

Two Fools In One Deck

Kiiam

<http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com/> (2015)

Tags: StoryMaster, FanFiction.Net

Pick a card. Any card. Two fools chosen to embark on a journey together. Two guests with the potential to safeguard the future. Where will that future lead them? Where will they end up? Come and join us. It should be interesting to find out.

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Produced By: <http://storymaster.the-code-monkey.com>

On: 6/10/2015

Retrieved For: thisseatiscold@gmail.com

Story URL: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/9553344/>

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1. Prologue: Two Fools

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A/N: Well, here we go. I've been planning this for a while and its something I always wanted to do. Talked a lot with The Infamous Man regarding this fic and I'm grateful for the helping hand he's lent me in the development of this. Let's get started!

...But before I do, I'd like to point out a couple things. I know most of you are probably rolling your eyes at the prospect of another author's attempt to novelize the entirety of Persona 3. I know there's already a handful of fics like it on the site. Even still, I love the Persona series and want to take a shot at it. So, here's some things to know about this fic:

1) Both Protagonists are included in this fic. MaleMc and FemMc. Named Minato Arisato and Hamuko Runako respectively. They ARE NOT RELATED and they will NOT BE PAIRED TOGETHER.

2) Both are Wild Cards. Both are guests of the Velvet Room. Each will have their own set of Social Links. Some might even be new.

I believe that should do for now. Anyone here still interested?

For those remaining, I hope you enjoy the story.

Prologue: Two Fools

"Welcome... to the Velvet Room..."

An old man with bulging eyes and a long nose smiles as he seems to address someone who cannot be seen. He sits on a couch with a table set in front of him. The entire room is blue, and the couch and cloth that covers the table compliment that, being the same dark hue as the room. Strangely though, if one were to take a moment to look around they would notice doors set off to the side of the room. Behind the strange old man there is no wall, but a large gate with a large clock in the middle of it. The room appears to be an elevator of some sort, moving upwards at a fast pace...

"This is a place that exists between dream and reality, mind and matter." The old man says. "My name... is Igor. I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

Igor chuckles to himself, as if something has amused him.

"It has been years since we've had a guest... though two at once is a rare thing indeed..."

As he says this, the strange man gestures to two pieces of paper on the table in front of him.

"Both of you sign your names here, please."

Without a word, two figures whom the man appears to be speaking to step forward and sign their names on the paper.

Igor glances down at the two parchments and nods, waving his hand over them as he does. The two papers disappear.

"Thank you." Igor says with a smile. "The contracts you both just signed state that the two of you will take full responsibility for your actions. I am pleased that neither of you were hesitant about accepting the terms and conditions. It says a lot about you as people."

Igor chuckles again as his guests both nod. A deck of cards is suddenly on the table.

"Do either of you believe in fortune telling?" Igor asks. "Each reading is done with the same cards, yet the result is always different. Now... why don't we see what fate is reflected in the cards? Which of you would like to go first? Hm... let's start with you."

All the cards fan out as Igor waves his hand over the deck, never touching it. One card flips over.

"The Fool, in the upright position." Igor says with a smile. "This card indicates the kind of person you are now. You are free of worries. Free of burdens. You take pleasure in finding out where life takes you. Of course, this also means you are quite immature and naïve."

Another card flips over.

"Fitting that The Magician would follow, hm?" Igor chuckles. "In the upright position, this card indicates growth and progress. Maturity. Gaining strength to overcome life's trials and a clear focus on your goals along with appreciating what is in front of you. This shows what kind of person you will become in the future. Now, about the kind of trials you will face..."

A card flips over.

"The Moon, in the reversed position. When reversed this card suggests fear and denial. The trials you will face will certainly be difficult to face, but beware of your own delusions and keep your emotions under control. You will be faced with pain and heartache, but remember that actions have consequences and decisions made based on fear or emotion are rarely any good. But..."

The card in front of The Moon flips over.

"...Do not be discouraged. The Sun in the upright position is proof of your capability to overcome your hardships." Igor smiles, gesturing to the card. "This card represents happiness. In time depression fades, enthusiasm merges with experience, and you regain former optimism. If you persevere, you will reach the light of a new day."

The cards shuffle themselves back into the tarot deck when Igor waves his hand over them once again. His smile never leaves his face.

"Now for the other one... let's see what kind of person you are and what your future holds."

With a flick of his wrist, the cards shuffle and spread out once again. The first card reveals itself.

"Oh... The Hermit, in the reversed position." Igor notes with interest. "This card shows what kind of person you are currently. You isolate yourself from others. You don't dislike people, but you find it hard to be around them. Yet, even if some of this isolation is brought upon by yourself, you do not wish for it. The card that indicates who you will become in the future is..."

Another cards flips over and Igor smiles.

"The Emperor, in the upright position." Igor chuckles. "It represents power, stability, and leadership. You will become a person who can be counted on, looked up to, trusted and respected. A far cry from your current self, no? Now, let's see what trials you will face personally in the future..."

Once again, another card reveals itself.

"Hm... Death, in the upright position." Igor says. "This is not a bad card as one might think. It represents transformation and rebirth. New beginnings. During your journey you will cast aside old lifestyles and habits, indication of your change of person. The change will not be easy, but it will only be for the better. The card that comes at the end of your trials to come is..."

A different card is shown.

"The Hanged Man in the upright position. Once again, not a bad card, and quite fitting given your fortune so far." Igor chuckles. "It represents greater understanding. Contemplation and acceptance. It is a card of faith and trust. It seems your trials will lead you to many new thoughts and feelings."

The cards shuffle themselves back into the deck and Igor stares ahead as he folds his hands together in front of him.

"These are fortunes that indicate your future as individuals, and of the trials that will cause great changes within the two of you." Igor smiles from behind his hands. "But there is one more fortune to tell. It is of the journey you two will share in the coming future."

Three cards are in front of the deck. The first flips over.

"Once again, The Fool, in the upright position." Igor chuckles. "It indicates the beginning of the journey that's in store. As your fortunes already suggested, it is one that holds new experiences and difficult trials that you two will need to overcome."

The second card flips over.

"Next is... The Tower, in the upright position." Igor says solemnly. "There will be tragedies that befall you both during the course of this journey and you will have to endure. Whether this misfortune is brought upon by yourselves or by

others, I cannot say. All I can say for certain is that these times will be the most difficult for you."

The final card flips over, and Igor smiles once again.

"But fear not, for The Star in the upright position is the final card and represents the climax of your journey." Igor grins. "It is hope for the future. In spite of all you have faced, a happy future can still be forged so long as you strive forward. However, it is up to you to grasp onto that future. Promising indeed, no?"

The three cards return to the deck and disappear. A new voice suddenly makes itself heard.

Unnoticed until now are two people standing next to Igor. One a young woman, and the other a young man. The woman speaks.

"Our new guests are most interesting, aren't they?" The woman smiles.

"As are their destinies." The young man adds with a smile of his own.

"Indeed." Igor chuckles. "However, I believe proper introductions must wait for now. Do not be alarmed, for we will meet again very soon. Until that time comes... farewell."

The blue room and the three residents inside it fade away...

"Attention passengers."

Minato opened his eyes blearily as the train conductor's announcement sounded over the intercom. He glanced around the train as the conductor went on.

"We apologize for the delay earlier. We will be arriving at Iwatodai in just a few minutes."

The young man sitting in one of the seats, Minato Arisato, sighed as he heard the announcement. It looked like he had fallen asleep during the train ride, and if it weren't for the fact that one of his headphones had fallen out or he might have slept through the conductor's announcement and missed his stop. That would have been troublesome. Minato rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn as he sat up straight. His head felt fuzzy. Had he been dreaming...?

Shaking his head to get rid of his grogginess, Minato fixed his left headphone back onto his ear as he got up and stood next to the door. Minato turned up the volume of his mp3 player as the music of his favorite artist filtered through his earphones. He had bought Shoji Meguro's new album before leaving for Iwatodai and it was already proving to be his favorite one yet.

The song he was currently listening to, "Burn My Dread" was his favorite song in the album.

The monorail doors opened and Minato stepped out into Iwatodai station. He ignored the announcements of other arriving and departing trains as he took out the directions he

had received that would lead him to the dorm where he was supposed to stay at. He glanced up at a clock on the wall as he left the station.

"Almost midnight..." Minato muttered. If it weren't for train's departure being delayed, he would've arrived a lot sooner. He hoped that either the dorms didn't lock up or if they did that someone was there to let him in when he got there.

Minato stepped out into the streets of Iwatodai. Even late at night the city was still bustling with activity. Lights blared from all around him and cars were honking at those going too slow. Minato turned the volume of his headphones up until his music drowned out the sounds around him. He took the few steps down from the station.

Behind him, both hands of the clock struck twelve.

The world transformed.

Minato blinked as everything stopped. Darkness swallowed the light and the frenzy of activity from before was gone. The atmosphere was eerie and silent as his surroundings and the sky above took on a sickly greenish hue. Minato glanced up at the large moon above. Unmoving clouds framed the large orb that served as the only source of light in the dark world. Minato gave an annoyed sigh as he ran a hand through his blue locks and continued on his way.

His mp3 player had stopped playing right in the middle of the song's climax.

Minato ignored the countless numbers of coffins that surrounded him and when he stumbled into a puddle he wasn't at all fazed by the water's disturbing reddish coloring. He walked through the city at his own pace as he followed the directions he had been given. With no people around to get in his way and with time at a current stand still, he arrived at the dorm in record time. An hour was a fraction of the time he had thought it would take to navigate through the new city he'd be living in for the rest of his high school years.

He took a few seconds to stare at the dorm he'd be staying at for the time being. Apparently part of the boys' dorm was being renovated so he'd stay at the girls' dorm for a while. As a teenage boy, part of him was happy about that but it wasn't anything to get worked up about. It wasn't like he was particularly smooth with the members of the opposite sex in his opinion. He just hoped the residents would be able to tolerate someone with a Y chromosome sticking around for a few days until he was able to move out.

Minato didn't bother knocking on the door, knowing that no one would be able to answer and was relieved to find out that the door was unlocked. He checked over his bag and made sure that he hadn't lost any of his belongings before stepping inside the building. Minato found himself in a lobby of some sort. He set his bag down on the ground as the door closed behind him.

"You're late. I've been waiting a long time for you."

Minato blinked when he suddenly heard a voice next to him.

He turned and was surprised to find a small boy in black and white striped clothing sitting on the lobby desk smiling at him. The boy stood out in the silent green atmosphere, appearing almost like a ghost in Minato's eyes...

"No one can escape time." The boy said, smiling eerily at him. "It delivers us all to the same end. You can't plug your ears and cover your eyes. You can't pretend it doesn't exist."

The boy's form shimmered and faded away into the darkness.

"And so it begins..."

The cryptic message echoed in Minato's ears as the boy disappeared. The young man was silent, unsure of what to make of the strange encounter.

"...Who's there!?"

Minato turned to see a girl with brown hair staring at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"H-How can you be... but it's...!" The girl gasped.

But Minato wasn't focusing on her face or words. No, his attention was drawn towards the gun in the holster strapped to the girl's thigh. So many strange events occurring after he had only just arrived was overwhelming. Minato took a tentative step back as he watched the girl warily.

Apparently making any sort of movement was the wrong course of action to take, evident by how the girl's eyes

widened in panic as she reached for the gun...!

But then suddenly, the door behind Minato swung open with a loud bang. The blue haired boy saw stars as the door's edge slammed into the back of his head and brought him to the ground. Through the pain he could hear the girl gasp and another voice shout out.

"Takeba, wai-!"

The stern command was drowned out by an enthusiastic third voice that came from behind him.

"Hello! Hamuko Runako is here~! I... eh?"

Minato groaned as his music turned back on. One of his earphones had fallen off again. Because of that, he was able hear the girl behind him stammer her apology.

"O-Oh my gosh! I'm SO sorry!" The girl, Hamuko, stammered as she knelt down and tried to help Minato up. "I didn't know you were there! I didn't mean to hit you!"

"I-It's fine..." Minato muttered, hissing as he rubbed the bump that was already forming. "I'll live..."

He glanced at the girl who was checking him over. Her wavy brown hair was held up by a few hairclips while her expression was apologetic. But what really stood out were the girl's eyes. They were a deep redish color, shining at him with worry behind them. And she was still talking.

"Still, you should probably... wait a second, I thought this was the girls' dorm. What's a guy doing here?" Hamuko asked, suddenly giving the boy she had knocked over a suspicious look.

She blinked when she finally took notice of the two other girls in the lobby. The one with brunette hair and a pink shirt was staring at the two of them in confusion while another girl with red hair just looked surprised and didn't know what to say. Hamuko's eyes homed in on what the first girl was holding in her hand. She tilted her head to side in both curiosity and confusion.

"What's with the gun?"

A/N: The Journey has started. Here we go...

I hope this has been a good enough of a hook to get at least a few people interested. I love character interaction and development, both points the Persona series is known for and plan to have fun with it. That said, I'm not going to completely railroad the story and will add in a couple twists here and there, but I promise to remain faithful to the series. Nothing too outlandish. I look forward to developing both Minato and Hamuko as two separate characters and seeing how two protagonists will shape the Journey.

Anyway, I thank anyone who decided to take a glimpse at the story as it's taking its first steps and if you decide to stick around to watch it grow, I'm grateful. Any feedback or

comments regarding the story's start is appreciated, and I wish you all happy days.

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2. Chapter 1: Awakening

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Can't let the prologue sit for too long. Time to move the story along. For those interested in seeing what's in store, I hope you all enjoy.

Chapter 1: Awakening

Hamuko pointed at the gun in Yukari's hand as she stared at it. The girl made a small yelping sound and quickly hid the weapon behind her back as the red haired girl stepped forward. She cleared her throat with a loud "ahem" and Hamuko and Minato turned their attention from Yukari to the other girl.

"I wasn't expecting you two to arrive this late." The girl said, giving the two a welcoming smile. "My name is Mitsuru Kirijo. I'm one of the students who live in this dorm."

Minato's eyes narrowed as she introduced herself. So she was just going to brush everything that just happened under the rug? Well, Minato didn't want to be difficult on his first day so he decided to let the matter slide for the moment so as not to provoke her. At least things couldn't get any worse than

dorm mates pointing guns at him, right?

Hamuko didn't seem to have a problem accepting the situation for what it was either. She gave a bright smile and bowed politely at Mitsuru.

"Pleased to meet you, Kirijo-san. My name is Hamuko Runako." The girl smiled.

"Aha... it's a pleasure. I don't mind the formality, but there's no need for it. Kirijo-san is my father. I'm fine with just Mitsuru." Mitsuru smiled.

"Well, then... Mitsuru-senpai?"

"That's fine."

"...What about him?" The other girl asked suddenly, pointing at the blue haired boy.

"Minato Arisato." The boy introduced himself bluntly. His gaze shifted towards the girl who spoke up. "It's nice to meet you."

"Y-Yeah..." Yukari mumbled. She didn't have to wonder why he was glaring at her...

"Both of them are transfer students. They both ended up here, but they may move to the other dorms once things settle down." Mitsuru went on, gesturing to the two newcomers.

"Huh? I thought this was a girls' dorm..." Hamuko said with a puzzled tone. Her eyes widened for a brief moment before her

expression turned sly. She held her hand up to her lips as a mischievous grin stretched over her face. "Hu hu hu... I see. It's one of *those* types of dorms, is it...?"

"Er... what?" Mitsuru's calm expression changed into one that was much more confused. "I'm not sure what you mean by that but... this is just a normal dorm building."

"Y-Yeah! There's nothing weird going on here!" Yukari added, though her voice sounded several octaves higher than normal.

"She who denies it..." Hamuko giggled, wagging her finger teasingly.

"Geez, what are you getting at?" Yukari sighed, her annoyance with the girl's insulations helping her regain her calm.

Minato just shook his head at the ridiculous direction the conversation had gone in.

"Whatever. Anyway, I'm Yukari Takeba. It's... nice to meet you guys."

"She's a second year, just like you two." Mitsuru added. "And as for your question earlier, Runako, this dorm is different from the others. This is a dorm for people with... certain needs, I guess you could say."

"Like what?" Hamuko asked.

"I'll tell you about it later if we have time." Mitsuru said,

refusing to give any more detail than that. "It's late and you two must've had a long train ride. You both should get some rest." Mitsuru turned toward Yukari. "Why don't you show these two to their rooms?"

"...Alright. Yeah, I can do that." Yukari nodded, finally giving a small smile. She turned towards Hamuko and Minato. "You two probably want get some sleep by now, right?"

"Oh, that actually sounds good!" Hamuko beamed. "Yeah, I almost missed the train too! I'm lucky that there were some issues that caused a delay or I would've missed it! But then I fell asleep on the train. I woke up and barely made it out as the doors were closing! Then I got lost for a while because I forgot that I had directions to the dorms so...!"

Minato put his other earphone back in its proper position and turned the volume up again to mute Hamuko's excited ramblings.

The two of them followed Yukari upstairs to the second floor. She tapped Minato's shoulder to get his attention and he responded by turning down the volume of his music so he could hear what she had to say.

"The guys' rooms are on the second floor here." Yukari explained. "Your room is all the way at the end to the right side. I think all your things should be there already..."

"Guys as in plural?" Hamuko suddenly asked. "So this really is a co-ed dorm?"

"Er, sorta... I guess." Yukari shrugged. "There's only one other guy living here. I don't really talk to him that much, but I'm sure you'll run into him eventually."

"...Alright then." Minato nodded, hefting his bag up and headed in the direction of his room.

"W-Wait!"

Minato stopped and turned towards Yukari when she called out to him. She had an uncomfortable look on her face as she shuffled around.

"Look, about what happened earlier... I'm sorry." The girl muttered, bowing slightly in apology.

"It's fine." Minato said dismissively. "I'll remember to knock next time."

"Um... hey, can I ask you something? This goes for you too, Hamuko-san."

"What's up?" Hamuko asked while Minato arched an eyebrow at the girl.

"Well... did anything seem strange to the two of you when you were coming over here?" Yukari asked with an uncertain tone. "W-What I mean is, were you two okay getting to the dorm?"

"Hm...? Yeah, everything was fine." Hamuko nodded.

Minato paused and stared at Yukari for a few moments. Well,

if she was talking about something strange there was definitely one thing that came to mind. That eerie atmosphere... and come to think of it she had been moving in it...

...No. Minato decided not to make trouble by talking about that. He did, however, have his own question to ask.

"Does that kid live here too?" Minato asked.

"Huh? What kid...?" Yukari asked, confused by the question.

"...Never mind. It's nothing." Minato muttered, smiling ruefully. Figures she wouldn't know what he was talking about. The whole thing was strange as it was, and certainly different than what he was used to. "Good night."

With that, Minato bid the two girls good night and stepped into his room, shutting the door behind him.

Hamuko followed Yukari up to the third floor where the girls' rooms were. Yukari led her down the hall and gestured to the last door.

"Well, this is it. You guys shouldn't have any problems remembering since you both got rooms at the end of the halls." Yukari smiled.

"Thanks for the room!" Hamuko beamed as she opened the door. She turned and smiled at Yukari. "You'll show me around later on, right?"

"I-If you want me to. Though I should tell you there's really not much else in this dorm..." Yukari trailed off.

"Say, you never answered my question downstairs." Hamuko said, raising a finger up as if she had just remembered something important. "Why did you have that gun before?"

"O-Oh! W-Well, you know, it's... kinda like a... hobby...? Er, um, not really, but..." Yukari stuttered over her words. "It's for... it's for self defense!"

"Self defense?" Hamuko questioned as she tilted her head to the side curiously.

"Y-Yeah! You know how it is these days. It's dangerous out there in the streets." Yukari said with an uneasy smile. "It's not a real gun, of course. But if there's ever someone who's giving me trouble I know how to use it!"

"Okay..." Hamuko gave a slow nod.

"A-Anyway, are you sure you didn't see anything strange coming over here?" Yukari asked again.

"You're the paranoid type, huh?" Hamuko giggled. "Other than nearly missing the ride over here there was no trouble. And even though I don't look like it, I'm pretty tough! I can take care of myself!"

"Hm..."

"Should there have been anything strange when I came here?"

"No... no, it's fine." Yukari sighed. She gave Hamuko a tired smile as she turned away. "Just forget about what I said. There's really nothing to worry about."

"Then don't make such a fuss about it. Geez." Hamuko huffed with pouting lips.

"Ha. I guess so..." Yukari gave a small laugh. She paused for a moment and turned back again. "Look, I'm sure you still have questions, but just hold off for now. Good night."

Hamuko watched her until Yukari's form disappeared downstairs again. Hamuko went over everything she had seen and heard since arriving at the dorm in her mind before giving a careless shrug and entering her room, shutting and locking the door behind her.

"Weird." Hamuko said to herself as she took a quick glance around the room.

She could see two boxes next to the bed that contained the items she couldn't carry in her bag. Hamuko wasn't a particularly materialistic girl so the boxes only had clothes and a few personal possessions and not much else. Hamuko looked at the digital clock that was set on a shelf over the bed. She thought about unpacking her things, but decided that she would rather sleep than do something she could put off until later. She made a mental note to text her parents tomorrow and let them know she had arrived safely. She threw off her sweater, removed her boots and leggings and climbed into bed, nuzzling her pillow and wrapping the covers

tightly around her body.

It was much more comfortable than sleeping on the train.

As she drifted off to sleep, Hamuko couldn't help but think back to what Yukari said. Something strange when she was coming here...

"Wonder if she was talking about..." Hamuko mumbled to herself before trailing off. She smiled and shook her head as her eyes slowly closed.

Nah... there was no way anyone else knew about that...

Minato yawned as he slowly got out of bed. He hadn't bothered changing out of his clothes the other night, only discarding his dark jacket before falling into bed. He glanced at the digital clock on the stand next to his bed. His eyes moved over to his school uniform he had set out last night just before he had gone to bed.

"Another new school..." Minato mumbled as he began to change.

Just as he finished tying the black bow tie around the collar of his white shirt and moved his headphones to his ears, he heard a couple knocks from the door.

"It's Yukari. Are you awake?"

"And Hamuko! Open up!"

Minato sighed as he listened to the voices outside his door. He moved over and undid the lock, opening the door for the two girls as they stepped inside.

"Good morning. Did you sleep okay?" Yukari smiled as she greeted him. Hamuko leaned against the doorway and as she waved at him with a smile of her own.

"Is there something you two wanted?" Minato asked.

"Not really. Mitsuru-senpai just asked me to take you guys to school." Yukari replied nonchalantly. "It's your first day, so you shouldn't be late. You ready to go?"

"...I can find it myself."

"Huh? But I..."

"Hey, what's with that attitude?" Hamuko demanded, stepping forward and leaning close to Minato's face. "You've got two cute girls offering to walk to school with you. That's not something you can just pass up!"

"I said I'm fine." Minato replied, leaning back and away from the girl blatantly invading his personal space.

"Don't be so shy. C'mon!"

Minato's eyes widened when Hamuko suddenly grabbed his arm, pulling him forward and out the door. Hamuko's grip was tight as she pulled him down the hall.

"Grab his bag, Yukari!" Hamuko called back as she flashed a stunned Minato a cheeky smile. "I don't want to be late on my first day!"

Yukari stared after the two of them for a few moments, watching Hamuko tug Minato's arm as he stumbled along. The girl giggled before grabbing Minato's bag and jogging down the hall after them.

Maybe getting along with these two wouldn't be so hard after all.

Minato stood between Hamuko and Yukari as they rode the monorail to Tatsumi Port Island where they would be attending Gekkoukan High School. Yukari had told the two of them that they'd stop at Port Island Station and they'd walk to school from there. Yukari turned towards the two transfer students and smiled at them.

"Bet you guys didn't have to ride a monorail like this at your old schools, huh?" Yukari asked teasingly. She sighed as looked out the windows. "I love it. It feels like you're gliding over the ocean..."

"I see what you mean." Hamuko said, giving her own smile. "It feels like I'm flying above the water!"

"I heard Tatsumi Port Island is a man-made island. Is that true?" Minato asked, turning to Yukari for an answer. He had been wondering that for a while and Hamuko had forced him

to keep one of his earphones off so he could join in the conversation.

"Yep. It's an artificial island that was made by the Kirijo Group years ago. They built our school right in the middle." Yukari answered.

"Kirijo...?" Hamuko wondered aloud. "Doesn't that mean Mitsuru-senpai's...?"

"Oh, look! You can see it now!"

Minato and Hamuko both turned to look as Yukari pointed out the windows. Both pairs of eyes looked down at a large island with a big white building in the middle. The complex that surrounded it was the school grounds, and even far away the place looked massive.

Hamuko was the first to give voice to her awe and wonder.

"Wow!" The girl gushed as she leaned forward towards the window to get a better look. Her hands pressed against the glass as she stared at the island and their school. "It looks so pretty! And the campus looks huge! THAT'S our school?!"

"Well, given who runs and sponsors the place it's got a lot going for it." Yukari said. "We've got a few bad teachers, but the staff is capable and just about every club and sport you can think of can be signed up for. Gekkoukan is really a one of a kind high school."

"Yeah..." Minato nodded, also taken in by the sight. "An artificial island and they built a school on it..."

Yukari smiled at the admiring duo.

"Trust me, you two are gonna love it there."

"I think I already do." Hamuko beamed.

Minato only nodded mutely in response.

Yukari led Minato and Hamuko through the school entrance, with Minato bobbing his head slightly as he listened to his music while Hamuko tried to take in everything around her, focusing particularly on the cherry blossoms and flower beds that led up to the entrance of the school's main building. The trio stepped past the shoe lockers and into the main lobby where a crowd of students were gathered around the bulletin boards and a small vendor was placed by the stairs. Books, other student supplies and lunches could be bought there.

"You guys are fine from here, right?" Yukari said, turning to address the two of them. "You should find out what rooms you're in and report to your homeroom teachers. The Faculty Office is down the hall on the left. Do you guys have anything you want to ask me before I go?"

"What class are you in?" Hamuko asked.

"I don't know. I haven't looked at the class assignments yet."

Yukari replied. She looked around a few times before she gave both of them a serious look. "Hey, about last night..."

Hamuko and Minato both blinked at her.

"Don't tell anyone what you guys saw, okay? Later."

With that last request, Yukari disappeared down the hall to the right. Minato and Hamuko stood next to each in silence as they looked around. Hamuko stepped forward and smiled at her blue haired fellow transfer student.

"Well? Wanna see what class we're in?"

"Sure."

He followed Hamuko over to the crowd of students congested around the bulletin board that had the list of where the students were assigned. Hamuko stood on her tip toes to look over the many head that blocked her vision.

"I can't see from here. Can you see anything?" Hamuko asked the taller boy.

"No." Minato shook his head. "Doesn't matter. They might not even have our names posted since we just transferred in."

"You might be right..." Hamuko nodded thoughtfully. "I guess we should head to the Faculty Office if we want to know what our homerooms are."

This time Minato led the way as Hamuko trailed after him at

her own pace. She noticed a few students that caught her eye, like a girl with dark skin arguing with some guy in a P.E. uniform, plus another pair of students near the bulletin board where a smart looking girl seemed to talking heatedly to another student who seemed to pay her no attention. As they walked down the hall Yukari had pointed them to, Minato and Hamuko were slightly perplexed to find a teacher wearing a... samurai hat talking with an exotic looking student with his blonde hair in a bowl cut. The two of them quickly moved past the shouting duo and nearly bumped into a tall girl who apologized to them before moving on her way.

"So... which one of these doors leads to the Faculty Office?" Hamuko wondered out loud.

"Don't know." Minato replied even if he hadn't needed to. From the corner of his eye he spotted a student with long brown hair wander around a few feet away from them with a lost look on her face. Minato tapped Hamuko's shoulder and gestured to the girl. "Why don't you ask her?"

"Good idea." Hamuko smiled. She waved towards the girl as she called out to her. "Hey you!"

The girl jumped nearly three feet in the air at the sound of Hamuko's voice before she slowly turned around to face them. Her head darted back and forth before she looked back at them and slowly pointed at herself with an uncertain look on her face.

"Yeah, you." Hamuko smiled. "Do you know which one of

these doors is the Faculty Office?"

The girl stood unmoving for a few moments, like a deer caught in headlights before she slowly pointed to the door they were standing in front of.

"Okay, thanks!"

The girl nodded and hurried past them and out into the lobby where the other students gathered. Minato silently marveled at how skittish the girl was while Hamuko opened the door and let herself in. Minato followed shortly behind her. There was only one teacher in the office and she turned towards the two students when she heard them enter.

"Oh, are you two the new students?" The woman asked as she picked up a clipboard.

Minato and Hamuko both nodded in confirmation. The teacher glanced down at her clipboard and scanned it until she found two names.

"Let's see... Minato Arisato and Hamuko Runako. Both second year students. Juniors, correct?"

"That's us!" Hamuko smiled.

"Alright, let's see about Arisato first..." The teacher murmured to herself. "You've lived in a lot of places. Hm... it says here in 1999 ten years ago your parents...!"

The teacher gasped and held a hand up to her mouth. Minato

grimaced at her reaction. Hamuko looked between the teacher and Minato in confusion. What was that about Minato's parents ten years ago...?

"I'm sorry. I've been so busy I didn't have time read your information beforehand." The teacher said empathically.

"Before we move any further, let me introduce myself. I'm Ms. Toriumi. I teach Composition. Welcome to Gekkoukan High School."

"...Thanks." Minato replied curtly.

"Pleased to meet you, Toriumi-sensei." Hamuko smiled, bowing politely to the teacher.

"My, so polite! Girls like you should be an example for others." The woman smiled at Hamuko approvingly. Hamuko flushed a bit at the praise. Minato rolled his eyes.

"Now, Runako ..." Ms. Toriumi went on, looked back down at her clipboard and turning a page over. "Let's see... your guardians have already taken care of most of the paperwork so there's not much left to do. You were adopted ten years ago by the Runako family and..."

She paused again as she looked from Hamuko to Minato and back again. She shook her head and tucked the clipboard under her arm and gave the two new students a welcoming smile.

"Well, I can look over your papers later. Have you had a

chance to look over the classroom assignments yet?"

Both students shook their heads in the negative.

"Alright then. Runako, you're in class 2-F. That's my class."
Ms. Toriumi smiled. "As for Arisato, you're in class 2-E with Mr. Ekoda. But before you go to your classes, you'll both need to attend the opening ceremony. Follow me to the auditorium. Arisato, I'll show you where your class is sitting when we get there."

Both of them followed the teacher out the door.

Hamuko yawned as she sat in her seat in the classroom. The ceremony itself had been short, but the way the principal's speech made it seem like the whole affair had gone on for hours. Hamuko was the kind of person who could say she liked school and mean it, but there were certain things she disliked. Other than mean teachers and one or two subjects, she couldn't stand how the principal had gone on and on while getting so far off topic he had to be brought back on track several times by the vice principal standing at his side. Well, she had stopped listening halfway through. She was glad she had remembered to bring her mp3 player with her. She felt listening to Shoji Meguro's new album was far more productive than listening to the principal drone on about things everyone already knew.

Regardless, she had enjoyed her first homeroom class and right now they were on break until the next lesson. As Hamuko

began to write a few notes in her notebook, she heard someone's voice from behind her.

"Sup, dude?"

Hamuko blinked and turned towards who had addressed her. A student with a goatee sporting a blue hat sat at the desk behind her, smiling at her as he leaned forward with his elbows on his desk. He gave her a carefree smile.

"So you're the new girl, huh?" The boy grinned.

"I guess I am." Hamuko smiled back. It was always good to make friends with classmates. "Who are you?"

"Me? The name's Junpei Iori. Nice to meet ya." The young man, Junpei, smiled at her as he got up from his seat and stood by her desk. "I transferred here back in eighth grade."

"Really? You were a transfer too?"

"Yep!" Junpei's smile widened. "I know it can be tough bein' the new kid, so I thought I'd introduce myself and make sure you're not freaking out on your first day."

Any response Hamuko had to that was cut off when a familiar voice broke into their conversation.

"At it again, huh?"

Hamuko turned and smiled at Yukari who was approaching them.

"Hi Yukari."

"Hey, Hamuko. Junpei." Yukari said, looking at the male student with an exasperated expression. "Already decided to try hitting on her? Honestly, did you ever think that you might be bothering her?"

"What? B-But I was just bein' friendly..."

"Don't worry. I haven't heard anything that sounds like a pick-up line yet." Hamuko grinned.

"There. Ya see?"

"If you say so..." Yukari said, still sounding skeptical. She smiled and turned back to Hamuko. "Still, I was surprised that we we're in the same class. Funny coincidence, huh?"

"Yeah. It's a shame Minato-kun couldn't join us." Hamuko replied. "Still, I'm glad to at least have one friend to share homeroom with."

Yukari looked surprised for a few moments before her face melted into a warm smile.

"Yeah... me too!"

"Er, hello? I'm still here too y'know." Junpei frowned. He glanced between the two girls. "So do you guys know each other? I heard you guys walked to school together. Two cuties like you caught a lot of people's attention."

"What? Well, we only met yesterday." Yukari said, sounding uncomfortable. "We live in the same dorm so I was just helping her get to school. Is that really such a big deal?"

"No, not really." Junpei shrugged before giving her a mischievous smirk. "But that's not the only buzz going around. Was there a guy walking with you two on the way here...?"

"Y-Yeah. So what?"

"Oh really?" Junpei grinned. "So, what's his story then? He your boyfriend?"

"W-What!?" Yukari gasped. She glared at Junpei as her face flushed. "O-Of course not! He's just another transfer student and he's in the same dorm and I was just showing him around like I was with Hamuko! That's it!"

"Okay, okay, geez. Don't need to get so worked up about it..." Junpei grimaced. His smile came back as he turned to Hamuko. "So is he yours then?"

"Nope. I'm still single but happy." Hamuko said.

"Huh. Guess all the fuss was for nothing then." Junpei sighed, sounding a little disappointed.

"Is that really what people are talking about? Stupid rumors and gossip..." Yukari grumbled. She gave Hamuko an apologetic look. "Sorry. It's only your first day and you have to deal with this..."

"It's fine. High schools run on gossip. Students wouldn't be able to distract themselves from tests and homework properly without it." Hamuko said jokingly. "You just gotta deal with it."

"Heh. See, Yuka-tan? This girl knows what's up!"

"Ugh... you're both unbelievable." Yukari said, shaking her head at the two of them. "Anyway, I'm going to go take care of some stuff in the Archery Club. Don't try anything funny, Junpei."

"Hey!"

"Calm down, I was only kidding." Yukari smiled but was still giving him a stern look. "But be nice to her, alright?"

Yukari flashed the two of them a quick smile before turning and walking out of the classroom. As soon as she was gone, Junpei sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Man, what is she my mom...?" Junpei lamented. "Seriously though, I didn't come to hit on you or anything."

"I believe you."

"Good." Junpei smiled. "Hey, if you've ever got any problems, let me know and I'll help you out, 'kay?"

Hamuko smiled at him. Junpei was a bit over familiar and aloof, but he seemed like a good guy.

"I'll remember that."

"Heh, cool. Well, I'll see ya around."

Flashing her one last smile, Junpei left the classroom. Hamuko went back to her notes as her thoughts began to drift.

"I wonder how Minato's doing in his class..." Hamuko wondered to herself.

Minato gave a relieved sigh as he exited his classroom. Figures he'd be stuck with a teacher like that. It had only been ten minutes into his first lecture and he could already tell why the majority of the class had been whispering complaints about having homeroom with the worst teacher in school. Now that class was over, Minato found that he shared his classmates' opinion on Mr. Ekoda. It was nice to know he had one thing in common with the rest of his class. Not that mutual hatred of one man would help him make friends or anything like that...

Once he got downstairs to the shoe lockers, Minato was surprised to see Hamuko standing by the entrance talking to some guy wearing a hat. She smiled and waved at him when she noticed him.

"Minato-kun! We've been waiting for you!"

"Waiting for... why?" Minato asked incredulously as he approached her.

"So we could walk back together, of course." Hamuko smiled.

She gestured to the guy next to her. "And he's offered to help escort us there."

"Junpei Iori." The boy grinned as he introduced himself. "So... you're Minato? I've heard about you. Lots of people are already talking about you, y'know."

"...Why's that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Junpei gave an excited grin. "It's because you're the guy that was seen walking with the popular Yuka-tan and the cute transfer student Hamu-tan! You da man!"

Hamuko giggled a little at how Junpei had begun to refer to her.

"Is that so...?" Minato said, scratching the back of his head with a slightly puzzled look. "Is it really that interesting for me to be seen walking with them?"

"It's only because Yuka-tan's popular and everyone was excited about the transfer students. Don't worry too much about it." Junpei assured them as they all headed out the door. "It's just gossip. If there's really nothing going on you shouldn't worry about it."

"Right..." Minato muttered as he put on his headphones and turned the volume up.

"Hey, check out the jocks on their run." Junpei pointed to the group of students in tracks suits that ran past them.

"That reminds me, what kind of clubs does Gekkoukan have?" Hamuko asked.

"Already interested in joining one?" Junpei grinned. "I don't remember them all, but I'm sure if you look you'll find one you like. We've got all kinds. I hear some of the sports clubs are accepting new members soon, so there's that..."

Minato remained silent as he listened to his music while Hamuko and Junpei chatted amicably the rest of the way to the dorm.

Hamuko decided that she liked the dorm. It was spacious, she had a television in her room, and there were living rooms on each floor that were at least a quarter of the size of the lobby on the first floor. There were even vending machines. The place was top notch.

As Hamuko ascended the stairs to the second floor on her way to her room, she noticed a head of blue hair leaning back on one of the couches in the living area. Hamuko grinned mischievously as she quietly approached Minato. Even if she was tired and ready for bed, she couldn't let the opportunity pass. Leaning close to his ear, Hamuko shouted.

"HEY MINATO-KUN!"

Of course, since Minato had his back turned and most of his figure was obscured by the couch, Hamuko hadn't noticed the Cielo Mist he'd been drinking or the sketchbook on his lap.

Hamuko's voice blared through the song Minato had been listening to, crashing through his thought process and making him drop his drink right onto his lap in surprise.

Hamuko's hands flew to her mouth in panic as Minato stood up and cursed as his soda spilled onto his sketchbook. As he frantically looked around for something to wipe up the spill, Hamuko ran around and pulled out a handkerchief and began trying her best to clean the drink off of his book. But it was already too late. With a guilty expression, Hamuko gingerly picked up the ruined sketchbook, its pages wet and sticky and the drawings all but washed away and smeared.

"Ah... ehehehe... oops?" Hamuko giggled uneasily. She glanced at the sketchbook. "So... you... draw much...?"

Minato gave her a piercing glare for a few moments before snatching his ruined book and tossing it in a nearby trashcan. Hamuko stood in place as she listened to Minato stomp down the hallway towards his room, wincing when she heard his door shut loudly. Hamuko sighed miserably to herself as she resumed her trek upstairs. In hindsight, that might not have been the best thing to do. Minato didn't really seem the type that would appreciate a prank like that anyway. She'd have to make it up to him later.

Unbeknownst to the two transfer students, another resident of the dorm had caught the tail end of their antics on his way downstairs. Akihiko Sanada glanced down the hallway and up the stairs before shrugging and making his way down to the lounge, tugging on some boxing gloves as he went. He didn't

look at Mitsuru who was quietly sitting on the couch reading a book as he told her his plans for the night.

"I'm going out for a bit."

"Hm?"

Akihiko stopped halfway to the door and turned towards her when he heard her curious tone.

"Haven't you seen the newspapers lately?" He asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I know..." Mitsuru nodded in understanding as she closed her book with a difficult expression on her face. "People who have had no problems before are suddenly developing acute cases of Apathy Syndrome. Some say it's due to stress, but..."

"Yeah, right," Akihiko chuckled. "It's definitely THEM. Wouldn't be worth my time, otherwise."

Mitsuru only shook her head at that. How could he just laugh off something like this...?

"Will you be okay on your own?" Mitsuru asked.

"Relax. I'm just going out for a little practice."

As he left, the young woman sighed, glancing down at her watch as she spoke to herself.

"This isn't a game, Akihiko..."

The clock struck midnight.

Minato collapsed onto his bed as he went over his encounter with the Chairman in his head. After an uneventful second day of school he had been greeted by Shuji Ikutsuki upon arriving back at the dorm. They had exchanged introductions quickly, with Ikutsuki apologizing for the problems in his dorm assignment and offering to answer any questions Minato might have. He had refrained from asking why the man had walked all the way to the dorm when this could have been taken care of at school, instead opting to simply ask why he was here. Ikutsuki had insisted that he only wanted to meet the new transfer students. Again, Minato didn't see why he had gone through the trouble when they could have met and discussed whatever issues he may or may not have had at school.

When he heard Hamuko enter the dorm Minato had quickly excused himself and turned in for the day. After what happened last night he had avoided Hamuko as best he could. He didn't appreciate what she had done, and now because of her he had to find out where he could buy a new sketchbook. It wasn't like he drew very often or was very good at it, but it was a hobby and he had been angry when she had destroyed his work, even if she hadn't meant to.

Minato glanced towards his clock. It was almost midnight now. The boy sighed and closed his eyes.

"The early bird catches the bookworm!"

Minato groaned when he remembered Ikutsuki's parting comment. Was that really the person in charge of the school...?

In the command room on the fourth floor of the dorm, three figures were crowded around the monitor's screen. The computer's screen was split, showing the dorm's two newest residents sleeping soundly in their rooms. The three people watching Minato and Hamuko sleep were Mitsuru, Yukari, and Ikutsuki.

"Hm... it seems neither of them have transmogrified into coffins." Ikutsuki noted as he leaned away from the screen and took a seat on a chair nearby. "They've both retained their human forms, even though it's the Dark Hour."

"So this means..." Yukari paused and bit her lip.

"That's right." Ikutsuki nodded to the girl's unspoken question. "It is quite possible that both of them have the potential. Otherwise, the Shadows would've preyed on them by now."

"It's unbelievable." Mitsuru said with some amazement in her tone. "Two people with the potential suddenly appearing like this..."

"Yes, well, it's possible but not for certain." Ikutsuki cut in. "We'll monitor them for a few more days and see if anything changes, then make a decision."

Mitsuru nodded at that. "Yes, sir."

"But... is it really okay? To be spying on them like this?" Yukari asked, clearly uncomfortable with watching two people while they slept.

"It's only a precaution, Yukari-san." Ikutsuki assured her.
"Please have patience."

"Alright..."

And so, within the murky green atmosphere, SEES continued their surveillance in silence.

Nothing extravagant or out of the ordinary happened at school the following day. Minato headed back to the dorm as soon as class was out while Yukari had taken Hamuko to Paulownia Mall to show her around. The girl had been impressed, bouncing around after visiting all the shops and stores, even convincing Yukari to spend some time at the arcade with her until it got late. After arriving back at the dorms Hamuko had bid Yukari good night and headed upstairs to her room. Yukari had stayed awake and read a couple magazines until the world shifted and the Dark Hour started when the clock struck midnight. Yukari made her way up to the command room and took a seat next to Mitsuru who had already been in the room. Mitsuru didn't turn away from the computer's screen as she greeted Yukari.

"Takeba."

"Hey." Yukari replied, taking a seat just as the Chairman entered the room.

"How are they?" Ikutsuki asked as he approached.

"Still asleep." Mitsuru replied.

"I see. Interesting..." Ikutsuki muttered thoughtfully. "Those with the potential tend to be unstable at first, but surprisingly, neither of them has shown any signs of discomfort when experiencing the Dark Hour."

"I still feel bad about watching them like this though." Yukari said.

"I understand your concern, but it's imperative that we recruit new members." Ikutsuki said sternly. "While you, Mitsuru and Akihiko are very capable, wouldn't you be more comfortable with two more people helping us?"

"I know, but still..." Yukari trailed off before perking up. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask, where did Akihiko-senpai run off to?"

As if on cue, the computer sounded off as they received an emergency call from outside. Mitsuru quickly pressed the button on the monitor to answer.

"Command Room." Mitsuru answered. "Is that you Akihiko?"

There was a burst of static from the speaker before they heard an out of breath voice answer.

"You're not gonna believe this...! This thing is huge!"

"Akihiko!"

"I don't have time to talk! This thing's chasing me... but I wanted to let you guys know I'm almost there!"

Mitsuru, Yukari and Ikutsuki all stood up in a panic as the communication was cut off. Yukari was the first one to respond to the situation.

"Wait, so he's bringing whatever's chasing him here?!"

"It must be quite something if it has Akihiko on the run..."
Ikutsuki said with some surprise in his voice.

"We'll suspend our observation for now!" Mitsuru said as she picked up a rapier that was set on the table. "Mr. Chairman, you stay here and let us know if you pick up anything on the monitors!"

"R-Right!"

"Takeba, you're with me! We must prepare for battle!"

"Y-Yeah...!"

Mitsuru and Yukari rushed out the door and downstairs to the lounge, arriving just as Akihiko burst through the front door and slammed it closed behind him. He sank to his feet and leaned against the doorframe as Mitsuru and Yukari rushed over to him. Both girls grimaced when they noticed his torn

sleeve and the way he was holding his left arm.

"Akihiko, are you-"

"I'm fine." Akihiko insisted, brushing off Mitsuru's worry as Yukari checked him over. Despite the situation, he was smiling. "Get ready to be surprised, this thing will be here any second!"

"You're... honestly!" Mitsuru huffed as she drew her Evoker. "So it's a Shadow?"

"I think so, but it's not an ordinary one!"

Yukari's eyes widened at that. "What do you mean by-!"

The girl screamed when the entire building suddenly shook. Mitsuru tensed while Akihiko slowly got to his feet.

"Takeba, go wake up the other two and get some place safe." Mitsuru commanded. "We'll stop it here."

Yukari looked worriedly between her two senpai before swallowing her fright and turning back towards the stairs. As she ran off, she called back to the two of them.

"Be careful!"

Mitsuru made sure Yukari had left before she opened the door. Her eyes narrowed when she saw those... things moving near the bottoms of the steps. She turned her head a fraction to address Akihiko.

"Don't relax just yet. I'm afraid you'll still have to fight."

Akihiko scoffed as he pulled out his own Evoker and held it to his head.

"Like I had a choice!"

Hamuko mumbled in her sleep when she heard loud banging noises from outside her door. Who could be calling her at this time of night? And what had been that shaking she felt earlier...?

"Hamuko, wake up!"

The girl sat up in her bed and rubbed her eyes blearily.

"Yukari...?"

"Sorry, I'm coming in!"

Yukari practically kicked her door in during her rush to get inside. Hamuko blinked when she saw the girl's panicked face.

"There's no time to explain! We've got to get out of here!"

Yukari shouted, thrusting something into a bewildered Hamuko's arms. "Here, take this just in case!"

The girl felt her drowsiness drain away when she saw what Yukari had given her. Hamuko's eyes were wide as she stared down at the naginata she'd been given.

"W-Wha...?"

"C'mon!"

Clad in her pajamas and tightly holding onto the weapon she had suddenly been gifted with, Hamuko was dragged out of her room by a frantic Yukari. Her eyes widened when she noticed someone else standing outside her room.

"Minato-kun?!"

The boy, still clad in his school uniform, looked just as confused and bewildered as she did. Hamuko's eyes widened even more when she noticed the sword he held in his hand. Hamuko opened her mouth to speak when the whole building shook as if something had slammed into it. Hamuko clutched onto her spear in fright as she looked around.

"W-What was THAT?!"

"That's what I'd like to know..." Minato muttered. "Yukari-san, what was-"

Minato was cut off by the sound of glass breaking on the floor below them.

"No time!" Yukari shouted as she took off down the hall.

"Come on!"

Minato and Hamuko both glanced at each other before following Yukari upstairs. They made their way to the fourth floor, practically jumping out onto the rooftop in their rush. Yukari quickly closed and locked the door behind them before

giving a relieved sigh.

The full moon glowed in the green world, its light reflecting off the puddles of liquid that seemed too much like blood...

"Our senpai are fighting downstairs, so we should be safe up here." Yukari said as she turned towards the two of them.

"You still haven't told us what this is all about." Minato pointed out, his expression serious. "I want answers. What is going-!"

"Yukari...!" Hamuko suddenly gasped as she took in their surroundings. "And Minato-kun too! You guys can...!"

The building shook again, this time more violently and with enough force to almost send the three of them to the ground. All of their eyes widened when they heard something move behind them. They turned towards the noise and were shocked at what they found themselves staring at.

A blue mask was peering at them from over the edge of the roof, held up by a large black hand. More hands rose up and grasped the edge of the rooftop before pulling a large, shadowy form up and onto the roof. The creature looked like a black mass of arms and appendages all tied and fused together. Not only that, but a good majority of the hands held up large daggers that gleamed in the moonlight.

"Yukari-san... what is that...?" Minato whispered as his whole body tensed.

"No way... it climbed up?!" Yukari gasped, not registering Minato's question. "Mitsuru-senpai and Akihiko-senpai should've...!"

"It's coming!" Hamuko shouted as the monster began to crawl towards them.

With her mind in a panic, Yukari barely registered pulling out her Evoker until she felt the muzzle of the gun against her forehead. Her frantic breath came in short gasps as she screwed her eyes shut and fought to keep her emotions under control, to focus on pulling the trigger.

She could do it... she'd be fine... she had to save Minato and Hamuko... she just had to keep calm... keep calm... and just pull the trigger...!

"Yukari, look out!"

Yukari's eyes snapped open just as something slammed into her. Her body recoiled with her Evoker flying out of her hands as she collapsed to the ground.

"YUKARI!"

Hamuko rushed over to the downed girl and propped her up, trying to shake the girl awake. Hamuko looked between Yukari and the black creature. The blue mask was getting closer...!

Minato, however, seemed to ignore all of this.

All he noticed was the gun that suddenly clattered to the ground by his feet.

"There!"

From inside the command room Mitsuru, Akihiko and Ikutsuki were watching the events on the rooftop unfold. When they saw Yukari go down, Mitsuru and Akihiko immediately headed for the door.

"Wait."

Both seniors stopped and turned back towards the Chairman with furious looks on their faces.

"Mr. Chairman, you can't expect us to just leave-!"

"Look." Ikutsuki said, pointing at the screen.

Mitsuru and Akihiko's eyes widened when they saw Minato bend down to pick up Yukari's Evoker...

His whole body was numb. He couldn't find it in himself to string together a coherent thought. All of this was too unreal. Even so, Minato found himself leaning down to pick up the gun. His fingers wrapped themselves around it, the feel of cool steel somehow calming his nerves. Minato turned his head to Hamuko and Yukari, watching the former tend to the latter. When he turned back he noticed that blue mask was facing in his direction...

"Go on."

Minato didn't react at all when he suddenly found himself staring at that kid he had met in the lobby when he first arrived at the dorm. What was he doing here? And what was he saying...?

"You know what to do." The boy smiled as he held up two fingers to the side of his head.

Minato found himself mimicking him. He felt the gun's muzzle rest against his temple. Minato's finger tensed on the trigger as the boy's voice echoed in his head.

"Just pull the trigger..."

Minato felt the words come naturally. He could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Per..."

He could hear it. He could hear the voice...

"...So..."

Minato felt a smile stretch across his face. He could feel the power coursing throughout his body, welling up inside him...

"...Na!"

Minato pulled the trigger.

He heard something break in his mind as the power was

unleashed. Blue mist surrounded him as fragments of whatever was released from his mind gathered together and began to take shape above him. Minato heard a voice resound inside his head.

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

Hamuko watched the spectacle unfold in front of her with awe. Yukari groaned and shifted in her arms as she slowly came to. Her eyes widened when she saw the figure forming above Minato. A figure with a blue torso and platinum limbs, along with red scarf around its neck and a large harp strapped to its back...

"From the sea of thine soul I cometh..." The figure's voice echoed. "I am Orpheus, master of strin-?!"

Orpheus stopped and roared at the same moment Minato dropped the Evoker and clutched his head in pain. It felt like something was trying to rip its way out of his head...!

For Orpheus, something was quite literally doing just that.

Orpheus' form convulsed and spasmed as an arm suddenly burst out of its neck, followed by another that completely tore apart its form, giving birth to something far more intimidating and far, FAR more powerful.

Thanatos reared its head back and roared, a ring of coffins spreading out around it like wings before the black creature dove forward and slammed its fists into the approaching

Shadow. The monster tried to fight back. It tried to throw its attacker off of its body. But it couldn't even hope to stand against the beast that tore into its limbs and crushed its body under its hands. Thanatos kept hammering its fists into the Shadow before drawing the long sword attached to its belt and swinging it forward, cutting through the blue mask within the center of those flailing arms and hands.

Thanatos stood atop the crushed body of its prey as the Shadow began to dissolve and fade away. Hamuko and Yukari merely stared in mute wonder as Thanatos threw its head back again to deliver a triumphant roar that echoed through the air. It hadn't been a battle they had witnessed. It had been an execution. Thanatos' body flickered for a moment before it was suddenly Orpheus standing atop the remains of the Shadow instead of the one that had killed it. Orpheus faded away as Minato fell to his knees and collapsed on the ground.

"Minato-kun!"

"Eh...? Hamuko, wait!"

Hamuko left Yukari on the ground as she rushed over to Minato's unconscious form. She checked the boy over for injuries before she heard something moving in front of her.

From her position on the ground a few feet away, Yukari's eyes widened when she noticed some of the Shadow's remains had taken form and were slithering towards Hamuko and Minato. Yukari's hands flew towards the holster on her

thigh, reaching for the Evoker that she had forgotten wasn't there. Yukari gasped when she suddenly noticed it in Hamuko's hands.

Hamuko quickly stood to her feet, holding the gun to her temple as she watched the dark forms approach. She glanced down towards Minato before her expression steeled. If he could do it, then so could she! All she had to do was remember... remember that word...!

"Per..."

Remember that word, the same word Minato had said...

"...So..."

She smiled when she heard a voice in her head, almost whispering the word to her...

"...Na!"

Hamuko pulled the trigger.

The same words Minato had heard echoed in her mind.

"Thou art I... and I art thou...!"

Yukari's eyes widened when she saw Orpheus appear once again, this time rising up behind Hamuko. No... there was something different about him this time, or rather, something different about HER. This Orpheus had long flowing hair and a golden torso as opposed to a blue one. Its limbs were silver,

and were of a lighter shade when compared to the other Orpheus. And while it kept the red scarf, its harp was in the shape of a large heart this time.

"From the sea of thine soul I cometh...!" The female Orpheus echoed. "I am Orpheus, master of strings!"

"But that's..." Yukari whispered. "They summoned the same Persona...?!"

Yukari watched as Hamuko cried out and rushed towards the two Shadows that were crawling towards her and Minato with her Orpheus trailing behind her. Her Persona took its harp and swung it down like a hammer on top of one of the Shadows, smashing its mask to pieces. Hamuko simply rushed at the other Shadow, swinging her naginata and cutting furiously into the Shadow's body. The Shadows had no chance to put up any resistance and both dissolved into nothingness just as Orpheus disappeared.

Hamuko simply stood there under the moon, her form quivering in exhaustion as she too sank to her knees. She turned her head in Yukari's direction as sweat ran down her forehead.

"Yukari... are you okay...?"

Yukari blinked guilelessly before answering. "Y-Yeah. I'm okay..."

"And Minato-kun... is he...?"

"He's fine, Hamuko." Yukari assured her as she stood up and approached the girl. "Are... are you okay...?"

Hamuko gave the girl a bright smile as the dark atmosphere began to fade away.

"I'm fine." Hamuko smiled as her body fell forward. "Just... fine..."

"Hamuko!"

Yukari's voice sounded like she was underwater to Hamuko before she joined Minato in blissful unconsciousness.

A/N: Prologue and Chapter 1 up. Wonder if this has been enough of a draw for those reading. Almost forgot, thanks to the Infamous Man for betaing this and giving it his stamp of approval.

I debated splitting this chapter in two, but decided that it would be better to get to the point where Personas show up now. Hope I did the scene justice since the summoning of Orpheus and Thanatos' slaughter of the Magician Shadow is probably one of the most awesome parts of the game. I thought about giving Minato and Hamuko different initial Personas, but figured it was better to stick them with their respective Orpheus given that they're both Wild Cards and they both share a contract and will go on the Journey together, etc. It's better than coming up with something completely new, I think.

So, aftermath of the awakening comes next as Minato and Hamuko are made aware of what's going on. Hope those reading choose to stick around and I hope they enjoy what's depicted so far. Any feedback is appreciated, especially this early on as it let's me know if this is off to a good start or not. I wish you all happy days and sunshine until next time.

Kiiam

3. Chapter 2: SEES

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Chapter 2 is now up. Now we see the aftermath of the summoning and the two protagonists' initiation into SEES. Hope you all enjoy.

Chapter 2: SEES

It felt like he was floating underwater. His body felt light and his mind was numb. Minato couldn't describe the feeling. In the dark haze of his mind, an image suddenly burst forth from the black abyss he felt like he was floating in.

A blue door.

Minato felt it was strange and natural to be there as he gazed at it. Or at least it felt like he was looking at it, he couldn't tell. He wouldn't have been able to see it if he wasn't looking at it, right? He felt the sensation of his body moving and his arm reaching out, grasping the handle of the door and pushing it open...

The sense of vertigo and the feeling that he had been floating disappeared as he stumbled into the room. Minato blinked

rapidly as his vision adjusted and shook his head to shake off any dizziness. When his five senses were back under his control and working in proper order again Minato found himself staring at blue.

Lots of blue.

"It's nice to see you again."

And there was some smiling old man with a very long nose staring at him from where he sat across the table.

...Wait, what?

"What the..." Minato glanced down at himself and suddenly found he was sitting in a chair. Also blue like the rest of the room. "W-Where..."

The rest of the question died on his lips as he finally took in his surroundings. A blue room... doors on all sides... an elevator... a giant clock...

"I've... I've been here before..."

"I'm pleased to see you remember." The old man chuckled. "Now, do you remember me as well?"

"Yeah..." Minato nodded slowly. "You... you're Igor, right?"

The old man's grin seemed to get wider if that weren't possible. The man turned his head and smiled at someone to Minato's left.

"And you remember as well, don't you my dear?"

Minato followed Igor's gaze and his eyes widened when he noticed someone was sitting next to him. A particular someone who he was still cross with for ruining his sketchbook.

"Hamuko-san?!"

"Eh, ah? Minato-kun?!" Hamuko jumped in her seat, pointing at the boy she had just noticed. "H-How long have you been here?!"

"Please remain calm." Igor said gently, causing the duo to look at him. "The two of you arrived here at the same time after falling unconscious due to the awakening of your powers. Your minds are just about finished adjusting to the Velvet Room. I'm not surprised that you two did not notice each other, or that I was speaking to the both of you."

"S-So you've been here before too, Minato-kun?" Hamuko asked the boy tentatively.

"Yeah... but I only thought it was a dream..." Minato said, rubbing his forehead as he realized the surreal dream had apparently been his reality. Or maybe he was still dreaming...

Minato blinked as something else Igor said finally registered with him.

"Wait, you said something about awakening our power."

Minato pointed out, his eyes narrowing as his mind whirled.
"What did you mean by that?"

Igor gave an amused chuckle. "Now, now. Don't ask me when you can clearly remember for yourself. Both of you, think back to before you came here. What were you doing...?"

"That's..."

"We were..."

Both Minato and Hamuko gasped as the events of the night rushed back to them. Igor held up a hand, forestalling anything the two of them might have said about the matter.

"The power you two used is what is called a Persona." Igor explained as the two listened intently. "It is a manifestation of your psyche."

"Per... sona?" Hamuko asked, testing the familiar word that came to her lips.

"Our psyche...?" Minato questioned with a confused look on his face.

"It may take some time for the both of you to fully comprehend." Igor said with an understanding smile. "A Persona is a reflection of your inner self. A facet of your personality given form. Think of it as a mask you use to protect yourself as you face hardships."

"That's... not very helpful." Hamuko said, feeling very put out.

Minato nodded in agreement a frown.

"You'll come to understand for yourselves soon enough." Igor assured them. "That being said... your powers are still very weak. When a Persona is used, you must channel forth your inner strength. Your Persona evolves as your bond with others, your Social Links, grows stronger."

"Social Links?" Minato muttered confusedly.

"Sounds like something out of a game I played once..." Hamuko said thoughtfully as she tapped her finger against her lips.

"The stronger your Social Links are, the more powerful your Persona abilities become." Igor went on. "Make sure that you both remember that."

"Hold on." Minato raised his hand to stop. Igor arched an eyebrow at him. "You keep going on about this Persona stuff, Social Links and power but... what do the two of us have to do with this?"

Igor smiled that all-knowing smile of his and Minato frowned as the old man gazed at him.

"Because the two of you not only possess the power to use a Persona, but the two of you also hold the power... of the Wild Card..."

Minato and Hamuko glanced at each other uncertainly.

Wild Card...?

"It is because of the unique power you both share that your destinies have become intertwined. Your journey is shared with one another." Igor smiled. "You both will face trials together using this power... and it is my hope that you both will overcome them."

"So... so Minato-kun and I have this special power no one else does and we can come here because of that? And intertwined destinies?" Hamuko asked. She gave Minato a playful grin. "Maybe we knew each other in a past life. Or maybe we're lovers reincarnated..."

"Please, take this a bit more seriously..." Minato sighed in annoyance. Hamuko folded her arms over her chest and pouted.

"I was only joking..."

Igor's chuckling regained their attention. The man clapped his hands together lightly as his gaze switched between the two of them.

"Ahaha... I suppose this is the benefit to having more than one guest. Seeing the two of you interact will be a never ending source of amusement I'm sure." Igor smiled. "You are radically different individuals, but strikingly similar despite everything. Perhaps that is why Orpheus answered to the both of you, but reflected itself as two different Persona. Or is there more to it than that...? Ah, the possibilities..."

"You seem like you're having fun..." Minato grumbled.

"Um, Igor-san?" Hamuko spoke up.

"Yes, my dear?"

"Who're they?"

Minato's eyes widened when he suddenly noticed the young man and woman standing on opposite sides of the couch Igor sat on. How long had they been standing there?!

"Ah, forgive me. I have neglected to introduce my two assistants." Igor smiled as he gestured to the two elevator attendants dressed in blue. "The woman on my left is Elizabeth, while the young man on my right is Theodore. They are both residents of this room, like myself."

"Pleased to meet you both." The woman, Elizabeth, smiled warmly.

"Charmed. And please, just call me Theo." The man, Theodore, said as he gave a light bow.

"Ah, pleased to meet you Elizabeth-san. Theo-san." Hamuko got up and quickly bowed to the two of them. Minato gave the two a hesitant nod in greeting.

"They are here to help aid you both during your journey." Igor said. Minato opened his mouth to speak but Igor shook his head. The old man raised his hand, and two pieces of parchment appeared on the table in front of them.

Minato's and Hamuko's eyes widened when they recognized the forms that had appeared.

"Those are...!"

"The papers both of you signed, stating that you both individually agree that you take responsibility for your actions." Igor explained. "Only those who have signed this contract can enter this place of their own accord. Both of you, hold on to these..."

Two blue lights suddenly flashed in front of Minato and Hamuko. Both teenagers reached out and grasped onto the objects floating within the light.

"A key...?" Minato murmured.

"Henceforth, the two of you will be welcomed here... in the Velvet Room." Igor smiled at the two of them. "Now, the two of you are destined to hone your unique ability, the power of the Wild Card. The three of us will help you master your power, and only ask one thing in return..."

He gestured to the two signed documents on the table.

"...And that is that you both abide by the terms of the contract you both signed, and assume responsibility for the choices each of you make."

Both Minato and Hamuko glanced down at the papers they had signed, both having completely different thoughts on the

matter. Minato was trying to think of a good way to voice his objections and how he shouldn't have been held responsible for a contract he barely remembered signing in a semi-conscious state, and that they could find someone else to go on this journey Igor was talking about.

Hamuko... well, she voiced her thoughts quicker than Minato could gather his.

"I understand."

Minato whirled his head towards Hamuko and gave her an incredulous stare.

"Wha...?! Hamuko-san, do you even know what you've agreed to?"

"Ah, ehehe... not really." Hamuko smiled, sticking her tongue out and knocking herself on the head in a silly gesture.

"Then why are you...!"

"But you remember what happened, don't you Minato-kun? About that thing that attacked us?"

Minato's words got caught in his throat.

"We used... that power called "Persona"... I want to know more about it." Hamuko said resolutely as she gave him a confident smile. "I'm really confused right now about the whole thing. And all this talk about a journey, destiny, and this Wild Card ability we both seem to have... I can't just ignore it, and

I doubt I'd be able to even if I tried. That thing... I have a feeling there's probably more just like it. And if I've got a Persona and if it can fight those things then... then shouldn't I do whatever I can to understand and use that power?"

Minato was silent at that. Her words struck a cord with him. She... she wasn't letting hesitation or fear get in the way of her decision. Despite not understanding a single thing, she still agreed to play a part in whatever plan Igor was talking about. And while Minato was curious about his newfound power as well... it was obvious that if he accepted and followed Hamuko's decision things would be radically different from before. This was a whole new world he was entering, and who knew what it had in store for him? Still, a part of him knew he couldn't just stand idly by without doing anything.

Not like that time years ago, in that dark world...

Minato gave a large sigh as he decided. He looked up and noticed everyone in the room was staring at him, awaiting his response. Minato stared into Igor's piercing eyes.

"...I understand. I accept the terms of the contract."

Igor smiled.

"Wonderful!"

Minato felt a sense of finality descend on him after that.

Hamuko felt a similar feeling.

"Now, time marches on in your world. I won't keep either of you here any longer."

"H-Hold a minute!" Minato demanded. "I've still got questions for-!"

Minato and Hamuko both slumped forward as their visions began to darken and distort. The feeling of vertigo from before came back...

"I'm sure you do, but you really can't stay here any longer." Igor smiled. "But do not fear, for the next time we meet, you both will come here of your own accord. Until then..."

Minato's and Hamuko's presence disappeared as Igor's voice echoed within the Velvet Room.

"...Farewell."

Minato groaned as he slowly came to. He winced as morning sunlight hit his eyes and he raised his arm to block it.

"You're awake!"

Minato turned his head towards the voice on his right. Sitting in another bed, Hamuko smiled at him.

"Hamuko-san..."

"Wakey wakey, Minato-kun! Good morning! Or good afternoon, rather..." Hamuko's giggling died off as she

glanced at the calendar. She scratched her head and gestured to it with her thumb. "Would you believe me if I said we've been asleep for a whole week?"

"Great..." Minato groaned as he collapsed back onto his pillow. Minato glanced down at himself and scrunched his nose when he noticed he was wearing his school uniform. He'd have to wash it before going back to school if he'd been wearing it the whole week. Either that or use his spare. He could only imagine how much schoolwork he had to catch up on now. Or maybe they'd be granted some leniency since they just transferred in...

"So... did all that really happen?"

Minato turned his head back towards Hamuko when she spoke up. Still clad in her pajamas, she gave him an inquisitive look.

"The dream?"

Minato stared at her for a few seconds, debating whether or not he should lie to her just to see her reaction but decided against it. He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Igor, Personas, Wild Card... do any of those words mean anything to you?" Minato asked.

"So it really DID happen!" Hamuko gasped as she bounced on her bed excitedly. "And that night a week ago with that monster, and we summoned Personas, and with the Velvet

Room, and, and...!"

Minato was thankful that her ranting was cut off as the two of them heard the door opening. Both of them turned and saw a familiar person enter their room, giving the two of them a relieved smile as she noticed them sitting up.

"You're both awake!" Yukari smiled as she stepped inside the room. "Geez, you guys had me worried. I mean, how much sleep do you two need? It's been a whole week!"

"Yeah, we noticed." Minato sighed as he reclined in his bed.

Yukari shuffled her feet as she glanced between the two of them, trying to find the words. She sighed and gave the two of them a soft smile.

"You two saved my life that night." Yukari smiled. "I... I was supposed to be the one protecting you guys, not the other way around..."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up over it." Hamuko smiled at the girl. She flexed her arms and waved them around. "See? We're just fine! Right, Minato-kun?"

"Ah, yeah." Minato nodded. He had almost dozed off...

"If you say so..." Yukari muttered uncertainly. "Still, you guys really came through, huh? I mean, it was my first time fighting them too and you guys just... you didn't hesitate, did you? You pulled the trigger and actually used your powers like

you'd been doing it your whole lives. And Minato-kun..."

Minato's eyebrows went up when Yukari addressed him.

"Your power was amazing! You completely destroyed that large Shadow!" Yukari exclaimed. "I was really surprised. It was almost scary in a way..."

Minato grimaced as he remembered what had happened. That's right, after he had summoned Orpheus, that black... thing had torn its way out of his Persona and then tore apart the large creature that had attacked them. His head throbbed just thinking about it. Just what had that thing been...?

"And then Hamuko finished off those other Shadows while I just cowered in the back." Yukari sighed. "I feel so embarrassed when I think about it. That's what I get for panicking..."

"Like I said, don't feel bad about it!" Hamuko said soothingly. "I was pretty scared too."

"Sure didn't seem like it." Yukari said bitterly to herself. She gave a helpless shrug of her shoulders before her eyes narrowed. "I won't freeze up next time..."

"Hey, Yukari? What were those things we fought anyway?" Hamuko asked curiously.

"Oh, you mean the Shadows?" Yukari asked with an uneasy expression. "They're what we're fighting against."

"We...?" Minato thought. He could take a good guess about who else might be involved. *"Definitely a dorm for those with 'special' needs..."*

And going by that logic that would mean...

"So you can use a Persona too then?" Minato asked Yukari.

"Huh? How do you know what...?"

"Igor told us about them!" Hamuko answered with a smile. Minato shot her a dirty look while Yukari just looked confused by Hamuko's proclamation. The girl quickly covered her mouth and looked sheepish when she realized what she had let slip out.

"What are you talking about...?"

"She's just joking." Minato cut in quickly. "We know what the power is called because that's the word that we heard in our heads before we summoned those things. It is what you call them, right? Persona?"

"Ah, yeah. And I can use one." Yukari affirmed. "Look, I'm sure you've got a lot of questions about Persona and Shadows and all that, but can we hold off on that for now? I... we'll explain everything to you guys once you're out of here."

"...Fair enough." Minato agreed, relieved that he'd be getting some answers.

"Thanks for visiting us." Hamuko smiled at her. "When can we leave this place anyway? Hospitals are so stuffy."

"You make it sound like you been to them a lot." Yukari teased her. "And if you guys aren't feeling that bad I can probably get you out of here before tonight. You'll probably have to let the doctors examine you first, but they said it was just a case of severe exhaustion so..."

"The sooner we're out of here the better!" Hamuko beamed. "Right, Minato-kun?"

"Hm? Ah, yeah. Whatever." Minato gave a brief nod. He hadn't really been paying attention.

"I'll go find a doctor or a nurse and tell them you guys are up. I'll let the others at the dorm know too." Yukari said as she headed towards the door. She paused and withdrew her hand as she reached for the handle. "Hey..."

Minato and Hamuko glanced at her.

"I... I'm sort of like you guys, you know? I mean, besides being able to use a Persona."

"What do you mean?" Hamuko asked.

"My dad died in an accident here when I was little, and due to that my mom and I aren't exactly on good terms." Yukari shifted at the door with a guilty expression. "I... I already know about both of your pasts. About Minato-kun's parents

and your situation, Hamuko..."

Minato tensed at the information while Hamuko blinked in surprise. How had she gotten their information?

"I-I mean, it didn't seem fair that I knew something about you guys while you didn't know anything about me." Yukari stammered. "See, my dad he... there was some sort of explosion in the area ten years ago and apparently he was caught in the blast. At least, that's what everyone says. Nobody knows for sure what happened or what caused the incident, but... he was working in a lab for the Kirijo Group at the time. So I'm hoping I'll find out more if I stick around. You know, since Gekkoukan is sponsored by the Kirijo group and I'm staying at the dorm with Mitsuru-senpai. She's the daughter of the head of the Kirijo Group, you know."

Minato and Hamuko simply listened as Yukari vented to them. The girl finally sighed and chuckled to herself.

"Sorry for telling you guys all this when you just woke up but... this whole week I've been thinking about how much I've... how much we've been hiding things from you two so I wanted to tell you this at least. This way I think I can apologize and... and I've really wanted to tell someone about this for a long time."

"Yukari..." Hamuko said softly.

"Well, thanks for listening. And I'm sorry about what happened." Yukari said, finally smiling at the two of them. "I'll

go get a doctor and see about getting you guys out of here. I'll be back soon."

With that, Yukari gave the duo one last smile before heading out the door and shutting it behind her. Hamuko sighed and smiled at where the girl had stood.

"I feel bad about what happened to her father. It must have been tough to lose a parent at her age..."

"Yeah..." Minato agreed though he sounded a little bitter. "She meant well, but going so far as to look up what happened to us when we were kids... she should've asked us first. Some issues should be kept private."

"Minato-kun..." Hamuko muttered softly. "So you...?"

"It's not something I like talking about." Minato replied shortly as he leaned back against his pillow. "I lost my parents ten years ago in an accident. There's really not much more to it and there's no use crying about something that happened so long ago..."

"When you say it like that it sounds like you don't care..."

"It's not that. It's just that there's no helping it." Minato sighed, running a hand through his blue locks. "That's just... it's just life, Hamuko-san. People die. Some earlier than others..."

Hamuko didn't know what to say to that. He sounded so tired and distant, but it would be insensitive of her to just say

"cheer up".

"And what about you?" Minato asked suddenly. "I don't know about your situation, but Yukari implied that you didn't have parents. But back in the Faculty Office I remember Toriumi-sensei saying you had guardians though?"

"Actually, I don't know who my blood relatives are. I've been an orphan for as long as I can remember." Hamuko confessed. Minato turned his head to give her his attention. "I can only remember up until ten years ago when my parents, er, guardians picked me up from the orphanage. That's... I mean, it's not like my life was tragic or anything and I've been really happy with them. They treat me like family and I love them. I'm happy being Hamuko Runako."

"...I see." Minato mumbled, turning his head to gaze at the ceiling. "Our situations are different, but we are a bit similar, I guess..."

"Just a little." Hamuko smiled. "You know... I haven't actually talked with anyone about this before."

"...Is that so?" Minato didn't admit that he rarely talked about his parents' deaths with anyone. He was actually talking more with Hamuko than he remembered talking with anyone in his life. It was so out of character for him...

"I think we can get along with each other, Minato-kun." Hamuko smiled. "After all, Igor said we're in this journey or something together, right? So let's work together."

"...Guess there's no choice." Minato sighed. "Just keep the stuff about Igor and the Velvet Room a secret, okay? I think knowledge of that place is just unique to us and we don't need to go around telling people about our visiting a blue elevator in our dreams."

"Heehee! Right..."

SMASH

Minato and Hamuko both jumped in their beds as they both heard something like glass shatter within their minds, followed by a mysterious voice that rang in their heads.

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

"M-Minato-kun?!"

"I know! I hear it too!"

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Fool Arcana...

"W-What the...?" Minato stammered. Who was talking to them?!

"There are voices in my head! And they talk weird!" Hamuko shouted, covering her ears and shaking her head from side to side.

Thou hast established a new Social Link...

"Social Link...?" Both muttered in unison. Wasn't that something Igor had talked about...?

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Fool with Hamuko Runako...

That was what Minato heard in his mind. What Hamuko heard, however, was this:

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Fool with Minato Arisato...

The voice in their heads faded away as a strange sensation settled over the two of them. Minato and Hamuko glanced at each other uneasily, not quite sure what to make of what just happened. They sat staring at each other for several minutes before Hamuko finally spoke up.

"Does... does this mean we're married now...?"

Minato slapped his forehead and let out a tired groan.

A week in the hospital after that ordeal on the rooftop and Minato was in and out of the hospital as soon as the doctors had given him a once over yesterday afternoon. Same went for Hamuko. Minato had been happy to hear that Ikutsuki had excused the two of them for their week long absence from Yukari, so Minato arrived at school that morning composed and relaxed, wearing a calm mask as he thought of all that had happened to him since arriving at Iwatodai. It had all

started off no different than what he was used to, but the moment he stepped inside the dorm things had taken even more drastic steps away from the norm. He was lucky his constant moving around throughout his life had made him adaptable to sudden changes in life, but this was just...

"Minato-kun!"

Minato paused at the school gates when he heard someone call out to him. He turned to find Hamuko racing towards him. The girl stopped in front of him, taking a moment to catch her breath before beaming at him.

"G-Good morning!"

"...Morning." Minato replied. "Is there something you wanted...?"

"A-Actually, I was wanted to talk to you earlier but Yukari stopped me to tell me something and then I found out you already left so I ran to the train but couldn't find you on it so I ran here as soon as I got off so-!"

"Hamuko-san."

"Eh?"

"Stop. Breathe. Then talk." Minato sighed as he instructed her.

"R-Right." Hamuko giggled as she took a deep breath and composed herself. "Okay, two things. First, Yukari wanted me

to tell you that Ikutsuki-san wanted to talk with us today once we got back to the dorm and to meet him on the fourth floor."

"Okay. And the second thing?"

"The second thing is..." Hamuko reached down and dug inside her bag for a moment before pulling something out and presenting it to him with a flourish. "Here!"

"...A new sketchbook." Minato stated as he gazed at the book. He glanced at the smiling Hamuko. "You bought this for me?"

"Well, since it was my fault your old one was ruined I figured it was only right to get you a new one. I meant to give it to you a week ago, but with all that happened... well, you know!" Hamuko smiled. "Do you like it?"

"I would've been fine just using pages in my notebook during my spare time." Minato shrugged as he put away the sketchbook away in his bag. He gave the girl a small smile. "But thanks. I appreciate it."

"Hehe. Your welcome!" Hamuko smiled before her face turned serious. "Hey, what do you think Ikutsuki wants to talk to us about?"

"If I had to take a guess it would probably be about... that."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too." Hamuko nodded. "About Personas and Shadows and all that."

"Well, yeah, there's that too but..." Minato trailed off as he gestured to her. "Let's walk and talk. We shouldn't be late after a long absence."

"True, true." Hamuko nodded and fell into pace with him. "So what were you saying before?"

"Hamuko-san, you were moving during that time too, so I'll assume you know about it..."

"Eh?"

Minato sighed. "I'm talking about at midnight when the world..."

Minato's voice was drowned out as the bell rang.

After the bell rang Minato and Hamuko had taken the train back together and headed to the dorm for their appointment with Ikutsuki. About halfway through their trek home, Minato had popped in his earphones to drown out Hamuko as she tried to talk his ear off. It's not like he cared about what her class was studying or how she had helped out Junpei during class. However, as they walked up the steps of the dorm Hamuko noticed that he was listening to music instead of her. She would have been angrier at his rudeness if she hadn't heard the song he was listening to.

"I LOVE Shoji Meguro!" Hamuko smiled as she and Minato walked up the steps to the fourth floor. "I think his new album

is his best work yet. The song 'Battle Hymn of the Soul' is my favorite one! I always feel so energized when I listen to it!"

"Yeah, that one is pretty good." Minato agreed, happy that someone else appreciated his favorite music artist.

"Personally, I like 'Burn My Dread' the most. I like the lyrics and the beat is really nice. I never get tired of it."

"Mhm. I know what you mean. Oh, and there's also-"

"Ah, you guys are here."

Minato and Hamuko both looked up to find Yukari waiting outside the room for them. She opened the door and gestured for them to follow her. Once inside, Minato and Hamuko both noticed that the rest of the dorm had apparently been invited to this little meeting. Well, it wasn't like they hadn't expected it...

"Hello you two." Ikutsuki greeted the two of them as they took seats on the cushioned chairs. Yukari took a seat on the sofa next to Mitsuru while a boy with silver hair wearing a red sweater vest was sitting next to Ikutsuki. "I'm glad that you're both okay."

Minato nodded while Hamuko just smiled at him. Ikutsuki adjusted his glasses and gestured to the boy next to him.

"Before we begin, this is Akihiko." Ikutsuki introduced him. "I think I mentioned him when I first came to visit you two."

"How ya doin'?" Akihiko grinned at the two of them. Hamuko waved at him while Minato acknowledged him with a nod.

"Now, moving on." Ikutsuki continued with a solemn expression. "This question may sound strange, but would either of you believe me if I said a day consisted of more than twenty four hours?"

Minato and Hamuko answered together.

"Yes."

"I thought so. But as it turns out... I'm sorry, what?"

Minato and Hamuko were met with the shocked, disbelieving stares of the other four. Akihiko and Ikutsuki just looked startled while Mitsuru and Yukari both expressed more severe reactions to their rather nonchalant answers. Yukari looked like she was about to have a panic attack while Mitsuru's head shot back and forth between the two. The red haired young woman cleared her throat and started speaking.

"W-Well, you both are more accepting of our words than I thought, but-"

"Mitsuru-senpai." Minato interrupted the woman before she could say any more. "Both myself and Hamuko-san know about the world changing every day at midnight."

The room descended into silence.

"H-How...?" Yukari sputtered. "Wasn't last week your first...?"

"No." Minato shook his head. "I've been aware of the change since I was a kid. I've known about it for ten years to be precise. The dark atmosphere, no electronics working..."

"People turning into coffins." Hamuko added. Everyone turned to look at her. "I've been aware of it for about as long as Minato-kun has. It's been happening for me since before I was adopted." Hamuko smiled at them. "But I didn't think there was anyone like me until now!"

"Hamuko-san and I talked about our experiences before we came here today." Minato explained to all of them. "We figured that along with Personas and Shadows, this would probably be the other thing you would mention."

The four members of SEES simply stared at the two newcomers for a few more seconds before Ikutsuki spoke up.

"Fascinating..."

"Chairman!"

"Now, now, Mitsuru." Ikutsuki raised his hands to placate the girl as she shot him a harsh look. "This is a good thing! They've been living within the Dark Hour their entire lives, and they've adapted to it. This also explains why they seemed so at ease when we were monitoring them!"

"I'm sorry? Monitoring us?" Hamuko asked. Ikutsuki ignored her and smiled at the two of them.

"Tell me, have either of you encountered a Shadow or used a Persona before last week?"

"No. Last week was the first time I heard of anything called a Persona or a Shadow." Minato replied.

"I always treated the Twilight Zone as an extra hour of sleep or time to do some late night cramming before school." Hamuko said. "I never saw a Shadow until that time last week either..."

"T-Twilight Zone?" Mitsuru asked with a confused expression.

"Oh! That's just what I called it." Hamuko smiled. "Though, I guess I should start calling it the 'Dark Hour' instead, huh? It sounds better anyway."

"I-I see."

Ikutsuki clapped his hands together, regaining everyone's attention. "Well, we all came here tonight hoping to ease whatever worries or fears that may have developed from your first encounter with the Shadows, but the two of you know more than I thought! You know about the Dark Hour and it seems you understand what a Persona is. That saves us the trouble of explaining everything to you. All you really need to know now is how to deal with Shadows."

"I don't think they need much help with that." Akihiko said with a grin. He nodded to Minato and Hamuko. "We were watching the monitors that night and saw you two summon your

Personas to knock off those Shadows. That's basically what we do. Shadows only appear during the Dark Hour, and normal people aren't aware of them since they're all asleep in their coffins. They'll attack anyone not in a coffin, and it's our job to defeat them." Akihiko gave them a confident smirk. "Sounds exciting, huh?"

"Akihiko!" Mitsuru cut in sharply. "You just got hurt the other day! Why are you always like this?"

Indeed, Minato and Hamuko could tell that the grey haired boy was cradling his left arm a bit. They could barely see a cast peeking out from underneath his sleeve. Akihiko grimaced at Mitsuru's tone and looked like he was going to retort before Ikutsuki beat him to it.

"Come now, Mitsuru. He does his work well." Ikutsuki said with a strained smile, hoping that he could forestall an argument for now. The man gave a relieved sigh when Mitsuru sat back down. The man turned back towards the two newcomers. "So, long story short, we are the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad. Or SEES, for short. On paper we're classified as a school club, but in reality we're a group that specializes in hunting and taking down Shadows."

"Wait, a school club?" Minato asked incredulously. "What do the other teachers think about a name like that? Or the principal?"

"Well, I am the chairman of our school, Minato-kun." Ikutsuki smiled. "I'll admit that when I first presented it I was given a

few strange looks, but we're seen as more of a private neighborhood watch. Besides, I'm just the supervisor. And the name was Mitsuru's idea. She is the leader of our little club, after all."

"I thought it was a good name." Mitsuru said with a proud smile. She frowned as an unsure look crossed over her features. "Was I wrong...?"

"No! I think it's a cool name!" Hamuko gave her opinion. Mitsuru smiled at the girl's response.

"As long as no one is bothered by it..." Minato murmured. If it were, him he would be a little apprehensive about a group with a name like that.

"One other thing you both should know about Shadows is that they prey on a person's mind." Mitsuru explained. "They're actually responsible for some of the incidents you might have heard on the news, plus all those who have developed Apathy Syndrome."

"Oh, I heard about that from Yukari when she showed me around Paulownia Mall." Hamuko said. "Those people were all pale and were wandering around like zombies. Are... are you saying they've been attacked by Shadows?"

"That's right." Ikutsuki picked up from where Mitsuru left off. "And though it's rare, some people have the ability to move around within the Dark Hour. Even rarer, unique individuals can awaken to a power that allows them to fight Shadows."

"Persona..." Minato muttered the word.

"Exactly." Ikutsuki smiled. "Only Persona-users can fight Shadows. Which means, it's all up to you guys."

Mitsuru suddenly stepped forward, producing a silver briefcase from somewhere and setting it on the table in front of Minato and Hamuko. She opened the briefcase and revealed a pair of guns that looked like the same one Yukari had carried with her that night when they first arrived at the dorm, and two armbands with the word "SEES" on them.

"You both can probably see where this is leading. We'd like the two of you to join us." Mitsuru said. "We've prepared Evokers for the both of you. We'd like you both to lend us your strength."

"I understand." Hamuko nodded determinedly and picked up her Evoker and armband.

"J-Just like that?" Yukari gasped.

"I don't mind either." Minato said as he took the remaining Evoker and SEES armband. "If we have the power, why not use it?"

Plus, he had already signed a contract. If this was the journey he was meant to take... he saw no other alternative. There was no walking away.

"Shadows won't be snacking on anyone's brain while I'm

around!" Hamuko grinned as she strapped the gun to her side and put on the SEES armband. "They won't know what hit 'em!"

"Heh, that's the spirit!" Akihiko grinned at the girl's attitude.

"I was afraid you guys would say no..." Yukari gave a relieved sigh before smiling at them. "Welcome to the team!"

"I really appreciate it." Mitsuru smiled as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "If you two have any questions, feel free to ask me. I'll answer what I can."

"And if she can't answer those questions, don't be afraid to ask me either." Ikutsuki smiled warmly. "To think we would gain two new members in one night! Thank you both so much."

"No problem!" Hamuko smiled.

"Yeah." Minato nodded absentmindedly as he looked over the Evoker.

"As for your room assignment, Minato-kun, why don't you just stay here?" Ikutsuki smiled. "I don't know what the hold up was, but there's no sense transferring you to the other dorms, is there? Feel free to stay in your current room."

"Like it was going to end up any differently..." Minato said, rolling his eyes.

Ikutsuki laughed in amusement while the other members of

SEES shook their heads.

SMASH

Both Minato and Hamuko jumped when they heard glass breaking and a familiar, ominous voice speak to them from within their minds.

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

Minato and Hamuko glanced at each other. This was...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Judgment Arcana...

Judgment? Not Fool...?

Thou hast established a new Social Link...

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Judgment with SEES Team...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Judgment with SEES Team...

As the voice faded again, Minato and Hamuko gave each other uncomfortable looks.

Was this going to happen every time they formed Social Links? And if so, how many could be formed...?

Minato turned over the Evoker in his hand. The silver sheen of the gun gleamed despite the lack of light. It was the Dark Hour, so he was using the time to think about everything that had happened so far. He had also been sure to cover up the camera he had spotted in the corner of the ceiling across from his bed. No more "monitoring" if he could help it. Leaving aside the blatant intrusion of his privacy and personal space, Minato wondered what the future would hold for him. All this business with Personas and Shadows... as if the Dark Hour hadn't already been enough. And then there was everything Igor had told him...

But he couldn't deny the possibility that this would lead answering questions he had about the Dark Hour since he first experienced it. Not only that, but he'd learn more about Personas and this Wild Card ability he and Hamuko seemed to possess...

"Hi. How are you?"

Minato blinked when a voice spoke to him from within the dark silence. He quickly sat up and came upon a familiar figure sitting at the foot of his bed.

"You..." Minato's eyes widened as he stared at the boy in striped clothing he had met when he first came to the dorms. The boy chuckled when he heard Minato speak.

"Soon the end will come..." The boy intoned before turning to look Minato in the eye. "I remembered, so I thought I should tell you."

"The end...?" Minato whispered.

"The end of everything." The boy said softly. The boy's expression grew sad. "But to be honest, I don't exactly know what it is..."

Even if he didn't know what he was talking about himself, "The end" still sounded pretty foreboding...

"I see you've awakened to your power. So has she." The boy went on with a smile. "And what unusual powers they are. A power that takes many forms, yet is bound by none. For a long time, I thought you were the only one. Perhaps she..." the boy shook his head. "Well, such power may become your salvation, depending on where you end up."

The boy's body seemed to distort and grow hazy.

"Remember to honor the commitment you made." The boy smiled, causing Minato's eyes to widen. "I'll be watching you, even if you forget about me..."

Minato could see through the boy's body now.

"Wait! How do you know about my contract? How do you know about my power? Who are you?"

The boy only smiled in response.

"See you later..."

Before he could even blink the boy was gone. Minato stared

at where his intruder had once sat before sighing and collapsing back on his bed.

"The universe is laughing at me somehow, I just know it." Minato sighed as he pulled his covers up and buried his face in his pillow.

He'd think about everything that he had been thrust into later and deal with things as they came. It was easier that way. Personas, Shadows, SEES, Social Links, the Velvet Room, that weird kid... he'd worry about all that some other time.

For now, he just wanted to get some sleep.

A/N: There we go. Minato and Hamuko have joined SEES. Can't wait until they get to show off once they hit the tower. Also a big thank you to The Infamous Man for the beta of this chapter. Appreciate it, man.

So yeah, here's the first instance of a relatively minor change regarding Social Links. I wanted Minato and Hamuko to link with each other, and Fool Link is perfect, but then there's no SEES link. Easily fixable by making it the Judgment Link since I always felt that was a wasted link in game. It's put to much better use here as an actual link I think rather than ranking up from just climbing a few floors. I'm also of the belief that the reason both main characters were so nonchalant about the Dark Hour when arriving in Iwadotai during the game was because they were already used to the Dark Hour, but Shadows and Persona were a first. I foreshadowed this a bit

with how both Minato and Hamuko reacted to the Dark Hour and their thoughts regarding what Yukari thought was strange. Of course, I'm sure there are other questions being raised regarding certain events in this chapter. I'm hoping for that. Want the answers? Stick around if you want to find out. Should be fun.

Anyway, thanks to anyone who dropped by to give it a read. Feedback is always appreciated as it only helps improve the story and my skills as a writer. Again, thanks goes out to my readers and I hope you all have happy days and whatnot.

Kiiam

4. Chapter 3: Leader

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona

A/N: Next chapter is go. Now we finally get our first trip to Tartarus. Or at least build up to it. Hope you all enjoy it.

Chapter 3: Leader

"Persona..."

Hamuko muttered the word to herself as she rode the monorail to Gekkoukan High School. Even as Shoji Meguro's music blared in her eardrums she still found it easy to concentrate on her thoughts. She had almost been up all night contemplating about what had happened since last week. Awakening her Persona, fighting monsters called Shadows and meeting Igor in the Velvet Room and being told that she would be going on a journey.

It sounded like something out of the games she played.

"I was just the new transfer student until a week ago."
Hamuko said to herself as if she was narrating something. She stepped off the monorail and headed towards Gekkoukan. "But then all of a sudden, I find out I have this

unique power no one else has and suddenly the fate of the world is in my hands...!"

Hamuko paused for a few moments before bursting out into laughter. A few students passing her gave her strange looks before hurrying away. Hamuko giggled to herself as she resumed her trek.

"Aha... wouldn't that be something..." Hamuko giggled to herself. Really though, joking around was her way of dealing with everything that happened.

Well, it wasn't like her world had been quite ordinary before, what with experiencing the Dark Hour since she was a kid. Now in the middle of her life as a high school student she found others just like her and about Personas and Shadows. The question was where did it all come from? Shadows had to come from somewhere and what made people have the potential use Persona anyway? Then there was the Dark Hour she had been living in since ten years ago, which was as far back as she could remember. Where did it come from?

"Well, this is my chance to find out!" Hamuko thought to herself. *"I could ask Mitsuru-senpai or Ikutsuki-san. If anyone would know it might be them."*

Let it never be said that Hamuko wasn't a positive thinker. She was so deep in her own thoughts that she didn't notice Yukari walking next to her until the girl greeted her.

"Morning."

Hamuko perked up when she heard her friend's voice over her music. The girl removed her headphones and gave her a happy smile as she returned her greeting. "Good morning, Yukari!"

The girl chuckled in response as she stared at Hamuko. "You seem pretty upbeat this morning. Though, I don't think it's much different from usual..."

"You say it like it's a bad thing." Hamuko grinned as the two of them walked towards the school gate. "You could say my energy carried over from yesterday."

"Yeah. You were pretty enthusiastic about the whole thing." Yukari sighed.

"Mou... you still sound pretty depressed about it." Hamuko pouted. "Does Yukari dislike me...?"

"Huh? N-No, it's not that at all!" Yukari stammered, waving her hands and shaking her head in the negative. "I'm actually really glad you and Minato-kun agreed to join us, but... I mean, I was really surprised when you both said you already knew about the Dark Hour and I got worried and... and I don't want you getting in over your head or anything..."

"So what would that make you guys?"

"W-Well..."

"Stop worrying so much." Hamuko smiled, patting Yukari on

the shoulder reassuringly. "I know what you guys do isn't fun and games and I joined you because I want to use my power to help people if I can. Sure, it was a lot to take in all at once but there's no reason I should be sad or angry about it if that's what you're worrying about. Besides, I've been experiencing the Dark Hour for a long time and I'm happy I found people who are like me. Why can't I be optimistic about it?"

"I guess you're right." Yukari said, finally giving a shrug. She smiled at Hamuko. "And between you and me, I was afraid of working alone with Mitsuru-senpai since Akihiko-senpai is injured. At least with you and Minato-kun things should be a little less tense."

"Just leave it to me!" Hamuko beamed, patting her chest confidently. "Let's do our best together, Yukari!"

Hamuko was satisfied when Yukari gave her a genuine smile in response.

"Sounds good to me!"

Nothing special happened at school and no one had called Hamuko out about her week long absence yet, so the girl was happy with her mundane day. After homeroom was over Hamuko collected her things while Yukari waited for her. She had offered to show Hamuko around the strip mall by the station if she wanted and Hamuko had happily accepted. Just as Hamuko finished packing up, someone from the door called out to the two girls.

"Can I have a minute you two?"

Hamuko and Yukari both turned to person addressing them. Yukari was mildly surprised to see Mitsuru standing before them.

"Eh? Mitsuru-senpai? What do you-"

"I'll be brief." Mitsuru interrupted Yukari. "I'd like the two of you to come to the lounge when you come back to the dorm. I've already told Arisato the same. I have something I need to tell everyone. I'll give you the details later. See you there."

And as soon as she had said what she needed to, the Kirijo heir abruptly turned on her heel and left the room. Hamuko blinked guilelessly in the face of her senpai's swift arrival and departure.

"That was... fast."

"She's probably busy with things like the Student Council, unlike us." Yukari scoffed, surprising Hamuko with the bitterness in her tone.

"Whoa, Yuka-tan! Do I sense some hostility there?" Junpei spoke up from behind the two of them.

Yukari glared at Junpei for his apparent eavesdropping while Hamuko gave Yukari a curious look. "Do you not like Mitsuru-senpai, Yukari?"

"It's not that, she's just..." Yukari trailed off before shaking her

head with a sigh. "Never mind. Let's go, Hamuko."

Hamuko quickly followed after Yukari who left in a bit of a huff.

"L-Look, about earlier... it's not that I don't like her or anything, okay?"

Hamuko looked up from the magazine she was reading to give Yukari a puzzled look.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I'm talking about what I said about Mitsuru-senpai..."

"That? I had actually forgotten about that." Hamuko grinned before shrugging her shoulders carelessly. "You shouldn't let it bother you. We all say things we don't mean sometimes."

"Yeah. I just got bothered about the way Junpei put it," Yukari sighed. "He's always talking about stuff that isn't his business. Be careful about what you say around him. He's got a talent for spinning offhand comments into these perverted delusions..."

"So he's that kind of guy, huh?" Hamuko giggled.

"Oh, you laugh now, but just you wait until he does it to you." Yukari said, rolling her eyes. "He's not a bad person, but the things he says sometimes... ugh! Listen to this, during freshman year he...!"

Hamuko and Yukari continued to gossip while browsing through magazines and books in the Book On! Shop before heading back to the dorm.

Minato came upon an unusual sight when he arrived at the dorm late in the day.

"Hey, Minato right? Wanna give me a hand here? This thing is freakin' heavy!"

Junpei lori, if Minato remembered his name right, was standing on the steps that led to the dorm, struggling to tug a large suitcase up the stone steps. Minato removed his headphones and shouldered his bag, moving up to help Junpei drag the suitcase up the remaining steps.

"Whew! Thanks, man." Junpei grinned at Minato. "Could've packed a bit lighter, but I was able to move all my stuff in one trip this way!"

"...Why are you here?" Minato asked, glancing at the suitcase again. Though there was really only one answer to his question...

"Heh. Guess we'll be staying at the same dorm from now one, huh?"

Minato sighed. He figured that was the case. But wait, if Junpei was moving in, then that could mean...

"Hey, what's the hold up?"

"Ah, just a sec!" Junpei called back in reply to Akihiko's voice, who shouted at him from inside of the dorm. Junpei made his way into the dorm with Minato following after him.

The faces of two shocked girls met them upon entering.

"Heh. Wazzup?" Junpei grinned as he greeted Hamuko and Yukari who were standing next to Akihiko.

"J-Junpei?!" Yukari exclaimed. "Why are YOU here?!"

Hamuko glanced from Akihiko who stood by the door, to a grinning Junpei, then finally to a stoic Minato before going back to Akihiko. Slowly, she raised a finger to point at Junpei.

"Hey, Senpai, is Junpei...?"

"So you all know each other?" Akihiko smiled. "That's good since he'll be staying here from now on."

"Wait, he's staying here?" Yukari went on, still having trouble coming to terms with what was going on. "Why?"

"Yeah, I thought that... wait, can Junpei use a Persona...?" Hamuko asked.

To Yukari's shock, Akihiko nodded in the affirmative.

"That's right. I actually bumped into him a couple nights ago." Akihiko explained. "He has the potential, and it seems he

awakened to it just recently. I told him about us, and he agreed to help. Both Mitsuru and the chairman approved."

"Y-You've gotta be kidding..."

"So you DO have a Persona!" Hamuko smiled as Junpei nodded in assent to her statement. "So he knows about the Dark Hour and Shadows too?"

"I've already explained most everything to him." Akihiko replied.

"He found me cryin' like a baby at the convenience store surrounded by a bunch of coffins." Junpei said sheepishly. "I don't remember much else but... looking back it was embarrassing the way I freaked out."

"It would happen to anyone if they didn't know what was going on." Hamuko said assuringly, and Junpei smiled in response.

"So it happened to you too?"

"Well, I can't really remember... it was ten years ago after all."

"Huh? Ten years?!"

"What about you, Minato-kun?" Hamuko asked, turning towards him. "Do you remember what it was like to experience the Dark Hour for the first time?"

"...I don't remember." Minato said quietly after a moment. "I

was too little to remember."

Hamuko's eyebrows rose at the way he said that. Minato's melancholy tone didn't seem to fit with what he was saying in her opinion.

"Eesh... all those coffins and the world turning green, and you're tellin' me you two have been living like that for ten years?" Junpei shook his head in amazement. "Wow..."

"You get used to it eventually." Hamuko smiled. "When it happens everyday, you kinda have to."

"I'll bet." Junpei suddenly grinned. "Still, it's nice to know I'm not the only one. If it was just me it'd be lonely."

"Yeah." Hamuko smiled softly in response to that, agreeing with what Junpei was saying. Up until a week ago, she had thought she'd been the only one. "It's good to have you on the team, Junpei!"

"Heh, you can count on me!"

"Well, I think that's all with the introductions." Akihiko said. "I'll show Junpei where his room is so he can get unpacked. The rest of you meet back in the lounge at about an hour before midnight. Mitsuru already mentioned that she had something she wanted to tell you all, right?"

Akihiko left to help Junpei haul his luggage up to the second floor, leaving Yukari, Hamuko and Minato to stare after them.

Yukari gave a tired sigh as she rubbed her forehead.

"Of all the people..." Yukari said incredulously.

"It's better than a complete stranger joining up." Hamuko smiled.

"I guess so. He just seems a little too excited about this." Yukari sighed. "He's like a little kid who doesn't know what he's gotten into."

"It'll be more fun this way though!"

"You sound just like him..."

Minato stepped past the two girls as they continued to talk. He put his headphones back on as he trudged up the stairs. He figured he might as well relax until the meeting.

Late at night all the members of SEES gathered in the dorm's lounge. The chairman, Mitsuru and Akihiko were already seated and waiting for the others. Upon entering, Hamuko and Yukari took seats on the couch next to Mitsuru while Minato and Junpei sat down on the cushioned chairs next to the coffee table.

"Okay, now everybody's here I'd like your undivided attention," Ikutsuki said. "For a long time, Mitsuru and Akihiko were the only Persona users we had. However, that number recently jumped to six. With our four new members, I think we're more

than ready to explore that place..."

Akihiko smiled excitedly at the chairman's words. "You're talking about Tartarus, right?"

"You got it." Ikutsuki smiled. "Starting tonight, at 12:00AM, we shall commence the exploration of Tartarus."

"Tartarus?" Junpei muttered the word, sounding puzzled. "I think Akihiko-senpai mentioned something like that to me but what exactly is it?"

"It's the first we've heard of it too." Hamuko added, gesturing to herself and Minato.

"Ah, I guess we forgot to mention that..." Yukari said.

"It's no surprise that they haven't seen it. After all, it only appears during the Dark Hour." Ikutsuki said.

"Just like the Shadows..." Minato murmured.

"We've only seen glimpses of the inside, but it's the perfect place for us to train." Akihiko said, picking up where the chairman left off. "You can think of it as a Shadow nest."

"Woah... a nest?" Junpei said.

"So it's where all the Shadows come from then?" Hamuko asked.

"Not only that, but we also believe that the reason for the

Dark Hour's existence can be found there as well." Ikutsuki said solemnly. "By exploring Tartarus, not only can we help eliminate the threat Shadows pose, but we may be able to find out more about them as well."

"That's great and all, but what about Akihiko-senpai's injury?" Yukari pointed out. "Won't fighting make it worse?"

"Don't worry about him Takeba." Mitsuru said reassuringly. "Since Akihiko still needs time for his arm to fully recover, he'll only come as far as the entrance. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, I got it..." Akihiko gave a despondent reply.

"Are you coming with us, Ikutsuki-san?" Hamuko asked.

"Oh no." Ikutsuki waved his hands in the negative with a sheepish look on his face. "I can't use a Persona, so I'll just monitor things from here."

Minato glanced up at the crescent shaped moon glowing brightly in the dark night sky. He flipped open his cell phone to check the time. It was ten minutes until midnight. As the group followed after Mitsuru and Akihiko, who were leading them to wherever they were headed, he couldn't help but wonder about this Tartarus place they were going to. He was curious about what this so called "Shadow's nest" looked like or where it was at.

"Isn't it a little strange though?" Hamuko's voice broke through

his train of thought. "If he can't use a Persona like the rest of us, why can Ikutsuki-san experience the Dark Hour?"

"I'm not surprised by your confusion, but there are people like that. There are those who can move in the Dark Hour but can't summon a Persona." Mitsuru replied. "But the chairman supports us even without one. He helps keep us organized and provides us with the supplies needed to combat Shadows."

"So he gets us these then?" Hamuko asked, twirling her Evoker in her hand. "Wonder where he gets these toys..."

"I wouldn't refer to the Evokers as "toys", but if you're so curious why don't you ask the chairman when we get back? I'm sure he wouldn't mind answering your questions."

"Hm... I think I'll pass. It's probably a really long explanation and I can only imagine the puns that would come along with it."

Mitsuru gave an amused smile in response to that statement.

"We're here." Akihiko announced from ahead of them.

The new members of SEES, barring Yukari, were mildly surprised where they had ended up.

"Seriously? This is the place?" Junpei asked pointing past the gate. "Why our school?"

"No way... our school has a secret basement that hides all the

Shadows?!" Hamuko exclaimed.

Minato and Yukari gave the girl odd looks at that.

"Not exactly." Akihiko said. "Just give it a minute. It's almost midnight."

Minato took out his cell phone and checked his clock again for what might have been the sixth time. Akihiko was right. In just a few seconds, the Dark Hour would begin. Suddenly, all the light was seemingly sucked out of the area, leaving everyone within the pale atmosphere of the Dark Hour, illuminated only by the large yellow moon. Nothing out of the ordinary so far.

The tremor that shook through the area was new though.

Minato looked up from his phone, his eyes going wide as he watched Gekkoukan High School grow and stretch up into the night sky. The other buildings seemed to surround and attach to the tower that seemed to spring up out of nowhere. Everything in the area twisted around or stacked itself on top of the buildings as they morphed and grew. Sounds of the earth moving and metal grinding against metal were the transformation's symphony. Eventually, a warped tower was settled in the place where their school had once been, the top of the tower almost looking like it was being cradled by the crescent moon in the background sky. The entrance loomed in front of them just past the gate, a large glowing blue clock with its hands pointing to midnight hovering just above the doors.

Throughout the school's transformation, Mitsuru and Akihiko's faces had remained impassive while Yukari only looked a bit unsettled. Minato, Hamuko and Junpei's faces clearly expressed their awe and surprise. Mitsuru stepped forward, snapping them out of their shock when she began to speak.

"This is Tartarus," Mitsuru announced. "The tower that reveals itself during the Dark Hour."

"T-This is Tartarus?" Junpei stammered. "W-What the hell happened to our school?!"

"Wow..." Hamuko stared up at the tower. Her tone was evidence of her wonder.

Minato shared their surprise. Though he wondered how he had missed the large tower the first night he came here. It stretched almost up to the clouds, and he wondered if he could see it from the dorm...

"So this is the nest you guys talked about..." Minato muttered.

"The tower disappears without a trace once the Dark Hour ends. There's almost no evidence that it even exists, though people like us can confirm its existence with our own eyes." Mitsuru said.

"B-But why?" Junpei continued to sputter. "Why'd our school turn into a giant tower?!"

"...I don't know." Mitsuru answered after a moment. Her

response sounded unnaturally subdued.

"That's what we hope to find out. There has to be clues in Tartarus that will help explain about why it appears and how it relates to the Dark Hour and the Shadows." Akihiko explained. "Mitsuru and I have only taken a peek inside, but now we can really start exploring it."

"It sounds pretty exciting the way you put it." Hamuko smiled.

Akihiko smiled back. "Doesn't it?"

"Akihiko..."

His enthusiasm was gone the moment he heard Mitsuru's chiding voice. "I know, I know..."

"Don't feel so bad, Senpai." Hamuko chirped, patting him on the back. "It's better to give your arm time to heal rather than make the injury worse! You can explore all you want after you're healed."

Her words were meant to be encouraging, but they didn't seem to do much to improve the older boy's mood. The six Persona users stepped inside the tower. Minato took a quick look around the entrance, immediately noticing the flight of stairs that led up to a huge golden clock with a door at the base. A strange glowing mechanism of some sort was on his right, while a smaller clock was set just beyond the stairs to his left. There was also the motorcycle placed next to the stairs that he assumed belonged to one of his upperclassmen.

He assumed it was Mitsuru's when she walked up to and inspected the vehicle before turning back towards the group.

"This place is pretty cool on the inside..." Junpei said as he inspected the place for himself.

"Cool? More like creepy..." Yukari said, rubbing her upper arms uncomfortably. "It's so quiet..."

"I'm with Junpei on this one." Hamuko smiled. "I think this place looks really cool. Don't you think so, Minato-kun?"

"Ah, yeah..." Minato nodded absently, not really paying attention.

"This is only the entrance. Tartarus contains a large maze that winds throughout the tower, and the entrance lies just beyond that doorway." Mitsuru proclaimed, gesturing to the door at the top of the stairs. She turned to stare at the four newest members of SEES. "The four of you will go inside in order to get a feel for the place."

"B-By ourselves?!" Yukari exclaimed.

"I'm not asking you to go very far." Mitsuru said. "You're all still new to this, and this will help you all get adjusted. And I'll be monitoring you from here to make sure you're safe."

"Plus, the Shadows on the first few floors are small fry." Akihiko smirked. "Even beginners like you should have no problem taking care of them."

"So you have explored a couple floors already, huh?" Hamuko asked. She narrowed her eyes at her senpai with a playful smile on her lips. "You never meant to come in with us, did you?"

"That's right." Akihiko nodded.

"That's pretty irresponsible. Sending us newbies alone into a tower full of Shadows."

"It's not irresponsibility, Runako. I know you're all more than capable of exploring the first floors of Tartarus without our assistance." Mitsuru returned with a smile.

"Having said that, we're also going to appoint a leader to make any necessary decisions that might come up." Akihiko said.

Junpei immediately perked up at this.

"For real? One of us...?" Junpei grinned excitedly. "Oh! Oh! Me, me, me! Pick me!"

Yukari and Hamuko both gave Junpei flat looks behind his back while Mitsuru shook her head slightly as Junpei's behavior. Akihiko sighed before looking past the three of them.

"Hey, Minato!"

The blue haired boy raised his head when he heard his name called.

"You're in charge."

Minato was nonplussed in response to that.

"...What."

Hamuko accepted the decision with a smile while Yukari gave a slow nod of understanding in response. Junpei immediately voiced his objections.

"W-Wait! Why him?! He doesn't look like a leader!" Junpei protested with a frown.

Despite his own feelings on the matter, Minato glared Junpei for the comment.

"Well, he HAS fought Shadows before." Yukari pointed out.

Junpei glanced over at Minato in surprise. "What? Seriously?"

"It was either going to be Arisato or Runako, but we eventually decided on the former." Mitsuru said.

"What! But she's a girl!"

"Hey! I'll have you know I fought Shadows before too!"

"Oh, er, really...?"

"That's one of the reasons we decided to pick one of them for the position, but there's also the fact that both of them have lived in the Dark Hour for ten years, so they're already used to

it. Not only that, but both of them can summon their Personas without any difficulties." Akihiko turned towards Yukari and Junpei and gave them a hard look. "Can you two do the same? Can you summon your Personas without hesitating like they can?"

"Y-Yeah, of course I can." Junpei boasted.

"Um..." Yukari was less sure.

Everyone in the lobby except Mitsuru jumped when a gunshot echoed throughout the room. Akihiko stood with his Evoker pressed underneath his chin. His Persona floated above his head.

"So that's Senpai's Persona..." Hamuko murmured. "It looks pretty strong..."

"Polydeuces." Akihiko said the name of his Persona for everyone's clarity. Its body was bulky but its hands and feet were small and thin, bar some sort of attachment on its right arm. "This is how a Persona should be summoned. No hesitation. Against shadows, without your Persona you're screwed. Do you understand that?"

"G-Got it." Junpei nodded.

"Y-Yeah." Yukari replied shakily.

"Hold on."

Everyone looked back at Minato who stood with one hand

raised while the other was rubbing his forehead, expressing his confusion.

"Are you sure you want me to be the leader?" Minato asked.

"Of course." Mitsuru nodded. "You've proven yourself capable enough."

"How? I got lucky against that Shadow from a week ago and the only reason I was able to summon my Persona was because I didn't want to die. It was more adrenaline than anything else." Minato said. He left out the part about the mysterious kid telling him to shoot himself. "Plus, Yukari-san has been with you longer. Why not pick her to be the leader instead of someone who you just met?"

"Despite what you say, you handled the situation quite well. You protected Takeba and Runako and showed us that you're a dependable person." Mitsuru said. "Not only that, but the reason we chose you over Runako was because of the power you displayed. The Persona you summoned that defeated the larger Shadow was-"

"That was a fluke. I'm not even sure how that happened and when... whatever it was showed up it felt like my head was going to split in two." Minato interrupted. "Do not ask me to repeat that, because it won't happen."

Minato grimaced and rubbed his temples as he thought back to that night when that black Persona... had it even been a Persona? Well, he thought back to when whatever it was had

torn its way out of Orpheus and slaughtered that large Shadow. He really hoped that it didn't decide to make another appearance when they encountered Shadows tonight.

"I... I see." Mitsuru slowly nodded, an expression of discomfort falling over her features. "Well, if you're that uncomfortable with the position I wouldn't want to force it on you. I suppose..."

"I can be the leader if he doesn't want to!" Junpei exclaimed. "Seriously! I have no problem with that!"

"I was going to suggest that Runako would be the leader since she was our second pick." Mitsuru told the disheartened Junpei. "So, Runako, if you wouldn't mind..."

"Ehehehe... I'm not really the leader type." Hamuko laughed sheepishly. "I'm more comfortable receiving orders than giving them. I'm not a good candidate in my opinion."

"Then...!"

"Junpei, calm down." Yukari sighed before he could speak up. "You're not going to be picked if you keep asking for it."

"But no one else wants to do it!"

"Why don't you want to be the leader, Minato-kun?" Hamuko asked suddenly, turning towards the blue haired boy. "I think you'd make a good leader."

"Really? Well, if you think so it must be true then." Minato

deadpanned.

"Don't make fun. All I'm saying is there's no reason you shouldn't accept the position." Hamuko smiled. "I don't mind following you. I'd actually feel really comfortable if you were the one calling the shots while we're in there. Right guys?"

"I don't mind." Yukari said with a small shrug. "If Mitsuru-senpai and Akihiko-senpai chose him I'm fine with it."

"Hey, don't pressure the guy." Junpei smiled. "If he doesn't want to be the leader wouldn't it be bad to force him?"

"Ignoring Junpei... it's just for a little while. What do you say, leader?" Hamuko asked.

Minato stared at the girl who kept smiling at him before heaving a sigh. He muttered something under his breath before glancing over at Mitsuru.

"I guess I'm the leader then."

"Thank you." Mitsuru smiled gratefully at Minato. Yukari and Akihiko gave him their own smiles while Junpei clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction. "We'll leave things in your hands then."

"Sorry for twisting your arm like this." Hamuko whispered to Minato with a giggle.

Minato rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

"Before you guys head inside, why don't you two try summoning your Personas for practice?" Akihiko suggested to Yukari and Junpei. "This way it's less likely for you to freeze up once you fight the Shadows."

"I won't freeze up!" Junpei protested before calming down. "But I get what you're saying. Yeah, I'll give a few test shots."

"Me too." Yukari said as she took out her Evoker. "I don't want a repeat of that night..."

Minato watched the two of them, curious to see what kind of Personas they had before he felt someone tapping his shoulder. He turned towards Hamuko who was staring off to her left for some reason.

"What is it?" Minato asked.

"Do you see what I see?" Hamuko asked back, pointing to whatever she was staring at.

Minato's eyebrows went up when he noticed a familiar blue door between two of the pillars that surrounded the walls of the room. He glanced down at his pocket, noticing the blue glow coming from the Velvet Key that had appeared in it out of nowhere when he had woken up from the hospital. Noticing everyone's attention was still on Junpei and Yukari, Minato headed towards the door. Hamuko followed after him. The two Persona users stood in front of the blue door. Minato took his key out of his pocket while Hamuko took out hers. He assumed her key had just appeared out of nowhere like his.

As they held their keys out in front of them, the door opened. Minato and Hamuko glanced at each other before stepping inside. They both felt that weightless feeling from before as they were momentarily blinded from a light beyond the door as it opened before they felt their feet touch ground and noticed their surroundings were painted in blue. Minato and Hamuko looked ahead as they walked into the room with a familiar voice greeting them.

"Welcome to the Velvet Room."

A/N: Good to end it here, I think. Now you can all look forward to a meeting in the Velvet Room and SEES' first foray into Tartarus next chapter. Thanks again to The Infamous Man for checking this over before its posting. Go read his fics. They're awesome.

So yeah, Minato's the leader in this one with Hamuko playing second banana. Of course, that doesn't mean she'll be less important. As most of you should be able to tell by now I'm sort of swapping perspectives between the two protagonists and will continue to do so, taking the time to focus on either Hamuko, Minato, or both at the same time. They both share the role of protagonist in this story, and I hope I've succeeded in showing that.

Anyway feedback is much appreciated to anyone willing to give it. Next chapter is an exciting one and a glimpse at how I'll handle battles with Shadows and using Personas so I hope you guys decide to check it out. Have a good one everyone.

5. Chapter 4: Tartarus

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Next chapter is go. This time we follow our protagonists as they venture into Tartarus following a brief visit to the Velvet Room. I hope it pleases those who decide to read.

Chapter 4: Tartarus

The room hadn't changed from their last impromptu visit. Minato and Hamuko each took one of the two seats in front of the table, Minato on the right, Hamuko on the left. Igor smiled at the two of them as he sat on the blue couch opposite of them. Elizabeth stood on the mysterious old man's left side, while Theodore stood on his right side.

"I've been waiting for you two." Igor smiled. "The time has come for both of you to wield your power."

Minato and Hamuko sat in their chairs silently as the man spoke, absorbing his words.

"The tower that you are about to venture into... how did it come to be? For what purpose does it exist?" Igor paused for a moment before shaking his head. "Ah, regrettably... neither

of you are capable of answering these questions."

"We will though." Hamuko said determinedly. "That's why we're going to explore Tartarus!"

"I am aware, and I wish you luck in doing so." Igor smiled. "But to help answer these questions, you both must be made aware of the nature of your power."

"About the door that appeared in the Tartarus lobby..." Minato began before Igor interrupted him.

"It leads here, though only you and your fellow guest are able to see it." Igor answered Minato's unfinished question.

"Moving on, the power you two possess is unique. It is like the number zero... empty, but at the same time holds infinite possibilities."

"And when put in a way we can understand, that means what exactly?" Minato asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at the old man.

Igor smiled widely at the two.

"It means you two are able to possess multiple Personas in addition to your own, and summon them as needed."

Minato and Hamuko's eyes widened at that piece of information.

"Wait, so we can use Personas other than Orpheus?" Hamuko asked excitedly.

"Do you remember how I mentioned that your Persona is like a mask that protects you from hardship?" Igor asked, happy when both guests nodded. "The two different Orpheus you both summoned are your primary masks to wear, and they will always be ready to heed your call. However, the Wild Card ability allows you to switch your normal mask for others, in other words, you can switch from Orpheus to other Persona with different, stronger abilities."

"So Orpheus will always be our Persona to use, but we can use others as we acquire them." Minato rationalized. "How do we get new Persona then?"

"By defeating enemies you come across, the faces of possibility will appear before you. In other words, by defeating Shadows you may acquire new Personas." Igor smiled. "There may be times when it is difficult, but you must reach out and grasp onto these powers. Of course, your powers will also grow accordingly... be sure to keep that in mind."

"How many Persona can we get? Do we get something special if we get them all?" Hamuko asked eagerly.

"Before you get too excited, I should mention that each of you can only possess a limited amount of Persona at one time. If you were to possess so many different faces, you may lose your sense of self, and that would be... problematic." Igor said, causing Hamuko to fall silent. "But fear not, for as long as you two are guests in the Velvet Room I shall not let that happen. Now, while I may occasionally guide you on your journey, my true role is something much different."

"True role?"

"Yes. I may not be able to provide answers, but I can lend support through Persona Fusion."

"Persona Fusion?" Minato muttered. "You mean... combining Personas?"

"That's right." Igor smiled. "The Personas you acquire will come in the form of cards. If you bring me these cards, I can take them and merge them into a single Persona stronger than its parts. The fused Persona will also inherit abilities from the Persona used to make it. These two will also lend their assistance."

Igor gestured to Elizabeth and Theodore, who had stood silently at opposite ends of the couch their master sat on until this point.

"Depending on what cards you bring, we will show you the possible combinations available, and record the Persona you acquire." Theodore explained.

"We will ensure that they inherit the skills you desire, and that the Persona's abilities are documented." Elizabeth added with a smile. She gestured to the tome she carried under her arm and then to an identical one her brother carried. "The books we each hold are called the Persona Compendium, and we will register the Persona you acquire or fuse within the pages. Should you ever want to recall a Persona you have dismissed or used in a fusion, my brother and I can bring them back..."

for a price."

"That's... you mean like sacrifices?" Hamuko asked uneasily when she caught the look in Elizabeth's eyes.

"She was actually talking about money." Theodore said with a chuckle. "The fee depends on how strong the Persona you wish to bring back is."

"Oh, that's good then." Hamuko smiled. Minato shook his head.

"I will keep track of our male guest's Persona, while my brother will handle the young lady's Persona." Elizabeth smiled, eyes on Minato as she said this. "I look forward to working with you."

"Same here..." Minato replied with a slow nod.

"I shall do my best to assist you during your journey." Theodore proclaimed, gently bowing towards Hamuko.

"Thank you, Theo-san." Hamuko smiled.

"Well... I believe now would be a good time to part. Time marches on in your world, and you cannot investigate the mysteries of the tower if you both remain here." Igor chuckled. "But feel free to come back whenever you wish. Even if there are times where I myself cannot assist you, Elizabeth and Theodore are more than capable of aiding you in my place."

"Alright then." Minato stood up. "We'll... see you all soon, I guess."

"Thank you for your help." Hamuko said gratefully, bowing as she stood.

"No need to thank us. You both are our honored guests, and it is our duty to help you." Igor smiled. "I look forward to seeing you two again. Until that time comes... farewell."

Giving the residents of the Velvet Room one last look, Minato and Hamuko both exited through the blue door they had entered in.

"Hey, are you guys alright?"

Minato and Hamuko found themselves facing the blue door as their senses slowly readjusted. Both turned around to see Yukari and Junpei giving them strange looks.

"Man, you both look like zombies." Junpei murmured. "What's up? You both were just kinda standing there..."

"Hamuko thought she saw something over here." Minato lied. "So we came over here to see what it was."

"Was it a Shadow?" Mitsuru asked, overhearing their conversation. "They don't usually appear in the lobby of Tartarus..."

"It was nothing. It's just my imagination." Hamuko assured

everyone with a smile. "Guess I'm just a little anxious."

"If you say so..." Yukari said uncertainly.

"I thought you guys had just dozed off." Junpei smirked. He turned towards Minato. "You're not gonna fall asleep in the middle of battle, are ya leader?"

"You need to worry about that." Minato said, narrowing his eyes at his fellow junior. "Just don't fall behind."

Junpei looked like he was going to say something in response to that, but Yukari cut him off. "C'mon guys, if nothing's wrong then cut them some slack, Junpei. Let's just get going."

"Alright, alright..." Junpei sighed before giving a stiff smile. "I follow your lead then."

Minato nodded and gestured to the staircase. They all headed for the stairs.

"Hold on."

The four stopped when they heard Mitsuru's voice. Minato blinked as a small headset was placed into his hands.

"For communication." Mitsuru explained. "My Persona, Penthesilea, can link up with those headsets and provide audio backup. It can also detect shadows and analyze their strengths and weaknesses from a distance, just so long as you keep those radio headsets on. It's not where my Persona's skills shine most... but it is a useful ability

nonetheless."

"You said you and Akihiko-senpai have already explored the first few floors. Did you to ever write down a map of the floors so we know where we're going?" Minato asked.

"We tried that at first, but it proved to be a fruitless effort when we realized that the structure of Tartarus changes from day to day." Mitsuru sighed. "Yet another mystery we hope to find the reason for within the tower."

"I see..."

"Of course, the entrance always remains the same so I brought weapons here at an earlier date." Mitsuru said, gesturing to the side of the staircase where Minato immediately spotted the shortsword he had used a week ago. Hamuko had already rushed over and claimed the naginata she had used previously. "While your Persona should provide you with a means of attack and defense, it never hurts to have a little extra protection."

"Can't argue with that!" Junpei grinned as he picked up a katana. He swung the long sword like a bat. "Haha, sweet!"

"Do you even know how to use that thing?" Yukari sighed as she picked up a bow and quiver, narrowing her eyes at Mitsuru. "I was wondering where my bow went."

"I made sure to take the spare one you use for practice, not your personal one." Mitsuru stated. "I assumed you wouldn't

mind."

"Instead of assuming you could've asked for permission first..." Yukari muttered under her breath. "I thought I had lost it..."

"I take it these are more or less for emergencies if Shadows happen to get the drop on us?" Minato asked. "Are Personas more effective?"

"I wouldn't say that. The weaker Shadows can be defeated with a few stabs." Mitsuru replied. "It's just a means of conserving your strength. Using your Persona does take energy, so if you need to rest use those weapons as a means of attack instead."

"Got it."

"Do you have any more questions, or are you ready to go?"

"There's no point in waiting around when we've only got about an hour to explore this place." Minato said before turning towards the three members who he'd be leading. "You guys good?"

"Ready!" Hamuko chirped as she balanced her naginata on her shoulder.

"I'm all set." Yukari smiled.

"Let's get going!" Junpei urged.

Minato turned back towards Mitsuru. "I guess we'll be off then."

Mitsuru nodded. "Good luck."

"So... this is it, huh?" Junpei muttered as the four juniors took a look around the place.

A maze of corridors greeted Minato, Hamuko, Yukari and Junpei as they entered the labyrinth of Tartarus. Minato didn't really see much difference on the inside of Tartarus than the outside. Murky green colored the scenery and the darkness almost seemed to move like a mist throughout the corridors. He did think the floor had some resemblance to the halls of the school though. He supposed that was a given since the school had transformed into the tower.

"It's even creepier than the lobby..." Yukari said uneasily. "I hope I don't get lost..."

"Just stick to the group and you shouldn't have anything to worry about." Minato told her. "It's kinda dark, but once you get used to it you'll be able to see pretty easily."

"Wow, Minato-kun. You're already sounding like a leader." Hamuko giggled.

"Whatever..."

{Can you all hear me?}

"Clearly." Minato replied to Mitsuru, whose voice was transmitting through all of their headsets.

"Woah! So Senpai's Persona really is like a radio, huh?" Junpei grinned.

{I suppose that's one way of putting it, Iori.} Mitsuru chuckled before getting serious. {I'll be supporting you all from the outside from here on out.}

"You could've just come to support us in person instead." Yukari pointed out.

"But that wouldn't be any fun, Yukari!" Hamuko grinned. "This is just like a mother tossing her kid into the deep end of the pool to teach him how to swim! It's to help teach us how to do things on our own!"

"...That doesn't make me feel better at all."

"Hamu-tan, did that happen to you when you were a kid?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just the way you said it made it sound like..."

"Mitsuru-senpai, do you detect any Shadows at all?" Minato asked with an exasperated sigh.

{Yes, there are a couple close by. Be on guard.} Mitsuru cautioned. {You should be ready to engage them at any moment.}

"Oh man, this'll be my first time fighting Shadows." Junpei grinned excitedly. "I'm getting a little pumped up!"

"There... won't be any Shadows like the one from last week, right?" Yukari asked worriedly.

{Don't worry about that, Takeba. Like Akihiko said, the Shadows on the first few floors are quite weak. You're all more than capable of handling them together.} Mitsuru said. {Even so, proceed with caution. I apologize for not coming along, but I believe this is the best way for all of you to get used to fighting.}

With that, the communication was cut.

"...Why is she always like that?" Yukari muttered. She hadn't meant for her words to be heard, but Hamuko picked up on them anyway.

"Like what?" Hamuko asked.

"It's nothing." Yukari sighed. Hamuko pouted but didn't press Yukari to answer.

"Let's get going." Minato ordered, leading the way as the group ventured into the maze.

It didn't take long for them to stumble across a shadow. The four Persona users hid behind a corner as they observed the black blob slowly crawl across the floor.

"It looks like one of those Shadows I defeated on the rooftop

when they tried to attack Minato-kun." Hamuko said quietly.

{It is quite weak.} Mitsuru told them. {Arisato and Runako, why don't you two handle this one? Though you have minimal combat experience, you're somewhat used to fighting Shadows already. Iori and Takeba will support you if needed.}

"What! Senpai, you don't think I can handle it?" Junpei complained.

"It's just one Shadow. We don't need to rush it together." Minato told Junpei before turning towards Hamuko. The girl already had her Evoker out. "I'll attack it first then you follow up with your Persona."

"Got it!" Hamuko grinned. "Just tell me when!"

"Ready... now!"

Minato and Hamuko both rushed the Shadow when its mask turned away from them. Minato took point while Hamuko followed just behind him. Whipping out his Evoker, Minato pressed it against his temple before pulling the trigger and shouting the name of his Persona.

"Orpheus!"

Blue mist surrounded Minato as Orpheus was summoned from his mind and into existence. The Persona of strings grabbed its harp and swung it down on the Shadows back, causing the creature to recoil from the blow. The Shadow

turned to respond to the attack, but it was given no time when the name of the Persona was called again, this time coming from Hamuko.

"Orpheus!" Hamuko shouted as she pulled the trigger of her Evoker.

The female Orpheus replaced the male one as Minato's Persona faded away. Hamuko's Orpheus smashed its own harp down right on top of the recovering Shadow's mask. The mask cracked and the shadow faded away into black ink and smoke.

"Huh..." Hamuko hummed to herself as her Orpheus faded away.

"What?" Minato asked, arching an eyebrow at the girl.

"I don't know. I guess I was expecting more than that." Hamuko shrugged. "It didn't really put up much of a fight."

{That's because you and Arisato didn't give it a chance to counterattack. It was a well executed attack.} Mitsuru complimented. {If you confront other Shadows the same way and work together like you did, I'm sure you'll have no problem fighting them off.}

"Nice job guys." Yukari smiled at the two Wild Card users as she and Junpei approached them.

"Man, I didn't get to do anything." Junpei whined. "You two

got all the fun."

"Don't be sad, Junpei." Hamuko chided. "You can have the next one, right Minato-kun?"

"Hm? Yeah, sure." Minato nodded absently as he checked around the corner. He glanced at the stairs that led higher up into the tower. "Mitsuru-senpai, I assume those stairs lead to the next floor?"

{Ah, so you've spotted the stairs already. Yes, they do lead to higher floors, but I would like you all to stick to the first floor today.}

"Eh? Why?" Hamuko asked. "If we can go higher, why wait?"

{Because we don't know how many floors the tower has, and the Shadows get stronger and stronger the higher up you go.} Mitsuru said sternly. {Don't let one victory go to your head, Runako. All of you are still new to this. Just eliminate the rest of the Shadows on this floor then head back. You can explore higher floors next time if Arisato thinks you're all ready.}

"Why should I decide?" Minato frowned.

{You are the leader, after all. I'll leave it to your judgment to decide whether or not you think you can handle the higher floors. Now, I suggest you get moving. There are more Shadows nearby.}

"Oh well. Next time then." Hamuko sighed as Mitsuru's voice

faded away. She glanced longingly at the stairs as they passed by them. "I wonder how many floors this tower has..."

"It's taller than any tower I've ever seen. Even the buildings in town aren't as big as Tartarus." Yukari said. "It could have hundreds of floors."

"And thousands of Shadows." Minato added. "If our job is to eliminate all of them, I think we might have our work cut out for us..."

"H-Hey, don't say something like that." Yukari frowned. "There can't be... thousands..."

"Don't be scared, Yukari." Hamuko giggled.

"I'm not scared!"

"Hey guys, check it out! More Shadows!"

Everyone looked to where Junpei was pointing to see two of the same Shadow Minato and Hamuko had defeated earlier slithering across the ground. Junpei grinned and hefted his katana up.

"Don't worry, I've got this one!"

"Wha...? Junpei!"

Junpei ignored Yukari and ran towards the two Shadows with his katana swinging. The two Shadows immediately noticed him and slid across the ground to meet him. The boy jumped

to the side to avoid their claws and hacked away at one of them. His sword cut through the Shadow, its remains fading away into nothing. Junpei grinned and rounded on the other one.

"Heh, this way I'll show that I should be in charge!"

"He's still on about that? How immature can he be?" Yukari sighed as she pulled out her Evoker.

"Hamuko-san, go help Junpei." Minato ordered.

"On it!"

Junpei stepped back as the remaining Shadow took a swing at him. He lifted his katana up to deal a finishing blow, but the Shadow was quicker than he thought. The Shadow swerved to the side, causing his slash to miss, and he hissed in pain when he felt the Shadow's claws strike his arm. He blinked when the Shadow was suddenly sent flying into the air by a gust of wind. Hamuko's naginata swung into the Shadow as it came down, splattering it against the walls before its remains dissipated.

{That was reckless, Iori.}

"What? C'mon, Senpai. Those Shadows were nothing." Junpei drawled.

{You were still hit though. If they had been stronger Shadows you might have ended up like Akihiko. Please, be more careful

in the future and wait for Arisato's orders or my own.}

"He doesn't need to tell me how to do everything. I can take care of myself just fine." Junpei frowned.

"Let me see your arm." Yukari didn't wait for Junpei to reply as she grabbed the arm she saw the Shadow strike. "Hm... nothing. It was pretty weak alright. His clothes aren't even torn."

"Heh. See?"

{This isn't a game, Iori.} Mitsuru stressed. {Takeba, could you heal him please?}

"Huh? But I didn't..."

"Shut up and hold still, you idiot. This is just in case." Yukari said sternly. She held her Evoker to her head and pulled the trigger, summoning her Persona, Io.

"...Your Persona looks kinda weird." Hamuko commented as she stared at the girl in chains who sat atop what looked like a cow's skull.

"It does not." Yukari huffed before turning back towards Junpei. Io made a gesture with its hands as a purple glow started to emit from Junpei's arm as he was healed. "You can't just rush in like that, especially when you don't even know how to use a sword."

"Hey, I can use it just fine!" Junpei said indignantly. "There's

not much more to it than swish, swish, stab. It's not rocket science."

{There is much more to swordplay than that.} Mitsuru cut in, sounding almost offended by the way Junpei had said it.

"Hey, Yukari, what's that your Persona just did?" Hamuko asked. "Does it have healing powers?"

"Hm? Oh, sort of..." Yukari said. "It's more like easing the pain though instead of healing."

"That gust of wind came from your Persona too." Minato noted. "Was it a spell?"

{Hm. Perhaps I should take a moment to explain if you don't already know.} Mitsuru's voice cut in before Yukari could answer. {Our Persona act as both our sword and shield. While they all have extraordinary powers and abilities each one is different. While all are capable of attacking physically like Orpheus, Takeba's Persona is more proficient in magic attacks. Specifically wind and healing magic, the former which she had used to help defeat the Shadow and the latter to heal lori's arm. The wind spell is called "Garu" while the healing spell is called "Dia".}

"If Yukari's Persona can heal, why couldn't she have healed up Akihiko-senpai's arm?" Hamuko asked curiously.

{Unfortunately, the healing powers of Persona don't work that way. It cannot heal physical damage. It can only alleviate the

pain somewhat and revitalize some strength you have lost fighting in battle.}

"So the spell acts like morphine and helps you ignore the pain?" Minato clarified.

{More or less. If Io's spells were really capable of healing Akihiko's arm, we would have done so already.}

"Aha... guess I'll be a little more careful next time." Junpei said sheepishly.

{I should hope so. I cannot stress how important it is for you all to not act recklessly during battles. Not all Shadows will be as weak as the ones you just fought, and some are capable of using spells like Takeba's Persona can.}

"Like that wind attack?"

{Exactly. Not only wind attacks, but some Shadows can produce ice, fire or even lightning to attack you with.}

"That's... not good." Minato said slowly, frowning as he thought about that. "Getting burned and struck by bolts of lightning sounds much more dangerous than a harsh breeze."

{Normally that would be the case, but our Persona provide us not only with offense, but defense as well.} Mitsuru explained. {Your Persona is a part of you, and it protects you even when inactive. Your Persona absorbs some of damage you would normally take, so even if you were to be struck by lightning or

fire you would not be shocked or burned. It would hurt, no doubt about that, but you would be safe. Some Persona even have resistances to certain types of attacks, so much so that getting struck in the head with a lightning bolt would feel like almost nothing at all!}

"And... you've tried this and confirmed this for yourself?" Minato asked in slight disbelief.

{Akihiko has. His Persona has resistance to lightning so lightning attacks don't do much to him.}

"...Okay."

{Ah, but you should also be aware that Persona also have their weaknesses. I scanned Orpheus earlier, and I would advise you and Runako to avoid any lightning attacks. Your Persona would still protect you from taking too much damage, but...}

"Avoid lightning. Got it. We would do that even if we weren't weak to it." Minato said solemnly.

"Here, here." Hamuko agreed.

{Sorry to cut this conversation short, but we really shouldn't be discussing this now. I'll answer your questions once you're out of the tower. I've detected a group of Shadows heading in your direction.}

Sure enough, the four SEES members could see four black

blobs scuttling towards them at a surprisingly fast pace.

{They're the same type of Shadows you fought before. I've already scanned the others so I know their weakness now.}

"So they're weak to certain attacks like our Persona?"

{That's right.} Mitsuru confirmed. {Those Shadows are weak to "Agi" skills, more specifically fire spells. Arisato and Iori's Personas should know some if my scans on their Personas are correct.}

"What about mine?" Hamuko asked. "If Minato's Orpheus can use fire skills, can't mine too?"

{Though you both use Orpheus, their skills seem to differ along with their appearance.} Mitsuru replied. {Your Persona knows "Bufu", an ice skill. It will work just fine against these Shadows.}

"Alright. Evokers out." Minato ordered. Everyone held their Evokers to their head. "When I give the signal, hit them with your magic skills. We'll each take one Shadow."

The four shadows came closer. When they came close enough to where Minato could see their masks clearly, he gave the command.

"Go!"

The names of their Persona rang through the corridor like a chorus.

"Orpheus!" "Orpheus!" "Io!" "Hermes!"

Minato's Orpheus and Junpei's Hermes, which was a black humanoid Persona with bronze wings fanning out, cast their fire skills on two of the Shadows. Their bodies were immediately incinerated and reduced to nothing. Hamuko and Yukari's Persona hit the other two with ice and wind skills respectively. While they weren't immediately defeated, the attacks did stop the two remaining Shadows in their tracks. Minato seized the opportunity.

"Junpei, again!"

Junpei seemed surprised at the sudden order for a moment before he nodded in response. "Right!"

Two more blasts of fire from Orpheus and Hermes did away with the two remaining Shadows. With their enemies defeated, the Persona gradually faded back into the minds of those that used them.

"That was awesome!" Junpei cheered, pumping his fist in the air. "Did you see that?! I'd say my Hermes has a thing for fire attacks, huh?"

"All our Persona were pretty cool!" Hamuko beamed. "We took down those Shadows no problem!"

"Jeez... you two are way too excited about this." Yukari sighed, even though she was smiling as she said it.

"Skills are easier to use than I thought." Minato said. "They seem to come naturally..."

{Your Persona is a part of you, Arisato. Using its skills to the fullest will obviously feel natural.} Mitsuru's voice seemed to chuckle. {Now... I believe all the Shadows have been taken care of. You can either head back to the stairs or try to find an Access Point in order to return.}

"Access Point?"

{They're special nodes found on some of the floors of Tartarus. Their existence is yet another mystery. However, should you activate one it will send out a signal and teleport all of you back to the lobby, so long as you're all on the same floor. Even if you split up and are in different areas on the floor, activating one will send all of you back here.}

"I see... and you're sure there are no more Shadows on this floor?"

{I'm positive. It's surprising that there were so few. There's usually more...}

"Well, I'm not complaining." Minato said before turning towards the other three Persona users. "The corridor forks off ahead, so we'll split up and find the node. Hamuko-san and I will go left while Junpei and Yukari-san will go right. Good?"

Everyone nodded and accepted Minato's orders. Junpei and Yukari broke off from them and headed right while Minato and

Hamuko ventured left. Eventually, the duo came across a glowing green mechanism that looked like a smaller version of the device at the lobby.

"So, this is it then?" Hamuko wondered.

{Correct. It'll activate once you step on it and the others will be teleported along with you. I'll see you back at the entrance.}

As soon as Mitsuru's voice disappeared, Minato and Hamuko both turned to face each other.

"Did it happen to you too?" Minato asked.

"After that last battle? Yeah." Hamuko nodded solemnly. "It felt like... like there was something in front of me, and when I reached out for it...!"

"A Persona card." Minato confirmed, holding his Evoker to his head and pulling the trigger. Instead of Orpheus, a woman with blue skin and robes was summoned instead. "Apsaras..."

"Hey, that's different than what I got." Hamuko said, pulling the trigger and summoning a small fairy instead. "I got Pixie."

"This is what Igor must've meant when he said the faces of possibility would appear before us after battle, and how we had to reach out and grasp them." Minato said thoughtfully. "It was like the card appeared in my mind."

"Same here. And that bit he said about our Persona being

masks that protect us from hardship makes more sense after Mitsuru explained about how our Persona protect us." Hamuko smiled. She bounced slightly on her heels in excitement. "Fufu... just wait until the others find out we can use Persona other than our own!"

"That'll have to wait." Minato said as he stepped onto the Access Point. "Let's just get out of here for now."

The node teleported the both of them faster than Hamuko could even blink. One second she and Minato were standing in the Tartarus corridor and the next they were back in the lobby. Like Mitsuru had said, both Junpei and Yukari had been brought with them. Hamuko glanced backwards at the glowing green mechanism they stood in front of. She wondered if that's where all the nodes connected to.

"Weird..." Hamuko mumbled.

"I'll say..." Junpei agreed with a startled expression. "One moment me and Yuka-tan were running around the halls and then the next we were standing here! Still, those Access Points or whatever sure come in handy..."

The group stepped away from the teleportation module and approached Mitsuru and Akihiko who were standing by the stairs just as they had been before Hamuko and the others had left.

"Welcome back." Mitsuru greeted them with a smile. "So, how

was it?"

"It wasn't bad." Minato answered her with a shrug.

"No problem at all!" Hamuko put in her own opinion.

"I see. Well, if you gained confidence that's the best thing you could have achieved." Mitsuru said approvingly.

"It's so crazy though... I never knew I could use power like that before!" Junpei smirked. "We kicked some ass!"

"We sure did!" Hamuko cheered, high-fiving Junpei when he raised his hand towards her. "Doesn't matter who our enemies are, no Shadows will be able to stand against us!"

"Yeah!" Junpei laughed before settling down. He suddenly heaved a big sigh. "But damn... I'm pretty beat."

"That's because you were bouncing around like a kid." Yukari told him before sighing herself. "But to be honest, I'm feeling a little tired myself..."

"That's to be expected." Mitsuru said. "Using your Persona does take energy, and you do become a little more fatigued than you normally would in the Dark Hour."

"Really? I actually wouldn't mind exploring a bit more." Hamuko said.

Mitsuru chuckled a bit at that. "Yes, well, they haven't had ten years to get used to the Dark Hour, unlike you and Arisato."

She turned towards Minato and gave a nod approvingly at him. "Despite protesting before, you did a very good job leading them. I trust you won't object to leading missions in the future?"

Minato sighed a bit before accepting it for what it was. He still didn't think of himself as a leader, nor was he fond of the idea of leading until Akihiko recovered or Mitsuru decided to join them, but he figured there was no point in arguing about it anymore.

"I'm fine with it." Minato replied. He ignored Junpei's grunt of dissatisfaction when he answered.

"I'm happy to hear that." Mitsuru smiled. She turned to the group as a whole. "You all did very well for your first night and performed much better than expected. Keep it up, and you'll catch up to Akihiko and myself in no time."

"Heh, we'll see about that." Akihiko smirked, apparently taking Mitsuru's comment as a challenge of some sort.

"We'll return at a later date." Mitsuru told them all. "Let's head back to the dorm. I assume you all must be fairly tired now."

"Ah... crawling into bed sounds so nice right now." Yukari said wistfully.

"I'll get used to the Dark Hour and no time. We'll get to the top of the tower before the end of the month!" Junpei proclaimed.

"That might be expecting too much..."

Hamuko giggled as they exited Tartarus. She nudged Minato in the side as she watched everyone talk about their successful first night exploring the tower.

"It's kinda exciting, huh? All this stuff about the Dark Hour and Tartarus," Hamuko smiled at Minato. "Don't you think so?"

"...Mm."

"At least try to sound enthusiastic..." Hamuko pouted.

"I'm tired, sue me." Minato retorted before glancing up at the night sky. "...But you're right. Things will definitely be interesting from here on out, being a part of SEES..."

SMASH

Hamuko and Minato both jumped when they heard glass breaking within their minds.

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

"Minato-kun..."

"I know." Minato whispered silently to her, confirming that they were both hearing that familiar and mysterious voice ringing in their heads.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Judgment Arcana...

The voice faded from their minds. Hamuko and Minato continued to walk together in silence for a few moments before Hamuko gave her teammate a playful grin.

"Just another thing to get used to, huh?"

In spite of himself, Minato smirked in response to that.

A/N: An so ends their first brief adventure in Tartarus. There is so much more to come. I extend my thanks to The Infamous Man for betaing this for me before the upload.

I hope this chapter gave readers an idea about how battles will be depicted in this story and how Persona abilities work as well. I felt that technicalities needed to be explained to add a little more meat to what the game gives us. Exposition, exposition. It's all important.

Anyway, feedback is much appreciated as always. I'm ready and willing to receive it. Hope those satisfied with the chapter decide to stick around for more. I wish you all happy days.

Kiiam

6. Chapter 5: Bonds

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Next chapter up. Still getting through the beginning bits of the game. That means exposition. Of course, development of the protagonists and introduction of more Social Links is fun too. Hope you all enjoy the chapter.

Chapter 5: Bonds

"Hm~hm~! I can't believe all the stuff that's happened in the past couple days!" Hamuko chirped, smiling from ear to ear. "High schooler during the day, Shadow slayer at night! I could barely sleep last night I was so excited!"

"...I don't know why you're telling me this." Minato deadpanned from a few steps in front of the girl.

Somehow they had ended up on the same train despite Minato's efforts to avoid it. Now he had to deal with an early morning of the upbeat girl talking his ear off...

"Don't be so cold! We're in this together, aren't we? Partner?"

"Don't call me that."

"Why not? That's what we are, right? Two transfer students, two Wild Cards, two individuals who share the same tastes in music, even down to the mp3 players and headphone brand." Hamuko grinned, comparing her headphones and mp3 player to Minato's. They mirrored each other, save for the color. Hamuko sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "But fine, if you don't like the nickname I'll just stick with leader."

"You can just stick with my name."

"Aw, that's no fun... but if you insist, Minato."

"...No honorific?"

"After everything that's happened, formality would sound distant, which we are not! Accept it or I go back to the nicknaming."

"You get attached easily, don't you?" Minato sighed tiredly.

"Just expressing my faith in you, leader~!" Hamuko giggled.

Minato grumbled to himself, regretting his accepting the position now more than ever. He was grateful that one of the things he didn't share with his fellow Velvet Room guest was homeroom. At least that would give him an opportunity to escape and have some time to himself...

"You two seem to be getting along well."

"Is that how it looks?" Minato found himself answering the voice. "You have something wrong with your eyes."

Hamuko didn't respond to Minato's jab, only glaring at him for a moment before turning and greeting the person who had spoken to them. "Good morning, Senpai!"

"Morning." Akihiko returned the greeting as he smiled at the two transfer students. He glanced at Minato then at Hamuko before speaking again. "You two doing okay? I mean, you just transferred in and things happened pretty fast..."

"You don't need to worry about us, Senpai. Minato and I can handle ourselves just fine." Hamuko smiled.

"I'll bet. You two fought pretty well yesterday." Akihiko complimented them before turning toward Minato. "Hey, I wish I could say I can take over your position from here on out... but I can't." Akihiko frowned disdainfully at his broken arm. "This thing... for as long as it's broken I can't do anything. I've never been so bored in my life..."

"Just focus on getting it healed up." Minato replied. "I don't mind being leader for a little longer if it keeps your injuries from getting worse."

"Thanks, but that doesn't mean I'm not sorry about it." Akihiko smiled. He fell into place alongside Minato and Hamuko as they walked towards the school. "Say, did you guys know there's an assembly today?"

"Another one? What for?" Hamuko asked.

"Just some announcement regarding clubs and classes, I

think. I know Mitsuru will be giving a speech though."

"Is that so...?"

"...And that concludes that main portion of today's assembly. Next, we'll hear a word from the Student Council." The student standing behind the podium on stage announced to the mass of students before her. "Please welcome our new President, Mitsuru Kirijo, from Class 3-D."

Hamuko joined the other students in polite applause as Mitsuru stepped onto the stage, taking the place of the other student who smiled and bowed to the red haired girl before stepping down.

"So, she did get elected." Yukari commented idly from beside Hamuko.

"Did elections just get done recently?" Hamuko asked as the applause began to die down.

"They ended a little after you and Minato transferred in and they announced the results of the election during the week you two were in the hospital." Yukari told her. "She won by a landslide too. She's athletic, smart, popular, has the respect of every teacher in school... it's no wonder she got elected."

"Right?" Junpei nodded in agreement from the seat in front of Hamuko. "She's got like, this aura around her or something that makes you wanna respect her. A lot of people look up to

her."

Hamuko could see what Junpei meant by the aura. Mitsuru definitely had a presence that most people seemed to lack. The way she composed herself and the way she talked was just regal and elegant, and not many people could present themselves so flawlessly. It was really something.

"This school is owned by the Kirijo Group, right?" Hamuko asked. "Maybe it was just how she was brought up..."

Anything response Yukari or Junpei might've had to that was cut off when Mitsuru began to speak.

"As I begin my term as Student Council President, I'd like to share with you all my vision for this coming year. It is my firm belief that each of us must accept the responsibility of bettering our school." Mitsuru spoke with passion as her voice carried throughout the auditorium. Hamuko found herself in awe. "However, change cannot occur without sustained effort and an unprecedented level of commitment. That is why we must restructure our daily lives to accommodate this lofty goal. I'd like each of you to dig deeply into your well of motivation, and re-evaluate your convictions, to imagine a bold new future without losing sight of the realities around you. That is the key. I am certain that many of you have your own visions of the future. For us to reap the full benefits of our education, your participation, ideas, and enthusiasm are essential." Mitsuru's eyes scanned the audience before she gave a beautiful smile, inclining her head slightly as her speech ended. "Thank you."

The applause that followed was not half-hearted or done as an obligation. Every student who listened to her speech was genuinely cheering, encouraged by their Student Council President's words. It said a lot about a speech that was actually taken to heart, when most students only half paid attention to most school assemblies. It also said a great deal about the person giving the speech, who could successfully reach out to those listening.

"Wow... that was amazing...!" Hamuko whispered. "I really feel like I don't want to let her down, you know?"

"She's got a talent for it. No wonder she was chosen to be President." Yukari said.

"Yeah... that speech was definitely something no normal high schooler could give." Junpei nodded hesitantly before looking back at them. "Say, did either of you two understand what she was talking about?"

"You mean you weren't paying attention?" Yukari asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"I-It's not that! I... just didn't get a few things she said..."

"In a nutshell, she just told us to do our best in school this year." Hamuko smiled.

"Really, is that it? Huh... don't really see the point in making a speech out of it in that case..."

"Honestly, were you even listening...?" Yukari said tiredly.

"Hey, I said I listened! At least I didn't fall asleep like some other guys!"

"Please, you think anyone would actually-"

"You, Arisato! Wake up this instant!" Ekoda's voice rang out from a few rows behind them. "I won't have one of my students sleeping during an assembly!"

Hamuko, Yukari and Junpei glanced backwards before giving each other exasperated looks, though Junpei looked a little amused.

"...He's such rebel, huh?"

Yukari rolled her eyes while Hamuko giggled at Junpei's comment.

"Hey there, sleepyhead! Enjoy the assembly today?"

Minato sighed and closed his shoe locker before turning towards Hamuko and Junpei, who were both giving him cheeky smiles.

"So, what did Ekoda do to punish you?" Junpei asked excitedly. "Clean the chalkboards? Mop the hallways? Maybe organize the books in the library?"

"I was given a warning since I just transferred in."

"Whaaaaat? Dude, that's so not fair! He punished me for the same thing during my first week here as a freshman!"

"Sorry for disappointing you." Minato said, rolling his eyes at the boy's complaints.

"Minato's lucky, isn't he?" Hamuko grinned. "Anyway, since we're all here we can walk back to the dorm together. Let's go!"

Junpei snapped out of his depressed state and quickly followed after Hamuko. Minato sighed again and followed them out the door. He winced when a multitude of screeching voices pierced his eardrums even through his headphones. He glanced towards the entrance gate where a crowd of girls had gathered. He could barely make out the head of silver hair peeking out from just beyond the mass of squealing high school girls. Akihiko stepped away from the crowd of girls, looking vaguely relieved when he caught sight of the three fellow members of SEES. Breaking away from his fangirls, the older boy jogged over to the three of them despite their protests.

"Hey, Akihiko-senpai!"

"Please wait!"

"Don't go!"

"Wow, just look at those piranhas swarm." Hamuko whispered, earning a chuckle from Junpei. "Does this happen

a lot?"

"Oh yeah. He's pretty popular since he's captain of the boxing team. Girls follow him around all the time trying to ask him out on dates." Junpei sighed as he looked longingly at the crowd. "What I wouldn't give to be in his shoes right now..."

Hamuko giggled while Minato just rolled his eyes at the comment.

"Hey, are you guys free right now?" Akihiko asked the trio when he finally reached them, sounding a little desperate.

"No plans for the moment, though we were all gonna head back to the dorm together. Why?" Hamuko asked.

"Well, would you guys mind coming to Paulownia Mall with me for a bit? There's something I'd like to show you."

Junpei answered before Hamuko and Minato had a chance to.

"You bet! We can totally come with you, Senpai!" Junpei grinned. "Let's get going!"

"You're pretty enthusiastic about this..." Akihiko noted with a confused look. "Well, whatever. Let's get going."

Minato and Hamuko followed after Akihiko as he turned to leave, causing Junpei to frown when they stepped right past the flock of girls.

"H-Hey Senpai, aren't your friends coming along with us?"

"Who, those girls?" Akihiko gave an annoyed frown. "I don't even know their names. They're always talking so much it gives me a headache..."

"I know the feeling." Minato said sympathetically.

"That comment wasn't directed at me, was it?" Hamuko asked dangerously.

"That's just your imagination." Minato replied evenly.

So the four SEES members headed to the mall, ignoring the mewling of the girls that were left behind and the whining of Junpei who wished they had come along.

"Why the police station? Did you get a ticket or something?"

Minato and Hamuko shared Junpei's confusion as they stood in front of Paulownia Mall's police station. Akihiko shook his head in the negative as they stepped inside the building.

"No. There's actually someone I wanted you all to meet." Akihiko said, raising his hand toward someone in greeting. "Hey, sorry for barging in like this. I wanted to introduce you to the guys I talked about yesterday."

From behind the counter, a police officer got up from his seat and stared at the assembled party. He was a tall man who had a solemn look on his face, though the slight shadows cast over his eyes by his officer's cap coupled with knitted

eyebrows and the seemingly permanent scowl made him seem quite intimidating. The man didn't respond to Akihiko's greeting, Junpei's audible gulp could be heard in the silence.

"This is Officer Kurosawa." Akihiko introduced the man who continued to remain silent. "He's the one who helps keep our squad well-equipped."

"So you didn't just have swords and lances lying around the dorm because you found them? You bought them from Kurosawa-san?" Minato asked.

"That's right." Akihiko nodded.

Minato looked past his senpai to give the officer a flat look. A police man giving weapons to teenagers? Where did he even get them?

"Don't ask, I have connections." Kurosawa spoke up, surprising Minato by answering the question he hadn't asked. "And I've talked with Kirijo-san and Ikutsuki-san before. I may be an ordinary police officer, but lately with all these people succumbing to the Apathy Syndrome along with strange events here and there... something is going on in the city, and I won't stand by doing nothing. It's my job to maintain peace, no matter the circumstances. I'm only doing what I think is right."

Minato gave a slow nod in response to that. The man's reasons were logical, and he couldn't fault him for what he was doing. After all, they were the one's benefitting from it.

"Don't let anyone know that Kurosawa is helping us or what he's selling. This has to be kept between us and him, understand?"

"My lips are sealed." Hamuko promised.

"Yeah, I won't tell anyone." Junpei nodded. Minato gave his own promise that he wouldn't speak of their business to anyone.

"Understand that while I might be willing to act, those above me might not agree with my doing so. Kirijo-san asked me to keep quiet about our dealings when she spoke with me, but the higher-ups wouldn't take it too well if they found out. You understand that I'm risking my job by helping all of you." Kurosawa said solemnly. "I'm giving SEES my trust, but if I feel that it's been misplaced and I find any of you a danger..."

"We won't give you any reason to arrest us." Minato cut in. "We appreciate you helping us."

"...Glad to hear it."

"Kurosawa-san helps us even if he doesn't know all the facts, and we're grateful for that. Don't cause him any trouble." Akihiko gave his own warning to the new members, who nodded obediently in response. The boxer smiled and withdrew some yen notes from his pocket, surprising the younger trio when he handed each of them 5,000 yen. "Just something from Ikutsuki to help buy yourselves some supplies."

"Wait, we have to pay for our equipment?" Junpei asked.

"Of course. Nothing in life is free." Kurosawa said, glaring at Junpei. "I have to pay my contacts to get those weapons and then I deliver them to the dorm. I can't use the department's funds for this, so it's up to you to provide money for the payments."

"Sounds fair." Hamuko said.

"I guess. But where are we supposed to get money?" Junpei asked as he looked over the catalog of weapons the policeman had given him. Some of the stuff looked pretty expensive...

"Get a job." Kurosawa bluntly suggested.

"I think we're fine with the weapons we have now." Minato said as he pocketed the yen he'd been given. "We'll come back when we've got more cash to burn."

"Suit yourself. Be sure to let me know if there are any disturbances in the area." Kurosawa said.

"We will." Akihiko said. "Thanks again."

The four high schoolers exited the police station. Hamuko smiled to herself as she glanced back at the station.

"He's a little scary, but I like him." Hamuko gave her opinion on the man.

"We're lucky to know him and that he's willing to help us out."
Akihiko smiled.

"How did you meet him?" Minato asked.

"He helped me out with something a while back. Trust me, he's someone we can count on." Akihiko assured them. He checked his watch before stepping away from them.

"Anyway, I gotta get going. There's a sale on protein at the store today and I don't wanna miss it. See you guys back at the dorm."

"Protein...?" Hamuko asked confusedly. Akihiko was gone before he could elaborate on the statement.

"Psh... only five thousand..." Junpei grumbled to himself. "You see some of that stuff in the catalog? This isn't enough for anything good."

"Even so, are you complaining about Ikutsuki giving you money?" Minato asked, arching an eyebrow. Junpei grunted something unintelligible under his breath.

"Maybe if we pool our money together we can buy something next time." Hamuko suggested.

"Maybe... anyway, I'm gonna hang around for a little while longer." Junpei said. "See you guys when I get back."

Minato and Hamuko stared after him as he headed towards the arcade. Minato sighed while Hamuko chuckled a bit to

herself.

"He's going to blow half of his money playing arcade games." Minato stated rather than asked.

"Only half of it?" Hamuko giggled. "Wanna head home now?"

Minato nodded. It wasn't like there was anything else to do at the mall.

"...Or so I assumed."

"What are you mumbling to yourself?"

Minato sighed to himself as he sat across from Hamuko at the table one of the waitresses at Chagall Café had seated them at. One minute he thought they were heading towards the mall's exit and before he knew it he was somehow in front of the café with Hamuko dragging him inside.

"Nothing." Minato sighed, deciding there was no use fighting it at this point. "Why are we here?"

"I thought we could get something to eat before heading back to the dorm. I know Ikutsuki-san gave us that money for supplies, but it won't hurt us to spend a little of it here. Yukari took me here when she showed me around the mall for the first time and this place makes the best coffee." Hamuko smiled, lifting her cup of coffee to her lips and taking a sip. She hummed in contentment as she savored the taste. "Mm..."

you want a sip?"

"No thanks."

"You sure? This is Chagall's own special blend, named 'Pheromone Coffee'. Just take a few sips and it's guaranteed to increase your charm." Hamuko took another sip before setting her cup down. She raised her fingers up in a peace sign and gave Minato a flirtatious wink. "How's it working? Feeling charmed at all?"

Minato gave her a look so flat he might've appeared two dimensional to anyone looking. Hamuko puffed up her cheeks and turned away from the unresponsive boy.

"You're no fun..."

"Sorry if I'm not entertaining company." Minato replied, biting into the sandwich he had ordered. He took a few more bites of out of his meal before Hamuko's staring got the better of him. "...What?"

"I get the impression that you're kind of a downer." Hamuko said as she scrutinized him.

"Really? My warm and sunny personality didn't win you over?"

"The sarcasm is not needed." Hamuko frowned. She leaned forward in her seat, getting right in Minato's face. "I brought you here because I thought it would give us a chance to talk and get to know each other more. We're attending the same

high school, living in the same dorm, and will be fighting Shadows side by side for who knows how long. I'm trying to be friendly. I don't like the rude responses. If I'm bothering you, let me know, but I'd appreciate it if you'd at least meet me halfway, Minato."

Minato's eyebrows went up at how confrontational she had suddenly gotten. The good humor and airy demeanor of hers had evaporated and now she actually looked serious.

"...I get the impression that you're a direct sort of person." Minato said with a small smile.

Hamuko's grin returned.

"I don't tend to dance around. I'm all about direct confrontation." Hamuko leaned back at sat in her seat. She sighed and grabbed her coffee cup again, tapping the side of it with her finger as she adopted a more sheepish expression. "I mean, if I'm bothering you just tell me, but I'd like it if we could be friends..."

Minato stared at her, mildly surprised how she had gone from blunt to withdrawn so quickly. He went over a number of responses in his head, trying to decide how he would respond.

"...Look, it's not that you're bothering me or anything, I'm just not used to talking with others." Minato confessed with a sigh.

"What do you mean? Did you live most of your life as a shut in

or something?"

"No, nothing like that..." Minato shook his head. "It's just that I've just been tossed around so often I haven't ever had the chance to make lasting connections with anyone."

"Er, 'tossed around'...? What do you mean?" Hamuko asked, puzzled by the phrase.

"You remember what I told you back at the hospital, right? About my parents dying in an accident when I was little?"

Minato asked. Hamuko gave a slow nod in response to that.

"Well, I've actually got a pretty big family. My mom grew up in a house with four other siblings and my dad had two sisters with their own families and after they died I was handed off to one of them."

Minato leaned back in his seat and stared up at the ceiling for moment before turning back towards Hamuko, who listened intently with a solemn expression on her face.

"Thing is, my parents obviously didn't expect to die young since all they had was a skeleton of a will that left me with plenty of money and enough benefits to get by. Half of it was for my education. The only reason I was kept from being sent to an orphanage was because my relatives felt they had an obligation to my parents to take care of me. It didn't go beyond that."

"Didn't go beyond what?"

"I mean it didn't go beyond that sense of obligation." Minato elaborated. "After taking me in, my relatives made sure I was well fed and that I went to school but didn't know how to deal with me, so they just left me alone. I never felt accepted. I was just an addition nobody expected, and somehow this system of passing me around to different members of the family had been created so I was never in one spot for very long. First I was in Kyoto with my father's older sister for about six months, then with his younger sister for three. I spent eight months with my mother's brother and his family in Hokkaido before spending another six with a different brother in Osaka. The longest I ever stayed in one place was in Saitama with my father's mother for a little over a year and a half before she died."

"So... you never made any friends at the places you stayed?" Hamuko asked.

"I did at first. But after the first couple moves I didn't see the point anymore. I would occasionally get calls from the people I exchanged numbers with, but those were obligations too." Minato said in a dry tone. "You can tell someone that you'll keep in touch and promise to text and call as often as you can, meet up sometime or whatever... but there's no point when no one puts in the effort. The people at the schools I went to didn't feel the need, and neither did I. With how much I moved around it would've been impossible anyway."

Hamuko listened to all of this silently, not sure what to say. She had gotten a similar vibe when they talked back at the hospital but that distant tone in his voice was so much more

pronounced now than it was then. He didn't even refer to his relatives as his uncles, aunts, or grandparents. He just said things like "his mother's brother" or "his father's mother", like they were just people he knew and not his family.

It was... actually really lonely.

"Assuming I spend the rest of high school living at the dorm, it'll be the longest time I've spent in one place since my parents died." Minato said.

"Is that why you came here and signed up to live in the dorms? So you could stay in one place?" Hamuko asked.

"Maybe." Minato shrugged like he didn't know the answer himself. "I just read about the school in a catalog while I was planning what school to transfer into and noticed they had dorms available. I considered school dorming before, and I figured I was old enough to try it. Nobody raised any objections when I told them my plans, so I went ahead and got the papers filled out. I packed my bags, took a train, arrived here. There's not much more to the story than that." Minato paused for a moment before a small chuckle escaped past his lips. "Or maybe I really was tired of all my constant moving around when I thought I had gotten used to it. The fact that Iwatodai City is both my hometown and where my parents died might've helped my decision too."

"Wait, so you're originally from Iwatodai?" Hamuko asked, surprised.

"Yeah. Gotta say, it's been one hell of a homecoming so far." Minato remarked dryly. "Shadows, Personas, Tartarus... maybe I should've just stuck with my relatives."

The two of them sat in silence for a few moments. Hamuko gently tapped her mug with her fingernails while Minato stared down at nothing. Finally, Minato turned his head upwards to smirk at Hamuko.

"So, satisfied? Feel like you've gotten to know me a little better?" Minato asked.

He blinked when Hamuko suddenly beamed at him.

"Yep! At least for now. We've got plenty of time to get to know each other better if you choose to stick around!"

Hamuko grinned. "I'm glad you're not some whiny brat looking for someone's sympathy. You're just a loner who's forgotten how to be social! Friendship is the perfect remedy for that!"

"...You're an overwhelmingly positive person, aren't you?"

"You're a little slow if you haven't figured that out already."

Hamuko smirked. She grasped onto Minato's hand as she smiled at him. "Doesn't it feel good to vent about these things sometimes? I just want to let you know I'll be willing to listen if there's ever something you need to talk about. School, Shadows, complaints, personal stuff, I'm all ears! It's what friends are for, after all!"

Minato quietly withdrew his hand from the girl as he continued

to stare at her. He could've laughed, brushed her off, insulted her or just gone back to eating. He did none of those things.

"I'll keep that in mind." Minato replied instead, keeping a straight face.

"Glad to hear it." Hamuko smiled.

SMASH

Hamuko jumped when she heard the sound that was becoming increasingly familiar, followed by a voice that was also familiar.

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

"Geez, I wonder how long it'll take me to get used to that." Hamuko grumbled to herself.

Minato gave her an odd look. "Get used to what?"

Hamuko blinked confusedly.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou choolest to create a Persona of the Fool Arcana...

"You know, the voices!" Hamuko replied. Minato arched an eyebrow at her. "The sound of glass breaking, the creepy voices that talk weirdly about blessings and arcana and stuff? You said you could hear them too!"

"I'm not hearing them right now..." Minato said slowly. "...Do

you hear them?"

"Er... yeah, I think. It mentioned the Fool Arcana instead of Judgment though..." Hamuko said uncertainly, afraid that something was wrong if Minato wasn't hearing the same voices she was this time.

"...We'll ask about it when we visit the Velvet Room again." Minato assured her when she began to look frantic. "These... Social Links are going to probably be a regular thing, so we should get a little more concrete information about them."

"Yeah." Hamuko nodded, taking a deep breath to calm herself down. Another sip from her delicious Pheromone Coffee assuaged her nerves. "Mm~! You really should try this! You could stand to be a little more charming, Minato!"

"I'll pass, thanks."

Night had fallen and the Dark Hour came as per usual, and after letting Junpei and Yukari know of his and Hamuko's plan to visit Tartarus, Minato had notified Mitsuru and they had all taken their second trip to the tower. Even though they had taken their first trip to the tower only a day before, Mitsuru had complimented his decision, noting his dedication to exploring the tower and Junpei had also been gung ho about going again. Yukari had just accepted it with a shrug, though she did look a little excited about it. Still, exploring the tower wasn't the primary reason for going. Seeking to better understand Social Links for themselves, Minato and Hamuko

had excused themselves for a moment upon arriving in the lobby of Tartarus and headed for the Velvet Room door. Upon entering, they were given a much more detailed explanation about Social Links.

"I see..." Hamuko nodded in understanding as Igor finished explaining the concept of Social Links in greater detail.

"So these 'Social Link' things, these voices in our head... they represent our bond with others? Like... how close of friends we are with someone?" Minato clarified.

"That is a rather simple way of putting it, but yes. You are correct."

"Well, simple is understandable." Minato said, narrowing his eyes at the old man who did not know how to frown.

"Mentioning 'Social Links' once or twice in our first few visits didn't really give us a chance to memorize all the details... or warn us about the voices in our heads."

Igor only chuckled in response to that.

"So then that 'Fool' Social Link is my bond with Minato? The representation of my friendship with him?" Hamuko asked.

"Precisely." Igor nodded. "Your bond grows stronger the more time you spend with one another. Knowing and trusting one another is an important factor of friendship, wouldn't you agree? Didn't you feel closer to Minato after talking with him today?"

"Yeah, I mean I... wait, if my Social Link with him grew stronger from talking with him, why didn't his?" Hamuko asked, remembering that she had been the only one to hear the voices at the café. She turned towards Minato. "You have a 'Fool' link with me, don't you?"

"Yes, well... you might feel closer to him, but does he feel the same towards you?"

"That's..." Hamuko paused and thought about that for a minute. She peered over at Minato, who looked as impassive as ever. "Minato...?"

The boy seemed to shift uneasily at the wide-eyed, accusatory look she was giving him. He turned away from her before answering.

"Just because I share one detail about my life doesn't make us best friends, Hamuko." Minato replied evenly. "You don't just become friends after talking with someone a few times."

"Why not?"

"We met barely over a week ago. And we were asleep for most of it!"

"Hmph!" Hamuko pouted and turned away from him. "I can't believe you hate me this much!"

"I never said... ugh."

Minato and Hamuko's argument was interrupted when they

noticed all three residents of the Velvet Room were laughing at them. Hamuko slowly began to laugh along with them while Minato just sighed tiredly.

"Are we that entertaining to you?" Minato deadpanned.

"Well, you two have quite the dynamic." Elizabeth giggled.

"Please, don't be offended. We are happy to have such lively guests." Theodore smiled gently.

"There is no need to worry about this." Igor smiled. "Your Social Links will evolve given time, and you will form new bonds with those around you. However, it will be your choice whether or not you wish to form links with others, and you must nurture these bonds if you wish for them to grow. Even without them you two are capable of wielding great power, but with them, your potential will be almost limitless."

"Making friends gives us super strength, huh..." Hamuko noted thoughtfully to herself before beaming. "Well, I don't really get all of it, but I was going to make new friends even if you didn't tell me to! It'll be kinda weird hearing those voices every time I talk with someone though..."

"It's nothing like that. Social Links will take time to grow and you won't hear them every time you chat with a friend." Igor smiled. "And the voices will fade given time, and also after you have forged unbreakable bonds with those around you."

"...I think that's all then." Minato sighed as he sat up from his

chair. "At least we know now."

"Feel free to visit again if you have any other questions. I will be happy to answer them if it is within my power." Igor smiled.

"I bid you two a good day." Theo smiled before chuckling to himself. "Or rather, good night, I should say..."

"We look forward to seeing you again." Elizabeth added before Minato and Hamuko disappeared beyond the blue door and back into the real world.

"Junpei, watch out!"

The boy's eyes widened and he jumped away just in time before the large, bird-shaped Shadow slashed where he had been standing with its talons. Hamuko held her Evoker to her head and pulled the trigger.

"Forneus!"

A manta ray wearing a crown appeared above Hamuko's head and shoot forward, slamming into the swooping bird. The shadow cawed loudly Hamuko's Persona crashed into it. It screeched when Yukari's arrow struck it right in the mask, bringing it down to the ground. Its body dispersed into black ink and smoke as it crashed the floor. Junpei whooped after they had finished off the enemy.

"Alright! Nice shot, Yuka-tan!"

"I guess. It was more luck than anything."

"Don't be so modest!" Hamuko grinned at the girl. "You're skilled enough to get a flying Shadow right between the eyes of its mask! Be proud!"

"If you say so." Yukari giggled in response to the praise.

"Omoikane!"

The trio was interrupted when they heard their leader's voice over their praise of Yukari. They saw Minato's Persona shoot a bolt of lightning at another of the same Shadow they had just finished off to ward it off.

"Congratulate each other later!" Minato called over to them exasperatedly, avoiding the bird as it tried to rake its talons across his face. "Help me finish this one off...!"

Hamuko, Yukari and Junpei quickly rushed to his aid, embarrassed that they had forgotten there had been three birds on the floor. They had taken down the first one in a simultaneous attack with their Persona, while they had broken off in an attempt to separate the two remaining Shadow birds, which had been successful. Now that there was only one left, they could finish it off together. Yukari notched another arrow to her bow, letting it fly and piercing the bird's right wing. The Shadow cawed and tumbled to the ground, though it didn't disappear.

"Rush it!" Minato shouted.

The four Persona users all raced forward, swinging their weapons and stamping their feet down onto the immobile Shadow. It could do nothing to defend itself against the onslaught. Its body was cut and stomped into nothing, its remaining dissipating into the air.

{Nicely done.} Mitsuru's voice echoed through their headsets.
{That's all the Shadows on this floor.}

"Good work team!" Hamuko smiled as they regrouped. "They were a little tougher than the others, but we showed them, didn't we?"

"Yeah..." Junpei nodded slowly as his gaze switched from Minato to Hamuko. Minato arched an eyebrow at the boy.

"What?" Minato said, making Junpei jump. "If you have something to say, say it."

Junpei seemed to hesitate for a moment before glaring at both Minato and Hamuko and pointing an accusing finger at the both of them.

"How come you guys can use multiple Personas?" Junpei demanded. "I can only use one! Same with Yuka-tan! How come you guys are different?"

"It's not really a big deal, is it?" Hamuko asked, only for Junpei to frown at her.

"Not a big deal you say... come on, it's not natural!" Junpei

whined. "Can you use multiple Persona, Senpai?"

{No, I cannot.} Mitsuru answered. {I'll admit, I was surprised when they began using Persona different from Orpheus... and many different ones at that. I'm quite curious as to why you two have such a unique ability. Possessing multiple Personas is something I've never seen...}

"Don't worry about the trivial things." Hamuko smiled, seemingly brushing the matter under the rug. "Why complain about it when it could help us fight more efficiently? Persona have different abilities and powers, so this will help us!"

"Can't argue with that." Yukari said, glancing at Junpei and giving him a teasing smile. "Don't be mad because you're jealous, Junpei."

"I-I ain't jealous!" Junpei sputtered defensively before sighing. "It's just... I wanna know why you guys can do that..."

"We don't know why we can use multiple Personas, only that we can." Minato lied, intent on not giving any details regarding the Velvet Room or his and Hamuko's Wild Card ability. "It's useful. We shouldn't waste time worrying about it."

{You're quite practical, Arisato.} Mitsuru chuckled lightly. {While I'm curious, I'm willing to leave the matter alone since it only benefits us... and because we have no clues to explain it. Now, you've all made good progress for one night. Why not take a break and wait for another day?}

"No arguments here." Minato replied before turning towards the other three. "What about you guys?"

"That's fine with me." Yukari answered.

"Same here." Hamuko smiled.

"...Ah, who cares if they can use more than one." Junpei muttered, not paying attention. "Hermes is better than all of 'em combined! I don't need any Persona but him!"

"Junpei..." Hamuko frowned, making the boy blink when he gave her a depressed look. "Are you really that angry at us because we can use more Persona?"

Junpei began to sweat when Hamuko's eyes turned glassy.

"You... you don't hate me because of my talent, do you...?"

"Ah! No, no, no! Not at all, Hamu-tan!" Junpei laughed boisterously, waving his hands as he quickly backpedalled. "I think it's great! You guys are definitely something else! Don't worry about I said before, okay? I'm happy for you guys! Honest! A-Ahahahaha!"

"Smooth." Yukari murmured flatly, earning a chuckle from Minato who overheard the quiet comment. The girl sighed and shook her head. "He's too easy..."

"At least it'll keep him quiet about the issue for now." Minato commented as they stepped over to a node. "Ready to go?"

"Ready to go to sleep, more like." Yukari said as she stretched. "Running around in this place really tires you out."

Minato smiled a bit as he activated the node.

"You'll get used to it."

Hamuko stretched in her seat as the bell signaled the end of classes for the day. The girl quickly gathered her things up and was about to pop in her headphones before she heard a voice from behind her called her name, with the pronunciation giving away who was speaking to her.

"Yo, Hamu-tan!"

"Junpei." Hamuko smiled at the boy who greeted her. "Did you need something?"

"Not really. I was just wondering if you wanted to hang out with me for a bit after school." Junpei smiled.

"Huu... asking for dates already, are we?"

"It's nothing like that." Junpei grinned. "I just know this place that sells good food and I wanted to show you. It'll be my treat."

"Sound generous." Hamuko smiled, tapping her finger against her cheek in thought as she gave her companion a coy look. "And you have no ulterior motives at all, hm...?"

"C'mon, give me a little credit..." Junpei complained. He rubbed his neck and turned away from the girl. "Actually, I kinda wanted to make up for the way I acted last night. I said things that I probably shouldn't have, and I was hoping that if I fed you you'd forgive me."

"You get points for honesty." Hamuko smiled as she got up. "And you don't need to worry about that. I was never mad at you so there's nothing to forgive."

"My offer still stands." Junpei smiled back. "So yes or no, would you like me to treat you?"

"I don't see why not." Hamuko grinned.

"Sweet! Let's go then!"

Hagakure Ramen was a small restaurant in the Iwatodai Strip Mall complex that had gotten quite the reputation for its special Hagakure Bowl. It was popular amongst the students who would frequent the mall, and upon entering the shop Hamuko could already spot several other customers that wore Gekkoukan's uniform sitting at the tables and booths. She and Junpei took seats at the counter as Junpei waved a chef over.

"We'll have two specials over here!" Junpei told the chef enthusiastically. The old man nodded in response.

"You got it, kid. Coming right up!"

"The special, huh? You sure?" Hamuko asked.

"Don't worry about it. Like I said, it's my treat. All you have to do is enjoy the food." Junpei grinned.

"If you say so. It's a shame Minato couldn't come along." Hamuko said. The boy had already left by the time their class was out. He'd probably already headed back to the dorm.

"Whatever." Junpei gave a careless shrug at that. "I wouldn't have paid for his anyway."

Hamuko frowned a little at that response. She wondered if Junpei was still sore about the leader thing. "Be nice to him. Don't forget he's a transfer like you and me, and you were a little rude to him too."

"Yeah, yeah..."

They didn't have to wait long for their food to arrive. Hamuko stared down at bowl, the scent wafting off from the combination of soup, noodles and other ingredients making her drool and her stomach growl loudly. Junpei chuckled from beside her as he grabbed some chopsticks.

"Well, don't just stare at it. Dig in."

Hamuko didn't need to be told twice. She took her own chopsticks, muttering a brief prayer of thanks before slurping up the noodles. Her taste buds sang as the soup and noodles blended together. It was like nothing she had ever tasted

before.

"This is delicious!" Hamuko beamed, sighing contentedly before digging into her meal with renewed vigor.

"Good to hear!" Junpei grinned. "I'll be digging in too!"

Both SEES members slurped noisily as they ate, the sound echoing from others who were also enjoying the Hagakure special. Hamuko gave happy sigh, patting her stomach as she finished of her meal.

"Thank you for the meal." Hamuko smiled as she placed her chopsticks over the empty bowl. "Best ramen I've ever had."

"Right? This place cooks it like no other. There's been rumors of a special ingredient they use that no one else knows about..." Junpei trailed off as he glanced at Hamuko. "So... how do you like things here so far?"

"It's great! Coming here was definitely one of my better decisions." Hamuko grinned. "I mean, the school is so great and I met all of you. Everything is just so exciting!"

"Yeah, things have gotten pretty lively since you and Minato showed up." Junpei laughed. "Seriously. When you transferred in I was a little worried about you, but you're always so energetic even with the fighting we've done recently."

"That's because I'm an energetic person." Hamuko boasted, puffing her chest out a bit.

"I can tell. I get tired just looking at you sometimes." Junpei grinned. He crossed his arms and nodded to himself. "Yeah, I shouldn't have bothered worrying just because you're another transfer. After seeing how you act, I know you'll do just fine here."

"Aw... but I appreciate you worrying about me!" Hamuko grinned cheekily at Junpei who gave an embarrassed smile in return.

"Heh heh... don't worry about it."

SMASH

Hamuko jumped in her seat when she heard something shattering in her mind.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Those voices again... but this time they were a little different.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Magician Arcana...

"*Magician...? Not Fool or Judgment?*" Hamuko thought to herself. Then that meant...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Magician with Junpei Iori...

Hamuko smiled a little to herself as the voices faded. So this Magician link represented her bond with Junpei, huh...?

"Still... guys and girls livin' in the same dorm can't be good..."

Hamuko blinked at that. "Huh?"

"Nothing, nothing." Junpei grinned at her. "I don't drag love into my work. Although... can't guarantee I won't fall for somebody! Or maybe someone'll fall for me!"

"Geh... so this is what Yukari was warning me about..."

Hamuko blanched, leaning away from Junpei. "That's quite a look you've got on your face..."

"Wha...! Hey, come on! I don't look... and what did Yuka-tan tell you about me?" Junpei whined.

"I'm only teasing you." Hamuko went back to smiling. "And all Yukari said was that you make weird and perverted comments from time to time."

"W-Weird and perverted? Man, she's always saying that stuff about me..." Junpei sighed.

"But she also said you were a good person."

"Oh? R-Really?" Junpei perked up, cheeks flushing a bit. "W-Well, obviously! I'm a pretty great guy, y'know?"

Hamuko chuckled to herself as Junpei laughed. He was definitely fun to tease. At least life living at the dorm would be

entertaining, no doubt about that. A mischievous smirk rose onto her face she leaned towards her friend.

"Say... you don't mind me ordering another special, do you?" Hamuko smirked while Junpei's eyes widened in alarm. "You said it was your treat, right~?"

"H-Hey... that bowl is expensive, you know." Junpei protested. "Show a little mercy, would ya..."

Despite himself, Junpei couldn't help but grin when Hamuko let out a joyful laugh as she sat beside him. Hamuko hummed to herself as she got lost in her own thoughts about her new friend and what might be headed in their direction in the days to come.

"Social Links, huh..." Hamuko murmured quietly to herself.

At least it wouldn't be boring. She was sure of that.

A/N: And that brings this chapter to a close. Hope it was enjoyable. And thanks go to The Infamous Man who beta'd this chapter before posting. I appreciate it.

Some of you probably assumed this from the context, but next chapter is all about Social Links! At least the first few ones. They are key in the Persona world, and I will enjoy writing and developing both Minato and Hamuko's Social Links as the story goes on. Of course, there's also the first Boss coming up in a chapter or two as well. Hope you all stick around to

see that one.

Again, hope you all enjoyed the chapter and feedback is always appreciated. Always happy to hear what readers think. Have a good day.

Kiiam

7. Chapter 6: Social Links

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Chapter six is up. I wanted to hold off on this since this story is just a side project and I want to work on my other fics but... I wanna at least get done with the first Full Moon boss before the Movie comes out. Which I am very excited for, by the way. Enjoy.

Chapter 6: Social Links

Hamuko hummed along with her music as she swept up the leaves on the first floor corridor. She had been volunteered to clean up the area since every month the classes took turns cleaning the hallways during the daytime, with different students assigned to various days of the month. She didn't mind it much since there really wasn't anything else she had going after school. She was the type of person who got bored easily if she had nothing to do, so even a tedious chore was a little fun for her.

The corridor was an open area lined with trees and low hedges, though if one looked past the foliage they could see the track field and members of the track club doing exercises. Hamuko had heard a few chatty students passing by on their

way to the gymnasium mention that some of the sports clubs were recruiting new members. The girl entertained the idea of joining one of them, thinking that it would be fun to participate in a sport of some kind. Truthfully, Hamuko hadn't really played a lot of sports but she liked to think she was athletic enough to be part of a team. She made a note to look into it when she had a chance.

"And that's all of it!" Hamuko grinned as she finished raking up the last of the leaves into a large pile. Now all that was left was to stuff them all into a garbage bag and toss them in the trash.

Still... Hamuko felt a little reluctant to do so as she stared at the pile of leaves. After all, it was the perfect opportunity to...

She glanced to her left. She glanced to her right. No one was around. No one was looking.

Hamuko grinned and tossed the rake she was using aside, flinging herself into the pile of leaves with a gleeful laugh.

"Maybe that wasn't such a good idea." Hamuko muttered as she brushed her skirt off for what must have been the thirteenth time. There were still grass and leaves sticking to her uniform, though she had gotten most of the leaves out of her skirt.

Oh well. It had still been fun.

Hamuko made her way through Iwadotai's Strip Mall as she headed back to the dorm. As she walked through the complex, a sign set out in front of one of the stores next to the stairs caught her attention.

"Bookworms Used Books – Reopening!" Hamuko read the sign that was drawn with chalk on the blackboard sign aloud. She glanced at the store for a moment before smiling and stepping towards the door. "Well, I do need a few books for class!"

Hamuko entered the store, taking a quick glance around. It was a relatively small store, though the shelves were completely filled with books. It almost looked like there wasn't enough room to store them all as evidenced by the piles of books that littered the floor and desks. Still, Hamuko felt the place had a good atmosphere. She liked secondhand bookstores because they always made her feel relaxed. Plus, if you were lucky, some of the used books had marks and notes from those who previously used them. She thought hand-me-downs were appealing because they had history.

"Like so." Hamuko giggled to herself as she glanced through one of the textbooks she had picked up off a desk nearby, stopping to read the humorous notes the previous owner had scribbled inside.

Hamuko gathered up a few textbooks and picked out a few purchases for her own enjoyment before heading to the counter where an old man and woman sat behind. The old man perked up when she placed her books in front of him,

smiling as he began ringing them up.

"Welcome, young lady." The old timer smiled. "Would you like some fresh mackerel to go with your purchase?"

"...Eh?" Hamuko asked, tilting her head to the side with a confused smile.

"Ah, don't mind him. We don't sell fish here." The old lady quickly cut in, lightly thumping her hand against her husband's chest. "Don't fool with our customers like that."

"It was only a little joke, Mitsuko!" The old man grinned as he rang up Hamuko's books. "Now, your total will be... hm?"

Hamuko blinked when the man suddenly squinted his eyes at her, studying her intensely as he looked her over. Hamuko shifted uneasily, wondering why she was being scrutinized all of a sudden.

"Is something wrong?"

"Huh? Oh no, nothing's wrong..." The old man shook his head. "It's just... those leaves..."

"Oh! Sorry." Hamuko stuck her tongue out as she gave a sheepish laugh. "I'm probably getting them all over your store, huh? I can-"

"No, no! No need to apologize." The old man grinned, waving his hand dismissively. "Let me ask you this. You're from Gekkoukan, right? That's the school's uniform, right?."

"I am, and it is." Hamuko smiled.

"I knew it!" The old man grinned, sounding oddly excited. "Now, could you hand me one of those leaves?" Hamuko shrugged, picking a leaf off her shirt and handing it to the old man, wondering what he needed it for. The old man's eyes shined as he held the leaf, smiling from ear to ear. "Ah-ha! I knew it! I knew I recognized those leaves! This is from the persimmon tree!"

"Persimmon tree...?" Hamuko wondered aloud.

"Oh, come now! You must've seen it if you're really a student from Gekkoukan!" The old man insisted. "Not a day goes by that we don't think about that tree!"

"Is that so...?" Hamuko gave a slow nod, a little bewildered that someone could get so excited over a tree. Had she seen it...?

"Please ignore him. He's just rambling." The old lady gave Hamuko a slightly tired smile as she nudged her husband aside. "I'll finish ringing you up. Now, your total is-"

"Wait, I know what you're talking about!" Hamuko said suddenly, tapping her fist against her palm as she realized. "Yeah, that small tree that's growing in the courtyard walkway. I was cleaning there today."

"You hear that, Mitsuko? They're taking care of the tree!" The old man grinned. He gazed at the small leaf he held warmly.

"It must be growing nicely to produce such splendid leaves."

"It's growing so much you can make a pile out of persimmon leaves." Hamuko smiled.

"Oh...! You're a kind young lady, aren't you!" The old man smiled happily, making Hamuko blush at the praise. "Really, thank you for this. I've been meaning to see that tree for some time but I'm afraid these stumpy old legs wouldn't be able to make the trip!"

"Was that a pun?" Hamuko grinned.

"What? I don't... oh! Oh! 'Stumpy' and tree 'stump'! Looks like I did make a little pun there!" The old man laughed. "I didn't mean to though, honest!"

"Now you've gotten him started..." The old lady sighed, though her smile was warm. "Please, allow me to introduce my silly husband, Bunkichi. I'm Mitsuko."

"Mitsuko. That's a pretty name." Hamuko smiled.

"Please, you shouldn't use the word 'pretty' to describe an old woman like me." Mitsuko smiled. "Maybe if I were a decade or two younger..."

"Don't say that, Mitsuko! You don't look a day past fifty!"

"That's still old to me, dear..."

"Anyway, young lady," Bunkichi continued, turning back

toward Hamuko. "Would you mind telling us your name?"

"Hamuko. Hamuko Runako." Hamuko smiled brightly.

"Hamuko Runako..." Mitsuko smiled. "Such a lovely name..."

"We'll call you Hamuko-chan from now on!" Bunkichi announced before smiling sheepishly. "Er, you don't mind do you?"

"Of course not. Hamuko-chan is fine with me, Bunkichi-san." Hamuko smiled.

"You really are a nice girl..."

Hamuko giggled to herself as she talked to the excitable old man and his soft-spoken wife. Guess it had been worth it to throw herself into that pile of leaves since it led to an event that made the two of them so happy. The tree must've held some sort of sentimental value to them or something. Hamuko was glad to make the old couple smile like they were.

SMASH

Hamuko jumped in place as the sound echoed in her mind.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

The voices...! So then that meant...!

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to

create a Persona of the Hierophant Arcana...

"...*What's a Hierophant?*" Hamuko thought to herself.

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Hierophant with the Old Couple...

"*That's... kinda rude.*" Hamuko thought, internally scolding the voices. "*Sure, they're a little old, but they have names...*"

"Sorry if we kept you. Here are your books." Mitsuko smiled as she bagged the texts and novels and handed them off to Hamuko, who handed the woman a few yen notes as payment. "Please come again."

"I will." Hamuko promised with a smile, looking around the store. "I like this place. Maybe we'll be able to talk more next time I come to buy a book."

"Even if you have nothing to buy, feel free to visit anytime." Bunkichi encouraged. "Our doors are always open for you, Hamuko-chan."

Hamuko smiled and bowed to the couple before exiting the store. She clutched her bag of books to her chest as she walked down the street, thinking to herself about what had just occurred.

"What are the chances of that?" Hamuko mumbled to herself with a cheerful smile along with an expression that was a little disbelieving. "So these Social Links... I wonder how many

there are...?"

"Hey, have you joined any clubs yet?"

Hamuko looked up from the book she had been reading to answer Yukari who had asked the question. They were sitting on the couch in the lobby of the dorm, and the only other people in the room were Mitsuru and Junpei. Akihiko and Minato were still out, the former having left to go on a workout run earlier while the latter's whereabouts were unknown.

"I've been thinking about it." Hamuko replied, marking her page as she closed her book. "I overheard a couple girls saying that a few sports clubs have positions open."

"As president of the student council, I encourage you to join at least one club during your time here." Mitsuru put in from where she sat across from the two girls. "It'll make your experience at school much more gratifying, I think."

"You said something similar in your speech a few days ago." Hamuko said. "But I do think it sounds fun. Are you in any clubs, Senpai?"

"Fencing." Mitsuru replied with a proud smile. "I am captain of the club. We have many members and not one member has missed a day of practice."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Junpei called from the table. "Any position that does open up is immediately filled by girls and boys trying to

get close to the stunning council president who hope to impress her with their dedication to the club."

"What are you talking about?" Mitsuru said, puzzled. "I would assume anyone signing up for the club is doing it for the sport itself. I haven't asked any member to join personally."

"Never mind..." Junpei sighed.

"But he is right about the positions being filled up." Mitsuru said. "I apologize, but I've already gone past the limit of usual members because people were so enthusiastic about the club. I can't really..."

"It's fine. Fencing isn't really for me so don't worry about that." Hamuko smiled. She turned towards Junpei who was busy reading a magazine. "What about you, Junpei? You in a club?"

"Ha! Good one, Hamuko!" Yukari laughed.

"Hey, hey! That hurts, Yuka-tan!" Junpei protested. "I'm a very dedicated member of my club!"

"Seriously? You actually joined club?" Yukari asked, clearly surprised. "Which one?"

"The Go Home Club!"

"Of course..."

"I don't suppose the Archery Club has any available positions?" Hamuko asked.

"Sorry. We actually had our last open spots filled in last week." Yukari apologized.

"Mou... guess this means I won't have any of you as my fellow club member." Hamuko pouted.

"I think that it's better this way. It'll give you a chance to meet and interact with other students in the school." Mitsuru smiled. "Off the top of my head, I believe the Swimming, Tennis, and Volleyball Clubs have positions open."

"I'll look into those clubs then. Thanks, Senpai!"

"Of course."

The girls turned towards the door when they heard it open, revealing a familiar head of blue hair. Minato yawned as he stepped past the couch and headed towards the stairs.

"Where have you been?" Yukari asked.

"Out." Minato replied, making the girl frown at the bluntness of his answer. His trek for the stairs didn't stop.

"Wait, Minato!" Hamuko called out to him. "Did you join any clubs yet?"

"Yep."

Hamuko blinked with no small amount of surprise. "R-Really? Already? Which one?"

"Kendo."

"Ah, good choice." Mitsuru smiled. "We actually have a very capable club. The team has even made it to regionals before. Perhaps with you as a member we could make it to nationals."

"Ha... it's not like I'm doing it for enjoyment or anything." Minato replied dryly. "Given the circumstances, it's more practical joining that club than anything..."

"Wow... you sound pretty excited." Yukari remarked sarcastically. "When's your first club meeting?"

"Tomorrow. All I did was sign a form to mark my membership in the club." Minato said.

"Oh..."

"What is it?"

"Well, I was walking around today and noticed there were a lot of The Lost walking around." Yukari said worriedly, referring to those with Apathy Syndrome. "I was hoping that we could go to Tartarus today, but I'll understand if you're not up for it. I mean, it would be bad if you were tired on your first day at the club..."

"I don't mind." Minato shrugged. He turned towards Mitsuru. "Is it fine if we go to Tartarus tonight?"

"I see no problems with that." Mitsuru smiled. "Just remember

to be careful. It can be dangerous."

"We're all aware of that." Minato replied shortly before heading upstairs. "See you guys at midnight."

"I'm surprised he joined a club already." Hamuko muttered to Yukari. "I thought for him to join any club that involves interacting with other people would involve blackmail of some sort."

"...Just how do you see him?" Yukari replied before turning in the direction of the stairs. "Though he does seem a little distant. Doesn't really talk much either..."

"Someone one just needs to help bring him out of his shell." Hamuko whispered back. "And I'm just the person to do it!"

"You seem excited about that." Yukari noted with some amusement.

"Of course! It's just like getting an animal to like you. All you've got to do is persevere and show a little kindness, and they'll be friendly and attached in no time!"

"I-Is that so?" Yukari gave a strained smile. "The only problem there is that your target is human, Hamuko..."

Yukari was glad that the boy they were talking about had already disappeared upstairs. She doubted someone like Minato would appreciate being compared to an animal.

Minato hadn't been lying when he said he joined a club out of practicality and not out of enjoyment. With all that had happened and the revealing that monsters actually existed, Minato decided that it would do him some good to actually make time to practice using some form of weapon. The openings in some sports clubs at this opportune time were the perfect, convenient solution to achieve that. It had been a toss up between the Track and Kendo clubs. On one hand, Track Club would help his endurance and cardio, helping him avoid Shadows... but he figured it would be more beneficial to join the Kendo Club. While he wasn't treating his sword like a baseball bat, unlike Junpei, it wouldn't hurt to learn a little technique. Plus, he was sure they did some endurance exercises that would help improve his stamina. Of course, he there were a few openings in the Swimming Club too...

...But there was no way anyone was getting Minato to wear a speedo. Even if it was for a sport and not his preferred choice of swimwear, wearing one was...

Expertly turning his mind away from such thoughts, Minato found himself standing in the gymnasium being greeted by some dark-skinned girl in a track suit.

"So, you're the new guy joining the team, huh?" The girl asked, giving Minato a once over. "You look a little scrawny, but give it a few weeks and I'm sure you'll be able to keep pace with the rest of the guys here."

"...Good to know." Minato replied, biting down the retort that had been on the tip of his tongue.

"Anyway, I'm Yuko Nishiwaki. I'm the manager of the Kendo Club." The girl, Yuko, smiled at him. She turned towards the gym doors when she heard them open. "Oh, here comes Mr. Takenozuka. He'll get you introduced to the rest of the team."

"Okay, everyone. Put down the shinai and get over here for a second." Mr. Takenozuka called out to the uniformed club members as he approached. He scratched at the scruff on his chin as he gestured to Minato. "This here is Minato Arisato. He'll be joining the Kendo Club as of today."

Minato greeted the members of his new club with small wave, who returned his greeting with nods or greetings of their own.

Takenozuka nodded and gestured to one of the students. "Kazushi?"

A student with tan skin and short hair stepped forward, glancing at Minato before turning towards the teacher. "Yeah?"

"He's Kazushi Miyamoto, the future captain of this team." Mr. Takenozuka introduced the junior to Minato, sounding a little proud. "He's got passion and talent for the sport and always scores well in competitions. He'll be showing you the ropes for the first few weeks."

"Nice to meet you, Minato." Kazushi grinned at Minato who returned his smile with a small nod. "I've actually heard a lot about you already."

"Oh really...?"

"Yep." Kazushi grinned. "One of the two famous transfer students. Still, don't think I'll go easy on you just 'cause you're the new guy. In order to keep up with the rest of us, you're gonna have to be dedicated! I'll make sure that you pull your own weight!"

Minato noticed a couple of students laugh at Kazushi's enthusiasm or give their own encouragements about not going easy on the new member. Yuko rolled her eyes and stepped forward, clapping Minato on the shoulder.

"Don't let this guy intimidate you. Just get used to things at your own pace. If any of these guys give you a hard time just let me know and I'll set 'em straight." Yuko smiled.

"H-Hey, Yuko. I'm trying to get him pumped for the club." Kazushi whined. "Don't say stuff like that..."

Minato's lips quirked upwards a bit as he watched the two bicker. It was a little amusing to watch them. At least here he could get some exercise in his free time and participating in one club wouldn't be too hard. Minato had actually never been in a school club before, but who knew? It might be a little fun.

SMASH

"...?!" Minato jumped a bit when he heard the sound of glass breaking.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Minato frowned a little to himself as the voices echoed in his mind.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Chariot Arcana...

"Chariot, huh..." Minato thought to himself.

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Chariot with the Kendo Team...

Minato gave no outward reaction to what he had just heard. He sighed to himself as the voices faded away.

"Sorry, Minato." Yuko suddenly apologized. "I didn't have a chance to get you your uniform, so why don't you just watch practice today? I promise I'll have your kendo uniform ready by next practice."

Minato nodded, retreating to the back of the gymnasium and leaning back against the wall as Takenozuka started shouting to the club members to resume their exercises. He let out another sigh as he watched the kendo club members spar. The clacks of the shinai smacking against each other as the club members fought with each other echoed throughout the gymnasium.

"Chariot Arcana..." Minato muttered to himself.

To think that the trigger for establishing these... Social Links would be so simple. All he did was sign a form, joined a club, exchanged greetings with two of his fellow club members as it was enough to trigger the formation of a link? To establish a bond? To Minato, it all seemed a little flimsy.

"Then again, the idea that friendship makes me stronger is pretty crazy too." Minato chuckled dryly to himself.

"What are you mumbling to yourself?"

Minato started a little when he heard someone address him. He glanced upwards to see Kazushi staring down at him with a smirk and an arched eyebrow. Minato coughed to himself, a little embarrassed he'd been caught talking to himself before narrowing his eyes at the fellow junior.

"Is there something you needed?" Minato asked.

"Nah. I was just thinking it must be boring to just watch."

Minato caught the shinai that was suddenly tossed to him.

"...What do you want me to do with this?"

"Isn't it obvious? This is the Kendo Club, man! We use those things to practice. Or did you forget joining?" Kazushi chuckled at Minato who didn't share his humor. "Anyway, I was thinking it wouldn't hurt to take a couple swings with that. Just because you don't have a uniform shouldn't stop you from having at least one spar. I mean, you shouldn't just be

watching on your first day in the club. Why not get involved?"

Minato was a little surprised the boy was making such an earnest effort to make him feel included. He supposed that enthusiasm Kazushi had for the club wasn't half-hearted after all. It was a little flattering and reassuring to know that another member of the club was trying to look out for him and wanted him to join in. So, in response to Kazushi's offer, Minato's answer was obvious.

"...I'm fine, thanks."

Minato rejected the kind offer.

"What? C'mon, don't be like that. I'll set you up with one of the lazy guys so you can get warmed up."

"I said I'm fine. I'll get started when I get my uniform. Club is almost over anyway." Minato replied. "Go back to practicing. I'm okay with watching for today."

"...Suit yourself." Kazushi relented, sounding a little disheartened by Minato's refusal. "Well, just make sure you suit up the next time the club meets!"

Minato watched Kazushi walk back to the center of the gym and rejoin the rest of the club members. He blinked when he heard someone sit next to him.

"Sorry about that. Kaz is always like that to the new members." Yuko said from where she sat next to Minato. "I

hope he didn't bother you too much."

"I don't mind." Minato replied neutrally. "It's not a bad thing to show concern for his fellow club members."

"...Pft."

"Did I say something funny?" Minato asked, glaring at the giggling girl.

"No. It was just the comment about him showing 'concern' for others. I'd say it's more about him being competitive." Yuko smiled. "He always attacks the newbies because he's always on the lookout for someone who will give him a real challenge. He's always complaining to me that the other members of the club don't help him work up a good enough sweat. I honestly wish any of these guys were good enough to smack him around a bit. Maybe then he'd calm down a bit."

"...That so?"

"Well, I guess that dedication is his selling point. That or his stubbornness." Yuko laughed to herself. "He shows up every day for practice. Hasn't missed once. Most of the other guys just do this to kill time though there are some who try to match Kaz's enthusiasm. Seriously, don't feel like you have to show up every day but at least pop in now and again or Kaz will come after you. One of the guys didn't show up for a month once and Kaz cornered him one day after school."

"...What happened to him?" Minato asked, mildly curious.

"Nothing really, though he did drop out of the club a couple weeks later." Yuko shrugged. "There's a little more to it than that, but I don't want to bore you. I'm just giving you a little fair warning about what might happen if you plan to be a ghost member of the club."

"I'll make sure I don't give him a reason to come after me." Minato assured her with a sigh.

"See that you do. Whenever he's got a problem with someone he usually comes complaining to me first." Yuko gave a tired sigh.

"So by telling me this, you're hoping you won't have to deal with him complaining to you?"

"Of course!" Yuko smiled. "Hope you enjoy the Kendo club, Minato-kun!"

"...Right."

"Hey, Yuko-san! Could we get some towels over here?"

"Ah, just a sec!" Yuko called back to the student yelling at her as she got to her feet. She smiled down at Minato before taking off. "See ya around."

Minato watched her hurry about, his gaze switching over from her to Kazushi. They both seemed friendly enough. Maybe being part of a club wouldn't be too troublesome.

"...I wonder... is this really considered a bond?" Minato

muttered to himself. He shook his head, deciding not to think too deeply about it as he sat back and watched the Kendo club members spar as the sound of shinai striking against each other continued to echo in the gym.

"So, today I'd like to introduce you all to a new teammate."

"Hamuko Runako, second year student from class 2-F who just transferred in!" Hamuko announced as she beamed at the other members of the Tennis club. "Nice to meet you all!"

"My, you're an enthusiastic one." Ms. Kanou smiled at Hamuko before turning towards the other club members. "I hope you'll all be nice to her. Now, um... who was the leader for the juniors again?"

"That'd be me."

A keen looking girl with her long dark haired tied back in a ponytail stepped forward as she answered the teacher in a slightly irritated tone. Her ire seemed directed at the teacher herself, but Ms. Kanou didn't seem to notice. She only smiled and daintily held her hand up as she giggled to herself.

"Oh, Rio. I'll leave the rest to you then. I don't really know what I'm supposed to do here anyway."

"...Right. Have nice day, Ms. Kanou." The girl said with a tired sigh.

"I will! You girls play nice!"

The club members all watched at the teacher left the tennis courts still giggling to herself. As soon as she was gone all the girls let out their own annoyed sighs and rolled their eyes at the woman.

"I don't really know what I'm supposed to do here anyway! Tee-hee!" One girl with short hair giggled in a high pitched tone, doing a mock imitation of Ms. Kanou that got half the group laughing. "Seriously, she's too old to try and act cute like that!"

"She only shows up when there's a new member or when the principal's around." Another club member sighed, shaking her head. "Isn't there a better teacher to supervise us? Do we really have to deal with such an airhead?"

"No use complaining about it." The dark haired girl that stepped forward said, turning back to address the collective of the group. "Get back to practice guys."

A chorus of half-hearted affirmations and groans of displeasure met the girl in response to that, who gave a long suffering sigh. Despite the badmouthing of a teacher behind her back, Hamuko liked the club's easy and friendly atmosphere. A couple of members smiled and waved at her in greeting before picking up their rackets and pairing off to practice. Hamuko turned back towards the girl who Ms. Kanou called forward as she approached her.

"You're Hamuko-san, right?"

"That's me." Hamuko smiled.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Rio Iwasaki, a junior like you." The girl, Rio, smiled back. "So, what made you decide to join the Tennis club?"

"Oh, just looking for a way to pass the time after school and get some exercise. I also thought it would be a good way to make more friends at school." Hamuko replied, parroting Mitsuru's words from last night a little bit. "I've never played tennis before, but I learn quickly and it seems like lots of fun!"

"Haha... well, even if you're only doing it in your free time you sound like you'd make a promising player." Rio grinned. "And tennis is fun if you put in some effort. Why don't you grab a racket and we'll do some basic exercises to help get you started? That's what we're doing today anyway."

"The basics are ALL we've been doing for the past two weeks." One of the club members nearby complained nearby with some of the others making their own agreements to her statement. "Can't we do something other than drills for a change?"

"Fundamentals are important!" Rio insisted with a solemn look on her face, narrowing her eyes at the person who had been whining. "I told you, after next week is when we'll-"

"Okay! Okay! Geez, I get it." The girl cut in hurriedly before

Rio could say anymore. "Just go easy on the new girl, 'kay? Don't scare her off by running her ragged on the first day."

"I'm wouldn't scare... ugh." Rio huffed before turning back towards Hamuko with a serious expression. "Look, just keep up as much as you can, alright? If you start getting worn out, just keep your mind focused and you'll be able to pull through."

"You're not going to tell me to rest instead? Even though I'm a beginner and just starting out?" Hamuko asked.

"W-Well, I assumed-"

"No, that's good! If I'm going to do something, there's no way I'll do it halfway!" Hamuko beamed, pumping her fists in the air enthusiastically. "Don't be afraid to push me, Rio-san. I'll be running circles around you and the others in no time!"

"Hamuko-san...! Okay!" Rio nodded, giving the girl an excited smile as she handed her a racket. "Let's get started then!"

"Er, wait!"

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"Um, am I holding this right?" Hamuko asked, showing Rio her grip. "I mean, it doesn't look complicated but with sports you never know if there's a right way or not to do things..."

"Just go with what you're comfortable with, though you should hold it something like this to help keep a grip on the racket and give your swings more power." Rio replied, showing how

she was holding her racket. The girl sighed to herself and rubbed her temple with her free hand. "Honestly, that teacher... she should be the one showing you this, not me. She's really a supervisor in name only. Totally useless..."

"Well, at least you're devoted. I think that shows a lot."
Hamuko smiled.

"...I'm happy you decided to join this club, Hamuko-san." Rio smiled, sour mood forgotten. "Ready to start practice serving?"

"Show me how!"

"Heh. You got it!"

SMASH

Hamuko stumbled a little as she followed Rio onto one of the open courts.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Hamuko smiled as the familiar voices echoed in her head.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Chariot Arcana...

"Hm... Chariot this time, huh?"

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Chariot

with the Tennis Team...

"Hamuko-san? Is something wrong?"

"Oh! Sorry, Rio-san. Just got lost in thought for a moment." Hamuko smiled as the mysterious voice disappeared. "So, what's a good technique for serving?"

"I'm home!"

Hamuko paused at the door, taking a quick look around and noting that nobody was hanging out in the lobby for once. She smiled when she spied one person sitting on the couch. Minato was bobbing his head slightly as he listened to music, and Hamuko could faintly hear the lyrics of his music from where she was standing. She circled around the couch, dropping her school bag on the floor before hopping over the couch as plopping down next to Minato. She tugged on one of his headphones and pulled it off, to which Minato responded with an annoyed glare that the girl pointedly ignored.

"So, how was school?" Hamuko grinned cheekily, sounding like a parent asking her child how his first day went.

Minato didn't bother replying. He let the earphone she tugged out hang over his shoulder as he continued with what he was doing. Hamuko glanced downward, finally noticing what he had been doing before she had come in. Her eyebrows went up and her smile grew wider when she saw what he had in his lap.

"Hey, that's really good!"

"Thanks." Minato replied absentmindedly as he erased the stray mark that he'd accidentally drawn when Hamuko had landed beside him and made him skew his line.

Hamuko watched as Minato dragged his pencil across a page of the new sketchbook she had bought him to replace his old one. Since she had ruined the pages before taking a look at his old book, she never got a chance to sample his work. The offhand way Minato had mentioned that he drew made it sound like he just did it to waste time, but he was much better than she thought. The strange characters he drew had lots of detail and the shading was in a way that really helped define the drawings and made the picture pop. While they just appeared to be black blobs and ghosts, Hamuko could see the fine details on the masks they wore and the arms on the blobs helped her-

"Hey, aren't those the Shadows we fought at Tartarus?" Hamuko asked excitedly when she realized she recognized the figures Minato was drawing.

"Some of them." Minato confirmed as he shaded in another blob. "I'm not that creative. I can only draw what I've seen."

"Even so, I think they're really good." Hamuko repeated as she pointed at the pictures of the Shadows. "I like how you drew this one like its attacking. Then there's this other one that looks like its fleeing!"

Hamuko turned over to the next page, giving her comments on the drawings she found there and continuing onward. It wasn't just Shadows she found in the book, but Minato had drawings of their Persona as well. She found a picture of Io casting a wind spell, Hermes in a gliding pose like it was about to strike something, Minato's Orpheus swinging its harp down and a drawing of her Orpheus playing its harp.

"I wish I could draw like that." Hamuko sighed as she flipped through the pages. At some point the sketchbook had ended up in her lap.

"All it takes is a little practice." Minato said as he twisted his pencil between his fingers. "They aren't that hard to draw. The Shadows are just dark splotches with arms and masks."

"I can't even draw dark splotches. It just looks like I threw up on the paper." Hamuko pouted. Her eyes widened a bit as she came upon the next drawing. "Hey, that's...!"

Minato's eyes glanced down at the drawing that had caught her attention. It was the Shadow Minato had defeated that night when he and Hamuko had awakened their Personas. One dark arm had the frowning mask raised up high above the numerous other arms that made up the Shadow's body, all of which were holding swords. There was a crude looking moon drawn on the corner of the page while the background was shaded in, and a large black splotch with a large sword and a mask was drawn off to the side of the Shadow with a large question mark next to it.

"...I can't draw backgrounds." Minato admitted quietly after a long moment of silence.

"Thinking back, that was actually a really crazy night, huh?" Hamuko smiled a bit as she closed the sketchbook. She handed it back to Minato who placed it off to the side of the couch. "I mean, I remember that I was so scared... and then you..."

Hamuko trailed off, folding her hands and staring down at her lap while Minato gazed listlessly up at the ceiling. Both were thinking back to the night that had been the start for both of them. While Hamuko thought about how incredible the events were, Minato was still stuck on that black thing that had torn its way out of Orpheus and destroyed the large Shadow.

"Both Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai mentioned a Shadow that strong had been out of the ordinary. They only got the occasional weak Shadow that wandered out of Tartarus until that night." Minato thought to himself. "Yet, it appeared on that night. And despite its strength... I had beaten it."

Well, to say he had beaten it would have been a stretch. Despite Mitsuru and Akihiko's sudden and unfounded expectations of him, he was completely inexperienced at fighting Shadows. Minato tensed as he remembered the sensations from that night. The terror that made his body freeze up and the pressure exerted from the Shadow that was leagues above him in strength. He highly doubted that Orpheus alone would have been enough to defeat that

Shadow.

And that was what bugged Minato most about that night. For some reason, that other... had it been a Persona? Regardless, whatever that thing was... he had barely been able to contain its power. His head had nearly split open when the thing appeared, or at least that's what it had felt like. Mitsuru had asked him about it not long after his recovery, but Minato had nothing to tell her. He was just as clueless as she was.

Minato was worried about that thing appearing again in the middle of a battle.

"How did you feel?"

"Ah... huh?" Minato snapped out of his thoughts when he heard Hamuko address him. "What did you say?"

"I asked how did you feel?" Hamuko repeated. Minato glanced down and suddenly noticed that she was holding her Evoker in her hand. "I mean, I was only able to pull the trigger because I saw you do it. And even then you looked so calm. You pulled the trigger without any hesitation. I was actually worried I'd blow my brains out if I couldn't summon a Persona like you did."

Minato actually chuckled a bit in response to that. Hamuko glared at him a little for laughing at her morbid comment, but her expression softened into a more curious look as she leaned forward.

"So how did you feel?"

Minato thought about that for a moment. Honestly, in the face of everything that had happened all at once he had expected to die that night when he saw Yukari get blown away by the Shadow. However, that child whose sudden appearance and existence was another mystery to Minato, had somehow calmed his nerves and convinced him to pick up the gun and pull the trigger. Minato was actually a little frightened when he remembered how eerily calm he'd been about the whole thing. Still, that child, the voice that had calmly spoken to him and coaxed him to shoot himself... he had obeyed. He trusted the voice that whispered into his ear like an old friend.

"I'm actually surprised how calm I felt." Minato said. "When that Shadow came at us I thought I was going to die. I didn't know what I was doing when I picked up Yukari's Evoker. But suddenly, I heard a voice... telling me to pull the trigger. So I did."

"That's all?"

"...That's all." Minato replied after a moment, refusing to say any more than that much to Hamuko's irritation.

Minato thought about telling Hamuko about the child that had appeared to him, but decided against it. He had mentioned the kid on the first night of their arrival and she hadn't made a comment on it, and the child's words during his later appearance in Minato's room a few nights ago lead Minato to believe that Hamuko was unaware of his existence and Minato

decided he preferred it that way. Who knew what she would say if she knew about him.

Not only that, but the kid seemed to know what was going on and was aware of both Hamuko and their connection to the Velvet room. Minato found himself frustrated at the things he still didn't know. Too many questions and not enough answers...

"What about you?" Minato found himself asking.

"Eh?"

"How did you feel that night?" Minato asked, his tone more curious than expected. "When you summoned your Persona, how did you feel?"

"Mm... it's hard to say." Hamuko hummed as she leaned back against the couch with a thoughtful look on her face. "I mean, even after I saw you do it I thought I was crazy for picking up the gun and deciding to try the same thing. Just because it worked for you didn't guarantee that it would work for me. But..."

A peaceful expression came over Hamuko's face as she held her hands to her chest. She took a deep breath and sighed, surprising Minato with how solemn she looked at the moment.

"...The moment I picked up the Evoker I heard a voice in my head. I don't know if it was my conscious trying to convince me everything would turn out okay or my Persona calling out

to me, but I heard a voice whispering to me... telling me to speak the words that I knew deep down inside, like they had been there my whole life, forgotten." Hamuko smiled. "I was really, really scared... but maybe what Igor said about Personas and how they're another side of ourselves that protect us from harm was right. Even if it was scary, it felt a little warm... like I always had the power inside me but didn't know how to use it..."

Hamuko suddenly stuck her tongue out, her expression reverting into that playful look Minato often saw her with.

"I may act chipper and careless, but this whole business with Shadows and Persona... it's really got me shaken up." Hamuko found herself admitting. "Plus our contract with Igor and the Social Links, along with Tartarus... it's scary, y'know? This isn't fun and games. I mean, Akihiko-senpai got his arm broken and if you hadn't saved us that night... who knows what could've happened?"

"...Yeah."

"I guess I'm a little irresponsible."

"Huh?"

"One of the reasons I didn't want to be leader was because I was afraid if someone got hurt... it'd be my fault." Hamuko admitted. "But you accepted the position, and these past few days you've been so strong and capable. I can see why our senpai picked you to lead."

"Maybe you can explain it to me." Minato frowned. "I don't-"

"You're too modest, Leader." Hamuko giggled, making Minato's frown deepen. "Seriously, I may not be keen on leading but I want you to know I'll be here to support you. After all, we're in this journey together, right?"

Minato stared at the girl next to him. The moments where she didn't act like an airhead surprised him most. She projected the image of being upbeat and cheerful, but she was more vulnerable than Minato realized before. He found himself wondering what things would be like if it was just him, if he didn't have anyone who understood his troubles or shared a contract with. Being able to talk with her like this, discuss things that they were both troubled by deep down inside was...

...It was nice having a companion that could understand him a little.

"...Right." Minato nodded slowly.

SMASH

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou choosest to create a Persona of the Fool Arcana.

Minato smiled a little to himself. Maybe these "bonds" weren't a bad thing...

"So... do you feel closer to me now?" Hamuko asked.

Minato stared at the girl, nonplussed in reaction to her sudden question.

"...What?"

"I saw that smile! You heard them, didn't you? The voices in your head?" Hamuko smiled widely, leaning forward and causing Minato to back away. "Did my rank increase a little, maybe...?"

Minato's eyes widened in shock when her words registered. That devious little... had all that been an attempt to...?

"You...!"

"It DID, didn't it?!" Hamuko squealed in excitement, suddenly throwing her arms around Minato.

"H-Hey! Get off me!" Minato cried out in protest as his cheeks flushed.

"I did it! We're friends now! It's official!" Hamuko laughed joyfully as she clung to her leader. "See? I just needed to get you talking! You like me! You like me~!"

"S-Shut up! I don't!"

"We're friends~! Besties~! Doesn't matter what you say, nothing can change it now!" Hamuko grinned. "We're in this together 'till the end, Minato!"

"We're not...!"

"Whoa! What have we here?"

Minato froze when he heard a familiar voice come from the door. His expression was one of horrified embarrassment when he saw the rest of the members of the dorm standing at the door, having just arrived back from their clubs, or in Junpei's case, from the arcade. Junpei, who had made the comment, smirked at the two of them though the look he gave Minato was a bit envious.

"This isn't what it looks like!" Minato found himself blurting. Only after he said it did he realize saying those exact words in the way he had only made his situation worse.

"Sounding a little defensive there." Yukari giggled to herself. "What were you two getting up to while we were gone?"

"Guy moves fast. I'll give him props for that." Junpei smirked.

"I'm glad to see the two of you getting along so well." Mitsuru smiled while Akihiko chuckled a bit from behind her.

Hamuko continued to smile even as Minato shoved her off of him. She smiled broadly at her friends as she spoke. "Of course! Minato and I get along great! Isn't that right, Minato?"

"...Whatever. Be quiet." Minato grumbled, annoyed when Hamuko only continued to laugh.

"Y'know, I was going to suggest going to Tartarus tonight, but

if you two are busy..." Junpei trailed off, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

Minato abruptly stood up, snatching his sketchbook off the couch as he began heading towards the stairs. Before taking the first step up, he turned back towards the group.

"See you guys at midnight."

Ignoring their laughter, Minato stomped upstairs to his room.

These "bonds" were nothing but trouble...

A/N: I've always liked character development and interaction, so I'm having a lot of fun with this. I give my thanks to The Infamous Man for betaing this chapter.

So just going to focus on establishing Social Links for now and then onto the first major battle of this story. Like I said, I might also be changing up a few Social Links but let me assure you, all characters from the game who had a Social Link or were part of one will be included. I'm not tossing anyone out, just adding a little more to separate the two protagonists. Though you'll all see that in links that will be established later.

Anyway, thanks for reading the new chapter and if anyone has any questions I'll answer so long as I don't spoil the story. Any feedback is appreciated and thanks for reading. Have a good one.

8. Chapter 7: After Class

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Okay, new chapter. Onto more Social Links! Gotta love character development and interaction. Enjoy.

Chapter 7: After Class

Minato yawned as he followed his class out of the auditorium. He had almost fallen asleep during the principal's speech, and in all honesty he wished he had. The man had kept droning on and on in a way that somehow kept him from completely nodding off. Minato suppressed another yawn as he reflected on the principal's speech, which was completely boring and uninspiring and the old man couldn't string together a sentence without injecting some strange proverb into it, even if the proverb spoken was completely unrelated to what he was talking about.

"Maybe it was a good thing I didn't fall asleep though."

Minato thought to himself as he watched his teacher chew out a couple students that had been lucky enough, or maybe not so much, to fall asleep during the speech.

"Now, I want you three to return to the classroom. I'll have a

fitting punishment for your disrespectful behavior." Mr. Ekoda declared with a sneer.

Minato smirked a little when the three students who Mr. Ekoda was punishing dropped their heads and began trudging back to class. It was a shame too since passing period was just after the assembly and they'd miss it. Minato's fingers brushed against a few yen notes in his pocket, and he glanced toward the direction of the stairs. That speech had only lasted an hour but it had felt like days had gone by, and Minato was feeling a little hungry. He decided that a light snack from the student store wouldn't be too bad at the moment. Minato avoided the clusters of students milling about as he headed down the hallway towards the stairs.

"Kyah?!"

Minato grunted when something suddenly bumped into him. His ears picked up the sound of several papers spilling onto the ground and books crashing to the floor. Minato glanced downward to see a girl with short teal colored hair on the floor, a few notes and books scattered around her and his feet. The girl looked dazed for a moment before regaining her bearings and looking up at what she had bumped into, flushing when she realized she had crashed into a person.

"I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to... I mean I didn't...!"

The girl was a stammering wreck and Minato grimaced as she continued to fumble over her words. He quickly held up a hand, forestalling the girl's stuttering attempts to apologize for

bumping into him.

"It's fine." Minato said simply.

The girl stared at him for a moment before she gave a slow nod, turning away from his gaze and bending down to hurriedly gather the papers and books she'd dropped. Minato took a quick look around and noticed a couple students were finding entertainment at their expense. The most amused seemed to be a group of girls nearby who were giggling and whispering amongst themselves as if what they witnessed was the funniest thing in the world. Rolling his eyes, Minato stepped around the girl as she finished gathering up her belongings and moved past her.

Minato made his way downstairs and smiled a bit when he found that he wouldn't have to wait in a line. He stepped up to the counter and handed the vendor a couple coins and received his cutlet sandwich. After unwrapping the foil containing his food, Minato took a bite out of the sandwich.

"Ah, Arisato. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Mm...?" Minato swallowed his food before turning towards the person who had addressed him. "Oh. Hey, Senpai."

"Couldn't wait for lunch period?" Mitsuru smiled as she approached him.

"Can't help it if I'm hungry." Minato shrugged as he continued to eat. "That speech seemed like it gone on for hours. I feel

like school should be out already."

"What's wrong with the principle wanting to encourage his students? While bits of his speech were a little... confusing, as students we should be eager to accept guidance and counseling from those who teach us, don't you agree?"

"Spoken like a true honor student." Minato replied lightly, wondering if his senpai realized how much the principle had copied her speech. Take out the nonsensical and unfitting proverbs the principal had inserted, and it would have been exactly like Mitsuru's speech.

"I'm actually glad I ran into you." Mitsuru smiled. "There's something wanted to ask you."

Minato arched an eyebrow at her as he kept chewing his food. Taking his silence as a gesture to continue, Mitsuru went ahead with what she wanted to ask him.

"To be blunt, I would like you to join the Student Council."

There was a pregnant pause following Mitsuru's words where Minato stopped chewing his food and gave Mitsuru a flat stare. She returned his gaze, looking serious as she always did. The students around them were ignorant of their conversation, bustling about and talking amongst themselves. Eventually, Minato's shoulders slumped and he gave a sort of exasperated sigh.

"Why all of a sudden...?" Minato muttered.

"It's not like you'd have to show up for every activity," Mitsuru said, frowning a little at the junior's tone. "Just come to the Student Council Room when you have the time."

"Why me?" Minato asked.

"Well, I've only just recently become President of the Student Council and I've learned that it's very time consuming. Not that I didn't expect it." Mitsuru said wryly. "While the students already on the council are quite capable, I'd appreciate any extra help I can get. I asked you because you understand my situation."

"How so?"

"You know what it's like being a leader."

"...Senpai, I've been leading the team for barely a week. Most of the time you're the one directing our movements anyway."

"I do what I can to help guide you, but you're the one calling the shots out in the field." Mitsuru insisted. Her expression faltered when Minato shook his head. "Arisato?"

"Sorry, but I'll be declining this invitation to join the council." Minato declared, throwing the foil wrapper into a nearby trashcan.

"If you're worried about the workload, I can assure you that-"

"Look Senpai, I just don't have any interest in joining the council." Minato said a little more firmly. "Even if there isn't

much work to do, I don't need anything else filling up my schedule."

"You joined the Kendo Club, didn't you?" Mitsuru pointed out. "It's not much different, and all I'm asking-"

"The only reason I joined was because I wanted to learn something beneficial that would help out during the Dark Hour." Minato said quietly so the students nearby wouldn't hear them. "If there's ever a time where my Persona doesn't work at least I'll know the right way to swing a sword and maybe that will save me. That was my mindset when I signed up for Kendo, otherwise I wouldn't have seen the point."

"...There's nothing I can do to convince you?" Mitsuru asked quietly.

Minato grimaced at her expression, feeling a little guilty for refusing her but pushed aside the feeling and maintained his stance on the matter. "Even if I did join I doubt I'd do much to contribute. You don't want someone who's half-hearted about it joining. Sorry."

Mitsuru opened her mouth to respond to that, but smiled softly and shook her head, deciding against arguing the point any further. It was wrong of her to make any requests when she'd already asked Minato for quite a lot. Getting him involved with SEES and saddling him with the position of leader during Tartarus expeditions... not to mention there was still a lot she was keeping from him. Not just him, but the others as well. Of course, while she felt the information was better off unsaid

and kept from the team, Mitsuru didn't have the right to ask Minato for anything else. Not after all that had happened and given his situation.

"I understand. If that's how you feel then I won't force you." Mitsuru said, smiling understandingly. "I apologize for bringing it up."

"You don't have to apologize..." Minato muttered, shaking his head. "Anyway, I'll be heading back to class now. See you back at the dorm."

"Of course. Keep up your studies, Arisato." Mitsuru told him, though she wasn't sure he heard him as he had already started heading up the stairs to his classroom.

Mitsuru sighed to herself as she reflected on things. Despite how sudden everything had been, she was happy that they had four new Persona users to join SEES. Even if they were all beginners, the past couple nights in Tartarus had proven that they were all capable of fighting Shadows. After all the years of waiting and preparing they were finally exploring the towering labyrinth that was Tartarus. She was responsible for getting everyone involved, so she'd do whatever she could to protect and support her allies.

...Knowing that, Mitsuru realized that she might have been a little insensitive to Minato. She had already asked him to take up the position of leader when she, as the one who had the most experience dealing with Shadows and the Dark Hour, should be doing so instead. She had her reasons, but she...

well, she wouldn't ask for more than was necessary. She wouldn't trouble Minato more than she already had. Same went for the others. She didn't have the right. There were also a few other issues that concerned her, but she wouldn't-

"Hey there, Senpai!"

The girl snapped out of her thoughts when she heard the cheerful voice of the other transfer student that had joined SEES.

"Ah, Runako." Mitsuru smiled at the girl who approached her. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. I saw you and Minato talking so I thought I'd come over and say hi." Hamuko grinned, glancing towards the stairs with a small pout. "Though he got away before I arrived. What were you two talking about?"

"It's nothing serious." Mitsuru said. "I was just talking to Arisato about needing some extra help on the council, is all..."

"...So with that said, I'd like you all to welcome the newest member of the Student Council." Mitsuru announced to the rest of the council members who sat around the table. "Please treat her with respect and help her feel welcome."

"Hamuko Runako, second year, Class 2-F. Nice to meet you all!" Hamuko smiled as she greeted the other members of the Student Council.

Mitsuru smiled at the girl's enthusiasm, thankful that Hamuko had been willing to join. She'd only mentioned needing more help on the council offhand, but Hamuko had taken the offer she'd meant to extend to Minato and said she wouldn't mind joining the council if Mitsuru needed an extra pair of hands. Mitsuru had accepted the offer and retrieved the girl after classes were dismissed, got her signed onto the council after talking with one of the teachers in the faculty office, and then they had entered the Student Council Meeting Room together where Mitsuru began things by formally introducing Hamuko to the other students on the council.

"Hamuko-kun, huh..."

Hamuko turned towards the one who had spoken, staring at the tall student with hair combed backwards and with a tan armband around his left sleeve. His gaze moved up and down as he looked at her, though Hamuko didn't get any sort of creepy vibe from the look. It felt more like she was being observed and analyzed by an officer or teacher. The student eventually nodded as if he found something that satisfied him and gave Hamuko a thin smile.

"Welcome to the Student Council." The boy greeted. "I'm Hidetoshi Odagiri, third year, Class 3-C. Vice President of this council and supervisor of the Disciplinary Committee."

"Thanks for the welcome, Odagiri-san." Hamuko smiled.

"I'm fine with Hidetoshi." The senior assured her before turning to the other members that sat around the table. "Everyone,

why don't we all take a moment to introduce ourselves to the new member of the council?"

The students nodded, agreeing with Hidetoshi's suggestion and began with the girl who sat on the left end of the table. Hamuko vaguely recognized her, remembering her as the flustered girl who had shown her and Minato where the teacher's office was on the first day of school. The girl's face flushed as she sat up, taking a few deep breaths to compose herself before smiling warmly at Hamuko.

"I-I'm Chihiro Fushimi. First year, Class 1-E. I was selected as Treasurer this year, t-though I'm still learning the ropes, so... please be patient with me, Hamuko-san."

Hamuko smiled at the girl who quickly sat back down once she had finished introducing herself. The next student sitting beside Chihiro introduced herself, followed by the next student beside her and so on until Hamuko was acquainted with everyone in the room. After introductions were finished, there was a short meeting where members of the council gave their reports on what had happened during the first few weeks of school and a rough outline of school events planned for the year. Hamuko was happy to learn such information and was looking forward to the events that were planned. A few other students had even suggested some additional events if there was time and if the school allowed it. Eventually the meeting wrapped up and everyone began filtering out of the classroom, promising to attend the next meeting.

"So what exactly is my job?" Hamuko asked Mitsuru as they

stepped out of the classroom that had been used to hold the meeting. It wasn't like she was in a titled position, after all.

"Think of yourself as an officer or commissioner of sorts. You're an extra set of eyes and hands that'll help maintain order within the school." Hidetoshi answered for the president as he followed the two girls out of the room. "You don't have to attend every meeting, but you would help us get a student's perspective. Check in with the class representatives every so often and ask if they're having any trouble with certain students or if there are any issues that they're concerned about. Let us know if there are. Other than that, we'd also appreciate your opinion on other matters brought up in future meetings."

"The only people who regularly attend meetings are those with seated positions like myself, Odagiri, the treasurer, the secretary, and named commissioners. Other students on the council should only feel the need to attend if they have something to report or wish to contribute on matters presented." Mitsuru smiled.

Hamuko was about to respond but yelped when she felt someone crash into her from behind, almost making her lose her footing. A stammered apology accompanying the sound of scattering papers made its way to Hamuko's ears as she turned around to find Chihiro quickly gathering up the papers she dropped. Hamuko was about to say something to the flustered girl but someone else beat her to it.

"Fushimi-kun." Hidetoshi said sternly, causing the first year to

freeze as she was picking up the papers. Hidetoshi bent down and collected the last pieces of paper, narrowing his eyes at her and gesturing to the papers. "Please be a little more careful with these. You're in charge of the council's budget so I'd like you to be more organized in the future."

"I-I-I k-know, t-that's... um..."

Hamuko watched the exchange between the two, amused at and sorry for Chihiro as Hidetoshi reprimanded her. It was a little funny watching the first year's face light up like a search beacon, but the look on her face made it seem like Hidetoshi was sentencing her to death rather than lightly scolding her. The girl's shyness went beyond the extreme it seemed.

"It's rare for first year students to hold a seated position on the council." Mitsuru told her suddenly. "Fushimi is a rare exception that earned a place on the council due to a recommendation by a third party."

"So why did you recommend her, Mitsuru-senpai?" Hamuko asked. Mitsuru smiled at the girl's perceptiveness, and continued as she watched Hidetoshi and Chihiro talk.

"Because she is a very able student who caught my attention early on. I believed that she'd make an optimal candidate and when I offered her the position, she showed no hesitation in accepting it." Mitsuru smiled. "Earnest students like her will only help improve this school and will ensure that our time spent here is both memorable and enjoyable. I expect a lot from her. All she needs is a helpful push and I'm sure her

efforts will shine though."

"Wow. Politicians should hire you to write their speeches." Hamuko grinned, once again overwhelmed by the older girl's charisma. "And such a dependable Senpai you are, looking out for Fushimi-san!"

"Underclassmen shouldn't be afraid to rely on their upperclassmen. And I look out for everyone in the council." Mitsuru returned modestly. "Really, I must thank you again for joining the council, Runako. I know you offered to join, but I really only mentioned it in passing so you don't need to feel obligated to-"

"Now, I'll be having none of that. It's fine if upperclassmen rely on their juniors every once in a while too, right?" Hamuko said cheekily. "I don't mind lending some extra help so if you've got something that needs doing don't hesitate to ask. I won't be dead weight, I promise!"

"...Very well then." Mitsuru said, giving Hamuko a warm smile. "It's not like your duties are particularly overwhelming. I'll be depending on you in the future."

"Mm-hm!"

"President."

"Yes, Odagiri?" Mitsuru replied, turning to face him as he addressed her.

"If you have the time, there are some things I'd like to discuss with you briefly before heading home." Hidetoshi said. He gestured to Chihiro who stood next to him, the girl rigid with nervous tension and with her head ducked down to the point where Hamuko began comparing her to a turtle. "Fushimi-kun also seemed a bit confused about some documents so I'd also like to have help teaching her how to order things a little better."

"I don't mind." Mitsuru said, taking some of the papers off Chihiro's hands. "It shouldn't take a too long."

"Hamuko-kun, I'd also welcome your assistance and opinion on these matters if you're willing to stick around for a little while longer." Hidetoshi added briefly.

"Sure. Happy to help." Hamuko chirped, earning a satisfied nod from Hidetoshi. She gave a comforting smile to Chihiro who hesitatingly returned it.

If she was being honest with herself, Hamuko had been a little nervous about what the council would be like once she and Mitsuru stepped foot in the council room, but now she found herself looking forward to participating. Her gaze switched between the three other students, satisfied that the council wouldn't be boring.

SMASH

Hamuko's heart sped up for a moment but she kept calm, smiling to herself as the voices echoed in her head once

again.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Emperor Arcana...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Emperor with the Student Council...

"Student Council, huh?" Junpei mused as he idly flipped through the manga in his hands. "As exciting as that sounds, I think I'll pass."

"It's not like I was offering you a position." Hamuko replied playfully as she and Junpei talked about their day as they both lounged on the couch in the dorm's lobby. "Besides, I don't think you're student council material anyway."

"Ouch, Hamu-tan! That hurts!" Junpei said, placing a mocking hand over his heart. He grinned and turned towards Minato who sat on another chair. The leader of team was casually scribbling in his sketchbook. "So, you turned down Mitsuru-senpai, huh? That sure took guts."

"...How's that?" Minato asked without looking up from his drawing.

"I'm just saying there are a lot of guys who would fall over

themselves to get her attention. You coulda earned yourself a few points if you agreed to join." Junpei said. "I'm just amazed you can turn down the Student Council President so easily. You're quite a guy, aren't ya?"

"Junpei..." Hamuko warned, frowning at the tone Junpei was taking with him.

"What? I'm just saying." Junpei smiled disarmingly.

Minato closed his book the moment the front door of the dorm opened. He stood up as Mitsuru stepped inside.

"Ah, Mitsuru-senpai." Minato suddenly greeted her with a smile. "Junpei was just telling me how he was interested in the student council and wanted to ask you a few things."

"What...!" Junpei recoiled at the claim, expression alarmed. "I never said...!"

"Is that so? I never thought you'd take an interest in council affairs, Iori." Mitsuru smiled as she took a seat on the couch opposite from him and Hamuko. "Are you interested in joining? I actually wouldn't mind having one or two more students join."

"Ah... er, that's..."

Hamuko found herself giggling at Junpei's predicament, though gave Minato a small glare for putting Junpei on the spot. Minato's lips twitched a little before he narrowed his eyes at Junpei, silently asserting that he brought it on himself. The

young man turned on his heel and headed upstairs to get some rest.

Hamuko leaned back on the couch as she listened to Junpei's stuttering attempts to correct the misunderstanding Minato had caused. Looks like he was still sore about the leader thing despite how childish it was to be upset over such a trivial matter. She hoped Junpei would lighten up soon though. It would be better if he and Minato got along.

Hamuko stretched her arms before packing away her things and lifting herself out of her seat. She smiled and waved at Yukari as the other girl stepped over to her.

"Hey, got anything planned after this?" Yukari asked after returning the girl's smile.

"Not really." Hamuko replied. "Wanna come with me to Paulownia Mall?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing." Yukari smiled. "Chagall Café?"

"Sounds good to me!"

Everyone was cleaning up their desks and collecting their books as classes were dismissed. Yukari and Hamuko left the classroom together, chatting about their clubs and how Hamuko was adjusting to the school as they walked. Once they made it down to the first floor Hamuko noticed another

member of SEES making her way through the halls.

"Hello, Mitsuru-senpai!" Hamuko quickly greeted the older girl, who stopped walking and smiled at the two juniors.

"Runako. Takeba. Are you two heading home already?"

"Not exactly. We were planning on going to the mall to get something to eat." Yukari said.

"Is that so? Well, don't let me keep you here then."

"Why don't you come with us?"

Yukari and Mitsuru blinked at the offer Hamuko extended seemingly out of the blue. Hamuko looked between the two, perplexed at the incredulous looks they were giving her.

"What? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, it's not that. You just..." Yukari trailed off, seemingly at a loss before turning towards Mitsuru with an uncertain look.

"Senpai...?"

"Er, yes, well..." Mitsuru stuttered for a moment before composing herself and giving Hamuko an apologetic smile. "While I appreciate the offer, I've other matters to attend to. Perhaps some other time when I'm free."

"What are you doing?" Hamuko asked curiously.

"I agreed to train some of the newer members in the fencing

club today." Mitsuru said. "I shouldn't keep them waiting longer than I have to. I'll see you two later."

Hamuko and Yukari watched Mitsuru disappear down the hallway before making their way to the shoe lockers.

"Seriously, was it the way I said it?" Hamuko asked, frowning at Yukari. "Both of you looked at me like I asked something outrageous."

"It's not that, it's just... I've never really imagined hanging out with Mitsuru-senpai before." Yukari said, trying to explain herself to Hamuko. "She's always so collected and acts so formal. It kinda makes her distant, and with the way she is..."

"But you live in the same dorm. Haven't you ever talked to her before?"

"A couple times, yeah. But that was mostly about school or when she needed something from me. Just asking her to hang out is..." Yukari shrugged. "I'm just surprised at how easily you asked."

"...Still not seeing the problem here or the reason the two of you seemed so shocked."

"Oh, just forget about it." Yukari huffed, pushing Hamuko along. "Let's get going already."

"Mu...! Fine!" Hamuko pouted, dropping the matter for now. "You're paying for my pheromone coffee though."

"Hey, don't just decide that on your own..."

"So it wasn't just me who thought that?"

"Nope. A few parts of the principal's speech were lifted from Mitsuru's. All he did was add proverbs to change it up, like he always does..."

"Wow, that's so... I mean who does that?" Hamuko laughed. "And he's the principal of the school too! Copying from a student... for shame!"

Hamuko and Yukari giggled together as they talked. They'd already finished their meals and were just enjoying one another's company. Hamuko drank the last of her Pheromone Coffee and took a look around.

"Hey, I think this stuff really works." Hamuko whispered mischievously, leaning forward over the table. "I can feel people looking at me."

"Maybe that's because you're leaning halfway across the table." Yukari said dryly. "Sit back down. You might get food on your uniform."

"Fine, mom." Hamuko giggled, playfully sticking her tongue out at Yukari before sitting back down.

Yukari watched her for a moment, twiddling her fingers together before letting out a small sigh. "H-Hey, Hamuko..."

there's something I need to say to you..."

"Hm? What's up?"

"W-Well... you might not remember, but... remember back at the hospital? You know, after the dorm was attacked by that Shadow and you discovered your Persona?"

"Of course. What about it?"

"I... just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"...You lost me." Hamuko said.

"No, it's not..." Yukari sighed, reorganizing her thoughts before speaking again. "Back when you woke up I said stuff like, 'you're the same as me', and 'you're alone'. Plus I looked up stuff about your past without asking you about it and... I guess I made some assumptions about you."

"What do you mean?"

"I just lost my dad, but you never knew either of your real parents. I mean, our situations may seem similar but people react to them differently." Yukari said, looking down. "I ignored how you might've felt and looked up those things about you and forced my own opinions onto you. So the reason I'm apologizing is because I was insensitive towards you on that day. I just wanted to properly say I'm sorry."

"You don't need to feel bad about that, Yukari." Hamuko said, giving the girl a reassuring smile. "I really didn't mind you

telling me all that. I can't speak for Minato, but it doesn't bother me. Granted, if you wanna know something about me you can just ask, but if you ever want to tell me anything I'm all ears."

"If you say so... I still feel a little guilty though." Yukari muttered. "I mean... I've never really talked about my parents with anyone before since I don't think others would understand. I mean, I've got friends at school, and all the time they're complaining about their parents getting upset about them coming home late from school or pestering them about how they're doing in school." Yukari sighed and looked away. "I... I'm actually kinda jealous that they can whine about that stuff. Whenever they go home they get to see their parents. It's different for me. Because of that, I've always felt this sort of distance between us."

"Yukari..."

"It's actually why I was a little happy when you and Minato showed up." Yukari said. "I felt like I finally found people who would understand me a little..."

Hamuko stared at Yukari, a little taken aback by all she had said. Who knew how long she'd kept her feelings bottled up, waiting for someone to confide in. As an orphan who never knew her birth parents, Hamuko had never experienced losing a parent. She didn't have one to lose. Yukari had lost her father. Hamuko couldn't even begin to imagine how it must've felt. Of course, Hamuko still had her adoptive parents, the Runakos, people she confidently and comfortably called her

mom and dad. For a moment, Hamuko tried imagining what it would be like to lose one of them.

It was a scary thought.

"Ugh... listen to me go on and on. This is exactly the type of thing I was apologizing for." Yukari groaned.

"Like I said, you have nothing to apologize for." Hamuko smiled. "I think we are a little similar, though I've still got my adoptive parents. It must've been really hard to lose your father..."

"...Yeah." Yukari nodded.

"It's okay to vent every once in a while. Sometimes you need to. Just remember this," Hamuko placed a hand against her chest, gesturing to herself. "If there's ever something you need to talk about, someone who you need to confide in, I'm here for you. That's what friends are for, right?"

"Thanks, Hamuko." Yukari said, a warm smile blossoming on her face. "I'm really glad you're part of our group now. It makes me feel a lot better."

"I'm happy to be a part of it." Hamuko smiled back. "I mean, for the longest time I thought I was the only one who knew about the Dark Hour. After meeting you, Minato and everyone else... I've got friends who can understand me too. It's a good feeling."

"Yeah. And hey, this goes both ways." Yukari said. "If you ever need someone to hear you out, I'm all ears. If anything's bothering you, just come to me. I'll help you out."

Hamuko's grin widened. "Good to know."

SMASH

Hamuko barely kept herself from jumping when she heard the familiar shattering noise.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Lovers Arcana...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Lovers with Yukari Takeba...

"So this is the link that represents my bond with Yukari."
Hamuko thought to herself with a smile.

"...Ah, enough with this pity party! We've got better things to talk about!" Yukari proclaimed, cheeks flushing little in embarrassment. "Though I guess I'll have to apologize to Minato at some point too."

"Oh, he did kinda say he was annoyed that you looked him up without asking." Hamuko remembered.

"I thought so. I haven't really had a chance to talk with him though. I haven't even seen him today. Do you know where he went?"

"If he didn't have Kendo today, he probably went back to the dorm." Hamuko shrugged.

She honestly couldn't think of anywhere else their antisocial leader would go.

Minato came up to the top of the steps and took a quick look around the area. He felt a vague sense of nostalgia wash as he walked up to the Naganaki shrine house. He remembered visiting a few times with his mother years ago when he'd lived in Iwatodai, though his trips had been more frequent after his parents died, at least until he moved away. Minato felt a small smile come to his face. His gaze moved from the old traditional building to the offertory box in front of its closed doors, then off to the right where the fortune box was set out. Minato glanced at the Shinboku tree before peering down into the well that was set in the middle of the shrine grounds. Really, not much had changed from what he remembered.

"The playground is new though." Minato noted as he caught sight of the slide, see-saw and jungle gym that made up a small play area. It seemed a little out of place in a shrine, but Minato didn't pay it much attention as he moved toward the offertory box.

The teenager stood in front of the box for several moments

before tossing in a few coins. His hands slowly came together and Minato bowed his head as he prayed. A few seconds later he pulled his palms apart and heaved a sigh.

It wasn't that he was feeling depressed or troubled, but Minato felt it was only proper to at least pay his respects to his deceased mother and father since he had finally returned home.

"Maybe I should've asked for a little help with my 'journey' while I was at it." Minato said dryly.

A couple barks drew Minato's attention as he let out a grunt as he felt something push against his legs. He looked down to stare at the large dog with white hair and, weirdly enough, red eyes who stared back up at him. The dog's tongue lolled out of its mouth and sat down on the ground, wagging its tail as it watched Minato.

"...Don't mind me. I'm just about finished up here." Minato told the dog.

The dog continued to watch him. Minato stared back. After a few seconds of silence Minato tentatively reached out his hand to scratch behind the dog's ears. The dog leaned into the scratches, and Minato smiled as he knelt so he was level with the dog's head.

He liked animals, and the dog seemed friendly enough.

"Where's your owner?" Minato asked when he noticed the dog

didn't have a collar. It looked too fit and well fed to be a stray. Minato's eyebrows went up when the dog's head suddenly turned away, head drooping in a way that almost made the mutt look depressed. Minato frowned at that. "Missing maybe? Where do you live?"

The dog padded over to the shrine and sat down next to the offertory box, turning its head towards the doors of the shrine. It let out two barks before turning back to face Minato.

"...So you live here then?" Minato asked.

Another bark.

"I see. So who..." Minato trailed off when he realized what he was doing. He let out a small chuckle and quickly got to his feet. He turned toward the stairs that led back down to the streets and away from the shrine and made his way towards them.

A series of barks made him stop a few feet shy of the stairs. Minato turned back to see the dog trailing after him, making small whines as it approached.

"I hope you don't think you're coming with me." Minato told the dog. "I look crazy enough for trying to talk with you, and can't afford to take care of a pet."

The dog let out another whine.

"...I'll probably be back at some point." Minato said finally.

"Will you still be here?"

The dog made a strong bark.

"Then we'll see each other again eventually." Minato said he scratched the dog one more time. "See you around."

The dog slobbered all over his hand just as he pulled back, making Minato laugh a little as the dog licked his fingers before he wiped them off on his pants. Minato waved and made his way down the stairs. When he reached the bottom he glanced back up at the top of the stairs. The dog had disappeared. Minato sighed and turned on his mp3 player. He decided it was about time he headed back to the dorm.

"Minato?"

Minato paused and left his headphones hanging off of his shoulders as he turned to address the person who addressed him. "Akihiko-senpai."

"I didn't expect to run into you out here." Akihiko said as he approached the junior. "What are you doing here?"

"Just decided to go for a walk. Familiarizing myself with the sights. See what's changed over the years." Minato said nonchalantly.

"Ah, that's right. You used to live here, didn't you?"

"...How would you know that?"

"I just remembered Mitsuru mentioning it offhand when she was talking about the two new students who would be transferring to our dorm. She checks out anyone who comes into the place. Specifically those who have the potential like us. She did the same with me." Akihiko said.

"So she can do that sort of thing, huh..." Minato murmured, a little uncomfortable that the senior could get ahold of his records so easily. It also explained how Yukari was able to look up him and Hamuko too. "I guess being the daughter of the head of the Kirijo Group has its benefits."

"Yeah. She's pretty amazing sometimes." Akihiko said. "You know, I'm actually glad I ran into you. I wanted to ask you a favor."

"...Okay."

"It's nothing major. Just when you get around to it I'd like a copy of your class roster."

"What for?"

"Mitsuru wants it. She didn't really tell me why she wanted it, but she did say she had something she wanted to look into."

"If she's the president of the student council, couldn't she just get it herself?" Minato asked.

"She asked me since she's already got enough to do as is. Running the student council, being the captain of the Fencing

Club, monitoring for Shadows at night, writing reports on what's going on at the dorm and occasionally helping Ikutsuki out with paperwork-

"Wait, reports? What does she report about?"

"Just how everyone's been doing in school and our performance during the Dark Hour. Ikutsuki is the one who asked her to do it. Says it's good research towards understanding the Dark Hour." Akihiko replied.

"Doesn't our privacy matter at all...?" Minato muttered, remembering the camera he found in his room and had recently covered up to keep others from spying on him. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "But sure. I'll ask Ekoda or someone else when I get the chance."

"Thanks."

"No problem. How's the arm?"

"Another month or so and it should be okay. So long as I don't put any strain on it, that is." Akihiko said, frowning disdainfully as he examined the cast under the sleeve of his shirt. "I can't wait to get back in the field. I'm afraid I'm losing my edge."

Minato listened his Senpai complain about his arm, nodding and giving short replies when appropriate as the duo headed back towards the dorm.

Hamuko nervously shifted in her seat as she felt his heavy gaze bore down on her. Yukari scooted a little ways away from her, silently withdrawing away from the pressure. Akihiko simply watched from a distance, curious about what Hamuko had done that had annoyed Minato so much. Hamuko glanced up and gave Minato a nervous smile while he continued to glare at her.

"Don't be mad."

Minato snatched his sketchbook away from her, hurriedly flipping through the pages as he checked to see what had been altered. Upon returning to the dorm with Akihiko he'd stumbled across Hamuko and Yukari huddling around his sketchbook which he had accidentally left on the coffee table the night prior. Hamuko had been scribbling something in his book with a pen. He'd immediately confronted her, stopping what he assumed to be either her messing with his drawings or preparing some other prank.

Minato's anger turned to confusion when he didn't notice any alterations made to any of his drawings. He stopped on one page to scan it more thoroughly, brow furrowing when he noticed what the girl had written inside.

"Merciless Maya, Muttering Tiara, Magic Hand, Venus Eagle... what is this?" Minato asked, noting each of the titles that were now placed above or below various drawings of the Shadows he'd drawn in the book over the past week or so.

"Oh, well, I was showing Yukari your drawings of the

"Shadows we encountered in Tartarus and thought about naming them." Hamuko said. "I mean, there are a lot of different types of Shadows and we need to differentiate between them, so what better way to do that than to give them all names!"

"Huh, that's actually not a bad idea." Akihiko said before Minato had a chance to respond. "I'm sure Mitsuru would think that's a good idea. We could even track their weaknesses this way so we don't forget."

"Sorry for not asking you before looking through your sketchbook." Yukari said, apologizing to Minato.

"...It's fine." Minato sighed, flipping through the pages to make sure just the names were added and nothing else. "I don't get some of these names though..."

"What do you mean? All of them fit and they all sound cool! What's wrong with them?" Hamuko asked, narrowing her eyes at Minato.

"All of you seem to be having fun."

Everyone turned towards the door as Mitsuru stepped inside. Akihiko quickly went about explaining what was going on and what Minato had been drawing. Mitsuru flipped through the sketchbook that eventually ended up in her hands, complimenting Minato on his artistic ability before smiling approvingly at both him and Hamuko.

"It's a wonderful idea. This would certainly help us gather data on the Shadows and help the Chairman and I refine our reports. It will certainly be easier to classify these Shadows by name instead of collectively referring to them all as Shadows." Mitsuru said. "Can I count on you both for this?"

"Drawing is more of a hobby for me. I didn't plan on making it a reference book." Minato said dryly. Plus, if someone was telling him to draw it made it seem more like homework...

"Don't be so against it! I'll help you out!" Hamuko smiled. "Whenever you draw a Shadow let me know and I'll give it a name! It'll be our little project."

"As leader of the squad, this would really help us as we explore Tartarus." Mitsuru said. "Just collaborate with Runako every once in a while. I don't want to make this a chore for you, but if you have the time..."

"Alright, alright." Minato sighed, taking his book back from Mitsuru. "I don't mind adding names and jotting down the weaknesses of Shadows in the spaces. Just don't hound me about it, okay?"

"Of course." Mitsuru nodded.

"Awesome! It's like our own little Monster Book!" Hamuko grinned. "Why don't we go to Tartarus today? Climb more floors and encounter more Shadows! Two birds with one stone!"

"I've no objections to that." Mitsuru said. She turned toward Minato. "What do you think?"

"Sure. Whatever." Minato sighed again. He glanced toward Yukari. "You want to join us?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, I don't mind." Yukari said. "We'll have to wait for Junpei though. I don't think he's back yet."

"Maybe I'll join you guys this time." Akihiko said.

"Akihiko... are you trying to make me angry?" Mitsuru said lowly.

Minato tuned out the members of SEES as he glanced down at his book. He flipped through the pages, thinking of how many Shadows they'd run into and how tall the tower was. Who knew how many more they'd run into? Minato paused as he came to the page that had both the Shadow they'd encountered during the night he and Hamuko had awakened their Personas and the black thing that had ripped itself out of his head.

...Well, there was a lot to think about. For now, they just had to do what they could.

Hopefully some answers would come in time.

A/N: That'll do. I extend my thanks to The Infamous Man for being my beta for this chapter.

I'd say give it one more chapter before getting to the first Full Moon battle. I still have a couple events to get out of the way and maybe one or three more Social Links then it should be set. I hope I can do the Priestess Shadow/the First Full Moon boss fight justice, and I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. Feedback is appreciated and I'll answer questions if anyone has 'em. Have a good one.

Kiiam

9. Chapter 8: Tagalong

Disclaimer: Don't own Persona.

A/N: Decided to update this one. Even if its only a side project, I'm having lots of fun writing it. Gotta love character development and seeing Minato and Hamuko bounce of one another! How I wish you could use both of them in the actual game. Anyway, enjoy.

Chapter 8: Tagalong

"Over here!"

Minato followed after Hamuko at his own pace, holding back a yawn as she tried to hurry him along. It was Sunday, the one day of the week where they could take a break from their studies. Originally, Minato's plans had been to sleep throughout most of the day and catch up on some sleep since they'd been spending a majority of the past few days exploring Tartarus. Maybe draw or read if he felt up for it. However, those plans had been thrown out the window when Hamuko had started banging on his door early in the morning and dragged him outside, saying there was something she wanted to show him.

"Couldn't this have waited until later?" Minato asked the girl, grouchy that he was walking around inside of relaxing back at the dorm.

"But it's important!" Hamuko insisted, having the said the same thing over and over to him as they walked through the city towards their destination. "I found it when I was out with Yukari yesterday and almost forgot to tell you."

Minato took a look at his surroundings, not seeing anything out of the ordinary. Paulownia Mall wasn't bustling with as much activity as it usually did, though that was expected when his watch's display indicated that the time hadn't even reached four numbers yet. He could see housewives doing some early morning shopping and businessmen making stops at fast food places to get a quick bite before heading off to work. There were also some of the Lost stumbling along, but Minato ignored them. With nothing really standing out, Minato was a little curious about what Hamuko wanted to show him.

"Here we are!"

Hamuko had stopped so abruptly that Minato had nearly knocked her over, but stopped just before bumping into her. Minato in front of him at the place they had stopped at, giving Hamuko a flat look.

"An alley?" Minato deadpanned, staring at the open space between the police station and the staircase that led up the second floor stores.

"No, it's not that. Come here!" Hamuko huffed, grabbing his arm and dragging him into the alleyway with her.

It was only after being pulled into the open space that he noticed the familiar blue glow coming from the back of the alley. Minato's eyebrows went up when he saw a familiar blue door.

"That's..."

"Right?" Hamuko grinned at him. "Now we don't have to stand around the Tartarus lobby anymore. We can just come here!"

Minato had to admit, this was a good find. The other members of SEES always gave him and Hamuko odd looks whenever they made some excuse to go visit the Velvet Room before heading into the Tartarus maze. It was a problem Minato noticed not long after their first couple fusions. Apparently their bodies just stayed behind, completely inert whenever they entered the Velvet Room. Of course, it's not like they were gone long as even though length of time they spent in the room varied, whenever they exited barely a few seconds had gone by in the real world. It still was an odd picture though, walking to the other end of the Tartarus lobby, standing around for a few second before giving the okay to head into the labyrinth. With this, that problem could be fixed.

"Can I go back to the dorm now?"

After all, it's not like his presence was needed anymore.

Hamuko gave him an annoyed look before gesturing to the door. "Actually, now that we're here wouldn't it be better to check in and get some new Persona? Remember what Mitsuru said last night before we stopped? There's supposed to be a powerful Shadow on one of the next few floors."

She had a good point. In the dozen or so floors they'd explored, Minato had begun to notice that a couple floors were completely devoid of Shadows save for a select few that were unique and slightly stronger than Shadows encountered before. Minato noticed the trend after they'd begun recording their progress in his sketchbook. On the fifth floor there had been a trio of Venus Eagles, and on the tenth there had been those large Dancing Hands. While they were still relatively easy to beat, they did pack a little more punch than other Shadows.

"...Alright then."

Hamuko grinned. "See? Now there's a sensible decision there, Leader!"

Minato rolled his eyes and pushed passed her, stepping inside the door while she hummed and skipped along after him.

There was no longer any disorienting feeling when entering the place. They'd done it so often over the past few weeks that all there was a moment of weightlessness followed by a bright flash of white before finding themselves standing in the blue room. Minato and Hamuko took their usual seats, turning to face the three residents who were always there to greet

and assist them.

Both Wild Card owners blinked when they noticed the most prominent resident was absent.

Igor was gone. Only Elizabeth and Theodore were present.

"Oh my. This is a surprise." Elizabeth said, eyes widening when she noticed her master's two guests. "We weren't expecting you until later. Has the tower already appeared?"

"Ah, no, nothing like that." Hamuko said, waving her hand to dismiss that inquiry. "Minato and I just found another door in the mall and decided to drop by. You know, why not? This way we can actually prepare for tonight rather than just drop in during the middle of our exploration."

"I see... I believe this should prove most efficient." Theodore smiled. "Such wise guests..."

"I can't tell if you're serious of making fun of us." Minato frowned.

"O-Of course not! I would never...!" Theodore coughed. "I'm not the sort of person who would mock others. I don't seem that way, do I...?"

The man was normally so composed, and seeing him so flustered due to Minato's offhanded remark gave the two guests pause.

"Er, no, you don't..." Minato muttered, sounding slightly

apologetic.

"Yeah! Theo-san is always really polite!" Hamuko asserted.

"I-I see. That's good to-"

"Please, you needn't flatter him. My little brother does need to be more mindful of his manners." Elizabeth said with a smile. "I'll be sure to inform our master upon his return. A little scolding will do him some good."

"S-Sister, you needn't-"

"S-Speaking of which, where is Igor-san today?" Hamuko asked quickly.

"Ah, yes. He's currently away attending other matters." Theodore said, regaining his calm. "Did you wish to perform Persona fusion? If so, my sister and I are more than capable of-"

"Now Theo, isn't good that they're here now?" Elizabeth asked, smiling as she gestured to the two guests who glanced at each other uncertainly. "An opportunity has presented itself, and nothing here happens without reason. That they would arrive when our master is absent... is that not significant?"

"...I would call it circumstance rather than anything of real meaning."

"So narrow-minded. My younger brother is but a child..." Elizabeth sighed.

"Sister, please. I'm an adult, and you shouldn't-"

The two Velvet Room residents' banter was interrupted when Hamuko started giggling at the two of them. Even Minato was unable to suppress a small smile as they argued.

"You two get along really well." Hamuko smiled. "Makes me wish I had a sibling."

Theodore gave a tired sigh, but smiled. "Well, she can be a troublesome sister that-"

"What was that, Theo?" Elizabeth asked, turning to smile at her brother.

"Ah...! No, it's nothing..."

"Well, as to what I was saying before, Theo and I were discussing the two of you before and thought of making a request. Several, in fact."

"What do you mean?" Minato asked.

"Sister, we really shouldn't. They are our guests, and we-"

"Be quiet, Theo." Elizabeth said before continuing as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Anyway, this room and the outside world are vastly different, and we've always been curious about the things the world outside the room contains."

"What it contains? What does that...?" Hamuko began before trailing off. Her eyes widened. "Wait, are you saying you two

have never been outside the Velvet Room."

"No. There have been times, rare though they may be, where we've had business in the outside world. But it was all done as work for our master." Elizabeth explained. "I have seen many things and learned while on those errands, but unfortunately have been unable to indulge myself as I like. My brother feels the same way."

"I confess, that the world in which you live has always fascinated me." Theo agreed. "Of course, as much as we wish to go out and explore, our duties to our master come first. As do our duties to the two of you, our honored guests."

"However, if it isn't too much trouble, will you accept our requests?" Elizabeth asked.

"You haven't told us what you mean by requests." Minato said, frowning.

"I mean just that. Theo and I would make requests of the two of you that are related to the outside world." Elizabeth replied. "The requests would vary. We may ask you to run an errand for us, or acquire something from the outside and bring it here to us. Some might even take you into the tower in which you're currently exploring."

"Should you accept these requests, upon completing them you would be rewarded." Theo went on. "These rewards would surely help you on your journey, and as you two are individuals with exceptional power I have no doubt in your

abilities to complete the jobs we'd give you."

"Aren't you just handing off your work to us...?" Minato asked.

"Not at all. This is a favor we are asking, and it is your choice whether or not to accept." Elizabeth smiled.

"So I'd do requests for Theo-san, and Minato would help Elizabeth-san?" Hamuko asked curiously.

"We hadn't intended to look at it like that... but I suppose it is fair." Theo murmured thoughtfully, glancing towards his sister. "After all, I am in charge of overlooking Hamuko-san's progress like you are in charge of looking after Minato-san."

"I suppose you're right. We'll only make requests of the guest we are attending to." Elizabeth nodded, turning to face Minato. "But only if they agree."

"I don't mind." Hamuko smiled, giggling a little when she saw Theo's smile broaden. "It's the least I could do since you've already done a lot to help me, Theo-san."

"You have my thanks." Theo said, bowing gratefully to Hamuko. "I'll try not to impose upon you too much."

Minato sighed to himself. Honestly, it sounded like nothing but trouble to him. He didn't want to spend what free time he had running around doing errands. Even so...

"You needn't feel obligated to complete requests immediately. It is up to you whether or not you accept requests, and none

would be anything of great urgency." Elizabeth told him, as if sensing his indecision. "This is just a humble request, and if you can't spare the time I understand."

Minato sighed. The way she said it made him feel bad for thinking of refusing.

"...Alright." Minato said finally, turning away when Elizabeth beamed at him. "Just don't request anything too outlandish, okay?"

"Thank you very much." Elizabeth said happily. "I anxiously await your cooperation."

Minato sighed while Hamuko gave him a smile and an encouraging nod. It felt like she was a mother commending her child for doing something thoughtful, and it kind of annoyed him. Hamuko ignored the way he glared at her as she stood up and stepped towards Theo.

"So! The reason we came here today. I've got these Persona, so what can I fuse...?"

"There you go. Hope you enjoy!

"Thank you!"

Hamuko thanked the vendor at the Octopia stand and hurried over to where Minato was sitting. The boy had wanted to return to the dorm after they'd finished their business in the

Velvet Room but she'd managed to drag him to the Strip Mall with her. Such a beautiful day wasn't meant to be spent wasting away indoors! It was a time to have fun and get active! She sat down at the table she'd left Minato at and pushed one of the two boats of takoyaki she'd bought at him, keeping the other for herself.

"Here!"

"Thank you."

"Mm...! Good!" Hamuko hummed appreciatively as she popped one of the snacks into her mouth. "Even if it doesn't use octopus, I think that's part of its appeal!"

Minato paused as he was about to eat one. "...What do they use instead?"

"I don't know. The vendor said it was a secret."

"That makes me a little nervous about eating them..."

"If you don't want them, I'll take them." Hamuko said, reaching forward to steal one of his snacks before he pulled his boat out of her reach. She giggled when he glared at her and quickly ate the piece of takoyaki he'd been holding. "Good, right?"

"Yeah..."

Of course, he was just happy to be eating something. He'd missed his chance of having any breakfast before when

Hamuko had dragged him outside.

The two sat in silence, Minato quiet as he ate while Hamuko's appreciation for her food was audible. She kicked her legs a few times under the table and fidgeted in her seat before leaning on her hands and staring at Minato. He arched an eyebrow at her when he caught her staring at him, but didn't say anything.

"So, how are things?" Hamuko asked with a smile.

"Fine."

"Enjoying school?"

"Moderately."

"You were really cool in Tartarus the other night. The way you took care of that Grave Beetle was amazing."

"Thanks."

"Have you gotten used to Iwatodai yet?"

"Well, I did used to live here. Didn't take too long to familiarize myself with the city again." Minato replied.

Hamuko's smile grew, happy that his response had been more than just one word. Honestly, trying to make conversation with Minato was trying to squeeze water from a stone sometimes. Hamuko liked to believe that she had broken through his stoic exterior somewhat, but he was still pretty blunt with her and

everyone else in the dorm. Speaking of which...

"Say, have you gotten any more of those Social Links?" Hamuko asked curiously.

"Have you?"

"I asked you first." Hamuko replied cheekily. "Well? Make any new friends?"

Minato gave an annoyed sigh. "It's only been a few weeks. I haven't really talked with anyone other than the other members of SEES."

"A few weeks is plenty of time to at least make some acquaintances!" Hamuko accused, dissatisfied with his answer. "Other than the Fool and Judgment Link, I've got Magician with Junpei, Lovers with Yukari, Chariot with Rio from my Tennis Club, Hierophant with an old couple I met, and Emperor with members of the student council. That's seven."

Hamuko frowned a little when an odd expression came over Minato's face before returning to his usual stoic one. He nodded towards her.

"Good for you."

"So? How many to you have?" Hamuko asked. "Other than Fool with me and Judgment with the rest of the SEES team?"

Minato stared at her for several moments before popping another takoyaki in his mouth. He chewed slowly, heightening

Hamuko's anticipation as she waited for his answer. Eventually, he swallowed and gave the girl a level look.

"One." Minato said nonchalantly before resuming his meal.

"That it?" Hamuko asked incredulously. "One new relationship?"

"Yep. Chariot with my club." Minato replied as he ate.

"Though I don't know if I'd go so far as to call it a relationship..."

"Ah... you're more antisocial than I thought." Hamuko moaned. "You've been jumping from place to place for so long you've forgotten how to make friends...!" Her eyes widened suddenly before she gave him an embarrassed look. "Or do you feel like I'm the only one you can really connect with...?"

"...Are you done?" Minato asked, unamused by her dramatics. Hamuko pouted before turning serious and crossing her arms.

"Seriously though, not even with anyone at the dorm?" Hamuko asked, honestly perplexed. "I mean, we've been fighting together the past few weeks. Don't you talk with any of them?"

"Of course I've talked with them."

"Are you nice to them?" Hamuko restated her question. After all, he could be a litte...

"I get along with Mitsuru-senpai and Akihiko-senpai well enough." Minato said. "Same goes for Yukari-san. Junpei and I have a tolerance for each other."

Hamuko sighed. "Is he still giving you a hard time about the leader thing?"

"That's stopped. Though he'll comment about it occasionally when he thinks I can't hear him." Minato said.

"Even so..."

Hamuko had seen the way Minato treated the other members in SEES. Save for the occasional sarcastic remark and general aloofness, he was actually quite polite and respectful. Even so, his formality and indifference to everything made him seem so distant. That was probably why he'd only formed one Social Link even though they'd already had plenty of time to get accustomed to Iwatodai and Gekkoukan, at least in her opinion. Of course, the difference between her and the rest of SEES was that Hamuko was willing to put forth the effort and try to get closer to him despite his attitude. She felt close to him, not only because they were both guests in the Velvet Room, but because they had a few other similarities that made her curious, and after talking to him a few times Hamuko earnestly wanted to get to know him better as a friend.

Of course, he still turned her down most chances he got. She didn't find it hard to imagine him turning away other friendly gestures in a similar manner.

"Just try to make a little more effort, okay?" Hamuko requested with a sigh. "It isn't that hard to make a couple friends."

"Whatever." Minato replied, making no commitment. "Why do you care so much anyway? What does it matter?"

"Don't you remember what Igor said? Forming Social Links, making friends, apparently makes our power stronger. It'll help us fight Shadows." Hamuko reminded him. "And ignoring the pragmatic aspect of that, we're going to spend the rest of high school here! Wouldn't it be more fun to have people to spend time with?"

Minato gave a tired sigh, and that look from before made a return. Hamuko narrowed her eyes at him, wondering why he looked so... pensive?"

"Social Links..." Minato muttered, almost sounding a little bitter. "Can they even be called relationships...?"

"Hm?" Hamuko tilted her head at him. "What was that?"

Hamuko would have asked him to speak up a little more and repeat what he just said, but a familiar figure near the line of shops caught her attention. Hamuko smiled and picked up her boat of takoyaki as she got to her feet. Ignoring Minato for a moment, she rushed over to greet the old man she'd recently met.

"Bunkichi-san! Good morning!"

The old man turned towards her, looking quite startled as Hamuko approached him and bowed to him in greeting. Bunkichi blinked at her and rubbed his chin as gazed at her, seemingly at a loss.

"Ah, hm... good morning to you too, young lady." Bunkichi smiled. "Er, sorry for asking this, but what was your name?"

"Eh?" Hamuko faltered for a moment. "You don't remember me? I'm from Gekkoukan..."

Hamuko jumped when Bunkichi suddenly started laughing. The old man grinned and gave her arm a pat, trying to stifle his own chuckles.

"I was just joking with you, Hamuko-chan. I'm not that old yet!" Bunkichi smiled.

"Oh... oh! That's mean, Bunkichi-san." Hamuko giggled. "I almost believed you for a minute."

"Sorry, sorry! I just couldn't resist. Hope I didn't hurt your feelings or anything." Bunkichi said, looking a little sheepish now.

"Don't worry about it! Are you just opening up?" Hamuko asked.

"Yep! Just getting ready to start the day!" Bunkichi said, turning towards his bookstore and flipping the sign to show that the store was open. "What about you, Hamuko-chan?"

"What brings you here?"

"Nothing much. I was just hanging out with a friend when I saw you and decided to come over and say hello." Hamuko smiled, gesturing to Minato who was still sitting at the table. She beckoned him over. "Minato!"

Minato sighed when Hamuko called out to him. He tossed his empty boat into the trash can and slowly trudged over to where Hamuko and the old man were standing. Hamuko pulled him forward when he was within arm distance of her so she could properly introduce him.

"Bunkichi-san, this is my friend Minato. Minato, this is Bunkichi-san." Hamuko smiled. "I met him and his wife about a week ago when I was shopping for books. They were really nice to me."

"Ah, Minato's your name then, hm?" Bunkichi asked, sizing the young man up. "Well, it's good to meet you, Minato-chan!"

"...Nice to meet you." Minato replied, bowing his head slightly towards the elderly man. He ignored the way the man referred to him.

"So, are you... oh, we shouldn't keep standing out here. We'd be blocking other customers from getting in!" Bunkichi said, motioning Hamuko and Minato into the store. Hamuko happily stepped inside and Minato followed after him. "Mitsuko, look who's here!"

"Hamuko-chan!"

Hamuko smiled when the old woman greeted her. She wasn't honestly a little embarrassed with how happy they seemed to be at seeing her.

"It's good to see you again." Mitsuko smiled warmly at the girl. She peered around her when she noticed someone else standing behind her. "And who's this?"

"Minato. Pleased to meet you." Minato introduced himself.

"Of course. I'm happy to meet a friend of Hamuko-chan's." Mitsuko smiled. "You'll have to excuse the mess. We've been meaning to clean up the store but haven't had the time."

"It is kind of messy. Do a lot of people come here?" Minato asked, making Hamuko glare at him for the remark.

"We have plenty of customers! We are the store with the most books!" Bunkichi laughed, the mild pun making Minato grimace slightly while Hamuko giggled a little. "It's mostly older folks those. Most kids your age prefer the manga café on the upper floors."

"I don't know. I think that this place has a sort of charm to it." Hamuko smiled, glancing around the shop. "It's quiet and relaxing. I actually might prefer this place to other stores."

"Even if you're just saying that, we appreciate it." Mitsuko said, giving an amused laugh.

Hamuko smiled back at her. "I don't say things I don't mean, Mitsuko-san."

"Ah, you really are a sweet girl..."

SMASH

Hamuko did a little cheer in her head when she managed not to flinch at the sound she was slowly growing accustomed to hearing.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Hierophant Arcana...

"Ah, that reminds me." Bunkichi said suddenly, shuffling over to where his wife was standing and opened a box on the floor. He peered up at Hamuko. "Do you like melon bread, Hamuko-chan?"

"Yep! Why do you ask?"

"Well, a neighbor of ours gave us some, he works at a bakery you see, and Mitsuko and I can't eat them all by ourselves. I was wondering if you'd be willing to take some off our hands." Bunkichi grinned, taking a packaged piece of the aforementioned bread.

"If you're offering," Hamuko smiled, extending her one hand out to take the package. "Thanks for the food!"

"What about you, Minato-chan? You're free to have some if you want." Bunkichi offered.

"Ah... thank you." Minato said, taking the bread that was held out to him.

"Want some of my takoyaki?" Hamuko asked, still having a couple pieces leftover. "Equal exchange for the bread?"

"Well! Don't mind if I do!" Bunkichi grinned, taking one of the pieces when Hamuko held the boat out to him. "Honestly, Hamuko-chan, you're such a nice girl! He could learn a thing or two from you!"

"Who?" Hamuko asked, tilting her head slightly in confusion.

"Ignore him, Hamuko-chan. He's just rambling." Mitsuko said. "Now, we shouldn't keep you here any longer. You kids shouldn't spend your whole day talking to us in an old bookstore. Plus, we really should get around to cleaning this place up. We really should make it look more presentable to other customers."

"Feel free to drop by anytime though! You too, Minato-chan! It was nice meeting you." Bunkichi smiled.

"It was nice meeting you too." Minato nodded, turning and heading towards the door.

"I'll drop by again soon!" Hamuko promised as they left. "Bye!"

The old couple waved the two Gekkoukan students off as

they exited the store. Hamuko finished off the last of her takoyaki before tossing the empty paper boat into the trash. Minato glanced back at the bookstore with a frown.

"What's wrong?" Hamuko asked.

"Wonder who they were talking about..." Minato wondered aloud. "Mitsuko-san looked pretty sad there for a moment."

"You think? Bunkichi-san's a little scatterbrained, and I think she was just didn't want him to go off on a rant."

Minato shook his head and decided not to bother thinking about the exchange too hard. When he looked back, he found himself facing Hamuko whose mouth was stretched into a wide grin with her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"...What?" Minato asked, unnerved by the way she was looking at him.

"So? Did you hear them?"

"Hear what?"

"The voices! You know! Social Links!" Hamuko huffed.

"No. Why? Did... oh." Minato's eyebrows went up when he realized. "So that was the old couple you formed a link with?"

"Yes." Hamuko said, crossing her arms. "I thought if I introduced you to them you might be able to form a link with them too."

"I barely talked with them."

"It was enough for me! It wouldn't kill you to be a little more outgoing!"

"Not all of us are social butterflies like you. I don't go out of my way to introduce myself to strangers." Minato said.

"Why are you so reluctant to make friends?"

"I'm not..." Minato said, getting a little annoyed by how she was pressing the issue. "It's just that friendship isn't something you can force or just make happen. It takes time. Now quit nagging me about it."

"Hmph... fine." Hamuko relented with a sigh. She stretched her arms and gave him a cheeky smile before turning and walking off. "Well, you'd better try and be more social. You'll fall way behind me at this rate!"

Minato stared after her for a moment before sighing and following after her. He pulled on his headphones and shoved his hands in his pockets, muttering to himself as his music began playing.

"Don't make it sound like it's some kind of contest..."

Minato was looking forward to Golden Week. It would be one last chance to slack off and relax before midterms began. Before he'd left for school this morning, Mitsuru had reminded

him not to forget the testing week even though it was time off. Junpei had groaned his displeasure at being reminded while Hamuko and Yukari hadn't seemed too bothered by it. Akihiko had chuckled at them, rationalizing the tests as a sort of training that needed to be prepared for. While Minato had ignored what his senpai thought was good advice, his brief exchange with the two older students had reminded him of something else he could get done before the long weekend.

"Here you are."

"Thank you."

"...If I might ask, why did you want a copy of our class roster, Arisato-san?"

Minato glanced up from the roster of Class 2-E at Ekoda, the man's suspicious eyes boring into him while his seemingly ever-present disapproving frown accompanied it. Minato sighed, wondering what he could have possibly done to make him seem suspicious in the eyes of his homeroom teacher, or rather he wondered what Ekoda thought he planned to do with a copy of the class roster.

"Just trying to find an easier way to get to know people." Minato replied, pulling a smile onto his face. "After all, the first step to knowing a person is knowing their name."

"Hmph. Don't try to be smart with me." Ekoda frowned. "And try not to fall asleep in class. Don't think I haven't seen you."

"Of course. Thank you, Ekoda-sensei."

Minato left the faculty room and shut the door behind him, letting out a sigh that was both tired and relieved as he walked down the hall. After the Kendo club had finished practicing Minato had headed to the faculty office to see if he could grab a copy of his class roster, though asking for one shouldn't have been as much trouble as it had been. Ekoda always assumed the worst of students, especially his own. At the same time, no matter how much the teacher complained about and criticized them, he never seemed to do anything about it.

Well, no use whining about it. He got what he wanted, now he just needed to deliver it to Akihiko.

"Minato-kun?"

Minato stopped by the shoe lockers when he heard someone call his name. He turned to see Yuko, changed out of her track suit she wore for the club and in her regular uniform.

"Hey, Yuko-san." Minato greeted his club manager

"You don't need that formality stuff with me. Just call me Yuko." The girl smiled as she opened her shoe locker. "I thought everyone went home already. What are you still doing here?"

"Just had to pick something up from the faculty office." Minato said, waving the paper he was holding a little to show her.

"Is that our class roster? That means you probably had to ask Ekoda." Yuko sighed. "Must've been a pain. He always makes everything so difficult."

"He gives you a hard time too?"

"Uh, duh? We're in the same class together." Yuko said, giving him a wry smile. "Don't tell me you didn't notice?"

Minato glanced down at the roster in his hands. Sure enough, there was her name along with a couple others he recognized from the Kendo Club.

"...Guess I didn't."

"You're lucky I'm not the overly sensitive type or I might actually be offended that you didn't know." Yuko grinned. "Why did you want that anyway?"

"It's not for me. Someone else asked me for it." Minato said. "I was going to go give it to him now."

"Oh. That's a shame."

"Why's that?"

"Well, if you weren't doing anything I was gonna ask if you wanted to get something to eat." Yuko said. "Do you have to do it now? We could just swing by the strip mall real quick and get something at Wild-Duck Burger."

"...Thanks, but I'd really just like to get this to him now."

Minato said.

"I understand." Yuko nodded, giving him a smile. "Maybe next time."

"...Yeah, maybe."

"Oh, before you go, just a heads up," Yuko said, stopping him before he left. He blinked when she smirked at him. "You've been doing really well in the club. I thought you were just a newbie, but you're actually pretty good."

"I'd thank you for the compliment, but why doesn't it sound like one?"

"Because it's meant to be a warning." Yuko smirked. "Kaz has noticed and plans to corner you during the next club meeting. He's really excited about fighting you. Just thought you should know."

"Joy." Minato deadpanned.

"Don't sound so depressed. I actually hope you beat him. Like I said before, I think it's best if someone takes him down a peg or two." Yuko smiled.

"...I'm not sure if I should be happy for your support or worried that you'd wish harm upon a fellow club member."
Minato said.

"Don't think too much into it." Yuko said dismissively, giving him one more smile before stepping past him. "See you later!"

Minato stared after her for a moment, surprised at how familiar she'd been with him. The rest of the club members were the same way, all of them pretty outgoing and friendly to a certain degree. He was actually having more fun in the club that he originally thought he would. Still, he wondered why everyone seemed to have such an easy time talking to him. Was it because they thought he shared their interest?

Minato stood in place for a few moments. The silence stretched on for a minute or two before he let out a sigh.

...Well, there was no point in thinking about it too much.

"Minato!"

The boy grunted when he felt something slam into his back. He grumbled and turned to see Hamuko smiling up at him.

"You..."

"Me." Hamuko smiled, sticking her tongue out at him. "Sorry if I surprised you. You were just standing there and I couldn't resist."

"It's fine." Minato sighed. A few weeks living with her and he was slowly and reluctantly getting used to her eccentricities. "You just come back from your club?"

"Yep. Had to stick around since some girls left early and I didn't want to leave Rio with all the work." Hamuko said. She glanced down at the paper in his hands. "What's that you've

got there?"

"The roster for my class. Akihiko-senpai wanted it and I was gonna give it to him when I got back to the dorm." Minato said.

"Oh, didn't you hear? He actually went to the hospital after school today to get his arm checked out. Might be a while before he gets back."

"I see..."

Well, he didn't mind. He'd just leave it on the lobby desk when he got back to the dorm then. Akihiko, Mitsuru or even Ikutsuki would be able to pick it up then.

Tatsumi Memorial Hospital was the same place Minato and Hamuko had woken up after they'd first awakened their Personas. Minato endeavored never to set foot in the place again after leaving, since the only reason he could imagine returning was if he sustained a grievous injury, something he was committed to avoiding for however long they planned to explore Tartarus for. That and hospitals always made him uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, his efforts were for naught given that Hamuko had taken him here after somehow deciding that they should deliver the roster to Akihiko while he was at the hospital.

"What is it about me that makes you want to drag me around

with you everywhere you go?" Minato asked tiredly as he and Hamuko walked through the hallways of the hospital.

"Come on, I'm sure Akihiko-senpai will appreciate the visit." Hamuko beamed at him. "Besides, it's not like you've got anything better to do. You never have anything to do."

"That's not-"

"This is his room, right?" Hamuko interrupted as they stopped in front of a room. Not waiting for Minato to respond, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. "Akihiko-senpai! Minato and I came to... eh?"

Minato stepped inside after Hamuko and found out what had derailed her usual excitement and fervor. Akihiko wasn't in the room, but rather the only one inside was a scowling young man sitting in a chair. He looked about their age, maybe older, and even though he was slouched a little in his seat Minato could tell he was quite tall. He wore a long maroon coat and most of his unkempt hair was hidden underneath a beanie. Minato thought he looked rather shifty, like how most delinquents dressed. The stranger glared at both Minato and Hamuko, with the latter shifting uneasily while Minato just sighed.

"Apparently this isn't his room." Minato said, sounding a little amused. "Nice going."

"B-But the nurse I asked said that... um..." Hamuko turned towards the delinquent, shooting him what she hoped was a

friendly smile. "Er... is Akihiko-senpai...?"

"What are you two doing here?"

Minato and Hamuko turned to find the actual person they were looking for standing behind them. Hamuko quickly composed herself, happy to see someone familiar and smiled at him.

"Ah, Akihiko-senpai! We came to visit you!" Hamuko smiled.

"What for? It was just a checkup..." Akihiko said, sounding confused.

"She was the one who wanted to visit you." Minato said, pointing to Hamuko. He took the he'd folded up out of his pocket and handed it to Akihiko. "I just wanted to deliver this."

"Oh, is this your class roster? I appreciate it." Akihiko smiled gratefully. "Still, you could've just waited until I got back..."

"Again, she was the one who wanted to visit you." Minato repeated. "I was just dragged along."

"Heh. I see." Akihiko chuckled. "Thanks anyway."

"Is that it, Aki?"

Minato saw Hamuko jump slightly at the deep baritone that came from behind them. The delinquent was standing up, confirming Minato's assumptions about his height as he towered at least a head above him and Akihiko. Their fellow SEES member smiled at him and nodded.

"Yeah. Thanks."

The young man gave an annoyed grunt and rolled his eyes.

"I don't have time for this shit..."

He stepped passed the three of them before turning back. He glanced at Minato, then Hamuko, then back. His eyes narrowed.

"You two..."

"...Yeah?" Minato asked, arching an eyebrow. The delinquent kept staring at him before shaking his head.

"Never mind." He nodded to Akihiko before exiting the room.

"...Huh." Hamuko stared after him before turning towards Akihiko with an inquisitive look on her face. "Who was that?"

"A friend from school... sort of." Akihiko explained hesitantly. "He actually knows a few people who've been suffering from Apathy Syndrome and I was asking him about it."

"He goes to our school?" Minato asked. "I haven't seen him around..."

"Ah, well... he skips a lot." Akihiko sighed. "Mitsuru tried talking to him a few times about that but he doesn't listen. She eventually just let it go though..."

"Our student council president knows this delinquent and lets

him do whatever he wants?" Hamuko asked, sounding admonished. "That doesn't sound like the president I know!"

"Well, she has her reasons. After all, he's..." Akihiko trailed off, shaking his head before smiling at his two underclassmen. "You know, since you guys took the trouble to come visit me, how about we stop by Hagakure on the way back? It'll be my treat."

"Can we get one of the specials?" Hamuko asked, eyes sparkling.

Akihiko smirked. "What else would we get?"

"Good point!" Hamuko giggled and gave Minato a hopeful look. "You're going too, right?"

Minato shrugged, giving Akihiko a tired smile. "Sorry to impose on you."

"Don't worry about it." Akihiko smiled. "Let's get going."

Hagakure was having a rush hour it seemed, and the three members of SEES were barely able to place their order and grab a booth before the entire place was bustling with activity. Minato glanced around the restaurant, seeing others wearing the Gekkoukan uniform.

"This place is pretty popular." Minato observed.

"Of course. Their food is great and the special is amazing."

Akihiko smiled. "You've never been here before?"

"Of course he hasn't." Hamuko said, answering for Minato before he could reply. "The only time he ever leaves the dorm is during the Dark Hour when we explore Tartarus and when I take him out with me."

"Don't listen to her." Minato sighed, glaring at Hamuko. "And don't describe it like that. You make me sound like I'm some sort of pet."

"You said it, not me. I didn't suggest anything like that." Hamuko said, flashing him a mischievous smirk. "So you admit to your own withdrawn behavior?"

"You two really do get along." Akihiko smiled, chuckling as the duo bantered. "Things have definitely gotten livelier since you guys transferred in."

"We're happy to assist and entertain." Hamuko grinned. "Aren't we, Minato~?"

Minato only sighed.

"Mitsuru's got nothing but praise regarding you two. Since you both joined SEES, along with Yukari and Junpei we've made more progress than ever before." Akihiko said, sounding pleased.

"We do our best." Hamuko said modestly. She pounded her fist as she remembered something. "Oh, that's right! There's

something I've always wanted to ask you, Akihiko-senpai."

"What is it?"

"How did you join SEES?" Hamuko asked curiously, leaning forward a little in her seat.

"You mean like how I met Mitsuru and the chairman?" Akihiko asked.

"Sure."

"Well, it'd take a little while to tell you the whole story, but long story short they found out I had the potential and scouted me." Akihiko said. "It hadn't been too long since I joined the Boxing Club at school. I wanted to get stronger, and fighting Shadows seemed like a good way to get some training."

"So, you joined to get stronger?"

"In a nutshell. I'm curious to see how strong I can get." Akihiko smirked. It disappeared after a moment and he clenched his fists as he remembered something. "Plus, I know what it feels like to be powerless... and I wanted to fix that."

"I see..." Hamuko said softly. "Why did-"

"Number 83! Three specials!" The chef's voice suddenly called out, heard beyond the mass of bodies surrounding the counter. "Number 83, your order is ready!"

"That's us. I'll get it." Akihiko said, making a move to get up

before Hamuko beat him to it.

"Not so fast! You shouldn't move your arm until it's healed and you'll need both to carry three hot bowls." Hamuko chided him. She smirked at him. "Besides, imagine what Mitsuru-senpai would say if she heard you were straining it."

"Ah... I'll leave it to you then." Akihiko relented, flashing the girl a sheepish smile which she returned with a sweet one.

"I'll be right back. You two wait here." Hamuko ordered before hurrying away.

"She's pretty energetic, isn't she?" Akihiko mused, chuckling a little.

"...So what happened?"

Akihiko blinked at the sudden question. He peered over at Minato who quickly averted his gaze.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to ask that question aloud." Minato said, sounding apologetic. "It's your business, and you've probably got your own reasons for joining SEES."

"It's fine." Akihiko dismissed the apology. He glanced down at his arm, which was still bound in a cast. "It was my fault for getting a little morbid there anyway. Suffice to say, I lost someone very precious to me because of my own weakness... and I needed to get stronger so I wouldn't lose anyone like that again."

"...I see." Minato nodded, not sure what else he could respond with. He was all too familiar with what it was like to lose someone close to you.

"It's why I'm frustrated about this arm." Akihiko said, giving the cast a disdainful look. "I've wasted so much time healing. I need to get back to training. After hearing about all the progress you made I'm worried I'm starting to fall behind."

"There are no storage of Shadows in Tartarus. I'm sure once you fully recover you'll have plenty of time to get back in the swing of things, senpai." Minato said wryly.

"Actually, about that... when my arm does recover, would you mind it if I let you keep leading the team?"

"...Why?"

"It's a little selfish, but if you're leading I can just focus on fighting. Plus, you already seem pretty natural at it. I just think it would be strange if we switched leaders now after all this time." Akihiko said. "Mitsuru chose you not just for your power, but she honestly thought you'd make a good leader. I agreed with her. So, what do you say?"

"...I don't know what it is about me the two of you think I'd make a good leader, but I don't mind." Minato sighed, giving Akihiko a resigned smile. "I don't mind staying as leader."

"Thanks." Akihiko smiled. "And just because I'm not the one leading doesn't mean I won't contribute. I'll have your back

whenever we're out in the field. Well, once I recover anyway."

Minato smiled a little. "Well then, I'll be counting on you."

Akihiko smirked. "Of course."

SMASH

Minato nearly jumped in his seat when he heard the sound of glass breaking.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Emperor Arcana...

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Emperor with the Akihiko Sanada...

Minato was completely still, blinking as he slowly registered what had just happened.

"Something wrong?" Akihiko asked curiously, frowning at the odd expression on Minato's face.

"Ah, it's nothing." Minato said quickly. "So, er, that friend of yours who was at the hospital... does Mitsuru-senpai know him?"

"You're pretty perceptive, huh? How'd you know?"

"You mentioned Mitsuru talking with him so I assumed she knew him too." Minato replied before a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Wait, is he-"

"Food's here!"

Minato forgot his question when the alluring smell of Hagakure's special ramen bowl overwhelmed his senses. Hamuko grinned as she sat down next to him, setting her own bowl down in front of her while she pushed Akihiko's bowl towards him. She turned and gestured the bowl in front of Minato.

"You'll love this stuff. Best ramen that ever exists." Hamuko smiled.

"...Smells great." Minato said honestly, picking his chopsticks up and nodding gratefully to Akihiko. "Thanks for the meal."

"Yeah! Thanks for this!" Hamuko said, also showing her own gratitude.

"Don't worry about it." Akihiko smiled. "Eat up. This stuff's best when it's fresh."

Both Minato and Hamuko agreed with him there, and with that the three SEES members began digging into their food, slurping on the noodles contentedly as they enjoyed their meal together.

Minato opened the door to his room and collapsed on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as he reflected on his day.

It had been surprisingly pleasant. While he'd been initially annoyed with Hamuko for dragging him around, he'd actually enjoyed the time he'd spent with her and Akihiko. After they'd finished their meal, they'd spent a little time making idle conversation and hanging around the strip mall before heading back to the dorm. Akihiko and Hamuko had both bid him a good night before returning to their rooms. Apparently Mitsuru had some business she needed to take care of, so Tartarus was a no go. Minato was fine with that. It wasn't like they had to spend every night exploring the place.

Still, it had been a long time since he'd taken the time to hang out with classmates. He'd sort of given up making connections after growing adjusted to his constant moves. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to have a day like today every once in a while.

Minato sighed, idly noting his lights going out as the Dark Hour began. He closed his eyes, intending to use the extra hour to get a little more sleep.

"Hi there."

Minato shot up from the bed when he heard a voice right beside his ear. His heart pounded as his eyes darted around the room, looking for the source of the voice. His eyes eventually fell upon a small boy in striped clothing standing next to his bed. Minato's eyes widened when he realized he knew the boy.

"You..." Minato whispered, recognizing the boy he'd met upon first coming to the dorm and meeting again after he'd agreed to join SEES.

"How've you been?" The boy asked, smiling warmly at Minato and acting as if it was natural to be there next to him.

"I... you..." Minato wasn't sure how to respond to him. The boy chuckled, seemingly amused by Minato's reaction before his face sombered.

"You know... one week from now there will be a full moon."

Minato stared at him. Even if he sounded nonchalant, the boy's words still made him a bit uncomfortable.

"Be careful." The boy suddenly warned him. "A new ordeal awaits you..."

"What...? An ordeal?" Minato asked, wishing that the kid would be a little more specific and less cryptic. "And what does a full moon have to do with anything?"

"Yes. On those days, you will face your greatest challenges." The boy said. "Time is of the essence, and you must be prepared."

The boy smiled at him.

"But I'm sure you aware of that." The boy said cheerfully. "I'll see you again when it's over. Goodbye."

"Hey, wait, what are-!"

Minato reached out to grab the boy but his hand found nothing but air. He glanced around his room warily, not seeing the kid anywhere. He disappeared. Eventually, Minato gave a tired sigh and fell back onto his bed.

"So much for getting some sleep." Minato grumbled to himself.

An ordeal? Just what had that kid been talking about...?

A/N: And done. Next chapter... the first Full Moon Boss! Priestess Shadow incoming! Well... hopefully, anyway.

Hamuko is clearly far ahead of Minato in terms of Social Links, what with him only just now getting his second link. He'll get better as he does have reasons for being reserved about it now, other than his social awkwardness as alluded to in this chapter. However, this also is an example of what I meant how some Social Links would change/be different for Minato and Hamuko. Minato's link with Akihiko is the Emperor Link, while Hamuko's (when eventually established) link with him will be Star as it was in her story. There are others that have changed, or there will be new ones completely, and I hope those reading look forward to seeing how the links and relationships between the characters develop.

Anyway, feedback is always appreciated and I hope those who read are still interested in the story. I'll fix any grammar

mistakes later. Next chapter will come whenever I finish writing it up. Thanks as always for reading, and I wish you all happy days. Farewell.

Kiiam

10. Chapter 9: Ordeal

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Here we go, new chapter. Finally getting to the first Full Moon Shadow. And Minato actually advances his links! Crazy chapter, this one! Enjoy!

Chapter 9: Ordeal

"What's with the box?" Yukari asked curiously, leaning over the couch and staring at the package that was in Hamuko's lap.

"Just something my parents sent me. Probably something for Children's day." Hamuko smiled, pointing to the calendar that was hanging next to the desk in the dorm's lobby.

"Oh. Aren't you a little old to be getting gifts today though?" Yukari asked.

"No child is ever too old to get gifts from their parents. Even adopted ones like me." Hamuko said cheerily as she tore open the box, beaming happily when she pulled out what was inside. "Ah, perfect! Mom made cookies!"

"Quite a lot too." Yukari noted, spotting several plastic bags in

the box. "You going to eat all those?"

"You bet! Mom makes the best cookies and these should last me for a few weeks." Hamuko giggled before grabbing a bag of cookies and holding it out to Yukari. "But I don't mind sharing. Take one!"

"Wha... y-you don't have to!" Yukari said, cheeks flushing a little at the offer. "They're your gift, after all..."

"Nah, even this much is unusual. She probably meant for me to share. She's thoughtful like that." Hamuko grinned.

"Seriously, take some. I'll take it as an insult if you don't."

"Alright, alright. Thanks for the cookies." Yukari sighed, bemused as she accepted.

"What about you, Minato? Want some?" Hamuko asked.

The referred to was sitting on the couch opposite to Hamuko drawing in his sketchbook. He fumbled a little to catch the bag that was thrown at him before he had a chance to reply. He glared at Hamuko who just gave him her usual smile before stuffing the bag into his pocket.

"Much appreciated." Minato said, politely showing his gratitude.

"Tell me what you think of them later. Mom will be happy to hear when I thank her." Hamuko smiled as she sat up. She turned to Yukari. "Ready to go?"

"I was just waiting for you. Ready when you are." Yukari smiled.

"Going somewhere?" Minato asked curiously.

"We're going to spend our last day off at Paulownia Mall. Have a little fun before going back to school." Hamuko grinned. "Maybe see if we can sneak into Club Escapade."

"No we're not." Yukari sighed, narrowing her eyes at Hamuko. "They'll throw out any minors they catch."

"Pretty sure it's closed during the day anyway." Minato added.

"That's no fun..." Hamuko pouted before glancing at Minato. "What about you? Got any plans for today?"

"Not really."

"Well then, why not join us?" Hamuko asked, glancing toward Yukari. "You don't mind, right Yukari?"

"I'm fine with it." Yukari said, shrugging her shoulders.

"So?" Hamuko gazed at Minato imploringly.

"...I'm fine." Minato replied, ignoring Hamuko's disappointed sigh. He continued scribbling in his sketchbook. "I just want to relax today."

"Alright then." Hamuko conceded as she stood up. "Let's get going, Yukari."

Minato didn't look up from his sketchbook as the two girls left, barely listening as he heard the lobby door shut as they departed. He sat alone in the spacious lobby, with only the sounds of his pencil scratching against his paper as he drew being heard. After a few minutes Minato let out a tired sigh, putting his pencil down and leaning his head back against the couch.

"A new ordeal awaits you..."

Minato muttered that to himself as he mulled over what he'd heard from that strange kid a few nights ago. Seeing the boy again was a surprise in itself, but what annoyed him was that he had nothing but cryptic things to say and Minato could make little sense of what his words meant. He didn't discount the importance of the boy's words or his presence though. His words had to have some meaning, but what...?

He glanced around the room, taking note of how empty it was. Junpei had left earlier to hang out with some friends from school and both Akihiko and Mitsuru had their own errands to run. It was just him inside the dorm, alone with nothing but his own troubling thoughts.

Minato closed his sketchbook and tossed it onto the coffee table before getting to his feet. Though he'd refused Hamuko and Yukari's invitation, he supposed getting a little fresh air wouldn't hurt.

He could only think of one place that was suitable.

Minato took a brief look around as he stepped onto the shrine grounds. Even on the holidays the place was pretty vacant, though that wasn't entirely unexpected given that most people were probably just hanging out with their friends and family. He did spy a small girl trying to talk with a boy her age near the jungle gym, pointing to the playset and seemingly trying to coerce him into playing with her. Minato ignored them for the most part and made his way to the front of the shrine, staring at the offertory box as if he were expecting it to somehow give him answers. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't stop mulling over the kid's words throughout the entirety of Golden Week and even now it was all he could think about. The ordeal the mysterious boy had mentioned...

"...The only significant thing that would qualify as any sort of ordeal would have to be the Dark Hour." Minato muttered to himself.

The ninth of May... something out of the ordinary was going to happen, or at least something more unusual than what had already happened. Minato could assume that much at the very least. He had some suspicions about what the mysterious boy had alluded to, but he didn't want to jump to conclusions when there was still so much that was unclear.

Fishing around in his pocket, Minato retrieved a couple of coins and tossed them in the box in front of him. He placed his palms together and muttered a quiet prayer before stepping away. He gave a tired sigh, wishing there was more he could do.

"Well, we'll have to be careful at the very least..." Minato murmured, deciding that it might be best for the SEES team to take it easy for the next couple days. Even if specific details were nonexistent, Minato greatly appreciated the warning itself. It would give them a little time to prepare...

A loud bark followed by something furry knocking into his side finally tore Minato away from his thoughts, and the young man felt a smile come onto his face as the dog he'd met before happily licked his fingers.

"Koromaru." Minato greeted the dog, kneeling down and scratching the dog behind his ears. "Good to see you."

The dog gave a few enthusiastic barks before settling down, content with the scratches he was receiving. The dog was always at the shrine, and Minato always ran into him during the few times he visited. He'd even stumbled across the mutt while coming back from school a few times. He'd only recently learned the dog's name from a priest who had been cleaning the shrine during his last visit. Apparently his owner had been a monk who lived at the shrine, who had apparently died in an accident a few months ago. The other priests and monks made no claims to taking ownership of the pup, but made sure he was well fed at the very least. The dog seemingly stuck around of his own choice. Minato assumed it was loyalty toward his owner's former home.

"Um, excuse me..."

Minato and Koromaru both turned to face the person who had

addressed them. Minato noticed that it was the boy he'd seen over by the jungle gym, awkwardly shuffling his feet as he gestured to the offertory box he and Koromaru were in front of.

"Could you move please...?"

"Ah, sure." Minato said, quickly standing to his feet and stepping away from the box. Koromaru trotted away, sitting down on his hindlegs next to Minato and watched the child curiously.

The boy gave Minato a brief nod of thanks before stepping in front of the offertory box and dropped in a couple coins. Minato raised his eyebrows a little at the child's solemn expression as he put his hands to together in prayer. It was odd enough seeing children wandering around in a shrine, but stranger than that was a kid his age making voluntary offerings and actually having something to pray about. Children weren't easily troubled, naiveté and immaturity making them oblivious to most thing, or at least Minato always thought so.

"Spending Children's Day at a shrine of all places?" Minato found himself asking after the child had finished praying. The child jumped a little, seeming surprised that he had been addressed, blinking guilelessly at Minato who gestured over to the jungle gym where the girl the boy had been talking with earlier was playing by herself. "Why not go play with your friend instead?"

"Oh, um... she's not my friend. I just see her here sometimes."

Minato eyebrow rose a little higher at that. His words seem to imply that he visited the shrine a few times before. "You come here often?"

"Sometimes. It's a quiet place and gives me time to think." The boy replied. He gazed at his feet, face contorting in dejection. "I'm in mourning, you see..."

"...I see." Minato said, expression softening. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." The boy sniffed, wiping his nose before looking back up. "What about you, mister?"

"Getting some fresh air. Wanted to think about a few things." Minato replied, smiling when Koromaru walked over to the boy and began licked his fingers, earning a small smile from the kid who gave the dog a couple of friendly scratches. After giving a few moments of thought, Minato pulled the bag of cookies he'd received from Hamuko out of his pocket and held them out to the boy whose eyes widened in surprised. "I don't know how recent your tragedy is, and it probably isn't my place to say, but you should at least try to have fun on a day like today. This is your day, after all."

While Minato was aware of his own rather blunt personality, he had a sort of soft spot for kids. There was just something that twisted in his gut whenever he saw a child who was sad

or crying. He couldn't ignore it as easily as he could other things. He acknowledged that the reason for that was because of the hard times he went through as a kid.

Minato was relieved when the kid took the bag and cracked a small smile at him, even if it was admittedly a little strained.

"Yeah... I'll try." The boy said, opening up the bag and sampling the cookies. "...These are really good!"

Minato was a little regretful that he hadn't had a chance to taste one, but was glad that the kid's mood seemed to improve after taking a bite. "Glad you like them."

"...Thanks for today, mister." The boy said earnestly, bowing to Minato in gratitude. "I hope you enjoy today too."

With that polite and formal goodbye that slightly baffled Minato, the child turned and left down the stairs that led away from the shrine. Minato stared after him for a few moments before Koromaru's barking caught his attention.

"Does that kid come here a lot?" Minato found himself asking.

Koromaru gave a small whine in response, looking in the direction the boy had left to with a look that almost seemed sympathetic. It was surprising for Minato to have a dog look so expressive.

"Wonder what happened..." Minato idly wondered. He glanced back at the jungle gym where the girl was, seemingly

gotten tired of the playset and was idly kicking her legs as she sat on the bench next to the playground. Minato turned back towards Koromaru. "Why don't you be her playmate? I'm sure she'd be happy.

Koromaru gave a short bark and nudged into him. Minato shook his head at that, not budging in response to the dog's light pushes.

"Not me. I've actually got to get going." Minato replied, sighing at the dog's dejected look. Minato pulled his lips up a little. "Maybe next time, okay?"

Koromaru gave a happy bark before dashing over to the girl. Minato watched the girl who jumped in surprised when Koromaru suddenly appeared in front of her, but laughed happily when the dog began licking. She gave the dog a few pats and scratches before jumping off the bench and running around the playground with Koromaru chasing after her. Minato watched the scene in amusement before leaving the shrine.

A cry that sounded both surprised and pained echoed through the gymnasium followed by several startled gasps from the onlookers who watched as Minato knocked Kazuto's shinai away and struck the left side of the padding that protected the boy's torso. Minato quickly stepped away from Kazushi, shinai still held in front of him even as Kazuto fell to his knees. All the other members of the Kendo Club were silent until Yuko stepped forward.

"M-Minato wins!" Yuko announced. She glanced down at Kazushi whose heavy breathing could be heard even with his helmet on, shaking her head in slight disbelief before giving Minato a wide grin. "Nice job!"

Minato was surprised and slightly flattered when a handful of the other club members started applauding him. They all quickly surrounded him, voicing their congratulations and clapping the boy on the shoulder.

It had been decided that they'd be doing practice matches today, and as soon as Takenozuka had made that announcement Kazushi had immediately stepped up and challenged Minato to a match. He'd accused Minato of being better than he had initially implied, citing his excellent performance even as a newcomer to the club and that he already had a number of wins under his belt from matches with other members of the club. Minato could do nothing but accept the challenge he'd been issued.

To the shock of everyone present, he'd managed to beat the club ace. And quite soundly too.

"Excellent work, Minato!" Takenozuka commended him, a wide smile on his face. "This is the first time I've seen someone beat Kazushi in a long time. It's astonishing how much you've improved in such a short period of time. You're a natural!"

"S-Seriously..." Kazushi said, finally speaking up as he removed his helmet. He grimaced, but was still smiling. "I

knew you were skilled, but man... my side is killing me. You beat me pretty good."

"You're taking your loss better than I thought you would." Yuko commented as she helped him up.

"Hey, you learn a lot from losing. I just need to toughen up, that's all!" Kazushi grinned, chuckling as he watched Minato pull off his helmet. "Look at that guy... you're not even winded! You got some kind of secret training you do at home?"

Minato couldn't help but smirk a little at the question, thinking of the additional practice he'd gotten fighting Shadows in Tartarus.

"...Something like that." Minato replied.

"I knew it. Otherwise I wouldn't be like this." Kazushi said, gesturing to himself. Unlike Minato, he had a lot more sweat to show how much he'd been pushing himself. "Guess I've still got a long way to go..."

"That's a good attitude to have, Kazushi." Takenozuka smiled. "I saw a few areas in your form that could use work, and once you've practiced a little more I'm sure you'll be able to match Minato in no time." The teacher turned to Minato. "Again, impressive work Minato. I'm glad that you seem so dedicated to the club. It's very encouraging to see! If all of us put in that extra effort, I think we could go pretty far in the regionals!"

As Takenozuka-sensei began giving a pep talk to the club,

Kazushi approached Minato. The boy clapped him on the shoulder giving him a wide grin.

"Better watch out. I'll beat you next time." Kazushi challenged with a smirk. "I won't hold back just because you're a newbie anymore."

In spite of himself, Minato couldn't help but feel a little competitive towards his challenge. He was proud of his victory, and if he faced Kazushi again he had no intentions of losing.

"Looking forward to it." Minato returned with a confident smile.

SMASH

Minato flinched at the sound echoing in his mind.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Chariot Arcana...

"Didn't expect that..." Minato thought to himself with a slight frown. It was hard to predict the triggers of these Social Links...

"Listen to you, trying to make it sound like you were still holding back." Yuko admonished, clicking her tongue as she approached the two of them, clearly overhearing Kazushi.

"Don't act like you weren't giving it your best effort. Guess you

are a little bit of a sore loser after all."

"A-Am not! I was just, y'know, I kinda did take it easy on him in the beginning." Kazushi protested.

"Sure you did."

"That's... shut up!" Kazushi pouted, ignoring Yuko and turning back to Minato. "Seriously though, I'm glad someone like you showed up. I feel like I can really push myself to my limits against you. I couldn't ask for a better rival!"

"Rival, huh..." Minato said bemusedly.

"You bet! Just you wait, Minato. The next win's gonna be mine!"

Minato rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Even as he said so, Minato couldn't help the small smile that crawled onto his face.

"Welcome back."

"We're back!" Hamuko said, responding to Mitsuru's greeting with a smile as she the other juniors staying at the dorm stepped inside. Mitsuru was the only one who appeared to be home, and she looked quite busy. There were several papers and folders scattered around on top of the coffee table, drawing curious looks from those who had just arrived.

"What's all that, senpai?" Yukari asked, voicing her curiosities aloud. "That's a lot of paper..."

"Did you bring student council work home?" Hamuko asked, making her own assumption about the papers.

"You make it sound like that's a bad thing. I don't mind devoting some of my free time to organizing the council's affairs." Mitsuru said wryly. "But no, you're incorrect in your assumption. These are just some reports I'm looking over."

"What kind of reports are they?" Minato asked, also curious.

"They're actually progress reports on our Tartarus explorations that I've compiled as well as notes the chairman has written up on the Dark Hour." Mitsuru said.

"The chairman? So he actually does contribute..." Junpei mused.

"Junpei!" Yukari admonished.

"What? I'm just sayin'..."

"My, do you really think so little of me?"

Hamuko jumped when she the chairman suddenly stepped out of the kitchen, coffee mug in one hand and a folder in another. Junpei brought his arms up and began waving them around, immediately backpedalling.

"Er, no, that's... I mean I didn't...!"

"It's fine, it's fine. I'm not offended." Ikutsuki smiled as he sat down on the chair adjacent to the couch Mitsuru was sitting on. "After all, you all do far more than I."

"You should really watch what you say, Junpei." Yukari scolded him.

"It just slipped out." Junpei muttered, giving Ikutsuki an apologetic look. "Sorry about that, Ikutsuki-san."

"I told you, it's fine! I actually feel bad that I can't do more." Ikutsuki smiled. "After all, it's because of your exploration of Tartarus that we've been able to learn so much."

"Like what?" Minato asked, taking a seat on a chair. He honestly did want to know a little more about the Dark Hour.

"Well, for starters we've learned that there are multiple types of Shadows, at least far more than we initially thought there to be. I've categorized them into twelve categories based on the data Mitsuru has gathered from scanning them with her Persona."

"The Major Arcana," Minato stated aloud, picking up one of the papers nearby that had a list on Shadow classifications on it. "From a tarot deck. Why?"

"It's what my scans show, or rather, what I feel when scanning Shadows." Mitsuru said. "It's hard to explain, but it was decided long ago even when we only had miniscule amounts of data that this was the most apt way to classify

them. We do the same for Persona, as you know."

Minato stared at the list. It wasn't entirely unexpected, after all they classified their Personas the same way. The Velvet Room Residents also referred to Persona by designated Arcana.

...It was only now that he had data in front of him to compare that Minato realized the connotation. He glanced at Hamuko, who gave him a nod only he noticed to show she realized as well.

"...Thinking about it, there's really not a whole lot we know about Shadows and Persona even after being here for over a month. Same with the Dark Hour." Minato thought to himself.

Hadn't that been one of his goals in the beginning? He should've asked more questions and done a little more digging by this point. Still, what to ask...

"We've also managed to compile ample data on their strengths and weaknesses, as well as other subtleties in their actions and behavior." Ikutsuki went on, Minato breaking away from his own thoughts so he could listen. "But that's just the surface. We've actually learned far more about how Shadows affect the real world as well. Specifically their connection to those who've been diagnosed with Apathy Syndrome."

"The Lost..." Hamuko murmured.

"Precisely." Ikutsuki nodded. "As I believe I mentioned before,

Shadows prey on the minds of the living. While those with the potential like all of you are capable of defending themselves as well as being immune to the effects of the Dark Hour, those without the gift cannot. The Shadows that get out of Tartarus hunt people down, and attack them even while they're asleep in their coffins."

"So the coffins don't protect people from Shadows?" Yukari asked tentatively.

"Well, rather than protect them, it acts as a sort of boundary." Ikutsuki explained. "Regular people aren't aware that the Dark Hour exists, and are asleep throughout its duration. The coffins keep many from being noticed by Shadows... but there are plenty that Shadows still prey on. Thus, whatever happens during the Dark Hour, it isn't possible for them to notice that they've been attacked, though we can see the effects. Heightened stress levels, bouts of dizziness, increased paranoia, and in some cases short-term memory loss are all signs or symptoms that a person may have been attacked during the Dark Hour. It's not physical damage, but more related to the mind, or perhaps more accurately, to one's psyche."

"For the more extreme cases where one's psyche has been completely devoured, people develop Apathy Syndrome and become one of the Lost." Mitsuru said. "While people can recover from the damage, it can take anywhere from weeks to months before someone comes out of it. The worst case recorded was a man in his late twenties who remained in a vegetative state for well over three years. He lost many years

of his life before finally coming out of it."

"D-Dude..." Junpei whispered.

"That's horrible..." Hamuko said softly.

"Ah, you shouldn't worry about it too much! It's been years since we had a case like that and the longest anyone has remained in that state since then is about a year! Don't get so depressed over something that happened in the past!" Ikutsuki said cheerfully.

"...You're way too dismissive of this." Minato said.

"Not dismissive, Minato-san. It's because I have faith in all of you." Ikutsuki chuckled. "I haven't told you our most heartening discovery. Turns out, your actions have solved most of the cases for those with Apathy Syndrome!"

"What?" All four juniors said in unison.

"Yes! The more Shadows you defeat, the more of the Lost are cured of Apathy Syndrome!" Ikutsuki proclaimed, making everyone but Mitsuru's eyes widen.

"S-Seriously?" Junpei gaped.

"Yes. From what research we've gathered, it seems that as more Shadows are defeated the more of the Lost seem to recover. Since you all started, the longest case has been a little less than two weeks." Ikutsuki smiled. "I've theorized that whenever a Shadow is defeated, the psyches and energy

they've consumed return to its source and the damage they've done disappears. They lose a connection... have no more base to exist, I suppose. We're still not quite clear on how it's related, but we've taken notes and ran the numbers and the data doesn't lie. Since you all began exploring Tartarus the number of Apathy Syndrome cases have decreased significantly, and those afflicted have been recovering!"

"That's... that's great!" Hamuko cheered, pumping her fists in the air. "We're really making a difference!"

"...Yeah." Minato agreed, smiling a little at the news. It was something to be proud of.

"I'm happy that our efforts have yielded such a result." Mitsuru smiled, leaning back on the couch. "Perhaps we'll find a way to cure Apathy Syndrome completely once we finish exploring the tower."

"So... it's really paying off. Everything we're doing..." Yukari said softly, smiling in relief at the news.

"You got that right, Yuka-tan!" Junpei grinned. "Hehehe... you know, with the way it sounds, it kinda makes us heroes, huh?"

"I don't know about that..."

"What are you talking about? It totally does!" Hamuko grinned, in complete agreement with Junpei.

"I'm sayin'!" Junpei said, matching Hamuko's grin. He turned

towards Minato. "Well, guess that means we'll be hittin' up Tartarus tonight!"

"...What makes you say that?" Minato asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

"C'mon! After hearing that, don't tell me you don't want to get in there!" Junpei smiled. "We can help people this way! Or at least we're helping people while doing it. Why not?"

"This is all well and good, and it's great to know that defeating Shadows results in Apathy Syndrome cases being cured, but we shouldn't push ourselves." Minato said. "We're making good progress and we've already spent the last couple of nights exploring Tartarus. Let's just take it easy for a bit."

"What! Come on, dude! You say this after hearing all that?" Junpei said incredulously, turning towards Hamuko and Yukari. "Can you believe this guy?"

"Actually, Minato-kun does have a point." Ikutsuki said, expression turning solemn. All the students turned towards him. "Taking care of yourselves should be top priority. You shouldn't get too carried away."

"The Chairman and Minato are right. I mean, this is good news don't get me wrong, but it's true we've been going to Tartarus a lot these past few days, especially during Golden Week." Yukari put in.

"I wouldn't mind going..." Hamuko said."

"Feh. So we're two for two then. Guess we gotta go with our Leader's decision then." Junpei grumbled.

Minato rolled his eyes at the Leader comment. Hamuko and Yukari both frowned at Junpei while Mitsuru gave him a level look.

"Don't get so worked up, Iori. While defeating Shadows has benefits, we can't take them all out at once so we should take it a pace we can handle. Arisato, do you the team should take the night off?"

Minato was silent for a few moments before nodding. "I think it'd be best."

"Man, come on! What's the big deal?" Junpei protested. "If I was the one in charge, we'd- ouch!"

Junpei rubbed the back of his head and shot Hamuko an accusing look while the girl only arched an eyebrow at him in turn.

"Stop it." Hamuko said, wagging a finger at him. "Behave yourself and apologize to Minato."

"But I didn't-"

"Junpei..."

"But seriously! You told us the more Shadows we defeat the more people are cured of Apathy Syndrome, right?" Junpei said, pointing an accusing finger at Minato. "Are you telling me

you don't care what happens to them?"

"Junpei!" Hamuko gasped.

"That's a terrible thing to say!" Yukari said, glaring at the boy. "And said we should take it easy too! Are you suggesting I don't care either?"

"N-No! All I'm sayin' is-"

"This isn't a game."

Everyone fell silent when they heard Minato speak. The leader of their group turned to face all of them, expression passive.

"We can't afford to be reckless. We can't push ourselves too hard. We have a responsibility to the people we can help."

"W-Whadaya mean by that?" Junpei asked, confused by Minato's words.

Minato sighed tiredly. "Think about it. It's great that we can help people by fighting Shadows. We explore Tartarus, get stronger, and help people all in one. It's a great reward. But if something happens to us, what will happen to those people we can help?"

"T-That's..."

"We have to take care of ourselves first if we're going to try and take care of others." Minato went on. "We're the only ones with the power to fight Shadows. There won't be any

second chances. We have to work together, think rationally, and keep ourselves safe."

Minato glared at Junpei who quickly looked away.

"Do you understand?" Minato asked coolly.

"Y-Yeah, I got it." Junpei stuttered. "We'll call it quits for tonight. Shadows will still be here when we get back..."

Minato nodded and blinked when he began hearing someone clap. He turned and sighed when he noticed Hamuko clapping her hands together in applause.

"What a speech! I wish our senpai had heard that!" Hamuko giggled. "Spoken like a true leader!"

"Yeah. You usually seem so detached. I'm impressed." Yukari agreed, giving Minato a smile of her own.

"Whatever." Minato said, turning away and ignoring the burning feeling on his cheeks.

"No, you're correct." Mitsuru said, turning to address the group as a whole. "Take his words to heart and be sure to take care of yourselves. Your courage and drive is to be admired, but if we're going to make any progress we have to be sure to keep ourselves in good condition so that we don't put ourselves in danger."

Mitsuru turned towards Minato, giving him a warm smile.

"I see I was correct in my assessment of you, Arisato."
Mitsuru smiled. "You make an exceptional leader."

SMASH

Minato froze at the familiar noise.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

"*What.*" Minato thought, shocked by what he was suddenly hearing.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Empress Arcana...

"I-I'm not..." Minato began, trying to talk even as the voices echoed in his head.

Minato Arisato has the Social Link: Empress with Mitsuru Kirijo...

Minato gave a resigned sigh as the voices faded away, baffled at what had apparently been the trigger for a new link. "I still don't think I'm leader material..."

"You don't have to be so modest." Mitsuru smiled. "I'm glad you said what you did. It was something that needed to be said. That kind of rational thinking and logic proves how suited you are to being a leader."

Minato stared at the young women for several moments before shaking his head.

"Whatever." Minato said. Just what kind of expectations did she have of him...?

"...Alright, alright. Guess I shouldn't complain about having more time to relax." Junpei sighed, though he still sounded displeased. "Guess I'll just kill some time at the Strip Mall then..."

"Maybe we can drop by Chagall Café for dinner later." Hamuko suggested to Yukari. "Up for it?"

"That sounds goods." Yukari smiled.

"Yes, yes, you all should remember to take some time for yourselves." Ikutsuki smiled. "Even so, I'm glad you're all so determined. I'm glad none of you are too apathetic about helping those with Apathy Syndrome!"

Everyone stared at Ikutsuki, who's grin faltered slightly at everyone's flat looks.

"That was terrible, Ikutsuki-san..." Hamuko sighed.

"Oh. Was it perhaps too soon?" Ikutsuki asked with a pensive frown. Shrugging he picked up a folder and opened it up, frown deepening as he read the file.

"Something wrong?" Minato asked, staying seated even as the other SEES members headed upstairs to drop off their

bags in their rooms.

"Well, even though I said that your actions have helped reduce those afflicted with Apathy Syndrome, it seems to have increased recently as well..." Ikutsuki murmured. "I wonder why that is..."

"Indeed. I only just noticed the number of Lost rise a few days ago." Mitsuru said. "While it's not bad enough to cause alarm, it's still strange..."

Minato glanced between the two of them before looking back down at the paper in his hands. He read through the twelve classifications of Shadows, named based on the first twelve of the major arcana.

"...Mitsuru-senpai," Minato began, getting both the girl and the Chairman's attention. "That large Shadow that showed up that one night... did you ever find out what its arcana was?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. I scanned it just before you defeated it." Mitsuru said.

"While it was an entirely different class on its own in regards to other Shadows in terms of strength, was classified it under the Magician arcana." Ikutsuki said. "Why do you ask?"

"...Just curious." Minato muttered.

"So in conclusion, you all can see that-"

Minato could tell that he wasn't the only grateful for the bell, ringing to signal the end classes for the day and cutting off Ekoda's lecture. The teacher gave an annoyed frown before sighing and addressing the class.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to properly finish next week. Be mindful of your studies over the weekend. You're all dismissed."

Minato pushed himself up from his seat, pausing to glance up at the clock hanging next to the chalkboard. He stared at the hands of the clock before his eyes moved to rest on the number twelve as he thought of the significance of today.

May ninth... a week from the day that mysterious boy had told him about the ordeal that was supposed to occur. If his prediction was correct, then sometime today, probably during the Dark Hour if Minato had to guess, something would happen...

"I wish the kid would've been more specific." Minato thought to himself as he gathered his things and stuffed them into his school bag. *"I mean, I can't think of anything that would be significant other than maybe-"*

A crashing noise coming from behind him along with an alarmed cry interrupted his train of thought. Minato glanced back to see a girl on the floor, hurriedly gathering her things which had apparently been dropped onto the floor. Minato vaguely recognized her because of her short teal colored hair. Minato frowned when he saw the gaggle of girls standing

close to where the girl was kneeling down, giggling obnoxiously as they observed. From the way the girl's bag was positioned and the way one of the girls who wore her hair in pigtails was standing, the mess was the result of deliberate action rather than accident.

"Whoops! You should be more careful, Fuuka-san." The girl with pigtails giggled.

"Yeah. Now we have to step over the mess you made." One of the others girls sneered. "Why can't you be more considerate of those around you?"

"I-I'm sorry..." The girl, Fuuka, briefly looked up from gathering her scattered things to give that brief apology before reaching under a chair to retrieve her eraser.

Minato's frown deepened when he saw one of girls, a brunette with dark skin and baggy leggings pull out her phone and aim it at the girl, who's back was turned.

"Your skirt's rising up." The girl stated before a clicking noise echoed from her phone.

"Ah!" Fuuka immediately shot up, pushing the back of her skirt down and quickly getting to her feet, expression alarmed. "Moriyama-san, you didn't...!"

"Sorry." The girl replied insincerely, waving her phone around. "I had the camera app opened and my finger just slipped. Took a picture by accident."

"C-Could please delete it then?"

"I don't know... maybe I should post it on the school message boards. See what others think."

"W-What! Y-You can't! Please don't!"

"Why are you freaking out so much? It's no big deal." The girl with pigtails sneered. "You're really not much to look at. Maybe if you showed a little more skin it'd get some guys interested in you. Posting the pic might actually be doing you a favor."

"Please! Y-You can't let other people see something like that...!"

Minato felt disgusted just watching. He'd dealt with his fair share of bullies in the past, with a few schools he'd transferred to in the past having a few kids who thought being aggressive with the new student would be a good way to kill time. Minato hadn't had any problems with this school, but apparently that was because the delinquents already had a target to pick on. While he had his own methods for dealing with bullies, the flustered girl seemingly had none. He glanced around the room. A couple students glanced in their direction, but otherwise stayed uninvolved. Minato was actually shocked that Ekoda hadn't intervened, thinking that the usually strict teacher would have no tolerance for bullying. Rather, he had just finished collecting his own things and left the classroom without even glancing in the girl's direction.

Minato looked back toward the group. He felt sorry for the girl, but it really wasn't any of his business to get involved. He had other issues to deal with anyway. It was better to take a cue from the other students and ignore them so he could head home early and prepare for-

"Alright, I think that's enough."

"Ah, hey!"

Minato blinked when a girl he recognized suddenly appeared and snatched the phone away from the delinquent girl.

"Real mature there, Natsuki." Yuko sighed, holding the phone away from the girl when she made a grab for it. Yuko stepped away and glanced down at the screen, shaking her head. She gave Fuuka a dry smile. "Don't worry about this, Yamagishi-san. This pic she took doesn't show anything. She was just trying to get a rise out of you."

Fuuka didn't answer, instead looking away from Yuko with glassy eyes and red cheeks. Yuko glared at Natsuki and her group before pressing a few buttons on the phone.

"And gone. You'll never make it as a photographer if you don't take better pictures." Yuko smirked, tossing the phone back to its owner who fumbled before catching it. "Now, don't you have better things to do?"

"Kuh! Nishiwaki, you...!"

"Uh-huh. Run along now." Yuko cut the girl off, waving her away. "Shoo, shoo."

Natsuki and the other girls gave her an angry look before they shoved past Fuuka and stormed out of the room. Yuko glared after them, shaking her head as they left. A girl with a pony tail nearby smiled at Yuko.

"Nice going, Yuko." The girl complimented.

"It's nothing, Rio. I'm used to dealing with her type." Yuko said. She turned to Fuuka with her hands on her hips.

"Seriously though, Yamagishi-san, you really should try telling them off one of these days."

"I-I've tried asking them to stop plenty of times..." Fuuka said quietly.

"Well, I can't imagine them stopping if you just ask." Yuko sighed. "You should at least tell a teacher though..."

Minato recognized the dejected look that crossed the girl's face, evidence that particular avenue had yielded no positive results. Perhaps it explained Ekoda's indifference. After all, it was rare that the delinquent students ever listened to or were intimidated by a teacher's warnings. If they were cowed that easily, they wouldn't be delinquents.

"I'll be fine." Fuuka said, smiling at Yuko. "Thanks for making them go away, Nishiwaki-san."

"Mm... have a good one, Yamagishi-san."

"You too..."

Yuko and Rio both stepped away from Fuuka, who kneeled back down to finish gathering the rest of her things. Minato grabbed his back and met Yuko and her friend at the classroom door, greeting her before gesturing to Fuuka.

"She get bullied a lot?" Minato asked.

"She was singled out by Moriyama and her group a couple weeks after school began." Yuko told him. "I feel sorry for her. Yamagishi-san isn't the type to stand up for herself and Moriyama and her cronies get too much of a kick picking on her to stop. She's a little skittish and doesn't seem to have a lot of friends. She's at the nurse's office a lot, though I don't know if that's because she's got frail health or if she's really just trying to get away from the teasing."

"I see..."

"I've tried getting them to knock it off, but they don't listen to me." Yuko sighed. "I know what it's like to be the subject of bullying. It can't be any fun for Yamagishi-san..."

Minato said his goodbyes to his classmate at the shoe lockers as he headed home for the day. He pushed his thoughts on the event he'd just witnessed to the back of his mind as he focused on the immediate future, specifically on the impending ordeal he'd been warned about.

Mitsuru sighed as she stared at the large computer screen in front of her. The Dark Hour had already begun and she'd decided to use her time scanning the city. Mitsuru stared at the terminal intensely before taking a deep breath and closing her eyes.

"Penthesilea..."

Mitsuru quietly muttered the name of her Persona, invoking its power as she kept her hands on the terminal in front of her. She could feel her senses stretching out, a hazy picture of the area around the dorm appearing in her mind's eye. She could feel the presence of Shadows out there, crawling within the darkness. She could feel the presence of those asleep in their coffins, their consciousness' in stasis within the Dark Hour. Mitsuru tensed as she tried to stretch her senses even further, pushing her abilities to the fullest as she tried to get a clearer picture and expand her vision further beyond just the neighborhood. Mitsuru clicked her tongue when the image of the streets disappeared.

"As expected, I can't see any further..." Mitsuru sighed, leaning back her seat as the door opened.

"You're still at it?"

"Akihiko." Mitsuru nodded to him in greeting as he entered the room. Her eyebrows rose in surprised when she noticed the other person trailing behind him. "And Arisato?"

"Senpai." Minato greeted her before glancing at the terminal's screen. "So, this is what you use to monitor the city, huh?"

"Only the surrounding area." Mitsuru corrected, turning back to the monitor. "It also links to my motorcycle and can scan the area in proximity with it. Linked up with my Persona, it serves as our communication. Though you already know this."

"I thought that you couldn't scan outside of Tartarus. At least not very far." Akihiko said.

"Again, without proper augmentation the terminal and my bike provide." Mitsuru said. She gave a dejected sigh. "Honestly, alone I lack the power. There's a limit to what Penthesilea can do..."

"Even so, you've already gathered a lot of data based on what you and Ikutsuki said yesterday." Minato said, sitting down on one of the cushion chairs.

"That's more general knowledge. We still lack anything really specific." Mitsuru said. "Much about the Dark Hour remains a mystery."

"...I would think you'd know more than that." Minato pressed. "You're the daughter of the head of the Kirijo Group. They built our school and run it. Tartarus appears in the same spot. Is there any sort of connection."

Minato frowned at Mitsuru's hesitant expression.

"...I cannot say. Perhaps." Mitsuru said slowly. "If there's anything I'd let you know."

"...It's just frustrating that we're missing so many key details." Minato said, letting the matter slide for the moment. "We've been exploring Tartarus for weeks but other than climb higher and defeat Shadows, we really don't have a clear objective. At least not one that can be readily completed."

"Reaching the top and finding out the reason for the Dark Hour is definitely easier said than done, and we are missing a lot of clues..." Akihiko agreed.

"I agree with the both of you, but we've learned more than we have previously. Shadows and the Dark Hour aside, I'm amazed at how broad the power of Persona is." Mitsuru mused. "After all, Arisato... you and Runako both have an amazing ability. To be able to use multiple Persona and switch them in the middle of battle... it's been quite the ability."

"It hasn't been that long since you guys awakened too." Akihiko smiled. "You two have got potential. Yukari and Junpei too. You guys are-"

A burst of static interrupted Akihiko. Minato tensed as his upperclassmen turned towards the terminal, Mitsuru's hand flying over the keyboard as she quickly typed in commands.

"It's a Shadow!" Mitsuru proclaimed, eyes narrowing as she glanced at the readings being projected on screen. "And if this isn't another glitch... this shows that this one is much bigger

than the normal ones."

"Yeah, you're right...!" Akihiko said, surprised at the readings himself. "This is...!"

"Like the one on that night, right?"

Both Mitsuru and Akihiko turned towards Minato, who's expression was solemn as he gazed at the screen. The two seniors glanced at each other before their eyes narrowed.

"I'll get the others." Akihiko said before dashing out of the room.

Mitsuru hit a few keys and an alarm wailed throughout the dorm. In a few minutes, all the SEES members were inside the command room, crowded around the terminal as Mitsuru addressed the group.

"We've detected a Shadow outside of Tartarus. While normally I wouldn't wake you all up for something like that, this Shadow appears similar to the one that appeared on the night Arisato and Runako awakened their Personas."

"So it's another big one?!" Yukari gasped, remembering the encounter with the large Shadow and how she had reacted to it.

"We believe so." Mitsuru said solemnly. "It is important that we defeat this one as soon as possible. While normal Shadows don't cause much damage, this large one could

prove a threat to the city."

"Normal people don't remember what happens during the Dark Hour," Hamuko said thoughtfully. "If that Shadow destroys a building or smashes a street up and people wake up to that..."

"There would be mass panic." Mitsuru finished. "Obviously, that must be avoided at all costs."

"So in other words, just kick its ass before it does any damage!" Junpei said enthusiastically, smashing his fist into his palm. "Well, count me in!"

"Junpei, this isn't a game." Yukari said, worry etched on her face. "You weren't there that night. If it's anything like that other one..."

"It'll be tough, that's for certain." Akihiko said before smirking. "But that just makes it more fun."

"No, Akihiko. You'll stay here to wait for the Chairman and monitor our progress." Mitsuru told him.

"Wha...! Are you kidding?!" Akihiko sputtered angrily, rounding on Mitsuru. "I'm going!"

"You'll just get in the way!" Mitsuru said firmly, matching his gaze. "You still need to recover. Let them handle it."

"But...!" Akihiko protested, face twisting in frustration.

Mitsuru's expression softened. "Have faith in them Akihiko," She turned to look at the newest members of SEES. "They're ready..."

"...Dammit." Akihiko cursed, though his tone was resigned. "I guess I've got no choice..."

"Don't worry about it, Senpai! I'll take care of it!" Junpei boasted.

"We'll fight twice as hard in your place." Hamuko added.

"...Fine." Akihiko nodded at them before turning to Minato. "Well, I'll leave to you then, Leader."

"Ugh, him again...?" Junpei groaned. Any further protest from him was cut off by Hamuko driving her elbow into his gut.

"Good luck." Mitsuru said, also nodding to Minato. "I know you can do this."

"...We'll get it done." Minato promised, earning confident smiles from both Akihiko and Mitsuru.

"The Shadow should be at Iwatodai Station." Mitsuru said. "I'll need time to get prepared, so you four go on ahead. I'll meet you there."

"Be careful out there." Akihiko cautioned. "I'll keep watch over on this side."

"Guess this is ordeal the kid talked about." Minato thought to

himself.

At least now he could stop worrying about the cryptic information. Now that the enemy had appeared in front of them, they could confront it. If this was supposed to be the ordeal, then they would overcome it together.

And so SEES deployed to take care of the large Shadow that had appeared.

~::~**Velvet Theatre**::~

A blue room comes into focus, with a large clock looming above a gate overhead. The blue room is not just that, but appears to be an elevator of sorts moving up at high speed. There is no one else in the room save to two individuals dressed in blue to match the room's hue, one woman and one man. The duo smile and give polite bows, as if greeting someone.

"Welcome, to the Velvet Room." The woman greets. "I am Elizabeth, your favorite elevator attendant."

"And I am Theodore." The man greets. "Welcome, to Velvet Theatre."

Theodore's expression falters somewhat, showing his exasperation and slight embarrassment as he gives his sister a tired look.

"Forgive me for asking this, sister, but is this strictly necessary?" Theodore asks. He didn't mind indulging his older sibling from time to time, but this was...

"It is entirely necessary, my dear little brother." Elizabeth answers with a cheerful smile. "I am ever so bored, and with our Master gone and attending to other matters we need something to occupy our time. Are we not allowed to entertain ourselves?"

"Well, I'm not saying we shouldn't, but this is-"

"Furthermore, this will give us more appearances. We are prominent figures in this story and must do everything we can to stand out."

"...I'm not sure I understand."

"Perhaps when you are older then. Such a small imagination you have..." Elizabeth sighs mournfully before speaking aloud again. "Well then, as residents of the Velvet Room it is our duty to provide information on such matters as they are happening. It seems our guests are in the midst of facing their first ordeal."

"Indeed. I wish for both their safety and their victory, and have every confidence that they will emerge victorious." Theodore says, smirking a little. "...However, this is only the first of many ordeals to come."

"Of course. 'Twould not be much of a journey if this were to

be their only challenge." Elizabeth says, nodding her head. "The relationships our guests have formed with other individuals have yet to bear any fruit as well. They must be given time to develop, and it would be very disappointing not to see them."

"Indeed." Theo agrees before smiling. "Of course, my guest seems to have a leg up on yours in that respect."

Elizabeth smiles sweetly at her brother. "Excuse me, brother, I'm not sure I heard you. Come closer and repeat what you just said."

Theodore takes a few steps away from his sister. "Well, I'm just saying. You can plainly see which of the two is more social."

"My guest is just a little shy. And he's made a few links." Elizabeth says. "Let's us post their progress so we can compare."

"As you wish."

Both siblings open up their Persona Compendiums and take out a piece of paper. They place it on the blue table in front of them for all to see.

Minato Arisato's Current Social Link Ranking:

Hamuko Runako – Fool – Current Rank: 2

Mitsuru Kirijo – Empress – Current Rank: 1

Akihiko Sanada – Emperor – Current Rank: 1

Kazushi Miyamoto + Yuko Nishiwaki – Chariot – Current Rank: 2

SEES Team – Judgment – Current Rank: 2

Hamuko Runako's Current Social Link Ranking:

Minato Arisato – Fool – Current Rank: 2

Junpei Iori – Magician – Current Rank: 1

Bunkichi and Mitsuko – Hierophant – Current Rank: 2

Yukari Takeba – Lovers – Current Rank: 1

Rio Iwasaki – Chariot – Current Rank: 1

Hidetoshi Odagiri + Chihiro Fushimi – Emperor – Current Rank: 1

SEES Team – Judgment – Current Rank: 2

"My guest's seven, to your guest's five." Theo says, smiling triumphantly.

"Of course. However, Keep in mind that this isn't a competition." Elizabeth says. "Our guests are two different individuals and have their own relationships. And this is just the beginning. There is still much in store for them."

"Indeed." Theodore agrees.

"...Well! I believe that should be enough for now." Elizabeth chirps, clapping her hands together. "We'll be doing this every so often to keep information up to date, so look forward to it."

"Er... sister? To whom are you referring and who exactly are we doing this for?"

"Oh Theodore, you honestly don't know?"

"I do not."

"My sad, ignorant little brother..." Elizabeth says, shaking her head. She smiles. "Well then, look forward to our guests' journey. This has been the Velvet Theatre. We will see you all soon, but..."

"Until then... farewell." Theodore finishes.

Both siblings bow.

"...Sister, I feel silly."

"Suck it up."

The room fades away...

A/N: Build up got too long and it seemed like a good cliffhanger so I left it off here for now. Chapter 10 will DEFINITELY be the Shadow battle. It can't be anything else at this point.

So, Minato finally got some spotlight since I've focused on Hamuko lately and he needed another link to match up with her. Bet you weren't expecting the Empress Link, especially not this early. Well, I certainly didn't want to wait until the final chapters to establish it! That's the beauty about not having to worry about gameplay and story segregation. It's why I can introduce Koromaru and Ken before they join SEES.

Those Velvet Theatre shorts will pop up every so often. They'll be used to keep Social Link info up to date and serve as info for Persona stats. Also gives me an excuse to have more fun with the Velvet Siblings.

Anyway, next chapter should come out relatively quickly since I've already got the Shadow fight written up. I fix up grammar later. Feedback is always appreciated and thanks all those who stopped by to read. Have a good one.

Kiiam

11. Chapter 10: Priestess

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: And finally, the first Full Moon Shadow battle! I really do hope I was able to do this battle justice. It is the first ordeal, after all. I hope you all enjoy.

Chapter 10: Priestess

Hamuko had never stood outside in the middle of the Dark Hour for very long before. While she'd experienced it for years and had long since gotten used to it, and the fact that they were getting ready to go and fight some monster notwithstanding, there was something about being out in the open in the middle of the eerie atmosphere that put her on edge. Whenever the Dark Hour started she just spent her time indoors, or ever since she joined SEES, made a quick trip to Tartarus and spent the majority of the Dark Hour exploring inside the tower. Other than the need to move from one location to another, Hamuko had never had to simply stay outside in one area in the Dark Hour.

"Even I find this a little scary..." Hamuko mumbled to herself as she glanced around, eyeing the coffins she spotted and the tall buildings that loomed overhead.

There was no noise. Everything was absolutely quiet. No talking, no animals, no insects, not even wind. The only noises she heard were her own voice when she spoke or her footsteps, which sounded way too loud within the dark emptiness.

Hamuko shivered, shaking off her anxiety and focused not on her surroundings, but on what was in front of her.

Specifically the vending machine that had eaten her yen coins without giving her the drink she'd requested.

"C'mon, I paid... give me my Mad Bull." Hamuko grumbled, pushing the buttons again and glaring through the screen that kept the drinks caged inside and away from her. After a few more seconds of staring the girl gave a frustrated huff, kicked the machine and dejected walked back to where her friends were sitting on the steps just outside of Iwatodai Station.

"What's wrong?" Junpei asked, noticing the girl's expression.

"I couldn't get my drink..." Hamuko said sadly.

"I don't know why you bothered trying." Minato said, sipping on the can of soda that he had the foresight to bring from the dorm. "You know machines and electronics don't work during the Dark Hour."

"I know... but I thought that if I put the coins in it might..." Hamuko trailed off before sighing, shrugging helplessly and accepting it for what it was. "Guess you win, Minato..."

"Yep."

"Wait, win?" Junpei looked between the two transfers. "You guys make a bet or something?"

"We did, actually." Minato said. "Now she owes me a can of soda."

"That's a petty bet." Yukari commented.

"Didn't get mine, and now I have to pay for one that I won't be enjoying either." Hamuko said mournfully. She peered over at Minato, who arched an eyebrow at her pleading look.

"...What?"

"Can I at least have a sip?" Hamuko asked bluntly.

"No."

"Oh, c'mon. Just one small sip? We're about to go into battle and I need energy. Even just a little is fine." Hamuko said, folding her hands together as she pleaded. "Please? Please, please, please, please, please-"

"Stop." Minato ordered, annoyed as he reluctantly handed her the can. "Here."

"Thank you~"

Minato rolled his eyes at her childishness. "Whatever."

The foursome sat in place for a couple minutes, maintaining silence as they waited for their senior to show up. Yukari got to her feet and looked around, slightly bouncing on her heels as she began to grow impatient.

"Where is she?" Yukari muttered.

"Don't worry, she'll be here soon." Junpei said lazily as he sipped on a drink he'd brought from the dorm.

Yukari sighed, fidgeting a little in place before gazing up towards the sky. Hamuko and Minato followed her stare, eyes coming to rest upon the large orb floating above them.

"It's a full moon tonight..." Yukari mused.

"You know, I remember thinking that the moon looked pretty. But during the Dark Hour it just looks creepy." Hamuko said, turning away from the moon with a grimace.

"Tell me about it..." Yukari muttered, also turning away.

All four juniors jumped slightly when they heard the sound of an engine gun in the distance. Minato, Hamuko and Junpei got to their feet as the four of them noticed a light shining in the distance coming towards them from further down the street. A few seconds later, a familiar motorcycle came into focus and came to a halt just a few feet away from them. They approached the rider, who took off her helmet and shook her hair a few times to fix it.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting." Mitsuru greeted, smiling at the four SEES members.

"It's fine." Minato said. "What's the plan?"

Mitsuru nodded, expression solemn and grateful that she could get right to the point. "We'll treat this as a regular operation. I'll be providing support from here while the four of you find and eliminate the Shadow. The only difference between here and Tartarus is the environment."

"We got that." Yukari said. "But where's the Shadow specifically?"

"According to the readings and what I can sense with Penthesilea, it's inside a monorail not far from the station." Mitsuru answered. "In order to get there, you'll have to walk on the tracks."

"A-Are you serious? Isn't that dangerous though...?" Junpei said anxiously.

"It's fine. No electronic equipment works during that monorail. That includes the monorail." Minato said.

"It's as Arisato says. You'll be fine." Mitsuru assured the boy with a smile. "Again, I'll be supporting you all the entire way. If circumstances change, I'll immediately notify you all. Are you ready?"

The four juniors all glanced at each other, nodding

reassuringly to one another as they turned to retrieve the weapons they'd left lying on the steps while they waited for Mitsuru to arrive. They geared up and turned to face the senior, Minato nodding to the young woman in confirmation.

"We're ready."

Mitsuru nodded. "Very well. Then let's begin the operation."

Junpei was a little confused when he heard several giggles escape from Hamuko as they approached the tracks.

"What are you laughing for, Hamu-tan?" Junpei asked.

"It's nothing." The girl giggled. "It's just... as a kid I always wondered what it would be like to walk on the tracks of a monorail or train. It was a childish curiosity. Now I get to do it. It's a little exciting to be honest..."

"Man, what a thing to think about. You act just like a kid though." Junpei quipped with a grin. Hamuko stuck her tongue out at him playfully in response.

"Be careful." Minato's voice cautioned all of them as he was the first to make the jump onto the tracks. He held out his hand. "The tracks are a little uneven, so watch your step."

Hamuko smiled and took his hand, Minato pulling her onto the tracks with him. Minato nodded and held out his hand again, to which Junpei frowned.

"Dude, c'mon." Junpei said, turning away. He took a few steps back before jumping onto the tracks. He smirked at their "Leader". "See?"

Minato frowned but otherwise didn't say anything, keeping his hand held out for the last member of their group. "Yukari-san?"

"...Right." Yukari nodded uneasily, seemingly more hesitant about taking Minato's hand than she was about stepping onto the tracks. Eventually she took the offered limb and was pulled onto the tracks with the rest of their party, nodding to Minato with a small smile. "Thanks."

"Yeah." Minato nodded back once before tapping the headset he wore. "Mitsuru-senpai, how far away is the monorail?"

{About 200 meters ahead. You should be able to see it.}

"I see it!" Hamuko announced, pointing further down the tracks. "It's actually not that far away from us."

{Good. Be sure to hurry. We don't want to risk the Shadows harming any of the passengers.}

"Got it." Minato responded before turning towards the other members. "Let's get moving."

"Right." Yukari nodded.

"Roger!" Hamuko chirped, snapping a salute while she balanced her naginata on her shoulder.

"...Yeah." Junpei muttered.

"...That was less enthusiastic than I expected." Hamuko noted, arching an eyebrow at Junpei's unusually withdrawn response. "You seemed pretty gung-ho on the way over."

"O-Oh... well, I mean, I still am. Hermes and I are itchin' to get started." Junpei grinned wide before his smile faltered a bit. His gaze drifted over to Minato. "Still... how come he's always the one who gets to call the shots?"

"Not this again..." Yukari muttered, rolling her eyes in annoyance. "Now? You bring this up now? I thought you'd gotten over it."

"Apparently not." Hamuko frowned. "Junpei, why are you so stuck on this?"

"W-Well, it's not a big deal or anything..." Junpei said, his words contrasting with his own feelings, pointing a finger at Minato who just stared back at him dispassionately. "It's just... what's he done that's so special?"

"Junpei..." Hamuko sighed.

Junpei frowned as Yukari sighed and shook her head while Hamuko gave him a disapproving look. Honestly, he did feel a little bit like a prick for complaining about the issue now out of all times, but now that it was out in the open he decided he might as well make his case.

"I mean, why pick him? Sure, he's got that ability, but so does Hamu-tan. I'm not sayin' Minato's done a bad job leading us or anything, but why not let someone else have turn, huh?"

Junpei asked, turning to narrow his eyes at Minato.

"Seriously, why is it always you?"

{Enough, Iori.} Mitsuru's voice cut in sharply through their headsets. {This is not the time to be discussing this. You all must focus on the Shadow, and the more time you spend arguing the less time you-}

"He's got a point."

Mitsuru suddenly fell silent, as did the other three SEES members as they all stared at Minato in disbelief. The young man turned towards the group, his expression completely impassive.

"It's not like I've done anything to deserve the role. I didn't even want the position in the first place. And since it seems to matter so much to you, Iori..." Minato stepped forward, clapping a baffled Junpei on the shoulder. "You're in charge tonight. You get to call the shots, "Leader"."

Everyone was silent for a beat as they stared at Minato.

"Uh..." Junpei began eloquently before their headsets crackled.

{Arisato, this isn't the time for jokes. We delegated leadership to you, and you've lead all the operations since-}

"And as leader, I'm deferring command to another." Minato said. "Who knows? Iori might actually be a better leader."

Hamuko groaned at Minato's words. His expression and tone didn't give away anything, but the way he was referring to Junpei said enough. Junpei's constant complaints had clearly irritated him to some extent. This was NOT what they needed when they were about to fight.

"Guys, c'mon, this is stupid." Yukari said, trying to be the voice of reason. "Does it really matter that much."

"Why try to fix what isn't broken? Minato's done great, and remember what he said the other day? That's the kind of speech I'd expect from a good leader." Hamuko put in.

Junpei suddenly rounded on both girls, glaring at the both of them. "You guys sure are against this! You think I can't do it?"

Hamuko held her hands up in denial. "What? No! We didn't mean that..."

{Iori, this isn't-} Mitsuru tried to cut in but Junpei beat her to it.

"Fine. I'll show you guys." Junpei turned and glared at Minato, who returned the look with narrowed eyes. "I can be just as good a leader as you!"

"By all means." Minato replied coolly. "What's the plan then."

"That's... find the Shadow, of course!" Junpei said, smirking confidently as he hefted his katana and pointed down the

tracks towards the monorail. "Let's do this!"

Junpei took off and the other SEES members headed off after him, with Hamuko and Yukari having reluctant expressions etched onto their faces.

"Minato..." Hamuko began to speak, peering over to her fellow Wild Card.

"It's no big deal. Mitsuru-senpai gives most of the directions already and as long as we follow that it doesn't matter who takes point." Minato said before she could start. "It's fine, Senpai. Letting Junpei lead one operation isn't too much to ask, is it?"

{...Very well. If you're okay with it, who am I to object...?} Mitsuru sighed to the three members before speaking to the group as a whole. {All of you keep yourselves from getting reckless. This Shadow is unique from the rest, and as such it might catch you by surprise if you drop your guard.}

"You say that, but I'm not seeing anything out of the ordinary, Senpai..." Yukari commented with a frown as the group reached the monorail. "Are you sure it's here?"

{I'm positive.} Mitsuru assured the girl.

"Well, we're not going to find the Shadow standing around out here." Junpei grinned, stepping up to the ladder bars that led into the monorail.

"...I'm not the only one that finds the fact that the monorail doors are open in the middle of the track odd, right?" Hamuko said uneasily.

Indeed, it was a strange sight to see. Even if it appeared as though the train had only just left the station, the doors always closed before departure. The fact that they'd been left wide open gave the SEES members an uncomfortable feeling.

"...It's probably a trap." Minato said, voicing what everyone else thought.

"S-So what do we do then?" Junpei asked.

"I don't know. What do you think, leader?"

Junpei blinked guilelessly at Minato before his expression hardened. He walked up to the train and grabbed onto the ladder bars, hoisting himself up.

"H-Hey, Junpei...!" Yukari exclaimed.

"What? We can't just wait here all night." Junpei reasoned. "Even if it is a trap, we won't be able to find the Shadow like this."

{Iori's right. Even if it is a trap, you all don't have any other options to take at the moment.} Mitsuru said sternly. {Just proceed with caution. I'll immediately let you all know if something changes.}

"Some say the best way to foil a trap is to spring it first."

Hamuko sighed. "Guess we have to go."

Even as she said so, Junpei had already finished climbing into the monorail. He took a quick look around the car, noticing only two coffins and nothing else. He poked his head back outside, flashing the other three juniors a grin. "It's cool guys. No trap here. At least not one that I can see."

{Nothing on my end either. The rest of you should get on the train.}

"Alright, alright..." Yukari sighed, shaking off her nervousness and began climbing up the ladder. She stopped halfway up, freezing in place before turning to glare at Minato, who blinked at the sudden hostility. "Don't. Look."

Minato arched an eyebrow her in puzzlement before his eyes slowly drifted down to the girl's skirt. The boy sighed and stepped back, turning his head away so that Yukari would be satisfied. The girl nodded as the boy averted his gaze and quickly climbed up the rest of the way. Hamuko giggled a little before climbing up into the train herself, telling Minato it was fine to look back now and that he could get into the train's car now. Minato climbed up and stepped into the car, glancing over at the others as they took a look around. Junpei approached the coffin closest to them.

"Must be a late worker headin' home for the night." Junpei said as he stared at the object that sat in front of him. The body of the coffin was pitch black, save for the red glow that radiated from the bottom of it. "So people like this don't

remember anything that happens here, huh..."

"It's probably better that way." Hamuko said, stepping next to Junpei to gaze at the coffin. She slowly reached her hand out before thinking better of it and quickly pulled her hand back before she touched it. "I don't think very many people who handle it well if they knew about the Dark Hour and the Shadows."

"Yeah." Junpei nodded before smirking. "Guess that makes us special kind of people. Y'know. Since we've got Personas and all."

Hamuko smiled. "Yep. This is only something we can handle."

"So... what now?" Yukari asked, looking around the car. "It doesn't look like-"

The rest of the girl's words got caught in her throat as the entire train shuddered. There was a low groaning sound that echoed through the train. The SEES members looked around nervously.

"W-What was-"

Again, Yukari didn't get to finish her sentence. Everyone's eyes widened when the train doors suddenly closed.

"H-Hey!" Junpei shouted, quickly rushing over to a door just as it finished closing. He tried digging his fingers in between the space where the door opened, trying to pull it open. He

struggled for a few seconds before pulling back with only stinging red fingers to show for his efforts. "Crap. We're locked in!"

"Mitsuru-senpai!" Hamuko called, before their upperclassman's voice crackled through their headsets.

{I know! I sensed something just now. What happened?!}

"The Shadow locked us in somehow." Minato told her. "I think it knows we're here."

{I see... I suppose this was a trap we should've expected. It might have been waiting for you.}

"Pft. Who cares?" Junpei suddenly broke in, smirking widely. "Not much of a trap if you ask me. The Shadow just locked us up in here with it, the guys who are coming to take it down!"

{Don't get carried away, Iori. Proceed with extreme caution and be ready for anything.} Mitsuru warned them.

"You're telling us to proceed..." Hamuko said, taking a look around and frowning at all the locked doors. "But we can't go anywhere like this..."

Just as she was saying so, Minato noticed something move on the ceiling above them. He quickly whipped out his Evoker and pushed it against his temple, pulling the trigger as he did so.

"Orpheus!"

His sudden cry and appearance of his Persona startled the other SEES members, but he didn't pay attention to them. Orpheus appeared from the blue mist and strummed his arm, shooting of an Agi spell towards the ceiling. There was a sharp cry as the fire spell struck something and a Shadow dropped to the ground. The Spurious Book flailed on the floor, it's cloth-like body fraying at the edges as the fire ate away at it.

"W-What the...!" Junpei shouted in surprise before regaining his bearings and lifting his sword up, quickly bringing it down on the Shadow. The sword cleaved through the Shadow's body and the creature dissipated into black sludge and smoke.

The SEES members all stared at where the Shadow used to be in a tense silence before they slowly looked towards the ceiling. Hamuko looked to Minato as Orpheus faded away, giving him a smile.

"Good eye."

Just as she finished saying so, the four all jumped when the door in front of them suddenly opened, leading to another car.

"So it's like that, huh?" Junpei smirked as he stepped forward. He turned towards the other SEES members. "Let's get going then."

Sticking close together, they carefully proceeded to the next car. It didn't look any different from the one previously other

than one coffin which sat near one of the closed train doors.

"Any Shadows in this car, Senpai?" Junpei asked as they all looked around.

{Yes. I'm sensing one Shadow close to you.}

Acting as if to confirm the girl's words, another Shadow dropped down from the ceiling a few feet away from the group. It was the same type as the one they'd just finished off before and could be taken care of just as easily. However, instead of trying to attack, the Shadow quickly turned and headed towards the front area of the car.

"H-Hey! Where's it going?" Junpei shouted as the Shadow tried to escape.

The door to the next car opened and the Shadow hovered through it. Junpei made a move to go after it but stopped in his tracks when Mitsuru's voice echoed in their ears again.

{Wait! Something's not right.}

"She's right. That Shadow was acting weird." Hamuko agreed. "I don't think we should follow it."

"But if we don't go after it we're gonna lose it!" Junpei protested.

{Don't you find it strange at all that it would escape right as it revealed itself?} Mitsuru pointed out. {It may be up to something...}

"But it could lead us to the big Shadow!" Junpei argued.

"Calm down and think for a minute!" Minato said, getting a little frustrated himself. "This could be another trap. What we need to do now is stick together in order to-"

"Who asked for your advice?" Junpei suddenly snapped, glaring at Minato. "I thought you said I was in charge."

{That may be, but Arisato's right. He was just-}

"Why are you guys worked up about one Shadow? It's a small fry! Any one of us can beat that thing no problem!" Junpei said, pulling out his Evoker. "Hell, I'll do it myself!"

Before anyone could stop him, the boy took off into the next car after the Shadow.

"Junpei, wait...!"

Hamuko tried to go after him, but the door shut in her face before she could make it through. She pounded on the door, the other SEES members eyes wide as they were cut off from Junpei.

{Behind you!}

Minato and Yukari both turned just as two more Spurious Books dropped down from above. This time Hamuko was the quickest to move as she pulled her Evoker's trigger.

"Ara Mitama!"

A red tear drop with an angry face appeared and immediately ignited, shooting forward and slamming into one of the Shadows. Getting the drop on both Shadows, it managed to fire off another fire spell that brought the remaining Shadow to the floor. Minato immediately stepped forward, swinging his sword and cutting through the masks the Shadows wore and eliminating them.

"Ugh... this is probably what the enemy was hoping for..." Yukari sighed, before letting out an angry huff. "Dammit, Junpei, what were you thinking?!"

"Guess he's taking the leader thing a lot more personally than we thought." Hamuko grimaced. "Seriously though, of all the times why did he choose now to be so...?"

{We can't waste time lamenting over this. You all have to go after him before the Shadows overwhelm him.} Mitsuru ordered. {Move quickly. He's only a few cars ahead of you.}

"Geez, how far did he chase the stupid thing?" Hamuko growled before turning to Minato. "And you..."

"Me? What did I do?" Minato asked incredulously, surprised that Hamuko was suddenly angry at him.

"What did you do? How about-"

"Guys, save it for later!" Yukari urged. "We've got problems!"

Minato and Hamuko both turned to see that the door to the

next car had opened, but two more Spurious Books were blocking the way along with another Shadow they hadn't seen before. It looked like a scale of some sort that had the appearance of a cross.

"Get out of our way!" Hamuko shouted, raising her Evoker again. "Agi!"

Ara Mitama returned and did a repeat of the attack from earlier, igniting and setting the two Spurious Books aflame. Yukari pressed her Evoker to her forehead and summoned Io, shooting off a blast of wind that knocked the balance to the ground. It seemed to have a weakness for wind based attacks. With all the Shadows on downed, Minato gave the command.

"Finish them off!"

Minato raised his sword, Hamuko hefted up her naginata, and Yukari notched an arrow to her bow. Moving together, Minato and Hamuko slashed through the bodies of the two Spurious Books with their weapons while Yukari's arrow flew and struck down the last Shadow as it was getting up. The Shadows all dissipated into nothing.

{Good work everyone.} Mitsuru complimented them all before her voice grew urgent. {Now, get a move on. I'm concerned about Iori.}

"Right. We're on our way." Yukari nodded, gesturing to Minato and Hamuko as she headed through the door to the next car,

which had luckily stayed open. "Let's catch up to that idiot before he gets hurt."

"Yeah." Hamuko nodded before turning back toward Minato as they moved forward. "And you need to have a talk with him once this is over."

"With Iori?" Minato said. "What for?"

"You know what for! You two have been silently antagonizing each other ever since we started going to Tartarus!" Hamuko said, glaring at him. "You're both men, aren't you? If you've guys got a problem with each other, speak up and confront each other about it! Resolve it before it turns into something like this!"

Minato glared back at her, opening his mouth to retort before Yukari's voice stopped him.

"Um... guys, we've got a problem."

Minato and Hamuko both turned to Yukari, who was standing near the door that led to the next car. The girl pointed to it with a worried expression.

"It won't open."

"What?" Hamuko frowned, stepping forward and trying to pull the door open to no avail. "Do we have to beat more Shadows to get it open?"

"The Shadow wants to keep us away from Junpei. I don't

think it'll just open the door for us, and if sending Shadows after us didn't work the first few times..."

"Then how to we get through?" Hamuko demanded. "Mitsuru-senpai, can you do anything on your end?"

{I'm afraid I can't. It's not as if I can control the train's door mechanisms myself.} Mitsuru said regretfully. {Try looking around the car for something that can help get the door open. I'm not sensing any Shadows in that car, but I do feel the large Shadow's presence faintly throughout the train. There must be something that'll get the doors to open...}

"It's gotta be controlling the train somehow." Minato said, trying to think of how the Shadow could be working the train. He glanced up toward the ceiling, which was shrouded in darkness. "Maybe..."

"Minato?" Hamuko asked, puzzled when he held his Evoker's muzzle against his head. There weren't any Shadows around...

Ignoring her, Minato pulled the trigger and Orpheus emerged from his soul once again. The Persona strummed on the harp it carried once more, setting off another Agi spell towards the ceiling and temporary banishing the darkness imposed by the Dark Hour with the bright flame. The trio's eyes widened at what was revealed.

"What the..."

Something seemed to be pasted on the ceiling of the car. It almost looked like wire, but it also looked a little like paper and even had words written on it. The characters gave off a faint glow, pulsing with energy. The thin strip of wires seemed to feed into the other car and some of it was embedded into the crooks and open spaces of the train car.

"Maybe... you think that's what the Shadow's using to control the train?"

"It might be what's at least keeping the doors sealed shut." Minato said. He turned to his Persona. "Light it up."

Once again Orpheus strummed the strings of its harp and another ball of fire was conjured, shooting up towards the ceiling and igniting the wire. There was a hissing noise as the it disappeared and following that there was the gratifying sound of the door to the next car opening.

"Ah, it opened!" Hamuko grinned. "Good going, Minato!"

"Yeah."

"Let's hurry and find Junpei." Yukari said. "Still, what was that-"

"Look out!"

Yukari and Hamuko both blinked when Minato's Orpheus suddenly threw itself in front of them. The Persona was struck by something and was smashed into the side of the car,

causing Minato to grimace in pain when he felt some of the pain from his Persona. Hamuko and Yukari immediately retreated back to Minato, eyes wide as they stared at what had attacked them.

"W-What is... is that that metal wire?" Hamuko exclaimed, staring at the steely looking tendril that was sticking out of the ceiling.

"No... look closer." Minato said, pointing to the tendril and the kanji characters glowing on it. "It's the same as what was on the ceiling... we just couldn't see properly."

"S-So what is it then?" Yukari asked.

"If I had to guess... it's probably from the big Shadow we're here to fight." Minato said. "It's using those wires to control the car and to attack us."

"Kuh... it's trying to block our way." Hamuko growled. "Well, we won't let that stop us!"

"No we won't." Minato agreed, narrowing his eyes. "Orpheus!"

The Persona pushed itself back up and lifted its harp, swinging it forward and knocking away the tendril of wires before sending off another blast of fire that struck the roots of the wires where they were sticking out of the ceiling. Not unlike a Shadow, the wires all turned into black muck and smoke as they faded away. Orpheus retreated back into the sea of Minato's soul as the three SEES members recovered.

"Thanks for the save." Yukari said gratefully, gazing at Minato in concern as he worked his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." Minato waved her off the girl's concern. "We really should get moving. Let's-"

"Hold on a minute."

Yukari grabbed Minato's arm as he made a move to go, holding her Evoker to her head.

"Io!"

Yukari's Persona appeared and raised her hands as Yukari placed her palm over Minato's shoulder. A blue light emitted from her hand and Minato relaxed somewhat as he felt the pain disappear.

"Thank you..." Minato said.

"We've all gotta take care of ourselves if we're going to save anyone. Isn't that what you said?" Yukari smiled. "I do agree with Hamuko though. You should have a talk with Junpei so you can sort this whole leader thing out."

"...After this is over." Minato promised, nodding to both Yukari and Hamuko, the latter of whom smiled at him in approval.

"Let's focus on rescuing our leader for now."

"Running off on his own and leaving us behind isn't making a very good bid for the position." Hamuko said, smirking at him.

"You take point?"

"Fine. You cover the rear and Yukari will be between us. Stay close together at all times. We don't want to get separated from each other." Minato ordered. "Also, summon your Personas now so we can deal with Shadows and those wires the second they appear."

Both girls nodded at the command and the three SEES members all pulled the triggers of their Evokers.

"Orpheus!"

"Nekomata!"

"Io!"

The trio all advanced to the next car with their Personas following them, and when a group of Shadows appeared in front of them they were prepared. Orpheus immediately swung its harp down onto a Spurious Book while Hamuko's Nekomata burned another with a fire spell. The last one was shot down by a pair of arrows and just as the trio of Shadows disappeared, two more wire tendrils made their appearance. The three Personas quickly jumped back as the tendrils took a swipe at them, with Io firing off a wind blast that seemed to momentarily stun the tendrils. Orpheus and Nekomata immediately followed up with two Agi spells that wasted the tendrils.

{Good work!} Mitsuru's voice called. {Iori should be in the next car. Hurry!}

The three Persona users quickly made their way through the door as it opened, the sound of battle ringing through the car as they arrived on scene.

"Junpei!" Yukari called out, immediately spotting him at the front end of the car.

He wasn't alone. At the moment, he was currently battling against a group of Shadows. Hermes was already out, swooping down to strike at the Dancing Hand that was attacking, though the hand dodged out of the way in time. It was able to dodge Junpei's sword sweep though, and the katana cleaved it in two. Junpei briefly spared a glance backwards before turning to face the remaining enemy in front of him.

"I've got this...!" Junpei shouted as he swung his katana like a bat, knocking the Spurious Book into the air. "Take that you freak of nature!"

Hermes quickly moved in for the kill and struck at the Shadow with one of its bladed appendages. However, Junpei did not notice the Heat Balance rising up behind him, the pointed end of the Shadow poised to skewer him on the tip. Seeing this, Minato broke out into a sprint.

"Watch it!"

Junpei let out a surprised squawk as Minato tackled him to the ground just as the Heat Balance stabbed through where his body had been just a second ago. This also threw off

Hermes, who spasmed in the air before veering off. Hamuko and Yukari didn't give the Shadows another chance to attack though, with Nekomata cutting through the Spurious Book and finishing it off while Yukari blasted apart the Heat Balance with a strong wind attack from Io. With the Shadows taken care of, Hamuko and Yukari were relieved to see both Minato and Junpei get to their feet. Their Personas faded away as the two girls approached them.

"Ow..." Junpei groaned, rubbing his back as he glared at Minato. "What was that for?"

"He saved you just now." Yukari said, glaring at Junpei. "You didn't notice the Shadow behind you. You'd have been seriously hurt if Minato hadn't gotten you out of the way."

"T-That so..." Junpei muttered, turning to Minato. "Well, thanks I gu-"

A sharp slap from Hamuko kept Junpei from finishing. Minato and Yukari both looked on in shock as Hamuko grabbed Junpei by the collar and made him face her. The man himself looked more lost and confused than angry about the fact he'd been hit, and shrank back a little when he was faced with an intense glare from the normally cheerful girl.

"H-Hamu-tan, you-"

"What were you thinking, going off on your own like that? Leaving us behind... not only is that something a good leader WOULD'N'T do, but you made us worried sick!" Hamuko

shouted. "What would you have done if you'd gotten hurt without one of us to heal you?"

"I-I was doing fine." Junpei protested. Hamuko wasn't having any of it.

"Don't try to deny it. What are you trying to prove here, Junpei?" Hamuko said, making Junpei stiffen. "The leadership issue and your arguments with Minato aside, you put yourself in danger by going alone. Seriously, if something happened..."

"O-Okay, okay! I got it, I'm sorry!" Junpei said quickly, panicking when he noticed Hamuko's eyes getting wet. "I-It won't happen again! I swear! Just... just take it easy, alright?"

"You promise?"

"I promise!" Junpei nodded, and Hamuko finally let him go. Junpei stared at the girl, taking in the worried expression on her face and grew a little sheepish. He turned toward Minato and Yukari. "Er... sorry for going off on my own."

"It's fine. Just try and be a better listener in the future." Yukari said.

"Right... and Minato?"

"...Yes?"

"Thanks for the save... really."

"...Don't mind it."

"So you're really okay?" Yukari asked.

"I told you I'm fine." Junpei insisted. "I mean, I got a little roughed up, but other than that..."

{Wait a moment!}

"Huh? Mitsuru-senpai?" Hamuko asked, the other SEES members also adopting curious looks. "Is something the matter."

{I'm not sure... but I'm sensing a strong presence in the front car.} Mitsuru said. {I don't detect any movement, but...}

The four juniors all stumbled when the train shuddered, and their faces paled when the train suddenly began moving forward.

"T-This isn't..." Hamuko stuttered, eyes wide as the scenery outside the window began moving past them.

"Whoa, why are we moving?!" Junpei exclaimed. "Electronics don't work during the Dark Hour!"

"Looks like the Shadow is done playing with just the doors." Minato said, looking around worriedly.

"W-What is it planning?" Yukari wondered.

{This is bad...! It probably intends to crash you all into another train up ahead!}

"W-What?!" Junpei gasped.

"W-What are we gonna do?!" Yukari exclaimed.

{Calm down and listen.}

"Calm down?! If we don't stop this thing...!" Junpei said desperately.

{The Shadow is the one controlling the train! If you eliminate it, it might stop the train!}

"Might stop the train...?" Hamuko ventured uncertainly. "That 'might' worries me..."

{There aren't any other options. You all have to hurry. You're running against the clock now. You've less than ten minutes before you crash into the train in the station ahead of you!}

"You said the Shadow we're looking for is in the front car, right?" Minato demanded.

{Yes. The Shadow sho... ough it... be car... so...}

"Senpai? Senpai!" Yukari shouted when Mitsuru's voice began to break up. "What's wrong?"

"The train's probably moving far enough away that she can't communicate with us anymore." Minato said.

"So we've gotta stop this thing by ourselves now?"

"Guys, we're accelerating!" Hamuko announced with a frantic expression. "I think our time just got cut in half. Let's get going already!"

The four immediately headed for the door, but were stopped by two Dancing Hands and a Laughing Table dropping down from above.

"W-What kinda messed up ride is this?!" Junpei exclaimed as the Shadows rushed them.

"Hello? Hello?! Can anyone hear me?!"

Mitsuru bit her lip worriedly as the connection was completely cut. She looked up and saw that the train was almost out of sight. She felt a spike of fear rise within her but quickly fought it down. She had faith in the four of them, and she refused to believe that they would fail. Even so, maybe if she had joined them, or if Penthesilea's abilities were a little more...

No, now wasn't the time for doubt. She still had to do what she could to support them.

Mitsuru quickly mounted her motorcycle and turned the key, the engine roaring to life. She pulled on her helmet and twisted the handle, the motorcycle shooting down the street as she tried to catch up to the runaway monorail. The advantage she had was that she didn't have to worry about oncoming cars or moving pedestrians. She kept her eyes on the road while also keeping the monorail in sight, slowly

gaining on it as her machine accelerated.

"Everyone, please be okay!"

"Dammit, get out of our way!" Junpei shouted. "Hermes!"

The Persona shot forward and pierced through the Merciless Maya with its feet. As it did so, a metal tendril rose up from behind it.

"Oh no you don't!" Hamuko called. "Orpheus!"

Hamuko's Orpheus appeared, its long hair whipping behind it as it swung its harp and knocked away the tendril before it could strike at Hermes. A blast of fire from Minato's Orpheus did away with the wires, and lo let loose a Garu spell that took out the last Merciless Maya.

"I think that's all of them." Hamuko said. "How much further do we have left to go...?"

"We've gotta be at the front car by now!" Yukari said. "If not..."

{He... lo... can anyone... an you all hear me?!}

"Senpai!" Yukari exclaimed, relieved to hear the girl's voice.

"Oh man, Mitsuru-senpai, it feels great to hear your voice!" Junpei grinned. "What happened."

{When the monorail started moving it got too far away for Penthesilea to maintain the connection through our headsets. I'm currently pursuing the monorail with my motorcycle.}
Mitsuru told them all. {Be prepared, all of you! The primary target should be in the car ahead of you!}

"So we did make it to the end!" Hamuko cheered.

{Not quite. It's not over until you take out that Shadow.}
Mitsuru said urgently. {Are you all ready?}

"It's not like we can spend a lot of time to prepare. We've probably only got a few minutes left until we crash." Minato said.

Junpei turned to face the group. "Then let's get going!"

The group gave each other determined nods before rushing forward, the doors to the front car opening before them as they headed into the room. Everyone's eyes widened at the sight they came upon.

"There it is...!" Hamuko exclaimed, pointing to the Shadow in front of them.

"What the hell?!" Junpei cried as they all beheld the Shadow.

It certainly didn't look like anything any of them had imagined. Other than the greater mass and height it had on other Shadows they'd encountered, it was surprisingly humanoid in appearance. Half of its body was a chalky white, while the

other half was an inky black, and its top half was completely uncovered, with two letters covering part of the Shadow's breasts. The Shadow looked like something from out of those dirty magazines Junpei occasionally read, sitting on the ground with its legs open provocatively, which were barely covered by some sort of cloth, and leaning back on its arms. It wasn't attractive at all though, as its pose was more sloppy looking than anything at its stomach was sunken in and its ribs could be seen pushing against the contrasting skin. It wore a red butterfly mask the team had come to associate with Shadows that fell under the Priestess Arcana category and its long hair fanned out to cover the walls and ceiling of the car. The Shadow almost seemed to smile as it observed the SEES members as they finished analyzing it.

"Guess this is it..." Yukari murmured.

"Wait, guys, look!" Hamuko said, pointing to what appeared to be the Shadow's hair. "That's the same wire from those tendrils! Were we seriously fighting pieces of its hair back there?"

{You can discuss that later, Runako! You're all running out of time!} Mitsuru's voice broke in. {You've got less than five minutes before you have a collision with another monorail!}

"Which means we've got less time than that to beat this thing." Minato muttered, Evoker in one hand and his sword in the other.

"Then let's take this thing out before it takes the train out!"

Junpei shouted. Junpei pulled the trigger of his Evoker and Hermes came bursting out from the blue mist emanating from him. "Burn her up, Hermes!"

Hermes' wings fanned out as an Agi spell was tossed directly at the Shadow. The attack would've hit dead center if several of the Shadow's metal locks hadn't gotten in the way to form a shield to block the attack. The tendrils of wire struck out like a whip, swatting Hermes out of the air.

"What the...!" Junpei gasped, shocked that his Persona had been repelled so easily.

{Be careful! This Shadow is much tougher than the others you've faced until now!} Mitsuru advised them. {Blindly rushing in isn't going to work against it!}

"Kinda hard to rush it anyway given the lack of space." Minato grimaced. While the car was spacious enough for them to move, the monorail wasn't large. It didn't afford them a whole lot of maneuverability. Of course, the advantage was that the Shadow couldn't move from its position in front of the monorail controls.

That didn't seem to bother the Shadow much though, as it looked like it had no intention of moving from where it was. The Priestess Shadow brought one hands to its mouth, muttering something none of the SEES member could hear.

"It's trying something!" Minato shouted. "Hamuko!"

"Right!" Hamuko nodded, getting the cue from Minato as he held his Evoker up.

"Orpheus!"

"Orpheus!"

The male and female Orpheus appeared and shot forward, harps raised as they tried to get in close. Even with two Persona attacking, there wasn't much difference when it had been Hermes alone. A collection of tendrils rose into the air and surrounded both Persona, knocking both to the floor of the train and moved in for a secondary attack.

"Get away!" Yukari shouted as she summoned her Persona. "Io!"

A Garu spell buffeted the tendrils and knocked the hair back. The two Orpheus quickly recovered and retreated, and the four SEES members found themselves at a loss.

"Anyone got any ideas?" Hamuko asked, tone both worried and urgent.

{You have to find some way to get past it.}

"Its hair tendrils move too fast for our Persona to get close enough. It also uses them to block our spells!" Yukari said.

"That was just the one!" Junpei said. "Let's see how it likes a combined attack!"

{That's actually not a bad idea, Iori.} Mitsuru said. {Everyone, use your magic attacks together!}

"Alright!" Junpei grinned. "Everyone, together!"

"Orpheus!"

"Orpheus!"

"Io!"

"Hermes!"

The four Personas all gathered and launched their spells together. Minato's Orpheus and Hermes let loose a pair of fire spells while Hamuko's Orpheus casted a Bufu spell. Io followed it all up with another Garu spell. The four attacks homed in on the Shadow, but it only seemed to pay attention to three of them. A collection of wire tendrils met the two fire attacks, reducing the Shadow's hair to ash while the wind attack was taken head on. The Shadow staggered for a moment, but barely budged when the Bufu spell struck it. If anything, the Shadow seemed to enjoy the icy attack.

"Bufu spells aren't working!" Hamuko shouted.

"We noticed!"

Having finished what it was doing, the Shadow swept its hand out, and suddenly two Muttering Tiaras were conjured up in front of it. The two Shadows spun in place and two Agi spells were shot in the direction of the SEES team.

"Junpei, block it!" Minato shouted.

"Huh? Uh, got it!"

Hermes placed itself in front of the other Persona, having a resistance to fire unlike the others. Even so, the combined attack seemed to stagger the Persona and Junpei winced as Hermes faltered.

"Junpei!" Hamuko cried.

"It's cool!" Junpei grinned. "Hermes can take a little heat!"

Unfortunately, none of them saw the next attack coming. The Priestess Shadow seemed to gather itself up for a moment before letting loose a blast of icy wind that knocked the four Persona back. The SEES members dropped to the ground in an attempt to cover themselves up against the attack, shuddering from the intense cold.

"D-Dammit...! This thing's really strong!" Junpei grimaced.

"Nothing we do seems to affect it!" Yukari said. "And we're running out of time!"

Minato frowned. It wasn't that the Shadow was strong. They actually weren't that far apart from it in terms of strength, but the narrow space they were fighting in didn't give them a lot of room to fight in, and he was just now realizing that it put them at quite a disadvantage. The Shadow had plenty of tendrils and they were not as limited in movement as they were, plus

those two Mutter Tiaras seemed to be healing up what little damage they'd inflicted. If they could just get past the Tiaras and the Shadow's hair tendrils they could strike it down, but how could they do it without getting intercepted...?

"If we were a little faster..." Hamuko muttered. "Maybe our Persona can't get past it, but if we could maybe get in close..."

"...That might work actually."

"Eh?"

Hamuko gave Minato a confused look as did both Junpei and Yukari when they heard his words. The blue haired boy got to his feet as Orpheus faded away. In his mind's eye, Minato swapped the image of his primary Persona for another.

"Angel!"

The Persona appeared behind Minato, its wings fanning out as it rose into the air. Minato gripped his sword as he called out the name of his spell.

"Sukukaja!"

Minato was suddenly surrounded in a green aura, and he glanced back at the other SEES members. "Cover me."

"Huh?"

Minato suddenly shot forward, body moving faster than

normal due to the effects of the spell he'd casted on himself. Hamuko quickly recovered from her surprise and stood up sweeping her hand forward.

"Orpheus, cover him!"

Junpei and Yukari also quickly got to their feet.

"Clear the way for him, Hermes!"

"You too, Io!"

The three Persona followed after Minato, intercepting the tendrils and Muttering Tiaras as they moved to bar Minato's path. The two Tiaras fired off a pair of Agi spells, but Minato managed to avoid them, cutting through both Shadows with his sword while twin Garu spells, one from Io and one from his own Angel finished them off. Hermes and Hamuko's Orpheus warded off the tendrils that tried to strike at Minato. The Wild Card user dodged past the tendril and closed in on the Shadow, raising his sword to strike at it.

The Shadow suddenly cried out and another ice spell was let loose, knocking Minato and the Persona back. Minato tumbled across the floor, the tendrils that whipped out just missing him as he was forced to retreat back to where the other SEES members stood.

"Close...!" Minato hissed, smirking a little.

"It's just that ice spell that's stopping us." Hamuko said.

"Not this time." Minato said, once again pushing his Evoker against his temple. "Jack Frost!"

A cute snowman dressed in something that resembled a blue jester's uniform replaced Angel.

"That ice spell shouldn't hit too hard now." Minato said. He turned to Junpei. "Same thing, only this time you follow after me."

"Huh?" Junpei gaped at him.

"With both of us together we have a better chance of finishing it off." Minato explained. "Can you keep up."

Junpei stared at the boy for a moment before grinning fiercely. "Of course."

"Good." Minato nodded to Hamuko and Yukari. "You two cover us so we can get in close."

"Right." Hamuko nodded. "But before that... Forneus!"

The manta ray looking Persona appeared in the air above Minato as she turned to face Minato and Junpei.

"Tarukaja!"

Junpei was enveloped by a red aura while the energy mixed in with Minato's present green one. Forneus faded away as Hamuko switched back to Orpheus. The girl grinned at the two of them.

"Go for it!" Hamuko encouraged, giving them a thumbs up.

"Me too!" Yukari said quickly, casting a Dia spell on both Minato and Junpei to recover the damage both of them took. "Take that thing down!"

"Heh, you got it!" Junpei grinned, nodding to Minato. "You ready?"

Minato nodded back. "Let's go."

Both boys ran forward, with Minato taking point while Junpei sprinted just behind him. They didn't have the Tiaras to worry about anymore, but the Shadow had seemingly caught onto their tactic the first time Minato tried it and the majority of the wires whipped forward like a metal gale. Both Orpheus and Io shot forward, slamming into the whipping metal and knocking them away. The Priestess Shadow cried out, wrapping its tendrils around Orpheus and Io, constricting their movement. Even so, they'd bought enough time for Minato and Junpei to rush past. Again, the Priestess Shadow seemed to draw a deep breath before the ice spell swept out once again. Even with the mask, the Shadow seemed surprised when the humans running towards it weren't blown back like they'd been before. Jack Frost braved the icy gale, with Minato and Junpei following in the Persona's wake.

With a shout, Minato struck his sword forward in a thrust, stabbing the Shadow through the chest, causing the creature to recoil from the blow. Immediately following that, Junpei jumped forward, letting out a battle cry as he brought he

swung his katana at the Shadow's neck.

Suddenly, the wires that squeezed Orpheus and Io slackened and the Persona were freed. Hamuko and Yukari also felt the pressure lift from their bodies, having felt as though they themselves were being constricted the same way their Persona had been. The wires suddenly disappeared, and both girls faced forward to see Minato and Junpei standing in front of the Shadow, which was collapsed on the floor. Slowly, the large Shadow's body began to dissipate, its body breaking down into black smoke and sludge just like any regular Shadow. The two girls rushed over to Minato and Junpei, smiles on their faces as their Personas faded away back into their souls.

"We did it!" Hamuko cheered.

"Hell yeah we did!" Junpei grinned. "Even Shadows like that are no match for us!"

"But did we make it in time?" Yukari asked.

"We haven't crashed yet..." Minato said.

"Okay..." Hamuko said. "So then why are we still moving?!"

"W-What?!"

The SEES members looked around in a panic, the fact the scenery outside the windows was still shooting past them and the hum of the monorail's engine both evidence that they

hadn't even slowed down.

"W-What the hell!" Junpei shouted in panic. "M-Mitsuru-senpai said if we beat the Shadow the train would stop!"

"I remember hearing a 'might' when she said it...!" Hamuko said, visibly shaking. "Oh no... we're not stopping, are we?!"

{What are you all waiting for?!} Mitsuru's voice shouted frantically. {There's another train up ahead! You're going to crash!}

"H-How do we stop this thing?!" Yukari screamed.

"H-How the hell would I know?!" Junpei shouted back. "O-Oh shit! We're gonna...!"

Junpei dove to the floor and covered his head while Hamuko and Yukari both screamed. Minato's eyes widened as he stared through the front glass of the car, seeing the train ahead of them getting closer and closer. Body moving before his mind could catch up, Minato ran to the train controls.

"Minato?!" Hamuko shouted. "What are you... kyah!?"

All the SEES members shouted as they were suddenly thrown forward, a loud screeching noise screaming around them as the monorail suddenly buckled and slowly came to a halt. The screeching noise slowly faded and Hamuko, Yukari and Junpei slowly got up from the floor. They watched with wide eyes as Minato slowly walked out of the conductor's room, stepping

around the single coffin that sat in there.

"D-Did we stop...?" Junpei asked shakily.

"Y-Yeah..." Hamuko nodded before looking to Minato.

"Minato, did you...?"

"L-Looks like it..." Minato replied with a strained smile as his legs shook.

"I-I don't believe it..." Yukari whispered, almost collapsing again due to the relief. "We're okay...!"

{Is everyone alright?!}

Mitsuru's urgent shout made everyone jump. The four juniors tried to calm their beating hearts as they recovered.

"We're fine." Minato replied, voice surprisingly calm. "Maybe a couple bruises, but we're fine."

"Fine isn't the word I'd use, but... we're alive..." Yukari said, giving a weak chuckle. "M-My legs are still shaking..."

"Mine too..." Hamuko shuddered.

"D-Dude..." Junpei said, stumbling over to one of the seats and collapsing onto it. "I'm like drenched in sweat... that was..."

{Thank goodness... I'm so glad you're all safe!} Mitsuru said. The four could hear the relief in her tone even through the

headsets they wore. {I'm sorry I couldn't do more on my end...}

"I-It's over now though, right?" Hamuko asked. "N-No more runaway trains or anything...?"

{Ha... no. There will be no more of that, Runako.} Mitsuru assured the girl with a chuckle. {I'm detecting no more Shadows. The operation was a success.}

"Ha... haha..." Junpei chuckled. "Hell yeah... kicked that Shadow's ass..."

"But, Minato-kun..." Yukari said, turning toward the boy. "H-How did you know how to stop the train?"

"Emergency break lever in the conductor's room." Minato said, pointing back over his shoulder.

"But how did you know which was the right one?" Hamuko asked, peering over and seeing the numerous buttons and levers on the console. They were just a couple meters away from the other train...

"Instinct."

"...Really?"

Minato smirked a little. "Actually, I just guessed..."

"S-Seriously?!" Junpei gasped before sinking in his seat. "You gotta be kidding me..."

"Whether it was instinct or a lucky guess... you saved us." Yukari said, giving Minato a warm smile. "Thank you."

"Ah, don't worry about it." Minato replied.

"Don't just brush it off!" Hamuko said, grabbing Minato's arms.

"Wha... Hamuko-"

"You... I don't even..." Hamuko seemed to struggle with her words before giving Minato a bright smile. "Seriously, that makes twice for all of us now? Me and Yukari on that first night and Junpei in that other car... and now this too. Thanks."

"...Yeah. You're welcome." Minato said, accepting their gratitude.

SMASH

Minato blinked.

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

He peered over at Hamuko who just continued to smile at him. It didn't look like she was hearing the voices this time...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Judgment Arcana...

"*Well... whatever.*" Minato thought to himself. After everything, he supposed the link wasn't entirely unexpected. He was just happy that he and everyone else was still in one

piece.

"Hey, man..."

Minato was surprised again when Junpei suddenly got up and grabbed his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Junpei said, surprising the other SEES members. "Y'know... about what I said, making a big deal about the leader thing. I've been a real prick to you. I mean, seriously... what you did..."

Junpei shook his head, clapping Minato's shoulder and giving him a big grin.

"You deserve to be the leader." Junpei smiled. "No more complaining from me, especially after you saved my bacon twice tonight. I'll follow your lead from now on."

"Iori..."

"Junpei, man." The boy grinned at him. "Don't have to bother with the honorifics with me, Leader."

SMASH

"What the...?!"

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

"Another one...?" Minato thought, eyes widening slightly in

surprise.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Magician Arcana...

"Then this is..."

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Magician with Junpei Iori...

"Seriously though, I'm sorry for the way I acted." Junpei sighed. "So, uh... we cool?"

"...Yeah. We're cool." Minato replied, smiling slightly.

"Heh. Awesome."

Minato and Junpei both blinked when suddenly Hamuko enveloped both of them in a tight hug.

"Hey...!"

"Wha... Hamu-tan, what're you...?"

"I'm so happy you two finally made up!" Hamuko said enthusiastically, grinning from ear to ear.

"At least we won't have to listen to Junpei whining about it anymore." Yukari smirked.

"H-Hey, I didn't whine THAT much about it..."

"You kind of did." Minato said flatly.

"What? Dude, come on..."

{Haha... I'm happy to hear you're all in high spirits.} Mitsuru said, also pleased that Minato and Junpei had resolved the issue between them. {Well, don't dawdle there for too long. Let's all go home and get some rest.}

"Ugh... sinking into bed sounds great right now." Yukari groaned. "After this, I don't know if I'll be able to ride the train to school..."

"Don't let tonight's experience take away your love of the monorail!" Hamuko protested. "Remember, it's just like gliding over the ocean!"

"...Yeah. I'm not so sure I think that way anymore."

"It's not like there's another way to get to school." Junpei grinned. "Or maybe you plan to swim to the island from now on, Yuka-tan?"

"...I think I stick with the train." Yukari said, smiling slightly.

As they all moved to exit the train, Minato found himself reflecting on the voices he'd heard.

"...*Could this be considered a bond?*" Minato asked himself as he listened to the others laugh and bicker.

Back at the dorm's command room, Akihiko stared at the terminal in front of him before giving a frustrated grunt.

"I can't the waiting..." Akihiko muttered. "I should've gone with them."

"Now, now... I'm sure their fine." Ikutsuki, who had arrived about ten minutes ago, assured Akihiko with a smile. "The readings indicate that the large Shadow has disappeared. I expect we'll hear from Mitsuru and the others in just a-

A beeping noise came from the terminal.

"You see?" Ikutsuki smiled as Akihiko hit a button on the terminal.

"Akihiko here." Akihiko answered. "Is that you, Mitsuru?"

{You were expecting someone else?}

Akihiko chuckled a little before getting serious. "So...? How'd it go?"

If smiles could be heard through one's voice, Akihiko could definitely hear Mitsuru's.

{There was a bit of a close call with the monorail, but the operation was a complete success.} Mitsuru replied. {The Shadow was defeated and the monorail didn't sustain any noticeable damage.}

"Thank you, Mitsuru." Ikutsuki said, sounding relieved. "When I

arrived and Akihiko told me that the Shadow had apparently hijacked a monorail, I'd feared the worst. You all did very well tonight. Now I don't have to worry about tomorrow's headlines."

{There will be questions about how the monorail ended up where it did thought...}

"Just leave that to me. I'll take care of it." Ikutsuki assured her.

{Alright then.} Mitsuru let out a sigh before speaking again. {The team did very well tonight, and they all seem closer than before. They adapted to the situation quickly and were able to return without sustainable injury. I couldn't ask for better results.}

"Neither can I." Ikutsuki agreed.

"It's good that the operation was a success, but..." Akihiko said before trailing off.

{What is it?}

"It's just... taking over a monorail..." Akihiko said, brow furrowed in confusion. "Just what are the Shadows up to? Something like this has never happened until now."

"I'll be looking into the matter, don't worry." Ikutsuki said solemnly. "Still, the first thing that comes to mind is..."

{...Do you think it's begun?} Mitsuru asked tentatively.

"...Well, let's not jump to any conclusions." Ikutsuki said. "For now, we should continue studying their behavior while looking for clues that might help us determine their intentions. If possible, I'd like us to start acting first instead of just reacting whenever the Shadows attack."

{If I had more power, things wouldn't be so difficult for the others. If I had the strength, I would've been able to help-}

"Enough of that!" Ikutsuki said, admonishing the girl. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Mitsuru. You're doing a wonderful job. All of you are. I'm sure your father would be proud of the progress you've made."

{Chairman...}

"Now, we'll see you when you get back to the dorm." Ikutsuki smiled. "Excellent work tonight, everyone. Let's keep it up."

{Roger!}

As soon as the connection was cut, Ikutsuki let out a tired sigh. Akihiko arched an eyebrow at the man.

"Are you okay, Mr. Chairman?" Akihiko asked, only now noticing how tired the man looked.

"I-I'm fine..." Ikutsuki huffed, placing his hands on his knees as he took deep breaths. "More importantly... do you have anything to drink, Akihiko?"

"...Well, yeah. There should be some water downstairs and..."

wait," Akihiko's eyes widened in surprise when he connected the dots in his head. "Don't tell me that bicycle outside is yours!"

The man gave a tired chuckle. "Boy, am I gonna be sore tomorrow!"

And with that, the first SEES operation came to a relatively successful end.

~::~Velvet Theatre~::~

A blue room comes into focus, with a large clock looming above a gate overhead. The blue room is not just that, but appears to be an elevator of sorts moving up at high speed. There is no one else in the room save to two individuals dressed in blue to match the room's hue, one woman and one man. The duo smile and give polite bows, as if greeting someone.

"Hello," Elizabeth greets. "And once again, welcome to the Velvet Room. I am Elizabeth, one who rules over power..."

"And I am Theodore, one who can claim the same." Theodore smiles. "This is the Velvet Theatre..."

The young man dressed in blue suddenly sighs, giving his sister a long suffering look.

"Sister... once again, this is-"

"I'm sorry, am I hearing things?" Elizabeth asks herself as she looks around. "I feel this tickling in my ear... it reminds me of my little brother's whining. But he wouldn't complain to his sister after his sister has politely asked him to do something for her, as he would have no right to whine after agreeing to go along with her, would he? I wonder what this noise is then..."

"...You're probably just hearing things, sister."

"Indeed." Elizabeth smiles, clapping her hands. "Now, let us discuss what we are meant to discuss!"

"And that would be?"

"Why, our guests overcoming their first ordeal, of course!" Elizabeth says, sounding shocked that Theodore didn't know. She gives him a haughty look. "Please, brother, do try to keep up."

"I find it difficult with you, dear sister."

"...In any case," Elizabeth continues, ignoring her brother. "It was quite a close call for our guests, wasn't it? If my guest had been just a few seconds slower, their journey would have come to an abrupt end!"

"Indeed. It would have been a tragedy." Theodore says solemnly. "I shudder at the thought of what might have been."

"Well, no use dwelling on it. They succeeded, and for that they

deserve praise!"

"Yes. Of course, there will be many ordeals yet to come..."

"Indeed. Let us pray that our guests might overcome them..." Elizabeth says somberly before brightening up. "But let us take this opportunity to share information on our guests' Persona!"

"...And with whom might we be sharing this information with?" Theo asks. "We... are the only ones here, currently."

"In any case!" Elizabeth continues, ignoring her brother's complaint. "Both our guests use the Persona, Orpheus. However, they summoned two different versions."

"For those of you who don't know, Orpheus was a legendary musician and poet of Greek mythology skilled in playing the lute." Theo says. "It was said that when this master of strings played his lute, he could charm any who listened. In his legend, he journeyed to the underworld in order to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, who had died from the venom of a snake bit."

"What a devoted husband." Elizabeth comments.

"Yes. With his lute he softened Hades' heart and the lord of the underworld agreed to return his wife to him under one condition," Theo goes on. "He could not look back at his wife until they both reach the world of the living. Orpheus agreed, and traveled back to the world of the living, unable to look back to see if Eurydice was really following him."

Unfortunately, his doubts got the better of him and just before he reached left the underworld he looked back, and his wife was lost forevermore..."

"How tragic..." Elizabeth says sadly. "He should not have looked back..."

"Yes. Orpheus despaired and that anguish manifested in horrible lute playing that angered those around him, and it is said that he was killed by having his head chopped off."

"Perhaps that is why both Orpheus have a mechanical body." Elizabeth points out.

"Perhaps." Theo agrees. "However, I think the better question is why my guest's Orpheus is even female to begin with? After all, Orpheus is male in the legend..."

"Mythological tales can be interpreted in numerous ways. Legends from another age... it's hard to know the exact details." Elizabeth says. "Perhaps Orpheus was really a woman and it was a husband she was rescuing?"

"Who knows? It's certainly possible." Theo muses. "Maybe in another world..."

"Well, the two Persona are similar but different. They have the same weakness to darkness and lightning attacks, but Minato's Orpheus specializes in Agi skills while Hamuko's is skilled with Bufu spells." Elizabeth says. "Though I'm sure they'll both grow stronger in time."

"Indeed. For even though our guess will acquire a multitude of masks, I'm sure... this Persona will always be ready to heed their call."

"Yes." Elizabeth nods before clapping her hands. "Well then, I believe that should do for now!"

"So... so we're done then?" Theo asks hopefully.

"For now."

"Of course..."

"Thank you all for joining us. This has been the Velvet Theatre." Elizabeth smiles before bowing. "I'm sure we'll see you all again, but until that time comes..."

"...Farewell." Theodore finishes also bowing. He sighs.
"Sister, I-"

"Hm? What's that? Is there something in my ear? Surely not my brother complaining!"

"..."

The room fades away...

A/N: And done! I'm actually pretty satisfied. Was anyone else satisfied?

Anyway, first Full Moon is done now. Gotta start building up

for the next one now! So, more Social Links and character development to come (Happy I was able to establish Magician for Minato in this one) so I hope those reading are looking forward to that. I've got the conflict that's coming outlined, but might take a bit to put in down. We'll see how things go.

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter. Feedback is appreciated as always and I'll answer any questions if I'm able. I'll fix grammar mistakes later. Next one will be out when its out, and I wish you all happy days.

Kiiam

12. Chapter 11: Questions

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona

A/N: Happy to get this out. Time for more Social Links and relationship building. I think some will be a little surprised about what develops in this chapter, especially if one is knowledgeable about links. Enjoy.

Chapter 11: Questions

It had been an exhausted and relieved SEES team that had made it home after the mission on the monorail. It had been too close of a call for any of them to be comfortable with and most of the team had retreated to their rooms to rest upon their return. Both Mitsuru and Yukari had fretted a little about what people might say about the monorail when the Dark Hour ended, but Ikutsuki had assured the group that it would be taken care of without a major incident. Sure enough, the following day when Minato had turned on the news he'd caught the tail end of a report about the monorail incident. The matter had been explained away by the train missing a red light and overshooting its mark, with the train's driver receiving most of the blame for the accident. Minato was actually surprised that things were settled so quickly, though he imagined that it was easier for those not present to brush it

off and fabricate stories. After all, there weren't that many people on the train that late at night and he could only imagine what witnesses might have said about the matter if they had been questioned. Even if it seemed like the monorail had instantaneously "jumped" from one spot to another, no one would believe something like that.

Well, Minato didn't pay much attention to it since it was better for people to accept things as they were rather than panic. Since nobody got hurt in the end, it was better just to leave things be.

Granted, there were still other related issues that were still bothering the leader of SEES.

"Why are you acting so surprised about it? I say it's completely expected."

"What makes you say that?"

Hamuko gave Minato a coy smirk and nudged the boy with her elbow. "You saved our lives, Leader. Say what you will, that earned you quite a few points with everyone on the team. I mean, if that doesn't deserve a rank up I don't know what does."

Minato and Hamuko were discussing the events of the operation on Saturday, and despite their adventure on the monorail, they didn't have any trouble taking it to school. As they talked, Minato had mentioned that his Judgment Social Link, his bond with the entirety of the SEES team, had

increased. Hamuko noticed his confusion and called him out on it.

"All I did was pull one lever." Minato said.

"And pulling it saved our lives."

"It was a lucky guess."

"A guess everyone else was too busy panicking to make." Hamuko pointed out. The girl's eyes narrowed at the boy. "Geez, why are you so stuck on it? You should be happy! Team cohesion is important! Or is our depending on you really bugging you that much?"

"...It's not that I'm bothered by it." Minato denied, though truth be told he was still uncomfortable with the concept. "It's just that the triggers to these links are a little... odd, don't you think?"

"How do you mean?" Hamuko asked curiously.

"I get that joining SEES got the Judgment link established, but what about the others?" Minato said with a frown. "All I did was join a club to establish my Chariot Link, and I've barely exchanged words with Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai yet after just one conversation I establish their links too?"

"Wait, you got links with both our senpai? Good for you!" Hamuko said cheerily, smiling at Minato like a proud parent would. "It's nice to hear that you're starting to connect with

others!"

"...That's not the point." Minato grunted, annoyed with how flippant her attitude was towards the matter. "My point is, that the triggers for these links seem too broad and vague. All it takes is a little small talk one time while other times it's saving the lives of everyone around me?"

"Again, thank you for that." Hamuko smiled.

"...Again, you're missing the point." Minato continued as his irritation grew. "Don't you find it strange? It's hard to figure out how these links work when it all seems pretty random. I mean, if these links are supposed to make us stronger we should try to figure out... why they... er..."

Minato trailed off when Hamuko started humming loudly, tuning out what he was trying to say. Minato narrowed his eyes at her as she hummed before she turned his way and blinked guilelessly at him.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you not finished?" Hamuko asked innocently. Minato continued glaring at her. The girl rolled her eyes and playfully mussed up Minato hair before he swatted her hand aside. "You're thinking too much, Minato! There's no guide to relationships so don't expect to find one on social links! Don't worry about it and just enjoy things as they come!"

"...If only I could think and live as freely as you."

"...Geez, don't sound so morbid." Hamuko frowned. She

brightened up a second later. "Seriously though, it'll do no good to just fret over it. Why think too deeply into it? It's just us growing closer as a team."

"...Whatever." Minato said finally, heaving a sigh as he dropped the subject.

"Hm, still, links with Akihiko-senpai and Mitsuru-senpai... looks like I've got some catching up to do!" Hamuko giggled.

"This isn't a contest..." Minato muttered.

"I know. Besides, I'm still winning."

Minato groaned and rubbed his temples as he felt a headache coming on.

"Now arriving at Gekkoukan High School."

"Oh, here's our stop." Hamuko chirped as she hopped out of her seat. She smiled down at Minato. "Let's get going."

Letting out another sigh, Minato hoisted himself out of his seat and followed Hamuko outside and began their trek towards the school's front gates. As they walked, with Hamuko thankfully forgoing conversation to quietly hum along to whatever music she was listening to, Minato directed his thoughts to other matters that bothered him.

That mysterious boy's prediction had come true. However vague he'd been when informing Minato of the "ordeal" that he'd apparently be faced with, the fact that it had come true

proved that the child knew something about the Dark Hour and Shadows the rest of them didn't. The boy's entire existence was an oddity, completely unexplainable and just thinking about him and his words confused Minato. The boy had said he'd see Minato again once the ordeal was over, yet he hadn't made a reappearance and Minato was growing anxious to see him again. If he ever saw that boy again he wouldn't let him go without having a few questions answered first.

Still, something else about the boy was nagging him, specifically something about what the boy said. Minato could scarcely remember the exact words the boy had said since his appearance had been so sudden and he'd been half asleep at the time. The way he'd said ordeal and the way he told him... could Minato assume there would be other similar "ordeals" in the days to come? If so, when would they come? Knowing that there might be other Shadows like Magician and Priestess were alarming enough, but should he really be so quick to make that assumption? He'd hate to waste time worrying if it never happened again. He needed more information before drawing any conclusions. He still barely knew anything about the Dark Hour or Shadows in general, Personas too, so it wouldn't do any good to worry with almost no specific details.

"...I should really have a talk with the Chairman or Mitsuru-senpai one of these days." Minato thought to himself, thinking about how little they'd told them so far. *"They have to know more than just that information on Shadows an Apathy Syndrome. They should-"*

"Wazzup?!"

Minato grunted as he was suddenly thumped on the back, breaking him out of his thoughts. He turned his head to find Junpei grinning at him.

"Hey, Junpei." Hamuko greeted with a smile, hearing the boy's exuberant greeting and turning to face him. She waved when she noticed someone else familiar trailing behind him.

"Morning, Yukari."

"Hey." Yukari smiled back. "Guess we missed each other on the train, huh?"

"Guess so."

"Speaking of which, did either of you guys catch the news about the train?" Yukari asked as the four of them fell into pace as they walked the rest of the way to school together. "It's being blamed on the driver. Missing a red light and overshooting his mark."

"Is that how it ended up?" Hamuko asked.

"You really didn't see anything on the news about it? They went over the incident a few times, I heard."

"Well, I don't really watch the news that much so..."

"Well, it sounds like it was taken care of. Ikutsuki-san said not to worry." Junpei grinned. "Yep, everything's back to normal. Just another ordinary day at school. Nothing compared to the

craziness the day before yesterday."

"You sound happy." Yukari noted.

"Hehe... what can I say? Things are getting kind of exciting," Junpei chuckled, earning incredulous looks from Yukari and Minato. "I've never had that kind of thrill before."

"We almost died." Minato said, feeling the need to point that out. Yukari shivered as she remembered their near crash, but Junpei waved him off.

"Hazards of the job." Junpei said, still grinning. "And come on! Despite the danger, you've gotta admit all this business with Shadows and the Dark Hour is really exciting!"

"...I wouldn't mind a little more ordinary." Minato said.

"No more joyrides on trains, at the very least." Yukari added empathetically, siding with Minato on the matter.

"C'mon, guys! I think Junpei has a point." Hamuko smiled. "I mean, in the end we stopped the crash and saved the city!"

"Not the city. It was just-"

"Hush, Minato. We did something great that night." Hamuko smiled. "Sure, the experience was pretty dangerous itself, but since we got through it let us be happy about it! Plus, I don't know if you've noticed, but there's haven't been a lot of the Lost around lately. When Yukari and I went out Sunday night, we didn't see a single wanderer."

"Now that I think about it, you're right..." Yukari murmured, surprised that she hadn't realized. "Mitsuru-senpai and Ikutsuki did say that those afflicted with Apathy Syndrome and Shadows were connected..."

"Heh. Won the battle, save the city, and helped a lot of people by doing it." Junpei grinned, looking ecstatic by the fact. "Yeeeeeeep! I'm feelin' pretty awesome right now!"

"...Well, I hope you keep that enthusiasm," Yukari said, smiling a little. "After all, midterms start next Monday."

"...You just had to remind me, didn't ya?" Junpei sighed, face dropping as he remembered. "Way to kill my good mood, Yuka-tan."

"Better start studying, Junpei!" Hamuko advised her friend teasingly.

"Not you too, Hamu-tan! Don't make me think about that stuff now!" Junpei whined.

Minato placed his headphones over his ears as the group walked down the path towards the main school building, drowning out the voices of the rest of SEES playfully bickering with one another and shoving the troubling thoughts concerning the Dark Hour to the back of his mind.

"Yo, Minato!"

Minato closed his shoe locker and turned to see Junpei jogging towards him. The boy arched his eyebrow at his fellow junior and turned to face him. "What's up?"

"Nothin' much. I was just wondering if you've got any plans now that school's over."

"Not particularly."

"Well, how's about gettin' a bite to eat with me at Hagakure's? My treat!" Junpei offered with a grin.

"...What's the occasion?" Minato asked. Granted, he was all for accepting a free meal, but he and Junpei had only just recently began to get along, or at least buried the animosity between them. He was curious about what he'd done to bring about such goodwill.

"Ah, well, y'know... I know I've been pretty difficult to deal with and I was pretty immature about the whole leader issue, so I thought I'd try making it up to you by buying you lunch." Junpei said, scratching the back of his neck in a gesture that gave away his slight embarrassment. "I know I already apologized, but it just didn't seem like enough. And you did save my bacon that night after I ran off. So... if you want..."

Junpei left the offer hanging as he trailed off. Minato gave a few moments pause before shrugging his shoulders.

"Sure. If you're offering to pay, I'll take you up on it."

"Sweet!" Junpei grinned, his enthusiastic reply surprising Minato somewhat. "Let's get going!"

The two boys had apparently beaten the afternoon rush or had just missed it seeing as Hagakure was surprisingly empty when they entered. Minato and Junpei took their seats as the latter turned to the SEES leader.

"You okay with the special?"

"More than okay." Minato said, eyebrows rising in slight surprise. "You don't mind paying for it?"

"Nah. Like I said, it's on me! Plus, I've got things to make up for and repay you for so don't hold back!" Junpei grinned before turned to the chef. "Hey! Two specials over here!"

"Coming right up!" The chef called back.

"Lucky that we got here when it ain't that busy. We'll be chowing down in no time." Junpei grinned.

"Yeah."

"Oh, almost forgot," Junpei said, turning toward Minato and flashing him a grin. "Welcome to Iwatodai."

"...What?" Minato said, expression puzzled.

"Ah, it's just... I don't think I greeted you properly when we first met. I did with Hamu-tan, but I can't remember being that

friendly with you when she introduced us to each other."

"That was over a month ago. We're way past introductions." Minato said, lips quirking upwards slightly in amusement.

"I know, I know. It just didn't sit well with me so I thought I'd do it. Guess it seems weird to do it now." Junpei said sheepishly.

"So how should I respond? 'Thanks for the welcome' just doesn't feel right after all we've gone through already."

"Maybe... 'let's work together from now on' or something?"

"Sure, let's go with that." Minato sighed, with Junpei letting out a couple laughs at his own silliness.

Their words were soon muffled by loud slurps as they received their ramen bowls. Both boys didn't bother with conversation, content with enjoying their meal and the comfortable, relatively quiet atmosphere around them. Sipping the rest of the broth, Junpei placed his bowl on the countertop and turned towards Minato.

"So, where'd you transfer from anyway?" Junpei asked.

"I was staying with a relative in Shinjuku before coming here." Minato replied, pushing his bowl away as he finished.

"In Tokyo? Huh. I just lived a little ways from this city when I transferred so it wasn't a big change for me but I bet it's a big difference between here and Shinjuku."

"Not so much. Iwatodai was never a rural city so it didn't take too much time to get readjusted again." Minato said.

"Readjusted? You've been to Iwatodai before?"

"I used to live here." Minato said, pausing when he realized where the conversation had ended up. "...I moved away when my parents died."

"Oh... er, I-I'm sorry. I didn't know you..."

"Don't worry about it. Happened a long time ago." Minato said, dismissing the issue and steering the conversation in another direction. "So, you're a transfer too?"

"Huh? Oh, y-yeah! Didn't I tell you?" Junpei smiled, glad that Minato didn't seem to be bothered by his insensitivity. "Back in the eighth grade I started attending school in this district, so I know where you and Hamu-tan are coming from. What do you think of Gekkoukan anyway?"

"Definitely the most extravagant school I've ever attended." Minato said. "Guess that's what you can expect since the Kirijo Group is its builder and sponsor."

"Yeah, no kidding. It's way better than my other school." Junpei grinned. "I mean, I've been attending the place since freshman year and I still haven't gotten the entire layout of the island down. It could be another small city on its own! And with Tartarus too..."

"To build an artificial island and build a school on top of it... it sure is amazing to think about." Minato muttered. "Guess that goes to show how much power the Kirijo Group has..."

"Yeah..." Junpei nodded absently, glancing at Minato before grinning to himself. "Hehehe..."

"...What's so funny?" Minato asked, wondering if he said something humorous.

"It's nothing. It's just... this is nice, y'know?" Junpei said, scratching his cheek. "Just this, talking with a friend. Had a hard time doing that when we were being jerks to each other. I was just laughing about how stupid I was being for making such a big deal out of the leader thing instead of getting along with you."

"You seem to get along pretty well with the others." Minato commented.

"Even so, there are some things I can't talk about with Hamutan and Yuka-tan since their girls. Regarding our senpai, Akihiko-senpai is a little too straight-laced sometimes and I feel like Mitsuru-senpai would start lecturing me if I did anything improper." Junpei said. "So right now I'm glad I've got someone who I can really talk to."

Minato raised his eyebrow as Junpei grinned at him.

"...Are you coming onto me?"

"What the fu-?! NO!" Junpei shouted, face reddening with indignation at the accusation. "Girls, man! I like girls! All I'm saying is that it's nice to have girl and guy friends I can talk to! I'm not-!"

"Calm down. I was just joking." Minato deadpanned, though he smirked a little at Junpei's vehement denials. Minato sighed and stared ahead listlessly for a moment, mulling over Junpei's words. "Although... I admit that it is nice to have people you can talk to."

In spite of his own mixed feelings about certain issues regarding relationships, Minato could tolerate and appreciate just the mere exchanging of words.

"L-Like I was sayin'," Junpei nodded, glaring at Minato before smiling again. "Still, the way you talk... did you not have a lot of friends back home?"

"Home is a relative term for me. I moved around a lot growing up, so I was never in one place for very long. It made it hard to make friends." Minato said neutrally.

"Well, if you ever need anyone to talk to, I'm here!" Junpei grinned, pointing to himself. "Same goes for Tartarus too. Just tell me what needs to be done and I'll do it! Besides, after thinking it over I'm more suited for dashing second-in-command than actual leadership."

"Right..."

SMASH

Minato let out another sigh.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Magician Arcana...

Well, it wasn't like the voices were entirely unexpected this time. It was one of the only times they hadn't caught him completely off guard.

"Don't tell me I'm getting used to this..." Minato thought, frowning to himself.

"Something wrong?" Junpei asked, noticing the odd look on Minato's face.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it." Minato replied, waving off his concern.

"Alright then." Junpei shrugged, deciding not to make an issue of it. Instead, he grinned and leaned closer to Minato with a conspiratorial look on his face. "So..."

"...What?" Minato frowned, leaning away from the boy.

"...When you think about it, we're actually pretty lucky, huh?"

"...Why do you say that?"

"C'mon, dude! I'm talking about living in the same dorm with the three prettiest and most popular girls in the school!" Junpei grinned.

"...So that's what you meant, huh...?" Minato muttered, realizing what Junpei meant when he mentioned there were only things guys could talk about with each other.

"Don't sound so apathetic! And don't take our good fortune for granted!" Junpei said, grin widening as he explained things to Minato. "Yuka-tan has been the school idol ever since freshman year. She's got the looks and the body of a model, and guys are asking her out all the time! She friendly to most everyone in school, though she can be cold at times... but that combo makes her all the more appealing...!"

"She probably only has an attitude towards people like you who talk about her like this." Minato said. Although this harassment might explain why she seemed to make quick assumptions and get defensive sometimes. There had been times where he felt she'd be particularly stand-offish with him when he hadn't really given her a reason to act like so, or at least he thought so anyway...

"Then of course there's Mitsuru-senpai, adored by practically everyone in the school. The only reason she isn't the school idol is because no one has had the balls to try to get her. That cool, regal attitude is what endears her fans to her but also keeps the admirers at bay. This untouchable aura of beauty... definitely one a kind, a flower only the strongest have even the slightest chance of plucking...!"

"...I really wish the others were here to hear you say this." Minato said honestly. He could imagine the other SEES members being surprised at his eloquence in describing their status at school while also being disgusted with being referred to so objectively.

"And lastly there's the cute new transfer, Hamu-tan. Her looks alone earned her big points, but that upbeat attitude and cheerful demeanor in combination with that has garnered quite the following according to certain sources. Just watching her skip around the school puts a smile on your face and makes any guy happy that the school uniform makes the girls wear skirts. There have been a lot more students visiting the shrine to give their thanks since she transferred to Gekkoukan..."

Minato finally decided it was best to remain silent. Inwardly, he thought that Hamuko was a little overfamiliar and could be annoyingly persistent at times, but she was actually the one he felt that he got along most with. Given that they both were guests of the Velvet Room and they had a shared secret that initially defined their relationship notwithstanding, he saw her as a cheeky friend rather than a potential partner. In the face of Junpei's ramblings, Minato only gave a mute nod, his expression flat and impassive.

"My point is... we're pretty fortunate. It gives us a golden opportunity, you know?" Junpei grinned. "Be honest... any of them strike your fancy?"

"...I don't know any of them well enough to answer that." Minato replied, neutrality emanating from his words and tone.

"That's a pretty reserved answer." Junpei said. "What? Got someone waiting back at your old place?"

"Nothing like that." Minato replied, though paused when he thought back. "...Well actually, there was this one girl I went out with once..."

"Whoa, what? S-Seriously?" Junpei exclaimed, eyes wide. "When?! D-Do you still talk to her? Have her number? Picture? Tell me!"

"Calm down! You're creeping me out..." Minato grimaced, leaning away from Junpei. "It's no big deal..."

"The hell it isn't! C'mon, dude, gimme details!" Junpei demanded, grinning from ear to ear. "How far did you get with her?"

The conversation continued like that for some time, with Junpei trying to pry details out of Minato life before he moved to Iwatodai with awkward, invading questions. While Minato was bothered and annoyed by his insistent questions, he couldn't deny that a small part of him was happy that he and Junpei were finally getting along. Minato still felt like he was treading unfamiliar ground, but it was nice.

"Looks like you need more practice, eh?" Junpei chuckled.

"Whatever." Minato muttered, annoyance growing and Junpei continued to gloat.

"Hey, you weren't that bad. A little more training and you might be able to stand up to the master!" Junpei laughed. Minato only gave a short grunt in response.

After paying for their food, Junpei had managed to convince Minato to join him at the arcade. The boys had spent the majority of their afternoon there, with most of the evening devoted to one of the classic fighting games most arcades had. Junpei, a frequent of the arcade and avid player of the game chosen, had trounced Minato quite soundly in several consecutive matches. He hadn't stopped bragging since, and Minato was grateful when their dorm finally came into view. Junpei quickly jogged up the steps and opened the door, grinning as he gestured inside the dorm.

"I'm a gracious winner though." Junpei grinned cheekily. "After you, my good-"

Junpei choked on his words when Minato elbowed him in the stomach as he walked past. Junpei coughed and grimaced, hobbling after Minato and closing the door behind him.

"Okay, I deserved that..."

"You did." Minato agreed, giving a puzzled frown when he heard the odd jingle echoing in the room.

"Here comes Tanakaaaa, over the waves to youuuuu~"

Minato noticed Hamuko sitting on the couch watching TV. The SEES leader glanced at the television screen, watching the

advertisement as the irritatingly catchy song continued to play through the speakers.

"Oh, is that Tanaka's show?" Junpei asked.

"Hm? Oh, Minato and Junpei! Welcome back!" Hamuko smiled, greeting the boys as Junpei made their presence known. "Yeah! They were having a special today and I managed to catch it!"

"Huh. What's the occasion?" Junpei asked, walking over and sitting next to the girl. "I thought they only aired on Sundays."

"It's some kind of promotion they're doing." Hamuko told him. "They've got all kinds of new products to use at home and recreationally. They had some pretty good ones. An All-Purpose Apron, an Explosive Fishing Set, and some new diet food that looked really good..."

"You know advertisers just pretty up the merchandise for the commercials, right? They're never as good as they look." Minato said.

"I'm choosing to ignore that. There's at least some legitimacy to every advertisement, and Tanaka's Amazing Commodities has great stuff!" Hamuko said enthusiastically. "Sure, some of their products are faulty, but...!"

"Wait, you've bought from them before?" Minato asked.

"Of course. They really do have great deals."

"Yeah. Tanaka sells things you can't normally find in stores, and the stuff you can he sells in bulk for really low prices!" Junpei explained.

"There was this one product that looked really useful." Hamuko said, eyes shining. "I think it might be worth the spending the cash to buy it!"

"...Whatever." Minato muttered, deciding that how Hamuko used her money didn't matter to him.

"Welcome back everyone."

The trio turned towards the stairs, noticing the chairman who gave them all a friendly smile in greeting.

"Oh, Ikutsuki-san." Hamuko muttered, blinking at the man. "I didn't know you were here..."

"Ah, I was upstairs in the Command Room compiling some reports on the Shadows we fought recently." Ikutsuki said. "I've actually been here for quite some time. I'm sorry that I didn't come downstairs to say hello earlier."

"It's fine. We didn't come up to say hi either." Hamuko grinned. Ikutsuki chuckled a little at that.

"Did we find out anything new?" Junpei asked.

"Not particularly. I was able to get some new data from that Shadow on the train, but nothing really substantial." Ikutsuki said, looking apologetic. "We've made so much progress over

the past month or so thanks to you all, and if we keep exploring Tartarus I'm sure we'll find more clues eventually."

"Let's hope." Hamuko said, smiling optimistically.

"Indeed. Say..." Ikutsuki began, looking at though he'd remembered something important. "Would any of you happen to be good with electronics? Specifically computers?"

"Er, not really..." Hamuko mumbled.

"I mean, I play video games and stuff on 'em, but if you're asking if I know how they work I can't really help you with that." Junpei chuckled sheepishly. "What about Minato? He seems like he'd be good with electronics."

"What makes me seem like that?" Minato asked, glaring at Junpei as he was halfway to making his escape up the stairs when he'd been called out.

"Are you?" Ikutsuki asked, turning towards the leader of SEES.

"Well, I've helped on of my relatives install a new television once and fixed my cousin's laptop, but other than that..."

Minato stiffened when Ikutsuki's hand suddenly clasped his shoulder.

"That's close enough." Ikutsuki smiled. "If you wouldn't mind coming with me for just a minute..."

"In short, I'd like to see what you can do about this."

Minato stared at the multitude of wires underneath the console in the Command Room. Ikutsuki had pulled away a panel to show off the guts of the large computer, gesturing vaguely to the dozens of wires and circuits that it contained.

"...I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to be looking at."
Minato confessed.

"That's okay. I'm not entirely sure either." Ikutsuki smiled, apparently unconcerned with the fact. "I tried poking around a little in there and it didn't make the situation any worse. Although, I didn't make it any better either."

"Is that so..."

"Yes. I suppose my brain's not wired to understand this stuff!"

"...Is that so."

Ikutsuki pursed his lips at Minato's lack of reaction to his joke, but withdrew from the underside of the monitor and stood back up with Minato following him. "So, did you find anything out of place?"

Minato sighed and gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders. The main computer had apparently been subject to glitches and hiccups ever since the Magician Shadow attacked back when he and Hamuko had first arrived at the dorm. The computer must have been damaged from the Shadow knocking around

the building, or at least that what Ikutsuki hypothesized, and ever since then the computer would malfunction. The hiccups weren't bad enough to interfere with operations and information gathering, but were still annoying to deal with when they popped up. Ikutsuki had been trying to fix it for the past few weeks with little luck and had decided to ask if anyone else in SEES was knowledgeable of computers and could lend a hand.

"Why not just hire someone to fix this?" Minato asked, feeling that was the most pertinent question.

"It's... not exactly that simple. A lot of this machinery is designed to interface with Persona and analyze Shadows and their activities, not to mention this computer is specially designed to keep working even during the Dark Hour. I doubt a simple electrician would be able to solve the problem."

"And you think I'm better?" Minato asked disbelievingly.

"Well, you know about Shadows and the Dark Hour. You know how technology responds to both. I figure you or one of the others might think of something I didn't."

Completely illogical reasoning, but Ikutsuki said it in a way that almost made Minato believe it was genuine.

"Just see what you can find. It couldn't hurt." Ikutsuki smiled.
"Consider it... extra credit, I suppose. Fiddle with this in your spare time. I would really mean a lot."

"...Fine. Whatever." Minato sighed, deciding it was easier to accept rather than argue. He bent back down and peered into the collection of wires again.

"Thank you, Minato-kun." Ikutsuki grinned. "You're a very reliable young man."

"So I've heard." Minato muttered dryly as he moved a couple wires around to get a better look.

"...Well! I think I'll leave you to it then!" Ikutsuki said cheerfully as he turned towards the door. "Thanks again, Minato-kun."

"Wait."

Ikutsuki paused and turned back around, blinking when he noticed Minato staring at him with piercing eyes.

"Ikutsuki-san," Minato began solemnly. "There's something I want to ask you."

"O-Oh, is that all? If you have questions, I'll answer them as best I can." Ikutsuki said, a little put off by Minato's tone. "No need to look so serious."

"This is how I normally look."

"A-As you say..." Ikutsuki murmured. He walked over to one of the cushioned chairs, adjusting his glasses as he sat down. He gave Minato his full attention and gestured to the young boy as he pulled a smile back onto his face. "By all means then. Ask away."

"Why is it Tartarus appears at our school during the Dark Hour?"

Ikutsuki lost his smile. Minato immediately noticed the change and knew he had hit the nail on the head, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the chairman.

"You can't expect me to believe it's just coincidence. I've been living in the Dark Hour since I was a child, and I've never seen anything like that tower until a month ago. Buildings never changed, just the people. Other than Personas and Shadows, Tartarus was the new oddity that's most prominent to me. Why there? Why our school, on that island? The Kirijo Group constructed that island and built a school on top of it, but for what reason? You're the Chairman of our school, and you obviously have ties to the Kirijo Group. If anyone knows anything about the specifics, it would be you or Mitsuru-senpai. So... could you please explain?"

Ikutsuki stared at Minato for several moments. Minato didn't break his gaze or look away. Finally, Ikutsuki sighed and pushed his glasses up, giving Minato a rueful smile.

"...I knew I may have to answer that question at some point, I just never thought it would be so soon." Ikutsuki sighed, before his lips quirked upward. "You're too perceptive, Minato-kun. I really wish that we could've held off on this conversation for a little while longer."

"So you won't tell me?" Minato asked, his expression impassive and unreadable.

"No, no. I said I'd answer any questions you had when you agreed to join SEES." Ikutsuki assured him, holding up his hands in surrender. "Not just that... but we adults have already asked a lot of you kids. You're risking your lives during the Dark Hour... the least I can do is answer to your inquires if it helps ease your worries. I suppose answering the hard questions is the only way I can really shoulder the burden."

Minato relaxed a little at that, feeling slightly guilty that he had put Ikutsuki on the spot. But he need to know was greater than his remorse.

"The Kirijo Group has known about the existence of Shadows for some time now. Over a decade, in fact. As you know, Shadows, while dangerous, are unique creatures with special powers. The Kirijo Group set out to study these existences known as Shadows, and found out that they had an effect on time and space. It's why Shadows are invisible to most people and only appear during the Dark Hour, a time displaced from normal reality. To be able to harness that kind of power and find their own uses for it... those in charge of the Kirijo Group were quite taken with the idea."

"So the Kirijo Group wanted to study Shadows and find a way to harness their power." Minato said, following along.

"Obviously something went wrong."

"Obviously." Ikutsuki agreed with a sheepish smile before his expression turned solemn. "Researching Shadows, the Kirijo Group made great many discoveries, Persona being one of

them. However, due to circumstances, the Kirijo Group could... no longer continue to study Shadows in the way they used to."

Ikutsuki sighed, removing his glasses and briefly rubbing the bridge of his nose before placing them back. Minato waited patiently for him to continue.

"I suppose I've veered a little off-topic from your original question. Truthfully, the experiments were conducted where Gekkoukan was built. The large facility that is a house of teaching today was formerly used to contain and study Shadows."

"These circumstances that kept you from continuing your research... they wouldn't have anything to do with the incident ten years ago, would they?" Minato asked. "Specifically the explosion that was all over the news?"

"...So you're aware of that too." Ikutsuki muttered.

"Even if I was a kid during that time it was a big enough event for me to take notice. By chance, Yukari-san also reminded me of it some time ago and it was just another detail that stood out too much for me to ignore." Minato said.

"You'd be correct in your assumption. That explosion and the events leading to it are the reason Shadows crawl around the streets in the Dark Hour today, and why Tartarus appears during the Dark Hour in the same place the Kirijo Group conducted experiments on the Shadows ten years ago. It's

because of that failure that the Dark Hour came into existence and why SEES was established."

"Why a school?" Minato asked.

"At first, it was used as a front to hide what its facilities were truly used for. It became more genuine when it was used as a cover up for the explosion. The Kirijo buried the incident well enough to the point where very few people even remember it and Gekkoukan is one of the most renowned high schools in the country. By building and funding the school, the Kirijo group could take responsibility and maintain control of Tartarus' location, and cover up anything abnormal or strange that happened in the Port Island area. We wouldn't have nearly as much freedom to operate in any other case."

"I see. So that's why..." Minato murmured, understanding. He leaned his head back against the console, processing the information.

Honestly, just knowing that was gratifying in a way Minato couldn't describe. Fumbling around in the dark for the past few weeks had made him a little frustrated, and Minato was glad that he finally found the time to ask some of the questions that were weighing on his mind. After the operation on the train, and with that boy that had warned him of the Shadow beforehand, together with miniscule information on the Dark Hour and Tartarus itself... Minato was glad that Ikutsuki had answered his questions.

Still, it seemed like the Kirijo Group had a pretty shady past. It

was a little unnerving that a company whose logo could be found on a multitude of electronics, consumer goods, and other merchandise had tried conducting experiments on Shadows in the past and had kept it hidden under the guise of a school. That, and the cover up of the explosion that had taken quite a number of lives... Minato sure didn't see the Kirijo Group the same way he used to anymore.

"...Is there a reason Mitsuru-senpai didn't tell us about any of this?" Minato asked.

"Now, now... she has her reasons. Recruiting new SEES members took precedent, and we wouldn't have made much of an appeal if we'd opened up with this kind of information." Ikutsuki said. "Try to imagine her situation. She is the daughter of the head of the Kirijo Group. Even if she had nothing to do with the incident or what took place all those years ago, Mitsuru still hold herself responsible for the tragedy and the Dark Hour. Because of her family she feels like she deserves part of the blame."

"Is that all?"

"Well, I'll admit there are other reasons she kept her silence... but I don't think it'd be my place to say. Some matters are private and better off left alone, don't you agree?"

Minato kept himself from making a comment about the girl looking into his past and obtaining his records without his knowledge, instead simply nodding in response. "Yeah..."

"Ha... I thought this conversation would be easier the second time I told it, but I should've known better..." Ikutsuki sighed tiredly. "I suppose I shouldn't expect to feel anything positive digging up and reciting such a past."

"Second time...?" Minato questioned, arching an eyebrow. He was about to ask what the chairman meant before it clicked in his head. "Akihiko-senpai asked you about it too?"

"In the beginning of his junior year at Gekkoukan he asked me. It took him some time to ask. Evidently he didn't regard the information with the same importance as you do." Ikutsuki said, giving an amused smile. "Akihiko, while capable as a Persona user, can be a little slow. You're a little quicker on the uptake."

"Should the chairman of Gekkoukan be talking about a student that way?" Minato asked, lips quirking upward in a smile.

Ikutsuki smiled back. "I won't mention it to him if you won't."

"Heh..."

They sat in silence for a while, Minato lost in his own thoughts while Ikutsuki observed him. Eventually, Ikutsuki got up from his seat and addressed Minato as he turned to the door.

"Do you have any other questions for me?" Ikutsuki asked.

"...I'm sure I will at some point. Just give me time to think about things for a while." Minato replied.

"Of course, of course. I'm sure what I've told you is a lot to process all at once. Just come to me when you decide what questions to ask." Ikutsuki said with a smile before giving Minato a look that was slightly pleading. "Just... promise me not to discuss what I've told you with the others. I'd prefer it if they came to either me or Mitsuru of their own volition like you instead of hearing anything from a third party. And don't tell Mitsuru of what I've informed you. She actually asked me to keep quiet as well."

"And you chose not to?"

"Well, though she is the daughter of the head of the company I work for, I am an adult and her senior. I was involved in ongoing matters when Mitsuru was just a child, and while she's grown into a capable woman, I believe it is my right to relay the information as I see fit." Ikutsuki said. "Besides, this isn't the sort of thing I can or should lie about. As I said, you kids are risking a lot to investigate Tartarus and clean up the Kirijo Group's mess. The least I can do is be honest if one of you comes to me asking questions. You especially, since you've been saddled with the role of leader."

"Yeah... I still don't see why Mitsuru-senpai put me in charge." Minato sighed. "If she feels responsible for the incident like you say, why make me the leader?"

"Indeed, I admit I was surprised when she told me. It isn't like her to hand of responsibility to another when she tries so hard to keep some measure of control in anything she does. No doubt she's... no, we've cause trouble for you by pushing the

burden onto you." Ikutsuki said, expression apologetic. "While Mitsuru is confident in your leadership thus far, as am I, I still don't think it's fair for you. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help you, even if it's simply answering whatever questions you have for me."

"...Thanks, Ikutsuki-san." Minato said sincerely, grateful he had finally gotten some straight answers and that the adult seemed to sympathize with him.

Ikutsuki smiled. "Of course, Minato-kun. I'm glad you came and asked me."

SMASH

Minato stiffened.

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Yet another one that had caught him off guard.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Jester Arcana...

Minato Arisato has established the Social Link: Jester with Shuji Ikutsuki...

"Minato-kun? Is something wrong?"

"It's nothing." Minato said, waving the chairman off. He turned

around from where he sat and peered back into the guts of the computer. He reached inside with one hand and tugged on a loose wire. "I'll see what I can-"

Minato's eyes widened when the wire he was pulling came loose and he could hear the monitor suddenly turn on. Minato scrambled out from underneath the console, staring at the screen as an image faded in and out before finally coming into focus. It appeared to be a video of the Command Room, though it showed Ikutsuki sitting at the computer console with a couple of folders and binders laid out in front of him.

"Don't look so alarmed. It looks like you accessed the old video logs somehow." Ikutsuki noted. "It actually looks like it's from yesterday when I reviewing the data gathered on the train operation. This is actually one of the more frequent glitches. The monitors start recording without being prompted and old video recordings keep showing up."

Minato's shoulder slumped in relief, glad he hadn't broken anything.

"Hm... a Shadow in the middle of town managing to take over public transportation..." The Ikutsuki in the video sighed, setting his pencil down. *"I'll have to do a little more investigating. After all if it was able to take over the monorail... monorail... listen to the monorail in monaural."*

Minato flinched as if though he'd been hit by something. Standing next to him, Ikutsuki's face broke into a wide smile.

"Heehee... oh, I'll need to write that one down." The Ikutsuki on the monitor chuckled before getting serious. "But really, they were incredibly fortunate. If Minato hadn't pulled the right lever, I fear what would've happened. Mitsuru said that the large Shadow used its hair to control the doors and machinery... it must've been a pretty hairy situation!"

"Ugh..." Minato choked at the horrible pun. Ikutsuki began to laugh merrily to himself.

"Ah... I suppose I've been caught red handed. I got a little distracted while working, as you can see..." Ikutsuki said, struggling to contain his laughter.

Minato didn't respond, shuddering as another terrible pun echoed from the computer's speakers.

"Still, to take over the train's engine... that was certainly an engine-ous move on the Shadow's part!" The Ikutsuki in the video went on, giggling at his own jokes. *"Boy, what's with me today? I'm on a roll!"*

No... no more.

Minato quickly dived back under the computer.

"Let's see, how about... one should always wear bright clothing at night, otherwise the Shadows-"

The monitor suddenly turned off as Minato readjusted the wire he'd fiddled with earlier, and he let out a sigh of relief. He

stood back up, turning to find the chairman staring at him with a pensive frown.

"We were just about to get to the best part. If you'd waited a couple of minutes, you'd see that I really got into a groove."

"You told me to fix the computer, so I did." Minato reasoned, happy that he'd managed to stop the recordings though he didn't let his relief show on his face. "And about those recordings..."

"But that's fine." Ikutsuki went on, flashing Minato a smile as he walked over to a nearby book case and pulled out a binder. "I actually wrote them down in here so I could tell them to you all later! Now then, what do you think about this one..."

Deciding he could try his hand at fixing the computer some other time, Minato quickly fled.

A/N: All done for now. Was a little more lengthy than intended, but it happens.

More school/social life will come in the next chapter along with other points to further the plot along. It'll probably focus mostly on Hamuko since Minato was the primary focus in this chapter, but we'll see.

Certainly is the year of Persona though, what with Q being released in Japan yesterday and Midsummer's Night Dream P3 movie released today. Waiting for a release for the former

and subs for the latter is killer, then there's Ultimax in September. Waiting is hard...

Ignoring that, I certainly hope those who waited for this chapter enjoyed it. I'll get the next one up when I can. As always, feedback is appreciated and I'll fix grammar mistakes at a later date. Thanks for reading and have a wonderful day.

Kiiam

13. Chapter 12: Thebel

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona

A/N: Hello. Been a while. I've actually had this chapter for a while, but I promised myself I wouldn't post it until I updated one of my other stories. Now with that personal goal met, we can move on. For those who stuck around, please enjoy.

Chapter 12: Thebel

Minato was roused from his slumber as several knocks sounded from his door. Minato ignored them at first, but they continued in quick intervals as the person behind the door didn't seem to want to give up. Slowly, he dragged himself out of bed and trudged over to open the door.

"Good morning!"

Hamuko greeted Minato with a bright smile. Minato stared at her with half-lidded, drowsy eyes.

"...Morning." Minato mumbled, still too lethargic to muster up anything else to say.

Hamuko was happy that he had returned her greeting at all. It felt like she'd achieved something.

"Ready for school yet?" Hamuko asked, glancing down and noticing he was still in his pajamas which consisted of cotton pants and a white t-shirt.

"Why do you care...?"

"I thought we could walk to school together." Hamuko chirped.

"...Go ahead without me." Minato replied, narrowing his eyes at her before shutting the door in her face.

"...So mean." Hamuko pouted to herself before smiling as she brushed off Minato's sour mood and made her way downstairs.

She set her bag down on the counter before making her way to the pantry, grabbing some bread and putting two slices in the toaster to cook for a small breakfast. It was remarkably quiet in the morning. Mitsuru had student council affairs to get in order early in the mornings which is why she always left early, and today was one of the days Akihiko had a morning jog. He'd started, or rather restarted, his morning exercises ever since his last checkup at the hospital when the doctor said his cast would be ready to come off in another week or so. Akihiko insisted that he'd have it off and join them in Tartarus as soon as midterms were finished. More surprising than that was Junpei's early disappearance. Like Minato, he was the type that preferred to sleep in but when she had knocked on his door earlier that morning no one had answered, and after announcing herself she had pushed open the door to find that not only was it unlocked, but the boy was

gone. She idly wondered what reason he had for getting up early for once, but shrugged it off and happily noted that this would give her time to hang out with Minato before school.

A little over a month since meeting Minato and learning of their shared occupancy of the Velvet Room as hosted guests, she really felt like she was making progress with him. He wasn't as curt or blunt anymore, and she could actually have real conversations with him. He was still rather distant with everyone else in the dorm, but Hamuko was happy that he seemed comfortable enough around her. It might be a little mean, but she did enjoy trying to get reactions out of him by teasing him. She decided that she was justified given his general attitude and a little ribbing could be tolerated.

But there was also more to it. Even if the circumstances weren't actually ideal, Minato was the first person she had really connected with in a long time. She felt a certain... kinship with him that she hadn't felt with anyone else. A resonance. Not that this was a romantic attraction, not at all. He wasn't her type. It's just that given everything that happened, and the fact that they were both chosen as guests of the Velvet Room among other members of SEES who had the potential, made their relationship sort of special. It had been a long time since she had a person she felt she could implicitly trust. While Minato might object to it, he really did make a good leader. She felt confident and comfortable knowing that he was always around to back her up and discuss matters related to the Velvet Room whenever she was concerned. She briefly wondered what things would be

like if it was just her and Minato wasn't around...

"...Yeah, things are much better this way." Hamuko decided after a moment.

Maybe it was the combination of anxiousness and giddiness she felt over the whole situation with the Velvet Room, Shadows, and the Dark Hour that made her feel this way. Plus it really had been a long time she she'd really bonded with anyone. While she recognized the danger and peril, the benefit to this so called journey was that she'd finally met people who were similar to her. She and Yukari were already great friends, and she was pretty friendly with Junpei. She tolerated Ikutsuki's puns to a certain point and her Senpai seemed impressed with the effort she made. She'd already made friends and acquaintances at Gekkoukan and made a point of participating in class often, so she was pretty well liked by the teachers. Even with the Shadows and the Dark Hour, Hamuko made it her goal to deal with that as part of SEES and still enjoy her daily life to its fullest.

They were two completely different issues, after all.

"You're still here?"

Halfway through Minato's sentence the toaster's timer went off and Hamuko retrieved her toast, swiping butter on both slices before turning to face Minato. He still had that perpetually sleepy look but was clearly ready for school, dressed in uniform and school bag lazily thrown over one shoulder.

"I was waiting for you." Hamuko smiled, grabbing her bag off the counter and holding out a piece of toast to the boy.

"Breakfast?"

Minato stared at the offered slice for a moment before taking it. "Thanks."

"You're welcome!"

Hamuko kept staring at Minato who gazed back at her with half-lidded eyes before shifting uncomfortably when she didn't avert her eyes. Minato frowned at her, arching an eyebrow in curiosity.

"What? Are you expecting something else?"

"...Not particularly." Hamuko said after a moment, pouting for a reason Minato couldn't figure out. Had he said something wrong? He decided to not worry about it since her expression switched back to her cheerful one a second later.

Hamuko for her part shrugged off his glare and decided not to worry about the fact that the voices hadn't piped up. It's not like making him a quick breakfast would make them extremely closer.

Minato turned and continued towards the door while Hamuko skipped along after him, pointedly ignoring his exasperated sigh as quickly stepped ahead of him and held open the door for him.

"After you." Hamuko said cheekily, gesturing outside.

Minato gave her a withering glare which didn't faze the girl in the slightest before putting on his headphones and stepping past her. Hamuko giggled, shutting the door behind her and moving her own headphones to her ears and turned on her mp3 player. She hummed along with the song that was playing, glancing briefly at Minato to see him bobbing his head lightly to whatever he was listening to.

He might still be a little cold, but Hamuko didn't let that deter her. A little more effort, and she was sure that she'd be able to make Minato a little more social and see him smile more often.

After all, she preferred it when her friends were happy.

"Hey, guys!"

Hamuko blinked when she heard shouting from someone familiar. Removing her headphones she turned to see Junpei sprinting up the steps of the station. Junpei slowed to a halt in front of them, placing his hands on his knees as he took in huge gulps of air to regain his breath. Hamuko gave Minato, who had also stopped and turned to see what the commotion was about, an inquiring look but the boy shrugged. Hamuko turned back to Junpei and crouched down a little to peer at his face.

"Junpei? What's going on...?" Hamuko asked. "Why are

you...?"

"Just... just tryin' to... catch the train." Junpei gasped, managing to flash Hamuko a victorious grin before grimacing from the mad dash he'd made. "N-New COMPstation Portable... came out today... woke up early... bought... had to run... or else late... ha...!"

"Oh...! I thought it was odd that you weren't in your room this morning." Hamuko smiling, happy that the mystery had been solved. "You must be more of a gamer than I thought if you were willing to get up early and risk being late in order to get the new handheld."

"What can I say... I know... my priorities!" Junpei joked, standing up straight as his breathing began to even out. "Hey, wasn't Minato with you?"

"What do you mean? He's right..." Hamuko sputtered when she turned to find out Minato was no longer standing next to her. She and Junpei both gasped when they noticed Minato through the crowd of students, stepping into the train just as the announcement for the train's departure for Gekkoukan was made over the speakers.

Hamuko and Junpei glanced at each other before taking off and both managed to jump through the doors right before they closed. Junpei was once again left trying to catch his breath while Hamuko quickly glanced around, eyes narrowing at the blue haired boy she spotted sitting on one of the seats to her left with a small smirk on his face.

"D-Dude, not cool..." Junpei gasped.

Leaving Junpei to catch his breath, Hamuko walked over and plopped into the seat next to Minato, digging her elbow into his side and smirking a little at the pained grunt she got in return.

"Jerk." Hamuko murmured before moving her headphones to her ears.

"Morning, Minato."

"Hm?"

The Wild Card user glanced up at Yuko when he suddenly heard the girl's greeting. He'd been making his way towards his classroom and it seemed he'd caught her attention somehow. She was standing just outside 2-E near the lockers and there were two other students standing next to her that she appeared to be talking to and Minato realized that they were members of the Kendo Club when he recognized their faces. The two boys gave him their own friendly greetings, which Minato politely returned. They didn't stay to chat though, saying their farewells as soon as they'd finished saying hello and headed down the hall opposite from where Minato came from. Yuko smiled as she approached him.

"Still a little sleepy, huh?" Yuko asked with a small smirk.

"I guess..."

"Actually, it's good I caught you. I forgot to mention last week, but since this is the week before midterms you don't have to worry about the club. Takenozuka-sensei gave us all leave for the week and the following week so we can focus on testing."

"I see. Thanks for telling me."

"No problem. I don't know what testing week was like at your old school but here all midterms and finals are the same way. No clubs the week before or the week during tests." Yuko said. "Sorry that it almost slipped my mind. Bet you would've felt silly showing up for practice and find out that no one is there."

"...Kaz might be."

"...Funny that you say that, because that actually has happened before." Yuko said with a sigh that conveyed both her amusement and exasperation. "...More than once, in fact. Guy should really not be so obsessed with kendo and take it easy once in a while, especially during midterms."

"He's not the studious type." Minato stated rather than asked.

"Don't state the obvious in front of him. He won't take it well." Yuko smiled cheekily. The bell suddenly sounded and Yuko gestured to their classroom. "Anyway, we shouldn't stand out here anymore. We don't want Ekoda to yell at us about standing around instead of being in class after the bell rang."

Minato kept conversation with Yuko and maintained half-

interest as they walked into the classroom, only separating when Ekoda walked into the classroom and told everyone to quiet down, giving the class a reminder that midterms were next week and everyone should be devoting time to their studies.

Minato simply yawned and laid his head on his desk. He'd worry about tests later. For now, he'd catch up on a little sleep.

"C'mon, get those legs moving! You need to get in front of the ball!"

Hamuko dashed from one side of the tennis court to another, the sound of her racket hitting the tennis balls echoing around her. Rio was on the opposite side, hitting balls towards the corners of the court and alternating between the right and left side, forcing Hamuko in a back and forth race to keep each ball from getting past her. The girl's breath pounded in her ears, tired from the surprisingly straining endurance exercise as she continuously pivoted on her heels and sprinted to the other side as she intercepted the tennis balls.

Fatigue dragged on her heels, and as she began sprinting toward the left side of the court again one of Hamuko's shoes stubbed the ground and caused her to stumble. The girl yelped as she fell to the ground, hissing when she felt her knees scrape the pavement.

"Hamuko-san!"

Rio hurried over to the fallen girl who glanced at her knees to check the damage. Specks of blood dribbled from the shallow cuts. A few other club members also made their way over to Hamuko.

"Are you okay?" One of the girls asked, crouching down to Hamuko's level.

Hamuko smiled and shrugged her shoulders despite the stinging wounds. "I'm fine. I just got scraped a little."

"They've got to hurt though."

"Not really. I'm okay though, seriously. It's what I get for tripping up." Hamuko stuck her tongue out playfully. "I'm more annoyed with the fact that I let the ball get past me."

A few of the girls rolled their eyes in response to Hamuko's words, though Rio actually managed to crack a smile at the girl's positive attitude.

"You shouldn't have pushed her so hard, Rio. Hamuko-chan's just started out." One of the other girls said, turning to the team captain. "You don't have to be so intense all the time."

Rio glared at the girl for the comment, but her expression softened as she knelt down next to Hamuko. "Sorry about this..."

"I said it's fine," Hamuko stressed, flashing Rio a smile. "When I joined up I was the one who asked you not to go easy on

me, remember?"

The other club members whispered amongst themselves while Rio sighed and gave an amused shake of her head. Rio called for one of the girls to bring out the first aid kit that was kept in the locker rooms. As one of the girls ran off to get it, Rio turned back to Hamuko.

"Not that I don't appreciate your commitment, but if you get tired just tell me." Rio advised her. "It's fine to push yourself, but it's no good if you get hurt."

"Ehe... that's true." Hamuko agreed sheepishly.

"What's going on here?"

Hamuko and the other members of the tennis club all turned to the newcomer who had called out to them. Hamuko smiled when she realized who it was.

"Yukari! What are you doing here?"

"My club ended practice early and I thought we could walk back to the dorm together once you were finished with yours." Yukari replied, giving a sympathetic grimace when she saw the cuts on Hamuko's knees. "Rough practice today?"

"Nah, I just tripped up a little. It was my bad." Hamuko said as Rio gingerly helped her get to her feet and led her over to one of the benches to the side of the tennis courts. The girl Rio had sent off earlier returned with a medical kit and handed it

to the club captain, who took out some bandages and disinfectant and began to fix up patch Hamuko's cuts. Hamuko hissed as the disinfectant was sprayed onto her cuts, which elicited an apologetic look from Rio.

"Sorry if that stung a little."

"It's fine. You don't have to do this. I can-"

"I feel a little guilty for this, so let me do at least this much."
Rio interrupted.

Hamuko felt that everyone was making a big deal at what she thought was a minor injury, but decided against arguing her point and sat still as Rio finished dressing her wound. While part of her was exasperated how her fellow club members were fretting over her, another part of her was pretty happy that she was receiving this much attention. She'd never been a part of any clubs at her old school, so Hamuko indulged in the friendliness and care that was being given to her.

"Guess this means we should end it for today, huh." One of the tennis club members said aloud, sounding like she was stating it as fact rather than asking.

Regardless of whether it had been a question or not, all the girls either nodded or voiced their own agreements. With Rio sitting so close, Hamuko was able to catch the irritation that flashed on her expression for a moment before resignation replaced it. Gathering up the medical supplies and returning to the kit, Rio got to her feet and addressed the other club

members who were already packing up their things.

"You guys probably already know this, but the club won't be meeting for the rest of this week or the next one because of midterms. Put some effort into studying for the tests rather."

A chorus of half-hearted replies was all Rio received in return as one by one the other club members departed. Hamuko got to her feet and watched as the last group of girls left before grinning at Rio.

"Boy, they sure left in a hurry, huh?" Hamuko quipped.

"I'll say. They probably just used your injury as an excuse to end practice earlier than usual."

Hamuko blinked at the bitter response to what had meant to be a joke. She gave Rio a concerned look for a moment before Yukari addressed her.

"You okay to walk?" Yukari asked, glancing down at her.

"Don't you start smothering me too. I was fine with the concern but there's a point where it gets to be a little too much." Hamuko said, bending her knees and bouncing on her toes to show how little her scrapes bothered her. "See? I'm totally fine!"

"If you say so." Yukari shrugged, deciding that the girl's usual exuberance was enough of a testament to her wellbeing.

"Anyway, before we head back I was wondering if you

wanted to make a quick stop some place?"

"I don't mind. Got an errand to run?"

"Nothing like that. I just thought it'd be the kind of place you might be interested in." Yukari smiled.

"Sound interesting. I'm sold! After I change out of my gym uniform we can go." Hamuko smiled cheerfully. She turned towards Rio who had just finished picking up the few stray tennis balls the other girls hadn't bothered to pick up. "Hey, Rio, you wanna come with us?"

"Huh?" Rio glanced up, surprised by the sudden offer.

"Yeah. You don't mind, right Yukari?" Hamuko asked.

"Not at all. You're welcome to come along, Rio-san." Yukari affirmed. She was barely acquainted with the tennis club captain, but Hamuko seemed to be friendly with her so she was probably nice enough to hang out with.

Rio smiled, but shook her head. "As much as I'd like to, I've actually got another appointment."

"Hey, Rio!"

"Speaking of..."

Hamuko and Yukari turned to find a male student making his way onto the court. Looking at his face, Hamuko realized that she recognized him from her class. She couldn't remember a

name, but she did remember seeing him hanging out with Junpei a couple of times. To her amusement, she also recalled this particular student had been reprimanded by Toriumi-sensei once or twice for falling asleep in the middle of class.

"Kenji..." Rio sighed, turned to face the student with her hands on her hips. "I thought I told you to wait."

"Yeah, I was. Though on my way over here I saw most of the club was leaving so I assumed you were finished." The male student, Kenji, said as he glanced around. "It's unusual for you to finish early. Though with midterms, I guess it's understandable."

"Well, that's... part of the reason." Rio muttered.

It was then that Kenji took noticed of the other two girls standing on the court with them. His face broke out into a wide grin as he gave Hamuko and Yukari a friendly wave.

"Why, hello there ladies!" Kenji greeted the duo.

"Hello yourself." Hamuko replied, returning his smile and giving her own wave of greeting while Yukari managed a stiff smile.

"Who's this, Rio?"

"Him? He's just some guy I know." Rio answered flippantly, earning a hurt look from the boy next to her.

"Just some guy you know? C'mon, Rio! That's too cold!" Kenji

whined, though his tone was more joking than offended. "I'm way more than just some random guy! We go way back! We share the bond of childhood friends, don't we?"

"You don't need to put on a show and announce it to them." Rio deadpanned, unamused by his antics.

Ignoring her, Kenji stepped over to Hamuko and Yukari and gave an exaggerated bow. "I'm Kenji Tomochika. We're actually in the same class, not that you two would've noticed a plain face like mine."

"You're Junpei's friend, aren't you?" Hamuko asked.

"I am! Though I'm not sure I'm happy about that being how you identify me..."

"A friend of Junpei's, huh?" Yukari mused, rolling her eyes a bit. "That explains it."

"Kenji, stop bothering them." Rio said in a chiding tone. "They don't need to suffer your poor attempts at flirting."

"Flirting? Who's flirting? I'm just being friendly." Kenji said honestly. He gave Hamuko and Yukari a thumbs up. "And while I'm happy to hold a conversation with the school idol Takeba Yukari and the cute transfer Runako Hamuko, you don't have to worry about me hitting on the two of you!"

"And why's that?" Hamuko giggled, the boy's introduction and mannerisms reminding her of when Junpei had introduced

himself on her first day.

"That's because I only like-"

"Kenji, enough already." Rio stopped him, tugging on the back of his uniform and making him gag on his words as the collar choked him. Rio flashed the two other girls an apologetic look. "I'm sorry about him."

"Don't mind it. We actually have to put up with someone similar." Yukari said, earning a smirk from Rio.

"Then you understand what I have to go through?"

"Completely."

And suddenly, the two acquaintances felt a certain camaraderie with each other. It was a bond created knowing that they both had to suffer a unique type of fool.

"...Hey, I'm still here." Kenji said, pulling away from Rio as he readjusted his collar. He was less animated, speaking much more formally than before. "So, Rio, you're still up for it?"

"I already promised. I've got no choice."

"What's happening?" Hamuko asked, a little curious as to what they were talking about.

"Oh, right. Like I was saying before, the reason I can't go out with you guys is because I already agreed to help him study for the midterms." Rio said, jabbing a thumb at Kenji. "So as

much as I appreciate the offer, I'll have to decline this time."

"It's fine. Go help your friend." Hamuko smiled. "Next time though, 'kay?"

"Next time." Rio promised with a smile.

SMASH

Hamuko did a mental cheer when she heard the voices in her head speak up.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou choosest to create a Persona of the Chariot Arcana...

"It was nice officially meeting you two." Kenji said as he and Rio made a move to leave. "Talk to you later, hopefully."

"Nice meeting you too, Kenji-kun." Hamuko smiled. "Later, Rio."

"Mhm. You take it easy, Hamuko. Make sure you study too." Rio smiled back.

After the two of them left, Hamuko turned to Yukari.

"So! Where are we going?"

At first, Hamuko had been confused since they'd walked the

same path they took to get back to the dorm. It wasn't after they went a little ways from the Port Island Station plaza area that they reached their destination.

"So this is where you wanted to take me." Hamuko said, smiling at the array of colors in front of her. "It's a nice little place."

The two girls stood in front of a small florist shop some distance away from the train station. There were several stands lined up just outside the entrance of the building itself, all filled to the brim with different kinds of flowers. Yukari smiled happily as she approached one of the stands, her fingers lightly brushing the petals of a lily.

"I'm glad you think so. I come here every once in a while. Looking at them just makes me feel happy." Yukari smiled as she went about inspecting the flowers. "There are so many colors, and they're all so pretty..."

"They really are. This must be a special kind of flower shop to have so many." Hamuko said, actually surprised by the variety and abundance just from the stands outside.

"I've noticed small places like these have a personal touch that larger stores don't. This shop has more character to it than others I've been to, so I only come to this one. Plus, they just have so many." Yukari said, smiling wistfully. "I kinda wish I had a room filled with flowers like these. It'd be hard to get sad or angry if I was surrounded by so much color all the time."

Hamuko glanced at Yukari, taking note of her melancholy tone.

"Do you buy a lot of flowers?" Hamuko asked.

"Not really. I've been thinking about getting some for my room though." Yukari said, seeming to hesitate before sighing and focusing on the batch of roses in front of her. "It was actually my mom who liked to buy flowers. Growing up, my house was full of them. My mom and I would always stop by someplace whenever we went out shopping and would get some new flowers before going home. She'd decorate the house with the ones I picked out. I really liked them."

"And you don't now?" Hamuko inquired, a little confused by the tense she used.

"I do. I've always liked them, but there was a time where I couldn't stand them. They brought up bad memories." Yukari murmured. "See, my dad worked a lot when I was little so sometimes he'd be gone for a while. Whenever he was gone for a longer than usual he always brought me and my mom a bundle of flowers when he came home. It always made me look forward to him coming home. But then..."

Yukari trailed off as she bit her lip, and Hamuko didn't ask her to continue. How the conversation ended was obvious. Yukari's father died in that incident and Hamuko could imagine that looking at flowers wouldn't bring as much joy as they used to if they reminded her of her father's death.

"...So flowers were bad reminders. So why do you come here?" Hamuko asked quietly, feeling a little guilty even as she asked.

"Because after finding this place I started liking flowers again. I actually stumbled across this place in the middle of my freshman year at Gekkoukan. Seeing so many flowers and so many different colors... it was too pretty to be sad. So instead of remembering the bad times, I remembered the good. Besides, dad always brought me flowers to make me happy. It wouldn't do to get sad whenever I saw them."

"Yukari..."

"Ah, sorry. I probably sound pretty depressing right now." Yukari said, berating herself as she gave Hamuko a sheepish look.

"Not at all. I said I didn't mind if you told me these things." Hamuko smiled. "We're friends, right? I encourage you to confide in me."

"Still though..."

"And you're right. Flowers should make people happy, not sad." Hamuko grinned. "I know they put a smile on my face, so they should make you happy too."

"...Yeah. You're right. They do." Yukari said, smiling nostalgically as she looked back at the flowers. "Thanks for... saying all that. I needed to hear it."

SMASH

Hamuko's smile widened.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou choosest to create a Persona of the Lovers Arcana...

"No problem, Yukari. Happy to say it."

"...Alright, enough of this talk!" Yukari said, snapping out of her wistful state and regaining her usual liveliness. "I shouldn't be saying things like this when I'm here. In fact, today's the day I buy a bouquet of flowers for myself!"

"That's the spirit!" Hamuko cheered. "What are you going to buy?"

"And there's the dilemma. There's just so many to choose from..." Yukari said, inspecting the flowers with a critical eye. She peered over at Hamuko. "What kind of flowers do you like?"

"Roses, definitely. No question." Hamuko chirped.

"Really?"

"They just come in so many different colors. Almost every shade. You could make a rainbow out of roses if you wanted to." Hamuko smiled.

"Huh... there are a lot of colors, true. I think of them individually, not together so..." Yukari mused. "Plus, there's the meanings behind them..."

"Meanings?"

Yukari smiled, adopting a pleased expression as she saw a chance to educate her friend. "You don't know? Every flower actually has a meaning. Not just that, but the colors also mean something too. Instead of a letter, you can use flowers in order to send a message to someone."

"Really?"

"Yep. It's the language of flowers." Yukari declared proudly. "Roses actually have the most meanings since there are so many colors. I think pink roses would suit you since they represent energy and joy."

"Red is my favorite color though. What do red roses mean?" Hamuko asked, getting very curious.

"Love, obviously. It's why in those drama and romance movies the guys always give the girls they like red roses." Yukari said. "Same goes for real life. It's a bit of cliché, but it's still romantic."

"I always thought roses were romantic." Hamuko said. "How about these flowers?"

"Gardenias? They're meant to wish someone good luck, but

they also have a hidden message." Yukari said, giving Hamuko a sly look.

"A hidden message? What is it?" Hamuko asked, getting excited as Yukari continued to tell her about the language of flowers.

"Secret love. So if you get them it can mean the person is wishing you good luck, but it might also be a love confession!"

"That's amazing! And what about these daisies over here? What do they mean?"

"Oh, those? Actually, they're like roses in that depending on the color they can have different meanings..."

And so their discussion continued as Yukari taught Hamuko the diverse and expansive language of flowers. When the sun began to set, the girls finally decided to pool their money together to buy a bouquet to divide between themselves when they got back to the dorm.

They eventually decided on a batch of yellow roses, which Hamuko learned were supposed to represent friendship.

The Wild Card user found them very fitting and immediately put them in a vase by her bed as soon as they returned to the dorm.

"Tam Lin!"

The Persona appeared and rose into the air, thrusting down with his lance and spearing the overturned Grave Beetle through its softer underbelly. The shadow dispersed into a haze of black smoke and sludge. The warrior faded back into Hamuko's mind as she smiled victoriously, twirling her naginata around before snapping her in the direction of where the Shadow once was.

"And that's how it's done." Hamuko said before turning to the rest of the group who stood off to the side. "Told you I could take it on alone."

{Very well done, Runako.} Mitsuru's voice echoed from her headset. {That victory is evidence of your growing stronger.}

Yukari and Junpei offered the girl smiles while Minato looked as impassive as always. Currently, they were getting practice fighting Shadows one on one. The past couple times they'd visited Tartarus, whenever they attacked Shadows as a group they were defeated with complete ease. Seeing how that together they could defeat Shadows with little to no effort now, the group got overconfident. This was a mistake, since when SEES had moved up to another floor their environment suddenly shifted and the group was somehow separated. This had caused quite a panic, though during the incident Mitsuru had informed everyone that they were all still on the same floor much to the Infiltration Team's collective relief. They'd been lucky and hadn't run into any Shadows while separated and quickly reunited with Mitsuru's guidance.

After that, Minato had suggested that they practice fighting

Shadows one on one, a proposal which Mitsuru had immediately encouraged. Yukari and Junpei had been uncomfortable with it, and Hamuko herself had been unusually hesitant when Minato first voiced the idea. Minato's argument in response to their worry was that they would be prepared if they ever got separated again. He went even further by reminding them of the night of the operation on the monorail, citing Junpei's separation from the group.

There had been no room for argument after that.

Everyone was a little unsteady at first, but after a few tries each of them became quite comfortable with it. Plus, those not fighting were always standing close by so if there were any signs of trouble the others would immediately jump in. After numerous bouts, each member of SEES could fight a small group one on one with no problems. Granted, it was much preferable fighting in a group, but at least this way each of them were comfortable being on their own if they were ever put in that situation again.

"Still, you've definitely got an advantage. Must be nice having options to choose from whenever you're fighting a Shadow." Junpei mused.

"Junpei, you..." Yukari began, her tone disapproving and sounded like she was at the beginning of a lecture before Junpei held up a hand and gave her a look.

"C'mon, Yuka-tan, I'm not patronizing her. I'm just sayin' it does give her an advantage. Minato too." Junpei said with a

grin. "I mean, I know I can count on Hermes for anything but he's got weaknesses I can't cover. I'm just saying it would be nice to have the option to switch out and cover the disadvantages, y'know?"

"...I can't really disagree with you there." Yukari admitted with a sigh. She peered over at Hamuko. "And that was another new one. It's pretty strong too if it was able to take out a Grave Beetle in one hit."

Hamuko smiled coyly in response to Yukari's words. "I have you to thank for my Persona's strength, Yukari."

She made sure to visit the Velvet Room while they were preparing for today's expedition. Tam Lin had been one of the stronger of her new fusions, and her growing bond with Yukari was certainly exemplified by the benefits the Persona received upon being fused, if Theo's words had been anything to go by.

"Huh? What does that mean?" Yukari asked, confused by Hamuko's words.

"Oh, nothing~"

"Wha... Hamuko!"

Minato ignored Hamuko's teasing of Yukari while Junpei laughed as he observed. Instead, he stepped away from the group to address his senpai. "What do you think so far, Mitsuru-senpai?"

{What do you mean, Arisato?}

"Of everyone's performance." Minato elaborated. "Do you think we're ready to move on?"

{Well, you've all certainly improved by leaps and bounds since you first joined SEES. The Shadows on these first few floors pose no threat to you all now. However, you know your strength better than I.} Mitsuru's voice answered him. {You're the leader, Arisato. I'll leave the decision to you.}

With that, the communication was cut. Minato sighed, keeping himself from voicing his complaints out loud as he turned to address the rest of SEES.

"Hey everyone," Minato called out to the group, interrupting their banter and getting their attention. "Seeing how well we're doing, I think we're more than prepared to start heading to the higher floors. That said, I've decided that-

"We're finally heading to the next floor?!" Hamuko finished excitedly, earning a look from Minato for cutting him off.

"...Yes." Minato nodded.

"Mitsuru-senpai's fine with it?" Yukari asked.

"I asked her. She said it was up to me. I think we're ready." Minato replied. "The Shadows on this floor are easy to beat. One of us can take on a group of them without getting injured. The weaker ones have even started avoiding us. It's time to

move on."

"Well, it's about damn time!" Junpei cheered, happy with the announcement. "I mean, I get wanting to play it safe and all, but training on the same floor for the past couple nights has gotten really old. The infiltration finally continues!"

The reason everyone was so enthusiastic because they'd been stuck training on floor fifteen for the past three visits. Floor fourteen had a Guardian, which was the term Hamuko had coined that was supposed to stand for Shadows they'd come across on certain floors that were unique and tougher than average. These Shadows usually stood alone or in a group and SEES found them much harder to defeat than the regular Shadows they'd come across while exploring Tartarus. There had been the three Venus Eagles on floor five, then the three Dancing Hands on floor ten.

The Rampage Drive on floor fourteen had been their toughest battle by far, possibly on par with the Priestess Shadow from the night on the monorail since the Guardian Shadow had been immune to all forms of physical attack from their weapons and even their Persona. With its rotating spikes for arms and heavy bulk, getting close enough for a physical hit was suicide anyway. The SEES team had gotten through three floors on the same night before arriving on floor fourteen, so they'd been quite fatigued and seeing the strength of the floor fourteen Guardian Minato had ordered a retreat for the day so they could come back fresh the next night. Luckily, SEES had also found that for every floor that had a Guardian or Guardians, there was also a teleport node

to take them back to Tartarus' lobby. Not only that, but these nodes were special in that they could be used as a waypoint by the node in the Tartarus lobby and the team could teleport to the Guardian floors whenever they wanted.

A bonus was that a Guardian floor only had the Guardians and no other Shadows, and once a Guardian was beaten it never came back. After the Shadows were defeated, those floors essentially became Shadow-free resting areas for the team. It was very convenient.

That said, the Rampage Drive had been a challenge even when the team was at full strength. The only reason they had defeated it was because Minato weakened the Shadow's defenses with a Rakunda spell from Orpheus while enhancing his and Yukari's Persona's magic attacks with a Tarukaja spell. Hamuko had also thrown the Drive off balance with a spell from her Persona Pixie that apparently made the Guardian Shadow dizzy. It had been surprisingly helpful.

After the battle they'd advanced to floor fifteen, which had been surprisingly devoid of Shadows that night, before moving onto floor sixteen where they found a long winding staircase different from others they'd found moving from floor to floor. It led up much, much higher and the floor itself was just was large room with a single elevated platform that connected floor fifteen and sixteen. The stairs obviously led up to the seventeenth floor, though given the difference and how empty the floor was save for the staircase, there was obviously something different about the next set of floors that set them apart from the others they'd previously explored. An update

from Mitsuru had confirmed that the Shadows on the next floor were indeed stronger than ones they were used to fighting.

With that in mind, Minato made the decision to suspend their exploration for the time being and focused on building up the group's strength in preparation for the floors to come. Everyone accepted his decision. Not even Junpei had complained. Even so, floor seventeen had become a subject of curiosity for the group and every visit following Minato's order Hamuko or Junpei had asked if he thought they were ready to move on. Until now, Minato had decided against resuming the exploration of Tartarus.

But now, the time to proceed had finally come. Everyone was excited.

"I say we're ready to move on, but we can hold off if we need to." Minato went on as Hamuko and Junpei finished brief celebration at his announcement. "You guys still up for exploring, or do you want to turn in for the night?"

"Screw that! Let's get going!" Junpei grinned. "Let's see what floor seventeen has to offer!"

"I don't know... shouldn't we hold off and start fresh some other time?" Yukari ventured in an uncertain tone. "We've already spent the last half hour training..."

"C'mon, Yukari. This is a big deal. You can explore for a couple more floors, right?" Hamuko said, trying to persuade

her.

"Well..."

"We've already been here a while, it's true. And it would be better if we explored a potentially new area if we were at full strength." Minato said thoughtfully.

"Dude, don't say that...!" Junpei whined. Minato rolled his eyes at his reaction before turning to Yukari.

"We'll compromise." Minato said, earning curious looks from the other SEES members. "We'll head to the next floor, but we'll try to find a teleport node to get out. Doing this, we can resume from floor seventeen immediately next time we come back."

"Hell yeah! That's our leader!" Junpei whooped, happy that they wouldn't leave without checking out the next floor.

"Is that okay with you, Yukari?" Hamuko asked.

"...Okay. Yeah, that's fine." Yukari said with a smile. "I don't mind if it's just that. I just don't want to start exploring right after training for so long, is all. Still... if there's a bunch Rampage Drives up there..."

"We'll immediately retreat. We don't want to deal with those, right Minato?" Hamuko assured the girl, turning to Minato who nodded in response.

"Okay. Sorry for putting a damper on the whole thing." Yukari

apologized, feeling like an extra wheel when she was being so unenthusiastic when compared to Hamuko and Junpei.

"It's fine. You made a good point and it'll be better to start for real once we're at full energy." Minato said. "The stairs are nearby. Let's go."

The group had made sure to stay close to the stairs during their training. Another interesting note they'd made while exploring is that while retreating from Shadows one night, the group had found that Shadows seemed unable to enter a room that had stairs. Or at the very least they didn't want to. In response to this, Mitsuru and Ikutsuki had theorized that since Shadow's were creatures of instinct and habit, with an intellect not unlike a wild animal, they felt tied to the floors and areas they resided in and had no desire to change locations especially if the objects of their agitation were leaving.

Hamuko herself was a little skeptical about that theory, but she didn't have the heart to voice her skepticism when her senpai and the chairman had looked so enthusiastic developing and explaining their hypotheses on the behavior of Shadows.

They quickly advanced to floor sixteen, taking a moment to glance around the large room before peering up at the long staircase that led to the next floor. They couldn't even see the ceiling. That was how far the staircase led up to.

"Looking at it again, that's quite a set of stairs." Yukari mused.

"Want me to carry you up?" Hamuko joked.

"I think I'll manage." Yukari replied with a wry smile.

"Let's get going then." Minato said, taking the first step up the stairs. "We'll just run out of time standing around here."

"You got it, leader!" Junpei grinned, following after him. He hefted his katana upward. "Let's see what we can find up there!"

Hamuko gave Yukari a comforting pat on the back, earning another smile from the girl before both of them moved after the boys.

And so, the exploration of Tartarus continued.

A/N: I do so enjoy writing this story, so it's nice to finally move on. Special thanks to The Infamous Man for giving it a once over, and for those who like Persona go and check out his fic A Different Kind of Truth which crosses this wonderful franchise with Jojo's Bizarre Adventure!

I'm really doing my best here to explain and make sense of how gameplay mechanics transition into the story. Keeping the nodes, getting rid of the gates, while still making sure SEES makes steady progress through the tower and not speeding through it. I do want to include more Tartarus bits though, since looking back I've neglected to put in as much as I want. In spite of the chapter's name, we're actually leaving

Thebel and moving on so that just enforces the point. Still, character development is just as important. We've still got a bit until we get to the next Full Moon Boss, but I got the path mapped out and several new Social Links to introduce.

Anyway, I extend my thanks to anyone who stopped by to read/glance at this story. Any feedback/criticism is very much appreciated. I'll fix up any grammar mistakes when I've got the opportunity. Have a good one, everyone.

Kiiam

14. Chapter 13: Circumstances

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Here we are, next chapter is a go. Hope you all enjoy.

Chapter 13: Circumstances

"I liked Thebel a lot more."

Hamuko voiced her complaint as the group made its way back to the dorm. Her dissatisfaction with the aesthetics of the new section of Tartarus, which the girl had dubbed Arqa for some reason, had been announced repeatedly during their return trip. While nobody made a comment or inquiry about where she was getting these odd names, most of the group actually agreed with her in regards to the new floor's appearance.

"Seriously... it wasn't anything like I expected." Junpei said with a frown. He shuddered a little. "Man, you can't even compare the first sixteen floors to the new look."

"All those faces... and the walls too." Yukari muttered, looking a little pale as she thought of the ugly faces and protrusions that resembled the bodies of snakes or centipedes that lined the walls of the new floor. "It's disturbing..."

It was nothing like Thebel which vaguely resembled their school if it had been the set of a cliché horror flick. The new floor shared no aesthetics with Gekkoukan and really nailed home that they had finally gotten to a new area.

"Does it really look that bad?" Akihiko asked with a teasing smirk. "You guys sound more worried about how the floor looks than the Shadows crawling around."

"Don't say something like that when you didn't see it." Junpei whined.

The upperclassmen were the only ones who seemed to have no problems with the Arqa Block's look. Despite their initial plan, the team made it up another floor than originally planned to see if the new look was kept. The eighteenth floor looked no different than the seventeenth, which meant the disturbing look was something they'd all have to get used to. Of course, the SEES Infiltration Team also noticed the new Shadows that had shown up. While they were stronger than Shadows from the Thebel Block, the group still took care of them with relative ease. They had their prior training to thank for that. Before leaving, Mitsuru had informed the group that she'd felt a strong presence a few floors above them, which could only be the next Guardian was lurking above them somewhere. While she couldn't pinpoint the exact floor, the notice meant they would have to proceed cautiously on their next few visits.

"Regardless of... Arqa's appearance," Mitsuru began, accepting Hamuko's name of the floor without complaint like Thebel before it. "I want to commend you all on the progress

you've made so far. It's an entirely new area you've discovered. This change in environment proves just how much progress we've made this past month. I can only imagine what answers we might find in this new area..."

"The stronger Shadows should offer a better challenge too." Akihiko said, grinning excitedly. He glanced down at his injured arm in disdain. "Just a little more..."

"Getting your bandages off soon, Senpai?" Yukari asked.

Akihiko nodded. "Yeah. During my last check up the doctor said my arm is practically all fixed up. I might even have the cast off by this weekend."

"Although he has advised you to take things easy for another week or so. The cast might come off, but you're still in the recuperating stage." Mitsuru pointed out.

"Did you go with Akihiko-senpai when he took his last check up?" Hamuko asked the older girl.

"No, though I do have access to the team's medical records and I get updates from Akihiko's doctor weekly." Mitsuru informed her, surprising Hamuko with the information.

"W-Wait, you can access our medical records?!" Yukari asked, not having been aware of that fact. "How?"

"The doctor taking care of Akihiko is actually employed by the Kirijo Group. In fact, a majority of the hospital's staff is

employed by Kirijo. Given our situation, my father decided it would be better if we had people from our own company taking care of us as opposed to those who are uninformed or would ask too many questions."

"So the doctors associated with the Kirijo Group know about the Dark Hour?" Hamuko asked.

"Not as such, no, but they've been informed of the existence of SEES and its members. They won't ask questions, as my father has made their duties clear. We have responsibilities to complete our mission and the staff are ready to take care of us should we sustain significant injury." Mitsuru said, giving each member of SEES a solemn look. "The work we do is dangerous and while I don't want to imagine one of us getting hurt like Akihiko, precautionary measures such as these are necessary."

"Knowing we have professionals to take care our injuries is nice, but shouldn't they be the only ones privy to our records?" Minato asked. "Why should it concern you, Senpai?"

"How could it not, Arisato?" Mitsuru asked, arching an eyebrow at the junior's question. "I've asked you all to be part of SEES and lend the Kirijo Group your abilities, and while you recognized the risks involved and still decided to join SEES, I'm the one who asked you to endanger yourselves. You've all chosen to bear the responsibility, responsibility that we of the Kirijo Group alone should bear, so it's only natural that I have the obligation to ensure your safety and health as long as I am able."

While her words sounded logical enough, Minato didn't completely agree with what she was saying. Her concern seemed genuine and that in itself was appreciated, but he would've much preferred it if she'd simply informed them of this earlier or asked permission first. First his general history, then his school records and monitoring him at the dorm, and now he learned she could get ahold of his medical records just as easily? While part of him was amazed at how far the Kirijo Group's reach apparently was, another part of him was irritated by the continued blatant invasion of his privacy.

Hamuko was the only one who noticed the irritation flash across Minato's face. She frowned a little when she noticed the look, also a little concerned when she caught a similar expression on Yukari.

"...I really wish you'd check with us before doing these sort of things, Senpai." Yukari said curtly, though there was some resignation in her tone.

"I didn't think it was cause for concern." Mitsuru said, frowning slightly when she heard Yukari sigh at her response. Brushing the matter under the rug, Mitsuru turned to Akihiko. "That said, even once the cast comes off you should refrain from joining the infiltration team for at least another week."

"Mitsuru!"

"Akihiko, while I appreciate your enthusiasm, you sustained a grievous injury. Even if the Doctor says you're fine, it's better to be sure about these things. We can't afford to make

mistakes out in the field."

"I won't make a mistake! My arm is practically healed!" Akihiko said indignantly, raising his arm and flexing his fingers to show the girl. There was no strain or discomfort on his face from the motion. "I'm tired of sitting on the bench. I've had plenty of time to heal. I'm ready to get back out there!"

"You can't rush into these things, Akihiko. I've told you many times before that-"

"We'll take a week off."

Everyone turned towards Minato who had suddenly interrupted the argument between the two upperclassmen. His fellow juniors also gave him surprised looks, a little thrown off by their leader's abrupt proclamation. The two seniors also gave Minato perplexed looks before the bluenette sighed and started to explain himself.

"Midterms start next week." Minato reminded everyone. "It's nice we got to a new section of Tartarus, but we've got plenty of time to explore the area. This is a good time to take a break and prioritize our studies. Using this time to put a hold on exploring Tartarus and studying instead will give Akihiko-senpai's arm a little extra time to heal properly and when we start exploring again after the exams are over he'll be able to join us. It's fine that way, right?"

Akihiko seemed to be at a loss in response to Minato's words while Mitsuru gave Minato an approving nod.

"That's a good suggestion, Arisato." Mitsuru said. "While exploring Tartarus and trying to find out more about the Dark Hour and Shadows is important, we can't let our studies suffer because of it. We'll go with your proposal. What do the rest of you think?"

"...I'm okay with it." Hamuko put in after a few seconds of silence. "I've used my time in the Dark Hour to study before anyway. A break would be nice too."

"I don't mind either." Yukari said, voicing her consent after Hamuko. "I won't have to worry about coming back from Tartarus and being too tired to study."

"Taking break to study, huh...? I'd rather keep exploring Tartarus." Junpei sighed, through backpedaled when Mitsuru narrowed her eyes at him. "B-But school is important, yep! I'm totally okay with taking a little time off if you think it's best, Senpai!

"Seems our newest members are all in agreement." Mitsuru said, giving a prompt nod. The young woman turned to Akihiko. "I trust you have no complaints in regards to suspending operations for the time being?"

"...Well, at least this way I won't miss out on anything." Akihiko said after calming down, sounding slightly appeased. He gave Mitsuru a hard look. "But after midterms are over..."

"We'll talk about it then. You still have your cast on, and we'll see how much time passes after it's off before making a call."

Mitsuru told him, rolling his eyes at his childish behavior regarding the issue. After receiving a begrudging nod of agreement from her fellow senior, Mitsuru turned to address the rest of SEES. "Then it's settled. We'll take the weekend and following week off to focus on schoolwork. We'll resume our exploration once midterms have concluded."

There were many nodding heads and a couple vocal affirmations in response to the Kirijo heiress' words, with every SEES member agreeing to the break time.

Mitsuru smiled and gave a concise nod. "Good. Now, it's late and you should all get some sleep. Excellent work tonight, everyone. We'll begin exploring the new block of Tartarus after midterms are over."

"And then I'll finally be able to join the fray." Akihiko smirked, pumping his fist in anticipation.

"Just be careful not to overexert yourself, Senpai." Yukari advised him, eying the seniors healing arm with a frown.

"Yeah. It sure would suck if you got careless and somehow injured your arm again." Hamuko pointed out.

"I don't see how I could possibly break my arm again." Akihiko said as the group made their way upstairs.

Well, almost everyone did.

"Arisato?" Mitsuru asked, looking at the only SEES member

who hadn't moved. "Is something the matter?"

Minato didn't reply immediately, checking to make sure the others were gone before turning back to the senior. "Mitsuru-senpai, would it be alright if I ask you something?"

"Can't it wait for another day? It's already late and after exploring Tartarus you really should get some rest."

Minato shook his head. "No, this is something I need to ask you now."

"...Very well." Mitsuru sighed. "What is it then?"

"You're not hiding anything from us, are you?"

Though her expression remained the same, Minato saw the way the girl had stiffened in response to his question. He'd gone over this several times in his head, trying to decide the best way to broach the subject, how to ask and when he should ask. While Ikutsuki had satisfied his curiosity, Minato couldn't keep himself from wondering how much Mitsuru actually knew and how much she had decided to keep from them. Of course, she didn't know of his discussion with Ikutsuki and Minato would make sure it stayed that way. However, ever since his talk with the Chairman he couldn't help but wonder if Mitsuru would've been as straightforward if he'd gone to her first.

How much was the heiress of the Kirijo hiding from them?

"I'm not sure what you're asking. What could I possibly have to hide?" Mitsuru asked.

Minato gave a resigned sigh. That question and the tone she used was answer enough. Unless he came out with some evidence she wouldn't willingly answer his questions with the truth. Knowing that, Minato couldn't help but feel insulted by her response. Asking anyone with the potential to join SEES without sharing all the facts? Not only that, but avoiding telling the truth when minutes earlier she had expressed feeling responsibility for their wellbeing? It was hypocritical.

At the same time, Minato couldn't bring himself to get angry. In the end, even if he hadn't known much of anything at the time, he'd still made the choice to join SEES. And like Ikutsuki said, she had her own circumstances. Mitsuru had done her utmost to support them since they joined in her own way, Minato recognized that, so he wouldn't press the matter too much. He was glad he'd gone to Ikutsuki first. Minato imagined that he would've reacted less calmly to her feigned ignorance if he was still in the dark about the incident ten years ago and the Kirijo Group's involvement with it.

Still, that didn't mean he was going to let her off the hook completely.

"Mitsuru-senpai, don't treat me like I'm an idiot." Minato said solemnly, raising a hand when the girl opened her mouth to protest. "Please, just let me speak for a minute."

Mitsuru frowned, but gave a hesitant nod and gestured for him

to continue.

"You can't expect me to believe that Tartarus showing up at our school is just coincidence. I've lived in the Dark Hour for ten years and I've never seen anything like it until now. Shadows and Personas too."

"..."

"...If you don't want to tell me, I won't force you to answer. You've probably got your reasons. Just don't try to convince me that there's nothing significant about Tartarus and Shadows appearing at Port Island of all places." Minato said. "And you are the daughter of the leader of the Kirijo Group. I have a hard time believing that you don't really know anything about Tartarus or the Dark Hour and where they come from. I don't think your dad would've trusted you to form SEES in the first place if you really knew so little."

"...I'm sorry." Mitsuru said suddenly, causing Minato to shake his head.

"Don't apologize. I know you have your reasons." Minato said. "All I want is for you to be honest with me. You made me the leader of SEES, so I'd appreciate it if you were straight with me at least."

Mitsuru stared at Minato for a moment before her lips quirked upward. He was...

"I suppose I should've expected this at some point. I didn't

think I would be questioned this early though." Mitsuru mused. "You're quite perceptive, Arisato."

"I'd say I'm more curious than perceptive." Minato said, smiling a little at how similarly she reacted to Ikutsuki in response to his inquisitiveness. "What we're doing is important and needs to be done, but I don't like risking my life without knowing all the facts."

"I understand. And there are indeed things that I've neglected to share with you all." Mitsuru admitted. "I believe it to be for the best though. Some things in the past shouldn't be revisited if they don't need to. Personal matters are best kept private sometimes."

"Maybe keep that in mind next time before you look up our records without asking permission first?"

"Ah... I'll admit that I may have been a little insensitive in that regard." Mitsuru said, some redness dusting her cheeks.

"Understand that scouting for new members of SEES took precedence at the time and without knowing more about you I couldn't-"

"It's fine." Minato said, forestalling her explanation. "Again, I'd just appreciate it if you'd ask before you do these things."

"I'll remember next time." Mitsuru said solemnly.

"Thank you." Minato said sincerely. "Now, there's one other thing I'd like you to be honest with me about."

"And what would that be?" Mitsuru asked a little anxiously.

"Why make me the leader?" Minato asked. "We've been exploring Tartarus for over a month. Yukari-san, Hamuko, Junpei and I have had plenty of time to get used to fighting Shadows. Akihiko already asked me to keep leading after he heals so that he can focus on fighting."

"That's not surprising." Mitsuru chuckled.

"It isn't. But what about you, Senpai? Will you join us after Akihiko is healed, and if you do, will you lead the team? How much longer will I have to lead?"

"Are you really that troubled by leading the team?"

"I've gotten used to it at this point." Minato said. "I'm just wondering if it might be troubling for you."

"...I suppose I might as well be straightforward with you. You've already shown that you're not willing to leave things alone without knowing the reasons why." Mitsuru said, though she didn't sound bitter or frustrated by the fact. If anything, the way she spoke made it sound like she was complimenting him. "While I try to stay on top of things, there's only so much I can do at once. In this case, I can't lead effectively while also serving as mission control."

"What do you mean?"

"I use Penthesilea to scan floors and Shadows, however I

can't fight while doing that. Penthesilea is a battle-oriented Persona despite having the ability to analyze our enemies. Scanning Shadows and the floors of Tartarus for danger takes up all my energy and concentration. I'd be too much of a burden if I were to fight as well."

"Is it really that exhausting?" Minato asked.

"I need to use the amplifier on my motorcycle to push Penthesilea's scanning ability to its fullest. Without it, I doubt I'd be able to properly scan enemies and floors now. To be honest, lately I've been beginning to feel a strain whenever I'm trying to scan the floors ahead of you. As much as I hate to admit it, Penthesilea may be beginning to reach her limit in regards to Shadow analysis. It's just not what my Persona's abilities are geared towards."

"I see..."

"But we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Mitsuru said. "In answer to your question, Arisato, I chose you as the leader due to necessity. While I could lead the team, I'm the only one who can analyze Shadows and scan the floors of Tartarus. I would never want any of you to explore without knowing the layout somewhat or fight Shadows without knowing their weaknesses. We'd have a much harder time otherwise."

"But why me specifically? Why not one of the others?"

"Well, haven't you already proven yourself?" Mitsuru asked,

smirking a little. "You've been an apt leader thus far, making sure the others don't push themselves and that the group moves forward at a steady pace. You're aware of your strength and the strength of the other SEES members, and you keep the group organized. I don't mean to speak ill of the others, but lori can be reckless and Takeba is prone to panic in tense situations, though she'd gotten better the more you've explored. Runako has the same power as you, but you're more level headed. She takes orders well, but she can also be as reckless as lori at times. And while Akihiko is a strong fighter, I think you're more capable at leading the team than he is at this point."

"...I guess those reasons are good enough." Minato sighed. Honestly, he was a little embarrassed by how the senior was commending his leadership when he still thought he hadn't done that much. All he really did was follow her orders and relay it to the group most of the time...

"Is there anything else?" Mitsuru asked.

"No, that's all I wanted to ask." Minato said. "Thanks for listening."

"Of course. Though I still feel a little bad for not being able to completely answer your questions at this time."

"Don't worry about it. If it becomes an issue later on I'm sure you'll bring it up then." Minato said. That, and if he had more questions about Kirijo, Tartarus, the Dark Hour and things related he knew now to just go to Ikutsuki.

"Thank you for understanding." Mitsuru smiled. "And even though I'm grateful for your acceptance that I can't answer your questions about the Dark Hour and Tartarus, the fact the you asked makes me feel like you're really invested in solving the mystery behind them and help me find a way to end them."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. It's actually a bit relieving. I respect someone who has the courage to ask these questions up front rather than just accepting things as they are. It's evidence of a keen mind, and just makes me more confident that I chose the right person to lead the team."

"You're making too much of it..." Minato muttered.

"I'm just saying what I feel. Ignore me if you're bothered by it." Mitsuru said, giving a light laugh.

"Whatever..."

SMASH

Minato blinked.

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Empress Arcana.

"I try interrogating her and this somehow made us closer?"

Minato thought to himself disdainfully.

He wasn't even going to pretend to try and understand the triggers of these Social Links anymore.

"Well, if there's nothing else we should turn in for the night." Mitsuru said. "And while I admit to withholding my knowledge of Tartarus and the Dark Hour, I promise you that I'll tell you everything I know when the time is right."

"...I'll hold you to that." Minato said. There was still a lot he wanted to know, after all.

The duo lapsed into silence as they made their way upstairs. Reaching the second floor, Minato turned toward the hallway while Mitsuru continued on up to the third floor. Pausing, Minato turned back toward Mitsuru.

"Senpai?"

"What is it?" Mitsuru asked, stopping and looking down at Minato.

"I might be willing to leave things alone, but I'm sure that I'm not the only one who has questions." Minato said. "Just don't wait too long to tell us what you, okay?"

"I'll keep that in mind."

Minato nodded and headed toward his room. "Good night, Mitsuru-senpai."

Mitsuru smiled as she looked after him. "Good night, Arisato."

Minato's eyes flickered to up to the clock hanging above the chalkboard.

Ten minutes left until lunch.

Minato sighed turned his gaze back down to the book on his desk. He scanned the print without really reading the words, only barely listening to Ekoda as his homeroom teacher read aloud and explained the passages to the class. Even after having a month to get used to him, Minato still found Ekoda's lectures tedious. The man was the sort of teacher who expected the students to immediately understand the material even without explaining it, and always sounded reluctant when answering questions, like he assumed anyone who asked him something wasn't listening. He knew his stuff, but Minato learned more reading by himself and reviewing textbook than from the teacher.

When it was so close to lunch, he didn't feel like listening to Ekoda's lecture was making him smarter. Minato just felt himself getting hungrier.

Even in his apathetic state, Minato made sure to keeps tabs on where they were in the book. Ekoda called people at random to read from the book, and he didn't want to get caught not knowing what they were reading. He always gave those who he caught a hard time.

"Yamagishi, can you read the next bit for us?" Ekoda called out.

Ekoda's request was met with silence. Minato turned away from his book, glancing across the room at one of the desks near the window. The girl who Ekoda had called on remained silent and seated, staring down at her desk.

"Yamagishi?" Ekoda asked again, sounding impatient as he turned away from the board to glare at the silent girl. Slowly, the girl stood up.

"Um... Ekoda-sensei, I can't..."

"You can't what, Yamagishi? You're not going to tell me you can't read, can you?"

Laughter began to drift through the classroom at Ekoda's comment.

"...I'm sorry, Sensei."

"Don't apologize." Ekoda sighed, approaching her desk. "If you just read... wait, where's your textbook? You don't have it?"

"...No." The girl replied meekly.

"How could you show up to class without your textbook?" Ekoda asked with a stern frown. "You are aware that midterms are next week, aren't you? How do you expect to study properly without your book?"

"...I'm sorry."

Minato grimaced slightly when he heard her softly repeat her apology. What else could she do?

"I expect my students to be more organized. If you're not properly prepared, you'll waste your time, my time, and the time of your fellow classmates. Please keep that in mind."

The girl just nodded lightly in response to the teacher's words. Ekoda gave a firm nod, feeling that he had made his point, before heading back to the board. Minato watched as the girl slowly sank back into her seat.

"Now then, how about-"

The bell interrupted Ekoda as he was about to call on another student. The teacher clicked his tongue in annoyance before announcing the dismissal of class for lunch period. The teacher was out of the classroom barely a minute after that.

Minato got to his feet. Again, he glanced at Yamagishi who now had two girls standing next to her. They were the same girls who had been laughing the most at Ekoda's heckling. Minato recognized them because they were the only ones who frequently associated with Yamagishi.

He'd come to recognize the girl, Fuuka Yamagishi, because this wasn't the first time she'd caused a scene in the middle of class. Not that she was the one at fault.

"Hey, Fuuka, sorry about that." The girl with dark skin, Natsuki Moriyama, laughed.

"S-Sorry for what, Moriyama-san?" Fuuka asked.

"About your textbook being missing. I actually borrowed it cause I forgot mine at home. I probably should've asked first."

Saying that, the girl suddenly produced the textbook in her hands and gave it to Fuuka. The girl took it, looking quite bewildered, before giving her a small smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"It's fine. I'll just read the passage later."

"Yeah, you do that. Though, I did take a few notes for you."

"You did?" Fuuka asked, genuinely surprised.

"Yep. They're in the book. I wrote 'em in the margins."

"O-Oh..." Fuuka's shoulders sank. Still, she kept smiling. "I-I'll be sure to look at them later."

"Happy to help. See you around." Natsuki grinned before turning away and heading out of the classroom with her friend.

Minato glanced around the room, wondering if anyone had heard or watched what just happened. No one appeared to have paid attention, or had purposely ignored them. It was a common enough scene. It occurred often enough for Minato to take notice after Yuko had pointed it out to him that day.

Picking on Fuuka was Moriyama and her group's favorite pastime.

Minato turned back and watched Fuuka, looking on as she tentatively opened her textbook. Minato notice the way her eyes widened before her face took on a resigned expression.

"*Bullies.*" Minato thought darkly as he made his way toward the door. They were high school students. Couldn't they be a little more mature?

Whatever. While he did feel sorry for the girl, it wasn't like it was his problem.

"How many times is this going to happen?"

"What are you talking about?" Hamuko asked, turning back to arch an eyebrow at Minato.

"This." Minato said, pointing down to where Hamuko had a firm grip on his wrist. "Why not drag Junpei or Yukari around with you instead? Why is it always me?"

"Because you never have anything to do." Hamuko said bluntly. "I'd never see you if I didn't go out of my way to hang out with you. I didn't ask Yukari because she's over at a friend's place and Junpei went to the arcade with some guys from class. So that's why it has to be you!"

Minato grumbled to himself. He'd found himself intercepted by

Hamuko after school and the girl had dragged him to the strip mall, saying that there were some books she needed to help her study. Minato didn't know why he had to be involved since this wasn't his errand to run, but his protests had fallen on deaf ears as they wound up in front of the secondhand book store Hamuko had taken him to a while ago.

"I could be back at the dorm studying if I wasn't here with you." Minato said.

"You can get some books here with me! Bunkichi-san and Mitsuko-san let you rent books and I know a few books that'll help with preparing for midterms." Hamuko said, brushing off his complaints. "Besides, an hour or two shopping with me isn't going to kill you."

"Those words clearly belong to someone who is negligent when it comes to their studies."

"Hmph, says you. I'll have you know I've aced every exam I've had since transferring." Hamuko said smugly. "I'm a very diligent student."

"Could've fooled me."

Hamuko stuck her tongue out at Minato as she made her way over to the door, pausing when she turned back and noticed Minato hadn't moved from where he was standing.

"...What?" Minato asked.

"Aren't you coming?"

"I told you, I don't need any books. My methods of study work just fine." Minato replied.

"You could at least come and say hi to Bunkichi-san and Mitsuko-san. I'm sure they'd appreciate it."

"I'll just wait out here for you."

Hamuko sighed before pouting at him. "Fine. You better be here when I get back though. Don't go running off!"

"What is she, my mom?" Minato murmured, rubbing his forehead in annoyance as Hamuko ran into the shop. "She gets attached way too easily..."

Minato stood alone in front of the shops. After a few minutes of waiting, he began to feel a little ridiculous. He saw other students pass by occasionally along with office workers and other employees, obviously all on their way home. Minato began debating whether or not to just leave, but if he did Hamuko probably wouldn't let him hear the end of it.

"I told you to give it a rest."

"C'mon, Shinji, just hear me out!"

Minato blinked and turned to his left. While he didn't recognize the deep baritone of the first speaker, he did recognize the voice of his senpai that spoke afterward. Sure enough, his gaze fell on Akihiko and a tall, shifty looking delinquent

wearing a beanie cap that the former was talking to for some reason.

"Akihiko-senpai?" Minato called.

Minato watched the boxer start a little a being called out, turning in his direction to see who had called him. He smiled when he caught sight of Minato.

"Hey, Minato. What are you doing here?" Akihiko asked as he walked over. The taller teenager followed him, and looking at his face Minato found that he vaguely recognized him, but couldn't remember where he'd seen him.

"Hamuko caught me after school and took me with her to shop." Minato said, jabbing a thumb backwards at the bookstore. "I'm hoping she'll just get her books and then we can head back to the dorm, but who knows with her."

"Heh. Just got roped into it, huh?" Akihiko chuckled. "Well, tough it out. It's all you can do."

"Thanks." Minato said dryly before turning to his companion, who was gazing at him with narrowed eyes. Minato grimaced a bit at his expression. "...What?"

"...So you're one of the new members, huh?" The delinquent muttered.

Minato's eyebrows went up at that. "You..."

"Ah, sorry. I guess I haven't introduced him." Akihiko said

quickly. "Minato, this is Shinjiro Aragaki. We grew up together, and he actually goes to Gekkoukan like us."

"Really? I haven't seen... wait," Minato trailed off as he remembered where he's seen the guy before. "That's right. You were at the hospital that time."

"That was me." Shinjiro replied curtly. "You must be Minato Arisato. Aki's talked about you a lot."

"That so?" Minato mused, glancing at his senior who just gave a light shrug in response.

"Yeah. He actually used to stay at the dorm, but-"

"Enough, Aki. He doesn't need to know about that." Shinjiro cut in sharply, earning a curious look from Minato.

"Right. Sorry..." Akihiko said, rubbing his neck sheepishly.

"So, you used to live at the dorm, huh?" Minato asked, noting the way the older teen's expression darkened when he made the inquiry. "Does that mean you-"

"Ah, Akihiko-senpai!"

Minato was cut off when Hamuko suddenly appeared at his side, loudly greeting Akihiko along with giving a friendly wave before her eyes widened when she noticed Shinjiro. She stepped back a little, clutching Minato's sleeve as she gave him a shaky but friendly smile.

"Oh, um... hello." Hamuko greeted him, trying her best to ignore the way he was glaring at her. "You are...?"

"You don't remember? He's the one we saw in Akihiko-senpai's room at the hospital." Minato informed her.

"Oh? Oh... oh yeah! Nice to see you again!" Hamuko smiled, growing more comfortable when she recognized him. "You're Senpai's friend, right? Um, we didn't really get a chance to introduce ourselves last time. I'm Hamuko Runako!"

"Shinjiro Aragaki." Shinjiro introduced himself shortly. "You're the other transfer student."

"Yep, that's me." Hamuko grinned. "So, um... what were you guys talking about?"

"Nothing important." Shinjiro answered, shooting Akihiko a hard look. Abruptly, the young man turned on his heel. "Later."

"Ah, Shinji, wait!"

Akihiko's call was ignored, with Shinjiro quickly moving out of sight.

"Dammit." Akihiko cursed, glaring after his friend. "He's too stubborn..."

"...Sorry." Hamuko said quietly. Akihiko gave her an incredulous look.

"Huh? What for?"

"I just thought I might've offended him somehow?" Hamuko ventured uncertainly.

"No, it's nothing you did. He probably just used you guys as an excuse to get away. I'll corner him some other time." Akihiko said, smiling to reassure the girl.

"...Does he really go to our school?" Hamuko asked. "He's a senior right? He's pretty intense. If someone like him went to our school, I think I would've noticed him at some point."

"Well, he's enrolled, but... well, he's got his own circumstances." Akihiko explained awkwardly. "It's a little hard to say..."

"Does it have something to do with what you were talking about with him?" Minato asked.

"Sort of."

"And he knows about the Dark Hour and Tartarus."

"Wha... did I tell you that?" Akihiko asked, giving Minato a confused look.

"No. But you said he used to live at the dorm, so I just assumed." Minato said. "He's got the potential?"

"...Yeah." Akihiko nodded. "He was actually part of SEES at one point."

"But he quit?" Hamuko asked, sounding surprised. "And

Mitsuru-senpai let him? Why did he leave?"

"Well, there was an incident..." Akihiko began before he quickly trailed off. The senior shook his head, giving the two Wild Card users a disarming smile. "Actually, I don't think I should say. It's his business, and what happened was... personal."

"Must've been something big if he quit..." Hamuko mused, placing a slim finger on her cheek as she thought about it. "I wonder what it was..."

"Well, you're free to ask him if you see him. I don't think he'll tell you though." Akihiko smiled.

"Aha... I don't think so. I'm not that insensitive and... well, he seems a little scary." Hamuko admitted sheepishly.

"Heh. I know how he looks, but he's a good guy." Akihiko said, chuckling at Hamuko's words. "Seriously, there's no one I trust more."

"I'll take your word for it then."

"Did you get your books?" Minato asked.

"Yep! Just some stuff to help with math and foreign language." Hamuko smiled, raising a bag to show the two boys. "I'm ready to head back to the dorm."

"Mind if I tag along?" Akihiko asked. "I just came to meet Shinji after school, but since he's gone..."

"Of course not." Hamuko smiled. "Minato?"

"Why would I mind?" Minato asked, arching an eyebrow at the girl.

"I dunno. It's hard to tell with you sometimes."

"..."

"So! Senpai, how are your studies coming along?" Hamuko asked, turning away from Minato as he glared at her.

"Ah, well, since I couldn't attend my club or do most of my usual workouts I've had plenty of time to study. Mitsuru's been pestering me constantly, telling me to take advantage of my free time..."

"How confident are you?"

"Well... I'm confident that I'll get a good score, though I'm worried about whether or not the results will be good enough to meet Mitsuru's standards..."

Hamuko giggled at the apprehensive look on Akihiko's face as he imagined Mitsuru's disapproval. The expression was enough to even inspire a smile on Minato's face.

"Playing video games, Iori?"

Junpei jumped when he heard the stern voice from behind him, quickly turning in his chair with excuses already flying from his

lips.

"W-Well, ya see, Senpai, guys like to take breaks when studying to... hey!"

Junpei glowered at Hamuko who stood in the doorway to the kitchen, giggling as she approached and sat down next to him.

"Did I scare you?" Hamuko asked, grinning cheekily.

"Y-Yeah you did. For a second I really thought you were Mitsuru-senpai." Junpei shivered.

"Seriously though, shouldn't you be studying for midterms?" Hamuko asked.

"I-I've got the weekend to study." Junpei said, earning another giggle from Hamuko. "I just wanted to try out my new COMPstation Portable before hittin' the books."

"I'd be careful if I were you. Get too absorbed with gaming and you'll never get any studying done." Hamuko warned him.

"Oh? Speaking from experience?" Junpei grinned.

"My dad owns a console back home. It's an older model, but he's got fun games." Hamuko said. "They've been a distraction in the past."

"Your dad sounds fun. Must be a pretty laidback guy if he own a video game system." Junpei smiled. There was something odd in his expression, but Hamuko couldn't quite place it.

"Say, you into any online games?"

"I haven't played any before, so no."

"Really? Well, I guess I'm not surprised. Girls don't usually play a lot of video games anyway." Junpei said before turning in his seat and calling over his shoulder. "How about you, Minato?"

"I'm not much of a gamer." Minato called back as he read through his textbook. He sat on one of the couches in the living room away from the other two juniors.

"Aw, c'mon man! Don't you have any fun hobbies? Video games are great! There was this one online game I played for a while, Innocent Sin Online, and it was super fun. You should give it a try!"

"I'll pass."

"Dude, c'mon!" Junpei whined.

"Don't try and drag us down with you." Hamuko smirked.

"I'm not! But taking breaks is important!" Junpei said, getting up from his seat and leaning over Minato's chair. "You've got a computer, right? Let's go install the game and play for a while!"

"No."

"Dude, trust me, you'll love it! You gotta be tired of reading

that book by now!"

"No."

"Just an hour! One hour!"

"No."

"Half hour! Please?"

"Go away."

"Dude...!"

"Rather than playing video games and pestering others, shouldn't you be focusing on your studies, lori?"

Junpei chuckled. "Nice try, Hamu-tan, but I'm not falling for that again!"

"Excuse me? Falling for what again?"

"Geez, you really..." Junpei turned around with a scoff. He jumped when he noticed that his senior really was standing behind him, glaring at him with her arms crossed. "M-Mitsuru-senpai! W-When did you...?"

"I came down to see what the noise was. Interrupting others when they're trying to study... perhaps I should confiscate that device so you won't be distracted."

"T-That's..."

Five minutes later, Hamuko and Junpei had joined Minato in the living room. All three had textbooks in their hands.

"S-She really took it..." Junpei whimpered, sinking his face into his book. "Why...!"

Despite their fellow junior's misery, Minato and Hamuko couldn't help but give a few laughs at his expense.

~::~Velvet Theatre::~~

A blue room comes into focus, with a large clock looming above a gate overhead. The blue room is not just that, but appears to be an elevator of sorts moving up at high speed. There's no one else in the room save for two individuals dressed in blue to match the room's hue, one woman and one man. The duo smile and give polite bows, as if greeting someone.

"Hello," Elizabeth greets. "And once again, welcome to the Velvet Room. I am Elizabeth, one who rules over power..."

"And I am Theodore, another who rules over power." Theodore smiles. "This is the Velvet Theatre..."

The forced smile drops from Theodore's face as his shoulders slump.

"And here I'd hoped we were finished with this..." Theodore sighs.

"Of course not! Rejoice, brother, for Velvet Theatre continues!" Elizabeth smiles. "Don't sound so sad!"

"Forgive me, dear sister, but I can't find it in myself to rejoice. Indulging your odd whims is, as always-

"Oh? Indulging your loving sister is what, hm...?"

"N-Never mind. Shall we continue?" Theodore asks hurriedly.

"Yes! Now, I was thinking that this time we could share some information about Tartarus! Given that our guests have ventured into a new area of the Tower of Demise, I thought it would be fitting." Elizabeth smiles. "What do you think?"

"Ah, it doesn't really matter. You'll just do what you want with or without my input."

"True enough!" Elizabeth agrees, clapping her hands. "Now, since we're unlikely to see it again, let's discuss the aesthetics of the Thebel Block and the notable Shadows our guests have encountered within!"

Suddenly, a screen drops down from above, startling Theodore. An image suddenly appears on the screen, showing a view of Thebel's many dark halls with Shadows crawling about.

"S-Sister, when did... how did you...?!" Theo stammers, gesturing to the screen.

"Now, now, that's not important." Elizabeth waves off her

brother's concerns as she points to the screen. "As one can see, it's quite a dank looking area. Apparently it resembles our guests' school to some degree. If it's true, I find myself curious as to how they can focus on their studies in such a dark atmosphere."

"I'm sure their school looks much different during the day." Theodore assures her. "From what I've heard, schools are rich environments that freely offer information and knowledge to those who attend. I'm sure their school looks much more marvelous than the halls of Tartarus."

"Hm... perhaps." Elizabeth nods thoughtfully.

"Moving on, Thebel has a total of fifteen floors, starting from second floor and going all the way to the sixteenth floor. The Shadows within the block are all very weak, with all of them being vulnerable to at least one element. They have resistances, but any attack can hurt them." Theodore explains.

"Floors five, ten, and fourteen are where the Guardians of Thebel resided." Elizabeth picks up, the screen in front of her switching to another image that shows off the Guardian Shadows. "On floor five there were three Venus Eagles, and on the tenth floor there were three dancing hands. Out of all the Guardians, floor fourteen's Rampage Drive is the most formidable given that it has no weaknesses and is resistant to most all forms of physical attack."

"Though, our guests and their fellow Persona users were able

to defeat them all." Theodore smiles.

"Indeed. They've grown quite strong. I look forward to seeing them explore the Arqa Block and best the Shadows there." Elizabeth says.

"As do I." Theodore nods before giving his sister a hopeful look. "So, is that it...?"

"I believe so."

"Oh good, because I was-"

"After I read this paper I found lying around." Elizabeth said, holding up a withered document. "It is most curious..."

"Where did you find it?" Theodore asks curiously.

"That's not important!" Elizabeth shouts before clearing her throat. "I will now begin reading the document..."

"O-Okay..."

"...The electricity's hooked up. But, why do they need so much? There's only a school on this island..."

"...Is that it?" Theodore asks.

"...It seems so. The rest is inelible." Elizabeth frowns, looking dissatisfied. She promptly tears the paper in half.

"Wha...! Sister!"

"What? I have no further use for it." Elizabeth says. "It would just take up space if I didn't dispose of it."

"It's a single piece of paper!"

"We live in a small room, little brother. Even one piece of paper takes up a lot of space."

"B-But it sounded like it was important! Our guests might've-"

"It's just scribbles, Theodore. Stop fretting. I'm sure our guests will find out much more on their own." Elizabeth smiles. "Besides, we are mere observers. They are the ones on this journey, not us. Our assistance is only limited to this room and helping them with their Persona, nothing more."

"And yet, you asked them if they wouldn't mind running your errands for you..."

"WE asked them." Elizabeth reminds him before facing forward. "Well, I believe that's all the time we have for now. Thank you all for joining us. This has been Velvet Theatre. Until the next time we meet..."

"...Farewell." Theo finishes as he and his sister bow. "Sister, how long much longer will this go on?"

"Hm... I wonder~" Elizabeth muses, holding a hand to her cheek thoughtfully.

Theodore gives a tired sigh.

The room fades away...

A/N: I wanted to squeeze another day in, but that would've made the chapter too lengthy. Thought this was a good place to end it. I extend my gratitude to The Infamous Man for betaing this chapter, checking it over and touching up my grammar before its posting. Thanks for that.

So, not too much happened this chapter but chapters like these are necessary sometimes. A lot of focus on SEES here though, so I hope people enjoyed that, plus Elizabeth and Theo being silly while sharing some information/trivia. There will be much more Social Links and development during the next chapter. Not really much else to say.

I sincerely hope that those reading enjoyed the chapter. I appreciate any feedback given. Expect the next chapter sometime in the future. As always, thanks for reading.

Kiiam

15. Chapter 14: Midterms

Disclaimer: I don't own Persona.

A/N: Here's the newest chapter, and the longest one yet. More than anything, I hope those reading enjoy it.

Chapter 14: Midterms

"Are you satisfied with these?" Igor asked.

"Yeah." Hamuko nodded, smiling as several newly fused Persona flashed in her mind's eye. She bowed gratefully to Igor. "Thank you so much."

"There's no need to thank me. This is simply my duty. To assist you as you are one of our beloved guests." Igor chuckled. "Nonetheless, your gratitude is appreciated."

"Hah... I'm going to miss you guys." Hamuko said as she glanced around the Velvet Room.

"Oh? Are you going somewhere?" Elizabeth inquired.

"No. It's just that I probably won't visit for a while since midterms start tomorrow. I'll barely have any time to do anything else. We've even decided to take a break from

exploring Tartarus. So I won't really have a reason to come by until then."

"That hasn't stopped you before." Theodore pointed out with a smile.

It was true. A little bit after discovering the Velvet Room's alternate entrance at Paulownia Mall, Hamuko had made a point of visiting the residents of the Velvet Room on her own at least twice a week, not including the small detours she and Minato took together in order to fuse more Persona during their exploration of Tartarus. Even if she didn't have any Persona to fuse, Hamuko would take a few minutes to chat with the trio. She talked about what they were going through in Tartarus or responded to questions Theodore or Elizabeth had about her daily life. The two were surprisingly curious about her day to day activities, though asked the oddest questions at times. Igor never did much talking, though always listened to her with a smile on his face. Though, Hamuko had yet to see the old gentleman frown and lately had been wondering if it was possible for him to stop...

"Yeah, well, I'm really gonna buckle down this week. As fun as it is talking with you guys, I've gotta get focused really soon here. I've already spent this weekend studying like crazy, and one of my upperclassmen said she'd give me a reward if I scored well on my tests."

"We wish you luck then." Theodore smiled. "While your journey is of utmost importance, it is still important that you enjoy your daily life as well."

Hamuko smiled at Theodore before suddenly snapping her fingers. "Ah, that's right! There's also something else I came here to do."

Hamuko picked up her bag from where she had set it down and quickly stepped over to Theodore, who blinked curiously at the girl as she stood in front of him. Rummaging around for a couple seconds, her eyes lit up when she managed to retrieve one of the items she'd been looking for.

A few days after the fiasco with the monorail and the Priestess Shadow, during one of Hamuko's visits she had remembered Theodore and Elizabeth's talk about making requests. Remembering their discussion and her prior agreement, she'd asked Theodore if there were any requests he had for her. While he'd been hesitant at first, especially since that time Igor had been around when she asked, Hamuko had eventually coaxed him into sharing his requests. He didn't ask for much, just a few items he was curious about. For Theodore's peace of mind, she'd gotten permission from Igor. To her joy and Theodore's relief, the smiling old man had seemed more amused than anything and told her that if she didn't mind sparing the time, Theo could make as many requests as he wanted. The same went for Elizabeth. Both siblings had be overjoyed, though Theodore stressed that she shouldn't feel the need and only follow through with his requests if she was free.

Rather than deterring her, his words had encouraged Hamuko since she thought it would be fun to surprise him by presenting him with the items he asked for. So, before she buried herself

in books and schoolwork, Hamuko decided she'd finish up Theodore's prior requests if she could.

"I believe you requested this, Theo-san?"

"Ah!" Theodore grinned broadly as he accepted the item that was given to him. "Is this Muscle Drink?"

"Yep! I spotted it at the store while I was shopping. Didn't cost me much. The carton seems a little odd looking though."

"It's that oddness that inspires my curiosity. I look forward to tasting it." Theodore smiled. "Thank you very much."

"That's not all. I also have this." Hamuko said, handing over a small jar. "That's pine resin. I got it from my friend Yukari when I mentioned that I needed some. She uses it in her club and she had some to spare, so she gave it to me after I asked."

"Well, that was certainly nice of her." Theodore said as he unscrewed the cap on the small jar and took a small whiff. "It certainly smells like freshly cut pine, though I didn't think that's what it would look like..."

"Are you disappointed?" Hamuko asked, noticing Theodore's expression had suddenly become very strained.

"No, no... it's just..." Theodore muttered, casting a quick glance over at his sister before handing the jar back to Hamuko. "Um, you may keep that. It reminds me of soybean

powder, a substance which I have had several platefuls of in the past. I don't wish to recall those times. While I'm grateful for your bringing it here, I'd rather not hold onto it."

"Okay, you don't have to convince me." Hamuko giggled. "And you just had it by itself? Why?"

"It was an... attempt to experience a unique taste. It did not live up to the expectations I had. Even after this revelation, I was forced to continue consuming the powder to try and 'acquire' the taste. That was also a fruitless venture." Theodore shuddered. "Every bite was absolute torture."

"Wow. Who made you do that?"

Again, Hamuko saw Theodore's eyes briefly shift over to his older sister who just smiled at them.

"W-Well, it's of no real importance."

"Okay..." Hamuko gave a slow nod before reaching back into her bag. "Well, I know you'll enjoy this item. Ta-daa!"

"Oh! Is this...!"

"It is! A handheld console!" Hamuko grinned, giggling at Theodore's expression of awe as he happily received it. "Junpei gave it to me as a thank you after I convinced Mitsuru-senpai to give him back his new COMPstation Portable. It's an older version, but it's still got some pretty fun games on it."

"A portable game system..." Theodore murmured. "I hear

these special devices have mechanisms that can alter someone's brainwaves and make them forget the passage of time..."

"Er, huh?" Hamuko gave the older man an exasperated smile. She never heard someone describe a video game console like that. "They... don't have anything like that."

"Is that so?" Theodore mused. "Well, I wouldn't want to risk it. You may take it back with you."

"Hey, hey! Don't just give it back without giving it a try! You'll have fun with it!"

"But..."

"Look, I don't know who put the idea of brain altering devices in your head but it really means that you have so much fun playing that you don't pay attention to the time." Hamuko explained as Theodore turned over the device in his hands. "It'd be a waste to return it without playing a few games first. Just give it back to me the next time I come by, okay?"

"...Even so-"

"Brother, you made this request. Surely you're not the least bit curious about these games?" Elizabeth asked. "She's offering you the chance to experience something fun and interesting! What reason have you to refuse?"

"...Very well. If you insist, I'll try playing it sometime."

Theodore said tentatively, tucking away the portable console into his coat.

"Good. I hope you enjoy it." Hamuko smiled. "I think you will. Pretty much every guy I ever met loves games.

"Really...?"

"If I may, I want to thank you for indulging my assistant and acquiring these items for him." Igor said. "I honestly can't remember the last time we had a guest so thoughtful or interacted with us residents this much."

"I don't mind running a few errands for you guys, especially since you're helping me and Minato so much." Hamuko smiled. "Do you have any requests you'd like to make, Igor-san?"

"While I appreciate the offer, I think I'll refrain." Igor chuckled. "If there is something I need I'll have Elizabeth or Theodore get it for me."

"Alright. The offer still stands though!"

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Say, Elizabeth... has Minato accepted any requests from you yet?" Hamuko asked.

"He has not." Elizabeth smiled, seemingly unconcerned with that fact. "I've tried asking him to retrieve a few things for me, but he often declines or says he's too busy."

"Busy. Right..." Hamuko muttered skeptically. It was more likely that he thought accepting the requests was too much trouble. Hamuko knew her fellow Wild Card user spent most of his time at the dorm. Other than Kendo Club, there was absolutely nothing he had to do...

"It's fine." Elizabeth assured her. "It is his choice whether or not to accept. I won't force him. Perhaps one day in the future he'll be able to devote some time to completing a quest or two for me."

"What did you ask him? If you want, I could always..."

"We already agreed that you would accept Theo's requests and Minato-san would accept mine. You've already spent plenty of time indulging my brother. I wouldn't feel right adding my requests to his when you're our guest." Elizabeth said. "Please, pay it no mind."

"If you say so..." Hamuko said hesitantly. Maybe she should talk with Minato about this...

"Hamuko-san, thank you for accepting my requests and bringing these items to me. I'm very grateful." Theodore smiled. "Now, as per our agreement, I shall give you your reward."

"I get a reward?"

"Of course. Surely you didn't forget? And I would never make these requests if I didn't plan on compensating you for their

successful completion."

"Okay then." Hamuko smiled. She wasn't about to turn him down. "So what do I get?"

"Well, you completed all the requests I had for you at once so... I believe this should suffice."

Suddenly, a small bundle appeared in Theodore's hands that Hamuko recognized as a sweater.

"Oh hey, this is cute!" Hamuko said gleefully as she took the sweater and unfolded it to get a better look at the design. "When did you get this?"

"I don't remember when I got it, just that I had it." Theodore said simply. "I'm glad that it appears to be to your liking. While it will get warm soon it's still rather cold out so I hope you'll find some use for it."

"Thank you, Theo-san!"

"I accept your thanks, but one article of clothing is hardly enough to repay you." Theodore said, handing over a small envelope. "I believe this should be a suitable reward."

"Can I open it?" Hamuko asked as she took it.

"Of course."

With an excited smile, Hamuko quickly tore open the envelope and peered inside. Her eyes widened at what she saw.

"T-This is...!"

"Hm? Is there something wrong?" Theodore asked.

"N-No. If you ask me if something wrong, there's definitely nothing wrong." Hamuko said, turning away from the envelope and peeking back into the envelope to confirm what she saw.

Money. An absurd amount of money was in the envelope. Easily four times the monthly allowance her parents sent her, which was already a pretty generous sum. Theodore could've easily gone out and bought his own portable console with the money in the envelope and still have some leftover. She didn't point this out though.

"I-Is it okay to give me this much?" Hamuko asked.

"Of course. Is it not a fair amount? Honestly, I still have somewhat of a difficult time understanding your monetary system." Theodore confessed. "From what I understand, you give the amount equal to the value of the item you wish to purchase or the difficulty of the task. Should I have given more?"

"No, no! This is fine!" Hamuko barely kept herself from shouting. She'd feel guilty if she asked for any more than what she'd already been given. "Um... do you have any other requests?"

"Not at the moment, but I'll be sure to tell you if I think of any." Theodore said.

"O-Okay." Hamuko took a deep breath, finally getting over her shock before smiling at the Velvet Room residents. "Well, I should probably head out now. I'll see you all again in about a week."

"We look forward to it." Elizabeth smiled.

"Good luck with your tests." Theodore said.

"Farewell." Igor smiled, inclining his head slightly as Hamuko left the Velvet Room.

Stepping back into the real world, she briefly turned back toward the blue door before gazing back at the envelope she'd been given.

"Equal to the value of the item or difficulty of the task, huh..." Hamuko muttered, still amazed at her reward. Theodore must've really wanted to see those items she brought.

...Though, if he based her reward on what he thought the difficulty of the request he asked her was, just what would his future requests be like?

Hamuko never really thought there would be a point in her high school life where she possessed so much money. Sure, she saved a little bit of her allowance every month for personal purchases or emergencies, but it would've never amounted to this much. She didn't even have a part-time job, and yet her wallet was bulging with her new funds. While part of her

thought about saving her money, a bigger part of her couldn't help but splurge a little.

"Ah...! Delicious...!" Hamuko gave a contented sigh, setting her chopsticks down. "Thanks for the food!"

"W-Will you be wantin' another bowl there, missy?" The chef of Hagakure asked, his expression one of amazement as he eyed the fourth bowl the girl had just finished polishing off. He couldn't believe that a girl, and one as pretty and delicate looking as her, could tackle four bowls of the Hagakure Special in one go!

"Hm... nah, I think I'm good for now." Hamuko decided after a moment's debate. While she felt like she could've gone for another bowl, the Hagakure Special was pricey and she really did want to save her money. Though, the special ramen bowl was delicious and one of the greatest foods she'd discovered upon coming to Iwatodai...

Hamuko shook her head and pushed herself away from the counter with visible effort. She had to resist the temptation.

"Thanks again for the food." Hamuko told the chef as she left her money on the counter. "I'll be back again soon."

"H-Have a nice day." The chef replied with a shaky smile. He watched the girl leave, noticing the looks other patrons were giving her and the jealous whispers of some girls sitting at the booths.

There were some amazing people out there...

After exiting Hagakure Ramen Hamuko made her way back down to the ground floor. She took out her wallet again and peered inside.

"...Yep. It's all still there." Hamuko said, giggling to herself before pocketing it. She glanced around the Strip Mall, trying to decide if there was anything else she could buy.

"Hm... maybe I should get something for the group." Hamuko mused, glancing back up at the floors above. "I remember Junpei saying that Wakatsu had great sushi..."

"Aw... where is it?"

Some commotion near the Octopia stand caught Hamuko's attention. Curiosity getting the better of her, she approached the stand and noticed a kid that looked like she was in grade school making a fuss to the vendor. The lady who ran the stand didn't look annoyed by the child's antics though. She looked more apologetic than anything.

"I know it was here! I had the money!" The child insisted loudly as she searched through her backpack. She glanced up from her back at the vendor, giving the woman a pleading look. "I'm just a few coins short! Please?"

"Sorry, kid. I can't make exceptions even if you ask me nicely. If you can't pay, I can't give you anything." The woman said.

"But I KNOW I had it! I saved up! Really!"

"It's not that I don't believe you, but like I said..."

"Um, hi!" Hamuko announced herself, jumping in between the duo's argument with a friendly greeting. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, um..." The child suddenly shrank back, looking a little nervous. "I'm sorry. Did you want to buy something?"

"Ah, um, maybe." Hamuko said, the smell from the stand starting to rouse her appetite again. "I'm just wondering if there's something wrong?"

"This kid doesn't have enough money to pay." The Octopia vendor explained. "She lost some of her money, or so she says."

"I did! It was all here when... oh..."

The girl suddenly deflated when she turned over her bag. Both Hamuko and the vendor immediately spotted the hole on the underside of her backpack. While it wasn't anywhere near big enough for books or other schools supplies to fall through, it wasn't hard to imagine some coins slipping out while she was walking around.

"...How much are you missing?" Hamuko asked.

"Just eighty yen..." The girl mumbled quietly.

"That's all?" Hamuko smiled. "How about I pay for it?"

"Huh?" The girl's head shot up, eyes wide as she gazed at Hamuko. "R-Really?"

"Yeah! In fact, I'll pay for the whole thing. Keep what you have, I don't mind buying you a snack." Hamuko grinned. She turned back to the vendor. "Two orders of takoyaki please!"

"Coming right up." The vendor smiled in approval, giving Hamuko a thankful look as she filled up two paper boats with takoyaki and handed them over. "There ya go! Hope you enjoy!"

"We will." Hamuko smiled as she handed her second boat to the girl. "Here!"

The girl seemed to hesitate for a moment before she beamed and happily accepted the food. Hamuko's grin broadened when she saw the joy on the kid's face.

"Thank you so much!" The girl said happily.

"Ah, hehe. It's nothing." Hamuko giggled, feeling a little embarrassed but happy at the same time. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Huh?"

"That takoyaki looks kinda hot and it's always good to have a beverage to help wash it down." Hamuko smiled. "So? Water? Juice?"

"Mm... you'll really buy one for me? It's okay?"

"It's totally okay! Truth is, I've got quite a bit of money to burn all of a sudden and I need help spending some of it." Hamuko grinned. "Don't hold back."

"Well... okay!" The child smiled, finally giving in and accepting the offer. "There's a vending machine nearby that has my favorite drink! Can we get some?"

"Sure thing! What drink is it?"

"Mad Bull!"

"Really? That's my favorite too!"

After getting their drinks, Hamuko found herself sitting on one of the benches near the food court, happily chatting with the girl as they ate their food.

"My name's Maiko." The child introduced herself once her takoyaki was all gone.

"Nice to meet you, Maiko-chan." Hamuko smiled. "My name's Hamuko."

"That's a nice name." Maiko smiled. "Thanks again for the food. My parents told me not to talk with strangers since they can be bad people sometimes, but you're really nice! You're not a bad person at all."

"I'd like to think so." Hamuko said with a wry smile.

"Mm... you're the first big person I've really talked to other than my parents." Maiko mused, kicking her legs against the bench. "I was supposed to meet with my friends near the station, but they never showed up. We were gonna eat together. I got tired of waiting, so I came here by myself."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's okay now though." Maiko smiled. "I got to meet you, so everything worked out."

"Well, I'm happy I was able to keep you company, Maiko-chan." Hamuko smiled back.

The girl nodded happily before suddenly growing shy. Hamuko watched as Maiko fiddled with her empty paper boat before the child spoke up again.

"...Hamuko?"

"Yes?" Hamuko leaned down so she could hear her better.

"Um... I like talking with you. Since my friends didn't come like they said... do you think we could play together for a while?"

"Oh! Um..." Hamuko was a little surprised by her request, checking her phone for the time before giving Maiko an apologetic look. "...I'd like to, but my school has these really important tests I have to study for. My friends and I were planning to have a study group today see, and I've really gotta get home soon. I can't keep them waiting."

"Oh... okay."

Seeing the girl look so dejected, Hamuko quickly amended her statement.

"B-But that's only this time! After this week, I'm completely free! If you still want to play I can make it next Saturday!" Hamuko said, trying to cheer her up.

"Next Saturday?" Maiko said. "We can play then?"

"If you want to. I'll come to meet you right after my exams finish." Hamuko promised.

"...Okay!" Maiko nodded, giving Hamuko a bright smile. "Yeah! Next Saturday! It's a promise!"

Hamuko returned her smile, glad that she had managed to cheer Maiko up.

SMASH

"Oh! This is...!"

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Hanged Man Arcana...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Hanged Man with the Young Child...

"Young child... these voices aren't very good at giving proper descriptions or using someone's actual name." Hamuko thought to herself. It wasn't any better than Bunkichi and Mitsuko being referred to as the "Old Couple".

Regardless, Hamuko was happy for the new bond she'd created.

"Where do you want to meet up, Maiko-chan?" Hamuko asked as the voices in her head faded away.

"Um... do you know where the shrine is?" Maiko asked.

"I do."

"Then that's where we'll meet!" Maiko smiled. She gave Hamuko an earnest look. "You will come, right?"

"Of course. I said so, didn't I?" Hamuko said, smirking a little when Maiko still looked a little uncertain. "I see you still have doubts..."

"Well... my friends already promised to meet with me today, but they didn't show up."

"They're just kids. They probably forgot. I'm older and more responsible, so I don't forget things easily."

"Mm..."

"Here, we'll do a pinky swear." Hamuko offered, extending her pinky toward Maiko.

"Oh! I've heard of these! I've never actually done one though." Maiko smiled excitedly. "They're supposed to be even more serious than a regular promise since you have to swallow a thousand needles if you break it."

"That's right." Hamuko smiled as Maiko intertwined her pinky with hers. Hamuko raised her hand up and down, keeping their pinkies together as they made the promise. "I promise to meet with you at the shrine next Saturday after my class gets out or else swallow a thousand needles. There!"

Looking very satisfied as she separated her finger from Hamuko's, Maiko got off the bench and threw her empty boat and soda can into the trash bin next to the bench they were sitting on. She picked up her bag and waved to Hamuko.

"I'll see you soon!" Maiko smiled.

With that, the small girl took off. Hamuko watched her go, chuckling to herself as she threw away her own boat and can. Little kids like that were always so excitable, and even though they'd only talked for a bit Hamuko had really taken a liking to the girl.

"Next Saturday..." Hamuko said softly, fully intent on fulfilling the promise she'd made to Maiko.

Not that she'd been planning of forgetting, but they had a bond now didn't they? That made fulfilling the promise that much more important.

"I can't let my new friend down, can I?" Hamuko grinned to herself.

Minato frowned as he removed his headphones, glaring at the door over his shoulder as someone knocked against it in a steady rhythm. Sighing tiredly to himself, he pushed himself away from his desk and lifted himself out of his chair before slowly making his way over to the door. Even after he opened the door, the girl he was facing still felt the need to make a few more knocks against the doorframe, apparently unsatisfied until she ended on a proper beat.

"...What do you want?" Minato asked.

"Well, I wanted to ask if you wanted to come down and study with us." Hamuko answered with an upbeat smile, brushing off her fellow guest's apathy as she usually did. "Midterms start tomorrow so we're having a big study session in the common room downstairs to help prepare."

"I'll pass, thanks."

"C'mon!" Hamuko pouted. "Yukari and I even got Junpei to join in. Don't be the only one left out. We're helping each other this way."

"I'm comfortable studying by myself." Minato said. "Besides, I don't want my study time to be cut in half by Junpei constantly asking for help."

"It won't be cut in half. You'll just lose an... hour. At least." Hamuko said, smiling awkwardly to herself. Junpei had been asking a lot of questions...

"Why don't you ask one of our senpai instead?" Minato suggested.

"They're seniors, Minato. They're not studying the same stuff we are."

"I'm sure Mitsuru-senpai remembers everything from her second year. She'd make a great tutor."

"...That might be the case, but I don't want to bother asking for help when she'd probably busy with her own studies."

"And yet you have no problem asking me."

"That's because we're actually studying the same stuff! Besides, studying together is way more fun than studying alone."

"Studying isn't fun."

"I'm saying it CAN be when you're with other people." Hamuko huffed, getting a little frustrated. She glared at Minato when she noticed the smirk on his face. He was teasing her. "Look, are you coming down or not?"

"...I really prefer studying alone." Minato replied. "I have an easier time focusing when there aren't any other distractions. Maybe some other time."

Before she had a chance to respond, Minato shut the door in front of her. Hamuko stared at it for a few seconds, glaring up at the nameplate before giving the door a light kick with her foot.

"Jerk." Hamuko muttered.

Sighing to herself and shaking off Minato's rebuttal, Hamuko made her way back downstairs where Junpei and Yukari were studying. Hamuko managed a chuckle when the sounds of Junpei's piteous whines and Yukari's irritated remarks made their way to her ears. As she stepped into the common room area, she spied Yukari jabbing her finger at the notes in front of her while Junpei was slouching over so far that the tip of his hat was nearly touching the table.

"This is the third time I've had to explain it! I shouldn't even have to! The formula you need to remember is written right there!" Yukari said impatiently.

"All I see are a bunch of symbols and numbers stacked on top of each other. It doesn't tell me how it works." Junpei moaned.

"Well maybe you'd understand what's written down if you actually paid attention in class." Yukari said, narrowing her eyes at him. "Seriously, all you do is sleep or doodle in your notebook when you should be taking these notes yourself."

"Hey, what I do aren't doodles. It's art!"

"What Minato draws is art." Hamuko announced herself, leaning over Junpei shoulder and glancing down at his notebook. "This isn't art. Even calling them doodles is a bit too gracious."

"That hurts, Hamu-tan. Way to make a guy feel inadequate." Junpei moaned, though his tone was playful. "So, couldn't get Leader to come out of his burrow, huh?"

"I tried and failed. He said he was more comfortable studying alone." Hamuko said.

"...To be honest, I'm starting to see the benefit of studying alone." Yukari muttered, giving the only boy between them a pointed look. "I've barely gotten any reading done because he keeps asking me to explain every formula."

"It's not my fault I suck at math!"

"Again, if you paid attention in class you might be a little better at math. So yes, it completely your fault that you suck at math." Yukari retorted.

Junpei frowned, the girl's biting comments beginning to get on his nerves. "You don't have to help me if it's too much of a chore."

"You're asking me to help you!"

"How about I help you?" Hamuko cut in quickly. She gave her two fellow juniors a placating smile. "Yukari, you can study by

yourself. I'll help Junpei memorize some digits and formulas then we can all work on history and composition together, okay?"

"...Yeah, that sounds fine." Yukari nodded, giving a tired sigh as she took a seat and opened her notebook.

"So, what exactly do you need help with?" Hamuko asked, hoping her cheer would help elevate Junpei's mood.

"Ah... everything?" Junpei admitted sheepishly. He was surprised and glad when instead of getting mad at him, Hamuko just smiled instead.

"Then we'll start with everything."

The next hour passed by in companionable silence as Hamuko briefly summarized and went over every math lesson their class had since the school year started while Yukari studied at her own pace.

"See, this part's kinda tricky. You have to be careful and always remember to do this step or else you'll get it wrong." Hamuko explained. "Now, you try solving it."

"Ah... okay. Let's see..." Junpei nodded before slowly working through the problem. "Er, is that right?"

"It is, actually." Hamuko grinned. "Good job."

"Whoa, seriously?" Junpei exclaimed, matching her grin with one of his own.

"You actually got a problem right?" Yukari asked, looking up from her notes and raising a skeptic eyebrow at Junpei.

"I'm surprised too." Junpei chuckled. "Hamu-tan's not a bad tutor. I actually got almost half of them right!"

"Almost half?" Yukari smirked. "You sure sound happy about that."

"Hey, half is better than none." Junpei smirked back. "I'll still probably get a bad grade on the math portion, but now there's a chance I won't totally bomb it!"

"Well... that's good to hear, I guess?" Yukari muttered, not quite sure how to respond.

"Thanks for the help, Hamu-tan." Junpei said sincerely. "If it wasn't for you, I still wouldn't know a thing about any of this stuff."

"Happy to help." Hamuko chirped. "If you need me to explain anything else, just ask. I'm always available."

"If you say that, I'll probably be coming to you after every lesson." Junpei joked.

"Or you could try paying attention in class every so often." Hamuko suggested.

"Aw, now don't you start..." Junpei chuckled. "Y'know, I was reluctant at first, but I'm glad we're having this little study group. It's actually kinda nice to have someone who's willing

to teach me one on one like this. Though I'm afraid some of the guys might call me out for being a traitor when I actually get an average score on the midterms."

"Only hoping for an average score? Isn't that aiming a little low?" Hamuko asked.

"Nah, that's aiming high." Junpei grinned. "You might be a pretty good teacher, but you're no miracle worker, Hamu-tan."

Despite his words, Hamuko could tell that Junpei was really grateful for her help. It was a little odd to see him expressing this much gratitude, but Hamuko was glad he benefited from her teaching and was appreciative of her efforts to teach him. That was reward in itself.

SMASH

"*Oh...!*"

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

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Magician Arcana.

"*That's also pretty rewarding.*" Hamuko thought as she smiled giddily to herself.

"I wouldn't get too ahead of yourself. Math is only one of the subjects we have to study." Yukari pointed out.

"Man, don't go ruining my mood by saying that..." Junpei

whined.

"I'm not trying to ruin it. We've just got a lot left to study for." Yukari said. "I'm about done reviewing my notes for math. You guys wanna review composition and history now?"

"Hey, uh, can we do physics instead?" Junpei asked. "I'm not so hot on that subject either. Composition's actually the one thing I'm pretty okay with..."

"I don't mind. Yukari?"

"That's fine. I'm actually pretty worried about physics myself." Yukari confessed.

"Well then, fear not my friends!" Hamuko announced with a large grin as she held up her notebook. "For this book contains many facts and notes that will surely help you during next week's tests!"

"Hope you're not planning to keep it to yourself then." Junpei grinned. "C'mon! Share with the rest of the group."

"I jotted down a few things that'll help too." Yukari said, opening up her notebook and sliding it to the center of the table. "Though I don't know if everyone here will understand it."

"C'mon, Yuka-tan. Totally uncalled for."

"I gotta agree with Junpei, Yukari. Don't needlessly antagonize him."

"Sorry, sorry. I'm just... nervous about the exams. I really didn't have as much time to study as I would've liked." Yukari sighed. "I'm frustrated. I really want a good grade."

"Yeah, me too. I really want to know what Mitsuru-senpai will get us if we score well." Hamuko said.

"I don't really care about whatever Senpai promised us. I just want to pass with a high grade." Yukari sighed.

"Well... it's not like this is gonna be our only chance to study." Hamuko said.

"Huh?"

"Well, I asked Toriumi-sensei about what testing would be like since I'm a transfer and she said that we focused on one or two subjects per test day." Hamuko said. "Tomorrow it's Composition, then the next day it's Foreign Language and Economics, then Wednesday is Math and Physics, then Thursday is Science, Friday is History, and finally Classical Literature and whatever Edogawa taught us thrown in on Saturday."

"So what're you saying?"

"I'm saying that all we really have to worry about tomorrow is Composition." Hamuko smiled. "If you guys want, we can do this every night until midterms are over. We'll spend each night reviewing the basics of everything, but focus on the subjects that we'd be tested on the following day."

"Hey, you're right! I didn't think about that..." Yukari realized, becoming much more relaxed when she thought about it. "Yeah, it's not like we need to study everything all at once. We'll review little by little as we go along."

"So is that a yes to having a study group every day for just this week?" Hamuko asked.

"Yeah! We'll get together every night to review notes and brush up before we take the tests. We'll be as prepared as can be that way." Yukari smiled. "How about you, Junpei? Up for it?"

"Ahaha... well, maybe not every night." Junpei chuckled weakly, though held up his hands in surrender when both girls gave him stern looks. "But who am I to turn down two pretty ladies when they request my presence? I'd be happy to join you guys."

"Hm... on second thought, feel free to skip out. Hamuko and I could probably get more done without you around." Yukari said.

Hamuko couldn't help but giggle a little at that, laughing as Junpei's head sank down to rest on the table.

"So mean..." Junpei mumbled before his head shot up. "Ah, that's right! Hamu-tan, you said that the exams for math and physics were on Wednesday?"

"I did."

"Really? Man...!"

"What's with you?" Yukari asked.

"I just spent the last hour having Hamuko teach me math when we're not even taking that exam tomorrow!" Junpei groaned. "I'm probably gonna end up forgetting..."

"You better not." Hamuko said seriously. "Otherwise it'll be like I wasted that hour trying to teach you all that. Retain those lessons, Junpei!"

"I-I'll try my best." Junpei said quickly. "Y'know, since composition is what tomorrow's exam is on why don't we just hold off on physics and focus on that?"

"You sure you just don't want to put off more studying?" Yukari asked.

"I'm not gonna deny that, but I really think it's better to study what we're going to be tested on tomorrow rather than what we'll be tested on in a few days."

"...I'd have to agree with that." Yukari said. "Hamuko?"

"That's fine with me. I've got notes for composition in here too." Hamuko said as she placed her notebook on the table. "Maybe one of these days I can convince Minato to join us too."

"Good luck with that."

Hamuko blinked at Yukari's bitter reply. "Yukari?"

"Ah, no, I... didn't mean to say that out loud." Yukari explained, embarrassed that she'd accidentally voiced her private thoughts.

Hamuko frowned, remembering Yukari's comment about Mitsuru as well. She liked Yukari as a friend, but sometimes the girl could be a little harsh. "Do you not like Minato?"

"It's not that. It's just..." Yukari paused, trying to think about the best way to explain herself. He's nice and polite, but he's just a bit... distant, it seems like. Just with the way he is, it's hard for me to really see him joining in. Even though it's been a while since he moved here, I haven't exactly gotten many chances to talk with him. I talk more with our Senpai than I do with him."

"You get along fine when we're in Tartarus and you said you didn't mind him being our leader." Hamuko pointed out.

"That's different. When we're exploring Tartarus, it's not like we're talking about our hobbies or what we did at school. It's mostly just him giving orders and we follow them. That's not really getting along the way friends would. It's like... it's like working with classmates on a group project. You don't know the people in your group, and they're not your friends, but you get along and work together in order to get a good grade."

"That's an interesting way to put it." Hamuko said, quirking a small smile at the way Yukari's description.

"It's the best I could come up with." Yukari muttered. "I'm just saying that I don't really know him. We live in the same dorm, we have the same goal, but I can't really call him a friend when we barely talk outside of our SEES operations."

"That's..."

"I kinda get where Yuka-tan's coming from."

Hamuko turned towards the other junior, a little surprised by his proclamation. "Junpei?"

"He's a quiet guy, that much is true, but he does kinda go out of his way to maintain his distance." Junpei said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I catch him in the hallway at school or after classes. Not often, but sometimes. Whenever I ask him if he wants to grab a bite to eat in the cafeteria during lunch period or if he wants to hang out somewhere after school he usually has some excuse and just kinda leaves. I mean, he doesn't refuse all the time, but I can count on one hand the number of times we've hung out and still have fingers left over."

"But you guys get along at least, right?" Hamuko asked. After all, since that incident with the Priestess Shadow she had thought that the two boys had bonded...

"If you ask if we get along, I'd say we do, but thinking about it we really haven't spent a lot of time hanging out recently." Junpei said, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat. "I mean, I think he's a good guy. After that whole fiasco on the monorail I consider him a pal, but I don't know if he feels the

same way."

"Is that so..."

"I mean, I make an effort to talk with him, but he brushes me off more often than not. He's not bein' antagonizing or anything, but it's a little discouraging getting constantly turned down." Junpei's expression twisted. "Ugh. I made that sound pretty weird. Like I should care if another guy doesn't want to hang out with me!"

Hamuko cracked a smile at Junpei's words, but sighed to herself as she thought about her fellow Wild Card user. She couldn't really ignore what Yukari and Junpei were saying. After all, she'd been actively reaching out to him only to get constantly rebuffed. She could identify with Junpei's discouragement and understand why Yukari thought he was distant. Minato had been a great leader so far, but he really hadn't acted anything like a friend.

"There's... also another thing that kinda bothers me about Minato." Yukari admitted.

"Eh?"

"Well... do guys ever notice how he looks when he fights?" Yukari asked.

"When he fights?"

"Yeah. It's just... he's always so calm and collected. Even

when Shadows are attacking or when they're shooting lightning or fire as us he never seems to get scared." Yukari said.

"I don't know. I remember him being pretty shaken up when we thought we were gonna crash into the other train on the night we fought that big Shadow." Junpei said.

"E-Even still! He recovered pretty fast. And while we were all panicking he had enough sense to pull the lever that saved us!"

"I guess I see your point..."

"It's the same when he's using his Evoker. There's no hesitation or pause before he shoots. He just does it. I mean, he's putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger and he does it so easily!" Yukari said, looking disturbed at the very idea. "I-I mean, I know the Evokers aren't real guns, but... but I still haven't gotten used to using one. There's a reason I hold onto it with both hands when I summon Io. I wouldn't be able to hold the gun properly if I didn't."

"...I have a pretty easy time with it." Hamuko said.

"Maybe. But again it's because I don't really know Minato that I feel this way. I know you, Hamuko. You're my friend. I'm actually jealous that you have such an easy time using your Persona. But I just don't know what Minato's thinking. It's strange." Yukari said. "Plus, there was that first night when that one Shadow attacked the dorm. The way he looked when

he summoned that... thing..."

Hamuko's eyes widened when she remembered the thing that had torn its way out of Minato's Orpheus and completely destroyed the Magician Shadow. She had almost forgotten about it...

"I just can't help but wonder, you know? What was it? Did it come from Minato, or is it something else..."

The trio lapsed into silence, suddenly feeling very tense as they mulled over the archer's words.

"...Sorry." Yukari eventually spoke up. "I kinda killed the mood."

"That's one way of putting it." Junpei muttered.

"Yukari, Minato is..." Hamuko began before Yukari hastily interrupted her.

"Ah, just forget it!" Yukari said forcefully. "I don't want to make things any more uncomfortable than they already are. I just... I was just venting. Truth be told, I'm actually a little envious of how easily Minato accepts and does everything sometimes. It's because I can't imagine myself doing it, and I guess I'm just find him strange because I don't know him that well. If he was as friendly as you, Hamuko, I don't think I'd be as uncomfortable."

"Yukari..."

"Please don't get the wrong idea." Yukari said with a pleading look. "Despite how he acts I... I don't think he's a bad person. He wouldn't be helping us if he was. I just wish I understood him a little better."

"And I wish he'd be a little more social." Hamuko said with a dry smile. "I'm with you guys. He does seem to go out of his way to avoid others unless he really has to."

"Eh, maybe he'll come around one day. His social skills aside, he's still a solid leader." Junpei said with a grin. "Let's just keep supporting him. He'll come around eventually."

Hamuko smiled, happy that Junpei was sticking up for Minato when the two boys had been at odds for a while. Still, Yukari's words had really struck a chord with her. While she'd been making an effort to interact with Minato, it clearly wasn't enough as he was still just as introverted as the day he arrived at the dorm according to Yukari and Junpei's accounts. And she never really noticed before, but did Minato really look that odd when using his Evoker? She always thought of him as a pretty calm guy, but maybe it was a little strange...

"Okay, enough of this talk." Yukari said, clapping her hands as she smiled at her two fellow juniors. "Let's just get back to studying! Exams still start tomorrow!"

Well, she'd think about that stuff later. Though she would certainly have to have a talk with Minato at some point in the future...

The lunch bell rang, and Hamuko gave a happy smile when she heard it.

"Finally!" Hamuko grinned, stretching her arms over her head as she tried to get rid of the stiffens in her limbs. She'd finished her test a bit early and had done nothing but sit and stare into space for the past half hour. Sure, she'd had the other half of the test to take once lunch was over, but she could ignore that fact for the time being. Finally being able to move around felt great.

Getting some food in her stomach after spending her entire morning taking a test would feel even better.

"Yo, Hamu-tan. You plan on eating lunch?"

Hamuko turned to find Junpei grinning at her. Another boy who she recognized as Kenji stood next to her fellow SEES member. She gave him a friendly smile to which he returned.

"I plan to." Hamuko replied, only to blink when Junpei and Kenji started laughing to themselves. "What's so funny?"

"Ah, well, it's just... you didn't bring your own lunch?" Junpei asked.

"I don't usually pack my own lunch. I just get food from the cafeteria or the student store."

"Oh, you poor soul. You don't know do you?" Kenji laughed.

"Though you did just transfer in month ago so I guess it's expected?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, I probably should've told you this earlier but trying to get food from the cafeteria or vendor during testing week is nearly impossible for a newbie." Junpei said.

"Excuse me? Newbie?" Hamuko said, growing more confused by the minute. "What are you two talking about?"

"Well, you wouldn't know this, but during testing week there's a discount on food at the cafeteria and the student store. Not only that, there's even a few new items to buy all for the same discount." Junpei said, looking more serious than Hamuko had ever seen him look before. "Students crowd those places trying to take advantage of the bargain, and it can get pretty hectic. I heard one student broke his wrist last year trying to fight the crowd."

"You sure you're not just exaggerating?" Hamuko asked incredulously.

"Hey, I'm speaking from experience. The first year I transferred here I was almost trampled alive trying to fight my way to the front." Junpei said. "I don't blame you for not believing me though. It's really something that has to be seen to be believed."

"...Did a student really break their wrist?"

"Aw, that's just a rumor." Kenji said dismissively before suddenly looking thoughtful. "Then again, there is some truth in every rumor..."

"W-Well then, what about you two?" Hamuko asked, pointing an accusing finger at the both of them. "I don't see you two carrying around any lunches."

"I actually bought some bread at the convenience store before coming to school." Junpei confessed, pulling out said bread from his uniform's pocket.

"And I already begged Rio to share her lunch with me beforehand!" Kenji grinned, giving Hamuko a thumbs up.

"You sound pretty proud about that."

"Yeah, well, she gets something out of it too. I gotta be her packing mule when she goes shopping this weekend." Kenji sighed. He clenched his fist dramatically. "But if it means I don't have to go hungry, I'll carry as many bags as she needs me to!"

"You could always just buy food beforehand like Junpei." Hamuko suggested.

"Heh... please don't say that to someone as penniless as I."

"Sorry." Hamuko giggled at Kenji's dejected expression before she adopted a similar look. "Still, fighting a crowd doesn't sound fun. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Hey, never fear! Your pal Junpei is here!" Junpei suddenly announced, pulling a second package of bread out from his pocket and dropping it on the desk in front of Hamuko. "Tadaa! Food for you!"

"You bought me some too?" Hamuko asked, surprised.

"Yeah. While I was buying my own food I remembered that you usually got yours from the school. So, I shelled out a little extra so you wouldn't have to face the horde." Junpei grinned. "Ain't I a thoughtful guy? It's just melon bread though..."

"I'll take it!" Hamuko smiled, snatching the bread and cradling it to her chest. "Thanks, Junpei!"

"Hehe, no problem." Junpei smiled, rubbing the back of his neck in a slightly embarrassed gesture. "It's the least I could do. Think of it as a sort of thank you for helping me study."

"Can I count on you for the rest of the week then?"

"Ah...ahaha...well, t-that's-"

"Relax, I'm just joking." Hamuko chuckled. "Now that I know I can think of something for the other days."

"Yeah, with the amount of money I have buying you bread everyday would be a little too hurtful for my wallet." Junpei said with a light snort. "Now, we just gotta find a place to eat..."

"Let's just go to the gymnasium. A lot of clubs eat around

there and that's where I need to pick up my food from Rio anyway." Kenji said. "I'm sure I can convince her to let us stick around. Being friends with the team captain has gotta count for something, right?"

"If it's not enough, I'll put in a good word for you two." Hamuko said, arching an eyebrow when the two boys gave her a curious look. "Did you two forget? I'm part of the Tennis Club like Rio."

"Oh yeah! Heck, that's how I met you! Can't believe I almost forgot." Kenji laughed.

"Hey, with two members vouching for us we might actually get to eat lunch surrounded by girls!" Junpei said with a wide grin. "Say, Hamu-tan, do you know which members of your club have boyfriends? If you could put in a good word for me there's a few cute ones that I think-"

"I'm not gonna do that."

"Aw..."

Minato had heard the fuss his classmates had been making over the lunch menu discount and new items for sale during test week. While he had also overheard various things other things about the menu and what people did to get the food, he assumed they'd been exaggerations. Still, he hadn't brought his own lunch and he usually just bought from the student store so he went about his business as usual and headed

down to the lobby area once the lunch bell had rang.

Still, this was outside his expectations.

"Okay, I'm going in! Back me up guys!"

"Out of the way!"

"Stop pushing, geez!"

"My hunger gives me strength! Make way!"

"A man's hunger is no match for his fighting spirit!"

Minato stared at the sea of crowded around the student store in mild awe. The lobby area was completely congested with dozens and dozens of students surrounding the vendor, shouting orders. There was more than just the single woman at the counter this time, with three other people wearing similar uniforms also handing out bread and sandwiches. Minato just stood back spectating for a bit, fascinated by the sight. Minato let out a chuckle when he saw one student actually jump from the first two steps of the stairs into the mass of hungry students. Several students made several protesting shouts, and many were ejected from the crowd. It was crazy how much effort these people were putting into getting a few snacks.

"...Maybe I should just skip out for today." Minato muttered thoughtfully to himself, not quite willing to risk his body the same way some of these people were.

"Ah... excuse me...!"

Minato blinked when he spotted someone who didn't quite fit in this chaotic scene.

Fuuka Yamagishi was skirting just on the outside of the massive crowd, trying to find a way to squeeze in but flinched back every time the crowd moved. Compared to all the other students who were pushing and shoving each other out of the way, there wasn't any place for her to go.

Even still, she tried to give her orders over the din of the crowd.

"I just need two cutlet sandwiches, a meat bun, and... um...!"

It was all in vain though. Minato just barely heard her over the shouts and grunts of the other students.

Fuuka eyed the crowd worriedly before her eyebrows knitted together as she adopted a determined expression. The girl seemed to take several deep breaths before she took a step towards the mass of students and disappeared into it.

...And a second later she was promptly ejected from the crowd and onto her rear.

"Ow..." Fuuka moaned as she sat there, completely ignored by the students fighting desperately for their own lunches.

The scene looked so comical that Minato couldn't help but give a snort of amusement at the girl's efforts. Why someone

like her was trying so hard to get food was beyond him.

"...Hm?"

Minato bent down and plucked a small notepad from the ground.

"Two cutlet sandwiches, one meat bun, yakisoba bread, three Dr. Salts, one Mad Bull..." Minato read off, mildly surprised at the number of items listed.

"Ah...!"

Minato glanced up to see Fuuka staring at him, or rather at the notepad in his hand.

"This yours?" Minato asked, gesturing to the notepad.

"Y-Yes." Fuuka nodded as she hastily got to her feet and approached him. "Could I have it back, please?"

"Sure." Minato handed it over, to which the girl smiled gratefully in return. "I didn't think you were such a big eater, Yamagishi-san."

The girl's eyes widened in surprise before she gave him an exasperated smile and shook her head. "Oh, t-these aren't for me. I'm buying them for some other people."

Minato arched an eyebrow at her. "Who?"

"For Moriyama-san and the others."

"Them?" Minato asked, quite surprised. "But aren't they the ones who..."

Minato trailed off, biting his tongue when the girl's expression turned downcast. There was no need to continue. He didn't have to remind her of her relationship with Moriyama and her gang. But that still begged the question of why she was even bothering to buy food for them.

"They couldn't come buy food themselves?" Minato asked, a bit curious.

"W-Well, it's easier if it's just one person. I usually get our lunches anyway."

Minato scoffed a bit at that. More likely was that they forced her to get their lunches for them. Anything to avoid a crowd like this.

Still, what she said at the end caught his attention.

"You eat lunch with them too?"

"Yes. We all usually eat together." Fuuka smiled.

Minato was flabbergasted by that. And she said it with a smile on her face. Did she really enjoy eating with the same people who picked on her all the time?

"Oh, um, excuse me. I have to get their food before lunch period ends." Fuuka said, giving him a small bow. "Thank you for picking up my notepad."

After abruptly thanking him, to Minato's further amazement the girl rejoined the fray and disappeared into the sea of people. That she was willing to go this far...

Minato sighed and leaned back against one of the pillars as the swarm of students continued to push and shove around in front of him. He checked his phone, noting that there were still about twenty minutes left in the lunch period. He'd wait for a little while longer and if the crowd didn't thin at all during that time he'd just have to settle for getting some juice from one of the vending machines.

The young man spent several minutes watching the students in front of him like a spectator at a sports game. He bobbed his head lightly as he listened to his mp3 player, having turned up the volume so high that it almost completely muted the sounds of the crowd in front of him. After about ten minutes had passed Minato paused his music when he saw something interesting.

Yamagishi had made it out of the crowd, and in her arms were several packages of bread and beverages. The girl looked a little frazzled, but relieved that she'd managed to get what she needed. Minato was actually a little impressed that she managed to...

...Wait.

"Yamagishi-san!"

He suddenly found himself calling out to her. The girl jumped a

little when she heard her name, giving him a perplexed look.

"Yes...?" Fuuka answered hesitantly.

Minato paused, quickly counting the items in her hands before frowning. So he hadn't just miscounted. She was missing something from the list. Still, should he even tell her? It really wasn't his business.

...Then again, he couldn't just leave it alone.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Minato asked flatly.

The girl looked puzzled before looking down at the food in her arms. She stared for a few seconds before her eyes widened in surprise.

"Ah! The yakisoba bread!" Fuuka gasped. "You're right. How... how could I forget that?"

"...*Wow. She turned pale fast.*" Minato noted with a grimace as he watched the girl shudder.

"Oh... that's what Moriyama-san asked for. If I'd forgotten that... oooh..."

Clutching what she had already bought tightly to her chest, Fuuka turned back toward the swarm. Despite the shaky way she stood, it looked like she was preparing to go back to acquire the forgotten bread.

Minato sighed to himself, giving a small shake of his head as

he pushed himself off the pillar. He opened his phone, noticing that only ten minutes were left before class resumed. Seeing as how the crowd had barely reduced in size in the past fifteen minutes, he decided to forsake a proper meal and just get something to drink from the vending machines.

"Um, excuse me...!"

Just as he headed back toward the hallway, Minato heard a voice behind him. He turned and found that the Yamagishi girl was facing him. Minato stared at her from over his shoulder, observing the girl as she shuffled her feet and looked around nervously. She almost looked afraid to stand close to him. Minato wondered how often she talked to others since she looked so uncomfortable.

Eventually, her lips twitched upward and she gave him a small smile.

"Um... thank you for telling me."

She said it so quietly that Minato barely heard her. She looked so nervous and hesitant while saying it too.

"Don't worry about it." Minato replied after a moment.

The girl nodded, turning away from him and heading back toward crowd of students. Minato watched her go before letting out another sigh, shoving his hands in his pockets and heading back toward the hallway.

"...I hope she gets something for herself too." Minato muttered quietly.

"Okay, made it through the first day." Hamuko said to herself as she picked her drink out of the vending machine.

While she wasn't completely starving thanks to Junpei's thoughtfulness, the bread hadn't been filling enough to satisfy her hunger. The juice helped her a little bit, but it still wasn't enough.

Well, nothing a trip to Hagakure's wouldn't fix!

"Oh, Mitsuru-senpai!" Hamuko smiled when she saw the Kirijo heiress coming out of the student council room as she was walking down the hallway.

"Ah, Runako. How are you?" Mitsuru smiled at the girl as she stepped out into the hallway.

"I'm happy that the first day is done." Hamuko said. "What were you doing in the student council room? I thought there weren't any meetings since we had midterms this week."

"There aren't, but that doesn't mean that there isn't any work to do. Even during this time, there are still certain things that require my attention as the president of the student council."

"You're so diligent."

"What are you talking about? This much is normal."

"Not for everyone." Hamuko replied cheekily.

"Hm..." Mitsuru looked thoughtful for a moment, but eventually let the issue drop without comment. What she did take notice of was that the girl was by herself. Since joining SEES, Mitsuru had gotten used to seeing the girl with one of her fellow juniors accompanying her. She was rarely by herself. "Where are Iori and Takeba? Don't you usually go home with them?"

"I was planning to, but Yukari went to a friend's house to pick up some notes she'd lent her. The girl she lent them to planned to return them today, but forgot them at her place so Yukari tagged along to get them. Junpei got together with a bunch of other guys from class and headed off to the arcade. They wanted to have some fun and try to forget we've still got five more days of exams left." Hamuko giggled. "So today I'm all by myself."

"I see."

"...Say, Mitsuru-senpai." Hamuko began as an idea popped into her head. "You don't have anything else to do, do you?"

"Not at the moment. Fencing Club is also taking a break for exams and since I've suspended council activities for the moment there's little else I can do besides study. Although there are a few documents I was planning to look over..."

"But it's not anything urgent, right? You don't have to take a look immediately."

"No... but I'd prefer to look at them sooner rather than later."

"It's okay to take a break once and a while." Hamuko insisted. "After spending an entire day cooped up in a classroom taking tests, wouldn't you rather do something that doesn't require work?"

Mitsuru folded her arms across her chest, lips quirking upward in an amused smile. "Well then, what you suggest I do?"

Hamuko smirked. "We-e-ell, since you asked..."

"My, it's quite crowded here."

Hamuko was a little surprised by the hesitance in her usually self-assured senpai's tone as the two of them stepped into Hagakure. It also felt a little odd being the one leading Mitsuru around when it was often the other way around. Regardless, Hamuko smiled at the older girl as she claimed two stools at the counter so they could sit down.

"It's expected. This place is popular and it's right after school. A lot of people come here." Hamuko said as she and Mitsuru took their seats.

"Indeed." Mitsuru nodded in agreement, looking around and spotting several Gekkoukan students sitting at various booths in the restaurant. "It seems to be quite popular with our own students. I had no idea..."

"Really? Have you ever been to Hagakure's before?" Hamuko asked.

"No. I've passed by this place many times, but I've never gone in myself. This is my first time here." Mitsuru confessed, much to Hamuko's surprise.

"Seriously? Akihiko-senpai never invited you? Or what about your friends at school? I mean, I guess this isn't really the place most girls would choose to eat at but still..."

"Akihiko never has and I'm... not really well acquainted enough with anyone at school to ask if they wanted to come with me to a place like this." Mitsuru said, much to Hamuko's shock.

"But what about your club? Or the council? You don't have any friends in either of them?"

"Well, I get along with everyone certainly. As for friends... I can't really say I have much." Mitsuru said simply.

"T-That's insane! You're so popular! I can't imagine that you..."

Hamuko trailed off, holding her chin thoughtfully as she really pondered the issue. Then it suddenly hit her. While Mitsuru was undoubtedly popular and most of the student body looked up to her, Hamuko realized that might actually be the reason for her lack of companionship. After all, she was Mitsuru Kirijo! One of the most popular and smartest students in

Gekkoukan, Captain of the Fencing Club, President of the Student Council, and daughter of the head of the Kirijo Group, the organization she created and funded their school! While it was no question that she was respected, perhaps it was that she was too respected to be so casually approached.

Hamuko remembered what Junpei said about Mitsuru during her first week at school and how there was this aura about her that made everyone respect her. Everyone put Mitsuru up on a pedestal and really admired her, but how many of those people actually took the time to approach her?

Hamuko began to wonder if Mitsuru ever felt lonely during her time at school.

"A-Anyway, there's no point in being here if we're not going to order anything!" Hamuko smiled, quickly raising her hand to get the chef's attention. "Two of the Hagakure Specials over here!"

"You got it!" The chef called back.

"Since it's apparently your first time coming here, I'm buying!" Hamuko grinned.

"Are you sure? Looking at the menu this Hagakure Special Ramen Bowl is rather expensive for a regular student. I'm fine paying for myself." Mitsuru said.

"It's fine, it's fine! An underclassman treating her senpai to a meal isn't that unusual, right?" Hamuko smiled.

"Ha ha... if you insist." Mitsuru chuckled. "Thank you, Runako."

"No problem." Hamuko waved her off. "So, um, while we wait for our food... how do think you did on today's exam?"

"I was adequately prepared so I have confidence in my score. I devoted most of my time the week prior to studying, after all." Mitsuru smirked. "I'm aiming to have the best scores in my year, so no matter the outcome I'm sure my results will be favorable."

"Wow, I wish I had your certainty." Hamuko chuckled.

"Are you not confident? I thought you, Takeba and Iori were going to study together."

"Oh, you know about... well, even if I study I can never shake the nervousness I get before a test starts. I never really know how I'm gonna do until I see the questions in front of me." Hamuko said.

"If you've spent an ample amount of time studying there's no need for you to stress out over it. Have some confidence. I'm sure that will make you less anxious before the exams."

"Coming from you, I think I can believe that." Hamuko smiled.

"You ladies ordered the specials, right?"

"Oh wow, that was fast!" Hamuko exclaimed as two large ramen bowls were placed in front of her and Mitsuru. She

smiled at the chef. "Thanks!"

"Don't mention it. My policy is to treat those who might become regulars well!"

"Regulars?"

The chef gave Hamuko light smirk. "Hard to forget a petite girl like you going through four special bowls in one go."

"Oh, um, that was..."

"Hey, don't worry about it! I was surprised, but for someone who enjoys my food that much I'll always make sure they feel welcome! Eat up!"

"You come here to eat often, Runako?" Mitsuru asked as the chef moved away.

"I guess more often than I thought if I'm becoming a regular." Hamuko mused. She smiled as she picked up her chopsticks. "But I'm okay with that! I'd be lying if I said I wasn't planning to dropping by plenty of more times in the near future!"

After muttering a quick prayer of thanks, Hamuko dove into her meal. Her taste buds sang as she slurped up the noodles. It was still as good as the first time she had it when Junpei first took her to the place.

"Ah...! This is the best!" Hamuko sighed contentedly before turning to Mitsuru. "So, what do you think of..."

Hamuko trailed off when she noticed Mitsuru's bowl was still untouched. Mitsuru was staring at it with a difficult expression on her face.

"Um... Mitsuru-senpai?" Hamuko ventured. "Why aren't you eating? Are you not hungry?"

"Eh? Oh no, that's not it." Mitsuru replied, suddenly looking very uncomfortable. "It's just that... I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with etiquette here. Are there any customs I need to follow?"

"...What?"

"How am I supposed to eat this?" Mitsuru asked, gesturing to the ramen bowl in front of her.

Hamuko was silent, completely nonplussed as she stared at Mitsuru. Was she seriously asking her how to eat ramen?

"...You just eat it." Hamuko said dumbly, not really sure what else she could say.

"I'm sorry, I seem to have asked something odd." Mitsuru sighed after getting a look at the junior's expression. "I just didn't want to offend the chef by eating improperly so I asked you."

"Oh, er, that's... thoughtful." Hamuko said. It seemed like Mitsuru wouldn't be satisfied unless she gave her a real answer. She thought hard for a moment before smiling at the red haired girl. "You just have to make sure you finish all of it."

Make sure you drink any soup that's leftover. Oh, and make lots of noise while you eat!"

"Make lots of noise?" Mitsuru asked, looking surprised. "That seems so... primitive. Are you sure that wouldn't be rude?"

"No, it's really polite. It, uh... lets the chef and those around you know that you really enjoy the food!"

"...Very well then." Mitsuru nodded, looking so serious that Hamuko gave a light snort of laughter at her expression. "Bon appetite."

Suddenly very curious, Hamuko let her meal sit for a moment while she watched as Mitsuru carefully picked up her chopsticks. Hamuko continued to watch, mildly surprised how neat Mitsuru looked even as she nosily slurped up some noodles from the bowl. Mitsuru's eyes widened as she swallowed, staring down at her bowl in fascination.

"This taste... it's very interesting." Mitsuru said softly before taking a few more bites. "I thought it was a little strange at first, but as I kept eating I slowly realized that it has quite a charm to it. I've never had anything like this before."

"It's good though, right?" Hamuko asked, giving an amused smile in response to Mitsuru's critique.

"Yes. It's quite delicious." Mitsuru answered with a satisfied smile. "My highest compliments to the chef."

"I'm glad you like it." Hamuko smiled.

"Indeed. Excuse me!" Mitsuru said, suddenly calling out to the chef.

"Hm? What can I do for ya?" The chef asked.

"I just wanted to tell you that this ramen tastes absolutely wonderful. I can't remember the last time I complimented a chef for the food he made, but I wanted to let you know I really enjoy this."

"Oh. Uh... I'm happy to hear that."

Hamuko giggled as the Hagakure chef's face pinked at little at such blatant praise. He probably wasn't used to someone thanking him in such a respectful way before.

"If you don't mind me asking, what do you use for bouillon?"

Now the chef just looked confused. "Bouillon? The hell is that?"

Hamuko shared the chef's confusion. She'd never heard of the word either.

"I mean the broth." Mitsuru clarified. "It has such a unique texture and taste."

"Oh, that. Well, I can't tell you that, young lady." The chef smirked. "The noodles, the broth, everything is all a part of our secret recipe. I can't tell anyone or else I'd be out of

business."

"Ah, you own this establishment as well? Impressive." Mitsuru smiled. "Forget my asking then. I understand the necessity of keeping the recipe a secret. Still, if you don't mind my suggesting I think you should patent the recipe if you wish to properly safeguard it."

"Er, patent? Safeguard?"

"Yes. By doing so you would deter those wishing to steal it and if you ever did decide to sell the recipe you could make quite a bit of money as well."

"Um, Mitsuru-senpai, I don't think he has to worry about something like that happening." Hamuko cut in with an exasperated smile.

"Oh. Well, I was merely thinking aloud." Mitsuru smiled. "Sometimes I let my imagination get the better of me."

"Um... well, enjoy your meal." The chef said awkwardly before hurrying away.

"...I probably shouldn't have distracted him. He must be quite busy." Mitsuru mused as she watched the chef go.

"It's fine, Senpai. " Hamuko assured her. "So this might be a weird question, but have you ever had ramen before?"

"I haven't. Though I've wanted to for the longest time."

"...Wow." Hamuko sighed, giving a small laugh at how incredible that was. In Japan you could find ramen shops almost anywhere you went, and she'd never had any until today?

Just what kind of life did the Kirijo Group head's daughter live?

"...Sorry." Mitsuru suddenly apologized, earning a confused look from Hamuko. "I suppose that makes me a little strange."

"I wouldn't say that makes you strange... but it is a little odd." Hamuko smiled. "What did you eat growing up?"

"A large variety of things. The cooks employed at the Kirijo manor made all sorts of food."

"You had your own cooks? Oh... I bet you got to eat all sorts of fancy foods every day, huh?"

"I don't know if I would call the dishes fancy or anything of the sort, but they were all exceptionally made. My father made sure that I had the proper nutrition growing up."

"Did he ever take you out to eat?"

"...No, not really. I almost always ate at home." Mitsuru said, briefly looking down at her ramen bowl. "I never had a chance to eat foods like this."

"What about now? What do you do for lunch or when we're at the dorm?"

"My lunch is delivered to me at school, and most of the food I eat at the dorm is prepared beforehand. A lot of the foods can be preserved and saved for later, so I usually just check my fridge and heat up whatever is inside."

Hamuko stared at Mitsuru for several seconds before sighing and leaning her cheek against her hand. "I think I've just gotten a small peak into the life of the Kirijo heiress... and now I'm wondering if I really should've offered to pay for you."

"I admit, the way I grew up and how I live my life today is different from the norm. I have more provided to me than most. I acknowledge that, and although sometimes I worry about it, it's something I've come to accept." Mitsuru said, sounding a little amused with herself. "And even though I'm the daughter of Takeharu Kirijo, there's still much I need to do myself."

"...Not all by yourself."

"Oh?"

"You're talking about SEES and Tartarus, right? Well, you're not doing it alone. You have me, Minato, Akihiko-senpai, Yukari and Junpei to help you out." Hamuko smiled. "Don't be afraid to lean on us every once in a while, Senpai. We're here for you, whether it's fighting against Shadows or grabbing a bite to eat."

"Ha! I suppose you're right." Mitsuru chuckled. "Thank you, Runako. I appreciate it."

"Don't sweat it. If you ever need help with anything, just give me a shout. Or if you just wanna talk, that's fine too."

"...Yes. How long has it been since I've talked with someone my own age like this? Sitting here, eating food together, making small talk... it's all rather unique for me." Mitsuru said, with a melancholy expression. "I wonder if this is what normal girls do every day..."

"Hehe... I guess our esteemed student council president and Kirijo heiress doesn't have a many opportunities to feel normal?" Hamuko asked cheekily.

"Not as many as you'd think." Mitsuru smirked. "Which, again, is why I appreciate you asking me out here today. If I had come here alone, I think I would've enjoyed it far less."

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right?" Hamuko smiled.

Mitsuru returned it, and in that moment Hamuko thought she looked dazzling. It was no wonder everyone respected her so much. Earning this person's gratitude... Hamuko felt pretty good about herself.

SMASH

Thou art I... and I am thou... thou hast established a new bond...

"Yes!" Hamuko cheered in her head when she heard the familiar voices speak up from within her mind.

Thou shalt have our blessing when thou chooseth to create a Persona of the Empress Arcana...

Hamuko Runako has established the Social Link: Empress with Mitsuru Kirijo...

"The Empress link, huh?" Hamuko thought to herself with a smile as the voices faded. *"How fitting for Mitsuru-senpai."*

"Oh, we should probably finish these up." Mitsuru said as she gestured back to their ramen bowls.

"You're right about that. Ramen's no good when the noodles are soggy!" Hamuko grinned.

"And Runako?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm still... unfamiliar with this kind of restaurant." Mitsuru said, giving the younger girl an embarrassed look. "So, if you wouldn't mind... could we come again sometime?"

Hamuko beamed at the older girl.

"Definitely!"

A/N: You know, in retrospect the title of this chapter actually really fits. It's midterms week for me as well. Anyway, a big thanks to The Infamous Man for once again devoting some of his time to looking over the chapter before its posting.

Most of the focus was on Hamuko this chapter since it was mostly Minato for the past few, but it should return to a balance in the coming chapters. I'm just happy to get some Social Links done. They're always such fun to write. And for those who have played P3, you'll notice I am NOT going to wait until the endgame to establish Mitsuru's Social Link. Ah, the liberties of not having to worry about gameplay and story segregation!

Hope those reading enjoyed the chapter and please, post some feedback if you wouldn't mind. Sharing thoughts and criticisms helps me and improves the story, so it's always appreciated. As always, thanks for reading. Have a good one.

Kiiam