The game was a simulation, a story told before. The survivors wake up first, but something is wrong. Where's the studio? Where’s the producers, the executives, the fans, the cameras? All that's there is an island, all too familiar. And people. People that shouldn't exist. After all, they should just be fictional.

Discord: https://discord.gg/T8MAuHw
Is there a way to experience nothing? It’s hard to imagine. No air to breathe, no concept of the “breath” to waken the lungs to movement. But it's that nothing that Shuichi feels. Then again, can he "feel" if there is nothing to feel or if feeling doesn't exist?

He wants to say that he floats in nothingness but to float would imply there was something to float on. No, it's better to say that he's currently existing in nothingness.

His thoughts are clouded, muddy, or are they even there at all? He occasionally tries to move. All he can manage is to twitch a finger or maybe lift his eyelid a hair’s width. But for the most part, he simply exists aimlessly.

How long will I be here? He wonders, one of the few thoughts he manages to complete. Did time even exist there? And where is there? Does “there” even exist? He wants to think these thoughts, but they escape him, fleeing into the nothing before he can get solid hold of them.

I will be here forever. He decides. However, as soon as he finishes the thought, something happens. A sensation, something he hasn't felt in far too long. It's as if he's being pulled. A light tug on his shirt, no more.

“Hey,” a light voice echoes. “What are you doing here?” The voice is a welcome break from the endless nothing.

Where did it come from? He opens his eyes fully. All he can see is blackness. But he knows something is there, maybe even someone.

“Come here, you're almost there,” the voice says.

It's coming from above. He wants to go to it, but his body doesn't move. He wants to jump or swim or run towards the voice but he can't.

“Come on!” the voice says, sounding suddenly focused, “You're awake. But you gotta hurry! I don't know how long it'll last.”

Another pull on his shirt, stronger this time. Shuichi fights it initially. Where will this force take him? To the voice? Deeper into nothingness?

“C’mon, relax, I'm just tryin' to help.” The voice is insistent, but Shuichi isn't sure.

"Oh yeah?" he shouts, his voice stronger than he expected. “Then where are you taking me?”

The pull relaxes. “I’m taking you out of the simulation.”

Memories flood back into Shuichi’s head. His time on Danganronpa, the killing game, his desire for confidence, for purpose, all of the friends he'd made...Akamatsu...

Taking advantage of Shuichi’s lapse in concentration, the force suddenly launches him upwards. Wind that shouldn’t be there whips past Shuichi’s face, his long, black hair careening behind him. He tries to fight it, but there's no point. The force has him, yanking him through the nothingness.
Though it isn't just nothing anymore. A small circle appears above him, growing larger by the second - it seems time has returned as well.

As the circle grows larger, the light emanating from it grows brighter. Shuichi closes his eyes. He feels hot, the light searing his skin. He screams and the force only pulls him faster. Faster to that light. Shuichi roars as he nears the circle of light. Finally, he bursts through.

And promptly bumps his head.

Recoiling in pain, Shuichi instantly lays back down. Green tinted light floods into whatever container he's in. A machine hisses and the lid that he had knocked into springs outwards. A muffled voice attempts to speak to him but his head still isn't clear.

A hand appears in Shuichi’s vision. While his gut screams at him to be cautious, he grasps the hand tightly. He feels himself being pulled up; it's a little too quick, however, and he tries to lay back down as his vision swirls.

"Hey hey hey!" the voice from earlier chastises, "Get up already!" A quick push and Shuichi stumbles to his feet. He catches himself on the cold metal of a large machine. "There we go, that's better," says the voice, pleased with itself. "Now the last one!"

Shuichi catches a glimpse of a person as he (assuming from the deeper voice that the person is indeed a "he") runs around to the opposite side of the machine. Shuichi looks around. A sinister blue and green tone runs throughout the room. Pods are organized in a circle around a central contraption that gives off an ever-present whirring. Glancing at the pods, Shuichi flinches as he sees the painfully still body of Kaito Momota next to him.

He looks peaceful. There's no tension in his face, no expression of frustration or determination. His breathing is even and slow. Wait, Shuichi thinks, Breathing? Something rings in his head. A thought, creeping up on him. Momota is dead...so how is he breathing?

Shuichi throws himself back. In doing so he sees Miu Iruma's pod. She, also, looks far too peaceful. Shuichi remembers Iruma's bulging eyes, the panicked expression on her face, the sickening blue pallor of her skin. This Iruma has none of that.

"Wha-what the hell is going on?" Shuichi cries.

The thud of rubber heels is his only response. Finally, he seems something he recognizes: Maki's eternal scowl. The red of eyes of hers bore into him with the same intensity as they had in the game...in the game...what happened to the game? The last thing Shuichi really remembers is escaping the stage and falling asleep in the forest.

"H-hey, Shouty McShoutface!" came the voice from across the room. "Keep it down, would ya, I'm trying to focus here!"

Ignoring the voice, Shuichi turns to Maki. "Haru-Harukawa? That's you, right?"

"I...think so," Maki says.

"Where are we?" Shuichi asks.

"I don't know." Maki is blunt as ever, but there's something off about her voice, something Shuichi can't place.

Minutes pass until a loud hiss permeates the room. The mystery man mumbles something as he
reaches down and grabs hold of Himiko's hand. He pulls her up in the same manner as Shuichi and gets her on her feet. She's disoriented and her eyes glaze over as she tries to take in everything around her. The man picks up her hat from its pod and hands it to her. She hesitantly takes it, but doesn't put it on her head. Instead, she and the man move over to where Maki and Shuichi stand.

It's the first time Shuichi can get a good look at the man. He's taller than the rest of them, probably older too. His black hair is dyed pink at the ends and hangs in a low ponytail. He peers through thick-rimmed eyeglasses. He's a muscular man, lean; his sleeveless white shirt shows off his upper body well. A yellow jumpsuit covers the bottom portion of his legs with the top tied around his waist with the sleeves. Most striking, however, are his teeth, ground to a point, and the scars and burns that line his arms. He feels familiar.

"How're you guys holdin' up?" the man asks, concern apparent. None of the three say anything. Shuichi says nothing.

Where are we? Who are you? Why are we here? What happened to the game? Why are dead people sleeping in pods? He wonders these questions to himself, but his voice remains silent. Even if he tries to speak, he knows his voice will just catch in his throat.

The man grimaces, holds the palm of his hand to his forehead. "Ah, yeah, I remember comin' out of those things. It's weird as hell." Rather suddenly, he breaks out into a smile. "But you know what helped me? Hearing people's names!" He thrusts his hand forward into the middle of the group. "Name's Kazuichi Soda, nice to meetcha!"

That name - I know that name. I know that name! How do I know that name? Shuichi thinks to himself but still says nothing.

No one in the group moves to take Kazuichi's hand. His grin falters. He drops his hand. "I guess...uh...I guess you guys need more time." A pregnant pause. "You know what, I'll get the others, see if we can't figure out what's going on!" With that, he throws open a door and runs out the room.

The trio stare at each other, faces illuminated partially by the dull turquoise of the pod room, partially by the sunlight streaming from the outside. Their faces. Their faces. Shuichi knows their faces. He knows Himiko's tired eyes and curled lip. He knows Maki's cat-like gaze. He sees these traits on their faces. He knows these faces. But who are these people?

Oh god, who are these people? Why does he know them? Why doesn't he know them? He wants to bring them together in a group hug, to shout in celebration that they're alive and up and he's talking to them and they're okay. He also wants to avert his eyes; it's rude to stare at strangers, after all. And these people are strangers. Or they should be, but when Maki fidgets with the bow on her outfit, he knows she's uncomfortable. How does he know?

Judging by their expressions, Shuichi assumes the others are having similar thoughts. A paradoxical mix of intimate familiarity and complete separation.


Wordlessly, the group walks into the bright sunlight. The cold interior of the pod room is quickly replaced by the almost painful heat of the sun. Salt assails Shuichi's taste buds. He breathes deeply. They didn't have any sort of real beach back in the game or in the city, for that matter. What city?

Himiko marches forward until she reaches the edge of the ocean. Remnants of waves crawl their
way up the sand and kiss her shoes until retreating away, leaving a swathe of darkened sand in their wake. Himiko lurches forward and falls to her knees, clutching her hat. She wails. It's heartrending. Her voice is broken and it's as if her throat is clawing for water. Tears begin to stream down her face as another wave breaks, closer to shore this time, and almost covers her legs.

Out of pure instinct, Shuichi goes to her and places what he hopes to be a comforting hand on her shoulder. The smaller girl hiccups and nuzzles his hand in a way that's both affectionate and awkward. Shuichi tugs lightly at her shoulder, watching another wave break in the distance. Himiko stands, her lower half covered in sand. Tugging her hat on, she tries to hide her still crying face. Neither Maki nor Shuichi comment on it.

The sound of footsteps on wood catches the trio's attention. Three people run along a bridge connected to what appears to be another island. "See?" says Kazuichi, breathless, "I told you these guys just appeared. That's what those weird readings were."

A shorter man with close-cropped blonde hair steps forward and glares at them with one eye - the other being covered by an eyepatch. "The fuck?" is all he says as he makes his way into the pod room.

"H-Hey, Fuyuhiko, don't touch anything; other people are still in there!" Kazuichi chases after the man apparently called "Fuyuhiko."

All who remains is a young woman. Her expression is stern, but there is a hint of confusion and an almost maternal quality to it. She's carrying a camera draped across a simple, flowery sundress. Red hair falls around her face in a bob. "Huh, seems Kazuichi wasn't just pulling our legs." She approaches the group and they flinch away. Recognizing their fear, the woman stops. She smiles apologetically. "I'm sorry," she says, "You guys are probably so scared and confused right now."

Shuichi nods without meaning to. He bites on his lip. He looks at Maki and sees that she's in a combat stance, ready to spring, coiled tight.

The woman seems to pick up on this as well. "Please, relax, I'm not gonna hurt you. In fact, I want to help." She steps forward slowly. "My name is Mahiru Koizumi."

"Wh-what's going on?" Himiko manages through her sobs.

Mahiru gives her a gentle, sympathetic look. "That's what we're trying to figure out, sweetie."

Mahiru noticeably recoils. "Don't call me that." Mahiru simply nods.

"Okay, the fuck is going on here?" comes a shout from the pod room. Fuyuhiko emerges, hands in his pockets, face sour. "Who the hell are you all and how the hell did you get here?" Himiko hides behind Maki.

"Fuyuhiko!" Mahiru snaps, "Would you stop yelling? They know about as much as we do, so cool it!" Fuyuhiko clicks his tongue dismissively, but is otherwise silent.

"Again, I'm so sorry," Mahiru says, "He's a bit brash, to say the least." Mahiru puts a hand to her cheek. "Here, let's go back to the main island, we can get you all some food and make sure you're okay before we keep going. How's that sound?"

Shuichi moves to go with her, but he glances back at the brick front of the pod room. *But, my friends are in there.* He thinks. His friends? Are they his friends?

"Don't worry 'bout them," Fuyuhiko says. "Kazuichi's in there and he's a fucking whiz with
machines. He'll make sure nothing happens to your buddies."

Mahiru and Fuyuhiko turn and begin to cross the bridge. Shuichi looks at Maki, then Himiko. They both look as lost as he is. They both agree that they have no better options. They both agree they know these people.

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. Mahiru and Fuyuhiko spend most of their time moving around the island. Had this been a conventional stay, Shuichi would be impressed with how well he's being treated. The two find rolled up futons and lay them out in the lobby of what looks like an old hotel. They bring the trio food and don't complain when only nibbles are taken from it. When Shuichi looks out the window he sometimes sees one of the two on a cell phone. *Who are they calling?*

Shuichi, Maki, and Himiko spend much of the day doing nothing. No one speaks; they hardly move except to use the bathroom. Occasionally a sob will break out from one of them (even if Maki will never admit when it was her).

It's not until night that everything comes to a head. It's not until night when Shuichi realizes he can't sleep. It's not until night that the blood of his classmates drip from the wooden ceiling onto him. It's not until night that an out-of-tune piano plays in the distance. It's not until night that he screams.

"Shut up, Saihara!" Maki snaps at him from her futon. Her eyes are full of venom, but they too are puffy and wet.

Himiko begins crying as well. She clutches her hat to her chest, feeling each bump it makes as she chokes on her sobs. "What...what...what..." is all she can say. Does she even have a question?

Maki glares. "You shut up, too."

Shuichi's mouth forms into something that can barely be considered a smile. "Said the hypocrite."

"What did you call me?"

"You've been murmuring to yourself nonstop." Shuichi's almost-smile turned into a sneer. "So don't fucking tell us to shut up."

Maki's face flushes, part anger, part embarrassment.

"Please, stop fighting," Himiko whimpers. "We're friends, aren't we?"

"Are we?" Maki is looking straight ahead. Out at the night covered in the silvery tint of a waning moon. "I know you two have felt it. Like we don't know each other." Shuichi opens his mouth to speak, but is cut off. "But we do know each other. We went through that ... game ... together. But I have never heard Saihara be that profane that casually." She lays back down and pulls her blanket to her chin.

Himiko begins sobbing again. "B-bu-but, I know you guys. We survived together. We're here together. Doesn't that count for something?"
Shuichi grabs a tuft of carpet. "It does," he assuages, his voice calmer. He sighs. "Look, we're stressed, scared, tired, confused… all of the above, right now. We'll - We'll talk about it with those guys in the morning, okay? We'll get it all figured out."

No one responds. They let the ocean crash and the bugs hum. They see the private cottages beyond the pool. The light is on in one of them, for a time. Two people leave it. One goes back down towards the main path, the other to another cabin. Two lights are on. Then one. Then none.

Shuichi imagines that those people, those familiar people, are sleeping soundly. They must be. They're so comfortable here. Moving around the islands is so natural for them. The way they talk is casual and friendly, intimate.

He falls into a restless sleep. The night is spent in a cacophony of rustling sheets, choked sobs, and the all too familiar sound of panic.

Night eventually turns to morning. Dawn, to be accurate. Maki enjoys this time of day. The sky holds a pink, icy quality to it. The remnants of night that had yet to be burned away by the sun. A cloud of fog clings to her ankles. Humidity to her skin. The sun is peeking over the horizon and everything is covered in long, welcoming shadows.

Sitting down on the side of the pool, the assassin (can she even be called such?) dips her bare feet into the pool. She shivers in the chilly water. But it's nothing she isn't used to. In the game - and perhaps before it, if she remembers right - she took cold showers. They woke her up, made her alert, ready if an attack might come. But there weren't going to be any more attacks. She's supposedly safe.

She makes a noise in her throat, intentional or not, she can't tell. The idea of safety lingers in her mind. Is she safe? She doesn't know where they are, the only contact they have is with strangers, and the three she does know are now so unfamiliar to her. No, she corrects herself, the fifteen I know. There's thirteen others laying in pods in the middle of an island who should be dead.

Vomit begins to rise in her throat. She chokes it back. Dead. The word sounds so heinous, so permanent. So real. So many of them are dead. Somanydeadsomanydeadsomanydead. She can't hold it back any longer and retches into the pool. As soon as she's finished, she stares at it. It's mostly bile; she hardly ate anything the day before.

"Pull your legs up, sweetie," comes a soft voice. Maki tries to jerk herself up, but only ends up falling and scraping the palms of her hands. "Easy, easy. It's just me." Harsh red eyes meet soft yellow ones. Mahiru kneels down on the concrete beside Maki.

"What do you want?" Maki snaps.

Mahiru chuckles lightly. "Nothing, I was just on my morning walk and I come across you ruining our pool."

Feeling her cheeks flush, Maki looks away and tugs at one of her pigtails. They're tangled and a little ratty. "Sorry," she murmurs.

"Oh don't worry about it." Mahiru shifts to be at the edge of the pool. She scoops water in her palm and drops it back in. "Kazuichi upgraded the filter so it works almost instantly." Indeed, the water
was as clear and blue as it always seemed to be.

Maki huffs. "He good with that kind of stuff?"

Mahiru nods. "The best, some would say."

"Let me ask again," Maki says, bringing the topic back up, "What do you want?"

"Do I have to want anything?"

"Yes," Maki states matter-of-factly. "People don't just do things out of the goodness of their hearts. There's always a catch, always a reason." A brief flash of a face she knows appears before her.

"Ah, so I'm caught then, huh?" Even though Mahiru's smiling, Maki only tenses and tries to move away from her. The redhead adjusts the strap of her camera. "I was listening to you guys last night. It's been...rough for you, hasn't it?" She eyes Maki for a response, but the assassin is unreadable. She continues, "We've had it rough here, too. I figured maybe you could use someone to talk to."

Now it's Maki's turn to laugh. A bitter, sarcastic one, but a laugh. "Rough? You guys live on a tropical island. I find it hard to be rough here." She sounds cocky, but Maki recognizes that, in the back of her mind, something is telling her that she's wrong, that not only should she believe this "Mahiru Koizumi" but that she knows exactly what the photographer is talking about. Wait, how does she know she's a photographer? The camera, that must be it.

"I woke up from those pods, too, you know." Mahiru's voice is solemn, quiet. Maki bites the inside of her cheek. Without prompting, Mahiru continues. "We were in a simulation of some sorts. It was designed to heal us, but it got corrupted. We ended up killing each other. Well, I ended up being killed." She forces a chuckle. "I don't remember much after I was killed."

"Fascinating," Maki deadpans.

"Point is," Mahiru says, nonplussed, "I know what you're going through. Your memories are probably a mess right now. And the ones that aren't are like out of focus pictures." A light smile returns. "Give it one more day or so, they'll all come back to you."

"Is that a good thing?"

Mahiru looks down at her folded hands. "In some ways. Just figured you should be prepared." The redhead dips her feet in the pool and invites Maki to do the same. Hesitantly, she obliges, shivering again.

The two sit in silence for the rest of the morning. Maki will never admit it, but Mahiru's presence is comforting. She's a certainty. She knows that she only met Mahiru yesterday, that she and the other two are guaranteed to be strangers. She knows to call them by their surnames only, no nicknames or given names. It's simple and clear. An image of Kaito flashes in her vision. The name Harumaki. It makes her want to vomit again. It makes her heart pound furiously against her chest. Maki digs her nails into her palms.

Mahiru's gentle hand takes Maki's. "Give yourself time."
The buzzing of the diner sign is familiar to Himiko, as if she's heard it before. Well, obviously she's heard it, but it's such a comforting sound to her. It means normalcy, away from the island, away from the game. She doesn't remember what it's like outside of these two situations so she stands for a while, simply listening to the buzzing.

She clings to her hat, but doesn't put it on. It's useful for hiding, but she doesn't want to hide, not right now. So there's no reason to put the hat on. It means nothing. But she can't let go of it. It means too much to her.

Balling her fist, Himiko raises her arm to throw the infernal hat on the ground, fully prepared to stomp it into the hot concrete. Instead, she only cradles it in her arms.

Frustrated and confused, she enters the diner. It's empty. She doesn't know why but she expected it to be bustling with people. Tiresome, MP-draining people. She expects a man with his hairy belly poking out to be at the grill shouting in his indecipherable English. She expects a small, duochrome teddy bear to bring her a meal. She expects a lot of things but is only met with the subtle creak of a ceiling fan.

She sits in a booth. The hard plastic is uncomfortable. Grabbing a salt shaker, Himiko mindlessly stares out the window. The ocean is so close. People are walking from the diner, to-go boxes in hand, to the beach, laughing. Kids run across the parking lot as parents try to corral them away from boxy, overflowing cars. A man driving a minivan honks and shouts at one of the kids who, in turn, sticks his tongue out and throws his ice cream cone at the man's windshield. The ice cream melts almost instantly on the hot glass. The people soon melt away with it, leaving the parking lot empty sans the blur of heat waves rising from it.

Himiko picks up a salt shaker and turns it over in her hands. It's half empty. Or half full, Tenko would say. "Tenko," the small girl says, the name leaving an ache on her lips.

As if on cue, the vibrant aikido master bounds into the diner and sits opposite Himiko. She's talking, but Himiko can't hear her. Only see her mouth move and the way her ribbon bounces slightly every time she makes an exaggerated movement. However, what Himiko sees the most is the blood that coats her neck and face. It's still wet and glistening, but impossibly still. It doesn't drip, it doesn't shift with Tenko's movements like it should.

Should. Why _should_ Tenko's blood move? Why is Tenko so bloody? Who is Tenko anyway and why does the thought of a knife piercing her throat bring so much anxiety, so much apathy to Himiko?

Himiko puts her head down on the table, willing Tenko away. _Go away_ she thinks. She raises her eyes and Tenko is still talking, still smiling, still bleeding. _Go away, I said!_ Himiko pulls the hat tight on her head, covering as much of her face as possible. She can hear Tenko now. Hear the voice that's a combination of her normal one and the gurgling of blood that dripped into her mouth as she died. Why won't she spit it out? Why won't she go away? Go away. Go away.

"GO AWAY!" Himiko screams, ripping her throat raw. Finally, finally, Tenko disappears. Kazuichi takes her place. Or maybe he'd been here all along. Himiko doesn't know. She just knows that right now he's staring at her. Not out of fear or confusion, but profound sympathy.

"Hallucinations?" he asks, his voice gentle. Himiko shivers. Her throat burns too much to speak. Kazuichi nods knowingly. "I got them too." Himiko peeks out from under her hat, a curious eye the only part of her face visible.

Kazuichi smiles, flashing his sharpened teeth. A few of them are chipped, Himiko notes. She
wonders if he broke them when he was an Ultimate Despair. Wait. Where did that come from? What does "Ultimate Despair" even mean? And why is she associating it with this man she just met? She feels she knows this. As if it shouldn’t be a surprise. There’s no surprise here, no plot twist. She just can’t place it.

"God, I saw some horrible stuff when I first got out," Kazuichi continues, either ignorant of or purposefully ignoring Himiko’s thoughts. "Did you… did you see someone close to you?" Himiko tucks her eye back into her hat, shrugging slightly. Kazuichi nods again. "Hard to tell, huh? Yeah, I get that. First few days were tough."

Himiko sinks deeper into her seat. How she’s facing, she can just make out the simple design of the tile floor. It's dirty, needs to be swept. She wonders how much of a fuss Tojo would make if she saw it. She wonders who Tojo is. Why would she care about some diner?

Kazuichi gets up; he has a tool box with him that rattles gently. "Look, I know… I know it’s not easy to talk about this stuff right off the bat but…" He trails off, scratching the back of his head. "I'll - I'll be here for a while fixing some stuff if you wanna talk." Himiko doesn't respond. Kazuichi sighs and sets to work. He grabs a ladder and begins to work on the ceiling fan, occasionally muttering a curse.

Himiko only registers that Kazuichi finished the fan when the creaking stops. It had been one of those mindless white noises that had helped fill the silence along with the vague buzz of the sign and the clinking of Kazuichi's tools. The silence seems so much louder now and Himiko lifts her head. There's a crick in her neck.

Kazuichi smiles lightly at her before ducking down beneath the bar counter. He pulls out a tube light bulb, sets it to the side, and then begins to unscrew a burnt out bulb. The entire time Himiko stares, transfixed by him. Kazuichi notices and smiles at her. "You're staring," he says playfully.

J jerking her head back, Himiko mutters something that might have been "I'm sorry" but sounded more like "m ssrrree."

"What was that?" Kazuichi asks, putting a hand behind his ear. "I'm hard of hearing, you see." His tone is decidedly playful and Himiko even manages a small smile, the corner of her lips barely moving.

"I said, I'm sorry."

With a dismissive wave, Kazuichi says, "Don't worry 'bout it. Does you some good to take your mind off things."

For the better part of several hours, Himiko watches Kazuichi fix up the surprisingly dilapidated diner. I guess it's not that surprising, she thinks, This place probably isn't used much.

Putting his tools and the ladder away, Kazuichi extends a hand to Himiko. "I'm all finished up here. Why don't you head back to the hotel? I'll check on your friends and then bring ya'll some food."

"O-okay," Himiko responds. She doesn't take his hand as she stands and walks out of the diner. Back into the heat and into the pleasant buzzing of the sign.
Shuichi stares at the building. It feels so out of place. While the rest of the buildings are made of stucco or wood or siding, this bizarre building is made of deep red brick. Signs of being built hastily are clearly apparent. Sloppy masonry, unevenly cut bricks, rusted bars that look ready to snap at any moment. Why the builders would place such an important device in a ransack building like this he doesn't know.

Listening to the hushed conversations of the three strangers had revealed much to Shuichi. The contraption he woke up in was supposed to be non-operational. Not broken, he notes, just not in use. It's something of a relic, a symbol to them. A reminder. Of what, they never said, but a nagging voice tells Shuichi that he knows.

Regardless, he's not quite sure why he came in the first place. There's nothing in the building that would interest him. That's a lie. He knows. He feels like Ouma for a moment. He feels the urge to slap a piece of tape over Ouma's mouth for a moment. He doesn't question that desire. There's someone in there he wants to see. He didn't see her when he woke up, too much was happening. So for now, she's not real. Souda had said that all thirteen were accounted for, but until Shuichi sees her with his own eyes, he's not sure he can believe. He made himself believe she'd be gone forever a long time ago.

What was her name? He remembered it once and now it eluded him. Maybe on purpose.

"You gonna fucking stand there or you goin' in?" A rude voice comes from behind Shuichi. Fuyuhiko steps up beside him, hands in his suit pockets. *How is he not hot in that?* Shuichi wonders. He had rolled up his pant legs and taken off the gakuran top as soon as he'd gotten to the hotel and was still sweating profusely.

"I…" Shuichi trails off. Did he have anything to say? He feels like Himiko. Words just to say words. To remind him he's real, here, alive.

"You're stalling, dumbass," Fuyuhiko says plainly. There's no malice in his voice.

"I'm what?"

"Can't you hear? I said you're stalling." Fuyuhiko turns to face Shuichi. His eyepatch is simple, no embellishments, no dragon. *Shouldn't there be a dragon?" You wanna go in there, don't you?"* He points to the door. Shuichi shrugs and the shorter man growls. "See, that's the bullshit I'm talking about. You're gonna sit out here on your ass and pretend you don't know what you want." He suddenly lunges at Shuichi, who isn't nearly fast enough to avoid it, and grabs his collar, dragging him forward.

"K-Kuzuryu, stop, I-"

"Just shut the fuck up and tell me which pod you wanna go to."

Something about that statement hits Shuichi. Maybe it's the tone, no, it's the message underneath. The message says, "I did the same thing, I'm not letting you get away with it." There's a connection, Shuichi notices, a connection he only feels briefly with Maki and Himiko. It's stronger with them but with Fuyuhiko, it's more consistent. He doesn't know which he prefers. He honestly does not know.

The room looks the same as it did the day prior. Was he expecting something different? The sickly, sea-green luminescence splashes high shadows across the walls. Sleeping silhouettes surround the central unit. Shuichi can identify them by their shape. The long, lanky, austere form of Shinguji, the short, well-built Hoshi, even Angie's fluid, lithe body stands out against the cold metal of the room. He sees all of them, can identify all of them, except for her.
She lays there, motionless as the rest. Her blonde hair held up with a cute music clip. He can see the vague hints of purple that dominated her outfit through the green glass. A desire to tear the glass from its hinges, fall to his knees, and embrace the girl nearly overwhelm Shuichi. He begins shaking and balls his hand into a fist.

Fuyuhiko brings him a chair. An uncomfortable foldable chair, the kind one finds at conventions. "Sit," he orders and Shuichi obeys. "Don't force it. I'll be outside when you're ready." With that, Fuyuhiko leaves, practically slamming the door behind him.

Now Shuichi's alone. Though is he alone? He's surrounded by people. People who should be dead but aren't. A sinister pink overtakes his vision but he rubs his eyes and it clears away. He turns his attention back to the girl in the pod before him. It's sad. He remembers what they did with increasing clarity.

He remembers when they were introduced. They were introduced twice, weren't they? The first time she was gruff and aggressive, the second - placid and kind. She stayed that way. A determinator, urging everyone forward in that heinous escape route that they never did complete. He remembers her leading the group; she fell into the role so naturally. Even at her weakest, even when she was doubting herself the most, she still inspired a confidence in him that he'd never felt. He remembers her pushing him forward, pushing him towards the truth, the truth that she was a murderer (or so she believed - did believing it so fervently make it true?) He remembers her flying away from him, hooked by the collar around her neck. He doesn't remember her execution. It's probably for the best. He doesn't remember the song she played.

He grips his knees. That song, he hears it from time to time, but, like her, he can't remember its name. The tip of his tongue is heavy with a million pieces of knowledge that are stored somewhere in his brain but he can't find. He'd heard Koizumi say to Maki that the memory loss would end within the next day or so. That's fine, it's fine. He wants to know, wants to unburden his tongue. Wants to cry, to get out of the current purgatory he's in.

Shuichi stands up and dutifully folds the chair, placing it against a wall out of the way. He leaves the room, but not before counting. Eleven, twelve, thirteen, he counts mentally. All here, all still here. They're back. Are they back? Back implies that they've returned, but none of them have been here, to this island, Shuichi's sure of it. He pushes the thoughts out of his mind. They'll wake up, he tells himself and continues to do so as he leaves the building.

Fuyuhiko opens his eye, having been dozing under a palm tree and greets Shuichi with a wave. Wordlessly, he falls into step with Shuichi as they head back to the hotel.

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Dinner that night is quiet. While Kazuichi, Mahiru, and Fuyuhiko attempt to include the other three in their conversation, none of them bite. After a while, the three excuse themselves and head down to the hotel lobby, each silently hoping for an easier night, none of them fully expecting one.

"God dammit," Fuyuhiko says, exasperated. "What'd we do to get stuck with a buncha fucking mopey teenagers?"

Mahiru rolls her eyes. "Last I checked, we were mopey teenagers when we left those pods."
"Yeah, yeah, I fucking know."

"'Sides," Kazuichi interjects, "They seem to be getting used to things."

Smiling, Mahiru says, "That's optimistic, but I think it'll take a bit longer than a day."

"Well yeah, but they ate more today!"

Nodding in agreement, Fuyuhiko begins collecting the dishes. Three are distinctly full. Piles of dried cranberries missing only a few of their pieces and small slivers of plain chicken practically untouched except for a few nibbles at the corner. One chicken has the skin peeled off. Fuyuhiko hopes that's a good thing

"I'm going to make sure they're all set for the night," Mahiru says. She leaves the cafeteria and heads down to the lobby.

Kazuichi rubs his eyes. "How long you think they're gonna be?"

"Who?" Fuyuhiko asks.

"The kids in the pods."

Fuyuhiko shrugs. "Hell if I know. I'm no expert."

Standing up and stretching, Kazuichi holds the door open for Fuyuhiko. The two begin washing the dishes. "Speaking of experts, you manage to call Mikan?"

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko says. "Hinata, too. They both said they'll come."

"Hinata, eh?" Kazuichi says with a slightly too wide grin.

"Bastard, you know he isn't gonna fuck you so why are you smiling like that?" Feigning offence, Kazuichi splashes some soapy water at Fuyuhiko. "Son of a bitch!" Fuyuhiko shouts. "This is my good fucking suit."

"They're all your good suits," Kazuichi replies. "'Sides, I'm not smiling 'bout Hinata, it's who he's with."

"What I-? Oh shit, shut the hell up," Fuyuhiko says, a blush forming over his naturally red cheeks.

"C'mon man, don't tell me you forgot Peko is with him?" Kazuichi teases. Fuyuhiko doesn't reply. "Married for three years and you still get all nervous when she comes back." He taps a finger against the simple gold band around Fuyuhiko's finger.

"Yeah, well… Shut the fuck up, bastard!"

Kazuichi just laughs.

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Night comes again and it's quieter than the previous one. No one speaks. No one cries or whimpers or even shifts. Stillness reigns supreme. Clouds overtake the moon, leaving the night shrouded in
impenetrable dark. Mahiru had said it might rain late into the night. It's not uncommon for tropical islands like Jabberwock.

It was when she said "Jabberwock" that the silence came. The mention of the island's name sent the gears whirring in each of the survivors' heads. But the gears spin uselessly. They're not quite aligned, not quite touching. Occasionally they'll bump against each other and a spark of inspiration will light up on the lucky person's face but it will disappear just as quickly.

Still, curled up in the comfortable - if a bit dusty- futons, Shuichi feels at ease. More at ease than he has for the past thirty-six hours, at least. Himiko's breathing is soft and easy, she's asleep, thank goodness. The girl had woken up with such serious bags under her eyes that morning that Shuichi could've used her for shopping. A light snore escapes Himiko and Shuichi manages a small smile.

Gonta appears, gently kneeling over Himiko's body, an affectionate expression on his kind face. After the third trial he'd carried her back with that same expression. He stands and melts into the night. Shuichi rolls over. As pleasant as the vision was, he didn't need anymore reminders of his friends for tonight.

His friends. It sounds better now, more real. When he'd first awoken, he had a vague knowledge that these people were his friends, but the more he said it, the more he thought about it, the more he believed it. Is it the truth? That girl had impressed upon Shuichi how important the truth was. As his eyes grow heavy, Shuichi sends up a prayer - he'd never been particularly religious - that tomorrow he'll wake and find his memory restored and everything he believed confirmed. He falls into a dreamless, but deep sleep.

The next morning, the three survivors wake up. Whether it was simultaneous or if those who got up earlier were struck immobile, it's impossible to tell. What is known is that look on each of their faces. That look that says they all realized the same thing. That their memory, most of it, has come back, that things have become more real.

However, as everything became more and more real, the three realized something that seemed so obvious in hindsight:

Jabberwock, the three taking care of them, the simulation.

Shuichi finds his voice first and in a low, ominous tone says,"None of this should be real. This is fiction. This is Danganronpa."

Chapter End Notes

When V3 was first released in Japan, a few "Wake-Up" fics started coming out, notably those by idaate and ikuzonos (go read them, they're awesome!). I was intrigued at the idea and also with the idea of having these characters deal with their pain and suffering, so I decided to write my own. As I started, I realized I was just retreading over already written ground. So in a (probably drunken) burst of inspiration, I decided to see what would happen if the characters woke up in a "fictional" world and how they would deal with it. And now this fic is born!

Also, Fuyuhiko gets all flustered whenever Peko comes up and I don't care what you say.
Comments and critiques are always welcome. And that's enough shameless begging.
In many ways, Shuichi wished that his memories had come back in a rush. An overwhelming surge where he'd remember what he'd forgotten. Not just the memories themselves, but actually be able to say, "I had forgotten about my training sessions with Momota." It would have provided a catharsis, a sudden freedom.

He also would have taken a slow trickle of memories that came to him throughout the day for the same reason. He wants to know what he's forgotten.

Instead, he wakes up and he knows. He knows about the killing game; he sees each of friends' deaths clearly. Hoshi's suspended body, Chabashira lying on the floor surrounded by salt, the flood of blood surrounding the sleeve crushed beneath a hydraulic press. The floor gives way beneath him as he thinks of Tojo's impossible fall, only to splash in boiling oil. Their executions. Did they deserve them? He can't remember deciding that.

What he can't say is what he still hasn't remembered. He can't identify specifically what he's forgotten. There are a few things that are obvious. His time before the game is still blurry, though now there are two figures with the word "grandparents" vaguely attached to them. He can't remember how to make tempura batter though he's sure that one of those "grandparents" taught him at a young age. And he can't remember her name.

But all of those memories seem inconsequential at the moment. At least it's possible that he'll regain them, at least he can be certain that they happened, that they were real. But he shouldn't be sleeping in futon given to him by fictional characters in a fictional world. That's impossible. It should be impossible. "Should" being the operative word.

"Nyeh… I don't… understand," Himiko says. She's staring at the pool as if she's never seen one before. She has, of course; she used to be a lifeguard during the summers. But this pool suddenly appears too blue, too clear, too maintained to be anything other than fake. Pools have leaves and dirt and clumps of ammonia settled at the bottom.

Shuichi jumps up, begins walking around the room. He has to confirm. He touches everything. Maki and Himiko follow suit.

A bit tune escapes from the video game console as Himiko turns it on. The title screen says "Metris."

"N-no!" Maki cries over Himiko's shoulder. "It should be 'Tetris', with a T damn it!" The same rings true for all of the video games. Mac-man, The Myth of Grelda, Lario Sisters, all cheap facsimiles of real titles, meant to be no more than cheeky references.

Across the room, Shuichi examines bottle after bottle of alcohol. He remembers playing this game, Super Danganronpa 2 (he loved it so much, it was what gave him the real-life Danganronpa events, after all). These bottles shouldn't have words on them, they should just be indiscernible scribbles. Give the overworld some flavor. Instead, they say "Towa Brewing Company. Hope's Peak Academy Ultimate Brewmaster Approved!" His mind races. This isn't flavor text, it was never in the game. The bottles slip from his hands.

Maki is on a chair, a too solid chair for something that should just be a bunch of lines of code and
She's batting at the ceiling fan. It's turning weakly and stops as soon as she touches it. She bites her nail. The ceiling fan isn't supposed to stop. It's not programmed to stop. It never stops, no matter what. So why is it stopping now? Tear off her hand, or push her down off the chair, just don't stop.

The trio clamber upstairs, barely registering when Himiko slips and tears a hole in her tights, leaving a nasty gash on her shin. How can the wood do that? It's not real. "It's not real!" Himiko shouts. But the blood is undeniable. It's a grotesque pink color. "Nononononono! Blood is red, blood is RED!" She collapses on the stairs, her hat squeezed between white-knuckled hands.

Shuichi and Maki don't stop to help. They run up the stairs. Her injuries aren't real after all. Nothing in this world is real. Because this world isn't real; it's a videogame. But if it's not real, then why does the food in the kitchen taste so natural? Why do the apples taste like apples? The day-old rice tastes like day-old rice. Why are there bare spots in the fridge? This is a game, it should be automatically stocked, a mechanic that players don't have to worry about.

Shuichi runs to the balcony. He can see a couple of the other islands. *They're in 3D. They shouldn't be in 3D, they should just be placeholders!* His mind whirs. The detective brain of his can't comprehend what he's seeing.

"What the HELL IS GOING ON?!" he screams. Why does it echo? It shouldn't echo.

The words "should" and "should not" once held so much power. The ability to determine what is best. "You shouldn't do that" Shuichi's grandfather would say when he went to poke a fork in an electrical socket. Shouldn't. It swayed Shuichi. Clearly, if he shouldn't do it, then he won't.

The words also told what was possible and impossible. "Don't worry, Mrs. Saihara, the infection should clear up if you take these pills." It's possible the infection will clear up. Doesn't mean it will. Doesn't mean it did. But it's possible. Should determined it.

Now those words mean nothing. Shuichi shouldn't have woken up in a simulation, shouldn't be in a fictional world, shouldn't be surrounded by fictional characters. But this world doesn't care what should be possible.

"Hey, hey you guys! What's going on? Yumeno? Why are you hurt?!!" Mahiru's voice made its way to Shuichi's ear. Such a disgusting sound. The sound of some voice actress. But that voice actress should never have voiced the name "Yumeno" because she wasn't a part of the damn game.

Mahiru appears in the dining area and grabs Shuichi's shoulder. He yanks it away, taking a step back. "Wha-?" Mahiru tries to say but Shuichi bolts. He flies down the stairs. Fuyuhiko is in the lobby, wrapping Himiko's shin with gauze. She's barely moving, watching Fuyuhiko with an empty, bloodshot eye.

"Hey! What the fuck are you doing?!" Fuyuhiko shouts, but Shuichi ignores him, fleeing into the open air.

No, there should be no air here. There's no reason to program air when computer characters don't actually need to breath. So why does he feel the salty grit of the sea every time he takes a breath?

The stench of the chlorine from the pool swirls around him. "Welcome to the world," the stench says, wrapping its tendrils around his throat. "You're here now, this is real, enjoy your stay!"

Shuichi starts flailing, screaming. "Get away! This isn't real! None of this is real, it's all bullshit, a lie! A LIE!"
A prick. Quick, nearly painless. The world swims. Black spots appear in Shuichi's vision. The world falls and he falls with it. The world crashes but Shuichi is caught. Laid down gently. He sees sandaled feet. He sees darkness. He doesn’t see.

Mahiru is standing over Shuichi's unconscious form. She bends down and delicately picks up the empty syringe from his neck. A fast acting sedative, courtesy of Mikan and Hajime, not needed for so many years. She exhales, sees Fuyuhiko half-jog out of the hotel lobby.

"What the fucking mother of fuck was that?" he asks in the eloquent manner only he can.

"Like I would know, geez." Mahiru bends down and checks Shuichi's pulse. It's fast but slowing down. "How's Yumeno doing?"

Fuyuhiko scratches the back of his head. "She's alright, I guess. All bandaged up. She curled up in a corner so I put a blanket on her. Doesn't look like she's going anywhere."

Mahiru pulls out her phone and calls Kazuichi. A brief conversation and an "I'm on the way!" from Kazuichi and she hangs up.

"You see the last one? What's her damn name? Harukawa?" Fuyuhiko asks.

"No, I think she got away."

"How the hell did she do that?"

Mahiru glares at him. "If you bothered to read the status on the Neo World Program, you'd know she's the Ultimate Assassin. Probably managed to hide in the shadows or something."

The yakuza throws his hands up. "Oh, fantastic, we just knocked out a friend of an assassin." He pinches the bridge of his nose. "What a fucking mess."

Mahiru bites back a curse. He's right. The situation looks extremely bad from the outside. But why did they act like that? Like they were scared of us? She could understand them being off put by Fuyuhiko, and even Kazuichi, but her? She even put on extra concealer to hide some of the more brutal scarring.

Fuyuhiko kneels next Shuichi. "Think it's 'cause of their memories?"

Shrugging, Mahiru says, "Probably, but I don't know for sure. They were fine yesterday."

"Yeah, but remember when Nekomaru got his memories back? He ran around the islands for fucking hours." Fuyuhiko stands up straight. "We all were fucked up in some way or another."

"Mmm, probably."

Footsteps alert the duo to Kazuichi's arrival. "Woah!" he says, "Did you guys kill him?!"

"Kazuichi!" Mahiru yells, staring daggers at him. "That was uncalled for."

Putting a hand by his head, Kazuichi blushes. "Sorry, sorry.

"Geez, just help us get him inside."

The trio lift Shuichi, carefully maneuvering him into the lobby and nestle him into a futon. Himiko's eyes never leave them, she bunches the blanket in her hands and pulls her legs even closer to her body.
Noticing this, Mahiru says to the others, "Let's head out and look for Harukawa. Make sure she's alright." She placed extra emphasis on the last bit, hoping Himiko would relax.

The three leave and Himiko scurries over the Shuichi, curling next to him and wrapping her arm around his. "Saihara... I want to go ho-home..." she whispers.

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Listen. Don't trust only your eyes, they're easily deceived. Detect anomalies in patterns. Trees rustle in a certain way, listen for the breaks. Nature has no consistent rhythm, humans do. Listen.

Maki runs through advice that she got from an old mentor. No, advice that was programmed into her by the people running Danganronpa. The real Danganronpa. Which is the real one? In a way, she's played all the games now. Both virtual and real. Though which one is which at this point? She saw a poster for Ultra Despair Girls in the lobby of the movie theater she's hiding out in. Another videogame. Another false world. So why is it here? If this world is "real," then that means that everything that happened in Towa city should be too. But then what's this game poster?

Maki slaps her cheeks. Focus. Confusing yourself will just lead to you getting captured. Captured. Kaito and Ouma are squaring off suddenly. Kaito's kneeling, exhausted. Ouma triumphantly holding an antidote. It was the last time Maki could really say she knew what was going on. But even then, she'd been mistaken.

She shakes her head. Dammit! Focus! Peeking from her position on the catwalk above the stage, Maki surveys the theater. It's rather fancy, well maintained as well. She wonders if perhaps these "people" (she can't bear to think of them wholly as people) use it from time to time. What are they doing here anyway. If she remembered the anime - the awful, terrible, downright insulting anime - then the Remnants should be travelling, trying to undo the damage that the - oh man what's that annoyingly long name? Who cares? - Tragedy caused.

A light casts over the seats. Two long shadows enter. Maki sinks back into the shadows. Never let your feet leave the ground. Be ready to run. Don't always run away, running towards an assailant can be effective. She silences her breathing, running through her drills. The drills she never really had yet can remember so clearly.

"Harukawa, are you in here?" Mahiru's voice. "Please, we're not trying to hurt you!" It sounds worried, genuinely worried. But these characters are code. Worry is only present when it's coded to be.

"I'm gonna check the catwalk!" Kazuichi says. His heavy footsteps make it easy for Maki to keep track of him. She hops up on the ledge of the catwalk. She grabs a lighting batten and gives a hard tug, one more for safety. It'll hold her if she's quick.

Deftly leaping forward, Maki balances on the thin strip of metal. It sinks under her weight but she's already decided where she's going next. She springs forward and grabs the heavy curtain, sliding down it. For a moment she feels like an action hero, doing something probably impossible. For a moment, it's just another day in the life of Maki Harukawa, Ultimate Assassin.

She lands stage left. Kazuichi is above her on the catwalk now. He doesn't think to look down. Maki quietly thanks even Angie's questionable Atua that it wasn't Mahiru up there. She'd be smart enough
to look down.

For now, Mahiru's distracted checking each row of seats. She hasn't stopped calling out. There's desperation in her voice. It's starting to sound hoarse. She coughs and Maki pauses. Mahiru's chin is covered in blood. She coughed it up.

But not really. She just cleared her throat. Maki can't even see Mahiru's face from where she is. This isn't good. Constant distractions. It's going to make getting away that much harder.

There's no back exit to the theater. An obvious design flaw. But one that was necessary for the game to make sense. There was no need for the player to go this far back into the theater. In fact, why does this part of the theater exist? It should never have been programmed. Maki wipes her sweaty hands on her skirt.

Ten minutes go by before Kazuichi and Mahiru leave. Maki doesn't let her breath out for another five afterwards. Six times she thinks she hears the door open again. Six times nothing happens. Finally, she eases. Eases, not relaxes. Never fully relax, that's when your target will get away. Or find you.

Mindlessly playing with the bow on her outfit, Maki sits down on a box marked "Light Up Stars - DO NOT TOUCH OR ELSE I'LL DESTROY YOUR 73RD HAIR FOLLICLE! -Love, Ibuki!" Maki sighs, almost smiles. Ibuki was one of her favorites from the game. The girl was so unpredictable, so excitable. Every scene with her was sure to be infinitely more fun than without.

An online friend of Maki's had once said that you could tell a lot about a person by who their favorite characters are. Maki's head is clear, if only briefly. She's sitting at a desk, a shoddy, slow laptop casts its light through the dark room. She's holding a pillow close to her body, typing awkwardly.

Harumaki: Do you really believe that?
BeheadBeaut: Oh ya, its definiately tru
Harumaki: Whos your fav then?
BeheadBeaut: Fuyuhiko! And Sonia!
Harumaki: Those are two very different
BeheadBeaut: ya, but they're so fun!
BeheadBeaut: so glad they both survived
Harumaki: Minw didnt
BeheadBeaut: Who?
Harumaki: Ibuki and Peko
BeheadBeaut: FuyuPeko 4 lyfe
Harumaki: please dont
BeheadBeaut: Sorry, couldnt resist
Harumaki: you really could have
BeheadBeaut: ohw ell
BeheadBeaut: i can totally see those two being your favs
Harumaki: Whys that?
BeheadBeaut: Pekos kinda like u
BeheadBeaut: ibukis not at all like u lol
BeheadBeaut: We like those like us
BeheadBeaut: And opposites attract

A sound in the distance breaks Maki from her memories and they escape her. She tries to picture the person she'd been talking to. Who were they? She knows. The person sent them a picture at one point. All Maki remembers is that she thought they were beautiful. Is that odd? To know someone is beautiful without knowing what they look like, who they are?

The sound comes again, closer this time. From her cavern, Maki can barely discern what it is. It sounds like a horn of some sort. She gets up and slinks through the shadows out of the theater. As she exits, she's thankful that there's a thick cloud cover. It'll probably rain later. It means that she doesn't have to wait for her eyes to adjust. That would cost her a few precious moments of vulnerability. She hides behind the empty billboard, peeking out towards Central Island.

In the distance a small boat approaches. It blows its horn again. Maki shoves her fingers in her ears. Why does such a small boat have such a loud horn? She has two choices, hang back or investigate. The pragmatic part of her mind takes over. It's a useful assassination tool.

Hang back - Pros: Less likely to be captured. Cons: Lack potentially useful information, capture by non-hostiles isn't likely anyway.

She doesn't need to think about it any other way. Moving quickly, she dashes across the bridge, breathing even, feet silent. Move with, not against, the sounds of the world. Each time a wave crashes, she takes a step. The dull thud is easily drowned out by water smacking water. She catches brief glimpses of the boat through the trees. It's heading to First Island, most likely the pier on the beach.

She crosses Central Island, getting to the bridge to First. However, there she stops, climbs a tree. No use getting any closer. That would just give her potential captors better chances. Then again, can she really call them "captors?" They didn't bring her here, nor were they keeping her out of anything except the goodness of their hearts. And she was the one who ran. Why did she run? They probably were just trying to do a morning check-up.

A lump forms in Maki's stomach. She grips a branch harder, ignoring the splinters that dig into her skin. She's humanizing them. Or is it personifying? Anthropomorphizing? Applying human characteristics to something inhuman. They are inhuman, aren't they? She's human, she knows. She has to give them characteristics. They are tools to tell a narrative.

The horn blows again and, in her surprise, the foot holding her weight slips. She falls, hits her back hard on a branch. It snaps and she lands on the ground. Pain rings in her head. Numbness takes over. She wakes up in the hotel lobby.
Six people enter. Five of them walk, one of them is carried. Shuichi watches as the man he recognizes as Hajime Hinata gently lays Maki's body on the futon. Shuichi never realized how big Hajime really was. Broad-chested and tall with an intense look on his face. His lips turned in a seemingly perpetual frown. He's wearing a casual white shirt, V-neck, and black pants much more informal than he wore in the game. *Wears* Shuichi reminds himself.

Hajime says something to Kazuichi who steps out. A few minutes later he's back with a small first aid kit. Squatting next to Maki, Hajime begins to inspect her.

Watching Hajime work mesmerizes Shuichi and Himiko. There's a limit to imagination. To say a person has all of the talents of the world, a master of everything. It's an impossibility in the real world, so the brain never bothered developing a concrete idea of what this would look like. Infinite recreations and interpretations dot the internet. Many fanfictions and videos attempted to describe what Shuichi is watching. They can never do it justice.

His movements are precise, yet natural, as if they are innately aware of the exact degree Maki's head needs to be held. He finds her pulse without hesitation. Lifts her eyelid, allows her unconscious eye to meet his red one, then drops it back down, all in less than a second. Shuichi can tell that he knows everything he needs to.

"She has a concussion," Hajime announces, gathering the unused first aid kit. "Minor, but still."

"Hey, why'd ya make me walk all the way to the cottage to get something you're not gonna use?" Kazuichi asks. He's seated and picking at his teeth.

"I didn't know if I would need it or not," Hajime answers simply.

Kazuichi scoffs. "Yeah, bullshit, man."

Unexpectedly (at least to Shuichi), Hajime smiles. "Okay fine, I'm caught." He holds up his hands. "I just didn't want to see your ugly mug here for a bit."

Kazuichi stands up and pokes Hajime in the chest, fighting a grin. "C'mon man, you're supposed to be my Soul Brother!"

"I still have never agreed to that."

"Irregardless!" Kazuichi shouts.

"That's not a word, dummy," Mahiru chimes.

Kazuichi glares at her. "Regardlessssss I need one person here who isn't gonna make me the butt of all the jokes."

As Kazuichi says that, Shuichi thinks of a review he just remembered he wrote:

"The characters are all solid this time around. Much better balance of good to bad this time compared to Trigger Happy Havoc, imo. There are some that don't work well. Kazuichi Souda, for example. He starts off fine enough. Typical coward trying to be brave and works well as a kind of endearingly
annoying friend to Hinata. Then Chapter 4 happens. He already had a thing for Sonia and it was funny for a while, but then it becomes his ENTIRE CHARACTERIZATION. I don't know what Kodaka was thinking, but poor Souda just can't catch a break after that. He's a butt monkey for all butt monkeys out there."

Does Kazuichi know what Shuichi wrote? A judgement made only with the context of the game. He hadn't even done Kazuichi's free time events. And yet it seems so accurate to what Kazuichi just said. He pushes it from his mind as his head begins to ache.

Himiko adjusts her hold on Shuichi's arm. She's wrapped both her arms around his right one, head resting on his shoulder, pointedly not looking at the group of adults in front of her. He only knows she's awake because of the subtle movements and occasional sob. He reaches to her shoulder and gives it a light squeeze. She sobs harder and buries her face into his shoulder.

He has to admit, it's kind of awkward. He never had this relationship with Himiko even in the game - he pauses. Game. Game. Game. Game. Game. Which game? Video or reality TV? Life-or-death bloodbath or the harmless escapism? "Shit..." he swears under his breath. Not even his words are safe from the confusing situation.

Hajime must have heard Shuichi (did the Ultimate Musician talent give him super hearing, too?) He walks over to where Shuichi and Himiko are sitting. The rest of the adults look over at them.

Shuichi meets Hajime's hard gaze. He's not threatening, per se, but there is a clinical aspect to how he looks at Shuichi. He's analyzing and assessing, making logical deductions and applying them to his natural knowledge of social situations. Shuichi wrote an analysis of the Hajime-Izuru dichotomy once.

"You're scared of us," Hajime states. States, not a question. "Why is that?"

Shuichi opens his mouth, but his voice is lost in the myriad of unanswerable questions he has. Contradicting beliefs about what he knows and what he's observing, what he's experiencing. The fictional characters that are staring at him, speaking to him, that don't exist. Not really. The stuffy air clouded by the breaths of the crowd, like it was in the cafeteria at the beginning of his killing game, like it was in the cafeteria of the underfunded public school he went to so many years ago. The mess of memories that are indistinct. He would say they're fuzzy, but that has too positive of a connotation. If he tried to speak, the lump of murky memory would erupt from his throat in an almost literal version of word vomit.

Instead, it's Himiko who speaks. "You're not real." She says it with fierce conviction. A single eyes shoots a withering look.

"E-excuse me?" Peko says. Shuichi had barely registered she was there. Similar to how she was in the game, silent and stalwart. Though perhaps more relaxed. Fuyuhiko's arm is intertwined with hers, his black suit matching her white one. She pushes up her glasses. "You said we're not real?"

Kazuichi slaps his arm and lets it echo. "Yep, definitely feels like I'm real"

"I-I kinda agree," Mahiru says, fussing with the hem of her dress. "We're all here, in the flesh."

"That's the problem," Himiko says. "You're here and you're not supposed to be. Cause-" She faces the group, expression brutal and resolute. "Because you're NOT REAL!"

Heavy silence falls over the group, only broken by Himiko heaving. She pulls Shuichi close to her and yanks him with her as she crawls over to where Maki is laying. Himiko rests half her body over
Maki's, as if protecting her. "We three are the only real ones here!" Tears stream down her face. "So why are we here?"

"I told you, we're trying to figure that out, sweetie," Mahiru says.

"I said don't call me that!" Himiko lashes before choking on saliva.

Fuyuhiko steps forward. "Calm the fuck down! You're not making any sort of sense! What the hell do you mean we don't fucking exist. We're right here, damn it!"

Peko presses a hand to Fuyuhiko's chest, starring him down. "You're not helping, Fuyuhiko."

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbles.

Peko detaches herself from Fuyuhiko's arm. In a fluid motion, she removes a sword bag and an actual sheath from her shoulder, setting them on the floor reverently. "Please," she says, her voice soft and delicate, "Can you explain what you mean when you say that we're not real?"

Something is wrong with this Peko Pekoyama. The Peko from the game is stoic and intense, so much so that animals flee from her sheer aura. This one, however, is gentle and open. Shuichi can feel his shoulders relax as she speaks.

Himiko tries to speak but it only comes out as a pitiful squeak. The tears have stopped but it seems like she used up her strength. Her MP needs to recharge, Shuichi remembers, a code for emotions tiring her.

"I- It's- You see-," Shuichi tries. Several false starts. Words are cumbersome and they fight in his mouth to be said. His cheeks bulge with them.

"Take your time," Mahiru says, smiling lightly.

The rest of the group nods. They all take seats except Hajime who hasn't moved or said a word since Himiko spoke. There's a patience to them, Shuichi notes. They've done this before. Of course. It should be obvious. They recovered as well. Everything they went through. Falling into despair, the atrocities they've committed, their own killing game, whatever the world is like even now, it must take a toll. They probably are all used to this kind of thing.

Except, that doesn't make sense. Shuichi had seen 2.5, the OVA. According to that, Hajime's program worked spectacularly and everyone came out with minimal trauma. Hell, he'd read essays on a subreddit that lambasted how the cast of 2 never had many consequences or lasting effects. Except that doesn't make sense either. Kazuichi's scars are proof enough of that.

What's the answer? What's the truth of this situation?

"A videogame." Hajime's voice rings out and pierces Shuichi's musing. "You think we're from a videogame." Again, it's a statement, not a question.

"H-how did…"

Hajime interrupts him. "You two both keep looking towards the arcade games. Coupled with the fact that you keep saying we're not real, I just put two and two together." He shrugs.

"Y-yeah… That's right…" Shuichi's voice gets quieter and quieter. He's barely above a whisper and everyone except Hajime and Himiko are leaning close to hear. "You all… I know… everything about you." He looks up and points at Peko. "You used to be Kuzuryuu's bodyguard, but… but he
didn't want that, he wanted you to be his, uh, be his friend or lover.

Peko and Fuyuhiko blush and Peko says, "That is… correct."

"But how the fuck did you know that?" Fuyuhiko says. His blush still tints his ears.

"I t-told you… I played a game and - and right before Peko's-" Shuichi trails off, rapidly losing confidence.

Peko rescues him. "Before my execution in the simulation, you mean?" Shuichi nods his head.

"But wait a minute, that was in the simulation, wasn't it?" Kazuichi says. He pulls at his pony tail. "Maybe it was some kind of broadcast or I don't know."

"We also know how you fell into despair," Himiko says. She's shaking, holding onto both Shuichi and Maki. "You all… you all watched that hypnosis video and it caused, it caused you all to become Ultimate Despair."

Mahiru coughs into her fist, more out of want for attention. "That's… no, that's not quite right."

"Huh?" Both Shuichi and Himiko look up, shock apparent on their faces.

Mahiru continues. "It wasn't just one video. We all had specific videos."

"Hey, Mahiru, why're you just spilling all our fucking secrets to these kids?" Fuyuhiko says. His tone is harsh, but his head is hanging between his legs. Peko rubs his back lightly.

"Ah… sorry, I just figured we should all be on the same page."

Fuyuhiko straightens. He has a look in his eye that Shuichi recognizes. Vague and spacey, yet entirely enthralled. The look of someone experiencing something they never wanted to experience again. "I get it, I know. Still, these bastards know way too much about us, even if some of it isn't totally right."

"And they just appeared in the simulation room," Kazuichi adds. "One day, it's empty as usual, the next all sorts of alarms are going off 'cause people are waking up!"

"How did you all get in those pods?" Mahiru asks, eyes narrow.

Shuichi's back straightens and Himiko pulls Maki by the shoulder towards her. Interrogation. That's what this has turned into. And there's been no time to prepare. Where's the investigation to help Shuichi gather evidence that they're innocent? He blinks. He's standing in the trial room, staring at her. That girl. He still can't remember. But she's there and she's passion. Not passionate, no. She is passion. Defending him as he stands mute, unable to hear anyone else's voice except hers. He killed Amami, at least according to half the room. But what they thought didn't matter, because she knows the truth, as does he. She looks over at him and smiles. He bows his head. It's time to take over.

"We don't know anything about how we got into the pods," he states. The force of his voice pushes everyone back, even Hajime's immovable face furrows. "We escaped a killing game and we camped out in the woods near the studio where it was filmed. I remember falling asleep and then when I woke up, we were in those pods. That's the cold hard truth of it."

When he finishes, he feels the subtle traces of adrenaline begin to flow through him. He's at trial and he will defend himself and those he believes in. That's how Shirogane Tsumugi designed his character. The thought creeps into his head unwillingly. He tries to ignore it, but he can tell that
Hajime has caught on to his deflating.

In spite of that, or maybe because of it, Hajime sighs and says, "I believe you." All eyes are on him. "You don't sound or act like you're lying."

Fuyuhiko jumps up. "So you're saying you believe that we're all fucking fake?"

Hajime holds up a conciliatory hand. "No, I'm not sure what to make of it. What I believe is that these three aren't trying to deceive us. They believe in what they're saying."

"Nyeh... we don't just believe it, it happened!" Himiko says.

"We can't prove that, not at the moment." Hajime steps towards the three and reaches his hand out, smiling a tender, earnest smile. "But I do know we're not your enemy. It's probably weird, but we're here for you." He grins. It's warm, friendly, and so, so genuine.

Shuichi searches Hajime's face for any imperfection, any tell, anything to grasp onto to say that he's lying. He can't find it. He looks to the others. Mahiru has her hands behind her back, head cocked and a fond, motherly smile to her. Peko and Fuyuhiko give him confident nods. Kazuichi gives an oil covered thumbs up.

Before he can fully register what's happening, Shuichi reaches up and grabs Hajime's hand. He feels himself being pulled up, dragging Himiko to her feet with him. Hajime's hands are on his shoulder. "We'll figure this out."

Everything is okay. For the first time since he woke up in the locker. Everything is okay. The storm in his stomach is over. No, not over, he can't say it's over. It's a reprieve, more storms are coming, he knows. He knows. But right now, in this moment, he's okay. The world doesn't make sense. The timeline doesn't make sense. The evidence doesn't add up. But it'll be okay. He has to believe that.

"C'mon," Hajime says, "Let's get you guys something to eat. I'll take care of your friend, try to wake her up."

Night falls, as it always does and Shuichi's thankful. While he's significantly more comfortable with the Remnants (he needs to find something else to call them), the lingering fear will never leave. Not to mention with night comes the mind warping. Night has a peculiar way of shifting reality in a way that can't just be described as "it's dark." No, night is psychological, a turning point, so opposite to day that the world outside simply cannot be the same.

For Shuichi, night brings out the colors. Particularly reds and pinks. Pink makes sense, but red should hide in the night. Instead, it seems to be luminescent, determined to make sure that Shuichi sees it. Red covers the flowers outside the hotel, embellishes the trim along the walls, screams to make itself known from Himiko and Maki's outfits.

What are they doing? He rips his thoughts away from the color, focusing on the two girls. They're chatting, something so unimaginably casual. They'd explained everything to Maki and while she's still wary, the tension in her had most gone.

"I one time saw a guy who was so fat he could float on it," Himiko says, chuckling. "We called him
Cheez Whiz."

Maki runs her fingers through her hair. "Why?"

Himiko has to stifle giggles. "He was floating in the pool talking to a guy and he said, 'Oh man, Cheez Whiz is so good, I could just eat it up all day, straight from the can like globglobglob!'"

Shuichi busts out laughing and even Maki manages to smile. "Maybe you should have given him some Cheez Whiz for the pool," Shuichi says.

Himiko lifts her hands and waggles her fingers. "I could use my magic to levitate it next to him." She laughs again but it fades quickly. "I wish I was magical."

"Hey, it's you who always says magic is real," Maki says.

Pulling her legs to her chest and resting her head on her knees, Himiko says, "Magic is real, but I'm not a mage, just a magician."

"Don't say that," Shuichi chides. "You're an amazing mage, Yumeno."

Himiko hides her face. "If I was, I could have saved people. I saved more people as a lifeguard than as a mage." She twists her hands together in front of her legs.

Shuichi isn't sure what to say, if there's even anything to say. At this point attempts to comfort her might just lead everyone down a dark path that he's sure they're not ready to take yet.

"They have a second chance, you know." It's Maki who's speaking. She's staring out the window, following a bug walking on the glass.

"Who?" Himiko asks. Her voice is fragile.

"Everyone." Typical Maki, keeping things vague, though Shuichi suspects it's because she can't remember all of their names. Faces are forever. Death was forever.

"How can you be so sure?"

Shuichi replies. "The Remnants keep talking about how they woke up. If it's a similar situation then I think everyone will slowly wake up." He rubs his shoulder through the thin fabric of the black t-shirt he'd been given. "And with Hajime working on it, I'm sure it'll be even faster."

"Hey now, don't go giving him a bigger ego than he already has," says Mahiru as she and Hajime enter the lobby.

"How are you all holding up?" Hajime asks, making eye contact with Maki. She tenses but lets him begin examining her. A chorus of "Okays" is the response.

"I'm gonna make some hot chocolate, would anyone like some?" Mahiru offers. Winking, she says, "By the looks of it, Yumeno does."

Himiko makes a noise that could reasonably be interpreted as a "yes." Shuichi passes, he'll just have to pee later and that might wake him up. He'll have enough trouble sleeping as it is.

"Can you make me some, babe?" Hajime's eyes never leave Maki as he shines a flashlight in her eyes.

"What'd I say about calling me babe in front of others?!" Mahiru grumbles. Nonetheless, she roughly
runs her hand through his hair. He swats at her affectionately. She disappears up the stairs into the
restaurant.

Minutes pass in silence as Hajime finishes up with Maki, then checks on Himiko's leg. He groans as
he stands up, leaning back to stretch. "Got the talent of a gymnast and my back still gets sore."

"I don't have much pity," Maki says, a hint of venom.

Hajime rubs the back of his head sheepishly. "Yeah, I know." He pulls out a cell phone. "I'm gonna
step outside and call Mikan, see where she is. Let Mahiru know where I am if she asks." With that,
he steps out into the night.

Another few minutes of silence before Himiko breaks it. "I shipped them pretty hard."

"Hajime and Mahiru?" Shuichi says.

"Yep. I wrote some really awful fanfiction of them."

"Anything… risqué?" Shuichi asks playfully.

Himiko giggles. "Tons and tons. Iruma would love it." Her face drops for a second. "I have… kind
of a weird question…"

"Go for it," Shuichi says, smoothing out his futon.

"Do you think… Do you think we could call each other by our first names?" Himiko looks at them
with big, pleading eyes. She bites her bottom lip, running it along her teeth.

"Why?" Maki asks, her voice neutral.

"It's just… I was thinking… " She trails off as she searches for the words. "I was thinking that the
Remnants all call each other by their first names, so maybe we could. We went through a lot
together, too."

Shuichi mulls it over for a moment. It's true, they did go through an experience possibly more
binding than any other. Did that give them the right to familiarity? He gazes at Himiko and Maki.
Their faces are no longer those of strangers. Comrades, friends, partners, survivors. They promised to
move towards the future with him. Yet he could still feel the insurmountable distance between them.
It was as if they were each on their own islands, surrounded by stormy, turbulent waves that threaten
to swallow them. Between each was a bridge, barely wide enough for one foot to step in front of the
other. Who is willing to make that first step? To risk stepping onto that precarious bridge? Shuichi
decides it's him.

"I'd like that, H-Himiko." The name is foreign to him. Tenko would use it sometimes, much to
Himiko's chagrin, but still, it sounded odd coming from his lips.

Himiko brightens, even giving a soft smile. "Thanks, Shuichi." His name sounds much more natural
coming from her. Maybe she's practiced. Maybe it's something she's wanted for a while.

The two look at Maki but she turns away. "Not… not right now, okay?" She says it quietly,
resolutely.

"Oh… okay, sorry," Himiko says.

"Don't be. It's nothing against you guys. I'm just… not ready."
Shuichi opens his mouth to say something but suddenly, an alarm rings out across the islands. It blares through the speaker in the lobby and he's momentarily reminded of a certain song played before it all started. The alarm is harsh and grating.

"What's going on?!" Himiko shouts, hands over her ears.

Mahiru runs down the stairs, pinpoint focused. "Someone's waking up." Curt, to the point. She barrels out of the door, nearly barging into Hajime.

"Mahiru!"

"Do you know who it is?" Mahiru asks.

Hajime shakes his head. "No, I was on the phone with Mikan; Peko is monitoring them currently." He turns and looks at the three survivors. He points at Himiko and Shuichi. "You two, come with me. Mahiru, stay with Maki."

"I'm coming," Maki states. "Concussion or no."

Hajime weighs his options. "Fine, but you have to walk. Mahiru, make sure she does." Mahiru nods and helps Maki up, they walk out the door. Hajime holds it open. "Let's go, if there's people the person waking up knows, they're less likely to be violent."

Without another word, Shuichi and Himiko race out the door. It's hard, especially keeping up with Hajime who is probably going slower for their sake. Shuichi's lungs burn. He hadn't focused much on cardio when he trained with Kaito, just strength. An ache begins to creep in his legs and Himiko is beginning to slow down. Only one more bridge though. He pushes as hard as he can.

Who is it? He has a one in thirteen chance that it's her. That she'll wake up and they'll make eye contact, that he'll remember her name and she'll know his. Guilt climbs in his throat thinking that, but he can't help it. While all of their faces rush past his vision, hers is constant, he's propelled forward by that image like a donkey and carrot.

Finally, they arrive on the sandy beach of Second Island. Fuyuhiko is standing outside of the old building. The trio slow to a stop and the short man quickly briefs them. "Kazuichi is pulling them out now, didn't see who it was. Peko's got her shinai, just in case."

"And her katana?" Hajime asks, not so much as winded. Fuyuhiko nods.

Out of breath and sore, Shuichi and Himiko double over, hands on their knees. Himiko goes to the ocean and vomits. Shuichi tries to walk to the old building but Hajime holds up a hand. "Don't, too many people and it could get messy. There's not much space and if something goes wrong, well, we don't want any collateral damage."

"You keep saying that. Is there really danger?"

Hajime's expression turns grim. "The last thing these people remember is their deaths, how they react is completely unpredictable."

It's as if Shuichi has been punched in the gut. Hajime's right. He, Himiko, and Maki were lucky. They survived. How does someone react to dying?

The door to the old building opens. Peko steps out, flashes a thumbs up. All clear. She heads back in. Himiko manages to get next to Shuichi. Her breathing is still ragged but she's upright.
Peko steps out again, backing up slowly, a spotter's stance, hands prepped to catch. Shuichi’s breath hitches as the person finally makes their way out of the building.

From the building steps the spindly form of Korekiyo Shinguji.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, time for spooky scary sister lover to make his appearance. Why him? Why not him? They all have a one in thirteen chance of waking up, plot relevance be damned.

Also, Hajime and Mahiru is one of my favorite ships. That's neither here nor there, but if this devolves into a Hajime x Mahiru fluff fest you know why.

Thank you all for the lovely comments. Your kind words fuel my narcissism!

Final note: I also have an alternate cast fan Danganronpa fic going on. It's self-indulgent as anything, but check it out if you'd like. Shameless self-advertising over. Though, is it "shameless" if you bring attention to it to justify your shame at self-advertising? Probably not.

Anywho, comments and critique are always welcome!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

No. A statement of negation.
No. See above.
No! See above. With added emphasis. Usually indicates suddenness or passion.
No. See above. See also: Repetition.
NO! See above. Extreme emphasis. Informal, unprofessional, emotional.
"No…" See above. Spoken. Ellipses indicate disbelief, uncertainty, or quietness.
"NO!" See above: Spoken. Extreme emphasis. Raw.
Him. Objective pronoun, referring to a male person or animal.
Him. See above


Himiko. A name, a girl

Himiko. A person.


Why Himiko? Question. Why does she have to see his face again? Or what's uncovered. His smooth yellow eyes, like snakes hiding in caverns, peek out from beneath his cap. Beneath his mask there's ruby red lips, elegant and perfect. Why Himiko? Why hide?

Nails. Hardened epidermis on the tip of the finger. Pointed metal rods used to connect pieces of wood together.

Nails in palms. Digging one's fingernails into the palm, indicates frustration, anger, restraint.

Nails in palms. Pointed metal rods that have pierced the flesh of the hands. Invoke Christian notions of Jesus.

Want. Desire.

Need. Nails in palms.

Do. Lunge towards him.

Himiko makes it two steps before stumbling, her legs still weak from the brutal run. Her chest heaves, out of breath, full of fury. Why, of all people, why Korekiyo Shinguji? What had she cause him to be the first to wake? What had he done to wake up at all?
In her head, Himiko had imagined the first waking as a transcendent experience. The first person representing a change in fate. Whereas in the killing game the first person was a fatal omen, the first person here would be one of rebirth, a new beginning.

So why was the murdering piece of shit standing in the doorway?

"Himiko!" Shuichi says, startled by her movement. He reaches out to her but pulls back. Her shaking isn't from fear or exhaustion, but from a cold, unrelenting hatred.

Hajime rushes forward and immediately begins examining Korekiyo. He has a flashlight and it creates a halo of light around Korekiyo. One of two. Standing in the silvery glow of the moon, basking his entire body in an ethereal, holy light. Like a portrait that Himiko remembers from Sunday School.

She always hated those paintings. Deciding who was holy and who wasn't by virtue of a circle around their heads, it insulted whatever religious beliefs she may have held at the time.

She hadn't always hated Korekiyo. He was creepy, unnerving, sinister, but never hateable. Until he murdered them. When he came forward as Tenko's killer, when Shuichi proved he was Angie's as well, she thought she felt hatred. Even if she hadn't expressed it, she felt it. Deep and boiling, filling her body to the extremities. Eerily comforting. Rational hatred.

But she was wrong. Only now does she realize how hatred feels.

Her arms ache with it. They're heavy, so heavy. Fingers curl and uncurl, filled with strangulation. Teeth grit together, grinding against each other, peeling layers away. His skin flayed away in that boiling oil. The smell of salt. Is it the ocean? Or the salt Monokuma used to erase him from existence? Only that thought brings a twitch of a smile to her lips. He's not just dead, he can't be reanimated by a book or ritual. His soul, everything he was, all possibility of his return is absolutely gone.

So why is he walking towards them? Boots crunch sand and meager grass as he walks. Are there still splinters from where he stomped on the cheap wood? Paint from a workshop? His eyes are unfocused, vacant. They stare at nothing as the body moves. Himiko hopes that it's because his soul is truly gone. His voice destroys that hope.

"Where… am I?" The slimy, almost sensual tone of his voice isn't there. It's barely a voice at all, craggy and weak.

"Jabberwock Island," Hajime answers clinically. He's jotting something down on a small notebook. "Specifically, Second Island, though we'll be transferring you to Third shortly so you can rest in the hospital there."

"Hospital…" Korekiyo echoes. His gaze trails to Shuichi and Himiko. Vague hints of life play in his eyes.

Shuichi steps forward. He's trying to look brave, Himiko can tell. But Korekiyo is tall and intimidating even in this half-existent state. "Shin-Shinguji," he says. "Do you… Do you remember us?" His voice cracks on the word "remember."

"I recognize you, that's all," Korekiyo says. He closes his eyes, as if it will help him recall something he's long forgotten. He opens them again. "You." He points to Himiko.

She steps back, nearly falling. Hajime is at her side, ready to catch her. "What?"
"You're... you're beautiful."

Beautiful. Possessing qualities that give great pleasure or satisfaction to see.

Beautiful. What causes Himiko to snap.

Faster than even Hajime can react, Himiko is on Korekiyo. A guttural, primal growl and she launches her entire body at him, ramming it hard. He can't stop her. They both spill to the ground. There's a rock next to Korekiyo's head. *He should have landed on it*, Himiko thinks, *But it will have to do.* She grabs the rock and lifts it above her head.

Fear. A distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc.

Fear. The first real emotion Korekiyo feels since waking.

Relief. When Hajime grabs Himiko's wrist and forces her to drop the rock.

"Let me go!" she screams. "I won't kill him. I won't KILL HIM! That's against the rules. I'll just hurt him, make him forget all those sick thoughts! It'll be magic. Poof, they're gone!"

Shuichi tries to latch on Himiko's shoulder but she's flailing so maniacally that he can't get a good grip. "Himiko! Stop it, please!"

"No! He murdered them, Shuichi, you saw. You saw! He murdered Tenko and Angie. Remember? You said he might not have. But he did! He killed them both. They're both dead because of him! He... he..."

In that instance, all of the hatred, the fury, the disgust that had built up in Himiko died. A great crescendo that arrived at nothing but anticlimax and an out of tune chord. Because when she looked at his face, Korekiyo Shinguji wasn't there. It was Angie, eyes wide as she saw the board fly towards her. It was Tenko whose went wide as she was launched into the awaiting sickle. The tool of the Reaper. It was Korekiyo Shinguji, snide and confident. But it's not any of them.

It's a look of fear, panic. His mask falls from his face revealing unremarkable pink lips that are quaking violently. Tears prick at his eyes that look like an animal's when it's cornered. His body is taut and twitchy, not the loose snake it once had been. Or never was, because this isn't Korekiyo Shinguji. It is definitely Korekiyo Shinguji. Who the hell is it?

Hot streaks fall down Himiko's face as she drops the rock. "I-I..." she tries to say.

It's Korekiyo who finishes for her. "I... Killed?"

"Yes," Himiko says, "You murdered two people I was close to. You're a sick bastard who deserves the execution you got!" She can't tell what's falling faster, her words or the tears. And who's crying more, Korekiyo or her?

"E-executed? What do you mean? I died?"

"You don't remember anything?" Shuichi asks, hand on his chin.

Hajime speaks up. "It's pretty common, especially for those who were executed, to have fewer memories when they first wake up. The psychological trauma of the execution and, you know, dying cause the brain to repress-"

"Okay, okay, we got it Mr. Psychologist," Fuyuhiko says. He and Peko stand quietly off to the side.
Why didn't they do anything? Himiko wonders. She feels a tug on her arm so she lifts herself off Korekiyo. He scrambles up to his feet, eyes still wide with fear.

Hajime steps into the middle of the group. "Here's what's going to happen." He points to Korekiyo. "You and I are going to go to a hospital not far from here. I'll give you a full psychological and physical assessment."

A chuckle interrupts him. "I love it when you get all reliable." Mahiru walks slowly with a very dazed Maki.

"Ugh, not so loud," Maki complains.

"You're the one who wanted to hurry," Mahiru says. She turns and puts her hands on her hips. "I bet you're glad I made you take those breaks now."

Maki doesn't respond. She's too busy staring at Korekiyo. He edges closer to Hajime.

Hajime gives Mahiru a deadpan stare - which the photographer rolls her eyes at - and continues. "Fuyuhiko, you keep an eye on the others here till the end of your shift, as usual. Mahiru, take Harukawa and Saihara back to the hotel. Saihara can sleep but I want Harukawa awake until I can examine her again."

"Fantastic," Maki says, her eyes haven't left Korekiyo.

"And me?" Peko says.

"I want you to take Yumeno on a walk. She needs to calm down."

Himiko hears her name and pulls her hat over her head. Her eyes hurt.

"Everyone all clear?" Nods all around. "Good, Shinguji, was it? Follow me." He walks towards the bridge and Korekiyo follows.

As Korekiyo passes by Shuichi he bends down close to his ear. "Tell her... tell her I'm sorry... " He rushes off.

Mahiru clasps Shuichi on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get you two back to the hotel. You can make yourself useful and help me with Harukawa." They leave as well.

Fuyuhiko whispers something to Peko, gives her a peck on the cheek, then walks back into the old building. The door closes, leaving Himiko and Peko alone on the moonlit beach.

Himiko looks at her feet. The stupid shoes Team Danganronpa shoved her in point at her face. The Remnants couldn't find any others that fit her. They look even more ridiculous combined with her mage's hat, the bright orange shorts, and red t-shirt she's got on. Two worlds separated by the exposed flesh of her legs. The wind blows and she can feel the salt in the air pull at the small hairs growing. She hasn't been able to shave. Hasn't wanted to. Mahiru gracefully offered razors when she saw Himiko scratching at her tights. Himiko said no.

"Where would you like to go?" Peko says, her gentle voice caresses Himiko.

The younger girl scans Peko's face, settles on her smile. Soft, gentle, earnest. It reminds her of Tenko. She had that same smile. *I wonder if they did that on purpose?*

"Nyeh... Do we have to go anywhere? I'm tired." She hugs her arms. "And cold."
Peko shakes her head. "I am sorry, but I do not think that is wise."

"Why not?"

Peko's expression turns serious. Her red eyes are indomitable. "You almost killed Shinguji."

"I wasn't gon-"

"Intent and action are two separate things. Did you learn nothing from my trial?" Himiko's head jerks up, her mouth opens slightly. "If what you say is true," Peko goes on, "Then you should know that lesson."

Himiko's shoulders drop. "I guess so…"

Looping her arm with Himiko's, Peko begins walking along the beach. Himiko can feel Peko's defined muscle through her white button-down shirt. Compares it to her own weak arms. When she'd trained with the others in the game, she couldn't keep up with them in the slightest. *Who would win between Maki and Peko?*

"Take your shoes off," Peko says, stopping. Himiko complies. "Hat, too." She does so. The sand is cool and damp; she sinks into it if she stays still. A breeze blows stray hairs into her face. The night is even, calm. She almost feels guilty for breaking that calm.

"When I first woke up, Fuyuhiko took me on a lot of walks like this," Peko says. She's gazing out over the ocean. It stretches until the horizon, small waves eventually flattening out into a smooth expanse of blue.

"Did you react how I did?"

Peko chuckles. "Not really, I think he was trying to be romantic." Her face softens. "We had to figure a lot of things out. To go from being his obedient tool to a lover? It was quite the change."

Himiko tucks her shoes into her hat. "How long did it take?"

"It's still going on." Peko sucks in a deep, deliberate breath. "I don't know if it will ever end."

Himiko's stomach is tight. *I wish I knew a healing spell.* For both Peko and herself.

Days pass. Little changes. There was a storm through most of the morning. A thin gray blankets the sky pocked with heavy rain clouds and patches of blue. Everyone spent the day in the hotel. The Remnants upstairs in the kitchen, the Survivors down. Shuichi doesn't know when he started referring to himself, Maki, and Himiko as Survivors, it came naturally. They survived the game, they won.

He's sitting on the stairs, staring at the old wooden building. Fuyuhiko had told him that it was mostly storage for the Future Foundation or used to hide a person recovering from Despair. All Shuichi can see is the blood of the Imposter seeping out under the door. Then again, he can't see whose blood it is so it could be anybody's. Images of blood splatter patterns filter in his head. The ones spilling out from the building are indicative of being crushed. She'd been crushed. As had
Ouma. So who's in there?

Radio fuzz buzzes above. "Kazuichi, can you hear me?" Hajime's voice. He and Korekiyo had been at the hospital the past few days.

"Loud and clear!"

"Good, I have an update of Shinguji's condition." The voice coming out of the radio is disturbingly clinical. Is this how Izuru sounded?

Entangled voices speak all at once. "What's show'salrightdamnitiswillhepainrecoverycan" She'd been able to tell them apart. Shuichi was never very good at it. The conversations went too loud and too fast.

Hajime, however, seemed to have no trouble. "He's stable, but I'm worried about his mental state." His voice drops and Shuichi strains to hear. "Don't let the kids know; I don't know how they'll react."

"Wow," Kazuichi says, "Even Mr. Talent here doesn't know something."

"Shut up, I haven't had a chance to thoroughly analyze them."

"Don't talk about them like test subjects, Mister." That has to be Mahiru.

"Sorry, sorry." He doesn't sound very sorry. "Regardless, I'm going to get Mikan. We should be here by tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Wait!" Mahiru says. A chair scrapes against the floor. "You're going? What happens if there's an incident?"

"There won't be. I have Shinguji sedated and on a drip. He won't be waking up for a while. If there's a problem, I made more of the sedative. Don't worry, I trust you guys to be fine for a night."

"Hmph, well, hurry up. I dunno when the others will start waking up." Mahiru's voice suddenly gets much quieter. "And make sure you give me a goodbye kiss next time."

There's a round of snickering that quickly devolves into banter that quickly devolves into making fun of Kazuichi.

Shuichi takes it as his cue to leave. In the lobby Himiko is napping soundly, a light snore muffled by her face being buried in a pillow. Maki sits in the corner by the window, reading. She looks up with her eyes and says, "Where are you off to?"

"Take a walk," Shuichi replies. It's not a lie. He is walking. But he has a destination in mind.

Maki opens her mouth, closes it, scrutinizes Shuichi's face. "You're getting better at lying."

She saw through me that easily?!

A small smile. "Be careful."

Shuichi leaves. There's no humidity and a delicate wind is all that remains of the storm. Green leaves blow into the pool only to be sucked into the high powered filter. How it doesn't drag swimmers down, he doesn't know. Maybe there's some sensor that doesn't let it. But that doesn't make sense. Nothing much makes sense. It would make sense if it was a videogame.
The walk from First Island to Third is uneventful. A couple birds flew out from a tree, that's about it. Even Shuichi's normally loud thoughts didn't intrude.

He arrives at the hospital. The front is cracked and decrepit, but it looks sturdy. The windows are all intact, if coated in spiderwebs. There's a path that leads up to the front door flanked on either side by lines of peonies. They look freshly planted. Shuichi isn't sure how he knows what a freshly planted peony looks like. Glass doors open automatically.

The interior of the hospital is much cleaner than the outside. The chairs in the lobby are all neatly arranged against the wall next to the door. An entrance desk sits unoccupied with a large book open-faced lying on top of it. Shuichi approaches and sees a list of names.

Hajime Hinata
Sonia Nevermind
Fuyuhiko Kuzuryuu
Akane Owari
Nekomaru Nidai
Ibuki Mioda
Kazuichi Souda
Kazuichi Souda
Akane Owari
Gundham Tanaka
Sonia Nevermind

He skips to the bottom.

Korekiyo Shinguji
Hajime Hinata
Shuichi Saihara - HH

So Hajime predicted that he'd come? Shuichi's spine tingles. Just how talented is Hajime? He's managed to keep track of everyone in such a short time period. He'd talked about setting the Survivors up with group and individual therapy sessions.

"Once Mikan gets here," he'd told Maki, "I can focus more on the mental issues caused by the game." Maki had only nodded and walked off. And in the moment she walked off, Hajime probably
instantly understood everything about her. The thought scares Shuichi.

Should anyone really have that much ability? That much power? If he were a real detective, how would he even solve a case like that? The trial grounds appear before him. 15 skeptical faces stare at him. They're blank, unmoving, unbelieving.

"I'm serious!" he shouts. "The culprit leapt from the floor to the building where they built a zipline out of twine to the next building in order to get away!"

Laughing. They're laughing at him. An idiot, a fool. Who the hell gave him the talent "Ultimate Detective?!"

The lights flash on, revealing the faces of the Danganronpa executives. They grin and sneer at him, teeth yellow in the ugly lights above them. Pressed suits and dresses cover each of them from head to toe, embellished with bits of jewelry. Studded rings and necklaces laden with gemstones. One man wears a monocle. Another twirls a thick, burly mustache around his finger. A woman lets out a long drag of a cigarette. The smoke lazes across the trial grounds and smacks itself into Shuichi's face.

He's sitting there, in front of them, in his little school gakugan. Half of them disappear from his vision. His hat is on his head. Its weight crushes his skull.

"What kind of answer is that?" asks a man wearing a hoodie. He was wearing a monocle but it's morphed into thick-rimmed glasses.

"I-I'm sorry…" Shuichi stammers.

"No no no!" chides the woman. She's munching on a pen that was a cigarette. "Don't be sorry, boy! Just give us your honest answer! What's your best quality?"

Shuichi looks down at the murky black shoes on his feet. "I told you. I don't have one."

"Ha," says the intern. His mustache has thinned to the point that it's patchy and ugly. "I think he's telling the truth."

Laughing. Shuichi flushes, tries to hold back tears. They're in his eyes, burning. His audience is begging them to fall. They're actually asking him if he's okay, if he needs a break. But they're laughing at him. That's the truth. They want to see him fail. Cigarette lady presses her concerned thumb against his arm, to check his pulse. She presses her burning cigarette against his arm, to make him suffer. His vision swarms black from the pain.

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Shuichi wakes up on the ground, with a person leering over him. Korekiyo. No, it isn't Korekiyo. The face is too soft for that. Too feminine.

"Excuse me," it says. "You are Saihara, correct?"

"Yeah," Shuichi's mouth replies in perfunctory compliance. His voice is scratchy. He craves water.

"Oh good, I thought I recognized you!" the face says. It hands Shuichi a small paper cup which he
drinks greedily. It's only after he drinks that Shuichi notices the swathes of burn scars along the face's arms.

"Your… Are you okay?" Shuichi asks. He points to the face's arms.

The face chuckles. "Oh yes, these are quite old. Years in fact. Ah, I remember when darling Korekiyo got them." She says this as though remembering a pleasant evening at the park. "Speaking of Korekiyo, have you seen him?"

It takes Shuichi a moment to connect the dots. The third trial replays in his mind. The word "sister" appears in his head. "Wait… who are you?"

The face puts its cheek in its hands, tutting disappointedly. "I thought you remembered, Saihara. I'm Korekiyo's sister. I'm hurt you don't remember me."

"S-sorry?" Shuichi says, taking a step back.

Korekiyo's sister narrows her eyes at him. "So, please answer my question. Have you seen Korekiyo or not?" The face twists into a delicate, sinister smile. "I miss him so. I haven't felt his embrace in far too long." She holds out his hands in front of it. "Korekiyo, darling, where did you go?"

This is wrong. The face talking to Shuichi is Korekiyo's. Long black hair tied in a neat ponytail. Olive skin holding two yellow eyes. A facemask hanging loose on the neck that should be shrouding his face. Even in the blue hospital robe his thin, bony frame is apparent. This is wrong.

"I… I mean… Aren't you him?" Shuichi asks. His vision darts around. Korekiyo is between him and the door. There's a phone on the wall but does it even work? Who would he call? He knows no numbers.

Korekiyo's sister steps closer to Shuichi, movements graceful, elegant, like a dancer's. "No, a common misconception. He and I are together, always. But he has left. The person in this body is not him."

"Wh-what makes y-you say that?"

Her eyes narrow again and she rubs her arms over Korekiyo's chest, slowly, sensually. He makes a motion, as if cupping and fondling her breasts. "When he speaks, it is not the words of my darling Korekiyo. When I approach he fights me away instead embracing me with his strong arms." She shudders and moans. "How I miss those arms!"

She steps towards Shuichi, he can feel her breath, hot, smelling of vanilla chapstick. She puts her head on Shuichi's shoulder. He's paralyzed. He grips the desk so tight that he can feel his circulation cutting off. She slithers a hand around his waist, up his back, down, plays with the hem of his shirt. Threatens to penetrate beneath it. Flesh and flesh.

"Please, Saihara," she purrs. "Tell me where Korekiyo is."

"I-I-I-I-" Shuichi can only stammer.

Wispy, haughty laughter. She nibbles at his ear. "Oh you're so beautiful. Korekiyo always had a good eye. Even though he gave me so many friends, I wouldn't have minded having you as well." She kisses his cheek. "As my toy."

"Get… get off of me." Tears fall down Shuichi's face. They swerve to avoid the imprint of her lips. Gottagetawaygottagetawaygottagetawaygottagetaway.
"You aren't thinking of leaving me, are you, Saihara?" She pulls him close to Korekiyo's body. Shuichi can feel his ribcage pressing against Korekiyo's. "Don't you leave me like my darling brother did." She stares directly into Shuichi's eyes, piercing him with cold malice. "I will kill you if you do."

"Korekiyo…" Shuichi whimpers. This is how he dies. What does this psycho personality want from him?!

However, as soon as Shuichi says Korekiyo's name, the arms surrounding him go slack. The eyes that bored into him suddenly vacant and unfocused. Shuichi scrambles out of the way, bolting towards the door.

"Saihara!" a voice shouts. He turns. Korekiyo is back, he can tell. He's pulled up his mask, sweat beads his brow. "Don't go, please. Give me more medicine."

"Medicine?"

"The- the sedative, please, it keeps her away!" Korekiyo thrusts out his hand. "Please, help me. Don't let her come back!"

Shuichi wants to grab his the boy's hand. He wants to drag him off and find the sedative, jab it into Korekiyo's arm. As Korekiyo fell into slumber, he'd whisper, "Thank you." Instead, his legs bolt themselves to the ground. All he can do is quiver.

"I- Shinguji… I can't… I don't know how… " Shuichi's voice shakes as much as his body.

"Saihara," Korekiyo pleads. He falls to his knees, scurries over to where Shuichi is standing, and grips his jacket. "Please, I can't do it myself. She'll come and try to 'save me.'" Korekiyo's mouth twists into a smile. "You look so beautiful right now, Saihara, quivering like- NO!"

Korekiyo throws himself away, slamming his body against the desk. Something cracks. The desk or bone? "No, I'm not thinking like that anymore! I refuse! I won't go back."

"Oh brother, dear brother," Korekiyo's sister says, her sultry voice rising from Korekiyo's mouth. "I saw you for a moment but now you're gone! Please, come ba-"

"STOP IT!" Korekiyo wails. He clamps down on his tongue. Teeth bite into flesh and blood spills from his mouth.

Out of nowhere, as if materializing from the shadows, Hajime appears. He's on Korekiyo in an instant, plunging a syringe into his forearm. Korekiyo slumps forward and slips into unconsciousness.

"Hmm, interesting," Hajime says. He sticks his finger in Korekiyo's mouth. "Good, doesn't look like his tongue is swelling too bad."

Shuichi collapses. Adrenaline still courses through his veins. His heartbeat pounds his temple and his lungs can't expand enough to accommodate his hyperventilating. "What… what the hell was that?!" he cries, staring at the popcorn ceiling.

"He's been having these sorts of swings between three personalities," Hajime exclaims calmly. He offers a hand to Shuichi but the detective just swats it away. Nonplussed, Hajime continues, "However, it seemed to be under control while I was here, so I needed another person to come."

"And you couldn't just ask?"
Hajime shakes his head. "No, the sister and simulation personalities are too malevolent for that. They would have suppressed themselves."

"They could have killed me…"

"I would've stopped them well before that."

"Asshole," Shuichi spits, propping himself up on his elbow.

Hajime bites his lip. "My apologies. No, I'm sorry. I sometimes forget that other people aren't, uh how do I say this… pawns for my experiments?"

Shuichi eyes him warily. Hajime leans down to Korekiyo and hefts him into a bridal carry. He turns to Shuichi. "I will take care of this for now. Head back and tell the others what happened. I'll join you shortly." He shakes his head, muttering, "Gonna get an earful from Mahiru about this."

"You deserve it."

"I'm aware."

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"Brother wake up!"

Go away. I'm trying to sleep.

"Brother!"

I said go away. It's Korekiyo sleepy time.

"Hmph. Fine."

"Finally."

She hops on top of him. His sister, legs straddled over his stomach. "Wake up, Brother!"

"Ugh, I'm awake already," his head is pounding. He shouldn't have stayed up so late watching American horror movies. They were so fascinating, though. It is just fine.

"Good, it's about time." His sister crosses her arms triumphantly. She's so beautiful. Her hair is new, I love what she's done with it.

Korekiyo sits up and pushes his sister off of him. "Why did you wake me up so early?"

His sister scoffs. "Early? It's almost noon and you promised to take me out today!"

"Did I?"

"Yes! Cause Mom and Dad are out on business."

He weaves a hand through his thick, greasy hair. "Alright, alright. Lemme get a shower first. You already get something to eat?"
"Mhm!" His sister bounds over to the door. "Hurry up! Don't make me wait long!"

So energetic, so lovely. Korekiyo throws the covers off and sets about getting ready. He hurriedly showers and gets dressed, sliding his hair into a low ponytail. It's still wet and clings to the shirt he's wearing, but he can deal with it. Can't keep Sister waiting, she deserves so much more than that.

He steps outside and sees his sister walking along the edge of garden, one foot in front of the other, trying not to step into the beds of flowers. "Hey!" he calls, waving her over. Yes, please, come close to me, Sister.

She grins a simply majestic grin and runs past him. "C'mon slowpoke!"

Jogging lightly to keep up, Korekiyo smiles beneath his mask. He can't remember why he wears it. Something he picked up when he was younger, perhaps.

The two make their way along the sparsely populated streets. Everyone is at work or school. The siblings are supposed to be at school but is so horribly boring compared to being with Sister. Down the street and two rights later, they arrive at an old park.

There's a path that cuts through the center. On the right side of path, a dilapidated swing set with one swing and one rope sways idly. On the other side a metal slide glints in the sun. Surrounded by trees, the park feels encompassed by time, passing slowly. This park was here during the Edo period, his sister likes to say, that's how old it is. Such a wonderful imagination.

"Jiurj Brother!" his sister calls from the top of the slide. What? He stares at her and cocks his head in confusion. "Oxhwe Brother!" she calls again. "Watch me!" She flings herself down the slide, shooting off the end and landing on the sandy pit at the bottom. A cloud of sand flies upwards and she coughs.

"Sister!" Korekiyo says, jogging over to her. "Are you okay?"

She beams that delightful smile that melts my heart at him. "Just fine, iiafe Brother!"

There it is again. "What did you just say?"

"Huh? Do you need your hearing checked, bifeg Brother!"

"Humor me."

"Okay, weirdo. I said, 'Just fine wbeig Brother.'"

Almost there. Almost there. "One more time, please."

She pouts. Oh she's so beautiful when she gets frustrated! "Not unless you push me on the swing!" She runs off and hops onto the swing, it creaking in tandem with her giggles.

"Okay, okay," Korekiyo says. He stands behind her, grabs the rope on either side and heaves her forward.

"Wee!" she yells. "As high as you can go, btgi Brother!"

Yes, yes. Higher and maybe clearer. He pushes her by the back at first.

Oh no, that's much too high. Lower.

She swings back and he pushes her on the lower back.
Wouldn't she look so good with a tattoo there? Some cultures find that sexually appealing. Lower still.

She swings back and he pushes her by the top of her butt.

Ahhhh! Wonderful, feel it. Doesn't it feel so tender, so welcoming? Imagine if it were my hand to her flesh. Simply tantalizing.

He pushes harder. "Hey!" she cries, "You're gonna push me off, Big Brother!"

Big. Large, as in size, gravity, outstanding in a specified quality.

Big Brother. Older brother.

Little Sister. Younger sister.

Six Years Old. Korekiyo's Sister.

She swings back. He doesn't move. She yells at him and he looks at her. Choppy pigtails that she cut herself that morning. Smeared jelly from a hastily put together piece of toast for breakfast around her lips. Grubby fingers covered in dirt from playing in the garden. A hot pink shirt with a smiling picture of Doraemon on it. Isn't she the most sensuous being you've ever seen?

"NO!" he screams.

He wakes up.

He's in a hospital room. Stark white walls illuminated by a full moon. The bed creaks and the plastic mattress crinkles under his weight. He sits up, vision blurry. Indistinct forms flow into each other and shadows dance from one side of the room to each other.

Cold feet on the floor. Or is it feet on the cold floor? He stumbles. By his head, a small desk, cracked and worn. Shoddy white. A crack along one side. About to break soon.

"Excuse me," says his own mouth, but not his voice. His sister's. Not his sister's. Not his sister's.

"Where is my Korekiyo?"

"You're not her."

"I am."

"You're not her!" Korekiyo smacks his face. It stings.

His mouth tuts. "Do not do that, you have such a lovely face." His hand lovingly strokes his jawline. "Give me my Korekiyo back."

He tries to stand up but his legs force him back down. His head slams against the desk. It breaks, a jagged, sharp piece falling to the ground.

Pain pulses and blood dribbles from the side of his head. "I'm here, sweet Sister." It's his voice but not Korekiyo's words. It's his voice and his words. It's neither.

"Oh, darling Korekiyo, how I've missed you. So many here do not understand our love."

"Stop, that's not who I am!" Korekiyo cries out, he digs his nails into his palms. Visions float through his head.
A stocky, giggling girl, licking ice cream as she gives a toothless grin. Her fingers sticky with melted treat, she waves as if taking a photo.

"How beautiful," his voice says again. "Such a lovely image."

"Do you truly think I am beautiful, Korekiyo?"

No! Korekiyo thinks. "Of course, dear sister," his voice says.

"It's such a pity, then, we must exist inside this unfathomable creature." Her voice is smooth and pointed.

"Do not worry. He will come to soon enough. We are one, after all. He and I particularly. Kukukuku! And besides, his suffering is beautiful.

Korekiyo lies on the ground, hair spilled in thick tangles around him. He claws at his body. "Somebody! Anybody! Get them away, get them away from me!"

"No one is coming," his voice says. "But it is okay. Find comfort in Sister."

She's in his vision again. They have the same yellow colored eyes. She's crying. She was bullied at daycare. She was so proud, in her pink coveralls. They called her a freak. Only Korekiyo cared.

"Oh yes, you cared," his sister whispers. "Cared for me so well. Go on, touch me, rub my shoulders and back and let me hold you. Feel my body, Korekiyo."

"Embrace her," his voice says. "I know your desires. You crave her, just as I do."

Correct. Conforming to fact or truth; free from error; accurate.

Correct. His voice's assertion.

Desire. Want.

Desire. Lust.

Lust. For his sister.

Six Years Old. Korekiyo's sister.

Desire. Want.

Lust. Want.

Punishment. Severe handling or treatment.

Deserving. Korekiyo.

Murderer. Korekiyo.

Desire. Korekiyo.

"So," Korekiyo says. His hand wraps around the piece of wood, voice suddenly calm and almost entirely his own. "This is to be my punishment. For my sins." Tenko's limp body lying on the floor in a circle of salt, Angie's in a splatter of paint. His fault. His sister is calling out to him. Begging for him to help her. His fault.
He raises the wood above his body. Its pointed end cackles in anticipation, glowing in the halo of moonlight. Blessed punishment. Deserved.

Healing punishment. Heal the desire. Remove.

Stab. To thrust, plunge, or jab.

Pierce. To penetrate into or run through.

Penis. The male sexual organ.

"GYYYYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

He brings it down. Repeats. Over and over. Until his desire is no more. His bottom half coated bleeding out his desire. His voice is silent. Only he is here right now.

Attached to Korekiyo, an alarm rings out across the hospital. Someone is critical.

Across Jabberwock, an alarm rings out. Then a second.

Two are waking.

Chapter End Notes

Is this how you edgy?

Or, don't read Angela Carter while writing fanfiction.

As always, comments and critique are always welcome!
"If these god damn alarms don't stop going off in the middle of night, I will kill someone," Maki says as she walks next a distinctly more wary Mahiru.

Putting a hand on her head, Mahiru says, "Just consider yourself lucky that there were a few days in between. There were three nights in a row people woke up when we went through this."

Went through this. This. Present tense. An odd choice, Maki thinks. Could she say that they went through this? Or only, they went through that? Does it matter? Probably not. But thinking of even asinine topics like this is better than dealing with the dull pounding in her head. Her concussion is healing nicely - at least, according to Hajime, but that does nothing to assuage the constant headaches. Apparently she's allergic to the pain medicine they have on the island which just confirms that she pissed someone off somewhere in a past life.

"Do you try to predict who it is?" Mahiru asks suddenly.

"Did you?"

Mahiru nods, sucking in the tangy air. "I woke up fourth. Every time I tried to guess who was next."

"Why? It didn't change anything?"

"To have control over the situation, a little bit, in my head." She stops, as if that statement answered all of Maki's possible questions.

It doesn't. Maki narrows her eyes. "Control? How?"

Mahiru chuckles. "Not real control, not even Hajime can do that." She holds a hand up as if trying to touch the moon. "But it made me feel like if I said who woke up and was right, that, maybe, I caused them to wake up." She laughs again and draws her hand to her mouth. "It's silly, I know."

It is silly. Though the words Maki wants to use are "stupid" and "childish." Still, she can't help but wonder who she wants to wake up. There are a few who can stay in those pods until they rot for all she cares. Ouma, Yonaga, Iruma. Loud, annoying, and sticking their noses in everything.

That's a lie. No, not a lie. A lie implies intent. No, it's something she simply says to maintain her image. What had Tsumugi called her? Tsundere? That was it. There's something nice about being a "tsundere." The control. She gets to gatekeep who gets close to her. At the beginning of the game she meant for that to be absolutely no one. Unfortunately, Kaito Momota had none of that.

She looks at her feet, moving automatically, like they aren't part of her body. She can feel blood rising to her face. Kaito. His smiling face shows up in her head. Indomitable, passionate, irritating, all words that made her "fall in love" with him. Of course, she never said she fell in love with him, just
that she fell for him.

Did she fall for him? Does she love him? The thoughts war in her brain. She feels her brow furrow and her teeth clench. She remembers a romance novel she started once out of sheer boredom. One of those trashy things that cost five hundred yen and are found abandoned in a bin. In it, a young, bold assassin in training fell in love with her target and the whole book is spent with her agonizing over it and deciding that love was more important than her life. Bullshit. Whatever she felt - feels - towards Kaito currently, it doesn't compare to having to face the cult for a failed assassination.

Except, she doesn't have to face the cult. The cult never existed. Though there are surely some out there. Tsumugi had to get that idea from somewhere. She bites back a curse. Why, of all people, did Tsumugi give her the love story? From what she remembers of the few seasons of Danganronpa she watched, the couple was almost always the one to be fan favorites, both loved and hated. At least one of them also died. Always.

Of course that meant either her or Kaito had to die. But then, if they hadn't been picked as the couple, would she even care? "Gah," she growls, pulling at one of her red scrunchies.

"You okay?" Mahiru steps in front of her, walking backwards, threatening to stop her.

"Yeah," Maki says, "Just thinking."

"About?"

"Unimportant things."

Mahiru opens her mouth to press further but closes it. Maki exhales pointedly, as if she could blow Mahiru away from her.

"No, no, I can't! Not yet damn it!" somebody says. Maki looks up from her feet and Mahiru turns around.

Shuichi sprints by them. He's barely a blur but Maki's training pays off. She sees his face. Tears stream down almost impossibly fast, flying away into the darkness. Yet, his face isn't sad or upset in any capacity. Rather, there's a look of stark indifference, a lifelessness to it. His eyes are faded, vague. His mouth hangs open barely a centimeter, only changing as he slowly mutters to himself. He fades into the night across the bridge.

"Wh-what was that? Is he okay?!" Mahiru says. She begins to chase after him before turning to Maki.

"Go, I'll be fine," Maki responds to the unasked question.

"Are you sure?"

Maki nods. Mahiru holds her camera close to her body and then runs off after Shuichi. Picking up her pace, Maki sees the old brick building in the distance. Where is the line between prediction and informed opinion? Because right now, she feels she knows at least one of the two that woke up.

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There was a boy there. He's gone now. He was there, though, only for a moment. Such a brief moment. Staccato. Short, intense. He was standing casually, nothing could bother him. Then she saw him. He saw her. A lighting bolt, but it only struck him. She said nothing, did nothing, and he ran. Faster. Faster away than he could ever run towards. A pit in her stomach. Disappointment? Can't tell.

Others, there are others. Indistinct recognition. A man with an eyepatch, a woman with swords, a man with tools. There's a tugging. In her stomach, or maybe her sternum, somewhere.

There's another. She's sitting under a tree. Elegant silvery-blonde hair blows in her face but she doesn't seem inclined to move it. Her hands wrap and unwrap, stretching the fabric of her gloves. She occasionally picks at the right one. Surprised that fabric is there.

The man with the tools is talking to her. Talking at her is more appropriate. She barely responds. The occasional nod. An eye flashing towards the man before falling back into place.

"Hey, you," says a voice. It's brutal and gentle simultaneously. The short man is talking to her.

Kaede blinks. She drums her fingers on her thigh. Chopin, Op. 9, No. 3 in B major. Allegretto.

"Fuyuhiko," the swordswoman chides. "Try using her name."

Kaede's voice bubbles from deep in her throat. "My name is Kaede Akamatsu; I am the Ultimate Pianist. It's nice to meet you."

"Uh-huh, good for you..." Fuyuhiko says. He reaches into his front pocket and pulls out a little notebook. Opens it. Presumably to read. "Do you feel any pain?"

The words are disjointed, awkward, certainly not his. The swordswoman laughs. She thinks. Yes. My head hurts a bit and my neck feels like it's been burned. She says, "My name is Kaede Akamatsu; I am the Ultimate Pianist. It's nice to meet you."

She doesn't recognize the difference.

"Shit, that's probably not good."

"Probably?"

"Okay, okay, definitely not good. Kazuichi how's Ms. Maid over there?"

Kazuichi gives a thumbs up. "Not bad. She's not saying much but that's normal."

The maid sitting under the tree. Kaede knows her. The world "Helpful" comes to mind. Her face was in the periphery of his. He was there. When everything stops. Only him. But also the maid, and the gentleman. That's all she can see. Kaede stumbles over to her.

She holds out her hand. "My name is Kaede Akamatsu; I am the Ultimate Pianist. It's nice to meet you."

The maid eyes her. Harsh green, flashing, dangerous. "Kirumi Tojo. Don't touch me, please."

Kaede nods.

Footsteps. Two sets. One coming from the beach, the other the pier. Two girls to match the footsteps. A short one, and a tall one. Both clad in red. Kaede giggles. Are they sisters? Twins? A sideshow performance.
They're looking at her. The tall one is glaring. Something inside Kaede tells her that that's nothing new. The shorter one shifts from foot to foot, biting her lip, glancing back to the bridge the tall one came from. Is she looking for the boy?

"Akamatsu?" the short girl says. Her voice is nasally, almost cute, but not quite. Her face is cute though, in a moe sort of way. What the hell is moe?

"My name is Kaede Akamatsu; I am the Ultimate Pianist. It's nice to meet you," she says, hand extended, smile genuine.

The short girl hesitates. "Uh… yeah, I-I know that. Do you remember me? Himiko? Yumeno?"

Kaede nods. She does remember. Sort of. The name is familiar. So is the face and voice and outfit and manner and attitude and a million other things. She doesn't know this girl. Her face and voice and outfit and manner and attitude and a million other things are entirely new to her. *I can't wait to be friends!* She thinks. It's easy enough to guess what she says.

"Is she alright?" The tall one says. Her name is either Maki Harukawa or Hifumi Yamada, Kaede isn't sure.

Fuyuhiko scratches the side of his head. "No, but it's nothing we haven't seen before."

The swordswoman steps forward. "Indeed, I believe it was Ibuki who repeatedly shouted 'guitar solo' for a few days."

"Guitar… no, I play piano," Kaede says, confused. Her name isn't Ibuki. It's Kaede!

"That certainly wasn't a week," Maki Yamada says. Wow, she sure is serious.

"Gah, where the fuck is Hajime? This is weird as shit."

"I'm right here." A man is behind Fuyuhiko. Has he always been there? Even Kaede's precision hearing couldn't pick him up.

Fuyuhiko turns and pokes him the chest. "Where the hell ya been? Akamatsu's talkin' some weird shit and who knows how much Kazuichi has messed up with the maid over there!"

"Hey!" came Kazuichi's indignant reply. He's handed a wrench to Kirumi who seems to be mindlessly polishing it with a small rag. Left, right, left, right, left, right. Where she's polishing must be spotless by now.

"Sorry, I got caught up with something," Hajime says sheepishly.

"Yeah, what?"

"Shinguji repeatedly stabbed himself in the penis."

"HE DID FUCKING WHAT?"

************************************

The hospital is clean. That's good. It needs to be clean. Tojo's not sure why it needs to be clean, but it
needs to be clean. She can feel the sterility in the air. The tiles are glossy with polish and the air reeks of disinfectant. Exactly how she needs it.

Her gloves itch. They're dirty with sweat and sand. The mechanic's wrench was disgusting. It's clean now. As it needs to be. She wants to take her gloves off. But that would expose her hands. To the door. One door, the door across from hers.

She can smell the iron emanating from it. The room isn't dirty. No, that poor, poor room. It's the resident that's dirty, filthy even. He'd bled so much, leaking himself all over the innocent room. Disease runs rampant in blood, you know. The name "Shinguji" written in light pencil on the placard resting outside the door. Even the name is disgusting. The "sh" sound is a vile one, dirty. Mush. Crush. Shh, sleep now, Kirumi baby.

"No," she mutters. "I don't want to sleep. I don't want to sleep."

"But you must"

"I won't"

"But you must"

"I won't"

"But you must"

"I won't"

Ad infinitum. They've come for her again. Kirumi baby, they call her. They'll get her again. She'll run, but they'll get her. Kirumi baby come here Kirumi baby we just wanna love you. Faceless, voiceless words. They'll get her. They'll get her. They'll get her. They're coming for her. She can't run and it's all over soon. It'll be over soon. Kirumi baby.

"Tojo," says a voice.

"Don't call me baby," she responds, wispy, ethereal.

"I didn't," the voice says.

Tojo opens her eyes. There's hair in them. A tangle of blonde. She can see bacteria racing along the strands, racing towards her exposed eyes. She bolts upright and pushes her hair back. The girl puts a hand to Tojo's chest. "They're gone, they fell and died," she says. So did I, Maki.


"Did I fall, Maki?" Tojo says, she wraps her gloved hand around Maki's bare one. "Did I fall?"

Maki's gaze is impenetrable. Kirumi remembers that gaze. It was the one sent to her on a computer so long ago. Two girls staring at each other so early in the morning the sun hadn't even begun to think of rising. The only light in their cramped rooms being the dull screens of hand-me-down laptops. And the smiles on their faces. But Maki thought that was cheesy last time Kirumi said it.

"Answer me, Maki," Kirumi begs. She entangles her hand in Maki's long hair. It's as soft as ever. She can't really tell; her glove's too thick for that. But she needs to imagine the silky hair trailing through her fingers once more.
"Kirumi…" Maki breathes and the maid inhales her words. Deep, desperate.

"Yes, Maki?"

"You fell."

"I died?"

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Why did I fall?"

"You killed."

"Isn't that what we said would happen?"

"You remember? This early?"

"Only a bit. Only a bit."

Maki, perhaps uncharacteristically, wraps her arms around Kirumi, pulling the maid to her chest. Sobbing. Kirumi's sobbing. The fabric of Maki's outfit is fresh. Clean, smelling of laundry detergent. Kirumi twists Maki's hair in her fist.

"How much do you remember?" Maki whispers. There's a sanctity in the air and a game is being played between the two of them. It's an old game, who can break the silence first? Of course, there used to be fewer clothes involved in that game.

"As I said, only a bit." Tears are so unbecoming of a maid. They represent the ultimate lack of restraint. The ultimate selfishness. To be held and vulnerable and openly weeping. Her face is hot from embarrassment.

"Any specifics?"

Kirumi lifts her head from Maki's chest and rests her chin on her shoulder. Her lips grace Maki's ear. They ache to touch it, her teeth clamoring to nibble on the exposed lobe. Maki would shudder so wonderfully. But she resists. Says, "You and I, together. Please tell me that's true. That's real."

"It's true."

"Is it real?"

"I don't know."

Kirumi almost loses. The silence stretches and strains but doesn't break. "Why don't you know?"

"Because I fell, Kirumi. I fell, too."

"Did you kill?"

"Almost."

"How did you fall?"
"Do you remember Momota?"

"No, not yet."

"You will. I fell for him."

Kirumi’s heart beats at the silence. There’s a bruise forming on her chest. There must be. She can feel the relentless pounding of both her own heart and Maki’s. They’re ever so slightly out of sync.

"Do you love him?"

"No."

"Did you?"

"I don't know."

The silence shatters. "Damn it, Maki!" Kirumi wails. She yanks at Maki’s hair and the assassin cries out. Regret. Kirumi releases her hair.

Maki steps back, running her hands through her hair. Kirumi hates looking at her. Because she’s not mad. Or disappointed. There’s only a deep sadness in her red eyes. Pools of lava that Kirumi wants to leap into and burn. Let Maki’s fire overtake and melt her. Absorb her. Maki is also the one who she can pin Hoshi’s murder on. After Yumeno. Was. Was.

"I'm going," Maki states. She’s trying to be firm, but her voice trembles.

"Please, don't. You'll bring them back," Kirumi says, bunching the thin sheet in her fists.

Maki raises her eyebrows a hair’s width. "You remember them?"

"Only that they exist."

Maki sighs. "I can't stay here, not right now. Not until Kai- Momota wakes up."

Kirumi catches the slip. Decides to rationalize it as Maki meaning to say her own name. "Then can you stay just a little longer. Just until I'm asleep."

Maki stares out the window for a moment. The night is cloudy. A rim of silver moonlight trims the dark storm clouds coming over the ocean. "Yes," she says finally.

Sitting down in the chair, Maki watches Kirumi settle. Kirumi adjusts the sheets so that they cover her whole body. The sheets smell clean, they’ll protect her. From them. Who’s them? Who knows. Maki knows. She won't say, Kirumi knows. But they’re present, whoever they are.

"Goodnight, Kirumi," Maki whispers.

"Goodnight, Maki," Kirumi replies, adding, "I remember I love you."

Maki says nothing.
The storm comes early. Lightning breaks the sky, illuminating it for a second before plunging it back into consuming dark. The rims of the clouds are alive when lightning strikes, letting it bounce between them as if to create a web of electricity. Thunder echoes between the buildings on Third Island, warring for to create noise with the tumultuous waves crashing on the shore. From her hideout in the lobby of the hospital, Maki watches the sheets of rain pummel the sand.

Damn it all. Why Kirumi? Why now? Lightning strikes and the light through the window panes creates a perfect rectangle of light, like the dusty laptop she’d sneak down to use at night in the orphanage. Of course, that had to be the part of her life that Shirogane didn't make up. Dead parents. How poetic. Car crashes are anything but poetic.

She runs her finger along the scar on her shoulder. Kirumi’s chin had been there, pressing into it. Did she remember it was there? In the simulation, she had believed it was caused by a mission almost gone bad. She remembers maneuvering the cyanide pill into her teeth as her target's blade struck her shoulder and her legs buckled. But she managed to swipe his legs out from under him and hone in on his neck. Go for the jugular. Such cliché advice, but it got the job done.

None of that happened. She was thrown from the car after her parents were hit by a drunk driver. Her dad had told her to buckle her seatbelt and roll the window up. She didn't listen. She survived.

The conversations she and Kirumi had were what kept her going in the orphanage. She wasn't a cute kid. Always dirty and smudgy with a sour look etched onto her face. Potential adopters would take one look at her and simply shake their heads, muttering to themselves. Not that Maki minded, necessarily. At least, she told herself she didn't. Tells herself she doesn't.

When the laptop was discovered and Kirumi came into her life, it cemented Maki's desire to never leave.

Maki sighs, fogging up the window. Another bolt of lightning. Another roar of thunder. A wall of rain. She counts the seconds between the last bolt and the next.

"14… 15… 16…" It strikes. Though now, something catches her eye. A figure. A silhouette staring at hospital, utterly still.

Her mind briefly flashes to a horror movie Kirumi and she watched the second time they met in person. God, Kirumi's lips were so soft, so tender.

Another bolt and the figure hasn't moved. Maki palms the shiv she'd whittled days ago. The memories might be fake, but they're still memories. Her hand is ready to spring forward and pierce a lung if this figure is dangerous.

She pushes the hospital door open. Wind screeches and the palm trees crack and whip against each other. Lightning. The figure is clearer now. A mop of black hair plastered to its face. Arms limp at the sides. The face vacant.

Oh hell. "Shuichi? Shuichi is that you?!" Maki screams over the storm.

He seems to respond to his name. Some recognition returns to his eyes. "Yeah, it's me."

"Get the hell inside, dumbass!" Maki holds the door open, beckoning him with her entire arm.

Shuichi barely hesitates before running inside, letting Maki slam the door behind him. He slides into a chair. A subtle drip drip drip as rain falls from his soaked clothes. Maki scowls at him. "Wait here, I'm finding something dry for you." She heads down the hallway, turns on her heel and says, "If you're not in that same spot, I will hunt you down."
Shuichi nods his head and Maki finds the linen closet. Inside is a wide variety of everything from hospital gowns to sheets to heated blankets to towels. She scoops a couple of towels into her arms and grabs a long robe-like gown for him to change into. The entire time muttering phrases such as "dumbass," "idiot," and "I'm gonna kill him" under her breath.

When she comes back Shuichi hasn't moved. He's like a statue. Skin like marble, cold and blue and white, his arm resting on his forehead like The Thinker. His expression is far away, a statue carved in time. Maki throws the towel at his face. That wakes him up. "H-hey!"

"Don't give me that," Maki says, frowning. "Dry yourself off and change into this." She tosses the robe onto a chair then leans on the reception desk. Either it groans or she does. It's one and the same really.

Shuichi dries in silence, occasionally daring to look at Maki. The first few times she just glares back, but her head is heavy with exhaustion and she eventually just lets it fall into her arms. She hears squeaky footsteps leave and a door open then shut. Shuichi's left to the bathroom to change. A few minutes pass and only the sound of the storm keeps Maki from sleep. The thunder rattles the windows and the lightning pierces even her buried, shut eyelids. Maybe she should have stayed with Kirumi.

No, that wouldn't be fair to her… Maki thinks. Kirumi once told her that she disliked when contestants never stood a chance on Danganronpa.

"C'mon," she'd said, fingers toying with a lock of Maki's hair. "The guy stabbed him with a knife. There was zero evidence. Then he did all of that to 'hide' his crime. Ridiculous."

"They gotta keep the show going, I suppose," Maki said. She'd pressed her face to Kirumi's bare stomach. She hadn't really been watching, just listening to the arguments and occasionally kissing Kirumi's belly. Kirumi giggled every time she did it.

"Still, poor guy never stood a chance. They could have at least given the others less evidence to go on. It's so unfair."

Unfair. How unfair will she consider it when she remembers how she fell victim to those same producers? She could've just drowned Hoshi and left him there. No elaborate setup, barely any evidence, none of it conclusive. But that didn't make interesting TV, so she got caught and fell.

There was a sickening sensation in Maki's stomach when Kirumi fell. She thought at the time it was simply because of the sheer cruelty of the execution. Maki had, ostensibly, once pushed a target from a window. As her memories came back, she recognized that feeling as one when you watch your lover die. Die by your hand, no less.

Maki's finger quivers. She'd pressed the vote button so easily. One of many to do so. Unanimous except for Kirumi herself. Maki smiles. Voting for Shuichi out of sheer pettiness? That was the real Kirumi shining through.

The sound of footsteps slapping tile causes Maki to lift her head up. Shuichi is barefoot and dressed in the robe she'd brought. A damp towel is wrapped around his clothes. His hair swings heavy, still wet. Even the hair that perpetually sticks up on his head looks droopier than usual.

"Better?" Shuichi asks, a hint of sarcasm.

Maki narrows her eyes at him. "Excuse me for not wanting you standing out in a storm." As if to underscore her statement, an almost simultaneous crack of thunder and lightning rips through the sky.
Maki doesn't flinch, Shuichi nearly jumps out of his skin.

Setting the ball of clothes and towels aside, Shuichi scratches at the back of his calf with his foot. "Thanks," he says.

"Don't thank me, just tell me why you were out there in the first place," Maki says.

"I went for a walk."

"Please don't bullshit me, Shuichi."

Shuichi bites his lip. "You're calling me by my first name."

"What of it?" Maki asks, shifting her weight away from the reception desk.

"I thought you didn't want us to call you Maki."

Maki closes the distance in barely a second. Her eyes level with Shuichi's. "I don't," she hisses. "But… You guys said you were fine with being called by your first names."

Arching an eyebrow, Shuichi says, "Isn't that a little unfair?"

"Was Akamatsu being a murderer fair?"

Shuichi flinches, and a sound erupts from his throat that is practically inhuman. Grotesque and painful. "She… She wasn't-"

But Maki is undeterred. "She was. Intent is what matters, Shuichi. Intent and action. She got lucky she didn't actually hit Amami." Shuichi looks down at the floor. His hands balled in tight fists. Seeing that he isn't responding, Maki repeats, "What were you doing out there?"

"I- I don't know."

As much as Maki wants to be angry with the answer, it's one she's all too familiar with. "It's because of Akamatsu waking up?"

Shuichi shrugs his shoulders around his neck. It's something people do when they're afraid. Protect the neck. "Yes…" His voice cracks.

"You can't run away from her forever," Maki chides, though her tone softens.

"I know… I know. I just… thought I had more time."

"More time to do what, exactly?"

"I don't know. Think about her? Come to terms with it? Ma- Harukawa, don't do this to me, please."

Maki lays a hand on Shuichi's shoulder. "Wasn't it Akamatsu who helped you face the truth? You faced off against me. And Kaito. And Ouma. So why can't you face her?"

"Harukawa, you don't understand."

"I said don't bullshit me, Shuichi. I just marched straight into Kirumi's room and had an awkward as shit conversation with her. We have much more of a history than you and Akamatsu. If I can do that, you can talk to her."
"No, I lit-"

"Excuse me? I heard my name?" A gentle voice floats into the lobby.

Maki can feel Shuichi tense in her hand. She lets it drop to her side. "Sorry, Akamatsu, we didn't mean you. Go back to sleep."

Kaede squints at Maki. "I know you're lying, Harukawa." She crosses her arms and pouts. "What were you guys saying about me?"

"Akamatsu, we-"

"Just tell me please. My memories are messed up enough as it is," Kaede says before devolving into a coughing fit. Her hand flies to her throat and she pulls at a rope that isn't there. "Like why I sometimes can't breathe," she chokes out.

Maki stares at the floor. This isn't good. Shuichi has become a statue again, mouth agape, completely useless and now Akamatsu wants answers.

"Well?" Kaede says.

_Fuck it. Brutal honesty, it is._ Maki tugs at the bow on her shirt. "We were talking about Shuichi confronting you."

"Shuichi?" Kaede's eyes flash to the paralyzed boy. A blush creeps on her face. "I-I mean, Saihara, sorry." She looks at the ground. "Why… why do you need to confront me?"

"You guys had a pretty intense relationship in the simulation."

"Simulation?" Kaede blinks. "O-oh… the killing game… right."

Silence. The storm has quieted. Only distant rumbling remains. Even the rain has subsided for the most part. Maki didn't quite realize just how painfully still the lobby was. Needing something to stare at, she watches Shuichi's pile of clothes. She can imagine Kirumi freaking out about it.

"You can't just leave them there!" she'd say, arms flailing. "They'll get moldy and gross."

Maki feels her lips almost curve into a smile but she restrains them. Now is not the time. When will be the time?

"Saihara," Kaede says. She's looking off to the side, not at him

He says nothing, boring a hole with his eyes into the wall behind Kaede's head.

"Saihara," Kaede repeats, louder, more sure. She forces her lavender eyes to meet his dark ones. "Please, I- I don't exactly know what was between us, but…" She trails off, looking at the ceiling as if it will miraculously tell her the words she needs to say. "But… Whatever it is, I'm sure you can talk to me… " She offers a smile, small, but earnest.

"I-I-I…" Shuichi stammers. Sweat coats his brow and he's shaking.

Kaede's smile broadens. "Come on, at least say my name."

If Shuichi was scared before, now Maki knows he's downright petrified. His pupils are massive and his muscles tense. He's a cornered animal.
"Saihara…" Kaede says. Her smile drops. "Saihara… please, just say my name…"

Shuichi's chest heaves up and down. Maki can see the desperate scrambling in his mind. *He can't remember? I said it several times.*

Tears are falling down Kaede's face. She keeps trying to force a smile but it can only twist into a miserable, wicked thing. "Shuichi Saihara! For god's sake, say my name!" she screams. Her hair falls around her in a ratty lump and her neck is covered in scratch marks. Her body is contorted oddly. But none of that matters, Maki knows.

Because Shuichi remains silent.

"Saihara…" Kaede sobs. "If we really had something… If we really did… Then why can't you remember me?"

"I-" Shuichi tries to say, but Kaede cuts him off.

"Don't," she says, her voice strong despite being a complete mess of tears. "If we had something, then it either wasn't important and you don't remember, or you don't want to remember." She turns and stomps back to her room. The slamming door echoes painfully loudly.

Maki twists a lock of her hair in her fingers. She doesn't look at Shuichi. He has two choices now. He can chase after her, explain himself, and she'll forgive him. Or he can run. What will he do?

The sound of the hospital door closing gives her the answer.

********************************************

The lobby of the hotel never felt so empty to Himiko. Maki had said she'd return from the hospital but never did and who knows where Shuichi is. Himiko holds her pillow in her arms as if it's a stuffed animal. She never had one as a kid; she can see how they'd be comforting.

It makes her feel bigger, helps fill the enormous space that is the lobby. The high rafters seem to stretch forever away. The shadows so much deeper without Shuichi and Maki on either side of her. She turns on her side and tries to reach one of the bar stools. She swears she could reach it when they were with her, but now they're so far away.

"I'll be back," Maki had told her.

"Nyeh? Where are you going?" Himiko asked before biting her tongue. That stupid verbal tick they gave her in the game was still there.

"To the hospital."

"Are you gonna see Akamatsu?"

"No, Kirumi."

Himiko noted the use of her first name. "Why?"

"She and I have some history. I want to see what she remembers." With that, Maki had left Himiko alone.
She pulls the pillow over her face. There had to be some kind of sick joke going on. Maki and Kirumi, Shuichi and Kaede. Almost perfect pairings. Happened by total chance. And who's the one with the most connection to her? Korekiyo Shinguji.

Himiko quickly lays on her stomach. She can't look outside. He's there sometimes. Beyond the window, tapping on it with a bandaged hand. He'd wanted her to be a friend for his sister. Like Tenko and Angie are now. Were. Were. She has to remind herself that they're going to wake up. It might take some time, but they'll wake up.

Tenko's boisterous, intense personality. Himiko hated it at first. It was tiring and made her feel uncomfortable, especially as she cooed over how "cute" Himiko is. She treated me like a child. Of course, that's how Tenko was. And there was nothing that could restrain Tenko from espousing what she believed, loud and proud. Himiko buries her face in her pillow.

There was a night, after the first trial, that she'd cried into Tenko's shoulder the same way. She only ever did it once, though Tenko always offered each time something potentially upsetting happened. Until Tenko was gone, Himiko never realized how much she appreciated having that support.

"Tenko…" Himiko whimpers. "I'm so sorry… I couldn't protect you." A smacking sound. The sound of boots meeting wood. For a moment, Himiko is Tenko. Sitting in the dark, gurgling out something that might be a cry for help. A distorted, unholy song being sung, drowning her desperate cries out. She puts a hand to her neck, bleeding profusely. A message, she should write a message, letting them know it wasn't a suicide or that it was the plank. But her eyesight is fading. Even in the darkness, she can tell. Her head is light, and she can't feel her limbs. The song stops and there's vague noises that might be voices. Light barely illuminates her prison through the heavy cloth. She can see the bloody tip of a scythe. It's the last thing she sees.

Himiko wakes up covered in sweat. Icy sunlight pours in through the windows. She's still alone. A pit of concern forms in her stomach. Peeling herself from the futon, she stands and stretches on shaky legs. Tenko's final moments - rather, her interpretation of those moments - replays over and over in her head. Tears prick at her eyes. She tries to hold them in. Two escape.

Murmuring. Indistinct, but present. From upstairs. Himiko goes to the stairs. She can hear the remnants talking. Placing each foot carefully on the steps, just like Maki taught her, she moves to listen in on their conversation. They're usually so boisterous, even in the mornings; it's what usually wakes her up. So why are they so quiet this morning?

Straining, she can hear them converse in low tones.

"What are we going to do?"

"This isn't good, especially with Shinguji."

"None of this is going according to plan."

"We have to keep moving forward."

"And how are we gonna do that?"

"I have a plan and I'll make a few calls. Besides, we'll have one more person to help later today. It'll work out."

"Yeah, you say that, but can you be sure?"

"No, but it's not like we have any other choice."
"Fair enough, I guess. Do you what you have to."

The conversation shifts and suddenly, they're at their normal volume, talking about some old kid's anime they used to watch. Deciding to come out, Himiko walks up the stairs. All of the Remnants on the island are there. Mahiru beams at her.

"Good morning, Ms. Bedhead," she giggles.

Himiko furiously pats down her frizzy morning hair. "G'morning," she says quietly.

Peko scoots aside on a bench. "Come, sit down, we'll get you some breakfast shortly."

"I can do it myself," Himiko says, choosing not to sit down.

Peko nods and Hajime gets up from the table, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Food's in the kitchen, as usual. I gotta go check on your friends in the hospital."

"Do you know where Maki, er, Harukawa and Shuichi are?" Himiko asks.

Hajime smiles gently. "Yep, they're at the hospital, too. They stayed there to ride out the storm."

Himiko breathes a sigh of relief. Images of Korekiyo hunting them down and killing them one by one still played in her mind. Even with his... injuries... she can't let herself relax when thinking about him.

Hajime packs up his stuff, kisses Mahiru on the cheek, and heads out. Himiko lets herself into the kitchen. She bites her lip once the door closes. There's something wrong. She can't place it.

There's something they don't want us to know.

Chapter End Notes

KiruMaki most underrated ship of all time. Of course, will it last?

As always, comments and critique are always welcome!
Kirumi is the first of the recent awakeners to be released from Hajime’s -and, as of a few days prior, Mikan’s- direct care. She's still required to go to daily check-ups and of course, there's always therapy offered. She hasn’t taken them up on it. Doubts she ever will. Kirumi Tojo doesn't need therapy. She can work herself out. Besides, it's a burden on her gracious hosts and as a maid, one should never be a burden.

That's not true. She's scared. She can't go to therapy with a fictional character. Looking at Hajime, with his duochromatic eyes and friendly, albeit a bit forced, smile, it's too much like looking at a fan drawing. He's realistic and three-dimensional, not a sprite like he should be. Maki told her that they all hold that same fear, that same wariness. But how do you convince a person you're talking to they’re not real?

Kirumi rubs her thumb over the austere steel grate that blocks her access to Fourth Island. Both it and Fifth Island are inaccessible because of the gates. Though Kirumi can imagine several ways one might get around them, should they desire to. That desire creeps into Kirumi. Fourth Island is her favorite.

She had played Danganronpa 2 twice in her life. The first time on her friend's computer whenever they hung out. The second with Maki the third time Kirumi visited her in the orphanage. Fourth Island is her favorite. The roller coaster scene in particular. It was the first time she heard Maki's laugh. Her real laugh. Full-bodied and a bit throaty. Sure she'd giggled and gave one note laughs here and there, but this was different. Kirumi smiles. It's a memory she's glad she remembers so clearly.

"What's that sound?" Kirumi said, looking around the room.

"Shut up."

"Excuse me, I'm looking for that weird sound. It sounded like you were laughing, but we both know that's impossible." Kirumi grinned slyly and glanced to Maki out of the corner of her eye. Just in time to see a ratty pillow thrown at her.

"I said, shut up!" Maki said, but her smile, small and impermeable, gave her away.

The screen hadn't shifted. The roller coaster was still going. Or, not going, as it were. A semi-still image. A cinemagraph of sorts.

Maki picked up the laptop off the floor. Her smile widened. "How many bolts do you think Nidai has lost?"

Kirumi walked over to Maki and slid her hands around Maki's waist. She kissed her cheek. "I'm more worried about Souda. He's been dying forever." Maki turned her head and pressed her lips to Kirumi's.

"Ms. Sakura!" called a high-pitched voice. "Tojo and Maki are being gross again!"

Back in reality, (call it reality, it has to be reality, it can't be another simulation) Kirumi lets her hand fall from the gate. The little boy who had interrupted her and Maki's moment. What was his name?
"Manny," says Maki; Kirumi knows her voice by the first syllable. "The boy's name was Manny."

"Are you sure?" Kirumi asks. She stares intensely forward at the blocked bridge, fixated on the point where it disappears into the morning fog.

"Hat on sideways, jam on his cheek? Yeah, that was Manny," Maki says. She stands next to Kirumi but looks straight ahead.

Kirumi feels the weight in her jaw. She wants to turn and look at Maki. But this is a game, the same game they played in the hospital, the same game they played under the covers in Kirumi's old room. She won't lose this time. "How'd you know I was thinking about him?"

"I'm psychic," Maki replies. Kirumi almost looks in disbelief but Maki quickly follows with, "Just kidding, I have a good intuition."

"Don't quote the dead."

"I'm not; she's fake. She can't die."

"So are the people taking care of us."

"Perhaps."

"Still, it's distasteful. I'd prefer you didn't."

"As you wish, I am a maid after all."

"Not funny."

"I hope she's dead."

"Me too."

Maki adjusts her bra strap. "To answer your question, you close your eyes when you think. Figured since you were looking over there, that's what you were thinking about."

"I suppose I do," Kirumi says. She twists her gloved hands together. There's thin layer of sweat so they cling to her skin. It's vile, but it's better than whatever's on the metal gate.

"And you twist your hands whenever you're nervous."

An attack. Bait, obvious bait. Kirumi decides to give into it. She drops her hands to her sides. She feels Maki's fingers tugging at her glove. Again, she obliges. She pulls off her glove and removes a small handkerchief from the pocket of her shirt. Wipes her hand and lets it fall again. Maki catches it, intertwining her fingers. Kirumi breathes deep. She can feel Maki's pulse from their wrists. It's steady and proof that if nothing else, they're alive.

Kirumi speaks. "I thought you said you couldn't be with me."

"I'm not," Maki responds, too quick.

"I meant physically."

"I've visited you every day."

"You're confusing me."
"Good."

Kirumi almost looks, but she strains the muscles in her neck and forces her head straight. The bridge stretches into the horizon. Fourth Island is swathed in shadow and fog. It looks as if it's simply resting on the horizon itself, swallowing the bridge into a maw.

Maki tenses and Kirumi hears the reason soon after. Someone's coming. Two people. There's footsteps and the sound of wheels on dirt. Maki tries to pull her hand away but Kirumi doesn't let her. My turn, Maki.

"H-hello," says a shaky, tinny voice. Mikan, it must be. Neither girl looks. To look would risk losing the game and that'd be worse than a million killing games right now. The footsteps stop and Mikan says, "W-what are y-y-y-you looking at?"

Kirumi and Maki say nothing, not because they don't want to answer but because there is no answer. They aren't looking at anything. Kirumi doesn't know what question she could answer. What are you looking for? What are you looking towards? Where are you looking? Any variation and she has no answer. She looks because Maki looks. And Maki looks because she looks.

When did this game start? Was it a game? The killing simulation was a game. Is this the same? Will whoever look die? Maybe not. Probably not. Though Kirumi could look and Maki could thrust a knife deep into her stomach and watch her bleed out. There's no reason for her to do that and Mikan is right there to help, but it's a possibility. Impossibly small, but impossibly present.

And what of the next game? What will it be? Who can truly say? Either of them could start it. There's a taboo of being first in their relationship - whatever the hell that relationship is. To be first is to lose. Why? Who knows. It was never explicitly decided, simply always present. From the time they first messaged each other over the forums, it was present. Neither had lost that time. They spoke and spoke about increasingly pointless topics until Maki was forced to give up the laptop. She wasn't the first to stop speaking, so she didn't lose.

Maki usually wins. She's patient and deadly. She'll act like she's on the brink the double her resolve as soon as you've lowered your guard. Perhaps that's why Maki became the assassin and Kirumi the maid. They'd auditioned for the opposite roles. And it was Maki who won that game. She'd survived. Thankfully, neither of them were first.

"Are… are you two alright?" says a voice, smooth and even. Korekiyo's.

Kirumi feels her back tense. She'd heard what happened after she fell. Korekiyo was the next killer. A double killer, as is tradition. In the hospital she could feel the blood seep from his self-inflicted injury. His blood would creep under her door and dirty everything, staining sheets and turning the grout between the bathroom tile a sickly grayish crimson. He spoke to himself often as well. It was always his voice. Sounding scared. As if at any moment it wouldn't be his. From what she overheard between Hajime and Mikan, it was a valid concern.

"We're fine, Shinguji," Maki says. She doesn't turn but Kirumi wants to. Maki's on the brink, or so she seems. Kirumi's not letting her guard down. Her head is eerily still. Her neck aches, her fingers are losing circulation, and her feet have begun to sink into a small pool of mud she didn't notice she's standing in.

"A-are y-you sure b-because I can wah!" Mikan suddenly falls forward, landing on Maki and Kirumi's hands. Both girls grunt as Mikan's weight stretches their wrists. They let go and face each other. Neither one, neither lost. Both faces unreadable. Both faces relieved.
"Tsumiki… that's… are you alright?" Korekiyo asks. Kirumi looks at him for the first time. He's in a wheelchair, his hands crossed politely in his lap. He shifts every now and again. No doubt still in pain.

"How'd you even end up like that?" Maki asks. Indeed, Mikan had miraculously ended up with her dress hiked all the way up to her stomach, showing off her panties. Kirumi instantly extends a hand and helps the poor girl up.

Tears prick at the edges of Mikan's eyes. "I'm sorry!" she wails. "It just sometimes happens and I don't know why and please forgive me for being so clumsy and waaahhhhh!" And now she's in a full blown meltdown. Fantastic.

Kirumi pats Mikan on the shoulder. "Tsumiki, it is quite alright. There is nothing to forgive, simply an accident."

"Quite," says Korekiyo. "You are taking excellent care of me. A minor trip is nothing to be ashamed over."

"R-really?" Mikan says. A small smile. "In- in that case-"

She never finishes her thought. An alarm. But not the right alarm. Not the waking alarm. This one reminds Kirumi of an old tornado siren she heard once on a trip to the United States. Mikan suddenly grows still and her eyes seem to lose focus for a minute.

"Follow me. Now," she says, her voice filled with a determination that really does not match the Mikan that Kirumi knows. Mikan dashes to Korekiyo and turns him around, toward First Island. "Sorry, this might hurt, but we have to move quickly."

"Where are we, woah!" Korekiyo tries to say but Mikan starts running, pushing him at a breakneck speed.

"Hurry up, you two!" Mikan shouts. "To the hotel."

Mikan turns a corner. Kirumi and Maki stare at each other for a long while. Not really. It's only a few seconds, but to Kirumi, time's no longer an issue. When she and Maki look at each other, eye-to-eye, they're displaced from time, sent to a sort of purgatory where nothing moves. Not even she and Maki can. Of course, Maki doesn't care about what she can or can't do. She moves anyway.

She strokes Kirumi's cheek and presses her lips against Kirumi's. A deep, passionate kiss that somehow feels kilometers away. Kirumi can feel Maki's body against her own, yet she can see Maki walking away from her, into the horizon, through the fence and into the maw of Fourth Island. Ride the roller coaster, be trapped perennially.

Kirumi pushes Maki away, but keeps hold of her shoulder. Maki doesn't look surprised. She only looks surprised when Kirumi slaps her, kisses her, then slaps her again.

"Damn it!"

She runs off after Mikan. Maki follows close behind. Kirumi is first again. Kirumi lost again.
As much as Kaede tries, she can't get comfortable in the lobby of the hotel. For one, she's only wearing a hospital gown, nothing else. And the only other person in the room is Kazuichi Souda, who has been known to have a thing for blonds. She crosses her arms over her chest and glares at Kazuichi, who is pointedly looking away.

"Look, I'm sorry," he says, "But when that alarm goes off, something serious is happening. Had to get you out of the hospital."

"You couldn't wait till I got some clothes on?" Kaede spits. Kazuichi had woken her up from a pleasant dream. In it, she had been playing the piano for a massive crowd, the prime minister of Japan and all his people. They'd been applauding her, cheering for her. People she recognized as friends, friends she only knew for three days, in front row seats, her support. The one tragedy of the dream. It was a duet and Shuichi was her partner. They never got to play their duet. Perhaps they never will. She hasn't seen him in days. Few have from what she's gathered.

Kazuichi shrugs, pulling his hat low on his brow. "I didn't know how much time we had. Again, sorry."

Kaede just huffs and pulls her arms closer around her. She hadn't know they'd be waiting, especially with how apparently urgent this was. There's a cut on her bare foot from the run here. She lifts up her other fit and tries to grab a small splinter. She only manages to push it deeper in. Fantastic.

The door to the hotel bursts open. Korekiyo and Mikan barrel in, followed closely by Kirumi and Maki. "Kazuichi!" Mikan shrieks. "What are you just standing around for?! Open the damn cellar!"

Nearly falling to the ground, Kazuichi says, "Why? What's going on?"

"Despair invasion," Mikan says, her voice low and deadly.

Kazuichi instantly snaps to attention and nods. He walks over the videogame table and starts moving the joystick around very carefully. A few taps on the buttons and a hissing sound escapes. "Everyone by the door," he orders.

Kaede hops down from the stool and walks over to where Kirumi and Maki are standing. Her first instinct is to hide between them, but she doesn't know exactly what's going on with them so she simply stands as close to Kirumi as she can. The faux maid picks up on her discomfort, fortunately, and moves to block Kaede from view.

Suddenly, the floor opens. It splits in two and slides into itself, revealing a staircase that sinks into darkness. Kazuichi reaches into his jumpsuit and pulls out a mini flashlight. He clicks it on and shines it down the staircase. "I'll head down and turn on the generator," he says, disappearing. A few seconds later, "AHHHH SPIDERS, GET THEM OFF!"

"What's going on," Maki asks, though it's more of a demand.

Mikan turns to the group and steeples her fingers together. "A small emergency, nothing to worry about."

"You can't say 'emergency' and 'not worry' in the same sentence," Kaede grumbles.

As if she didn't hear Kaede, Mikan continues. "This is one of our safety cellars. We're going to have you guys stay in here until the emergency is resolved." Mikan's voice is clinical and professional, like it's any other day in the office.

The door to the hotel opens and Himiko and Shuichi stumble in, hurried along by Mahiru. "Sorry
we're late," the photographer says. She glares at Shuichi. "Had to look all over Second Island to find this unreliable guy."

Shuichi looks at the ground. He briefly looks up and meets Kaede's eye. He steps to edge of the group, as far away from her as she can. Kaede sighs, flexes her fingers. Good, stay away from, Saihara, she thinks. She also thinks, Please, Saihara, don't run away from me. She bites her cheek.

A light turns on, illuminating the stairs but only revealing a solid stone floor. Kazuichi emerges from the cellar, dusty, but smiling. "All clear!" he says, giving a thumbs up. "We'll get you guys downstairs.

"Korekiyo first, please," Mikan says, as composed as Kaede has ever seen her. In game or otherwise.

Kazuichi and Mikan each stand on either side of Korekiyo. They twine their arms under his and help him up. He winces in pain but is silent. As they help him down the stairs, he makes occasional grunts of pain and Kaede thinks she can hear Himiko laugh behind her. Kaede nudges her in the stomach and Himiko gives her a withering look that Kaede balks at. She knows Korekiyo murdered Tenko and Angie, but she thought that Himiko was more annoyed by them than anything.

Finally, they manage to get Korekiyo situated in the cellar. Kazuichi calls up, "Okay, the rest of you can come down now!"

The group looks at each other - except Shuichi whose eyes haven't left the floor - and stay still. Mahiru harrumphs and pushes them forward. "Come on, come on, we don't have all day." They move forward, Kirumi goes first, followed close by Maki who grabs onto Kirumi's dress.

Kaede's next. The stone is cool on her bare feet. The air is musty, stagnant, as if it hasn't moved in centuries. A piece of music that builds but can never escape. When she reaches the bottom, she's surprised at how small the space is.

Korekiyo is settled against the farthest wall, which is just more concrete and piping. His head rests against the wall and he occasionally twitches in pain. There's shelving to her right that holds everything from batteries and space heaters to freeze dried meals and non-perishables. A Tucked away in the corner is a small generator that hums pleasantly. A single lightbulb illuminates the entire cellar.

Kaede sits down on the wall opposite the shelves. Kirumi and Maki are next to Korekiyo, so close they're practically on top of each other. Kaede has to fight a smirk as she imagines that they probably want to be like that.

Himiko stops dead on the stairs. She glares at Korekiyo and sits down on the bottom step, never letting her eyes move away from the pained boy. Kazuichi says something to her but she simply blocks him out with her hat. The move reminds Kaede of Shuichi, how he used to do the exact same thing.

As if on cue, he appears in her vision. There's not much room left, the only real space available is next to her. She scoots over, and jerks her head at him. Yeah, you can sit here, Saihara, it's okay.

Tentatively, Shuichi makes his way over and slides down the wall. Kazuichi smiles from the middle of the room and Mahiru pokes her head down and smiles as well.

"I brought some blankets and pillows for you guys," Mahiru says. She gets a small round of thanks in response. After tossing the items down, she says, "We're sorry about this, we'll come get you once everything's over."
"What's going on?" Maki says.

Kazuichi scratches his head. "Thought Mikan told ya. Despair Invasion."

Kirumi cocks her head. "What does that mean, exactly?"


"They're in the bunker," Kazuichi says into his lapel, a microphone barely visible. "All six are accounted for."

Hajime sounds relieved. "Good, Fuyuhiko and Peko have secured the pod room. Meet us in the Park. We got a Despair Cruiser."

"Gotcha, heading there with Mahiru and Mikan." He sucks in a heavy breath. "Sometimes, bits of despair approach the island and we gotta fend them off. We shouldn't be too long, but you have enough supplies in here to last you a few days. If we're not back by then, assume something happened." He points to a large green button above the generator. "That's the emergency escape."

Himiko pulls her hat even lower on her head. "Do you think we'll need it?"

Flashing a pointy smile, Kazuichi says, "Nah, sounds pretty routine. Should be over by nightfall."

With that, he and Mahiru leave the room. Mikan calls down, "There's gauze in the first aid kit, if you need to change your bandages Korekiyo."

If he blushed, Kaede can't see because of his mask, but he definitely doesn't look pleased with that idea. A hissing sound permeates the room as the floor shuts itself again, culminating in a dull thud.

Silence.

Six people staring at each other, the first time they're present as a whole. Second time, really, the first time in the game. And are they whole? No. Ten are still missing. Trapped in some simulation. Kaede tries to think of the time before she woke. There was none. Her neck tightens as she remembers her execution. Flying around the piano, hearing the clunky, out-of-tune rendition of the Flea Waltz as the rope grew tighter and tighter, her breathing growing harder and harder. Her vision blurred until only Shuichi remained. She could see him, reaching out towards her, it was the last thing she saw. The last thing she felt was a sickening crack and her body go limp.

Except it's not the last thing she felt. Because she's feeling the stone beneath her, the soreness of her bottom on the ground, the awkwardness that fills the space between her and Shuichi. She can feel the animosity coming from Himiko and the resigned acceptance from Korekiyo.

She watches each of them individually. Kirumi sits upright, proper, her back erect and her hands folded, eyes closed in thought. The perfect image of a maid if her dress wasn't worn at the hem and her hair didn't slip down her shoulders in messy curls.

Maki rests her head on Kirumi's shoulders. They have a past, that's all Kaede knows, clearly an intimate one. Yet, despite her prone posture, her muscles are tense and Kaede can hear the control in her breathing. Even, determined, designed to fill her lungs with the exact amount of oxygen she needs. The assassin Maki and the real Maki. Present together. Staring at each other.

Korekiyo plays with the tie on his mask. It's loose, threatening to unravel. Himiko had told Kaede that underneath his mask was a pair of ruby lips that his sister spoke through. A barrier that held her at bay. No, that she confined herself in until Korekiyo needed her. Though that was a different
Korekiyo. That Korekiyo's body was loose, snake-like, twisting in angles that made no sense, he never moved right. This Korekiyo's body is limp, defeated, tired. Each movement he makes seems heavy and forced.

Himiko's been through shit, it's obvious. The lazy, whimsical mage is no more, replaced by an experienced, hardened witch. Her hands are balled in fists as if holding fireballs that are barely contained, ready to scorch her target. So clearly Korekiyo. Her tiny form shakes when she looks at him. She tries to look everywhere but at him, but her eyes are always drawn back to his prone form. *What are you thinking Yu-Himiko?* Kaede wants to be mad at her, wants to criticize her for holding on to her hate like this, for not confronting Korekiyo. But that would make her a hypocrite for the second time in her life. She killed while telling others killing is bad. She wants Himiko to reconcile with Korekiyo while Shuichi sits not a meter away.

Himiko and Kaede had bonded the day before. Himiko visited her and explained everything. What happened after Kaede's execution, the revelation that it was all a show, everything. So she didn't kill Rantarou. She tried, that's what counts. Maki said that it's intent that makes a killer and she's right. There's even a phrase: *"Killing Intent."*

Kaede had cried, cried for what felt like hours. Himiko sat on the edge of her bed while she did so. The smaller girl never made any movement to comfort Kaede, but it was enough to be there. When Kaede couldn't cry anymore Himiko spoke.

"Wanna see a magic trick?"

To hear Himiko refer to her magic as a trick surprised Kaede so she faltered as she said, "Y-yes, yes I would."

In one fluid motion, Himiko reached behind Kaede's ear and pulled out a hundred yen piece. "Ta-da," she deadpanned.

"I've seen that trick before, Yumeno," Kaede said, perhaps unintentionally. A bit of cruelty. Himiko told her that her audition video was cruel. Kaede doesn't remember auditioning.

However, Himiko just smiled. "Call me Himiko," she said. Then she closed her hand, wrapping it around the coin. When she opened it again, about ten coins fell from her palm onto the floor, filling the room with a pleasant clinking sensation.

Kaede's eyes widened. "How'd you do that?

"Magic"

Kaede looks at her hand. Opens it, closes it, opens it again. No coins fall out. The room is still and silent.

A weak "booming" reverberates throughout the room. It wakes the room. Rouses it from its lethargic misery. Kirumi whispers something to Maki, Himiko pulls her hat down, and even Shuichi looks up from between his legs. The lightbulb swings like a pendulum on the chain that holds it to the ceiling.


This continues for a time. The booming is almost consistent, the room's shaking has become like a cradle, rocking several of its inhabitants to sleep. Korekiyo rests his head on the pipe and snores softly through his mask. Kirumi's head has fallen onto Maki's as she dozes. Maki's eyes are closed but Kaede can tell she's awake. Himiko is curled up in blankets and pillows on the floor.

It's that creeping feeling that commands her fingers to reach out to Shuichi, to touch him. To get close to him, lean on him, rely on him as he once did with her. To whisper in his ear that she forgives him for forgetting his name. To beg forgiveness for betraying his trust.

But she knows better. She knows that won't fix things. Things that broke irreparably the second she made the decision to roll the shot put down the vent. Or was it when she arranged the books? When she picked up the ball? When she made the decision? When she told him to trust her?

She broke something. What she broke, she doesn't know. Is it her fault she broke it? Is it Monokuma's? Shuichi's? Blame is such a tender concept. Used to scapegoat, to heal, to identify an outlet. It's destructive, not restorative. You blame someone to vilify them. So should she blame anyone? Then who's accountable? Nobody?

It can't be nobody because her stomach doesn't let her forget her guilt. Because she has nightmares when she's the ball rolling down the vent. She falls onto the ramp of books, stalking her unassuming prey. The flash illuminates the room and her prey takes the bait. She hits the end of the books, turns and sits on the edge for just a moment. Enough to see her prey. Vulnerable, unaware, the perfect target for a murderer. She drops off and crashes against his skull. She drops off and crashes against the ground. He falls to the ground. He looks to the ground beside him at her. She watches his blood pool around her. She watches Tsumugi murder him. Shuichi picks her up and uses her as evidence. Tsumugi picks her up and throws her in the trash. Reality.

"Akamatsu," says a gentle voice. Her name. That's her name. Respond to your name she thinks, but she's a shot put ball. She has no mouth, no voice, as good as dead.

"Akamatsu," the voice repeats. It shakes her shoulder. She doesn't have a shoulder. Or didn't, but now she does. She looks with her newly grown eyes and meets Shuichi's eyes.

They're gray and green, a mixture of the two, sloppily done. A disharmonious chord. The color of storm clouds that refuse to pour. But her attention is drawn to his lips. They repeat her name over and over. "Akamatsu, Akamatsu, Akamatsu." That's her name.


He flinches. His name, it holds power, as does hers. "Akamatsu, you're… you're crying, are you alright?"

Typical boy, has to swoop in to the rescue. Can't handle a damsel in distress. He's in his armor. Dented, weakened with multiple batterings. Come on, Shuichi, you can't save me in that.

She wraps her arms around his neck. He makes a sudden noise and she forces her head against his jaw. It probably hurt, to have his jaw forced close like that. She could feel his teeth smacking against each other. Good. "Hurt, Saihara," she says, "Hurt like me."

His arms have gone to his sides. Indeterminacy fills him. She watches his chest rise and fall. She can see down his shirt a little, the top few buttons are undone. "Akamatsu, I… Do you want me to hurt?"

"Yes," she says.

"No," he responds and she smiles. "I won't."
"Good, cause I want to hurt you. I want to hurt you again." Her words are barely a whisper.

"Why, Akamatsu?" He reaches his arms around her, lays them gently on her back. She's suddenly reminded of her nakedness under the thin hospital robe. She curses at Kazuichi but pushes the thought out of her mind.

"It's all I can do," she says. "To get close to you."

"That's… that's wrong," he says.

"How do you know?" His grip tightens around her. It's like a song. Call and response. The light, airy melody, played in a distant minor calling out to a somber, unsteady harmony, all underscored by the tumultuous violence of the rhythmic explosions.

"I've dreamed about it," he says. "We're happy in those dreams. We played our duet."

She freezes for a moment. "I think I've had that dream, too."

"Since you've woken up?"

She shakes her head. "No, while I was dead. In that simulation."

Shuichi says nothing so Kaede watches his neck. She never noticed before his tendency to swallow when he's nervous. His adam's apple bobs constantly. If she wanted, she could swoop in and bite his neck. Like a vampire. But that'd be much too similar like a novel series she liked when she was younger. She could rip his throat from him. Kill him and leave his head barely attached. Maybe he'd smile as she did it. Nowhere can she imagine nestling her head into his neck and resting there. That's too peaceful. Her throat burns.

"Shuichi," she says. She leans away from him. Their eyes meet.

"Kaede."

Her name. He knows her name. That's a start. He knows her name and she hasn't hurt him. But will he remember and can she resist? She doesn't know. She watches him lick his lips. She licks hers. She read online long ago that it means that they want to kiss each other. If this were a movie, the soundtrack would escalate, crescendo as they move closer and closer. Then it would do one of two things as their lips met. Explode or disappear. But there is no soundtrack here. The booming ended, their song ended two minutes ago. The time for that magic kiss has passed. Or was it ever present? She couldn't hear the song well enough. So she pulls away.

She wipes her eyes. They're dry. They dried a long time ago. But it feels like she needs to do it. Shuichi reaches out, pulls back. His hand is on the ground.

She covers it with hers. Gives it a squeeze. He frowns and his eyes are stormy, but still the rain in them refuses to fall. She touches his nose with her other hand, presses down and lets go. As she does, she scurries back to where she was. The distance between them the same and yet somehow shorter than before. Or longer. She can't tell. She's not looking at that, only the shelves filled with survival.

The staircase hisses again and Kazuichi appears holding a gun. He's covered in scratches and there's blood on his pant leg but he's smiling. "Alright it's safe to come up, now," he says.

Kaede is the first to leave.
There's evidence of a battle everywhere. The sand along the beach is rough with footprints and there are craters in several places. One tree has fallen across the road on First Island and many are missing bark from where bullets or blades have ripped them. Several of the cottages have bullet holes in their sides. The smell of blood doesn't necessarily fill the air but it's impossible to not notice. In the distance, Shuichi can see a ship heading away.

He watches it for close to an hour, letting it grow smaller and smaller until it disappears. Then he simply watches the sunset. The colors are warm and comforting. Deep reds and pinks, soft. Unlike the cruel red of blood or the electric pink of the simulation. The colors enter him, fill his body, restore him. Each beat of his heart pumps color. Because he remembered her name.

Kaede Akamatsu. That's her name. He knows it, he says it, he feels... mildly pathetic that he's this happy about remembering something as basic as a name. He trails a hand along the sand, stopping only to curl his fingers around a rock. He throws it in the ocean. When he was younger, his grandmother would take him to a lake a teach him to skip rocks. He was never very good at it, but it was still fun to see them skid across the water until they plonked down into the depths.

"Are you fucking mad at the ocean or something?" asks Fuyuhiko; only he could be that vulgar that casually.

Shuichi lies back in the sand, letting his arms fall to either eide. He looks up to and sees a bemused Fuyuhiko and Peko looking down at him. Peko is spotless, her silver hair perfectly arranged in a long swathe. Fuyuhiko looks a bit roughed up. There's a nasty bruise above his eye and a cut on his chin. "Just felt like throwing rocks, I guess," Shuichi says sheepishly.

Peko chuckles. "If that is what relaxes you, then just be careful."

"Yeah," says Fuyuhiko, "Don't wanna knock someone's eye out." He pauses for a moment. "That wasn't intentional."

"It was funny, though," Peko says. She undoes the strap of her sword sheathes and sits down next to Shuichi. "How did everyone handle the bunker?"

Shuichi tries to shrug, but it was a bit awkward with the position he's in. "I'm not sure, really. I know most everyone slept."

"The bunkers do a good job of keeping the fighting seem far away." Peko lifts up a stick and holds it in the sun, examining it.

"These attacks happen often?"

Shaking his head, Fuyuhiko says, "Not too often, and they've gotten less common as time's gone on, but always gotta be on the lookout, ya know?" He puts a hand to the cut on his chin. "And some of those bastards can be a real pain to take down."

Shuichi sits up. He grabs a pile of sand and lets it sift through his fingers. "What do you do with them? The despair, uh, people, I mean."

"You know you ask a lot of damn questions, right?"
"I am a detective."

Fuyuhiko shrugs. "Fair enough."

"We usually try to get some information out of them," Peko answers. "Try to find where they're coming from and so we can go out on missions to reform them. It's a sort of... atonement for our past sins."

That's right. Most of the Remnants weren't on the island. Hajime had said that they tended to travel around the world, trying to undo despair's influence on the world. It was slow going and dangerous, but whatever difference they could make, they tried to do so.

A bit of guilt creeps into Shuichi. Here he is, sitting on an island paradise being taken care of by people he barely knows, wallowing in his own problems while they're out fighting despair. Of course, none of this had been real until only a couple weeks ago.

A couple weeks. Had it really been that long? No, only a week and a half. He needs to ask for a calendar. Days slip and meld into one another here. It's easy to forget what day it is and how long it's been. He thinks it's a Thursday. He can't rely on sleep to help him count either. Sleep comes when it comes, erratic and unpredictable. Entire nights spent awake then entire days spent asleep only to sleep even more deeply the next night. An impossible pattern to figure out.

"Hey," Fuyuhiko says. "Don't worry about sitting on your ass, okay?" It's as if he read Shuichi's mind.

"I mean, it's just-"

Fuyuhiko waves dismissively. "It's nothing. This is our mess, we're gonna clean it up."

Shuichi opens his mouth to say something but Peko beats him to it. "You need to focus on healing, Saihara. You and all of your friends. There are still many who need to awaken. They will need you."

"Will they? I don't know, I haven't been much help with Shinguji or Tojo or Ka-Akamatsu."

Peko nods. "I think you've been more helpful than you realize." She looks out over the ocean. "You all say we're not real. That this world isn't real. I do not understand that, but I do know that having someone like you and Yumeno and Harukawa here helps them come to terms with that complication."

"It's one less thing they need to fucking worry about," Fuyuhiko chimes.

A crab scuttles out of a hole as a wave breaks. It begins picking at the sand, likely looking for bugs. Shuichi can see Gonta desperately trying to shoo the crab away so that the precious insects don't get eaten. He smiles, but it drops quickly. He was the one who sent Gonta to his death, after all. Maybe if he'd kept a closer eye on Iruma or Ouma, he could have prevented that entire trial.

Fuyuhiko clasps Shuichi's shoulder. "Don't go beating yourself up, man. Whatever it is, it's happened. Time to move forward."

"Easy to say," Shuichi responds.

"You're right it is. But we all went through it, still going through it. Remember that." Removing his hand, Fuyuhiko goes and squats next to Peko. "By the way, when are you and I heading out?"

"As soon as Gundam and Sonia arrive, I believe," Peko answers. "We are to take the boat that they
arrive on."

Fuyuhiko nods and stands, offering his hand to Peko who takes it graciously. "You gonna stay here?" It's directed at Shuichi.

"Yeah," Shuichi says. "Need some time alone."

Wordlessly, Fuyuhiko and Peko acknowledge that and bid goodbye. They walk towards Central Island, leaving Shuichi alone with the fading colors of the sun.

He stays there until the sun disappears completely and allows night to envelope the world. It's a cloudless night and innumerable stars pock the endless black sky. Little balls of flame hovering in an empty expanse. He can relate. There's so much distance between him and his classmates. Classmates. Friends? Comrades? Titles are difficult, some would say pointless.

Perhaps he moved closer to Kaede's star today. Her star would be bright, bright enough to be mistaken for a planet. And she'd be surrounded by a massive solar system. Would he be a planet? Or another star drifting along that came and devoured the planets and moons that surround her? And what happens when two stars collide? He remembers researching it for a school project back in grade four. They fuse, if he remembers right. They become one, a different breed of star. They cause calamity. How romantic.

He gets up and dusts the sand off his pants. He goes back to the hotel and sees Maki floating on an inner tube in the pool. The underwater lights cast a bizarre glow underneath her. Long shadows hide her face. Shuichi can't tell if she is actually wearing a swimsuit or just her clothes.

"Hello, Shuichi," she says. She's facing the sky, eyes closed.

"Hey, Maki," he says. When they'd first met, he was astonished at her ability to tell when he approached. Now it's so normal he almost expects it. She doesn't always do it. "Why are you in the pool?"

"I felt like swimming," Maki says as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"Aren't you cold?"

Maki rolls her neck and dips her head onto one side of the inner tube so that the top just barely kisses the water. "A bit."

"Oh." Shuichi's about to walk into the hotel. Another thing he's learned about Maki: she will let you know when the conversation is over.

Apparently, he misread this time. "I heard you and Akamatsu talking, you know."

"I figured you were awake."

Maki lifts her head and looks directly at Shuichi. Her eyes are puffy and red and hard. "It's not going to end well for you two. Whatever you're doing, it's not healthy."

Shuichi snorts. "You're one to talk."

"I know what I'm doing."

"That's a lie, Maki. Er, Harukawa, sorry."

Maki shakes her head. "Whatever. Just stay out of my love life, okay?"
Shuichi feels his temper flare. "Then you stay out of mine!"

"I can't do that. I care about you too much."

Shuichi walks to the edge of the water and reaches a hand out to Maki. "I care about you, too, Maki. Please, let me care about you."

Maki stares at his hand, unmoving. She grips the inner tube. The awful squeak it makes seems so out of place in the night.

"Maki, you remember what I said I'd do for you right? That'd I'd stop your assassin cult. That I'd help stop people having reasons to resort to murder? You believed in me then, believe in me now."

She shifts in her inner tube and swims over to Shuichi. She reaches out her hand and touches the tips of his fingers with hers. Red eyes bore into him. "I will believe in you, when you do the same." She retracts her hand and dips down into the water. Her hair plumes out as she swims underneath the inner tube. Leaving the water, Shuichi can see that she is, indeed, still in her clothes.

The inner tube floats to middle of the pool. Shuichi moves to grab a hook from the nearby fence but Maki holds out her hand. "Don't," she commands.

"Why not?"

Maki begins walking towards the hotel. "Because," she says, "Kirumi usually wakes up first."

That night, Shuichi sleeps soundly. That night, he hears Maki curl up next to Kirumi. That night, he hears piano music floating in from Third Island.

That morning, he sees Kirumi staring at the inner tube in the water. That morning, he sees Maki watching Kirumi. That morning, he hears the wakening alarm sounding off across the islands.

That morning, he walks to see who it is instead of runs.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, updating two fics in one day with a third in the works? Man I'm good. Or have no life. One of the two. If you didn't know, I have an alternate cast fic that is just about to enter it's first chapter, so make sure you check that out. Or don't. I don't control your lives. Be your own people.

As always, comments and critique are welcome!
"Okay. Okay, listen. Listen up, you… you! Listen up. Are you listening? Cause you better be listening. If you're not, I'm gonna be mad. And you wouldn't like me when I'm mad. I get angry when I'm mad. So listen. I have something important to tell you. Real real real important. 'Kay. You good? Cause I'm good. In fact, I'm real real real good. Why? Cause of what I got to tell you. Here it is."

"I am tripping absolute balls right now."

Twenty minutes prior to this wondrous diatribe, Mikan administered a drug to Korekiyo. This drug was supposed to help with the pain in a less addictive form than morphine. She had casually mentioned that one in a million or so have an allergic reaction that might cause hallucinations but dismissed it as irrelevant. As it so happens, she probably should not have left Korekiyo alone in a hospital room to go check on the new person waking up without assuring that he would not have said allergic reaction.

Now, Korekiyo's head is detached from his body, rolling around on the floor singing while his body on the bed claps to keep time.

"At last, at last, at long last! Young guard dog and little girl sealed within an iron cage! At mountain's bottom, within the darkness! At last, at last, at long last!" He cackles in delight at his own voice. Is it coming from his mouth or his throat? Ah who cares?! It's a catchy tune, a delight! Where'd I hear it?

He rolls his head to face his body. "Excuse me," he says in only the most polite manner; it does no one any good to go insulting your own body, after all. "Would you be so kind as to reattach me to my neck?"

His body nods enthusiastically. Sort of. His neck stump bobs up and down. Which is sorta like nodding. But creepier. Reaching down, his hands clasp his head by the ears and pull it up onto his lap.

"Excellent, right on the neck if you please!"

Instead, his body decides to play catch with his head. Korekiyo laughs as the room swirls and twirls. No wait, that's he who's doing the swirling and twirling.

"Ah!" he cries, "I am a dancer, a ballerina. Watch me go!"

Several minutes pass and his body decides that it is now an expert at playing with his head. Korekiyo laughs as the room swirls and twirls. No wait, that's he who's doing the swirling and twirling.

Perhaps through the divine intervention of Atua (who the hell is Atua? He wonders), Korekiyo manages to unscrew a camera mounted to the ceiling by the Ultimate Mechanic. Hope's Peak, it's
time to reevaluate Kazuichi's talent. Again.

He puts the camera on the edge of his bed, smiles through his mask, and then begins his no doubt informative and useful guide on how to play with your head.

"If you ever feel like playing with your head, just follow these instructions:

1) Toss head upwards, toward the ceiling.
2) Listen to your head giggle in delight.
3) Catch your head as it falls back down.
4) Almost miss.
5) Drop your own head.
6) Catch it by the hair which you are now infinitely glad you didn't chop off in a fit of teenage angst two years ago, and yank it back up, only mildly unnerved that your head has enjoyed the pain.
7) Decide that it's probably not best to play with your head and play with your junk like normal person.
8) Realize that you mutilated your junk and that even someone who could be called the Ultimate Surgeon could only reconstruct the urethra so that you could urinate properly and you will now never have sexual intercourse or likely experience any form of heightened sexual pleasure via the penis ever again, not that you deserve it anyway because of your heinous perversions that totally don't keep you up at night as you think about your younger sister and how it's twisted and all sorts of fucked up that a team of professional entertainment producers decided to transform your brotherly love and protectiveness into one of the most taboo forms of love according to most societies and then morph that into a reason to commit not one, but two different murders - historically an act that people have looked at as "bad" - in order to exploit a legitimate mental health disorder and perpetuate fear of said disorder all for the sake of creating a character that falls more on the evil side of the moral ambiguity section and spark animated discussions about the character as a whole.
9) Repeat!"

Proud of himself for doing that entirely in one take, Korekiyo tries to grab the camera, but, tragically, it has turned into a likely venomous serpent that seems to have claimed Korekiyo's bed as it's own. *That's okay, little fella, I'll leave,* Korekiyo thinks as he climbs out of bed. And by "climb out of bed," he really did something more akin to "flop onto the floor." Easy mistake.

But that's okay, because the floor's one of those spinny tiles from an old *Pokémon* game he and his sister played on a Gameboy that they found abandoned in a park. He spins towards the door, not at all nauseous, because nausea isn't something a character feels in most video games. And he's in a videogame right now. Literally.

I mean, c'mon, how else can he explain fictional characters of a series that has simultaneously enriched and ruined his life that are somehow not only occupying the same space as he, but also interacting with him? He should have bled out on the floor of a hospital he shouldn't even be in. The devs of Danganronpa didn't code this room, after all. Instead, Hajime Hinata AKA Izuru Kamakura AKA guy who liked Orange Panta before Grape Panta was even relevant AKA the guy who totally should never be shipped with Nagito, it's abusive, I don't care what you say, Sister, fixed Korekiyo up to the best of his positively inhuman abilities.

Korekiyo's sister shows up. Opens the door and plops in the chair at the desk which has now been replaced and outfitted with foam padding. "Big brother! Why are you on the floor?"

"I dropped my mask," he said. Says.

"Why do you even wear that thing?"

Korekiyo picks himself up off the floor. Except he doesn't. Instead, his arms and torso stretch until he's about where he normally would be standing up. "There's quite a bit of illness in this world. Can't have me getting sick."

His sister swings her legs, feet just barely clipping the ground. "I like getting sick," she says. Said. "Means I don't hafta go to school."

"You don't go to school much anyway."

"Yeah, but at least then I have a excuse," she said, as if it should be obvious. She jabs a finger up her nose. "So why don't you like getting sick?"

Korekiyo tries to walk over to her, but then he remembers he can't walk very well right now and elects to crab walk instead, but then he remembers that crab walking is harder than regular walking and decides to sit his ass down which is about his only sensible decision since this shit show started. "It means I can't work," he says. "And Mr. Kobayashi says I have to work for him if we wanna keep living here."

Hopping down from her seat, his sister grabs a hairbrush that has conveniently materialized on the desk. Drugs are useful! She grabs a lock of Korekiyo's horribly matted hair and begins brushing. "But I thought you said you didn't need to work for him much longer."

"Mmm," he says. For a moment, brief, impossibly so, he's lucid. The world melts into reality. Sun falls in through the window. His bed is unmade and messy and he's in a heap on the floor with something that might be blood seeping through his bandages. His sister's nowhere to be found. But reality is fleeting. He blinks and it disappears.

His sister reappears, but she's wrong. She's long and elegant, shapely and sensual. Her movements are smooth and practiced, not the inefficient jerkiness of an excitable eight year old. The brush has changed into silky, manicured fingers that weave their way through his hair. Delicate and tender, lingering on the strands, soaking in the divine softness. "That's right," she says, her voice smooth and womanly, snaking. "You love me so much that you auditioned for that game. Such a wonderful brother."

"I… " Korekiyo tries to speak but his sister's finger meets his mouth. It tries to pry its way in but only gets past his lips. Her nail chips against clenched teeth.

"I got the money," she says. She presses her body against his back. The hospital gown might as well not exist. "The day you left me alone with that lovely old couple, I got the participation prize in the mail."

Korekiyo tries to shove her off of him, revelling in the absolute disgust that builds in his gut. *Good, good, my sacrifice was worth it.*

He thinks he's safe in his thoughts, but his sister's haughty laugh crushes any semblance of safety.
"Dearest stranger, you know it's not you that I have an interest in. You think you've broken away, that you're alone now. But when you die, you don't have to go to an afterlife." She trails her finger across his back, sharpened red nail tearing a hole in the thin fabric of his gown. "So when my beloved Korekiyo died, he stayed in here." She digs her nail in, etching a pattern of blood into his back.

Ruby lips kiss his ear and he flinches. "He's in there, with you, as am I. Always," she whispers. Her breath is hot and she tries to move down to his neck. Korekiyo jerks his head and smacks it into his sister's. "That wasn't very nice," she hisses.

"Gyah!" Korekiyo cries as her nails burrow deeper into his skin. Sweat stings his eyes. The door is only a meter or so away. He can reach it. He can call for help. There will be help in the hall. There has to be.

"No, stranger, no, don't try to run. Just let my darling Korekiyo out. He'll manage your body for you. You can rest. It's a blissful, endless, warm dream."

"Warm?" Korekiyo says as he begins to try and drag himself towards the door. "I'm... I'm not a fan of warm anymore."

"Tsk tsk tsk, all because of a little boiling oil?" She laughs condescendingly. "Such an experience was child's play compared to what we used do."

Korekiyo falters. The drug is still surges through his veins. The serpent on his bed is slowly sliding off of it, its eyes flashing in predatory anticipation.

His sister's teeth gnash at his neck and Korekiyo tries to cry out but she hooks her fingers on the side of his cheek and pulls it taut. "Don't you remember those games. Our bodies twisted in such lewd manners. What beautiful foreplay."

_No, no, that's wrong. She loved Twister is all._ Korekiyo's pulls himself along. Steady progress, but agonizingly slow. The serpent slithers closer. Lackadaisical. All the time in the world. Like it's already caught its prey. _But you haven't caught me, yet._

Suddenly, Korekiyo lets his body go limp. "Oh?" his sister says, "And what is this?"

Korekiyo turns his heads and his voice creeps out, "Beautiful sister."

His sister responds with a wry, cocky smile. She laughs. "Please, stranger, as if you could fool me like that. My Korekiyo is unmistakable." Her smile turns into a violent scowl. "And to try to impersonate him is qui-mmpf!"

Lips meet lips as Korekiyo kisses his sister. Passion flows through him. He lets his tongue slide across her lips as she relaxes into his embrace. They separate only long enough for him to say, "Dear, sweet sister."

"Korekiyo! You have returned to me!" She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him again.

Footsteps, faint, indistinct. _Faster... Faster... almost there..._

Voices. Many. He recognizes. Shuichi... Himiko... Hajime... Mikan... The serpent notices too. It lunges like a lightning bolt, fangs bared directly at Korekiyo's exposed neck.
He screams. "SOMEBODY, PLEASE SOMEbody."

"Stranger!" his sister cries but she's drowned out by the door opening. The serpent misses Korekiyo and smacks into the door, dissolving into a swarm of fleas that scatter into nothingness.

"Sh-Shin…" Mikan stands in the doorway, quivering. "You… why are you out of bed… "

Korekiyo pleads with his eyes. He can barely keep them open as sweat drenches them from his brow.

They burn. They burn.

"Oh God, they burn!" he cries. A cauldron appears above him. Oil splashes out of it. It lands on his arm. He screams again. "Stop it! Stop, it hurts!"

"W-what hurts? Tell me! Shinguji!" Mikan desperately cries over him. Hajime pushes his way through. In the hallway, Korekiyo can see Shuichi, Himiko, and a green-haired boy he only barely recognizes staring at him with fear in their eyes.

A prick. A prick that's becoming all too common. The world begins to fade. The burning subsides. Replaced with an even more terrifying sensation.

In his execution, Monokuma banished his spirit with salt. He didn't just die, he disappeared into nothingness. An overwhelming, gradual numbing overtook his body and he vanished from existence.

He feels the same now and tears mix with sweat as he clings to the last words he hears before the sedative takes effect.

"Scratches… Back….

"Self-inflicted…"

"No…"

It doesn't burn anymore.

******************************************************************************************

Himiko's a little put out. When she played Danganronpa 2 there was a convenient clock on the statue plinth in the middle of the park. The characters could use it to keep track of the days. Sure, it was a countdown to who knows what (that ultimately meant nothing), but at least it was something. There's just a pointlessly convoluted piece of art on the plinth now.

The days blur together so easily. Slipping into each other. One day never fully ends and another never begins. Past and present move in tandem with each other, as if racing to see which can reach the future first.

But today is different. Today, Himiko isn't wearing her mage's outfit. She's in a simple, rose-colored sundress that flows just above her knees. Mahiru had said that it belonged to Hiyoko during her
growth spurt. Himiko rubs the fabric between her fingers. It's soft cotton, basic, no design. She likes it. There's no air of showmanship, no hint of mystery, just a dress. She can be a girl in this dress, she doesn't have to be a mage or magician.

She shaved her legs earlier. Armpits and mustache, too. When she was a lifeguard, she'd always complain about having to do it. So what if she looked good? The patrons were there to swim, not ogle her. Besides, she was never the object of their stares. That was Airi. She looked kinda like Miu.

Himiko bends over and feels the smoothness of her legs. She didn't realize she'd ever miss it. Always took it for granted. Hated that it was mandatory, but did it anyway. It was only when she had placed a razor against her leg and desired to see it draw blood that she was wary of it.

- "Yumeno?" Mahiru had called. "Yumeno, are you alright in there?" The survivors used the showers in the Remnants' cabins. The ones in the motel were suspect.

"I'm fine," Himiko said. That was a lie, of course. Ouma had taught her how to lie. She still wasn't good at it, but they came more naturally. The razor Mahiru had given her was pressed to her leg, idle, waiting.

"Well, Himiko," it had said, "Do I get to taste blood today?"

It was a battle like this every day. How hard it is to fight a battle in which your opponent simply must exist in order to win. It's metal edge on the precipice of breaking fragile skin. But was the razor her enemy? Her hand? Her hand is what she has to use to slice the razor across her skin. Or is it her mind? The one who's created this entire scenario in the first place.

Himiko never did it. She just returned the little plastic covering to the razor and set it on the shelf in the shower. Her legs itched and pulled when she wore her tights and there were more than a few questioning glances from Mahiru, but her legs never bled.

For that, she was proud. She hoped the others won their battles, too.

- But today is different. Today, the razor glided over her skin and sheared the hair across her body. Only a bit of hesitation. It was over before she could say, "ta-da."

Of course, even though her legs spilled no blood, some still ran in the shower. It wasn't Himiko's, though. Tenko was there today. Clothed, letting the water spill over her. The gash on her throat still fresh. Blood still bubbling from it. No matter how much washed down the drain, it was always there, always on her neck, a constant reminder. Of what?

Himiko thinks she knows. For once. An answerable question. A rarity. The answer is in the hospital. He's one of two in there. Kaede was released some time earlier (Himiko doesn't trust herself to give a specific number of days), so only he and the newly awoken Rantaro are in the hospital.

They're going to have to move out of the hotel lobby soon. Hajime had told her and Maki that Kazuichi was fixing up the motel and it should only be a couple more weeks. Whatever a "week" is anymore.

Still, the lobby is somehow more crowded and infinitely more lonely for Himiko. The reason is obvious. Kirumi and Maki sleep together, either wrapped in each other's embrace or tangled in their own sheets. They often face each other when they sleep. When Maki's expression tightens, Kirumi
caresses her cheek. When Kirumi wakes and mutters "I killed him, I fell" over and over, Maki
shushes her and rubs her back until they both fall asleep.

Since Kaede has joined the group, there's a separation between Himiko and Shuichi that wasn't there
before. The distance hasn't changed. Himiko is still nudged in between Maki and Shuichi and he
doesn't curl up to Kaede the way that Maki does Kirumi. Quite the opposite, in fact. He and Kaede
seem to make a point to sleep facing away from each other. When either wakes up or can't sleep,
they don't comfort each other. At least, not intentionally, not with their actions. It's as if simply being
around each other calms them, lulls them back to sleep.

Himiko sleeps the least of them. Mahiru calls her cute. She ignores the bags under her eyes.
The breeze picks up and blows the small, low ponytail that Himiko has her still damp hair in. She
closes her eye. In a stage show, she'd use a breeze (caused by a fan) to stir her audience, to distract
them as she shifted a card to her sleeve or transfer a ball from her hand to her pocket. Magic is based
on deception. Lying to your audience to their face about what you're doing. And they eat it up.
Maybe Ouma had a point. Lying does keep things interesting.

"Hmm... stupid Ouma," she mutters to herself. He'd drilled honesty into her. Honesty with herself.
Expressing your thoughts and emotions freely, openly. No, that was Tenko. Ouma was to know
what those emotions are. Himiko bites her lip, trying not to punish herself for getting those two
mixed up.

If she's honest now, then she's procrastinating. She came this way on a mission: get to Third Island.
If she could do that, she was closer. Closer to him, closer to confrontation. She'd seen him writhing
on the floor earlier (yesterday?). He looked pitiful, a mess of blood, choked in his own hair, hospital
gown in tatters. Mikan had, as per her usual, freaked out and even Hajime seemed concerned.

A dark part of Himiko wanted to laugh. But she couldn't. Because she wouldn't be laughing at
Korekiyo the killer. She'd been laughing at Korekiyo the victim. Victim. The same as her in a way.
Molded into a character. Forced to perform.

Himiko turns and walks down the path to Third Island. She does it before she can stop herself. The
day is young and fresh. The air feels clean. When the breeze blows, it kisses her skin and as she
walks she holds her arms out, hugging it. Inviting the wind into her. "Carry me," she says. She thinks
of the doves that flew out of her hat. They were trained, of course, but the audience was always
amazed. Or, they would have been, if they were real.

Stretching her arms out in front of her, Himiko imagines them covered by a wetsuit. She was about
to get her diving license. Then the crash happened. Her aunt needed care. Intensive, round-the-clock
care. Diving took a backseat. So did most things. Her family wasn't rich. Danganronpa offered a lot
of money. Himiko made sure it went to her and her alone. Her aunt died the day before she got her
acceptance letter.

"Hey, uh, Yumeno, isn't it?" says a deep, soothing voice.

Himiko blinks and she's on the bridge, staring at Rantaro. He's wearing his hospital gown but at least
he has his pants on. His shaggy green hair hangs loose around his eyes. Trademark friendly smile
rests so naturally on his face. "U-uh, hey, Rantaro."

Rantaro raises an eyebrow. "I know my memory is shot, but I don't remember being on first name
basis."

There's no malice in his voice but Himiko blushes regardless. "S-Sorry, Amami, I've been calling
everyone that."

Rantaro laughs. "It's okay. If it helps you, then I'm fine with it." He leans against one of the wooden supports on the bridge, but quickly hops off of it as it groans with his weight.

Giggling, Himiko asks, "What are you doing out of the hospital?"

Rantaro shrugs, wanders around the bridge in a circle. "I felt restless, figured I'd get some fresh air. All I've got is a headache anyway." He shoots Himiko a sly look. "Besides, Hinata and Tsumiki are a bit occupied at the moment."

"Shin… Shinguji?" Himiko says, voice small.

Rantaro nods. "Some serious therapy going on with him."

"Oh… I see."

"You sound disappointed."

Himiko instinctively reaches up to grab her hat that isn't there. "I… was going to see him."

If Rantaro was surprised he didn't show it. "I see," he says. "Why were you going to do that?"

Himiko looks at the ground and Rantaro gets the message. He smiles again. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Nyeh… I want to tell you, though," Himiko affirms. She clenches her fists. "I'm trying to be honest with myself. And others."

Rantaro places a hand on her shoulder. She wants to shrug it off, but her shoulder is heavy with a past laziness. "Don't force yourself, go at your own pace."

"That's such a big brother thing to say," Himiko says.

Scratching the back of his head, Rantaro laughs a bit. "I guess, but that's who I was programmed to be."

"We never did get your backstory."

A pink tint splashes across Rantaro's cheeks. "Ah, well, apparently, I managed to lose all twelve of my sisters or something like that."

At that, Himiko literally falls to the ground laughing. "How? How do you lose twelve sisters?"

"That's what I'm wondering!" Rantaro responds. "Like, one sure, but all twelve. Someone in the office was on something that day!"

The duo try to continue the conversation but end up in fits off giggles every time they try. Something about the absurdity of the whole situation. One time there was a mother who left all three of her children at the pool after closing. Himiko had thought that she was the worst. Though apparently now Rantaro had her beat. At least, the fake Rantaro did.

As they're laughing, someone turns the corner. A flash of blonde hair and lavender eyes suddenly stop in their tracks. Rantaro looks up and his smile almost instantly drops. Himiko, still on the ground, lolls her head back and sees Kaede standing at the edge of the bridge, frozen.

She's wearing her white shirt but no vest and she has a pair of black shorts on that probably belong to
Peko or Mahiru. Her feet are bare. She looks so tall from the ground.

"A-Amami, I-" Her voice catches in her throat.

"What's up, Akamatsu?" he says. He takes a step forward. Kaede flinches but doesn't move from her spot.

Himiko hurriedly gets up from the ground and dusts herself off. Pushing the sinking feeling in her gut away, she positions herself in between Kaede and Rantaro. "What are you doing here, Kaede?" she asks.

"I'm… exploring," Kaede responds. Her eyes are still locked with Rentaro's. A mix of fear and determination swirls in them.

"Exploring huh?" Rantaro says, crossing his arms. "Looking for shot put balls?"

Right in the gut, no punches pulled. Kaede grabs the end of her hair, if only so she has something to hold onto. "Amami…"

Rantaro is having none of it, he walks towards Kaede, each step echoing on the wooden bridge like a war drum. Himiko tries to keep herself between the two, but Rantaro simply pushes her aside. "Move," he orders. His voice is filled with absolute venom.

Despite his intimidating approach, Kaede doesn't back down. She twirls her hair around her finger, but otherwise is immovable. Her eyes lock onto his and her shoulders are squared. Himiko can't help but feel a twinge of admiration.

Finally, Rantaro is only a few centimeters from Kaede's face. He's taller than she is and he's lording over her. However, Himiko notes that Kaede's presence is bigger. Maybe because she's a performer, maybe because her spirit is just that big. From where Himiko's standing, the two almost seem perfectly matched. "Guys… don't-don't hurt each other," Himiko squeaks.

Rantaro turns his head and glares at Himiko with one eye. "And why should I not? She did kill me after all."

Kaede opens her mouth but Himiko beats her to it. "No! That was Shirogane! Kaede's shot missed!"

Rantaro shrugs. Earlier, it indicated a carefreeness, now, it only shows a violent apathy. "And? I probably wouldn't have died if not for her little trap." The way he says the word "trap" forces Himiko to flinch.

"Himiko," Kaede says. "It's okay. You don't have to defend me. I know what I did."

Rantaro whirs back to face Kaede. "Oh, you do? Then you know you have this coming."

Raising his hand, Rantaro's expression morphs into one of sheer fury. His eyes seem to darken and his mouth hangs open just enough to see his canine teeth. "Rantaro, NO!" Himiko shrieks. She lunges for his raised arm but he's already dropped it by the time she gets there. Kaede closes her eyes and braces for a strike and Himiko desperately grabs at air trying to stop it.

But it never comes. Instead, an extended hand and a mischievous snicker. Himiko looks in incredulous shock as Rantaro has put his hand out for a handshake. "Truce?" he asks. His face is back to normal (thank God) and his lips are even turned in a quiet smile.

Kaede, for her part, looks conflicted, as if she can't quite determined if Rantaro is genuine. She
tentatively reaches her hand out and takes his, shaking weakly.

Rantaro's smile returns in earnest. "There we go. All is forgiven."

"That… that's it?" Himiko says, clasping her hands over her mouth as soon as she does.

"Yep, that's it!"

Kaede grabs her arm after letting go of Rantaro's hand. She stares at his feet. "You… you have to be lying, Amami." Her voice hitches again. "I… I tried to murder you. You can't just forgive me that easily."

Rantaro puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head. "Maybe it's lucky that Saihara was the one to explain everything to me. He made a pretty strong case that you didn't mean to kill me." He puts his hand behind his head again. "And I did look pretty suspicious, admittedly."

But Kaede is still uncertain. "I… I don't know how you can forgive me so easily."

"I mean, I didn't go through as much as you all," Rantaro says. "No trials, no executions, nothing. And, I mean-" He hops from one foot to the other and shakes his arms. "I seem to be doing just fine so far. Better than you all from what I've heard."

Kaede begins to cry silently. Tears roll down her face, but they're smooth and elegant. Himiko's remembers her execution. Rather, the build up to it. She had those same tears. A paradoxical mixture of deep, intense emotion and pure restraint. Kaede, the masterful performer. Actress, pianist, magician.

"Aw, c'mon now, don't do that," Rantaro says, holding his hands up. "I'm trying to forget a buncha little sisters crying to get what they want."

Himiko hums. "I, uh, don't think she's trying to get anything."

Kaede half-smiles. "I don't really know how to respond right now. When I heard you were the one who woke up… I don't really know what I expected, but it wasn't this!"

"Like I said, I don't have much memory of that game anyway. If anything, I'm kind of looking forward to seeing if my memories from my first killing game surface."

Right, Himiko thinks, He was in a game before this one. "Huh," she says, "Maybe you're Ultimate Survivor talent is real."

Rantaro laughs. "If I can survive two games, I'm pretty sure I can survive anything."

I hope they're all this easy. But Himiko knows, deep down, that's not going to happen. She's evidence enough of that. Kaede and Rantaro chat, almost casually, while she can barely think of Korekiyo without feeling a wave of sickness. And she wasn't even the one killed by him. That's weird to think about. That there are two more who will be dealing with him. In the future. Angie and Tenko.

She's looking forward to it, somewhat. She wants to see what Angie's like when every other word out of her mouth isn't "Atua." And Tenko. God, she hopes Tenko is still that bombastic personality she was in the game. Maybe a little less personal-space-invadey, but still the genuine, unabashed soul that Himiko feels such a strong connection to. Is that what love is? She doesn't think so.

"Hey, Himiko," Kaede says, snapping the smaller girl out of her reverie.
"Huzza- wha?"

Kaede stifles a giggle. "Still just as spacey as ever, I see."

Himiko's face puckers. "No, no I'm not you just… caught me at low MP."

Giggling again, Kaede says, "Amami and I are going to explore the Titty Typhoon, did you want to
join us?"

Kaede doesn't pick up on the unasked question, the one Rantaro posed without speaking. "Are you
going to see Shinguji?" Himiko looks to Rantaro but he's turned his back to her. It's her decision, he
offers no help.

"Yeah," Himiko responds, "I'll come."

Kaede clasps her hands over Himiko's and begins to pull her along the bridge. "Come on, Amami,
I've wanted to see this place since we woke up!"

Rantaro walks slowly behind the two. "You're taking being in a fake world surprisingly well," he
says.

"You're going to a place in a game with a girl who tried to kill you," Himiko responds.

"True enough, true enough," Rantaro says, laughing.

He's not sure what it was about Mahiru that made him follow her. Okay, that sounds creepy. 
Context:

Shuichi had been laying on one of the lounge chairs, dozing in the afternoon sun. A loud thud jerked
him awake and he saw Mahiru leaving the Old Building rather quickly. Detective's instincts firing,
Shuichi didn't move until Mahiru passed him.

It could've been how she was walking, with purpose, almost angrily. Completely unlike the calm,
composed Mahiru he had come to know. Or it could've been the pained expression on her face.
Teeth clenched and eyes hard. Either way, Shuichi carefully got up from his chair as Mahiru turned
the corner around the hotel gate and began to trail her.

It's not until they make it to Second Island that Shuichi begins to suspect that she's on to him. While
he's far enough away from her that she won't hear, his own experience (as much as false memory can
be called experience) tells him that there's a certain sixth sense when it comes to being followed.
Some people just know. Mahiru's probably one of those people. Even if she wasn't before, the
Tragedy certainly turned her into one.

He ducks into the pod room, the door left adjacent the night prior in the hurry to see what was
causingshinguji's alarm to go off. Shuichi listens carefully as Mahiru's footsteps gradually disappear,
replaced only by the calm churning of the ocean and the consistent humming of the pod room.

Deciding to wait a bit before trying to track Mahiru, Shuichi inspects the pod room. He hasn't been in
here since he first visited Kaede. A darkness shrouds the room, possibly because seven pods are
inactive now. It feels incomplete. The wheel of brightly lit pods, separated by empty, dull ones.

It reminds him of the trial grounds, the portraits of the deceased that Monokuma kept around as some sort of sick ghost. What if these guys were at the trial? Without him, without Kaede? Would they be able to handle it. He didn't like to think poorly of his classmates, but they didn't all have that natural intuition that he and Kaede did.

His eye trails to Kokichi's pod. The small boy barely takes up half the pod. He looks so pitiful trapped inside, no hint of emotion on his face. The smarmy smirk and condescending smile were his trademarks in the game.

Shuichi walks over to Kokichi's pod. He rests his hand on the glass. It's warm, almost hot, he hopes by design. Kokichi's brow is free from sweat, so Shuichi can only assume that his classmates are comfortable in their prisons.

"You'd be leading the trial," Shuichi says quietly. "They wouldn't realize it, though." Kokichi was smart, perhaps too smart for his own good. He'd play games. But would he know when to stop? Would he be able to? When his tricks confused the others beyond saving, when a miscalculation cost them their lives.

"No, no, I think they'd be fine." Shuichi walks over to Kaito's pod. "Because they have you. You'd tell Ouma to shut the hell up, wouldn't you?" Kaito's stubbornness was both a boon and a curse. He kept Shuichi together emotionally. His endless optimism and powerful persona. It was what Shuichi needed. It also could have killed them in the fourth trial.

"It's okay, Gonta, you didn't do anything in this trial." That's right, if there's a trial, that means someone died and someone killed.

If he had to guess, it was probably himself who died. He doesn't want to think about who might've killed him. His thoughts linger on Kokichi.

But he has a mission. A self-assigned one, but a mission nonetheless. He peeks out from the door of the pod room and sees no trace of anyone. The island is still and calm. All is normal.

He walks over to the beach. Mahiru had been walking on the edge of the path, so there was a messy, random footprint every now and again. Shuichi follows them until they suddenly stop. In front of the library.

He's meant to come here, but every time he never gets around to it. He wants to see if the books here could possibly hold a clue to where they are. Why they're here. How they're here. There's so many questions yet almost no answers. His grandpa used to tell him that there were always answers, sometimes you just haven't found them yet. For once, you might be wrong, Grandpa.

Shuichi tries to enter to library quietly but the old doors slam shut behind him, exhuming a fine mist of dust. He instantly dashes behind a bookshelf and listens for footsteps. One minute. Two. He wants to leave. Wait one more. Three. Four. The only sound is his breathing and an indistinct noise coming from the stairs to the bottom floor.

Leaving his hiding place, Shuichi creeps along, moving from bookshelf to bookshelf. Just because Mahiru didn't come to investigate the sound doesn't mean she's not here and he really doesn't want her to see him right now. She'd probably put on a face and say that everything's alright.

He reaches the stairs and begins his descent. The noise is definitely coming from downstairs. A musty odor clings to the air that reminds him of his lab in the simulation. The smell of old books, old
information, rotting, unread. The smell should remind him of the library in the simulation, not his lab. But that room only smelled like death to him.

Aside from a few cobwebs and a shaky step, he makes it downstairs with no trouble. The lights are all off but a glow illuminates the back part of the library. Rows of desks lie beyond the bookshelves. A distinct shadow cuts the the glow and casts a sinister shadow across said desks.

Mahiru, what are you doing? Taking care to watch his step, Shuichi slinks behind the bookshelves. There are precariously stacked books at every corner, it seems. They all threaten to fall over and expose him. One slip and Mahiru will be on to him, if she's not already.

This could be a trap. It could always be a trap. It's one of the best ways to catch a criminal. Lure them into a false sense of security, make it seem like they're in control, then strike, take them down. It was a favorite of Kokichi's, as well.

He peers around the corner, finally close enough to see Mahiru and hear whatever it is she's listening to. She's sitting at a desk in the corner. The square screen of a laptop is the source of the glowing. Strange, Hajime had said that there were no computers on the island except for the one in the pod room and the ones in the hospital.

Not daring to get any closer, Shuichi closes his eyes and listens to what's coming out from the laptop.

A crowd, there's chanting. One person is talking above them all. A reporter? She sounds clear and concise. Shuichi can't quite make out what she's saying.

"Here today ……… … crowd … … Responding…"

Shuichi risks a step closer. It sounds so loud compared to the laptop. He's certain Mahiru will turn and expose him.

But she doesn't. Instead, she shifts, covering her mouth. A sob escapes and Shuichi realizes that she's crying. Her shoulders quiver ever so slightly and she's shaking her head. She whispers something that Shuichi can't hear.

He steps closer again.

…

Then again.

He holds his breath. He hears the laptop fairly clearly now. The reporter has stopped talking and the crowd's chanting has gotten louder. Suddenly, a different voice emerges.

It sounds like a young girl, a child. She's bawling, barely coherent as she tries to form words.

"Please!" she wails. "Stop… hic… stop it! Stop hurting Big Brother!" She practically screams the last part.

Shuffling, more screaming. Hurried voices. The sound cuts off, leaving the library in cold silence except for Mahiru's sobbing.

"I'm so sorry…" she says. "I'm so sorry, Shuichi."

He tries to turn and run.

Prick.
Another chapter out! Hooray! A bit shorter than usual, but you do what you gotta do for the sake of narrative development!

Also, Korekiyo on drugs is my new favorite thing.

As always, comments and critique are welcome!
Cognac and Milk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fluorescent light always did give Rantaro headaches. From the time he was barely old enough to realize that his head hurting was a bad thing, in fact. But there's only so much aspirin one can take before accepting that the pain isn't physical. It's like an imprint, no, more like a dent. One that's slowly and painfully fixing itself until one day it pops back into shape like nothing ever happened.

He wishes he could pretend nothing ever happened, it'd make dealing with the arguably greater issue of being surrounded by a world that isn't fucking real that much easier. But while he did forgive Kaede for what she tried to do and really held no strong opinions towards Tsumugi - at least, not yet, anyway; out of sight, out of mind and all that - the subconscious doesn't let go so easily.

There should be a subconscious suppression pill. A person could take it and just let those nasty cockroach thoughts disappear for a while. The type that long overstays its welcome. Oh hello Kaede, how are you? Shekilledyouhateherforever!

Those types of thoughts. At the very least Rantaro thinks it would make his head stop hurting. Then he could enjoy browsing the thirty different brands of cup noodles that line the back of the Rocketpunch Market shelves. They're all expired, of course, but he remembers reading somewhere that they won't hurt him if he eats some. It'd be better than whatever Mahiru cooks, that's for sure. For all her traditionally motherly qualities, cooking is certainly not one of them. Sister number seven was a good cook, according to his fabricated memories.

They don't have names, his sisters. They're just a backstory created to elicit sympathy. And laughs, if Himiko's reaction is anything to go by. In some ways, he misses being an older brother. He's an only child, according to his "real" memories. An only child has no responsibility to a younger sibling nor any aspirations to an older one. There's a freedom in that. There's also a loneliness. A bond that he's missed out on that some people claim to be the strongest in the world.

Then again, he could end up like Korekiyo. That'd be… inconvenient.

The entrance to the market dings so Rantaro puts back the sriracha sauce he'd been carrying for no particular reason and walks to the front of the store, as if he's an employee. A part of him guesses he might have, at one point, been a clerk.

Kirumi wipes her gloved hand across the dusty checkout counter. "Filthy…" she mutters as Rantaro approaches.

"Tojo, hey, what's up?" he greets with a small wave.

Jumping slightly, Kirumi puts her hand to her chest. "Oh, Amami, hello. I am afraid I was not aware you were here."

"It's all good, no harm done."

"Did you come to look for something that is not Mahiru's cooking as well?" Kirumi asks.

Rantaro fiddles with the rings on his fingers. "Yeah, something like that. Mostly just exploring."

"Fitting," Kirumi says, "For someone who was called the Ultimate Adventurer."
His cheeks flush at the title. "It sounds so corny when you say it like that."

Kirumi chuckles. "My apologies. I found it amusing."

"You know, the same could be said for you."

"Oh, how so?"

Rantaro mimics her reaction to the dusty counter. "An Ultimate Maid would make sure this place is clean enough to eat in."

The polite smile Kirumi wears falters and she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "Quite. It appears that the producers at Danganronpa decided to turn my mysophobia into a talent."

Rantaro's mouth hangs open for a second before responding. "I-I'm sorry, Tojo, I didn't know you actually… eh… sorry."

While he expects her to be a little more cross with him, she smiles much more genuinely than before. "It is no worry, Amami. I understand." She passes by him and grabs a basket, stepping back to dodge the plume of dust that escapes. Her face puckers. She removes a handkerchief from her pocket and wipes down the basket with practiced efficiency.

Though, it can't really be called practiced. However long she was in the game is the only true practice Tojo ever got. But muscle memory is still memory, so he figures that it could be implanted as well.

They spend the next few minutes casually browsing the store. While it certainly isn't what Rantaro would call a normal place - the shelves are lined with non perishables and survival gear - there's something calming about simply walking through a mart. When they pass by the cup noodles again he nearly forgets that he's not in Japan.

He sticks his hand out and runs it along the smooth front of the shelves. A film of dust gets on his fingers. Bringing his fingers to his lips, he blows the dust into the air, then watches the cloud drift away.

"Eh-hem," Kirumi coughs, brow furrowed. "I would appreciate it if you would not blow dust around while I'm nearby."


Her back is stiff and her grip on the basket strengthens. "P-please, also do not refer to me as your mother."

His smile falling, Rantaro moves to be in front of Kirumi. "Ah, sorry, again."

"Just please do… do not let it happen again." As Kirumi tries to walk around Rantaro he holds his arm out. "What are you doing?"

"The mom comment, you didn't like it in the game either," he says. "But you never had that severe of a reaction." He rests his chin between his index finger and thumb. "Is there a story there?"

Kirumi's mask cracks. It doesn't break, though, not fully. Rantaro knows he's not that good yet. Only Maki can convince Kirumi to get rid of her mask. "You are treading on thin ground, Amami. So please, shut the hell up." She pushes past him and storms around a corner.
It's at this point that if this were a western cartoon Rantaro would have an angelic and devilish version of himself on either shoulder.

"Let her be," Angel would say. "She clearly does not want to talk about it."

Devil would laugh and probably poke Angel with his pitchfork. "She's so close to breaking though. Just a bit more pressure and she'll shatter."

"Well I don't want her to do that," Rantaro says. He claps his hand over his mouth as he realizes that he said that out loud. Fortunately, Kirumi doesn't seem to have heard.

"And besides, it'll be good for her, get it off her chest and all that," Devil says. Angel tuts. "You know that's not why you're doing it."

I mean, I want to help her. Rantaro smiles. Kept it in my head this time. He frowns. I'm really proud of myself for thinking... that's rather sad.

As Devil and Angel begin fighting in earnest, Rantaro shuts his imagination off. According to his memory, he had to develop a pretty wacky imagination in order to entertain his sisters. Also according to his memory, he had to develop a pretty wacky imagination in order to entertain himself when he was bored alone.

He begins searching for Kirumi. Aisle to aisle he can't find her. He even checks between the surfboards. She's quicker than she looks.

He finally finds her, tucked away in a corner of the store. It's dimly lit, with a light bulb flickering in one of the displays. It feels reminiscent of a horror movie. Maybe Kirumi will turn into a monster and attack him.

"H-hey, Tojo," Rantaro calls, unable to keep his voice steady after that invasive thought entered his head. She looks up slightly in recognition but then immediately turns her head back to the display. What's so interesting... oh...

The display is filled with alcohol. Everything from wine to hard liquors. Rantaro is in front of the vodka section. It's arranged with the cheap stuff at the bottom, growing in value as you go up the shelves. Rantaro isn't too familiar with alcohol. Well, he doesn't think he is. But even he can recognize several higher quality brands despite their bizarre naming. He reaches up and picks up two bottles.

"Aylesbury Goose and Grey Duck," he reads aloud. Come on, that's not even trying to be subtle. But then again, what's the point of subtly if a player was never supposed to see them? Rantaro turns to the front of the store. He can't see the doors. Based on what he remembers from the game, Hajime wouldn't have been able to see this corner of the store. Was the alcohol programmed here as a joke? It had to be.

Unless this was real and it made sense that there'd be alcohol in an all-in-one mart but that can't be right because that can't be fucking right, dear god it can't be right!

"Think the Remnants would be mad if we snuck some of this?" Rantaro says jovially, shaking the bottle of Grey Duck.

But Kirumi doesn't move. Her eyes are glued to the top shelf of the brandies. Rantaro slips behind her and follows her eyes to a specific set of bottles. He reaches up and grabs it.
"Cognac," Kirumi whispers.

"What about it?"

Kirumi's basket is by her feet. Her hands are twisted together, squeezing. "In the game, the producers… they made a joke about me."

Interest piqued, Rantaro says nothing but raises his eyebrows.

"They said I had trouble cutting kognac," she continues. "The vegetable. But… they made it sound like I had an addiction to the drink."

Rantaro laughs. "I gotta say, that is kind of funny." Kirumi shoots him a dark glare. He balks. "Okay, it isn't funny."

Kirumi draws a deliberate breath. "I don't how they found out I had an alcohol problem before the game as well."

"No way," Rantaro says, the booze in his hands suddenly feeling very heavy. "Was it bad?"

"Bad enough that I felt some symptoms of withdrawal when I first woke," Kirumi answers. Her shoulders shudder as if she has a chill. "I had been rather thankful that there was none of it present on this island. Until now, that is."

Hurriedly, Rantaro shoves the vodka and cognac back onto the shelf. He grabs Kirumi's shoulder and tugs lightly. "Here, let's get you out of here."

Kirumi nods. "Yes… that is… definitely for the best."

Rantaro turns and leads the way to the front of the store. Kirumi quickly leaves, offering only a brief goodbye.

Rantaro pretends that he doesn't notice the bottle she's holding. He knows she'll need it. Because he didn't tell her that he saw Maki come into the store earlier. That she grabbed rope and a pair of black gloves.

"Good luck, Tojo," he mutters to himself then heads back to the cup noodles.

***********************************************************************

Back in grade school, Kaede was one of the few in her class to not get nightmares. Other kids would talk about them. They seemed ridiculous at first. A rabid tortoise on roller skates chased after one girl. Another girl claimed that she was murdered repeatedly until a vampire came and turned her into his mind slave. A boy tried to top that by saying that he one time was forced to kill his whole family and then had to watch it be replayed over and over in a room covered in bugs. She'd dismissed these as childish fears at best and downright made-up stories at worst.

But now nightmares are part of sleep. An inextricable, entangled web that clings to sleep. If she wants sleep then she will nightmare. She doesn't want to sleep. Her body forces it on her. Betraying her like she betrayed her classmates. It beats her into submission. Bruising itself with exhaustion and crushing itself under its own limbs' heaviness. Her eyes dry too quickly, forcing her to blink. Every
blink risks sleep.

Blink. The ceiling fan whirs.

Blink. A cloud rolls in front of the moon.

Blink. The paint on the walls is chipping.

Blink. The trial room is ghastly.

Blink. Monokuma is staring at her. Laughing his ear-piercing laugh.

Blink. The plug on the video game is out. Charred a bit from Shuichi accidentally yanking on it too hard.

Blink. Her classmates vote wrong and nooses drop from the ceiling, encircle their necks, and pull taut. Thirteen bodies hang lifeless. One still remains. Shuichi eyes bulge and his tongue pokes out, engorged with captured blood, as if he'd been hanging there for years. He speaks. It's Monokuma's voice. "WINNER, WINNER, WINNER!"

Blink. She dropped the shot put ball. Doesn't remember where. But now everyone is running. Mechanical Monokumas wreak havoc. One has Tenko's torso hanging from its maw. She'd tried to defend them. She was torn to shreds. One wears Kaito's bloodied coat as a trophy. All the television sets show a number. The remaining students. There are four left. Gonta fights off two, but a third leaps on his back and gores him through with its claws. Three. Maki leaps from building to building, stealthy, lethal. A Monokuma intercepts her, she falls to the ground in a lump. Two. Ryoma dashes from one point to another. He's too fast for them. So they pelt him with metal balls. One finally connects with his head. One. They surround her. Teeth bared and mechanisms screeching. Then they stop. Open their mouths. Voices. "WINNER, WINNER, WINNER!"

Blink. She's drowning in sweat. Figuratively.


Blink. She's running outside.

Blink. Shuichi is chasing her.

Blink. Rantaro is conducting her execution. His smile is friendly, his posture calm. The baton flows smooth in his hand. The Flea Waltz comes out perfectly. Her feet pound on each key in perfect time. She's not choking this time. The crowd of Monokumas cheer. Rantaro slows down. He's doing the piece a piacere . Taking his time. His expression grows dark and the lights dim. Behind him flashes a sign. "WINNER, WINNER, WINNER!" He's won this time. Because she's alive. Alive to feel herself crushed by the spiked piano lid.

Blink. She's choking on sand.

Blink. She's wrapped in a blanket by bloody hands. Kirumi's. Then Korekiyo's. Gonta's. Kaito's. Tsumugi's. Her own. Tighter and tighter they wrap. The blanket is made of scratchy wool and it rubs her skin raw with each layer. The blood seeps through the blanket and covers her. Inside her cocoon she melts. Her head is all that remains of her. The five surrounding her hold their hands above her
and let the blood fall on her. Each drop melts her a bit at a time. Until she disappears except for her ears. They're left behind so they can hear the chant, "LOSER, LOSER, LOSER!"

Blink. Shuichi slaps her.

Blink. She's gagging on salt water.

Blink. The world returns to her.

Blink. Shuichi slaps her again. He's saying words. But she's deaf. She's always been deaf. Like Beethoven.

Blink. Her fingers scuttle over Shuichi's sides. He should be wearing his gakuran. Black and white. Keys for her to play. Ode to Death, H. 144. Op. 38 by Holst. She's playing it so beautifully. Each note sings itself. An angelic choir couldn't create a more wondrous noise.

Blink. "Kaede!"

Blink. "Kaede!"

Blink. "KADE, WAKE UP DAMN IT."

No.

Blink. No, don't let me wake up.

"Kaede, Kaede, please!"

Blink. I don't want to wake up.


If I wake up, I win.

Blink. The trial grounds are in front of her again. They vote wrong again. They're impaled by spikes that launch out from the voting screens. As soon as they hit Shuichi he turns to her and says, "KADE, KADE, KADE!"

Shuichi.

Shuichi

Blink. "Shuichi."

"That's it, Kaede, wake up. Come on, please."

Blink. She's hanging from the noose again. But Shuichi's there. Still in his armor. He hacks at the rope with a dull sword while she hangs until she dies.

"Shuichi" she says. She says it. She can speak.

More cold, salty water. She sputters and spits and rubs her eyes. It only digs the saltwater deeper into them, but it makes her feel better damn it! Like she's making progress.

Tender fingers help. She tenses when she first feels them wipe her eyes, then lets her arm drop to her side. She buries her fingers into the sand and cups them around a shell. The fingers are soft, delicate,
like a light aria in an opera. They soothe her and actually manage to get some of the water out of her eyes.

Her eyes. She doesn't dare open them. She thought it was blinking that held the risks, but it wasn't the blink itself, but what she sees when her eyes reopen. Nightmares. The fake world she's in. She doesn't know which is worse.

"Kaede," Shuichi says. Oh how she loves his voice. It's sensitive, not quite fragile, but not entirely whole either.


She opens her eyes. It's almost anticlimactic. A powerful symphony should've accompanied her. The mighty crescendo that culminates in a harmonious chord. But it's becoming a pattern, this mundanity. Has the world lost its spark or has she lost hers? She knows what the world should be and she once tried to make it such.

Night is dark and stars are in the sky and the ocean crashes and sand is gritty. A normal night on the beach. Almost too normal. Light pollution from a nearby tourist town should cover the stars and the sand should be pocked with trash. This isn't normal, though. Wherever Jabberwock is, it's not normal. It's in limbo. Real, unreal, it doesn't matter. Because she's here.

And she's here with Shuichi who's hovering over her, his hair a mess and his clothes wrinkled.

She's here with Himiko, who stands off to the side wearing bunny slippers. She sounds like she's stifling sobs.

She's here with Maki, who, for once, can't hide the concern on her face.

She's here with Kirumi, elegant and pretty as ever in her sheer nightgown.

She's here with Rantaro, earrings glittering in the moonlight.

She's here. She's here. She's here.

WINNER. WINNER. WINNER!

No. No... I don't want to be the winner. Her limbs move on their own, twisting in the sand.

But Shuichi's there. No, he's here. He touches her face and looks at her. His mouth opens and closes. He's never been a wordsmith. That's not true, she remembers, he mentioned that he thinks he was a writer of some sort, before Danganronpa. A writer. It fits, she thinks. Always thoughtful, always considering what new angle he could take on any subject. So careful with his words. Knowing the value of names. Her name.

She tries to ignore that he forgot her name. It wasn't his fault. How could it be? And she hates that it was her trauma that brought out her name. She shouldn't be his damsel. In the simulation, she saved him. She gave him the ability to face the truth and that's what let him live. So is it his turn to save her? No, he can never save her. Perhaps because she doesn't need saving. Perhaps because she'll forever be in peril.

Kaede sits up. Sand falls in clumps from her hair. She probably looks a mess. The oversized t-shirt she's wearing is soaked - whether from ocean water or sweat who can really tell? Shuichi tries to guide her up. She shrugs his hands away.
"Kae-" he tries to say but she holds up a hand. It says "stop." Then it transforms. It says "come with me."

She stands. Her legs ache. Her whole body aches. But it's a cathartic ache. Blood carries pain through her body, but it pools in her neck like a clot. She swallows, trying to force the pain down. Again. She coughs, trying to force the pain up. It doesn't move. She relaxes her shoulders, her chest, her stomach, her legs, her feet. The pain falls down her body, out her toes. A wave washes over them, retracts, taking her pain to be lost in the endlessness of the sea.

Blink. Stare at the gathered.

Speak. "You all, go back to the hotel. Not you, Shuichi." She probably didn't need that last part. The look in his eyes. He understood he was to follow her.

"Akamatsu, don't be ridiculous," Maki chastises. "You just ran out of the damn hotel screaming your ass off. You're not going anywhere."

"I must agree with Maki," Kirumi says, stepping forward. "Clearly something is amiss. Please, come with us and get Hinata."

Kaede shakes her head fervently. "I can't, not right now, okay guys?" Her mouth forms something that could be considered a smile if someone squinted hard enough.

"Kaede," Himiko implores, grabbing onto Kaede's sleeve. "I'm worried."

"So am I, Himiko," Kaede says quietly. "Which is why I need you to go back to the hotel. I'll be fine, I have Shuichi with me."

Rantaro kicks some sand while fiddling with a piercing. "Compromise. You go do what you're gonna do, but in the morning you see Hinata for some one-on-one. Deal?"

Make a deal? Why make a deal? She could run. Maki would catch her. She could lie. Shuichi would unveil it. She could act. Himiko would see through it. "Okay," she sighs. "Deal."

Nodding, Rantaro says, "Okay, guys, let's head back."

With varying degrees of reluctance, each member of the group turned and headed back to the hotel. Himiko's slippers squeak with every step. Maki looks over her shoulder repeatedly. Kirumi holds Maki's hand. Rantaro doesn't look back.

Shuichi stays still. A wave crashes into their legs, coating them both. In the morning, when they're dry, their skin will be taut and crusty. "Where to?" he asks like he's trying to be romantic.

Kaede snorts a bit and Shuichi blushes. "We're going to the Titty Typhoon. There's a piano there."

The walk to the club is brief. The walk to the club takes hours. Kaede had ended up on the beach on Second Island, by the clubhouse. The two survivors (can she call herself a survivor?) are barefoot and step on every stone along the crumbling paths. She never noticed how rough they really are.

It's unsettling. In the game, they paths were smooth. Hajime's lanky, awkwardly animated form could glide over the paths with ease. But time erodes. Whether short or long or both simultaneously, time destroys. Kaede remembers a chemistry class. The second law of thermodynamics. All things move towards entropy. If all things decay with time, how is time supposed to heal all wounds?

Games can only do that if the code is corrupted. Life entropies continuously. The road she's on is
falling to bits. It's not a game.

Each time she steps on a piece of concrete or cobblestone or upturned splinter or even a dried worm that couldn't make it back to the grass she's reminded that this world is as real as she is.

As real as she is. That phrase is comforting. Because she's been told that she's not real. Kaede Akamatsu as she knows her isn't real. She can play piano, play it well. But she's not the Ultimate Pianist. She can lead and command. But she's not the leader of the group. Or is she? They listened to her with only minor complaint and Shuichi follows her as he did in the simulation. Perhaps she's more real than she thinks.

She's only gotten bits of her memory back. Envy twinges in her whenever she hears Kirumi and Maki reminisce about their old relationship. When Himiko tells a story from the pool or Sunday School. When Shuichi told her that he used to be a writer.

Memory flits in her head but always escapes. But not before taunting her. The one solid memory she can grab. She was at an event, a gala. Her dress was lovely. Satin, form-fitting. An off-white piece embellished with pearls. She held a wine glass filled with sparkling cider. People danced and chatted and complimented each other. An arm interwoven with hers.

She can never hold onto it long enough to see anything else. She doesn't know if the piano music was ever really there. Tchaikovsky, Waltz of the Flowers.

"Kaede, we're here," Shuichi says.

The Titty Typhoon. A stupid name. Meant as a one-joke. Black comedy when considering that two murders happened here. In the game, it's neon lights spun vibrantly. Now, they sit, engrossed in the darkness of night. Blank swirls that will likely never spin again.

Kaede pushes open the door. The interior is musky and a little damp, though not as bad as when she, Rantaro, and Himiko explored it a few days prior. It was fun. A brief chance to forget. To be giddy high schoolers running around an abandoned building that had piqued their curiosity.

Himiko had paraded around on the stage, pretending to perform a magic show. Rantaro studied the wallpaper for way too long to be considered normal. Kaede found a piano. A keyboard, really. Mobile and clunky with keys that landed with a dull thud when pressed. She'd played for hours. She recorded a song on it.

The keyboard sits on the empty stage, where a chair once was. There's no body hanging over it, fortunately. That weird part of Kaede's brain that thinks the strangest thoughts wonders if she and Ibuki could bond over how they died.

Climbing on the stage, Kaede instructs Shuichi, "Stay down there, okay? Find a seat. Or sit on the floor."

He hesitates and she smiles to herself. *Good, Shuichi, don't listen to me. Not right away. I'll just manipulate you.* She scurries over to the stage panel and turns on the lights. The venue fills with a warm glow. Gentle shadows accompany Shuichi as her audience. The dust floating in the air titters in anticipation.

The wood of the stage is scraggly and warped. Splinters prick her feet as Kaede walks to center stage where the keyboard rests. There's a tarp surrounding the keyboard and it's a welcome reprieve when she steps on the plastic. Sitting down, Kaede lifts the keyboard onto her lap. She's not used to the weight, oddly enough. Her memories only have her sitting at a grand piano. *Only the best for*
Danganronpa contestants. She doesn't like the word contestants. Leaving with your own life shouldn't be a prize.

She inhales.

Kaede rests her fingers on the keys. They know where to go even if she doesn't. She presses down and falls into the music. Gentle, now, gentle. She plays to the kindness of Shuichi's fingers. Their tender caress.

She sends each note to the boy sitting in the middle of an empty venue. Between them, a vast space. He looks up at her and she down at him. The lights covering her like a shimmering aura and the shadows embracing him, friends.

Peace. Bring peace to the tumultuous night. Let the music soothe the nightmares back to their slumber. Calm the storm in Shuichi's eyes.

At once, she's millions of kilometers away, in a nameless forest by a nameless stream churning with the motion of fish and frogs and dragonflies zipping around. The air is clean and still. Though the forest waves with life, it too possess a stillness that Kaede tries to emulate. But her fingers move. The forest isn't angry with her, though. It loves her music. Trees reach their branches down to tickle her face with their wide leaves. Birds perch by the speakers and match her pitch. A wolf family watches from a distance. Two wolf cubs gnaw at each other, playfully wrestling.

Most striking, however, is the brilliant stag that peers at her from across the stream. His endless black eyes reflect the entire forest within them. He stands proud, upright, antlers pining toward the sky. The sun glistens on his soft brown fur, a beautiful sheen that looks almost like a coat.

As Kaede plays, the stag moves closer. He braves the chill of the stream, finding rocks poking out wherever he can. He barely makes a ripple. He reaches Kaede, stands over her as if daring any part of the forest to come near her. He bows his head. Kisses her cheek.

He's suddenly a man. No, a boy. Kaede's age. She giggles softly as the thin beard he's trying to grow tickles her face. He takes her face in his hand. It's rough and worn, experienced at such a young age. But so gentle, so kind. She doesn't take her eyes off the stream, but Kaede turns her head towards him.

"Akamatsu," he purrs.

The stage reappears under her. The rays of sun that had poked through the canopy return to being stage lights and the trees that formed the canopy are pillars holding up the ceiling that's lost in darkness.

Kaede ends the song, her fingers pulling away from the keys as the last notes float away into silence. It's one of her favorite parts of music. Even before she entered the game, she's loved the time immediately after a song ends. When the memory of the music plays in her head and though it's silent, her mind's music is as powerful as ever. Chills run down her arms and goosebumps spring up along her skin.

She exhales.

Shuichi stands up. He doesn't applaud. Instead, he comes to the edge of the stage and reaches a hand up. Kaede smiles, puts down her keyboard, and crawls over to his hand. She intertwines her fingers with his.

For a moment, she's back in the forest. The stillness returned, her hand intertwined with his. He's
wearing a red flannel. "American style," he says. His voice is deep, a sermon-giving voice. It would boom were he not purposefully keeping it low.

Shuichi tugs on her arm and she's at the venue again. She stands, then hops down. He guides her, puts his hand on her hip as he does so. He's gotten so bold, she notes. But he can't hide the blush across his cheeks even in the low light. He can't hide the uncertainty in his eyes. The storm is coming back.

She won't let it. Her lips meet his ear. A simple peck. He tenses, but she presses forward, moving to his temple, where she lingers just a hair longer. His cheek. It's warm and soft.

It's rugged and bony.

His nose. It's small and cute.

His nose. It's wide and goofy.

The corner of his mouth, which twitches with nerves.

The corner of his mouth, which relaxes with practice.

Her lips on Shuichi's, pressed tight, filled with passion.

Her lips on Touma's, pressed tight, filled with love.

She draws away. Shuichi isn't there anymore. His smooth, mellow face replaced by one she recognizes. Aquiline and sharp, with piercing eyes that glimmer with mirth. He's smiling because Kaede kissed him. Touma Suzuki. A boy she knows, she loves…

She remembers.

Pushing Shuichi back, Kaede whirls around and nearly slams her head on the stage. A loud wail erupts.

"Kaede!" Shuichi says, concern filling his voice. "Kaede, what's wrong?!

Kaede lifts her head and turns to him. No tears fall, but her eyes are misty and her lip quivers. "Shuichi… Shuichi, I… I think I have a boyfriend."

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I really don't like when chapters are significantly shorter than the rest of the work. Pet peeve. But I really cannot justify adding anything more to this one. Oh well.

Also, I feel like I've never really thanked everyone reading this. You all really do help keep me going. Stories are meant to be read and so I'm glad to that you're all on this ride, however pretentious it may get! So thank you so much!

Finally, Himiko... with bunny slippers. Enjoy the cuteness overload.

As always, comments and critique are welcome!
It's clear to Maki where Mahiru's influence is in her and Hajime's cabin. The place is immaculate, sterile. The bed is crisply made and the clock on the dresser is perfectly parallel to its edge. It reads 3:56 a.m. A single hydrangea rests dead center of a table that's the optimal distance away from all other furniture. That's Hajime's doing, clearly. Precise, efficient, almost cold.

That said, a colorful array of photographs line the walls. Smiling faces and bright palettes contrast some of the stark, almost disturbing photos of the Tragedy. Written below each one is a caption. Maki can't read them from where she's sitting, but they're done in a looping, effeminate hand so they have to be Mahiru's.

Somehow Maki didn't think Izuru Kamakura would write like that when she watched the anime.

What she did imagine and is now experiencing is how unsettling his stare could be. He's sitting across the precisely positioned table, piercing her with his dull green eyes. He almost looks bored except for the twinge of anger that casts a shadow over his face.

Mahiru, on the other hand, just looks sleepy. She's sipping coffee from a mug, the coffee pot already halfway drained by her. It's weird seeing her so disheveled. Red hair flying in all directions, eyes unfocused, ratty, loose clothes.

"Harukawa," Hajime intones, his voice disconcertingly neutral.

Maki only responds by focusing her gaze on his chin. *Never look your enemy in the eye.* She can't remember who told her that, the man in her fictitious cult or a little girl she was playing a game with. *The second you do, they see all of your weaknesses.*

Of course, none of that matters when your enemy is the most talented person alive.

"Look me in the eyes," Hajime commands.

Maki refuses. She's still, silent, yet entirely relaxed.

"Harukawa, please, we're trying to help, sweetie," Mahiru says, her voice light, feathery. A mother's voice. Maki had almost forgotten what that sounds like. Having two histories with no parents will do that to you. But it's a ruse, clearly. Good cop, bad cop. A classic.

Maki tenses her shoulders.

"We'll get through this a lot quicker if you speak with us," Hajime says, jotting something down on that damn clipboard he always carries around.

"Hello, my name is Maki Harukawa, I'm the Ultimate Child Caregiver," Maki hisses before biting her cheek. She meant to say it in a deadpan, sardonic tone. She fails again.

Regardless, Hajime isn't amused. "Harukawa."

Mahiru drapes an arm around Hajime. His expression softens briefly. *A weakness.* Maki's mind instantly formulates a plan. *Get him worked up, appeal to his anger. Have Koizumi comfort him. Put*
him off guard. Guaranteed to work. Emotions are weakness everyone, even Izuru Kamakura, has. She has it especially bad.

"We can start, if you'd like," Mahiru offers. She seems more alert now.

Maki shrugs.

"Very well," Hajime says. "I must ask, why are you tormenting Kirumi Tojo? It was my understanding that you two had a positive relationship in the past."

He's choosing his words more carefully than Maki would like. Each time she thinks he's about to slip, about to give her an opening to turn the tables on him, he covers it. "Tormenting." Is that what she's doing?

Hajime had found her earlier this morning. A routine check on the Survivors, or so he said. Maki wasn't convinced. But there was little she could do. The others were in various states of sleep while she was in the rafters tying a rope right above Kirumi's eye line. Tormenting.

"Harukawa," Hajime says forcefully. "Please explain."

"Hmph. You're pretty cruel for someone with the Ultimate Therapist talent," Maki scoffs.

"You're pretty cruel for someone who claims to care about her girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend!" Maki roars, slamming her hands on the table. Mahiru manages to catch the vase holding the hydrangea before it falls. *Fuck* Maki thinks to herself. She let herself slip. And so easily too. Why? How? Maybe it was the way Hajime said it. His words snaked their way into her ear, bit on the one part of her brain, forced her to jerk, to yell. *Emotion is weakness.* Who said that? Her non-existent master? Her late mother? Maki?

Hajime writes on his clipboard, completely nonplussed. "What is she to you?"

"Fuck you," Maki whispers. He's already gotten to her, no point in maintaining any shred of a facade.

"Harukawa, sweetie…" Mahiru reaches her hand out.

Maki slams it on the table, twists. A crack and Mahiru grunts in pain. The photographer lifts her arm gingerly. Her wrist is clearly broken.

For the first time tonight, Maki looks into Mahiru's eyes. She wants to see the anger, the betrayal. Maki hurt her. Maki hurt her. *I hurt you. I hurt you. I hurt you.* Instead, all she sees is profound sympathy. Mahiru's eyes are soft, like little sunflowers. Bright, gentle. The same damn look Kirumi gives her every time Maki is upset, or pulls a stunt, or screams or bites or *why won't these idiots just hate me?*

Suddenly she's sitting in front of the laptop again. There's a lingering smell of something that Manny burnt in the air. She opens up the messenger.

Harumaki: Come over

BeheadBeaut: Y?

Harumaki: I wanna see you
BeheadBeaut: u soundd like a fuckboi
BeheadBeaut: and its 231 in th emorn
Harumaki: Sstill wanna see you
BeheadBeaut: i hafta work tomorrow
Harumaki: That's nice
BeheadBeaut: ur bein' mean
Harumaki: I wanna see you real bad
BeheadBeaut: im comin ths weeknd
Harumaki: But I want you now
BeheadBeaut: cant hav evrythin we want
Harumaki: I'll kidnap you
BeheadBeaut: afterwork
Harumaki: Now
BeheadBeaut: kinky
BeheadBeaut: im loggin off now
Harumaki: ill just spam your phone
BeheadBeaut: Please don't
BeheadBeaut: My dad checks it every day
BeheadBeaut: Maki, please.
Harumaki: then come over
BeheadBeaut: wtf…
BeheadBeaut: now ur really being a bitch
Harumaki: I just wanna see you that bad
BeheadBeaut: Goodnight Maki
BeheadBeaut: Don't text me
BeheadBeaut: Please
Harumaki: Too late
BeheadBeaut: Maki
Maki
Makiharumakiharumakiharumakiharukawaharukawa

"Harukawa!"

Makiharumakiharumakiharumakiharukawaharukawa

"Harukawa!" Mahiru's voice snaps Maki out of her reverie. Her face is wet and she can feel her shoulders quivering ever so slightly.

"Harukawa…" Hajime says, his voice gentle, surprised. Hajime coming through full force. "I-I didn't mean…"

"I'm awful, aren't I?" Maki asks, though she's already decided the answer. Memories of her and Kirumi flood back to her. But they're not the comforting memories she's had so far. They're brutal.

In one, Maki refused to let go of Kirumi's arm until long after the last bus left her city. Kirumi didn't make it home until late. The next time she saw Kirumi the girl's arms were a minefield of ugly purple bruises.

Another. There was a local boxing ring and Maki knew one of the boxers. Kirumi did too. He was one of "them." Kirumi rarely mentioned who "they" were, but Maki knew that "they" were a sensitive spot for Kirumi. She had begged Maki not to take her there, or to go alone, or to let her stay in the car. But Maki yanked Kirumi inside. They watched as Maki's friend was demolished by Kirumi's "they."

Still another - no. Hajime's hand rests on her shoulder. A shoulder that's slumped against the table. Mahiru's uninjured hand intertwined with Maki's own fingers. Her other hand is in a crude splint. How much suffering had this girl endured to ignore the pain of breaking a wrist? More than Kirumi did at the hands of Maki. No, that was Maki's mind at work.

There is no justification in this work. Her mentor, what did he look like? What was his name? We kill. You have to find a way to live with that.

Perhaps that's why she did it. Tormenting. It helps her live. She killed Kaito in the game, so many in her fake history. Ouma, too. And maybe Kirumi deserves punishment. Hoshi is dead because of her. Was. Was.

"Stop it…" she whispers. To whom? Herself, most likely. She was like this before. She's always been like this. She is like this.

An urge swells in her stomach, nauseating desire. To scream at Kirumi. To berate her and grab her shoulders until Kirumi begs her to let go. Refuse. Kiss her. Apologize. Mean it. Be forgiven. A scene similar to that plays out in her head over and over and over and over and over andoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandoverandover. Are they separate times or one? Who knows.
"Harukawa," Hajime is shaking her. She glares at his eyes. Each time he blinks, "V3" appears in them. Hajime was a shared favorite of Maki and Kirumi. Not their all-time favorites, but up there in those stupid tier lists they made. Damn Tsumugi for ruining him. "Harukawa!" he says again, more forcefully, but she only hears Tsumugi's all-too-pleasant voice.

What would Kirumi have said if she was there with them? She'd believed she was the prime minister of Japan, after all. How hard would that crush her? To go from the most important position in the country to… to…what was she? A waitress? That sounds right. It was at her uncle's restaurant.

Of course, if Kirumi was there, that means she didn't kill Ryoma. How would he react? He thought he had no one to live for. That no one loved him. Maki knows that feeling. That all-encompassing loneliness. Would he be happy? Probably.

So Kirumi suffers but Ryoma benefits. Is that worth it? Should Maki even be thinking like that? Maybe that's how she justified everything. It made Maki feel better, so Kirumi could suffer because in the end Maki's happiness outweighed the damage done to Kirumi.

The air catches in Maki's throat. She had only once told Kirumi that she loved her. It was after the only time that Maki ever hit Kirumi. When Maki had said it, there was a lightness, a giddiness; she did love Kirumi, at the time, at least. She's not sure about now. On second thought, she's not sure about then. But Kirumi had smiled, said she loved Maki too. There was bruise forming on Kirumi's arm, one unique to the usual landscape. And Maki had justified it. Their love made it okay.

No it didn't. No it doesn't. No it didn't. No it doesn't. No it didn't. No it doesn't.

In the game, she avoided everyone, didn't want to get close to them. She thought she was protecting herself. Maybe she was protecting them.

An alarm blares. Maki is dragged back to reality and her head snaps up, vision fuzzy and lightheaded. Maki gets up, meets Hajime's eyes, looks down.

"Harukawa," he says, his voice soft, tender. "You did well. We'll continue whenever you're ready."

Maki nods.

Another alarm. Two people. Hajime and Mahiru walk out of the cabin, with Mahiru sporting a new brace on her arm. Why does she have that? Maki wonders. Oh right, I hurt her. As always.

Mahiru says something, probably encouragement to get Maki going. Other bodies are running past them, down the bridge towards Second Island. She sees the shimmering silvery blonde hair of Kirumi and nearly falls to her knees.

The alarms stop. Two people are waking. Two people for her to hurt.

***************************************************************

Booting…

DRS Framework successfully initialized
using 11037 buffer headers and 3604 cluster V3 buffer headers

IOAPIC Version 0x53 Vectors 0:16

ACPI: System State [S0 S0] (S0)

Extension "exe.personality.driver.KIIBOpersonconfig" has immediate dependencies on com.danron.kpi kernal; use style

mbinit: done

Security and auditing service ERROR

BSM auditing ERROR

From path "XXXXXXXX"

"Kübo, honey, wake up. It's time to go to school."

Waiting for boot volume with UUID M0N0KUUM4-SV52-3F3A-XXXX-ERROR

Waiting on <dict ID="V3"><key>Danganronpaclasse</key><string ERROR> XXXXXX

ACPI: Button driver prevents system sleep.

"Mom, I don't have to. I'm going to the Danganronpa auditions today!"

DanganIntelM0N03304 Secondary PCI IDE channel is enabled

ATA Disk: Checksum Cookie valid

"Audition or not, I still want your butt up young man. Why are you so tired anyway?"

Got boot device = ERROR

BSD root: Unavailable

"I was up late."

"Doing what?"

"..."

Mar 12 05:53:21 localhost com.danron.a9ge8eh 8eg ERrR

"I was- I was- I was- I was- I was-"

Oct 29 11:03:07 localhost com.danron.kri launchd 842uj8gb09e72u 84tjhhy=Er

"My rob- My r-r-r-r-o-bb--b--b-bots!"

"Give them-give them-give them b-bb-b-b-back!"

"I'm sick of being - of being - of being - of being."

Resetting HUMcatalogue

"I want to be someone cool! Someone people can rely on!"

display: ERROR

Matujc8yu8u 8ygv78e4y&^83y ERR-RR0r

display: family specific ERROR

"They broke it again!"

"They didn't break it, honey, it failed."

XXXXxXXX (V#V#V#V#)

"Bye Mom."

"Keebo, please, think about this!"

"I already did"

display: @@@%%%%%%%%@%@$@)<>@#@>!<@#$!%(:!<!

"Justice robots! Fight for the weak!"

"..."

"Give them back! Please! Please!"

drv3 : Initializing…

drv3: Hook and humanization contexts set

drv3: Starting…

"Wake up."

Keebo's eyes burst open. Lime green light pours through the window above him. A man is holding out his hand.

If human_Action <extend hand> True Then
	ActionCategory.exe Action:= keebo_Action <take hand>

Take the hand, a voice whispers. His voice. But he can't move his arms. Can't move at all, in fact. There's no programming to move. The process to move should be automatic, streamlined. And his body is so heavy. Impossibly heavy. If he could move, could he even lift his arms?

The mechanic-looking man above him falters. His fingers curl in uncertainty. Take his hand, the voice whispers again. Though to say it whispers wouldn't be right. There's no sound to it. Instead, it feels as if the thoughts are forming inside his own head instead of coming from an outside source. A feeling that is somehow foreign and familiar.

"Kid, can you hear me?"
If human_Action <query> True Then
   ActionCategory.exe Action:=keebo_Action <respond>

If human_Query <affirmative response> True Then
   SpeechCategory.exe Action:=keebo_Speech <respond true>

"I-" Keebo tries to say but stops immediately. His throat vibrated! It vibrated! It's not supposed to do that! The soundbox in his throat is designed for seamless transition of sound through the mouth, it's not a speaker. "I-I… yeah…" He tries again, desperate to ignore that awful quivering in his throat.

The man smiles. He has pointy teeth. There's nothing in Keebo's databases that says humans have pointy teeth. "Having trouble getting up?"

If human_Action <searchhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh>
   ERROR


Engaging keebo_Action <searchhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh>
   Result: ERROR

His leg kicks and his head rolls from side to side involuntarily. His arm slams again and again. Teeth clamp down on his tongue and blood fills his mouth.

_Blood? I don't have blood!_

keebo_Action <diagnose>
   ERROR: Action unavailable.

"Mikan, Mikan!" the man calls out to someone Keebo can't see. "He's seizing! What the hell do I do?"

Seizing? The word rings a bell. Images flash through his head. Blurry, indistinct. Not at all how he knows memory. Memories are crisp playbacks done via the visual recall function in his brain. He can see a woman, she's over him. She fades in and out. There are words. "Again! Again!" Crying. A lot of crying. "Call 119!"

Seizing? Robots don't seize.

A woman dressed as a nurse appears. "Oh-Oh my God, Kazuichi, disengage the pod walls!"

The pain is gone now. Most things are, honestly. Rather, everything has morphed into one giant mess in Keebo's vision. Shapes no longer exist, only vague patterns of color interspersed with blackness. There's a hissing noise. His arm stops slamming, now it only thrashes, though that, too, is lessening. His leg has long stopped kicking. There's something soft beneath his head. It's not a pillow. It's his own skin. His skin. Robots don't have skin.

Above all, he's warm. Not hot, not uncomfortable. A warmth he hasn't known in too long spreads throughout his body. It's not the warmth of a hug, nor one of friendship. Not the glow of success. It's internal, natural. His warmth.

"H...Ho...fing…" The woman above him is speaking. Is she speaking? Keebo can't tell. Indistinct noises clamor in his ears. Silence. Silence. Silence. Why isn't he recording? He has a recording function, doesn't he?
"Nyeh… it's taking them a long time…" Himiko mumbles under her breath. She's wrapped in a blanket, rubbing sleep out of her eyes, mildly perturbed that the alarm woke them all up at the crack of dawn. Couldn't these people just wake up at normal times?

"Perhaps the two are simply taking a while to come to?" Kirumi offers. She stifles a yawn with her fist. Himiko notices that Maki isn't with her. Isn't there at all. Unusual. Still, Kirumi looks too tired to even register that fact.

Almost everyone else is here. Rantaro leans against the brick building, his head nodding being the only sign that he's awake. Shuichi rests on a downed tree. He's been wearing his hat the past couple days and Himiko can't see his eyes as he looks at the sand. Kaede is on the other side of the group, fiddling with a loose lock of hair that came out of her ponytail. Ever since a couple nights ago when Kaede had her freak out, she and Shuichi had been pointedly avoiding each other. Himiko wants to ask what happened. But who to ask?

Shuichi? They're survivors together. He was the one who pulled her from the rubble after Keebo blew up the soundstage. Perhaps that means they have a connection, one that she can use to satisfy her curiosity. But he's been even more withdrawn than usual and Himiko's afraid that any pressure she puts on him will make him shatter with anger. Anger directed at her.

A strand of hair is blown by the breeze into her mouth. It's getting longer. Himiko likes it, even if it is more of a hassle. It makes her look more mature, she thinks. She glances at Kaede. She could ask Kaede directly. She at least appears to be more optimistic than Shuichi. She keeps her smile up and even manages to laugh here and there. But there's a distraction to everything she does. There's a band-aid on Kaede's thumb from when she cut herself while chopping vegetables for dinner. Himiko wants to see if the cuts match the ones that criss-cross across her own legs. Do intentional injuries look the same as accidental?

Footsteps on the bridge. The group shifts and sees Hajime, Mahiru, and Maki walking towards them. Himiko could ask Hajime. After that night, Kaede began one-on-one therapy with him. Most of them have at least been to one session. He's detached, but good. No matter how unorthodox his methods. That said, if Maki was just at one of said sessions, then Hajime really messed up.

Her arms are wrapped around each other and her head is down, long hair almost skimming the ground. She's still dressed in her day clothes. Unlike the rest of them, she never accepted the offer of clothes the Remnants gave. Himiko can't remember seeing her without her crimson blouse and black skirt. It's funny, in the game, Himiko and Maki shared a color scheme, just inverted. Now, even Himiko's pajamas are bright and floral. When she was a lifeguard she would always wear a lei. Didn't know why, still doesn't. It just felt right. More than a few times, she would go to blow her whistle and get a mouthful of artificial flower.

"Who is it?" Hajime asks dutifully.

"Dunno yet," Rantaro responds, not opening his eyes. "All we know is something's going wrong."
Hajime narrows his eyes and Mahiru puts a hand to her mouth. Her other is wrapped in a makeshift brace. Good God, what happened in that therapy?!

"I'm going in." Hajime states, stepping towards the door. "Where are Peko and Fuyuhiko?"

As if on cue, Peko comes barrelling down the sand from the direction of Third Island, pushing a heavy-duty bariatric gurney across the sand.

"Peko! What's going on?"

Pausing in front of Hajime, Peko glares at him intensely. "One of them started seizing. I got a gurney from the hospital. Fuyuhiko is at the hospital with Shinguji."

Hajime nods. "Good work, let's get inside.

The two disappear inside the old building. Rantaro chuckles. "Think one day we'll actually be able to see our friends wake up?"

"Friends?" Himiko says warily. Are they friends? Could she ever consider Korekiyo a friend? What about Kokichi? Or Tenko?

Oh God, what if it's Tenko? Himiko gnaws on the front of her sleep shirt. She doesn't know how she'll react to Tenko. Throughout the entire game, Himiko had kept the other girl at an arm's length. She'd been scared. Scared of Tenko's openness, her willingness, an unflinching kindness (towards girls at least). To be honest, Himiko's still scared. If she sees Tenko what will she do? Run and leap into her arms? Run away? Break down crying? Attack her? God, she doesn't know. She doesn't know so much.

Who can she talk to? Shuichi? Kaede? What will she do? When she sees Tenko. Hell, just in the shower. She'd tried to shave her legs again. It didn't happen. A glistening red line nearly stained the green skirt that Mahiru gave her.

"Himiko," a gentle voice says. It's Shuichi's.

She faces him. She can see one of his eyes poking out from beneath his hat. "S-Shuichi?"

"Stop eating your shirt."

"I'm nervous."

"So am I."

Himiko lets the fabric fall from her teeth. Shuichi pats a spot on the tree next to him, so Himiko sits down. On a whim, she rests her cheek against his shoulder, but makes quick eye contact with Kaede and sits up quickly. "What are you nervous about?" Himiko asks.

"Who's gonna wake up," Shuichi says. "Same as everyone. Except Amami, I guess."

"Mmm." Rantaro does seem to be rather composed compared to the rest of them. Maki has buried her face into Kirumi's back, with the taller girl desperately asking what's wrong. Kaede tries to help, but she keeps glancing over at Himiko and Shuichi. And even though he's talking, Shuichi's gaze hasn't moved from the sand.

"Are you nervous about meeting Chabashira?" Shuichi asks, though it's clear he already knows the answer. Himiko only nods. Reaches for her own hat that hasn't been there for weeks, bites her lip
"I am, too."

"Why?" It comes out more cruelly than Himiko intends. She had that habit in the game, too. Maybe it's just her.

"I failed her."

"How?"

"I failed just about everyone here."

"You didn't."

Shuichi pulls his hat down over his eyes by the brim. "I was the detective. I should've solved the case. Kept everyone from dying." Himiko says nothing so Shuichi continues. "So every time someone wakes up... I have to confront someone I failed."

"What about... What about Shirogane?" Even Himiko can't bring herself to use that girl's first name. Shuichi's fist tightens. "I'm nervous about seeing her too."

"Why?"

"I might try to kill her."

Before Himiko can respond, the door to the old building bursts open. Peko, Mikan, and Kazuichi push the gurney past the group. For the briefest moment, Himiko can make out the sky blue of Keebo's eyes. So that's who was giving them trouble. Makes sense. He's a robot. Bound to cause some issues with the program.

Rantarô whistles, echoes Himiko's sentiments. "Guess that explains that."

Kirumi, having managed to get Maki to sit down on the ground with Kaede, nods. "Though there should be one more, correct?"

There's reservation in her voice. Himiko wonders if Kirumi's as scared of Ryoma as she is of Tenko. The door opens again and all eyes are instantly glued to it. Himiko doesn't have to worry about Tenko yet. Kirumi doesn't have to worry about Ryoma yet. Himiko's not entirely sure if what they got is better.

"Hell yeah! Miu Iruma's alive, bitches!" the inventor shouts, demolishing any sense of calm that the early morning may have.

Standing from their perch, Himiko and Shuichi move to join the others crowding around Miu. Everyone except Maki, that is. She's still sitting in the sand, listlessly letting it fall through her fingers.

"Jeez, back up, will ya?" Miu says, pushing everyone away with her hands. "Girl gets choked out and the first thing ya'll do is crowd her? Tch, not cool!"

There's a bit of stunned silence as everyone gazes at Miu suspiciously. Mahiru weeds her way through the group. "Okay, everyone separate, please, we have to get Miu to the hospital."

"Eh?!" Miu cries, jerking back. "Why do I need to go to a fucking hospital?"

"It's just a check to make sure-"
"I'm fine, just peachy." Miu snorts. "Well, except for people not giving me some personal space!"

Himiko and the rest of the group sheepishly take a step back. Out of everyone Himiko's seen come out of that simulation, Miu is by far handling it the best. Too well. Suspicion builds in her throat. What's she suspicious of? They all reacted differently? But how…? How…?

"Iruma," Maki says, strict, fierce.

Miu looks around Mahiru and grins. "Well there's the assassin. Figures you'd be awake."

Maki's red eyes pierce Miu's blue ones and the inventor backs off. For a moment, it looks like she's about to revert to her afraid-of-the-world personality, but she never does. Instead, she simply nods her head and says, "Sorry…"

"As I was saying," Maki rises to her full height. "You… remember that you were in the game? How you died and everything."

Instinctively, Miu raises a hand to her throat and Himiko notices that Kaede almost mirrors the motion. Miu scratches at the choker around her throat. Dissatisfied, she yanks it off and lets it drop into the sand. "Yeah… I got… I got strangled by Gonta, right?"

Solemn nods.

"Fuck," Miu whispers. "And there I was gunning for Kokichi."

"You… you don't sound very upset about that…" Kaede says warily, taking a step back.

Miu shrugs. "To be honest, I don't know how I feel about a lotta things right now." She stretches out her arms, nearly smacking Himiko in the face. Miu walks until the ocean is lapping at her boots. "Right now… " She sucks in a breath. Smiles. "Right now I'm glad I'm alive."

Mahiru claps her good hand on Miu's shoulder. "We're glad you're here, too, um, Iruma, was it?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm Miu Iruma, best damn inventor there is. Or I was."

Mahiru smiles gently. "Let me show you to the hospital. It won't take long."

Sighing dramatically, Miu finally relents. "Fine, let's get this fucking over with."

As the two leave, Mahiru turns to the rest of the group. "Tell Hajime where we are. He'll wanna know everything that's happening."

Silence. Silence. Almost unbearable. Himiko tugs at her shirt. There's a fiber stuck between her teeth from when she was chewing on it. Uncertain glances pass around. An unsaid sentiment passes between them. How does she remember?

Himiko had been a survivor - God, she needs to stop saying that, they all survived - and even she didn't quite remember everything that happened until much later. So how does Miu know?

"Well," Rantaro says, scratching the back of his head. "I forgot how much a joy she is to be around."

"She seems much more, um, forward, than I recall," Kirumi says, rubbing the back of her hand. Maki suddenly grabs it and Himiko notices Kirumi flinch before relaxing as Maki simply kisses Kirumi's cheek and turns to leave.

"I'm heading back to the hotel," Maki says. "I didn't sleep much last night." She jerks her head
towards first island. It's directed at Kirumi. Maki pauses, then shakes her head. Runs off.

"The hell's up with your girlfriend, huh, Toj?" Rantaro says. He puts his hands in his pockets.

"I… do not know," Kirumi responds, her voice is distant.

The door to the old building opens and Hajime emerges, tapping away at a laptop resting on his arm. Kaede flits up to him.

"Hinata," she says, waving her hand in front of his face.

"Hmm?"

"Koizumi wanted to let you know she and Miu are at the hospital."

"Noted, thank you for letting me know." With that, Hajime moved to leave the group, heading towards the hospital.

"W-wait!" Shuichi cries, causing Hajime to turn and raise an eyebrow. "U-um… Do you… do you know why Miu remembers so much?"

By this point, Himiko had moved to the back of the group. The sun was starting to come up in earnest and she wanted to try and grab a shower before the others. However, the question piques her curiosity again.

Hajime nods. "I do have a theory. If what you all have told me is true, then Miu died while she was in a sort of virtual reality of sorts, correct? To make that virtual reality, my guess is that she somehow managed to actually hack into the very programming of the simulation you all were in. It's likely that while you all were in the virtual reality program, your consciousnesses were more awake, to put it simply. Since she died there, whatever the simulation program was using to store your memories stored hers in the more awake state, meaning she has an easier time accessing those memories. If that makes any sense."


"If that's the case, then wouldn't she have woken up first?" Kaede asks.

Hajime shakes his head. "The actual physical awakening seems almost entirely random. Even I can't find a pattern to it."

"Now, if there are no more questions, I will be heading to the hospital. Kaede, you and I are still meeting at one, yes?"

"Good, I will see you all later when Gundham and Sonia arrive. I will have an update for you on Keebo as well." Hajime walks off.

In all the excitement about Miu, Himiko had nearly forgotten that Keebo woke up as well. She says goodbye to everyone before heading down the bridge to first island, her stomach a knot.

"I'm like Miu, unsure how she feels. On one hand, Keebo was unwilling used as an - oh, what had Shirogane called it? - an audience surrogate. He was a part of Team Danganronpa whether he knew it or not and he was perhaps the most manipulated of all of them. How could she hate him for that.

Yet, a bitter part of her wants to hate her. Not in the same way that she hates Korekiyo, but in a cold, apathetic hatred. A desire to have nothing to do with him. Maybe it's what he represents. He's a
machine, able to be replaced and reprogrammed at will. Will she even know this Keebo? (Then again, she can almost say that for everyone.)

Ugh, she needs a shower. The freshest cut on her leg burns. Baby hairs cling to the fabric of her pants. She can only hope they'll be gone by the time she finishes.

***************************

From where his bed is situated, Korekiyo gets a pretty good view of Third Island. At his request it was moved to be right next to the window. Since the day he decided it would be a good idea to stab himself, this hospital had been his prison. Though Mikan and Hajime check on him daily, and Kaede, Rantaro, and - albeit it rarely - Kirumi visit from time to time, there's still an isolating feel to the hospital. Those who visit do so more out of obligation to him and little is said other than clipped words and small updates about who is remembering what.

In his own memories, he has a fairly clear view of who he was, for which he's thankful. There's comfort in being able to say that he and his sister were abandoned by their parents with a local landlord, being able to say that he signed up for Danganronpa and that his sister is guaranteed his participation prize. He'd worked it out with the bank so that she had access to it when she turned sixteen. That's still six years away, if his time is accurate, but the landlord had taken a shine to the girl and was letting her stay for free provided she help out around the property.

Above all, having a grasp on his memories kept her away. Him too. It's what he had been calling the other personalities. Hajime had said that they likely were so strong because the personalities are so drastically different than his normal one. Compared to the others, who had minor adjustments to make them more "entertaining" - the word makes Korekiyo recoil in disgust every time he hears it.

He sighs and sets aside the empty bowl of soup on his nightstand. Mikan has been busy all day with Keebo and Miu so other than checking on his medications and giving him his meals, Korekiyo had been left alone most of the day.

Outside, the sun is setting. He's never had much of an affinity for sunsets. Finds them overrated. He much prefers the moon, especially when its visible during the day. An almost translucent orb that hangs in a perfectly blue sky, always present, but only if you look for it. Perhaps that's why he likes it so much. The sun appears and disappears, but the moon is always there. A literal rock floating in space. Of course, he knows that's not scientifically true, but the metaphor is a comforting one. There's a beauty in permanence.

His groin aches as he thinks of the word "beauty." Another word tainted. How many would he find he cannot stand? "Anthropology," "beauty," "sister," all words that when he said them burn his tongue, like a cross to a vampire. He's an unholy beast and those are words he is never permitted to say again. Another punishment for his crime.

Or is it his crime? Her crime? A crime at all? If it's fictional did it happen? Of course it did. He can feel the plank in his hand, the details of the salt symbol are etched into his memory forever. When he slammed on the plank to send Tenko to her death, he'd nearly fallen and twisted his ankle. Now, he wishes he had.

"Well lookie here, it's the resident bondage freak." There's no mistaking that voice.
"Hello, Iruma," Korekiyo replies, voice even. As much as Miu is, well, Miu, he's silently thankful that she doesn't speak in that same forced manner as the rest of them.

Miu saunters up to Korekiyo's bed and plants herself at the edge. "Heard you, uh, cut yourself up pretty bad." There's a playful smirk of her face.

"Yes, it has not been a pleasant experience here."

"You should just tell people that you were too damn big to fit in any vagina so you had to cut it down to size!" Miu laughs warmly. Warmly, that's a word Korekiyo never thought he'd apply to Miu. Her laugh used to send an ache down his spine. Loud, more of a cackle than a laugh.

He even finds himself smiling. "That's exactly what happened," he says.

"Oh? He's got a sense of humor?"

"I'm not the same person you knew, Iruma."

"Miu."

"Excuse me?"

"Call me Miu." The inventor scratches at her neck for a second, then places her hand on her chest, takes a few deep breaths.

Korekiyo blinks at her. "I- I don't think we're that close…"

"And I don't give a damn!" Miu says, standing. She grabs the spoon out Korekiyo's bowl and holds it up in the slats of sunlight that stream through the top of the windows. "Yume-, er, Himiko - the loli one - said she wants to call us by our first names cause we all survived or some shit. I fucking like it." She jabs the fork at Korekiyo's face. "So call me Miu!"

Korekiyo smiles again. Somehow it doesn't surprise him that Miu of all people would be the optimistic one through all of this. "Okay then, M-Miu, where are you hearing all of this?"

Miu snorts. "Don't tell anything to Hajime you wanna keep a damn secret."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, all through the damn exam he's just telling me random shit like that."

"That's… rather concerning."

"Fortunately that Koizumi woman shut him up after I started having trouble breathing. Kept me for a long damn time after that." Miu rubs her chest. Even in the low light, Korekiyo can see that her skin is red and a there's a small spot where she's practically worn all of the skin away.

"You were having trouble breathing?" he says carefully.

Miu shrugs. "Guess so, figures."

"Um… figures?"

"Oh shit, you weren't around when I fucking died, were ya?"

Korekiyo narrows his eyes. Miu immediately apologizes. Sometimes, being born with oddly yellow
eyes is a good thing. "I was told what happened but that was weeks ago."

"R-right, well, I got strangled with toilet paper."

"You're joking. You have to be joking." Korekiyo remembered being told that Miu was strangled by Gonta, but he'd assumed that it was with his hands or something, normal.

Miu tuts. "Not at all, Snakekiyo, things got *fucked up* after you… eh, yeah…"

Korekiyo's somewhat glad that Miu's lack of tact is still there. Some things must never change. However, more pressing matters. "Snakekiyo?" he asks incredulously.

"Hell yeah." Miu holds her hands up by her head and hisses, waving her tongue around. "Cause you look like a sneaky snake sometimes. Hiss! Hiss!"

For the first time since Korekiyo remembers, he laughs. A full-bodied, powerful laugh. The sheer ridiculousness of the situation is almost too much for him. Miu Iruma, a girl who has just woken up from a killing game simulation, is pretending to be a snake. Tears roll down Korekiyo's face as Miu puts her hands on her hips.

"Mission fucking accomplished," she says in a haughty tone.

Calming down, Korekiyo wipes his eyes. "What mission is that?"

"Get you to cheer the fuck up."

"Huh?"

Miu walks over by the window and looks out over the beach. Below, Kaede, Himiko, and Rantaro are strolling by waves, occasionally kicking water at each other. Their shrieks of delight penetrate the windows just enough for Korekiyo to hear them. "Seems like everyone else is having fun, figured you might be little lonely."

Korekiyo twines and untwines his fingers. This Miu, the real (?) Miu, is so different from the crass, vulgar girl he knew from the simulation. Of course, she also is waving the spoon around by her crotch pretending it's a penis, but still. There's a maturity to this Miu that he never saw in the simulation.

*I wouldn't mind being friends with this Miu…*

No… He hasn't heard that voice in so long. He grips the guard rail on his bed till his knuckles turn white.

"You fucking okay there?" Miu asks, stepping closer. "Did my spoon dick get you all exci-"

"Miu, please leave…" Korekiyo spits.

"Huh, wh-why?" There's hurt in Miu's eyes and Korekiyo curses himself for it.

Still, he has to get her away from him. She's triggering his sister to come out. "I'm sorry, we can talk more tomorrow. It's just-"

But Miu is already halfway out the door, hand up in a dismissive wave. "Don't worry 'bout it. Far as I figured out, we all got our fucking issues." Before Korekiyo can say another word, Miu turns the corner and all that's left is the sound of her boots stomping down the hall.
Korekiyo slams his head against his pillow and lets out a growl of frustration. He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes. "When will this stop?" he whimpers.

For the first time since he'd woken, Korekiyo actually felt happy, genuinely happy. So of course, this damned fake sister of his had to come in and ruin it. Why? What had he done? Murder two people? No, before that. What had made Team Danganronpa want to give him such a twisted personality?

He tries to remember his audition. He knows he didn't do it in person, he sent in a video. Everyone told him that they usually don't take video applicants, but they must have seen something in his. What was it? What did they see? And why did it make them want to punish him in this way?

Crossing his arms over his eyes, Korekiyo blocks out all of the light from the fading sun. Distantly, he hears Miu. She probably found someone to talk to, he can't tell who. Eventually, her voice disappears, replaced by the rhythmic hum of the waves. Before he realizes, Korekiyo falls asleep.

- 

Several hours later, a phone's ringing rouses Korekiyo. As if on instinct, Korekiyo's arm reaches out to his nightstand for his phone. If only things were so normal. Blinking away the blurriness in his vision, he looks towards the door to his room, still open from when Miu left.

Kazuichi is standing there, his own phone casting a bright light on his face, which is twisted into a severe frown. He looks almost distressed. Still, he answers the phone.

"Who the hell is this?"

There's a rumble on the other end of the line, though all Korekiyo can make out is that whoever is calling isn't happy.

Kazuichi pinches the bridge of his nose. "Look, pal, how'd you even-"

... 

"No, you listen, how'd you even get this number?"

... 

"Yes, it matters! No one's supposed to call these lines. Remnant communication only!"

... 

As the person on the phone continues to ramble, Kazuichi starts pacing. Korekiyo quickly closes his eyes as Kazuichi passes by his room. He's not sure why, but his gut is screaming at him that whatever conversation Kazuichi and the mystery person are having, Korekiyo is not supposed to be hearing.

Finally managing to speak, Kazuichi says to the person, "Look, we don't control what they do. It's all on them."
"I don't care you wanted Kaede and Shuichi together! It didn't happen."

Kaede? Shuichi? What is he talking about? Through the rumor mill, Korekiyo had heard something happened between them, but as far as he's aware the two have been decidedly tight-lipped about it, even to Hajime?

…

"Look, buddy, I'm not even the one you want to talk to. I just-

The person's screaming suddenly intensifies as Kazuichi holds the phone away from his ear. Though he still can't make out the words, Korekiyo can tell the caller is a younger guy, sixteen at the most.

"Fine, fine, here." Kazuichi rummages around in his pocket before pulling out a scrap of paper. "You wanna bitch at something, call this number."

Kazuichi turns his back to Korekiyo and with one ear buried in his pillow, Korekiyo can't hear the number. He bites back a curse.

…

"Good, don't call again." Kazuichi hangs up and sighs, adjusting his beanie. "Crazy people out there."

"Who was that?" Another voice. Mahiru's.

As subtly as he can, Korekiyo shifts so that he can hear more easily.

"I dunno," Kazuichi replies. "Some nutter who thought we control what happens on this damn island."

Mahiru chuckles. "If we controlled what happened, you think I would have a damn snapped wrist?"

"Shit, did she really break it?"

Mahiru holds up her arm. Through narrow eyes, Korekiyo can see that it's wrapped in some sort of cast. "Yep," she says, "Clean break."

"How the hell did you keep a straight face?"

"Was a clumsy kid, I've broken my wrist a lot."

"Still, that's cra-

Korekiyo coughs. Instantly, he can feel both Mahiru and Kazuichi's gaze on him. He tries to look as relaxed as possible, as if he's still asleep. People cough when they sleep, right? Right?

Two pairs of footsteps stalk towards him. It takes every fiber of willpower not to move. The corner of his eye twitches. Shit.

He feels Kazuichi poke his side. Once, twice, a third time. It dawns on Korekiyo that the mechanic is trying to tickle him, see what he'll do. If there's a god, Korekiyo is currently thanking it for not making him ticklish.

"Ah, he's out," Kazuichi says, though there's an edge to his voice.
"Still, let's go somewhere else. And make sure Mikan's giving him sleeping pills with his meds," Mahiru says. The two leave the room, footsteps fading into nothing as they leave the hospital.

Korekiyo doesn't move for what feels like hours. Every creak, every glint of light that shines through his eyelids, every inkling of movement he makes sends panic through his body. Whatever he overheard, he clearly wasn't meant to. His gut tenses and he feels as if he needs to vomit. Beads of sweat dot his forehead but never fall, as if they, too, are scared of drawing attention.

Finally, he opens his eyes. He prematurely jumps, half expecting to see Kazuichi or Mahiru hovering over him, ready to reveal his charade. Fortunately, he's alone.

He groans. "What do I do?" he says aloud, though instantly slaps his hand over his mouth. Stays that way for several seconds before exhaling.

Turning his head, Korekiyo spots his wheelchair. For the past couple weeks, Mikan and Hajime have been working on strengthening his legs again. Though he's nowhere close to being able to walk, yesterday had been the first time he was able to support himself for a full thirty seconds. An idea creeps into his head. If he can get to the wheelchair, he can get out of the hospital, tell one of the others what he heard.

With Keebo currently occupying most of Mikan's time and Hajime distracted with a million little things, he might just have an opportunity to sneak out. And if he's caught he can just say he wanted some fresh air and try again.

He looks out the window. The moon is high in the sky, shining bright over the ocean. Perspective is a bizarre thing. From where Korekiyo is laying, the moon seems closer than First Island, as if grabbing the moon would be as simple as reaching up and plucking it from the sky.

He closes his eyes. Though he doubts sleep will come with everything running through his mind, tomorrow is going to be tough. He's out of shape and without his meds (which has found he can no longer trust), the pain from his injuries is going to be severe. But still, there's an urging in him that he can't ignore. A desire to help his fellow survivors.

Is it that it? Is he really that selfless? Maybe he just wants an excuse. A way to earn his way back into their graces. Kaede and Kirumi managed to have others in the group who they could latch onto. Maybe this would be the thing that let him in.

He shakes his head. No, he can't think like that. Even if they still don't forgive him, he has to get this information to them.

He has to.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, it totally hasn't been over three months since I updated. You're all just imagining things. I update regularly.

Right. Totally. Definitely. Kokichi-approved 100% true.

In all seriousness, apologies for the long wait. I had trouble with this chapter and that
pesky "real life" thing got in the way. Regardless, it's here, hooray, everyone celebrate!

Also, I don't program, if the Keebo bits don't make it obvious enough. So please forgive the many, many errors. Was trying something new.

As always, comments and criticism is always appreciated!
Canned yams.
Canned fucking yams.
Not candied yams
Canned. Yams.

All of the others remember impactful snippets of their past lives and Miu remembers that she likes canned yams. There was a stock in the backroom of the market and Miu had pried off the lid to one laughing at who in their right mind would like canned yams.

She does, apparently. So she grabbed a bunch and made for the airport for whatever reason with a backpack full of water and canned fucking yams.

It's hot as shit out. No breeze and the air might as well just be liquid with how humid it is. Miu shovels a spoonful of yam in her mouth, swallowing it quickly. Warm and slimy. Just how she likes 'em.

There's an innuendo in there. In the game she'd have shouted it out even though no one's around. Now she just giggles to herself quietly and tries not to choke on her spoon.

The airport isn't that much cooler than the mart. At this point it's so hot that the air conditioning is pointless. A trail of sweat races from her armpit down her side causing Miu to shiver in disgust. She rubs her arm against her side to try and dry it. It probably will just end up staining the white button-up shirt Mahiru gave her. It had apparently been Akane's. None of Mahiru's shirts could ever fit on the bust of Miu "Balloon Tits" Iruma.

She decides to shove the heat out of her mind by exploring a bit. Lots of planes that don't work, conveyor belts that don't work, seats that look so dilapidated that they'll probably collapse once someone sits on them (in other words, they don't work).

Miu huffs. Can't that useless mechanic fix what really matters? Who needs nice housing and privacy when you could have a fucking airport! She rolls her eyes and scrapes the bottom of her can to get that last little bit of yammy goodness out.

Unfortunately, instead of her mouth, it ends up on her chin, running down her neck.

Ah! Another innuendo!

Who fucking cares?

There's a suitcase by one of the rows of seats and Miu can see a shirt hanging out of it. She tosses her empty can onto the frayed leather seat and reaches for the shirt. As she pulls on it, a sickening smell assaults her senses. Blood, lots of it. The shirt is caked in dried blood. The inside of the suitcase reeks. She pulls away instantly. Who knows what's in that suitcase? Could be a body.

A BODY HAS BEEN DISCOVERED!
Monokuma's screeching voice echoes in her head. Miu sprints away from the suitcase. That's the last fucking thing she needs. When she woke up this morning she could've sworn she heard his morning announcement. It had only been a seagull.

When she's put enough distance between herself and the suitcase, Miu plops down on the ground and grabs a water bottle from her backpack. It's still cool from the refrigerator in the mart so she rests her forehead on it. Condensation mixes with sweat as it dribbles down her face. Her chest heaves. Fuck. That. Bear.

She sucks in a shaky breath, then another, another. The air is sticky, gross, she almost doesn't want to breathe it. But apparently you have to breathe to survive. Or so she's heard.

_Breathe_ she thinks. Calming breaths. _Inhale, exhale_. She performs each action as she thinks it. The process comes naturally, though she's not sure why. She can calm herself down pretty easily.

_Breathe._

_Breathe._

_Breathe._

_Breathe._

_Breathe._

_Can't fucking breathe!_

The air in Miu's throat suddenly stops. She tries to force it, but it's as if something's blocking it. The flesh of her throat constricts. Tighter, tighter. Skin pulling and being pulled, folding on itself, the inside of her esophagus growing closer. Her windpipe is nearly crushed, just one more tug, one more one more one more.

_Breathe._

When she died, the first thing Miu did was breathe. When she woke, the first thing she did was breathe. She has to breathe. Breathe to survive.

Her chest aches. But it's not because of lack of breath. Her skin is bruised and torn from her constant rubbing. Mahiru had given her some band-aids to cover the more prone abrasions, but in the few hours since Miu woke up this morning there's already a new bunch, a small circle of violent red holes. Barely 23 hours awake from that hellish simulation and she's already back to hurting herself.

Back to? When did she ever do it?

Who fucking cares?

The rubbing helps her breathe. She massages her chest with her fingers, small circular motions that gradually grow bigger, then small again. Breathe. Breathe. Breathing.

She can breathe. She's breathing.

Miu lets her hand fall to her side and collapses against the wall of the airport. The putrid air tastes so sweet. She holds her hand up in front of her face. Two fingertips are covered with a bit of blood. Maybe they belong in the suitcase.

God fucking damn it. How many times has that been today? Seven? Eight? She only woke up from
that fucking pod yesterday and she's already lost track of how many times she's had to convince herself that she's not fucking dying. That she can breathe. That she's breathing.

Unscrewing the cap on her water bottle, Miu runs the a bit of water over her bloody fingers, then she does the same on her chest. It stings, but she decides that's better than feeling nothing. Or next to nothing.

When Gonta had choked her, all she felt was overwhelming terror. A complete realization of her impending death. She could only watch in tranquil fear as her vision went spotty, then dark, then nonexistent. That was the weirdest part.

She covers her eyes with her hands. Blackness. She can't see. But she can. She can see the blackness. She recognizes what's in front of her. But when she died, she couldn't see anymore. No blackness, no nothing. Perhaps that was her mind's way of saving itself. Or trying to. If she couldn't see, couldn't feel, could barely hear, then she couldn't experience. She would never experience death, she would just die.

Miu Iruma, genius gorgeous girl inventor, fucking dead. Rest in fucking peace, start the investigation, execute the killer.

Fuck that noise.

She shoots upright. Wait… "gorgeous genius" or "genius gorgeous?" Who the fuck knows? Doesn't matter, they don't even sound like words anymore.

She shakes out her hair then throws it over her head and continues her trek through the airport.

She marches her way to the back of the airport. She had never seen it before in the game. She half-assumes it'll just be an empty void, something that she could throw herself into and get lost in the miasma of virtual nonexistence. Or some shit like that.

What she finds is that it's just as messy and boring as the rest of the airport. Seriously did that mechanic ever do anything fun? Not like he had an apocalypse to worry about. Or maybe he did. She played the game so long ago she can't remember.

She huffs and is about to turn around but a door propped open catches her attention. Light spills from the door and she can hear shuffling from inside of it. Then a hideous belch. Nice.

"That's fucking rude, ya know!" Miu shouts, flinging open the door. Of all the people she expects to see, Kirumi Tojo wasn't one of them. The mental image of Kirumi burping just isn't there in Miu's mind.

"I-Iruma!" Kirumi cries, jumping back. She nearly knocks over a nearby bottle.

"The fuck?" The room is just a janitor's closet, though it's mostly empty except for a shriveled mop in the corner. That, and the rather alarming amount of empty bottles scattered around the floor. Vodka and cognac and gin and beers of all sorts. Some are stacked neatly against the wall, others roll around listlessly.

Kirumi herself is a mess. Her hair is disheveled, clumped in the back, heavy with sweat. Her eyes are glossy, unfocused. Stains dot the soft purple slip-on that clings to her toned upper body. As Kirumi tries to stand, she collapses, sending bottles skittering across the floor. She hacks and spits.

"Disgusting…" she mumbles.

Miu is on her in an instant, sitting the other girl up against the wall. Kirumi tries to push Miu away
but she's so drunk that it's completely ineffective. "Kirumi, what the actual fuck?"

"Not… not so loud." Kirumi tries again to push Miu away. Miu just grabs her hand and squeezes it.

"The hell is all this shit? How long have you been drinking?"

"How old m'I?"

"I dunno, like 16 or 17?"

"Three yearsh."

Oh sweet Jesus fuck. Miu rolls her eyes. "I meant *today*."

Kirumi's eyes widen as if Miu just revealed the secrets of the universe. "Oh…since I… Since I woke up." She grabs a half-drained bottle of gin next to her. "Speaking of…" She tips the bottle into her mouth and swallows a massive gulp. Miu resists the urge to cringe. That has to burn.

Miu's chest burns. *No!* she thinks *This isn't about you!*

"Kirumi, give me the bottle, you've had enough!"

Whining in a way that was so not Kirumi Tojo, the maid pulls the bottle out of Miu's reach. Despite being shit-faced drunk, Kirumi is still quite a bit stronger than the inventor, who harrumphs and sits back against the wall, pouting.

A twinge of a cocky smile plays on Kirumi's lips as she brings the bottle back to her lips. Miu glares at her. "Fucking fine, if that's what you wanna do!"

The two sit in an uncomfortable silence. Kirumi eyes Miu out of her periphery, clearly wanting Miu to leave so she could drink alone. Of course, every time Miu catches her, she sticks her tongue out as if to say "I'm not fucking leaving."

Miu also says that out loud. Several times.

Wiping some sweat from her brow, Miu peels off her backpack and sets it on the floor with a thud. A couple seconds of rummaging later, she snatches a water bottle and starts drinking greedily. "Ah!" she says with a smile. "That's better."

"Not…not…" Kirumi mumbles.

"Huh?! What?! Can't hear ya!" Miu shouts rather pointedly. Kirumi just lowers her gaze and fiddles with the cap for the gin. Miu rolls her eyes, a hint of guilt in her gut. She offers the maid an unopened water bottle from her backpack.

Hesitant, Kirumi's eyes dart from the extended bottle to Miu's eyes, as if expecting Miu to say it was all a joke. "May...ma'l?" She covers her mouth with her hand.

Miu nods. "Yeah, you can, just so long as you give me a sip o'that."

"Hmm?"

"Your gin, it's Old Tom, isn't it? Or…" Miu squints at the label. "Old Mom, I guess. Gotta avoid copyright or some shit."

"Very well." Kirumi trades the bottle in her hand for the water.
Before the maid can even uncap the water, Miu upends the gin over the dry mop in the corner. "Ah!" she says with a sneering smile. "That's better!"

"That… wash ma last -hic- last one!" Kirumi says, staring daggers at Miu who only laughs. "Bitch…"

"Oooh! Bringing out the big girl words!" Miu points to the water. "Better wash your mouth out!"

Kirumi goes to throw the bottle at Miu but before she can she keels over and vomits. Acting quick, Miu gently pulls Kirumi's hair from her face and lets Kirumi empty her stomach. The scene seems too familiar to Miu. Had she done this before? Probably. As Kirumi retches, there's no accompanying sense of disgust. Instinctual apathy. A desensitization that she's not sure why she has. Maybe once you die everything seems much tamer by comparison.

Heaving with lack of breath, Kirumi manages to suck down some of the thick air before another bout hits her.

"That's it, girl, just breathe and get that shit out of ya," Miu says, touching Kirumi's back. It's sticky with sweat. Most of the maid is, honestly. The underside of her hair is absolutely drenched. Miu bites her lip but says nothing, just keeps reassuring. "Should be just about done now, keep breathing, 'Rumi."

Breathing.

Breathe

Breathing.

Breathe

Not breathing.

No breathe.

Can't fucking breathe.

I can't fucking breathe!

An agonizing burn strikes Miu's lungs. Her throat clogs. The air trapped in her mouth rots. Miu's hand that was on Kirumi's back instantly lunges to the her own chest. Before she can begin rubbing, however, there's a whine from Kirumi.

Swallowing as best she can, Miu returns her hand to Kirumi's back, rubbing gently. Kirumi stares out of the closet. Does she see Miu's pain? The light that streams in from the windows beyond the closet. It's so beautiful. If only because it's the only thing that Miu can see. Blackness encroaches on her vision as her body lusts for oxygen. But she can't breathe can't breathe can't fucking breathe god damn it.

Suddenly, the door to the closet opens wider and a silhouette blocks some of the light. It's a massive, muscular figure, tears of regret streaming down its face. It's a petite, wicked figure, a twisted smile cackling. It's a calming, familiar figure, welcoming Miu with open arms. Is it Death again?

"O-Oh my! What has happened in here?!"

It's none of those things. The darkness retracts from Miu's vision. She can breathe. She could always
breathe. She's breathing.

Miu blinks. Once. Twice. Takes a breath. Takes a breath. Takes a breath. She's breathing. She rests her hand against her chest, feels it rise and fall, feels the flesh of her lungs expand and deflate. Breathing.

"Iruma, Tojo, what is going on?" the figure asks. A woman's voice, velvety and calming. Miu looks up to see Sonia Nevermind. She'd arrived early that morning. She and Gundham replaced Peko and Fuyuhiko, who had gone to some remote island or something.

The original big-titted blonde chick Miu thinks, not entirely sure why she thought that.

Hopping up, Miu tosses her hair behind her. She motions to Kirumi with her boot. "This party animal forgot the fucking party starts at nine p.m., not nine a.m."

"I am sorry?" Sonia says, "I am not quite understanding."

"She's drunk as fuck."

"Ah, I see."

Kirumi groans from the floor as if to remind everybody that she's still there. Sonia kneels down in front of the maid, helps her get to a sitting position, carefully feeds her sips of water.

"She is burning up," Sonia comments.

"Tsk, no shit, hotter n' more humid than a wet pussy today."

Sonia scrunches her brow, then relaxes. "Oh, right, right. You are the crass one."

"So that's what they call me?" Miu kicks an empty bottle. "Fucking figures."

"Oh! I do not mean to offend!" Sonia says, mild blush forming on her face.

Miu just shrugs. "Not fucking wrong, I guess."

After several minutes, Sonia manages to clean up most of the vomit off Kirumi's face. The maid herself seems to drift in and out of awareness. Each time she looks like she's about to lose consciousness, Miu gives her a good slap or three to the face. Wakes her right up. Eventually, Sonia turns her attention to Miu.

In the simulation, whatever dickhead that wrote her character decided to make Miu shrink away at the slightest resistance. Really fucking funny, huh? If there's one thing she's figured out about herself, it's that Miu Iruma doesn't back down. At least, not in that weird, submissive bitch kind of way.

Except for when Sonia Nevermind stares at her.

Her stare is unnerving, to say the least. Her game sprites never did it justice. Her cool blue eyes shimmer with deadly competence hiding just beneath them, like a shark lurking just beneath a still pool of water. Miu takes a step back.

"Iruma," Sonia says, her voice too calm, too even. A perfect negotiator's voice. Or interrogator. "What happened?"

Swallowing hard, Miu recounts how she was exploring when she stumbled on Kirumi. Sonia says nothing except for asking a couple of clarifying questions. After Miu tells her admittedly short story
(leaving out the part where she can't breathe, she doesn't need them on her back any more than they already are), Sonia seems to be satisfied.

"I see," the princess says. "I was merely making sure that you were not responsible for her current state."

"The fuck? Why would I even do this?"

Sonia's face is unreadable. "I cannot say. But those who come out of the pods can be unpredictable."

Miu pulls an annoyed face. "So ya'll think we're a bunch of ticking fucking time bombs?"

Sonia sighs heavily. "You and us, both, Iruma."

Shit. Right. They were in them, too. Welp, good going Miu!

"Besides," Sonia continues, "I also did not know if you were aware of Tojo's history with alcoholism."

"Nah, first I heard of it was cause she," Miu jerks a thumb at Kirumi. "Fucking told me she'd been drinking for three years." As silence falls between her and Sonia, a nagging thought creeps into Miu's mind. "How'd you know about her booze problems, princess?"

Both Kirumi and Sonia make noises of annoyance.

"Do not call me 'Princess,' please," Sonia says. Kirumi just looks pissed through her bleary-eyed stare.

"Sorry." She's really not.

"It is fine. To answer your question, there is some information in the Neo World Program concerning bits of your past." Sonia rises to her full height. "We have finished the repairs on the motel and we wanted to help you all move in."

That catches both Miu and Kirumi's attention. Miu steps forward and jabs a finger at Sonia. "Our past? Don't tell me you were fucking holding out on us!"

"I was not," Sonia says. Gentle, earnest. "We have only just recovered them this morning and are still sorting through them. We will share with you what we find as soon as possible. For now we are spread out trying to find all of you so you can sleep in your own beds tonight." She glances at Kirumi. "I did not expect this, however. My mind assumed the worst." She bows towards Miu. "My apologies."

"Whatever. I just wanna see this past shit," Miu says, already heading towards the door. She stops in the doorway and turns to Kirumi. "Can you walk?"

"Y-yeah," Kirumi says. However, as she tries to stand, she immediately falls back down, barely stopping herself from clocking her head on the wall. "No…"

"Oh dear," Sonia tuts. "Iruma, would you please help me escort Kirumi to the rest of the group?"

A lightbulb clicks in Miu's head and a devilish grin appears on her face. "I'll do ya one better. Wait right fucking here!" She runs from the room. A few minutes later she returns pushing a suitcase trolley. "One trolley for one inebriated maid!"

Sonia's gentle expression turns stern. "This is no joke, Iruma."
Miu snorts and moves to where Kirumi is leaned against the walls. "And I ain't joking. Help me load her up." Miu tucks her arms under Kirumi's armpits and hefts her partially up, grunting as she does so. "God damn, 'Rumi."

"Shu-shut up...Iurma. Is mushcle," Kirumi replies, arms limp. Despite her aggressive tone, she's pretty docile.

Sonia hesitates for a moment before shaking her head. "If you are certain this will work…"

"Course I am!" Miu says. "Done this before!"

"You have?"

"Hell if I know. But there's no way we're dragging her all the way there."

"I could call for a gurney."

"That's no fucking fun!"

Sonia regards Miu for a moment before a wry smile forms. "Very well, Iurma, I will get her legs."

Through some fancy maneuvering (and plenty of swearing on all three women's parts), they manage to lift Kirumi onto the trolley and secure her using some baggage straps lying around. Her arms are bound to the back on the trolley as well as her head to keep it from jostling too much.

Miu laughs as she tightens the last strap around Kirumi's ankle. "God, Kirumi, we should call Maki up. I'm sure she'd love to see you all tied up like this."

Kirumi only rolls her eyes and tries to maintain any shred of dignity she may have.

"Please, let us hurry," Sonia says, though Miu can see the mischievous gleam in Sonia's eyes that betrays her amusement.

With some effort, Sonia manages to begin wheeling Kirumi out of the airport, with Miu following behind.

Miu who suddenly can't breathe.

Miu who says nothing and tries to keep her stride even with Sonia's.

Miu who can't breathe.

I can't breathe!

Who fucking cares?

*************************************************************************

If this were any other situation, Rantaro would be happy. Sunbathing alone on a tropical beach, waves licking his feet gently, a cooler full of unhealthy snacks and a gallon of water to his right. It
would be heaven. A vacation like no other. Even his other self would like it. The Ultimate Adventurer discovering a secluded oasis, truly befitting his title.

Of course, he shouldn't have another self. He should be Rantaro Amami, only child who grew up in the concrete jungle that is Tokyo to middle-class parents and an utterly boring life who decided to sign up for a killing game to make it more interesting. Or, he should be Rantaro Amami, older brother to twelve sisters, one of which he somehow lost, and is now travelling the world to find only to get roped into a killing game. Either or. But no, he's both.

In a way, it makes no sense. Logically, that is. He has to be either or. If one of two experiences was a simulation, then that one wasn't real. Or. And yet, is a simulated experience real? In the end, he still feels headaches from where the shot put hit. He still feels headaches from where he was hit with a gate to his family's home. Still can't remember what his talent is. Only remembers he has no talent.

And that says nothing of the first killing game, the second experience. The killing game he was supposedly in before the simulation. Bits and pieces of memory float around it in an opaque plasma. Nothing clear, nothing concrete. Could it have even happened? And who was that Rantaro Amami? Is he Rantaro Amami or Rantaro Amami or Rantaro Amami?

Rantaro Amami or Rantaro Amami?
Rantaro Amami and Rantaro Amami?
Not Rantaro Amami or Rantaro Amami?
Rantaro Amami and not Rantaro Amami?
If Rantaro Amami, then not Rantaro Amami?
Rantaro Amami so not Rantaro Amami?
Rantaro Amami and Rantaro Amami, therefore not Rantaro Amami?
Rantaro Amami but not Rantaro Amami and Rantaro Amami
Not Rantaro Amami or not Rantaro Amami, therefore, if Rantaro Amami, then not Rantaro Amami.
Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami Rantaro Amami

I am Rantaro Amami.

Who is Rantaro Amami?

Click.

He presses the clicker in his hand down, is about to press it again but stops himself. Hajime had given him the clicker a few therapy sessions ago. He had told Rantaro that the adventurer was suffering from intrusive thoughts related to trauma. Hajime had instructed Rantaro to click whenever he felt a thought was out of the ordinary or if he felt that the thought was becoming overwhelming.

Rantaro stares at the silver clicker. It glints in the sun, hiding the mechanical number on the front.
Hajime had said that the clicker would serve both as a distraction for Rantaro and as a measurement for Hajime to track how frequently the thoughts occur.

For a brief moment, Rantaro contemplates tossing the clicker into the ocean. Maybe it would float away or sink into the abyss. Or maybe the waves would carry it back. A perennial reminder that he was sick and needed treatment. That they all were.

He throws himself down, clenching his eyes and swallowing his lips as a plume of sand erupts from under him. A small breeze carries most of the sand away but he can feel a few bits fall onto his skin. Maybe it will bury him alive. That would be an improvement to this life.

Click.

*Can't think like that, can't think like that, can't think like that, can't…*

Click.

Groaning, he sits up again. At this rate, he'll have a godlike set of abs by the end of the day. He dusts some sand out of his air then plays with some of the piercings in his right ear. He didn't have them before the simulation, he can remember that much. That's annoying. Now he'll either have to just deal with having a ton of piercings or wait for the awkward line of holes to close up. Also annoying.

Why even pierce his ears if it was all just a simulation? Couldn't they just, like, press a few buttons, hire some graphic designer, and boom, earrings on Simulation Rantaro Amami. Oh great, another Rantaro Amami, as if there aren't enough of them around here.

Click.

Figuring food would take his mind off of… everything, Rantaro digs into his cooler and picks out a bag of American chips. Salt and vinegar. What a weird combination. Still, the slight stinging as the chips pass his lips in tongue isn't unpleasant and the taste is vibrant, harsh, distinct. He pops a few more chips into his mouth before bringing the gallon jug of water to his lips, drinking greedily. As he lowers the jug, he considers it for a moment. Gallons, huh? Weird, it's a Japanese game *that can't be can't be can't be real-

Click.

It's a Japanese game, Rantaro figures they'd use liters. Whatever. Water is water and it's better than having to boil his water from the ocean. Adventurer Rantaro Amami remembers doing that often. Adventurer Rantaro Amami needs to be quiet or else Real(?) Rantaro Amami will-

Click.

Wait, no. Rantaro didn't click. He turns around to face the path and sees something of a surprise. Korekiyo rolls himself down the path, alone. His face is contorted beneath his mask in effort and perhaps pain and sweat races down his face. Each time he bends or leans too far forward he grimaces in pain.

"Hey, Shinguji!" Rantaro calls. A distraction, an interesting one at that.

Korekiyo's head jerks to face Rantaro and he seems relieved as he starts to wheel over to Rantaro. When he reaches the edge of the sand, however, he stops and motions for Rantaro to come to him.

Rolling his eyes behind his sunglasses, Rantaro hefts himself up and walks over to Korekiyo.
"Hello, Amami," Korekiyo says, somewhat out of breath.

"You okay there, man?"

"Just need a chance to regain my composure is all."

Rantaro runs a hand through his hair. "What are you doing out here anyway? Tsumiki say you could leave?"

Korekiyo suddenly tenses and looks around frantically. There's nobody, though Rantaro thinks he can hear someone in the distance. "No," Korekiyo says, voice low. "I managed to get myself out."

"Uh-huh." Rantaro moves behind Korekiyo and gets the wheelchair back from the grassy line that borders the beach onto the tarmac. "And why did you need to get out?"

Korekiyo glances around again. "I… I overheard something. Last night."

Rantaro laughs. "Maybe it was Iruma's snoring. That girl kept me up all night."

Based on the glare Korekiyo is giving him, Rantaro quickly comes to the conclusion that the other boy is in no mood for jokes. "I am serious. I have a bad feeling."

The voices in the distance are growing closer. "Let's walk and talk," Rantaro says, pushing Korekiyo in the direction of the bridge.

"What about your belongings?"

Who cares they're not real none of this is real they'll probably just despawn.

Click.

"I'll pick 'em up later. They're not going anywhere."

"Very well," Korekiyo says, pulling his low ponytail to the front of his shoulder so it's not in Rantaro's way.

The two walk for a bit, letting the only sounds between them be the click of the wheels on the pavement, the crash of the ocean, and the voices behind them. Though the voices don't seem to be getting any quieter, they aren't getting any louder either. Rantaro assumes that's a good thing.

"So," Rantaro starts, "What did you want to tell me?"

"Well, not you specifically, but really any of… um… us."

"Us?"

"Yes, not -er- not any of them from the - the game."

"I see."

Korekiyo twists his hands in front of him. It's weird to see them, Rantaro notes, not covered in bandages. They're so normal. Well-manicured, too. Guess Korekiyo doesn't really have much to do in that hospital room.

"I… I overheard Souda and Koizumi talking last night. Souda specifically."
Rantaro cocks an eyebrow. "Okay, go on."

"Someone called him. And they sounded very angry. But… but it was how Souda responded that was weird. It was like he was… annoyed."

"And that's… suspicious?" As much as he's trying to humor Korekiyo, there really seems to be nothing weird about this story.

Korekiyo sighs and scratches at his chest underneath his hospital gown. "I apologize, I am doing a poor job of telling the story."

*Which Korekiyo Shingui would be a better storyteller?* Rantaro wonders. This one seems to be evasive with the important details. The other one didn't know when to stop.

Click. Focus, Rantaro Amami. Survivor Rantaro Amami. Real Rantaro Amami.

Click.

Finally gathering his thoughts, Korekiyo speaks up. "Do you know what happened between Akamatsu and Saihara?"

"Not really," Rantaro says. "I know Akamatsu lost it one night and dragged Saihara somewhere. Haven't spoken to each other since. Why?"

"She… lost it?"

"Yeah, running away, screaming, nightmares. The usual," Rantaro spits, sardonic, bitter.

"And she is… alright now?"

Rantaro nods. "Guess so. She's more or less been herself. Been seeing Hinata ever since. Think it's done her some good." He shrugs.

"That is good." Korekiyo shakes his head. "My apologies, I got off track."

"It's all good," Rantaro says, clapping a hand on Korekiyo's shoulder. Of course, letting go of the wheelchair handle causes it to veer to the left, nearly sending Korekiyo into a wading pool. Fortunately, Rantaro grabs him at the last second. "My turn to apologize."

To Rantaro's surprise, Korekiyo lets out a light chuckle. "It is quite alright." He clears his throat. "As I was saying, the man on the phone knew about what happened between those two."

Okay, that's weird. "What'd he say? Specifically?" Rantaro asks, voice low and dark.

"I didn't hear what the man on the phone said, but Souda responded that he -Souda, that is- could not control whether Akamatsu and Saihara ended up together."

Rantaro thinks back to the night on the beach. Kaede had looked wild, a beast set free from her cage, sights targeted on Shuichi. And something had happened between the two, something that could result in them being together but didn't. He'd have to find out what went down. The next time he sees Kaede, he'll ask her.

"Anything else?" Rantaro says coolly.

Korekiyo nods. "Yes, Koizumi and Souda became very alarmed when it seemed that I might be awake."
"You were awake, I take it?"

"Yes, but they did not know that. And they clearly wanted to ensure that was the case." Reaching up to the straps on his mask, Korekiyo undoes one side and lets the fabric fall to the side. Several white pills of varying sizes fall into his lap, which he then scoops into his hand.

Rantaro stops, reaches for the one of the pills. He holds it in the light but can't see any sort of label or branding. "What are these?"

"Some of them are pain medication," Korekiyo says. "Some," he turns and looks up at Rantaro, eyes wide. "Some, are sleeping pills."

"Sleeping pills?" He runs his thumb over the smooth white pill in his hand. It flakes a off a bit. "When did Tsumiki give you these?"

"About an hour ago."

Grimacing, Rantaro says, "Don't they usually give people sleeping pills at, you know, night?"

"Indeed, I believe they wanted to ensure that I would be… unavailable for a while." Korekiyo shivers and wraps himself in his arms. "I do not know what for. Why would they keep me asleep? Eventually I would have to wake up and interact with somebody. Otherwise it would seem suspicious."

"Maybe," Rantaro says, "Maybe they just wanted to monitor you. Or something." Rantaro wracks his brain for ideas, but all he can think of is that they wanted to kill Korekiyo in his sleep. But they wouldn't do that, would they? Just like Akamatsu would never kill me!

Click.

"Give me the rest of the pills," Rantaro instructs.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Get rid of 'em. Make it look like you took them." Korekiyo obliges, handing Rantaro the remaining pills. Rantaro walks to the edge of the ocean and chucks them as far as he can. They barely make a ripple in the churning sea. He returns to Korekiyo, who looks decidedly less satisfied than Rantaro would like.

"They will be expecting me to be asleep. We need to get back."

Though he has more questions, Rantaro knows that Korekiyo is right. "Don't worry, I'll get you… Is that Tojo on a suitcase trolley?"

Turning the corner from the bridge, Sonia and Miu emerge with a rather sickly looking Kirumi on, yes, that is a suitcase trolley.

Rantaro leans close and whispers, "Between us?"

"Between us, for now."

Miu is the first to notice Rantaro and Korekiyo. She flashes a shit-eating grin that tells Rantaro that Kirumi's predicament is entirely her fault. "Rantacado, Snakikiyo, what's goin' on?"

Rantaro smiles an easy smile. Is it his smile? Or his double's? Or his triple's? Or-
Click. None of that matters now. He smiles and lies with equal ease.

"Shinguji's been cooped up for so long. Figured he could use a walk, you know?"

"It was rather stuffy in that hospital room," Korekiyo adds.

Miu snorts. "Not much fucking better out here."

"I agree," Sonia says, "It is most unbearable." She suddenly smiles in a way that is far too sincere for Rantaro's liking. "But I am glad I found you both, we are to meet with everyone at the motel shortly!"

"Guess we're lucky we ran into you, then," Rantaro says, turning Korekiyo around and falling into stride with Sonia. "So, to address the elephant in the room…"

Sonia blinks. "Elephant? What elephant?"

*Oh my God, she really does that.* Rantaro thinks to himself. That is rather odd to hear in real life. But is this real life?

Click.

Miu rescues him from his thoughts. She bends down and pats Kirumi's cheek. "Kirdrunky here just had a little bit too much today, didn't she?"

Kirumi's green eyes have never looked so hostile. "I… I do not like you right now, Iruma."

"Miu, call me Miu," she says with a giggle. "Need more water?" Without waiting for a response, Miu tips a bottle into Kirumi's mouth, giving her just a sip.

"Thanksh…" Kirumi says, reluctant.

The group makes their way to the motel, with Sonia and Miu filling Rantaro and Korekiyo in on exactly how Kirumi came to be attached to a suitcase trolley. Rantaro can't help but feel a twinge of guilt. He'd seen Kirumi take the cognac, but, at best, he figured she'd only get through one or two bottles in the several days it's been since then. With how many bottles Miu said there were in that little closet… How could he have let that happen?

*This is how you lost your sister.*

Click.

He doesn't click, he keeps walking. The voices surrounding him fade away into a drizzle. Of course, it makes sense how he could lose a sister. He never paid attention, not to anyone, really. He was going to stop a killing game? How? He was distracted by a camera flash. He didn't notice a person sneaking up on him after a damn shot put ball fell right next to him. It makes sense. It's logical for that Rantaro Amami. What about this Rantaro Amami? Or the original Rantaro Amami? Or that one in the middle? Or the one that hasn't emerged yet? Or the one that spoke to Kirumi a few days ago?

"Sh-Shinguji!" A timid voice snaps Rantaro back to reality. Mikan is rushing towards Korekiyo with tears streaming, almost comically, from her eyes. She barrels past Sonia, Miu, and Kirumi, stopping just short of crashing into Korekiyo. "W-w-what are y-you d-doing out? W-without me?"

"I-" Korekiyo tries to say, but all he does is look at his lap.

"D-do you not want, want my help?" Mikan sobs. Rantaro's not sure if it's some sort of guilt act or if
she really does think that.

"Hey, Tsumiki," Rantaro says. "It's my fault. I took him out for some air."

After several minutes of Sonia calming Mikan down and reassuring her that, yes, she is taking
wonderful care of Korekiyo, they finally manage to console her enough that she actually can speak
coherently.

"S-sorry," she mumbles. "I wanted to check on him and when he wasn't there, I panicked." She
bows low, head nearly knocking into Korekiyo's knees. "A-also..." She turns to face Kirumi. "What
seems to be the issue?"

"Do I have to fucking tell the story again?" Miu says, throwing her hands up.

"I will take care of it," Sonia assuages.

Rantaro breathes a sigh of relief as Mikan directs all of her attention to helping Kirumi. He makes
eye contact with Korekiyo and they both nod, the shared secret between them hopefully intact.

**************************

Sleeping in the motel, Shuichi decides, is infinitely more difficult than sleeping in the lobby of the
hotel. The Remnants had made it seem like such a big deal that all of the Survivors (how easy it's
become to call their groups by their titles) would get their own rooms, their own space. They even
got to pick which rooms they wanted!

Hooray, way to punish those who haven't woken up yet. He had to admit that the lobby was getting
crammed. And Miu was noisy as anything. And being so close to Kaede, even if she had long moved
to the other side of the pile, kept him up. Maybe he just doesn't need to sleep anymore. He can exist
in the a purgatory state where everything moves around him so that he doesn't need to respond to it.

Wishful thinking.

For now, he's walking along the balcony on the second floor. In the game, there was only one floor.
Maybe that's what Kazuichi had been doing. Creating a whole new floor. No, that couldn't be it. Too
much chipped paint and ratty carpeting. Just another inconsistency. Another piece of evidence that
they're not in the game.

But that's not possible. There's no evidence that's possible. There used to be evidence it was
impossible. Now Shuichi himself shows that it very well might be. What is it, anyway? He doesn't
know.

The wind howls, shaking the palm trees and causing several boards from the giant motel sign to flap
and clatter against themselves. Another storm is coming. Hajime had said that hurricane season is
coming up soon. Fantastic.

A door opens as he passes by. Himiko jumps back in surprise as she almost barges into Shuichi. Her
slippers squeak as she does so. She's carrying an over-sized pillow, clutching it close to her chest. A tuft of hair blows free in the wind.

"Shuichi," she says, voice tinny and small.

"Evening, Himiko," he responds, reaching up to grab his hat. Oh right, he left it in his room. "Can't sleep either?"

Himiko shakes her head emphatically, nuzzling her chin into the pillow as she does so. "No… too empty… M'scared."

"Of what?"

"Too many things to say." Shutting the door behind her, Himiko steps onto the balcony then almost immediately plops down, resting her head against the high railing. "I wanna go home, Shuichi," she says, her voice heavy with uncried sobs.

"Me too, me too," Shuichi replies. Though there's a sour note to it. He doesn't remember where he's from. He knows he lived with his grandparents. He can remember the apartment complex they lived in. But names escape him. As they did with Kaede. He sits down next to Himiko, so she presses her cheek against his shoulder. When she first did that to him, he had gone rigid, but now he knows it's just something she does when she needs comfort. She usually needs comfort. So does he.

"Hey, where are you from?" Shuichi asks, hoping… well, he's not really sure what he's hoping for. Maybe he shouldn't hope for anything. Hope hasn't exactly done much for him lately.

"Minna-Jima," she says.

"Where's that?"

"It's an island. Off Okinawa. Really nice beaches." Himiko squeezes the pillow tighter. "I one time swam so far out in the ocean that I nearly drowned. A nice lifeguard saved me."

"That's good," Shuichi says.

"Why?"

"Huh?"

Himiko sits up and stares into Shuichi's eyes. "Why's it good? If I drowned, I wouldn't be dealing with this."

Shuichi grips the railing in front of them. Sucks in a salty, bitter breath. "I don't know what to say to that." Failure rings hollow in his gut.

"'S okay," Himiko says, returning to her place on Shuichi's shoulder. "Didn't think you would. Jus' talking is all."

"Morbid topic," says a voice to their left. Both Shuichi and Himiko look and see Maki walking towards them from the end of the balcony. Her room was technically on the first floor, but she'd been inseparable from Kirumi since the meeting earlier. Shuichi had never seen her move as fast as she did when that suitcase trolley showed up.

"Hi Ma- Harukawa," Himiko says.

"Maki is fine."
Himiko noticeably brightens, sitting up straight with a tired smile.

Maki slides down on the other side of Himiko, letting her legs dangle over the edge, underneath a gap in the railing. "Any reason you two are out here?"

"Couldn't sleep," they answer in unison.

"Don't do that."

"Sorry," they say, again in unison.

Maki narrows her eyes. "Do you wanna die?"

At that, Himiko bursts into a fit of slow giggles. "You sound like an edgelord when you say that."

Shuichi smiles as Maki's face takes on a nice red blush. Did Team Danganronpa give him a catchphrase like that? That's one thing he's glad he can't remember.

"How's Tojo?" Shuichi says.

"Fine," Maki answers hurriedly. "Didn't need her stomach pumped. Just threw up a lot."

Himiko scrunches up her nose. "Gross."

"Yeah."

Silence overtakes the trio. Shuichi gazes out into the dark ocean. It's almost a full moon. A luminescent white glow shines over the waves, occasionally blocked by a passing cloud. When a cloud passes, it's rimmed by the glow, the silver lining, as the idiom goes. Another gust of wind blows. A series of waves thunders against the beach, slamming it mercilessly.

The ocean's funny, Shuichi thinks. It's an irregular pattern. An uncertain certainty. He knows that waves will crash. If he stares long enough he can even find the rhythm in their crashing. But they're rarely in the same place. A wave might crash a meter away from another or a centimeter. Almost never in the same place. Inconsistent.

He'd had a recording when he was a kid of the ocean crashing. Was it the real ocean? Or recorded? He thinks the latter. It was too perfect. Each crash was the same pitch, the same frequency. The real ocean isn't like that. It's raw and powerful, listening to no rules but its own, indomitable.

Shuichi is surrounded by the ocean, being tossed around, submerged deeper and deeper. The pressure squishes him on all sides, and still deeper he goes. Fish and kelp and the occasional sea turtle pass him on his way down. Down into the darkness, into that all-consuming intensity. It's only when he sucks in air that he remembers that he's escaped. That he's alive.

Team Danganronpa, that seemingly all-powerful ocean that drowns each of its participants until they're nothing but skeletons in a shipwreck. They didn't get him. Or Himiko. Or Maki.

Maybe Tenko was the lifeguard that saved Himiko. Or Angie. Or Gonta. Or maybe even Kokichi. How would you even see Himiko? She's so small that the ocean could hide her with little problem. Maybe it was her magic that saved her.

Maki saved herself. She wouldn't have it any other way. She found debris in the ocean and hauled herself to shore. She'll never admit that maybe that debris was Kaito's coat.

And who saved him? Who saved Shuichi? He doesn't know. It could be Kaede. She dragged him
down, down to the very bottom of the ocean where the pressure squeezes out even sound. But then she pushed him up, gave him her last breath and sent him to the surface. Maybe it was Kokichi, who shone a light into the ocean's darkness like an angler fish, drawing Shuichi closer and closer. But when Shuichi thought he would see a row of a predator's teeth, he only saw a scared little boy who knew he wasn't making it out alive.

There's millions of possibilities. But he's here, alive and dry and together with his other survivors. He calls them all survivors, but in reality it's he, Himiko, and Maki that are the survivors. Maybe. Too many maybes. The maybes can drown for all he cares.

"Hey, Shuichi," Himiko says.

"Yeah?"

"What happened that night?"

"Which night?"

"You know the one she's talking about," Maki says.

He does know. The night with Kaede. They both have avoided talking about it, to each other and to the rest. "She played piano for me, then we kissed, and… and she said she thinks she has a boyfriend."

"A boyfriend?" Maki says, playing with her hair. "Figures."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Shuichi asks, half defensive, half playful.

"She's pretty, plucky, and charming," Maki replies simply.

"And she's got big boobs," Himiko adds.

"That, too."

Shuichi smiles and rolls his eyes. It's funny. He built that moment up in his head so much. The big reveal of what happened that tragic night. But really, there was no moment, not like he imagined. Besides, if he's being honest with himself, he didn't feel anything from that kiss. No magic, no spark. And he knows why.

"I'm not that broken up about it anymore," Shuichi says.

"Could have fooled us," Maki says.

"I mean," Shuichi scratches the back of his neck, a pained smile on his face. "It's still awkward, but she and I managed a small conversation today."

"Whatever you say," Himiko quips.

"Just let me finish. But I kinda… kinda remembered something that made it easier." Maki and Himiko lean in closer, so Shuichi holds up his hand and pushes them back a bit. "You guys are making me uncomfortable."

"You remembered you're gay, didn't you, Shuichi?" Himiko says, stone-faced.

Shuichi stammers for a couple seconds before managing a weak, "Yes."
"Hm! Hm! Hm!" Himiko laughs triumphantly. "I called it, Maki!"

"Yes, you did."

"Did you guys bet on this?!" Shuichi says, scandalized.

Rolling her neck, Maki lays down. "We didn't bet, but we talked about it."

Shuichi can feel his face heating up, but with Himiko's giggling and Maki's chaste smile, he can't help but laugh as well. "Honestly, I think I'm only 95 percent gay."

Maki furrows her brow. "What's the other five?"

"Kaede."

"He's Kaede-sexual," Himiko stage-whispers to Maki.

"Team Danganronpa," Maki muses, "The only cure to homosexuality."

"It doesn't need a cure!" Shuichi retorts, only to be met with a withering stare from Maki.

"Shuichi, think about who I'm with and then say that again, but slowly."

Turning away to hide his blush, Shuichi buries his face in his hands, hearing Himiko and Maki's laughter behind him.

Himiko adjusts so that she's sitting on her pillow, drawing her legs under chin, resting it on her knees. "I don't think I've really thought about what I am."

"Never been in a relationship?" Maki asks.

Himiko shakes her head. "Never really liked anybody. Maybe Tenko."

"Maybe?"

"We'll see when she wakes up."

"Fair enough."

Though she doesn't say it out loud, Shuichi knows that Maki is thinking of Kaito. For however ham-fisted of a romance that might have been, it's a feeling that Maki won't be able to shake for a while. At least, if how Shuichi feels about Kaede is any indication.

As Shuichi loses himself in his musings, Himiko and Maki move on to other topics. Their high schools, friends, any random tidbits that they can remember, really.

For a moment, it's as if they're regular teenagers on some sort of school trip. Talking about themselves and others and nothing and everything. Away from the world but entirely invested in it. Keeping their voices low so not to wake their chaperone and talking so loud that the world can't help but listen in. The universe revolves around them and they're insignificant cogs. Teenagers.

For a moment, Shuichi feels normal.

And that terrifies him.
Chapter End Notes

It's 3:30 in the morning. Current mood: Ibuki foaming at the mouth sprite.

That's it. Goodnight.

Next time some stuff will happen. Or not.

As always, comments and criticisms are appreciated.
Incidental Indecent Incidents

Chapter Notes

Since this is the tenth chapter of this fic, I just want to say, I am always blown away by the amount of support it's received. For everyone who leaves kudos or comments or even just takes the time to read this fic thank you.

And whoever recommended my fic on the TV Tropes page, you're amazing! Probably. Could be an awful human being who recommended this because you thought it was terrible. Probably amazing though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Four days. Four days since Keebo woke up. Kiib? K1-B0? His mind flicks through all the spellings of his name, finding all of them and none of them correct. For now it's Keebo, though that could be subject to change within the next five minutes.

Now that he thinks about it, has it been four days? Maybe it's been five? Staring at the ceiling tiles day in and day out does have its disadvantages. Not that he wants to stare at the ceiling tiles, just that moving is such a chore that he's willing to put up with the boredom. Still, it's bothering him to not know how many days have passed. Were he still a robot (can he say that? Was he ever a robot really?"), he would just check his internal clock, calibrated to the microsecond.

His eyes dart over to the wall next to his bed. Some movement is easy. Mikan and Hajime had mentioned that he seemed to be slowly re-acclimating to automatic movement. Still, his case stumped even them. They had never seen someone turn into a robot and turn back before. Well, not since Nekomaru, but he had known he wasn't a robot the entire time.

Keebo had been a robot. In his mind at least. Now his whole body feels far too light. Sometimes, when he tries to move, his body will lurch forward, like picking up a can that you thought was filled but is really empty. Even worse is the awareness of his body. As a robot, the awareness seemed natural, a constant stream of data that continuously informed his central processor about his general maintenance needs. But the human brain likes to be unconscious of the body, forget it exists.

When questioned by Mikan about how he felt, he managed to liken the feeling to when someone draws your attention to the fact that you are manually breathing or blinking, or when you notice the tongue doesn't ever sit quite right in the mouth. A minor annoyance, yet one raised by this aggravating consciousness that the mind tries so hard to eliminate.

Right, the calendar, the date. He can hardly focus sometimes. It's like being around Kokichi all over again. The date is just out of his eye range. He'll have to move his head to see it. No doubt that's intentional. Hajime had been the one who put the calendar up. By making Keebo unable to see with just his eyes, Hajime forces him to move his head even if just a little bit.

Grinding his teeth (another small victory for him) Keebo wills his head to move. It doesn't. When he was a robot it was so easy. A couple lines of code informed his every movement, going so fast as to simulate automation but in reality being instructed, intentional.

He tries again and his head moves with no resistance, as if he were a normal human. He is a normal
human now.

The calendar's gone. Strange. He remembers Hajime putting it up. Or maybe he doesn't. His robot brain created no fantasies. Memories were stored crystal clear in his databanks to be brought up at a moment's notice, even recorded if need be. Maybe this human brain had made up Hajime's visit, tricked him into believing that he had hope of ever getting concrete data again.

Before he has a chance to ruminate on this any further, the door to his room swings open.

"ARISE, CONSTRUCT MADE FLESH. THE DARK LORD COMMANDS YOU!" A deep, booming voice shouts.

Keebo is on the ceiling. Not really. A human expression to indicate a sudden, exaggerated movement, often motivated by fear. In reality he's standing on his bed, arms pressed against the wall, eyes wide, breath heavy. In front of him, Gundham Tanaka stands with his hands on his hips, laughing triumphantly.

"You see, Meek One, you see? Even magic such as this cannot resist the aura of the mighty Overlord of Ice!" He cackles as Mikan emerges behind him.

"I-I'm sorry, Keebo!" she cries, bowing deeply and repeatedly. "I c-couldn't stop him! Oh! I'm su-such a failure!"

"Silence!" Gundham shouts, "You powers of restoration are great, but in this moment they are not what is needed. No, he must be hit with overwhelming force so that this creature may move again!"

Breathing slowing, Keebo blinks as he processes Gundham's words. It suddenly clicks. He moved! Keebo moved! Automatically! He leapt from the bed and was standing! Standing! His arms flailed out and braced his whole body against the wall. A slow grin emerges on his face and he doesn't even have to tell it to.

Crossing his arms, Gundham's smile turns cocky. "I see that you have finally seen the wisdom in my magic."

"Y-yeah…" Keebo says, voice soft. He's still not entirely used to talking, but it's getting better. The vibrations of his vocal cords don't bother him as much and his mouth moves pretty freely. "Thank you, Tanaker." Okay, maybe he still slurs some words together.

"Oh no, we are far from done! This is just the beginning!"

"Huh?" Both Mikan and Keebo say.

"Go, my Twelve Zodiac Generals, your time has come!" With a flourish, Gundham thrusts his arm forward. Almost immediately, a surge of hamsters erupts from various parts of his clothing, scurrying down his arm then hopping off and racing towards Keebo.

"W-wait!" Keebo cries, arms in front of his face. "I-I don't think this is…"

Before he can finish, the hamsters assail him. They crawl up his hospital gown, running all over Keebo's body. But instead of hurting Keebo, their assault… tickles?

How long since he's felt this? He doesn't even remember being ticklish! But he doesn't have the time to think as a laugh forces its way from his throat. He doubles over, sliding down the wall onto the bed. He grips his sides and tries to snatch the hamsters as they run around. They're much faster than he is so they easily evade him, especially once they figure out that his sides are particularly
vulnerable.

All the while Gundam chants, "Yes, my Generals, yes. Purge the remnants of the construct, ALLOW FOR THIS BEING OF FLESH TO BE REBORN AS MAN ONCE AGAIN!"

"P-please!" Keebo begs, tears streaming down his face. "St - hahaha- Stop! It's- It's starting…" A hamster dances over his side and Keebo instinctually grabs at it.

Gundham nods then holds up his fist. The hamsters stop, returning to Gundam and nestling themselves back into their hiding spots.

Keebo breathes a sigh of relief, wiping his eyes and taking heavy breaths. He hasn't been this embarrassed and confused since Tenko and Gonta threw him at the tank holding Ryoma's skeleton. His stomach sinks as memories from the game resurface. If there's one good thing about his focus on his own body, it's that he's been distracted from that.

Unless he feels like he's exploding again.

Before that horrid thought can take root, however, Mikan rushes over and starts examining him. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, you're not hurt are you?"

From behind her, Gundam scoffs, turning his head. "As if my Generals would be so careless as to harm this boy accidentally."

Ignoring him, Mikan keeps running her diagnostic, almost desperately looking for something wrong with Keebo. Finally, just as she seems to be done, she blushes furiously and slams her eyes shut. "Please forgive me for this but I must check!"

Keebo can't even think of reacting before Mikan lifts his hospital gown and ducks her head beneath it. He slams his arms down and pushes against Mikan's head with all of his strength. Either he's really weak or Mikan is really determined because she doesn't budge. "T-t-t-tsumiki, I beg you to stop!" he shouts

"Mikan, what madness has overtaken you?!!" Gundam says as he runs forward and pulls on Mikan's dress from behind.

In all the struggle, Keebo barely notices the door open. When he looks up he sees Miu.

"Hey Keebs, brought ya some stuff if you can mo…"

Time freezes as Keebo experiences what humans call "absolute mortification." According to his, now rather inaccurate, math this situation looks exactly like…

"HAHAHA! Keebs you can finally move and you start an orgy!" Miu doubles over with laughter. "Next time let me know so I can join in!" She turns to leave and close the door.

"Miu wait it's not-!"

"It's fine Keebs, I won't tell anyone." With that, she leaves and shuts the door.

If Keebo ever doubted the human capacity for feeling shame, he has now learned that there are no limits to it. Mikan emerges from beneath his gown, a small, unassuming smile on her face.
"Everything seems to be in order," she says as if she hadn't done anything out of the ordinary.

Keebo looks to Gundam for support but he, too, seems to be entirely immobile, mouth agape in
shock. When he finally manages to regain some semblance of composure, Gundham squeaks out, "Why, Meek One, why?"

Giggling, Mikan clasps her hands in front of her. "You were right, Gundham, shock therapy does seem quite effective." She prances out the door, grabbing Keebo's clipboard on her way. No doubt, Keebo thinks, to update it with this new "discovery."

For several minutes, Gundham and Keebo say nothing. Neither move, neither make any sort of eye contact. Finally, Gundham straightens, mumbling something about needing to nourish the Generals to replenish the energy spent on the ritual. As he leaves he mumbles a quick, "My apologies… Even I could not have foreseen that."

Keebo suddenly craves the ceiling tiles. Maybe if he hadn't moved when Gundham came barrelling in, that wouldn't have just happened. And he would have gotten to talk to Miu.

He leans his head back against the wall. Though almost everyone has visited him fairly consistently since he's woken up, Miu has kept him the most company. Mostly because she can manage to hold a conversation all on her own. Or, if he listens to her, she's such a genius that she can read his eye movements and tell what Keebo's thinking. Maybe she can.

Still, he can't say he hasn't enjoyed her visits. She keeps him updated about what's going on around the island. That Shuichi and Kaede have started talking again but it's painfully awkward. That Rantaro has started to take Korekiyo out on walks with Kirumi sometimes joins them. Himiko makes it a point to be on the island farthest away when that happens. Kirumi and Maki sometimes walk down the beach together, hand-in-hand. According to Miu they don't say much, but she said that she thinks it's better that way.

They do a lot of walking, Keebo notes. A vague memory from before the game says that he liked to walk too. Liked. Something happened and he stopped. But he can't remember what. Maybe once he can walk easily again he'll join them.

At least, if they let him. The entire game he'd been working for Team Danganronpa without even realizing it. They used him to record and televise the entire event. That voice, that lovely little voice in his head that he misses even now being instructions sent to him from some far-off headquarters.

He tries to bury his face in his hands but they don't move so he grits his teeth instead. He can do that, at least, to show his disdain? Show it to whom? To who? No one says "to whom?" Not unless they have an entire book of English grammar rules programmed into their brain. But who is he showing disdain to? There's no one watching now. An almost deserted island in a vacant hospital.

Maybe it's for himself. He thinks it was Tenko who told others to express themselves. When Keebo would try, Kokichi would shoot him down, make some remark about how robots couldn't experience true emotions. Maybe he was right. Maybe all of the emotions Keebo ever felt were just simulations. Mere facsimiles of those that his classmates were truly feeling. Lines of code constituting feeling.

But that makes no sense. Aren't human feelings just chemistry after all? Hormones and chemicals rising and falling in amount within the body to produce physical changes. Perhaps the code worked like that.

Then again, would a person who could truly feel be analyzing them in such a detached way? Treating emotions as if they were insignificant data points waiting to be observed for catalogue? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

When he was a robot, he'd been programmed to pursue humanity, to find what made humans so,
well, human. Even as a human again he still doesn't know. Maybe nobody does.

He lets himself fall, head hitting his pillow with a dull *thwump*. Was falling movement? Did he fall or did gravity pull him? Can he claim that as victory?

So many questions. So few answers. Is that humanity? A robot is certain. It has a function and it performs that function and it knows that function. Or functions. But he asked in the game, asked so many questions, expressed uncertainty so many times. If this is humanity, was he ever a robot?

He buries his face with his hands (finally) and bites the heels of them. It hurts. Robots don't feel pain. He's human. Human. Human. Human.

The door to his room opens and Keebo manages to lower his hands. Hajime stands there, typing something on a tablet.

"Hello, Keebo," he says without looking up. "Or would you prefer Idabashi?"

Furrowing his brow, Keebo says, "That… was the man who created me."

"Oh yeah, almost forgot that's why I came here." Hajime pulls a small chair from the desk and sits next to Keebo. "Can you sit up on your own?"

"I-I can try." Keebo manages to get his arms in the right position but when he tries to push up nothing happens. Once Hajime starts helping he can manage, but he still feels like dead weight. After getting Keebo upright and steady, Hajime turns the tablet so he can see.

"As you know, a few days ago we uncovered files related to your pasts before the simulation. There was some seriously heavy encryption, to the point that it took even me several days to get through it all." He looks away for a moment, sheepish. "Even now, we haven't managed to recover everything."

"W-what have you got on me?" Keebo asks, leaning forward. What he thinks is excitement swells in his gut.

Continuing, Hajime says, "As I mentioned, we now know this Team Danganronpa simply used your last name to give you a creator."

He points to a line at the top of the screen. It looks as if it's on some sort of audition form. Written in simple, neat handwriting is the name "Kībo Idabashi."

"So that's how you spell it…" Keebo (Kībo?) whispers.

"In Romaji, yes," Hajime replies with a nod. "Though it appears to be spelt otherwise in several spots on the application."

Deflating somewhat, Keebo says, "Oh… Why though?"

"Uncertain."

"That… isn't comforting."

Hajime nods again. "I am aware. Unfortunately, until I have more time with this encryption, I don't think you will find much of the information satisfactory."

Keebo frowns, but then manages a small smile. "Still, it's nice to have something concrete, you know?"
Smiling back, Hajime places the tablet in front of Keebo, propping it up on a pillow. "I will get back to work on the code. Will you need assistance with the tablet?"

Keebo lifts his finger and flicks the screen downward. "I-I should be alright."

"Very well, call Mikan if you need help; she is downstairs."

"I-I'm sure I'll be fine," Keebo says, blush creeping onto his face.

Hajime just gives him a quizzical look before turning to leave. Right before he does, however, he stares at a spot just above Keebo's head. "Why did you take the calendar down?"

"I-I didn't!"

Hajime narrows his eyes and Keebo can only hope that Hajime can see he's innocent. He was doubting that Hajime ever did put it up in the first place a little bit ago!

Apparently it works because Hajime's face softens. "Must have been one of the others by mistake. I will bring it back shortly."

A distant part of Keebo's brain sends red flags flying, but he pushes down the creeping suspicion building in him and focuses on the tablet.

It's time to find out who he is.

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A headache. A normal headache. Kaede had been outside all day. She's tired, probably a bit dehydrated, and sunburnt. It's natural she'd get a headache. It's almost pleasant. No nightmares, no screams, no late night therapy sessions, nothing. Just a headache.

The doors to the pharmacy ding as she passes through, letting the imaginary employees know that she's arrived. Though the ringing in her head says otherwise, she appreciates that Kazuichi kept up with such mundane things like that. It makes her feel more grounded. Like she's not in this messed up situation. Of course, thinking about the mundanity only serves to enhance the insanity, so she quickly tries to focus on finding some aspirin and water.

Oh, and deodorant. She ran out this morning and has a nice little cut on her arm where the plastic nicked her. Why do they make those things so sharp?

Picking her way through the aisles, the water and aspirin are easy enough to find. Poorly disguised brands like Madvil and Dasanininini. She grabs the biggest bottle of aspirin she can find; she has a feeling she'll need it.

When she gets to the deodorant aisle, she decides to indulge herself and take her time picking out one. There's so many different scents and types. Up to this point she'd just used the basic stick deodorant that left that awful white residue on all her clothes. Not that any of the clothes were truly hers except for the outfit she'd woken up in. There's no way she's putting that thing on again.

She picks up a stick and sniffs it. Lavender, light and pleasant. Everyone always says her eyes remind them of lavender, maybe she could just go all out and become the Lavender Girl. As she
muses to herself the nickname rings an uncanny bell, like Piano Freak did in the simulation.

An image of that boy, her possible boyfriend, appears again and he's mouth words. It might be lavender girl. Kaede is suddenly in a lavender dress in a lavender room decorated with pots of lavender flowers. He whispers something else to her, but she shuts her eyes. Doesn't wanna think about that right now.

Returning the stick to its place, she gazes over her other options. Most of them are floral with pretty little pictures accompanying them. She turns her attention to the men's deodorant, smirking at the contrast. The scents make no sense. "Icy Mountain Blast," and "Sahara Heat" and all sorts of other ridiculous things. She takes a quick sniff and decides that she does, in fact, like the smell of "Icy Mountain Blast." She tucks it in the little basket she's carry.

Just as she does so, there's a pain in her chest. Not a terrible one, or even a physical one. No, it's a sense of deep foreboding. In just the couple weeks she's been up (has it really been that long? That short?), she's learned to feel her panic attacks coming on, as if her body is warning her before her brain decides to shut down for some arbitrary reason.

The therapy sessions with Hajime have helped. After that first nightmare-fueled night, he'd helped her start learning to predict and cope with the attacks. They're still not fun or welcome, but at least she can deal with them. She takes a deep breath, steels herself. Panic attacks are funny, for as ready as she could ever be for them, the individual ones will inevitably take her by surprise.

Common triggers, foreshadowing feelings, preparation, all of those techniques she discusses in therapy with Hajime only do so much. He had warned her of that, too. That, ultimately, there's little anyone can truly do to outright prevent one if it's going to happen. The key is to manage them and treat the preventable ones.

Kaede always notices that her attacks are less severe immediately after therapy. (Is it a bad thing she has them so frequently that she can ascertain that? Probably.) It's like deodorant in a way. She smiles a bit at the comparison.

She goes to therapy and for a bit the stench of her mind, of those fucked up things she was forced to go through, that she forced others to go through, is lessened, almost nonexistent. Replaced instead by a nice, pleasant scent. Thoughts of healing and stability, of moving forward. All those things she used to believe in before she was hung by her neck and crushed to a bloody pulp.

Her breath hitches in her throat. A noose wraps around her neck.

No, she thinks. Be active, be mindful. "There is no noose," she says to the empty store. She opens her eyes, not realizing that she closed them in the first place. She's in the pharmacy, safe and alone and not being hung.

But of course, deodorant requires reapplication as does therapy. It wears off and the underarm stench re-emerges. No matter how many showers someone takes, no matter how well they clean, it always comes back. Sometimes you need to apply twice in one day. A faint memory of a particularly sweaty friend comes to Kaede's mind. No name, no face, just that the pits of his shirt had holes in them because he would sweat through the threads, making them weak and prone to tearing.

Just like a traumatized mind. Prone, vulnerable, needing constant attention. Daily, even. Just so she can live somewhat normally. Just so she doesn't chase everyone away with her awful stench.

She's standing on the beach, drenched in moonlight, the others around her. They're shouting at her. And she knows she stinks. Reeks of panic and guilt, smells like the blood that dripped from the
piano, like the blood pooling around Rantaro's skull.

She smells like nightmares, which are constant and unpleasant, an indistinct foul aroma that wafts around a room, clinging to every nook and cranny.

She smells like fear, visceral and crude. The rotten smell of unwashed armpits, days old sweat congealed in the hair beneath.

She smells like guilt, nagging and poignant. Rotten food hidden somewhere in the fridge and the only way to get rid of it is to bury her nose in the stench and waft it up until it can be thrown away.

She smells like lavender. Simple, classy lavender. Lavender Girl, a field of bright purple flowers with sprigs twisted in her hair, friends and family galavanting around her.

The door to the pharmacy dings. It's so far away. Both the ding and the door, as if Kaede is looking down a long hallway with nothing but tall blackness on either side of her.

"Here you are!" Mahiru says. Kaede only know it's Mahiru because of the red smudge that must be her hair. "I've been looking for you."

Kaede's on the floor. Her basket tumbles away. Distantly, she's aware that Mahiru's running towards her, but right now she's focused on the deodorant rapidly scattering away from her on the floor. She lunges for it but misses. Or she stays perfectly still and does nothing. She can't tell.

Her other senses are clouded, clouded by how disgusting she smells. A visible stench films in her arms, rising to cloud her face. She hacks and chokes on the fact that she's a killer, that she'll probably kill again. That she died and came back but should have stayed dead. The stench forces itself down her throat.

There are those who say that taste is influenced by smell. That if you hold your nose your sense of taste is diminished. Maybe if she can grab the deodorant she can plug her nose and swallow that awful chalky mixture, cleanse her insides. She might vomit but that's okay, too.

When did it happen? When did she become so calm about self-hatred? When she let the ball go? When she threw Shuichi away? When she ordered everyone to run that god-forsaken obstacle course over and over again? Either way, she's here now, her knees close to her chest, eyes wide but staring at nothing.

She can see herself now, as if she's disembodied. She stands next to her body, in that long hallway. Well, her body is in the hall, she's in those black walls, clamped between the keys and the cover of the piano.

Is that how she looks when she panics? Balled up and quivering? How pathetic. How like her.

Mahiru comes down the hall and Kaede smiles lightly. It happened like this a few days ago. Sonia had found her that time and managed to coax her out of her panic. Kaede expects this to happen just the same.

But something's wrong.

When Mahiru reaches Kaede she doesn't kneel down, doesn't say anything. No, instead she brings up the camera around her neck, starts taking pictures. Kaede's body barely responds, only blinking in perfunctory reaction with each flash of the camera. Kaede tries to scream out, to return to her body, but she can't, her mind and body are too far separated right now.
Mahiru moves around Kaede, getting different shots at different angles. All the while she has a pleased smile on her face, like she found a few hundred yen just lying in the street. A stroke of good luck.

Why, Mahiru, why? Kaede wants to cry out. Why is she not helping? When Kaede first woke up, it was Mahiru who explained everything to her, it was Mahiru who helped her remember what happened in the simulation and she'd done it with delicacy and care. Nurtured Kaede like an older sister.

So why was she doing this?

Kaede isn't sure how long it goes on, but eventually Mahiru stops taking pictures. She pulls out her phone. However, instead of calling for help, she just opens up a little game, leans against a shelf, as if waiting for her turn to be called at a butcher shop.

As soon as Kaede tries to walk over and call out to Mahiru, she's back on the floor. The white hallway and black walls are gone and she can't see her body because she's in her body. A body that's clinging to its legs so tight her arms are growing sore. A body that's drenched in a foul-smelling film of sweat that's cold under her armpits.

She blinks a few times and looks up at Mahiru.

"Oh my goodness!" Mahiru cries, kneeling down and taking Kaede by the shoulder. "Akamatsu! Look at me Akamatsu!"

Kaede complies, mesmerized by the genuine-sounding concern in Mahiru's voice.

"Can you hear me?"

Kaede nods. She can smell her, too. Mahiru's deodorant is fading. She smells like facade, like disguise, an unclean bathroom that someone tried to hide with cheap airspray.

Mahiru smiles, easy, comforting, sleazy. "It's okay, it's okay, just take your time." Her words are so tired, so warm. Kaede wants to wrap herself in those words and drift into a heavy sleep.

Time passes. Kaede can't even begin to tell how much. She just knows that it passes because her heart rate gradually slows and her breathing becomes more even and she can loosen her grip on her knees. Mahiru's with her the entire time, supportive and caring and confounding.

Finally, Kaede stands, perhaps abruptly by the shocked expression on Mahiru's face.

"Akamatsu, please sit down. You just had an attack!"

"I'm fine," Kaede says. She walks over to her basket and goes to pick up her spilled merchandise. But nothing spilled. The basket landed face-up. Everything is safe inside.

"Are...are you sure?"

Instead of answering, Kaede tears the cap off the Advil, or "Madvil," and downs four pills with a gulp of water.

"Akamatsu, stop!" Mahiru runs over to Kaede but the pianist runs from the store.

She's acting on pure adrenaline now, sprinting down towards the motel, Mahiru gaining behind her. Of course she'd be faster than Kaede, she's lived in a post-apocalyptic world where she would need
to be in at least decent shape. Maybe.

But fortunately Kaede manages to run up the stairs to her room without incident while Mahiru slips and smashes her shin into the metal. Kaede rushes inside and slams the door closed, locking it. Then, she hauls a nightstand from its spot, shoving it against the door.

She’s breathing hard. *God, I'm out of shape* she thinks. *No wonder I couldn’t get through that damn sewer.*

Will she ever be able to let that go? Or will the stench follow her wherever she goes? She cries out in frustration, tossing herself onto her bed. The deodorant spills out of the basket she’s still carrying.

She uncaps it, rips the plastic bit off, and smears it all over her body in a desperate attempt to hide that awful stench.

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The air conditioning unit rattles constantly. Each room is equipped with a window unit that Kazuichi salvaged from Fifth Island. Kirumi notes that she'll have to ask him if he can take a look at hers. It's making it quite difficult to sleep at night.

Then again, she has spent the past couple nights in Maki's room. She's not sure which she prefers. She doesn't get sleep either way.

According to her simulation self, Kirumi didn't like to sleep. She said it was too idle, that there were tasks to be done and sleep was nothing but a necessary evil. She did a lot of things in the name of "necessary evil." She can't take baths because she only feels Ryoma's struggling body beneath the water.

She shakes her head, takes a sip of water from the glass next to her bed. She's been on close watch since the incident in the airport. Though she won't admit it to the others, she's grateful for it. One sip and she'd spiraled back into the clutches of alcoholism. How easy it is to trip up, to be the paragon of virtue, then to fall fall fall.

But that's why she has the tablet open in front of her. Sonia had stopped by earlier to drop it off saying that they managed to decrypt some data about each of them.

The desktop on the tablet is empty except for one folder labelled "Kirumi Tojo." Apparently Kazuichi had salvaged these, too. Her finger hovers above the folder. She licks her lips. Inside could be information about why she is the way she is. Or how Kirumi Tojo the alcoholic germaphobe addicted to abuse could end up being cast as someone who was ostensibly the Prime Minister of Japan. Or it could just be random medical facts like her height and weight and the fact that she has an annoying mole on her shoulder.

She closes her hand, opens it again, then double taps the folder icon before she can stop herself. Inside, there's only two files. One looks like an image, the other, a video.

She opens the image first. After a few seconds, it fully loads showing what looks to be some sort of report, handwritten then scanned. The top of the paper scanned is cut off, likely to prevent any identity leaks.
However, what catches Kirumi's attention is the label at the top:

**Audition Notes: Candidate: Kirumi Tojo**

*This must be what the judges used during her interview*, Kirumi realizes. She doesn't quite remember the interview, just that there were two judges and they never stopped writing. She hesitates before scrolling down. Does she really want to see this? This isn't going to be her. No, this is going to be what professionals thought of her.

She sucks in a deep breath and tries to channel the determination of the Ultimate Maid that's still embedded somewhere in her memory. Finding her will, Kirumi scrolls down and sees that this judge wrote in bullet points, the handwriting quick and slanted, almost indecipherable at points.

- Good posture, pretty, meek expression (easily manipulative?)
- Speech altersen tween conf. And timid.
- Wraps hands around- habit???
- Aweaaa a bit too hi strun
- Prepped responses - good good
- wants to be imporant. needs validation?

The page ends at that but Kirumi can see a hint of a few more letters, indicating that there's more to this image. Either the image was intentionally cut off here or whatever encryption is hiding this is stronger than Kirumi could ever imagine.

She reads over the list again. It all lines up with what she already knew.

She and Maki had spent weeks coming up with responses to possible questions they could be asked. They searched through hundreds of forums looking for any leaked information about what kind of subjects the auditioners asked. Maki, at one point, had actually contemplated going onto the dark web to see if there was anything else. The only thing that stopped her was that the head nun of the orphanage found them and got after them for being up so late past light's out.

Kirumi twists her hands together - guess she's always had that habit - and picks at the fabric of her gloves. It's weird, wearing her gloves underneath a nightgown. But no matter how much she cleaned (with the miraculous knowledge provided by her talent), the motel could never be clean enough for her to fully relax. Something about "motel" and "clean" could never quite mesh fully in her mind.

Rereading the last line, Kirumi can easily see how they would cast her as they did. She wanted to be important, to be someone everyone would come to. Team Danganronpa provided. Of course, they're like genies, twisting her wish and making her regret ever rubbing the damn lamp.

Someone important. Did she really want that? All she wants right now is for everyone to forget about her, for them to let her hide in the closet and drink herself into a stupor. Or to clean every centimeter of the island until the sand sparkles like glass. Then again, what she wants has never been exactly good for her.
Her eyes drift over to a shirt Maki had left behind.

Returning her attention to the tablet, she tries to scroll a couple more times but the image really is cut off there. She minimizes the image then taps on the video. A few minutes pass before the video fully loads and she's instantly met with an image of her face, mouth slightly open as if she's speaking.

The room she's in is barren except for an unused chair and a light that illuminates her in a perfect halo. The clothing she's wearing is so simple, a long-sleeved shirt and jeans. Such a difference compared to her uniform in the simulation. God, that thing took so long to put on every day.

Kirumi's eyes fall down to her counterpart's exposed forearms. She'd rolled the sleeves up, revealing a violent pattern of bruises, some old and faded, others new and swollen. She bites her lip.

Had that been intentional? A pity plea or a sob story? Maybe they asked her to roll up her sleeves? Either way, she drops the tablet onto the bed and cradles herself. She runs her hands down her arms. There haven't been any bruises there for quite some time. Probably. Time is a difficult thing to tell right now, especially because she has no notion of how long she was in the simulation.

She flexes her fingers, feeling the stretch of her gloves. As quick as she can, Kirumi presses the play button on the video. She's immediately greeted by her own voice.

*My name is Kirumi Tojo. I am seventeen years old and -um- this is my… this is my audition for the 53rd season of Danganronpa.*

As if she's not in control of her own body, Kirumi stops the video, rushes outside into the humid night. She can't do this, she can't do this, she can't do this. There'd been a small part of her that held onto the hope that somehow she actually had been forced into the killing game, that everything Tsumugi said about their being there willingly, that all of her memories were somehow falsified.

But hearing her own voice, watching her own lips… That quashed any hope. Fitting. That even after the game was over, even after she was supposed to be dead, Team Danganronpa could find hope to crush.

"Kirumi?" says a small voice.

Her back instantly becoming straight, Kirumi turns in the direction of the voice, seeing Himiko standing there, pillow tucked underneath her arm.

"Himiko, what are you doing out here?"

The smaller girl shrugs. "I've come out here every night since we moved here." She walks over to Kirumi and the former maid can't help but smile at the floppy ears on her slippers. Where did she even get those things? "'Sides," Himiko continues, "There's usually someone out here to talk to."

"And that would be me tonight?"

"Mhm, looks like it."

They stand in silence, letting the still air settle between them. The air is heavy with humidity; Kirumi's nightgown sticks to her skin. When the Remnants had offered her a choice of pajamas, she was still in the mindset of the Ultimate Maid, so she grabbed the most elegant, proper piece she could. Though it was thin and a pain to clean, Kirumi can never bring herself to change it.

"You look at your stuff on the tablet?" Himiko says.
Kirumi hesitates for a second before saying, "Some of it."

"Same 'ere."

"You did not look at all of it?"

Himiko shakes her head. "Nah, was too depressing."

"If you don't mind my asking," Kirumi says, "What… was the content of yours?" A sudden weight tugs on Kirumi's arms. These feel entirely too similar to the second motive of the game. The motive that caused her to fall. Information about their past on a tablet… For a moment, Kirumi's afraid that she's going to pitch over the railing and fall again. Her whole body shudders as it relives that devastating smack as she fell down that impossibly long shaft.

However, the tugging relaxes and Kirumi realizes that it's only Himiko who has part of Kirumi's sleeve pinched between two fingers. "Let's sit," Himiko says, then she plops down her pillow and sits down without waiting for a response.

Nodding, Kirumi follows suit.

"You okay, Kirumi?"

"Excuse me?"

"You look like you're about to faint."

Bringing a hand to her forehead, Kirumi suddenly notices how hot she really is. "I… guess I am, how improper."

Himiko snorts. "Now you sound like you did in the simulation." Himiko smiles, but when she sees Kirumi's pained expression, she drops it. "M sorry," she says, "I forget you guys… went through it differently."

"It is fine, Himiko," Kirumi replies, trying her best to mean it. "To answer your question, I am… rather upset, honestly."

"'Cause of your video?"

Kirumi nods.

"Thought so." Himiko's eyes widen, as if she forgot something. "Nye- I never said what my video was."

"You tell me yours, I will tell you mine?" Kirumi offers.

"M'kay." Himiko stretches her legs forward and leans back so she's supporting herself with her arms behind her. "It was a video of me at my old lifeguarding job."

Kirumi folds her hands in her lap. "That is rather odd."

"Hmm, thought so, too. But then it showed me and a girl I worked with talking about the auditions." Himiko's eyes suddenly seem far off, as if trying to gaze at the stars. "S-she said something like 'I betchu won't' and then I… I… I said I would." A sob escapes the small girl. "I think… I think I did all this 'cause of a bet."

Kirumi's first instinct is to draw the girl close to her, but Himiko's hair looks greasy and some of the
pink lines across her legs look too fresh for Kirumi's liking, so she compromises by placing a consoling hand on Himiko's shoulder.

"You don't hafta touch me if you don't wanna," Himiko says. "I know you don't like germs and I didn't shower today."

Thankful for the reprieve, Kirumi takes her hand off and carefully peels off the glove, bundling it inside-out for washing in the morning. "I apologize," Kirumi says, "If I am not the best at consolation right now."

Sniffling, Himiko replies, "Is 'kay. I just like talking."

"Would you care to rant to me? I can at least be a good listener for you."

Himiko doesn't even say yes. "It's just, if I hadn't made that stupid bet, I wouldn't… I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have had to go through all that… all that shit! I don't think I ever expected to get in and I still don't know why I even accepted the stupid invitation. I feel so stupid!" She reaches up as if trying to pull her hat down. "Nye- urgh. And now I have all these stupid habits and- and I can't stop hiding things up my sleeves for tricks."

Kirumi gives her an empathetic look. She surprises herself with how genuine it is. It becomes so easy to wrap yourself up in your own problems on this island, to become an island yourself. It's easy to forget that the others here are all dealing with similar things. So much for selfless devotion.

"And you know what's the worst, Kirumi?" Himiko continues. "The worst is that, is that if I didn't get in or audition, I probably woulda watched this season and been so pissed off at how it ended. I probably woulda wanted it to continue or said Shuichi should've died instead of Kaede." She looks at Kirumi, eyes wide and vulnerable. "How awful is that?"

"Himiko, you cannot blame yourself for what did not happen," Kirumi says, voice soft. "We are all here because of the choices we made. We may regret them - I certainly do - and I will always be here for you to express that regret." She turns her whole body to face Himiko. "But speculating about what could've been… it does us no good."

Wiping her nose, Himiko nods. "Yeah, I know. Just… I like talking."

Kirumi smiles lightly. "So you said."

A few minutes of silence pass before Himiko says, "Your turn. What was on your tablet?"

Bunching her nightgown in her hands, Kirumi faces forward once again. "There… there were notes on my auditions. Not many, but enough to confirm some of my memories."

"Anything else?"

Kirumi closes her eyes. "Yes… my… my audition tape."

"That why you came runnin' out here?"

"Yes. I could not bear to watch it. Not yet, anyway."

Himiko scoots a bit closer to Kirumi. The maid notices that Himiko takes special care not to touch her, which she can't help but feel appreciative for. "If you need, I could watch it with you."

"I… I am not sure, but thank you for your offer."
Flash a lazy thumbs up, Himiko says, "No problem."

A sudden wave of exhaustion washes over Kirumi and she yawns almost comically loud. "I am grateful we could talk, Himiko, but I should at least try to get some sleep."

"Mmm, me too."

However, before either of them can stand, an alarm blares.

"Really?" Himiko whines, rubbing her eye. "Why is it always in the middle of the night?"

Kirumi stands and grabs the rail. To either side, doors start opening and their occupants stagger out into the night. It seems even the allure of sleep cannot quell curiosity. Kirumi offers her gloved hand to Himiko, who takes it reverently.

"Come, Himiko, we can walk there together."

*****************************************************************************

By the time Shuichi manages to stumble to Second Island, almost everyone else has already arrived. He has to admit, it's kind of amusing to see everyone in their nightclothes. Rantaro's hair shoots out in every direction and he has an eye mask on his forehead that he occasionally fiddles with while tapping his foot impatiently.

Miu and Kaede are sitting on a downed tree, heads lolling onto the others' shoulders as they try to wake each other up. Shuichi's kind of surprised Miu is as clothed as she is. He kinda expected her to be running around naked.

Ahead of him, Maki stands off to the side watching Kirumi and Himiko follow in behind Shuichi across the bridge. She seems like she wants to say something, but instead just stares at the ground.

Outside the door to the pod room, Sonia, Gundham, and Mahiru mill around the entrance with a hospital gurney next to them. Guess after what happened with Keebo they're not taking any chances.

Nobody says anything, though the Remnants whisper something to one another every now and again, never loud enough that Shuichi can hear. He wonders if Kaede could hear them. He could ask her. Might help with the whole "smoothing out the friendship" process.

After several minutes of waiting, the door to the pod room opens. Hajime steps out from it, his face hard, deadly serious. He whispers something to the Remnants. The three nod and then form a semicircle around the entrance, arms spread to either side.

"What's goin' on?" Rantaro says, irritation clear in his voice.

"I am going to need you all to take a few steps back," Hajime commands. Something about his tone puts Shuichi on edge. Hajime could always be unnerving, especially when he was more Izuru than Hajime, but he's never sounded so... final before.

The others must feel it too because everyone steps back without protest. Hajime nods and leans in to the pod room, making a beckoning gesture.

A gust rattles the tree leaves and causes a coconut to come loose, landing with a sickening crack right
where Miu had been sitting a moment ago.

"Fucking hell!" Miu cries and scampers away towards the ocean.

There's an instinct that most detectives get after being in the business for years. Shuichi has the benefit of having years of training already implanted in his head. That instinct is firing off the charts. His stomach twists and his hands are clammy. A chill shoots up his spine.

The door to the pod room opens fully. Kazuichi steps out, looks around as if appraising the situation, then nods to whoever else is left inside.

Shuichi sees red.

Actually, Shuichi sees blue. Long blue hair and big blue eyes blinking through round glasses.

From somewhere deep in his gut Shuichi finds his voice. He roars. No, he doesn't roar. His voice is quiet and violent, a barely restrained fury.

"Tsumugi Shirogane."

Chapter End Notes

Hehehe things are getting interesting now. Gah, I'm simultaneously excited that Tsumugi's awake but also terrified. I have quite a few plans for both her character and her interactions with the group. Hopefully I can do them justice.

Also, I never expected I'd right an entire extended metaphor comparing deodorant to therapy and trauma. Welp, hope it was interesting to say the least. Also, writing disassociative panic attacks from the POV of the person having said attack while still trying to move plot forward is rather difficult.

Anywho, as always, comments and criticism are always appreciated!
Deserving Empath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Oh.

This is wrong.

So plainly wrong.

When a participant loses in the killing game, they are under no circumstances allowed to return to it.

Well, Tsumugi can't say under no circumstances. There was that whole business with the Necronomicon and all. But Team Danganronpa had understudies for that. After all, you can't revive people from the dead.

So then why is she standing in front of a mirror in a hospital room instead of being mopped up by some intern after pushing that rock off of her? She had to do that back in season 46, only fair that whoever the newbie was this year would have to as well.

So, yes, returning to life is perhaps the biggest "wrong" thing about this situation. Or maybe the second biggest. She hasn't decided about the second major thing wrong. Maybe it's not wrong at all. After all, she's a bit concerned with all of the little wrongs that she now notices.

She knew that Team Danganronpa would alter her memories a little bit, can't have her going around and exposing names of producers or executives. But perhaps they took a bit too much.

Her vision swims in front of the mirror, so she takes off her glasses. The world is clear. Hm, maybe they just added that so she could make some "glasses girl" references. She always did love that design choice. In fact... She presses against the lenses until they pop out and fall to the floor. Putting the frames back on, she pushes them up by the bridge, smiling wickedly and trying to make them sheen to hide her eyes. They don't, but it's fun to pretend.

She scratches at her hair. Has it always been blue? Poking at her scalp yields no results. The makeup crew really is top-notch. Or her hair really is blue. What an odd color. Though if Rantaro's hair can be green who's to say Tsumugi simply hasn't forgotten what natural colors of hair are.

A somewhat... concerning wrong reveals itself when she lifts up her breasts to see a scar underneath each one, mostly healed but still apparent. Did Team Danganronpa give her a... boob job? Okay, that's probably overstepping a boundary. Not that she has any. She, like the rest of them, signed away all agency to their bodies. And Team Danganronpa is rather thorough in their contracts.

Scratch that, Team Danganronpa is extremely thorough in their contracts.

Despite all this, Tsumugi can't help but grin a little bit. She skips over to her discarded hospital gown. Taking it in her arms she shoves her face in the fabric and wafts deep. A nice, sterile aroma. Clean and fresh feeling but scentless.

So this is what Mikan would use. A trail of drool leaks from Tsumugi's mouth as she clutches the gown closer to her. All the things she gets to discover now that she's in Danganronpa.

She's in Danganronpa. Not a replica or a roleplay forum or a company based off it. No, she's in the
Danganronpa.

Her spine tingles as she recalls how Hajime had given her such a talented examination; she could feel his talent oozing from him. And he'd been so detached, almost aloof. To be honest, she'd always written him as more friendly post-simulation in her fanfics, but this works, too! In character and just as handsome as some of those doujins made him out to be.

As she pulls the hospital gown back on, however, she can't help but pout a bit that he got together with Mahiru. She's so boring! "She's reliable," she whispers mockingly to the empty room, "She's so motherly and kind and has the best interests blah blah blah!"

"Is everything quite alright in there, Miss Shirogane?" says a muffled voice through her door.

Oh Sonia, as regal in person as Tsumugi could ever hope for. She sighs as she imagines Sonia simply speaking to her in that rich, indulgent voice forever. "Yes, I am fine," Tsumugi says.

"Very well."

Good, that's settled. Back to shipping. Frankly, Hajime goes so much better with Chiaki or Nagito. Hinanami is so sickeningly sweet that Tsumugi can feel the diabetes running through her veins. On the other hand, KomaHina is just so rife with possibilities ranging from abusive and unhealthy to comforting and gay as anything. The possibilities are endless with those two!

Her fingers twitch to write a quick domestic AU of them but there's nothing to write with in here. Or anything pointy, really. Damn Korekiyo and stabbing himself. If only she thought to add a self-mutilating character. Would the fans have liked that? Probably not. But what an interesting trial that would have been, especially if the character had killed themself!

She stands in the center of the room, facing the center as if she's in a class trial (she misses them already). Pointing dramatically -which she'd practiced for days before the season started- she accuses the door handle of being the culprit. But that's so easily disproved because she crafted such a talented protagonist in this little fake game. Oh, but if the culprit and killer are the same, who gets punished? She'll have to think of that later.

Tsumugi shakes her head, glasses wobbling; they're so much lighter without the lenses. Where are those, by the way? Clear bits of glass are rather hard to find on such a clean tile floor. Maybe Kirumi cleaned these.

On her hands and knees, Tsumugi feels around for the lenses. No, Kirumi wouldn't do it now. Too many germs. Oh that poor girl. She was so shaky when she came into the audition room. Whenever people would try to direct her she'd scitter away from them or jump or push them away then squirt far too much hand sanitizer on her hands. They were really red, probably dried out from all the alcohol. Well, all the alcohol she didn't drink.

Tsumugi snickers to herself. Maybe she shouldn't have changed Kirumi's personality as much as she did. But that kognac joke was just too good to pass up.

Her hands brush something hard and smooth. "Found one~" she sings to herself lightly.

Oh goodness, there's just plain too much going on right now! She can't focus at all. She'd get like this, she remembers, when she was feeling particularly inspired. More than once she'd spent most of the night pacing back and forth in the tiny apartment Team Danganronpa gave her. But it was worth it! Worth it to give the audience such a wonderfully despairing season.

When she walked out of the pod room (the actual, honest-to-god, real pod room!), all of her fellow
contestants' faces dropped so wonderfully. From what she can make out, they're dealing with all sorts of baggage and trauma. How grand! It means Tsumugi did her job and caused them all to despair. The audience has to be pleased.

Well, maybe not. They did vote, or rather, not vote to discontinue Danganronpa. But that doesn't really mean anything. It could all have just been rigged by the higher-ups. People have been complaining the old hope vs. despair trope was getting old anyway.

Her hand circles around the second lens as she stands up, holding them up to the early afternoon light. They're smudged and one of them is chipped along the edge, probably from where she dropped it. Maybe she can find a pair of fake lenses to pop in her frames. She does like the look.

A knock at the door snaps Tsumugi out of her musings. "Yes?" she says, a hint of excitement in her voice.

The door opens a crack though is stopped by a short chain. She was the mastermind, after all. Have to keep her on close watch. She loves that.

"You have a visitor," Sonia says.

"Let them in, let them in!" Tsumugi responds, clasping her hands together, the lenses making a delicate clicking sound as she does so.

"Very well, but please allow me to brief them on proper etiquette." With that, Sonia closes the door.

Tsumugi rests the side of her chin in her hand. "Proper etiquette," she tuts. What that means is making sure that whoever comes to visit her doesn't try to attack or kill her. Apparently that's a very real possibility. Sonia had told her when Hiyoko woke up, the first thing she did was charge Peko. If that was just a killer and friend of the victim scenario, imagine a mastermind and… well she'll see who the person is in a moment.

It's taking longer than Tsumugi likes but she forces herself to calm down. A few deep breaths, a good stretch to each side. That's all it really takes. She had to be patient to the killing game after all. Gotta pace your heavy events with a few days of monotony after all. Kokichi didn't understand that and that's why she's glad he's still in stasis. Then again, she did write him that way. Live and learn. That statement has never rung so true.

The chain lock on her door clatters as Sonia unlocks it. Tsumugi straightens her hospital gown and turns to look out the window, hands crossed in front of her. It'll look more intense this way. She'll get to do a dramatic turn and see the likely furious or terrified or confused face of whoever has come to visit.

"And remember," Sonia says to whoever is with her. "At the first sign of aggression towards Miss Shirogane, I will remove you from the room."

"I understand," says a voice and what a voice. Endearing like a single music note but powerful like an orchestra.

"Hello, Kaede Akamatsu," Tsumugi says, trying to suppress a grin. Oh! She's like a super villain. How plain awesome is that?

"S-Shirogane…" Kaede says.

She can't wait any longer! She has to turn around! Has to see the pain on Kaede's face. She must
have known by now that Tsumugi framed her for everything, that she could have survived the game.

Managing to keep her turn slow and deliberate, Tsumugi faces Kaede, a friendly smile on the cosplayer's face.

It immediately falls.

Kaede is standing there, yes, but her face… her face is… unsettling. It's exactly as Tsumugi predicted. Her eyes are hard with confusion and hatred, her balled fists peeking out from crossed arms, even her ahoge standing on edge like a knife. Her breathing is clearly heavy with how her chest heaves and she's tapping her foot anxiously. It's everything Tsumugi could have wished for in such a confrontation.

So why does Tsumugi feel so much… nothing?

It's not as if she feels guilt or even hollowness. But there's no sense of triumph as she'd thought there would be. No feeling of victory. There's nothing. Perhaps a bit of empathy as if Tsumugi's looking at a stranger having a bad day across a street. Enough to feel pity, perhaps, but not enough to stop and help.

"Shirogane," Kaede repeats, stronger this time.

"Yes, Akamatsu?" Tsumugi tries to get that sweet smile back on her face. "You came to visit someone as plain as me? Are you sure?"

Kaede scowls. "Please don't do that. I know that's not the real you."

Tsumugi just shrugs. "I think it is. Like you all, I'm not quite sure where the game me starts and the real me ends anymore."

Hesitating, Kaede looks at the floor then looks back up at Tsumugi. She looks so determined, Tsumugi notes, just like she did walking into that first trial, so confident she could find the mastermind.

And Tsumugi can't help but feel a bit of sympathy.

"You're… not sure?" Kaede says. Tsumugi nods in response. "Then," Kaede continues, "Us waking up again… you didn't do it?"

Tsumugi's heart lurches in her chest. She paws at her gown, bites the inside of her cheek. An… unexpected reaction. She'd taken so many classes on how not to react to basic stressors like that. "No, I'm afraid I didn't." She stares off into the sky, wistful. "I wish I did, though. Can you imagine, Akamatsu? Ultimate Real Fiction would take on such a new meaning."

"That's what you're concerned with?!" Kaede nearly shouts. Sonia steps forward, arm outstretched, ready to grab Kaede. "Sorry… I just… sorry."

"See that it does not happen again," Sonia orders.

Kaede swallows hard but nods regardless. Yes, this is even better than the games! Sonia sounds so forceful, so royal. Tsumugi would love to be ordered around by her any day. Oh God, did her memories get mixed with Miu's?

"I am sorry, Kaede-"
"Akamatsu. You call me Akamatsu," the pianist says.

Flushing a bit, Tsumugi giggles. "Geez, you were so much more forgiving in the game." Kaede opens her mouth to respond but Tsumugi goes on. "But I apologize for that, too. I spent so long tweaking all your characters, it feels as if I know all of you personally."

Unfortunately, Kaede doesn't take the bait, instead choosing to turn her back to Tsumugi and try to calm down. *Am I trying to get myself hurt?* Tsumugi thinks.

A small part of her answers a resounding "yes."

Minutes pass before Kaede turns back to Tsumugi. "You were saying something… before you called me by my name."

What was she-? "Oh yes! I remember." Tsumugi claps her hands together. "I am also sorry that I cannot be of any more help. I honestly had nothing to do with this situation."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Because I have been lying to you for the entire, admittedly short, time we've known each other." Huh, maybe a little bit of Kokichi got mixed in as well.

Or maybe she's just plainly this messed up. She pushes the thought out of her head.

"Are you… are you purposefully being this mean?" Kaede asks and a lump forms in Tsumugi's throat. There's no threat in Kaede's words, no hate or virulence. It sounds like exasperation and exhaustion with the smallest, most terrifying amount of concern.

"I…” Tsumugi thinks for a moment. "I am so glad I can finally be my true self around you all!" Kaede looks at Tsumugi incredulously, which causes the cosplayer to giggle. "Look, you have me revealing my motivations and character development already!"

"This is pointless," Kaede mutters. "I don't know why I came here." She turns to leave.

"I think you do, Akamatsu," Tsumugi says.

Kaede stops. Faces Tsumugi, narrows her eyes, crosses her arms.

A smug smile appears on Tsumugi's face. "You wanted to confront me, didn't you? Wanted to get a little verbal revenge? I understand. I did frame you, after all. I took you out of the game so early and broke the rules to do it." She stares at Kaede, a wicked glint, a twisted emptiness in her eyes. "Even better, I manipulated you every step of the way. The entire time, you thought you were moving closer and closer to the mastermind. But you weren't. I should know. I wrote your character so that you would always have vague ideas but nothing concrete. You would always need Shui- or Saihara, I suppose. And in the end, none of it plainly mattered because it was all fake. Us waking up makes that all the more true."

As Tsumugi finishes her speech (they're *so* delightful) she faces Sonia. To her credit, the princess's face does not betray any emotion, rock solid and elegant as ever. But she's closer to Kaede than before, ready to restrain the pianist if need be. Such a wonderful bodyguard. Tsumugi wishes they didn't have to take shifts guarding her.

She really is gay for Sonia, holy shit. That explains the memories of… risqué fanfiction perhaps written by her.
However, when Tsumugi looks at Kaede, she's again disappointed. Kaede simply drops her head, shaking it. Her hair looks so brilliantly golden in the sun. A shining beam of hope. That's what the producers had been going for.

They succeeded and it's causing Tsumugi nothing but agony.

"You're still wrapped up in the world of the game, huh?" Kaede says.

Tsumugi falters, steps back. Her butt bumps against the bed. Had she been retreating this entire time?

"I… I don't really care about the game anymore." Kaede takes a heavy breath. "I just want my memories back. I want to go home. I'm sick of games. We all are." She looks at Tsumugi, ferocity apparent in her expression. "When you're ready to join us… don't bother."

A cold sweat breaks out on Tsumugi's forehead as Kaede turns and nods at Sonia. She… she doesn't care? The room begins to spin and the smoothie Hajime had given her does backflips in her stomach. Audiences will love or hate or be somewhere in between. But to be apathetic? To not care? Tsumugi feels as if she's been executed all over again.

"Shirogane I have someth- Oh I didn't realize you had guests," A male voice says.

Tsumugi looks up to see Kazuichi standing in the door with a tablet in his hand.

"Do not worry, Kazuichi, we are just leaving," Sonia replies.

"Ah, no worries, just given Shirogane what we've uncovered about her past."

Finding her voice, Tsumugi says, "Do not bother. It's plain to see I'm the mastermind. I am quite well aware of most of my past."

Kazuichi's smile fades and he scratches at the back of his head. "Um…"

"Kazuichi…" Sonia says, voice thin.

"H-hey, don't look at me like that!" He blushes furiously, tugging at his beanie. He thuds over to Tsumugi and practically shoves the tablet into her hands. "Just… you should probably watch it."

With that, Kazuichi leaves the room.

"Well," Sonia says. "I suppose Akamatsu and I will leave you to it. Unless you would prefer company while watching. It is my understanding the others are quite…" She glances at Kaede who's staring at the floor. "Unsettled with what they saw."

"What did you see, Akamatsu?" Tsumugi doesn't expect Kaede to answer, but it never hurts to ask.

"My audition tape," Kaede spits. "My real one."

"A-ah… right…" Tsumugi says. She remembers filming Kaede's fake audition tape. They had one for each person. Designed specifically to drive any survivors into despair.

Despite knowing that she has more memory than all of them, Tsumugi can't help but be hung up on Kazuichi's words. She turns on the tablet and taps through the folders until she finds a video. The thumbnail is a photo of her, sans glasses, looking thrilled, eyes wide with glee.

She presses play.
Hello! My name is Tsumugi Shirogane. I am sixteen years old and this is my audition tape for the 53rd season of Danganronpa!

She pauses the video, looks up. Kaede's eyes are like saucers and even Sonia can't hide her confusion.

Voice trembling, Tsumugi squeaks out, "A-audition tape?"

"M-M-Miu, please s-s-slow down!" Keebo shouts from his wheelchair that's currently flying down the the paved path on Second Island.

"No fucking way!" Miu shouts back. "This is fun!" She attached a small dollie to back of the wheelchair. It's a damn good thing she kept some of her inventing chops from that damn simulation. "Besides, we're not going that fast you fucking virgin."

"Do-do not call m- WATCH OUT FOR THAT ROCK!" Keebo throws his arms up.

Miu just snorts and jams her foot down, stopping so suddenly that Keebo lurches forward in his seat. "C'mon Keebs, don't be scared of a little pebble."

"T-that pebble is the size of my fist." He holds up his hand for emphasis.

"Please, I betcha I can kick the bitch all the way to the ocean in one go." If Keebo was about to protest, Miu didn't care. She runs in front of him and slams the side of her foot into the rock. It rolls across the pavement and onto the beach where it stops in the sand. "Tch, whatever, stupid sand got in my way."

Keebo holds his head in his hands. "Why did I agree to this?"

Jabbing a finger at him, Miu says, "Cause there ain't anything better than spending time with this blonde bombshell!" She walks back around to start pushing him again. "Besides, I think I'm getting the hang of this whole 'shock you into moving thing'."

"You are doing this on purpose?" Keebo asks, looking up at Miu.

"Hell fucking yeah, Keebler Elf."

"What did you just call me?"

"Who cares?" With that, Miu kicks off again and the two resume their walk, or roll, as it is, down the island. It's been two days since Tsumugi woke up and Miu had been so mad that Keebo missed it that she's been taking him out every afternoon. Mostly to prove that he can be there when people wake up. It's a big fucking deal. 'Course, Miu isn't exactly thrilled that the fucking mastermind of a killing game is walking around the island, but eh, what can you do? Besides, she has Keebo who's as sweet and awkward as ever. He might not have those sexy robot parts anymore, but at least he's still a dork that she can mess with. And Kaede's been an absolute sweetheart to her, Himiko and Kirumi, too. Hell, even Korekiyo can stand her. It's kind of a welcome change compared to the simulation. Must be her tits. They look even better in real life.
“Where are we going anyway?” Keebo says. His speech is pretty clear now. Though it's still fucking adorable when he gets all tongue tied.

"Dunno yet," Miu replies. She never knows where they're going on these walks. That's the fun of them! Not knowing what's gonna happen. That's half the fun of inventing, too. It could explode or catch fire or turn into an impromptu sex toy, who knows?

Or maybe she's just saying that because she has no fucking idea what's going on.

"May I make a-a reueuw, ugh."

"Slow down there, buddy."

"A request," Keebo manages.

"Sure, but if I don't like it you're gonna have to beg my forgiveness for wasting my time."

"Whatever you say," Keebo says playfully, flashing a small smile at Miu. She gives him a big grin in return. However, his face falls soon after into a somber expression. "I would like to visit the pod room."

Miu stops the wheelchair, gazes at the black pavement ahead. The building is within eyeshot. Fuck. She's been avoiding the place since she woke up. Something about staring at all these people who should be dead unnerves her. Or maybe she's just hiding from Gonta. No, not Gonta, definitely Kokichi.

Her hand rushes to her chest. But she can breathe. Can still breathe. Is still breathing. That's fucking good.

"Miu," Keebo says, voice soft. "We do not have to go if you are uncomfortable."

Miu snorts. "Pfft, like I'm worried about that place. Just checking to see where it is."

"You do not have to lie to me."

"Just shut the fuck up and enjoy the fucking ride," Miu hisses so Keebo remains quiet. She does not need a lecture today. Besides, she can handle a building. She's the goddamn gorgeous girl genius. She can do anything.

Who fucking cares?

In silence, Miu gets off the dollie and pushes Keebo normally the rest of the way to pod room. She remembers the first time she played the game and tried so hard to figure out how to get Hajime to input the code. It was so damn obvious what the code was. Kodaka is so fucking predictable sometimes. She also remembers trolling forums saying it was possible to open the door early. And that if you entered the code wrong three times you got shot.

As she approaches the door, she can see the base of a turret where a gun had probably once been. A shudder runs up her back as she imagines what sort of defenses this island must have had back during the Tragedy.

"Miu we do not…"

"Keebs," Miu says, "I'm telling you one last fucking time. I can do this."

Keebo opens his mouth but quickly closes it when Miu gives him a withering glare. She shoves the
The room is the same as she remembers it. Sickly green light, creepy, wheel-like pattern of pods, odd way that some of the pods are open while others are still closed. The works. The whirring of the central mechanism reminds Miu of her lab back in the game. She'd made so many inventions in that lab. Could she ever be as useful now as she was back then? Maybe that's why Kokichi killed her. She'd be too useful.

No, he killed her in self-defense. Maybe she's just as much of a murderer as Kaede.

Can't breathe can't breathe can't breathe you don't deserve to fucking breathe die you whore


"Keebs!" she shouts, causing him to jump. "Anyone in particular you wanna see?"

Keebo thinks for a moment before shaking his head. "No thank you. I simply wish to reflect."

Miu rolls her eyes. "Whatever, let me know when you wanna go."

"Of course."

Well, now she's gotta find something to do. It's still hot as shit outside and at least in here it's temperature controlled. Can't risk safety or some shit.

Walking around the room, the first pod she sees is Kaito's. What'll he be like? Apparently some video that Tsumugi showed Shuichi, Himiko, and Maki made him out to be a real asshole who just wanted to kill to get fame and money. Well, maybe he got his fucking wish. They all should've gotten half of their participation prize up front. Who did Miu send hers to? Who fucking knows.

Does she even have anyone?

Can't breathe.

She keeps going, forcing air down her throat. Like cum from a virgin's first blowjob she thinks to herself, part in relief, part in disgust. Has she always been this terrible? Has she always been this fucking wonderful?

Don't breathe.

Can't breathe.

Won't breathe.

Little circles.

She stops outside her pod. A sickening urge swells inside her to hop inside the pod and slam the lid shut. To go back to whatever fucking state she was in after she died but before she came back alive. That was nice. She didn't have to worry about breathing. Or did she? She can't fucking remember. She can't fucking remember anything. No friends, no family, no pets.

You didn't have them.

What if she did that? Jump in? What if she closed the pod and all no one could get it open again. Would she die from suffocation or starvation first? She hopes it's the latter. She already died of lack of breath once, why not try another way? Then again, she can't imagine any of the people on this
island letting her do that. They'd probably smash the pod to bits just to get her out.

You don't deserve them.

Why would they even do that? Especially for someone like her?

Don't breathe.

Don't breathe. Don't breathe. Can't breathe.

Little circles. Keep going.

Tenko. Annoying ass bitch. Fucking amazing girl. She's next. Miu just can fucking feel it. Frankly, she's surprised that Tenko's let so many of the boys wake up before her. Ew, what if she and Himiko fuck the instant they see each other. She doesn't need to watch that. Now participate in it... that's another story.

No it isn't stop fucking lying to yourself you piece of shit.

Don't breathe.

Moving the fuck on.

Kokichi.

Moving the fuck on. Moving the absolute fuck on.

It doesn't help. She stops at Kokichi's pod, eyes locked with the small boy. It'd be easy. She could smash the glass and then bash his head in. There's enough scrap metal lying around. Hell, if she didn't know any better, she'd say that Monokuma set up this whole room.

She sighs, as if she could let all her aggression out in that one breath. Why'd she even want to kill him? And why him? The little shit was smart and crafty, especially when it came to plans. Why'd he even go into the virtual world? Such a fucking obvious trap. And no one questioned it when she'd fucking prostrated herself like a goddamn submissive slut and begged for them to go in. Who was the sick fuck that even made her character? She's gotta have a word with Tsumugi later.

You can't. Words need breath.

Can't breathe.

Can't breathe.

Litt-

Don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe don't breathe

She practically runs to the next pod. Then keeps running. She doesn't stop until she's hit the wall. Slams herself against it a couple more times. Anything to kickstart her lungs.

"Miu!" Keebo cries. "What is wrong? Please, stop!"

"Shut the fuck up, Keebs!" Miu yells back; her voice sounds like it did in the simulation. High and cackling and grating.

"Why are you slamming yourself against that wall?"
"Cause… cause it's…" Miu desperately searches for a reason. She finds one. Or perhaps, one finds her. As she slams herself against the wall one last time, the slam echoes. Echoes way more than any brick building should. "Huh?"

"What is it? Are you alright?"

Miu nods silently. "Gimme a sec." She runs her hand along the wall, knocking it with her knuckles at various points. It echoes the entire time.

*Don't breathe.*

*Can't-*

*Shut the fuck up I'm working.*

She walks along the wall, brow furrowed. Based on the outside structure of the building, the metal plating should be directly against solid brick. There's no way it should echo this much. Eventually, the wall stops echoing. Turning back, she notices a small air vent just before the echoing stops.

"What the fuck?" Miu murmurs.

"Are you sure I should not get help?" Keebo asks, his voice high and urgent.

"Like you can fucking move," Miu counters. "Just sit there and look pretty."

"Miu, I am worr-"

"Don't be," Miu interrupts. "Just fucking don't be."

She refocuses on the wall. Kneeling down, she tugs on the vent. Surprisingly, it comes right off without much of a struggle. The screws were stripped, apparently just for show.

"Keebs, I'm going spelunkin'."

"You are doing what?"

Miu gets down on her belly. The vent is larger than an average one, even for a room this size. Big enough for a person to crawl through pretty easily. "I'm going in," she says.

"That is a vent!"

"I don't fucking think it is."

Ignoring Keebo's increasingly frantic warnings, Miu shimmies forward. As she suspected, once she's past the thin sheet of metal, the vent opens up into a larger space. She can't go too far before hitting actual brick. With a hand above her for caution, she stands upright. The space is tall enough that she's only slightly hunched by the time her hand reaches a ceiling.

"Keebs, can you see my feet?" she calls, putting her foot forward out of the vent.

"Yes, I can."

"Good, hope you have a foot fetish!"

Miu can practically see the embarrassed yet deadpan look on Keebo's face. "Anyway," he says. "How are you standing like that?"
"I told you, this isn't a vent. It's some sort of passage. I'm gonna see where it fucking goes."

"Should we not alert the others?"

Miu bites her lips. She doesn't want to say it, but she doesn't entirely trust everyone here. In the game, when you had an advantage, you kept it to yourself. Or you died. Though that didn't really work for her, now did it?

"It's fine, I won't be fucking long."

"Be careful!"

"Whatever, Mom."

With a hand extended in front of her, Miu starts walking down the small shaft. The brick scrapes her arm on one side, but the ceiling itself is made of metal. That doesn't stop her from knocking her head a couple times, but a good swear or five usually fixes that. It's not long before she reaches the end of the tunnel, feeling solid brick.

"Hmm…" Kneeling down again, Miu feels the ground until she finds a small indent in the ground. Running her finger along the indent, she eventually finds a hinge. And where there's a hinge there's a… found it. A small handle is carved into the floor, likely so that no snoops like Miu would find it accidentally. But whoever made this clearly doesn't understand the genius Miu Iruma.

You're no genius

Can't breathe.

Little circles. And she's back to work. Maybe that's how she survived so long in the game. She was always working, she could never plot. Once she had time to do that, she had doomed herself.

Repressing the thought as best she can, Miu tugs on the handle and the trapdoor springs open. Last fucking moron probably forgot to lock it behind them. Swallowing a lump of nerves, Miu feels around the perimeter immediately inside the trapdoor. A ladder rung.

After a couple minutes of trying to turn around inside the cramped tunnel, Miu slowly lets her leg down until she has solid footing on the rung. She braces herself against the floor before lowering the other leg down one rung lower.

"Miu!" Keebo shouts. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fucking fine."

"You sound stressed!"

Miu rolls her eyes. The boy's concern is endearing, but not what she fucking needs right now. "I told ya, I'm fine, just found something cool."

As she's about to lower herself fully down on the ladder, there's a small commotion in the pod room. Not an alarm, but rather sounding like a bunch of people are entering all at once.

"Huh, Souda?" Keebo's voice. "Who are the- Hey! HEY! GET AWAY! MIU, MIU HELP M-" he's cut off and Miu's blood turns to ice.

"Shit," Kazuichi mutters. From where the light streams in from the open vent, she can see Kazuichi's shadow.
Miu realizes he's about to check the passage, so she hurriedly ducks down into the trapdoor, making sure she's entirely in the dark drop.

"You heard the kid, she's definitely in there," Kazuichi says.

"Can ya see 'er?" says a man's voice that Miu doesn't recognize. Who the hell are these people?!

A few seconds of silence. A flashlight beam appears over Miu's head, illuminating the very obviously fucking open trapdoor.

"She's heading down. We can cut her off. Radio the guys in Pod Room Two," Kazuichi says.

_Pod Room Two?_ Miu thinks. Since when are there two pod rooms? Why the fuck are there two pod rooms? What the shitty fucking fuck is going the fuck on?

The flashlight clicks off. Miu can hear the vent being shoved back into place. "Weld it shut for now. Once we catch her we can undo it."

"Do we even have a blowtorch?" A woman's voice this time. Again, Miu can't recognize it.

"'Course we do," Kazuichi says. "I'm the Ultimate Mechanic, aren't I? It's in my cottage."

He says "Ultimate Mechanic" in a mocking, sardonic tone that makes Miu grip the rungs that much tighter. Her arms are beginning to burn and she has to wipe the sweat from her hands.

"C'mon, let's go," the woman says. "Pod Room Two is sending a guy up, he should intercept her on the ladder."

"You said it," says the man, "I'm missing lunch for this load o' shit."

"Hey, it's important," Kazuichi argues.

Their bickering fades as they leave, slamming the pod room door shut behind them, shrouding the room in thick blackness.

"What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?" Miu whispers to herself, trying desperately not to hyperventilate. What was that? Who were those people Kazuichi was with? Why are they here? They really did not sound happy that Miu is here.

A decision pulls at Miu's heart. On the one hand, she wants to find out what is at the bottom of this shaft. But that's probably a bad idea. Whoever they're sending is probably to the ladder already. Her best bet would be to run and get out of here while they're looking for tools. But this could be a trap. They slammed the door so loud. Maybe it's all a fucking trap that's designed to get her as she leaves. Station a guard out by the vent ready to ambush her.

She leans her head against the metal. The burning in her arms is becoming unbearable. She goes to adjust her footing, but her boot nearly slides off the rung. "Fucking shit..." she hisses. "Don't die, Miu, don't die a fucking virgin."

Up or down? Neither choice seems to be particularly appealing right now, but she can't just cling to this one spot forever.

The choice is made for her when a light illuminates the shaft. Miu looks down to see a man with a headlamp staring back up at her, the brightness nearly blinding her. "Gotcha!" he shouts.

"No you fucking don't," Miu responds, beginning to pull herself up.
The rungs vibrate as the man hops onto the ladder, yanking himself upward with surprising, experienced speed.

Miu almost makes it out of the shaft but the man reaches her last leg and wraps his fat fingers around her boot. "Get the fuck off me!" she cries, desperately kicking her leg.

"Just come with me," the man says, "It'll be alright."

"Hell. Fucking. No!" With each word, Miu flails her leg with all her might. On the last one she manages to catch the man's forearm between her foot and the edge of the shaft. He grunts in pain and his grip loosens enough for Miu to wiggle free.

With the toe of her other boot, Miu slips her foot against the back of the trapdoor and slams it shut, the edge landing on the man's exposed hand with a satisfying smack.

She shoots forward down the narrow tunnel, desperately trying to ignore the brick tearing at her arm. By the time she reaches the vent, the man in the shaft has thrown the trapdoor open and shouts, "Masa! She's coming out the vent!"

So it is a trap! Miu hears the sound of footsteps and the click of a flashlight, revealing a shadow in front of the vent. She sees the shadow lean down and the long gaunt face of another man, Masa for whoever the fuck cares, grins at her. "Don't make this so difficult, honey," he purrs.

"Fuck you." She braces her back against the brick wall and kicks the vent out right into Masa's face. He screams in pain, recoiling backwards. Miu bites back a curse. She won't be able to get out fast enough. He'll recover by then.

At the end of the tunnel, the man has made it out of the shaft, but he's cradling his fingers and moving slowly. *Must have broke 'em*, Miu thinks. Looking back to the vent, Miu notices that there's a dent where she kicked and a small hole torn in the bolted seam between the two wall panels.

Her feet are going to hurt so fucking bad tomorrow. She winds up another kick and slams it against the wall. Masa's shadow reappears near the vent.

"That wasn't nice, bitch!" he yells, sputtering a bit.

"I repeat," Miu shouts back, reeling back for one more kick. "Fuck! You!" On the second word, she lets her kick fly. Cheap sheet metal flies from its bolts, knocking directly into Masa, forcing him to the ground in surprise.

Without missing a beat, Miu surges out of the tunnel and into the pod room. Not stopping to so much as look at the downed man, she sprints from the building into the violent sunlight.

Shielding her eyes, Miu frantically scans the area in front of her, looking for someone, *anyone*. If she's alone they'll probably chase after her, but if she can find others, they likely won't want to make a scene.

Miu isn't sure she's believed in a god before this, but as she races towards the beach house she figures she just might become a believer. Maki and Kirumi emerge from the changing room with towels wrapped around their waists and hair stiff with ocean water.

She runs up to them, nearly crashing into Kirumi as she skids to a stop on the sand.

"I-Iruma?" Kirumi says, clearly confused. "W-what are you running for?"
Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Can't breathe.

Little circles.

As if all of the adrenaline suddenly leaves her system, Miu slumps against the beach house wall and shakes her head. "Running… from some… from someone," she pants.

Both Maki and Kirumi look around for a moment before Maki gives Miu a questioning glare. "Who? I see no one."

Miu glances back down towards the pod building. Sure enough, there's no one there. Not even multiple sets of footprints. Just a bunch of sand splashed on the pavement from Miu came barrelling down. "Motherfuckers…" Miu murmurs.

"Excuse me?" Kirumi says, scandalized.

"Hold… on…" Miu wheezes. "Let me… catch my breath. I'll explain…"

"This better be good," Maki says.

After a few minutes and a much needed guzzle from Maki's water bottle, Miu manages to get herself upright and able to talk easily enough.

"So I was the fucking pod room and I found this secret ass room," Miu explains, though Maki and Kirumi both look skeptical. "And I, and I fucking explored it, but then these people came in - Souda was with 'em - and they took…"

Miu's heart nearly stops.

"They took Keebo!" she shouts. "Where the fuck is Keebo?!"

"Iruma!" Kirumi says as Miu starts knocking over surfboards in the unlikely case that Keebo was stored behind one of them.

"We gotta find him!" Miu cries. She can feel tears welling up in her eyes. Fuck! She was so fucking stupid! She let Keebo get caught and didn't do shit about it.

"Iruma," Maki deadpans, pointing behind the inventor. "Look right there."

Turning around, Miu's mouth drops open as she sees Keebo being pushed by Mahiru, the two casually conversing. As they approach the beach house, they both wave to the three girls.

"Hello, ladies," Mahiru says, pleasant as always.

"Yes, heloooo, ugh…" Keebo tries.

Mahiru giggles, patting him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Hajime can help you with your speech as well."

Before Keebo can respond, Miu is on him. She shoves her face barely two centimeters from his. "What the fuck, Keebs?"

With an uncertain expression on his face, Keebo says, "M-Miu, what is wrong? Are you okay?"

"Okay? Okay?!" Miu chokes out, voice cracking. "Am I fucking okay? You get abducted from the pod room and now you act like everything is just fucking peachy?"
"Are you sure you're okay, Miu?" Keebo asks.

"Never fucking better. Why do you ask, you fucking virgin?"

"Because," Keebo says, "I… certainly was not abducted. In fact, I have not even been to the pod room since I woke up."

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhangers, cliffhangers, cliffhangers galore! Not really. I need to stop writing boring chapters where absolutely nothing happens.

Not much to say about this one. Hope ya'll are enjoying Smoogi. She's a challenge to write because until she becomes the mastermind, she really doesn't have much of a personality outside referencing things.

It's also 4 in the morning, so please forgive the probably copious amounts of errors in this chapter. I really need to go through this fic and edit a bunch of stupid mistakes out overall. But, to quote Himiko, I don't have the MP.

Anyway, as always, comments and criticism are always appreciated!
Learn the Self, Hate the Self

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Picture 1

Four people, arms linked around each others' shoulders, faces all smiling. Kaede is second from the right, Touma Suzuki immediately next to her, his hand around her waist. Kaede's in a gorgeous embroidered dress, sequined and shimmering in the dull orange light of the hall. Behind the group, tables lined with half-cleaned platters of food stretch into the background until swallowed by the swarms of attendees to the gala.

This picture is the first in Kaede's file. She's looked at it too many times to count by now.

Kaede moves her thumb over Touma's face. It's bizarre. Of all of the people in the photo, he's the one she remembers most clearly. The two on the left mean nothing to her. Empty faces. But… that's not right, is it? They meant something to her. Meant. Past tense. Were they friends? Acquaintances? Had they met at the gala that night or had they been together since they were children? Who knows.

Who cares, really? When Kaede looks at them, she feels nothing. Not like when she looks at Touma. When she sees that easy, tilted smile on his face, something bubbles in her chest. A witch's cauldron of guilt and infatuation and hatred and comfort and disgust. These other two? Well, if Kaede could rip them out of the picture she would. That way the picture would at least fit on the screen without her having to slide it back and forth a bit. The file's too big and the screen is too small. How fitting.

Kaede sighs, drumming her fingers against the back of the tablet as if it's a piano. The person she's most conflicted about, however, is herself. Or, that girl in the picture that looks so much like her. But that isn't her. Not anymore.

The girl in the picture's eyes are filled with unbridled innocence. But she would never realize that. No, this girl would say that she hates the world and has no faith in anyone. Her eyes betray her, though. They glimmer. They still shine with mirth and hope. A brilliant lavender color that lights up the photo. When Kaede gazes into the mirror every morning, all she sees is dull, cloudy amethyst. Gems that were cut against a harsh grain and cracked to their core.

Himiko and Rantaro had told Kaede that she was warm. In the game, that is. She was easy to be around, approachable. Even if she was forceful and headstrong, it was often endearing. But this girl in the photo, Kaede can tell that she's cold, aloof.

As genuine as her smile is, the girl is clearly faking the pose. Though her arm is wrapped around the girl to her left, it's barely touching, almost a hover-arm. And though Touma's arm is snaked around her waist, there's space between the girl in the photo and him, as if she's trying to get away. Her feet are turned inwards, a clear sign of discomfort.

Kaede strokes the girl's face through the screen. That's her. That's Kaede Akamatsu. But she is Kaede Akamatsu. Who is Kaede Akamatsu?

She flicks the screen, unable to look at that stupid fucking girl anymore.

Picture 2

Three people this time. Set against the backdrop of a bustling city. New York? Had she gone to the
States before? The girl is in this one, too. She's taking a photo of some huge building covered in flashing lights. Two people are on either side of her. A man with brilliantly blonde hair and a woman with lovely purple eyes. The word "parents" faintly registers in Kaede's mind.

There'd been another form in Kaede's file. Some notes on her family. She has a sister, very young. Only three years old. And parents, obviously. Apparently, her parents are business moguls of some sort, owning quite a bit of property and several businesses. Music businesses.

Bile rises in Kaede's throat (it can't be vomit because she hasn't eaten in two days). Is that why she is (was?) the Ultimate Pianist? Some sick joke at her parents' business? When she first woke up, Kaede hoped that she would find answers, awe-inspiring, earth-shattering answers. But just like how she thought she could find the mastermind, her hope is crushed every time.

She flicks to the next picture, though she knows she shouldn't.

**Picture 3**

A diagram. Of a piano. The keys are specially designed to be pressed by the weight of a full human body. Spikes line the lid. A sample of the intricate pattern emblazoned on the piano is in the top right corner. A series of complicated calculations and a maze of arrows directs how ropes are to be set up to ensure the victim lives for as long as possible before being hanged.

Her execution. Or rather, a plan of it.

Makes sense. To create something so elaborate would require months of planning at the very least. Kaede traces a fingers over the various ropes, following where they go, across pulleys and threading the hinges of the key cover so that it will collapse as soon as the ropes go slack. It's a wonder, really. Someone had to conceive of this, someone had to do the math, spend hours rigging and testing the trap over and over, each time envisioning a young girl slowly having the life choked out of her. How many tests did it take? Did they use dummies? Or did they even test it at all? If everything was a simulation then what does it matter? They could crush her body as much as they wanted.

She doesn't remember that part, the body crushing. She was already dead by that point. Her body hanging, swinging back and forth, lifeless and broken. The bones in her neck are brittle. Each time she turns her head, she swears they're going to shatter and she'll die again.

Or maybe she was supposed to be crushed. Maybe they rope was just supposed to bring her to the brink of death and the spikes on the piano were to end her life. Obliterate her from existence until she's nothing more than a blood stain on the keys. It's more than she deserves.

She throws the tablet across the room, hears the screen crack as it slams into the wall. Is that the sounds her bones made when they were crushed? She forced her friends - the people she claimed were her friends, at least - to hear that sound. How terrible of a person could she be? How arrogant?

Tears well up in Kaede's eyes. She doesn't try to brush them away, but they don't fall. She's learned since waking up that there's no point. The tears will either come or they won't. She'll either cry or she'll soldier on. Never both. She did both in the game. But that girl is long gone. What about the girl in the photo? Kaede figures she'd just cry and run to mommy or daddy until things were better.

That's not fair. She doesn't know that girl in the photograph. Not anymore. So what can she say? Maybe she was cool and level-headed in the face of adversity, able to keep her composure no matter what happened. That probably wasn't the case.

But who really cares?
She hasn't been to Hajime in the past two days, not since her last panic attack. Not since she saw Mahiru taking those photos. Did she even see her doing that? She had, after all, been in the middle of an attack that left her cradled on the ground like a child in a thunderstorm. Who knows what her mind was convinced was happening.

Kaede slaps her cheeks, shaking her head. Mahiru wouldn't do something like that. Even in the game (Mahiru's game, the one Kaede seems to be living in, though she tries not to think about that), Mahiru was genuine and motherly. She wouldn't take callous pictures, she wouldn't pretend to care about Kaede.

She tells herself that every day and yet, she hasn't left her room at all in two days.

Shuichi knocked on her door yesterday. He stayed for a bit, the two chatting casually. But he left after a painful silence lasted just a bit too long. She wishes she could talk to him. His voice is gentle, soothing, like a lullaby. She's managed to mostly sort out her feelings for him. She isn't attracted to him, at least, not romantically. It made it easier that he rediscovered his sexuality. It means she doesn't have to worry about him pining for her.

But still. There's a part of her that yearns for him. It's foreign, a lump that weighs heavy in her gut when she thinks of Touma. Team Danganronpa meddling. Shuichi says he feels the same. Maybe one day it'll disappear and they can be friends. She'd like that. Shuichi is a sweet boy. Then again, last time she saw him, he had an aura of anger around him, likely because of Tsumugi's awakening.

Kaede hangs her head in her hands. Tsumugi's awake. The one time she left her room it was to go see that… that… that bitch! The rational part of Kaede's mind reminds her that she can't blame Tsumugi for everything, that, in some ways, she's just as much of a victim as the rest of them. Hell, she doesn't even know what role Tsumugi really played. She was the mastermind, sure, but there had to be more people working on it.

A grin creeps its way on Kaede's face. Tsumugi's tablet had only held a fragment of her audition tape. A brief introduction and Tsumugi gushing about how much she loved Danganronpa. Nothing really new. But the look of utter despair on Tsumugi's face when she realized that she, like the rest of them, may have been just another gullible nobody picked up off the street, it sent shivers down Kaede's spine.

Maybe Kaede should've been the mastermind.

There's a knock at her door. Kaede stands to answer it but hesitates. What if it's the Remnants? What if it's Mahiru? Kaede's not sure what she'd do in that situation. Would she fight? Try to act cool? Kill Mahiru with an exceedingly elaborate trap?

Another knock, more aggressive. This time, there's a voice. "Akamatsu! Open up, we got something for you."

"What the fuck? Are you guys fucking serious?"

Oh, Maki and Miu, probably Kirumi as well. Kaede heads to the door, opening it to find three very damp girls standing in front of her. Maki and Kirumi are in bathing suits wrapped in towels while Miu's just in a now entirely see-through white shirt. A steady rain drums against the overhang above the balcony. Kaede hadn't even realized it was raining.

"Here, take this," Maki says flatly, pushing Miu forward.

"H-huh?" Kaede replies, barely managing to keep Miu from barrelling into her.
Miu turns around in a huff. "Well fucking forgive me for telling you when there's some shady shit going on!"

"Iruma..." Kirumi says in that delicate way of hers. "Please, it is not that we do not believe you, but Keebo himself was-"

"Blah blah fucking blah, save your mouth for Maki's pussy," Miu snaps.

"Asshole," Maki mutters, glaring. She and Kirumi leave before Kaede can get a word in.

Miu turns back around and jabs a finger at Kaede. "Kaediot, you'll listen to me, right?"

"I-Irum-"

"Miiiiiiuuuuuu."

"Miu... uh, what's this about?"

Suddenly animated, Miu leans forward, way too into Kaede's personal space for her taste and grabs the pianist's hands. "The craziest fucking thing just happened. You see-" She cuts herself off, looks around, squints.

"M-Miu?" Kaede says. "Wha-? Hey!"

Miu's next to her ear, her breath hot. "I'm taking a fucking shower. If you need to pee in five minutes, don't worry about intruding." With that, Miu stomps into Kaede's room, to the personal bathroom and slams the door. A minute or so later the shower turns on and Miu starts singing a rather crass song.

Confused, Kaede shuts her door and sits on the edge of her bed. Miu's acting weird. Well, weirder than usual. And what was that she'd said? Shady shit? A surge of excitement swells in Kaede's throat. Could Miu have seen something similar to what happened in the pharmacy? And just recently? But Maki and Kirumi don't believe her?

No, that's not exactly right. They want to believe her. Kirumi's tone was conciliatory, almost apologetic, like she believed Miu. Even Maki managed not to demean Miu's intelligence, despite the inventor's, um, colorful insult.

Kaede glances at the clock, it's probably been long enough. Though part of her wonders why Miu would want to talk in the bathroom (yes her mind is going there), there's a sickening realization that all of their rooms are probably under surveillance. Himiko had told her that the killing game was supposedly broadcast via cameras the size of insects. Which is ridiculous. There's no way such a thing exists. It was all part of the simulation.

Right?

Steeling her nerves, Kaede gets up off the bed and walks over to the bathroom. The shower is still running but Miu isn't singing anymore. A image of Miu dead in the shower flashes through her mind, that they'll have to go to trial, that Kaede's the culprit again.

Before her mind can play anymore tricks on her, Kaede forces the door open, scurries inside, then slams it shut.

"Damn, girl, you must really have to take a piss," Miu says. She really is in the shower, her wet clothes flung all over the bathroom.
"Er- Miu?"

"You think I was fucking kidding?" Miu laughs, "Got drenched in the bitch of a storm out there. Needed to warm up." Miu's face appears from around the shower curtain, a sleazy smile on her face. "There's room in here if you wanna join."

Cracking her own grin, Kaede says, "Maybe later, your fingers might be a bit pruned by now."

Miu cackles in a way that's both ear-grating and comforting. It's the simulation Miu cackle through-and-through, but there's a calmness to it. No, that's not the right word. A confidence to it. "Lookie here, Kaediot's not such a fucking prude after all."

Feeling lighter, Kaede pushes Miu's damp shorts off the toilet and sits down. "Okay," she says, turning serious, "What'd you want to talk about?"

Miu drops her smile, glances at the floor then around the room, bites her lip. "Listen up, only saying this fucking once."

Kaede sits, enraptured, as Miu tells her of what happened in the pod room, how she barely managed to escape and that Kazuichi had been part of the group. Her heart drops in her chest when Miu tells her what happened with Keebo.

"Shoulda fucking been there…" Miu hisses, grip tightening around the shower curtain.

"There's no way you could've known that would happen," Kaede says.

"Fuck, I know. Just…" Miu sits down in the tub of the shower, the water from the showerhead running over her legs. She drapes her arms over the side. "If I hadn't been so fucking bent on exploring whatever that was… Shoulda gotten one of ya'll. Left Keebs, who can hardly fucking move anything but his dick, all alone." She scratches at her scalp a little too roughly for Kaede's liking.

Reaching over, Kaede takes the hand Miu's scratching with and covers it with her own. "Look, we can't worry about that now. Keebo seems fine, just… lacking a few memories, ya know?"

Miu regards Kaede warily. "So you fucking believe me?"

Kaede nods. "Yeah. I-I…" She puckers her lips, tries to grab her own arm but Miu tightens her grip, so she stays put. "I had a similar thing happen."

"You knock a bitch out, too?"

Kaede can't help but giggle a bit, though she stops when Miu's face doesn't change. "No, I-I had a panic attack in the pharmacy." She glances at Miu, gauging her reaction. Miu raises her eyebrows, but otherwise is stoic. It's weird, Kaede almost doesn't like it. The Miu she knows wouldn't miss a beat before calling Kaede weak or pathetic for that. Or somehow turn it into an innuendo.

"Kaediot, you're spacing out," Miu says. "Kaito give you some of his 'space juice' before the trial?"

Oh, there's Miu.

Refocusing herself, Kaede tells Miu what happened, how she's pretty sure she saw Mahiru taking photos of her, but she can't be sure. It could've all been a hallucination.

Miu seems to think about the information for a moment before nodding. "Normally I'd say you're full
"of shit, honestly."

"Gee, thanks."

Shaking her head, Miu continues, "Not like fucking that. I mean-" She points her middle finger to her head. "Your panic attack made it up. Didn't you fucking say you didn't believe in anyone before all this shit? Woulda said that it was the old you coming through. But..." Miu looks down and Kaede squeezes her hand. "With all that's fucking going on... I dunno, man."

Kaede frowns. Miu has a point. It could very well be that it was all in her head. Himiko had said that Kaede's audition tape had her saying that she didn't believe in people, didn't trust them. That girl in the photo, did she trust people? She was aloof, that's for sure. But distrusting? Maybe. Would Touma know?

"Kaediot if you don't stop making that sexy face I'm gonna drag you in here."

"Wh-what?!" Kaede practically shouts as Miu gives her a bemused expression. "Are you sexually harassing me?!"

Clicking her tongue, Miu says, "Works every fucking time."

"Why do you say those things?"

"Gets a reaction outta ya."

"Please stop."


Kaede's shoulders slump. It's true. They know so painfully little. In the game, she'd probably have confronted them, marched right in their faces and accused them. Then what? They'd probably restrain her, tell her that the trauma was worse than they thought. Likely they'd do whatever they did to Keebo, erase her memories of it all.

"Do you think anything's happened to anyone else?" Kaede says.

Miu shrugs again. "Dunno, couldn't say. Figure everyone's so fucking paranoid 'cause, you know, killing game, they probably keep it to themselves."

"Why didn't you?"

"I escaped, Kaediot. Now they got a gorgeous girl genius with a golden brain running around with all sorts of juicy shit. Figure I'd tell someone in case they get me."

"Are you worried?"

Kaede blinks, or rather, it seems like Miu's face fades from view. A brief flash of an unreadable expression. Though not entirely unreadable. There was one thing. Fear. Absolute terror. It disappears as soon as Kaede sees it and Miu's usual cocky expression returns.

"Course I'm fucking worried," Miu says, "Though I think if I stay with ya'll I should be okay. For now, at least."

Kaede hums for a moment before saying, "And when you sleep?"
"We'll burn that bridge when we fucking get to it."

"I don't think that's how that expression goes," Kaede says with a laugh.

Miu looks at her, curious. "Do you notice you're fucking doing that?"

"Doing what?"

Jabbing a finger at Kaede, Miu narrows her eyes. "Acting all flirty. That wasn't just a laugh, that was a 'omg you're so funnay!' laugh." Her eyes drop to Kaede's chest. "And you're sticking your boobs so far out they're gonna fall off your chest."

"H-huh?! Are you sexually harassing me again?!” Kaede leans back a bit. Her back cracks. Had… had she been leaning forward? She hadn't even noticed. Now that she thinks about it, she was like that in the game. She passed out compliments and cute giggles and promises of future dates left and right. Was that something Tsumugi had written into her? Flirt with everyone? Make everyone love you so that they'll be even more crushed than you on your piano.

Kaede bends over, she can feel another headache coming on. Hopefully this one doesn't turn into another panic attack.

"Shirogane's a bitch…” Kaede spits, causing Miu to hum in agreement.

"Hey, at least you're flirting with me," Miu says, "I can give it right fucking back to ya." She shrugs.

"What, like how you're still holding my hand?"

Miu lets go of Kaede's hand before Kaede even finishes her sentence, muttering something profane under her breath. Good, she's still easily flusterable. It's cute.

She's cute? Is that what Kaede's concerned with right now? How deep had Tsumugi gone? Deep enough that she can't focus apparently. The Remnants aren't on her side and she's paying attention to how cute Miu is. Really?

Then again, is there anything else she can do? Sure she knows the Remnants are questionable, but… she's already been over this. There's nothing she can do. There's never been anything she could do.

Her neck burns. She's already faced one punishment for trying to save everyone, she's not going through another.

Kaede coughs, violent and full of phlegm. She spits it out into the trashcan by the sink. That happens a lot. Whenever her neck burns, really. An automatic reaction, she supposes. Maybe she'll spit up the blood that splattered the piano.

She looks at Miu, half-expecting the inventor to make some lewd comment (and secretly hoping she does). Instead, Miu seems to be off in her world, too, rubbing small circles on her chest. A small streak of blood looks like a river as it spills from a hideous abrasion and mixes with the water in the shower.

In the first game, Sayaka had left Makoto's shower a bloody mess. Would Miu leave hers like that? Or would it all be gone when Kaede returns to her bathroom later? Like Miu was never even there.

An alarm blares.

"The fuck?" Miu says, standing and giving Kaede more of a view than she ever really wanted.
"Someone waking up?"

Standing as well, Kaede shakes her head. "No, this is a different alarm. Despair's in the area."

"The fuck does that mean?"

"Oh right you weren't… um," Kaede turns around as Miu steps out the shower.

"Kaediot, we're both chicks. Ain'tcha never seen tits before? Here's a hint, look down."

"Just put some damn clothes on, you can borrow some of mine if you need! Once you're done, follow me."

With that, Kaede leaves the bathroom. She opens the dresser drawer in her room, pulling out some clothes and underwear for Miu. They're about the same size. Not like any of this is really hers anyway. All of it is just stuff delivered when Sonia and Gundham showed up. Random articles of clothing scavenged from wherever isn't destroyed.

After handing the clothes to Miu, Kaede walks over to the window. In the distance, she can see a vague shadow that looks like it might be a ship. It's not terribly big. Or it's really far out, she's not sure.

A knock at the door. "Musical One, are you resting in your domicile?"

For a moment, Kaede's breath hitches in her throat. Gundham, a Remnant. "J-just a minute. Miu is finishing up in the shower."

"Very well, but do not dally. The forces of accursed despair approach."

She can hear his footsteps fade as he walks down the stairs. Miu exits the bathroom, her hair pulled into a loose, still dripping ponytail.

"Still fucking raining?" Miu asks, going to the window. She shakes her head. "Good. Guess that's the despair shit?"

"Yeah, Hinata said they sometimes go by the island and try to attack."

"And we do what exactly?"

"Just follow me, I'll show you."

"Lead the fucking way."

Another despair invasion. They'd made it through the last one with hardly an injury on the Remnants' side, but could that have just been a fluke? Maybe this time there's more. She'd been rushed from the hospital so she never saw how big their forces were. Did the few people here really manage to fight off an entire group of despair-driven maniacs? Then again, they do have Hajime. She's seen his talent firsthand, his sheer ability is almost terrifying.

Kaede puts her hand on the doorknob, freezes. She can't stay here, she knows, but a part of her is screaming that this is a trap. That somehow the Remnants are faking this and it's a big ruse to lure she and Miu into that inescapable basement.

She feels a hand on her shoulder. Miu's. She's smiling at Kaede. "Let's fucking go."

Kaede nods. "Miu, this might sound weird but… No matter what happens. Let's believe each other,
okay? Believe in each other. If something happens to one of us, let's believe the other as best we can.” She can feel a small blush forming on her face. She'd given plenty of speeches like that in the game. It had never ended well.

Miu flashes her a grin and thumbs up. "Damn fucking straight, Kaediot."

Sitting in a wheelchair watching Mikan bluster back and forth as she tries to get everyone together is not exactly what Korekiyo would call "fun." The alarm has long since stopped going off, so Despair must be getting closer. With the way Mikan is running around, you'd think they were already here.

To his right, Keebo twiddles his thumbs (quite literally; Hajime had told him to do it) in his own wheelchair. He'd never said much to Korekiyo, not that the two interacted much, either. While Korekiyo was confined to his room because of his injuries, Keebo, apparently, could hardly move some days. It made a certain amount of sense in that way.

However, he had to admit that he holds resentment towards Keebo. People have visited him constantly since he woke. Almost all day Korekiyo sees someone pass by his door as they make their way to Keebo's. Some of the kinder ones, namely Shuichi and Miu will poke their heads in and ask how he's doing, but they never stay for long. Well, Miu does, sometimes, but she's such a whirlwind that it can be hard for Korekiyo to notice when she's just being polite compared to when she actually wants to speak.

Rantaro is the only one who consistently comes to visit, keeping Korekiyo updated on the news of the island. Not that there ever is much. It's mostly what various people are discovering about themselves and telling others. Maki seems to be much nicer and Kirumi more assertive. Shuichi and Kaede are speaking again. Himiko's become something of a late-night talk-show host. The world keeps moving and Korekiyo feels far too still inside his little hospital room. Because of that, he's so thankful for Rantaro's visits.

Still, Korekiyo would like the others to visit him, though he'll never say it. He knows he deserves this. Or does he? Maybe *He* deserves it. That other Korekiyo that dwells silently inside him. The amicable anthropologist with a sister fetish and a murder count under his belt higher than most serial killers. Korekiyo hasn't heard *Him* in a while. When Korekiyo speaks, it's his own voice, his own words, his own thoughts.

*I miss him so much, stranger.*

*She*, on the other hand… *She* only seems to be getting more and more persistent. *She* invades his dreams, his memories, his thoughts. Always there, always waiting. Korekiyo wishes she'd just die, but if his beliefs in the game are any indication, she'd just end up more deeply rooted into his subconscious.

*Why don't you let me play? Just for a bit, just let me see my beloved brother.*

Korekiyo ignores the thoughts, turning on the tablet in his lap. Immediately, a bright picture fills the screen. His folder hadn't really had much of value, nothing he didn't already know. He had auditioned for the money, sent it to his sister who's being taken care of by their landlord. But there were also pictures, mostly of him, sloppily taken and with a thumb visible in several.
This one, though, this one is special. In it, Korekiyo holds a small cage filled with small crabs. He's at a beach, long hair tied back. Standing beside him is his sister. His real sister. Chuya Shinguji. He has a name for her, he said it in his audition tape. In Chuya's hands is another crab that she no doubt caught.

He traces a hand over her face. The two look similar. They both have that silky straight black hair, though hers is cut short and choppy, as if she did herself. And while Korekiyo is tall and lanky, she seems rather stout, a bit shorter than she should be. If Korekiyo did his math right, she'd be about ten now. They're most similar, however, in their eyes. Narrow and yellow, unsettling to look at. Their eyes had long been a source of exclusion for the two of them. Too many times his sister had come home crying because of those eyes.

Was it his eyes that made Team Danganronpa cast him as the villain? He certainly looked the part. He wears a mask, has creepy yellow eyes and long, eerie hair. Was that the reason? The entire reason? He could look creepy so they made him despicable.

You're sister is so beautiful.

Great. Her. Korekiyo pushes her away as best she can, but her feelings linger. Desire lingers. He presses the tablet into his lap. Pain sears up his legs.

He hopes his stitches pop and he bleeds out. It's all he deserves.

The pain is just another part of his punishment. He hasn't taken his medication since that night. Can't trust it. He deals with the pain. Though, with how the bags under his eyes have grown, maybe he will take the pills just one night so he can actually get some sleep without the ache keeping him up.

"H-hey, Shinguji," Keebo says.

Grateful for the distraction, Korekiyo faces Keebo. "Yes, Idabashi?" That was Keebo's last name, yes? His true last name.

The boy blushes slightly. "K-Keebo's fine. I am- I am more accustomed to it now."

"Very well," Korekiyo says, "What is it?"

"Is that… is that your sister?" Keebo asks, tentative.

"No, that isn't me, foolish boy. "But I am here," Korekiyo says. No, She says.

"Wha?!"

Korekiyo drives the tablet into his lap again. The pain clears Her away. Away from him, from his voice. "My… my apologies. That false memory escapes sometimes…" Gods, he sounds like a fifteen year old's understanding of schizophrenia…

Though wary, Keebo nods. "I- I heard. I am sorry that you must deal with this."

"Do not be. It is not your fault. We all have our own struggles in this."

"Yeah, I suppose."

There's silence except for Mikan fussing over getting Tsumugi up. The former mastermind hasn't done much except stay in her room the entire time she's been awake. And for all the visitors Korekiyo doesn't get, Tsumugi gets even fewer. As far as he's aware, only Kaede visited her and that
was only to tell her off. Every now and again Shuichi will stop by, only to be turned away by whoever is guarding the door. It's easy to see why, honestly. His anger is practically visible.

"Do you remember any more of your family?" Keebo asks.

Putting his finger to his chin, Korekiyo thinks for a moment. "I do not believe so. As far as I am aware, it has just been my sister and myself."

"Oh... What happened to your parents?"

"I am unsure. All I know is that they have not been around for at least two years."

"I see," Keebo says.

He's not an efficient conversationalist, Korekiyo notes. Then again, Keebo is trying to talk to him of all people. Keebo's conversations with Miu always seem much more animated. Maybe it's the long-winded part of him talking, but Korekiyo would still like to speak.

"And you, Keebo?" At Keebo's confused expression, Korekiyo continues, "Your family. Do you have any recollection of them?"

"Oh!" the faux robot's face lights up considerably. "It appears that I am an only child and it is only me and my mother!" He smiles, faint, but there. "I do not remember much about her, but when I look at her picture - the one in my tablet, that is - I find myself feeling calmer, more content. I can only assume we had a good relationship."

Korekiyo smiles. "It is the same with my sister. Though I do have some memories of her."

"Please tell!"

Korekiyo looks at Keebo for a moment. He has that childish gleam in his eyes he had in the game. It's almost hard to imagine the two of them being the same age. "I remember she and I skipped school once to get ice cream. The line after school was always so long, so we decided to just go there and sit the whole day. The owner of the place was this truly kind younger woman who gave us discounts. She made a bet with us that day to see if we could finish a scoop of every flavor. If we did, she'd give us free ice cream for a year."

Keebo chuckles. "Did you do it?"

"Almost. We ended up with only two flavors left and Chuya wanted to keep going, but she looked as if she was about to vomit, so I told her no more."

"You are a good brother, Shinguji." Keebo's expression drops. "I am... I am sorry for what Team Danganronpa did to you."

A warmth spreads in Korekiyo's chest. In the game, he'd never truly interacted with Keebo. Sure, his relationship with Kokichi was interesting, but the anthropologist in him was interested much more in the overall culture created by the killing game. Individual observation could come later. Nonetheless, he knew Keebo was kind and simple, earnest. Perhaps Keebo was lucky and all they changed was his body.


"Mikan!" Hajime calls out.
"R-right here!" Mikan cries, darting around a corner. "I-I know I'm l-late. It's… it's just I can't get Sh-Shirogane out of her room and…"

"Don't worry about it," Hajime says. If it was supposed to sound comforting, it isn't. In fact, it sounds more like an order to Korekiyo. "The safe room in the hotel is full and the one in the music hall isn't working. We'll have to keep these four in here. I want you in here, as well."

"W-what?" Mikan squeaks, back suddenly at attention. "W-why? What if- What if someone g-gets hurt out there?"

"I can take care of it. But I need someone here to operate the defenses in case Despair breaches Third," Hajime explains, moving over to a breaker panel on the wall. He flips some switches, causing lights to flick on and off as he does so. With one final clack, Hajime slides the last breaker into place before turning back to Mikan. "You remember how to activate it, yeah?"

"Um… um…" Mikan tugs at her hair before perking up. "Yes! Yes!"

Hajime nods. "Good. I'll radio you when it's safe. Until then, do not open this door." He faces the rest of them. "You three, listen to Mikan. She knows the protocol. If something goes wrong, rely on her."

"Whatever you say, boss," Rantaro says with a mock salute.

For a moment, Korekiyo thinks Hajime's going to get mad, but instead, the man smiles. "I do sound like a hardass, don't I? Sorry I-"

Hajime's radio crackles to life. "Hey, Hajime, where are ya, man?" Kazuichi's voice. A shiver races down Korekiyo's spine. "Estimated landfall in ten minutes. We got all the others down here and - hey! Mahiru! Get your own!"

The voice switches. "Get your butt over here, Mister!"

"Sheesh." Kazuichi's voice again. "How do you deal with that all the time?"

The radio clicks off and Hajime sighs. "Guess I'm heading out. Hopefully it won't be too long. This one doesn't have any long-range weapons."

Hajime heads outside, disappearing around the corner as he runs towards… wherever he's going. Korekiyo isn't sure.

Taking Hajime's place at the front of the group, Mikan skips to the front, looking all too cheery. "Alright!" she says. "Since I'm in charge, you all need to rely on me if you need anything. Absolutely anything!"

Oh yes, now Korekiyo remembers, Mikan has that side to her personality as well.

I still think she'd make a good friend.

"Now," Mikan says, interrupting Her, "I need you all to please go to Shirogane's room and gather in the center of it."

"Why her room?" Rantaro asks, an edge to his voice. He flashes a knowing glance at Korekiyo.

Mikan tents her fingers together. "It is the farthest away from the windows and is in the back of the hospital. You will be safest there." She gestures towards Keebo. "Amami, will you please assist
Idabashi in getting there?"

"Yeah, sure…"

Korekiyo decides that confident Mikan is… unsettling. He nearly jumps when she directs her attention to him. "Shinguji, do you require assistance or can you make it on your own?"

"I can manage," Korekiyo says, if only to get away from Mikan sooner.

"Alright!" Mikan says, though her voice sounds strained. She probably wanted Korekiyo to "rely" on her. "Head there now, please!"

A couple minutes and a lot of swearing as they tried to turn Korekiyo and Keebo around in the cramped hallway later, the three Survivors are outside Tsumugi's room. They glance at each other. Korekiyo knows they're all thinking the same thing: Who wants to knock?

"Rock, paper, scissors for it?" Rantaro offers.

"No," Keebo says, "I will do it." Leaning forward, he raps on the door a few times. No response. "Shirogane!" he calls. "It is me… well, it is me, Shinguji, and Rantaro. Tsumiki has instructed us to wait out the attack in your room."

Silence.

Keebo tries to knock again, but his arm seems to stop working halfway through, leaving him slumped forward, growling in frustration. Rantaro quickly helps him back up. As he does, the door opens.

Tsumugi looks a mess. Her hair is knotty and disheveled. Heavy bags line her eyes and her hospital gown hangs dangerously loose off her shoulders. She's holding a swathe of fabric by the tips of her fingers. "Come in, then," she says. Her voice holds none of the sweetness it did before, but none of the arrogance that Shuichi described.

The three shuffle inside, settling in a small circle in the center of the room. Mikan calls from down the hall, "Is everyone ready?!"

"Yep," Rantaro calls back, almost automatically.

There's a squeal of glee and a loud ker-thunk. The group whirls around as an awful screeching sound seems to erupt from the walls. Heavy metal sheets slide down over the windows, cutting off the outside light as they descend. Keebo tries to cover his ears, but only one of his arms cooperates. Korekiyo helps him with the other one.

Finally, the screeching stops and the sheets stop moving, leaving the room encased in darkness. Glancing out the door, Korekiyo can see that the entire hospital is dark save for a few security lights illuminating the halls. A few seconds later, Mikan turns the corner holding a flashlight, smiling as sweet as ever.

"What is going on?" Keebo asks, clearly still reeling from the noise.

"The hospital is now in defensive mode. The power is on low, so if you need to go somewhere, please let me know. In fact, if you need anything, please rely on me! I will be around making sure everything is in order." Without a word more, Mikan turns on her heel and skips from the room.

From the dim light in the hallway, Korekiyo can just make out everyone's features. Keebo is playing
with his fingers again, brow furrowed in concentration. Korekiyo wishes that he could be that easily entertained. There's a charming simplicity to watching Keebo work so furiously at such a basic function. It reminds him of Keebo's time as a robot. The most basic of human emotions fascinated the robot. Is it the same feeling? That feeling of discovery, or rather, rediscovery in this case.

To Korekiyo's left, Rantaro seems to have splayed out on his back, shirt lifted so that his skin is on the cool hospital floor. Rantaro has always fascinated Korekiyo. His ability to be so relaxed and yet so aware at the same time. Korekiyo doesn't doubt that if he tried to mess with Rantaro, the boy would stop him before he even got close.

Separated slightly from the rest of them, Tsumugi has scuttled over to be near the hall. She's sewing two pieces of cloth together it seems. With practiced expertise, she plunges the needle into the fabric, pulling it through as if the cloth was only air. Sweat beads her brow and her glasses hang loose off her face, almost useless. Are there even lenses in them anymore?

It's funny. She always seemed so in control during the killing game. Sure, Korekiyo hadn't seen her mastermind persona, but still, even when she was upset or angry, there was an air of control about her that he could never place. Now he could: performance. She was never upset, she was never furious or scandalized. No, she was performing, performing one big act. While everyone else was on trial for their lives and feeling the sting of betrayal and distrust, she simply could play her part and laugh later in the privacy of whatever little hole she'd carved herself.

And it's her fault that Korekiyo now has to deal with *Her and Him.*

He thought about targeting her. In the game. He figured that she'd be excited enough to be included in the ritual that maybe she'd volunteer. The thought makes him feel ill. No matter how much anger and disgust he feels towards her, the fact that he murdered not one, but two innocent people… It's something he doesn't think he'll ever get over.

"So," Rantaro says, "I think I'll get this little pow-wow started."

"Pow-wow?" Keebo asks.

"Meeting, Keebs."

"I know!" Keebo says, indignant. "I just was confused at your choice of words."

Rantaro sits up, rolling his shoulder. "I hear ya." He levels his gaze at everyone in the room, though Tsumugi seems to be wrapped up in her work. "You know what'd be fun? Let's start our own killing game right here and now."

Everyone, Tsumugi included, jerks their heads and stares at Rantaro. He's grinning like a madman. Sighing, Korekiyo says, "Please do not joke about such things."

"I dunno if I was joking, we got ourselves a killing starter right here," Rantaro says, pointing at Tsumugi.

"That is plainly unnecessary. I'm not feeling the best right now so please, leave me alone." she hisses before turning back to her work.

"Cute, real cute," Rantaro replies. He laughs a bitter, sick laugh.

Tsumugi glares back at him, hunches over her work.

Rantaro doesn't give up so easily however. He hefts himself up from his spot on the floor, walks over
to Tsumugi, then squats in front of you. "Hey, that's the part where you say 'what's real cute', dummy."

"You're freaking me out," Tsumugi says, eyes glued to her sewing.

"And you killed me, I think I've earned this."

A beat. Tsumugi stops sewing. Keebo leans hard on his armrest, as if trying to get as close to Korekiyo as possible. Tsumugi looks up, her eyes like ice. A small smile forms. "I'm glad I made you so oblivious in the game." Her face darkens. "It made you an easy target."

This is a performance, Korekiyo can tell. He, or rather, He has spent so long observing people that he picks up on all of her little tells. Tsumugi loosens her grip on whatever she's holding, her nostrils flare just a bit. What Korekiyo can't answer is why she is performing.

For all his awareness, Rantaro doesn't seem to pick up on Tsumugi's little game. Instead, he reels his hand back and slaps her across the face.

"Amami!" Keebo cries out. He tries to roll over to them but ends up getting his fingers tangled in the spokes.

Tsumugi tries to back away from Rantaro but she's against the wall.

"Not so tough now, huh?" Rantaro says, voice even. Scarily so.

"What do you want from me?" Tsumugi hisses. "Just leave me alone."

Rantaro scratches his arm nonchalantly, as if he's having just a normal conversation. "I want you to stop pretending you're like the rest of us."

"What?"

Standing to his full height, Rantaro towers over Tsumugi. It almost looks as if he's trying to seduce her. "Stop locking yourself in your room like Akamatsu. Stop letting your appearance go like Saihara. Stop intentionally pricking yourself with that damn needle like Yumeno." He growls. "Stop pretending you've been through the same shit as the rest of us, damn it!"

He kicks the wall next to Tsumugi; the cheap plaster crumbles and Rantaro swears as he jerks his foot out of it.

Tsumugi opens her mouth to speak, but Rantaro slams on the wall.

"Don't. Just don't. No excuse you give can make me forgive you." He turns away, takes a heavy breath. "You made me miss a sister I may or may not have. Look at Keebs, he can barely move without help. Why? 'Cause you thought it would be cool to make him a robot. And Shinguji. He mutilated himself. Hear that? Mutilated himself because of what you made him into."

He faces Tsumugi. Though she's still pressed against the wall, she doesn't flinch away. "It wasn't supposed to matter," she spits.

"Oh, and why not?"

"Because," Tsumugi says, "The winners of the game were supposed to get their memories restored and the rest of us were dead anyway."

Rage flashes on Rantaro's face, black and ugly and full of malice. He leans back to kick Tsumugi
again. Before Korekiyo can react, Keebo lurches himself forward, managing to roll his wheelchair forward, stopping between Tsumugi and Rantaro. Tsumugi cries out as the wheel rolls over her foot.

"Rantaro, please stop this!" Keebo urges, holding his hands up.

"You're defending her?" Rantaro says with all the virulent curiosity of an executioner.

"I- I do not want anyone to get hurt."

"Hmph, then maybe get off her foot." Rantaro leaves, vanishing in the darkness of the hallway.

"Oh!" Rolling off Tsumugi's foot, Keebo bends down as best he can. "Do I need to call Tsumiki?"

Tsumugi shakes her head. "No. I'm fine. Just… leave me alone." After shoving away Keebo's concerned hands, Tsumugi curls in on herself and returns to her sewing, going much faster than before.

Keebo looks to Korekiyo. "What… what just happened?"

How does Korekiyo answer that? He's not sure himself. Rantaro, relaxed, go-with-the-flow Rantaro had just been angrier than Korekiyo had ever seen him. Was this who he truly was? Before the game? Or… wasn't he in the previous season of Danganronpa? Was this that personality coming through?

"Shinguji?" Keebo's voice breaks him out of his musings. Gods, Keebo looks even more like a little kid now. His eyes are shiny in the low light and his mouth is pressed into a confused, desperate line.

"I do not know… But, I will go investigate." Korekiyo unlocks his wheelchair and, after some maneuvering around Keebo, heads out into the dim hallway.

The security lights provide more than enough light for him to see, but he still finds himself getting caught on random doorstops or jutting walls as he rolls through the silent halls. What is it about the dark that seems to amplify everything creepy about hospitals? Places of healing that seem to always be the subject of corruption.

Korekiyo sees a room with a light on and makes his way towards it. Inside, it's not Rantaro, but rather, Mikan, humming to herself lightly as she fills out what looks like paperwork. Korekiyo's wheel catches the side of the door, causing Mikan to startle and turn around.

"Ah! Shin-Shinguji, are you feeling alright?" She glances at the clock on the wall. "It is about time for your medication."

"That's-" Korekiyo tries to say but Mikan is already by the dispensary and presses a button on one that's labelled "Korekiyo Shinguji." Several identical pills fall out onto her hand. Mikan goes to the sink and fills a disposable cup with water, then hands both to Korekiyo.

He takes the pills. Normally, he'd fake swallowing them, hiding the in his mask when Mikan turned her back, then later dissolving them in water and pouring that into his room's toilet when he got the chance (and could find the energy to drag himself over there). But this time, Mikan seems to be watching him.

"Is-Is e-everything okay?" she asks, concern apparent. "I- I can assist you if- if you need." She gets an unsettled smile on her face. "Just rely on me."

"It is not that," Korekiyo says. He has an idea. "It's just, you have been giving me sleeping pills for a
while. I do not think I need them any longer. If anything, I believe that I am overrested." It's a gamble, he knows that much. It's very possible that Mikan will just laugh and assure him that the pills are completely necessary, that she's a nurse and knows best.

You should trust her, stranger. She is like me. Devoted. And such a wonderful figure as well.

Korekiyo would really like to have just one thought without Her infecting it.

However, Mikan doesn't react like Korekiyo predicted. In fact, she looks absolutely panicked. "Sleeping p-pills?" she cries, rushing over to where she was doing paperwork a moment ago. Flipping through the pages, she mutters to herself until she finds Korekiyo's file. "Th-there's n-nothing in here about sleeping pills!"

"There… is not?"

Mikan stares at Korekiyo, wild-eyed. "Why do you think you're on sleeping pills?"

Taken aback, Korekiyo stammers for a second before managing to explain. "I… well I always find myself extremely drowsy after taking my medication. I then wake up hours later feeling relatively rested, but not having dreamt much."

Moving quick, Mikan reaches into the cabinets above her and snatches several flasks and a bottle of green liquid. She pours some of the liquid into each flask before dropping one of Korekiyo's pill in each flask. A few moments pass as the pills dissolve. Liquid in two of the flasks turns a forest green, while liquid in the other two almost turns a faded pink color.

Mikan cries out and yanks at her hair. "OhmyGodsomeonemixedupsleepingpillswithyourpainkillersI'msosorry!"

"Tsumiki," Korekiyo says, voice noticeably higher, "What's going on?"

"I don't know, I don't know. I-I just put your pills in a solution Hajime made for testing medication and- and- and ohhhhhh, I'm such a failure." Mikan suddenly drops to her knees, tears streaming from her eyes. "Forgive me, Shinguji!" She crawls over to where he's sitting and takes his hands. "You can do whatever you want to me. Draw on me, strip me, whatever!"

"Uh…” Mikan never was Korekiyo's favorite character playing the game. There's something really unnerving about how pathetic this grown woman is being. "How about… er… how about we just fix my medication?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely!" Mikan hops up and opens up the top of the dispensary, upending it into a nearby bowl. "I will have to test all of these immediately!" She glances back at Korekiyo. "Will you be alright with the pain?"

Korekiyo nods. "It is not too severe today and the effects of this morning's pills still linger," he lies.

"O-okay… This will take a while. Please forgive me!"

"It is… okay, Tsumiki, thank you for your concern."

Eager to leave, Korekiyo turns himself around and leaves, making some excuse about tracking down Rantaro that isn't entirely untrue. As he returns to his journey down the hallways, a nagging thought clings to his brain. One that sends nothing but confusion through him.

Mikan didn't know about the sleeping pills?
The day had been boring, Maki decides, even with the despair invasion. Without the fear or adrenaline of the first invasion, it had just ended up being them sitting in a way too close room watching Miu freak out every now and again. That gets old. Quick.

And it had been hot despite the rain. She and Kirumi had gone to the beach but the storm forced them away.

So now here she is, sweating buckets in her bed with Kirumi sound asleep next to her. Popcorn ceilings are really ugly. They remind Maki too much of the orphanage, they seem too normal. In the game the rooms were excessively clean, almost too perfect. The walls were smooth and even, without blemish or dent. That probably should have tipped her off it was all a simulation. That an all of the other crazy shit. Exisals? Really? She believed that?

Then again, she is stuck on an island surrounded by characters from a video game she'd played twice in her life.

Maki turns her head, sweaty skin sticking to the cheap pillowcase. She'll ask Kirumi to wash it in the morning. Because of course she will. She always asks Kirumi to deal with her dirty work, always has.

The sheets have slipped off Kirumi, leaving her bare back exposed. The heat didn't preclude them from other activities. Maki looks at the former maid's back. Blinks, there's a bruise on it, blinks, it's gone.

Maki had given her that bruise. She'd been frustrated playing the first Danganronpa. She couldn't get past one puzzle and somehow that was Kirumi's fault. Somehow Kirumi was distracting her, messing up her concentration. So the logical course of action had been to drive her nails into Kirumi's arm and beat on her back every time Maki failed. Because that's what good girlfriends do.

At least, that's what Maki told herself, completely serious, too. Good girlfriends keep their girlfriend in line, make sure they don't do anything stupid, make sure they don't hurt themselves or anyone else.

Pressure builds behind Maki's eyes. She can't tell if it's from tears or a migraine. It shouldn't be tears. If it's tears then that means she's sympathetic, and she doesn't deserve sympathy. She can't play the victim any longer.

That's what she did in the game. Everything was someone else's fault. Even when she tried to take responsibility for Kaito's death, it was just for her, just so she could feel like a hero. A martyr sacrificing herself for the sake of the others. No, that's not it. Just so she could be right. Just so she could beat Kokichi.

As usual, he'd played her easily.

"Maki," Kirumi says. "Your breathing is heavy, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, go back to sleep," Maki lies. Lying comes so easy to her, so why is she so bad at it?

Kirumi turns to face Maki, her blonde hair falling loose over her face. That was the first thing Maki remembers noticing about Kirumi, the way her hair seemed to always be in her eyes yet never
hampered her, as if she could see right through it. Maki used to think that Kirumi was hiding behind it (and she now knows that she found that weakness delicious).

"I was never asleep," Kirumi says, "Never cared for it, remember?"

"That was you in the game. You always used to sleep in."

"That is only because I stayed up late with you all of the time."

Maki nods, scrunches her nose. "I swear I remember you waking up before me."

"I did," Kirumi says simply, but there's an edge to her voice, vindictive. Maki can see where she's going. She decides to let herself get caught in the trap.

"When did you start?"

"A little after I started visiting with you."

"Why?"

"Because you'd beat me when I didn't."

Maki's stomach twists and her leg twitches. Kirumi's been doing this lately. Dropping hints, no, dropping bombs on Maki, trying to get her to react, to engage. Maki shuts down every time, growing quiet, probably glaring at the world as if she could scare away reality. This time… this time it will be different.

"I know…" Maki whispers. "I'm sorry."

Kirumi raises her eyebrows in surprise, sits up, her gaze eons away. "Are you? You said that quite a few times."

Maki only nods, her own eyes locked to that popcorn ceiling she hates so much. Maybe she can drag herself across it and it will cut her into oblivion. Death by a thousand cuts. No, that's much too close to Kirumi's execution.

"If only sorry fixed everything," Kirumi whispers.

Maki knows what's coming. She's always known. She's great at predicting what will happen, but she's so, so stupid because she can never act on it. She knows that hurting Kirumi is wrong, she does it anyway. She knows that pushing everyone away will only hurt her, she does it anyway.

Kirumi touches Maki's cheek, in essence forcing Maki to look at her. "I do not think I will ever forgive you for what you've done."

Bitterness rises in Maki before she can stop it. "Then why are you still here?" She clamps down on her tongue and blood seeps into her mouth.

But Kirumi doesn't take offense, she only nods, as if she predicted this answer. If the two of them are so psychic then why did they not see this shitshow coming?

"Perhaps for punishment," Kirumi says. "For my actions in the killing game."

"Kirumi," Maki says. "Leave." She wants it to sound like an order, but she chokes on a sob halfway through the word so it only comes out weak and pathetic. Perfect for someone like Maki.
"Excuse me?"

"If being with me is a punishment… Then leave. Don't punish yourself." Each word rends at Maki in a way that seems almost overblown. This relationship she has with Kirumi has been nothing but volatile, nothing but cruelty. So why is she telling Kirumi to leave? Why does she want to grab onto Kirumi and cry into her stomach? Why does she want to smack Kirumi and tell her how dumb she is for believing Maki?

Kirumi goes silent for a moment. She gets up from the bed, walks to Maki's side and begins stroking her hands through the Maki's hair that's tumbled off the bed. "You are saying these things out of self-hatred, as well."

"I know, doesn't make them less true."

"Perhaps," Kirumi says. She stands again, this time grabbing her clothes that are strewn around the floor. She dresses slowly, purposefully, a skinned animal donning its flesh in front of the hunter.

Maki holds out her hand. A hunter caught in the trap caught by an animal. No, Kirumi is no animal. She has always been human. A wonderful, kind human girl who stuttered over her words sometimes and only wanted to join Danganronpa so they could turn her into someone wanted, someone respected.

After Kirumi finishes, she takes Maki's hand, squeezes it, lets it drop. "I'm going Maki." She makes her way to the door. "For now," she adds, opening it. A sliver of moonlight surrounds her, illuminating her. An angel coming to take her away from Maki's Hell.

Kirumi looks at Maki, as if daring the assassin to beg for her back, to tell her not to go. But Maki knows she can't. Knows she shouldn't. This time, she's going to act on her knowledge. Kirumi closes her eyes, steps outside, the door closes behind her and darkness swallows Maki.

The room seems to get hotter. Maybe the room is truly turning into Hell. Soon demons will come and tear her to bits. She is a demon princess after all. And Kirumi was a beheading beauty. So come, Beauty, come and behead this hideous demon that has kept you captive for so long.

No, Kirumi shouldn't grant Maki such peace. She should just leave her to rot. Maki curls into a ball.

Why did Kirumi have to say "for now" as she left? Because of that, Maki feels a bit of hope, a ray of light that she could climb, climb to escape this place. But Maki knows better, as usual. She saw it with Kirumi's execution. That hope is just an illusion, a mockery, and that offering will cause her nothing but agony.

She tries to roll over and her scalp burns as she accidentally pulls her hair. In a flurry, she shoots up from the bed and goes to the bathroom, opening up the medicine cabinet behind the mirror. Inside, a knife rests hidden among various toiletries that the Remnants gave them. She'd taken it from the kitchen, almost out of habit. An unarmed assassin is a dead assassin.

She grabs the knife, holds it up. It's a simple kitchen knife, but plenty sharp. Hajime keeps the tools in excellent condition.

Bunching her hair into twin tails, Maki ties each clump with her red scrunchie. Back in the orphanage, Kirumi had asked her why Maki never cut her hair except to get rid of split ends. In the game Maki wondered the same thing. After all, having long hair was nothing but a liability being an assassin, but each time she tried to cut it, something stopped her. She remembers telling Kirumi that it was because little kids have long hair, that Maki will cut it when she finally considers herself grown
Maki holds the knife to one of her twintails, takes a deep breath, makes the first cut. It isn't clean and isn't easy. She doesn't slice through. No, it's more like she carves through the bunch, constantly having to readjust and grab loose hairs as they try to escape. Her hair falls to the ground with heavy thuds. By the time she's finished, her bathroom is covered in a thin layer of brown hair. Through the mirror, she can see several long strands that float in the air conditioning. She cuts through each one.

She does the same with the other bunch. Hacking away at it until her head jerks forward with its newfound lightness. A gentle tug at her scrunchies is all it takes to cause them to fall to the floor as well. She shakes her head. Her hair now just brushes the ends of her ears. It's choppy and rough, practically like a child's. She'll find scissors later, clean it up, maybe have Hajime do it. He's probably got that talent somewhere in there.

She puts the knife back in the cabinet, doesn't bother washing it. Hopefully she'll never need to use it again. She's covered in hair, contemplates taking a shower, but that would just clog the drain. A swim in the ocean should get most of it off.

Deciding not to wait until morning, Maki leaves the hair-coated bathroom and steps out onto the porch of the motel. It's muggy and gross out, the air still, but Maki feels cooler. Her neck can breathe without her hair strangling it. Her back rejoices because it won't be smacked by heavy hair whenever she sweats or gets it wet.

A familiar squeak. Maki sees Himiko, pillow and slippers and all, walking towards her, a surprised expression on her face.

She stops in front of Maki, looks at her as if appraising her. Maki reaches her hand up to thread it through her hair but it only finds empty air and the memory of what was once there.

"You look good," Himiko says flatly.

"You don't need to lie to me," Maki responds.

Himiko frowns then steps close to Maki. Before Maki can say anything, Himiko nuzzles her head into Maki's chest, pressing their bodies together.

"Wh… What are you doing?" Maki asks, resisting the urge to threaten Himiko.

"You looked like you needed a hug."

A hug? Does Maki really look that bad? "I don't think this is how you hug people."

Himiko shrugs. "Didn't wanna drop my pillow on the sand."

The mage looks up at Maki, eyes darting to something above. Maki turns and sees Kirumi looking over the edge of the balcony. Their eyes meet for just a moment, just to acknowledge each other. Kirumi might even have smirked. In what? Pride? Bemusement? Maki can't tell. Without a word, Kirumi turns and disappears into her own room.


Maki takes one final look at where Kirumi was, then forcefully wills herself to look away. She nods. "Yes, that sounds like a good idea."
Another one down, and the longest chapter thus far at a little over ten thousand words! A bit slower though, wanted to focus a bit on interactions between the group. Might do that for the next chapter as well. Good thing there's nothing else going on in this fic, huh?

Also, I updated the tags in the fic, just for funsies.

As always, comments and criticism are always appreciated!
An Alarm Ringing Dead Silence

Chapter Notes

Content/Trigger Warning: Graphic Depiction of Self-Harm in the first half of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Water spirals down the shower drain. Himiko wishes it didn't. She wishes that the water kept filling higher and higher until she was suspended in it, just like a real magician. Her hands aren't bound right now, but they were never really. All a trick. Have an audience member tug one way and the knot seems to tighten, but relax the wrists and touch them together and the knot falls to bits. The crowd is amazed.

But there's no crowd here, just Himiko. She stares at the showerhead, ignoring the water pelting her face. What if piranhas started gushing out? Would they magically shrink as they went through the pipe, then grow once free so they could devour her? Just like they devoured Ryoma.

A pang of guilt stabs her gut. It was her fault, wasn't it? Not that he died, but that his trial went on for so long. She kept urging and demanding that her trick was real. Because, to her, magic was real, magic had to be real. What else could she believe in when inside that God-forsaken school?

And on this God-forsaken island? Well, she's pretty sure magic is real, but Himiko knows that she's no mage. She's a street performer at best, going out every night to pretend everything is okay and talk with people who may or may not be her friends.

Are they her friends? She talks with them every night. Sometimes they open up to her. Actually, a lot of times they open up. Maybe it's because Himiko's so small, so vulnerable. If she crosses a line, they could all escape from her or shove her away or kill her and there's nothing she could do about it.

How the hell did she survive anyway?

The water temperature spikes causing Himiko to grimace. Someone flushed a toilet on the floor. She'd always heard that happens in some old buildings but she never really believed it. As soon as the wave of heat hits, it's over. A sudden burst but nothing permanent, nothing but fading red skin.

She runs her hands over her body. It's rough. Little hairs prick her hands and the skin around her hips and thighs is raised and scarred. Those are new. Those are permanent.

Himiko grabs a disposable razor from the soap ledge, takes the plastic cover off and lets it drop. The clattering seems so loud. Like an alarm, as if the echo is racing to tell someone what she does in these long showers.

Her grips tightens around the plastic handle. When she first started, Himiko had tried to take the razor out. All that succeeded in doing was cutting her hands to bits. Too visible. Too visible. Too visible.

She can't be visible. That's how she survived. For all Tsumugi's talk of being plain, Himiko could disappear just as easily. An insignificant player in the grand scheme of things. She isn't as smart as Kokichi or Shuichi, nor as bombastic as Kaito or Miu. She doesn't have the mystery of Angie or
Korekiyo, the kindness of Gonta and Kaede and Tenko. She has nothing. She is nothing. Maybe she could relate to Ryoma. Maybe that's why she let his trial go for so long. Because she knew then, deep down, that they were kindred in a way. Both people the world would easily forget. But at least Ryoma was competent.

The blade is at her leg before she can blink, but she holds it there, deathly still and the water seems to howl as it shoots above her. A clump of red hair falls in front of her face so she pushes it back. It falls again. She pushes it back. It falls again. She pushes it back. It falls again. She lets it hang.

Her hair is the color of blood. Red, red blood. No, her hair isn't the color of blood. Pink, pink blood. The color of bubblegum. The color of hatred. Himiko's not sure anymore. Sometimes, she looks at her legs and sees red, other times she sees pink. Every time she sees skin. White as milk, lined with hills of all colors. Disgusting.

The razor reaches her leg. No, she presses the razor to her leg. This is her. This is intentional. She can't hide, can't run. This is her, this is her, this is her, this is her.

Oh God, this is her.

A quick slice. Simple, perfect. It doesn't hurt. Or it does and she just doesn't care. But it helps her feel. She can feel the skin separate, flesh splitting just enough to let blood spill down her leg.

The water washes it down the drain. Against the white of the shower floor, the spiralling blood almost looks like candy. For a moment, Himiko wants to drop to the ground and lap it up as if she could restore what's being lost. Metallic peppermint. What a divine flavor that would be.

She doesn't. Instead, she draws the blade twice more across her skin. Once on her thigh, once on her hip. The hip hurts more, but that's not saying much.

Lowering the razor once more, Himiko pauses.

Tenko's there. Her face nuzzled against Himiko's leg. Where's the blood stop? Her blood, Tenko's blood? It all gurgles and slips down Tenko's neck.

Himiko kicks away the hallucination. It's always Tenko. She's always there. She's the reason Himiko goes outside every night. Tenko chases her away. At night, Tenko wraps her arms around her, holds her close. She purrs gentle comforts into Himiko's ear. Promises her everything will be alright, that they'll get out and they'll be together.

The entire time, Himiko drowns in that hideous wound. When Tenko buries her own chin on Himiko's head, the smaller girl's face is pressed into the flesh. Himiko can't smell the blood or feel the opening, but she can see it, see it, see it. Oh God, can she see it.

Himiko remembers once, when she was a lifeguard, a boy had been running around the pool. No matter how many times she told him to walk, he refused to listen, backed up by an equally as obstinate mother. The sound of that kid's face smacking concrete is something that she thought she'd never forget. It sounds similar to a board being stepped on. The boy had split his face open, and she had to hold it shut to keep him from bleeding out.

What color was his blood?

The memory sparks a desire. Himiko draws the razor across her hip once again. She bites her lip.

She's gotta get out of here.
As if drunk, she stumbles from the shower, slamming the water off. After managing her way to the medicine cabinet behind her mirror, she dresses her new wounds. They're not too deep this time, but the second one on her hip is still oozing a bit. She'll have to carry around a few more bandages for that one. Have to keep it hidden.

She's a rock she's a rock she's a rock she's a rock she's a rock.

"Express yourself," Tenko says, wrapping her arms around Himiko's waist.

Himiko runs from the bathroom, barely suppressing the urge to scream.

She throws her nightclothes on, taking care to make sure they cover as much skin that isn't too suspicious. A cut peeks out above the hem of her shorts but she has no intention of lifting her shirt at all so it's fine.

She slips on her shoes (she's not in the mood to be cute tonight) and heads out into the night. She has to see Tenko. It's only been this damn hallucination of Tenko since she got here. She needs to see the girl, the real one.

Then again, has she ever seen the real one? The Tenko in the game was a facsimile, like a cheap knock-off. One that falls apart if you're too rough with it.

Or jab a scythe into it.

Himiko shakes her head. No point in thinking about it. There's nothing she can do. Asking these questions is just wasting MP.

"And that's a lot of effort," she murmurs to herself, sardonic edge to her voice. Is that really the best Tsumugi could do for her? Lazy?

She forges ahead, trying everything to distract herself. She counts the different calls of birds, tries to dodge waves while still keeping near the ocean's edge, balances a stick on one hand as she walks.

Finally, finally, finally, she's at the old pod building. Its silhouette crushes the pristine star cover of the night. Himiko swallows hard. It reminds her of when she took the crossbow to Kaito.

Is everything in her life now going to be compared to that game? Probably.

She opens the door. The soft cerulean glow isn't nearly as powerful as it once was. Only six left. Somehow she's not sure who's luckier, those awake or those asleep.

Picking her way around the maze of wires, Himiko gives a cursory nod to Kaito and Gonta as she passes by. She can't help but hope they wake up soon. Hell, she imagines Gonta's brow twitching. What a mess. She presses on.

However, when she sees Tenko's pod, she stops dead. Two figures hover over it, faces masked by shadow. She takes a step back, trips over an empty pod.

Before she can react, one of the figures dashes over to where she's sprawled. Panic seizes her throat. Am I gonna die? No, she can't die here. She made it too far, she won the game! Trying to force herself up, Himiko feels her wrist twist but pushes through, ready to try and escape.

"Hey," the figure says and Himiko recognizes the voice. "You alright, Yumeno?"

"R-Rantaro?"
Even in the dark, Himiko can see his easy, smooth smile. "The one and only," He says. "Well, maybe not the only."

Rantaro takes Himiko's hand, hauling her to her feet. "Thanks," she mumbles, brushing off her shorts, tugging them down a bit to better cover her thighs.

"You here to see Chabashira?" Rantaro asks.

"Yeah… been a while."

"We're here for that, too."

Rantaro leads the way back to Tenko's pod. Himiko stops again. Getting closer reveals the second person. Korekiyo.

Himiko balls her fist, feels the pressure of tears building behind her cheeks as she watches. Korekiyo has his hands outstretched across Tenko's pod. His hair falls over his shoulder in a neat braid with two flowers tucked near the bottom. He reverently prays in genuine sanctity.

"Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad. Adonai Hu Ha-Elohim," he whispers. He's silent for a few seconds before dropping his hands and taking a heavy breath.

Opening his eyes and mouth as if to speak, he grows pale at the sight of Himiko. At least, she likes to think he does. It's too dark and she can't see, but the way his eyes get wider and he averts his gaze makes her feel too intimidating to care about that.

"H-hello, Yumeno," Korekiyo says, folding his arms back in his lap.

"What are you doing here?" Himiko asks.

Rantaro positions himself in between Himiko and Korekiyo, acting as a barrier. Truthfully, Himiko can't blame him.

"I… I wished to visit Chabashira and Yonaga," Korekiyo says. "It is awfully stuffy in the hospital and…"

"Go away, they don't want you here," Himiko spits with absolute venom.

"They don't, or you don't, Yumeno," Rantaro responds, wry and with a tilted stare.

Himiko bites back a curse. She knows he's right. She can't say what either of them wants. She doesn't know either of them, really. Only who they were in the game. Why does she even care? It's not like she particularly liked either of them. Tenko was annoying and Angie basically indoctrinated her into cult. But then again, that Himiko didn't like them. Maybe she does now. Maybe she wants to be brainwashed so she can stop thinking all the damn time.

"If it helps," Korekiyo offers, "I… was offering an old Jewish prayer. Some believe it can help those in comas wake faster."

"I didn't know you were Jewish," Rantaro says.

"I am not. However, I still retain quite a bit of knowledge about cultural practices."

Rantaro chuckles. "I guess I'm pretty good at 'adventuring,' or whatever my talent was. Wouldn't know, haven't really tried." He turns to Himiko. "What about you?"
Himiko reaches into her pocket, presses her hand to her thigh until she finds a quarter. She shows it to Rantaro - pointedly keeping it inconvenient for Korekiyo - then closes her hand around it. When she opens it, the quarter is gone. "Happy?" she says.

Chuckling again, Rantaro nods.

"Then leave." Himiko sets her hand against the warm glass that houses Tenko. She looks so peaceful, as if she's settled in for a gentle nap. Her face looks so kind, even comatose. Himiko sends up a prayer that Tenko is just as genuine as she was in the game.

"We don't have to-" Rantaro starts but is cut off by Himiko's sobbing.

"Please," she says, "I just wanna be alone."

Wheeling himself around, Korekiyo tugs on Rantaro's sleeve. "It is fine, we can visit Yonaga later." He bows slightly to Himiko, wincing as he does so. It brings her no joy. "Yumeno, I do not expect forgiveness, but please believe that my wishes are like yours. I want nothing more than for Tenko to wake."

Himiko's sobs choke in her throat. Tears wet her cheeks. "Just leave," she says.

There's some mumbling as Rantaro and Korekiyo navigate the pod room. Then the sound of the door opening. However, as soon as they're about to leave, all three in the room jump as a loud pounding echoes.

"Hey! HEY!" comes a muffled voice followed by more pounding.

"The hell is that?" Rantaro says, looking around.

Himiko hurries to the front of the pod room, wiping her face as best she can. It doesn't take long to find the source of the banging. "No way…"

"Let Gonta out!" Gonta cries from inside his pod, slamming his fists against the pod lid.

"H-hold on!" Himiko says, hoping Gonta can hear her. It seems he can as he gives a solemn nod and lets his hands fall to his side.

Dropping to her knees, Himiko looks along the side of the pod. She's never been in here when the Remnants have woken anybody, so it's all a bunch of dials and switches and readings that make no sense to her. "Rantaro, Shinguji, can you help me?"

The two boys look at the mechanism but shake their heads. "I believe we will have to get the Remnants," Korekiyo says.

"They should be here soon," Rantaro says, nonplussed. "The alarm will have alerted them."

Something strikes Himiko as odd. Now that Gonta has stopped banging against his pod, she notices it. "There's no alarm," Himiko whispers.

Rantaro and Korekiyo both narrow their eyes as if listening closely. Indeed, despite the door to the pod room being open, the night is eerily silent. Himiko notices that Rantaro and Korekiyo share a look that says they know more than they're letting on. She learned that look well in the game.

"Get Miu," Himiko says.

"Hm?" Rantaro responds.
"If we all still have our talents… maybe she can figure this out."

"Are you sure? If I recall, Iruma's specialty was inventing, not programming," Korekiyo says.

Himiko glares at him. "Nyeh… she made a whole virtual world, she can figure something out."

"Come on, man, let's just go," Rantaro says, moving behind Korekiyo and wheeling him out the door.

Once they leave, Himiko stands back up and shouts to Gonta, "We're, uh, we're getting help. Sit tight, I guess?"

Looking bemused, Gonta simply nods again and lets his head fall onto the headrest. Himiko slides down the side of the pod, curling her legs to her chest.

God, what's going on? Why is there no alarm? Where is everyone? What do Rantaro and Korekiyo know? Why is all of this happening? Why why why why why why?

She claws at her scalp. Why can't this God-forsaken nightmare end?

Above all - and guilt cloys at her for this thought - why isn't it Tenko waking up?

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There's a commotion in the hall that wakes Tsumugi. Almost instinctively she reaches for her nightstand for her glasses before remembering that she doesn't need them and never actually has. How silly of her. Still, she went through the hassle of getting fake lenses from Hajime, might as well wear them.

Stumbling about the various swathes of cloth strewn throughout the room, Tsumugi waddles her way to the door. Oh it's such a mess in here. She's always had this habit of getting so wrapped up in her…

Well, maybe she didn't. That pesky little audition video has cast some… doubt on her memories. Then again, it could have just been a fake in case someone got too close to discovering her a bit too early. Yeah, that's it, that has to be it.

Hushed voices outside her door. Right, right, should investigate. Maybe there's been a murder! She should check the cameras. Wait, there are no cameras here (she checked and there are no Nanokumas either).

Finally making it to her door, Tsumugi undoes the chain lock and knocks three times, code for whoever is her bodyguard that she'd like to leave her room. However, there's no response. Odd. Cracking the door, Tsumugi peers out into the dimly lit hallway. From the end, she can see one of the previously unoccupied rooms has a light on. Keebo manages to pull himself into the hallway next to her.

"Shirogane, what is going on?" he says.

"I don't know. But it seems exciting!" Tsumugi says, ignoring the peculiar look Keebo gives her. Oh, she knows it's bizarre to be excited about this, but it's as if she's in some sort of spy thriller. Or maybe even a horror movie! She read the most phenomenal horror fanfic once that left her unable to
sleep for a whole week.

"I'm going to see what's happening," she says.

"Are you not supposed to stay in your room?"

Looking to her left and right, Tsumugi shrugs. "I don't see anybody, so I'll take my chances!"

He begins to roll in front of Tsumugi. "I really don't think- Hmph!"

Tsumugi cuts Keebo off by suddenly "falling" onto him, pressing her chest into his face. Her shirt - hand-sewn, by the way - is decidedly more low-cut than what she'd been wearing in the game. She lifts her leg to let the slit in her skirt do its work, revealing her ivory skin to the warm night air. She worked and dieted for over a year to get this body, she's gonna put it to good use. Even if that use is just distracting Keebo.

She tries to push from her mind that Team Danganronpa still thought she needed changing after all her work.

To his credit, Keebo doesn't panic, but he's clearly uncomfortable, pushing at Tsumugi as best he can without actually laying a hand on her. How thoughtful.

"Sh-Shirogane, please stop this!" he begs.

Tsumugi smiles, "Sorry, Keebo, I tripped," she muses as she leans down, pulling the lock on his wheelchair.

"H-hey!"

"Bye, Keebo!" Tsumugi says, scampering towards the light. Oh, that was fun. She'd always wanted to play a femme-fatale type character, but her original pitch was deemed far too close to Junko for the producers' liking. Still, just like when she was teasing Shuichi back in her lab, she managed to find ways to play it up.

Still, there was something disappointing about all of that. Keebo's a simple, earnest boy; he had been like that in his audition, too. Direct, polite, unsure of his own body. A perfect toy that still liked to play with toys. Or his robots. Whatever.

She'd expected him to be more flustered, what with how much of a prude he is as well. Or was. She can't say for certain. Could she ever? Her audition video plays again in her head.

Oh well, she got a reaction out of him, that's what matters. Besides, she can figure out more ways to toy with him later; he's not going anywhere anytime soon. Truthfully, she didn't expect this reaction, for him not to be able to move. Then again, she didn't expect to wake up after getting crushed by a boulder either. So it goes.

When she reaches the end of the hall, she presses herself against the edge of the doorway and peers in. It's not really necessary. She's mastered the ability to fade into the background like she's a damn ninja. Scratch that, she's mastered the ability to mask her presence with zetsu! *Hunter x Hunter* is a much better shonen than *Naruto*.

Regardless, she feels like a spy as she looks into the room, as if she's on some clandestine mission. In the room, there's a group of people surrounding… is that Gonta? But there was no alarm? At least, she doesn't think there was. No, there couldn't have been; if she'd woken up because of clamoring in the hallways, she'd have woken up to an alarm.
Let's see Tsumugi thinks, counting. Miu, Himiko, Rantaro, Korekiyo, Kaede. Quite the lot of them here. That leaves Keebo (who she remembers is in the hallway with a bit of a giggle), Shuichi, Maki, and Kirumi unaccounted for.

Everyone in the room is talking at once, so she can't make out what anyone in particular is saying, but she gets the gist. Gonta woke up and Miu got him out. No alarm, no Remnants. That'd make sense, there was no one outside of her door either. That's…more than a little odd.

She turns back to the hallway to sneak back to her room but is met with a knife to her throat and a very cross-looking Maki.

"You have something to do with this, Mastermind?" Maki spits.

Oh, yes, that's probably a bad thing that Maki still has her talent. And personality. Unfortunate. Tsumugi had written her to be harsh, but experiencing it firsthand was not something that she'd anticipated.

"Do with what?" Tsumugi asks, innocently cocking her head as best she can.

"Can't find any of the Remnants anywhere on this island. Gonta wakes up with no alarm. And I find you sneaking out. Suspicious, huh?"

Tsumugi shrugs. "Is it that plainly obvious?"

Maki narrows her eyes.

"I-I meant… is it that simple what's happening? I've been asleep in my room all night," Tsumugi says. "Besides, I plainly didn't want to make a scene. Though you seem to be doing an excellent job of that."

"Hmph," Maki says and Tsumugi thinks she's taken the bait. Unfortunately, Maki lowers the knife and sheaths it back into her makeshift holster. "Don't know if I believe you," Maki says. "But for now, you're sticking with me."

Tsumugi smiles, empty. This is wrong. This is wrong. This is wrong, wrong, WRONG. Maki is easily aggravated. She doesn't give up. She's impulsive and headstrong. She should be threatening Tsumugi or trying to hide her emotions and failing. This is wrong. This world is wrong. This isn't her Danganronpa. This isn't her world.

"Get inside," Maki orders.

Stepping in first, Tsumugi feels the gaze of everyone staring at her as she enters.

"Oh fuck it's Titsmugi," Miu says.

Tsumugi glares at the inventor, but she doesn't back down. That's wrong. But it's right. It's what she's heard. Being next to Keebo has its perks. Miu doesn't back down. That's wrong.

"Gonta confused," Gonta says, then grumbles something unintelligible. "I mean… I'm confused, damn it."

That's wrong. Gonta doesn't swear. Gonta doesn't use the first person much really.

Rantaro smiles and holds out his arms like he's presenting Tsumugi on a platter. "Behold, the bitch that put us through the killing game!"
Gonta's eyes grow wide, flicking back and forth between Rantaro and Tsumugi. "You the mastermind?"

"Guilty," Tsumugi sings a bit. She can still revel in the disbelief and despair her reveal causes. "However," she says, "I did not put you in the killing game. You all did that willingly, remember?"

"No…" Gonta says, head in his hand.

"Don't listen to her, big guy," Kaede says softly. "We'll explain more once Shuichi and Tojo get here."

"Oi! And Keebler, where's he at?" Miu says.

"I left him locked in the hallway."

She can feel Maki grow closer. "Do you wanna die?"

Ah, now that's the Maki she knows. "Not what I meant. His wheelchair lock."

"Nice one, ya fucking virgin," Miu says with a huff. "I'll go fucking get him. Kaede, come with me."

"H-huh, uh, okay?" Kaede says as she leaves with Miu, the two of them passing by Kirumi on the way out.

"Hello, all." When she notices Shirogane, she smirks a bit. "And hello, Shirogane."

"Am I not part of this group?"

"No," far too many people say.

"Right."

"Gonta still…" Gonta purses his lips. "Is this a thing? Does it go away?"

"Nyeah, you get used to it," Himiko says.

"Fabulous, thanks for that, Shirogane." Gonta shoves his chin in his hand.

Somewhat offended, Tsumugi rolls her eyes and says, "I was just going for a cute third-person kind of thing, blame the producers for making you sound like the Hulk."

"How about we blame you and call it a day, hm?" Rantaro says, leaning against the wall. Did she program that quirk into him? Did he even do that in the game? She can't remember. She can't remember his first game either. It was probably a bad season.

Tsumugi tuts. "I keep telling you, it's plain to see that you all got into this mess on your own." She waves dismissively. "Don't blame me you all threw your lives away."

Several people react at once. Rantaro jerks forward, lunging at Tsumugi. Himiko bursts into tears. Gonta leaps up from the bed. Tsumugi falls on her ass at Maki's feet.

Fortunately for her, Gonta had leapt up to intercept Rantaro. "Cool it," he says, even.

Rantaro flashes a look of rage at Gonta then quickly relaxes. He runs his hand through his hair. "And I'm supposed to be the chill one, huh," he says. A dark look crosses his face as he looks down at Tsumugi.
Before he can do anything, Korekiyo grabs Rantaro's hand. "Please, Amami, calm yourself. We all have good reason to be upset with Shirogane, but resorting to violence is barbaric."

Though he opens his mouth to argue, Rantaro's shoulders sag and he sighs. "Fine, fine, I'll take it easy."

Blinking in surprise, Tsumugi hardly registers Gonta's hand in front of her as he offers it. "Get up," he says. She takes his massive hand and quietly thanks him as he pulls her up.

Turning to the group, Gonta's eyes move to each person. When they land on Tsumugi she can tell he's almost instantly gone back to how he was before the game. His eyes aren't cruel, but there's a hardness to him that wasn't there in the game. Well, except for when he had his insect party. A shudder runs up her spine. Whoever came up with that needs to be fired immediately.

"What plan?" Gonta finally says.

"If I may," Kirumi says, stepping forward. "We should wait until Akamatsu and Iruma return with Keebo. Saihara should be here shortly as well." She glances at Tsumugi. "Gokuhara, when Saihara arrives, please assure that he doesn't attempt to harm Shirogane."

"Gonta got it."

"Ask and you shall receive, bitches!"

Oh, Miu is back, how charming. Tsumugi can't hide her grimace apparently as Kirumi's face twists into a scowl. Tsumugi never really cared for Miu, didn't like her in the audition much. But someone on the hiring committee apparently has a thing for big-titted blonde chicks. Tsumugi remembers writing Miu's character to be purposefully annoying, someone who would inspire the killings to start simply by existing. Though it seems that Tsumugi had made Miu a bit too smart in some ways.

As Miu, Kaede, and Keebo join the group, Tsumugi notices that Kaede's looking around rather frantically. "Guys, where's Shuichi?"

"He has not returned?" Keebo says.

"What's the hurry?" Rantaro asks.

"When we left the motel... We said to meet back at the hospital in twenty minutes." Kaede crosses her arms across her stomach. "It's been close to an hour, hasn't it?"

"Nyeh, maybe he found everyone?" Himiko offers.

Miu shakes her head. "Nah, that chucklefuck woulda been back by now if he did."

The room erupts into conversation as people toss out various theories about what could be holding him up. Tsumugi has to commend Kaede and Shuichi for managing to hear what people are saying in this mess. Even now Tsumugi watches as Kaede closes her eyes and listens carefully to what's going on. What a marvelous group... Why did she ever want them to die?

"We should fucking look for him," Miu shouts above the tumult.

"But what if there danger?" Gonta counters.

Korekiyo coughs to get attention from the back. "If we searched in groups it could help mitigate any danger."
"That's a good idea!" Kaede says, animated.

"I do not know," Keebo says. "There is still a high chance of something going wrong."

Tsumugi wonders if she's the only one who notices Kaede and Miu wince.

Maki unsheathes her knife. "Then we send a guard with each group."

"This sounds like a lot of effort," Himiko mumbles. "Maybe he's just in the bathroom or something…"

Kaede shakes her head. "We can't take that risk. Especially because we don't even know where the Remnants are! What if despair attacks us?!"

"Gonta agree. Gonta no know… I don't know what these attacks are. But sound like bad news."

Pointing to each person, Miu seems to take count of everyone available. "This is all fucking great and all, but we got two in wheelchairs and some of us are more brain than brawn."

"That's true…" Kaede says, hand in thought.

"May I help?" Tsumugi asks, finally deciding that she should offer her assistance. She is rather well versed in planning, after all.

"No way," Rantaro says, jerking his head to the side.

If Rantaro expected others to join in with his disagreement, he must be sorely disappointed as everyone glances around, seeing if listening to Tsumugi's plan is truly a good idea. She has to fight a smug smirk.

"Let's hear it, Shirogane," Kaede finally says, though she's not looking Tsumugi in the eyes.

"Wonderful!" Tsumugi claps her hands together. "Gonta, Tojo, and Harukawa are the three most physically talented, so they will act as the groups' guards." She points to each person as she names them. "Gonta, Iruma, and Akamatsu will be a group, then Tojo and Amami will be the second, and lastly Harukawa and Yumeno will be the final one! Keebo, Shinguji, and I will stay here in case Saihara does show up."

She smiles pleasantly as she waits for everyone to digest her masterful plan. Oh, it makes so much sense. Miu and Kaede work so well together and Gonta will be the perfect complement to their leadership-brains-brawn combo! Rantaro and Kirumi are quite mature (when Rantaro isn't threatening Tsumugi, that is) and so will likely be the most level-headed group. And Harukawa and Yumeno survived her little game so they'll likely work together well.

"Convenient how you left yourself with the two people who couldn't stop you from escaping," Maki says.

"I am inclined to agree," Kirumi says. "I would feel more comfortable if you three simply accompanied us."

Tsumugi shakes her head. "That would only slow you all down. And even if I did escape, I have nowhere to go on this island."

"There also wasn't a secret passage in the girl's bathroom, either," Kaede says. "Shirogane, you're going with Harukawa and Yumeno. Shinguji can go with Tojo and Amami, and Keebo will be with
A sudden emptiness swells in Tsumugi's stomach. Not the despairing kind, not at all like loss. No, it's something more akin to so enraged that it's sucked every other emotion from her body. "Why must you always interfere with my plans, Kaede Akamatsu?"

Gonta and Maki whirl around in threatening stances. "So you were planning something?" Maki says.

"If you are referring to an ulterior motive, not at all, not at all. It's just…" Tsumugi lets out a heavy, dreamy sigh, "I would like one of my plans to go off without a hitch. Even something as plain as this."

Kaede growls and crosses her arms. "We're wasting time with this shit!" She grabs Miu by the arm, shoving her behind Keebo. "C'mon, we're looking. You coming, Gonta?"

Gonta nods and moves to leave, but not before sending Tsumugi one more tough glare.

Silently, Kirumi, Rantaro, and Korekiyo follow.

"Nyeh… I don't like this…" Himiko says, sidling close to Maki.

"It's going to be fine. We'll find Saihara and the Remnants and figure out what's going on," Maki says, calm.

"You make it sound so simple, Harukawa," Tsumugi taunts. "And maybe if we kill the mastermind this will all end!"

"That can be arranged more easily now." Maki flips the knife in her hands, professional, threatening. "Get moving, try anything or say anything I don't like and I cut both your Achilles tendons."

Tsumugi simply smiles a quaint, plain smile and turns on her heels, letting her skirt billow out, as if she's heading for a nice stroll through the park. Of course, inside she's absolutely panicking, but if it means getting these naughty actors to be in character, she enjoys playing the villain.

Still, a sickening feeling swims around her. There's something wrong here, seriously, plainly wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Over a month later and one of the shorter chapters. Originally I planned one more character to be in this chapter, but I think this ending is more interesting. Bleh, writing's been tough lately. Always a struggle to feel like you need to force yourself to write just to get over some weird hurdle. Oh well, life goes on.

Anyways, comments and criticism are always appreciated!
A crime scene, bloody. Yellow tape thrown around like a maze that Shuichi and Kyoko maneuver through with ease. Tarps dotted with pieces of bright plastic with fading numbers. Evidence, completely useless to the two Ultimate Detectives. Within a minute of entering the room, the two have noticed more than the squad of officers.

"Saihara, the third window from the left is ajar," Kyoko remarks.

Shuichi nods, jotting down the observation in his notebook. He looks closer at the window. "The frame is scratched up. More than the rest."

"Think that's the entry point?"

"It's a possibility," Shuichi says, "But it could be the exit point or the window could be cracked because of how worn down the frame is."

Kyoko gives him a sly smile. "You're picking this up quickly."

Though he pulls his hat down to hide his blush, Shuichi returns the smile. "T-thanks, Kirigiri, but I'm not really-"

Shuichi's statement is interrupted by the lead officer approaching them. He gives the two detectives a quick brief of what they know. The victims are two young men, both in their early twenties, both with their throats cut. There are stab wounds on their hands and feet. Discovered at six this morning, police arrived ten minutes later. Witnesses say they didn't notice anything.

With a quick bow, the man walks away and Kirigiri rolls her eyes. Shuichi knows the feeling. All of that is cursory stuff. Easy enough to come by, probably dismissed by them just as easily. Which means that the two of them will have to give everything a once over just to be sure. Fantastic.

Head pain. Splitting, right down the middle.

Shuichi grabs at his head, tries to shake it off. It dies down in less than a minute. Weird. But Kyoko's already moving on, lavender ponytail swishing back and forth almost as if it's intentional. She's so cool.

For as long as he can remember, Shuichi has looked up to the Kirigiri line of detectives. They've all been cool and composed, able to solve crimes most would deem unsolvable. The best of the bunch is definitely Jin Kirigiri; he managed to solve a case of serial robberies happening all over Japan in a matter of days after taking over. However, many would say that his daughter is currently on the fast track to overtaking him.

Exactly why Kyoko decided to take Shuichi on as an apprentice, he doubts he'll ever really know. Regardless, she saw promise in him when he-

When he…

When…

"Saihara," Kyoko calls out. "Come take a look at this."
"Right, coming." Pulling his hat down, Shuichi makes his over to where Kyoko's standing, almost immediately regretting it as he did so.

A third body, largely decomposed, is wedged between two of the older machines. Based on the state of decay, Shuichi would have to guess that it's been here for at least a few months. The stench invades Shuichi's nostrils. He tries to take a step back, but Kyoko grabs his arm.

"Don't look away. Can't let your stomach get in the way of the investigation," she instructs as if it's the most casual piece of advice she's ever given.

Swallowing hard, Shuichi steeles himself and looks back at the corpse. The torso and legs are folded on top of one another, with the spine clearly snapped and jutting from just above the pelvis. No, not snapped, cut. The bone is remarkably even around the breaking point, implying that someone did this intentionally and with very specialized equipment.

"Look at his fingers," Kyoko says, pointing.

The corpse's fingers are ground down and the bit of dessicated skin left seems drawn and taut, scraped away.

"He was trapped," Shuichi says.

"It would seem so."

"But why? Who would do something like this?"

Kyoko rises to her full height. "Don't get ahead of ourselves, there's still quite a bit to investigate."

"Ye-yeah…"

Kyoko cocks her head, putting her hand to her chin. "Are you feeling alright, Saihara?"

"O-oh me? Yeah, I'm fine, just got a pretty bad headache. I can push through."

Shuichi looks up to meet Kyoko's cold eyes. They seem to analyze every part of him in a moment. She blinks. "If you do not feel up to investigating, I would not be opposed to you leaving. Especially if it will impact your ability." She seems to gaze off somewhere behind Shuichi.

Rising, Shuichi shakes his head. "I'm fine, really. It's mostly passed."

As he says this, however, the pain strikes again. It's as if a balloon is being inflated inside his skull, pushing and stretching the bone. It's a wonder his head doesn't split.

He falls to the ground, landing hard on his knee. He can feel blood from the scene begin to seep into his pants, but that's the least of his concerns as his vision starts to swirl. Trying to stand yields no success; he only succeeds in getting one leg up before collapsing into Kyoko.

"Someone get a medical unit!" he can hear Kyoko shout, though it's distorted and fuzzy, as if she's far away from him.

Through his hazy vision, Shuichi can see police officers running out of the old warehouse into the light of the day. The light is so bright, impossibly bright, like it's shining directly on him, blaring into his eyes. He forces his eyes shut but that makes the pressure move down to his ears so he opens them once again.

A group starts running towards him. His first instinct is to try to run. He manages to get onto his
back, clutching at his head, an overturned turtle.

People are around him, voices melting into a cacophonic mess that assaults Shuichi. Hands grab at him, but he rails against them. One tries to snatch his wrist. He claws the hand away. Another holds his leg. Shuichi kicks and kicks.

Something inside him is telling him that these people are here to hurt him. That they are the reason he's like this.

The voices are shouting now, telling him to calm down, to stop struggling so much. But they can't understand. They're professionals, clearly. They don't have the scream of instinct in them, the scream that helped Shuichi survive the killing game.

What killing game?

Memories flood back to Shuichi and his head gorges itself on them, shoving memories into it like a starved creature. The game, his friends, his audition, Jabberwock, everything comes back to him at once.

He screams, he screams, can only scream now.

A skeleton in water.

His uncle, no his grandfather scolding him.

The pinwheel design of the pod room.

His grandmother's sweetbread.

A hanging girl.

"Kaede!" Shuichi cries, reaching for the light.

Light surrounds him, pain defines him, and for a moment, she's there. Golden hair and gentle heart. Or fierce eyes and a tenacious bite. He's not sure, but she's there.

So is he. A boy, fluffy black hair, dyed at the tips. He's the one crushed behind the machine, he let himself be crushed. Shuichi has solved the case again. Ultimate Detective.


"Saihara, can you hear me?" Kyoko says and her voice sounds just like he always imagined, smooth, yet strong.

"Saihara..." That stark purple hair, like a winter evening. Lavender with a drop of blood.

"Shuichi..." She loves to wear purple.

"Mr. Detective!" he calls, his hair looking as royal as the night sky.

In that moment, Shuichi's head seems to clear. The pain is still present, but he can think. There's too many people around he doesn't recognize. They all seem to be dressed up for work, gloves and collared shirts with medical insignias on them. Paramedics, clearly.

Kyoko stands above them, looking down, arms crossed. There's something off about her, though,
something he can't place. Her demeanor and appearance and stance and attitude are all correct. *She's not looking at the crime scene*, Shuichi thinks. That's it. Kyoko would definitely be examining the scene for something that would have caused this. Or, at least, not let it distract her from the rest of the investigation. Or is that wrong? Had her character development softened her? Had Makoto's influence helped enhance her empathy?

Shuichi lets his arms fall to his sides. They're sore from thrashing and his chest heaves from exertion. Above him, he sees everyone breathe a sigh of relief.

"Hey, kid, you there?" says one man, voice gruff and unforgiving.

Shuichi says nothing intentionally. Instead, he stares at the lights past the man's head. He lets his vision blur and blinks slowly. He has to throw them off, has to make it seem like that fit took it all out of him.

The man murmurs something to another, then slaps Shuichi in the face. It's not hard, but enough that it stings. Still, Shuichi hardly responds other than turning his head slightly in the direction of the slap. There's a few more whispers before Shuichi feels some of the worst physical pain he's ever felt. A sharp, cruel pain directly on his sternum as the man drives his knuckle into it. Though he flinches and tries to curl in, Shuichi manages to keep from crying out, only conceding a half-hearted groan.

These are all tricks. Trying to get Shuichi to reveal how aware he really is. But whether from personal experience or from the talent implanted into him, Shuichi doesn't budge.

Seemingly satisfied, the man sits up and says, "All clear looks like." He nudges Shuichi's side. "Seems that seizure knocked him for a loop. He should fall asleep here in a bit."

"Is that okay?" says another's voice. "I've heard sleeping after a seizure is bad."

"Tha' wa'n't a seisher. He flip'd ou'"

"Swallow your damn food before you talk, dumbass."

"Ah'll show you a du'ass."

"Ignore them. He'll be fine, especially once he's back under."

"Is it safe to put him back?"

"Whattaya mean?"

"I mean his brain is so clearly fried from the last time. It could cause permanent damage."

Shuichi nearly flinches at the phrase "permanent damage." What are they talking about? Are they going to put him back into the simulation? And where is he?

"Don't worry," says a familiar voice. Through his veiled eyelids Shuichi can see the imposing form of Hajime Hinata step up to him. "I have a feeling that this result is simply because there were too many inconsistencies given Shuichi Saihara's understanding of the world. Removing him from Jabberwock to assist here was a mistake."

"Inconsistencies?"

"Such as Jin Kirigiri being a detective. Saihara knows this isn't the case, so his mind attempted to-"

"Oh my God, stop fucking around and just put Saihara back under. Buncha fucking kids. We gotta
get him back NOW."

"You're no fun."

Millions of thoughts whirl through Shuichi's head, but none of them truly matter because there's only one all-too-familiar feeling running through him.

*Prick.*

Keebo makes a mental note to himself to always let Kaede push his wheelchair when given the option. He wishes he could store that note in his databanks to ensure that he'd never forget it, but considering he's lying face down in the sand because of Miu's terrible driving, that might not be an issue.

"Miu, what did you do?!" Kaede says, rushing over to Keebo's side.

"Hit a rock."

"There is no rock," Keebo deadpans. Kaede offers him her hand. Slowly he manages to grab it. He clambers onto his knees and lifts his back straight.

"Can you get into the chair on your own?"

Keebo shakes his head, sweat begins to pool on his forehead and his arm feels shaky just from holding onto Kaede's hand. Curse this inferior body.

"Gokuhara," Kaede calls, "Can you help me lift Keebo?"

As Gonta walks over, Keebo notices that Miu suddenly seems very interested in exploring the pharmacy, hurrying over with surprising haste.

"What happen?" Gonta asks as he hefts Keebo into the chair.

"I, um, have been having trouble with my movement since I awoke from the simulation."

Gonta pokes Keebo's cheek. "You no robot?" He growls. "*You're not* a robot anymore?"

"No, I am not. It seems that was all part of the simulation."

Scratching his head, Gonta nods. "Gonta smarter than in simulation, but still not sure."

"None of us are, really," Kaede chimes in, moving behind Keebo to push him.

"Come on you chucklefucks!" Miu shouts from a distance away. "Cuckhara ain't in there, let's keep lookin'!"

With that, Miu marches off down the beach. Why isn't she staying with the group? It was her suggestion that got them put into groups in the first place. Then again, she always has done her own thing regardless of what's actually good for the group.
Though Keebo's surprised she has so much energy. His entire body feels drained. They've been searching for hours now. Almost all of the groups have covered each island at least twice. No sign of the Remnants or of Shuichi. He's beginning to feel the urge to call it a night, to resume the search in the morning. Then again, does he really want to ask Kaede of all people to abandon the search? He is unclear of the standing of their relationship, but he definitely notices how tense Kaede has been this entire time.

Though perhaps he will not have to make the suggestion as Gonta yawns massively. Covering his yawn with his fist, he looks down at Keebo. "Sorry, gentlemen no..." He blinks a couple times. "Sorry, gentlemen don't yawn in front of others like that."

"Getting tired, Gokuhara?" Kaede says.

He nods. "Yeah."

"You did only just wake from the pods," Keebo adds. "It is natural that you would not be at full strength for this search."

"Doesn't make me feel much better," he spits.

Kaede lays a gentle hand on Keebo's shoulder. It is truly an unnecessary - though not unappreciated - gesture; Keebo can understand Gonta's frustration with the situation. Not being able to do what you once could is an endless endeavor.

"Let's take a break," Kaede says, reaching for a backpack she grabbed while they were searching the store. "I have water if anyone needs it."

Gonta nods and heads towards the ocean. "Want to sit down, Keebo?"

Brightening, Keebo smiles. "I would, thank you, Gokuhara."

In a matter of seconds, Gonta lifts Keebo by his armpits - Kaede helping to guide him down- and settles Keebo onto the sand, his back resting against a large rock. Looking out over the ocean, Keebo watches the sky as night begins its transition to day. A thin line of purple emerges from the horizon and the moon sits low in the sky, as if it will sink into the ocean.

"Oh God, have we been searching that long?" Kaede says, sinking down on Keebo's right. To his left, Gonta stretches on the sand. He's taken off his jacket and dress shirt, so all he's wearing is a once-pristine undershirt.

"Yeah, we fucking have," Miu says, still standing, "And we should keep going before something happens, lazy virgins."

Keebo looks up at Miu. Her eyes dart between him and Gonta. Ah, so that is why she's been so antsy this entire time. It's sensible; Gonta was the cause of her death in the simulation after all.

"We can't do anything if we're too exhausted to move, Miu!" Kaede chides, grabbing a hold of Miu's sleeve. "Sit down for a bit. Those boots must be killing your feet by now."

Miu makes a disgruntled sound, but she relents, taking a seat next to Kaede.

For a time, there's nothing but the soothing sound of the waves hitting the shore. Keebo closes his eyes, listening in. Palm leaves whisper gently. Gonta picks up and lets sand sift through his fingers. Exhaustion hits Keebo almost at once. According to his knowledge of human anatomy, the initial
adrenaline surge of the search must have worn off long ago, so coming to a rest only exacerbated the problem. Beside him, Gonta has stopped playing with sand. It is likely that he has dozed off.

To keep himself awake, Keebo decides to make conversation. "It is odd," he says. Miu turns her head to face him, but Kaede appears to be asleep as well, her head resting on Miu's shoulder, snoring softly.

"What, that we never found out if robots had dicks?"

"N-no!"

"I coulda make you one, you know. Still can!" Miu cackles, causing Kaede to stir. She blinks wearily before sitting up.

"It is not that, Iruma," Keebo says, wishing his chassis could close over his face. "When I was a robot, I had an internal clock that would keep track of time to the millisecond. I always knew precisely what time it was. It made time go by rather slowly."

"Like checking a watch constantly?" Kaede says.

"Yes! Much like that!" Keebo folds his hands in his lap. His pinky refuses to move.

"What's so damn weird about that?"

Keebo thinks for a moment. "Since waking up, time has passed by much quicker for me. Even when I am alone in my room, time seems to disappear. It is as if I blink and an entire day has gone by. Perhaps it is because I do not have a clock to check. But for the past few days, time has slowed back down again. It feels nice. Not too fast, not too slow, just right." He smiles at Miu and Kaede.

However, their faces do not match his glee. In fact, both look outright bothered by what he just said. Kaede refuses to look at him. Miu squeezes Kaede's arm, staring past Keebo.

"I-is everything alright? I did not say anything embarrassing, did I?"

"N-no, Keebs," Miu says, "It's... we're just fucking tired is all."

Keebo bites his lip. As much as he wishes to believe his friends, there is something about their behavior. "Please, if there is something bothering you, tell me. If I can be of assistance-"

"Keebs," Miu interrupts. "Just..." She looks on the verge of tears, a rare look since she left the simulation. "Do you... do you remember anything weird happening... fuck how long ago did that happen?"

"Did what happen, Iruma, please tell me!"

Kaede lifts her head, counts on her fingers. "It's either a few days or a few weeks ago. I don't really remember."

"Huh," Miu says. "Maybe Keebler's onto something with his whole time thing. Don't even know how long we've been awake."

Keebo breathing quickens. What is this they're keeping from him? Did something happen? Something he's not aware of but should be? And why are they not telling him?! Tears well up in his eyes. In his robot form, he could mimic tears by releasing saline solution, but this is an entirely different thing. The pressure in his cheeks is maddening and tears start leaking out of his eyes.
without his prompting.

"P-please," he says, "Tell me what is wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

Neither Kaede or Miu make a move, they just stare at Keebo and then look between themselves. As if an unspoken agreement passes between them, Kaede grips Keebo's hand in hers.

"What we're gonna tell you isn't going to be pleasant, okay? So just… tell us if you need us to stop."

Keebo nods, clenches his eyes shut. He tries to will his eyes dry. Somewhere, his mind is telling him that Justice Robots don't cry, that heroes don't cry. Little robot figures swim in his vision for a moment before disappearing. "Be a hero," they say as they melt into darkness.

"Be a hero," Keebo whispers, opening his eyes.

"The fuck?" Miu says. "You okay there?"

Nodding, Keebo says, "Yes, I just recalled an old hobby of mine. Justice Robots. That is there catchphrase. Be a hero."

Kaede raises her eyebrows, clearly trying to suppress a smirk. It stings in a familiar way that Keebo can't place. But he can always infer. His memories may be shaky, but even he knows that a boy his age should not be interested in such a childish pastime.

"That is not the issue," he says hurriedly. "What is it you wish to tell me?"

Though Keebo can't truly tell time anymore, he knows the story takes a while to tell. The sun slowly peaks over the horizon as Miu and Kaede tell him of the pod room, of the secret passage, how he was supposedly grabbed, and how he reappeared with no memory of the incident.

The entire time Keebo manages to remain calm. At least, in his mind. He asks a clarifying question or two, but stays quiet.

When Miu finishes her hands are shaking and she's twined her arm with Kaede's.

Keebo desperately wishes that he had his processor back. That he wouldn't have to unpack all of this information on his own. He can only stare into the ocean. A tropical bird swoops and plucks a fish from the water. Keebo imagines watching the fish flail as the bird gulps it down. When does the fish die? As it goes down, suffocating? Or when it hits acid and dissolves?

When do his memories start? Stop? Have they done either? Or are they a continuous stream that is rewound time and time again until they're dessicated and content?

Keebo goes to speak, but before he can, Gonta says, "We in deep shit, aren't we?"

Miu practically leaps out of her skin. "Were you fucking listening in?"

Gonta just nods as he sits up. He pulls at his undershirt, shaking the sand off it. "You were talking very loud anyway."

"Why you son of a-"

"It is fine, Iruma," Keebo says. "If… if this truly did happen, then it is important we all be of the situation, yes?"

"Keebo's right," Kaede says. "We need to trust each other or-"
"This sound like game," Gonta says, blunt and simple.

"No one fucking asked you, bugs for brains," Miu shoots back.

Rising to his full height, Gonta shakes out his hair. "Look at this way. Gonta no think we can trust Keebo."

"W-what do you mean?" Keebo says, shakily trying to get himself up. He collapses in the sand.

"Gonta mean...ehem... I mean, we no know if they did anything else to your brain. Could be trick." Despite Gonta's harsh words, he extends a hand to Keebo and helps him back into the wheelchair.

"Asshole," Miu mutters, taking her place behind Keebo.

"Akamatsu," Keebo says, "You believe in me, right?"

Kaede hesitates, and that's all the answer Keebo needs. He looks down at the ground. "I'm sorry," she says.

"Hmph!" Miu stamps her foot on the ground. "I fucking believe in Keebs. There's no way they went probing too deep into his little virgin brain."

Gonta regards Miu for a moment. "Whatever," he says. "Gonta no want anyone to get hurt. We be careful."

"Hurt my ass... Fucker killed me..." Miu mutters.

"And you try to kill Ouma," Gonta says right back.

Miu says nothing.

"Come on," Kaede says, stepping into the middle. "Let's get back to the motel and get some rest. We clearly need it."

The walk back is spent in silence. When they return, Rantaro opens up a room for Gonta and offers to let Keebo stay in his own room until they can get him back to the hospital. The entire thing blurs in Keebo's mind, as if time was passing simultaneously too quickly or too slowly.

Whoever's behind this, maybe they're messing with his mind now."

Gonta's not sure what possessed him to work out, but whatever it was, it's the reason that he's out on the beach with numerous homemade weights outside the market. He grunts slightly as he curls one of the ten liter jugs he'd partially filled with sand. He had tried to fill it all the way, but, clearly, the time spent in the simulation had weakened him.

Letting the jug crash down into the sand, Gonta rolls his neck, then grabs the towel he put on a nearby rock, dabbing away the sweat. It's overcast today, but still pretty humid. When he tried to run earlier, he couldn't make it very far. His stomach had begun to hurt, and he was overheating way too
quickly for his likely. So running would either have to happen indoors or during cooler days.

Then again, he probably knows why he felt such pain. His own execution.

To say he remembers it would be a lie (and he's had enough of those working with Kokichi). It's more like a faint glimmer in the back of his mind, eternally present, but never clear. A flickering candle shrouded by the darkness of whatever the simulation did with his head.

It clearly did something. Ever since he woke, everyone around him has been giving him strange glances, particularly when he swears or acts aggressive in any way. From what he's gathered, the Gonta inside the game was some sort of perfect angel with a heart of gold.

Gonta resumes his reps. His muscles groan with exhaustion, feeling weak and jelly-like, but he has to get back into shape. Can't get sloppy, can't get weak.

He only manages a few reps before he has to drop the jug again. Sweat pours down his face. Finally relenting, Gonta begins takes a gulp from his water bottle and wraps the towel around his neck. A few quick stretches later and he's headed back to his room.

According to Rantaro, he should be spending a few days in the hospital to recover or be under observation, but with the notable lack of anyone remotely qualified to do such things, Gonta thinks he'll take his chances. Besides, aside from phantom pains and some weakness, he feels fine. It kind of reminds him of when he was shot.

He pauses. Shot? He was shot? When was he shot?

Monokuma had a gun during the execution, but… that's not it. There's something else. An alley of some sort, a transaction. Something happened.

He moves along; worrying about it will do him no good. There's a whole host of other issues he has to concern himself with. People, too. So many people, and more will just keep coming. He has to keep them all safe.

As he walks towards the motel, he sees a blur moving towards him. Without his glasses, it takes until the blur has closed most of the distance between them that he can tell exactly who it is. Maki.

The first thing he notices is that she's cut her hair. He'd always wondered how she never tripped over it. Hell, he had to tie back his own wild mane using several of Kirumi's hair ties. That kind of hair couldn't have been conducive to being an assassin. Then again, she never was an assassin, not really. That's gonna take some time to wrap his head around.

The next thing he notices is that she's dressed for exercising. Gym shorts and a sports bra with beat-up sneakers. Where'd she get those? Gonta's just wearing his undershirt and some too tight shorts that he managed to salvage from the market.

The final thing he notices is that Maki is glaring at him and he realizes that he's staring.

"Can I help you?" she says, stopping her run.

Gonta averts his eyes and looks at the ground. "Gonta sorry, can't see well with no glasses."

"That'd make one of you."

"Huh?"
Maki squats down and sticks one leg out, then reaches to touch her toe. "Shirogane apparently doesn't actually need glasses, she just liked the aesthetic is all."

"Shirogane…" Gonta mumbles, clenching his fist. "Mastermind…"

"Hmph, yeah, she was."

Maki continues to stretch as Gonta tries to reconcile the image of Tsumugi with the reality of the situation. She'd always seemed so kind, so heartfelt. She called him sweetheart more times than Gonta could count. To be fair, that hadn't been very high in the game.

Gonta bites his lip as he thinks how she each time she called him sweetheart, she knew he wasn't. How he'd been so dumb that he couldn't see the blatant lie. How he'd failed to protect everyone.

"Beating yourself up won't do you any good," Maki says.

"Gonta mess up," he replies.

Maki appears far away for a moment, then says, "We all did. Gotta keep going forward. It's what let Shuichi get us out of the game."

"Maybe Gonta not strong enough." He curls his bicep. Tired and weak.

Maki sighs. "Whatever, don't believe me, it's not my problem. I'm going back to my-

As she turns to leave, however, her eyes narrow a bit. Gonta turns to see Kirumi and Himiko rushing towards them. When they arrive, Kirumi hardly looks winded, but Himiko seems to be panting a bit.

"What is it?" Maki says, an edge to her voice.

Kirumi's straightens her back. "We are simply informing everyone on the island that there's been a ship spotted."

"Ship?" Gonta says, looking out over the sea. Indeed, in the distance there's a small ship heading towards the direction of first island. There's a pier there if Gonta's remembering right from last night's search.

Maki narrows her eyes even more. "Is it Despair?"

There's that word again. Despair. Gonta only understood a bit, but whatever this "Despair" is, it sounds like bad news. They may need him to protect the others.

Himiko shakes her head. "N-no, the ship looks different."

"Could be a ruse," Maki suggests.

Now it's Kirumi's turn to narrow her eyes. "Instead of being obstinate, would please help us gather the others. If that it not to your liking, I believe that Amami is already at the beach with Shinguji."

"Tch." Maki looks as if she's trying to grab her hair, but she only swipes air. "Fine, I'll help."

"What about Gonta?"

Though Kirumi's expression softens when she turns to Gonta, there's still a hardness to it. A look of having her guard up. Gonta recognizes that look. How? Doesn't matter now.
"If you'd mind," Kirumi says, "Would you accompany Amami and Shinguji. I feel they could use your assistance."

"Got it," Gonta says, heading off before anyone else says a thing. He breaks into a steady jog, making to sure to be quick, but not tire himself out.

Before long, he's made it to the beach. Rantaro is sitting on the beach, watching the ship approach while Shinguji seems to be weaving together long strands of grass in his wheelchair.

They notice Gonta's presence quickly. Rantaro gives a quick "sup" before turning his attention back to the water. Shinguji, at least, is polite enough to bow his head in Gonta's direction.

"Hello, Gokuhara," he says. His voice isn't as creepy as it used to be. Now he just seems soft-spoken. Damn, it's a lot to take in.

"You need help?" Gonta says. He may not be the smartest (or really know what's going on, like, at all), but he can still probably be of some assistance, even if that's as a meat shield.

Shinguji smiles. "Not currently, though," he glances at the ship, "Depending on whether that is friendly or not may change my answer."

Gonta nods again, then takes a place leaning against a palm tree. Everything's so fuzzy; he should've grabbed his glasses before heading off. Still, he's not so blind that he can't fight if need be.

A chill runs up his spine. A fight. How long has it been since he's been in one of those? A real fight, not a shouting match or even whatever happened in the game. There's something that tells him that he's been in a fight before. Familiarity with this situation. The waiting, the unknown. It's all familiar. Why?

A tingling sensation rushes down Gonta's arm. He looks at it to see some sort of beetle racing down Gonta's arm. He can't identify it off the top of his head, but it's clearly native to the area. For someone as dumb as he is, Gonta's always been good with bugs. At least, that's what the memories forced inside his head say.

Gotta remember those are fake.

Slowly, Gonta pushes his meaty finger against his forearm, inviting the beetle onto it. The beetle doesn't move for a second, but then scuttles onto the offered digit. He brings the beetle up to eye level. Its shiny black carapace seems to glimmer in the late morning sun.

Such a fragile creature. Protected by an ostensibly impenetrable shell. Odd, how this insect may see itself as immortal, as invulnerable, always safe because of its exoskeleton, always safe because of its camouflage.

But does it realize its mistake, crawling onto Gonta? Against Gonta's tanned skin it stands out, apparent. Atop Gonta's finger it rests, likely unaware that it would not be hard for Gonta to bring his finger and thumb together and crush the bug like… well like a bug! But he'd never do that, no, he's too much of a gentleman. Gentlemen don't crush marvelous creatures such as this beetle.

In an instant, Gonta pinches the beetle between his fingers, then wipes the remains on the palm tree. He's not that Gonta anymore.

The guilt in his gut says otherwise.
A few minutes later, the rest of the group appears, abuzz with chatter and speculation. Even Tsumugi is present, though both Maki and Kirumi seem to have their eyes on her. She makes eye contact with Gonta and smiles cheerfully, waving to him. She taps Maki on the shoulder and whispers a few words to her. Maki looks between her and Gonta before nodding sharply.

Tsumugi scampers to Gonta, reaching into the breast pocket of her blouse when she arrives. "Oh, Gokuhara, you big lug, you forgot these!" She hands him his glasses, neat and polished, as if she'd done it herself.

After snatching them from her, Gonta puts his glasses on and the world instantly becomes clear. "How you get these?"

"Gokuhara, sweetheart, that's not how you say thank you!" Tsumugi practically sings.

Gonta resists the urge to knock her unconscious.

"Don't break into my room."

Giggling, all Tsumugi says is, "No promises!" Then she skips back to where Maki is glaring at her.

Eventually, everything calms down. Well, not quite. Everyone's clearly nervous, but there's a bizarre tranquility to the nerves. No one is shaking or even seems particularly fidgety. Nobody clings to anyone else and even the most clearly unnerved (being Keebo and Himiko) seem to be doing alright.

Gonta knows this situation, too. Desensitization. How much have those awake gone through that they're used to being nervous like this? How much more did they go through in the game? How is he so used to this? So many questions that Gonta just isn't smart enough to answer.

After an agonizingly long ten minutes, the ship finally moors. It's a small thing, relatively speaking, though heavily armored. Radio antenna of all shapes line the head of the ship. Sitting just below those is a massive turret that sends a shudder up Gonta's spine. Looking over the edge of the ship, several Remnants seem to wave to the group. He can make out Sonia's blonde hair, and can infer that Gundham is the one standing next to her looking stern.

A door opens up and a bridge slides out, landing with a reverberating clang when it hits the pier. Gonta doesn't know much about boats, but that probably isn't how this is supposed to go.

Regardless, Sonia and Gundham step out onto the pier and head towards the group. The click of Sonia's heels and the thud of Gundham's boots are the only sounds in the world right now. The Survivors all lean forward, Gonta included, breaths held, eyes wide.

When the couple reaches the sand, Sonia smiles, pretty, apologetic, a perfectly sympathetic smile. "Hello everyone, we apologize for being later than we planned."

"Later than planned, huh?" Rantaro says, standing. "And you didn't think to tell us you were leaving?"

Gundham steps forward, arm extended. "Speak not, nave! Foul magic rises quickly and demands swift action!"

"He means," Sonia says, ducking under Gundham's arm, "That there was an emergency on an island not too far from here, so we left immediately."

"Where's Shuichi?!" Kaede shouts, running up to the front of the group. "You took him with you, didn't you?!"
"Akamatsu, please-"

"Don't 'Akamatsu' me! Just tell me where Shuichi is damn it!"

"Kaede?"

Gonta turns to look at the ship and there, indeed, stands Shuichi. He's wearing what he wore in the game, his hat tucked low over his eyes.

"Shuichi!" Kaede cries, running towards him. She's followed hurriedly by Himiko, Miu, and Maki. As soon as Kaede reaches Shuichi, she throws her arms around him and squeezes tight.

Then she slaps him.

"Ow! W-what was that for?"

"Idiot," Maki says, "We were up all night looking for you."

"Y-you what?"

"Nyeh, it was so exhausting," Himiko says, slumping.

Miu pokes Shuichi's chest. "You and your little pervert hat better have a good fucking explanation, you cuck!"

"Please, please, everyone!" Sonia calls. "We required Saihara's assistance for what we had to do?"

"And what, exactly, was that?" Kirumi says.

"Catching a serial murderer," says another voice. Hajime. He steps from the boat, suit looking as crisp as ever. "Saihara's detective abilities ensured that we were able to apprehend him as swiftly as possible."

"And your talent wasn't enough?" Maki says.

Hajime shakes his head. "I am not all-powerful. Besides, two people with a talent for detective work will always be better than one. And since Kirigiri is unavailable, I calculated that it would be most efficient to bring Saihara along. He was of great assistance."

Shuichi rubs the brim of his hat. "I-it was nothing, r-really."

Kaede seems unconvinced. Crossing her arms, she says, "You still could have told us!"

"That's what I said to do!" says another voice. Mahiru snaps a photo from the side of the ship as she disembarks. "Sorry, haven't seen you all gathered like this in a while. But, yes, I said that we should tell you guys what was happening, or, at least, leave me or Kazuichi here to watch over you guys, but nooooo, we need 'everybody' according to Mr. Talent over here." As she says this, she pinches Hajime's cheek.

"Ah, Mahiru, stop-"

"I'll stop when you admit I was right!"

"Oh my fucking god," Miu says, walking back towards the beach. "Get a fucking room."

"Excuse me," Shinguji says. "If I may ask, where are Tsumiki and Souda?"
"They are currently working on the ship," Sonia explains. "There was an issue with the engine, so Kazuichi is fixing it. Mikan is simply worried that he will harm himself."

"Such a fear is not misplaced," Gundham says with a smirk, earning him a nudge from Sonia.

As individual conversations take over, Gonta finds himself at a complete loss for words. What… what exactly just happened? These are the Remnants, the people watching over him and the others. They just… up and… left? In the middle of the night? And took Shuichi with them?

He stares at Shuichi, who is talking with Kaede and Himiko, using elaborate, animated hand gestures as he does so. He seems to be okay, no external injuries. Then again, he is mostly covered, so there could be bruising underneath his clothing. He also appears to be corroborating the Remnants’ story.

Still, Gonta is uneasy. His mind flashes to the story that Kaede and Miu told this morning.

"You can tell that what they're saying is fiction, can't you, Gonta?"

Gonta jumps, more out of surprise than fear, that Tsumugi is suddenly standing next to him. Kirumi seems to have wandered off and is speaking with Keebo and Sonia. "What you mean?"

Tsumugi chuckles. "Oh, I do hope that wears off. It was beginning to get on my nerves by the time your trial came around."

Gonta stares daggers at Tsumugi, but elects not to say anything.

"Don't pretend you didn't hear me. You know that everything the Remnants just said is a lie." Her voice drops, low and threatening. "There's no way an audience would believe something like that. It plainly stretches the suspension of disbelief too far."

As much as it pains him to say it, Gonta manages to get out, "Me agree. Too convenient."

"Oh yes, yes!" Tsumugi claps her hands together. "If it were my story, I would have had them be gone for several days and then wash up all tattered and then-" Tsumugi cuts herself off, points to the ship. "Nevermind, I think this just got very, very interesting."

As if by Tsumugi's command, all eyes turn towards the ship.

"Oh my, it seems you all have noticed me after all," says the man, wispy white hair billowing out despite the small breeze. He raises a robotic hand. "Hello, I'm Nagito Komaeda, though my name doesn't truly matter."

Suddenly, Nagito begins running forward, arms outstretched. "So many Ultimates! So many survivors! So much talent concentrated in one place! Oh, I cannot wait to see what sort of hope emerges from such a despairing situation! If there is anything I can do help you achieve that hope, then let me be your stepping stone!"

Hajime promptly grabs Nagito by the collar before he can do any real damage.

Gonta doesn't remember much about playing Danganronpa, but he does remember that this Nagito Komaeda… he's unpredictable. There's only one thing he can say to it.

"Oh shit."

Chapter End Notes
Wow, another long time span between updates. Oh well. I feel this isn't my best work, honestly, but I'm glad I got it out there. Had this chapter planned for a while, so it's good that it's finally done.

Nagito is here! Hooray! *sound of a deflating balloon* That's sure to spice things up. Probably.

Also, I've started a Discord for this fic (and really just as a place to chat in general) because... because... well because I felt like it! So if you feel like stopping by for scintillating conversation and tea (neither of which are provided, you'll have to bring your own), then just use this join link: https://discord.gg/T8MAuHw

Finally, as more and more characters begin to appear, it's becoming more difficult for me to give them all decent amounts of screen time. As such, I'm asking you guys if there's anyone (Survivor-wise) that you'd like to see more of, or that you feel needs more love. I'm not counting Remnants in this one since they're rather important to the plot.

I think that's it? So, as always, comments and critique are always appreciated!
It's been three days since the Remnants showed back up. Three entirely normal days. Too normal for Kirumi's liking. Shuichi has revealed nothing about his trip. Rather, he has revealed nothing unique. His story lines up perfectly with the rest of the Remnants'. Perhaps there is nothing new to tell.

Or perhaps someone, somewhere is lying.

It's her turn to wash the dishes. The Remnants set up a chores schedule when they got back, something about giving the Survivors something productive to do as they waited for the rest to wake up. Admittedly, Kirumi had been getting somewhat bored on the island, and it's nice to have a task to accomplish once again. Her inner Ultimate Maid, fake as it may be, nonetheless perpetually nags at Kirumi to be absorbed in some task or the other.

Still, these chores seem awfully convenient to keep everyone split up. Alone.

She's heard the whispers flowing through the group. Whispers of a conspiracy, of members of the Remnants acting strange or aggressive. There's only clandestine euphemisms, but, from what Kirumi's gathered, it's happened enough to be no mere coincidence.

These rumors have clearly taken their toll on everyone. Himiko doesn't take her nightly walks or speak much out on the balcony. It's rare to see any of them travelling in groups less than three. The only exception is Gonta and the occasional time that Tsumugi is allowed to walk around the island, escorted by a Remnant, of course.

Kirumi can't help but theorize that Tsumugi is somehow involved. That cynical, plastered smile that never leaves her face seems too at odds with the general feel of the island, as if she knows something the rest don't. It wouldn't be the first time. Then again, if what Maki had said about Tsumugi was true, then the delusional girl could just be overwhelmed by the fact that she's surrounded by Danganronpa.

Grabbing a plate from the stack, Kirumi starts scrubbing to try to force the thought from her mind. It's better that way. Don't think about their circumstance, just try to get through, just try to survive.

Whatever sauce Kazuichi put on the salmon is clearly oil based. The water slides right off the plate no matter what she does. This soap is terrible, too. Cheap and smelling like sour chemicals instead of its advertised "Cherry Blossom Spring." She attacks a particularly stubborn spot with the rough side of a sponge.

It won't come off. Is it even from dinner or is it just a stain? She doubles her efforts to no effect. Grumbling in frustration, she bites off the end of her rubber glove, debasing herself to using her nail to try to get the spot off. She can practically feel the oil and vinegar from dinner seeping into her skin, the bits of saliva leftover from the fork, all of it charging towards her skin through her exposed nails.

She can't do this anymore. Putting her the dish down, she lets scalding water rush over her hand, feeling the disease and germs fall down the drain.

Once she's adequately sure that her phobia has been satiated, Kirumi puts her glove back on and looks at the spot once again. It's definitely not a stain. The edges are raised and it does appear to be
slightly smaller.

Smirking, Kirumi readies herself for another assault. It's a little silly, she knows, but she has to find the small victories that are so few and far between that they're practically non-existent.

She reaches to the side, meaning to grab more soap, but accidentally grabs an empty beer bottle left by one of the Remnants. Her fingers curl around the glass, familiar, almost muscle memory at this point. Her lips quiver, begging for a sip. Can't even go through an entire killing game without addiction triggering.

Is this what she's become? An alcoholic msyophobe?

No she hasn't become that.

She's become an alcoholic, msyophobic killer.

Back to scrubbing. Scrub, scrub. Grab the steel wool, that'll do it. More pressure, turn the water up higher, hotter. Do anything, do anything that isn't think about Ryoma or Maki or Kirumi Tojo. Just do your damn job and clean this spot!


Kirumi steps back. As she does so, she knocks the bottle off the counter.

It falls, shatters.

Kirumi fell, shattered.

Kirumi falls.

Shatters.

Sinking to her knees, Kirumi's in the execution chamber. She'd thought she was running away. She ran to her death. Did Monokuma leave that hallway open just for her? It doesn't matter because she climbed and climbed and was cut and climbed and fell.

God she fell, she fell, she fell.

The wind rushes past her; it feels as if it's blowing the very blood from her innumerable wounds all at once. Warm and slick, like the light at the top of the chamber that was used to fool her. How simple, how stupid. Just like her plan, just like her belief that she could ever be Prime Minister, just like her belief that she could ever be worth more than a lowly maid.

She's in the kitchen. Someone is shaking her. There's glass all around her. The sink overflows, cascading onto the floor.

That means the sink is full, just like the one in Ryoma's lab.

She should dunk her head in, force herself to drown in a rusted sink like she did to Ryoma. The scratches are already there. That was proof, wasn't it? Proof that he had woken up and struggled, proof that Kirumi forced his lungs to burn and his vision to darken and panic to set in. Everything she's read about drowning she forced upon him. She should do the same to herself. It's punishment time.
"Tojo, Tojo!"

The falling is the worst part, not the landing. It had all been precisely calculated. She fell and falls and fell and falls just long enough for her to feel the utter despair in her failure, just another in a long line.

"Worthless little bitch!"

"Tojo!"

"Dad, I'm sorry, I-"

"Tojo, please, come on."

"I didn't raise a daughter who does nothing but go out with that orphan dyke!"

"Dad, please…"

"Tojo, please!"

"I'm getting them."

There's a pain in her sternum, intense and flowering out over her entire body. She's back in reality, landing from her fall onto the cold hardwood. The water isn't overflowing from sink, Ryoma is still in the simulation, and she is away from her father. Standing above her, Mahiru presses a cool rag against her forehead. Her entire body feels heavy with sweat.

"There we go," Mahiru breathes, a small smile on her face. "You were hyperventilating and shivering on the floor. I almost couldn't get you to snap out of it."

Kirumi tries to respond, but her mouth is dry. Her first instinct is to try and ask for water, but all she can imagine is the water flowing down into her lungs until they burst.

"Easy, easy," Mahiru says, "No need to rush." She brushes strands of hair from Kirumi's face, then takes Kirumi's head and puts it on her lap, still smoothing her hair. "Take as much time as you need to calm down, okay, sweetie?"

Before she can stop herself, reign in control, Kirumi lets her muscles relax a little bit. She turns her face in Mahiru's lap and closes her eyes. Mahiru's dress smiles like fresh cotton, her fingers send pleasant shivers running down Kirumi's cheeks and across her nose, just like the splash of freckles across Mahiru's face.

These gentle caresses, so tender, so motherly. Everything Kirumi craves, everything she's ever wanted. At least, she thinks this is what she's wanted. It's as if she has to preface everything with "as far as I know." As far as she knows, this is something she's wanted for so long. Something Maki mimicked, something her father took away from her, something she abandoned to feel needed in the game.

"You seem much more relaxed now," Mahiru says quietly.

Taking that as a cue to sit up, Kirumi removes herself from Mahiru's lap, rubbing her eyes. "I… I am, thank you."

Mahiru smiles, a kind, earnest smile that fills Kirumi with contentment. "I'm glad!" Suddenly, her expression drops to one of concern. "Do you wanna talk about what happened?"
Kirumi bunches the hem of her shirt in her hands. Does she want to talk about it? Not particularly. The practical side of her is saying that it will do her well to speak about her issues, but the instinctual side is telling her something else.

It's telling her that Mahiru is lying right now.

She's noticed how Kaede looks at the older woman. There's plain distrust, so clear and apparent. Distance clouds her eyes, and she scurries behind whatever or whoever is closest when Mahiru approaches.

Mahiru's hand is in her face. "Let's go for a walk. We can clean this up later. Maybe I'll make Kazuichi do it; he's been sitting on his butt all day." She punctuates this statement with a giggle and Kirumi can only nod.

Clouds float high in the sky, stretching endlessly to the horizon. Wonderfully overcast. Kirumi enjoys the dowdy gray sky, the continual movement when she stares upward. What's the cliché? Wishing she could float away like a cloud?

No, that's not what she wants. She simply wants to be up. Up so impossibly high that no one can reach her, but with no possibility of falling again. She doesn't have to be permanent, just can't fall. Dissipate into impossibly tiny water droplets until she's dissolved by the sun's rays.

"Watch your step," Mahiru says.

Indeed, Kirumi almost trips on a pool chair that someone's dragged close to the pool. Gonta's sandals sit next to it. Well, one does. The other has fallen in the pool. She sighs. That boy has been awake for only a few days and he already has made himself at one. Then again, maybe he just forgot his shoes out of habit. She grabs them on the off-chance she sees him again.

"So, ready to talk?" Mahiru asks, kind and even-toned.

"It has only been a few minutes."

"Maybe," Mahiru says, shrugging, "But I've always found a change of venue helps from time to time."

"Oh, how so?" Kirumi asks. She can't deny that she wants to confide in Mahiru, but something holds her back. Confiding would be selfish, hardly something a good maid should indulge in.

And Mahiru can't be trusted, have to remember that. Have to remember that.

"Well sometimes I can't get my pictures just the way I want them. They can be a little fuzzy, or the composition is off, or the lighting isn't right. No matter what I do, they come out… off. So I move. Sometimes I go to a different spot in the same area, or change locations entirely." She chuckles a bit, absentely fiddling with a camera strap that isn't there. "One time I even changed the topic my entire portfolio was about."

They step off the bridge onto the middle island.

"What was the original topic?" Kirumi asks.

"Photos of the Tragedy," Mahiru responds plainly. "Had to change it to those in recovery rather than those affected."

"Your mother was a war photographer," Kirumi says, unsure of why exactly she said it.
"How…? Oh, right, you say that we were some sort of game?" Mahiru shrugs. "Not sure about that, but yeah, Mom took all sorts of great pictures of war. I guess I never could follow in her footsteps, even if I was part of the reason the wars started." Her gaze drops deep into the horizon.

Comforting others had never been Kirumi's strong suit. Even in the game, she only pushed forward, never comforted. Then again, maybe Mahiru doesn't need comforting.

"I feel…" Kirumi starts. Pauses.

Mahiru smiles, warm and encouraging.

"I feel as though I am burdened. We all have our trauma, and yet I somehow feel everything is compounding upon me worse than the others. Worse still, I feel entirely selfish for believing this to be so." She wrings her hands, hating the feeling of her own skin, wishing for the pristine safety of her gloves. "I… I do not know how the others are managing to move on so well. And sometimes… sometimes I wish I was back in the game if only so I could be the Ultimate Maid once more."

The words come out in a torrent, partially unwilling, but relentless. Though her body feels no lighter through the confession, her mind is somewhat at ease having the strength to begin to put into words her struggles.

Humming for a moment, Mahiru puts her finger to her chin. "I'm no therapist, but it sounds like you had a lot of baggage even before the game, eh?"

Kirumi nods.

"Well then, maybe instead of trying to topple it all at once, we break it into smaller chunks."

"We?"

"Hajime and I. We've sorta taken over tag-teaming the therapy. I know you've been avoiding it just about since you woke up, but there's never a bad time to start."

Kirumi looks at the ground, at her plain white sneakers, laced as neatly as the prim pair of flats she'd woken up in. It made sense when put that way. Tackle issues one at a time, with the help of someone with the talent of a professional. Even if she doesn't trust the Remnants fully, she can't deny that some of her fellow survivors who have gone to their therapy sessions are notably improving. Kaede's panic attacks are less frequent, Korekiyo seems to be more in control of himself, and even Shuichi seems to be coming out of his shell.

Then again, Kaede will only go when she's sure Mahiru isn't present, for what that's worth. Still, doing something has to be better than this awful idleness that's overwhelmed Kirumi for the past, what, month since she's been awake. It has been a month, hasn't it?

"Very well, Koizumi, I will attend therapy."

Mahiru stops walking to take Kirumi's hands, before quickly dropping them when Kirumi grimaces. "Sorry, sorry, I got excited. Geez, you have no idea how happy I am to hear that! Tell you what, I want you to come to our cabin tomorrow morning, ten o'clock! Pick any one of your issues. Hajime and I will start helping you through it!"

"I… thank you," Kirumi manages.

Mahiru sets her hands on her hips. "Don't you worry about it. I can't promise it'll be instant, but you're gonna improve, Tojo!"
A phone buzzes in Mahiru's pocket. Quickly answering, then quickly frowning and hanging up, Mahiru glances at Kirumi. "I gotta go. Nagito and Kazuichi messed with the circuitry for the cabins and blew multiple fuses. Now I have to help them find new ones. Typical men."

"It is no worry. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me," Kirumi says.

"No problem!" Mahiru chirps, beginning to walk back to First Island. "Think about what you wanna tackle tomorrow and we'll go from there, okay?" She breaks into a light jog, then disappears around a corner.

Think about what she wants to tackle? She makes it sound so simple. If "tackling" the issue was so simple, then Kirumi could've done it all on her own long ago. Or could she have? Before the game wasn't she just a simpering little nobody? How she managed to submit an application to a killing game is beyond her.

Intense, albeit questionable, sense of self-loathing. Add that to the endless litany of issues that Kirumi may or may not be saddled with.

A dull ache begins to pulse in her head, dreariness weighs down her eyelids. Ugh, she's tired. Tired of thinking, tired of never being able to answer anything.

Deciding to head back to the motel for a nap, Kirumi begins to turn to Third Island, only to be stopped by the imposing gate that blocks Fourth Island.

A change of venue Kirumi thinks. Maybe a change of venue could be helpful in figuring out just what's wrong with her head. Or, at least, help her figure out what to prioritize.

She wraps her hand around the rusty metal. How long has it been since these gates were opened last? Were they ever open? The Remnants had stated that Fourth and Fifth Island were in states of disrepair, that they were dangerous. So she'll be careful. Whatever rubble is there, she's sure she can pick through it.

A change of venue. All she needs now is a plan to get there.

*************

There's an alarm blaring, which means someone is waking up.

Rantaro doesn't care.

No, he's more than content to sit his ass on the beach and let the clouded sun bake his body until he gets skin cancer and dies as nothing more than a raisin. Okay, that might be exaggerated. He is comfy, though. The towels from the market are surprisingly plush, and the thin overcast means it's not terribly hot. Every couple of minutes a wave even manages to brush his heels partially buried in the sand.

"Rantaro," Korekiyo says from the towel over. "Would you mind assisting me back to my chair so we may go see who wakes up."

Sighing, Rantaro sits up but doesn't face Korekiyo. "I'll help," he says, "But I'm not gonna go see."
"Why not?"

"Don't really feel like it." Sand falls through his fingers. "Same thing every time. They pull someone out, someone else freaks out, and I feel nothing. I've got no one else to wait for."

Korekiyo scoots a bit closer. "Was the last one Shirogane? You were quite upset upon her awakening."

"Thanks for the reminder."

"I am sorry."

Rantaro throws the sand at the ocean, causing it to fruitlessly flutter down in a dusty cloud. He spits when some lands in his mouth. "Don't be, I'm just being moody is all." Chuckling, he raises his hand to his head. "You're pretty spot on about Shirogane messing with my head."

Korekiyo says nothing in response, instead opting to undo his ponytail and shake out his mane of hair. It's remarkably well cared for, Rantaro notes. Silky and smooth, not a split hair anywhere along the perfectly trimmed edge. He'd said that Hajime - because of course it's Hajime - cuts it at least once a week after a physical therapy session. It's nice. Korekiyo lets Rantaro style his hair however Rantaro really wants with little complaint (he wouldn't go for the full mohawk, tragically).

"Want me to braid that?" Rantaro asks.

"No, it is fine. It has been pulling for a while now, starting to get a headache."

"Right, gotcha. Do you still wanna get back in your chair and head to the pod room?"

Korekiyo thinks for a moment before shaking his head. "No, that is alright. I do not wish to leave you alone."

Despite his best efforts, Rantaro smiles. He really has been bitter these past few days (weeks? months? lifetimes?), so the gesture is appreciated.

Lying back down in the sand, he tries to get back to the spot where he was comfortable again. He thinks he has it for a moment, but a twig or rock or something shifts underneath his weight and now one shoulder feels lower than the other.

It's fitting. For so long he's felt off-balance. He's either relaxed, chill, as many would call it, or he's irritable and angry, never both, never neither. He's either the brother to impossibly many or solo in the world. Either a survivor or the first to die. Which will he be in this game? Because this is a game, and another player has just woken up. Once all the pieces are in place something will happen, he feels. Doesn't know what. But knows.

That sounds so pretentious.

What would his sisters think? They'd probably laugh and pull on his shirt and clamor around his ankles chanting some silly song about how silly their older brother is.

What would his parents think of their only child be so prodigious as to recognize his own annoying qualities? They'd probably be relieved. Having one child to entertain constantly must get old really quick. So why wouldn't they have more? Why wouldn't they have 13 total and ship the oldest off to die in not one, but two killing games?

Click.
He almost forgets his clicker. That one tether keeping him from trying to build a boat and sail off into the distance until he's so lost at sea that not even the Ultimate Adventurer could find his way back.

"Is everything okay?" Korekiyo asks. His voice is even, though he can't hide the hint of concern. Okay, maybe Kiyo is the other thing holding him to this island. He figured out almost immediately that whenever Rantaro clicks it means something invasive has wormed its way into his head.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You sure? You are always able to talk to me if you need."

"It's okay, really," Rantaro says, waving his hand dismissively. It's probably not okay, but no one needs to know that.

Everyone already does, but he doesn't let that little tidbit bother him.

"Oh, look!" Korekiyo says suddenly, pointing towards the ocean. "Dolphins!"

A pod of dolphins crests to the surface of the water, zipping through like there's nothing in their way. Would they come and tow Rantaro to shore if he floats out to sea? Dolphins do have a reputation for being kinder animals. They also are known to rape other sea creatures, and even humans. So maybe that reputation isn't deserved.

Regardless, they're fun to watch. Several more pods pass by in quick succession, driven by some instinct for food or warmer waters. Free to dive as deep as they want for as long as they want wherever they want. Free to travel the world if they so choose.

Rantaro's leg twitches, he flexes his fingers around his clicker. Almost presses it, but doesn't. Don't want to alarm Kiyo.

"You know, dolphins are often symbolic of higher forms of consciousness in many New Wave spiritual schools of thought," Korekiyo says in that academic voice that never quite left him from the game.

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. They often symbolize freedom or a lack of restraint; furthermore, they seem to have higher levels of thinking than we humans do. Of course, this is not meant to be taken literally, though I am sure some believers do. In fact, there are even exercises some people perform that they say simulate a dolphin's breathing."

Raising an eyebrow, Rantaro does his best not to laugh outright. "Breathe like a dolphin?"

"Yes, observe." Korekiyo puts his hands together in his lap. He breathes in through his nose deeply and then is utterly still, clearly holding his breath. He sits so still that Rantaro could mistake him for a statue. With the way the breeze lightly blows his hair, it seems he could be an idol statue that so many peoples he's studied would worship.

Rantaro hadn't noticed just how angular Korekiyo's face is in the game. It was always covered by that mask of his. Even during his initial stay in the hospital, he preferred to keep a surgical mask on. Now, on most days, he can go without. Still, his aquiline features, his stone steady posture, the looseness of his shirt that exposes an equally pointed collarbone, they all contribute to Rantaro's inability to look away from the young man.

Abruptly, Korekiyo exhales through both his nose and mouth forcefully, startling Rantaro.
"What was that?" Rantaro asks, readjusting his sunglasses.

"To breathe as a dolphin," Korekiyo explains, miming each instruction with his hands, "You inhale through your nose as much air as you can. Then, you hold your breath for as long as possible, even if it begins to hurt. During this time, you reflect on your life while picturing a dolphin. Imagine its freedom as yours, imagine its creativity as yours. See how you may apply the philosophy of the dolphin to your own life. Finally, once your truly cannot bear to go without breath any longer, you exhale with all your might, just as a dolphin does. Practitioners repeat this process several times, some even for long periods."

Rantaro laughs.

Korekiyo blushes. "Ah! My apologies, forgive me for my long-windedness."

"No, no, it's not that," Rantaro assures. "It's that I think most of these New Wave people are all just high off lack of air."

"Do not mock others' belief systems," Korekiyo says, brow furrowing. "It is uncouth."

"I know, I know, man. I should know this, being a traveller and all." Rantaro folds his hands in his lap. "Think I'll give it a try."

Closing his eyes, Rantaro inhales as deep as he can, feeling the oxygen flow to his lungs. When they're almost full to bursting, he stops and holds his breath. The tension is unimaginable; his chest feels awkward being so still, having been so accustomed to constant motion. Reflect, he should reflect. The freedom of the dolphin.

Rantaro is a dolphin. He's skiing through the sea, surrounded by his podmates. Kiyo is the dolphin next to them and he's followed by Kaede and Himiko swimming behind them. They're on a journey to nowhere in particular, moving at breakneck speeds simply for the thrill. The entire ocean is their playplace, and they intend to cover every kilometer of it, regardless of how unrealistic that goal might seem.

All around him, he emits a call and a network appears before him, a network of underwater plant life and sea creatures, relayed back to him by the sound of his own call. He is his own vision. Though he cannot see well with his eyes, his ears are so tuned that he picks up on Kaede surfacing for air and getting smacked by a sudden wave.

He lets out another call; Korekiyo is closer to him now. Though usually Rantaro would push away the closeness, he allows it for today. After all, there is a large whale several kilometers to Kiyo's left, wouldn't want to get caught around that.

Rantaro is a dolphin, he is free, he is the king.

He's caught. Tangled. Choking. Thin mesh winds its way around Rantaro's throat. He utters a pained cry, one that's met with the agonized cry of his fellows all caught in the same net. They trash until the water is practically a storm, but it only succeeds in causing the mesh to constrict tighter, tighter, tighter.

Kaede is the first to give up thrashing, then Korekiyo. They resign themselves to floating lifelessly in the entrapment of the net. Though Himiko and Rantaro thrash, they're soon hauled up to the surface and onto a boat.

Hajime and Mahiru and Kazuichi and Sonia and Gundham and Nagito and Fuyuhiko and Peko all stare at him, tittering among themselves at the four dolphins they caught. Rantaro passes out.
He wakes and he's swimming again. He goes forward. There's a wall. He goes back, another wall. Left, right, up, down, any direction there's only walls. He swims, but he is not free. He lets out a cry, but cannot see. One wall is clear, one wall is open.

People, people, people, people, people, people, people.

Click.

Rantaro exhales so violently that it sends snot and spittle all over his chest.

"Rantaro!" Korekiyo cries. "What happened?!"

Coughing, Rantaro wipes his mouth, which only leaves more of his grossness along his arm. He hasn't really cleaned the mess, just transferred it to a different spot.

"Ugh, give me a second," Rantaro grumbles, standing. He wades into the shallows of the ocean and splashes some water on himself. It's not really helping, just leaving salt and whatever other grime stains the ocean on his chest, but it feels better than mucus.

When he returns, Korekiyo offers him a towel that he takes gratefully.

"Hey, Kiyo," Rantaro says, "Remind me not to make fun of cultures again."

"Why? What happened?!"

"I got a bit too into it. It was like a dream that turned into a nightmare." He burrows his face into the towel, breathes in the scent of department store air freshener.

"Perhaps you are more keen to spiritualism than you thought," Korekiyo says.

"Maybe," Rantaro responds. "Maybe before all this I was really religious or spiritual, you know?"

"Did I unlock your memory with my ancient wisdom?" Korekiyo asks playfully.

"Hardly, I think I'm just messed up."

"Aren't we all?"

"Don't be a downer, man, I'm enough of one." Rantaro tosses the towel at Korekiyo.

"Aren't we all?" Korekiyo repeats, throwing the towel back.

Rantaro rolls his eyes. Breathes deep, exhales immediately, decides he doesn't like dolphins that much anymore.

Behind him, he hears footsteps. Shuichi and Himiko walking with sad expressions on their face. Shuichi catches Rantaro's eye, waves to him.

"There you guys are," he says. It sounds like he's trying to be threatening, but the words come out hollow.

"Yep, here we are," Rantaro responds, prodding.

"Nyeh, you missed him waking up," Himiko says.

"I guess we did."
Korekiyo leans forward. "Forgive us, it is still somewhat difficult for me to move, so we remained here."

_You don't need to lie for us, Kiyo Rantaro thinks. They can know that I'm actually not that great of a person._

"Who woke?" Korekiyo asks before Rantaro can correct anyone.

"Momota," Shuichi practically whispers.

Nothing stirs in Rantaro. Kaito had been a nice enough guy, if a bit loud and headstrong, but a good person. He'd heard a rumor, though, that Kaito had auditioned for the game with the intent to win, to kill everyone and take the grand prize. Fuck Tsumugi Shirogane for changing him so drastically.

"How'd everyone react?" Rantaro asks. He can't deny his curiosity. Even if he had no reaction, surely others did.

"Everyone's pretty happy," Shuichi says. "He was one of my best friends in the game."

"Yeah, he was okay," Himiko agrees, "But Maki isn't doin' too hot."

"Oh? I do not recall them being that close," Korekiyo says.

"They got closer after you…" Shuichi shuts his mouth and everyone understands. It's a common reasoning.

"Ah."

"She hasn't moved from her spot," Himiko says. "Hinata and Tanaka are about to physically carry her to the hospital."

"Sounds bad," Rantaro says, meaning it. That's a new reaction. He's sure Shirogane is more than pleased at it.

Click. Gotta stop thinking about her.

Still, Maki has to crack eventually. "How was Momota doing?"

"Nyeh…"

Shuichi pulls his hat low on his brow. "He… he threw up some blood and they rushed him away…"

******************************************************************************************

Hospitals suck. Their hallways are too long, their floors are too clean, and their staff is too clinical, too obsessed with procedure. They won't let Maki in to see Kaito until they're sure that he's stabilized.

Hajime also wants to perform a psych evaluation on her, but she won't let him. She doesn't need any more probing into her brain. Sure, she froze when she saw him walk out of there, but isn't that normal? It was shocking; people freeze when they're shocked.
So what if Kaito threw up blood? It was probably a residual effect of the simulation.

Maki groans, pulls her legs close and rests her head on her knees. She's being stupid, she knows she's being stupid. That's just her default state, isn't it? Flail forward with no regard to anything sensible?

There was a technique she learned when she was pretending to be an assassin. She imagines a small dot of light. It travels from the top of her head, between her eyes, into her mouth. She swallows so the light descends her throat and stops her stomach. That's her center. That light, clear and quiet in her tumultuous body.

Taking a heavy breath, Maki leans her head back against the wall. That's better.

It's late, very late if her estimate is right. Mikan and Hajime had been in the room for hours, only leaving to get another tool or measuring device for the endless list of tests they're performing on Kaito. Hajime had said that injuries in the simulation shouldn't transfer to the real world, even if the psychological effects do. As such, Kaito shouldn't have thrown up blood. Even a placebo isn't that powerful.

She squeezes her legs closer. The lights are mostly out in the hall, save for the emergency light. Another light at the end of the hall is on, motion detecting, turned on when Keebo called for Sonia (who's currently guarding Tsumugi) to help him get to the bathroom.

Why is she even here? A simple question. A simple answer. She wants to see Kaito. But why does she want to do that? According to Tsumugi, it's because Maki is in love with Kaito, but that was all just part of Tsumugi's stupid, idiotic, sadistic game. An excuse to shoehorn a love plot to enhance the tragedy of Kaito's death is all.

In truth, her feels are muddled at best. She feels an attraction to Kaito, but it's the same as Kaede and Shuichi feel towards each other as far as she can tell. Almost more obligation than true attraction, a fundamentally changed part of her. Maybe she should lobotomize herself to be free from that part.

Another part of her is angry at him. Angry at him for all that he did behind her back in the game, angry that she wouldn't have done half of what she did if she'd just been informed what was going on.

Who is she kidding? No she wouldn't. She'd still impulsively shoot Kokichi and then try to act like the hero. Idiot.

She needs to get out of here for a bit. Walking through the halls and down a set of stairs, Maki finds herself in front of the vending machines, the bright light emanating from the flashy drink choices nearly blinding her. Truthfully, she doesn't recognize the selections. They're all just fake drinks with stupid names that only remind Maki once again that this world isn't supposed to be real. That everything in this world is a facsimile of reality. Another layer of falsity that's so ingrained that she's not sure what the truth even could be.

"Are you struggling to decide?" says a peaceful, familiar voice.

Kirumi's graceful form stands illuminated in the little alcove. She's staring at the vending machines intently.

"Don't have any money," Maki responds, hoping that it'll give her an excuse to leave.

The rustling of change. "There is a jar on the front desk of coins. I believe it is Sonia who retrieves them." Kirumi offers the jar to Maki.
What is she getting at? Is this some kind of joke? "I've decided I'm not thirsty," Maki says with as much finality as she can muster.

"Suit yourself," Kirumi says, beginning to rummage through the jar herself.

It's when Maki tries to head back to her post that she realizes Kirumi is in her way. The alcove isn't terribly wide, so Kirumi just staring at the first machine blocks her exit. So she's doing this on purpose.

"Look, you want something, what is it?" Maki demands.

"I am… curious," Kirumi says.

"About?"

"About how you're feeling now that Momota is awake." The lights flashing around Kirumi's face turn neon as she pushes a button. The selection turns red and a message scrolls by on the small screen above the bill acceptor. "Insufficient Change."

Maki sighs. "Is this some weird jealousy thing? Because I thought you broke that off with me." She looks down. "For good reason."

Returning to shifting through the change, Kirumi gives Maki an unreadable look. "Hardly. Well, I suppose that's not entirely true." She takes a heavy breath. "I am a bit concerned, Maki. You did not respond well when he emerged from the pod room, and I know you can be…" She meets Maki's gaze directly. "I know you can be rather unstable."

Maki bristles, her hand automatically moving to where she normally keeps her knife. Kirumi smiles as if she'd just proved her point.

"Hmph, so you came here to taunt me?" Maki says, relaxing her shoulders.

Kirumi says nothing.

"This isn't like you, Kirumi. Did something happen?"

"I think so…" Kirumi whispers. She turns entirely to face Maki. The sound of rain drums against the roof. "I think so…" She drops the change jar, sending metal sprawling over the floor. "I think it's because I got away from you, and I don't want Kaito to have to go through the same thing."

Maki grits her teeth, trying not to rise to the bait. Her breathing labors, chest heaving, hands clenching and unclenching. "What I did to you was wrong, okay? I know that. So just leave me alone. Forget I exist, whatever, I don't care, but I changed, damn it!"

"The others sure said that a lot. Saihara, especially," Kirumi responds, her voice menacing. "I do not know if I believe them, honestly."

"Why. Not?"

"You treated me horribly even after I woke up!" She kicks some of the coins. "Recreating my own murder? Really? What would possess you to do that."

Despite the rage boiling in her chest, Maki manages a breath, then another. Find her center. Find her center. Remember what was said in therapy. "I… I was looking for a way to control you because I feel I have no control over this situation, okay? I reverted back to how I was because I was, am,
scared." Red eyes match green. "It's not an excuse, but it happened. I'm trying."

Kirumi's arms drop to her sides. "You truly believe you've changed." She turns and begins to walk out of the alcove.

"Is that it?!" Maki shrieks. "That's what you're gonna leave on?! What the hell is wrong with you?!

"Is there anything more to say?" Kirumi responds, calm. "You clearly have convinced yourself you've changed. I can only pray for Momota's sake you are correct."

"Tch, asshole."

"Takes one to know one." With that, Kirumi leaves, heels clicking on the linoleum floor until the ding of the hospital doors close shut behind her.

One minute.

Two.

Three.

Maki collapses. Coins dig into her skin, her fingers grind her scalp. "God dammit!" she cries, her throat scratchy. What the hell was that. What the hell was that? What the hell was that?! "God dammit!"

She slams a fist on the ground. Why? Why is everyone bent on torturing her? Why do Hajime and Mikan keep Kaito from her? Why do Shuichi and Himiko just leave her there frozen? Why did everyone disperse? Leave her to be carried away? Why is Kirumi bent on reminding Maki every day that Maki is an abusive piece of shit?

Every day she tries; she tries to engage with Himiko, tries to be friendly, if a bit curt, with everyone on the island. She's been going to therapy, she's given Kirumi her space. So why are they all trying to hurt her?

She knows. She knows. She knows. Fuck does she know.

She deserves it. This is her punishment.

She should've died in that game; she doesn't deserve to live. An assassin's sole purpose is to take lives. Her mentor taught her long ago that her life meant nothing, that she was nothing. The old nun who ran the orphanage taught her that same lesson before all of this.

She deserves this.

Picking herself up, Maki collects the coins and returns them to the jar. She can barely feel them when she picks them up, doesn't really register as they clink together when they fall. When the jar is full, she sets it back on the counter and returns to Kaito's room.

His door is ajar. Hajime and Mikan must be done.

Gingerly, she opens the door, letting the dull light from the hallway flood in. She quickly wishes that it was pitch black.

Wires and machinery and patches and tubes wind their way around Kaito. Monitors show numbers and charts that mean nothing to Maki. An oxygen mask covers his mouth, fogging up with his breath. A trashcan sits nearby, stained red with blood.
She can't, she can't look at this.

Before even she can register what's happening, she's broken into a full sprint, tearing from the hospital into the sluggish rain. It's a foggy night, so it's hard to see where she's going, but Maki knows from the sounds that she's on the wooden bridge back to the center island. It's slick going and she loses her footing, but quickly regains it. From there it's a straight shot across one more bridge to Hajime and Mahiru's cabin. She can spend the night there. Away. Away from all of the other Survivors. Away from the people she's hurt.

Away from Kaito. She's the reason he's like that. If she hadn't shot at Kokichi, he wouldn't have blocked the shot. If she wasn't always trying to help, trying to kill the mastermind, then she wouldn't have stressed out his condition. He would be alive, he'd be standing next to Shuichi as they faced off against Tsumugi.

It's all her fault. She deserves this torture, she deserves everything.

She loses her footing again. When she tries to regain it, she trips on a raised plank of wood. She's falling, slams her gut against the bracing of the bridge, knocking the wind out of her. Her momentum carries her and she can't even cry out as she falls from the bridge. The last thing she hears is the sound of her head smacking against the wood of the bridge and the endless churning of the water before she loses consciousness.

Her last thought:

*I deserve this.*

********************************************************************************

The first place Kirumi goes after leaving the hospital is the Titty Typhoon. It's such a garish place, really, but a perfect little hiding spot, especially during this nasty storm. Really, she swore that the weather app installed on those tablets they were given said it would just be cloudy. No rain! Then again, it does put Kirumi's mind at rest a bit, knowing those damnable tablets are fallible.

She hops up to the stage, heads to the backroom, where Mikan strangled poor Ibuki and slit cruel ol' Hiyoko's throat. Oh, it was such a delightful case! Well, Despair Disease aside, that is. What a ridiculous motive.

Her eye twitches a bit. Right, right, been a while since she wore these. Stretching her eye open, Kirumi peels the colored contact from it. In one motion, green is revealed to be blue.

Tsumugi blinks a couple times before taking out the contact. Much better. Hajime really could procure anything. People that Tsumugi hadn't recognized delivered a shipment the other day. In it, she had specifically asked for cosplay supplies, saying how much she missed it, and how confining her room felt without them.

Naturally, it didn't take someone of her talent long to craft a fancy cosplay of Kirumi Tojo.

With practiced efficiency, she carefully removes her wig, then the bald cap, letting her long blue locks flow free. Good thing, too, she was starting to get a pretty bad headache. Take some pain meds with her next time she goes out in costume.
She hadn't originally intended to cosplay as Kirumi Tojo, but it really came down to practicality. Unlike in the simulation, she couldn't just change her entire body to fit whoever she was cosplaying. Kirumi was a strategic choice. They're almost the same height, similar body shapes, easy enough to pass in low light.

Of course, finding Maki was a risk. Maki would know Kirumi better than any, even if she doesn't remember entirely. As Tsumugi strips the pleasant shirt she'd made (and is totally something that she could Kirumi wearing), she reflects on the conversation.

Multiple times Maki had said that Kirumi was acting differently. Multiple chances for Tsumugi to be caught. Despite her cosplay skills being top-notch, her acting clearly requires a bit more work.

Okay, one last thing, breast binder. While Kirumi certainly isn't flat-chested, she is obviously several sizes smaller than Tsumugi, significant enough that her silhouette would be off.

Alright, one, two, three! And… she can breathe easily again! The material really isn't good for binding, but that's alright. That's alright.

"I won't need it~" Tsumugi sings to herself as she packs up the cosplay. "Not for this next one."

From beneath several boxes, Tsumugi pulls out a thin mattress with ratty-looking pillows. At least she managed to stitch herself a nice blanket. Can't go back tonight; Sonia will be on guard until the next shift change in the morning. Of course, she and Gundham always sneak off a few minutes early to get in some "quality time." Plenty of time for Tsumugi to sneak back in, cuddle up under her blankets, and pretend she got a good night's sleep.

"Oooh!" she says with a devious grin as she places her wig on its bust. "I'll need to take that into account with this next cosplay!"

Tsumugi smooths down a stray hair that pops up on her newest wig. She'll have to thank whoever developed the technology to place talent in people, otherwise these wigs would take forever, especially this one. The blonde color has to be precise, the royal aura perfect, and the shimmering bow must be immaculate.

"Sorry, everyone, but this is going to be my Danganronpa again, one way or another," Tsumugi says. "And Sonia will be able to find out quite a few more secrets than I will!"

Chapter End Notes

*sojiro voice* Hoo boy!

Kaito's awake, Tsumugi is scheming, Rantaro's a dolphin, and Nagito hasn't done anything of interest yet! Just another normal day. How boring.

Anyway, not much to say about this one. Hope you're all still enjoying? Not just sticking around by some weird semblance of Stockholm Syndrome, I hope.

As always, comments and critique are always welcome!
Urgh. Everything fucking hurts. Kaito's head, his arms, and especially his goddamn stomach. Plus it's dark as shit, and there's that annoying beeping in the corner. Is this Monokuma's execution? Aggravate him to death?

No, he's not in the rocket that launched him into space anymore. He's in a bed with scratchy sheets. Someone's walking. Toward him if the footsteps are any indication.

He tries to rise, but finds he's mired in a thornbush of wires. He tears them away, first the pads on his chest, then the clamp on his finger, and finally the IV from his arm. He doesn't need that shit; he's Kaito Momota.

With a grunt, he hefts his body over the edge of the bed. The floor is cold tile, a hospital, then. He'd spent a lot of time in those once. Spent just as much time escaping them.

When the staff thinks you're weak, that's when you gotta prove them wrong. The impossible is only possible when it's possible.

…

That's not right. How can he screw up his own catchphrase, no, his own philosophy? Fuck, his head hurts thinking about it. Besides, he's gotta move.

The handle on the door jiggles, turns, light streams into the room, and that's when Kaito Momota, Luminary of the Stars, makes a break for it. He shoves past the woman who opened the door, who cries out in shock as she falls, then makes a left.

Despite his first instinct being to turn back and see who he hit, his brain quickly rationalizes that it was likely an actress played by Monokuma. That damn bear won't trick him the way it tricked Kirumi!

That way only leads to a branching hallway. He makes another left, something about mazes and only going one direction ringing in his head. No luck. Another door. He throws it open to reveal an empty room.

"Ah! S-someone help meeeeee!" cries a squeaky voice, and for a moment, Kaito considers rushing towards it.

No, can't do that. Gotta keep moving, get the fuck out of this place, and get to somewhere he can just fucking think. Can't let Monokuma win. Pain stabs his stomach, jabbing upwards into his throat. The taste of metal and vomit swirls in his mouth for a moment before he manages to choke it back down.

*Keep going!!!* he yells at himself.

He turns back and heads down the other hallway. Yet another door. Have hospitals always had this many damn doors?!
Forget he asked that.

This time, however, the door opens up. A boy in a wheelchair looking oddly familiar.

"Tsumiki? Is every- Momota?! You're up!"

It takes Kaito a second as he blinks the blurriness in his vision away. It's Keebo. Isn't it? He looks less… angular than before, more subdued. Why's he in a wheelchair?

"The fuck?" Kaito hisses. "What'd Monokuma do to you, Keebs?"

"Mono…? No, no, Momota, you have it all wrong!" Keebo says, extending his arms forward.

Another pain strikes Kaito's stomach. "Ugh, explain it later, let's go!" He whirls around to try grabbing Keebo's chair, but the other boy backs out of his reach.

"Momota, you need to calm down!"

"Shit, don't tell me Monokuma's gotten to you?!

"If you would just-"

But Kaito's already running off. "I'll come back for you, Keebs! Don't fucking worry! Just trust in me!" Keebo's protests fall on deaf ears as Kaito storms through the building. His muscles burn and there's a stabbing pain in his side. Damn, he's really out of shape. If only he'd been able to train with Shuichi and Maki!

That's it. He's gotta find those two. If Keebo is alive, those two probably are, too. He can't imagine anything managing to kill Maki Roll.

Bursting out the front door of the hospital, Kaito is thankful that the sun is hidden behind a heavy overcast. The air sticks to his bare chest, the salty smell of the sea pricking his nose. Where the hell did Monokuma fucking take them?! How did he do this?!

There's voices coming from further down the beach. Something familiar about them. Another rush of vomit swells in his mouth. This time he spews it into a nearby bush, ignores the dredges of red that now soak the ground. He can… he can worry about that later.

He tears off down the beach. Or, rather, he tries to. He can only make it a few meters before he falters, stumbling into the sand. He lands hard on his ankle, causing him to groan as he desperately tries to force himself to his feet.

"GOD DAMMIT!" he roars. He's not letting some sickness or Monokuma or an fucking injury keep him from finding the others and figuring out what the hell is going on. He's Kaito Fucking Momota, Luminary… Illusionary… Dairy… Delusionary, ugh.

Clamping his fist around a pile of sand, he pounds on the ground once, twice.

A thought crosses his mind. What if this is execution? What if this is all part of Monokuma's plan? Get him to tire himself out and kill himself. That would make all this effort pointless, along with giving Monokuma a disgusting amount of satisfaction. Maybe he should just lie down. That sounds nice. Lie down, let himself bleed out, let this sickness kill him. Deny Monokuma whatever sick pleasure he may gain from these sack of shit executions.

Laying his head down, the sand feels coarse against his cheek. He closes his eyes. His stomach
gurgles. Just... give in...

...

...

...

Fuck that.

Kaito erupts back to his feet, shooting forward despite the pain in his ankle and... well, really his whole fucking body. If Monokuma is gonna be a dumbass and give Kaito a way out, even a small one, it's his job, no, his duty to take advantage of that. He can't let his sidekick down, can't let his Maki Roll down. He's gotta save Keebo and Himiko and Tsumugi, too. They need him right now.

Through labored breaths, Kaito thunders across the beach, swallowing both his own blood and any thoughts of giving in. The voices are getting louder, so he's clearly getting closer to whoever's there.

Images of Shuichi, Maki, Himiko, and Tsumugi calling out his name, cheering for him like they all did to Kirumi flash through his mind. He remembers the unjust actions that lead to Gonta's execution, of Kokichi's final, fleeting moments of fear as the press crushed his tiny body. The tears that rolled down Miu's breathless face, Himiko's impossible scream when she uncovered Tenko's punctured throat. Ryoma's skeleton, and Kaito himself, front and center, ready to combat the exisals that threatened to steal Kaede away.

He may have failed them then, but he's here now. He's going to survive, he's going to beat whatever game Monokuma has in store for him.

"Fucking bring it!" he shouts, rounding a corner.

There, he sees his first obstacle. Kaede Akamatsu.

Kaito practically screeches to a stop, kicking sand as he does so. Like Keebo, Kaede looks different; she's more demure, dressed differently, too, as if she really is just a tourist at a beach; her hair bobs in a ponytail.

"Harukawa!" she yells. She's facing away from Kaito. "Dammit, where did she go?" she says, turning, then jumping in fright when she makes eye contact with Kaito.

It's in that eye contact that Kaito sees Monokuma's lies. Kaede's eyes light up the room when she enters, they glimmer with emotion, even when she's being sent to her death. She's bright and powerful like the stars. This fake Kaede has none of that brightness. She's a cheap copy, something meant to give Kaito pause, run down the clock on his disease.

He won't let it.

"Momota!" Kaede says. "You're up! Are you alright?!" She jogs towards him, so Kaito does the one thing he can think of at the moment.

He punches her in the face.

Kaede instantly falls to the ground with a scream. Kaito ignores her, opting instead to bolt forward. Running towards him, Miu - Monokuma's Miu, that is - exits a building, presumably after hearing the scream. Kaito knows better.
He shoves past her, can't let himself get fooled by Mono… Monokuma's… his…

Kaito's head feels light, his vision swims. A rush of blood spills from his mouth, surprising him. At once, all the pains he'd managed to block out ambush him. Soreness pulses in his limbs, a cramp twists his sides, and that ever present agony stabs at his stomach.

He can't give up, though, he has to keep running, has to keep going until he finds Shuichi and Maki Roll and… and… who else.

His run slows to a jog, then to a walk, then to a crawl, then to a pitiful drag as he claws his way forward. "Can't… fucking… quit… " he spits out.

As he reaches his hand forward, he nicks it on a stick protruding from the sand. The red line is shallow, but blood pours out of it as if he'd chopped the entire hand off. In desperation, he grabs at the cut, putting as much pressure as he can manage to try to stem the bleeding.

Looking up, his vision is nothing but blurs and it feels as if his head simultaneously weighs as much as a boulder and a grain of sand, each motion sluggish yet as if he's whipping his head around.

He's failed… Kaito Momota, something of the fucking something, has failed. As darkness encroaches on his vision, a distinct, lithe black blob comes racing towards him.

"Saihara…?" he croaks out, then lets his head crash onto the ground.

Kaito Momota, Luminary of the Stars, gives himself to death.

-However.-

He wakes up a few hours later.

It's not with a start or even a gradual, groaning wake. Rather, much like he'd woken up from a not-quite-refreshing nap. He's groggy as he wipes the crust out of his eyes, his ability to do so hampered by the mess of wires reconnected to his arm.


But that at least confirms one thing. He escaped Monokuma's execution. There's no fucking way that bear would leave him alive if he had the choice.

"Momota," whispers a hoarse voice.

That familiar black bob slowly creeps into his vision. Bit by bit, it comes into focus, revealing the concerned face of Shuichi Saihara.

Kaito tries to grin, but his face is constricted by an oxygen mask. He tries to pull it off, but Shuichi rests his hand over the mask and shakes his head.

"Calm down, Momota, you're okay."

"Saihara," Kaito croaks. Damn his throat is dry. "What… what the fuck is all this?"

Shuichi's expression darkens as he begins to explain the situation, picking up after… after Kaito's
half-successful execution.

As hard as Kaito tries to keep a hold on Shuichi's words, he can't help but eventually nod back off into unconsciousness.

He dreams a bit. Dreams of space, of supernovas imploding into rainbow clouds of stardust. Dreams of himself at the center of that supernova until he's obliterated with it.

When he wakes up again, he hears a pair of female voices.

"Ow, Miu! Don't poke it!"

"Blah, blah, fucking, blah. It's nasty as a swollen vagina, I'm gonna touch it."

"That is vile, even for you Iruma."

That last one was a smooth, silky voice. Forcing his eyes open, Kaito sees Shuichi, Miu, Kaede, and Korekiyo sitting around his room. Miu seems to be trying to poke at a brutal bruise on Kaede's cheek while the pianist fruitlessly fends her off, ice pack in her other hand. Shuichi sits at the vanity, arm propping his head up, occasionally yawning.

"You are awake again?" says Korekiyo, who is seated directly next to Kaito in a wheelchair. Fucking hell, what has this game done to all of them?

Immediately, all eyes turn to Kaito. Feeling self-conscious, he scratches his head and says, "What's up?"

Miu stomps over. "I should fucking smack you, you cuck!" She jabs a finger in Kaede's direction. "Look what the fuck you did! Now how's she gonna get a man?!"

"U-um, Iruma," Shuichi starts. "I... I don't think that's what we're concerned with right now."

Kaito clenches his teeth in a goofy grimace as he looks at the bruise on Kaede's face. "Hey, um, Akamatsu," he says. "Sorry about the whole, you know..." He trails off, instead opting to simply punch his palm in a weak pantomime.

"Yeah, whatever," Kaede says, eyes downcast.

"I just thought... Fuck, man. I thought you were part of the game."

"Still, that was quite the obtuse reaction," Korekiyo says.

"You callin' me stupid, you goddamn serial killer?" Kaito growls.

A pregnant silence. A confusing silence. All eyes drop to the floor. Korekiyo mumbles a brief apology or something, then leaves the room, having Miu open the door for him.

"What?" Kaito says, glancing around. "He's fucking killed how many girls?!"

"That's not... That's not true," Shuichi says, rising. "I told you, all of our personalities, our memories. Everything was fake." He clenches his fist. "Shirogane and Team Danganronpa. Everything was fake."

A distant part of Kaito recalls Shuichi telling him that, but a much more present part of him doesn't want to believe him. "That, that can't be fucking true!" he shouts. "I'm still Kaito! I'm still me! You all know me, especially after everything we've been through!"
"That will change," Kaede says. Her bag of ice crinkles as she presses it to her cheek. Her eyes, her eyes, her god damn eyes are too dim to be those of Kaede Akamatsu.

"Oi, Kae, you're getting all depressing again," Miu chides. She walks over then proceeds to flick Kaede in the forehead. "Stop it."

"Miu, you jerk!" Kaede says, a bit of brightness returning. "I'm gonna get you back for that, you know."

"What're you gonna fucking do, cowtits? Make me flash mine?" For emphasis, Miu pulls down her shirt just enough to expose the top of her chest. Kaito tries to hide his surprise at minefield of red abrasions. Clearly, he doesn't do a very good job as Miu jerks her shirt back up and slaps her hand on her chest. "I'm fucking leaving," she says.

"Miu, wait!" Kaede calls after her, chasing her out.

Kaito relaxes his head onto his pillow. "So… this is it, huh? We really fucking made it out?"

Shuichi nods. "I guess we did."

Grinning, Kaito flashes Shuichi a thumbs up. "I bet my sidekick was the one who saved everyone!"

"It wasn't just me," Shuichi replies, a hint of a smile playing at his lips.

"Come on, man, give yourself some credit. Oh dude, I would've killed to see Shirogane's face when you blew up the whole fucking academy!"

"That was… a bad choice of words, Momota."

Kaito laughs, short, but genuine. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Hey, tell me something. Who all managed to survive? I think I blacked out when you were telling me."

"Oh, it was me, Himiko, and… " Saihara grows quiet, hand rising to his chest. Kaito has long learned that that gesture is for when he's uncomfortable.

"Keebo?" Kaito offers.

"N-no… Keebo… He turned out to be an unwitting pawn in Team Danganronpa's scheme."

Realization dawns on Kaito. "Then if Shirogane was the mastermind…" He claps his hands loudly. "Ha! I fucking knew Maki Roll would make it!" He reaches out and pats Shuichi on the shoulder. "Shoulda just said so, dude! Yo, where is she?"

"We… we… d-don't know…"

Kaito stomach drops and he feels the need to vomit. "What?"

"She's been missing since last night. We've spent all day looking for her."

No, no way. No fucking way. There's no fucking way anything happened to Maki, she's far too skilled for that, Kaito knows. He groans as he tries to lift himself from the bed.

"E-excuse me, Momota…" says a tiny voice.

He relaxes as a nurse-looking young woman approaches him, hiding half her face behind a clipboard. "Ugh, what the fuck do you want? We got a Maki to find!"
"N-no!" the nurse squeaks, startling Kaito. "Eek! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to shout! It's just, you overexerted yourself far too much. You need to rest or there could be serious complications!"

"Complications?" Kaito repeats. "What fucking complications?"

"Erm… complications from your haemophilia…"

********************

Despite wanting to spend more time talking to Kaito, Shuichi was eventually shooed out by Mikan. If he was being honest, it was for the best. Kaito was already not-all-there and the longer he tried to stay up, the less lucid he got. At one point he'd been convinced that Maki was just hiding under his bed, waiting to surprise him. Because that's something that Maki would totally do.

Sighing, Shuichi glances at the sky. A pretty orange blends with timid blues of the late afternoon. There's no way to keep time on the island unless you ask one of the Remnants. Shuichi had asked Hajime to bring some watches or something, but Hajime continually found convenient reasons to not bring them ranging from they couldn't find any to they had found a community more in need of them.

Convenient. That's a word that Shuichi has become quite used to lately. There seems to be a lot of conveniences on this island. Food is easy to come by. It may not be the highest quality stuff, but it's satisfying and diverse. Despite being trapped on three islands, there's plenty to do. Mahiru and Sonia had raided a storage area (where it was located, they wouldn't reveal, conveniently being paged by Mikan that they were needed) and found a bunch of old board games, video games, and sports equipment. The finds were godsend because a sense of boredom had begun to overtake the Survivors, Shuichi noticed. Convenient, then, that the activities had been "discovered."

He counted himself lucky, then. He'd accompanied the Remnants to assist in finding a member of Despair forces tormenting a nearby island. The case was rather simple; the culprit left so many clues to his whereabouts that it was as if he was advertising where he was. When he brought this up to Hajime, he had simply explained that a psychological analysis revealed the Despair either wanted to be caught to cause him more despair or it served as a monument to his arrogance. Still, they had left him handcuffed to a heavy concrete statue and left him on the island for pickup by Nekomaru.

Shuichi had asked why they weren't staying with him to ensure he didn't escape, so Kazuichi explained that they needed to get back to Jabberwock ASAP to ensure nothing went wrong with any of the life-support systems in the pod room. He'd said it was a lucky break that Gonta wasn't harmed coming out of the simulation.

Convenient and lucky.

If there's one thing even an amateur detective knows, it's that when too many coincidences line up, too many lucky breaks, it means that something is wrong. There's something hidden.

Compounding this, thinking about the past few days leaves a sour taste in his mouth and a pit in his stomach. Lesson two of being a detective, learn to listen to your gut. Why doesn't he remember agreeing to join the Remnants. He got on the boat, sure, and helped them, but he doesn't think they ever asked, or even informed him what was going on. He simply… was on the boat. Just like how he ended up in the locker…
"Are you alright, Saihara?"

A voice jars Shuichi from his thoughts. Kirumi stares at him with concern apparent in her eyes. "O-oh! Yeah, sorry, got lost in thought."

"I would say so," Kirumi says with a chuckle, "You were about to walk into the ocean."

White surf barely misses Shuichi's shoes, lending credence to Kirumi's statement. He hadn't even realized he'd been walking. "Thanks, Tojo, I appreciate it."

"It is no worry. It would be quite unfortunate if you drowned…" She puckers her lips as she finishes. "Let us walk," she urges and Shuichi is happy to oblige. One thing he remembers clearly is pressing the button to send Kirumi to her death after Shuichi revealed her plot. Though he also remembers the scoreboard for that trial and can't help but giggle. Kirumi glances at him and raises an eyebrow, whether playfully or threateningly, Shuichi can't tell.

"Hey, Tojo, in your trial-" Shuichi starts. Kirumi sucks air through her teeth. "Did you vote for me out of spite?"

"Must we talk about this?"

"It… it was just a question."

"I would hardly say so," Kirumi spits. Her shoulders rise as she tenses. "If you really want an answer, I do not remember. I was a bit busy trying not to die." Her eyes grow distant for a moment; she stops, plants her feet for a moment, sucks in another breath, then continues walking.

Biting his lip, Shuichi curses at himself. This has been happening more and more lately. Cruel, inconsiderate questions to his fellow Survivors. Why? What's changed? He doesn't really need to ask, he knows the answer. It lies in a little fanboy so obsessed with Danganronpa he would write fanfiction every day speculating about every minuscule detail around the characters. There was one particularly awful one about why Kyoko enjoyed coffee.

It seemed so harmless at the time, to investigate and prattle on about the endless mundanities of lives detached from his own, to theorize about the thoughts going through fictional characters' heads based on partial knowledge of their actions. There were the detractors, of course, ones who said only an author could truly understand a character, or even those that said fans look too deep. Too deep. He never thought you could go too deep, find the truth of the character.

But Kirumi Tojo isn't a character. She is, but isn't. She's a scared young woman walking silently with Shuichi. She's a maid who became the Prime Minister of Japan and killed a friend of his. No, he can't think like that. Kirumi Tojo isn't a character. She isn't a character.

"I'm… I'm sorry, Tojo," Shuichi says, as genuine as he's able, ignoring the part of him that wants her to react just as a maid would. Some stern consternation about paying mind to others.

"Please, just drop it," Kirumi replies.

"Okay."

The two continue walking in silence. Are they even going anywhere? Kirumi has a bag with her, canvas and bulky. It reminds Shuichi of the special prize from the second game. He wants to interrogate her about it. Someone carrying a bag in the game was always a sign that they were plotting or involved in a plot.
Kirumi seems to read his mind. "I am getting snacks and water from the mart to bring back to my
room," she explains evenly, though there's a twinge of annoyance in her voice.

"I wasn't-"

"You were, Saihara, you always are."

Something is definitely on Kirumi's mind. Even after the simulation she is rarely this… brusque. The
only other time was after she and Maki, um, split, if that would be the term for it. He knows that he's
risking alienating Kirumi even further, but maybe he can be supportive.

"Have you, um, have you heard anything knew about Ma- Harukawa?"

If looks could kill, Shuichi would still be alive. Despite Kirumi's best attempt to look withering, she
just looks defeated. God, Shuichi's brain aches trying to reconcile the determined, indomitable look
Kirumi often had in the game with the pathetic one she's giving him now. "Why are you so intent on
pressing me? I wished for your company because I believed that you would be good to walk with. I
was mistaken."

"N-no! You weren't! I'm just… concerned for you is all. And, and I really don't know how to
comfort people, I guess," Shuichi says.

"I feel as if you were better at doing so before we awoke."

Now it's Shuichi's turn to feel a bit indignant. "Well, I guess I don't live up to that fictional
character."

Kirumi shifts the bag on her shoulder, but otherwise doesn't indicate that Shuichi's remark affected
her. "No, I have not heard of any news. She is still missing."

"Oh, well, are you…"

"If you are going to ask if I am worried, I am. I do not wish harm to come to Maki, regardless of my
personal feelings towards her. To answer the unasked question as well, no I would not harm her… or
worse." They stop in front of the mart and Kirumi faces Shuichi, expression stern. "If you wish to
help others, then please do so in not such an aggressive manner, or leave the therapy to Hinata. Have
a good evening, Saihara. And stay inside, it is supposed to rain tonight."

With that, Kirumi pivots on her heel and enters the mart.

He doesn't bother trying to apologize, only hangs his head and walks off in the opposite direction.
He… he messed that one up, didn't he? Bad. Kirumi had come to him in some semblance of
confidence and he'd stomped on it at every turn.

Is this who he really is? Rather, who he was before the game? That little fanboy so narcissistic and
fanatic over a game where others die that he's become unable to interact without acting as if he's in a
game himself?

He spent last night remembering bits of his past. It's something of a pastime on the island. You'll find
any Survivor staring into space, lost in their own thoughts of what was once real but now feels like a
trailer to a move, all the good, impactful bits with none of the dull life that connected them.

Last night, he remembered writing at his desk, a plate of his grandfather's signature American
hamburgers next to him. Apparently, his grandfather had picked it up from a travelling American
who stayed at an inn that his grandfather worked at. Or so the memories say. Do things like that
actually happen, or are they just figments of creative imaginations? Chance meetings that leave lasting, beautiful marks on those involved.

Maybe they do happen, but maybe they're simply regular occurrences until someone puts it down on paper with embellishment and the benefit of pensive memory.

Of course, as everyone on this island well knows, memory is a fickle beast at best. In courts, witness testimony has rapidly become less revered as research into memory reveals how fallible it is, how it twists itself to suit whatever purpose the brain needs to survive. Maybe that's why Shuichi imagines grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins all living under the same roof. Why, despite the many members, he had a room to himself, of course dedicated entirely to Danganronpa merch.

Eventually, lost in his ruminations, Shuichi manages to get back to his motel room. His motel room, as if he's actually on a tropical vacation.

Once inside, he sits on the creaky bed, heavier than his lithe frame would imply. The sudden bump knocks the electronic tablet off the edge of the bed. If Shuichi's memories are right, he once asked his uncle for a drawing pad so that he didn't have to rely on his family's rather lacking amount of colored pencils to draw Danganronpa fan art.

Danganronpa, Danganronpa, Danganronpa. Is that all he was? Is that all he is? In a way, it's true. Everything before the game was about being a fan; all of his money spent of conventions where he'd cosplay as Kyoko, always Kyoko, and spend his every moment writing, drawing, or theorizing about these damn games. And now… now whenever he looks at someone who has died, he can only see them as a corpse, or as the fleeting moments they spent alone together, "growing closer" as the video games would put it. They don't exist on this island. They exist only in the game.

No! No! NO! He can't think like that. He shakes his head as vigorously as he can. What has gotten into him? What has gotten into him?

He reaches down, snatching the tablet from the floor and flicking it on. He doesn't expect to see much of anything new, just the same selfies of him dressed up as Kyoko with some unimportant boy dressed as Makoto in the mirror with him. However, when the screen lights up, a notification pops up.

"Connected to mobile hotspot unidentified_network"

The internet? Here? Hajime had said that there was no internet on the island, that really the only places that still had it were big cities and even they were spotty. He looks again. The connection is weak, but present. He swipes through the different screens offered to him by the tablet, searching for a shortcut to a browser.

If he can find a browser he can… he can… Well he doesn't know what he can do necessarily. If this is the world of the game, then it's not like he can contact his family or anything. Then again, how would that even be possible? There's no way he traveled worlds or something ridiculous like that.

When he can't find a shortcut, he brings up the search menu, typing in "Internet Explorer." It may be slow, but if he can connect then he-

The connection drops.

A knock on his door.

Hurriedly, he shoves the tablet beneath his pillow, as if the mere act of looking at it would get him sent away from this island.
Another knock.

"C-coming!" Shuichi calls, smoothing his hair and grabbing his hat.

When he opens the door, he's surprised to see Nagito standing there, wispy hair fluttering in the wind. "Hello, Saihara, is everything alright?"

"A-ah, yes, I'm fine," Shuichi manages.

"Are you sure, you look a bit pale."

"I do?"

Nagito raises an eyebrow. "Hmm? No, not really. Maybe it was just my imagination. Trash like me tends to see things that aren't really there." He smiles that deceptive, easy smile that Shuichi spent far too much time analyzing one night on a caffeine pill-induced rant about how Nagito was a good character. "Well, I'm here because we have to ask you guys to head to the shelter again."

"A-again? There's another despair invasion?!"

Sighing, Nagito nods. "Such a pitiful sight. They sometimes grow desperate when new things happen on the island. I am sure by now they have heard about what has happened here."

"What… do you mean?" Shuichi asks. "How would they hear about us?"

"Rumors travel fast, especially about such wonder beacons of hope as you all!" Nagito's watch beeps, so he holds it up to look at it. "Well, I must go and help Hajime with some defensive plans. Head to the hotel, okay? You'll be safe there, trust us." He smiles again, then disappears down the stairs.

Clutching his hat, Shuichi swallows hard. Even his old fanboy self never would have wanted to actually talk with Nagito. He's too smart, too deliberate. Shuichi sucks in a deep breath.

If Shuichi wasn't pale when he was talking to Nagito, he sure is now, because when Nagito had looked at his watch, he had very clearly shown Shuichi something entirely intentional.

He showed Shuichi his phone.

***********************************

"O-okay! That is enough! Put me down!" Keebo cries as Gonta lifts him - chair and all - above his head, pressing him like he's a weight.

"Ha! How's the view Keebler?" Miu shouts. "See any good racks up there?"

"Miu, I feel that is highly- Oh my we're going down!"

Gonta rests Keebo back on the floor of the hotel, much to the disappoint of several in the crowd gathered there.

"I didn't think you'd be so strong even here…" Himiko murmurs, holding her pillow tight. Gonta's noticed that she carries that thing around with her everywhere, as if a pillow could protect her from
the dangers of the world.

"Seriously, you could break a girl in fucking half!" Miu says.

Before she can say anything else, Kaede slaps her hand over the ex-inventor's mouth and gives her a stern look. Gonta can figure that Miu was about to say something about his dick.

Gonta turns to face Kazuichi, who has watched the whole "lifting various Survivors" thing with a mix of bemusement and abject terror.

"See? I'm strong. Let Gonta fight," he says, stepping forward. Sitting back and hiding in some safe room doesn't sit well with him. If there's danger, having one more person in the fight can do wonders to give your side the advantage. While Gonta isn't entirely sure how he knows that, it feels like instinct. Like an animal's instinct.

"Not happening," Kazuichi says, tapping his head with a wrench. "We're responsible for you kids, so we're gonna be the ones to protect you. " He smiles. "Besides, this means you guys can just take it easy while we do all the heavy lifting!"

"Gonta no want to take it easy!" he shouts, stomping his foot.

"Gokuhara, please," Kirumi chides from her place in an armchair, arms wrapped around a bag. "You still have not fully recovered from waking up from the simulation."

Biting back a curse, Gonta crosses his arms. "I know that…" he concedes. "Gonta can still protect."

"No one's saying you can't," Kaede says, voice even. "We're just… well none of us are really in a good condition to be fighting, you know?"

Miu snorts. "Besides, not like any of us know any-fucking-thing about fighting whatever the hell this despair shit is."

Gonta doesn't like being ganged up on like this. Taking advantage of the stupid one in the group is just… ungentlemanly. Still, they have a point. He's been working out for the past few days and his strength is still coming back to him. Besides, his muscles ache with weak soreness from the continuous stress.

"Fine, but what about Harukawa?" Gonta demands. Everyone in the room visibly tenses when he mentions her name, so Gonta presses his advantage. "She been missing for two days. What if she in danger?"

"We have been looking," Keebo says, glum.

"And we ain't found shit!" Miu finishes.

"Besides," Shuichi says, walking through the door, causing everyone to turn and look at him. "I don't think we'd have time to look for her while fighting."

Frustrated, Gonta sharply nods his head, then stares at the ground, tapping his foot. This sucks. He's not weak. He's can fight. He's not weak, dammit.

You ain't weak, right, boy? You got my back, doncha?

That voice. He's been hearing that voice since he woke up. Or, remembering that voice. He doesn't literally hear it. It's so familiar, but he can't place it. Every time, it's always something about having
the voice's back or keeping the voice safe. Safe from what? And who's back does he have? So many questions for a boy whose entire character was based around being stupid. So many questions for a boy who is stupid.

"We'll keep an eye out," Kazuichi says. "But don't expect anything. Knowing that girl, she's probably hiding from ya'll"

"No! Maki wouldn't do that!" Himiko shouts.

"Yumeno..." Kirumi whispers.

"She wouldn't, okay? She's... she's flawed like the rest of us, I guess. But she's our friend. She has no reason to hide!"

Gonta adjusts his glasses. He didn't know that Maki and Himiko had grown close, or that they were fond of each other at all. Then again, surviving through the hell that was Danganronpa is bound to do that to anyone.

Kazuichi scratches the back of his head. "I didn't mean anything by it, kid. Just throwing out ideas."

"Perhaps then, it would be advisable to keep your ideas to yourself," Sonia says, walking in as dignified as every. She's dressed differently than usual, Gonta notes. She's wearing combat gear, carrying a pistol. So this despair invasion thing, despite the dumb name, is some serious business. It just makes Gonta want to help out even more.

"And," Sonia continues. "To apologize."

Kazuichi nods solemnly. "Yeah, yeah, sorry kid. I really didn't mean anything." When Himiko doesn't say anything back, Kazuichi addresses Sonia. "Everyone else accounted for?"

"Indeed. Momota, Amami, Korekiyo, and Shirogane are all present at the hospital. While we would prefer you be there as well, Keebo, the ship quite rapidly approaches."

"Mikan on guard at the hospital again?"

"Naturally. Now come, we must get everyone to safety. Gokuhara, will you please assist Kazuichi in transporting Keebo downstairs?"

Finally, he gets to help out. Bending over, Gonta threads his arms under Keebo's legs and with a grunt, maneuver's Keebo into a bridal carry. Someone whistles, probably Miu.

"This is not what I expected..." Keebo moans.

"Hold still," Gonta orders as he descends the staircase, careful to make sure Keebo does not hit the walls on the way down.

Kaede was right about the room being cramped. It's so small that Gonta has to hunch over a bit just to avoid hitting his head. With seven of them cramped in there (and really, Gonta could count for two easily), he's almost glad that Maki isn't there to take up more space. A pipe sticks out from the far wall, so Gonta sets Keebo down, propping him up against the pipe.

"Thank you Gokuhara, I will be fine. My motor skills improve every day!" Keebo says brightly.

Oh, if only Gonta could have that sort of optimism. "No problem," he says, massaging the soreness in his arm. Don't be weak.
One by one, everyone else who had gathered comes down the stairs and finds a place along the walls. In the end, Gonta has to sit on the stairs so he doesn't take up too much space. Even so, several people are practically on top of each other. Kaede is practically on Miu's lap, and Himiko scooched closer to Shuichi than Gonta expected.

It's odd to think about, really. He's one of the last few to wake up. Everyone else in this room has been awake before him, some for quite a period of time. Every relationship they forged in the game, everything that Gonta remembers about them, all of it is just almost thrown out the window. Yet, also not. Himiko avoids Korekiyo like the plague; the name "Tsumugi Shirogane" sends everyone into hysteria; Miu will hardly look at Gonta unless she's making a crude remark.

He can't say he blames her. He did murder her after all, with fake toilet paper, no less. Not just traumatic, but embarrassing. Even now, he has an urge to laugh at the whole charade. That could be caused by the fact that he doesn't really remember murdering her. Like in the game, his memory of the event itself is practically zero. What he does remember is likely more just hearing the stories the others told him piecing themselves together in his mind. Ah well, whatever.

After the door shuts, everyone chats lightly among themselves. A lot of it centers around their memories, funny things they've realized, or just random observations they've had throughout the day. The conversations are boring, so Gonta doesn't participate, but he does like the warm feeling that comes from the simple camaraderie. It, too, feels familiar, like he's home.

The conversations drop immediately when the first room-shaking explosion resonates from above, swinging the light bulb above their heads. The shadows around the room do a harrowing dance.

Gonta can't tell how long the explosions go on for. Each time he thinks they've stopped, another sends dust clattering down from the ceiling. Miu and Kaede grip each other's hands tight; Keebo slumps after a particularly violent explosion, and he's unable to get back up, causing Kirumi to crawl over and help him. Shuichi stares ahead, a hard, blank look in his eyes; Himiko's face is buried in her pillow.

Gonta grabs a cliff bar from the shelves.

Sure, they're only supposed to be for emergencies, but he's hungry. Besides, having something to munch on keeps him distracted from that big green button that's been taunting him since he sat down. Kazuichi said that pressing that will open up the safe room doors, just in case something goes wrong and they need to escape.

One press and Gonta can join the fight.


"What the fuck?" Miu cries.

"Ow! Miu, don't stand up so suddenly!" Kaede says.

"I can't see!" Keebo says.

"No one get up!" Kirumi yells above everyone.

Gonta can only roll his eyes. These are the people that survived Danganronpa? Then again, maybe that's what Team Danganronpa was going for. Still, it's pitch black now thanks to the light bulb being, so after a few minutes of mild panicking, Gonta finally speaks up. "Who closest to shelves?"

"I- I am..." Himiko responds.
"Okay, see if there replacement on shelf."

The only sound for a few minutes is Himiko's rummaging around. Gradually, Gonta eyes adjust to the low light and he can make out the vague forms of everyone in the room. Fortunately, everyone is close to the walls and not trying to walk around like dumbasses.

"I don't think there's anything here."

"Any flashlights?" Shuichi offers.

"Nope. It's all just food and water and blankets."

"That is quite unhelpful," Kirumi comments, and Gonta can tell that she stands up a bit, twisting her back.

"Anyone else have any ideas?" Kaede asks. "Because I really don't want to spend the entire time here in darkness."

Another boom, this time accompanied by the sounds of glass skittering across the floor. Kirumi wisely sits back down.

"Gonta gonna press button," Gonta says.

"Huh? Why?" Shuichi asks. "We're fine down here even if it's dark."

"Please, you know why Pooichi. Ol' Big Dick over there been trying to get his cock into the action since we got here," Miu says.

"Must you always be so crass?" Kirumi says.

"Keeps my mind off things."

"Leave it, Miu," Kaede chastises. "Gokuhara, you sure you wanna go up there? It sounds like we're being bombed!"

Himiko shuffles back down next to Shuichi. "Nyeh... I don't want you to get hurt."

"Gonta be fine," he says. "Ehem, I'm gonna be fine, I mean. Look, if you want stay down here, that's fine. I'm sick of being useless, though."

Without waiting for a response, Gonta slams his massive hand against the button like he was squashing a bug. Ew, bad comparison. Why think like that, huh?

He waits for a moment, then another. Presses the button again.

Nothing happens.

"Did you hit the right button?" Kaede asks.

"I don't think there is any other one," Keebo says.

Gonta rapidly pushes the button over and over again. "It not working!" he growls, standing, just barely avoiding smashing his head against the ceiling.

"Please don't fucking tell me we're trapped down here! There's no way I'm dying again! " Miu says.
As everyone else descends into chatter, Gonta carefully climbs the stairs to where the mechanical doors are. Feeling along the surface, he eventually finds the crease where the doors meet. Taking a deep breath, he pulls his fist back then lets it fly, sending a reverberating clang through the room and his body.

"What the hell was that?!" Kirumi cries.

"Gokuhara what are you doing?!" Shuichi yells.

There's the sound of shuffling as everyone crowds around the bottom of the staircase.

"I leaving," Gonta says simply. He punches the doors once more, this time managing to accomplish what he set out to do. Despite his hand aching like nothing else, there is a dent between the doors just wide enough that Gonta can slip his fingers between. Whatever metal they made these doors out of, it's flimsy. Definitely not strong enough to protect against a direct hit. Good thing he's decided to help out.

"Miu, help me with Keebo," Kaede says.

"Fucking gotcha."

"I will clear a path through the glass," Kirumi says. "Saihara, Yumeno, I believe we may want to stand back."

Giving everyone a five second count to get ready, Gonta plants himself firmly, then squeezes his fingers into the gap between the doors. With a mighty heave, Gonta begins to wrench the doors open.

Little by little, a beam of light streams through the widening opening. Gonta feels sweat forming on his brow and his arms cry out in agony as he strains.

Don't be weak. Don't be weak. Don't be weak. He repeats in his head. He has to help the others fend off this invasion. To distract himself from his effort, he thinks of a game plan. He should first go to the hospital to check in on them. If he were to assault an island like this, that would be the first place he would attack. Plus, if they only have one guard - a rather weak-looking nurse, at that - then they would be in the most need of his strength.

Metal creaks and groans as every bit of machinery fights to keep the doors closed. It's a battle of attrition, Gonta realizes. Either he gives up or the doors do.

Don't be weak, ya hear. Gotta be strong to protect those ya care about, boy."

The voice.

With a guttural, animalistic scream, Gonta wrenches the doors open, their mechanisms failing simultaneously as the doors fling to either side, letting light flood in to the shelter. Gonta's covered in a fine sheen of sweat and his arms feel heavy with weakness.

But he can't give up yet. The battle still rages on.

Right as he's about to climb out of the basement, another explosion rings out. However, this time, Gonta notices something rather odd. Though the room has shaken before, Gonta always assumed that it was because the explosions were sending vibrations everywhere. At the top of the stairs, though, he can see that it seems like the room is literally shaking. Rather, it's being shaken.
Between the top of the stairs and the floor of the hotel, a little gap reveals a series of machines and gears and all sorts of mechanical devices that Gonta has no hope of comprehending. When the room stops shaking, the gap disappears, practically undetectable except for a fine line so easy to miss is you weren't looking for it.

Before the room can shake again, Gonta runs up the stairs, into the hotel lobby, and then out into the battle.

But something's wrong.

He dashes back inside, calls out to everyone, "Everyone out here, now!"

Despite everyone scrambling to get up, it takes a while for Miu and Kaede to get Keebo up the stairs. Gonta wants to help, but he also doesn't want to risk going back down the stairs. As everyone leaves the hotel lobby, they all get the same wide-eyed look as they realize just what Gonta was so scared about.

For a moment, Gonta tries to fool himself into thinking that he was just seeing things, but, no. When he walks back outside, he sees exactly what had scared him more than any fight ever could.

Despite all of the explosions and booming and room shaking and crashes. Despite the stories that Shuichi told him about what the beaches look like after every battle. Despite the fact that all of the Remnants seemed so scared, so concerned over the invasion of despair.

The beach looks absolutely pristine. Not a speck of sand out of place. The trees are all upright, blowing in the wind. Dark clouds blanket the sky.

Finally, in the distance, on what must be Fifth Island, rests a boat. Not a battleship or other fighting vessel. A cruise ship, big and luxurious, parked right at Fifth Island's pier, as if welcomed.

Lighting pierces the sky, rain collapses onto them, and the thunder Gonta hears might be the first real explosion all day.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter in the books. Things happen. Nagito showed up for like 30 seconds. My cat threw up on my newly cleaned sheets while I was writing this at one point. All in all, I'd say a decent chapter.

Also, alternate chapter title: Kaito Punches Everything

As always, comments and criticism are always appreciated!
Won't You Remember?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A group of people sits around a group of monitors, staring dumbly at them in silence as they watch the group emerge from the shelter beneath the hotel. They can hardly move until one of them slams their hand against the wall.

"God damn it all! They're out of the freakin' shelter!"

"Relax, would ya? We got contingencies for stuff like this."

"Oh go shove your contingencies up your ass. If they just got outta there it'd be all fine and dandy, wouldn't it? Well guess what, dinglenuts? We also have a fucking participant with a BROKEN! FUCKING! NECK! How do we explain that to 'em, huh?"

…

"I see our dilemma."

"Do you now? Just now? Only now? God, this is why we shouldn't hire interns."

"Hey, I'm on payroll!"

"That's not the issue! Point is, we got a buncha kids running around who really shouldn't be running around, another one in the medical ward who just barely escaped dying because our divers happened to be nearby, and a cruise ship full of paying guests who are gonna be really upset if they don't get what's promised to them."

…

"This is quite the dilemma."

"Say that one more fucking time and I'll…"

"ENOUGH! We're getting nowhere with this. I think we all know what we have to do."

"Do we have to? Boss man up top chewed us out something terrible last time we suggested that."

"Look, we're getting our asses handed us to us no matter what we do, but we've gotta keep this show going no matter what. Call Kaz and tell him he has the go ahead to perform a complete wipe. I want all their memories wiped as clean as you can get 'em. They need to believe they're on an island again."

"You really sure about this?"

"I'll take the heat for it. Make the call."

"This was a terrible fucking idea. This whole goddamn show."

"What a dilemma."

…
They're all running. Kaede isn't sure why they're running considering they're not going anywhere, but it seems to be the right thing to do. Everything happened so fast. Gonta punching his way through the metal door (is he really that strong?!), the pristine beach, and now the sprinting. She shoves her hair, heavy with rainwater, from her face.

Gonta leads the charge. He had practically launched from his spot to race towards the hospital to get the others out. Shuichi and Kirumi are just behind him, with Kirumi doing her best to push Keebo, though it's clearly taking its toll on her. Kaede, Miu, and Himiko take up the rear. Far too fast, Himiko's breathing had become labored, so Miu made them slow down to make sure she was okay.

The distance between the groups grows as Kaede begins to feel her own muscles burn. She knows she's out of shape, but that's only part of the reason. The way the wind whips around reminds her too much of her execution, her throat being slowly crushed. She sucks in a pathetic gasp, swallowing a surge of rain. She stops, sputtering and hacking to try to get it out.

"You fucking okay?!!" Miu shouts, a roar of thunder nearly drowning her out.

"I… can't breathe…" Kaede says. She can feel it. That all too familiar sense of impending doom. Building, pulsing in her chest, in her fingers. Her neck tries to expand but only finds cold metal. "Not now…" she pants.

"I'm fucking taking you inside somewher-"

"I said NOT RIGHT NOW!" Kaede shrieks before dissolving into another coughing fit. "We don't have time… we… we need to…"

By this point, Shuichi notices the stragglers, so he turns and jogs towards them. He nods at Himiko as he approaches, so she hurries to catch up, clutching her pillow tighter than Kaede ever thought possible.

Another wave, another constricted neck. Her muscles want to give out, want to let her collapse to her knees. She blearily, desperately searches around her; for what, she's not sure. Something to distract her, something to prevent this upcoming panic attack.

A brief balloon of anger swells in her chest. These stupid things always come at the most inopportune times, always when something's happening.

She turns her head, stares down the endlessly trapped hallway that she was so sure would lead her and everyone involved with her to freedom. What if she had made it? She wouldn't be clutching her knees in a rainstorm with Miu and Shuichi trying to comfort her.

That twisted hallway, that spiraling dizziness as she was whisked away. The rain crashes around her, like the air rushing behind her, like it rushing from her lungs. A gust of wind screeches, forcing air into Kaede's lungs to the point where she hopes they'll explode. Instead, she can only exhale and cry out in vain as she tries to reclaim the air she just let go of.

She's being pulled, a hand on her cheek, her face against someone's skin. Another hand pats the top of her head with the tenderness of the morning sun. It takes Kaede a second to realize that Miu had tucked Kaede close and was holding her tight.
In romance novels, her fears would be alleviated, she'd feel lighter and free. In a movie, the soundtrack would swell, the full orchestra rising to an impossible crescendo before collapsing into muted silence, accompanied only by the the forceful sound of a heart beating.

But this is no romance novel and it's all Kaede can do to keep herself from scratching at Miu's already battle-pocked chest. She gasps for air, only managing to inhale the foul scent of the rubbing alcohol that Kaede had spent all morning dotting over the red, pink craters.

"Come on, Kae," Miu whispers, pleading. "Come on, you can fucking do this."

From somewhere behind her, Kaede hears Shuichi's voice, but his words are irrelevant to her. The blood rushes through her ears as the thunderstorm pulses. A streak of lightning illuminates the once glimmering day, and Kaede sees her hope in the form of the bridge leading to Second Island.

"This… this way," she sputters, trying to pull forward, though Miu's grasp is firm.

"The hell you think you're going?!" Miu cries.

Pointing down the bridge. "Pod room two. We can- We can get to it now, I bet. No one would be guarding it." Kaede looks up at Miu's face. The former inventor's hair is a mess, with strands laying haphazard over her all parts of her face.

She can see Miu mouth the words "pod room two" and then gaze down the bridge. "You think we have a shot?"

Kaede nods. "We have to try." She grabs Miu's shoulder, uses it to hoist herself up, though Miu still holds her elbows.

"What makes you think there ain't any motherfuckers there?"

"That does…" It wasn't Kaede who had spoken, but Shuichi. He begins pushing Kaede and Miu towards the bridge.

Following Shuichi's gaze, Kaede sees a group of people through the storm. Vague silhouettes undoubtedly approaching them, quickly, too. Their voices are distorted by the storm, but they seem to be searching for something or someone. Or several someones.

"Let's go!" Kaede practically shouts, tugging herself away from Miu but still holding her hand. She tries to ignore the pressure in her chest and around her neck as she runs, focusing entirely on the brick building dead ahead of her. Truthfully, she's not sure if there would be anyone there, but they have to try something. Anything is better than sitting in the middle of the storm waiting to be caught.

Then again, doing anything was what killed Rantaro.

Fortunately, she bursts through the flimsy door into the pod room before those thoughts can overwhelm her. It's so much darker with so few pods still in use. Only five remain. That's how many went into the final trial in the game, right? The turquoise glow hypnotizes Kaede as she imagines herself in place of Shuichi in that final trial, as she tries to imagine her own reactions to the revelations, as she tries to fight back against her rapidly closing throat.

"Come on, Kae, keep moving," Miu says gently. "The entrance was over here."

Redirecting her attention, Kaede sees Shuichi kneeling down near the far wall, running his hand over it. "Well they definitely reinforced it, but it seems like there's still a hollowed out portion behind here."
"Move Pooichi," Miu commands. Two or three kicks from her massive boots is all it takes to send the flimsy metal crumpling enough to grab a piece of discarded wood and pry open the rest. A part of Kaede wonders just how physically strong Miu was before all of this.

With the light streaming in from the high windows in the pod room, Kaede can see partway into the niche. It's shallow and short, but seems to extend past where the wall of the pod room ends, ever so slightly angled down.

"Come on. Let's see where this goes," Kaede says, willing her voice to be stronger than she feels.

Shuichi nods and ducks in first, which surprises her a bit. Then again, he did end up investigating most of the time in the game, so it makes sense he'd be eager. Kaede follows after, catching Miu's eye on the way in. If Miu caught the tension in Kaede's voice then she doesn't let it show, simply jerks her chin towards the opening.

They move as silently as they can, though their shuffles echo even in the confined space. Taking a heavy breath, Kaede's gut sinks as they approach the trapdoor. It's open, which is an indication that it was probably used recently at some point. If they tried to bolt the hidden entrance shut, then it's likely that no one would be using this passage as a method of travel.

"Do we head down?" Shuichi whispers, turning his head as best he can.

Summoning her courage, Kaede nods. "It's our best bet right now. Hopefully this will lead somewhere useful."

It takes some funky maneuvering, but eventually Shuichi manages to get turned around and start heading down the ladder. When Kaede turns around to do the same, she finds Miu's face barely a hair's width away from her own.

"You sure you wanna do this?" Miu says, voice full of concern. "You look like absolute horse shit."

Kaede scowls. "Thanks, appreciate it."

"All 'm sayin' is you just had a fucking panic attack and-"

"I'm fine, Miu. Besides, I'm not the one who looks like she has chicken pox on her chest." The words come out of her mouth faster than she can stop them.

Miu looks down, baring her teeth a bit. "You're lucky I don't have balls, else that low blow really woulda fuckin' hurt."

"I… Miu, I-" Kaede tries to apologize, but Shuichi interrupts her.

"You guys coming? I don't want to be down here alone!"

Miu looks up, her eyes dim. "We'll talk about it later or something. I dunno."

"Right…" Kaede bites her lip as she finds her footing on the ladder. Her body feels heavy with guilt and a deep sense of dread has made its nest in her stomach. She could practically vomit with how nervous she is.

Heading down the ladder is slow going. Kaede takes care to find her footing on each wrung before sliding down. The darkness around her seems to consume her, and it's only the sound of Shuichi pacing at the bottom and Miu's heavy boots above her that keep Kaede tied to reality. Whatever this reality is. The "reality" of the situation is that the Remnants are lying to her, to everyone. These
"attacks" were all some ruse. But a ruse for what? No one would go through all of the effort of faking attacks - complete with falsified battlegrounds and wounds - just for laughs, would they? It makes no sense. Even Kokichi wouldn't have gone that far.

Then again, she can practically hear the little menace's laugh above her, resting stock-still in his pod.

She reaches the ground and looks around. There seems to be a hallway stretched out ahead, illuminated only by lines of small lights marking the edges where the floor and wall meet. It reminds Kaede a bit of movie theaters. Shuichi is kneeling where the lights on one side suddenly cut off.

"A turn," he says, as if the information was the most pressing matter at the moment.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Kaede steps forward as Miu hops off the ladder. Glancing between Miu and Shuichi, the three quietly agree to start moving, though none of them do. Each seems to take a brief step forward before finding something exceedingly interesting to investigate on the walls, procrastinators avoiding the expanse of dread that emanates from the hallway.

Finally, Kaede grabs Miu's hand and Shuichi's wrist and begins moving forward. She drags them both along, though really she's only doing it for herself. If she doesn't keep going, she knows that she'll lose her nerve and retreat back to the pod room.

After what seems like several minutes (it could be seconds, it could be hours, it could be years), a soft glow shines from around another corner. It's gentle and luminescent, almost welcoming, like a porchlight on a stormy night. It also reminds Kaede of the glow in the pod room above.

"Pod room two..." Miu mutters. She originally wasn't holding Kaede's hand very tightly, but now her grip is cutting off Kaede's blood flow. Though she can't be too mad considering she's doing the same thing.

As they round the last corner and step into the full expanse of the room, all three of them gasp in surprise.

**Prick**

Kaede recognizes the feeling, recognizes the rapidly approaching darkness of sedation, the way the ground seems to an eternity away and directly in front of her.

And a part of her knows that she when she wakes up, she won't remember the battle. She won't remember the panic attack in the storm. She won't remember Miu's comfort. She won't remember her kicking down the sheet metal. She won't remember the pain her words inflicted or the dread that had nearly overtaken her.

As her consciousness drifts into a dreamless sleep, it realizes one final thing. One final piece of information she won't remember.

She won't remember that in pod room two, the body of Fuyuhiko Kuzuryuu rests just like her friends.

**But you will, won't you?**

**Remember, remember, remember for them.**

**Please.**
It hadn't been easy to shake off Gonta, Keebo, and Himiko. Gonta had wanted Kirumi with them because she was physically capable; it had been impossible to slip away pushing Keebo as that would have left him stranded, and Himiko would have seen her from her position.

Still, Kirumi managed by convincing them that she was going to look for Kaede, Miu, and Shuichi. A quick fib that she was worried and that Keebo and Himiko could rest at the hospital was all it took to convince them that she had the best of intentions. It wasn't a complete lie. She was worried about the group they'd left behind, but she had more immediate issues to attend to.

For several days, Kirumi had been preparing for this. Trips to the mart to grab water and food were nothing out of the ordinary, and she always had a penchant for stocking up, so a backpack was no more suspicious. However, inside the backpack was a length of rope and a other assorted pieces of climbing equipment. That was stage one; gather the necessary materials. In many ways, it was the easiest stage and the one that would arouse the least suspicion.

Stage two was the one she was now skipping. Originally, she'd wanted to scout out her plan, take note of people's schedules over a couple of weeks. Prod for weaknesses in the Remnants' watch or take advantage of a lapse in concentration. That scouting was risky. If she had stalked her target too closely or too obviously then it would not be hard to tell what she was planning to do and the Remnants would likely put a stop to it, as they should.

However, with the ostensible despair invasion and the inevitable chaos that would come from their escape, Kirumi saw a perfect opportunity to - how had Mahiru put it? - "get a change of scenery." From the time she'd been awake, Kirumi had felt a bizarre longing to go to Fourth Island. It had been her favorite in the game. She loved the wackiness of it all, especially compared to the relative groundedness of the setting prior to it. It was bright and exuberant and entirely impossible, the first hint that the scenario was not at all real. For some reason, the Remnants blocked it off. Mahiru claimed that it wasn't safe, that the real amusement park had fallen into disarray and the island was just a scavenger's playground at that point. Kazuichi said he tried to avoid going over there to get parts despite how useful they are because of the danger.

Kirumi had believed that. She wanted to believe in something and their explanations were sane, logical, safe. Still, that nagging feeling never abated. She wanted to see it for herself, maybe to act as a purification of some sort. Through challenging the collapsed park, maybe Kirumi desired to be purged from the variety of sicknesses that plagued her.

Or maybe she's just a stupid child for believing such a thing is possible.

Regardless, she approaches the foreboding gate. It's old and rusty, though the lock seems pristinely well-kempt. She weighs it with her hand, even heavier than it looks. On top of the fence barbed wire curls like spiky serpents daring Kirumi to brave their edges. Innumerable wounds force blood into Kirumi's tattered clothes from her foolish escape attempt in the simulation. She commands her mind to stitch everything back together.

That's what this is. Another escape attempt. The last one had been rigged from the start. Suffering in vain for a pointless trick that lead to her demise.
She bites her lip and narrows her eyes in that same brutal, defiant way that she remembers doing during her execution. How she hopes she actually looked intimidating and determined. How she hopes she actually look intimidating and determined now.

Setting down her bag, Kirumi begins preparing. She loops the rope into a lasso shape, making sure the knot is loose so that she can tighten the lasso when it curls around the top of the fence.

In the game, the fences blocking the island were small affairs. It would have been trivial to simply step around them were it not for the mechanical death beasts that guarded each one. If only they had stayed that basic.

In reality, the gates are bordered by massive concrete supports dug into the ground ahead of the actual bridge. Extra foundation juts out about halfway down the supports and continues forward at a slant until ending even further inland. The result of this extra support is that, were Kirumi to try and shimmy her way around the gate, she would have to make a short leap to the bridge from a slanted surface where the only point she could push off of would force her away from her destination.

A massive wave crashes against the shoreline. Pushing her hair from her eyes, Kirumi twists the rope in her hands. The shoreline is horribly eroded to the point that it is a sharp embankment rather than a smooth transition from grass to sand to sea. If she fails, she is taking a severe fall to the roiling ocean below.

Fall. Fall. Fall. Fall.

That's all she seems to do, isn't it? Fall. Fall. Fall. Fall.

Her knees slam into the ground as the twisted trap whirls past her vision once again, as she takes the verbal abuse from her father and his friends once again, as she feels Ryoma's struggling, writing form in her hands once again, as she feels the sting of Maki's nails once again, as she tries to tie the knot one more time.

She's going to fall. She's going to fall. She's going to fall and disappear this time. She's fallen every time before, what's going to make this time any different? The harness around her body? The thick work gloves that replaced the delicate maid gloves? The thick threads of rope that are so much stronger than any vine? None of it matters because it's all connected to her. And she can do nothing to fall.

Her hand reaches toward the knot, but this time it's to unravel it, to pack up everything and run to the hospital and hide until she inevitably falls into the clutches of the Remnants once again. She already had fallen for Mahiru's honeyed words. Maybe this time she'll just let herself fall, fall into those gentle, rosy cheeks and that dress that smells like flowers. Let herself be taken in by the illusion.

Maybe she really was meant to be a maid. A maid never has to think, never has to dream of reaching new heights that she can fall from. That's what she'll do. She'll be the maid of the island, subservient to everyone's wishes once again.

"Damn it!" she howls and even the storm is silent for a moment. "I don't want to be a maid!" she cries, "I don't want to live like that! I don't want to fall!"

She tears her gloves off, digs her hand in the dirt, dry heaves at the thought of millions of microbes burrowing into her skin, revels in the mud that will cake beneath her nails, welcomes and reviles the earthworm that wriggles over her skin to get to the moisture of the surface.
"GYAAAHHHHHH!" she screams. She screams, she screams a hideous, violent scream from the depths of her very being and shoots to her feet, grabbing the rope as she does so.

She tosses the lasso so that it would wrap around the top of the concrete column. She misses, but wastes no time mourning it. Instead, she simply throws it again, this time succeeding. Stepping onto the extension, Kirumi manages to reach the knot and pulls it taut. Rather than stepping down, she jumps off, keeping her legs up so that her entire weight is pulling on the rope. She was never half-bad at the rope climb in gym, so she manages to hold herself up and her weight seems to be no issue as the rope doesn't so much as begin unraveling. The concrete slab is immovable.

Satisfied, she lets herself down and tries a few practice throws. Her goal is relatively simple; she's going to swing around the gate. She can't unlock it or climb over it, the Remnants are adamant about refusing her entry, and the supports are too wide to walk around, so this seems to be the best option. Once she's sure that the rope can reach all the way around the base adequately enough for her to get her footing on the other side, Kirumi regains her position on top of the extension.

She takes a few heavy breaths, thankful for the lull in the storm for this point. The rope is slick, but the hairs sticking off it give her some useful, if slightly painful, grip. It's nothing compared to the spider's thread she climbed before. It's nothing.

With a mighty kick off, Kirumi launches herself from the extension. For a moment, everything seems to be going well. She got the angle right, and she sails over the drop-off of the embankment with ease, beginning to loop around towards the bridge.

However, unbeknownst to her, someone was watching and waiting for this exact moment.

As Kirumi swings, a sudden jerk kills her momentum. She shrieks as the rope jolts up and down from its sudden stop, causing Kirumi to slip down it towards the ocean. She manages to tighten her grip enough to stop, though that leaves her swinging in all directions as the wind batters her mercilessly. Eventually, she slows to a stop. Looking around, she finally sees the person who she never even realized was watching.

Nagito Komaeda leans against the support, glaring down at Kirumi from the top of the shoreline, a smug, condescending expression on his face. "And where were you going?" he asks, though it's clear he already knows.

"Pull me up!" Kirumi shouts.

"Hmm, why would I do that?" He examines his nails as if this was a casual conversation. "You broke the rules we put in place, so shouldn't you be punished?"

His words ring far too close to the rules in the simulation. "Please, I'm sorry. Just help me up!"

"I think you can pull yourself up. That was quite the show after all. You were screaming and wailing so loud I just had to see what was going on. Oh~ It was beautiful, really. Such a raw display of hope. If I were to help you, it would undermine all that wonderful hope you just created in yourself. I think you can get up on your own." He crouches low, reaching out just enough so that he's barely touching the rope. "I guess I could help you, but then I'd have to march you right down to Hajime so we could decide what to do with such a naughty troublemaker."

There's a venom in his eyes as he says that. Kirumi realizes instantly that he's giving her a chance. Hopefully he is, at least.

Her arms are starting to grow sore, but she takes a quick survey of her situation. Formulating a plan,
she glances back up at Nagito, who hasn't moved and is watching her like she was some sort of show animal.

Being close to the embankment has its perks. She presses her feet into the mud a few times, trying to find a solid spot. After a few tries, she manages to find a large rock embedded in the cliff face. She can't get enough force to swing all the way up to the bridge, and her arms are far too tired to hoist herself up the rope on their own, but she can reach one of the piers holding the bridge up. Once she's there, then she can use that to climb up to the bridge with the little remaining strength she has.

Similar to her first jump, she pushes off the cliff face and swings around. Too long, she's already heading back by the time she hits the pier and she can't reach it. She tries again. Too long again. The soreness in her arms is quickly turning to weakness and can feel them quivering. She sucks in a heavy breath, pushes off one last time and sticks the landing, which sends reverberations through her whole body.

Smiling in relief, Kirumi begins to climb up the pier, bracing against it to give herself more support. However, right as she begins, something feels off. She looks up and sees Nagito leaning out near the rope. In one hand he holds a knife that he's using to saw the rope bit by bit.

"What the hell are you doing?!!" Kirumi screams, eyes wide.

Nagito pauses his cutting to look down and sneer. "My, my, Tojo, that is the exact expression you wore in your little execution. I wonder if your hope is strong enough to survive this time."

"Why?! Why are you doing this?!"

"Well," Nagito says innocently. "I wasn't originally, but you figured out the little puzzle on how to get up too quickly. That's no test of your hope, but this is perfect! It replicates such a despair-filled scenario and forces you to overcome it against all odds! So, Tojo, show me your hope! Or prove you're not worth my time and fall, just like you always do."

With that, he begins cutting once again, his knife fraying the rope one strand at a time.

Surged on by panic or anger or both, Kirumi scrambles to climb up, adrenaline pulsing through every limb, her weakness long forgotten by the will to survive. "I will not die…" she whispers, all too aware that those were some of her last words in the simulation as well. "I WILL NOT DIE!" she cries and thunders forward. Her limbs are like an unstoppable machine, grinding upwards until, at last, she reaches the lip of the bridge and hefts herself onto the rough wood.

This bridge clearly isn't as well taken care of as the others. It's full of splinters and warped planks, but Kirumi doesn't care. Her heart pounds against her ribs and her lungs suck in mouthfuls of air and rain in equal parts. She spits out the water and gets up on her knees, staring at Nagito through the bars of the gate. He looks far, far too satisfied for Kirumi's liking.

"That was amazing, truly phenomenal! Your talent may have been implanted in you, but your hope is something so natural that it can be considered nothing less than miraculous! Ha! I was just about to begin pulling you up as well!" He claps his hands and laughs. It's hollow and sends a chill down Kirumi's spine.

"You… you asshole," Kirumi spits, rising to her feet. Her hands are covered in a criss-cross of scratches, though the blood is washed away by the rain. Her clothes are torn in a few places and caked in dirt from where she collided with the embankment. But this time, she's alive, she's won. She's won.
She didn't fall.

Her victory is short lived, however, as Nagito reaches into his pocket and pulls out a shiny key. "As much as I would love to foster your hope further, you aren't permitted over there, so I'm going to have to take you to Hajime." He seems genuinely sympathetic as she inserts the key.

Kirumi is about to break into a run when there's a sharp snapping sound. Nagito lifts his hand and examines the key, broken cleanly at the teeth. "How tragic," he says morosely. "What rotten luck. Though, I suppose I deserve it. After all, I was so lucky to see a marvellous display of hope, so it's natural that my luck would turn on trash like me." He tucks the half-key away and smiles, easy-going, gentle. "Guess I need to get a new one. Don't you go anywhere, okay? I'll be awhile, though. It's such a nice day that I'm in no hurry."

A bolt of lightning and a roar of thunder underscore his lie.

He waves. "Good luck, Tojo, I hope you find what you're looking for. And more." With those ominous last words, he turns and disappears into the storm.

Kirumi decides it's best to not wait around. Ignoring the tiredness in her limbs, she takes off down the bridge towards Fourth Island. Anxiety wells in her gut. Nagito never did anything unintentionally. He reminds her of Kokichi in many ways. For both of them, it was almost impossible to tell where their good intentions ended and their machinations began.

Regardless, as Kirumi gets closer to Fourth Island, she slows. Something is wrong. No. Everything is wrong. Everything.

She had been expecting dilapidated buildings and ruins of an amusement park. Twisted metal of rides and empty hulls of shop vendors. Instead, she seems a circle of two-story cabanas arranged around a charming pavilion. On the far end of the pavilion, a multi-floor building pierces through the storm with various neon signs attached above a wide variety of doors all leading to well-lit, kitschy shops like those you find at tourist traps worldwide.

No one seems to be milling about in the storm, but each of the cabanas' lights are on and Kirumi can see silhouetted figures through the sheer blinds.

As she scans the housing, she notices one has its blinds drawn and a young girl seems to be peering out into the storm. Before Kirumi can find a place to hide, the girl notices her and her eyes grow wide. Instantly, she disappears from the window and the door to her lodging swings open.

Kirumi tries to turn and run, but her exhaustion finally catches up with her and it takes all of her will to simply remain standing.

As the girl approaches, she has an odd familiarity to her, like Kirumi's seen her before. "I know you," the girl says, her voice even and smooth.

"No...no," Kirumi says. "You must be mistaken."

"Kirumi Tojo, that's your name."

Kirumi's throat runs dry as the name slides off this random girl's lips. Around her, the storm is beginning to die down and the people inside seem to be taking notice. More and more get up; Kirumi can practically hear them comment on the improving weather.

By this point, the girl's hair, long, silky, and black, is slicked close to her face. She rushes forward and tugs on Kirumi's sleeve. "Come with me," she says. "You can stay in my cab-anne-ah."
"But…" Kirumi glances back. "Who… who are you? How do you know me? What is this?!" She's aware that she's growing more frantic and less dignified, but she doesn't particularly care at this point.

She and the girl lock eyes as the girl opens her mouth to respond, though it's in that moment that Kirumi has her answer. Those yellow, snake-like eyes.

"I'm Chuya Shinguji. I'm… I'm Korekiyo's little sister."

So noisy. Always so noisy. As excited as Tsumugi is to be part of a real-life Danganronpa, she never truly appreciated how noisy such an experience would be. There's always someone running around or screaming or making some sort of anime-esque noise that has no place in reality. Not that she minds terribly, but it'd be preferable if she could sit down and sew without her light being ruined with heavy metal curtains that signal a lockdown. How droll. Repeating the same old invasion tactics? If this was the best that despair could do, then Tsumugi wanted no part of it. Rather, she'd like to join despair, if only for a little bit, so that she could show them how to really cause some chaos.

Fortunately, while she expected another frustratingly tense situation, it became clear that other events were transpiring beyond their little metal prison. She didn't leave her room, which seems to be a good thing because there were all sorts of people running around downstairs for a while. Lots of shouting, too. Eventually it grew quiet, but Tsumugi couldn't help but smile at the thought of something unexpected happening. Something beyond these little Remnants.

After a bit of waiting, Tsumugi's wish had been granted by Gonta, quite literally she might add, busting down the door to the hospital. His shouts could be heard from the other end of the island. He was yelling something about everything being fake and how there was no despair invasion.

Following that, there was more shuffling as if there was a kerfuffle going on outside. Naturally, Tsumugi didn't leave her room. She had been well trained by Team Danganronpa to simply let chaos happen and not try to control it. If you tried to do that, you end up with situations like Kokichi. But that was the past, all of it.

Now, when everything's quiet once again (Tsumugi is noticing a pattern), she finally decides it pragmatic to investigate at least a bit. Cracking open her door, Tsumugi peers into the hallway. At the junction, Kazuichi, Sonia, and Gundham stand over the prone body of Gonta, several syringes sticking from his neck. She can't say she's surprised. For someone Gonta's size, it would take a horse tranquilizer to get him to be sedated.

Straining a bit, she can hear the conversation.

"The kids are all riled up about something," Kazuichi explains. "Hajime thinks it's some sort of mass panic. Something about their past trauma." He scratches the back of his head. "I dunno really, but we gotta sedate them before they hurt themselves."

"Are the mage and the former mechanical creature attended to?" Gundham asks.

"Yeah, managed to snag 'em when they followed Gokuhara here in." Kazuichi nudges Gonta with his shoe.

Sonia sighs and clasps her hands over her brooch. "How tragic. These poor dears must be so scared. Is Hajime really considering this the only option?"
Kazuichi nods. "Yep. Got reports that that Akamatsu chick was going around attacking people thinking they were all Amami or something."

Gundham closes one eye. "That seems rather inconsistent with her past expressions of madness."

"I must agree," Sonia says ardently, "This is most suspicious." She stands to her full height. "Several of you seem to have been keeping secrets from the rest of us recently. Did you know of the entrance in the pod room?"

The color drains from Kazuichi's face.

"How clearly the guilt of criminality exposes the hidden demon," Gundham says.

"What is going on, Kazuichi?! You will tell me right now!" Sonia orders, reminding Tsumugi exactly what sparked the all-powerful bi-awakening within her.

"I… uh… shit," Kazuichi seems nervous at first, but then quickly regains his composure. He reaches into a pocket to pull out a handheld radio. "Kaz to home. Gotta purge some of the Remnants, too."

Gundham and Sonia look at each other in confusion as Tsumugi digs her nails into the door frame. She has to resist the urge to shut the door and climb under the covers. If there's one thing that being a mastermind has taught her, it's that information is paramount and a lack of it will kill you.

Eventually a voice gargles from the other end of the radio. "Go ahead."

Smiling slightly, Kazuichi tucks his radio away as Sonia says, "Who was that? What do you mean by 'purge'?"

"What malicious demons of hell have you been-"

Gundham never finishes. Instead, Kazuichi simply says, "Leon 1-1-0-3-7."

Suddenly, both Gundham and Sonia go limp, their arms falling to their sides. Their eyes grow distant and cloudy, their mouths hanging open just enough to give them a rather dumb expression. If they weren't breathing and blinking, Tsumugi would have been convinced that Kazuichi killed them right then and there. She wills her own breathing steady as she wipes some sweat off her brow and takes off her glasses, which are starting to fog up from the heat. Thank goodness they're fake.

"Can you hear me?" Kazuichi says and his voice is entirely different. It's lower-pitched, less shrill, less cocky. He sounds less like Kazuichi Souda and more like a random stranger you'd meet on the street.

Gundham and Sonia nod listlessly, each mutter out a quiet, deadpan "yes" before dropping back into whatever trance they're in.

"Good, now listen up." He takes out several syringes of the sedative that Tsumugi is really getting sick of seeing, then presses them into the hypnotized duo's hands. "Gundham, you're going to find and sedate Amami and Shingoji. Sonia, you're going to find and sedate Shirogane and Momota. If Momota is already asleep, do not sedate him; I don't know what the hell is wrong with him, but I'm not gonna be the one who injects random shit into him."

"Yes…" the duo says in tandem. It's starting to get very creepy.

"Good. Now I'm going to coordinate with the pick-up team. When you're done sedating the kids, go to pod room two and remain there until given further instructions." With that, Kazuichi turns and
stomps down the hall.

Sonia and Gundham don't move for several minutes. Tsumugi takes advantage to slip her door close, taking care to be as silent as possible.

Well, this certainly isn't good. Not at all. What is this purge? What's the goal here? Why collect everyone? There has to be a motive somewhere. Someone wants something done, or someone forgot to do their job properly and now others are having to clean up their mess.

Still, it doesn't make sense. If this was somehow the work of Team Danganronpa, they wouldn't intervene regardless of what happens. They'd made that very clear to her when briefing her about being the mastermind. No matter how off-the-rails the killing game got or how out-of-control the students became, Tsumugi was on her own.

That was the most fun, really. When it was her show and her Danganronpa. A sneer etches its way onto her face. Whatever this facsimile is, it isn't her Danganronpa. Her eyes trail over to a lump beneath her bed. It's a bit early, but maybe she can start taking some… creative liberties.

She scampers over to her bed and quickly pulls out the gaudy box that she's hidden her Sonia wig in. She just moved it the other night, so she considers herself the Ultimate Lucky Student this time. With a giggle, she smooths out any imperfections before beginning to pin her hair as best she can. There's so much; maybe she'd be better off cutting it short like Maki did.

Oh Maki, that was a fun night. Though Tsumugi hadn't anticipated that she would up and disappear. Where even is there to disappear to on this island? Hmm, well, maybe Sonia knows.

The lock on her door jiggles, causing Tsumugi to jump in surprise. She has to work fast. Though this trance clearly has slowed Sonia's responses, a locked door won't hold her forever. With the masterful efficiency that her artificial talent allows, Tsumugi pins her hair just enough that it will be hidden by her wig and sloppily tosses a bald cap over it. Glancing at herself in the mirror, she frowns. The cap is off center and will likely chafe, but it's sturdy enough to give her a reasonable silhouette from a distance.

The door opens, and Tsumugi whirls around. Sonia stands, limp and docile as ever, almost like a zombie. Her eyes stare simultaneously at Tsumugi and at the cold metal sheets over her windows. She moves forward far too smoothly for even her elegant persona, as if she really was just a puppet. In her right hand she holds several syringes loosely, while her left holds one, finger already on the plunger, ready to inject Tsumugi.

But the former mastermind did pick up a few tricks here and there. She bides her time until Sonia gets close, not even bothering to put on some show like saying "How could you do this, Sonia, betray us like this?! Oh what tragedy, what cursed fate!"

Okay, maybe she does say it, but panic has to divert itself somehow, right?

When Sonia is close enough, Tsumugi makes her move. She charges into Sonia's stomach shoulder first, tackling the woman to the ground. Sonia makes no move to stop her. Hell, she hardly makes a noise of surprise. Acting fast, Tsumugi grabs Sonia's wrist and presses her thumb between the tendons, stroking toward her forearm. The pressure and pain combined force Sonia to release her grip on the syringe, which Tsumugi snatches up and presses into Sonia's neck. Within seconds, Sonia is lying on the ground motionless and unconscious.

"Sorry, Princess," Tsumugi says, "Guess those self-defense classes Team Danganronpa made me take really paid off." She sticks her tongue out before hurriedly closing her door.
In a flurry of motion, Tsumugi strips Sonia and then lays her in bed, covering her entirely with the sheet to pretend as though it was Tsumugi herself that Sonia had incapacitated. Tsumugi then dresses in Sonia's clothes; she didn't have time to sew her own costume yet, so the fit is a bit awkward. The waistline is tight as well as the shoulders. She's worried that if she were to lift her arms, it would cause the sleeves to tear. The tights don't quite fit, but that's okay. Tsumugi has a pair of black tights that match anyway. The worst part are the shoes. Her toes are cramped and crushed in the ruby pumps; it'll be hard to walk but she can manage. Finally, she inserts her contacts. The green is a couple shades darker than Sonia's, but, once again, Tsumugi doesn't think that will be an issue.

Giving herself the once-over in the mirror, Tsumugi nods. It's not perfect, but it'll have to do. At least from a distance nobody would be able to tell the difference, and hopefully Gundham's delirious state will make him a non-factor.

She steps out into the eerily silent hallways. Compared to the bombardment of noise that was the despair "invasion" and the chaos of what appears to be those in the hotel escaping, the quiet is unnerving. Gonta lies in the hallways, his massive neck bulging with multiple syringes jabbed into it, his face tense with anger. Tsumugi pities whoever was on the team to take him down; his strength alone (as exaggerated as it was for the game) is nevertheless something quite scary to behold.

Down the nearby hallway, Gundham exits a room, steadfast but empty. Peering in, Tsumugi sees Korekiyo slumped forward in his wheelchair with Rantaro on the ground next to him. That can't be good for his stitches.

Mimicking Gundham, Tsumugi forces her face into a blank slate and drops her hands to her sides, walks slowly, but with purpose, and tries to make her movements as natural as possible. Gundham stares at her, but it's less critical and more questioning, as if he's asking if she'd completed her task. Tsumugi walks past him and down the hall to face the door that houses Kaito. The door gives with no resistance, so either Kaito keeps his door unlocked or one of the Remnants unlocked it beforehand. Then again, maybe they only lock Tsumugi's door.

She stalks over to where Kaito is resting. From conversations that she's overheard, Kaito is still in quite critical condition, that he's been unconscious more often than he's been awake. At least, when he didn't go tearing up half the island and punching Kaede in her stupid, smug face.

Inside, the room is lined with wires and tools of all sorts beeping away, keeping close monitor on Kaito's vitals. He seems to be relatively stable, but how long that lasts is anyone's guess.

Mulling over her options, Tsumugi rattles the syringes in her hands. She could simply inject Kaito like she's supposed to, but even Kazuichi admitted that it could have unpleasant side effects. He's asleep now, so she should probably leave him be, but he could be a useful ally to have on her side. But if this is what Tsumugi thinks it is, then his memory will probably will be wiped along with all of the others no matter his condition.

Spotting a piece of paper on his nightstand, Tsumugi hatches a plan. She scribbles down some notes before slipping it beneath Kaito's pillow. It's not so much a plan as it is a… contingency. Just in case.

With that done and nothing else for her here, Tsumugi slips back out into the hospital. Gundham is long gone, so that leaves her free to leave the place without interruption. In the lobby, Himiko has been thrown haphazardly onto a waiting room chair and poor Keebo looks like his head is about to fall off with how far back it is. Still, she ignores them like the good little hypnotized Sonia that she is.

The island is quiet as well, the only sounds being the peaceful lull of the waves as they calmly down after the storm. Despite the quiet, the air is charged with tension so thick that Tsumugi has to choke
back a gasp. Across the bridge, she can see groups of people scurrying from place to place. Several of them appear to be holding bodies between them. It reminds Tsumugi of cleaning up after a particularly short killing game in season 49 when the students got the first trial incorrect. It took forever to clean up the mess that execution made.

Whatever happened to the winner of that season?

Oh yes, she hung herself.

Admittedly, Tsumugi doesn't know where this "pod room two" is, but figures her best bet is the pod room itself. After that, well, she's improvising. Luckily, she finds Gundham as he's crossing the bridge to Second Island.

All around her, people in hazard masks work run about, talking hushed whispers over radios. She can't focus on what they're saying and keep up her act, but as far as she can tell, they're pretty much certain there's only one survivor left to find. For a moment, her gut twists when she thinks they're talking about her, but she hears the name "Kirumi Tojo" over and over again. Unsurprising, really, that Kirumi would manage to evade capture. A pity she couldn't escape her execution.

As she walks, the crew surrounding her seems to give her and Gundham a wide berth. Makes sense, they probably look quite unsettling with the vacant gazes and robotic movements. At least, that's the character Tsumugi is going for. As in many of her greatest performances, she channels Junko Enoshima and that lovely, despair-fueled sprite she had. Oh, those wondrous dead eyes, that impossibly unreadable expression!

The pod building appears in view. In front of it, Mahiru and Hajime stand stock-still, holding the same dead expression that Gundham has and Tsumugi is miming. More curiously, however, is that Kazuichi, Mikan, and Nagito appear to be completely fine, talking normally, casually. Mikan even is leaning against the building smoking while laughing at something that Nagito is saying.

"Well lookie here," Mikan says with a flick of her cigarette. She has the same high voice, but it's not nearly as breathy as Mikan's normally is. "They finally finished."

"Pick-up team has confirmed everyone at the hospital is sedated," Kazuichi said. "They're beginning extraction from the top floor and working down.

Nagito sits up fully and snatches the cigarette from Mikan's mouth. "Guess since they're here we actually have to do work. Let's get 'em down to room two, yeah?"

"Coulda let me finish my cig."

"But I didn't!"

"Jerk."

Kazuichi rolls his eyes, but smiles. "Come on, asshats, we got a schedule to keep. " He turns to the four of them. "Follow us down to the pod room, got it?"

Hajime, Mahiru, and Gundham nod listlessly, so Tsumugi follows suit. As Nagito leads the way into the pod room, he hops out of the way of two members of the crew wearing shirts with the word "Extraction" emblazoned on the back. Between them, Shuichi Saihara. He seems to be in a daze, but standing upright.

"He all set?" Mikan asks.
"Yep, went perfectly," replies one of the extraction team. "We'll shuffle him back to the motel and he'll be good as new."

Tsumugi suppresses a smile at the term "good as new." It's a term used to describe objects, refurbished and restored. It's a term tossed around a lot by Team Danganronpa when describing contestants. Only contestants. Not masterminds.

One by one, each of the Remnants enters the building until only Tsumugi and Mikan remain. Before Tsumugi can take a step forward, she feels Mikan's hand tap her shoulder. "Head straight forward, if you'd please."

It would've been better if you said "would you kindly" Tsumugi thinks. Nonetheless, she obeys and heads straight into the pod room, going past the hole in the wall that the other Remnants are ducking into, likely heading to pod room two.

"Stop, please," Mikan says. "This is where you'll be staying."

Tsumugi looks before her and sees the pod, empty, but whirring with life. In fact, all of the pods are active now, even from those who have already woken up. Several of them are filled. Miu and Kaede look so delicate and peaceful as they lay in their pods, as if they'd never been awake in the first place. Tsumugi glances down and realizes exactly what pod that Mikan has stopped her in front of. Her own pod. Rantaro will be on one side of her, Korekiyo on the other, but she'll be the first of their little trio.

She turns back to face Mikan, who's smiling devilishly. "It was a good shot, Shirogane. A for effort."

Tsumugi returns the smile. "I can see why Saihara was so determined in my game." Mikan tilts her head quizzically as Tsumugi's smile turns absolutely demonic. "It is so fun trying to figure out how to take this whole game apart. Bit. By. Bit."

She's practically shoved down into her pod and the lid closes, muffling Tsumugi's laughter until the sleeping gas pumped in silences her completely.

"Hey, techie," Mikan says, "Make sure her wipe is extra thorough."

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MONOKUMA THEATER

Dramatic irony is a concept in which the audience of a work of fiction knows something that the characters within the work do not.

It can be used to add tension or humor to a work.

The most common example is "Romeo and Juliet."
The audience knows they're going to die at the end, but the characters don't.

Isn't that mean? How audiences the world over repeatedly watch two stupid teenagers die over and over and over and over again just to satisfy their need for entertainment?

So keep that in mind as we're moving forward. These poor souls won't remember a thing.

But you will. You'll cry out when they make foolish decisions. You'll beg for them not to follow the Remnant you know is lying. You'll even be aware of the crew holding up this whole charade.

But you'll keep reading.

Because you love to watch them suffer.

Don't you?

Chapter End Notes

There are words here. These words may or may not mean anything.

Sorry for the wait. Enjoy your lives.

Terrible, terrible people.

:)
Four days. Four days since the Despair Invasion was driven off. Four days that Himiko spent wandering the island feeling like an island herself. Shuichi had sent her a message in a bottle but with instructions not to send one back. But that's for later. For now, it's 5:27.

5:27 in the morning. 5:27. The time that Himiko would wake up for school back when school was more than an intangible spot in her memories. She'd stared at the time on the garish Monokuma clock during the game, unable to sleep after Gonta had carried her back from the third trial. The time now that she waits, foot tapping on a downed palm tree from the recent Despair invasion, after the waking-up-alarm-thingy jolted her from a dreamless sleep.

Fewer people show up than when Kaito or Gonta woke up. Gonta had been surrounded by just about everyone when he emerged, if she remembers right, and only a couple were absent from Kaito's awakening. Shuichi is here, but he always is, same as Himiko, the ritual they share as penance for surviving the game. Maki couldn't make it on account of her neck, but there's no shame in that.

How did Maki break her neck again? Hm. Oh well, it'll come to her.

Himiko picks at the tag on the end of her pillowcase. No matter how many times that Hajime tells her to abandon it, that it represents her inability to let go (or whatever he says when she zones out in their weekly meetings), she holds it tight wherever she goes. Just the other day she had been taking inventory and nearly fell over trying to balance on a stack of bagged rice with a clipboard in one hand and her pillow in the other. It would've saved her if she did fall, anyway. That, or her magic, provided she had the MP.

"Himiko," Shuichi says to her right, the warm night breeze whipping the untucked hem of his shirt. She'd grown used to seeing him put together, his gakuran buttoned high and neat, or, when he wasn't wearing the jacket, his shirt pulled taut by being tucked into his pressed crisp trousers. Now, with his sleeves rolled and his pants hanging a bit loose from his lack of belt, Himiko appreciates the differences in everyone.

"Hmm?" she says, though her eyes are focused on Miu's thin hair done up in a high, sloppy ponytail that bounces as she regales a tired-looking Kaede in whatever dream had invaded her head that night.

"Who do you think it'll be?"

"To get up?" Himiko says, twisting the tag between her forefinger. "Tunno. I want all of 'em to wake up really soon. Well... maybe Ouma can stay asleep for a little longer." She glances at Shuichi. "Unless... you want him to wake up sooner."

Shuichi shakes his head, consoling. "He'd definitely make things interesting around here."

"Maybe it's a good thing he's not awake then."

"You like it boring?"

Himiko tucks her chin into her pillow. "It's never boring around here. It's tiring." She glances at Shuichi once again, daring him to comment on her being tired. It had practically been her
catchphrase in the game, but she'd overcome it. Character development, as Tsumugi would say.

But being on the island is a different kind of tired. Different, but the same. In the game, her sleepiness arose from laziness and denial, a reluctance to engage with everything around her. Here, she can't escape from the exhaustion that simply is. It's as if there is a perpetual being that sucks dry everyone from any energy they could have, leaving only dessicated, hollow husks lying in their beds.

It's the constant reminders that each person damned to this island has killed or was killed or contemplated killing (others or themself) and demanded all of it. It's the constant itchy sting of her thighs and hips criss-crossed with two-day old cuts that Himiko refuses to let close, and how they stick to her shorts and cute dresses that Mahiru picks out for her. It's the longer hair that gets in her mouth that she refuses to cut because then she'd look like Maki and she's not Maki.

Her fingers curl around an imaginary razor. The release, the release, the call of release. Skin separating from itself, sudden, brief, enduring, lethargic pain that burns in the hot water and is frozen in time. A need, as simple as breathing, as devastating as thirst.

Shuichi puts a hand on Himiko's shoulder and she buries her face to his chest, eyes squeezed shut. "Sorry…" she mutters.

She hears Miu and Kaede's conversation drop to a whisper and Shuichi greet Gonta as he shows up, still entranced by the novelty of the awakening scenario.

"Everything alright?" Gonta asks, voice heavy with concern. As gruff as Gonta can be, Himiko is glad that he still has his golden heart.

Taking a shaky breath, Himiko extracts herself from Shuichi. "Y-yeah," she says, fully intending for that to be it, but as if from inside the pod room, she hears an echo of Kokichi's voice chastising her for her dishonesty. "I mean- I will be… in a little bit. Just havin' a moment, I guess."

Gonta gives a curt nod. It's odd, Himiko notes, how formal and informal he looks. He hasn't cut his hair, but instead combs it straight and keeps it held down in a low ponytail. Though he still dresses in button-up shirts, he doesn't bother with the top few buttons, exposing his barrel-chest a bit. In some ways, it reminds Himiko of a Sunday school teacher she had back before all this. He tried way too hard to make God cool and relatable to the group of bored twelve-year olds.

God. From a distance, Himiko remembers that she used to believe in God, that He would guide her and protect her. She went through her phase of rebelling against Him, but eventually came back around. She looks at the sky, the moon waning, but still mostly present. God closing his eye on the world. When the new moon emerges, when God has his eye closed, a new killing game will start because there's no way a god like Him would allow such things to happen.

Or Himiko is just rationalizing and God is laughing his ass off at how Himiko cried when Tenko died.

"God is an asshole," Himiko says.

"Too fucking right," Miu says, having sat down at some point. She seems to be curiously examining the tips of Kaede's fingers for reasons that Himiko assumes even Kaede doesn't know. "He's a sack o' shit, that's for sure."

"Gonta no… I don't believe in a god," Gonta says, arms crossed. "Never made much sense to me."

"I never was raised believing," Kaede says, twiddling with one of the locks of Miu's hair that is perpetually upright.
Himiko and Shuichi share a look that clearly says they're both thinking the same thing: just kiss already. It's ironic, to Himiko at least, that she thought the same thing when she first saw Kaede and Shuichi alone together. They'd been walking across the courtyard, Kaede in the lead, of course, and Himiko couldn't help but notice how utterly enamored Shuichi was and how completely smitten Kaede was. It was cute, if a bit enviable, and the fact that they had just found each other so easily was at the time appealing.

But Kaede has a boyfriend and Shuichi wishes he had one, so it was all just a lie, a trick done with some slight of hand, smoke and mirrors, and more than a lot of brainwashing.

"Yumeno alright?" Gonta says.

She shakes her head again, raises an eyebrow. "Nyeh… I'll be fine."

"Not what Gonta asked."

Himiko shoves her face into her pillow again and mumbles something about wanting to bury herself in the ground.

"Let her be, Gokuhara," Kaede says. "We all have our… moments."

It doesn't take the Ultimate Detective talent for everyone to understand what Kaede means. Himiko had once overheard Hajime referring to Kaede's panic attacks as "legendary." Does someone with the Ultimate Therapist talent do that sort of thing? He must, Himiko guesses. After all, she certainly isn't qualified to say anything about that.

"Maybe God can stop everyone from getting these moments," Gonta spits.

"Harsh…" Shuichi comments.

"Hey, you never said if you believe in God," Himiko says, trying any tactic to get away from their various traumas.

"M-me? Well, I guess I believe in evidence, and I haven't really seen much evidence for a god. Certainly not here," Shuichi says, eyes downcast.

"Three that don't believe and two that think he's a prick with a small prick," Miu says, "Real winner of a god we got here." She looks at the door to the pod room. "Ten yen says it's that Yonaga bitch that comes charging outta there, all pissed cause we're being blasphemous."

"Miu, stop it," Kaede says, leaning in closer.

Miu's brow furrows for a moment, but then relaxes. "Yeah, yeah, alright. Bit uncalled for. Sorry."

Goosebumps race over Himiko's skin, irritating her cuts. She'd never really thought of the possibility that Angie could wake up next. Or Ryoma, for that matter. Tenko and Kokichi were so centered in her mind that she'd almost forgotten about the other two. Oh God, how horrible is she? She clenches her eyes shut (being sure to face away from everyone else so they don't notice) and forces herself to remember them.

The floating skeleton, the piranhas tearing his flesh just beside her as she made her escape, the hat with two points that she'd kind of wanted to wear at least once, that baritone voice, that piercing gaze. She unearths every memory she has of Ryoma until he's practically staring at her.

And Angie. Angie's a bit easier, but it's hard to see her as anything but a god-worshipping freak who
created a student council to manipulate everyone. Himiko imagines the hug Angie gave as she promised Himiko that Atua was handsome and looking out for her. The comfort and solace brought by that hug has long been replaced by the bitter taste of blood and regret and guilt that Himiko's actions somehow got both Angie and Tenko killed.

Tears trickle down her eyes and over her nose. Dammit! She wants to remember them and all she can think of are their deaths and the worst parts of them.

The door to the pod room creaks open, so Himiko hurriedly wipes away her tears and tries to look natural. Based on the worried look Shuichi has on his face, she's done a miserable job of it.

Kazuichi is the first to walk out. He smiles good-naturedly, though it only causes Himiko's gut to sink lower for reasons she can't quite piece together. "Good news! Two are awake this time!" he says, grin sharp as ever.

Himiko doesn't have time to think as Ryoma Hoshi steps out of the pod room, one hand in his pocket, the other scratching under his hat. Relief washes over Himiko as she sees him, fully clothed, fully flesh, fully alive. He runs a hand across his sweat-dribbled forehead, and the action makes Himiko want to bust out laughing because sweat means he isn't a skeleton and he's alive.

The whole group moves forward a bit to get a closer look, causing Ryoma to raise his (well, non-existent) eyebrows. "Uh… hey?" he says, voice as rich as ever.

"Hoshi…" Kaede says, "How… how are you feeling?"

Ryoma ponders this for a moment, eyes far away, as if the concept of assessing his own feelings is foreign to him. "My head hurts," he says, palming the back of his head. "And I could use a smoke, but otherwise I'm good." He gazes back at Kaede. "You're looking more alive than I last saw ya. Care to explain that?"

Kaede recoils and blushes while Miu lets out a huge cackle that earns her a slap on the shoulder from Kaede. Even Gonta tries to suppress a smirk at the comment.

"C-can we explain it?" Shuichi asks Kazuichi.

Kazuichi scratches at his chin and glances back inside the pod room. He makes some hand motions, vaguely gesturing towards Ryoma in some kind of rudimentary sign language. "Hajime says it's okay, so go ahead."

"Gonta will do it," Gonta says, causing all eyes to turn to him. "I wanna be useful, so let Gonta do it."

"Fine by me," Kazuichi replies, a little blasé.

Gonta takes Ryoma off to the side, with Kaede and Miu following them to make sure and clear up anything Gonta misses. Himiko thinks that it should probably be either her or Shuichi to explain because they saw the whole game, but something about Gonta saying he wanted to be useful struck a chord with Himiko, so she lets the matter be. Besides, Kazuichi says there was a second person, so they'll need an explanation, too.

Himiko and Shuichi find a tree trunk and sit down. The time between awakening varies, it seems. At least, Himiko thinks it does. It should. That would make sense.

"It's kinda weird without Maki here, huh?" Shuichi says.
"Yeah… I wish she was."

"Me too." Shuichi pauses, puts his hand to his chin in that idiosyncratic way of his when he's in deep thought. "How'd she break her neck again?"

Himiko opens her mouth to answer, but her mind draws a blank. She absently recalls that she had wondered the same thing earlier. "I… Nyeh, I'm not sure…"

"Me neither," Shuichi says.

"And I don't have the MP for a memory recovery spell that could reverse any sort of memory erasing spell," Himiko says, glancing quickly at the door to the pod room before back at Shuichi. His eyes light up as he catches Himiko's meaning

"R-right… " He pauses again. "Maybe we should ask her. She probably mentioned it the last time we visited."

"When was that?" Himiko says, trying to choke down the worry in her voice.

"I don't remember," Shuichi says. "Sometime after-" He licks his lips, eyes flicking back and forth. "Sometime after Tojo went missing."

Himiko nods her head. "Yeah, that sounds right. Um, we should go see her after this."

"We should."

The sun peaks over the horizon suddenly, the sky breaking away from the navy blue of a receding night into the hazy pink of morning. Shiny spots on the ocean catch Himiko's eyes before the sound of the pod room door shifts her attention once again.

This time, Hajime steps out, followed by Mahiru and Kazuichi. They steady someone just out of view before separating to allow that person to fully come out.

Himiko drops her pillow into the sand.

She's there. She's standing there, tall and proud, shading her eyes from the sun that illuminates her entire presence. Her twirly hair ribbon casts an odd shadow on the ground, one hand on her hip, and an infinite amount of glittering life in her eyes, her silhouette exudes a beautiful strength. And she's there. She's here. She's awake.

"T-Tenko!" Himiko cries, launching herself from her seat. She scrambles over to the other girl, tripping and slamming her knee hard against the packed sand, but not caring as she swings her arms around Tenko's legs. "T-Tenko! You're alive," she shouts, breathless, voice cracking.

"H-huh?!" Tenko says, jumping slightly.

Suddenly aware of how terrifying she's acting, Himiko unravels herself from Tenko's legs and stands fully, dusting herself off. "I-I'm sorry. I just… You're alive and I got excited, and I never thought I'd see you again. There's so much I wanted to say to you, but I never got the chance and now you're here and…" She trails off, unable to look Tenko in the eyes. "Nyeh… I'm sorry. I… You probably don't know who I am right now. Not really."

A strong hand clamps itself on Himiko's shoulder. She looks up and sees Tenko's eyes, such a lovely shade of green, glimmering with confidence. "Tenko could never forget you, Himiko!" she says with a huge smile.
Every wall, every dam, every damn wall that Himiko could have built, any strategy or coping mechanism she could have used to keep the tears at bay simultaneously fail. "T-T-TENKO!" she wails, throwing herself into Tenko's arms and rubbing her face as far into Tenko's chest as she can.

"Himiko…" Tenko whispers tenderly and wraps her arms around Himiko, pulling her close.

"I… I'm so sorry, Tenko," Himiko chokes.

"Shh, it's okay. Let it out, it's good for you."

Himiko clutches the back of Tenko's shirt. Her back is defined with lean muscle that accentuates the strength that she hugs Himiko with. She smells a lot like sweat and stale air, but the fact that she's alive and standing here and speaking and Himiko has the opportunity to say everything she ever should have said makes that fact irrelevant.

Eventually, the two separate, with Himiko blushing as she becomes distinctly aware of everyone watching the two of them.

Shuichi is the first to step up. "He-Hello, Chabashira. Do you remember us?"

Tenko squints, though not in the disgusted anger that Himiko is used to. Rather, it is a genuine attempt at remembering. "Tenko… knows that she knows you. And she recognizes you." She shakes her head solemnly. "But that's it."

"Your memories will return in time," Hajime says, absently writing notes down on a clipboard. "Particularly memories from the killing game will emerge firs- ow!"

"Be more sensitive, mister!" Mahiru chastises as she yanks on his cheek. She smiles at Tenko and says, "What he means is that you're going to remember some unpleasant things at first, but we'll be right here to help you through that, okay, sweetie?"

"How come I remember these guys, then?" Ryoma says. "I know who they are and what happened."

Hajime taps his clipboard before sighing. "Honestly, I'm not sure. Maybe because you knew you were about to die compared to Chabashira who died suddenly?"

"Excuse me?" Tenko says, her hand instinctively raising to her neck. So even if she doesn't remember consciously, her body does, Himiko notes.

"We'll explain everything in a little bit," Mahiru says, clapping her hand over Hajime's mouth. "But first, we need to make sure that you and Hoshi are physically okay, so please follow Kazuichi to the hospital for a little bit. Once we're done, you can visit others or have them visit you guys as much as you'd like."

Tenko nods. "Okay… Tenko's not too sure about this, but if Himiko's okay with it…" She looks at Himiko.

"It's fine, you can trust them," Himiko lies.

"Gotcha. Tenko hopes she's still in good shape, then!"

Himiko holds onto Tenko for just a bit too long before letting her go and watching her begin following Mahiru to the hospital. Himiko didn't have the heart to tell her the awful truth of this place. Not yet, not after what just happened, not while Shuichi is still investigating. Soon, hopefully. Soon.
Himiko walks over to where Shuichi is standing to find him dusting off her pillow. "For you," he says.

"Thanks."

"You got your wish," he says with a small smile.

Himiko smiles back. "I guess so. You didn't."

"I'm glad two people woke up. Only a couple left and we'll all be together again."

"Yeah… all of us," Himiko says knowing that Shuichi will catch on.

"Right…"

Before an awkward silence can hang over the two of them, Ryoma approaches. "Hey, you two. Wanted to talk to you before I go to the hospital or whatever."

From down the beach, Kazuichi stands tapping his foot as he watches Ryoma talk. "What is it?"

Shuichi says.

"Just wanted to clarify something. How did I die?"

Himiko swallows hard, her mouth suddenly very dry. Before she can answer, Shuichi swoops in.

"You… were killed," he says softly.

"By who?"

"K-Kirumi Tojo," Himiko says even quieter than Shuichi had spoken.

Ryoma tugs on his hat and nods, a satisfied smirk on his face. "That's what I thought. Glad you two said so 'cause the others weren't so forthright."

"What do you mean?" Shuichi says.

Ryoma's eyes glint menaciously. "They said that Yonaga killed me. In fact, they don't seem to know who Kirumi Tojo is." He taps his head. "Just making sure my memory is right. Glad to hear it is. Don't worry. I won't say a thing." His entire small body seems to heft with a sigh. "Probably shoulda stayed dead, huh?"

Himiko can't find it in her heart to lie to him, either.

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Having a broken neck sucks. Maki was lucky, according to Mikan and Hajime at least. Her break was clean and didn't damage the spinal cord. A relatively small fracture. If anything, they were more concerned with the concussion she sustained. Regardless of how mild her injury truly is, having to wear the neck brace and stare up at a blank ceiling in the dark for hours on end is not particularly enthralling.

She sleeps a lot, true, but the times when she's awake are nothing but counting ceiling tiles, pressing various buttons on her bed to see what they do, and try in vain to get her head to move without
having to shift her entire body.

At least the pain meds are good.

Her time in the hospital (how long has it been now? A week? A month? A day?) has at least given her time to think. She was stupid, that much is clear. Running around in the storm like that was foolish at best. But what could she have done? Kirumi's words pierced her so deeply, so truthfully that she resorted to her typical behavior of trying to run away from her problems. How like her.

She raises her hand and lets it fall, smacking herself in the face. A vague part of her remembers that one way to tell if someone is faking unconsciousness is to lift their hand and drop it; a conscious person will naturally move their hand away before it hits their face. When that doesn't work, you drive your knuckle into their sternum or the bottom of their foot. Was that assassin Maki or orphan Maki?

To make matters worse, she still hasn't seen Kaito. She just needs to see him. No matter how much she thinks or reflects or mentally self-flagellates, she can't work out how she feels about him.

He's loud and annoying and his relentless optimism apparently made it out of the game. From what she's gathered, he's very similar to his ingame self which (and she will deny that she ever admitted this) is a good thing in her book. If she'd found out that he was the person that Tsumugi had shown them in the video… she doesn't like thinking about that.

She grips her bunched up sheets beneath her. There's a lump right below her shoulder that's driving her crazy. It's a good comparison to Kaito. Aggravating, but if it weren't present, if Mikan were to come in and smooth it out for her, there would be an oddly empty feeling beneath her. It felt that way before Kirumi woke up and after Kirumi left her and when Maki was waiting outside of Kaito's room and when she watched each person be systematically executed and… maybe emptiness is just what she needs to feel.

Whenever she has something, someone, she finds an inexplicable way to push them away, to force herself back into her self-dug hole. All she has to find is someone will to shovel the dirt back on top of her and let her suffocate.

She probably deserves it anyway.

A chill runs up her spine at the thought, which causes her neck to ache. She'll need more painkillers soon. Maybe that's how she'll die. Get addicted to painkillers until she swallows the whole bottle or floods her blood from the IV drip and dies as her body ceases to function.

When did she grow so accustomed to death? An assassin need only be concerned with the deaths of others. In fact, they should assume that they cannot die because once you realize that you're going to die, nothing can convince you otherwise. Maybe it was as she fell from the bridge. Or when Kaito let himself die, die so confidently, so proudly, that Maki feels that she needs a death as true as that. Not that she deserves one. Truthfully, she deserved to die on that bridge, to sink into the waves and be out of everyone's lives forever. That way they could forget about her the same way they've forgotten about Kirumi.

She hasn't let on that she knows, doesn't want to. There's two versions of the events that play out in her head when she thinks back to that night.

In the first, she's fleeing from Kirumi's harsh, truthful words, screaming and crying all the while until she slips. In the second, she saw Kaito and ran straight out of the hospital. No vending machines, no Kirumi. Because in that version, Kirumi Tojo doesn't exist. Never did, never will. There were 15
participants in the killing game and Maki grew up lonely and isolated in an orphanage with no one to abuse.

It's a peculiar tactic, Maki thinks. Whoever is pulling the strings (because there's obviously someone out there) is trying to alter their memories again. Why? They have someone who has conceivably every talent there is. Surely they could make up something about him having helped Maki. And Kirumi disappearing. If they never had had Maki disappear, then it would be much more logical and believable for Kirumi to disappear.

Maki sighs. Did Tsumugi sound like this when she was masterminding their killing game? It's kind of addicting, Maki has to admit. Navigating the lives of 16 distinct people who have had their brains completely wiped must have been near impossible. Still, she did it, so why is it so hard to control them now? What's different?

There's really no point thinking about it now. It's not like she could do anything even if she wasn't laid up in bed with a broken neck. She'd probably just do something rash like trying to end the killing game by shooting a guy who was so painfully not the mastermind.

Someone knocks on Maki's door, startling her and sending another wave of pain down her neck. "Come in," she groans, resisting the urge to pull at her brace.

"Maki Roll!"

Fabulous. Yes, she'd wanted to see Kaito, but on her terms. Then again, when had he ever done anything according to her terms?

"Momota," she says as flat as she can manage.

"Oof, cold shoulder much?"

"Just tired," Maki replies. From the corner of her eye she watches Kaito shuffle forward and pull up a chair next to her. He looks good, for whatever that's worth. Shuichi had said that after Kaito's collapse he'd look pale and weak, but now he looks like he was never sick, save for the IV sticking out of his arm and slow walk.

When his face enters her field of vision, she's greeted by that stupid, endearing smile of his. "How ya feelin'?"

"Bored beyond belief," Maki says. "What about you?"

Kaito scratches at his beard, which has started to grow thin and scraggly along his jawline. "Eh, I'm up, that's for damn sure. Can't keep me down for long, you sure as hell know that."

"Yeah, I know. Are you still sick?"

"Sorta? Tsumiki said that I have hemophilia or whatever."

Maki raises an eyebrow. "There was a kid in the orphanage I grew up in that had that."

"Huh?!" Kaito gasps, confusion evident on his face. "I thought that was just your fake backstory from the game."

Glaring, Maki shakes her head as best she can. "No, dumbass. I really did grow up in an orphanage."

"Shit, didn't expect that."
"It doesn't matter. Do you have any of your memories back?"

"Eh, some," Kaito says as he leans back in his chair. "Not a space cadet or anything, but I think I went to space camp once. Oh and got suspended for fucking knocking out a kid at school once."

"That sounds like something you'd do," Maki says.

"Yeah, fucking guess so." Kaito leans forward, pushing his fists together, fiddling with his fingers. "Hey, where've you been?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Like, I wake up and next thing I know you're missing and then you show up here with a broken fucking neck!" he says, voice rising in pitch with each word. "Shit… I was just worried about you."

Maki swallows hard. "Where was I?" She reaches up to pull at her hair, but it's so short that she can only play with the tips. "I don't know."

"Maki Roll…" Kaito says, sounding way more exhausted than he should ever in Maki's eyes. "I've been stuck here for days and nothing is making any sense. Don't do this to me."

"Maki Roll…" Maki repeats. "I really don't. I was waiting outside your room, then I walked downstairs, Kirumi and I had a… conversation that upset me, so I ran outside. It was raining, the bridge was slick. Last thing I remember was hitting my head when I fell, okay?"

Kaito studies Maki for a moment before nodding. "Okay, Maki Roll. I trust ya. Especially cause you mentioned Tojo." He suddenly appears a bit flustered. "Or, I guess you called her by her first name."

Sighing, Maki presses the button on her bed to have her sit more upright. "Kirumi and I were in a romantic relationship for a time before the game. We had something after she woke up, but I messed it up and she's better off for it."

Kaito snorts. "Well yeah, if anyone could find her. Or remember her…"

"Keep your voice down," Maki hisses. Kaito knows about Kirumi… that's interesting. Maki was sloppy letting Kirumi's name slip so casually, but something good came from it, so maybe it wasn't all her screw up.

Leaning in close, Kaito's expression grows deadly serious. "Maki Roll, what's going on?"

"Do you trust me, Kaito?"

Without hesitation or acknowledgement of his first name, Kaito nods.

"Then I need you to keep your mouth shut for right now. Shuichi is working on it, so just keep your head down."

"What the fuck… Let me help! If this is about my health, I'm fine!" He stands up abruptly, wobbling only a bit. "See? I can help!"

"Stop it. You're acting like a brat. This isn't about what you can do. It's what you should do," Maki says.

"We can't do nothing!"
"If I didn't do anything in the game, you and Ouma wouldn't have died," Maki says, brutal and blunt. She hadn't wanted to bring it up, but Kaito is impossible sometimes.

"That is not the same thing!" Kaito says, voice rising again.

"I panicked and rushed and tried to kill him. If I hadn't, things would have played out differently," Maki urges, shifting her entire torso to face Kaito fully. "If I hadn't run out of the hospital, I wouldn't have this neck brace on. If I didn't sign up for this stupid game on a whim, Kirumi and I wouldn't be here. My entire life has been one big rash decision, so learn from my mistakes and just do nothing this once!"

Kaito's eyes scan Maki, a mixture of hurt and concern and anger and all sorts of other emotions that Maki is terrified to deal with. He slumps back in his chair, scratches wildly at his hair and picks his nails afterwards.

Reclining back into her bed, Maki returns it to its mostly prone position. A dull ache pounds in her head that runs down into her neck and pressure wells in her cheeks from the urge to cry. Truthfully, she's with Kaito; she wants to do something. Pressure or threaten the Remnants, interrogate some of the others, or even just eavesdrop on those who pass by. But like she said, when she makes the decisions, things don't go according to plan. If anything, she should just do as she's told and leave the planning to others, like a good assassin.

"Fine," Kaito spits. "Fine, I won't fucking do anything. But the second I can, you tell me, damn it."

Exhaling in relief, Maki reaches out her hand. "Thank you. I know this is a shit situation, but we really don't know what's going on."

A bit reticent, Kaito wraps his fingers around Maki's. They're warm and tender, just like him, deep down. "It feels so different now," Kaito says. "Everyone's so fucking… passive out here. Hell, remember how crazy Akamatsu was about ending the game."

"Look where it got her," Maki reminds him.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Don't get stuck in the game, Kaito. Out here it's different. Different rules."

"I guess."

"E-excuse me," says a voice from the doorway. Maki and Kaito turn to see Mikan standing there, her shadow long and overwhelming from the hallway light. "I… I'm sorry but I'm going to have to ask Momota to leave!" she says in one breath.

"Huh? The fuck? Why?" Kaito says, rising.

"It just… we heard you shouting. I mean! We weren't trying to listen, but you were really l-loud and…" She closes her eyes tight. "It may aggravate Harukawa's concussion if you keep stressing her out like this!"

"He's not stressing me out," Maki says. "I'm fine."

"S-still, Momota should still be on bedrest as well. I have to insist."

Maki doesn't like the way that Mikan emphasizes "insist," but capitulates regardless, releasing Kaito's hand and returning to her appropriate position "Fine, but Saihara and Yumeno can still visit me,
right?"

Mikan smiles slightly. "O-of course. I'm sure you'll like getting some fresh air."

"Yeah, I would," Maki says, doing her best to conceal the venom in her voice.

"Guess I'll... leave then," Kaito says.

Shifting her weight, Mikan glances aside, abashed. "Y-you can still visit. J-just not for today. It'll be best for you both to cool off before continuing any contact! I'm sorry!" She bows low and nearly tips over but catches herself at the last second.

"Yeah, yeah. I fucking get it," Kaito says, beginning his slow departure from the room. When he reaches the door, he turns back to look at Maki. "Don't blame yourself for everything, Maki Roll. Ouma and I made our choices, too."

Maki says nothing, so Kaito takes his leave. Before Mikan can escape as well, Maki speaks up.
"Tsumiki."

"Y-yes?"

"My sheets are bunched up under my shoulder. Can you help?"

Mikan smiles again, brighter than before. "Absolutely! Just tell me when you're comfortable."

Is this how Kaede felt? Or Kirumi? Or Korekiyo? Miu, Gonta, Kokichi, Maki, or Tsumugi? Stomachs a mess of knots, throats full of guilt and the day's lunch, feet dragging and moving through air as if it were molasses? Plans so carefully made that relied on them not making any mistakes? A horrifying readiness to engage in what they felt they needed to do?

Plotting, Shuichi decides, is something so entirely foreign to him that he doesn't think he'll ever fully understand it. Detectives are reactive, after all. Something must happen for a detective to leap into action. Even if someone attempts to have a detective follow someone they suspect might be up to illicit activities, that person still did something to inspire such fear. So to take the ball, so to speak, into Shuichi's own court, with only Himiko and Maki on his team, it's unusual for him.

Maybe he's psyching himself out for nothing. Calling the tentative plan they have a "plot" is stretching it. All he has to do is find Himiko, retrieve Maki for what is ostensibly an evening walk, and make it to Maki's motel room. With luck, they won't run into any Remnants on the way; however, considering they are contending with the Ultimate Lucky Student, Shuichi isn't counting on that. Instead, he's counting on Maki being able to appeal to Nagito's sense of mystery and intrigue in saying that she needs to go to her room for reasons unexplained. She can lie remarkably well when she's prepared.

Not much of a plan, but the motel rooms are the only place that Shuichi can be sure aren't bugged. Anywhere public on the island would definitely be rigged with some sort of surveillance system. The bathrooms likely wouldn't, but that's too open for Shuichi's liking. But if his suspicions are correct, and based on the Remnants' little stunt they tried to pull they are, then the motel rooms, where the Survivors undress and sleep and potentially engage in mature activities, would be a risky endeavor to
observe. Though even the motel is a risk considering the thin walls and easy vantage points, but it's the best they've got, and if they want to move forward, then Shuichi needs to be able to talk plainly with Maki and Himiko.

Shuichi wipes his hands on his pants and gives a weak smile to Sonia and Gundham as he passes by them, the paranoid part of his mind insisting that they could read his thoughts and are now onto him. They pass by, arms linked, without so much as a word, of course, but Shuichi can't breathe easy.

Himiko said that she'd be on Center Island. They'd meet there and walk to Third Island together where they'll check Maki out of the hospital and everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine.

Rounding the corner to the center plaza, Shuichi swallows the lump in his throat. It's not as if they're actually doing anything illicit. A simple stroll and hangout in a fellow survivor's room, nothing suspicious about it. He swallows the lump again, recognizing it as the soup he'd had for lunch.

"Shuichi!" Himiko says, causing Shuichi's eyes to dart up. She'd been sitting on the bench beside the statue. Hopping up, she practically skips over to where Shuichi's standing.

"Himiko, hey," Shuichi says, still walking, Himiko falling into stride with him.

"Let's get Maki," Himiko says with such determination that Shuichi briefly wonders if this isn't some imposter meant to trick him. Even just glancing at Himiko, Shuichi sees subtle, but definitely present differences. Her steps have pep to them, and she swings her arms (notably pillow-free) from side to side. Even her eyes, usually a dull brown, seem to glitter with hints of amber in the evening sun, a confidence in them that he hadn't seen since before they had made the final descent into the trial room. When they step up on the bridge to Third Island, Himiko kicks a few stones from the path, watching as they plonk into the calm ocean below.

"Having fun?" Shuichi asks, partially to assuage his nerves.

"Yes," Himiko replies. "The rocks were draining my MP. Evil rocks."

"Uh… evil rocks?"

"Evil. Rocks."

Shuichi shakes his head slightly, but Himiko just bumps his side with hers in response. "You look good, by the way," Shuichi says.

"I'm immune to flattery spells," Himiko says, though her subtle blush says otherwise.

"Ah… that's - that's not what I meant!"

"I know," Himiko giggles. "You save that for Ouma."

Now it's Shuichi's turn to blush and fiddle with the buttons on his shirt. "Ugh, it wasn't like that."

Himiko's smile drops. "Nyeh, did I go too far?"

"N-no! I was just surprised you mentioned him is all."

They walk in silence for a while, passing by the Titty Typhoon. Shuichi remembers how he and Kaede had kissed in that building. She'd had a panic attack and then led him there; she'd remembered that she had a boyfriend, and Shuichi discovered that kissing girls is something that he is decidedly
not interested in, despite his programming.

The tension from that night never really went away. He can talk to Kaede freely, and they have pleasant, friendly conversations, but that intimate friendship he'd shared with her in the game (however forced upon them it was) is forever missing. A void between them, both unsure how to cross it, both unsure if they want to. Maybe it's better that they don't try to conquer the void. They can be friends, just friends, and have their own groups. She seems happy as is possible, given the circumstances. Rantaro and Himiko make her laugh; she visits with Keebo and even Korekiyo on a fairly regular basis; there's whatever the hell she has going on with Miu that is ambiguously healthy, so maybe she doesn't need him.

The thought cramps his stomach. Kaede had been one of his primary motivators in the game; her memory inspired him to keep going, so to let go of that feels almost sacrilegious. But isn't that what growing is? For however dubious Hajime as a person is, he still gives good advice in the therapy sessions from time to time. He'd told Shuichi to not be surprised when certain groups formed and the idea of everyone being together as one unit didn't manifest. Still, Shuichi can't deny that it's something he had hoped for. No matter how divided the forces that be try to keep them, he's going to find a way to pull everyone together. That starts with getting Maki to the motel.

"We're here," Himiko says.

"Right. Let's do this."

The two enter the hospital. Nagito greets them. "Hello, you two. Here for Harukawa, I take it?" he says, his voice tinged with boredom either from sitting at the desk for too long or from how transparent Shuichi and Himiko are. They did ask Mikan for permission earlier, so it makes sense that Nagito would know about their arrival, but Nagito's voice still sets Shuichi on edge.

"Yeah," Himiko says. "Are you gonna get her or do we…?"

Nagito waves towards the stairs. "You know where her room is. Just have her back by nine." He glances at the clock on the wall. "It's six-thirty now, just so you know."

"Thank you," Shuichi says, professional, channeling whatever is left of the detective in him.

Hurriedly, the duo get to Maki's door. She answers almost immediately, as if she had been waiting right by the door. They're lucky that she can walk, albeit slowly and for short distances, because Mikan has started insisting that a Remnant accompany Keebo and Korekiyo when they go out.

Without a word, the trio head for the exit, Himiko in front and Shuichi behind Maki to catch her if she stumbles. As they're about to head out, Nagito peers over the desk at them and smiles. "Have fun. It'll surely be more interesting than sitting here. Then again, trash like me deserves this job." His expressions darkens. "Sorry for being wordy, I haven't talked much today. Have plenty of scintillating conversation for me, okay?"

Of the three, Maki is the least perturbed by Nagito's statement, at least outwardly. Shuichi manages to keep a straight face, but definitely speeds up, nearly bumping into Maki in the process.

Nagito is many things, too many things to list, but above all he is intentional. Everything he does, everything he says has some sort of greater meaning, some mystery that he begs others to solve. His actions, twisted and misguided, part of the many gears that he spins to keep his complex machine working. Knowing that, it's not a matter of if Nagito has figured out what they're up to, rather, how much he knows.
In that sense, he's quite a bit like Kokichi. Through the trials, Shuichi learned that Kokichi rarely knew as much as he showed. He acted like he had everything figured out, but truly was probing and maneuvering people into positions where they'd give up information. If those failed? Well, they were all a lie anyway.

A bit genius, if risky. But risks sometimes pay off, and inaction can only carry them so far. How would Ouma handle this situation? He wouldn't involve anyone else. Or, he would, but they wouldn't be aware that they're helping him. A convenient lie or provocation to entice his unknowing partner, then drop them when they became a liability. Right away, Shuichi knows he could never do this how Ouma would. He glances at Himiko, who has taken Maki's hand to help steady her, and the feeling is affirmed. He won't abandon these two, he won't abandon anyone on this island.

Well, he'll try not to. An unsettling part of him wonders what it would be like if his and Kokichi's philosophies were switched. Not their personalities, per se, but their beliefs on the necessity of others. Shuichi, the stoic detective who kept others at arm's length for their own good. Kokichi, the aggravating, but endearing prankster whose pranks brought everyone together. Would make a fascinating AU, wouldn't it? Maybe he wrote something like that, back before the game.

"Finally," Maki says and Shuichi blinks, realizing that they're at the motels. Maki fumbles in her shirt pocket for her key. "I hate this shirt," she mumbles.

"Where'd ya get it?" Himiko says.

"Tsumiki gave it to me."

"Tsumiki gave it to you?" Shuichi asks, a chill running up his spine.

Maki narrows her eyes as she produces her key. "Yes, she did, so it's sad that I slipped into some mud and got it all messy."

Shuichi swallows and nods, following Himiko into Maki's room and flicking on the light.

"I'll be right back," Maki says. "Gonna toss this shirt in the shower to see if I can get the stains out before they set." She rummages in her dresser, then heads to the bathroom. A moment later, Shuichi can hear the shower running and some incomprehensible swearing.

Himiko closes the window and draws the blinds before settling down beneath the window, tucking her legs close. Shuichi takes a position by the door, sliding down the wall similar to how Himiko had done. The room isn't big by any stretch of the imagination, but with Shuichi and Himiko on opposite sides, it feels like a canyon. A canyon with ugly beige carpeting and indents in the wall that seem like they match Maki's shoe size. Shuichi jerks his hand suddenly, jumping, when he feels something creeping on it, only to realize a second later that it's a long brown hair.

Giggling, Himiko says, "Careful, it's gonna get you and take you away."

"Shut up," he says back playfully. "Or else I'll send the hair monster after you."

"Are you five?" Maki says, leaving the bathroom. "Playing with my hair is weird."

"You're the one who left it on your floor," Shuichi says.

"I will endeavor to find and properly discard each individual strand of hair to ever fall from my head," Maki replies, collapsing onto the bed, wincing as she does so.

"Careful!" Shuichi chides.
"I am."

"That definitely wasn't careful," Himiko says, tutting.

"Just heal me with your magic or whatever."

Himiko smiles sadly. "I wish I could. I don't think I'll ever have enough MP for that."

"Worth a shot," Maki says.

They fall into a steady silence, the only noise being the echo of the ocean in the distance, steady and powerful. At one point, several incoherent voices rise and fall as the group they belong to passes by.

Slowly, Maki sits up, frowns. "Kirumi has a big butt," she states.

Shuichi blinks. Once. Twice.

"Nyeh…?" Himiko says, scooching a bit further away from the bed.

Maki's face turns beat red, hands instantly grabbing for her hair as she tries to hide. "I didn't say anything."

"Don't even try that," Himiko says.

Groaning, Maki shakes her head. "I didn't mean to say that out loud."

"What… what do you even mean?" Shuichi asks, though he's not entirely sure he wants an answer.

"Just. Drop it."

"No way!" Himiko says, giggling. "I wanna hear about Kirumi's big butt!"

"Do you want to die?" Maki says, obviously trying to be threatening, but failing with her bright red blush and the pathetic whimper she gives. "Fine. She usually slept on this side of the bed. There's a… large indent where he butt would have been 'cause the mattress is so cheap. Happy?"

Himiko instantly falls into a fit of laughter. "I never took you for a butt girl."

"Do you want to die?!

Smirking, Shuichi regards Maki wryly. "I'm wondering something."

"I don't wanna hear it, damn it!" Maki says.

Undeterred, Shuichi leans forward. "How did you only notice her butt just now?"

"Because I was too busy beating the shit out of her, okay?!!" Maki snaps, her breathing heavy and ragged. "I- I... that's not what I…"

But it's all been said. Himiko clams up on her laughter and Shuichi retreats back into the corner. The ocean roars, it's entire weight descending on the room at once. In a part of his mind, Shuichi knew that Maki had abused Kirumi in the past. However, he'd always justified it as having happened before the game. That was a lie. She'd continued her habits practically as soon as Kirumi had woken up.

"Damn it!" Maki whispers. "I... I'm sorry. I know I'm an awful person. I just was frustrated and said
"Maki, wait!" Shuichi says, trying to rise, but slipping. He reaches out for her, but she jerks her hand away.

"Just leave me alone," Maki spits.

She opens the door. Everyone's hearts sink.

"Hello there!" Tsumugi Shirogane, standing in the doorway, a pleasant smile on her face, her hand posed as if she was about to knock. "May I come in?" Without waiting for a response, she bounds in, closing the door behind her and flops onto Maki's bed, causing it to squeak. "Hmm, these beds are actually a bit better than the ones in the hospital. And you're right, Harukawa, this is a big indent."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Maki demands, hand still on the doorknob.

Tsumugi sits up and looks around the room with a finger on her chin, as if the question is so complicated that it actually requires intense thought. When her eyes land on Himiko—who has taken to trying to gnaw through the curtains—Tsumugi's eyes light up and she launches herself at the smaller girl. "Yumeno! You look so cute with longer hair! I shouldn't have let make-up cut it. Oh, you would make such a good Maki!" She glances over her shoulder. "Not that one, Maki Nishikino from Love Live!"

Shuichi, red-faced stands up. "Answer Maki's question! What are you doing here?!

"So testy, Saihara. I kinda like it. Hmm…nah, I like your little, anxiety-riddled self better. Your character was just fine. Shame it changed." Twirling around, Tsumugi faces Shuichi head-on. "As to why I'm here. Well, I saw you three leaving the hospital, and you looked so very serious. So I snuck out and followed you here! Then I listened for a while. Motel doors aren't that thick, just so you know."

"You expect us to believe that?" Himiko says, emerging slightly from behind the curtains.

"She's right," Shuichi says, stepping forward. "Sounds very convenient. How'd you even manage to sneak out when there's always a guard at your door?"

Tsumugi sighs, putting a hand on her cheek. "Silly boy, you know you have to wait till the trial to ask questions like that! But I'll play nice. There's a secret passage in the girl's bathroom, obviously!"

"You're impossible," Maki says, hand tightening into a fist.

"And you're an abuser! So glad we got rid of that nasty habit," Tsumugi says cheerily.

"Get out of here," Shuichi says, pointing at the door. "We don't need you messing with our heads."

"Hmm… I don't think I will," Tsumugi replies, sitting back down on Maki's bed, crossing her legs. "I heard some interesting things, and I want answers."

"Why should we tell you anything?" Himiko says.

"Because you're all my good little puppets, so you'll do as I say."

That's it. Anger dissipates from Shuichi as the final piece of the puzzle appears in his head. From the time Tsumugi had flounced into the room, Shuichi had noticed something off about her. In spite of her blasé demeanor and dismissive attitude, her clothes are rumpled and misshapen, when she usually
takes such meticulous care of them. Hell, she usually brags about how custom-made they are. Her hair, usually lovingly cared-for, is ratty, sticking up in various directions. Her eyes, haggard and baggy, dart between everyone in the room, like an animal caught in a trap.

"You're scared, aren't you?" Shuichi says, his shoulders relaxing. If he's right, then the best tactic for dealing with her will be to avoid letting her get to him.

"Of what?" Tsumugi says, cocking her head. "I'm in Danganronpa, what could be more wonderful?"

"No, you want information because you're scared of something."

Tsumugi frowns. "I really have no idea what you're talking about. If you mean to say about those pesky tablets the Remnants passed around, then I'm sure you've figured out that they're fake by now. It's so obvious. They probably did those in the same room I did when I faked those audition tapes."

"They were fake?!" Himiko cries.

Latching on to the outburst, Tsumugi lies down, staring at Himiko upside-down. "Of course they were! Each one was specially designed to inflict the maximum amount of despair possible."

"According to your memories," Shuichi says, stalking a bit closer to Tsumugi. "Which could be fabricated."

"They're not~" Tsumugi trills. "And even if they were, it's irrelevant. Fiction is more powerful than reality in this case; you should know that better than anyone."

Maki stands next to Shuichi, hand on her neck. "Get off my bed. I need to lie down."

Rather than rising, Tsumugi simply lifts her legs, being sure to hold her skirt properly, and nods towards the open spot.

"Off."

Tsumugi sighs as she kicks up from Maki's bed and allows her to sit down. "I really should ask to leave the hospital. I might get a good night's sleep!"

An opening. "Sleep deprivation," Shuichi explains with the professionalism of a doctor, "Is a symptom of consistent fear. So, Shirogane, what are you afraid of?"

"This again? I told you-"

"You're lying," Himiko says.

"I am?"

"Yeah… you… you have something in your pocket that you cover whenever Shuichi says you're scared." Himiko points to her chest.

On Tsumugi's shirt, there is a pocket sewn onto the breast with a bit of paper sticking up from it. "An old tag," Tsumugi says, dismissive, but Shuichi notes that her hand instantly covers it again.

Trying a different tactic, Shuichi offers a conciliatory hand. "Look, Shirogane, I don't trust you. I don't know what you're up to. But you know something and we know something."

"Are you suggesting a trade, Saihara?" Tsumugi says, guarded and eyes narrow. "Because I plainly think that it's a ridiculous idea."
"Huh? Why?"

"Simple," Tsumugi harrumphs, "You don't trust me. If I give up my information first, who's to say that you three won't simply abandon me? And you certainly won't tell me anything because, again, you don't trust me."

"Wanna bet on that?" Shuichi says.

"Not really," Tsumugi replies flippantly. "Last time I challenged you I got rather well acquainted with a rock. That did hurt, by the way."

"Do you know who Kirumi Tojo is?" Shuichi asks.

Tsumugi thinks for a moment, and, for the first time, Shuichi feels that she's being genuine. Her brow furrows as she shakes her head. "No, I don't. But there's a plainly awful familiarity with that name."

"She was part of the killing game," Maki says.

"Impossible," Tsumugi responds immediately, whirling to face Maki. "There were 14 contestants, plus me as the mastermind."

Shuichi shakes his head. "There were 15 total, 16 including you. Kirumi Tojo was the second… culprit… She killed Hoshi."

Himiko pulls her legs close. "Messied up my magic show, too."

"No…" Tsumugi says, stepping back. "That was Yonaga. She interrupted your show! I personally created her execution!"

"Four days ago," Shuichi continues, undaunted, "Tojo disappeared after we discovered something about the Despair invasions."

"What about them?"

"Not relevant right now," Shuichi replies. Can't give away his entire hand. Ouma would be proud. "The point is that after that happened, Tojo vanished and the rest of us had our memories of her and everything that had occurred up to that point wiped."

Tsumugi considers this, pacing back and forth for several minutes. "I suppose it's possible," she murmurs. "But if all our memories were wiped, how do you three still remember all of this?"

It's odd, Shuichi thinks, to see Tsumugi so serious. Once she'd revealed herself as the mastermind, her entire being had been consumed by a frivolous, apathetic persona that cared only for Danganronpa. He has to fight back the feelings of empathy that creep into his stomach. She still is one of the main reasons they're even here.

"That's the thing," Maki says, twirling a strand of hair between her fingers. "For some reason… it didn't work on us three. Mostly. Some memories are fuzzier than others."

"What?"

Himiko nods vigorously. "We've spent the past few days trying to see what people know. It's just us! Well… and Hoshi, but he just woke up. Tenko, too, probably, once she gets her memory back."

"That's where we are," Shuichi says, arms open. "We were going to try and figure out a plan, but then you interrupted us." He doesn't bother hiding the bite behind the last bit.
Tsumugi puts her finger to her chin again, paces a bit. Finally, she turns and looks Shuichi dead in the eye. "You're not lying to me?"

"Not on my life," Shuichi says.

Tsumugi nods, then smiles, wider, wider, wider until her smile is practically a manic grin. "Then you're an absolute idiot, Shuichi Saihara."

"Wha-?!"

Before anyone can react, Tsumugi shoves Shuichi against the wall, taking extra steps to slam the back of his head once more. His vision blurs, and he sees the vague forms of Himiko and Maki try to get up in time to catch Tsumugi as she storms out the door, giggling like a madwoman the entire time. By the time Maki and Himiko manage to get to the door, Tsumugi has disappeared around the corner.

Shuichi groans as he holds his head, hoping he isn't concussed. Soreness grows from the impact, so he collapses onto the ground.

"Damn it!" Maki cries, yanking at the brace around her neck. "If I didn't have this stupid thing I could've grabbed her!"

Himiko kneels next to Shuichi. "A-are you okay?!" Her hands hover with uncertainty over Shuichi's head.

"I will be," Shuichi mutters, blinking away the blurriness in his vision. "Just… need ice or something."

"I'll go grab some!" Himiko says, heading out the door to go the ice machine behind the motel.

A few minutes later, Himiko returns with a big bucket of ice. Wrapping some in a washcloth, she presses it to Shuichi's head. It doesn't help much, but the coolness does offset some of the pain. Once he's sure he's coherent, Shuichi holds the bag himself.

"Well, that went terribly," Maki says, slumping onto the bed. "We've accomplished nothing except telling everything to the one person on the island we shouldn't have."

"Nyeh, don't say it like that…" Himiko says, cradling one of Maki's pillows.

"Well it's the truth isn't it?" Maki snaps. "And we all want that."

"I… I don't think it was a complete bust," Shuichi says.

"How? How is this not a complete and utter failure?"

"Shirogane gave me this," Shuichi says, reaching into his shirt pocket. He hadn't been sure if it just wasn't some of his notes from earlier, but with his head clear, he could tell that whatever this is, it's not his. He unfolds the notes and reads aloud. "My room. Two days. Afternoon. Harukawa only."

"The hell?" Maki says, snatching the paper and reading it herself, with Himiko peering at it over her shoulder.

"Should we… should we trust it?" Himiko says.

"Why does she only want me?" Maki says, crumpling up the paper and tossing it at the door.
Shuichi adjusts the ice as he shakes his head. "I'm not sure. About either of those things. I don't know when she wrote that, either, because it couldn't have been while she was in here."

"What if it was in her pocket?" Himiko suggests.

"That would mean that she had planned something like this," Maki hisses.

Shuichi leans his head back against the wall, careful to avoid aggravating the pain in his head. It doesn't make much sense. She had no opportunity to write the note while she was in Maki's room, so that theory is out. But if she had pre-planned this, then would that mean that she knew how Shuichi would respond to her antagonism. He wouldn't put it past her. She was the mastermind, after all, so she knows how to manipulate an audience. Who's to say that the ragged clothes and hair weren't all part of her act? Regardless of how she did it, Shuichi can definitely say one thing.

"I say we go through with it," Shuichi says.

Maki rolls her eyes. "Yes, because trusting her has worked out so well in the past five minutes."

"I don't like it either," Shuichi admits, "But frankly, whatever she's up to, she clearly has a plan. Which is a hell of a lot more than we have."

MONOKUMA THEATER

Did you expect that?

The reveal, that is.

Why would I reveal so soon after a memory wipe that there are some who do, in fact, have their memories?

Wouldn't you like to know, bub?!

But I'm not telling.

Because you don't care. This gave you hope, didn't it?

Hold tight to that hope.

Because I can't wait to break your fingers when I wrench it from your hands.

By the way,

Who am I?
*Insert witty author's note here because creative*

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