

# *Persona: Cloud Nine*

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Tetsuo Katsuji has signed a contract he does not remember signing. His fortune details pitfalls and potential he does not comprehend. And when the transfer student he chose to escort around the city goes missing, he discovers a world of surreal power, fueled by unfulfilled dreams and coveted by unscrupulous figures. Now, he and many others must find the strength to defy fantasy.

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# **Persona: Cloud Nine**

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# 1. Prologue

Sweat soaks his shirt. It's heavy, but he can't feel its weight at all. *Move!* his mind screams, but his legs do not listen, and they remain splayed out uselessly behind him. Lying on his stomach with his arms propping him up a few inches so that he can see the obscured figure standing above him, he awaits his fate.

Did it do this to him? He can't remember. He doesn't know why he's here. He remembers flashes of things: a numbness, a dim twinging in his chest, the rattle of some plastic object. And now he is here. But he needs to stand. Stand so he can run, or to fight, or even just to feel less helpless in front of this thing that oozes such a strong sense of malice.

Craning his neck as far up as it will allow, he tries once more to make out its face. He can't. There is only a mass of smoky, bluish-black tendrils crowning the entrance to some abyssal, dark pit. Seeing it, he is consumed by the overwhelming desire to escape. Pulling his body away from the thing is an agonizing and slow process, as he is unable to do little else but drag his torso forward across the smooth floor. Ever so slowly he begins to crawl away, but in his peripheral vision he sees the thing walking briskly alongside him. Casually, even, as if to mock his efforts.

Realizing that the effort is futile, he slumps to the floor. Beside him, the figure crouches and the pit comes to eye level.

"Why are you struggling?"

A voice. Human language. Yet laced with an undercurrent of surreality, a discordant rippling at the edges of its curious tone. Not human. Not at all. He refuses to answer, yet does not attempt to crawl away again. Whatever it wants, it will have its way at this point.

As if sensing his acquiescence, the figure takes on a more pleased tone.

"Good. I don't want to harm you anyways. In fact, I want to show you something. Do you want to see?"

It was almost like an excited child, but he couldn't bring himself to nod or shake his assent or dissent. It would do what it wanted. It takes his inaction as agreement.

"Very good! Now, do you want to be perfect?" It paused, waiting for an answer. He couldn't give it one. No words would form. How would one answer a question like that, given no prompting or explanation?

"I see. Maybe you think it makes you a bad person to wish that way. Maybe you think *I'm* a bad person. There are a lot of people who don't understand what I see. But I think you're different."

It rises to its feet, and out of his vision. It isn't until the hairs prick up on the back of his neck that he hastily squirms to flip himself over.

The figure stands over him in an aggressive stance, the blackish-blue smoke creeping over every inch of its humanesque form. But it is not this that so deeply disturbs him. It is the glinting gold eyes that now peer out from within the pit that provokes a cacophony of shrieking within his mind. They seem to reach hungrily into his soul, seeking to devour him from the inside out.

It is going to kill him.

"Please prove me right," it says, and instead of murdering him, it holds out its hand. Unlike the rest of it, it does not smoke, nor is blackish-blue. In fact, it looks disturbingly close to the hand of a real person.

He is unsure of how to react to this gesture. He knows nothing about this figure, other than it is not human, yet is quite adept at mimicking one. There is also the distinct possibility that it may be responsible for maiming him and putting him into this distressing position. The figure is frightening, for sure, yet at the same time, intriguing. Indeed, the more time he spends near it, the more his fear subsides and his curiosity peaks. He is so tired of lying here helpless like this. Would it be so bad, to take its hand?

In the end, he decides to do exactly that. He grasps the hand of the thing standing above him.



Its fingers instantly clench around his as if seeking to crush every individual bone in them beyond recognition. Its grip is disgustingly strong, and spears of pain lance up his arm and through every nerve ending in his wrecked body. The agony is so acute that he cannot even muster the strength to scream before foggy whiteness creeps into the corner of his eyes. However, before he slips into the cold sleep of the unconscious, a barely indistinct sound reaches his ears.

"The contract is sealed."

## 2. An Unexpected Guest

Waves.

It takes some time for your mind to register them, but the sounds you are hearing as your brain awakens from its addled state are definitely waves.

The ocean.

Laboriously, you open your eyes so that you can figure out just where you are that you're hearing such things, yet the sight that meets your eyes does nothing to alleviate your sense of confusion.

You are lying face down on what appears to be a plush blue carpet that stretches across the entire floor of this modestly sized space. But that's not so bizarre, all things considered. No, the large door that monopolizes your vision is much stranger.

It's a huge, gaudy thing, absolutely dwarfing you in size, composed of what looks to be golden, square panels. Each one is engraved with illustrations of eyes pointing-no, *moving*-in all sorts of different directions. Two enormous chains cross it from corner to corner to form a large, golden "X". It's clearly meant to keep people out. Or perhaps something else in.

Finding the strength to rise to your feet, you feel compelled to touch it, even though you have no key or means of opening it at all. Your fingers are about to graze its surface when a soft voice from behind you arrests you.

"Please don't touch that."

You whirl around to discover a sharply-dressed young man seated on a velvet blue couch behind you, his legs casually crossed as though he had been waiting for you to notice him all this time. He is dressed in highly formal attire – a tuxedo, a pearl-white pocket square, and heavily shined white leather shoes –almost as if he were about to attend a high-class gathering. Only a pair of headphones dangling around his neck beneath waves of shaggy azure hair disrupt the air of panache.

Next to him, a demure-looking blonde girl sits on a wooden chair with an amused expression on her face. She is dressed in a slim, blue jacket with large, brass buttons and a similarly blue short skirt. A thick book rests across her folded legs, which are almost pale white with blue (again!) boots pulled up almost to her knees.

Behind them both is a wide arch with billowing, sheer cobalt curtains draped from it. Beyond that is something that you've never seen in person, but can instantly identify: the prow of a ship, cutting through waves tinted orange by the setting of a distant sun.

"That door is not for you to open," she says.

"Wh-Where am I...?" you breathe. You hadn't meant to say it aloud, and yet, you couldn't help yourself.

The young man smiles broadly and spreads his arms wide.

"Hard to say. This place is both real and not real. It drifts somewhere between mind and matter, dream and reality." It's strange: the young man is the one gesturing, yet the girl is one speaking.

"That doesn't even make any sense. How can something be 'real and not real'? And how the hell did I get on a boat?"

"This room reflects the soul of the one who enters it. Perhaps if the form it takes confuses you, it means you're in need of some soul-searching. But I don't think that it matters at all *what* it looks like. All that matters is that you are *here*. And it is very strange that you *are* here at all, for that matter. As I understand it, you shouldn't have been able to come here. But then again, everything happens for a reason, and stranger things have happened."

"Well then, I want to know *how*. *How* am I here?"

"Well, there's only one reason for that: because you have entered into a contract."

A contract? It sounds familiar, but when you try to remember what it means, all that comes to mind are hazy shapes and indistinct voices. Yet you don't feel like she's wrong. And the thought of that makes you uneasy.

"I don't think so. I don't even know what I signed."

"We cannot tell you what you have agreed to, but only that it binds you to a powerful fate. Your presence here is proof enough of that."

"Ah, so 'I'm here because I'm *meant* to be here,' is that it? Pretty way of saying nothing, isn't it? And you two...I don't think I've ever met either of you before in my life. Who are you?"

Then, the young man in the tux smiles at her, and the girl feigns an expression of mock surprise. "Ah! We've been rude, haven't we, Master? We haven't introduced ourselves at all. That should've been the first thing we did when he arrived. I suppose I'm rather...out of practice when it comes to guests. Let's start over."

The girl turns back to you and bows with a grandiose sweep of her arm. "My name is Elizabeth."

"...And my name is Minato," the young man states, speaking for the first time. "Welcome to the Velvet Room."

The Velvet Room? It sounds more like the name of some cheesy cocktail lounge than...whatever this is supposed to be, but at the same time, it is rather appropriate given the décor.

"So you *can* talk," you say to Minato.

"My Master's residence here is quite...complicated," Elizabeth

offers, "as such, communication can be quite strenuous. So for the time being, I will speak for him unless he has something he wishes to say directly. My Master and I have an...*intimate* understanding of one another. I assure you that anything that I say can be understood as coming from him. Does this satisfy you?"

"I suppose it'll have to," you respond.

"And you, who fate has guided here, what would your name be?" Elizabeth asks.

She *is* a stranger in an even stranger place, but you can't think of any reason as to why just giving her your name would be a bad idea.

"Tetsuo Katsuji."

"Tetsuo...I get the feeling that your name will be on the lips of many around you in the coming year – a year that will be incredibly vital in determining your ultimate fate. It may sound quite dramatic, but I assure you that we don't exaggerate lightly."

"You keep on talking about this 'fate'. Are you gonna tell me what it is, or just keep acting whimsically mysterious about it?" you ask.

"Eager to learn what destiny awaits you? Very well, shall we consult the cards?"

"Cards?"

Seemingly out of thin air, Minato produces a deck of cards which he begins to rapidly shuffle. He rearranges, flips, and even twirls them about in midair in tantalizing arcs and loops. It seems to defy reality, which you notice has become something of a recurring theme. Finally, he places a number of them facedown on the table between you and stares you right in the eyes. His gaze is now piercing and strong, and you must force yourself not to look away.

"The Arcana is the means by which all is revealed. Allow my Master to read your fortune."

He takes one card between his thumb and forefinger and deftly flips it face up. It reveals the image of a skull, its eyeless black sockets boring into yours.

"Death, upright." His grey eyes are now transfixed upon you.

"Wait, *death*?" You can hardly keep the edge of panic out of your tone. "Are you saying I'm going to *die*?"

Elizabeth remains calm, even bemused maybe. "Not necessarily. Although this card is certainly tied to the cycle of life and death, it doesn't always mean that someone is about to die. In all likelihood, it points to a rebirth of sorts, the beginning of a new cycle in your life. However, there is always the possibility that it may be taken literally. It's a powerful card, and one with powerful implications."

Somehow, that does little to make you feel any more confident. Minato ignores your perturbed expression and reaches over to flip up the next card.

"Now, see? This one's much more promising. The Wheel of Fortune, upright. It seems your life is about to go through some dramatic changes, ones that should be favorable to you. It represents the beginning of a cycle of good luck. Now, let's continue."

He turns the card face up, and an image of the moon stares up at you.

"The Moon, reversed. It appears to be warning you against escaping reality by seeking comfort in delusions. You'll need to have the strength to face the harshness of life and see through lies. And finally..."

With a flourish, he flips over the next card and slides it in front of you. It depicts a figure with a bundle slung over his back.

"Ahhhh... somehow I had a feeling that this would be the final card. The Fool. It is a representation of limitless potential and freedom of the soul. For you to draw this card is very intriguing indeed. It comes with a great deal of power. But of course, how much you're able to tap into will be entirely dependent on how much you're willing to share with others."

"This...still doesn't mean anything to me. Honestly, I'm still a little worried about the part where I might die," you say.



"Death is not a hunter unbeknownst to its prey," quips Elizabeth. "It comes for us all at some point or another. But the Arcana do not create futures; they only grant us the means to perceive them. But if you'd like me to summarize, it seems as though your life is about to undergo a serious transformation, yet from that, you will experience a great opportunity for growth. However, during all of this, you must remember to face all these challenges head on, even if it would be more comfortable for you to believe in falsehoods and empty promises. Does that make things a little clearer?"

"It sounds like a lecture. What you're saying is that I should watch out."

"You can take it that way, but I'd rather you were a bit more self-conscious than that."

"It's hard to take this stuff seriously under the circumstances. Be honest, is this a dream or not?"

"It is. Right now, you exist somewhere in between the conscious and unconscious mind. But the Velvet Room is also very real, and you will come here again."

It seems hard to imagine any reason why you would want to return, but seeing as there appears to be no way out besides the door you were told not to touch, you remark that it would be awfully hard to come back to someplace that you never left.

Minato looks about the Velvet Room as if searching for an exit

himself.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Elizabeth says finally, "you'll wake up soon enough. But now I know that we'll see each other again. When your potential awakens, you will come to this place on your own, and I think we'll be able to speak with much less confusion."

"I hope you're right, because I'm still incredibly lost here. What should I even look for?"

Elizabeth chuckles and Minato smiles and shakes his head. "Don't let it bother you. The Velvet Room is exactly what I said that it was. It's only a waypoint for those bound by powerful fates. Nothing more, and nothing less. I wouldn't worry about recognizing the entrance once you're back in your world. You'll know it when you see it.

"Now, it seems like our time is at its end...for the moment. Do your best to recall what we spoke of here when you return to the land of the living. This is the beginning of an important journey for you...don't squander the opportunity you've been given, or the consequences could be more dire than you imagine."

There are many other things you want them to explain, but already you can see and feel the Velvet Room melting away into a miasma of blackness. You can only just make out a muffled "Farewell" from Elizabeth as the sound of waves comes to dominate your hearing. Soon, you are falling away into the void of unconsciousness, and you feel no more.



### 3. The Transfer Student

The chirping of birds and the gentle, insistent warmth of sunlight filters in through your open window, alerting you that morning has arrived. You sit up straight in bed, the events of your dreams clinging vividly in your head like strands of persistent spider webbing. Almost a little too vividly. It was only a dream, for sure, but then again, how many dreams have you had before that actually told you that you were dreaming? It's much too strange for you to think about on a Monday morning, so you decide to forget about it for now and get ready for school.

Your name is Tetsuo Katsuji, a student at the nearby Seganshima High School. Today will mark the first day of your second year, a day you've been dreading all vacation. Your first year of high school, you vaguely remember being extraordinarily boring, and nothing about it really stood out in your mind. In fact, you now recall that you spent most of it on your own at home, practicing your guitar. You don't seem to remember making any real friends, joining any clubs, or doing much hanging out. It wasn't a *terrible* year, per se, but everything seemed like such a drag. The thought of another year of having to put up with Seganshima's cliques, corrupt, lazy teachers, and punishing exams makes you cringe inwardly.

However...

The things those strange people, Elizabeth and Minato, told you in your dream begin to bubble to surface of your thoughts. Drastic changes, good fortune, limitless potential... It was only a dream. And tarot readings are right up there with horoscopes and palm reading on your "useless hippy bullshit" meter. But the idea of something, *anything* different in your life happening sounds promising. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to broaden your horizons a little this year, and try to reach out to someone other than your guitar. You make a note in the back of your mind for future consideration.

As you pull on your uniform for the day, you happen to glance out the window and notice someone walking down the other side of the street.

She's on the short side, with thick, brown hair pulled into a jaunty ponytail behind her. She *looks* cute, but it's hard to tell from this far away. However, you can tell that she's wearing a white Junes jacket over your school's uniform, but you can't remember ever seeing her around Seganshima High before. A large canvas suitcase that's almost bursting at the zipper rolls along behind her, jumping at every rut in the road. She must have just gotten off the bus from somewhere else.

By some coincidence, she stops at the house just across the street from yours, rolls her suitcase up to the gate, and pushes the buzzer. While she waits, she leans up against the gate and casts an inquisitive glance around your neighborhood. Eventually, her eyes land on yours and there's

a brief moment of embarrassment as she catches you watching her. But if she's put off, she doesn't show it. Instead, she waves enthusiastically to you, which you reciprocate with a half-hearted wave of your own.

Then, the buzzer must be sounding outside, because she turns away from you and begins speaking into the microphone. After a few minutes, a tall, grey-haired woman emerges from the house and escorts her up the walk, taking her suitcase from her. She glances back over her shoulder at you one more time before the door closes behind them and they're out of sight.

You can't help but think that it's a little strange that someone would be staying with the family across the street. They're almost never home for very long, and you don't think they've ever hosted guests. There's a first time for everything, you suppose.

Downstairs, your father is already putting things away from breakfast. You spot yours lying on the table and dig in greedily. For reason, your appetite is larger than usual this morning.

"I was gonna say that maybe you ought to heat that up, but it looks like it doesn't matter. Do you have everything ready for today?" he asks.

You nod in between mouthfuls and swallow to speak.

"Did Mom already leave?"

Your mother is the sole breadwinner in your family, having recently secured a well-paying job with a well-known law firm in the city. She leaves early and gets home late, so you rarely see much of her. Your father, on the other hand, hasn't had a job as long as you've known him, and stays home to keep the house in order.

"Oh yeah. At the crack of dawn, just like always. Took the entire pot of coffee with her, too, so I haven't had any myself. Better not make me grumpy this morning," he says with a wink. You shrug and continue eating. You're still curious about the girl from earlier. Maybe your father knows something, but you don't want to sound too interested.

"Hey, how many kids do the people across the street have?" you ask.

Your father puts down the sponge in his hand and becomes thoughtful.

"Uhh...pretty sure there's just one, a boy, but don't quote me on it. Why, did he come home again?"

"Nah," you say in between bites of toast. "But I saw this girl come up to their gate today with a couple pieces of luggage."

"*Really?*" Dad asks, his brows rising and eyes widening with interest. "That *is* interesting..."

Suddenly, he bounds towards you and pulls you into a tight headlock while ruffling your already messy mop of black hair.

He's a skinny guy, but his arms are lean and muscled, and clamp around you like a vice.

"Good man, Tetsuo! Gotta go after her before every other guy gets a chance! I like your thinking!"

Damn. You must have sounded too interested.

"H-Hey! Knock it off! Not exactly where I was going with that. Just wondering if you knew who she was."

Dad loosens his hold, allowing you to slip out and pat your hair back into its natural place. He looks disappointed.

"Well, how should I know? My only job is to keep the house in one piece, not to figure out what the neighbors are up to every waking hour. Just 'cause I stay at home doesn't mean I'm the same as some gossiping old housewives...why don't you just ask her yourself if you're curious?"

You shake your head. "Probably something personal. I shouldn't bother her on her first day of school."

Your father sighs deeply. "Sometimes I gotta wonder if you're actually a real man, Tetsuo. Before you know it, high school's going to be over, and you'll be wishing you had at least made it to first base. Don't blame me for lack of trying."

"Give it a rest, Dad," you mutter in hopes of getting your father off your case about your social life. Fortunately, you're spared any further inappropriate remarks by the sound of the



buzzer out front.

You're finished with your breakfast, so you volunteer to answer the door in order to prevent any further opportunities for conversation. You grab your bag, pull on your jacket, sling your guitar case over your shoulder, and hastily wave goodbye before leaving for the day.

Outside, the one who rang the buzzer turns out to be none other than the girl you saw across the street this morning. She's lost the jacket and her luggage; all she has with her now is her schoolbag and uniform.

"Hey!" she says, raising her hand quickly in greeting. You return the gesture.

"Hey," you return. "You...you're new here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, you must have seen me get in this morning, right? I'd rather have gotten here yesterday, but beggars can't be choosers, I guess."

You have no idea what she means by that, but you don't feel confident enough to ask about it.

"I noticed that you're wearing the same uniform," she says, pointing to your long black jacket and pants. Of course, it's not the *exact* same, but you know what she means. "I guess that means we're going to the same school, huh?"

She looks at you expectantly. Since she's new – as in, a

couple hours to the area new – she likely doesn't have anyone to show her around. This might be an excellent opportunity for you to connect with someone at school, to begin anew like Minato had suggested...

"Well, why don't you stick with me today and I can show you around to your homeroom and stuff. I'm Tetsuo Katsuji." You offer your hand to the girl.

"Mariko Tsukino. It's good to meet you, Tetsuo-kun! It's been a crazy morning...I really appreciate it. Hopefully I'll get to hang around long enough to get a feel for the place myself."

"Huh? Why do you say that? Are you not staying for long?"

Mariko's eyes drift to her feet. "It's...complicated. I guess I'll know in a few weeks or so. But until then, I'm not gonna worry about it too much! Are we ready to go?"

You take a glance at your watch. It's later than you thought it was! If you don't step on it, you might be late on your first day!

"Yeah, actually, we need to leave right now! Come on, follow me!" you say hastily as you take Mariko by the arm and take off down the street towards school.

"Whoa! Okay!"

You and Mariko run headlong in between throngs of men and women making for the trains and cross your fingers that you

don't end up running into someone. Fortunately, you know the way by heart. After a year of perfecting the best way to get to and from school with the least amount of hassle, you know all the streets that tend to have the fewest people and the route that requires minimal waiting at stoplights.

When you emerge from the crowd and arrive at one of the few intersections along the way, you take a moment to look up and notice that you're not where you expected to be.

The school should be just visible past a cluster of low shops ahead of you, but instead, you seem to have wandered your way towards the large bridge that passes over the river that cuts across town. Now, it's drifted off to your right at the intersection. Fortunately, it's still not too far away, and you can still make it in time if you book it. Your uniforms are going to be sweaty and sticky all morning, but there's nothing you can do about it now.

You turn to tell Mariko which way to go, but she's no longer listening. Her eyes are half-lidded and her body is beginning to sway back and forth like a snake in harmony with some unseen snake charmer. It almost looks as if she's about to fall asleep.

"Hey, Mariko-chan!" you shout over the roar of traffic, but she doesn't seem to hear you. Instead, she begins plodding towards the intersection. "Mariko-chan!" you cry out, but you may as well not even exist.

Another glance at your watch reveals that you're certainly

going to be late now. The only thing you can do is damage control. You don't know what Mariko's deal is, but it's made you late and it's seriously creeping you out. Something in the recesses of your mind, something that is causing the hairs on the back of your neck to stand at attention, is telling you that something is wrong here.

Lunging forward, you manage to catch her just before she steps into traffic. You place one hand gently on her shoulder, and she shudders for a brief moment before turning around to acknowledge you for the first time since you arrived at the intersection.

"Umm, what is it, Tetsuo-kun? You don't look so good. What's going on?" Mariko asks, looking about in confusion. Was she completely unaware of what she was just doing?

"Are you kidding? You almost ran into traffic! You looked half asleep – are you sure you wanna go to school today?" you ask.

Mariko vehemently nods her head. "Yeah! I'll be fine, trust me. I must still be a little out of it from the bus ride over. The roads from my hometown to here kinda suck, so didn't get much sleep. Heh heh...maybe I was sleepwalking!"

Is she trying to make a joke? Her tone doesn't sound all that humorous. Whatever was going on, she clearly doesn't feel comfortable talking about it with you.

"If you say so...just try to stick with me the rest of the way,

okay? If we run, we won't be too late."

A mortified shadow crosses her face.

"*What?!* H-How late are we?" She grabs your watch. The color begins to drain from her face when she realizes what time it is.

"Geez...c'mon, we gotta go!" she says, and dashes off, but before she even goes a meter, she realizes she has no idea where to go and looks back at you sheepishly.

"After you, of course."

You take the lead back towards the intersection, but Mariko lingers a little while longer and glances back across the bridge for a fraction of a second before hurrying after you.

## 4. New Old Grind

By the time the both of you arrive at Seganshima High, your uniforms are sticking to your skin, your brows are slick with sweat, and your mouths are dry from gasping for air. And you're ten minutes late. With any luck, your new homeroom teacher will be understanding, and you might be able to get your tardiness overlooked under the pretense of assisting a new student.

Seganshima High School looms large over you, its size accentuated by the emptiness of the grounds. It was recently renovated before you got here, or so you had heard. Out front, the second floor boasts an absurdly large glass window that stretches the length of the school from end to end, with fake friezes inlaid over top of it featuring all sorts of famous scholars from disjointed periods of history. Over top of it all, they installed a new clock with a face of matte black paint and chrome Roman numerals. Inside, the classrooms are tiled in black (some say to match the uniforms, but more pragmatic argue that it's to hide scuff marks) with brand new furnishings and interactive whiteboards.

It puts on convincing pretension of modernity, but there are those who aren't impressed. During the old days, it had been closer to a prison than a school according to a few of the older teachers. It's not difficult to imagine why, looking at the

bits of exposed grey brick that squeeze in between and wrap around all the modern bells and whistles that were added to the façade. That and having access to all that money hasn't done anything to alter the fact that Seganshima has just as many cliques, awful teachers, and gangs as any other high school in the country. You figure that the people who thought otherwise when they donated their cash to the project must be living in a fantasy.

Inside, you and Mariko rapidly scan the class rosters for your name and homeroom. You spy Mariko's first. Ms. Otomuji, the Spurned. Rumor has it that her personality is so venomous that no man has ever even dated her. You're about to offer your condolences when Mariko mentions that she's found your name.

"Hey, I found you, Tetsuo-kun!" Mariko says. Sure enough, she's pointing to your name...and it's only a few names underneath hers. "We have the same homeroom! Now *there's* a coincidence, huh?"

True, it'll be nice to have someone around to share in your misery, but the thought of having to explain your tardiness to Otomuji makes your breakfast pull backflips in your stomach. Mustering up all your resolve to not be violently ill, you wave for Mariko to follow you up the stairs to the second years' hall.

Your class, 2-B, is the first door on the right after you come up the stairs, right across the hall from the laboratory. When you slide the door open, you can immediately feel every eye

train on the two of you, especially Otomuji's thin, snake-like glare. Next to you, Mariko's expression is impassive, almost defiant – if she's nervous, she's not showing it.

"*Oh my God*," drawls Otomuji, rolling her eyes for extra dramatic effect. "Is this some kind of joke? Do you find this funny? To force me to interrupt my class so you can roll in whenever you feel like it? Hmm?"

She leans in closer and closer to your face as she speaks, each word coated in more exasperation than the last. You can smell her breakfast on her breath, and you have to try not to gag. Is this part of her psychological warfare? Mercifully, she doesn't linger close to you for long as she stands up straight to deliver another diatribe.

"Each and every year they stick me with the worst little shits this school has to offer, and then they have the balls to turn around and deny me my retention bonus. This when I'm expected to come in here and force the likes of *you* to learn trigonometry when you obviously can't even read a clock properly! What a farce."

Otomuji takes a deep breath and returns to the podium at the front of the room.

"Normally, I'd tell you to just take a seat so that the rest of us can get on with our lives, but since today is the first day of school, I may as well give you chance to try whatever half-baked excuse you cooked up before you got here. Well, come on, spit it out!"



You're about to speak up for the two of you, but Mariko comes forward before you can say anything.

"I'm very sorry for being late today, but it's my fault. I'm new to the city and I got lost while he was showing me to school. I promise it won't happen again."

Otomuji's lips curl into an awful grin.

"Then maybe you should have left earlier if you knew you were too stupid to read a map. You kids have those on your damn phones these days anyways! What a half-assed excuse, I should've known this would be a waste of my time. Just sit down already, shut up, and listen carefully to the rules so you never screw up in this class again."

Otomuji is being unnecessarily cruel to Mariko, and it's beginning to piss you off. Normally, you'd just follow directions and hope to get through the rest of the day without incident, but you need to say something, especially since Mariko just took the heat for you.

"Hey. Aren't you forgetting something?" you ask Otomuji, with maybe a little more edge to your voice than you'd meant. Not that you care how nasty you sound to her right now. The class, who's been regarding your scolding with only moderate interest, now begins to sit up at rapt attention at your defiance.

Otomuji looks at you the way people inspect mold on old produce.

"I don't know, did I forget to write up a report on a hormonal little punk in all the excitement?"

"Mariko-chan. She's new."

"What about it? So is this migraine I'm getting. Sit down already."

"A good teacher should introduce a new student to the class instead of treating them like garbage."

"I-" Otomuji is at a loss for words. "I-I'll do whatever I please in this class! I went to university for the right to do so!"

"You know, you really ought to," says a brown-haired kid with stylish sunglasses near the back of the room. "That's kinda messed up."

"I agree."

"Totally."

"The bitch is in rare form already..."

"Come on, introduce her, teach!"

As the murmuring protests in the classroom begin to rise, so does the color in Otomuji's face. Finally, it reaches its peak and erupts.

"*FINE!* If it'll let me teach in peace again, I'll do it. Come here, girl. What's your name?" she almost hisses at Mariko.

Mariko takes a few strides towards the podium.

"Mariko Tsukino."

"Alright then, class, this here is Mariko Tsuwhatsherface from the Middle of Nowhere and she's going to be in our class this year. Do your best to help her out by speaking slowly and maybe slipping her some travel-sized deodorant. Now *sit!*"

Satisfied, you and Mariko take a couple of empty seats in the second to last row, in front of the guy in the shades who spoke up for you. It wasn't the best start to the school year, but you already feel more confident. Your classmates seem to respect you more as well.

Otomuji makes sure to shoot you a death glare before launching into the obligatory recital of the school's rules and regulations. "*This isn't over,*" she mouths to you. All of a sudden, you feel as though this will be a long year.

Then, a finger in the small of your back draws you out of your troubled musing. The guy in the shades leans forward to whisper in your ear.

"Hey, that was a gutsy move, dude. Do you wanna die this year or something?"

"No," you reply, "just standing up for a classmate."

"Well, you're *my* hero, dude. A bitch like her shouldn't even *be* a teacher if she's gonna act like this. I'd heard the stories, but

it's way worse in person, isn't it? It's about time someone spoke up for us."

"It probably would have been a lot worse if you hadn't said something, too. Thanks," you say. It's true, as well. You feel like things would have gotten a lot worse if this guy hadn't come to your defense.

"No prob. Don't think I woulda said anything on my own, though. I'm not that ballsy. But hey, for a good enough cause, who knows?" He glances none too subtly at Mariko and pulls his glasses down his nose to wink at her. "Anyhow, you got a name? I've seen you around before, but I don't think we ever spoke."

"Tetsuo Katsuji."

"Ooooh yeeaaaah...come to think of it, that does sound kinda familiar. Hayate Hirada." He extends his hand, and you grasp it firmly in yours.

"Hey! I hope to God there isn't any conspiring going on back there! So help me if there's even one whiff of mutiny in my classroom, I'll have all of you scrubbing the faculty office for the rest of your lives!" Otomuji snaps.

Hayate sighs. "We'll have to pick this up later. If you got time after school, you'll probably find me at Ikkuman's at the Air Mall. And bring Mari-chan, will ya? I'm sure she doesn't know a thing about the best places to eat around here yet."

Hayate's intentions might not be totally selfless, but you sense that he's friendly enough. Perhaps you'll take him up on his offer today...

The rest of the day drags on slowly, as each teacher cycles through to deliver their expectations for your performance during the school year. At lunch, you make sure to show Mariko where the most important places in school are; the club rooms (of which you note are accepting new members in a week), the faculty office (at which you don't linger terribly long), the library (which oddly enough seemed to be passed over in the renovation, leaving it just as musty and cramped as ever), and the sports complexes.

You're on your way up to the roof for one last stop when Mariko stops and turns to you in the middle of the hall. She looks like she wants to say something.

"What's up?" you ask.

Mariko smiles a sad-looking smile, which confuses you somewhat. Sure, this morning was a little dicey, but you don't think you did anything wrong.

"I just wanted to say thanks for showing me around today, Tetsuo-kun. I know I made things hard for you today, so if you don't want to, you don't need to hang around me tomorrow."

"What? No, no. I mean, you didn't bother me at all. You've just had a long day, today, right? It's normal to feel a little out of it, you know? Don't be so hard on yourself."

Mariko chuckles lightly at that. "And maybe you're being a little too nice, Tetsuo-kun. I guess...I just feel like I shouldn't have to be a burden on anyone anymore. Dad was never home very often growing up, so a lot of people around town felt like they had to spend time with me to cheer me up. But I didn't really need cheering up...I was fine on my own most of the time."

"You didn't like hanging out with them?"

"Well, it's not really like that, either." Mariko frowns. "I had fun, but whenever I had a problem, they felt like they had to swoop in and make it all better. I don't really need that anymore. My problems are my problems, I shouldn't have to have someone with me all the time to make sure I'm all right. Some people don't get that."

Your face starts turning red, and Mariko notices.

"No, no! I didn't mean to sound rude, Tetsuo-kun! I didn't really mean you! I'm not saying that I want to be by myself *all* the time. It really did enjoy today! It's just...more my Dad that feels that way. Like I need to be watched every second of every day. I'm not a kid anymore. He needs to worry more about himself and less about me. I don't think anyone should have to feel obligated to keep tabs on me."

Mariko's brow furrows and her gaze becomes distant. It's reminiscent of the way she got on the way to school this morning. Then, as quickly as it comes, she waves her hand vigorously in front of her face as if to chase her thoughts

away.

"Well, just never mind that stuff for now. I'm sorry I bored you with all that family crap when it's not really your problem or anything. Let's just keep going, I really wanna see the view from the roof, OK?"

You decide to let topic drop for now since that's what she wants, and gesture for her to follow you towards the stairs. However, before you can mount the first step, a booming voice echoes down the hall after you.

*"KATSUUUUUUUJI!"*

The blood in your veins starts to freeze as you recognize who that roar belongs to. When you turn around, you are suddenly face to face with a behemoth!

Shigesato Shibutani is a caricature of a high school student. That is to say, his proportions are in such excess of an average high schooler's that he would seem cartoonish if he wasn't so frightening. Ever since being appointed to the position in his second year last year, Shibutani has garnered a reputation as a fierce, uncompromising Disciplinary Committee Chair.

At first glance, he doesn't seem like someone who would be interested in upholding any kind of rules at all. He sports a modest pompadour, similar to the kind the local gangs like to wear. However, it doesn't appear that he uses any hold on his at all, as the ends spring upwards naturally, like he uses only

sheer willpower to keep them in place. Powerful, thick sideburns slash downwards across a heavy jawline seemingly set into a permanent scowl. His pupils are small and round, like little black beads, but when he gets agitated (as he is now), the beads almost become lost in the whites of his eyes, an effect both comical and terrifying. In addition, you've never seen Shibutani wear his jacket buttoned up. Not even once. Yet he wears it year-round for reasons no one will likely ever know. All things considered, if it wasn't for the traditional orange band around his left arm marking him as a Student Council member, you'd think he was one of the delinquents he works so tirelessly to round up.

Shibutani looms over the both of you with menacing ferocity, and you immediately know that even though you don't really know what you did, you're screwed.

"Are you aware of why I had to stop you?" he bellows. You weakly shake your head. Shibutani sighs and cracks a wry smile.

"Unsurprising. Very rarely do delinquents believe that they've done anything wrong. They're the most delusional breed of human being, completely oblivious to the destruction they leave in their wake in the pursuit of self-satisfaction!"

"Umm," Mariko ventures, unfazed by Shibutani's posturing, "but Tetsuo-kun still doesn't know what he's done."

Shibutani's eyes go wide and he bends in half to bring himself down to Mariko's height.



"And you!...Who would you be?"

"Mariko Tsukino...I'm new this year."

Shibutani straightens back up, his eyes shrink back to their normal size, and he extends his hand.

"Ah. Well then, that changes things somewhat. Allow me to formally welcome you to Seganshima High School in lieu of the greeting you received this morning."

"Thank you," says Mariko with a short bow.

Shibutani then turns back to you. "Now, as for *you*...I have chosen to issue you a warning instead of assigning a more severe punishment as was suggested. Ms. Otomuji was insistent that you scrape the gum off the bottoms of every desk in the school."

This entire incident is suddenly becoming clearer to you. But why is Shibutani letting you off the hook?

"The rules I enforce here at Seganshima are steadfast and invincible," Shibutani says, "but there are times when the Disciplinary Committee must consider all the circumstances behind an infraction. I am well aware of Ms. Otomuji's reputation...and word of mouth travels quickly here. My job is to protect Seganshima's student body and preserve justice. I won't punish someone for doing the same."

You instinctively exhale, but your heart is still pounding. You

can't remember ever hearing about Shibutani letting anyone off the hook before. He laughs, a deep, throaty chuckle, at your obvious relief.

"Ha! Even I, Shigesato Shibutani, am capable of mercy! But remember that when you choose to disobey the great edicts laid down by the faculty and Student Councils past, your life is in my hands! Just as I give, I also take away! Every one of our teachers here, no matter how polite they may or may not be, demands your respect as a student! It's the chain of command! Fail to follow it, and the entire system degenerates into chaos and anarchy! Sloth and filth! Depravity and crime! Common thugs like the ones that run with the Yatabuya Gang don't understand this. Never stoop to their level! Got it?"

Shibutani is being a little more dramatic than the situation deserves, but you're not about to protest. Instead, you nod in agreement. Shibutani seems satisfied.

"Fine then. If you understand, then I won't waste any more of our time. I've got a meeting to attend, and I'm sure Miss Tsukino would appreciate more of your guidance...err..."  
Shibutani looks around. "Where has Miss Tsukino gone to? I got so caught up in what I was saying that I didn't notice her leaving."

Sure enough, Mariko is nowhere to be found. You were so caught up in appeasing Shibutani that you didn't see her leave either!

"Well, I'll leave it to you to track her down and make sure she

gets home safely, Katsuji. We have a promising year ahead of us." He stops in mid-stride. "And one more thing – the Student Council is looking for more members this year."

You can't imagine why anyone would be reluctant to join.

"I would be more than happy to recommend someone confident enough to do what they believe in...as long as they were willing to make more intelligent choices from now on," he says, raising an eyebrow at you.

Shibutani gives you a small salute in farewell and heads off down the hall towards the Student Council meeting room. Shibtuani appears to be offering you a seat on the Student Council, but you don't really feel confident enough to devote yourself to that right now. The entertainment value in enforcing the law around school is dubious as well.

But for the moment, you need to focus your energy on figuring out where Mariko went. You're not terribly worried about her; despite everything that happened today, nothing really fazed her much. Besides, she did just say that she was tired of people worrying about her. She probably just decided to head home while Shibutani finished chewing you out. You want to take up that Hayate guy on his offer and grab some ramen – you're starving despite lunch only being a few hours ago.

However, the strange way that she acted this morning is still in the back of your mind, and she *is* still new in town. You'll have to pass on Hayate's offer today and stop by the house across the street on your way home.

Hayate seems a little disappointed when you decline, but not terribly so.

"Hey, I get it, man. Shit happens, right? And if you're checking in on Mari-chan, then how can I blame you? You're a smooth operator, man. All like, 'I...I just wanted to make sure you were okay, Mari-chan...I get so worried when you're not around.' And then she's like, 'Oh, Tetsuo-kun, you're so thoughtful and also attractive to me in multiple ways. Would you like to come inside for tea, cookies, and a three-hour long makeout session?' I like your style."

It's really not your style at all, but for the moment you're content to let Hayate believe what he wants. You agree to make plans for some other day and head home.

When you turn onto your street, the first thing you notice is the grey-haired woman standing outside of the house across the street from yours. She stares at you as you draw near, but after scrutinizing your face, she shakes her head and resumes watching the end of the street.

She's waiting for someone.

Didn't Mariko come home?

The woman takes notice of you again as you walk up to her. She's got the worn, tired look of someone who's constantly busy.

"Hey, you're Mariko's..." You pause for a moment to

remember what Mariko said her relationship with this woman was. "...aunt, right?"

Mariko's aunt raises her eyebrows. Up close, you can kind of see the resemblance in parts of her face. It's funny, even though you've been neighbors for as long as you can remember, you've never actually spoken to any of them.

"Yes," she says. Tinges of panic are creeping into her voice. "Have you seen her?"

With that, your fears are all but confirmed, but you have to ask, just in case.

"Didn't she come home after school today?"

"No...I was hoping she'd just made some new friends and that maybe she'd gone out somewhere. But it's getting awfully late for that, and she's not answering my calls..." She stares towards the end of the street again.

"God, if anything happens to her...I think I'm gonna be sick. I'll never be able to look my brother in the eye..."

"I'll go and look for her. This is partially my fault anyways, I told her that I was going to show her around and I lost track of her."

Relief washes over her face. "Thank God. If you could bring her back for me, I couldn't tell you how grateful I'd be. We were both reluctant about this whole arrangement...if I ended

up letting something happen to her, I'd just about die of shame. I'll let your parents know where you are. Just make sure she's all right, okay?"

You nod and take off down the street. You know Mariko probably wouldn't be pleased about you searching for her, but if what you're thinking is correct, you don't really think you have a choice. It's not pleasant to consider, but you have a feeling that you know exactly where Mariko's gone.

## 5. Awakening

The crowd around town has thinned considerably since this morning, so you reach the intersection near the bridge within fifteen minutes. Traffic is also considerably – no - drastically lighter as well. In fact, there are almost no cars on the road at all. It almost seems to you as if people are deliberately trying to avoid the area...

You quickly shake that thought from your head. What reason could there be for that? From the looks of things, there's nothing strange or out of the ordinary going on around here. A lot of people must have just decided to take a different route home today, that's all.

With that resolved, you cross the intersection towards the bridge in hopes of finding Mariko somewhere along it. That's where she appeared to be heading this morning when she fell into that trance-like state. Come to think of it, she was awfully evasive when you asked her if anything was wrong. Hopefully the reason is inconsequential.

However, the minute you set foot on the bridge, you know that something isn't right. Shivers race from your head down to your toes, like you were just submerged in a tub of freezing ice water. The air itself feels...prickly, as if tiny shocks were igniting along your exposed skin as it moves. For a moment,

your hearing becomes muddy, and the sounds of the city – cars, horns, the tinny voice of the walk signs at the streetlights, the voices of people – are muffled, bubbling at the very edges of your senses. But as you walk along the bridge, it begins to focus itself again, yet the only sound you can hear is the rippling of water as it moves below you. Still, there's no sign of Mariko.

Then, at the moment you lift your shoe to take the first step onto sidewalk on far side of the bridge, sharp pain suddenly engulfs your body! It spreads rapidly from your solar plexus, expanding to seemingly affect the ending of every nerve you have.

*"I art thou."*

The voice is deep and commanding, ringing in your mind like the peal of a massive bell. It rips through your mind with the force and intensity of a jet engine, and then, like the shockwave from an explosion, spreads to every extremity with an uncomfortable prickling sensation.

*"Thou art I."*

This proclamation detonates within you with even more strength than the last, to the point where it almost feels like your body and soul are being separated from one another. You clasp your hands to your head and drop to one knee, shaking yourself in a vain attempt to reclaim control.

Then, as quickly as it came, it ceases, and you're left kneeling



on the ground gasping for breath. It barely lasted an instant, but it feels as though you've been writhing there for an hour. As you rise to your feet, you wonder if you're getting sick, but when you realize what's happened to the world around you, it seems like the least of your worries.

Before you is an imposing, golden wrought-iron gate that you're positive wasn't ever there before. And it's not the only thing. Beyond it, asphalt streets have given way to quaint roads paved with white brick, where there were once towering buildings and bustling shops, low, squat suburban houses have taken their place. Statues of angels line the street, tireless stone sentinels devoted to monitoring all those who wish to pass. In the distance, the Earth seems to defy its own rules as the path rises, branches, and twists into gravity-defying zig-zags that race towards islands suspended in midair. Above, the sky has turned a near-white shade of blue, and lavender clouds scud gently across its surface.

Awestruck, you stumble towards the gate and lightly press on it with one hand. It's not at all heavy, and swings open invitingly with just that one touch.

You hesitate at the entrance, staring with your mouth agape and trying desperately to make sense of what you're seeing. There's absolutely no way that you could really be experiencing what you're seeing right now. There was no sign of any of this from the other side of bridge. How could it just pop into existence? It must have something to do with that strange sensation you experienced on the bridge, but you can't seem to think of a suitable explanation that connects the

two.

Another thought dawns on you while you consider the circumstances leading up to your finding yourself here: did whatever just happened to you happen to Mariko this morning? When you caught her with her eyes half-closed, stumbling about like she was half-asleep, was she experiencing the same things? Obviously, she hadn't felt the pain you did – you would have noticed if she had. But the way she looked and the way you felt are too similar to dismiss as coincidence. She must be somewhere around here... somewhere beyond this gate.

"Mariko-chan!" you call into the village beyond. No response. You'll have to go in after her.

A part of you is scared out of your wits to set foot in a strange, unfamiliar place like this, especially one that just appeared out of thin air. It can't exist, and it *shouldn't* exist. But it does, and no matter how many times you pinch yourself, you're not waking up from this dream. But your curiosity is overpowering your fear, and what's more, something is telling you that this is something you were *meant* to do.

*Fate.*

The word echoes through your mind, resonating and intensifying in power like a tuning fork until you can no longer hold back. You made a promise to find Mariko, one you intend to keep, regardless of how strange your circumstances are.

Taking a deep breath, you steel yourself and step over the threshold.

Almost instantly, a shriek rises above the rooftops and an almost oppressive force presses against your body, causing you to take a step back. Somewhere in between the rows of houses in the distance, a plume of what looks like black smoke erupts accompanied by another wretched wail. It rises high into the sky like a signal, churning and undulating for what seems like an eternity before dissipating in a light breeze. You instinctively take a step backwards, only to discover that the gate has shut itself behind you and won't budge. Another plume of smoke rockets into the sky, this time much closer.

You have no idea what it is, but one thing is immediately obvious as another shriek and tower of smoke punctuates the sky only a couple hundred feet from you: it's coming for you.

That, coupled with a fresh wave of fear-induced adrenaline, forces your body to move before it's caught and killed. Of course, you don't know for sure what is chasing you, but your intuition is screaming at you that it wants you dead for daring to set foot here.

You consider trying to hop the gates, but you can't bring yourself to stay put for even a second longer. Not only that, but leaving that thing behind would also mean leaving Mariko with it, and that's something you simply can't convince yourself to do.

Instead, you reason that it would be easiest to lose your

pursuer in the maze of lanes that run in between the myriad houses. However, the second you turn down one of the streets, the shrieks start coming in quicker intervals. You don't dare look behind you to confirm it, but you bet that the plumes of smoke are coming faster and closer as well.

The tapping of your sneakers on the bricks as you sprint sounds way too loud in your ears, and you just know that it's giving away your position to the horrible thing that's chasing you through the maze. The only thing you can do is push your body to its absolute limit and pray that you'll be able to outrun it. Once you've done that, then you can worry about finding Mariko and get the hell out of here.

You blast past hundreds of houses, careening down seemingly endless, uninhabited streets that all seem to be connected to one another. Eventually, the houses on either sight become indistinguishable beige blurs as you throw yourself further and further into this insidiously deceptive neighborhood. Planting your foot firmly into the pavement, you rapidly turn a corner into one of the streets only to be stopped dead in your tracks.

Crouching (or at least, it seems to be crouching; its anatomy is too different from your own to really be sure) only a few feet away at an intersection between two paths is some monstrous, smoking, oozing blob of what looks like black tar. Nearly as tall as you and twice as wide, it's planted itself right in the middle of the path with its back to you. It hasn't noticed you, probably because it looks like it's preoccupied with some other task. Its back arches and shudders violently causing the

surface of its body to quiver grotesquely. With each horrible lurch, it emits a guttural shriek similar to the ones that came from the other, but much lower, as if they were passed through one of those sound filters designed to protect peoples' identities on TV. You're reminded of a stray cat hunching over a freshly caught bird, and all at once, you understand what it's doing.

It's eating something.

Your mind immediately assumes the worst, that it must have caught Mariko. Although you're about ready to soil yourself in fear of this...*thing*, you summon up whatever remaining bastions of courage you have left to creep delicately to the left to allow yourself a better view. Fortunately, when the front of the creature comes into view, you can tell that it's not Mariko that it's devouring. However, you immediately wish that you hadn't been so curious.

The creature doesn't have a face so much as it has, well, you suppose a *mask* would be the best way to describe it. A slab of polished metal in the shape of a sunburst appears to have been affixed to the blob, pressed onto it like a decoration in some hideous black dough. Two small slits for eyes like black teardrops are cut from the sides. It could be that you just aren't looking at the right angle to see them, but from here it doesn't look as if there are any eyes peering out from the behind it.

However, it is the rows of massive, tombstone teeth protruding from the bottom of the mask in a wretched,

demented grin that make you hesitate to truly call it one. It's both a mask *and* a face, which is honestly twice as awful as either one alone. Each time the creature bends over to rip another chunk from its prey, it pulls its gleaming "lips" back to bare those horrible teeth before taking another massive, messy bite.

From what you can tell, the thing it's eating is another creature like it, only much smaller and evidently, much weaker. The sight would make you vomit if you weren't so worried that it would hear you retching. Whatever these...*abominations* are, they're hungry enough to feast on each other. What would they do if they got ahold of you?

You haven't heard any shrieks from the one that was chasing you before in a while, and neither have you caught sight of any more smoke geysers above the rooftops. For now, the best choice would be to back away quietly and carefully from this creature while it's preoccupied.

Beads of sweat trickle down your face and soak the collar of your shirt as you take each silent, controlled step backwards and away from the creature. Craning your head to look behind you, you notice a narrow alleyway in between a couple of the houses that you might be able to squeeze through. It's only a few feet away, and if you can reach it, you should be able to hide there until the creature finishes and leaves.

You begin to make your way over towards the alley, but as you do, the creature makes an ugly sighing sound, and its mask-face rolls upwards on its gelatinous body towards the

sky. It then lets loose a cacophonous shriek that blasts into the sky and echoes down in between every house for miles. It attacks your eardrums with such force that it causes you to suddenly clutch your ears in midstep.

The sudden imbalance sends you tumbling right onto your rear end, clutching your ears in pain until the ringing subsides. If it were to turn around, it certainly wouldn't have a hard time capturing you, and you'd end up just like that smaller creature. Fortunately, the pain dissipates fairly quickly, allowing you to softly rise to your feet and head for the alleyway again. This time, you don't care whether or not you can see if it's coming after you, you turn yourself around so that you can reach the alley as quickly as possible. And as you do so, an enormous pillar of smoke erupts in front of you, and an ear-splitting shriek cuts through the stillness.

As you figured, the thing that was chasing you looks just like the one behind you at the intersection, and when you turn back around, you're mortified to discover that it's spotted you now as well and is lurching towards you!

Your survival instincts kick in once again, and you make a break for the alley, pumping your legs for all their worth. Just inches from the mouth of the alley, a thick, black tendril darts forward from the creature that was chasing you, and the end takes the shape of a long, bony hand. It reaches for your head, but at the last second you have the presence of mind to drop to the ground and slide under it into the shelter of the alley.

Both creatures slam into each other, grabbing, squealing, and scrabbling with elongated tendril arms into the cramped entryway, desperately trying to latch on to some part of your body in order to drag you out. You flip onto your rear end and scramble further back into the confined space. You don't dare take your eyes off of them anymore. However, your back hits a solid wall far sooner than you'd like. Looking up, the wall is too tall for you to climb, especially with those things getting closer with every second. There's nowhere to run or hide now. The only thing you can do now is wait to die.

One of the creatures then finally relinquishes a bit of space to the other, allowing it to reach further into the alley and wrap its hand around your ankle. Its grip is ridiculously strong for something so brittle-looking, and without any exertion at all, it forcefully hoists you into the air and flings you out of the alleyway and into a flowerbed on the other side of the street.

Petals explode around you as you crash down into the soil and skid through the dirt into the wall of the house behind you. The force of the impact robs the air from your lungs, and you can just barely sit up in time enough to see the tendril flying towards you at tremendous speed. With as much strength as you can muster, you roll your battered body to the left, and the tendril smashes harmlessly into the ground beside you, kicking up a spray of soil into your face. But just as soon as you've dodged that, the creature has already cocked its appendage back for another strike. You try to stand up so that you can try to maneuver around them and down the street, but your legs have turned to jelly, and as soon as you



get upright, your knees buckle and the tendril slams into your side with cruel force.

The impact sends you spiraling to the ground where you land face-first in the dirt. Propping yourself up on your elbows, pain lances through your side where the creature struck you, forcing you to drop back to the ground howling. Colors pop in front of your eyes, and your head is positively swimming. As you roll yourself face up, you can see the creatures advancing you, their shining teeth gnashing in anticipation beneath those pitch black eye slits.

This is it. This is how you're going to die, in a strange place, devoured by eldritch masked monsters, and no one will know how it happened. All of a sudden, in the face of certain death, your life seems starkly, pathetically unfulfilling. There is nothing you've done that you're proud of. Not even your guitar playing has gone anywhere. You've never kissed a girl, graduated high school, made a real friend, planned for a career...and now you never will.

"No..." you breathe. Your voice sounds wavering and pleading in your ears.

*"No, no...please no...I don't want to die,"* you gasp, pulling yourself backwards against the wall of the house. The creatures are nearly upon you, and their heavy breathing suffocates your senses.

*"I don't want to die. I don't want to die."*

This litany of desperation seems futile; meaningless to the monsters that continue to advance upon you and pathetic to your ears as they escape your lips.

*"I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"* you scream. *"GODDAMMIT, GIMME ANOTHER CHANCE!"*

And then, time itself seems to freeze. All sounds cease, the creatures halt in their tracks. The stillness is overwhelming. And then, the voice returns.

*"Thou art I! And I am thou. In the sea of thine soul I sleep, Launcelot, knight of the lake! If thou wouldst conquer fear, summon me to thine side!"*

Its voice rebounds inside your head millions of times in that one instant, and you know exactly what to do. The word leaps into your head, and repeats itself constantly as if begging for release from your tongue. And without thinking, it then escapes your lips, three syllables whispered as if in prayer:

*"Per-"*

*"So-"*

*"Na."*

A harsh light pours forth from the skies above, causing the creatures to recoil and writhe in pain. The sound of whistling wind causes you to look towards the sky behind you just in time to witness an enormous object plummet through the air

and into the house, crushing almost half of it.

You stare up at it in awe, wondering if it was really you that did this. It's a gigantic card, emblazoned with the picture of a man with a bag slung over his shoulder.

*"The Fool."* The voice surfaces from somewhere deep in your memory.

Then, as if damaged by the sudden impact with the ground, shining cracks race across the surface of the card, and it shatters into countless pieces. The debris begins to swirl in the air behind you, a cascade of glimmering, ethereal material. Little chunks of it begin to stick together, and bit by bit, something begins to form from the pieces. A leg, an armored torso, a shield, a helmet with a plume of flowing horsehair; the silhouette of a knight is beginning to take shape, floating there in front of your very eyes! The last pieces then come together like a puzzle, and the summoning is complete.

Before you now floats an armored knight equipped with a massive lance and shield. Its entire face, save for a thin pair of lips, is obscured by a pointed visor. Long, straight black hair falls over a ragged red cape that flutters in some invisible breeze. It rapidly flexes its limbs outwards like a star with a booming shout, and a wave of energy ripples through the air, raising goosebumps on your arms and causing the creatures to cower and hiss.

Launcelot. It feels like it's been with you – inside of you – for a

very long time. You can sense the same sort of presence in it as the monsters in front of you – both possess a foreign, powerful aura about them. But where the creature is threatening and malevolent, you instantly feel confident and rejuvenated with Launcelot. Even your side doesn't hurt anymore.

Rising to your feet, you turn around to face the creatures and look over your shoulder to Launcelot.

"You...are you here to help me?"

Launcelot nods. It's much less talkative outside of your mind, apparently.

"Then...with you, I can take these things, right?"

Launcelot smiles.

You can't help but grin as well. It's all you needed to know.

You reach behind your head and pull your guitar out of its soft case. You don't have a real weapon, so unfortunately, your baby will have to do in a pinch. But a guitar can be replaced, your life can't. Besides, if nothing else, Pete Townshend would approve.

You advance on the creatures, which shrink from you with each step. As their fear grows, your confidence rises. You've been chosen – by whom or why you have no clue – to have this power, and with it you can save yourself and Mariko from

this place.

"All right," you yell, "who's first?!"

As if sensing your intention to rumble, one of the creatures makes a desperate lunge you, perhaps hoping to take you unawares. Steadying your breath, you adopt a lower stance and swing your guitar at it like a golf club with all of your might. It connects with a satisfying *thwack*, taking an entire chunk off of its gelatinous body and sending it soaring through the air where it dissipates into black smoke before hitting the ground. Surprisingly, your guitar isn't even harmed by the impact. You had no idea you had this much strength.

The thing itself tumbles to the ground, a quivering heap of black ooze. Its mask slithers across the surface of its body until it faces you again, and it howls with anger. Evidently, it doesn't take too kindly to being challenged by its food.

The creature sprouts a number of thin appendages this time and thrusts at you with all of them at once. As they soar through the air towards you, they quiver and reform themselves into the shape of gleaming, onyx-black broadswords. On pure instinct, you shut your eyes and raise your arm to shield yourself, even though there's no way that your clothing will protect you from the blades. However, not a single one touches you. When you open your eyes, Launcelot has moved in front of you with his shield raised, and the creature is frantically (but fruitlessly) hacking against it with all its might, the gooey blades glancing off in showers of sparks and harsh clangs. Finally, the creature pulls back all its

tendrils and catapults them towards Launcelot all at once. Launcelot braces itself and pushes its shield into the strike. The blades slam point first into the metal and shake violently as the creature pours all its strength into piercing Launcelot's defensive magic. However, with one movement, Launcelot easily turns all the blades aside with its shield, leaving the creature completely vulnerable.

Launcelot hefts its lance in front of it and darts towards the creature's exposed visage. The point of the lance buries itself in between its teeth and sinks in even further when Launcelot applies more pressure. With one more push, Launcelot pierces through the creature entirely, splitting it into two pieces. The halves of the creature momentarily fall still before it emits one more ear-splitting shriek and disintegrating into a cloud of black smoke. The halves of its mask clang harmlessly to the ground in its wake.

The first of your assailants dead, you turn your attention to the other, which appears to be deciding whether or not to try its luck or escape. The way you see it, it doesn't have an option.

"You're not getting away! Launcelot!" you shout.

Launcelot swiftly pivots about to face the creature. Its body begins to shimmer with a supernatural greenish aura, and with a swipe of its lance into the air, massive blades of wind rip through the air towards the creature. Upon contact, they shear its body into four pieces, all of which collapse into puddles of murk before bursting into puffs of smoke like the other one.

Its job complete, Launcelot returns to the ground and strides up to you. Looking into its eyes, you can see nothing but yourself reflected in them. Launcelot places one mailed hand on your shoulder, and then dissipates in a flash of blue light. As it fades, a bright blue butterfly, the only recognizable living thing you've seen since you entered, flaps gently around your head before alighting on your hand. It rests there for a few seconds, its fragile wings lightly rising and falling. You've never seen one quite like it before. Well, you've seen pictures of blue butterflies, but none quite like this one. Its blue is practically luminescent. It's somehow reassuring to look at, as if it were a sign telling you that you're going to make it out of here alive. It remains on your hand just long enough for you to consider why it's even here before taking off into the sky and out of sight.

All of a sudden, you feel exhausted. In the heat of the fight, you hadn't paid it any mind, but just being in here is beginning to make you feel sleepy. You give your head a shake and your face a couple of slaps to ward off the feeling. Even though you might have gotten out of a tussle with those creatures in once piece, you bet that Mariko wouldn't be so lucky without the kind of power you have.

Your power...where on Earth did all of that come from?

There's not much doubt that it was you that summoned Launcelot to protect you. In a way, you think it was also you that directed it to protect you and attack those monsters. And while you were fighting with Launcelot, you yourself were much stronger. You doubt you could have done what you did

to that monster with only your guitar otherwise. Flashes of your conversation on that boat – the Velvet Room – and shades of another conversation half-remembered bubble to the surface of your thoughts. Is this what they meant about potential? This power, the mysterious appearance of this village beyond the bridge, those monsters...none of it makes a lick of sense to you, yet somehow, you feel tied into it all. If you ever make it out of here, you'll need to make a point to make another visit and get those two to tell you what all this mess is all about...somehow. You haven't worked out the specifics. At any rate, the task at hand comes first.

You'd like to know how large this place is, but it's impossible to tell from down here on the street. None of the houses around here are particularly tall, but if you could make it onto the roof of one of them, it'd be a nice start.

On the inside, the houses are almost entirely empty. Well, devoid of life, at least. The furnishings are bland and a little shabby – tatami mat flooring, a small kitchen sans dishwasher, one TV set, a tattered couch, and three plainly-furnished bedrooms upstairs. It reminds you of your relatives' house, the ones who live in the country. Just enough to support a modest-sized family. However, instead of being full of life; the smell of cooking food, chatter between parents and children, and the low hum of the TV, it's empty as school on Sunday and silent as a crypt. The effect unsettles you, so you don't hang around for long and instead venture up to one of the bedrooms in search of a window.

The one closest to the stairs has a couple that slide open



rather easily. Gingerly placing your guitar on the couch below the sill, you hoist yourself through the window backwards and grab hold of the edge of the roof. Surprisingly, you're able to heave yourself up to the roof with relative ease. You don't remember being this strong before. You seem to remember having a hard time even doing one pull up in Gym. You wonder if this is because of Launcelot as well.

Atop the roof, a quick survey of the area reveals something that you were afraid of: the maze of houses is extensive. However, off in the distance and to your right a little ways, one structure rises up out of the sea of squat country homes. It's easily ten times the size of anything in the area or on any of the low-hanging islands in the sky, and scanning the area around it, you notice that all of the larger, main roads run right towards it, including the one leading down from the gate where you entered. While you're up here, you try to see if you can spy anything familiar beyond it, but all there is is more of the blue abyss. It's like you're trapped in a little girl's snow globe.

A sigh escapes your lips. One problem after another. You glance at your watch, but the hands are spinning wildly, making it effectively useless. Not that it matters at this point. By now this has got to be the latest you've been out after school anyways. Mom probably won't care; if you *do* manage to escape, you'll probably make it home before her anyways. Dad'll chew you out, though.

But before you can consider escape, you'll have to find Mariko first. You decide that the large building would be a decent

place to start, as anything that breaks up the monotony of this place deserves investigation.

## 6. Interlopers, Enforcers

You're not approached by any creatures on the way down the road, although every once in a while you think you spy a trail of black smoke disappearing down a side street or into an alley. Word must have gotten around.

At some point which seems to you like halfway between the house where you met those creatures and the dominating edifice on the horizon, you arrive at an intersection between two roads, and hear a faint sound coming from your left. You take a few tentative steps towards it, and as you do, it resolves into something more familiar: a boy yelling, his screams laced with terror.

There's no doubt about it – the voice is too low to be Mariko's. There must be someone else trapped in here besides the two of you, and it sounds like he's gotten himself into the same situation you just escaped from. There's no guarantee that you'll make it in time to save him, but right now there's no one else around, let alone anyone who stands a chance against those monsters. In a sense, the power of Launcelot leaves you with no choice.

With a deep breath and resigned sigh, you turn away from the path that leads towards the center of the strange village and veer north to investigate the cause of the commotion.

With each block you travel, the screaming grows closer and closer, rising in volume and in pitch, telling the story of the victim's desperate bids for escape. Eventually, the path opens up onto a wide square, and the sight that meets your eyes still manages to defy your expectations in spite of everything you've witnessed to this point.

The first thing that catches your attention is the boy. He looks to be around your age, with a mat of long, wavy black hair that looks like it would obscure his vision, but fails to hide the expression of sheer terror plastered on his face. He wears your school's uniform, too, but that's not his most distinguishable feature. What you notice above all else is his wheelchair, his skinny arms pumping at the rims of its wheels frantically as he flees from the next thing to arrest your attention.

It looms almost eight feet tall, a mishmash of iconography and appliance. From the neck down, it's similar to the typical image of an angel in sculpture and paintings – flowing, pristine, white robe, pale, porcelain skin, and spread, white wings. However, this heavenly image is then immediately blasphemed by the low-end television set perched upon its shoulders, antennae bent and displaying nothing but the image of a sunburst mask – the same those creatures were wearing – on a background of static. Manacles are clamped tightly around its ankles, chains rattling behind it as it pursues its target.

You make to step forward into its path, to put yourself in between it and the boy in the wheelchair. However, you can

barely move an inch before a bolt of lightning erupts from the thing's antennae and strikes the boy's chair. The strike upends the chair, sending it skittering across the square on its side and pitching the boy onto the ground. He doesn't move at first, and immediately you fear the worst. He got hit by lightning while sitting in a metal chair – by all rights that ought to kill him. But amazingly, he groans loudly and laboriously turns himself onto his back to face his attacker. He's in pain – but *alive*.

His eyes flit towards you, and he notices your presence for the first time. They go wide, pleading with you for some kind of help. He pushes himself backwards on his hands, his legs unresponsive in front of him. It's now or never.

The sky opens up just like before, and with a *crack* and a flash of light, an enormous card strikes the pavement, sending pieces of cracked brick flying into your face. However, it's not the same card as before. And the phantasm materializing opposite the creature is not Launcelot.

Its shape is decidedly feminine, slimmer and with wider hips. Its hair flares out behind it in thin strands like shafts of sunlight. They're so intense, it almost looks like they're on fire. It's wearing a strange sort of crimson, angular suit that tightly hugs its body and flares out along the legs and arms. Thin, intricate detailing that shines with a piercing, sparkling light run up and down its body seemingly feeding into its palms, where two balls of crackling flame hover gently. Its face is nearly obscured by the brightness, but you can barely make out two dark, round eyes and the hint of a smiling mouth.

"Step aside and stay out of the way," commands a muffled voice to your right. Someone wearing what looks like a black scuba diving wetsuit with turquoise piping and a motorcycle helmet places a hand on your shoulder, pushing past you to stand underneath the new Persona. The wetsuit's pretty form-fitting, leaving little question to her gender. But the helmet obscures her entire face and hair, and effectively masks her voice. In her right hand, she holds a nine-iron golf club, which she twirls like a baton as she stares down the creature. It stares (or at least, as far as you can tell, it's staring) back at her in an almost confused sort of way, its screen flickering rapidly in a hum of static feedback. For the moment, it seems to have forgotten all about the guy in the wheelchair, who continues to crawl towards some bushes on the side of the road. The girl in the wetsuit then begins talking to no one in particular.

"Looks like I've run into something interesting! What do I have here?" she asks. You have no idea what she's talking about and you're about to tell her so when a clear, confident voice resounds out of nowhere. It belongs to a guy, probably someone close to your age from the sound of it.

"Seems you've found the Persona. Not quite what we're looking for, but it's a good opportunity to really piss off the Dreamweaver. Don't let it get away, but be careful."

"When aren't I?" the girl responds with a shrug of her shoulders and begins marching towards the creature. Needless to say, the situation's somehow gotten more

confusing. These things that come from the cards are supposed to be Personas, or at least that's what you figured. But now that television angel thing is *also* a Persona? You'd like to ask this wetsuit girl to explain herself, but she's a little busy at the moment.

"Come on! First move's yours!" she shouts through the helmet, pointing her golf club at the Persona like a sword. At first, it doesn't react to her challenge, instead leaning towards her like a curious cat inspecting a bug. You inadvertently begin holding your breath, waiting for it to cast lightning at her like it did the other guy. For a few seconds, neither one moves. Then, as if tired of the stalemate, the girl heaves a heavy sigh, steps forward, and cracks the Persona on the underside of the television with a swift swing of her club. She moves so fast, you barely see it happen. Its screen goes black as if someone had switched it off, and it goes reeling backwards across the square, its wings beating frantically to stabilize itself. When it does manage to regain its balance, the screen flickers back to life with a wicked hiss of red static, and the image of the sunburst mask shakes violently in the picture.

"That got her going," the girl muses, standing her ground as the Persona charges her with its arms outstretched.

"Just don't take it too far. Elaine really doesn't have the right tools to incapacitate this thing," the voice reprimands. "And from what I'm getting on my end, it's quite a bit tougher than any Enforcer Persona we've seen so far."

"*Technically*, I guess," the girl says, sidestepping the

Persona's charge like a matador and delivering a precise blow to the small of its back. "But I'm the one fighting it right now, and it seems pretty clumsy to me. I might not even need Elaine." It tumbles to the pavement, rolling over on its side until it comes to rest near the opposite side of the square. The force of her blow is astounding – she doesn't look like she'd be able to hit that hard, yet she's been knocking this monster around the square like a sack of potatoes. You and the girl watch it cautiously, but it doesn't seem to be moving. Is it... dead? It doesn't seem very likely, considering that some *people* wouldn't even be killed with a couple swings from a golf club.

The girl doesn't seem to think so either, as she keeps her distance and doesn't recall her Persona. "This one wasn't nearly as fun as I thought it would be. Let's just put it away already. Elaine!" She nods to the Persona, which has been patiently coasting in midair just behind her this entire time. It lifts its palms towards the sky. A mass of dark, reddish clouds begin to form above the prone Persona, swirling ominously and accompanied by a distant, low rumbling. That rumbling begins to grow louder and louder, ramping up in pitch, and as it does so, a hole opens up in the clouds, a bright, orange aperture that seems to suck the light from the surrounding skies.

Then, spears of flame rip the clouds apart, seeming to ignite the entire sky. A massive pillar of fire erupts from the hole in the sky and screams towards the Persona, colliding with it and bursting into a massive ball of fire that explodes outwards



towards you and the girl. You flinch and raise your arms as if that would save you from being immolated, but the wall of flame dies out before it reaches you, despite the size and force of the explosion you just witnessed. Compared to Launcelot, the power of her Persona is overwhelming – it has a definite weight to it that you can feel hanging in the hot air.

"Agidyne? That might have been a little overkill," the voice remarks. The girl sniffs at that.

"There's no such thing as overkill in the Cloud. And besides, weren't *you* the one who's been telling me it was tough?"

The voice sighs. "Whatever, we don't have time for this 'he said, she said' thing. Just move on and focus on tracking down that Dreamweaver."

"What about the other two? They could see it."

"Really? Persona users?"

"Doesn't seem like it. They were about to be killed before I showed up."

Well that's hardly a fair assumption. You're about to tell her that you were about to take care of that Persona yourself when a shadow within the slowly dying flames behind the girl catches your eye.

You can hardly believe it. Despite the massive impact of the blast from that girl's Persona, the creature is somehow pulling

itself upright again. It hasn't come away from the attack unscathed. There are a number of holes burned through its robe, which is now grey with ash, and the old-fashioned wooden paneling on the television screen bears numerous scorch marks. Despite that, the thing is still *alive*, and spreading its wings wide for another strike at the girl, who's completely oblivious to the fact that it's practically survived being nuked.

"*Hey! Watch out!*" you yell out to her. She whips around to see the Persona collecting electricity in its antennae, ready to fire.

"What the..." she breathes, and at that moment, the creature looses the bolt towards her. Instinctively, you cry out for Launcelot. There's a blinding, bright flash as your Persona appears and the bolt of electricity sizzles through the air. For a while, you can see nothing but white, but gradually, you blink the world back into focus.

The girl is alive, standing right behind Launcelot, apparently unharmed. Launcelot's shield smokes where the bolt hit it, and static leftover from the attack crackles wickedly in the air. Your uniform is even sticking to your skin because of it! She turns to you, her expression concealed within her helmet, but her voice betrays her surprise.

"You...that's..." she stammers, looking back and forth between you and Launcelot, which is busy poking at the enemy with its lance. The moment of bewilderment doesn't last long, however, as she quickly straightens back up and

rests her golf club on her shoulder.

"Well then, that explains some things. But let me tell you something: if you let your Persona fight *her* Persona, you're going to get yourself killed. You know that, right?" You shake your head. You haven't had Launcelot for very long, so you haven't considered what would happen if it died. And considering how well Launcelot seems to be holding its own right now, it hardly seems relevant. The girl shakes her head in disapproval.

"Should have figured. You probably just awakened to him, right? There's no time to go into a whole spiel about what a Persona is, but know this: that Persona isn't just a part of you, he *is* you. They don't say all that '*thou art I, I art thou*' stuff to hear themselves talk. Whatever happens to him, happens to you, and vice versa. And right now, your Persona is ridiculously overmatched. That Enforcer isn't real *physically* strong, but her magic packs a wallop. One good zap and you'll be toast. For now, why don't you let Elaine and I help you get rid of this one?" she offers, extending her hand. You grasp it firmly and give it a brief shake.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are you sure about letting him in on this? I was under the impression that we were trying to keep a low profile," says the voice.

"We're not letting him in on anything. In fact, you should be pleased: I'm calling you right about the Enforcer. It's too much for either of us to handle on our own. So for the time being, we may as well pool our resources."

"If you say so. Hey, buddy," the voice calls, presumably to you.

"Yeah?" you respond.

"Oh wow, you can already hear me. Guess that makes sense what with the Persona thing and all. Anyhow, would you mind letting me take a look at it?"

"What? Why?"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, dude, I'm just gonna analyze it real quick to find out if your Persona's a little better suited to taking that thing down than hers. Just gimme a minute."

The voice falls silent for a few moments, and you look nervously back towards the battle where Launcelot and Elaine are grabbing the other Persona's arms to keep it from lunging at the two of you. The mask on its screen is jittering around madly, and it looks like your Personas are struggling to keep a hold of its thrashing limbs. Then, it manages to pull one of them free and clamps it over Launcelot's helmet. A surge of electricity surges through its arms and into Launcelot. Immediately, you feel a surge of pain course through your body, from your head all the way down into your toes, and you crumple to your knees with your extremities tingling and shaking involuntarily. Elaine quickly grabs at the other arm, bringing them together behind its back and trying to avoid being buffeted by its flapping wings.

"Are you alright?" asks the girl, bending over to help you up

and get your body back under control. You've never been shocked before, and you don't have any desire to be again. It feels like every inch of your skin is vibrating, and your muscles have turned to jelly. "Hate to say I told you so, but this is the kind of thing we're talking about. If you want to fight using a Persona, you'd better be tough enough for it."

"Well, sometimes it's better to find out the hard way," the voice says. "Anyhow, we're in luck. Looks like this guy's Persona specializes in wind magic. If he can land a solid hit on it, that ought to knock it out long enough for you to really put it away."

The girl turns towards you again. "Did you hear that? All you need to do is get your Persona to hit the Enforcer with some magic, and I'll take care of the rest. Sound simple enough?"

You nod, as does Launcelot. "Tell your Persona to let go of it!" you shout to her. The girl then gestures to Elaine, who lets go of the Enforcer's arms. Free from restraint, it emits its loudest hiss yet and surges towards you. Visible ropes of electricity course along its figure as it charges. Now that it's running you down, it seems ten times more terrifying than it was when you were watching it get knocked around by a girl with a golf club. But if she can stand up to it, so can you. Launcelot needs to hit it full-on, so you need to stand your ground as long as you can to make it an easy target.

"Now, Launcelot!" you yell when you can't afford to stay still any longer. As you slide down to the ground, the Enforcer soars right over your head so close your skin prickles, and

continues right towards Launcelot, who's been waiting behind you with its lance clasped in both gloved hands. He raises it skywards, and with a flash of green, blades of wind slam into the enemy, accompanied by a tremendous gust that sends you rolling along the pavement.

Dragging yourself to your feet, you see that your strike was dead on – the enemy Persona's crumpled up into a heap on the ground, stunned.

"That's perfect! Now's our shot at an all-out attack!" cries the girl. She raises her club up over her head and charges past you towards the dazed Enforcer. "C'mon!" Removing your guitar from its case, you heft it over your shoulder and leap after her. With a mighty swing, she bashes the Enforcer in the back of the screen, the image of the mask cutting out in a spurt of static. You follow up with a blow to its back, your guitar *twanging* with the impact. The Enforcer tumbles onto its stomach and its head smacks into the ground. As it attempts to pick itself up, you can see a thin crack running from corner of its screen to the other.

"Don't let it get back up!" says the girl. "Let's finish this now!"

You both rush towards it with your makeshift weapons raised, and bring them down onto the Enforcer's head with all of your strength. The contact sends shivers skittering up your arms as your guitar and her club smash right through the top of the set. The Persona's entire body shudders violently, then falls completely still. You and the girl exchange glances, unsure of whether or not it's over.

Suddenly, the Persona explodes in a shower of black butterflies, and you fall onto your backside out of surprise as they swarm into your face. As they rise higher and higher into the air, the black begins to chip off of their wings like old paint, revealing the same luminescent blue of the butterfly you saw earlier after defeating those monsters. The flakes of black drift gently back down towards your upturned faces, vanishing in little puffs of smoke before hitting the ground.

However, a soft glow redirects your attention back towards the ground. A translucent, shimmering figure hovers where the Enforcer fell. In some ways, it resembles the Enforcer, but it's not entirely the same. The television set head and mask are gone, replaced by a gently smiling, kindly woman's face with streaming brown hair. In her arms, she cradles a large, hefty sword with a blade that's nearly as long as you are tall. Two angel's wings flap idly behind her, emitting sparks with each beat. She nods towards you once before fading out of sight.

"Wait, what was that?" you breathe to the girl.

"That was what her Persona really looks like; how it was before the Cloud's Dreamweaver took control of it."

"Sorry, but all that? It means almost nothing to me."

She cocks her head towards you. "This really *is* your first time in a Cloud, isn't it?" She sighs. "I don't really have the time to explain every last thing to you, but here's the best I can do. This whole place-" she gestures broadly around in a circle "-is a Cloud. A Dream Cloud, as a matter of fact. A big one, too."

I'm sure you've noticed, but this place is a little separated from reality."

You nod. After everything that's happened this afternoon, this has by far been the easiest bit of information to swallow. "Then this is someone's dream?" you ask.

"A projection of someone's dream, actually. Their perfect world, drawn out of their mind by a Dreamweaver and given tangible form, if we're just going to out-and-out spill everything we know," the voice chimes in. "A Cloud is a weird little area between mind and matter, born from a person's subconscious. Naturally, that makes it easy for Personas to manifest...as well as Shadows. I'm sure you've seen a couple by now – they seem to like that disgusting, blobby shape around here."

"Bit of a shame. Ruins the aesthetic," the girl remarks.

"*Right*. Would that they had the sense of style you, do huh? Anyhow, if you're wondering why you don't see anyone else around, that's why."

Your face scrunches up in horror. "They got eaten by those things?"

"What? No! No. They *are* those things. Kind of. Rather, every Shadow you see is a representation of someone's innermost thoughts and feelings. Right now, they're all asleep, in a way. That is to say, they've bought into the dream. They've accepted it as reality. The only reason why you're not



appearing as a Shadow too is because you're 'awake'. There must have been something your brain couldn't accept as real, and it rejected the illusion.

"The Shadows, though, they don't like that. When they sense that something's wandering around 'awake' in the Cloud, they try to eliminate it. Same with Enforcers like the one we just fought. They're basically the dreamer's Persona that's gone berserk from the shock of the dreamer's internal thoughts suddenly becoming external. It makes it easy for the Dreamweaver to let them loose and send them after threats. That's why people wandering around like that without Personas are a bit of a hassle. You're basically walking targets."

"Speaking of which," says the girl, "where's that other guy?"

"Here," pipes up a wispy voice from the shrubbery. The boy slowly emerges from his hiding place, dragging himself forward with his arms towards his toppled chair. The girl rushes over to right it while you help the boy over your shoulder and ease him back into it. "I'm still a little frazzled, but...I *think* I'm okay."

"Are you sure, dude? You got hit by lightning," you say. He nods his head.

"Y-yeah, I'm perfectly fine, but...what *were* those things? And just who are you guys? Some kinda superheroes?"

"Hmm...kinda. Don't know about *him*," the girl nods in your

direction, "but fighting these things is my forte. You could call it a service for the people," she says with a smug grin, and the voice groans.

"Knock it off. The last thing we need is a bunch of vigilante Persona users getting in our way. You took out the Enforcer, so let's get a move on and find the Dreamweaver so we can terminate this Cloud already."

The girl nonchalantly swats at the air as if to wave the voice away. "You're just grouchy because you drew nav duty today. Besides, I'm curious about something." She turns to you and the boy in the wheelchair. "You," she says, pointing, "you were probably able to resist the Dreamweaver because you could summon your Persona. But you..." Her gaze turns to the other boy. "What about you? Can you summon your Persona?" The boy's eyes fall to his feet.

"I-I don't think so. I don't really even know what you're talking about, to be honest. Personas...they're those things you used to fight for you, right? I feel like if I could summon one of those, I'd probably know," he says, an edge of dejection creeping into his tone.

"Hey, don't worry about it," she says, stepping forward and placing a hand on his shoulder. "It's not like just anyone can summon their Persona. But," she says, taking on a more serious tone, "if you can't protect yourself, you need to get out of here ASAP. It's actually safer for regular people to stay asleep inside of a Cloud – I don't know how you managed it, but waking up just makes you an easy target for Shadows."

The girl turns her head towards the sky to address the voice. "I'll be taking this guy out of here for now so he doesn't end up as Shadow food. We'll rendezvous at the usual point once I've made sure he's safe."

"Why not just let the other guy take him? I don't know if you've forgotten, but we kind of have a job to do here." The girl cracks a sly smile at that.

"Actually, I want *him* to take on the Dreamweaver."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Not at all. He can summon a Persona, and the Dreamweaver'll be weak without the dreamer's Persona to boss around. What say you?" she asks you.

"I wouldn't have left even if you told me to. I can handle it," you say. Your only goal since you entered this place – the Cloud – has been to find Mariko and get her out of here, and the more you've heard from this girl and the annoyed, disembodied voice, the more you're beginning to believe that she's been captured by this Dreamweaver. You and Launcelot have taken out three monsters already – one more isn't about to force you to back down.

"I like the bravado, but don't get a big head. Dreamweavers are tricky little cretins, even without their Enforcers. It'll say anything to try and catch you off guard - no matter what, *don't believe a word it says*. Just trust yourself to do what's right, and you should be okay. And remember, I'm *letting* you

handle this yourself. Don't make me have to come back and clean up after you."

"I said I can handle it," you grumble, trying your best to appear as confident as you can so that she doesn't have a change of heart. This aloof attitude of hers is starting to piss you off - as if she didn't just see that you were perfectly capable of handling yourself.

"All right then, in that case, I'm off. Maybe we'll meet again," she says, and blows you a kiss before grabbing the handles of the other boy's wheelchair and pushing him down the street behind you.

"Frankly, I'd rather you didn't," says the voice. "If you know what's good for you, you'll forget all this business the moment you make it out of there. Well, *if* you make it out of there. I don't care if you're a Persona user or not - if you don't know what you're doing, you're going to get murdered by a Shadow one way or another. It's nothing personal, just do us both a favor and stay away."

"You sure know how to give one hell of a pep talk," you say, but no one responds. It seems that the voice has followed suit and vacated the premises, leaving only your own thoughts for company.

Turning back towards the complex looming large in the center of the village, you can't help but feel that your situation has only become more enigmatic and uncertain after your encounter with that girl and the voice. Somehow, they know

an awful lot about this place and how it works, leaving you to only ponder why. It was simpler when it was just you trying to escape from monsters so you could find Mariko. Now, the idea that there's actually some kind of structure to this madness fills you with anxiety...and the slightest hint of exhilaration.

You give your head a shake to clear those thoughts from your head. There'll be time to mull over the questions still bouncing around inside your mind once you've defeated the Dreamweaver and found Mariko. Summoning up whatever resolve you can muster, you begin your trek towards the nucleus of the Cloud, and to face whatever lies in wait.

## 7. Sun: Dreamweaver

Admittedly, this was not quite what you were expecting to find when you finally reached the center, but at this point, you figure that you shouldn't really be surprised by much of anything. Instead of a solemn cathedral or temple like you were expecting, it's just a regular old department store, neon letters flickering idly across the front and speakers on the rooftop blaring a cheerful tune that your ears picked up from about a hundred meters away. When it's coming over the television set at home or over the din of a crowd of people, it's not so bad. Annoying, at worst. But here in the emptiness of the Cloud, with nothing but Shadows around to hear it, its presence is just eerie and unsettling. It gives the entire store a sense of being recently and urgently vacated.

You recall what the voice said about the Cloud being the dreamer's "perfect world". A world with nobody in it, where all the houses are the same and a department store jingle is the only sound to be heard for miles – is this really what she wants? It seems bleak for a girl like her, but then again, you've barely known her for an entire day. You take a deep breath to clear your mind, and step inside.

The doors slide closed automatically behind you as you enter the lobby, a small space tiled in a checkerboard pattern with a couple shopping carts hastily pushed up against the wall. To

your right, there's a door to the stairs, and to your left, a couple elevators. Pushing the call button doesn't seem to be working – neither of the elevators' doors open. Stairs it is.

Each of the floors turns out to be just as deserted as the rest of the Cloud – you don't even find a single Shadow as you comb each one for Mariko. One floor is a grocery, although all the bins and shelves are stocked with food that's long since rotted. Another features clothing and shoes, and as you pass by each mannequin, you instinctively grip the neck of your guitar in anticipation of attack. Eventually, you make your way to the electronics department, which is relatively benign, save for the fact that every single television screen looks to have been smashed in. The rest of the floor's inventory, however, is untouched. The scene reminds you of the Enforcer, and you quicken your pace towards the next flight of stairs. But before you even make it halfway across the floor, the PA crackles to life, and a familiar voice begins to speak:

*"Welcome valued customer! We thank you for choosing us, but at the moment we are currently closed. Please vacate the premises immediately, and have a great day!"*

A short version of the jingle you heard outside follows the announcement, and then the PA goes dead. That was definitely Mariko's voice that you just heard, but there was something about it that didn't quite sound right. It reminds you of a 3D picture viewed without 3D glasses – easy enough identify, but hazy and out-of-focus around the edges. That and the nature of the announcement seems out of character for

her. Remembering what the girl in the wetsuit told you, you figure the Dreamweaver must have something to do with it. At any rate, at least that tells you that you're going in the right direction. Ignoring the warning, you sprint across the floor towards the next flight of stairs, dodging piles of broken glass strewn across the floor.

The PA comes back on the moment you set foot into the kitchen goods department on the next floor. Mariko's voice sounds decidedly more agitated, and whatever cheerfulness remains sounds forced.

*"Attention, uninvited guest! We do our best to provide you with service and a smile during our regular hours of operation, but we cannot extend the same courtesy to trespassers! Vacate the premises now or we will be forced to remove you."*

When the PA goes dead again, you become acutely aware of the security cameras on the ceiling tracking you as you make your way around displays of knife sets and hi-tech blenders. Their whirring is unnaturally loud in the silence. You take two steps forward. The cameras follow you and stop when you do. You take two steps backwards. They move back to where they were before. An idea pops into your head.

You turn, stare directly into the lens of one of the cameras, and start to dance crazy! To your amusement, the cameras follow each and every one of your moves until you finally stop, out of breath. It feels a little dumb and silly, but at least it's helped you relax. The Dreamweaver is clearly trying to freak



you out, and you're not going to let it while Mariko's still in danger.

The door to the next flight of stairs you find turns out to be locked, but after a few well-placed kicks, you manage to bust it open. The crash the door makes as it collides with the wall echoes throughout the stairwell, and you instinctively tense up. However, after a minute passes, nothing has happened - yet - so you decide to carefully press onwards.

When you emerge, it's into a long hallway illuminated only by softly dying fluorescent lights overhead. Doors with brass nameplates line either side of it. They must be offices for the management - or at least that's your best guess. On one of them you can make out a couple characters - a "na" and "ra" - but the others are completely blank. As you carefully creep down the corridor, your mind begins to play tricks on you. You hear sounds, incredibly faint sounds that you couldn't possibly be hearing - a distant horn, the *whoop* of sirens, a child weeping.

Then, you begin to feel a pressure on your throat, soft at first, as if someone was taking your pulse, but growing tighter and tighter the closer you get to the end of the hall. You drop to your knees, clawing at invisible hands clamped tight around your windpipe. Your diaphragm contracts frantically, seeking even the smallest gasp of air. And it might be that lack of oxygen reaching your brain, but you swear you can also feel someone's hot, ragged breath at the nape of your neck. And just when the edges of your vision become tinted black, spreading like film burn, the grip vanishes. The sudden rush of

air into your lungs and bloodstream sends the world spinning, and it takes some time before you stop spluttering and coughing enough to stand upright again. You start to wonder if this is the Dreamweaver's way of punishing you for your little performance earlier, but your thoughts are quickly interrupted by another message from the PA system.

*"What's the angle, trespasser? What do you think you're trying to do? There's no one here that needs saving, no one that needs your help. I'm finally strong enough to solve all my problems all by myself, so turn around. If you're looking for a damsel to save, the only thing you're going to find is despair. Consider this your warning."*

With that, the PA clicks off, and there's a low *shoom* as the power shuts down throughout the entire store. Total darkness envelops you, broken only by a small sliver of light streaming in from a crack in the doorway at the end of the hall. It should lead to the rooftop food court, the only place you haven't checked yet.

Mariko's last message still echoes in your head. You don't buy into what she's saying, at least the part about her not needing any help. You've experienced how hostile the Cloud is firsthand – it's no place for *any* human being; not you, not her, not even someone truly tough like Shibutani. Hell, without your Persona, you'd have been eaten a long time ago. You know Mariko doesn't like relying on other people – that's probably why she's saying the things she is – but she's obviously gotten herself in over her head. If she's got a problem with it, she

can take it up with you later. You're her guide, goddammit! And more importantly, you're her friend. It's time to get her the hell out of here.

You push open the door to the roof slowly so as to avoid making any noise that might alert the Dreamweaver (which you're sure must be close by), but unfortunately, you can't prevent it from making an ear-screaching squeal as it swings outwards. Subtlety all but destroyed, you rip your guitar out of its case and dart into the midst of the food court, pivoting about in all directions so you're not caught unawares. However, there appears to be nothing and no one up here to attack you.

Then you see her.

Suspended in midair several meters off the ground, Mariko appears to be trapped in some sort of invisible coffin, its outline traced in gently pulsating strings of some wispy, blackish-blue substance. The way her body is positioned adds to the impression, stiff like a board with her arms crossed over her chest and eyes closed.

"*Mariko!*" you shout, but she doesn't respond. You run under her and jump as high as you can to see if you can't grab on to one of her shoes and pull her down, but she's just out of your reach. "*Dammit... Mariko! C'mon, wake up!*" you yell again, but you still can't elicit a response.

"*Mariko! Mariko! Mariko!*" a voice from across the food court calls out mockingly. "Jeez, you really are some kind of stupid,

aren't you?"

"What the...?"

There was nobody there before, you're sure of it. But now, a near-perfect doppelganger of Mariko leers at you from beneath her hovering, prone form. It's strange: although they look so alike, at the same time it'd be impossible to get them confused. Aside from the differences in wardrobe (this new Mariko looks like a salaryman come home from a day at work – dark slacks, grey shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and a red tie), something in her demeanor is violently at odds with the person you know. There's a cold, aloof edge to her stance, a sensation that's only enhanced by a pair of bright, golden eyes.

"I was trying to be nice. I was trying to take the high road. You heard me, right? You shouldn't be here. You don't *need* to be here. But you've awakened to your Persona, and now you figure it's your chance to play the hero, huh?"

You snort, not fooled in the least. The way this thing's acting, it must be the Dreamweaver. "If you think that I'm not gonna beat your face in just because you *look* like a person, you're in for a rude awakening. I know all about you," you say. Hopefully it doesn't call your bluff.

It laughs, high and scathing, causing you to wince involuntarily. "Oh you *do*, do you? What a typical human!" The other Mariko begins striding towards you, its steps slow and deliberate.

"You don't know a thing about me. You think I just *look* like her – soon enough, I'll *be* her, too."

Her words snap something in your brain, and you rush her down, ready to drive your guitar into the imposter's smug little skull. You swing downwards with all your might – but your guitar never reaches her. With lightning speed, her arm shoots out and clamps around your wrist with a crushing grip, preventing you from delivering the blow. You push against her even harder, but she doesn't even budge an inch.

"This...this has gotta be a joke," you say.

"I know / think it's funny," she says, and drives her foot right into your stomach. The force of the kick immediately drives all the air out of your lungs and sends you flying backwards across the food court, toppling over numerous tables and chairs. Flipping yourself over onto your hands and knees with a low groan, you clutch at your stomach to keep yourself from puking. This *can't* be how strong a Dreamweaver is. Didn't the wetsuit girl say it should be *weaker* without its Enforcer?

It doesn't look like the Dreamweaver is finished yet. She reaches around behind her back, and from her waist, she removes a sleek, heavy-looking black handgun. Your eyes widen in shock, and the Dreamweaver must notice, because she starts cackling again.

"You like it?" She levels the weapon at you briefly, then flings it aside, laughing even harder. "Don't worry, I don't plan on using it – human weapons are so clumsy and boring. Perfect

for humans, but a Shadow has no use for them. Where'd I get it, then? Why not ask her?" she says, pointing to Mariko. "She had it on her the entire time, holstered in her jacket like some kinda cop! Who would have guessed, a sweet girl like her? Not you!" The corners of her mouth turn up into a cruel grin. "After all, when it comes to poor little Mariko, no one knows her better than me."

"The hell you do," you snarl, but the Dreamweaver rolls her eyes.

"What? Does that bother you? I'm not doing anything but telling the truth." She turns back to look at Mariko. "She's shared *everything* with me: every struggle, every tragedy, every single little thing she hates about herself. She's lived a pretty miserable life, you know. But what else can you expect? She's only human!" The Dreamweaver begins laughing at her own joke again. You're tempted to try and catch her off guard while she's having her moment, but you're not terribly confident about that right now.

"Deep down, you're all like that. Neurotic creatures with a hundred dreams, a thousand little fantasies, and a million flaws that keep you from realizing any of them. That's why she came to me."

"I...I don't understand."

"Of course you don't, *human*. You don't think I just forced my way into her dream, did you? No, I'm here because I was *invited*. I'm here to make them *come true*."

It's an innocent enough phrase, but the way she says it sends shivers down your spine.

"What are you doing to her?"

The Dreamweaver puts her hands up in a disarming gesture. "So accusing. I'm just giving her what she wants. You know, it doesn't make sense. Why are humans the ones that get to live in the real world when they're just so *bad* at it? When you're human, all you can be is just...*you*. If you're doomed to an ugly life, there's not a thing you can do about it. We Shadows are different. We can be everything humans aren't – clever, strong, charismatic, beautiful.

"You've seen her dream world. It's a nice, perfect little town with nobody around to shelter or coddle or protect her. She's only got what she needs to survive, and that's it." The Dreamweaver then sneers, an expression that drips with contempt. "But even still, she can't let go of others - there's still all sorts of reminders of the people she's tried so hard to leave behind. How sad is that, to not even be able to commit to your own dream? This kind of crap is exactly why humans don't deserve to exist."

"That's bullshit. Since when do *you* get to decide who should exist and who shouldn't?"

The Dreamweaver's face screws up with disgust. "Why *shouldn't* I? Humanity's had its chance, but you've screwed it up every single time! The verdict is clear –your time here is just about up." She jerks her head towards Mariko's body.

*"I'm grown-up! I can take care of myself! I wish everyone else would leave me alone! Let me do what I want! Isn't that hilarious? She wants to make her own decisions, yet she runs away from home to go live with another adult! She wants to take care of herself, but she hangs onto you like a little lost puppy! Let me do what I want! But live my life for me! How hopeless! How pathetic! How utterly and completely human! She doesn't have a clue. Once I take her place, I'll be doing her one hell of a favor!"*

"What's that supposed to mean?" you ask, and the Shadow rolls her eyes.

"You sure ask a lot of obvious questions. Pity you didn't ask to be put out of your misery, too, you could stand to be a lot smarter. What I mean is that I'm replacing her. As a Shadow, I'm much more suited to take charge of her sorry situation than she is. What's the point of becoming a gun-toting vagabond if you're not even going to do it right?"

"You can't do this to her! You're right – I have no clue what she told you or what you know about her. But there's no way this is what she wanted! There's no way that any sane person wants this!"

You're not doing a very good job of masking your emotions, because she starts giggling snidely at you. "Oh, wow! What are you getting so angry for? If you hadn't been snooping around here, you'd never even know! Besides, it's not like she really gets the short straw. Everything that I do, say, and feel, her consciousness will experience. It's like she's having a



fantastic dream that she never has to wake up from. Now ask yourself this: would it *really* be fair to take that away from her? We've already established that you don't know anything about her, so why do you think that *you* get to decide what's right and wrong? Isn't that exactly the kind of thing she would absolutely *hate*?"

"Oh, so you're just taking her to a better place, is that it? Pretty sure that's the exact same logic kidnapers and serial killers use."

Her eyes narrow, and she heaves a frustrated sigh. You're hoping that it's just your imagination, but the whites of her eyes appear to darken, and bluish-black smoke begins to roil around her form like steam from a boiling tea kettle. And when she speaks, it's as if her voice takes on several different pitches at once.

*"I should have known that trying to reason with a human was going to be an exercise in futility. Your self-righteous attitude makes me wanna puke. A world of dream trumps reality in every way possible! She won't even know it's not real! Better for her, better for me! A real win-win!"*

Your hand reaches for your guitar once more. It doesn't matter how easily she countered you last time, you're running out patience.

"Yeah, see, this right here? This is the kinda thing that makes it hard for me to take you seriously. I can't imagine anyone in real life who'd prefer you over the real thing. I'm not playing

this game with you anymore. As far as I'm concerned, you're just another Shadow. I'm here to bring Mariko home; if I need to smash your face in to do it, then that's fine with me."

*"Your ignorance is really starting to piss me off now! This is the way things were always meant to be! Shadow over human! Mind over matter! Fantasy over reality! I've waited too long for an opportunity like this, and I'll be damned if I let some pigheaded white knight like you get in my way!"*

The Dreamweaver doubles over and clutches at the right side of her face. From under her palm, the smoke begins to stream forth in long, ropy tendrils of dark miasma. Then, she slowly drags it down, revealing half of a sunburst mask underneath with one golden eye leering murderously from under it.

*"I think it's time you learned your place!"*

## 8. Excalibur

The Dreamweaver raises one arm, and you brace yourself for an attack, but nothing happens. Suddenly, something strikes you in the back of the head, causing bursts of color and stars to swarm your vision. Through the haze, you see Mariko's gun zip into her palm as if by magic. The Dreamweaver laughs and flicks off the safety.

*"You know what? I think I've had a bit of a change of heart. Killing you with a human weapon seems kinda fitting. The irony's just too delicious to pass up! I know you like to dance, so let's see it!"*

The Dreamweaver takes aim at you, and your body locks up instantly. Action movies and anime make it look like no big deal to dodge a bullet, but now that you're actually staring down the barrel of a real gun held by a creature that wants to kill you, you have no clue what to do. How good is the Dreamweaver's aim? It said it doesn't like human weapons. Does that mean it's a bad shot? But the gun belongs to Mariko – she probably knows how to use it. If the Dreamweaver's taken on her body, does that mean it's just as good as she is? In the end, there's no way to be sure.

The Dreamweaver's finger begins to close around the trigger, so you close your eyes and dive towards one of the toppled

tables nearby. A crack resounds across the food court, and you cringe involuntarily as you tumble into cover. For a while, you don't dare open your eyes for fear of seeing your own blood soaking your shirt and jacket. But you know that the Dreamweaver will come to check on you whether you've been hit or not, so you slowly open your eyes to search your body.

To your immense relief, there isn't a single bullet wound on you, and the only pain you feel is from your shoulder where you hit the ground. You heave a sigh of relief, but the sound of the Dreamweaver's footsteps drawing near snaps you back to reality. Somehow, you need to figure out a way to get close enough to attack this thing without getting shot. If you can summon Launcelot, maybe you can advance on her behind his shield.

"*Per-*" you begin, but just then, the Dreamweaver steps around the table, a deranged grin plastered across her face.

*"I don't think so, asshole!"*

With one swift motion, the Dreamweaver smashes the butt of the handgun across your face, sending you reeling backwards and your head snaps into ground. Throbbing pain lances through your skull, and a hot, irony wetness begins to pool on your upper lip. Through your blurred vision, you look on helplessly, unable to pick yourself up off the ground to flee, as the Dreamweaver approaches. She studies you and cocks her head as if the situation puzzles her. Then, she reaches down, grabs you by the collar, and hoists you up to eye level. You note that this only requires one hand, a testament to her

seemingly absurd strength.

*"This is it? How did you even manage to kill one of my Shadows? Even with the power of Persona, you humans are pitifully, contemptibly weak."*

Using both hands now, she clutches both sides of your head, holding you aloft. She squeezes it firmly between them like a vice, and new waves of pain crash upon you. You can't prevent yourself from groaning in agony.

*"I could crush your skull like a grape right now, you know that, right? Just a little pressure, that's all it would take."*

She holds you there like that for a moment, contemplative. Then, she lets go, letting you drop to the ground.

*"No, no. Too easy. For someone who talks themselves up so much while being so weak, you need to really learn just how pathetic you are compared to a Shadow. Up,"* she commands, gesturing you to your feet with the hand that holds the gun. Your head is still swimming in pain, and you can barely think clearly enough to comprehend what she's saying, let alone formulate some method of counterattack. Sluggishly, you stumble upright, swaying back and forth as you search for some semblance of balance.

*"Good,"* the Dreamweaver says, and fires a bolt of lightning directly into your chest.

Even though you've already been shocked once today, this

time around, the sensation of electricity coursing through your body is positively excruciating. The force of the Dreamweaver's magic is exponentially greater than that of the Enforcer's, making it impossible to resist the pain. The jolt rips a piercing scream from your lips and you collapse to the ground, convulsing violently as the lightning runs its course. It feels as though it takes forever for the pain to finally dissipate, but eventually the agony subsides, leaving behind a crackle of static in the air and a stream of tears coursing down your cheeks.

The Dreamweaver steps up to you and jabs you in the ribs with one foot. An involuntary whimper escapes from the depths of your lungs, and she laughs long and hard.

*"C'mon, human! I'm 'just another Shadow', right? Why aren't you smashing my face in already, huh? C'mon! Get on your feet and play the big damn hero! Don't tell me this is as good as it gets!"*

Once more, the Dreamweaver grabs you and hauls you upright. Standing feels like an exercise in futility – the world is having a hell of a time staying still.

*"I'll tell you what: I'll even let you summon your precious Persona. Go on, call it out! I want to kill you at your best so that you truly understand just how futile your delusions of heroism are!"*

This has to be a trap. She'll probably shoot you before you can even finish summoning. A surge of anger rushes through

you – at the girl in the wetsuit for leaving this impossible task to you, at the Dreamweaver for making a fool out of you, and especially at yourself for being pushed around like this. This can't be how it ends, not after the way you escaped death once already today. You made a resolution not to die, to ensure that Mariko got home safely. There's no way you're going to just let yourself get beaten and shocked to death. If the Dreamweaver's going to make the mistake of giving you a chance, you're going to take it.

A brief moment of clarity cuts through the fog of pain, and you reach down inside yourself to salvage whatever amount of strength you still have left. So far, the Dreamweaver's been able to predict your every move. If that's the case, then maybe it's time to try something stupid.

"Alright..." you say.

*"What?"* calls the Dreamweaver. *"If you have something to say, say it!"*

"Think fast!"

With one motion, you spring towards the Dreamweaver, yank your guitar from its case, and drive it up towards her chin with as much power as you can possibly muster. To your satisfaction, it connects with a near bone-shattering impact that sends vibrations through your entire body, and the Dreamweaver soars backwards through the counter of a food stand and into the kitchen behind it.

For a few seconds, you're in total shock, your guitar still clutched in a white-knuckled grip at the apex of its swing. The rush of adrenaline is short-lived, though, and once it's over, you collapse and fall backwards onto your rear end. However, there's no time to relax. You know that there's no way that you killed the Dreamweaver in just one blow, and you finally have enough time to summon Launcelot. Even if your strength is almost exhausted, Launcelot should still be ready to fight.

"*Launcelot!*" you cry, and your Persona materializes before you in a flash of light.

Immediately, you realize something's not right. Instead of standing proudly, lance and shield held ready in front of him like he normally is, Launcelot is hunched over and heaving, clutching his stomach. His cape appears tattered and ragged, and his once pristine armor sports multiple dings and dents.

"*You son of a bitch!*" the Dreamweaver shrieks from within the food stand, reporting her imminent return to action, and at the same time, a horrible realization dawns on you.

*"...that Persona isn't just a part of you, he is you...Whatever happens to him, happens to you, and vice versa."*

In the heat of the fight, you'd completely forgotten about the wetsuit girl's warning. With the shape you're in now, Launcelot is every bit as useless as you are. In essence, all you've done is piss off the Dreamweaver and exhaust the last bit of your strength.



The Dreamweaver is a grotesque sight as she emerges from the food stand. Her head is almost completely twisted around to the point where it's practically facing behind her. With a sickening *pop*, she grabs it and twists it back into position, jerking it back and forth the way a boxer would work out kinks in his neck.

*"Enough screwing around! I'll kill you here and now! Prepare to witness the true power of the Cloud!"*

The Dreamweaver points one finger skyward and screams.

*"Persona!"*

Terror seizes your entire body at the word. There's no way that a Shadow could have its own Persona. If that's true, then you're certainly about to die.

But nothing happens. For almost thirty seconds, the Dreamweaver stands there, finger raised while absolutely nothing occurs, and the atmosphere slowly begins to transition from dire to comical. Finally, the Dreamweaver grows impatient and stomps one foot into the ground.

*"What the hell? Persona! Persona! I summon my Persona! Come on, damn you!"*

As the Dreamweaver screeches angrily into the sky, a smile begins to play across your face. The Persona that she's trying to summon was none other than the Enforcer that you and the wetsuit girl subdued earlier. Of course, there's a sense of

avoided disaster underneath the humor here – you now understand just what the wetsuit girl meant when she said that the Dreamweaver was much weaker without Mariko's Persona. If you hadn't taken it out, there's no telling what kind of shape you'd be in now – broken, most likely.

You allow yourself a laugh at the Dreamweaver's expense. Sure, you're just going to make it angrier, but at this point, there's nothing else you can do. You and Launcelot are probably going to be killed no matter what, so you may as well go out by causing her some aggravation one last time. Sure enough, the Dreamweaver rounds on you and lifts you up by the shirt collar again.

*"You! Where is my Persona?"* it screams into your face. You shrug, but flash her a grin that should tell her all she needs to know.

*"No! Impossible! There's no way a human like you could have beaten my Persona! Where are they? Where are the others? How many of you filthy rats are there? Tellmetellmetellme!"*

The Dreamweaver shakes your battered body back and forth like a ragdoll, but you keep your mouth shut. There's nothing left to say. Once she realizes that she's not getting anything more out of you, the Dreamweaver tosses you to the ground.

*"Fine. It doesn't matter whether there's one of you or a hundred of you. I'll wipe out every last one I see, Persona or no! But first, it's about time we wrap this up. Hope you've*

*made your peace with your pathetic existence, human,"* she says, and raises the gun towards you once again.

Peace? What peace is there to make? In the end, you've failed completely. Failed to save Mariko, failed to realize the potential Minato and Elizabeth said that you have, and failed to keep your own promise to continue living. You've given it everything that you had, yet it simply wasn't enough to stand up to the Dreamweaver's punishing strength. And so, you will die here in this strange world, likely never be discovered, never to see your parents or classmates or even your shitty, awful teacher again. The thought of all this makes you awash with despair.

You close your eyes, lean your head back against the underside of a chair, and await the inevitable.

"No," says a voice that is neither yours nor the Dreamweaver's. *"This simply will not do."*

*"You cannot fail here."*

Everything goes black.

---

The Dreamweaver pulls the trigger. The bullet is true. It soars towards Tetsuo's head and evaporates before making contact with his temple like a droplet of water hitting a hot stove.

*"What the..."* the Dreamweaver says, her gaze flicking back and forth between the gun and his prone form as if expecting

some sort of explanation. She takes aim once more and this time loses off two shots. Both suffer the same fate as the first. This incongruity pushes her over the edge and out of composure's reach. With a wild scream, she empties the magazine into Tetsuo. Again, those shots that don't completely miss their mark disappear before they touch his skin.

Then, even as he is being fired upon, he begins to rise. His movement is ungainly and stilted as he lurches to his feet, stumbling back and forth like a new sailor struggling to find his sea legs. He moans softly, and his hands shoot to the sides of his head, clutching at it with desperate, probing fingers. His eyes, wide in their sockets, rattle about wildly with some unknown dementia. Inside his mind, a cacophony of jet engines sound in mind-shredding harmony to a melody of tuneless chanting.

*I AM THOU.*

*THOU ART I.*

*I AM THOU.*

*THOU ART I.*

*IAMTHOUARTIAMTHOUARTIAMTHOUARTIAMTHOUARTIAM*

*"AAAGGGHHH!"*

The force of Tetsuo's scream rips the world out from under

the Dreamweaver's feet, sending her tumbling across the ground cursing. The food court erupts into an explosion of light and sound. Everything not bolted to the floor soars off of the rooftop from the resulting shockwave save for the Dreamweaver, who clutches desperately to a railing to avoid being carried away. At the epicenter of the swirling miasma, Tetsuo's silhouette is taken to pieces, bit by bit, until nothing more remains of him. Then, with one final puff of dust and wind, the burst of light seems to fold up on itself into a single spear of light that launches heavenward, leaving only Mariko, the Dreamweaver, and the motionless, floating form of Launcelot behind.

Cautiously, the Dreamweaver opens one eye. When she notices that the outburst is over, she scrambles to her feet and sprints over to the spot where Tetsuo once stood.

*"Where are you? Come out and face me, human! You think you can prolong your death with cheap tricks like that?"* she yells while peering into empty food stands. Behind her, Launcelot's fingers twitch.

*"If you think you can hide from me, you're making a huge mistake! This Cloud belongs to me! There's nothing I don't see! I will find you, and when I do, I promise that I'll make your death as slow and painful as I possibly c-"*

The rest of her livid outburst is cut short as a huge mailed hand clamps around her head and mashes it into the wall of the food stand. The impact leaves a small depression in the concrete wall from which spidery cracks race outwards in all

directions. The hand still clutching her by the head, the Dreamweaver is lifted into the air and brought face-to-face with her assailant.

"A-Ahhh..." she gurgles, an inarticulate mixture of pain and fear at what she sees behind Launcelot's visor.

*"You're not...gahhh!"*

However, she is once more cut short as Launcelot forcibly drives her face back into the wall. Unsatisfied, Launcelot peels the Dreamweaver's body off the wall, only to slam her back into it once – twice – three more times. Puffs of smoke leak from her body with each blow, and the outline of her figure begins to waver hazily like a mirage. Finally, Launcelot cocks back his arm to its fullest extent and bludgeons the Dreamweaver into the miniature crater he's created with punishing force. Trapped between the wall and his hand, Launcelot applies pressure to the back of her head, and the Dreamweaver's limbs begin to thrash madly about in a desperate bid for escape.

Then, with one final push, Launcelot crushes the Dreamweaver's body against the wall. Her wriggling body ruptures like a paint-filled balloon, leaving a blackish-blue splatter where she once was. He slowly removes his hand from the wall, and the half-sunburst mask clatters to the floor, the only thing that still remains of the vicious Shadow.

Launcelot steps back and releases a victorious scream into the cloud-dotted sky. There is another flash of light, and when

it dissipates, he has vanished.

---

Consciousness returns to you slowly and with much difficulty, much like awakening after a night of uneasy sleep. There's a pounding in your head, but other than that, you think you're okay. Last thing you remember, the Dreamweaver was about to put a bullet in your head, but seeing as you're still alive, something must have gone wrong.

You give your body a quick once over. Incredibly, all your bruises and cuts are completely gone, and your nose and ribs aren't sore at all! If it wasn't for the fact that you were still on the rooftop of this awful department store, it'd be easy to believe that you'd never even fought the Dreamweaver at all.

Rising unsteadily to your feet, you take stock of your surroundings. It looks like a tornado's been through here – all the tables and chairs are gone, the awnings are torn and collapsed, and the railings around the edge of the roof are twisted and bent. The only things still remaining are the food stands, spared only because they were part of the structure. A stain on the wall of one of them catches your attention, and you go over to investigate.

This stand has clearly suffered heavy damage - this entire portion of the wall is riddled with cracks and chips. The stain is even more curious, a Rorschach-like blob almost as large as you are tall. Before you can even make an attempt at guessing what happened here, your foot brushes up against something on the ground.

At first glance, you can hardly believe that the object at your feet is what it appears to be, but once you pick it up and bring it up close, it indeed turns out to be the same half-sunburst mask that the Dreamweaver was wearing.

*"Wake up."*

A myriad of violent images cascade before your eyes, and at all once you begin to remember what happened. The hissing voice inside your head and the sudden realization of what you've done makes you drop the mask and take a step backwards. There's absolutely no way those visions could have been real. You were completely hapless against the Dreamweaver and on death's door before you passed out. But yet here you are, in better shape than you were before you entered the Cloud, and the Dreamweaver is, well...nowhere to be found.

Trying to avert your gaze from the mess on the wall, you notice something else lying on the ground a short distance away. Upon further inspection, it turns out to be Mariko's handgun. It's heavier than you expected it to be as you turn it over in your hands, and its grip seems strangely cold. Holding the weapon that almost killed you makes you uncomfortable, so you tuck it into your jacket for the time being so that you can return it to Mariko later.

Come to think of it, you haven't seen Mariko since you woke up. Casting a more scrutinizing gaze across the food court, you spy a small figure on the ground near one of the shredded awnings.



"Mariko!"

You dash over to her body and gently turn her onto her back. To your relief, she's unharmed and still breathing, her chest rising and falling in a gentle rhythm.

"Mariko, can you hear me? You gotta wake up!"

You give her shoulders a brief shake, and a small groan escapes her lips. Her hand rises to rub her eyelids open and she yawns loudly.

"Tetsuo-kun? What's going on?"

Suddenly, thin, white lines form across the sky, seeming to split the world into giant segments. Then, one by one, each segment falls away to reveal bits and pieces of the city you know behind them. When the last one vanishes, you and Mariko are left sitting in the middle of the parking lot outside of a church. In the distance off to your left, the last rays of the setting sun sparkle off the surface of the river, its banks straddled by the bridge.

The Cloud is gone.

"Do you remember anything?" you ask, hoping that she might be able to tell you something, anything, about how or why she came to the Cloud. She shakes her head.

"Nnh...no...maybe...I don't know. Sorry, Tetsuo-kun, but my head seriously hurts right now." With some effort, she pulls

herself into a sitting position. You immediately move your hand to steady to her, but she catches your arm and pushes it away. "It's all right, I'm okay. I know there's a lot you probably want to talk about, but right now, I'd really just like to go home. Everything seems like it's just one huge, confusing blur...like trying to hold onto a dream after you wake up."

"That's fine," you say. "Tomorrow, then. Let's go."

"That sounds great. Thanks," she says with a weak smile. You help her up, and with one arm around your shoulders, the two of you finally head towards home.

## 9. REM

You and Mariko make it back to your neighborhood without incident, and when her aunt answers the door, she lets out a relieved gasp and clutches her niece tightly. Mariko grimaces, but doesn't protest. Assuming that the things the Dreamweaver said were true, she's probably feeling somewhat bittersweet about how things turned out. All she wanted was to avoid causing others distress, and now everyone's hanging all over her. "Sorry," you say, but Mariko's expression softens and she shakes her head. *It's fine*, she mouths.

Her aunt, thinking you were talking to her, steps forward. "You don't have to apologize for anything, Tetsuo. I can't tell you how grateful I am that you were able to find her and that everything turned out all right." You and Mariko exchange a glance. "All right" is an extremely liberal summary of what the two of you just went through, but there's no way she'd know that. Her gaze returns to Mariko.

"Come on inside, get something to eat, and go to bed. I'm going to go ahead and let your father know what happened."

Mariko's eyes suddenly go wide and she cries, "No!" Her aunt shakes her head and purses her lips.

"Sorry, but you know the deal. If anything happens to you, he wants to know. That was part of the agreement for letting you stay in the first place." She places her hands on her hips, taking that familiar "displeased adult" stance. "You know, you're awfully lucky that he didn't make me put you on the first bus home the instant you showed up at the door. He would have been justified in doing so, if you ask me. He had no idea where you'd gone, and I had no idea you were coming."

Mariko's eyes fall to her shoes, and she mumbles something that sounds like an apology. You feel bad for her. If her aunt had any clue what she'd just been through, she wouldn't be giving her an earful right now. You decide to speak up.

"Hey, listen...it's not really her fault. I asked her to meet me for ramen in the city after school and forgot to give her the address for the place. If her phone hadn't died, this whole thing wouldn't have happened. It was just one of those weird accidents, and everything turned out okay in the end, right?" you say, talking to her aunt but looking at Mariko. Fortunately, she picks up on what you're doing and pipes up.

"You know I would have called to let you know I'd be home a little later if I could have. I was actually trying to find a pay phone to use when I ran into Tetsuo-kun, but, you know, how many pay phones are there nowadays? Anyhow, I wasn't hurt, and it'll never happen again, so do you *really* need to bother Dad?"

You're impressed. For such a sweet girl, she lies really easily. Of course, there's no way she could have told the truth, either

(if she remembers any of it). In this case, reality is stranger than fiction.

Mariko's aunt casts a somewhat skeptical glance between you two.

"So that's what happened, huh?" The both of you nod and she sighs deeply. "All right, then. I suppose I may have overreacted a bit. If nobody got hurt, then that's what matters." She cracks a wan smile. "Besides, no sense in stressing him out if there's nothing to stress out about. He does a good enough job of that himself. Now come on inside. If you're really fine, then you still have school tomorrow. Chop chop," she says, and lifts her arm off of the doorframe to let Mariko inside. Mariko pauses and turns back to you with a grateful smile before disappearing around a corner and out of sight.

Once she's gone, her aunt drops her smile and pinches her temple between her index finger and thumb. Letting her cheeks puff out, she exhales long and loud, letting herself collapse against the doorframe. From the back pocket of her jeans she withdraws a carton of cigarettes, and with the other hand, she conjures a small, plastic lighter seemingly out of nowhere. With the practiced air of someone who's been through this routine a number of times, she flicks the underside of the cardboard until one pops out, ignites the lighter on her first try, and holds it up to the cigarette until it smolders a bright orange. Bringing it to her lips, she takes a deep drag, craning her neck upwards to blow the smoke away from your face. The acrid-smelling wisps rise silently

into the deepening twilight, little specters reminiscent of a nightmare that suddenly seems so very distant.

"Sorry, hope you don't mind if I smoke," she says, despite the fact that it's too late for you to say no.

"It's okay," you lie, trying to choke back a cough that's rising in your throat.

"I'm trying to quit, you know. It's just that...life is making it awfully hard to. So when I say that I'm grateful to you for looking out for my niece, I really mean it. I don't want to sound cold-hearted, but we really have enough to worry about without having to deal with another kid..." she trails off and takes another drag of the cigarette. "No warning, no letter, no call even...just out of the blue she shows up and says she wants to stay with us, and I have no idea what to do but invite her in. She's family, what can I do? Then I call *him* up to ask 'What's going on?' and he blows up at me because he thinks she's at school and all the while *no one* wants to tell me what's going on..." Another puff of the cigarette, a small glowing beacon in the advancing darkness. Her aunt sighs and shakes her head.

"She's hard-headed, just like my brother, but neither of 'em will admit it. She's fortunate she caught us while we were home for a while, so it's not *that* much of an inconvenience. I *do* owe him a favor, so we'll put her up until one of them apologizes to the other. Until then, I don't suppose you'd mind just keeping an eye on her, would you? I hate to impose, but it at least seems like you're getting along."

You can understand where she's coming from – to some extent, she reminds you a lot of your mother – but that's one request you can't accept.

"No can do," you say, and press on before Mariko's aunt can interject. "I can be her friend, but not her watchdog. She's pretty tough – honestly, I don't think she needs one."

"Is that so?" Her aunt seems caught in between bemusement and irritation. "You guys are just teenagers. Right now you probably think there's nothing in the world you can't handle. Sorry to tell you this, kid, but reality's a little harsher than that." She removes the cigarette from her mouth and extinguishes it on the doorframe, dropping the butt into an ashtray on a small, wooden table just inside the door.

"Nevertheless, you may have a point. Perhaps if she has herself a little social life here, it might help her calm down a little. As long she's making good friends, then I suppose that satisfies me."

Straightening back up, she suppresses a yawn with her fist. "Okay, it's about time I turned in for the night. Sorry to make you listen to all that. Your own parents must be wondering where you are, too."

You grimace inwardly as she says that. You haven't checked your phone all evening.

"No, it's...it's fine, really. I probably oughta get home then," you say, suddenly quite eager to turn in yourself.

"Of course. 'Night, kid," she says, and slides the door shut.

Overhead, red and orange and purple have been almost completely washed away the deep blues and black of the night sky. Constellations flicker to life in mirror image of the streetlights below, and your neighborhood is suddenly awash in a warm, yellow glow. A cool breeze whips down the street, causing you to draw your jacket tighter around you. Even though it's getting on in spring, warm nights are still a ways off. In the distance, the low hum of commuter traffic provides a comfortable urban background to the stillness of your neighborhood, a horizon of sound melding both city and suburb together. This time of day is a pleasant, familiar paradox; the ease of solitude amidst a mass of humanity. As you take this moment to savor the sights and sounds of your hometown, it's troubling to think of how this world and Clouds could possibly exist at the same time.

However, those worries evaporate as you approach the door to your house. Even though you know it must have been finished hours ago, you can still smell the enticing aroma of dinner: Dad's twice-fried rice. You let your fingers hesitantly hover over the latch for a moment. Carefully, you stalk across the lawn to take a peek around the house and into the driveway. Mom's still not home. With any luck, Dad might be more worried about her than you.

You return to the door and push on through, kicking off your shoes as you enter and making a beeline for the stairs.

*"Hold it."*



You wince at the severe edge to your Dad's voice and halt in mid-step. Gingerly turning your head towards the kitchen, you see him standing there in the doorway in his favorite "#1 Dad!" apron, arms folded, legs akimbo, expectantly tapping a large, greasy spoon against one shoulder.

"Check your phone," he says, pointing to your pocket. Silently, you withdraw it and swipe it open.

"How many texts are there?"

Five. Actually fewer than you were expecting there to be. Not that you'd say that part out loud.

"Who are they from?"

"You," you reply, deadpan.

"So then what's it take to get a reply from my own son nowadays, eh? I'm not asking you to end world hunger or find a leprechaun or – while we're on the topic of impossible things – get your mother to come home at a reasonable hour, just to let me know when you're gonna be home late. That way, I don't have to be wondering whether you've been mugged, kidnapped, or gotten dinner on your own," he says with the air of someone who truly believes that missing dinner is a bigger problem than being mugged or kidnapped.

"My bad," you say, "I was out with some friends and we just lost track of time. I'll pay more attention or set an alarm or something in the future."

Dad sighs. "I'm not asking for that. You're how old now – twenty?"

"Seventeen."

"Yeah, I know. Wishful thinking. But the point is that I don't care if you wanna go out and have a good time or – nudge, nudge; wink, wink – get a job after dark. When I was your age, I was at a different club every night of the week on the prowl." He curls his fingers into "claws" and bares his teeth in a wholesomely embarrassing gesture. "I tell you what, back then, the party never stopped for ol' Shin Katsuji. After a while, your grandma and grandpa just stopped asking where I was going, because on any given night I could tell them four or five different places and still be telling the truth. Good times. Good times..." he says, nodding thoughtfully.

"Anyhow, one night, I was puttin' on the *moves* both at the bar *and* the dance floor, when out of the blue, your uncle busts in with some terrible news. Grandma...well...all I'll say is that if I'd only been there, she'd still be with us now," he says, trailing off and bowing his head.

"Grandma's still alive, you liar."

He winks and clicks his tongue at you. "Just checkin' to see if you're still listening, bud. The point still stands. Moral of the story is: if you don't check your texts, you'll end up responsible for your mother's death. As long as it doesn't happen again, I don't feel like there needs to be any consequences. What do you think?"

"Okay, Dad," you say, slinging your bag over the back of one of the kitchen chairs and collapsing into it, letting your body mold into its shape. All of a sudden, it's as if all the exhaustion from your expedition in the Cloud has caught up with you at once, pulling your limbs and eyelids towards the floor. Today's been one hell of a first day of school. Dad slides a bowl of rice towards you from across the table.

"Been keeping it warm 'till you got back. Try to eat fast, that way when your mother gets back it'll look like you've been here a while."

"Thanks," you mumble in between huge mouthfuls of greasy rice, egg, and pork. The scent is intoxicating. Exhaustion's not the only thing that's caught up with you, it seems.

Then, from in the foyer, you hear the sound of the front door being slammed open, then shut, rattling about in its track. The noise draws the attention of both you and your father, your heads perking up like a couple of meerkats in anticipation.

Your mother emerges from around the corner, one hand clasping both the strap of her purse and the side of her head, while the other rests against the wall to steady herself as she kicks off her shoes. Heels fly across the room in different directions, but she makes no effort to gather them up and put them with yours and your father's. Instead, she lets her jacket drop to the floor and stumbles across the kitchen towards the living room, where she falls wordlessly onto the couch and drags her stockinged feet up onto the coffee table.

You and Dad exchange glances. You're both quite familiar with the protocol for this kind of situation by now. With a quick "Here," you flip on the television to a cable talk show (the vaguely trashy kind), turn the volume down to the point where it's barely audible, and flick off the lamp on the end table next to the couch. Dad moves to the cupboard and withdraws a highball glass and a handle of brandy, kept together for easy access. He plinks two (not one, not three) cubes into the glass and splashes three fingers of the brandy on top of it. Then, with a furtive glance up at Mom, adds another finger for good measure.

*"Looks like that kinda night,"* he whispers to you in passing before turning his attention back to her. "Your elixir, Princess," he whispers, brushing his lips across her forehead and placing the glass into her waiting fingers.

"Thanks," she mumbles, and drains half the glass in one swig.

"If you need anything else, I'll be in our room reading." He yawns loudly, stretching his arms towards the ceiling. "'Bout time for me to turn in for the night, methinks. When you're finished, just put your dishes in the sink. I'll take care of them tomorrow morning," he says to you. "Hope you feel better, Princess," he adds. A flash of worry crosses his face, but it's soon replaced by his same old goofy smile, and he mounts the stairs, creaking out of sight.

You turn back to your half-finished bowl of rice. Somehow, your appetite has all but evaporated. In the living room, Mom stares vacantly at the television screen, absent-mindedly

swirling the remainder of her drink around and around in its glass. Ever since she took her new job, it feels like you and Dad have been through some variation of this routine every night. She comes home positively exhausted, has a glass of booze, and falls asleep on the couch watching TV. During her first couple of weeks, the two of you would attempt to make small talk - asking her about her day, what her coworkers were like, what cases she was working on - but after a while, she'd always rebut with "Not right now." By now, you both know better than to try, and the small hours of the night between when she comes home and you go to bed often pass without a single word being exchanged.

That's why it catches you off guard when she groggily turns her head towards you and asks, "How was your day?"

"Huh?" You were just about to set your dishes in the sink and head upstairs yourself when you hear her voice.

"I just thought I'd ask how your day went...if you'd rather not say, that's fine."

"No, I, uh...it was all right," you answer. You suppose that in the end, it's not entirely untrue.

"Good. That's good." Mom turns her attention back to the TV and takes another swig of brandy.

You sigh. It was more than you usually get, at least. You give your bowl a good rinse out so that Dad won't have to scrub out any hardened food tomorrow before setting it in the sink

and making for the stairs. Before you head up to your room, you hang back on the bottom step and take one last look back into the darkened living room, lit only by the flickering blue light of the television. Somehow, Mom's already fallen asleep in the short amount of time it took you to clean out your dishes. Her light breathing mixes with the muffled yelling of talk show guests.

"Night," you whisper, and creep upstairs.

You're barely able to get your uniform hung up for tomorrow before you crash onto your futon in your shirt and boxers, staring up at the ceiling from under heavily-lidded eyes. There'll be no more holding off sleep tonight, no more worrying about your mother, and no more musing about Personas or Shadows or Clouds. A heavy, oppressive tiredness is crawling across your entire body, and you're powerless to resist as soft darkness edges into your vision.

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When you next become aware, an all-encompassing darkness has surrounded your being. It's not darkness in the traditional sense, an absence of light that obscures sight. No, this darkness is something more absolute, almost *womb-like* in its mystery and totality. There is no sense of a world beyond the spot where you stand - it is as if nothing else exists in this space but you, and if you were to venture beyond into that darkness, you would tumble into an endless abyss. The only frame of reference you have is a sliver of light an indeterminate distance away which illuminates the edge of a door and patch of checkerboard tile. Were it not for that, it

would be impossible to tell if you were even conscious.

Tentatively, you take one step towards the light into the darkness, and finding solid ground, take another. As you draw nearer to the doorway, muffled voices slowly resolve into slightly agitated conversation. You halt just outside the entrance. One of them you recognize as belonging to Elizabeth, Minato's attendant. The other you do not, a smooth, lyrical gentleman's voice with the slightest hint of an accent.

If Elizabeth is on the other side of this door, then you must be just outside the Velvet Room - which also means that you must be asleep. Within, it sounds as if Elizabeth and the man inside are in the middle of some kind of argument, so you hold off on entering for now and crouch down to the floor, leaning as far towards the opening in the door as you dare.

"...on the precipice between maintaining the status quo and inviting certain catastrophe." The man's voice.

"His power should stabilize once he has grown used to it, I should think," draws Elizabeth. You can't tell if Minato is with them or not. "Is it truly so unnatural for Wild Cards to have such...*peculiar* reactions to their awakening?"

"I hardly think it appropriate to compare such drastically different circumstances. For better or for worse, you have found yourselves the midst of a highly delicate situation. Any lapses in judgment - or control - could result in extremely dire consequences. When next you meet, I would highly suggest imposing the importance of this upon him."

Are they talking about you? You inch closer, pushing the door open ever so slightly further.

"As you wish."

The man clears his throat. "Excellent! However..." A brief pause interrupts the conversation. "...perhaps I ought to bring it to your attention...this visit was not made by choice. You see..." His voice drops to an inaudible whisper, and you can no longer make out what he is saying. Then, Elizabeth's breath catches softly, a tiny squeak cutting into the stillness.

"Ah!..."

"My apologies. It is not my intent to imply that you require additional coercion, but simply to remind you of the vitality of our role. Were it up to me, I would much desire for your initiation to be under less difficult circumstances. However! The die has been cast, the cards have been read, and the chariot of fate has been sent rolling towards its ultimate destination. And in the end, our task is naught more than to ensure that it arrives there safely. Now, if you'll excuse me, I will be needed elsewhere shortly. Farewell!"

From within the Velvet Room, there is the sound of muffled footsteps crossing the room and another door opening and swinging shut. Then, silence.

For a while, you remain crouched behind the door, waiting so that your sudden entrance doesn't invite suspicions of eavesdropping. There's little doubt in your mind that the



conversation you just heard involved you to some extent, but with your relative lack of context, it's impossible to extrapolate any real meaning from it. If by "difficult circumstances", they mean all that business with the Cloud, then they certainly weren't covering any ground you weren't already aware of. However, that man, the one whose voice you couldn't recognize, sounded awfully on edge, and knew something that even disturbed Elizabeth. It feels like it would be the wrong time for another conference with the residents of the Velvet Room, but you have too many questions to pass up the opportunity. Once you feel as though an appropriate amount of time has passed, you gingerly push open the door and step inside.

The Velvet Room hasn't changed one whit since your last visit. The scene is almost portrait-like in its constancy, right down to the position of the sun above the ship's prow and the direction of the wind as it blows faint whispers through the curtains. The only variables in the scene are the expressions upon its residents' faces - both Minato and Elizabeth's brows are furrowed ever so slightly with a faint distress, and their gazes are somewhat disconcerting as they study you.

"Ah...you've returned," says Elizabeth. Minato uncrosses then recrosses his legs. They seem to be waiting for you to say something, but now that you're here, you don't have much of an idea of where to begin.

"It would appear you've been quite busy since last we met," she resumes, arching an eyebrow expectantly in tandem with Minato.

"That's a bit of an understatement," you say. "How long has something like that been inside me?" You don't really feel like dancing around the point tonight.

"For as long as you have been alive, so too has your Persona. It is but one of many selves that reside within you."

"Wait. 'Many'? Just how many knights am I packing in here?" you ask, tapping your head. For the first time, Elizabeth cracks a smile.

"Each soul has many faces that they wear throughout the entirety of their lives. I have heard tell of a mystical 'hall of mirrors' in your world in which one person may see themselves reflected hundreds of times over." It may be your imagination, but you could swear Minato rolls his eyes slightly. Elizabeth takes no notice and goes on. "Just as the hall of mirrors reveals myriad reflections, your power, the power of the Wild Card, reveals myriad selves." Minato leans towards Elizabeth and places a hand on her arm. She nods and continues. "Many people may only awaken to no more than a handful of Personas over the course of their lives. Most may only discover one. Those with the gift of the Wild Card, however..." Elizabeth opens the book on her lap, and instantly, hundreds of small cards circle about her and Minato, each one emblazoned with the name and portrait of a different creature. "...are privy to the strength of as many Personas as their heart will accept." Then, with a snap of their fingers, the cards burst into plumes of blue flame and vanish, leaving no trace behind.

"Whoa...are you Persona users, too?" you ask.

Minato shakes his head and Elizabeth smiles sadly. "We are but residents of the Velvet Room. Nothing more. You may come to realize as many Personas of your own in time. However, as of now, the you are but an empty vessel. Your power may be limited, but your potential is near limitless. According to my master, there may well be over one hundred Personas lying dormant within your soul."

The thought of that nearly floors you. A hundred beings like Launcelot, a hundred incarnations of you...such a thing scarcely seems plausible. But like it or not, Minato and Elizabeth have had an eerily accurate track record so far when it's come to stuff like this, so you figure the time for skepticism is over at this point.

"However," Elizabeth says, her expression instantly hardening, "this power is not to be treated casually, nor to be underestimated. The success that you have in wielding the power of your Personas is directly tied to the strength of your heart. If your strength of will is strong, then so too will be your Persona. And if it should falter, then it may well devour you, and your journey will come to an end." Both hers and Minato's stares bore into the core of your very being, twisting and worming their way into some desperate, primal, private part of yourself lurks, gone into hiding after satiating itself upon the Shadow that took Mariko. You feel exposed, and fail to repress a shiver. Minato glances at Elizabeth, and she begins to speak again, as if cued.

"Remember, this coming year will be a crucial one for you. If you attempt to face it alone, I can guarantee that you will most certainly fail. But take heart! You are not alone. The soul yearns for those like it, and by opening yourself to others, you will discover the means with which to make it strong. I can see that there is the potential for you to create such ties already...all that is required is a for you exercise some of the other facets of your soul to make them a reality."

"I...I don't really have a choice here, do I?" you ask, a question that contains within it a host of uncertainties about fate, dreams, Shadows, and the now looming threat of unavoidable change.

Minato smirks. "Of course you do. But will you really deny it?" he asks. A pregnant silence descends upon the Velvet Room as you consider the implications of what has been imposed upon you.

"No," you answer. In the end, your answer had been decided from the moment you summoned Launcelot and for the first time that you can recall, felt truly alive.

"Very well then," says Elizabeth. "As long as you are confident in that, then our time together is close to its end. Hopefully, when next we meet, your Wild Card powers will have become more...*well rounded*. My Master and I are quite invested in seeing you succeed, and wish to be able to render assistance in any way possible."

The wish is surprisingly heartfelt for being made so formally,

and a strange tingle works its way through your body.

"Until next we meet," she calls. A familiar blackness casts itself over your vision, and your consciousness slips away again to the sound of waves.

## 10. The Voice and The Fists

Inexplicably, the dawn of the next day arrives in much the same way as the previous one. As you make your way to Seganshima, you almost feel a sense of *betrayal* at the way the city has continued its routine in spite of the supernatural horrors you witnessed yesterday. This is a city in which Shadows exist, and yet your classmates are still walking to school, adults are still ambling into their cars while trying to juggle coffee, keys, and briefcases, and businessmen are rolling up the grates on their storefronts to begin another day at work. It feels as though something, *anything*, should have been noticeably different today, that there should be some sign that what you experienced was real and meaningful. But there isn't. It seems the only thing you've earned is the right to see is the world continuing to turn as it always has, and you can count the number of people that are aware of the threat of Shadows and the power of Persona on one hand.

Nevertheless, even if the rest of the city remains ignorant of what's going on, you've decided that you can't afford to be. Sometime today, you'll have to meet up with Mariko to go over what happened and find out what she knows. And come to think of it, there was also one other person awake in the Cloud who had completely slipped your mind – the boy in the wheelchair. You figure it may be worth your while to track him down, too, to gain his perspective.

"Tetsuo-kun! Tetsuo-kun!"

As you approach the intersection that separates the suburbs from the city proper, the sound of her voice makes you halt and whip around. Mariko jogs towards you up the sidewalk, wildly waving one hand in hello. You let her catch up, and she stumbles up alongside you, doubled over and wheezing for breath.

"Gooooood – *cough* – morning, Tetsuo – *cough* – kun!" she splutters.

"I'm not so sure sprinting was the smartest way to start your morning," you tell her. Rummaging about in your bag, you pull out a bottle of water and hand it to her. She takes it gratefully, and despite being so obviously short of breath, only takes a few small sips.

"This is nothing...I feel fine! Really!"

"Okay, if you say so," you say, although you're not entirely convinced.

Mariko must notice. She sticks her hands on her hips and huffs. "Oh come on, Tetsuo, I'm not gonna get taken down that easily. And what about you? You're not tired at all?"

"Not any more than usual," you say, patting your chest for emphasis. "I just kinda figured that you'd wanna take the day off today."

She makes a face. "I'm not sure Otomuji-sensei would appreciate that. Call it a hunch, but I get the feeling she doesn't like me much."

"Yeah, I guarantee you're not alone."

"And besides, Tetsuo-kun, I think we need to talk."

Mariko steps in front of you and folds her arms, staring up into your eyes with a cool, level gaze. Her entire demeanor has gone stony serious.

"That makes two of us. But-" you say, twisting your head around to either side, "can it wait until lunch? There are too many people here." You doubt that the casual eavesdropper would be able to make any sense of a conversation about "Personas" and "Shadows", but at the same time, it feels like knowledge that ought to be kept secret. That stern voice that accompanied the girl in the wetsuit certainly seemed to think so.

Mariko takes a deep breath. She seems a little put out. "All right, then. We can take our lunches up on the roof, there shouldn't be too many people up there. What do you say?"

"Deal. I know you've probably got a lot of questions. I do, too. But this isn't the place for it. You just gotta trust me that we'll get to the bottom of this."

Striding past the gates onto the Seganshima High grounds, Mariko lightly jabs your side with an elbow.



"Hey, Tetsuo-kun, do you know those guys?" she asks, pointing to a couple of students leaning up against a waist high planter on the lawn. Your gaze follows her finger, and it becomes immediately obvious that these aren't your average high school students. Their uniforms are frayed at the seams and torn at the edges. The hair of the one closest to you is dyed bright green, and the other is bald, which wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the characters spelling out "YOU DIE" inked across his forehead. But worse than all this, worse than the torn clothes and the hair and the obviously stolen jewelry adorning their necks and fingers are the tattoos on the sides of their necks, a fist clutching the blade of a sword.

*Yatabuya.*

"I think they're staring at you."

They are, and you don't want Mariko drawing attention to the fact that you know they are. There's only one thing worse than Otomuji to get tangled up with at Seganshima, and the Yatabuya Gang is it. You take her wrist and start walking briskly towards the door, trying your best not to make eye contact with the thugs. If you can just make it inside the school, you should be all right.

"H-Hey! Tetsuo-kun! What's going on? What's wrong?" Mariko protests, pulling away from you.

*"I'll tell you later. Now c'mon!"* you hiss, placing one hand on the door handle.

"Yeah, *Tetsuo-kun*. What's wrong?" drawls a rough, gravelly voice from behind you.

Swallowing hard, you withdraw your hand from the door and turn around. Baldy and Green Hair tower over you, grinning smugly in a way that makes you clench up. Baldy places one rough mitt on your shoulder. His fingernails are chipped and caked in dirt. You doubt that this guy's ever washed his hands.

"Ya know, it's not real gentlemanly to be treatin' a lady all rough-like, buddy," he says.

"Seems to me like *Tetsuo-kun* here has a problem with respect, doesn't he?" chimes in Green Hair.

"It's funny you should say that. As it turns out, I seem to recall someone else saying the same thing!"

"Yeah! In fact, I think this someone said that he'd like to have a word with our good friend *Tetsuo-kun*, right?"

"Indeed you are! A man-to-man chat!"

"A heart-to-heart!"

Mariko pushes her way in between them and you. "Listen here, *Tetsuo-kun* wasn't trying to be 'rough'. I'm new, and he's just trying to make sure that we get to class on time."

"*Mariko...*" you whisper, but she's not having any of it.

"*Let me handle it, Tetsuo,*" she whispers back.

Your breakfast turns a flip in your stomach. How does she figure she's going to "handle it"? She'd better not be thinking of her gun. And besides, she *can't* be making enemies of these guys. People get away with a lot of things at Seganshima. Coming to class late. Smoking in the bathrooms. Cheating on exams. But no one gets away with pissing off the Yatabuyas. You have no clue what they want with you, but it's not worth it for her to even *try* to bail you out.

Green Hair snickers. "Says she's gonna 'handle us' – you hearin' this shit? Sounds like a decision she's gonna regret."

"Someone's going to regret this," she snarls back.

That's it. Enough's enough. Ducking under her outstretched arms, you cut back in front of her and hold up your own.

"Hey! It's okay. I'm just gonna go with them and see what they want, and I'll meet up with you in class. No big deal."

Baldy chuckles, a squealing, stunted sound that resembles a small animal choking. "Good man. Don't think your friend here understands the mess she almost stepped in."

The two goons clutch you painfully by the shoulders, angling you away from the entrance and towards the lawn. Rumor has it that the Yatabuya operate somewhere on the school grounds, away from the eyes of the faculty and the Disciplinary Committee, but no one's been able to nail down

where. Possibly because everyone that finds out never leaves.

"Right this way," Green Hair, says, gesturing you forward. You take one last look over your shoulder. Mariko lingers in the doorway with a frustrated expression on her face. You wink, and slowly she retreats inside.

"C'mon, ya little shit," growls Baldy, yanking you forward and abandoning all pretenses of civility.

"What do you want with me? I haven't been stepping on anyone's toes."

Green Hair responds to that with a smack to the back of your head. "Man, shut up. You don't get to ask questions. You're gonna find out soon enough."

Still smarting, they guide you around the front of the school and away from anyone who might see you. Sun slants in through the boughs of the full trees planted in a row along the edge of the school, lending the east side of the grounds an inappropriate serenity considering what's happening. You halt at a set of stairs burrowing into a small alcove underneath the school. The paint on the door set within is chipped and discolored, dating it before the school's renovations. There's a sign that says "Maintenance Only", but that probably doesn't mean anything to the Yatabuya.

"Well c'mon! Down you go!" grumbles Baldy before planting his foot in the small of your back and pushing you down the

stairs. You tumble awkwardly down the short, narrow stairwell and come to a halt with your legs flipped over your head. You can hear the two of them having a laugh at you from above.

As if cued by the racket, the door begins to swing outwards. You rapidly spring to your feet, dust off your jacket, and pat down your guitar to make sure your baby isn't broken. All good.

The boy who opens the door is unsettling. His thin, pointed face and heavy-lidded eyes give him an air of snakishness as he appraises you. All of his movements seem crafted and deliberate, from the way he gestures you inside to the smooth, slow way he blinks. His uniform is far too pristine for a gang member, with not a speck of dust or frayed thread out of place. Every inch of his appearance seems to have been groomed to stand up to even the most intense scrutiny, and his unwavering smirk almost appears to invite it. The fist and sword tattoo jumps out at you from under his collar. Baldy and Green Hair make to head down the stairs after you, but the boy holds up one hand and they nod and stay put.

He closes the door behind you, and the lighting is so dim that it takes a moment for your eyes to adjust. But once they do, you realize that you've been led into the school's boiler room, judging from the tangle of pipes and water heaters. A small space has been sparsely furnished here with a bare stool and couple of ratty, moth-eaten armchairs. A sour-looking girl with braided hair is lounging in one of the armchairs, picking idly at one of the studs on her leather gloves. It's hard for you to

avoid staring at her toned, muscled arms revealed by her rolled-up sleeves. Like the boy, she too has the Yatabuya tattoo on her neck. Her eyes flit up to meet yours and you quickly avert your gaze.

"Have a seat, Katsuji." Even his words slither out of his mouth. Apprehensive, you slide onto the stool. He elects to lean up against the wall. The girl loudly cracks her knuckles and flashes you a toothy smile.

"Now," the boy says, "are we comfortable?"

The stool is hard and much too small, probably on purpose. The girl mouths "Yes" to you. A helpful suggestion, you're sure. You nod, which seems to satisfy them.

"Excellent. Before we get started, we'd like to make sure that you know who we are and what we do. I am Taishi, and this is Chikara. I am the Voice of the Boss-

"-and I'm the Boss's Fists," says Chikara, cracking her knuckles again for emphasis.

"Together, we enforce the will of the Boss. When you speak to us, you're speaking to him. Are we still on the same page?"

"Sure, but...what'd I do?" Your mind is racing trying to determine what on Earth you possibly could have done to get the Yatabuya Boss pissed off at you. You've always been one to mind your own business, especially when it comes to the gangs at school. Does it have something to do with the

incident with Otomuji yesterday? It's been rumored that the Yatabuya make deals with the staff so they can operate on campus unimpeded, but you've never heard of anything as wild as a teacher taking out a hit on a student.

Taishi glances over at his partner, bemused.

"He doesn't know?"

"He'd better remember awful quick."

"I agree. Chikara doesn't share the same affinity for conversation that I do. As much as I'd love to hash out our difficulties, she's somewhat more impatient. And when she's impatient, she can get irritable. I think both you and I would prefer to see you leave in more or less the same condition as you arrived, so why don't we drop the smokescreens and be a little more forthcoming, hmm?" Taishi says, bringing his leering grin inches away from yours. You're still clueless as to what they're talking about, but perhaps it's not such a bad idea to try and help them out. They probably don't want to be doing this either. If you just tell them what they want to hear, then they'll let you go and all of you can go about your lives.

"Is this about what happened in class yesterday? If Otomuji wants me to do detention, then hey, that's fine with me. I'll scrape as much gum as she wants."

"Gum? Is he screwing with us?" Chikara gets to her feet and begins striding towards you. "Goddammit, he'd better not be screwing with us. *Nobody* screws with me." Taishi darts

forward to prevent her from reaching you.

"Ah-ah, Chikara. Give me a little more time than that, at least."

"Fine," she huffs and collapses back into the chair again with a creak and puff of dust.

"Now come on, Katsuji. The Yatabuya don't waste their time with petty classroom issues. Perhaps if I helped jog your memory, we'd be able to finish this faster, yes?" he says, his voice calm and reassuring.

Just like you thought, he doesn't like having to do this any more than you do. You nod your head quickly, glad that someone's finally willing to be reasonable. It's got to be some small misunderstanding that you'll all laugh about.

"Good! Try to think back to yesterday for me. You spent quite a long time near the Tagekawa District across the river yesterday, right?"

Tagekawa District? Of course. That's where Mariko's Cloud was. You almost chuckle to yourself with relief. You never even saw a Yatabuya member while you were over there. You probably weren't even in the same plane of existence! This *has* to be some kind of mistake. If you just explain it to Taishi, then he'll have to let you go.

"I was. Did I do something wrong?" you ask, shaking your head a little. For some reason, your voice is starting to sound



loopy.

Chikara starts to open her mouth, but Taishi holds up a finger to silence her. He smiles warmly and shrugs.

"Well, yes and no. You have to understand that as the premier...*organization* in Seganshima, we're constantly embroiled in plenty of nasty conflicts to retain territory. Such a horrible consequence of membership, wouldn't you think?"

You nod again, more drowsily than you intended to. It would have been nice to have gotten more sleep last night.

"At any rate, we're always quite leery when we notice students coming and going from contested turf. We're always watching, you see."

"Always," chimes in Chikara, who's been idly picking her nose for a while now.

"Yes, and as I mentioned earlier, one of our reliable members noticed you there, hanging around too long to be just passing through or running errands. I hate to sound paranoid, but we have to be sure that you're not running errands for one of our rivals. Now, all we're interested in is a simple answer. Be truthful, and I'm sure we can put this unpleasant business behind us. What were you doing there?"

"I was-" you begin, but the words suddenly die in your throat and you're instantly aware of what you're doing, palms sweaty, eyes wide, breath short and panicked. You were

almost about to say *I was rescuing my friend from Shadows* and the secret would have been out already, and to a couple of gangsters, no less. But fortunately, some alert part of your brain must have frozen your vocal chords to prevent you from saying something you'd regret. What's wrong with you? Did he...*make* you do that?

"Was what?" Taishi says, and his tone is no longer friendly.

Now that you're more cognizant, you notice that Taishi is leaning in uncomfortably close, staring you directly in the eyes. You look away towards his stomach instead. You probably look more suspicious that way, but you've got no desire to meet his gaze anymore.

"Why aren't you lookin' at him?" says Chikara.

"I was looking for my friend," you say, sidestepping the question. "Yesterday was her first day in Seganshima and she got lost on the way home. It was an accident. I don't stick my nose into stuff like this on purpose."

Taishi bends over to bring his vision level with yours.

"You're lying."

You blink, shifting your attention to Chikara.

"If I tell you I'm not, what happens?"

Chikara grins. "Like Taishi said, I'm not big on dressing things up, so I'll put it to you this way: I'll beat the piss outta you until

we get an honest answer or you end up in a dumpster. Sound good?"

Sounds like you never really had a choice. "Not really."

"Too bad it's not up to you. Outta the way, now we're doin' things my way."

Taishi groans and throws up his hands in surrender as Chikara shoves him aside. You carefully edge off of the stool, stepping backwards as she advances on you. There's a bit more room behind you, but there's only one way out of the boiler room and that's the way you came. But even if you were able to slip around them, you'd never make it past the thugs outside. You're trapped.

As if she can tell what you're thinking, Chikara shakes her head. "You're not going anywhere, you little bug. Hold still and I won't - hit - too - hard!" she grunts, punctuating her speech with a series of whistling punches. She's fast - certainly faster than you and definitely stronger than you if those arms of hers are any indication. You only barely avoid getting hit by dropping to the ground and rolling away. Your return to reality has robbed you of the physical prowess you'd gained in the Cloud.

Deciding that running from the two guards outside is preferable to dealing with this she-beast, you pop up into a crouching stance and make to get on your feet and run by her, but she quickly puts herself in your way again, pulling back her fist for another swing. You brace yourself for the blow, but

she drops her fists and whips around as the door swings open.

"What is this?"

The Voice and Fists of the Boss visibly sneer as the boy strides through the door. Exceptionally tall and lanky (maybe an upperclassman?), he doesn't look like much. His haircut is simple, with only a few unruly, light tufts pinned back by a pair of thin glasses. Instead of a jacket, he's opted for a patterned sweater vest, and he carries a thin tablet under one arm.

"What does it look like?" says Chikara, looking positively tortured for having been interrupted.

"It looks like you're wasting more time assaulting students instead of doing something more productive. I've been trying to track you down all morning to discuss border control. I wonder how you'd have explained it to the Boss if there was some kind of emergency and no one could find you?"

It would seem that this guy is Yatabuya, too, but the scarf wrapped around his neck makes it impossible to be sure. Whoever he is, he doesn't appear to be intimidated by these two.

Chikara spits. "Screw off, egghead. *You* found us. Besides, nothin' that comes outta *your* mouth is ever worth listening to."

Even Taishi sounds frustrated. "I think the Boss would understand, Jidou. He was the one that ordered us to take

care of this interloper in the first place. I'm absolutely *certain* your toys can wait."

"I know that I'm talking to a brick wall here, but maybe if you took my *toys* a little more seriously, there wouldn't be so many breaches to deal with." He turns to you as if noticing you for the first time. "Jeez. Are you really trying to say that *this* guy is a threat?"

"You-You don't know what you're talking about! He was..." Taishi trails off, unwilling to say anything more in your presence.

"What? Minding his own business, probably, until you had those idiots outside grab him for your amusement."

"We're here on orders from the Boss! Are you sayin' you got a problem with him?" says Chikara. She's pulled out her trump card, but incredibly, the boy they call Jidou isn't fazed in the least.

"And if I asked the Boss, would he say the same thing?"

Taishi and Chikara blanch and fall silent. Doesn't sound like it to you.

"You've never even spoken to him. Everything he says goes through me," says Taishi.

"And you're certain about that?" Jidou fires back, and they both scowl.

"Tch."

Visibly disgusted, Chikara forcefully hoists you to your feet and pushes you towards Jidou. "Whatever. Get the hell outta here. Make sure to kiss his feet on the way out."

"Consider yourself lucky, Katsuji, that this one's so full of himself." He then turns to Jidou. "When the Boss wants to know why this trespasser was let go, understand that *you'll* be held responsible."

Jidou snorts. "Oh, I'm sure." Then, he grabs you by the shoulders and turns you around so that his back is to Taishi and Chikara. *Go*, he mouths to you, and shoves you towards the door. Wordlessly, you nod your understanding and push it open. Shimmering daylight floods into the room, causing everyone but Jidou to bring a hand up to their eyes.

"He's clear! Let him go, understand?" he shouts up to the two gangsters outside. A cloud of confusion and disappointment passes over their faces, but reluctantly, they step aside to let you past. Behind you, you can hear Taishi and Jidou continue to argue.

"I hope you know that you won't be the gang's new pet forever, Jidou. I'm looking forward to the day you outlive your usefulness."

"The way you run things, I hope you're patient. In the meantime, I've got a few things I'd like to discuss..." you hear Jidou say, but his voice dies out the instant the door shuts.

Baldy coughs, and you realize that you've stopped halfway up the stairs to listen to them. Rapidly, you mount the rest of the steps and walk past the two thugs as quickly as you dare.

*"Better watch your back,"* Green Hair hisses as at you, but you're beyond caring. You take a huge breath and exhale loudly once you're out of their sight. You made it out of the belly of the beast with barely a scratch on you. As far as you know, that makes you the first. You really owe that Jidou guy, whoever he was. You can't remember ever seeing or talking to him before, although if he's really an upperclassman then you probably wouldn't have. Either way, it doesn't make much sense to you why he would save you, especially if he really is a gang member. Just another mystery for you to put on the backburner – you'll have to think of someone who might know more about him.

As you make your way into school, your eyes flit to your watch causing your heart to plummet into your stomach. Homeroom is already halfway over! Making the executive decision to declare yourself tardy with food poisoning later, you decide to skip the rest of homeroom and wait in the stairwell for Mariko. One interrogation is plenty for today.

## 11. Sleepwalkers

As you wait for the bell to ring, you unzip your guitar from its case and turn it over in your hands. It's been through a lot over the past couple of days, but miraculously, it still looks as good as the day you unwrapped it.

It was a birthday present, an out-of-the-blue surprise from your Dad for turning thirteen. You and your Mom were shocked. You couldn't believe he had gotten you such an expensive one. She couldn't believe he was letting a guitar into the house. To this day, it's the best birthday present you've ever gotten. Candy apple red and crafted with gleaming rosewood, catching that first glimpse of its beauty through the wrapping paper filled you with elation. Since then, you've taken it everywhere with you. Practicing your guitar gives you calm like nothing else can; wherever you play becomes your sanctuary in that moment.

Holding it close to your ear, you pluck a few strings, letting them resonate into the empty stairwell. You tighten them up and test them again. Perfect. No matter what, you're always able to get it in tune on the first try. Over the past four years, you've memorized the exact feeling, that ever-so particular amount of tension in the pegs needed to create the perfect sound. It's so deeply ingrained that your fingers move there by memory.



The soft sound soothes your agitated nerves as you play, and finally you begin to relax for what feels like the first time since school started yesterday. You decide to start with one of the songs you've been working on for a while. It's not finished (like most of your compositions), but when it is, you're planning to put all of your songs together on vinyl and give the album to your Dad for his birthday in January. Your eighteenth birthday is the day before, and you want to show him what you've been doing with his present over these past five years. You understand that you're quiet most of the time. You're aware that you don't always let your parents know how you're feeling. And now that this Cloud business has reared its ugly head, you're probably going to have to start keeping more secrets from them. But you really do love them, more than anyone else you've ever known, and this once, you want to express that in the best way you know how.

So deep are you in your music, that you almost miss the bell for first period. The soft, quick tapping of shoes across the floor alerts you, and you quickly stow your guitar in case it's a teacher. To your relief, it's Mariko that rounds the corner of the landing.

"Wow. You sound really good."

"Uhh...thanks."

She stands there for a moment, then skitters down the stairs towards you. To your surprise, she buries her face in your chest and wraps you in a tight hug.

"You're okay!" she says, then immediately, she gasps and draws back, her face red. Yours is starting to feel warm, too.

"I – *wow*, sorry...I just, um...you missed homeroom, y'know, and I started to feel bad about not doing anything, and I told Hayate-kun what happened, and *he* said you were probably *dead*...and...yeah."

*Thanks for that, Hayate*, you think, but in all honesty, it was a fair assumption to make.

"No, it's alright. I'm fine...somehow. I guess I've developed a talent for cheating death lately."

"Don't put it *that* way!" she says, and punches you on the arm. "I'm serious, I didn't know who those guys were, and you looked like you were scared to death. *You*."

"I'm not so sure you should use me as a measuring stick for bravery. These have been the most ridiculous and frightening first days of school of my life. I'm not used to this. But don't blame yourself. They were coming after me one way or another, and I doubt you were gonna stop them."

"*Hmph*," she huffs. "You'd be surprised. I could probably handle a creep or two like them."

"Maybe. But it's just a better idea to leave these guys alone."

"Okaaay. But I *could've* taken them."

"So, was Otomuji mad?" you ask, trying to change the subject.

Mariko grimaces. "God, she was furious for a bit. But then she got all smug, like she thought you were trying to avoid her."

"Not entirely untrue. I wasn't looking forward to it. She'll be pissed to see me, I bet. Now c'mon, let's get back to class. I'll tell 'em I was having stomach problems."

The rest of the morning passes without much incident, to your relief. Since it's the only the second day of the school, your far milder history teacher accepts your excuse without any further questions and steers the class into a wildly tangential discussion regarding premature hair loss. Hayate, once he's gotten over the initial shock of seeing you back in one piece, incessantly taps you on the shoulder throughout the lesson, trying to coax a story out of you.

*"Hey, what happened to you? Mariko-chan says you got grabbed by the Yatabuya."*

*"That is true,"* you whisper back.

*"But - and don't take this wrong way man, I'm glad you're okay - you don't have a scratch on you."*

*"I was just lucky, I guess."* You're not trying to sound dismissive, but your mind's preoccupied with what you want to discuss with Mariko at lunch.

*"I don't get how you can sound so causal about it. Man, when word gets around that you got away from the Yatabuya, you're gonna make a real name for yourself, too. How have we not hung out before?"* As if to convince you that he is indeed, someone worth hanging out with, he casually runs his fingers back through his hair and adjusts his sunglasses. You can't remember much about Hayate from last year. You'd think someone like him would've stood out more.

*"I don't know how I feel about that..."* you say, glancing towards the front of the classroom where your teacher casts an annoyed eye your way. *"Anyways I can tell you about it later. Whatever there is to hear."*

That seems to appease Hayate, who grins ear to ear and claps you on the shoulder.

*"Good, good. I tell you what, you're off to one hell of a start this year."*

When the lunch bell finally chimes, yours and Mariko's eyes meet instantly. Grabbing your lunches, you dart out of the room and meet just outside the door.

"All right, Tetsuo-kun, let's go," she says, turning towards the stairs.

You put up a hand to stop her. "Hold on. I actually wanna bring one more person." Mariko seems confused and a little put out.

"Huh? Are you saying there was someone else?" she says, glancing around and making sure to choose what she says carefully.

"A couple other 'someone elses', actually. You didn't know they were there?"

She sighs and looks away. "No, sorry. All that I remember is watching you walk through that store and, you know, that bit on the roof."

You flinch. "Wait - you saw what happened in the store?"

Mariko giggles and narrows her eyes slyly. "Oh yeah. You're quite a dancer, Tetsuo-kun."

"It-It was strategic. To throw the Shadows off their game."

"If you say so. But really, how many other people were there?"

"That we can track down right now? One. It's kinda complicated. Like I said, I'll try to explain things the best I can once we're out of earshot. For now, I need you to help me track down a kid in a wheelchair."

Mariko's eyes go wide. "Really? And he was in a place like that?"

"Yeah. I don't think he was having much fun, either. But he was wearing our uniform, so he's got to be in this school somewhere."

"What year do you think he is?"

You try to think back and recall how the boy looked. He was rail-thin, almost sickly, with tangled black hair that drooped down nearly past his eyes. He had a young face, pale and gaunt. He probably couldn't be older than you.

"Let's try the other second year classes first."

Mariko heads over to the far end of the hall to check 2-C, while you go the other way towards 2-A. You slide open the door and quickly scan the room – he should be easy enough to spot. However, he's not in here, just a smattering of students chatting over their lunches. The student seated closest to the door, a tired-looking girl in round glasses with a mop of short, frizzled burgundy hair, stares up at you from baggy eyes.

"Are you looking for someone?"

"Um, yeah. A guy in a wheelchair, really skinny. Seen him? Is he in our year?"

"Oh, him," she says, and promptly hunches back over her lunchbox as if the conversation was over.

"You know who I'm talking about?" you say, taking a step into the classroom. The girl instantly leans away from you with a perturbed expression on her face.

"Yeah, he's in 2-C. Why do you want to know?"

"I saw him take a nasty spill yesterday," you say, which isn't untruthful. "I wanted to make sure he was okay." The girl glances your way with a skeptical raise of the eyebrow, and then turns back to her lunch as if you weren't even there. An awkward silence descends. Is she ignoring you?

"Do...you not believe me?" you ask. She finishes chewing what's in her mouth and stares at you again, twirling a bit of hair around her finger absent-mindedly.

"I dunno," she says, and takes another bite. "It's just...it seems like he gets harassed. A lot. People who pick on guys like him are the worst."

She stares down at her lunch with disgust, and you understand the feeling. It's hard to believe there'd be anyone your age low enough to do something like that. A roiling, hot anger suddenly claws its way up your throat. In this moment, you'd like nothing more than to find those people and teach them how to act like human beings. The Enforcer that attacked him was berserk, at least. But there's no excuse for this.

"I'm not like that," you growl. As soon as you do, the feeling subsides. You're aware that your fists are balled, your teeth are clenched, and that you've bitten your tongue. The taste of iron is tangy in your mouth. Where did that come from?

The tired girl blinks at you, eyes wide for the first time. She's probably wondering that same thing. "I-I guess not. Sorry, I shouldn't have assumed..."

"It's fine. I didn't know things were like that. It just...*surprised* me, I guess."

"*Tch.* It just means you have a sense of decency. This place is like one of those lawless post-apocalyptic wastelands. I hate it," the girl says, staring vacantly out the window. "Listen, if you're looking for him, I think he takes his lunch into the old art room, so maybe I'd check there."

Finally. "All right, thanks."

"Mmhmm," she nods, and immediately returns to poking at her lunch with her chopsticks looking lost in her own thoughts.

2-C. With any luck, Mariko should have run into him, but when you see her coming towards you and shaking her head as you exit 2-A, you know that probably isn't the case.

"He wasn't in there, Tetsuo-kun? Is he a first year maybe?"

"No, someone told me he's in 2-C."

"Well, I didn't see him."

You shrug. "That's fine. There's still somewhere else we can try."

The annex, as far as you're concerned, is a much more accurate representation of Seganshima High. It's not really an annex – in reality, it's just the old school building – but most people have taken to calling it that, maybe in some attempt to distance it from the main building. Located behind the



renovated main building as if it were trying to hide from the view of passers by on the street, it is a peeling, creaking, dusty monument to the school's past. From the outside, it looks foreboding, the sort of place you'd expect people to consider haunted. On the inside, however, it's a man getting dressed in the dark, its classrooms reflecting a hodgepodge of the most popular tenets of interior design from their respective eras. There's no attempt at coordination or uniformity, just a chaotic amalgamation of peeling paint – and in some cases, wallpaper. Seganshima still holds some elective classes here, though. Even with the new renovations, the school still managed to run out of classrooms, which, as far as everyone was concerned, was pretty much par for the course. Nevertheless, most of the annex serves as a treasury for dust, and most students regard it as the place to go when you want to be alone – or if you don't want to get caught.

The old art room is located in the corner of the east wing on the second floor, as are all of the unused classrooms. You and Mariko slip underneath a length of rope stretched across the hallway, a sign hanging from it that reads "Please Keep Out." As you draw closer, you begin to hear multiple voices. You tense up, remembering what the girl from 2-A told you. You hold your arm out to keep Mariko from entering and press your ear to the door. She nods and wriggles underneath it to listen as well.

"What's wrong? Why you gotta be so unfriendly like that? We're just looking out for you."

"Stop...you know what you're doing..." mumbles the voice of

the boy in the chair.

"What? What are we doing? We're *helping* you. Your hair looks like shit, man. Do you ever wash it?"

"Doubt it. You could fry shrimp with that grease," sniggers one of the other boys.

"Now come on, hold still and we'll give you a *niiice* scrubbin'."

"No! No, no, stop..."

You venture to crack the door open just a sliver so you can see what's going on. Mariko squeezes in under your armpit and you both peer inside.

The boy in the wheelchair is there bookended by two other students, third years from the look of them. He struggles in his chair, twisting desperately back and forth as one of them has him gripped by the shoulders. The other leans over his head, struggling to stifle laughter. Horrified, you watch as he starts to loudly clear his throat, his throat undulating as he collects saliva and mucus in his mouth. His lips purse to hock the loogie into his hair, and you decide that you've seen more than enough. That same burning sensation surges under your skin; pounding relentlessly against your brain, tightening your chest. Some part of you tells you that you're starting to lose yourself, but it's too late now.

"Get my back," you hiss to Mariko, who starts and nods.

Like you were fired from a gun, you slam open the door and barrel into the room. You meet the spitting boy headfirst in his stomach and tackle him to the ground, kicking up a thick cloud of dust that dances in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

"The hell...*oogh!*" he starts, but your fists sinking into his chest cut him short. You deliver one blow, then another, and another, and another. You don't know where this indignation comes from, this desire to defend someone you barely even know, but you can't stop. You just can't stop punching him. Beating the hell out of this piece of shit just feels too good.

"*Holy...*"

Out of the corner of your eye, the other bully starts backing away from you as you lay into his friend. When he reaches the door, he breaks into a sprint, his footfalls echoing throughout the abandoned hallway. Mariko makes to grab him, but he leans just out of her reach.

"You...you *coward!*" she yells after him, but it's pointless.

Meanwhile, you grab the other guy by the collar, hoisting him up close to your face before smashing him down into the floorboards. His head snaps back and forth like a ragdoll with each impact, and the hot, stale breath being forced from his lungs flies into your face.

"Tetsuo-kun!"

Mariko is yelling at you.

"Tetsuo-kun, stop!"

They wouldn't have stopped.

*"Tetsuo, get off him!"*

You feel a push from behind, causing you to tumble off of the bully and roll across the floor. He sputters, gasping for breath as he turns over onto his side. For a second, your eyes meet. He stares at you with a mixture of fear and anger before unsteadily getting to his feet. He stumbles towards the open door, but before leaving he turns to you and flips you off.

"What's your problem, man? What's your problem?"

He turns to go, but again, he stops to add something else.

"You're not gonna get away with this! Shibutani's gonna blast your ass, man! You are fucking done!"

You could easily get up and run after him, but you don't. Instead you laugh. You laugh long and hard. You laugh at the irony. You laugh at the idea of someone being scared of you, quiet little Tetsuo Katsuji. And you laugh at how screwed you probably are.

"Tetsuo-kun, are you okay?" Mariko seems quite concerned, approaching you tentatively, like you were a cornered animal.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. I don't know why I did that. Why did I

do that?" The ire is beginning to subside, making you more and more aware of what you've just done. You don't *regret* it, it's just taken you by surprise. It's not something you would have done last year. Could awakening to your Persona be changing you *outside* of the Cloud, too?

"You probably shouldn't have. This is the second time you've gotten yourself into trouble because of me. I don't think it's worth it," says the boy, looking genuinely remorseful.

"Nonsense. You don't deserve to be treated like that. No one does. They got what was coming to 'em, and if Shibutani wants to write me up for that, then that's that."

"*Mmm*," he muses, staring at his feet. "Maybe you're right..."

"How about you? You're not hurt or anything, right?"

"No," he says, looking himself over. "They'd never try anything serious. You're right," he looks at Mariko, "they're just cowards."

"I was asking more about yesterday."

His eyes go wide. "You *do* remember! Then it's not just me..." Then, he points to Mariko. "Wait, what about her? I don't remember her. Were you the one in the wetsuit?"

"The *what*?" Mariko says, more to you than him.

"No, not her," you say, "Mariko was the one having the

dream."

"Oh! Then it's good to know you're okay."

"I-I'm really getting confused, now, Tetsuo-kun. Wanna fill me in?"

You check your phone. You've got enough time.

"I suppose now's as good a time as any." You extend your hand to the kid. "Tetsuo Katsuji. Second year."

He takes your hand in both of his. He has a limp, clammy grip. "And I'm Nisekao Fukui. I'm a second year, too."

"I'm Mariko. Mariko Tsukino. Pleased to meet you, Nisekao-kun!"

Nisekao doesn't reach for her hand, but instead gives her a kind of half-wave and a weak "Hello."

"All right. Now that we all know who we are, I guess I'll start from the top." You all take a moment to unwrap your lunches, and on the dusty floor of the abandoned art room, you launch into the story of what happened in the Cloud.

Nisekao and Mariko listen raptly as you recount what happened from the moment you crossed the bridge all the way up to when you summoned Launcelot.

"So it just kind of...*happened*?" asks Nisekao. "You were attacked by those monsters and then your Persona

appeared? You didn't do anything special?"

"I don't really know. I don't *think* I did. All I remember thinking was how much I didn't want to die."

"*Hmm*. I guess that's not all there is to it, then. If it was, then I'd probably have one, too," he says, cradling his chin in his thumb and index finger, lost in thought.

"Well, I'm for sure not the guy to be asking about them. There's a lot I don't get myself. But I think everyone has 'em – they're like a part of you, something deep down inside, like another you."

"Yeah, that girl said something like that, too. Those people sure sounded like they knew an awful lot about this stuff."

Mariko pipes up. "Wait. I wanna know who these 'other people' are. What were they doing in my dream?"

You shrug. "Killing Shadows is what it sounds like. Pretty good at it, too. There were two of them: a guy and a girl, but I couldn't see the guy. I could only hear him, like some kinda voice in my head."

"And that girl, the one in the wetsuit and motorcycle helmet, she had a Persona, too. It looked really powerful. No offense...but it might have even been stronger than yours. At first, she was handling that other Persona like it was nothing," says Nisekao.

Mariko glances at him with interest. "Hold on, how many Personas are there now? I'm really getting lost."

You and Nisekao start to speak at the same time, but he defers to you with a shrug. You explain to Mariko everything that happened from when you saw Nisekao being attacked to when you parted ways with the wetsuit girl.

"You beat up my Persona?" says Mariko, mortified. You can't help but flinch at the face she's making.

"C'mon, it's not like that...the wetsuit girl said it was being controlled by the Dreamweaver – that other you that attacked me. It's not like we 'beat it up', I think it was more like 'setting it free'."

Mariko narrows her eyebrows at you. "You'd better hope so, Tetsuo-kun."

Yikes.

"Anyhow," she continues, "did they ever say who they were? I mean, from what you're saying, it sounds like they understand this better than we do. They've got names for these things and everything. Maybe if we got a chance to talk to them—"

You shake your head before she even gets a chance to finish. "Forget about it. She was covering every inch of skin on her body and he was *invisible*. They don't want anyone to know who they are, and I don't think they want anyone to know what they *do*, either. That voice was really adamant about



telling us only the bare minimum, and before they left, he told me to just forget about everything I saw." You turn to Nisekao. "What about you? What'd they tell you once you guys made it out of the Cloud?"

"The same thing, more or less. There was a lot going on, though - it was hard to keep track. We made it to this huge gate, but before we went through, she leaned over my shoulder and told me not to breathe a word of this to anyone. She made me promise before she'd push me through to the other side. After that came the strangest sensation, like surfacing from really deep water while someone's blowing a car horn in your ear. Once my eyes got adjusted and my ears stopped ringing, I was on the other side of the Tagekawa Bridge, and she was gone. I looked around, but there was no trace, like she'd just vanished into thin air. She might've gone back into the Cloud again, I don't know. I-I was too scared to head back and find out. Sorry."

"Don't sweat it. I would've done the same thing in your shoes."

"Thanks," says Nisekao, who finally cracks a smile. "So how'd you get out? That girl said you were going to fight the Dreamweaver. I mean, you must've won, but still..."

You and Mariko exchange a glance. The Dreamweaver had said a bunch of awfully personal things about her, a lot of which you feel like you shouldn't have heard.

"It's up to you," you tell her.

She plucks at the collar of her blouse for a few seconds, contemplative. Finally, she heaves a sigh and says, "The short version."

"Got it."

Everything from when you entered the department store up to when you made it to the roof you relate to Nisekao as it happened, with a few minor omissions relating to your boogie fever. Once you get to the part where you met the Dreamweaver, however, you skip right to the fight, much to Mariko's evident relief. In addition, you also choose to leave out the bit where you lost consciousness. You're still not one hundred percent certain what happened during that time, and you don't feel like dwelling on it. Instead, you just say that you managed to bait her into missing you and splattered her against the wall.

"Seriously, though, I thought I was gonna die for sure there. Even without her Enforcer, she was *way* outta my league. I have no clue what that girl was thinking, sending me in there alone."

"But you still pulled it off," says Nisekao.

"I was lucky."

"Luck is a skill in video games."

"Yeah, if only this were one of those."

Mariko rises to her feet, and you take another look at the time. Still a few minutes left before lunch ends.

"Then, I guess that brings us all up to date, doesn't it?" she says.

"Not quite," you say. No doubt she's not interested in talking about it, but it's easily the most important question you still have left to answer. "We still don't know exactly *why* or *how* all that happened yesterday. And to figure that out, we're gonna need your side of the story, Mariko."

"*Oh*. Right..." She reluctantly sits back down and begins messing with the elastic on her socks.

"It might not be easy to talk about, but that Shadow targeted you. The girl in the wetsuit said that it created that Cloud from *your* dreams. Nisekao and I have said everything there is for us to say. We need you to help us fill in the blanks for us. After you left me and Shibutani yesterday...is there *anything* you remember?"

"Well..." She starts to say something, but trails off, chewing on her lower lip as if searching for the right words to use.

"If you'd rather I left, that's okay with me. I...I know I can make some people uncomfortable," offers Nisekao. Mariko takes a deep breath, then vehemently shakes her head.

"No. It's not you. It's just that...there's a lot that I half remember, and some of it is, well, not like me. My life is

pretty weird right now, and there's a lot that I'm trying to deal with," she says, looking right at you.

"That's fine. Remember, we're all friends here. Once you've been through a near-death experience in a surreal dreamscape, you don't judge each other," you say. She cracks a smile at that.

"I guess that's true, huh? All right...where do you want me to start?"

"From the beginning, I guess. You said you were just tired, but you were really out of it yesterday morning on our way to school. I mean, you almost stepped into traffic gunning for that bridge. What was *really* going on with that?"

Mariko pulls on the end of her ponytail, looking just like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "I wasn't *exactly* telling a lie. I *did* have an awful ride over and I didn't get much sleep that night. But when we got to that intersection, I started feeling funny. Kind of like a cross between being dizzy and sleepy. My arms, my legs, my backpack, all of it started to feel really heavy. I wanted to curl up right there on the sidewalk and take a nap, but someone was whispering in my ear telling me that I would be much more comfortable over there."

"There?"

"You know, across the bridge. It felt like somewhere I needed to go. But you were acting really confused, and I didn't want

to leave you. Then, for a second, everything..." she halts in midsentence, and inhales deeply. "Everything changed. Like a blink, and then it was gone. In that moment, it was *that place*. And nothing else mattered anymore. It was so quick, but I knew in an instant that it was *made* for me. I had to find it again, and that little voice in my ear was going to take me to it. So I started walking."

"Almost right into a four-door sedan."

She chuckles. "I know. It's a good thing you were there with me, or else I might have. When I felt your hand, it all stopped. I wanted to tell myself it was just sleep deprivation, but I knew that it wasn't. It was real – and I...I wanted to go back.

"You've probably already figured this out by now, but I wasn't supposed to come here. I ran away from home two days ago after I got into a fight with my dad. I didn't tell anyone – I just woke up in the middle of the night and realized that I had to leave. I don't know why it had to be then or why I felt it so strongly. I just knew that I had to be somewhere else, somewhere less...suffocating.

"So I packed up as much as I could, snuck out of the house while Dad was asleep, and got on the first bus out of town. At first it seemed like a great idea – I was finally going to live on my own, the way *I* wanted to. But the more I thought about it, the sicker I got. I had almost no money, nowhere to live, I had basically dropped out of school...I cried and cried for hours at how stupid I was. At the next stop, I decided that I could at least go to Seganshima and live with my aunt for a while, but

all the same I felt trapped. I couldn't face going back home to Dad and my same old life, but I couldn't survive on my own, either. I wanted a way out so badly. So when I saw that world and heard those whispers promising me all the things I'd been praying for...I caved. It was exactly the way I pictured it. It was so perfect...I...I..."

Mariko swallows hard, her voice beginning to crack. Wetness starts to swell up in the corner of her eyes, and she turns away from you to wipe at them. You feel so helpless, standing there watching her break down. You can't even begin to imagine living without your parents around.

You rise to your feet and walk over to her. You want to say something to comfort her, but you can't come up with a single thing. So instead, you kneel down and push the tears from her cheek with your thumb and smile.

"T-Tetsuo-kun...I'm so sorry...if I wasn't so weak, all this would've never happened."

"No. No apologies. Save those for when you've done something wrong. I don't think giving in to something like that makes you weak. You made it this far on your own, and you still managed to crack a smile the first time I saw you. I think you can take anything life throws at you, honestly. And if you can't, don't be afraid to ask for help. You've got friends here in Seganshima now. No matter what it is, I've got your back."

"And...um...me, too! I'm not sure what I could do, but...I could probably think of something," adds Nisekao.

Mariko wipes away the last of the tears and lets you help her to her feet.

"Thanks, guys, I...I really needed that. That Shadow from my Cloud...the Dreamweaver...she was awful, but in a way, I guess she was still me. Maybe not the real me, but the me I thought I wanted to be, the one in all my fantasies. But now that I've seen – well – *been* her, I'm not so sure I want that anymore. I don't need to be her to be happy...but at the same time, I don't know that I could face going back home, either."

"I think your aunt would be okay with it if you wanted to finish the year here at Seganshima. And if she's not, you can just stay at our place. I'm sure Dad wouldn't mind."

"O-Oh! I don't..." Mariko starts blushing furiously, and you begin to wish you'd worded that more smoothly.

"W-Well, I'm sure it won't come to that, but we have a room for guests. All to yourself! So...y'know..."

"Err, well, anyways, I'll do that – ask my aunt if I can stay for the year, I mean. I don't think my cousin's coming home any time soon, so it should be fine for me to stay in his room. But while I'm still here," she says, straightening up and adopting a serious expression, "I wanna figure out why this is happening. It's not right to take advantage of people's minds like that. I got lucky – you saved me before I could become one of them. But this must be happening to more people than just me! The fact that you've got people running around in wetsuits clubbing Shadows is proof enough of that."

Nisekao nods. "I think so, too; those things are dangerous. I hate to say this, but think about it – that girl in the wetsuit is only one person. How many Shadows could she possibly be defeating on her own? We don't know how many there are out there. What happens to all the people whose Clouds she can't find? Are they...still there, watching their life happen through the eyes of a Shadow? Who's to say how many of these Shadows we passed just on our way to school alone – or worse – are here at school with us?"

He's raised a good – and chilling – point. You hadn't even considered it. The faces of all your classmates and teachers flash through your mind, all of them with glinting golden eyes and grotesque masks.

"What do you think, Tetsuo?" Mariko asks.

"Why's it up to me?"

"Why not?" says Nisekao. "You've saved both of us at least once, me twice. You're a good guy, you're not afraid to do what's right, and you're the only one of us that can summon a Persona. I don't think I could handle calling the shots, anyways. So...why *not* you?"

"Jeez, guys, way to put me on the spot like this. I don't even know where I'd start."

You've always made a point of avoiding responsibility to this point in your life. Group projects, the school festival, elections...you just don't care for that kind of pressure. This,



however, is much bigger than any of that, and the stakes are atmospherically higher. The conversation you overheard in the Velvet Room bubbles to the surface of your mind, causing you to question whether you should really be the one in charge of something like this if you can't even control your Wild Card powers.

Mariko and Nisekao study you expectantly.

*"The soul yearns for those like it, and by opening yourself to others, you will discover the means with which to make it strong."* Elizabeth's voice reverberates through your mind.

You sigh. If they trust you, then perhaps that's good enough for you.

"All right then. I say we do it." Mariko's face lights up, and Nisekao cracks a wry smile. *"But*. I can't promise that I'll be able to keep you safe on my own - these things can get seriously vicious. I nearly got killed even with Launcelot."

Mariko sniffs. "Not a problem. I've actually got just the thing to deal with a Shadow or two!"

"You mean this?" You produce the handgun from within your bag, glad to finally be rid of the thing. Mariko makes a sound like she's choked on her own spit, and Nisekao's eyes bug practically bug out of their sockets.

"Wh-What are you doing with something like that at school, Tetsuo?" he sputters. "You're gonna get expelled if they catch

you with that!"

"It's not mine! I was just holding onto it for Mariko."

"I don't think that changes anything," mumbles Nisekao, who wheels himself to the doorway and nervously swings his head back and forth. Mariko sheepishly steps forward and tucks the gun into her own bag.

"Wow. I woulda been in some serious trouble if I'd lost that. Thanks a ton,"

"No problem, just don't bring it to school. Why do you have something like that with you anyways? Can you use it?"

"Why? I dunno, it was a spur-of-the-moment thing when I left, really. I don't even know if Dad knows it's gone; it wasn't his anyways. I guess I figured it would be good to have if things got *really* bad. I'm a pretty good shot with it, too," she says, winking and flashing a toothy smile that's more unnerving than reassuring.

"Good thing your Dreamweaver wasn't," you say. "And what about you, Nisekao? Are you gonna be...well..." You immediately wish you hadn't said anything. Nisekao, however, doesn't seem fazed by your lack of tact.

"I'm not really sure, actually. I can't shoot or summon a Persona or do much of anything, so I'd probably just end up dragging you guys down. But...I know there's got to be *some* way that I can be useful. I just need some time to figure out

how."

"You got it. You're in this now just as much as Mariko or I am. Anything you could do to give us a leg up would be perfect."

"All right. I'll see what I can do!"

Just then, the bell in the main building begins to chime, four long, electronic tones that echo across the lawn and down the dilapidated corridors to signal the end of the lunch period.

"Looks like we're gonna have to wrap this up," says Mariko.

"Right. Let's try to work out a time and place to meet up again and hash this out. I don't even know how we'd go about finding a Cloud on purpose."

"And...this might just be me that feels like this, but maybe we should find somewhere private to talk about this kind of stuff. It just feels like something that should be kept secret, right?" says Nisekao.

You have to agree with him, especially with the possibility - no matter how small - that there could be Shadows listening in. The fewer people that know about what you're doing, the better. An idea hits you.

"How about we meet in my garage? No one at my house ever parks their car in it - I usually just use it to practice my guitar, so we'll have plenty of privacy. And if anyone asks, we can just tell 'em that we're starting a band. Lots of guys our age

do that, it's not super unbelievable."

Actually, it's been a dream of yours to start your own band, but they don't have to know that.

"That's not a bad idea, y'know," says Nisekao.

"That's awesome, Tetsuo! And whenever we wanna meet, we can just say that we're having 'practice'! But, if we're gonna pretend we're in a band, we gotta have a name," says Mariko, who's positively beaming over the idea.

"Do we? It's not a real band," says Nisekao.

"Even fake bands need a name! How about *The Dreamcatchers*?"

"Isn't that a little on the nose?"

"Okay...*Sweet Dreams*?"

"I-I don't know if anything with the word 'dream' in it is being very subtle..."

"*Sleepwalkers*," you say. It just sounds right.

"I like it! What about you, Nisekao-kun?"

"Yeah. It's not bad at all."

"All right, then!" Mariko takes yours and Nisekao's hands in hers. "Then as of this moment, the *Sleepwalkers* are officially

ready for action!"

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*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Fool Arcana...*

## 12. The Book of Avalon

"Shio and egg, babe, you know that's how I like it. What about you, my man?" Hayate leans over to elbow you in the ribs. The waitress, a cute college-age girl, rolls her eyes, emits a poorly suppressed sigh, and turns to take your order.

"Tonkotsu pork is fine."

"Thank *you*," she snaps before calling your order back to the kitchen.

"Girlfriend?" you ask. Hayate shakes his head and chews on his upper lip.

"One day, man, one day. I've coming here almost twice a week since last year. I figured she woulda warmed to me by now – I even got her schedule all figured out and everything! Must be one of those *tsundere* types. But hey, that's cool with me. I can withstand all that bitter *tsun* to reach that sweet, sweet *dere*." He grabs the neck of his bottled cola as if it was a beer and takes a swig.

"Uh huh. And what happens if there's no *dere*?"

Hayate smirks at that. "*Pfft*. There's always *dere*. *Always*."

The waitress returns to the counter with a couple steaming bowls of ramen in each hand. Gently, she deposits yours in front of you and places your chopsticks neatly on top. Then, she plunks down Hayate's, causing a bit of broth to slosh over the side of the bowl and splash sizzling onto his pants. Hayate chokes down a whimper of pain as the waitress dunks his chopsticks into the soup like a couple of darts.

"Y-You're the best, babe..." croaks Hayate as he dabs at his crotch with his napkin. The waitress replies with her middle finger.

Ignoring Hayate's clowning, you break your chopsticks apart and take in a healthy mouthful of noodles steeped in thick, gelatinous pork broth. It doesn't compare to Dad's, but Ikkuman's, like most restaurants in the Air Mall, is pretty skilled at what it does (and sports the prices to back it up). You'd taken Hayate up on his offer for ramen not because you particularly needed or wanted his company, but rather because he said he'd pay to hear what happened between you and the Yatabuya. You take a glance back over your shoulder into the glare of the setting sun, which washes the mall in a rich, orange glow.

The Air Mall has been considered the "crown jewel of Seganshima" since its construction. True to its name, it is an enormous cylinder suspended in midair between two of the largest department stores in the city, held in place by a number of reinforced walkways that allow access to the mall and a series of cables that are thicker around than a tree trunk. To emphasize the "air" theme, almost the entire mall

has been paneled in huge panes of glass, from the ceiling to the floor to the three huge windows that stripe the structure from top to bottom. In addition, many of the stores within the mall *also* feature an unfortunate number of windows, making it almost impossible to see at sunset unless you face east. However, it *is* one of your favorite places to visit after the sun goes down, when you can see the entirety of Seganshima glittering around you like a bag of jewels scattered onto a swath of black felt.

"A-Anyways, that's probably enough about girls. If we really wanted to get into that, I bet we'd be here all night, eh?" he says, peering over his glasses at you. "You got taken in by the Yatabuya and *lived*. What's the deal? Did you give 'em money? Beat 'em up? Did they ask you to join?" Hayate reaches over and yanks down your collar to look for a tattoo. You slap his hand away, annoyed.

"No, no, and *no*. I'm telling you, there's not a whole lot to say. There were two of them: this skinny guy that looked like a snake and some weightlifter girl. They asked me about a bunch of shit I didn't know anything about until the girl got mad and tried to beat my skull into paste."

"And your skull is pretty un-pasty. C'mon, man, I coulda guessed all that. Cut to the good stuff!"

"Some other guy interrupted, told them to quit wasting their time, and they let me go. That's all there is to it."

Hayate doesn't seem terribly satisfied with the truth. "You're



kidding, right? And just like that, they let you walk right out? You and I both know that's not how it works. You let one guy go and that tanks your rep! Suddenly everybody thinks they can get away with messing around with the Yatabuya!"

"It is what it is. You'd rather I'd have turned around and asked them?" you reply, getting quite tired of this thread of conversation. Hayate isn't however, and appears more than a little put out that your story didn't involve any wild fistfights or intense mind games.

"Well, no...the last thing I'd do after escaping the lion's pit is hop back in and pull his tail. It's just weird is all." He leans back in his chair and runs his hair through his fingers, idly tapping his chopsticks on the edge of his bowl like drumsticks. "That guy - the one that bailed you out - you think he was someone important? Think he was the Yatabuya Boss?"

"Doubt it, he didn't look like it and he wasn't treated like it. Besides, the other two said that *they* were representing the Boss. Wouldn't make much sense to send them and then come down yourself, would it? They called him Jidou. Does that sound familiar to you?"

Hayate frowns and takes another exaggerated swig of cola. "Maybe? I've heard it somewhere, but I can't say I *know* the guy. Shame he wasn't anyone special, though. If you'd found out the Boss's identity...now *that'd* be a story."

"If it was really him, he wouldn't have let me go. Why are you so obsessed with turning this into a 'story', anyways? I'd like

to forget about it," you say, and not untruthfully. You've got the sneaking suspicion that Hayate is trying to use your newfound reputation as a means to bolster his own. This free bowl of ramen seems less and less worth it by the minute. Hayate stares at you as if you'd just said something incredibly stupid.

"Seriously? We're in high school, man. This is where we become who we're gonna be for the rest of our *lives*. Great stories are currency – if you're part of an exceptional one, you're set for life! No one forgets someone who's got a great story to tell. You did what no one else has done before, and you're saying you just wanna forget about it?"

"Yeah, I do. I'm not looking for attention, and I definitely don't want rumors going around school saying that I made the Yatabuya look bad – that'll definitely get me killed. I don't want the help."

You expect Hayate to get agitated, but instead he just shakes his head and sighs into his ramen, his breath casting ripples across the surface of the broth. "Okay then, if that's your choice. But...I don't get you, man. Everyone wants to be remembered for *something*."

You've got nothing to say to that, so instead you busy your mouth with slurping up the rest of your noodles and fishing the last few chunks of pork from the murky depths of the bowl. As soon as you're done, you set the empty bowl atop the bar. The waitress saunters over to take it and asks you for seconds, which you decline.

"Could you fix me up with a little extra, babe?" croons Hayate, who peers suggestively over the top of his sunglasses at her.

"I can fix you up with your bill," she says, and quickly vanishes back into the kitchen.

Hayate shrugs and chuckles to himself. "She's probably just having an off day."

*Imagine that*, you think to yourself, but you hold your tongue. Hayate hasn't paid for your ramen yet.

"So, how're things going with Mariko-chan?" he asks, and you choke back a groan.

"Fine," you say.

"Alright, alright...so when you say 'fine', does that mean...you know...I mean, you guys have practically been attached at the hip ever since she got here."

You briefly consider the pros and cons of sticking a chopstick in your eye as a means of escape.

*"I'm helping a new student."*

Hayate throws up his hands in a disarming gesture. "Whoa, whoa. Sorry I asked. But, I mean, you can hardly blame me, right? If she's not seeing anybody, that's valuable information."

"Okay, fine. We're going out," you spit. You hate to lie like this, but you're sure Mariko would do the same in your shoes.

Maybe. Either way, it should be fine as long as he doesn't mention it to anyone... which as you think about it, seems less and less likely. You have never been so desperate to see a restaurant bill in your life.

"Aha! I knew it! Well good for you, man, she's criminally cute. Wish I could find a girl like that in only two days."

"Err...keep trying?" you offer, and then immediately wish you hadn't. Hayate chuckles and leans back on his stool.

"Hey, no worries, man! If there's one good thing about me, it's that I'm persistent. But...I gotta admit; it makes me a little jealous when you make it look so easy." With another roll of his chopsticks on the edge of his bowl, he dunks into his ramen to slurp up the last of his noodles. "Anyhow, no time to dwell on stuff like that. Some of my buds are about to swing by and get us into the karaoke bar upstairs. Y'know, the one where they serve booze? This one guy knows where to get fake IDs, he made one for all of us. Want me to get one for you?"

You hastily blurt, "No thanks," as you see the waitress emerge from the kitchen with your bill.

"All right, if you say so. Your loss, man," shrugs Hayate as he slaps a stack of yen down onto the counter and stuffs even more into the tip jar. "Hey, there they are now," he says, glancing outside where a group of about guys and girls from your school are passing by outside. It doesn't look like they're stopping.

"All right, I gotta go, but I'll hit you up on G-Net later, OK? I'll send you a friend request. Later!" he says, darting out of the restaurant after the group before you can even make up a lie to bail yourself out. Maybe you should delete your profile when you get home.

You look down at the money on the counter, and groan audibly, releasing all the frustration of the afternoon in one go. That son of a bitch only paid for himself. With a grimace, you slap your share of the bill down next to his, sling your guitar over your shoulder, and head for home.

On the way out, you shoot a cursory glance up to the level above you. The mall's five floors are arranged in rings that circle around the circumference of the structure, with each one specializing in certain businesses. The floor above you belongs to the clubs, bars, and arcades, and from here, you can see the bar Hayate was talking about, *Pop Miracle*.

A small line is beginning to form as the afternoon gives way to evening, their faces giddy with the anticipation of a night of singing and drinking their worries away. However, Hayate isn't with his "buds." He's standing awkwardly off to the side, nervously whipping his head back and forth to survey the faces around him. When someone turns his way, he rapidly strikes a pose, leaning back against the wall as he whips out his phone and makes exaggerated swiping motions that let you know that he's not actually checking on anything.

In a way, you had a sense that this was how it was. Shaking your head, you make for the elevators, leaving him to his

antics.

---

When you return home, Dad's sitting at the table, eating, and as usual, Mom is nowhere to be seen. On the television, the a news anchor delivers a story about a little girl who's come down with some incurable "mystery disease." Her pained expression mirrors how you feel inside. Dad gives you a small wave as he finishes chewing.

"There he is! How'd it go today?"

You decide to be truthful with him about the fight right now, figuring that he'd rather hear about it from you than someone else.

"I...I ended up getting into a fight today."

"*Hrrk!*"

Dad pounds on his chest a couple times to clear the stuck food from his windpipe. "I *really* hope you're joking, Tetsuo," he says, incredulous. "You're not joking, are you?"

"Well...no. But these guys were picking on one of my friends and I couldn't let them get away with it!"

"Tetsuo, that's when you call an adult and let them handle it! You're not supposed to be going around beating up people for being assholes; there are too many of 'em running around for that. Tell me: what were they doing?"

"Holding him down and spitting in his hair. He's handicapped, Dad, it's messed up. If I had gone to get someone, they might have already been gone by the time we got back."

Dad opens his mouth as if to say something in rebuttal, and then stops, his expression one of disbelief.

"Wow. That-that's awful. What's *wrong* with people today?" He inhales deeply and runs his fingers through his hair. He looks conflicted. "I'm not going to lie, I'm not exactly sure what to say here. I guess I'm surprised, first off. You've always been pretty hard to rile up."

"I know, I know...there was just something about this guy that made me so mad I couldn't see straight."

"That's understandable," he says, pushing his bowl aside and folding his arms on the tabletop, "but you can step in without knocking some guy's teeth out. No matter how much he deserves it. Unfortunately, crappy things are always going to happen to good people. I'm not saying you shouldn't stand up for them, but fixing things with your fists – even though it might be the easiest solution – isn't always gonna be the best."

"I know. It's not like I'm looking for fights all the time."

Dad gives you a wry smile. "I know that, too, but Mom wouldn't approve if I didn't give you the runaround. Frankly, I'd have punched the guy's lights out, too. These people are living in their own little world where they think the rules just don't apply to them. If he rats you out for butting in on his fun, I

hope they nail him, too. Speaking of which, am I going to be expecting a call in the next day or so or no?"

"Probably."

Dad rolls his eyes and grimaces. "Of course. If I'm going to be upset about anything, it's that I have to listen to some teacher that has no clue what's going on ride me about you. But at least it'll give me the opportunity to tell them your side of the story. Thanks for being straight with me, Tetsuo. As long as you're honest, I'll always go to bat for you."

"Thanks, Dad. I appreciate that."

"No problem. Of course," he says, his eyes narrowing, "I seriously hope this is only a one-time thing. Right?"

"Yeah! Yeah, of course."

"Good. You gonna wait for Mom to come home?" he asks, rising from the table to rinse out his dishes.

"Nah, not tonight. I think I'm just gonna head up to bed," you say, dumping your bag on the floor and shifting your case's strap into a more comfortable position. It's been a hellish day, and you're just ready for it to be over.

"All right then. I'll tell her you said goodnight. Hope tomorrow turns out better. G'night Tetsuo," says Dad, waving you towards the stairs.

"Night."



*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Temperance  
Arcana...*

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As you lie in bed that night, you're finding it difficult to keep your eyes shut. With a soft groan, you roll over onto your side and pluck your phone up off of your nightstand to check what time it is.

Midnight.

You decide to check your G-Net page in the hopes that you'll be able to find something to read or watch that'll put you to sleep. There's nothing new on your feed since the last time you checked, but you do have two new friend requests. The first one, from Mariko, you accept without a second thought. It'll be useful to keep in touch with her so that you can organize Sleepwalkers meetings. The other, as you'd feared, is from Hayate, his profile picture an uncomfortable closeup of him pulling down his glasses and roguishly sticking his tongue out. But after seeing that sorry display outside of *Pop Miracle* you feel compelled to at least grant him this, against your better judgement.

Almost immediately, you receive a notification that Hayate's posted a link to your feed, and you have to resist the urge to instantly unfriend him. Out of sheer curiosity, you decide to see what it is.

The link's title, *The Book of Avalon*, is fairly non-revealing, and it doesn't even come with a description to tell you what it is. All you have to go by is a message that Hayate's attached to it that reads, *Hey man, you gotta try this!*

That effectively tells you that it's not worth wasting your time on at all. You choose to ignore it.

Placing your phone back onto your nightstand, you hunker back down into bed. As you watch the midnight moonlight squeeze through the gaps in the curtains, illuminating slivers of your room in eerie silver, your eyelids suddenly feel much heavier. For a second, a tall figure appears to be standing in the middle of your room, its features obscured by the play of light and shadow. The headlights of a passing car cast a piercing arc of light across the room, and within its brilliance, the figure vanishes. But before your mind has a chance to register what you've seen, sleep seizes you violently, and you fall into unconsciousness.

## 13. Mister Congeniality

The chiming of the homeroom bell drags you out of your morning stupor blinking and groggy as you prepare to face the day. Because you'd stayed up so late last night, you slept right through your alarm and awoke abruptly to Dad throwing off your covers and asking you if you were planning on going to school today. The shock of your lateness kept lethargy at bay until you made it to school – a full ten minutes early, to your chagrin – but now it's back in full force, pulling down your eyelids as fast as you can pry them back open. But when the door slams open and Otomuji strides through, you snap wide awake, trying to match your posture to that of your similarly terrified classmates to avoid drawing her attention. Fortunately, she heads right for her desk and starts agitatedly rummaging around in her handbag, cursing none too subtly under her breath.

Sensing an opportunity to talk, Mariko leans over to whisper in your ear.

*"Hey, are we going to meet today?"*

*"Sure. I was thinking the same thing. Somehow, we've gotta figure out how we're gonna find these Clouds. Obviously those other guys have figured something out, so there's got to be a way."*

Mariko digests this with a simple nod and looks back over her shoulder.

*"Looks like Hayate-kun isn't here yet,"* she remarks.

*"No. No he's not,"* you say, a contented grin spreading from cheek to cheek. It's been a welcome change of pace this morning. Perhaps he was up too late "partying"?

You open your mouth to suggest that to Mariko, but before you can say anything, a set of thin fingers with nails as bright red as a ladybug's shell clamp down painfully on your shoulder. Grimacing and clenching your fists in anguish, you bring your head around to come face to face with the devilish smirk of Otomuji.

*"Decided to slink on back to class, have we?"* she practically crows, loud enough so that all of your classmates swivel around in their seats to see what the commotion's about. The bitch must be enjoying every second of this.

*"Hmm hmm hmm. This is exactly the problem with kids your age. You little know-it-alls think the world is your playground, and that you can just do whatever you want. Talk back to adults! Skip class! Smoke weed in the bathrooms! Who gives a damn, right? Well, you might have gotten away with your roguish display of disrespect, but there'll be no weaseling your way out of *this*! Know what this is?"* She brandishes a slip of paper at you, waving it so obnoxiously close to your face that you can't even read what it says. However, you think you have a clue.

"Enlighten me," you drone, unamused by the theatrics.

"*Watch your tone if you want this to have a happy ending,*" she hisses back for only you to hear. You don't care – you doubt any of your options right now qualify as "happy". She straightens back up and gleefully announces, "There's no escape this time. *This* – is an official disciplinary report featuring a first-hand account of your *assault* on another student! It-" she says, leaning in close to leer in your face – "is incontrovertible evidence of your delinquent behavior – behavior that must be met with an appropriate *punishment*." She lets the word *punishment* drip off her tongue, savoring each and every syllable with obvious pleasure.

"I wonder...what kind of consequence should an infraction like this merit? Detention? Suspension? *Expulsion*? Goodness, it *would* be a shame if your cocky little ass got jettisoned not even a full week into the year!"

"You can't expel him!" blurts out Mariko. "He was just defending another student! Those other guys are the ones you should be punishing!"

You shake your head. She just can't stay out of your business. Otomuji rounds on her with a sneer.

"And you -! What does this have to do with you? You're turning into quite the pimple as well; maybe you wanna shoot for an expulsion, too?"

"Maybe I d-"

**BANG!**

Her retort is cut short as the door comes sailing open, hitting the end of the track with a mighty crack. The sound of raucous giggling drifts in from the hall, diverting the class's attention from your spat with the teacher as they whirl about as if coordinated to face the door.

Hayate swaggers into the room flanked by what looks to be three incredibly attractive third-year girls, casually chatting with them as if he's either unaware that he's ridiculously late or he just doesn't care. The girls appear to be deeply invested in whatever it is that he's saying, as every now and then they'll nod enthusiastically or burst into fits of tittering laughter.

However, his unusual (at least, to you) company isn't the only thing that grabs your attention. Today, Hayate appears to have abandoned the dress code in favor of his own wardrobe, a tight-fitting black shirt with a low-cut collar that plunges a good few centimeters lower than you feel is necessary. As you stare, you can't help but notice that the cut of the shirt reveals that he's quite fit. Not excessively so, but enough to show through the thin fabric. A white tie hangs loosely around his neck, tied in a fashion that's deliberately half-assed. His hair is similarly styled - mussed, but not naturally. And of course, the sunglasses remain. It looks like he came straight to school from some kind of club, but that bit about going to *Pop Miracle* last night was all bogus, wasn't it?

Oddly enough, the rest of the class doesn't seem to find his flashy entrance the least bit out of the ordinary. Instead, your

classmates are practically falling out of their seats leaning into the aisle for high-fives which he reciprocates with a wink or a short "Hey, man." Even people who normally don't say much are greeting him enthusiastically. Eventually, he settles into his seat behind you, and his entourage of bubbly third-years wave cupped-hand goodbyes accompanied by seductive winks and blown kisses. He claps you on the shoulder affably and tips his shades in hello. Mariko shoots you a skeptical glance, which you reciprocate. The hell is all this about?

You know in your mind that this isn't normal. But at the same time, there's a bizarre sense of almost...*déjà vu*, as if this may have happened before and you're just having a hard time remembering. That possibility only compounds your confusion, an insistent pulling at the back of your mind like a wild dog pulling meat from the bones of butchers' scraps.

At the very least, you expect Otomuji to fly off the handle at this kind of brazen behavior. Instead, she smiles sweetly at him and says, "Good morning, Hirada-kun. If you wouldn't mind, try to be a little more punctual tomorrow, please."

Hayate flashes her a glittering, toothy smile. "Of course. Your wish is my command, Otomuji-chan."

Otomuji starts and emits a wholly uncharacteristically girlish giggle. "*Please*, Hirada-kun. I'm your *teacher*," she says before returning to the front of the room to take attendance.

*Otomuji-chan?* Mariko mouths at you, her expression incredulous. You're right with her - it's a pretty ballsy move.

However, it's put her into such a good mood that she's forgotten all about expelling you, so as far as you're concerned, he can call her "Otomuji-chan" as much as he wants.

A possibility runs through your head, one which you have to test immediately. Twisting about in your seat to face Hayate, you whisper to him, "*Hey. Nice threads, man.*" Your flattery has the intended effect – a wide smile creeps across his face and he tips his shades down his nose once again. "*You like 'em? They're the latest styles, y'know. I hear people in Italy wear these. Italy,*" he whispers back, but you don't care. What you're looking for are the eyes – the gold, glinting eyes of a Shadow. But there's nothing out of the ordinary about his – they're just his natural green.

Turning yourself back around, you consider the situation at hand while Otomuji's lecture goes in one ear and out the other. It's not as if you can just go and ask him "*Hey, are you a Shadow?*" His behavior's odd, sure, but it's not enough to really prove that the person behind you isn't really him. You never knew him before this year. It's possible that he's not the poser you pegged him as. But that doesn't mean you can't still be suspicious. You've got serious doubts that the guy who repulsed that Ikkuman's waitress so strongly could have possibly landed three groupies overnight.

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"That doesn't feel right to me, either," Mariko says to that later that evening, in your garage. After school, you got



together with Nisekao to get his opinion and to convene your first Sleepwalkers meeting. "I don't think Hayate-kun's a *bad* person, really, but he's kind of...umm...well..." she hesitates, possibly to pick out the most polite way to put what she wants to say.

"A creep?" you offer, picking idly at your guitar. Mariko makes a half-smile, half-grimace that suggests that she agrees, but doesn't want to say so.

"Ehh, *kinda*, yeah. He just tries a little too hard. I think that if he just acted normally, people would like him more."

"Doesn't look like he's got any problem with that *now*," mumbles Nisekao around a bit of hot dog cut to look like a little octopus. When Dad heard that you were having friends over, he was practically beside himself, making more snacks than the three of you could possibly eat. "I couldn't go more than five minutes without hearing someone whisper, '*Are you going to Hirada-kun's party tonight?*'" he says in a mocking tone. "It's like he's the center of the universe or something."

"Don't tell me *he's* been picking on you, too," you say, his surly tone making you worry.

"Eh...? No...no. I-I've actually never met him, it's just...I don't care for people that only want to be the center of attention," he explains, suddenly becoming meek again.

"I can sympathize," you reply. "I spent an hour with the guy just yesterday and it felt like I'd had enough of him for a

lifetime. This is just too much."

"Y'know, a bunch of people in our class were talking about that party at lunch, too. Seems like a lot of people got invited," says Mariko.

"I didn't," says Nisekao, "not that that surprises me or anything..."

"*Pfft*. Don't sweat it, I didn't either. I'm not complaining. What about you, Mariko?" you ask. Mariko shifts uncomfortably in her seat (a cardboard box marked "Photo Albums") and hastily pops a handful of animal crackers into her mouth.

"You *did*?" you blurt.

Mariko swallows hard and her entire face flushes bright red. "Uh-huh...he said that if I came, he'd...well..." She stops, too embarrassed to continue.

"He'd what?" you ask, even though you have an idea where this is going.

"He said, '*I'll show you a better time than anyone else ever could.*' *Uggh!* I'm sorry, it was so *gross!*" she squeals, and grabs another handful of crackers.

"That son of a bitch," you say, and find yourself taken aback by the edge in your tone. Taking a few deep breaths to clear the haze of indignation in your head, you try staying focused on the task at hand. "At any rate, this is as good a place for

us to start as any, isn't it? I mean, this is exactly the kind of fantasy he would come up with, too. Maybe this is just wishful thinking on my part 'cause his face is just so damn punchable, but if this isn't some Dreamweaver bullshit at work, I'll come to school in my skivvies tomorrow."

"Thanks for that mental image," Nisekao grumbles and Mariko laughs. "But seriously, though, I know you two are pretty convinced, but doesn't this all feel kind of...*familiar*? M-Maybe I'm just crazy, but I feel like I've heard this story before. Wouldn't be the first time I've been wrong about something, though, so feel free to ignore me..."

You wave off his doubts with a flick of your hand. "No, I got the same sensation, too – it was kinda like *déjà vu*. I don't buy it, but you're not alone."

"Do you think that's part of the Cloud's power?" Mariko asks, her expression worried and pensive. "Could it be trying to change our memories so we don't notice?"

Her voice trails off, and a pregnant silence descends over the three of you.

"There's no way to know unless we track it down and find out," you say at last.

"So how do you think we're supposed to find it?" asks Nisekao. "The last one I just happened upon by accident. What about you, Tetsuo?"

You'd been wondering about that as well. Mariko's Cloud had taken you by surprise, so you weren't really looking for any kind of sign that would indicate a Cloud's presence. Of course, now that you need to, you wish you had been more observant.

"No, me neither. I only found it because I knew where Mariko was going."

"That's it," says Nisekao, and his eyes light up in a way you haven't seen before.

"You have an idea, Nisekao-kun?" asks Mariko.

Nisekao's gaze drops to his feet and he starts pulling nervously at his fingers. "I-I think so. If you followed Mariko-chan to her Cloud...maybe Hirada will lead us to his. Umm, Mariko-chan, where did he say his party was again?"

Mariko taps a finger against her chin thoughtfully. "Umm...I wasn't planning to go, so I wasn't paying close attention, but I think he said he was having it at some club in the Air Mall. He started bragging about how exclusive and 'cutting edge' it was and I kinda started tuning him out."

"Well then," you say, a smirk playing across your lips, "sounds like we got a party to crash tonight." You check the time. It's already a little after ten. "How soon can you guys be ready to go?"

Mariko flashes a shark-like grin. "I'm ready to go right now."

She pulls her jacket aside to reveal her handgun, tucked neatly inside a concealed shoulder holster. "Just say the word, Tetsuo."

"Jeez, you can't be carrying that thing with you everywhere," you say. "But maybe we oughta bring more than just a weapon. Time moves a lot faster inside the Cloud than it does in the real world. It might not hurt to take some supplies with us in case we need to eat or someone gets hurt. How about we split up and get what we need from our houses. Then, we meet at the mall's Junes entrance at midnight. Sound good?"

"So we're really going tonight?" asks Nisekao worriedly.

"Do you really want to wait around for Hayate to throw another party? This is as good a chance as we're gonna get."

"OK! Tetsuo, I think you ought to be in charge of bringing the food," says Mariko, casting an eye over the platters and platters of uneaten snacks. "I know my aunt keeps a first aid kit and some painkillers above the stove, so I'll grab those. And Nisekao-kun..."

"I've actually got a lot of stuff I need to put together...after yesterday, I stayed up all night trying to figure out how I could help you guys, and I think I came up with a pretty good idea," he says.

"Awesome! Can't wait to see what you came up with," you tell him, to which he chuckles awkwardly.

"Well, you should probably see it first."

Mariko leaps to her feet, jauntily slinging her bag over her shoulder and bounding towards the small side door that leads out to your driveway.

"I'll see you guys later, OK? Try not to get caught!" she says before leaving. A swift, cool evening breeze rushes into the garage as she opens the door. You can briefly hear the chirping of crickets and distant drone of engines before it swings shut and it all cuts off as if to the swish of an invisible conductor's baton.

That's right – if you're going to be meeting the others at midnight, that means that all three of you are going to have to figure out some way to sneak out under your parents' noses.

"Are you gonna be able to get away from your folks?" you ask Nisekao. He shrugs noncommittally.

"Don't worry about it. I can manage one way or another." He wheels himself over towards the door as well, but before his hand lands on the knob, he stops and spins around to face you again.

"Hey...I don't want this to sound weird or anything, so promise me you'll have an open mind."

You're not sure what to expect after hearing him say that, but you can't think of a good reason to refuse, so you nod and let him continue.

"Thanks. So...I never really got the chance to say thanks for yesterday. No one's ever really stepped in when I get picked on. I'm not used to it."

"Don't mention it. How...how often does that kinda stuff happen to you? Is it okay if I ask that?"

"No. No, it's fine. If you really want to know, it happens...at least four times a week."

You seriously hope he's exaggerating, but the morose expression he's wearing tells you otherwise. In fact, his every bit of his body language is stark evidence of the harassment he's endured. Every wince, every nervous wring of his hands, every stuttered word is a scar left behind by some unseen trauma.

Upon realizing this, you feel a strange closeness to Nisekao. For an instant, you swear you can feel his pain as though it were your own: there is a rush of powerful feelings both yours and not yours that drown your senses. Depression, confusion, loneliness, pain, apprehension, and anger overwhelm even the deepest corners of your thought – and then it passes. It's a connection that runs deeper than you have the ability to explain, a sensation both saddening and frightening.

Finally, you say, "I...I had no clue."

He hangs his head and shakes it back and forth, letting his limp strands of hair wave across his forehead. "*Heh*. It's okay. But you learn to deal with it. You just...make yourself empty.

Let it happen, collect yourself afterwards, and move on. If they don't get a reaction, they get bored easier."

"Do you really believe that that works?"

Nisekao pauses. "...No. It's complete bullshit. But there's nothing else I can do anymore. At least, nothing that doesn't make it worse."

Then, his gaze locks directly onto yours, and his eyes widen as if in epiphany. Slowly, he wheels towards you, never breaking eye contact, and he takes you by the wrist. The corners of his lips turn up in an unnatural smirk.

Then, his voice practically trembling, he says, "That's why... that's why yesterday, when you stopped that *bastard* from spitting in my hair...I *loved* it. Watching you give him what he deserved was the most satisfying experience I think I've ever had...I'm so glad you didn't hold back. In fact, I kinda wish you'd gone a little farther. If it was me, well...I've thought about it so many times..."

"Nisekao, I..." You're at a loss for words in the face of this unnerving confession. His eyes wild and his grip steadily tightening around your wrist, his personality has taken an alarming turn. You can tell that there's a wellspring of raw emotion behind his words, emotion that's probably been pent up for a long time.

As if reading your mind, Nisekao goes on. "I know this must be a lot for someone who's almost a complete stranger to



take in...I've never spoken like this to anyone else before. But to you, it feels okay. Do you understand what I'm talking about?"

Wordlessly, you nod in understanding. The things he's saying are a bit disturbing, but for someone like him, you don't think they're completely unjustified. He relaxes his grip and sits back in his wheelchair.

"Good. I was afraid that you wouldn't. But I feel like I can trust you with just about anything, Tetsuo. I don't have any siblings, but this connection...you feel like a brother to me. It-It's not too strange of me to say that already, is it?"

"No. We're not judging each other, remember? Besides, I'm an only child, too. We gotta stick together, right?"

Nisekao chuckles awkwardly. His fit of mania seems to have passed. "Y-Yeah. Of course. Thanks, Tetsuo. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"No problem. If you ever want to get anything off your chest, let me know. In the meantime, you said you some stuff to get ready, right?" You check your phone again. It's going on ten-thirty. Outside, you can hear the low thrum of the engine of Mom's car as she pulls into the drive. You doubt that she'll have the energy to care much if you have people over this late, but you want your parents to feel like they can go to bed sooner rather than later.

"Right, right...I'll see you later, then, Tetsuo. Sorry for wasting

so much of your time!" he says as if just remembering what you're planning on doing tonight. Hurriedly, he grabs his things and leaves, avoiding eye contact the entire time, the wheels on his wheelchair squeaking and clattering in his wake. Wincing, you hope that none of your future expeditions hinge upon stealth. You can feel a peculiar bond forming between you and Nisekao...

*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Moon Arcana...*

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Later that night, you lie in bed fully clothed, eyes wide open, waiting for the opportunity to strike out for the Air Mall. You're fairly certain that your parents are asleep by now – Dad doesn't tend to stay up reading very late, and Mom is usually out cold within minutes of getting home – but you can't risk getting caught. You're the only one with a Persona, after all. If you can't go, the entire thing would have to be called off. You can't hear any muffled whispering or shuffling coming from your parents' room below, but you can wait a couple minutes more just to be certain.

Once the screen on your phone reads 11:30, you decide that

you can't afford to wait any longer and spring to your feet. Moving as silently and deliberately as possible, you grab your guitar and your bag stuffed with snacks and pad down the hall to the stairs. Making sure to avoid the squeaky bottom step, you steal past the darkened living room, through the kitchen, and into the hall where you slide on your shoes. The light of the moon casts ghostly shadows across the floor, making you crouch down low to the ground a couple times, fearing that the outline of a floor lamp or an open cupboard door is someone waiting to catch you in the act of sneaking out. Gingerly, you slide the front door open just wide enough for you to slip through sideways. Once close it behind you, you silently pump your fist in victory, knowing the hardest part is behind you. Then you dash down the walk, vault over the gate, and take off sprinting down the deserted street into the city.

Not entirely to your surprise, Mariko is the first one there, sitting on one of the benches along the glass walkway between Junes and the mall with a full grocery bag beside her. When she notices you, she waves excitedly, pulls a bottle out of the bag, and tosses it to you. It's a melon-flavored sports drink.

"You really went shopping? How long have you been waiting?" you tease, stowing the drink in your bag and plopping down next to her on the bench.

"A while," she answers with a sheepish smile. "I couldn't help myself. I *love* going to Junes, and yours is so *huge*!"

"That's the way everything is in a city like this. Is this the first time you've been to one?"

"Yeah," she says, the word dropping out of her mouth as if it embarrassed her. "My ho - where I'm from is nothing like this."

You put on a reassuring smile. "You'll get used to it. Try wandering around late at night - maybe not *this* late, but after most of the people have gone home. You'll get a feel for it in no time. And besides...I think it's a lot more beautiful that way."

She snickers. "*Woow*. Look at Tetsuo getting all starry-eyed and romantic!"

"What? I'm just stating my opinion, that's all. I'm allowed to do that," you insist, but the heat in your face is betraying you.

"Well, I guess all musicians have to be a little sentimental, huh? I'm not trying to be mean, Tetsuo! It's cute that you have that side to you!"

"*I'm not cute...*" you grumble. Thankfully, the rattling of Nisekao's chair echoing down the empty walkway rescues you from having to continue the conversation of whether or not you're really "cute".

"Okay!...Okay! I'm here! I'm so sorry I'm so late, it just took me more time to get together what I needed than I thought...I'm so sorry..." he wheezes, out of breath. He must

have been pumping those arms awfully hard. You check what time it is. 12:02.

"It's fine, man. Seriously. So what do you got for us?"

Nisekao rummages around in his bag and pulls out a couple small objects that he cups in his palm. He holds it out to you.

"Each of you take one."

As you turn the thing over in your hand, you can see that it looks like an earpiece of some sort, with a hook for keeping in place. In addition, a small, elliptical case bulges out of the side.

"You'll also need one of these," he adds, producing another couple of items. This one he doesn't hand to you. Instead, he comes up to you and Mariko, removes your Seganshima patches, and pins on new ones that look exactly the same.

"There we go," he says, "that should do."

"Okay," says Mariko, tapping on her earpiece, "I get that this must be a radio, but what's up with the patches?"

Nisekao takes a large, bricklike laptop from his bag and pops up the lid to power it on. While it boots, he explains, "Well...I get that it's not really feasible for me to come with you guys inside the Cloud. If I did, I'd always be slowing you down and making you waste your time and energy having to save my butt. So what I thought I'd do was figure out a way to support

you from out here, and this is how I'll do it." He points to the patch on your chest. "I fixed a small spy camera to each of your new patches so that I can see what you guys see while you're in the Cloud. They're not real high quality - I got them from a hobby store - and I'll need them back after you're done so I can charge the batteries. But for what we're doing, I think they'll serve. Now this way, I can map where you've been, keep track of info on Shadows you run into, and keep an eye out for trouble on the real world side. Not that there'd be much I could do about it, but still..." he trails off and looks hopefully to you two for approval.

Frankly, it's more than you could have asked for. "It's fantastic, Nisekao. We need someone watching our backs; chances are, we're gonna have our hands full in there as it is."

"Yeah, I hadn't even thought of what we'd do if we got lost in there..." Mariko says. "This'll be a real lifesaver, Nisekao-kun!"

Nisekao rubs the back of his head and grins sheepishly. "I'm just glad someone like me can be useful to you... So do you think we're ready to get started?"

You turn toward the double doors that lead to one of the two Air Mall lobbies. You're unsure of what you'll find on the other side. The prospect sends a tingle down your spine and into your arms and legs. Your muscles tense with anticipation and fear, and you can feel the adrenaline beginning to pump pure jet fuel through your veins.

"Yeah. C'mon guys - we're late for our first gig."



## 14. Party Crashers

"Now what the hell is *this*?"

You can hear the party going on behind the door; feel the powerful, rhythmic thumping of the bass under your fingertips as you run them across its darkened, opaque surface. Your suspicions are all but confirmed by its presence – it wasn't here yesterday. However, there doesn't seem to be any clear way to open it. There's no handle, no knob, no bars, nothing. Nothing, save for the round blue mask set into its center.

The three of you stand clustered around the entrance of the mall's south lobby. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for the Sleepwalkers to encounter a roadblock – a heavily tinted glass door spanning the entire entryway. Its presence confuses you. That is to say, you're glad to see it here - it more or less confirms your suspicions - but on the other hand, it doesn't really make sense. Cloud One (you've taken to numbering them so that when you're talking about "The Cloud", you won't all be asking "Which one?") had that huge, golden gate at the end of the bridge, but it swung open at the slightest push. You've tried pushing, pulling, lifting, and bashing this one, but it simply won't budge.

Making your middle and index fingers into a "V", you stick them into the mask's round eyeholes. Unsurprisingly, nothing



happens. There are no secret buttons or switches within, and you're back to square one. Its vacant gaze and slightly open mouth seem to be mocking you.

"Maybe we should try the other side..." muses Nisekao, looking back over his shoulder. You shake your head.

"No, that'd waste too much time. Besides, what'll we do if there's another one of these doors at the north lobby, too? There's *got* to be some way inside that we're just not getting."

"Stand back," says Mariko. You whirl around to see Mariko leveling her gun at the mask.

"No, wai-!"

The words barely pass your lips before Mariko starts emptying her magazine into the door. With a yelp, you and Nisekao dive to the ground, covering your heads as bullets ricochet all around you. When the shooting stops, you gingerly open your eyes. Satisfied that you haven't been shot by a stray bullet, you shakily rise to your feet and stumble over to help Nisekao back into his chair. That done, you round on Mariko, who reloads her gun with a sheepish smile.

"Jeez, what did you think was going to happen? Let the Shadows have a shot at us first."

"Sorry...thought it was worth a try."

"Well, we're all okay, so no harm done. Just...give us a little

more warning next time."

Nisekao goes over to the door and begins to inspect the mask closely, running his fingers over every curve, crevice, and edge.

"It's like the ones the Shadows wear...it's got to have something to do with this," he mutters to himself. Then, suddenly, his hand stops along the edge of the mask. He brings his other hand to the other side and begins yanking hard on it. Nothing's happening, but he appears encouraged. He lets go of it and turns to you and Mariko.

"There's a little space here along the sides of it for you to slip your fingers underneath. I'm not strong enough to get it, but maybe one of you...?"

"Oh! I'll try!" says Mariko, apparently eager to put her earlier gaffe behind her. She quickly slips her fingers underneath the mask where Nisekao's were. Taking a deep breath, she pulls on it with all her might, but again, the mask stays put. She removes her fingers, rubbing at the bright red marks the edges of the mask left behind.

"Wow. It's really stuck on there, isn't it? Let me have one more try!"

Stepping up the mask, she bends over and gives it a challenging glare. It doesn't respond to her attempts at intimidation. Bracing herself against the door with one foot, she gives the mask one more herculean pull, grunting and

straining with the effort. She pulls so hard that her fingers slip out from under it, her foot slides up the surface of the door, and she goes crashing to the floor.

"A-Are you OK, Mariko-chan?" asks Nisekao. Mariko winces and gingerly rubs her back.

"I don't think this is how you do it..." she says.

"Well, we haven't let Tetsuo try."

The two of them look to you expectantly.

"All right," you shrug, "let me have a go at it."

Stepping up to the mask, you feel around in the small space between its edge and the edge of the indentation into which it's set until you find the spot Nisekao was talking about. Sure enough, it's just large enough to fit your fingers into it. What's more, there are little grooves that seem to suggest that you're *meant* to grab the mask there. Making sure that you've got a good grip, you give it a good pull.

The eyes of the mask emit a flash of light, and to your surprise, it pops off of the door with barely any effort at all! For a second, you just stand there, staring at the thing in your hands, locking gazes with its empty stare. Then, it begins to disintegrate, and the crumbling bits of mask transform into a swarm of black butterflies. You, Mariko, and Nisekao throw your arms up to your faces to protect yourselves as they swirl about your heads, buffeting the three of you with hundreds of

dark wings. However, they only circle for a few brief moments before surging towards the door, diving into it as though it were a pool of water and leaving only a faint ripple behind.

Letting your arms drop back down to your sides, you watch as a seam begins to form right down the middle of the door's surface. The two halves then begin to slide open, and the faint beat you could hear before resolves into a full-fledged thumping as a wave of heavy club music floods your eardrums.

"All right, then. Who's ready to party?" you ask your friends.

"Jeez, how obnoxious. But then again, I don't know what I was expecting," Mariko says, hefting her bag over her shoulder.

"I'll be waiting just out here. If you guys need anything, just press the button on the side of your earpiece to talk to me and I'll see what I can do," says Nisekao.

"Gotcha."

"See ya later, Nisekao-kun!"

The two of you wave goodbye to Nisekao, who returns a half-hearted wave of his own. He wears a worried expression, which mirrors some of your own uncertainty. However, you can also discern something else there - a slight tilt of the eyebrows, a resigned slouching in his shoulders...is he perhaps envious of you? But before you can dwell on it too

much, you pass through the threshold and into Cloud Two proper, causing the door to slide shut behind you, blocking him from view.

Turning around, you see that Mariko's standing stock still, her face turned upward and mouth hanging slightly open with awe. When you face forward yourself, you can see why.

The Air Mall has been completely taken over by the Cloud, transformed into a massive orgy of light, sound, and gyrating bodies. The walls have all been replaced with sleek, modern black paneling with royal blue accent lighting that softly pulses in time with the music, and the mall's iconic window panes are now titanic slabs of frosted glass that alternate colors in a way that reminds you of a lava lamp. Behind (or maybe within?) it, silhouettes of attractive women thrust and twirl about in ways that make your face flush. Fortunately, you think the flashing colored lights that strobe from the ceiling far above are masking it nicely.

"This...this is definitely Hayate's dream," you stammer. Mariko nods, covering her ears.

"Why does it have to be so *loud*? I can hardly hear you right next to me! And there're so many people! This is gross, I feel like a sardine."

Mariko's right. Almost the entire ground floor has become a massive dance floor crowded with throngs of people. All around the Cloud, pounding music pumps from enormous speakers that stand taller than you are, and the sound of

hundreds of indistinct conversations merge into a near-deafening noise. The vibrations they create are powerful enough to make your skin tingle. Craning your head back, you can see that each level of the mall is similarly packed with fist-pumping, head-bobbing party-goers. You try to see if you can recognize anyone from school, but the lighting's too dim to properly make out anyone's faces.

"How are we supposed to find the Dreamweaver in all this?" she says, practically having to shout to be heard above the din.

You shrug. Casting your gaze all around you, the mall seems much larger than you remember it being, and the signage above the entrances to all the stores and restaurants you used to know is entirely unfamiliar. Even Ikkuman's three floors above you seems to be some kind of garish open bar. But of course it would be this way – this is Hayate's twisted little world now.

"I dunno," you respond, "this place is a freakin' zoo. Any ideas, Nisekao? You're seeing this, right?"

With an electronic crackle, your earpiece comes to life and Nisekao's voice cuts in.

*"I am! It works! What a nightmare...umm, no pun intended. A-Anyhow, I'm trying the best I can to put together a map for you, but my view isn't much better than your thanks to all those people. Sorry, guys."*

"That's not your fault, Nisekao-kun," Mariko says. "I bet the reason why he invited so many is because it'd be easier to hide."

"That seems kinda clever for Hayate, don't you think?" you say. "Besides, that'd mean he'd have to know we were coming. Seeing as I'm pretty sure Shadows don't read minds, I'm confident that we can rule that out. We're just gonna have to work around the guests."

Nisekao sighs into the mic. *"OK then. In that case, try to work your way up the top floor, if you can. I don't know how, but maybe a better vantage point might help."*

In the real world, there's a cluster of elevators directly in the center of the mall, connected to the ring of shops on each floor by five walkways that radiate outwards from it like spokes on a wheel. Getting on your tiptoes and scanning over sea of the crowd, it appears as if Cloud Two is same. Unfortunately, that means that you'll have to cut your way through the bulk of the undulating mass on the dance floor.

"Better than nothing. Let's move."

With Mariko following closely behind, the two of you hop down a short set of stairs down to the dance floor. You spot what looks to be a gap to your right, so gesturing forward with a point of your finger, you sidle towards it before it closes up.

"Scuse me...sorry...on your left...oof!"

Despite your best efforts, the crowd only gets thicker as you push towards the center, and you can't help but bump into someone wearing a bunny girl costume. Your shoulder catches theirs, sending you both stumbling backwards.

"Sorry," you mumble, "wasn't looking where I was-"

Your voice catches in your throat. Where the dancer's face should be, there's the same blue mask from the door in the lobby. A choking sound escapes your throat and you take a step backwards. One of the lights overhead flashes by, briefly revealing smooth, jet black skin that roils and smokes faintly in the colored haze.

*"Shit."*

You'd completely forgotten. Inside the Cloud, all these guests that Hayate's Shadow invited have turned from a horde of wild teenagers into a horde of wild Shadows.

Its hips hypnotically swaying from one side to the other, the Shadow turns on you and begins to advance, peering at you like a curious child. Instinctually, you take another step back and accidentally trod on one of Mariko's toes.

*"Yowch! Testuo, watch where you're-"*

As she gets a good look at the Shadow herself, her eyes grow wide, and her hand shoots into her jacket. Slowly, she also begins to back away from the creature, which continues to march towards the both of you with every inch that you



retreat. As you pass by, more and more of the dancing figures stop what they're doing to stare at you. Most of them are also dressed like flamboyant clubbers, with intricate outfits that feature more fringes, flared hems, and low necklines than you thought were still in style. It feels like you've fallen into the plot of a seventies music video.

But strangely, not a single Shadow has made a move to attack you yet. Instead, they're just circling around you, inspecting you the way a drill sergeant would look over a new recruit. The Shadows in Cloud One were way more aggressive than this.

"Stay alert," you hiss over your shoulder. The floor has gone silent – even the throbbing music has ceased. From a turntable mounted in what used to be a nearby storefront, a Shadow clutching a large pair of headphones to one ear (or at least where an ear would be if it had any) adds its dark gaze to the others. Carefully, you begin to wrap your fingers around the neck of your guitar and brace yourself to summon Launcelot.

As you watch her gauge the situation with a concentrated expression, you're impressed with how calm Mariko is being right now. She's not screaming or spraying the crowd with lead, just quietly sizing up the enemy. You only had to fight two Shadows in your first encounter with the creatures. Right now, there must be upwards of fifty staring you down. You'd be shitting your pants if you were in her shoes. Maybe it's her upbringing – if that gun used to be her dad's, then he might've been JSDF or something.

"What are you guys doing? Get out of there!" blares Nisekao's panicked voice in your ear.

Mariko holds up a finger and *shushes* him, even though the Shadows can't hear him.

"I don't think they want to hurt us," she says at last.

*"Are you sure about that? I don't feel sure about that."*

"Well, at least not yet. I think they're waiting for something..."

Then, Mariko's eyebrows shoot up in inspiration. She turns to you and whispers, *"Tetsuo, I need you to get behind me and grab my shoulders."*

"What? Why?" you whisper back.

*"Just promise me you'll follow my lead."*

"Okay..."

Unsure, you awkwardly shuffle around behind her while you keep the Shadows in your peripheral vision. Lightly, you place one hand on each shoulder and wait for her to show you what to do. The stillness is overwhelming, and with every moment that passes, you expect one of the Shadows to leap from the pack and attack you.

*"All right, on the count of three...one....two...three...CONGA!"*

Mariko leaps forward, kicking her legs and rotating her arms around each other to an imaginary beat. There's a moment of disbelief and dread as you follow her train of thought to the station. She glances back at you with a devilish grin.

"Ohhhhh no. No, this is *not* becoming a thing," you say, stumbling along behind her with your hands still gripping her shoulders. "This *cannot* be your plan."

"You just need to trust me, Tetsuo! Look!" Mariko calls over her shoulder and points forward.

To your amazement, the wall of Shadows begins to part as she approaches, and as they do, they start to resume their frenetic dancing.

"This never leaves this Cloud," you mutter in her ear. Reluctantly, you kick your legs in time with hers, letting out a short "*Whoop!*" every couple of steps.

Evidently, your boogying must satisfy the Shadows, as the music quickly resumes and they get back to partying as if nothing ever happened. More and more Shadows then start to step aside to let you through, and eventually, your two-person conga line begins carving a path straight to the elevators. Even a couple Shadows decide to join the line, which nearly makes you freak out and bash the one that clamps down on your shoulders, its grip painfully strong as its fingers sink into you. But once you come to terms with idea that as long as you keep dancing, the Shadows won't harm you, you actually start to find that you're enjoying yourself. But only a little. No

one must know.

As you draw closer to the elevators, the stowaways on your conga train break off to do their own thing, and the number of Shadows starts to thin out somewhat. Looking back over your shoulder over the sea of masks, you can hardly believe you just got through that unscathed. Mariko starts to giggle, which blows up into full-on laughter.

"I can't *believe* that worked! And then they started doing it, too...*snrk!* Ha-ha-how are we not *dead?*"

"*You guys are insane...how did you even think of trying something like that?*" asks Nisekao.

Mariko has to suck in a couple deep breaths to steady her voice before replying. "*Hoo...Well, we couldn't have fought all of them. And besides, I wouldn't have thought of it if it wasn't for Tetsuo. I mean, you *are* the expert, riiight?*" She sends you a teasing, sideways glance.

"No."

"*I don't get it, what's she talking about, Tetsuo?*"

"No."

"Oh, you should've seen it, Nisekao-kun, Tetsuo knows some pretty smooth mo-"

"No, this is dumb, you got lucky, let's **go**," you say flatly, and

sidle between a couple of the high tables arranged in a ring around the elevator bank.

"Oh come on, don't be such a stick in the mud!" Mariko huffs, but you're done talking about it. Next time you'll just let the Shadows eat you. Upon seeing that you're not going to wait for her, she shouts "Hey! W-Wait up!" and bounds after you.

When you reach the elevators, you swiftly realize why this part of the floor is less crowded. A line of red velvet rope runs around the elevators, prohibiting access to them. A tall, voluptuous, bunny girl Shadow stands at the break in the line holding the segment with clip. As each Shadow approaches, she lifts the rope to let them into the elevator, and presses a button next to the lift to send them on their way. A long line of other Shadows are waiting to enter, presumably to gain access to the other floors. The line stretches all the way to the northern edge of the Cloud, through the crowd of Shadows and out of your sight. The Shadows waiting in line are comical to watch – some jump up and down and lean around one another to get a better idea of their position, others try to cut without the one in front of them noticing, and some are even *fighting* each other for a closer spot.

Their slapstick behavior is incredibly bizarre - it's so... so...*human*. Granted, if what the wetsuit girl and her partner said was true, then all Shadows come from people's minds. But then how can some be mindless, cannibalistic monsters, while these are busting moves and forming queues? You know you shouldn't let your guard down like this, but Cloud Two's Shadows are actually starting to grow on you. You'd

almost feel bad fighting them at this point.

However, this *does* present an obnoxious obstacle.

"I guess the VIP area must be up there," says Mariko, staring at one of the elevators as it comes down.

"Yeah, but I sure as hell ain't waiting in *that* line. I'd rather find the stairs."

Your earpiece chirps to life. *"VIP, huh...interesting idea, Mariko-chan. If that's true, then maybe the Dreamweaver is on one of the other floors. You guys need to find a way onto that elevator. I've been searching the video feed to see if I could spot another way for you to get up there, but I'm just not seeing anything."*

"Not even any stairs? I seriously wouldn't mind taking the stairs," you answer.

*"I can look again, but I don't think there are...sorry."*

"Hey, Tetsuo! Look," says Mariko suddenly, grabbing your sleeve and pointing towards the front of the line. The elevator Mariko was looking at has come to a halt, and the bunny girl Shadow beckons the next Shadow in line forward with its index finger. The bunny girl makes a few gestures towards it that you can't interpret. Whatever it was, it really seems to piss off the other Shadow. It angrily stomps its foot and sticks a finger in the bunny girl's face...mask...thing. The bunny girl slaps the other Shadow's finger aside and points back

towards the crowd.

"I guess he's not a VIP," says Mariko.

"Yeah, he's not having any of that," you say, watching as the other Shadow grabs a fistful of the bunny girl's collar and starts shaking it back and forth with rage.

Then, the bunny girl throws its head back and emits an ear-splitting, high-pitched, ululating shriek that rips through the air and causes you and all the other Shadows to fall to your knees, clutching at your heads.

For the second time, the Cloud falls ominously silent. Gently, the two of you rise to your feet. The bunny girl Shadow has stopped screaming, but the rest of the Shadows continue to cower.

Then, in the distance, there comes a faint rumble, a rhythmic crashing like an enormous boulder tumbling to the bottom of a canyon.

*THOOM. THOOM. THOOM.*

"Tetsuo...what was that?"

The question barely passes Mariko's lips before an enormous shadow eclipses the lights overhead. A giant figure leaps from one the floors far above you and comes crashing down onto the dance floor, causing what feels like entire Cloud to shake violently. You and Mariko stumble into one another, grabbing

at each other's sleeves to keep your balance. The rumbling quickly subsides, and you hastily detach yourselves and turn back towards the line.

Towering almost ten feet tall, a monstrous creature hulks over the shivering line of Shadows. Slightly hunchbacked, it's heavily muscled, yet lean, with a matted mullet of straw-brown hair. Like most of Cloud Two's Shadows, it's dressed in a human fashion – a ripped black T-shirt and similarly torn jeans. Block white letters across the back of the shirt spell "SECURITY". Its shoulders are massive and swollen, lending it the appearance of wearing pads or even armored pauldrons underneath. The bunny girl points to the Shadow that grabbed her and the newcomer nods and grunts. As it bends over to grab the Shadow by the head, it twists slightly to reveal that it, too, wears the same wide-eyed mask as the one from the entrance.

Neither you nor Mariko make the slightest move as you watch the behemoth hoist the Shadow high above its head like a doll. As though it were only just now realizing its plight, it desperately wriggles its body back and forth with snapping, jerky motions. Annoyed, the monster grunts again, and with its free hand, pins the Shadow's legs together. The bunny girl Shadow makes a couple quick gurgling sounds to her companion. It nods curtly. Holding the Shadow like a party popper, it starts to pull both ends of the Shadow in opposite directions. It squeals with pain and increases its thrashing, but the monster only tightens its grip and pulls harder. Horrified, you almost swear you can hear it start to come apart.



Then, the creature lets out a massive bellow that reverberates throughout the whole Cloud. Its sides start to ripple. Then, a new pair of limbs erupt from its underarms, and its new hands clamp down over the old ones. Its victim's screeching pierces your ears as the monster redoubles its efforts.

There is an audible tearing sound, and the Shadow comes apart at the torso in a spray of viscera. Black miasma pumps from the two halves, spilling onto the dance floor and instantly evaporating into trails of hissing smoke. Howling in triumph, the monster heaves what remains of the Shadow's corpse into the crowd. The dancers instantly descend upon its discarded body, pushing and clawing over one another to grab a bite. You slam your esophagus shut to keep your dinner from escaping. Silently, you take back what you were thinking about these Shadows seeming human.

*"Th-That's it...that's the Enforcer...it has to be,"* breathes Nisekao in your ear.

"That's Hayate-kun's Persona? There's no way," says Mariko.

*"Shhh!"* You swear that you can hear something coming from one of the floor above cutting through the clamor.

"Hey, hey, hey! Come on now, guys! What's all this now?"

Standing on a wide, semicircular balcony jutting off the 5th floor ring, looking much the same as he did in class today, the Dreamweaver glares down at the chaos going on below. His stare is piercing, uncomfortable, and most notable of all,

glinting gold. Two attractive Shadows stand at his side, clinging adoringly onto each elbow. The Shadows all freeze in place, twisting their heads to follow his voice.

"You all know how this works – I don't give a shit what you do, just respect the help, OK? If you're not a VIP, you're not a freakin' VIP. Cripes." He turns to address the Enforcer. "Good work, amigo. But next time, could do me a solid and not make such a scene? You're ruining my buzz."

It nods its understanding and leaps up onto another floor – at least 50 feet or more - swinging itself up over the ledge like a giant ape and bounding out of sight. Eventually, its thundering footfalls fade into the distance, and the party starts back up again as if nothing had even happened.

The Dreamweaver heaves a sigh and props himself up on his elbows, surveying the scene. You could be wrong, but he almost looks disappointed. What for, you can't imagine. His gaze travels the length of the dance floor, but halt when it falls on you. For a moment, you think your eyes meet. You want to look away, but don't for fear that it might seem more suspicious. After all, with all the flashing lights and the hundreds of feet between the two of you, could he really recognize you from all the way up there? You'd like to be able to say that he can't, but your gut is saying otherwise.

Then, he smirks and winks in your direction, and you know your presence is no longer secret. Gesturing for his entourage to follow him, he turns his back to you and retreats back into one of the venues above. Frankly, it would have been less

unsettling if he'd called his horde of Shadows on you.

You decide not to mention it – your friends are probably spooked enough right now as it is. At least now you know where you have to go. You'll just have to try not to get yourselves ripped in half on the way there. Business as usual.

"Okay, so...ready to go?" you ask as nonchalantly as possible.

Mariko breathes deeply. You can tell she's really trying to put on a brave face. "Yeah...yeah, I think so. Listen, is it weird that I'm more worried about that Enforcer than the Dreamweaver? I didn't think it would be so *big!* Was mine like that?"

"Not *quite* like that, but yeah, it was pretty intimidating. Must be something about the Cloud that makes 'em like that. But anyways, don't start underestimating the Dreamweaver just because he looks like our dumbshit classmate and *that* looks like a roided-out bouncer. We actually probably stand a better chance against the Enforcer, to be honest."

"*Do you guys think you can do this?*" asks Nisekao.

Mariko takes another deep breath and cracks an encouraging grin. "Of course we can! We wouldn't have started the band if we didn't think we could do it! Now let's quit wasting time and get on that elevator!"

You can't help but smile back at her enthusiasm. She's right –

now isn't the time for you to be getting cold feet. As long as you've got Launcelot with you, you can handle this.

"I agree, let's just get on with it. If we're lucky, we might not even run into the Enforcer," you say, painfully aware that this is a fine piece of wishful thinking. "But if we don't figure out a way to slip past that Shadow in the bunny suit, we're gonna meet it face to face whether we want to or not."

The two of you fall silent. Then, Mariko's face lights up.

"Follow me."

She leads you around to the other side of the elevator bank opposite from the line. Each elevator has a glass back so that you can see out into the rest of the mall, but because the elevator doors on the other side are closed, the Shadows on the other side are blocked from view. Mariko lifts up a segment of the rope, stoops underneath it, and straightens back up on the other side.

"There!"

"Are you sure this is okay? Why aren't any of the other Shadows trying this?" you ask.

Mariko shrugs. "Well, they *are* just Shadows. Lines are for chumps anyways. Let's take this one," she says, and presses the call button for the elevator in front of her. With a faint ding, the doors slide open. However, as they do so, the elevator on the other side opens as well. For a second, both you and the

Shadows stare at each other unblinking through the panes of glass.

"Oh, *dammit*. Tetsuo, get on the elevator."

"Aye aye!"

Circumventing her line does *not* sit well with the bunny girl, and she immediately sprints around the elevators towards you. She's much faster than you'd figured. You're barely past the rope before she lunges at you with her hands outstretched. The tips of her fingers sharpen into claws, which she uses to slash at your face. You barely have enough time to bring your arm up to guard against the attack. She tears through your sleeve as she flies by, shredding the fabric and slicing three crimson lines in your skin. Having missed her mark, she somersaults head over heels behind you.

"Launcelot!"

Seizing your opportunity, you direct Launcelot to cover your escape by bashing the bunny girl Shadow across the face with his shield. She hits the floor with a wail, allowing you to dash into the elevator.

"C'mon, let's go, let's go!" you yell.

"Wait, where are the buttons?"

The two of you quickly canvas the elevator, but for some asinine reason, there don't appear to be any controls.

"How the hell do you make this thing move?" you shout.

Outside, the line grows restless. Throwing a glance over your shoulder to check on them, you see what looks like an oversized glove scuttle underneath the legs of the Shadows ahead of it. Turning back to the crowd, it gives an ugly, high bark and rips down the rope barrier.

That sets off the veritable powder keg of irritable Shadows. Having lost all semblance of self-control, the mass swarms towards the elevators. A cluster of them surges into the one across from you, chattering and screaming and pounding on the glass in an attempt to reach you. You need to think quickly – the rest of the Shadows are spilling around the sides of the elevator bank and will reach you any moment. Unless you can get the elevator moving, you're essentially a canned meal.

You try to think back to how the bunny girl operated the elevators. If you remember correctly, she used the panel on the outside instead of pressing anything within the elevator itself. Without any hesitation, you lean out of the door and mash the up button. The doors begin sliding shut at what feels like a painfully slow rate. The chorus of yammering coming from the Shadows grows louder and louder with each second. A tinkling sound from behind you draws your attention that way. Whipping around, you find that the Shadows opposite you have shattered the glass in the back of their elevator and have cracked yours.

"C'mon, c'mon!" you mutter through clenched teeth as though it would force your little metal coffin to move.

"Ree!"

A squeal coming from around your ankles draws your gaze downwards. The glove-like Shadow has wedged itself in the gap between the doors, preventing them from closing! A tiny little nub head where its wrist would be with its own tiny little mask wriggles madly in its attempt to get at you. You stomp at it with your shoe, but that only makes it squirm more frantically. It squeezes its thumb and pinky through the crack, using them to try and push itself all the way inside. Behind you, the crack in the glass grows larger.

"No you don't!" shouts Mariko. Whipping out her gun, she looses off three well-aimed shots directly at its face. The force knocks the Shadow back through gap, and the elevator doors slam shut with a *ding!* Mercifully, it finally begins to climb, leaving the horde of mad creatures behind.

"God," you sigh, slumping against the wall and letting your body slide to the floor. Across from you, Mariko is still staring at the door. Her arms are shaking, and she clutches the grip of her gun with white knuckles.

"You all right?" you ask.

Mariko blinks a couple times at the sound of your voice. "Y-Yeah. Yeah, I'm OK. I-I've just never actually shot anything before..."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, technically they're not real."

"I know that! But...it still feels real to me."

You lean over and clap a hand on her shoulder. "You're doing great. Way better than I did in Cloud One. If it wasn't for you, I'd be dead already, probably. Just keep your head up."

Mariko gives you a grateful smile. "Thanks Tet-"

"*Guys, look out!*" your comm shouts, but Nisekao's warning is too late. The pane in the back of the elevator shatters, showering the both of you with shards of glass. When you lower your arms, the cause is apparent - the other elevator has somehow pulled up alongside you with its cargo of belligerent Shadows in tow.

"Dammit! We're not done yet! Launcelot!"

Your Persona materializes in front of you - a tight fit in the now crowded space - and deflects a strike from an oncoming Shadow. Frantically, you search for a way to get rid of your attackers. Peering over Launcelot's shield, you can see that the doors of the other elevator are slightly stuck on the torso of a Shadow that appears to have been trying to climb inside as it took off. It's just wide enough for someone - or something - to fit through.

"Grab hold of something!" you shout to Mariko. She nods and latches onto one of the thin railings near her waist.

You gesture to Launcelot. With a swipe of his lance, he fires a barrage of wind blades at the knot of Shadows clambering



over one another to reach you. The spell doesn't tear these enemies apart - for what it's worth, these appear to be stronger than the ones in Cloud One. But it does have the effect you intended. They go toppling backwards, tumbling head over heels until they slam into the Shadow stuck in the door. The impact jars it loose, popping it out into thin air. The rest of its comrades follow suit, shooting out of the gap one by one and careening helplessly towards the ground.

However, one Shadow still remains on its feet, shrugging off Launcelot's magic as if he'd just been blown on. It snickers, and faster than you can react, it rolls under Launcelot's shield and leaps towards Mariko. As it soars through the air, balls of fire engulf its fists, and it raises one to strike her.

You make a split-second decision and throw your shoulder into her, shoving her aside. She harmlessly bumps into the wall and falls on her backside, but you take the full brunt of the Shadow's hit. It feels like someone's smashed your face with a hot plate, a white-hot searing like the skin of your cheek's being melted off. Then the impact hits home, knocking you off balance, and Launcelot evaporates into thin air. The elevator swims before your eyes and you find yourself having a difficult staying upright. You reach up to feel your face. It's warm to the touch, but otherwise unharmed. Doesn't surprise you much by now, though.

Unfortunately, you're not given much of an opportunity to reflect on your Rasputin-like ability to withstand punishment. The Shadow, evidently pissed at your interference, grabs you by the collar and lifts you into the air. With one of its legs, it

kicks out one of the door panels, and your stomach drops out from under you as you realize what it's doing. It swings you towards the opening, and gravity takes a short break.

Then, you're sailing out over nothing, the dance floor below you just a collection of colored specks about to grow larger and larger. Desperately, your flailing arms seek purchase on something, *anything*.

Your left swipes and grabs air.

Your right swipes and just barely grasps the edge of the elevator floor.

Your fingers clutch those few inches of precious metal for all they're worth and try not to think about how far up you're dangling. Every second you spend hanging here is one that Mariko has to spend in there facing that Shadow on her own.

It doesn't take much effort to swing your left hand up onto the edge as well. But before you can pull yourself back into the elevator, there's an audible crunch, and something smashes the fingers in your right hand. You let go with a yelp of pain, now hanging only by the gradually weakening strength in your left hand. Above you, the Shadow peers at you with as much contempt as something wearing a mask can muster.

"Mariko, do something!" you yell. Your right hand is in too much pain to grab onto the edge again, and you can't summon Launcelot outside of a moving elevator. What will give first, your grip, or the Shadow's patience?

Three gunshots resound above you, and the Shadow's head snaps forward as each bullet finds its mark. However, it doesn't so much as faze the thing. Mariko's voice rings out, laced with growing hysteria.

"Tetsuo, it's not doing anything!"

"Please," you plead, "I can't-" You attempt to grab the edge with your right hand again, but they've gone numb and slide right back off. Mariko fires off three more shots, but the effort remains futile.

*"Tetsuo!"* she screams. *"Oh God, Tetsuo, I'm sorry!"*

"Mariko, you have to try to summon your Persona!" you shout. The Shadow lifts its foot over your trembling knuckles. Nisekao is saying something in your ear, but you can't process a bit of it. The only thing you can hear is the whipping of the air around you as you ascend and Mariko's choked sobbing.

*"I don't - I can't - I don't know what to do, Tetsuo!"*

"Yes you do! You're more than strong enough! Don't you tell me that you aren't!"

"No, Tetsuo, I...what am I doing here? This was a mistake...I can't summon a Persona, I can't fight these things! I can't even help myself, let alone you!"

The Shadow brings its foot down on your knuckles, and you have to bite down on your lower lip to keep from letting go. A

trickle of red runs down your chin.

"*Bullshit!* You *can* do this, Mariko! If there's anyone who can, it's you! Remember, no matter how bad it gets-*agh!*" The Shadow grinds its foot on your hand, causing you to howl. "No matter how bad it gets, you're with us now! You gotta trust me...but first, you gotta trust yourself!"

"You're right. I don't want to be alone...I'm not going to be alone! I'm-I'm not going to lose you, too!" she shouts.

All around you, the lights in the Cloud appear to dim. The Shadow removes its foot from your hand, befuddled. Then, like rays of sunlight piercing through parting clouds, a shaft of light splits the darkness.

*"Persona! Come, Nyneve!"*

A massive card with the illustration of the Sun upon it hurtles into the roof of the elevator and shatters into thousands of pieces. The shards swirl around inside the cabin, coalescing and reforming into the figure of a kindly woman with the wings of angel wielding a large, ornate blade. With a start, you realize that you recognize her - she's the same being as the vision you saw after defeating Mariko's Enforcer.

Forgetting about you, the Shadow rounds on Mariko and advances on her and her Persona. Now that you're not being harassed, you're able to swing your right arm up onto the edge and hoist yourself back into the elevator without putting pressure on your injured right hand.

Within, the Shadow is squaring off against its new target. It seems unsure about how to approach Nyneve, as it takes a hesitant step backwards every time a snap of electricity crackles through her wings.

*"Mariko-chan, can you hear me? You gotta press the advantage now while you've got it afraid of you!"* says Nisekao.

You're not sure how good Shadows' hearing is, or whether they can understand human language for that matter, but the instant Nisekao stops talking, it attempts to lunge past Nyneve with its fists blazing. It doesn't get far.

Nyneve plunges her sword into the creature's foot, pinning it to ground. The Shadow cries out and pulls at its leg in a vain attempt to wrench itself free. Nyneve floats over to it and gently - almost like a caress - places her palm over its mask. The cabin lights up with the glow of high-voltage magic. The enemy shudders violently from the shock that surges through its body as it loses all control of its limbs. Static hisses in the air, and the hair on the back of your neck stiffens.

*"That's it! It's working! Now finish it off!"*

Nyneve presses more firmly against her opponent, and the power of the current ramps up. Visible bolts of electricity coil around the Shadow's body, crackling and popping and forcing to shield your eyes against the intense light. A horrid sizzling noise fills the cabin, and the Shadow evaporates into a haze of black mist.

Nyeneve bows slightly, and disappears with a gentle flash of light. Wide-eyed and mouth agape, Mariko stumbles backwards towards the broken window, and you have to leap to your feet to keep her from falling out.

"Whoa there. Don't save my life and then go falling out yourself. You still with me?"

She blinks a couple times, shaking her head and pressing her fingers against her temple.

"I...I did it. That was my Persona."

"I sure hope so. It'd be awful weird if it was someone else's."

"You know what I mean, you dork!" she says, and give you playful punch in the shoulder.

"Yowch!" She didn't hit all that hard, but your arm's gotten sore from supporting the entire weight of your body for so long.

"Oh jeez! I'm sorry Tetsuo, I forgot! Are you hurt anywhere?"

Apart from the aching in your left arm, the only thing that really still hurts is your right hand, but even that pain is starting to fade.

"I'll be fine, I think. Not that you should be making a habit of it or anything, but Persona users can really take a beating."

"Oh, good. Uh, not that you got hurt, but that you're okay!"

Her eyes drop to the floor. "Seriously...I'm sorry it took me so long to pull myself together. I thought that I'd be ready for anything this time, that I'd be able to handle myself. But in the end, I almost let you die. I don't know how I would have lived with myself."

"Well, I'm still here, aren't I? I knew I could count on you to pull through for me. Truth be told, you're probably the most reliable one out of us."

*"I'll vouch for that,"* Nisekao chimes in.

"Thanks guys...I needed to hear that."

"I'm not making anything up. It's the truth."

That elicits a smile from her, much to your relief.

Suddenly, the elevator comes to a halt. There's a soft ding, and the one door panel that's still left slides open onto one of the connecting walkways.

"Looks like this is our stop," you say.

The two of you waste no time exiting the metal deathtrap. Leaning out over the railing to survey your surroundings, it appears that the elevator's dropped you off a floor short of your goal. The floor you're on now is what used to be the mall's food court. On the other side of the elevator bank, you spot the place that used to be Ikkuman's, where you were just a little over a day ago. It seems like as good a place as any

to find a place away from the Shadows to catch your breath.

"Come on," you say, gesturing for her to follow you, "let's find somewhere to take a break."

*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Sun Arcana...*



## 15. A Series of Difficult Negotiations

There are only a couple of Shadows seated at the bar where Ikkuman's used to be, seated on tall, leather-cushioned stools and sipping garishly colored drinks out of bizarre curly-cued glassware. They don't seem to have been particularly disturbed by the ruckus, likely placated by whatever it is they're drinking. So long as they're not belligerent, though, you figure it ought to be safe enough to take a short break here. However, your nerves are still wound up tight as a spring, and you can't help but steal quick glances over your shoulder every couple of seconds.

You and Mariko take a couple stools down at the very end of the counter, putting as much space between you and the closest Shadow as possible. Her hands still shaking a little, Mariko cracks the seal on her drink and takes a couple deep gulps. Once she's had enough, she caps it back up and sighs deeply.

"OK," she says, whether to you or to herself, you can't tell.

"Feeling better?" You flex the fingers in your right hand as you ask her, testing their strength. The shooting pain is completely gone.

"Yeah. Lots, actually. It's weird, though. Technically, it's past

midnight in the real world, but I don't feel tired at all. In fact, I feel really good - like I could go for a run or something."

*"That makes one of us," yawns Nisekao. "I feel like I'm gonna conk out any moment now. I wish I had a Persona."*

"Tell you what, Nisekao, next time we go out on an expedition, I'll lend you my coffee card. My treat," you offer.

*"Oh, you don't need to do that. I mean, I'll be all right."*

"It's just coffee, man. Can't have our navigator falling asleep at the helm, right? Just take it. It's what friends do for each other."

*"A-All right. Thanks, Tetsuo."*

An awkward pause settles between the three of you. Mariko hastily jumps in to change the subject.

"Umm, so...do you wanna get going again? We have to find the Dreamweaver before the party ends, right?"

She shifts uncomfortably in her stool as she says this, and adjusts the strap of her bag as if she's about to get up. You could go back out there too if you wanted to, but you'd like a little more time to collect yourself.

"Hold on a second," you say, putting up your hand. She relaxes back down onto the stool. "We kinda made a huge scene out there, so it wouldn't surprise me if we attracted

some unwanted attention. Dunno know about you, but I'm not super eager to run smack dab into the Enforcer the second we leave this bar."

Mariko grimaces. "True, true...OK then, I guess we can stay a little longer."

"Those sound like magic words to me. Can I fix you anything?"

The strange, gruff voice drags you out of your conversation and draws your attention to its source: a paunchy Shadow in a wrinkled, stained shirt. Mariko starts, and you stare at it dumbly. Its use of human language is throwing you for a loop – to this point, the only Shadows that you've been able to comprehend are the Dreamweavers. This one seems harmless enough, but that common thread is enough to make you wary.

"Jeez, don't look at me like that. Gonna make me think I'm ugly or somethin'. Listen, you ain't one of those loiterers, are ya? 'Cause I don't put up with that crap here."

The bartender seems to have a short fuse; it's probably not worth it to argue with it and draw attention to yourselves.

"Uh, then...two...house...specials?" you reply. That sounds like something that might be a drink.

If you could see the bartender's eyebrows (or if he had any – you're unsure what a Shadow would need eyebrows for), you're certain it'd be raising one right now. But it nods and

trundles off to fix your order.

Mariko turns to you, visibly disturbed.

"You can understand them?"

"Just that one, apparently. Why, can't you?"

"No! It sounds like all the rest of them – a bunch of grunts and clicks."

"W-Was I making those noises, too?"

"No, you sounded normal," she says, although the tone of her voice seems to indicate that she doesn't think the situation is terribly normal at all.

"Well, that's a relief, I guess."

Mariko still doesn't look convinced, so you add, "For what it's worth, it's kinda freakin' me out, too. But it might end up being useful."

"True," she muses, cradling her chin in the crook of her thumb. "I guess I'd rather meet a Shadow that wants to talk instead of fight anyways. So what did it want?"

"Our drink orders. It thought we were loiterers."

Mariko's eyes go wide and her face flushes visibly in the blue-tinged light. "Tetsuo, I don't think we're old enough to drink!" However, she halts her protest when the bartender returns

with a couple of fat, bowl-like glasses topped up with a violently blue substance. He plunks them down on the bar in front of you, and instead of spilling over, their contents sway gently in their spherical containers.

"*Can you drink this?*" Mariko whispers to you.

"Enjoy," says the bartender, but it makes no move to leave you alone. Instead, it just stands there, expectant. You slide the glass around in your grip a little, watching its contents slosh thickly around the rim.

"Uh, how much for these?" you ask, desperately hoping that's what it wants.

"All the beverages here are complimentary. Nobody should have to pay to have a good time, eh? Now lemme see ya pound those suckers!" it says, giving you a hefty clap on the back that just about takes your breath away. You and Mariko exchange a sideways glance. Hesitantly, you lift the glass to your face.

"Bottoms up."

The "drink" oozes past your lips, and your tongue is awash in a number of sensations. The beverage is pudding-like in texture and consistency - almost gelatinous - and easy to swallow. The taste starts out acrid. If you had to describe it, it'd be "burning electronics"-flavored. But fortunately, it quickly turns sour and candylike, and leaves your mouth and throat slightly numb. Then, a warm tingling shoots from your stomach

into your brain, and you become extremely light-headed. The world around you starts to slide in and out of focus, well-defined shapes becoming kaleidoscopic before your eyes.

"Tetsuo, are you all right?" asks the collection of fuzzy lights that used to be Mariko.

You try to tell Mariko not to drink any of hers, but all that drops out of your mouth is "You are a million colors."

She seems to take the point well enough. Pushing her drink to the side, she takes you by the shoulders and gives you a gentle shake. Or at least, that's what you suppose is happening now that the world has stopped lurching like a ship at high seas.

"Give him a second. This part's my favorite," says the bartender.

For a moment, everything falls back into definition. Then, little particles of light - literally every individual photon - begins to ignite one by one before your eyes, tiny stars exploding into shafts of intense light that pierce your retinas, a symphony of stellar life unfolding before your eyes until all you see is an ocean of blinding white. You then begin to accelerate through this searing photoscape, speed manifesting as the deafening roar of wind in your ears, advancing ever faster towards some invisible horizon.

And then, abruptly, the world around you slams back into reality as clear and crisp as it ever was. Your head snaps

forward from the absence of a sense of momentum, your breath short and ragged.

"God. *Daaaaamn.*"

"Yeah, most folks stay away from the Special if they know what they're doin'. But you handled it pretty well for a human - I'm impressed. And maybe a little disappointed. I dunno, I kinda figured your head would pop off or something."

This Shadow's kind of a dick.

"How do you feel?" asks Mariko.

"Isn't it obvious?" Your fingers probe your temple in a futile attempt to alleviate the pounding within. "Just...don't drink that. Please."

The bartender chuckles at you.

"You're kind of a funny guy, you know that?" It leans over the counter towards you conspiratorially. "Listen, I know you're not supposed to be here."

"Eh?" you croak. You drank its trippy pudding, what more does it want? You start to plead your case, but the Shadow shakes its head and interrupts.

"Hey, hey, shut it! Just...hear me out, OK? It's obvious there's something fishy goin' on here with you. I mean, I don't see any other fleshy folks like you wandering around, so...y'know?"

You nod your understanding and wait for it to continue.

"Good, good. So long story short, you seem like the kinda guy interesting stuff happens to. Don't ask me why I feel that way, I just do. Me? Not much interesting goin' on with this right now," it says, gesturing to itself.

"Now, I know what you're thinkin': 'You're partyin' all the time, how is that not interesting?' Well, lemme tell you what, once you've seen one guy tear another to bits in a drunken rage, you've seen 'em all. I'm more of a...wanderer type. I wanna get outta here. See the world. You feelin' what I'm sayin' here?"

"Sure," you answer, although there's a persistent ringing in your ears that's making it tough to care about what he's blabbering about.

"Nice. So here's the deal: I'm willing to lend you my power if you're interested."

That catches your attention.

"Your power?"

"That's what I said, isn't it? Those ears aren't just for decoration, are they? You get me – the real me, not this flabby fatsuit. I know it sounds like I'm tryin' to pull one over on ya, but underneath these rolls, I can really light shit up."

You're not entirely sure what "lighting shit up" entails, and



usually when someone insists that they're not trying to trick you, they're *definitely* trying to trick you. Under normal circumstances, you wouldn't trust this thing farther than you could throw it. But the way you see it, even if this Shadow does try something with you, you feel confident enough that between you and Mariko, you could handle it if it came to that. Besides, you're curious to know what it means by "lending you its power." When it said that, something resonated deep within your mind; a sense of connection not dissimilar to the kind you've experienced with your family and friends. For some reason, you also think of the Velvet Room; of the aura of destiny and purpose exuded by its mysterious residents. The similarities are convincing enough to dispel your skepticism.

"It wants to come with me," you tell Mariko. Her incredulous reaction tells you exactly how she feels about that, not that you can blame her for being wary after what she's just been through.

"Just trust me on this one," you say. Shifting your attention back to the bartender, you say, "OK, I'm on board. You wanna tag along, feel free."

The Shadow gives another deep, creepy laugh. "All right, that's what I'm talkin' about!"

Then, it pauses, contemplative.

"...I'll do it for 5000 yen."

"Wait, what? Where'd that come from? You were just begging to go with me not more than a minute ago. Now you want money? What happened to 'complimentary'?"

The Shadow stares off to the side somewhere. "Dunno what you're talkin' about, that don't sound like me. The way I figure, if I'm putting myself out there for you – this is a dangerous place for humans, after all. It's not too strange to ask for a little...*compensation*, right?"

*"What's it saying?"* whispers Mariko.

*"It wants money now."*

She draws back.

*"Seriously? No, it's not worth it!"*

You sigh. *"It's like, the cost of a new pair of jeans. I know you don't like it, but I think it's the right move."*

She huffs, but doesn't say anything else, deferring to your judgment. You can kind of understand where she's coming from - she's clearly anxious to be moving again.

With some reluctance, you withdraw a dog-eared 5000 yen note from your wallet and press it into the Shadow's smoky palm. The bill appears to sink into its skin and disappears to wherever it is that Shadows store their cash.

"Hmm...yeah, that's a good start. Now how about a little

somethin' to eat while we're at it?"

*"I – You – Wha -?"*

All this sputtering must make you look like a complete imbecile, but the Shadow's gall is unbelievable.

"I just gave you five thousand yen! Go buy your own food! Actually, better idea – make something yourself, you run a damn bar."

It winces, but quickly draws itself back up again.

"You try doin' this as long as I have and see if you feel like eatin' your own food all the time."

*"As long as you have,"* that's gotta be what? All of a couple hours?"

"I'm just in the mood for something home-cooked is all," it says, effectively sidestepping the question. "Smells like you got something in that bag. What's in there? Got enough to share?" The Shadow stalks toward you, pawing at the pouch on your bag with Dad's snacks inside. You yank it back out of its reach.

"You know, there's a saying about cooks who won't eat their own food..." you say dryly.

"Never heard of it. So what's the deal, you gonna hook me up with some comfort food or what? Or do you not want my power after all?"

"It's starting to sound like a bigger waste of time by the minute," you grumble. It's almost to the point where you want to tell the bartender to shove off out of principle. It knows it has you on the hook and you hate it. But, you figure this is one of those times where a man has to swallow his pride— and watch someone else swallow his food.

Making sure to muster as much disdain as you possibly can, you reach into your bag, remove one of the tins octopus weenies, and toss it to the Shadow. It must not have expected you to give in quite so easily, because it nearly drops the thing in surprise. It pries the lid open just a smidge and holds the tin up close to its mask to look inside.

"Oooh!"

Once it's satisfied that you haven't booby trapped the snacks, it flings the lid aside with a clatter and holds up one of the weenies between two fat fingers, squeezing it like a little stress ball.

"Wouldja look at these cute little things! Only a human would think of stuff like this!"

With its thumb, it pops the weenie into the slit in its mask where its mouth would be and starts chewing very loudly and enthusiastically.

"Oh yeah! That's good! Real good! I can taste the love in each meaty little tentacle! Tell you what, I could sit down and eat a

hundred of these without even realizin' it!"

"Well, we don't *have* a hundred. And that's all you're getting."

The Shadow upends the entire tin of weenies into its waiting maw and casts the tin aside, belching loudly. Mariko looks from you to the Shadow with an expression that can't decide whether it wants to be disgust or bewilderment.

"Yeah, yeah, that's okay, I guess."

"So are we satisfied now?" you ask. If the answer's not "Yes," you swear you're going to skewer this thing and be on your way.

The Shadow pretends to be deep in thought, letting out a slew of theatrical "Hmmm"s and "Ehhh"s before finally heaving a shrug.

"I *suppose* so. I wouldn't mind a little more pocket change, but I'm in a generous mood today, so I'll come with you on the cheap. *Alley-oop!*"

With a snap of its fingers, the Shadow disappears in a puff of black smoke that engulfs the area around you. A slew of curses escape your lips as you cough and hack on the smog, thinking that it jacked your stuff and ran. But when the smoke clears, something bright and shining hangs in the air before you, emitting a soft, iridescent blue glow. Cautiously, you reach forward and grab it.

As you take it between your thumb and index finger, the light dissipates, and you're left holding a thin card. The side facing you seems somewhat familiar, although you can't immediately say where you've seen it before. There's an image of a mask on it - one half black, one half white – on a deep blue background. On the other side, there's the picture of some kind of imp peering above the rim of an ornate pot. Underneath it is an inscription that reads "Agathion".

You flip the card over again in your hands, and as you do, a memory floats to the surface of your mind. The design on the back of this card is that same as the ones Minato had in the Velvet Room, both the ones he was using to tell your fortune, and the ones with all the different Personas on them. If that's the case, then this must be...

*[Hey! So whaddya think? Pretty neat, eh?]*

The bartender's sudden voice in your head almost makes you jump with surprise. The idea of talking to a card strikes you as impossibly dumb, but you flip it back over to the side with the picture of "Agathion" and think, *[Is that you?]*

*[Who else would it be? Your mother?]* the bartender says, voice dripping with sarcasm.

*[You keep my mother out of this.]*

*[Jeez, it's just a joke, pal. I'm sure she's a very nice lady. Anyhow, anyone ever tell you that you got very nice headspace? Wasn't expecting a roomie, but that ain't a*

*dealbreaker.]*

*[What?]*

*[Big guy, armor, doesn't talk much...ring any bells?]* it says. Is it talking about Launcelot? If it is, then that must mean that this thing (as loathe as you are to admit it) is another one of your Personas. You decide to ask it.

*[I dunno, this whole deal is new to me, too,]it replies. [But it doesn't sound wrong, so what the hey. If you wanna know what to call me, Agathion'll do. Figured that would be pretty obvious, though. I mean, it's on the card, right? Anyhow, you're the boss now, so lemme know when you want somethin' to burn. Or if you want a drink. Your call.]*

And with that, Agathion falls silent, and card in your hand vanishes into thin air with a flash of light.

Looking back up, you notice that Mariko has been staring at you quizzically this entire time, looking hopelessly baffled.

"What was that all about? And why'd you give it our snacks, too?"

"Shadows are greedy little assholes. That's all I've got to say. But I got a new Persona out of the deal, so I guess it was worth it."

Mariko's expressions shifts from confusion to curiosity.

"A new Persona? You can do that? Did you really give up Launcelot for *that* thing?"

"No, no, no," you say, waving your hands about, "Launcelot's still there. In my mind, I mean. They're both there, because they're both my Personas. They're both...parts of me, I guess."

*"I'm not an expert, of course, but I thought you could only have one,"* says Nisekao.

You heave a sigh. There's no time right now to explain everything to them, but it's not like you can just say "I'm a Wild Card and I'm special, so deal with it" either and expect your friends to be satisfied.

"You guys...you trust me, right?" you ask.

"Of course. We wanted you to be our leader, after all," Mariko says. Nisekao adds a quiet "*Uh-huh.*"

"OK. Then I just want you to believe me when I say that it's kinda complicated, and not even I know what it's all about one hundred percent. But I can use more than one Persona."

Mariko opens her mouth, and you can hear an intake of breath over your mic, but you interrupt them before they can say anything.

"I don't know why I can do this, and don't ask me how I know about it either. It's a longer story than I've got time to tell, and



it's some pretty out there shit." You pause. "Not that these last couple days *haven't* been out there, but...it's just hard to explain. It's...part of who I am. Sorry for sounding so sketchy, but that's why I wanted to be sure that you guys trusted me. I promise that when we get the opportunity, I'll give you the whole deal, but right now, we've got bigger things on our plate."

You fall silent to give Mariko and Nisekao some time to digest what you've said. In retrospect, you probably should have said something about the Velvet Room earlier to save yourself the trouble later, but for some reason, it felt like something too intimate and private to share. After all, Mariko's a Persona user, too, and she's never been there before. Or at least, if she has, she's never said anything about it, either. There's also the fact that the idea of a couple ship-dwelling weirdos who can accurately predict the future that you've only met in your dreams is a tough pill to swallow.

Surprisingly, Nisekao breaks the silence first.

*"That's okay, Tetsuo. Y-You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. Like Mariko-chan said: you're our leader, and whatever's going on, I...I think you'll make the right decision. You don't have to explain yourself to me."*

Mariko gives a short bob of her head.

"I'm with Nisekao-kun. It's not like having more than one Persona is a bad thing, anyways. If anything, it'll probably be pretty useful. Besides...everyone has things that are hard to

tell others. If this isn't a good time, then it isn't a good time. I agree that the most important thing we need to do is find Hayate-kun. Anything else can wait until later."

That went better than you'd expected. Inwardly, you're grateful not to have to try and explain the Velvet Room to the others – like Mariko said, it's just not something you're ready to share just yet. You don't like keeping secrets from people you consider your friends, so it puts your mind at ease to know it doesn't bother them.

"Right," you say, refocusing your thoughts on the task at hand. "I think we're plenty rested up by now, so let's get going again. The elevator brought us most of the way, but we're still one floor short. I know it's the last place either of us wanna go back to, but let's check out the elevators again."

When you return to the elevator bank, none of them are there waiting for you. Peering as far out over the railing as you dare, it seems as if all of them have returned to the first floor to await more passengers. The line has reformed, and looks like the bunny girl Shadow has recovered enough to resume her task of verifying "VIPs". With some amusement, you note that the line is much shorter than it was before.

Drawing yourself away from the railing, you notice a Shadow at the bank on the floor below you. Interested in seeing how the elevators work from a different floor, you watch as it presses the call button adjacent to the door and the car races upwards from the first floor. It arrives seconds afterwards with a barely audible *ding*, and the Shadow strides inside. The

elevator returns to the first floor, the Shadow climbs out, and the doors slide closed, ready for the next passenger.

You shift your focus to the call button for the elevator nearest you. What you find isn't encouraging. Where normally there would be buttons to indicate whether you wanted to go up or down, there's only one such button present here. Based on what you just saw, it looks like the only thing you can do with it is return to the first floor.

You relay this information to Mariko and Nisekao.

"Well *that* sounds pretty stupid," Mariko says. "What's the point of having an elevator that can only go between two floors?"

*"I think all of them are like that,"* says Nisekao. *"I've been watching them, too, and it seems like each elevator services a different floor – one for the second, one for the third, and one for the fourth – the one you guys are on now. I haven't seen them stop anywhere else, so I'm at least eighty-five percent sure about this."*

"Just eighty-five percent?"

*"I like to give myself a wide margin of error..."*

"Then how does anyone reach the top floor? *That's* where we need to go," Mariko says, frustration edging into her voice. "Shadows are rotten architects."

*"I don't think it's that so much as it is a way to control where their guests go. It could be that the Dreamweaver doesn't want anyone going to the fifth floor."*

"But there's still got to be a way up there," you point out. "It's not as if they can just teleport or something...I think."

*"Right, right, I know that...I haven't figured that part out yet is all. Sorry."*

"You gotta break that apology habit, man. I know what you mean."

The conversation withers as the three of you delve into quiet contemplation. An idea strikes you.

*[Agathion?]* you call out inside of your mind.

*[Present. You wanna get turned up again already?]*

*[Yeah, nah. I got a question for you.]*

*[Shoot,]* it says. It's hard to tell, but it sounds significantly less interested.

*[How does anyone around here get up to the fifth floor?]*

There's a brief pause.

*[Well, you gotta be invited, for starters,]* it says after a couple beats.

[*And how do you get invited?*]

Another pause laced with hesitation. Whether it's because of ignorance, or out fear of the Dreamweaver, you can't tell.

[*Truth be told, I got no clue. Zip. Zilch. Nada. Most of the time, his pals are of the sexy variety, but it's not like he's exclusively a ladies' man or nothin'. There's no rhyme or reason to it, but there's always someone with him.*]

[*C'mon, you gotta give me more to work with than that! I don't care if I'm invited or not, I just want to get up there! There has to be something you've noticed!*]

[*Okay, okay! Just gimme some time to think.*]

Mentally, you step back to give Agathion some room to remember, and your mind goes quiet. After a bit, he pipes up again.

[*All right, I don't know how helpful this is gonna be, but here goes: every so often, the Host likes to make himself seen up there with whoever he's chilling with at the moment. I dunno why he does it, could be the attention, could be that he wants to show off – not that I blame him, his parties are crazy famous among Shadows. But whatever the reason, I know that everyone he's ever brought up there stops on this floor first. Where they go after that, I don't know.*]

[*It's a start. Thanks, Agathion.*]

"Uhh, Tetsuo?" Mariko waves a hand in front of your face.  
"Are you still there?"

Her voice snaps you back to reality, and you sheepishly scratch the back of your head.

"Yeah...I just wanted to ask Agathion what he thought."

"Anything useful?" she asks, although the skepticism in her tone suggests that she doesn't think much of whatever Agathion has to offer.

"Kind of. He says that all the Dreamweaver's special guests stop on this floor before they appear up there," you say, pointing up towards the balcony where he was earlier. "Makes sense to me that the way up there has to be hidden somewhere near here."

Mariko's eyes suddenly light up. "You mean...like a *secret passage*?"

"Umm, I...guess? Whatever the case, it can't be obvious or else I'd have gotten a more direct answer."

"Well then, I guess there's nothing else we can do but look for this secret passage!" Mariko says with a pump of her fist.

"I...I never said there was a secret passage..."

Nevertheless, Mariko ignores you and hops off towards the outer ring in search of secret passages. Heaving a sigh, you take off after her.

You catch up with her outside of a lounge full of thick, impenetrable smoke. Faint wheezing and hacking noises are coming from within. Mariko's caught a lungful of the stuff and is doubled over, clutching her knees and coughing up a lung herself. You come up alongside and guide her towards a nearby bench away from the haze, giving her a couple hearty thumps on the back for good measure.

"C'mon, quit running off like that. What are you, six?"

"Sorry. When it comes to stuff like secret passages and hidden doors, I just can't help myself. Don't they excite you, too, Tetsuo?"

"Not this much."

She scrunches up her face and sticks her tongue out at you. "*Booo*. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Jeez, you really *are* six. Anyways, we should probably put our heads together and figure out a plan to-"

*THOOM.*

Your train of thought comes to a screeching halt as the deep rumble echoes through the wide hall and into the corners of dim bars, parlors, and lounges.

*THOOM.*

Another, the beat of some unseen bass drum pounding out a

funeral march.

*THOOM. THOOM. THOOM. THOOM.*

Faster and harder, closer and closer the pounding comes. You feel your heartbeat quicken, your pupils dilate, and your hand has found its way to the neck of your guitar. Your muscles tense in preparation, and then – nothing.

An eerie stillness settles over Cloud Two as the sound disappears. Next to you, Mariko has her hand inside her jacket, her expression now a mask of anxiety and tension. For an excruciating minute, the two of you stand stock still. There's a weight in the back of your throat, a dull leaden thing that's making it hard to breathe normally. Another minute passes uneventful, and cautiously, you release your white-knuckled grip on your guitar.

As if your hand was holding closed the door to a lion's cage, the instant you let go, a tremendous roar rips through the Cloud, a powerful bellow that rattles the glassware hanging in racks above the bars and threatens to tip over tables. A massive, black figure launches from the cloud of smoke in the lounge and skids to a halt in front of you, kicking up bits of shredded tile in your faces.

The Enforcer towers above you, its chest heaving and black, soulless gaze transfixed on yours. It was monstrous enough from a distance, but up close – close enough for you to reach out and touch one of its lean, toned legs – it's positively... there's no other way to describe it but *unreal*. There's simply



no comparison to anything you've ever seen before.

It extends one hand towards you, palm open and fingers outstretched, and places it on your shoulder. Its touch is gentle, but the memory of that Shadow getting torn apart still runs rampant through your mind. Heaving the Enforcer's hand aside as you duck out of its reach, you pull your guitar out of its case and steel yourself for a fight. Beside you, Mariko adopts a shooter's stance and levels her gun at its chest.

The Enforcer draws back and jerks its hands to itself, giving the impression that it's offended that you stopped it from tearing your arm off. Stepping away from you, it throws its head back and lets rip another floor-shaking roar. Then, it draws each one of its four arms back and crouches down low.

*"Get ready, it's coming!"*

The words are barely out of Nisekao's mouth before the Enforcer lunges at you, palms outstretched and raised high. Without hesitation, you throw yourself down onto your haunches, and its arms whistle harmlessly through the space where your head used to be. Predictably, it draws its right arms back for a follow-up, and your calves tense as you prepare to leap aside. But instead of springing out of the way, a wave of nausea hits you like a punch to the gut, and the world slips out from under you. Fortunately, your stumbling puts you just out of reach, and the Enforcers lodges its fists firmly into the floor. As it struggles to free them, Mariko runs over, pulls you to your feet, and the two of you amble into a nearby restaurant and collapse behind a counter.

"What the..."

All of a sudden, your vision's gone blurry again, and the world wobbles unsteadily before your eyes.

"...The hell is happening to me?" you say, and you're disturbed to hear your voice slurred in your ears.

Mariko clasps her hands to the sides of your head and gives you a concerned look.

"Tetsuo? Tetsuo, what's going on? Oh, c'mon! Don't give out on me, not now!"

She starts to shake you by the shoulders, and it takes a herculean amount of concentration on your part to bring your hands to her wrists so she stops before you vomit all over her.

"No...no, please don't..." you croak. As you say it, Nisekao's voice blares in your ear. He sounds unnaturally loud and grating.

*"Umm, this is just my guess, but you look a little...how should I put this...hung over, Tetsuo."*

*"Guhhh."*

Not the most poignant expression of how you feel, but it's all you can muster in response. A hangover? Being underage, you've never had one before, but given how god-awful this

feels, it's plausible enough. Agathion had better be one hell of a Persona for all the crap you're dealing with.

A series of crashes ring out behind you in the atrium – sounds like the Enforcer's taking the whole damn floor apart trying to find the two of you. Pretty soon, it's going to run out businesses to trash before it finds you. Your stomach churns at the thought, but you'll have to find a way to suck it up and face it down.

Your fingers scrabble weakly along its smooth surface, but eventually, you're able to get a strong enough hold on the polished surface of the counter to drag yourself upright. The world pitches violently when you attempt to stand up straight, but Mariko positions herself under your arm for support, which stabilizes things somewhat. But your grip on your guitar is still shaky, and your arms remain limp despite your straining to flex some feeling into them. Mariko notices this.

"What are you doing, Tetsuo? You can't fight that thing like this!"

"Do we have a choice?" Your tongue feels alien to your mouth, something thick and fuzzy. "We can't run from it, it knows the place better than we do. Unless you think you can take it on your own, I've at least got to try."

She looks as if she wants to argue that point, but it looks like not even she can convince herself that she'd be a match for the Enforcer by herself. Just then, Nisekao speaks up again.

*"You guys' Personas can use magic, right? Can't one of them do something for Tetsuo? Mariko-chan, what about you?"*

"Me? I guess I can try."

Mariko turns to you and summons Nyneve. As she does, you hear another hostile bellow, this time disturbingly close by. A spark of panic passes across her face, but she quickly wipes it away, replacing it with one of intense concentration. She closes her eyes, and her lips start to move without speaking. Is she talking to Nyneve?

If so, the conversation doesn't last long. After a couple of tense seconds, her eyelids swipe open. She points to you, and Nyneve floats over, laying one hand on your forehead. You instinctively flinch. The last time she touched you, she lit you up like a power line, but now, her palm is pleasantly cool against your temple. As she holds it there, you can feel the pain in your head ebb away, and your vision rocks back towards clarity. Within seconds, you're able to stand under your own power and your "hangover" feels like little more than a bad memory.

"How do you feel?" Mariko asks tentatively.

"Tons better. Let's get back out there!"

With that, you vault over the counter and dash towards the entrance to the bar with Mariko following closely behind. As you pass through the doorway, you drop into a roll in case the Enforcer is waiting outside to take a cheap swipe. You

manage to make it behind a planter unscathed, but from behind you, there's a thud and a stunted squeal.

You snap your head back around just in time to see Mariko soar through the air and hit the floor, her arms and legs whipping loosely about her like a ragdoll's. Framed by the dim, neon light leaking out of the bar is the silhouette of the Enforcer, one of its right arms frozen in the end of a throwing motion.

Initially, your breath catches in your throat as she lies there with no sign of movement. There's no way she'd die just from being tossed. Not so far from your hiding place, the Enforcer slowly brings its throwing arm back to its side, but remains in place. Its gaze is transfixed on Mariko's still form – either it didn't see where you went, or it simply doesn't care.

*"I-I think Mariko-chan's okay," Nisekao says. "Her camera feed is moving, so she's still breathing."*

A wave of relief breaks over you, but you don't dare answer Nisekao. As long as she has the Enforcer's attention, you don't want to give away your position. It's scummy, using her as bait like this, but it's the best chance you've got at an uncontested strike.

Then, a low groan rises from Mariko's throat, and she slowly begins shuffling onto her hands and knees. Just like you thought, the Enforcer's head snaps up and it launches itself at her, a speeding bullet of animalistic brutality. It moves so quickly that there's barely enough time for you to react.

With surprising agility, you spring from your hiding place with your guitar raised high. A cry escapes your lips, and like you hoped, the Enforcer digs its feet into the ground and slides around to face you. The instant it brings its head around, your guitar comes down on the nape of its neck and drives its mask into the floor with a resounding crack.

Using your guitar like a vaulter's pole, you use the momentum from your jump and swing yourself over the Enforcer's body towards Mariko. You waste no time hoisting her upright, and she quickly levels her gun at the prone form of the Enforcer as if nothing happened. However, even after a couple seconds pass, it remains face down on the floor. Mariko relaxes her aim.

"*Whoa*. Is it...you know?"

You shake your head. Honestly, you didn't think that would turn out so well. But your last bout with an Enforcer taught you two things: they don't make the same mistakes twice, and that you should never pass up the opportunity for a free attack.

"Hell no, I think I just got a nice cheap shot in on it. Let's go all out while we have the chance!"

Mariko nods, cocking her gun, and you leap back towards the Enforcer for another swipe at the back of its head. You hear her fire at almost the same time that you bring your arm down. But almost as though it were in on the timing as well, one of the Enforcer's arms twists about in a decidedly

unnatural way and clamps down over both your wrists, preventing your strike from reaching home. Simultaneously, its head snaps up, and Mariko's bullet ricochets harmlessly off its mask.

The Enforcer pushes itself upright using its free arms, and floor falls out from under your feet. As you dangle in its grasp a good couple feet in the air, you swing your body and kick your feet back and forth. But the more you struggle, the tighter the Enforcer's grip becomes. Beads of sweat start brimming on your forehead in anticipation of what you know is coming next.

As another arm reaches for your ankles, a series of shots ring out, and three bullets rip through the dark flesh of its hand. You breathe a sigh of relief as the Enforcer draws that arm back to its side and snaps its attention to Mariko, smoke rising in twisted wisps from the barrel of her weapon. She flashes you a thumbs-up, although all you can do is grin back.

Something about your cavalier attitudes must trigger something in the creature. An infuriated scream claws its way out of its throat, and you practically swallow your tongue as it forcibly hauls your body over its shoulder like a sack of potatoes and you slam into its back. Next thing you know, you're hurtling through the air headfirst towards Mariko as it heaves you judo-style.

"Nyneve!"

Instead of bowling over your partner like some kind of human

cannonball, Nyneve catches you in her arms, absorbing the brunt of the impact. Gently, she sets you down on your feet. You rub your wrists a bit to get the blood flowing again.

"Thanks for that, " you tell Mariko, who's watching the Enforcer intently as she reloads, "I'm getting the feeling taking it head-on isn't the best idea."

*"It-It's those arms," says Niseako, "having four of them makes it really easy to counter in close combat. Maybe try keeping your distance and using magic. As long as it can't grab you, it should be fine, right?"*

"I'm all for not getting ripped in half. C'mon, Launcelot!"

Launcelot swipes its lance through the air, launching a wide blade of wind hissing towards the Enforcer's legs. The way you figure, it'll be easier to keep your distance if it's not pouncing at you all the damn time - which it's evidently quite good at. The spell works just the way you'd intended it to - it takes the Enforcer's feet right out from under it, and it crashes back down to the ground.

*"Mariko-chan! It's...uh...it's your turn!"*

Nyneve steps up and extends her sword towards the Enforcer's prone figure. A surge of electricity flows from her wings and into the sword's blade. It gathers there, building up until she releases it in one bolt that splits the air with an impressive *crack*.



Her magic is dead on, striking the enemy square in the back. The Enforcer thrashes and spasms violently as high voltage magic surges throughout its body, causing the tile underneath your feet to quiver dangerously.

Eventually, the lightning fizzles out until all that's left is an audible hissing and tiny sparks arcing across the Enforcer's singed shirt.

"Hit it again!" you yell. Lightning's been pretty effective so far - there's really no reason why you shouldn't just let Mariko zap this thing into oblivion as far as you're concerned. She nods to Nyneve, who raises her blade for another shot.

Suddenly, a chill sweeps through the air, biting into your skin and creating goose pimples up and down your arms. Mariko gasps sharply. She hastily shoves both her hands firmly in her jacket and up under her armpits. Looking over at Nyneve, you can see why.

Clouds of shimmering crystals swirl up her arms, and her hands are already encased in chunks of solid ice. Shifting your focus back to the Enforcer, you can see that its hands are glowing with a soft, blue aura.

*"It's casting some kind of magic! I know what I just said, but you have to disrupt it somehow!"* says Nisekao having noticed the same thing you did. It's certainly irksome to have to abandon your strategy so quickly, but the Enforcer's forced your hand.

However, you quickly find that you're completely unable to move from your spot. Your feet feel numb, and when you glance down, you're shocked to see that they've been frozen solid as well! You desperately try to work them free, but in the end, you're helpless to watch as the Enforcer barrels towards you.

It's on the two of you in a flash. With one pair of hands, it backhands Mariko to the floor, and with the other, it wrenches you free from the ice and heaves you into a nearby wall. The impact of your back against the black paneling takes your breath away, but for some reason, you keep on going, right through the wall until you tumble end over end to a halt amidst a pile of rubble.

*"Son of a..."*

Propping yourself up on one knee, you rub your aching back as you take a look around. You seem to be in the middle of a long hallway that looks to wrap around behind the stores on this floor, and there are a number of doors along the innermost wall to your left and right. However, there's no time to waste on your new discovery - the Enforcer hasn't bothered following you in here, which means it's still out there with Mariko!

As you leap over a pile of busted concrete and twisted paneling, you're greeted by the sight of the Enforcer advancing upon Mariko. Nyneve's nowhere to be found, and she's been frozen from her shoes all the way up to her hips. A look of desperation encroaches on her usually calm facade as

she twists and squirms against the advancing shell of ice.

Your mind starts racing. You could try knocking over the Enforcer again, but both it and Mariko are too close to the railing for that to be feasible. If you somehow sent Mariko over the edge with it, you'd never forgive yourself. You could possibly slide between its legs to position yourself between her and it, but it's not like it doesn't have enough hands to dump you both over the edge. Panic begins to gnaw at the edges of your psyche. Both time and your imagination are beginning to run short.

*[Gee, if only you had a way to melt that ice! Like, I dunno, a Persona or something that can spit fire, for example. Wouldn't that be swell?]*

The voice in your head snaps you out of your dilemma.

*[Agathion? Can you-]*

*[Are you friggin' dense? This why I'm here, isn't it? Just get me out there already!]*

"All right, all right. Agathion!"

There's a flash of light, and a waist-height golden pot materializes before your eyes. A tiny blue head pokes itself out from beneath the lid. It takes a glance back at you and flashes a wide, toothy grin before spewing a searing jet of flame towards the Enforcer.

Perhaps it thinks you're dead. Maybe knocked out. Either way, it never sees it coming.

The spell hits its mark and the beast lights up like a torch. Fire roils around its hulking form, setting its shirt and wretched mullet alight. Lurching about in agony, the Enforcer's hands madly attempt to pat out the flames with no success. As it continues its tortured flailing, the few tongues of flame that made it past its wide frame collide with the ice trapping Mariko's legs. A loud hissing adds to the sounds of screaming and crackling fire, and the ice melts away to a puddle of water surrounding her shoes.

Mariko makes to dart to her right, around the Enforcer, but it seems determined not to let her get away. Its entire body shaking with visible effort, it gets into a widened stance and puts itself between the two of you. Its burning outline traces a hellish figure in the dim light of the Cloud. Laboriously, it drops down onto one curled fist. Its muscles tense for one final attack. Mariko's eyes go wide as she recognizes what it's doing.

*"Nyneve! Help!"*

Time almost appears to slow as the Enforcer hurls its burning body towards Mariko, arms outstretched and ready to take her over the railing with it. But as you watch Mariko lithely somersault underneath it and out of its grasp, you realize that time actually *has* slowed. Or rather, the rest of the world is moving at normal speed while the Enforcer practically swims through the air as if it were a vat of molasses.

Mariko pops to her feet next to you and watches the Enforcer slowly sail towards the railing with a satisfied look on her face.

"Waaaait for it..."

If the universe has a sense of humor, it's never been more evident than it is at this moment. With timing that you can only describe as "cosmic", the Enforcer returns to normal speed as soon as it clears the ledge. The two of you race to the railing just in time to see it tumble to the dance floor below, its limbs waving about like a cartoon character. Seconds later, it hits the ground with an audible and sickening *thud*. You flinch.

When you decide to open your eyes again, you see that the Enforcer must have taken a serious bounce when it hit the floor, coming to a halt in one of the vacated elevator shafts and leaving behind a splatter of some unidentifiable black substance. Even now, its body is still smoldering.

"Well," Mariko says, "I guess you could say he really-"

*"Don't."*

*"-fell for me."*

"Kinda going for the low-hanging fruit there, aren't we?"

"You're just jealous you didn't think of it first."

*"Uh, guys? I really don't want to be the bearer of bad news,*

*but...*" Nisekao interrupts, dragging your eyes back to the ground floor.

It's unbelievable – despite having fallen what must be over sixty feet, the Enforcer is stirring. It's not going anywhere, but somehow, it's survived.

"You've *got* to be kidding me, "you snarl. You prepare to summon Launcelot again, but Mariko places a hand on your arm.

"What is it?" you ask. She says nothing and points back down.

Upon closer inspection, the tiny form of the bunny girl Shadow is going absolutely berserk down there. She's tugging and pulling on one of the Enforcer's massive arms, but it's not budging an inch. It seems like a bit of an overreaction, seeing as it's not actually dead and all. But then Mariko's finger starts moving upwards, and you understand.

Above the depression where the Enforcer lies, an elevator is making its way down the shaft to the ground floor. The bunny girl Shadow must have called it down just before the Enforcer fell into the bottom of the shaft, and now she's freaking out. The Enforcer's head lolls back and forth groggily, but it's evident there's only one way this is going to end.

The bunny girl Shadow takes a bit longer to reach that conclusion, but once she does, she takes off without looking back. Having passed the second floor, there isn't much time now before the elevator reaches its final destination. You and

Mariko duck beneath the railing, unable to watch.

A few tense seconds pass, and there comes the sound of screeching metal as the elevator encounters resistance. And then-

*CRUNCH.*

You stand back up just in time to see a geyser of black butterflies surge towards the ceiling, spreading out and swirling about the perimeter of Cloud Two as they shuffle the darkness from their wings. And in the midst of the blue glow they emit hovers the ghostly image of a smirking, four-armed man. Long, golden tresses of hair spill over the golden pauldrons on his shoulders, but the rest of his body is unarmored, clothed instead in a long coat thrown over a ruffled shirt. And then, as quickly as he appears, he's gone like breath in the wind.

Mariko lets out a long sigh of relief.

"Tetsuo, we did it!"

She grabs your shoulders and starts hopping up and down. You're nowhere close to being done here, but you can't repress a smile when she's like this. To be fair, your own heart's thumping pretty quickly, too.

*"It looks like your new Persona really paid off, Tetsuo,"* says Nisekao, and he's not wrong. The little bastard's an enormous blowhard, but at least he wasn't a liar.

"With all the crap I gave him, he'd better be worth it. But you're really the one that finished it off, Mariko. How'd you know your Persona could *do* that? Slow down the Enforcer the way you did, I mean."

She shrugs. "I dunno. How do you know everything Launcelot can do? After all, she's...me, right? I knew that if I just trusted her that everything would be all right."

*"Trust, huh...you guys really are something else. To do what you do in the face of certain death is amazing."*

"Don't count yourself out, Nisekao-kun! You were really helpful, too! I trust you just as much as I do my Persona!" Mariko says.

*"Hmm. I see..."*

You cringe inwardly upon hearing his reaction. Mariko's just being nice, but Nisekao clearly can tell that she's forcing it a little for his sake. In an attempt to steer things in a different direction, you point towards the hole you made in the wall.

"All right, let's refocus. When the Enforcer tossed me through that wall, I found this long hallway back there. There's a chance there might be some stairs or something back there, so I think it's at least worth a look."

*"I noticed that, too. I don't go to the mall that much, but aren't those usually for service people? If that's so, then there might be access to the entire Cloud back there."* Nisekao



adds.

"Right. Let's dust ourselves off and get a move on. Hate to say it, but that might have been the easy part."

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**AN:** So hey, this one was a long one! Thanks to those of you who have been reading and leaving feedback, you guys are rad. Just a couple things I wanted to touch on that I was thinking about as I was writing this one. First off, translating attacks from video games into readable fiction can be a tricky business, or at least for me it feels like it. I'm not big on having characters announce their attacks (yes, I know I kind of did this once already during the first Enforcer battle and I hate myself for it) because it feels kinda hokey. But as a result, sometimes you as the reader end up wondering "Well, what does this action translate to in Persona terminology?" Example from this chapter - Mariko casting Sukunda on the Enforcer to avoid its suicide attack. Like, how do you reasonably narrate what amounts to a decrease in agility? You gotta take some creative liberties, and I hope mine don't end up being too offensive.

Second, no pun intended, second person! All I can say about this is that it's both something of an experiment of mine and that there's also a narrative reason for it that I can't explain given where we are in the story. Thanks for bearing with me on this one.

Third, I won't be exploring all twenty Social Links in this story. If we're going to be real, most Social Links in P3/4 have little

bearing on the overall plot and just serve to reinforce the game's overarching theme. So for that reason, I'm keeping the SL interactions to those that are plot relevant.

With that said, thanks again for reading, and I promise not to do too many of these notes!

## 16. Magician: Dreamweaver

As you and Mariko clamber over the rubble and into the hallway, it takes some time for your eyes to properly adjust. The light in here is dimmer still than it is outside, the only source being a number of sparsely placed lamps that throw weak splashes of yellow upon the walls. The corridor curves off out of sight in both directions, but you remember the balcony where the Dreamweaver appeared being to your right, so that's the path you choose.

Now that you have a chance to inspect them more closely, each of the doors on the wall to your right bear signs stating the name of an establishment in the Cloud. Most of them you don't recognize, but to your amusement, there are actually a couple that have the same name that they do in real life. Either Hayate doesn't care much about this part of the Cloud to be thorough, or his imagination kinda sucks. Mariko halts abruptly in front of one of them, so much so that you practically run into her.

"What is it?" you ask. She steps aside to let you see.

In the space where a door should be, there's a large hole in the wall more than twice as large as you are. You peer through it to find yourself looking into a place that would be more at home in some red light district somewhere. It looks

like someone's put a wrecking ball through here, but you know better.

"So this is how the Enforcer was getting around without us seeing it," Mariko says.

"Unless there's another ten-foot Shadow running around here," you reply. Mariko gives you a slight shove.

"Don't *even*, Tetsuo!"

"Just kidding, just kidding. Let's keep moving."

As you continue on, you find yourself coming to appreciate the stillness of this part of the Cloud. To this point, Cloud Two's been an excellent reminder of why you hate the typical nightlife culture with its spastic atmosphere and inescapable sense of claustrophobia. But in a way, you're also aware that this is only the eye of the storm, just a brief respite before the real battle begins.

You find yourself wondering what Hayate's Shadow will be like. Personality-wise, you already know that it doesn't seem all that different from the idiot it's based off of. But all things considered, you suppose stupid and narcissistic are better than cruel any day – a quality that Mariko's Shadow had in spades. You don't want to get complacent, but you don't feel the same sense of apprehension about going up against Hayate's Shadow that you did before. It helps to have a capable partner with you, too. So far, Mariko's had a lot more poise during her first time than you did. It's easier to feel

confident when you know it's not all on you.

You're then lifted out of your thoughts by the chirping of your earpiece.

*"Hey, look up ahead! I think that's it!"*

A little ways away on your left is a set of frosted sliding doors that stand out from the rest. They're bracketed by a pair of bright red accent lights that cast an ominous, sanguine glow over the area. Painted across the doors' glass panes are white letters that read "**VIP LOUNGE**" in big, block font.

When you approach, they slide aside with a faint hiss, beckoning you to step through. Evidently, security must not be considered much of a concern for anything that makes it this far.

*"Are you guys going to be ready? The Dreamweaver must be right up there."*

"Ready as we'll ever be," you say. "I mean, he's practically inviting us up there to beat the piss out of him. It'd be rude to refuse."

"You sound awfully eager, Tetsuo," Mariko remarks with a hint of disapproval.

"You're not wrong," you say, and step through the threshold.

The room on the other side of the doors is darker still, the

only source of light being what little filters in from the fixtures in the hallway. The red velvet-carpeted staircase before you lolls out of the gloom like the tongue of some beast, leading you onwards into the warm wetness of its waiting maw above. However, the darkness isn't total, and within a minute your eyes have adjusted enough to give you a faint idea of where you're stepping.

Mariko switches on the flashlight on her phone and shines it up the stairs, but the beam doesn't reach far enough for either of you to tell what's at the top or how far it goes. She gives you a sideways glance and shrugs. Looks like it's time to start climbing.

Fortunately, the staircase isn't as long as it seems, and the only thing you end up having to be careful about is tripping over the steps. When you reach the second landing, you notice a soft glow leaking from a door left ajar at the top of the next flight.

As you mount the next step, you become aware of a soft ringing at the edges of your hearing. Twisting your pinkies around the inside edges of your ears doesn't do much to help. If anything, the sound is getting louder and clearer, resolving into focus as it morphs from indistinct hum into comprehension.

Voices.

There are two of them, faint, and they cut in and out like a phone conversation held over a weak signal.

*"-ave to work...over... we get back...-orth it."*

*"-st...fun he's...ages."*

*"-ait until...sees what I...for...-day-"*

**"STO-"**

*"Aggh!"*

The sudden scream knifes through your brain, sending you to your knees with a grunt of anguish. You slap your hands over your ears and squeeze your eyes shut so tight that the inside of your eyelids turn white, but that awful sound won't stop bouncing off the walls of your skull. Then, there's a hand on your shoulder, and everything ceases.

"Tetsuo?"

You open your eyes to find yourself staring into Mariko's, her face ghostly white in the pale glow of her phone. This is starting to become an embarrassing pattern. Quickly, you pull yourself upright and do your best to ignore the residual pain.

"I'm good, I'm good. Just...stubbed my toe on the step. Can hardly see a damn thing in here."

It's kind of a weak excuse, and it looks like Mariko knows it. But to your relief, she only says, "As long as you say you're okay," and goes on ahead of you.

Thinking back, something like that happened in Cloud One as

well. This marks the second time that you've been assaulted like this before confronting a Dreamweaver. It might be some last-ditch attempt to deter intruders, but if that's the case, why isn't Mariko being affected?

You give your head a small shake to clear your thoughts. Some perturbing thoughts are brewing in the back of your mind, but this isn't the time or place to be entertaining them. Climbing the stairs after Mariko, you catch up with her at the top, and throw open the door.

As you step into the room beyond, the soles of your shoes are enveloped in plush, white shag carpeting. Mariko gags.

"Oh, *yikes*."

"Yikes" is an adept way of putting it – this room is nightmarish. You're sure that everyone has imagined their dream house at one point or another in their lives, and from the looks of things, it appears that Hayate wants to live on a porno set. Tiger-striped furniture, awful black velvet paintings of his own face, a gently bubbling hot tub in the corner across from an impressively-stocked bar...all that's missing is a heart-shaped water bed, which may or may not be behind the bead curtain to your left. On your right is an open archway that leads out onto the balcony you saw earlier. From wall to wretched wall, there isn't a single thing about this place that doesn't make your skin crawl.

"Not real subtle, is he?" you say.



"I don't wanna touch *anything*," says Mariko. "Let's just find him already and get this over with."

"Well, there's really only one place left," you say with a nod towards the curtain.

The two of you draw your weapons, and cautiously, you step through to the rattle of beads.

Slouching on a broad leather couch, his feet propped up a beer-can strewn table and the two curvy Shadows from earlier still attached to his arms, the Dreamweaver's head lazily draws his eyes up to meet yours upon hearing you enter. The greasy smile on his face flattens out quickly, and he pulls himself upright.

"Uhh, *heeeyyy*...I don't remember inviting you up here."

His eyes flit to your guitar, and linger on Mariko's gun.

"And I *definitely* don't like the looks of this. If you're looking for trouble, I think you're making a *big* mistake."

The two Shadows with him make a high-pitched squeal that sounds like "*Yeah!*" and squeeze his arms even tighter.

"Unless..."

He cranes his head back and points above him. Your own eyes follow. Hanging in the air near the ceiling is Hayate's body, his arms folded over his chest and trapped in the same

kind of spectral coffin that Mariko's was.

"You can't seriously be here for *that*."

You snort. "Yeah, I can't believe it either, but hey, here we are. So unless you're gonna give us a damn good reason why we should let you take over Hayate's life, we're not putting anything away."

The Dreamweaver heaves an exasperated sigh and leans forward. You and Mariko raise your weapons, but he only reaches for a new beer, putting up his other hand in a disarming gesture. He casually pierces the top with a single finger and takes a deep swig.

"You guys really need to chill out. Why don't you take a seat and have a couple drinks as long as you're here?"

Your stomach churns as you grimace.

"No. No more drinks, and no changing the subject, you little weasel. This party's over."

The Dreamweaver rolls its eyes in a thoroughly irritating way.

"Gimme a break, dude. I'm serious – if you promise to loosen up a little and enjoy yourself, I'll forget this ever even happened. No tricks, no strings attached, no nothing."

"Why?" you ask. His efforts to put you at ease aren't exactly having the intended effect. The Dreamweaver shrugs.

"Why not? I'm not a bad guy once you get to know me. Don't give me a bad rap just 'cause you didn't like *him*," he says, jerking his thumb towards his motionless figure. The corners of his lips curve into a knowing smirk. "What? You think I didn't know? Hayate wasn't much of a secret keeper. You should've seen how much he wrote in the Book."

"Wait, what does *that* mean? What book?" Mariko asks, but the Dreamweaver shakes his head and wags his finger.

"*Eeehhh*, if you don't know, don't worry about it" he says. That's incredibly suspicious, but he's clearly not willing to elaborate. "But the point is, there's no reason to get yourselves all worked up at me when you're just as much to blame." He takes another swallow of beer before going on.

"*I just want to be somebody to someone else.*" His words, obviously, not mine. The guy was obviously desperate for attention, but everybody just kinda turned the other way. I get it, though, he wasn't exactly what you'd call a 'smooth operator', you know? You probably thought he came off a little too strong, a little too desperate, right?"

You want to say something, but bite your tongue. He's not wrong, but you can still tell what he's doing. However, next to you, Mariko's expression softens and her eyes fall to the floor. The Dreamweaver notices this and smirks.

"Mmhmm, you know what I'm talking about. You thought he was a creepy, obnoxious loser, too. Well, so did he. He was perfectly aware that nobody liked him, and after a loner like

you-" he points in your direction"-made it clear you weren't interested in being friends, he couldn't lie to himself anymore. And *then* that's where I came in."

That last remark makes you flinch as though you'd been hit in the gut. Even though you'd probably killed Hayate a hundred or so times in your head yesterday, you didn't think you were acting like too much of an asshole. You were at least *trying* to be amiable. Did he really notice? Were you really the reason why he gave up?

"Although," the Dreamweaver continues, "'blame' probably ain't the right word to use. After all, I bet that little punk must've had the time of his life today! If it wasn't for you, he'd still be trying to convince himself that if he just tries a *little* harder, he won't die alone. And, of course, I owe you one, too. He might be an idiot, but at least he had his priorities straight. I couldn't believe my luck when I found a human whose dream was to basically drown in panties and booze. I think both of us are better off now, wouldn't you agree?" He finishes off his beer, crushes it against his forehead, tosses it aside, and leans back on the sofa with an expectant grin.

There are a couple choice things you'd like to say in response to that load of horseshit, but Mariko saves you the trouble.

"*Ugh!* Are you even *listening* to yourself? How can you say all these things about Hayate-kun when you're no better? He might be a pervert, but you're absolute scum for taking advantage of his loneliness like this! You're just a freeloader creep with no excuse!"

The Dreamweaver's expression sours fast, and his "friends" make agitated tittering noises at Mariko that you can only assume mean something less than flattering.

"Now, now, calm down, girls," he coos. Then, addressing Mariko, he says, "You've got a pretty face, but an ugly attitude, sweetie. Tell me: just what about the way I operate has your undies all in a bunch? I'm not hurting anyone. Worst you can say is that I kept a bunch of human teenagers out past their bedtime. Is that *really* such a crime?"

"Not really, but I can see where someone might take issue with the 'stealing someone else's body' bit. Don't you think he has the right to pull his own life together?" you say.

The corners of his mouth twist into a scowl – the Dreamweaver seems to be struggling with maintaining his air of nonchalance. Fingers of purple smoke begin to seep from his skin and curl around his frame.

*"If humans could do that, they wouldn't come crawling to us. Getting chosen by me was the best thing that coulda happened to him! We're both living the good life now – are you trying to tell me that you got a problem with that? What gives you the right?"*

You readjust your grip on the neck of your guitar and swallow the hard lump forming at the back of your throat.

"To be honest? Nothing. But if I had to choose between having Hayate around and having you, I'd pick him. He'll change. I

don't know whether it'll be tomorrow or twenty years, but he'll pull his head out of his ass eventually. You'll stay a shallow douchebag for the rest of your miserable existence."

"Well said, Tetsuo!" says Mariko, giving you a thumbs-up.

The Dreamweaver, however, just laughs. The two Shadows let go of his arms and scoot towards the ends of the couch as he doubles over and his cackling grows comically loud.

*"Gyehehehe! I get it! I think I understand what's really going on here! You...you're just jealous – jealous of my good looks, jealous of my women, and jealous of my popularity! You just can't stand that someone that looks like him has it better than you! So you wanna take me down a peg, then, huh? You wanna 'restore the natural order'? Well come at me, then!"*

The Dreamweaver buries his face in his palms, and smoke streams forth. When he removes them, that ubiquitous blue mask dominates half of his face. His Shadow girls rise to their feet and seductively lean against his shoulders.

*"There's no way I'm giving this up!"*

*"Here they come!"* shouts Nisekao, and the two of you brandish your weapons.

*"All right, girls, why don't you give the guests some 'special service'?"* the Dreamweaver sneers.

*"Mmhmm!"* they squeal in response, stepping between you

and the Dreamweaver.

Mariko groans. "Do we really have to do this? You're not man enough to fight us yourself?"

*"Don't insult me like that, sweetie. If I fought the way humans did, I wouldn't last very long, would I? Besides, these ladies have been itching to dance with someone all night. Entertain them for me, will ya?"*

With that, the Dreamweaver falls back onto the sofa and the Shadow girls advance on you. They exchange a quick glance between them before turning their sights on you and Mariko. The dark, round eyes of the one on the right bore into yours, and you know you only have a moment to react.

"Launcelot!"

Your Persona appears just in time to heft his shield in between you and the Shadow leaping at your throat. You can't see what happens, but there's a harsh clang, and the Shadow hits the floor, clutching its head in agony. Launcelot lowers his shield, and the two of you regard the writhing creature with a sting of disappointment and pity. You were kind of hoping it would be smarter than that.

You motion to Launcelot, who flips his lance upside down with a nonchalant flick of his wrist and drives it through the Shadow's mask. A tortured cry fills the air as it shatters and the Shadow's body erupts into a column of thick smoke. Out of the corner of your eye, the Dreamweaver flinches and

edges towards the other end of the couch.

Meanwhile, Mariko is having a more prolonged struggle with the other Shadow. The air sings with the crackle of electricity, the report of gunshots, and the whistling of razor sharp claws as she and Nyneve exchange blows with it. You're confident that she can take care of it herself, though. You've got your eye on a bigger prize.

Or at least, you *had* your eye on it. When you turn back to confront the Dreamweaver, the couch is empty with only a faint indentation left behind in the cushion. You hear a rattle, and snap your head about just in time to catch the bead curtain swaying back and forth.

*"He's making a break for it! Is...is that okay?"* says Nisekao.

*"Dammit,"* you mutter under your breath. "Mariko, he's running! Catch up with me later, OK?"

Mariko slides underneath the table and flips it over to block an incoming fireball, sending beer cans scattering everywhere.

"I'll be with you in a minute; just go!" she shouts, popping up over the top to fire a few shots at the Shadow.

That's all you needed to hear. Pivoting about, you dart after the Dreamweaver into the next room with Launcelot at your heels.

There's no sign of him on the other side of curtain, which



seems strange to you. You listen for the sound of footfalls nearby, but the only audible sound is the idle frothing of the hot tub in the corner. Something doesn't feel right – he can't have gotten very far. You stride out onto the balcony, but it's empty as well. A thought strikes you, and you walk over to the railing. Down below, the party rages on. Jumping from this height would be insane, but for a Shadow, not necessarily suicidal. You think. At any rate, if he *did* jump, there'd be no way to find him in that throng of monsters anyways.

You're not ready to admit that you've lost him quite that easily, though, so you double back inside. Trying to remain as casual as possible, you survey the room with your peripheral vision. If the sneaky bastard really is hiding in here somewhere, you don't want to spook him. An anguished squeal sounds from the other side of the curtain followed by the bright blue flash of lightning. Sounds like Mariko's finishing up.

You pretend to have given up looking and walk back towards the inner chamber, all the while keeping your eyes swiveling about in your head searching for some disturbance that might give away the Dreamweaver's hiding place. But if he's in here, he's keeping his composure remarkably well, because as you draw near the edge of the room, you haven't even noticed so much as a rogue cushion or martini glass askew. Panic begins to gnaw at the edges of your mind, and you almost don't notice the sloshing noise behind you as you make to brush the curtain out of your way.

You whirl around, and in a tremendous spray of hot water, the Dreamweaver breaches the surface of the hot tub and leaps

high into the air, a vicious smile plastered across his face.

*"Ha ha! Gotcha, bitch!"*

He extends his right arm, and the droplets of water hanging in the air coalesce and freeze into sharpened icicles the size of your forearm. They soar through air towards you, and before you can react, one of them slams into the center of your chest.

The impact wrenches the air from your lungs, forcing a hoarse gasp past your lips as you stumble backwards. This isn't real. This chunk of ice sticking out of your chest isn't real. The dull throbbing that radiates from the wound, the hot, wet blood seeping across your shirt, none of it could possibly be happening. How could you have been so careless?

The warmth of your blood melts the tip of the icicle, causing the rest of it to fall out and shatter into pieces on the ground. You quickly follow suit, and topple onto your back as your legs wobble and give.

*"Tetsuo! Tetsuo! No, no, no, no! Get up! You have to get up!"*

Why does Nisekao sound so far away? It's as if you're standing at opposite ends of a chasm with him yelling at you from the other side.

*"Tetsuo? What's going on, why is Nisekao-kun freaking ou – Tetsuo!"*

Mariko must have arrived. It's getting difficult to tell with the way your sight is clouding. Even her terrified screams sound diminished and segregated from reality now. You close your eyes, and all there is their disembodied conversation.

*"Mariko, you have to do something! Please!"*

"What? What can I do about *this*?"

*"Can't you fix him with your Persona?"*

"Th-That was a hangover, not a chest wound! I don't – sorry, Nisekao, hang on..."

The sound of gunshots and something shattering. Someone grunts.

*"You have to try..."*

"I know, I know. I think I bought myself a couple seconds, keep an eye for me, Nisekao."

"OK."

Your friends fall silent, and all that permeates the thick fog obscuring your hearing are the pained groans of the Dreamweaver. Then, a greenish-white glow permeates your eyelids.

A cooling sensation flows into you, leeching into your skin at the site of your wound and washing the pain away with it, leaving only a comfortable numbness behind. It reminds you of

the airy lightheadedness that accompanies anesthesia, only instead of falling asleep, you're waking up. Strength returns to your body gradually, allowing you to open your eyes to the sight of Nyneve kneeling over you. Her hands hover over a gaping puncture in your chest, emitting a soft, pulsing light as her magic works to heal your wound. Mariko stands beside her, and when she notices that your eyes are open, her expression relaxes.

Feeling in your arms and legs return next, allowing you to prop yourself up on your elbows to get a better idea of what's happening. To your amazement, the wound is shrinking before your very eyes, getting smaller and smaller until all that's left is a red patch of raw skin. Finished, Nyneve returns to Mariko's side.

"Can you stand?"

Mariko extends a hand and helps you up.

"I'm feeling a little lightheaded, but otherwise, I think I'm good to go," you answer. For good measure, you pat the spot where the icicle struck you. It's sore, but at least it's not "put-you-on-your-ass" painful. Your shirt, however, is pretty much ruined. But at the moment, you don't care much about that.

On the other side of the room near the hot tub, the Dreamweaver is doubled over, leaning on one knee and clutching the other, breathing heavily through gritted teeth. Upon seeing you, his visible eye goes wide, then narrows to a golden slit. Wincing, he drags himself to his feet and shakes

out his injured leg.

*"Oh, come on! Not fair!"* His tone is mocking and jocular, like the victim of a prank. *"What do you need that kind of handicap for? That's some weak shit, human! Real weak shit!"*

He darts towards the bar, tumbling behind the counter to avoid Mariko's pursuing fire. She jumps up to go after him, but Nisekao's voice stops her.

*"W-Wait! Don't! He's just trying to bait you! I don't think he's powerful enough to beat you in a fair fight, so he's trying to create situations where he has the upper hand."*

"What's he gonna do, break bottles over our heads?" you ask, hushed so that the Dreamweaver can't hear. You're wondering why you and Mariko just can't stomp him with your Personas while he's cornered and call it a day. Nisekao sighs.

*"I...I don't know, but do you really want to take a chance with a Shadow that can weaponize a hot tub?"*

You exchange troubled glances with Mariko and quickly decide that you don't.

*"This is just my take, but why don't you let Agathion smoke him out, so to speak? His magic is ice-based, so wouldn't it make sense to be using him instead of Launcelot anyways?"*

Again, Nisekao makes a valid point. You summon Agathion,

and point to the bar. Agathion's bug eyes follow your finger with interest.

"Torch that sucker," you say. The imp snickers and breathes a searing stream of fire at the Dreamweaver's hiding place. Bottles burst, scattering shards of glass and splattering liquor all over. The alcohol mixes with the flames, causing a giant, roaring fireball to balloon towards the ceiling. There comes a short yelp, and the Dreamweaver scrabbles up and over the counter, his golden eyes wide and the hem of his shirt alight. He tumbles to the floor and madly rolls back and forth to put himself out. You and Mariko both try - and fail - to suppress your laughter.

*"You think this is funny?" he screams. "You think you're clever or some shit, human?"*

A frigid blast of air surges outwards from the Dreamweaver's body, extinguishing the flames and coating the room in a thin layer of glittering, crystalline frost. Crystals of ice rake across your face, tearing thin cuts in your cheeks.

*"I'll freeze the both of you solid, and then, I'm gonna break off your arms and legs one by one while the other watches! How's that sound to you? That sound funny?"*

He brings his arms up over his head, and a massive chunk of ice that used to fill the hot tub rises into the air over his head. With a grunt of exertion, he makes a tossing motion and the massive frozen brick careens your way.

Fortunately for you, Mariko acts quickly. She summons Nyneve, who casts some spell you can't see. The ice chunk slightly decelerates as though someone had thrown the scene unfolding before your eyes into slow motion. That gives you just enough of an opportunity to dive aside to safety. The world resumes its normal speed, and the chunk lands where you were just standing, sliding across the slick floor and crashing into the wall.

"Thanks for that," you tell her.

"You're welcome, but I can't rely on that too much. He's harder to slow down, and doing that kinda wipes me out."

Now that she mentions it, Nyneve does look like she's wilting a bit, and Mariko's breathing is more labored than usual. It's an inconvenient realization, but it seems like even your Personas' strength has limits. Finishing the Dreamweaver will have to be your job.

"Just hang back a little for now – c'mon, don't look at me like that," you say as she puffs out her cheeks. "I don't know what happens if you use your Persona too much, and I don't think either of us wanna find out. I'll at least hold him off while you catch your-"

"Tetsuo..."

"No, I'm not letting you argue with me this time."

"No, Tetsuo, it's-"

"Mariko, just trust me on this one."

*"Tetsuo, look at your feet!"* Mariko and Nisekao cry out in unison, and your head whips downwards.

You're trapped up to your ankles in solid ice, and only just now do you feel the sting of cold through your socks and shoes.

"Goddamn it, not again."

A few feet away from you, the Dreamweaver starts cackling his head off as his hands rhythmically cycle back and forth, shimmering blue with the aura of magic.

*"Maybe you oughta take care of yourself before you start worrying about her, eh? Don't worry, she'll get her turn, too. I'm thinkin' I'll keep her intact, though. I've always wanted some pretty ice sculptures up in here."*

"Son of a..." you mutter. You already know there's no chance you'll break free under your own power. Mariko leaps up and starts bashing the ice with the butt of her gun. The Dreamweaver's attention snaps to her, and he raises one hand. A spike of ice juts from the floor in front of her, and she falls backwards away from you.

*"You stay where you are. This is between me and my best friend Tetsuo."*

The Dreamweaver strides towards you with hands orbited by



clouds of crystalline frozen dust.

*"Tetsuo, you can free yourself! U-Use your other Persona!"*  
Nisekao sputters.

You let out a frustrated sigh. The cold must be numbing your brain, too, for you to not think of that right off the bat. You're about to summon Agathion to get you out when a much better idea hits you.

Standing up as straight as you can muster, you puff out your chest with as much bravado as possible and call out, "Well, come on then. You gonna hit me, or just talk about it, you friggin' poser?"

The Dreamweaver's eyes appear to flash with anger, and he draws himself up large.

*"You shut your mouth, human! I. Am not! A POSER!"*

A bestial scream tears its way out of his mouth, and the gap between the two of you closes fast.

"Agathion! Now!"

The Dreamweaver is practically on top of you when Agathion materializes in front of him. The look of panic that flashes across his face as he realizes his mistake is oh, so sweet. He desperately attempts to change direction, but his momentum is too great. The Dreamweaver slides right into a white-hot jet of fire, and the sound of melting ice mixes with his distorted

shrieking. The light from the flames refracts through the frost crystals that cling to every surface, transforming the lounge into a steaming, hellish cavern.

*"Nice shot, Tetsuo! But...you can't kill him like that; Agathion's magic doesn't look like it's strong enough."*

It's true - as entertaining as this is, it's getting you nowhere. As Agathion works on the ice at your feet, you cast your gaze around the room. At first, there's nothing that looks particularly useful insofar as killing Shadows goes. But then, your eyes light on an object lying on its side near the couches. That should do. That should do quite nicely.

While the Dreamweaver's still busy trying to extinguish itself, you make a mad dash for the gas tank that used to heat the hot tub. It must have come dislodged at some point during the fight. Summoning up the remainder of your flagging strength, you lift the tank in the air over your head and toss it in your enemy's direction. The Dreamweaver stops slapping at the burning remains of its shirt just long enough to sidestep it. The tank lands with a clatter and rolls to a halt against his foot. He stares at it dumbly.

*"Are you kidding me? What were you thinking this was gonna do, dumbass?"*

"This! Mariko!"

"Yeah?"

"Shoot it!"

In one practiced movement, she levels her gun at the tank and pulls the trigger.

*\*Click\**

Her eyes go wide.

*\*Clickclickclick\**

The Dreamweaver doubles over, howling with laughter.

*"This is a joke, right? Or maybe you're trying to make me laugh so hard I can't kill you! You might've ruined my night, but damn if you haven't made it entertaining at least."*

He takes a moment to get himself under control, and hardens his expression. Your mind searches furiously for some way to make your plan work.

*"But I think it's about time I showed you the exit. Persona!"*

The air hangs heavy with silence, and the Dreamweaver looks around, bewildered. An idea bubbles to the surface of your brain. You cringe at the thought of what you're about to do, but there's no time to come up with anything better – this is the best opening you're going to get.

"Mariko, get down! Come, Launcelot!"

You and your Persona sprint up to the Dreamweaver, and

before he can react, Launcelot punctures the tank with a thrust of his lance and throws up his shield. The Dreamweaver's eyes go from you, to the softly hissing gas tank, and then to the open flames that are still consuming his clothes.

*"Well fuck me, then."*

An ear-splitting bang rocks the air, and a tremendous force plows into you, driving the breath from your lungs. The blastwave from the explosion sends you and Launcelot flying backwards across the room and tumbling across the floor. You clutch at your chest, moaning. It's like a heavyweight boxer just sucker punched you as hard as he could. Rolling over onto your side hurts even more. It aggravates the spot where the Dreamweaver stabbed you, and there's a new, sharp pain in your ribs. But thanks to Launcelot, you came out a hell of a lot better than the Dreamweaver did.

The damage was extensive. The tiger-striped furniture has been put out of its misery, cushions torn to bits and the upholstery smoldering to a generally more pleasing ashen color. A set of eyes belonging to Mariko peep from behind the overturned table, its underside totally blackened. The velvet paintings are vaporized, as is much of the carpet. And in the center of it all, a perfect ring of scorch marks where the Dreamweaver stood only seconds ago. The only things to suggest that he ever existed are the chunks of black material splattered across the floor and ceiling, and the half-mask he was wearing.

Wincing, you manage to stand up and walk over to it. Just like before, a strong compulsion to touch the thing seizes control of you. Your hand is trembling as you pick it up and bring it closer to your face. There's a flash of white, and suddenly you find yourself in the middle of a vast, white space devoid of definition or landmarks. The darkened silhouette of a hunched over figure lies on the floor some distance away, its knees tucked in tight to its chest. You find yourself opening your mouth to speak, but the voice that emerges isn't yours.

*"Thought you could use some company."*

And just like that, the vision ends, and you're back in the VIP Lounge. You drop the mask with a start. Another one...but not quite like the one you experienced in Cloud One. This time, it didn't feel as though you were yourself. Rather, you were someone else. But why? Before, it was easy enough to brush off as superstition, but it's becoming harder and harder to deny that the Clouds are doing something to you.

"Tetsuo, shouldn't we check on Hayate-kun?"

Mariko's voice drags you from your reverie.

"Yeah...I guess if we *have* to."

"At least *try* to be nice to him, Tetsuo. We went through all this trouble, after all."

You step back through the bead curtain, and sure enough, Hayate has been freed from his shadowy prison and is

already sitting upright on the couch, clutching his head. As if on cue, white lines slice across the room, and Cloud Two falls away, leaving the three of you in an empty karaoke booth.

"What the...why am I...huh?" Hayate mumbles to himself, but when he notices you and Mariko, he abruptly stops. He locks eyes with you, studying your face like there's something he hopes to find in it. Then, his expression contorts into a look of unmistakable anger. Before you can say anything, he cocks back his fist and punches you square in the jaw.

"*Hayate-kun!*" exclaims Mariko. You rub your jaw. He hits quite a bit harder than you'd have figured, but at least nothing's busted.

Hayate leaps to his feet and gets right up in your face.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he yells.

You grimace. "More like what the hell is wrong with *you*? We just saved your life."

"I-I didn't want to be 'saved'!" he says. With that, he storms past you and out of the booth, leaving the both of you thoroughly bewildered.

## 17. Curious Residents

You and Mariko chase after Hayate (eliciting some strange looks from the Pop Miracle staffers along the way), but are unable to catch up before he disappears into the Air Mall's late-night crowd. Thanks to the Dreamweaver's invitation, the place is more packed than usual. On the way to the exit, you pass by a number of people you recognize from school, each one wearing a weary, befuddled expression and rubbing at their eyes and temples. You've got a hunch that class is going to be a little empty tomorrow morning.

Nisekao is waiting for the two of you over near the walkway where you left him. As you approach, he shuts his laptop and wheels over to you excitedly.

"You did it! I can't believe you guys did it! I mean, not that I thought you *couldn't*, but there were parts that were kind of hard to watch..." Then, his eyes flit between the two of you and his brow furrows. "Wait, where's Hayate-kun?"

"I dunno, he got pissed at us for waking him up and socked me in the face. He'll probably be fine," you say, rubbing your swollen face. "Do I have a bruise?"

Nisekao looks you up and down and cringes.

"I'd be more worried about your shirt."

You'd completely forgotten – your shirt is still soaked with your blood.

"Of course...jeez, and I just ran through the entire mall in this, too. It must look like I'm fleeing a murder scene."

Immediately, you shed your jacket, strip off your shirt, and then button your jacket back up, stashing the ripped, bloody clothing in your bag. Mariko blushes furiously and turns away.

"W-Warn somebody next time, Tetsuo!"

You roll your eyes, saying, "Well, what was I supposed to do, run into a store and find a dressing room? Anyways, it's 'safe' to look now."

"OK..." she says, and hesitantly turns back around.

Nisekao stares out the window at the swiftly tiring city below. Lights wink out before your eyes as even the businesses that stay open late begin to close up shop.

"Do you really think it'll be okay to just let him go like that?" he muses aloud.

"If he doesn't show up at school tomorrow, then we can go looking for him," you answer. Nisekao doesn't seem reassured by that, though, so you add, "If you're worried about him telling anyone, don't. No one would buy this story without any proof. Even less so if it's coming out of *his*



mouth."

"I agree with Tetsuo, Nisekao-kun," says Mariko. She stifles a yawn. "Besides, I'm too tired to go chasing after him tonight. We can check on him tomorrow."

Based on the weary looks reflected in everyone's eyes, it would seem you're all in agreement on that at least. You decide to table the issue until later and get some much-needed rest. With heavy eyelids and sore, throbbing muscles, you leave for home.

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Upon returning, you're startled to see the flickering light of the television coming from the living room window. Frustration wraps its hot tendrils around your throat as you come to the realization that you're about to be busted. But you suppose it couldn't be helped – if your parents woke up for whatever reason in the middle of the night to find you missing, there's nothing you could have done. Nevertheless, you take great care to open the door as silently as possible in the hopes that there might be some chance of getting to your room unseen.

As you slip your shoes off and peer around the wall that separates the hall from the kitchen and living room, you find your mother slouched on the sofa in her nightgown, feet propped up on the coffee table, half-empty glass of liquor in one hand, and eyes vaguely focused on the television screen. She notices you almost immediately, but says nothing and returns to the news report she was watching. Once again, the sick little girl is the night's top story.

Oddly enough, instead of relief, her dismissal of your late arrival is somehow disappointing. Ever since she took her new job, it's felt less like you have a mother and more like you're sharing the house with an alcoholic zombie. You'd have been more at ease if she'd actually scolded you for once, or even said *anything*.

Instead of going directly to your room, you sluff off your bag at the foot of the stairs and take a seat in the armchair next to her. Her eyes flicker in your direction, but aside from that, she still doesn't acknowledge that you're there.

"You're up late," you venture. Kind of an ironic thing to say, but it's the first thing that jumps to mind. "Having trouble sleeping?"

Finally, Mom nods.

"Mmhmm. What 'bout you?"

Her voice is slurred and croaky as she speaks, and the bottle of brandy on the floor next to her explains why. Yesterday, it was more than half-full, but tonight, there's barely a fourth of it left. You let out a sigh. No wonder she's not asking where you were.

Carefully, you lean over and move the bottle in between the couch and chair where she can't reach it.

"Yeah, uh...same here."

Clearly, something's wrong – to your knowledge, she's never done this before. You want to ask her, but you have no clue how to phrase it. Parents should be taking care of their kids' problems, not the other way around.

"So, how's work?"

You cringe inside as soon as the words leave your mouth – work has got to be the last thing she wants to talk about in the middle of the night. However, she rubs her forehead and forces her lips into a thin smile. The light from the television accentuates the lines in her face, making her appear ghostly.

"*Hmm*. I must be really screwed up for you to ask something like that," she says. She reaches down for the bottle of brandy, discovers that it's not there, and casually returns her arm to her lap as if she doesn't want you to notice.

"No, I just wanna know what's going on."

"Don't worry about it, hon," she says, and goes back to the TV.

"You know saying that just makes people worry more."

"You're just like your dad. What'd I do to deserve such sweet boys?" She exhales deeply. "Oh well, here goes: I've been assigned to a tough case at work, and it's kicking my butt."

"What kind of case?" you ask, relaxing back into the chair and folding your left leg over your right.

"The kind of case nobody wants. My client's been convicted of murder, and based on the evidence, there's no way he didn't do it."

"Yikes. And you *have* to defend him?"

That elicits yet another exhausted sigh.

"If I want to get paid. Of course, it's not impossible to get him cleared; the evidence is mostly circumstantial. But after him, the list of suspects is awfully thin and anyone on the jury with some common sense will be able to come to the same conclusions I am now."

The two of you fall silent for a moment. The anchor starts interviewing the girl's father.

"It doesn't seem fair to make you defend a murderer. You've been working hard enough as it is. You're a person, not a robot."

Your mother sits up and regards you with a look of distant sadness.

"I'm sorry, but I can't turn down a case, even one like this. I may not like it, but I have to do my best for you and your dad."

She groans as she takes her glass to the kitchen and deposits it in the sink.

"I think I'm going to try sleep one more time. You should, too,

it's way too late for either of us to be up right now."

She makes as if she's going to head up to bed, but hesitates at the foot of the stairs.

"Once this case is over, things are going to get a lot easier, I promise. But you just worry about you for right now, okay? Goodnight, Tetsuo," she says, and wearily mounts the stairs.

You watch her leave with a twinge of frustration. It says something that the most you've been able to speak to her was at past midnight with almost half a bottle of booze in her. But at least you were able to understand what she's going through a little bit better; even though you're not convinced that Mom understands where *you're* coming from. For now, though, you'll take what you can get.

*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Empress  
Arcana...*

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"Welcome back."

Elizabeth's voice and the now familiar sound of crashing

waves heralds your return to the Velvet Room before you even open your eyes. There they are, hands folded, legs crossed, waiting patiently the way a doctor and his nurse do when expecting a patient. Although the Velvet Room itself has long since ceased to be surprising, the way Minato and Elizabeth anticipate your arrival will always be unsettling.

"What is it this time? I feel like everything went pretty well, don't you?"

Elizabeth and Minato exchange a coy glance. Elizabeth opens her arms in an appeasing gesture.

"Now, now. There is no need to be confrontational. We are not here to assess your performance, but merely to render assistance. If we have given you that impression at any point, we sincerely apologize. It would be a source of much joy if you would come to associate these visits with feelings of opportunity and fulfillment, rather than frustration.

"In any case, my master and I would like to congratulate you on taking the next step in realizing the full extent of your Wild Card abilities! It is *ever* so exciting to watch your menagerie of Personas bloom, like so many petals unfurling from the bud of a flower!"

"Your words, not his, right?" you say with regards to Minato's annoyed expression, which vanishes once Elizabeth looks back over her shoulder at him.

"To some extent, yes. I may take some creative liberties with

my interpretations, but the gist is the same. But...getting back on topic, it is relieving to see that you've taken our advice."

You hold up a hand. "Wait, I'm getting mixed signals here. First you're saying you don't care what I do, and then you tell me you're 'relieved' that I'm doing what you say. Which is it?"

Another look passes between the two of them, this one more hesitant. What is it they're still keeping from you?

"In a sense, both," replies Elizabeth at last. "In fact, it is very much so inaccurate to say that we 'don't care' what you do. In fact, we are quite invested in the results of your journey. More so than is typical, if you are truly curious."

"I've never met anyone who says so little in so many words," you say as your frustration with her cryptic allusions mounts. "Am I going to be allowed to *know* why exactly you're so invested in me at any point? What are you getting out of helping me like this? What's your motivation? *Who* are you? *Why* are you here? I've terminated two Clouds already, but when it comes to you, I'm no closer to figuring out what your deal is than when I started."

Minato sighs sadly, shaking his head. Him, you almost feel bad for. You feel as though he would be more ready to answer questions than Elizabeth is. Sure, Elizabeth says that she's speaking for him, but seeing as Minato doesn't seem able to say more than a few words at a time, all you have is her word.

She smiles, an upturning of the lips containing coquettish thoughts, and doing little to alleviate your suspicions.

"My! What is this tantalizing, yet thoroughly improper feeling coursing through my veins right now? Master, surely you must feel it, too?"

Minato nods in agreement and thoughtfully bites down on a knuckle.

"Understand that it is not our place to divulge the nature of our presence in this space other than to say that it is the result of some act of fate. Certainly there can be no other cosmic force that would intertwine such colorful threads in such a manner! Indeed, for you to be our guest, and for us to play your hosts is a curious wrinkle, but not altogether unintentional. What to do, Master, what to do...?"

You're beginning to notice a strange dynamic between Minato and Elizabeth. Although she refers to him as "Master", it certainly feels as though it's really the other way around. Whether this is intentional or not is still unclear, however.

"Listen, I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but you're still avoiding my questions," you say.

Elizabeth turns back to you and says, "My apologies - sometimes I forget myself. But as I said before, there are limits to what we can and cannot do. And for now, explaining all of the detailed intricacies of our mission is expressly forbidden by our Lord. But what we can tell you is this-" she



stops and gestures to Minato, who continues for her.

*"The moment man devoured the fruit of knowledge, he sealed his fate.*

*Entrusting his future to the cards, man clings to a dim hope.*

*Yet, the Arcana is the means by which all is revealed.*

*Beyond the beaten path lies the absolute end.*

*It matters not who you are...death awaits you."*

Then, he closes his mouth, and falls back into his chair. His face becomes tired and gaunt, slackening as if dragged down by some great weight. Terrible, icy hands grip your spine, causing you to stiffen. The gravity of your situation and completeness of your ignorance comes down around you all once, oppressive and crushing in its totality.

"Death...awaits me? Why...why do you keep telling me these things? What am I doing here?"

Elizabeth shakes her head, refusing you the reassurance you crave.

"Would that we could provide you the answers you crave. But rest assured, as long as you venture forth into the shadow carrying the light of hope and confidence in yourself, you will survive and beat back any delusion. Remember that death does not always signify an end. Whenever you feel threatened

by its finality, call that to mind. Mankind is not a hopeless endeavor. *That* is what we hope to prove. Now stand, please. You will soon arrive at a critical milestone in your journey, and your strength must not be found lacking."

Embarrassed, you find that you've fallen to your knees, clutching at large clumps of your hair and shaking. Taking Elizabeth's outstretched hand, you straighten back up and try to recompose yourself.

"Much better!" she says, her voice regaining its usual lilting quality. "Despite some initial concerns, you have demonstrated the qualities of a capable Wild Card as of late. Although the changes you are experiencing may seem severe at times, we believe that you are more than strong enough to withstand this trial. Keep your head held high, and continue to keep your heart open."

With this, your vision begins to blur, and dark tendrils of unconscious eat away at the scene in front of you.

"It may be some time before we meet again, but do not forget that as long as our fates are intertwined, we are forever your steadfast allies!"

Elizabeth's last words barely register before sleep drags you forcibly from the Velvet Room and into its snug embrace.

*Thou art I...*

*And I am thou...*

*Thou hast established a new bond...*

*It shall grant you the strength to open thine eyes...*

*Thou shalt be blessed under the sign of the Death Arcana...*