bit, each looking out of the window, until Junpei spoke. "... Man, what was everyone's problem last night?" he asked.

"Apparently, you aren't allowed to hang out with other girls if you have a girlfriend." Minato said. He shrugged. "Don't know why they got so annoyed, though. Everyone knows the type of things we get up to in Escapade. People getting pissed because I was hanging out at her a shrine?... I've got nothing."

"... Actually, I think that's actually a thing." Junpei said. "I mean, you can hang out with your girl's friends, because she knows em', but... well, anyways, this ain't the point I was trying to make! Look, what I'm saying is, I don't think everybody has their shit straight."

"... That's an interesting claim." Minato said. "How so?"

"That meeting last night was to get us prepped for the operation in a week, right? I mean, yeah, I kinda see why you would get called out for being with Elizabeth, but seriously... they wrecked the whole set-up by starting something! I mean, c'mon, we're trying to make sure all of us live past the next full moon, but it's a more important to talk about the freakin' possibility that you're cheating on your girl? All of them need to wake up! We aren't playing a freakin' game, we're dealing with DEATH dammit!" Junpei said. "We fuck up, we're done! No retries, none of that... and they want to talk about relationship problems first? What the hell are they thinking?"

"Who knows?" Minato asked. "You're right, though... I'm out here spending my hard-earned money and planning strategies to ensure our survival, and that's the first topic raised in an official meeting." He chuckled. "If this keeps up, I think I'll have to become a bachelor for the sole purpose of maintaining group focus. I guess the ban on dating your co-workers really does have its merit."

"Hey, I don't think you gotta go that drastic! I mean, just dumping your girlfriend like that is a big decision, y'know?" Junpei asked.

"Is it? The action itself is merely the utterance of a few words, less than the amount I've used in this very sentence." Minato said.

"... Well, yeah, but... ah, who am I kiddin'? I ain't the guy to give you girl advice cuz I've got nothing in the experience department." Junpei said. "Do what you got to do."

"Hey, look at it this way. If me and Kenji really do end up in rough patches with our girls, your two best friends will find themselves with a lot of free time on their hands again." Minato said.

"That... doesn't really make me feel better." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"It was just a little piece of information you might find useful." he said. "Oh, and before I forget... thank you for acting as the voice of reason last night."

"It was nothing... I mean, you were being pretty reasonable... kinda cold and distant, but you were staying on point and moving things along." Junpei said. "Everybody else just wasn't having it. Hell if I know why."

"That's just because people like to hear what they want to hear. To them, I was probably just repeatedly denying my afternoon activities and trying to defend my position." Minato said. "They'll probably be sour about it for a while, but I don't really care. It'll pass, or they can just let it gnaw at them until they cry themselves to sleep. Regardless, SEES will be back to form shortly."

"... Damn. Don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes you sound like a scary ass guy." Junpei said. He chuckled. "But then again, you are, so I guess it fits."

"A leader needs to be scary. Anyone that disagrees has obviously never led in their life." Minato said. Junpei nodded, and the conversation ended. They arrived at school, and were about to head to class when Minato saw Fuuka and Yukari standing near the school gate. He would have ignored them if he and Junpei didn't notice Yukari's stomach growling.

"Eheh, sorry, Fuuka... I probably should have grabbed something to eat." she said, not noticing Minato or Junpei nearby. Minato quickly produced two melon breads from the Dimensional Compactor, and silently walked over to them as they kept walking.

"It's fine, Yukari." Fuuka said. "I can-"

"Good morning." Minato said from right behind them, getting both of them to flinch slightly. They quickly turned to face him, and he shoved the melon breads into their hands before any of them could speak. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. Without it, you'll break fast." he said. He let out a little laugh at his pun.

Yukari facepalmed, but quickly recovered. "Hey, you've got some nerve just popping up out of nowhere-"

"And giving you free food?" Minato asked. "That's the type of attitude that contributes to world hunger, Yukari."

"You didn't let her-" Fuuka began.

"Finish a complaint that makes no sense?" Minato asked. "I'm just trying to be efficient. In any case," he continued, popping out two Yawn-B-Gones from the Dimensional Compactor, "I think you two could use these. You'll attract fleas walking around full of Z's!"

"What are you, a –" Yukari began.

"Walking pharmacy? Not really, but I am the equivalent of a convenience food truck." Minato said. He hurriedly forced the Yawn-B-Gones into their open hands one at a time before they could react, and he backed away quickly.

"Alright, that's enough!" Fuuka said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"... Oh, did I forget to give you a morning kiss?" Minato asked, scratching his chin. "I did, didn't I?"

"Uh, hello?! Can you at least try to make sense if you're going to talk to us?" Yukari asked.

"How am I not making sense? I gave you breakfast as usual, though you apparently missed the food I left for you at the dorm. I mean, this is an unorthodox delivery, but the important thing is that you're energized, right? And I mean, I probably should make sure to give Fuuka a morning kiss for good measure, right?" Minato asked. "It's a nice way to brighten her day and make sure she's sure she's not a Shadow of her true self! Heheheh, get it?" The two girls said nothing as Minato chuckled for a bit before letting out a little sigh. "Ah, but I'll leave you two to your 'girl talk' as you called it last time. Toodles!"

At that, Minato made his way back over to Junpei, who had watched the whole scene unfold. "... Uhh, what was that?" Junpei asked.

"Bulldozing my opponents." Minato said with a grin. "Fuck those bitches. Let's go see what's up with Shinji. Can't leave him for dead now, can we?"

"... Yeah, we can't just abandon him, can we?" Junpei asked, electing to ignore Minato's last comment. They quickly looked around the area to see Shinjiro enduring a bombardment of questions from Mitsuru and Akihiko. They walked in their general area and began to devise a plan to save their

comrade.

"You do realize that his actions affect the morale of the entire team, correct?" Mitsuru asked. "I had originally believed that he could be allowed to act unsupervised, but it's become apparent that he requires regulation. Surely you understand?"

"She's right, Shinji. What do you think is going to happen if he starts breaking up the team?" Akihiko asked.

Shinjiro said nothing, steadily making his way towards the school. He turned to see Minato and Junpei quite literally slide between him and the other two seniors creating a human barrier. "Woah there, senpai!" Junpei said. "I think you guys are coming on a little too strong right now."

"Seriously, think about it. At this rate, you'll split up the subgroup of SEES seniors." Minato said. Shinjiro turned around, a look of absolute confusion on his face. Akihiko and Mitsuru stopped in their tracks, both glaring at Junpei and Minato.

"Iori, this has nothing to do with you. Stand aside and you won't face execution." Mitsuru said.

"Out of the way, Minato. This is a private conversation." Akihiko said.

"But senpai, if you do an execution now, you'll reveal your Persona right here in front of everyone!" Junpei said.

"A conversation requires the participation of all involved parties. Shinji is obviously not interested, so technically, you are currently harassing him." Minato said. He grinned. "Were you not with Madame President, I would have all the right to call this bullying and beat the shit out of you. Shinji wouldn't do it since you're his brother, and this is how you repay that respect?"

"Tch... where are you going with this?" Akihiko asked.

"Your executions will happen tonight, in public, if you keep this up." Mitsuru said.

"We're just sayin' maybe you might be annoyin' Shinji-senpai." Junpei said.

"Resorting to violence over a peaceful intervention in an incident of possible bullying isn't very fitting for a Kirijio." Minato said.

"You of all people have no right to make that claim." Mitsuru said.

"This is getting stupid. Shinji, get them out of our way." Akihiko said.

"... Sure. Minato, Junpei, let's go." Shinjiro said, quickly walking away. Minato and Junpei both grinned and hurried after him, leaving Mitsuru and Akihiko with scowls on their faces. The trio made it to the second floor. Shinjiro slowed down and took on a normal pace, allowing Minato and Junpei

to catch up. "... Thanks." he said as they matched his pace.

"It would seem that everyone wants to be excessively stupid today." Minato said. "We weren't about to let them just keep doing that to you. Voices of reason need to watch out for each other."

"Yeah... man, I really get the feeling today is gonna be annoying." Junpei said. "But I feel sorry for you, Shinji-senpai. You sit right next to those two."

"I'm more than willing to help you ditch if you want." Minato said. "As long as I get to come along, that is."

"If we do that, we really are going to be executed." Shinjiro said. "... You two try and keep out of trouble today. Especially you, Minato... put up with any crap they give you, and don't pick a fight. This'll blow over..."

"I already know that... as long as nobody outright picks a fight with me, I'll restrain myself." Minato said.

"That ain't enough... Junpei, make sure this guy doesn't start something that'll end badly." Shinjiro said.

"I'll try... but the girls we know are feisty." Junpei said.

"You don't need to remind me." Shinjiro said. He let out a slight sigh as they reached 2-F. "... Good luck." he said as Minato and Junpei walked inside. With that, he adjusted his beanie and slowly made his way to the third floor, knowing full

well what await him in his classroom.

Minato and Junpei walked into class to see Yukari already inside, finishing up her melon bread. She shot both of them vicious glares as they walked past, but neither of them reacted. They simply took their seats and did as they usually did. Minato took out his English Composition Notebook, two pencils, and then set about getting his Fiends to compose some nice music for him. Junpei took out a random notebook, opened it to a page of old notes, and then set about getting his game system out and connecting to the school's Wi-Fi to start the day. He could pay attention when it was closer to finals and everything got reviewed.

The day passed quickly in Minato's view, mainly since the majority of it was spent listening to music in his head. Lunch came sooner than he expected, and he immediately got up and left the classroom with Junpei following him. Yukari saw them hurriedly leave, and followed in pursuit. She saw Fuuka and Natsuki looking at the duo leave, and turned to her. "What are those two up to this time?" Yukari asked.

"... I don't know." Fuuka said.

"Whatever they're up to, I'm about to go kick Minato's ass." Natsuki said, hurrying after them. Fuuka and Yukari followed suit, and ended up going up to the third floor.

Minato and Junpei quickly made their way into class 3-D and found Shinjiro trying to leave with little success. Akihiko barred his way, and Mitsuru looked like she was preparing to let

loose a verbal barrage. He saw Junpei and Minato enter, and his scowl changed into a grin. He could tell from the look in Minato's eyes that the next move was going to be just ridiculous enough to work. Mr. Toudou had already left, meaning nobody could get in their way.

Minato produced a can of Cielo Mist from the Dimensional Compactor behind his back and passed it to Junpei. Afterwards, he produced the purple-tinted Narcissus Flower and held it in his hand as he walked towards Mitsuru. Junpei shook the Cielo Mist can behind his own back as he slowly approached Akihiko. Minato made his presence known by loudly clearing his throat, attracting the attention of everyone in the room as well as that of the seniors.

"Attention, everyone, attention!" Minato called as he walked forwards. "I have come here today to declare that I am a liar!"

"What the hell is he doing?" Akihiko asked.

"... Explain, Arisato." Mitsuru said.

"I am a liar... because I have told myself that I would simply be content with assisting in your happiness, Mitsuru Kirijio!" Minato said. "But I cannot deceive myself any longer," he began, picking up his pace, "because I," he continued, moving forwards in one quick motion to slide on one knee, the Narcissus flower in his left hand and his right hand over his heart as he stopped in front of Mitsuru, "love you, Mitsuru."

The classroom erupted, and Akihiko froze. At this time,

Junpei, who had been shaking the Cielo Mist for the duration of Minato's display, bumped into Akihiko's side. "Hey, wha-?" Akihiko asked, turning towards him. Junpei aimed the can at his face and got ready to open it.

"Sorry, senpai." Junpei said, opening the can. A spray of soda erupted in Akihiko's face, and he sputtered. Shinjiro took his opportunity to walk around him and get out of the classroom, and was quickly followed by Junpei.

Meanwhile, Mitsuru looked utterly confused. "... What are you trying to pull?" she asked.

"A distraction." Minato said with a smile. He got up and chuckled as the swarm of Mitsuru admirers descended upon him. "Thanks for being so popular." he said. With that, he turned and elbowed the first boy who came at him in the face, and then threw a quick punch at the one next to him. A girl came around wielding her bag to hit him, but he pushed it down and kicked the bag straight into her, sending her to the floor. The others stopped at the sudden outbreak of violence, and he cackled. "C'mon, what's the matter? Is that how you fight for your queen?" he taunted. With a manic laugh, he charged at the ones gathered near the exit, and they quickly got out of his way and he made his escape. Mitsuru turned to see Akihiko drenched in soda with Shinjiro already missing. She stewed her teeth, and knew that there would be three executions tonight.

Yukari, Fuuka, and Natsuki saw the entire operation unfold from outside, but were swept aside when the horde of

Mitsuru-admirers attempted to flood the classroom. "He did all that just to help out his boy, huh?" Natsuki asked. "That guy's crazy. You guys all live in the same dorm, after all. He can't run forever."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure Mitsuru-senpai's not going to let him get away with that." Yukari said. She chuckled. "They're in trouble now."

"... Didn't you think Mitsuru-senpai's reaction was odd?" Fuuka asked. "She wasn't really affected by that confession, even though it was fake."

"She probably deals with that from a bunch of guys... but their confessions are probably a bit more private." Yukari said.

"No, I think Fuuka's got a point... even if she is shooting him down, she would at least give it to him straight. But she didn't even shoot him down." Natsuki said.

"... And now that I think about it, aren't they really close normally?" Fuuka asked.

"Close? They're..." Yukari began, but she then remembered their bathing incident along with the random lone bedroom visits she occasionally noticed and froze. "... Actually, yeah, they are really close..."

"... Hey, you don't think he's always been..." Natsuki began. Fuuka's eyes narrowed.

"The more, the merrier', he'd probably say..." Fuuka said. At that, she turned around and quickly returned to her classroom, followed by a very concerned Yukari and Natsuki.

Minato, Shinjiro, and Junpei had escaped from the area quickly and met back up in the hallway leading towards the gym. Shinjiro chuckled as they all caught their breath looking out at the Persimmon Tree. "You're both bat-shit insane." he said with a grin. "Mitsuru's going to have our heads by nightfall."

"Eh, we'll live." Minato said with a shrug.

"Yikes... ya think we really pissed her off that much?" Junpei asked.

"Probably... she doesn't take kindly to that kind of attention being thrown at her." Shinjiro said. "... Maybe we should all go out tonight."

"Those were my thoughts exactly." Minato said with a grin. "Us three, Escapade, and all the women we want. Dress to impress, the more formal the better."

"Again, huh?... Well, it beats staying back at the dorm right now, so why not?" Junpei said. He chuckled. "Who knows? I might be the one guy to benefit from this rough patch!"

"Good... but one rule. No hats." Minato said. "I'm looking at you when I say that, Shinji."

"No hats, huh?... Hmph. If we're really going to try and pick up chicks, fine. But you better know I'm not looking for any relationships." Shinjiro said.

"That's the right attitude to have." Minato said.

"Hell yeah, we're gonna go have some fun with some ladies! Time to bust out the tailcoat!" Junpei said.

"Woah, a tailcoat? Impressive." Minato said.

"... And here I thought I was the only one." Shinjiro said.

"Woah, you've got one too, Shinji-senpai?" Junpei asked.

"A bodyguard's gotta look like a member of the crowd... so if I get stuck in a fancy party, I can blend in." Shinjiro said.

"Damn... looks like I'll need to get something for the occasion." Minato said. He grinned. "Fortunately, that's not too difficult. I know just who to go see for it. Quick question... are any of you fans of silk gloves?"

"... I own some." Shinjiro said.

"Hey, the set I blew my money on this summer said it came with some too... but I really just wanted the top hat." Junpei said.

Minato laughed. "This is too perfect! Tonight's going to be too fun!" he said. He flicked his Dimensional Compactor a few times, summoning some Takoyaki and melon bread for

everyone. "Ah, if only I kept a bottle in here."

"... Dude, I've been meaning to ask, but when do you get all this food?" Junpei asked.

"Whenever I pass by Octopia, I get a pack or two of Takoyaki. And sometimes, before school starts, I buy out the supply of melon bread. Of course, I make it a habit to take one of each soda every time I pass a vending machine too." Minato said. He chuckled. "When your job pays over 100,000 yen per week and one item costs a paltry 400 yen at most, you tend to find yourself in an abundance of money... Besides, even though I blew it all on the flowers yesterday, I'm not worried. I'll make it back on Sunday."

"That much for selling bathroom products?" Shinjiro asked.

"You'd be surprised at how many people I can convince to throw away their money." Minato said. "But that's enough... we should eat and then relocate. I left David with Akihiko, and right now, he's on the move, looking for us. Alice is monitoring Mitsuru, and she seems to be plotting something."

"Seriously? Then let's eat before he gets here." Junpei said. At that, the trio quickly ate, and then spent lunch avoiding Akihiko. Inevitably, they were forced to return to their classrooms, and Shinjiro very carefully took his seat near the other two seniors. They both gave him death glares, and he was certain he made the right choice in staying out of the dorm tonight.

The day passed without any further incident, and Minato simply ignored the glares he received from Yukari as usual. As he packed his things away once class was over, he considered what he would do after school. *"I definitely need to go see Igor about giving me a suit like his."* Minato thought. *"Although, I can do that after working on a Card... the problem here is that I'm certain if I allow for too much interaction with Priestess, Empress, Emperor, or Lovers, there's a real chance of reversing them... I can easily avoid three, but I'm almost certain pursuing Fortune now would put me in a direct line of fire with Priestess... yes, that settles it. I'm going for Star or bust today."*

With that in his mind, he walked out of his classroom and was thankful that Fuuka hadn't been waiting for him. Instead, however, he encountered a rather angry Yukari on his way out. "Hey, listen up. It's time I gave you a piece of MY mind." she said. Minato walked right past her.

"I don't care." he said as he kept walking. Yukari sputtered, not knowing how to react to such a thorough dismissing. Minato continued and got out of pursuit range before she could continue, taking the long way to the east entrance as to nullify any chance of encountering Mitsuru, Akihiko, and Catherine, who would drag him along with her to Art Club. He swiftly made his way out of the school and headed to Paulownia Mall on Hell Biker's motorcycle. Once there, he immediately headed to the Velvet Room and entered.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I assist you today?"

Elizabeth greeted. Minato chuckled.

"Actually, I require Igor's assistance today." he said. "And I'm sure you know why."

"Yes... However, I cannot begin to imagine why you'd want one exactly like mine." Igor said.

"You really need to install a mirror in here. I mean, when's the last time you've seen your coat? I'll say it now, it's amazing." Minato said. "So let me hold one, would you?"

"... I'm afraid we are not the same size. However, I can make one for you." Igor said. He chuckled as he waved his hand, and a small suitcase appeared on the desk of the Velvet Room. "This, however, is."

"Thank you kindly." Minato said, walking over to pick up the suitcase. "I wish I had some more business here, but unfortunately, it was all covered yesterday."

"Of course... we cannot replace your other Social Links." Igor said. Minato sighed.

"And that's a little sad, don't you think?" he asked.

"It would appear my requests have caused you unnecessary troubles..." Elizabeth said.

"No, they haven't." Minato said with a grin. "You've actually given me a great opportunity, which, if you recall, I am predestined to capitalize on."

"... That is true." Elizabeth said. "In that case, I wish you an enjoyable night."

"Do you want to come with me?" Minato asked.

"Would that not be cheating if you have to 'pick up chicks'?" Elizabeth asked. Minato laughed.

"Actually, yeah, you're right." Minato said. He turned back to face Igor. "Well, thanks again. Until next time."

"Farewell." Igor said as Minato exited the Velvet Room. He carried the suitcase in his hand along with his school bag, and made his way back to Paulownia Mall. He entered Power Records in search of Kazuya, with no luck. He tried every place, including the Police Station and Antique store, with similar luck. He had heard from Kurosawa that Captain Hazama was dealing with the demons in Red Hawk, and he quickly drew a few conclusions after his search ended badly.

"Kazuya is probably in Red Hawk working as either muscle or a negotiator. I recall him saying something about having combat history against Hazama, so his strength alongside those numbers should at least make the situation too destructive for a confrontation in the middle of the day." Minato thought.

"However, that leaves us with no options for a Social Link today... unless we try Ken, but I feel he's still learning." David said.

"... Maybe if we time our return to school, we can intercept Catherine as she leaves Art Club while avoiding Fuuka." Jack said.

"I'd rather not take a stealth operation which revolves around avoiding someone whose specialty is being able to monitor people across an entire city." Minato replied. *"And you're right about Ken... so that means I can simply get some extra money by opting to work today."*

With that decision, Minato entered Be Blue V and went into the Office. Once again, Nemissa was missing, though the rather nervous employee seemed to know how to deal with Minato if he arrived. One quick workday and about 40,000 yen later, he left Paulownia Mall and returned to the dorm. He entered to see Fuuka and Yukari sitting in the lounge, both on their laptops. They turned to him, but neither of them greeted him. *"Well, what do you know? They chose my favorite, the silent treatment."* Minato thought with a slight grin. He quickly ate, showered, and then returned to his room to don Igor's new suit.

He opened the briefcase, changed, and then inspected his new look. The black tailcoat Igor gave him had twin tails that went down to exactly above the back of his ankles, which he felt denoted superiority. In addition, though it covered a plain white inside, Igor had taken the liberty to include his own version of the ever-present handkerchief in his right breast pocket, with Minato's being the same dark blue to match his hair. The lower portion of the jacket was adorned with

numerous sapphire buttons that kept it together at his waist, and the tails themselves had thorn-themed Victorian Era patterning running along them. Minato couldn't help but chuckle when Igor included a special tie that was essentially a longer, slightly thicker version of his own necktie, which Minato put to good use. The pants were simple and black, as were his shoes, though they had a thin silver lining outlining their shape. Finally, he examined his plain white silk gloves, which, he had to admit, felt like they should never be removed. "... This is an outfit." he said, looking himself over once more.

After thoroughly indulging in his own vanity, he walked into the hallway and knocked on Junpei's door. "Hold up! I almost got it!" Junpei yelled.

"Try not to rip the thing." Shinjiro said as he opened his door. He didn't have his hat on, instead letting his hair flow down his back. In all honesty, Minato couldn't believe that was what Shinjiro's hair looked like without his hat. However, he was even more impressed by his attire.

Shinjiro wore a black tailcoat which also had twin tails, albeit they were broader than Minato's and only reached his knees. The tailcoat was open atop a white inside shirt with a gray sweater vest on top of that, and was held in place at his sides by three gold pins. His pocket watch that Minato had occasionally noticed him looking at served as an excellent addition to his outfit, as the gold chain was visible to the side of his suit. He wore a checkered black and grey tie, which went well with his overall outfit, and slightly looser black pants

atop black suede variants of his usual shoes, and he wore white silk gloves as well. "That looks like it was specially made." Shinjiro said, looking over Minato. He chuckled. "You didn't get that from a human, did you?"

"As if paltry human clothing could do me justice." Minato mused. "Still, you're not doing bad... is that a special work outfit?"

"Security at a less than average wedding." Shinjiro said. "The pay was good, and I got to keep this. Didn't even need to fight."

"Sounds good." Minato said.

"Hah, got it! I hope you're ready to be amazed!" Junpei called from in his room. A few moments passed, and his door burst open with Junpei walking forwards with his head held high. "Ta-da-da-dah! Junpei lori, world class gentleman, at your service." he said.

Aside from Junpei's lack of a hat revealing his buzzcut hairstyle, he wore the plainest tailcoat, one that had tails as thin as Minato's yet only extended to the back of his knees. It's only design was a gold insignia that served as the button for his two breast pockets. He wore it open above a white inside shirt as well, though he had opted for a blue sweater vest on top of it instead of a gray one like Shinjiro. His pants looked were average, but he wore rather fancy suede shoes which stood out more due to the plainness of his pants. Finally, he wore a striped black and white tie with his outfit,

and also had a pair of white silk gloves. "... It's good, but I feel like it's lacking something." Minato said.

"Aw, c'mon! I don't have the dough to get custom stuff like what you guys have!" Junpei said.

"... Didn't you say that came with a top hat?" Shinjiro asked.

"... Oh yeah... try it." Minato said. Junpei muttered a little before quickly going back into his room and then re-emerging wearing a top hat, which had a single white stripe near its base for design. "... Yeah, that completes it. You get to wear a hat."

"I agree." Shinjiro said.

"... Wait, really? I just needed a hat?" Junpei asked.

"It brings everything together." Minato said. Junpei looked at him with a raised eyebrow, and then turned to Shinjiro, who nodded in affirmation.

"... I don't get it, but... what the heck? I'll rock it." Junpei said with a shrug.

"Good... then it's time to stun the town." Minato said. At that, he turned to leave the dorm with Junpei and Shinjiro in tow.

The other members of SEES had all been in the lounge, with Mitsuru and Akihiko watching the news while Fuuka and Yukari remained on their laptops. The air was oddly tense, and the girls gave each other odd glances every now and

again while Akihiko focused on getting absorbed into whatever was on TV. The trio had avoided Mitsuru and Akihiko for the entirety of the day, so the sound of them coming down the stairs quickly got their attention. Everyone turned to see the trio walk down, and their jaws all dropped.

Minato, the leader of the pack, had his usual cocky smirk on his face as he adjusted his tie one last time before heading for the door. He glanced sideways and blew a kiss in the general direction of the other members of SEES before heading out of the door.

Shinjiro was in the middle, a grin on his face as he patted his hair down as he walked forwards. He gave a sideways glance to the sitting members of SEES before straightening the sides of his tailcoat in one swift motion and following Minato out of the door.

Junpei held up the rear, smiling as he tested the elasticity of his gloves as he went last. As the final member to give a quick glance at the other members of SEES, he took off his top hat and gave them a quick wave, putting the hat back on in a singular fluent motion. He straightened it as he left the dorm last, and closed the door behind him.

"... Avoiding punishment, I see..." Mitsuru said.

"... I didn't know Shinji actually kept other pieces of clothing." Akihiko said.

"I'm... not the only one wondering where they all got those

outfits from, right?" Yukari asked.

"I don't think that's the big issue here..." Fuuka said.

Meanwhile, Minato's group leisurely made their way to Paulownia Mall. When they arrived at the entrance to Club Escapade, everyone noticed the looks people, but most importantly, women, in the line were giving them. Minato walked up to Vergil, and saw him actually seem to show a bit of respect, stepping forth to bar other people from getting in their way and returning the nods each of Minato's group gave him. The trio made their way to Minato's usual table in the VIP section, and each took a seat as electronic music filled the air. One of the servers stepped forwards and bowed to Minato. "Good evening, Master Minato, Master Shinjiro, Honored Guest Junpei... You all look dashing tonight." the butler greeted.

"Tonight, we hunt." Minato said with a smirk. "And we'll need a bottle each for preparations... the same one that Paimon gets, if you would."

"Right away, Master Minato." the server said. He withdrew from the table, and Minato chuckled. "Now then, what awaits us on this fine eve? Gentlemen... this is our playground, and for your information, I intend to keep score."

"Oh, making it a competition, huh?" Junpei asked with a grin. "I don't know... with your rough patch lately, I think this one is all mine."

"Not even counting me in, huh?" Shinjiro asked. He moved some hair out of his face. "For your information," he began in a much more soothing voice than usual, "I know a thing or two about scoring."

"Wheet-who." Minato said in lieu of actually whistling, something which he was unable to do. "This is going to be fierce, isn't it? I like it. I like it a lot."

Their bottles came, and they each took one glass, eyeing the main floor of the club for targets. After they each finished their first glass, Minato looked at his companions and wordlessly nodded. They all got up and made their way down to the first floor, each heading to a different girl.

Minato moved to an area off to the side of the entrance, where two girls, one wearing a sweater that stopped below the shoulders instead of atop them, along with a short skirt with stockings, while the other had a small light jacket on top of a comfortable looking vest and short shorts with knee high socks. The girl with a sweater had short black pigtails and looked a bit uncomfortable about the whole situation, while the girl with the vest and jacket combination had short brown hair and seemed to be urging her friend on.

"C'mon, didn't you say this is what Den Mother said you should do?" the girl with the vest asked.

"B-but... I don't know if I'm cut out for this." the girl in the sweater said.

"Don't wimp out now when you're already here!" the girl with a vest said. She noticed Minato walking over to them, and she grinned. "Look, turn around and say hi to that guy."

The girl in the sweater reluctantly turned around to see Minato's approach, and she froze. *"Too easy."* Minato thought. He moved in one swift motion to kneel in front of her, and kissed her hand before she could react. "Good evening." he said as he got back up, still holding her hand. The girl's face had gone entirely red. "You know, I think you've given me the most difficult question I've ever faced."

"R-really?" she asked. "What would that be?"

"Why," Minato began, cupping her chin, "is the most beautiful woman in the club hiding herself?"

"Oh, uhh... I-I'm not hiding... I'm just... shy!" she said. Her friend facepalmed behind her.

"Jeez, when a guy like that comes up to you, you go with it!" the girl in a vest said.

"Now, now." Minato said. "I assure you, we'll do nothing you don't want. In fact, if I'm bothering you, say the word and I'll disappear."

"No!" the girl in a sweater said. "I-I mean, umm... do you think we could... start slowly?"

"Of course. But we'll have to start moving before deciding a

proper pace, won't we?" he mused. With that, he began to lead her to the dance floor. "Ah, but your friend is now all alone... you don't mind if she joins, do you?"

"Of course not!" the girl in a sweater said. She turned to her friend. "Senna, you should join us too!"

"... Well, if you're open to sharing, Kari." Senna said, walking forwards to join them. "But hey, you never gave us your name, blue... though you look familiar."

"Minato Arisato." he said. Senna and Kari's jaws dropped. "You've probably seen me with much less clothing."

"... No way." Senna said. She squealed. "I'm about to dance with a model!"

"I want to do more than just dance... how about we get to know each other?" Minato asked. "I'm always looking for more friends."

"... It was true." Kari muttered. A huge smile appeared on her face. "I'd like that."

"*An easy first two.*" Minato thought as he began to dance with his two new 'friends'.

Meanwhile, Shinjiro had made his way to the bar and sat down next to a woman with black hair that went down to her neck, though the front had been trimmed so it stopped above her eyes. She wore a white biker jacket closed at the front,

but was open enough to expose a leather strap she apparently had tied around her chest to hold her breasts in place and also give what he considered too large of a view of her cleavage. She had on white short shorts and knee-high brown boots as she lugged around a large guitar case. He noticed what looked like a brown bag on her leg as well, but didn't think much of it. He had found a girl who he considered to be a stereotypical biker girl, and had somewhat of an idea on where to go with this. The bartender approached him as he sat down. "Master Shinjiro, how may I serve you?" he asked.

"A Virgin Mary for me... and a Dirty Martini for her." Shinjiro said.

"Right away." the bartender said. The woman next to him shifted her gaze towards him and lowered her sunglasses to get a good view. Shinjiro noticed her left eye was red while her right eye was a different color he assumed was green, and that immediately alerted him that this might be a huge mistake. However, he ignored it, since he knew the chances of there being a serious fight in the club were slim to none.

"Aren't you a little young to be in here?" the woman asked.

"That's why I ordered a non-alcoholic drink." Shinjiro said.
"Aren't you too good-looking to be sitting here alone?"

"Hah... you're bold." the woman said. Shinjiro heard a clicking noise, and then looked down to see the glint of a gun barrel with a silencer aimed at his neck. "But I'll be damned if you think I'd let a demon like you try and-"

"Hey, Lady, calm down there." Dante said, walking over. Shinjiro turned to him, and Dante chuckled. "Sorry, kid... you could hit on her, but you saw what happens if you try."

"... You know him?" Lady asked.

"Yeah... he used to work for the people who run this place, and is now part of a group trying to deal with that Tower that appears outside." Dante said. "I told you... every demon you run into here is either like me or the type that doesn't cause trouble."

"... Sorry about that." Lady said, holstering the gun underneath the 'bag' Shinjiro had disregarded before.

"... I don't blame you." Shinjiro said. "I might not be a natural demon, but I count as one all the same."

"True... but more importantly, what's with that get-up?" Dante asked. "You weren't seriously trying to hit on Lady just now, were you?" Shinjiro grumbled, and Dante broke out laughing. "I bet Minato put you up to this, didn't he? Where is he?"

"You can talk to your friends later... I have a job you might be interested in." Lady said. "It'll only take about a week, so your boss shouldn't mind."

"Probably... let's go talk to him first." Dante said. Lady got up as the bartender placed the two drinks down in front of Shinjiro. Dante smirked. "Try not to get in over your head again." At that, he and Lady left Shinjiro to down his two

drinks and also contemplate exactly what had just happened.

Junpei had gone straight to the dance floor and tried to become the life of the party, so he could get as many girls as possible. His plan was going fine until he reached the dance floor, and a serious case of nerves struck him. He teetered on the edge, making small unsuccessful passes at various girls, but was otherwise ignored. After about half an hour of this failure, he headed back up to the VIP section. At the stairs, he encountered Shinjiro, who had a troubled expression. "You have bad luck too, senpai?" Junpei asked.

"Bad luck? I got a friggin' gun in my face." Shinjiro said.

"... Wait, what?" Junpei asked. Shinjiro sighed.

"Don't ask." he said. The duo walked up the stairs and headed towards Minato's table. They froze a little distance away from it. Minato had brought Kari and Senna back up with him, along with a more mature looking woman who the two girl's seemed to refer to as 'Mama'. Minato was listening intently to what the 'Mama' figure was whispering into his ear while he alternated between kissing Senna and Kari.

"... God damn." Junpei said, tipping his hat towards Minato.

"... No way are we going back there empty-handed." Shinjiro said. "C'mon... we're teaming up."

The duo went back down the stairs quickly, leaving Minato to his new 'friends'. In all honesty, he was rather interested in

hearing the fortune that the Mama figure was telling him. She had explicitly said that twelve Shadows would gather to him, and that the greatest power he had was darkness so black it pierced the night. After hearing that, he decided that his method of payment would be what they had previously agreed upon, which was his full on attention for a decent chunk of time.

Junpei and Shinjiro eventually each got a girl, though they couldn't say either of them really liked them that much. Shinjiro's girl was much too cheery for his liking, but she had her good points and did serve as generally good company. Junpei's girl actually reminded him a bit of himself, and while they hit it off, their interactions just seemed awkward. Near the end of their night, however, Minato made sure to just have a good time messing around with everyone and hanging out with Junpei and Shinjiro to congratulate them for getting a girl.

They made a point to leave before the Dark Hour struck, and returned to the dorm together as it ended, Minato looking rather disheveled and covered in lipstick stains, while the other two simply looked as if they had a good time. Fuuka was in the lounge, apparently reading a magazine, as well as Mitsuru, who had a book as usual. They both turned to see Minato and his companions, and scowled. "... Shameless. Utterly shameless." Mitsuru said as she watched the trio walk towards the stairs.

"We'll be sure to invite you along next time." Minato said. With that, he, Junpei, and Shinjiro went upstairs and retired to their rooms. Mitsuru and Fuuka remained in the lounge for a while

longer, but both of them had reached a conclusion after that display.

79. Chapter 79

Chapter 79: Condescension Ascension

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: Actually, Minato can't do a lot of things. If you recall, in VS Emperor and Empress, Minato notes a fatal flaw in his method of covering the city because he doesn't know how to ride a motorcycle. He uses the knowledge Matador during the operation, and now uses Hell Biker's knowledge anytime he rides. Also, when he does Karaoke with Kazuya and Haru, he cheats by having David control his pitch and tone to ensure he hits the proper notes while singing, which also shows he can't sing very well on his own. So yes, while he does actually have years of combat and torture experience, culinary skill, manipulative prowess, and a very high aptitude for retaining knowledge, his odd life has also made him unable to do a few markedly 'normal' things.

Author Note about Yu: He'll be different... but that's all I'll say.

Minato had spent the morning putting in some basic physical training before prepping for the day and making breakfast. He was still in a good mood from his debauchery last night, and

had his music playing as he worked on made breakfast. **"Boss, Fuuka's down here."** Jack said. He didn't bother looking up from his work, and only stopped when he actually needed to turn around and unavoidably caught Fuuka in his sight.

"Good morning, Fuuka. You're up early." Minato greeted as he took off one of his headphones. "What's up?"

"... I have something I have to say." Fuuka said. "You should listen... properly." Minato nodded and turned off his headphones, taking them out of his ear and letting them dangle around his neck.

"Sounds serious. I'm listening." Minato said.

"Thank you... umm..." Fuuka began. She had her eyes downcast, but then clenched her fists and stared right at Minato. He could tell she was struggling with this immensely.

"Take your time. If you don't want to say it now, I can wait." Minato said.

"No, this can't wait!" Fuuka said. She took a few quick breaths, shut her eyes for a bit, and then opened them once more. "Minato... you were right. I don't really know you... so we... we have to stop."

"... In other words?" Minato asked, tilting his head slightly to the side.

"I'm... dumping you." Fuuka said.

The Priestess Social Link has been Reversed!

The news hit Minato, but he stood firm. Fuuka had expected a hurried apology or something of the like, but in reality, Minato started giggling. "... Minato?" she asked.

"Heheheheh... that's fine by me, Fuuka." Minato said.
:Although, are you sure you want to do that?"

"... What are you saying?" Fuuka asked. Minato straightened up to let his manic smile show in all of its brilliance.

"Oh, I'm just thinking logically here." Minato said. "I mean, since we're no longer a couple, you need to consider the effects on both parties. You, Fuuka, are going to end up exactly how you were before you met me. Unloved, unwanted, and alone... unless you think Yukari and Natsuki will make up for it, but I mean, have you seen them?"

"You..." Fuuka said, her eyes narrowing. Her hand moved to behind her back, and Minato knew she had concealed an SMG there, but didn't care.

"You'll be back to square one, but I guess I got rid of your bully problem for you." Minato said. He chuckled. "Now, let's take a look at my situation. Obviously, the bachelor life suits me. I've never required the presence of another to perform at my best. But the biggest thing, Fuuka? Can you guess what that is?"

"... Tell me." Fuuka said, her eyes very close to changing color.

"If I really did need a girlfriend," Minato began, looking right into Fuuka's eyes, "I could always find another."

Fuuka pulled her SMG and pointed it right at Minato, but he didn't flinch. "How could you say that?!" she asked. Minato laughed right in her face.

"I think you know." Minato said. *"If she even looks like she's going to pull the trigger, get ready to hold her down."* he mentally ordered his Fiends. "Well? What are you going to do about it, Fuuka? Will you cry for me again?"

The SMG Fuuka had pointed at him trembled, and her eyes flashed yellow repeatedly. She was struggling to stop herself and her Shadow from attacking, and Minato could tell it from the pained expression she wore. He was about to speak again when a second set of footsteps came down the steps. Minato saw Mitsuru enter the first floor, and chuckled as her eyes widened in horror.

"Yamagishi, lower your weapon!" Mitsuru said, quickly drawing her Evoker. "Stand down now!" Fuuka took a few ragged breaths, still staring right at Minato, and then turned her SMG towards kitchen wall and proceeded to unload the entire clip at it. Mitsuru covered her ears at the sound of the gunfire, but Minato just stood there and watched, still smiling all the while.

Once Fuuka's gun finally stopped firing, she lowered it and gave one last quick glance to Minato. He chuckled and slowly clapped his hands. "Looks like you just can't get rid of me. Oh well... Points for trying, right?" he taunted.

Fuuka let out a very quiet curse before quickly turning around to walk past Mitsuru. Once she left, Mitsuru stood there, Evoker still at the ready, staring at Minato. "... What did you say to her, Arisato?" she asked.

"Oh, I didn't really say anything." Minato said. "She chose to dump me, so I just reminded her of what that entailed. Things I'm sure a smart girl like Fuuka would've already realized anyways, but I just wanted her to know exactly what she was doing... Turns out she overlooked a few things, and it didn't sit well with her. She could have always taken it back, but somehow, aiming a gun at my face seemed like the better option at the time."

"... I want exactly what you said, word for word." Mitsuru said. There was a series of hurried footsteps going down the stairs, and the boys of SEES all came downstairs and froze at the sight of the confrontation.

"... What happened?" Shinjiro asked.

"Yeah, why was Fuuka just carrying her gun around?" Junpei asked.

"Nothing too important. I got some bad news, and Fuuka overreacted. The kitchen's a mess, though." Minato said.

"... I believe the Chairman has been mistaken in his diagnoses." Mitsuru said. "Arisato... until further notice, you are to remain in the dorm until his return. You are allowed leave only for school, expeditions to Tartarus, and operations. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clearer than ice." Minato said. He chuckled, and then headed towards the door. "Then, I'll be off to school. As you can see, the kitchen is in no shape for use right now."

"No you aren't." Mitsuru said. "Not alone."

"Then one of you comes with me. I'll even buy breakfast for you." Minato said.

"... Akihiko, Shinjiro, keep an eye on him." Mitsuru said. "And Shinjiro... I expect your full compliance. You know what failure merits."

"Tch... I know." Shinjiro said. He trudged after Minato with Akihiko following him, leaving Junpei and Mitsuru to look at the damage caused by Fuuka's outburst.

"... Dang, this must have been messy." Junpei said.

"He has broken our trust... Arisato must be watched." Mitsuru said. She sighed as she examined the destruction, realizing that this didn't bode well with an upcoming full moon.

Minato had opted to get breakfast at Café Chagall, dragging a silent Akihiko and Shinjiro along with him. He got a few odd

looks from the waitresses, but didn't care. His eating companions were dead silent, with Akihiko watching him like a hawk while Shinjiro simply seemed done with the current state of affairs.

After their strained breakfast, Minato went straight to school. While there, he listened in on two girls talking by just lowering his headphone volume enough to catch what they were saying.

"Hey, listen to this. Last time I was out with my boyfriend, he was heading to Shirakawa Boulevard!" the first girl said.

"Whoa, Shirakawa Boulevard?" the second girl asked.
"Eww... I know what was on his mind!"

"We've just started dating, but I'm already kind of disgusted." the first girl said. "He's got such a dirty mind... maybe I should dump him. I don't want to be the subject of one of those rumors that goes, 'A couple was found unconscious...'"

"Yikes... and then you end up being one of those Apathy freaks?" her friend asked.

"Yeah... oh god, I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it. Let's stop talking about that, huh?" the girl asked.

"That's a good idea... besides, once you dump that guy, you'll be fine, right?" her friend said.

Minato stopped listening as the conversation went on to topics

of smaller interest for him, and continued onwards to enter the school. *"Four days away from the big fight. Hmph... even if all of SEES turns against me, I could find and eliminate the next Shadow on my own."* he thought. With a grin, he entered class, and his two escorts left him alone.

He noticed quite a few odd looks from some of the other students in class, but ignored them and simply listened to music as he sat in his seat. Eventually, Yukari walked in and shot him a vicious glare. His response was a smiling wave, which she scoffed at as she took her seat. Junpei passed by him and said nothing, obviously a bit uncomfortable with what had happened that morning.

Early on in the day, while the other members of SEES all seemed distracted, Mr. Ekoda went on teaching Classic Literature as usual. "As you should all know, there are many theories about the author, Murasaki Shikibu. That the 'Genji Monogatari' had a different author... That 'Murasaki Shikibu' was a shared pen name... Some have even suggested that Murasaki Shikibu was an alien from outer space. An intriguing theory... Now, here's a simple question. Which currency has a picture of Murasaki Shikibu on it? Tell me... Junpei." Mr. Ekoda said, calling Junpei out. Though he wasn't playing his game today, he certainly wasn't paying attention.

"Huh? Me?" Junpei asked. "Uhh, lemme check my wallet..."

"Hmph... go ahead. I doubt you'll be able to tell from just the pictures." Mr. Ekoda said.

Junpei took out his wallet under his desk and looked straight down so his cap obscured his face. "Hey, Minato... can ya help me out?" he asked as he pretended to look through his wallet.

Minato did a little stretch and leaned back in his chair. "Two thousand." he whispered with a slight turn of the head in Junpei's direction. After pretending to look through his wallet for a while, Junpei put it up and looked back at Mr. Ekoda.

"Oh yeah, the two thousand yen one, right?" he answered.

"Correct... It seems you know a bit more about Shikibu than I thought if you know his appearance." Mr. Ekoda said. "Moving on..."

"Phew... thanks, bro." Junpei whispered. Minato simply nodded without looking back, and the day continued without any incident until lunch.

Minato was intent on simply eating right in his desk and allowing Junpei and Kenji to join him, but as the trio set up, the seniors of SEES arrived in class 2-F. Mitsuru led Shinjiro and Akihiko over to their group and stopped near Minato. "I didn't think you were the type to start a scene, Mitsuru." Minato said as he turned to face her.

"This won't be a scene... we need to talk." Mitsuru said.

"But not here, right?" Minato asked as he got up from his desk. "Lead the way."

Junpei and Kenji watched in a bit of confusion as Minato followed Mitsuru out of the classroom while being watched by Akihiko and Shinjiro, who took positions right behind him. Minato knew he was being taken to the roof, and prepared a quick escape plan if things got violent. As much fun as it would be, Mitsuru and Akihiko weren't allowed to die just yet, and he didn't really feel like killing Shinjiro after the fun they had last night. Once they reached the roof, Mitsuru gave a quick glance towards Akihiko and Shinjiro, who stopped and shut the door behind the duo to give them privacy. Mitsuru walked towards the center of the roof and then turned to face Minato. He stopped a little distance away from her, and saw that she was once again trying to analyze him. "If you want to know something, you really should just ask." Minato said after Mitsuru's visual dissection seemingly produced nothing.

"... Why did you do that to Yamagishi?" Mitsuru asked.

"... I already reversed a Social Link today by letting whimsy get the best of me. That isn't happening twice in one day."

Minato thought. "Are you asking about my indifference to her 'dumping' me, or something else?"

"I wouldn't call your actions indifferent so much as I would vindictive." Mitsuru said. "However, that isn't what I'm asking about... I'm asking as to why you would have an affair behind her back... from what I understood, you two had entered into a serious relationship, yet you still pursued another woman. What was your reasoning?"

"... This is an all or nothing, but the reward far outweighs the

risk." Minato thought as he chose his next few words.

"Because the only serious relationship I have is with you." he said.

"... Do not try to change the subject, Arisato." Mitsuru said.

"I'm not... you asked why I would cheat on Fuuka? Because even though she did think we were 'serious', in reality, she was just a front." Minato said. "You said it yourself... as the leaders of SEES, we can't openly be together. What better way to hide any traces of that..."

"... Than by operating under the pretense that you are already in a serious relationship." Mitsuru said.

"I haven't forgotten what you said, Mitsuru." Minato said. His usual smirk faded to a sad smile. "Soseki Natsume, wasn't it? What a fitting translation for our situation..."

"... So you were aware..." Mitsuru said.

"... Well, since I'm on the spot like this, I'd also like to formally apologize for every time I sparked envy in you... I knew what I was doing could only hurt you, but I couldn't drop my act." Minato said.

"Apology... accepted." Mitsuru said. Her serious expression lightened slightly, and Minato mentally did a little dance to celebrate his newfound victory. His Fiends played fanfare to accompany it, though none of it showed on his face. "... However, adultery isn't something to take lightly, even if it is

just a game to you, Minato. I trust you have a method of reconciling with Yamagishi?"

"... Yes, but she'll need time." Minato said. "Fuuka is a strong girl... once she recovers and sees past this, I'm certain she'll become even stronger... however, what I don't have is a method to reuse her as my front."

"... I think it's in our best interests that you avoid using members of SEES as your... 'fronts'." Mitsuru said.

"I thought so as well... perhaps I should really pursue my associate in blue, and work with that." Minato said. "Or perhaps I can work with Catherine for a time... but that deliberation can happen later." At that, his smile returned to his usual smirk. "Well, did you need anything else?"

"I would like to address the possible schisms you are creating within SEES." Mitsuru said. "Surely you've realized that you hold the most influence over the members... as such, you must realize that while you may enjoy pitting them against each other every now and again, if you continue to do so, you will create a serious problem. We cannot have infighting now... not while so many of the members are already openly voicing their doubts as to SEES' existence."

"... Those schisms are created by the lingering distrust between the members." Minato said. "It's as I said... humans can claim to have so much faith in camaraderie and believe in harmony, but when push comes to shove, everyone looks out for number one: themselves. Everyone else is a possible

threat, and that's where distrust is born. Granted, the levels vary between each pair of members... but the fact is, none of them are close enough to get over that... not even you and me, as the last two days have shown. And until something big happens to change the situation, that distrust can only fester and grow."

"... I understand the point you're making, but the fact is, you create many situations that worsen their relationships." Mitsuru said. "To be honest, I don't know how you can stop it... I doubt that simply having you act in a more reserved manner among the members will do anything other than create even more suspicion of you... which I'm certain that you're aware exists."

"I know... as does their suspicions of you." Minato said. "You've got much more to worry about than I do in that respect, since I've spent a good amount of time connecting with each member of SEES."

"I know that... it's a problem that I find myself unable to solve." Mitsuru said. She averted her gaze and held her arm, a slightly pained expression reaching her face. "When I... when the truth about SEES is revealed, I believe that will be the first step towards lifting the air of suspicion that surrounds me... However, I have no idea what to do next."

Minato walked over to her and hugged her, surprising getting a slight surprised reaction from her. "We can work this out... I know it's a problem, but we already have the first step to a solution, right? The rest will come when the time is right, but

nobody can see that far into the future." he said.

"... That's reassuring, but..." Mitsuru said.

"Even if it's not that easy, we can make a plan once we get there." Minato said. "You can't prepare for a situation if you don't know any of the conditions... so when we see them, we'll see them. And even if there isn't a simple solution, that just means I'll have to work some of my magic, won't I?"

Mitsuru couldn't help but chuckle. "Your approach to life always amazes me." she said. At that, she pushed him back, and he let himself get moved away. Mitsuru had a smile on her face, though it still held a hint of sadness within it. "... We shouldn't remain here much longer."

"And we'll need our old facades once more... unfortunately, that places us at odds with one another." Minato said. He sighed and scratched his head. "... This is going to be a bit saddening."

"... I'll have to stick to the plan I've shared with the others as to avoid birthing any strange ideas." Mitsuru said. Her expression returned to what it was when they first walked to the roof, and Minato's returned to his overly confident smirk. "Then, we're returning."

"Sure thing." Minato said. At that, Mitsuru walked towards the door and knocked twice. Akihiko opened it and looked the two of them over as they passed by him.

"Heard you want to monitor my house arrest." Minato said. He chuckled. "You're going to need a lot of coffee, though I'm sure there's protein powder with caffeine inside. But hey, if you get bored, I'm more than happy to train with you during your watch."

"... Then you know the deal." Akihiko said.

"Exactly... now then, do you think I can get some food?" Minato asked. "I prefer to not skip lunch."

"... Very well." Mitsuru said. "I expect your attendance in Student Council today. Don't be late."

"When am I ever?" Minato asked. With that, he was allowed to leave the trio of seniors, and he quickly made his way back to class and ate lunch. The day ended without any further ado, and he made his way to Student Council as instructed.

He was the first in the room as usual, a benefit of having his classroom almost directly across from the Council Room. He threw on the yellow armband which was essentially a palette and lettering swapped version of his SEES armband once more, and took his seat next to Mitsuru's and Shinjiro's as usual. The members of Student Council all gave him odd glances as they passed by, and Minato couldn't help but notice a bit of expectation in their eyes. As Mitsuru came in and took her seat alongside Shinjiro, Chihiro Fushimi very cautiously walked forwards with a large piece of paper attached to a clipboard.

"E-excuse me, Miss President... umm..." Chihiro began, "... there's actually something that needs your attention."

"What is it?" Mitsuru asked.

"Umm... there's been a petition... to set a formal punishment for Arisato-san." Chihiro said. "After what happened yesterday... and his previous abuses of his position, even teachers have signed the petition..."

Mitsuru looked her over, and then the other members of Student Council. Each of them was obviously in agreement, and in all honesty, a few of them seemed to look forwards to the punishment. She knew that, had Minato not explained himself at lunch, she would have deposed him in a heartbeat. However, since he did, she actually felt that he didn't deserve too serious a punishment. This caused her quite the dilemma. Deferring punishment for his actions or lessening the sentence too much would show outright favoritism and possibly reveal her intentions. However, she personally had a problem with removing Minato from his position since she considered him, even with his often outlandish behavior, the most reliable ally she had. "... Miss President?" Chihiro asked.

"... As the head of the Disciplinary Committee, I believe he has a right to say a few words on his behalf." Mitsuru said. She turned to Minato. "Well?"

"... Trying to let me worm my way out of a severe punishment? That's... almost touching. But, the other will only see outright favoritism unless I suffer. Those faces don't

want words and promises... they want instant gratification." Minato thought. He got up and cracked his neck. "I have nothing to say. All of them are right... nobody in this school stands above our laws. As one of the men charged with ensuring that they are followed, I can only say I should be punished in the same manner which I've punished others." he said. He turned to Shinjiro and Mitsuru, who both had slightly shocked expressions on their faces. "... This should be a public affair, so there can be no question. Shinji, I want you to kick my ass in this room here and now. Don't stop until I drop to my knees, got it?" He turned to the other members of the Council, and a few of them couldn't contain their enthusiasm. *"Hmph... enjoy those shit-eater smiles while you can. It'll be the only time you can wear them without fear."*

"... I have no problem with this arrangement." Mitsuru said. She turned to the other members as well. "Does this punishment suffice?"

"Yes." echoed almost every member of Student Council.

"Then, Shinjiro... are you prepared?" Mitsuru asked. Shinjiro got up, and he walked off to the side of the room with Minato. Every member of Council watched them as they turned to have a slight standoff near the wall.

"Tch... you took the chance you had to save yourself and made it worse." Shinjiro said.

"The way I see it is like this. After today, we'll really be even." Minato said with a grin. Shinjiro chuckled.

"Dumbass... then don't take it the wrong way if I start to enjoy this." he said.

"I was counting on it." Minato said. At that, Shinjiro threw a huge left hook at Minato, connecting with his head. Minato staggered backwards, and took a right uppercut to the gut. Shinjiro quickly grabbed his head and smacked it into the wall, causing it to bounce against it, before delivering another powerful punch to his head again. Minato ended up rocking near the wall, and Shinjiro took his chance to start pummeling his torso as he clutched his head from the repeated hits.

As Mitsuru saw the other members practically cheer as Shinjiro continued to wail on Minato, she wondered for a moment if this was how Minato saw the majority of all humans. As they were now, every member of the Council was utterly repulsive. Even the meek mannered and generally kind Chihiro had a look of absolute glee on her face as Minato endured his abuse. She turned to see Minato get thrown against the wall once more before taking a powerful swing straight to his face. She watched Shinjiro follow that punch with one to his torso and then another to his stomach before hitting the reeling Minato with an uppercut once more, and finishing with a smashing headbutt once Minato hit the wall. She cringed at the sight as Shinjiro rubbed his forehead and Minato wobbled on his feet, but he refused to fall.

With a grunt, Shinjiro grabbed Minato by the collar and threw him aside, sending him against another wall. Shinjiro moved over and drove an elbow into Minato's stomach, and then grabbed his face and slammed his head against the wall. He

started driving repeated hits into Minato's stomach, causing his entire body to shudder with each hit. She turned away, not wanting to watch anymore, and saw the other members of the Council reaching a fever pitch in their excitement. The members were practically jumping as Shinjiro pulled a completely defenseless Minato away from the wall and then raised his fists high above his head to drop a twin-fisted axe blow directly on Minato's head. Minato fell backwards, but somehow caught himself before both of his knees could hit the floor. Shinjiro walked forwards and threw one last huge left hook at Minato, knocking him backwards and forcing him onto all fours. The members of the Council all squealed in excitement, and Shinjiro delivered one final elbow directly to his back, sending him to the floor. He didn't stir on the floor, and the members all cheered as Shinjiro backed away and caught his breath

"...Done." Shinjiro said as the members all quieted down. He turned to see them each looking at Minato with wide smiles on their faces, and frowned. "Show's over. Siddown or join him." he said. The members all quickly snapped out of their daze and returned to their seats. Shinjiro watched each member sit before taking his usual seat again.

"... Then, the general meeting will now begin." Mitsuru said after Shinjiro sat down. It went on just as any other meeting did, and ended in usual time.

Minato hadn't completely lost consciousness after his beating, but he was in neither the condition nor the mood to start moving anytime soon, even with his regenerative Magatama

helping him. He could have completely healed himself, but that was far too unnatural to be performed in public. As such, he lay on the floor in the corner of the room, out of sight and out of mind while the meeting went, and the other members each began leaving after performing their duties. He kept Alice monitoring the room, and after about an hour and a half, he found it empty.

"... Time to get up." Minato said to himself. He slowly rose from the floor and then proceeded to dust himself off. He did a little stretch, and found his Magatama had healed much more than he thought. Everything worked fine, and the majority of his pain had subsided, though he had a slight headache. He was rubbing his forehead in the spot when Mitsuru emerged from her office at the back. "Ah, you're done. Ready to head back to the dorm?" he asked. She turned to face him, and wore a rather sad expression on her face.

"... I'm sorry you had to go through that." Mitsuru said. "I had hoped you would try to reason your way out of such a predicament... but after watching them watch your sentence, I realized why you didn't bother defending yourself."

"I had a feeling you'd understand once it began." Minato said. "... But what are you so sad about? The punishment wasn't anything I couldn't handle... and I think Shinji won't beat himself up too badly for not holding back against me."

"It's neither of those things. I never feared for your safety and I've seen firsthand that Shinjiro has grown beyond pinning all

of the blame on himself." Mitsuru said. "... I'm saddened because I hoped... no, rather, I believed people as a whole weren't so... disgusting. But to see every member of Council revel in the suffering of one of their own, even if he occasionally dealt out punishment?... It's sickening."

"... There's no better way to say this, so... I told you so." Minato said. "People use others as crutches or as stepping stones. I won't say I'm any better... I use stepping stones all the time, and try to avoid having crutches."

"... I thought you said you didn't need any crutches." Mitsuru said.

"True... but I've got you now, don't I?" Minato asked. He chuckled. "The funny thing about crutches? There's always a chance that if you serve as somebody else's, they'll begin to serve as your own somewhere along the way... and when two cripples lean on each other, do you know what happens? They collapse."

"... I don't think so." Mitsuru said. "Collapse certainly is a possibility... but there is also the possibility of achieving true harmony. When that happens, even an imperfect duo will be able to do more than a perfect individual."

"... Isn't that a bit idealistic?" Minato asked. "I mean, I've seen a lot of people serve as each other's crutches. Fought a duo that did the same in a fighting pit once, and trust me... you disrupt their tried and true strategy, and it all falls apart. People might be able to elevate themselves a bit, but I have

yet to see anyone reach this... true harmony you're referring to."

"In that case..." Mitsuru said. She walked towards Minato and stood right in front of him to look him dead in the eye. "I'll show you firsthand. We'll be the ones to achieve it."

"... You're going down a road that will only end in despair." Minato said. "How do you expect to accomplish a joint goal if your partner doesn't believe in it?"

"He doesn't have to believe in it now," Mitsuru began, "but I can show him that even if the world really is as cruel and horrid as he claims... even if he's jaded by a past that has turned him into a monster... and even if he truly believes he's all alone... hope still exists. And if he can't find it anywhere... then I'll be his hope." With that, Mitsuru took Minato's face in her hands and kissed him before he could react.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Empress Arcana...

Mitsuru quickly pulled away and stared at the floor, though she still held Minato's face in her hands. "You... are even more naïve than I thought." Minato said, putting a hand on Mitsuru's cheek. "Looks like I've got my work cut out for me." he added. At that, he directed Mitsuru's face upwards once

more and kissed her before she could react.

Minato slowly pulled away and kept looking at Mitsuru. Her face had reddened immensely, but she maintained enough composure to meet his gaze. "... If we remain here much longer, we'll arouse too much suspicion." she said.

"Oh, there are a lot of things we can arouse right now..."
Jack said.

"Is she ready to go for a ride?" Hell Biker asked.

"Am I allowed to have one intimate moment without your commentary? Am I?" Minato asked.

"Nope." Alice said. Minato mentally cursed before returning his attention to Mitsuru, instead electing to drown out his Fiends' chatter.

"You're right... but once we leave, I think you'll have to serve as my despair for a while before any 'hope' happens." Minato said.

"... A few minutes won't make a noticeable difference."
Mitsuru said.

"Are you sure about that?" Minato asked, putting his other arm around her waist and drawing her in close. "We could always lose track of time..."

"... That's why this is as close as we'll get." Mitsuru said,

allowing her body to rest against his. "This... will suffice."

The next few minutes passed too quickly for either of their likings. Minato simply stood there, occasionally running his hand through Mitsuru's hair while embracing her. He knew that she was mentally cursing every obligation that she had just as much as he was. *"Ah, to live for the moment... how nice that would be."* Minato thought after a while. Eventually, however, Mitsuru freed herself of his hold, and took a deep breath as she adjusted her clothing. "... We'll need to return to the previous state of affairs." Minato said.

"I know... but I believe I can act less vindictive now, since you've elected to receive quite the punishment." Mitsuru said. She smiled. "And even if the others do call it outright favoritism... I don't care."

"... Do as you please." Minato said with a grin. At that, the duo gathered their things and quickly returned to the dorm rather silently. By the time they had left school, they had already reassumed their roles. Minato occasionally pestered Mitsuru about getting some food while she scolded him at every turn, though was kind enough to let him buy some Takoyaki for them. They entered the dorm as night began to set in, and saw the other boys of SEES all waiting in the lounge.

"S'up du-... I mean, hey." Junpei greeted, taking his pause when he noticed Mitsuru's arrival.

"Hey, everyone." Minato said as he turned to sign-in. "So

what's this business you said I need to discuss, Mitsuru?"

"It's about your monitoring for tonight." Mitsuru said as she took a seat. "The Chairman will return tomorrow, making that your next appointment. You aren't allowed to leave tonight, and while I'd like to trust in your word, there is no harm in taking extra precautions... Do you have a problem with this arrangement?"

"Not at all." Minato said as he moved over to take an empty seat. "So, I take it you three are my wardens?"

"That's right." Akihiko said. "Junpei's in charge of watching you until two. I'll take over and go until two in the morning, and then Shinji will watch you until morning."

"... And my only restriction is that I can't leave the dorm, correct?" Minato asked.

"That's correct." Mitsuru said. "If that'll be all, then your watch begins now."

"Sweet... then Junpei, do you think you could set me up with Eternal Punishment Online?" Minato asked, catching the seniors off guard. Junpei chuckled.

"Sure thing, dude. You can buy it on your computer with all the expansions for like less than 10,000 yen." he said.

"Then what are waiting for? Let's hit up the second-floor." Minato said, getting back up just as quickly as he sat down.

Junpei joined him, and the two went upstairs, leaving the seniors all a bit confused.

"... That guy really is indifferent to everything, isn't he?" Shinjiro asked. "Didn't even mention how bad I beat him."

"Not only that... he's going to treat this whole situation as a game." Akihiko said. He sighed. "Minato's a difficult person to deal with..."

Mitsuru let a little grin slip as she watched Minato and Junpei head upstairs. "He's quite the troublemaker, indeed."

The night was rather scheduled after his little explanation. He played videogames with Junpei, trained with Akihiko, and worked on learning odd recipes with Shinjiro to pass his supposed 'monitoring' period much faster than he thought possible.

80. Chapter 80

Chapter 80: A Mind Game

Author Note to Guest with a Question: There are four reasons which I'll list in order of importance:

Remix Minato's personality and Yukari's really don't mesh. Considering that Yukari is very angry with her mom for her sleeping around, if you consider how Remix Minato carries himself, she'd consider him disgusting most of the time.

Though she doesn't say it a lot, Yukari is still scared of him. Remix Minato certainly doesn't try to alleviate this in any way.

Remix Minato has a habit downright insulting Yukari. Not in a playful way either, as you can tell. No real sparks fly from that.

Lastly, I don't like their fan-art.

Author Note to That Guy: Thanks for that, it means a lot! I can't answer your question (no spoilers), but I'll try and keep a steady feed coming.

Author Note to Number13teen: Eh... no. Not even close. It's taken from an actual translation which is a question used in Persona 4. Google it.

Author Note to jasonwu: Because Minato made sure to think before he acted in that conversation.

Final Author Note: 200+ Reviews. Apparently, this story is good XD

Minato and Shinjiro were busily trying out a variant of smoked salmon which they worked on. Sure, they had to use tuna instead and lacked about half of the spices required, plus the stove had been riddled with bullets, meaning that it wasn't working properly, but overall, their pan-seared (or Hell Biker seared, depending on how technical one was being) fish came out rather well in their opinion. Every member of SEES got a third of a fish for breakfast, but Shinjiro insisted that he and Minato eat the eyes. "It's a waste to throw them away. They control cholesterol, lower the risks of getting any hypertension related diseases, and improve your eyesight. And like every other part of fish, it helps your brain, too." Shinjiro said.

"... Did the streets teach you that too?" Minato asked.

"I told you... anyone who overcomes a serious health problem turns into a health nut." Shinjiro said. "Besides, I don't sit on my ass all day because I'm unhealthy... I sit on my ass all day because I enjoy it."

"Can't call you out there." Minato said. He took one of the fish

eyes that were in the little bowl they had put them in while they were cooking, and examined it. Shinjiro took one as well, and casually threw it in his mouth and began to chew. Minato did the same, and they stood there, letting the eye melt in their mouths before swallowing.

"See? These are actually pretty good." Shinjiro said.

"... Huh. Who would have known?" Minato mused. He took another eye and popped it in his mouth, and Shinjiro did the same. With breakfast already prepared, they found themselves with a bit of free time on their hands as they both leaned against the kitchen counter, looking around at the empty dorm. They said nothing as they silently finished the bowl of fish eyes. Minato was about to go wash the bowl when Akihiko and Mitsuru walked downstairs.

"Good morning, Mitsuru, Akihiko." Minato said. "I think you'll like today's breakfast. We managed to pull off something exquisite, even though the stove didn't exactly work properly."

"Good morning." Mitsuru greeted back. She looked at the meals on the table, and a rather content smile appeared on her face. It died quickly, however, as she realized that they still weren't allowed to have a good relationship. "I'm impressed." she said with little emotion. "However, if you intend to bribe your way out of your predicament with food, you're sorely mistaken."

Minato chuckled. "Never even considered it." he said. "Still, the food's at its best. We should hurry up and get started."

Everyone walked over to take their seats, and Akihiko examined the food carefully while the others quickly began to eat. Shinjiro noticed and let out a sigh. "It ain't poisoned, dumbass. I watched him the whole time." he said. "Besides, even if it was, it's not like we don't have someone who can fix that."

"... Alright." Akihiko said, beginning to eat as well. Their breakfast went along just fine afterwards, with Junpei giving a few excited comments once he came downstairs and joined them. Fuuka and Yukari also joined, but both of them were silent for the duration of the meal. Their presence brought an air of tension to the table which never went away until SEES left the dorm. The train ride was spent with the group divided once more, and Minato spent all of it listening to music alone. He walked ahead of the group as usual and almost reached the school.

"Boss, Yukari's coming. And she looks pissed." Jack said. Minato took off his headphones and turned to face her, and he could tell she was just waiting to explode at him.

"Might as well endure this." he thought. "Good morning, Yukari." he greeted.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Yukari asked as she walked up to him. "Not only are you a cheating bastard, you just blow people off when you don't want to deal with them!"

"You mean like what you do to Junpei?" Minato asked.

"Don't start with any of that, alright?! We're talking about what you did to Fuuka!" Yukari said. "She really cared about you, you know that? Do you even understand the relationship you had with her?"

"Perfectly. In her eyes, I was her significant other." Minato said. "Whereas in my eyes, she was a good friend. Is it really my fault if a misunderstanding is borne from people who can't see eye to eye?" he asked. He let out a little chuckle. "Though I probably should have seen it coming. I mean, look at our height difference!"

"You... making another stupid joke at a time like this!" Yukari said. "Can't you even pretend you care?! Or is that too much for you, since we're all just lowly humans in your eyes, huh?"

"Oh, recognizing my superiority? I think you need to be upgraded from 'smart girl' to 'intelligent girl'." Minato said.

"Enough with dodging the questions!" Yukari said. "Answer me already!"

"You really should stop yelling. You're attracting a crowd." Minato said. Yukari quickly glanced around and saw a large number of students giving them odd looks, and swore under her breath.

"... Don't think this is over." Yukari said before hurriedly walking away. Minato chuckled and put his headphones back on before slowly making his way to class and starting the day. It passed rather quickly without anything of real note

happening, and he was about to enjoy lunch when Yukari quickly turned around in her seat and glared at him again.

"Let me guess... round two of this morning?" Minato asked, continuing to take out his lunch without flinching.

"Not here... on the roof." Yukari said.

"And why would I follow you to the roof where I know you will be allowed to scream at me without any risk of getting in trouble?" Minato asked. "I think we can have this right here, in more civilized tones if you don't mind."

"Augh... you arrogant..." Yukari began.

"Uhh, hey, what's goin' on here...?" Junpei asked as he walked over to Minato's desk, attempting to join him for lunch. Yukari shot him a vicious stare, and he flinched.

"Nothing to do with you." Yukari said.

"Blowing people off because you don't want to deal with them? How cruel, Yukari." Minato said.

"Shut up. This is between you and me, alright?" Yukari said.

"... Uhh, I guess I'll just go." Junpei said, not wanting to be anywhere near what was happening. He quickly moved over to join Kenji for lunch, and left them alone.

"Actually, what's between you and me is this little gap between tables." Minato said. "Technically, nothing."

"God, will you quit being a smartass already?" Yukari asked. "I'm just going to let you know what you've really done, if this is so much of an annoyance to you."

"That's the best idea you've had all day." Minato said. "Give me a damage report, stat."

"Ugh... look here, you inconsiderate prick. Fuuka's been tearing herself apart since yesterday, you know that?" Yukari asked. "She blames everything on herself because she 'made the mistake of trusting you'... 'thought you were a good person'... 'had feelings for you'... does that even get a reaction from you?"

"... It's as I said. People see what they want to see, hear what they want to hear, and believe what they want to believe." Minato said. "When your temple of ignorance comes crashing down, people can give you an escape route... but you have to be the one that takes it. Obviously, Fuuka chose to hold onto her ignorance for far too long." *"But I wish I could have let that temple remain standing, even if only until I got rid of her... I doubt I'll ever find another person who would place that much belief in me..."*

"That's what you get from hearing that?!" Yukari asked. "You're a horrible human being, you know that?"

"Then it's a good thing I'm not really human, isn't it?" Minato asked.

"... You know what? I'm done." Yukari said. "If your ego's that

big, I hope you choke on it. Somebody like you doesn't deserve anyone nearly as good as Fuuka."

"I could say the reverse, and it'd be just as true." Minato said. "It wasn't going to work out, so isn't it better our little game ended sooner rather than later?"

"Game... Everything's a game with you." Yukari said. "You don't care about others... you don't even care about your own life as long as you win, right? Because that's all that matters to you... some stupid victory to put you above everyone else."

"Life is a game, Yukari. I'm just one of the few people who happen to be exceptionally good players." Minato said. Yukari scoffed and got up.

"You're sick, you know that?" Yukari said. "Whatever... Enjoy your little victory. I don't even care enough to try and help you anymore."

"But that'll be doing quite a bad job of reciprocating my friendship." Minato said.

"Friend is just another word to you... it doesn't have any meaning when you say it." Yukari said. At that, she left the classroom and left Minato to his lunch.

"... And? What's wrong with that?" Minato thought as he ate. "Everyone is the same. A friend is just a means to an end. Whether it's for your own self-improvement or a clearly defined goal, it makes no difference... Fuuka tried to become

my crutch, probably for her own ego. To make herself feel special... but I don't blame her. It's what I do to others, after all. And though my goals are loftier than simply feeding my ego, the act in of itself holds little to no difference other than the individual who commits it and those they target... And even though Mitsuru claims she can show me otherwise, until such a time arrives, I see no reason to change how I act. I can already tell... now that I've scorned them, they'll come back to take vengeance. That's why you kill your enemies as quickly as possible... the more time you give them, the better they understand how to defeat you. That is something I can't have... so I'll need to work on getting back into their good graces once this period of turmoil draws to a close. My best bet is after the operation, around the same time Mitsuru gives her little revelation. A time of change will arrive... and I'll capitalize on the sudden open-mindedness that accompanies it."

Minato finished lunch without doing any further ado, and the rest of the school day quickly flew by. He knew for a fact that the seniors were all going to come and pick him up, so he took his time packing his things before walking out to the hallway. Sure enough, when he exited his classroom, the seniors were already making their way down the hallway towards his position. "The Chairman's already made it back?" Minato asked as they approached.

"That's correct." Mitsuru said. "You'll be having an appointment today... under our supervision, since he claims his security had business to attend to."

"Sho's out? Hmm... then we won't have a riveting conversation about ending the world..." Minato thought. "Isn't that an invasion of privacy?" he asked.

"You know all of us have read up on you long ago... I think we're past you claiming any privacy." Akihiko said. Minato chuckled.

"That's true... no point in wasting any time on a something that's already been decided." Minato said. "Then, let's go see how Ikutsuki's doing today."

At that, he joined the seniors, and they left school and got on the first train to Iwatodai. Minato stood in a little crowd surrounded by all three of them as he looked out a window, and began a quick analysis. *"I should be prepared for the possibility of not gaining a rank with Ikutsuki today, so let's see how we can make today productive... The girls of SEES are all out of the question, and I'm certain neither Junpei nor Shinjiro will be able to rank up back at the dorm with everyone else around... That leaves Akihiko, but we're still at odds, unless I do something special in this little therapy visit. Otherwise, I have nothing... also, I'm certain that the only place I could go tonight is Tartarus, so night visits are out. My options are very limited today..."*

"Why don't you just break out? Who could stop you?" Jack asked.

"Common sense. If I fight my way out of there, I can kiss all

the progress I've made in reparations down the drain."
Minato replied.

"Tch... damn politics." Hell Biker said.

"The duty of the Blank Card is by no means easy. If I'm to gain all the power that is rightfully mine, every relationship is more of a numbers game than anything else." Minato replied.

"Of course... one wrong step could result in disaster when some of your greatest power comes from the one you dance with." Matador said.

"Exactly. I've got to keep pace and make sure not to step on any toes... a waltz with more than ten partners at once."
Minato replied.

"But each waltz doesn't have to be finished at the same time. You can still choose your preferred partners, right?" Alice asked.

"That's right. However, as you see, occasionally I am severely limited in partner choice." Minato replied. *"... It would seem I'm stuck for now. Today may be a necessary sacrifice."*

They reached Iwatodai quickly, and returned to the dorm while the sun still hung in the sky. As they entered, Ikutsuki was the only person inside. "Ah, it's good to see you all again." Ikutsuki said from his seat in the lounge. "I'm glad that the damage is only structural and not personal."

"Oh, talking about the cracks in the roof and the bullet holes riddling the kitchen wall?" Minato asked. "Yeah, a few situations got out of hand."

"I'm aware of what happened." Ikutsuki said. "Well, we should continue in the Command Room..." At that, they all migrated upstairs and took their seats in the empty lounge. "Now then... it would seem we have to discuss your mental state once again, Minato."

"Why the rush? How about you tell us all about your trip first?" Minato asked.

"Stay on topic." Akihiko said. "We're talking about you."

"I'd like you to put pleasantries aside... this is strictly business." Mitsuru added. Minato let out a little sigh.

"Fine, fine... well then, what are we going to talk about today, Ikutsuki?" Minato asked. He and Ikutsuki exchanged a quick knowing glance, and both of them knew the question had a different meaning for the two of them than it did for everyone else in the room. However, neither of them allowed it to show on their face, and both of them knew their relationship here

"Today, since you've been explicitly brought here due to your... unique outlook, we'll call it, in regards to relationships..." Ikutsuki began, "we'll run through a few of your previous relationships on file. I'll be relying heavily on you once more to fill in any gaps your files have, just like last time... of course, you're also free to refrain from sharing any

information as well. And before we start..." Ikutsuki continued as he adjusted his glasses and surveyed the room, "I'd like you all to maintain an atmosphere without judgment. If I or Minato feels you're exerting too much pressure on him, you'll be asked to leave the room... That being said, if Minato begins to act violent, I am also counting on you all to protect me as well, eheh..."

"Come on, Ikutsuki. You should know that if I wanted to gut you like a fish and replace your jugular with a segment of your small intestines, I would have done it ages ago." Minato mused.

"... It's that type of talk that makes these meetings necessary, you know." Ikutsuki said. To the surprise of Akihiko and Shinjiro, he grinned. "I'm well aware that you're mostly harmless. Regardless, procedures must be followed..." After adjusting himself into a more comfortable position, he reached into his briefcase that he kept at his side and pulled out a few files. "Now then, let's begin... we'll start after your parents' death, since you've clearly stated that your memory from before then is hazy at best."

"Fine by me... though I'm surprised my file contains information on my relationships. That's quite thorough." Minato said.

"These documents are the result of additional research... SEES' standard records don't possess nearly as much detail as these." Ikutsuki said. "Now, I'd first like to ask you about a... Hirohito Rokushou. Do you remember anyone with that

name?"

"... Hiro... Rokushou..." Minato mumbled to himself. He closed his eyes in thought for a while before opening them again. "Deceased, age twelve. Cause of death: Repeated blows to the head with a toy car. Murderer: Me."

"... Correct. At the age of eight, you got into a fight with him at the first home you were placed in while his parents were away, apparently over the same car you nearly embedded into his skull." Ikutsuki said. "The official reports blame it on your unstable mental condition at the time... but I'd like you to tell me why you killed him. I know that the first year after losing your parents must have been very traumatic for you, so I understand if you can't tell me. Also, if you'd elect to not talk about it, that's always an option as well."

"... Why I killed little Hiro?" Minato asked. He tilted his head sideways in thought, and then chuckled. "I suppose it was because he would always bully me whenever his parents weren't around. Mr. and Ms. Rokushou were rather nice people, but little Hiro hated the idea of having a sibling, especially a younger one that got more attention than him... so he took his anger out on me whenever we were alone. He often told me he wished I had died in the car crash along with my parents... but after a car crashed into his cranium a few times, he couldn't wish that on anyone."

"... So you killed him in self-defense?" Ikutsuki asked.

"No... while Hiro was a bully, he was merely a child, untrained

in the art of torture." Minato said. "I killed him because he would inevitably bring up my parents to make me angry... and I didn't have as much restraint then as I do now. If anything, it happened in the heat of the moment, I'd say."

"I can see why that would happen..." Ikutsuki said. "For your first relationship with another child after your parents' death to be with a boy who had no interest in taking in a sibling... I don't know if you've realized it, but that may have had more of an effect on you than you know."

"It showed me that everybody can be two-faced. Hiro was the nicest little boy whenever his parents were around, but the moment they left, he became a smug little shit." Minato said. "That and a testy, twitchy little boy equals disaster, don't you think?"

"The result has already been recorded." Ikutsuki said. "If that was the first relationship you had with someone around your own age... well, forgive me for saying this, but the story only goes downhill from there, doesn't it?"

"What better way to gain momentum?" Minato mused. Ikutsuki let out a slight chuckle and flipped through a few pages in his folder.

"... Then, you don't mind if I jump a few years into the future, do you?" Ikutsuki asked.

"By all means." Minato said.

"Alright... then, what does the name Yukino Miyabi bring to mind?" Ikutsuki asked.

Minato once again closed his eyes and thought for a bit, but another chuckle escaped him when he opened his eyes once again. "Alive since I last saw her... Released from Tokyo's Center for the Mentally Handicapped three years ago, correct?" he asked.

"That's right... she was released a month before you." Ikutsuki said. "I think you'll be pleased to hear that her schizophrenia has improved immensely."

"Oh, really? Good for her." Minato said. "She was nice. Never tried to kill me, even when the voices in her head told her to, heh."

"I believe you found her more than 'nice'... you were often, and I quote, 'seen volunteering together in the hospital kitchens because you both refused to eat yucky food all day'." Ikutsuki said.

"Hospitals might charge a lot, but their biggest money maker is their food... if you eat enough of it, you'll extend your stay." Minato said. He and Ikutsuki both chuckled before he continued. "Yes, we did some group cooking. You didn't think I just magically knew how to properly cooperate and lead while cooking, did you? That takes experience, and when you have to quiet your assistant's complaints and the complaints of the voices in her head as well? Ha! I'd say I could work with the deaf and dumb if I knew sign language."

"... That's certainly quite the tale." Ikutsuki said. "I would ask, but... considering this is one of the few relations I could find for you where the other party is still alive, I'll go ahead and call this one of your healthier relationships. Now... what made that different from dealing with, say, Hirohito?"

"Everything." Minato said. "Hirohito was an idiot that thought he was worth more than he actually was. Yukino, on the other hand, knew very well that she was a danger to others and herself, and that the chances of her amounting to anything in life if she didn't recover being slim to none. Not only that, but she had no problem admitting her dependence on me and also openly asked for favors which she repaid in various ways, from extra food to favors of her own."

"Then, the defining characteristic in your relationship was that you hid nothing from one another?" Ikutsuki asked. Minato broke out laughing and almost fell out of his chair.

"Hahahaha, hold up!" Minato said. "What is this, a cartoon?! Like hell we didn't hide things from each other! To this day, she doesn't know I'm the one that put the laxative in the pie she gave to the guards, heh... oh, how she got punished for that. That was fun to watch... but don't think for a second this was one sided. I know for a fact she was the one to call the guards when I started wailing on a patient that puked on me, even if she denies it. Nobody else could have seen me jump the bastard."

"... I think this is coming back around to your belief we talked about the other day." Ikutsuki said.

"It is... I liked Yukino because she suffered, was suffering, and would continue to suffer... but she plowed right through it because she had ambitions." Minato said. "Granted, they were probably not on a grand scale, but the fact is, it kept her going. Hiro, on the other hand, was a short-sighted brat with no vision for the future... so I did his parents a favor and let him die as the boy with promise instead of as a failure of an adult."

"Then you apply that even to your relationships..." Ikutsuki said.

"The only worthy existence is not one that simply endures suffering, but one that walks through it knowing full well that it'll reach its destination at the end." Minato said. "The key, however, is that suffering is a constant... there is no such thing as a respite in reality. Previously, I tried to only affiliate with others who could see my views... but now, I prefer to expand my horizons. I find it interesting to see what happens if I disrupt my own tried and true strategy."

"... Now, I believe I understand what you want in a relationship." Ikutsuki said. "You aren't looking for a follower or a supporter... you're looking for someone that can stimulate your brain, because you want them to test you and your beliefs... correct?"

"... Actually, that's a very good way of putting it." Minato said. Ikutsuki grinned.

"So you seek thrilling situations to spice up the mediocrity of

everyday life?" he asked.

"Of course." Minato said.

"And what better way to spice up a relationship than by having an affair?" Ikutsuki asked. The seniors of SEES refrained from letting out a collective gasp.

"... You did even better than I could have, Ikutsuki. Talk about a way to drive a point home." Minato thought. "... You put a science to my fun." he said with a grin. "Well... this is unprecedented. I might be more predictable than I thought... I'll need to work on this."

"And your inner perfectionist arrives right on time." Ikutsuki said. He chuckled. "Well... while I doubt I can act as a relationship counselor, I believe I've shown you what you need to work on to fix your womanizing habits."

"Easier said than done... just because I know why I want to have fun doesn't mean I can just stop having fun, you know?" Minato mused. Ikutsuki chuckled and got up.

"That, Minato, is a battle not even a therapist can help you with." he said. Ikutsuki turned to the seniors and scratched his head. "As I said, this isn't exactly my field of expertise... I'm better at dealing with individual problems, not those surrounding interactions with others... but I'll be around town, of course, and present for the operation."

"... Thank you, Mr. Chairman." Mitsuru said. "I'll call you if any

other problems occur."

"Of course... well, I'll be taking my leave." Ikutsuki said.

"I'll walk you to the door." Minato said, quickly getting up. He followed Ikutsuki out of the room and downstairs before the seniors had time to deliberate what could happen. As they reached the second floor, Minato spoke again in a very quiet voice. "That was excellent on your part."

"I was just the cue giver... you were the story teller." Ikutsuki said. They reached the first floor, and slowed down as they headed to the door. "It's reassuring to know we can trick the highest ranking members, even when they're all together."

"Oh? Do you have a special plan for them?" Minato asked.

"I'll just say that there's more than one reason for them to survive until the plan can truly begin." Ikutsuki said.

"Regardless, you really should be careful... we can't have them in this much turmoil so early on."

"I know, I know... I'll take extra care so as to avoid having a situation like this happening ever again." Minato said. "Until then, though... let's just say the knowledge I'll get to watch them disappear fills my imagination with some of my happier thoughts."

Ikutsuki chuckled. "And Sho says I'm the scary one of us." he said. "Though I would take pride in that title, I believe it fits you much better. The man who boasts of his strength, when in

reality, his deadliest weapon is his tongue... Genius."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"Well, what do you know? Things went my way today."

Minato thought. He grinned. "Of course... knowing the statistics associated with physical strength means little to nothing when going against it. A man's true secret weapon is that which everyone calls cheap." he said.

"Heh... you remind me of an old friend." Ikutsuki said. They reached the door, and Ikutsuki opened it. "I'll return for the next operation. Try to stay out of trouble until then."

"Emphasis on 'try'." Minato said. He and Ikutsuki chuckled before Ikutsuki walked out of the dorm, leaving Minato near the door. *"... Looks like that's all I'll get for today."* he thought as he turned to walk back upstairs. He made it halfway to the stairs when the rest of the seniors reached the first floor. He had kept Matador on them to ensure they were out of earshot, so he had no fear of confrontation. "Let me guess... Last day of house arrest?"

"That's right." Akihiko said.

"Then we're going to Tartarus tonight." Minato said. "I'll tell

Fuuka when she gets back."

"... You sure that's a good idea?" Shinjiro asked.

"If I just say we're going to Tartarus, what can she say back? If she has a problem, then we just can't go." Minato said. "I, for one, would like a bit of extra training before our star festival special bout. The Incomprehensible Azure Dynamo can't afford to fall short when the stakes are this high."

"... Hmph." Akihiko said, cracking a slight grin. "If you're up for training, count me in."

"That puts you on my team, and I guess I'll take Mitsuru as well. Shinji, do you mind dealing with Yukari?" Minato asked. Shinjiro sighed.

"It ain't like she's mad at me. Besides, Junpei's the Vice Leader. He's the one that has to deal with her if she starts acting up." Shinjiro said.

"... Then, we'll all prepare for battle." Mitsuru said. "Minato... please try not to provoke Yamagishi."

"Any provocation she takes will be in her head." Minato said. At that, the seniors all went about doing their normal activities in the dorm, and Minato decided he would join Mitsuru in her reading. The nature documentaries Shinjiro constantly watched actually provided a nice background for reading, though he kept his headphones on since he preferred his own music.

He heard the dorm door open, and turned to see Fuuka and Yukari enter together. He took out one of his headphones and waved. "Good afternoon, you two." he greeted. Both of them turned towards him, but said nothing, their rapidly darkening expressions telling them all he needed to know. "Since the full moon will be in three days, I've decided that we'll take a training expedition to Tartarus tonight to prepare. Are you okay with that?" he asked.

"... That's fine." Fuuka said. "I'll be down before eleven."

"Thank you." Minato said with a little nod. He returned to reading his book, and Yukari followed Fuuka upstairs.

The night was a simple night of training. Nothing extraordinary happened, and aside from everyone getting back into practice and gaining a little strength, it flew by. Minato didn't even bother getting new Personas, since he didn't feel as though he had improved much, and the day ended on a rather boring note.

81. Chapter 81

Chapter 81: Sketchy Advice

Author Note to Guest: You and the rest of the Council too, eh? I mean, with a bit of a stretch, sure, a guy that has deemed making attachments too risky so he utilizes his skills at reading people to create situations which always stack the odds in his favor while resorting to strength clearly given to him by much more powerful beings when things go downhill COULD be considered a Gary Stu... but if that's the case, then every character ever made is a Gary Stu. Also, remember, this story is mainly told from Minato's viewpoint, and he's clearly talked about what he calls his 'Selective Apathy', so if a topic is covered by that, it'll never enter his mind or really be brought up by him in or out of his thoughts.

Author Note to Bladehaste: Thanks for the big up! As for your question, beats me. People like angst-ridden protagonists more than cold and cunning strategists, I guess...

Minato spent the majority of the Sunday twilight hours taking a jog around Iwatodai. *"Sunday is always an odd day... if Nemissa isn't present, I'm usually screwed for the daytime*

rankings." he thought. *"Tonight, I'm definitely going to see if either Dante or Vergil is around... That'll be fun. Still, as for the morning... I know. I'll go check on Ken, and see if anything special happens. Maiko and Akinari should be there, so even if that doesn't work, it'll be a good way to pass time."*

After finishing his planning for the day, he returned to the dorm just before six in the morning. After quickly making an average breakfast and taking the time to shower and change into his comfy white and blue t-shirt with his sky blue jacket over it, light blue jeans, and his ever present hat. By the time he returned to the first floor, Mitsuru and Fuuka were already seated in the lounge. Both of them had on their summer outfits, with Mitsuru wearing a white, sleeveless turtleneck shirt atop black pants with open heels, while Fuuka wore a bright aqua green sundress atop her usual footwear.

As he made his way towards the exit, he noticed that the odd air of tension around Fuuka had dissipated. *"... That's not normal. No way in hell is she back on her feet that quickly."* Minato thought as he walked past them.

"A Shadow is going to appear the day after tomorrow." Fuuka said suddenly. Minato stopped and turned to her.

"We've made the necessary preparations." Minato said.

"For charm... make sure you're ready for everything else, too." Fuuka said.

"Don't worry... our contingency plan should still hold up. However, I will go see a few of my contacts again and see if I can get anything similar to the flowers." Minato said.

"An excellent idea." Mitsuru said. "However, try not to overwork yourself... you can't afford to get sick before the operation."

"I know." Minato said. "I'll see you later tonight."

He left the dorm and quickly headed for Naganaki Shrine. Since he had almost two hours before he had to arrive at work, he had no doubt that he would have more than enough time to at least pursue the possibility of an increased rank with Ken. When he arrived, he found Ken in an orange and white t-shirt very similar to his own and brown cargo pants over his sneakers. What surprised him more, however, was the fact that he was apparently being held up by Junpei and Yukari, who were also at the shrine. *"This is an interesting mix."* he thought as he approached the trio.

Junpei wore a plain white shirt over his blue t-shirt and black jeans, with his usual cap and shoes on all the while. Yukari had on her simple pink vest and white pants combination, still wearing the odd choker she seemed to never discard. "Ken-kun, aren't any of your other friends around?" Yukari asked.

"Most of them are going to the movies or back home to see their parents." Ken said. "I'm not a big fan of going to the cinema... besides, I prefer the atmosphere here, Takeba-san."

"Ah, like a true warrior, huh?" Junpei asked with a grin. "The fierce man that appreciates peace and tranquility, but transforms into a demon to do what must be done... just like an anime hero huh? That's pretty cool."

"... That's rather childish, Iori-san." Ken said. "I'm here because I find it relaxing, not so I can pretend I'm a hero. That sounds more like something you'd do."

Yukari started laughing while Junpei was taken aback. "What? C'mon, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be a hero, dude... It's every man's dream!" Junpei said.

"More like every little boy's dream." Yukari said with a giggle. "Still, Ken-kun... isn't it a little weird acting so uptight all the time? It's okay to like normal boy stuff, you know."

"... And what about me isn't normal?" Ken asked.

"Huh? O-oh, I just meant, uhh..." Yukari began, quickly turning to Junpei for help.

"Like it's totally normal to be into anime and action shows as a kid!" Junpei said. "Don't get me wrong or nothing, but... ain't it kinda weird not wanting to be a superhero when you're a kid? I mean, heck, I still wanna be one."

Ken got an annoyed expression on his face, and Minato took his chance to quite literally swoop into the conversation by walking in between Junpei and Yukari. "Why believe in something so transient?" Minato asked, catching all three of

them off guard. "The hero of today is the villain of tomorrow, and the villain of tomorrow is the hero of next week... it's all dependent on your point of view. We should do away with the ridiculous titles and just acknowledge that every man works in favor of his own interests. No more heroes, no more villains... just individuals. Don't you agree, Ken?"

Yukari and Junpei both had on slightly dumbstruck expressions when Ken actually chuckled at what Minato said. "Every time I hear you talk, you sound more and more like one of the enemies from Featherman... but you've got a point, just like they do." Ken said.

"Woah, woah, woah, you talk to him a lot, Ken-kun?!" Yukari asked.

"Minato and I have been acquainted for a few weeks now." Ken said.

"Dude, first name and no honorifics..." Junpei muttered.

"Hey, uhh..." Yukari began, nervously eyeing Minato, who had moved to stand next to Ken, "maybe you should..."

"Be cautious around me?" Minato asked.

"Don't trust him?" Ken asked. The duo glanced at each other and laughed, increasing Yukari's worry ten-fold. "I know, Takeba-san... Minato himself gave me the same warning, and a few other people who know him said the same."

"Sheesh, that's just his way of... never mind, Ken-kun." Yukari said. Ken raised an eyebrow at her, and Minato chuckled.

"Yukari and I have been at odds recently, but don't worry. We're still good friends in my book." Minato said.

"... That's a little optimistic, if Takeba-san's voice was any indication." Ken said.

"What? Man, what are you talking about...?" Junpei asked. "I mean, friends get into fights sometimes, ya know? This is totally normal for them."

"Obviously. Friendship isn't always rainbows and sunshine." Minato added. He gave Ken a quick pat on the back.

"I'm aware of that, but this seems bigger than normal." Ken said. He sighed. "Then again, it's not my place to judge any of you."

"But it is your place to judge Shinjiro." Minato thought.

"... That's very mature of you, Ken-kun." Yukari said. She had a hint of fear in her voice, and Minato could tell that she was beginning to realize just how far Minato had already inserted his ideals into Ken's mind. "... Sorry, but I just remembered I have somewhere to be. It was nice talking to you two."

"Yeah, I've gotta go meet up with Kenji today too. Later." Junpei said. He turned and walked away first, but Yukari remained and shot Minato a quick glare.

"Don't you dare try anything with him." she projected with her stare. Minato merely smiled and waved back at her.

"Have fun, Yukari." he said.

"It was nice speaking with you both, Takeba-san, Iori-san." Ken said. He and Minato turned towards the Shrine stairs afterwards, headed towards the main area. As Yukari watched the two of them walk away, she couldn't help but feel an ever-growing sense of dread, as if she had just left a child in the hands of the devil. Reluctantly, she turned and walked away, knowing full well that there was nothing she could do since Ken knew nothing of SEES. She buried those emotions quickly, and resolved to try and remedy the situation at a later time.

As Minato and Ken walked towards the main area of the shrine, Ken let out a slight sigh of relief. "... Thanks. Those two were starting to annoy me." he said with a slight grin.

"Junpei isn't that bad, but he's not as eloquent as I am." Minato said. "As for Yukari, you're right... she's a hassle to deal with, but I do what I must. I'm a man of many contacts, after all... the more the merrier, I say."

"Heh... you really are something." Ken said. "I doubt I could put up with that much open hostility."

"Not yet... but you'll learn why that can be one of your best assets over time." Minato said. They arrived at the main area, and saw Akinari and Maiko already sitting on the little bench

by the playground. Akinari was apparently writing something on a little notepad while Maiko busily ate a small burger. She didn't have her school bag with her, and instead carried around a little plastic bag apparently filled with food. "Ah, the gang's all here. How about we have some fun today?"

"As long as we aren't raiding the fortune box again, I don't mind." Ken mused. They walked over to their companions on the bench, and Maiko let out an excited little squeal when she noticed both of them approaching, alerting Akinari to their presence.

"It would seem Maiko isn't tricking me today... you really have made it a habit of coming here, haven't you, Ken?" Akinari greeted with a slight grin. "And I honestly didn't expect to ever run into you again, Minato."

"It's good to see you again, Akinari, Maiko." Ken replied.

"You should know I'm not that easy to get rid of." Minato said with a smirk.

"Minato, you came back!" Maiko said. "And you brought Ken, too." she teased. Ken let out a slight sigh, but grinned nonetheless.

"So impatient... really, you could have waited on us to start eating." Ken said.

"But I was hungry!" Maiko said.

"Heh... she only just started." Akinari said, putting the little notepad and pen he had into his pocket. "You've arrived as the dawn... Not quite on time, but early enough."

"Mm-hmm... but... what about you?" Maiko asked, looking at Minato. "We only have enough food for us..."

Minato let out a shocked gasp. "Surely you haven't forgotten?" he asked with serious concern in his voice. Maiko let out a little snicker.

"Does the Mystifying Minato have another trick today?" Maiko asked with a grin.

"Heh... Watch and be amazed." Minato said, slowly backing away.

"... The Mystifying Minato?" Ken asked, looking at Akinari. Akinari shrugged, unaware of what they were talking about.

"Now," Minato began, making a giant circle in the air with his hands. He did a few over exaggerated punches at the air, and then did a spinning roundhouse kick resembling what he saw Shin do, making odd grunting sound effects the entire time, and landed on one knee, with one hand behind him and one touching the ground. "Azarath Metrion Zinthos!" he called as he stood up straight with a quick spin on the ball of his left foot while he kept his right bent and slightly hovering above the ground. He summoned a can of Cielo Mist and a melon bread from the Dimensional Compactor while his back was turned to them, and stopped while cradling both items against

his chest with his left arm, his right arm hovering above them with the Dimensional Compactor in case they flew out of his grasp. He smiled as Maiko started clapping once she saw the food he had, and Akinari also joined in, genuinely impressed with his performance. Ken's eyes were wide, as he couldn't believe what he just saw Minato do. "Behold, and marvel."

"... How did you do that?" Ken asked. "There's no way you could have pulled those two out of any pockets... you barely even have a place to hide them."

"It was magic, silly." Maiko said.

"No way. Magic isn't real." Ken said.

"Magic is very real, Ken." Minato said with a grin.

"The only way to prepare for the encroaching dark is to expect the unexpected." Akinari mused. "For in that night, there are just as many wonders as there are terrors."

"It is for that reason the sun hides behind the horizon, trying to sneak a peek at the mysteries of the dark." Minato said.

"Once at the start of the day to feed it's imagination..." Maiko said.

"And once at the end to sate it's curiosity." Ken said. Akinari and Minato both turned with surprised faces to the two children, and both of them quickly averted their eyes, a slight blush reaching both of their faces.

"W-what, Hat? I heard Striped Shirt say something like that..." Maiko said.

"... It would seem Akinari has rubbed off on me more than I thought." Ken said. Minato and Akinari both laughed, though Akinari stopped sooner to let out a few coughs. Even so, he was still smiling.

"At this rate, maybe I will have a legacy." Akinari mused. He chuckled, and scooted over to the edge of the edge of the bench. "Since we're all going to eat, we may as well sit together."

"My thoughts exactly." Minato said, walking over and taking the opposite corner. Maiko slid over near to Akinari, and moved her bag to the floor to allow Ken to take a seat next to her and Minato. Maiko quickly passed Akinari an odd bag of chips and a bottle of water, and then gave Ken a small burger and a can of Mad Bull, which was exactly what she had. Maiko let out a little giggle as she got comfy in her seat and returned to her food.

"Now it's like a picnic!" she said with a smile. "You three are the best, you know that?"

"Obviously. I mean, you've seen us, right?" Minato asked. Maiko let out a little laugh, and even Ken and Akinari chuckled.

"I'm not sure I'd call us the best... but I'll admit we're good company." Ken said.

"All that glitters isn't gold... and more often than not, it isn't even shiny." Akinari said.

"Mm-hmm." Maiko said as she finished chewing a piece of her burger. "Oh, by the way, Hat and Striped Shirt! Did you know it was my birthday the other day?"

"Really?... I'm a little sad I wasn't in attendance." Akinari said.

"Make that double. We could have had a lot of fun." Minato said.

"No, it's fine... it was really nice, actually. Mom and Dad didn't forget about my birthday this year... they remembered!" Maiko said. Ken let out a little chuckle.

"Nobody could forget you." he said.

"Course not!" Maiko said. "But... we still didn't really do anything as a family... we haven't even had a meal together as a family in almost a year, even though we used to eat dinner together every night..." She sat there, her smile becoming more and more melancholic with each passing moment. "... We'll all stay together, right?"

"... Yeah." Ken said. He had a distant expression on his face as he stared at the ground, and Minato knew right away that he was thinking about what he would do if he knew he had to leave everyone to avenge his mother.

"We won't leave..." Akinari said. He gazed off to the side, and

Minato knew he was mentally trying to force death's door out of his mind.

"... But what if I have to go the bathroom?" Minato asked. Everyone else snapped out of their serious thoughts, and turned to Minato. Maiko pouted.

"I was being serious, Minato!" Maiko said, a quick burst of anger getting the best of her. Everyone else chuckled, and Minato just turned to her with a grin.

"I know, I know... none of us are going to go anywhere in the foreseeable future." Minato said.

"He's right... we're still going to be here, hanging out on the weekends... even though we really should find somewhere better than a shrine." Ken said.

"Ah, perhaps you have a point there... but there isn't a park in Iwatodai, so I'm unsure as to where we'd go instead..." Akinari said.

"... But I like it here." Maiko said. "We can do whatever we want here, because nobody really comes around... we can play, we can eat, we could even read in a big circle if we wanted to!"

"Heh... I like the sound of that." Akinari said. "It's as if this space is our own private world... the realm of a storybook manifest in reality."

"I think it's something better." Minato said. "Unlike the realm created in a storybook, this one has no defined ending."

"... That's right." Akinari said. "We don't have a reason to abruptly stop... there's no threat of us ending up alone."

"... You guys..." Maiko said with a sniffle.

"... H-hey, enough with the sentimentality... y-you'll make Maiko cry." Ken said, suppressing a sniffle of his own.

"... With tears of joy, she brought forth life... and the children played in the fields that grew, inseparable." Akinari said, patting Maiko on the head.

"And even after they left, each on their own path... Their hearts remained full of the time they shared, memorable." Minato said, patting Ken on the head.

"... N-now you two just want us to cry..." Maiko said, rubbing her eyes. Akinari and Minato chuckled. Ken joined Maiko in clearing up his own tears, and the duo was left to finish their meals in relative silence. After the group collectively finished, everyone got off of the crowded bench and looked around. Minato checked his watch, and saw he only had half an hour left until he had to go to work.

"... *Shit. It's now or never. I need to get Ken alone, fast.*" Minato thought. "Ah, man..." he said, scratching his head. "Looks like I miscalculated... I need to be off to work soon."

"What?" Maiko asked. She looked at her watch, and let out a slight gasp. "Uh-oh, I need to get back home before Mom gets back..."

"In that case, let me walk you back." Akinari offered, much to everyone else's surprise. He nodded to Minato, and Minato knew he was killing two-birds with one stone. By walking Maiko home, he would ensure that, no matter what, Minato couldn't get a chance to speak to her alone, while also giving him the opportunity he needed to speak with Ken alone about topics Akinari quickly recognized that neither he nor Maiko were supposed to hear about.

"Oh, how dangerous you could be if you were healthy, Akinari..." Minato thought as he nodded back to him. "Then can Ken walk me to work?" he asked.

"... Excuse me?" Ken asked.

"Hey, don't leave him alone, Ken." Maiko said. "Go."

"But he's... never mind." Ken said, moving over to Minato. He stopped and turned to Akinari and Maiko, who had just begun walking away. "It was nice seeing you all today." he said with a wave.

"We should do this again!" Maiko called back. "Don't you think, Striped Shirt?"

"Today was fun... I felt a lot better than usual." Akinari said with a grin. "I don't mind doing it again. I'll see you around,

Ken, Minato."

"Same to you." Minato said. After those two walked off, he turned his attention to Ken. "You've learned quite a bit since we last spoke." he said. "Come... walk with me."

Minato and Ken took their leave from the shrine and began the walk towards Paulownia Mall. "... You really just wanted a chance for us to speak in private, didn't you?" Ken asked.

"Correct." Minato answered. He chuckled. "So... what do you think about your new friends? Compared to the two that held you up this morning, which do you prefer?"

"Obviously, I like spending time with Maiko and Akinari more... Iori-san is too old to get away with how childish he is, and Takeba-san is so self-righteous, it irritates me." Ken said. "... But I'm guessing those are more the results of their circumstances than anything else."

"That's right... Junpei's mother died when he was a child and his father is an alcoholic. He wants to be the hero he never had." Minato said. "Yukari was, from what I've observed, very attached to her father, who she idolized, as a child. After he died, her mother broke down and began whoring herself out, essentially isolating her. Yukari strives to be the offspring of the idol she created, the perfect daddy's perfect little girl. Both of them have very fatal flaws because of this, but I'll leave that to you to find out if you ever feel like it."

"... I can see that. Just like how Maiko wants constant

attention and a sense of attachment now because her parents no longer prioritize her existence and have isolated her, and how Akinari hides the fact that he's going to die from me and Maiko because he doesn't want to differentiate himself from us so he won't be alone, even though it's written all over his face when he starts to think about it around us." Ken said.

"... I take back what I said earlier. You've grown immensely since we last spoke properly." Minato said.

"My fortune did say growth." Ken mused. "But, I have to say... I didn't think you could use the knowledge that other people had problems and use it to your advantage."

"It's one of the most important parts of securing the upper hand in a relationship, and the most effective way of doing while giving the other person the illusion that they're the one in control." Minato said.

"That's right... people are so arrogant, they never look out for the little guy." Ken said. "And from what I've seen with you, nobody expects the teddy bear to have fangs and claws."

Minato chuckled. "Oh, you're really good... though sometimes, you need to affirm your position. From what I've seen, Maiko really will start considering you her bitch any day now." he said.

"... It might be more than just her thoughts there." Ken said. "I'll start to feel like it too if this keeps up."

"Then that means I can tell you the next big thing that can help you out." Minato said. "Now that's you've realized that everyone is suffering and subsequently seen how you can use that to your advantage, the next big thing to pay attention to is... actually, take a guess first."

"... Give me a moment, please." Ken said. They walked on for a few minutes as Ken spent some time thinking about the question, until he suddenly let out a little laugh. "... You can't be serious... their hopes and dreams?" he asked.

"If I had a prize, I'd give you one." Minato said. "That's right... if you understand a person's suffering as well as their hopes and dreams, all of their individual actions become easier to predict, and thus, they become easier to control."

"... Before we continue, I need to apologize to Feather Hawk, because it looks like I'm more suited to be an Invader than a Featherman." Ken said. Minato laughed as Ken silently did the equivalent of a prayer. He had a smirk on his face as he kept walking, and turned his attention back to Minato. "You're a scary guy, Minato... but there are a lot of benefits to being good friends with scary people in general, aren't there?"

"That's right." Minato said. "Many of my best friends could easily injure or even kill me... but don't worry. Those relationships are usually with people who have just as much of an understanding as I do, so the risk is rather low unless you purposefully provoke them."

"Ah, so the most dangerous people to deal with aren't

necessarily the ones that appear the most threatening..." Ken said. "It's the ones you can't always control."

"Or at least predict." Minato said. "Well, that's really my big tidbit of advice for now... I want you to work on understanding your two friends' hopes and dreams better before we speak again."

"Alright... but..." Ken said. He turned and gave a suspicious glance in Minato's direction. "Do you really consider them... 'friends'?"

Minato chuckled. "Not telling... do you think you can read me enough to find out?" he asked.

"... No. Not yet." Ken said. He chuckled. "Though, I get the feeling your definition of 'friend' is very different from everyone else's... which I think is fitting. You're the most dangerous person for me to deal with right now, and even though you've gone out of your way to help me... I really don't know why. I thought it was because you saw yourself in me, but... now I'm not so sure." Ken chuckled. "But then again, that just makes it all the more fun to hang out with you. After all, it's not every day I get to see a professional at work, or get hands on advice... I think you might be able to really help me out, even beyond just this."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Justice Arcana...

"Oh? Want to rope me into your plot to kill Shinjiro? Heh, you're getting ahead of yourself..." Minato thought. "Who knows? If I like your plan, I might just work free of charge or favors." he said. The duo shared a little chuckle, and parted ways once Minato reached Paulownia Mall. He entered Be Blue V again, and once again found the same employee informing him that Nemissa was still away on a 'business trip', though she had supposedly had enough time to set up a few photo shoots for him.

A few hours of shower-pole dance poses and average sales later, Minato thought that his work at Be Blue V was going to be just another boring day when he saw Mitsuru enter the store. *"Ah, I had almost forgotten... it's that time of month again."* he thought. *"Looks like tonight will be more fun than I thought."* He walked over to her and did his usual cap off bow in his employee uniform. "Welcome, Mitsuru, to the healing shop, Be Blue V... do you want a soap, a shampoo, or a fragrance?... Or do you want me?" he asked, taking her hand.

"... I think you know the answer to that question." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled.

"It's nearly a full moon... will we act as if tonight is the last night ever?" he asked.

"... It won't be." Mitsuru said. "I'm certain of it."

"I jest, I jest... but you and I will do a bit of de-stressing tonight, won't we?" he asked.

"Exactly." Mitsuru said. She moved closer to him and whispered "Tonight, away from prying eyes."

"My, aren't we being bold?" Minato asked.

"There's no need for masks when it's just you and me." Mitsuru said with a smile. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before backing away. "Now, I think we'll go with our usual arrangement."

"With pleasure." Minato replied. Once more, he got Mitsuru to buy an array of candles, flower petals, and a new slate of bath items. After she left, the rest of Minato's shift passed by quickly, and he returned to the dorm after hearing that his pay would be given in a singular lump sum once Nemissa returned, since she had apparently returned during the week and taken all of the money save the bare minimum required to run the store. He was annoyed that he couldn't get another Narcissus Flower, but his plan worked just fine with the three he had.

He returned to the dorm to find only Yukari and Fuuka in the lounge, both of whom were busy using their laptops. "... Hey." Yukari greeted. Fuuka didn't bother looking up from her laptop, apparently very absorbed in whatever she was doing.

"Hello there, you two." Minato said as he signed in at the front-desk. "Hope you're both rested for Tuesday."

"We're fine." Fuuka said. "You didn't get sick, did you?"

"Do I ever?" Minato mused. "Well, make sure you get some exercise, Fuuka. You remember what Keisuke said about using the computer all day, right?"

"I do... Oh, I made some lunch with Shinjiro-senpai today if you're hungry." Fuuka said.

"Even though you don't deserve it." Yukari muttered.

"I heard that." Minato said, catching Yukari off guard. He chuckled. "Still, thanks for the offer, Fuuka. I'll be sure to have some after a nice shower. You've become a good cook, you know?"

"Really? Thanks." Fuuka said. At that, Minato headed upstairs to his room to prepare for his shower with Mitsuru. The boys of SEES weren't anywhere to be seen, so he made his way to the third floor and knocked on Mitsuru's door.

"Ready?" Minato asked behind the door.

"I hate to admit this..." Mitsuru began from the other side. She opened the door, and Minato saw her clothed only in her bathrobe. "But I may have been a bit expectant..."

"There's nothing wrong with that." Minato said. "Let's enjoy ourselves, shall we?"

As they went to the third floor bathroom, Junpei arrived back at the dorm alongside Shinjiro and Akihiko. They all entered

together, and headed up to the second floor lounge, each apparently wanting a little break from their excursions. "Phew... senpai, I'm not the only one that gets a bit anxious before a full moon, right?" Junpei asked as he sat down. Akihiko and Shinjiro each took open seats across from each other.

Shinjiro, clad in only a black t-shirt over gray jeans with his usual hoodie and shoes due to the heat, cracked his neck. "Nothing wrong with being a little afraid before an operation... if we've learned anything, it's that shit gets serious on a full moon." he said.

"Shinji's right." Akihiko added, wearing a red t-shirt over khaki jeans and sneakers. "The Shadows seem to reveal their true powers on a full moon... the first ones took over a monorail, and the ones after that called somebody to Tartarus while we fought. And then there's the unpredictability of the situation... having to defeat the Shadow in a matter of minutes because the train it hijacked would crash into another one, or the person we saved turning out to be our biggest threat..."

"... Damn, you've got a point. The Shadows that appear during full moons all have some really crazy powers, don't they?" Junpei asked. He sighed. "I hope this one is dumber... like, it can regenerate by eating paint or something like that."

"This ain't Super Mario Sunshine." Shinjiro said. "We already know the next Shadow is going to be hitting our mind, and we've got a plan for that too... so this fight shouldn't be too much of a problem."

"Our biggest problem is location... if the Shadow is somewhere inaccessible, or in a small area, it might be easy to tap and engage alone, but it would hinder team combat." Akihiko said. "And we can't expect Minato to win the battle for us... not only should that only be relied upon as a last resort, but that can we even call ourselves fighters if we let that keep happening?"

"No kiddin'." Junpei said. "Our pride's on the line... but ya know, I've been thinking... Even though we've been getting stronger... the Shadows have been getting stronger too. How long can we keep this up? What happens if we reach our limit and then totally get our asses kicked? Man, that would suck."

"Reaching your limit means you can't get any stronger... and that only applies to someone who's a master. Most people use it as an excuse. They say they've reached their limit, but in reality, they've just given up. You can start by forgetting about reaching your limit. That's the first step to getting stronger... Remember that, Junpei. We aren't even close to being down for the count just yet." Akihiko said.

"... Dang, that was friggin' inspirational." Junpei said, tipping his hat to Akihiko. "Still... what are your thoughts on it, Shinji-senpai?"

"The only way we'll know if it can happen is if it happens." Shinjiro said. "There's no reason to worry about something like that right now."

"That too... the future isn't set in stone. We can't know

whether or not we'll even come close to reaching our limits right now." Akihiko said. "And I doubt we'll be able to for quite a while."

"Heh... guess you guys are right." Junpei said. He leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I'm just getting too excited right now. We're gonna crush the next Shadow, no sweat."

"That's a better attitude to have." Shinjiro said with a nod.

After a while had passed, Mitsuru and Minato emerged from her room, now clean and clothed. Mitsuru had on the reverse of what she wore in the morning, this time having a black sleeveless turtleneck atop white pants, while Minato wore his dark blue long-sleeved shirt atop black jeans. *"Just got a back wash from Mitsuru with her boobs for my services and a half-naked make-out session. WINNING."* Minato thought as he closed her room door. Both of them had very content smiles on their faces, and stopped in the hallway. "... If we go downstairs, we'll have to return to our little act once more." Minato said.

"... I believe we've indulged in each other enough to last a while." Mitsuru said. "Perhaps after the operation, we can see about this again."

"Oh? Are you sure you want to make this a regular occurrence?" Minato asked.

"We won't have to remain at odds for much longer." Mitsuru said. "... And I'm certain you'll be able to find a 'front', as you

said, soon enough."

"... Well, then I suppose I may need to visit Be Blue V as a customer someday soon." Minato said. Mitsuru chuckled, and she walked towards the stairs. Minato stopped her by placing a hand on her shoulder, and she turned to get a quick surprise kiss from him. He pulled back, leaving her a little flustered. "Sorry, but the boys are on the second floor, so I'll be going down a different route. That's my goodbye."

With that, Minato silently moved over to the window on the wall, opened it, and hopped up to the roof with his Speed Magatama. He ran to the other side of the building, and jumped off, summoning his Fiend's heads to create stepping stones so that he could reach his window and enter his room. Once back inside, he straightened out his clothing, threw on his scarf, checked to make sure there were no traces of lipstick on him, and then left his room. He saw the three boys all sitting in the lounge, and passed them with just a few nods of acknowledgement.

After eating the food Fuuka spoke of, which turned out to be quite good, Minato left the dorm and headed for Club Escapade without anybody batting an eye to his excursion. *"Well, my house arrest is technically over, so that's nice."* he thought. He made his way to Paulownia Mall, and headed to Club Escapade. Vergil served as the bouncer as usual, and Minato walked past him with his usual nod. *"Ok, so Vergil's around as always. Good. Now, to see about my 'front' business... I doubt I can finish the Empress without one at*

this point. Let's see... if I recall, Kari and Senna are... over there."

Minato made his way over to the corner of Club Escapade's dance floor, and found the duo in similar clothing to what they had on last time. Though Kari had opted to go for a brighter yellow sweater and Kari swapped to a more monochromatic jacket and vest combination, the duo looked more or less the same as the last time Minato saw them. He gave away his position with a slight chuckle. "My question once again remains unanswered." he greeted.

"... You're back." Kari said, a huge look of surprise on her face. She stared at Minato for a moment before running up to him and almost tackling him to the ground with a hug, which surprised him greatly.

"What the hell?! Does this bitch wanna get cut?!" Jack asked.

"We don't need any more crazy-ass stalker bitches! The Reaper is more than enough!" David said.

"Trust me, if she's threatening me, I'm impaling her coffin during the Dark Hour." Minato replied. "Woah, was I that missed?" he asked, hugging her back.

"Mama wasn't lying! I met a real friend following her fortune! I met you!" Kari said, still hugging him. "This is so great! Maybe I should have my fortune told the next time I'm in trouble..."

"Sheesh, you're getting way too caught up in the moment." Senna said, walking over to the two of them. "I mean, yeah, it's amazing your fortune came true and all, but seriously..."

"... Oh. So she is crazy, just not dangerous to me crazy. That works." Minato thought.

"If you decide everything based on the readings of a fortune teller, you might as well become a gladiator." Matador said.

After Minato spent a rather tame hour and a half with the duo, he excused himself by saying that he was leaving. In reality, he knew the Dark Hour was about to strike, and opened the entrance of Club Escapade as the world was dyed a sickly green. The Transmogrification process was instant, which always puzzled him, since he knew that after people were forcibly ripped from their coffins, it took time for the coffin to break apart.

He stood next to Vergil, and the Vergil merely nodded his head in recognition of his presence. "I've discovered that influence can actually be heavily influenced by physical prowess." Vergil said.

"The power that comes with fear, correct?" Minato asked. "Yes, that works when you have the ability to slice a building in half with ease... which I'm assuming you can do."

"If I fought like an idiot with no sense of precision, I could... but when I fight, all that's left are corpses and bloodstains,

nothing more." Vergil said.

"Oh, so you're a precision fighter with a focus on decisive hits? I see why you dislike Dante's idea of fighting, then." Minato said. "He likes to play with his opponents, always wanting to beat them at a level where it looked like they had a chance."

"Precisely. It's a waste of time and energy to behave like that in battle." Vergil said.

"Then you'd dislike how I fight. I prefer a similar style, as long as I'm certain I can win." Minato said. "I do swap to one like yours if I know I need to end a fight quickly, however... while I believe Dante likes to overwhelm his opponents with constant pressure. But speaking of Dante, where is he?"

"A friend of his had a job for him, and he's received clearance from Lucifer to take it." Vergil said. "He should return by the end of the coming week, according to his contact."

"Hmph... you must feel lonely." Minato mused.

"I'm more than accustomed to acting alone." Vergil said. "But we're digressing... I wanted to know your opinion on the usage of fear when controlling others."

"It's certainly useful, but relying too heavily on it will actually lower your efficiency as a leader." Minato said. "But in times of turmoil, it's as good of a bet as any to get others to follow you. You'd be surprised how people changed when presented

with the reality that they're practically waiting to die."

"... As I thought, it couldn't possibly be that easy." Vergil said. "I cannot rely on my title of being the Son of Sparda when attempting to deal with humans... none of them even knows who my father was."

"That's true. I deal with Lucifer and a few other big names, and I've never heard of Sparda." Minato said.

"Demons generally don't dwell on the past... this tendency is one of my only human traits I tolerate." Vergil said. "Even so, it can often be a hindrance."

"Ah, human emotions are often annoying, aren't they?" Minato asked.

"You speak as if you're above them." Vergil said.

"I'm not, but I'm trying my best to overcome them." Minato said. *"But damn, is it hard when you've got a friend with benefits in Mitsuru."*

"That wasn't the only thing hard." Alice said in a sing-song tone.

"I'm telling you, she's ready for a ride." Hell Biker said.

"We'll get to that when we get to that." Minato replied.

"Then you are embarking on quite the quest." Vergil said.

"You have my support."

"Thank you." Minato said. "... You know, I think your biggest problem may be that you remain in your comfort zone too much."

"... Explain." Vergil said.

"Well, from what I've heard, the majority of your entire existence has been steeped in combat. You rely on your skills with a sword for practically everything, so naturally, you'll go to the one thing that allows you to rely on that when trying to exert influence over others, which is the aura of fear." Minato said. "What you need to do is place yourself in a situation where you can't rely on that."

"... Ridiculous." Vergil said. "To stay my sword when the enemy is before me is no different from running away."

"Perhaps... but sometimes, it's the only way you can negotiate properly." Minato said.

"Tch... Then I should expect dishonorable battles?" Vergil asked. "If each conversation is a trial, then the inability to show my superiority with a blade is tantamount to giving my opponent a large handicap in an arena I'm already unfamiliar in."

"Yes... but think about it. If you can win like that, it just makes you that much better than everyone else." Minato said.

"Imagine how much easier it'll be once you're allowed to battle with the sword again, huh? Remember, most of your bouts here will be training matches of no real consequence once you

lose... well, perhaps a little shame, but nothing you can't brush off."

"... I see." Vergil said, placing his hand on his chin. "Yes, you have a point... victory with that many restrictions means that once I'm allowed to use my full power, it will be that much easier. Yes, that makes perfect sense... the equivalent of training in adverse conditions." He turned to Minato and gave him a serious look. "You're quite knowledgeable in this area... I'd like you to continue aiding me once I've improved."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hanged Man Arcana...

"Two Cards plus the bath? Oh, what a wonderful day."

Minato thought. "With pleasure... I enjoy watching you progress. Although, I wonder... are you planning to make an army to return to Hell with, or are you aiming at something else?"

"... I have no need for an army." Vergil said. "However, my foolish brother left a strange idea in my head before he left... and I wish to examine the limits of human nature before I make my own conclusions. For that, I need to know how to control people so I can create situations."

"An experiment?" Minato asked.

"You may call it that if you wish... but I doubt it will change anything." Vergil said.

"... *Somebody isn't ready to share that.*" Minato noted. "Well then... all I can say is good luck setting it up." Minato said. He began to walk away. "Though if you get desperate, I could always see take a shot at it."

"While that would speed up the process, I have no intention of asking for help when I am more than capable of completing the task myself." Vergil said. With that, Minato returned to the dorm, and enjoyed some tea after the Dark Hour ended, feeling rather good about his Sunday's performance. He'd say he got an S-Rank for Stylish.

82. Chapter 82

Chapter 82: Filler

Author Note: Sorry, it's a short one.

It was the Monday before the big operation, and the members of SEES all spent the majority of their morning each absorbed in their own thoughts. Minato didn't really mind, since it gave him an excuse to just listen to music on his own. If anyone asked, he was deep in thought considering every possible detail about the coming battle, but in reality, he was just enjoying a bit of quiet before the battle. He had arrived at school undisturbed when he noticed Junpei heading towards him, and he took off one headphone. "What's up?" Minato asked.

"Yo... Tomorrow's the big day." Junpei said.

"I don't see what's so special about it." Minato said. "We're going to go out there, kill a Shadow, and then head home like we do every night. The only difference is we know what to expect this time around, which should make it even easier than normal... I see no real cause for concern in the majority of situations I've plotted in my mind."

"The majority?" Junpei asked.

"Well, if the Shadow resides underwater, there's no real way for us to try and fight it other than trying to electrocute it or by blindly sending our Personas after it." Minato said. "I was thinking that it could be some type of Siren-like creature that focuses on long-range mental attacks... though I hope not."

"... Dude, you better not jinx us with that." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"Well, in every situation where we have a real method of fighting, such as if the Shadow flies around or resides on the ground, our victory is all of assured." Minato said. "So there's a much larger chance of things going in our favor then against them... the requirements for us to have a real problem are very specific."

"That's... kinda good to know." Junpei said. "I mean, I'm not gonna lie, I've got butterflies in my stomach right now... Like right before a big tournament, ya know? Now I know how Akihiko-senpai feels before he gets in the ring..."

"Meh. The enemy will come and the enemy will fall. Simple as that." Minato said. "It's not like I'd allow any other outcome."

"Yeah... it's not like we can afford to lose, either." Junpei said with a nod. The two entered school, and the school day began. As if to reinforce Junpei's statement, the student who sat next to him was missing that day, and they both guessed that it was probably Apathy Syndrome.

While SEES spent the day at school, Sho Minazuki was

thoroughly enjoying himself. He sat on a specialized private jet that had been given to Ikutsuki years ago for his continued service to the Kirijio Corporation. One side had five rows of first-class seating, three chairs each, while the other side had a bar, snack bar, and small buffet with metal trays and a little drop off area for trash. Sho sat in the middle row of seats near the aisle, and was tormenting Hamuko, who sat near the window one seat over from him, in the best way possible: Utterly crushing her in Guilty Gear XX over and over. They had left Iwatodai along with Takaya, Jin, Chidori, and even Koromaru earlier that day at the airport, allowed to bypass security after Ikutsuki pulled a few strings. "You cheap sonuvabitch... enough with the fucking dust loops!" Hamuko yelled. Sho laughed at her as he just won yet another match.

"If you're scared, just get outta the corner!" Sho said. "C'mon, it ain't my fault if you can't pull an aerial recovery for shit."

"How about you use a different frigg'in character?" Hamuko asked.

"Hell no! That's like tellin' me use a different weapon cuz I'm too good with my swords!" Sho said.

"Can't you see other people are trying to sleep, dumbasses?!" Jin yelled from the seat behind them, startling them both. "You're louder than my goddamn headphones!"

"... Sorry." Hamuko said as she peeked back over the seat. Jin rested his head against the window and grumbled, trying to fall asleep once more. Koromaru sat curled up on the seat

next to him, apparently also annoyed with their volume level, and let out a content whine before also attempting to fall asleep. "Heh... you two are cute together."

"Shut up." Jin said without moving or opening his eyes. Hamuko chuckled, and turned around to peer over the seat to see the duo in front of her. Chidori was busily drawing near the window, completely absorbed in her work, while Takaya was just as busily writing something on his notepad.

"... So, what are you guys doing?" Hamuko asked them.

"Finding the proper means by which to express the pitifulness of imperfect artificial life." Takaya said.

"Same." Chidori said.

"Ok..." Hamuko said, slowly slinking back into her seat. She let out a slight sigh. "Man, we're going on a trip. We should all be excited."

"We're heading out to the sticks." Sho said. "The only thing TO do there is our job... seriously... have you ever heard of Inaba before?"

Hamuko thought for a moment, scratching her head for a bit, before finally letting out a sigh. "... Nope." she said. "Still, why do we have to be there instead of... somewhere people know about? I mean, we just need to reactivate 24 and 31 and slap that little upgrade on them, right?"

Sho closed his eyes and let out a deep sigh, and the atmosphere around him changed. Minazuki opened his eyes with a scowl. "Must I remind you of the plan yet again?" he asked. Hamuko let out an excited little squeal and tried to hug him, but Minazuki grabbed her face and shoved her backwards. "Do NOT touch me, woman."

"Agh, you meanie!" Hamuko said, almost falling out of her seat. She recovered, and gave Minazuki a quick punch on the arm, which failed to make him flinch. "Hmph... I know the plan. I just want to know why we have to go to Inaba."

Minazuki turned to her for a moment, and then sighed. "Since you've forgotten the plan yet again, I'll remind you." he said. "In order to bolster our forces as a contingency during the coming rebirth of the world, we will use the two best ASW's that were salvageable: Unit #024, Kopsis, and Unit #031, Labrys. However, since no ASW until the sixth generation ever managed to properly manifest its Persona, their combat prowess may not be enough as is."

"Uh, hello? Labrys has a huge freakin' battle-axe that doubles as a jet pack and friggin' rocket punch arms, plus Kopsis has a pretty damn big great sword that doubles as a jet board and rocket boosters all over her arms and legs anyway... I'm pretty damn sure they can handle most people pretty easily." Hamuko said.

"... Regardless of their impressive arsenal," Minazuki said, "the addition of a Persona could only serve to strengthen them even more. Thus, we are going to head to Inaba, where I

discovered the Malevolent Entity... there, using the device Ikutsuki has prepared, I will harness its power and forcefully awaken the ASW's Personae. Afterwards, I will eliminate it... we cannot allow a being that powerful to exist, lest it interfere with our new world."

"... Wait. You're basically going to steal some crazy being's power... and then kill it?" Hamuko asked.

"That is the basic premise." Minazuki said.

"... That's exciting." Hamuko said, licking her lips. "Very exciting... you're very exciting..."

"I believe I told you to refrain from staring at me with lustful eyes on multiple occasions." Minazuki said. Hamuko giggled and swapped seats to be right next to him, and then proceeded to use him as a hug pillow. Minazuki didn't care, however, since he was too engrossed in a different conversation at the moment.

"Heh, that chick's thirsty as fuck. It's a good thing if we crash, it'll be over the ocean, heh." Sho remarked in Minazuki's head. "Still, they're all idiots... how have they not suspected that instead of just killing Hi-No-Kagutsuchi, we absorb the rest of his power first, huh?"

"It's an incredulous plan... so incredulous, nobody could think we'd try it. Ikutsuki has engineered his own demise..."
Minazuki replied.

"ASW personality suppression software... tweaked first to work on humans, and then even tested to make Shadows obedient... well, until they dissolve." Sho replied. *"We already got a resonance frequency with the horny bastard from the second time we spoke... and the device is all set to go."*

"Exactly... even if it doesn't stop our opponent completely, it'll weaken it more than enough for us to defeat it." Minazuki replied.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Hamuko said, snapping Minazuki out of his thoughts with a few shakes. He huffed and pushed her backwards again.

"What now, woman?" Minazuki asked.

"Why can't the Malevolent Entity go to someplace cool like Tokyo, huh?" Hamuko asked.

"That was also covered in the debriefing, but I'll explain it yet again." Minazuki said. "For some reason, the space distorted by the Dark Hour in the Inaba area is much more unstable than the rest of the world... in short, the area transforms into the equivalent of a miniature Tartarus. We'll need the concentration of negative energy amassed there for my awakening method to work."

"I brought you some lunch." a flight attendant that seemingly appeared out of nowhere with a food cart said from next to them. Hamuko let out a little squeal and hugged Minazuki,

while Minazuki narrowed his eyes and looked the newcomer over. It was a woman who appeared to be in her early thirties wearing a very professional flight attendant uniform, complete with cap and stockings. What caught both Sho and Minazuki's attention, however, was her odd blood red eyes and rather messy silver hair styled into a messy bun, rather reminiscent of Hamuko's hair. Something about this woman raised numerous danger flags in his head, but he had no idea why. "... Oh, am I interrupting something? I'm sorry... I can come back later if you'd like." the flight attendant said.

"... That won't be necessary." Minazuki said. "But... what did you hear?"

"Hmm? Oh, just you two talking about your game." the flight attendant said, looking at the two PSP's they held. She chuckled. "But if you were trying a confession, I think you need to do better than that."

"What?! No way, we weren't doing anything like that, eww!" Hamuko said, quickly moving away from Minazuki. The flight attendant laughed.

"Ah, sorry, sorry... that was a little mean, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Don't mention it... or me confessing to this guy." Hamuko said.

"... Who are you?" Minazuki asked.

"Me? I'm just the attendant for this jet." the flight attendant said. "I cook the food, keep the bars stocked, tend to the needs of the passengers, and make sure it's ready at any time... well, on special call, that is. This bird actually doesn't get airtime that often, you know? It's a shame."

"... How much did Ikutsuki tell you?" Minazuki asked.

"Huh?... Just that his redhead son and a few of his co-workers were heading out to the country to test out some new machine parts. He's talking about those big containers, right?" she asked.

"That's correct." Minazuki said.

"Oh, can you guess what's inside?" Hamuko asked. Minazuki turned to reprimand her, but the flight attendant laughed before he could say anything.

"Beats me! The most complicated machine I've ever used is a gas pump!" the flight attendant mused. "Still, your lunch will get cold if you don't start soon. Here you go." She placed a covered plate in front of Minazuki, and then one in front of Hamuko. "I know you're going to Inaba... the sticks are a good place to try out fancy equipment in private, isn't it? Well, not like I'd know... I hope you can watch some TV there, or it'll get boring, quick."

"When TV is all we've got, that's a serious problem." Hamuko said with a sigh. She took the cover off of her plate and saw a very large meal, which immediately perked her up. "Thank

you, Ms..."

"Call me Nami." she said with a smile. "I'd love to chat, but I actually have some other work to get to... and I wouldn't want to disturb the sleeping couple back there." Hamuko let out a quick laugh, but Minazuki still watched this 'Nami' character carefully.

"... Thank you for lunch. That will be all." he said. Nami gave a smiling nod, and moved forwards to silently serve Takaya and Chidori, both of whom were still absorbed in their work. Hamuko began to eat her food quickly, and Minazuki swapped places with Sho. *"Did you feel that, boy?"* Minazuki asked.

"Yeah... something's off with that bitch. And how come we never heard about her, huh? What, does the old man think we like surprises?" Sho replied as he started to eat. *"... But I'm not gonna lie, this is a tasty lunch."*

"Hmph... Nami, is it? If she begins to appear too often, we'll deal with her. However, if she really is just a lowly attendant, then we're mistaken." Minazuki said. *"For now, however, we need to focus on the task at hand... steel yourself, boy. After we manage to stop the ASWs, our true fight begins."*

"Tch... we didn't go through hell to lose against some loser horned freak." Sho said. *"Gonna make sure he has a nice fall, heh."* The jet continued undaunted, set to arrive at Inaba early in the night.

Back at Gekkoukan, the day had ended and Minato had just

slapped on his Council armband and took his regular seat. Mitsuru and Shinjiro came in after a few other members and joined him, both looking rather nonchalant about the meeting itself. "Minato, I thought I should inform you... Fuuka has elected to go with Mr. Toudou today to try and upgrade her arsenal, as well as get practice." Mitsuru said. "As such, she won't be returning until later this evening... we should avoid an expedition tonight to allow her rest."

"Oh, that's good. I was wondering if she would ask me to buy her something soon, but I guess she had the money herself." Minato said.

"Actually, she asked me for the money. It wasn't a problem... also, if you ever require funds for necessary items, please, don't hesitate to ask." Mitsuru said.

"Sorry, I'd only ask my wife for cash." Minato mused. "Maybe in a few years."

"... Hmph." Mitsuru said.

"It's good you two patched things up." Shinjiro said. "An operation's no place for mixed feelings."

"You don't need to tell me." Minato said. "But, let's rush through this little obstacle first, shall we?" True to his word, Council was quick. Minato attended the meeting, intimidated a few Council members who let their heads swell since his beating, and patrolled with Shinjiro afterwards. Try as he might, he had nothing new to talk about with either of them,

leaving him without a Card for the afternoon. The trio returned to the dorm, and found Junpei and Akihiko watching TV in the lounge.

"S'up?" Junpei greeted to all of them. "Hey, what happened to Fuuka? She go out or something?"

"Wanted some new toys for tomorrow night's play date." Minato said.

"... Oh, I get ya." Junpei said. He smirked. "Glad to see she's got her head in the game now. It'd suck if she was out of it."

"It would seem she has a stronger sense of duty than I thought." Mitsuru said. "That's an excellent quality to have."

"That's true." Minato said with a stretch. "But enough debates... I'd like lunch." *"My... it would seem the fear of death has swapped Fuuka into a soldier mode. Interesting, but... I just realized that today is going to be empty. Tonight, Vergil isn't ready, Dante is missing, I'm not ready to pass Shin's test, I don't have any more Fiends for Lucifer, and I have nothing to do with Elizabeth and Igor... shit."*

With that knowledge, Minato did the one good thing he knew to do that would allow him to pass time. He did basic physical training for hours on end on the roof of the dorm, through the Dark Hour and into the next morning.

83. Chapter 83

Chapter 83: VS The Hierophant and The Lover

Minato made a grand breakfast for SEES that morning, and everyone ate heartily together at the table before school. The general quiet and slightly tense atmosphere informed Minato that everyone secretly had doubts in the back of their mind, and the looks on their faces confirmed it. "Everyone." Minato said, getting their attention. "I've been thinking... are any of you adverse to diagonal cross-sections?" he asked.

"... What?" Yukari asked.

"For tonight's Shadow, of course." Minato said. "Do you mind if I slice it into diagonal cross-sections if I think it'll look better that way?"

"... Heh." Junpei said with a slight smirk. "What if I wanna make a big 'X' mark on it instead, huh?"

"That'll fit in with diagonal cuts, dumbass. You're talking about a cross-cut." Shinjiro replied. He shook his head, but a slight grin reached his face.

"Heh... like a good cut of steak." Akihiko agreed.

"Food references aside," Mitsuru began, "I'm fine with any

method capable of ensuring victory. You have no restrictions tonight."

"... Just try not to go too crazy, okay?" Yukari asked. "I mean, we can't go blowing up buildings or anything like that."

"Really?" Fuuka asked. "... Maybe I shouldn't have gone for the second bazooka..."

"I'll try to be on my best behavior tonight." Minato replied. He resumed eating, and everyone else's attitude had quickly improved. The air lightened, and SEES was on the train to Gekkoukan soon after breakfast. They all took their usual positions, and Minato thought he was going to enjoy a quiet ride when he noticed Fuuka walking up to him. "Nervous?" Minato asked as she approached.

"... A little." Fuuka said.

"Don't be." Minato said. He placed his hand on her head and messed with her hair, catching her off guard. She looked at him with a puzzled expression while he just smiled. "This won't be like last time. You won't be on the front lines this time around, and you're on our side." He withdrew his hand and chuckled.

"That's true, but... I'm worried about everyone else." Fuuka said. "Umm... if it's not too much, could you..."

"Protect them?" Minato finished. He grinned. "That was always the plan."

"Thank you." Fuuka said. A slight smile appeared on her face. "We're all counting on you."

"Then you've made a smart bet." Minato said. Fuuka nodded and was about to turn around to leave, the conversation over. "Hey." Minato called, stopping her.

"Yes?" Fuuka asked.

"We should have some fun together tomorrow." Minato said, again catching Fuuka off guard. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to, of course. But I'd like for us to be friends again... like how we were before you knew about SEES."

"... That would be nice." Fuuka said. "Tomorrow sounds good."

"... It'll come." Minato said, catching the odd melancholy in her voice. "For both of us."

"... Yes." Fuuka said, now taking her leave.

"Alright... reparation plans in action." Minato thought. "... But what keeps giving me this odd feeling? Hmm... I'll think it over later. Right now, I need to keep morale high to get everyone in top form for tonight. A time of turmoil is a time of weakness... and I cannot afford to let any of my Cards disappear just yet."

He arrived at school and walked ahead of everyone else as usual. However, he slowed pace just enough to let Yukari

catch up to him. She was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice him fall into pace next to her. He took one quick glance at her and knew exactly what she was questioning. "Throw away any lingering doubts of right and wrong." he said, getting her attention. He turned to give her a serious look. "The fact is, if we lose, the city will be overrun with Apathy Syndrome, and everyone can kiss the future goodbye."

"... I know." Yukari said.

"Then what are you really worried about?" Minato asked.

"... You wouldn't get it." Yukari said.

"The truth of our fight?" Minato asked. "Why does the very school we attend turn into a nest of Shadows? Why aren't we told more than merely that our success is necessary if we want to live or keep Apathy Syndrome in check?" He glanced at Yukari, who merely returned a slight nod. "... Knowing the reason for the battle may give you peace of mind... but the reality is, our powers responsibilities could very well be nothing more than power which was randomly handed out. We're working towards uncovering the truth of Tartarus and the Dark Hour, and though we may not have gotten any solid answers, we can't know if there is a greater truth until we reach the end."

"That's... you're saying we need to risk our lives until the end, whether or not anybody tells us anything?" Yukari asked.

"Any path not carved in blood is a path that leads to

nowhere." Minato said. "We haven't endured enough suffering to reach the ending just yet. As horrid as that may sound... it's the reality we all face."

"... School really is hell, huh?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"It is." he said. With that, the duo entered school, and passed by a very uneventful Tuesday. To everyone else, it seemed perfectly normal. However, each member of SEES spent the day finding their resolve for battle once more, each acknowledging the gravity of their situation.

After school, at the request of his fellow sophomores, Minato headed straight to the dorm after making a quick stop at the Velvet Room on the premise that he wanted to go check with Officer Kurosawa about new weapons so he could fuse some new Personae. Afterwards, he returned to the dorm and outfitted every member of SEES with various items required to cure mental statuses. He placed his purple-tinted Narcissus Flower in his hair as usual, and gave Yukari the plain white one to wear. "As for the third," he began in the Command Room a few minutes before the Dark Hour struck, "though I had originally planned on giving it to Shinjiro, I believe we should wait and see where we'll be fighting first. After all, there are a few locations Castor Prime simply can't fit."

"... That's true. I can't use my Persona indoors." Shinjiro said. "Good call."

"An excellent factor to take into consideration." Ikutsuki said from the chair he was seated at. He had arrived early that

night and made enough bad puns with Minato to get everyone cringing in a happy yet annoyed manner, which Minato thanked him for in private soon after. "It's true... though we are fighting for the safety of the people, Iwatodai itself should suffer the least amount of noticeable damage possible. Of course, if you need to cause a bit of destruction to save yourselves, however, please. I don't know what I would do if any of you were to be injured."

"That's correct. While the safety of the city is important, your lives receive much higher priority. Do not be afraid to use whatever means necessary to ensure your survival and that of your comrades." Mitsuru said. The Dark Hour struck, and Fuuka wordlessly summoned Baba Yaga, the bright blue sphere surrounding her once more. Minato turned to her, and couldn't help but feel that she looked a bit like one of the giant robots she drew.

Fuuka had taken the time to upgrade her arsenal, and now wore a specialized harness apparently given to her by Mr. Toudou that went around her entire upper body, allowing her to carry both of her bazookas slung over her back, her two SMGs on the side of her leg, and a new high-powered sniper rifle that rested in a large holster on her lower back, allowing it to be quickly drawn by the inhuman strength Fuuka possessed thanks to her Shadow's presence. After a few minutes of searching, Akihiko came forwards.

"Any luck, Fuuka?" he asked.

"... Just a moment..." Fuuka replied from inside of Baba

Yaga. Her third eye shifted erratically while her other two eyes were closed, and she held her hands together in what looked like prayer. "... I found it!" she said, opening her eyes. "There's a strong presence... in Iwatodai, inside a building on Shirakawa Boulevard."

"Hmm, Shirakawa Boulevard... They've been finding The Lost in pairs lately... now I understand why." Ikutsuki said. Minato broke out laughing.

"Ah, been enjoying a few painted whores, Ikutsuki?" he asked.

"Wh-What?! Why does everyone jump to that conclusion?!" Ikutsuki sputtered.

"... Ah, I understand." Mitsuru said, making the association of the place with the name.

Baba Yaga disappeared, and Fuuka looked around at everyone else. "Why? What's on Shirakawa Boulevard?" she asked. "I'm not familiar with that area..."

"I've heard about it, but..." Yukari said. Junpei got a mischievous grin on his face.

"That's where all of THOSE hotels are. That explains a lot!" he said. "You've heard about em', right, Fuuka? The ones where people go to... you know..."

"... Oh." Fuuka said, quickly turning away.

"Nonsense... They're no different from ordinary hotels. The

rooms are a bit fancier, that's all." Ikutsuki said. Minato grinned, and Ikutsuki quickly turned to him. "BUT I do not speak from experience."

Minato broke out laughing. "... Aside from that," Shinjiro said over Minato's laughter, "we should head out."

"Right... we'll stick to normal battle formation, with Minato in the lead as always." Akihiko said, heading towards the door.

"Fuuka, we'll be counting on you for support during the operation. I trust you can handle it?" Mitsuru asked.

"I'll do my best!" Fuuka said with a salute, catching Mitsuru off guard. Fuuka giggled once she saw Mitsuru's puzzled expression, and walked towards the door with her weapons all attached to her. "... Well, Mr. Chairman, I trust you'll remain here?"

Ikutsuki let out a small sigh. "As usual..." he said. "Still, all of you should be careful. Remember, these full moon Shadows are leagues above the average enemies you encounter in Tartarus, so stay alert."

"I've already taken into account the majority of possible battle conditions for a building on Shirakawa Boulevard." Minato said. He grinned. "None of them have us losing."

"Excellent." Mitsuru said. "Come... the operation has begun."

With that, the members of SEES all quickly made their way to

the building Fuuka found, and stood at the entrance. It was tall for a three-story building, but from what Minato could tell, Shinjiro would still be unable to use his Persona inside. Shinjiro stewed his teeth when the same realization hit him after everyone stopped at the entrance. "... Looks like I'm sitting this one out." he said.

"Unfortunately, yes." Minato said. He summoned the last Narcissus Flower, the blue one, and held it in his hand. "... Mitsuru, you get this one. You're one of the most agile and have healing capabilities."

"Understood." Mitsuru said. She took the flower from Minato and paused for a moment, looking at it. "... Hmm. I haven't really considered how to carry this around. My hair is too long to allow it a safe resting place during combat."

"I know." Minato said. He walked up to her, undid her ribbon, then the first few buttons of her blouse, and slipped the flower into her cleavage before redressing her. He looked up to see Mitsuru completely petrified by what had just happened, and then turned to see the other members all dumbstruck. He walked away casually, and adjusted his jacket. "There, the flower has no chance of falling away and shouldn't get in your way during combat, since you're wearing that breastplate." Minato said.

"... Right." Mitsuru said very quietly, fighting on the inside to maintain her composure at what had just happened.

"... If everyone's ready, I believe the Shadow is on the third

floor. There are other weaker ones around it and on the lower floors, but they shouldn't be a problem." Fuuka said. She turned to Minato. "Don't hesitate to ask for support... I can't use my bazookas, but I still have my other guns."

"Actually, stick to your rifle... it would be odd for the hotel to suddenly be riddled with SMG shells, wouldn't it?" he asked.

"That's true... ok." Fuuka said, taking out her rifle. "Then," she continued, summoning Baba Yaga, *"good luck, everyone. The operation begins now."* she finished over the team's transceivers.

"Sheesh... we're really going into a place like this..." Yukari grumbled. "Let's hurry up and get this over with, huh? I really don't want to be here right now..."

The inside of the hotel was plain enough. It was simple and undecorated, and actually resembled the inside of an apartment complex with the room layout revolving around a central area with four rooms. Minato quickly led SEES up to the third floor, easily dispatching Shadows similar to the usual dice enemies they fought in Tartarus with ease. Once they reached the floor itself, they quickly checked the various rooms. The interior of each room was, to Minato, actually rather elaborate. The center of the room had a large purple bed, usually with two coffins very close to one another in various arrangements atop it, with one side housing a large drawer and mirror, presumably packed with any toys and other additions that the customers might need, as well as a closet, while the other side had a large see-through shower.

"... *Is it wrong if I want to take people here now?*" he wondered as he systematically ran through room after room. "There's only one left." he said as led SEES towards a door on the far back wall.

"*Wait!*" Fuuka said as he put his hand on the door. "*That's definitely where the Shadow is... are you sure you're ready?*"

"Everyone?" Minato asked, turning his head back.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Yukari said, prepping her bow.

"C'mon, let's do this!" Junpei said, readying his sword.

"Heh... I've been aching for some real action. This Shadow better be more than just mind games." Akihiko said, punching his steel gauntlets against each other.

"This ends here." Mitsuru said with a quick flick of her rapier, entering a fighting stance.

"Then, light them up, Fuuka." Minato said as he opened the door.

SEES was greeted by the sight of the Hierophant Shadow, which was a large, extremely obese man made of the same black substance Shadows were made of clad in distorted white and red papal robes atop a very small throne, the decoration on it shown between the man's spread legs to be two crossing golden keys. Behind the man seemed to protrude a tall and thin beige woman whose head was in the

shape of a mangled six-barred cross. To the left of the Shadow stood what looked like the paper cut-out of a man with a little red insignia on its chest, while to the right, another figure in the same shape with a blue insignia on its chest stood there, bouncing right alongside it in rhythm with the Hierophant's breath.

Almost immediately after Minato opened the door, Fuuka appeared right in front of him and fired directly at the head of the woman while Yukari let loose an arrow at the Hierophant's mask, which rested on the face of the obese man in papal robes. The attacks connected simultaneously, and Fuuka quickly unleashed two more shots, one into the Hierophant's left and right breast as Minato fired his Evoker. "Matarukaja." he said. Black Frost appeared behind him and sent an orange light to envelop him and all of his allies as they rushed into the room.

"It repels electricity!" Fuuka yelled before disappearing from the battlefield. *"Be careful, Akihiko-senpai!"*

"Tch... Then I'll play support!" Akihiko said, stopping swiftly in his tracks. He drew his Evoker and fired. "Rakunda!" Polydeuces appeared above him and released a purple light from the antenna on its arm, covering the Hierophant and lowering its defenses. "Take it down!"

"Got him!" Junpei said, firing his Evoker. Hermes appeared alongside him and stopped as he did. "Kill Rush!" Hermes took off at high speed and hit the side of the Hierophant with a ridiculously fast kick, rocking it on its throne. However, what

Junpei didn't expect was for Hermes to get caught in the Hierophant's flab and the two paper men to suddenly swarm it and electrocute his Persona before he could react. He held his head as his Persona broke apart. "Agh, those paper dudes counter close range!"

"Then I'll exterminate them." Mitsuru said, drawing her Evoker. "Mabufu!" Penthesilea appeared behind her and did its usual sword dance before pointing its weapons at the Hierophant. Small shards of ice appeared all around the Hierophant and struck it from every direction, with numerous shards piercing the paper men. After the attack however, the paper men quickly regenerated and returned to their feet. "Hmph... it seems attacking them is useless."

"Then we can get rid of them! Magaru!" Yukari called, firing off her Evoker. Io appeared behind her and sent numerous small tornadoes at the Hierophant and the paper men. Though the men were slightly shredded and the Hierophant slightly cut, they remained together, and the men regenerated as usual. "No way!"

Minato was about to move when the Hierophant began to laugh in two voices, one male and one female. It shook violently as the obese man apparently rocked back and forth in his chair while the woman shook its contorted head around wildly. The woman's head began to glow, and Minato knew an electric attack was coming. "Get down!" he yelled, rolling to the side. As he moved, a large arc of lightning passed narrowly by him and dispersed against the wall. He turned to see that while Mitsuru had reacted quickly enough, everyone

else took the hit. Junpei had a few jitters and a small wound on his shoulder, but he was otherwise alright. Akihiko's Persona was resistant to electricity, so the attack impacted against his guard and passed through his body, doing little damage. Yukari, however, was weak against it, and had been sent tumbling backwards, now with her back to the wall.

The Hierophant decided to press its advantage, and the two voices laughed again. This time, however, the man laughed as the woman seemed to grow from his back and the paper men jumped to attach themselves to the odd head. ***"That thing's going to start fighting physically! Cover Yukari!"*** David said.

"Get ready for a physical hit!" Minato yelled as he used his Speed Magatama to quickly get between Yukari and the Hierophant. Sure enough, she was the first intended target, and Minato quickly summoned Jack's cleavers to counter the attack. The union of the woman and the two paper men proved to create a giant sledgehammer, and the attack impacted against Minato's cleavers and sent him skidding backwards on the balls of his feet and into the wall. He soon recovered and saw Junpei suffer the same fate as him, though he had a better brace with his sword. Next, Akihiko managed to just barely back out of range of his swing, which saved him, but left Mitsuru to take a hit to her side, a rapier being useless against such a strike, and was sent to the floor. She quickly got back up, however, and scowled.

"A powerhouse... Akihiko!" Mitsuru said as she straightened up.

"Tarunda!" Akihiko called as he fired his Evoker again. Polydeuces appeared once more and summoned a yellow light to engulf the Hierophant, weakening its strength. Yukari got up in that time and swiftly put her Evoker to her head.

"Media!" she said. Io appeared in the air above her and sent a quick burst of green energy to every member of SEES healing their minor wounds. The Hierophant seemed to realize what was happening, and turned its attention to Yukari. It was greeted by Minato firing his Evoker.

"Getsu-Ei." he said. One of his new Personae, Hanuman, appeared in front of him as a bipedal monkey clad in light armor with a golden helmet that had a small ruby on its front wielding a large broadsword. With one swift leap it flipped once through the air and took a huge slice out of the Hierophant before swiftly disappearing as the paper men leaped at it. They collided with each other, and Minato fired his Evoker again. "Agilao." he said, summoning Incubus this time. His Persona humped the air, and a large blast of flame engulfed the paper men and struck the Hierophant.

"Agilao!" Junpei yelled as he fired his Evoker, and Hermes appeared and launched a large fireball of its own at the Hierophant's back. The woman behind the obese man swiftly turned around and defended against the attack, using its hands as a shield.

"Bufula!" Mitsuru said with a quick shot. With both the paper men down and the woman stunned, nothing could save the

obese body from a huge shard of ice flying straight into its body. The attack impaled it, but the paper men quickly recovered and went to remove the wound. Minato saw that as his chance, and dashed forwards, summoning Matador's sword and one of Jack's cleavers. He charged at the exposed body and leapt into the air to drive Matador's sword deep into its neck. The Hierophant let out a slight howl as the female head swirled around to attack Minato. He quickly sliced upwards, deflecting the head, and then brought Jack's cleaver back down to take another big chunk of the Hierophant. He went for another, but the Hierophant let out two shrill cries and released numerous arcs of lightning from its body, one getting Minato directly in the chest and sending him tumbling backwards.

Akihiko had moved over to protect Yukari, but Junpei and Mitsuru still took the brunt of the attacks. As Minato got back up, he saw Yukari fire her evoker again. "Diarama." she said. Io appeared above him and bathed him in a green light that healed his wounds, and he dusted himself off as the Hierophant's attack ended. It seemed to slow down, and Minato reached a quick realization as the other members of SEES were getting their bearings back. He charged forwards again. "Don't give it time to recover! It can't use a mental attack if we keep hitting it!" he yelled. He summoned Hell Biker's motorcycle above his head and hurled it at the Hierophant using his Strength Magatama.

The Hierophant's paper men intercepted the bike, stopping it before it could reach the fat body, and crushed it in midair.

Minato had reached them when the male version of the Hierophant let out a sickeningly clear laugh. Time seemed to freeze as Minato and the rest of the SEES members were suddenly flooded with visions of their own deaths, each one being ridiculously vivid.

Yukari saw her mother sitting in the house she grew up in, drinking herself to sleep. And though she tried to move or call out, she found herself trapped as a man in a business suit came by and dropped off her father's life insurance. The image then flashed to show her own body being crushed by the very Hierophant they were fighting. It tortured her with electric attacks after the other members had fallen because she had failed as the healer, and though she wished for the nightmare to end, she could do nothing to stop it.

Akihiko saw himself as a child running towards a burning building which he recognized as the orphanage he grew up in. He saw the childhood form of him struggle to move debris out of the way, to try and open the door that would let him get his sister out of there, all in vain as he slowly passed out from smoke inhalation, clawing at the door even as he slumped to the floor. The image then flashed to a scene of the current battle, with Akihiko being the last remaining member of SEES, powerless to do anything alone. The Hierophant took cheap shots and slowly beat him down, his fists, which, try as he would, could never get past the paper men.

Junpei saw his father sitting in his car, with bottles of liquor strewn all over the passenger seat. He had crashed into a wall, but hadn't died. Sirens blared as his Father sat there,

staring blankly at a photograph of his mother. Junpei was in the back seat, and he wanted to reach out to his father, to do something for him, only to find that the crash had trapped him. When his image change, it showed the Hierophant beat him into the ground after the others lost, and no matter what he did, he could never get back up. Junpei took hit after hit as he saw his friends all writhing in pain, but he could do nothing but wait for his own inevitable death.

Mitsuru saw her father working tirelessly at his desk, doing meeting after meeting, constantly trapped by paperwork. She saw her father constantly dismiss her, and no matter how much she begged or what she did to get his attention, she would always find herself alone once more. Enraged, the little girl in her vision picked up a training rapier and ruthlessly began assaulting a training dummy with her grandfather's face on it. The image flashed to Mitsuru thrusting forwards in combat, her rapier piercing the Hierophant, only to be pulled into the folds of its fat, leaving her, the last surviving member of SEES, defenseless and trapped. She tried to get help, but the corpses surrounding her were even more unresponsive than her father.

Minato saw himself as a child, alone in the Dark Hour. He was standing on the bridge his parents had died, and saw them living once more. His father turned to him with a little wave, and motioned for Minato to come join him. His mother did the same, and he saw himself as a child go over to them. They stood on the edge of the bridge during the Dark Hour, staring into the sea of blood. With smiles on their faces, they jumped,

plunging towards their death and leaving Minato behind. He turned around and saw Naoto standing there, and though he tried to reach her, she was pulled away from him and vanished from the bridge. He turned around to see his Tarot Cards scattered about on the floor around him, and he stood there lost, surrounded by nothing other than his Cards. The image flashed to Minato watching the other members of SEES abandon their mission, each quickly fleeing for their own lives. They trapped him with the Hierophant, and the only allies he had left were the Cards in his head.

Yukari, Junpei, Akihiko, and Mitsuru all stopped in their tracks and clutched their heads, each suddenly hyperventilating and struggling to stay on their feet. The Hierophant let out a cry, and they all shuddered and looked up.

Minato had continued with his attack, bypassing the paper men and summoning Hanuman's broadsword in his right hand. He took a huge swing into the Hierophant's belly as he drew his Evoker and fired. "Seiryuu!" he shouted. A slender blue Chinese dragon which curled its body around the room with long whiskers, emerald eyes, white horns, and a red stomach appeared from behind Minato and flew right into the cut Minato made, biting directly into the Hierophant's body. "Virus Breath!" he called. Seiryuu opened its mouth and unleashed a burst of acidic, poisonous gas directly into the Hierophant's wound and on the area around it, causing the Hierophant to let out a cry of pain as its very insides began to melt. *"Well, you guys weren't lying. You can drown out my fear if I focus enough on your music!"* Minato thought as he hurriedly

backed away, his Fiends all playing a very rhythmic, precisely timed concerto. He let Seiryuu break apart after the attack finished and fired his Evoker again. "Clotho, Me Patra!" he yelled. A pale blonde woman in a white skin-suit and black dress covering the majority of her legs appeared holding the start of a long piece of yarn that seemed to continue into nothingness. Clotho twirled a bit of her thread, and a few bursts of light hit the other members of SEES.

The other members of SEES all shook their heads and caught their breaths, the fit of fear passing over them. *"Everyone, thank goodness... That attack causes you to be overcome by fear. Don't give the enemy time to rest, or it'll use it again."* Fuuka said over the transceivers.

"Fear... dammit." Akihiko said, raising his fists.

"Everyone, close range! Fuuka, light it up!" Minato said, summoning Jack's cleavers. He dashed forwards, followed closely by Akihiko as Yukari put a quick arrow into the Hierophant, and heard Fuuka appear near to Yukari and unload three shots into the Hierophant's open wound, creating small gushes of black Shadow mass to spurt with each impact. The paper men moved to intercept the duo, but Minato got ahead and made sliced the first into quarters with two swift slashes while Akihiko intercepted the second by punching two holes straight through it. The paper men fell, and Minato dashed forwards with the intent of stopping the beige woman who had snaked around to block them. He did a full spin with his slash, knocking the woman's mangled head

away. Akihiko took the opportunity to run in and bury two solid punches in the Hierophant's stomach, tipping it, and then stopped low to do a big uppercut. He got the throne of the Hierophant onto its back legs, and quickly reeled back, prepping his left arm.

"Goodnight!" Akihiko yelled as he threw a devastating hook to the Hierophant. Everyone expected the Hierophant to fall, but instead, it rose into the air. Minato quickly saw that the beige woman had wedged her upper body into the floor and used her connection to the Hierophant's throne to lift the fat body into the air. It reared backwards, and Minato knew exactly what was coming next.

"Move it!" Minato said, shoving Akihiko aside. The Hierophant slammed the black obese man's body down towards Minato, and he had no time to move. "Unearthly Form!" he said. Alice's black body engulfed him and took the impact of the Hierophant's attack, shooting Minato out of its side and allowing him to roll to safety. The Hierophant pulled back, but Alice remained attached to the obese body and began to constrict the beige woman's body, rendering it unable to move.

"I got this!" Junpei said as he ran in. He took one big slash at the beige woman's barely exposed neck and severed the head in one huge slash. The Hierophant's body tumbled and was about to fall as Alice disappeared to let the body take the full impact. Yukari quickly realized that fall would break the floor, and swiftly put her Evoker to her head.

"Garula!" she yelled, summoning Io behind her. With one gesture, a large tornado appeared underneath the Hierophant and buffeted it as it fell to the floor, slowing the descent, but inflicting numerous small cuts on its body as it gently hit the ground. Mitsuru had already advanced on the body, her rapier at the ready, and began to very violently stab away at it, tearing bits of black Shadow mass away with each hit. The Hierophant rolled to its side and squirmed to try and get to its feet, aiming its mask right at Mitsuru and making disgusting squealing noises as it tried to gain footing.

"Out of my sight!" Mitsuru yelled as she delivered a powerful kick to the Hierophant's stomach, sending it rolling onto its back. It struggled to move, and Mitsuru saw the opportunity she made. "Now is the time to strike!" she yelled as she readied her rapier. Before she could move, however, the two paper men had stealthily regenerated and slid along the floor to raise themselves up around her. Encased, she was caught in an electric field, and let out clearly pained screams as the paper men trapped her.

"Double Fangs!" Junpei said as he fired his Evoker. Hermes appeared above him and shot two of its winged metal blades towards Mitsuru, each impaling one of the paper men around her and destroying the electric field they created. With a quick growl, she did a swift slash in a circle, downing the paper men.

While Mitsuru and Junpei got rid of the paper men, Minato had summoned Jack alongside him as he called Hanuman and Matador's swords to his own hands. "Danse Macabre!" he

called as he ran in on the downed Hierophant.

"This one looks nice and juicy!" Jack yelled as he flew alongside him. They reached the body and began to violently take huge slices out of it, rending chunks of Shadow goo with each slice. The Hierophant took the hits, but the beige woman had reattached her head and pushed off the floor, getting the Hierophant back to a standing position as Minato finished his attack. Black Shadow mass fell like water from the horridly wounded body, and the obese man clutched his stomach. The woman, on the other hand, tried to apparently soothe the man while gathering energy.

"I won't let you!" Fuuka said over the transceivers. A fanged mouth of almighty energy appeared and clamped down on the woman's head before detonating, dispersing the electricity through the air and destroying it once more.

"Dia." Akihiko said as he put his Evoker to his head. A green light covered Mitsuru, and she brushed off the minor pain that remained once she advanced towards the Hierophant. Akihiko followed suit, and he delivered a smashing right while she stabbed forwards with strength and speed nobody could have expected. The Hierophant recoiled, and Junpei ran forwards seeing his chance.

"It's gonna be a homerun!" he said as he slid between his senpai, sword at the ready. He took a great baseball swing with the blunt side of his sword, and knocked the Hierophant over once more. "Here's our chance! Let's get em'!"

"Fuck cross-sections! We'll turn you into pudding!" Minato called as he dispelled Jack and leaped directly onto the Hierophant's stomach in one swift motion. He began to violently hack away at the squirming body, and the other members of SEES took that as their cue to begin attacking the body indiscriminately. Shadow goo flew everywhere as they savagely tore through the Hierophant's body, and Minato was about to drive his swords into its mask when the Hierophant let out a shrill cry and released a small burst of electricity from its body, knocking everyone away. Minato flipped backwards through the air, but managed to land on all fours and quick rise while Yukari rolled backwards once again and wound up on her stomach, electricity being bad news for her. Akihiko walked back, not too affected by the attack, but he knew better than to continue point blank range attacks without support. Mitsuru and Junpei both rolled backwards, but were on their feet in seconds.

The Hierophant's paper men had regenerated and pushed the body back up as the beige woman regenerated once more. With a pained bellow, the woman fused with the paper men once more to create the giant sledgehammer and went for the SEES members. Yukari was the first target, and she let out a small yelp as she saw the hammer coming down to smash her as she tried to get up. Though she managed to roll out of the main hit, the woman reared back up and caught her in the stomach as she got back up, knocking her back into the roof over the bed. With a pained scream, she dropped to the bed, bounced, and fell to the floor, clutching her side.

The Hierophant didn't stop there, however, and quickly turned its attention to Akihiko. He didn't have time to react to the sudden approaching attack, and took a hit directly to his side, sending him tumbling into the wall. The attack continued and tried to go for Mitsuru, but she was on guard this time and sidestepped the first swing to her stomach and then did an evasive roll to avoid the strike to her legs. The woman came around for a third strike, but Mitsuru quickly thrust forwards with her rapier and led the beige woman impale itself, stopping it in its tracks.

"Filth!" Mitsuru yelled as she fired her Evoker. Penthesilea appeared above her and slammed its weapons down to destroy the paper men. "I'll make it rain your putrid blood!" she continued as Penthesilea moved on to swiftly cutting off the woman's head with its dagger before spinning to drive its rapier directly into the Hierophant's body. "BE EXECUTED!"

The Hierophant let out pained moans as ice shards began to burst forth from its body in various locations. Minato had taken a position behind the Hierophant and fired his Evoker at the sight. "You're pissing me off." he said. The large demonic Black Frost came forth in front of him and drove one of its hands into the Hierophant's back. "So why don't you..." he began as red shards of ice began to sprout alongside the normal ones caused by Penthesilea, "DISAPPEAR!"

The Hierophant's body was torn apart from the inside, and it squirmed and squealed as the last of it was ripped apart. Minato summoned Matador's sword in his hand once more and rushed forwards to do one blindingly fast stab past the

Hierophant as Mitsuru did a similar feat on its opposite side. They both stopped on opposite sides, flicked their swords free of the ice that coated them, and chuckled. The Hierophant burst apart into spray of powder snow and Shadow mass, with only the head falling to the floor.

"... Damn, that was badass." Junpei said, tipping his hat to the duo while he held his Evoker. He had thought he would be the one to shatter the Hierophant, but was glad he waited for their attack to finish.

Akihiko had gotten up during their attack and moved over to heal Yukari. She was up, and saw the battle was over, with only Shadow goo covering their weapons and the surrounding area. "Whew... Media." she said, firing her Evoker once more. The wounds on every member of SEES were quickly healed.

"That was a tough battle... but it looks like the enemy focused on fear instead of charm. Lucky us." Akihiko said with a grin.

"Good job, everyone!" Fuuka said cheerfully. *"I'll be waiting for you outside."*

"Sweet! We're totally heroes!" Junpei said. "Dude, we didn't even damage the room that much!"

"... Huh. You're right." Yukari said, surveying her surroundings. "I mean, there are a few cracks on the floor, but that's not too bad."

"At the very least, any voices can be silenced with a bit of compensation." Mitsuru said.

"That's true." Minato said, doing a little stretch.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" the odd voice in his head asked.

"Oh, so you are here. Well, time to eat." Minato replied. "Now then, if you'll excuse me." he said, walking towards the center of the room. He stood in the center of the Hierophant's remains and picked up its mask. "It's time for me to enjoy my pudding." With a manic laugh, he shattered the mask in his hands over his head, and the Shadow mass in the room all swirled towards him. He was laughing all the while as the black substance encircled him and then flooded into his open mouth. He licked his lips and chuckled, turning to see the other horrified members of SEES, all of whom had either forgotten or repressed the thought that Minato was capable of such a feat. "That," Minato said as he licked his lips, "was delicious."

"... Can we leave now?" Yukari squeaked. She went to the door and swiftly tried to open it, but found it locked. "Hey, what?!" she asked.

"You aren't the only ones in here." an unfamiliar voice said from behind Minato, who was still reveling in the feeling of power surging through his very being. He turned around to see a skeleton seated in a meditative position wearing dirty yellow and gray Buddhist monk robes, complete with a traditional hat with twin tassels on the front and back. He held a small bell in

his left hand and a string of prayer beads in his right hand.

"Minato-sama, I, Daisoujou, Fiend of Hierophants, know this as truth. A presence has hidden itself away within an object in this room."

"... *He's right! There's another Shadow in that room!*" Fuuka said.

"Another enemy?" Mitsuru asked, readying her rapier. She grimaced. "And a cowardly one at that... despicable."

"Hmph... looks like we aren't out of the woods yet." Akihiko said.

"So what? We'll tear that one apart too." Junpei said, readying his sword.

"Exactly." Minato said, allowing Daisoujou to enter his head. "Check the room... I'll be on standby here in case the Shadow actually does jump the person who finds it."

"W-what? How come you don't have to search?!" Yukari asked.

"Calm down... I can move the fastest and have the quickest reaction time. Unless you'd like to let whoever finds the Shadow to take the first few seconds of battle with no support?" he asked.

"... Oh. O-ok then..." Yukari said. The other members of SEES began to quickly check the room, with Mitsuru opting to

examine the area by the bed while Junpei peeked inside the bathroom and Akihiko checked the wardrobe. Yukari went for the set of drawers, and paused once she approached it. Her reflection wasn't shown, and neither was anyone else's. "... Is it just me, or is there something strange about this mirror?" she asked. Minato saw what she saw, noticed that her Narcissus Flower had apparently fallen out of her hair, and prepared to move.

"Boss, there's a teleportation field getting prepped in here!" Jack warned.

"We can't allow ourselves to be kicked offstage just yet! The window!" Matador said. Minato turned on his feet and saw a clear path to the window past the bed where Mitsuru was checking. She had picked up Yukari's Narcissus Flower, which had apparently fallen out of her hair when she was knocked to the roof, and turned to see Minato take his first step in her direction. He took off with his Speed Magatama as a bright light began to come from the mirror, sweeping Mitsuru off of her feet and then leaping right through the window with her being too surprised to react. All she saw was a huge flash of light emerge through the window, apparently chasing after them, but it was seemingly repelled, and Minato knew that was due to their Narcissus Flowers. Minato summoned Samael without his Evoker in midair, and landed on the gigantic red winged-serpent's back with Mitsuru in his arms.

"What just happened?!" she asked as Minato put her down.

"That Shadow teleported everyone with that light, and I think it hit them with something else too." Minato said. "Fuuka, do you know where they went?"

"Yes! Everyone is still in the building... but they seem to be under some type of spell. I can't communicate with any of them!" Fuuka said. *"Also, the building is now flooded with Shadows! Shinjiro-senpai is eliminating the ones that are trying to escape out of the building, but he can't hold them alone! I'll have to fight too!"*

"No you won't." Minato said as Samael rounded the building and came upon Shinjiro using Castor Prime to decimate numerous weak Shadows that were rushing from the building while Fuuka prepped her guns inside of Baba Yaga. "Megido!" Minato yelled. Samael's eyes lit up, and three spheres of almighty energy descended to the pathway where the Shadows were concentrated and then coalesced to create one large blast, wiping the majority of them out.

He landed with Samael, and Mitsuru quickly hopped down with her Evoker already to her head. "Mabufu!" she said as she fired. Penthesilea appeared once more and summoned a barrage of ice shards to eliminate what was left after Minato's attack. "Shinji, Fuuka, are you both alright?" she asked.

"Just fine." Shinjiro said, twirling his obsidian axe and allowing Castor Prime to disappear from behind him. "Tch... so now we've got another rescue mission."

"I'll leave you three in charge of that." Minato said from atop

Samael. "Mitsuru, give Shinji that extra flower just in case. That building's safety is no longer of our concern."

"... Understood." Mitsuru said, handing Shinjiro the flower. He took off his beanie and rested it atop his head before putting it back on.

"There... what are you going to do?" Shinjiro asked.

"Finish the fight." Minato said. "Fuuka, the enemy is still in the same room, right?"

"That's correct... but the entrance is sealed. How are you... wait..." Fuuka said. She narrowed her eyes at Minato, who grinned.

"I prioritize our own above all else." Minato said. "I won't destroy the building... but I might break part of it."

"... You know there are people in there, right?" Fuuka asked.

"... We can find another way, Minato. You don't need to dirty your hands that much." Mitsuru said.

"I'm not willing to explore the possibility of 'what-if we can't get back in'." Minato said. "Save the others, and be quick about it." With that, Samael took off with one great beat of its wings and circled around the building again.

"... It's his decision as the Field Leader, but... no. We have to get to the others first." Mitsuru said as she watched Samael take off. "Fuuka, will you..." she began, but stopped once she

saw Baba Yaga's sprout four large, withered talons at its sides, lifting Fuuka's protective sphere into the air and elevating her Persona so that it was as tall as Castor Prime.

"It's time." Fuuka said.

"Fuuka?" Shinjiro asked. She turned to them with a sad smile as her eyes swapped to their bright yellow.

"Sorry... but I made up my mind to do this." Fuuka said as Baba Yaga's cauldron disappeared from the floor. Mitsuru and Shinjiro had no time to react as Baba Yaga swiped at them with it's staff, knocking them both onto their backs.

"Tch! What the hell's wrong with you, dumbass?!" Shinjiro asked, quickly getting to his feet. He saw Baba Yaga leap onto the side of the building and begin to rapidly scale it by digging its claws into the walls. Mitsuru rose to her feet to see Fuuka reach the roof and advance out of sight.

"Yamagishi!" she yelled, pressing her transceiver. There was no response. "Yamagishi, I'll execute you for this! How dare you?!"

"Save it!" Shinjiro said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "We've gotta save the others like Minato said first... we can deal with whatever Fuuka's planning after."

"But what if she's after Minato?!" Mitsuru asked. She stewed her teeth. "I had thought her sudden change in demeanor was strange, but a planned assassination... I should have seen this

coming. What was I thinking?!"

"We can worry about that later!" Shinjiro said, quickly shaking her out of her thoughts. "The fact is, the quicker we rescue the others, the quicker we can deal with Fuuka! Now c'mon!"

"... She will pay dearly for this." Mitsuru said, taking a few strained breaths. She readied her rapier and walked towards the entrance with Shinjiro close behind her, their mission to find and rescue Yukari, Junpei, and Akihiko from the building before pursuing Fuuka.

Meanwhile, Samael broke through the wall with the window Minato had jumped out of head first. "Stagnant Air!" Minato said as he quickly sent Alice's head to where his opponent was located. In the center of the room floated the Lover Shadow, which was a gigantic floating pink heart with golden bands around it, each containing spikes. Inside of the heart floated the symbols for male and female, male being blue and female being red, while atop the heart was a tiny head which housed its red mask. Extending from the back of the large heart were two large pink wings with large tentacles in the place of feathers, as well as a few other small tentacles simply hanging off of its back in what seemed to be the representation of plumage.

Samael opened its mouth and let out a huge burst of yellow fog that covered the room, eliminating all visibility before dissolving. Minato swiftly ran around the room before the Lovers could react, and summoned Hell Biker without his Evoker behind it. "Hell Spin!" he called. The Lovers turned to

have Hell Biker come at full speed and slam into it with a power slide, knocking it backwards. Minato followed up the attack by jumping off of Hell Biker and calling on his Strength Magatama to deliver an impossibly powerful drop kick, knocking the Lovers through the wall and into the next room.

He was about to press his attack when he heard Fuuka's rifle fire, and then felt a bullet take his arm off. He fell to the side, and heard another bullet come and rip through his left knee. The Lovers apparently came back into the room and let out a shrill screech, causing numerous bursts of flame to explode around the room and completely decimate the area, going so far as to shatter the floor. Minato was caught directly in one of the attacks, and fell down to the second floor, with only one arm and one and a half legs at his disposal.

"... Suppressed killing intent." Minato noted in his mind, realizing what that odd feeling he got from Fuuka was now as he collapsed onto the floor. *"Damn, and I can't eliminate her right now... so, how to stop her? Hmm..."* He called on the full powers of his original Regeneration Magatama, and saw first new bone followed by nerves, muscle fibers, and finally, skin, emerge to replace his arm and lower half of his leg. His clothing was completely destroyed and his Narcissus Flower was missing. *"Shit... now I have no mental defenses."*

"Leave that to me. I specialize in mental combat."

Daisoujou said. He quickly checked what skills Daisoujou had, and a smile came to his face. One of his skills was null mental ailments, meaning no charm, fear, or confusion for him.

"*Good... stay alert.*" Minato commanded as he rose from the rubble and dusted himself off. He drew his Evoker and pressed it to his head, waiting for the first person to come see if he was really dead. Obviously, the first person to come for him was the Lovers Shadow, descending past the smoke to his location. "Samael!" he said as he fired.

Samael spread its wings as it appeared coiled around Minato, tearing into the two adjacent rooms and then charging straight at the Lovers, clamping it in its mouth and pushing it back upstairs and through the roof. Fuuka, who was on the opposite roof inside of Baba Yaga, quickly holstered her rifle and slung her two bazookas over her shoulder, watching carefully for Minato. Samael spun in the air, taking the Lovers into the sky before diving downwards and flying straight into the street, embedding its opponent into the street and vanishing before its body crashed into it.

"ZA WARUDO!" Minato screamed as he jumped out of the ruined building above where the Lovers had been slammed into. He whipped the Dimensional Compactor underneath him, and Fuuka's eyes widened as a steam-roller appeared beneath him. He summoned Hell Biker inside of it to start it up, and then let it drop to crush the Lovers. He landed on top of it with a thud, and raised his fist into the air.

"Mudamudamudamudamudamudamudamudamudamudamudan he yelled as he began to furiously punch the steam-roller.

Fuuka saw this as her opportunity, and had Baba Yaga jump off of the building. She took aim with both of her bazookas, and fired them simultaneously at Minato, the recoil pushing

Baba Yaga back a little down the street. Minato expected this, and quickly drew his Evoker. "Trafuri." he said as he fired. He vanished in a flash of light right before the two rockets hit the steam-roller and blew it to bits, worsening the damage on the street already.

Minato reappeared in the ruined third floor room the fight originally took place in, and laughed as he saw the now heavily damaged Lovers tear itself out of the floor and turn its attention to Fuuka, who had just dropped onto the street inside of Baba Yaga. *"If I want to see the proper way to stop this, I need a real motive first. Time to talk."* Minato thought as he used Trafuri once more, appearing between Fuuka and the Lovers. "Good shot! But what about the others?" Minato greeted, much to Fuuka's surprise.

"... Don't play dumb." Fuuka said, drawing her SMGs and aiming them at Minato. "You know what I'm here to do."

"Kill the Lovers and then me, or me and then the Lovers?" Minato asked without taking his eyes off of the recovering Lovers.

"Minato... I do understand you." Fuuka said. "You're a menace... you only care about yourself. You don't have comrades... you have units. And I know that once you've taken all you can from SEES, you'll turn around and kill everyone else... But I won't let you!"

"... *Damn, she's good.*" Minato thought. He grinned. *"But I'm still better."* "... Is that really what you think?" Minato asked,

still not turning his attention away from the Lovers, which was now beginning to regain its bearing and gain the ability to float again.

"I know it... once you complete a Card, you'll want us all gone. And if you can't get rid of us, you'll just kill us. That's your go-to answer whenever there's a problem... kill the spares, right?" Fuuka said. "You've given everyone fair warning... you are a monster. You'll gain everyone's trust and then trample on it, all for your own sick amusement! You'll hurt my friends, and then find other people's lives to ruin until the day you die! That's why I can't let you live!"

With that, Fuuka fired her SMGs directly at Minato, but he was ready with his Speed Magatama. He bolted to the side once she began firing, and let the bullets hit the Lovers. Fuuka would have turned to keep firing at him, but the Lovers responded to Fuuka's attack by opening a little heart-shaped marking on its chest and launching a purple blast at Fuuka. Baba Yaga used its main body to block with its arm, and Fuuka quickly swapped to her rifle, reloading quickly as the Lovers advanced on her. She took two quick shots at the Lovers, both puncturing its weak body and stopping it in its tracks. Enraged, the Lovers suddenly flew directly skyward in one swift motion, far above the building, and launched the same barrage of fire blasts it used in the hotel.

"Maragion!" Minato called from the sidewalk. Incubus appeared on the road and thrust the air, countering every attack with an equal one in midair before any of the attacks could reach Fuuka. Incubus disappeared, and Fuuka turned

her rifle on Minato, who had turned to say something.

"At least focus on the Shadow first!" he yelled as he narrowly avoided a shot to his head with his Speed Magatama. He kept it going and summoned Seiryuu above him, leaping onto the blue dragon's back so he could pursue the Lovers. The Lovers took off, trying to flee, leaving Minato to pursue it. Fuuka also made Baba Yaga leap to the rooftops and took off in pursuit.

Inside of the hotel, Mitsuru and Shinjiro had just found all three of the other members of SEES dressing in the same room. "Are you all..." Mitsuru began, but stopped when she saw every member half-dressed. Akihiko and Mitsuru had large slap marks on their faces, and everyone was blushing madly. "... Never mind."

"Tch... so that's what the Shadow set up." Shinjiro said.

"N-nothing happened, alright?!" Yukari said. She got her bow and growled as Junpei and Akihiko finished. "What did that stupid Shadow do?"

"From what Minato told me, it would seem it caught you in some sort of teleportation attack while also attacking your mind at the same time." Mitsuru said. "It was unfortunate... I had just found your Narcissus Flower when the Shadow attacked."

"... Wait. Why didn't you get teleported, Mitsuru-senpai?" Junpei asked.

"... Minato tackled me out of the window when he saw what was going to happen." Mitsuru said. She grimaced. "Now, Minato is trying to end the battle with that Shadow while Yamagishi has gone to kill him."

"... What?" Akihiko asked.

"Minato went to fight that Shadow alone while we saved you... and right after he took off, Fuuka went after him once she knocked us down so we couldn't stop her." Shinjiro said. He scowled. "And I'm damn sure she wants him dead now... "

"She... she did that?" Yukari asked, staring in disbelief.

"We don't have time for sad reactions. We should hurry to join the battle. Hopefully, we aren't too late." Mitsuru said.

"There were some serious explosions nearby... that's what brought us to our senses just now." Junpei said. It only had the wall with a door, a small portion of floor, and nothing else. He gulped. "Oh, man..."

"We're going! C'mon!" Akihiko said, rushing out of the room. The rest of SEES followed suit and made it to the room they had previously fought in and burst in to see the utter destruction left in its wake.

"Holy shit!" Junpei said, his eyes wide at the fact that the room could barely be called a room anymore. The members of SEES all quickly looked around, but saw no sign of Minato.

"Penthesilea!" Mitsuru called as she fired her Evoker. Her Persona crossed its weapons above her head, and she began to search for Minato's presence. "... He's flying at rooftop level, circling around to return to the area. He's in pursuit of the Shadow... with Yamagishi following close behind! Prepare to intercept!"

"Intercept?!" Akihiko asked.

"Shinjiro, I want Castor at the ready with its cannons. If you can't shoot down the Shadow, shoot down Yamagishi. Yukari, ride Io into the air and take aim at whatever enemy you can. Junpei remain on standby with Hermes and be ready to launch at a moment's notice. Akihiko, you and I will remain here and provide long range support." Mitsuru commanded. "Hurry and get into position. They'll be here soon."

The other members of SEES reluctantly looked around before Junpei and Yukari both summoned their Personas, with Junpei remaining at ground level on Hermes' back while Yukari floated above the building. Shinjiro simply hopped out of the building, using his Devil Body parts to allow his legs to endure the fall, and summoned Castor Prime to take a position amidst the ruined area filled with steam-roller debris and lingering flames. Akihiko and Mitsuru overlooked the empty street, with Mitsuru constantly looking in the direction Minato would come from, her Evoker at the ready. Akihiko surveyed the situation before taking a worried glance in Mitsuru's direction.

"... Mitsuru... we don't know if Fuuka is trying to kill Minato."

Akihiko said. "You're jumping to conclusions."

"If she was going to help, why would she have ensured nobody could follow her?" Mitsuru asked. "If she wanted to fight the Shadow, there was no reason for her not to arrive alongside Minato... nor would there be a reason for her to disable our transceivers. She's out for blood, Akihiko... I saw it in her eyes."

"... Why? She didn't seem like the type of girl to react to a break-up like that..." Akihiko said.

"Motive no longer matters." Mitsuru said. "Any betrayal to SEES will be met with swift and severe punishment. What awaits her is a fate far worse than a simple execution."

Akihiko was about to speak again when he saw the Lovers quickly round the corner of the building, followed swiftly by Minato atop Seiryuu. The Lovers launched a barrage of fireballs at Minato as he came forwards, and Seiryuu opened its mouth. "Magarula!" Minato yelled. A series of whirlwinds appeared and blew the attack harmlessly into the sky where the fireballs all detonated, and Seiryuu flew forwards without slowing a bit, hounding the Lovers without end.

Baba Yaga leapt onto the building opposite of the hotel once more, with Fuuka aiming her rifle in Minato's direction. That was all the justification Mitsuru needed. "Take them down!" she ordered as she fired her Evoker. Penthesilea once more appeared, and launched a Mabufu which was spread to hit the Lovers and the area Fuuka would have to inevitably reach if

she wanted to keep pursuing Minato.

"Not yet... Aeon Rain!" Fuuka called as she advanced. Baba Yaga swiped its staff to create a rain of projectiles to counter Mitsuru's attack, and launched it. The attack fell downwards at an angle compared to Mitsuru's and the majority of her attack was nullified as Fuuka's strike made little holes in the streets. The Lovers took a few hits, both from Mitsuru and Fuuka, slowing in its flight pattern. Shinjiro took that as his cue, and Castor Prime aimed all of its cannons at the Lovers.

"Dreadnought!" he yelled. Castor Prime let out shot after shot, each one pummeling the Lover in midair.

"Zionga!" Akihiko shouted as he fired. Polydeuces appeared in front of him and unleashed a beam of electricity that pierced straight through the Lovers weakened body as Castor continued to fire.

"This'll hit!" Yukari said from atop Io. She let loose an arrow that went straight into the Lovers' head, causing it to spin around, dazed after Shinjiro's last attack connected.

"Alright! Junpei Iori, Hermes, launching!" Junpei said as Hermes suddenly took off with him on his back. Hermes zoomed straight towards the Lovers, with Junpei holding out his blade above Hermes' wings to deepen the cut. Minato grinned and used his Strength and Speed Magatama to push off of Seiryuu's head, summoning Jack's cleavers in his hands, along with Hanuman and Matador's arms with their weapons at the ready right underneath his own. The duo flew past the

Shadow at the same time, their weapons sliding past each other in the Shadow's core. Minato quickly summoned Samael underneath him and rolled onto its back, his Persona barely avoiding an impact with the ground as it pulled back up.

The Shadow struggled to hold itself together, but turned towards the immobile Mitsuru and Akihiko. It prepped to attack, but was hit by a quick shot from Fuuka's bazooka, and burst apart after the final direct hit. "Way to go, Fuuka!" Junpei cheered as he came around on Hermes. His cheering died, however, when he saw that her next shot was aimed directly at the loop Samael was making to land. "No, wait!"

Fuuka fired her second shot directly in Minato's path, but he quickly jumped to the same building Fuuka was on as the explosion hit Samael's head. He tumbled on the hard roof, getting a few cuts from his fall, but he ignored them quickly turned his attention to Fuuka.

"Yamagishi!" Mitsuru yelled from the remnants of the hotel room. "Stand down now, and you will be allowed your life!"

"Don't be stupid! Get down here and we can talk about this!" Shinjiro added.

"Fuuka..." Yukari said as she got off of Io, which had descended to the ground.

"Seriously, you guys just come down here! We already won, right?! Heheheh..." Junpei said as he landed with Hermes and went to the street.

The members of SEES all watched as Fuuka reloaded her bazooka, watching Minato the whole time. He was watching Fuuka and Baba Yaga, waiting for any sign of hostility. After she finished reloading her bazooka, everyone's transceiver came back to life.

"I would like to begin with an apology." Fuuka said quietly over the transceiver. "I am sorry, because tonight, I have to kill Minato. You may all think you know him, but he is not what he appears. Minato is neither a good friend nor a good-willed human being. He operates entirely under self-serving pretenses and intends to kill all of us once we've served his purposes. He has no morality, no compassion, no regard for human life... in the end, he sees us all as merely tools to an end. As your friend, I can't allow him to use you... nor can I stand being used anymore. Every relationship he has creates a 'Card' which gives him strength... and the more time he spends with you, the stronger he gets. Minato does not care about you. Minato does not have feelings like you. The only things Minato wants are power and pleasure... once he can no longer get either from any of us, he will dispose of us with the only method he knows. He will kill us, and find another group to exploit, and then kill them. Minato is that type of existence... he was right. He is a monster, one that I can't allow to exist because he will harm my friends... he will harm you all. It's up to you all whether or not you believe me... but just know that once this is done, I'll accept any judgment you pass to me. But, just this once... I will do what I want, without fear. Because if I don't do this now, then when?"

Minato... You have to die tonight. I know that you will fight back, and I'm prepared for your challenge... but before we begin, do you have any last words?"

"... It would seem I have to save you from yourself yet again." Minato said. "Sorry, Fuuka... but this might hurt."

"... *That's it? You aren't going to apologize for what you've done?*" Fuuka asked.

"I've done nothing wrong... the only thing I regret is that I drove one of my closest friends to this point and wasn't able to see that something was wrong." Minato said. "Sorry, Fuuka... but I can't let myself die tonight. Everyone... stand down. If I lose, my only wish is that you forgive Fuuka."

"*You... even at the end, you lie to everyone.*" Fuuka said as she aimed her rifle at Minato. "*This is the end.*"

She fired, and Minato used his Speed Magatama to pass the shot and get right underneath Baba Yaga before Fuuka could react. "I told you," Minato said, summoning Jack's cleavers and the same arm configuration he used to slice through the Lovers, "I'm not going to let myself die." At that, he spun around, his blades cutting the back of Baba Yaga's legs as he passed underneath it, causing the body to break apart.

"Then forgive me," Fuuka began as she quickly drew an SMG and aimed it at Minato, her eyes fully yellow with her third eye being just as focused as her normal two, "for not holding back!"

She unleashed a quick spray of bullets at Minato, and he evaded by diving off of the building with his Evoker pressed to his head. "Samael!" he called as he fired. The red serpent appeared once more and caught him, and Minato fired his Evoker again. "Seiryuu!" The blue dragon appeared across from Samael, and the two snaked around the building Fuuka stood on. She wordlessly summoned Baba Yaga and holstered her rifle, opting to draw her second SMG. She stood on the roof, protected by Baba Yaga's shell while her Persona carefully looked around the roof. "Poison Mist!" Minato yelled suddenly as Seiryuu and Samael's heads appeared on opposite sides of the building, their mouths gaping open. A purple haze flooded the rooftop, and Fuuka immediately opened fire at both heads. The bullets weren't enough to dispel them, and the attack continued until she had absolutely no visibility.

"You... Goddess Eye!" Fuuka called. Her vision went blank, but she knew exactly where everyone was. Seiryuu and Samael had disappeared, but she knew that Jack and Matador were on the roof heading towards her. She quickly aimed an SMG each at them and unloaded, taking them out before they could react by emptying a spray of bullets at each. She then turned around and aimed both of her guns forwards, knowing Minato was hanging on the edge of the roof.

"Damn, a skill that lets her see even in those conditions?" David asked. ***"Impressive..."***

"With vision like that, I wonder what she thinks of this?"

Minato thought as he put his Evoker to his head, still hanging on the edge of the roof. "Evil Smile." Minato said as he fired. Incubus appeared in front of him and exuded its dark aura.

In Fuuka's eyes, where she saw energies and existences instead of physical beings, Incubus' attack was burned into her mind. She let out a slight cry and released her attack, her vision returning to normal. She heard Minato land on the roof, and rose to her feet to see him summon a forklift from the Dimensional Compactor and slam it into Baba Yaga's upper body, shattering her Persona as the mist dissipated from the force of the impact. She staggered, unused to having her Persona forcefully broken, and saw Minato put the forklift back in the Dimensional Compactor before trying to close the gap between them. He summoned Matador's sword and took a swing at her, which she blocked by swiftly drawing her rifle and using it as a club. "Fuuka, wake up already!" he said as he pushed her back in their clash.

"Wake up?!" Fuuka asked, gaining her footing and pushing Minato back. "You're the one that needs to wake up!" she yelled, finally forcing him backwards. She summoned Baba Yaga almost instantly as she holstered her rifle and slung her bazookas over her shoulder. "You're a man trapped in his own delusions!" Fuuka said, taking a quick shot at him. Minato rolled out of the way, and Fuuka fired in anticipation of where he'd land. However, as he rolled, he summoned Hanuman's tail to stop and then push him backwards, out of the way of the second attack. The roof they stood on had two craters,

but was yet to collapse. "You use people without any regard to how they feel! You enjoy hurting people!" Fuuka continued as Minato backpedaled and dodged her next two shots.

"You're a murderer that doesn't know anything but how to cheat and inflict pain!"

Minato said nothing, and merely drew his Evoker as Fuuka quickly finished reloading. "Meditation." he said. Daisoujou appeared in front of him and let loose strange otherworldly chanting while shaking his prayer beads. Fuuka clutched her head as her physical and mental strength was leeched while Minato fired his Evoker again. "Energy Drain." he said. Alice appeared next to Daisoujou and made a childish gesture to Fuuka, doing an attack similar to Daisoujou's by also draining Fuuka's power. "Give up, Fuuka."

"... Not to someone like you." Fuuka said. "Heat Riser!" Baba Yaga suddenly solidified, and the inside of Fuuka's protective sphere became charged with the same electrical energy that came when she was teleporting. Baba Yaga's wire like hair stood up and seethed with energy, and Minato knew that whatever she had just done made her much stronger. Her Persona's blue dress seemed to spark every few seconds as it suddenly began to flow, until her Persona disappeared entirely save for Fuuka's protective sphere.

"This isn't looking good." Hell Biker said in Minato's mind.

"Wild Charge!" Fuuka yelled from within the blindingly bright sphere. Minato barely had time to dodge to the side after Daisoujou and Alice both tried to stop Fuuka, but they were

quickly vaporized by her attack. He turned, expecting Fuuka to have flown off the roof and began a free fall, but instead saw Fuuka's energized shell sling back around to hit him in midair. Without any other options, he barely managed to awaken and took the attack head on, being slowly pushed back as the attack constantly caused damage, inflicting numerous small cuts all over his body as he tried to push her back.

"Tch... Hell Exhaust!" Minato called, summoning Hell Biker behind him. With a quick rev of his motorcycle, he summoned a tornado to engulf Fuuka and push her back after Minato realized her buffs had disappeared. The energy around her dissipated, and Minato ran forwards and delivered a powerful kick to the side of her shell, knocking it and Fuuka off the roof as she recovered. He took off in pursuit and leapt after her, the duo falling just down the street from the rest of SEES. Minato reached Fuuka's shell as it went down, and delivered a swift punch to it as Fuuka tried to get her bearings. The attack sent her down faster than before, and she crashed into the floor, her shell taking most of the damage for her, but not all of it.

Minato landed a little away from Fuuka, and reverted from his awakening. As of current, he looked like an absolute wreck, with his entire shirt save for his right sleeve gone and his jeans now being very torn shorts. It amazed him that his right shoe was still intact, but he wasn't complaining. His body was full of small cuts that wouldn't heal since his Regeneration Magatama was on cool down until tomorrow, and he had yet to heal from Fuuka's last attack.

He lumbered forwards, going into the clearing smoke to see Fuuka struggling to her feet. Despite the power provided to her by her Shadow and Baba Yaga's protection, her body was still incredibly frail. Minato was certain he had just done a serious bit of damage, and he stood there watching Fuuka struggle to her feet, her weapons strewn about her. The other members of SEES all ran over to the site, and saw Fuuka woozily stand and turn to face Minato as he walked forwards. "... Sorry, everyone. I failed..." Fuuka said, barely being able to stay on her feet. She knew Minato was coming to finish her, and prepared for death's embrace.

What she wasn't ready for was Minato's. She stood there, unable to do anything, and saw the other members of all stop at the sight of them. None of them knew what to say as they saw Minato hug the defenseless Fuuka. The silence was broken when Minato finally let go and slowly backed away, his usual cocky smirk on his face. "Looks like I just can't get rid of you either." he whispered. Fuuka's eyes widened as he helped walk her back to the other members of SEES once the realization of that line hit her, and Minato chuckled. "Well, that was a pretty fun fight. But I still expect our date tomorrow, okay?" he asked.

"... Why...?" she asked.

"The Minato you were talking about," Minato began, "died a few weeks back. You were one of the people who helped murder him, too... You can't kill a ghost, after all."

"... But I tried to kill you." Fuuka said as Minato stopped in

front of the rest of SEES. "I took off your arm and leg..."

Minato laughed. "Tis merely a flesh wound, my lady." Minato said. "Besides, didn't I tell you I couldn't you?"

"... Are you really going to just let this go, Minato?" Mitsuru asked, her stare piercing straight into Fuuka's soul.

"Friends fight all the time, don't they?" Minato asked. "When you have superpowers, it only makes sense that the fights become larger than life, right?" he mused. "... Though, Yukari, a nice heal would be awesome right now."

"... Oh! Media!" Yukari called, returning to her senses and firing her Evoker. Minato's small wounds were taken care of, and Fuuka was strong enough to support herself again.

"It's good to have ya back, Fuuka! We missed ya!" Junpei said, walking over and throwing an arm over Fuuka's shoulder. "We got a lotta catching up to do in EP, ya know? There's an event coming up, and we should really hit it together!"

"... Really, Stupei? You want to bring up videogames now?" Yukari asked with a smile. She walked over and put a hand on Fuuka's shoulder. "But seriously... it's good to see you acting more like a normal person. I mean, we've already got one creepy psychopath, and trust me, we don't need another."

"Hmph... Psychopath or not, no student of mine is going to get away with stupid shit like that without a spanking. It's a good thing you stopped." Shinjiro said.

"C'mon, Shinji, lighten up... mistakes happen, but we forgive them." Akihiko said.

"... That's right." Mitsuru said. "We may occasionally lose ourselves... but we all strive to move on from the past. Forgive my rash actions tonight, Fuuka... I should have given you more time."

"... Everyone..." Fuuka said, tears welling up in her eyes. She slowly started to cry. "I-I'm... I'm..."

"You don't have to say it." Minato said, gently moving Junpei aside. He wiped one of Fuuka's eyes, and smiled. "We forgive you... and I forgive you... for everything."

"... Mi... Minato..." Fuuka sobbed, resting her head against him.

The Priestess Social Link has been fixed!

"That's not all... we've defeated two of the twelve Shadows tonight. Each of us played vital roles in each battle... and the battle that followed." Mitsuru said.

"Yeah... we've shown how much stronger we've grown... as people, and as friends." Akihiko said with a smile.

CRACK!

Thou art I... I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the

Fool Arcana...

"Yeah... but let's call it a night. I'm beat." Junpei said with a stretch. He had a wide smile on his face which spread infectiously to every member, and Minato walked back to the dorm with Fuuka at his side the entire night as she silently tried to get back into his good graces.

As SEES walked back to SEES, Minazuki and Hamuko's group stood in a barren floodplain by a river, all looking ragged and beaten as a gigantic body that hovered overhead broke apart into dust, with a surge of fire rushing into Minazuki's body. They had killed the Malevolent Deity, and Minazuki had just taken all of its power as his own. Across the field lay two ASWs face down in the field, one with white metal skin and the other with black metal skin, both with white hair. "... The deed is done." Minazuki said, letting out a sigh of exuberance as his new power flooded his body.

"Finally... here's the last one. Salvation!" Hamuko said. Behind her, Ardha, a fusion of Shiva and Parvati, half man and half woman, appeared behind her and did a little dance which spread a light that completely healed everyone in the area. Her Persona disappeared once again, and she let out a little sigh.

"Multiple Personas... I was unaware of your unusual power." Minazuki said. Hamuko giggled.

"It's actually a really trippy story. I might tell you if you go out with me!" Hamuko said. Minazuki didn't scowl, but instead

chuckled.

"It matters not... the ASWs are ready and the liability dealt with. We'll return to Iwatodai tomorrow." he said.

"... Unfortunate." Takaya said, holstering his pistol. "I haven't had a battle that thrilling in years... now, we return to the mundane."

"... It ruined my dress." Chidori said, her clothing being horribly torn and charred. "Good riddance."

"About time... it's damn good we had three people immune to fire, or we'd be screwed." Jin said.

"Actually, two people and a dog." Hamuko corrected.

"You get the idea." Jin said. "Since that thing couldn't get its big boy attacks, all it had left was flames and claws... with the flames being nulled, a bit of claws is nothing... but damn, those things were powerful." Koromaru let out a sympathetic bark, knowing firsthand exactly how powerful one attack was. "That old man actually did something really damn useful for once in his life... who would have thought?"

The group chuckled and went to go pick up the ASWs. Across the floodplain, Nami stood in the dark wearing a pure white kimono, watching them. "My foolish son... so you insist on leaving your mother alone again, preferring the ranks of the dead to me?... Am I that repulsive that even you too must abandon me?" she asked. With a look of disgust and a single

tear, she broke apart into the thin fog that covered the area and disappeared.

Back at the dorm, Minato was sitting in his room, a manic smile on his face as the Dark Hour was drawing to a close. He sat on his bed in his ruined clothing, holding the Priestess Card in front of his face. *"Ah, you're so fun to toy with, Fuuka! All I had to do was play the overly optimistic hero to win your trust again... and this time, I think your new loyalty is much stronger than before. The funny thing is, every one of your reasons was right... and I lied my way out of all of them. I may be known for having a powerful tongue, but actions are louder than words. Now that I've changed the circumstance, you'll see what I want you to see, hear what I want you to hear, and believe what I want you to believe... and not only that, but your foolish little ploy has furthered the cumulative bond as well. Ah, you don't know how good you really are for me, Fuuka. You really have no idea how much you help me."* Minato thought as he stared at the card. His manic smile widened, and he crushed it. He stared at his fist and the energy that left his closed fist, and couldn't help but laugh.

Author Note: Damn, the longest chapter to date. That's crazy.

84. Chapter 84

Chapter 84: Post-Shirakawa

Author Note to guedesbrawl: Yay, someone gave me credit for the action scenes!

Author Note to ARSLOTHES: Me too XD

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze and : Answers in chapter. Read below.

Minato decided to keep the TV on to the local news the morning after the full moon battle as he made breakfast. He always found it funny to see how the Kirijio Corporation covered up their exploits, but something of this caliber was rather serious. He was fairly certain there were a few casualties from the fight, and wondered just how far the power of the Kirijio stretched. The local news came on, and Minato listened intently as he worked. After the usual morning greetings, the announcer began their news.

"Before we begin the usual announcement, let us first take a moment of silence to honor the victims of last night's tragic accident." the announcer said. After a short pause, she continued. "Around midnight last night, a joint research project between the Nanjo and Kirijio groups was sabotaged

by an unknown individual. The project, known commonly in the scientific field as the Breath of Life, was conducting the first field test for one of the unmanned chemical dispensing drones off the coast of Iwatodai. The premise of the project, long known to the public, has been the incorporation of technology to repair or improve naturally occurring processes to counter the adverse effects of global warming. The test took a turn for the worse, however, when the system which directed the drone was hacked. The Nanjo Group has reported that while they were able to quickly block the hack, they were unable to retake control of the drone. Without guidance, the drone eventually crashed into the penthouse suite of Hotel Stork's Retreat on Shirakawa Boulevard. While the drone itself was designed to be smaller than the average helicopter, the chemical container it carried had not been designed to take severe impacts. The exact cause of the container's explosion following the crash is unknown, but researchers currently speculate that the container was punctured during initial impact. This would have resulted in a sudden change in pressure and temperature, exciting the chemicals inside and causing, from what we've now seen first-hand, a violent reaction."

"Beware the power of the Kirijio indeed. If I didn't know better, I would call that true." Minato mused as he continued working on breakfast.

"While the hotel suffered serious structural damage, the damage done to the surrounding infrastructure was

surprisingly contained. While the Kirijio Group dealt with undisclosed chemical waste this morning at the site, the Nanjo Group has already begun making reparations for all physical and personal damages incurred in the accident." the announcer continued. "While the primary investigation to discover who was behind this tragedy is still underway, many speculators have already begun pointing fingers at the Hishikawa Foundation, which has openly opposed many of the proposals put forth by both groups and denounced the Breath of Life project on multiple occasions. The president of the Hishikawa Foundation, Ms. Aizawa, has yet to respond to any of these early accusations. However, both the Kirijio and Nanjo Groups are requesting that until any evidence can be found to implicate the Hishikawa Foundation that they not receive persecution in any way, shape, or form."

While the report continued, Minato immediately froze in his tracks as he had just finished his work. *"The Lovers... Why didn't I absorb it?"* he thought. *"Hey, voice in my head, answer me!"*

"... It will return to us." the odd voice in Minato's head replied, which caught him off guard. *"We will find it... and take our birthright."*

"... Birthright?" Minato asked.

"They belong to us... All mine... All yours." the voice replied.

"... What exactly are we absorbing with those Shadows?"

Minato asked.

"Power." the voice replied. "I have gained enough power... to visit you. But I will wait... for our friend."

"Our' friend?" Minato asked.

"He has promised... to return." the voice said.

"... Are you talking about Pharos?" Minato asked. He received no response after a while, and sighed. *"Well, whatever... I'm interested to see what a 'visit' from you entails."*

Minato moved breakfast over to the table for each member of SEES and heard footsteps on the stairs as he placed his own food last. He turned to see an uncharacteristically disheveled Mitsuru rubbing her eyes as she walked with distinctly forced grace down the steps. "... Good morning." Mitsuru said, repressing a yawn.

"... You still need sleep." Minato said. She shook her head and quickly took her seat at the table, straightening out her clothing and taking a deep breath. She looked around the table, and only then noticed that nobody else was around. "... It would appear everyone has slept in today."

Minato took his seat next to her with a slight chuckle. "Last night was apparently very tiring. I'm surprised you're up, considering how hard you fought." he said.

"The operation was difficult... but we somehow prevailed." Mitsuru said. She turned to him with a concerned look on her face. "Are you... really alright with forgiving Fuuka so easily?"

"... I know it wasn't her Shadow that fought me last night." Minato said. He turned to Mitsuru, who had a slightly surprised look on her face. "You were ready when the Lovers came because you searched the area for us, right? And you felt it, didn't you? Fuuka's presence never changed during that fight, like it did when I battled her Shadow. And though that should give me quite a bit to worry about... I can't fault her. She fought to protect you all, even if it was against the wrong enemy."

"Aren't you worried that she'll try again?" Mitsuru asked. She looked at Minato, who was thinking about what to say, when a thought struck her. She smirked as she watched Minato consider what to say, and though he showed no difficulty, his response took almost a minute to form.

"... No." Minato said.

"Why?" Mitsuru asked.

"... I think you already know the answer." he said. "As foolish as it may be."

"Hmph... even though you're already starting to believe, you insist on calling it foolish." Mitsuru said. She chuckled. "You really are a stubborn man." With that, she accidentally let slip a yawn, which she stopped by swiftly covering her mouth.

"And you're a stubborn woman, you know that?" Minato asked as Mitsuru recovered from her blunder. He chuckled, and slid his arm around her waist, moving his chair so that it was right next to hers. "A quick power nap should be fine. I doubt anyone will get up to reach school half an hour early, anyways."

"... Perhaps you're correct." Mitsuru said, deciding to lean against him. "Wake me if you see anyone approaching... I'll execute you otherwise."

Minato let out a slight chuckle and began to stroke her hair. "Then I'll make sure to wait until everyone has arrived and taken pictures." he mused.

Mitsuru smiled as she closed her eyes. "Such insolence..." she said. As Mitsuru drifted to sleep, Minato elected plant a quick kiss on her forehead. Though he essentially had to serve as a sitting hug pillow, he found a very interesting way to pass the time. Since Mitsuru did appear a bit unkempt for the morning, he decided to stealthily work on fixing her clothing while Daisoujou monitored the stairs.

"That's right. Boss shouldn't be with a woman that looks anything less than dazzling alongside him." a rather arrogant sounding male voice said in his head.

"Of course... but who are you?" Minato asked.

"That pretty motherfucker, in more ways than one. The Fiend of Lovers, Adonis, is at your service." the new voice

replied. ***"If you need anyone to beat those swarming bitches back with a stick, I've got you."***

"*Heh... I'll be sure to keep that in mind.*" Minato replied. After he managed to unwrinkled Mitsuru's skirt, straighten the majority of her blouse and fix her ribbon without causing any real disturbance to her, Daisoujou appeared in his head once more.

"Two hats have risen." Daisoujou said.

Minato gently shook Mitsuru, rousing her from her sleep. As she straightened up, he planted a quick kiss on her cheek, startling her. She held her cheek and turned to him, a slight blush on her face. "Just making sure you're really awake." Minato said with a smile. He scooted his chair slightly away from hers, and began to eat as Mitsuru merely smiled back and turned to her own food.

Junpei and Shinjiro both entered the first floor yawning, and took their seats at the table. "Mornin'." Shinjiro said.

"Yo." Junpei said. "Oh? You're lookin' happy, Mitsuru-senpai... did you eat Yukari's bon-bons again?"

"Stolen food tastes best, after all." Mitsuru replied with a grin. Junpei's eyes widened.

"Wait, are you for real?!" he asked. Mitsuru giggled.

"It was sarcasm, Junpei." Mitsuru said. "I'm feeling rather

refreshed this morning."

"... Good." Shinjiro said, eyeing Minato from across the table. Minato simply nodded to him without looking, and Shinjiro nodded back. The other members of SEES swiftly came down, and breakfast proceeded as normal. There was no air of tension when Fuuka came down, and everyone was in a pleasant mood.

Afterwards, they left the dorm and headed for school. While the seniors had all read the news report that Minato heard that morning, the sophomores all went their own ways. Junpei had found Kenji on the train and decided to go have a quick chat with him. Yukari was off brooding on her own, and Minato wanted no part of that. Fuuka seemed to remain silent, so he decided to give her some space and take his place alone with his music as usual. The ride was almost over when he noticed Fuuka nervously walking up to him. He took off his headphones and stopped his music as she stood a little distance away from him. "Feeling alright?" he asked.

"... Do you know?" Fuuka asked.

"That the person who I fought last night was you, not your Shadow?" Minato asked.

"So you know that I... I was really convinced that you were like that." Fuuka said.

"*You knew, actually, but now you don't.*" Minato mused in his head. He smirked. "Sometimes, I can be like that. But people

aren't just one set of characteristics... you said so yourself, after all."

"I know... that's why I need to apologize." Fuuka said.

"Minato... I'm sorry. For hurting you, for saying those things about you, for doubting you, for jumping to conclusions, for-" she began, her voice slightly escalating with every point until Minato put a finger over her mouth.

"Apology accepted." Minato said. "People make mistakes, but we live with them and grow." He withdrew his finger slightly and held out his hand in front of her in offering precisely between their current positions. "Personally, I've never been a fan of keeping unnecessary strife over past tension... so how about we start fresh?"

Fuuka looked at him for a bit, and slowly extended her arm to take his. "I..." Fuuka began, her hand moving towards Minato's. She caught her own wrist with her other hand, however, and then stared at the floor as her extended hand slowly returned to her side, being held by her other hand the entire while. "... don't..."

"... Fuuka?" Minato asked, moving a bit closer. "*If this is what I think it is...*" "... We can just go back to being friends, if that's what you want."

"I don't deserve this..." Fuuka said under her breath. She took a shaky breath, and then forced a smile at Minato. "I'd like that." she said. She quickly turned around. "I'll see you later."

With that, she quickly walked away, and Minato returned to his usual resting position. He put his headphones back on with his manic smile, and struggled to control himself. He wanted to roll around on the floor and laugh his ass off right now, but that couldn't happen. *"HAH! She thinks she doesn't DESERVE ME?! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA THAT'S TOO DAMN GOOD! Oh, Fuuka, you've just made my day! Keheheheheh, what a Card she is! Not only have you helped me out so much, but now you've damn near eliminated any chance of serious attachment happening ON YOUR OWN! Ahhhh, what an adorable little doll you are... what a doll indeed."* Minato thought.

Minato left the train, disturbing smile scaring quite a few unprepared onlookers, and turned his music down a bit as he approached school to see if he caught anything interesting.

"It's almost summer break! Let's go somewhere for vacation!" one rather cheery girl said to her just as cheery looking friend.

"Sounds cool to me! I wanna go to the sea, the mountains, everywhere! But before that... we've got finals starting on Tuesday." the girl's friend said.

"Ugh, I'd forgotten about that..." the girl said, her enthusiasm dying a little. "But that means a break is after exams... and summer vacation is just around the corner!"

After hearing some information that reminded him that the Clubs were now cancelled until exams were over, he made his way to class and the day began. Early on, he was called out

by Ms. Toriumi to pronounce the word 'onomatopoeia' in English, and did so without any trouble. Afterwards, school passed quickly, and he was about to leave when Ms. Toriumi called him. "It's your turn for cleaning duty again, Arisato." she said.

"Ooh, how fun. Looks like I've got a nice day with Isako coming up." Minato thought. "Really? Ok, then." he said, turning back around to do his cleaning duties.

After a quick clean-up, Minato was left in the classroom with Isako, who packed away her things with a sigh. "Hey, Minato." she said, getting his attention. "Let's get married."

"Sure. When and where?" Minato responded.

"I don't know about where, but after you hurry up and finish high school." Isako said.

"Alright. I'm holding you to this." Minato said with a smirk. Isako giggled.

"I preferred your nonchalance more." she said.

"I know." Minato said. "Still, why the sudden proposal?"

"I'll tell you about it at our usual spot. It's hot, so dress light." Isako said. Minato nodded and quickly took his leave, heading straight back to the dorm. Nobody had returned by the time he reached there, so he hurriedly cleaned up and swapped his school outfit out for his casual dark green shirt, sleeveless

black jacket, cargo shorts, and his usual hat. He got back on the train to Tatsumi Port Island quickly and made his way back to the station. He took a seat on the empty bench once more, and glanced at his watch. His preparations had gotten him there in just under an hour, meaning Isako would arrive at any time. "Didn't I say light?" he heard her ask from nearby. Minato turned to see Isako in her usual beret atop a simple floral white vest with an extremely short denim jacket over it, the sleeves stopping just before her elbows and the jacket itself ending at the center of her lower back, with loose blue jeans over sneakers. She sat down with a grin. "You look like you're ready to go clubbing in an outfit like that."

"So do you." Minato said as she sat down. "Want to?"

"Hmph... the only club open now is Red Hawk, and I'm not really in the mood for it today." Isako said. "Too much nagging recently... I wouldn't be able to focus."

"... Ah, so that would explain the marriage proposal." Minato said. "Let me guess... your father?"

"Close... my mother." Isako said. She chuckled. "Apparently, true happiness is known only to a housewife in a kitchen. She's trying to marry me off, incessantly. Not that I blame her, though... I've run into my fair share of problems with my lifestyle."

"Can't be that bad since you don't have any scars from it." Minato said.

"Scars? Sheesh, what do you think I do, rob drug dealers?" Isako asked. "The worst thing that happened to me was I wound up almost passing out in front of the Police Station after a bit too much drinking... I almost got arrested for cursing out this old guy who called me a drunken slut. It was actually kind of funny now that I think about it, heheh. I bet that old man enjoyed a few drunken sluts when women would actually be attracted to him, don't you?"

"I don't know... He might not have been so bitter if he had some good memories." Minato said. He and Isako both laughed a little.

"You're right... I didn't call you out here to brood." Isako said. She got up with a grin looked around. "Let's see... where to have some fun?"

"I would say a nice spot on Shirakawa Boulevard, but with the accident this morning and all, I don't think that's an option." Minato said as he stood up next to her. Isako giggled.

"Don't you have a one-track mind?" she mused. "Well, since I asked you to marry me, I might consider it... but I won't love you just yet." Isako giggled a bit, and then seemed to be struck by an idea. "I know... how about instead of doing something so exuberant, let's be nerdy for a day and visit that manga café back in Iwatodai?"

"Sounds like a good day to me." Minato said. "Besides, I'm sure we can have some fun if we rent a booth."

"Now you're really getting your hopes up too much." Isako said. She took his hand and hurried off to the train, dragging him along with her. "We only have time to lose, so no standing around!" she said.

After a quick train ride back to Iwatodai, Minato entered the manga café on the second story of Iwatodai Station's strip mall area with Isako, and she quickly got a booth for them along with a small collection of manga, earning some odd looks from the pudgy owner, but nonetheless earning them some privacy. Though the booth was the equivalent of a black cubicle with leather seating surrounding a small table which housed a few laptops, Minato found it oddly comfortable as he sat next to Isako. "How quaint." Minato said as he closed the door. "This is actually my first time in one of these."

"Really?... Now I'm a bit embarrassed by how often I've been in one." Isako said. She chuckled. "But I guess that goes to show the difference between you and me. You're not the type to shirk your responsibilities, are you?"

"Not really, but I'm always open to cutting corners as long as it gets the job done." Minato said.

"There's the folly of youth." Isako said with a smile. "As awesome as it is to work like that, it's not very practical. Unless you don't mind doing grunt work, but I'm sure you prefer more intellectually stimulating endeavors."

"I know. Oddly enough, acting like one of these clichéd manga protagonists can get you really far in life... assuming you don't

mind walking around feeling like some sort of hippie sell-out." Minato said. He smirked. "Hell, you might even get as many girls as I do if you can pull it off and know who to go for."

"... I don't even want to imagine what the world would be like if every teenage boy could get themselves a harem." Isako said.

"A hentai world, that's what." Minato mused. "It's true that we can't leave everything to men... I believe the ones that lead the world are more often than not women like you."

"... Whatever you say, Scirocco." Isako said with a shake of her head.

"Please, I prefer Master Paptimus." Minato said. Isako laughed and threw an arm around Minato's neck.

"Keep dreaming." she said. "That's a good sign that you're still just a kid, with you thinking the sky's the limit... Fact is, when you're an adult, you realize it's pretty damn hard just to reach the roof, much less the sky."

"I think it's because somebody put you in a box when you weren't looking." Minato said. "A lot like this one."

"... Now that you say it like that, it makes this place seem dark and dreary." Isako said. "And I've gone and spent so many hours in these. You should hurry up and leave me be before you find yourself trapped in a box as well."

"Don't be ridiculous." Minato said. "I don't mind staying in a box if it means I get to stay with you, Isako."

"That... was a good one." Isako said.

"Then you don't mind if I take my reward, do you?" Minato asked. Before Isako could say anything, he quickly leaned over and kissed her neck. He kept his head there, and Isako let out a small giggle.

"Is this what happens when a gold star isn't enough anymore?" Isako mused as she placed a hand on Minato's hat. "If so, then we should start modifying kids so all of them look as good as you."

"No way." Minato said, returning to a normal seated position. "Beauty like yours and mine wouldn't have a meaning if everyone looked good."

"Beauty like mine? You mean the one of a withering flower?" Isako asked.

"The one of a rose adorned with thorns. It takes a talented individual such as myself to enjoy it without getting pricked." Minato said, leaning in close to Isako.

"You're beyond confident, aren't you?" she mused. "But that's good... there's no reason for somebody like you to doubt yourself." Isako put a hand on Minato's cheek and looked him in the eye. "I might bitch to you a lot, but don't let me get you down. You probably already know I do it just to feel better

about myself too... and since you don't mind that, I hope you won't mind this." With that, she stole a quick kiss from Minato.

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hermit Arcana...

After she quickly backed away, Minato couldn't help but grin. "... That's an idiotic expression you've got there." Isako said with a smile. "Honestly, you look like a kid who just won some candy."

"Didn't I tell you my prize has been in front of me the entire time?" Minato asked, backing away.

"... You know what? Spoil me a bit, would you?" Isako asked, leaning forwards to kiss him again. Minato obliged, meeting her halfway, but was surprised when he was pushed back almost violently against the door. They parted lips, and Isako took a quick breath.

"What'd I tell you? You've been holding back too much." Minato said.

"Then you'll understand if I seem a bit forceful, right?" Isako asked. With that, she kissed him again, and once again pushed him against the wall. Minato responded by shifting to have her against the wall after a few hurried kisses, once

again knocking the cubicle.

"How spoiled do you want to be?" Minato whispered into her ear. Isako chuckled.

"I've only just gotten past my obligations... I don't think my morality or decency are ready to go just yet." she replied. "But we're not done yet." She kissed him again, and then shifted to have him against the wall once more. The cycle repeated for a bit, allowing the duo to move to the left wall of the booth as they began to pull at each other's clothing. They would have continued if the door wasn't suddenly opened by the pudgy owner, who froze at the sight of them. They stopped and separated themselves while he slowly took in the situation.

"... I get that Shirakawa is locked up, but... c'mon." the pudgy man said in an almost pleading voice.

"Our apologies... we were just leaving, actually." Isako said, swooping up the unread manga rather quickly. Minato took a few, and nodded to the store owner as they put everything back and left together.

"Feel better now?" Minato asked as they stood there.

"... Better and worse." Isako said. She laughed. "I think you've sparked a war in my conscious, and it's not looking too good for the heroes... It's probably best we stop for today before either of us gets out of hand."

"Leaving me wanting more... what a cruel mistress." Minato said. "Well, you know where to find me if you feel like giving in."

"I couldn't call myself a teacher if I didn't at least try to put up a fight." Isako said. She turned to walk away, and gave one final glance to Minato. "Try not to wait for me, or you'll ruin your own fun."

With that, she left him at the strip mall, and Minato elected to head back to the dorm. When he entered, everyone save Mitsuru and Fuuka were seated in the lounge. "... Oh, hey. Sorry, I need to talk to Fuuka..." Yukari greeted.

"You be nice to her, or I'll kick your ass." Minato said as he signed in.

"Of course I'll be nice!" Yukari said. "Jeez, I'm just saying we're both busy for the night. We have a lot to talk about, and it's not about last night either." She walked upstairs, leaving only the other boys in the lounge. Akihiko was studying along with Shinjiro, apparently working to tutor him to no avail, while Junpei was busy catching up on one of the books he was supposed to have read in Mitsuru's reading spot, probably for what Minato assumed was good luck or for some of her intelligence to rub off on him.

"... *Yeah, I suppose I might as well start studying tonight.*" Minato thought. With that, he ate dinner, showered, and spent the night studying in his room.

85. Chapter 85

Chapter 85: The Low and The High

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Sorry, can't say.

Two days after the fight, and SEES had already fallen back into their usual schedule. They ate breakfast as usual with light banter followed by a short train ride to school, with Minato going ahead of everyone else once they reached Port Island Station to see if he could catch any interesting conversation. He focused on a discussion between a young couple this morning, an excited boy and rather reserved looking girl walking together as they entered.

"The morning sunrise is so refreshing!" the boy said to his less than amused companion. "The sunlight reflecting off the windows is so beautiful!"

"It's because the building wasn't built that long ago, so everything is still gleaming." the girl said without a hint of emotion. "You know, I heard from my parents that there was an explosion here ten years ago. They replaced the building after that, but... there's more to it, too. Around that time, a lot of students stopped coming to school. Maybe that's why they put a new building... To start with a clean slate..."

"... Maybe they put it up to house the angry spirits that were consumed by the flames." the boy said in a spooky voice. The girl delivered a swift slap to the back of his head.

"Don't be an idiot." she said. "The spirits would be tethered to the ground, not the building... it's the site of their grave that tethers them to this world, unlike a lingering sentiment which remains in objects. Not even I, with my vast knowledge on exorcisms, could not cleanse such a site alone... Not without unleashing my other half."

"That's... way too much Chuni-byo." the boy said as he rubbed the spot where he was hit. "Still, an explosion? Did someone screw up in the chem lab or something? That must have been one dangerous lecture..."

"Everyone and their dog likes to talk about that explosion, don't they? Too bad nobody will ever learn that it revolves around the Dark Hour or Tartarus... unless they happen to have a Persona, in which case, we'll probably have to deal with them." Minato thought as he turned his volume back up. *"Still, I think that girl looks forwards to Mr. Edogawa's class much more than she lets on."*

With that, he continued onwards towards his class and took his seat, taking the time to observe Yukari and Junpei as they entered. Yukari was still apparently brooding over something, so Minato knew she wasn't a possibility for today. Junpei had entered with Kenji, and Minato noticed the air around the duo was heavy. He'd see what was happening at lunch in an

attempt to finish the Magician. *"If ten really is the magic number, then I might be able to blow this one out of the water here and now... as for disposing of him, well... accidents happen on operations, but I may need his strength for later. I also need to wait for the cumulative link as well... so you might live for quite a while, 'bro'... though I really don't want to get rid of you just yet either."* Minato thought.

The day was slow as usual, and Minato found himself doodling a little murder scene in his notes when he realized Mr. Ono had turned his attention to him. "Umm, today, we're scheduled to talk about the Nara Era. Let's just cover the basics, okay? I might put this section on the exam next week... I'm feeling lazy. Heizei-kyo became the capital in the year 710. Minato!" Mr. Ono said. Minato stood up as usual, his usual smirk on his face, though he stood at full attention instead of with his usual slouch.

"Ono-sensei!" he replied. Mr. Ono let out a slight chuckle, adjusting his black and gold Kabuto as he shook a bit.

"That's the spirit, young man! Now, tell me... What happened in the year 794?" Mr. Ono asked.

"Heian-kyo became the capital." Minato said.

"That's right! The capital was moved from Nagaoka-kyo to Heian-kyo." Mr. Ono said. Minato sat back down, and Mr. Ono continued. "And in 894, the Kentoushi – the assembly to China – was abolished. After that..."

Afterwards, lunch came as usual, and Minato elected to go eat with Junpei and Kenji, who had taken to forming a little private group in the back of the class. "You don't look so hot recently, Kenji... what's up?" Minato asked as he took his seat.

"Oh, hey dude..." Kenji greeted. "... It's really good you're here too. I have something I need to tell you guys... after school, though... do you guys mind?"

"You know I'm down for it." Junpei said.

"No clubs tying me down this time. Besides, if it's really serious, you know I'd skip." Minato said. Kenji slightly perked up, but still looked rather sad.

"Thanks... that means a lot." Kenji said. At that, the trio enjoyed a rather quiet lunch free of distractions.

Meanwhile, Mitsuru and Akihiko had dragged Shinjiro to the roof with a brilliant plan to help him survive the next batch of midterms. "This idea is complete shit." Shinjiro said as he sat on one side of a table. "All this is going to accomplish is making me goddamn hungry."

"Nonsense... necessity is the mother of improvement." Mitsuru said as she sat across from him with Akihiko next to her. All of their food lay in front of them along with Shinjiro's, as well as a few of their notebooks. "I believe avoiding starvation is a good enough incentive to motivate even you to memorize the main concepts in our classes."

"If you want to get extra, you'll need to pull off application as well." Akihiko said. "I even brought the good stuff today, Shinji... you better work hard."

"If I didn't know any of this five minutes ago, what makes you think ten minutes later, when I'm starting to die a slow, agonizing death from starvation, I'll suddenly know it?" Shinjiro asked.

"To quote Minato... 'The only worthy existence is not one that simply endures suffering, but one that walks through it knowing full well that it'll reach its destination at the end'." Mitsuru said. "Twisted as it may be, there is inherent truth in that statement... we are constantly being tested, Shinji, made known most clearly in the field of academics. This exercise is exemplifying the consequence of failure to hasten you along the path to your full potential. Simply put, if the amount of suffering you undergo increases, then naturally, you should reach your destination that much quicker."

"... You've gotta be kiddin' me." Shinjiro said as he blanked at Mitsuru. "There is no way in hell that logic makes any friggin' sense. C'mon, Aki... you must think this is bullshit." Shinjiro looked at Akihiko at the same time Mitsuru glanced at him. Akihiko took one look at Shinjiro and then one at Mitsuru, and he knew only one answer helped him here.

"That's a quitter's mentality, Shinji." Akihiko said. "You've got to put in the time to get the results... the harder you train, the stronger you become. There's not that much difference between exercising your mind and exercising your body..."

Besides, it's been proven that a risk-reward system is both mentally stimulating and increases progression when you train."

"... Traitor." Shinjiro said under his breath.

"Akihiko is correct... now, I hope you're ready, Shinji." Mitsuru said as she opened a notebook. Shinjiro was glaring at Akihiko all the while.

"You know I don't have a choice." Akihiko mouthed to him.

"Your ass is mine once we get back." Shinjiro mouthed back. Akihiko winced, because he knew that when only one of them was really serious about a fight, there was no way the other one stood a chance. Mitsuru's study session began, and Shinjiro only managed to get a few bites of food as he watched the other two eat the majority of his lunch as well as their own.

While Shinjiro suffered through lunch, Sho and Hamuko once again found themselves on Ikutsuki's jet back to Iwatodai. This time, however, Takaya was facing off against Chidori in Guilty Gear, with Hamuko and Koromaru sitting next to Chidori and watching while Sho and Jin sat next to Takaya. "Damn, Revolver Jesus, your timing is ridiculous... how the hell do you just recover and pull off combos when you're cornered and that close to death?" Sho asked.

"There is no consequence to losing one's own life in a game." Takaya said without looking away from the screen. He was

calmly fighting, not even fidgeting in the slightest as he played. "My character's existence is ephemeral. Existing for only two minutes at most... it's only right that he live his life to the max."

"Now you sound like Eddie too." Jin said, watching the match. Koromaru let out a series of barks as Chidori lost a round.

"... I hate third rounds." Chidori said.

"Nghh, those drills are cheap!" Hamuko said. "Dizzy should kick Eddie's ass all day!"

"She takes too much damage... it's annoying." Chidori said as the last round began.

"She puts out more. If you lose, it's because you can't play." Jin said.

"You don't have the right to talk! You're the worst of us all!" Hamuko said.

"Unlike you bums, I have real JOBS." Jin said. "And I still beat you half of the time, so what's that say about you?"

"Nobody asked about that." Hamuko said dismissively. She started laughing.

"He sliced you like a pig's ass there, hahahahaha!" he said. "Talk about a roasting, huh, HAM-uko, eheheheh!"

"... Both of you are meanies." Hamuko said with a pout. Jin

chuckled at that, and resumed watching the match.

"Oh, my... you're all having quite a bit of fun, aren't you?" a voice asked from next to them. All of them turned suddenly to see Nami in her usual flight attendant clothing standing there next to them. "It's nice that you're in a group... I wish my son had good friends like you."

The atmosphere around Sho changed, and Minazuki took over. "... There is no employee registered to work this plane save the pilot and co-pilot." Minazuki said. "I checked with Ikutsuki... you aren't supposed to be here."

At that, every other person on the plane dropped what they were doing and turned their attention to Nami. Takaya dropped the PSP and put his hand on his revolver while Chidori did the same and let the axe chained around her forearm underneath her wide dress sleeves fall into her hand. Hamuko reached under her seat and passed Koromaru his little double bladed knife while she reached under her sweater and drew her rope-knife. Jin leaned forward and put an arm on the briefcase between his legs, adjusting his glasses to get a better look at Nami. Finally, Minazuki tore the black wrapping off of his two swords which were next to him, revealing two dual katanas with gun triggers on the handles. "... The truth's already been revealed, huh?" Nami asked as she took off her hat. She smirked. "Oh well... I was wondering why such an interesting bunch of people would visit my town... and I learn it's to kill my son."

"... Oh shit." Hamuko said, her eyes widening.

"He always insisted on being alone. I thought giving him a few friends would be good, but instead, they killed him." Nami said. "Personally, I think they should go apologize."

"A mother's love is much better consolation." Takaya said, swiftly getting up and drawing his revolver. He fired off a quick shot straight at Nami's face, and she vanished into a burst of fog.

"Chidori, where'd she go?" Jin asked as everyone got up. Hamuko swiftly opened a luggage area above them and got her Naginata, ready for anything.

"I told you, I can't sense her." Chidori said. "Keep an eye open... we aren't alone."

"Tch... don't tell me another contingency has appeared." Minazuki said. Two gargled screams came from the front of the plane, and every person inside turned towards the entrance. The PA system came on, and Nami's voice began to speak.

"I had taken an interest in all of you... so I'll give you a little gift from Inaba." she said. At that, numerous red skeletal arms, each holding a large metal blade, began to tear through the plane from the front.

"Get the ASWs!" Jin said as he turned to run towards the cargo area along with everyone else.

"You've gotta be shitting me!" Hamuko said as she turned to

join the others. "Screw this! Ardhanari Dance!"

As she ran backwards, Ardha appeared behind her and split into two, forming the complete version of Shiva, the blue four-armed man, and Parvati, the pink-haired woman in an orange and pink sari. They began to do an intricate dance around each other, and generated a mass of fire between them before it exploded like a gigantic napalm bomb in the plane as the skeletal arms reached it, splitting the plane apart.

Everyone had reached the cargo area as the explosion rocked the plane, and the whole section went into free fall as it was sent tumbling from the force of the explosion. "Jin, now." Takaya said as they began to tumble. "Hypnos!"

"Moros!" Jin said. Hypnos appeared around the container labeled 024 and Moros, a bipedal mechanical Persona with two slender feet attached by a thin ring to a body that looked like a distorted needle, with a large point at the bottom followed by a thin section which led to a cylinder followed by another thin section which led to a funnel like piece with a spike protruding from the middle, all in the color of faded steel with a second ring by the cylinder that connected to a singular triple-jointed arm composed of three orbs, the final one having three tentacle-like fingers, appeared around the container labeled 031. Hypnos' human part clutched its respective container while Moros grabbed its own with its odd hand.

"Mazandyne!" Jin and Takaya said as they moved atop their respective Personae, with Jin resting in Moros' odd funnel head and Takaya grabbing onto the red connections that

attached Hypnos' wings to its back. Their Personae shook quickly and generated two huge bursts of wind, blowing the container apart while avoiding their falling comrades. As they remained in free-fall, Minazuki quickly got his bearings in midair and saw Nami floating slightly above them.

"Don't think we're through." he said, summoning a Persona card in his hand. "Tsukiyomi!" he said as he crushed it. Behind him, his Persona, a thin man with a yellow skull face that had a half-crescent blade of black flames in a black and white striped suit with a red shirt and flowing black poncho, appeared wielding a sword of black flames. His Persona emitted a dark red energy that engulfed Minazuki as he turned around, and then vanished. He reappeared in the same substance which spawned directly behind Nami, his blades at the ready for a killing strike. He swung at her, only for his blades to pass through nothing as she reappeared a little distance in front of him, this time facing him.

"Clouds are merely fog that has yet to descend to the surface. Here, I'm invincible." Nami said as Minazuki tumbled past her.

"Suparna!" Hamuko called, summoning the large yellow bird underneath her. She landed atop it and swiftly went about catching Chidori and Koromaru. Takaya could fly just fine atop Hypnos, as could Jin atop Moros since it could use its odd legs as a gigantic engine without any real consequence other than generating random sparks of electricity every few seconds. She turned to see Minazuki attempt to attack Nami again, also to no avail as she vanished and reappeared in a

different area the moment his attack was about to connect. "Sho, hold up!" Hamuko called as she flew over to catch him. Minazuki swiftly landed on Suparna's back alongside Chidori and Koromaru, both of whom were staring at Nami.

"She says the clouds make her invincible. Clear them out!" Minazuki said.

"Let's go, dog." Chidori said. "Medea!" Above Chidori, a womanly figure with red extremities separated from a black center by golden flame designs appeared, its head being a painted grey mask with two white arrows going down it and red eyes, with small curved horns on the sides and snake-like golden locks of hair emerging from the back. She held a black dagger in her right hand and a brown cup with fire spewing from it in her left hand. Koromaru let out a howl and Cerberus appeared above him, all three heads howling. "Maragidyne." Chidori said. Medea swiped her dagger over the cup, and a sea of flame erupted from it. Cerberus opened all of its mouths and spewed a torrent of flame from each. The combined attacks lit the sky and parted the majority of the clouds. Nami descended a bit to avoid the attacks as Jin and Takaya rose on their own Personae to continue the fight.

"Thought you could run?" Jin asked as he opened his brief case atop Moros. He dropped a cluster of grenades out, and pulled all of the pins. "Good luck with this, bitch!" he yelled as he threw it towards her before quickly backing away. The string of explosives detonated, and Takaya watched intently for any movement.

"Interesting." Takaya said as he turned around and fired four shots into the area behind him. Nami swiftly flew out of the way, having appeared there at the moment Jin's attack detonated. "But it still isn't enough... Megidoloan!" Hypnos shook violently and then let out a pained groan as Nami was encircled by purple energy which came from the area around her. It coalesced to encase her in a blinding sphere of energy before violently exploding. Immediately after the explosion, a wave of the same came forth like a blade as it headed towards Hypnos.

Before it impacted, however, Minazuki appeared in front of Takaya in the red energy he teleported in, his swords charged with the same substance. "Fall!" he yelled as he slashed in the shape of an 'X', sending two blades of energy to counter the one headed for Takaya. The attacks collided and exploded in mid-air, and the shockwave knocked Minazuki towards Takaya, who caught him with one of Hypnos' wings. Minazuki and Takaya watched as Nami stood there, seemingly unfazed, an arrogant smile on her face.

"This bitch..." Jin said as he pulled a singular grenade from his suitcase. Suparna swooped past him towards Nami, with Chidori's axe which was chained to her flowing behind it as well as Hamuko's rope knife.

"So you can block elements! Big whup!" Hamuko called as Suparna pulled up next to her. It lowered its head to allow for she and Chidori to move forwards and swing their weapons, the axe and rope both aiming for her. Nami simply evaded their wide slices by floating out of the way, not even bothering

to teleport. Koromaru let out a slight howl and summoned Cerberus, who bathed them in a green light that increased the speed of their attacks, but they still failed.

"Had you not cheated my son, he would have crushed you all." Nami said. Takaya had finished reloading and emptied his revolver in her direction again, this time getting her to teleport out of the way so that she was near to above them all. "I'll send you to Yomi so he can have his revenge on you... Kuro Ikazuchi."

A sudden storm cloud appeared above them all, and it rained down numerous bolts of black lightning, striking everyone save Nami without giving them a chance to react. All of their Personae were torn apart, and they were once again sent into a free fall. "Agh, dammit!" Hamuko cried as she tumbled. "Salvation!" she said. Ardha appeared behind her and covered everyone in a white light, getting them back to full strength. They each summoned their Personae as she summoned Suparna to catch herself along with Koromaru and Chidori. Minazuki teleported away from Takaya to join her, and the group collectively began flying towards the shore. "We're not going to get anywhere fighting like this, and I did not do all this shit to die against some crazy cloud lady!"

"Agreed." Minazuki said. *"Unbelievable... a second god. Sho... we might need to use our new power faster than we expected."*

"Shit, shit, shit! Why is this stupid bitch here?! Dammit!" Sho replied. *"If we've got to, we've got to... but fuck, our ace is*

gone if we do."

"I'm aware of that... but we cannot prioritize a trump card over our life." Minazuki said. He turned to watch Nami, but was surprised to see that she wasn't following them. Instead, she simply watched them all fly away, an annoyed look on her face, before vanishing.

"... Stay alert." Jin said from within Moros, looking around. Takaya did the same, as did everyone atop Suparna. Nami never reappeared, and they eventually all landed on an abandoned beach with a small town not too far away from it. Moros and Hypnos dropped the crates on the sand and disappeared to let their owners drop down to solid ground as Suparna landed and everyone got off. "... We need to call that in."

"Undoubtedly." Takaya said. "We need to battle on solid ground... then, we may have a chance."

"Still... who was she?" Hamuko asked. Koromaru let out a few loud barks, and everyone else turned to see Nami standing on the beach behind them, dressed in her all white kimono.

"That'll remain in the fog." Nami said. With that, she broke apart to create a huge burst of fog that consumed everyone, including Koromaru, and then disappeared. When the fog dissipated, everyone was unconscious on the sands. None of them would remember how or why they got there, but they would know that they needed a new ride back to Iwatodai.

Back at Gekkoukan, the day had just ended, with Minato going along with Junpei and Kenji as he had promised. They had walked almost silently to Port Island Station, until Kenji suddenly stopped. "H-hey, guys... I was gonna tell you when we got to the Ramen Shop, but... now's as good a time as any." he began. "I've decided to go to Kyushuu with Emiri, so this'll be my last bowl of ramen... hey, wait... is that?"

Kenji had turned to the far end of the station, and Junpei and Minato turned with him. Sure enough, Ms. Kanou stood there in her work clothes talking to a very well-dressed man. *"They're in a relationship... a serious one at that."* Minato noted. "... She's talking to a lover." he said.

"... I think you're right." Junpei said, narrowing his eyes at the two of them. They only managed to catch bits and pieces of the conversation, but Ms. Kanou was apparently engaged to the man and was going to visit him for the duration of summer.

"... I didn't even know she was going to be gone for summer break..." Kenji said. "I thought we'd... Emiri would have at least told me she was... H-how could she just..."

"You thinking what I'm thinking, Junpei?" Minato asked, cracking his finger rather loudly.

"Let's go kick that poser's ass, huh? Nobody steals my boy's girl and gets away with that shit!" Junpei said, clenching his fists.

"... N-no, no... I'm okay." Kenji said. He took a big, shaky

breath. "I'm... okay. It's not Emiri's fault... it's mine. I... I was the idiot who just thought she'd be with me forever. But... I saw this coming somehow, you know? I saw it, and I ignored it... like an idiot!" A few tears came to Kenji's eyes, and Junpei immediately went over and pat him on the back.

"Hey, hey, hey! Don't beat yourself up, bro!" Junpei said. "C'mon, it ain't really your fault!"

"She's the unfaithful one... you deserve better." Minato said. "Let's get out of here... we don't need to watch those two anymore."

"... Y-yeah..." Kenji said with a few sniffles. "I... I th-think I'll just head home, guys... sorry. I just need... some alone time."

"... Got ya." Junpei said with a nod.

"Cry it out once you get home... real men don't let things like this just sit inside of them and boil over." Minato said. Kenji just gave them a quick nod, and they silently took the train back to Iwatodai. Kenji left wordlessly at the station, leaving Minato and Junpei alone. "... You know, I could probably kill that man Ms. Kanou was with and get away with it." he said. "But you've put more into this relationship than I have... so it's your call."

"... That won't accomplish anything except hurting Ms. Kanou... and I'm pretty sure Kenji ain't trying to take revenge or anything crazy like that." Junpei said. He let out a deep sigh. "Hey, man... I think I'm just going to head back early

today. I'm not really in the mood to do anything now... sorry."

"I understand... I'll probably just grab some food before heading back." Minato said. With that, Junpei took off towards the dorm and Minato made his way to Paulownia Mall. *"Fuck that. I need a Card for today, and since that was a bust, it's time for my next best bet."* he thought.

When he reached the mall, he found Kazuya from his insect-like headphones and smirked. He quickly walked over to him as he was apparently contemplating whether or not to bother entering Power Records. Kazuya turned to see Minato approaching and chuckled. "And here I thought you went and died." Kazuya greeted. "Lemme guess... you were the one responsibility for tearing up Shirakawa?"

"Partially." Minato said. "A battle got a little out of hand, and things escalated after a few dirty hits. Though I could say the same about you... what, you don't come here on Sundays anymore?"

"Nah, not really... now, I spend a decent amount of time down in Red Hawk because 'Shoot First' Hazama likes to run around with his gun pointed at every demon in the city these days." Kazuya said. "He kills some of those Shadow things too, but he doesn't really discriminate on the job. He watches out for tough opponents like me and Naoya, though, so we're fine as long as he doesn't come prowling around too often. His cronies usually dodge us since they know we can take them when they're alone, so that's also nice.

"He's got you on the defensive? Huh... I'm a little disappointed." Minato said.

"Well, what do you expect? It's not like we want a repeat of the Tokyo Lockdown, and they prioritize minimizing damages and casualties... it's the best for both of our groups to just stay on alert." Kazuya said. He chuckled. "So we should all be safe as long as nobody makes any sudden movements."

"You're living with guns pointed at each other. That's asking for an accident to happen." Minato said.

"It's not like we have a better alternative... Big Boss isn't willing to send the manpower our way, and Shin has no interest in fighting him. Besides, you need him around too, don't you?" Kazuya replied.

"That's true, but a nice fight would spice up city life, wouldn't it?" Minato asked. Kazuya laughed.

"Man, you would have loved the Tokyo Lockdown if you think a good clash with the JSDF spices up city life." Kazuya said. "Still, I kind of agree with you... a good fight once in a while is entertaining, and Hazama's a great opponent because he just keeps getting back up... well, at least more than enough times for me and my old crew to run out of steam."

"For a changed fate to end in defeat, doesn't that suck?" Minato asked. "Big Boss surely could have given you something better."

"My original fate was supposed to end in my death." Kazuya said. "Just like yours, apparently, no matter what I did. Hazama was basically supposed to stomp me out of existence and everything would have gone back to normal, with my existence being nothing more than a statistic in the aftermath of that Lockdown. Same for my crew, too... they're all alive, each doing their own thing. We keep in touch, but everyone's got their own work to do... other Naoya and Haru, everyone chose anyplace other than Tokyo to live."

"Still, aren't you even the least bit annoyed that you couldn't keep your victory?" Minato asked.

"Well, yeah... I was supposed to rule over Japan and then the entire world." Kazuya said. "But, when I really think about it, what would I have done after that? I mean, world domination sounds great and all, but once the conquest is over, all you're left with is a bunch of angry people to rule over... and that doesn't really sound that fun in the long run, plus you need to approach things from a global perspective and worry about problems that affect the entire world because you're the one with the power to solve it... and when I think about that, I realize that maybe this was the better option than my victory. Now, I don't have to worry about any of that garbage. I can live life at my own pace, do exactly what I want to do, and fight whenever I want to because I know there's always an enemy willing to take me on. Honestly, I'm just cruising through life right now, and it's amazing."

"... Damn. I never thought a King of Demons would point out how annoying the job of ruling over the entire world would be."

Minato said. "That's... surprisingly legit."

"Think about it like this... if you win too completely, you'll run out of things to do at the end. You need to make sure you have something to entertain you once everything is over."
Kazuya said.

"Like making sure there's another battlefield to go to once your fight has finished, right?" Minato asked.

"Something like that... Big Boss promises us all one in the future, so that's a sick perk of working for him, I guess."
Kazuya said. His phone suddenly rang, and he quickly answered it. "Hey, what's up?" he answered. A few seconds later, his smile turned to a slight frown. "... I'll be right over."
He hung up and turned to Minato. "So Haru has a few problems right now. I've gotta go."

Minato chuckled. "I thought you could get away with doing whatever you wanted now." he said.

"Hey, I'm going to get some amazing sex after this, so it's all worth it." Kazuya replied as he turned to walk away. Minato laughed and turned back to see Kazuya smirking as he looked back at him. "It might be a pain, but when the payout is this sweet, really, who cares? Remember, Minato... we might not speak much, but my sage advice to you today is that something's always worth doing if there's a sweet reward at the end! Having something to look forwards to makes everything better!"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Star Arcana...

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind." Minato said. *"Ok, it's about time that ranked up... I thought it would go stale or some crap like that."*

After Kazuya left, Minato got some food at Wakatsu alone, opting to eat from the mystical DH Menu for fun since exams were coming up, and then returned to the dorm. His phone rang as he entered, and upon seeing no caller ID, he answered with a smile. "Had any sweet dreams about me yet?" he greeted.

"Dreams about you? Hmm... I wouldn't know, since I don't sleep." Elizabeth answered.

"Oh, another thing we have in common. How nice." Minato said. "Let me guess... the usual?"

"That's correct... I'm calling to inform you of a change in Tartarus. A path that was once blocked is now open, so now you may rejoice at the prospect of having new opponents." Elizabeth said. "I wish you a safe journey."

"Make sure you think about our next date." Minato continued as he went to the fridge to see if there was anything he could

snack on. With that, he hung up, and after finding nothing, turned to see Mitsuru and Junpei in the lounge, with Mitsuru apparently tutoring him once again on one of the books for English.

"... Welcome back." Mitsuru said as Junpei took the time to read a bit. "With each full moon, the Shadows are getting stronger. They are employing more dangerous attacks, as well... So even though we have a lot of time until the next full moon, we had best use that time wisely."

"I know. I'll be sure to-" Minato began, but was interrupted when the back door burst open. Shinjiro walked in, a few scuffs on his face, dragging Akihiko by the back of his shirt across the floor. Akihiko had a trail of blood coming from his mouth and his cheeks were swollen. He clutched his stomach as Shinjiro dropped him near a chair. He wordlessly glared at everyone who stopped to look at him, anger and malevolence exuding from his very being, and then walked up to his room. "... Let Akihiko recover tonight and study for finals. We can go to Tartarus once those pass."

"... A wise decision." Mitsuru said. Minato made good on his word, and spent the night in the same manner he spent the last one.

86. Chapter 86

Chapter 86: Triple-Play

Author Note to hmmm: A Shadow only manifests when a person's instability reaches a high-point, and as shown with Fuuka, Tartarus cannot create a physical Shadow like the Midnight Channel. The chance of Minato's Shadow manifesting in Tartarus is slim to none since he doesn't really lose his composure often(I mean, he got an arm and a leg shot off and his first thought was a realization of what he was noticing earlier). Also, just having a sudden Shadow Minato arrival is a bit of a cop out in my opinion, I honestly don't believe a person's character can shift that dramatically just because they accept their Shadow (I'm looking at YOU, The Truth of Death, and your 'Oh, god...' Minato responses to every single bit of tragic backstory for a man who supposedly used to infiltrate criminal groups so he should have the skills and emotional fortitude necessary to properly do that but he's still a whiny crying bitch and RAGH that's enough let's just say I disagree with that story).

Author Note to fanfictheory: It's not just a theory... it's a fanfic theory! XD Heh, you get a gold star for such a well-thought out answer.

Author Note to Number13teen: He could have with enough drive. I don't depict Kazuya as being rather brilliant or too ambitious... after all, he's a DJ despite having otherworldly powers and spends the majority of his free time watching demon gladiator battles and gaming so much that Haru calls him somewhat of a bum. I envision him as a character whose strength and skill speaks loud enough to get things done, but he lacks initiative now that he isn't fighting for survival anymore. Simply put, he's content with his situation, nuff' said.

Minato was once again making breakfast in the morning, working alone while Adonis had taken his full form as a buff though perfectly proportioned muscular blonde man with mid-length curly hair clad in nothing but Greek sandals and a red flowing sash which covered from his waist to his knees at the front, back, and sides, tied to him by a thin green cloth, and a few brown leather bands around his elbows and wrists. He was playing a flute with extreme skill, doing a fast-paced jig that Minato was bobbing his head to as he worked. "You're up early, Shinji." Minato said when he heard footsteps approaching him.

"Anything to get my mind off the crap people are tryin' to shove down my throat." Shinjiro said. "I'm back in school, but that ain't enough to get Mitsuru off my ass..."

"That's why you had a little match with Akihiko last night, correct?" Minato asked.

"Traitor sided with Mitsuru when she decided that I'd learn if I was half-starved to death." Shinjiro said. "Complete bullshit... if anything, I probably lost some knowledge because I was too damn focused on how hungry I was for the rest of the day. Apparently, all that suffering shit you talked about with Ikutsuki gave her the idea."

Minato chuckled. "Well, she's got the right idea, but in practice, it's difficult to properly force real suffering onto a person... anything that falls short of it really is just annoying, isn't it?" he said.

"Got that right... I didn't learn shit yesterday." Shinjiro said. "Still, I get their concern... Mr. Toudou said he'd personally teach me if I didn't pass this test... and I don't want to find out what that means."

"Good call... Toudou might be rather tame, but he's powerful and has a slight temper... I doubt even I could save you if he really wanted to deal with you. You'd best start listening to French music and learning the lyrics, because that's the only thing I can think of to help you." Minato said.

"... I just might do that." Shinjiro said. After finishing off breakfast, dispelling Adonis, and then eating with the rest of the SEES members, Minato was on the way to school once more.

"Today, we have another dilemma... with finals coming up and Isako recently worked with, I doubt I can get any school Cards today. Perhaps I could go for Kazuya again, or maybe

see if Hazama is doing anything... Any other options you think I could do?" Minato thought.

"The boy, Ken... he has shown that he develops quickly."
Daisoujou said.

"You're overestimating the kid. Give a few weeks first."
Hell Biker said.

"That Elizabeth chick, huh? Put in some work with the bitches." Adonis said.

"I don't know... she puts a lot of time into these visit requests, so I doubt we'll get anything... and the Nose sure doesn't like to spark conversation that often." David said.

"The Moon may have risen again." Matador said.

"We can check that chick on Sunday. C'mon, let's go pay Big Boss a visit. Didn't he say you could get a power up if you got more Fiends?" Jack said.

"Ooh, extra juice for us! Let's do that, let's do that!" Alice said.

"I can do that after I choose one for today since it takes no time... as for your options, I think Hell Biker is right. Ken doesn't learn that quickly, and Elizabeth and Igor probably don't have anything to talk about yet." Minato replied. **"I can check Nemissa on Sunday as Jack said, so... I suppose it's**

Paulownia Mall... but then again, I could always go up against Shin. I think I have a good idea on how to deliver an injury to him with Adonis and Daisoujou... or it could backfire completely. Nevertheless, it doesn't hurt to try."

"Try him tonight in the Dark Hour as usual, then... no point in losing daytime over that. If you're lucky, you could score three in one day!" Jack said.

"No problem with breaking the limit, right?" Alice asked.

"This plan is good... but it'd be better with some bitches." Adonis said.

"Fool... all that matters is Minato-sama's gain. Our preferences mean nothing." Daisoujou said.

"Hedonistic monk... admit that you want to battle Hitoshura once more." Matador said.

"I have no ties to this world, including grudges... you are the one that clings to such useless notions." Daisoujou said. ***"The only peace that can ever grace me is death."***

"You fought for the Candelabra just as much as I did. And not a single one of us can say we don't have a grudge." Hell Biker said.

"Candelabra... I also own one, but I light the fires. What makes mine special?" Minato asked.

"That... is a good thing to talk to Big Boss about." David said.

"Not even I understand why your Candelabra requires preparation... our tournament only included completed Candelabrum whose powers were contained to a special Labyrinth, with the grand prize being at the bottom... with the only Fiend reaching there being this universe's Shin. There was another competitor with him, Raidou, who ventured alongside him... though he was more interested in restoring the world to its rightful state, as was the other Shin." Daisoujou said.

"... Wait, what? This world experienced the Conception as well?" Minato asked. **"I thought the world was destroyed in that event. So why am I here now?"**

"As the monk said... Shin wished for the world to return to the exact way it was. It was as if the Conception never occurred in this reality." Matador said.

"... So how do you have a bone to pick with the Shin I know if you also fought the other Shin?" Minato asked.

"Because the other Shin turned his back on ultimate power and disappeared into obscurity. For Fiends like us, who can exist across dimensions, there is no fate worse than fading into unimportance... something this world's Shin did to himself. It's strange, since this world's Shin still has all of the power he had when he

recreated the world..." Hell Biker said.

"He may have had the power, but he didn't have the will... strength of spirit is just as important as strength of body." Daisoujou said.

"So this tournament has happened multiple times across multiple dimensions... because time is relative, meaning you never find yourselves needing to attend multiple tournaments at the same time?" Minato asked.

"Correct... and the Shin of each dimension wins each time, because unlike us, he doesn't have a limit on his strength." Hell Biker said. ***"It's our only weakness... all Fiends can never grow more powerful than we were at our creation. Hitoshura's fearsomeness comes from the fact that he is the best of man and the best of Fiends... he possesses humanity's potential and a Fiend's longevity."***

"... And when the limits placed on a human body are removed because of the resilience a Fiend's body has... that man could break every limit known to man and live to tell his own story." Minato realized. ***"Interesting... I take it Hitoshura is the only Shin whose decided to go ahead and follow Lucifer to the end?"***

"That's right. Hitoshura's the one guy crazy enough to even go up against Him on his own, too." Alice said.

"I know... apparently, he killed off his entire universe, which I think is ridiculous enough to be true." Minato said. "Still... I'll see what each of them has to say tonight. Until then, I need to hurry and finish the school day already."

As Minato waited for the day to pass as usual, Mr. Edogawa began one of his usually ridiculous lectures late in the morning. "Silence! Class is beginning. Sebna uru quah... I plan on using the word "magic" in a very general sense. But today, we'll talk about the single most magical place and time. Today's topic is the magic of medieval Europe. There are a lot of materials pertaining to western magic, from books to folklore. We'll cover all of it, including the changes it's gone through. As I mentioned last time, European magic has its origins in paganism. Starting with Christianity, though, it's been influenced by the influx of various cultures. Some well-known examples are... Kabbalah, the study of the mystical aspects of Jewish texts. Gnosticism, a Christian sect founded by Simon Magus, the Sorcerer. Greece's philosophy and natural sciences were the fruits of magical researchers... The same was true of Islam's scientific advances, which surpassed Europe's at the time. Now, as for the circumstances of magic in this age... It was an era where the rule of Christianity and the insight of the natural sciences collided. Magicians bravely reached up for a connection with the gods... Are you all awake? You're not daydreaming, right? Eeeheehee. A little test, to see if you were listening... Get it wrong, and you'll get a scary guardian angel. Sebna uru quah... Who should I choose...? All right, Minato, I ask thee." Mr. Edogawa said. Minato merely looked at him with a blank expression, not

really caring for any teaching on 'magic' since he knew full well that he was a much better magician than Edogawa could ever hope to be. "What is the mystical study of Jewish texts?" Mr. Edogawa asked.

"You just said it, dumbass." "Kabbalah." Minato replied.

"Very good." Mr. Edogawa said, looking as unimpressed as ever. "The magicians of the age achieved great things... Particularly the famous 'grimoires'. Grimoires are collections of a wide range of magical texts, and..." he continued on as class crept by.

School inevitably drew to a close, and Minato soon saw that the majority of his dorm mates had opted to go study once again. He didn't mind though, and headed straight to Paulownia Mall after school, munching on some Takoyaki he bought at Iwatodai Station in case any of his engagements became very time consuming. His first stop was the Crimson Room, since it took no real time and he honestly would feel just a little safer with an extra Magatama if possible. He walked into the back alley and found the Crimson Door directly across from the Velvet Door as usual, and entered. Inside, upon the marble floor which was encompassed by an endless of expanse of swirling red energy with the two skull chairs facing Lucifer atop his throne of skulls with Paimon to his left and Lucifuge to his right, Minato did a proper bow along with his Fiends, all of whom appeared on their own as usual. "Good afternoon, Master. I apologize for not visiting more frequently." Minato said.

"There is little reason for you to visit if we have no business to discuss." Lucifer said. "Please, take a seat... I sense curiosity within you."

"Ah, but before that, you've earned enough Macca for another Magatama!" Paimon said. "Hungry?"

"Always." Minato said as he took his seat. "I had thought you ran out of those with how little I accumulate new ones."

"Hmph... supernatural powers aren't cheap, boy... you received your most powerful ones free of charge. Do you honestly think weapon summoning is more expensive than regenerative powers or the ability to surpass human limits?" Lucifuge asked.

"I know I got my best for free... after all, I have a second life free of charge." Minato said. "Still, what do we have today?"

"An interesting one... This Magatama will allow you to channel demonic energy directly through parts of your body. Naturally, this will increase the strength and durability of said body immensely... the drawback is that prolonged use of this power at one time will begin to eat away at your body." Lucifer said.

"So it's good for swift uses... counters and otherwise weak attacks, correct?" Minato asked.

"Those are both excellent choices... but it's flashy as well, so it's a great tool to show off with." Lucifer said with a smirk.

Minato chuckled.

"I'm sold." Minato said, pulling the Card of the Beast out of his pocket. "Time for some fun."

Lucifer closed his eyes, and the Card of the Beast left Minato's hand and appeared on the black table between them. Black flames once again erupted from the table's surface and swirled to form a large black mass above it which slowly coalesced into the teardrop shaped item known as a Magatama. Lucifer slowly opened his eyes, and watch as Minato very eagerly eyed his new prize. "Eat up." he said.

"Thanks for the meal." Minato said. He reached over, gave a little bow to Lucifer as he took the Magatama, and then let the oversized object rest in his mouth. It broke apart as usual, the odd substance dissolving and beginning to course through his veins.

The exhilarating pain of assimilation. The blissful embrace of a complete shutdown. The rejuvenating spark of life. The soothing descent from absolute power. The calm of settling into strength that was now his. Minato experienced all of this after he ingested his new Magatama, and took slow, controlled breaths afterwards to relish his ascension to yet another plane of power. "... Damn. Looks like I can't launch energy blasts." Minato said as he reopened his eyes. Lucifer chuckled.

"Unfortunately, no, my amusing servant... that type of power cannot be granted." Lucifer said. "With enough training,

however, humans can accomplish great things. It always fascinates me."

"So I've heard... it's what allowed Hitoshura to become everything he is, and why you've taken such a liking to meddling with the destinies of at least demi-human beings." Minato said.

"Why meddle with something that has a limited set of options. It's much more fun to watch people with every choice in the world go down a singular path... and even more fun when that path is one all their own." Lucifer said. "The affairs of short-lived beings are always more interesting than those of transcendent ones simply because there's a rather short time-limit to their game."

"... I suppose from the view of a being that has held numerous world-changing tournaments across multiple universes, that's certainly the case." Minato said, leaning back in his chair. "Although, aren't you a bit sad that Shin wins every time?"

"Not at all... Shin wins every time because I want him to win every time. And like all of my favored, he makes sure not to bore me by doing something as foolish as dying without finishing the small tasks I gave him." Lucifer said. "Just like you."

"You'll have no complaints here... dying doesn't really suit me. Suits everyone who's foolish enough to stand against me, though." Minato said with a smirk. "Still... I never really asked you, but... what's the real purpose of the Candelabra I

received in the Velvet Room?"

"It's too soon to reveal the true purpose of your Candelabra." Lucifer said. "I could, but that would ruin the surprise it has in store for you... I can, however, grace you with its name. The Candelabra I've bestowed upon you is the Candelabra of Encompassment... and from that look in your eyes, you seem to have reached an understanding."

"Encompassment... that's perfect." Minato said. He held out his hand and summoned a Tarot Card with a completely white front. "I am the Blank Card, after all... And though I'm unaware of what the Candelabra really do, I have an idea as to why mine is that of Encompassment... and as to why mine must be developed over time as compared to the ones you had in your tournaments. The flames represent that which I can claim control over if I wished... and once all of them have been lit, I should be able to claim everything... though I doubt it'll be that easy." With that, he dispelled the card and leaned forwards in his chair to look Lucifer right in the eye. "No... if I want everything, I'll have to be victorious in every battle... more victorious than anyone who's ever graced my plane of existence. Only then will I have encompassed everything."

"Hmph... a true Fool's belief." Lucifuge said.

"No... that's a Jester's train of thought." Paimon said.

"Both of you are wrong." Lucifer said. He smiled. "It's been far too long since I've seen true Hunger with my own eyes... not since the days of Hitoshura's rise." He closed his eyes for a

moment and then opened them, his eyes suddenly becoming the overpowering bright gold once more. The Crimson Room quaked, and Lucifer spoke once more in his unearthly, reality shaking voice. **"I am thine Master... And thou art my disciple... He who possesses the Card of the Beast... I give to thee a portion of my Majesty... Thou shalt draw forth hidden strength from thine Fiends... And thou shalt bask in my Light... The Light of Lucifer..."**

Minato felt a sudden surge of power well up in him as the Card of the Beast resonated on the table between them, exuding a bright red light from the strange shape engraved on it, the half human, half ram skull on the front. Minato knew each of his Fiends had just gained a new power, and smiled like he had just made a small child choke to death on an oversized lollipop. "Master, you give me far too much for my own good." Minato said with a reverent bow. "I'll be sure not to disappoint you."

Lucifer's eyes faded back to their usual sickly yet iridescent yellow, and he chuckled. "I know you won't... I wouldn't have chosen you if I knew you would have." Lucifer said. "Once again, you'll need to acquire a few more Fiends before I can give you more power."

"Of course... I'll be sure to return promptly when that happens." Minato said. "However, I have one final question..."

"Go ahead." Lucifer said.

"If Shin... well, Hitoshura Shin, is capable of killing off God on

his own... why do you need people like me and Kazuya around?" Minato asked. Lucifer grinned.

"You don't honestly think we Fiends are the only beings capable of working with other dimensions, do you?" Lucifer asked.

"... Just as there is a dark, there must be a light, huh?" Minato asked. "Let me guess... the 'God' you want to battle is one that has similar abilities to yours, and is amassing his own group of fighters, just like you."

"Correct... and since all out warfare would only serve to decimate multiple planes of existence, we host a tournament every now and again to decide who gets their way for a time before reaching a meddling period where we find new warriors for the next tournament... the time we're in right now." Lucifer said. "The tournament draws close... and while Hitoshura is a guaranteed victory for me, I like to have surprise trump cards. I've never tried using a Persona-user before... and you have the most promise."

"Well, well... we really are the playthings of the Gods, aren't we?" Minato asked.

"The majority of existence is... but you won't be if you win in my name." Lucifer said. "But I'll let you dream about all the fun you'll have in the future another time. Now... it's time for us to part." With a flick of his hand, Minato broke apart into red butterflies and reappeared in Paulownia Mall's back alley in front of the door to the Crimson Room.

"Well, well, well... the future is rather promising indeed." Minato thought. *"A tournament held to decide which being gets to have their way with the infinite planes of existence that exist throughout the multiverse... how exciting!"*

With a feeling of absolute glee, he strolled out of the alley and walked towards the Police Station. He entered to find Officer Kurosawa and a rather bored looking secretary using the computer at the desk. Minato nodded to Kurosawa, and he walked over and gave the secretary a quick tap on the shoulder. The secretary didn't even look to see who it was when he got up, simply heading towards the side door to work in some other area of the station without saying a word. "Talk about respect... are you sure you're just a normal Officer?" Minato asked.

"One thing I may have inherited from my time with Captain Hazama is an attitude of ambivalence when it comes to my actual rank." Officer Kurosawa said. "Though he's attained the rank of Captain, he never asked for nor reveled in his promotions. A title is just decoration; the only thing that should speak for you is your actions."

"That's true." Minato said as he stood near the counter. "So, did you get those papers for me?"

"About your special items... yeah, I've got them... and judging from the fact that you're still alive and people are beginning to recover from Apathy Syndrome, I'm guessing you managed to get those flowers." Officer Kurosawa said. "I won't ask where you got them... but they must have cost quite the pretty

penny."

"Interested in buying?" Minato asked. "Shoot me a price and I'll see what I can do."

"Trying to hustle an Officer in the Station? Hmph." Officer Kurosawa said with a grin. "You're crazy, but anybody with a brain could tell that after a few conversations with you... as for your question, however, I'm sorry to say that Captain Hazama has quite a store of those flowers and the other things on this list." Kurosawa grabbed a small manila envelope from a drawer behind the counter, and handed it to Minato. After Minato quickly put it in his bag, he turned back to look at Kurosawa.

"So, nothing to say about the destruction on Shirakawa?" Minato asked.

"I could complain about you causing casualties or doing too much noticeable damage to the city... but the fact is, I know it would have been a lot worse if you didn't do whatever you had to do." Officer Kurosawa said. "As long as you don't tear down a city block, we won't have a problem."

"That's good to hear." Minato said. "But... if you don't mind, I'd like to see Captain Hazama again. I'd rather he get an explanation for Shirakawa rather than waste his time trying to find a terrorist that doesn't exist."

"So you're trying to ingratiate yourself with him." Officer Kurosawa said. Minato chuckled.

"Best start earning favors now, before I need to call them in." he said. "You know how it goes."

"That's a dangerous game to play with the Captain, but that probably just excites you." Officer Kurosawa said. He chuckled. "Come around back. I'll take you to him."

Minato followed Officer Kurosawa through the small region of offices at the back of the Police Station and once again came face to face with the elaborate metal door. Kurosawa spent a quick few minutes opening it very meticulously, and then moved out of the way as the great wall of metal finally opened. Minato walked in and gave Officer Kurosawa a little nod, heading into the center of the room lit by the floor with the tireless visor and headphone wearing workers going constantly at consoles to control the four screens on the walls. Surely enough, one of them had a picture of Shirakawa Boulevard and then seemed to be rapidly flashing through a detailed list of demons alongside it. Captain Hazama and his crew were once again standing around the table, all wearing their Demonicas without their helmets on. Jimenez was looking at the screen that displayed Shirakawa while Zelenin was flipping through some pages of a large book, with a small stack next to her as she read. Hazama's attention was on a small virtual screen floating in front of him that came from the Gauntlet on his left hand. He hit a few buttons on his gauntlet before dragging something on the virtual screen around and then hitting another button. Minato felt a quick surge of demonic power from Hazama, but it died down within a few seconds. Shortly afterwards, the screen disappeared, and

Hazama was staring right at Minato as he approached the trio's desk. "Good afternoon, Captain Hazama." Minato greeted. "Hard at work as usual, I see."

"Good afternoon." Hazama replied as Jimenez and Zelenin both turned their attention to Minato. "Before we begin, I'd like to formally thank you for your previous advice. I underestimated the power our reputation held. However, we now have a much more solid grasp on this city and have been able to increase our Shadow hunting efficiency... though I believe that was your real goal for that visit."

"Found me out, huh?" Minato asked with a grin. "I'm sure you've noticed that the Apathy Syndrome victims all react differently around people like us... and I get the feeling things might get stranger later on. If you keep less and less people from joining The Lost, then if a storm does come, it won't be as severe. Besides, even though I'm sure you're capable of genocide for the greater good, I think we should explore more preventative options beforehand."

"Hmph... with your track record, I thought you would look forward to such an opportunity." Zelenin said.

"Why not just kill em'? The Lost are closer to zombies than humans. They don't even recover that well either." Jimenez said.

"It is the task of the JSDF to protect the populace of Japan from all supernatural threats." Hazama said. "Until the Lost become a threat to the majority of people in the city or are no

longer counted as people by the government, then they fall under our jurisdiction... We will do all in our power to lessen the number of victims."

"Thank you." Minato said. "Now, for our second matter of business... I was the one responsible for Shirakawa."

"... Come here for a peaceful death, boy?" Jimenez asked, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Strange... though that night did register a spike in your demonic signature, it seemed controlled." Zelenin said. "You aren't experiencing possession, are you?"

"Neither of those. As I said, every full moon, there's a powerful Shadow that appears in the city. SEES deals with it personally, but that night was different. We handled the first enemy without doing any more than causing a bit of damage to a singular room in that hotel... but the second Shadow employed some underhanded tactics by fighting with traps and highly destructive attacks. Needless to say, things got messy until we drove the fight into the sky." Minato said. "So, if you need to deal out any punishments to us, I'll take them on behalf of SEES. That spike in my reading was me going all out near the end... and I caused a good bit of havoc with my opponent, much more than anyone else."

"Trying to sink so that the others may float by?" Hazama asked. "How noble of you... but that isn't going to happen. Since you've openly confessed to us and the damage wasn't too severe, I shall let you go this time. After all, the Kirijio has

already installed a rather good cover for you, which has eased the public's minds, which is our primary concern."

"It doesn't really matter if the world is slowly going to shit. They just can't know it's going to shit." Jimenez said with a grin.

"Despicable... we also work to fix these problems, ape." Zelenin snapped. "However, it is much easier to operate without civil unrest."

"Exactly... beliefs and attitudes towards our goal are irrelevant. All that matters is whether or not we are successful, nothing more." Hazama said. "I trust you think along the same lines?"

"That's why business should always remain impersonal." Minato said. "There's no need for distractions when the important decisions need to be made. With those two zealots you've got working with you, it's no surprise you're the big shot, in more ways than one."

"Hey, you wanna start a fight?" Jimenez asked.

"He has a point. Honestly, if you weren't good at running around a battlefield, we wouldn't have a reason to keep you." Zelenin said.

"That's enough." Hazama said, silencing the two of them. "I don't care for praise or recognition. All I require is a set of victory conditions." Oddly enough, Hazama grinned rather

eagerly, and Minato could swear he saw some of himself in his eyes. "I play to win, after all."

"... Nor do you play nice." Minato said, quickly glancing around the room. "What do you want?"

"Nothing in particular... we just need a few blood samples to keep on record and study." Zelenin said with a smirk.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way. The choice is yours, kid." Jimenez said.

"... Any particular reason why?" Minato asked.

"Since you are on our watch list, it's only natural we try to understand your abilities." Hazama said. "Intelligence wins battles, after all... and though I have no doubt you could tell us of your abilities, Zelenin insists that we must understand it on a cellular level. Now... what will you do?"

"You're in their base, with three against one... let it slide, Boss." Hell Biker said.

"... I know. Still, what can they get out of my blood?" Minato asked.

"Nothing too fancy. They'll learn that your body has been altered to react accordingly to certain influxes and frequencies of demonic energy, but otherwise, they shouldn't get anything too substantial... unless they have Shin's blood on file, but I highly doubt that." David said.

"... How much do you need?" Minato asked.

"A just enough to fill up a few syringes." Zelenin said with a smile.

"Hey, we'll give you some free food after, so you've got nothing to lose." Jimenez said.

"... Alright. Let's do this." Minato said. He stared at Hazama, who had a smirk on his face. "Looks like I can't always be the one to come out on top in these meetings, can I?"

"You needn't lose every time... but I intend to break even when this is over." Hazama said. "From one leader to another, I'm sure you'll understand."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Temperance Arcana...

"Temperance, huh? Looks like I really have to... watch my temper." Minato thought. He started chuckling, and then looked back at Hazama. "Let's have ourselves a dirty match." Minato said with a grin. Hazama chuckled.

"That's better... Zelenin, Jimenez, take him." Hazama said. Minato put up no resistance, and willingly followed the duo to a door that stood behind Hazama. Inside was a dark room

lined with weapons and various medical instruments on the walls, with a singular room with numerous restraints on it in the center and another door behind it.

"... I'm not dumb enough to willingly sit in that." Minato said with an unimpressed look on his face.

"You don't need to sit. Just stand still." Zelenin said as she walked over to the wall and took a few syringes off of the wall. They were all empty, and Jimenez merely remained at the door to stand guard. "Now, as long as you don't move, this won't hurt... so make sure to quake a lot." Zelenin said as she walked up to him. "Take off your shirt... these are going into your neck."

"Isn't any vein just fine?" Minato asked.

"Maybe, but I prefer piercing the neck." Zelenin said. "Now, take off your shirt."

Minato glared at her for a bit before doing as commanded, and then stood there as Zelenin walked over and stabbed needle after needle into the side of his neck. She didn't lie when she said it would hurt immensely if he moved, as he decided to test early on. At that, he steeled himself and took very controlled breaths to achieve stillness, though the stabs themselves were painful in their own right.

After what seemed like a rather long time, due to how slowly the syringes, or Zelenin, drew blood, Minato was hit with a little spray on his neck that Zelenin kept in her pocket. "There.

All done, and you shouldn't get an infection. See what happens when you're a good boy and follows the rules?" she asked.

"I get stabbed repeatedly in the neck inside of a torture chamber? I think I prefer being a rebel." Minato said. Jimenez started laughing.

"Kid's got a point there." he said.

"As insolent as always, ape." Zelenin said with a frown. She turned back to Minato and returned to her usual cold smile. "Thank you for your cooperation... you're free to go as you please. I'll be sure to enjoy seeing what makes you tick."

"What, no lollipop after my doctor's appointment?" Minato mused.

"There are some donuts out front. I'll grab you a few." Jimenez said, opening the door behind him. "Let's go before Ms. Frankenstein gets another great idea."

Minato quickly left with Jimenez as Zelenin went into the room on the other side of the little chamber he was in, carrying all of the syringes of blood she took from him in one hand. Jimenez walked past Hazama with a quick, informal salute as he stood at the table, though this time he was apparently working on his Demonica's body armor, hitting a few buttons on it to control a virtual screen in front of him once more. Hazama merely nodded as he and Minato walked past him, and Minato managed to catch his Demonica release a few bursts of

steam as it seemed to reconstruct itself on top of him.

"What's he doing?" Minato asked his Fiends in the last few seconds he could watch him.

"Changing his suit's properties. Demonicas are special because they can change their resistances and weaknesses in a matter of seconds." Matador said.

"Against a well-trained individual or squadron, most demons don't stand a chance."

"Scary." Minato thought as he turned back to follow Jimenez to the area with offices. There was a little box of donuts on the desk near the back, and Jimenez stopped there.

"Take your picks, kid." Jimenez said. "But you only get three... the rest are mine."

"Greedy, aren't you?" Minato asked. He took three donuts and put them atop a paper towel before carrying that in one hand and his bag in the other. "Thanks for the treat."

"I ain't a big fan of needles myself... especially not from that crazy chick." Jimenez said. "You took it like a trooper... so hurry up and get outta here, before I get a reason to throw you out."

"I know, I know, I'm going." Minato said. "I'd say be nice to each other, but I'm sure that's what Hazama's for."

"That's Captain Hazama to you, kid." Jimenez said with a grin. "Now get." At that, Minato made his way out of the Police

Station, munching on donuts as he nodded to Officer Kurosawa, and returned to the dorm.

He entered once more to find Junpei doing various practice problems at the dining table alongside Fuuka, who was helping him out. Across from them, Shinjiro and Mitsuru were essentially doing the same thing, although Shinjiro looked much less enthusiastic than his sophomore counterpart and Mitsuru was much sterner than hers. Akihiko was going over his some notes on his own in the lounge to the right of Yukari, who had apparently laid claim to the entire couch against the wall, her laptop next to her along with piles of notes and work scattered about. "... Oh, s'up?" Junpei greeted as he saw Minato sign-in.

"Hi. How was your day?" Fuuka greeted.

"Got stabbed in the neck just now. Nothing too out of the ordinary." Minato said as he finished signing in. That caught Shinjiro and Mitsuru's attention, both of whom turned to see him walk up to the table and take a seat between the two groups.

"S-stabbed in the neck?" Fuuka asked, completely shocked. Minato chuckled.

"It was just a blood test, Fuuka." he said.

"Who takes a blood test from the neck?" Junpei asked.

"The JSDF... they asked me to have a check-up, and I wasn't

really in a position to refuse. Regardless, nothing bad happened. I claimed responsibility for the damages at Shirakawa so they wouldn't bother wasting their time when they could better spend it hunting Shadows." Minato said. "In other news, I got this." He took the manila envelope out of his bag and opened it, revealing collection of small files on various demons and the special items which could be taken off of their bodies. "I'll be joining you two once I run through a little something from Officer Kurosawa." Minato said with a quick glance towards Fuuka and Junpei.

"What'd the old man have for you?" Shinjiro asked.

"Just a few files on how to acquire certain items of interest... things like the Narcissus Flowers." Minato said, opening the first file. Inside, he saw a crude picture of a deceased multi-headed serpent, which he recognized as Yamatano-Orochi. The first document contained a breakdown of the creature's biology, followed next by a series of tactics for individual and squadron combat both against and alongside the creature, with the last page containing details on how to properly extract the Serpent's Eye from the creature's true head, which supposedly eliminated the owner's sense of fear completely. *"Well, well, well... document one and I've already found something useful... heh... this'll be good."* Minato thought.

"... I suppose this will allow you to request these items from your contacts." Mitsuru said.

"Correct. We were prepared for the worst case last time, but I think we could've done better." Minato said. He chuckled. "I

just hope my wallet can handle it."

After making a mental note to ensure he knew which Personas he had and the items they granted, he stored everything away and returned to his room, storing the manila envelope in his desk near his notes on Social Link Progression and then returning to the first floor to have a quick dinner. Afterwards, he made good on his word and studied alongside Junpei and Fuuka for a good few hours, essentially helping Fuuka ensure that Junpei was well and truly fried by the end of their session. "Man... I don't think I can take any more of this." Junpei said around eleven at night. "If I keep this up, I'm gonna die."

"You've been doing your best, Junpei... I think you've deserved a good night's rest." Fuuka said. She let out a slight yawn, rubbing one of her eyes in the process. "And I think I need it too..."

"Both of you were troopers." Minato said with a smile. He checked his watch, and then looked around to see the majority of the other members had already left. *"It's about time I go get my third for the day. Triple play, away, or so they say, eheheheh..."* he thought. "I think I'll keep going for a bit longer. Make sure to have a good night's rest."

"... Ya know, I always wondered... aren't you ever tired?" Junpei asked.

"... I was thinking about that too." Fuuka said.

"Tired? Occasionally... but it takes a lot to wear me out. I have no problem with going through the night if I feel like it." Minato said. "Why?"

"Ain't that... kind of depressing?" Junpei asked.

"Depressing?" Minato asked.

"What he means is... don't you get lonely?" Fuuka asked.

"Not really." Minato said. "It's just an accepted part of my schedule, the same as making breakfast or going to school. Besides, I don't expect anyone to wait up for me."

"That's... horrible." Fuuka said with a seriously concerned look on her face.

"Yeesh, seriously... do you really just jam with your music from midnight to dawn all the time?" Junpei asked.

"That's how it usually goes. Occasionally, I go out during the Dark Hour, but you already knew that." Minato said.

"... Do you want to try staying with other people in that time?" Fuuka asked. "N-not in any special way... just... we could stick around. Right, Junpei?"

"... Pardon me?" Minato asked.

"Well... I might fall asleep, but... sure, why not? You know how you just feel better knowing your friends are around? At least we can do that, right?" Junpei asked.

"Mm-hmm." Fuuka said. Minato glanced at Junpei, and then at Fuuka, a confused look on his face the entire time.

"... Did I do something extra special recently?" Minato asked. Fuuka giggled.

"That's exactly why we're doing this." she said. "Everyone might not say it often, but... you do a lot for all of us. So why don't you let us do something for you?... Then again, this might not be much, but..."

"C'mon, bro... you gotta at least let us try to even the scale sometimes. Friends look out for each other, and believe it or not, you're one tough ass guy to look out for." Junpei said with a smirk. "I know this is probably super corny and all, but it's what we got right now."

"... *Why break the two a day rule when I'm not pressed for time?*" Minato thought. He chuckled. "You sure? What if you wake up as one of my dolls?" he asked.

"You wouldn't do that." Fuuka said with a smile. "We should have a midnight snack and do something together... Actually, maybe a before midnight snack would be better..."

"We've all got EP now, right? Let's get our stuff and set up." Junpei said.

"I might drag you down in-game. There's a big level gap between us." Minato said.

"Then we'll really be able to look out for you there, won't we?" Fuuka said. Minato couldn't help but laugh.

"Alright, alright... you've won me over. Let's play." Minato said.

The night began as they planned, with them playing Eternal Punishment Online together downstairs. They all ate special chocolate cake that Fuuka had apparently bought from the Sweet Shop yesterday together before the Dark Hour, and then spent that hour playing some random board games Junpei apparently had stored in his closet at his insistence. Once the Dark Hour passed, Minato made them all tea and they returned to Eternal Punishment Online until about two in the morning, when both Junpei and Fuuka were letting sleepiness get the best of them.

"Nah, man... I'll just crash here. Besides, we still got a couple hours left." Junpei said after Minato suggested they go back upstairs to sleep. "Can't leave you all to your lonesome, after all..."

"Junpei's right... we said we'd stay till the end..." Fuuka said very drowsily as she drifted to sleep on the opposite of the lounge chair.

"You know you'll get sick staying here, right?" Minato asked.

"Never happens to you... so we should be fine." Junpei said. Fuuka nodded, and at that, the two of them fell asleep on opposite sides of the leather couch against the wall.

"It never happens to me because I don't sleep or tire." Minato said. He got no response, and just watched the two of them from the chair he sat on. After not receiving any response, he returned to playing Eternal Punishment Online alone for a while. Eventually, he got bored, and closed his laptop and went up to his room. He took his essentially unused blue and white striped comforter from his bed and carried it with him back to the first floor. He moved in between them and sat down, spreading the comforter so that it covered both of them just enough. "Looking out for me... honestly, there's a reason why it's my job." Minato mused.

He was about to slip out from under his comforter when Fuuka rolled to her other side and ended up embedding the side of her face into Minato's arm while using one arm to hug Minato's stomach. Almost on cue, Junpei adjusted himself and let his head drop to rest on Minato's shoulder. Both of them let out slow breaths that told Minato that they really were asleep, and he sat there in the dimly lit lounge with the two of them attached to him. "... Looks like I'm a hug pillow tonight." he mused. He summoned Jack to turn off the lights in the room, and sat there in the dark with the two of them. "... Honestly... you two always give me trouble." he whispered in the almost pitch black room. With those words, he became as still as the night itself. Though nobody saw it, he had a slight smile on his face as he sat there.

87. Chapter 87

Chapter 87: Revelations

Sorry for the slow updates. Anyways, Social Link Status Update:

Fiend (Lucifer) – Rank 6

Fool (SEES) – Rank 6

Magician (Junpei) – Rank 9

Priestess (Fuuka) – Rank 7

Empress (Mitsuru) – Rank 9

Emperor (Akihiko) – Rank 6

Hierophant (Shinjiro) – Rank 7

Lovers (Yukari) – Rank 5

Chariot (Dante) – Rank 6

Strength (Shin) – Rank 6

Hermit (Isako) – Rank 6

Fortune (Catherine) – Rank 4

Justice (Ken) – Rank 2

The Hanged Man (Vergil) – Rank 3

Death (Pharos) – Rank 2

Temperance (Hazama) – Rank 4

Devil (Ikutsuki) – Rank 7

Tower (Igor) – Rank 6

Star (Kazuya) – Rank 5

Moon (Nemissa) – Rank 8

Sun (Elizabeth) – Rank 5

Judgement (?) – Rank 0

Aeon (?) – Rank 0

Author Note to guedesbrawl: I certainly hope I have plans.

Author Note to fanfictheory: I should be thanking you for reading XD but hey, thanks for supporting the anti-Shadow Minato train. And of course Minato has to go off the beaten path, or else this story would be called

Persona 3: Rehash.

Author Note to hmmm: If you didn't get a lot of Adachi-like vibes from early in the story, you missed a lot. Minato used to call himself a Jester more than a Fool before he starts to really embrace the Blank Card idea and uses the Fool title to justify his limitless potential.

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: Remember, after the Conception and the events of Nocturne, the world is reverted to exactly how it was before it even happened, with only Shin, Raidou, and Lucifer remembering that it even happened. Nobody from the JSDF ever went in, so the most they would know is that Hikawa may or may not have used demons in the Yoyogi Park riots... so there's no reason for the JSDF to know that this world's Shin exists since he just decided to continue on with his life.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Hey, you're alive! Good to see you again. I think you overpraise me, though, but I'll take it.

Author Note to That Guy: Thanks for the update XD

Author Note to Shadowqueen15: It's subtly advancing.

Adonis and Alice made breakfast that morning, with Alice taking the time to prepare tea in the same manner as Minato did as the morning sunlight began to illuminate the dorm and placing three cups on the lounge table, one in front of each

person on the couch against the wall. Minato noticed that Fuuka was beginning to stir, and was struck by a brilliant idea. He managed to maneuver his arm around Fuuka's waist, and pulled her in close as she began to drift out of her sleep. Minato slowly ran his hand through her hair as she woke, and put a kiss on her forehead. "Good morning, Fuuka." Minato whispered.

Fuuka let out an almost childish yawn as she got more comfortable against Minato. "... Good morning, Minato..." she replied in a barely audible voice. She let out a content sigh as she found a better position against him, and began to drift back into sleep.

"Ah, you must be tired... last night really was amazing." Minato whispered.

"Mmm... Last night was..." Fuuka began, but suddenly stopped. She began to quickly blink, and then took in her situation.

"I never thought I'd be into a threesome with anything other than two girls, but this was pretty good too." Minato continued. He grinned and messed with Fuuka's hair. "I don't know about anyone else, but I like a wild Fuuka."

"... That didn't happen." Fuuka said, slowly getting up. She still used him as a brace, and peered around him to see Junpei in the same position as slept in, his head resting on Minato's shoulder with his arms on his stomach. She saw the comforter that covered the three of them, and took the time to

examine her own clothing just to be certain. "You're just trying to mess with me."

"Aww, I was hoping to see a cuter reaction." Minato said. He slid his hand to Fuuka's cheek and drew her face close to his own. "But then again, I'm happy with this too."

"... Junpei's right there." Fuuka said. "And I don't think... This isn't the right thing to do. Not for me... or you."

"I always find things more entertaining when I'm wrong." Minato said. With that, he stole a kiss from Fuuka. She had closed her eyes, and seemed to be in deep thought.

"... Are you really... ok with someone –" Fuuka began, but was silenced by another kiss.

"I'm happy with you." Minato whispered after the kiss. He stroked the side of her face. "You should be too." Fuuka said nothing for a while, but she placed one of her hands on Minato's cheek. She smiled and said nothing as she let her head rest against Minato again. He kissed her on the head a few more times before Junpei began to stir. "Oh... looks like our time's up."

Fuuka lifted her head back up and saw Junpei adjust his head a few times before shifting his whole body to lean against the edge of the couch instead of Minato. "He can get a few more minutes." Fuuka whispered. She turned on the couch so that one of her legs was over Minato's, and propped herself up slightly so that she was looking down on the laidback Minato.

"Oh? I wonder what you'll say if anyone sees us like this."
Minato mused.

"I thought you liked a wild Fuuka." she said. At that, she quickly moved to kiss Minato. They went quickly, with Fuuka almost clawing at his shirt to get it open and Minato preventing her from pulling away, with their simple kissing having already escalated into making-out. They would have continued for more than the minute they had if Junpei didn't roll to the side again, this time outstretching his arm. His arm hit Fuuka's back, and his face wound up hitting the slight gap between his two friends. He opened his eyes to see Fuuka's chest and Minato's chest touching, and then slowly looked up to see the two of them with their faces right in front of one another's, both looking down at him. Fuuka looked slightly horrified while Minato looked amused.

"... Uh... If I'm the third wheel or what not, I can uhh... go, ya know?" Junpei said. Junpei began to slowly back up, and didn't have time to react when Minato actually pulled him back so that he was close to them.

"What are you talking about? You fell asleep pretty early last night, so I think you should get the lead now." Minato said with a smirk. "Dual conquest is only possible in a threesome, after all."

"... Isn't that a move from... wait, OH CRAP!" Junpei said, his eyes widening. He quickly turned to Fuuka. "I AM SO SORRY FOR WHATEVER HAPPENED! PLEASE, I DIDN'T MEAN FOR-" he began before Fuuka covered his mouth with her

hand. She and Minato both laughed.

"We were just teasing you, Junpei." she said. "You'll wake everyone else up if you scream." She removed her hand and then got off of Minato.

"... Oh. Y-yeah, there's no way we'd do that stuff..." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"Maybe not you." he said, getting a little surprised reaction from both Fuuka and Junpei. He chuckled at their looks. "But, we've got tea for us and breakfast which should be done by now."

"You better love it... but not as much as you love me, of course." Adonis said from the kitchen.

"If you don't enjoy it, you get to eat in my doll house next time." Alice said. With that, the two Fiends disappeared and returned to the inside of Minato's head.

"And there you have it." Minato said, taking the comforter off of the three of them. "I'll just go put this back in my room and be back down here soon. We're up a bit earlier than everyone else, so that should give us time to steal a shower." With that, he got up and went back upstairs, essentially dropping the comforter onto his bed and summoning Hell Biker to deal with making it look neat as he returned to the first floor.

Junpei and Fuuka had moved their teas over to the table along with Minato's and taken their seats. He joined them in their

usual positions, with Minato across from Junpei with Fuuka to his left, since Yukari wanted to sit next to her while avoiding Junpei and had traded seats with her. "Dang, bro, this is some royal treatment... is it weird if I'm half-expectin' a show now?" Junpei asked as the trio began to eat.

"I'm sure David could arrange one, but trust me, he's a horrible actor. I wouldn't put too much stock in his directing skills." Minato said. "I'm sure Daisoujou could start reciting any Sutra you like, if you're into that sort of thing."

"Recite a sutra?... I don't think that's really morning entertainment..." Fuuka said with a slightly contemplative look. She quickly caught herself, and shook her head. "B-but this is more than enough! Really, you even brought down a cover for us and stayed as my... umm..."

"Teddy bear, or hug pillow?" Minato mused.

"... Wait, doesn't that mean... nah, couldn't have happened." Junpei said.

"You used me as a brace, but no hugging. You were more than content with yourself." Minato said.

"Yeah, no way I woulda done stuff like that." Junpei said. He chuckled. "I'm not cock-blockin' my bro even in my sleep! ... Oh, not sayin' you two were doin' anything while I was asleep... right?"

"W-what?! No, we weren't doing anything like that." Fuuka

said. "W-well... maybe right before you woke up..."

"Well, yeah, I got that..." Junpei said. "But, speaking of which... are you guys a thing again or... what?"

"We're actually going to keep that a secret." Minato said. "I think it was easy to tell from last time that we need a strict boundary between our SEES' involvements and private involvements."

"... He's right." Fuuka said. "So now that you know... if you let it slip..." Fuuka made a little gun with her fingers and pressed it to the side of Junpei's head with a smile. "Dududu bang bang." she said with multiple fake shots.

"... My lips are sealed." Junpei said, his eyes wide in shock. Minato chuckled.

"It's weird when I'm not the one to be scared of, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yep... it's definitely weird." Junpei said. Minato and Fuuka both laughed and returned to their meals, and finished the morning getting ready for school as the other members ate breakfast. Aside from a few odd looks in the trio's direction since they were generally moving in the opposite direction of everyone else, they got off without any trouble.

After a short train ride, Minato was once again strolling into Gekkoukan with his headphones on. He soon noticed Yukari walking a bit behind him, still brooding as usual. *"Might as well*

see if this necessitates a Rank Up." Minato thought as he slowed down drastically to let Yukari catch up. He dropped into pace next to her. "Finals can't have you down that much, can they, Yukari?" Minato asked. "I mean, I could tutor you if you really need it."

Yukari let out a sigh. "It's not that... there's just... some stuff I need to sort out." Yukari said. "You'd probably think it's just the same old, same old... don't worry about it. I'm just trying to figure something out."

"I get the feeling you're lying." Minato said. "But I'm also not one to try and stop someone from sorting out their own problems... Just letting you know that I'm around if you feel like talking. I'll even try not to disprove your world views or speak in a condescending tone if you want."

"... Did you have to throw in that last part?" Yukari said.

"I said I'd try not to do those things. I never said I wouldn't." Minato said with a smirk. Yukari sighed.

"It's official. You're worse than Junpei." Yukari said. "At least he isn't mean all the time."

"I'll have you know I'm probably the nicest person you've ever met." Minato said. "You should know that if you're capable of one extreme, you're also capable of the other. I can turn sympathy into sudden cruelty and back if I feel like it."

"Which is even worse than you just being scary in general..."

it's creepy that you can do that." Yukari said.

"Predictability is a weakness I can't afford to have." Minato said. "The more options you give yourself, the better chances you have to win."

"At what, exactly? You talk about winning all the time, but what are you trying to win?" Yukari asked.

"Life." Minato said with a grin.

"Tch... of course you'd say that." Yukari said, shaking her head. "Whatever... I'll think about whether or not I actually want to put up with you today."

"And I'm the mean one?" Minato mused. With a scowl and a growl, Yukari trudged forwards, speeding up to leave Minato behind. He didn't bother matching her pace, and put his headphones on once more as he entered school. The day flew by quickly, with Minato only having to answer that foreigners were scared of Japanese hairdos during the Kamakura Era.

As Minato went through the rest of his day at school, Jin was discovering that manual labor definitely didn't suit him. After he and the others had awoken on the island after their plane crash, he managed to send a distress message directly to Ikutsuki with Medea and Moros' combined powers. The 'rescue' he managed to get was a crab fishing boat, which would steered off course at the end of its run to save them and transport the ASWs back to shore in exchange for a

rather large sum of money without question. Their only condition was that on the return trip, the people they saved would have to work on the boat to make up for lost time. Thus, in the middle of the day aboard the large ship, Jin found himself hauling up a crab cage alongside Hamuko and Sho, the three men struggling aboard a ship on rough waters. If any of them fell down, the cage would drop, and they'd have to start over. "What kind of friggin' pilot goes head first into a fucking thunderstorm... That incompetent dumbass deserved to die." Jin grumbled as he inched backwards.

"If you've got time to complain, shut up and pull, dammit!" Sho yelled. "The girl's pulling more than you, for fuck's sake!"

"Shut up, ya sexist prick!" Hamuko said. She let out a strained grunt and got a few good steps back, pulling the cage up quickly. Too quickly.

"You're gonna tilt it over, you dumb bitch!" Jin yelled. "Slow down!"

"You speed up!" Hamuko yelled back. Jin swore under his breath and then heaved, evening out the cage.

"Shit... why the hell am I doing this?" Jin asked.

"Because you can't cook or clean for shit." Hamuko said. She took a few deep breaths along with the others, each of them preparing for the final push.

"... Hey, dollie! Get your ass out here!" Sho yelled behind his

back. A large door on the ship's body opened, and Chidori emerged with Koromaru, both pushing a large vat to hold the crabs that were about to flood the deck of the ship.

"I almost fell asleep waiting... work faster next time." Chidori said. "Jin, try harder."

"Hey! You want to switch places?!" Jin asked.

"No... the water would ruin my dress." Chidori said. "Now, hurry and pull the cage up. I don't want to stand here all day."

"You heard the lady! Get your asses in gear, because we're coming up on the next cage!" a man yelled from the level above theirs.

"Sonuvabitch..." Hamuko said. She shook her head and decided to focus on the task at hand. "All right, you limp dick maggots! Do you wanna be scrawny little whores for the rest of your life, or are you gonna be some goddamn men and DO THIS FUCKING JOB?!" she yelled, startling everybody. "NOW LET'S PULL!"

With a sudden titanic heave mainly on Sho and Hamuko's part, the rusty metal cage fell onto the deck. Jin went forwards first, quickly opening it so that they could go about stuffing the crabs into the vat that Chidori and Koromaru kept in place on the deck. While they all worked quickly, the manager who shouted at them, a tall and buff bald man who wore a bandana and heavy yellow raincoat atop baggy cargo pants and a tee-shirt, walked over to the other side of the upper

deck to see a few crew members in similar attire and helmets cheering near the side of the ship. "The new chef back yet?" the manager asked.

"He got a small shark AND lobster!" one crew member yelled. They all backed away from the side railing, revealing that a safety ladder had been hanging off of it. Takaya climbed up the side, still in his usual attire, though he was soaking wet and left his revolver and sandals inside of the ship. Instead, he was carrying a harpoon which had impaled a very small shark in one hand two live lobsters in the other. After throwing his harpoon onto the deck, he made a quick hop and got on the ship. A crewman quickly took the lobster from him, and he moved over and pulled the harpoon out of the shark's carcass.

"A good hunt, I see!" the manager said.

"These will make good lunches." Takaya said with a grin. "I don't get to cook something like this too often... perhaps I'm more suited to Man Vs. Wild than I thought."

"No kiddin'... that's your third haul for the day." the manager said with a grin. "You want to take a quick break or keep going?"

"If I am to do this, I shall do it with all of my being." Takaya said, walking around to where the others were. The manager laughed.

"Why don't you tell your friends that, huh? I'm looking forwards to our meals, Master Chef!" the manager said. With

that, he moved back over to give the other crewmen new orders.

Takaya walked past Chidori as she and Koromaru pushed the newly filled vat back into the cargo area of the ship and saw Sho's group huffing and puffing as they got ready for the next cage. "Our manager wishes for you to work with all of your being." Takaya said as he readied the harpoon in his hand and walked over to the opposite railing. A few crewmen came by him, ready with a rescue ladder. They busily began to set it up on that side of the ship as Takaya eyed the waters.

"For your information... this shit is tiring." Jin managed as he leaned against the wall. "Not all of us are magic fishermen and master chefs, you know?"

"Yeah, so shut it, Poseidon... or I'll stick that harpoon up your gilled ass." Sho added.

"What?... You two are just mad because Takaya... is the sexiest fisherman of all time." Hamuko managed. "I'd like to see either of you... do what he's doing."

"He's doing it because he's a friggin' maniac! We woke up on that island, and all of a sudden, this guy is getting ready to start a colony with him as the new god!" Sho said.

"At least he actually did something other than bitch like you." Jin said.

"Hey, can it, four-eyes! You're the one that doesn't even lift!"

Sho said.

"Silence." Takaya commanded suddenly. He had noticed movement on the water's surface, and watched carefully. The others reluctantly moved to join him, and watched the water. "Dorsal fins... black... a singular one."

"... That's an Orca." Jin said as he spotted the fin moving near the ship. "Alone, too... must've broken off from its group."

"Exactly... it's one on one." Takaya said, his eyes widening as a manic grin came over his face.

"... If you can catch that, your new name is going to be Hippy Poseidon." Sho said.

"Hey, hey, you can't be serious. Those things are the apex predators of the sea! APEX! They rule the seas!" Hamuko said. "C'mon, just because there's one doesn't mean you can take it!"

"... I shall claim that title... and prove my existence here and now." Takaya said as he slowly backed away from the railing. "Clear out... this fight is between me and him. I won't tolerate any interruptions." A small slew of cheering came from the crewmen who had set up his safety ladder, and the others all backed away from the railing. Takaya still had a visual on the Orca's position, and tightened his grip on his harpoon. "It's time to make yet another tall tale... NOW!" he said as he charged forwards on the deck. With a precise leap, he landed on the railing, and then pushed off with all of his might into the

air, his harpoon at the ready as he descended on the Orca's location. Takaya suddenly straightened his body like an arrow with the harpoon as the head in a perfect diving stance, and crashed down into the water directly atop the Orca.

Everyone watched in silence as the water grew still after Takaya's crash, with only the faintest bit of blood rising to the surface. After almost a minute of complete silence, the water shook, and the Orca emerged in one great leap, managing to put its full body into the air. Takaya had managed to get the harpoon into its side, and he clung to it with both arms while the Orca flopped onto its back in an attempt to rid itself of him. The duo went down with a huge splash, and then quickly re-emerged, with Takaya managing to dislodge the harpoon as they rose in a sideways jump. With one powerful thrust, he drove the harpoon into the Orca once more as they splashed back down, and the water grew still once more.

"... You've gotta be shitting me." Sho said. Jin chuckled.

"He might not do much, but he's the only guy I know that can pull off the impossible. There's a reason I don't screw with him." he said.

"Whew, go, Takaya!" Hamuko cheered. She took off her now dirty sweater to reveal a wet dress that showed through to reveal her bra and waved the sweater above her head like a sign. "C'mon, you show em"! Don't you underestimate us, ya stupid Orca!"

Inside of the cabin leading to the cargo area where the crab

vats were stored, Chidori watched the entire scene unfold with Koromaru eagerly barking at the window. "They really are energetic..." Chidori said. She was trying to mentally put the scene back together, thinking it was actually a perfect piece to draw the next time she got bored. She watched the Orca do another small leap, now bleeding out of three puncture wounds while Takaya rode solidly on its back with his harpoon next to its dorsal fin, and chuckled at the sight. "All this needs is a rainbow and this is perfect."

Back over at Gekkoukan, the day had just ended and Minato was slowly packing away his things. Yukari had given him some apprehensive looks during lunch, and near the end of the day, but she hadn't said anything. "*Struggle all you want. You'll have to come to me eventually.*" Minato thought. He had just finished packing up, and did a little stretch at his desk. By the time he finished, Yukari had caved and turned around with a serious expression on her face. "You know, your last few looks were a lot stealthier." Minato mused.

"Yeah... I think I need to talk to someone else about this..." Yukari said. "Don't get this twisted, alright? I'm not going to say we're suddenly best friends now... but I really do trust you."

"Aw, don't be so mean. I have people who can testify that I am the fluffiest and cuddliest teddy bear you will ever find." Minato said with a smirk.

"... I think I'll pass on that." Yukari said. "Anyways, look... I –" she began, but was swiftly cut off by both her and Minato's

phone going off. They both checked it, and saw that it was from one of their senpai.

Yukari's message came from Akihiko, and read "Ikutsuki-san is coming tonight. He has something to tell us. We'll meet on the fourth floor as soon as everyone is back."

Minato's message came from Mitsuru, and read "The Chairman is visiting us tonight to share the results of his research on the full moon Shadows. The meeting will commence in the Command Room as usual... Based on recent events, I believe I may have to reveal what I know sooner than I had hoped. If that happens, I'll be counting on you and Shinji for support. Forgive me for imposing."

While Yukari simply looked her message over again, Minato replied to his with "I think Yukari is going to call you out. Prepare yourself... she has been building this up for a while, and this meeting is far too good of an opportunity for her to pass up. You'll need to answer naturally while getting across everything you want us to know. Do you want reconnaissance?" After he sent the message, he quickly put his phone on vibrate and held his hand over it to ensure that it didn't make too much noise when she replied.

"... Actually, I think I need to organize my thoughts some more." Yukari said after she closed her phone. "Don't take this the wrong way, but... sorry."

"Really? That was a quick change of heart." Minato said. His phone went off, but he quickly silenced it and checked it

again.

Mitsuru's reply was "Thank you for your assistance, but I don't deserve such an advantage... I'd rather not look down on the others tonight. I want everyone as my equal by tomorrow morning... especially you."

"I know it's sudden, but please... I just need some more time." Yukari said.

"... Then the battle is one you wish to fight alone. I understand." Minato said with a nod. He shot Mitsuru a quick text which read "Do you want to talk about this?"

"I don't know if it's a battle... but thanks." Yukari said. She got up from her desk with a wry smile on her face. "I'll see you back at the dorm, then. Bye."

After Yukari left, Minato's phone went off again. He checked it once more and read Mitsuru's message, which simply read "No." At that, Minato put his volume back up and rose from his seat.

"Tonight's going to be interesting... so that means I should probably try and get the one Card I can probably get away with out of the way now, because there's a big chance I'll end up stuck at the dorm tonight." Minato thought. "Alright, Shin... prepare yourself."

With a small melon bread snack, Minato made his way to the usual back alley of Port Island Station near Club Red Hawk's

entrance. Shin was meditating in his usual spot, with the area around him completely devoid of punks. The singular Apathy Syndrome victim was looking at the sky, but stopped to watch Minato. It averted its gaze once Shin looked at it, however, and returned to staring at the sky. "You've amassed quite a bit more power since we last fought... do you believe you can injure me now?" Shin asked.

"That's my intention." Minato said. "Now, c'mon... I'm in a hurry today."

"Hmph... if you're that confident with yourself, then please, don't disappoint me." Shin said with a grin. He got up and led Minato to the usual secluded dead-end alley they went to, and took off his hoodie while Minato brought out his training apparel that he kept in the Dimensional Compactor, a simple set of black and blue athletic shorts. Afterwards, Shin teleported him to the wasteland, and they found themselves standing on the barren, dirt covered realm with a constant orange sky once more.

"I hope you're ready for this." Minato said as he awakened. The black and blue tattoo seeped onto the area of skin over where his heart was, and spread out to cover his body so that it was a slightly thinner and somewhat altered version of Shin's own black and green tattoo that covered his body.

"The first move is yours, as always." Shin said.

"How nice of you." Minato said. He drew his Evoker and fired twice in rapid succession, summoning Samael and Seiryuu

above him. "Poison Mist." he said. The two dragons opened their mouths and unleashed a spray of poisonous gas to engulf the area around Shin. Minato quickly dispelled them once the attack finished and immediately began to put distance between himself and Shin. He managed a few steps before a gigantic wave of energy came and dispelled the fog from inside out, with Shin wielding a sword of energy in his hand as he stood in the middle, completely unimpressed. The attack didn't reach Minato, however, and that was all he needed.

"I'm the only one here who can rock being shirtless and get away with it!" Adonis called as he appeared to the left of Shin. Daisoujou's bell rung as he appeared to Shin's right, and Minato smirked.

"Vanity, Preach!" Minato said. Adonis began to essentially start caressing himself while Daisoujou began to recite sutras in a language known only to Fiends as he rang his bell and shook his prayer beads. Waves of energy began to emanate from both Fiends and quickly bombarded Shin from both sides. The combined attacks didn't do much to his body, but the energy they carried struck his mind, and Shin ended up taking a second to deal with the mental assault that plagued him. By the time he opened his eyes, Minato's fist was right in his face, encased in a flurry of black energy. The punch connected, and Shin was sent flying backwards.

"Heartbreaker, Meditation!"

"Sorry, but I'm not into guys." Adonis said as he looked

away from Shin with one hand on his face while the other was outstretched to Shin, palm open and all five fingers pointing upwards to stop him, while Daisoujou shook his prayer beads and began to mutter something different in the unintelligible language he prayed in. A small portion of Shin's health and mental powers were sapped as an arrow of almighty energy burst forth from behind Adonis and flew directly at Shin, slamming him into the ground with a small explosion.

"Vile Assault!" Minato said as he ran forwards and dispelled Daisoujou. Adonis grinned and summoned his weapon, a long and slender brown spear with the area behind the blade being composed of a small entanglement of thorns, with three red straps flowing out of the entanglement and reaching the mid-point of the spear at full extension. With one swift bound, Adonis leapt through the air flipped with his spear, ready to drive it straight through Shin's chest as he lay on the floor. Shin raised his hands and hit the ground, pushing himself up and causing little cracks in the floor. He came forwards in a hunched position, and Minato immediately stopped advancing and drew his Evoker.

With one swift motion, Shin threw his arms back and unleashed a torrent of sudden light rays from his body. Adonis was torn apart as the ones going upwards struck him and exploded, while Minato quickly fired his Evoker and disappeared in a little flash of blue light as the attack came to consume him. He reappeared just behind the attack's range and quickly looked around.

"Behind you!" Matador warned in his head. Without looking,

Minato used his new Magatama to envelop his right hand and threw a full-force spinning punch. His fist connected with Shin's at full speed, and he was certain the impact would have destroyed his arm if he didn't have the Magatama on. Their clash caused a slight rupture in the floor beneath them, and Shin laughed.

"Your confidence wasn't a lie." Shin said, delivering a follow-up punch. Minato countered it in the same manner with his other arm, releasing power from his right arm to focus on his left. Shin laughed as their attacks clashed again, causing yet another small tremor in the ground. "Good! This'll be a fight to remember!"

At that, Shin began to punch and kick at a ridiculous pace, forcing Minato to enhance all of his limbs at once if he wanted to avoid a hit that would mean the end of him. Their attacks clashed one after the other, fist to fist, knee to knee, elbow to elbow, foot to foot, and even head to head at one point at a blindingly fast speed. They fought for a solid ten seconds like that until Minato began to feel immense pain well up in each of his limbs. "*Shit, that's all I get?!*" he thought as he matched another punch. This time, however, he felt the force of the impact rock through his whole body, and knew the next hit would mean his loss. He swiftly tumbled backwards and released all of the energy, seeing that his skin had practically been eaten off of his body as he got on all fours.

Shin aimed his hand at Minato released a beam of energy without so much as blinking. Minato barely managed to scramble out of the way, only for Shin to suddenly advance on

him with a sweep kick. Minato jumped the attack and summoned Jack's cleavers in his hand, along with Hanuman's tail wrapped around his sword, doing a little flip to slice at Shin. His attacks missed as Shin continued using the momentum of his attack to turn around and slide out of the way. By the time Minato had landed, Shin prepped a solid punch and lunged forwards. Minato summoned Adonis and Hell Biker's arms to create a six-armed block with his own arms, but the effort only pillowed an attack that sent him skidding backwards along the ground.

"Unearthly Form!" Minato called as he went backwards. Alice appeared behind him as the strange black mass and consumed him before beginning a swift retreat. *"Great... all my new plan did was get him excited. Time to go for broke."* Minato thought.

"No time, Mister!" Alice said. Minato was launched into the air out of the black substance, and saw that Shin had once again unleashed the torrent of small explosive projectiles from his spin kick. He dropped to the floor as Alice was blown to bits, and got into his hunched fighting stance just in time to see Shin approaching his location. He summoned Adonis' spear in his right hand and then cocked his left fist back, in preparation to throw a huge punch.

"Dragon fist!" he yelled as he punched the air. As his arm went forwards, he summoned Samael next to him and had the giant serpent rush forwards towards Shin. It was quickly shattered by a simple swat from Shin after he jumped to avoid

its mouth, and Minato rushed at him in the moment Samael's body returned to nothing more than blue light. He got closer, and threw Adonis spear at him with all his might. Shin shifted out of the way, but Adonis materialized around his weapon as he moved, and swiped at Shin as he passed by, slashing him downwards while Shin punched at his head. To Shin's surprise, however, the attack passed right through Adonis' head. *"Adonis merely chooses to take that physical form so he can exert his powers more freely... in reality, it is a spirit tied to the spear. Unless that is destroyed, Adonis can fight indefinitely."*

As Shin landed on the floor, Adonis flew downwards in pursuit, spear at the ready. **"Nobody touches the face!"** he yelled as he went at Shin. His attack was easily dodged by a quick sidestep, and Shin was about to attack him again when Minato reached him, his leg enveloped in black energy as he tried to deliver a flying kick. That was also avoided, and Minato skid to a stop past him and swiftly summoned and threw Jack's cleavers at him as Adonis began to rapidly stab at him

"No spirit can fool me twice." Shin said, catching Adonis' spear by the thorn entanglement. He swiftly crushed it, and Adonis' body dissolved instantly as Shin deflected Jack's cleavers with the spear shaft. Afterwards, he snapped the spear in two as Minato jumped high into the air. He gripped the Dimensional Compactor in his hand and shook it, watching Shin the whole time.

"I'll leave you under construction!" Minato said as he flung the Dimensional Compactor down towards him. Two bulldozers, a crane, two forklifts, and five random steel girders all emerged from the Dimensional Compactor and flew towards Shin at a ridiculous speed, all slamming into the ground at high speed before Shin could react. Minato landed, and he wasn't waiting around to see what would happen next. He drew his Evoker once more and fired. "Megido!" he yelled. Samael appeared above him and roared, its eyes all glowing, and three lights descended from the sky and coalesced in the center of the wreckage, causing a small explosion. But he wouldn't stop his assault there. "Death Chaser!" he said as Jack materialized next to him.

"Oh, what a day!" Jack yelled as he flew directly towards Shin with his cleavers at the ready. As it happened, Shin had been hit by a bulldozer and a girder, as well as the Megido attack, and was in the process of righting himself when Jack reached him and dropped his cleavers down on him. Though the blades broke on impact against him, Shin was hit slightly downwards by the attack.

"Death Counter." Minato said, sensing that Shin had been hit. Jack disappeared from in front of Shin and was replaced with Matador.

"Your blood shall feed my sword today, boy!" Matador said as he prepared a stab directly to Shin's head. Shin simply rushed forwards to shatter his body with a quick tackle, and didn't expect Matador to vanish into his Capote and reappear behind him. He took a swift slice to his back, which also only

served to knock him forwards, before Matador disappeared. He looked forwards to see Daisoujou and Alice appear in front of him, and narrowed his eyes.

"Not bad." Shin commented. He clenched one of his fists, and a storm of lightning bolts shot out of it, decimating the two Fiends and hitting Minato with a stray bolt. Shin vanished from his location and reappeared behind Minato as he got to his feet, a manic smile on his face. "That was a wonderful effort... now it's my turn." he said as he slowly crossed his hands in front of him with his palms facing outwards. His body grew black so that the only visible features he had were his eyes and the lines on his tattoo, and he raised his hands over his head.

"RUN!" all of Minato's Fiends yelled in his head. He rose to his feet as the very ground underneath him began to violently tremble and split apart, revealing bright lines of energy. Shin let out a huge roar that shook Minato's insides as he lowered his arms, and everything in the immediate area, including Minato, was obliterated in an instant.

Minato woke back up in the wasteland, completely naked and without his awakening activated. Shin was a little distance away from him, and he silently put on his school uniform before walking over to him. "... So, I guess I failed." Minato said.

"... After some serious consideration, I've realized that this test might be impossible." Shin said. "I can hold back as much as I want, but... I haven't been physically wounded in years.

You won't attain that power for quite a while."

"... Normally, I would find that insulting, but not from you." Minato said. Shin chuckled.

"I'm not insulting you at all... you got me so caught up in that fight that I used one of my best moves." he said. "For that, you pass... and have also earned my respect. Your confidence truly was well placed."

Minato chuckled. "I don't know about that, but if you say so." he said. "At least now I know that if I really stick with Lucifer till the end, I'm going to be a complete badass once this is all over."

"Ah, you heard of that?" Shin asked.

"You did exactly what you had to do, no questions asked, right?" Minato asked. "All that mattered was that you were going to become stronger, right?"

"If you're asking about whether or not it was my desire for power or my ambition that got me to where I am today... it wasn't." Shin said.

"Really?" Minato asked. "You're above desires and ambitions?"

"No... I desire what all beings should naturally strive towards." Shin said. "I want to be the best at everything I do, just as a good hunter will aim to be the best hunter they can be or a

good king will aim to be the best king they can be. There is no difference... I exist, therefore, I must be the best. I have already proven that not even Gods can stand against me in combat... however, I have much to learn. I am not the smartest, nor the most eloquent, nor the most expressive... and because I am not bored with existing yet, I will move towards becoming the best at those things."

"Those sound an awful lot like ambitions to me." Minato said. Oddly enough, Shin chuckled.

"It's only an ambition if it requires hard work." he said. "Everything I want will come naturally to me... you haven't forgotten what I said, have you?"

"All bends to your will... though I suppose you like to take your time at doing that." Minato said. He chuckled. "I bet you just want to do things the hard way because you like a challenge."

"I've grown accustomed to a rough life and an easy life... and I always prefer the rough life." Shin said. "My greatest enemy is boredom... as yours will be one day, I'm certain. Once that happens, we can make these fights a habit to spice things up. That's an order from your sensei, so write it down. I'll find you if you disappoint me."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Strength Arcana...

"I have no doubts about that." Minato said. "Tell you what... once I can fight you on even ground, it'll be a once a week gig, minimum."

"Excellent." Shin said. "For now, however, we should return to Iwatodai... it takes a while to resurrect someone from bloodstains."

"... Ouch." Minato said as Shin teleported them back to Iwatodai. Shin wordlessly disappeared once more, and Minato made his way back to the dorm. The sun was almost completely down by the time he entered, and he knew everyone would already be in the Command Room. He walked into the dorm, found it empty, and quickly made his way there. As he entered, everyone was taking their seats, and Minato quickly cut in front of Akihiko to steal the seat next to Mitsuru and Shinjiro. His silent arrival surprised everyone, and he chuckled as he sat down. He looked at Akihiko with a grin. "Sorry if I cut it a little close." he said. Ikutsuki, who had the single chair, started laughing as almost everyone else facepalmed.

"... Good. Everyone is here." Mitsuru said as Akihiko moved over and took the other single seat which remained vacant across from Ikutsuki. "Now, Mr. Chairman... you've read my reports on our last operation?"

"Yes... it would seem the Shadows are getting tougher and

employing more dangerous tactics." Ikutsuki said. "But, it's not all bad news. I called this meeting today because –"

"I'm sorry." Yukari said, cutting Ikutsuki off. She sat directly across from Mitsuru between Junpei and Fuuka. "Before we go on, I'd like to ask Mitsuru-senpai something."

"... Me?" Mitsuru asked. Minato took a quick moment to mentally applaud her almost perfectly genuine surprise.

"Since I joined, so many things have happened." Yukari began. "... I went along with it, without really understanding what was going on... But now, I need to know. I'm gonna ask you straight out... you've been hiding something from us, haven't you senpai? You act like you don't know anything about the Dark Hour and Tartarus... but they're related to that accident ten years ago, aren't they?"

"What accident...?" Junpei asked.

"There was an explosion near our school, and a lot of people died... It must've been big news back then, but now, almost every trace of it is gone... but you know about it, don't you?" Yukari continued.

"... Yes." Mitsuru said.

"Luckily, no students were injured... But... around the same time, a large number of students were recorded as absent... Seems like more than just a coincidence." Yukari said.

"And you intend to prove it... go on." Mitsuru said, looking Yukari dead in the eyes the entire time.

"I dug up some old school records, and found something interesting. The students who were absent... They all collapsed suddenly, and had to be hospitalized. Sound familiar? You know, like the girls who bullied Fuuka..." Yukari said.

"The earliest known cases of Apathy Syndrome, though it was unnamed at the time." Mitsuru said.

"See?! You do know, so tell us! There has to be an explanation! What really happened on the day of the accident? The Kirijio Group built our school, and you've already shown they're big enough to manipulate the news... besides, a lot of people died on that day. Including him." Yukari said, turning to Minato. "That's right... your parents died on the day of the accident, Minato. Yet you haven't even heard anything about it!"

Everyone turned to Minato, not expecting that turn of events. "I knew about that from before the articles were tampered with." Minato said, startling everyone. "What else do you think a detective's son searches for after his parents have died? The dates of their death, and it didn't take a genius to tie an accident on the island they were headed either headed to or fleeing from to their deaths."

"How can you just speak so calmly about your parents being killed?! Mitsuru-senpai -!" Yukari began.

"Was an eight-year old at the time." Minato said, cutting her off. "You're directing your anger at the wrong person, Yukari... and while I was interested for a while in finding out why my parents died, I soon realized that it was a moot point... After all, will knowing how horrible the monster under your bed really is make you any less afraid of it?"

"... Minato has a point, Yukari." Ikutsuki said. "Just because she is a Kirijio doesn't mean you should begin to target her."

"... So you're just saying I should drop this?" Yukari asked.

"No." Mitsuru said. "You have a point... everyone in this room has a right to know what I know..." She wavered for a bit, glancing at the apprehensive stares of the three sophomores across from her.

"... You've got this." Shinjiro said with a little nudge. "No sweat."

"... I'll tell you the whole story." Mitsuru began. "The Shadows have many mysterious abilities. Some research, along with our own experiences over the last few operations, indicates that they can even affect time and space. We think of them as our enemies, but what if we could somehow use them to our advantage? They would be a source of unimaginable power, wouldn't they?"

"... What?" Yukari asked.

"Actually, that makes sense..." Fuuka said.

"Woah... never woulda thought of that." Junpei said.

"... *They could enhance my own.*" Minato thought. "*So when I'm eating them... oh, things are looking good right now.*"

"From what we've seen with the singular Shadows on operations, a large group of them could make miracles." he said.

"Indeed... Fourteen years ago, one man pursued that line of thinking. He was the former leader of the Kirijio Group, Kouetsu Kirijio... My grandfather." Mitsuru continued. "My grandfather was obsessed with the Shadows. He wanted to harness their power, and create something extraordinary."

"Harness their power?" Fuuka asked.

"Ah, that's where my private detective skills come in." Minato said. "If you bother looking around beneath Iwatodai and Tatsumi Port Island, you can find some rather destroyed areas littered with generators and machinery I doubt even Fuuka would understand from just a look."

"... You actually went underground for this?" Akihiko asked, his eyes wide.

"You're crazy as hell... what if you ran into something?" Shinjiro asked.

"I did. And I dealt with it." Minato said. "But we're digressing... sorry, Mitsuru."

"No... it's good that they know the traces, though hidden, still exist." Mitsuru said. "... To harness the Shadow's powers, he assembled a team of scientists, and over several years, collected a significant number of Shadows."

"He what?!" Junpei asked. "Damn, that's freakin' crazy!"

"However... Ten years ago, during the final stages of the experiment, they lost control of the Shadows' power. Consequently, the nature of the world was altered." Mitsuru continued.

"You mean..." Fuuka said.

"Yes... Tartarus and the Dark Hour..." Mitsuru said. "By their account, the mass of Shadows they collected split into several large ones and then dispersed. These are the Shadows we've been encountering when the moon is full."

"Is that why they've appeared in different places?" Fuuka asked.

"Wait a minute... if what you said is true, then why did our school turn into Tartarus?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"I think the question you should be asking is why Gekkoukan was rebuilt on top of that lab." Minato said. "Though, I think I have a good guess as to why..."

"... It's as you're thinking, Minato." Mitsuru said. "The Kirijio Corporation used the reconstruction of Gekkoukan to justify

constantly monitoring the area surrounding the accident and to keep excessive personnel in the area for expeditions into Tartarus. However, Tartarus was far too active and unstable during the first few years after the accident... hundreds of people have died in there... so much so that my father cancelled expeditions inside and opted for containment instead of eradication."

"... So does this mean that... all we've been doing is cleaning up their mess?! You lied to us?!" Yukari asked.

"... I admit that it was foolish to think you wouldn't need a better reason." Mitsuru said.

"You knew too, didn't you, Akihiko-senpai?! They've just been using us! Or did you not care as long as you get to fight?!" Yukari said.

"That's not true." Akihiko said. "I have my reasons..."

"And what about you, Shinjiro-senpai?! Or maybe you quit because you weren't taking that, weren't you?! I bet she hid this so none of us would leave!" Yukari said.

"That wasn't why I left." Shinjiro said. "I'm just hearing this too... and even though this is heavy shit, you need to stop pointing fingers and calm down."

"... Think what'd you like, Yukari." Mitsuru said. "It was my decision not to share that information... I'm sorry. I never intended to deceive you. Convincing you to join SEES was my

highest priority. As absurd as it may seem, only we – with our Personas – can fight the Shadows."

"How could you...?!" Yukari said, struggling to refrain from exploding with rage.

"Besides... some of us were never given a choice. I..." Mitsuru began.

"Mitsuru... don't." Akihiko said. She shook her head.

"No... she'll hear my story as well." Mitsuru said. She looked right into Yukari's eyes. "Yukari... do you want to know how I awakened to my Persona?"

"Please, enlighten me." Yukari said sarcastically.

"... Barely a year after the incident, I had finally convinced my Father to take me with him to Tartarus. I wanted to know what he was becoming obsessed with... and inside there, we met a Shadow that I still remember to this day... it seemed as monstrous as The Reaper." Mitsuru began. "My father's best men at the time all tried to defeat it, and it tore through them, one by one. We made it back to the lobby, but this one... it followed us. Our reserves fought to buy us time, but I watched them... I watched them throw their lives away. It still wasn't enough... and only when the Shadow tried to take my father, I managed to call on my Persona and fend it off..."

"*A Shadow that followed her into the lobby...?*" Minato thought. "... That won't happen ever again." he said.

"I know... I've dedicated my life to making sure... that nothing like that will ever happen again. I will not... watch..." Mitsuru continued, letting out a few sobs.

"... It's ok, Mitsuru." Ikutsuki said. He gave a quick glance to Minato, and he took that as his cue for the only medicine he could use at the time. Minato turned to Mitsuru and hugged her as she slowly stifled her own sobs. Yukari still had anger in her eyes as she watched Mitsuru, but it very slowly began to die as understanding replaced ignorance. "... Yukari. It's those in the past that are to blame. And they lost their lives as a result of what they did... We're all in the same boat here; none of us deserve the burden that's been thrust upon us."

"... But..." Yukari managed.

"It's been ten years since that incident... no one knows why those Shadows suddenly returned. But, since they're active, at least we can find and destroy them... Do you realize what this means?" Everyone turned their attention away from Mitsuru to Ikutsuki, and even she managed to regain enough of her composure to give him her attention. "What if I told you that those twelve Shadows were the cause of everything?"

"... No shit?" Shinjiro asked. Ikutsuki nodded.

"Then, if we defeat them all, Tartarus and the Dark Hour will disappear...?" Akihiko asked.

"Exactly! That's what I was going to tell you earlier. See, it's good news, isn't it?" Ikutsuki asked, trying his best to be

cheerful.

"Is that true?!" Fuuka asked, trying to match his excitement. Ikutsuki nodded enthusiastically.

"There's evidence to support it! Our true battle begins now, ahahaha!" Ikutsuki said. Minato chuckled.

"Things are getting exciting, aren't they?! Aren't you psyched, Junpei?!" Minato asked.

"Heck yeah, I'm hyped! We're gonna finally win!" Junpei said. "Yo, Akihiko-senpai, we gotta start working out more often! Drag me along more often!"

"... You better not complain." Akihiko said with a smirk. "You're coming along too, Shinji. No questions asked."

"Hmph... like I had a choice." Shinjiro said. "Maybe we should get the girls in on it too... can't afford to carry all the weight now, can we?"

Mitsuru chuckled, but Yukari said nothing. She still harbored her inner demons, and everyone could feel it. "...Regardless of what's happened in the past, we must fight to protect the people. The Shadows are gaining strength. We can't afford to just wait for them. And there are many mysteries still surrounding Tartarus. Why did such a gigantic structure appear in the first place? The answer must lie within it." Ikutsuki said. "... I believe that's all for now. I'll be around if any of you has questions about... anything, really."

"... Then, I'll be going." Yukari said, getting up and heading towards the door. She left quickly, and everyone remained silent for a time.

"... I believe I'll go as well." Mitsuru said, finally getting Minato to stop hugging her. "Thank you, both of you." she whispered to Minato and Shinjiro before leaving. They simply nodded, and she took her leave. Akihiko quickly went to follow her, but Shinjiro grabbed his arm. Akihiko turned to say something, but Shinjiro simply shook his head at him. There was a slight silence between the two, but Akihiko finally released himself from Shinjiro's grip and left.

"Tch... Aki's such a goddamn kid." Shinjiro said. He turned to Junpei and Fuuka, both of whom looked a bit confused at the situation. He turned to Minato, and Minato understood that it was his turn to leave. He got up and walked towards the door.

"If nobody minds, I'll be grabbing dinner." Minato said.

"... Dinner?" Junpei asked. "Dude, I mean, I know you can't run on an empty stomach but... there's a whole lot we don't get..."

"Then come over here and let me explain it." Shinjiro said, catching Junpei and Fuuka by surprise. "I've lived this life for at least two more years than you both have... so I can tell you what I know. Ikutsuki here can fill in the blanks."

"An excellent idea." Ikutsuki said.

"Alright... tell me what you don't get." Shinjiro said, getting comfortable on his now empty chair. "I'll go over it as much as you want, so ask away."

"... Really? Thanks, Shinji-senpai." Fuuka said.

"... Yeah. That's... really cool, senpai." Junpei said.

As those four worked on covering the topics they didn't quite understand from the somewhat tense meeting, Minato went to the third floor and quietly knocked on Mitsuru's door. "... Who is it?" Mitsuru asked.

"Minato... are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine..." Mitsuru said.

"... We really should talk about this." Minato said.

"I've caused trouble for you... and even relied on you for support when I was lying to you the most." Mitsuru said. "You risked your life on those investigations... when I could have just told you what I know. We... We shouldn't see each other for some time."

"Bullshit." Minato said. "When you told that story, a lot of memories hit you... I'm here for you. We're here for you... You don't have to beat yourself up anymore."

"... You can't expect me to face you after such ongoing deception... after you called me out on it and then allowed me to continue for my own peace of mind when I should have told

and everyone else so long ago." Mitsuru said. Minato knew she was near to the door, and he turned around and sat on the ground with his back pressing against her door.

"... Alright. You won't face me, then." Minato said. "But, because you imposed on me earlier... I'm going to impose on you right now. You're going to be subjected to the comforting sound of my voice until I decide otherwise... I will do as I please here and now without contest." *"David, get me a quick line-up of classics to hum."*

"On it." David replied.

"... You can't honestly —" Mitsuru began, but Minato suddenly began humming Beethoven's Fifth. He did it just loud enough for Mitsuru to hear if she remained in her room, but not loud enough to leak too far into Yukari's room. After that, he moved on to the Fur Elise, and he actually heard Mitsuru giggle from the other side of the door. "I can't believe you'd..."

"I thought we established everything I do is unbelievable." Minato said. He resumed his humming as Mitsuru chuckled, and he sat there for almost half an hour, simply humming for Mitsuru from outside of her door. Fuuka came downstairs to go to her room, and froze once she saw what Minato was doing. He turned to her and put a finger over his lips, and Fuuka smiled back with a happy nod. She silently went to her room, and left Minato to continue what he was doing. Junpei and Shinjiro came down shortly after, and both of them had confused looks on their faces at first. Shinjiro quickly realized what was happening, however, and failed to suppress a

genuine smile as he turned and headed back to his room. Junpei tipped his cap to him before following Shinjiro, though he seemed preoccupied with something as well.

Almost two hours after Minato sat there humming, he knew that Mitsuru was already moving around and getting to her studies. Eventually, however, she walked over and opened the door. Minato fell backwards onto the floor, but kept humming. He got up, and turned to face her as he finished his last song. "... Better?" he asked. Mitsuru's response was a hug that almost tackled Minato to the ground, but he managed to stand his ground.

"... Thank you." Mitsuru said, having buried her face in his shirt. Minato hugged her back.

"... Anytime." Minato said. After a short time passed, Mitsuru finally backed away slightly, a smile on her face. "... I'll be around all night. You know where to find me if you need anything."

"I know... but... there's one more thing." Mitsuru said. She drew Minato in for a kiss, keeping him for almost twenty seconds all to herself before letting go. "... Forgive me if..."

"Definitely anytime." Minato said with a grin. He and Mitsuru shared a quiet laugh with Mitsuru before he finally left and went back down to his room. He elected to go study since finals were coming up, but he kept a Alice watching the third floor in case Mitsuru actually did need something.

Despite the tense meeting, however, the night was peaceful, and Minato got to study undisturbed, save for a singular thought that stuck around like the plague. *"A strange Shadow that chased her out of Tartarus... nine years ago... around the time when the Reaper said I had the strange form with a helmet and coffins... could that have been me?"*

88. Chapter 88

Chapter 88: Reminisce

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: There are convoluted plots that make little to no sense, and then there are ones that are tough to follow but end up being masterfully crafted. I'm really aiming for the latter, but I very well could end up in the first. Here's to hoping that doesn't happen. And yes, Minato and the other crew would probably work great together... As for this chapter, get ready! The days leading up to summer break are rather eventful.

Author Note to That Guy: He and Fuuka are now trying to be secret, with Junpei as their confidant. Thus, Fuuka can't be Minato's front for his relationship with Mitsuru, where Shinjiro is their confidant and Akihiko is somewhat trapped in denial. You won't understand unless you realize Minato is playing more than one game.

It was Sunday, seven in the morning. Minato had grown bored of studying and decided to drop the first question that lingered in his mind from last night in favor of one he found much more interesting. He sat on his bed with his Fiends going about their own business as figurines. Adonis was pestering Hell Biker as

he rode around on Minato's desk, constantly trying to let him pose with his motorcycle when all Hell Biker wanted to do was flip around on his little stunt courses. Alice had invited Daisoujou and David for a mock tea, opting to model her dollhouse into somewhat of a mock Japanese tea garden atop Minato's actual tea table to accommodate Daisoujou's style of pouring. Jack and Matador were apparently trying to see who the better tap dancer atop Minato's drawer was, out of all the things they could be doing. Needless to say, Minato had his headphones on the entire time as he scribbled on a few pieces of paper.

"Amassing enough Shadows changed the nature of the world when an accident occurred." Minato thought as he wrote. "If everything had gone according to plan... well, the world may very well be exactly what Kouetsu Kirijio would have wanted it to be. Ikutsuki knows this... he has to. There is no 'doomsday weapon'. The power he'll use to recreate the world will be the Shadows... and I believe the reason why he quickly tried to ensure my services is because he's aware of what I, or at least, the thing inside of me, is capable of... and following the logic of a madman, he just might believe that I could act as some sort of control or stabilizing factor that wasn't present ten years ago. The creature inside of me said it was regaining parts of itself whenever it was absorbing one of the Shadows from the explosion that we've been fighting... meaning that there may well have been more than just twelve Shadows that escaped." He stopped his train of thought and examined his notes once more to make sure he wrote everything he wanted.

"Notes on Shadow Applications:

Control Methods:

Mind Control - As Shadows have been shown to have vulnerability to mental assaults, there is little doubt that Shadows can also clearly be controlled. Though the exact methodology is unknown, the most plausible attempt would be to have special tools, equipment, or skills to use on every category and possibly sub-category of Shadow. When perceived with sensory abilities, each Shadow can be represented as carrying a unique energy signature, usually a specific frequency, which denotes their identity as well as their strengths and weaknesses. Possible resonance, interference, or distortion of said frequency may allow for manipulation of a Shadow. To be tested/researched when possible, as this is by far the most promising method.

Force – Shadows, like all other sentient beings, react to pain according to how much strength they have left. They are capable of experiencing both fear and distress, meaning dread and despair are also possible. Overpowering them and torturing them should yield results, but this method is dangerous as many Shadows can be surprisingly powerful. This works on a small scale, but is impractical for large projects.

Misdirection – Shadows, though sentient, are predictable and live solely on instinct. Like children, they are capable of being easily tricked and taken advantage of. However, once again, their violent tendencies and abilities make this impractical on a

large scale.

Uses:

Energy Generation – Many Shadows can manipulate the elements, which, when harnessed with a simple machine, can easily generate energy with no real cost. Creating an optimized system to derive the most energy from every specific type of elemental attack, or perhaps singling out which Shadows can use the strongest elemental attacks and focusing on using that particular type of Shadow should yield the best results. Has been tested previously, and should be feasible with the proper controls in place.

Spatial Distortion – Some Shadows have displayed the ability to transport themselves almost instantaneously across various distances, both small and large, inside and outside of Tartarus. This shows that their ability stems not from any latent energy held within Tartarus, but from the actual powers of the Shadows themselves. In addition, some Shadows have gone so far as being able to manipulate and influence objects indirectly, even going so far as to seal themselves within certain objects and teleporting living beings without the need for direct contact. The applications for the instantaneous movement of people and objects across varying distances are limitless in and of itself. Coupled with the ability to influence, control, and even alter the properties of inanimate objects, Shadows have more than proven that they are capable of changing the very fabric of reality. If controlled and implemented on a large scale, the world could very easily be reshaped. With enough focused energy, the world could also

be destroyed and recreated in one's liking.

Time Manipulation – The very existence of the Dark Hour is a testament to the Shadows' ability to alter time itself if enough of their power is drawn out. Though traversal through time may be impossible to achieve without accident, the slowing or acceleration of it may be possible. In addition, if the future can be reached, then it should naturally be viewable as well. This means real predictions of the imminent future, or at least a glimpse at the numerous possibilities, should be achievable with enough power."

"... That's all I can be certain of for now. I would say fusion, but... it's unknown whether or not the creature inside me really is a Shadow or if it's something else entirely. After all, I've yet to see Shadow cannibalism first hand." Minato thought. He got up and stored that piece of paper with his Notes on Social Link Progression and his rather detailed extractable item folder that he had received from Officer Kurosawa. With a grin, he dispelled all of his Fiends, their figurine bodies dissolving into nothingness and their presences rejoining his own. He left his room and decided to go shower before making breakfast and heading off to work. Every other boy in the dorm was already out, which he quickly realized meant that each of them had a few things they had to come to terms with after last night. *"Good... the faster they move on, the quicker I can develop their Cards."*

Outside of the dorm, Shinjiro and Akihiko wore their usual plain t-shirt outfits as they headed towards the little alleyway

that housed the remains of the orphanage they grew up in. They walked without speaking through the semi-crowded streets, and eventually reached their destination. "... So what'd you drag me out here for, Aki?" Shinjiro asked.

"... It's been almost fourteen years since we met here, hasn't it? You, me and Miki... we used to run around town like we owned the place till the sun went down. Back then, it seemed like we had all the time in the world. " Akihiko said.

"It's rare for you to think about the past... you only start reminiscing when you've got something on your mind." Shinjiro said. "... It was that little comment Yukari shot at you, wasn't it?"

"... Honestly, she wasn't exactly lying." Akihiko said. "All I've been thinking about lately is getting stronger... but after she called me out like that, I have to wonder... what am I really fighting for? Even if we get rid of the Dark Hour, Miki won't ever come back... nor will Ken's mother. I said I wouldn't fail anybody ever again, but the only person I can fail right now is myself... it isn't like when we were kids. Miki's not around to depend on me, and you're wrapped up in things I can barely even understand because I couldn't stop you before. ... What am I fighting for, Shinji?"

"... Your reason for fighting, huh?" Shinjiro asked. He stood there, silent for a moment as he looked at the barren lot before speaking again. "That's different for every person... I can't tell you exactly what yours is... but I can tell you mine. Before, I thought that if you didn't like your reason for fighting,

that was as good a reason as any to quit... but I've learned now that quitting can be even worse than losing. I'm fighting to fix all the shit that happened because I quit... and to fix what happened because I was just as much of an idiot as you... no, I was even more of an idiot. Tch... I remember all that dumb shit I said... 'A Shadow on my birthday is just a free EXP present'... 'There's no way I can lose today'... All that cocky bullshit and one lousy fight later, I killed a woman and damn near got myself killed... and then I ran away because I couldn't face what I had done. I only just recently realized that if I kept beating myself up about the past, the future would fall to shit too... and even though I still can't let it go, I can't let it stop me from doing what I have to do. We've all got our own fights, Aki... but sometimes, you lose track of your opponent and don't even realize you're swinging at something that's not even there anymore. It ain't an easy pill to swallow to learn you've been spending the last few years of your life doing it all wrong... but you have to take it."

"... Wow. Mitsuru's really been drilling you, hasn't she?" Akihiko asked with a smirk.

"Wha-?! Tch... dumbass." Shinjiro said, not expecting that response. Akihiko chuckled.

"I never expected you to be the type to make speeches. It might not have been eloquent, but it worked." he said. "You're right... there's no point in fighting the phantoms of the past. We have to live with them, somehow... and find a real purpose. I can't think of one yet... so if you don't mind, I'll copy yours. I'm going to make up for my failures by helping

you fix yours."

"... Whatever keeps you going." Shinjiro said. "... I'm not in the mood to stick around. You want to grab some breakfast or what?"

"I'll take you up on that." Akihiko said. With that, they walked out of the alley and left the area.

As they headed off to get breakfast, Junpei was sitting on a bench near Screen Shot at Port Island Station. He had gone there early in the morning to get some private time, and was sitting there with his arms crossed while he watched the few people in the station. "... I guess everyone really is just tired or bored on a Sunday, huh?" Junpei mused. He let out sigh. "So, Tartarus and the Dark Hour will be gone... forever. That's good... it's what we've been fighting for, what we've risked our lives for... so why am I getting scared of?"

He looked to the side to see two teenagers, one boy and one girl, walk out of Screen Shot, both with bored looks on their faces. "Ugh, that movie was bleh... why did we even bother coming to see it? And jeez... it's really hot, even for July." the girl said.

"Seriously... but at least we're seniors." the boy said. "We won't be wearing these stupid uniforms much longer."

"Yeah, I've had enough of this. I just want to hurry and get into college and have some fun... but then again, I'll have to study even harder once I get there... so when I get a job? But then

"I'll just have a job I'm stuck in for god knows how long... jeez, this is depressing..." the girl said.

"Welcome to life." the boy said. "But before you start complaining about that, the question is whether or not you'll even get accepted into college." At that, the pair left Junpei's hearing range, and he turned his attention back to the all discontent or otherwise uncaring faces that littered the station. A wry smile crept onto his face, and he quietly chuckled.

"Haha, I get it... I'm scared of living just as much as I'm afraid of dying, dammit." Junpei said. "I'm fighting because it's my duty... What a buncha bullshit. I'm fighting because it makes me feel friggin' special... because I know I have something to look forward to, something cool to do, something that'll let me be the hero... but even then, I'm still just the sidekick, ain't I? When this is all over, the real hero's probably gonna go off and do some more amazing stuff... and I'm... I'm going to be just like the rest of them." Junpei surveyed the discontent faces once more, and trembled. "I'm going to end up tired of everything... and end up just like dad. Then I'll let him down too... haha... then again, who cares what a loser hopes for, right?... God dammit, why the hell am I thinking like this now?! Shit! Shit! Shit!" With a stomp, he rose from the bench and stalked back towards the trains. He was off to his old haunt at the arcade once more to kill his thought process and lose himself in a game once more.

Back at the dorm, Minato had changed into a rather lazy Sunday outfit consisting of his plain white and blue shirt over jeans with his hat. He went downstairs to prepare breakfast in

the empty first floor while Yukari sat on her bed, looking at a few papers she kept carefully stored in a box in her drawer. The pages had obvious signs of age on them, and almost had tears in her eyes as she looked at them. "... Seems like my worst fears keep coming through. Am I stupid to believe in things like trust and friendship...? Dad... This old letter of yours... I must have read it a thousand times since it came last spring..." Yukari said. With a shaky sigh, she began to read the letter she held.

"March 6th, 2000. To my family.

Tomorrow, I'll bring this letter to the opening ceremony for the Moonlight Bridge. It'll be stored in a time capsule, and sent to you ten years from now. Yukari... You're so small right now, but in ten years, you'll be sixteen. You'll be in high school. I know you've been sad because I have to work so late, but you still always greet me with a smile. I'm really proud of myself. Kirijo-san appointed me Head Researcher. I'll be starting on a big project soon, and I'm happy to be receiving so much recognition for my work... But, I swear to you that nothing is more important to me than you and your mother. Yukari... Are you remembering to enjoy life? Are you still bright-eyed and hopeful, like you are now? No matter what happens in the next ten years, I hope you are happy. ...Well, I hope this letter brings a smile to your face.

Love, Dad"

"... I can't lose hope... for his sake." Yukari said. "I won't turn my back. I won't be like Mom... Not ever."

Outside of her room, Mitsuru walked by and headed over to knock on Fuuka's door. "Yes?" Fuuka asked from behind her door.

"... Can I talk to you for a minute?" Mitsuru asked.

"Senpai... oh, please come in." Fuuka said as she opened the door. Mitsuru walked into Fuuka's room, which was rather plain and conservative, designed with nothing more than a simple well-kept red bonsai near the window, a desk, and a small drawer in the corner near her bed.

"I'm impressed with the scope of your abilities, Fuuka... Not only do you excel in providing support during battle and actual combat, but also at obtaining information as well." Mitsuru said.

"... S-so... you knew. ...I-I'm sorry for doing that without permission." Fuuka said.

"Don't worry, you're not in trouble. But, I do have a special favor to ask of you... if you don't mind, of course." Mitsuru said.

"... What is it?" Fuuka asked.

"I want you to find out as much as you can about the incident ten years ago... I shared all of what I know, but I'm certain there's more to it than just that." Mitsuru said.

"But, very little was made public..." Fuuka said.

"That's why I want you to access the Kirijio Group's database." Mitsuru said. Fuuka blinked, not expecting that, but then narrowed her eyes a bit. Mitsuru saw a flicker of yellow run across her eyes, but they were still brown. Her guard had obviously been raised, however, because her demeanor seemed to suddenly switch to one similar to her Shadow's.

"... So you know I'm a hacker too." Fuuka said. "Then I'm guessing you know how good I am with machines as well if you've got a file for me."

"... Correct." Mitsuru said. "However, I'm not asking for anything like that... I'll give you my ID and password so that you can access the database freely. You'll be free from accountability... I just want to know the full truth of what happened that night, in detail."

"... Oh." Fuuka said, dropping her guard. "Okay. I'll see what I can do... and sorry about that."

"It's fine... you have every right to be suspicious of me." Mitsuru said. "I appreciate your assistance."

"It's nothing... but, senpai... are you feeling okay?" Fuuka asked. It was Mitsuru's turn to be caught off guard.

"... Am I acting that strangely?" Mitsuru asked. "I know I may not have asked for help before, but..."

"Huh? Oh, no, not that!" Fuuka said. "What I meant was... well, Yukari really went right for you last night... and then you

shared that story... I just wanted to know if you were doing well. I know Minato was humming last night because he was really worried about you, so... I guess this is the follow-up."

"... I'm actually doing quite well." Mitsuru said with a smile. "Minato was insistent that he not leave until he was absolutely certain I was doing well... needless to say, he succeeded as he usually does when it comes to helping his friends."

"I'm glad." Fuuka said with a smile. "I was worried that you would isolate yourself... speaking of which, we should go to the Sweet Shop together, senpai. They actually have really nice breakfasts!"

"... You'd do that with me?" Mitsuru asked.

"Of course. We're friends, aren't we?" Fuuka asked.

"Fuuka... aren't you resentful?" Mitsuru asked. "After all, I was the one who dragged you into this without fully explaining everything... and in the last operation, I openly attacked you and issued orders for the others to try and take you down... Do you really consider somebody who would do that your friend?"

"Not at all. You all forgave me for trying to do something much worse... I feel important here, and I can help you and everyone else." Fuuka said. "It's true, friends fight... but we're still friends in the end. At least, that's what I choose to believe."

"... Then I'll do the same." Mitsuru said. "You're right, Fuuka... You're irreplaceable, both in and out of SEES business. I'll take you up on that offer for breakfast. Just knock on my door once you're ready to go."

"Yes!" Fuuka said eagerly. "I'll be just a moment." Mitsuru chuckled.

"Take your time, Fuuka... I'm not going to hide today." she said. With that, she left and returned to her room to prepare for their breakfast as well.

Minato had recently left the dorm and arrived at Be Blue V. He walked straight to the Office and chuckled once he saw Nemissa sitting in her usual seat. She was once again working on her singular laptop, and Minato detected an air of triumph around her. "The Moon shines again." Minato said. "Welcome back."

"It's good to be here." Nemissa said with a slight grin. "I had quite a productive trip."

"Do tell what a few of Hell's bourgeoisie has to discuss." Minato mused.

"I'm going to become a branch manager soon." Nemissa said. "I'll still be based here since I'm too lazy to move, but now, this entire province is going to be under my jurisdiction! How's that for an improvement?"

"... So you're going to run numerous soap stores?" Minato

asked, not expecting that answer. "No more prestige or demonic benefits... you just get some more money which you... don't really need to use."

Nemissa's slight grin broke down into a look of unadulterated rage. "And what?!" she asked. "So they said I wasn't ready to move up on the ladder yet. So I'm apparently unfit to handle jobs of a sensitive nature because of my personality. Why the hell does that mean I get stuck at this shitty position as a goddamn money maker?! I don't even get to bring in fucking Macca!"

Minato started laughing, rather loudly. "Seriously?! You don't even make Macca?" he asked. "Shit, you really are bottom of the barrel, aren't you, partner? Or should I call you kid, since I've been making Macca since the moment I entered this playing field?"

"Shut up!" Nemissa yelled. "It's not my fault I ended up in this piece of shit position! I'm powerful enough and loud enough to be an enforcer, but no, I don't even get to keep lesser demons in line! I'm stuck managing good for nothings like you, and I can't even manage that properly without resorting to... agh, fuck this! Just get back there and leave me alone, you inconsiderate shit!"

"Oh? Was that acceptance right there? Well... my path is clear for today." Minato thought. "Resorting to what? Underhanded tactics because you can barely manage people, much less demons?" he asked.

"... Go." Nemissa said with a vicious glare. Minato chuckled and headed to the back room where he usually did his shots, riddled with green screen. Surprisingly, the shower and tub had been moved out of the way in exchange for a beach-chair, some towels, and, from what Minato could tell, an oddly shaped Tiki Bar.

"... I take it we're going to be advertising our summer collection." Minato said.

"That's right, starboy. You even get to keep the extra gear the lady chose for you today." the director said from his usual chair.

"How nice. What do we have, a speedo?" Minato asked. The director laughed.

"No, actually. This time, you'll be clothed. Can't imagine why though... I mean, there's not much left of you to be left for the public's imagination." he said. Minato chuckled.

"That's true." Minato said. "Alright then... let's begin." With that, Minato began to follow his shooting instructions as he usually did. After a few shots posing on beach chair in just his new swim trunks, which he had to admit were the perfect shade of blue to match his hair with faded silver flowers adorning them, he wound up taking a few shots at the bar in the same thing with his new robe, a plain vanilla-beige color that went down to the back of his knees and could only be slightly closed with a single string he had to tie around his waist. Obviously, he had to keep it open the entire time, and

was even required to remove it with a flourish for a video. Oddly enough, he found that to be both the most difficult and most entertaining shot, since the director had a very distinct vision of what the move had to be like.

Eventually, Minato returned to the Office with a little bag containing his new clothing in his hand, and saw Nemissa once again engrossing herself in work. "Start selling." Nemissa said without looking away from the screen.

"... David, Adonis." Minato said. His two Fiends materialized without their weaponry in front of Nemissa's desk, catching her by surprise.

"... Put those away. They'll just get in my way." Nemissa said.

"Unless you can get them to work for you." Minato said, getting her attention. "I'm going to leave these two here, free to do whatever they want other than harm you or the store in anyway. If you want to prove that you manipulate demons, then you should train with Fiends. Get them on your side, and you can get anything to follow you."

"Since you've already done the modeling, why am I here?" Adonis asked. **"You don't honestly expect me to do paper work, do you?"**

"He said we could do whatever we wanted... now if you don't mind, it's not often I get to practice in the morning hours at full volume." David said, summoning his Violin. **"Thanks for the free day, Boss."**

"No problem. You both got some uncalled for shit from the others and didn't lash out, so here's your reward." Minato said.

"... You want me to deal with these two?" Nemissa asked.

"I expect you to." Minato said. "Think of this as a cool test. I'll testify to your success if you need me to, and then you can tell whoever deemed you unfit to go fuck themselves."

"What weight does your word have in my case?" Nemissa asked.

"The weight of seven Fiends, which I'm certain is much more than you need." Minato said. "Of course, we could always just go kick their asses if you like doing things my way. But if you insist on climbing the ladder the proper way, I'll see what I can do."

"... You're welcome for the clothing." Nemissa said with a smirk. "Although, you could always directly say 'thank you'." Minato chuckled.

"This isn't for the clothing. My pay's been held for two weeks. This is the minimum I expected in return." Minato said with a grin. Nemissa laughed.

"Well, at least I know you aren't completely screwing with me just to try and make me feel better." she said. "Still, get to work. You're the one losing money here."

"I thought money wasn't that important in our sphere." Minato said.

"Not to me, but you live in this city. That costs money, so you should put it a little higher on your scale of importance." Nemissa said. "You've shown good business sense before, so don't start throwing it all away now because you think you're suddenly above everyone else."

"Hey, watch how you talk to Boss, lady." David said.

"You just sit tight... I'll get to you in a minute." Nemissa said.

"Ooh, feisty. I like." Adonis said. Minato chuckled.

"I'll leave you to it. Good luck." Minato said as he turned and entered the changing room. After quickly swapping to his usual work attire, he left the Office, leaving an overly vain Adonis trying to get Nemissa to let him model while David was beginning to heavily judge the speed at which she worked. Needless to say, she had her hands full trying to get either of them to do anything. *"Heh... she'll have her hands full for my shift."* Minato thought as he went out to start his sales.

A few hours in, and Minato was steadily making sales without any problems. The most interesting thing happened when he turned around to see Mitsuru and Fuuka enter the store together. *"Ooh, my 'secret lovers', together... how exciting!"* Minato thought with childish glee. He went forwards with an uncharacteristically stylized skip and did a little twirl with his usual hat-off bow to the two of them, catching them off guard.

"Hello, my loves, and welcome to the healing shop, Be Blue V. Minato, the granter of your innermost desires, shall serve at your beck and call." he greeted, getting a slight giggle from both Fuuka and Mitsuru.

"As unaffected as always, Minato." Mitsuru said.

"It's always reassuring to know nothing really gets you down." Fuuka said.

"If the base crumbles, everything falls apart." Minato said. He grinned and slid in between the two of them, getting an arm around each of their waists. "But it's nothing without amazing supports. I'm lucky since all I have to do is keep standing."

"... It would seem you're a fan of this arrangement." Mitsuru said. "And you as well, Fuuka. You're surprisingly comfortable with this."

"O-oh... umm..." Fuuka said, trying to avoid looking Mitsuru in the eye. Minato chuckled.

"She's also used to doing that whenever people point the fact out." he said.

"I am not!" Fuuka said, turning back to face them. Mitsuru and Minato both laughed. "... Now even Mitsuru-senpai is going to tease me..."

"Speaking of that, you two are getting along quite well. What sparked the sudden friendship?" Minato asked.

"... It would seem Fuuka cares about her friends even more than I thought possible." Mitsuru said. "Today's outing was actually on her insistence."

"That's Fuuka for you. Isn't she adorable?" Minato mused.

"... I am, for your information." Fuuka said with a grin.

"My... and you're more outgoing than I thought." Mitsuru said.

"Let's learn a lot about each other today, shall we?" Minato asked as he moved them along in the store. At that, aside from Fuuka learning of Mitsuru's rather specific taste in bathroom supplies and possibly gleaning some of her secrets as to the maintenance of her constantly perfect hair and Mitsuru learning of Fuuka's somewhat intriguing ideas about how to freshen up a room, the trio enjoyed a fun little time while Minato raked in one of his largest profits to date. After they left, the day passed by quickly and Minato wound up returning to the Office and changing back into his usual outfit. Oddly enough, Adonis and David were busy doing paperwork, though Adonis looked like he wanted to kill himself and David was only half-paying attention. "I give you a C-minus. They're barely even trying." he said to Nemissa.

"Finally... I didn't know how much longer I could take this." Adonis said, throwing his pen away.

"And here I thought practice was a good option." David said.

"These two bastards are lazy as hell. I think I should get a B for even getting them to do something." Nemissa said. She sighed. "Didn't even have to threaten them."

"Excellent." Minato said as he dispelled his two Fiends. "That's a big sign of improvement... though I feel like you haven't quite reached where you need to be to start moving up just yet."

"Of course I haven't... I'm probably going to have to redo everything they did anyways." Nemissa said. "But... this was useful. Thanks, partner."

"Oh, that was a genuine usage... I feel honored." Minato said.

"Hmph... getting ahead of yourself again." Nemissa said. "You're a real bother, you know that? Always talking shit and then offering to help people... honestly, I don't know why anyone puts up with you. I should really just spite you and dock your pay for being such a damn upstart, but then you'd just come out even more on top... you and your unwinnable situations are so damn annoying, it makes me sick. And you get away with them too because you never really make people feel like they're losing, either... Tch. You're a damn troublesome brat... it's a wonder why I even bother to listen to you. But I guess that just means I'm a lot stupider than I think I am... and I don't know if that's a bad thing or not."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Moon Arcana...

"You could have always just said you appreciate my advice even though I'm an asshole." Minato said. "But that works too.... Though I'm still not forgetting to collect my pay."

"... Shit." Nemissa said. She pulled out a rather thick folder, and Minato got his pay. He took the time to count over 300,000 yen inside and grinned. "Alright, you greedy bastard... see you whenever. If you want to be nice to me, try skipping work a few times. You're three times as expensive as my other employees."

"Is that an invitation? If so, I'll be sure to take it." Minato said with a grin. "Then, till next time, partner." At that, he took his little bag of clothing and returned to the dorm with a single thought in his mind. *"The Moon is almost full... perfect."*

He returned to the dorm to find Mitsuru, Fuuka, and Shinjiro being the only three in the first floor lounge. While Mitsuru and Fuuka were busy diligently studying on their own at the far ends of the table, Shinjiro sat alone in the center. He had taken off his beanie and had on rather large headphones that covered his ears and blared rather loudly. From what Minato could tell, he actually was listening to French Music, and he couldn't suppress a laugh as he signed-in. Mitsuru and Fuuka both gave him a smiling wave before quickly returning to their work. Minato decided to join them, and ate a quick dinner before studying over near the lounge on his own until everyone had begun to migrate up to their rooms. He was the last to

head up, and put himself in his room just before the Dark Hour. He walked over to his window and sat on one of the chairs near the little table he set up there, watching the moon.

The Dark Hour arrived, and everything took on the same sickly green shade as the moon became an almost bright yellow. "Been expecting you." Minato said, still looking out of the window.

"It's good to see you again." Pharos said as he sat across from him. "It's strange how expectant you are of me these days... how long has it been since we first met? Time passes so quickly."

"Though sometimes it doesn't have to." Minato said. "Not if you can control it, that is. You just need enough power to pull it off."

"That's also true... although, to do so, I suppose you'd have to attain the level of 'god'... or so I've heard." Pharos said. "... But I don't remember who said it."

"It certainly wasn't me." Minato said. He chuckled. "I like how you said 'the level of god' and not that you'd have to 'become a god'."

"Well, if you're born a human or a Shadow, you can never fully change yourself. You'll always have that part of you, no matter how much you don't want to admit it." Pharos said. "You can't plug your ears or cover your eyes, after all."

"All that would do is show you just how inseparable that part of you really is... a grudge or resentment can justify an existence just as much as a desire or affection." Minato said.

"That's right." Pharos said. "Simple relativity... it doesn't matter how we watch one another. All that matters is that we watch." He chuckled. "That must sound funny from me, since I watch you all the time... and I'm wondering, how do you view your life as a Persona-user?"

"Highly entertaining." Minato said. "I get to do all the things I like and enjoy random bonuses from my interactions with others... all while becoming more and more powerful. Needless to say, I doubt there's a better man for the job than me."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Pharos said. "... Hey. Are you alright?"

"... What do you-?" Minato began, but then stopped when he noticed what looked like the same black substance that gave Shadows their body seeping out of his skin from various parts of his body and making a small sphere in the air next to him. "**WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!**" Minato yelled to his Fiends.

"... **Your friend.**" Daisoujou replied.

Minato and Pharos watched as the stream of black matter finally stopped and swirled around very slowly. Suddenly, a pure white, almost mechanical bird like helmet with jagged teeth appeared from the sphere's core, and the rest of the

sphere collapsed into a small, flowing set of black threads with small loose chains coming from the bottom. This new figure's mask seemed to be fitted for Minato's head, and with its tattered cloak and chains, it was about half of his size as it floated in the air. The being slowly turned to face the duo, and looked directly between them. It had no visible eyes, with the inside of the helmet being completely filled with the strange black substance. "... **This is all I can manage for now.**" the being said in a deep, guttural voice that seemed to reverberate through the silence of the Dark Hour. The inside of the creature's mouth could only be described as being unfathomably black. Light seemed incapable of entering its mouth as it hung slightly open, staring at the moon.

"I was wondering when you'd appear." Pharos said.

"... So the other part of me makes his entrance." Minato said. He chuckled. "Does this make us a triumvirate?"

"Triumvirates fall apart... we will not." the creature said.

"Heh... then, what's your name, friend?" Minato asked.

"I... do not know." the creature said.

"Oh... you can't remember either?" Pharos asked. "That's too bad..."

"... You're oddly acceptant of him, Pharos. Do you know him well?" Minato asked.

"He's... something neither of us can run away from." Pharos said. "I don't know why... but I think it's because he's long since become a part of you."

"I can no longer leave... but I no longer wish to." the creature said. **"I only wish to be whole again... and Minato has chosen a path that allows for it."**

"And once you're whole, you'll serve under me." Minato said with a smirk.

"As long as you remain true to yourself, I will." the creature said.

"Interesting... an old friend appears when I remember something from long ago." Pharos said. "The coming of the end... it's tied to an incident that took place many years ago... Ten years ago, if I remember correctly. Though, you've already made that connection, so this might be useless information."

"Confirmation is never useless." Minato said. "Still... what do you remember about ten years ago?" he asked the creature that appeared next to them.

"... I lost everything." the creature said. **"And... I awoke... without my body."**

"... So you had wound up inside of me ten years ago." Minato said. "Or at least, somewhere in that time frame before your possession attempts."

"I remember those." Pharos said. "It's nice to see that you two are getting along now... you can see what happens when you fight each other if you go into that Tower, after all."

"We end up with a fourth friend... one that's rather dangerous." Minato said.

"The Reaper..." the creature said.

"She's one scary lady... it's a good thing you don't have to talk to her a lot, huh?" Pharos mused.

"No kidding... I prefer to avoid being riddled with lead." Minato said. He turned to the creature once more. "So... did you know our parents?"

"Our parents?" Pharos asked.

"We're all family as far as I'm concerned." Minato said.

"... I knew... a man that looked like you." the creature said.

"And... a great being... more powerful than even I was."

"... Mother." Pharos said.

"Interesting... do you have anything you can tell us about either of them?" Minato asked.

"... No." the creature said. **"Not yet... I do not remember everything... yet."**

"Just like me... and you, I guess." Pharos said. He giggled.

"We're all amnesiacs, aren't we?"

Minato chuckled. "You've got that right." he said. "And I think all of us have had quite a few experiences with death."

"... **Death...**" the creature repeated. Minato swore the air around it seemed to darken, as if it was gathering energy, but the aura soon vanished.

"... I don't think either of us has anything else to say." Pharos said, watching the creature. He turned back to Minato. "I wonder... are we really mirrors of one another?" At that, both Minato and Pharos made their presence known to the creature. He saw Minato as the great spectral black human skull and Pharos as the almost complimentary black ram skull. Minato and Pharos saw nothing save the white mask atop the black cloak, but the cloak seemed to envelop everything around it as the creature responded by displaying its own power. After a few seconds like that, all of them relaxed and returned to normal.

"Perhaps we are... none of us are really what we appear to be." Minato said.

"**And only we know it to be true.**" the creature said. Its body began to dissipate, and the mask broke apart as the black substance flooded back into Minato through his skin. After the odd sensation, he found himself sitting across from Pharos once more.

"That may be true... but regardless of what the truth is... I will

stay with you." Pharos said. He smiled. "We're brothers, after all."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Death Arcana...

With that, Pharos disappeared from in front of Minato, leaving him by the window. Minato said nothing, merely watching his empty room once more. After a few short minutes, he decided to make himself some tea and return to his studies. *"Brothers, huh?... I like that. It's only fitting for someone like me to have such an odd family. They're rather likeable... very likeable."*

89. Chapter 89

Chapter 89:

Author Note: So, BLACK FLAME09 has released Persona 4: Devils May Care. This started as a challenge response to Dubious Days and then took on a life of its own (so quite a bit of the challenge bits on my profile are different). You should all check it out and judge for yourselves whether or not you like it, but you'll have to make sure your filter doesn't block rated 'M' stuff to find it.

Author Note to DesertSeagull: That's high praise. I accept. However, I'm more impressed that you ran through 88 chapters in a single sitting!

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: I believe you mean where's my takoyaki XD but damn, I guess this is what happens when you try to make every character three-dimensional. Nice thoughts, so here are the answers I'm willing to give... no spoilers for the first one, but as for the second one, I can say that the majority of the involvement of the P3R characters in Persona 4 Re\$tile (yes, official title) will be minor. After all, P4's cast deserves their own stories too.

Author Note to fanfictheory: Well thought out...I'll leave the interpretation to the readers at this point.

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: No, I will not include Tera or Aqua spells, but... I'M GLAD YOU POINTED THAT OUT! See, this is just a little thing I've realized when playing SMT games. A 'Zan' animation is usually a circular vortex that surrounds the target area and spreads out. A 'Garu' animation is usually more of a wind spiral that goes upwards, consuming a portion of the target and swirling around to a focused point above the ground. While these are both wind attacks, if you take the animation into account and the distinction of 'Zan' being force, then you can logic out that...

Zan – Wind meant to push. It doesn't 'consume' the target, rather, it hits them like a rough impact. The less violent of the two, though it is almost a guaranteed knock down unless the target resists wind. Used by Jin and Takaya.

Garu – Wind meant to cut. It does 'consume' the target, and uses thin wind blades at high speed to repeatedly cut the target. The more violent of the two, though it will only knock down if the target is weak to wind. Used by Yukari and Minato (though Matador's Tornado is 'Zan' based).

... And cue nerd boos.

Monday morning, the day before their semester's finals. Minato was in an excellent mood as he prepared the last morning's breakfast before Mitsuru initiated Minatodai Lockdown for the upcoming tests. *"Hmm... no Social Links that day, but that's not too bad. I think I've been doing well, and if my year ends in the next nine months, then I'm ahead of the game right now."* Minato thought. *"As long as I make sure to get Judgment and Aeon soon, I'll be fine... though I've yet to see a singular Persona of either Arcana yet. Maybe they're not coming because of how inherently powerful they are... which means I have more time to acquire them."*

He was surprised when everyone else actually ate a markedly quiet breakfast. Aside from the usual good mornings and occasional question about whether or not everyone was prepared for finals, nothing of real interest happened. Thus, he made his way to school as usual, and once again went ahead of the group to see if he could catch any interesting bits of conversation with his headphones on. His attention was caught by a rather loud sigh, the source of which was one of two girls walking side by side.

"Finals start tomorrow... I feel like we just finished exams a little while ago." the sighing girl said.

"What am I going to do if I fail again? I wish the school wouldn't post our names..." her companion said.

"Yeah, that's the worst part... You get a bad grade, and

everyone looks at you like one of those Apathy victims that started mumbling all of a sudden..." the sighing girl said. "I wonder if they're saying the names of the next victims or something crazy like that... a couple people I know that used to mess with them came down with it a while back, so I wonder if they're like targeting all the people that walk by or something."

"Augh, c'mon!" her companion said. "One of those weirdos stands around my apartment complex, and I have to go around it all the time! Ughh.... If I come down with it, I'm saying your name first!"

"W-what?! I was just trying to get my mind off exams..." the sighing girl said. She let out another huge sigh. "... Maybe I should start messing with some of them so I can get it quick..."

"... They're mumbling now?" Minato thought. *"This isn't looking good... if they've gained control of their mouths, pretty soon, the body will follow... and that's a disaster waiting to happen."*

He headed off to class and took his seat rather early, making sure he could take a quick head count of the number of students in class. After everyone entered, he managed to count twenty-nine students; two more than were present in the week before the last operation. He tapped Yukari on the shoulder and then knocked on Junpei's desk as they sat down, getting both of their attentions. "I have bad news. The Lost are starting to make noise." Minato said.

"... What kind of noise?" Yukari asked, quickly turning serious.

"You mean... that thing about them all mumbling and shit was serious?" Junpei asked.

"That's right... but where'd you hear that?" Minato asked.

"Kazushi... you know, the track kid that sits opposite to Kenji?" Junpei asked.

"Ah, the one always in a track suit. I'd almost forgotten due to this school's blatant disregard for uniform." Minato said. He chuckled. "Though, social commentary aside, how'd he know?"

"He passes by a couple on his morning run, and he just heard em' all whispering. I thought he was just going so fast the wind was getting into his ears, but... if you heard the same thing, then this is legit." Junpei said.

"I heard the same thing from one of the girls outside." Yukari said. "You don't think... this might become something big, do you?"

"I know it will." Minato said. "The question is, will I have to eliminate them all or is there another option available? While I have no problems with wiping them off the face of this planet, I'm certain that you, Mitsuru, the JSDF, and the families of the victims would much prefer a less drastic effort. However, if the situation does call for it, I expect all of you to be prepared to do what must be done as well."

"... You mean we're going to have to fight... people? Like, zombies?" Junpei asked.

"You're going to have to kill people." Minato said.

"Hey, I did not sign up for that!" Yukari said. "Our enemies are the Shadows, not their victims!"

"Again, this is only if the Lost begin to either threaten us or the general population... as of now, they're harmless. We can live with them. Though, if you haven't noticed, their behavior seems to change as we defeat more and more Shadows that appear during full moons... and with six left, I'm certain somewhere along the lines, we're going to see something happen." Minato said. "I'll bring this up with everyone else back at the dorm tonight. We'll continue then."

"Yeah... I wanna hear what our senpai have to say here..." Junpei said.

"... Alright." Yukari said, turning back around in her seat as Ms. Toriumi walked into the classroom. The day flew by quickly with every teacher essentially drilling in some quick review in each subject. Minato spent his time going through it with a rather bored expression, since he already knew most of it. Regardless, he knew the power of 'rinse and repeat' when it came to school, so he made sure to pay enough attention throughout the day.

In the early afternoon at Iwatodai's Port, Takaya shook hands with the crab fishing boat's manager one last time as the

representative of his group. They stood near the water, blocked off by a few large freight containers so that nobody save all involved parties was present. Ikutsuki stood alongside Sho and the rest of the members while some crewmen counted a suitcase full of money behind the ship's manager. "There'll never be another spear-fisherman like you to ever grace our boat. That necklace is proof of it." the manager said as he looked at Takaya's new necklace of Orca teeth.

"And never shall I receive such a skilled culinary partner either." Takaya said. "To cook even octopi so perfectly in that rig's kitchen... your existence is a worthy one. Let us hope we never meet again."

"Indeed." the manager said. They stopped shaking hands, shared one quick nod, and then parted ways. Takaya nodded to Ikutsuki, and their group walked out of the freight yard and towards a small limousine that remained beyond the fenced entrance. Ikutsuki held the door open, allowing everyone to get in before him, and entered last. With a few quick knocks, the driver began to head for the warehouse that everyone save Ikutsuki and Sho resided in.

"It seems as though all of you had a good time." Ikutsuki said.

"Bullshit. You how friggin' hard it is to haul those fuckin' cages up one after the other?" Sho asked. "Those shits are heavy... especially when this goddamn shut-in can barely pull his own weight!"

"If it wasn't for me, you ungrateful fuck, we would've lost Unit

31." Jin said. "I don't remember your ass flying through a storm with her container."

"Tch... just because your shit Persona can fly-" Sho began, but was silenced by a quick smack on the head by Ikutsuki.

"That's enough, Sho." Ikutsuki said. "Now... I'm terribly sorry for this entire trip. I have no idea why the pilot would've decided to cut through a storm instead of detouring around it... but what matters is that all of you are safe and sound. You are essential to the creation of the new world, after all... one where you'll all get whatever you want. The transport for the ASWs left a little while back, so you don't need to worry about them anymore."

"We know that." Hamuko said. "But right now, I'm tired as hell... I think I'm gonna sleep for a week before I get back up."

"No can do. I can already tell the job requests have piled up." Jin said.

"... Summer is the time of misunderstanding, after all." Chidori said. Hamuko sighed.

"Why do you have to remind me?" she asked. Koromaru moved over and began licking her, but she had no reaction at all.

"So there is more prey... I can only hope that they will be as exciting of a challenge as that which resides in the ocean."

Takaya said.

"... In other news, I'm going to be out of town for a few days in about a week or so." Ikutsuki said. "I'm doing a morale boost for the hunting party... which brings me to my next big cause for concern. When are you intending to motivate them?"

"Next full moon." Jin said. "There's no point in us just showing up out of the blue and attacking them... besides, if they aren't ready for a fight when we show up, we might just kill them. And you already told us that can't start going down just yet."

"Which is lame... why bother fighting if you don't get to kill them?" Hamuko asked.

"Didn't you hear? We're motivating them." Chidori said.

"It was a rhetorical question, Chidori." Ikutsuki said.

"However, that is the case... and I'm glad that you took that into account. If you appeared as anything less than a serious threat, their leader would likely have just blown you off anyways. Remember, be careful around him... he's hard to miss since he's the first one to enter direct combat and the last to run."

"He looks like Jin if Jin were actually good looking, right?" Hamuko asked.

"Like you have any taste in men." Jin said.

"Then you have better?" Chidori asked, catching Jin off guard.

"You'd need to know it to be able to critique someone else's." Sho said with a grin. "I bet you REALLY like Topsicles, huh?"

"Nah, he only goes for the real thing." Hamuko added.

"Go fuck yourselves, all of you." Jin said. Ikutsuki sighed.

"If it's not emo-kids, it's obnoxious brats..." he muttered to himself. Takaya chuckled when he heard him. Needless to say, their limousine conversation very quickly deteriorated into a bit of a shouting contest.

At Gekkoukan, the day had just ended, and Minato rose from his desk wondering how to spend the day before going back to the dorm. *"I don't want to bother with Hazama today, and Kazuya seems like a far stretch... Ken, perhaps, or... hmm... wow, today is rather lacking in opportunity."* Minato thought. *"Maybe Akihiko? He seemed to get into a bit of a problem recently..."* He was about to leave the classroom when Junpei came over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yo, Minato... uhh, you mind hearin' me out for a sec?" Junpei asked.

"... What's up?" Minato asked, turning to face him. *"Trying to finish yourself off, Magician?"*

"It's about Kenji, actually... we sorta made a plan to try and get him to confront Emiri, and even though he's pretty insistent that you've got your own problems and stuff, which... well, we know is bullshit. He wouldn't ask you himself, so... yeah, I'm

askin' for him." Junpei said.

"... This probably won't result in the final rank since it isn't about Junpei." Minato thought. *"But, it could accelerate my acquisition of it... and prove entertaining."* He chuckled. "He's too big of a man for his own good. Let's go meet him." he said.

"Heh... thanks. I might be his go-to, but I know when I'm not enough." Junpei said. "He's by the store right now."

With that, Junpei and Minato walked down to the main hallway and found Kenji standing alone near the school store. He turned with a slightly pained expression once he saw Minato come over alongside Junpei. "Dude, why'd you call him out? My problems aren't any more important than his." Kenji said. He turned to Minato. "Hey, I'm sorry about this bro... I know you've got stuff to deal with, so you don't need to worry about me, alright?"

"You expect me to leave after that speech? You might as well have begged for me to stay." Minato said with a grin. "Yeah, I've got problems. But I handle them in my own way, and I'm much less affected than you. Besides, I've got things lined up for over the summer, since my problems are close to home. You, on the other hand, need help now. I'm not watching you sink yourself because you're too concerned about dragging somebody else down with you."

"... Dude... why'd you have to say it like that?" Kenji asked, cracking a slight grin. "Now Junpei's gonna know I don't mind

asking him because he doesn't have a girlfriend."

"... Wait, seriously?! That's why you ask me for help?!" Junpei yelled.

"Well, yeah... you don't have anything to really take up your time." Kenji said. Minato laughed.

"He's got a point there." he said.

"I see you... fine... when I get a girlfriend, just you watch. I'm abandoning both of you guys in a heartbeat!" Junpei said.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there." Minato said.
"Still, I hear you have plans with Ms. K. Care to share?"

"... Look. I know Emiri is going to head towards her office over by the sports fields to finalize her tests. I'm going to walk in and confront her in there... but I'll need you guys to make sure nobody's around when it happens. I don't want this blowing up... it'd ruin her job." Kenji said. "You get it, right?"

"So we're watchmen?" Minato asked. "No problem. We should hurry and take our positions ASAP to make sure you catch her."

"Yeah, we used up too much time already. Let's go." Junpei said, heading off towards the sports fields.

"... Thanks." Kenji said, quickly following them. After a bit of fast walking, they reached the hallway with Ms. Kanou's office and stood near the corner. The hallway had one real

entrance, with the other side consisting of restrooms and water fountains. They hid near the restrooms, certain that nobody was inside either. "Okay, now we just wait for Emiri... well, since there are two of you, one of you can distract anyone who comes by while the other waits by the door. If things go bad, the person by the door knocks and I try to turn my talk into a counseling session... which should hopefully work."

"Not a bad plan at all... Junpei, I'll leave the door to you. No offense, but I'm better at misdirection." Minato said.

"None taken... but, how will I know if you can't stop em'?" Junpei asked.

"I'll do my whistle." Minato said.

"... Your whistle?" Kenji asked.

"Wheet-who." Minato replied.

"Yeah, he actually can't whistle... occasionally, he does that in place of it. Not too often, though." Junpei said.

"Oh... wait, I think somebody's coming." Kenji said. The trio fell silent and hid behind the corner, watching the hallway to see who was approaching. Sure enough, Ms. Kanou came in looking rather bored, and quietly entered her office. The group waited for about a minute as Kenji took a series of deep breaths.

"... Alright. Here goes." Kenji said. He left their hiding corner and entered Ms. Kanou's office. Junpei followed quickly and took his position near the door while Minato moved over to the singular entrance hallway and rested his back against the wall. He put one headphone on and began listening to music, appearing nonchalant as he overlooked the hallway.

Ms. Kanou quickly turned around to see Kenji enter her office, and sighed. "I told you we can't be seen at school, Kenji... so why are you here?" she asked.

"Emiri... I know you're engaged to another man." Kenji said.

"... What are you talking about?" Ms. Kanou asked.

"I get that you're trying to hide it... and I know it's just because I'm a kid. But... I saw you, Emiri. At the train station... you were talking to your fiancé about waiting to get married." Kenji said. Ms. Kanou quickly realized that her original ignorance plea wasn't working, and decided to use her newfound intimacy with Kenji to her advantage. She switched from her usual upbeat smile to one with a hint of sadness.

"... Kenji, you know why I didn't say anything." Ms. Kanou said. "When you heard I was going to Kyushuu, you took it so badly... I didn't want you to have to go through that again. You're such a sweet boy, and I wish we could be together... But if we go any further –"

"I'll just get hurt again, right?" Kenji interrupted. "I know that... I know I'm going to get into so much trouble for doing this.

Nobody will understand... but that doesn't matter. Don't you get it, Emiri? I'd have the whole world hate me, call me a loser or a freak, if it meant YOU were still with me!"

"That's... just like you." Ms. Kanou said. "You're such a passionate boy, full of hopes and dreams... but you have to realize someday that not everything can have a happy ending."

"... I know that." Kenji said as he closed his eyes. He clenched his fists and took a few shaky breaths. "Nobody ever just gets a perfect life... But you can work for it! I can work for it!" he suddenly snapped. "I'm not a boy! I'm a man! I'd do anything for you... please. I'm begging you. We can get through this together, Emiri... I swear."

Ms. Kanou watched and listened to Kenji's heartfelt plea with utter joy beneath her affected exterior. Inwardly, she was popping a bottle of champagne to celebrate her complete and utter control over the best toy she'd ever held in the palm of her hands. This boy was willing to devote himself to her, to worship her if she so wished... and she was already designing a situation for just that in her head. "... You're serious, aren't you?" she asked. "This isn't something you can just decide like that. It'll change your entire life."

"I might be young... but I'm ready." Kenji said. Ms. Kanou let out a slight chuckle.

"Do you know how strange that sounds?" she asked, suddenly catching him off guard.

"N-not like that! I'm being serious here!" Kenji said. "Please, Emiri... just give me a chance. Maybe that other guy might be better for you, but I love you... I really do. If... if this type of stuff only works in movies... then both of us are superstars!"

"... It's that kind of line the shows you're still a boy." Ms. Kanou said.

"Emiri..." Kenji said. Ms. Kanou walked over to him and put a hand on his cheek.

"But that's not always a bad thing..." she said as she put her face right in front of his. "Maybe... I need a boy like you... to remind me that I'm not alone."

"... You already have me." Kenji said.

"... Then remind me." Ms. Kanou said.

While Kenji went about 'reminding' Ms. Kanou exactly how much of him she owned, Minato stood guard near the hallway like a hawk. He had even employed his Fiends to do a quick scout of the area, and found that the only doors he had to be wary of were back-exits to the boy's and girl's locker rooms. He suspected nothing would happen since finals were coming up, but was proven wrong when the girl's locker room back-exit opened. The two girls to emerge were Rio and a brown-skinned girl with oddly white lips and, brown eyes, and surprisingly light black hair. Both of them had on the school's grey track suit, and seemed a bit tired.

"Whew, a good run the day before exams really clears your head, huh?" the brown-skinned girl asked with a stretch. "Still, how do you not know that you have to-"

"What are you doing here?" Rio asked when she saw Minato walk up to the two of them.

"Huh?" Minato asked, completely confused.

"I asked what you were doing here." Rio said.

"Oh? You two know each other?" the brown-skinned girl asked.

"Rio and I are very close acquaintances." Minato said. "We were almost boyfriend and girlfriend once, you know?"

"... So you're THE Minato, then!" the brown-skinned girl said.

"Do you see anyone other charming blue-haired, gray-eyed boy wandering around the halls?" Minato asked with a shrug.

"Presumptuous as ever." Rio said. "Still, what are you wandering around back here for? Don't tell me you're trying something weird on the girls that pass by here. Yuko, I hope you're not rusty with that Tae Kwon Do... this guy can fight."

"Hey, isn't that being a little drastic?" Yuko asked. "I mean, this place is nice and quiet... maybe he was just trying to relax."

"... So you two really don't know what I'm here for then?"

Minato asked. "I mean, I've already had a few girls who know the deal come visit me, but... I guess I can explain it if you'd like."

"... Girls who know the deal?" Rio asked. Minato chuckled.

"Let me explain. Midterms and finals are such stressful times... people do all sorts of things to cope, and it can get destructive." Minato said. "One of the unlisted reasons for my being the 'Dog' of the Council is to help relieve the stress of overworked girls who are usually referred to me by the Health Committee."

"... And how would you do that?" Yuko asked.

"Well, that depends." Minato said, getting rather close to both of them. "If you hold a collar in your hand, then you can have your way with an obedient dog... but if you come without a collar, then you can see what a dog in heat can really do."

"WOAH WOAH WOAH WHAT?!" Rio yelled, suddenly backing away. "Y-you can't be serious right now!" she continued. Minato chuckled.

"Don't worry. I'm used to sharing... and being shared." Minato said with a grin. He moved his hand to Yuko's collar and lightly tugged at it. "So... since you don't have a collar, I take it the word 'ravage' excites you?" Minato had to try very hard to contain a laugh when Yuko began to have a nosebleed, completely frozen in place. He turned his attention back to Rio. "I know you might think one at a time is the proper way to

go about this... but there are some pleasures that can only be experienced with three people. I can show you all of them."

"Uhh..." Rio began.

"Don't worry about screaming... nobody's around here at this time." Minato said. "We can be as loud and as dirty as we want... can't kick the janitors out of a job now, can we?"

"W-we just w-want to use the bathroom, so..." Rio continued.

"Hmm... well, I suppose I can let that pass since you were unaware." Minato said. He got on one knee, running his fingertips down the still frozen Yuko's tracksuit very slowly. He licked his lips and aimed his head upwards. "Your personal toilet is right here." he said, leaving his mouth open after he spoke. Rio's eyes bulged ridiculously in her head as her nose began to bleed as well.

"... A-are you... r-really serious?" Yuko finally whispered.

"Are you?" Minato asked, tugging at her pants' waist.

"D-don't encourage him! It only m-makes him bolder!" Rio said, trying to wipe away her nosebleed.

"Too late. I've already claimed this one." Minato thought.

"Nobody will ever know... no commitments, no inquiries, no judgments... just release." he said.

"Y-you... man-whore!" Rio said, walking over to pull Yuko away as she stood in almost hypnotic contemplation.

"Don't let the restraints of society bind you. Here, we can do as we please... as you please." Minato said as Yuko was quickly pulled away. Yuko looked like she was going to say something, but Rio had forced her back into the girl's locker room before she had the chance and swiftly entered after her. Minato chuckled quietly as he rose to his feet and returned to his guard spot. *"Heh... that was fun. Wonder if anything else interesting will happen."* he thought.

After a few more minutes, he heard the door open and two sets of footsteps approaching. When he turned, he saw a rather happy, somewhat disheveled looking Kenji and an excited Junpei walk into the hall. "So? How big of a success?" Junpei asked.

"... I think I can get Emiri to back out of her engagement." Kenji said. "She's not sure, but... she's thinking about it too. She loves me, you know?"

"Congrats, bro!" Junpei said with a tip of his hat. "Damn... talk about doing what you have to."

"Heh... I knew you could pull it off." Minato said. "Are we going out for a ramen celebration or what?... Actually, no. You probably need to make sure you ace these finals, don't you?"

"Yup. I need to get into a good college, after all. Can't start disappointing Emiri this early, after all!" Kenji mused. "Sorry guys, I need to be home an hour ago. Later!"

With that, Kenji took off and left school. Junpei and Minato

decided that they might as well head back to the dorm immediately so they could do a follow-up on their findings with the Lost. They arrived quickly, and found everyone already seated in the lounge, with Mitsuru, Shinjiro, and Akihiko claiming the chair against the wall to make a study trio while Fuuka and Yukari each took one of the single chairs to work on their own. Mitsuru was the one to notice the duo enter. "Welcome back. I'd like to announce that our official lockdown is now active... anyone who leaves the dorm for anything other than attending exams will be executed without question." she greeted.

"Yikes... nice to see ya too, senpai." Junpei said.

"Of course... but before that, there is some quick business about the Lost that I need to discuss." Minato said. That caught everyone else's attention, though Yukari merely straightened in her seat since she knew this was coming, but still paid attention. "Now, with the help of Yukari and Junpei, I've confirmed that since we've defeated the last two full moon Shadows, the Lost have begun to mumble. While this may not seem like anything important, the fact is that they are starting to become more and more active as we defeat more and more of the Shadows that appear on full moons... and I get the feeling they might begin to exhibit dangerous tendencies with the more Shadows we deal with. I'd like all of your opinions on how to deal with them if that should happen."

"... So you a storm really is approaching." Akihiko said.

"You noticed it too, huh, Aki?" Shinjiro asked. "Tch... shit is

going to get complicated if this starts to speed up."

"... I see. The more Shadows we defeat, the more active the Lost become... and if they can already begin to slightly move and speak on their own now, after only beginning to exhibit any signs of change after the fourth Shadow fell... if they continue to change at this rate, or even worse, at an increasing rate... this could spell disaster." Mitsuru said.

"I maintain the approach I told Akihiko... if they become a threat to us or the city, we eliminate them all. Hundreds of deaths for thousands of lives... not the best trade off, but one that's guaranteed to work." Minato said. "The only possible downside is that every one of you will get to join the Murderer's Club, but it's actually quite nice in my opinion." he mused.

"You... well, I can't really say anything there." Yukari said. "He's right... I've been thinking about it, and... if they start hurting people, we have to be the ones to stop them. And if knocking them down doesn't work, then we..."

"... Keep them down." Fuuka said. She gulped. "Double-tap rule, huh?"

"Hey... that's a big-ass jump in logic." Shinjiro said. "I'll fight all of them my goddamn self before we start forcing people to murder, so you throw that plan out the fucking window right now."

"... Shinji-senpai, he's got a point." Junpei said. "I mean, if we

know they're going to start doing something... shouldn't we be ready to... do what we've got to do?"

"If the enemy stands before us... we will give them no quarter." Mitsuru said. "Whether that enemy be the Shadows... or their creations."

The entire lobby fell silent as everyone contemplated what they were going to do. The tension grew heavy, and Fuuka was the first one to try and break it. "Um... y-you know, everyone, it's almost summer break. Do you have any plans?" she asked very quietly. Junpei turned to her and forced a grin.

"I wish I could go the beach." he said. "Hot sand, cool breezes... babes in bikinis... man, it sure would be nice!" he continued, gradually raising his voice and demeanor.

"Somewhere in the south, where the water is crystal clear! But first, we have exams to worry about... Man, what a drag, huh?"

"Now, now. You'll be fine! I'd love to go somewhere famous for its beautiful beaches, like Okinawa." Fuuka said, trying to match his attitude.

"You can run from the question all you'd like... but when the time comes, you better know what your answer is. None of you can die before I finish your cards off, so I need to know if I'm fighting the Lost with or without support." Minato thought.

"Well, it's not Okinawa, but how about Yakushima?" Ikutsuki asked as he suddenly entered the dorm.

"Mr. Chairman... I didn't know you'd be coming to visit today." Mitsuru said.

"I happened to be in the area, so I thought I'd drop by and tell you my schedule for next week." Ikutsuki said. "Mitsuru, your father will be vacationing in Yakushima during the break."

"He will...?" Mitsuru asked, rather surprised by the news.

"You'll all have some time off after exams, right? Why don't you go and pay him a surprise visit?" Ikutsuki suggested.

"Seriously?! We're gonna go on a trip?! YES! Beach babes, here I come!" Junpei said, no longer needing to fake any enthusiasm.

"Heh... bet I can score more than you." Minato said.

"... You really wanna make another competition out of this?" Shinjiro asked.

"Another? ... Wait, why is this the first time I've heard of this?" Akihiko asked.

Yukari let out a big sigh. "Men..." she said as she shook her head.

"How about it, Mitsuru?" Ikutsuki asked.

"But... my father is a very busy man. The requests and calls I make to him for SEES' operations are already taxing his time... I don't want to ruin his vacation." Mitsuru said.

"Haha, don't worry... No father would be upset with a daughter who came all the way to see him. You've all done a great job. You deserve to relax for a while. We already know when the next operation will be, so it should be fine."

"... Actually, you're right." Mitsuru said with a slight grin.
"Everyone needs a break now and then... and none are more deserving of one than the people in this room. Let's do it."

"Woohoo!" Junpei yelled.

"Ah, I wonder what the fish will be like." Minato said.

"Fish?" Fuuka asked.

"He's talking about the girls." Shinjiro said.

"The beach... maybe I should design a special training regimen." Akihiko said.

"Dude, I'm stoked!" Junpei continued.

"Oh... hmm, that reminds me. I need to buy a swim suit..."
Fuuka said.

"Hey, don't worry. I've got an extra pair you can borrow."
Junpei said.

"Nice try, man." Akihiko said, noticing Yukari's sudden look of disapproval that seemed to hit Junpei and stop him dead in his tracks.

"Are you going to swim too, Ikutsuki?" Fuuka asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know how to, actually, eheheh... I'm a bird in water." Ikutsuki said.

"And a fish out of it." Minato added.

"... Though that may seem true, I actually do a lot of work, you know?" Ikutsuki replied.

As the banter for the trip continued, Minato noticed Mitsuru and Yukari both stealthily make their ways to the stairs. He left them alone, deciding that it was for the best if they sorted out their own problems. Mitsuru had gotten to the second floor when Yukari caught up to her.

"Um, senpai!" Yukari called, getting Mitsuru's attention. "Uh... sorry about the other day... I got a little carried away..."

"... Don't worry about it. You had a point. I shouldn't have gotten anyone to fight without a reason... that's tantamount to leading a slow mass suicide." Mitsuru said.

"... I didn't know you... felt that way." Yukari said.

"Are you implying that I'm not entirely human?" Mitsuru asked.

"Huh? N-no, not at all!" Yukari said, raising her hands in defense. Mitsuru chuckled.

"That was a joke, Yukari... it would seem Junpei is a better teacher than he believes." Mitsuru said.

"... Junpei is a teacher?" Yukari asked.

"His payment for my tutelage." Mitsuru said.

"Oh... ok." Yukari said. "Then... I hope you're really excited about this trip."

"Actually, it makes sense that we're going to Yakushima. The Chairman said that no one who was responsible for the accident is still alive, but... in reality, there is one witness who survived." Mitsuru said.

"There is?" Yukari asked.

"My father." Mitsuru said. "And though I doubt this is the usual interruption from 'daddy's little girl', as most would say, this... has to be done." With that, she turned back up the stairs and headed for her room. Yukari said nothing, simply watching as she left.

As for the rest of the night, nothing of real interest happened. With Mitsuru's lockdown in place, everyone soon dropped the excitement from the trip and hastily went straight to studying. Ikutsuki had little to say after his news, and left quickly to give everyone their space. Minato made sure to finish up his studying. He had a feeling Mitsuru would start her competition up again, and he had a feeling he could get away with asking for a much better prize if he felt like it.

90. Chapter 90

Chapter 90: The First Finals

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Yakushima cometh. Get ready.

Author Note to fanfictheory: ... The last few, I saw them... didn't see this one at all. You'll have to elaborate well, because I've got nothing for you.

Author Note to hmmm: No relationship spoilers.

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: No. The one time he let David use his body, he went too far and got Minato slapped and then executed (which he realized he enjoyed, but still). So, he has a well-established rule that his Fiends can counsel him, but never dictate his actions.

Author Note to DesertSeagull: Minato gains Fiends with every great fight where he proves himself, so pretty much. Also, if you recall, Minato has his own Candelabrum which he is lighting within the Velvet Room with fifteen candles. He has seven lit as of current. While the Fiends have a sense of identity, they are not full beings: It is their trade off for being immortal beings

(after all, even if obliterated, they can just regenerate, though it takes a while).

Minato cannot use Fusion Spells because the Card of the Beast, though giving him a LOT of fusion benefits in regards to his Persona, it strips away their individualities. Fusion spells require UNIQUE Personae to perform; without an individual presence, Minato's Personas are vessels that serve his bidding. Notice they almost never talk save for the Jack Brothers, and though unwritten, that was because of Jack the Ripper's interference in their fusion. To make up for this, however, Minato can do bastardized multi-spells as shown before (double Magaru, double Poison Mist, etc.). Oh, and yes, it will be noisy. Every bit of power has a price; the Fiends, aside from being a binding contract to Lucifer, also include the price of having to deal with their voices in his head, though they are usually quiet unless something interesting is happening.

Minato can summon without his Evoker, though it has been pointed out early on that summoning with an Evoker focuses mental power and is less draining. In addition, he is limited to summoning only two Personae at combat efficient levels (when he fought Fuuka during the Shirakawa Operation, he summons Jack and Matador on the roof silently, though they are killed before being able to attack) without his Evoker. He can summon more, such as when he calls his host of Fiends to clean or help

him move breakfast over to the table, but they aren't exactly combat worthy. Hence, he only goes over two Personas at once in combat using his Evoker.

If you want to submit any ideas, PM me. I'll reply to them in the same manner.

Minato prepared a grand breakfast for the first day of the finals. As always, Mitsuru was the first downstairs, though she was quickly followed by Fuuka, then Akihiko and Shinjiro, and finally Junpei and Yukari. They all sat at the table, prepared to eat, until Mitsuru cleared her throat. "Everyone, I believe you remember the competition I put into place last time." Mitsuru said. "As previously, anyone capable of scoring higher than me shall be granted one wish."

"I already know what I'm picking." Minato said with a grin. He winked at Mitsuru. "Hope you're ready." Akihiko, who had been drinking some tea, almost spat everything out, giving Minato a good laugh.

"Alright! Yakushima and a wish!" Junpei said. "Heh, you guys aren't ready for the true mastermind... while all of you have been all sad and pouting, guess who's been hitting the books like never before? That's right, Junpei Iori, the Extraordinary Academic!"

"More like Extra-Ordinary Academic." Yukari said. "What do you think you are, some type of genius?"

"Actually, a master waits for their opponent so show

weakness before striking." Fuuka said. "Although a true master paralyzes their opponent, leaving them vulnerable to attack... wait... Were you secretly studying very hard after bringing up everything a few days ago?"

"... Sometimes, I don't get how you think at all, Fuuka..." Yukari said.

"Why the heck are you all getting so gung-ho about it? We already know Minato's gonna win." Shinjiro said. "That guy probably just studies while all of us are asleep."

"Hit the nail on the head, Shinji." Minato said. He chuckled. "I guess that's what makes you good with a hammer, huh?"

"... Why did you adopt the Chairman's sense of humor, again?" Akihiko asked.

"Hey, aren't we forgetting that I was the guy with the brilliant plan to strike when all of you guys were busy with other stuff?" Junpei asked.

"That's not really something you go for in a friendly competition." Akihiko said.

"What? C'mon... fine. I'll show you guys when the results are posted." Junpei said. With that, he adjusted his cap and quickly went back to eating. With every member of SEES mentally prepped for the exams, they all headed off to school to start their trials under Mitsuru's watchful eye.

Finals, Day 1 Results:

Minato Arisato: Foolish, Edogawa. Foolishness. You have chosen to adopt the dark... to think you can test a man who has merged with it on its contents... idiocy.

Junpei Iori: Damn, that one test you literally can't freakin' study for... ain't gnostic like a part of Christianity or something?

Yukari Takeba: Geez... What kind of school even allows a teacher to test people on occult stuff?

Fuuka Yamagishi: Hmm... I never really understood why Mr. Edogawa taught this subject... I guess it's good I have copies of a lot of the texts he references on my laptop...

Akihiko Sanada: French up first? Well, I haven't practiced that much, but this shouldn't be too bad... as long as they aren't all about myths again.

Shinjiro Aragaki: Ou est to papa? Dis-moi est ton papa? Sans meme devoir lui parler... shit. I wrote parlor instead...

Mitsuru Kirijio: Cela est insultant... I'll have a few words with Mr. Toudou again. This test re-used far too much of the same vocabulary as the last.

Finals, Day 2 Results:

Minato Arisato: Classic Literature and English Composition combined, eh? Wonder if I should threaten Mr. Ekoda to give

me extra credit this time... Or maybe I can get all playful with Isako in the essay... or both... hmm...

Junpei Iori: Hey, I remember this question! ... I cheated on it with Minato, but I know the answer! And that's what counts! Hah! Take that, test!

Yukari Takeba: Ugh, literature... I spent too much time looking into the incident to get a good chance to memorize all the online notes... well, at least the English isn't that hard.

Fuuka Yamagishi: An easy one! I remember reading all of these, and I've practiced more than enough English!

Akihiko Sanada: Tch... the one thing I don't bother paying too much attention to. Looks like it's coming around to bite me.

Shinjiro Aragaki: Like hell I read any of that shit.

Mitsuru Kirijio: Simple memorization and thematic analysis... however, it was nice to see some of the more light-hearted pieces on the test.

Finals, Day 3 Results:

Minato Arisato: You know, if I had Castor Prime as a Persona, my hairstyle could shoot nine bullets at once... in a palm tree arrangement, most likely. There's something I need to try...

Junpei Iori: History, huh? Man, Ono-sensei is right... this is really boring until you reach the samurai. Good thing Fuuka

helped me out big time here.

Yukari Takeba: The only history in my head is the stuff about the incident... I'm not feeling very confident about any of these tests now...

Fuuka Yamagishi: I had to teach Junpei more than was on this test... this is all really basic, so I think everyone should do well.

Akihiko Sanada: Saints, priests, monks, and various magical artifacts... a lot of these stories sound like they could well and truly be us. Heh, maybe reincarnation really is true.

Shinjiro Aragaki: Two years dealing with a booze addled monk... who would have thought I actually picked up this much?

Mitsuru Kirijio: The one subject I lack familiarity with... however, most of these are rudimentary questions which allow for simple answer deduction with sound logic. Trivial.

Finals, Day 4 Results:

Minato Arisato: Physics, physics, physics... I like this bonus question here. You want a more complicated projectile motion problem? I'll show you how to solve one with a spinning projectile, moving target, moving source, variable wind-speed, obstacles, all in an environment where objects gravitate away from the ground due to electromagnetic flux.

Junpei Iori: Thanks for throwing in the easy memorization stuff like who invented what... but what's with all of these hypothetical prediction questions?... And how the hell are we supposed to do a bonus we haven't been taught?

Yukari Takeba: Finally... Just math and concepts. Easy stuff... Oh, and this bonus isn't too bad. Hey... maybe I'm not gonna do that badly after all.

Fuuka Yamagishi: ... Wow. I never would have thought getting experience with guns could help this much in school.

Akihiko Sanada: Hrgh... why aren't we allowed a formula sheet? I'm supposed to remember everything from the last test AND the new ones we learned?!

Shinjiro Aragaki: Fuck science, I've got demon magic.

Mitsuru Kirijio: I really must compliment Ms. Ounishi. She's the best tester at our school... difficult enough to weed out the diamonds in the rough, but not so difficult as to ruin those whose efforts fall just short.

Finals, Day 5 Results:

Minato Arisato: ... I wonder if anyone has realized Ms. Miyahara is dyslexic? Again, she's left unsolvable problems on the test. Again, I fixed the problems with multiple variants, each exemplifying a certain formula we learned recently... which means more extra credit for me.

Junpei Iori: Ya know, I'm seriously starting to think some of these questions are bullshit. Seriously... number 7 and 23... what the hell do I even do here?

Yukari Takeba: And if you worked that out, then... Both of those responses give you an answer that makes no sense... ugh...

Fuuka Yamagishi: Hmm... I guess if you approach it from a different angle, you can get a range of solutions... then again, some of these can't be expressed as elementary functions, and I'm pretty sure nobody else even knows what those are yet... I hope everyone else realized there are errors on the test.

Akihiko Sanada: Number crunching... it's a good thing I went out of my way to learn that Laplace trick well. I could solve everything much quicker with that, and I didn't need to memorize all of the different approaches either.

Shinjiro Aragaki: ... I get the feeling I'm going to lose extra for ripping a section of the test. Not like I could do much worse, though...

Mitsuru Kirijio: This is more like it. At least this time, the actual math is at least somewhat mentally stimulating.

Post Midterms

"I'm done, baby!" Junpei yelled triumphantly as he rose from his desk. "The dark days of tests are finally over! The sun is

shinin' bright!"

"Tell me about it." Yukari agreed, oddly enough. "So, how'd you do?"

"Pretty damn good, actually! I'm feelin' hella confident about it!" Junpei said. "But hey, who cares about the scores now? I'm already thinking ahead to Yakushima!"

"Oh yeah, that's coming up soon." Yukari said. She turned to Minato, who had remained rather silent. "So, are ya ready?" she asked.

Minato's deadpan expression grew into his usual cocky smirk, though Yukari could swear it was bigger than before. "I'm going to be the Be Blue V catalogue come to life." he said. "How about you? Ready to turn heads?"

"Me? Um, not really..." Yukari said. "I guess I should be more enthusiastic, huh? Hey, I don't have practice today, so how about we all go do something?"

"Sounds good!" Junpei said. "Where we goin'? If you need to buy a swimsuit, I'd be happy to help!"

"Just a little too excited there, Junpei." Minato whispered.

"More like way too excited." Yukari said with a smirk. "Hey, just lemme grab my stuff from the locker room... oh, and I'll invite Fuuka too." She quickly took her leave and went to get her things, leaving Junpei and Minato in the classroom.

"Hey, I never really properly thanked you for yesterday. It meant a lot to Kenji that you were there." Junpei said.

"Didn't I say I was more than willing to help out a friend in need?" Minato mused. "Though speaking of helping..." he continued. He quickly punched Junpei in his shoulder without really holding back. "The fuck are you running away from, you little bitch?"

"Ouch, dude!" Junpei said as he held his shoulder. He grimaced for a bit, but then let out a sigh. "... Well, at least you didn't actually start wailin' on me."

"Answer the question." Minato said. "Now."

"Alright, alright, shit! You know this is... tch, screw that. You're right... no excuses." Junpei said. "This... might sound weird and all, since this is kind of what we were all going for, but... when we heard that the Dark Hour could be destroyed and everything... I started to think that if we did that, what would I do then? I mean, yeah, the fighting's dangerous and everything but... if we didn't go through this, none of us would be this tight, ya know? Plus... after everything's over... what am I even gonna do with my life? I was lookin' at a bunch of people at the station one day, and listening in on what they were sayin'... and I realized that... everyone's lives are just... so friggin' boring. There are people that walk around doing the same shit, seven days a week... and I'm scared shitless of that. I don't wanna end up being like that, or worse... I get sick of that and end up a drunk like my old man did."

"... A fear of the uncertain future." Minato said, relaxing slightly. "Well, think about it like this: You'll have all the time to find an answer to your worries after you survive this battle. But... you still like baseball, right?"

"Hell yeah... but you know why I don't play." Junpei said.

"I know... but maybe, once this is done, you could do something that still revolves around the game but doesn't break you from your deal with your father." Minato said. "You could be a trainer of some sort. With all the benefits from going into Tartarus, there's no doubt you're physically up for it... and with the speed you swing a thirty-pound sword at, you'll be blocking bullets with a baseball bat."

"... Are you saying I should be a batting coach?" Junpei asked.

"Something to that effect." Minato said. "It doesn't have to be that specifically, of course. My main point is, yeah, when the fighting is over, it's going to suddenly seem really fucking boring. Trust me... I became good with blades in a fighting pit a couple years ago, and when I left, shit, was I annoyed when I got stuck having to play nice with my new caretakers. But eventually, you'll always have a chance to get back into something you like. It was SEES for me this time... next time, it should be something my Boss had lined up."

"That's... really optimistic, dude." Junpei said. He grinned.

"Damn. I thought you were gonna go off about having to deal with hardships or something like that."

"I never said you'd have it easy, but I'll be damned if I condone boredom when there's fun to be had." Minato said. He and Junpei both chuckled for a bit.

"Yup. That's definitely legit right there." Junpei said with a tip of his hat. "Right now, we're heroes of the city, and that's what we've gotta be worried about!"

"But before that, we're a bit pre-occupied with a little place called..." Minato began. He and Junpei both grinned as they heard the classroom door open.

"YA! KU! SHI! MA!" they both yelled. When they finished, Fuuka's laughter filled the room.

"I knew Junpei was super excited, but I didn't expect you to be like this." Yukari said with a surprised look on her face.

"They're just having a little fun, Yukari." Fuuka said. "So, are you two ready?"

"Course' we are!" Junpei said. "Let's go hit the town, huh?"

With that, the four sophomores rather happily made their way out of school. Akihiko and Shinjiro silently slipped into their group, and Minato fell behind a bit to speak to him as they made their way to front door. "Coming along without an invitation is generally considered rude, you know?" Minato whispered.

"Sorry... but Ikutsuki-san called me. He said it was about a

new candidate." Akihiko replied.

"... It's going to be Ken." Shinjiro said. "I know it."

"Then this will be interesting." Minato said. Fuuka, Junpei, and Yukari reached the door first, and were soon followed by Minato, Akihiko, and Shinjiro.

"Woohoo! Freedom at last! What should I do now?!" Junpei yelled. Fuuka giggled.

"I'm sure you can think of something." she said.

"Hell yeah, I will! Right, Min... ato?" Junpei asked as he looked left and right.

"Behind you." Minato said. He was a bit surprised that none of them jumped when he spoke, but didn't let it show.

"Oh, there you are... and senpai? What're you guys doing here?" Junpei asked.

"Ikutsuki-san wants to talk to us about a new candidate." Akihiko said.

"Does that mean another person is going to join?" Yukari asked.

"Maybe..." Fuuka said. Minato noticed Ikutsuki walking near the school gate, as well as the silhouette of the person following him. He decided to silently move back into the shadows cast by the entrance as the other members of the

group seemed to be stuck in contemplation.

"Ah, friendship! How beautiful! Adolescence is such a wonderful thing! So full of vibrancy!" Ikutsuki said as he walked towards the group. The silhouette stopped near the gate, and Minato remained in the shadows.

"Mr. Chairman!" Yukari said, attracting everyone's attention.

"It's so wonderful to see all of you together... usually, you're in little sub-groups." Ikutsuki said. "Odd, if you think about it, but I'll drop that there."

"It's rare for you to personally come to school... is something special happening today?" Fuuka asked.

"Actually, I just stopped by to pick someone up." Ikutsuki said. "I might as well introduce him to you now... Come along, now."

After Ikutsuki called back towards the gates, Ken walked around in his usual elementary school attire and stood next to him. "Hello." Ken greeted. Everyone managed to maintain their surprise, though Shinjiro tried to make sure Ken didn't get a good look at his face.

"Oh, hi, Ken-kun. What's up?" Yukari asked.

"... You know him?" Akihiko asked, doing his best to play off the fact that he was well aware of who Ken was.

"He doesn't leave during the break because of his..."

circumstances." Ikutsuki said.

"Oh, I heard about that... something about his parents, right?" Fuuka asked, also managing to play off not knowing Ken.

"It was only me and my mom, but she got in an accident, and she... she died. It happened two years ago." Ken said.

"... Right now, one of his distant relatives is paying for his school expenses. But, staying at the elementary school dorm all by himself isn't proper for a child his age. So, I decided to move him into your dorm for the summer." Ikutsuki said.

"To OUR dorm?" Yukari asked. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"I hope I'm not being a bother." Ken said with a slight bow. "Though... I could've sworn..."

"That you'd inevitably end run into me?" Minato asked as he walked out of the shadows and to the front of the group. Everyone was more than surprised by Minato's sudden appearance, and he chuckled at their reactions. "Relax, Yukari doesn't like any new boys in the dorm. She almost attacked me when I tried to move in."

"Huh?" Fuuka asked, turning to Yukari. "Is that true?"

"I-it was a big misunderstanding! I thought he was a robber, I swear!" Yukari said.

"... You seem well acquainted with Minato, Ken-kun." Ikutsuki

said.

"He comes to hang out with me and my friends sometimes." Ken said with a slight smile.

"Really?... I never would have placed him in that situation..." Akihiko said with a raised eyebrow.

"I didn't know that either..." Fuuka said. She smiled. "Though, that does sound like something Minato would do when he had the time."

"... Really? How well do you know him?" Ken asked.

"We used to be an item, you know?" Minato said, moving over to Fuuka's side and giving her a quick one-armed hug.

"I'm Fuuka Yamagishi. It's nice to meet you, Ken-kun." Fuuka said, offering him a handshake. Ken took it as Minato quickly gave her some space.

"It's nice to meet you too, Yamagishi-san." Ken said. Akihiko chuckled.

"It's kind of amazing how much you've changed, Fuuka... you kept your composure in a situation like that." Akihiko said. Fuuka chuckled.

"I'm not that easily teased anymore, senpai." Fuuka said.

"... Are you... Sanada-senpai?" Ken asked, snapping Akihiko out of his thoughts.

"Um... yeah." Akihiko replied.

"I've heard a lot about you... You haven't lost a boxing match yet." Ken said.

"Yeah, well... it's nice to meet you..." Akihiko said. Shinjiro sighed.

"C'mon, Aki, give him the time of day." Shinjiro said.

"... Uhh, how?" Akihiko asked. Shinjiro facepalmed.

"Protein-addled idiot..." he mumbled.

"... Pardon me, but... who are you?" Ken asked. Shinjiro removed his hand from his face and straightened up, oddly enough.

"Shinjiro Aragaki." he said. "Good to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Aragaki-senpai." Ken said, catching Shinjiro off guard.

"... Aragaki-senpai?" Shinjiro asked. Akihiko chuckled.

"C'mon, Shinji, give him the time of day." he teased. "What, can't take a little praise?"

"Tch... you keep talking, and I'm gonna beat you down again." Shinjiro said. Ken chuckled.

"You two are really close. You act very similar, too." Ken

said.

"Heh... we're actually brothers." Akihiko said. "Still, I didn't expect you to bring up my career... how long have you been following it?"

"Since last year, actually. It's inspiring to see you fight." Ken said.

"Inspiring, huh?" Akihiko asked as he scratched the back of his head. "Well, I don't know about that, but..."

"No need to be modest, Akihiko! You're undefeated for a reason!" Ikutsuki said. "Now, while I'd love to let introductions continue, we have a few things that need to be finalized for Ken's paperwork... so unfortunately, we have to cut this short."

"That's fine, Ikutsuki-san." Ken said.

"You'll have plenty of time to talk sooner or later." Minato said. "As will we." he mouthed to Ken as he and Ikutsuki began to walk away. Ken nodded back to him and turned to follow Ikutsuki, leaving the group near the entrance.

"... So he's the new candidate." Yukari said.

"... Yup." Junpei said, adjusting his hat.

"Umm... at least he already knew a few of us. This won't be too much of a shock for him." Fuuka said.

"He'll be fine." Akihiko said. "We're going to make sure of it."

"Make sure you don't baby him or anything like that. He hates it." Minato said. "Treat him like a man, and he'll respect you."

"Thanks for the tip." Shinjiro said with a nod. "Well, we'll have to meet up with him after the trip... so I guess this is where we part."

"Hold up... since you're here, why don't you two join us for our little shopping trip?" Yukari offered. "I'm sure you don't have everything for the trip ready."

"... Sure, why not?" Akihiko asked. "You in, Shinji?"

"... Might as well." Shinjiro said.

"Thank goodness... I was really hoping you'd come along." Fuuka said.

"Heh... so a day of shopping around town." Minato said. "This should be interesting."

Unfortunately, Minato soon realized that shopping around town was much more uneventful than it seemed. Aside from stocking up on a few travel essentials such as beach towels and the like, he really felt that the day was a waste since he didn't do much other than make some small talk. The return to the dorm was spent just as predictably, with everyone packing their things and then promptly getting some rest for the journey. As such, Minato found himself bored at the dorm as

the late night hours struck, and decided that he would quickly head for Club Escapade. He had no intention of bothering with a Social Link tonight, since he technically counted all of his exam days as days where he couldn't get a Link anyways. So he passed his boredom the easiest way he knew how. He found a few stressed students, and danced the night away.

91. Chapter 91

Chapter 91: A Great Start

Author Note to fanfictheory: Get a profile so you can't be impersonated.

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: Information not available to be released at this time. In other news, here's how Minato spends his first day of vacation.

Author Note to NocturnalDesertSeagull: Uhh... is this the same Desert Seagull? Regardless, their wishes shall remain unknown.

Author Note to That Guy: You're a FAKE! Where's your dynamic exit?! WHO ARE YOU?! Er-herm... that aside, you will see how the Incomprehensible Azure Dynamo deals with the Heartless Armed Angel when the time comes. However, the titles will come if I see a good time to put them in.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Yeah, as you can see, Minato generally understands that a few Social Links require time to upgrade. Going off of Junpei's rank nine, he has a solid understanding that Junpei needs a lot of

time. In other news... who knows if Ken is being molded into the second Minato?

Minato had made it back to Minatodai dormitory early, well before the sun managed to rise, and found himself planning out how to spend his first day of summer and last day before their vacation. *"I should definitely attempt to get two Cards today."* Minato thought. *"Obviously, every school option is completely out of the question... and I doubt anybody here will want to speak about anything other than the upcoming vacation. Meaning my best options are the Velvet Room members, Kazuya, Hazama, and Nemissa... because I'm certain that even if Shin has a new test for me, I'm going to get my ass handed to me. Oh, but I'd almost forgotten Dante and Vergil! They're certainly possibilities... so yes, I think my first stop for today is Paulownia Mall."*

After relaxing for a bit until the sun rose, Minato finally ate breakfast, put on his simple light-blue shirt with a white butterfly bleeding black as well as some light cargo shirts, and then headed towards the mall. As he walked with music blaring in his ears, he couldn't help but notice that there were now enough members of the Lost turning to stare at him around for his presence to apparently attract noticeable attention when the streets were almost barren, as they were so early in the morning that day. A few of the other people walking around in the morning took notice, but he pretended to be oblivious. *"There are at least ten of those bastards around the place, all of them taking the time to stare at me, moaning and mumbling all the while."* Minato thought. *"Annoying*

bastards... if it were up to me, I'd kill all of you off here and now. There aren't enough people around to merit any witnesses escaping... but I have words to keep, so you filth may continue your wretched existence. I hope that vigilante gets around to all of you."

In spite of his annoyance at the changing landscape of the city, Minato continued on his way to Paulownia Mall and found it sparsely populated save for a brown-haired girl wearing a short-sleeved plain orange shirt, small white skirt, and sneakers. What caught Minato's attention about her was that she was wearing the same headphones he used, though hers were red and had a few odd scratches on them. She was sitting down with her legs crossed near the fountain, playing a PSP game with rather serious focus.

Hamuko, the girl in question, actually noticed Minato as he walked past her, and immediately realized that he was the leader of the team she would have to battle. A quick thought crossed her mind, and she decided what she would do. "Hey, those are nice headphones." she said as he was walking away. Minato stopped, and she turned off her game.

"An observant one? Interesting." he thought. "I could say the same about yours." Minato said, turning back to face her. "I haven't seen you around here before. Finally getting out for summer break?"

"You know it! Summertime is the best time, I say!" Hamuko said. "It's nice to get the chance to just go out whenever you feel like it, huh?"

"Why's does it have to be summer for that to happen? You don't actually have somebody guarding you every other time of the year, do you?" Minato asked. Hamuko laughed.

"You have a point there." she said. "... Y'know, you look familiar. Where have I seen you before?"

"Probably on TV or in a magazine." Minato said. He did a quick bow and chuckled. "Minato Arisato, Be Blue V model. A pleasure to meet you, Ms...?"

"Hamuko Yuki. Uhh... no job title, heheheh." she replied after a hurried curtsy once she stood up. "So, you're that new model! Umm... well, I didn't think I'd run into you here! Just walking around, too!"

Minato laughed. "Is that so? What, did you think I'd roll up in a limo with a squadron of bodyguards?" he mused. "... *I'm not the only one sensing all that power within her, am I?*" he asked his Fiends.

"Well, yeah, actually! I mean, not to be weird or anything, but I think a few girls would attack you if they got the chance!" Hamuko said.

"... ***What the hell? This is ridiculous.***" Hell Biker said.

"Hey, if they're cute enough, I welcome it." Minato said. "*Explain.*"

"She has a bunch of different energies connected to her. Whatever power she has, it's not coming from a singular source." David said.

"Wow, that's a bold statement... but I can't say I'd do any different in your position." Hamuko said with a smile. "So, would you mind if I attacked you?"

"That's actually a tough one." Minato said. *"... Multiple energies... and a very familiar type of power... oh, shit."*

"Aw, am I not cute enough for you?" Hamuko asked, giving him puppy dog eyes.

"... She wields multiple Personae." Daisoujou said.

"Powerful ones, too..." Alice said.

"Hmm... well, we could always try it. I'll have a definitive answer then." Minato said, gesturing towards the alleyway that led to the Velvet and Crimson Doors. *"In that case, this is a dangerous individual. Best if I kill her before she becomes a problem."*

"That's..." Hamuko said, getting very close to his face. She stopped right as soon as they were practically touching. "... Really perverted." she whispered. At that, both of them backed up and started laughing. Minato actually started clapping as he settled down.

"Now there's a good answer! Kudos to you!" Minato

applauded. *"Great. And she only acts like an airhead... a fucking dangerous type."*

"Maybe we can just avoid this chick... she seems like a shut-in type. Could be Mr. Toudou's secret back-up or something like that." Jack said.

"What, did you expect to me to start sputtering and fall head over heels for you?" Hamuko mused. "C'mon! That might work for most girls, but not this Hamuko!"

"With an attitude like that, I'm sure men flock to you." Minato said. *"I'll make sure to ask him when school starts back, then. For now, I need to lose this girl already."*

"I totally could get as much boys as you get girls if I tried!" Hamuko said. "Hmph... and here I thought we weren't going to start having a harem battle..."

"... How do you know my success rate with women if you've just met me?" Minato asked.

"Huh?... Oh, well, I just assumed... I mean, look at you!" Hamuko said. "Sheesh, don't try and make me sound like a creep, alright? I'm playing hard to get here so you can- ack, no forget I said that too!"

Minato chuckled. *"Well, she might be aware, but maybe she is still a bit of an idiot."* "I don't know. My memory is very good." he said.

"We should get some information on her. Anything at all can be a potential weapon if we end up having to deal with her." Matador said.

"... But that look in your eyes says I can do something to make you forget, right?" Hamuko asked with a half hopeful, half fearful smile.

"Then, time to get serious." Minato thought. "That depends... my memory tends to get a bit hazy when I go swimsuit shopping with cute girls." he said. Hamuko's eyes widened. "Sometimes, I forget lots of things when they keep asking for my expert opinion on each and every swimsuit they try on, and even more when I get to choose them. If I get to dress them as well? My, I might even forget what day it is."

"... Holy shit. You are a pervert." Hamuko said. Minato put a finger over his lips.

"Shh... it's a secret." Minato said. *"And there's one fake weakness given."* He removed his finger from his lip and chuckled. "Can't let the people know their untouchable model actually loves nothing more than touching, eheheheh..."

"Right..." Hamuko said with an odd nod. A mischievous smile came over her face. "Well, there's something I'll need for my silence there, you know?"

"Really? The pleasure of my company isn't enough?" Minato asked.

"Now that I know you're secretly a huge pervert, I'm not sure it's worth that much." Hamuko said. "But... you know all those things you said? I might stay quiet if you let me do the same stuff to you."

Minato laughed. "And here I thought it would be something unpleasant." he said.

"Oh, goodie! This just made my day!" Hamuko said. "Well, what are we waiting for?! There's a great place near Port Island Station with the cutest selection... in more ways than one, if you know what I mean."

"Well, if you already have a place in mind, by all means." Minato said. Hamuko giggled and turned to lead Minato to the shop she knew, and he silently followed. *"That was a quick adjustment to match my tempo. So she can adapt on the fly... as expected of someone who wields multiple Personae, I suppose... but how is that possible? Could she be a guest of the Velvet Room as well? Or is there something I'm not considering?"*

"Hmm... this should be brought up with the Nose." David suggested.

"Definitely. Once these little charades have ended, I'll see what he has to say about Hamuko Yuki." Minato replied. He continued following Hamuko until they ended up on a train to Port Island Station, which was surprisingly empty due to the fact that school had just ended. They had both walked with their headphones on, and when they ended up sitting next to

each other on the train, Hamuko suddenly laughed. "Are you that happy you've got my company?" Minato asked.

"No... but I was just thinking about whether or not I could call you Mina-chan." Hamuko said.

"Pet names already? Hmph... and you think I move fast, Hamu-chan." Minato said.

"Hey, I was just going to suggest that one for me! Heh, you catch on quick." Hamuko said. "The other Mina-chan hates it when I call him that, so that's the only way I'm going to refer to you from now on."

"Other Mina-chan?... So you are one of those creepy stalkers obsessed with a name..." Minato said. He scooted over on the train seat rather quickly.

"No, don't leave me, Mina-chan!" Hamuko said in an extremely exaggerated manner as she almost fell over and grabbed onto Minato's arm. She laughed as she scooted over to return to their usual sitting position. "Yeah, that'd make me really sound like some kind of freaky stalker, wouldn't it?"

"I can imagine freakier." Minato said. "Speaking of which... you know me, so you must stay in the area. Which part?"

"That's a secret. I don't tell strangers where I live." Hamuko said with a rather convincing innocent smile.

"But you cling to their arms as you go swimsuit shopping with

them?" Minato asked with a smirk.

"There's a difference to being promiscuous and being stupid." Hamuko said. Minato laughed.

"Does that make you easy?" he asked, catching Hamuko off guard.

"I'll have you know I'm a very classy lady! I'm just... a bit flirty is all." Hamuko said. "I get the same feeling from you. I'm right, aren't I?"

"Indeed. Some would call me an insatiable playboy, but I'm always delicate with a woman." Minato said. *"Nowadays, that is. Hmm... actually, wow. The Social Link system has made me have to pursue entertainment while sustaining relationships... not a problem I had before."*

"Really? Then are you going to try to add me to your harem?" Hamuko asked.

"I don't know... while I enjoy quantity, quality is essential." Minato mused. "I only accept the best of the best, and I'm afraid I don't know enough about you to judge." Hamuko giggled.

"Talk about being an elitist... seriously, not even a hint of shame in those words." she said.

"Why be ashamed of doing something you enjoyed? All regrets do is weight you down, so you should try to have as

little as possible." Minato said.

"That's true. Living life one moment at a time is a lot more enjoyable than trying to deal with everything you didn't like before." Hamuko said. "All ya have ta worry about is what's right in front of you, what's right behind you, and what you're standing on."

"Heh... not the worst outlook to life." Minato said. "Though, in my experience, you don't reach that conclusion unless you're an absolute idiot or have your own fair share of problems... care to share?"

"Meh, my problems are the basic staples of any angsty protagonist." Hamuko said. "Dead parents, dead sister, crappy end to my childhood and a somewhat embarrassing fit of Chunibyo that lasted longer than I like to admit... yuck, now I have a bad taste in my mouth... wait up." Hamuko reached into one of her skirt pockets and pulled out a small wrapped chocolate which she quickly popped and ate very slowly. After she swallowed, a smile reached her face. "Okay, better. Do you need one?"

"I haven't even talked about my angsty past, but I don't have a real reason to. It's rather similar to yours... minus the Chunibyo, that is." Minato said.

"You brought it up! You need one!" Hamuko said, pulling out another chocolate. She unwrapped it and reflexively put it in her mouth. "Oh, crap..." she said after chewing once.

"Looks like you'll be popping three at once." Minato said.

"Nuh-uh! I can't eat these too fast!" Hamuko said. She quickly pulled Minato over and kissed him, forcing the chocolate into his mouth.

"Well, damn, that was unexpected. Can any of you tell whether or not I've contracted Syphilis?" Minato thought. The kiss actually lasted a few good seconds due to Hamuko's apparent insistence that EVERY bit of chocolate end up in Minato's mouth. She pulled back and licked her lips, watching Minato chew. "So you are easy." Minato said.

"Hey, I didn't want to eat three chocolates that quickly!" Hamuko said.

"You'd do that to avoid eating a chocolate that costs less than 300 yen?" Minato asked.

"It's not the cost... I can't walk around with too many at once, so I need to make sure I don't use up my stock too fast." Hamuko said. "It's rationing, ya know?"

"Nope, you're Syphilis free, Boss! That means you can really have some fun with this bitch if you want!" Adonis said.

"Hey, we're doing serious enemy scouting here! This is serious playtime!" Alice said.

"Yeah, time for Boss to seriously play this bitch! You can

hit it and quit it like that if you really go for it, I'm sure of it!" Adonis said.

"*Not now.*" Minato replied. "With how skilled you just were, I get the feeling you've had to ration quite often in the past." he mused.

"... Not that much." Hamuko said. She smiled mischievously. "I bet that kiss got you really excited though, didn't it?"

"Not really, actually." Minato said. Hamuko's smile dropped.

"The hell?! That was a good one!" Hamuko said.

"Emphasis on 'one'." Minato said.

"... And you say I'm easy." Hamuko said.

"There's a difference between being easy prey and a good predator." Minato said. Hamuko laughed.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Predator... just try not to let anyone else hear that." she said.

"Heh... if I really cared what faceless losers thought of me, I think I'd have very different thoughts on life." Minato said.

"How true." Hamuko said. They both said nothing after that, and simply remained seated with their music lightly continuing in their ears as the train went along.

"Alright... there's another person who she refers to as Mina-

chan. Not very helpful if that's all I have to go off of, so that's no lead. She has gone through a good bit of suffering, so there's little doubt she's much stronger than she seems..." Minato thought as they got off at Port Island Station. "So, where's this great clothing store?" he asked as they got off of the train.

"It's actually a little away from the station. If you go to the school here, you probably pass the street it's on all the time." Hamuko said. Surely enough, after a single turn off the path Minato took to school, he managed to reach a Croco Fur fashion outlet, which he honestly had never even noticed before. They entered the oddly bright pink store lined with racks and racks of all kinds of clothing, and Minato immediately noticed an apparently new 'summer selection' rack nearby, which consisted strictly of bathing suits. "Here we are... now, we've got all kinds of things to choose from!"

"I see you're serious about playing dress-up." Minato said. He walked over to the female section with Hamuko in tow. "Well, let's see just how well I can dress you up."

"Just remember it's my turn once you're done!" Hamuko said as she followed. After a rather quick browse and making sure he got Hamuko's measurements correct, Minato chose a few suits for Hamuko and moved over to the changing rooms, a small area near the back with multiple booths which had two areas, one blocked by a red curtain, and a second inner one blocked by a proper door. "Ok, I'll call you if I need anything. No peeping, though, Mina-chan... it'll ruin the surprise." She

walked into the nearest booth and disappeared, leaving Minato alone.

"I'll be right here, Hamu-chan." Minato said as he took a comfortable position leaning against a wall. He was about to listen to music when one of the nearby changing rooms opened, revealing Yukari and Fuuka.

"I think those looked great, Yukari." Fuuka said.

"I guess... I don't know. Maybe I'm just not really in as good of a mood as I thought." Yukari said. "You had a few good ones, Fuuka... they looked really good on you."

"Thanks. I was really glad that I had your opinion on... huh?" Fuuka began, but then stopped once she noticed Minato waving to the two of them from his position. "Minato...?"

"It's too bad you seem to be done looking at your swimming suits." Minato said. "I could've given you a professional model's opinion."

"Never mind that... I didn't think you would be the type to shop at a store like this." Yukari said. "Are you really that into modeling?"

"Actually, today's the first day I've heard of this store." Minato said as his two dorm mates approached him. "I'm helping a friend pick a good swimsuit."

"You are?... Who?" Fuuka asked.

"Someone I met... about two hours ago." Minato said, taking a quick glance at his watch. "I think you'd like her."

"Her?... Aw, geez, don't tell me you're using the first day of vacation to try and pick somebody up..." Yukari said. Minato chuckled.

"What can I say? I'm an insatiable playboy." he mused. Yukari facepalmed, and Minato took that moment to quickly wink at Fuuka. "Summer is the best time of the year, after all... Isn't that right, Hamu-chan?" he called into the booth.

"You've got that right, Mina-chan!" Hamuko responded, catching Fuuka and Yukari's attention. "Though... I'm having a little trouble with this top-piece." Hamuko extended a hand from behind the red curtain in invitation. "Think you can help?"

"You can't be serious right now." Yukari whispered, her eyes bulging.

"Duty calls." Minato mouthed to Fuuka and Yukari. "That's what I'm here for, right?" Minato mused as he moved over and took Hamuko's hand

"Stop trying to play a gentleman." Hamuko said, quickly pulling Minato inside. "You just want to do naughty stuff, don't you?"

"Why, you wound me!" Minato said from inside the booth. Fuuka and Yukari both glanced at each other and nodded, agreeing to leave quickly before they saw or heard anything they couldn't easily forget.

Inside the booth, a topless Hamuko held out an intricate top-piece to a swimsuit in front of her chest, which she was using to pin Minato to the wall. They both heard Fuuka and Yukari hurriedly leave, and let out quiet giggles. "Suckers." Hamuko said.

"They're fun to tease." Minato said. "Though, are you trying to tease me right now?"

"Huh?... Oh, this setup. Well, this thing only works if somebody works the back while I keep it from sliding off of me. I'll keep it in place like this because it's easiest." Hamuko said.

"Are you sure it's not because you want to be a little naughty right now?" Minato asked.

"Please... if that was what I was going for, we wouldn't be talking right now." Hamuko said with a grin.

"You have a point there." Minato said, beginning to fix the top for her. He finished it rather easily, and then allowed her to back up a bit. "Ok... let's see what we've got here."

After a rather long period of Minato and Hamuko getting each other to constantly try out multiple swimsuits, they eventually ended on both of them buying two additional outfits each. They left the bright pink store that was Croco Fur and quickly took the train returning to Iwatodai. "That was really fun! We should do this again sometime, don't you think?" Hamuko asked as they reached Iwatodai Station.

"I don't know about that. I'll be out of town for a few days starting tomorrow." Minato said. He grinned. "Sorry babe. I might go out with you, but I won't love you."

"That's... disgusting." Hamuko said with a smirk. "Well, I'm not around that often, so we probably won't meet up. If we do, though, let's have some fun, okay? Who knows? I might kiss you for real sooner or later!"

"Hah... the only kisses you'll be getting from me if we meet again will belong to cold steel." Minato thought. "The question is, do I really need to look forwards to that?" he mused.

"Hey, don't be so mean about it." Hamuko said. "But anyways, I'm off to my home! Until next time, Mina-chan!" With that, Hamuko practically skipped away with her bag of clothing in her hand.

"Have fun, Hamu-chan." Minato said. *"You won't have much more if you run into me again."* He watched her leave, and then immediately headed straight to the Velvet Room, dumping his bags into the Dimensional Compactor as he reached Paulownia Mall and entered the back alley. There, he opened the Velvet Door, breaking apart into numerous blue butterflies and reforming within the Velvet Room.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room. How may I assist you, Minato?" Elizabeth greeted as usual.

"Tell me who Hamuko Yuki is and why she can use multiple Personae." Minato said as he took his lyre-shaped seat. Igor,

who sat on his usual couch, chuckled.

"That, my friend, is something neither of us are at liberty to tell you... yet." Igor said.

"... Yet?" Minato asked.

"There will come a time when that question becomes pertinent to your Journey, and we, as the only ones who will give you the answer, will then be able to provide it to you... but it is not that time just yet." Igor said.

"So I'll have to face off with her first, eh?" Minato asked.
"Damn... and here I was hoping for some insider secrets."
Elizabeth laughed.

"That's a fine choice of words to use when inquiring about a person's identity." Elizabeth said.

"Isn't it?" Minato agreed. "Still... can I at least ask how you know about her?"

"Once again, we cannot inform you of her just yet." Igor said.
"However, I will tell you this... her story directly affects you. Thankfully, you have yet to reach a juncture where it does as of now."

"Well, that's lovely." Minato said. He sat there for a moment, considering what to ask next. "... Then, can you at least tell me why she seemed to know me?"

"Even if I was at liberty to answer that question, it would

make no sense." Igor said. "There are multiple answers, each of them correct, none of which where you would understand their significance."

"Simply put, the Cards are not in your favor." Elizabeth said. Minato sighed.

"... Then it would seem I have no business here." he said, rising from his chair. "However... Elizabeth, let's go have a nice talk."

"Oh? But I have yet to decide on a suitable destination for our next date." Elizabeth said.

"This is more like a nice lunch. I'll take you to a special place this time, and I know you'll be delighted once you see their menu." Minato said. "It'll be fun, just the two of us. Unless you feel like coming along, Igor."

"My answer still remains the same as before." Igor said with a grin.

"... Well, if you insist on me accompanying you," Elizabeth began as she let the Compendium disappear, "then I simply must accept your invitation."

"Then shall we, my lady?" Minato asked as he offered her his arm. Elizabeth took it as usual, and the two left the Velvet Room. They quickly emerged from the back alley and once again reached the fountain plaza of plaza of Paulownia Mall. He was about to leave when he saw the other boys of SEES

all engaged in a discussion near one of the paths leading to one of the many clothing stores in the area.

"Akihiko-senpai, don't you get it? Not everyone can pull off wearing a speedo, ya know?" Junpei asked.

"And it looks uncomfortable as shit, anyways. Why the hell would I bother getting one of those?" Shinjiro asked.

"Speedos are the best type of clothing to swim in. They're optimal for a beach training regimen." Akihiko said. "I'm not saying you have to only wear speedos, but you should definitely carry at least one each for when we do a mandatory training session."

"Unlike you, Akihiko, I like my genitals." Minato said as he walked over to the group with Elizabeth.

"A speedo... I suppose the name is intended to sound like 'torpedo' because of how fast you may supposedly move underwater while wearing one." Elizabeth said. "An interesting choice of apparel..."

"Oh, hey, Minato... and Elizabeth too!" Junpei said.

"It's rare to see you at any other time than night." Shinjiro said with a nod to Elizabeth.

"While I do prefer that time due to the availability of clubbing, I am happy to announce that I may function any time of day." Elizabeth said.

"... Right." Akihiko said with a raised eyebrow. "But... we left the dorm less than an hour ago. Weren't you with some... Hamu-chan, I think Yukari said?"

"Traitor." Shinjiro snarled.

"S-senpai, what are ya talkin' about?!" Junpei suddenly exclaimed.

"I'm aware." Elizabeth said, catching all three of them off guard. "Actually..." she continued, grabbing Minato's hand to use his watch, "he was with her until... seventeen minutes ago."

"Meaning she's seventeen minutes' old news." Minato said. "Besides, what's a girl I met this morning to any of my real friends?"

"... Oh... got a point there." Junpei said.

"Just screwing around like you always do, huh?" Shinjiro asked.

"But hey, since you guys are here, maybe you can talk some sense into Akihiko-senpai." Junpei said. "Me and Shinji-senpai have been trying, but this guy won't have any of it. Tell him he should wear something instead of just a speedo all the time."

"Hmph... what's manlier than constantly having on training apparel?" Akihiko asked. "And as I said, at the beach, a speedo is the optimal training gear. So it makes sense for me

to always wear a speedo."

"Why not wear a red loincloth instead?" Elizabeth asked. "If you are trying to exude 'manliness', traditional is easily the most effective way to go."

"Maybe throw on a shirt of chivalry, and then you'll really be looking like a man." Minato said.

"Y-yeah, that's what a REAL Japanese man would wear! You should totally do that, senpai!" Junpei said.

"You've gotta have balls of steel or no shame at all to even consider wearing that." Shinjiro said.

"... Actually, I see their point." Akihiko said. He grinned.

"Alright, then... I know what I've gotta get next."

"I'm glad to be of service, and I wish you luck on whatever misguided endeavor you intend to embark on." Elizabeth said, catching Akihiko off guard. Shinjiro and Junpei both chuckled.

"Laugh all you want... it'll work." Akihiko said.

"It'll do something good, I'm sure of it." Minato said. *"Maybe not for you, though."* "We were just off to lunch, however, so I'm afraid we must part ways here."

"Indeed. Farewell." Elizabeth said. With that, she turned around with Minato and the duo took their leave, heading for Iwatodai Station.

"... Beach apparel aside, damn... a girl is 'seventeen minutes' old'?" Junpei asked as he watched them walk away. "I guess there's the fast life, and then there's the Minato life."

"No kiddin'... that guy doesn't slow down for anything." Shinjiro said.

"... I just hope it doesn't come back around to haunt him." Akihiko said. After a brief moment of silence, the group began to head towards a different clothing store, with Akihiko intent on buying his loincloth.

Meanwhile, Minato took Elizabeth to Wakatsu and led her to the Divide, where they were quickly escorted to one of the booths curtained by shades containing a simple table surrounded by cushions. "We'll take two of my usual starters." Minato said to the geisha awaiting their orders. She swiftly bowed and backed out of the booth and disappeared into the generally dark area. "I know we've been here before, but we could only try so much, after all." he said as he turned to Elizabeth, who was sitting right next to him.

"There are a few items I had considered getting. I'm glad that I've been given a second chance to finish testing everything for myself." Elizabeth said. "However, I have to ask... was today's summons meant solely to grant you one of your Cards? Or was it perhaps for a different reason?"

"Why can't it be for both?" Minato asked. He put an arm around Elizabeth's waist and moved closer to her. "You know I have my ambitions. Some are noble, some are crude... all of

them are self-serving. I'll be going on a trip for a while, so I decided I'd have to make a final round to my dearest friends who can't accompany me... well, I should say dearest friend, actually, since you're the only one I'm going to go out of my way to visit. I would go to Escapade later tonight even if I didn't have a Card there. Can't leave without a proper going away party, after all."

"How fitting... though I would have certainly liked to attend this going away party." Elizabeth said.

"You can." Minato said. "Today's invitation may last as long as you wish... I only asked you for a private meeting because I wished to share a... slightly more intimate moment with you."

"Intimate?" Elizabeth asked. She giggled. "You're implying something rather serious when you speak like that. Are you certain that's what you desire?"

"I desire what's in my grasp yet seems to dance between my fingers." Minato said.

"Perhaps that which rests in your hand has realized that it would rather not be held only to be cast aside once it has outlasted its usefulness." Elizabeth said.

"... Why would I cast you aside?" Minato asked.

"As enjoyable as our relationship may be... it is still your intention to dispose of those you no longer have a use for. And though I shall remain as a resident of the Velvet Room

even after our bond has become unbreakable... will I be happy with that existence any longer?" Elizabeth asked. "You've spoiled me in more ways than one... perhaps it's for the best that we stop before this becomes irreversible."

"... You're right. I intend to dispose of the ones I no longer have any use for." Minato said. "But recently, I've been finding more and more often that people's uses more often than not extend far beyond their contributions to my power... and often, even their contributions to my entertainment factor. But you surpass even that... like my ghostly little brother, you are a weakness that can never be exploited, meaning you aren't a weakness at all."

"... Meaning?" Elizabeth asked. Minato chuckled and leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"I'll never have to let you go." he said. "After all... somewhere in the world, the Sun is always shining."

"And thus it must never truly set." Elizabeth said. She smiled. "That's quite an answer you've reached... although, I must question whether or not you're serious about this. When it comes to relationships, your approach to them is... questionable, to put it kindly."

Minato laughed for a bit, and the Geisha silently entered and poured them two drinks while leaving the unmarked bottles on the table for them. She left, and Minato took his glass. "Well, I can't say you're wrong there... but who knows? Maybe I'll change for the worse and begin to start very deeply caring for

those around me, or I'll change for the better and elevate myself to a more fitting position for an individual of my caliber... however, regardless of what happens, I see no reason to change what I think of you. You're a constant, and that's how you'll stay. You can only get closer to me, after all."

"... And do you now believe I've finally fallen into the palm of your hand?" Elizabeth asked.

"From what I've seen, it's a rather enjoyable position." Minato said. "For humans, that is... I can't say much about something as beautiful as you. Then again, I may be dancing in the palm of your hand and not even know it... but I don't think I'd mind."

"My... you put far too much trust in me for your own good." Elizabeth said. "I approve."

"Ah, stealing my lines?" Minato asked. He picked up his glass, and Elizabeth took hers as well. "That's all the proof I need to know neither of us has completely fallen into the other's palm just yet." He took a quick drink with Elizabeth and then giggled as the Geisha slipped them their menus.

"I suppose that's necessary for an interesting courtship." Elizabeth said. "It's strange... though I'm fully aware that this will more likely than not bring about a great deal of misfortune, I would still like to see how far we may go before we reach that point. Is it my desire for experience... or is it something else? ... I don't know for sure, but I know I'll find the answer with you."

CRACK!

"Then I am humbly at your service." Minato said.

Thou art I...

"I do not request a service... I request your company."
Elizabeth said.

And I art thou...

"You can have that whenever you want." Minato said.

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Sun Arcana...

"That is a dangerous statement... I am known to be demanding." Elizabeth said.

"It wouldn't be very fun if you rarely asked." Minato said.

"In that case..." Elizabeth said. She turned and kissed Minato quickly. "I am going to enjoy it thoroughly." she said after just barely pulling away.

"Just how I like it." Minato said. He kissed her again, and was held for a good few seconds just like that, body to body. Unsurprisingly, he found himself pushed backwards and ended up having to prop himself up on his elbows as they continued. He was certain they would've gone farther if the Geisha had not abruptly returned, likely in anticipation of their order.

"Ah, forgive me." the Geisha said as Minato and Elizabeth froze on top of each other. She quickly backed out of the booth once more, and both of them simply remained in that same position feeling rather amused.

"Perhaps we should save this for the party tonight." Minato said.

"That... is an excellent idea." Elizabeth said, slowly backing off of him. She chuckled. "Well then... perhaps we should get around to the actual dining portion of this lunch, hmm?"

"My thoughts exactly." Minato said. At that, they spent their time sampling odd bush meat that had apparently recently been added into the menu as well as finishing up quite a few bottles between the two of them. After agreeing to pick Elizabeth up along with Lucifer, Paimon, and Lucifuge later that night for a good time at Escapade, he returned to the dorm with a rather happy smile on his face. He paused when he entered, however, since the first floor was completely empty.

"... *Scout it out.*" he instructed his Fiends. All but Adonis scattered throughout the dorm quickly as tiny shrunken skulls, and Minato drew his Evoker while widening his stance and slightly bending his knees, preparing for an attack. After a few silent moments, his Fiends all returned to him.

"The sophomores are all on the second floor. The seniors are all missing, however." David reported. ***"All of them are talking about the upcoming trip again."***

"*Hmph... fair enough.*" Minato said, putting his Evoker away and then easing his stance. He wordlessly signed-in as usual and proceeded to the second floor to catch a bit of conversation from the sophomores who all sat in a circle, each doing their own thing on their laptops, though Junpei was playing on his PSP.

"Yo, s'up, dude!" Junpei said as he noticed Minato walk up the stairs. "Hey, I'm so ready for this! Look out, ladies! Here I come!"

Yukari sighed. "Is that really all you think about, Junpei?" she asked.

"It's nice that he doesn't let his troubles get him down that much... don't you think so, Yukari?" Fuuka said.

"Yeah, you gotta get the most outta life!" Junpei said. "C'mon, don't you like the beach?"

"Usually, I do... but I'm just not really up for it right now." Yukari said. "What about you, Minato? You haven't really said anything after that little thing about picking up more girls... which you're getting a head start on, apparently."

"Indeed. I'm going to go clubbing tonight with a few more." Minato said.

"... Ok. But, still... aren't you really excited to go to the beach?" Fuuka asked.

"Of course I am, it's a vacation! I just don't really have much to say since I've never gone to the beach before." Minato said.

"... Wait, what? Are you for real?!" Junpei asked. "Dude, you've never gone to the beach?!"

"I could tell you what I did instead... but you wouldn't be able to just forget it." Minato said, his manic smile reaching his face. "Needless to say, I'm sure it'll be fun. I'll finally get to see what it is about sand, sun, and water that makes the beach so attractive... aside from the free shows, of course."

"... Eww, are you for real?" Yukari asked. "C'mon, why do you have to say it like that?"

"Hey, what's wrong with that? That's a totally legit point." Junpei said.

"Is that really how you think, Junpei? ... Maybe you are more of a creep than I thought..." Fuuka said.

"Ack, not you too!" Junpei said. Fuuka giggled.

"I'm just messing with you. Everyone has something they're looking forwards to... who said it had to be something innocent?" Fuuka asked.

"Wheet-whooh." Minato said. "Talk dirty to me some more, Fuuka."

"Ugh... both of you are hopeless perverts." Yukari said.

"And we're your best friends too." Junpei added with a smirk.

"... The sad thing is I have nothing to say against that." Yukari said as she hung her head in defeat.

"The tsun is mighty in this one." Minato mused as he headed off to his room. Junpei and Fuuka cracked up while Yukari merely let out a huge sigh of exasperation.

Minato took out the special outfit Igor had given him and left Hell Biker and David to fixing it up as he ate a quick dinner. Once he was done and cleaned himself up, he donned the full twin-tail coat suit along with his hat, giving him the same appearance as the one he had the night he had gone out with Shinjiro and Junpei. Without a word, he left the dorm quickly and headed straight for Paulownia Mall.

His first stop was the Velvet Room, which he quickly entered once more. "Alas, your replacement has arrived, old man." Minato said as he materialized in the elevator-like room. Igor chuckled.

"My station requires much more than merely looking the part." Igor mused.

"I'm certain I could learn everything else if you gave me the chance." Minato said. "However, we'd have to start some other time... as you are probably well aware, I have other pressing engagements."

"Hmph... if you were to replace the Master, I believe the

décor would be very different." Elizabeth said. "It's an interesting thought..."

"Quite." Minato said. "Well, I'll be sure to return her after we've had our fun, Igor. Try not to get too lonely." With that, he and Elizabeth disappeared from the Velvet Room and reappeared in the alley. Oddly enough, they appeared at the same time Paimon, Lucifuge, and Lucifer appeared from the Crimson Room. Minato grinned once he realized that Lucifer had taken his more adult form, which made him appear as a very tall handsome young man in his twenties with the same hair and face, though it was less child-like to match his body's age. Paimon had already discarded her veil letting her hair and face show properly. All three of them were in their usual black attire, though Lucifer's suit had golden buttons, a golden angel-wing insignia on the right breast pocket, and a red handkerchief in the left one. "Master, it's good to see you." Minato said with a bow.

"Your wish for one final party before your vacation has reached my ears." Lucifer said, his voice still carrying the same weight behind it, though it now lacked the childish undertone it usually had and replaced it with an air of importance and high stature. He smirked. "It's been a while since I've had this much free time."

"Free time? The JSDF implements new rule, Apathy Syndrome is on the rise, and every demonic establishment has been grilled recently." Minato said.

"My work is to ensure chaos." Lucifer said. "My tools are

many... including you."

"... Ah, I see. Only the worthy will rise above it, correct?"
Minato asked.

"And only the worthy shall retain my favor." Lucifer said.
"However, I did not come here to discuss my work. Tonight,
we play." Lucifuge and Paimon both laughed.

"This'll be so much more fun now that Master is going to join
in." Paimon said. Lucifer wordlessly extended his arm, and
she took a position to mirror Elizabeth's with Minato. "Aren't
you excited?"

"There will be songs about this day, boy! Songs!" Lucifuge
said.

"It would seem everyone is in rather high spirits... tonight is
promising." Elizabeth said.

"Let's rave." Minato said as he turned to walk alongside
Lucifer. They all emerged from the alley and walked straight
past Escapade's rather long line, turning quite a bit of heads.
Vergil, who stood watch near the door, immediately pushed
aside some people who were trying to enter before them and
moved aside, holding them back.

"Good evening." Vergil said.

"You forgot the Master part." Lucifer said as he walked by
him. "But I admire your pride... carry on."

"That was a good people block. Looking sharp." Lucifuge said as he took up the rear. After they entered, the group quickly made their way up to the usual table they sat at and quickly got a round of drinks. Elizabeth sat on Minato's lap, Paimon sat on Lucifer's lap, and Lucifuge sat in between them at the far end on the table.

"So, Master... planning to show me how you work?" Minato asked.

"Rather simply." Lucifer said. He looked around the unusually crowded second floor and saw two women, one with short red hair and the other with long purple hair both dressed in black gowns adorned with fur apparently having a chat in the center of the floor. They turned in the direction of Minato's table, and he was outright amazed at what happened next.

Lucifer lazily raised his hand in front of him and simply gestured for both of them to come over with his finger. The two women seemed to find it incredulous for a bit, but stopped once they realized he was serious. He gestured once more rather lazily, and they looked around to see if he could be talking to anyone else. Once they realized they were the only ones paying attention, they turned back and actually walked over. "Hey there." the red-haired woman said. "You're confident to call us like that."

"Take a seat." Lucifer said as he allowed Paimon to get off of him and sit next to Lucifuge. He began to, oddly enough, personally pour them drinks as they sat down. "I saw you. I liked you. And now I want you." he said as he casually slid the

glasses across the table. They stopped right in front of the women he saw next to. "You can make this easy or you can try to make it hard... but either way, we'll be enjoying ourselves."

"... *That right there is how you use prestige.*" Minato noted.

"You can't be serious right now." the purple-haired woman said with a smile.

"Both of you want a good time... I'll give you that and more tonight." Lucifer said as he finally poured himself a drink. He lazily picked up his glass. "I only need one chance to show you."

The two women both glanced at each other, and then at the other people sitting at the table. Elizabeth had retained her original position and was busy messing with the observant Minato's hair. Lucifuge and Paimon were both taking slow drinks, and Lucifer sat in his seat with his glass just at the ready, watching them the entire time. "... One chance, then." the red-haired woman said.

"Don't disappoint us." the purple-haired woman said. At that, Lucifer simply chuckled and raised his glass slightly in a half-assed cheer before taking a good drink along with the women.

"*And it's over.*" Minato thought as he watched them drink. He turned to Elizabeth, who seemed a bit expectant. "... It's been a while since we last danced here, hasn't it?" he asked.

"Is that an offer?" Elizabeth asked. Minato responded by standing up, bringing her to her feet with him.

"More like a demand." he mused as he began to lead her down to the dance floor.

"Perhaps the Master's clothing has affected you." Elizabeth mused. They both laughed and headed down as the constant electronic music playing began to increase in tempo.

What followed was a night that reminded Minato of his early days in Iwatodai. A completely ridiculous amount of dancing followed by bouts of heavy drinking. Lucifuge even went out of his way to pick up women of his own, though all of them were likely alcoholics, and Paimon took her pick of the men, though she usually lost them during a good session of dancing and swapped to another. Lucifer remained as composed as ever, occasionally disappearing with women and then reappearing with different ones. Minato didn't know what happened to the women who disappeared with him, but he was certain that they enjoyed whatever it was. He opted to remain with Elizabeth for the majority of the night, but when Paimon called her over for a good dance partner, he didn't miss his opportunity to go enjoy some company with the Den Mother, Senna, and Kari while he had the chance. Inevitably, however, during one of their bouts of drinking at the table as a group, the Dark Hour struck and stopped the party.

"Ah, that one odd hour returns again." Lucifuge said. "Would you like to skip it again, Minato?"

"Actually, I think I want to go have a little chat with somebody downstairs right now." Minato said as he rose from the table and moved around Elizabeth. *"Dante should be back. Let's rank up."* "I'll return soon."

"Very well." Lucifer said as he put down his glass. "Make it quick. I do not wish for a break longer than ten minutes."

Minato nodded and hurriedly moved around some coffins to the bar. As usual, Dante sat there with a finished strawberry sundae in front of him. "From what I've seen, you're doing just fine." Dante said. Minato chuckled.

"Was it the clothing or the company?" he mused. "Still, it's good to see you again. How've you been?"

"Actually, things are looking up. That last job got rid of a good portion of my debt." Dante said. "Plus, I don't know what Vergil's doing, but he's being agreeable. We even ate pizza the other day, heh... I guess you could say I'm living the easy life right now."

"Good things happen when you plow straight into the future, I suppose. The benefits of being the first through the breach." Minato said.

"No kidding." Dante said. "I heard there was some noise about a week ago or so. That was you, right?"

"The fight got a little out of hand, but I finished it." Minato said. "There were some other complications that contributed to it,

but I won't bother with any excuses."

Dante chuckled. "It's always the unexpected thing that makes it all more interesting... but it usually causes a lot of extra damage too." he said.

"You must have dealt with a lot of 'unexpected things' if you've got bills that follow you around." Minato said.

"Don't get me wrong... life would be boring as hell without them." Dante said.

"And is life boring as hell right now?" Minato asked.

"Not exactly... but it isn't thrilling either." Dante said. "So, that's why I've decided I'm going to start taking more jobs so it never gets too boring. Besides, you only come here in the middle of the night once every few weeks... and now, you talk to Vergil too, which means I'm just sitting on my ass here most of the time. Besides... according to Lady, there are a lot of things I could be doing instead of just sitting around in the back of a club."

"And if you do enough, you can blow away your debt too." Minato said. He smirked. "This is a solid course of action... though something tells me it's still not what you want to do."

"... Yeah, but I don't exactly have the time or cash to do what I want to do right now. So I have to put up with this... besides, I'm stuck here until April thanks to my job with the Boss." Dante said. He frowned. "And now that my brother's

back, I don't know if I'll have the time either."

"What are you trying to do, exactly?" Minato asked.

"Something stupid that would probably land me in a mountain of debt again." Dante said. He chuckled. "I guess it's just how I live. You'd probably think it's really stupid if you heard it."

"... I'm feeling overly noble and philanthropic." Minato said.
"Am I in the right area?"

"Hmm... that's pretty close." Dante said. "Let's just say it's a costly business that isn't always guaranteed to make money if I'm the one in charge."

"I'm running out of patience." Lucifer said suddenly from the second floor, just loud enough for both of them to hear. Dante chuckled.

"Well, damn, kid. Boss has stuff for you." he said. "You know what? I'll tell you about it next time we get a good chance to talk. Knowing you, you're going to laugh your ass off when you hear this idea... and who knows? Maybe I could use your take on the situation."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Chariot Arcana...

"A bit of foresight before rushing through a wall can't hurt that much, right?" Minato mused. He got up as Dante chuckled. "We'll speak again. After all, we have a while." With that, he hurriedly went back up to the second floor and found his seat once more across from Lucifer. "Sorry about that, Master." Minato said with a quick bow.

"Good... we're continuing." Lucifer said. Suddenly, the air seemed to grow heavy as space itself seemed to warp around his entire being. There was a sudden pulse, enveloping everything in the area and blinding Minato for a moment. When his sight returned, the Dark Hour suddenly ended and everyone in Club Escapade continued as if nothing had happened.

"Master is serious when he personally influences time." Lucifuge said with a nod.

"I came here to play, and I play hard." Lucifer said with a devilish grin. "Now then... let's continue."

The debauchery continued and escalated. Minato spent a good portion of his time making out with Elizabeth and occasionally Paimon between dances, and engaged in what he was certain were impossible drinking contests against Lucifuge. Early on, his coat had been almost lit on fire by a bumbling drunk that he and Lucifuge violently assaulted and left crumpled in a corner after the affair. Afterwards, Elizabeth helped him to completely blow the minds of a few drug-addled teenagers with a few Tarot Card tricks. He then helped Paimon trick every man at the bar into getting her free drinks

just because she found it funny. Finally, after Lucifer had gotten hold of some large number of women, he took Minato with him to show him that he had created a huge, female only orgy in a private suite reserved for him on the first floor before assuming his position as its king and was, from what Minato saw, literally enveloped by women. He left the room with a laugh and let Lucifer do his partying while he returned to the table. Paimon had snuck off to join in on Lucifer's fun, and Lucifuge had actually gone to have a good time with the various workers behind the bar, leaving Minato and Elizabeth alone to enjoy their private table.

Eventually, however, the Club closed, and Minato left with Elizabeth, the rest of the party having disappeared entirely. "That... was a fun night." Minato said, kissing Elizabeth once more when he was done talking.

"Ah, but all things must end. You should hurry back. After all, you have plans, do you not?" Elizabeth asked. She kissed him again, and then swiftly backed away. "This is where we part, Minato. I shall await your return to the Velvet Room."

Minato chuckled. "I'm almost not looking forwards to this vacation now." he mused. With that, he waved goodbye to Elizabeth and made his way on slightly unsteady feet back to the dorm. "... *How the hell do I still have my hat?*" he thought as he walked away from the Mall.

One odd walk later past some Apathy Syndrome victims, one of which he punched out of the way because he wasn't in the mood to walk around it, he made it into the dorm and

instinctively signed in. ***"Boss, people are already awake."*** Jack told him. He turned to see the seniors all in the lounge apparently all trying to decide on last minute things to pack.

"... You literally reek of alcohol and perfume." Shinjiro said as he saw Minato.

"I had to do a final visit to my dear friends before leaving." Minato said as he forced himself to stand steadily. "Besides, it's good practice to enjoy a locale the day before you leave it."

"... So that translated to you trying to pick up at least three women in one day?" Akihiko asked.

"I am an insatiable playboy, am I not?" Minato mused as he began to walk past them. He shot a quick wink at Mitsuru that neither Shinjiro nor Akihiko caught, since both of them were busy with a quick sigh. "I work hard and play harder... though I'm sure we can do that on the lovely beaches of Yakushima, right, Mitsuru?"

"That is the point of a vacation." she said with a slight smile, realizing what he meant. "Although, you may want to clean-up... I fear the ferryman may not allow you on the boat in that condition."

Minato nodded and went about showering while the other members of SEES woke up. He got his luggage, ate a quick breakfast, and headed out of the door alongside everyone else, intent on going to the docks where their ferry awaited.

92. Chapter 92

Chapter 92: The Reunions

SEES' arrival at Iwatodai's port early in the morning was filled with Junpei's constant excited chatter with the others about how amazing the trip would be, even though they were mere hours away from their destination. He managed to keep the usually sad Yukari from moping too much with some help from Fuuka, Akihiko, and Shinjiro, oddly enough. As the four of them took point, Minato found himself trailing behind alongside a slightly uneasy Mitsuru. He took one look at her and knew something was still troubling her. "It'll be fine." Minato said suddenly as they walked, catching her attention. "We trust you, Mitsuru. Whatever secrets you may have opted to withhold, whatever revelation you or your father intends to give us at our destination, it doesn't change anything."

"... Thank you." Mitsuru said after a slight pause. "There are... other things that worry me on this trip."

"Your father, correct?" Minato asked. Mitsuru nodded, and he chuckled. "Don't worry... it'll be just like Ikutsuki said. No father could be angry that his daughter went out of her way to visit him."

"That's true... I only hope I know what to say." Mitsuru said. "I

haven't spoken to him in person for almost three months... and so much has changed. I'm not sure if I'm prepared to face him."

Minato walked over next to her, still dragging around a rolling suitcase, and held her hand. "You don't have to do it alone if you don't want to." Minato said. "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" he asked.

"... It is." Mitsuru said, turning to face him. She smiled. "How strange... I should be furious with you for your actions yesterday."

"If you didn't know better, you'd have every right to be." Minato said. He turned and quickly stole a kiss. "I haven't gotten a front yet... so I'll have play the part of free bachelor. Forgive me, but that involves quite a bit of feigned intimacy with other girls."

"... You taste like alcohol this morning." Mitsuru whispered. She kissed him back. "But I don't mind." She was about to go again, but stopped and moved away, though she still held his hand. "... However, we'll have to wait." she said with a slight blush. "The ferry... has cabins. We'll meet thirty minutes after the ship departs."

"I like this idea." Minato said. Mitsuru looked away quickly, and he chuckled. Eventually, they reached their ferry at the rather empty port, a small white luxury ship with two levels. After a quick boarding, everyone was informed that the journey to Yakushima would take anywhere from four to five

hours, meaning they would arrive around noon at best. The interior of the ship was as plain as any luxury ship's interior would be, with white walls and wooden floors. Every member of SEES quickly moved towards their respective cabins to try and catch up on sleep, since each cabin consisted of a single bed and dresser. The only two members who remained awake were Minato and Mitsuru, who had gone to their respective cabins and awaited the predestined time.

Once their time had arrived, they both quietly left their cabins and saw that they were the only two awake. After a quick nod of confirmation from Mitsuru, Minato closed his door and stealthily made his way to Mitsuru's cabin. She let him pass by and quietly closed the door. "It's finally our private time." Minato said as he turned to face her. He was greeted by a rather sudden embrace, which he responded to in kind.

"... Finally." Mitsuru said as she rested her head against him. "I'm a little embarrassed about this, but... I find myself thinking about times like this much more frequently than I should..."

"If you want me to haunt you, I'll gladly do so." Minato said. "Although... don't you think we'd be more comfortable on the bed? The boat does rock, after all."

Mitsuru giggled. "Honestly? That's your concern?" she asked.

"I am incomprehensible, after all." Minato mused. The two broke their embrace and moved to sit next to each other on Mitsuru's bed. Minato immediately moved over and put his

arms around her waist and rested his head on her shoulder. "Well, now you have me... what do you want to do?"

Mitsuru put one hand on Minato's cheek and another on his arms. "... Things I shouldn't want." she said. "But I..." she continued, but suddenly let out a small yawn, catching Minato by surprise.

"... You're still tired." Minato said.

"... I'm sorry. At a time like this... damn it all." Mitsuru said, taking on a very venomous tone at the end. "But, I shouldn't let something like this-" she continued, as she turned her head towards Minato, but was silenced by a sudden kiss. Minato pulled back and hugged her tightly.

"How about I sleep with you?" Minato asked. "I don't like seeing you go around tired all of the time... so I'll stay with you while you rest."

"... I can't do something that selfish." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled.

"This," he began as he kissed Mitsuru's neck, "is all I need to be happy."

"Minato..." Mitsuru said. She let out a slight sigh, but then slowly removed his arms from around her. "... The least you could do is make yourself comfortable."

"Then lie down." Minato said as he scooted back. Mitsuru, to

his surprise, complied with his request and took a rather comfortable position on the bed, still fully clothed. "... *Damn. I was expecting some kind of resistance, but I suppose I've gotten farther than I previously thought.*"

"... Well?" she asked. Minato quickly stopped his thoughts and moved to lie down next to her. He let one of his hands rest on her lower back and let the other serve as a pillow for her face. Mitsuru simply moved to hold onto him, as if he would leave at a moment's notice. Minato chuckled.

"I'm not going anywhere." he whispered as he began to slowly run his hand through her hair. He chuckled. "Though I doubt you'd let me like this."

Mitsuru chuckled. "Of course you'd say something like that." she said. They remained there for a moment, before Mitsuru took an oddly deep breath. "... Minato... could you... hum for me?" she asked in a very quiet voice.

"I'd sing for you if you wanted." Minato said. "But hum it is." With that, he made good on his word, and once again used David to ensure he had a constant string of tunes. Together, they remained there for almost another ten minutes until Mitsuru finally drifted off to sleep. Regardless, Minato kept on going for another twenty minutes. Finally, he stopped as Mitsuru slept there next to him. "... *So defenseless.*" Minato thought as he watched her.

Inevitably, time passed and the ferry's surprisingly loud horn went off, signaling that they would reach their destination in

approximately thirty minutes. Mitsuru was just barely roused from her sleep, and Minato kissed her forehead. "Looks like we've arrived." Minato said. Mitsuru slowly opened her eyes and smiled.

"... I always want to wake up like this." Mitsuru said very quietly.

"I'd say the same, but I don't get enough sleep." Minato mused. Mitsuru giggled and slowly propped herself up on one arm. Minato mimicked her, and they gently bumped heads.

"You're a true clown." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled.

"Whatever it takes for a smile." he said. Mitsuru was about to say something else until a shout echoed throughout the ship.

"ALRIGHT, ARE YOU ALL READY FOR THIS?!" Junpei yelled from rather close to Mitsuru's door. The sound of a door slamming open and Junpei getting a swift slap on the head followed.

"Quiet down, dumbass! You're gonna make people go deaf." Shinjiro said from outside.

"... I believe I'll have to leave stealthily." Minato said.

"... Unfortunately, yes." Mitsuru said. "The windows can all open... I trust you'll have no problem climbing aboard the ship?"

"Me and my bad habits are always ready." Minato said. He

quickly got off of the bed and adjusted his clothing as he walked towards the window. "See you topside."

At that, Minato quickly opened Mitsuru's window, a large, circular one with a metallic outline, and jumped out. He quickly summoned his Fiends' heads which he used as quick stepping stones to swiftly make his way up to the deck of the ship, and landed quietly. He turned to see Junpei rush out of the ship's interior and up to the railing, looking in the direction of Yakushima.

"Hahaaa! Awesome!" Junpei yelled. "There it is..."

"YA!" Minato yelled.

"KU!" Junpei yelled.

"SHI!" Minato yelled.

"MA!" Junpei yelled. He and Minato stared cheering rather loudly as he walked over to the front of the ship near Junpei, attracting the attention of the other SEES members who were filing out of the ship.

"Doesn't your throat start to hurt if you scream that much?" Fuuka asked Junpei as she walked forwards.

"Hmph... if there weren't too many waves, I would've said we should all try swimming there, but this water's too rough." Akihiko said.

"Tch... swim from here in clear waters and you're asking to

drown." Shinjiro said.

"What? At most, it'd be an hour's swim." Akihiko said. Shinjiro sighed.

"Like any normal person could do that." Shinjiro said.

"Who cares?! We're so close to the beach!" Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"We're going to make quite a wave." he mused. "There'll be a big splashdown to celebrate our arrival. We'll have so much fun, the beach is going to be flooded with energy. There'll be a whirlpool of –"

"Are you trying to make people die of cringe?!" Yukari asked. "Seriously, if it's not Ikutsuki, it's you..."

"Come now, Yukari... we're here to enjoy ourselves first and foremost." Mitsuru said as she stepped out of the ship. "Anything that constitutes a good time is allowed... within reason, of course."

"Aw yeah, Mitsuru-senpai is down! This is gonna be awesome!" Junpei said.

In high spirits, the party arrived at a small dock on the beach and followed Mitsuru down a large path which led to an exquisite mansion. From what Minato could see, the mansion had to possess at least fifty rooms and stood four stories tall, despite their seemingly only being two floors as indicated by

the two rows of windows. *"Not a bad establishment at all. I could get used to a place like this."* Minato thought as SEES entered through a huge set of elaborate doors.

"Wow..." Fuuka said as she entered, taking in the surroundings. The interior of the mansion was extremely well-lit, with numerous hanging plants doubling as lights with glowing pots. There were columns going around the perimeter of the entrance room, supporting a second walkway for upstairs that could look down into the area they stood. The floor had an elegant beige, orange, and blue carpet covering black tile, which was visible near the columns and numerous doors on the first floor. At the far end stood a huge double stairway that led to the second floor, which made two simple zig-zags to connect the areas.

"... I almost feel like I need to straighten up around here." Shinjiro said, looking over the house.

"It's like we're in an episode of the Lifestyles of the Rich and Fabulous..." Junpei said.

"I am rich and fabulous, am I not?" Mitsuru mused, startling Junpei. She chuckled, and a small army of maids in traditional maid uniforms appeared from doors on the left and began to make a line. Minato had to resist the urge to start fighting, since his only experience with people rapidly bursting through doors was related to the raid and subsequent burning of a house. The maids all formed a pathway and bowed.

"Welcome back, Milady." the maids all said in unison. One of

them walked forwards and stood in front of SEES.

"And you must be her schoolmates, correct? Welcome to the Kirijio's vacation home. Please, follow me." the leading maid said.

"Um, is this the right place?" Yukari asked, looking around in disbelief.

"Dude, real-life maids..." Junpei said, almost drooling over the sudden appearance of Mitsuru's maids.

"I knew she was from an important family, but seeing things firsthand is really something..." Fuuka said. Minato wasn't too fazed, however, and simply moved to follow Mitsuru as the rest of SEES seemed to dawdle in awe. They quickly snapped out of it and continued to be led by the maids down the huge entrance hallway to a large door between the two stairways. Suddenly, it opened, and a lone man walked emerged from it.

He had a rough face and short, well combed black hair that was parted slightly to his left, and a black eye patch covering his right eye. He wore an open gray suit that matched his eye, oddly enough, along with a black inside vest and red tie. Aside from Mitsuru, Minato, and Shinjiro, everyone else seemed a bit intimidated by the man's sudden appearance. He walked straight without stopping, and the maids all moved out of his way. He kept going until he stood a little in front of Mitsuru, and began to examine the members of SEES. His gaze froze on Minato, however, and he shot him a much more serious

look than the other members received. Minato responded with a slight grin. *"Want something, old man? Come on then... I'll tear you apart just like anyone else."* Minato mentally taunted. Oddly enough, the man seemed to get his message, and narrowed his eyes at him.

"It's good to see you." Mitsuru said with a smile. That got the man's attention, and he gave her a quick once over just as he did the other members of SEES.

"... I'm glad you're in a good mood." the man said in a very rough voice. He nodded to Mitsuru, and then walked around the members of SEES to reach a different room in the mansion.

"Was that...?" Fuuka began.

"... Her father?" Yukari finished.

"Dude, talk about scary!" Junpei said. "He's not gonna make us walk the plank, is he?"

"Don't be stupid." Akihiko said.

"You must be on something..." Shinjiro said, glancing at Junpei. Mitsuru chuckled.

"We won't be here too long, but make yourselves at home." she said.

"Sweet! This is gonna rock!" Junpei said. "Hey, wanna go to the beach? It's right there!"

"I suppose that's a huge perk for this location." Minato said. He chuckled. "Count me in. Let's go, everyone!"

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about!" Junpei said.

"What, already? I mean, sure, but let me get changed first!" Yukari said.

"While I appreciate your enthusiasm, you should at least learn which room you'll be staying in, Junpei." Mitsuru said.

"Oh, right..." Junpei said, suddenly remembering the small suitcase he was carrying on his back.

"Exactly. Slow down a bit, and take everything in. The beach ain't going anywhere, after all." Shinjiro said.

Once the maids went about setting everybody up with their rooms, the members of SEES all quickly settled into their temporary lodgings. Minato elected to wear one of the outfits Hamuko chose for him first, this one being a rather flashy set of longer than usual black swim trunks which had blue crashing waves lining the bottom with a mermaid sitting atop a rock on the left side. The art was done in the style of traditional Japanese art, making it appear much more elegant than any set of swim trunks really deserved to be in Minato's opinion. He added a plain loose black shirt that he wore in an open style over it and threw on some loose slippers, completing his outfit. He walked out of his room and made his way to the beach after meeting up with Akihiko, Junpei, and Shinjiro in the

large entrance area.

Akihiko came out wearing only a white t-shirt over a black speedo and slippers while carrying a singular beach towel. Junpei, on the other hand, had on plain blue swim trunks over some sandals and wore two arm floats inflated around his elbows along with his ever-present hat, though he turned it backwards for today. He carried a beach ball in one hand, a beach umbrella in the other, and had his beach towel slung over his shoulder. Shinjiro had decided not to wear his hat to the beach, instead opting to wear a makeshift bandana in its place over an open maroon shirt, black swim trunks, and slippers.

"Bout' time you got here! I barely even put my stuff down!" Junpei said.

"Not all of us had our trunks on from the boat." Shinjiro said.

"Hmph... it's been a while since we've been to a beach, huh, Shinji?" Akihiko asked.

"You can reminisce on the move. We're heading out." Minato said, moving to take the lead. The boys all left the mansion and slowly made their way to the beach. Strangely enough, it was practically empty, leaving the sands surrounded by the forest around it completely to them. To Junpei's dismay, however, there were proper beach chairs with towels, tables, and umbrellas already set up in the area, meaning he brought his for no reason.

"Dang... they really have everything." Junpei said as he put his umbrella down in the sand. "Oh well... we're here now!" He did a big stretch and smiled like a kid. "Ahh... Got my sandals on... Givin' my feet a chance to breathe... Yup! Summer's here!"

"Darn..." Akihiko said as he eyed the horizon. "There's nothing good out there I can use as a marker... Too bad. I was hoping for a good swim."

"C'mon, Aki. This ain't a training trip." Shinjiro said.

"Girls don't like guys who are already married to the gym." Minato said. "You'll never score with a mentality like that."

"... Wait, what?" Akihiko asked.

"You must be joking... I thought you were just wearing a speedo because you could rock the look, but you're seriously gonna train?" Junpei asked.

"Hey, what's wrong with that?" Akihiko asked.

"Everything." Shinjiro said. "This is a vacation. You relax on vacations, not work."

"I bet you used to look forwards to these a lot when you worked the streets. It probably meant you could sleep in all day and then be a real maestro whenever you got the chance." Minato said. Shinjiro smirked.

"Lazy days doing exactly what I wanted to do. Those were

the good times." Shinjiro said.

"Emphasis on 'lazy', Akihiko. That means no training on my watch." Minato said.

"So much for what I want to do, then." Akihiko said. "Tch... if I'm not training, then do any of you have a better idea about what to do?"

"Damn right, I do!" Junpei said. "It's summertime at the beach! I've got the perfect activity!" With that, he turned back to the path that they just came from and saw the girls of SEES all walking towards them. Yukari arrived first, wearing a pink swimsuit with light blue outlines for on the bra with very thin straps serving to hold it in place, along with brown sunshades she kept resting on top of her head. She stopped when she noticed Junpei staring at her.

"... What?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Say hello to Contestant No. 1, Yukari Takeba!" Junpei announced. "As you can see, she's chosen a bold design – quite unexpected! It takes a lot of confidence to pull off a swimsuit like that!"

"... Are you serious, Stupei?" Yukari asked. Junpei ignored her, however, and turned his attention to Fuuka, who walked past her. She wore a conservative teal swimsuit with a top that covered everything down to the top of her stomach and a skirt-like bottom.

"Is that umbrella taken?" Fuuka asked, looking past the boys.

"Next up is Contestant No. 2, Fuuka Yamagishi!" Junpei said. He paused, however, and simply stared at Fuuka for a bit. "... Wow, Fuuka, I had no idea you were so... I mean, you should wear a swimsuit more often!"

"Really?" Minato asked, walking forwards to put a rather firm hand on Junpei's shoulder. He froze. "I don't think we should make her do anything she doesn't want to, right?"

Fuuka giggled at Junpei's slight panic. "Maybe he's right." she said. Minato released Junpei's shoulder and backed up with a slight chuckle.

"It was just a friendly suggestion, ya know?" Junpei said.

"Trying to be a little too friendly." Shinjiro said, getting a chuckle from Akihiko. Akihiko stopped, however, when he turned to see Mitsuru finally come and join the group. Junpei noticed her as well, and grinned.

"And here's our final contestant..." he said. Mitsuru approached near the group, wearing a traditional white bra with a red camellia attached to the front left over a white beach skirt. She giggled as she stopped in front of everyone.

"I heard what you were saying... is my victory that easily assured?" she mused.

"Wow... Mitsuru-senpai, you're beautiful..." Fuuka said.

"Yeah, your skin is flawless! Did you already put on sunscreen?" Yukari asked.

"Ah, I had asked Minato to carry that for me." Mitsuru said. "You haven't forgotten, correct?"

"Of course." Minato said, flicking the Dimensional Compactor he still wore tied around his wrist. Surely enough, a bottle of sunscreen fell into his hand. "Shall we?" he asked as he walked forwards. Akihiko and Junpei's jaws dropped as he walked past them. When he went past Akihiko, however, he quietly whispered "What'cha gonna do?"

"The set-up there will do just fine." Mitsuru said, turning to join him.

"... Dang." Junpei said. He glanced at Fuuka, who didn't seem too worried, and then turned to Shinjiro, who was, out of all the things he could be doing, stifling a laugh as he watched Akihiko's horrified expression.

"Those two are really friendly, huh?" Yukari asked.

"... Yeah, they're pretty tight. But hey, that's all good in my book!" Junpei said. "Man, I'm in heaven! How about a swim, everyone?! Buh buh buh bump buh baa! Charge!" With that, he raced into the water.

"Hey, Aki," Shinjiro said, still suppressing a laugh, "I thought you wanted to go swim."

"... You're coming with me." Akihiko said, grabbing him and heading off towards the water. Fuuka and Yukari stood there, looking around for a bit.

"... Huh... there aren't that many people here today." Fuuka said. "It's odd... but I guess that means we get the beach all to ourselves." She smiled and started heading towards the water. "Are you coming, Yukari?"

"... Sure, why not?" Yukari asked with a smile. She headed off towards the water, leaving Minato to apply sunscreen to Mitsuru's back. She had undone her bra strap to allow Minato to reach every area with ease as he knelt near her, and let out a content sigh.

"Isn't this place nice?" she asked.

"For my first time at the beach, it's already looking up." Minato said.

"... Oh. Forgive me, I didn't-" Mitsuru began.

"Though I think what makes it really worthwhile is the company. If I were alone, I'd have trouble finding things to do." Minato said, cutting her off. "I might have even acted like Akihiko, looking for some great training method."

"... That's true. I came here often when I was young, but I don't remember it looking quite like this." Mitsuru said. "Both the people and the locale itself have changed... and I think I prefer everything this way. There's... a difference between

friends and servants. A difference between comrades and pawns."

"No matter how much you try to convince yourself, you'll never escape isolation surrounded by people who follow you without question." Minato said. He finished applying the sunscreen to her back, and closed her bra. "Alright, time for your front." Mitsuru turned over, and Minato started at her legs and began to work upwards. Mitsuru giggled quietly.

"I can imagine everyone at the mansion throwing a fit if they saw us." Mitsuru said. "I must appear so undisciplined right now... but I don't mind at all."

"That sounds like happiness to me." Minato mused.

"Happiness...? I suppose there's no better word for it." Mitsuru said. She giggled once more. "Secretly, I always thought I was unlucky... being so isolated from my peers, with all the responsibility of the Kirijio Group thrust upon me... struggling against the Shadows for the majority of my life... but now, I think it may all have been merely trials that were prepared for me." She slowly rose in the beach chair as Minato finished her legs and was about to work on her stomach. She took his free hand, which was going for some more sunscreen, and held it. "If none of this had happened, I wouldn't have met you, Minato... I'd still be the same prideful workaholic who places results above everything else if I hadn't met you, the same little girl who locked herself away claiming she was fighting for the greater good."

"... *Don't say that to me.*" Minato thought. "I only helped speed along the inevitable, Mitsuru." he said. "I know you... you would've found the answer on your own."

"Perhaps..." Mitsuru said. She used her other hand and let it rest on Minato's shoulder. "But would it have been soon enough? Could I have led SEES this far without you?"

"It might have been difficult... but you would've found a way." Minato said.

"... I don't think so." Mitsuru said, pulling him closed to her. "You don't realize how important... how special you really are... especially to me. That's why... even though I don't have much to give... I want you to be happy." She sat up fully so that she was looking down on him, and released his hand to instead catch him in an embrace which had his face pressed against her chest. "I want to use this trip... to make memories that will last a lifetime." She gently kissed him on the forehead, and Minato froze.

"... *How could you?*" Minato thought. "... Mitsuru..." Minato said, doing his best to contain himself. He held her as well, though it took all he had to stop his grip from shaking or becoming violent. While he managed to stop himself from attacking her, he couldn't keep a steady grip.

"Boss... you can still turn back." Jack said.

"Mister, it's not too late." Alice said.

"This is a game... you don't have to play." Matador said.

"... Even I think this is messed up." Adonis said.

"This is a road... that should never be walked." Daisoujou said.

"Though you stare down the path... you can turn away." David said.

"No point in going after something useless." Hell Biker said.

"... Enough." Minato replied. ***"If I... If I cannot do this, then I am weak. I'm stronger than this. This is all... just a game. I cannot afford to lose here. She is just a Card... one that will outlive its usefulness, as they all will... It is my duty to win. I will be victorious. More so than anyone who has ever lived... and to do that, I must exterminate... all around me. Those who stand in my way... those who stand at my back... those who stand at my side... their corpses will be my ladder to the heavens. And when I get there... then the corpses of the gods will be my ladder to what lies beyond."***

"... It's alright." Mitsuru said. Minato slowly, very slowly, stopped trembling and looked up to see Mitsuru's smile. She moved one of her hands to his face, and wiped a singular tear off of his face. **"I won't leave you."**

"... Isn't that my line?" Minato asked with a smile. He rose slightly and kissed Mitsuru. First one, and then another very

quickly. He quickly became somewhat forceful, moving over Mitsuru to continue his barrage of kisses. He moved to her neck and her chest, and then worked his way back up to her lips.

"Minato... you can't be this impatient." Mitsuru said, suddenly stopping him by catching his head. "We have four days... and we aren't alone." Minato chuckled.

"Congratulations, Mitsuru... you're the first person to make me forget something." Minato said. Mitsuru giggled and rose as he slowly backed away. "You're right... we should go join the others now that we're all done."

"Yes... and from the looks of it, none of them have seen us." Mitsuru said, eyeing the other members of SEES who were far out in the water. She smiled, and rose from the chair to stand near the still kneeling Minato. She offered her hand to him. "Shall we?"

"Since when did we switch position?" Minato mused as he took her hand and stood up.

"We haven't switched positions... we've become equals." Mitsuru said. "Forgive me, but... it's a position I've longed for."

"... It's comforting to have someone there." Minato said.

"I know." Mitsuru said. Together, once Minato left his shirt at their table, they made their way to the water and entered, moving over to where the rest of the SEES members were.

Junpei was waist high in the water, spinning around in pure joy while Fuuka and Yukari were slowly swimming next to each other. In the distance, Akihiko and Shinjiro had apparently gotten into a swimming race with no clear winner.

"Hey!" Junpei said as he waved at them when they waded over in their direction. "Th-thank you Mitsuru-senpai! Thank you so MUCH! For this and all the help back at the dorm! I could die now with no regrets!" Mitsuru laughed.

"I should be thanking you, Junpei. You've helped me out much more than you know." she said.

"Nah, it's nothing!" Junpei said. He turned and saw Fuuka and Yukari moving over to greet Minato and Mitsuru, and suddenly used the opportunity to splash Fuuka.

"W-what?" Fuuka asked, suddenly getting defensive. Junpei splashed her again. "Junpei!"

"Heheheheh! You like it? You like that, huh?" Junpei asked. "Nobody can resist splashing girls at the beach! Heheh, I'm gonna splash more water on you!"

"You!" Yukari said. "H-hey, you're gonna pay for that! Take this!" She went ahead and splashed water at Junpei, getting him to stop momentarily.

"Oh, so you want in on this too, huh, Yuka-?" Junpei began as he rubbed his eyes, but was quickly splashed by Fuuka as soon as he left an opening.

"I'm not letting you off easy for that!" Fuuka said. Yukari laughed.

"Hah! For the Vice Leader, you sure picked a bad fight!" she said, joining in on Fuuka's splash attack.

"Blah! Bro, you gonna leave me hanging?!" Junpei asked, turning to Minato. Oddly enough, both of them had disappeared. "Ack, you're kidding me!"

"No back-up for you!" Yukari said. Suddenly, Minato and Mitsuru surfaced behind Fuuka and Yukari with manic smiles on their faces.

"Pincer in place." Minato said.

"Commence the attack." Mitsuru said. With that, they hurriedly began splashin Yukari and Fuuka slowing them.

"Wha-?! Mitsuru-senpai?" Fuuka asked.

"Haha, my cavalry is right on time! Get ready for our counterattack!" Junpei said. He joined in on their splashing, and the sophomore girls were forced to flee after the combined assaults. The sound of Junpei, Minato, and Mitsuru's laughter served as their victory fanfare while Akihiko and Shinjiro blew past each other, neck and neck in a rather long swimming race.

The beach proved to be full of things to do. Minato finally went up against Akihiko in a swimming race, though he managed to

win since Akihiko had used most of his energy making sure he beat Shinjiro. Shinjiro proved to be a great sand sculptor, making a large version of a Knight chess-piece which he repeatedly claimed was supposed to be Castor in just under an hour with some trial and error. Fuuka and Yukari took their revenge on Mitsuru and Minato when they were busy trying to do a water dance together with the help of Akihiko, who was more than happy to serve as their distraction. Junpei and Shinjiro took advantage of the situation by finally dunking Akihiko, the unsplashable man, when they were reveling in their victory before taking fire from Fuuka and Yukari.

While all of this happened, however, Minato felt something was watching him. He scattered his Fiends to search for it, but every time they left, the feeling disappeared before they returned and they said nothing was there. He kept the thought in the back of his mind, and neglected to say anything about it. *"If there's something or someone that wants one of us, I'll deal with them when they make an appearance."* he decided over the course of the day.

Time passed in a flash, and before anyone could realize it, they had all returned to the Kirijio Vacation Home, and were all freshening up in the multiple bathrooms in preparation for dinner. Mitsuru had finished first and had gone to the center of a large hallway on the second floor. Eventually, her father, Takeharu Kirijio, walked into the hallway and saw her standing in front of the door that led to his office. "It's been a while. I'm glad to see you're in good health." Mitsuru said.

"Our guests are residents of the dorm, I presume." Takeharu

said.

"They are my friends and comrades." Mitsuru said. At that, Takeharu suddenly looked at his daughter again.

"... I heard you told them about the incident." Takeharu said. "You had hid it for so long, I thought you would never say anything... so what changed?"

"... I'm not sure, Father." Mitsuru said with a smile.

"... I've been rereading a few of your reports personally." Takeharu said. "This new leader... Minato Arisato; rather, Minato Shirogane... you've developed an interest in him."

"... Actually, Father, I-" Mitsuru began.

"Sever any ties you have with him immediately." Takeharu said.

"... Father?" Mitsuru asked.

"It only took that single meeting when you all arrived." Takeharu said. "He is not to be trusted under any circumstances, Mitsuru."

"He has proven his trust and loyalty time and time again." Mitsuru said. "'Two in harmony surpasses one in perfection'; the guiding principle of the Kirijio since we parted from the Nanjo... Father, I've realized it now. Some things can only be accomplished by trusting in others... some tasks cannot be done alone, no matter how great the sacrifice. So why-"

"Mitsuru." Takeharu said, once again cutting her off. "... I will give him one chance. Bring them all to me tonight... I will deal with him. However, there is one more thing I have to ask."

"... Yes?" Mitsuru asked.

"You accessed our database instead of asking me directly... and then you used this trip as an excuse instead of asking me directly?" Takeharu asked.

"... I lacked the confidence." Mitsuru admitted. Takeharu shook his head and walked past her towards his office. He stopped at the door and glanced back at Mitsuru.

"I've made preparations to discuss everything." Takeharu said. "There's a girl named Takeba in your group, correct? For her to awaken to her power... It must be fate..."

"... Father?" Mitsuru said as Takeharu opened the door. "If I may ask just one question before then..."

"... Go ahead." Takeharu said.

"I understand that Minato has a more than questionable past, violent tendencies, and an appetite for battle... but he's also a man who will give up everything for the happiness and joy of those around him without blinking an eye. He cares for others more than he cares for himself... so why are you... afraid of him?" Mitsuru asked.

"... If I'm wrong tonight... forget I said anything." Takeharu

said. "However... if I'm correct, I'll tell you personally." With that, Takeharu entered his office and closed the door.

Inevitably, after a quiet dinner in their usual summer outfits which the members of SEES all agreed was amazing, Mitsuru did as her father instructed and led the members of SEES to Takeharu's office, a large room with a one area consisting of three large sofas surrounding a large table, facing a huge wall. A projector sat on the roof, aimed at the pristine wall at all times. Around the area, various plants in large vases were used as decoration, and a huge landscape painting of waves against a mountain sat above the couch against the wall. Everyone filed in and sat down, with Minato sitting on the far corner of one couch next to Yukari and Junpei, across from Shinjiro who sat next to Akihiko and Fuuka. Mitsuru sat next to her father for lack of space, though neither of them seemed to mind.

"Good evening." Takeharu said to everyone as they sat down. "From what I understand, Mitsuru has already given you the short version."

"That's correct." Minato said.

"Well, it's true... we adults are to blame. If I could've atoned for it with my life, I would have done so... Now, I have no choice but to rely on you." Takeharu said. "What my father wanted to create with these monsters' power... was a time manipulation device."

"That's what he was trying to do?" Mitsuru asked, genuinely

shocked.

"Imagine if you could control the flow of time... eliminate unwanted events before they occur, or erase something that already happened." Takeharu said. "With such a device, the future could be shaped to your liking."

"... Change whatever you want, huh?" Shinjiro asked.

"Damn, that's insane..." Junpei said.

"Misguided. The energy required to alter time itself would require both movement through it as well as the ability to affect objects across an unknown temporal plane. The possibilities for distortion are beyond infinite... such a machine can't be made by a human." Minato thought. "If the bastard had half a brain, he would've realized this and settled on predetermination, such as the device I thought of to predict possible futures and show how they come to pass..."

"However, under my father's direction, the research began to stray from its original goal... In his later years, my father seemed to only have nihilism in his heart." Takeharu continued. "Now that I think about it, his madness may have resulted from his struggle to break free from that. It's only natural that you want to know the truth... and it's my duty to tell you." He picked up a little remote he had in his pocket and hit a button, turning on the projector in the room. A video began, with the only scenery shown being what looked like a stereotypical laboratory pointed at a giant reactor.

"What's this...?" Akihiko asked.

"This is the only existing footage of the accident, recorded by a scientist who was at the scene." Takeharu said. Everyone turned back to the screen, and hurried footsteps were heard along with labored breathing. The outline of a man in a lab coat came forwards, with one hand on his abdomen while he braced himself against the bank of consoles the camera rested on.

"I pray that this recording reaches safe hands..." the scientist said.

"That voice...!?" Yukari exclaimed.

"My employer had become obsessed with a loathsome idea." the scientist continued. "This experiment should have never been conceived... I'm afraid what I've done will result in an unprecedented disaster... But if I hadn't the entire world may have paid the price."

"The entire world?" Fuuka asked.

"Please, listen carefully... The Shadows that were amassed here have been dispersed as a result of the initial explosion. To end this nightmare, you must eliminate all of them! I am to blame for this. I knew the risks, but I was blinded by the promise of success... And so, I didn't raise any objections... It is all my fault..." the scientist continued. The camera flickered as the sound of an explosion came across, and the reactor behind the scientist began to spark.

"You idiot!" a female voice yelled from off-screen. "Look at what you've done! Do you have any idea how close we are?!"

"... That's all the time I have." the scientist said. He reached into his lab coat and drew a small blade, still holding his shoulder. He put his hand over his face and grunted. "One last time... Cerunnos!" The scientist was engulfed in the bright blue light that everyone realized as the one that accompanies the summoning of a Persona, and the video suddenly cut out. Yukari stood up, staring at the wall while the projection faded away.

"... Dad..." she said.

"... You're shitting me." Shinjiro said.

"You mean... that was...?" Fuuka asked.

"Father..." Mitsuru said, turning to face Takeharu.

"His name was Eiichiro Takeba... He was the head researcher of the Ergonomic Research Division at the time, and a very talented man. But, we are the ones who are responsible. We pushed him to continue the research. The Kirijio Group is to blame for his death..." Takeharu said.

"... That's... I can't believe it." Mitsuru said, turning to Yukari. She was suddenly trembling.

"So, that means... my dad caused it all...? The Dark Hour, Tartarus... The people who died in that incident... It was all

his fault...?" Yukari asked.

"Hey..." Shinjiro said.

"Y-you okay?" Akihiko asked.

"So, that's why you were hiding this...?" Yukari asked, turning on Mitsuru. "Because you felt sorry for me? Is that it?!"

"Yukari, I..." Mitsuru began.

"I don't want your pity!" Yukari yelled. She turned and dashed out of the room, leaving everybody in silence.

"... Will you go?" Mitsuru asked, glancing at Minato.

"She often said this was a battle she had to fight alone." Minato said. He got up from his seat. "Obviously, I was wrong to believe in her judgment... But don't worry. I'll bring her back."

"... Thank you." Mitsuru said. Minato nodded to her and turned to walk away.

"Wait." Takeharu said suddenly, stopping him from leaving. "Minato Shirogane... your father, Makoto Shirogane, also contributed to what happened that night. I'd like for you to hear this."

"Wait, what?!" Junpei asked.

"If it ain't one family drama, it's another..." Shinjiro said.

"... Alright." Minato said, sitting back down.

"But Yukari..." Fuuka said.

"I have Daisoujou tailing her... he'll stop her if she tries to hurt herself, and tells me where she is. I can reach her almost instantly as long as she doesn't start swimming in the ocean." Minato said. He drew his Evoker. "Sorry, but I'll keep this on me in case I need to go in a flash."

"... A useful ability." Takeharu said.

"How are the Shirogane tied to this?" Mitsuru asked.

"Makoto Shirogane approached the Kirijio Group's Ergonomic Research Branch almost a year before the incident... he came as both a benefactor and assistant. He was one of the men who helped contain the Shadows we collected and oversaw their evolution into what they are now." Takeharu said. "However, in reality, he was sent by the Nanjo Group to serve as a monitor on the project and sabotage it if he realized it was too dangerous."

"... You mean he was a double agent." Shinjiro said. Takeharu nodded.

"He managed to delay the incident by damaging the machine and then fleeing... though he was hunted ruthlessly by the Kirijio, he was also being guarded by the Nanjo. He returned a month later, intent on finishing what he started with the help of Nanjo forces in one desperate assault." Takeharu continued.

"That's straight out of a friggin' movie..." Junpei said.

"However, they failed... and while the specifics of the incident are lost, the general consensus is that during the assault led by Makoto Shirogane, Eiichiro Takeba used the confusion to release the Shadows trapped in containment... thus making the machine unstable and causing the initial explosion. The second explosion was Eiichiro's destruction of the machine... That gave birth to the Dark Hour and Tartarus, that night at midnight. It would last for an hour... the original trial time the machine was intended to work across." Takeharu said. "We don't know how Makoto and his wife ended up on the Moonlight Bridge... nor do we know how they died."

"You can't be serious..." Mitsuru said, staring at her father.

"That's..." Fuuka said, failing to find the words. All eyes were on Minato, but he merely looked back at Takeharu.

"... So he failed twice." Minato said. He got up and turned towards the door. "That makes him a loser not worth mentioning."

"... Are you serious?" Akihiko asked.

"There's no need to speak kindly of the dead... they are what they are." Minato said. "Mr. Kirijio... thank you for that information. I assure you that I am no failure like my father, and will destroy the Dark Hour."

"... He helped prevent something that may have destroyed the

world as we know it." Takeharu said. "How is that a failure?"

"It's a failure for two reasons... firstly, the world as we know it was changed with the creation of Tartarus and the Dark Hour." Minato said. "Secondly, he went ahead and died without winning... the definition of a failed gamble. Now, while I'd love to stay and chat, Yukari is approaching the beach at quite the speed... I'm not going to let her drown herself, figuratively or literally. Excuse me."

With that, he drew his Evoker and fired, disappearing in a flash of light. "... Talk about harsh." Junpei said.

"... I get where he's coming from, but..." Akihiko said.

"Everyone, please return to the lounge downstairs... I'll join you shortly." Mitsuru said. The other members of SEES all did as instructed, and filed out of the room, leaving Mitsuru with her father. "... Well?" she asked.

"... You didn't see it, did you?" Takeharu asked. Mitsuru said nothing. "That boy's reaction to the news about his father... he showed no emotion. He criticized him and called him a failure... all to make it appear as if he was suppressing anger similar to Takeba's."

"... Pardon me?" Mitsuru asked.

"Mitsuru... I'm afraid my fears have been confirmed." Takeharu said. "Sever all ties with that boy as soon as possible."

"Father, please... you have to tell me what's going on."
Mitsuru said. Takeharu gulped, catching Mitsuru's attention. She knew him only to do that whenever he was extremely afraid, something that used to follow his nightmares years ago when she was a child. "... Father?"

"... I've only known one other man who acted like that... A man who manipulates people so well, he improves them while keeping them under his control... those who recognize it are swiftly silenced by his supporters, but in the end, he shall only serve himself..." Takeharu said. "The only other man I knew who acted like him... was Kouetsu Kirijio."

"... Grandfather acted like...?" Mitsuru asked.

"Almost in the exact same manner... never showing weakness... always selecting the best responses to illicit the reactions which would benefit him the most from the people around him... a man who always wants more, no matter the cost... one that enjoys hurting others in every way possible... a true freak." Takeharu said. "I've read your reports... Yamagishi's battles against him prove both points. With his connections to these other beings that you don't know... there is no telling what he'll try to do. He isn't merely similar to my father, Mitsuru... he is my father."

"Minato... isn't that type of person." Mitsuru said.

"... How well do you know him?" Takeharu asked.

"Better than anyone else... Father, I think... rather, I know

you're wrong." Mitsuru said. "Minato and I... we're not just acquaintances, or even friends..."

"Mitsuru..." Takeharu said, turning to face her. She had a resolute look on her face.

"Perhaps now might not be the best time, but... I wanted to ask you if... it would be alright for me to... m-marry him." Mitsuru said.

"Never!" Takeharu said, suddenly getting up. "Don't you see?! He's distracted you from his true nature by showing you new things! He's a master of misdirection, a liar, a cheat, and an uncaring psychopath! His history shows it, his actions have shown it, and now that I've seen him for myself, I'm certain!"

"... No." Mitsuru said, standing to face her father. "You're wrong, father... Minato is a dangerous man, but he isn't what you make him out to be. Maybe he thinks this world is twisted and full of darkness... he might be right. But, he's fiercely protective of his comrades and looks for light in even the darkest of situations. And I... I love him, Father."

"... You've already been blinded." Takeharu said. "You won't see reason now because of what he's done to you. Mitsuru... you've already let the enemy win."

"Minato is not the enemy!" Mitsuru snapped, surprising Takeharu. She caught herself however, and cleared her throat. "... Why does everyone want to go against him? From the start, he's fought the hardest and given up the most to

ensure everyone else's happiness. Why can't you see that?"

"... You aren't allowed to marry him, Mitsuru." Takeharu said, turning to leave the room. "Never approach me with such foolishness again."

"Were you that afraid of grandfather?" Mitsuru asked. Takeharu stopped and gave her one last angry glance.

"You may remain in his company until the Dark Hour has been destroyed. ... Also, I want you to think about this." Takeharu said. "You will never see the face of true evil until you've outlived your usefulness to it... and by that time, you won't be able to escape. What makes true evil dangerous... is that it never runs out of masks to wear." With those words, he left the room, leaving Mitsuru alone.

Meanwhile, Minato appeared on the trail leading to the beach and strolled down it, heading for Yukari's position. *"Didn't expect that story to be thrown at me, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle."* he thought as he walked forwards. Eventually, he saw her standing near the ocean. "We swam for quite a while today... and while I appreciate your enthusiasm, you'll catch a cold if you go now. Best wait for tomorrow."

"I believed in him for so long... This is too much... Remember what I told you at the hospital...? How my dad died when I was little...? You understand now, right...? He died in that incident. Nobody knew the truth, so there were all sorts of rumors... Because he was in charge of the research team,

people were really mean to me and my mom... We even had to move a few times." Yukari said.

"People want simple solutions... solutions like finger pointing and violence." Minato said.

"... Maybe you're right..." Yukari said. "But all this time, I kept telling myself it wasn't his fault. I loved him a lot, and I believed he'd never do anything wrong. I received a letter back in the spring. It was from him, written ten years ago... It cracked me up cuz, even though it said 'To my family,' it was pretty much all about me. That only made me believe in him more... When I found out I had a special power, I thought it was fate. I was scared, but I thought if I cooperated with the Kirijo Group, I might find out what really happened. That's why I agreed to fight using my Persona. But, it turns out... all of that was for nothing..."

"If it were all for nothing, I'm certain half of SEES would be dead." Minato said. "Don't devalue yourself just because of your father's actions. It's foolish."

"Is that supposed to be some moral? Because it isn't helping." Yukari said. She sighed. "...Why does reality have to be so harsh...? I tried so hard to fight my fear, and this is what I get... Maybe I'm just jealous of Mitsuru-senpai. I mean, why my father and not hers...? Haha... I'm a horrible person, aren't I?"

Minato started laughing. "Ain't that everybody's wish, huh? See that? There's proof you're still a human being." he mused.

Yukari turned to him with a look of utter disgust on her face.

"You... goddamn maniac!" she yelled. "Aren't you just Mr. Perfect?! Nothing ever fazes you, and now you're spouting out more bullshit about your great knowledge on how human beings act?! Well news flash, asshole! Every human being is different! You think you know me?! You don't know anything!"

"That's news to me." Minato said.

"Of course you don't know anything! You're barely even a human anymore!" Yukari said.

"Still playing that card? There's a sign your argument is weak, if you start off reusing old points." Minato said.

"Ugh, will you stop talking like that?! Just because your-" she began.

"Parents both died, I spent about eight years of my life going through hell and everything it had to offer, transformed into a homicidal monster just to survive, and now deal with the voices of monsters and more in my head on a daily basis?" Minato asked. Yukari stopped in her tracks. "I've been down pretty low in life, so if you want to play this game, don't expect to win. Though if it makes you feel better, I just learned my dad helped fuck up the world as well."

Yukari said nothing for a bit, staring at Minato and then turning towards the water. "... I'm sorry." she finally said after a while, a heavy melancholy in her voice. "My head's a mess..."

I'm so afraid... I don't know what to do anymore... I'm totally lost... Tell me... What should I do...?"

"Get on your knees and suck my dick." Minato said.

"You think- WAIT, WHAT THE HELL?!" she yelled, suddenly catching what he said. Minato broke out laughing.

"Got ya!" he said.

"Ugh, you're disgusting!" Yukari yelled, shoving him down onto the sand. Minato kept laughing.

"What's wrong with what you've been doing now? Your life belongs to you, not your father or his failures." he said from his seat on the floor. "Finger-pointing is stupid anyways. I always preferred going straight to the violence."

"Ya know... You really are crazy." Yukari said. She chuckled. "One of a kind in every way." she sighed. "... Hey. I'm sorry for acting like this. You've lost your parents, too. But, I'm alright now... I'm used to dealing with stressful situations... well, obviously not enough, eheheheh... Anyway, thanks for listening. Lemme guess... Senpai asked you to bring me back, right?"

"That's one thing, but it's not like I could just let you go out all alone." Minato said. He grinned. "I'm looking out for you whether you like it or not."

"Even if you don't realize he is." Daisoujou said from behind

Yukari, suddenly appearing full size. She let out a shriek, and Minato cackled alongside Daisoujou before he disappeared. Minato heard movement behind them, and readied his Evoker, which he still held in his hand the whole time.

"Hey!" Junpei said, running out from the path to the mansion. "Yo, what was that?" he asked.

"You missed it. I got Yukari good." Minato said as Yukari recovered.

"Sheesh... what's taking you so long. It's almost the Dark Hour, so everybody's worried." Junpei said.

"... Oh, yeah, that's right. It doesn't matter where you are when the Dark Hour arrives..." Yukari said, still nervously glancing around. Minato chuckled.

"That was the only surprise." he said as he got up. "Still, feel better now?"

"Kind of..." Yukari said. She sighed. "You know, I've been thinking lately... Once you awaken to the power of Persona, you remember everything that happens during the Dark Hour... It's like trading away your innocence... In exchange for power, you can no longer look away from the things you don't want to see. So, I guess I'm stuck with you guys, huh?"

"Yup. Now that that's settled, let's get back!" Junpei said. Minato got up, but then silently summoned Adonis' spear. "Uhh, dude?" Junpei asked. Without any warning, Minato

turned and hurled it into the bushes. Adonis hit a tree, and then materialized his physical body to survey the area before disappearing.

"Something was there... but it left quickly and quietly."
Adonis said in his head.

"Minato...?" Yukari asked. He chuckled.

"I wanted to see if I could cleave a beetle on a tree. I missed." Minato said. *"Tch... next time I'll deal with it."* "Still, you're right. I might be fine on my own, but neither of you have Evokers or weapons right now." At that, the trio made their way back to the mansion and returned to their rooms as the Dark Hour arrived. Minato spent the night simply reading a book he packed in the Dimensional Compactor since the bed he was given had proven itself to be extremely comfortable, and he had no desire to quickly part from it for the night. His reading was occasionally interrupted by thoughts regarding his father, but he disregarded them.

93. Chapter 93

Chapter 93: Vacation Dichotomy

Minato had been served breakfast rather early in his room, apparently because Mitsuru had informed the maids that he never slept. While that was a pleasant surprise, he had no intention of going anywhere without the other boys due to the presence he felt watching him before. As such, he remained reading in his room while the girls woke earlier than usual and all left the mansion together after a quick breakfast. "Thanks again, Mitsuru-senpai. I'm sorry if this seems odd since we're at a beach house..." Fuuka said as they walked into the forest in one group, all in their usual summer outfits.

"It's the least I can do for you, Fuuka." Mitsuru said.
"Besides... the air is so fresh around here."

"That's true... you really can't do this in Iwatodai, huh?" Yukari asked. "Still, it's good we're out here alone... Junpei was really ruining yesterday by being such a pervert, and then Minato was busy trying to replace Ikutsuki with all of those weird water puns... ugh, we deserve a break."

Fuuka and Mitsuru both chuckled. "They were just trying to keep everyone in a good mood... even though they might have been a little misguided." Fuuka said. She was going to

continue speaking, but Mitsuru's phone suddenly rang. She quickly looked at it, and then let out a slight sigh.

"Sorry, I have to take this." Mitsuru said. She answered.
"Mitsuru speaking."

"Uh, Mitsuru... we have a slight problem." Ikutsuki said. "Are the others with you? They should hear this as well..."

"... Very well." Mitsuru said. She stopped walking and put her phone on speaker. "Fuuka and Yukari are with me at present. Please continue, Mr. Chariman." she said as Fuuka and Yukari stopped around her.

"Well, I'm at the lab here on the island... and a machine that was considered inoperable was turned on by... Minato's project." Ikutsuki said. "They escaped the facility yesterday, and we haven't been able to track them down... I need you to capture and contain them."

"A machine...?" Yukari asked.

"Minato's project...? Can you be more specific? I won't be able to find it without more information..." Fuuka said.

"Combat vehicles. Anti-Shadow weapons, to be precise."
Ikutsuki said.

"What? You mean... Minato's project has already proven itself?" Mitsuru asked. "There are two ASWs on the loose?"

"Combat Vehicle? Do you mean a tank?!" Yukari asked.

"We're not with the others right now and don't have our weapons... we have to take time to assemble." Fuuka said.

"I see... well, regardless, I want you to handle this as soon as possible. I'm on my way there now." Ikutsuki said.

"If we can't capture them... will we have to destroy them?" Yukari asked. Ikutsuki laughed over the phone.

"I highly doubt that you'll be able to destroy them." he said.

"ASWs are highly durable... most of them were deemed too destructive for continued usage, which is why their production was halted until Minato approached Ikutsuki." Mitsuru said.

"Huh?! Then how are we supposed to stop them?!" Yukari asked.

"Just do your best. I'll call you again later." Ikutsuki said. He hung up, and Mitsuru put her phone away. Yukari quickly tried calling the others with her cellphone, but got no response.

"Great, no one's answering." she said. "Are we really supposed to go up against two of... whatever an ASW is?"

"Don't worry about it." Mitsuru said. "Unless they've been specifically instructed to do so, they will refrain from killing a human even when engaging them in combat... For now, let's go back and get our equipment. Fuuka, I'll need you to scan

the area once we arrive at the mansion... This island is quite large, so we need to hurry."

"Roger." Fuuka said. They all turned and headed back towards the mansion, preparing to do the task that was set out for them.

"Geez, where are those guys when we need them..." Yukari muttered.

As they all returned to the mansion, the boys of SEES all arrived at the beach. Minato had opted to wear his Be Blue V summer modeling outfit today with his plain trunks matching his hair and the almost translucent silk robe reminiscent of a starry sky that went down to his knees and hung open at the front. Junpei and Shinjiro looked pretty much the same except that Junpei lacked his arm floats and Shinjiro dodged his bandana today, but Akihiko opted to wear his secret outfit. He had on a wrapped red loincloth that served as his underwear, a white headband, and a gray shirt with flames outlining the bottom that had the kanji for 'force' printed in large white lettering on the back. "Wheet-who. Everyone watch out for all this man coming through." Minato said.

"... Where are the others, Junpei? You still haven't read that note yet." Akihiko said. He walked over. "That looks like Fuuka's handwriting..."

"This says 'We've gone to see the Jyomon-Cedar Tree.'" Junpei said.

"Tch... I wanted to see that..." Shinjiro said.

"Aw man! We're at an island resort in the middle of the summer! Why don't they go to the beach? That's just not right!" Junpei said.

"Well, it is your fault." Akihiko said.

"Perving a little too hard there, Junpei... you lost control yesterday." Minato said.

"Whaddya mean? I-I just wanted to lighten the mood..." Junpei said.

"With sexual harassment?" Shinjiro asked. Minato chuckled while Junpei winced at the comment. "Even I could've told you that was a dumb idea."

"Well, it doesn't matter now... We're on our own now, just the guys!" Junpei said. "If you're outta ammo, you just pick it up on the battlefield! That's one of the most basic military tactics! We'll call this Operation Babe Hunt!"

"Babe Hunt'? You mean, like, pick up girls...?" Akihiko asked. Shinjiro chuckled.

"Ain't that what your outfit is for, Aki? Don't tell me you're nervous, 'manly' man." Shinjiro said.

"Yeah, Akihiko-senpai, whaddya think? With you on the squad, we're guaranteed to succeed!" Junpei said. Akihiko looked around at Junpei and Shinjiro, and Minato immediately

saw that he was nervous. Finally, he turned to Minato.

"... What do you think about this?" Akihiko asked.

"It's about time you got a proper initiation." Minato said. "You didn't contribute to our clubbing, so you better prove your worth here and now." He chuckled. "Of course, I'll still do the best, but Junpei has a point... you've got a big advantage."

"Challenging us again, huh? I'm not just gonna sit down and let the last loss slide, you know!" Junpei said.

"Hmph... when we're all dressed up, it's hard to tell the difference." Shinjiro said. He straightened his stance and fixed his hair. "But like this, there's no extra crap distracting people... I'll show you the difference between being handsome and being a pretty boy."

"Pretty boy? I'm that pretty motherfucker, in more ways than one." Minato said as he flicked his hair. He turned to Akihiko. "Well, since you're the new one, I'll let you choose the starting method... do we go as a pack, split into two, or leave every man on his own?"

"... Since this is an operation, we'll go in as one group. You're the leader as usual." Akihiko said, suddenly getting serious. He had quickly realized that in this fight, he was the underdog, and knew better than trying to go it alone or just teaming up with Shinjiro.

"What?! WHY!" Junpei asked. "Dude, we're not even gonna

have a chance if he gets to lead off!"

"He's got a point... Minato's ruthless." Shinjiro said. Minato chuckled.

"I don't like to hold back in a battle. Picking up girls, though it has an odd set of rules, is a fight nonetheless." Minato said.

"You said yourself that this is an operation..." Akihiko said.

"... This is going to be bullshit, but alright. I'll follow along." Junpei said. "But hey, you better not hog them all to yourself!"

"If they all throw themselves at me, do you expect me to say no?" Minato asked with a shrug. Shinjiro adjusted his back so a bit so that he could easily maintain his full stature in an upright position, his chest slightly pushing out.

"Then that just means we need to pull our weight." Shinjiro said.

"Tch... then you all better take this seriously. This is an important operation!" Junpei said. Minato nodded, and began to walk with the rest of the boys down the beach. This time around, there were a few people around, and the first people to attract their attention were two girls sitting on beach chairs under an umbrella. The first girl had short brown hair which matched her eyes that fell down around her face, and wore a small necklace along with an orange swimsuit that had some kind of light print running up and down as the design. The second girl also had brown eyes, but had medium length dark

blue hair, even darker than Minato's. She wore a plain, thin-strapped green swimsuit, and was lounging on her chair while the other girl sat drinking something off of the table.

"Beep... Beep... BEEP!" Junpei said. "Target confirmed! Let's move in for the kill!... Oh, but we should probably update Akihiko-senpai on how this works, huh?"

"I know how it works... but if you've got a standard, I guess I should try and match it." Akihiko said.

"Whatever you say." Shinjiro said.

"Tch... you trying to say something, Shinji?" Akihiko asked.

"Hey, save that for later! We don't have much time." Junpei said. "Okay, senpai, listen up. This is my area of expertise, so listen up... First off, think of something to talk about-something they might be interested in. Give them an easy question to get the ball rollin'. That's the golden rule. Somethin' like, "Where're you from?" or "Havin' fun?" Pretty soon, you'll be tossin' questions and answers back and forth like you're playin' catch. I'll start things off, and you can ask the questions, alright? ... Uhh, bro, maybe you should hold back first... let senpai test the waters."

"Hmph... alright. I'll come in if I think you're sinking." Minato said, letting himself fall behind the pack. "You three are up. Go."

The trio walked forwards while Minato pretended to suddenly

be interested in a passing crab on the beach, though he kept an eye on them as they worked and remained out of sight. Junpei led off. "Hey, ladies!" he said as he walked up to them.

"Havin' fun?" Akihiko asked. The girl in green, who had been lazily reading a magazine, put it aside and glanced at the three boys.

"... None of your business." the girl in green said.

"Hey, no need to be shy... we don't bite." Junpei said.

"Why should we tell you?" the girl in orange asked.

"Come on, cut us some slack... We just wanna talk." Junpei said. Akihiko nudged Junpei.

"I thought you said you were an expert..." he whispered.

"Hold your horses... I'm just getting warmed up..." Junpei whispered back. Shinjiro let out a slight sigh as he realized both of the girls could hear their little conversation. "So, ladies, are you in college?" Junpei suddenly asked.

"Umm... don't tell me you guys are still in high school..." the girl in orange said.

"That's right." Akihiko said. Shinjiro let out another sigh.

"High school kids vacationing in Yakushima? That kinda pisses me off." the girl in green said.

"Well, we were invited to our friend's vacation home... Pretty cool, huh?" Akihiko asked. Shinjiro facepalmed.

"Good for your friend. We, on the other hand, have to pay for our vacation with our hard-earned money." the girl in orange said.

"I guess we're just lucky..." Junpei said.

"Yeah, lucky you... what do you want in that weird outfit anyway? Are you trying to sell us something?" the girl in orange asked.

"... W-we just-" Akihiko began.

"This is becoming painful." Shinjiro said, walking past Akihiko and Junpei. He stopped in front of the girl in orange and fixed his hair. "Sorry about those two idiots... they insisted we come over here and hit on you even though neither of them has a damn idea about how to do it." he said. Then, he whipped out his secret weapon: a slight smile. "Thanks for not putting them down easy... I don't want to have to put up with crap like that back home, you know?"

The girl in orange chuckled. "Hey, you're pretty bold... but I feel kind of bad for you, having to put up with those two. It must be troublesome." she said.

"That's one way to put it." Shinjiro said, taking a seat next to her. "Still, you're right... it's bullshit that we get to be here for free just because of who we know. My job pays well enough,

but not for this."

"Oh, you have a job in high-school? You're certainly proactive." the girl in orange said.

"Stop giving him compliments... he might not be that bad, but he was still with those guys." the girl in green said.

"He's also with this guy." Minato said suddenly as he walked around the girl in green's chair and picked up her magazine from the table. He quickly flipped through it, found a photo of him in the exact outfit he was wearing, and quickly turned it to the girl in green that had turned to look at him. "This is a pretty good picture, don't you think?" he asked.

"What do..." the girl in green began, but froze when she realized who she was talking to.

"We're staying with some old money friends right now, but I've been thinking of taking that vacation home off of their hands... I'm growing fond of it." Minato said. "I've been looking for a few reasons to stay... think you can become one?"

"... You're kidding me." the girl in orange said as she stared at Minato. "You hang out with guys like... them?" she asked pointing at Junpei and Akihiko. "I mean, I get this guy, but... them?!" Junpei and Akihiko both cringed as Minato chuckled.

"They're my entourage... and you can't really choose family, right?" Minato asked. Shinjiro chuckled.

"I couldn't just leave my little brother alone." Shinjiro said.

"H-hey, are you saying I can't look after myself?!" Akihiko suddenly snapped.

"I KNOW you can't." Shinjiro replied. The girl in orange started laughing.

"But enough about them..." Minato said, walking around so that he stood right next to the girl in green. He lazily held his hand out to her. "I'm much more interested in you, Ms..."

"... Kasumi." the girl in green said, rising from her chair to take his hand. Minato swiftly knelt and kissed it, getting a smile from her. "Aren't you a flirt, Minato?" she mused.

"Some would say I'm an insatiable playboy." Minato said. He began to slowly run his fingers up Kasumi's arm. "But I think I've found somebody who can prove them wrong."

"Oh... and what's your story?" the girl in orange asked Shinjiro, turning away from the scene. He turned to face her as well.

"I won't say I'm anything special." Shinjiro said. He put his hand on her lower back. "I like to let people decide that for themselves."

"... And you'd let me, Mr...?" the girl in orange asked.

"Everyone calls me Shinji." Shinjiro said. "You?"

"Suko." the girl in orange said. She pulled at Shinjiro's shirt, and he slowly began to remove it. Meanwhile, Kasumi had sat up completely and watched as Minato swiftly disrobed in a singular quick flourish, exactly how he had done in his advertisement. His robe fell gently onto the back of Kasumi's chair, and she got up to stand near him.

"I think we can go enjoy ourselves in the water." Minato said. "Everything's better when it's wetter, after all."

Kasumi chuckled. "Looks like you're at least somewhat of a dork." she mused.

"I might not be perfect... but isn't that what you're here to fix?" he asked. They headed off towards the water, and Shinjiro stood up near to Suko. She chuckled.

"Are you going to take me away from these annoying people now?" she asked with a mischievous grin. Shinjiro responded by pulling her up and then sweeping her off of her feet so he was carrying her, princess style.

"I'm running just as much as you are." he said. Suko giggled, and he made his way over to the water a little distance away from Minato. In the end, Akihiko and Junpei wound up standing with their jaws hitting the floor as they watched their friends literally steal their targets from right under their noses. After a while, they recovered and stood around, waiting for Minato and Shinjiro to return.

"... Chalk one up for Minato and Shinji-senpai, I guess..."

Junpei said.

"... So much for your 'expertise'." Akihiko said.

"Hey, I did my best! What about you, Senpai?! You think you can do any better? Come on, show us what you got." Junpei said.

"Wh-why should I?" Akihiko asked.

"Well, you're supposed to be a tactical master, right? And, isn't it our duty to help each other succeed?" Junpei asked.

"... I guess you have a point there." Akihiko said. "Fine, I'll give it a shot. I'm sure I'll do better than you. I'll set the pace this time, so you give me a hand... we'll go once those two get back."

After about half an hour of waiting, Minato returned with a giggling Kasumi from the water. He licked her neck, and she smiled. Soon after, Shinjiro reappeared, still carrying Suko like a princess. He gave her a light kiss on the forehead, and she kissed his neck. After a quick parting since they had something to do and a wish to meet again, they left, leaving Minato and Shinjiro to put their shirts back on after a quick drying session. "Not bad at all, Shinji." Minato said.

"Hmph... you better not get cocky, or I'm taking you down." Shinjiro said. The duo rejoined the bored Junpei and Akihiko, who were busy devising an attack strategy.

"Who do you have up next?" Minato asked.

"Oh, you guys are finally back... well, check this! There's a lady in black over there all alone! That means she's waiting for someone to hit on her!" Junpei said.

"We're guaranteed success with this one... so you two stay out of it." Akihiko said. "You're just extra support... though I doubt we'll need you."

"Go ahead... we'll just swoop in and steal her anyways." Minato said.

"Actually... I'm not that sure about this one." Shinjiro said. "Something's... weird."

"Man, don't be a stick in the mud." Junpei said. "You ready, Akihiko-senpai?"

"Let's go." he said. Minato and Shinjiro hung back while they went to approach the woman in black. She had long brown hair that fell to her upper back and was parted directly in the middle of her head so it cupped her face. She wore a rather revealing one-piece swimsuit that allowed puffed up her chest, and she stood in a position that allowed her to jut out both her rear and front. She saw Akihiko and Junpei approaching and grinned.

"Hey, cutie pies... Hehehe, can I help you?" she asked as she walked forwards.

"Uhh, he-hello..." Junpei said, taken aback by how forward the woman was. "... Excuse us... we're looking for the restroom!" He quickly grabbed Akihiko and pulled him aside. "Hey, senpai... she's pretty... old up close."

"Tch... it doesn't matter! We need to even the score!" Akihiko said.

"Hey, what are you whispering about?" the woman in black asked.

"What?! Oh, uh..." Junpei began.

"You guys are in high school, aren't you?" the woman asked.

"Ye-Yes! You have a good eye!" Junpei said.

"I can't help it. My job..." the woman began, but she stopped. "Well, that's not important. You guys wanna have some fun?"

"Ohh uhhh.... That's not right, is it? I mean, our ages..." Junpei said.

"... What?" the woman asked.

"A-Akihiko-senpai, it's your turn!" Junpei said, backing away from the woman. "It was your turn anyways, and you're closer in age to her!"

"Uh... Oh." Akihiko said. "Well..."

"... Hehe... you have a nice body. Thin, yet muscular..."

"Mmmm..." the woman in black said. "I choose you! You want to go on a vacation to the world of romance with me?"

"... Honestly, not really..." Akihiko said after re-examining the woman. He had to get even, but self-preservation came before the pursuit of glory.

"Hehe, you're gonna have to keep this a secret from everybody else!" the woman in black continued, not listening to him. She walked forwards and took his arm, causing him to panic.

"Hey, don't... Don't touch me!" Akihiko said, trying to shake her off. He turned to Junpei for help, and he knew what he had to do.

"G-g-g-g... guh..." Junpei said, his lips trembling.

"Guh'?" the woman in black asked, stopping her advance.

"GRANDMA!" Junpei yelled. The woman in black's face suddenly stopped being joyful and began to tremble. She slowly backed away from Akihiko, and they knew she was about to explode. "Let's run, senpai!" Junpei yelled, turning to dash back to Minato and Shinjiro. Akihiko followed suit, and they managed to escape the woman and reach the laughing Minato and Shinjiro. "D-dude, that was close! Don't laugh, man..."

"Let's... not talk about that again." Akihiko said.

"You two are dumbasses." Shinjiro said. "Still up for this, or what?"

"H-hell yeah, we're still in! The party hasn't even started!" Junpei said. "C'mon, let's keep looking... we should be fine." With that, the group reformed and started looking around the beach once more. Eventually, they found a woman with long flowing brown hair that went to her lower back sitting alone on a beach chair under an umbrella, wearing a faded gold swimsuit.

"She's all alone... kinda strange, don't you think?" Akihiko asked.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Junpei asked. "You and me again, senpai... that last one didn't count." Akihiko nodded and followed suit while Minato and Shinjiro followed, though they still remained at the back. "Excuse me, miss..." Junpei said.

"Hello! How can I help you?" the woman in gold asked.

"Whoa, she's hot..." Junpei whispered once he got a good look at her. "Uhh... Are you alone?"

"Yeah, I'm so bored." the woman in gold said. "And I was watching you... You two have been trying to pick up girls for a while. So, how'd you do?"

"Us at the back had our fair share of fun." Minato said. "These two, not so much."

"... Do you have to put it like that?" Akihiko asked. The woman in gold chuckled.

"Haha, that's what I thought. You men at the back are doing just fine... but these two boys don't understand women at all." the woman in gold said.

"... Boys?" Junpei asked.

"You in the hat... you're way too wrapped up in yourself." the woman in gold said. "You don't think about doing anything for the GIRL to make HER feel special."

"... Yes, ma'am." Junpei said with a sigh.

"And Mr. Manly over here, with his loincloth and headband... you're the stoic type, but not very experienced around girls." she continued.

"Y-you may be right." Akihiko said.

"Or, rather, you seem like someone who's too much of a hassle to be with. Like, you're super-logical about everything." the woman in gold said.

"Well..." Akihiko said, scratching the back of his head and looking at the floor. She chuckled.

"It's fine... as for you two with the long-hair at the back, though..." the woman in gold said. "You with the brown-hair... you're the surprise gentleman. Another stoic type, but you aren't big on formalities unless you want to be. Tough looking

with a heart of gold... you can definitely hold your own on a good day."

"I do what I do. That's all there is to it." Shinjiro said.

"Yeah, definitely a surprise when people find out you're a gentleman." the woman in gold said. "As for you with the blue hair... I'm not sure what to think about you."

"Heard of Be Blue V's model? That's me." Minato said.

"I know that... but even without that, you've just got this whole air of mystery going around you. You've got that whole 'androgeny' thing going on, and you seem like the type of guy who knows exactly what to say... it's like you're more than one person... You know what I mean?" she said. Minato chuckled.

"Not bad at all... you read me rather well." he said. "People need to be flexible, don't they?"

The woman giggled. "I like people who aren't stuck in one mindset... it means you have an open-mind." she said. "Mm-hmm. I think you're my type."

"H-hey, wait a second!" Junpei said.

"Juuuuuust joking... I like you a lot too." the woman said.

"R-really?!" Junpei asked.

"Do you want me to teach you... how to make ME feel

special?" she asked.

"Y-yes, ma'am!" Junpei said, barely being able to contain his excitement.

"I wonder how long it's going to take any of them to notice the part he forgot to shave. This is going to be funny as fuck."
Minato thought.

"But, four versus one is too much..." the tranny in gold said.
"Can I pick one? I want someone fun... and with a big heart."

"Oh, this is going to be good." He glanced at Shinjiro, and he saw a slight smirk on his face. He was also aware of who they were speaking to, and nodded. "Fun with a big heart? Junpei, you're up." Minato said.

"That's right! I'm your man!" Junpei said.

"Hey, wait..." Akihiko said.

"What? Are you trying to ruin my summer of love?" Junpei asked.

"There's something that's been bothering me for a while..."
Akihiko said.

"Yes? What is it?" the tranny asked.

"... It's just... there's something on your chin there..." Akihiko said.

"What? What?" the tranny asked, suddenly feeling her chin. His voice went from the girly voice he used before to a slightly deeper one, and Junpei froze. "Did I miss a spot?"

"A-are you..." Akihiko asked. Junpei's jaw dropped, and the tranny let out a slight sigh.

"There goes my chance... I was so close to snagging myself a little boy-toy." the tranny said.

"Dammit, so close!" Minato thought. "Better luck next time, fella. I was rooting for you." he said.

"Oh? You knew?" the tranny asked.

"Y-ya mean, SHE'S a HE?!" Junpei asked.

"Maybe it was too early for you boys, anyways." the tranny said. He chuckled. "Come see me when you're ready to have your horizons broadened... but what about you, blue?"

"Sorry, not my style. Fix that chin, though, and you should be fine." Minato said. "It's summer... there are sure to be a lot of boy-toys on the prowl. Good luck."

The tranny chuckled. "Aren't you sweet? ... You know, from behind, I look and feel just like a woman... are you sure?"

"I-I think we're going!" Junpei said, suddenly turning and pulling Minato away. He laughed.

"Try that with some of your fresh meat! They'll love it!" he

called as Akihiko and Shinjiro quickly turned to follow Junpei. "Happy hunting!"

"Same to you!" the tranny called with a wave. After a large period of walking, the boys all eventually ended up near the dock their ferry dropped them off at. Junpei caught his breath as Minato adjusted his robe, getting weird looks from Shinjiro and Akihiko.

"... Were you really considering going with... him?" Akihiko asked.

"Hell no. But that doesn't mean I need to be rude to him. I respect hunters, especially those with tricky game." Minato said with a smirk.

"... The fucked up thing is that you're dead ass serious right now, aren't you?" Shinjiro asked. Minato nodded, causing both Akihiko and Shinjiro to shudder. Junpei walked back over and let out a big sigh.

"This sucks... you two got the first ones, but me and Akihiko-senpai are 0 for 3..." Junpei said. Akihiko let out a sigh as well, getting Junpei's attention. "What's wrong? I thought you weren't interested in picking up chicks."

"If I'm in a match, I want to win." Akihiko said.

"Then make sure you never go up against me." Minato mused.

"... He's got a point." Shinjiro reluctantly agreed. Junpei and

Akihiko both sighed again.

"I know what our problem is... you can't control yourself, Junpei." Akihiko said.

"What?! Don't blame this on me!" Junpei said.

"I'm just stating the obvious." Akihiko said.

"B-but you haven't scored either!" Junpei said. "Why do you always gotta be so logical in front of babes?! It doesn't make any sense!"

"What did you just say?!" Akihiko asked.

"Both of you have horrible attitudes... that guy was right." Shinjiro said. "Both of you screwed up."

"Bullshit!" Junpei said.

"I won't accept a stalemate! It's either him or me!" Akihiko said.

"Too bad. That's how it is. Right, Minato?" Shinjiro asked. He turned to Minato, who was looking out to the edge of the docks. There, on the dock overlooking the ocean, stood two women, one in a light blue sundress and one in a dark red sundress. The one in the light blue sundress had white leggings on, short blonde hair, and deep blue eyes, along with some odd red headphones that somewhat resembled Minato's. The one in the dark red sundress had black leggings on, short blue hair like Minato's, deep red eyes, and wore a

strange red and gold headdress, and kept one hand apparently gloved.

"Whoa... talk about saving the best for last..." Junpei said, now noticing the girls. "Now that's what I'm talking about! Man, they're both super cute..."

"I agree..." Akihiko said.

"... I think I'll give this one a try myself." Shinjiro said.

"As will I." Minato said, still staring at them.

"Hey, hey, hey! This is our last chance to make up for our failures!" Junpei said. "But this time, we should try one by one instead of all together. We'll have a better shot that way."

"Sounds like a good plan... but who's going first?" Akihiko asked.

"Either you or Junpei. I'll be kind and wait until last, since I'm a guaranteed victor." Minato mused.

"Hmph... that confidence will destroy you." Shinjiro said. "But fine, I'll let these two idiots go first."

"Then I cede to Junpei... he'll get shot down anyways." Akihiko said.

"Keh! Fine... when I come back with one of em', I'm gonna laugh in your face!" Junpei said. He made his way over to the dock and slowly walked up to the two girls. Both of them

turned slightly to face him as he approached, and he paused. "H-hey, h-how's it goin'?" he greeted. "I noticed you've been, uh, staring at the ocean. So, um... do you come here often? My name's Ju-Ju-Junpei."

"...Ju-Ju-Junpei?" the girl in the blue sundress asked.

"That's a stupid name." the girl in the red sundress said.

"Hey, I just want to talk... I mean, you girls looked like you needed some company." Junpei said.

"... I am looking for a human." the girl in the blue sundress said.

"As am I." the girl in the red sundress said.

"O-oh yeah?" Junpei asked, quickly looking around. Both of the girls returned to looking at the ocean.

"You are not the one." the girls said in unison. Junpei's expression died, and he slumped back towards the group.

"Wow, he got shot down faster than I expected..." Akihiko said. Junpei rejoined them.

"S-she's a tough one, senpai..." he said.

"Heh... Don't worry about me..." Akihiko said, confidently walking forwards. He approached them on the docks, and the two girls both turned their heads to look at him. "Hey there... Do you girls like the ocean?" he greeted.

"Is your question directed at me?" the girl in blue asked.

"What a stupid question." the girl in red said.

"Uhh... Yeah, I like the ocean, too. Hey, I heard that triathletes who train at the beach perform better than those who practice indoors... makes sense, doesn't it?" Akihiko asked. He narrowed his eyes, and prepared his trump card. With a quick move, had pulled off his shirt of chivalry and flexed in just his red loincloth. "After all, you can't get a body like this with just machines." he added.

"... Dumbass." Shinjiro said as Akihiko stood there, flexing while the girls simply watched him.

"That type of information is irrelevant to me." the girl in the blue sundress said.

"Don't waste our time." the girl in the red sundress said. They both returned to looking at the ocean, and Akihiko finally stopped his odd dance and put his shirt back on as he walked back to the group.

"Heh, I won... I talked to her longer than you did." Akihiko said. Junpei sighed.

"It doesn't matter how long you talked to her... this sucks..." he said. He turned to Shinjiro. "Shinji-senpai... avenge us."

"Tch... don't get your hopes up. They look like trouble." Shinjiro said. He walked over to the docks, and the girls

turned their head once more. "The weather is enjoyable today... it's a perfect day for ocean-gazing. Might I join you?" he asked.

"We are searching for a human." the girl in the blue sundress said.

"Stay out of our way." the girl in the red sundress said.

"Searching?... You'd be better off checking the interior of the island instead." Shinjiro said.

"We do not require your assistance." the girls said simultaneously as they turned back towards the ocean.

"Tch... fine by me." Shinjiro said, turning back to the group. He approached them, and shook his head.

"Damn, they didn't even give you the time of day..." Junpei said.

"I don't blame em'... we're going in there like assault waves. They're probably pissed off already." Shinjiro said. "Minato... I think you should leave em' be."

"Not happening." Minato said. He walked forwards with a grin. "My victory awaits."

"Good luck... you'll need it." Junpei said.

"There's difficult and then there's impossible... make sure you know the difference." Akihiko said. Minato nodded and walked

onto the docks, once more getting the girls to turn their heads.

"... *Those aren't normal girls.*" Hell Biker warned.

"*I thought as much... but if I remember correctly, this could be interesting.*" Minato replied. He stopped behind the girls and they both turned to him. "An angel and a devil stand before me... which one wants to play first?" he mused. The girls both turned completely to him, and both of them had shocked expressions on their faces.

"Huh?" Shinjiro asked, watching the scene.

"I couldn't hear what he said... But they look surprised... We should get closer." Junpei said.

"You are..." the girl in the blue sundress said. She turned to the girl in the red sundress, and they nodded to each other.

"Initiating capture. Confirmation must be made in a secure location..." the girl in the red sundress said. Suddenly, they both bounded towards Minato at high speed and picked him up, surprising every other member of SEES.

"Well, I know I'm attractive, but girls, please!" he mused as they dashed into the forest with him.

"DUDE!" Junpei yelled.

"... He'll be fine." Shinjiro said.

"Like hell I'm just gonna ignore that!" Junpei said, taking off

after them. Akihiko grabbed Shinjiro and started running, getting him to come along.

Minato allowed himself to get taken until they reached the front of a huge tree, the Jyomon-Cedar, as it was marked by the huge sign he was put down next to. "Well... now that you have me, what do you want to do with me?" he mused. *"They aren't faster than me with my Magatama, so I should be able to escape with ease. Strength wise, I'm not certain yet..."*

The two girls looked him over multiple times, even backing up to circle around and look at him, until they both stopped right in front of him. The girl in the red sundress smiled while the one in the blue sundress got a serious look on her face. "We were correct... We have found you." the girl in the blue sundress said. The two girls suddenly ran up to him and hugged him on both sides, essentially trapping him. "We have been searching for you. Our highest priority is to be with you!"

"You're finally here! I've wanted to meet you for so long!" the girl in the red sundress said.

"... Metal. ASWs... and with this appearance, I already know one of them." Minato noted. He moved his arms so he was hugging both of them and chuckled. "My daughter, Metis..." he said, kissing the forehead of the girl in the red sundress. "Who's your friend?"

"That's my sister, Aigis!" Metis said. "Father, you're finally here! Just like they said you would be!"

"Aigis, is it? You're beautiful as well." Minato said, moving to kiss Aigis' forehead.

Suddenly, the other boys of SEES all burst in from the path Aigis and Metis made, and froze. "WHAT?! No way!" Junpei said.

"What's going on...? There's no way he could've gotten to both of them that quickly!" Akihiko said.

"There's game... and then there's bullshit. I call bullshit." Shinjiro said.

From a different path, the girls of SEES all entered, all armed. Yukari had her bow and Evoker, Mitsuru had her rapier and Evoker, and Fuuka carried her two SMGs in her hands.

"There you guys are! What are you doing here?! We've been looking all over for you!" Yukari said.

"Um... what're you doing in the middle of the woods... with your swimsuits and...?" Fuuka asked.

"You have no idea what we... huh?" Yukari began, but stopped when she noticed Aigis and Metis hugging Minato.

"Who are they?"

"... The ASWs." Mitsuru said, lowering her weapon. Minato chuckled.

"Hey, Metis, look. Mother has come for a visit." he said, gesturing to Mitsuru.

"Hi, Mother!" Metis said, turning to face Mitsuru.

"... You can't be serious." Mitsuru said. Ikutsuki chuckled as he entered the scene using the same path as the girls.

"Sorry... she might have taken that joke to be true." Ikutsuki said.

"... Wait... these are the ASWs?" Yukari asked.

"ASW? What the heck is that?" Junpei asked.

"I'll explain everything tonight... but for now, I have to deal with these two." Ikutsuki said. He sighed. "Metis, Aigis, you had me worried... I told you not to leave the lab without my permission."

"But, I met Father..." Metis said.

"And you'll meet him again tonight... but for now, you two have to return and have some quick work done. Please, don't make this difficult..." Ikutsuki said. Aigis and Metis stared at Ikutsuki for a bit, but did nothing,

"It'll be fine... if you can't come see me tonight, I'll come see you. How about that?" Minato asked.

"... Okay." Metis said, letting go of him. Aigis followed suit, and they left following Ikutsuki. Nobody spoke much about the odd situation, and they all agreed to return to the house and await Ikutsuki's visit.

After a short dinner, Mitsuru received another call informing her that it was time for Ikutsuki's visit. The members of SEES all gathered in a large sitting room on the first floor and sat around a huge table. Ikutsuki was inside, and waited for everyone to take a seat before he began speaking. "I apologize for all the trouble." he began. "Everything is under control now."

"So, what's happened to my daughter and her friend?" Minato asked, catching everybody's attention.

"... She's fine. Actually-" Ikutsuki began, but was interrupted by the sounds of a door quickly opening. Metis, without any clothing to hide her metal body and battledress, walked in alongside Aigis. Unlike Metis, Aigis' body had no battledress, and was plain white except for her face and the bottoms of her legs, which were a dark gray. Her leg and arm joints were gold plated for armor over a flexible black metal substance similar to Metis' armor, and she wore a red ribbon around her neck. Her wrists had large steel bands running around it which Minato assumed were meant to hold bullets, since her fingers were all gray colored and seemed overly flexible.

"Hi, Father!" Metis announced as she walked into the room with Aigis in tow.

"... They're here right now." Ikutsuki finished. He cleared his throat. "Before you get about to speaking with Minato... I'd like to formally introduce you both. As you can all see, they're both 'mechanical maidens'. The elder sister is Aigis, while the younger sister is Metis... please, introduce yourselves."

"I am Aigis. My mission is to destroy Shadows. I have been assigned to SEES, effective immediately." Aigis said.

"I am Metis. My mission is to destroy Shadows. I have been assigned to serve under Father, effective immediately." Metis said.

"No way... it's like they're alive..." Yukari said.

"This is unbelievable..." Akihiko said.

"They're so cute, but... they're robots." Junpei said.

"Anti-Shadow weapons were created long ago to combat uncontrollable Shadows. Until recently, Aigis was the last to be made... she was the only one to remain until Minato approached me with his project proposal and the item required for Metis' creation." Ikutsuki said.

"... Anti-Shadow weapon... you don't mean..." Shinjiro said.

"Yes... Both Aigis and Metis can summon and use a Persona." Ikutsuki said.

"I am capable of using the Persona 'Palladion'." Aigis said.

"I am capable of using the Persona 'Psyche'." Metis said.

"Aigis suffered major damage in combat ten years ago and remained in the lab ever since... She wouldn't wake up, no matter what we tried. However, Metis managed to do so yesterday and promptly snuck out of the lab alongside her..."

apparently in search of you." Ikutsuki said.

"Anti-Shadow Weapons... with wills of their own... that's amazing!" Fuuka said, marveling at the sight of the sister ASWs.

"Um... by the way... when I saw you earlier, it seemed like you knew Minato..." Yukari said.

"Yes, it is very important for me to be by his side." Aigis said.

"Hmm... I had informed Metis of Minato, so her behavior is to be expected... however, I don't understand what happened to Aigis." Ikutsuki said. "Perhaps her identification system is still malfunctioning... Or maybe she's still half-asleep... This is quite interesting... Hmm... Well, I can ponder this later on. Oh, I forgot to tell you all... You can participate in a wide range of recreational activities here. There's a tennis court, a pool table... even a karaoke machine. While I'd love to stay and chat... I need to borrow Minato for a little bit."

"Borrow me?" Minato asked.

"A minor check-up due to his... well, you know." Ikutsuki said. "It'll be over quickly, I promise!"

"Alright then... let's go." Minato said, rising from his seat. He walked over to Metis and messed with her hair, getting a slight giggle from her. "Daddy'll be back soon. Be good, you hear?"

"Mm-hmm." Metis said with a nod.

"Dude... these ASWs are really cute..." Junpei muttered.

"They're robots... calm down." Shinjiro whispered.

"You too, Aigis. I'll be back." Minato continued.

"I will not allow you to escape me." Aigis said. Minato chuckled.

"Are you sure you aren't my daughter as well?" he mused. Mitsuru had moved to be near Ikutsuki and stopped him by the door while Minato spoke.

"Did my father put you up to this?" she asked very quietly.

"... Forgive me, but I can't go against him." Ikutsuki replied. "I promise that no harm will happen during this meeting."

"... Very well." Mitsuru said. Minato walked forwards and stood next to Ikutsuki. He saw the concern on her face and chuckled.

"It'll be over quickly. I'm sure this isn't very serious." Minato said with a smile.

"... Of course." Mitsuru said, forcing a smile. Minato nodded to her and followed Ikutsuki down a hallway, leaving the other members of SEES with Metis and Aigis. She watched the members of SEES awkwardly try to interact with the new ASWs to no avail, with Aigis only speaking very bluntly while

Metis' responses were often short, uninterested, or both. After a few minutes of watching, she slipped out of the room and took a roundabout route to her father's office, where she knew Minato was being taken.

Minato and Ikutsuki arrived at Takeharu Kirijio's office and entered silently. Inside, Takeharu sat in the same spot he sat last time with his back to the painting, though there was a vial of black Shadow substance on the table set in front of him. "*The Lover?*" Minato asked in his head.

"*No... a fake.*" the voice in his head replied. "*It's behind you.*"

Minato realized the voice meant that Ikutsuki had concealed it on his person, but said nothing so as not to risk falling from Takeharu's good graces. "Good evening, Mr. Kirijio... or do you prefer Takeharu-san?" Minato greeted as he stood across from him.

"... Mr. Kirijio." Takeharu said. "Now, take a seat... there are a few things I'd like to discuss with you. Take a seat."

Minato sat down on the couch to the left while Ikutsuki claimed the couch to the right. "Then, if you don't mind, I'd prefer it if we hurried. My daughter has been waiting on me for a long time, and I don't want to leave her waiting." Minato said with a smirk. He saw Takeharu's expression slightly darken, and inwardly congratulated himself. "*We aren't friendly, old man... don't think I can't sense all that animosity you've got coming my way.*"

"The new ASW is not your daughter. Whatever misconceptions you may have about attachment to it... abandon them." Takeharu said. "Every ASW is the property of the Kirijio Group... so I don't know why you told our latest model that this man is its father, Ikutsuki."

"... My apologies, sir. Since she had developed much faster than we anticipated, it was my method of motivating her to finish her preparations for active duty. Forgive me." Ikutsuki said with a bow. Takeharu glared at him for a bit, but then turned his attention back to Minato.

"Now... I've read numerous reports about you, including your past, role in SEES, and your strange powers." Takeharu said. "I understand that you've been... absorbing the remains of the Shadows from the incident."

"Devouring them, actually." Minato said.

"... Show me." Takeharu said, gesturing to the container on the table. Minato laughed. "... Is something the matter?"

"I'm not going to eat that shit." Minato said, pointing to the container on the table. He turned to Ikutsuki. "He's got my meal on him... likely on your orders, correct?"

"... Correct." Takeharu said. He turned to Ikutsuki. "Give it to him."

"Y-yes." Ikutsuki said, reaching into an inside pocket in his jacket. He took out a slender but long vial filled with the black

remains of the Lover and held it in front of him.

"Don't move." Minato said as Ikutsuki was about to get up. "*Take it.*" Minato commanded the voice in his head. He opened his mouth, and the cap on the vial Ikutsuki held flew off as the remains of the Lover spiraled into the air. Ikutsuki barely managed to refrain from dropping the bottle in shock, and even Takeharu seemed stunned. The mass came forth like tendrils gushing out of the vial, arcing high into the air and then flowing into Minato's open mouth. The scene continued for a few seconds until he ingested all of the remains, prompting him to lick his lips once he was finished. "Ah... Thanks for the meal." he said with a content smile.

"... That will be all, Ikutsuki. Take the sample back to the lab." Takeharu said. Ikutsuki wordlessly nodded, and hurriedly took the small container of Shadow mass with him out of the room. He gave Minato a mixed look, both concerned yet somewhat proud, before leaving. Once the door shut behind Ikutsuki's departure, there was a brief period of silence as Takeharu and Minato simply looked at each other from the chairs they sat on.

"... So, what's the real reason you called me here?" Minato finally asked.

"... I'll be blunt." Takeharu said. "You should have died with your parents ten years ago."

"That's a rather mean thing to say." Minato said with a grin. "Being rich does not excuse a lack of upbringing or decency..."

in fact, it should reflect that. As head of the Kirijio Group, surely you know better."

"I have no intention of listening to your sophistry." Takeharu said. He frowned. "Even your tone of voice matches his... it's sickening."

"And who would be this loathsome individual you seem to be comparing me to?" Minato asked.

"... You don't need to know." Takeharu said. "However, let me ask you this... if you could harness the power of the Shadows I spoke of last night, what would you do with it?"

"That's an odd question." Minato said.

"Answer it." Takeharu said.

"Pushy, aren't we? Alright..." Minato said. "For starters, I wouldn't make something as foolish as a time alteration device, or even a time machine... there are too many unknown forces involved for normal humans to even dream of controlling. I suppose I'd have... a prediction device. Something like... well, this might seem off topic, but have you ever watched Gundam Wing?"

"What does that have to do with this?" Takeharu asked.

"I'll take that as a no, then..." Minato said. He sighed. "Well, in the show, the best Gundams have something called the ZERO system installed on them, a device which, utilizing real-time

combat data gathered during battle, shows the pilot every possible future outcome as they pilot and what they need to do to reach that future in the form of hallucinations." He chuckled. "Obviously, in actual combat, seeing yourself die thousands of times a second can scare people shitless, so it the system had its fair share of problems. Now, while that may prove downright insane in terms of second by second combat, suppose you could apply that system over a large period of time?"

"... A large scale prediction machine." Takeharu said. "You could see exactly what you'd need to do to get the best possible outcome in the long run... however, you'd need to gather data from everywhere in the world at once to count for every possible contingency."

"Which should be possible... after all, the Dark Hour covers the globe for an hour and warps both time and space." Minato said. "If you can cover the world, you can watch the world... with the proper setup, you can account for every possible contingency. And once you do that, you can choose whatever future you want and mold the world into exactly what you wanted it to become... essentially, you'd get to play the role of a god."

"... You've put quite a lot of thought into this, I see." Takeharu said. "That isn't an answer you could've simply come up with on the spot."

"I know my enemies and their abilities." Minato said.
"Naturally, I became curious as to how far their power could

be pushed once I realized that the Shadows were the creators of the Dark Hour, and not the other way around."

"... To know thine enemy is to love thine enemy." Takeharu said. "My father originally dedicated his life to battling Shadows... they enthralled him, and I'm certain they've already begun to enthrall you. Even worse... you have some kind of connection to these monsters. Tell me... how do you eat them?"

"That... is a secret." Minato said. He chuckled. "Sorry, but I don't trust you enough to tell you that just yet."

"I doubt you trust anyone enough to tell them." Takeharu said.

"... And why would you say that?" Minato asked.

"Because you're egotistical." Takeharu said. "Every action you take revolves around making yourself feel better. The constant condescension... the arrogance... the love of confrontation... the thirst for power... the manipulation of human beings as if they were your playthings... or rather, your dolls, as it would seem you prefer to call those completely under your control..."

"... Well? Do you plan on finishing this argument as to why I should have died ten years ago, or not?" Minato asked.

"I don't believe that people are born evil... but I know that true evil exists in this world, far worse than the Shadows you battle." Takeharu said. "Maybe once, you were a respectable

individual... an honorable Shirogane like your father. However, the man you are today... if you can even be called a man, that is... is a disgrace to the Shirogane name. You're a crazed freak that has convinced all of those around him that he's simply an eccentric... but you cannot fool me. I've dealt with your kind before... and I will never forget him. While I pity you for everything you went through and know that you are but a product of your past... I detest you, and will not allow you continue going around unchecked. Freaks like you must be put down... the only reason you're still breathing today is because I realize your power is necessary to eliminate the Dark Hour. However, once that has been accomplished, I will give you an option... you can disappear, and never approach any member of SEES or the Kirijio again... or I can eliminate you once you've finished your task. After this is over, you will be nothing more than just a memory. Do I make myself clear?"

Minato looked at Takeharu for a bit, taking in what he said, before he grinned. His grin slowly contorted into his manic smile, and he then began to very quietly cackle. Soon, his cackle turned into a full blown laugh, and he rested a hand on his face to keep himself from falling forwards. "Ahahahaha... Take-chan, you're gold, you know that?" Minato said. Takeharu narrowed his eye at Minato and scowled.

"... I knew it was foolish trying to reason with a freak like you." Takeharu said.

"Freak like me?" Minato asked. "Take-chan, I know I act like a Kirijio, but please!"

"What did you say?!" Takeharu snapped. Minato cackled.

"You're afraid of me because I remind you of your father, right?" Minato asked. "Guess what... if all those behaviors you listed remind you of him, then you really are his son!"

"You have no right to compare me to that monster... But I suppose only the mind of a madman could see a resemblance." Takeharu said.

"What are you talking about, Take-chan?" Minato asked. "I'll go down the list you just gave and show you what I mean... First, let's begin with egotistical, shall we? For starters, you planned to vacation in this entire house all alone with an army of maid servants at your beck and call... if we hadn't shown up, I bet you would've gotten up to all kinds of kinky things with them as their boss, ahahaha! Or maybe you wanted to isolate yourself because you were sick of dealing with all the incompetents around you?! Though I bet it was both, ahahahahaha!"

"Shut your insolent mouth!" Takeharu said.

"Moving on, number two, constant condescension!" Minato said. "You commute through glares, grunts, and a series of one-line sentences as if you're dealing with the mentally impaired! And even when you're riled up, you like to assert that the other person's at fault... Never saying 'I', always saying 'you'."

"That's enough!" Takeharu said, putting a hand into his jacket.

"The third charm, arrogance!" Minato continued. "Well, you thought you could just deal with me alone tonight, even though you claim to know all about me. If that's not arrogance, I don't know what it! But then there's number four, the love of confrontation!"

"If you don't stop talking..." Takeharu said, rising from his seat.

"I've never seen or heard you give a single concession that wasn't in preparation for an attack... you make yourself appear tough and threatening because you want somebody to try you, namely, a person like me, who also loves confrontation but hides it well." Minato said. "And then there's your fifth, the thirst for power." He cackled. "This one you hide well, but anyone with a brain can see that you're even more underhanded than your father!"

"You're pushing your luck." Takeharu said, drawing a pistol from his jacket and aiming it at Minato.

"Oh, is Take-chan going to shoot me?" Minato mused. "Well, c'mon then... your little Nanjo cronies aren't around though, so you better make sure you don't miss. You can't mobilize SEES on me, after all! I'm an integral member, so even though I do contribute to your power, we're out of play for this game... but perhaps one of your fellow groups in the conglomerate you've been building over the years is hiding somewhere I can't sense them."

"I am ensuring the survival of the Kirijio! That has nothing to do

with power!" Takeharu said.

"Yes, because we all know a company will tank unless it stands with at least forty other Groups backing it, right, Take-chan?" Minato mused. "But I think the best proof that you're REALLY a Kirijio? The manipulation of people as if they were your pawns!"

"You have no grounds for that argument! Only a monster does that, and I am not a monster, nor is my daughter!" Takeharu said.

"Hey, you finally took the time to care about her! Good job!" Minato said as he stood up and did a mock clap. "However, I hate to say this... but you really are a monster, Take-chan. Just like me... Just like Kouetsu... and yes, just like Mitsuru. For starters, you have all sorts of contacts with various uses... but when you want to relax and have a good time, where are your friends? ... Hmm? What's that? You don't keep people that have outlived their usefulness? Just like how you want to discard me once I help destroy the Dark Hour?"

"... That isn't true." Takeharu said.

"Come now, Take-chan, don't hate me for this. All of those traits mean you, like me, your father, and your daughter, have what it takes to lead the foolish masses!" Minato said. "I mean, you've seen Mitsuru's Gekkoukan, right? She's quite good at ruling, and I help her out to the best of my abilities... I do such a good job, I dare say she might have a dependency on me. If I were to suddenly disappear... well, I'd hate to see

what would happen to Mitsuru."

"... I won't let you touch my daughter." Takeharu said, his eye twitching. He steadied his aim, and set his face. "I WON'T LET A MONSTER LIKE YOU NEAR HER!" With that, he started firing. "DAMN YOU, DAMN YOU, DAMN YOU TO HELL! GO BACK TO WHERE YOU BELONG, YOU FREAK!" he screamed as he began unloading. Minato knew what was coming, however, and used his Speed Magatama to quickly take cover behind the couch Ikutsuki was sitting on. Takeharu barely tracked him, and ended up having to reload his pistol.

"Mr. Kirijio, please, you're losing your composure!" Minato said as he popped his head above the couch. "We're not enemies!"

"SHUT UP!" Takeharu yelled, reloading and beginning to fire at Minato's new location. The door opened as Takeharu fired, with Mitsuru walking in to see Minato hiding behind the couch while Takeharu finished firing the last of his clip at the couch.

"Father!" Mitsuru yelled, running over to the scene as Takeharu reloaded. "What are you doing?!"

"Getting rid of him before he becomes a problem, something I should've arranged much earlier." Takeharu said as he reloaded again. Minato came out from behind the couch and raised his hands in the air.

"Mr. Kirijio, please!" Minato pleaded. *"My advantage, asshole. You lost your temper first, meaning I have the high ground."*

"I know we disagree, but this is going too far! I'll consider your ultimatum, but –"

"Don't twist the facts, boy!" Takeharu said, aiming his gun at Minato. Mitsuru swiftly ran in front of Minato and extended her hands. "What do you think you're doing, Mitsuru?! Move!" he yelled.

"I won't!" Mitsuru said. "Father, you're being irrational! I know you're afraid that he'll end up like Grandfather, but I know him! He won't!"

"You know one of his masks! The real Minato IS Kouetsu Kirijio!" Takeharu said, his eye trembling with deadly intent. "If I let him live now, then he'll create another nightmare! We can't let that happen!"

"I'm fighting to eliminate the Dark Hour and contain the Shadows!" Minato said. "Maybe I'm interested in what they can do, but I have no intention of repeating the mistakes of the past!"

"That's right! You intend to succeed where my father failed!" Takeharu said.

"Father, please, you aren't thinking straight!" Mitsuru pleaded.

"Forgive me, but I have to do this!" Takeharu said. Minato saw he was going to fire, and moved forwards to push Mitsuru out of the way.

"*And here's my victory.*" Minato thought as the first bullet ripped into his torso.

"MINATO!" Mitsuru yelled as she watched him take another seven bullets into his torso and stomach. He staggered backwards and clutched his wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. He began to violently tremble, and breathe heavily.

"... You actually did it..." Minato said. His healing Magatama was already pushing the bullets out of his body and fixing his wounds, but it still hurt to move. Regardless, he began to exude as much power as he could, startling Takeharu as he reloaded. "... I should kill you right now..." he continued. "You would've hurt Mitsuru... you hurt me... and you wanted to finish the job. It's only right I respond in kind." he finished, suddenly awakening his full power. The tattoo spread over his body, and Takeharu dropped his gun at the mere presence that he suddenly felt. Minato took a step forwards, and Mitsuru ran between the two of them once more.

"STOP!" she yelled. Unlike her father, Minato actually did as commanded. "Minato, my father isn't thinking straight... his fear of my grandfather has made him irrational... please, forgive him."

"... Are you alright?" Minato asked, slowly releasing his awakened state. His transformation pushed the bullets out of his body, but the wounds still persisted.

"I'm fine." Mitsuru said. She turned to Takeharu, whose face had contorted into one of utter rage. He realized what had just

happened, and wanted to kick himself for what he had just done. Mitsuru gave him a serious glare, and the temperature in the room began to drop. "Father... I want you to stop this immediately. You have no right to persecute Minato like this because he may share some similarities with Grandfather... You taught me that people have more than one set of attributes, so why can't you see that about Minato?"

"... Get him out of my sight." Takeharu said, kneeling to pick up his gun. He put it back in his jacket, and turned to a trembling Mitsuru. "You heard me... Get him out of my sight."

"Father... You-" Mitsuru began.

"Leave!" Takeharu snapped. The word hit Mitsuru like a truck, and she took a few shaky breaths. Minato, who had used the full power of his healing Magatama just now, walked forwards and put a hand on Mitsuru's shoulder.

"... He needs some time." Minato said.

"Get your hands off my daughter." Takeharu said with a harsh glare.

"... No." Mitsuru said, putting her hand atop Minato's. "Have your privacy, Father... I'm sorry for ruining your vacation with my presence." With that, Mitsuru and Minato made their way out of Takeharu's office, leaving him with the bullet riddled couches. He stood there, watching the door close, before slumping back into his seat and beginning to take very deep breaths. He had to recollect himself before he could even think

of approaching anyone again.

Mitsuru had led Minato to her room, which was a larger, more lavish version of her dorm room with a proper queen bed and huge windows, possessing a much larger closet, desk, and dresser along with a bookshelf and a corner filled with fencing equipment. She took a seat on the bed, and Minato sat next to her, pulling her into a hug as she shook. "... This is my fault, Mitsuru. I was the one who pushed him too far." Minato said. "I wanted to know why he was angry with me, but... to think he'd associate me with his father that much..."

"... It doesn't make any sense." Mitsuru said, turning to hug him back. "My father is a rational man... he had nightmares when I was a child, but... for him to do something like this is inexcusable. He shot you, he..." she began, but suddenly stopped. She turned to feel Minato's body for wounds, but couldn't find any. "Your wounds..."

"I didn't want them lingering, so I fixed them while you were talking." Minato said. "It would be a shame to have blood all over the carpet and bed. I don't want to give the maids too much extra work."

Mitsuru sighed and shook her head, but then let out a slight giggle. "Everything that's just happened... and that's what you were concerned about?" she asked.

"It's difficult work getting out stains from a carpet." Minato mused. He kissed her on the forehead. "But in all seriousness... all that matters is that you're unharmed."

"... I wish I could say the same for you." Mitsuru said.

"Tis' merely a flesh wound." Minato mused. He rested his head on Mitsuru's shoulder. "I said I wouldn't leave you, remember? We still have to make memories that will last a lifetime."

"I know..." Mitsuru said. "... My father will come around... I believe he'll see past his irrationality. But that doesn't mean we can't enjoy our time together now."

"I like the sound of that." Minato whispered, turning to lick Mitsuru's neck. She turned to kiss him, but they were suddenly interrupted by the sound of her cellphone going off. She let out a slight growl and hurriedly took her cellphone out. "Yukari... of course." Mitsuru said quietly.

"You should answer... she's probably worried about us disappearing." Minato said. Mitsuru nodded, and answered her phone.

"Yes, Yukari?" Mitsuru answered.

"Senpai, where'd you go? Everyone else is playing pool and the Chairman came back to pick up Metis and Aigis... but I'm kind of worried about you. Minato still hasn't come back yet, but he was with the Chairman, so he's probably just making a bunch of bad jokes again." Yukari said over the phone.

"... Actually, his meeting with the Chairman had just ended." Mitsuru said. "I met up with him after making a quick inquiry..."

we'll join you shortly."

"Oh, so you're together? Great! Make sure you get back soon... and, uhh..." Yukari continued.

"... Is there something else?" Mitsuru asked.

"... I guess I just want to say sorry for flipping out last night. I shouldn't have snapped on you like that." Yukari said. Mitsuru chuckled.

"It was perfectly understandable... I don't blame you for anything." Mitsuru said.

"Oh, phew! Thanks... I'm kinda getting tired of all the heavy atmosphere we've got going on, ya know? Anyways, we can talk once you guys get here. See ya!" Yukari said. She hung up, and Mitsuru did the same. Minato chuckled and suddenly began to play with Mitsuru's hair.

"What's so funny?" she asked with a smile.

"Nothing... it's just nice to see everyone doing well together." Minato said. "Especially you and Yukari... you two were at odds far too much before."

"It was a lack of communication." Mitsuru said. She giggled. "Yet another problem you helped fix." With that, she leaned forwards and kissed him.

"I didn't do that much." Minato said after the kiss. "But... we

really should be going. I need to change this shirt before we get there after all."

"... You're right." Mitsuru said. She drew back and got off of her bed. "... While we may both have some bad memories from this vacation... I don't want that to hold us back."

"Then it won't." Minato said, rising alongside her. Mitsuru took hold of his hand, and he didn't let go. Together, they made their way back to the group after Minato swapped his shirt, and spent the night seeing just what the Kirijio Vacation Home offered.

94. Chapter 94

Chapter 94: Vacation's End

Author Note to Guest: Thank you for the feedback. I appreciate it.

Author Note to DesertSeagull: Metis is an entirely different being than what she was in the Answer; you missed something. Also, yeah, Yukari has often said her best friends are idiots (i.e. Junpei and Minato), so she expects as much from them.

The last night had been rather enjoyable for Minato. He spent his time lounging on the bed he had been given once more, reading another book he had stored away for the trip while he sat more than content with the state of affairs he had managed to create. However, his comfort was disturbed by a sudden knock on his door around five in the morning. "... *This is an hour earlier than breakfast.*" Minato thought as he put his book down and went to the door. "Good morning." he said as he opened the door. It was one of the many maids who worked at the mansion, though she held nothing for him.

"Good morning, Mr. Arisato." the maid greeted as usual. "You have visitors requesting your presence this morning."

"Who?" Minato asked.

"Mr. Ikutsuki and his associates." the maid said. Minato smirked once he realized what that meant.

"Excellent. I'll see them now." Minato said, stepping out of his room and closing the door. He followed the maid down the long hall filled with numerous rooms and came upon the stairway down to the entrance of the mansion. Surely enough, a rather sleep-deprived looking Ikutsuki stood there with Metis and Aigis standing behind him. The maid slipped out of sight as Minato made his way over to them and waved to everyone. "Good morning." he greeted.

"Good morning." Aigis and Metis replied in unison. Ikutsuki let out a stifled yawn and simply nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Ah, Minato... well, as you can see, I've brought back Metis and Aigis." Ikutsuki said in an extremely drowsy voice. "Now... while I couldn't find anything wrong with either of them, Aigis still claims to know you... however, that shouldn't be too much of a problem... they're both well-armed and powerful combatants, so... I'm sure you'll be able to put them to good use."

"You sound like you're about to collapse, Ikutsuki. Don't tell me you plan on going back to work after this." Minato said. He chuckled. "As they would say... your energy levels have reached critical condition. You must recharge immediately."

Ikutsuki and Metis both started laughing, but Aigis remained emotionless. She stood there, taking in the others for a bit, before she suddenly seemed to reach a realization. "I see... such a comparison also counts as 'humor'. I comprehend." Aigis said as Metis and Ikutsuki stopped laughing.

"Hmm, it would seem Aigis hasn't developed as much as Metis has... or is that an effect of being asleep for ten years?" Minato asked.

"In terms of live operating time, Aigis and Metis are almost the same at this point..." Ikutsuki said, scratching his head.

"Oh, I must be holding you up. I'll take them off your hands now." Minato said.

"Thank you... they've given me quite a hassle these last few days, so I think I'll take up residence in one of these excellent guest rooms." Ikutsuki said. He walked off to a door on their right. "Metis, Aigis, starting from now, Minato will primarily look after you... try not to give him any trouble." With that, he walked off into a first floor hallway as Aigis and Metis approached Minato.

"Starting now, we are officially in your care, Father." Metis said. She smirked. "So, what are we going to do today?"

"What are we going to do?... Hmm... that's a good question." Minato said. He thought for a bit before a slight grin reached his face. "... This might seem like an odd question, but how good is either of you with your hands?"

"As per the standards of all ASWs, we have optimal control over each and every part of our bodies." Aigis said.

"Then, let me get my bathing suit, and we'll go do something fun then." Minato said. He hurriedly turned to walk towards his room, prompting Metis and Aigis to follow him. *"Ah, so they did follow... well, this might be even more fun than I thought."*

Once Minato got changed, he headed off for the beach with Metis and Aigis following behind him almost like escorts. A few hours later, the members of SEES all ate breakfast and prepared to go to the beach once more at Junpei's insistence. "... Ain't we ever gonna go see that tree properly?" Shinjiro whispered to Fuuka as they walked towards the beach in one big group.

"I was wondering about that too... but I'm also wondering where Minato went." Fuuka said.

"Minato is already there." Mitsuru said, overhearing their conversation. "Apparently, Metis and Aigis were returned to us early in the morning and left in his care. He's elected to take them to the beach."

"Huh?... But... are they allowed that close to the water?" Fuuka asked. Mitsuru chuckled.

"The ASWs, though made over a short period of time, were built to operate in any environment." Mitsuru said with a smirk. "They can easily withstand a dip at the beach. As for the

tree... I'm sure we can make time to-

"You've gotta be kiddin' me!" Junpei yelled from a little ways in front of everyone else. Everyone stopped and hurriedly ran to where he was and turned to see the sight he saw. Yakushima's beach had suddenly shrunk tremendously in size, and instead of having a giant beach, there was a castle of sand the size of a small building facing the path that led to the Kirijio Vacation Home, fully designed with small windows and a supposed drawbridge. There was a first level perimeter that surrounded an upper room with a singular opening. Minato emerged from it, followed by Metis and Aigis. He stopped at edge of his little roof to look down on the other members of SEES alongside the two ASWs and smirked. "Dude, what the heck-?" Junpei began as he took a step forwards.

"Halt!" Metis yelled, holding up an arm. "What business does a Casualry have here?"

"Casualry?" Junpei asked as he stopped.

"Castle Arisato is only open to Luxurors. Your kind is unwelcome here." Metis said.

"Casualry? Luxoror? What the hell are you going on about?" Shinjiro asked.

"Human beings are divided into two classes." Aigis said. "There are the unprivileged and uneducated, lacking birthright and knowledge to enjoy the finer things in life. Such people are known as Casualries. Above them rests the Luxorors, the

privileged elite and highly educated who have been born into an upstanding family and can appreciate the finer things in life."

"... He really took the time to set this up." Fuuka said.

"Doesn't make it any better." Akihiko said. "Mina-!"

"You shall refer to the lord of this castle as Arisato-sama!" Metis said.

"A filthy Casualry like you has no right to speak to the lord of this castle in such a familiar tone." Aigis said. "However, Kirijio-sama... you are also a Luxoror. Why do you associate yourself with the Casualries?"

"What the heck is this turning into, some sort of period drama?" Yukari asked. "Mitsuru-senpai, please end this..."

"Very well." Mitsuru said. She walked forwards and cleared her throat. "Minato, I believe this has gone on for long enough. This structure is compromising the entire beach, after all..."

"The beach is the Casualries land! To hell with them and their wants!" Minato said as he threw his hand to the side. "They might have wants, but we Luxorors have needs! Do you think they could handle the pressures of ruling these lands?!"

"... This is becoming really stupid." Yukari said as she turned to watch Mitsuru. Oddly enough, though, she wasn't exasperated or annoyed. She looked like she was holding in a

laugh. "Uh-oh."

"No... They could never understand. Lately, these Casualties have been getting overconfident... they're encroaching on lands belonging to us Luxorors without even the slightest hesitation! But no more!" Minato said. "Yes, Castle Arisato, nay, Fortress Arisato shall remain! It shall serve as the immovable eyes of the king, a constant reminder to the masses that his word is law! Wahahahahahahaha! Tremble and despair, Casualty scum, and learn your place once more!"

"Screw this, I'm just knocking it down." Shinjiro said, walking forwards past a Mitsuru who was stifling a laugh.

"An enemy approaches!" Aigis warned.

"Guards! Deal with him!" Metis yelled.

"This ain't imagination land, kid." Shinjiro said as he kept walking. Suddenly, a skeletal hand burst forth from the sands and pulled his leg down into it, forcing him to use his arms and knee to stay upright.

"Then take this seriously." Hell Biker said as he appeared from the sand behind him and grabbed Shinjiro's back.

"The hell?!" Shinjiro yelled as he was pulled farther down into the sand, with both of his legs nearly submerged. He would've gone farther if Akihiko hadn't run forwards and punched Hell Biker's head straight off, crippling his body.

"Shinji, you alright?" Akihiko asked as he went to offer a hand to him.

"Move, dumbass!" Shinjiro said before taking Akihiko's hand. His warning came too late, however, when two sets of skeletal arms grabbed Akihiko's legs and swiftly pulled him down into the sand.

"You aren't touching that castle." Hell Biker's head said before it disappeared into nothingness. There, a little away from the gigantic castle's walls, Shinjiro and Akihiko were waist almost underarm deep in sand and stuck looking around.

"Uhh, bro, don't you think you're takin' this... a little too seriously?" Junpei asked.

"... There's no one around for the next five miles." Fuuka said.

"Then that means we don't need to put up with this." Yukari said. She reached into the bag she was carrying with her and drew her Evoker, stunning everyone. "I'm blowing that castle to bits!" She put her Evoker to her head and fired. "Garula!"

"Sorceress Metis." Minato said.

"Garula!" Metis said. Blue light encircled her as Psyche appeared above the castle and clasped its disconnected hands as Yukari's tornado spiraled towards the castle. The very same attack appeared and collided with Yukari's hit head on, and the winds dispersed harmlessly into the sky.

"Hey, watch it!" Shinjiro said as he got up. The attacks had blown him and Akihiko in opposite directions, sending Akihiko into the ocean and him towards the tree line.

"You're kidding me." Yukari said. "Fuuka, c'mon, let's get rid of this thing already!"

"Already ahead of you." Fuuka said as her third-eye opened. Baba Yaga quickly formed around her and raised its staff into the air. "Aeon Rain."

"General Aigis." Minato said.

"Palladion!" Aigis said. Her Persona, Palladion, appeared a flowing blue dress with gold adornments around the waist, shoulders, and breast-piece. It lacked legs, though it possessed two arms with hands always kept perfect straight at its sides. The head of Palladion actually sprouted from its core, with the breast actually being an armor plating along with the upper arms along with the flashy blue roman helmet, complete with a golden pattern which formed a resting golden Pegasus that held up red battle plumage to complete the head. The multiple pieces of armor opened up to reveal a large black lance connected to a running engine, constantly spinning within her Persona. As Fuuka's barrage of tiny projectiles came forth, Palladion position itself so that the lance was pointing towards the sky. The engine began to rumble, and the attacks were suddenly pulled towards her Persona. The hits impacted harmlessly, leaving Palladion unharmed.

"It can draw in physical attacks... this won't be easy." Fuuka said.

"I'm aware of that." Mitsuru said as she slowly backed away from the castle to join Fuuka and Yukari. She reached into the bag she was carrying and drew her Evoker as well. "Cover your ears."

"Seriously? Why are all of you armed?!" Junpei asked. Mitsuru quickly put her Evoker to her head and fired.

"Tentarafoo!" Mitsuru said as she fired. Penthesilea appeared behind her and did a little dance before harshly slamming its blades together. The impact created a high-pitched warbling sound that made even the sand itself begin to vibrate. Palladion disappeared as Aigis, Metis, and Minato all had to quickly cover their own ears as the castle shook. The attack passed, and Minato grimaced.

"So, you've sided with the Casualties, have you?" he asked as he uncovered his ears. "Then expect no mercy... David! Opera of Despair!"

David appeared at the foot of the castle with his violin at the ready and stared at the three girls. **"Are you prepared to dance the Dance of Death?"** he asked. He began to play a very slow, mesmerizing tune, while a barely tangible cone of energy quickly spread from him to the girls.

"Yeah right! Ga-!" Yukari said as she put her Evoker to her head. She froze, however, as did Mitsuru, and then let her

hands drop to her sides and took a completely straight position.

"What?!" Mitsuru asked. Suddenly, she and Yukari began to do an incomprehensible dance, moving as if their limbs were spaghetti, leaning around while just barely avoiding falling over. There was drunk dancing, and then there was the madness that Fuuka was witnessing.

"Senpai? Yukari?" Fuuka asked as the two girls suddenly turned towards her.

"I can't stop!" Yukari yelled, now completely panicking. "I can't stop!"

"Hmph... your protection prevents my music from influencing you..." David said as he kept playing. **"You may be safe from me... but what about them?"**

"This is too far, Minato!" Mitsuru yelled.

"I thought you wanted something that would last a lifetime!" Minato called.

"Crazy bastard!" Shinjiro said as he used his Devil Body parts to enhance his legs and bound towards David. He punched straight through his torso, destroying the Fiend and giving Mitsuru and Yukari control of their bodies once more.

"... This is not an acceptable twist of logic." Mitsuru said. "I will execute you if you go any farther!"

"... *Hmm, yeah, that was probably pushing it a little too far.*" Minato thought once he saw the girls' faces. "... Yeah, that was a little uncalled for." he said, scratching his head. "I'll take this down now." At that, he jumped off of the castle along with Metis and Aigis, landing on the sands near Shinjiro.

"Is it time for the best thing about sandcastles?" Metis asked.

"You know it." Minato said. He turned with Metis and Aigis towards his castle and called on both his Strength and Speed Magatama. Together, they suddenly charged right through the sand castle. It caved in on itself, sweeping Shinjiro up in a small wave of sand that pushed him back to near the girls. Akihiko emerged from the ocean at the time only to be knocked back into it by a small wave of sand. It died down before it reached any of the other SEES members, however, and Minato emerged with the two ASWs a good ways down the beach, all three of them completely covered in sand. He and Metis took one look at each other and started laughing before all three of them went into the ocean and took a quick swim.

"... Dude, that was crazy." Junpei said. The beach had mostly gone back to its original shape save for the slight bulge that remained at the base of Castle Arisato's remains.

"That was just downright ridiculous, more like it." Yukari said, still confirming that she could control her body. Shinjiro shook some sand off of himself as he stood up before scowling.

"Tch... dumbass really got caught up in the moment, didn't

he?" he asked.

"He did... I expect a serious repayment on his behalf." Mitsuru said.

"No kidding. That was way out of line." Akihiko said. Fuuka dispelled Baba Yaga and let her third eye close as she turned towards everyone else.

"... I have an idea." Fuuka said with a smirk. "Everyone, listen..."

After a short swim, Minato emerged alongside Metis and Aigis near the rest of the SEES members once more, all three of them shaking their heads to dry their hair as best as they could. "We have returned, Kirijio-sama." Aigis said.

"Sorry about that, but we were just having so much fun." Minato said. He stopped when he noticed the odd grin on everyone else's face, and knew immediately that they weren't about to let him off with just an apology. "... State your conditions."

"We'll have a role reversal." Fuuka said. "Now, all of us are the Luxorors... and you're the single Casualry. That means you have to make sure that all of us are having a good time, even if you want something else."

"... Oh. That's not too bad." Minato said. "This should be fun, right?"

"Indeed. The optimal method to 'have fun' is with an activity that engages everyone present." Aigis said. "... Currently, I want nothing. I will remain at Minato's side to ensure the activity goes smoothly."

"... Actually, I can think of a few things I want." Metis said. Minato chuckled.

"Then go right ahead and join them. I don't mind." he said. "It's not like I wasn't planning to spoil my daughter anyways." At that, Metis giggled and moved over to join the rest of the SEES members.

"Then, you'll be making sure we have quite a bit of fun." Mitsuru said.

"We will ensure the refreshment of your minds and bodies." Aigis said.

With that, the other members of SEES went about setting Minato and Aigis to do various tasks. At Yukari and Fuuka's command, Minato and Aigis coached a volleyball match which they weren't allowed to participate in until Metis destroyed the ball by spiking straight through the volleyball. Next, they operated as Junpei's floating water throne while he attacked Fuuka and Yukari with a water gun he managed to get from the mansion. However, they were suddenly tasked with doing the same for Metis, a much more difficult task due to her increased weight, once Yukari and Fuuka managed to dethrone Junpei. Inevitably, however, Mitsuru took her place in favor of watching the now full-blown water war taking place.

Ikutsuki had returned to speak to Akihiko and Shinjiro, who were taking some quality time to lounge on the beach chairs after the odd ordeal they went through, but avoided the odd scene once he learned of the events that had just transpired while he was asleep.

Eventually, the water war ended with Junpei's crushing defeat due to a lack of support against the combined forces of Yukari, Fuuka, and Metis, who proved to be capable of generating small waves with powerful swipes of her hands. As the decisive winner, Metis joined Mitsuru to perform a proper water dance with Minato and Aigis. While the human couple enjoyed their time trying out more elaborate moves, Metis went more for thrilling maneuvers. The use of the thrusters around her battle dress and on her arm were matched by small thrusters Aigis had in in her joints and on her feet, allowing them to do the equivalent of jet plane performances underwater.

Inevitably, the sun went down and the members of SEES were all at the mansion once more, having eaten again and simply enjoying the quiet of the night. While most of them were gathering their things to leave, Minato hadn't even unpacked, allowing him to remain seated in the usual first floor room SEES occupied while Aigis and Metis stood near him. "I believe our mission was a success, Minato." Aigis said.

"I'm certain it was. You were amazing, Aigis." Minato said. He chuckled. "I'd expect no less from my daughter's sister."

"... If I am the sister of your daughter, does that not make me

your daughter as well?" Aigis asked.

"... That's correct." Metis said. She smiled and shook Minato's shoulder slightly. "Father, can we keep her? Please?"

"Hmm... I already have one rather demanding daughter to look out for..." Minato mused. "But if you'd like that, then sure. Do you mind, Aigis?"

"If I am to become your daughter, then I will have a better claim to remain at your side. I agree with this arrangement." Aigis said.

"Then it's settled!" Minato said as he got up. He walked over and put one arm around Metis' shoulders and another around Aigis' shoulders. "We're going to need a proper picture to commemorate this." At that, Jack appeared and picked up his cellphone from the table and moved to take a picture.

"I gotta say, this is a weird ass family." Jack said.

"You're just jealous you aren't part of it." Metis said. She hugged Minato, which prompted Aigis to copy her.

"The picture is now ready. Now is the optimal time to take it." Aigis said.

"Hmph... say 'carnage'." Jack said.

"Carnage." they all said. Jack took the picture, and the trio parted. He handed Minato his phone and broke apart, allowing

him to look over the shot. He smiled when he saw that all three of them had completely blank expressions on their face. Metis saw next and giggled.

"A highly synchronized photograph." Aigis said with a nod.

"This'll be my new background." Minato said, setting the picture over his shot with Isako. "You'll be coming with us to Iwatodai, correct?"

"We're going to be staying with you, Father." Metis said. Minato chuckled and put his phone away.

"I wouldn't have it any other way." Minato said. He put his phone away, and returned to his lounge activities. *"Perfect. Two fighting machines much more reliable than humans have now sworn their absolute loyalty to me... this trip was well worth the hassle."*

After that day, nothing eventful happened at Yakushima. Takeharu Kirijio had isolated himself for a while, making no appearance for the night. The next morning, SEES all got on a different ship to Iwatodai complete with accommodations for Metis and Aigis, arriving at Iwatodai as night came. Oddly, Minato had decided to spend the whole trip with them in private, leaving everyone to wonder what he could have been doing. Regardless, upon their return, they all reached the dorm ready for nothing more than sleep. The first to speak was Junpei, who slumped down on a couch along with the majority of the other members.

"Man, I'm beat." he said. "It seemed to take forever to get back."

"Yeah, it was a tiring trip." Fuuka said. "We should all rest up so we're ready for the next operation."

"Yeah, yeah... I don't have any plans for summer break, so I can fight Shadows all you want."

"... Wow, you must be really bored." Yukari said.

"Sh-shut up, Yuka-tan." Junpei said.

"Whatever... we just have to defeat those last six, and it'll be all over. The Lost will get better, and everything will be back to normal, right? That's why we have to try our hardest."
Yukari said.

"I like that resolve." Minato said as he headed up to his room. "Hold onto that... it'll serve you well. Now, Metis, Aigis, we'll be continuing where we left off."

"Yes, Minato." Aigis said. She and Metis followed him upstairs, and everyone turned to look at each other.

"Does... anyone know what that's about?" Akihiko asked.

"... It can't be anything too weird. They're robots." Shinjiro said.

"You'd think so, but... I'm not so sure." Yukari said.

"... Could we drop such a subject? I'd prefer to not have that be the last thing in my mind before I go to sleep." Mitsuru said. With that, the members of SEES let it drop, and the night passed without incident.

95. Chapter 95

Chapter 95: The First Finals Results and Minato's Angels

Author Note to Mr. Haziq: That question was answered. No, he can't. The move Jin and Takaya did in the falling plane was simply them doing the same attack back to back (a 'Ma' spell hits every target in front of the user, so doing it back to back hits every target in range around the duo).

Author Note to Numnber13teen: No, they can't. This was explained because Minato has a summoning Magatama. He usually uses it for his partial summons, but he can always opt for a complete summon.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: No biggies, glad you're back! Good questions as always.

Author Note to Aizana Suguha: A new face! I hope I don't disappoint you.

"Good morning. Please wake up!" Aigis said. Yukari rolled around in her bed a bit before slowly opening her eyes. The first thing she saw was Aigis, Metis, and Minato's faces all leaning directly over her, watching her as she lay there. Naturally, her first reaction was to let out a bloodcurdling

scream while scrambling backwards, which resulted in her tumbling off of her bed. "Mission accomplished." Aigis said as the trio stood up properly.

"That scream likely woke the others. That was amazing, sister!" Metis said.

"An excellent job, Aigis." Minato said.

"W-w-why are you here?!" Yukari asked, quickly rising to her feet.

"One of the most effective methods to learn about someone is by observing them." Aigis said. "The paper on the wall says 'Do things five minutes early'. Therefore, I woke you up five minutes prior to the triggering of your alarm clock."

"It was also our mission to ensure that you and the others were not late to the breakfast currently being prepared by Father's servants." Metis said.

"You always eat it when it's nearly cold, after all. You really should try it hot sometime." Minato said. "There's a big difference."

"... H-how long were you... observing me?" Yukari asked.

"Four hours and twenty-three minutes." Aigis said. Yukari's eyes widened as a sudden knock came to her door.

"Yukari! Are you alright?" Fuuka asked. "The two girls are missing, and Minato isn't around... Do you think he took them

outside? I hope we don't have a repeat of Yakushima so quickly."

"We aren't 'two girls'..." Metis said as she walked over and opened the door. "I'm Metis, and she is Aigis. We're sisters, and we're here."

"Huh...? Metis?" Fuuka asked. "How did you—wait, Minato?"

"Yukari-san was asleep, so I unlocked the door." Metis said. "We could not observe her otherwise."

"O-observe?" Fuuka asked. She shook her head. "Still, that's unlawful entry... Minato, we asked you to make sure they stayed in the Command Room at night."

"They want to stay close to me, and the Command Room is too far away." Minato said. "I was thinking of just letting them stay in my room, but I know everyone would give me hell for trying it. So, I decided that I should let them stay around you girls. Besides, their power isn't anywhere near low yet."

"I propose we remain on standby in the room of the one we are currently observing. Is this acceptable?" Aigis asked.

"What?! N-no, that's not acceptable at all!" Yukari said. Mitsuru walked over to the door and peered stood near Fuuka, taking in the situation.

"Ah, good morning, Mother." Metis said. Mitsuru stopped and took in the situation before letting out a deep sigh.

"Good morning... Minato, may I ask why you've infiltrated Yukari's room?" Mitsuru asked.

"My daughters want to learn more about everyone else by observing them, so I'm just making sure they aren't doing anything too strange." Minato said.

"How is watching people while they sleep for hours on end not strange?!" Yukari asked.

"Senpai, Aigis and Metis don't want to remain on standby in the Command Room... they want to be around us." Fuuka said.

"My sister's proposal still stands." Metis said.

"But, you can't stay in the room with one of us every night..." Fuuka said.

"It's creepy..." Yukari said.

"And also against dorm regulations." Mitsuru added. "Though you may be special cases, we must still abide by Gekkoukan's rules."

"Actually, the regulations forbid two humans from sharing a room." Minato said. "It prohibits all types of pets as well, but has nothing against the presence of robotic helpers, androids, or anything of the sort."

"H-hey, don't say that! You know she can't stay here!" Yukari said.

"While that may be correct, we are operating under the guise that Metis and Aigis are both humans... and must be treated as such." Mitsuru said. "The two rooms on the other side of the hallway are both empty... They are directly above Minato and Junpei's rooms, so you shouldn't have any complaints about the distance there. They will serve as your new standby stations. In addition, neither of you are to leave the dorm unsupervised, meaning that either I, Minato, or the Chairman must be accompanying you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Mother." Metis said.

"I will do as commanded." Aigis said.

"Good. I'll have the preparations be performed under the Chairman's watch while we're at school." Mitsuru said. She left the doorway and made her way downstairs, content with her quick solution.

"... So, do you guys mind leaving?" Yukari asked. "I need to get ready for school, ya know?"

"Ah, sorry... we should go now." Fuuka said. She left the doorway, and Minato followed suit along with Aigis and Metis.

"... Everyone goes to a place called school in the morning. I comprehend." Aigis said as they made their way downstairs.

"Father, how would you classify this place known as school?" Metis asked.

"That's a good question." Minato said. "... I'd have to say... highly entertaining at times, but otherwise very boring."

"... That is a well-made assessment." Aigis said. "Analyzing your facial expression supports this claim. I shall place school under the 'time-sensitive' category instead of a single arbitrary classification."

"As I thought... Father is very well informed." Metis said. Minato chuckled.

"I know some things. Feel free to ask about whatever you want to know, and I'll tell you what I can." he said.

After a breakfast spent filling in the other boys of SEES as to what the scream they heard earlier was, everyone made their way to school as Mitsuru set up Metis and Aigis in their currently empty rooms, telling them to wait until the Chairman arrived with the crew carrying the necessary equipment needed to maintain them. Most of SEES was far too sleepy to be of any real conversation, so Minato found himself on the train listening to music once more. *"... I don't think Metis is going to like her room."* Minato thought.

"She is clingy... but she's also a robot. Isn't she used to that?" Alice asked.

"Maybe... I'm not sure of her living situation beforehand." Minato replied. *"Aigis... doesn't seem to have the emotions necessary to realize what being alone means. Or she hides her emotions very well, like me. Either way, I doubt she'll*

have any problems being cooped up in that room all day."

"It's unlike you to worry about others, Boss... got a soft spot for your daughters?" Jack asked. Minato smirked.

"If only it were that innocent... but no, not really. Unlike my other associates, they have almost sworn themselves to me already. If I live up to their hopes or even surpass them, they will never betray me." Minato replied. *"I don't know if I can get a Card from either of them, but it doesn't hurt to try by starting off on very good footing."*

"They are also the only beings in SEES who have a real chance of defeating you." Matador said. ***"If your only competition is on your side, then the match is purely for spectator enjoyment. There is no risk of losing."***

"Exactly. They serve as a back-up in case the rest of SEES turns against me." Minato replied. *"But I won't lie... they're rather good company."*

"You spent a lot of time teaching them things on the trip back and last night... Those babies are gonna serve you good, won't they?" Adonis asked.

"Not only are they two compatible machines, but they identify as sisters. They're a perfect fighting duo which, if I take the time to ensure is constantly at peak performance while keeping track of their fighting abilities, I can make ready for almost any situation." Minato said.

"Then your daughters will truly be children of carnage, won't they?" David asked.

"That's the plan." Minato said. His Fiends all let out a few laughs and then fell silent, more than happy with the news.

When everyone arrived at school, they were all far too sleepy to be concerned with anything. Minato bided his time until lunch, when he heard that the exam results would be posted. He left class to see the results.

Finals Results (Rank and Cumulative Score out of a Max 500)

3rd Years:

Mitsuru Kirijio – Rank 1, Score: 496

Akihiko Sanada – Rank 15, Score: 451

Shinjiro Aragaki – Rank 152, Score: 323

2nd Years:

Minato Arisato – Rank 1, Score: 520

Fuuka Yamagishi – Rank 2, Score: 494

Junpei Iori – Rank 52, Score: 438

Yukari Takeba – Rank 65, Score: 417

Minato was once again assaulted with looks of pure disbelief, jealousy, admiration, and envy as he looked at his score. A sudden thump got his attention, however, and he turned to see Yukari smack her head against a nearby wall. "... This can't be." Yukari said. "There's no way..."

"Yukari?" Fuuka asked, moving over to her. "... You didn't do that badly..."

"... Stupei beat me..." Yukari said. She banged her head against the wall again. "I'm stupider... than Stupei."

"You're going to give him a huge advantage if you keep hitting your head like that." Minato said as he walked over to them.

"Why does it matter? I'm already behind..." Yukari said.

"Aw, yeah!" Junpei said from a slight distance away from them. "I'm movin' on up!" He walked over to see the other sophomores and grinned. "Oh, hey! How's it going, Yupid?"

"Junpei!" Fuuka said, quickly turning on him.

"No... he's right." Yukari said. "This is exactly what I do to him... all the time..." She hit her head against the wall again. "C'mon... lemme have it... start the rant."

"... Uhh..." Junpei said, watching the rather distraught Yukari. "... Actually, you know what? I'm not really feeling it right now, Yuka-tan. Guess I'm too hungry."

"Then let's all go grab a bite." Minato said, shaking Yukari's

shoulder. "If you don't come quick, I'm going to steal your bon bons."

"... I don't have bon bons." Yukari said, righting herself from the wall. "Why does everyone think I carry around bon bons now?"

"It's an inside joke." Minato said. *"I get a wish from Mitsuru... I should use it wisely."*

While they ate lunch, Metis and Aigis stood in the Command Room while Ikutsuki worked with the sudden crew of Kirijio employees to hurriedly prepare their rooms before the school day ended. Metis had quickly found out how to tap into the dorm's security camera system, which seemed to malfunction on its own and randomly start recording members of the dorm. Aigis hurriedly agree to watch the videos on the basis of observation. The first recording was of the Command Room, with Ikutsuki getting caught up in making train puns while looking into the first full moon operation.

"It would seem Ikutsuki-san's affinity for bad puns is much deeper than I had thought." Metis said, resting her chin on her white hand. "I knew he liked to make bad jokes when with company, but to go that far alone..."

"I suspected Ikutsuki-san's affinity for bad humor surpassed that of the average human's." Aigis said. "During the update following my reactivation, he also worked on my humor settings. I now have the folder
C:\ROOT\LANGUAGE\WORDPLAY\PUNS\PUNS_FOR_EVEF

I have not yet taken the time to examine its contents... what do you propose I do, sister?"

"... It can't all be horrible, can it?" Metis asked. "Give it a try."

"Understood." Aigis said. She stood there, completely still, now taking the time to quickly process and examine everything in the folder of puns Ikutsuki had created. Two minutes passed. "... DEL
C:\ROOT\LANGUAGE\WORDPLAY\PUNS\PUNS_FOR_EVEF
Aigis said, breaking her silence.

"So it was that horrible..." Metis said.

"I would like to continue our observation." Aigis said without looking at Metis.

"Of course, sister." Metis said. She quickly accessed the computer again, and this time pulling up a video of Junpei's room. What followed was a misunderstanding with Mitsuru calling Officer Kurosawa due to the state of Junpei's room with the door being left open. She had thought that there was a robbery, but in reality, that was how Junpei's room normally looked and he had merely left the door open to air out the room that day. "... It would seem Mother is unaware of the lifestyles enjoyed by commoners."

"My records indicate that Kirijio-sama has only spent three years in this dormitory." Aigis said. "In addition, for the previous two, there was an individual known as a 'dorm mother' who ensured the cleanliness of the dorm... This may

have been her first encounter with living conditions different than her own. The exposure likely placed her in what is commonly referred to as a 'state of shock'."

"I comprehend. Mother is unused to the standards of the lower classes." Metis said. "... I do not comprehend how why that information would be relevant to her."

"... Nor can I." Aigis said. "Perhaps we may ask Minato?"

"Agreed... Father should know." Metis said. "However, it would seem this 'Kurosawa' individual is very knowledgeable."

"He is registered as a respected affiliate of the Kirijio family and ally of SEES." Aigis said. "As a member of the local police force, it is his duty to provide SEES with weaponry in exchange for a service fee and payment to the Iwatodai Police Department per weapon acquired."

"A job that far reaching would require interaction with a wide range of people... he must be highly experienced." Metis said. "Perhaps we can ask Father to meet him someday."

"Agreed." Aigis said. "... Junpei-san appears to be a good example of the 'average' high school male. I suggest we try and observe him after we conclude our observations on the female members of SEES."

"He appears to receive Father's good graces despite appearing unspectacular in every way." Metis said. "I am curious to know why... That course of action is acceptable."

"Affirmative. Commence the final recording." Aigis said. Metis began the last video, one detailing Fuuka in her room trying on her swimsuit, apparently in preparation for her trip to Yakushima. She had opened a package on her desk containing a device which she strapped around her waist.

"It said online that it was very effective for its price, so if it helps even a little before we leave... Now let's see... How do I turn this on?" Fuuka said in the recording. She pressed a button on the device, and it began to quickly vibrate on her stomach. Almost immediately, Fuuka began laughing uncontrollably. *"It tickles! Ahahahaha! W-what am I gonna do?!"* Fuuka continued as she clutched the machine. She struggled with it a bit until she fell back onto her bed. Suddenly, her eyes turned yellow, and she began to very violently try and remove the device from her waist. *"Hahaha, dammit! Wh-wh-why won't this piece of... ahahahaha... no!"*

Suddenly, there was a knock on Fuuka's door as she continued struggling with the contraption around her waist. *"Fuuka, may I bother you for a second?"* Mitsuru asked from outside the door. Fuuka turned her attention towards the door, her eyes returning to normal.

"Oh... it's Mitsuru-senpa- hahahaha!" she said. Her eyes returned to yellow. *"The door, godda- ahahahaha!"* she said. *"!!"* she said, managing to roll off of the bed. There was a little thump, and the device on her waist began to whirl even louder. *"I'm- ahahaha- I'm- heeheehee- COMING!"* she finally managed as she struggled to her feet with no luck, causing

quite a bit of noise.

"...*Oh.*" Mitsuru's voice said from behind the door. She cleared her throat. "*I-I'm sorry for... disturbing you.*"

"*N-no, not – heeheeheehee!*" Fuuka said, trying desperately to now crawl to the door. "*Mi- hahahaha! I-inside! Eheeeheheehee!*"

"... *I-it's not that important.*" Mitsuru said. "*Um, never mind... just... carry on.*"

"**INSIDE!**" Fuuka yelled, almost reaching the door. The sound of Mitsuru's hurried footsteps came were heard, and Fuuka began pounding on the ground. "*Shi –hahahahaa!*" she said. Her third eye opened, and the camera feed began to crackle. "*Fuck th- ahahaha!*" Baba Yaga's shell appeared around the floored Fuuka and began to spark with energy, cutting off the camera feed.

Aigis and Metis stared at the screen as the recording ended and said nothing for a while. "... I do not comprehend that series of events." Metis said. "Mother ignored cries of distress from one of her allies."

"Fuuka-san provides support during SEES' expeditions to Tartarus. Her role is arguably the most important. Surely a cry of distress from her should be worthy of investigation." Aigis said.

"... Humans may be more complicated than we originally

thought." Metis said. "This may be the result of a misunderstanding... bur for what?"

"Perhaps Fuuka-san's inability to convey her intentions with full sentences gave Kirijio-sama the wrong impression." Aigis said. "However, I also cannot find anything other than a cry of distress that may have constituted Fuuka-san's outbursts... I do not comprehend."

"Nor do I..." Metis said. She began to work away at the console once more, but soon stopped and turned towards Aigis. "There are no more recordings to view, sister..."

"We should check on the status of our new standby stations." Aigis said. "There will have been heavy modifications... I am curious as to whether they can still be referred to as 'dorm rooms'. ... What is troubling you, sister?"

"... I thought it would be different." Metis said. "After I left the lab... I wouldn't spend all day in a dark room by myself."

"You are not alone, sister. I am next door." Aigis said. "Your assessment is incorrect... Did Ikutsuki-san alter your classification systems?"

"... No, he didn't." Metis said. "Maybe you're right... I do not have sufficient data to properly assess the situation."

"Our standby arrangements are more than acceptable. I see no problems with them." Aigis said.

"You're right." Metis said. "There's no reason to expect different treatment here. Let's make sure our rooms are being correctly outfitted." At that, the two ASWs left the Command Room and went down to the third floor.

Back at school, the day had finally ended. It was the last Friday before break, and Minato knew that there would be a mandatory Student Council meeting that day. He made his way to the Council Room as he always did, threw on his Council armband, and took his seat. *"Hmm... now that I think about it, it's been a while since I've properly attended one of these meetings. Wonder what we'll talk about."* Minato thought as the other members began to file in. Mitsuru and Shinjiro entered and took their seats as usual, both apparently a bit annoyed at something. "Let me guess... we actually have some type of summer work, don't we?" Minato asked.

"Correct... I'll explain once the meeting begins." Mitsuru said.

"It's friggin' stupid is what it is..." Shinjiro said. "Especially cuz' it's us..."

"It already has Shinji like this?" Minato asked. "Something tells me this isn't going to be good."

"... I'll let you judge for yourself." Mitsuru said. She cleared her throat as all of the members sat down, and everyone became quiet as the meeting began. "Thank you all for your attendance... Now, as I'm sure you're all aware, summer break is upon us. While this would usually constitute a well-deserved break for the majority of us, Iwatodai's School

Board has sponsored a local outreach program in response to the increasing number of Apathy Syndrome victims... in other words, the increasing number of the Lost. In short, we'll be going around the city to assist in helping move them off of the streets and into homes where they'll receive proper care, as well as performing their care as well. Participation is mandatory for all Officers, including myself. ...While it is my job to encourage as many of you as possible to enlist, I understand that this may be unreasonable for some of you for many reasons. Therefore, I will not punish any non-member who does not participate. Incidentally, this program runs from the 27th to the 2nd, the same time that our school has its largest sports meet. Any Officer on a sports team will be excused as long as they give proof of participation in both the special training camp and tournament... are there any comments?"

"... I-is there... any chance we could catch Apathy Syndrome?" one nervous student asked from across the table.

"... While there is no proof that Apathy Syndrome spreads through proximity, I cannot give you any guarantees. Many of the other schools in the area have put up resistance against the entire set-up, but the Director of the Board has already gone ahead with the decision." Mitsuru said. "If you are uncomfortable in any way, you aren't required to attend."

"... Ok." the student said. No more questions came, and the last general meeting passed quickly without any ado. Mitsuru actually lacked paperwork, giving the trio the opportunity to

leave very early. They made their way to the train back to Iwatodai and stood as a group in relative silence for a short time.

"... What are we going to do if one of the Lost tries to interact with us?" Minato asked as the train began to pass over the water on its trip into the city.

"... Nothing." Mitsuru said. "Thankfully, I've noticed that the Lost also seem attracted to a few individuals other than ourselves... and currently, the Lost mumble and stare at worst. I believe we can do this without incident."

"Yeah, they don't do shit because we just pass by them... but who the hell knows what'll happen if we try and touch them?" Shinjiro asked. "If any of those freaks so much as lay a finger on me, I'm going to beat it to a pulp."

"Shinjiro... We'll all be in trouble if you act that rashly." Mitsuru said.

"Tch... but don't you realize how goddamn ridiculous this is?" Shinjiro asked. "What the hell are we wasting our time dealing with those freaks when all that could do is make people suspicious of us? Besides, we know what the real cause is and how to get rid of it. Pushing them into pens isn't going to do shit for them or this city and you know it."

"Even so, we are obligated to do this." Mitsuru said.

"Because of one stupid decision by that Director? Bullshit."

Shinjiro said.

"As flawed as the system is, it is what we operate within."
Mitsuru said. "Please, bear with it this once."

"... It's crap like this that made me glad I dropped out."
Shinjiro said. He scowled. "This is all a big waste of time..."

"... Hey, are you hungry, Shinji?" Minato asked. He turned to give a sideways glance to Mitsuru. "I could go for some Beef Bowl right now... my treat."

"Hmph... anything other than thinking about this shit." Shinjiro said. The group fell silent after that, and once the train reached Iwatodai Station, Mitsuru gave the boys their privacy and went back to the dorm. Meanwhile, Shinjiro and Minato quickly entered Beef Bowl as promised, and hurriedly ordered. "... You can't agree with this idea, can you?" Shinjiro asked. "I'm sure your tactical side is just screaming out everything that could go wrong if we do this."

"It is... I have no doubts that if one of us feels threatened enough, we'll kill a member of the Lost without hesitation."
Minato said. "But... this is our best opportunity to really gauge how much the Lost really act. It'd be better to learn about them now, in a controlled environment, rather than simply waiting on them to start acting radically different one day. I won't deny that there's a risk involved with this... but you gain nothing if you risk nothing. This information might be the deciding factor between the life and death of one of our own, and the foreseeable risks aren't anything we can't deal with."

Shinjiro said nothing, merely taking a sideways glance at Minato as their food arrived. He began to eat wordlessly alongside him before suddenly stopping a few minutes into his meal. "... We can see if they try anything with normal humans... and if we're lucky, what they do to people with potential if we run into any of them." Shinjiro said.

"With that many people going to the meeting and the nature of this city, we have a good chance of running into at least one other person with potential... even if it is just latent like Kurosawa's and Ikutsuki's." Minato said. "I have no intention of merely biding my time walking around bodies yet to fall... so I want you to help me out with this."

"... Keep an eye out and watch how they interact with everyone. Don't draw too much attention to myself, only fight if they make a move first, right?" Shinjiro asked. Minato nodded. "... Aki told me about this once. I thought he was being paranoid... so now I have a chance to see for myself."

"If this really is just a load of shit, you won't hear about it again." Minato said. "But until we confirm this for ourselves, I'm asking for your help."

"Weird thing to call in my help for." Shinjiro said. "Why not Mitsuru? She's better with this sort of thing than I am."

"She might act as if she's alright, but the events of Yakushima are still weighing heavily on her." Minato said. "I won't go into specifics, but... events transpired which gave me enough proof that her mental facilities are currently compromised, and

likely won't return to normal for a while. Unlike Yukari, Mitsuru is the type that recovers well when given some space... so that's what I'm doing. She doesn't need to be dealing with this along with her personal problems."

"... I thought something was off on the train." Shinjiro said. "I'm no people watcher, but Mitsuru ain't the type to throw one and two sentence responses at complaints that serious."

"That's right." Minato said. "... Though I didn't know you were the type to pay attention to people's habits."

Shinjiro chuckled. "You learn a lot on the streets... including how to read people. You act pretty damn well most of the time, but even you have signs. There's always a little delay before you talk after you learn something you didn't expect... like what you just did." he said. Minato chuckled.

"Well, that's certainly something I didn't expect from you." Minato said. "That'll serve you well when you start dealing with Ken. Make sure you apply it... he's not somebody you can understand by taking what he usually does as his real intent."

"... I know. It's fucked up that he's like that." Shinjiro said. "But I can't complain... I'm the one that made it happen."

"Don't forget you're the one that's going to make it right as well." Minato said.

"I'm going to try... but if he thinks the only way to get this right

is with me dying, then so be it." Shinjiro said. He turned to give a serious glare at Minato. "And also... I don't want to hear any more of that 'eye for an eye' bullshit mentality you've got... if Ken does decide to go through with killing me, then he's going to live with that decision. You aren't gonna kill him, and you aren't gonna let him kill himself either... because if he dies, then both of our lives were a waste."

"How noble of you." Minato said. He chuckled. "I can only promise you that he'll remain unharmed so long as you live... after that, well... I don't put much stock in promises with the dead. But don't worry about it too much. You won't be around to see it, after all."

"Tch... homicidal fuck." Shinjiro said. Minato laughed.

"Hey, no need to get offensive! If anything, you can think of this as an incentive to make sure you get him to like you." Minato said. "The entire point of doing something good is to reap the rewards, right? Well, you can't do that if you're dead... so keep yourself alive."

"... Reap the rewards, huh? What am I supposed to get outta this other than peace of mind?" Shinjiro asked.

"You could..." Minato began, but then a small smile reached his face. "... Actually, I think I'll let you see for yourself. I would hate to ruin the surprise."

"Hey, what's with that shit-eater smile?" Shinjiro asked. Minato chuckled and returned to his food. "I'm serious. What

the hell did you just realize?"

"Nothing you need to know just yet." Minato said. *"Ken can do my job for me, and if I work efficiently, I can eliminate him without arousing any suspicion almost immediately afterwards... heheheheh... I love being in touch with my inner child."*

"... Whatever." Shinjiro said, turning back to his food. They ate in relative silence until they finished their meals and paid, now leaving to go back to the dorm. "Hey," Shinjiro said as they left the strip mall near the station, "hurry up and tell me what I'm supposed to get out of this already."

"I can tell you," Minato began, "but if I did, then you wouldn't get it."

"The hell?" Shinjiro asked. "What kind of shitty riddle is this?"

"Riddle is a good word for it, I suppose." Minato said. He chuckled. "Shinji, c'mon... I'm sure you know that there are some things everyone discovers on their own."

"... You're kidding me." Shinjiro said. "You think I'm gonna get some life changing revelation or shit like that? Find my reason for living and all that garbage?"

"I don't know." Minato said with a shrug.

"Bullshit. You're always in the know." Shinjiro said. "... Tch. I get that you think I've come along way, but that's a big

goddamn stretch. You know me... I do what I have to do, and pay back what I've gotta pay back. There ain't anything deep or meaningful about it, it's just how I live. This is my biggest price, so once I pay it back..." he began, but then paused. Minato turned to him with a grin, and Shinjiro growled. "... I'll decide what I fucking do then. With or without this self-improvement you're trying to force on me. ... So stop bothering me about my future. ... Don't get me wrong, though. I'm not telling you to fuck off or stay out of it... But it'll happen when it happens, alright? And when it does come... I want you to respect my decision."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Hierophant Arcana...

"I would always respect it... agreeing with it, on the other hand, is an entirely different story." Minato said.

"Tch... damn punk." Shinjiro said.

"You want me to kick your ass again?" Minato asked.

"Like you could do it now." Shinjiro said. As they shot quick verbal jabs at each other as they made their way back to the dorm, most people who saw them were left utterly confused. They spoke only of violence and hurting one another, but they smiled the whole way back to the dorm.

When they entered, Minato signed is as usual while Shinjiro quickly moved to take an open spot in the lounge. Every member of SEES, including Metis and Aigis, had taken up spots in the lounge. There was a program detailing the rising number of Apathy Syndrome victims on TV, with the two ASWs watching intently as they stood side by side near the wall. Fuuka turned to greet Minato and Shinjiro as the door opened. "Hi, how was your day?" she asked. "Shinjiro-senpai, how did you do on your exams?"

"... Good enough." Shinjiro said as he sat down. "I don't have to worry about Toudou this time, so that's a success in my book."

"Oh... well, it is only the first term. There's always time to improve." Fuuka said.

"... In two weeks, the moon will be full again." Aigis said.

"A new enemy will appear... we have to be ready for it." Metis said.

"That's right... it's why we're going to Tartarus tonight." Minato said. "We haven't trained in there yet, but with Metis and Aigis on board, we can now have two four man squads."

"Good call..." Junpei said as the show they were watching ended. "Those Apathy Syndrome dudes will be everywhere... Wait, I mean the Lost." He let out a slight sigh. "Prolly shouldn't complain about em', since it's not their fault... it's the Shadows."

"It is possible to end this... Six Shadows remain. If we eliminate them, the Dark Hour will vanish." Aigis said.

"Yeah, that's true..." Junpei said. He smirked. "So what you're saying, Aigis, is that we gotta give it 100% out there, right?!"

"Actually, more than. You must exceed your own limits." Metis said.

"Heh... that's what I like to hear." Akihiko said. "She's got a point... we have to push ourselves beyond our comfort zones to make sure we win."

"That's true... but aren't you getting a little too excited for this, senpai?" Yukari asked.

"It beats crying about it, doesn't it?" he asked.

"He's got ya there." Junpei said.

"... I guess." Yukari said, turning her attention back to the TV. Minato walked over to Metis and Aigis, both of whom now turned their attention away from the TV. The other members of SEES were busy relaxing, so they all moved a slight distance away from them over to the window to have a private conversation.

"So, are your rooms prepared?" he asked.

"Yes. Ikutsuki-san's workers were highly efficient." Metis said.

"Our accommodations are acceptable." Aigis said.

"Acceptable?" Minato asked. "... Is there a problem?"

"... None, Father." Metis said.

"That is a lie." Aigis said. "My sister does not like the isolation our rooms create."

"Well, I was right." Minato thought. "Metis?"

"... It is just like the lab. A dark room with walls and a single door. A door I cannot always open of my own free will." Metis said. "I... dislike it."

"Then I'll change it." Minato said. He turned around and walked over to the sitting area once again. "Mitsuru, I believe you owe me something." he said.

"... I'm aware of that." Mitsuru said. The other members of SEES all froze and turned to Minato. "One wish... which I will do all in my power to grant."

"Correct." Minato said. He put on his manic grin, and he could feel the other members of the dorm all slightly shiver in anticipation of something terrible. "I want you..." he began, walking over to where she sat. He saw Akihiko twitch, Junpei gulp, Fuuka begin to hold her breath, Yukari wince, Shinjiro give him a sideways glance, and Mitsuru have a half frightened yet half expectant look on her face. "... to join Aigis and Metis' rooms into one." he finished as he stopped in front of her. The other members of SEES all paused, taking a few seconds to process what just happened.

"... Pardon me?" Mitsuru asked.

"I wish for you to join Aigis and Metis' rooms into one. Preferably with an open cut in the wall allowing free passage." Minato said. "I think they could use a television in there as well... and definitely some type of games to keep them entertained. I'll leave the specifics to you, though, since I'm no architect."

"... I see." Mitsuru said. She smiled. "That's very kind of you... Metis is lucky to have such a caring father."

"H-hey, are we seriously going with the father thing?" Yukari asked.

"... I don't think it's that strange, Yukari." Fuuka said. She chuckled. "Actually, it's cute."

"Uhh... right..." Junpei said. Akihiko smirked as he wiped some sweat from his brow.

"I like this arrangement." he said. "He doesn't sleep, so he can interact with them the most... and now that their rooms are one, they won't be alone if he decides to go out."

"I bet he just had this arrangement so he could keep going out at night anyways." Shinjiro said. "You do good things to reap the rewards, right?" Minato chuckled.

"Why, you wound me, Shinji. Even I have a heart." Minato said. Shinjiro chuckled, and then turned his attention back to

the TV. Minato walked back over to the two ASWs by the window, and saw Metis come as close to shaking with excitement as an ASW could. "Changed." Minato said as he rejoined them. Metis suddenly moved over and hugged him, almost pushing him to the ground. As usual, Aigis joined in shortly after.

"... Thank you." Metis said.

"You have made my sister happy." Aigis said. Minato chuckled.

"As if I'd let my daughter be unhappy." he mused. *"And their loyalty is strengthened."*

SEES bided its time until the Dark Hour, with Aigis and Metis taking the time to observe the interactions between the other SEES members rather intently. Inevitably, they found themselves inside the lobby of Tartarus as the Dark Hour began, everybody already fully armed. Aigis needed no weapons other than the guns on her fingers, and Metis stored her sledgehammer inside of a secret compartment that opened on her back. Metis' battledress extended the black blades which had retracted while she was at the dorm, and she stood in a line along with the other members of SEES as Minato examined everyone. "Now... we have to make two squadrons. The first squad, led by me, will advance up from where we last left off and proceed as usual. The second squad, led by Junpei, will follow from the last previous preset floor to train." Minato said.

"I wish to be by your side." Aigis said. "Please take me with you."

"And take me as well" Metis said.

"I understand you have your preferences, but –" Mitsuru began.

"The first team will be me, Mitsuru, Metis, and Aigis." Minato said. "Junpei, you get Akihiko, Shinjiro, and Yukari."

"Hey, are you sure that makes sense?" Shinjiro asked.

"I'm once again dividing up the healers." Minato said. "Also, I need to get a good grasp of how Aigis and Metis fight... they've told me about it, and I've given them some battle strategies I want to test first hand."

"... Very well." Mitsuru said. "Then those are our formations."

"I can provide support to both teams... but I'll only be able to provide combat assistance to the vanguard." Fuuka said from within Baba Yaga. She now wore the same combat outfit she had during the last operation, complete with all of her weaponry.

"As usual." Minato said. He started to walk off towards the teleporter, and was quickly followed by his group. "Prepare for combat."

They reached the previous platform of Arqa and found the gateway blocking the path upwards removed. They took the

stairs to the 65th floor and found themselves faced with new scenery. The main floor was golden with light blue tiling around the main floor. The area was markedly brighter than the dark floors of Arqa, and the walls were now elaborate pieces of architecture from varying regions of origin, all barely jutting out to give the place character. There was still blood littering a few of the halls, but that was to be expected in the Dark Hour. Mitsuru classified this new block as 'Yabbashah', and they quickly began to move upwards.

Aigis and Metis worked perfectly with Minato's military tactics, even more so because Aigis could assist Fuuka during her surprise attacks, doubling the damage dealt by their bullet storm. Metis was as fast as Minato when it came to initiating surprise combat, and many Shadows found their masks shattered by a well-placed sledgehammer strike before they could react. The new Indolent Maya stood no chance against Aigis' onslaught, and Minato had more than enough elemental coverage without upgrading his Personas since the last full moon operation. Mitsuru's ice and blade combination was as efficient as could be expected since the majority of their enemies either resisted one or both of her attack types, leaving her to play support. Thankfully, however, Tentarafoo and Marin Karin both proved rather effective against the weaker Shadows, making battles much easier.

Minato had taken to experimenting with his Fiends new skills, seeing which attacks would serve him best. He was particularly fond of Daisoujou's Samsara skill, which was a light variant of Alice's Die for Me. However, he often found

himself using Alice most of the time since a few of the Shadows on the floor were actually weak against darkness, and alternated between Incubus, Seiryuu, Raja Naga, and occasionally Black Frost to finish any foes they couldn't swiftly eliminate. Inevitably, they reached a clear area on the 72nd floor, and Minato knew what was coming next.

"There are three powerful Shadows on that floor!" Fuuka warned. *"Be careful... they reflect blunt force attacks and are unaffected by fire, light, and darkness. Use wind!"*

"Got it." Minato said as he slowly led the team forwards. He quickly fired his Evoker. "Matarukaja." he said. Black Frost covered the group in a bright light that increased their strength, and they came to a hallway with three Furious Gigas Shadows in waiting. They were huge, muscular creatures that looked stereotypically like wrestlers, reminiscent of the other Gigas Shadows they had encountered previously, clad in golden underwear and boots. Minato stopped as he watched the three Shadows, and smirked. "Mitsuru, provide support... Metis, Aigis, after my attack, use Maneuver A, Wind Orientation."

"Understood." Metis said, getting into a combat position.

"... So this is your new tactic." Mitsuru said. "Very well."

Minato ran forwards with Aigis and Metis at his side while Mitsuru took up the rear. "Fuuka, I want you to start attacking one of the ones Metis and Aigis aren't engaging once my attack hits." he said as he put his Evoker to his head.

"Roger!" Fuuka replied.

"Magarula!" Minato said as he fired. Seiryuu appeared above him and roared, unleashing three tornadoes to shred and send the almost unaware Shadows tumbling in different directions. One fell towards the group, and Minato grinned. "Now!" he called.

"Initiating Android Dance." Aigis and Metis said in unison.
"Orgia Mode."

Metis' visor fell down in front of her face and began to glow a bright red as Aigis' ear covers began to spin rapidly. The golden parts of their body began to glow and spark as they sped up and reached the Shadow with speed not even Minato expected. "Garula." Metis said as she ran past the Shadow. Psyche appeared right above it and threw its spectral hands aside, summoning another bladed tornado that knocked the Gigas into the air. Aigis slid to her knees and activated the thrusters on her joints to keep moving, firing her finger cannons directly at the Shadow as it was knocked into the air. "Garula." Metis said again as she stopped running to face the Shadow. Aigis slid to her side as Psyche now clasped its hands together, summoning another tornado above the Shadow to slam it down into the floor.

"Palladion!" Aigis yelled as she turned to stand next to Metis.

"Fatal End!" they both said. Their two Personae rushed at the Shadow from either side, tearing through it as they passed by. Palladion's lance sliced clean through the Shadow while

Psyche's hands left deep rips in its skin, splattering it. By the time the other two Shadows got back up, Fuuka had already appeared and opened fire with her rifle at one, trying to cripple it. Minato ran forwards to the two ASWs.

"Aigis, Mitsuru, take the one Fuuka's dealing with! Metis, with me!" he quickly yelled as he stopped near them.

"A full volley!" Aigis said as she quickly ran to join Fuuka. She skidded to a halt next to her, beginning to unload with all of her finger cannons at the Gigas once more. The Shadow staggered backwards at the sudden onslaught of attacks that were being directed at it, and raised its arms to guard itself.

Minato and Metis ran towards the last Gigas as it took a pose signaling that it would take them down, an orange light enveloping its body. ***"That's a power charge, Boss! Its next hit is going to be a big one!"*** Hell Biker warned.

"We end it here." Minato said. He quickly fired his Evoker as Metis pulled ahead. "Hell Exhaust!" Hell biker appeared and revved his bike's engine, creating a tornado that swiftly enveloped the Gigas Shadow and knocked it down once more.

"Garula!" Metis called, summoning Psyche again to knock the Shadow right back up into the wall. Minato called on his strength and Speed Magatama as he summoned Adonis as just the spear in his hands, and ran alongside Metis.

"Pierce it!" he said. Metis swiftly turned her sledge hammer so

that the spiked bottom was facing the Shadow, and activated her arm rocket as Minato leaped forwards. They drove their weapons clean into the Shadow, pinning it to the wall. It swiped upwards quickly, however, knocking Metis backwards and almost to the roof. After a few flips in the air, however, she quickly recovered and landed without substantial damage. "Heartbreaker." Minato said. Almighty energy focused at Adonis' tip, and then exploded from within the Shadow. Bits of shadow goo fell to the side and began to quickly dissolve as the creature's upper half was replaced by a puddle, and Minato quickly turned his attention back to Aigis and Mitsuru.

"Bufula!" Metis and Mitsuru said from behind Aigis. Fuuka had disappeared, and left Aigis to avoid a crazed charge by the last Furious Gigas. Penthesilea and Psyche conjured up two ice shards that struck the Shadows weakened knees and tripped it. Aigis, who had been back pedaling while putting bullet after bullet into the Shadow, skid to a stop. She bounded forwards and stopped right in front of the fallen Shadow, her hands pointed like arrows with all five fingers pointed directly at the Shadow's mask. Without a word, she concentrated her fire directly at the Shadow's face, shattering its mask and ripping through its head. It squirmed on its hands for a bit as the bullets ripped through its insides before collapsing and beginning to dissolve at her feet.

"Mission complete." Aigis said, putting her hands to the side so that they could cool down. "Orgia Mode ending in forty seconds."

"Orgia Cancel." Metis said as she held her visor. The glow

went away, and she lifted it back up so that it appeared as her headdress.

"... *What is Orgia?*" Fuuka asked.

"Orgia Mode is a state that releases their safety limiters." Minato said. "Metis actually has a special Neo-Orgia Mode which is slightly more efficient than Aigis' own, and has the Orgia Cancel which allows her to safely exit it within a certain time frame. Aigis, on the other hand, has no safe method other than waiting it out... if she hasn't consumed too much power during the final moments, she won't overheat and require a period of recharge where she is unable to do anything."

"Affirmative. As of current, I should safely be able to exit Orgia Mode without the need for cool down." Aigis said.

"If I do not Orgia Cancel, I will overheat if I remain in Neo-Orgia Mode for too long. However, this only disables my arm and thrusters. I can still move, but I will lack combat utility." Metis said.

"... Those are quite useful abilities." Mitsuru said. She turned to Minato. "Then, since you've already worked with them, I'll leave it to your judgment whether or not they use it while in combat. For now, however, we'll proceed once you are both ready."

"Yes, Kirijio-sama." Aigis said as her Orgia Mode wore off. Her gold bits stopped glowing, and she carefully walked back

over to everyone else. "I am ready to resume our mission."

Some loot later, and twelve more floors of Shadow hunting. Minato found more than his fair share of odd items to keep, and enjoy running literally up and down walls alongside the Orgia Mode ASWs. The sudden abandonment left Mitsuru less than amused, but thankfully, she didn't encounter any other Shadows during the trio's frantic hunt for the Supreme Hand. Eventually, they used a teleporter on the 85th floor to heal at the clock, allow Minato to fuse some new Personae and hand in his odd loot that Elizabeth's requests required, and generally take a little rest. Junpei's team returned as Minato left the Velvet Room, and were in the process of healing when Fuuka spoke. *"I've scanned the next Shadow... there's only one, but it reflects every element except wind, and resists slash and pierce attacks."* she said. *"I don't think either of the teams is suited for this..."*

"... Then we'll change formation." Minato said. "Metis, Shinjiro, Yukari, on me. We're taking that Shadow. Everyone else on Junpei, starting from where we fought those Gigas."

"Ah, man... I was hoping for a part of the action, but even I can tell I'd be pretty useless against something like that." Junpei said. "Well, at least I continue where I left off."

"That's a whole lot of defense for that Shadow... I hope it's attacks are weak to make up for it." Yukari said.

"It's never that easy." Shinjiro said, hoisting his obsidian axe up over his shoulder. "C'mon. Let's go kill this thing and be

done with it."

"It probably uses something to counter one of its weaknesses. Yukari, you hang back in case of an electric attack." Minato said. "You'll be in charge of support."

"Got it." Yukari said. The group headed for the teleporter, and Minato once again used Matarukaja as they rounded the corner to see the Shadow barring their path. It was something known as a 'Fanatic Tower', and was composed of three male faces with wearing elaborate headdresses with mirrors on their fronts. The topmost head wore a blue mask with the number 'V' carved on it, denoting its Hierophant Arcana.

"Shinjiro, I want Castor Prime attacking once Fuuka finishes unloading. Metis, we're going in once Shinjiro's attack hits." Minato said.

"Yes." Metis said.

"Good. Fuuka, start us off." Minato said.

"*Fuuka Bazooka!*" Fuuka said. She suddenly appeared in front of them with her two bazookas aimed at the tower, and fired one after the other. What happened next defied anyone's expectations. As the first rocket flew towards the middle head, the tower broke apart as all three faces floated out of the way. The shot aimed at the base exploded underneath the heads, but the blast passed around the heads harmlessly. "This is... keh!" Fuuka said. She fired her next two shots in quick succession, both aimed at one of the floating heads. It

avoided the first shot, but was hit head on by the second one. It tumbled backwards, but was otherwise unscathed.

"Star Drop." Shinjiro said as he fired his Evoker. Castor Prime appeared behind him and fired its cannons into the air, raising its horse head into the air as it prepped for its attack. Castor Prime leapt through the air towards the three heads, its enormous size bearing down to crush one of them. Two of the heads easily moved out of the way, but the one hit by Fuuka was crushed underneath Castor Prime's body. The other two floating heads circled around Castor Prime and linked together with an electric beam, each of them sending another to a spot beneath Castor. Suddenly, the air between the three of them was filled with electricity. The attack ripped through Castor and shattered the Persona, forcing Shinjiro to clutch his head. "Tch... pieces of shit." he grumbled.

Minato and Metis had charged ahead, both aiming at the two floating tower heads. Minato jumped up and shrouded one of his legs in energy with his new Magatama, delivering a swift heel drop to ground the head in front of him as it disconnected. Metis moved in tangent with him, opting to swing her sledgehammer in a crescent motion and knock the head in front of her far down the hallway. They landed next to each other a short distance from the head that was hit by Castor, the one with a mask, and moved for a joint strike. The Shadow responded by opening its mouth and releasing a sudden Poison Mist that enveloped the area. "*Alice, you're up.*" Minato mentally commanded. She became his primary Fiend, preventing him from using any others while giving him

all of the benefits she incurred, including the nullification of poison.

He moved through the mist alongside Metis, who was unaffected by poison because she was a robot, following her with sound. He knew she had put down her visor to see through the mist, and felt that they were quickly gaining on the source of the mist. He and Metis both leapt forwards and struck, Metis delivering a rocket punch while Minato threw one enhanced by his Magatama once more, though this one also had his Strength and Speed Magatama behind it as well. The combined force cracked the mask of the Hierophant as it went tumbling down the hallway, bouncing along the floor with each hit. The masked head tumbled underneath the head Metis hit, as it suddenly flew towards them, eyes glowing with electricity. The second of the Fanatic Tower's heads opened its mouth and spewed a blast of lightning directly at Minato, who just barely managed to tumble to the side to avoid a direct hit. His clothing had been seared by the grazing attack, but he was mostly unhurt. He turned to see the previous head he had hit emerge from the mist behind Metis, ready to fire at her back as well.

"Garula!" Yukari shouted as her Evoker went off. The new head was consumed in a sudden tornado erupting from underneath it, sending the attack off target towards the wall as it was whirled around violently. Metis moved forwards and tried to take a quick swing at the head which shot Minato to no avail as it easily drifted out of the way. The same head quickly opened its mouth and revealed a thin spear that

suddenly extended towards Metis as she landed. With a quick flip, her battledress extended the black blades that jutted from it, and the motion easily deflected the attack, sending the head spinning.

"Got you!" Metis said, firing off her arm and skirt thrusters. She flew directly towards the head and slammed it downwards as she passed over it, embedding it into the ground. Minato was on it in a flash, his fists covered in his new Magatama's power as he began to ruthlessly assault the down head. He saw the masked head rise and prepare and attack, but knew he was covered.

"Dreadnought!" Shinjiro yelled as he fired his Evoker once again. Castor Prime began to fire its cannons down the hall at the masked head. Most of his attacks missed, but one of them clipped it and sent it tumbling to the floor. The head that had been caught by Yukari's attack re-emerged from the wall and fired off a quick electric attack at Shinjiro, but it was quickly absorbed by his Devil Body's arm. Minato continued to ruthlessly wail on the downed head, ignoring the action around him. Inevitably, the head released a small electric burst that forced Minato backwards and suddenly flew to regroup farther down the hallway.

"Fuuka, nail all three of them when they combine." Minato said as he got up and adjusted his jacket. "Metis, here comes the big one."

"Power Charge." Metis said. Psyche emerged above her and cloaked her in a harsh light, powering her up. "Neo-Orgia

Mode!" she said, her visor beginning to glow. Minato cracked his neck and then awakened to his full power, ready to finish the fight.

"I've got them!" Fuuka said as the Fanatic Tower reformed. *"Devour!"* A huge set of fangs made from almighty energy emerged from the floor and clamped down on all three heads, locking them in place. Minato and Metis took off as the attack detonated, and both bounded forwards at full speed. Metis' sledgehammer was enveloped in red energy as Minato's fist was covered in black energy. She swept low, aiming for the base head, as Minato punched forwards, taking the one in the middle. Their attacks went clean through their targets, the heads bursting apart as the final masked head fell to the floor. Minato spun on the balls of his feet, dropping to all fours so he could slow himself down as much as possible, even summoning Adonis' arm with the spear in tow alongside Matador's with his sword, both weapons digging into the ground to slow him down. Metis entered a similar stance her, battledress extending all of its blades into the ground to help slow her down. They small scars in the ground as they slowly reached a stop, and swiftly righted themselves as the last head turned to face them.

Its eyes began to glow, but it was suddenly slammed downwards by a blow from Shinjiro's axe. He stood there, energy pulsing in his arm from the attack he had absorbed, and began to repeatedly hit the Shadow as he held it down with his foot. It struggled and squirmed, but eventually fell still after he continued hitting his opponent. He kicked it aside and

put his axe over his shoulder as pieces of it began to dissolve. "Adios, asshole." Shinjiro said as he turned to walk away.

"It's not dead!" Metis yelled. Shinjiro turned back to see the head slowly begin to rise into the air, prepping an attack. This time, it was Yukari who ran forwards and smashed it down with her bow.

"Tsk! Why won't you hurry up and die already?!" she yelled as she beat it with her bow. She drew an arrow from her quiver and drove it into one of the Shadow's eyes before punching it down and then kicking it repeatedly. "It's your damn fault that everything is happening! Just disappear!" she yelled. She delivered two more hard kicks and then a swift stomp before backing up. The Shadow still squirmed, so she quickly fired off her Evoker in a different manner than usual. Instead of aiming directly between her eyes with both hands on her gun, she adopted a style more like Shinjiro's, her head tilted towards the gun as it almost dug into the side of her head. Her face was riddled with nothing but disgust and rage as she pulled the trigger. "Go to hell!" she yelled. Io appeared above her, but this time, instead of the woman moving, the bull she sat on let out a loud roar. Her Persona moved and crushed the Shadow with its size by charging directly at it, slamming into the wall. It pulled back once, charged again, and then did the same attack once more before slowly breaking apart. Nothing but Shadow goo was left after that attack.

"*Well... that's new.*" Minato thought as he released his awakening.

"Orgia Cancel." Metis said, removing her visor.

"... Good work." Shinjiro said. Yukari scowled at the disappearing Shadow mass before quickly holstering her Evoker.

"... Let's go already." she said. "The next barricade should be close, right? I want to hurry up and get out of here."

"Of course." Minato said. He grinned. "It seems I've underestimated you, Yukari. Looks like you can hold your own at close range."

"It's not my preference... but it's not like I'm defenseless." Yukari said. She grimaced. "Not after what happened against the Shadows when we rescued Fuuka."

Minato nodded and Shinjiro nodded, knowing that it was probably for the best if they stopped talking. Some more interesting items later and four more short floors up, they arrived at an open platform with a barricade blocking the stairs. Minato got his new Old Document and returned to the first floor with the group. They had a few minutes until the Dark Hour would end, so everyone began to pack up. Minato handed showed Elizabeth his spoils, got his rewards, and let SEES return to the dorm for the night. While everyone else decided to go rest for the night, he opted to spend the night in Command Room with Aigis and Metis after he got Junpei to let them hold onto his board games for the night. The hours passed as he taught them how to entertain themselves if he had to go out, something he knew he would need if he wanted

to proceed with a few of his Cards.

96. Chapter 96

Chapter 96: School's Out

Author Note to NocturnalDesertSeagull: Wow, lots of praise! Though I won't fix that typo, as I don't fix any of them. Forgive me for expecting rational humans to somewhat be able to discern meaning from slight errors XD

Anyways, yeah, thanks a lot! Aigis was easy to do, but I really had to work with Metis. Her original character is somewhat tough to use as a base, though I did pull a lot from it. I had to make her much better than simply a second, even more clingy version of Aigis. I did the Fuuka recording part because while the first two recordings wouldn't have been that different from the originals, her own would have to be inherently different due to her altered character. ... Though, was Minato's wish really that unexpected? He was hinting at it since the train ride.

Finally, the battles. While I said that this work isn't battle-centric, that doesn't excuse poorly written combat. A shitty fight is a reflection of laziness on my part, and besides, I enjoy writing fight scenes. Having to balance

the over-the-top with believability is a good game, though I think I often gravitate more towards the over the top. At least in the big battles. The battle changes I made just... make sense to me? I mean, if you know there's a guardian coming up, why don't they scan that shit before hand? Why don't you cast a buff right before entering combat? Everyone got stronger to match the stronger world and MC.

Author Note to That Guy: Not sure about the whole PQ business. Not even sure if I want that as canon. As for Sho, I've dropped HUGE hints about his role in the story. Do your homework.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Yes, Yukari's gotten some newfound power in the form of unadulterated rage now that she knows about the incident. The idea comes from the fact that her Persona is a woman atop a bull... which I have as the rage she suppresses. I like what I did with Metis and Aigis too XD

Author Note to Guest: While I haven't explicitly gone out of the way to mention it often, the Social Links really function to strengthen the Personae he fuses as usual, as well as convince the person he has made the Card with that Minato is an ally. By the way... I'm certain I can do better than whatever comedy you're trying to get out of that.

Author Note to Aizana: Magatama List:

Strength – Passively makes Minato slightly stronger, when called on, boosts strength to inhuman levels. Has a recharge equivalent to twice as long as it was used (which is why Minato tries to activate it only when he's about to attack).

Speed – Same as strength, except with his speed and agility.

Regeneration – Passively gives Minato Regenerate 1 and Invigorate 1. When channeled, it heals him completely (all HP and SP). Has a cool down of 12 hours after use.

Summon – Allows Minato to summon up to two of his Personas or Fiends at full strength just by thinking. This type of summon is about double the cost of doing it with his Evoker, but it allows him to summon stealthily and without warning. Minato has learned how to do his partial summons with it, and is what he usually relegates it for. His Fiends can appear as bodies without any power free of charge, however, due to their nature.

Weapon – Allows Minato to summon the weapons of his Personae and Fiends for barely any cost.

Aura – Allows Minato to channel demonic energy around his body for a short period of time. This will make that portion of his body stronger, more durable, and protect it from injury. Usage of this power for more than 10 seconds at once will begin to eat away at his body (i.e.

his skin will start to dissolve, followed by everything under it).

There. No spoilers, though.

Author Note to Shaodowqueen15: Junpei and Mitsuru, both at Rank 9. He plans to sever his attachments to people once he has taken all the power he can get.

That was long. Sorry.

Four o'clock in the morning. Minato never really liked losing, but he couldn't complain too much. After all, he was going up against an opponent with a literal computer for a brain in a game of Battleship, so perhaps he was the fool for trying to win against Aigis. "Your cruiser has been sunk, Father." Metis said as Aigis put in her last shot.

"Victory!" Aigis said with a slight smile. Minato chuckled and surveyed their new joint room. Metis had the room above Minato's, with her power station set up against the window to block it out. There were numerous tuning tools on the wall left wall with a small table in the center of her room. Oddly enough, she had a traditional teapot almost exactly like Minato's in the center of it, though he didn't bother asking why. Aigis had the room on the right, with her power station in the same spot that Metis' own was in her room. However, instead of mere tuning tools Metis had, she actually possessed a number of firearm attachments and crates full of ammunition lining the right wall as well. Finally, she had a small rack of books on various facets of human behavior near

to her power station, which Minato thought was quite a useful thing for his daughters to keep. Mitsuru had called in a crew a few hours before they went to Tartarus that created a large passage way in the shape of a simple square arch through the wall between their rooms, and had even gone so far as to put a wall-mounted TV on one side and a small shelf on the other.

"It's your win." he said. "I think you've got the hang of this after tasting three victories straight."

"Yes. I shall now add 'Battleship' to my repertoire of known board games." Aigis said.

"That makes six games we know to play." Metis said.

"However, my preference still lies with the game 'Risk'." and a quick idea struck him. "It's now the morning, isn't it?" he mused. He took a quick glance at Metis, and knew what she had in mind.

"... Mother has said that we cannot spend our nights observing the others." Metis said. "Now that it is morning, this is the optimal time to gather data."

"Affirmative." Aigis said. "Who shall be our target today, sister?"

"I am interested to see Mother's reactions to our presence." Metis said. "Is this acceptable, Father?"

"I'm also interested to see her reactions as well." Minato said with a smirk. "Let's go."

With that, they all exited through Metis' door very quietly and made their way over to Mitsuru's room. "Commencing unlock." Aigis said. She made a fist to the door, and her knuckles opened up to reveal a small set of lock-picking tools. She worked quickly and quietly, with Metis and Minato watching intently to see if anyone had detected them. Mitsuru's door opened with a quiet click, and Aigis slowly opened it. Her knuckles returned to normal, and she stood up. "Unlock time decreased by 0.013 seconds. I am steadily improving." she said.

"Good work." Minato whispered. "Now, what's the first thing to do when entering uncharted territory?"

"Proceed quietly and stealthily, taking in as much detail as possible." Metis whispered as she began to very quietly lead them into Mitsuru's room. Minato closed the door and relocked it once they were inside, and followed the two ASWs so that they were in the same position they were in while they watched Yukari sleep. Each of them surveyed the room, and then turned back to the sleeping Mitsuru. "There is no writing on the wall... it would seem Mother is a more independent thinker than Yukari-san."

"Kirijio-sama is an individual of high importance. Differences in thought patterns and processing capabilities are to be expected when compared to those of lower societal standing." Aigis whispered. She broke their formation and quickly looked at the alarm clock next to Mitsuru's bed. "... Her alarm is for set for five-forty-five. Should we wake her at five-forty?"

"No... let her sleep." Minato replied. "Mitsuru is a busy woman... she needs all the rest she can get." Aigis and Metis both nodded, and then returned to their observatory stance. There the trio stood, watching the sleeping Mitsuru. Minato knew Metis and Aigis were taking in every little detail about her sleeping, from the slight sleepy adjustments she made with her messy hair to the little bit of repositioning she did on her pillow and even the fluctuations in her breathing pattern that accompanied any slight bit of motion.

And so they stood, still as statues as they waited for Mitsuru's alarm clock to go off. Inevitably, the abrupt ringing broke the utter silence that filled the room, but Metis quickly turned it off and returned to her original position. "Good morning, Mother! Did you sleep well?" Metis greeted the barely waking Mitsuru.

Mitsuru groggily opened her eyes, her hair unkempt and messily blocking her entire face. She let out a slight grumble. "Metis, didn't I-" she began, suddenly moving to get up while she cleared her hair out of her face. The sudden movement caught the trio off guard, leaving Mitsuru to slam her forehead into Metis' own, stopping her from talking. The impact didn't move Metis, but knocked Mitsuru right back down and got the hand she was using to clear hair out of her face to instead stay there, clutching her forehead.

"Mother!" Metis said, suddenly moving to kneel down next to her. "Are you alright?"

"... I'm fine." Mitsuru said, very slowly removing hair from her face with her other hand. Minato took that as his cue to pass

by Metis and lean over to kiss Mitsuru's forehead.

"I know you said you wanted to wake up to me every morning, but I never thought you would be this excited." Minato mused.

"That..." Mitsuru began, but then stopped talking. She rubbed her head and let out a slight sigh before slowly getting up, her hair now looking somewhat like what it usually looked like, though it was messier than usual. Minato backed up to give her space, moving to stand next to Aigis again.

"Mission accomplished." Aigis said.

"Ah, there's no substantial damage." Metis said, getting off of her knees. "That's good."

"Thank you." Mitsuru said. She sighed as she straightened her posture so that she was sitting properly in her bed. "... I believe I told you that you weren't allowed to monitor people in the night."

"That is why we waited until the morning, Kirijio-sama." Aigis said. "You have only been under observation for one hour and thirty-eight minutes." Mitsuru took a deep breath, apparently not amused by the answer.

"Then... you are hereby forbidden from entering anyone's personal quarters without their express permission." Mitsuru said. "Although... Minato, did you put them up to this?"

"I don't know about 'put them up to this' so much as 'gave

them the idea'." Minato mused.

"... I expect a royal breakfast." Mitsuru said. "Anything less will merit an execution."

"It has been said that the key to a man's heart is through his stomach. Does this statement also apply to females?" Aigis asked.

"It applies to everyone." Minato said. "It's transcendent, really... you can gain the affection of creatures from entirely different species if you feed them well."

"I comprehend. Living organisms respond well to the fulfillment of their basic need for food." Metis said.

"Simplistic, aren't we?" Minato mused. He chuckled. "But you girls are better than that."

"... What are you trying to teach them, Minato?" Mitsuru asked.

"Only that they surpass human kind." Minato said. "A simple truth. They're faster, stronger, smarter, and more durable. They have no defined lifespan and can adapt to practically any situation."

"... However, would that not make us inhuman?" Aigis asked.

"Not at all!" he said, pulling Aigis over to him along with Metis so he could mess with their hair. "My daughters are enhanced humans, the future today! You can do whatever you want

because you stand above everyone else!"

"... I would like both of you to forget those last few statements." Mitsuru said as the temperature in the room began to drop. "Minato... don't try to tell them anything of that sort again. Aigis and Metis, just like you and I, must live within a certain set of rules set by society and circumstance. While it is true that they possess a number of advantages over human beings, they are still to regard them as their equals and must give them the proper respect... meaning that they have to respect their rights, including their right to personal privacy. If I hear about another incident where you three have unlawfully entered another person's room, I will execute you just as I would any other member of SEES. Do I make myself clear?"

"... Yes, Kirijio-sama." Aigis and Metis said in unison.

"Good... then, if I could have a moment with Minato?" Mitsuru asked. Aigis and Metis both turned to him, and he simply nodded in affirmation. The two ASWs left the room wordlessly and closed the door after they took one last look at Minato.

"... *This may have worked out much better than I thought possible.*" Minato thought. He sighed. "Spoiling them too much, am I?" he asked.

"... There's a difference between spoiling and corrupting, Minato." Mitsuru said. "I realize that you... may not be able to see that differentiation clearly due to your history, but the fact remains that those two ASWs are property of the Kirijio Group. While they were made to surpass humans in terms of

combat mechanics, they are still machines... Do you see where this is going?"

"... A machine is made to serve people, right?" Minato asked. "I know that... however, machine or not, Aigis and Metis both have the potential to be failures or greats, just like the rest of us. If we keep reminding them that they are machines, then they'll never be able to truly improve. You'll place limits on them prematurely and bar them from reaching their full potential... and in case you haven't noticed, more power is no longer a might but a must. The Shadows are getting stronger and the conditions in this city are rapidly deteriorating. If we don't allow Aigis and Metis to realize that they are more than simple combat machines, they'll fall behind everyone else."

"... That may be true... but that does not mean we should encourage destructive behaviors." Mitsuru said. "You may have found yourself through a chaotic life, but that doesn't mean it's the only way to do so. There were countless opportunities for you to slip through the cracks... we cannot afford to risk such valuable assets in that manner. In addition, it's almost miraculous that you emerged the man you are today... if either of them becomes the usual result of your path, something much worse than you... it would be catastrophic. I could not forgive myself if that happened, and I am not willing to take that risk."

"Even though you know I'd be there to guide them every step of the way to keep them on the right path?" Minato asked.

"... You committed atrocities in the past, Minato." Mitsuru

said. "There's no denying it... and even though you have become a great man, the path you took to get there is riddled with scars you've left on the world. ...I trust your judgment on many things, Minato, and if you asked, I would entrust my life to you. However, something like this... I believe it's best handled by SEES as a group."

"So you're saying I'm unfit to raise them?" Minato asked.

"That's..." Mitsuru began, but she quickly fell silent. She took a deep breath, but then met Minato's glare with one of her own. "... Yes. You'll lead them down a path of no return, and I cannot allow that."

"... Then we have nothing more to discuss." Minato said with a smirk. He moved forwards in one swift motion and kissed Mitsuru before she could react, and then just as quickly backed away. "If that's what you really want, I won't argue. You are their mother, after all." With that, he turned and headed towards the door. "I'll have pancakes ready in twenty. Yours will be made just the way you like, my dearest." With that, he opened the door without looking back and left, leaving a somewhat embarrassed Mitsuru on her bed.

Outside, Metis and Aigis stood side by side in the middle of the hallway, both waiting for his return. "You have returned." Aigis said.

"How was your meeting?" Metis asked.

"Good. Your mother was just a bit concerned because she

thinks I spoil you too much." Minato said. He grinned. "I disagree, though. You both deserve at least this much." That got a little smile out of both of them, and he chuckled as he headed downstairs towards the kitchen with both of them following him. He worked rather quickly as he made pancakes, summoning Alice as a helper to speed along the process. Aigis and Metis were more than content with observing him as he worked and occasionally doing simple tasks if he asked them for help, so he finished breakfast in the twenty minutes he had promised. He was just getting around to finalizing the preparation of Mitsuru's dish, trying to artistically place strawberries in a way that wouldn't compromise the perfect syrup blades he asked Aigis to make when Mitsuru quickly came down the stairs. She saw him finish her plate, and then quickly walked over to him.

"Minato, why were you so happy at the end of our talk?" Mitsuru asked suddenly.

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked. "We had our first argument over how to raise our kids! It was a special moment, wasn't it?"

"... T-that's not really... something to be happy about." Mitsuru said, taken aback by how he said it. There was almost a giddy tone in his voice, something childishly innocent but still possessing the psychotic undertone she could always detect in his voice.

"Of course it is. This means we're adjusting to parenthood without any foreseeable problems." Minato said, pulling her into a one-handed hug. "We've even fallen into roles. I'm the

nice parent that spoils the kids and lets them get away with things, and you're the mean one with the best intentions for them."

"This isn't a game, Minato!" Mitsuru quickly said, trying to hide the sudden swell of embarrassment that hit her. "A-and let go of me. The others will be here soon."

"If you say so." Minato said as he released her. "Then, I present your royal breakfast. I trust it meets your standards?" he asked. Mitsuru fixed her clothing and took a seat, regaining her composure as she looked over her meal.

".. It passes." Mitsuru said. Minato chuckled and took his seat next to her, his syrup skull adorned pancakes done by Metis waiting for him.

"Good. Then, have you decided our wedding date?" he asked as he began to eat. Mitsuru almost choked, but managed to keep herself in check.

"Y-you can't just ask things like that!" she said.

"Well, it wouldn't do for the future heir of the Kirijio Group to have children with a man that isn't her husband, and I don't think concubines are really allowed in this day and age." Minato said. He took a quick bite and chewed for a bit before swallowing. "So naturally, since we already have two children, we have to take responsibility and get married."

"That is correct." Aigis said, suddenly moving near to them

and standing to the left of Mitsuru. "It has come to my attention that your relationship is a secret. However, just now, you were fused like paparazzi at a scandal, indicating that this is serious. The logical course of action for public announcement would be a wedding ceremony."

"Aigis?!" Mitsuru asked, surprised by her sudden statement.

"This marriage benefits both of you, Mother. Not only does Father have a prestigious family name, but there are signs of love in this relationship. I see no reason for you not to follow this plan of action." Metis said, walking to stand to the right of Minato.

"Both of you need to stop this!" Mitsuru said. "I'll... I'll execute you two if you let this slip!"

"Our lips are airtight." Aigis and Metis said in unison.

"The only ones left to seal are mine." Minato mused.

"... You wouldn't." Mitsuru said.

"I'm an erratic individual, am I not? I think you're safer off sealing my lips too." Minato said.

"... How insolent." Mitsuru said. A slight smile crept onto her face. "I can't believe what I'm being forced to put up with..." With that, she quickly cupped Minato's chin and leaned forwards to kiss him. It wasn't nearly as quick as the one in her room. She held him there for a good thirty seconds before

pulling back, and lingered near his face as they parted.

"... Well, that's certainly done the job." Minato said. He chuckled and quickly glanced at the stairs, alerting Mitsuru to the fact that there were footsteps coming down. They quickly returned to their breakfasts as Akihiko and Shinjiro were the first two into the lounge. "Good morning, Akihiko, Shinji." Minato said.

"Mornin'." Akihiko said, moving over to the table. He took his seat, but then stopped when he saw Aigis and Metis both watching Minato and Mitsuru intently. "... So, uhh... are you two under observation?" he asked as Shinjiro took his seat.

"We're just giving them an example of normal breakfast interaction for reference." Minato said.

"It'd be more effective with the rest of you participating." Mitsuru said.

"Ok... sure, I don't mind." Akihiko said.

"I ain't doin' anything special for it, but I'll take part." Shinjiro said.

"You have my thanks." Mitsuru said. The rest of the SEES members eventually came in and began to make small talk along with everyone else, all while Aigis and Metis watched from behind Minato and Mitsuru. Inevitably, Minato escorted the ASWs back to their joint room before leaving for school with the others, ready for a quick final day before his real

work with the Lost began.

The morning was plain and uneventful. Junpei made sure everyone knew how excited he was, and Minato matched his enthusiasm as best as he could. The school day began quickly, and Minato cruised through it without a hitch.

Over at the abandoned warehouse Hamuko lived in, everybody was back to their usual routines. Takaya wore his Orca tooth necklace as he worked on his writings quietly, occasionally glancing at the television Hamuko lazily watched with Koromaru going around the room. Jin sat at his computer as he always did, but made sure to feed Koromaru a little treat every time he came around. Chidori had taken to her drawing once more, seated away from everyone else so she could focus. The room was almost deathly quiet save for the television.

"... I'm bored." Hamuko said, turning off the TV.

"There are too many Lost around this area. Not many people come by, so people are going to notice if we start to attract their attention." Jin said. "And before you make that suggestion, no, we can't just start killing them off. There'll be too many damn bodies to clean up... hell, there already are. You've taken out thirty of the bastards already and gotten the police on high alert."

"So? It doesn't really matter how many of them are around." Hamuko said. "And what the hell can the police do to us anyway?"

"It's not them we need to worry about. But if we start hitting them, the JSDF will be on us, and those motherfuckers don't play." Jin said. "I've heard about the people deployed in our area, and if even a tenth of what's said about them is true, they're trouble we don't want."

"That's lame... I don't want to sit around all day." Hamuko said.

"When the full moon rises, we'll get to meet our opponents." Takaya said. Koromaru barked twice before running over to sit next to Takaya.

"... Is it even that exciting? We aren't allowed to kill them..." Chidori said.

"It might just be play fighting, but these guys aren't pushovers... especially if what Ikutsuki said about them causing all the destruction on Shirakawa being true." Jin said. He chuckled. "That old geezer sounded pretty sad when he said it."

"... But the next full moon is so far away..." Hamuko whined.

"I don't mind being inside... The Lost are annoying." Chidori said. "How about you go find something better to do than just watch TV? Your complaining is becoming annoying too."

"C'mon, Chidori... don't be like that..." Hamuko said.

"There are only two people who truly deserve the right to

complain." Takaya said. "Those whose lives begin to quickly wither when their circumstances begin to improve... and those who cannot find the solace of death when they've realized they have nothing to live for."

"And he's off." Jin said. "Good job, Hamuko... your complaining started up Takaya."

"The first type of complaint rings hollow... in this world, there exists nothing worth living for. To grieve in the face of ultimate salvation is either ignorance or hypocrisy. Ignorance is tolerable... humanity fears the unknown, and most do not realize that death is the only true peace that can ever be found." Takaya said. "As for the hypocritical... they are souls that I truly grieve for. They know that they are finding peace, but have yet to get their fill of excitement from life... and though eternal slumber's beckoning is inexorable, there are those that plague themselves by raging against the darkness, clinging to a light that exists only in their minds. These are the lost lambs. Those that have forgotten the value of life..."

"Great... now I have to hear this out..." Hamuko said. She tried to curl up on her bean bag and drift back to sleep, thoroughly annoyed at her lack of things to do.

Back at Gekkoukan, the day had finally ended. "We're outta here!" Junpei said triumphantly after everyone was dismissed. Minato chuckled as he lazily got up. Despite everything that had happened, even Yukari seemed like she was in a good mood as she packed everything away one last time. "Yo, Minato, let's go celebrate! You too, Yuka-tan! Oh, and we can

get Fuuka in on this too!"

"Hmm... that actually sounds like a pretty good idea." Yukari said with a grin. "I'll go grab Fuuka, 'kay?"

"Somebody's in a good mood. I like where this is headed." Minato said.

"Sweet! We can finish up everything we started before our trip." Yukari said as she started heading towards the door.

"Sure thing... but I think I'd like to start with a good lunch. I'll let you all choose the place, of course." Minato said as she left.

"This is sounding better every second." Junpei said. He chuckled. "Ya know, one of these days, we should get everybody from the dorm and go out. Aigis and Metis too, ya know? It'll be really cool, I bet... like, maybe we could all go to the Summer Festival and hang."

Minato chuckled. "Is the end of the semester really that rejuvenating?" he asked.

"Of course it is, man! Yeah, we've got some BS summer work, but we can always cram that crap right before school starts back!" Junpei said. "Besides, it's not like it even really affects our grades. Heck, we barely even learn anything from it."

"I suppose you have a point there." Minato said. They walked

out to the hallway to catch Yukari emerge from 2-E alongside Fuuka, and quickly moved over to them so they could leave as a group. They made their way to the school's entrance and passed through the gates, all letting out happy sighs as they exited.

"It'll be nice to finally get a real chance to relax. It feels like it's been forever since any of us have gotten more than a few days of good rest." Fuuka said.

"Isn't it?" Yukari asked. "I mean, yeah, I've got that sport meet to deal with, but after that, it's smooth sailing from there!"

"Heh, me and Fuuka are lucky because we're on the Couch Potatoes." Junpei said. "... Though, now that I think about it, I don't really have any plans other than fighting Shadows and training..."

"That sounds like a summer to me." Minato said. "I've got that... philanthropy crap with the Council, but I'm in the same boat as you, Junpei. Well, I might work some more if I want some money."

"Working more over the summer sounds smart. You'll probably get the chance to do a lot of modeling as well with all of the events that are coming up and the changing season." Fuuka said.

"Well, I could always model for you in private if you ask nicely, Fuuka." Minato mused. Fuuka reddened a bit, but giggled.

"Are you sure? I might take you up on that." Fuuka said.

"You guys are getting a little too friendly there." Yukari said with a smirk. "Not that I mind, though."

"Hey, let em' do their thing! Nobody gets on your case for calling me crap all the time, Yupid." Junpei mused.

"Really, Stupei? This is the first thing you want to start?" Yukari asked. Minato chuckled.

"Sometimes, I don't know which one of you is more mature." Minato said.

"It mighta been Yuka-tan in the past, but I'm a changed man now." Junpei said.

"You really have changed, Junpei." Fuuka said.

"Huh? You knew him, Fuuka?" Yukari asked.

"Knew him? Oh, not really... he was in the class across from mine, and he'd get in just before the bell a lot with Kenji or one of his other friends." Fuuka said. "He was a huge underachiever... I can't remember you trying at anything other than playing PSP."

"... Oh yeah! Now that I think about it, your username looked familiar when we started playing EP together." Junpei said. Minato chuckled.

"The Bass Monster cometh for your souls." he mused.

"... The Bass Monster?" Yukari asked.

"... I made it a long time ago." Fuuka said, scratching her head. She chuckled. "It was when I really started to listen to music a lot... so I ended up with that. It stuck, and... well, I guess that's the story."

"I like it." Junpei said with a grin.

"... Maybe I should change it." Fuuka said.

"Huh? Hey, c'mon, I'm being serious!" Junpei said. Fuuka giggled.

"I'm just teasing you." she said. "It'd be weird for me to change it after so long."

"Funny thing about names is that they stick if you use them enough." Minato said. "Who knows? You two might be Stupei and Yupid well after high school if you keep calling each other those names."

"Yupid? Please, no way that's sticking!" Yukari said. She snickered. "Stupei, Ace Defective on the other hand... now there's something that isn't going away anytime soon."

"You think so? Cuz if that's how it's gonna be, I'm only gonna call you Yupid from now on." Junpei said. "If I'm goin' down, you're coming with me."

"In your dreams." Yukari said. They reached the train and quickly boarded before forming a little group to continue their

conversation. "So, where are we gonna eat? I'm not that hungry, so I'm not really feeling anywhere too nice. You have any ideas, Fuuka?"

"... I would say Wild Duck, but this is a special occasion." Fuuka said. "Plus, I know Minato hates eating there."

"Huh?! Wait, are you for real?!" Junpei asked, turning to Minato.

"What can I say? The food is sub-par and it smells." Minato said with a shrug.

"Dude, ya mean that time we went..." Junpei said.

"Trust me, that time we went, eating was the last thing on my mind." Minato said. "But yes, this time, I'm not entering that greasy cesspool of my own accord. I've been in less odious slaughterhouses, and that's no lie. At least they had a steady supply of air-refresher at the ready."

"... Then how about Café Chagall?" Yukari suggested.

"Woah, Yuka-tan, going into a place like with me and Minato?" Junpei mused. "Ya sure it ain't gonna start weird rumors?"

"Hey, I'm way past stuff like that... Besides, everyone knows we're all friends now, so what could they say?" Yukari said.

"... The way you said that is kind of suspicious." Minato said.

"We all know what she means." Fuuka said. "I'm fine with

there."

"Same." Minato said.

"Alright, then it's settled." Yukari said. She turned towards the window as the train began to pass over the ocean between Tatsumi Port Island and Iwatodai, doing a slight stretch with her arms behind her head. "It's funny that one of the biggest things I'll miss about school is the train ride, huh? I might just visit here a bunch so I have an excuse to go back and forth on the train."

"There'll be a film festival coming up, so if you really wanted, you could watch every movie." Fuuka said.

"Hey, that'd be fun. Whaddya say, Yuka-tan? Wanna see em' all?" Junpei asked.

"The film festival... nah, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't like ALL of them. But I'd go for a few." Yukari said.

"So does that make it a few dates, huh?" Junpei asked with a grin.

"... Actually, on second thought, I think I'll pass." Yukari said with a smirk.

"Pushing just a little too hard there." Minato said. Junpei chuckled.

"Hey, I had to try." he said.

"If anything, I'll bring Aegis and Metis along and you can say one of them is your girlfriend." Minato mused.

"... Wait, are you saying I could...?" Junpei asked.

"Junpei, I know they look like girls, but you should really think about more about that..." Fuuka said.

"I guess you could try, but remember... you do anything to so much as annoy my daughters, you'll be answering to me." Minato said with a smile.

"... A-actually, I think I'll try my luck at picking up chicks at Escapade when we head out." Junpei said. Minato chuckled, and they continued their train ride. After they arrived back in Iwatodai, they quickly made their way to Paulownia Mall and entered Café Chagall as a group, occupying one table with Minato on one side with Fuuka while across from Junpei and Yukari. They all ordered before taking a moment to relax. "... Ya know, I just noticed that there are way less people in here than I thought there would be." Junpei said. "Though, it's prolly cuz of those Lost near the entrance to the Mall..."

"Hey, don't let that get you down. By the next full moon, we'll have cured a bunch of them." Minato said. "Besides, I'm going to be helping to get them into proper homes where they can be cared for... but I think the main reason is so that they aren't scaring the crap out of everyone by lingering around on the streets."

"They were talking about that on the news... there have been

a few local groups that are now trying to increase awareness about the Lost." Yukari said.

"I heard it was for their protection." Fuuka said. "Apparently, a lot of them died over the last month, and some people think they're being killed... I think the idea is something along the lines of 'out of sight, out of mind'. It's a little dehumanizing, but... I can't really think of a better way to deal with them."

"... I mean, if it's for their protection, I guess it's alright... I just hope that when we finish this up, Apathy Syndrome really goes away for good along with everything else." Yukari said.

"They say the people who recover all get some little memento from it." Minato said. "But hey, did we come here to talk about depressing stuff, or did we come here to celebrate? If all we do is worry about a battle that takes place for at most an hour a day, we'll be too distracted to enjoy the other twenty-four hours." He leaned back in his chair and chuckled. "The world is in chaos, the people are uneasy, and our only path is based on waiting for things to happen. And it's for those exact reasons that being too serious is a horrible idea."

"... Oh, I get ya." Junpei said. "If we get way too into what we're doing, we'll be just as messed up as everyone else right now. We gotta stay sharp if we wanna finish this the right way, so that means we need to make sure we do a whole lotta refreshment of our minds and bodies!"

"... You're just saying we need to play around a lot in Aigis-speak." Yukari said.

"Well, hey, I'm not wrong, am I?" Junpei asked.

"They have a point... we can't get paranoid." Fuuka said.

"Then, in the spirit of light-heartedness, anybody got a good plan for what to do after this?" Minato asked. "Personally, I was thinking of visiting the arcade."

"Arcade, huh?... Sure, why not? It's been ages since I was in one of those." Yukari said.

"I'd always wanted to go, but never really had anyone to go with." Fuuka said.

"Seriously? I woulda gone with ya." Junpei said. "Hey, I'm free this summer if you ever wanna hang. We don't always gotta stick around back at the dorm and play EP, y'know?"

"That would be nice." Fuuka said with a slight smile.

"Lemme guess. They'll be your dates?" Yukari mused.

"No!... Ok, maybe." Junpei said. "But c'mon, I'm a guy! What do you want from me?!"

"Relax, I'm just messing around." Yukari said.

"It's a bit tough to tell since you almost always talk like that." Minato said. "Or does that mean you're secretly even more of a jokester than Junpei?"

"Huh? No way." Yukari said.

"So you admit you're not exactly skilled with communication." Minato said. "In other words, you admit..."

"That you're a tsun." Junpei said with a smirk. Yukari facepalmed.

"That's what you're gonna bring this around to?" she asked. Fuuka couldn't help but giggle.

"Is it weird if I get what they're saying?" Fuuka asked.

"Please don't encourage them." Yukari said.

"We've got a snappy song for her. It's catchy." Minato said. Junpei chuckled.

"I think you'd like it. It's pretty easy to remember." Junpei said.

"If you two start singing that again, I'm leaving." Yukari said. "It's... way too juvenile."

"Hmm... then I'll want to hear it back at the dorm." Fuuka said with a grin.

"... This is going to follow me around, won't it?" Yukari asked.

"Yup. Hope you don't mind." Junpei said. Yukari let out a sigh, but then chuckled as their food arrived. After a quick and rather upbeat lunch, the sophomores all made their way to the arcade for some quick fun. As it turned out, Yukari was horrible with a gun while Fuuka was nothing short of a full-

fledged sharpshooter, easily beating the others at any type of shooting game, including Minato. He made sure to get his revenge on a DDR machine, but he was more than surprised to discover that Yukari was actually quite skilled at it, apparently because one of her dorm mates last year owned one and she used it far more often than she'd like to admit. Junpei was a jack-of-all-trades when it came to arcade games, meaning he did well in everything but never specialized, though he was actually the best Gundam pilot of the group. This was countered by his terrible skill at the train simulator, though Minato could clearly see his bad performance was due to his impatience rather than his lack of skill.

Time flew by, and before they knew it, Fuuka and Yukari had excused themselves to go visit Be Blue V. Minato opted to stick around with Junpei, but after doing essentially a tour of the arcade, they left and found some vending machines in the mall. Junpei bought one drink, but Minato did as he usually did and made sure to purchase five of each kind he liked, making sure to store the others in the Dimensional Compactor. "So that's how you keep stocked, huh?" Junpei asked. He chuckled. "Guess you've got emergency rations."

"Doesn't hurt to be prepared for anything." Minato said. "So, are we gonna wait on Fuuka or Yukari or do you just want to head back?"

"... Let's wait." Junpei said. "Actually, I've been meaning to talk to you for a bit... Mind if we grab a bench?"

"Sure." Minato replied as he opened his can of Mad Bull. They walked over to the central fountain and took an open bench facing towards the mall's entrance, taking up either side in rather comfortable positions. Minato took a quick drink, and then turned to Junpei. "What's up, bro?"

"Well... huh, it's kinda weird to say it." Junpei said. "Do you mind... just listening for a bit?"

"... *This sounds serious.*" Minato thought. "... Alright."

"Thanks." Junpei said. He adjusted his cap, and then chuckled a bit as he leaned back in his seat. Both of them stared at the entrance to the city, complete with commuters, in groups and alone, a few members of The Lost standing around, and cars going by in the distance. "... A lot of people think I've changed a lot, ya know? Not just everyone back at the dorm either... Kenji, Kaz, and the other guys I hang with every now and then... all of them think I'm suddenly shaping up. Funny thing is, sometimes I stop and realize 'damn, this is so unlike the old me', and I can totally see where everyone is comin' from. I'm not sayin' I've changed in a bad way, though. I mean, I'm actually doing decent in school... good enough that I might get into something better than community college if I'm lucky, as strange as that sounds. Plus all this fightin' Shadows actually whipped my lazy ass into shape... But I am still a bachelor and gamer though, so I guess some things never really change, heheheh... Actually, I don't want those things to change about me. I still don't wanna become the super serious studying all day type. I respect em', but that's not something I'd like."

Junpei scratched the back of his head, and then let out a big sigh. "... Damn man. This ain't really going anywhere fast, is it?" he mused. He chuckled and leaned forwards in the bench so he could start to look at everyone going in and out of the mall. "I don't know when I realized it... but the thing is, I think I know why most of the people around here always look really happy, really sad, or totally tuned out... it's because they don't change anything about their life. Hell, I don't think they even try to change anything. At first, I thought everybody was just freakin' crazy... but then I realized I was just like that not that long ago. I had no problem doin' the same thing day after day because I would just lie to myself and be like 'a good time is all I need' or 'if everyone else is happy, I should be happy too'... so I'd be the idiot that tried to make everyone's day. I was just like one of those really happy guys that walk around... I'm just convincing myself that everything's going to be fine."

Minato chuckled, and Junpei paused when he realized what he said. "T-that's not to say I don't think there are some really happy people, though! I'm not that pessimistic." Junpei said. "And of course, there are some people with pretty legit reasons to be sad a whole bunch, too. I'm pretty sure not all of them are just like... wallowing in self-pity and what not cuz they don't like how their life is going or something like that. Those guys that tune out, though... I used to think you were one of them, going around with your headphones full blast all the time. But you aren't... those guys are running away from what's in front of em' to the safest place there is... inside of themselves. I was like that before, playing games for hours on

end back in junior high and what not just so I didn't have to deal with my dad. ... Now that I think about it, that prolly helped make everything how it is today."

Junpei straightened back up so that he was back in his relaxed position, and took a quick drink of his SoBay. He fixed his hat so that it was aimed perfectly straight forwards, and let his arms rest on the back of the chair. "Man, this must sound like a whole lotta bitching right now, huh?" he asked. "You're pretty legit for just taking all a' this philosophy and shit I'm throwing at you, so I think I'll try and wrap this up. ...So now, you've got all these people that are distracting themselves, all these mopey emo peeps, and then a bunch of people who don't give a damn about anything... world's pretty shitty, right? But, if ya look just a little closer, you can see something crazy... There are people like you, who do what they've gotta do and face anything that comes their way, never settling on just going through the motions, always improving... always changing, but still being themselves."

Junpei stopped and put a hand on his chin, apparently thinking about his last statement. "... That might not make sense, but the point is, the crazy thing about people like you is that... anyone can do it. Anything can change... hell, anyone can change. You've just gotta man up... or woman up if you're a chick, heh... I think people are telling me I've changed because, even if it's just a little, I am becoming one of those guys. One of the 'Minatos', I guess... actually, forget that, that sounds really weird... So I might not have a name for them, but... I'm starting to become like them." he said. He turned his

head so he was looking directly at Minato, who had long since done the same. "... I don't know if I'm ever gonna be able to do the stuff you do. Hell, I don't even know if I can change that much... but I'm gonna try. You're the one that showed me all of that stuff, even if it took a while cuz I'm not the brightest guy around town. You, the punk Mr. Perfect that I used to be jealous as shit of when we first met. ... This is gonna be really corny, but... I couldn't have turned out like this if I never met you."

He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a small black box, examining it. "... When my mom died, she left me two pieces of jewelry. The necklace I'm always wearing... and her bracelet. A matching set. Well, I was never a big bracelet guy, so I usually just keep this thing around my room. I actually found it digging around for clothing to pack on the trip to Yakushima, and just held onto it." Junpei said. He laughed and threw the box up once before catching it. "Ya know, the first thing in my head to do with this thing was to give it to a girl I was trying to get with! To be honest, it probably wouldn't have been that bad... but then I was thinking, this should be a lot more than just something I use to pick up a chick. And... man, this is gonna be lame, but... I figured you should have it."

Junpei held the box out to Minato, and Minato quietly took it. "... Are you sure? This is something really important to you." Minato said after he held the box. "It has a lot more than physical weight."

"I know... but that's why you're the only person I think

deserves to get it." Junpei said. "You've helped me out a whole bunch, put up with everything from stupid shit to downright embarrassing shit without batting an eye... but I realize it's because you weren't lying when you said we were brothers. ... No matter what anyone says, I've got you, alright? I asked you to watch me to make sure I don't start acting like the guy who lied to himself all the time... so now, I want you to keep watching. I might not be as amazing as you, or even end up goin' down in history... but I'm sure as hell gonna try." Junpei turned back towards the entrance to the city and let out a slight sigh. "It isn't an easy road... but that's why I'm glad I'm not going alone. You, and everyone else we hang with... I know all of you guys are there to catch me if I slip. So I need to make sure I can do at least that much for all of you when it comes down to it. That's why... I'm never gonna stop improving." There was a slight silence as they watched the entrance, until Junpei started laughing. "Well, whaddya think? That was totally an epic anime speech right there."

"Meh, it could use some work." Minato said. "Too much roundabout talking."

"Tch... Punk." Junpei said.

"You know me. Peace, Love, and Harmony all sounds like hippie bullshit in my ears." Minato said. He opened the black box and found took out the bracelet Junpei gave him. It was simple with tiny chain links and a small cross exactly like the one on his necklace at the bottom. He put it on his right hand along with his Dimensional Compactor. "I might be a punk...

but that's exactly why I can be the one to kick your ass into shape if I have to."

Junpei laughed. "That ain't no lie." he said. He took a drink of his SoBay once more. "... I'm half-surprised you didn't make some weird love confession joke at me."

"Even I can be a little serious." Minato said. "Besides... what's weird about having some love for your brother?"

"... Ah, screw it. I'm a punk too." Junpei said. "I ain't ever gonna outright say it... but you know what I mean, brother."

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

The bond thou hast nurtured hath finally matured.

The innermost power of the Magician Arcana hath been set free.

We bestow upon thee the ability to create Surt, the ultimate form of the Magician Arcana...

"Yeah, I know." Minato said with a smirk. He took a drink of his SoBay, more than content with what had just happened. He felt the Magician within him, Rangda, overflow with power. He could actually feel his Persona's presence, and draw strength from it. Minato was almost certain he could've spoken to it if the Card of the Beast hadn't silenced it. *"It's like*

I've ingested a Magatama... minus the part where I almost pass out." he thought. The surge of power went away, but he knew that whenever he summoned a Magician again, the same power would return to him. *"... Now... I... wait."*

"Oh, there you guys are!" Yukari said as she walked over with Fuuka. They both carried a small bag in their hands from Be Blue V.

"Time sure flew. We should get back to the dorm before it becomes too dark." Fuuka said.

"Yeah, we had just finished up." Junpei said. "You ready to go, bro?"

"Might as well." Minato said. He chuckled. "I really enjoyed today. We should do something like this again."

At that, they made some small talk as they returned to the dorm. Minato answered questions robotically, the conversation in his head being much more important. ***"I guess that makes sense, Boss... though, that is crossing a very influential man."*** David said.

"It's perfect. Takeharu Kirijio wants me to disappear once I've eliminated the Dark Hour, so disappear I shall... along with the rest of SEES." Minato replied.

"A complete reset. No attachments nor duties left to fulfill." Daisoujou said.

"Though it eliminates any possible help you could keep."

Jack said.

"I'm not gonna lie, having some bitches on hand is pretty nice, Boss man. I wouldn't knock it till you try it." Adonis said.

"They have their uses, I'll admit... but my choice of action remains." Minato said.

"You'd turn on your brother?" Hell Biker asked.

"... I'd turn on anything that got in my way." Minato said.

"Mister... I really think you're going about this all wrong." Alice said.

"Nonsense. All that matters is the Boss' victory." Matador said.

"That's right... I will never taste defeat." Minato replied.

The sophomores entered the dorm once more to find the seniors all watching television with Aigis and Metis standing near the wall once more. What they didn't expect to see was Ken Amada sitting on the single chair facing the window, also watching TV. He got up to greet them as they all entered, seeing the confused looks on every face but Minato's. "Hello. I'll be staying here for the summer, like Ikutsuki-san said." Ken greeted. "I'll try to stay out of everyone's way, so don't mind me."

"No need for that." Minato said as he signed in. He smirked.
"We can have some fun pretty soon."

"Yeah, dude! This is gonna be awesome, I can feel it!" Junpei said.

"That's sounds nice." Ken said.

"So you'll be staying here, Ken-kun?" Fuuka asked. Minato moved past them and motioned for Aigis and Metis to follow him upstairs. They went to their room, and Minato decided to spent the night making sure they were still entertained with Junpei's odd barrage of games. He wasn't comfortable enough with leaving for the night without them being able to properly entertain themselves, and wanted to let Shinjiro make his first impression on his own. He could work on his Cards over the free summer, and he didn't want to do anything too difficult before he began his experimentation on the Lost. That work undoubtedly required him to be prepared for anything, and he could easily think of how to approach his work for tomorrow when he only had to ensure that his daughters were learning basic board games and a few old videogames.

97. Chapter 97

Chapter 97: The Joker and The Jester

Author Note to Number13teen: Sorry, no explosions going or sudden disembowelments for that Social Link Max.

Author Note to SilverFlameHaze: Hey, that's actually a pretty good way to describe it! Now, that's an interesting ending you've got there... Is Minato literally nothing on his own? His history has suggested otherwise, since he's left scars all over the place. He might not be anything nice, but he'll be something. The question is, though... is that how this story ends?

Author Note to Aizana Suguha: No spoilers on Junpei's survival, no spoilers on relationships, and I believe I've already said there's no Hamuko going on here.

Author Note to Shadowqueen15: I'm glad you really like it! Now, about his actions at a Social Link's completion, that depends on his judgment. Remember, it's not that he doesn't want to be around people, it's that he doesn't want lasting attachments.

Delighted couldn't begin to describe Mitsuru's mood when she

woke up that morning. She had beaten her alarm clock by about five minutes, but that didn't matter. It was nine fifty-five, and she was still in her bed, feeling refreshed as ever. She had informed Minato that the event had an earlier day than listed where the participating students would receive the proper training on how to work in the shelters made for the Lost, as well as go around surveying different areas of the city to denote which areas required the most attention. He volunteered to go along with her, and Shinjiro didn't have a choice when it came to his participation, once again due to his horrible test scores.

Her morning was as calm and structured as possible. She quickly made herself presentable without needing to rush, putting on her usual school outfit since the event would require them to present themselves as representatives of Gekkoukan. She left her room in good spirits, but froze at the sight she saw in the third floor lounge. "... Aigis, Metis... what are you two doing?" she asked.

"Good morning, Mother." Metis greeted as she turned her head towards Mitsuru, stopping in place.

"We are currently learning to appreciate the fine art of dance." Aigis said, also stopping.

"Excuse me, Ms. Kirijio. You are interrupting a very important lesson." David said as he held Aigis. **"Mastery of the Tarantella is an essential part of any young lady's education."**

"You're being ridiculous. A good Fox Trot and Cakewalk is all you need." Jack said as he held Metis.

"Are you trying to prepare them for Cabaret? You are working with the Boss' daughter, not some cheap whore you plan to dismember when you're finished with her!" David said.

"I am preparing them to do more than just ballroom dance. If you're going to teach them the Tarantella, you might as well teach them how to hunt ants with a toothpick as well, because nobody does it anymore!" Jack said. The two Fiends stared at each other for a bit, apparently both vehement about what they chose to teach.

"Umm... do they at least know the Waltz?" Fuuka asked as she sat on the chair facing the stairs. She was working on her laptop while the two pairs were taking up the hallway with their dancing.

"Of course they do. It's a foundational dance to be built upon." David said. He turned to Mitsuru. **"If you'd like to pass, I ask that you do so quickly. It's poor practice to take unusually long breaks. We'll lose our rhythm."**

"... Of course." Mitsuru said, walking to take a seat near Fuuka. "However, for you two to be here... Has Minato gone out?"

"Yup. Getting some quick work in at Be Blue V. He said

he'll meet you and Shinjiro at the Strip Mall at noon, since your event is nearby." Jack said.

"I see... well then, carry on." Mitsuru said. Aigis and Metis both began to hum different tunes, and they resumed their dancing lessons. "Fuuka... how long has this been going on?"

"I don't know... I woke up an hour ago, and they were already here." Fuuka said. "It's an odd thing to watch... but it's kind of funny, too. Skeletons teaching robots to dance..." At that, she let out a little giggle. "Oh, but have you eaten? Minato left some covered breakfasts on the table for everyone... I ate just now, but I think Shinji-senpai is still downstairs with Ken-kun."

"Ah, is that so?" Mitsuru asked. She smiled and turned to watch Aigis and Metis begin their dances. "... I believe I'll give them some time before I interrupt again."

"So you think dance is an important part of their education too?" Fuuka asked.

"I wouldn't say important... but I can't think of any reason why they shouldn't learn." Mitsuru said. She chuckled. "It's strange... Minato's become unusually attached to both of them, much faster than anyone else has. He really does treat them like his daughters."

Fuuka giggled. "Maybe he secretly has a daddy complex." she said.

"Perhaps." Mitsuru said. Fuuka returned to her work, and Mitsuru turned her attention back to Aigis and Metis. As she watched them, she couldn't help but begin to feel somewhat disturbed. The androids went round and round, encircled by two downright comical looking skeletons that were very much real and constantly engaging each other in a match over what dance was best suited for them to learn for a number of reasons. Mitsuru wasn't disturbed by the skeletal Fiends, which she had long since acclimated to, nor was she disturbed by the situation as a whole, since, from certain viewpoints, it made complete sense. What disturbed her was the fact that watching the living dead dance alongside robotic maidens, something completely absurd, was merely considered 'odd' inside of the dorm. That reality was insane, lacking any sort of reason... and yet it was easily accepted by the members of SEES.

"Mornin'!" Yukari said as she walked out of her room. She let out a slight yawn as she stopped near the dancing two dancing duos, and lazily waved at Mitsuru and Fuuka while she suppressed a loud yawn.

"Good morning, Yukari-san. Please move." Metis said. Yukari did as instructed, and Metis moved towards her location alongside Jack in two elaborate steps before stopping to kick with one leg while leaning backwards.

"Good, the back leg should be rigid to keep you from falling." Jack said. "Next, we're going to learn the jumps. That's the fun part."

"Enough of your Cabaret already." David said as he got Aigis to match some rather elaborate footwork of his own a small distance away from them.

"Is this not similar to the arcade machine Dance Dance Revolution?" Aigis asked.

"Boss loves it, so it's best if you learn something you can use for more than one thing." David said.

"A wise decision." Aigis said.

"Minato wants to teach you two how to dance?" Yukari asked.

"Father wants us to learn all sorts of interesting things." Metis said. "He said he would rather be here himself, but he could not afford to skip another workday."

"His reason was sincere. I detected no signs generally associated with deceit in his facial expression." Aigis said.

"... Now that I think about it, he did skip work when we went to Yakushima." Yukari said. "Guess even he can only get so far with his boss. Still, do you guys mind moving for a bit? I could go for some breakfast."

"I believe I'll go as well." Mitsuru said, quickly getting up.

"We aren't stopping, so make it quick." Jack said. He led Metis away from the stairway, and the two girls quickly took their chance to proceed downstairs.

"... Didn't you find that situation... strange?" Mitsuru asked Yukari as they reached the second floor.

"Huh?" Yukari asked.

"That entire... scene upstairs." Mitsuru said. "There were skeletons dancing with androids... in the middle of a high school dormitory lounge."

"Well, yeah, it was kinda weird." Yukari said. "But weird stuff happens to us all the time, senpai. I mean, we fight the Dark Hour in a time that doesn't even exist. Add that to all the crazy stuff Minato does and... well, something like that is kind of just expected to happen eventually."

"... Yet you screamed when Minato and the two ASWs infiltrated your room?" Mitsuru asked.

"Waking up to see somebody staring at you and waking up, getting dressed, and then seeing something totally out of place first thing in the morning aren't really the same thing." Yukari said. She scratched her head. "Then again, I did walk outside on auto, so maybe it didn't really hit me... But, why are you so concerned?"

"I was just curious. Don't mind me." Mitsuru said. "Minato has made breakfasts that he left for everyone, so we can share a meal downstairs if you'd like."

"You haven't eaten breakfast yet?" Yukari asked. Mitsuru smirked.

"Even I like to sleep in every now and again, Yukari." she said. She turned to walk downstairs, maintaining her appearance. In her mind, however, she reached a realization that she knew would trouble her for quite a bit. From what she could tell, everyone in SEES, including herself, had begun to slowly go insane. After all, no logically thinking individual would sit down and watch skeletons teach androids Victorian Era dance first thing in the morning. That sort of lesson couldn't begin until at least the afternoon, of course... dances come after tea. Mitsuru suddenly froze as she entered the first floor. "... This might become a problem." she whispered to herself.

"Mornin' Shinji-senpai, Ken-kun." Yukari said as she moved past Mitsuru.

"Mornin'." Shinjiro said. He and Ken's eyes were glued to the television screen, watching a re-run of last week's Phoenix Ranger Featherman R before the new episode aired later that day. Ken suddenly noticed their presence, and quickly turned his attention to a magazine he kept on his lap, though he was sneakily eyeing the television.

"Good morning." Ken said. Yukari and Mitsuru both made their way over to the table, and sure enough, in their usual spots awaited a covered meal. They sat down to eat together, both facing away from the lounge. Shinjiro nodded, and Ken put down his magazine and returned to properly watching the television. The new episode had just been announced, and the final message came on screen.

"And before the news begins, Feather Swan has a message

for you all!" the Featherman announcer said. The screen changed to show the white costumed Feather Swan standing on a hill overlooking a city.

"Hi there, everyone! Things are looking kind of glum around now, huh? But I hope you viewers don't lose heart! We Featherman Rangers are here to make sure everything works out, so don't you worry about a thing! We'll meet again next week, I promise!" she said. The ending credits for the show quickly began, and Ken turned towards Shinjiro.

"Aragaki-senpai, have you been following the news about Apathy Syndrome?" Ken asked.

"I don't really follow the news." Shinjiro said. "Why, what's up?"

"Apparently, it's started to appear outside of Iwatodai this last month." Ken said. "Strange, isn't it? I mean, if it spreads through the air, it's not like one of the victims could have left the city and taken it with them."

"... Some people think it can be triggered by high-stress." Shinjiro said.

"... I don't think so." Ken said. "That would make sense if it was only upper level students and people with jobs, but I've seen people younger than me that have it."

"No kiddin'?" Shinjiro asked. He scratched his head. "Well, like I said, some people think it's tied to stress. Nobody really

knows about it, though."

"I know... But it just bugs me." Ken said. "Then again, maybe I'm getting paranoid like everyone else." Shinjiro nodded, and the news began.

"Good morning, and thank you for watching." the news anchor said. *"... I'd... like to begin with today's top story."*

"... Doesn't something seem odd about the anchor?" Ken asked as he watched.

"She looks tired..." Shinjiro said. He narrowed his eyes, knowing full well what to expect. He quickly picked up the remote. "But I'm not one for the news, kid."

"Wait." Ken said as Shinjiro aimed the remote at the screen. "Something's definitely wrong."

"- the debate continued to continue... excuse me. The debate continued to create unness..." the anchor said. Mitsuru and Yukari, who had both heard the news, turned to watch. Shinjiro took a quick glance at Mitsuru, and she nodded. Both of them knew what was about to happen. *"I... Forgive me, everyone, I..."* the anchor said as she woozily got up. She took two steps away from her chair and then collapsed to the floor. A number of confused cries were heard before the camera feed died and the screen went to one of the old Technicolor displays.

"... What just...?" Yukari asked.

"... I think that was Apathy Syndrome." Shinjiro said. He swapped the channel to the first nature documentary he could find, one detailing a beach ecosystem. "That's why I don't watch the news. It's never good."

"... Yeah." Ken said. He actually began to read the magazine he held in his hands this time, quickly becoming silent. Mitsuru and Yukari exchanged one troubled glance before returning to their breakfasts, not exactly knowing how to react to that.

After their awkward breakfast and a quiet morning, Mitsuru and Shinjiro took their leave to meet with Minato at the Strip Mall. "... The situation is escalating." Mitsuru said as they walked. "I hadn't been keeping up with the recent reports on Apathy Syndrome, but for it to have begun spreading all over Japan is serious."

"It's not like there's anything we can do about it. We could go into Tartarus every night and fight the whole hour, and it wouldn't change shit." Shinjiro said. He sighed as he adjusted his pea coat. "Fact is, we're playing defense. Aki can spout as much shit about being on the attack because we know the real enemy shows up on full moons, but it's not like we can stop them from doing anything between those days... At best, we're a maintenance crew until we get rid of the last one."

"I know... the question is whether or not this city, or possibly even this country, will be able to last long enough for us to succeed." Mitsuru said.

"Who knows? I surely don't." Minato said from next to them.

Both of them quickly turned to see him wearing his dark blue long-sleeve shirt and jeans with his hat, walking right alongside them. He had his blue scarf trailing behind him as he walked, it being loosely tied around his neck so that it cushioned his chin. He chuckled. "But doesn't that just make everything more exciting?"

"Exciting? ... Well, it's a better attitude than just complaining about it." Shinjiro said. He quickly took out his pocket watch and flipped it open, getting the time before stowing it away just as quickly. They stopped at the front of the station and saw a small gathering of students from various schools. Oddly enough, Ikutsuki was also standing near them, speaking to some other men in suits. Once they walked over, however, he quickly excused himself and went over to greet them.

"Ah, you're right on schedule!" Ikutsuki said as he walked up to them. "How are you today?"

"As good as usual." Minato replied.

"Mr. Chairman... I didn't expect you to be here personally." Mitsuru said.

"To be honest, I wanted to personally help out." Ikutsuki said. He moved closer and lowered his voice. "I know I'm not much in terms of actually remedying the problem... but the least I can do is help cope with it. I'm sure all of you have already seen that if this continues unchecked, life in this city will begin to change... and not in a good way. I can't do much to prevent that from happening, but I'd like to do what I can."

"*Not bad at all. You even look serious about it.*" Minato thought. "That's admirable, Ikutsuki. So, are you going to be going around the city like us?"

"Actually, I'm being changed to a more administrative role due to my position." Ikutsuki said. "But that doesn't mean I won't be helping out physically. While I might not be helping gather the Lost, most of my 'free time', so to speak, is going to be spent caring for the ones we've already placed in suitable homes. Although, speaking of moving work, everyone is expected to work in pairs. Naturally, this means one of you is going to be the odd one out."

"I can work with whoever." Minato said. He turned to Shinjiro, who gave him a puzzled expression. "We're just writing numbers down today and learning what to do, right? Our actual job hasn't started yet."

"... I suppose that's true." Mitsuru said. "We can always alternate who serves as the one that operates outside of the group for fairness."

"Sounds good to me." Shinjiro said.

"The address assembly will take place closer to the station. After that, everyone will make their groups and receive the information about which areas they need to work on." Ikutsuki said. He chuckled. "We can't make Gekkoukan look bad, can we, Mitsuru?"

"Of course." Mitsuru said. She quickly led them over to a

small podium with a few workers setting the stage and stopped, getting ready for the welcoming speech. After a short wait, the Director of Iwatodai made his way to the stage in front of a rather small crowd of people, less than a hundred. Minato assumed those present would be the leaders of the actual groups when the real work began, and chuckled at his rather effortless acquisition of rank.

The Director was a short, somewhat thin bald man in a white suit. To Minato, he looked thoroughly unimportant and forgettable. "Good afternoon, everyone." the Director said in an almost monotonic voice. "I'd like to thank all of you today for volunteering to help clean up the fine city of Iwatodai."

"Fine's a good word for it." Minato mused.

"The streets of a city can share a wealth of information." the Director continued. "You can tell the quality of life its residents enjoy when you look at how clean or how dirty they are... You can get a glimpse of how content the residents are as you take in the atmosphere around you. At a glance, the streets of a city serve as the face of the city. ... When I was elected to my position, Iwatodai's face was bright and full of life. The streets were pristine and clean, and the people smiled brightly every morning. Apathy Syndrome existed back then, and was met with compassion towards the families of the victims and the understanding that knew the unfortunate afflicted could do nothing to neither prevent it nor spread it... I've watched Iwatodai's face gradually darken over these last six years. The streets have slowly become dirtier and dirtier, and those smiles once full of life have slowly given way to uneasy faces

riddled with fear and borderline paranoia. Since my election, the number of Apathy Syndrome cases has steadily risen, most recently in this year. In fact, in this month alone, there are now over a thousand cases of Apathy Syndrome confirmed outside of Iwatodai all around the country!"

There was a general murmuring through the crowd, and Minato quickly surveyed everyone around him. "A thousand around the country? We've got like a hundred million people anyways." a familiar voice near to him said. He turned away from Mitsuru and Shinjiro to see none other than a slightly disguised Sho standing near to him. Though he wore his usual black jeans and shoes, he had swapped out his double jacket combo in exchange for a dark green jacket with fur rimming the popped collar. Finally, he had on a stereotypical trucker cap, the back and cover piece being all black while the front was white. It had a logo on it, but he had spray painted a comical green pirate skull over it, obscuring whatever brand it was. "We could do with a few less losers walkin' around all over the place."

Minato chuckled. "Too bad they still take up our good air." he said.

"That ain't tough to fix." Sho replied.

"The news is shocking... however, we cannot continue this unspoken cult of fear that we allow to dictate our lives! The rise of Apathy Syndrome has left a scar on Iwatodai's face and its people. The increasing number of victims on the streets only serves to worsen the fears of the people, even

pushing some to take violent action against people who couldn't possibly have chosen their fate... But, we cannot overcome fear with aggression!" the Director continued. "The only way we can truly overcome fear... is to return to our old ideologies of compassion and understanding. By giving the victims the attention and care they deserve as human beings, and by ensuring that the people of this city know that this city is stronger than one mere disease, I believe we can make Iwatodai smile again! That's why I'd like to ask each and every one of you present to help me in this endeavor, one that will vanquish the lingering shadow that looms over our fair city and returns it to a city full of hopes and dreams, the Iwatodai we know to be the true Iwatodai! " Minato watched as a few members of the crowd began to clap and cheer, but the Director continued regardless. "For our afflicted friends, family members, teachers, and loved ones! I ask that you all work with me to make this city great once more! Apathy Syndrome will not define our lives! We are in control of our fate!"

"Sieg Zeon!" Sho suddenly yelled amidst the cheering crowd.

"For the Zabi!" Minato joined in. They both started laughing as crowd slowly began to quiet down and the Director took his applause. Mitsuru and Shinjiro both heard them, and turned to see the duo clutching their stomachs as they quieted down.

"... Looks like he'll be fine on his own." Shinjiro said. Ikutsuki turned to see Minato and Sho, and he grinned. Sho had managed to find Minato quickly enough, and that meant he could do what he was supposed to do

"Minato certainly is a sociable man. I didn't have any doubts he could find a suitable companion for today's activities." Ikutsuki said. "You two should stick close together so you don't accidentally end up separated. It'd be a shame if everyone dispersed."

As the work quickly got underway, Minato went away with Sho rather quietly, electing to slip through the crowd with his new companion before anyone even noticed his absence. After learning some rather stupid routines about how to care for a member of the Lost, which Minato essentially equated to taking care of somebody he had crippled without any of the fun banter, he and Sho found themselves heading towards a sparsely populated inner-city section of Iwatodai, littered with old buildings improperly demolished and numerous small stores. "We gotta go count those zombies? Sounds boring as hell." Sho said as they stopped near an alleyway.

"I have a few fun plans, actually." Minato said. He summoned all of his Fiends as tiny floating heads in front of him, and dismissed them with a wave. "They'll be doing all the counting... there's something else I'm more interested in, and you're the perfect accomplice. It could be pretty fun if we're lucky."

"Something that's my type of fun?" Sho asked. He snickered. "Who's the unlucky bastard?"

"That one." Minato said as he pointed at the nearest member of the Lost. A little down the street, a child wearing a simple shorts and t-shirt combination was looking in their direction

with the same uneasy stance every member of the Lost had. "I've got an interest in the Lost... so I want to know what makes them tick, the proper way. It's time for a biopsy."

Sho laughed. "Prepare for some science, bitches!" he said. Minato quickly walked over to the little boy that was a part of the lost, quickly grabbed hold of its neck, and dragged it with him into the alley he and Sho stood by. It led to a second small alley, forming a 'T' shape from the sky that had two dead ends facing each other.

"Here's a good enough spot for the tests to begin." Minato said as he threw the member of the Lost down near the wall. "Got your weapons on you?"

"Like I'd ever go anywhere without em'." Sho said.

"Don't forget what we're really here for." Minazuki said in Sho's mind.

"Good. I might need to borrow a few of your knives." Minato said. "While I can make blades just fine, I have trouble making cuts that aren't deep. It's not the worst habit, but it's one I have."

"I hear ya." Sho said. *"I know, I know! I'm gonna do it right now."* "But hey, blue, before we get started! Lemme ask you something."

"Ask away." Minato said.

"You know how me and the old man have said we've got that good plan going on?" Sho asked.

"It revolves around the Shadows I'm absorbing, correct? The same ones from the incident." Minato said. "You need me on board because I can act as some sort of control, right?"

"... Well, damn." Sho said. "Hold up..."

The atmosphere around Sho darkened as he closed his eyes, and Minato knew Minazuki had taken over. "... It would seem you've already gotten some sort of an idea as to what the plan is." Minazuki said.

"You want to use the same power Kouetsu Kirijio failed to harness to destroy this world and recreate it." Minato said. "If you stay off of the temporal plane, it should be simple enough. The Dark Hour clearly alters the nature of the entire world, and it was created from a failure with only a fraction of the original energy gathered. If we had it all, I'm sure world-recreation is reasonably within bounds. I'm an integral part of this plan, however, because I'm the one absorbing the Shadows... and thus, storing their energy."

"Correct... you are the catalyst for a process far greater than any human being can fully comprehend." Minazuki said.

"Ikutsuki wished for me to tell you this... though he asked that you defend the other members of SEES, he wants you to realize that your survival is much more important to the plan."

"My survival is much more important to me for my own

existence." Minato mused. Minazuki chuckled.

"That's correct... however, Ikutsuki also promises you this." Minazuki said. "With your continued cooperation, you will be granted a third of the new world to rule over as you see fit, as well as your daughters... they will be truly yours free of both Takeharu Kirijio's grasp as well as Ikutsuki's."

"... He put something inside of them when he upgraded them, didn't he?" Minato asked, turning back to face Minazuki.

"Yes... something terrible." Minazuki said. Minato chuckled quietly, catching Minazuki's attention. "... Is something the matter?"

"You want to know the beautiful thing about having robotic daughters?" Minato asked. He cackled a bit and let out a big sigh as he adjusted his scarf. "If they die, you can always rebuild them."

"... And you'd have no problem with trampling upon the bonds you've created?" Minazuki asked.

"Why would I miss something that holds me back?" Minato asked.

Minazuki paused and eyed Minato for a bit before a sly grin came to his face. "... Yes. It's much better to abandon such foolish notions." Minazuki said. "And for precisely that reason... We have something to ask you."

The atmosphere around Minazuki changed back to normal, and Sho chuckled. "I'm not gonna lie, Minato. You seem like a guy who gets it... the only reason you put up with others is to get what you want out of em' before movin' on to something better." Sho said. "So I'm gonna make you a counter offer... Why bother having to share a shitty third of a world with that crazy ass old man when you could just make separate ones for the people who matter? And by them, I mean one for you, and one for me, where we get ANYTHING we want. You can bring along your toaster daughters and all your SEES bitches if ya want to."

"Create multiple worlds? ... That's quite the idea." Minato said. "Although, that's awfully kind of you to give me that idea... or is there something else you want?"

"Of course I ain't doin' this outta the good of my heart or any shit like that." Sho said. "When the time comes to it, I'm going to want you to help me make the old man squirm like a dog before we get down to business... I play nice now, but I haven't forgotten any of the shit he put me through. The only reason he's still breathing is because he told me about this plan... but hey, to sweeten the deal, I'll get rid of that thing he added into your daughters for ya so they don't get in the way when it comes down to it. They'll really be loyal to just you... whaddya say?"

"I doubt I have a choice in the matter... you aren't good at suppressing killing intent." Minato said.

"I wasn't trying." Sho said. Minato chuckled.

"While I'm very curious to know just how powerful you are compared to me..." Minato began as he turned around, "I like your deal. It beats a measly third of a world, and I won't need to put up with Ikutsuki any more than necessary. If all you want to do is beat a weak old man into the ground and get a playground of your own... then I accept." Minato extended his hand, and Sho took it for a good shake.

"Heheheh... that's what I'm talking about." Sho said. "To hell with this stupid world and everything in it. Once this piece of shit burns, we're moving on to bigger and better things on our own." Sho said. The atmosphere around him suddenly darkened, and Minato knew Minazuki had taken over.

"Remember, though this plan does hinge on your cooperation, that doesn't make you irreplaceable. There is more than one way to finish this job." Minazuki said. They parted hands, and Minato chuckled.

"I'm just the easiest, safest, and quickest route, right?" Minato asked. "Don't worry... I had already planned to get rid of everyone I didn't need once I was done having my fun in this city. This plan just gives me a perfect opportunity to do everything I wanted to do in one fell swoop."

"Excellent." Minazuki said. "With our combined powers, there's no chance of failure."

"The only problem with this course of action is that it's too merciful." Minato said. "After all, we're going to kill everyone at once."

Sho took control of his body once more and grinned. "We're gonna rock this world, Minato. It'll be one hell of a good time!"

CRACK!

Thou art I... And I art thou...

Thou shalt be blessed when creating Personas of the Devil Arcana...

"Wasn't this with Ikutsuki?" Minato thought. "I'm counting on it." he said. *"Or is this like the Fool link, connected to multiple people? An interesting thought..."*

"Glad to hear it." Sho said. He leaned a little to turn and look at the boy behind Minato, who was still muttering incessantly while staring at them. "... So, we gonna get to your little project or what?"

"Of course. The first thing I'm going to test for is responsiveness." Minato said as he turned around and walked over to the waiting member of the Lost. He stopped and kneeled down right in front of the boy as his Fiends all suddenly returned to him.

"... Sixty-seven people counting this boy in the area you were assigned." Daisoujou said.

"Good. You've all done well." Minato replied. "Sho, could you grab two more members of the Lost and bring them here? We're going to say we found sixty-four."

"Want a sample instead of just one, huh? Fine by me." Sho said. He quickly turned and headed out of the alleyway, leaving Minato with the boy.

"Alright then... can you understand me?" Minato asked the member of the Lost. After he heard the same incoherent mumbling, he slapped the boy. After a slight pause, the boy simply turned his head back to Minato and kept staring.

"Alright then... let's make a big leap." Minato mused. He took one hand, carefully positioning it in front of the boy's face, and then swiftly plucked out one eye, not ripping it very far so that the optical nerve remained to tether it to the boy's head.

The member of the lost twitched violently, almost shaking, but it did nothing. It's incoherent mumbling got a little louder, and Minato decided to continue by fully ripping the eye out, severing the optic nerve with a quick yank. No change in response, though the boy seemed unaffected. *"Well damn... that's a lot of resistance."* Minato thought. He dropped the eyeball into the boy's gaping mouth and forced him to chew and then swallow it. Though the member of the Lost shook a bit, it did nothing. *"And it looks like its senses are so far gone it doesn't even care that it just devoured a part of itself... well, this might be looking good."*

Minato heard a thump behind him, and knew Sho had just kicked a high school girl that was a member of the Lost at the wall near him before swiftly heading back out of the alleyway. *"I think I'll relegate blades to a different body... so let's try something else."* Minato took one of the boy's hands and

swiftly broke the middle finger on it by forcing it back so that it lay atop the back of the hand. The boy actually withdrew his hand, surprising Minato, and shook rather violently. Minato watched as the boy's middle finger snapped back into place as if an unseen force were resetting his body. "That's something interesting... they don't care for their eyes, but their fingers are off-limits." Minato said. "Then, what about these parts?"

He swiftly broke the boy's nose by twisting it out of shape. No response came. He began to apply pressure to the boy's knee to cave it in, but the boy actually moved to try and remove his hand. It was useless, however, and with one sudden push, Minato broke the boy's knee. He crumpled to the ground, shaking violently, and once again, his knee seemed to be reset by an unseen force. Slowly, the boy got back up, and returned to staring at Minato. "... *Final test to see if this is true.*" Minato thought. He ripped the boy's ears off, and waited. Nothing happened. He changed his target to the boy's shoulder, and smacked it out of place with one solid hit. The boy staggered back, shaking once more, until his body reset itself.

"Damn, that's some exorcist shit." Sho said as he shoved an old man that was also a member of the Lost next to the girl waiting by the wall.

"The Lost can regenerate any part of their body underneath their head that gets broken, but it takes them a short period of time... around a minute or so of inactivity." Minato said. "Now,

the real question is... what if that part of their body is gone?"

Minato stood up and kicked the boy down, leaving him flat on his back. He planted his foot on the boy's stomach and took hold of the boy's left leg. With a tiny bit of help from his Strength Magatama, he ripped the boy's leg off, leaving a slight trail of blood to spew from the gashing wounds. Sho chuckled behind him. "I'd tell him break a leg, but he's only got one now!" he said. He and Minato both laughed as they watched the member of the Lost squirm. They waited for a while as the boy rolled on the floor, but his wound showed no sign of regeneration.

"... Well, looks like they can't do much for lost limbs." Minato said. "Now then... what if I severely damage their head without fully destroying it?" He walked over and rolled the boy onto his back with a little kick to the side. Afterwards, he took the leg he still held in his hands and delivered a few violent bashes to the boy's head with it, partially crushing it. He stopped after a few hits as a small puddle of blood formed around the boy's head. He twitched on the floor, unable to make any sounds as they stood there. After a minute passed, no regeneration happened. Instead, the boy stopped moving completely. "How original. Their head is vulnerable." Minato said as he threw the boy's leg over to the rest of his body. "Pass the girl and a knife. I want to try cutting next."

"Ooh, getting kinky there, huh?" Sho mused as he shoved the girl Minato's way. He reached into the back of his jacket and drew a curved knife with a hooked handle, throwing it up in Minato's direction. Minato caught it, and then quickly went

about taking the girl's top off. "... Hey, you aren't really gonna do anything too weird now, are ya?"

Minato chuckled. "It's easier to see the results on bare skin when working with cuts. Blood stains clothing and makes it harder to assess the damage." he said. He threw the girl's shirt towards the bleeding remains of the boy, and then took off the girl's bra and did the same. *"Let's go slowly again."* he thought. He very carefully made a wound that barely pierced the girl's skin on her stomach, slowly dragging it along there so tiny bits of blood would trickle out. He watched as the wound very slowly bled, but then began to seal itself quickly. After a few seconds, the wound disappeared, but the blood remained. "Baby wounds are insignificant." Minato noted.

He repeated the action, this time making sure that about half of the knife went into the girl's skin. He also moved faster, but not so fast as to tear through her body completely. Strangely, the girl clutched her wounds, shaking as the boy did. Minato watched carefully, and saw the wound begin to heal itself, apparently from the inside. *"... Alright, Adonis. You're gonna go inside of this girl."* Minato commanded.

*"... **Something tells me I'm not gonna like this.**"* Adonis said.

"Damn, that's impressive." Sho said, watching the girl remove her hands as the wound closed and the rest of the blood on her stomach trickled down onto her skirt.

"Let's see how deep of a cut they can take." Minato said.

"What's your take on disembowelment?"

"No guts, no glory." Sho said with a smirk. Minato chuckled, twirled the knife around in his hands, and then drove the blade deep into the girl's stomach. He began to rapidly rip through her stomach, pulling the knife out quickly and then slashing into it again. The girl struggled to keep the bits of intestine from falling out of her stomach, but it was all to no avail. By the time he was done, the girl had a trail of entrails consisting of her intestines spewing out of her stomach. The girl dropped to her knees, apparently struggling to stuff her intestines back inside of herself. Sho and Minato watched the girl struggle in vein as the wounds refused to close, and eventually, she bled out, her movements slowing until she collapsed into her own little pile of spewed intestines. Minato and Sho waited for a bit, watching the slumped body rest there in the ever growing puddle of blood.

"... Well, that was underwhelming." Minato said as he scratched his head. *"Looks like severe damage is still enough to take one down... that healing factor of theirs has limits. Adonis, did you find out what causes it?"*

"Yes... and it isn't pretty at all." Adonis said in Minato's head. ***"There was some weird source of energy in her heart of all things... it was like a really shitty Plume of Dusk."***

"Oh... that's interesting. Then I'll need one of those for examination." Minato thought.

"Lame! Next!" Sho said, kicking the man over towards Minato.

"Alright, alright, let's see here... blunt force is mostly ineffective unless it's aimed at their head or strong enough to put a gigantic hole in them. Cuts slow them down, and taking off a limb or their head is a guaranteed down." Minato said.

"Now, the big question... how do they respond to the beautiful art known as stabbing?" With that, he twirled Sho's knife around once more and drove it straight into the old man's stomach. He left it there and backed away, watching the old man. The old man very slowly went for the knife, and then swiftly ripped it out, dropping it in front of him. Minato watched as the wound regenerated, and he summoned Adonis' spear in his hands.

"Ooh, going for the big one already?" Sho asked.

"Let's see how it responds to being pinned." Minato said. He swiftly walked forwards into the growing puddle of blood and drove his spear into the old man's bicep, pinning him to the wall. Almost immediately, the old man began working to pull the spear out, though Minato had put it clean into the wall. He had no chance of removing it, so Minato walked forwards through the little corner of gore he had created and picked up Sho's knife. "Well, I think it's safe to assume that a well-placed stab through the body will kill one of them... now, it's time for a proper check-up."

Minato swiftly summoned Jack's cleaver to slice off the man's free arm to get it out of the way, and then drove it into one of the man's legs to help pin him down. He placed the knife right

below the old man's throat and pushed in just enough so that the blade went in by about an inch and a half. Next, he quickly sliced straight downwards and then tore at the wound he created, effectively flaying the man alive as he got the skin off of his torso. Finally, Minato moved onto ripping out a few ribs so he could get a better view of the man's heart, and then proceeded to take that as well.

What happened on contact with the heart was astounding. The man let out a shrill shriek, his eyes suddenly glowing bright red as he violently trembled. The skin left on him began to blacken, and Minato decided not to wait around to see what happened next. He quickly ripped the heart clean out of the man's body, and the shrieking stopped immediately. The blackened skin and glowing red eyes persisted, however, and would not return to normal. "... The hell was that?" Sho asked.

"I don't know." Minato said.

"Boss, company! Two cops headed over here!" Hell Biker warned.

"Sho, there are two policemen on the way." Minato said.

"I hear em'... we can't do any more work here." Sho said. He swiftly unzipped his jacket, revealing a plain black t-shirt underneath with two straps tied in an 'X' around his waist. He pulled at something on his back, and his two swords fell from behind him to their usual place at his side. "And we ain't gonna have any witnesses."

Minato swiftly wrapped his scarf around him to look like a terrorist, covering the lower half of his face and tying it at the back so that only a very tiny piece remained to flow behind him as he moved. He dispelled Adonis and heard the hurried footsteps of the police approaching. Minato didn't move from his place in the pile of gore, however. His shoes, jeans, and shirt were absolutely covered in blood, and he knew that he'd have to change into one of his extra outfits that he kept in the Dimensional Compactor before he could report his work.

"Freeze!" the first officer onto the scene shouted as she readied her gun. Her partner, an older man, ran in after her. They both stopped, however, when they saw Minato standing amidst the pool of gore he had created. Sho saw his opportunity, and dashed low to the ground as he drew his two swords.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" he asked as he moved at an almost inhuman speed between the two officers. The man turned around first, about to aim his gun at Sho, only for Sho to swiftly turn on the ball of his foot and slice with both blades. The policeman's arms tumbled through the air as his upper body fell forwards and his lower body fell backwards. The policewoman just barely managed to watch the pieces of her partner's corpse hit the ground, and she turned to Sho with a look of absolute horror on her face. "Hey, keep it together, Ms. Officer. You can't afford to fall to pieces here, huh? Ahahaahahaha!"

"T-this... can't be real." the policewoman muttered as she stared at Sho.

"But it is real." Minato said as he sliced off the arm she held her gun with using one of Jack's cleavers with an upward strike. "Just like that."

The policewoman was about to let out another blood-curdling scream before Minato quickly turned Jack's cleaver around and sliced off everything above the woman's jawline with one quick motion. Her tongue flailed as her body fell limp on the floor in front of him, but it made no real sound. "She really lost her head there, huh?" Sho mused. He had managed to avoid getting any blood on anything other than his swords, and he swiftly cleaned them by twirling them around rapidly before sheathing them. He chuckled at his own joke while Minato walked forwards and began to take off his clothing. "Huh? The hell are you doing?" Sho asked.

"I've got extra clothing on me." Minato said. "If you don't wanna watch, turn around. I need to change before I return."

"Got it, got it." Sho said, turning around to hide his swords away once more. They walked further out of the alley away from the puddle of blood, and Minato was lucky that he had a very similar outfit stored away. He kept some extra jeans, one of every color he owned. That meant he could easily replace his jeans, and the comfortable old black sneakers he kept with them looked close enough to his now bloodied dark blue shoes for most people not to notice. He also had a long sleeve that was a slightly lighter shade of blue than what he was wearing, but that didn't concern him too much.

After a quick change, a huge amount of sanitizer to take the

blood of off his hands, and quite a bit of body spray to cover the scent of blood, Minato walked forwards and tapped Sho on the shoulder to get him to leave with him. He undid his ridiculous terrorist look that he had fashioned his scarf in and returned it to its usual styling. "Good work... I learned a lot." Minato said.

"Me too. And I didn't even have to do the dirty stuff." Sho said. "Sixty-four, right? That's how much we've gotta report?"

"Yes. It's easy enough." Minato said. They left the alleyway, and Minato saw an empty patrol car that he knew belonged to the officers they had just murdered. "*Oh, this might be fun.*"

"But, we have one more piece of business... be ready to run."

"Business? What business?" Sho asked.

"Something extra." Minato said as he summoned a Maragi gem in his hand. They walked up to the patrol car, which had the windows slightly open. Minato squeezed the gem and then dropped it inside before swiftly running away. Sho realized what had happened and took off in hot pursuit as the police car suddenly exploded, the small blasts of fire from the Maragi gem igniting everything inside of it. Sho and Minato both laughed as they made it far away from the area on the thankfully empty streets. Inevitably, they stopped and calmed down as they distanced themselves away from the crime scene. "... So, are you going to disappear now that you've delivered Ikutsuki's message?" Minato asked.

"Pretty much... it's not like I ever planned on helping these

shits anyway." Sho said. "I feel for ya, with you having to deal with all this obligation shit. It's one of the things that makes bonds friggin' stupid."

"I do what I have to do to appear as a trustworthy and friendly leader." Minato said. "It's annoying at times, but sometimes it can be entertaining as well."

"If you say so. But hey, what do I know? It's not like I ever had to do any a' that crap." Sho said. They left the area they had been assigned to work-in and made their way back to the original meeting spot to report in just as it was beginning to get dark outside. After they told the worker about there being sixty-four victims in the area, they found themselves near the crowd at the Strip Mall.

"Well, that's all the work for today... so, are you going to disappear now?" Minato asked.

"I got no other reason to stick around here." Sho said. He smirked. "It's too bad that police woman didn't at least put on her radio, though... it probably would have been crazy fun if she did."

"I was contemplating telling her to do just that, but I didn't want to attract too much attention." Minato said. "It could've had annoying repercussions, none of which I would've liked."

"... Eh, I guess." Sho said. "Well, whatever... I'm heading out, so catch you whenever."

"Same to you." Minato said. With that, he watched Sho slink into the small crowd of people and swiftly disappear, leaving him on his own. Minato barely got a minute of silence before he saw Mitsuru and Shinjiro approaching him.

"Ah, Minato. How was your area?" Mitsuru asked.

"Sixty-four. Average." Minato said. He faked a yawn, surprising Shinjiro and Mitsuru. "Oh, sorry... my body's on lazy mode right now since it's past my work shift on a Sunday."

"... If there's nothing else for today, why don't we head back, Mitsuru? We've already done everything we had to." Shinjiro said.

"I agree." Mitsuru said. She chuckled. "I believe I'm beginning to fall back in love with the idea of sleeping in again."

On that odd bombshell, the trio made their way back to the dorm. Minato cancelled his plans on going out to avoid any suspicion for his crimes that day, instead opting to secretly clean the bloody clothing he had while his Fiends distracted Aigis and Metis once more. The members of the dorm were mostly too preoccupied to care about anyone else, since Yukari and Akihiko were both preparing for the upcoming sports meet and Ken was busy being introduced to the world of Eternal Punishment Online by Junpei and Fuuka until his bedtime.

"I'll keep that information about the Lost to myself for now... after all, if I reveal what I know, I'll have admitted to those

murders. Better I wait until they begin to move on their own before sharing... and I think I know what the sign will be. That transformation with red eyes and black skin... that's their cue." Minato thought as he finished cleaning up his clothing for the night. He walked out of the laundry room through the back door and went back to his room, preparing for another simple night of seeing what he could teach Aigis and Metis. *"This is good... now, I can only use Shinjiro for non-violent tests since I know how they mostly react. I suspect all Persona skills will be as effective as ever against them since they still have human bodies... but I may try burning them, among other things, if Shinjiro says he's okay with me killing a few subjects. Overall, however, today was quite the success."*